

African American Landowners: Clay County,
Kansas, 1880-1910

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- 1) This paper explores the agricultural history of Clay County Kansas and the African American workers who persevered during the time.
- 2) Sources used were newspaper articles, the class reader, websites, and a book about Broughton Kansas.

“By 1870 nearly 17,000 Blacks had migrated to Kansas. They came to work, to buy land, and to be free...”¹ When you think about early Kansas agriculture, you imagine a horse pulling a plow led by a white man, very similar to the image on the state flag. What is less known, is that thousands of freed African Americans migrated from the South into the eastern and central Kansas counties in order to start over after slavery was abolished. In 1900, 173,614 acres were reported as being farmed by black Kansans.² This fact seems to be incredible since there is little representation in Kansas’ history of these hardworking people. These African American settlers not only survived, but made a considerable profit on their farms and worked at it for many years. The families mentioned later in this paper settled in Clay County, Kansas, near the county seat of Clay Center. This paper’s purpose is to give an insight on African Americans in the area who were working in the agricultural industry. Little is known of these farming families that escaped the South and started fresh in Kansas by using their intelligence and hard work to establish a better future.

Clay County is located in northeastern Kansas and is very well suited for agricultural purposes. In 1860, the population of the county was 163.³ By 1890 it had grown nearly 2000% to 16,146, which had much to do with the great migration of eastern settlers.⁴ There is fertile farm ground along the Republican River, which runs through the center of the county. This is some of the best farming acreage in the area and everyone would have been interested in farming it in the late 1800s. The Republican River flows south, originally into the Kansas River at Junction City, but today, feeds the Milford Reservoir in the southernmost part of the county. There are also large tracts of ground in the western part of the county used as pasture for livestock in the warmer months, which are scattered with watersheds for collecting sufficient rainfall. With a hot, humid summer climate, many different commodities can be produced with

adequate rainfall. In the 1880s diversification of crops was already in use as farmers would grow winter wheat, rye, corn, oats, and even Irish potatoes.⁵ This was a much different time where it was much simpler to raise what you needed for the year, rather than buying what you thought you might need. The diversification in the agricultural sector kept these early farming families from becoming dependent on the town and also helped them keep their families fed.

The county seat of Clay Center was diverse for a small Kansas town, which grew from a population of 1,753 in 1880 to 3,069 in 1990.⁶ This increase in population is directly influenced by the Exodusters, who were seeking new occupations after the fall of slavery. The town of Clay Center was very accepting of different races and at one time had 400 black residents living within the city limits.⁷ The African Americans had two churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Baptist Church. These churches had members living within the city limits and also had members living in the country around the town.⁷ Another aspect that made the city of Clay Center popular with settlers was the railroads, the Union Pacific and the Rock Island, that ran through the town and throughout the county. This made it much easier for the transportation of commodities as well as people and was essentially a lifeline for people living in those times.

Nearly six miles southeast of Clay Center was another small town called Broughton. This was another prominent community in the 1880s which had a larger number of black farmers living in the area. One of the farmers I have examined was a man known as W.J. Davey (also written Davy in some censuses). W.J. Davey shows up in the 1895 census as being a 67 year old man from North Carolina. Being born in 1828, he was certainly born into slavery and found his way to Kansas after the Civil War to start his new life. His wife Matilda was 77 at the time and was born in Kentucky which also shows that she was familiar with slavery throughout most of

her life as well. Living with W.J. and his wife Matilda was his son A.W. and his wife Rachel, who also had three children.⁸ They most likely all lived in the house on the farm land and helped with all of the work that goes with the farm. On the 1900 plat map of Clay County, W.J. owns 160 acres, which is a considerate amount of ground for a black farmer at the time.⁹ There are two stories of how W.J. acquired his land. The first is that one prominent member of Broughton named Maxwell Sanders, which was a friend of the Davey family, gave them 12 acres to build on and also helped build a stone house. The second account of how W.J. bought his land was that Mr. Saunders co-signed the bank loan for him. In both instances, there was help from a member of the community to the Davey family as they were trying to grow their operation and continue with their farming career.¹⁰ With 160 acres of ground, the Davey family showed hard work and determination as they cultivated 80 of those acres for planting crops. Of those crops they mainly planted winter wheat and corn, which are very common for this region. Fifty-five acres consisted of these commodities and these were their main source of income as the other crops were mainly used during the winter months for cooking. Since coming to Kansas, W.J. had also bought a horse, four mules and two cows. The horse and mules were used for working the ground and transportation as the cows were used for cream and butter production. With only 80 acres of cultivated ground, there was another 80 acres of grass for the livestock to graze on.¹¹

The Davey family lived on this farm for an unknown time, for in the 1918 plat map, the 160 acres is shown as being owned by another farmer. What is new in this plat is that in the south eastern corner of the old Davey farm there is a new cemetery.¹² The ground for this cemetery was donated by W.J. Davey and was used for white, black and even Mexican burials.¹³ This is different from other towns in Kansas as many communities didn't believe in sharing burial grounds with those from other races, An example is Morris County, where separate

cemeteries were used.¹⁴ This also shows what kind of relationship the different races had at a rather difficult time in Kansas. After the selling of the land there is record of 15 members of the Davey family living in Clay Center.¹⁵ After moving to town, there were many less laborious jobs as W.J and Matilda were well into their 70's and 80's. On March 16, 1908, Matilda Davey passed away while living in Clay Center. W.J. Davy passed away six years later on March 20, 1914.¹⁶ They are both buried in the Greenwood cemetery in Clay Center and were two hardworking African Americans who were born into slavery and made the best out of coming to Kansas and starting all over.¹⁷ Their story tells one instance of coming from little and making a good living from persistence and determination.

Another record of a hardworking family heading west after the Civil War can be seen a mile east of the Davey farm on the 1900 plat map, but what is interesting is how this Patterson family arrived there. Reuben L. Patterson was born in 1834 in West Virginia. He fought in the Civil War with the 14th regiment of West Virginia for the Union in 1862 and served for two years and 11 months. In the 1870 census, Reuben is 36, married to Martha Patterson, and has 3 young children. He also has a property value of \$912, which is a substantial amount for the time.¹⁸ Ten years later, in the 1880 census, Reuben, Martha and now six children, have moved to Clay County, Kansas, and have settled on an 80 acre piece of ground. With a house on the land, they lived here and farmed the 40 acres of cultivated land for years to come. With 20 acres of corn, 20 acres of oats and just a small patch of Irish potatoes, the Patterson family lived as the Davey family also lived, through hard work and hope that they were making a smart choice moving to Kansas. The Patterson farm was, however, more diverse in their livestock. With a higher income from poultry and greater amount of cream and butter produced, it is an inference that the children are also helping with the farm and not just Reuben, Martha and their eldest son. With two horses,

two mules and four cows, they had a much easier time producing dairy products; it was also easier to cultivate the land without overexerting the livestock. Another difference we can find in the agricultural census between the two families is the ownership of dogs by the Pattersons. This shows that the family had additional income and purchased these animals more for pleasure than for agricultural use. This also gives us the assumption that the Patterson family is proving successful at farming and has built up a disposable income.¹⁹ In 1890, at the age of 56, Reuben applied for a pension from serving in his earlier days with the union. After his application was accepted, he was given \$30 per month for the remainder of his life. Reuben was also a member of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). On December 9, 1906, he passed away at the age of 72 and was buried in the same cemetery that W.J. Davey had donated to the county.²⁰ Figure 1 is a picture of the G.A.R monument with area members and R. Patterson in honor of their service to their country



Figure 1: Source: Private Collection of William Lienberger

Reuben's story is one of dedication as he and his family gave up what they had in West Virginia to come west and gamble on making a better living. By looking at their census records and agricultural records, we see that throughout their years they proved that moving from the east gave them an opportunity for advancement, but with it came many days of commitment and devotion to what they felt was right for them.

The last of these cases is of Harvey Ramsey, whose story begins much closer to Kansas. Being born in 1847 in Missouri, he was familiar with slavery as both of his parents were slaves. Like Patterson, Harvey joined the Union Army to earn his freedom with the 10th Missouri Infantry. After serving for two years, he moved to Clay Center and became a general laborer on a farm. After working as a farm laborer, he earned enough to purchase 30 acres. After farming the 30 acres for a time he purchased another 100 acres and eventually became a blacksmith. He married in 1902 to Maude Ramsey and lived in Clay Center for the rest of his life, working on his farm land and also in his blacksmith shop in town. After starting from nothing after the war, he made the best with what he had and used his work ethic to earn his way.²¹ Figure 2 is a photograph of Harvey Ramsey from the 1900 Clay County Historical Atlas showing him to be a businessman and a supporter of the town of Clay Center.²²

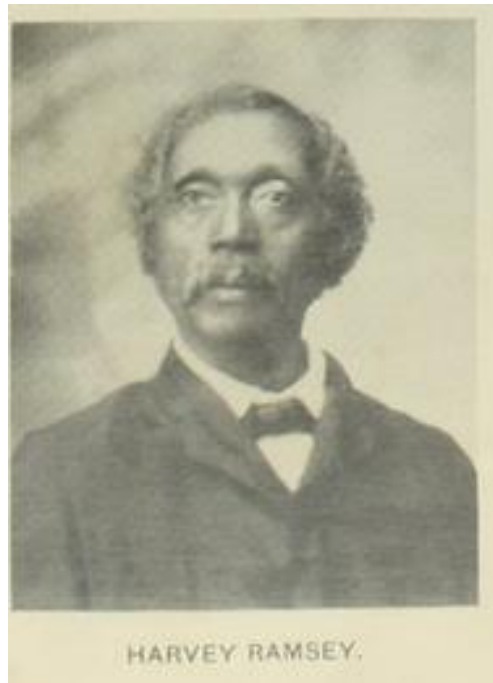


Figure 2: A photograph of black landowner Harvey Ramsey.
Source: 1900 Historical Atlas of Clay County

Here we see another man who fought for his rights to live freely and settled down in a state where he could do just that.

What we see throughout each of these stories are men who sacrificed everything they had to give their families a better chance at advancement. By leaving the east, they left behind their memories of slavery and had a chance to begin again. They didn't know for certain what the outcome would be but they also knew that giving it a try was worth it. In each case we see success, whether it be through creating a family business or living on the land that they owned. It may have been rather short lived but for a time they were making their own decisions and living free in Kansas. We also see how perseverance and spirit can make the difference between success and failure. These people were extremely dedicated to making it work and should be honored for what they did just to see their family live better lives.

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