

# Invisible History

Preserving the  
African-American  
Past in Missouri



**Missouri Department of Natural Resources**  
**Division of State Parks**

Reprinted from *Missouri Resources*, Summer 1997



Printed on recycled paper.

# Invisible History

by Steven E. Mitchell

In 1952, Ralph Ellison, in “Invisible Man,” wrote of the dilemma of the post World War II African-American: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me ... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything but me ...” For most white Americans, according to Ellison, African-Americans did not exist as a part of their world, but comprised an invisible community, with its own customs, hierarchy and commerce.

White and black existed in separate worlds, each with its own institutions and culture, often side by side, but legally forbidden to interact.

African-American buildings also were invisible. Usually located outside the official community, in unincorporated hamlets or crossroads communities, or isolated in small enclaves in less desirable portions of towns or cities, these buildings usually were on the fringes of industrial or commercial areas.

“Our state is the legacy of a diverse array of peoples, from prehistoric Native Americans to the Euro-Americans of more recent history,” said David A. Shorr, (former) director of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and State Historic Preservation Officer. “The department is committed to recognizing and encouraging the preservation of those reminders of the

*An important day in Parkville history was captured on film in 1907 when members of the African-American community dedicated the Washington Chapel C.M.E. Church.*





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accomplishments of all the citizens of Missouri. The cultural legacy of African-American Missourians and their example of perseverance and courage has enriched the history of our state immeasurably.

The buildings and sites that are often the only physical reminders of the history of African-Americans in the state have been identified by DNR's Historic Preservation Program as endangered resources. As early as 1979-1980, a statewide survey funded in part by DNR and conducted by Lincoln University in Jefferson City identified hundreds of buildings associated with African-American history and culture, many of them neglected and unrecognized.

**M**ore recently, to encourage the preservation of these resources, properties associated with the state's African-American heritage have been identified by DNR as priorities for its Historic Preservation Fund grants. These matching grants are awarded annually from federal funds distributed to state historic

