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To Merge Them In the Start of Superior Journeys: Community Identity, Education, and the Struggle for Citizenship Rights in North Webster, Missouri, 1865 - 1952

Lara Katherine Kuehling
University of Missouri-St. Louis, lkp6d@umsl.edu

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To Merge Them in the Start of Superior Journeys:

Community Identity, Education, and the Struggle
for Citizenship Rights in North Webster, Missouri,
1865 - 1952

Lara K. Kuehling

B.S.Ed., Secondary Social Studies Education, University of Missouri – St. Louis, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri –
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Master of Arts in History

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Advisory Committee

Priscilla Dowden-White, Ph.D.
Chairperson

Laura Westhoff, Ph.D.

Debra Cohen, Ph.D.

DEDICATION

To my grandparents:
Helen Kuehling
Lorraine Mattie
Irwin Kuehling
Glen Mattie

ABSTRACT

**TO MERGE THEM IN THE START OF SUPERIOR JOURNEYS: COMMUNITY
IDENTITY, EDUCATION, AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN NORTH WEBSTER,
MISSOURI, 1865 - 1952**

MAY 2014

LARA KUEHLING, B.S.Ed., UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI – ST. LOUIS

Directed by: Professor Priscilla Dowden – White

In this thesis I explore the community of North Webster; an African American suburban community that legally existed from 1865 to 1960 within St. Louis County, Missouri. I argue that North Webster's legal existence was a constant struggle to achieve an ever fuller version of citizenship rights for its residents. A major turning point in this struggle occurred in 1925 when the Webster Groves School Board created a High School department at North Webster's Frederick Douglass Elementary School. Prior to Douglass High School, North Webster was a relatively isolated community that provided education for all residents through eighth grade. After the creation of Douglass High School, North Webster delivered secondary education to all African American students in St. Louis County and became a leader in St. Louis's congregated African American community. By 1949, thirty years of expanded educational opportunity allowed North Webster residents to extend their pursuit of equality into larger societal arenas.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Chapter 1 - Community Development in a Separate World, 1865 – 1925 | 16 |
| Chapter 2 - Congregation and Educational Advocacy, 1925 – 1949 | 30 |
| Chapter 3 - Integration and the Struggle for Full Citizenship, 1949 – 1952 | 46 |
| Conclusion | 57 |
| Bibliography | 63 |

Introduction

Within the last three decades, there has been a renewed interest in North Webster - a historic African American suburban community that once existed within St. Louis County, Missouri. Efforts began in 1993 with the release of the book, *North Webster: A Photographic History of a Black Community*, in which longtime resident Henrietta Ambrose, and archivist, Ann Morris, described and visually presented the people and places that characterized the community. Shortly after its release, the Webster Groves Historical Society hosted a North Webster exhibit at the Hawken House, the Society's house museum. Since then, the *Webster-Kirkwood Times* has released several articles about North Webster's sports teams, school, and racial struggles.¹ While there have been efforts to "remember" the people and places of North Webster, no attempt to date has been made to understand the community from which memories of them derive. Furthermore, time and again, remembrances and tributes to North Webster repeat the same historical account, rendering the community's history simplistic and one-dimensional.² Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in relation to the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement, said:

¹ Bill Coats, "Grads of Blacks-Only Reminisce," *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (February 20, 2009). Accessed December 1, 2012 < http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/grads-of-blacks-only-school-reminisce/article_934a6e42-70d2-5c19-b60e-427cc99db14c.html>; Fran Mannino. "Swimming Against the Status Quo," *The Webster – Kirkwood Times* (February 17, 2006) Accessed October 7, 2013 < <http://www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com/Articles-i-2006-02-17-170647.113118-Swimming-Against-The-Status-Quo.html#axzz2h2jrBKSC>>; Fran Belz. "Benny Gordon Jr. Dies: Long Time Activist In Webster Community," *Webster – Kirkwood Times* (Webster Groves, MO) January 31, 2003. Accessed October 7, 2013. <<http://www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com/Articles-i-2003-01-31-176424.114137-Benny-Gordon-Jr-Dies-Long-Time-Activist-In-Webster-Community.html#axzz2h2jrBKSC>>Fran Belz, "The Indefatigable & Upbeat Benny Gordon," *The Webster - Kirkwood Times* (Webster Groves, MO) October 25, 2002. Accessed October 7, 2013

² Ann Morris and Henrietta Ambrose. *North Webster: A Photographic History of a Black Community*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); "Tribute to Douglass High School," *Webster Groves School District* (February 13, 2012) Accessed April 7, 2014. < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6mJ0yaZ5_8>

Yet remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement – distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various other artifacts of mass culture – distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals.³

Regardless of intent, recent efforts to “remember” North Webster have simplified, packaged, and utilized North Webster’s history as means to reduce the power of the community’s past.

In this thesis, I challenge the traditional narrative of North Webster and attempt to present a more complicated and significant version of its past. I argue that North Webster’s existence, from origin in 1865 to annexation in 1960, was a constant struggle to achieve an ever fuller version of citizenship rights for its residents. A major turning point in this struggle occurred in 1925 when the Webster Groves School Board created a High School department at North Webster’s Frederick Douglass Elementary School. Prior to the creation of Douglass High School North Webster was a relatively isolated community that provided education for all residents through eighth grade. After the creation of Douglass High, North Webster delivered secondary education to all African American students in St. Louis County. Because of Douglass High School’s existence and excellence, North Webster became a leader in St. Louis County’s congregated African American community, and by 1949, was able to extend their pursuit of equality into larger societal arenas.

The term “congregation,” introduced by historian Earl Lewis, refers to a culturally and politically empowering experience, cultivated through the development of extensive

³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, (March 2005) Vol. 91, Issue 4, p 1233.

kin and friendship networks. In his book, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia*, Lewis juxtaposed congregation and segregation, noting that segregation represented the “imposition of another’s will,” but that congregation in a Jim Crow environment created space within which African Americans could gather the cultural bearings necessary to mold their environment.⁴ St. Louis County’s congregated African American community consisted of several small communities, divided by distance and class, but united by education and the segregated experience.

My use of the term “citizenship rights” refers to the bundle of political, social, and economic rights due to all citizens of the United States which allows them to experience life as civilized beings. Throughout their existence, North Webster residents demanded citizenship rights from the suburban space in which they lived and from Webster Groves, the neighboring white municipality. North Webster’s demand strategy was used consistently throughout their existence; however, residential actors and the ways in which they conveyed demands changed over time.

Also central to this analysis is the concept of community identity. The term “community identity” is used to describe a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which a community is recognizable as a group. Although North Webster eventually played a leading role in St. Louis County’s congregated African American community, elements of their identity were always connected to the affluent white community of Webster Groves. North Webster’s dual affiliations with both Webster Groves and St.

⁴ Earl Lewis. *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 90 – 93.

Louis County's congregated African American community produced a complex and unique identity that still persists to this day.

Historiographical Foundations & Primary Sources

This thesis draws on a body of evolving literature which explores the intersection between urban and suburban development, African American public schooling, and racial segregation during the Jim Crow era. Suburban development, in particular, was consulted because North Webster was a suburban community, whose physical and cultural reality, at times, differed greatly from communities in urban and rural areas. African American public schooling was also considered, as it played an important role in North Webster's personal development and status among other communities in the metropolitan area. Finally, a diverse range of work concerning racial segregation was consulted in an effort to relate North Webster's experiences to that of other African American communities across the region and the country.

Historian Kenneth T. Jackson defined suburbanization as a uniquely American phenomenon that signified the shift of American society from urban to suburban areas during the decades following World War II. In his book, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Jackson asserted that the phenomenon was driven by the desire for more land, the suspicion of urban areas, interracial tensions, and unrestricted land use. While Jackson provided a thorough and thoughtful analysis of a particular portion of the American population at a distinct time, his definition and

description was limited to the decades between 1940 and 1980, and ignored the involvement of African Americans.⁵

Historian Andrew Wiese attempted to fill the gaps left by Jackson's study in his book, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, where he observed the development of African American suburbs across the country from the Civil War to present day. Wiese argued that many early unplanned African American communities emerged for the same reasons as planned white suburbs later in the century. Recent freedmen were either drawn or forced to the fringes of urban areas by discrimination, employment, and the desire to own property.⁶ Wiese also asserted that African American suburbs straddled the divide between urban and rural, often employing distinguishing aspects of both community types.

Historians of segregated education in the South emphasize that education was viewed by southern politicians and educational leaders as a way to transform the postwar society, economy, and political system. White Southern society used educational programs and institutions to fulfill, shape, and achieve an image of the New South. However, it was through cracks in these programs that African Americans provided children with quality education and guidance that oftentimes contradicted the goals of the ruling race. Although the literature regarding African American education during the Jim Crow era is comprehensive, existing literature ignores the educational experience in African American suburban communities and instead focuses on urban or rural areas.

⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 1 – 17.

⁶ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 11 – 34.

In the book, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860 – 1935*, historian James Anderson argued that contrary to popular belief, the industrial education movement was designed to appease the African American communities' educational calls while securing their position within a strict social hierarchy.⁷ Although Anderson acknowledged the relative success of these campaigns, he asserted that some African American communities wielded considerable control and influence over their local educational institutions, which resulted in high quality education.⁸ Historian James Leloudis agreed with Anderson in his work, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880 – 1920*. Leloudis argued that the emergence of the New South, directly and indirectly reflected the professionalization of education, facilitating a transition from the common to a graded school system. He asserted that white leaders viewed segregated education as an opportunity to prepare young residents for their respective places in a new economic society. On the other hand, African American educational leaders saw the push for industrial and manual training institutions as an opportunity to receive funding for and autonomy over schools.⁹

These concepts were further explored from an African American perspective by historian Vanessa Siddle Walker in *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*. In her book, Siddle Walker argued that African American communities acquired educational opportunities by purposely manipulating state and local requirements for funding. Once obtained, inconsistencies in state oversight both forced and allowed African American community members to become deeply

⁷ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860 – 1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 199, 202 – 205.

⁸ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 279 – 285.

⁹ James Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880 – 1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 21 – 24, 32 – 35.

involved with local institutions.¹⁰ Chronic school board neglect often rendered African American schools poor in financial resources, but rich in human capital, as educators and community members expected and demanded educational excellence from themselves and the students.

Scholars concerned with intended and unintended consequences of racial segregation have expanded their purview to include a variety of periods and topics. Recent studies looked specifically at the creation of segregated institutions and the role of public facilities in the struggle for equality. In her book, *Groping Toward Democracy: African American Social Welfare Reform in St. Louis, 1910 – 1949*, historian Priscilla Dowden-White looked closely at the role of community-organizing and organizations in the creation of St. Louis's segregated social institutions, such as Sumner High School and Homer G. Phillips Hospital. She found that through the “manipulation of public culture” community members and organizations were able to wrestle concessions from the St. Louis City government that improved the lives of African American residents. At the same time, these concessions exposed inherent contradictions between institutionalized segregation and the “community as a whole idea,” which was a central organizing principle of the interwar era.¹¹ Dowden-White's book looked critically at the part African Americans played in the creation of segregated institutions; taking into consideration important factors such as population, franchise, and the struggle for upward mobility in a discriminatory society.

¹⁰ Vanessa Siddle Walker. *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 32 – 35, 215 – 219.

¹¹ Priscilla A. Dowden-White. *Groping Toward Democracy: African American Social Welfare Reforms in St. Louis, 1910 – 1940*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011.) 1 – 21.

While, Dowden–White, focused on interwar period efforts to create African American institutions, in his book, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, historian Jeff Wiltse focused on efforts to integrate public institutions, namely swimming pools. As a major site of cultural production and community prestige, Wiltse argued that the segregation of public swimming pools, in particular, represented the alienation of African Americans from mainstream American life. In addition, reasons for pool segregation were driven by more insidious forms of racial discrimination, such as miscegenation and eugenics. Attempts to desegregate public swimming pools throughout the 1940s and 1950s were significant acts designed not just to desegregate public space, but to dismiss the irrational and inaccurate racial beliefs that fueled institutionalized segregation.¹²

Overall, historical literature regarding African American suburban communities continues to evolve. While Jackson and Wiese’s works have provided the groundwork for further analysis into black and white suburbanization, future studies will further reveal the contribution of suburban communities to the American historical narrative. The current historiography of segregated African American education in the South during the Jim Crow era is comprehensive. So far, however, the historiography primarily concerns rural and urban students, and excludes the experiences of African Americans living in suburban communities. Lastly, scholars continuously attempt to escape the traditional and misshapen narrative of the classic civil rights movement. Recent works, such as Dowden–White’s *Groping Toward Democracy*, add levels of complexity to the existing historiography, and present civil rights as inextricable from the African American

¹² Jeff Wiltse. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 1 – 7, 121 – 154.

experience. This thesis aims to expand upon and further connect prior discussions by considering the impact that segregated institutions had on the African American communities' struggle to achieve broader citizenship rights in suburbia.

Several primary sources were consulted in the creation of this thesis. However, I relied most heavily upon School Board Minutes from the Webster Groves School District and United States Census records. Webster Groves School Board minutes, housed at the district's central office, provided a chronological framework for my analysis, and shed light on the relationship between the district and the community of North Webster. United States Census Records furnished essential information regarding the economic and educational evolution of North Webster. Because the records indicated race, literacy, education level, and profession, a thorough analysis of the records over time allowed me to discern subtle and drastic changes that occurred within the area.

For the purposes of observing public opinion, I consulted the historic newspaper collections of: the Missouri State Historical Society, St. Louis County Public Library, the University of Missouri – St. Louis, and the Webster Groves Library. News outlets such as, *The St. Louis Argus*, *The St. Louis Post Dispatch*, and *The Webster News Times*, allowed me to understand evolving public sentiment and developments in Webster Groves and St. Louis County's general and educational history.

Archival collections from The Missouri State Archives in Jefferson City, The Webster Groves Historical Society, and the Missouri State Historical Society supplied countless primary sources. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education collection at the Missouri State Archives provided essential data regarding student enrollment, demographics, institutional distinctions, and evolving public school

law. The Ann Morris Collection at the Webster Groves Historical Society contained several photographs, personal scrap books, and informal histories. Finally, the Henrietta Ambrose Collection at the Missouri State Historical Society included a copy of the 1935 *Douglass Oracle*, Douglass High School's periodic yearbook.¹³ This source, more so than any other, shed light on the inner workings and culture of the school. The Ambrose collection also contained significant documents such as Douglass graduation announcements, valedictorian records, a program from the Missouri State Association of Negro Teachers, and more informal histories.

Chapter one considers the early formation period of North Webster from 1865 to 1925. Within this chapter, I argue that North Webster's suburban space met early residents' citizenship demands of home ownership and relative control over their daily lives. From suburban North Webster, residents could demand of themselves and their land rights not always available in urban and rural locations. While in many ways North Webster was independent and geographically isolated during this time, the community did have modest connections to other African American communities through kinship, employment, religion, and education that were amplified after the creation of Douglass High School.

Chapter two explores North Webster's community development from 1925 through 1949. In this period, I argue that the creation of Douglass High School marked a major turning point in North Webster's struggle for citizenship rights. Prior to Douglass High, North Webster was a relatively isolated community that provided education for all residents through eighth grade. After the creation of Douglass High School, North

¹³ After speaking with several Douglass Alumni, it seemed Douglass only created and printed yearbooks when money was available. Yearly additions were uncommon. One alumnus asserted that a yearbook was printed every three or four years.

Webster delivered secondary education to all African American students in St. Louis County and became a leader in St. Louis County's congregated African American community. North Webster capitalized on the educational opportunity afforded by Douglass High and demanded excellence from the faculty, students, and the Webster Groves School Board.

Chapter three critically examines North Webster's struggle to integrate public recreational facilities in Webster Groves, which occurred from 1949 to 1952. In this chapter, I argue that a thirty year period of secondary educational opportunity changed North Webster residents' expectations of their citizenship rights and the way in which they conveyed their demands. In addition, the timing of North Webster's struggle to integrate public recreational facilities in Webster Groves exemplified a growing racial consciousness between congregated communities within the St. Louis metropolitan area.

Chapter 1: Community Development in a Separate World, 1865 - 1925

To observe and understand North Webster's development over time, it is first essential to clearly understand the creation and early identity of the community. This chapter will explore the formation of North Webster from 1865 to 1925. During this period, I argue that early North Webster residents demanded social and economic citizenship rights from North Webster's suburban location. They expressed demands through home ownership and the construction of a distinct social culture, which emerged because of North Webster's relatively isolated geographical location. However, throughout this period, North Webster's identity included connections to other African American communities through kinship, employment, religion, and education. As we will see in later chapters, North Webster's connections to other African American communities, especially in St. Louis County, amplified after the accreditation of Douglass High School in 1932.

Early African American Suburban Communities in St. Louis County

North Webster was a black suburban community located within St. Louis County, Missouri that existed from 1865 until 1960.¹⁴ Formed shortly after the Civil War, North Webster was initially inhabited by former slaves who were either given land or purchased land near their former masters.¹⁵ My use of the term "suburb" is influenced by historian, Andrew Wiese, who defines suburbs as "referring to incorporated and

¹⁴ "City Wins Annexation Suit," *Webster Advertiser*, (April 4, 1963): 4.

¹⁵ John A. Wright. *St. Louis: Disappearing Black Communities* (Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2004) 2, 7 – 14; Morris, et.al. *North Webster*, 13, 20 -21

unincorporated places on the outskirts but outside the limits of a larger city.”¹⁶ North Webster was just ten miles from St. Louis City, and immediately neighbored Webster Groves, long considered the premiere commuter suburb of St. Louis County during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁷ Prior to 1896, the area we now recognize as Webster Groves was a conglomeration of legally separate predominately rural communities known as: Webster, Old Orchard, Webster Park, Tuxedo Park, and Selma.¹⁸ For a brief time before the annexation and certainly after it, the new Webster Groves enthusiastically portrayed itself as a residential getaway for St. Louis City elite rather than a rural community. An 1892 advertisement campaign by the Webster Real Estate Company declared Webster Park as “The Queen of the Suburbs, offering large homes in a country-like

atmosphere just a short 10 miles from the heart of the city.”¹⁹

Small African American communities developed in unincorporated pockets of land in every cultural area of St.

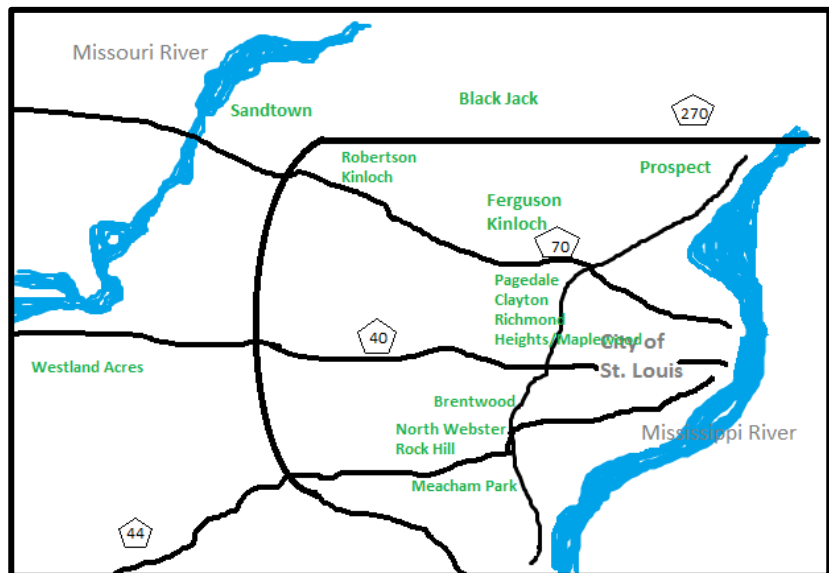


Figure 1 – Historic Black Neighborhoods in St. Louis County
Created by the author.

¹⁶ Wiese, *Places of Their Own*, 3 – 22..

¹⁷ *Webster: Queen of the Suburbs*. Webster Park, MO: Kilgen – Rule, 1892.

¹⁸ Smart, Clarissa. *Webster Groves*. (Webster, MO: Webster Groves Historical Society, 1975) 63 – 73.

¹⁹ *Webster: Queen of the Suburbs*. (Webster Park: Kilgen – Rule, 1892) 14.

Louis County, as seen in *Figure 1*. Although the exact number of African American communities that have existed since 1865 is unknown, historian John A. Wright described fourteen well known historic black communities in his book, *St. Louis: Disappearing Black Communities*.²⁰ Northern communities included: Blackjack, Sandtown, Robertson, Bridgeton, Ferguson, Kinloch, and Prospect Hill, Missouri. Central county communities included: Pagedale, Clayton, Richmond Heights, and Maplewood, Missouri. Southern communities included: Meacham Park (Kirkwood), North Webster, and Brentwood. Finally, Westland Acres remains the only documented western community. Most remained small, as white suburbanization at the turn of the century increased legalized housing discrimination and limited available unincorporated land. Despite the absence of modern conveniences, many African American residents were drawn to North Webster by the promise of home ownership and independence from white society.

Large distances and inefficient intra-county travel left many African American communities relatively self-contained and isolated for most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.²¹ While there was adequate transportation to and from the City of St. Louis, intra-county travel, in the form of roads and rail lines were difficult and sometimes primitive. Historian William A. Thomas, in his 1911's *History of St. Louis County Missouri*, described several recurring road issues within the county, such as the maintenance of newly constructed roads, generation of revenue, and building roads to

²⁰ Wright, *St. Louis: Disappearing Black Communities*, 7 – 14.

²¹ Wright, *Disappearing Black Communities*, 1 – 10; Morris et al., *North Webster*, 1 – 47.

reach remote rural municipalities.²² Several suburban and rural areas of St. Louis County did not receive adequate road access until the 1950s with the implementation of the Federal Aid Highway Act and significant suburbanization in the 1960s and 1970s.²³

St. Louis County was also home to several railroad lines that primarily connected the semi-rural county with the City of St. Louis. Due to commuter needs rapid transit to and from St. Louis City was advanced; however, intra-county travel remained time consuming and costly. Although possible for African American county residents to travel by railroad to almost all areas of St. Louis County, because each line serviced a different cultural area, railroad travel often required several layovers and line changes. In Thomas's *History of St. Louis County*, he gave a detailed account of the seven separate rail companies functioning within St. Louis City and County. However, according to his description, only Wabash, Rock Island, and Missouri Pacific made direct contact with known historic black communities.²⁴

Due to geographical isolation, each African American community in St. Louis County had their own institutions, events, and economies.²⁵ Distance and self-sustainability caused many African American communities in St. Louis County to perceive themselves and be viewed by others as distinct. Community distinction was observable in the metropolitan regions' leading African American newspaper, *The St. Louis Argus*. Mid-way through each issue was the "News From Other Places" section where African American communities reported weekly developments. This section

²² William Thomas, *History of St. Louis County* (St. Louis, MO: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1911), 236.

²³ "The Federal Aid Highway Act," Missouri Department of Transportation, Accessed July 14, 2013. < <http://www.modot.org/interstate/MissourisInterstateHistory.htm> >

²⁴ Thomas, *History of St. Louis County*, 230.

²⁵ Wright, *Disappearing Black Communities*, 1 – 10; Morris et al., *North Webster*, 1 – 47.

included reports from out-of-state communities, as well as contained weekly reports from the following individual communities in St. Louis County: Webster Groves, Kirkwood, Ferguson, Kinloch, and Pagedale. The distance between Webster Groves and Kirkwood, Missouri is barely two miles; the fact that they neglected to collaborate on an article makes it apparent that the two considered themselves, and wanted others to regard them as distinct.

North Webster's Physical Landscape and Early Institutions

Like most early African American suburbs, North Webster was unplanned, and for much of its existence physically resembled the rural South. Morris and Ambrose described the early community as “old and rundown...with dirt roads and privies.”²⁶ For several decades there was a chronic lack of basic infrastructure, like paved streets and electricity. In addition, North Webster was home to two creeks whose annual flooding often threatened homes and caused illnesses such as typhoid.²⁷ The majority of early North Webster homes were cottage like structures, sometimes referred to as “shacks,” built with found materials by their owners. In a 1974 interview, longtime resident Hallie Ewing discussed her childhood North Webster home:

My parents moved into their home when I was a baby, a lovely log house with white plaster between the logs. A lovely frame porch in the front with honeysuckle vines at each end. My father built a walk that led down to the country road. One half mile from our home was a public well. When family cisterns went, they could come and get water.²⁸

²⁶ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 2 – 5.

²⁷ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 26.

²⁸ Hallie Ewing, *In Retrospect II: Webster Groves, Missouri*. (Webster Groves: Webster High School, 1979) 6-8. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 47. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

African Americans were able to purchase land in North Webster because of its unincorporated legal status, which meant North Webster was free from race restrictive housing covenants and deeds that often restricted housing for African Americans in other parts of St. Louis.²⁹

North Webster was home to several churches and a segregated elementary school, Frederick Douglass Elementary. The First Baptist Church of Webster Groves, First Congregational, Emmanuel Episcopal, and Webster Groves Presbyterian were all founded in 1866. According to Morris and Ambrose, Douglass Elementary was also established in 1866 by a white English woman known only as Mrs. Dotwell. Folklore has it that on behalf of the Federal government Dotwell traveled the country throughout the 1860s creating and organizing African American schools. Two years after its founding, the Webster Groves School Board was established and immediately inherited institutional responsibility of the school that remained unnamed until 1895.³⁰

Prior to the creation of Douglass High School, North Webster residents and Douglass administrators often attended Webster Groves School Board meetings to publically demand educational opportunities for themselves and their children. Two particular instances that occurred in 1901 and 1902 demonstrated North Webster's demands for citizenship rights. First, in 1901, North Webster residents resisted the appointment of a new, seemingly highly qualified principal at Douglass School. Second, in 1902, a group of North Webster residents approached the school board to demand equal treatment under school policy.

²⁹ Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 1- 39.

³⁰ Ann Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 5 – 6, 11 – 15.

In 1901, delegations from North Webster attended nine separate school board meetings to seek information and make educational requests regarding a man named Professor G.H.L Nelson. Nelson was an elusive figure in North Webster History. He was scarcely mentioned in Ann Morris and Henrietta Ambrose's work, *North Webster*, and other secondary sources fail to mention him at all.³¹ The only information regarding Nelson comes from a 1910 *Webster News Times* article. According to the article, Nelson was a Springfield, Illinois native who immigrated to Missouri in 1893. He received a diploma from Springfield High School and attended Howard University in Washington D.C., taking special courses in pedagogy and literature. After college, Nelson worked as a clerk in the office of the Illinois State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the United States Treasury Department, and was a U.S. Consul at St. Paul de Loando, Africa. Once in Missouri, he was appointed Conductor of Colored Teachers Institutes and served as a member on the state's Educational and Horticultural Committees before accepting the position of principal at Douglass.³²

In April of 1902, the Webster Groves school board minutes indicated that a "Mrs. Henderson and North Webster Delegates appointed by the colored citizens for themselves," asked the board to approve the appointment of Nelson as the new principal of Douglass School.³³ The motion was unanimously approved by the board, and business was conducted as usual. Just a month later, another delegation of North Webster residents, led by a man named Frank Stone, attended another school board meeting to request that Miss Lulu Farmer, the former principal of Douglass, be reappointed to her

³¹ Morris, et al., *North Webster*, 10.

³² "Webster Groves to be Home of New Paper." *Webster News Times* (May 7, 1910): 4.

³³ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (April 17, 1902), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District* (Webster Groves Missouri)

position. Although no rationale or further description of the event was provided, a small note under the paragraph said, “Professor Nelson was present and talks to the Board after the delegation has gone.”³⁴ Again, in June of 1902, a delegation of North Webster residents appeared, unannounced, at the Board meeting. On this occasion they requested “...information regarding the moral fitness of Mr. Nelson.”³⁵ Why certain North Webster residents suggested the appointment of Nelson, while others questioned his “moral fitness” is unclear. However, the consistency with which residents attended meetings implied some felt entitled to question the decisions of the school board.

In November of 1902 and January of 1903, North Webster residents formally demanded of the Webster Groves School Board, expanded educational opportunity and equal treatment. The first request attempted to improve education through the creation of a night school. The second asked the School Board for equal procedural treatment. School board minutes from November 6th, indicated that Professor Nelson read a letter written by someone other than himself “asking for the establishment of a night school for colored pupils.” No decision was made; instead the issue was delegated to Superintendent W.D. Gore and the “colored teachers.”³⁶ Just a few months later, an unidentified delegation of North Webster residents attended the January 10th, 1903 meeting, and motioned that “the school board creates no separate rules to govern the

³⁴ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (May 10, 1902), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District (Webster Groves Missouri)*

³⁵ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (June 5, 1902), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District (Webster Groves Missouri)*

³⁶ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (November 6, 1902), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District (Webster Groves Missouri)*

colored children.” According to the minutes, the motion was carried unanimously and again turned over to Superintendent W.D. Gore for implementation.³⁷

North Webster clearly desired and publically requested greater control over their schools and expanded educational opportunity. On a daily basis, Douglass elementary was an African American community school subject to the supervision of the Webster Groves School Board. While residents realized that Douglass’s governance was beyond their immediate control, their request for equal policies reflected attempts to improve and make equal their separate educational facility. North Webster residents were not afraid to challenge the Webster Groves School Board, even though their demands and requests were frequently denied.

Citizenship Rights and Suburban Space

African Americans came to St. Louis for a variety of reasons shortly before and during what historians recognize as the first Great Migration, which occurred between 1910 and 1930.³⁸ The city boasted a strong industrial economy, an excellent school system (both for whites and blacks), and a large existing African American population. Although positive attributes were often countered by strict public segregation, housing discrimination, and limited economic opportunities.³⁹ Individuals and families were attracted to St. Louis County’s suburban communities for many of the same reasons. However, suburban living offered levels of cultural and economic independence often

³⁷ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (January 10, 1903), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District* (Webster Groves Missouri)

³⁸ Dowden–White, *Groping Towards Democracy*, 1.

³⁹ James Primm. *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764 – 1980*. (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1900) 1 -10. 225 – 271. Dowden-White, *Groping Toward Democracy*, 5.

missing from urban cities such as minimum intervention by whites on daily life, cheap land, and a relative lack of building restrictions.⁴⁰

The desire and ability to purchase land and build a home was a central feature of many freedmen's definition of citizenship. Historians recognize home ownership as a long deferred goal for African Americans. In the aftermath of the Civil War, property ownership was linked with freedom and the aspiration of former slaves.⁴¹ Home and property ownership also provided the opportunity for upward mobility and economic independence. Many African American suburbanites were able to build "sweat equity" in their homes and on their property through investing in their own labor. In addition, many supplemented their incomes and diet with home farming efforts which provided fresh produce.

In many ways, North Webster was an autonomous community. Within their borders, they could own their homes, operate and frequent local African American owned businesses, and attain some levels of economic independence from wage labor by utilizing property. However, to achieve independence from white landlords, racially discriminative businesses, and a total dependence on wage labor, North Webster was independently responsible for creating and sustaining public services with extremely limited resources. Evidence suggests that a great deal of North Webster's attention and resources were allocated to Douglass Elementary. For example, during the summer of 1913, a group of male residents, led by Charles St. James, manually dug a basement under the school building to create additional classrooms for first, second, and third grade

⁴⁰ Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 68 – 72.

⁴¹ Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 7-9; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 13.

students.⁴² Three years later, residents raised money to wire Douglass for electricity after the Webster Groves School Board refused to make the improvement.⁴³ Other public services came much later. In 1939, in response to a rash of fires that destroyed several homes in the area, residents created the North Webster Volunteer Firefighters Association.⁴⁴

Participation in a Congregated Community

As a suburb, North Webster was founded upon notions of economic and cultural independence from white society. However, it was also connected to and in contact with other African American communities through kinship, employment, religion, and education. These connections included the somewhat geographically isolated community in a larger, congregated network of African Americans across the region. In her research of the St. Louis Urban League, Dowden–White found that “neighborhood work,” or the intent to connect African Americans from various neighborhoods through social institutions, developed and expanded racial consciousness.⁴⁵ Through a more organic process, North Webster residents found themselves connected to and identifying with other African American communities from the St. Louis region and Southern states.

Many early North Webster residents were native Southerners, whose understanding the world was shaped by life in the rural South. Andrew Weise argued that black suburbanites often adapted to the North by recreating southern ways of life in their

⁴² Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 15.

⁴³ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (March 14, 1913), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District* (Webster Groves Missouri)

⁴⁴ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 31.

⁴⁵ Dowden – White, *Groping Toward Democracy*, 201.

new communities.⁴⁶ Census records from the late nineteenth century indicate that several North Webster residents were local freedmen, but the majorities were migrants from Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, and other parts of Missouri. Many residents came from the same Southern communities to live with or near friends and family. For example, Anderson and Anna Morrison moved to North Webster from Searcy, Arkansas in 1870 to be closer to friends and family. Longtime residents, Jacob Esaw and his wife Martha, also migrated from Searcy in 1880 for the same reasons.⁴⁷ Wesley Webster, who owned one of the community's first grocery stores, was originally from Birmingham, Alabama. Long before the store existed, Webster moved to North Webster to work with his father-in-law. In-migration, from surrounding Missouri counties, was also common practice. Frank Stone, a Franklin County native, moved his family to the area in 1898, and Charles Thomas, another grocery store owner, arrived from Washington County shortly after. Both men initiated the move to be closer to distant family members.⁴⁸

North Webster residents also associated with other African American communities through employment and religion. The majority of North Websterites worked on the homes or land of Webster Groves' families. However, a few worked in other parts of St. Louis City and County. Longtime resident Andrew Thomas worked at the Peckham Candy Company in St. Louis City. Charles St. James, another resident, became the janitor of the St. Louis County Courthouse in Clayton, Missouri. Both men

⁴⁶ Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 87 – 88.

⁴⁷ US Census Records, 1880.

⁴⁸ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 7.

commuted via train every day to work alongside white and black employees from other communities around the St. Louis metropolitan region.⁴⁹

In addition, North Webster's religious leaders worked closely with nearby African American communities. Emanuel Cartwright, preacher at the First Baptist Church of Webster Groves, had worked with John Berry Meachum in St. Louis City before moving to North Webster in 1869. After Meachum's death in 1854, Cartwright became preacher of the African Baptist Church, and took over Meachum's riverboat school for blacks on the Mississippi river.⁵⁰ Later in his career, Cartwright helped organize Baptist churches throughout African American communities in St. Louis County, and led the Union Baptist Association, an association of black Baptist churches in eastern Missouri.⁵¹

Lastly, Douglass Elementary provided North Webster students the opportunity to intermingle with African Americans from the Ferguson school district. To date, all historical accounts of Douglass recognize the creation of Douglass High School as significant because it marked the entrance of non-resident pupils to North Webster. According to folklore, it is widely believed that non-resident pupils did not attend Douglass until the 1920s. However, Webster Groves School Board records revealed that non-resident pupils from the Ferguson school district attended Douglass as early as 1900.

The last discussion of the April 3rd, 1902 Webster School Board meeting concerned non-resident African American pupils from the Ferguson School District. Located in North St. Louis County, the community of Ferguson is more than fourteen

⁴⁹ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 4, 7 – 10.

⁵⁰ R.S. Duncan. *A History of the Baptists in Missouri: Embracing An Account of the Organization and Growth of Baptist Churches and Associations*. (St. Louis: Schammel & Company Publishers, 1882) 94 – 100.

⁵¹ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 5.

miles away from Webster Groves. On this occasion, the Board instructed Lulu Farmer, then Principal of Douglass Elementary to “have those pupils being in School Districts where there are Colored Schools, to attend such schools or pay tuition at the regular rate of \$2.00 per student in advance in accordance to laws.”⁵² This statement implies that Ferguson, and perhaps other districts, were sending their African American students to Douglass Elementary long before the creation of Douglass High School. In addition, it also suggests that parents from these districts were sending their children to Douglass because they found their own schools inadequate by comparison.⁵³

As we will see in later chapters, North Webster’s community dynamics changed over time. The early stage of the community’s existence was negotiated by the interplay between independence and congregation. Residents were drawn to North Webster by the opportunity of citizenship rights afforded by home ownership and the ability to recreate better versions of the societies they left behind. At the same time, North Webster was connected to an expanded, congregated network of African Americans throughout the St. Louis region. In subsequent decades, North Webster residents attempted to expand citizenship rights by improving community education. In the process, they deepened their connection to, and became a leader among, the congregated community.

⁵² Webster Groves School Board Minutes (April 3rd, 1902), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District (Webster Groves Missouri)*

⁵³ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (July 3, 1902), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District (Webster Groves Missouri)*

Chapter 2: Congregation and Educational Advocacy, 1925 – 1949



Douglass Graduating Class of 1944 – State Historical Society of Missouri

In this chapter, I explore North Webster's community development from 1925 through 1949 through the creation and progression of Douglass High School. In this period, I argue that Douglass High School marked a major turning point in North Webster's struggle for citizenship rights and in their community identity. Before the creation of Douglass High, an educational ceiling existed within the community that prevented many North Webster residents from attending school beyond eighth grade. In addition, the community was relatively isolated from other African Americans by distance and poor transportation. After Douglass, all interested North Webster residents

could receive a high school education within their own community, and in 1932 were joined by all African American High School students within St. Louis County.

Throughout Douglass's existence North Webster residents demanded academic excellence from themselves and the Douglass faculty by participating in traditional and nontraditional forms of advocacy. The term "advocacy" refers to the active support of something through direct or indirect behavior. My use of the term was influenced by historian Vanessa Siddle Walker who asserted that educational advocacy manifested itself in several forms including: parent participation in the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA), driving students to school, donating manpower, and fundraising.⁵⁴ Academic excellence earned Douglass's accreditation and facilitated the entrance of non-resident African American students from St. Louis County. Because the school served all African American secondary students in St. Louis County, Douglass became a nucleus for St. Louis County's African American congregated community. By extension, North Webster became a leader in the congregated community with a heightened sense of status and pride.

The Creation of Douglass High School

Prior to the creation of Douglass High School, students from North Webster and presumably all municipalities in St. Louis County attended Sumner High School in St. Louis City. Although Sumner enjoyed a relatively new facility and elite reputation, in 1915, writers at the *St. Louis Argus* declared the High School suffered from "bad conditions," which included rapid student population growth and a "degraded moral

⁵⁴ Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential*, 1- 9.

atmosphere.” Observers attributed these bad conditions to the migration of students from Southern states and the employment of substandard teachers who had “outlived their service.”⁵⁵ A growing African American population credited to the Great Migration placed great strain on the school. In 1910, African Americans made up 6.4% of St. Louis’s population. By 1930, they constituted 11.4% and continued to grow in number.⁵⁶ According to Morris and Ambrose, the creation of Frederick Douglass High School followed the perceived deterioration of Sumner in addition to the financial strain of tuition payments.⁵⁷ By 1925, the Webster Groves school district was legally forced to cover 75% of the \$100 tuition payments to Sumner. With almost 40 students enrolled in grades 9 – 12, \$3000 annually was spent to educate their black secondary students.⁵⁸

Although Morris and Ambrose’s assertions regarding Douglass’ origins are supported by primary evidence, they overlooked a significant change in Missouri State School law that took place in 1921. During the legislative session of 1921, state legislatures amended Missouri School Law to include the creation of High Schools for “colored children” and the creation of the Office of the State Negro Inspector of Negro Schools. According to the law any county with a total population between one hundred and two hundred thousand was legally bound to create and fund a high school for African American students within its borders. The law also required that the school be centrally located within county boundaries. The population of St. Louis County in 1920 was

⁵⁵ “Citizens Discuss Bad Conditions at Sumner High,” *The St. Louis Argus*, Vol. VI, No. 18 (May 7, 1915: 1); “What will The Scholl Board Do? The St. Louis Argus. Vol VI No. 8 (June 4, 1915:1); “Negros Flood Northern States.” *The St. Louis Argus*. Vol. VI No. 26 (May 18, 1917: 1); “Three More Schools Needed for Colored.” *The St. Louis Argus*, Vol. VI No. 26 (October 12, 1917: 1).

⁵⁶ Gibson, Campbell and Jay Jung. “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 – 1990.” *United States Census Bureau*. Accessed October 27, 2012.
<<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/twps0076.html> >

⁵⁷ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 13, 19 – 21.

⁵⁸ Webster Groves School Board Minutes (September 27, 1925), Unpublished document, *Webster Groves School District* (Webster Groves Missouri)

already beyond one hundred thousand; Webster Groves, with its large population of 9,474, central location, existing African American community, and elementary school was a perfect fit for the new institution.⁵⁹

The decision to create a High School department at Douglass was handed down, first from the state of Missouri, then to the Webster School Board, and finally to the people of North Webster. This is not to suggest that North Webster residents did not want a high school within their community or that they passively accepted educational change. However, records of the Webster Groves School Board do not indicate that North Webster residents explicitly requested the creation of Douglass High School.

The process to create Douglass High School was slow and incremental. The first freshman class entered in the fall of 1925. According to Douglass's valedictorian records, the school added an additional grade level until a full curriculum was complete in 1929; the year in which the first senior class graduation took place.⁶⁰ Also notable is that a separate high school facility was never built; Douglass High, Middle, and Elementary schools resided in the same building until 1947.

Community Advocacy

Frederick Douglass High School received its accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 1932, making it one of two accredited African

⁵⁹ *Laws of Missouri passed at the session of the Fifty-first General Assembly 1921* (Jefferson City, MO: State of Missouri, 1922) 611 – 615, 640 – 641.

⁶⁰ Ann Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 20 – 21. "Senior Ratings," Unpublished document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 36. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

American High Schools in St. Louis City and County.⁶¹ Accreditation lent legitimacy to the institution and made it a viable alternative to Sumner High School in St. Louis City. In 1928, Douglass school included fifteen teachers and 425 students, with one non-resident student paying tuition. By 1935, there were fifteen High School teachers, and enrollment had increased 100%.⁶² The increase in enrollment was due to an influx of non-resident tuition-paying students. Under the 1921 Missouri school law, African American students without access to local accredited secondary schools had to commute to an institution located in their respective or neighboring county.⁶³ North Webster residents embraced non-resident students as members of the congregated African American community to which they all belonged. North Webster residents also supported the school by participating in the Parents and Teacher Association, which at times provided much needed financial support to the school.

It is difficult to determine which cities sent students to Douglass High School because some did not keep adequate records and others no longer exist. However, informal histories from North Webster residents provide a glimpse into what became an expanded network of African American students. According to an anonymously written “History of Douglass School,” students came from many places and went to great lengths to attend Douglass:

...numerous outlying cities and townships, including Ferguson, Kinloch, Manchester, Chesterfield, Elmwood, House Springs, Pacific, Bridgeton, and Overland. They traveled by their own private means, buses, trains, and carpools.

⁶¹ Ann Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 25.

⁶² Lucy J. Witt, “History of Our School,” *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 12; “Douglass Class Enrollment,” Unpublished Document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 32. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁶³ *Laws of Missouri passed at the session of the Fifty-first General Assembly 1921* (Jefferson City, MO: State of Missouri, 1922) 640 – 641.

Many students moved to North Webster in order to attend Douglass High School. In some cases, students lived with whites, working as domestics to pay room and board so they could reside close to the High School facility.⁶⁴

In addition to the municipalities and counties outlined above, Henrietta Ambrose and Ann Morris asserted that students also came from Berkeley, Richmond Heights, Brentwood, Clayton, Ladue, Florissant, Glencoe, Valley Park, and Washington, Missouri.⁶⁵ Some of the cities and municipalities that sent students to Douglass were located several miles west of city limits; however, some, like Ferguson and Florissant, were geographically closer to Sumner High School, despite being within county limits.

Non-resident students often lived far away and spent additional hours after school participating in extracurricular activities or fraternizing with Douglass students and North Webster residents. Their extended presence placed additional demands on North Webster residents and the Douglass faculty. Former Douglass English teacher Melzetta Brown described:

The students came from all over the St. Louis County area... Teachers at that time had to be parents, counselors, doctors, everything, I mean you had to do everything, really. The parents worked, and when the children had to come so far to school, why we had to see them. We had to provide all the necessary attention that they would have expected.⁶⁶

Brown's statement implies that, because students traveled so far from home to attend school, they were more reliant upon the institution and community than resident students.

Despite additional responsibilities placed upon the North Webster community, sources indicate that residents did not perceive non-resident students as outsiders. In fact,

⁶⁴ "History of Douglass School," Unknown date, Collection 83, 2005 Collection – Ann Morris, Folder 2. Webster Groves Historical Society Archives, Webster Groves, MO.

⁶⁵ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 25.

⁶⁶ Melzetta Brown, "Douglass School," *In Retrospect II*, 9-10.

North Webster residents accepted non-resident students and included them into the larger community. This was supported by a comparison of two yearbooks from segregated Missouri High Schools and the descriptions of former teachers and students. In Douglass's yearbook, *The Oracle*, class pictures included a name and short quotation. In contrast, *The Trojan* yearbook from Frederick Douglass High School in Potosi, Missouri, included pictures of students with their respective city or county of origin.⁶⁷ The absence of county or city stipulation implies that students were not seen in terms of their resident or non-resident status. Melzetta Brown elaborated on the inclusion and effect of non-resident students, "The students were the most cooperative group of High School people Douglass ever had. We were sort of like one big happy family. Everyone tried to help everyone else..."⁶⁸ Brown's statement supports the idea that non-resident students were viewed and treated as community members, despite their resident status.

The introduction of several hundred non-resident students from all over St. Louis and neighboring counties, and the ways in which North Webster residents embraced those students, made the community essential advocates of Douglass. In addition, the precedent of shared community that existed prior to accreditation was strengthened and expanded. Relationships that formed between North Webster residents and African American students and parents from other counties furthered the inclusion of North Webster into a congregated network of African Americans.

⁶⁷ *The Trojan*. (Potosi, MO: Potosi School District, 1937) Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 31. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁶⁸ Brown, "Douglass School," *In Retrospect II*, 10.

Faculty Advocacy

Missouri recognized Douglass as a first class institution until its demolition in 1956. According to the *Eighty-Sixth Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri*, a school could earn a first class distinction by maintaining four years of coursework in English, Math, Science, and History, conducting school for nine months of the year, and employing at least three well-educated faculty members. Well-educated meant that “most” faculty members achieved a two-year degree or above.⁶⁹ Advocacy on behalf of the Douglass faculty significantly increased the level of education provided at Douglass. Faculty members accomplished this by continuing their own education, interacting with local and statewide organizations, and supporting student organizations. Through the pursuit of higher education, faculty members provided excellent instruction to students and expanded Douglass’s influence within Missouri’s African American communities. In addition, the Douglass faculty dedicated a great deal of time to student organizations and athletics, which enriched student’s lives and further connected the school with North Webster.

Douglass consistently employed well educated instructors from all over the country. Because Douglass High School’s records were destroyed in 1956, it is difficult to determine the educational levels of all faculty members throughout its existence. However, according to the “Douglass High School Faculty” page of the 1933 *Douglass Oracle* yearbook, five of the eleven faculty members at the time held Bachelor degrees from Lincoln University, Illinois University, Hampton Institute, Illinois State Normal University, and the University of Kansas. The six remaining teachers held two year

⁶⁹ Lloyd W. King, *Eighty- Sixth Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri* (Jefferson City, MO: State of Missouri, 1935)43.

degrees from Wilberforce University, Geneva College, Lincoln University, and Nebraska University.⁷⁰ A 1954 Webster Groves Superintendent Reorganization report showed that six of the eleven 1935 faculty members remained at Douglass, and that most had, by that time, received a bachelor's degree or higher.⁷¹

In addition, many administrators participated in professional activities outside of school. As early as 1917, T.A. Moore, then Principal of Douglass Elementary, was appointed by the State Superintendent of Public Schools to conduct a ten day "institute for colored teachers" in Wellston, Missouri.⁷² Long time Principal and teacher H.B. Goins was a contributing editor to the *Journal of Education*, a Missouri Association of Negro Teachers professional publication.⁷³ Also, *The Argus* reported that during the summer of 1928, he attended workshops at the Illinois Normal School.⁷⁴ That same year, Douglass Principal H.S. Davis attended an unspecified teacher convention in Kansas City.⁷⁵

Douglass faculty participation in extracurricular professional activities continued into the 1940s. In November of 1945, the Missouri State Association of Negro Teachers (MSANT), held a 60th Annual Convention at three different educational institutions within the City of St. Louis. Events took place at Stowe Teachers College, Turner Open Air School, and Washington Technical High School. African American educators from

⁷⁰ "Douglass High School Faculty," *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 13; Unpublished Document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 32. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁷¹ Steger, Leonard. "Superintendent Reorganization Report," *Webster Groves School District*, January 1954. Collection 83, 2005 Collection – Ann Morris, Folder 15. Webster Groves Historical Society Archives, Webster Groves, MO.

⁷² Leola Laird, "Webster Groves, MO: News From Other Places," *The St. Louis Argus*, June 8, 1917.

⁷³ "Staff of the Journal of Education," *The Journal of Education*, *Missouri State Association of Negro Teachers*, Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 30. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁷⁴ "Webster Groves, MO: St. Louis County News," *The St. Louis Argus*, August 31, 1928.

⁷⁵ "Webster Groves, MO: St. Louis County News," *The St. Louis Argus*, November 23, 1928.

all over the state attended the event or presented at one of the many division sessions. MSANT sessions were divided by discipline. In each session, educators from all age groups who were specialists in their respective fields discussed current topics and issues related to the convention's theme: "Education for permanent peace."⁷⁶ Participation in the event was overwhelmingly dominated by two districts: St. Louis City and the Webster Groves School District, of which Douglass was technically a part.

Douglass's role in the convention and the nature of its representatives' participation were significant for two reasons. First, the frequency with which Douglass students and faculty contributed to the event was extensive. For example, Douglass's band played music for both the introduction and conclusion of the event, its instructors participated as panelists and presenters in all but two division sessions, and several of its students presented exhibits or participated in demonstrations. While the significant amount of unfailing participation in the convention spoke to Douglass's geographical location, it also clearly identified the Douglass faculty as educational leaders. Second, the nature of the school's participation (and absence in some key areas) revealed a potentially deliberate attempt to overcome the working class status of North Webster through education.

During the convention, Douglass students and faculty participated in all discipline sessions except two: the Division of Fine Arts and the Division of Household Arts. The absence of Douglass from the Division of Household Arts was particularly meaningful due to the overwhelming occupational dominance of domestic labor in North Webster throughout the twentieth century. From 1910 to 1930, domestic workers comprised

⁷⁶ "Official Program: Missouri State Association of Negro Teachers 60th Annual Convention," 1945, Unpublished Document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 30. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

between 50% and 60% of the total work force in the small community.⁷⁷ In addition, the state of Missouri was also focused on vocational education for white and African American students during this period.⁷⁸

The session category in which Douglass was most heavily represented was the Division of Mathematics. On the first day, Mrs. Mary Ella Tymony delivered a presentation entitled, “Arithmetic for Citizenship.” The next day Mr. D. C. Smith followed up with “Mathematics as Cultural Education,” and then Mr. J. W. Palmer’s “Appreciation of the Power of Mathematics in Developing Civilization” was presented.⁷⁹ The prioritization of math and other classical subjects was reflected in the pages of the *Douglass Oracle*, as student author, Bessie Reeves, described the Douglass curriculum:

The present day education in our schools has higher aims than that of long ago. There are some subjects in our school that students are required to take for they are especially needed if one expects to get far in life. These subjects are, English, Algebra, History, and Science...⁸⁰

Douglass High School strove to prepare students for a different future, one that extended beyond the domestic realm.

In 1937, Lloyd King, Missouri’s State Superintendent of Schools, summarized statistics of “negro high schools” by describing the types of courses offered to students throughout the state. He proudly reported that “Secondary Negro schools are showing progress in emphasizing vocational education. This fits the pupils to better take their

⁷⁷ United States Census, 1910 – 1930. *The United States Government*.

⁷⁸ King, *Eighty-Eighty Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri*, 46 – 48.

⁷⁹ “Official Program: Missouri State Association of Negro Teachers 60th Annual Convention,” 1945, page 14. Unpublished Document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 30. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁸⁰ Bessie Reeves, “Educating In Our School for Present and Future Needs,” *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 52; Unpublished Document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 32. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

place in society.”⁸¹ From there he distinguished between home-economic, industrial, and commercial programs. Although Douglass High School was located within the heart of St. Louis County’s largest domestic service suburb, the school was noted only in King’s commercial program description. While King did not define commercial education, the Federal Government’s 1931 survey of education defined it as relating to the expanding consumer economy and provided examples such as advertising, business, sales, and secretarial work.⁸² A glimpse of Douglass’s commercial education program can be seen again in Bessie Reeve’s description of the school’s curriculum:

Before selecting our subjects, we should think of what occupation we intend to carry on as a life’s work. Our school offers many subjects... Among them are Mechanical Drawing, Shop, Art, Music, and Business.⁸³

The commercial courses provided at Douglass High School may have fit within King’s vision of what constituted a vocational program, however, they were also were designed to prepare students to take an elevated place within Missouri and American society. Through a well-educated staff, a classically rooted curriculum, and the choice to provide commercial rather than domestic vocational courses, Douglass proved itself to be an excellent educational institution.

Douglass faculty members also supported student athletics and organizations. “Intermural” sports were introduced at Douglass High School in 1931.⁸⁴ By 1935, the school boasted several athletic teams including: football, volleyball, basketball, track,

⁸¹ King, *Eighty-Eighty Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri*, 48.

⁸² J.O. Malott, “Commercial Education,” *Biennial Survey of Education in the United States, 1928-1930*. Bulletin, 1931, No. 20. Volume I,49.

⁸³ Bessie Reeves, “Educating In Our School for Present and Future Needs,” *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 52; Unpublished Document. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 32. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁸⁴ Goins, H.B. “Douglass School,” *In Retrospect II: Webster Groves, Missouri*, Condon, Kathy ed (Webster Groves: Webster High School, 1979) 6-8. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 47. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

tennis, and baseball.⁸⁵ The most successful was the boys basketball team, the Douglass Panthers. In their purple and gold uniforms, the Panthers captured three state Missouri Negro Intercollegiate Athletic Association championships; in 1939, 1941, and 1955.⁸⁶ H.B. Goins, Principal of Douglass Elementary and High School from 1928 to 1955, reflected on Douglass's athletic achievement:

The fact that there were two separate High Schools (Douglass and Frank Hamsher for whites) didn't cause too many problems because there were so many activities for the blacks to get into that they would not have been able to get into at Hamsher...Douglass had basketball tournaments and they won many cups.⁸⁷

Several primary sources emphasized the importance of athletics to Douglass High. The gymnasium addition in 1931 was included in the "History of Our School" section of *The Oracle*, and athletic newspaper clippings describing the Panther's achievements were central to personal scrap books.⁸⁸ The inclusion of the gym into the school's history implies that it was a major milestone in their development and a source of pride. The Panthers accomplishments meant a great deal to the North Webster community and reminded them that they had at least one advantage over Webster Groves High, who did not win a basketball championship until after desegregation in 1966.⁸⁹

The largest section of the 1935 *Oracle* was dedicated to student organizations. Organizations included: student council, yearbook, boys HI-Y, girls reserves, art club,

⁸⁵ Hertha, Wallace, ed. *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 50.

⁸⁶ Coats, Bill. "Grads of Blacks-Only Reminisce," *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (February 20, 2009). Accessed December 1, 2012 < http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/grads-of-blacks-only-school-reminisce/article_934a6e42-70d2-5c19-b60e-427cc99db14c.html>

⁸⁷ Goins, H.B. "Douglass School," *In Retrospect II*, 7.

⁸⁸ Witt, Lucy J. "History of Our School," *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 12. ; Personal Scrap Book, unpublished document, unspecified date. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 35. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁸⁹ Coats, "Grades "Grads of Blacks-Only Reminisce."

junior HI-Y, music club, English honor club, and drama club.⁹⁰ In addition to these organizations, Douglass alumni Walter Ambrose recalled a math and foreign language club, and an article in the *St. Louis Argus* mentioned a Literary Guild Club, Sophomore Better Speech Club, and Junior Courtesy Club.⁹¹ In the *Oracle*, each organization was given a brief description summarizing their purpose and goals. According to the descriptions, organizations could be divided into two categories: moral development or enrichment organizations.

The Student Council, HI-Y clubs, and girls reserves all had a similar aim: personal development. Each organization sought to develop some aspect of the student. Student Council considered the school “a laboratory for training in the practical arts of citizenship,” while the HI – Y clubs attempted to “create, maintain and extend throughout the school and community higher standards of Christian character.” Finally, the purpose of the girls reserves was to “develop the girls physically and morally.”⁹² Development organizations worked within the school and local community, organizing various types of outreach programs.

In contrast, enrichment organizations had a much wider scale and scope; promoting the idea of professional development and academic achievement. For instance, the art club engaged in a variety of projects that concerned art theory, studio art, graphic design, and practical application. According to the *Oracle*, they even made several trips to the St. Louis Art Museum in St. Louis City. The English honor club also

⁹⁰ Wallace, ed. *The Douglass Oracle, 1935*, 31- 38.

⁹¹ Ambrose, Walter, “Douglass School,” *In Retrospect II*, 10. “Webster Groves, MO: Douglass School, St. Louis County News” *The St. Louis Argus* (November 15, 1929).

⁹² Wallace, ed. *The Douglass Oracle, 1935*, 31, 33.

focused on scholastic achievement, requiring a minimum grade point average and a writing sample for membership.⁹³

The most successful enrichment organization was the music department. Douglass's music department included students from the Elementary and High School and, like the Panther's, their local and state-wide achievements increased the prominence of the school and community.⁹⁴ Former Principal, H.B. Goins asserted that Douglass had a "fifty-piece band," that played at all major North Webster educational and local functions. In 1947, Douglass singers won the State Music Festival and their pictures and names were included in the *St. Louis Argus's* pictorial article entitled, "Douglass High Singers Take Honors in Contest Held At Jefferson City."⁹⁵

North Webster community and Douglass faculty advocacy exemplified larger demands to achieve upward mobility and expanded citizenship rights through education. Due to continued advocacy Douglass High School eventually served not just North Webster students, but all African American secondary students in St. Louis County. In addition, Douglass's academic, organizational, and athletic accomplishments elevated their sense of community pride and status within St. Louis County's congregated African American community. By 1949, time and the existence of Douglass High School again altered North Webster. After several decades of access to higher education and a growing racial consciousness, some North Webster residents expanded their expectations of citizenship rights into greater Webster Groves, and conveyed those demands in a new and powerful way.

⁹³ Wallace, ed. *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 35.

⁹⁴ Wallace, ed. *The Douglass Oracle*, 1935, 35.

⁹⁵ "Douglas High Singers Take Honors in Contest Held At Jefferson City," *The St. Louis Argus*, Vol VI No. 11 (April 4, 1947: 3)

**Chapter 3:
Integration and the Struggle for Full Citizenship, 1949 - 1956**



North Webster Residents in Japan, 1945. Missouri State Historical Society

This chapter critically observes North Webster's struggle to integrate public recreational facilities in Webster Groves, Missouri, which occurred from 1949 to 1952. I argue that a thirty year period of secondary educational opportunity, afforded by Douglass High School, changed North Webster residents' expectations of their citizenship rights and encouraged them to expand pursuits of equality into the community of Webster Groves. Prior to 1949, North Webster residents primarily placed citizenship

demands only upon the separate suburban space and institutions within North Webster, and conveyed them through home ownership and community advocacy. After 1949, their demands extended into Webster Groves, and were achieved by legal action. In addition, the timing of North Webster's struggle to integrate public recreation in Webster Groves exemplified and coincided with a growing racial consciousness that existed among congregated communities in the St. Louis metropolitan area.

New Actors in a Historic Struggle

A large population increase occurred within North Webster between 1920 and 1930. During that time, total population increased 90% from 438 in 1920 to 821 in 1930.⁹⁶ Although impossible to determine the sole cause of the population increase, it was concurrent with the establishment of Frederick Douglass High School, and many residents indicated the school as a motivating factor for moving to the area. An anonymous "History of Douglass School" reported, "Many students moved to North Webster in order to attend Douglass High School. In some cases, students lived with whites, working as domestics to pay room and board so they could reside close to the High School facility"⁹⁷ From the 1920s through the 1940s, North Webster saw many new residents moving to the area from other places, which further extended and entrenched ties to other African American communities.

Several decades of education, along with the entrance of new North Webster residents also catalyzed major changes in North Webster's employment patterns. For

⁹⁶ U.S. Census of Population, 1910 – 1940. *The United States Government*.

⁹⁷ "History of Douglass School," Unknown date, Collection 83, 2005 Collection – Ann Morris, Folder 2. Webster Groves Historical Society Archives, Webster Groves, MO.

much of North Webster's existence it was what historian Andrew Weise called a "domestic service employment suburb," meaning that most African American men and women worked in the homes or on the land of wealthy white Webster Groves families.⁹⁸ Census records from the early twentieth century revealed domestic service work in the form of servants, maids, laundresses, and chauffeurs to be the most common occupations in North Webster. Domestic workers comprised between 50% and 60% of the total work force in the small community from 1910 to 1930.⁹⁹ The prevalence of domestic work reflected the working class status of North Webster throughout the early twentieth century. Because many residents were working class, their ability to challenge the Webster Groves City government was hindered by economic dependence.

Between 1910 and 1940 the workforce in North Webster became increasingly diverse and professional, as seen in *Figure 2*. The 1910 census recorded twenty-four different occupations among North Webster male and female residents, the most professional being five teachers, two clergymen, and two clerks.¹⁰⁰ By 1940, North Webster residents recorded fifty different jobs, including sixteen teachers, eight business owners, a doctor, a dentist, a newspaper editor, and a nurse.¹⁰¹ Increasing diversification of employment, self-employment, and employment with companies or families outside the area meant some North Webster residents achieved economic freedom from the white families in Webster Groves, on whom many relied for their financial livelihood.

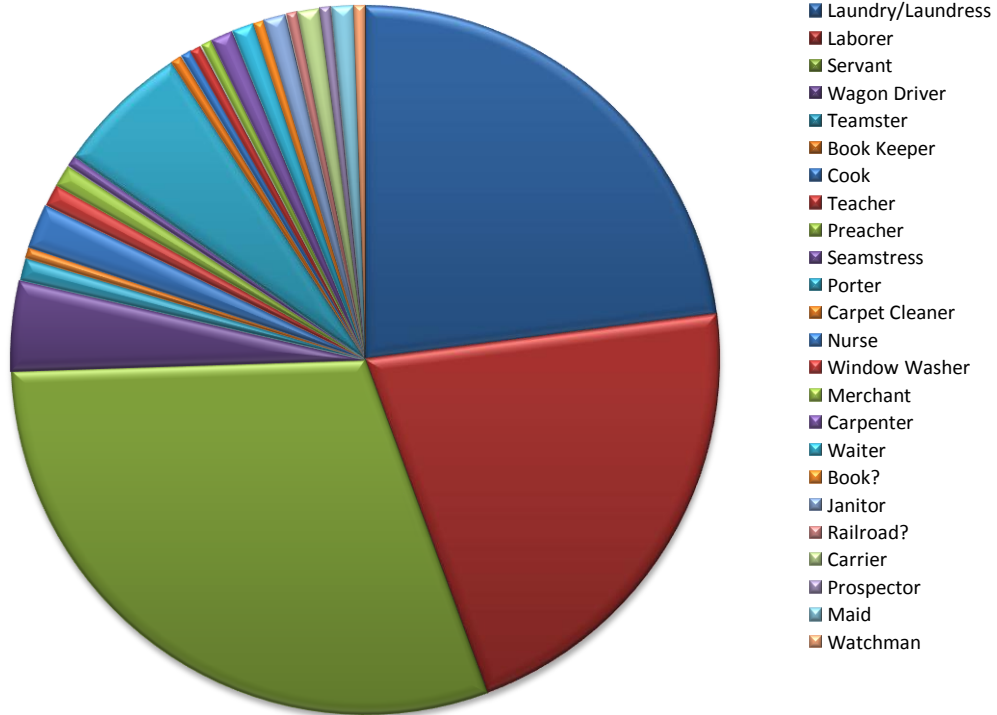
⁹⁸ Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 25 – 27.

⁹⁹ United States Census, 1910 – 1930. *The United States Government*; Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 310.

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Census of Population, 1920. *The United States Government*.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Census of Population, 1940. *The United States Government*.

Workers and Occupations 1910



Workers and Occupations 1940

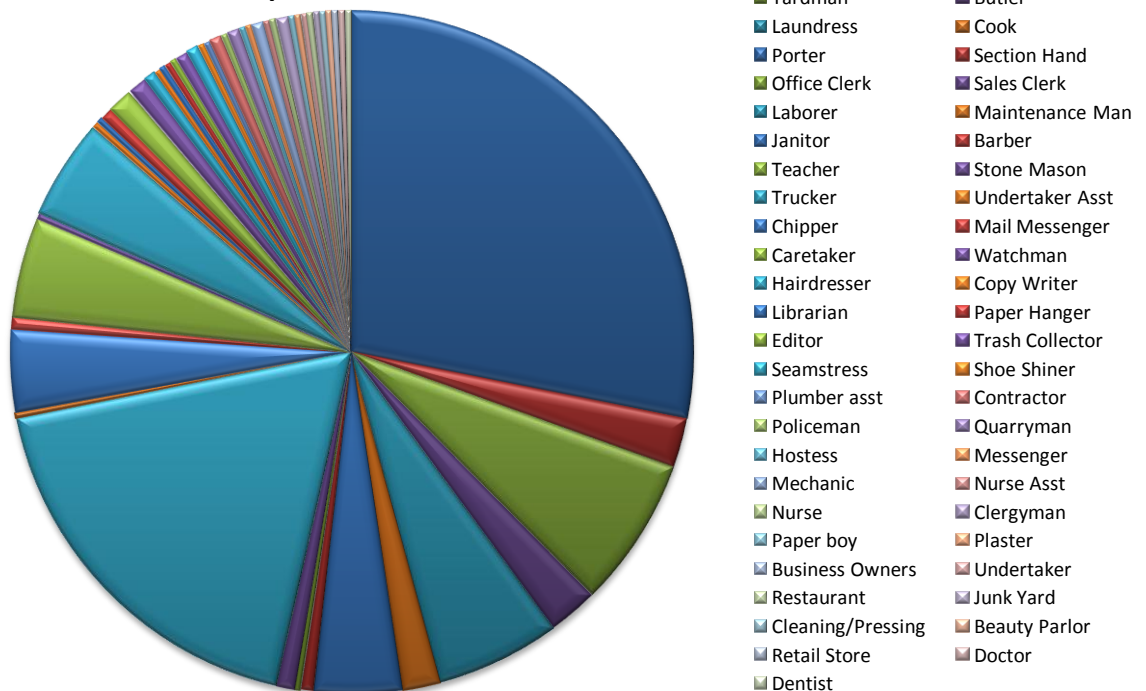


Figure 2: These graphs illustrate the level of employment diversification that took place between 1910 and 1940 in North Webster. Although domestic service work and unskilled labor still dominated employment throughout the area, several skilled laborers and professionals entered the community by 1940.

In sociologist Aldon Morris's, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, he asserted that African Americans whose employment did not depend on the white power structure were the most equipped to initiate early civil rights battles.¹⁰² Because the financial security of self-employed African Americans was not bound to their relationship with the white community, in which or near where they lived, they could protest and organize without fear of losing income. The introduction of professionals and skilled laborers to African American communities created a "constraining yet nurturing environment" where "diverse skills and talents of individuals at all income and educational levels were concentrated in one community."¹⁰³ By the 1940s North Webster was gaining the tools – economic independence, population, and education – to fight for equality.

Citizenship and Recreational Space

Folklore currently depicts the struggle to integrate public recreational facilities in Webster Groves as an isolated and spontaneous event.¹⁰⁴ However, North Webster's experience was not isolated, and unlikely spontaneous given that during the same period, African Americans across the country waged similar battles to integrate public recreational space. In her book, *Race, Riot, and Rollercoasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America*, historian Victoria Wolcott argued that African Americans demanded equal access to public recreational spaces not simply to integrate

¹⁰² Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. 1 – 4.

¹⁰³ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Fran Mannino, "Swimming Against the Status Quo," *The Webster – Kirkwood Times* (February 17, 2006) Accessed October 7, 2013 < <http://www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com/Articles-i-2006-02-17-170647.113118-Swimming-Against-The-Status-Quo.html#axzz2h2jrBKSC>>, Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 37 – 40.

but to exercise their rights as American citizens, to consume recreation on an equal basis, and to fully inhabit the cities and towns in which they lived.¹⁰⁵ From 1865 to 1949, North Webster demanded citizenship rights primarily from their separate community and from the Webster Groves School District, who oversaw Douglass Elementary and High School. The struggle to integrate Webster Groves' recreational space reflected North Webster resident's desire to expand citizenship rights beyond their borders. In addition, the timing of the incident in relation to similar local struggles suggests that North Webster residents saw their pursuit of equality as inextricable from that of other African American communities across the St. Louis region.

The Fairgrounds Park Swimming Pool Race Riot

Just days before North Webster's struggle began a race riot occurred in St. Louis City triggered by the recent integration of St. Louis City's public swimming pools.¹⁰⁶ The Fairgrounds Park swimming pool race riot took place on June 21, 1949. On that day, thirty African Americans entered the large public pool, and were met by 200 white "teenagers and young men," who at first shouted threats, and then exerted physical violence. Fifteen individuals were hospitalized by the brutality; ten of the fifteen were African American.¹⁰⁷ Immediately following the event, Mayor Joseph Darst closed St. Louis City's public swimming pools and announced the city would re-segregate facilities. Opening day the following year, three African American residents filed suit in the City of St. Louis U.S. District Court with the assistance of the St. Louis City chapter of the

¹⁰⁵ Victoria Wolcott. *Race, Riot, and Rollercoasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2012) 1 – 7.; Wiltse. *Contested Waters*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ "Race Riot In St. Louis: It Is Caused By Mixed Swimming Pools," *Life Magazine* (July 4, 1949) 30 – 31.

¹⁰⁷ "Race Riot In St. Louis: It Is Caused By Mixed Swimming Pools," *Life Magazine* (July 4, 1949) 30 – 31

NAACP. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, and on July 19, 1950 Mayor Darst opened the public swimming pools to all residents of St. Louis City.¹⁰⁸ The Fairgrounds Park swimming pool riot received a significant amount of local and even national attention. North Webster residents were undoubtedly aware of the event when they attempted to enter the Webster Groves swimming pool just a few days later.

Swimming For All in Webster Groves, Missouri

The story of North Webster's struggle to integrate Webster Groves' recreational facilities began in May of 1949, when Sergeant Benny Gordon Jr. returned home from war. Benny Gordon Jr. was a monumental African American figure in both Missouri and North Webster history. Born in 1924 in Lucy, Tennessee, Gordon moved to North Webster with his family at the age of nine. He graduated from Douglass High School in 1942, and shortly after enlisted in the United States military. By 1946 he was an accomplished war hero, having received European, African, and Middle Eastern Theatre Campaign Ribbons, two Bronze Stars, and a Good Conduct Medal. After the war, he stayed in Europe to study at Balliol College at the University of Oxford in Oxford, England and at Biarritz American University in Biarritz, France. In 1949 he returned to North Webster, where he later became the first African American real estate agent in St. Louis County, as well as owner of a successful real estate and development firm for over forty years.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 174 – 179.

¹⁰⁹ Fran Belz, "Benny Gordon Jr. Dies: Long Time Activist In Webster Community," *Webster – Kirkwood Times* (January 31, 2003). Accessed October 7, 2013. <<http://www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com/Articles-i-2003-01-31-176424.114137-Benny-Gordon-Jr-Dies-Long-Time-Activist-In-Webster-Community.html#axzz2h2jrBKSC>>

The traditional narrative asserts that one day in 1949, Gordon ran into a Webster Groves City councilman who boasted about the newly constructed Webster Groves recreational swimming pool. When Gordon mentioned that it “sounded nice” the councilman replied that it was for whites only. In a later interview with the *Webster – Kirkwood Times*, Gordon described his feelings about American racism upon returning from war, and hinted at the rationale for his next action:

We were drafted with the premise that we were fighting for democracy, yet we didn't have it. Well, what you do is fight harder when you get back to change this concept. If I could go thousands of miles from home to fight for an ideal, certainly I could stay here and make it happen.¹¹⁰

In July of 1949, Gordon and three other North Webster residents, Frank Witt, Erma Calvin, and Evalee Wilkerson, attempted to enter the Webster Groves public swimming pool. The four young African Americans were immediately asked to leave by pool employees, but instead waited outside, quietly protesting for admittance. Within a few hours the police, mayor, and three city councilmen arrived to warn the group of potential consequences.¹¹¹

In the fall of 1949, Gordon, Witt, Calvin, Wilkerson, and a man named Arthur Green decided to engage Webster Groves City Hall in a legal battle with the hopes of winning the right for all tax-payers to swim in the Webster Groves public pool. Together they hired Theodore McMillian, a young attorney fresh from St. Louis University School of Law, who later became the first African American to serve on the Missouri Court of

¹¹⁰ Fran Belz, “The Indefatigable & Upbeat Benny Gordon,” *The Webster - Kirkwood Times* (October 25, 2002) Accessed October 7, 2013 < <http://www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com/Articles-i-2002-10-25-176865.114137-The-Indefatigable-and-Upbeat-Benny-Gordon.html#axzz2h2jrBKSC>>

¹¹¹ Morris et al., *North Webster*, 37 – 42. Charles F. Rehkopf, “The Webster Groves Swimming Pool Issue 1949 – 1953,” (Webster Groves: Emmanuel Episcopal Church of Webster Groves, Missouri, 1988) 1 – 3. Fran Mannino, “Swimming Against the Status Quo,” *The Webster – Kirkwood Times* (February 17, 2006) Accessed October 7, 2013 < <http://www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com/Articles-i-2006-02-17-170647.113118-Swimming-Against-The-Status-Quo.html#axzz2h2jrBKSC>>

Appeals, and the United States Court of Appeals.¹¹² In the spring of 1950, McMillian filed suit arguing that the group was denied rights under the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, and in December of the same year a St. Louis County court judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. Even with the court ruling, the Webster Groves City Council did not give up, and in fact took drastic measures to keep African Americans out of the pool. In an interesting turn of events, the council's racism incited the collaboration of several individuals, organizations, and societal institutions in Webster Groves.¹¹³

Early in 1951, the Webster Groves City Council issued a statement via the *Webster-News Times*, publically refusing to open the pool to anyone for the entire 1951 season. A follow-up article to the statement summarized the council's position:

Allowing both races to use the same pool would result in a financial loss to the city, the council declared, citing attendance figures furnished by the City of St. Louis for periods before and after enforcement of the anti-segregation order at its outdoor pools last year. The council pointed out that the Webster Groves pool costs \$20,000 a year to operate. This must be met by fees charged to patrons and a sharp drop in attendance, therefore, would result in a financial loss, the council said.¹¹⁴

The Council's remark about attendance figures reflected that in the year since St. Louis City integrated their public swimming pools, white residents virtually stopped using them. According to historian Jeff Wiltse, at Fairgrounds Park swimming pool alone, attendance decreased 80% between 1948 and 1950.¹¹⁵ That the St. Louis City integration experience was specifically mentioned in the Council's statement showed that Webster

¹¹² John and Sylvia Wright. *Extraordinary Black Missourians: Pioneers, Leaders, Performers, Athletes, & Other Notables who've Made History* (St. Louis: Reedy Press, 2013) 1 – 10, 45 – 47.

¹¹³ Morris, et al., *North Webster*, 37 – 42. Mannino, "Swimming Against the Status Quo."

¹¹⁴ "Webster To Keep Pool Closed Rather Than Admit Negroes," *Webster News Times* Vol.1, No. 5 (February 8, 1951: 5).

¹¹⁵ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 179 - 180.

Groves was aware of the event and that it influenced the way they interpreted their own experience.

The bold statements discussed above caught the attention of several liberal minded organizations in Webster Groves, who immediately began voicing their opposition and collaborating for change. Local religious organizations and students, namely Emmanuel Episcopal, First Congregational, Webster Groves Presbyterian, and students at Eden Seminary, began attending council meetings, discussing the issue with their respective congregations, and raising money to cover the council's stated yearly costs. In addition, Glenn Thomas, the editor of the *Webster News- Times*, The Webster Groves League of Women Voters, and Arthur Armstrong, the director of the Webster Groves Red Cross, also assisted in efforts to raise the \$20,000 yearly oversight costs.¹¹⁶ According to a document from the Emmanuel Episcopal Church entitled, "The Webster Groves Swimming Pool Issue," sufficient funds were raised by July of 1952.¹¹⁷

By 1952, the Webster Groves City Council, still staunchly opposed to allowing African American residents to use the pool, attempted compromise by proposing a 3-1 schedule. White residents would use the pool three days a week, and African American residents, only after showing documented proof of physical fitness by a licensed medical doctor, could attend one day a week. Sources indicate this schedule was never implemented and the Webster Groves pool again remained closed for the 1952 summer season.¹¹⁸ Finally in March of 1953, City Attorney David Tomkins, under the direction of

¹¹⁶ "Webster Groves League of Women Voters History," Unpublished document. Collection 11, League of Women Voters Papers, folder 1. Webster Groves Historical Society, Webster Groves, Missouri.

¹¹⁷ Rehkopf, "The Webster Groves Swimming Pool Issue," 2.

¹¹⁸ Morris et al., *North Webster*, 39. Rehkopf, "The Webster Groves Swimming Pool Issue , 1 – 3; Mannino, "Swimming Against the Status Quo."

the city council, drafted a ballot including candidates for mayor, city council, the swimming pool issue, and the proposition of a Board of Freeholders to draft a new city charter. An election took place the following month, and a sizeable majority voted in favor of opening the pool to all city residents, despite race.¹¹⁹ In addition, a new mayor and council members were elected, and a Board of Freeholders was approved.¹²⁰

The desegregation of Webster Groves' public recreational facilities was yet another crucial moment in North Webster's ongoing struggle to achieve a fuller version of citizenship rights. Prior to the event, North Webster residents' demands for fuller citizenship were confined to the community's separate suburban space. Residents sought citizenship through land ownership, institutional development, and education – all of which took place within the confines of racial segregation. After 1949, North Webster residents sought rights through social inclusion and demanded those rights from the Webster Groves municipal and St. Louis County governments. This turning point was prompted by the presence of new community actors, who enjoyed access to higher education, professional occupations, and saw themselves as members of St. Louis County's African American congregated community.

¹¹⁹ Rehkopf, "The Webster Groves Swimming Pool Issue, 3. According to Rehkopf, the election results were 4700 in favor, 3500 opposed. This has not been confirmed by any other sources;

¹²⁰ Morris, et al., *North Webster*, 39 – 40; Mannino, "Swimming Against the Status Quo."

Conclusion

In the 1954 *Brown v The Board of Education* case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that state laws establishing separate educational facilities for black and white students were unconstitutional. Despite Douglass High School's accomplishments, the school closed its doors in 1955 and was demolished the following year by B.W. Gordon, Benny Gordon II's construction company.¹²¹ Benny Gordon's role in the destruction of school is symbolic of the complicated relationship that existed between North Webster and Douglass High. Although North Webster residents demanded expanded educational opportunity and procedural equality in the early decades of the twentieth century, there is no evidence to suggest they ever specifically requested the creation of a separate High School. Furthermore, at the same time Douglass High School was created the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People had begun their legal strategy to dismantle segregated education through litigation.¹²² The decision to create Douglass High School was not an act of good will; it was an attempt by the Missouri Legislature to sustain segregation in the midst of its own unraveling. In many ways, Douglass's destruction resembled the wrecking of the Berlin Wall – Gordon's company tore down a symbolic barrier to equality, representative of the discrimination and neglect that had plagued African Americans since *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896.

Shortly before and immediately following the demolition of Douglass High School the Webster Groves City Council began discussions regarding the annexation of North Webster (officially known as Webster Heights) an unincorporated area on the

¹²¹ Webster Groves School Board Minutes, September 9, 1956, *Webster Groves School District*, Webster Groves, MO.

¹²² Mark Tushnet. *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925 – 1950*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 1 – 21.

northern border of Webster Groves. In 1958, Webster created a Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA) so that they could apply for Federal Urban Renewal grants. The LCRA quickly proposed annexing the unincorporated area and transforming forty acres of the residential neighborhood into an industrial park.¹²³ In a 1960 election, Webster Groves residents voted on the annexation of the North Webster community via an election process that did not include votes from the residents of North Webster. It was that deceitful move that inspired the Sawyers Act of 1963, which stipulated that an area being annexed must be allowed to vote on their annexation.¹²⁴ Following annexation, Webster Groves immediately applied for Federal Urban Renewal programs, declaring the area “blighted” and in need of repair.

The successful annexation of North Webster began Urban renewal project Mo. R-15 in September of 1960, and had a devastating effect on the community. As a result of the project was that two square miles of residential homes were demolished and replaced with an industrial court.¹²⁵ Morris and Ambrose assert in their work, *North Webster*, that eighty-three North Webster families were forced to relocate due to Urban Renewal and that, although forty-seven found other homes nearby, thirty-six moved to St. Louis City or elsewhere.¹²⁶ The coerced migration of African Americans from St. Louis County in general is evidenced from population records and demographic reports. From 1920 to 1950, African Americans consistently comprised between 4.7% and 4.1% the population

¹²³ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 44-45; Bryan, “Urban Renewal in Webster Groves.”

¹²⁴ “City Wins Annexation Suit,” *Webster Advertiser*, (April 4, 1963): 4.

¹²⁵ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 45. Bryan, “Urban Renewal in Webster Groves.”

¹²⁶ Morris, et al. *North Webster*, 44-45.

in St. Louis County. In the decade between 1960 and 1970, this number was cut in half, with African Americans declining to 2.7% of the population.¹²⁷

As shown, North Webster was much more than an isolated neighborhood located on the fringe of Webster Groves. It was a thriving African American suburban community, founded by individuals not far removed from slavery whose goal was to achieve the rights due to them as citizens of the United States. From North Webster's suburban space early residents demanded citizenship through home ownership, as well as the right to exercise relative control over their daily lives. While in many ways North Webster was independent and geographically isolated during this period of time, the community managed to maintain modest connections to other African American communities. They accomplished this through kinship, employment, religion, and education that was amplified after the creation of Douglass High School.

The creation of Douglass High School in 1925 marked a critical juncture in North Webster's struggle for citizenship rights. Before the creation of Douglass High, an educational ceiling existed within the community and prevented many North Webster residents from attending school beyond eighth grade. In addition, the community was relatively isolated from other African American communities. After Douglass, all interested North Webster residents could receive a High School education within their own community, and in 1932 they were joined by all African American High School students within St. Louis County. North Webster residents capitalized on educational opportunity by not compromising on anything less than academic, athletic, and

¹²⁷ Stuart Wells et al., *Stepping Over the Color Line*, 46; 23 – 69; Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 69 – 111.

organizational excellence from themselves, the Douglass faculty, students, and the Webster Groves School Board. Academic excellence earned Douglass's accreditation and facilitated the entrance of non-resident students. Because the school served all African American secondary students in St. Louis County, Douglass became a nucleus for St. Louis County's African American congregated community. By extension, North Webster became a leader in the congregated community, instilled with a heightened sense of status and pride.

Lastly, the desegregation of Webster Groves' public recreational facilities was yet another turning point in North Webster's ongoing struggle to achieve a fuller version of citizenship rights. Prior to the event, North Webster residents' demands for fuller citizenship were confined to the community's separate suburban space. Residents sought citizenship through land ownership, institution development, and education – all of which took place within the confines of racial segregation. After 1949, North Webster residents sought rights through social inclusion and demanded those rights from the Webster Groves municipal and St. Louis County governments. This development was prompted by the presence of new community actors, who enjoyed access to higher education, professional occupations, and saw themselves as members of St. Louis County's African American congregated community.

At the 1944 Frederick Douglass High School graduation, narrator Clentery Franks read a selection from the Walt Whitman poem, "The Open Road."¹²⁸ The poem, derived from Whitman's 1856 book, *Leaves of Grass*, attempted to celebrate communion and

¹²⁸ "Program: Commencement Exercises Douglass High School, Webster Groves, Missouri," June 7th, 1944. Collection 698, Henrietta Ambrose Papers, Folder 24. Western Historical Manuscript Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

democracy based on place. To Whitman, the “open road” was a literal utopian, democratic space, in which all men came together in peace. The fourth line of the thirteenth stanza reads, “Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys, to see nothing anywhere but what you may reach and pass it.”¹²⁹ To the 1944 graduates of Douglass High School, Whitman’s words touched upon aspects of the community’s reality and future desires.

At the end of the Civil War, North Webster residents embarked on a journey to find a place in which they could enjoy the rights due to them as citizens of a democratic nation. A critical point in that journey came when North Webster and African American students from St. Louis County were brought together through Douglass High School. The educational merger of St. Louis County’s African American secondary students represented the start of another significant journey – the struggle to achieve civil rights.

My analysis of the North Webster community and their relationship to segregated institutions and other African American communities throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area is far from complete. I approached these relationships entirely from the perspective of North Webster; however, a more complete historical picture could be formed by including the viewpoints of other African American communities and conducting a reverse inquiry. What did non-resident students attending Douglass High School think about Douglass and North Webster? Did Douglass High affect non-resident students in the same ways it affected resident students? North Webster residents, able to afford tuition, attended Sumner High School in St. Louis City for over twenty years. How

¹²⁹ Walt Whitman. “On The Open Road,” *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1897) 120 – 137.

did North Webster student experiences at Sumner affect the development of Douglass High School? What examples from Sumner did North Webster implement, and which ones did they choose to leave behind?

I also propose additional research be conducted on historic African American suburban communities throughout the country. Historical research regarding the African American experience in American society since the Civil War is overwhelming concentrated in urban and rural spaces. Between these divides existed thousands of suburban communities whose stories could greatly contribute to the understanding of our nation's past.

Lastly, I encourage others to continue to research North Webster and other African American suburban communities in the St. Louis metropolitan area. North Webster, in particular, had several interesting individual figures throughout its history who deserve further attention. For example, the life and impact of Howell Berkeley Goins, Principal of Douglass Elementary and High School from 1929 to 1967, has yet to be fully explored. Goins, also a North Webster resident, oversaw the development, accreditation, and expansion of Douglass High School, and also witnessed its decline. His long reign as Principal could tell us much about the role he and others played as liaisons between black and white communities, and could just as easily raise additional historically significant questions.

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