

Coates, Kersey

Civic Leader
1823-1887

by Barbara Magerl

A highly educated Quaker from Pennsylvania and former teacher with a law background, Kersey Coates was born September 15, 1823. He came to Kansas City in 1854 as a land investor and developed the first upscale neighborhood on land purchased from Berenice Chouteau along the west bluffs, far from the riverfront gully town. His Quality Hill became an area of well-designed buildings and gracious brick homes for the wealthy.

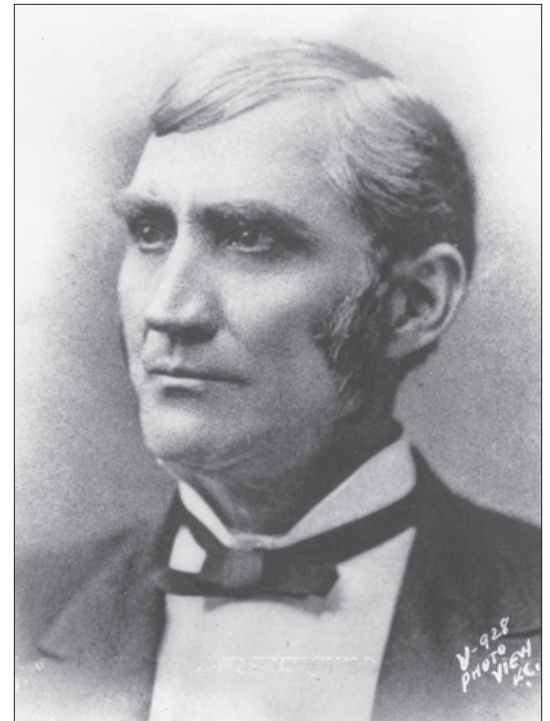
Coates and his wife, Sarah, were deeply involved in the Free State movement, assisting people who wanted to settle Kansas Territory as a state free of slavery. During the Border Warfare era, the couple endured many personal threats from pro-slavery residents.

When the Civil War exploded here, Coates became a colonel in the Missouri Militia. The foundation of his Coates House Hotel at 10th and Broadway served as a Union Cavalry stable.

At war's end, Coates headed many efforts to get the young town booming again. He joined two powerful friends to secure the first bridge over the Missouri River. Robert Van Horn, a native Pennsylvanian and former Kansas City mayor, was elected to Congress. Thaddeus Stevens, a leading Congressman with influence on railroads and banking, had been Coates' law teacher. Along with Charles E. Kearney of Kansas City, the three men landed the Hannibal Bridge, which opened in 1869. The bridge aided the city's beginnings as a major railroad center and budding metropolis.

In 1871 Coates organized the first Kansas City agricultural and industrial fair. He was a founding member of the Chamber of Commerce and member of the first Board of Trade, as well as a banker, merchant, and promoter of river barge commerce.

When he died on April 24, 1887, civic leaders served as pallbearers, but a group of black men asked to carry his casket to honor Coates' anti-slavery leadership. His own mansion and Coates Opera House are gone, but bustling railroad and river traffic remain. His Quality Hill neighborhood also lives on as a tribute to this pioneer



visionary.

Sources

"Kersey Coates: The Man Behind Quality Hill." *Kansas City Live!* December 1991.

Schirmer, Sherry Lamb and Richard D. McKinzie. *At the River's Bend*. Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1982.

Sandy, Wilda. *Here Lies Kansas City*. Kansas City, MO: Bennett Schneider Inc., 1984.

© 2003