At the turn of the twentieth century, Kansas City’s black leaders recognized that the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) movement could provide a vehicle for racial uplift. As the YMCA took root in US cities during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it promoted physical, moral, intellectual, and economic well-being and sought to direct young men and boys away from the dangers associated with urban living and toward stronger community life built on Christian and democratic principles. Like their urban counterparts elsewhere, Kansas City’s black medical professionals, educators, and businessmen found few social alternatives to the saloons, gambling halls, and boardinghouses, and saw the YMCA as a way to provide an environment that would shape the habits of young African American men and boys in ways that matched their own norms and goals for the community.1

When Sears, Roebuck and Company tycoon and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald offered to financially support the construction of buildings for black YMCA branches in 1910, modern facilities suitable for expanding programs and services became feasible for local African American communities. Kansas City became one of the locations where Rosenwald funds were employed, and the city’s Paseo YMCA, built in 1914, ultimately became a social center for the entire African American community, both men and women. The building project was thus a remarkable success, yet the Rosenwald grant also tied the previously independent Colored YMCA

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of Kansas City to the larger white metropolitan YMCA organization in an unequal relationship that reflected the city’s and nation’s troubled, paternalistic race relations in the early twentieth century.

The Paseo YMCA’s role as a community center for Kansas City’s African Americans is well known. The origins of the institution and its relationship to the metropolitan YMCA of Kansas City, Missouri, is not. Your Kansas City and Mine, published in 1950 by William H. Young and Nathan B. Young Jr., provides information about the functioning of the Paseo YMCA, but offers little and, in part, incorrect information about the development of the institution.2 Historian Charles Coulter also gives an account of the important role the Paseo YMCA played in black social and cultural life in Kansas City, but does not delve too deeply into its creation or the branch’s relationship to the metropolitan association.3 Scholar Nina Mjagkij, in her seminal study of African Americans and the YMCA, writes, “The paucity of YMCA histories is surprising, considering that associations provided many black communities with important and otherwise unavailable services.”4 This essay seeks to help fill in that gap as it relates to the social and cultural history of Kansas City’s African American community. It does not aim to be a complete history of the Paseo YMCA. The goal is to describe the origins and development of the YMCA movement in Kansas City’s black community leading to the creation of the Paseo YMCA. The success of the Paseo YMCA as a branch of the Kansas City metropolitan YMCA rested on the work completed by the leaders of the city’s independent Colored YMCA, and Kansas City’s African American community shaped this branch of the metropolitan association into something that fit its needs, namely a place free from local segregation and discriminatory policies.

The YMCA was founded by dry-goods clerk George Williams in London in 1844. The movement was born out of Williams’s experience of moving from his rural English town to the industrial city of London. Disappointed to find that taverns were London’s primary places for fellowship and diversion, Williams organized his fellow clerks, like-minded Protestant Christian men, to meet for prayer and spiritual and intellectual uplift. The idea spread to the United States by way of Boston, where a YMCA was established in 1852. The YMCA was attractive to a growing middle class in American cities seeking an urban counterpart to the moral support structure of the agrarian United States.5 Members of the national YMCA encouraged the creation of associations among the country’s African Americans following the Civil War. This group, as described by Mjagkij, consisted of former abolitionists, paternalistic white Southerners, and others looking for ways to support African Americans who would spread the movement to the African continent. African Americans found the YMCA attractive, seeing the association as a means of social uplift and racial advancement. The first African American association was founded by Anthony Bowen prior to the Civil War. Though self-described as Christian and democratic, the Confederation of North American YMCAs chose to be a segregated organization. Rather than push for integrated associations, the group’s International Committee, composed of delegates from local associations in both the United States and Canada, determined that local associations should make
decisions regarding membership of African Americans. The result was de facto segregation, which was codified in a resolution accepted during the YMCA’s 1891 convention. The International Committee appointed a traveling secretary—“secretary” being a generic term used to describe a paid YMCA employee—to assist African Americans in the South in organizing local associations. The organization’s confederated structure of locally autonomous associations, however, made forming African American associations difficult. Local YMCAs had to be financially self-sufficient; the national group did not provide monetary support to local associations. Many African American communities just could not financially sustain association work.

In 1891 the International Committee selected Canadian-born William A. Hunton to serve as the international secretary responsible for helping local groups organize black YMCAs. Hunton previously had been hired as the first paid black secretary at the African American YMCA in Norfolk, Virginia. He was joined by Jesse E. Moorland in 1898. The two eventually divided the difficult task. Hunton took responsibility for organizing African American associations among students, while Moorland assumed the task of organizing associations in urban areas. According to Moorland, it was the policy of the Negro Department, later called the Colored Work Department, to promote the creation of black branches of city-wide associations, though he and Hunton were authorized to organize independent colored associations as well. While it is not known if Hunton or Moorland were directly involved in the creation of the first black YMCA in Kansas City, the local association fell into the independent model.

Little is known about early efforts among Kansas City’s African Americans to form an independent black YMCA. What can be gleaned from newspaper accounts is that an African American YMCA was functioning in Kansas City as early as 1898, under the leadership of Reverend J. William King. In June of that year, King and his YMCA committee set up a reading room in an “old vinegar factory” at 554 Grand Avenue in the city’s business district. Among the early supporters were educators Gabriel Nelson Grisham and William Ward Yates, Reverend William Hancock, and civil servant Nelson C. Crews. By the end of the summer, the black YMCA numbered thirty-eight members. Though plans to move down the street to 600 Grand Avenue apparently fell through, the YMCA relocated in September to 110 East Sixth Street. According to the Kansas City Journal, the ten-room building on the new site provided a home for “thirty-five little orphan boys who earn their pennies selling newspapers on the street.”
King’s plans for the black YMCA included outreach to black prisoners in the county jail and the creation of a night school for the black newsboys.\textsuperscript{13}

King’s independent YMCA does not appear to have survived into 1899.\textsuperscript{14} This was unfortunate, because Kansas City’s growing African American population at the turn of the twentieth century could have used such an institution. African American men coming to the city for jobs in the area’s meatpacking houses or work on its railroads faced racial segregation. New residents mostly had to find lodging either in black boarding-houses or in the homes of family or friends, since few of the city’s hotels and rooming houses would serve them. Young African American men and boys had few opportunities outside of school for safe and uplifting recreation, and they faced plenty of exciting temptations in the gambling halls and saloons.

White young men and boys in Kansas City had an active YMCA with suitable facilities open to them. The Young Men’s Christian Association of Kansas City, Missouri, was founded in 1860 by a group of local ministers under the leadership of Methodist-Episcopal pastor W. M. Leftwich. At the time, the Kansas City association was primarily a religious organization, reaching out to young men arriving in what was still a frontier city by providing guidance on lodging and evangelizing to them. The association went through a number of financial catastrophes in the last half of the nineteenth century, being forced to close its headquarters during the national economic crisis of the early 1870s and losing its mortgage again in 1894. The YMCA of Kansas City regained economic stability and public confidence under the leadership of Henry M. Beardsley, onetime mayor of Kansas City and president of the local association from 1892 to 1938.\textsuperscript{15} Outreach to the city’s young African American men and boys does not appear to have been discussed much by the Kansas City association’s board of directors, and no mention of King’s efforts to organize a YMCA is found in the board minutes for 1898. However, in April 1902 the board received a letter from Jesse Moorland recommending that the association work to organize a YMCA for the city’s black men. The board requested that Beardsley respond to Moorland.\textsuperscript{16}

Whether the Kansas City metropolitan association responded to Moorland’s letter is unknown. What is evident, however, is that the Colored YMCA of Kansas City was active and providing services, if limited, to the city’s African American community independently from the white YMCA of Kansas City. It is believed that the organization met in the home of Lucinda Day at 1411 Lydia Avenue during the first years of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{17} The small group led by Aaron J. Starnes, Edward Ross, W. W. Waters, and Howard Harris opened a library and meeting rooms on the first floor of a building at 912 East Twelfth Street in February 1903. Announcing their program, the executive committee of the Colored Young Men’s Christian Association of Kansas City, animated by an ideology of racial uplift, stated, “The most important element in our race is the young man. On him the future depends as on no one else. The Y.M.C.A. stands for the spiritual, intellectual, moral, physical and social uplift of young men. No thinking man or woman will question the need of such a work among the colored men of Kansas City.” The committee, seeking “any contribution, no matter how small,” looked to the day when the association could support “baths, a
gymnasium, an employment bureau,” and all-day operation of the facility’s reading room.18

Edward Ross was a leading force in the development of a growing and sustainable YMCA program for Kansas City’s black young men and boys.19 His name appears with Garrison School teacher Aaron J. Starnes in the list of executive committee members in early 1903. However, in September of that year, Starnes took a position with Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, leaving leadership of the Colored YMCA to Ross. A native of Slater, Missouri, Ross came to Kansas City around 1880. He joined Second Baptist Church in 1881 and worked as a clerk for Faxon, Horton, and Gallagher, a wholesale drug company. Serving in the role of president—with Thomas Ward as secretary—Ross rallied support from leading voices in Kansas City’s African American community, including postal worker James H. Crews and Dr. John Edward Perry. In these early years, the Colored YMCA of Kansas City sustained weekly Sunday meetings for men, night classes, and a reading room. The group held public programs at both Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Second Baptist Church and also organized a literary society. The work of the Colored YMCA attracted the attention of the all-white organization led by Beardsley. A local African American newspaper, the Rising Son, noted during Beardsley’s 1904 mayoral run that the candidate had “not only subscribed to the maintenance” of the Colored YMCA “but joined in the effort to make it a success by giving his advice and knowledge of the work.”20

The Colored YMCA of Kansas City remained a fledgling organization until 1907, when the members launched a successful fund-raising campaign to purchase land for a permanent, fully equipped YMCA building and the association hired its first general secretary. The building campaign began in April 1907 with a rally at Allen Chapel AME Church. Abram Grant, the bishop for the Fifth Episcopal District and chairman of the association’s Special Campaign Committee, delivered a message, calling on those assembled to support the campaign.21 The committee’s campaign brochure outlined the association’s plan for a gymnasium, a Bible school and night school for young men, and dormitory rooms, and described the growth of YMCA work among African Americans throughout the country. Showing pictures of the black YMCA buildings in Louisville, Kentucky, and Buxton, Iowa, the brochure noted, “Forty other cities have Associations and eighteen have buildings,” and asked: “Shall we be the next?” The all-white YMCA of Kansas City took notice of the campaign in May and lent its support. Beardsley, board member John W. Jenkins, and Carl S. Bishop, its general secretary, served as an advisory committee to the Colored YMCA of Kansas City’s Special Campaign Committee. The campaign achieved its goal of $10,000 by midsummer.22

To direct the campaign, the Colored YMCA of Kansas City hired its first paid secretary, Robert B. DeFrantz. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1882, DeFrantz had studied medicine at Washburn College and then law at Howard University. He served for two years as the general secretary of the

Remembered in the organization's literature as “the father of the Paseo YMCA,” Edward Ross led the movement to create a vibrant and sustainable YMCA association for Kansas City’s African American men and boys. He continued his service to the organization until his death in 1942.

[National Newspaper Collection, SHSMO-C]
black YMCA in Topeka, which he organized with his brother Faburn E. DeFrantz in 1905. Mjagkij describes the role of the YMCA secretary as a combination of “Christian social worker and business manager.” Successful YMCA secretaries needed to be good diplomats and counselors with sufficient business skills to manage the organization’s finances; they carried out such tasks as collecting membership dues, paying bills, and keeping the books. DeFrantz stepped into difficult circumstances when he accepted the job. Writing to Moorland years later, he described his early years in Kansas City as a period of “terrible struggles,” when the “colored men were left to there [sic] own resources” and “few sacrificed much” to make it function. In 1908, following the successful fund-raising campaign, the association purchased land on the west side of The Paseo between Eighteenth and Nineteenth Streets for a building. The site was about two blocks east of Lincoln High School, the city’s public high school for African Americans, and near the heart of the growing Eighteenth Street and Vine Street business district. However, the Colored YMCA of Kansas City still needed the funds to construct a building on the site.

In December 1910, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company and one of the wealthiest men in the United States, offered to provide $25,000 to any community that raised $75,000 for the construction of a building for a colored branch of the YMCA, equaling a total investment of $100,000. Rosenwald, the son of German Jewish immigrants and himself the victim of anti-Semitism, was motivated in part by sympathy toward African Americans who also faced discrimination in American society. But Rosenwald also shared the belief of Andrew Carnegie that the wealthy had an obligation to give back to the country that had given them so much. Their philanthropy was based not on charity but on the idea of creating opportunity for personal advancement. Rosenwald chose to support the YMCA because the institution was organized around personal improvement and not charity. His goal was to foster self-help among the country’s African American communities and cooperation between the races. These goals were structured into the conditions that came with the offer. Before a community could receive the Rosenwald funds, it had to expend $50,000 of its own money on the project, a sum that practically demanded blacks and whites in the same city must work together. Rosenwald also required the receiving organization to function as a branch of the larger metropolitan YMCA. His offer demonstrated an acceptance of the Jim Crow policy of the YMCA to create segregated branches; it did not challenge the status quo. While there was criticism of the program—W. E. B. DuBois, for instance, used the occasion to challenge the YMCA’s “unchristian and unjust” segregation policy—it was acceptable to white metropolitan associations and welcomed by many African American communities eager to build modern facilities to serve members of the race.
The Rosenwald grant program was supervised by L. Wilbur Messer, general secretary for the Chicago YMCA, and Jesse Moorland, who went into the field to survey grant applicants and supervise fund-raising campaigns. Moorland examined the economic situation of the grant applicant to determine the applicant’s ability to raise funds and maintain the building, and then made a recommendation to Messer and the white officials of the Chicago YMCA. Rosenwald’s offer was not a handout, which meant not every grant applicant received funds. The decision was made not to provide grants to smaller cities because Rosenwald insisted that African Americans play a role in raising funds for the construction and be capable of maintaining the building and supporting a YMCA in their community; it was believed only cities with larger black populations could meet these requirements. When a grant applicant received a positive recommendation, Moorland traveled to the community to supervise the campaign, generally running ten to fourteen days, to gather subscriptions or pledges which would be collected after the campaign’s successful completion.

With this in mind, the leaders of the Colored YMCA of Kansas City, now located at 1419 East Eighteenth Street in the growing African American business district, appealed to the Kansas City YMCA’s board of directors to pursue the Rosenwald grant in 1911. The board discussed the Rosenwald offer in the summer of 1911. Due to its own recent fund-raising campaign, the board determined to hold off on the project until the following year. Furthermore, at the urging of businessman and philanthropist William Volker, the board folded the campaign for the black YMCA building into a larger effort—termed the Social Betterment Campaign—that included support for the Helping Hand Institute, of which Volker was...
the support of a strong supporter. The campaign was scheduled for ten days, beginning on January 29, 1913.

African Americans pledged their portion of the needed funds by the close of the Social Betterment Campaign on February 8. During the campaign the fund-raising committee, under the leadership of Lincoln High School’s principal, Gabriel N. Grisham, collected pledges both large and small, with Moorland on hand to assist. Kansas City’s black professionals gave generously: the donors included educators such as Gaitha A. Page, Richard T. Coles, and David N. Crosthwaite; medical professionals such as physicians John E. Perry and Lloyd Bailer and dentist Thomas C. Chapman; and ministers such as Samuel Bacote of Second Baptist Church and William H. Peck of Allen Chapel AME Church. But more illustrative of community support were the many smaller contributions from all age groups and from both men and women. For example, Capitola Richardson, a six-year-old girl, contributed $2.50 to the campaign; another man gave $50 in tip money to the cause. The Kansas City Star reported, “From a houseman, a furnace tender and odd job man . . . came $150,” and “Pullman porters came with $5 at a time to pay their subscriptions.” A female hotel worker who made only $1 a week paid her $25 subscription bit by bit, “fifty cents, $1, $2 at a time.”

Grisham, writing in the Kansas City Sun, thanked subscribers, saying the effort “won a new standing and name” for the race in Kansas City and that their efforts “will influence other cities.” Kansas City’s African Americans ultimately pledged over $30,000.32

The financial contributions of Kansas City’s African Americans, combined with pledges from white Kansas Citians and Rosenwald’s donation, amounted to $100,000. In March 1913, the board of directors of the Kansas City, Missouri, YMCA appointed a building committee for the newly designated colored “department” composed of Beardsley, J. W. Jenkins, and A. B. Colton as well as Lincoln High School vice-principal Hugh O. Cook, the chair of the black department’s Committee of Management, and Robert B. DeFrantz, its executive secretary. The committee was authorized to expend $100,000 and instructed to keep spending to that amount.33

Acceptance of the Rosenwald offer meant that Kansas City’s African American community would have a modern facility for association and community activities, but it came with strings attached. As per the branch by-laws, a Committee of Management, appointed by the metropolitan association’s board of directors from a list of eligible men submitted by the department, was responsible for the operation of the branch, including financial support for its programs. The Committee of Management’s budget proposal was subject to the metropolitan board’s approval and could not be altered without the board’s consent. Any money received by the branch was to be paid to the treasurer for the metropolitan association, and no money could be expended until after it had been drawn through the treasurer. The branch’s
executive secretary—responsible for the day-to-day operations of the department—was also appointed by the metropolitan board of directors after consultation with the Committee of Management. The arrangement, therefore, altered Robert DeFrantz’s relationship to the group of men he had worked for diligently since his arrival in Kansas City. He was now an employee of the metropolitan association. Thus in exchange for the building funds, the branch had sacrificed its autonomy from the metropolitan association.

Over the coming months, the metropolitan association’s board consolidated ownership of the assets of the Colored YMCA of Kansas City into the larger city-wide association. In May 1913 the group voted to hold all association property, including that acquired for the black department, in the name of one board of trustees. It does not appear that either Cook or DeFrantz was present for this meeting. At the September meeting, General Secretary Bishop called attention to the ownership of land where the new colored department building was being erected, which was still in the hands of the Colored YMCA of Kansas City. The black organization had never incorporated. The metropolitan board determined that the African American membership should transfer real estate ownership to the larger association, securing a clear title and deed to the property. Finally, in its December meeting, the board debated the official name for the colored branch of the Kansas City, Missouri, YMCA. The group settled on the Paseo Department, choosing to make no mention of the “negro feature of the work.”

Ground was broken at the building site on November 2, 1913. The Colonial Revival–influenced building was designed by the firm Smith, Rae, and Lovitt. Its cornerstone was laid on May 31, 1914. The ceremony, which featured speakers Jesse Moorland, Henry Beardsley, and Kansas City Sun editor and R. T. Coles Lodge Grand Master Nelson C. Crews, was attended by over eight thousand people. Beardsley wrote to Julius Rosenwald the following month, noting that the membership in Kansas City had fulfilled its obligations and was ready for payment. With the delivery of Rosenwald’s contribution, Kansas City’s black YMCA leaders made a final push in October 1914 to secure the remaining financial pledges, which would be enough to help furnish the completed building. The new building opened at 1824 Paseo in November 1914.

The Paseo YMCA quickly set about meeting the needs of the community. The Kansas City Star profiled the building and its programs two months after its opening. The newspaper noted that the dormitory rooms, “with their oak furniture, electric lights, steam heat and clean beds” rent-
ing for $1.50 to $2.50 a week, were “hard to beat anywhere in town.” The Fred Harvey Company, seeing a good bargain, kept a room in reserve for its dining car men. The Star also remarked on the various amusements available and being used by the community, such as the piano in the main lobby where people sang, the pool tables that “are very much in demand of an evening,” the gymnasium “with its running tracks, apparatus,” and the “big [swimming] pool of filtered water.”

The leaders of the Paseo YMCA also put themselves to work improving the surrounding neighborhood. For instance, in November 1915, Cook and DeFrantz were part of a delegation to the Police Board, seeking to persuade it to deny a liquor license to a saloon owner who wanted to open shop at 1331 East Eighteenth Street. Arguing that life in the neighborhood was improving, the delegation was able to persuade the Police Board that another saloon would do more harm than could be offset by either the Paseo YMCA or nearby Lincoln High School.

The Paseo Department reported a successful first year in its 1916 annual report. The department had enrolled 754 members—514 men and 240 boys. A library of “choice books” donated by a committee of citizens, supplemented by periodicals, made the reading room one of the “most popular rooms in the building.” The department hosted the Chauffeurs League, organized at the building for the purpose of making its members “more efficient and useful employees,” and the Domestic Science Club, composed of men who worked as “butlers, housemen and cooks.” The building also opened its doors for lectures and musical programs that met the needs of association members and the wider community.

The Committee of Management reported that the building served as a “wholesome” meeting place for men and boys, an alternative to the pool halls and bars. In the building’s lobby, reading and committee rooms, and cafeteria, men and boys could play recreational games such as billiards, checkers, and chess, or engage in discussion. The department promoted physical well-being through its gymnasium, baths, and physical education program. The annual report boasted that 125 men and boys “learned to swim the first six months in the building.”

According to the 1916 annual report, the building’s dormitories housed 300 “regular men,” meaning those staying a week or more at a time, and over 1,000 transients in 1915. The dormitories provided housing for young African American men with few options for short-term housing in the city. Cook and DeFrantz had noted that “young men roomers in negro homes” are often a “frequent source of immorality.” The dormitories reduced this “menace.” The report indicated that over 3,000 men attended a religious service in the building in 1915. The department also held daily devotional meetings for employees and visitors in the lobby.

For elementary- and high school–age boys in the membership, the department provided a summer camp within the first year. Dubbed “Camp Inspiration” by one of the boys, the camp was located just outside of Linwood, Kansas, about thirty miles from Kansas City, on the property of prosperous black farmer Eugene Graves. The boys enjoyed camping, fishing, and hiking during their sojourn. To instill the value of thrift and hard work, the department’s Boys Work Committee created a Christmas Saving Club and “chore employment” program, which dispatched boys to provide services such as washing dishes or carrying coal. The committee
also cooperated with local churches to increase Sunday school attendance and promote Bible study at the Paseo YMCA.47

The Paseo Department, however, did not succeed in becoming financially self-sustaining. As per the department by-laws, the Paseo YMCA was responsible for its own financial support, yet even in its first months of existence, it operated at a deficit. The financial situation contributed to increased friction between the Paseo YMCA Committee of Management and the metropolitan board of directors. For instance, when the committee made a request for additional equipment for the building, the board refused to allow the funds until “present financial obligations” had been met. In May 1915, Gaitha A. Page, the committee’s recording secretary, wrote to the board concerning the lack of black representation on the board and among the metropolitan organization’s secretaries. Considering that African Americans had financially contributed to the purchase of the Paseo property, Page wrote, it seemed only right that African Americans should serve on the Board of Trustees, which held title to the property. But beyond this consideration was the general proposition that the YMCA “is a great democratic Christian body” and therefore the “fullest possible representation of all the membership should be attempted.” The board of directors, however, formally declined the request for more equitable representation. In December 1916 it issued a number of directives meant to reinforce the Paseo Department’s subordinate position to the board and the metropolitan association as a whole. For example, no department was allowed to “solicit any subscriptions from any source without first submitting the names to the general office,” and “all printed matter” and publicity materials issued by the departments must “clearly indicate the Department relationship,” extending even to department stationery, which must include the names of the officers of the metropolitan association.48

Disagreements between the two bodies came to a head in May 1917. That spring, the Committee of Management had a gas pump installed in the Paseo building, since the furnaces had been shut down and there was not enough gas to keep the cafeteria and baths operating.49 Upon hearing that the gas pump had been installed without authorization from the board of directors, General Secretary Bishop, responding on behalf of the board, shot a letter off to DeFrantz chiding him for acting outside his authority and demanding that the pump be removed immediately.50 DeFrantz, acting on behalf of the Committee of Management, refused to comply with Bishop’s demand. Bishop then reminded DeFrantz that his first responsibility was to the board and not to the committee. “Your refusal to meet the wishes of the Board is a plain act of insubordination,” said Bishop. “Your evident purpose to oppose the Directors by violating their instructions

Educator Hugh O. Cook, a prominent figure in Kansas City’s African American community, served as chairman of the Paseo branch’s Committee of Management, putting him in the middle of conflicts between the branch and the metropolitan organization. He left his position not long after Robert DeFrantz, the branch’s executive secretary, was forced out in 1917. [1924 Lincoln High School yearbook, The Lincolnian]
has ended your usefulness to this organization. And I am authorized to inform you that your official connection with the Association in Kansas City ceases today." The board then named Frank A. Harris as the new executive secretary at the Paseo Department.

The Committee of Management was incensed by Bishop’s and the board’s action. DeFrantz had been chosen by the black leaders of the Colored YMCA of Kansas City prior to its joining with the metropolitan association, and after seven years he had become an important member of the community. Cook, the committee’s chairman, wrote directly to Beardsley, the board’s president, requesting a meeting with the board to discuss DeFrantz’s dismissal and asking that DeFrantz remain in charge until the issue was resolved. Beardsley replied that Bishop had acted as directed by the board and that DeFrantz would not be allowed to continue. Cook also appealed to Jesse Moorland, stating that the Paseo Committee of Management was unwilling to “submit to such summary action” or even “admit Bishop’s authority to discharge employees” of the department without consulting the committee. Cook emphatically stated, “We shall demand court order before we allow DeFrantz to leave in this manner.” Moorland, recognizing the severity of the situation, asked Cook to proceed in a manner that kept it “out of court by all means.”

Ultimately, Robert DeFrantz was not returned to his position with the Paseo YMCA. DeFrantz’s letter to Moorland discussing his dismissal reveals the underlying issues behind the response of the Committee of Management. DeFrantz reminded Moorland that prior to deeding the Paseo property over to the metropolitan association, there was a “verbal understanding” that the board would include black members. The board had not honored this verbal agreement. Furthermore, the by-laws it had forced on the black YMCA members with no opportunity for discussion indicated that the chairman of the Committee of Management was to be an ex-officio member of the board of directors. DeFrantz charged that Cook, the branch’s chairman, had “never been notified of any meetings and consequently had no opportunity to be present at meetings in which matters relative to our Department were to be discussed.”

The Paseo Department, as described by DeFrantz, was not seen by the board of directors as an equal partner in association work. DeFrantz provided Moorland with an “early illustration” of the consequences of the existing relationship between the Committee of Management and the board. The membership cards printed for the opening of the new building, the printer’s proof of which was never submitted to the committee for approval, included only the names of the metropolitan officers, the president, and the general secretary; “Only through protest was our chairman’s

Supporters of the Paseo YMCA break ground at the building site in November 1913. The building was completed within a year, but operated at a deficit for many years, creating ongoing tension between the Paseo branch’s management and the metropolitan association board of directors.

[Courtesy of Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Howard University, Washington, DC]
name printed thereon.” Finally, DeFrantz believed Bishop himself was a problem. Cooperation “as interpreted by the General Secretary has meant” the acceptance of “any and all of his rulings without discussion that he saw fit to make.” Now that he had been dismissed, DeFrantz wrote, Bishop was looking to remove Hugh O. Cook and Dr. Lloyd Bailer, men who had the “hardihood and manhood to question his actions from time to time.”

In closing, DeFrantz expressed his readiness to continue the work of the association in another capacity.

DeFrantz, who had been so instrumental in bringing the Paseo YMCA into being, left Kansas City for the army camp at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, to organize a new YMCA branch. He would go on to spend most of his professional life building and supporting the YMCA movement, serving on the Y War Work Council during World War I, becoming a national secretary after the war, and taking responsibility for African American personnel and fund-raising for black YMCAs across the country. DeFrantz left the YMCA in 1944 to assist in the first nationwide financial campaign for the United Negro College Fund. He died in 1956.

In the years following DeFrantz’s departure, the Paseo YMCA’s management, members, and patrons settled into a relationship with the metropolitan association that enabled the Rosenwald building to become a community center for greater Kansas City’s African Americans without threatening the city’s racial status quo. Through the leadership of DeFrantz’s successors—Frank A. Harris, who served as executive secretary from 1917 to 1922, and G. A. Gregg, previously of the Hunton Branch YMCA of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who served from 1922 to 1926—the Paseo YMCA became a place for black Kansas Citians to gather, to learn, to celebrate, and to voice opinions safely in a segregated city. Hugh O. Cook was succeeded by longtime YMCA supporter Dr. John Edward Perry as chairman of the Committee of Management. Perry served from 1919 to 1922 and was succeeded by Charles Westmoreland, who served from 1923 to 1930. The Paseo YMCA provided several services that were open to the entire community: an information bureau; the reading room stocked with current publications; chess, checkers, and other games; Sunday meetings and Bible study classes; lectures and movies; and the piano in the lobby. For a small cost, anyone could dine at the Paseo YMCA’s cafeteria. The Rosenwald building hosted many community organizations and events, including sports teams from Lincoln University and Western University, the Interstate Basketball League, Boy Scout troops, lectures and musical performances, and board meetings, including those of the board of directors for Wheatley Provident Hospital. The Paseo Young Women’s Christian Association, chartered in February 1919, used the Paseo YMCA building for its headquarters before securing its own building a few months later. Famously, over a weekend in February 1920, the National Negro League was organized in the Paseo YMCA building.

Even as the Paseo YMCA came to fulfill a wide set of needs for the city’s African American community, it remained committed to fulfilling the purposes of the YMCA movement, providing physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual uplift of young men and boys. Among the benefits of YMCA membership were access to the building’s gymnasium and swimming pool, showers and lockers, billiard tables, and dormitories. At
least two Paseo YMCA leaders contributed to the YMCA’s war work and support of American military forces during World War I. Edward Ross served on the home front as a YMCA secretary in Des Moines, Iowa, from November 1917 through January 1918. Upon returning to Kansas City, Ross served as the secretary for the Department of Religious Work at the Paseo YMCA. Committee of Management chairman Hugh O. Cook served overseas with the 371st Infantry of the Ninety-Third Division between June 1918 and February 1919; he was with the regiment during the Champagne offensive, aiding the wounded until he himself succumbed to gas. Cook survived and was recommended for a Distinguished Service Cross in 1919. A YMCA Hi-Y club affiliated with the Paseo branch was established with a platform of “clean living, clean speech, clean athletics, and clean scholarship.” Charles Coulter notes that as the number of African Americans moving into Kansas City increased in the 1920s, the Paseo YMCA found its dormitories consistently filled. In addition to recent arrivals, African Americans arrested for vagrancy were often turned over to the Paseo YMCA for shelter; the police also left elderly African American men at the doors of the Paseo YMCA.

Over its history, the Paseo YMCA was held up by the metropolitan association as an example of interracial cooperation in Kansas City, but based on the metropolitan association’s board meeting minutes, the leaders of the YMCA of Kansas City had limited interaction with the Paseo YMCA department during the 1920s and 1930s. In one of the few instances in which the Paseo YMCA directly solicited the support of the board of directors, to oppose the placement of a garbage plant at Twentieth and Vine Streets, the best the board could muster was to “send a communication to the Paseo Department promising possible cooperation.” However, in his study of the Rosenwald YMCAs published in 1934, George Robert Arthur noted there had been “exchange visits” between Bible study classes in white churches and the Paseo YMCA, which “contributed much toward interracial good will between the white and colored people of Kansas City.”

The Great Depression took a toll on the operation of the Paseo YMCA. As described by Arthur in 1934, the Paseo branch had become a “clearing house for a large number of community groups.” While it had no property debt, the Paseo YMCA was operating at a deficit, costing $9,912 to operate in 1933. African Americans contributed $1,400 toward operating expenses, while another $4,816 came from the “community chest.” By 1933 the Paseo YMCA had an accumulated operating deficit of $35,341. Arthur reported 305 paying Paseo YMCA members who were men and 175 who were boys. The branch employed one full-time and two part-time

The Paseo branch building in a photo believed to have been taken sometime between 1915 and 1930. Closed as a YMCA facility in 1964, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. In 2018 the building is under renovation by the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum to house the Buck O’Neil Education and Research Center. [Courtesy of the Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries]
officers in 1933; there were 300 committeemen and other volunteers. The branch did not operate a summer camp in 1933.⁶⁵

The board of directors of the metropolitan association was committed to maintaining the Paseo YMCA, despite its financial problems. The Paseo department’s financial problems became critical, however, in 1936. During the metropolitan association’s March 1936 board meeting, it was reported that during its twenty-one-year occupation of the Rosenwald building, the cost to operate the Paseo branch had exceeded its income by over $72,000. Lacking sufficient funds, the branch had not kept up with building repairs. The board concluded that no improvement of income could be expected until adequate building rehabilitation was completed. A committee to study the problem determined that the Paseo building was clean, well kept, and valuable to the neighborhood as a community center, noting that eighty-four different organizations used the facility in 1935. The board authorized the Paseo Department to arrange a loan to complete necessary building repairs to the dormitory floors.⁶⁶

The Paseo YMCA continued to serve African Americans throughout the Kansas City metropolitan area throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Dr. Earl D. Thomas, then the principal of R. T. Coles Vocational and Junior High School, became the first African American to serve on the board of directors with his election in February 1945.⁶⁷ Though the National Council of the YMCA called on local associations to eliminate racial discrimination in 1946, the Kansas City metropolitan association continued to look on the Paseo YMCA as its sole outlet for African American members.⁶⁸ A 1951 survey of the metropolitan YMCA and its branches indicated that the Paseo YMCA served African Americans not only in the immediate area but also in northeast Kansas City, Leeds, Westport, and Kansas City, Kansas. Over its existence, the Paseo YMCA’s leadership included numerous members from Kansas City, Kansas, including John A. Hodge, the principal of Sumner High School; Henry W. Sewing, founder of Douglas State Bank; and Reverend I. H. Henderson. The survey also illustrated the metropolitan association’s continued acceptance of the city’s practice and policies of racial segregation, with the document stating that the wide geographic reach of the Paseo YMCA would remain. The survey remarked, “Although commendable advances have been made in achieving the Christian and democratic purpose of the YMCA as a movement, the inherent social and religious heritage of the city will continue to exercise determining influence on the existing mores and any changes that may be attempted.”⁶⁹

The Rosenwald building at 1824 Paseo served Kansas City’s African American community for fifty years before closing in 1964. At that time, the YMCA of Kansas City combined service to that area of the city with the existing Linwood Branch at 3416 East Linwood Boulevard, with the intention of building a new facility on Linwood Boulevard between Cleveland Avenue and Mersington Avenue. When the YMCA of Kansas City was unable to immediately sell the Paseo and Linwood buildings, it offered the building to Coaches Council in 1968 to house its urban youth recreation and jobs program.⁷⁰ The Paseo building was finally sold to the Urban Redevelopment Authority in 1971.⁷¹
The Paseo YMCA building continues to stand as a monument to the local African American leaders and broader community that nourished the institution. The building, now under the leadership of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1991 and is currently undergoing renovations to convert the structure into an educational, research, and cultural center named in honor of Kansas City Monarchs player John “Buck” O’Neil. The structure is poised to once again play a significant role in the social and cultural life of Kansas City as testament to the resilience of the city’s African American community.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Margie Carr, Elvis “Sonny” Gibson, Dr. Antonio Holland, and Joe Louis Mattox for reading and providing comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2. William H. Young and Nathan B. Young Jr., Your Kansas City and Mine (1950; repr., Kansas City, MO: Midwest Afro-American Genealogy Interest Coalition, 1997), 16.


7. Ibid., 145. Mjagkij notes that the term “secretary” was adopted in 1873 when the first full-time YMCA worker was hired.

8. Ibid., 17.

9. Ibid., 35, 38.


11. The author was unable to determine which church King served. The Kansas City Star identified him only as the “minister of the negro Christian church.” See “A Negro Y.M.C.A.,” Kansas City Star, June 20, 1898, p. 2.


14. I was unable to locate any newspaper articles concerning King’s association with the YMCA after 1898 or additional published notices concerning the Colored YMCA of Kansas City until 1903.


16. Board of Directors minutes, April 15, 1902, Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) of Greater Kansas City Records (K0332), State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center–Kansas City, hereafter referred to as YMCA Records.

17. Young and Young, Your Kansas City and Mine, 135 and “Tabloid History of Paseo YMCA,” YMCA
Today 1, no. 7 (March 20, 1942), YMCA Records. The history of the Paseo YMCA in this 1942 issue of YMCA Today marks 1900 as the beginning of the colored YMCA in Kansas City, with Edward Ross as leader. It gives a 1902 address of 914 East Twelfth Street.


22. “A Building for Colored Men in Kansas City” and Board of Directors minutes, May 7 and July 2, 1907, all in YMCA Records. The board instructed Bishop to recommend a board of trustees composed of members nominated by the board of directors and including both white and black members to hold title since the group had not formally incorporated.


27. I have not seen this stipulation mentioned in secondary literature concerning the Rosenwald grant program. It is, however, discussed in the 1934 Kansas City YMCA publication More Than a Building, where it is noted that Rosenwald refused to “make a gift to any city where the work was not a branch of the metropolitan Association.” George R. Arthur’s work on the Rosenwald YMCAs, Life on the Negro Frontier (New York: Association Press, 1934), confirms that “All of the ‘Rosenwald’ Associations operate under the ‘Metropolitan Plan’ . . . whereby the city branches are related to each other through a centralized control and supervision by a general secretary and a board of managers.” I see no evidence that the Colored YMCA of Kansas City functioned as a branch of the metropolitan association prior to 1911.


30. More Than a Building, 83; see also “Colored Y.M.C.A. Campaign Ends,” Kansas City Star, April 18, 1911.

31. Board of Directors minutes, June 9 and August 18, 1911, YMCA Records.


33. Board of Directors minutes, March 14, 1913, YMCA Records.


35. Board of Directors minutes, May 29, 1913, YMCA Records. As it is not noted in the minutes whether Cook and DeFrantz attended this important meeting concerning department assets, it is likely that they did not, since other minutes do note when visitors were in attendance. See, for example, the minutes of June 24, 1914.

36. Board of Directors minutes, September 19, 1913, YMCA Records.

37. Board of Directors minutes, December 5, 1913, YMCA Records. As new branches were added to the metropolitan association, the board chose to name these by their geographic location, e.g., Northeast Branch, Westport Branch, etc.

39. H. M. Beardsley to the Chicago Young Men’s Christian Association, June 24, 1914, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Library.


42. “Knocked Out One Saloon,” Kansas City Times, November 18, 1915.


44. Ibid.


46. “Y.M.C.A. Notes,” Kansas City Sun, August 21, 1915; see also Kansas City Sun, June 10, 1916.


48. Board of Directors minutes, March 15 and April 13, 1915, YMCA Records; G. A. Page to members of the Metropolitan Board, May 26, 1915, Local Black Association Records, YMCA Colored Work Department Records, Kautz Family YMCA Archives; Board of Directors minutes, June 10 and December 22, 1916, YMCA Records.


50. C. S. Bishop to Robert B. DeFrantz, May 9, 1917, Local Black Association Records, YMCA Colored Work Department Records, Kautz Family YMCA Archives.


52. H. O. Cook to H. M. Beardsley, May 12, 1917; H. M. Beardsley to H. O. Cook, May 14, 1917; H. O. Cook to J. E. Moorland, May 13, 1917; J. E. Moorland to H. O. Cook, May 15, 1917; all in ibid.


54. Ibid.


56. DeFrantz, Robert B., Biographical Records, Kautz Family YMCA Archives.

57. Coulter, Take Up the Black Man’s Burden, 136.

58. Ibid., 137.

59. Ibid., 140.

60. Ross spent the remainder of his life in service to the YMCA. Credited as the “father of the Paseo YMCA” at the time of his death in 1942, he left his estate to the YMCA as a “bit of evidence of his appreciation for the fine way in which the YMCA had provided for him during the latter years of his life.” Official Record Book No. 2.—Employee Benefit Alliance, YMCA Records.


63. Board of Directors minutes, April 17, 1923, YMCA Records.


66. Board of Directors minutes, March 27, April 24, and September 18, 1936, YMCA Records.

67. Board of Directors minutes, February 16, 1945, YMCA Records.


