

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name EAST SIDE SCHOOL
other names/site number EAST SIDE JUNIOR HIGH, OSWEGO JUNIOR HIGH, OSWEGO COLORED SCHOOL, EAST SIDE ELEMENTARY, OSWEGO NEGRO SCHOOL, EAST SIDE GRADE SHOOOL, SOMETIMES EAST SIDE IS COMBINED INTO ONE WORD AS 'EASTSIDE'

2. Location

street & number IOWA STREET (UNASSIGNED ACCORDING TO LABETTE COUNTY CLERK) not for publication
city or town OSWEGO vicinity _____
state KANSAS code KS county LABETTE code 099 zip code 67356

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this XX nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property XX meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide XX locally (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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criteria. (See continuation sheet for

entered in the National Register _____
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the _____
National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the _____
National Register
 removed from the National Register _____
 other (explain): _____

EAST SIDE SCHOOL

Property Name

LABETTE COUNTY, KANSAS

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing Noncontributing

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| <u> 1 </u> | <u> </u> buildings |
| <u> </u> | <u> </u> sites |
| <u> </u> | <u> </u> structures |
| <u> </u> | <u> </u> objects |
| <u> 1 </u> | <u> </u> Total |

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

 0

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION/school

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/not in use

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

REVIVALS

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

roof ASPHALT

walls BRICK

other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See continuation sheets.

EAST SIDE SCHOOL

Property Name

LABETTE COUNTY, KANSAS

County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK
SOCIAL HISTORY
EDUCATION

Period of Significance

1921 - 1952

Significant Dates

1921

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

SUPERVISING ENGINEER: MR. SMITH
CONTRACTORS; SERGEANT AND GIBSON

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

OSWEGO PUBLIC LIBRARY,
OSWEGO CITY MUSEUM

EAST SIDE SCHOOL

Property Name

LABETTE COUNTY, KANSAS

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property _____

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

1 15 313080 4115460 3 _____

2 _____ 4 _____

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title ROBIN OLDHAM

organization HISTORIC PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF LABETTE COUNTY date JUNE 7, 2001

street & number 716 MICHIGAN telephone 620-795-2293

city or town OSWEGO state KS zip code 67356-2323

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name CITY OF OSWEGO

street & number P.O. BOX 210 telephone 620-795-4433

city or town OSWEGO state KS zip code 67356

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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The East Side School (c. 1921) is located at the corner of 3rd and Iowa Streets in Oswego, Kansas. The red brick building stands as an eclectic interpretation of the Neo-Classical style. The one-and-one-half story building maintains a western facade orientation. The structural walls are clay tile masonry with an exterior brick veneer. The brick is ornamented with stone (or cast stone) at the parapet cap, second floor window sills, and at the west entrance. The window lintels are painted steel angles and first floor window sills are brick. The building measures 65'-1" north/south x 54'-9" east/west and sits on the west half of a full city block. Double hung, 9/1 windows fenestrate the above ground basement and the upper story. The facade is broken by a parapetted central pavilion containing the main entry and 1921 date stone.

The roof is a low pitched wood-framed structure that slopes toward the east and is surrounded on the west, north and south by a shaped brick parapet wall with a stone (or cast stone) cap. The roof membrane is a modified built-up asphaltic roof system with a silver protective coating.

There are three exterior doors at grade and one second floor fire egress door to a fire escape on the north side of the building. The main entrance doorway is located on the west facade and is comprised of a pair of wood panel doors with one light each topped by a transom window with six lights. Other at-grade doors are an added fire exit door located at the north end of the first floor north hall and an original service door from the Mechanical/Boiler Room to the East facade. The fire egress door on the north wall of the second floor Multi-Purpose Room is a steel door and frame added in 1954.

The exterior windows are wooden double-hung windows with a nine-over-one configuration. The windows at the first floor are protected by expanded metal "screens" held in frames and affixed to the exterior of the window frames. These screens may have been installed to protect the windows from breaking rather than to prevent break-ins. There are a few windows on the north and east sides that have been covered over or partially filled in to provide mechanical ventilation.

The windows are in fair condition. A few windows—mostly at the first floor but also a few at the second floor—have rotted sills, bottom rails, and/or lower portions of the stiles. The rotted components may need to be partially replaced in kind or repaired with epoxy formulated for wood replacement. Most windows contain the original glass, but all of them need to be reglazed (new putty) and repainted. The windows typically have their original hardware.

Building Interior

Floors

The floors on the first floor are cast-in-place concrete. In most areas the concrete floor has been painted, but the painted finish is in poor condition. The second floor structure is 2 x wood joist construction finished with 3 1/4" pine tongue-and-groove boards that were originally stained and varnished. The

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current top coat of varnish is very thick—it may be an early polyurethane finish.

Walls and Ceilings

The interior walls are typically finished with painted plaster. The plaster was bonded directly to the clay tile structural walls or to expanded metal lath on the non-structural interior partition walls.

There are a number of chalk boards and bulletin boards that are original and were mechanically attached to blocking recessed in the masonry walls before the application of the plaster finish. There are several areas on the second floor where it was evident there was an original picture rail—in some areas it was extant and in other areas it was missing. In several areas of the second floor there is an original chair rail—a few areas have missing chair rail. The baseboards on the second floor are simple wood planks with a chamfered top edge. The baseboards on the first floor are smaller and have a rounded top edge. The first floor baseboards have been damaged by water.

A few walls that may not be original construction (located on both the first and second levels) have been finished with vertical pine boards. The pine is likely not original.

A Written Description of How the Building Functioned as an African-American School

Georgella Jackson Caldwell and Floyd Cavitt, Jr., are former students of East Side School who were interviewed for this narrative. Mrs. Caldwell attended East Side from 1942 to 1950 and Mr. Cavitt attended the school from 1949 to 1957. We were unable to gain this information from individuals who attended the school prior to 1942, nor was written documentation found listing historic functions for the building's spaces. Mrs. Caldwell and Mr. Cavitt provided the following description of the way the building was used during their combined tenure at the segregated school, 1942-1954.

On entering the building, one found oneself standing on a landing facing stairs which extend either up or down. The first floor of the structure was below street level and sometimes was referred to as the basement. The second floor was slightly above street level. The only portion of the building's interior which was at street level was the slightly elevated entry way (the building is said to be 2 ½ stories in height).

Descending the stairs to the first level, one entered a central hall which extended to the left and right (north and south).

Turning left/north, one entered a single large room which occupied the entire north end of that level. It had a concrete floor and was used as a gymnasium for sports and physical education.

Returning to the central hall, and directly opposite the stairs descending from the street level entry, was the boys' restroom, with its window located on the east/rear wall of the building.

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Turning right/south from the central hall, one could either turn right-west again and enter the lunchroom. During the time period the building served as an African-American school, female students helped their teacher prepare lunch in this room. It was outfitted along its west wall with cooking appliances and a sink. Students ate at long tables in the room and helped to clean up after lunch.

Immediately west of, and adjacent to, the lunchroom was the girls' restroom—at the south end of the central hall, with a window located on the building's south wall.

Located in the southeast portion of the first level was the mechanical room, custodian's office and storage.

Back at the street level entry to the school, if one had ascended the stairs one would have come upon a central hall at this second level, too.

Turning to the left/north, one would have entered the auditorium, which extended the entire depth of the building from east to west along the north wall (similar to the gymnasium below). A stage was built up along the east wall of the room and wood desks/seats were in place in rows facing the stage. On a daily basis, however, the west half of this room was used as a classroom for the upper grades (5th-8th?) by merit of a folding partition which could be drawn to effectively divide the large room into two.

Back in the central hallway near the top of the stairs, one could advance west and enter the principal's office. There was no "secretary's office" at the time as there was no secretary for the school or its staff.

In the southwest corner of this upper floor was a classroom which was used for the lower grades (K or 1st-4th?). A small cloakroom opened onto the west wall of this classroom.

In the southeast corner of this level was another classroom, with a cloakroom along its eastern wall, mirroring the situation of the classroom on the west. Mrs. Caldwell did not recall this classroom as being in use while she was in school at East Side. However, Mr. Caldwell, who attended later, recalled its use as a classroom.

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Historical Significance

The East Side School (c. 1921) is being nominated to the National Register under criteria A for its historical association with the growth and development of the public school system in Oswego, Kansas. Until 1954, when the US Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education* mandating school integration, separate schools for whites and African Americans were the norm. East Side School is a well-constructed brick building which was erected in 1921 expressly as a school for the African Americans of the Oswego, Kansas area.

The building provides an actual example, with very little modification, of an educational facility constructed for a minority race in rural Southeast Kansas and the United States. The quality of its construction and materials, its architectural style and its situation alone on an entire half city block surrounded by lawn, trees, open space and single-family residences also attest to the attention paid to an educational facility of that day. And again, the fact that the act of going to school to acquire an education has been and continues to be the most dominant activity of the emotional, intellectual and physical development of children. The place where that education happens can assume great importance in the mind of a child, and remain so for a lifetime.

Early records of education in Labette County go into a fair amount of detail concerning the physical school buildings and teachers for the white children of the area. The first school in Oswego was taught by Mrs. Augusta Herbaugh in a private log cabin. Sixty-nine students began their studies in June of 1867. Bigger and better buildings were built and the student population grew.

In the years just prior to 1921, there apparently existed in Oswego two school buildings. One was a brick school known as West Side School (built 1912) at 4th and Pennsylvania Streets in which grades 1-12 were taught. The other was a school, thought to be frame, located at 3rd and Iowa Streets, in which African American students were taught. In 1921, two new schools were built in Oswego. A new brick East Side School replaced (on the same site) the former East Side School and a new high school was built. That building still stands and serves as Oswego Middle School today.

Kansas law regarding segregation in education changed several times before racial segregation was banned by the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. After 1862, Kansas cities of the first class were allowed to segregate elementary schools by race if the local school board felt it advantageous. In 1905, Kansas law was amended to allow the high school in Kansas City to be segregated by race, but no other Kansas high schools could legally segregate.

Only a limited number of cities were of sufficient population to legally segregate, but many smaller communities attempted to do so. Many school boards believed students would progress faster if

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segregated by race. However, African American parents began to fight against the issue of segregation as early as 1880. At least 20 segregation related cases came before Kansas courts before *Brown* was filed in 1950. Several cases were decided in favor of plaintiffs when smaller communities illegally segregated schools. The *Brown* case was different from previous cases, because it directly challenged Kansas' authority to pass segregation laws that countered the 14th Amendment.

The school cost just over \$17,000 to build and it was dedicated and opened with much fanfare by the people of Oswego, as evidenced by early newspaper accounts; apparently the town took pride in providing such fine, separate but equal educational facilities.

Official public notice of completion of the new African American school building was provided in the Oswego Independent of April 8, 1921, in a story about a meeting of the Board of Education. The headline reads "New Building is Accepted -- East Side Grade School Structure was Formally Accepted by Board of Education Friday -- Cost Less than Contract Price -- A Commencement Speker [sic] Secured."

This article mentions the completed East Side school building's supervising engineer, a Mr. Smith, along with contractors, Sargent and Gibson.

According to this account, the total cost of the school building was \$17,128.50 -- \$420.50 less than the initial contract price. Of interest to the historian is the reason given for the cost reduction: "certain good materials from the old building, approved by the engineer, were used and credited" which refers to the previous school building which the new brick structure replaced.

Further text in the same article details the Board's authorization for "the East Side schools...to use the auditorium in the new building in practice for their closing day exercise and the exercises themselves will be there."

Presumably the African American children continued to have classes at some unidentified location while the new East Side grade school was being built (and while their old school was being salvaged for usable materials). This article being in April, would, of course, be referring to end of school year activities and does indeed mention upcoming commencement exercises for the high school.

Later articles reporting the new grade school's dedication appeared the same year (1921). It is unknown whether classes were actually held in the school for the remainder of the 1920-21 school year, or if the first students at East Side School attended in August of 1921.

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The Oswego Democrat and the Oswego Independent, both ascribed to the date 9/23/21, reported the dedication ceremony of the new school under the headlines, "Colored School Dedicated" and "Dedicated Colored Schools."

Descriptions of the physical school include mentions that it was "brilliantly lighted from basement to the top floor" and "the auditorium in the building was inadequate to accommodate all who came." It states that the rooms were decorated in purple and white school colors. A Domestic Science room contained a "white booth in which was a small kitchen cabinet and other equipments..."

Professor D.M. Bowen of Pittsburg (Kansas) Normal School spoke at the event. According to the Oswego Democrat, Professor Bowen spoke "of the splendid schools provided for the colored children of the city, stating that it was the best in this section and it was the best colored school in the state." The reporter added that the professor "was well pleased with the interest that the colored people were taking in their schools."

At the close of the dedication ceremony, Professor B.C. Easter, principal of the East Side school, asked the audience to "inspect the new building of which the colored children are so proud..."

The building was used continuously from 1921 to 1954 and attended solely by African American children. Following the Supreme Court's ruling mandating school integration in 1954, Oswego integrated East Side School to begin utilizing East Side as a junior high for both blacks and whites. The school continued to serve as junior high for the community until 1995, when due to the construction of a new high school, it was no longer used except for storage.

School Attendance and Curriculum

The East Side building is historically significant for the role it played in the lives of so many African Americans of Labette County from 1921-1954. Children of that era attended the school five days a week for their elementary school years. The act of going to school has been and continues to be the most dominant activity of the emotional, intellectual and physical development of children. For the black children of this era, going daily to a segregated school was perhaps the single most important reinforcement of the separateness in which Society held them.

Though records are scant on the East Side School's physical construction, even less information has been retained as to what the African American students of that era were taught in school. Newspaper clippings have been discovered with columns reporting activities at the East Side School and these have shed some light on the typical East Side School day.

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A column entitled "East Side Grade Bugle" with bits of information on the school's academic studies was found attributed to October 1928. It states that the column is "edited by the pupils of the eighth grade." It lists an editorial staff including: Lena Jackson, Editor-in-chief; Helen Parks, Associate Editor; Evaleanor Scott, Personals; Williana Bailey, Sports; Valentine Johnson, Story Telling, and Lorene Brown, Primary Chat. The column includes items of general interest to students and gossip. It details an outing, intermural sports games and more.

Regarding academics, the column expresses gratitude to the school board for the "new tools in the manual training department, also the utensils in the domestic science department." It also mentions their study of arithmetic and a teacher, Miss Bailey.

Another item of academic interest from a 10/12/28 column is "Health hobbies discussed by 5th grade."

On December 6, 1935, the East-Side News column in the Oswego Independent mentions celebration of Education Week at the school. Songs and speeches, both religious and secular, were presented. The children had been studying a "Kansas unit" and presented a Puritan-themed Thanksgiving program.

A 1933 newspaper article invites readers to a show of Captain Clyde and his wonderful Show Boat Minstrels, and entertainment sponsored by "the East Side Schools." It promised an evening of song, dance and play acting, including "spirituals (songs of the southland)," and talented local singers. The show was slated to be held at the high school auditorium on March 10, 1933.

A newspaper report of Oswego School News thought to be dated 1945 includes a column "Eastside School." The text welcomes two pupils back to school -- one was 4th grader Georgella Jackson, who was interviewed for this application. Spelling is mentioned, along with chapels and a newly organized PTA.

Musical performances seemed to be in great evidence in the school always.

Many of the names mentioned in these early accounts are representative of African American families still in the area today: Jackson, Parks, Scott, Johnson, Landis and Cavitt[e].

Information on the African American experience at a segregated grade school may also be gained by conducting oral history interviews. Following are comments by three former students of the school. All are African American; two attended East Side solely prior to integration, the third attended East Side both prior to and following integration with the white population.

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From Mr. Ora D. Walls of Lewisburg, TN, East Side student, 1939-1946:

A few comments on my memories as a student at East Side Grade School, Oswego, Kansas for the school years 39/40 through 45/46.

Getting to school:

We walked to school in all kinds of weather. I cannot remember a day that school was closed due to weather conditions.

Start of Day:

The day started with morning devotion. I don't recall if we had prayer, but we did sing a few songs and had the pledge of allegiance to the flag.

Teachers:

We had two teachers -- one taught the 1st through 4th grade. The other, the 5th through 8th grade. He/she was also the principal.

The relationships between teacher/parents and teacher/students were like a family. In fact, the black community of Oswego was almost like an extended family. Any adult could and would correct any child, and this was expected. As a result, this had a favorable impact on teacher/student relationship.

Discipline:

The most serious infractions were whispering in class or chewing gum in class. Usually punishment was performed by standing in a corner. In a few instances when more stringent methods were necessary, a few taps in the hand with a ruler or a few licks on the legs with a switch. I believe one year a teacher had a paddle. But for the most part, we were pretty well-behaved because if word got to the parent that the child had misbehaved in school, that child was in deep trouble.

Lunch:

We brought our lunch to school usually in lunch boxes -- sometimes a paper bag -- and on rare occasions we would buy some lunch meat, cheese and crackers from the grocery store.

Recreation:

We arrived at school early and played softball. Mid-morning we had recess. Played softball, sometimes football. During the cold winter days we played tag in the basement.

My school days at Oswego East Side were very happy days.

From Georgella Jackson Caldwell of Chetopa, KS, East Side student, 1942-1950:

I attended East Side grade school in Oswego, Kansas, 1942-1950.

I had to walk from West 4th Street to school each day, in bad weather and good.

I had several teachers: Mrs. Odessa Miles, Liz Alexander, Mrs. G. Folks and Mrs. McGee from Coffeyville.

We all helped prepare lunches. Every Friday we had assembly from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. I was always happy at recess. We played softball.

We were given tests from Emporia State College in Emporia, Kansas. We also graduated from eighth grade. I was Salutatorian of the class, and a dear friend of mine, Michael Patterson, was Valedictorian of the class. Five of us graduated from the eighth grade. I was the only girl, so the boys teased me all the time and put my braids in the ink well. I have a lot of good memories of East Side Grade School.

From Floyd Cavitt, Jr. of Oswego, KS, East Side student 1949-1957:

What do I remember about good old Oswego East Side Colored School? (Yes, in those days it was called Oswego Colored School.)

- From kindergarten when we all played and learned our colors and numbers.*
- As I became older in the 4th grade we had our basketball team that was one of the best. We also had our own marching band.*
- No Black history books.*
- The school did not have a fire escape until the school became integrated.*
- Some very good teachers that were so good with kids.*
- In the winter time sometimes we had to wear our coats in class because of the cold.*
- I, for one, often wonder why we had two grade schools. Each teacher had so many kids to teach.*
- Playing ball on break time.*
- Eating some very good food at lunch time, that was cooked at good old East Side.*
- For some reason, there were always more girls than boys.*
- In the spring: running track and playing ball.*
- I remember this young lady jumping out of the second floor window. She did not get hurt very bad.*
- After school in the spring we would all get our balls, bats and gloves and wait until some kids would come by and we had some*

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great games.

• Our marching band was very good.

Other than having a family (wife, kids, mother, father, brothers and sisters) some of my most wonderful years in my life were at good old East Side. I can remember going to watch Big Bob Bowers play football for Oswego High School. He was my hero. I told my dad: Some day I will play football like Bob.

Why does Oswego, Labette County, Kansas and America need a Bob Bowers Kansas Black Heritage Museum? Because all people, black and white, should know about black history.

I have three heroes: God, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Big Bob Bowers. My favorite building is good old Oswego East Side. This building should live on forever -- good old Oswego East Side.

African-American Settlement in Labette County

There is not much in the written record which attempts to document the earliest African American residents of Labette County and Oswego. However, if one reads carefully those publications focusing on early white settlers, information on their black counterparts can be gleaned almost "between the lines." It has been made certain, therefore, that African American slaves arrived in the area as early as the white settlers to whom they were bound. Once slavery was abolished free African Americans established farms and households alongside white neighbors throughout the county. This narrative will disclose information about Oswego's early African American community with public education of black children as its focus.

The man acknowledged as Oswego's founding father, John Allen Mathews, moved from Missouri to Kansas at age 26 in the 1850s. He was a licensed blacksmith and trader, friendly with the Native Americans (Osage) of the area. Mathews settled on land at the bluff above the Neosho River in Oswego in what came to be known as "Little Town." Below the bluff was Little Town Indian Village. As early as the white man John Mathews came to Oswego, however, so did his African American slaves come with him.

An early account by Father Paul Ponziglione and Larkin McGhee describes Mathews' property as it appeared in the early 1850s and attests to the presence of African Americans as slaves. They mention a walled and covered spring dug by slave labor (the well still exists) and other buildings on the property including "slave houses."

Despite the growing turmoil over the question of slavery which caused dissent and violence elsewhere in Kansas and especially along the eastern border, according to accounts in the 1967 Oswego Centennial Book, Mathews and his fellow pioneers Father John Schoenmaker and Dr. George Lisle (founder of nearby Chetopa, KS) were friendly and influential with the approximately 5,000 Osage Native Americans in whose midst they had settled; they were able to maintain neutrality to the slavery issue among them.

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However, another account in the same publication goes on to detail skirmishes and raids, especially one at Humboldt, Kansas in 1861, over the slavery issue in which Mathews was suspected of involvement. Indeed he was shot to death in 1861 by Union soldiers from Fort Scott who pursued him as a dangerous Confederate sympathizer. The slavery issue did indeed touch Oswego.

In 1866, an African American man named Dairy Nero purchased property near Oswego and became the first of his race to own land in the area.

In Nelson Case's "History of Labette County, Kansas and Representative Citizens," it is noted that in April of 1870, a stagecoach brought word to Oswego that African American men had been granted the right to vote. Case writes that "the colored men in Oswego were informed of their rights, marched to the polls, the election being then in progress, where they deposited their ballots." Readers may find the verb "marched" an interesting choice by Case! Case goes on to say that Spencer Jones of Oswego was the first African American in the county and one of the first in the state to exercise the right of suffrage.

There are a few accounts in historical documents that discuss an African American "exodus" from the south following the Civil War. Beginning in 1879, many former slaves began to move north and relatively sparsely populated Kansas was a destination. This mass migration, or exodus, from the former slave-holding South (particularly Texas and Tennessee) saw many new African American arrivals in Kansas. In describing these African American "exodusters," an early account published by the Oswego Independent and reprinted in the Independent's Semi-Centennial Celebration booklet had this to say:

All who then came, except the comparatively young children, had been slaves, and had the manners, the expression of respect for a great position the difference to the white race, which were incident to slavery. Quite generally both men and women were good workers, but some of them were as lazy and worthless as the few whites who go under the designation of white trash.

....and regarding education:

The colored children were at once admitted to the public schools, but were usually assigned to rooms by themselves and entirely separated from the whites. I am sorry to say that education has not done for them all we had hoped it would. The younger generation of the negroes who have lived here have not as a rule been as industrious, as virtuous, as reliable as their parents were. I do not by any means wish to be understood as saying this of all of them, for a number have been a credit to themselves, their family and their race. As a whole their condition has been wonderfully improved in every respect.

Case's "History of Labette County..." discussed the new arrivals as well:

In the fall of 1879 the "exodus" began, and hundreds of colored people...arrived in the county. Chetopa, Oswego and Parsons were almost overrun by them. Their coming was unexpected, and no provision for their care and comfort had been made. Buildings for shelter could not be procured. They were mostly without means, destitute of everything like comfortable clothing,

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and in a good condition to appeal strongly to the sympathies of charitable people. Rough board sheds were erected and made as comfortable as could be, in which large numbers were housed for that winter. During the next year or two others came in, until the number of colored people formed quite a large percentage of the population of the cities named. Quite a number also were scattered over the county, more especially in the river bottom.

Writing this account for publication in 1901, Case stated at that date "a very great improvement has been made in their condition both intellectually and financially, and there are now among the colored people many well-to-do families..."

However, the situation did not improve much until sometime after 1885, according to an unpublished paper written by local historian Wayne O'Connell, entitled "We have so much yet to uncover, concerning Labette County early history." O'Connell writes of a big flood which occurred the summer of 1885, directly affecting local African Americans who had largely settled on river bottom land below the Neosho River bluff northeast of Oswego. As the Neosho River fled its course and overflowed its banks, cabins floated away and livestock was drowned. O'Connell states that Oswego's white residents brought the newly homeless African Americans into town, providing the land north of 3rd Street -- present-day county fairgrounds, Riverside Park and Camp Siesta -- for them. This area, according to O'Connell, came to be known in slang terms as "Chitlin' Ridge."

"First Century of Education in Labette County," published by the Kansas State Teachers Association in 1963, has this to say about the education of the town's African American population:

In the elementary grades the white and colored students were provided with separate buildings and instructors. The first building for the colored students was erected at the corner of third and Iowa Streets, known as Eastside. It was torn down and the structure which now stands on the same location was erected in 1921 at a cost of \$19,000. The two elementary schools integrated in the fall of 1954.

It has not yet been made clear whether, prior to 1921, black students completing grade school remained for their high school classes in the East Side School, or joined the white high school students at the West Side building.

Floyd Cavitt recalls his grandmother, Zella Jackson, an early Oswego resident, as describing the old wood East Side building as being in "falling down" condition, without indoor plumbing. Ms. Jackson told him the building came to be in such a deplorable state that parents complained to the School Board. Mr. Cavitt conjectures that African Americans made up a larger proportion of the population at that time and their collective voice was loud and the Board took action.

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Verbal Boundary Description

Legal: Lots 7-18, Block 16, Subdivision A 1 Oswego Original City.

The lot on which the building is situated is bordered by four city streets. The building faces the street to the west, Iowa Street. On the north the lot is bordered by 2nd Street; on the south, by 3rd Street. Indiana Street delineates the eastern side of the lot.

Boundary Justification

The building is located on its original lot, which has been divided into east and west halves by the city, and original boundaries follow platted lot lines.

Photographs

East Side School
Oswego, Labette County, KS
Robin Oldham
April 2002
Kansas State Historical Society

1/7 east view, west facade
2/7 southeast view, west facade, north elevation
3/7 west view, east elevation
4/7 first floor classroom, west view
5/7 first floor classroom, east view
6/7 stairwell, west view
7/7 basement classroom, west view