

Black Kentucky Pioneers:

Wesley Earl Acton

(1937-)

By Jerry Long
c.2025



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Contributing Authors

Wesley Acton – Retired teacher, community activist, civil rights worker. He has won numerous honors and awards.

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Members of Daviess County Bicentennial Committee, 2013-2015: front row, left to right: Sister Amelia Stenger, Aloma Dew, Lee Dew, **Wesley Acton**, Jerry Long. 2nd row, left to right: Kathy Olson, Nancy Bradshaw, Sarah Patterson, Shirley Trunnell, Isaac Settle, Shelia Heflin, Forrest Roberts. Back row, left to right: David Smith, Whaylon Coleman, Ed Allen, Jim Lambert, Glenn Hodges, David Zachery, and Grady Ebelhar. Not pictured: Ross Leigh. Photo by Wendell Thompson.

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An Unfinished History – Daviess County’s Black Citizens

By Wesley Acton and Aloma Dew

This chapter is based largely on interviews with black citizens conducted by Wesley Acton during the 1980s, and is based on the words of those interviewed as much as possible. It also includes other highlights and notable people in the long and often difficult history of Daviess County's black citizens, most of whom were enslaved until the 13th Amendment in 1865. It is not all inclusive or complete, the authors hope that this scant history will encourage other researchers and writers to dig into the rich and complicated history of our black neighbors in Daviess County. The authors hope that when the history of Daviess County is written next time, that African Americans and women will not need separate chapters, that they will have been fully integrated into our stories; but for now our objective is to tell stories of people who have not always been included—we all have a story.

Wesley Acton

Wesley Acton was the eighth child born to Levi and Cecil (Collins) Acton in Hartford, KY. From birth to five years of age, he lived on a small farm off what is now Natcher Parkway. In the early 1940's, Acton and his family moved to Daviess County to the Pleasant Ridge Community. Thus began a long and active career as teacher, social activist, and volunteer. He attended Carver Elementary School, then Western elementary, junior, and senior high schools. His dream was to attend Kentucky State University and become a teacher, but lack of money forestalled that dream.

Acton worked hard on the farm – cutting tobacco, mowing grass, cleaning cemeteries – whatever work he could find which prepared him well. He received the opportunity to attend Brescia College and work for his tuition. Working for a group of professors who encouraged and inspired him also helped him learn skills he would use later as a classroom teacher. He was also encouraged by his life-long friend Leslie Shively Smith.

After receiving his B.A. Degree in history and English in 1960 and receiving certification, he taught at St. William High School in Knottsville and then the Daviess County School System as language arts and social studies teacher at Thruston. Acton was the first African American teacher in an integrated school in Owensboro and Daviess County. During his more than 30 year career, he taught at Thruston Elementary, Burns Middle School, Apollo Junior High, receiving his masters degree in the 1980's and doing additional studies at Abilene University in Texas and Florida College in Temple Terrace, Florida.

Although Acton grew up in rural Daviess County and was sheltered from some of the harsh realities of segregation in the deep South, he still realized at a young age that African Americans were not treated equally. He experienced what it was like to be denied entrance into the parks and playgrounds of his home county, to not be allowed to drink at a public water fountain, eat at a restaurant or sit where one pleased at a movie theater. He realized that the practice of "separate but equal" was simply a phrase to hold on to segregation. Acton was one of the co-founders of the Owensboro Human Relations Commission and he is a past president of the Owensboro NAACP

One of his accomplishments, working along with Emily Holloway, another retired teacher, was helping to clean up historic Greenwood Cemetery. This project mobilized more than 200 volunteers from area schools, city and county government, civic organizations, businesses, Boy Scouts, churches, Sons of the Confederate Veterans, and many individuals. Ms. Holloway had relatives buried at Greenwood and set as a retirement goal to do "something" about Greenwood Cemetery. She and Acton formed the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee in 1996. The site was overgrown with trees, thorny brambles, sunken graves, trash and flagrant examples of

vandalism. Interestingly, one of the first groups to volunteer was the Sons of Confederate Veterans. They had it on their list of neglected cemeteries where Civil War veterans were buried. After enlisting volunteers and help from city and county, the committee made a list of what to do and got organized. The *Messenger-Inquirer* publicized the project and helped bring much needed attention to the work. This project illustrated cooperation between many aspects of the community.

Greenwood Cemetery was begun in 1906 as a burial ground for African Americans and was the primary cemetery for several generations for at least 70 years. The oldest monuments are for Kittie Ann Jones (9 Aug 1853-13 Jan 1905) and Benedict Hayden (12 Feb 1828-13 Aug 1905). These pre-date the purchase of the property in 1906, so they may have been moved and re-buried there. Among others buried there are two Civil War soldiers – Richard Hardesty and George W. Robertson, at least 48 veterans of WWI and 14 WWII soldiers are buried there.

Acton remembered how the schools he attended were given handed down old materials and desks which had been discarded by white schools. Although he knew that change comes slowly, he and a small group of friends conducted a "sit in" at a theater in Owensboro after informing the management of their plan. To the surprise of many people, there were no arrests or negative repercussions. As a result of their peaceful protest, African Americans became able to sit wherever they pleased and were no longer required to sit exclusively in the balcony.

Integrating restaurants was more difficult for Acton and his friends. When they "sat in", often they were forced to wait hours, despite the fact that they kept ordering every time a waiter came their way. Then after many attempts, they were served and finally the restaurants in Daviess County, just as the theaters, were opened to African Americans as they were for whites. Though the U.S. Supreme Court Case of *Brown v. Board of Education* came down in 1954, it was not until the early 1960s that the schools here became integrated.

Acton continued as a substitute teacher after retirement and devoted himself to public service, his church and education as well as human and civil rights. He received numerous awards. Among them, the 1992 KEA Human Relations Lucy Harth Smith-Atwood S. Wilson Award for Civil and Human Rights in Education; 2010 Brescia University Distinguished Alumni Award; 2010 Kentucky Civil Right Hall of Fame Award; and 1998 Owensboro Mayor's Award for Excellence in Volunteer Service with Emily Holloway for their work in restoring Greenwood Cemetery.

Those interviewed by Acton and included in this chapter include: Leslie Shively Smith, C.D. and Babe Davidson, James R. Crump, Georgia Thruston, Carrie Lewis, William Norris, Martine Hicks, Theodora Smith, Katie Brown, Emma Edwards, James and Lucile Ayers, Marvelene Jackson, and Florence Baker Perkins. The tapes of these interviews are at Western Kentucky University.

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... [The Bethlehem Baptist Church African-American cemetery near Utica] became neglected, forgotten and overgrown and it was difficult to locate and identify burial sites, In 2002, members of the Utica and Owensboro communities, under the leadership of Wesley Acton and Ollie Crowe Purcell, began a clean up and restoration effort. Volunteers in small groups, were able to clean out all of the overgrowth and took great care to restore marked graves and headstones.

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Owensboro Human Relations Commission

On August 16, 1963, a group of eight citizens led by H.E. Goodloe that included J.V.A. Winsett, Wesley Acton, H.J. Schupbach, Lewis Gubrud, W.R. Brown, Otis B. Smith and C.D. Davidson met with Mayor Benjamin Hawes and city commissioners Irvin Terrell, George Greer, Tom Sweat and Doug Williams to suggest the creation of a committee to explore areas of racial discrimination in Owensboro. Following a unanimous vote, Mayor Hawes appointed a "Bi-Racial Committee on Human Rights." Of the eighteen men asked by the mayor to serve on the committee, only seven agreed to serve. Those who refused are said to have declined because "they were afraid to touch it."

The initial members of the committee were J.V. Vittitow, H.E. Goodloe, Lonnie Hayden, Dr. Harold J. Schupbach, Rev. Thomas Clarke, and C.D. Davidson. There are differing opinions on why Hawes formed the committee but it is believed that he did so with the hope that it would prevent racial incidents. The main focus of the committee was to report and investigate areas of potential racial tension to city government.

In September 1972, Mayor Waitman Taylor turned the Bi-Racial Committee on Human Rights into the Owensboro Human Relations Commission (OHRC). It became a city agency by Ordinance No. 115-72. Mayor Taylor appointed as chair Joseph L. Hagan and Harry Fields as vice-chair; there were twenty-two other volunteer commissioners to serve. The first full time executive director of the OHRC was hired in April 1974. The agency was also given office space inside of City Hall....



Wesley Acton graduate in 1955 of Western High School, Owensboro, KY.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 14 February 1955, p.4:



SCS ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS – Frank Lebold, left, secretary-treasurer of the Daviess County Soil Conservation District, presents awards to five District winners in the recent state-wide essay contest on Soil Conservation. First prize goes to R. C. Trunnel, second from left, Utica High School; second, to Wesley Acton, Western High School; third, Joyce Weikel, Maple Mount; fourth, Wanda Dillehay, Daviess County High School, and fifth, Roy Blandford, West Louisville Junior High School.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 9 May 1955, p.4:

Western High School Wins
Fourth Place In NFA Competition

Wesley Acton of Western High School took third place in the public speaking contest at the state New Farmers of America convention in Frankfort, May 2-5.

Western High School won fourth place in overall competition behind Hopkinsville, Lexington and Lincoln Ridge. Western's quartet, made up of Prentice Berkley, Brown, William Shultz and Charles Tandy, won third place; the livestock judging team, made up of Alphonzo Patton, Billy McKnight and Charles McCormick, took fifth place.

New officers elected for the 1955- 56 school year are Prentice Berkley, president; Edward Tinsley, vice president; Billy McKnight, secretary; and Charles Brown, treasurer.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 28 August 1955, p.3A:



WINNERS – These two 1955 Western High School graduates have just been notified of prizes they won in competition at the Kentucky NFA convention in Frankfort this past May. Wesley Acton (left) took second place in speaking, and Edward Tinsley won first place in farm-home improvement. Both boys are from Pleasant Ridge.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 16 July 1956, p.4:



NAACP YOUTH – Here James A. Crumlin, president of the Kentucky branch of the NAACP shakes hands with Wesley Acton, 19, president of the local Youth chapter. Watching, on right, is Barbara Tinsley, 19, asst. secretary of the group, and Sally Hatchett, 18, secretary.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 12 October 1959, p.5:

Abstract – Wesley Acton, student-teacher from Brescia College, is moderator for observance of United Nations day at Western High School on October 24th..



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 2 June 1960, p.1A & 14A:

Abstract – Wesley Acton received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Brescia College on 1st June 1960. He has completed teacher certification requirements.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 29 April 1962, p.1B:

Abstract – St. William’s Catholic Church observes 75th anniversary. ... “Father Tiell, in 1961, hired, Wesley Acton, a graduate of Brescia College, to teach in the high school. He was the first Negro to teach in an all-white school in this area.”



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 4 September 1963, p.2A:

Abstract – The hiring of three new teachers were approved by the Daviess County school board on 3rd September 1963. Including the hiring of Wesley Acton at the Thruston school.



**A Pictorial History of Owensboro – Daviess County 1950-1970)
Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro Publishing Company, 1995, p.112:**



Wesley Acton, of Pleasant Ridge, the first African-American to be employed in an integrated school in Daviess County and perhaps the first in western Kentucky. He began his teaching career in St. Williams High School in Knottsville, in 1961. In 1963 he was employed to teach in the Daviess County School System.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 25 March 1965, p.1B:

**Thruston Teacher To Receive
Second District PTA Award**

Wesley E. Acton, a teacher at Thruston Elementary School, Daviess County, is the recipient of the Pearl Stevens scholarship award to be presented at the Second District, Kentucky Congress of Parents and Teachers, spring conference to be held Thursday, April 1, at Union County High School, Morganfield.

The \$50 scholarship award is made each year to an in-service teacher for summer study....



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 7 August 1966, p.4C:

Abstract – Wesley E. Acton received a master of arts degree from Western Kentucky University at commencement on Friday, August 5.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 24 February 1970, p.1B:



At right are members of the Daviess County Education Association, Wesley Acton, DCEA treasurer; Bill Hardin, president; John Basham, KEA Second District president; and Harry Duncan, who set up DCEA information headquarters in Room 214 of the Owensboro Motor Inn Monday.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 26 September 1970, p.2A:

Abstract – Mayor Waitman Taylor appointed Wesley E. Acton as a new member of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Human Relations on 25 September 1970.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 20 November 1970, p.1B:



NEW HRC MEMBERS – New members of the Mayor's Human Relations Committee were introduced Thursday at the November meeting of the group. In the group are: Don Owsley, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Joe Hagan, chairman, HRC; Charles Morton, Cliff Hagan Boys Club; James Collins, assistant administrator, ODC Hospital. Other new members include Wesley Acton, teacher at Apollo School; Ed Tinsley, State Employment Agency; and Charles Flowers, G. E. employe.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 28 February 1982, p.10A:

‘Invisible minority’: Black leaders lament lack of opportunities

By Mary Ann Roser, Messenger-Inquirer

[Note: Wesley Acton was one of several Black leaders quoted in the article.]

"Blacks were given domestic and janitorial jobs. That's why the white population grew here and black population didn't.' In higher education as well, there were no opportunities for blacks before the late 1950s, said Wesley Acton, a Burnes Middle School history teacher who is collecting historical data on Daviess County.

Blacks went to college at Fisk University in Nashville and at Kentucky State University in Frankfort, Acton said. For jobs, they went t to Madisonville to work in the coal mines and to Hopkinsville to farm.

"Unless you were a teacher, you didn't have a job if you were black," he said. "Even in the last 20 to 25 years, blacks couldn't get jobs in Owensboro. It continues to be a problem."

Acton grew up in Pleasant Ridge, and he graduated from Brescia College in 1960 with a bachelor's degree in history. "If I had gotten my (teaching) degree elsewhere, I probably wouldn't have come back," he said.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 27 April 1986, p.2E:

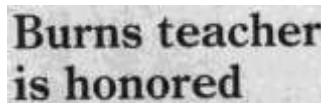
Wesley E. Acton was elected president of the H.L. Neblett Community Center board at its recent meeting. He succeeds Addie Talbott, who has served as president for the past 13 years. Mrs. Talbott will remain on the board as an active member.

Acton has served as treasurer of the board for many years. He is a teacher at Burns Middle School.

Other officers elected are Sam Boyd, first vice president; Marie McFarland, second vice president; Melvin Smith, treasurer; Janet Stewart, recording secretary; Alberta Taylor, corresponding secretary.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 3 November 1989, p.1C:



A Burns Middle School teacher was named Person of the Year by the Owensboro Human Rights Commission Thursday night.

Wesley E. Acton received the award for his continued dedicated service to all the residents of Daviess County, said Bill Dixon, executive director of the human rights commission.

Acton was instrumental in founding the commission in 1963, Dixon said.

Former mayor J.R. Miller also received an award for service to the people of Daviess County, Dixon said.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 2 May 1992, p.1B:

**Daviess educator
earns civil rights
award from KEA**

By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

Wesley Acton, a 29-year teaching veteran in the Daviess County School System and its first black teacher, received the Lucy Harth Smith-Atwood S. Wilson Award for Civil and Human Rights in Education.



Wesley Acton

The award is given through the Kentucky Education Association's Committee on Human Relations at the KEA's spring meeting.

Acton began teaching in Daviess County schools in 1963. Two years before, he became the first black teacher in local parochial schools when he started at St. Williams High School.

Mary Ann Blankenship, communications director for the KEA, said the annual award is given in recognition of a teacher's leadership in the area of civil rights in education and expanding opportunities for all people.

Acton has been active in the Middle School Association of Kentucky, the International Reading Association, and many civic and service organizations. He was nominated for the award by the Daviess County Education Association.

Acton teaches social studies and language arts at Burns Middle School. He said his civic involvement brought him the award.

"It's quite an honor and a privilege to receive such a distinct honor," Acton said. "It's an honor to know I am the recipient of a statewide award and it's an honor to be selected by my colleagues."

Acton is a member of the Green River Crime Council, the Green River Mental Health and Mental Retardation Association, a past president of the local chapter of the NAACP, a member of the Owensboro-Daviess County Council on Aging and member of the board of directors of the Owensboro Area Museum and past president of the H.L. Neblett Community Center board of directors.

In 1989, Acton was named person of the year by the Owensboro Human Relations Committee. Last year he received the Father Charles Saffer Alumni Hall of Fame Award from Brescia College for his work with the alumni association.

"A commitment to all people seems to be the central most thought of Wesley Acton," said Ed L. Allen, superintendent of Daviess schools. "His concern for his students, their families, his fellow teachers and for his community has been his life."

Acton is a native of Hartford. He grew up in Pleasant Ridge and graduated from Western High School in Owensboro. He graduated from Brescia in 1960.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 8 August 1996, p.1B:

Restoration:

Group planning to clean Greenwood Cemetery this Fall

By Tracy L. McQueen, Messenger-Inquirer

Abstract – Emily “Holloway and other, including Wesley Acton of Pleasant Ridge, plan to organize a cleanup effort. They are planning a work day for the fall.”



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 13 October 1996, p.1C:

Cemetery workers uncover history

Group cleaning up abandoned site

By Mark Cooper, Messenger-Inquirer

"The Lord is my shepherd" reads the marble tombstone above Eva Showers Clanton's grave. But Saturday, other shepherds joined the watch over her grave.

Volunteers with the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee equipped with gloves, hatchets, rakes and chain saws descended on the 14-acre cemetery off Leitchfield Road on Saturday morning. Cutting and hacking through the tangled underbrush and forest that had taken over the cemetery, they uncovered Clanton's grave and dozens like it.

"I found my uncle's grave," Elaine Pope, 42, said. "I knew he was buried up here, but until today, I didn't know where."

Volunteers hope the effort - expected to take days of hard work - will uncover part of Owensboro's history and restore pride in the burial ground, according to Wesley Acton, committee co-chairman.

The cemetery is the burial place for many African Americans from the Owensboro area, including veterans of the Spanish-American War, World War I and II and at least one Civil War veteran - a second lieutenant in Cobb's Battery, according to Fred Wilhite, president of the local Sons of Confederate Veterans group.

The first burial there was in 1906, the last in 1974.

The lack of maintenance has been blamed on a dispute among the heirs to the property and confusion about who actually owns the cemetery.

Helping the 30 or so volunteers were members of the Daviess County High School Co-Ed YMCA Club and Sons of Confederate Veterans. A crew from Kevco Enterprises provided a chipper and chain saws for the group as well as a truck to haul away the waste.

Before the cleanup started, only hollow depressions in the ground and a few overturned grave markers indicated a cemetery existed in the underbrush.

But Acton said the cleanup is the first step toward making the cemetery beautiful again. Future plans include forming a foundation to raise money for continued maintenance, he said.

"This has been a dream of mine for 20 years," said Acton, though he has no family members buried there. "I have just always thought that letting the cemetery go has been a bad reflection on the whole town."

Emily Holloway, committee co-chairwoman, said she hopes the work will inspire others with family members buried there to help keep the cemetery maintained in the future.

"We don't need to be doing this once every 10 years," she said.

For Information – To join the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee or for information, call Wesley Acton at 275-4511 or Emily Holloway at 683-7391.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 19 August 1997, p.5A:

Editorial:

Volunteers improve community

"This has been a dream of mine for 20 years," said Wesley Acton last October as volunteers started the hard manual labor of cleaning up Owensboro's Greenwood Cemetery. "I have just always thought that letting the cemetery go has been a bad reflection on the whole town."

Acton and Emily Holloway have served as co-chairs of the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee. Last Tuesday, the Messenger-Inquirer's Tracy McQueen wrote about their effort to bring the cemetery back.

It was the burial place for many African Americans from the Owensboro area. The first burial there was in 1906, the last in 1974.

Holloway said there are hundreds of graves there, spread over approximately six acres. Many soldiers are among those buried – including at least one veteran of the Civil War.

More than 150 volunteers armed with chain saws and weed trimmers have spent the past year fighting through the brush to try to restore the cemetery to its former beauty.

The work is far from finished. Acton and Holloway are still recruiting donations and volunteers to keep the effort up and ensure that the cemetery remains a point of pride, rather than an eyesore and a haven for snakes and vermin.

But we think of the work that has already been done as a success.

It is an example - far from an isolated one – of the power of community-based action and leadership. Greenwood Cemetery wasn't Acton's problem. He has no family buried there. The dispute among heirs that is reportedly the cause of the cemetery's neglect did not involve him.

But he and Holloway – who has relatives buried there – have labored on their own time for more than a year to better their community. And the power of their commitment has attracted the admiration and active support of hundreds.

In the grand scheme, it is only a few acres of land. But preserving our history is an important task. The cemetery had become an insult to those who were buried there. Setting that right was an obligation that is too often ignored.

Our region has a fair share of old cemeteries – some with self-appointed and underappreciated citizen caretakers.

How much better we would honor the memory and beauty of our communities if more people followed the example of Acton, Holloway and the volunteers who have done so much for Greenwood Cemetery.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 9 November 1997, p.1G:

Born with a Purpose:

Community project results in book about
contributions of local African Americans

By Aloma Williams Dew

.... “There are well-known names in the African American community, and their contributions deserve respect. Wesley Acton, a retired teacher, has devoted countless hours to the preservation of Greenwood Cemetery which was for many years the burial ground for the county's African Americans.

He was also active in the Civil Rights movement here in the 1950s and 1960s. Acton was one of the brave young blacks who challenged the policy of Owensboro restaurants that served whites only. He served as president of the Owensboro NAACP and may have been the first black to teach in an integrated school in Kentucky.”



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 16 November 1998, pp.1A & 2A:

Cemetery restoration finished
Trash, brush gone at neglected Greenwood

By Tracy McQueen, Messenger-Inquirer

There were days when it seemed the work would never end and help would never come, but Wesley Acton would never give up.

Over the past two years, Acton of Pleasant Ridge has worked steadily to uncover the history of Greenwood Cemetery. He and others cut through tangled brush and snarled trees to restore the cemetery off Leitchfield Road.

After more than 100 Saturdays of work and help from more than 200 volunteers, the cleanup is complete.

"I'm very pleased," Acton said. "I'm very happy that so many people have helped out."

Greenwood Cemetery had been a forgotten place. The brush was so thick that it didn't look like a cemetery at all.

Emily Holloway of Owensboro said she spent three months searching before she even found her family's graves.

"My mother used to cry about this place, because it was in such bad shape," she said.

Acton, Holloway and others formed the Greenwood Restoration Committee with hopes that one day it would look as it does today.

The brush has been cleared. The trees have been thinned. The trash that littered some graves is gone.

"It is truly unbelievable," Holloway said.

The cemetery was the burial place for many African Americans from the Owensboro area. The first burial there was in 1906, the last in 1974. There are hundreds of graves there, spread over approximately six acres.

The lack of maintenance is attributed to a dispute among the heirs to the property and confusion about who actually owns the cemetery. There had been cleanup efforts before, but never like this one.

"I was determined that I was not going to let this project fail," Acton said.

The first cleanup day in October 1996 attracted about 50 volunteers. The Sons of Confederate Veterans formed an alliance with the restoration committee that would last throughout the cleanup.

"They were the first group who called," Holloway said. "They knew that we needed help, and it was major muscles that we needed."

Students from Brescia University, Owensboro Catholic High and other schools volunteered their time. Progress was slow but steady.

Sometimes Acton worked with an army of volunteers. Other times, he was alone.

"This has been a very long, hard struggle," Holloway said. "There have been times when the spirits were low and everyone was very tired."

The spring of 1997 was one of the low points. The brush returned faster than the volunteers.

"It came so fast," Holloway said.

Acton became discouraged.

"I told Emily, 'Either this thing is going to flop or we've got to get some help,'" he said.

Acton contacted Daviess County Jailer Harold Taylor, who sent community service inmates to help with the work.

"They were here for 16 months," Acton said.

Acton, a retired school teacher, went everywhere looking for help. Many of his former students volunteered.

Some gave a few hours. Some were there week after week.

But some of the jobs were just too big for the tools the volunteers brought from home. Businesses such as Lanham Brothers General Contracting and Consolidated Mechanical donated heavy equipment and people who knew how to operate it.

The restoration committee received about \$2,500 in donations, usually in contributions of \$50 or \$100.

"What I am so proud of is that this is a grass-roots project," Holloway said.

Ironically, Acton has no family buried in the cemetery. He became concerned about it after a friend had asked him to care for some graves there.

"He couldn't understand why anyone who walk off and leave this," Holloway said.

Many couldn't understand. The Rev. R.L. McFarland's parents are among those buried at Greenwood.

"It makes me feel sad, I tell you," McFarland said during a visit more than two years ago. McFarland said it's hard to believe it is the same place today.

"Any person that didn't know would be amazed at what has been done there," McFarland said. "It makes me feel better." Now that the cleanup is complete, Holloway hopes that now the descendants of those buried there will help maintain the cemetery.

"We've very proud of it," she said. "I just think that God has blessed us."



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 27 January 1999, p.1C

8 given city hall's highest honor

By Tracy McQueen, Messenger-Inquirer



A retired teacher, a doctor, a college student and a school superintendent were among those honored Tuesday during the 11th annual Mayor's Awards for Excellence ceremony.

Wesley Acton and Emily Holloway were honored for excellence in volunteer service....

The mayor's award is city hall's highest honor. Mayor Waymond Morris said all of the recipients have made outstanding contributions.

"It was very difficult this year. We had a lot of good nominations," Morris said. "There have been so many people in our community who have contributed." Acton and Holloway were honored for their "tireless and unselfish efforts" to restore Greenwood Cemetery, Morris said. The cemetery off Old Leitchfield Road had become overgrown and littered with debris to the point it didn't look like a cemetery at all.

Acton and Holloway organized a two-year cleanup. They mobilized volunteers from area schools, civic organizations, businesses and individuals. Many volunteers were former students of Acton, who is a retired teacher.

Morris said the restoration could not have happened without the dedication of Acton and Holloway....



Wesley Acton and Emily Holloway receive Mayor's Award for Excellence from Mayor Waymond Morris on 26 January 1999 for their work in restoring Greenwood Cemetery.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 8 February 2004, p.2A:

Historic era First day of Owensboro desegregation is remembered

By Mark Cooper, Messenger-Inquirer

.... The Brown vs. Board of Education decision didn't spark any huge celebrations at Western High School or in the black community in Owensboro, said Wesley Acton, 66, a junior at Western in 1954.

In fact, the decision brought fear, Acton said.

"It was the unknown," said Acton, who in 1961 became the first black teacher in a Daviess County school. "People do fear what they don't know. We were a little bit apprehensive about what would happen to Western and black students during the transition. There was some fear."

Owensboro was just as segregated as most other Southern cities in the 1950s, Acton said.

"It was very segregated," Acton said. "The bus station had separate waiting rooms and drinking fountains. Restaurants did not serve us unless will got carryout from the back or side door. At the movies, we had to sit in the balcony."



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 28 December 2005, p.1A:



Wesley Acton of Pleasant Ridge kneels next to a marker Tuesday afternoon at Greenwood Cemetery across from Rolling Heights public housing units on Leitchfield Road. "We are working on a list of everyone buried here," Acton said. Acton helped spearhead the restoration of the cemetery. Story, Page 1B.



Greenwood Cemetery – 1821 Leitchfield Road, Owensboro, KY
By Jerry Long (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 2006) p.3:

... "With the formation in August 1996 of the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee, under the leadership of Wesley Acton and Emily Holloway, great progress was made in restoring and caring for the cemetery. In the next couple of years the cemetery was reclaimed with more than 200 volunteers cleaning up the grounds and repairing gravestones (see Messenger-Inquirer - "Restoration: Group planning to clean Greenwood Cemetery this fall", 8 Aug 1996 p1B; "Cemetery workers uncover history: Group cleaning up abandoned site", 13 Oct 1996 p1C; "Cemetery repairs get 'gee whiz' reviews", 12 Aug 1997 p1A; "Greenwood Cemetery restoration continuing: Old tombstones to be repaired during Saturday seminar", 16 Sep 1998, p1C; "Volunteers fix history, tombstones", 20 Sep 1988 p1A; "Cemetery restoration finished", 16 Nov 1998 p1A). To handle donations and manage upkeep the restoration committee was incorporated as the Greenwood Restoration Association on 24 June 1999 (Daviness County Corporation Book 115, p677)." ...



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 10 April 2009, pp.1B & 3B:

Acton remains active in community

Area native retired in 1993 after 48 years as a teacher

By Suzi Bartholomy, Messenger-Inquirer



Wesley Acton, the first black teacher in an integrated school in Daviess County, smiles as he talks about his teaching career Wednesday morning at his home in Pleasant Ridge. "I love being around people, and still want to continue to the community," said Acton, who retired from full-time teaching in 1993, but still works regularly as a substitute teacher. Acton was also a driving force behind the restoration of Greenwood cemetery.

Wesley Acton, the first black person to teach in an integrated school in Daviess County, was educated in Owensboro's segregated school system.

Acton, the eighth of 10 children, was born in 1937 near Hartford. His father, a sharecropper, moved the family to Pleasant Ridge in Daviess County when Acton was a small child. He attended George Washington Carver Elementary School that was on West Seventh Street and graduated from Western High School in 1955.

When Acton graduated from high school, he had his sights on college, choosing Kentucky State University. He worked the summer after graduation but was not able to make enough money to go away to school.

The tenacious young man, unwilling to give up his dream of becoming a teacher, enrolled at Brescia College in 1955. He paid tuition by working on campus and graduated in 1960 with a bachelor of arts degree in history with a minor in English.

Acton received a master's degree in 1966 from Western Kentucky University and earned Rank I certification in 1982. "Ever since junior high school, I wanted to teach," Acton said.

His first job was at St. William High School in Knottsville.

"I'm the first African American to teach in an integrated school in Owensboro or Daviess County, for all I know, maybe in western Kentucky," Acton said.

The 22-year-old teacher was well received at St. William. He said the students were more surprised by being taught by a lay person than a black man.

Acton went on to teach at Thruston Elementary, Apollo Junior High School, now Apollo High School, and Burns Middle School.

Acton retired from Burns in 1993, but has been substituting there and other schools every year since.

"I almost don't feel like I'm retired," Acton said.

After 48 years, Acton still enjoys walking into a classroom.

"I love being around people, and still want to contribute to the community," he said.

One of the rewards of teaching Acton said is seeing former students excel, one of whom is Allison Coomes, principal of Tamarack School where Acton occasionally teaches.

Acton taught social studies and language arts to Coomes in 1980.

"I was a student who had to be corrected from time to time, but with Mr. Acton, tomorrow was always a new day," Coomes said. "He gave everyone an opportunity to start over."

He's one of those successful people to model yourself after," Coomes said. It doesn't matter if he's working with an older, younger or special-needs student, he's always respectful and kind, Coomes said.

Former county Commissioner Gary Boswell has a long history with Acton.

"I had him in the seventh grade at Thruston Elementary School," Boswell said. Acton taught language arts and social studies from 1963 to 1969 at Thruston.

"He was an excellent teacher," Boswell said. "What I really loved about him is he instilled confidence in his students.

"He gave me the lead in a play, I think it was 'Wildcat Willie,' I was like a nobody and he picked me," Boswell said.

Years after seventh grade, when Boswell was a county commissioner, he had an opportunity to help out his former teacher. In 1996, Acton and another retired teacher, Emily Hall Holloway, were organizing a group to clean up the old Greenwood Cemetery where many of Owensboro's black citizens are buried.

"Gary got the ball rolling," Acton said. Acton, Holloway and 200 volunteers cleaned up the cemetery and Fiscal Court bought it and maintains the grounds.

"I helped in just a little way," Boswell said.

Holloway, whose family is buried at Greenwood, gives all the credit for getting the cemetery restored to Acton.

"He's wonderful, he can get things done," she said.

"He worked extremely hard on that project. He worked shoulder to shoulder with everyone else," Holloway said.

Acton is now considered an expert on cemetery restoration, Holloway said. He's helped restore two other area cemeteries.

Acton has been active in the community for more than 40 years, serving on numerous boards and committees, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Green River Crime Council, Green River Mental Health and Retardation, March of Dimes, Owensboro-Daviess Council on Aging, Kentucky Citizens Advisory Committee on Education and the H.L. Neblett Center where he is a life member and two-time chairman of the board.

"I feel my greatest contributions to the community are my work with the Neblett Center and Greenwood Cemetery," Acton said.

"Mr. Acton was not on the board when I worked at the center, but he always showed an interest. I could call on him at any time," said former Neblett Executive Director Linda Board.

When the center began a tutoring program for its clients, Acton recruited retired teachers in the community to participate in the program.

"He multifaceted, very organized and extremely talented," Board said.

If you want something done and done right, he's your man, Holloway said.



Ohio County Times-News, Hartford, KY, Thursday, 22 July 2010, p.8B:

**Wesley Acton
receives award**



Ohio County-born Wesley Earl Acton received the prestigious award of Outstanding Alumnus of Brescia College during the annual Celebration Banquet, April 9 at St. Pious Catholic Church in Owensboro. This honor is bestowed on graduates of Brescia who have shown outstanding citizenship, community leadership, community service, and dedication to the worth of individuals, their livelihoods, their hopes and dreams. Due to Mr. Acton's kind generosity and hard work as a spontaneous community leader, he was nominated to be recognized for his many endeavors on behalf of the youth, the aged, and the needy in the Owensboro-Daviess County and Ohio County communities.

Wesley Earl is the eighth child born to the late Levi and Cecil (Collins) Acton of Ohio County. He attended George Washington Carver Elementary School (Daviess County School System) and graduated from Western High School (Owensboro School System). To reach his goal to become a teacher, Wesley attended Brescia College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and a minor in English. He credits the receipt of this degree and a Provisional High School teaching certificate to the opportunities to work on campus to help fund his tuition. Wesley went on to receive a Master of Arts degree in Education and the Kentucky Rank I certification from Western Kentucky University. He took additional courses from Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas, and Florida College in Temple Terrace, Fla.

Mr. Acton has the distinction of being the first African-American in an integrated school in Owensboro—Daviess County, perhaps the first in western Kentucky. His teaching career started at St. Williams High School in Knottsville, Ky.; he went on to teach at Thruston Elementary School, Apollo Junior High School, and F.T. Burns Middle School. After 21 years at Burns, Mr. Acton retired in 1992. Even after retirement, he has continued to teach as a substitute for Ohio County Public Schools, Daviess County Public Schools, and Hancock County Public Schools.

As a professional, Mr. Acton was a long-time member of Daviess County Education Association, the Kentucky Education Association, and the National Education Association. He was also a member of the Kentucky Middle School Association and the International Reading Association. He served these organizations as president and treasurer over his years of membership.

Devoted to public service, Wesley is active in civic and community organizations: Daviess County Citizens Access Board; Daviess County-Owensboro Retired Teachers Association; the Owensboro Branch of NAACP; and the H.L. Neblett Center Board (serving as a two-time president). Wesley was one of the co-founders of the Owensboro Human relations Commission and is affiliated with the Green River Crime Council, the Green River Mental Health and Retardation Board, the March of Dimes, the Owensboro Civil Service Commission, the Owensboro-Daviess County Council on Aging, the Kentucky Citizens Advisory Committee on Education, and a founding member of the Board of Directors of the Owensboro Area Museum in 1966, and co-chairperson of the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee. Wesley is an active member of the Church of Christ of Owensboro. He is known for his quiet working faith, whether being song leader, Bible Study teacher, or filling in at the pulpit.

Over the years, Wesley has received numerous recognitions: 2007 Human Relations R.L. McFarland leadership Award; 2006 Owensboro Branch of the NAACP Lifetime Achievement Award; 1998 Owensboro, Kentucky Mayor's Award for Excellence in Volunteer Service; 1998 Owensboro Human Relations Award; 1992 KEA Human Relations Lucy Harth-Smith-Atwood S. Wilson Award for Civil and Human Rights in Education, 1991 Father Charles Saffer Alumni Award; 1989 Dust Bowl Community Service Award; and 1981 H.L. Neblett Board Member of the Year Award. In addition, Wesley was noted with brief biographical sketches in the 1969 and 1970 editions of Outstanding Personalities of the South.

Wesley Acton can best be summed up by the word "service." His goals, motivations, and intentions are best measured by what he does, not by what he says. When noticing a task needing doing, or a need that isn't being met, some individuals are content to "let the other guy do it" even if there isn't an "other guy" coming forth to do it. Others will see that this, that or the other needs doing and will then either just say it.. .and do nothing, or will wait for the proverbial "other guy" to either "do it," or come help them "do it." Wesley Acton simply "does it." He leads the way and he works shoulder-to-shoulder with comrades to get the job done.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 29 October 2010, p.1C:

Kentucky hall of famers – Nebletts,
Acton honored for civil rights work

Suzi Bartholomy, Messenger-Inquirer



Wesley Acton looks up as he talks about his recent induction into the 2010 Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame on Wednesday at the H. L. Neblett Community Center. Acton, along with the late Hattie Neblett, founder of the community center, and her husband, the late Dr. Reginald Neblett, were inducted into the 2010 hall of fame class. The induction ceremony was Oct. 15 in Louisville. Top: Trophies presented to the family members of the late Hattie and Dr. Reginald Neblett during the 2010 induction of the Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame will be on display at the H.L. Neblett Community Center, said the couple's great-grandson DeMarcus Curry.

Owensboro was well-represented at the 2010 Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame induction ceremonies Oct. 15 in Louisville.

Wesley Acton finally made the hall of fame, after being nominated five times by Emily Holloway of Owensboro.

"She told me if I didn't get in this year, this was it, she wasn't going to nominate me again," Acton said.

But the 10-year wait had an upside. It gave Acton the opportunity to be inducted at the same time as two other notable contributors to Owensboro - whom he had nominated for the honor in June.

"It only took them a few months to get in," Acton said of the late Dr. Reginald Neblett and his wife, Hattie Neblett.

Hattie Neblett was the founder of the H.L. Neblett Community Center, and her husband was a physician who served the black community of Baptisttown.

"People think Dr. Neblett was the only African-American doctor in Owensboro, but there were two others," Acton said.

While Neblett took care of the sick and injured, Hattie Neblett started the community center in the basement of their home on Elm Street. In 1940, she moved her recreation program to a converted tobacco warehouse and created the H.L. Neblett Community Center at 801 W. Fifth St. In 2006, the old center was torn down and replaced with a \$3 million building.

Holloway nominated Acton for his initiation and work in restoring Greenwood Cemetery, which is more than 100 years old and where many of Owensboro's black residents are buried.

Acton has been active in the Owensboro chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People since its beginning and is co-founder and organizer of the Owensboro Human Relations Commission.

Acton knew the Nebletts well and twice served as chairman of the center's board of directors.

The Nebletts' legacy lives on at the center. DeMarcus Curry, who is the center's recreation director, is a great-grandson of the Nebletts. Curry said he has spent the better part of his 23 years at the center.

"I don't remember a lot about my grandmother because I was just 6 years old when she died, but I feel her here," Curry said.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 27 May 2012, p.2A:

Tributes held at cemeteries



"In 1996 we cleaned up a 'wilderness,' " said Emily Hall Holloway of Owensboro, left, as she recounted the recent history of the cemetery, and, along with Wesley Acton, thanked the many volunteers who helped restore the cemetery where 100 veterans are buried. "We were just doing our civic duty," Acton said.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 21 June 2013, p.2A:

Daviess County Fiscal Court

At its meeting Thursday at the Daviess County Courthouse, Daviess Fiscal Court took the following action:

Approved appointing Aloma Dew (co-chair), Lee Dew (co-chair), Amelia Stenger, Shelia Heflin, Glenn Hodges, **Wesley Acton**, Sarah Patterson, Forrest Roberts, Jerry Long, Ed Allen, Grady Ebelhar, Nancy Bradshaw, Kathy Olson, David Zachary, Larry Worth, Shirley Trunnel, County Commissioner Jim Lambert, David Smith and Ross Leigh to the Bicentennial Committee.



The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia, edited by Gerald L. Smith, Karen Cotton McDaniel & John A. Hardin (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015) pp.216-217:

GREENWOOD CEMETERY, cemetery in Owensboro, ICY, that from 1906 to 1976 served as the final resting place for over 2,000 citizens, including Civil War, World War I, and World War II veterans. In February 1906, a group of 34 African Americans in Owensboro, led by attorney Edward Arnold Watts, purchased a 16-acre plot of land and formed the Greenwood Cemetery Association. The Greenwood Cemetery continued to serve the city's black community for the following 70 years.

The two oldest monuments in the cemetery predate its incorporation. Although their gravestones are at Greenwood, the obituaries for Kittie Ann Jones (died on January 13, 1905) and Benedict A. Hayden (died on August 13, 1905) indicate that they were buried elsewhere. It is unknown when their tombs were moved. Gravestones of many members of the military are located in the cemetery. Four of these (Richard Hardesty, George W. Robertson, Henry Michion Taylor, and Robert Woodard) were Civil War veterans; 48 were World War I veterans; and 14 fought in World War II. Many of Owensboro's most influential African Americans were also buried in the cemetery, including medical doctors, ministers, and teachers. Felix Wallace, an Owensboro native who was the owner and manager of the St. Louis Giants Negro League baseball team, was also buried at Greenwood.

In 1957, the Greenwood Cemetery Association was dissolved, but the United Brothers of Friendship, a fraternal organization, continued to maintain the cemetery until it dissolved in 1972. During the 1970s, Greenwood fell into a state of disrepair, and its last documented burial was in February 1976. The cemetery remained in poor shape, the victim of overgrown brush and vandals, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Some family members even removed their loved ones' gravestones to protect them, and others were unable to locate family members' graves because of the tangled brush and tall weeds that had taken over the cemetery's grounds.

In 1996, Wesley Acton and Emily Holloway formed the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee. Together, they promoted the historical importance of the cemetery and organized over 200 volunteers to engage in a massive two-year restoration project. Around the same time, a local

genealogist, Jerry Long, pored through thousands of burial certificates for Daviess Co. and discovered that over 2,000 people had been buried at Greenwood, although only about 300 gravestones existed. He later compiled an exhaustive list of all known men and women buried in the cemetery.

In 2001, continued care of the cemetery was ensured after the Daviess County Fiscal Court purchased the property. Throughout the rest of the decade, Greenwood Cemetery, located on 1821 Leitchfield Rd., joined other cemeteries in Owensboro as the site of Memorial Day observances that featured a military honor guard, a 15-gun salute, and the playing of taps.

Long, Jerry. *Greenwood Cemetery: 1821 Leitchfield Road, Owensboro, Kentucky*, Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 2006.

Newspapers: "Greenwood Cemetery Association Formed to Provide Burial Ground for Colored People," *Owensboro Inquirer*, February 20, 1906, 1; "Greenwood Cemetery Is More Crowded Than Thought," *OMI*, -March 3, 2005, C1; "Cemetery Project in the Works," *OMI*, December 28, 2005, B1; "Services Honor Veterans, Others," *OMI*, May 29, 2011, C1.

—Joshua D. Farrington



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 29 May 2022:



Wesley Acton speaks Saturday during the Memorial Day service at Greenwood Cemetery



Kentucky Commission on Human Rights Civil Rights Hall of Fame

2010 Inductees

<https://kchr.ky.gov/Hall-of-Fame/Pages/default.aspx>



Wesley Earl Acton, Utica, KY

Mr. Acton is an educator, Owensboro NAACP leader, co-founder and organizer of the Owensboro Human Relations Commission. Mr. Acton received the Owensboro Human Relations Award in 1989 for his long-time commitment to civic affairs and education. He has been active throughout his life in integrating schools, teaching positions, stores and businesses. He also lead efforts to clean, maintain and upgrade cemeteries for African Americans in his area.