

A photograph of Nick Chiles, which appeared in his Topeka Plaindealer in the summer of 1900.

Entrepreneur, Editor, Provocateur: Nick Chiles and the *Topeka Plaindealer*

by Sonja Czarnecki

On Seventh Street in Topeka, between Kansas and Quincy Avenues, stand some dilapidated brick buildings once owned by Nicholas (aka Nick) Chiles, who ran a “colored” hotel and restaurant there in the first decades of the twentieth century. Most notably, Chiles operated what was at that time the largest circulating Black newspaper in the region, the *Topeka Plaindealer*.¹ These buildings are now threatened with demolition, and while the Tenth Street overpass has a historical marker dedicated to him, these are the only physical reminders of the remarkable businessman, “jointist,” ward boss, political leader, bail bondsman, newspaper editor, activist, and all-around gadfly who was Nick Chiles. His grave is in the Topeka Cemetery, but it is unmarked—a shame, considering that he was one of the most important Black leaders in Kansas in his era. The story of Nick Chiles’s self-made transformation fits somewhere in between the prototype of his sometime ally and antagonist Booker T. Washington and that of the more radical Black visionaries W. E. B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter. Starting from notoriety in quasi-legal dealings in liquor and real estate, over time Chiles leveraged his power in business, law, local and state politics, and journalism to maneuver himself into the national dialogue about Black civil rights. While he never quite attained the status and recognition that he sought, he made the *Plaindealer* a regional vehicle for Black activism. The story of Chiles’s self-fashioning reveals a great deal about the possibilities and limitations of Black freedom in early-twentieth-century Kansas.

The formation of the Black community in Kansas generally and Topeka particularly goes back to the earliest days of the state itself. After “Bleeding Kansas” in the 1850s, Kansas entered the Union as a free state in 1861 just as the Civil War began, which prompted the first wave of Black emigrants mostly from Missouri, Arkansas, and neighboring states. Many settled especially in towns known for their antislavery sentiment, such as Quindaro, Lawrence, and Topeka. The 1860 census listed only 627 “colored” state residents, but by 1870, the number had grown to 17,108, or 4.7 percent of the state population. As Reconstruction ended in the South and racial violence worsened, these “push” factors encouraged more Black migrants, who were also attracted by speculators’ exuberant advertising and the possibility of independence and relative freedom. After an especially large influx in 1879, the “Exodusters,” as they came to be known, expanded the Black population of Kansas to 43,107 in 1880 and 50,543 by 1890. New Black settlers were

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1. Emma Lou Thornbrough, “American Negro Newspapers, 1880–1914,” *Business History Review* 40, no. 4 (1966): 467–90, 472.

met with a mixture of charity and prejudice among Topeka's white population and thus concentrated around the north in the "Bottoms" near the Santa Fe railyards, in Ritchie's Addition near the capitol, and southwest in "Tennessee Town."² In 1880, one of every six people in the Topeka area was Black. The economic downturn in the 1890s slowed growth overall; still, by 1890, the Black voting bloc of approximately 12,000 was significant enough to attract the attention of national political parties.³

Nick Chiles was among those who came to Kansas—and the boom town that was Topeka—seeking a better life. Chiles was born in 1867 in Cross Roads, South Carolina (about fifty miles from Abbeville), to Moses and Winnie Chiles, who had been enslaved. As a young man, Nick sold newspapers in Greenville, attended public school, and studied law informally.⁴ After spending time in Chicago and possibly Tennessee, he moved to Topeka in 1886 with, as he himself put it, his wife Minnie, five dollars, and "an abundance of self-confidence."⁵ With Minnie, he had two daughters, Arnicholas, who predeceased him, and Thelma.⁶ By 1896, Chiles had become a successful entrepreneur and had acquired three multistory buildings on east Seventh Street in Topeka: his restaurant, his

hotel, and most infamously his "joint," or saloon, where he sold alcohol despite the state prohibition law. In 1899, Chiles began publishing the *Topeka Plaindealer*. By about 1900, he also owned a grocery store, a skating rink, and farm plots outside town that he rented out. Real estate transactions printed in several Topeka newspapers show that Chiles speculated in buying and selling property, making him one of the wealthiest Black people in Topeka.⁷

The foundation of Chiles's success (and notoriety) was his good business sense and clever exploitation of the lax enforcement of prohibition laws. In 1880, Kansans added a constitutional amendment banning alcohol in the state, the first such amendment in the country. An enforcement act passed in 1881 declared all places that sold liquor in violation of the law public "nuisances," and offenses could be punished with fines of \$100 to \$500 and thirty to eighty days in jail, plus \$100 against the defendant's property for each injunction. But from the beginning, loopholes allowed liquor to be shipped into the state, and owners who presented their saloons as private "clubs" regularly circumvented the law. Many city governments, including Topeka's, accepted fines from saloon owners as a kind of fee for allowing them to remain open. Therefore, many saloons operated with the tacit approval of law enforcement, city officials, and compliant judges. Some towns even depended on the income from fees to pay the salaries of city officials and employees.⁸ Nick Chiles tested whether as a Black "jointist," he could enjoy the same degree of latitude within this system as a white man; when he learned that the answer was no, his politics took a more radical turn.

Politically, most Kansans and especially Black Kansans had been solidly Republican since the Civil War, but in the 1880s, Republicans began alienating Black voters. White immigrants, particularly the

2. Decennial Census Official Publications, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/decennial-publications.html; Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 154. Tennessee Town is bounded roughly by Tenth Avenue, Washburn Avenue, Huntoon Street, and Clay Street.

3. William H. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism: A Kansas Case Study," *Journal of Southern History* 34, no. 3 (August 1968): 405.

4. "A Martyr for His Race Gone. This Issue Dedicated to the Memory of Its Founder, Nick Chiles," *Topeka Plaindealer*, November 1, 1929, 1; "Nick Chiles," (Topeka) *Smasher's Mail*, March 9, 1901, 16.

5. "Nick Chiles," *Smasher's Mail*, March 9, 1901, 16; Mark E. Eberle, "William Lewis Eagleson and the Origins of African American Newspapers in Kansas," Fort Hays State University Scholars Repository, 2022, scholars.fhsu.edu/all_monographs/31, 11. Chiles's own obituary listed his birth year as 1867, but according to the 1900 census, he was born in 1863. In other federal and state censuses, his birth date ranges from 1860 to 1870. Five dollars in 1886 was approximately \$159 in 2023.

6. Arnicholas married George K. Williams in 1913. Thelma married Euclid Taylor in 1924, the year after her sister's death. Minnie died in 1917, and in 1926, Chiles married Henrietta Harper, who became business manager of the *Plaindealer* after Chiles's death on November 1, 1929.

7. J. J. Pipkin, *The Story of a Rising Race: The Negro in Revelation, in History and in Citizenship* (St. Louis, MO: N. D. Thompson Publishing, 1902), 67–68, catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007669486.

8. Kenneth J. Peak and Jason W. Peak, "Liquor Wars and the Law: Decisions of the Kansas Supreme Court, 1861 to 1920," *Kansas History* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 2; Miner, *Kansas*, 156; Peak and Peak, 95, 97.

Irish, began to outnumber Black migrants, so party patronage began to favor Irish over Black candidates. African Americans also experienced increasing discrimination in education and public accommodations, supported by Republican leaders, while incidents of racial violence went unaddressed. A major blow came in 1894 when the Republican Party withdrew financial support from several Black newspapers: the *Topeka Weekly Call*, the *Kansas City American Citizen*, and the *Topeka Kansas State Ledger*. When the Populists mounted a serious challenge to Republican supremacy starting in 1890, some Black voters looked to them for relief. That year, the Populists took 96 of the 125 seats in the Kansas House of Representatives and five of the state's seven U.S. congressional seats. The first biennial legislature in which the Populists prevailed passed a bill to enforce prohibition in cities such as Topeka that were notorious for violating it.⁹ This was probably the main reason that Nick Chiles never sided with the Populists when other prominent Black Kansans did. During their brief ascendancy, the Populists named several Black leaders to government positions, just as the Republicans had done earlier, but by 1894, the Populists had ceased to court the Black vote.¹⁰ Chiles remained a staunch Republican through this period, and he may very well have received party funds to sustain the *Plaindealer* as a reward for his continued loyalty.

The Republican Party overall held the best track record on political patronage jobs for African Americans in Kansas, so Chiles's allegiance to Republicanism was strategic. By the 1890s, Chiles was active in the politics of Topeka's Fifth Ward, an area with numerous Black residents and businesses,

9. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism," 406, 412; Randall B. Woods, "Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The Color Line in Kansas, 1878–1900," *Western Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1983): 196; Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka Kansas, 1865–1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 111–26; Miner, *Kansas*, 174, 182.

10. The People's Party nominated Benjamin F. Foster, a Black minister, for state auditor in 1890, the first nomination of a Black candidate in eight years. Fred Jeltz, the editor of the Black paper the *Kansas State Ledger*, promoted Populism after several Black Republicans lost support from the party in 1893. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism," 411, 416.

where he served as Republican secretary and then chairman.¹¹ Chiles's initiation into local Republican politics seems to have begun just before he bought the *Plaindealer*. From 1895 to 1897, Chiles's business ventures included providing meals for the city jail, which according to the white papers was a political favor bestowed on account of his ability to secure Black votes.¹² When Chiles lost the prison meal contract in 1896 because of quality complaints, he and other "colored men" went right to the office of Governor Edmund Morrill. Chiles prevailed and regained the contract.

Shawnee County Republicans nominated Chiles as a delegate to the state convention in 1888, 1890, 1892, and most of the following years. He also received a notarial commission appointment in 1889 and ran unsuccessfully for constable in 1890, with endorsements from several white papers.¹³ Chiles started hosting the "McKinley Club," officially for Black Republican men, in his hotel sometime before 1900. It attracted attention in the white press and was frequently raided by police for violating the "nuisance" law, i.e., by selling alcohol illegally.¹⁴ In 1900, Chiles made headlines for being appointed sergeant at arms at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, where he bounded up the stairs at the headquarters and boldly introduced himself to Mark Hanna, chairman of the Republican National Committee. During the election of 1900, Chiles began to become more politically active on a national scale. He traveled to Kansas City to interview staunch segregationist Senator Ben Tillman at the Democratic convention and went to Lincoln, Nebraska, to interview Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. At these meetings, Chiles berated both politicians for their racism, and Tillman would be the ongoing

11. "Another Veto," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 3, 1888; "Big Rallies," (Topeka) *Kansas Newspaper Union*, November 1, 1888.

12. "Our New Boss," *Topeka State Journal*, June 30, 1896; "Nick Chiles, Boss," (Topeka) *Daily Press*, July 1, 1896.

13. "Minor Mention," *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 1, 1889, 4; "Local Brevities," *Topeka Daily Press*, March 29, 1890, 8; "Local Briefs," *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 22, 1890.

14. Although private clubs were technically an exception to Prohibition laws, this was a loophole that was widely exploited.

target of Chiles's editorial ire.¹⁵

Because of his reputation for skirting laws banning alcohol sales and hosting gambling at his hotel, Chiles had numerous run-ins with the police, starting in the 1890s, that gained him notoriety in the white press. This ongoing conflict with the authorities, however, was a turning point for Chiles as a leader because it seems to have awakened in him a greater sense of racial injustice, which spurred him to broader activism. White newspapers frequently printed descriptions of Chiles dripping with the racist rhetoric typical of the era:

One of the most insulting pieces of political shysters is Nick Chiles, the brazen faced colored street politician who bosses police officers around at his sweet will and who sticks his nose into every gathering with the slyness of a slimy serpent and the odor of a skunk. . . . (He is the) pet of Republican pimps. . . . Some of these days Nick Chiles will . . . rub the fur the wrong way of some one who is not acquainted with the pull this grinning hyena has on the officers and—there will be a Negro in Heaven for breakfast.¹⁶

These accounts reveal more about the white news media's sensationalizing of racist fears than about Chiles. Either way, Chiles was clearly gaining a reputation.

Sometimes the white press reported on Chiles with grudging admiration for his business sense. When his restaurant opened, Chiles distributed handbills advertising the variety of beverages available, which included beer and wine. White reporters interpreted this move as indicative of Chiles's political power: "He knows the Republican

police board and the Republican county officials are afraid of him, for Nick controls Republican votes." When the hotel opened on New Year's Eve with both white and Black guests in attendance, some papers expressed approval of the fine food and atmosphere: the dining room was "brilliantly lighted" and contained a "framed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation." Reporting, however, quickly veered from portraying Chiles as a Black Horatio Alger hero to racist fearmongering: "HE FEARS NO ARREST. Nicholas II is Czar of All the Russias, but Nicholas I is Czar of Topeka. . . . Ought to Wear a Crown and Be Represented with a Large Hot Foot on Alf Rodgers' Neck, WHILE HE'S CRACKING A Big 'Blacksnake' Whip Defiantly in the Faces of Police Commissioners, County and City Attorneys, Etc."¹⁷ This sensational image of racial hierarchy in reverse, of Black dominance over whites, was clearly intended to shock and provoke. The offering of "free" alcohol at the Chiles hotel, however, was no different than what was occurring at numerous white establishments in Topeka, as the papers were forced to admit. Even white journalists recognized that Topeka needed "a good colored" hotel.¹⁸ The county attorney declined to prosecute Chiles, acknowledging that all the hotels in the city were also serving alcohol, but the incident seemed to draw attention to the broader problem of the police not enforcing prohibition rules.

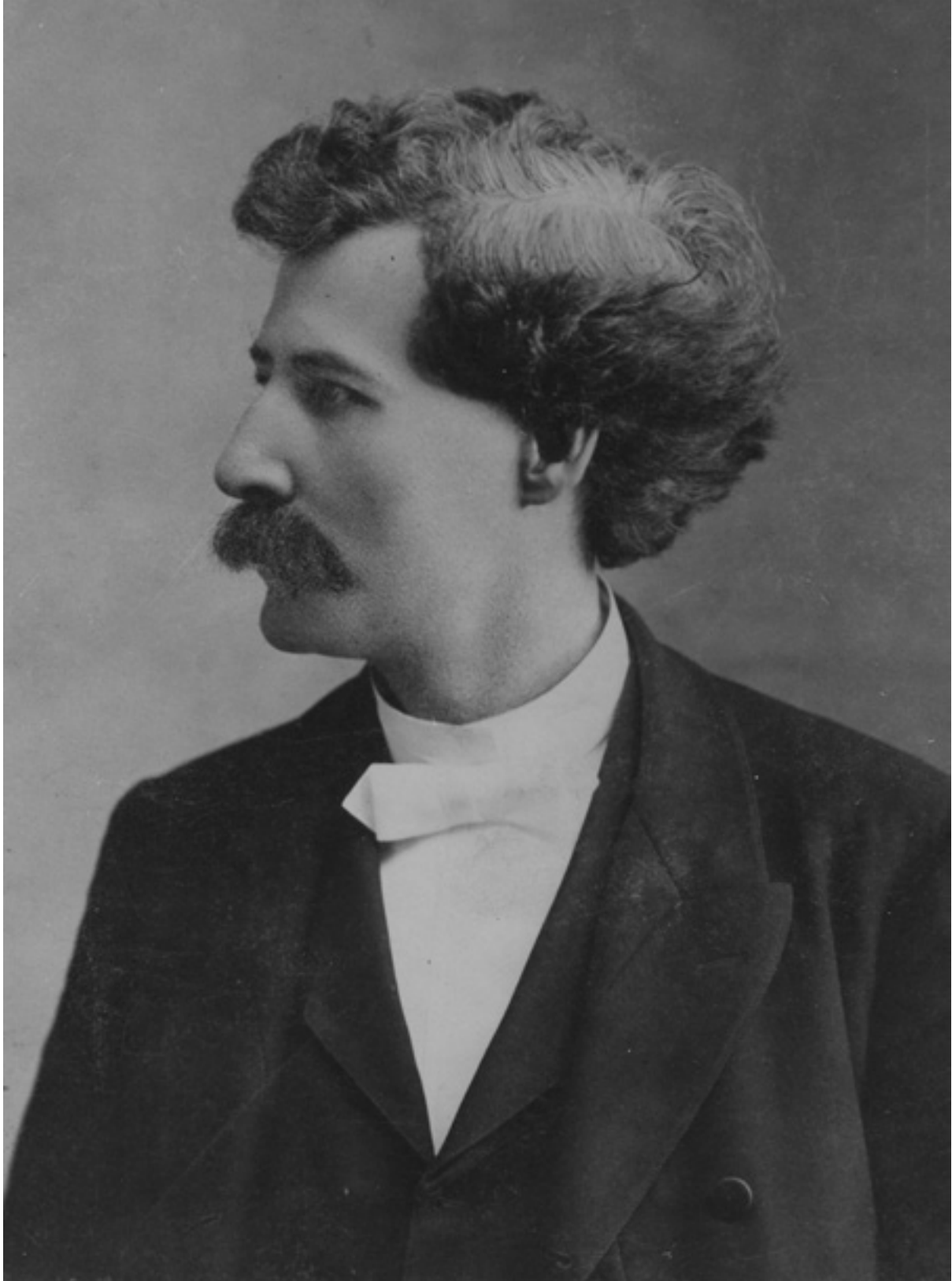
Prohibition enforcement followed a predictable pattern. Police would raid a "joint," and the owners would be thrown in jail and released upon payment of a bond. The owners would then fail to show up for trial, and the city would keep the bond money so that it effectively became a fine under a different name. This system was a profitable money-making venture that funded the police department. However, Chiles believed that the periodic police raids occurred more frequently at his joint than at white ones, and he fought back. In the summer of 1897, Chiles was alleged to be selling alcohol

15. "Mr. Chiles' Five Cent Social," *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 11, 1901, 6. The McKinley Club was renamed the Roosevelt Club when Theodore Roosevelt became president after William McKinley's assassination. "Our Business," *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 22, 1900, 4; "Place for Nick Chiles," *Topeka State Journal*, June 18, 1900; "No Use for N—s," *Ottawa Herald*, July 26, 1900, 4. It is our editorial policy to censor racist language.

16. "Boss' Nick Chiles," (*Topeka*) *Daily Press*, August 29, 1896, 1.

17. "Right in Their Faces," *Topeka State Journal*, December 30, 1896, 1; "Should Get Out," *Topeka State Journal*, January 1, 1897, 1; "A Big 'Ad' for Nick," *Topeka State Journal*, January 2, 1897.

18. "Police Board Meets," *Topeka State Journal*, January 4, 1897.



By the time he represented Chiles, Gaspar Christopher Clemens had already begun his political career as a Populist. He ran unsuccessfully in 1902 for Attorney General of Kansas as a socialist.

at the fairgrounds and was arrested and charged. Eighteen of the city's "jointists" confronted Chiles at one of the establishments because Chiles refused to play along. The assembled men "denounced Nick Chiles for fighting his case in police court," where Chiles claimed that his business was not a joint but a private club. The police chief retaliated by ordering all the "jointists" to close their clubs, so they tried to get Chiles to give up his case and pay the \$100 bond. Chiles refused. The police court case dragged on as the city called in over one hundred witnesses, including police officers who admitted having drunk beer at Chiles's place. Chiles was fined \$100 and given thirty days in jail but vowed to appeal in the district court.¹⁹

Chiles's protest inadvertently gave wind to the sails of the pro-prohibition and anticorruption movement. A citizens group formed to protest the corruption and lax enforcement of the prohibition laws that had come to light with Chiles's case, and they initiated *quo warranto* proceedings through the county attorney against the chief of police.²⁰ One member of the citizens committee, A. H. Vance, and another "witness" named J. D. Clark went to the district court office to swear to a complaint against Chiles for the appeals case. According to reports, Chiles attempted to strike Vance and landed a blow on Clark. Chiles was arrested and released on bond. It was one of three times that Chiles would be arrested that week alone; though he was clearly now a target, he kept his business going in flagrant defiance of the law and to the frustration of the temperance faction. In 1898, Chiles was again arrested, but not prosecuted, for selling liquor at a Labor Day picnic in a city park. As late as 1900, white papers were still referring to Chiles getting away with violating the "prohibitory law."²¹ Chiles

secured the legal counsel of local celebrity lawyer G. C. Clemens, and in 1902, *The State of Kansas v. Nick Chiles* was dismissed on technicalities.²² Local white papers reprinted a "humorous brief" by Clemens and Judge J. S. West, the assistant attorney general, about the case in late December 1901 and early January 1902, satirizing what was regarded as a sham trial.²³ Chiles's tenacious fight against discriminatory enforcement may have led him to buy the *Plaindealer* and reinvent himself as a newspaperman. If law enforcement and the courts would never let him prevail, owning a newspaper could be an alternative pathway for social standing and self-definition. With the *Plaindealer*, he could continue fighting not only for himself but also on behalf of others in the African American community.

By the time this legal battle had reached its denouement, Chiles had begun to adopt the more conventionally respectable role of newspaperman. The end of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century was a golden age for newspapers in Kansas as a new generation of editors determined to improve Kansans' self-image and the image of the state nationally. Nick Chiles aspired to be among this cadre of journalists who were also civic leaders. Like many editors of white-run newspapers, Chiles wanted the *Plaindealer* to be not only a money-making venture but also an instrument of moral uplift and progress. Newspapers linked Black citizens and civic organizations, networked across regions, and connected a larger Black community that included the whole of the United States.²⁴ Newspapers helped establish a proud identity that contradicted the racist stereotypes that filled

19. "Police Board Method," *Topeka State Journal*, July 5, 1897, 5; "The Nick Chiles Case," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 9, 1897, 5; "Nick Chiles' Trial," *Topeka State Journal*, July 9, 1897, 6.

20. "From Committee of 17," *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 5, 1897, 5. *Quo warranto* proceedings challenge an official's legal right to hold a position or dispute the official's right to exercise certain powers.

21. "Chiles Has a Fight," *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 27, 1897, 5; "Temperance Meeting," *Topeka State Journal*, October 18, 1897, 5; "Public Office a Public Trust," (*Topeka*) *Kansas Issue*, April 1, 1900.

22. *The State of Kansas v. Nick Chiles*, 64 Kan. 453 (1902). G. C. Clemens was a radical Populist and attorney from Topeka who made a name for himself publishing and supporting underdogs generally and was known for his stances against prohibition and segregation. See Michael J. Brodhead and O. Gene Clanton, "G. C. Clemens: The 'Sociable Socialist,'" *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1974): 475-502.

23. "Clemens to Herald," *Topeka Herald*, January 10, 1902; "Chiles Goes Free," *Topeka State Journal*, February 8, 1902. At the time, there were many other Prohibition-violation cases that were dismissed.

24. Miner, *Kansas*, 201. William Allen White and Arthur Capper are the best-known examples. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 193-96.

contemporary white papers and frequently rallied the Black vote (when funded by the party machine). The importance of the Black press in the formation of identity, institutions, leadership, and collective action has been demonstrated by numerous scholars. Several editors of these Black publications gained wide readership and respect at a national level; men such as T. Thomas Fortune (economist and editor of the *New York Age*) and W. Calvin Chase (lawyer and editor of the *Washington Bee*) were political leaders and organizers as much as newspapermen.²⁵ Through the *Plaindealer*, Nick Chiles wanted to join their ranks.

While Chiles never quite achieved the national status of these other Black newspapermen, he succeeded in making the *Plaindealer* a key part of a regional network connecting Topeka's Black community to others in the Great Plains, Midwest, and beyond. By the turn of the century, there had been six Black newspapers in Topeka alone, beginning with William L. Eagleson's *Topeka Colored Citizen* (originally based in Fort Scott). However, having enough subscribers to remain solvent was a constant problem, which explains the large number of extremely short-lived Black newspapers in Kansas. In 1898, the most widely circulated Black paper in Topeka was the *Topeka Call*, which Nick Chiles purchased and renamed the *Topeka Plaindealer*. The first issue of the *Plaindealer* appeared on January 6, 1899, as a four-page weekly.²⁶ Chiles may have

purchased the paper as a means of combating the *Colored Citizen*, whose negative reporting on Chiles may have instigated police raids on his businesses. There could have been rivalry among editors for readership, or possibly they competed for the attention and scant funding of state Republicans. Nick Chiles set out to make the *Plaindealer* the only show in town as far as Black newspapers in Topeka were concerned, and he succeeded.

Chiles hired J. H. Childers, an experienced newspaperman, as editor and turned the paper into a professionally produced and engaging publication. The paper soon had more news coverage, more catchy headlines, and more local advertising than other African American papers. As business manager, Chiles took pride in employing many young Black men and women and teaching them the trade. In addition to printing the *Plaindealer*, Chiles did printing work for Black fraternal and insurance organizations as well as clubs and had a long-standing printing contract with the statehouse in Topeka. The *Plaindealer* soon became the most successful Black paper in the region in terms of subscriptions: within three years, there were 3,500 subscribers in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Colorado, and by 1905, the paper boasted 6,000 paid subscribers in those states plus Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, and Georgia.²⁷ Chiles assumed the editorship in 1904 and enlarged each issue to eight pages the following year. His successful businesses undoubtedly helped underwrite the *Topeka Plaindealer* and made it outlast the other Black papers; the other factor was Chiles's nose for headlines that sold copies.

Chiles and the *Plaindealer* first burst into national headlines in 1901 for his unlikely and brief alliance with the country's most famous teetotaler, Carry A. Nation. Nation had been tearing through bars in the region with her "hatchitations," smashing up stills and exposing the sham of Kansas's prohibition laws. One of Nick Chiles's informal but significant roles was posting bond for people (Black and

25. On Black newspapers in the Midwest and Great Plains, see Gayle K. Berardi and Thomas W. Segady, "The Development of African American Newspapers in the American West, 1880-1914," in *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, ed. Monroe Lee Billington and Roger D. Hardaway (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1998); Rashey B. Moten, Jr., "The Negro Press of Kansas" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1936); William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Dorothy V. Smith, *Black Newspapers in Kansas, 1876-1925*, Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas; Shawn Leigh Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle before the NAACP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 5-6.

26. Smith, *Black Newspapers in Kansas*, 111-18; William M. Tuttle, Jr., and Surendra Bhana, "Black Newspapers in Kansas," *American Studies* 13 (Fall 1972): 119-24. There was a different *Plaindealer* published in Pittsburg that moved to Wichita in 1900 and was renamed the *Wichita Searchlight*. Smith, *Black Newspapers in Kansas*, 118-19.

27. Moten, "Negro Press of Kansas," 86-88.

white), and he did just that for Nation when she was thrown into the Topeka jail for yet another charge of property destruction. After her release, Nation asked Chiles to print her newspaper, the *Smasher's Mail*, and he agreed. A large photograph of Chiles and his biography (possibly written by himself) in the March 9 issue introduced him to a new audience: "In spite of intense opposition he has successfully operated all his various business and is gradually forging to the front." Chiles apparently had a "deep interest" in Nation's work and thus came to her aid when she was "deserted by her so-called friends." The white press had a field day covering the ironic partnership between the temperance warrior and the "jointist." Chiles may have allied with Nation because of the support for temperance among some Black Americans after Reconstruction, or the relationship may have been purely transactional.²⁸ Perhaps Chiles just enjoyed stirring the pot and knew what would sell papers.

Articles about Chiles and Nation appeared in every U.S. state and all over Kansas, which was probably exactly what Chiles wanted out of the arrangement. Many Kansas papers gawked at Chiles's significant net worth and property holdings: "Chiles . . . is . . . one of the richest negroes in the state . . . [with] wealth estimated at \$40,000. He runs two newspapers, a hotel, a joint when there is no excitement on, a farm, a dairy, and dabbles in politics."²⁹ The friendship with Carry Nation was fleeting; Chiles printed just a few issues of the *Smasher's Mail* before they had a falling-out, possibly after Chiles was warned by a local judge that he could be sued for libel because of inflammatory content in the *Smasher*. Nation later wrote that she "did not know this son of perdition when we gave him \$245 from an iron cell to print our paper but to our sorrow and knowledge we

28. "Nick Chiles," *Smasher's Mail*, March 9, 1901, 16; Seth Bate, "The Plain Dealer and the Home Defender: Nick Chiles, Carry A. Nation, and Smasher's Mail," *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* 17 (October 2016): 29.

29. "Kansas News Notes," *Axtell Anchor*, April 5, 1901, and others. Chiles actually ran only one newspaper, not two, and \$40,000 in 1901 was the equivalent of over \$1.4 million in 2022. I have not been able to confirm whether this was Chiles's actual net worth; it is very likely an exaggeration.

find him a thief, a rascal in every respect."³⁰ Chiles had never stopped selling alcohol the whole time, of course.

The summer and fall of 1901 saw a protracted game of cat-and-mouse between Chiles and the authorities, just a few months after the end of his connection with Carry Nation. Police raided the McKinley Club on July 18, 1901, and both Chiles and his bartender were arrested based on testimony by a "spotter" who claimed he had climbed in through a basement window to spy on the place. Chiles was fined \$100 and sentenced to thirty days in jail but appealed immediately. The spotter's testimony was discredited when Chiles proved that the window was too small for a grown man to crawl through. The spotter was then arrested for perjury in another case.³¹ In the meantime, Chiles apparently continued to serve beer at the McKinley Club, which was raided again in August. Chiles was arrested and held for a \$200 bond.³² Chiles went before the police court on August 20, but no witnesses would testify against him. Although the *Topeka State Journal* insisted that Chiles's establishment was a saloon that catered to "Indians" and white men, thereby breaking prohibition rules, Chiles insisted that the McKinley Club was private and open only to Black men, thus evading the restriction. Chiles was in court again for violating the "prohibitory law" on September 4 and was convicted for "nuisance" charges related to the raids, fined \$500, and given thirty days in jail with a \$1,600 appeal bond. Attorney General Atreas A. Godard put *State of Kansas v. Nick Chiles* on the docket "for hearing at some future time." Chiles went to Mayor James W. F. Hughes to complain.³³

30. "Hazen Objects," *Smasher's Mail*, March 30, 1901, 8; "Nick Chiles," *Smasher's Mail*, August 1, 1901, 4.

31. "Nick Chiles Fined \$100," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 24, 1901; "Quartet Serenades Mr. Nick Chiles," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 21, 1901; "Arrest of a Spotter," *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 13, 1901.

32. "Police Were Kept Busy," *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 7, 1901, 3; "Chiles Again Arrested," *Topeka Daily Herald*, August 14, 1901, 5.

33. "Police Jottings," *Topeka State Journal*, August 20, 1901; "Chiles in Court," *Topeka Daily Herald*, September 4, 1901, 2 (\$1,600 in 1901 is over \$56,000 today); "Chiles Case Revived," *Topeka State Journal*, October 2, 1901, 7; "Nick Chiles Must Answer," *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 3, 1901, 5; "Chiles Is Wrathful," *Topeka Daily Herald*, October 3, 1901.

Chiles's hotel was raided again by police on October 17, and Chiles put up a \$200 cash bond for his release. This game was getting expensive; still, Chiles did not back down. He was arrested again on October 21, but no case was set for trial.³⁴ The white papers mocked the charade: "The people of Kansas are not to be blamed if they form a notion that the main duty of the police force in Topeka is to chase around and arrest Nick Chiles." Finally Chiles was convicted of "maintaining a nuisance" and fined \$300 with ninety days in jail; again, he appealed. Even the *State Journal* recognized that Chiles was being unjustly targeted.³⁵ Local law enforcement was determined to make an example of Nick Chiles, while Chiles was equally determined to fight.

Chiles's battles with the police and the courts were what transformed him from an enterprising self-made businessman into something greater—a voice for racial justice. The McKinley Club continued to be the target of police raids over the next several years, but Chiles continued to give as good as he got. When his hotel was raided again in November 1903, the *Topeka Daily Herald* reported on it as a "joint," which prompted Chiles to sue the paper for \$3,500 in libel damages; he sued it again in 1905.³⁶ Chiles's tenacity in fighting the charges showed how he was repositioning himself in society, moving from the demimonde of compliant saloon owners into another, more respectable sphere as a community leader fighting against racial injustice. At a time when enforcement of prohibition laws was arbitrary and lax, Chiles was probably correct that he was targeted aggressively because he was an African American man who had a certain amount

of power within the community and was not afraid of a fight. He knew what the racial norms were but declined to accept the status quo.

By the time Chiles took over the *Plaindealer's* editorship in 1905, his transformation from marginal businessman to community leader was well underway. The *Plaindealer* published original and reprinted content about racial uplift and inspiring examples of Black leadership; undoubtedly Chiles saw himself as part of this movement. Chiles made it his mission through the *Plaindealer* to prevent legal segregation in Kansas from spreading and protect the few civil and political rights African Americans enjoyed. During the apex of white racist populism, this was no easy task. Black Kansans experienced de facto segregation in all-white restaurants, theaters, hotels, churches, hospitals, and neighborhoods; except for schools in larger towns and the state militia, there was little legally mandated segregation. While most white Kansans embraced a free-state identity, they did not condone "social equality," which was code for race "mixing" or intermarriage.³⁷ There were several attempts to pass discriminatory legislation in the first decades of the 1900s, and attempts to expand segregation in education succeeded despite the efforts of many Black leaders.

One of Chiles's persistent tactics to fight the encroachment of Jim Crow was to draw unflattering comparisons between white leaders in Kansas and their worst racist counterparts in the South. A frequent target was James K. Vardaman, who became governor of Mississippi in 1904 and later U.S. senator. Vardaman was popular with poor whites in the state and openly celebrated lynching as a means of maintaining white supremacy. The *Plaindealer* boldly challenged the kind of racist ideology Vardaman (and others, such as Senator Ben Tillman) represented. Chiles promoted a proud Black identity that was the antithesis of white racist stereotypes and shaped the *Plaindealer* into a paragon of the best "Negro" (with a capital "N") political thought and achievement. As Chiles

34. "Nick Chiles Raided," *Topeka State Journal*, October 17, 1901, 4; "Police Jottings," *Topeka State Journal*, October 18, 1901; "Police Jottings," *Topeka State Journal*, October 21, 1901, 8; "Nick Chiles Arrested Again," *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 22, 1901, 3.

35. "Kansas News and Comment," *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 23, 1901, 4; "Chiles Found Guilty," *Topeka Daily Herald*, October 30, 1901, 2; "Goblins—Get You," *Topeka State Journal*, October 31, 1901, 7.

36. "McKinley Club Raid," *Topeka State Journal*, February 1, 1904, 4; "Go After Chiles," *Topeka Daily Herald*, November 17, 1903, 1; "Chiles Will File Suit," *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 20, 1903, 8; "Wants \$3,500 Damages," *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 29, 1903, 5; "The Herald in a Jack-Pot!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, December 4, 1903, 1; "News about Town," *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 25, 1905.

37. Woods, "Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation?," 183.



Scene after a police raid at the old Shawnee County courthouse at Fourth Street and Kansas Avenue, probably in the 1890s.

once wrote to Vardaman, "I have faith in the new Negro and that if he is given proper recognition as a human being, he will be a delight in the eyes of the race by whom he is hated."³⁸ Chiles was only nominally writing to Vardaman; his true audience was Black and white readers in Kansas and beyond.

Chiles aligned the *Topeka Plaindealer* with the first "New Negro" movement, which emphasized education, self-sufficiency, property ownership, and race-consciousness and was often summarized by the word "uplift."³⁹ The message was directed

as much to white readers and leaders as to the African American community. By flattering white Kansans' free-state sensibilities and drawing a contrast between "good" and "Christian" whites in Kansas and their "low-class," racist counterparts in the South, Chiles strategically positioned the *Plaindealer* to leverage the support of white allies in the press and in politics. Chiles often attacked racist acts by the legislature by invoking Kansas's free-state legacy. When the Kansas house passed a bill preventing intermarriage, Chiles fired back in a headline, "Kansas Repudiates John Brown, Lincoln and Mrs. Stowe."⁴⁰ Invoking a common heritage positioned "good" whites and the Black

38. Nick Chiles, "To Discuss Race Problem with Vardaman!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, March 25, 1904, 1.

39. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* no. 24 (1988): 129–55; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 416–17.

40. "White Men Doubt Honor of Their Women!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 24, 1913, 1.

community on the same side.

As the *Plaindealer* expanded its size and audience, Chiles sought to make the paper a visible and recognized player in regional and even national politics while providing social cohesion locally. The *Plaindealer* knit together the Black community by printing updates from contributors in towns and cities around Kansas and some neighboring states, especially Missouri and Oklahoma. The paper quickly gained a regional reputation. Some of the *Plaindealer* staff went on to important careers in journalism and politics.⁴¹ Robert Sengstacke Abbott was a stringer at the *Plaindealer* sometime between 1901 and 1905, when he moved to Chicago and founded the *Chicago Defender*, the paper that would soon become the most famous Black newspaper in the world.⁴² Chiles himself was frequently on the road, selling subscriptions and talking politics. Even before 1905, readers of the *Plaindealer* assumed that editorials in the *Plaindealer* represented the views of both Nick Chiles and J. H. Childers. The Democratic Black paper the *Broad Ax* in Chicago did not distinguish between the two in criticizing them for the paper's staunch support of Theodore Roosevelt in 1900.⁴³ Many other Black editors admired Chiles, but he was frequently the butt of comments in the white press that ranged from wry amusement to indignant racism, depending on the paper. Derisive as many editors' attitudes toward Chiles were, he could not be ignored. Among the local white press, the worst caricatures came from the *Topeka State Journal*. Even more offensive were the white papers from other towns in Kansas that reprinted articles about Chiles with their own even more viciously racist spin. Arthur Capper of the *Topeka Daily Capital* and columnist Jay E. House had a more friendly attitude toward Chiles. Chiles

41. Langston Hughes's mother, Carrie Langton Hughes, worked as a stringer and sales agent for the *Plaindealer*.

42. "Locals and Personals," *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 12, 1901, 3. Chiles visited Abbott in Chicago in 1918 and claimed that Abbott had taken many of the *Plaindealer's* features, such as the "Guess Who?" column, with him to the *Defender*. "On to Washington," *Topeka Plaindealer*, September 13, 1918, 1.

43. (Chicago) *Broad Ax*, July 21, 1900, 1.



This 1909 cartoon from the *Topeka State Journal* dramatizes for racist effect the conflict between Chiles and Dolley.

eventually endorsed both for political office.

Chiles's good business sense ensured the *Plaindealer's* survival; he probably funded the paper in part from his profitable businesses, legal and otherwise. By 1905, the *Plaindealer* was circulating in eleven states, including some in the South, and had the largest number of subscribers of any African American paper in Kansas. Its militant stance against discrimination, political disfranchisement, and lynching drew readers, along with the fact that it was superior to other papers not only in the quantity but also in the quality of its content.⁴⁴ At the same time, the newspaper continued to print society notes and to publicize the meetings of various Black interest groups and clubs such as the Afro-American Council and Negro Business League. Despite the difficulty of selling subscriptions in a community with few resources to spare, the reach of the *Plaindealer* continued to spread throughout the first

44. Paul Emory Putz, "For Race and Region: A Brief History of the Western Negro Press Association, 1896-1920," *Great Plains Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 175-98; Moten, "Negro Press of Kansas," 88; Smith, *Black Newspapers in Kansas*, 118-19.

two decades of the century. Chiles bought property on Topeka's main business street, Kansas Avenue, and moved the *Plaindealer* offices there by 1912.⁴⁵ As a wealthy Black Topekan, Chiles was frequently mentioned in white newspapers for posting bond for other Topekans arrested for a variety of reasons. These may have been favors Chiles bestowed in exchange for securing votes. It is also possible that Chiles made loans and functioned as an informal bank. These economic entanglements may have helped Chiles as he expanded his role as a political leader despite, or because of, ongoing trouble with the law.

As Black Kansans' political leverage diminished after 1900, Chiles's editorial voice in the *Plaindealer* grew more radical, and the audience of the *Plaindealer* expanded.⁴⁶ Chiles reached a broad audience of both Black and white readers and exerted power to shape the public image of African Americans as one of dignity and honor, political relevance, and economic self-sufficiency. Chiles's efforts can be situated among those of his contemporaries, such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois; other prominent Black editors, such as William Monroe Trotter; and organizations such as the Afro-American Council and the NAACP. Between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of World War II, Black Americans had little political or legal power but formed religious and civic institutions and networks, powered largely by Black newspapers, that sustained political and economic development against great odds. The modern Civil Rights Movement began in this era. Nick Chiles tried to make the *Plaindealer* a leading voice for racial justice just as Black readers, also frustrated with the lack of racial progress, had the economic means to buy newspapers. This larger cultural and social shift helps explain Chiles's turn toward a more radical message.

The *Plaindealer* consistently addressed national political issues of concern to African Americans

45. Kansas Historical Society Historic Sites Survey, *Historic Preservation in Kansas, Black Historic Sites: A Beginning Point* (Topeka; Kansas Historical Society, 1977), 31–32.

46. Alexander, *An Army of Lions*, 5–6.

across the United States. Chiles's protest against lynching was reported on by T. Thomas Fortune in the *New York Age*, a leading Black newspaper in the East: "The work of the *Plaindealer* is receiving the hearty and unstinted support of some of the strongest race leaders in the country."⁴⁷ J. B. Bass, editor and owner of a Montana Black newspaper, admired Chiles, who, he wrote, "could pose on four sides of any one question, and come out unscathed,—who has stood the grill in many battles, and though he came out of many bleeding and bruised, he always had a smile." That same year, Chiles sent letters to the Kansas congressional delegation in support of an effort to revive the reduction clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which stated that any state restricting the Black vote would lose representation in the House. He wrote, "This is the only remedy to bring about fair play and the sooner the Southern white man learns that the Negroes have a right to vote and to free speech, the better it will be and the way to bring this about is to reduce his representation in Congress."⁴⁸ Chiles frequently used the *Plaindealer* to amplify national civil and political rights issues to readers locally and regionally.

Despite the state's reputation for white progressives such as Charles Sheldon and pride in its "free-state" heritage, racial violence was routine in Kansas, although to a lesser extent than in the South at the time.⁴⁹ The *Plaindealer* regularly condemned lynchings that occurred all over the country and criticized the hypocrisy of white newspapers in Kansas. In 1901, Chiles went to Kansas Attorney General Godard on behalf of the Afro-American Ministerial Union of Topeka to request ouster proceedings against the sheriff of Leavenworth County for failing to protect

47. "George R. Koester, Lyncher," *Topeka Plaindealer*, April 18, 1902, 4; "Give Him a Boost," *Topeka State Journal*, February 27, 1902; "Cowardly Leaders," *Topeka Plaindealer*, March 7, 1902.

48. J. B. Bass, "Retrospective," (Helena) *Montana Plaindealer*, June 7, 1907, 1; Nick Chiles, "Afraid to Speak His Sentiments!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 5, 1906, 1.

49. James N. Leiker, "Race Relations in the Sunflower State," *Kansas History* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 217, 221; Brent M. S. Campney, *This Is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1861–1927* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Taylor, *Racial Frontier*, 193–96, 212.

Black victim Fred Alexander from a lynch mob. When Godard refused, Chiles threatened to go to the governor. The governor signed a reward proclamation for the perpetrators, but no one was apprehended.⁵⁰ After this failed attempt to rouse white political leaders to action, Chiles increasingly used the *Plaindealer* to expose incidents of racial violence and hold authorities accountable. Chiles and other Black leaders supported an antilynching bill in 1902, which would have provided legal damages to a victim's heirs. A growing law-and-order movement among powerful white leaders and law enforcement in the 1890s gradually prevailed in reducing mob violence generally.⁵¹ The Kansas legislature outlawed lynching in 1903 and instituted strict penalties for even knowing about such an event.

In reporting on violence beyond Kansas, a frequent theme in the *Plaindealer* was the hypocrisy of law enforcement and the white press. After the white press failed to report on an attempted assault on a young Black child by a white man, Chiles mocked these newspapers and their racist caricatures of Black criminals: "John Gibson, a big, burly *white* brute . . . was prevented from accomplishing his hellish design by the timely arrival of the child's mother." Such language routinely appeared in accounts in white newspapers of alleged acts of violence by Black men against white women. Chiles threw the racism of the white papers' headlines back at them: "A White Brute's Heinous Crime! Tries to Assault a Little Colored Child! The White Papers Are as Quiet as Clams—the Brute Is Behind Prison Bars Awaiting Justice."⁵² Chiles made a similar point about the white press's hypocrisy when five white men were arrested for rape in March 1904, asserting that if the perpetrator had been Black, "every white thug and ruffian in

the community would have lined up for a lynching bee." Chiles made the same accusation repeatedly whenever the white press "went into spasms" over Black violence but ignored white violence against Black victims.⁵³ The racial double standard was a long-running theme in the *Plaindealer's* reporting.

Chiles also frequently touched on a topic that disturbed Victorian sensibilities: sex. When a white schoolteacher from Kentucky turned down a position because it was in a mixed-race classroom, Chiles attacked her for hypocrisy, calling attention "to the fact that her forefathers were rapists and seducers of colored women for centuries, and that they now lynch and burn Negroes for supposed crimes. . . . No doubt she has several half Negro brothers and sisters in her state, as Old Kentucky was loyal in lowering Negro women in the antebellum days." There was no more taboo subject. White newspapers in Kentucky responded with indignation and threats. Chiles reprinted their responses, including their threat of lynching: "If the editor was only in Kentucky for a night we would like to stretch him 'with hemp.'"⁵⁴ Chiles was not alone in shining light on the sexual abuse of Black women. Ida B. Wells, the antilynching activist, wrote openly that the white stereotype of Black men assaulting white women was in fact the inverse of the historical reality.

Dozens of *Plaindealer* articles reporting on racial violence or discriminatory laws proposed in Kansas or elsewhere returned repeatedly to the theme of white hypocrisy about the rape of Black women by white men. After excoriating a Mississippi law that imprisoned a white woman for marrying a Black man, Chiles satirically called for a bill to make "legitimate the illegitimate children of Negro women begotten by white fathers."⁵⁵ Chiles was relentless on this topic throughout his career, rarely missing an occasion to call out the sexual and racial politics of segregation

50. "Mr. Godard Refused," *Topeka Daily Herald*, September 5, 1901, 1; Chris Lovett, "A Public Burning: Race, Sex, and the Lynching of Fred Alexander," *Kansas History* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 94–115.

51. "To Stop All Lynching," *Wichita Beacon*, February 5, 1903; Brent M. S. Campney, "Ever Since the Hanging of Oliphant: Lynching and the Suppression of Mob Violence in Topeka, Kansas," *Great Plains Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 77.

52. "That Joplin Outrage," *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 8, 1903, 1.

53. "Big, Burly White Brutes!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, March 11, 1904; "A White Man's Awful Crime!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, April 21, 1905, 1.

54. "Turn Down Their Kin People!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 23, 1903, 1.

55. "Negroes Can't Have White Wives!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 6, 1905, 4.

in explicit terms. In 1913, an antimiscegenation bill was proposed in the state House of Representatives. Chiles's ironic headline aimed for maximum provocation by implying that only legal restriction could stem the tide of white women desiring to marry Black men: "White Men Doubt the Honor of Their Women! Intermarriage Law a Frank Admission That Kansas Legislators Have Lost Faith in White Womanhood—Law Aimed to Humiliate Blacks a Stigma on Their Homes." As usual, Chiles struck at the sponsor's low class: "He is a Democrat whose ancestors we know not of. His foreparents may be from Texas or hell." Chiles reminded readers that race was an ambiguous category: "Mr. Herr ought [sic] to know that there are members in the House who may have half brothers and sisters in the colored race and should be careful. Ninety per cent of the old ex-slave holders were fathers of colored children by colored mothers." Chiles said he would "bet doughnuts to ginger cakes" that Herr himself was part Black.⁵⁶ Chiles's typical style was to make white readers uncomfortable, pushing the rhetoric beyond the boundaries of propriety and then some.

Like Ida B. Wells, Chiles came to advocate the use of weapons in militant self-defense of the Black home should it be necessary. Chiles published stories about racial violence from around the country to rouse his readers to political action and "manly" dignity. This culminated later with the onset of World War I. Like Du Bois, Chiles advocated enlistment as proof of manly readiness for full civil and political rights. During the war, he printed several letters that he mailed to Woodrow Wilson and other leaders urging antilynching legislation and even traveled to Washington, D.C., to seek an audience. When the Black soldiers of the Twenty-Fourth Regiment were hastily tried and then executed or imprisoned in the aftermath of the 1917 Houston riots—a travesty of justice—Chiles hired leading Topeka lawyer Elisha Scott and organized the Kansas Defense Society to demand a fair retrial and presidential review. Chiles stayed

56. "White Men Doubt Honor of Their Women!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 24, 1913, 1.

politically active during the 1920s; among other efforts, he fought on behalf of the victims of the Tulsa massacre to attempt reparations for damages suffered by the Black residents of Greenwood.

Fighting job discrimination emerged as another cause in the *Plaindealer*. A number of Black Topekans, including Chiles, protested when the school board fired four Black female teachers who had gotten married and hired white, out-of-state teachers as their replacements. At the time, it was customary for women (who could afford it) to give up their jobs when they married or be fired; for women whose husbands did not earn enough to support their families, this was an economic blow. Teaching was one of the few professions available to educated young African Americans, and many competent young Black graduates had trained as teachers in Topeka.⁵⁷ Chiles complained in 1903 that African Americans were not able to obtain good-paying jobs as prison guards, and those in prison were learning trades.⁵⁸ Chiles frequently tried to use his political power to secure economic opportunities for African Americans in Topeka despite the political parties' general indifference to the concerns of the Black community.

While the Republicans gave up courting the African American vote in the 1890s, Chiles remained staunchly loyal throughout much of the early 1900s, possibly because he himself continued to receive party favors. In the Christmas issue of 1902, the *Plaindealer* celebrated its success and commitment to political action and representation through the Republican Party: "We believe that the sixty thousand Negroes of Kansas are entitled to a fair and a reasonable share of the offices, and shall continue to contend for fair treatment of our people in the state and nation."⁵⁹ Early in 1903, the first suggestion that Chiles should hold political

57. "Single Blessedness Is Their Only Hope—No Married Teachers Need Apply for Topeka Schools," *Topeka Daily Herald*, June 3, 1902, 6. Since the first Black schools were founded, Topekans have taken pride in their many fine African American educators, such as Mamie Williams.

58. Nick Chiles, "A School Fight in Chanute!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 2, 1903.

59. "Editorial Comment," *Topeka Plaindealer*, December 19, 1902, 1.

office as postmaster, on account of his personal wealth and influence, came from the editor of an Arkansas paper. Chiles demurred: "Thanks. . . . We are not looking for any political jobs. All we want is to see the Negro receive equality at law, free speech, a vote, and it counted. . . . As soon as we can secure the \$20,000 [the editor] accuses us of having, we will invest in a few farms which will prove more beneficial to the race."⁶⁰

Because of the Carry Nation stunt, Chiles had a reputation (not necessarily deserved) for being the wealthiest and most influential Black man in eastern Kansas. But his own political ambition would take many more years to develop. In 1903, Chiles went to governor W. J. Bailey to demand that Black barbers be represented by appointment to the barbers examining board. Barbering was one of the few professional occupations open to Black men, but a proposed law mandated that the two appointments must be members of the barbers' union, which excluded African Americans. Numerous white papers mocked Chiles's effort, which ultimately failed. In retaliation, Chiles refused to endorse Bailey the following year. The *Plaindealer* supported challenger E. W. Hoch; coincidentally or not, Bailey lost.⁶¹

By the end of 1903, the tide had firmly turned against Black influence in the Republican Party. Theodore Roosevelt himself visited Topeka in 1903, but no Black leaders were invited to participate in welcoming him. Chiles wrote bitterly about the snub in the *Plaindealer*. In the same editorial, he called out the violations of the Fourteenth Amendment in the southern states and criticized the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. But he ended on a hopeful note: "We will be invited in 1904."⁶² The 1903 Christmas issue of the *Plaindealer*, which normally sounded a celebratory tone, conveyed a sense of resignation. With the Populist threat out of the way, Republicans were again firmly in control in Kansas: "There is little in all of these things for

the black man. . . . He has received minor and menial appointments. He is denied admission into the party which he served with that patience and fidelity for which he is famous."⁶³ Chiles's protests fell on deaf ears while he complained about the lack of African American representation in Republican leadership.⁶⁴ Chiles got his wish, however, when he was appointed sergeant at arms to the Republican National Convention in Chicago in June 1904. One white paper joked that Roosevelt was likely to make Chiles the next secretary of war.⁶⁵ Chiles nonetheless grew increasingly disillusioned with the Republican Party and at the state level would go on to support several Democrats.

Chiles tested white sensibilities not only in what he printed but also in how he lived. This was especially apparent when he moved his family to 717 Topeka Avenue, a predominantly white neighborhood, in April 1904. A real estate agent rented property to Chiles's brother-in-law J. W. Golden, who was light-skinned and passed as white. Chiles and his family moved in shortly thereafter. Chiles responded to the scandal in the *Plaindealer* by writing that white Topekans were in much closer contact with "Negroes whom they believe to be white" than they thought. Chiles called out the reason for the existence of light-skinned African Americans, namely, that white men had raped Black women during slavery, which sometimes resulted in mixed-race children. "Had the white man been as good and virtuous as he should," he wrote, "he would have been able to tell the difference between a Negro and a white man." Predictably, this part of Chiles's response was picked up by white papers and reprinted.⁶⁶

In 1905, Chiles further inflamed sensibilities and gained attention in the national press when he purchased a home for his family across from

63. "Our State Officers," *Topeka Plaindealer*, December 25, 1903, 2.

64. "Our Delegation," *Topeka Daily Herald*, March 1, 1904, 3; "On to Wichita!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, March 4, 1904, 1.

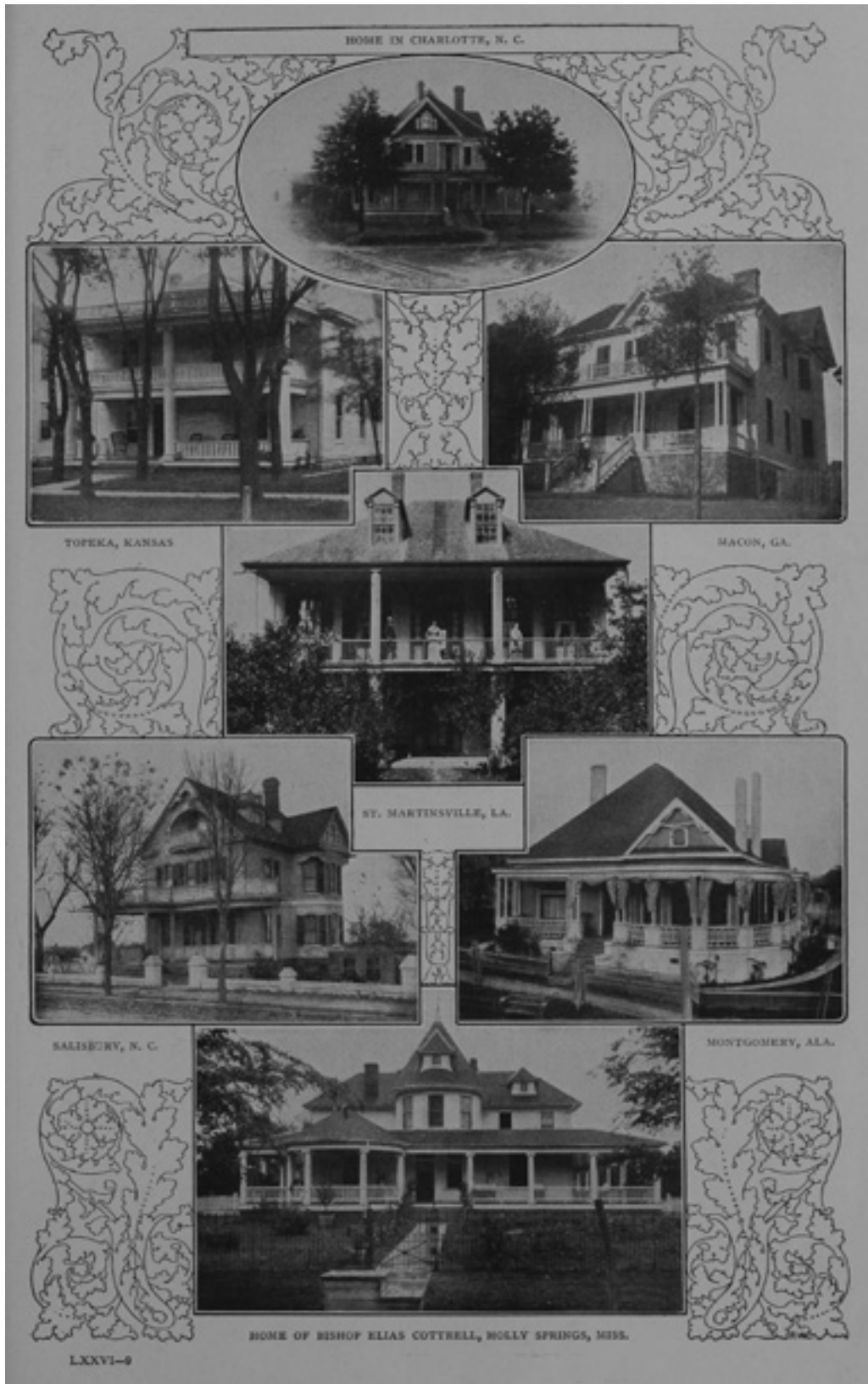
65. "Nick Chiles Appointed," *Topeka State Journal*, June 16, 1904, 4; *Horton Commercial*, June 30, 1904, 1.

66. "Nick Chiles Moved In," *Topeka State Journal*, April 13, 1904, 6; Nick Chiles, "Tillmanites on Topeka Avenue!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, April 15, 1904, 1; "A Hot Shot," *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, April 21, 1904, 2.

60. "The Topeka Postoffice!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 30, 1903, 1.

61. "D---y Wants a Job," *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 3, 1903; "Colored Voters Take Warning!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 15, 1904, 1.

62. "We Welcome President Roosevelt," *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 1, 1903, 1.



Chiles's house in Topeka appears together with other prominent African Americans' homes in a photograph accompanying an article by Booker T. Washington in Century Magazine.

the governor's mansion at 914 Buchanan Street, a move that was interpreted as a political signal. In February 1905, the legislature passed a bill creating a separate high school for Black students in Kansas City, Kansas (Sumner High School) following the killing of a white student by a Black man. Previously, all high schools in the state had been integrated. This was a period when Jim Crow segregation was only growing stronger and more institutionalized—Chiles and others protested to no avail.⁶⁷ Hoch's failure to prevent the segregated high school in Kansas City turned Chiles against the governor. Chiles also criticized Hoch for cutting janitorial jobs that had been traditional patronage positions for loyal Black Republicans and called for a different Republican gubernatorial nominee. When Chiles bought a home across the street from Hoch's on "governor's row" that year, many white papers interpreted it as a power move intended to insult the governor in retaliation for his racism. Chiles knew exactly what he was doing. Versions of the story depicting Chiles as a racist caricature of the "uppity" Black man circulated widely. Chiles defended his "investment" and played on class consciousness by claiming that only poor and ignorant white people resented Black success. Chiles delighted in contradicting stereotypes, which may have been reason enough for the move.⁶⁸

Chiles seems to have made these intentionally provocative moves to elevate his national profile while at the same time seeking connection with other civil rights leaders to learn and collaborate during this period of rising racial tensions. Chiles had a friendly but sometimes contentious relationship with the most famous Black leader of the time, Booker T. Washington. Washington visited Topeka

first in 1897 and then again in July 1907 to be the keynote speaker at a meeting of the state chapter of the National Negro Business League. Chiles had helped found a local chapter of the Negro Business League. In the *Plaindealer*, he encouraged support of Black-owned businesses by Black customers as a matter of self-sufficiency: "If white men and women do not give you and your children equal opportunity, don't trade with them, but go and build one of your own race enterprises, thereby securing places for your own."⁶⁹ But as much as he admired Washington, Chiles also criticized him for his accommodationism. Chiles was indignant that at the 1906 meeting of the National Negro Business League in Atlanta, Black attendees had had to use a separate entrance; because of this segregation, Chiles had discouraged attendance. As Chiles said to a reporter in Emporia, "In Topeka we go in the front door." Washington wrote back and pleaded with Chiles to change his mind, recalling the example of Frederick Douglass, who had once had to ride in a cattle car but refused to be humiliated.⁷⁰

Despite this disagreement, Chiles and Washington held each other in high esteem. Washington included a photograph of Nick Chiles's home in a *Century Magazine* spread about the homes of prominent African Americans.⁷¹ Arthur Capper commented wryly in the *Daily Capital*, "At any rate, Nick Chiles is the only Topeka man who ever got into the Century magazine."⁷² Chiles and Washington continued to politely disagree, especially about violent self-defense. Washington wrote to Chiles about his concern over a Chiles letter praising the use of violence by African Americans in Seneca, South Carolina; he warned that this

67. "Senator Getty Hissed by Negro," *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 18, 1905. See also David Trowbridge, "Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City: The History of Sumner High School," *Kansas History* 27, no. 3 (Autumn 2005), 188–201.

68. "Nick Chiles to Move," *Topeka Daily Herald*, July 20, 1905, 7; "To Be a 'Neighbor,'" *Hutchinson News*, July 21, 1905; "Whites and Blacks Can Dwell in the Same Block!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 28, 1905, 1; "Chiles Moves Up," *Topeka State Journal*, July 20, 1905, 9; "Hoch's First and Last Term!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, August 4, 1905, 1, 4; Nick Chiles, "It Is Not So," *Topeka Plaindealer*, April 20, 1906, 4.

69. Nick Chiles, "Stand Up for the Race!," *Topeka Plaindealer*, November 24, 1905, 1.

70. "Booker T. Washington to Nicholas Chiles, February 20, 1906," in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 8, 1904–1906, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021), 528–29; "Nick Chiles Here," *Emporia Gazette*, January 26, 1906, 7. Chiles must have approved of this interview because he reprinted the same story in the *Plaindealer*.

71. "Snapshots," *Topeka State Journal*, May 11, 1908, 10; Booker T. Washington, "Negro Homes," *Century*, May 1908, 71–79.

72. "On Second Thought," *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 12, 1908, 4.



Booker T. Washington reading correspondence in a 1915 portrait. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

letter might spark more bloodshed. Chiles replied, “Your line of procedure may be alright for the South, but ours is decidedly right for the entire world.”⁷³ Washington wrote back warmly a few days later, “There is no disagreement between us as to the end to be accomplished.” Washington went on asking for Chiles’s help in promoting the Negro Business League. In 1911, Washington listed the *Plaindealer* among the twelve “strongest colored papers” in the United States that he wished to have sent to him secretly through an intermediary, without using Washington’s name. Behind his conservative facade, Washington quietly supported the *Plaindealer* and

73. “Nicholas Chiles to Booker T. Washington, November 12, 1906,” in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 13, 1914–1915, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 516–17.

other more radical Black voices.⁷⁴

Like Washington, to be taken seriously as a leader, Chiles had to embrace religious conservatism and position himself as a solid Christian. Where one went to church communicated much about social standing in early-twentieth-century white Topeka, and this was true in the Black community too. Chiles was a lifelong member of St. John’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Topeka and had good relationships with several local congregations, but his notoriety and growing vociferousness made him some enemies. Reverend G. D. Olden, pastor of the First African Baptist Church, was one of several Topeka leaders who believed segregated schooling was better for Black children. When Chiles and *Plaindealer* editor J. H. Childers vehemently attacked segregation and Olden’s views, Olden lashed back, “It is just the class of men of Childers and Chiles that are causing all the trouble, the race prejudice by their bulldozing. . . . Nick stands for devil.”⁷⁵ Chiles had no patience for accommodationists. He often was in conflict with religious leaders; for example, when the ministerial council of the AME church passed a resolution that pledged to help authorities suppress “lawlessness” by urging members to “strive for higher ground,” Chiles shot back, “How much higher do they expect us to get in order to keep the prejudiced Negro hating white man from his eternal abuse[?]” Chiles blamed the ministers for being too weak when what the community needed was organized self-defense.⁷⁶ In the next few years, Chiles’s editorials would grow increasingly militant in tone.

In a gesture that may have been calculated to provoke white Protestants, in 1904, Chiles and other members of the Western Negro Press

74. “Booker T. Washington to Nicholas Chiles, November 17, 1906,” in *Booker T. Washington Papers*, 13:517–18; “Booker T. Washington to Emmett Jay Scott, February 13, 1911,” in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 10, 1909–1911, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 585.

75. “Uses the Cudgel,” *Topeka State Journal*, January 17, 1902. “Bulldozing” was a term that referred to bullying voters.

76. “Passed a Sacred Resolution!,” *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 31, 1903, 1.

Association congratulated the newly instated Pope Pius X and asked for his support in fighting racism and discrimination, particularly for Black workers excluded from Catholic unions. Their message also complained about white Protestants' reluctance to condemn racism. Chiles asked Kansas U.S. Senator Joseph Burton to deliver the letter.⁷⁷ When the Vatican responded to Chiles with a warm, supportive reply, the *Plaindealer* and other papers reprinted it, and Chiles again made headlines. Given that most Kansans were Protestant, this encouragement from the leader of the Catholic Church was meant to bite.

Practically all white churches in Kansas at the turn of the century excluded African Americans, although some white liberal Protestants in Topeka made gestures toward racial amity. The best-known of these efforts at the time was probably the Tennessee Town kindergarten for Black children founded by Congregationalist pastor Charles Sheldon, which ran from April 1893 to 1910. Sheldon rose to international prominence with his best-selling book *In His Steps*, which made famous the phrase "What would Jesus do?" In 1900, Sheldon took editorial control of the *Topeka Daily Capital* to run it "as Jesus would" for one week.⁷⁸ Chiles reported on this with a hint of cynicism: "There is no doubt in our mind if it were possible to conscientiously answer the question, 'What Would Jesus Do?' that the 'Jim Crow' car, lynchings, and burning of poor, defenseless Negroes would pass away." After Sheldon failed to address race, Chiles assessed his effort: "Rev. Sheldon has accomplished one thing . . . if all else was disappointing. He used the upper-case 'N' in Negro. We know that's what Jesus would do!"⁷⁹ In his many editorials throughout his career, Chiles was quick to criticize white leaders for their lack of true Christian morality when it came to taking a

stand for racial justice.

Despite his efforts to participate in the political mainstream, Nick Chiles was never fully accepted by progressive Republicans at the state or national level. The best example was his contentious relationship with William Allen White. White might have been Chiles's natural ally, since they both championed agrarianism and progressive Republicanism, but this was not the case. White did not care for Chiles, but he could not ignore him. White's *Emporia Gazette* often referred sarcastically to Chiles, as in this jab at the *Plaindealer's* encouragement of agriculture among young African Americans: "The Gazette's favorite exchange, the Topeka Plaindealer, is really a wonderful paper. No subject is too complicated for the mental grasp of Colonel Nick Chiles, the urbane editor."⁸⁰

Meant to amuse white readers, this type of lampoon was typical of many white papers writing about Chiles. Like other white editors, White used the honorific "Colonel" ironically to refer to Chiles and mocked "those able editorials which are doing so much toward the shaping of American history." The tone was always one of fake admiration. Chiles seems to have received the most jabs in 1908 and 1909. When he visited W. T. Vernon in Washington, D.C., the *Gazette* satirized the event: "Colonel Chiles was met at the depot by President Roosevelt, who escorted him to the White House and introduced him to the family, and then sat out on the front porch with him until a late hour at night, smoking and chatting, and asking the colonel's advice as to the affairs of the administration. That this advice was cheerfully given goes without saying."⁸¹ White himself had a cozy personal relationship with Theodore Roosevelt; perhaps the *Emporia* editor worried that Roosevelt might regard Chiles as the next Booker T. Washington.

Despite White's contempt, by 1908, Chiles

77. Putz, "For Race and Region," 182.

78. "Sheldon Kindergarten," Kansapedia, modified April 2013, www.kshs.org/kansapedia/sheldon-kindergarten/12202.

79. *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 26, 1900, 2, quoted in Putz, "For Race and Region," 183.

80. "Loyal Friends Are Rallying to the Support of Nick Chiles for Senator," *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 18, 1926, 1; "Boys on the Farm," *Emporia Gazette*, February 11, 1908, 1.

81. "That Sweeper," *Emporia Gazette*, February 17, 1908, 1; "Speaking of Kansas," *Emporia Gazette*, April 8, 1908, 1.

was too famous to ignore. It was the year of a gubernatorial election, and like every other major paper in Kansas, the *Gazette* followed Chiles's movements and pronouncements. White reported on Chiles's falling-out with Cyrus Leland, Jr., and support of Walter R. Stubbs with typical cynicism: "Cy hunted up Nick and began pointing the finger of scorn, but the able editor declined to be wilted, saying that it was all a business proposition with him, and that any reputable citizen might enjoy the inestimable boon of having his picture in the *Plaindealer* at the usual rates." White especially enjoyed following Chiles's antipathy for house Speaker Joe Dolley and relished the occasion when Dolley physically shoved Chiles out of his office.⁸²

Chiles's portrayal in the *Gazette* was frequently overdrawn and often fell flat. White showed an especially mean spirit in mocking Chiles's daughter Arnicholas when she reported on her experience riding in a segregated train car to Alabama. White offered an excerpt of her article with a smirking introduction about "how philosophically a Kansas lady can endure injustice." White's racism was never far from the surface. In reporting on the *Plaindealer's* acquisition of a linotype, he wrote, "The *Gazette* is glad to note Brer Chiles's prosperity."⁸³ The word "brer" as a contraction for "brother" in reference to a Black man was a common trope in the white press of the time, most likely derived from transcriptions of African American folktales for white audiences in the late nineteenth century. It is possible that White felt some degree of rivalry with Chiles since, like White, Chiles enjoyed a national reputation. Did White resent not being the only famous newspaperman from Kansas? There must be some reason for the animus behind his low blows, which showed the limits of White's celebrated progressivism when it came to race.

Chiles did not retaliate with the same vitriol, for good reason. Chiles needed white Republican

allies, and picking a fight with the most famous white editor in Kansas would have been political suicide. One exception was after the infamous "Red Summer" of 1919. Chiles blamed White for feeding the fire of racial hatred by perpetuating stereotypes about Black male sexuality. "Such outbursts," Chiles wrote, "belong to the 'lowbrows' of the white race; the Southern 'cracker' whose beastly lust makes the 'cave man' [here quoting White] pale into insignificance." Chiles blamed racial violence squarely on southern white racism infecting whites in the rest of the nation: "They come North, East and West sowing the seed of discord, murder and riot, and in many instances win a heretofore well meaning Yankee like Mr. White to assist in carrying on their damnable mission. . . . Get your system purged of that poison Mr. White."⁸⁴ Chiles seldom attacked White this directly, despite White's barbed attacks and antipathy to him.

Chiles's criticism probably came from a reasonable feeling of betrayal since White was one of the foremost white Republican voices in the country, the kind of "good" white ally that Chiles frequently praised in the *Plaindealer*. White ran for governor in 1924 to protest the influence of the Ku Klux Klan on both political parties. White's vociferous attacks on the Klan have recently elevated his profile as an early advocate of racial tolerance. Chiles did not, however, endorse White; the *Plaindealer* supported incumbent Jonathan M. Davis.⁸⁵ White appeared to give up mocking Chiles for the next several years but came out against Chiles when, in 1926, Chiles challenged U.S. Senator Charles Curtis in the primary. Apparently Chiles believed Curtis was corrupt and ineffective in enforcing Black voting rights in the South. White said he would side with the Ku Klux Klan in opposition to Chiles: "If Curtis should die between now and August 10 Nick Chiles

84. Nick Chiles, "Is W. A. White a 'Cracker?,'" *Topeka Plaindealer*, September 5, 1919, 1.

85. Beverley Olson Buller, "When 'Real American' William Allen White Ran for Office to Save Kansas from the KKK," *Kansas Reflector*, October 31, 2020, kansasreflector.com/2020/10/31/when-real-american-william-allen-white-ran-for-office-to-save-kansas-from-the-kkk/; "Governor Davis and Board Have Been Fair to Schools," *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 24, 1924, 1.

82. "Speaking of Kansas," *Emporia Gazette*, August 3, 1908, 1; "The Opening Gun," *Emporia Gazette*, January 25, 1909, 1; "Speaking of Kansas," *Emporia Gazette*, February 8, 1909, 1.

83. "Jim Crow Cars," *Emporia Gazette*, June 28, 1911, 1; "In Other Words," *Emporia Gazette*, February 26, 1912, 1.

would be legally nominated as the Republican candidate for United States senator from Kansas. Here is a case where the Gazette will pray, even with the kluxers, 'Long live Curtis.'"⁸⁶ White's antipathy shows just how far outside the mainstream Nick Chiles was in his style of politics—and the limits of White's progressivism.

By the late 1920s, the influence of the *Plaindealer* receded as new engines of activism, such as the *Chicago Defender*, took its place. Chiles died in 1929, and ownership of the *Plaindealer* passed to his daughter Thelma, who moved the press to Kansas City. Thereafter the *Plaindealer's* circulation declined. Nick Chiles's strong editorial voice never found a replacement, and the market became more competitive. The paper finally folded in 1958. His legacy survived, however, through the many individuals whose lives intersected with the *Plaindealer*. Chiles's lead lawyer for the Kansas Defense Society, Elisha Scott, had two sons, John and Charles, who also became lawyers and assisted with the 1951 U.S. District Court case that became *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Most importantly, because of Nick Chiles's indomitable leadership, the *Plaindealer* was one of the most visible Black newspapers in the region, giving voice to the Black community in Topeka and beyond, providing a network for economic progress, and fighting segregation at a time when the Kansas version of Jim Crow was still becoming institutionalized. The downtown Topeka buildings that are the only physical reminder of Chiles's legacy have been owned since 2017 by a developer, AIM Strategies, that has yet to



Photograph of Nick Chiles from his funeral program, 1929. Courtesy of the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

renovate or demolish the properties. In 2022, the Save the Nick Chiles Building Committee, a local civic group, engaged with two descendants of Chiles who expressed interest in investing in the structures to build a community center for youth; however, the group could not gather sufficient funds to move forward with the project. Nick Chiles's career in business, politics, and journalism followed an extraordinary trajectory that should place him among the other major Black leaders of his generation. Although his buildings may soon be gone, his story should not be. KH

86. "Curtis and Kansas," *Emporia Weekly Gazette*, July 22, 1926, 3.