

Black History Month – Education in St. Joseph Week 2 – Feb. 8-12, 2021

The black community of St. Joseph developed in three distinct areas of the town. The bulk of the African American population was in the area around Eighteenth Street, north of Messanie. In 1869, the number of black schoolchildren in St. Joseph was just shy of 200.

The beginning of public education in Missouri dates back to the Missouri Enabling Act of 1820. In 1861, St. Joseph became the second city in the state to open a public high school when a group of citizens obtained a charter from the state and the newly formed Board of Public Education invited Professor Edward Neely to conduct a public high school in his academy building at 111 N Tenth St.

Section one of the charter stated: “All free white persons residing within the limits of school district number one, school township eight in Buchanan County...., are hereby constituted a body politic by the name and style of, the St. Joseph Public Schools...”

The Civil War disrupted local education functions, and upon its conclusion legislators enacted the Drake Constitution banning the practice of slavery and providing for the resumption of public education for all persons in the state between the ages of 5 and 21. Under this system there was to be no charge, with buildings constructed and paid for by taxation.

The law provided for separate schools for black children when their numbers in a township exceeded 20 children. The 1875 census listed 570 school-aged black children in the district and as a result, the St. Joseph district provided for elementary education for colored students in a number of rented buildings.

The earliest African American school in town was secured just prior to 1870, in the northern part of the city, on Fourth Street. In 1887, one school was constructed for black students in the north end of town and named after Abraham Lincoln. High school education was a requirement of the Drake Constitution and the first colored high school was a rented room on the northeast corner of 20th & Frederick Ave. In 1887, the district secured property at 18th & Angelique Streets and a year later a new ‘Colored High School’ was built at that site, to serve black children living south of Frederick Ave.

Next week we will look at the education system that was offered African American children in St. Joseph.

Source: Gary S. Wilkinson