



Home of your Boone County Historical Society

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May 26, 2023

Mike Griggs

Deputy City Manager, City of Columbia

City Hall

701 E. Broadway

Columbia, MO 65201

Dear Mike,

I'm writing in an earnest attempt to faithfully respond to your request for a more complete history of the McKinney Building in Columbia at 409-413 E. Broadway. I'm pleased the City is considering the purchase of this historic building.

I recognize there has been a good deal of oral history about several popular musical artists that supposedly performed in the building's second floor dance hall in the early and middle 20th century. Unfortunately, our further research at the Boone County Historical Society finds very little evidence of the suggested Black superstar talent performing in the McKinney during the 1940s and 1950s. I will address that more fully in the following paragraphs.

However, even if huge musical artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Ike & Tina Turner, and Count Basie did not perform at the McKinney in their prime, there is some evidence one or more of them performed there before they were "stars." Further, there is a great deal of important local Black history that took place in the building making the belief of major Black artist's appearances there less critical to the full measure of the building's historic significance.

The lot on the fourth block of east Broadway was secured by Frank McKinney (not "Fred" as has been often recorded in recent decades) of Columbia in November 1916. McKinney was a local Black bricklayer who began purchasing lots in central Columbia in the 1880s. He was 60 years old when he purchased the lot next to the Second Missionary Baptist Church and went on to build what he named the McKinney Building. It seems evident he had been wisely investing his savings in real estate since he was 30 years old when he purchased his first downtown lot in 1886.

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The Daily Missourian ran an article about the building's imminent construction on August 8, 1917. It announced a forthcoming two-story brick building, put up by Frank McKinney for a cost of \$5,000, and would be completed in four or five months. It was to have three retail stores on the ground floor and an entertainment hall on the second floor. *The Kansas City Sun*, a Black owned and operated newspaper, recognized the "dream realized" by McKinney and his wife in a March 1918 edition. The newspaper reported the building opened on schedule and with two indoor restrooms, and the Second Missionary Baptist Church was possibly the first to make use of the building for a pageant titled, "The Stars and Stripes," on March 25, 1918.

City directories inform us the building's ground floor hosted several retail establishments over its first two decades, including Apex Electrical Distribution, Holloway Auto Paint Shop, F.H. Burr, Harness Maker and Auto Trimming, the R.R. Walter Plumbing & Heating Service, the People's Drug Store, the Broadway Drug Store, and the W.B. Smith Hatchery (turkeys, geese, ducks, and chickens).

During those same two decades, 1918-1938, the dance hall upstairs hosted a variety of civic, religious, political, and educational events. They included dinners and fundraisers centered around holidays including Armistice Day and Emancipation Day, but also events that featured Black legislators from the Missouri and Kansas legislatures, nationally recognized and visiting Black orators and Lincoln Institute (Jefferson City) presidents, union gatherings, and American Legion post events. Not all these gatherings appear to be those of strictly Black organizations, although the Richard T. Kelly American Legion post who sometimes met at the McKinney would seem to be a post WWI Black American Legion group. The second floor also hosted hundreds of Douglass School PTA meetings, dances, proms, and church dinners. There is a lot of evidence found in newspaper advertisements in the *Missourian* over those years that there were many visiting bands who played to Black and White crowds, although not always or necessarily on the same evening. This is where we find evidence of a very young and not yet famous, William James "Count" Basie, performing in the McKinney.

Frank McKinney, or whomever was managing the building on his behalf, welcomed in some of the nation's top, Black big bands over the years. They included the *King Oliver Band*, the *Eastern Night Hawks*, and Kansas City's *Bennie Moten and his Band*. Moten founded his band in 1923 and quickly gained significant fame. In 1927 he hired a new pianist by the name of William "Bill" Basie.

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According to the *Columbia Missourian* advertisements, the Moten band played at the McKinney in May 1932 and April 1935, and because Basie was the pianist of the band from 1927 until Bennie Moten's death on April 2, 1935, it is almost a certainty that the future great "Count" Basie was at the piano in the McKinney during those performances. Moten died just three weeks before the late April appearance at the McKinney, but Basie was his bandmates choice to replace Moten as the band leader. After their Columbia appearance and in that summer of 1935, Basie would reorganize the band, move their home to Chicago, and give himself the new nickname, "Count Basie". He and the new, *Count Basie Big Band* went on to greater heights with Basie becoming a musical giant by the 1950s.

As to the widely held theory that Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughn, or Ike & Tina Turner performed at the McKinney, it's very likely folklore brought about by their much more likely appearances at a large dance hall in Moberly called Orscheln Heights or at two Columbia nightclubs, Breezy Hill and Paradise Hill. There is evidence that Gillespie, B.B. King, Fats Domino, and Ray Charles did play those locations early in their careers. Another important fact that disputes anyone appearing at concerts in the McKinney during the 1950s is the fact that the dance floor was dismantled there in about 1938, four years after Frank McKinney's death in 1934. The new owner, W.G. Tallen of Randolph County and the proprietor of the Tallen Candy Company. Tallen gave the second floor's use to the W. B. Smith Hatchery at least through 1950. The candy factory made use of a portion of the first floor. There were to be more dances in the second-floor space by the mid to late 1950s, as local Black residents have shared memories of Douglass School events held there prior to integration.

As indicated by the business success of the building's founder and namesake, Frank McKinney, and by the building's special and very prominent role in the social, educational, religious, and civic life of Columbia's Black population for decades, this property is significantly historic. Many important events and gatherings have taken place there, and it is absolutely worth preserving for those reasons.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this history.

Sincerely, and on behalf of the Boone County Historical Society,



Chris Campbell

Executive Director, Boone County Historical Society