CREATING SUCCESS FROM ADVERSITY: SUMNER HIGH SCHOOL AND AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IDENTITY

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Introduction

This paper considers the story of Sumner High School, a segregated school in Kansas City, Kansas that operated from 1905 to 1978. I argue that while the nature of segregation created achievement barriers for African Americans, Sumner as a segregated school bolstered school and community identity, created strong leadership, and ultimately, produced successful black graduates. This study demonstrates that Sumner High School served as a source of both pride and shame. As the only segregated black high school in Kansas, Sumner acted as a reminder of racial tensions and unequal opportunities in Kansas City. However, as an excellent school with highly qualified teachers, motivated principals, and strong connections with the community it served, Sumner showed that the black community of Kansas City, Kansas could create an impressive institution from unfortunate beginnings. The concept of Sumner as an institution that served as a positive good amidst an unfair society is not my own creation, as the school was thus described by the African-American community in Kansas City itself. A former Sumner teacher wrote in 1935 a statement about the school that has become popular among Sumnerites. In that account he wrote:

"Sumner is a child not of our own volition but rather an offspring of the race antipathy of a bygone period. It was a veritable blessing in disguise—a flower of which we may proudly say, ‘The bud had a bitter taste, but sweet indeed is the flower.'"

This paper seeks to share the story of Sumner High and demonstrate that its existence was that “veritable blessing in disguise” even though it represented major inequalities in America.

Methodology

This article is a part of a project I have been working on for close to two years—my research comes from primary documents, some scattered histories of Sumner both published and unpublished, and interviews with Sumner alumni. The Spencer Special Collections Library at the University of Kansas holds an impressive amount of Sumner records, from school correspondence and personal histories to class schedules and school rules, to yearbooks for almost every year Sumner operated. The Kansas City, Kansas school district office opened their attendance and superintendents’ records to me as well. I also attended a Sumner reunion, interviewed alumni, and have since begun a project to record more complete oral histories from Sumnerites. Speaking with and learning from those who lived the history I am trying to record has made a strong impression upon me, transforming the story of Sumner High from a research topic into a personal mission. I have spent a lot of time with Sumnerites who are now or were librarians, principals, former teachers, CEOs, post office workers, lawyers, railroad workers, and restaurant owners. There is value in spending time with records and archives, and there is value in spending time with people—the records show a glimpse of what happened, while the personal memories and experiences help one realize why the story should be told.

Segregated Schools and the Black Community

In 1996, Vanessa Siddle Walker’s book, Their Highest Potential, significantly added to the story of segregated education by highlighting one specific school, Caswell County Training School (CCTS), in rural North Carolina. Walker’s study showed how the black community fought to create and maintain an educational institution within an antagonistic, segregated atmosphere. It also provided an insider’s perspective on the black school, as she focused her interviews on former students and teachers.1 This portrayal of a type of southern black school allowed readers to better understand the actual operation of a segregated educational institution. Walker elevated CCTS to the status of a model rural black school in the south. Whether in Kansas City, Kansas or Caswell County, North Carolina, where segregated schools existed, black communities fought to keep them operational. In The Black High School and its Community, Frederick A. Rogers asserted that the segregated school served both as an educational and a social institution for African-American communities struggling against white oppression.2 Rogers further elaborated:

"The black high school was the only long-term publicly supported institution that was pervasive across the black community, and that was controlled, operated, staffed, populated, and maintained by blacks that has ever existed (or most probably will ever exist again) in the United States.3" Rogers’s work concentrates upon the South, specifically North Carolina, and shows that the black school served a more important role than only a place for children to learn to read and write. It became a symbol of self-
determination and improvement among an oppressed people. The black community fought to have and keep schools because even though black education was often underfunded, schools provided hope that the next generation could have a better life.

Walker pointed out that the Caswell County school board’s neglect led to increased involvement by the African-American community in the education of their children at CCTS, which created an atmosphere that emphasized achievement. Walker commented that:

the community’s work toward the common goal of helping African American students excel suggests that this segregated African American school had other resources that are not usually captured in public memories of the segregated schools.

Walker followed this statement by referring to Charles Strickland’s theories in calling this phenomenon a “human resource,” explaining that the nature of the segregated school resulted in parents’ desire to not only be involved with their children’s education, but also to strongly support the school as an institution. In this sense, the segregated school became a center for the black community of Caswell County. Walker’s analysis is valuable for this study, as this phenomenon appears also to have occurred among the African-American population in Kansas City, Kansas.

**Sumner’s Origins**

Kansas prides itself on being the land of John Brown — he wasn’t a Kansas native, but because of his violent opposition to slavery and his leadership in the anti slavery movement Kansans claim him as their own and have inserted him into state histories and imagery. Additionally, the state’s flagship university celebrates Kansas‘ anti-slavery stance in the use of the mythical “Jayhawk” as its mascot. However, educationally and racially, Kansas has a less-than-spotless past. The “free state,” that so readily embraces John Brown is also famous for a court case challenging the necessity of a student to pass one school in order to get to another simply because she was not of the approved race. Brown v Board of Education Topeka 347 U.S. 483 (1954) was the landmark decision that began the desegregation of the public schools of the United States, marked the end of de jure segregation and a significant step in movement toward the acquisition of social equality.

Following in the theme of contradictory events within the narrative of state pride, this study deals with segregated education in Kansas, with a focus on the only black high school that ever existed within the Sunflower State – Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas. While Sumner played an important role in Kansas City, its story remains largely unknown outside of the African-American community in the greater Kansas City area. Because Sumner’s story does not fall within the traditional southern segregated school narrative, it is difficult to describe when attempting to understand race and education in America. Even though it was a small school set in a relatively unexciting or less controversial locale, Sumner was important. While the school operated for seventy-three years (1905 to 1978) as the only black high school in the district and only served a relatively small portion of the black student population in Kansas City, it had a meaningful impact on the lives of those it taught as well as the black community as a whole. For example, Sumner’s influential principal, John Hodge, was determined to maintain a liberal curriculum in the face of school board pressure to emphasize manual training, which anticipated the change in future occupations and the socioeconomic status of African Americans in Kansas City. The pride the black community felt for the school led the idea that blacks could gain an education and get ahead in a society dominated by whites, even if whites doubted their ability to do so. In short, Sumner exemplified and projected the hopes African American parents had for their children.

While Kansas had originally separated its elementary students by race and largely denied nonwhites further education, in 1879, legislators outlawed segregated high schools and allowed for mixed-race elementary schools in communities in which operating two elementary schools would be economically prohibitive. However, within thirty years of that decision, Kansas City re-segregated its secondary students, becoming the only city in the state to have and maintain a black high school.

The event which led to this re-segregation occurred on April 12, 1904, when a white student, Roy Martin, was shot and killed by a young man, Louis Gregory, who happened to be black. It is important to note that the circumstances surrounding the incident are a little “sketchy” at best—accounts disagree as to who started the altercation, and the motives for the violence—but all accounts do agree that Gregory did indeed shoot Martin. Also, while Martin was a student at Kansas City, Kansas High, Louis Gregory was not – he was an eighteen-year-old meat packer. The murder itself was not the reason Kansas City’s leaders decided to separate black and white students; instead a student protest that arose at Kansas City, Kansas High the next day provided justification. The white
students blocked the entrance to the school and did not allow any black students to enter, which created a spectacle exacerbated by the eventual presence of the police, the school superintendent, the mayor, parents, and the neighborhood in which the school was located. Only one person, a teacher, attempted to stop the “blockade,” and was met with violence. Eventually, the white students entered the school of their own volition, and the black students were asked to go home in order to ease tensions. The school was then closed until the following Monday, in order to give time for the board of education to determine what to do about their “race problem.”

While the school board was attempting to address racial disharmony at the high school, the community was in uproar. Complicating the situation surrounding the black and white high school students’ clash was the fact that Kansas City had citywide elections the same year. The school incident and the gossip it spread combined with the murder led to general unrest in the city. Politicians, community groups, and even the churches began to express their opinions on the matters of the murder and whether black and white students should attend school together.

Monday the eighteenth came, and the school opened its doors to both black and white students, but was marked with protests from white parents and the refusal of some whites to even attend school at all. Even so, this furor did not last, as Kansas City, Kansas High School was able to finish out the 1903–04 school year with relative peace. The school board however, decided to divide the student body at the high school the subsequent academic year. While both groups would attend the same building, white students held class in the morning and black students came in the afternoon. In a move that precipitated an official segregated institution, the morning student’s school was called “Kansas City, Kansas High,” while the afternoon students attended “Manual Training High School.”

After a certain amount of debate, intrigue, and political wrangling, on February 22, 1905 the governor signed into state law a bill that allowed for separate, racially based high schools in Kansas City, Kansas and only Kansas City, Kansas. While the African-American community fought the creation of a separate school, its existence was now a reality. Building a new school required money and thus an election to pass a school bond that would provide enough capital to begin construction took place in June of 1905. Although the black community opposed segregation, blacks joined whites in passing the bond, with 2,789 in favor and 554 opposed. Voting for the bond was not proof black community members had admitted defeat so much as evidence that they made the best of what was otherwise a very bad situation. Kansas City Manual Training High School was constructed over the same summer and black students with their black teachers entered the new school in September of 1906. One of the first things these teachers and students changed about the school was the name. African-American school leaders, students, and the black community were conscious of the connotation “manual training” carried, and were adamant in their desire to provide a liberal education that led to college attendance. Thus, Manual Training High School became Sumner High.

The Comprehensive High School

Understanding the leadership at Sumner High sheds light upon the school’s role within the African-American community in Kansas City. Specifically, two individuals at Sumner were instrumental in creating an exacting school atmosphere that offered manifold opportunities to its students. During its seventy-three years of operation, Sumner had six different principals. The most popular and influential, John A. Hodge (1916–1951) and Solomon H. Thompson (1951–1972), pushed for a college preparatory curriculum, created close ties with parents and community, and demanded professionalism from students. In terms of time spent as principal, both Hodge and Thompson each accumulated more years than the other four principals combined. Unlike the other school administrators, Hodge and Thompson worked at Sumner as teachers before they became principals; additionally, Thompson was also a graduate of Sumner High. Both men were highly educated, having received advanced degrees in chemistry and biology from major state universities, and both found extreme difficulty in securing employment after graduation. Teaching and then becoming principals at a segregated school was one of the few options open to them. Notwithstanding their own hardships, the dedication these two men displayed proved vital to the success of Sumner as a high school.

It was Hodge who was not satisfied with Sumner’s classification as a manual training school and when he became principal in 1916, he immediately emphasized a more liberal education that would prepare students for college. By the 1921–22 school year, Sumner had in place a mandatory college-bound curriculum that included three years of English, two years of science and history, and one year of math. Thompson was in many respects Hodges protégé, having attended Sumner as a student and worked as a science teacher under Hodge. Like Hodge, Thompson emphasized a liberal curriculum and preached the gospel of the college degree. In essence, these two men set the tone for Sumner High – both garnered reputations for being very strict and demanding high expectations from
their students. Alumni largely remember both Hodge and Thompson with great affection for these qualities and for the opportunities they provided to otherwise generally disadvantaged teenagers.17

Providing a liberal curriculum and seeing results are, however, two different things. Yet Sumner was an academically successful school – always performing at least at the same level as its white counterparts, and usually surpassing most schools in the greater Kansas City area. Ironically, the segregated school whose existence was intended to keep black teenagers away from the whites became a flagship school for Kansas City. Looking at Sumner’s record in science will help prove these points. In their study of science awards in Kansas City, Frank T. Manheim and Eckhard Hellmuth found that more students from Sumner won awards in citywide science competitions between 1952 and 1959 than any other school.18 The authors explained that the Kansas City Kansas and Kansas City Missouri school boards agreed to create a cityfied science fair that would then feed into the national science fair system that was concurrently coming together.19 It is important to note that African American students were originally to be barred from the cityfied science fair, until the national fair threatened to not recognize the legitimacy of the Greater Kansas City science fair winners until they complied with integration standards. This study did not limit itself to comparing Sumner to other white schools, but also included Lincoln High, a black school from the Missouri side of Kansas City. The fact that the segregated black schools outperformed the white schools in the field of science highlights Sumner’s achievement, as Lincoln students won an award three times between 1952 and 1959, while ten students won from Sumner. No white school came close to this mark. Sumner students won every year from 1952 to 1958.20 Additionally, nine of the ten students who won at the Greater Kansas City Science Fair went on to the National Science Fair and three won the fourth place award.21

**Sumner’s Impact**

What accounts for this success? Surely, the students themselves deserve credit, but further investigation reveals a superior teaching force. For example, in 1930, forty-four percent of the teaching faculty at Sumner had Master’s Degrees.22 By the 1950s, several among Sumner’s staff had doctoral degrees, while advanced degrees were very rare among the white high schools’ staffs. By 1959, even more teachers at Sumner had advanced degrees. Four out of the five science teachers at Sumner held Master’s degrees and all had continued science training from the National Science Foundation.23 As noted by alumni, teachers were generally unable to obtain jobs in the private sector or other schools because of their race.24 America’s social climate limited opportunities for these teachers, but at the same time, provided the opportunity for Sumner’s students to receive a superior education.

Having highly qualified teachers at Sumner benefitted the students, but also bolstered the institution in the eyes of the community. For the black community in Kansas City, the professional services, such as teaching, symbolized some of the most prestigious and well-paying jobs an African American could have for much of the twentieth century, thus black teachers at Sumner garnered respect in part because of the profession itself. The fact that many Sumner instructors held advanced degrees allowed them to earn more money as teachers and acquire the status of having completed a graduate program. The esteem black educators held within the black community translated into support for the school itself. Also, these teachers lived within the community whose children they taught. It is important to remember that these teachers were also neighbors and relatives. Status combined with familiarity strengthened the bond between Sumner and the black community.

Ironically, Sumner’s limitation as a segregated school became its distinctiveness. What made Sumner meaningful to the black community is that black teachers and black administrators worked hard to encourage black student success. Sumner’s exceptionality came from its relatively successful effort in improving the conditions of African Americans through education. If a student succeeded at Sumner, he or she also succeeded within and often on behalf of the black community. When the Kansas City, Kansas district finally began an earnest effort to desegregate its students, sending black students to other schools helped fight against inequality, but it also served as a blow to Sumner’s exceptionalism and to Sumerites’ community identity. In 1978, two decades after the Brown v Board decision, federal pressure resulted in the district’s closing then reopening Sumner as a racially integrated magnet school. The transition Sumner High made to becoming Sumner Academy, a primarily white magnet school – destroyed its identity as an institution that thrived in the midst of adversity. More importantly, the black community in Kansas City lost “their” school—a sentiment often repeated by Sumner alumni and former teachers. The school building was partially redesigned, the large art-deco letters spelling Sumner High were chiseled away, and trophies, pictures, and wall decorations mysteriously disappeared. Even the school mascot changed. Over one summer break, Sumner High essentially ceased to exist in both physical and spiritual form.
Even with the bittersweet ending/changing of the institution, Sumner’s story is poignant because of its contradictory quality. Sumner provided an excellent education for its students, due in large part to the leadership of John Hodge and Solomon Thompson, as well as the presence of an excellent teaching staff at the school. Yet many of these influential figures would not have been at Sumner if societal discrimination had not limited their occupational opportunities. Community involvement and the relationship teachers, students, and parents shared also played a large part in the success of Sumner High, yet this relationship was strengthened to a large degree by the fact that segregationist policies led to the creation of a distinctive identity both at school and at home. Former students and teachers of Sumner are proud of their school and largely unhappy that it no longer exists as they knew it, yet few or none would endorse segregation in society or in its schools. Essentially, Sumner’s strength came from society’s weakness. For the Kansas City, Kansas school board, Brown v Board’s ruling (originating just down the road in Topeka) to fix society through the schools meant ending Sumner and some of the sources of its excellent reputation.

Sumner’s success, however, came about because of the work of individual teachers, principals, students, and parents—their efforts to make the best of what was a bad situation show that African-Americans were actors within the story of segregation, not solely acted upon. However, the danger in showing how the Black community in Kansas City rallied around the school is to imply that segregated education was somehow positive, or worse, necessary. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore addressed a similar issue when writing about African-American women who fought Jim Crow laws in North Carolina at the turn of the century:

This is certainly not to argue that disfranchisement was a positive good or that African Americans were better off with limited social services than they would have been with full civil rights. It means that black women were given straw and they made bricks. Outward cooperation with an agenda designed to oppress them masked a subversive twist. Black women capitalized upon the new role of the state to capture a share of the meager resources and proceeded to effect real social change with tools designed to maintain the status quo.25

Much like their southern counterparts, the African-American community in Kansas City, Kansas found the means to create success out of hardship and inequality. Sumner was first envisioned as a place to keep black and white students separate, yet it became a flagship school for the entire Kansas City, Kansas school district. Whether using the analogy of lemons and lemonade, straw and bricks, or buds and juice, serious students of the history of education must recognize the value of Sumner High’s story and its role in the community as well as the people that ran it, attended it, and supported it.

ENDNOTES

1. Walker was a student herself at Caswell County Training School and her mother was a teacher at the school. Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*. University of North Carolina Press, 1996.


7. Laws of Kansas, 1879, Chapter 81, Section 1. “The board of education shall have power . . . to organize and maintain separate schools for the education of white and colored children, except in high school, where no discrimination shall be made on account of color.”

9. John A. Hodge, *Some Facts About Sumner High School* date unknown. Sumner Collection, Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas. Lawrence, Kansas. Page 1. The title of the school does fit with the model of emphasizing industrial education, common among southern segregated schools such as Caswell County Training School.

10. *Laws of Kansas, 1905*, Chapter 414, Section 1. “The board of education shall have power to . . . organize and maintain separate schools for the education of white and colored children, including the high schools in Kansas City, Kan.; no discrimination on account of color shall be made in high schools, except as provided herein.”

11. Lawrence, 91; Peavler, 198.

12. Hodge, 1.


15. Hodge, 2. A scarcity of records prohibits us from understanding the first two principals’ views on manual training, but Hodge’s codification of a college preparation curriculum was new to Sumner, indicating that he took a much more proactive position on liberal arts.


21. Hartland Jr, 2009. There were winners afterward, but it occurred more sporadically. Alumni attribute this to the transfer of Sumner’s Science teacher, William Boone, as in 1958 he became the principal of Northwest Junior High, an all-black segregated middle school. American Association of Physics Teachers Questionnaire, January 1960. Sumner Collection.

22. Manheim and Hellmuth, 3.


