



Historical Highlights

March 2019
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The Underground Railroad, Catalyst for Freedom

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This picture of a poor fugitive is from one of the stereotype cuts manufactured in this city for the southern market, and used on landbills offering rewards for runaway slaves.

THE RUNAWAY.

A central thread running through the American experience is the enduring struggle over freedom; those who enjoy it jealously protect it, while those whose freedom is restricted endeavor to reduce limitations. The history of Kansas, particularly that of its eastern segment, has included epi-

This story was written for *Historical Highlights* by **Bill Wagnon**, SCHS board member and Professor Emeritus, Washburn University.



sodes which demonstrate those struggles, enriching the fabric of the American experience.

Kansas was created as a chapter in the westward expansion of the nation in the middle of the 19th century, at a time when the development was hampered by intense questions over the expansion of slavery. Since its inception with the American Revolution, the new nation was divided over whether slavery should thrive or atrophy. By 1854 with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Congress simply abandoned its previous efforts to compromise and determined that local settlers should make the decision. That precipitated what came to be known as "bleeding Kansas," prelude to the carnage that occurred when civil war erupted, ending with the preservation of the Union and the adoption of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, extinguishing slavery forever.

As Kansas had opened the prospects for white settlement, it also opened another prospect for freedom. With slavery's advent in the early history of America, enslaved persons had sought freedom and the process whereby they self-liberated became known as the Underground

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President's Message

The Shawnee County Historical Society is off to a great start in 2019. I hope you have been attending our Shawnee County History Geeks speakers. We have learned about the **Underground Railroad in Shawnee County**, the early life of **Nick Chiles**, the history of the **U.S. Marshall** in Kansas. As of the end of February, we have two more sessions on **Woman's Suffrage** in Kansas and the **Topeka Cemetery**.

We were amazed that tickets for our **Historic Homes Tour** sold out the first day. We had no idea it would be so popular. *Thank you to everyone that bought tickets and to our underwriters.*

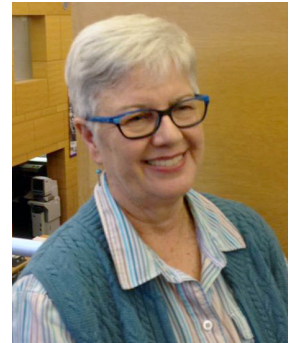
I have enjoyed visiting with **Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker** (pictured above) about her part in this program. She has some



great stories to tell about growing up in west Topeka. We are grateful to all the homeowners—**Ron and Rhonda Cathey**, **Helen and Dan Crow**, **Ann and Jerry Palmer** and **Dr. Michael and Katy Franklin**—for sharing their homes with us. Now we just need great weather for April 13.

We have initiated additional programming for adults while continuing to offer tours of the Ritchie House and the Cox Educational Center for school groups. Our trustees are hard-working but all of our committees need volunteers to assist in the work of the Society. *Please consider volunteering.* We welcome suggestions and input from our members. Feel free to contact me or any of the trustees with your ideas.

—**Patricia Michaelis**



2019 Speaker Series Brings Crowds

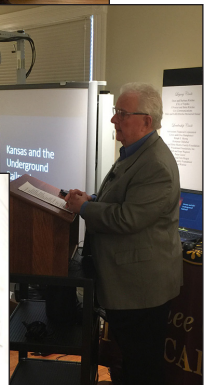
The Shawnee County Historical Society presented a series of speakers this Winter as part of the **Shawnee County History Geek Series**. Starting January 13th and occurring every other **Sunday** for **12 weeks**, the society hosted interesting 1-hour speeches on various subjects.

Professor Emeritus **Bill Wagon** started off the series with a talk on the **Underground Railroad** on Jan. 13th. It was followed by ESU History Professor **Chris Lovett** speaking on noted Public Health Reformer **Dr. Samuel Crumbine** on Jan. 27th. In February, Topeka West instructor **Christine Steinkuehler** enlightened folks about **Nick Chiles**, a noted Topeka black newspaper publisher of the 1900's. Then former Topeka Police chief and now U.S. Marshal **Ron Miller** talked about the **Marshal's office**. On Mar. 10th, **Pat Michaelis** presented information about the **Woman Suffrage**

movement in Kansas which was followed up by **Lisa Sandmeyer** who explained the importance of the **Topeka Cemetery** on Mar. 24th.

These talks all occurred at the **Cox Heritage Center** at 3 pm on **Sundays** during the winter months. Appealing to different audiences, the series has been a success with as many as 65 people attending in one setting.

The board of trustees is considering a similar series of lectures to occur in the fall.



The Underground Railroad, Catalyst for Freedom —continued

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Railroad. Missourians practiced slavery and when Kansas attracted antislavery settlers, their proximity induced freedom seekers to flee to Kansas Territory. Resistance to slavery then led to operating the Underground Railroad in the territory.

William Connelly wrote in his biography of John Brown: “Topeka was the real starting point of the Underground Railroad over the Lane Trail. It was necessary to have men there who would make sacrifice of time and money to aid the slaves to freedom. John Armstrong, Jacob Willits, Daniel Sheridan, Captain [sic] John Ritchie, Guilford Dudley and others pledged that all slaves arriving at Topeka on their way to Canada would be safely carried to the home of Dr. Blanchard” in Civil Bend, Iowa. Remembering John Brown’s association with Topeka, Susana Weymouth stated that practically everyone in the community supported Brown and that a “stranger” could knock on any door and find hospitality. “Stranger” alluded to freedom seeker.

The Underground Railroad operated in Topeka from 1857 through to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Constitution Hall (427 South Kansas Avenue*) served as the operations center for assisting freedom seekers. W. W. Ross and L. C. Wilmouth did business there. Joseph C. Miller resided there and managed resources to support the network of local men and families, who aided fugitives. Families of the then village who were active included

Dan Horn (2nd & Topeka), William Henry Weymouth (412 SW Harrison), Thomas Archer (8th & Harrison), John Armstrong and William Scales (427 SW Quincy*), and Joseph W. Emerson (200 SW Van Buren). Kansas Avenue ferries and bridge provided access to the Lane Trail north through Holton

George Gill. Helpful nearby neighbors included Cyrus G. Howard (near SE 27th & Indiana), Cyrus Flanders and son George (SE 29th & Ohio), and Jacob Willits (near SE 29th & Adams. East of the village in the Oakland area Gilbert Billard (1400 NE Sardou) and Charles Sardou (702 NE Gratton) par-



and Albany (Sabetha), approximately along today’s Highway US-75.

South of the village activists included John and Mary Ritchie (1116 SE Madison*) and Congregation Church minister Lewis Bodwell (1100 SE Monroe). In what would become the Highland Park area, Daniel Sheridan (SE 23rd & Pennsylvania) hosted meetings with John Brown and

anticipated. The network kept a jon boat tied at Billard’s for transporting parties across the Kansas River, when the ferry was too closely watched by slave catchers. Harvey Rice, whose farm encompassed Rice Park in the East End at 432 SE Norwood, collaborated. His neighbor to the east, Ike Edwards, was a notorious slave catcher, aligning

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The Underground Railroad, Catalyst for Freedom —*continued*

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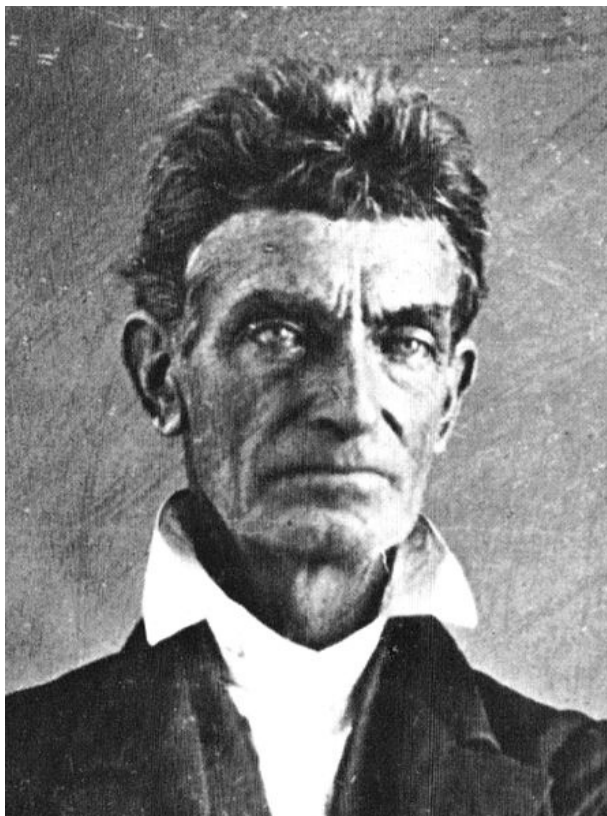
with the proslavery community of Tecumseh.

North of the Kaw several cooperating families lived near the beginning of the Lane Trail. William Bowker (near NW Tyler & Lyman Road) could be counted on to help with wagon repairs. Williams Owens, who married Olive Packard, daughter of Cyrus Packard, was associated with the house at 3212 NW Rochester Road,* a reliable stop on the Underground Railroad. John Kagi, whose family maintained a stop on the Lane Trail in Nebraska City, NE, was often a resident with the Owens. F.W. Fleisher (1525 NW 35th) helped.

In the Dover community, Alfred Sage (13553 SW Hwy K4), supported freedom seekers coming out of Wabaunsee County on their way to Topeka and its network.

Assisting John Brown [photo, right] in his final adventure in Kansas Territory demonstrated the extensive networking Topekans played in subverting slavery. On **December 20, 1858**, Brown and several associates conducted a raid into Missouri from Linn County that resulted in the liberation of 11 slaves, together with wagons and stock. They first took refuge in and around Garnett and subsequently Lawrence before traveling to Topeka. The party, which now included an additional African American, who had been born just weeks before, were boarded

out with Topeka families, including the Sheridan's and Willits. John Brown himself spent the night with John and Mary Ritchie. The next day they headed across the Kaw ferry and took breakfast with the Cyrus Packard family in Rochester. On January 29th they encountered a proslavery posse blocking their passage at Straight Creek north of Holton. Brown dispatched a messenger to Topeka for assistance. He found John Ritchie



at the Congregational Church (5th and Harrison) and sounded the alarm. Rev. Lewis Bodwell immediately dismissed the service and Ritchie alerted the local network, known widely as the Topeka Boys. Racing through Holton, they found Brown and his group on January 31st and immediately organized

an advance against the opponents drilling across the creek. While the stream was near flood stage, the company forded successfully and caught their pursuers off guard, taking prisoners without loss of life, giving the episode the title of "The Battle of the Spurs".* Several Topekans accompanied the party to Tabor, Iowa. Without additional interference, freedom seekers ultimately found freedom in Canada.

When Civil War came, the border conflicts took on new intensity. Slaves escaped their masters in droves under the protection of Union troops. Rather than fleeing to Canada by the Underground Railroad, they often found employment on Kansas farms and remained as residents. The Topeka Underground Railroad ceased to function.

While operational, the Underground Railroad had been a provocative reminder that the nation was not living up to its principle of the equality of man, set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Slavery ends during the Civil War but the equality for African Americans would remain a challenge for the nation to resolve. The struggle over freedom would continue.

Locally that struggle would lead to the modern civil rights movement emerging out of the precedent setting Brown v. Board of Education case before the US Supreme Court in 1954.

*Indicates local sites enrolled on the National Parks Service Network to Freedom.

Introducing New Board Member

The Board of Trustees has five new members for 2019. We meet **three of those members in this issue** of the newsletter and the **remaining two in our next issue**.

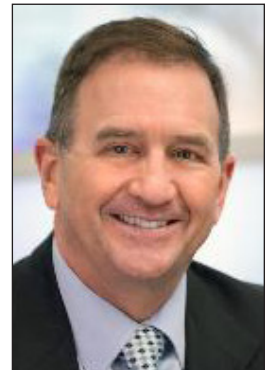
Megan Rohleder grew up around the world as the daughter of an Air Force service member. She graduated from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln with an undergraduate degree in English Literature. From there she spent the next decade in retail and banking compliance. In 2015, she decided that it was time to pursue her goal of getting her Masters of Library Science. While in her last semester, Megan accepted the Electronic Records Archivist position in the State Archives at the Kansas Historical Society. After completing her Master's degree from Emporia State University, she was promoted to the head of the Public Records section of the archives in early 2017. She spent the first few years of her career learning the ropes as a new archivist and fostering professional relationships with the many government agencies for which she is a records management consultant. Megan was named Senior Archivist of Public Services in August of 2018. In this position she oversees the Public Records and Reference sections. Megan lives in the heart of Topeka with her two cats and tiny dog.



Christine Steinkuehler is a high school teacher and free lance writer. She lives in central Topeka. She has degrees from Washburn

University and Emporia State University. She is an avid gardener, quilter and reader. She is extremely knowledgeable about Topeka and Shawnee County history. She gave a presentation on the early life of Nick Chiles, an African American newspaper publisher in Topeka, in February as part of the SCHS speakers series. She has previously served on the Board of Trustees and is a past president of the Society.

Roger T. Aeschliman is a Vice President and Trust Officer at CoreFirst Bank & Trust providing comprehensive and caring, personal and financial assistance to customers of all ages and backgrounds. Prior to banking Roger was a Kansas government executive in customer-focused programs including unemployment insurance and workers compensation. His early career was as an award-winning newspaper reporter for the Topeka Capital Journal. Roger retired from the Kansas Army National Guard as Colonel with extensive command experience. He volunteered for two combat deployments and was awarded the Bronze Star for his tour of duty in Iraq and the Defense Meritorious Service Medal for his tour in Kosovo. He holds a bachelor's degree from Kansas State and a Master's degree from KU. He and his wife, Robyn, are community leaders working through the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Rotary, Junior League, First Baptist Church and many other education and military organizations. Roger is a published author; his Iraq memoir is titled *Victory Denied: Everything You Know About Iraq Is Wrong*. Roger and Robyn had two perfect children who tragically became teenagers but survived and are turning into pretty decent human beings.



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| <input type="checkbox"/> Shawnee County Preservation | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historical Programs/Lectures | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ritchie House restoration and maintenance | \$ _____ |

I also want to renew my annual membership:

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Donate Online at <http://www.shawneecountyhistory.org/support-us>

Shawnee County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) organization. FEIN 48-6141221 ☐ I wish to be anonymous



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Lighting Freedom's Pathway,
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March 2019

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Mark You Calendars: Society Events, 2019!

April 13

July 14

August 1

December 8

1-6pm — Historic Homes Tour featuring Franklin/Landon Mansion
3-5pm — John Ritchie Birthday Celebration 1116 SE Madison
5-7pm — Topeka Alliance of Museum Educators (TAME)
Historical Society 6425 SW 6th Avenue
2pm — Annual Meeting of the Shawnee County Historical Society 1118 SE Madison