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Kansas City's Loss

At approximately 1:15 in the morning of July 15, 1970, Leon M. Jordan, the founder of Freedom, Inc., was gunned down as he closed his Green Duck Tavern. His murder was headlined in the *Kansas City Star* later that day. The next morning the *Kansas City Times* spoke to the value of his public life:

“The death of Leon M. Jordan is a shattering blow to this community. He was one of the most effective and distinguished members of the Missouri House of Representatives and a political leader of power and influence with the highest motivations to do what was good and right. . . . Few men in Missouri government could call on the varied experience and skills that were in the background of Leon Jordan. . . . But it was as a black politician in an age of racial pride and the reaching by blacks for political power that Representative Jordan made his great contribution. Along with a few other men he moved into an area that had been dominated for years by white, factional politicians who treated the center city as a personal fief and the people as voting pawns to be exploited economically and politically. Leon Jordan helped make these days a relic of the past. He was a successful advocate of black power in its most efficient form. He could win at the polls. In a representative government, that is the way you influence events, and Leon Jordan did exactly that.”¹

A few days later the *Kansas City Call* expressed both the shock and tribute of the black community Jordan represented:

“Leon Jordan is dead—the victim of an assassin’s bullet—but the legacy that he leaves will keep his memory green.

¹ *Kansas City Times* and *Star*, July 15, 1970.

“Leon will never die because the things that he stood for and the organization that he founded and headed—Freedom, Inc.—will live on.

“Freedom, which grew from a tiny seed in the minds of Leon Jordan and Bruce Watkins a scant eight years ago, has become today the strongest black-controlled political organization this city and state have ever known. . . .”²

Leon Jordan’s funeral took place at the Watkins Funeral Home the following Saturday. It was the largest Kansas City had seen in recent years, attended by a host of political and social leaders of the city and state, including the governor and the mayor. Senator Thomas Eagleton spoke movingly of sharing political concerns with Jordan while sitting with him in the back room of the Green Duck Tavern. Eagleton crossed the state to recognize his debt to Leon Jordan and Kansas City’s Freedom, Inc.

Harold Holliday, Sr., a fellow Missouri legislator and leader of Freedom, Inc., extolled Jordan as a man of vision who turned an apathetic community around in 1964 when Kansas City passed a public accommodations act ahead of the national government’s action. Leon Jordan “led us to the polls to make certain that there was placed among the laws of this city the requirement that every public place be open to every man.”

Jordan’s assassination was a local echo to the all too recent assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968 commonly used to mark the ending of the Civil Rights era. Jordan founded Freedom, Inc. in 1962 and he fueled the local ambitions of Freedom with the aspirations of the larger national struggle. During the years of Jordan’s leadership, Freedom, Inc. won the loyalty of the people it represented. It gave their voice a political power the

² *Kansas City Call*, July 17, 1970.

community had never previously known, and its reach into state and national politics has not been matched since.³

Sixty-five years earlier, on May 6, 1905, his birth surprisingly brought no notice in the local press, *surprisingly* not because the press should have anticipated his later public importance, but because his family for two previous generations had already been much in the news. When Leon's grandfather, Samuel C. Jordan, moved his wife, Kate, and their four children, including Leon's father, also named Leon, to Kansas City in 1874, the family immediately attracted public notice. Samuel Jordan was a barber with enough capital to invest in property in Kansas City during its early rapid growth. He was already notable in Leavenworth,

³ Copies of Holliday and Eagleton eulogies are in the Leon M. Jordan Collection housed in the LaBudde Special Collections of the Miller Nichols Library at the University of Missouri—Kansas City. I shall be frequently referring to this collection in subsequent footnotes and noting these references simply as LJC.

The Leon M. Jordan Collection began to be assembled in January, 2006. I had begun my research on Jordan the previous year. I had been told there might be some private papers of Jordan's in his home that was for sale at the end of 2005. I learned that the legal executor of Jordan's estate was the granddaughter of Guy Hollis, whom Orchid Jordan married after Leon's death. I called and told her of my biographical interest. She told me there was a scrapbook of photos from Liberia that she thought might be of interest. She asked me to call back a few days later while she would try to locate it. When I called back she refused to accept my calls. About two weeks later I was informed that the LaBudde Special Collections at UMKC had purchased a cache of material from the Jordan estate that included a remarkable collection of over 900 photographs from Jordan's years in Liberia.

Chuck Haddix, Director of the Marr Sound Archives and noted Kansas City Jazz authority, knew that I was working on Jordan. When he learned that Brian Thurn, an antiques dealer and friend, had acquired significant Jordan material, he recommended that the LaBudde Special Collections consider purchasing the material. Special Collections made the purchase. Thurn then told me that he had acquired the material from Philip Banks, who in turn had rescued the material from being hauled away from the Jordan home.

The photos in the scrapbook were immediately recognizable as an archival treasure. They opened a hitherto unavailable window on the Jordans' years in Liberia. I was astonished and grateful. I could only speculate that the reason that Orchid's granddaughter refused my subsequent calls was that when she looked for the scrapbook she thought I might be interested in, she realized it had been thrown away and was subsequently embarrassed. There is a lesson here in how we recognize and value our history.

The Leon M. Jordan Collection has grown significantly from that moment. I have added the products of my research to the collection, including most importantly the FBI file I acquired through the Freedom of Information Act on the FBI's role in investigating Jordan's murder, the military record of Jordan's father, Leon H. Jordan, as a veteran of the Spanish-American War, and Leon Jordan's personnel record as a police officer of the Kansas City Police Department, and the collection of documents from the Kansas City Police Department's first investigation of Jordan's murder.

The Special Collections Department has done a remarkable job of cataloguing this information plus a host of related materials. It has made the entire collection of scrapbook photos available as well as a full catalogue of all its Jordan material online at <http://library.umkc.edu/spec-col-collections/jordan>.

Kansas, where he lived for many years before moving to Kansas City. He was elected to the Kansas State Colored Convention in 1864.

That same year Confederate General Sterling “Old Pap” Price invaded Missouri and threatened Kansas. Samuel Jordan and two fellow barbers were recruited to become officers in Co. B. of the First Colored Militia Regiment organized in Leavenworth. Jordan was appointed 1st Lieutenant; James Woodland and William H. Burnham became Captains. Co. B. was ordered to move to Independence, Kansas, on Oct. 19, 1864, by boarding the steamer, *Benton*, and sailing for Kansas City. The company was later marched to the northern end of a twelve mile front from where the Big Blue joined the Missouri River in the north to Russell’s Ford near Hickman Mills in the south. Price feinted at this position Oct. 21, but then moved to the south. So Leon Jordan’s grandfather and his company played a minor role in this area’s well-remembered Battle of Westport. He was mustered out of service November 10th in Leavenworth. In 1871 he was paid eighty-eight dollars in Union military script for his service. But he had started a military tradition that influenced both his son and his grandson.

Samuel died in 1901, so Leon Mercer Jordan never personally knew his grandfather. But his grandmother Kate was living just a few doors from 1232 Vine Street where young Leon grew up. Captain Leon H. Jordan, Leon M.’s father, had become the leading male figure in the extensive Jordan family by the time of Leon’s birth. In Kansas City it was known that Leon H. Jordan had been brevetted Captain for bravery while serving in the American occupation forces in the Philippines. *The Rising Sun*, noted the improvements Captain Jordan made in his home on Vine and his mother’s move into her home two years before her grandson Leon’s birth.

More significantly in light of the young Leon’s later political career, his father, who ran the Autumn Leaf Club, was arrested just a year before Leon’s birth on a warrant charging him

with aiding and abetting false voter registration. He was released on \$1,000 bond. Republican canvassers found thirty-nine names registered at Jordan's Autumn Leaf Club, but were unable to find evidence that it was in any sense a residence. The judges and clerks went to the club. They were shown some doors which were said to lead to rooms where men stayed, but they found instead billiard tables, a bar, a room which "might be a reading room except for the absence of literature," and "large tables of the kind most convenient for a favorite negro game of craps." Jordan's club was described as a "sample of a good many clubs that are supporting anything Governor Dockery's machine wants."

In a gesture of balance, the *Star* also noted Captain Jordan has been a member of the board of managers of the Lincoln Institute, the state college for negroes, and "he has grown rich in his present business."

William Kemper, then a candidate for mayor, disavowed Jordan for the sake of his campaign and that of James Reed, then seeking the Democratic nomination for governor. Despite this embarrassing incident, the Democratic machines were then successfully siphoning the traditional black vote from the Republican party. Pendergast was just beginning his political career and had not yet acquired the sinister reputation now commonly associated with his name. With good reason he particularly enjoyed a favorable reputation in the black community. In 1906 the *Rising Son*, owned and edited by Nelson Crews, a notable Republican leader in the black community, would endorse only one white politician from either party. That politician was T. J. Pendergast of whom it asked its readers: "Where do the Negroes stand on this position and on this blunt and square man?" And it answered its own question, "Mr. Pendergast's term as marshall established a new era in penal progress. He stood for the Negro as well as for the white

man. No cruel treatment of prisoners. No jail scandals, but honest, intelligent. Let us try him again.”⁴

Captain Leon H. Jordan died after a lengthy illness when his son was only thirteen years of age. In what detail the son knew and understood his father’s life can only be inferred from a myriad of sketchy details. The father’s death certificate lists “General Paralysis of the Insane” as the cause of his death. He spent the last months of his life in the Topeka State Hospital. Young Leon and his mother, Lena Rivers Jordan, stayed with her sister, Josephine Wright and her husband, John. The Wrights were in the process of becoming a well-established middle-class family in Topeka. John Mercer Wright not only shared a middle name with his nephew, but he had a long and notable political career resulting in his often being referred to as “the dean of the county courthouse.” During the troubled adolescence that followed his father’s death, the Wrights became Leon’s closest and most effective family.

Leon M. Jordan had two notable public careers, the first as a Kansas City police officer that began in 1936 and culminated in his organizing and leading the police force of Monrovia, Liberia, from 1947-1952. While working in Liberia he was on leave from the Kansas City Police Department. Until 1950, he assumed his experience and achievements in Liberia would earn him a significant leadership role in the KCPD. However, when he put those assumptions to the test, he found what he could count on was in fact far beneath his expectations and he resigned in anger.

He returned to his post in Liberia for two more years and mulled over what kind of midlife career change he could possibly make upon his return to Kansas City. When his father

⁴ Clifford Naysmith, *History of the Negro Population of Kansas City, Missouri, 1870-1930*, Theodore A. Brown Collection, KC11, Western Missouri Archives, pp. 225-232.

died in 1918 it was headline news in the Kansas City black newspaper, foreshadowing the public recognition of his son's death sixty-two years later. The father, like son, was praised for his significant contributions to civil rights. He was praised for leading the battle in Jefferson City to keep the state legislature from passing Jim Crow legislation for railway cars and his money was credited for funding the telegram campaign that instigated a federal congressional investigation into the East St. Louis riots. He was also recognized for his achievements as a veteran of the Spanish American War, for the civil practice of law, and as a contractor and builder. Leon Jordan grew up in a prominently active political family. The grand public tribute to his father at his death could not help but impress the thirteen year old Leon, and that memory stayed strong in the son's memory, even into his final years in Liberia, almost forty years later, and helped him to decide to try to recreate a modern version of his father's political success.⁵

⁵ *Kansas City Sun*, July 2, 1917, LJC.

Samuel C. Jordan Md. Kate C. (Frazier) Jordan

1834-1901

1864-1927

Samuel D. 1865-97	Mary (Callie) 1866-1957	Sallie 1870-1950	Oliver T. 1873-	Kate A. 1876-1949	Alvin 1880-	Edna 1883-	Robert 1889-
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Md. Henry Booker
& John Love

Md. Frank Bufkin

Md. Henry Austin

Leon H.

1867-1918

Md. Lena Rivers

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Leon M.

1905-1970

Md. Orchid Ramsey
