

Richard T. Coles

Educator

1859-1930

by Susan Jezak Ford

Richard T. Coles was a Kansas City teacher and principal who not only taught his pupils, but introduced new methods to educate students. Coles initiated the idea in Kansas City of teaching African American grade school children lifetime job skills. His concept conceived a program of industrial training that began providing instructions in skilled fields for children in the fifth grade that continued through high school.

R. T. Coles was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1859. He attended public schools and completed high school in Poland, Ohio. He graduated with honors from the Hampton Institute, where he was a classmate of Booker T. Washington. He came to Kansas City in 1880 and taught in the Lincoln School, Kansas City's first public school for black students. Six years later he was appointed principal of the Pleasant Green School, which later became the Garrison School. During his 44-year tenure, he was the first principal to introduce industrial training programs in an elementary school.

Students in the Garrison School were trained in trades that included carpentry, house painting, and blacksmithing for boys and cooking, dressmaking, and millinery for girls. The courses were combined with traditional academic subjects and continued in high school programs. Manual training courses were also available to adults. Coles felt that the programs would increase the future earning potential of his students and offered help in finding employment to those who completed the program.

The Garrison School eventually expanded from one to more than 15 rooms, and Coles remained as principal until his death in 1930. The R. T. Coles Vocational/Junior High School was named by the Kansas City School Board and opened in 1936 at 19th and Tracy streets, a fitting tribute to the man who gave 50 years to the education of Kansas City's African American students.

Sources

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