



## **Faith in the Free State: Lawrence Black Churches and Spiritual Inspiration, Cultural Strength, and Social Empowerment** By Patricia Cecil

*Originally aired June 2021*

Freedom, celebration, and activism are central to the theology of the Black church, and Lawrence's Black churches express these pillars of faith through the filter of the unique history, geography, and politics of the region. Founded on Free State politics, African American communities across the United States saw Kansas as a land of opportunity and freedom. Migrations following the Civil War caused the African American population of Lawrence to grow from 933 in 1865 to 2,000 by 1880. Lawrence, however, still harbored discriminatory practices that forced a separate community structure for its African American citizens, and the African American population in Lawrence was segregated in north Lawrence, or "East Bottoms". Soon after the establishment of area Black churches, community meetings supplemented worship services to inform locals about topical issues. Organizations such as Ladies' Aid Refuge Society and Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Club provided opportunities for charity work and community building, and Black churches supported local Lawrence African American newspapers such as *The Historic Times* and the *Western Record*.

Beginning in the mid-20th century, many Black community members moved due to opportunities farther north and persistent discrimination present in Lawrence. Churches merged or closed. Despite the decline in population, existing members remained active and the Black church continued to address the needs of the community. It was during these years that figures such as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Dubois attended church in Lawrence and recorded their experiences in journals. By the 1960s, support for the civil rights movement had grown within regional Black churches. The two remaining black churches in Lawrence, 9th Street Baptist Church and Saint Luke AME Church, built upon the momentum of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in Topeka by advocating for social reforms and civil rights legislation. They organized NAACP meetings, voter registrations, a "Massachusetts Street Freedom March," and joined in protests, such as sit-ins, with students from the University of Kansas.

This legacy of organization and faith lives on. In Lawrence today, pride in African American identity and affirmation of American ideals through social justice work are still strong in local Black churches. This proclamation of dignity, promotion of inclusion, and dedication to cultural survival lends continues the ongoing story of Black churches in Lawrence, Kansas. The African American community in Lawrence, Kansas remains spiritually engaged and socially diligent through the political activism, fellowship, and community services supported by the Black church, offering a varied and exciting living narrative of the Kansas religious experience.

*This transcript of "Faith in the Free State" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*