

Nelson C. and James Crews

Civil Rights Pioneers

Nelson (1866-1923), James (1859-1946)

By Daniel Coleman

Kansas City, like the rest of the United States after World War I, heard its returning African American soldiers speak out for the democratic ideals they had been fighting for overseas, and perhaps none so exemplify the activism of this period as Nelson and James Crews. Vocal in print and at the podium, publisher Nelson Crews laid out an agenda of equality throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, while his brother James established one of Kansas City's most important African American institutions and integrated an organization previously closed to African American workers.

Nelson Caesar Crews was born in October 1866 in Howard County, Missouri, and spent part of his early life in Chillicothe. He and his wife Tillie moved to Kansas City in 1889, and by 1900 Crews was Clerk of the Police Court, one of several important public positions he held prior to World War I. In a civic environment where most political appointments excluded African Americans, Crews's intelligence, talent, and standing in the Kansas City community were such that he was also picked to serve as an assistant superintendent of streets, deputy city clerk, and as an agent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In small gatherings and eventually before crowds of thousands in Kansas City and throughout western Missouri, Crews honed his rhetorical skills and spread a message of political equality and racial pride. Eventually hailed as "the best of them all as a political speaker," Crews' eloquence brought him to the fore of African American activists in the region. An early triumph was a speech before the Missouri legislature in 1903 in which Crews convinced white politicians to defeat a segregationist railroad bill. In a 1919 speech to students at Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas, Crews reminded listeners that African American troops had "been fighting for Democracy" during the recently concluded First World War, and had "come home to enjoy the same."

Crews found new avenues of expression in the written word when he purchased the *Kansas City Sun* newspaper. Under his leadership, the *Sun* trumpeted a message of advancement, and

its reporters covered every aspect of the Kansas City African American community. Crews welcomed diverse perspectives and philosophies, ranging from the scholarly to the militant. He took stands of his own, as well, and his voice held sway on local issues. He was hesitant to support a 1921 bond issue for enhancement to public schools, arguing that African American voters should not approve such a measure without the promise of improvements to their own segregated schools. In 1922, frustrated that the major parties refused to nominate a candidate of color to represent the predominantly African American 8th Ward, he endorsed Theron B. Watkins, an independent black candidate, for the seat.

In addition to his role of prominence as publisher of the *Sun*, Crews was actively involved in almost every major organization of importance to Kansas City's African American community, including the YMCA and YWCA, Urban League, NAACP, Western University in Quindaro, Kansas, and Allen Chapel AME Church. To fund a new facility for Wheatley-Provident Hospital, on whose board he served, Crews spearheaded a 1917 campaign to raise \$25,000. His home at 2624 Highland became a destination for countless prominent visitors to Kansas City who wished to pay tribute to "the best known Negro in Missouri," as by a rival newspaper, the *Kansas City Call* referred to him.

Just a few blocks away, at 2735 Vine, lived Crews' brother, James. Although not as famous as Nelson, James Crews was no less of an activist and civil rights pioneer than his younger brother. Also born in Howard County, James preceded Nelson to Kansas City, arriving in 1877. He began working as a substitute letter carrier in 1883 and soon became Kansas City's first regular African American letter carrier. His work for the Postal Service continued until he retired, after nearly 47 years of service, in 1930.

James Crews is counted among the several individuals who first recognized the importance of a social service organization and public gathering place like the YMCA for African Americans in Kansas City. They brought about its establishment during the early 1900s, and after the "Y" they founded outgrew several locations, Crews and others raised the funds needed to create the historic YMCA at 1824 Paseo. Opening in 1914, the YMCA played a crucial, multi-faceted community role throughout the 1920s and '30s. Deeply involved in the Urban League and NAACP, James Crews was also one of five delegates from the Kansas City chapter of latter organization to travel to its 1921 national convention in Detroit. Kansas Citians read his dispatches from the conference in his brother Nelson's newspaper.

Nelson C. Crews died around the age of 57 in 1923. Ownership of the *Kansas City Sun* was assumed by a group of local businessmen, but the paper foundered without its dynamic leader, and the next generation of black Kansas City newspapers--the *Call* and the *American*—were left to continue Crews' cause of giving voice to the struggle for civil rights. James Crews lived on until October 23, 1946, and the Kansas City postal station at 2201 E. Truman Road now bears his name.

Sources

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