

Abstract/Summary

This historical project explores race relations in the Kansas City metropolitan area through the lens of the three-year legal struggle to desegregate the Swope Park Swimming Pool in Kansas City, Missouri. Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, it explores the unique role of the swimming pool as a racialized and sexualized public space. I intend to argue that City officials' resistance to integrating the Swope Park Pool was the result of not only a desire to maintain racial separation, but particularly racist fears of miscegenation. Accordingly, black residents were treated as unworthy of full citizenship and enjoyment of local amenities. In a conflict emblematic of desegregation battles in cities across the Northern and Midwestern United States, civil rights activists succeeded in a legal maneuver from 1951 to 1954 to secure the pool's integration. The legal rulings resultant from this struggle contributed to the Supreme Court's ultimate overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the doctrine of "separate but equal." Through understanding the rationale and result of this historical conflict, one may better understand contemporary discussions of race and discrimination as they relate to public accommodation.

Background and Introduction

While rich in primary sources, the desegregation battle of the Swope Park Pool is addressed in a relatively thin collection of secondary sources. Following a series of law review articles authored in its immediate aftermath, the desegregation of the Swope Park Pool went relatively unnoticed for four decades. While it was sporadically mentioned in narrative histories of Kansas City, no sources focused intently on the subject, opting to merely note it as an aside in discussions of the City's integration history.¹ This became a familiar trend, with no secondary material devoting extensive analysis to the Swope Park Pool's desegregation for several decades.

During this time, literature on the social implications of swimming pools in general was also largely nonexistent. Perhaps the dearth of secondary sources here is due to the swimming pool often being lumped together with other forms of public accommodation, as is the case with several theoretical and sociohistorical works through the 1990s.² While these works give a valuable theoretical structure to examine the racialization of public space and urban accommodation in terms of racial power, such a line of thought fallaciously equates such impersonal venues as theaters and municipal golf courses with the exposure and closeness of bathing with one another in public pools. Of particular interest is David Roediger's emphasis on consciousness and identity, which provides an important discussion of the role of citizenship in

¹ McKay, Robert B. "Segregation and Public Recreation." *Virginia Law Review*, 1954: 697-731; Brown, A. Theodore. *K.C.: A History of Kansas City, Missouri*. Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing, 1978.

² Wilson, William J. *Power, Racism and Privilege*. New York: Free Press, 1973; Gotham, Kevin Fox. *Constructing the Segregated City: Housing, Neighborhoods, and Racial Division in Kansas City, 1880-Present*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997; Feagin, Joe R. "The Continuing Significance of Race: Antiracist Discrimination in Public Places." *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 1 (1991): 101-116.

racial segregation. He argues that blacks were not viewed as simple non-citizens by much of American society, but as *anti-citizens*, or the manifestation of everything a citizen ought not to be. It was against this notion of the anti-citizen that white residents of cities like Kansas City cultivated their own notion of what it means to be a citizen: clean, law-abiding, and racially pure.³ Indeed, in the eyes of segregationists, allowing African Americans to come along with whites would signal moral degradation, sexual immorality, and even criminality.⁴ The equating of the swimming pool with any number of other forms of mundane public interaction, however, would dominate scholarship in the decades following the desegregation of the Swope Park Pool. Thus, little attention was paid to swimming pools and their unique place within the realm of public accommodation.

Perhaps the definitive narrative of events that composed the desegregation of the Swope Park Pool is Sherry Lamb Schirmer's 2002 book entitled *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960*. Here, she provides a succinct description of the pool's closure and ultimate desegregation, complete with copiously sourced public debates on the matter. However, despite its excellent historical narrative, the book fails to sift through the City's veiled references to miscegenation in their desire to maintain a segregated pool, leaving it up to the reader to decode the arguments of the City. Indeed, the closest Schirmer comes to uncovering the City's rationale is a quotation in which the City attorneys proffer the "natural aversion to physical intimacy inherent in the use of swimming pools by races that do not mingle sociably."⁵ A full fleshing-out of this reasoning is needed in order to fully understand its implications. The desegregation of the Swope Park Pool is not a story of "races that do not mingle sociably," but rather an attempt to maintain superior accommodations for those who were deemed to be true citizens while simultaneously guarding against race-mixing.

In 2007, the swimming pool finally received a historical analysis befitting its unique place in public accommodation. Jeff Wiltse's *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* charted the social history of swimming pools in the Midwestern and Northern United States, placing particular emphasis on their segregation in the 1920s and 1930s and their desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s, including Kansas City.⁶ While Wiltse's detailed narrative discusses the salience of race-mixing to the debate over segregated pools and the important legal precedents laid in litigation, it fails to adequately tie the usage of public swimming pools to the enjoyment of full citizenship. It makes several oblique references to progressive-era

³ Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso Books, 1999.

⁴ Wiltse, Jeff. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

⁵ Schirmer, Sherry Lamb. *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960*. Kansas City: University of Missouri Press, 2002, 215.

⁶ Wiltse, Jeff. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

promulgation of citizenship through the swimming pool, but never explores its implications for African Americans who were denied entry to these pools. Among other goals, this project seeks to bridge this gap and explore the implications on citizenship entailed in exclusion from the pool.

This project will contribute to both the historical narrative of desegregation in Kansas City while adding a theoretical approach that emphasizes the rights of citizenship afforded to oppressed social groups. It explores the unique importance held by swimming pools within the realm of public space, and the resulting significance of efforts to desegregate these public amenities. Further, it will lay out the inextricable link between concerns over miscegenation and opposition to integrating the swimming pool, as well as its implications for the citizenship of black Kansas City residents who were considered unworthy of comingling with whites in the City's finest pool. Through this lens, an analysis of citizenship in legal, political, and social terms will be presented.

Methods and Approach

To complete this project, I intend to synthesize the theoretical frames and narrative information provided by secondary sources with an analysis of primary sources, especially court proceedings, academic manuscripts, and articles from *The Kansas City Times* and *The Kansas City Call*.⁷ Documents from Thurgood Marshall, who litigated the case on behalf of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, will be featured extensively.⁸ I have also identified several archives for the procurement of more primary sources, including the Missouri Valley Special Collections at The Kansas City Public Library, the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, and the NAACP of Kansas City. I have visited the Missouri Valley Special Collections and the Spencer Research Library several times already, and intend to return as my project progresses.

Having undergone the initial process of locating sources and creating a workable thesis, I am currently in the early stages of drafting the narrative facts of the legal battle. After this stage is complete, I will consider theoretical interpretations of the desegregation struggle. As this project serves as my history departmental honors thesis, I frequently consult with my research mentor, Professor Sheyda Jahanbani, and focus-group my ideas with ten other history majors authoring their own theses. I also review each draft with Professor Clarence Lang of the African and African American Studies Department. The process of drafting this project involves

⁷ *Kansas City, MO. et al. v. Williams et al.; Williams et al. v. Kansas City, MO. et al.* . 14664; 14666 (United States Court of Appeals Eighth Circuit, June 10, 1953); *Williams, et al. v. Kansas City, MO, et al.* . 104 F. Supp. 848 (W.D. Mo. 1952) (United States District Court, W.D. Missouri, W.D, April 8, 1952); *The Kansas City Call*. "No Rights Have Been Violated." *The Kansas City Call*, August 21, 1951: 1, 10; *Kansas City Times*. "To Open Swope Pool." *Kansas City Times*, April 1, 1954: 1-2; Shipley, Alberta D. *The Admission of Negroes to the Swope Park Pool*. Kansas City: Kansas City University, 1952.

⁸ Marshall, Thurgood. *Thurgood Marshall: His Speeches, Writings, Arguments, Opinions, and Reminiscences*. Edited by Mark V. Tushnet. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001.

contextualizing and corroborating source information, analyzing the evidence each source presents and examining where each source originated.

Preparation

My study of history has prepared me well for this project. Having taken Historian's Craft (HIST 301), Contemporary American History (HIST 616), and numerous other history classes, I have become familiar with both historical research methods and how they relate to the study of racial history in the United States. Currently, I am enrolled in the History Department's honors thesis course sequence (HIST 490 and HIST 498), which provides additional guidance in research techniques from Professor Marta Vicente. My advisory research committee includes Professor Sheyda Jahanbani and Professor Clarence Lang, and I intend to ask Professor David Roediger if he would be willing to serve as my committee's third member. Further, I have compiled a bibliography of over forty primary and secondary sources for this project, a number which grows each week as I discover more relevant material.

Conclusion

The finished product of this research will total between fifty and seventy-five pages. Upon its completion, I will defend it as my honors thesis. After the spring semester, I hope condense it and pursue its publication in an academic journal.

Through an analysis of the legal, political, and social debates that surrounded the desegregation of the Swope Park Swimming Pool, one may derive lessons of citizenship – of which groups were considered worthy to comingle with others in the most intimate of public spaces. As all other major City-owned properties were desegregated by 1951, the pool represented the final stand of *de jure* segregation in public facilities, a notion that warrants extensive analysis.⁹ Additionally, the rulings from the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals over the Swope Park Pool contributed to a jurisprudential shift away from the doctrine of “separate but equal,” an example of a regional change causing a national shift.¹⁰ Through better understanding the history of race relations in public accommodations like the swimming pool, the United States may come to grips with its past and work toward a more equitable future.

⁹ Schirmer, Sherry Lamb. *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960*. Kansas City: University of Missouri Press, 2002

¹⁰ Wiltse, Jeff. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

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