Perpetual Persistence: The African American Community of Manhattan Bottoms, 1880-1920

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Kansas: most commonly known as the premier flyover state, home to political conservatives, relatively flat landscape, Civil War ties, and the place that shares a city with Missouri. However, Kansas also has an extremely rich African American history. Of all the cities that were impacted by the Kansas Fever Exodus, the city of Manhattan may have the most unique history of African American subsistence and agency. In spite of this, the history of this community has stayed buried.

As the county seat, Manhattan is the most populated city in Riley County, nestling in the Flint Hills region of northeast Kansas. The township of Manhattan, home to the city and also the Blue and Kansas Rivers, continues southward from the city boundary. Although Kansas was officially admitted into the Union as a free state in 1861, its turbulent years during the 1850s, Bleeding Kansas, left a legacy of racial tensions throughout the state; Manhattan was no exception.[1] However, there is an untold story of African Americans in Manhattan that is nearly impossible to unearth without using local history, census records, plat maps, oral accounts, and other historical methods. The history of the African American community of Manhattan *has* been addressed in the last twenty years. Nevertheless, not enough attention has been paid to the specific counterculture community just outside Manhattan proper: the Bottoms. More importantly, the understanding of Manhattan's black community currently lacks an explanation

[1] See Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

for the accumulation of African Americans – not only in south Manhattan – but in the Bottoms as well.

We do have several works on the African Americans of Manhattan by reputable professional authors and scholars. Nupur Chaudhuri has written two studies on the subject. The first is titled, *"*The Other Side of Manhattan, Kansas: Oral History of the Black Community*".*[2] The second is *"*We Must All Seem Like Brothers and Sisters: The African American Community in Manhattan, Kansas, 1865-1940," published in *Kansas History* in 1991.[3] Long-time Manhattan resident and local librarian, Geraldine Walton, wrote *140 Years of Soul* and provides a unique and local perspective to the subject.[4] James Sherow's book, *Manhattan*, 2013, touches on the African American community and gives a glance into the cultural area.[5] As early as 1976, the Riley County Genealogical Society published an amazing comprehensive study of individuals titled *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie: Kansas Counties: Clay, Geary, Marshall, Pottawatomie, Riley, Wabaunsee, Washington*.[6] This work includes sketches of Manhattan's early African American residents. Also important is the 2011 "African American Cultural Resources in Manhattan" project conducted by the City of Manhattan under the direction of Three Gables Preservation; this study identifies local landmarks such as early black churches.[7] Yet, none of these works focus on the evolved community of the Bottoms just outside South Manhattan.

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[2] Nupur Chaudhuri, *The Other Side of Manhattan, Kansas: Oral History of the Black Community*. In Hale Library Special Collections, Vertical Files-The City of Manhattan African American Community, Kansas State University.
[3] Nupur Chaudhuri, "We Must All Seem like Brothers and Sisters: The African American Community in Manhattan, Kansas, 1865-1940," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, Winter, 1991, No. 4.*
[4] Geraldine Baker Walton, *140 Years of Soul: A History of African Americans in Manhattan*, Kansas, 1865-2005 (Manhattan, Kansas: KS Publishing, Inc., 2008).
[5] James Earl Sherow, *Manhattan* (Arcadia Publishing, 2013).
[6] *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie: Kansas Counties, Clay, Geary, Marshall, Pottawatomie, Riley, Wabaunsee, Washington. Manhattan, Kansas.* (Riley County Genealogical Society, 1976).
[7] "African American Cultural Resources." City of Manhattan, Kansas. September 21, 2011.

The goal of this study is to document the early history of the Bottoms as accurately as possible while providing a new angle of vision. Using a case study of African American resident Jeremiah "Jerry" Mitchell will provide insights. Mitchell is best known for developing Manhattan's first trash collecting service, and his daughter Clara Mitchell Webster contributed her understanding of pre-World War II Manhattan to the public records.[8] Similar to the collective history of Manhattan's African Americans, Mitchell's profile is not complete either. This is due to the reality of poor record keeping and documentation of African Americans. Jerry Mitchell's contributions to the community and his family as the owner and operator of Manhattan's first garbage collection business and a local slaughterhouse provide irrefutable evidence for the story of South Manhattan.[9]

Background of Early African Americans in Manhattan

The year 1865 is the earliest concrete record of African Americans living Manhattan.[10] This early population existed in Manhattan prior to the Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879, which brought in 150 African Americans to Manhattan that spring.[11] The Shepard Chapel, Manhattan's first black church, was built prior to 1879. The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1880.[12] According to the *Manhattan Enterprise*, the first 104 Exodusters arrived in Manhattan on May 2, 1879.[13] The majority of these African Americans were very poor and came with little to no resources to begin their new life in the Promised Land.[14] They were indeed the

[8] Geraldine Baker Walton, *140 Years of Soul,* 11.
[9] Nupur Chaudhuri, *The Other Side of Manhattan, Kansas: Oral History of the Black Community*, 5.
[10]Kansas State Census of 1865, Riley County, Kansas.
[11] James Earl Sherow, *Manhattan,* 31.
[12] *"National Register of Historic Places Registration Form - Bethel A.M.E Church."* City of Manhattan Kansas. May 30, 2012. Accessed March 25, 2015, 6, 7.
[13] Nupur Chaudhuri, *The Other Side of Manhattan, Kansas: Oral History of the Black Community*, 6.
[14] Nupur Chaudhuri, *"We All Seem like Brothers and Sisters: The African American Community in Manhattan, Kansas, 1865-1940*. Topeka, Kan.: Kansas State Historical Society, 1992.

"poor, tired, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free" of the Midwestern United States.[15] What they did have was their will to live, hardworking attitude, and tenacity. Early male Exodusters were soon able to obtain work as hired hands.[16] Most of these individuals would have come from a rich agricultural background as slaves in Tennessee and Mississippi. Although the terrain and climate of the Flint Hills differed from the southern environments they were accustomed to, being able to work on farms immediately after arriving was a substantial benefit to them. Having exposure to what it took to sustain livestock and crops in their new climate was an invaluable experience. Below is an 1883 description of the soil in Riley County where ex-slaves settled and worked:

> "The composition of the soil is so varied in its chemical elements that nearly almost everything in the nature of grasses, grains, fruits and vegetables can be produced from it. The dark, easily-worked soil of the bottom-lands is very productive. Its depth, ranging from two to fifteen feet, comparatively makes its fertility inexhaustible. Sand largely predominates over the clayey element, and it very readily admits of drainage, so that it may be said there is next to nothing of stagnation in these bottom-lands of large expanse…Good brick-clay is found in the bottom-lands and a beautiful magnesium limestone is distributed over the county, immense quarries being in the vicinity of Manhattan."[17]

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[15] Lazarus, Emma. *"The New Colossus"* The New Colossus, http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/the-new-colossus.
[16] Bruce Ney, *"Researcher Analyzes Local Black History," The Collegian*. Hale Library Special Collections, Vertical Files - The City of Manhattan African American Community, Kansas State University.
[17] William G. Cutler, "*History of the State of Kansas*" Riley County, Part 1. (Chicago, Illinois: A. T. Andreas), 1883.

The location of the rich piece of land was significant geographically and politically. Practice provided new black workers with the cultural capital needed to be successful when they would eventually begin investing in their own farms and livestock, as seen in Figure 1. Having the ability to earn their own way, to receive actual wages, was a positive influence for the freedmen. Many had likely been share-croppers working only for a share of their farm product, usually cotton.

Figure 1. A photograph of an African American farmer and likely, his children, in fields adjacent to the Manhattan Bottoms, possibly the 1890s. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society.

By the 1880 Federal Census, most of the African Americans in Manhattan were working as laborers and fulfilling other domestic duties while living in South Manhattan.[18] In 1880 African American presence within the city limits was the highest until after 1930, and possibly

[18] United States Federal Census, 1880, Riley County, Kansas. See also Chaudhuri, "'We Must All Seem Like Brothers and Sisters.'"

ever.[19] However, after this, the African American population significantly decreases. It can be argued that this dramatic population decrease is directly associated with African Americans moving into the Bottoms where they would be recorded as part of the population for the township, not the city.

The Bottoms

While most accounts of the lives of those early African American Manhattanites refer to the community within the southern city limits, we see no substantial evidence documenting the individuals in the Bottoms. The documentation of the Bottoms is imperative because this area lies within the township of Manhattan and is legally outside of the municipal city limits. This is a crucial story because it opposes the majority perception of the history of African Americans living in Manhattan. The common misconception is that these residents all lived within the City of Manhattan. Yet, choosing to live in dwellings quite literally on the other side of the tracks gave those individuals the opportunity to create a niche subculture that was not possible within the city limits of Manhattan. The following figures, 2 and 3, show the Bottoms currently and on an 1881 plat map.[20] Before we can understand the subculture, the ideology must first be addressed.

[19] Nupur Chaudhuri, "African Americans of Manhattan." Lecture, April, 1985. Copy at Riley County Historical Society, Manhattan, Kansas.
[20] M.E. Bird and R.E. Mickle. *Historic Plat Book of Riley County Kansas*. Chicago, IL: Bird & Mickle Map, 1881, 71.

Figure 2. A photograph of the Bottoms, Fall 2014. SOURCE: Blake Hall-Latchman

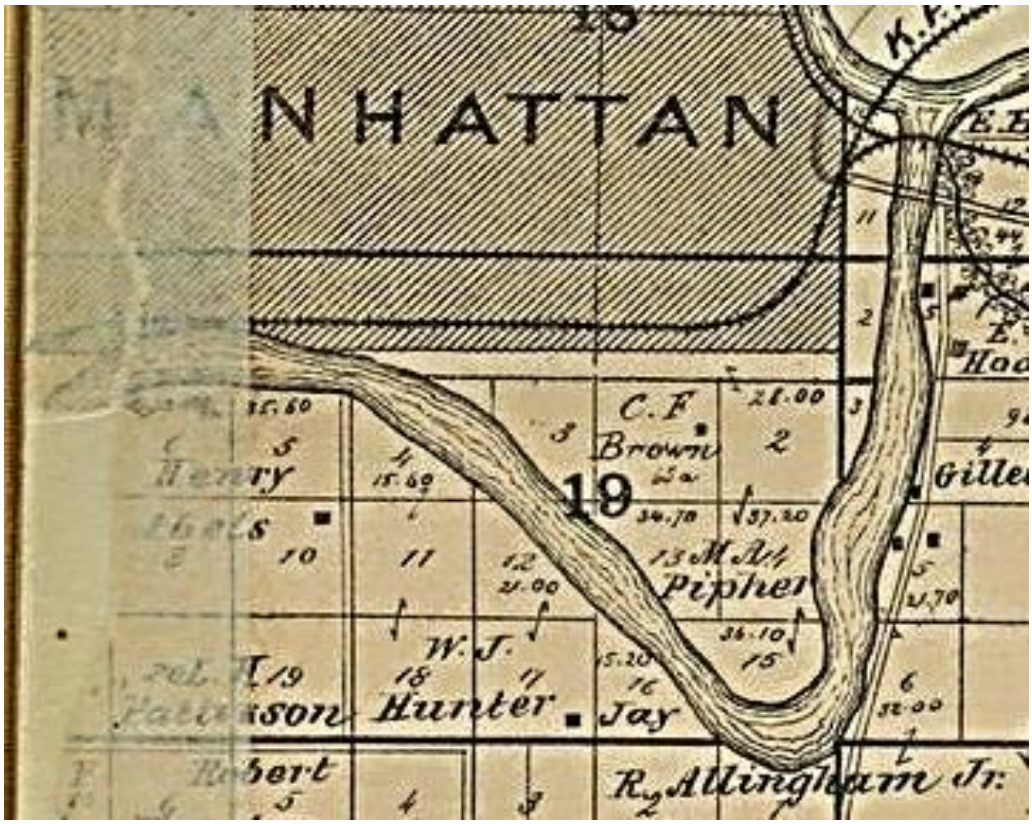

Figure 3. A plat map of Riley County including the city of Manhattan and the Bottoms, c.1881. City limits are indicated by the striped rectangle. The Bottoms is the triangular piece of land enclosed by the Kansas River and labeled the "19." SOURCE: KansasMemory.org.

Chaudhuri notes, "According to the interviewees," the black neighborhood was confined between 2nd and 10th Street and Pottawatomie to Colorado Street.[21] No historian has been able to verify the exact reason or reasons that African Americans concentrated themselves in South Manhattan from their original placements in the northern area of town and at the bottom of Bluemont Hill.[22] However, we do know several contributing factors that led to the migration. Racial tension was quite likely the driving force that took the early African Americans into South Manhattan. They moved from an original area near Bluemont Hill into the southern part of the city.[23] Even though racial and legal factors kept them there, it was their tenacity that made it a home. It was the overwhelming sense of community and family that strengthened the culture within the community. The foreshadowing of Chaudhuri's article titled *We Must All Seem Like Brothers and Sisters* gives evidence that although they were forced to live in a segregated area, Manhattan blacks were determined to make the best of their new home. Additionally, South Manhattan was replete with an abundance of resources: fertile bottom land, rivers and creeks - especially Wildcat Creek flowing into the nearby Kansas River; proximity to jobs downtown, and railroads. The natural and manmade resources of the area provided opportunities for African American families to become agriculturally independent. This had a direct effect on their household income.

Now that we have an understanding as to why the African American community of Manhattan became centered in South Manhattan, let's shift our angle of vision to the Bottoms peninsula. This placement of the Bottoms was key due to its proximity to the City of Manhattan but also, the access it provided to the Blue and Kansas Rivers and all the natural resources that

[21] Nupur Chaudhuri, "*The Other Side of Manhattan, Kansas: Oral History of the Black Community*," 10.
[22] James Earl Sherow, *Manhattan,* 31.
[23] Ibid.

accompany two rivers, especially the rich soil resulting from alluvial flooding. The term "Bottoms" appears in many references to geographical places in Kansas (and elsewhere); it is a shortened version of "river bottoms," or the floodplain. Significantly, the Manhattan Bottoms was also exempt from city laws and taxes. The children of the families who lived in the Bottoms were still able to attend their local Douglass School, opened in 1904.[24] However, the journey to school was longer for those children, estimated at nearly a mile; and they would also have to walk over the tracks of two major railways, the Rock Island and the Union Pacific, to get to the school on Yuma Street in South Manhattan. If other members of the household had jobs downtown or other places in the city, they would still have that relative proximity to work and could walk.

The Blue and Kansas Rivers provided members of the community with an abundance of aquatic foods, mainly fish, as well as a water supply; river and creek water was used for washing, swimming on hot summer days, watering gardens, watering stock, and in the slaughtering of animals. One of the greatest impacts the rivers had was replenishing the rich, fertile soil after frequent floods. Although flooding made the area extremely muddy – interview sources have repeatedly mentioned the mud of the Bottoms – the nutrients it provided the land were critical in providing a subsistence and, at times, supplemental income via truck gardening/farming.[25] However, the most important aspect of the Bottoms was the freedom it gave its residents to live in a way that was agriculturally and economically independent of legal controls. This independence was recognized and used by famed Manhattanite Jerry Mitchell.

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[24] For other Bottoms referents, see especially the study of Moehlman's Bottoms by Katie Brummett, posted to Chapman Center Digital Archive, ksu.edu/history/chapman; Geraldine Baker Walton, *140 Years of Soul*, p. 84; for walking route to Douglass School, informal interview with Don Slater, October, 2014.

[25] Don Slater, Manhattan resident, personal communication to author, October, 2014; Federal Census data from 1900 lists several African Americans, identified as both land owners and renters, living in "Manhattan Township." Later Kansas State censuses identify African Americans in the township as truck farmers.

Jerry Mitchell

The story of Jerry Mitchell is most vital to the African American history in Manhattan. Seen below in Figure 4, Jerry Mitchell is depicted in an often-published photograph with his trash-collecting rig. This man is important not just because he was the most well-known and successful person in local African American history or because he had a key impact as an entrepreneur. Due to racial and historical bias that has obscured the recorded history of impoverished African Americans in Manhattan, presently, Jerry Mitchell's is the only completely traceable account of a resident moving outside of the city limits and into the Bottoms. This move was expressly to maintain a critically necessary economic lifestyle.

Figure 4. A photograph of Jerry Mitchell with his trash collecting vehicle, ca.1912. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society.

Jerry Mitchell is first recorded living on Riley Street within the city limits in 1880. At that time, he worked as a day laborer like many other men of the period.[26] By 1915, Jerry had married and his family is recorded living at 731 Pottawatomie Street. According to the 1915 Kansas State Census, this was a home within the city limits and not a farm.[27] After the death of Mitchell's first wife, the family moved to 931 Pottawatomie Street in 1916.[28] Mitchell moved his family to 931 Pottawatomie Street because he had bought the Allingham slaughterhouse at that location.[29] Oral accounts establish that Jerry Mitchell undertook slaughtering for the African American community. The 1925 Kansas State Census for Riley County and the 1920 and 1930 United States Federal Censuses all reflect Mitchell's residence as 931 Pottawatomie Street.[30]

At this time, 931 Pottawatomie Street was considered part of the township of Manhattan as opposed to Mitchell's previous residence identified in the city, 731 Pottawatomie Street. We can make this inference because in the City of Manhattan federal census data **no census records were taken on the south side of the 900th block of Pottawatomie Street.**[31] On a modern day map, Mitchell's move may be perceived as a lateral two-block move; however, this move was a political strategy. Jerry Mitchell moved his family and business two blocks west in order to continue their collective practice of raising hogs, chickens, horses, and cows. More importantly, he would be able to slaughter animals and butcher meat without breaking the law. In 1916, the property 931 did not exist within Manhattan city limits and was therefore exempt from city

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[26] Nupur Chaudhuri, "*The Other Side of Manhattan, Kansas: Oral History of the Black Community*," 3.
[27] Geraldine Baker Walton, *140 Years of Soul, 11;* 1915 Kansas State Census, Riley County. See the entry for Jerry Mitchell.
[28] 1915 Kansas State Census, Riley County, Jerry Mitchell. *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie, 896;* Walton, *140 Years of Soul, 14.*
[29] *Twelfth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Land on Statistics*, Denver, Colorado: The Smith-Book Printing Co., 1911, p. 342. *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie, 1*896.
[30] Don Slater, personal communication to author, October, 2014; 1915 Kansas State Census, Riley County, Jerry Mitchell; United States Federal Census, 1920, Riley County, Kansas; United States Federal Census, 1930, Riley County, Kansas.
[31] Ibid.

ordinances; Mitchell's new home and slaughterhouse were part of the Bottoms. While we do not have a map of Manhattan city boundaries in 1916, we do have maps that establish how Pottawatomie Street changed over time. Figures 5 and 6 that follow are maps depicting the changes over time in Pottawatomie Street.

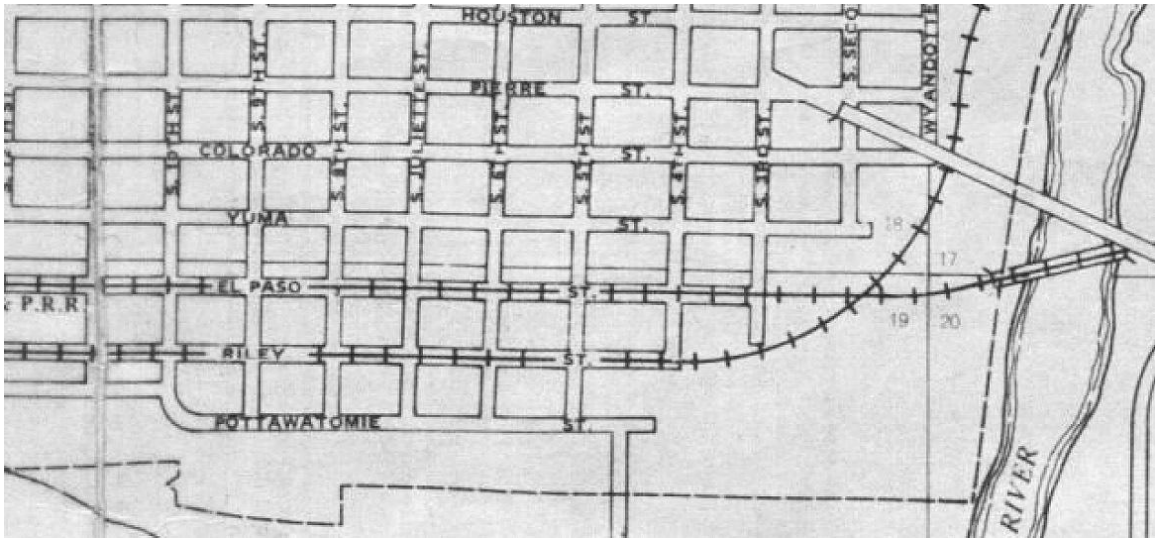

Figure 5. Undated portion of Manhattan map; likely the 1930s. Pottawatomie Street is shown to be dropping down below the general southern border of the city. When Jerry Mitchell lived on it in 1916, he was listed as being outside the city in Manhattan Township: the Bottoms. This reality must be contrasted with statements made to the author by Manhattan City Hall personnel that the southern boundary of Manhattan "has never changed." SOURCE: Hale Library, City Map Collection, Kansas State University. Interpretation of city maps involved consultation with several professionals, including Dr. M.J. Morgan, Research Director, Chapman Center for Rural Studies, and Hale Library reference librarians.

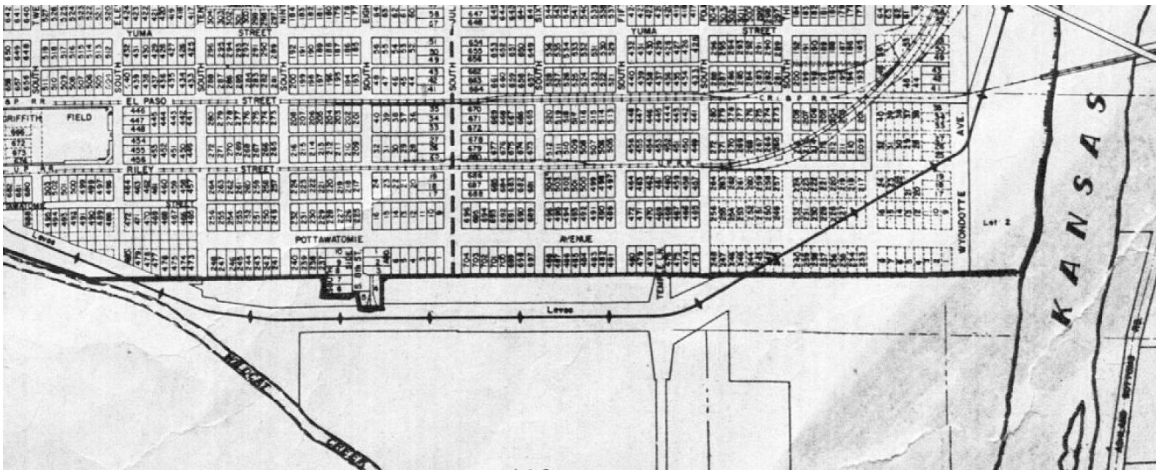

Figure 6. A city map of Manhattan, ca. 1970s. Pottawatomie Street is now much longer and is clearly shown to be completely within the city proper. SOURCE: Hale Library, City Map Collection, Kansas State University.

In order to truly understand the reasoning behind the migration of Jerry Mitchell and the other residents of the Bottoms, we must examine the city ordinances of Manhattan in regards to animals, livestock, butchering, and slaughterhouses. There were at least five Manhattan City ordinances passed between 1860 and 1916 that could have directly affected the quality of life for African Americans in Manhattan. A Manhattan City ordinance regarding swine and sheep running at-large within the city limits was passed in 1860.[32] While this prohibited residents from owning and keeping those animals within the city limits, it omits the Bottoms in reference. Horses and cattle, including milk cows, were banned from the jurisdiction of the municipality in 1873.[33] In 1887, a Manhattan City ordinance was passed regarding slaughtering within city limits, which replaced the previous ordinance; this new law placed restrictions on swine and stockyards.[34] Also under that same 1887 ordinance, chickens, other domesticated birds, and stockyards were prohibited inside the city limits.[35] In 1909 came another ordinance regulating swine within the city.[36] Finally, a Manhattan City ordinance regarding stockyards as a nuisance was passed in 1916.[37]

These systematic regulations direly affected subsistence farmers, such as poor African Americans, and made living legally within the city limits very difficult. In fact, it can be argued that such ordinances were passed expressly against the numbers of African American family farms/gardens in South Manhattan. The laws made it so that the residents were forced to move

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[32] City of Manhattan, "Records of Manhattan City Clerk's Office-City Ordinance & Misc. Records 1865 thru 1981", Microfilm #31792, Ordinance No.2, 6-7.
[33] City of Manhattan, "Records of Manhattan City Clerk's Office-City Ordinance & Misc. Records 1865 thru 1981", Microfilm #31792, Ordinance No.16, 25.
[34] "Ordinance No. 40." In City of Manhattan Ordinance Record Book No. 1. Manhattan, Kansas: City of Manhattan, 1887, 343.
[35] Ibid, 344-345.
[36] City of Manhattan, "Records of Manhattan City Clerk's Office-City Ordinance & Misc. Records 1865 thru 1981", Microfilm #31792, Ordinance No.143, 330.
[37] City of Manhattan, "Records of Manhattan City Clerk's Office-City Ordinance & Misc. Records 1865 thru 1981", Microfilm #31793, Ordinance No.391, 262.

away from the city's jurisdiction or risk fines/arrests. Their way of life involving domestic animals, especially hogs and chickens, and extensive river-bottom gardens wasn't a choice or a luxury but a necessity. The only option the early black residents had was to relocate to a place where they would be able to maintain vital, supplemental farms/gardens/domestic stock. These practices provided for their families when the extremely low wages paid to African American laborers during the Jim Crow years could not stretch. Families in the Bottoms were also free of municipal ordinances and taxes. This is the reason for the migration into the Bottoms adjacent to South Manhattan. Understanding that it was a rational choice by African Americans, as illustrated by Jerry Mitchell, fills in our understanding of the history of black Manhattan. Most people of the Bottoms remained renters on township land until flooded out in the catastrophic Kansas River Flood of 1951.[38]

[38] Exodus from the Bottoms began with the building of the levee system around Manhattan after the severe flood of 1935. Communication to author from Don Slater, October 2014.

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