

former mayor of the village of Green Island and Riverspark commissioner, and Senator Patrick Moynihan.

This study has led to National Historic Landmark nominations for the Harmony Mills Complex and the Kate Mullaney House. The Commission is considering the creation of three interpretive districts: the Harmony Mills areas to focus on the company town experience; the area around the Mullaney House to focus on the story of the only “bona fide female union in the country” and the related movement to create a cooperative laundry; and South Troy to focus on the iron molders. Much of the physical fabric from the 19th century has survived in these areas where people continue to live and work.

The Commission is looking forward to broadening its circle of partners to include the National Park Service in its efforts to preserve and interpret the resources associated with worker history. Models for partnership approaches like the National Heritage Corridor as well as Riverspark’s

own unique experiences with partnerships can be used in providing a partnership approach for national recognition for the nationally-significant resources in Riverspark.

Riverspark’s experience with partnerships reveals the park as a focal point for an ongoing process where everyone with a stake in its resources can benefit by participating and thereby advance the common good. This experience shows no precise formula for partnership parks other than the value of applying a lot of thought, planning, and commitment to the resources that make a special place special.

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Cheryl Brown Henderson

## Landmark Decision Remembering the Struggle for Equal Education

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*In December 1993, the Trust for Public Land transferred Monroe Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas, to the National Park Service for the new Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. This first unit of the national park system to be named after a famous court case will commemorate the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial school segregation in the United States. The Monroe School, which was closed in 1975 as a result of declining enrollment, will be refurbished with plans to reopen the building to the public in 1998 with exhibits that interpret its significance in the struggle for civil rights. In the following article Cheryl Brown Henderson reflects on the history and meaning of the new park — both to the nation and, more personally, to her family, for whom the court case is named. Henderson is president of the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence, and Research, established as a living tribute to the attorneys and plaintiffs of the Brown case. The foundation provides scholarships to future teachers, programs on multicultural understanding, and support for research in educational equity.*

**N**early three quarters of a century after it was built, a two-story red-brick school building in Topeka, Kansas, has come to symbolize the triumph of the human spirit. The work that brought this site from obscurity into the consciousness of the American people has been a labor of love for the family of the Reverend Oliver L. Brown and other longtime Topeka residents. My mother began school at

Monroe as a first-grader in 1927. My sisters, Linda and Terry, attended Monroe, as did their children after them. Finally, in 1972, I began my own teaching career there, a few years before the school closed due to declining enrollment.

Each member of our family has his or her own memories of Monroe. Mother remembers days begun with a pledge of allegiance and a morning prayer. Linda and Terry recall an atmosphere in which no less than your best was

expected each day, and their children fondly remember classroom friendships. My own memories are of a time of transition, with parents, students, and teachers concerned with the impending school closure. Now we all hope that the halls of the old school will once again ring with the voices of children, teachers, and other visitors. The National Park Service plans to turn Monroe Elementary School into a interpretive center for the new *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site, to explain how past generations worked to ensure a free and inclusive America.

*"We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'Separate but Equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."*

—Chief Justice Earl Warren for a unanimous United States Supreme Court, May 17, 1954

Kansas may seem like an unusual place for a historic site commemorating the civil rights movement. In fact, the state has a rich history of freedom and justice. Since the early 19th century, its borders have been open to all without regard to race, creed, or color. Education was also available to all in Kansas. Even prior to statehood, the prevailing belief was that an uneducated person was a dangerous person and could not be a productive citizen.

Before the Civil War the few African American children in Kansas were educated in privately financed charity schools. But as the state's African American population increased after the

war, private schools could not accommodate the rising demand. Even Kansans who supported public schools for African Americans had little interest in shared facilities. In the late 19th century the Kansas legislature passed a law allowing cities of over 15,000 to operate separate public schools for African Americans and whites. In response to this law, boards of education in cities like Topeka created a dual system of racially segregated schools. On July 13, 1868, the Topeka Board of Education purchased land on Monroe Street to construct one of the four elementary schools for its African American students.

The case that became known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was one of a long line of cases that sought equal education as a tool for social equality. For many years segregated schooling was sanctioned by the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which permitted separate-but-equal classrooms for African American children. In 1950, attorneys for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chose Topeka as one of the places in which to challenge that decision. The final documents were filed in behalf of 13 African American families for their 20 children. As fate would have it, Oliver L. Brown headed the list of plaintiffs and my family's name became forever linked to this case.

The circumstances for each of the families in the case were similar. My father agreed to participate because my oldest sister, Linda, and the other African American children in our integrated neighborhood had to walk through a railroad switching yard, cross a busy boulevard, and await a rickety school bus—sometimes for an hour in all types of weather—to travel the nearly two miles to Monroe School. This was despite the fact that we lived only four blocks from Sumner Elementary School, which served the neighborhood's white children. During the case, much was made of the fact that the board of education provided bus service for African American children and not for white children. But that was so much window dressing, since white children almost always lived within walking distance of their neighborhood schools.

In August 1951, a three-judge federal panel found against my father and the other plaintiffs. The decision acknowledged that segregation had a detrimental effect on Topeka's African American children, but found that it was not illegal, since school facilities and programs were equal to those of white students. The NAACP appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the Kansas case was joined with similar cases from Delaware, the District of Columbia, Virginia, and South Carolina. Because *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*

Oliver L. Brown.  
Photo courtesy  
Brown Family  
Collection.





Monroe School.  
Illustration by  
Denise A. Hopkins.

was first on the list, all of the cases eventually became associated with its name.

It was an important case because it was not from a southern state and because it delineated the issue so well. It was acknowledged that in most ways Topeka's white and African American schools were equal. To overturn the lower court's decision the Supreme Court would have to strike down the separate-but-equal doctrine.

On May 17, 1954, at 12:52 p.m., the Supreme Court announced its decision that "sepa-

rate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The decision effectively denied the legal basis for segregation in Kansas and 20 other states with segregated classrooms and would forever change race relations in this country.

Ironically, the decision came too late to affect the children of some of the case's plaintiffs, including my sister Linda. That fall these children would enter junior high school, and since only elementary school had been segregated in Kansas, they were already scheduled to begin their first integrated schooling. In 1959 our family left Topeka because our father had accepted a new parish. Two years later, my father died at the age of 42. My family returned to our old Topeka neighborhood, where, in the fall of 1961, I enrolled at the by-then integrated Sumner Elementary School. Each day, with the other African American children in our neighborhood, I would walk those short four blocks to the school my sister had not been able to attend a decade before.

Reactions to the *Brown* case were mixed around the country. In the fall of 1954, Kansas public schools quietly ended years of segregated education. In the southern states, however, reaction was more extreme. In 1957, nine African American students attempted to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Governor Orval Faubus closed all public schools in that community for one year. Similarly, in Prince Edward County, Virginia, officials closed public schools for four years rather than allow racial integration. In both instances, private schools sprang up to serve white students, but because some white families could not afford them, white children, too, felt the sting of discrimination.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site will forever symbolize both the harsh realities of segregation and the promise of equality embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. It is a welcome addition to our system of National Historic Landmarks and National Historic Sites, less than 5% of which currently relate to the role of African American citizens in U.S. history. The new historic site is a result of a long effort by local volunteers, the Kansas congressional delegation, and the Trust for Public Land. It demonstrates a commitment to a more representative national park system in which Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can take pride.

### CRM Thematic Issue African American History and the Struggle for Civil Rights

The establishment of the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site provides the National Park Service with a unique opportunity to interpret one of the most important constitutional questions to come before the Supreme Court in the history of this nation. The interpretive themes available at this new park span the entire reach of American history and much of early European legal and constitutional history as well as the specific history of the African-American community in the years after the Civil War.

In honor of African American History Month CRM will publish a special thematic issue in February 1996 discussing African American history and the struggle for civil rights. This issue will bring the latest scholarship in the field of civil rights history together with the National Park Service and other related institutions to examine common interpretive linkages between sites associated with civil rights.

If you have any questions or suggestions for articles concerning this issue, please contact either of the following guest editors:

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