

Kansas City Black History 2016

"A Celebration of Black Entrepreneurship in Kansas City"



Blankinship



Carter



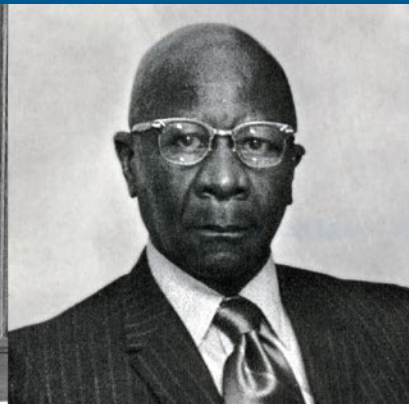
Groves



Meek



Raspberry



Sewing



Thurman

As in many Midwestern cities, Kansas City had a small but influential group of black professionals, business people, and entrepreneurs. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier famously labeled this group the "black bourgeoisie," and they have also been called "the black elite," "the black middle class" or "black leaders." But historians have now chosen the phrase "the black professional class" to describe these men and women – who through combinations of wealth, background, education, talent or ambition – assumed positions of prominence, influence, and esteem in their community.

The words of Richard Wright, the great novelist of the African American experience, held true for the notable persons being recognized here: "The American Negro, child of the culture that crushes him, wants to be free in a way that white men are free; for him to wish otherwise would be unnatural, unthinkable. Negroes, with but minor exceptions, still believe in the hope of economic rewards; they believe in justice, liberty, the integrity of the individual. In the heart of industrial America is a surviving remnant, perchance a saving remnant of a passion for freedom."

Learn more: kclinc.org/blackhistory



G. Lawrence Blankinship Sr.



1913 - 2005

One of Kansas City's best known black businessmen, G. Lawrence Blankinship Sr. was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1913 and moved to Kansas City as a teenager. A graduate of Lincoln High School, he learned the pharmacy profession, managed the Crown Drug store at 18th & Vine, and in 1947 started his own business. The company became Blankinship Distributors Inc., a wholesale supplier of African American beauty products. Blankinship Distributors supplied hundreds of sales outlets, mainly drugstores, with hair care and cosmetic products developed for a burgeoning, often overlooked African American market. Blankinship's national reputation as a successful entrepreneur complemented that of a tireless community leader and advocate for black economic development. With Bruce Watkins, whom he succeeded, he was among the first African Americans on the Kansas City Council. Blankinship also served on numerous influential boards, including the Douglass State Bank and the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, and was founding chairman of the Black Economic Union. Described as a soft-spoken leader, his even-handed style helped to bridge the racial divide during the city's troubled 1960s. He died in 2005 at the age of 92.

Image courtesy: The Black Archives of Mid-America

Andrew & Mildred Carter



1919 - 1988



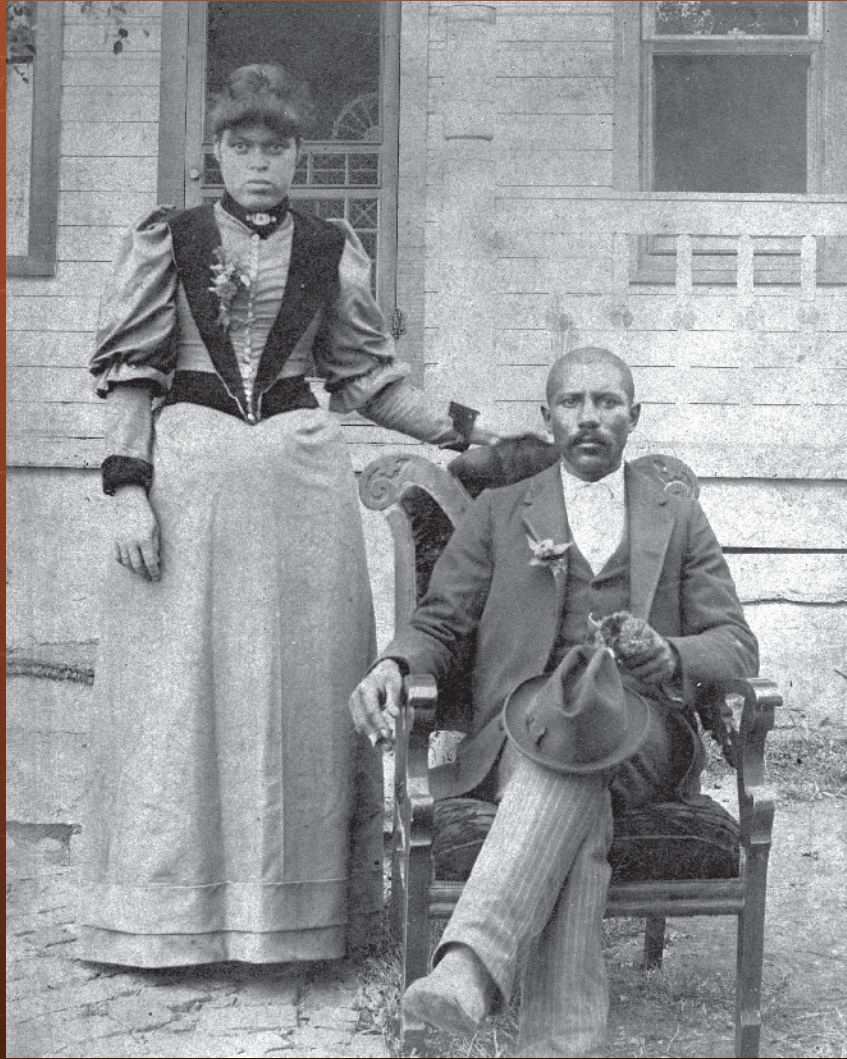
1913 - 2003



Andrew “Skip” Carter’s fascination with radio started early. Raised in Savannah, Georgia, he built his first radio set at age 14. He would become an industry pioneer, putting the first African American-owned station west of the Mississippi – Kansas City’s KPRS-AM, the forerunner of today’s Hot 103 Jamz – on the air in 1950. It remains the longest continuously black-owned station in the country, owing also to the work of Carter’s wife, Mildred, who suggested filing for an FM license that was granted in 1963. She then assumed chairmanship of the board upon Andrew’s death in 1988. Andrew, who served in the U.S. Army during World II, studied at the RCA School of Electronics and New York University but found efforts to own his own station thwarted by the era’s racial attitudes. He vented his frustration in a letter to *Broadcast* magazine that was published and read by former Kansas Gov. Alf Landon, who hired him to run a station he owned in Leavenworth, Kansas. Carter and partner Edward Pate went on to launch KPRS, devoting its playlist to R&B and soul. Carter and Pate were inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame in 1995. Mildred’s honors include the Pioneer of Broadcasting Award from the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters.

Image courtesy: Carter Broadcast Group

Junius G. Groves



1859 - 1925

Farmer, landowner, and businessman Junius G. Groves was one of the wealthiest African Americans of the early 20th century. Born a slave in Green County, Kentucky, Groves was later liberated and joined other freedmen in the “Great Exodus” to Kansas in 1879, eventually finding work as a farmhand. Impressed with his strong work ethic and production, Groves’ employer offered him nine acres of land to farm on shares. By 1884, he and his wife Matilda had saved enough to purchase 80 acres of land near Edwardsville, Kansas. So successful was their venture that, just four years later, they had acquired a total of 2,000 acres and replaced their one-room shanty with a 22-room mansion. Groves made a name for himself as a potato grower, producing as many as 721,500 bushels in one year – far and away more than any other farmer – and earning the title of “Potato King of the World.” He also operated a general store, maintained several orchards, and had investments in various mining and banking interests. Groves worked the farm until his death in 1925. He attributed his success to the endless hard work and devotion of his wife and 12 children.

Image courtesy: Kansas Historical Society

Fannie L. Meek



1898 - 1979

As the founder and operator of Mrs. Meek's Mortuary – identified in Kansas City by its pink limousines and building façade – Fannie L. Meek was a trailblazer, one of the few women of her time to go into the funeral business. Born in Georgia, Meek studied botany at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama under George Washington Carver, graduating in 1917. She was first an educator but found herself drawn to mortuary services after moving to Kansas City with her husband, Edward, in 1923. She studied at the Williams School of Embalming and Mortuary Science, opened her funeral home in 1937, and became a community pillar. Meek served as a director of Wheatley-Provident Hospital, member of the board of governors of the Kansas City Urban League, and trustee of the Jamison CME Temple. From 1960 to 1972, she sponsored an integrated American Legion Junior Baseball League team, the Sparklers, in an attempt to integrate competition and increase young black players' odds of being seen by professional scouts. Also a member of the Second Ward Republican Club and Fifth Congressional District Federation of Women, Meek was elected to the Missouri State Republican Committee in 1967. She retired in 1973 and died in 1979 at age 81.

Image courtesy: The Black Archives of Mid-America

Cloteele T. Raspberry

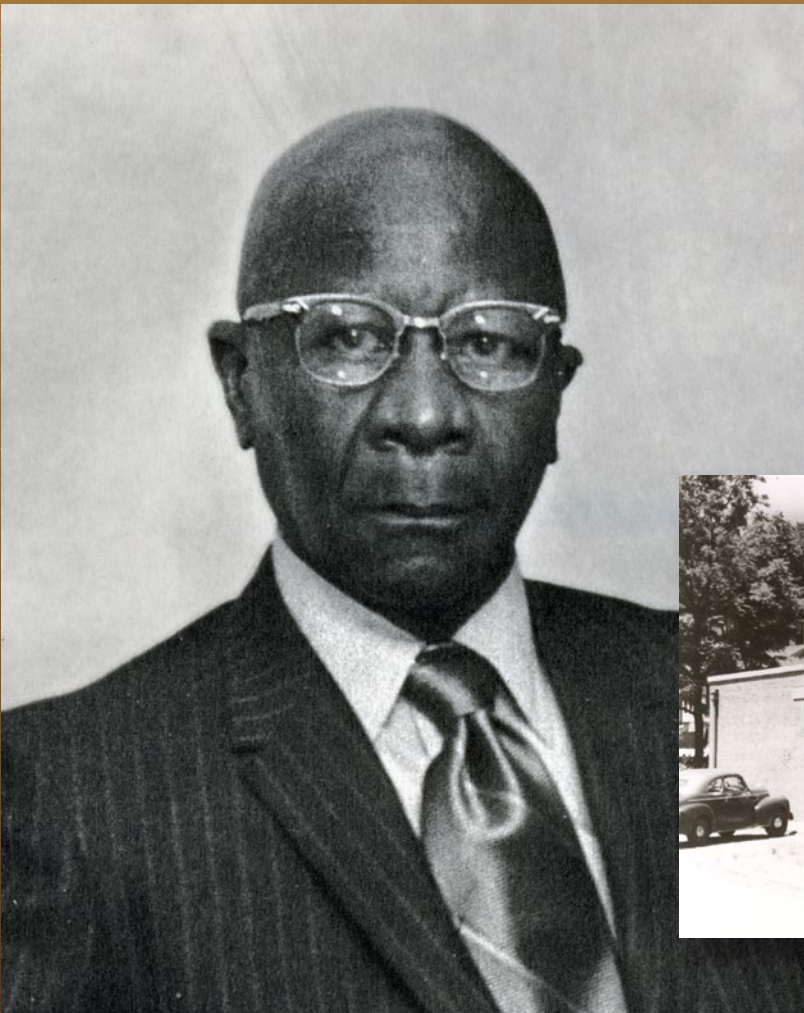


1910 - 1994

Born in Texas, Cloteele T. Raspberry moved to Kansas City at a young age and became a fashion designer and mentor to young women interested in the profession. Raspberry attended Wendell Phillips Elementary School, graduated in 1927 from Lincoln High (where she stood out in her sewing class), and two decades later earned an associate's degree from Isabelle Boldin's School of Fashion Design. While doing sewing in her home, she taught night classes at the Brooklyn Center and local YWCA. Later a self-employed dress designer, Raspberry joined the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers and traveled nationwide each year – to cities including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Chicago – to showcase her work at designer shows. She was chosen as a NAFAD junior leader, guiding girls and young women ages 14-18 who were members of the national organization. They staged their own annual fashion show, with proceeds going toward their “advanced training.” Raspberry also was a 25-year member of Kansas City's Urban League Guild, and served as a Sunday school teacher for more than 35 years at Paseo Baptist Church. She died at age 83 in March 1994, leaving her husband William, daughter Villa, and a Kansas City legacy of more than 70 years.

Image courtesy: The Black Archives of Mid-America

Henry Warren Sewing



1891 - 1980

Henry Warren Sewing founded the Douglass State Bank, the first bank owned and operated by African Americans in the Midwest. Sewing was born to sharecropper parents in Bremond, Texas, in 1891, graduated from Tillotson College in 1915, and taught in elementary school in Austin. After military service in World War I, he came to Kansas City and found work in the meatpacking and railroad industries before becoming an instructor at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas. Described as farsighted and determined, Sewing began a decades-long career in the insurance industry in 1922 as an immediately successful salesman for the Standard Life Insurance Company of Atlanta, Georgia. Prosperous years followed as the president and founder of his own Sentinel Loan and Investment Company. In 1947, he opened the Douglass State Bank at 1314 N. 5th Street, Kansas City, Kansas, to great ceremony. A motorized parade began at the segregated Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, and ended at Sumner High School, its Kansas counterpart. One dedication speaker remarked, "Douglass State is a continuation of the things Frederick Douglass fought for." This so-called "Negro bank," the product of Henry Sewing's vision, provided home mortgages and small business loans, and brought economic development to its community until it closed in 1983.

Image courtesy: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries

Leona Pouncey Thurman



1911 - 1985

Leona Pouncey Thurman was the first African American woman to practice law in Kansas City. Born in Russellville, Arkansas, Thurman became interested in the legal profession after moving to Kansas City in 1931 and working as secretary for attorney James D. Pouncey, whom she married in 1937. She earned a bachelor's degree from Lincoln University in 1947 and, following the death of her husband, enrolled at Howard University School of Law. She received her degree in 1949 and opened an office at 1505 East 18th Street, focusing on criminal law and divorce cases. Thurman's distinguished legal career spanned 34 years. She was the first black woman admitted to the Jackson County Bar, and also had a license to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Thurman was an active member of the community, serving as a member of the League of Women Voters, YWCA, Women's Chamber of Commerce, and numerous other organizations. She was also involved in efforts to revitalize the 18th and Vine jazz district, purchasing and restoring properties in the area and building a community amphitheater and park. Thurman inspired many other black women to enter the legal profession, and was dedicated to improving the east side community where she worked and lived.

Image courtesy: The Kansas City Star