Promotional material, Jackson Jubilee Singers, Western University.
Courtesy of Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.
Western University at Quindaro and Its Legacy of Music

by Paul Wenske

Every seat in the Wausau, Wisconsin, Methodist church was filled on a fall October night in 1924 as the Jackson Jubilee Singers from Western University in distant Quindaro, Kansas, completed their last encore of spirituals. The next day, the Wausau Record-Herald enthused that the performance was “one of the most enjoyable concerts of the year” and that the enthralled audience “testified its approval by appreciative applause.” Today one might ask, who were the Jackson Jubilee Singers and where is—or was—Western University? But between 1903 and 1931, as African Americans sought to secure a place in American culture barely two generations after slavery, the Jackson Jubilee Singers were immensely popular. They toured the United States and Canada on the old Redpath-Horner Chautauqua circuit, promoting Western University, whose buildings graced the bluffs of the Missouri River in what is now a neighborhood in north Kansas City, Kansas.

In fact, for a brief but significant period, the Jackson Jubilee Singers were the very face of Western University. Their talent, discipline, and professionalism raised awareness of and aided recruitment for the oldest African American school west of the Mississippi River and the best in the Midwest for musical training. “So great was their success in rendering spirituals and the advertising of the music department of Western University that all young people who had any type of musical ambition decided to go to Western University at Quindaro,” wrote historian and Western alumnus Orrin McKinley Murray Sr.2 Despite its promising start, Western’s success was fleeting, and it closed in 1943. Even so, the remarkable legacy of this historic black school lives on in the major contributions made to the nation’s music and entertainment industries by its most famous alumni. They include Eva Jessye, the original choral director of Porgy and Bess; Etta Moten, the first African American artist to perform at the White House; Nora Holt, the first African American

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1. “Jackson Jubilee Singers Entertain large Crowd at Methodist Church,” Wausau Record Herald, October 10, 1924.
2. Orrin McKinley Murray Sr., The Rise and Fall of Western University (Kansas City, KS: privately printed, 1960). 5. The most complete source of information on the Jackson Jubilee Singers, including travel itineraries, brochures, publicity photos, letters, programs, reviews, and newspaper clippings, is the Redpath Chautauqua Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections and University Archives, Iowa City, IA (hereafter Redpath Chautauqua Collection).
to gain a master’s degree in music; and Edward Boatner, one of the first black recording artists, a composer, and a noted arranger of spirituals.

None of the school’s six buildings, including its music hall, dormitories, vocational shops, livestock barns, and power plant, or its flower gardens remain. Only a statue of abolitionist John Brown, erected by the school in 1911, still stands on a high bluff overlooking the ruins of old Quindaro, the pre–Civil War town that served as a port of entry for freestaters and a haven for slaves fleeing across the Missouri River into Kansas. Renewed interest in Quindaro’s role in stemming the advance of slavery into Kansas has rekindled a fresh awareness of and appreciation for the educational heritage of Western University. The school blossomed from a seed planted in the early days of Quindaro’s brief existence between 1857 and 1860, when progressive citizens in the town saw the need to educate all school-age children no matter their color. For many African Americans, the possibility of an education was the final victory over the physical, mental, and emotional chains of slavery.

Despite its auspicious start, Quindaro’s boom was short-lived. As free-state advocates won over the populace and a free-state constitution was adopted in 1859, Quindaro’s major role as a free-state port was no longer needed. Inhabitants began drifting away to larger and more geographically hospitable towns. The Reverend Eben Blatchley, a Presbyterian minister who arrived in Quindaro sometime around 1857, was one idealist who stayed, becoming a central character in the next chapter in the development of what would become Western University. Whether Blatchley was involved with other Quindaro residents in developing a Quindaro school for blacks in 1857 is uncertain. Thaddeus Smith, in a 1966 master’s thesis written at Pittsburg State University (formerly Kansas State College of Pittsburg), concluded that Blatchley operated a school for blacks at least by 1862.

Where the school was located is unclear, though it likely began in Blatchley’s home. One tradition holds that classes were held for a time in the old town brewery, which is also linked by oral tradition to the Underground Railroad. Quindaro resident Mollie Lewis recalled in a 1934 interview with Wyandotte County historian Grant Harrington that Blatchley’s school was “under the hill” down near the boat landing. “It was on what is now 27th Street, pretty close to the old ruins now there. The colored children from all around the country came to his school,” she said. “He was a teacher, a preacher, and we all loved him.” Blatchley’s idea, courageous at the time—in light of the fact that slavery was still legal—was that education encourages cultural, economic and intellectual equality. In his 1966 thesis, Smith argues that Blatchley “laid the basis for Negro education in the state generally and especially in Wyandotte County.”

Blatchley dreamed of building a large campus and, with the help of other community leaders, bought land for that purpose. Little is known about the actual school operation, but in January 1867, the state legislature recognized Freedmen’s University with a tax-free grant of land for a school “to afford to the colored population of Kansas an opportunity to pursue the higher branches of learning.” The state renewed its financial support in 1872, providing for a four-year normal department. This support was significant in light of the fact that the state’s educational system was slow in some areas to readily admit black students into public schools. Some Kansans actively opposed taxes that supported public schools that admitted blacks. One or two schools were burned at the height of the conflict, according to some accounts.

Enrollment at Freedmen’s grew steadily, but the state withdrew funding in 1873 during a period of financial problems caused by a grasshopper plague that affected funding in general. By 1877, the health of both Blatchley and his school had deteriorated. Though Blatchley had donated his land to the school before his death, which also occurred in 1877, much of the land was subject to mortgage, and the school’s trustees began to consider selling the land in 1879. Despite his death, Blatchley’s dream of a black college campus remained alive. Corvine Patterson, a Baptist deacon and a community leader in Kansas City, Kansas, first approached the Baptists about reviving the school and, when he achieved no results, went to the


African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. In 1880, on Patterson’s front porch, a deal was struck.9

The AME Church was already convinced that education was a necessary path to advance the cause of a people for whom long years of enforced illiteracy had served to strengthen the shackles of slavery. “The thousands of our people already in this young and growing State of Kansas, the thousands of refugees constantly fleeing to us from Southern injustice, remind us that the field is white, (and) ready for harvest. The necessity to educate is laid upon us,” reads a statement written into the minutes of the Sixth Session of the AME Kansas Conference, held in the fall of 1881. The minutes continue, “We must educate or be crushed beneath the Juggernaut wheels of modern progress. . . . It is a religious duty to educate.”10

The AME Committee to Secure Land reported that it had “bargained for and secured a tract of land, here-tofore known as the Freedmen’s University land.” The terms were “very easy,” and “we see no reason why we may not in the near future, have a college here for the education of our youth,” the committee concluded. The conference attendees readily voted to found a school with the name Western University since the AME Church already operated Wilberforce University east of the Mississippi in Ohio, and this would be the first such institution west of the Mississippi.11 The timing was opportune. The wave of blacks into Kansas that began during and just after the Civil War was growing. By 1890, 47,713 African Americans lived in Kansas, and nearly 19,000 were of school age (5–21). While 13,852 of those were in elementary schools, only 375 attended secondary schools, and only 13 attended higher-level institutions.12

The school’s new trustees first sought contributions from midwestern AME churches to pay for land and finance building. They believed that success in this initial effort would attract outside funding. In a letter to the

Western University’s music program had a national reputation by the early twentieth century. This sheet music cover for “O Western U!” from 1906 includes images of the campus as well as that of William T. Vernon (right), the school’s president.

9. Smith, “Western University,” 28; Twenty-Sixth Biennial Report of Western University and State Industrial Department, June 30, 1932 (Topeka: State Printer, 1932), 4. The report claims that after his death, Blatchley was buried by “Negro boys” from his school “because the white people would not have anything to do with him.”


11. Ibid., 33–34.

12. Columbian History of Education in Kansas, 42.

13. C. C. Booth, letter to Kansas City Gazette, May 22, 1890.
become the Tuskegee of the West. Vernon instituted a curriculum based on the Washington model, which held that vocational training was as important as academics in helping African Americans learn a sustainable trade and gain an economic foothold in the larger culture. Vernon’s approach to education was reflected in the school motto: “Head, heart and hands for the home,” which was displayed in a school emblem depicting a four-leaf clover with an H in each leaf and a W at the center. “Teach the Negro a trade and the commercial opportunity will follow,” Vernon told the Topeka Daily Capital, touting the emphasis on vocational skills. “Every pupil in this school, unless ill health prevents, must put in half the time learning a trade. Maybe there’s a chance for another Tuskegee here.”

Vernon was born in Lebanon, Missouri, the son of former slaves. He was educated at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, an AME-affiliated school that was founded in 1856 and is the oldest black-owned and -operated university in the nation, and Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri, a state institution that was founded by black soldiers at the close of the Civil War and took the name Lincoln University in 1921.

Vernon was quick to see the advantages of state assistance, which had helped bring financial and political support to Wilberforce in the late 1880s. At the time, the Republican Party enjoyed great support from African Americans, and Vernon became a strong voice within the party for the education of blacks. In 1899, in return for Vernon’s help in gaining black support for his 1898 election, Governor William E. Stanley pressed the legislature to award Western $10,000. This money was used to build Stanley Hall, the second of the first two buildings on campus, and to begin the funding of a vocational department on fifteen acres of land deeded to the state for $1. In his address to the legislature, Stanley paid tribute to Vernon, saying, “The school at Quindaro is under the supervision of the Rev. W. T. Vernon, a gentleman of culture, who is fully devoted to the uplifting of his race.”

From then until 1933, the state and the AME Church jointly operated Western. A state board of trustees oversaw the industrial department, and the church, through its Western board of trustees, oversaw the academic side.

While Western’s trustees raised money through church contributions, donations, and modest tuition fees, over time an increasingly large share of the cost for new construction, supplies, class materials, building maintenance, and salaries fell to the state. A state administrative board oversaw the actual disbursement of funds. Despite the state’s major role, the church retained the right to choose the president of the school, who would preside over both the academic and the vocational side of the school. This somewhat awkward financial and management arrangement would prove unwieldy over time and eventually cause some legislators and state officials to question how the state money was being accounted for and managed by the school’s administrators.

As the new century began, however, Western and Vernon were shining stars. Vernon was gaining national fame as a Republican spokesman. In 1904, he served the Republican National Committee in the presidential campaign, and on January 30, 1905, he became the first African American invited to address the Kansas Day Club, a popular, Republican social club in Topeka. The Topeka State Journal noted that despite some objection, the chances were that “the Republicans of the state will endorse the action of the officers of the club in recognizing the valuable services to the party of such a man as W. T. Vernon.”

A year later, on May 4, 1906, Vernon introduced his mentor, Booker T. Washington, who addressed students, fac-

15. “Uplifting the Negro at Quindaro,” Topeka Daily Capital, April 13, 1902.
17. Biennial reports submitted to the state by Western University and the State Industrial Department at Quindaro, KS, provide snapshots of enrollment and state appropriations from 1908 to 1942. The reports show that state funding rose from $33,000 in 1908 to a high of $81,000 in 1922. Enrollment appears to have peaked at 338 students in 1911 before flattening out and beginning to slide after 1923. Enrollment was 141 in 1929, half what it had been in 1908. The reports are available at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka and online through the Kansas Government Information (KGI) Online Library.
ulty, and school patrons on the value of education. The Rising Son, a black Kansas City newspaper, opined that the timing of Washington’s speech “is significant and marks an epoch in the life and future of this growing institution.” That same year, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Vernon as register of the U.S. Treasury, which at the time was the highest public office that any African American had attained. President William Howard Taft appointed him to a second term. Vernon later became an AME bishop and served for several years in the Transvaal district in South Africa.

Western’s dual approach to education was reflected in its courses. On the vocational side, women learned sewing, cooking, typing, and accounting, and men learned cabinet making, printing, tailoring, blacksmithing, farming, and mechanical drawing. On the academic side, students studied English, algebra, business, literature, and foreign languages. The rules of decorum were strict, and smoking, drinking, and dancing were forbidden. Students participated in literary and drama clubs and wrote for the University Pen Point. They competed in writing and speech contests and enjoyed guest lectures. A printing shop prepared all the school publications.

However, it was the school’s music department that brought Western its greatest acclaim. “The music department was the outstanding department of the school that contributed more to the development of the school than did any other department,” Murray wrote in his history of Western. By 1911, it was the school’s largest department. Nearly half of the students were enrolled in music courses, which were challenging and included composition, theory, piano, voice, and instrumentation. The department had four teachers and ten pianos. Its recitals, competitions, and concerts were regularly attended by the community, for which Western had become an institutional anchor. Its graduates found jobs as teachers, musicians, and composers. “The proceeds from this department add materially to the current income, and the music itself gives cheer to the school and is a valuable means of chaining public interest and favor,” school administrators boasted in December 1914.

Western’s music department also featured a fine orchestral and band program under the leadership of Major Nathaniel Clark Smith. Smith himself would be hailed nationally as a top bandleader and was instrumental in developing Sumner High School’s prize-winning band program. Even so, the person most identified with bringing fame to Western’s music program was Robert G. Jackson, who arrived at Western in 1903 and became its dean of music. Jackson’s family moved from Kentucky to Lawrence, Kansas, where he was one of the first African Americans to graduate from Lawrence High School and the School of Fine Arts at the University of Kansas. Under Jackson’s direction, the music program grew from 42 students in 1903 to a peak of 153 students in 1911. He also directed the building of a music studio in 1907.

Music had played a key role in sustaining African Americans through slavery. In a system of bondage, music

20. Murray, The Rise and Fall of Western University, 10.
21. Western University, State Industrial Department, Biennial Report of the Trustees, Quindaro, KS, beginning December 1, 1912 and ending December 1, 1914 (Topeka: State Printer, 1914), 7.
often was the only way slaves could express the one thing that could not be controlled: their thoughts. Slave songs, which became known as spirituals, expressed not only a belief in a better life to come but also the eventual victory over slavery. Spirituals adapted Old Testament stories of the exodus and New Testament stories of Christ’s suffering with an often coded message of rebellion against oppression. In the introduction to his book *The Story of the Spirituals*, Edward Boatner, a Western alumnus, wrote, “Spirituals are Bible stories set to music. They originated in the cotton and corn fields on the plantations in the south and are the basis of the first true native American music.”

Spirituals were a major part of the musical training under Jackson, even though ragtime and other modern music styles were fast becoming the rage. Eva Jessye, another Western alumna famous for her choral direction of the Broadway opera *Porgy and Bess*, recalled singing for Jackson at Western:

The choirmaster was trying out some students to sing spirituals. In those days, people thought that the spirituals of our slavery days were something to be avoided, to be viewed contemptuously. So, when he wanted to get someone to sing the verse part to “My Lord, what a morning,” he tried girls from California, and he tried some from Colorado and so on, and none would do. So he finally asked me. Of course I didn’t know any better than to say that my people had always sung that, that I had spirituals in my blood, in my bones, in my upbringing, that I lived just a few doors up from the Macedonia Baptist Church [in Coffeyville, Kansas]. He said, “That’s what I’m looking for.”

Jackson was the creator and director of the Jackson Jubilee Singers, who toured the nation and Canada through the 1920s and the early 1930s, performing at churches, concert halls, schools, and Chautauqua events to often wildly appreciative audiences. Many reviewers considered them one of the nation’s top touring groups that sang sacred and classical songs, plantation-era ditties, and spirituals, often performed in the refined operatic style of jubilee singing. Consider a preview of an upcoming Chautauqua performance in the *Havre Daily News* of Havre, Montana, “Greatest Jubilee company in America to be here,” or the following quotation from an article in the *Cameron Sun* of Cameron, Missouri: “The great success of the company is due to the fact that it is a company of educated musicians who specialize in nothing but negro songs which they sing with an intelligent

interpretation that is not approached by any other negro company in America.”

The singers were represented by Kansas City–based Premier Productions, which handled publicity for the Redpath-Horner Chautauqua, one of the largest Chautauqua circuits with offices strategically located around the country, including in Kansas City; Chicago; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Detroit and Columbus, Ohio. Publicity brochures might variously depict the troupe dressed in formal wear or plantation garb, depending on the audience and the desires of the local promoters, and some of the promotional images and words might appear and sound uncomfortably racist in the present day. However, in many ways, this was still new music to audiences who had not heard black choral groups before. “Many so-called Jubilee Singing Companies have toured America. Regardless of merit, they have proved popular with audiences generally. It has remained for Robert Jackson to organize, train, and produce a company, which not only is the last word in Jubilee singing but is authoritative in representing negro folk lore and music at its best,” trumpeted one Redpath Chautauqua brochure.

Jackson might send two to three Western groups on the road at any one time under different names, such as the Deep River Plantation Singers or Robert Jackson’s Plantation Singers. The year that the singers began touring nationally is unknown. Though they performed hundreds of concerts, including annual performances at the Kansas State Capitol, the Redpath Chautauqua Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries documents only the Jackson Jubilee Singers’ national tours in the 1920s, even though Charles F. Horner established the Redpath-Horner Chautauqua and Lyceum Bureau in 1907 in Kansas City. Horner, in his book about his role in the Chautauqua movement, Strike the Tents, provides one possible explanation for the limited records in lamenting the destruction of many of his own files, “which completely filled an entire floor of a sizable building” in Kansas City, in about 1946, presumably in a fire.

The Chautauqua circuit was packaged culture on wheels that introduced the public to a blend of art, lectures, debate, drama, and music that was inexpensive, convenient, and exotic in comparison to audience members’ ordinary existence. But for the performers, the road could be grueling. Chautauqua managers kept close tabs on expenses. Groups often traveled by car, driving hundreds of miles overnight between performances. Cars broke down and had to be fixed. Etta Moten recalled traveling with the Western singers in the 1920s on bad roads in a touring bus without a radio, hurrying from one small town to the next, where pitched tents might stay up for a week. Percy Lee, a singer and road manager for the group, wrote in one of his daily reports to the office in August 1927 that after singing for “an appreciative audience” in Fairfield, Iowa, the singers drove 300 miles overnight to Chicago, arriving at their destination at 8 a.m. After a performance there, they drove another 189 miles to Geneseo, Illinois, catching little sleep along the way. Advance planning was crucial, especially for a black choral group. “We don’t find it convenient to get hotel accommodations often so we try to plan to get into towns where we know we may find them,” Percy Lee wrote in another update.

Few recordings of the Jackson Jubilee Singers remain. This writer found only one, recorded under the name of the Deep River Plantation Singers on January 24, 1931, two years after Robert Jackson’s death. Notes about the recording provide little detail except that it was made in Richmond, Indiana, for Champion Records and was originally filed as Jackson Plantation Singers. All five songs are spirituals, beautifully harmonized in the slow, refined, classical style that characterized many jubilee groups before the advent of the harder-singing gospel quartets. The recordings are also part of a jubilee-gospel compilation CD published in 1997 by Document Records of Vienna, Austria, and available online at www.document-records.com. These recordings, along with brochures, newspaper clippings, letters and itineraries in the Redpath Chautauqua Collection at the University of Iowa, may be all that is left to memorialize a truly unique musical touring group from Western University. Happily, the remarkable tradition of musical talent that took root and blossomed at Western was ably carried beyond the bluffs of tiny Quindaro to the world, where it helped change the

25. “Popular Program by Jubilee Jacksons, Coming,” Cameron Sun (Cameron, MO), February 26, 1925, 1.
29. Percy Lee, from two tour reports, one dated August 12, 1927 and the other August 20, 1927, Redpath Chautauqua Collection.
course of the music and entertainment industries through the careers of its most brilliant alumni. Four graduates dramatically stand out: Edward H. Boatner, Eva Jessye, Etta Moten, and Nora Holt.

Edward H. Boatner grew up listening to spirituals in the churches where his father, a former slave, preached. Largely self-taught, he applied to the University of Missouri to study music. Unable to obtain admission because of his race, he went instead to Western, where he studied voice and piano, and graduated in 1916. Tenor Roland Hayes heard him sing at a community program in Kansas City and encouraged him to continue his studies in Boston, which he did in 1917, over the objections of his father. Boatner’s interest in spirituals allowed him to connect with major performers of the day, including Harry T. Burleigh, who advocated for preserving spirituals. George Broome, who started the first black recording company in New York, asked Boatner to record some of Burleigh’s spiritual arrangements, which he did in 1919, recording “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” and “I Don’t Feel No-Ways Tired,” accompanied, it is believed, by Burleigh on piano.

Despite his brief and pioneering role in the recording industry, Boatner remained focused on teaching, arranging, and composing music. He headed the musical departments at Samuel Huston College in Austin, Texas, and Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. In all, he arranged nearly three hundred spirituals. In his book *The Story of the Spirituals*, published in 1972, he arranged thirty spirituals accompanied by vignettes explaining their origins. He had his own studio and publishing company, which published choral music and major works, including *Freedom Suite*, a musical produced in 1964 that tells the story of African Americans from slavery to the civil rights movement. He remained prolific throughout his life, and his arrangements were performed by such greats as Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Leontyne Price and Nelson Eddy. His works and papers are housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City.

Eva Jessye, who graduated from Western in 1914, was a versatile artist, director, and writer who produced a long list of firsts and opened doors for other African Americans. She formed the Dixie Jubilee Singers, who provided the musical talent for the first all-black musical film, *Hallelujah*, produced for MGM in 1929. Her book *My Spirituals* inspired Paul Robeson to include her arrangements in his recital programs. She is perhaps most famous as the choral director for the George Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess*, both on Broadway in 1934 and later for productions around the world. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. chose the Eva Jessye Choir as the official choir for the March on Washington. In a 1984 interview while she was artist in residence at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas, Jessye described how when she was a child in Coffeeville, Kansas, there were no schools for African Americans after the elementary grades, so her

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determined mother sent her to Western. “I entered school there when I was 13, although the entering age was 14. They had under-grades, you see, so I went through under-grades and went right on through college grades.”

When asked the benefit of an all-black college, Jessye said she found that “in teaching and in lecturing, and going about, even, that those students who have spent some time in a black college, they have more pride and more assurance. See, they haven’t been rejected so they have confidence.” As a teacher, Jessye inspired her students to realize their potential, telling them, “If you can’t run, jog, if you can’t jog, walk. If you can’t walk, crawl. But always remember to keep on moving.” Like other pioneering black artists, she unselfishly supported talent, helping fellow Western alumnus Etta Moten break into show business when she came to New York in 1931. In 1984, the Kansas Women in Communications named Jessye one of the six most important women in Kansas history.

Etta Moten was the daughter of an AME minister in Kansas City, Missouri. She attended Western from 1916 to 1917, and like Jessye, she successfully combined a singing, stage, and film career. While at Western, she joined the Jackson Jubilee Singers and continued to sing with them after graduating. When her first marriage soured, Robert Jackson and his wife encouraged her to continue her training at the University of Kansas, after which she moved to New York at Jessye’s urging. Within a short time, she landed a part in the Broadway show Fast and Furious. Although the show closed early, it led to more parts, including a singing role in The Gold Diggers of 1933, in which she sang the plaintive song “My Forgotten Man.” The scene depicts a strong, middle-class black woman seated at a window and singing of missing her husband, who is away at war. It was hailed as a major shift in the depiction in film of African American women, who were often relegated to stereotypically menial roles.

President Franklin Roosevelt was so taken by Moten’s singing that Eleanor Roosevelt invited her to sing at the White House, making her the first African American to perform there. She followed that up by singing the “Carioca” in the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movie Flying down to Rio. In 1934, she married Claude Barnett, president of the Associated Negro Press. The pair traveled with several official delegations to Africa, and her lectures “awakened new interest in Africa and its developing nations among African Americans.” She would go on to perform in the 1942 production of Porgy and Bess, produce her own radio program, and speak out for African American women. In an interview with Ann Vernon in Kansas City in 1997, Moten recalled Western’s influence on her life. “John Brown had been on that ground,” she said. “He led some black soldiers across that river and we could see from the girls’ dormitory the wilderness and we knew that history was there.” No evidence exists that Brown ever set foot in Quindaro, but the sentiment that his spirit lives there provided Moten, and other Western students, with a sense of history and inspiration.

Nora Holt graduated from Western in 1916. In his book Hot from Harlem, Bill Reed called her a “Renaissance Woman.” Indeed, she was an active participant in the Harlem Renaissance cultural movement. In the 1920s, Holt was a glamorous socialite who was in the headlines as often for her cabaret singing, partying, and five marriages as for her composing, musical criticism for several newspapers, and advocacy for black performers. In her article on pioneering musical women from Western University, Helen Walker-Hill wrote of Holt that her “long life contained enough tumult, contradictions and accomplishments for several lifetimes.” Holt was the daughter of an AME elder who was also a Western trustee. She showed an aptitude for piano at the age of four and graduated as valedictorian from Western. After Western, she attended the Chicago Musical College. She supported herself by singing at the parties of wealthy residents along Chicago’s “Gold Coast” and as a music critic for the Chicago Defender newspaper. In 1918, she became the first African American to complete a master’s degree in music and reportedly composed nearly two hundred works in her early career. Sadly, almost all of them were stolen while she was traveling in Europe. One surviving composition is “Negro Dance,” described as having been influenced by ragtime and reprinted in 2001 by Vivace Press.

33. Eva Jessye was interviewed at her Pittsburg, KS, home at the age of eighty-eight by the University of Kansas Center for Public Affairs. The interview and many of her works are housed in the Eva Jessye Collection in the Axe Library at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, KS.
34. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 31.
Despite her fun-loving lifestyle, Holt, like Jessye and Moten, had a passion for music education and supporting other black entertainers. She helped establish the National Association of Negro Musicians, the oldest organization dedicated to preserving, encouraging, and advocating for African American music. In the late 1930s, tiring of her hectic pace, she moved to Los Angeles to teach school, but she later returned to New York and resumed her career as a music critic. From 1953 to 1964, she produced a weekly program of classical music called *Nora Holt’s Concert Showcase*.

The words to Western’s school anthem, “O Western,” call attention to the legacy of Quindaro’s rich and colorful past, ending with the line “On bleeding Kansas’ famous soil stands dear old Western U.” However, Western’s foundations were slipping away even as its most famous graduates were ascending to fame. Enrollment was falling in 1929, the year Robert Jackson died during the Christmas holiday as his Jubilee Singers were performing at the capitol in Topeka. Multiple reasons account for Western’s demise. The school was slow to rebuild Ward and Park Halls, the men’s dormitory buildings, after they burned down along with school records, books, equipment, and clothing in March 1924. The two buildings, which could house 150 men, were gutted, and the loss was estimated in the tens of thousands of dollars.\(^\text{40}\)

Maintenance needs were increasing, while at the same time the Depression was making it more financially challenging for families to send students to school. By 1930, enrollment had fallen to 136. Rural-based vocational training was also losing its appeal to young African Americans, who enjoyed new educational alternatives and were increasingly attracted to the urban lifestyle of larger cities. School administrators complained that inadequate salaries made it hard to keep good teachers, leaving positions unfilled. Western’s board sought more funding for the school in its 1930 biennial report, writing that the school needed an administration building; a better-equipped library; higher salaries; and repairs to plumbing, heating, roofs and walls. “This financial condition has placed our school in a very poor physical condition,” the school reported.\(^\text{41}\)

The always awkward structure of joint control by church and state did not help matters. Increasingly, state legislators sought greater accountability for how money was spent at the school. AME bishops had traditionally appointed the president to preside over both the vocational and academic sides of the school, but a legislative fact-finding study begun in 1933 concluded after dozens of interviews that the appointments had become subject to outside political pressures, resulting in inefficient accounting and in some cases financial mismanagement. The committee recommended that the school’s industrial department could be run more efficiently if it was consolidated with the Kansas Vocational School in Topeka.\(^\text{42}\)

A separate review by the state Public Welfare Temporary Commission found

\(^{40}\) “Flames Sweep Boys’ Quarters at Western U,” *Kansas City Kansan*, March 19, 1924.

\(^{41}\) *Twenty-Fifth Biennial Report of Western University and State Industrial Department*, June 30, 1930 (Topeka: State Printer, 1930), 9.

that teacher qualifications and academic standards had fallen and concluded that the state was not getting an appropriate return on its investment in paying the lion’s share of the maintenance and educational costs.43

In 1933, Vernon returned to Kansas, at first to minister again in a parish. During his absence from Western, a group of rival church officials had alleged that Vernon had misused $17,000 in housing allowance funds when he was a bishop. He vehemently denied the allegations, and evidence suggested that the charges were politically motivated so that his bishop post could be awarded to another applicant. Nonetheless, Vernon was suspended from full status as an AME bishop.44 Once back in Kansas, Vernon again aligned himself with state Republicans, including Governor Alfred M. Landon, who was concerned about Western’s finances. With Landon’s blessing, the state board of trustees appointed Vernon superintendent of the vocational portion of the school. This action angered members of the Kansas AME Conference, who felt slighted that they had not been consulted and opposed Vernon’s appointment. In a pamphlet titled *The Rape of Western*, which was widely circulated in black newspapers across the nation, presiding Kansas Conference Bishop John A. Gregg accused the state and Vernon of conspiring to usurp control of the school.45

The state refused to back down even when the AME bishops threatened to withdraw support for Western, which they did on June 1, 1933, announcing the decision at commencement. Despite the split in the church, Vernon endeavored successfully to get the Industrial Department’s accreditation restored before he stepped down in 1936, and Landon promised more money for the school, “with an enlarged faculty composed of graduates of leading institutions of learning in the country.” Vernon sought to put the best face on the school’s problems, noting, “A beautiful little community has been built up around the school, affording it a home-like atmosphere.” From its “unrivalled position in the ‘heart of America, it seeks to radiate an influence of idealism and culture in keeping with its rich traditions.”46

Still, the lingering effects of the Depression and the war took their toll. Students were no longer coming to Western. They had other educational options. In 1940, the faculty was down to five instructors, and the 1943 graduating class numbered only six students. Legislators voted to combine Western’s vocational school with the vocational school in Topeka, and the school closed. Land that was owned by the state reverted back to the AME Church. Some of the school’s buildings burned down, and others were demolished. For a number of years, Douglass Hospital, which served African Americans, occupied the former Grant Hall. In 1978, Douglass closed, and the building was torn down.

Even though the physical structures of Western no longer stand, its vital legacy lives on. The school’s link with the region’s pre–Civil War past is historic. The unique experience of building an education system from nothing on the frontier to fulfill a multicultural dream of a society that values equality for all is a remarkable achievement. The best way to honor this history is to look beyond the mere physical presence of how Quindaro may appear today and honor the contributions of the idealists who dreamed Western into reality, unhindered by race or cultural differences. Further, we should celebrate the talented young people who received the creative spark at Western, inspiring the intellectual energy that they needed to succeed and to change the larger culture for the better. This is the lasting legacy of Western, and it is an irreplaceable chapter in the rising up of African Americans in America. It should not be forgotten. While much seems to be gone, the music remains. For that gift, a nation can be grateful. KH

44. Personal letters and notes of Vernon and his wife are held in the Bishop William T. Vernon Collection at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, and contain extensive information concerning the alleged charges and efforts to clear his name through his death in 1944.