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Trail Highlights Rich African American History in Kansas

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TRAIL HIGHLIGHTS RICH AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY IN KANSAS

"The belief that Kansas was founded for a cause distinguishes it, in the eyes of its inhabitants, as preeminently the home of freedom."

Carl Becker, "Kansas" (1910)

Kansas has an abundance of amazing African American history. An enjoyable way to learn about it is to hop in the car and follow the Kansas African American History Trail.

The Kansas African American Museum in Wichita in 2016 garnered an exciting opportunity to celebrate Kansas history, to inform and educate, and to honor individuals — African American *and* white — whose hopes, dreams, courage and determination helped formulate, create and anchor the American dream of equal opportunity for all. That year, the museum succeeded in getting a grant of nearly \$135,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to fund development of the Kansas African American History Trail. The trail was ready to go in 2019.

Each of the eight sites or institutions on the trail tells a unique and important story:

The **National Historic Site in Nicodemus** honors freed slaves from Kentucky who ventured to Kansas in 1877 in hopes of establishing a new beginning of independence and freedom.

The **Historic Ritchie House** in Topeka, the home of John and Mary Ritchie, served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Ritchies supported racial equality and equal rights for women. John Ritchie helped write the free-state constitution that brought Kansas into the Union in 1861.

The **Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site** in Topeka is the only national park dedicated to the U.S. Supreme Court decision that ended legal segregation in public schools. The historic site is located in the former Monroe Elementary School, which was one of four segregated elementary schools for African Americans in Topeka.

Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area, a nonprofit headquartered in Lawrence, is dedicated to building awareness of the struggles for freedom in western Missouri and eastern Kansas. In the nonprofit's upstairs display rooms, visitors learn about the critical points of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and how it pushed the country toward Civil War.

The **Richard Allen Cultural Center and Museum** in Leavenworth, which honors African

American history in that city, is in the former home of U.S. Army Capt. William Bly, a Buffalo Soldier during World War I. An addition to the home displays items and artifacts teaching about African American history in Kansas.

The **John Brown Museum** in Osawatomie addresses the foundational story about the establishment of Kansas as a free state and highlights Brown's leadership in assisting enslaved people to freedom.

The **Gordon Parks Museum** in Fort Scott celebrates this internationally known photographer, filmmaker, writer and musician. Parks was the first African American photographer for LIFE magazine and the first African American filmmaker to direct a movie, "The Learning Tree," for a major Hollywood studio. The museum's collection includes many of his famous photographs. Parks, along with his parents and two of his children, are buried in Fort Scott's Evergreen Cemetery.

The mission of the **Kansas African American Museum** in Wichita is to make the Kansas African American experience resonate with every Kansan, regardless of race. The museum is the premier home of Kansas African American history and artifacts. It owns a collection of African American contemporary art and African masks and statuary valued at over \$1 million. For those interested in scholarly research, the museum offers a sizable archive relating to African Americans.