



RESOLUTION NO. 6344

RESOLUTION TO COMMEMORATE CHAMPAIGN COUNTY'S 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF INCORPORATION

WHEREAS, the geography of Champaign County is the result of glacier activity and consists of one thousand square miles, subdivided into thirty townships and twenty-four incorporated municipalities and twenty-two villages; and

WHEREAS, the first Native Americans entered Champaign County probably around 10,000 years ago and subsisted on renewable resources that were native to the natural environment; and

WHEREAS, the first Euro-Americans arrived in this area in the early 1820s and sought out areas for permanent settlement in the woodland areas; and

WHEREAS, Champaign County was created by a separation of the western portion of Vermilion County, bringing the total number of counties in Illinois to sixty; and

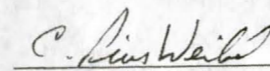
WHEREAS, incorporation was guided by State Senator John Vance of Vermilion who insisted that the county be called Champaign and the county seat be called Urbana as a tribute to Senator Vance's birthplace at Urbana in Champaign County, Ohio; and

WHEREAS, February 20, 2008 marks the 175th anniversary of Champaign County's incorporation as a county in the state of Illinois; and


WHEREAS, the Champaign County Board wishes to appropriately proclaim and celebrate this milestone.

NOW BE IT RESOLVED that the Champaign County Board dedicates the year 2008 to celebrations and observances in recognition of Champaign County's 175th and encourages citizens and organizations to do likewise.

PRESENTED, ADOPTED, APPROVED and RECORDED this 24th day of January, A.D. 2008.


C. Pius Weibel, Chair
Champaign County Board

ATTEST:


Mark Shelden, County Clerk
and ex-officio Clerk of the
Champaign County Board

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY'S 175TH ANNIVERSARY

THE EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

By Raymond K. Cunningham Jr. and Molly Spencer Shoaf
Homer Historical Society

The African-American experience in Champaign County begins before the Civil War as a few African-Americans came to settle in the prairie of East Central Illinois.

Sara Jane Johnson, born in Vermilion County in 1837, was the granddaughter of Pol Neal, a slave brought with Abraham Sandusky to the county in the 1820s. She lived for a time in the Homer-Sidney area after her marriage to Kyle Patterson.

A few African-American farm laborers came to the county in the early 1850s, but African-Americans did not begin to arrive in numbers until after 1855. By 1860, there were 48 African-Americans in the county, and a community began to take shape.

The Urbana Clarion carried a small notice in August 1860 proclaiming that African-Americans of Urbana celebrated the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies with a picnic on the Sangamon River. The Clarion wrote "Quite a concourse of the race joined in the festivities of the day."

The defining event in the history of African-American was the Civil War, and

when African-Americans were allowed to volunteer, the call was answered.

Men from Champaign County including George W. Johnson, James Walker, Jerry Pinney, Dennis Jackson and William Kelley enlisted in the 29th U.S. Colored Troops

from the county. Payton Colwell would die in New Orleans while serving in the war.

After the Civil War, African-Americans moving north and settling in the county clustered primarily in two locations: Champaign-Urbana and in the Homer-Sidney area. The Illinois state census of 1865 showed the county with a total of 183 African-American residents. West Urbana had the most with a total

of 91 but the township of Sidney reported 26.

In Urbana, African-Americans sought opportunities in the growing towns of the Midwest. They built their own social organizations and one of the first was the church. The Bethel AME Church was built in 1864 at 405 East Park Ave., and in 1877, the frame building was moved to a nearby lot. Larkin H. Walden, a war veteran from Tennessee, was one of the found-



An African-American family poses for a portrait in Homer about 1915. Tudor Collection, Homer Historical Society

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ers of the Bethel AME Church. Another church, the Salem Baptist Church, was founded in 1866.

A small group of African-Americans, primarily from Tennessee, formed an agricultural settlement known as Stringtown, north of the village of Sidney. Manuel Hall, with John Allen, William Randall and William Kendall and their families, formed the small agricultural community. Later, they were joined by the Beard, Falk and Gregory families. Robert Gregory, known as Rev. Bob Gregory, enjoyed an excellent reputation ministering to the African-Americans in the area.

South of Homer, the large ranches of Joseph and Lucas Sullivant employed African-Americans as ranch hands. As cattle ranching became popular in the late 1860s, African-Americans found work handling cattle.



African-Americans worked in rural area in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Tudor Collection,
Homer Historical Society



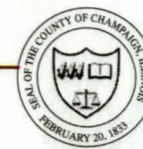
African-American laborers building the sidewalks of Homer around 1900.
Parish Collection, Homer Historical Society

Despite coming from slavery and having no financial assets, African-Americans undertook farming and purchased tracts of land in the county. African-American farmers in the Broadlands and Homer vicinities would accumulate large parcels of land and great wealth.

Jacob Earnest and George W. Smith both accumulated large tracts of farmland and enjoyed a great reputation for their skills. Jacob Earnest was also known for taking the veterans to the polls to vote. The Smith family farmed in Broadlands on the same land more than a century. In 1895, Smith's son, William Walter Smith, graduated from Homer High School and was the first African-American graduate of the University of Illinois in the class of 1900.

Central to the social calendar of the African-American community for decades was the September celebration of Emancipation. Large picnics with food, baseball and musical entertainment were held annually.

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Later countywide celebrations were held in Homer Park. These gatherings lasted into the 20th century at locations around the county.

African-Americans from the Homer and Sidney area were numerous enough to hold their own Emancipation Day celebrations. Homer's African-Americans formed a debating society in the 1870s and in November 1880 met to debate the issue, "Resolved, that Jefferson Davis did more to free the slaves than Lincoln." Al Robinson spoke for the Affirmative, and local barber Samuel Persons, a veteran of the 23rd U.S. Colored Troops, for the negative. The Times of Champaign noted that "Robinson got laid out."

Tickets to these well-attended events were sold to all in the area. Another issue debated was "Resolved, that a man will do more for money than he will for love." Al Robinson, of Sidney, worked hard to make the debating society active with topics timely to African-Americans.

By 1870, the population increased to 233 and nearly doubled to 462 by 1880. Former slaves began at the bottom of the economic ladder, working as day laborers and cooks, but they moved up into the 1880s with small businesses such as barbershops, laundries, cleaners, blacksmithing and restaurants.

In the village of Homer, African-Americans, like any settlers in the town, were accepted. Former Georgia slave Wiley Jones, who followed one of Homer's soldiers to the village, became a businessman and served on the board of

the Homer Savings and Loan. Jones ran for village board and was an honorary member of Post 263 of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Socially, the African-American community formed its own organizations, and by 1900, these groups became very active. A Champaign newspaper column detailed the news of the social scene in the community, and by this time, the first professionals moved into the community. Dances, debutante balls, clubs and other social events were chronicled in the papers.

As opportunities arose for African-Americans in the industrialization of the United States, a second wave from the south began as the railroads brought people to the industrial north. Agricultural employment began to decline in the county as farms grew larger and factory wages competed. Opportunities on the railroad also drew African-Americans to the larger railroad towns.

Younger African-Americans with high school diplomas moved to areas away from the county. By 1910, many of the African-Americans formerly living in the rural areas of the county had moved to the towns. By the 1920s, the decline in the rural economy displaced African-American labor.

The next great wave of African-American migration began about 1915 and extended into the Great Depression as states such as Mississippi witnessed the northward migration to new opportunities. The Illinois Central railroad

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brought new families seeking opportunities in the county, and as the Depression subsided, the old section of Champaign known as "Germantown" became the location for African-Americans to settle.

As real estate agents refused to sell to African-Americans in any other parts of the Twin Cities, the community became more isolated and an era of segregation set in. The economic and social gains made by the African-Americans up from slavery in Champaign County in the 19th century would be forgotten as the era of segregation reached the county.



An African-American woman taken in Homer around 1910. Tudor Collection, Homer Historical Society

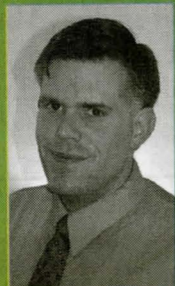


CHAMPAIGN COUNTY'S 175TH ANNIVERSARY

Happy 175th Birthday to Champaign County!



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Exterior of the Homer Park covered bridge over the Salt Fork of the Vermilion River. The photo was taken by A. G. Kistler on July 26, 1928. A copy of a letter from Illinois Department of Highways



Engineer R. F. Fisher dated July 20, 1960, is affixed to the back of the photo. This letter states that "the exact date of construction of the bridge is not known...the most authentic information seems to indicate that it was built in 1865 by one George Spraker. John b. Thomas...designed it and supervised its construction."

Photograph courtesy of the Champaign County Historical Society



CHAMPAIGN COUNTY'S 175TH ANNIVERSARY

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