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University once functioned at 27th and Sewell

(Editor's note: This is the tenth in a series of "then and now" articles on places of interest in Kansas City, Kan., compiled by area historian Margaret Landis in observance of the 100th birthday of KCK in 1986. Much of the information has appeared in The Kansan.)

(Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.)

On the northwest corner of 27th and Sewell is a Kansas City, Kan., historical sign marking the site of the old Western University (1881-1948).

The marker also points out it is the site of old town of Quindaro (1856-1862). A statue of John Brown, still standing, was unveiled on the Western University campus on June 1, 1911.

In the neighborhood today are Primrose Villa Senior Citizens Home, 2804 Sewell; the Bryant-Butler-Kitchen Nursing Home, 3500 N. 27th" and the Vernon Senior Citizens Community Multipurpose Center, 3436 N. 27th.

Western University had its beginning in the Quindaro's Freedman's School founded in 1880 by the Rev. Eben Blachley, a Presbyterian minister. The Freedman's School was intended to provide an education for the children of escaped slaves and black families who had begun to settle in the area. The school received support from the state in 1867 and 1873, but became inactive following the death of Blachley in 1877.

The school was revived in 1881 under the sponsorship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and reopened in 1882. In 1891 the school was renamed Western University and moved from the valley to a new building, Ward Hall, near 27th and Sewell. William T. Vernon, who was subsequently named registrar of the treasury by President Theodore Roosevelt, was placed in charge of the school in 1896. When Vernon retired from the school on 1916, he left behind a flourishing campus with many fine buildings.



Old Western University (top), picturing Ward Hall and the Industrial Building, is shown on a postcard circa 1909. The Bryant-butler-Kitchen Nursing home (bottom) is one of three facilities in that approximate area today.

Western University continued to prosper under Dr. H.T. Kealing, adding a junior college and a school of religion. As with many small schools, Western University was severely affected by the Great Depression and was finally forced to close in 1948.

Douglass Hospital moved into Grant Hall of Western University in 1945. The hospital was forced to close in 1978 because of financial conditions.

KCK city officials this year declined to apply for a special program that would have helped establish apartments in the former Primrose Village Nursing home. It was pointed out the Primrose Villa was built as a senior citizens home with a common kitchen, and was not suitable for a homesteading program.

Primrose Villa also this year was considered as the site of a prison work-release center, but residents and area politicians successfully opposed that plan.