

History of Merriam

The history of this community began between 1826 and 1833 when the Shawnee Indians were moved into this region from their settlements in the more desirable regions of Ohio and Missouri. They established themselves along the banks of the Kansas River and surrounding tributaries, including Turkey Creek in Merriam. Local missionaries were intent on upgrading the Shawnees' lives by converting them to Christianity. The Quakers had worked hard among the Shawnees in the Ohio Valley, and as the tribe moved to lands that would become Johnson County, the Quakers followed and built a mission in 1836, located at today's 61st and Hemlock in Merriam.

A Tennessean, David Gee Campbell, bought acreage from an Indian (Mary Parks) in what is now known as Merriam. In 1864 he moved his home to the south side of Johnson Drive near Turkey Creek. In honor of our founder, the town was named Campbellton and it had approximately 20 homes during this era, plus a few businesses including the Nall Hotel and James Walker's Store.

Railroad development played a major role in the settlement of this area with a route from Kansas City through the Turkey Creek basin to Olathe. The railroad, at this time, was known as the "Kansas City, Fort Scott and Gulf." In 1870, the first station in Campbellton was built and the name of the town was changed to "Merriam", in honor of Charles Merriam, a one-time secretary/treasurer of the railway. Merriam Park is also named for Charles Merriam.

With Kansas City becoming the focal point of trade, communication and transportation and with a population of over 75,000, railroad executives saw a need for a large, well-planned amusement park and purchased 40 acres in Merriam because of the country atmosphere and quick means of transportation. The park was completed in 1880 and as an added touch, former President Grant was asked to dedicate the park.

The Merriam Park was indeed a grand amusement. Costing 25 cents to enter, the park attracted more than 20,000 visitors per day. In years following, one of the park superintendents, George Kessler went on to plan the park and boulevard system of Kansas City. Much of the beauty of present-day Kansas City reflects the influence of this ingenious man, a young engineer from Germany. By the turn of the century, Kansas City had constructed its own amusements and Merriam Park went out of existence, however Hocker Grove, named after its founder RW Hocker, was another important amusement development within Merriam. Running along the trolley line, Hocker Grove existed from 1907-1919 and contained a picnic ground, baseball field and pavilion. Today, Hocker Grove is a well sought-after neighborhood with mature trees, rolling landscape and unique homes. Merriam became the biggest town in Northeast Kansas around 1930. Four grocery stores, two hardware stores, four gas stations, three drug stores, two dry goods stores, three restaurants, a bank, two garages, two barber shops, a beauty shop, two feed and coal yards, two taverns, a lumber yard, chicken hatchery, two realty businesses, a dry cleaning store, insurance agency, two churches and a grade school all called Merriam home during this time.

Education in Merriam was also a highly significant historical development. For 32 years, the Quaker Mission served to educate and evangelize in homes, stores and vacant buildings. Early settlers of

Campbellton sent their children to the Hickory Grove School which is now Shawnee Mission North High School. As the population of Merriam increased, so too did the need for a local school. School was held for a short period in the former Lelan Wilson Hatchery until the old Gin Mill was leased for a school building in 1871 when District 79 was formed and a 2-story red brick schoolhouse was built. The building was used for many years for classes and community affairs and still stands in downtown Merriam today. In 1911, the Merriam Grade and High school was built and now serves the Merriam area as the local community center, recently renamed in honor of former Mayor, Irene B. French.

Perhaps one of the most recognizable historic movements in education was the 1949 Webb vs. School District 90, a lawsuit filed on behalf of 39 families whose children were rejected from the white-only school, known as South Park Elementary. Corinthian Nutter, a true pioneer in desegregation, was the key witness in the lawsuit and helped create history when the Webb case paved the way for the 1954 Brown v. the Board of Education decision to remove segregation in the public school system. [Click here](#) to view an excerpt of Ms. Nutter's comments regarding desegregation at South Park school.

Education in Merriam is certainly a privilege for all, and we will forever remember and honor Ms. Nutter for her dedication and belief in equal rights for all children.

Merriam was unincorporated during much of its life. It wasn't until 1950 that the Merriam area petitioned the Governor to become an incorporated city of the third class, with Carl Engle Sr. serving as our first Mayor. Merriam became a city of the second class in 1957. Currently, our governing body consists of a mayor plus eight members to represent four wards throughout the City.

A pioneer and leader in the development of the Kansas City area, Merriam was the site of the first Bell Telephone office in Johnson County in 1908; the first public library in 1956; the first major park in Johnson County (Antioch Park in 1956); the first full-service hospital, Shawnee Mission Medical Center in 1962 and Merriam was also the first home to Johnson County Community College from 1969-1972.

Today, Merriam is a vibrant community, nestled just eight miles south of downtown Kansas City and minutes from anywhere in the metro. Although our transportation methods have progressed from trolley lines and railroads to automobiles, our area continues to grow and develop within the region.