

From Segregation to Preservation Monroe Elementary School

Cultural resources provide the backdrop to otherwise intangible deeds by linking them to their human agents and placing them within the contexts of time and space. The medium can be the message, convey it, or do both. Monroe Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas, joins a growing number of cultural resources significant for their association with the civil rights movement of the 20th century. This field traditionally has been underrepresented in the system, but in recent years, the National Park Service (NPS) has placed greater emphasis on its contribution to the historical record. It constitutes only one category of historic resources affiliated with the legacy of African Americans in the United States, but an extremely important one. The potential value of these resources can only be realized if they are protected and interpreted. This does not mean that they must be under public ownership. Extant cultural resources associated with the school desegregation campaign and the broader civil rights movement are safeguarded by the NPS, state historic preservation offices, local governments, private groups, and individuals who want to share the momentous accomplishments which the resources represent.

The record of events leading to Monroe's preservation provides a model for the protection of related resources. This venerable building has had

three lives: first, as an elementary school for African-American children; secondly, as a warehouse and storage facility; and thirdly, as a unit in the National Park System. Monroe Elementary, now comprising the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, bears distinction as a National Historic Landmark (NHL) for its association with the 1954 landmark school desegregation case and connection to the broader civil rights movement of the 20th-century. It provided crucial evidence for the Kansas case and became most famous for association with lead plaintiffs, Oliver and Linda Brown. Although no longer a public school, Monroe stands as a monument to honor those who labored for racial equity and to educate all Americans about the importance of their work.

Built as one of Topeka's four segregated black elementary schools, Monroe served its community well. It functioned as an educational facility and community center for a broad segment of Topeka's African-American population from 1927 to 1975. Thomas Williamson's classical Italian Renaissance design provided a wonderful setting for both purposes. While its architectural components and styling are a bit understated when compared to schools built during the same period for white students, it was touted upon completion as one of Topeka's "million dollar schools." Through this period, its constituency was segregated, first by law and then by custom. The African-American community, however, formed loyal ties to Monroe School and took great pride in the skill and dedication of its faculty, many of whom possessed Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees. Teachers offered core curricula in nine classrooms, in addition to kindergarten, manual arts training, and instruction in home economics. Alumnus Joe Douglas recalls, "The teachers here exuded love and trust, which was inductive to learning. The idea that separate is inherently unequal is correct, but here, there was a very strong substitute for what we didn't have."¹ They engendered a strong sense of community with the residents who lived near the school and among Monroe alumni, which, in turn, led to deep loyalty for this institution. The facility's dual auditorium/gymnasium housed a wide array of segregated extracurricular activities for high school students and community events, as well.²

Ten-year-old Linda Brown sitting in front row of her fourth-grade classroom of segregated Monroe School in Topeka, Kansas, March 1953. Photo by Carl Iwasake courtesy Time-Life.



Although famous for association with Linda Brown and the issue of school desegregation, Monroe Elementary School represented much more to its constituents. It stood as an institution of learning which fostered successful accomplishment in spite of the social stigma of exclusion and racial separation. Perhaps this explains some of the disappointment felt when Monroe's existence was challenged, first by desegregation, itself, and second, by declining enrollments. Rather than integrate black elementary schools, the board of education built new facilities and transferred African-American children to former white schools. As a result, Monroe's student population remained predominantly African American and slowly declined until 1975, when the school board closed the facility.³

For Monroe, the 20-year anniversary of *Brown II* marked the end of its days as a grade school. Administrators used the facility as a warehouse for the next five years, 1975 through 1980. Maintenance staff with USD-501 transformed Monroe's playgrounds into parking lots for buses and maintenance vehicles. The school board sold the property in 1980 to Richard C. Appelhans. By this time, city managers had rezoned the area for light industrial/commercial use, which significantly changed the character of the surrounding neighborhood. Commercial warehouses, businesses, and parking lots replaced residential housing through the next decade.⁴ Appelhans' plans for the building fell through, so two years later, he and business partner, Richard L. Plush, Jr., sold the property to the Church of the Nazarene. From 1982 to 1988, the building functioned as an inner-city church, which served religious and humanitarian needs of the community. Apparently disappointed with the limited impact of their work, the Church of the Nazarene sold the property in 1988 to S/S Builders, Inc., owned by Mark A. Steuve. Monroe again became a warehouse for construction materials and equipment. As others had found, Monroe required relatively high maintenance costs and did not accommodate the needs of the construction firm, so in 1990, S/S Builders offered the property for sale at public auction.⁵

By doing so, Steuve put the historic school in a very vulnerable position. Public sale raised the real possibility of demolition because the building had proven to be unsuitable for its most recent owners and the surrounding neighborhood increasingly had gained an industrial character. For the first time, it seems, people began to publicly recognize the building's historical significance, structural integrity, and design. From 1975 to 1990, Monroe's role in the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation suit received little, if any, attention. When the property was threatened with


potential demolition, however, Brown family members, Monroe alumni, and others rallied to save the building. The cause drew upon their appreciation for the quality education received in the segregated elementary school and its significance to the reversal of discriminatory policies across the United States. Concerted action to underscore the importance of these intangibles would launch the third phase of Monroe's existence, that as a national historic site.

Jerry Jones, a Brown Foundation board member, first called attention to the "For Sale" sign posted on the fence at Monroe Elementary in June 1990. It announced Steuve's plans to auction the 22,000 square foot building and adjacent tracts of land. Jones informed Cheryl Brown Henderson, President of the Brown Foundation, of the impending sale and, in doing so, unofficially began the campaign to save Monroe. Henderson

Flyer announcing the impending auction. Illustration courtesy Brown Foundation Collection, University of Kansas Libraries.

REAL ESTATE AUCTION

Monroe School, at 15th and Monroe, Topeka, KS
Tuesday evening, July 24, 1990 at 7:00 pm



A fine three-story structure with a parking lot adjacent. Considerable monitoring of the brick has been done and is in fine condition. The roof is good and is being structurally sound.

Building footprint of approximately 22,000 sq. ft. with a gym for walkout level. There are 5 combi air cooling units of 30,000 BTU's. There is a large clear brick lot area for continued use of 60,000 sq. ft.

The property has the City of Topeka Enterprise Zone Incentives for New Business.

Open House will be July 9 & 10, 1990 from 5:00 to 7:00 pm or call us at 913-266-5550 for showings.

Legal Disclaimer: Call for legal description of two tracts, actual location is an approximate 2-acre parcel and a half of said land underlying across about a lot of approximately .21 acre.

\$1,500.00 down if you wish and balance on or before August 14, 1991. (Cash/Check) This guaranteed.

Call Auctioneer for showings and questions. Any statements made by the auctioneer shall take precedence over any other statements or print.

S/S Builders, Inc., owners.

Kull Auction & Real Estate Co.
Auctioneers

913-266-5550 or 888-898-1600

Dan Kull

had three points of connection to Monroe Elementary; first, as a daughter of Oliver Brown and sister of Linda, secondly as a former teacher at the elementary school, and thirdly, as an African American. With her mother and sisters, Henderson formed the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research in 1988, a non-profit organization dedicated to honor the work of those involved in the *Brown* case, aid minority students, support educational research, and promote multicultural awareness.⁶ Members now added a more immediate cause to their broad agenda. The foundation formed a community coalition and organized a national fund-raising

campaign for the purchase of the building. Henderson, who led the charge, concisely expressed the importance of their cause in appeals for support. “Monroe Elementary School, the other half of the equation in *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka*,” she wrote, “is going on the auction block. If sold chances are great that the building will be destroyed or forever changed and therefore lost to present and future generations who know it to be a symbol of what we have overcome.”⁷ The coalition suggested instead that the former school house a museum and resource center for African-American history, but first supporters had to safeguard Monroe. Appeals for private patronage met with little success, so the Brown Foundation turned to public sources of support.⁸

Preservation of the building as a historic property hinged on official designation to the NRHP, preferably as an NHL. Monroe’s historical significance seemed unquestionable, even though it lacked official designation. Sumner, on the other hand, was listed on the NRHP in 1987 as an NHL. It had functioned as the white complement to Monroe during the school desegregation suit because Linda Brown would have attended Sumner Elementary School if segregation policy had not forced her to commute to Monroe. In essence, each played important, but opposing, roles in the litigation of the Kansas case. “By denying Linda Brown the right to enroll in the Sumner Elementary School,” the nomination states, “the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, started the chain of events that led to the Supreme Court and the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.”⁹ It seemed logical, therefore, that the segregated school, which Linda attended, merited equal status. Dr. Harry Butowsky, who had written the Sumner nomination, amended the NHL in 1991 to include Monroe Elementary School.¹⁰

A high school dance held in Monroe gym during the 1940s. Photo courtesy Merrill Ross Collection, University of Kansas Libraries.



Although the idea already had been broached, advocates now had sufficient ammunition to request the addition of Monroe Elementary to the National Park System. Timing was critical in this preservation process, but each step fell in line. Henderson had contacted the Trust for Public Lands (TPL) while the NHL nomination ensued. This non-profit organization purchases land threatened by development in order to protect natural and cultural resources. In this case, TPL helped relieve Mark Steuve of the financial burden of maintenance costs and facilitated the subsequent real estate transfer to the NPS. The Brown Foundation petitioned governmental leaders within Kansas, as well as its Congressional delegates, to save the property. Many helped during the two-year effort; namely, former *Brown* plaintiffs and other supporters, the Black Historical Society of the Topeka Metropolitan Area, the Kansas SHPO, the Trust for Public Lands (TPL), Senators Robert Dole and Nancy Kassebaum, Representatives Dan Glickman and Jim Slattery, and the National Park Service (NPS). Preliminary suitability and feasibility studies, conducted by the NPS in 1991, confirmed Monroe’s potential contribution to the National Park System and expedited its acquisition. President George Bush signed the enabling legislation on October 26, 1992, which established the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, with the mandate,

to preserve, protect, and interpret for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations, the places that contributed materially to the landmark United States Supreme Court decision that brought an end to segregation in public education; and to interpret the integral role of the Brown v. Board of Education case in the civil rights movement; to assist in the preservation and interpretation of related resources within the city of Topeka that further the understanding of the civil rights movement.¹¹

Ownership officially transferred to the NPS in December 1993, and plans began for staffing and rehabilitating the new park.¹²

Within a relatively short time, the former Monroe Elementary School went from the auction block to national historic site. The Brown Foundation played an instrumental role in this transition, largely through the hard work of its president, Cheryl Brown Henderson. And, its work continues. “The Brown Foundation,” Henderson proclaims, “is working cooperatively with the NPS and has the unique distinction of being one of a handful of non-governmental agencies that provide researchers, educators, museums, etc., with primary source information about the *Brown* case.”¹³ This park is an important addition to the National

Park System because it is one of few units which honor the achievements made by and for African Americans. Park staff hope to inform, challenge, and inspire visitors to look beyond stereotypes and pat stories. In particular, the *Brown v. Board of Education NHS* will focus its interpretive programs on all five school cases, their participants, local histories, and the broader, national context of the modern civil rights movement. This new park symbolizes the long, hard fight to gain civil rights for African Americans, first, and by extension, the attainment of human rights for all peoples throughout the world.¹⁴

Measures to stabilize and rehabilitate the building facility are currently underway, with its formal opening targeted for 1998. As the park's only building, Monroe must serve several capacities; primarily, as administrative headquarters, visitor center, interpretive media center, and as an educational/research facility. While linked to other sites associated with the civil rights theme, *Brown v. Board of Education NHS* will provide a specialized focus on desegregation in public education and endeavors to bring dual, segregated societies together. Like its juridical namesake, this historic site harkens to past injustices, praises hard-won accomplishments, and presages future attainments left for others to mark.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Kristen Hays, "Dedication Recalls Era of Segregation," *Topeka Capital Journal* (TCJ), 18 May 1992, A-1.
- 2 "A Million in New Schools," *Kansas City Times*, 15 November 1927 and Roland Smith, et. al., "Monroe Elementary School, Shawnee County, Kansas," Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Draft Report No. KS-67, U.S. Department of the Interior (USDoI), NPS, 1992.
- 3 Oral History Project, Brown Foundation in cooperation with the Kansas State Historical Society and "Monroe School" clipping file, Topeka-Shawnee County Public Library.
- 4 Sherda Williams and David Barnes, "Monroe Elementary School, Topeka, Kansas," Cultural Landscape Inventory (CLI), Levels I & II, USDoI, NPS, February 1995; "Monroe Elementary School" file, Unified School District-501, Topeka, Kansas; and letter of inquiry, *TCJ*, 25 May 1980.
- 5 Williams and Barnes, CLI, 27, 29; Smith, et. al., "Monroe School," HABS Draft Report No. KS-67, 2; Anne Elizabeth Powell, "Unfinished Business," *Historic Preservation* 46, no. 3:101; Shawnee County, Kansas, Deed Book 2096, 91, 93 (27 June 1980); Deed Book 2120, 161 (10 December 1980); Deed Book 2458, 123 (29 November 1982); and Deed Book 2490, 247 (4 August 1988).

- 6 Powell, "Unfinished Business," 58-59; "Position Paper: Brown vs. The Board of Education Management Alternative," NPS, 25 June 1991; "Cooperative Agreement Between the National Park Service and the Brown Foundation," Agreement No. CA6000-3-8050, September 1993; and Randall Baynes, et al., "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: Sumner and Monroe Elementary Schools," Management Alternatives Study, USDI, NPS, March 1992, 32.
- 7 Cheryl Brown Henderson to Congressman Dan Glickman, 26 July 1990, Brown Foundation Collection, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas.
- 8 Powell, "Unfinished Business," 101; Kristen L. Hays, "Unchaining History," *TCJ*, 13 February 1994, 1-E; Leslie Guild Moriarty, "Former Pupils Hope to Preserve Monroe School," *TCJ*, 4 September 1990, 1-A, 2-A; Hays, "Dedication Recalls Era of Segregation," *TCJ*, 18 May 1992, A-1; and Hays, "Effort Would Restore Monroe of '54," *TCJ* 15 June 1994, 3-A.
- 9 Harry Butowsky, "Sumner Elementary School," Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas, National Register of Historic Places Nomination (NRHP), USDoI, NPS, 1987, 8:2.
- 10 Ramon Powers to Randall K. Baynes, 26 July 1991, "Monroe School" file, Kansas SHPO; Harry A. Butowsky, "The U.S. Constitution: A National Historic Landmark Theme Study," USDoI, NPS, December 1986; Roger Aeschliman, "Sumner Named National Landmark," *TCJ*, 23 July 1987, 18; "Historic Designation Earned by Sumner," *TCJ*, 13 May 1988, 7-C; Leslie Guild, "Sumner Dedicated as Historic Landmark," *TCJ*, 18 May 1988, 1-A; and Butowsky and Martha Hagedorn-Krass, "Sumner Elementary School and Monroe Elementary School," NRHP, 6 November 1991.
- 11 Public Law 102-525, One Hundred Second Congress, 26 October 1992.
- 12 Powell, "Unfinished Business," 101; Baynes, et al., "Brown v. Board of Education," Deed Book 2857, 227; and Robert A. Pratt, "Segregation Overruled," *National Parks* 67, nos. 9-10:34-39.
- 13 Cheryl Brown Henderson, "The Brown Foundation Story: Developing Resources to Interpret Public History," *CRM* 19, no. 2:8.
- 14 Mike Bureman, et al., "General Management Plan: Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site," USDoI, NPS, August 1996.

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