

TAKING STEPS TO RECORD STEPTOE, WESTPORT'S VANISHING AFRICAN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOOD

BY JOELOUIS MATTOX

Steptoe is the name of an antebellum African American neighborhood in Kansas City, Missouri, that is about to vanish. Located in the historic Westport district, residents of Steptoe once called their community "a little island" and declared it "the best colored neighborhood in the city."

Steptoe *may* have originated around 1850. There is a mystery about who or what the area was named after. This article is the author's first attempt to take *steps* at bringing attention to the critical need of researching and documenting this historic ethnic enclave of Westport in Kansas City.

Westport was founded in 1831 and during its early years some of the town's most prominent citizens owned slaves. The founders of Westport, namely John Calvin McCoy, owned slaves as did John Wornall, a banker and gentleman farmer, who built a fine home operated today as The John Wornall House Museum (located at 6115 Wornall Road and originally restored by Jackson County Historical Society).

Missouri entered the Union as a slave state and slaves most likely were sold at auction in the building today operated as Kelly's Bar at the northwest corner of Westport Road and Pennsylvania Street.¹

Slavery in Westport was a peculiar institution in more than one way. First is the fact that McCoy established a way for slaves in the Westport area to buy their freedom. Slaves could earn \$3.00 per week to work off repaying the price their masters had paid for them. This, coupled with the fact that the founding families of Westport set aside land for former slaves to live makes this a unique chapter in our areas history that is worth exploring further. A small settlement grew at 43rd Street, west of Pennsylvania Avenue.²

Did free blacks call this place "Steptoe?" Was Steptoe a former slave, a town official of Westport, or possibly an Indian fighter named Edward Jenner Steptoe, who was stationed for a while at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas?

Edward Jenner Steptoe was born in 1816 in Bedford

County, Virginia. A graduate of West Point in 1837, just two years ahead of Ulysses S. Grant, Steptoe served in the Indian Wars in Florida, 1838-1842. He was also a veteran of the Mexican War, 1846-1848. In the spring of 1854, Steptoe, a Lieutenant Colonel, was ordered from Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, to duties in the Northwest where he served with distinction as commander of the Spokane Expedition of 1858. Steptoe resigned from the U. S. Army in 1861 due to ill health and died in Virginia in 1865, at the age of 49. The Steptoe Battlefield State Park near Olympia, Washington, is named in his honor.³ Is it possible that the Steptoe neighborhood in Westport is yet another landmark to the Colonel's fame? But

why would a community of free blacks in Missouri honor a military hero from Virginia, a slave state? Most likely they did not.

Maybe Steptoe was named after G. W. Steptoe, a black man who migrated from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Kansas City around 1878. The "black Steptoe" family may have arrived in Kansas City, Kansas, as part of the post-Civil War "Exoduster" movement. Exodusters were hundreds of Southern blacks, former slaves, who migrated to Kansas—the Promised Land—seeking a new life. It was the first major spontaneous migration of African Americans in this country.⁴ Sherry Lamb Schirmer estimates that perhaps a third of the 15-20,000 who made the journey found themselves stranded in Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas, when their travel funds ran out.⁵

According to the 1880 city directory for Kansas City, Missouri, G. W. Steptoe and his wife C. Steptoe lived in Kansas City, Kansas, in an alley between Armstrong and Wood Streets. The 1880 United States Census for Wyandotte County, Kansas, identifies G. W. Steptoe as a 75-year-old colored man, a laborer, who was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He lived with his colored wife, C. Steptoe (age 70) and their grandson Sam Steptoe (age 8).

Perhaps G. W. Steptoe or his father took the surname Steptoe from Robert Steptoe, who may have befriended them.



A scene representative of the Exoduster movement. Black laborers on a wharf on the James River in Virginia. Photo courtesy National Archives Records Administration (111-B-400)

Robert Steptoe, a mulatto and Baptist preacher, lived in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1810. Although his date of birth is yet unknown, Robert's birthplace was Bedford County, Virginia (Note: the same location as Lieutenant Colonel Edward Jenner Steptoe). Since the name Steptoe appears in Jackson County records as far back as 1857, some 21 years before G. W. Steptoe arrived in this area, the African-American enclave in Westport would not likely have been directly named for him either.

Did the village-like enclave of Steptoe get its name from a southern sympathizer who was a town official and who later became a colonel in the Confederate Army?

There is evidence that the name Steptoe in Westport is connected to Henry Clay Pate, a public official of Westport and native of, you guessed it, Bedford County, Virginia. In 1855, Henry Clay Pate was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Kaw Township (Westport). He was the publisher of the *Border Star* newspaper, which advocated making Kansas a slave state. In May 1856 Pate, having obtained the rank or title of "Captain," led an armed body of men into Kansas. At the Battle of Black Jack (near present Baldwin, Kansas) on June 2, 1856, Pate's forces captured two sons of abolitionist John Brown. In retaliation, Brown attacked Pate's camp capturing Pate and 28 of his men. The Missourians were released a few days later and Pate and his men returned to Jackson County.⁶ In December 1857, while serving as Postmaster of Westport, Henry Clay Pate purchased a pasture outside Westport for \$3,900 and platted Pate's Addition to the Town of Westport.⁷ Three streets in Pate's small addition were: Pate, Clay, and Steptoe (all which have since been renamed as will be seen below).

Could it be that Pate named the third street in his addition for a fellow Virginian from Bedford County? Most likely he did, but nothing yet has been found to confirm the assumption. In spring 1860, Henry Clay Pate left Westport and returned to his native Virginia. He joined the Confederate Army and was promoted to Colonel and Commander of the 5th Virginia Cavalry Brigade. Pate visited John Brown while he awaited hanging for his raid on the U. S. Armory at Harper's Ferry.

Pate died in 1864 at the Battle of Richmond.⁸

During the Civil War slaves in Westport and towns in the area such as Independence, Parkville and Richmond, prayed that the North would win the Civil War because their freedom was at stake.

Research is underway to find out if any freedmen from Steptoe served in the Union Army in one of the four colored infantry regiments organized in Missouri (two of which were the 62nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment and the 65th U.S. Colored Infantry) or one of the four colored infantry regiments organized in Kansas.

President Abraham Lincoln issued the famous *Emancipation Proclamation* on January 1, 1863. However, it did NOT free slaves in Missouri.⁹ Neither did the fierce Battle of Westport that took place October 21-23, 1864, in the area around what is today

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"Be it ordained by the people of the State of Missouri in convention assembled.

"That hereafter in this state there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except in punishment of crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, and all persons held to service or labor as slaves, are hereby
DECLARED FREE, January 11, 1865, City of Jefferson, Missouri."¹⁰

Some twenty months later in Jefferson City, Civil War veterans of the 62nd and 65th U.S. Colored Infantries founded Lincoln University.¹¹

What became of Pate's Addition? The African-American population in Westport and in Pate's Addition continued to grow. A school was started, churches were established, and new families arrived.

Penn School (located at 4237 Pennsylvania) was founded in 1868 for the expressed purpose of educating black children. The three-room school for grades 1 through 7 was the first school of its kind established west of the Mississippi River. The school was closed May 26, 1955 and the building burned in 1967.¹²



Emancipation Ordinance of Missouri. Photo courtesy Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-42582)



John B. Wornall (PHM5761)



John C. McCoy (PHM3175)

The Saint Luke African American Methodist Episcopal (AME) church was organized in 1879. The congregation completed its church building in 1882. It was the oldest structure in Kansas City built by blacks until it was demolished in July 2003.¹³

Howard, Scott and Wallace Smith and their families arrived in Westport from Richmond, Kentucky, in 1879. Wallace Smith had learned to read and write while a slave. Wallace and Howard Smith became leading members of the St. James Baptist Church located at 508 Pennsylvania. The church was organized around 1883 and services are still being held today.¹⁴

According to Kansas City maps in 1887, Steptoe Street ran from Broadway to Summit.¹⁵ In 1897, the Town of Westport was annexed into Kansas City. Three years later in 1900 Westport was thriving and Steptoe was attracting men and women possessing skills that earned decent livings.

In 1907, Samuel and Dora Smith, African-Americans from Richmond, Missouri, purchased a lot and built a house on Steptoe Street.¹⁶ Mrs. Jane Harris, granddaughter of Samuel and Dora, was born in 1918. As a child and young lady, Mrs. Harris attended Penn School and graduated from Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, and then entered Lincoln University in Jefferson City as a nursing student. As of April 2004, she continues to reside in the house built by her grandparents.¹⁷

According to the 1919 city directory for Kansas City, Missouri, Scott Smith lived at 508 Steptoe Street. Mr. Smith was one of the Smith brothers who came to Kansas City from Richmond, Kentucky, in 1879. He was the grandfather of Mrs. Arzelia Smith Gates. Mrs. Gates, who celebrated her 94th birthday on February 8, 2004, is the mother of Kansas City barbecue icon and civic leader, Ollie Gates, an alumnus of Lincoln University. Mrs. Gates remembers that her grandfather and his brothers operated a delivery service in Westport.

The 1925 Atlas of Kansas City lists Pate's Addition and Steptoe Street, which ran from Broadway to Summit Streets.

Steptoe was a fine place to live and grow up. Stories in *The Kansas City Star* have reported that, "In the 30s, many Steptoe residents were chauffeurs, maids or cooks who worked for wealthy families on the Plaza and farther south. But there were also railroad people—porters and cooks—along with plumbers, teachers and other professionals."

Racial geography of Kansas City is a fascinating topic. Segregation in Kansas City dispersed African Americans into segregated locations. In the Westport area, those boundaries were roughly Jefferson to Wornall, from 42nd to 44th Streets.¹⁸ The tiny hamlet in Westport known as Steptoe was

a collection of neat clapboard houses tucked along narrow streets between Westport Road and the Country Club Plaza. Its center was at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 43rd Terrace. The name "Steptoe" was spelled out in blue and white ceramic tiles set in the pavement at each corner.

In its time, Steptoe in Westport was "a little island," surrounded by white neighborhoods. Long time residents talk about having white, Jewish, German, Italian, Hispanic, and Swedish people for neighbors. Though there were segregationist attitudes, there was little racial tension.¹⁹

Roy W. Jackson as a youngster lived with his grandparents Arthur and Ida Jackson in a white neighborhood bordering Steptoe (on the north side of Boone Street--42nd Terrace since 1933). David W. Jackson relayed his grandfather's story: "Grandpa recalls having a lot of fun playing "War" with black children from Steptoe. Each side would set up their makeshift "forts" some distance apart either in a nearby vacant field or on the railroad bridge once spanning Broadway just north of 43rd Street (Kansas City-Westport Belt Railroad, later the Country Club Streetcar Line). They used old mattress springs, discarded lumber and other items. Grandpa's prized shield...a large, heavy boilerplate with a handle in the middle...really made a racket when a rock would strike. The black kids threw

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Pate's Addition and Steptoe Street from the 1925 Atlas of Jackson County, Missouri.

STEPTOE—First south of Forty-third from Broadway to Summit

Bway intersects

401 Harris John S Ⓞ
 403 Vacant
 405 Perry Neele C Mrs Ⓞ
 406 Hughes Timothy Ⓞ
 407 Dillard Winston R Ⓞ
 408 Wright Julius
 409 High Lucy Mrs Ⓞ
 410 Winston Susie D Mrs Ⓞ
 Burns John W
 412 Carter Clara Ⓞ

Washington intersects

503 Russell Chas F Ⓞ
 506 Anderson Henry A
 507 Moore Arth
 508 Vacant
 509 Givan Lloyd H
 510 Smith Chas W Ⓞ
 511 Smith Saul Ⓞ
 512 Walker Mary Mrs
 513 Collins Eliza J Mrs Ⓞ
 514 Wise Mary Mrs Ⓞ

Pennsylvania intersects

Residents of Steptoe Street from the 1931 city director for Kansas City, Missouri. The double "O" symbol to the right of some entries indicates they were the homeowner.

In 1933, Kansas City Ordinance Number 3083 changed the name of Steptoe Street to 43rd Terrace. The ordinance was introduced by Councilman Charles H. Clark to standardize street names, and the ordinance changed the names of 154 other streets in Kansas City, Missouri.²¹

Still, the name Steptoe stuck, and the few remaining residents still call it such. Others who have long moved away but still remember the area, and this particular neighborhood.



Photo courtesy Library of Congress (LC-USF344-007942-ZB)

Readers with ANY kind of information (personal recollections or documents or photographs) are encouraged to contact the Historical Society, or the author.

Over the next 25 years, Steptoe neighborhood WILL vanish as St. Luke's Hospital completes its \$150 million redevelopment program.²² Sooner or later, Steptoe will be paved over...gone...just a memory.

A happy and interesting end to the story of Steptoe in the Westport area of Kansas City, *might be*:

- ✦ As soon as possible, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources will focus on Steptoe for its Black History Month program to preserve "African American Neighborhoods in Missouri." Formal oral history interviews should be conducted; the area should be photo-documented with quality, archival black-and-white images; and further, extensive, investigative research should be done about this historic enclave. The reason for urgency is that the current number of black residents in Steptoe over the age of 65 may be less than 10;
- ✦ Residents of Steptoe—past and present—as well as Penn School, St. Luke's AME Church and St. James Missionary Baptist Church, will come together on this important project to preserve their memories and recollections. Scholars and historians will then have first-hand documentation to study these perspectives so that this unique aspect of Kansas City's history is well documented and never forgotten...even celebrated;
- ✦ The St. Luke's AME Church will find a permanent location and its membership will grow;
- ✦ The new apartments on 43rd Street known as "City Place at Westport" might be renamed "Steptoe at Westport;"
- ✦ St. Luke's Hospital will name one of its new high-rise towers or some important aspect of its campus "Steptoe."



In the 30s, many Steptoe residents were chauffeurs, maids or cooks who worked for wealthy families on the Plaza and farther south. But there were also railroad people—porters and cooks—along with plumbers, teachers and other professionals. (PHS2722 and 2730)

The cornerstones from Penn School and St. Luke's AME Church may also become part of the hospital's new facilities planned for the area once known as Steptoe;

- ✦ Someone may write a book about Westport's Steptoe, and a book about the Steptoes of Virginia;
- ✦ African Americans with the name Steptoe, who live in the New England states, Georgia, Louisiana, and Wisconsin, will trace their ancestry to the "white" Steptoes of Virginia. (According to records at the U.S. Combined Arms Research Library in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, eight African Americans with the surname Steptoe served in the Union Army and 18 in the Confederate Army); and
- ✦ Some kind of monument or memorial plaque may be erected in the former Steptoe neighborhood commemorating the unique area once designated by white slave owners for the exclusive residence of former slaves... Steptoe.



Penn School in its later years just prior to demolition. (PHM5291d)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION TO COMPLEMENT THIS ARTICLE MAY BE FOUND ON PAGE 25 AND ONLINE AT JCHS.ORG.

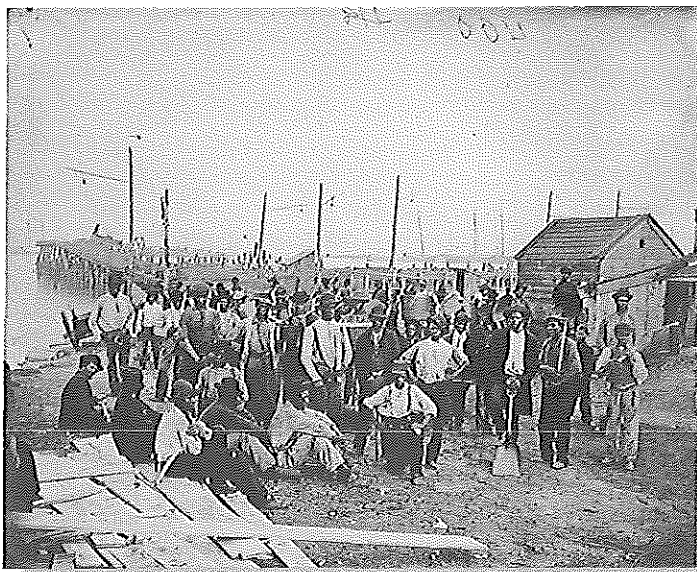
Joelouis mattox is a Kansas City free-lance writer. He majored in history and government at Lincoln University in Missouri and is a member of the Lorenzo Greene Branch, Association for the Study of African American Life and History. He may be contacted in writing at the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center, 3700 Blue Parkway, Kansas City, MO 64130. Readers with ANY kind of information (personal recollections or documents or photographs) are encouraged to contact the Jackson County Historical Society, or the author.

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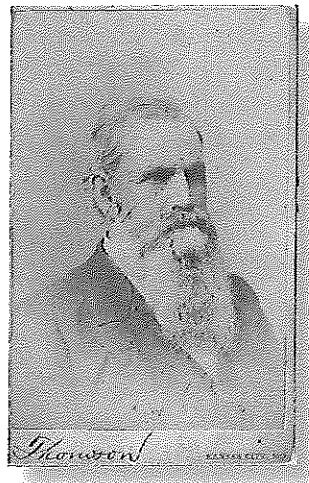
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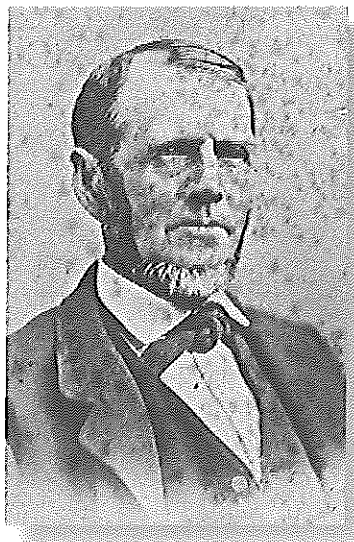
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What became of Pate's Addition? The African-American population in Westport and in Pate's Addition continued to grow. A school was started, churches were established, and new families arrived.

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St. James Baptist Church located at 508 Pennsylvania. The church was organized around 1883 and services are still being held today.

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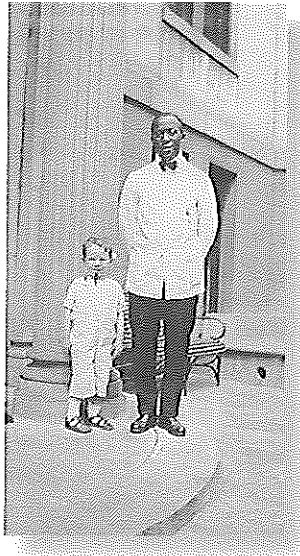
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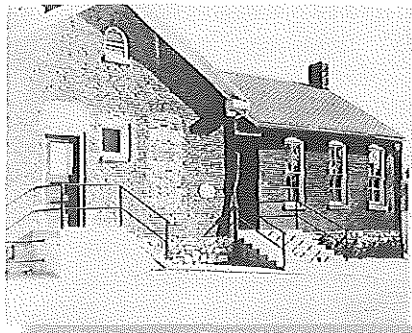
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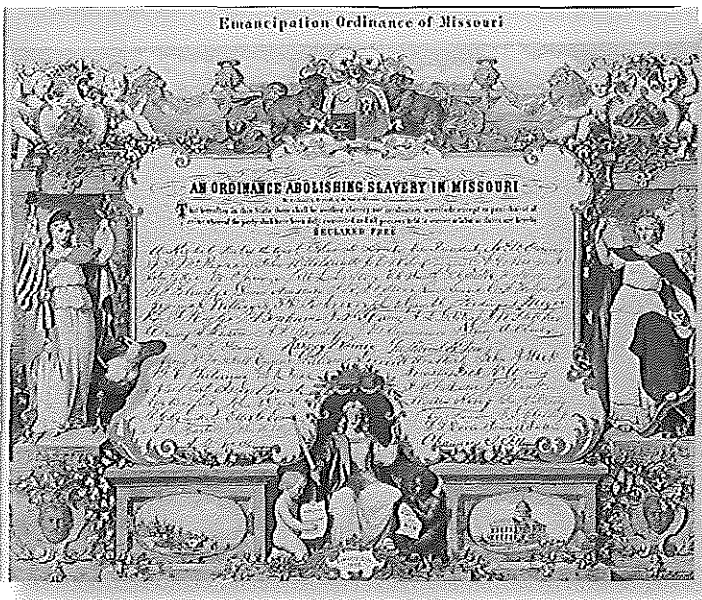
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Residents of Steptoe—past and present—as well as Penn School, St. Luke’s AME Church and St. James Missionary Baptist Church, will

come together on this important project to preserve their memories and recollections. Scholars and historians will then have first-hand documentation to study these perspectives so that this unique aspect of Kansas City’s history is well documented and never forgotten...even celebrated;

The St. Luke’s AME Church will find a permanent location and its membership will grow;



Emancipation Ordinance of Missouri. Photo courtesy Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-42582)

- The new apartments on 43rd Street known as “City Place at Westport” might be renamed “Steptoe at Westport;”
- St. Luke’s Hospital will name one of its new high-rise towers or some important aspect of its campus “Steptoe.” The cornerstones from Penn School and St. Luke’s AME Church may also become part of the hospital’s new facilities planned for the area once known as Steptoe;

Someone may write a book about Westport’s Steptoe, and a book about the Steptoos of Virginia; African Americans with the name Steptoe, who live in the New England states, Georgia, Louisiana, and Wisconsin, will trace their ancestry to the “white” Steptoos of Virginia.

(According to records at the U.S. Combined Arms Research Library in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, eight African Americans with the surname Steptoe served in the Union Army and 18 in the Confederate Army); and

Some kind of monument or memorial plaque may be erected in the former Steptoe neighborhood commemorating the unique area once designated by white slave owners for the exclusive residence of former slaves... Steptoe.

STEPTOE—First south of Forty-third from Broadway to Summit

Bway Intersects	
401	Harris John S ⊙
403	Vacant
405	Perry Necla C Mrs ⊙
406	Hughes Timothy ⊙
407	Dillard Winston R ⊙
408	Wright Julius
409	Hugh Lucy Mrs ⊙
410	Winston Susie D Mrs ⊙
	Burns John W
412	Carter Clara ⊙
Washington intersects	
503	Russell Chas F ⊙
506	Anderson Henry A
507	Moore Arth
508	Vacant
509	Givan Lloyd H
510	Smith Chas W ⊙
511	Smith Saml ⊙
512	Walker Mary Mrs
513	Collins Eliza J Mrs ⊙
514	Wise Mary Mrs ⊙
Pennsylvania intersects	

Residents of Steptoe Street from the 1931 city director for Kansas City, Missouri. The double “O” symbol to the right of some entries indicates they were the homeowner.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION TO COMPLEMENT THIS ARTICLE MAY BE FOUND ONLINE AT JCHS.ORG.

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[EDITOR’S NOTE: The full-sourced version of this article appeared in the Autumn 2004 edition of the *Jackson County Historical Society JOURNAL*. As a result of the publication of this feature article, the Society collaborated with the author and the Kansas City Public Library’s Missouri Valley Room Special Collections department, who conducted several oral history interviews of current and former Steptoe residents. These interviews were then utilized by Saint Luke’s Health System in the creation and production of a feature DVD titled, “A Step Above the Plaza.” Perhaps Mattox’s other suggestions may come to fruition for an even happier ending.]