

# tour the AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORICAL SITES of Liberty, Missouri

## Introduction:

African Americans first came to Liberty in 1817 with Southern slave owners from Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia. These enslaved people and their descendants became the pioneers who founded the Black community that has been an integral part of Clay County for almost 200 years: Estes, Beauchamp, Withers, Capps, Bird, Thompson, Houston, Dorsey, Boggess, Samuel and Allen.

In 1850, Liberty's African American population comprised just over 20 percent of the total population of 827; there were only 14 free Blacks in the entire county. The Missouri legislature passed the Slave Emancipation Act that ended slavery across the state on January 11, 1865, which is now known as Manumission Day.

Before integration and the passing of civil rights laws, living in a segregated community forced Liberty Blacks to provide their own small, home-owned "mom and pop" restaurants, entertainment and community services on the streets where they lived— Water, Gallatin, Prairie, Grover and South Main— on the northern and southern ends of town.

This tour guide presents a portrait of the historic African American sites located in the Garrison Historic District that are listed on both the national and local registers of historic places, dating from antebellum days to the present.

## Religious Institutions:

### St. Luke AME Church • 443 N. Main •



St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, once located on North Main, was organized by Rev. Jesse Mills in 1875. The second church partially burned in 1915, and members met in the basement while young men in Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps restored the building. The church was rebuilt in 1935 and dedicated in 1942. Dr. John Priest Green, former

president of William Jewell College, donated the stone used for the building from his land nearby, and the men of St. Luke quarried stone and transported the loads by wheelbarrow to the church site where the women mixed mortar. The stones were placed according to Rev. A. G. Thurman's plans.

### First Baptist Church • 336 N. Gallatin Street •



First Baptist Mt. Zion was established in 1843 under the pastorate of Rev. William Brown, a young man less than twenty years of age. Prior to 1843, church members worshiped in the old Clay County Courthouse located on

what is known today as the historic Liberty "Town Square." Later, the congregation moved to an old barn on Missouri Street. In 1869, the congregation purchased a lot on North Gallatin about three blocks from the public square and built a church northeast of the home of the town physician, Dr. William Wallace Dougherty. The cornerstone was laid by Rev. Daniel Sawyers, Rev. H.H. White and Rev. Hardin Morten. The present church was built in 1915 during the pastorate of Rev. J. L. Dudley.

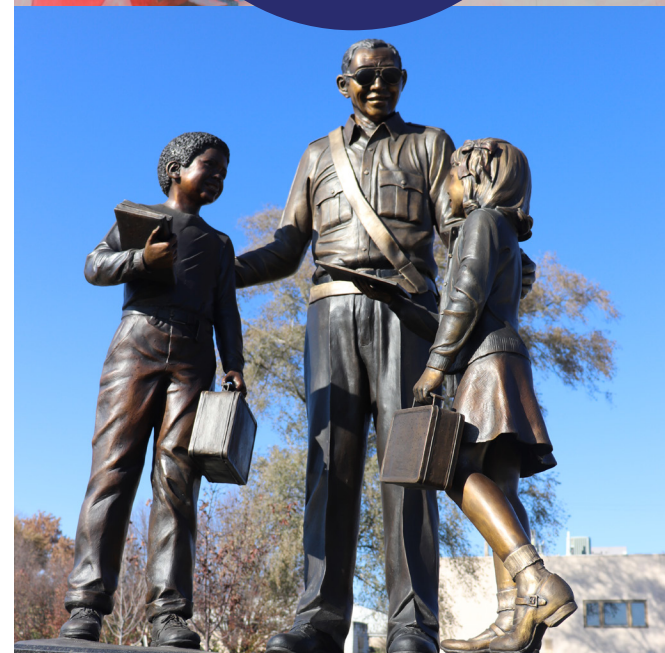
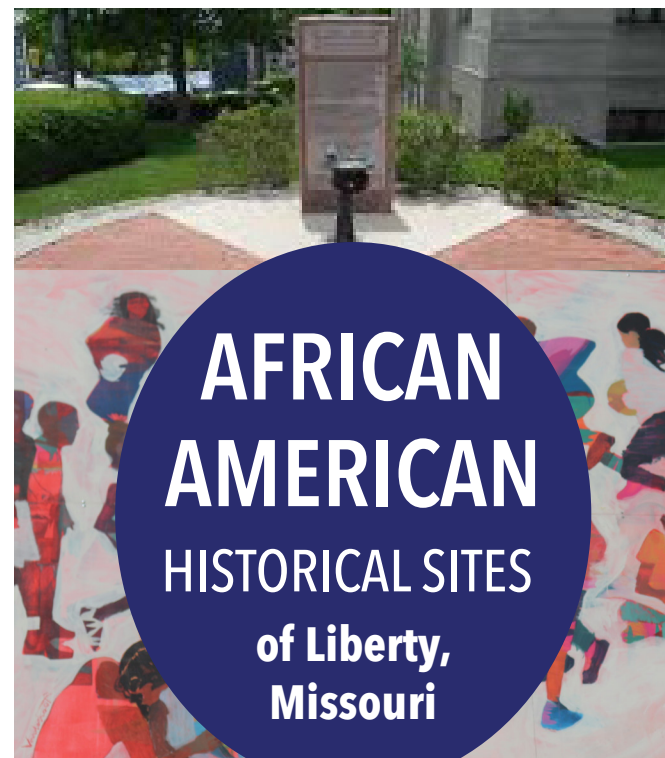
### Humphrey Temple Church of God in Christ • 213 W. Schrader Street •



Humphrey Temple Church of God in Christ (COGIC) was re-named in the 1940s by Elder Rolla Humphrey, a Liberty resident, who lived to be 104 years old. In the 1930s, the first Holy-Pentecostal Church congregation met in a house on South Main, and then in a trolley car when

the home deteriorated. In 1962, Elder Humphrey and his wife built the church that stands today. COGIC churches have a rich history dating back to 1907 when Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, an African American from Tennessee, founded the denomination. With over six million members worldwide, COGIC churches are one of the largest Pentecostal churches founded by African Americans in the world.

# AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORICAL SITES of Liberty, Missouri



**Garrison School**  
Cultural Center  
Est. 1877  
[www.ccaal-garrisonschool.org](http://www.ccaal-garrisonschool.org)

GIVE ME  
**Liberty!**



## Art Installations by location:

### The Garrison School Cultural Center

• 502 N. Water Street •

#### Clay County African American Gallery (On the lower level)



The Clay County African American Gallery, housed on the lower level of Garrison School, opened in 2014 and is devoted to the preservation and display of African American artistic, cultural and historical materials and exhibitions. Visitors will find examples of original works by local and national artists donated by community residents: a signed print, "Harvest," done by noted artist Charles

Bibbs; an original oil portrait of the 44th President, Barack Obama, painted by renowned illustrator Mark English; a three-dimensional depiction of a slave ship by artist Nancy Johnson of Abingdon, Virginia; and folk art artifacts from Africa, Egypt and the United States are on display.

#### Stony the Road We Trod (Water Street Mural)



"Stony the Road We Trod," the mural painted on the Water Street entrance of Garrison School, was dedicated in 2017. It tells the story from segregation to integration for African Americans in Liberty with images of the Laura Armstrong School on Mill Street in 1865; former Garrison teachers Ms. Marion

Pearley and Ms. Angie Kerford; former principals James Gay and Clarence Gantt; Ms. Clara Bell Colley's 1954 third-grade class; Linda Brown; Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall; the blindfolded Lady Justice; a scroll with the words "separate but equal" that focuses on the Brown vs. Board of Education case, that ended segregation in schools across the country. This mural was painted by Kansas City, Kansas, artist Lucky Easterwood.

#### Sing a Song of Hope that the Present Has Brought Us (Main Street Mural)



"Sing a Song of the Hope the Present Has Brought Us," the mural painted on the Main Street side of Garrison, was dedicated in 2017. It focuses on the celebration of youth and education during integration and depicts in bold colors children of all races interactively reading, experimenting, playing sports and walking to school. It

was during the 1959-1960s era that Garrison students received a playground, new textbooks, desks and chairs, as well as regular building upgrades, making them the first generation of integrated students in Liberty. This mural was painted by Dan Vanderhoof, an artist from Central Valley, California.

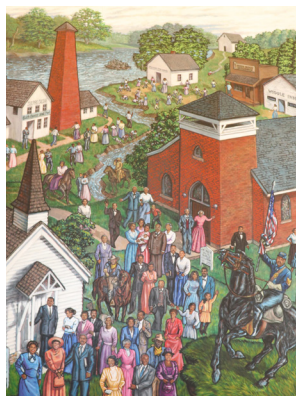
#### Bottle Tree Sculpture (Main Street side of building)



The Blue Bottle Tree was introduced to America by Africans of the transatlantic slave trade in the deep South, primarily the Mississippi Delta, Louisiana and South Carolina. According to tradition, the Bakongo people of the Congo believed evil spirits could be caught in lapis lazuli blue colored bottles at night. In the morning when the sun would shine against the bottles, the evil spirits would be destroyed. Later, bottle trees became decorative yard art

in the slave quarters. Bottle trees can be traced to both European and Egyptian civilizations. Liberty resident Robert Evans, owner of Shaped Steel, made the 800-pound steel sculpture for Garrison School Cultural Center in 2012.

### Clay County Courthouse • 1 Courthouse Square •



#### African American Mural (3rd floor)

On the third floor of the Clay County Administrative Center (old courthouse), visitors can find the African American Legacy Mural by artist David McClain. This mural depicts selected early 19th and 20th century Clay County African American pioneers, businesses, churches and schools, including: White Oak Chapel (the restored chapel has been relocated to the grounds of Stroud's on I-35); Fountain Waller Cemetery from the Waller Plantation (1836) located on Shady Lane Street in the Carriage Hills subdivision of Gladstone; Dr. D.A. Ellett's Sulpho Saline Bath House and Swimming Pool in Excelsior Springs

(1880); Peter Biggs, the first American owner of a barber shop in the Old West (1847); and the first African American School in Missouri City (1877).

### China Slaughter Reading Park • 200 W. Mill Street •



The China Slaughter Reading Park site, dedicated in 2018, was donated to Liberty Public Schools by Sylvia Willoughby to honor Lawrence "China" Slaughter and to provide a place for children, teachers, parents and neighbors to enjoy a good book, wait for the crossing light or take shelter from the summer sun. The focal point of the park features a life-sized bronze sculpture of China standing at the entrance with two children. The sculpture was created by artist Martha Aldridge. China worked over four decades as a custodian at Franklin Elementary School where he was commissioned as a crossing guard by the

Liberty Police Department. He was beloved by students and the community.

### African American Freedom Fountain

• 1 Courthouse Square •

#### Northwest corner of the Courthouse square



Erected in 2000 by the Clay County African American Legacy Inc., this monument honors African-Americans who have made contributions to the growth and development of Clay County from four Clay County cities: Liberty, Excelsior Springs, Missouri City and North Kansas City. The Freedom Fountain is placed near the location where 175 years ago slaves were regularly bought and sold. The single water fountain now for all people reminds Liberty of an earlier era when residents drank from segregated (white and colored) water fountains. The back side of the monument lists all the African American Clay County businesses, churches, schools and pioneer families from the 1800s to the present day.

## General Public Sites:

### Fairview Cemetery • S. Terrace Street •



Fairview Cemetery, established in 1858, is the second oldest cemetery in Clay County. In the segregated, "colored" section, on the eastern side of this hallowed ground, lies a legacy of Black men and women who are buried in unmarked graves. If the souls of Black folk could speak, visitors taking a stroll through this site would hear a cacophony of over 650 voices of unsung African American heroes and heroines such as: Perry Samuels, the stepbrother of Frank and Jesse James; Oleta Clarkson, owner of Wiggle Inn Night Club; John Houston, one of 14 Free Blacks in Clay County in 1844; William Slaughter, Union Soldier; James Alexander, Horse and Buggy Rental (1890); and Katie Brooks for whom Brooks Landing is named, and others.

### Garrison School • 502 N. Water •



Garrison School, established in 1877, was the first public school for African American youth in Liberty and is the only historically Black school still standing in Clay County. In the fall of 1954, after the Supreme Court case Brown vs. Topeka ordered "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional

and to desegregate "with all deliberate speed," the Liberty School District initiated integration by desegregating the high schools. Garrison became a fourth-grade center in the fall of 1958, and the kindergarten for all Liberty students in 1961. Today, owned by the Clay County African American Legacy, Garrison is a visual and cultural center preserving African American history, celebrating the culture and promoting human relations. Garrison celebrated its 141st anniversary in 2018.

### Ruth Moore Park • 401 N. Grover Street •



Every day is a "Hoops Day" at Ruth Moore Park. Situated in the heart of the Garrison District, this site provides a welcome retreat for neighborhood youth



and families throughout the year. Community picnics, family reunions, basketball tournaments and hoop games characterize this park that was purchased in 1949 for Garrison District residents by the Liberty Parks Department. During summer months, kids can play in the sprayground while

parents gather vegetables and fruit in the community garden and orchard that is free and open to the public. The basketball courts provide a haven for youth enthusiasts, and the Will Smith Annual Hoops Tournament is always a winner.