

# Report on the History and the Origins of the Name of Negro Creek, Johnson County, Kansas

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## Introduction to the Report Content

The staff of the Johnson County Museum approached me to research the history and the origins of the name of Negro Creek in eastern Johnson County on behalf of the Johnson County government. The name of this particular creek has recently come under increased scrutiny. Given the problematic nature of the name, it is important to examine the history of the creek and to consider whether it is time to rename it. I commend the city government for engaging historians in the process of working to discover the origins of the creek name and in the consideration of possible alternative names. I hope that this report will provide relevant information in your efforts to decide on an appropriate solution to this issue.

In this report we will do the following:

- Outline the known history of the creek and the origins of the name.
- Discuss the existence of similar place names elsewhere in Kansas and in the nation as a whole and connections to the Johnson County name origin story.
- Describe the results of our research on the history of the creek and the origin of the name.
- Discuss the possible links of the creek to either an act of racial violence or the Underground Railroad.
- Provide recommendations for how to move forward with renaming the creek, including additional stories of African American history in the immediate area of the creek and Johnson County as a whole.
- Outline possible additional research.

## History of the Creek and the Appearance of the Name

Negro Creek is a short creek of a few miles in length that is located in eastern-central Johnson County, Kansas. It is a tributary branch off the Blue River with the juncture with the Blue barely after the river crosses the state line into Kansas (somewhere between 149<sup>th</sup> and 150<sup>th</sup> Street). The creek crosses under Kenneth Road near the railroad crossing before its juncture with 151<sup>st</sup> Street. It meanders through an undeveloped wooded area and then crosses under 151<sup>st</sup> Street just to the west of Kenneth Road and 151<sup>st</sup> Street and west of the water treatment facility. It then flows through the Ironhorse development golf course and crosses under Mission Road, runs through a preserved wooded area that includes Creekside Park and Green Meadows Park with multiple tributaries branching off of it, and ends in residential neighborhoods between Nall and Metcalf and 150<sup>th</sup> and 159<sup>th</sup> Streets. The Blue River itself meanders through Jackson County, Missouri in a northeastern direction, cutting through Martin City, Minor Park, Swope Park, Blue Valley Park, and eventually meeting the Missouri River just to the east of Interstate 435.

An extensive survey of maps shows that the name Negro Creek has appeared on maps only sporadically since it was first listed on an extant map in 1856. The Whitman and Searl Map of Eastern

Kansas was published in 1856, just two years after Kansas became a territory and was opened to Euro-American settlement, and was meant to outline the territory belong to the Shawnees.<sup>1</sup> The map was not drawn to scale according to our current understanding of the geography, and shows a Negro Creek, which looks as if comes off the Blue River around its current juncture with Indian Creek on the Missouri side of the state line. This appears to be a few miles north of our current understanding of the location of Negro Creek. The Blue River is shown on the map a distance south of Negro Creek. It is not clear whether this was a mistake because of less extensive knowledge of the terrain at the time or if another creek also went by this name prior to this date. There is not an major existing creek that would be a good candidate, however.

The creek, but not its name, appears on a 1874 Map of Kansas Territory that shows the Black Bob Reservation and the Oxford Township section of Johnson County.<sup>2</sup> The name appears again on a 1886 map of Johnson County and the creek follows its known modern-day course.<sup>3</sup> The map clearly shows the location of the creek and the railroad tracks. A 1922 map of the Oxford Township Section also shows the creek but does not name it.<sup>4</sup> The creek shown in this map also mirrors the current geographic location. A 1956 Geographical Survey map names Negro Creek as well as outlines the topography in its vicinity.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, a 1973 US Corp of Engineers map for the Indian Lake project names and shows the creek with surrounding topographical features.<sup>6</sup> Currently, the named creek appears on some maps but not others. For example, the named creek appears on Apple Maps but not on Google Maps.<sup>7</sup> (See Appendix 1)

The name Negro Creek, and the derogatory epithet by which it was also called, appears in local newspaper accounts throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first mention is an article in the *Western Progress*, a Spring Hill, Kansas newspaper, in 1879, that suggests the origins of the place name. Subsequent mentions of the creek, typically using the epithet, appear in newspaper accounts of mundane happenings such as church baptisms (1891) and the building of a new bridge (1912).<sup>8</sup> There have been multiple recent media references to the creek, including a 1993 *Johnson County Sun* article about the origins of Johnson County creek names, a 2012 blog post about the alleged Underground Railroad history of the creek, and multiple recent calls to change the name.<sup>9</sup>

### Possible Origins of the Name

The origins of the name Negro Creek are less clear. There is oral tradition in Johnson County that suggests that the creek either was named Negro Creek because it was a known escape route on the Underground Railroad or because an act of violence was perpetrated against a Black man along the waterway. There have been suggestions of four additional origins of the creek name: a transliteration

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<sup>1</sup> Whitman and Searl Map of Eastern Kansas, 1856.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson County Maps, 1874, Showing Black Bob Reservation and Oxford Township Section.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson County Map, 1886, Oxford Township Section.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford Township Section Map, Johnson County, 1922.

<sup>5</sup> Geographical Survey Map of Stilwell, Kansas, 1856.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Corps of Engineers Map, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Google Maps, 2021. Apple Maps, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> “Stanley Items,” *Weekly Progress*, Spring Hill, Kansas February 20, 1879. *The Kansas Patron*, Olathe, Kansas, May 14, 1891. *Olathe Mirror*, October 17, 1912.

<sup>9</sup> Ron Wilson, “Many creeks take names from area history, but some are just a mystery,” *Johnson County Sun*, September 1993; Will Palmer, “Negro Creek,” *Life in Kansas – Stories from Suburban America*, May 16, 2012, <https://williamkpalmer.wordpress.com/2012/05/16/negro-river/>; Roxie Hammill, “Johnson County leaders consider Negro Creek name change, but it is not ‘cut and dried,’” *Shawnee Mission Post*, October 1, 2020; and “Historical or just offensive? Johnson County’s Negro Creek is long overdue for a Name Change”, editorial, *Kansas City Star*, September 28, 2020.

of Native American words (e.g. Ni=Osage/Kansa word for water; Ni.doho=translation for Blue River); bootlegging connections based on a story shared by a long-time Johnson Countian; it was named for Black families who lived in Oxford Township; or it had connections to the Santa Fe Trail, which runs nearby, and the Spanish language (e.g. negro=black). Both the Native American and Spanish language ideas are rooted in the idea that the color of the water inspired the creek name. Historians at the Johnson County Museum conducted early research and consulted relevant experts on these four origin stories and concluded that the name of the creek did not derive from any of those sources. They believe the most likely origin of the name was rooted in the racial history of the Border Region. They conducted some initial research on the connections of the creek name to slavery, racism, violence, and derogatory language in reference to Black Americans.<sup>10</sup>

The JCM enlisted my help in researching the possible origins of the name, as an expert on slavery and the Civil War in the Kansas-Missouri border region. Professional historians use historical and cultural evidence to reconstruct and interpret past events. Oral traditions are often important to this research, but they do not always fully reflect what actually happened in the past since the stories are passed down from generation to generation. This does not mean that these stories are not based in some aspect of the truth but some of the facts may have changed in the retelling. Working with oral traditions is always a challenge when attempting to reconstruct past events. Written documents are sometimes more helpful, but even they are sometimes problematic because the people who produced them often had inaccurate or incomplete information or because they harbored particular biases that colored their understanding of the facts. Like detectives, professional historians attempt to uncover as much evidence as they can from diverse sources and then triangulate this evidence to determine what likely happened. They also contextualize these sources in the broader history of the time and place, thereby helping them to interpret what the evidence reveals. We used this approach as we attempted to determine if the use of the name had its origins in the history of slavery, racial violence, and the Underground Railroad.

### Possible Links Between the Name and Acts of Racial Violence

The first known documented reference to Negro Creek, other than the 1856 map, is a 1879 article in the *Western Progress*, an early newspaper published in Spring Hill, Kansas. A column called “Stanley Items” includes the following text:

Stanley is located at the head of “N----- Creek.” Some of the curious may want to know why the stream is called by that name. As the poet would say, “thereby hangs a tale.” In 185--, James Chiles, of Jackson count, Missouri, had a negro man to “run off;” they followed and surrounded him on the stream running to Stanley to Blue, when finding they would capture him he drew a knife and cut this throat from ear to ear. From that day to this it has been known as “N----- Creek.” Of course the proper name is negro, but we being Democrats down here, (for short) spell it with two “g’s.” (See Appendix 2)<sup>11</sup> (*Changes in language mine*)

This highly problematic article reveals a lot about both the possible origins of the creek’s name and the racial politics of post-Civil War era Kansas. It is clear that there was a persistent local legend that linked the creek’s name to an incident of racial violence. The 1879 articles recounts an alleged story

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson County Museum Staff, “Negro Inquiry Report, Part 2,” October 13, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> “Stanley Items,” *Weekly Progress*, February 20, 1879.

from the 1850s, and as late as 1993, an article in an *Johnson County Sun* about local creek names suggests that there was a local legend that a “black person was hung near the creek.”<sup>12</sup>

There is a pattern throughout the United States of naming creeks or other geographic features either “Negro” or the associated racial slur to mark acts of racial violence or the death of a Black person at the location. While some of these events are well documented, in other cases, like Johnson County’s Negro Creek, the origins of the name have been passed down through oral traditions that were later retold in newspapers or other sources. As late as 2012, there were 757 US place names that included the word “Negro” or a related word. There are six existing place names using the word Negro in Kansas in the following counties: Atchison County, Cowley County (both a creek and oilfield), Johnson County, Kingman County, and Nemaha County.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, the origins of the name was linked to the death of African Americans, either through acts of racial violence or alleged accidental deaths. Our research demonstrates a pattern of violence against African Americans associated with other similarly named creeks and geographical features. A few of the many examples include:

- There is an often repeated story about the freezing death of a Black man in the company of a white hunter. The men were caught in a blizzard along a tributary of the Ninescah River to the southwest of Wichita in 1872. The stream was reported to have been named after the man who died.<sup>14</sup>
- *The Holton Recorder* reported what appears to be the lynching of a Black man, apparently on suspicion of stealing a horse and saddle. The perpetrators left the Black man's body hanging on a tree near a stream outside of Muscotah in Atchison County. The creek was known as Negro Creek from that time on.<sup>15</sup>
- In another instance, the name of Negro Wool Hollow in Missouri was changed from its pejorative form to its current form in 1991. A 1944 graduate thesis suggested that someone killed a Black person at that location. The Hollow drew its name from that event.<sup>16</sup>
- There is a creek that empties into the Arkansas River named Negro Creek near Wichita, Kansas. The report is that Cherokee enslavers pursued four freedom seekers who tried to escape and caught them at the creek. The Cherokee killed three and wounded one. The creek became known as Negro Creek because of this incident.<sup>17</sup>
- Outside this region, Negro Creek Road in Maury County, Tennessee, was given the name after three young Black men drowned in the creek in the 1800s.<sup>18</sup>

Substantiating the authenticity of the story told in the 1879 article about Johnson County’s Negro Creek has been challenging and, in the end, after extensive research in multiple places and

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson, “Many creeks take names.”

<sup>13</sup> GNIS Search Result, Department of the Interior. U.S. Board on Geographic Names, “Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names,3016,”

[https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pubs/DNC\\_PPP\\_DEC\\_2016\\_V.2.0.pdf](https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pubs/DNC_PPP_DEC_2016_V.2.0.pdf); “Quarterly Review List 437, United States Board of Geographic Names,” October 8, 2019.

[https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=GEONAMES\\_WEB:REVIEW\\_LISTS](https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=GEONAMES_WEB:REVIEW_LISTS).

<sup>14</sup> “How it Got It’s Odd Name, *The Leader Courier*, 1900 and “An Early-Day Story,” *The Leader Courier*, 1910 from Kenya Cox digital file, Johnson County Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. V.V. Adamson, “Reminiscences of an Old Settler,” *Holton Recorder*, July 9, 1908

<sup>16</sup> Boone Township, Crawford County, Missouri. Gertrude Minnie Zimmer, “Place Names of Fiver Southeastern Counties of Missouri,” 1994. GNIS #737583.

<sup>17</sup> *Wichita Eagle*, January 8, 1874

<sup>18</sup> There are many similar stories throughout the US. Kim Severson, “Race-Based Names Dot the Landscape,” *New York Times.com*, October, 7, 2011.

among many kinds of sources, we were unable to determine if the alleged incident actually occurred. This is not unusual for a story like this from this time period as violence in general, and violence against African Americans, was a common occurrence and not always documented. The lack of written evidence does not mean that the incident did not occur, however. We will outline the evidence that we found and also provide some historical context for understanding it.

First, we conducted extensive research into James Chiles and the Chiles Family of Jackson County, Missouri. There were two James Chiles who lived in Jackson County during the time period and who would have been of appropriate age for involvement in this alleged incident. The first is Colonel James C. Chiles (1803-1883), who was a prominent slaveholder and politician from eastern Jackson County. He was born in Kentucky and migrated to Missouri in the early 1830s to join his three brothers who had established farming operations near Sibley, Missouri. Col. Chiles earned his military title through service in the Seminole War in Florida and with Alexander Doniphan and the Missouri Volunteers in the Mexican War. In the years between 1838 and the Civil War, he went on to serve in various government posts including Jackson County Commissioner, Representative and Senator in the Missouri Legislature, and Speaker of the Missouri House. In the 1850s, he was deeply and enthusiastically involved in proslavery politics and the fight to make Kansas a slave state. He served as a delegate at the 1855 Lexington Proslavery Convention (Mo.), worked to shut down a proposed convention in Jackson County of the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church because of its anti-slavery views, and helped organize the settlement of proslavery migrants in Kansas. He also actively engaged in the proslavery fight in Kansas through participation in the battle at Ossawatimie and the Sack of Lawrence in 1856. (This is the first attack on Lawrence that resulted in the destruction of the town but no loss of life in contrast to Quantrill's 1863 raid during which 160 plus unarmed men and boys were killed and the town burned.)<sup>19</sup> Col. Chiles fled Missouri during the Civil War due to his support for secessionists, including local pro-Confederate guerrillas, which included his son. He likely left both to protect his life and to secure the continued enslavement of the 12 individual he claimed in 1860. He lived in Sherman, Grayson County, Texas, among a colony of pro-Confederate Missouri expats and returned to Missouri after the war. He later moved to Sherman to live with one of his sons and died there at the age of 79 in March 1883.<sup>20</sup>

The second James Chiles is Col. Chiles's son, James J. or "Jim Crow" Chiles (1833-1873). Before the war, Jim Crow Chiles was actively involved in the trade on the western trails. He was remembered by some in the community as a handsome and social young man and reportedly earned his nickname because of his skill performing a popular dance called "The Jim Crow Set." Chiles married Sarah Ann Young (1843-1907), who was the daughter of a prominent land- and slave-owner, Solomon Young, and also the sister of Harry Truman's mother, Martha Ellen Young. A known proslavery secessionist, it appears that Jim Crow Chiles moved his family to Sherman, Texas, early in the war, where he opened a boarding house and tavern that served ex-pat Jackson County secessionists. He went on to serve with Confederate General Joseph Shelby and later with the notorious Confederate Bushwhackers, William Quantrill and "Bloody Bill" Anderson. His bushwhacking activities helped to cement his reputation for violence in the Border Region. He was connected to multiple murders (including an African American man) in the years between 1857 and 1873, although he never served time for his crimes likely due to his family's prominence in the

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<sup>19</sup> "The Methodist Episcopal Church Threatened," *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), October 4, 1855. "Effrontery Unparalleled!", *The Kansas Herald of Freedom*, March 1, 1856. "Letters from Chiles to General Reid," *Glasgow Weekly Times*, September 04, 1856. "To Citizens of Missouri," *Glasgow Weekly Times* (Mo.), September 04, 1856. James C. Chiles-[http://kansasboguslegislature.org/mo/chiles\\_james.html](http://kansasboguslegislature.org/mo/chiles_james.html).

<sup>20</sup> See <http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~janiceksmith/genealogy/chiles/Henrynov2012/b7157.htm> ; and [http://kansasboguslegislature.org/mo/chiles\\_james.html](http://kansasboguslegislature.org/mo/chiles_james.html)

community. A 1893 historical article on bushwhacking in Missouri claimed Chiles was “a man of notorious reputation. He belonged to a very good family, possessed considerable property, was a sporting character, a dangerous man, had killed several men in his time, over-awed the town officers, and often boasted that he held the d---- town under his thumb. It was generally thought and is now believed by the old citizens who knew him best that he was king among the desperadoes and bushwhackers.”<sup>21</sup> He later returned to Missouri, where he died in a confrontation with the Independence Deputy Marshal in 1873. Deputy Marshal James Peacock shot and killed Chiles and then Chiles’s young son, Elijah, killed Peacock in retaliation. Peacock’s son, Charles, then killed Elijah in response. The tragic incident was reported in newspapers throughout the nation.<sup>22</sup>

The Chiles family had an extensive presence in Jackson County, Missouri by the 1850s, with multiple members of the extended family owning property and enslaved people (some in Southwestern Jackson County near Negro Creek). In 1850, James Chiles, 48, lived on his Fort Osage farm with his wife Ruth, 47, and seven of their children, ranging in age from 26 to 5 years old. Their son James, 16, resided in the household and was both identified as a farmer and listed as having attended school that year. Chiles’s real estate holdings were valued at \$8,000 and he claimed 14 enslaved people ranging in age from 46 years to 4 months old. In 1860, James Chiles, 57, of Fort Osage Township still lived with his wife Ruth, 57, and his four youngest children, ranging in age from 20 to 11 years old. He had real estate valued at \$16,000 and a personal estate, which included enslaved people, valued at \$21,250. He was listed as owning 12 enslaved individuals ranging in age from 55 to 2 years old. In 1860, his son James, who was listed in the census as JJ, 26, was living with his new wife, Sallie A., 17, in nearby Blue Township. He owned \$8000 of real estate and a \$3000 personal estate. The couple was listed as having married that year. They also claimed an 18 year old enslaved man and an 18 year old enslaved woman. It is possible that Sallie brought these two enslaved individuals into the marriage as part of her dowry, as was customary when daughters of slaveholders married.<sup>23</sup> There is an exact correlation between the ages and genders of only a few of the enslaved people in the 1850 and 1860 -- most of whom were female. The differences between the ages and genders of the lists of people in 1850 and 1860 could be due to mistakes in recording, but they also could be the result of deaths, sales, escapes, or gifts to Chiles’s heirs. It is possible that one of the adult or teenage men – 2 men age 22, one man age 16, and 2 boys age 10 -- listed in the 1850 census was the man written about in the *Western Progress* article. It is suggested by the account, although not proven, that the man was enslaved by Col. Chiles.

It is unknown if James Chiles, or which one, pursued the enslaved man into Kansas nor is it clear when exactly this incident occurred. The known biography of the two men, the historical context, and historical scholarship about slavery provides some clues, however. If the newspaper was correct about the decade in which the event happened and the creek was indeed named in response

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<sup>21</sup> “Bushwhacking in Missouri,” *Iowa Historical Record* (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1893), 82-86. Paul R. Peterson, *Quantrill in Texas: The Forgotten Campaign*, (Nashville, TN: Cumberland Press, 2007), 136-39. See also: article about shooting of Colonel Moore by Chiles, *The Kansas Herald of Freedom*, April 25, 1857; Report of death of T.E. Moore, *Cooper’s Clarksburg Register* (Va.), May 1, 1857; “Fatal Encounter,” *Staunton Spectator* (Va.), May 06, 1857; “Attempt to Arrest John West by Sheriff Baker,” *The Howard Union* (Mo.), October 12, 1865; Reported from the *Kansas City Advertiser*, *The People’s Tribune*, November 13, 1867; “Fatal Family Fight,” *The Boston Transcript* (Ma.), September 23, 1873. David McCullough also wrote about Chiles’s reputation for violence in *Truman*, (Simon & Schuster, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Accounts of the murders appeared in the following newspapers: “Filial Love,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 23, 1873; “Fatal Affray at Independence, Mo.,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 23, 1873; Article about a singular and terrible shooting, *The True Northerner* (Mi.); September 26, 1873; article about “another horrible shooting,” *The Weekly Caucasian* (Mo.), September 27, 1873; and “The Shooting Affray,” *The State Rights Democrat* (Or.) October 24, 1873.

<sup>23</sup> 1850 Fort Osage Township, Jackson County, Missouri Census; 1850 Fort Osage and Blue Townships, Jackson County, Missouri Slave Schedule; 1860 Fort Osage and Blue Townships, Jackson County, Missouri Census; 1860 Fort Osage and Blue Townships, Jackson County, Missouri Slave Schedule.

to the death of the enslaved man, the incident must have happened between 1850 and 1856 when the name first appeared on a map. It is possible that the event could have occurred before Kansas was opened up to Euro-American settlement in 1854. It was not unknown for enslaved people to seek protection with Native Americans or take their chances on the less settled areas to the west of Missouri. After free soil settlers from the Northern free states began to migrate to Kansas in large numbers, Kansas began to gain a reputation among enslaved Missourians as a place where they might achieve their freedom. This pull factor may suggest a mid-decade date for the escape attempt. The creek name would have been locally accepted for the map maker to include it, however, suggesting that the incident occurred long enough before the map's creation for it to be common usage.

As the 1850s progressed, Missouri enslavers became increasingly concerned that their enslaved people would run across the border into Kansas, where they might gain assistance from free soil or abolitionist settlers. Western Missourians were galvanized by the political conflict erupting to the west of them. Prominent men, such as Col. Chiles, were actively involved in promoting proslavery politics in Missouri and proslavery settlements in Kansas. Chiles himself was a delegate to the well-known proslavery convention in Lexington, Missouri in 1855. He also appears to have been actively involved in Missourians' fraudulent attempts to rig the vote in the Kansas Territorial elections to favor a proslavery government and was among the Missouri men who fought at Ossawatimie and Lawrence in 1856. Clearly, this virulent proslavery activity and his prior military service demonstrate that he was not beyond taking violent action in pursuit of a runaway enslaved man. The documented violence of the Chiles men toward white enemies, both political and personal, suggests that they were likely also violent toward the enslaved individuals on their property. The institution of slavery was undergirded by violence and the threat of violence. This was true in Missouri just as elsewhere in the South. Acts of violence or threats of it often served as a trigger for freedom seekers' escape attempts.<sup>24</sup>

It was Col. Chiles who claimed ownership of the people on his property, but it is more likely that his son, Jim Crow Chiles, would have served as slave catcher. If the incident occurred post-1854, Jim Crow Chiles would have been around 20 years old. If we assume that the enslaved man belonged to Col. Chiles, it would have been likely that some member of the Chiles family would be involved in a recapture effort. That said, it was typically a community affair when an enslaved person turned up missing and neighborhood men often banded together in pursuit of freedom seekers. Slave patrollers, who often doubled as slave catchers, were typically younger men and they were often involved in the work of slave catching. Participating in the slave patrol was a civic duty that was expected of all white men in the community but it was typical for older men or wealthy men to pay younger and poorer men to take their place to ride out at night on patrol. Fathers also would have likely sent their grown sons. Patrols were made up of multiple men on horseback, who traversed the roads at night looking for enslaved people who were on the run, or who were travelling at night and gathering in groups without permission from their owners. While most freedom seekers were caught within their own neighborhoods, some managed to travel outside the reach of the local patrol and were at large for many days. In these cases, it was typical for slaveholders to run runaway advertisements in regional newspapers. These ads usually included quite a bit of descriptive information about those who were on the run. After the US Congress strengthened the National Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850, people were required by law to capture and return runaways to their owners. There was a financial incentive for those who returned fugitives that, coupled with the slaveholders'

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<sup>24</sup> See Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Kristen Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery: The Kansas-Missouri Border in the Antebellum and Civil War Eras* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016); Jonathan Earle and Diane Mutti Burke, eds., *Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri: The Long Civil War on the Border* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); and Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

reward money, could be lucrative. In addition, there were men who, like bounty hunters of today, chased down runaway people for reward money. These men often formed a posse to search and recapture freedom seekers and they also frequently used hound dogs to track them. Given the various monetary incentives, it was common for people who were not related to the owner of those who fled to also engage in the pursuit.<sup>25</sup>

If the enslaved man started his journey from the Chiles family farm it is likely that James Chiles tracked him up the Blue River from near Fort Osage – a distance of over 30 miles. Chiles, who was likely with other men, would have travelled on horseback, finally catching up to the foot-bound freedom seeker just as he crossed into Kansas. Given the context described above, it seems likely that Col. Chiles would have sent one of his grown sons in pursuit of the man rather than go himself. It also seems likely that Johnson Countians, who frequently suffered at the hands of the bushwhackers, would pass down a story related to one of these infamous guerrillas. Jim Crow Chiles's Civil War notoriety, and the fact that the tragic cascade of events that led his death received nationwide press, suggests that he was quite well known in Johnson County. It is even possible that the story of the escaped enslaved man was based in truth but the identity of the pursuers was unknown and was pinned on Jim Crow Chiles in local memory because of his outlaw reputation.

It also is important to analyze the likelihood that an enslaved man would have committed suicide when cornered by his pursuers. Suicide was indeed an action taken by some enslaved individuals who chose the freedom of death over continued enslavement and violence at the hands of their enslavers. The historical record is filled with accounts of enslaved individuals, who when backed into a corner under threat of violence, sale, or recapture, either committed acts of violence against their enslavers and/or pursuers or against themselves or their family members. People also attempted escapes to freedom in response to these same stressful and volatile situations. One such locally documented example is the 1855 story of Lucinda, who escaped her abusive master in Atchison, Kansas, and purportedly drowned herself in the Missouri River.<sup>26</sup> Missourian William Wells Brown also told the story of the suicide of a young mother, who could not endure the separation from her children and sale in the southern market. She jumped off a steamboat to her death in the turbulent waters of the Mississippi River.<sup>27</sup> The most well-known of these true stories is the case of Margaret Garner, who killed her child rather than allow her to be transported back into slavery. This story served as the inspiration for Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*.<sup>28</sup>

The man at the center of the Negro Creek tragedy likely understood that not only would he be hauled back into slavery but he also likely would be physically brutalized upon his capture and whipped or otherwise punished when he was returned to his enslaver. He may have chosen the freedom of death over the abuse and pain he knew would be in store for him. Tragedies such as the story of Lucinda or Margaret Garner were often reported in the abolitionist press or in published accounts of fugitive slaves as examples of southern atrocities. We searched for evidence of the Negro Creek story in national antislavery newspapers and other publications, but were unable to find the story in online newspaper databases. Additional research might uncover the story in extant newspapers that have not yet been digitized.

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<sup>25</sup> See Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Kristen Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery: The Kansas-Missouri Border in the Antebellum and Civil War Eras* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016); Sally E. Hadden, *Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); and John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery*, p. 85-6.

<sup>27</sup> William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, (Boston: Antislavery Office, 1847).

<sup>28</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York, Vintage, 1987).

Lastly, it is always possible that the enslaved man's death was a murder rather than a suicide. Attempting to disguise a murder by a made-up suicide story was common during the Jim Crow era as historian Brent Campney explains, but during slavery it would have been economically irrational to kill a man who was viewed as a valuable laborer. That said, enslavers frequently committed acts of violence against enslaved people with impunity – and although economically irrational, this violence sometimes resulted in enslaved people's deaths.<sup>29</sup>

### Possible Links Between the Name and the Underground Railroad

There appears to be another local legend that Negro Creek was a known route on the Underground Railroad (UGRR). This idea was most recently suggested in a blog by Johnson Countian Will Palmer.<sup>30</sup> We explored the idea that the Negro Creek waterway was a route on UGRR. It is notoriously difficult to substantiate UGRR routes or sites, due to the secretive nature of the effort to help enslaved people escape to freedom (it was against state law in most places and federal law everywhere). There is evidence of the UGRR in the Territory of Kansas in the years after it opened up to settlement, and historians have documented safe houses that were run by Kansas abolitionists and stories of people who rendered aid to freedom seekers throughout the region. In addition, the Lane Trail, which was named after Kansas free-state politician James Lane, was created in order to transport people northward through Nebraska and then across Iowa into Illinois, where they would eventually make their way to freedom in Canada. The idea was to develop an alternative transportation route to the Missouri River, which forced people to travel and ship supplies through the slavery state of Missouri. A number of people made their escape from slavery in Missouri, Arkansas, and Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) via the Lane Trail.<sup>31</sup>

While freedom seekers often received aid from local residents through a loose network of safe houses once they made their way into Kansas, there was little guarantee that crossing into Kansas would result in their freedom. In fact, there were many Kansas residents who gladly recaptured those who had run in order to claim reward money. In addition, in most cases freedom seekers had no concrete instructions for how to find help once they arrived in the territory. In the case of most freedom seekers, their success had more to do with their own initiative, intelligence, and instincts, and less to do with help from white benefactors. Enslaved Missourians were extremely astute about political developments both at the national and local levels, and, therefore, understood fully well that the unfolding political developments in Kansas Territory might provide opportunities to bring about their freedom. They learned through eavesdropping on white Missourians, reading newspapers, and word of mouth that there was a fight among white people in Kansas over the status of slavery in the new territory. It did not take long for many to realize that there were people in Kansas who might render them aid, especially the abolitionists that white Missourians so feared and despised. They also learned that towns like Lawrence, Topeka, and Quindaro were well known for free state or abolitionist activity. Many enslaved individuals in western Missouri made the decision to strike out for Kansas during the territorial period and the chaos of the Civil War. There are documented stories of amazing freedom journeys, including accounts of people crossing the ice-covered Missouri River into Kansas.

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<sup>29</sup> Brent Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 199-200. See also, Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border*.

<sup>30</sup> Will Palmer, "Negro Creek," *Life in Kansas – Stories from Suburban America*, May 16, 2012, <https://williamkpalmer.wordpress.com/2012/05/16/negro-river/>

<sup>31</sup> Kim Warren, "Underground Railroad," *Civil War on the Western Border* Website, <https://civilwaronthewesternborder.org/encyclopedia/underground-railroad>.

Of course, it was easier for people to cross from Missouri to Kansas over the open border south of the Missouri River.<sup>32</sup>

There is no documented evidence to indicate that Negro Creek was an established route on the UGRR, in spite of the oral tradition that suggests Negro Creek may have served this purpose. We were unable to find any documentation in local records and Deanda Johnson, the Midwest Coordinator of the US Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network, was unable to locate any documentation in the Network's records. The same is true for Network-authenticated UGRR sites in Johnson County. That said, what is known about enslaved people's knowledge of the local geography, their acts of resistance, and their escape attempts lends some credence to the idea that the creek may have been a known way to freedom in Kansas. My research and that of historian Kristen Epps has shown that enslaved Missourians were geographically mobile due to the patterns and practices of small-scale slavery in the region. Most slaveholdings were small in size in Missouri and Territorial Kansas and so white enslavers allowed a fair amount of physical mobility for enslaved people in order for them to complete the functions of their jobs, which often meant they were sent throughout the neighborhood on errands. It was also common for enslaved people to be hired out as laborers to local farmers and businessmen as well as for enslaved married couples to live on separate farms. Enslavers also frequently allowed some controlled social interactions such as attending church or going to parties and weddings. Although extensive mobility was sanctioned by white people for the purposes described above, enslaved people in the Border Region also sought out social interactions that were not authorized, such as clandestine church services and parties in secluded wooded spaces, such as were common along creek beds. They also used the back trails and local woods and creeks for hunting and fishing and as places to temporarily hide while engaged in acts of resistance. All of this led enslaved people to have extensive knowledge of their local environment.<sup>33</sup>

Given this long history of mobility and resistance, it would not be surprising that enslaved people in Jackson County knew through experience or word of mouth that if you followed the Blue River it would eventually take you into Kansas. In addition, anyone attempting to hide their movements would know that following a trail along a creek bed was much safer than moving along an open and well-travelled road. In addition, wading through the creek itself would hide a person's scent from the hound dogs who were often used to track freedom seekers. Extensive knowledge of the ways in which slavery operated in the region and knowledge of how freedom seekers ran away leads us to believe that the Blue River and its tributaries were likely informal networks of escape into Kansas. There is no way to definitely prove that this is the case with the available evidence, however. Even so, if we assume that the Blue River and Negro Creek were possible routes to freedom in Kansas, it is essential to stress that this UGRR activity was less of a formal network of people assisting others in escaping than the result of the initiatives of brave individuals who made the decision to strike a blow for their own freedom.

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<sup>32</sup> Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border*; Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery*; Kristen Oertel, *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2009); Harriet Frazier, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865*, (Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> There is extensive scholarship on the Underground Railroad, including: Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, (New York: WW Norton, 2016); Richard Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Freedom*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); and Stanley Harrold, *Border Wars: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). See also Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border*; and Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery*.

## Recommendations for a Change of Name and Possible Ways Forward

We recommend that the government of Johnson County initiate the name change process. We believe that there is enough evidence to show that the name of this creek originated with slavery and racial discrimination. It is clear that the name did not derive from Spanish or Native American words or from bootlegging activities. The name of the creek appears on a map as early as 1856, during the Kansas Territorial period when African Americans were held in slavery on both sides of the state line. Given this date and the historical context of the time, it is highly unlikely that the name was given in honor or tribute to Black residents of Johnson County or because it was a known route on the Underground Railroad. Instead, it is more likely, although it yet has been proven, that the roots of the name were in the death of a Black man along the creek. In addition, it is well documented that into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, local residents of Johnson County repeatedly referred to the creek by the racial slur rather than the word “Negro.” Again, this supports the idea that the name was not meant to be laudatory and is enough to recommend changing the name of the creek. It appears that the US Board of Geographic Names, which is the federal agency that oversees place names in the US to guarantee consistency, came to the same conclusion and considered the pejorative name to be the common usage after the agency conducted research on the name. In October 1978, the name of the creek in Johnson County was officially changed from the pejorative to Negro Creek. Most likely, this was part of a Board of Geographic Names (BGN) project, following the 1963 mandate of the Secretary of the Interior, Steward Udall, that where the pejorative n----- appeared on Federal geographic locations, it be changed to Negro, as this was the term preferred by Black Americans at the time. In 1974 a similar mandate changed J-- in geographic names and on Federal maps to Japanese.<sup>34</sup>

In searching for information about Johnson County’s Negro Creek, we learned that there are six creeks in Kansas with the name Negro Creek and one in Missouri. According to journalist Kim Severson, in 2012, “The [United States Board on Geographic Names](#). . . list[ed] 757 names that use the word Negro or a variation.”<sup>35</sup> Requests to change some of these from Negro have been submitted recently and are currently under consideration by the BGN. The BGN is conservative in its approval process, attempting to balance historical geographic names that are part of documented history with requested changes, given that perceptions and connotations change over time. Therefore, the BGN will not approve a name change if the requested new name might be considered offensive to a particular group. Each geographical location is assigned a unique identifier to facilitate tracking over time and entered in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) database.<sup>36</sup> The Domestic Names Committee (DNC) meets monthly to discuss naming issues. The DNC researches and investigates all name changes submitted to it for consideration. The review process includes consultation with state geographic names authorities, land management agencies, local governments, and Tribal Governments. In its research, the DNC considers:

- “established usage, historical usage, legal usage, legislated usage, local usage, spoken usage, and written usage.” (2)
- The DNC gives strong consideration to “existing published names, names in legal documents, and names with historical significance. . . when proposed names differ from current official names.” (7)<sup>37</sup>

Results are combined in a Case Brief and posted on BGN’s website for access by all interested parties.

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<sup>34</sup> DNC cites *The Western Progress* article as its source for the original name.

<sup>35</sup> Kim Severson, “Race Based Names Dot the Landscape,” *NBCNews.com*, 2/26/2012

<sup>36</sup> Negro Creek in Johnson County is #479578.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Board on Geographic Names, “Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names, 3016,” [https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pubs/DNC\\_PPP\\_DEC\\_2016\\_V.2.0.pdf](https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pubs/DNC_PPP_DEC_2016_V.2.0.pdf)

According to BGN guidelines, anyone may submit a proposal to change a name, especially one considered offensive. The proposal should include an explanation of the requested change and a recommendation for an alternative name. The new name should consider the “historical, cultural, or ethnic significance of the original name.”<sup>38</sup> When proposing a new name, the proposer should make a “conscientious effort to offer an alternative name that does not eliminate or obscure the original intent of the geographic name as a historical record on the cultural landscape, taking into account the historical, cultural, or ethnic significance of the original name.”

Our recommendation of a change in name naturally leads to the question of what the creek’s name should be changed to. We suggest that the new name should come out of a community conversation as to what might be considered appropriate in 2021. In our professional opinion, however, in order to make progress toward restoration and reconciliation, it would be appropriate to consider renaming the creek so that it represents the history of Black Johnson Countians in a more historically accurate way. “Freedom Creek” is a name that has been suggested by individuals in the community. This name could work but only if “freedom” is understood in a broad way and does not refer exclusively to the UGGR. Going this direction would require the County to provide the community with historical context of Black Johnson Countians experiences in the area – this should include both stories of Black achievement and progress as well as historically accurate and unblemished accounts of what people endured and overcame. This would necessitate a reckoning with the region’s history of slavery and racial discrimination. In addition to community programming and conversations, the Johnson County government could consider erecting historical markers in appropriate and publicly accessible locations along the creek that would tell the Civil War era story of slavery and freedom in Johnson County and the Border Region. This signage might also continue the story of African Americans in the area into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

The focus of various historic markers might include and should consider the following:

- 1.) You cannot make a definite claim that Negro Creek was a known route on the UGGR. You would instead need to contextualize the history of slavery in the Border Region (as I did above in the report) and explain how the creek *may* have been an informal route from Missouri into Kansas based on what is known about freedom seekers in the area.
- 2.) You should address racial violence as a possible, but as of yet unsubstantiated, origin of the creek name. This should include the specific Chiles story but might also provide information about violence during slavery (including suicide).
- 3.) You should not bury the original name of the creek in an effort to hide a shameful history. You could discuss the use of pejorative and derogatory names for places such as creeks and the history of this in Kansas and throughout the United States. In the end, this might open up additional conversations and exploration of the history of other place names, such as “Indian Creek.”
- 4.) You should not portray Johnson County or Kansas in a way that is uncritical of the racial history. Said another way, the story cannot be simply that enslaved Missourians were escaping into Kansas, where they found actual freedom from both slavery and racial discrimination. There is a long history of slavery in Johnson County that predated the opening of Kansas to Euro-American settlement. The county’s namesake, Reverend Thomas Johnson, ran the Shawnee Indian Mission and owned enslaved people of African descent, as did other white

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

missionaries and some Native Americans in the area. The number of enslaved people grew as proslavery migrants moved into Kansas and Johnson County.<sup>39</sup>

- 5.) It is true that Black Americans saw Kansas as a beacon of freedom during the Civil War and in the decades after because of the state's well known role in the fight over the expansion of slavery into the West. The idea of "Free Kansas" persisted even though the state did not always live up to its reputation as a place of freedom and opportunity for African Americans, however. For example, white Kansas men voted against giving the vote to Black men in 1867 and historian Brent Campney and others have documented a long history of lynchings and other forms of racial violence in the state, including six in Johnson County.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Johnson County has a long history of racial discrimination, embracing Jim Crow practices in schools and public accommodations, and serving as a white flight destination after legal segregation was overturned by federal statute. In short, the history is complex and mixed and should be conveyed in a way that represents the reality.<sup>41</sup>
- 6.) Renaming the creek could provide an opportunity for telling little- or unknown stories of Johnson County and the Border Region, such as the Civil War era refugee camp that was located in the vicinity of Little Santa Fe. There was a refugee crisis in Missouri and its surrounding states during the Civil War as people were forced out of the countryside due to guerrilla violence. Kansas absorbed a large number of people but Kansans soon became overwhelmed by the influx of these desperate people. In the spring of 1864, US military officers in central Missouri began to feel pressure from white Missourians in the proximity of the military encampments, where freedom seekers often sought protection and aid, to move the refugee populations out of their communities. One Union officer made plans to transport the newly freed people to Kansas, where he believed they would be happily received. Instead, the group of women, children, and elderly were stalled out near Little Santa Fe, a crossroads town right on the border with Kansas, a few miles north of the juncture of Negro Creek. (The site of the former town is around 127<sup>th</sup> Street and State Line Road, although there is no way to know where the camp was actually located, we suspect that it was somewhere along the Blue River close to the Kansas state line.) Kansas Union troops set up military pickets to keep the freedom seeking people from crossing the state line into Kansas. The desperate refugees languished in a makeshift camp, suffering for want of food, shelter, and clothing, and succumbing to a small pox outbreak. It is unknown what happened to these people, although they likely eventually either moved into Kansas or Kansas City.<sup>42</sup>

This is only one of many compelling stories that could be told about the experiences of Black residents of Johnson County and the Border Region. Examples of other possible stories could include:

- The pre-territorial presence of enslaved people at the Shawnee Indian Mission as well as among some Native Americans, such as among the Shawnee, Potawatomi, and

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<sup>39</sup> Kevin Abing, "Before Bleeding Kansas: Christian Missionaries, Slavery, and the Shawnee Indians in Territorial Kansas, 1844-1854," *Kansas History* (Spring 2001, Vol. 24, No. 1), [https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2001spring\\_abing.pdf](https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2001spring_abing.pdf). See also Oertel, *Bleeding Borders*; and Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery*.

<sup>40</sup> See Brent M. S. Campney, *This is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1861-1927* (Campaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Harriet C. Frazier, *Lynchings in Kansas, 1850s-1832* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2004); and Genevieve Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 19 (May 1933): 182-219. See also: <https://www.kshs.org/p/history-of-lynchings-in-kansas/12580>.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, *Race, Real Estate and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2000*, (Albany: State University of New York, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Ira Berlin, et. al., eds., *The Wartime Genesis of Freedom Labor. The Upper South*, (New York: Cambridge Press, 1993), 561 and 611.

Wyandot, and other whites authorized by the federal government to operate in Indian Territory.<sup>43</sup>

- Black men who worked as teamsters on the Santa Fe Trail, which crosses through Johnson County.

- A description of slavery as it existed in Johnson County during the Territorial period.

- Stories of enslaved Missourians who made successful escapes into Johnson County in the 1850s and 60s and the possible opportunities that awaited them in Kansas. Local newspapers frequently reported a “slave stampede” and “slave exodus” from Missouri into Kansas. It should be noted that these escapes came with great risk, even after freedom seekers crossed into Kansas. It was likely that Missouri enslavers or slave hunters were in pursuit. It also was possible that they could encounter white Kansans who were either proslavery or who were eager to capture people for the monetary rewards.<sup>44</sup>

- Antislavery Johnson Countians and those who helped freedom seekers. The National Park Service Network to Freedom Underground Railroad site does not list any documented UGRR sites in Johnson County, but there could be additional research into anti-slavery or abolitionist families in the area and the aid they rendered to freedom seekers and refugees.

- The ways Black Missourians and Kansans were crucial to the eventual victory of the Union army over Confederate forces. They helped through spying efforts, laboring for the troops, and enlistment as soldiers.<sup>45</sup>

- The formation of the First Kansas Colored Infantry, the first military unit made up of Black soldiers to see action against Confederate enemy forces during the Civil War. The regiment was recruited in eastern Kansas and was mostly comprised of men who had fled slavery in Missouri, Arkansas, and Indian Territory. The First Kansas first fought in October of 1862 at the Battle of Island Mound, just to the south in Bates County, Missouri.<sup>46</sup>

- The census indicates that there were a small number of African Americans living in Oxford Township (mostly working for others) in the couple of decades after the Civil War. A small number of Black families also resided in their own households during this time. It is possible that additional information could be found about some of these families so that their experiences could be profiled on a marker.<sup>47</sup>

- The Exoduster Movement and the appeal that migration to Kansas held for African Americans in the 1870s and 80s.

- Even though Kansas held great symbolic significance for African Americans, it was not a racial utopia as is indicated by acts of discrimination and violence, including the fact that Kansans voted against extending the vote to Black people in 1867 (the 15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Territorial Kansas* website, [https://territorialkansasonline.ku.edu/index.php?SCREEN=immigration&topic\\_id=87](https://territorialkansasonline.ku.edu/index.php?SCREEN=immigration&topic_id=87). See also Oertel, *Bleeding Borders*; and Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery*.

<sup>44</sup> Leah Palmer, “Hunting Freedom: The Many Paths to Emancipation in Civil War Era Missouri,” (UMKC MA thesis, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border*, and others.

<sup>46</sup> Chris Tabor, *The Skirmish at Island Mound*, (Bates County Historical Society, 2001). Ian Michael Spurgeon, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African American Combat Unit*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> US Census, Oxford Township, Johnson County, Kansas, 1860, 1870, and 1880. Kansas State Census, Oxford Township, 1865 and 1875.

Amendment to the US Constitution gave Black men the right to vote soon after in 1870). According to the Kansas State Historical Society, there were six documented racially motivated lynchings in Johnson County, in the years between 1866 and 1901, for example. Historian Brent Campney has identified additional acts of racial violence between 1861-1927.<sup>48</sup>

- 20th century stories could tackle issues such as white flight and segregation of schools, residential neighborhoods, and public accommodations. There could be a description of the lives and experiences of the few African American who lived in Johnson County in the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the pre-Civil Rights era.

- Profile efforts of people like Rev. Robert Meneilly of the Village Presbyterian Church and Donald Sewing, the first Black resident of Fairway and a realtor who worked to integrate Johnson County neighborhoods. The story of the successful 1948 South Park School (Merriam) desegregation case and the dedicated efforts of Corinthian Nutter and Esther Brown could also be a focus.<sup>49</sup>

- Research and identify additional notable Black Johnson Countians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Describe the growing diversity of Johnson County in the past 50 years.

In conclusion, Johnson County could legitimately rename the creek “Freedom Creek” if the community is willing to engage in the restorative work that it would require to richly contextualize the experiences of African Americans in Johnson County during the Civil War era and examine the lives they built there in the aftermath of the war. The story could also be expanded into the 20<sup>th</sup> century to include the Jim Crow era as well as the Civil Rights Movement and the ongoing push for racial justice. “Freedom Creek” can work, if “freedom” is defined in an expansive way and the broader history of Black Johnson Countians’ experiences is told in an historically accurate and appropriate way.

It is possible that the community will arrive at a more appropriate name for the creek than “Freedom Creek.” Perhaps, the creek could be named after a historically significant Black Johnson Countian. In conclusion, we believe it would be a mistake to simply change the name and not take this opportunity to acknowledge the troubling history of the creek and the complex racial history of Johnson County. This should not be a history that only celebrates the positive aspects of this story, but instead could be an opportunity to reckon with the many troubling and tragic parts of this history. It is essential to engage in the restorative work of uncovering the lost stories of Black Johnson Countians’ experiences, which include the history of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and racial violence. This essential and important work could provide a space for increased understanding and continuing conversations as you work to improve the lives of all the people of Johnson County.

### Future Research Considerations for the Success of the Project

Additional Research is necessary for the success of this project. Both the Johnson County Museum team and my research team ran up against time and COVID restraints. Both teams reached out to numerous experts who might have information that could help with the search for the origins of the creek’s name. No one had any definite information about the creek or its name. We utilized both

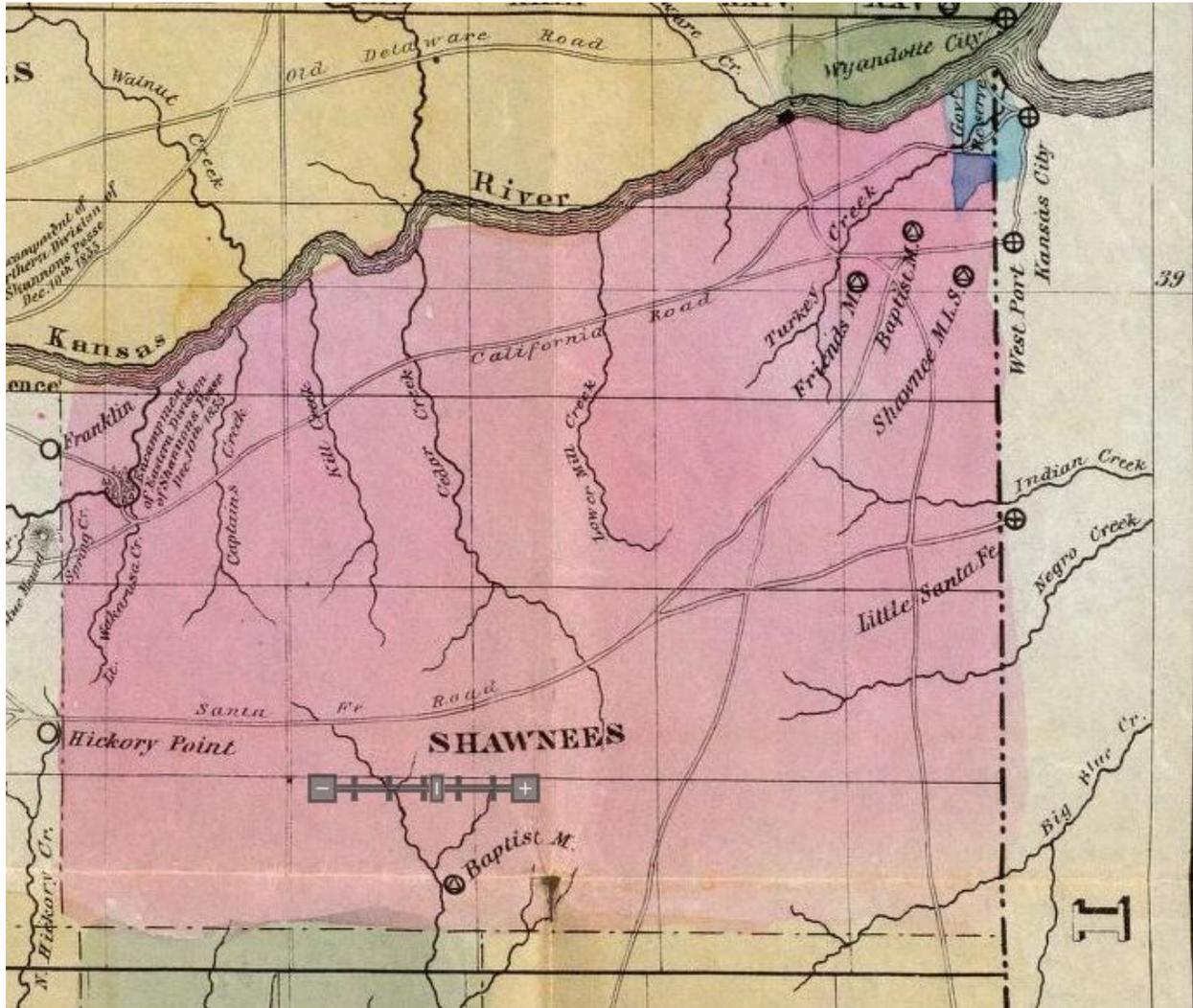
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<sup>48</sup> See Brent M.S. Campney, *This is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1861-1927*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

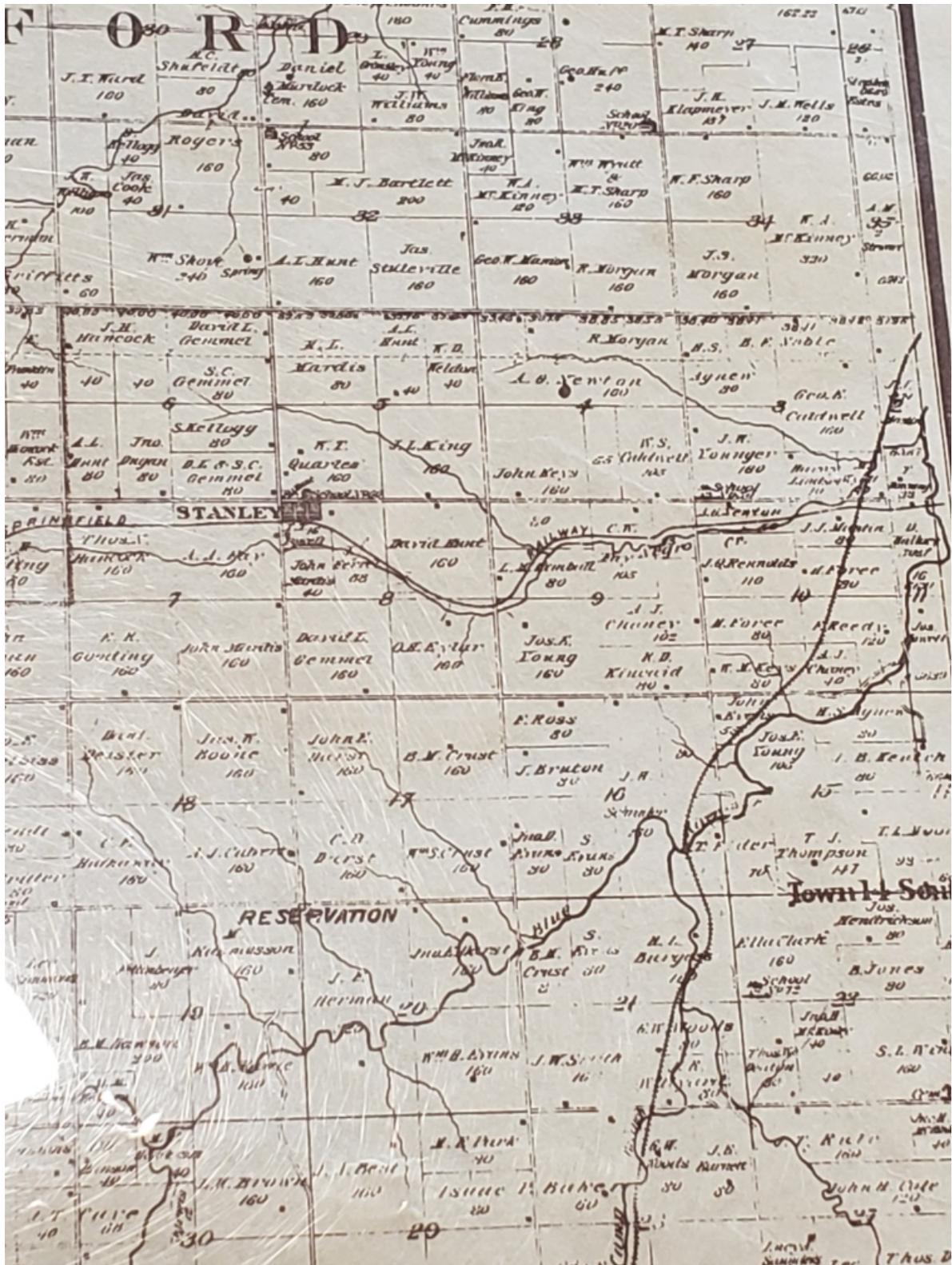
<sup>49</sup> Zane Irwin, “Reckoning with racism in Johnson County: An attempt to integrate,” *Shawnee Mission Post*, August 19, 2020. Milton S. Katz and Susan B. Tucker, “A Pioneer in Civil Rights: Esther Brown and the South Park Desegregation Case of 1948,” *Kansas History* (Winter, 1995), 235-247. Deborah Keating, “‘Because It’s the Right Thing to Do’: The Battle for School Integration on Johnson County, Kansas,” (MA Thesis, University Missouri-Kansas City, 2014).

online archives and data bases (maps, books, newspapers, and document collections) as well as local archives and libraries if they were open. Unfortunately, there currently is more limited access to in person archival and library resources due to COVID-19. We believe there may be additional documentary evidence available once we can fully access local archives and libraries. There also is a lot more research that could be done on the experiences of African American residents of Johnson County that fell outside the scope of this report.

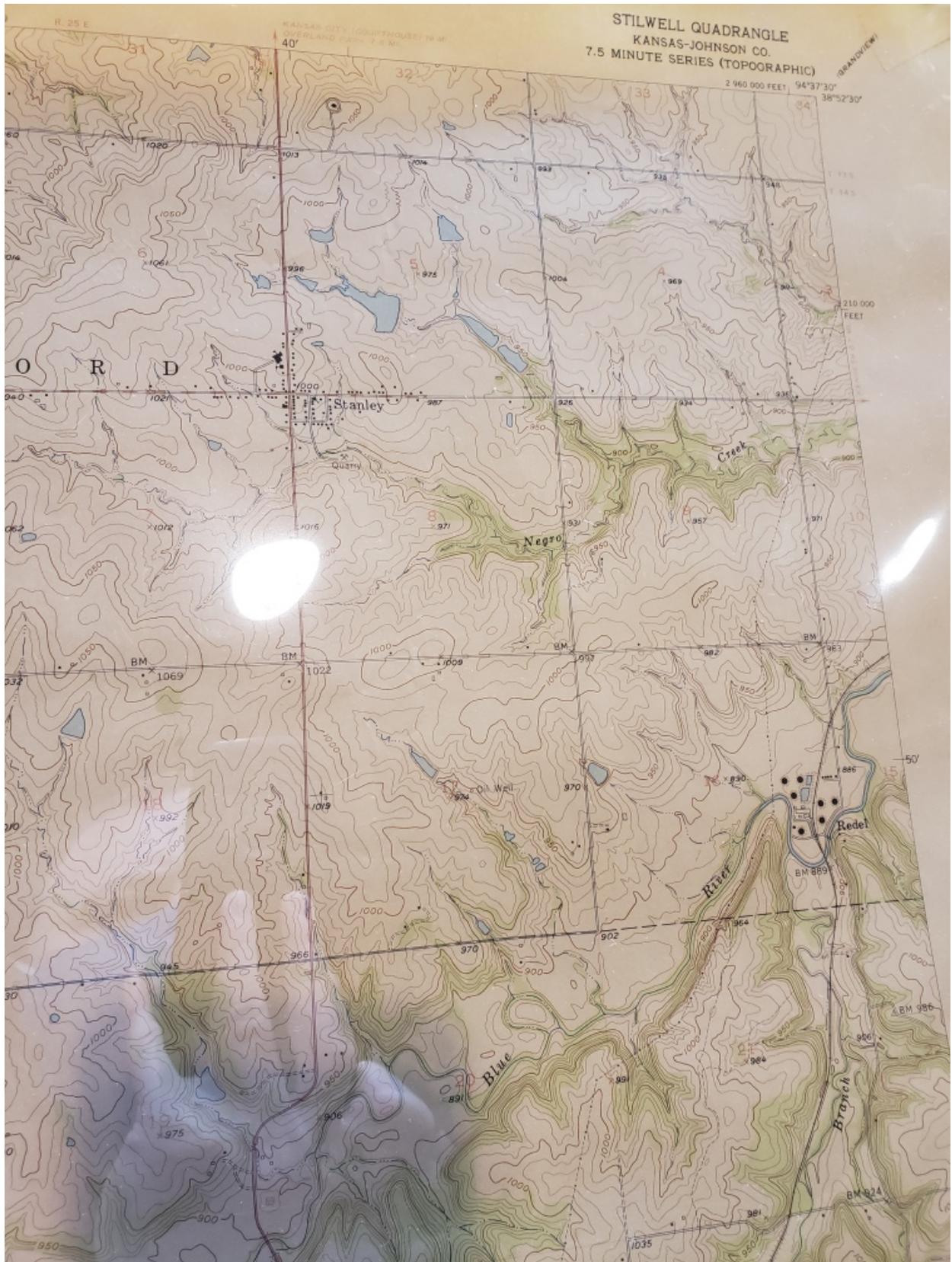
Appendix 1



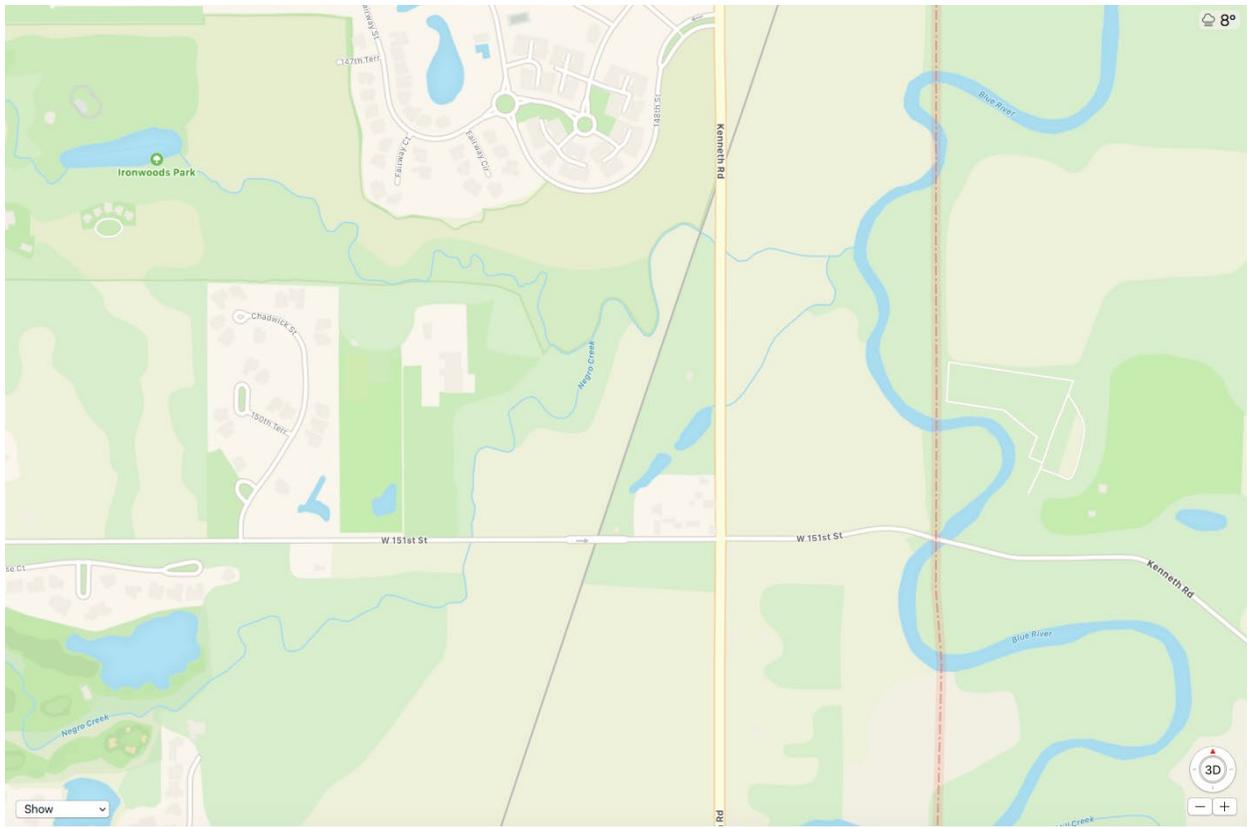
1856 Whitman and Searl Map of Eastern Johnson County



1886 Johnson County, Kansas Map, Oxford Township Section



1956 Stilwell, Kansas Geological Survey Map



Apple Maps, February 2021

Four or five boys about Stanley are making arrangements to call on Judge Hendrickson soon, for permission to "multiply and replenish the earth."

Stanley is located at the head of "Nigger Creek." Some of the curious may want to know why the stream is called by that name. As the poet would say, "thereby hangs a tale." In 185—, James Chiles, of Jackson count, Missouri, had a negro man to "run off," they followed and surrounded him on the stream running from Stanley to Blue, when finding they would capture him he drew a knife and cut his throat from ear to ear. From that day to this it has been known as "Nigger Creek." Of course the proper name is negro, but we being Democrats down here, (for short) spell it with two "g's."

"Stanley Items," *Weekly Progress*, Spring Hill, Kansas, February 20, 1879.