

Overview of the Black Community in Daviess County

Daviess County, Kentucky Celebrating Our Heritage, 1815-2015
(Evansville, IN, M. T. Publishing Company, Inc., 2015) pp.21-22:

From – Chapter 1:
“Our People – A Burgoon Pot of Cultures”
By Lee A. Dew

The county remained overwhelmingly Caucasian in race, although small African American populations were scattered throughout the area in such villages as Utica, Pleasant Ridge and Birk City. They were mostly small farmers, tenants, or farm laborers, although some worked as warehousemen, teamsters and stevedores in the towns with steamboat landings such as Birk City.

The education of black children was a critical need, as the overwhelming number of adult blacks were illiterate. No public schools existed in the city or county in 1870, but in 1871 a law was passed creating a school district in Owensboro for white children and two years later for "colored" children. By 1880 it was estimated that there were "about 500" school-aged black children in Owensboro, of which "about 200" attended school on a daily basis.

By this time local school districts had been formed throughout the county for both white and black children, although there was little similarity in facilities. Some areas with larger numbers of black children had well-equipped Rosenwald schools, named for the charitable foundation which founded them. Others were little more than shacks.

Between 1880 and 1900 of the biggest demographic change in Daviess County was the gradual movement of much of the black population out of the small towns and rural areas to Owensboro. Rising land prices tempted struggling black landowners to sell out, and modernized farm equipment meant fewer jobs for farm laborers; but many industries and a growing population in Owensboro meant work for adults and a better chance for education and improved way of life for black children.

Many of the newcomers found jobs in the eighteen tobacco stemmeries, the largest number in Kentucky. Here tobacco was placed by grade on the long tables where workers stripped the large center stem from the leaves, dividing each leaf into two strips. After being dried and re-graded, the strips were packed into wooden hogshead barrels holding 1,200 to 1,300 pounds each, and were ready for export. The stemmeries operated from November to June, which meant the work was seasonal, which meant that wages were low, but for many black workers it was an opportunity to earn cash money. The stemmeries employed primarily women and children, so their jobs supplemented the earnings of the husbands and fathers of the black family.

By 1886, the Owensboro city directory listed black adult males as employed by the growing distillery industry as fireman, cattle feeders, and laborers. Many of the 134 black common laborers and teamsters undoubtedly owed their jobs to the distilleries. Other black job opportunities existed as coachmen, cooks, gardeners, barbers and other service jobs. In 1870 only one-sixth of the county's black population lived in Owensboro. By 1886, the population had increased to one third of the total population. This migration slowed somewhat after 1889, but continued for succeeding generations.

The result was the growth within Owensboro of a thriving black community. While most of the adult men listed their occupation as "laborer" and most of the women were "domestics,"

there were also the beginnings of a viable middle-class composed of skilled workmen such as barbers, blacksmiths, federal workers (U.S. storekeeper and U.S. prison agent), teachers and pastors.

There was also a black business section which included seven black owned and operated barbershops, three groceries, four hotels, two restaurants, two saloons, two shoemaking shops, one physician (Dr. J.M. Peters) and four music teachers, according to the 1891 "Owensboro Family Directory."

By the turn of the twentieth century Daviess County's black citizens, both urban and rural, could take pride in the fact that they had a growing community within the larger town of Owensboro, and many looked to the new century with the belief that they would have even greater opportunities considering their accomplishments only thirty-five years after slavery was abolished.

But if African-Americans found hope as the new twentieth century dawned, the majority population saw opportunity in the thriving industrial world of factories, railways and burgeoning retail business. The latter years of the 1800s brought an industrial boom to Owensboro—an economic development which brought major changes not only to the growing city but to the entire little world of Daviess County, and set its course for the new century to come.

History of Daviess County, Kentucky
(Chicago, IL: Inter-State Publishing Co., 1883) p.179:

POPULATION OF DAVIESS COUNTY.

1820	3,876	1860:	
1830	5,209	Whites.....	11,958
1840:		Slaves.....	3,515
Whites	6,327	Free colored.....	76
Slaves.....	1,960		—15,549
Free colored.....	44	1870:	
	— 8,331	Whites.....	17,111
1850:		Free colored.....	3,601
Whites	9,419		—20,714
Slaves.....	2,889	1880:	
Free colored.....	54	Whites.....	22,008
	—12,362	Free colored.....	4,528
			—26,536

CENSUS OF 1880, IN DETAIL.

	White	Blacks	Males	Fems.	Total
Lower Town.....	3,301	1,316	2,221	2,396	4,617
Upper Town.....	5,259	1,544	3,413	3,381	6,794
Yelvington.....	1,534	346	1,054	876	1,930
Knottsville.....	2,442	64	1,280	1,227	2,507
Boston.....	1,497	15	779	733	1,512
Cardsville.....	2,370	134	1,267	1,237	2,504
Murray.....	1,618	381	1,035	964	1,999
Vanover.....	1,203	18	679	632	1,311
Oakford.....	924	375	685	614	1,299
Masonville.....	808	129	436	451	937
Sorghotown.....	920	206	600	526	1,126
	22,008	4,528	13,499	13,037	26,536