



“The Kingdom of Heaven at Hand”: Rev. Russel Taylor and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1920s Omaha

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Todd Guenther, ““The Kingdom of Heaven at Hand’: Rev. Russel Taylor and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1920s Omaha,” *Nebraska History* 92 (2011): 184-193

Article Summary: In the racially charged atmosphere of 1920s Omaha, Russel Taylor—a minister, teacher, musician, activist, and former homesteader—threw himself into the struggle for dignity and civil rights. His story illustrates some of the difficulties facing black leaders during the generations between the end of slavery and the civil rights victories of the 1950s and 1960s.

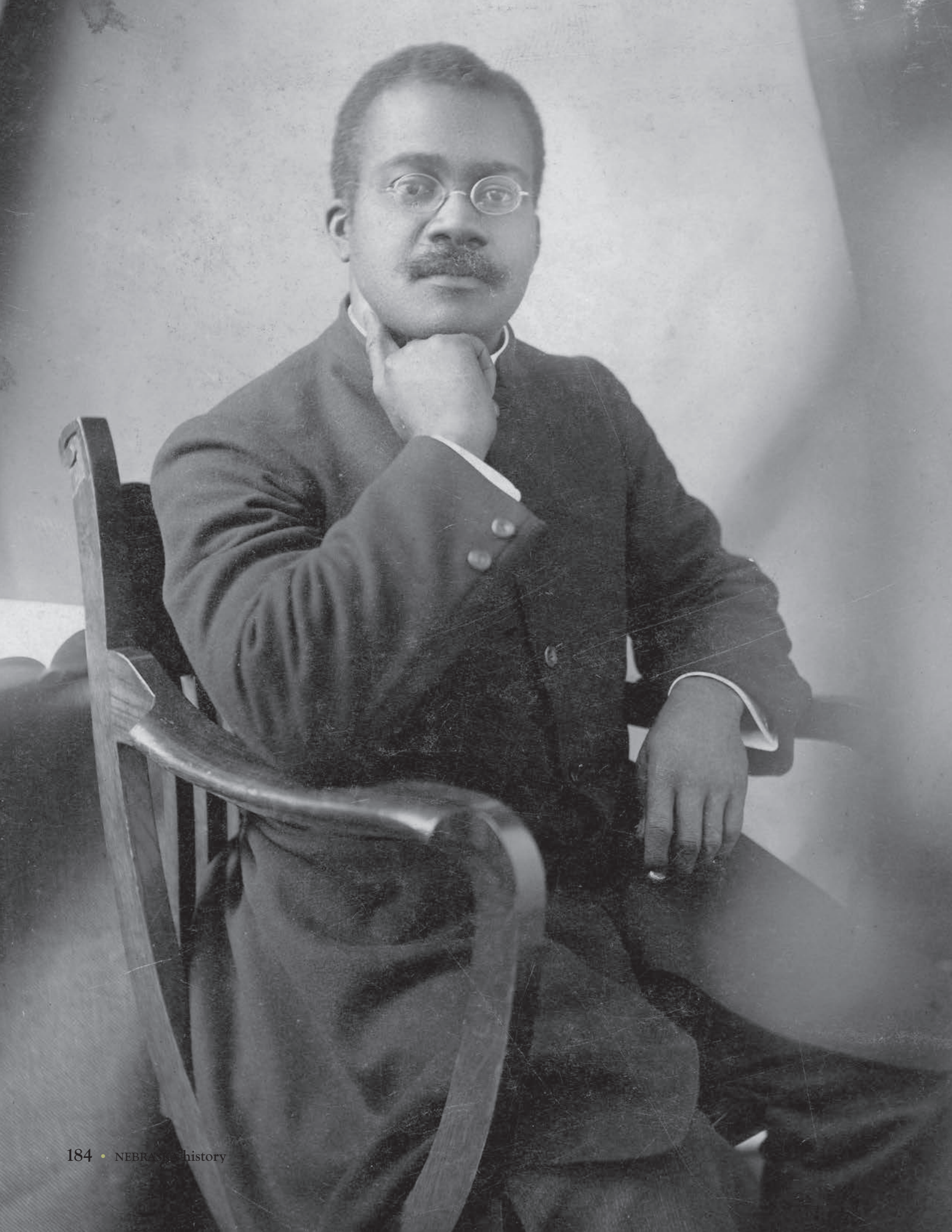
Cataloging Information:

Names: Russel Taylor, Henrietta Taylor, Charles Speese, Moses Speese, Susan Speese, Robert LaFollette, Booker T Washington, Oswald Garrison Villard, Walter White, John Albert Williams

Place Names: Empire, Wyoming; Scottsbluff, Omaha, and DeWitty, Nebraska

Keywords: Russel Taylor, Colored Commercial Club, African Americans, St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church (Omaha), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), lynching, segregation, Ku Klux Klan, Bellevue College, *The Monitor*

Photographs / Images: Russel Taylor at Bellevue College, about 1896; inset headlines about racial tensions from *The Monitor*, the newspaper of Omaha’s black community from 1915 to 1929; Taylor with Bellevue College’s Adelphian Literary Society in 1896; St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Omaha, where Taylor was the first pastor; Taylor pictured in *The Monitor*, Aug. 11, 1921; Rev. John Albert Williams, publisher of *The Monitor*; inset advertisement for a concert for which Taylor was to direct the choir, *The Monitor*, May 26, 1922; headline for front-page article reviewing the May 26 concert, *The Monitor*, June 2, 1922; modern view of Sheep Creek Valley, former site of Empire, Wyoming



“The Kingdom of Heaven at Hand”:

Rev. Russel Taylor and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1920s Omaha

By TODD GUENTHER

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s did not burst forth fully formed; rather, black resistance grew from feeble nineteenth-century origins to increasing power during the twentieth century. Nor was it entirely a southern movement. African Americans sometimes faced worse situations in the West than in the South, and racist sentiment was alive and well in Nebraska.¹

As in the rest of the United States, during the early 1900s Nebraska's African Americans were of different minds regarding how to achieve racial equality. Many had farmed in the Platte valley during the 1880s and 1890s, but by the turn of the century were leaving agriculture to settle in towns and cities. In the crowded and growing black neighborhoods, some determined to gain political power by organizing and demanding their rights. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) resulted from this philosophy. Others felt that segregation was a necessary evil while the race struggled to overcome the legacy of slavery, but that eventually they would attain their goals. Still others favored the creation of voluntarily segregated black communities in which they could avoid associating with whites.

At least one prominent black Nebraskan seemed to favor all these options. His is the story of a black leader from the era between the end of Reconstruction and the expansion of civil rights in the mid-twentieth century—years when the second-class status of African Americans seemed like a permanent feature in American society.

The Reverend Russel Taylor gained regional fame while serving as the optimistic and inexhaustible leader of Empire, a unique African American homesteading community that straddled the Nebraska-Wyoming border a few miles northwest of Scottsbluff. Taylor's parents had been slaves in Virginia. After the Civil War they moved to Missouri, where Taylor was born about 1871.² The family moved to Nebraska about ten years later, and lived in a sod house near Seward.

Small of physical stature and with weak eyes, Taylor went on to accomplish what many surely thought impossible for a poor, black farm boy: he earned a bachelor's degree at Bellevue (Nebraska) College in 1896, and may also have received a graduate degree. After ordination he served in Oklahoma and then in Tennessee as a missionary to ex-slaves. In 1911 he and his wife and children followed his brothers and their families to Empire, Wyoming, where he quickly established Grace Presbyterian Church.

In Empire, Taylor labored both to save his parishioners' souls for the kingdom of heaven and to build an earthly empire of god-fearing, well-educated yeoman farmers. Empire embodied the vision of a former North Carolina slave, Moses Speese, who led his followers on a roundabout journey from slavery to the Great Plains, and was ancestral in one way or another to many of Empire's residents (the Taylor family was related by marriage). Though he, like the Old Testament Moses, did not live to see his descendants establish this ambitious

Left: Russel Taylor at Bellevue College, about 1896. Courtesy Hastings College



The racial tensions of the 1920s are apparent in a sampling of headlines from *The Monitor*, the newspaper of Omaha's black community from 1915 to 1929. Published by Russel Taylor's friend Rev. John Williams, *The Monitor* published local and national news, and was a fearless advocate of racial progress. Taylor contributed numerous letters to the editor.

community, he instilled in his relatives the dream of free land, equality, and happy homes in the West.³

Taylor wore many hats as Empire's Presbyterian preacher, public school teacher, postmaster, and college-educated farmer. At first his role seems to have been that of a shepherd to his flock, but Taylor was soon prodded into political activism. In 1913 a

Taylor's parish disintegrated. He tried heroically to minister to the remnants of his flock, working simultaneously with African Americans in other communities.

brother was tortured for days and then lynched by the local Goshen County sheriff and his henchmen, and the following years saw a flurry of lynchings and widespread racial hostility in Wyoming. At the same time, some of the Empire boys Taylor had taught in school and Sunday school wore the uniform of the United States Army, fighting in World War I to make the world—if not the United States—safe for democracy. Taylor began to campaign for African Americans' civil rights and asked futilely that Wyoming live up to its nickname, "the Equality State." By the end of the war, he was traveling with increasing frequency to preach and agitate in Wyoming, Nebraska, and elsewhere in the nation.

For example, by 1919 Taylor had begun religious and social work in Scottsbluff, where he became a figure of some concern to local whites. The lynching of a black Omahan that year precipitated rioting and destruction by white mobs in that city. Shortly after the Omaha riot, whites in Scottsbluff mobbed the home of an African American family because of a rumor that Taylor was planning to open a boarding house for blacks there. Ten years earlier, construction of big irrigation projects had drawn many transient southern black laborers into the community; now new sugar beet plants were under construction and local whites were determined "that no more colored people were to be permitted to locate in that neighborhood."

Taylor wrote to the paper that he was not buying the building and called the incident a "tempest in a teapot." He suggested that white people were afraid that low class blacks were fleeing Omaha and North Platte for destinations like Scottsbluff, but that "our investigations failed to show that such was the case." He felt that "little if any difference is found between the moral status of this new influx of Negroes and those found in [Scottsbluff] when beginning our religious work last April." Two years later, perhaps in an effort to head off a similar confrontation in Omaha, Taylor was associated with the Colored Commercial Club, a sort of black chamber of commerce and employment bureau which by "cooperating with Labor Bureaus in the East and South [was] able to keep out of Omaha a great number of floaters" seeking work but who were deemed undesirable by established, resident African Americans.⁴

Meanwhile, Taylor's parish disintegrated. In the face of growing bigotry, drought, and the collapse of the postwar economy, the black families of Empire straggled back to Nebraska. Churches and schools closed. Taylor tried heroically to minister to the remnants of his flock, working simultaneously

with African Americans in other communities such as Scottsbluff.

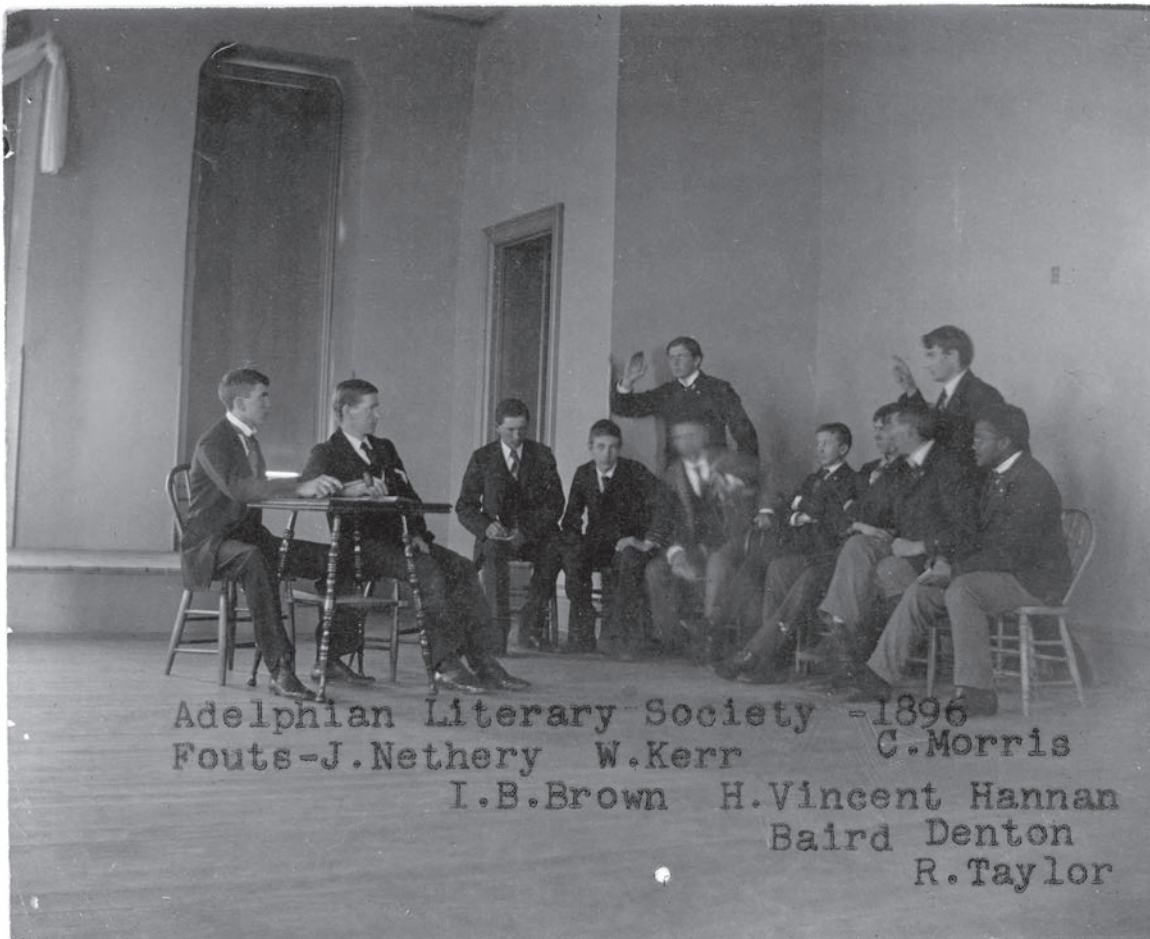
The closing of the Empire Post Office in August 1920 marked the end of the settlement. Like his former congregants, Taylor returned to Nebraska. In December 1920 he became the pastor at St. Paul's Presbyterian Church in Omaha.

Taylor's flock fought adversity when they returned to Nebraska and faced the same national economic and environmental factors that drove them from their Wyoming homesteads. By the early 1920s Taylor's former Empire congregants were scattered across the Cornhusker State. Following the postwar agricultural crash, some of the families moved from farm to farm buying, renting, or sharecropping—fighting losing battles to stay on the land before succumbing to urban life.⁵

Several tried to farm near DeWitty in Cherry County. Had they considered the area's economic and climatic conditions objectively, they would have seen that DeWitty was bound to perish just as Empire had. As early as 1915, when Empire still

seemed viable, sales and cancellations of black families' homesteads in Cherry County began to outnumber new entries. Almost one-fifth were sheriff's sales that occurred when the owners were unable to pay their taxes. A Cherry County historian wrote, "The Negro Settlement was doomed from the very first. No matter how industrious those good people might have been . . . 640 acres of the hilly, fragile, sandy land . . . were not adequate to support a family."⁶

The Charles Speese family, who had worshipped under Taylor at Empire, persisted near DeWitty until the winter of 1923-24, when so few pupils remained that their school closed. Charles's wife, Rose, and the children moved to Seneca so they could attend classes there while Charles remained on the farm. When the children arrived for their second day at school, however, they were told that "there wasn't room for anymore pupils." The newspaper reported that the school board "was confronted with a case of Negro pupils this week." It was feared that "one or two colored pupils . . . could precede an uproar



Russel Taylor with
Bellevue College's
Adelphian Literary
Society in 1896. Courtesy
Hastings College

Adelphian Literary Society - 1896
Fouts - J. Nethery W. Kerr C. Morris
I. B. Brown H. Vincent Hannan
Baird Denton
R. Taylor

Taylor was the first pastor of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church at Twenty-Sixth and Seward streets in Omaha.
The Monitor, Aug. 11, 1921



among the white boys.”⁷ The children were then enrolled in Thedford, where Charles was regarded as “one of the brightest of men without any distinction to color or race.” Speaking of the affair, Father Abel, a local priest, said he would rather “expel some of the white trash, who is without manners and religion, than to refuse these colored children.” In 1925 Charles and Rose moved to a farm near Pierre, South Dakota, and never again called Nebraska home.⁸

As the Cherry County black communities crumbled, the extended Speese, Shores, and Taylor clans abandoned their generations-old dreams of farming, mirroring the national white trend to flee farms for jobs or aid in the cities. Many of the former residents of Empire relocated to Omaha or Lincoln, where they endured the turmoil of the racially contentious 1920s. They worked to support their families and cooperated with activists all across the country to create a society in which they hoped their children could enjoy legal equality and economic opportunities on par with whites. The saga of that decade is one of trying over and over and over again to create a better world.

Taylor was the first pastor of the new St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, located on the corner of

Twenty-sixth and Seward streets in Omaha. As in Empire, he was a central figure in the community: not only preaching, marrying, and burying in many of the black churches, but also deeply involved in education and civil rights issues, publishing, traveling, and maintaining an almost superhuman level of community-oriented activity. Only a year after the Omaha lynching that had impacted race relations as far away as Scottsbluff, he was determined to build a new kind of empire.

Taylor utilized every available secular and religious platform to advance the causes of his race. This became the primary objective of his life and work, even ahead of his family and Christian ministry. He explained in his newspaper column: “We have given too much concern to the glory that is to be ours beyond the grave, and not enough concern to those things that make a heaven here.” Taylor was fed up with the status quo. Speaking in the third person, he explained that it “is the purpose of the Pastor at St. Paul's to keep before his people questions of vital importance. He feels called to discuss fearlessly the matters that make for racial as well as individual betterment. The kingdom of heaven at hand is what he desires this generation to be interested in more than the pearly gates above or the golden streets up there.”⁹

Though still a man of God, Taylor used his high-profile pulpits for political purposes. In October 1921 he met with another group of men to discuss forming a blacks-only YMCA. In his segregated public school at Empire, religion and secular instruction had proceeded “hand in hand.” He saw no reason it could not happen the same way in the city.¹⁰

His philosophy led him to positions as an officer or member of various sub-committees of the Black Ministerial Alliance, the Colored Commercial Club, and the local chapter of the NAACP. He was repeatedly elected to represent these organizations at national conventions. He also participated in many less formally organized groups.¹¹

Taylor's work was an individual manifestation of a national movement growing out of “spiritual discontent” that led many young, middle-class, educated blacks to reject the amalgamation of black and white cultures and instead exalt “the militantly assertive ‘New Negro,’ proud of his African heritage.”¹² In 1922, for example, St. Paul's Presbyterian hosted a performance by local students of a black music teacher who had been trained in Europe and at the New England Conservatory. She selected a program of classical European pieces, prompting complaints from the black audience that

**“The kingdom of heaven at hand
is what he (Taylor) desires this
generation to be interested in more
than the pearly gates above or the
golden streets up there.”**

she ignored the music of the race.¹³

Writer Alain Locke urged that rather than remaining passive second class citizens, blacks become collaborators and participants in American civilization. That meant combating sometimes barbaric racism including Jim Crow laws, race riots, and hundreds of lynchings nationwide. Following World War I some black and white Americans were disgusted at the effort and lives spent reforming foreign societies when such tremendous problems remained at home.

In the spirit of the times, even the Presbyterian Church's white hierarchy got involved and decided to study "the Negro" in order to determine how the church could foster better conditions for blacks and improve understanding between the races. Taylor presented the series' concluding lecture "in harmony with the general subject." His wife, Henrietta, addressed the Omaha Presbytery with a speech titled, "Conditions and Needs of the Race in Our City." In the spring of 1923 Taylor completed a circle when he spoke on the subject of race relations at Bellevue Presbyterian, the church where he had worshipped thirty years earlier as a Bellevue College student just beginning his crusades.¹⁴

The local NAACP began meeting at St. Paul's in October 1921, and under Taylor's guidance, the Omaha chapter increased its activity—at least for a time, until he was distracted by other efforts. The NAACP depended on a vanguard of cultivated, highly trained blacks to "save the race" by setting examples for other blacks and whites, but consequently attracted only limited participation from working-class blacks. The organization also used legal means to fight discrimination. NAACP members and Taylor's congregants and relatives participated in meetings concerning national issues, including how to generate support for the federal anti-lynching law known as the Dyer Bill. Taylor provided the music for one particularly large gathering in 1924. Later that same year, Oswald Garrison Villard, the white editor of *The Nation* and

a founder of the NAACP, came to Omaha and made a series of speeches to white and black audiences seeking support for Robert LaFollette's campaign for president and other Progressive Party candidates. Taylor chaired one of Villard's meetings. And when national organizer Walter White came to Omaha to speak, the program included Taylor leading "stirring songs" to accompany the lecture.¹⁵

Despite these events, the Omaha NAACP chapter was not sufficiently active to satisfy national leaders. Organizational meetings caused strife within the local organization and provided evidence that Taylor's too-numerous activities may have spread him too thin. White charged that Taylor and the other local board members had failed to adequately recruit and maintain the chapter. Saying that the organization "won't carry dead timber," he threatened to pull the Omaha NAACP charter—a threat that stimulated many lapsed members to pay their dues and inspired new people to join.¹⁶

The issue of segregated schools was a source of contention in Omaha in 1924—just as it had once been in Empire, and just as it continued to be nationally. The mass migration of southern blacks to northern factory towns led many school districts in northern cities to hire black teachers for black students, segregating both in usually inferior schools. *The Monitor* reprinted a series of national articles and editorials about the development of these institutions. Early in this debate, *The Monitor* recommended several black applicants for school positions, including the wife of one of Taylor's church board members.¹⁷

In response to a *Monitor* piece excoriating the evils of segregation, Taylor explored the complexities of the issue in an editorial titled, "Segregation Not Always Compulsory Nor With Sinister Motives," in which he cited biblical and other sources. He pointed out that a desire for separatism and class-consciousness was not the sole property of whites, that "Even among us are our 'Blue Veins' and 'Four Hundreds.'" He felt that "The fact that some [black] schools, perhaps most of them, are inferior in equipment and efficiency should not be charged entirely to segregation. Most Negro schools are in rural districts and all rural schools suffer in comparison to city schools."¹⁸ Taylor had likely been the most qualified rural school teacher in all Wyoming, but the Empire school had demanded black teachers and later self-segregated when white farmers refused to send their children "to a school where a nigger could tell them what to do," even a black teacher as overqualified as Russel Taylor.¹⁹ The school had thrived without them. Based on his



**Russel Taylor, as pictured in
The Monitor, Aug. 11, 1921.**



Rev. John Albert Williams, publisher of *The Monitor*, ran for the Omaha School Board in 1924, facing an unexpected challenge from Russel Taylor. *The Monitor*, Oct. 31, 1924

experiences in Nebraska, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Wyoming, Taylor believed that if blacks worked hard enough they could enjoy not just a “separate but equal,” but rather an even better life *alongside* mainstream white America.

About the same time, Taylor filed as a “LaFollette” progressive candidate for the school board, challenging the black Republican candidate and longtime friend, the Reverend John Williams. Voters who respected both men criticized Taylor for splitting the black vote and potentially bringing “about a double defeat.” NAACP President Villard, visiting Omaha, encouraged black voters to support the Progressives. In the end, Williams received 6,503 votes to Taylor’s 4,696; both men finished far down on the list of thirty-two candidates. If they indeed split the black vote, their combined total of 11,199 would still have left one of them 1,887 votes short of being among the six candidates elected to the board. In an editorial titled, “Will We Learn Our Lesson?” Williams complained, “The combined vote of the two would not have elected either candidate, but the entering of one would have shown the intention to concentrate upon one whom it was believed could muster the most strength.”²⁰

Two years later, *The Monitor* headlined a front-page article, “Loyalty Will Win the Day in Getting Negro Teachers in the Schools. Stick Together!” Still interested in school issues at an NAACP forum in 1928, but becoming discouraged by the interminable struggle, Taylor presented a paper titled “The Fading Democracy of Our Public School System: Are Our Boys and Girls Getting a Square Deal?”²¹

Meanwhile, Taylor was also fearlessly condemning the Ku Klux Klan, one of the most powerful forces in the nation at that time. The Klan had arrived in Omaha in 1923 from its strong base in Lincoln. Taylor repeatedly denounced the KKK orally and in his church column in *The Monitor*. In one case, he preached on “The Christian Attitude Towards Law Enforcement,” and later the same month wrote mockingly, “Yes, we [blacks] have no standing according to the Grand Ornithorynchus or some other kind of cuss of the KKK, but so long as we hold to the standard laid down by Moses and the prophets . . . all the Grand Tohrinkusses in the universe cannot disqualify us.” To the Klan’s chagrin in 1926, both black Omaha candidates for the Nebraska legislature won. *The Monitor* suggested that some candidates for other offices lost because they refused to denounce the KKK and were rejected by black voters.²²

While the other Taylor, Speese, and Shores families in Omaha were struggling to make ends

meet, Russel Taylor worried little about family finances and made time to participate—often on a volunteer basis—in activities with churches other than his own. He spoke on the “Progress of Other Denominations” at a Western Baptist Convention, and served as an officer of the Black Ministerial Alliance. He presented a controversial paper, “The Church in Relation to the Outstanding Evils of Our City,” apparently about prostitution and vice, to the Ministerial Alliance. Related to this crusade he and his wife Henrietta served on a censorship committee to review a controversial film about urban vice, after which Taylor assumed leadership of the vice and civic committee of the Black Ministerial Alliance. He even signed on as choir director at Pilgrim Baptist Church. Unlike many other duties, this may have been a paying position.²³

Maintaining the family tradition, the Taylors and Speeses continued to perform sacred and secular vocal and instrumental music at church, funerals, public events, private parties, and anywhere else the opportunity arose. As usual, Taylor had the leadership role in these events. In a program

MUSICAL CONCERT

CITY AUDITORIUM May 31, 8 P. M.

Negro Music Will Be Featured

MIXED CHORUS OF SEVENTY-FIVE VOICES

DESDUNES BAND WILL RENDER FOUR NUMBERS

A Mixed Octet Will Sing Beautiful Haunting Melodies
—A VOCAL SOLO WILL BE GIVEN—
A MALE QUARTET Will Render ITS BEST NUMBERS

ADMISSION—MAIN FLOOR, \$1.00; BALCONY, 50c

Tickets May Be Purchased at Colored Commercial Club,
2414 Maple Street, and from Club Members

The BEST MUSIC and the LARGEST AUDIENCE, EVER
DON'T FAIL TO BE THERE

Auspices COLORED COMMERCIAL CLUB

Russel Taylor led the choir, and Dan Desdunes (featured in the Fall 2011 issue of *Nebraska History*) performed with his band at a concert at the City Auditorium. *The Monitor*, May 26, 1922.

sponsored by the Colored Commercial Club, he led a ninety-voice choir and sang “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in a quartet with his sons to an audience of three thousand. A month later he led a joint performance of “The Nazarene” by the St. Paul Presbyterian and Pilgrim Baptist church choirs. As in the old days, the Speese Brothers Quartet and the Taylor Brothers Quartet performed both separately and together.²⁴

Throughout the 1920s, Taylor’s wife, Henrietta, was busy like all the other women in the extended families. Her primary work seems to have been the traditional role of caring for her children and maintaining a home. However, she also maintained a public role, occasionally representing St. Paul’s Church at Presbytery meetings. On one occasion her lecture topic was “Conditions and Needs of the Race in Our City.” She also taught cooking classes at the Cultural Center in South Omaha, near the stockyards. Overall, she enjoyed little assistance from her husband, who focused his attention away from the family, and whose travels and heavy workload also failed to provide much monetary support.²⁵

Taylor agitated for equality and dignity through a troubled period that saw race riots and lynchings nationally. He strove to guide those around him through two decades during which Booker T. Washington said, “I have never seen the colored people so discouraged and so bitter as they are at the present time.”²⁶ At the same time, Taylor alienated some of his congregation by placing such a high-profile emphasis on controversial issues and devoting so much time to worldly activities in the form of civil rights work. The “time and ability [he gave] to other lines and endeavors,” as he wrote, including his acceptance of a second job to “bring in added revenue on which to live,” prevented him from focusing on what some believed ought to be a pastor’s primary work. In 1924 several congregants organized to oust Taylor as pastor at St. Paul’s. He responded in *The Monitor*: “I shall discontinue preaching services at St. Paul’s church, this because the strain under which I have labored demands of me a rest.” Thereafter, he continued to strive for equality, and preached irregularly, from many rather than one Omaha pulpit.²⁷

As Taylor’s generation aged, death became a more frequent visitor. Radford Speese, so prominent in Empire, died in April 1924 after selling his farm near Scottsbluff; his death was front-page news in Panhandle newspapers. Taylor’s eighty-six-year-old father, born a Virginia slave, died in Lincoln in August 1924. Moses Speese’s very aged

widow, Susan, moved several times to live with different children until she passed away in January 1926.²⁸ She had been born into slavery about 1843 or 1844 near Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Late in life, in modern Omaha replete with telephones, airplanes, and automobiles, a world where even women could finally vote, Susan Speese wept while recalling how she and other girls and women had been forced to strip and stand “completely naked before the slave auction buyers and the rude gawkers” who wanted to examine, poke, prod, and caress.²⁹ Finally, when Taylor’s mother, Sarah, died in Lincoln in December 1928, the last of the relatives with firsthand, adult recollections of slavery were gone.³⁰

After 1928, an exhausted, fifty-seven-year-old Russel Taylor seems to have retired from crusading and public life. He is not mentioned again in the *Monitor*. His recurrent dream to build a thriving all-black community and school system—seemingly as a model for the rest of the nation—was abandoned. Perhaps the frustrations expressed by Booker T. Washington and the incremental progress of his heroic struggle wore him out. According to family tradition, the preacher, teacher, and postmaster who once was the pillar of Empire was now “a broken man.”³¹

Taylor never received significant funds from the sale of his Empire homestead, having given power of attorney to dispose of the property to a neighbor who “kept” his property. Perhaps the neighbor was dishonest, but he may have been unable to find a good buyer given the depressed economic situation. In 1930, according to census records, Taylor owned a home worth \$3,000 at 2618 Charles Street and worked in a hardware warehouse. Henrietta was a caterer for a private family. The two youngest children, Stephen and Paul, were schoolboys still living at home. The house was very crowded.

With Russel Taylor leading the choir, a concert at the City Auditorium drew an audience that was two-thirds white. The concert was apparently intended by the Colored Commercial Club as a way of improving race relations in the city. *The Monitor*, June 2, 1922.

A modern view of Sheep Creek Valley, former site of Empire, Wyoming. Near the end of his life, Taylor tried to visit Empire but became so distraught en route that he canceled the trip. Photo by author



Todd Guenther is an assistant professor of anthropology and history at Central Wyoming College in Riverton, Wyoming. His article "The Empire Builders: An African American Odyssey in Nebraska and Wyoming" (*Nebraska History* 89, Fall 2008) won the James L. Sellers Memorial Award.

Daughter Theodosia, who also cooked for a private family, lived under the same roof with her truck-driver husband and two surviving children. So did Russel Taylor Jr., though without his wife or children; he worked in a bakery. Thomas Taylor also lived at home and worked as a hotel busboy.

This was not the life that Russel Taylor's generation, the children of slaves, had hoped to build. With youthful optimism, they had believed hard work would bring a comfortable middle-class culture, proud of its African heritage and participating fully, comfortably, and peacefully in American life.³²

The bitter Taylor family descended into impoverished despair. Two of his sons eventually committed suicide. Russel developed Parkinson's Disease and suffered the rest of his life. Near the end of his days he tried to visit Empire but became so distraught en route that his condition worsened and forced him to cancel the trip. Afterwards, the family turned their backs on the place that, in their minds, had crushed their dreams of farming and dignified independence.³³

During the tumultuous decades of the 1910s and 1920s, Taylor struggled for the civil rights of his people, a battle that became more important to him than his Christian ministry. It may have seemed to him that only fellow blacks heard the message. Yet, the support of white northerners for the civil rights movement later in the century had to originate somewhere. And a likely place, at least in Nebraska, was in hearing the calls for justice by Russel Taylor and others like him, over and over again, during the decades leading up to the more successful movements during the 1950s and 1960s. Though he may have felt he failed and that

the oppressive system survived him, Taylor and his contemporaries kept alive their slave-born parents' dreams and ideals: equality, the moral obligation to challenge injustice, and the right of people to create their own communities. 🌱

NOTES

¹ Todd Guenther, "The List of Good Negroes': African American Lynchings in the Equality State," *Annals of Wyoming*, 81 (Spring 2009), 2-33.

² John Russell Taylor obituary, *The (Omaha) Monitor*, Aug. 23, 1924.

³ This story is told in Todd Guenther, "The Empire Builders: An African American Odyssey In Nebraska and Wyoming," *Nebraska History* 89 (Winter 2008), 176-200; and Guenther, "The List of Good Negroes," 2-33.

⁴ "Residents Issue Real Ultimatum: People Living South of Tracks Want No More Negroes in Midst," Oct. 7, 1919, "The Colored Population," Oct. 7, 1919, "None of Council's Affairs: Colored Problem Not Under Their Jurisdiction," Oct. 17, 1919, *Scottsbluff (Nebr.) Star-Herald*; "Object to Negroes on Overland Drive," Oct. 7, 1919, "Council Meets in Regular Session," Oct. 10, 1919, *Scottsbluff (Nebr.) Republican*; "A Passing Incident—A Possibility," Russel Taylor to the editor, *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Nov. 18, 1919; *The Monitor*, Sept. 15, 1921.

⁵ Margaret Speese, interview by author, Casper, Wyo., Feb. 20, 1991; "Four to be cited at Lambda Kappa Mu luncheon," *Staten Island Sunday Advance*, April 10, 1977.

⁶ *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Apr. 22, 1924; *Morrill (Nebr.) Mail*, Jan. 3, May 1, 1924; Don Hanna, Jr., in "DeWitty Community, the Negro Settlement," in Marianne Brinda Beel, Ruth Johnson Harms, eds., *A Sandhill Century* (Valentine, NE: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 246. See also Ava Speese Day, in Frances Jacobs Alberts, ed., *Sod House Memories: A Treasury of Soddy Stories* (n.p.: Sod House Society, 1972), 275; Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska*

Sandhills: The Human Landscape (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 230, 231, 233.

In addition to the published and unpublished sources found throughout these notes, see also a series of five illustrated articles by John Farrar, "Black Homesteaders: Free Land for Free Men," *NEBRASKALand* 66 (June 5, 1988): 12-15, "Black Homesteaders: Settling the North Loup Valley," *NEBRASKALand* 66 (July 6, 1988): 40-49, "Black Homesteaders: Living Off the Land," *NEBRASKALand* 66 (Aug. 7, 1988): 16-19, "Black Homesteaders: Scratching Out a Living," *NEBRASKALand* 66 (Oct. 8, 1988): 38-41, and "Black Homesteaders: Remembering the Good Times," *NEBRASKALand* 66 (Nov. 9, 1988): 6-7. See also McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sandhills*, 231.

⁷ Day in Albert, *Sod House Memories*, 274.

⁸ Ava Speese Day, fifteen-page abstract of twenty-eight page unpublished manuscript submitted to Lavonia Foster, December 1978, on file, Custer County Historical Society Museum, Broken Bow, Nebraska (hereafter, Ava Speese Day papers); *Seneca Clipper* articles as reprinted in the "From Our Exchanges" column, *Valentine Republican*, Nov. 2, Nov. 9, 1923.

⁹ *The Monitor*, Mar. 16, July 27, 1923.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 20, 1921, Nov. 3, 1921.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 15, 1921, June 2 and Dec. 8, 1922; Taylor's role as an officer of various organizations: *The Monitor*, Nov. 16, 1923, Nov. 20, 1925, Dec. 3, 1926, Jan. 20, 1928; Taylor's service as a delegate to national conventions: *The Monitor*, July 13, 1923, May 7, 1926; Taylor's participation on less formal groups: see, for example, *The Monitor*, Sept. 12, 1924.

¹² Marybeth Norton, et al, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States Since 1865*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1982), 693.

¹³ *The Monitor*, July 14, 1922.

¹⁴ *The New Era*, Nov. 10, 1922; *The Monitor*, Apr. 20, May 4, 1923. The Presbyterian Church's Bellevue College, which existed from 1880 to 1919, should not be confused with modern Bellevue University. The former was very small, graduating only about 250 students in forty years. Of these, some forty or fifty became ministers. There has been speculation that Taylor attended graduate school while in Tennessee during the early 1900s, but descendants believe he obtained his entire education in Bellevue. In his letter, "A Bit of Racial News," *The Monitor*, Apr. 12, 1919, he states that he was "northern" trained and educated; it is most likely that he studied in Bellevue, but he may have attended the Iowa divinity school where Henry Speese graduated, or another institution altogether. Regardless where he took his graduate studies, Taylor probably obtained his divinity degree shortly after his 1896 graduation from Bellevue. About 1910, the college divested the ministerial training program and divinity school to an Omaha campus which became associated by proximity with Omaha University. The current Bellevue University, which opened in the 1960s, is not a successor to the original college. See Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Bellevue College, 1880-1919* (Hastings: n.p., n.d.) and Jerold L. Simmons, Ph.D., "La Belle Vue": *Studies in the History of Bellevue, Nebraska* (n.d.).

¹⁵ Norton, et.al, *A People and a Nation*, 590; *The Monitor*, Mar. 7, Oct. 17, 1924, Feb. 17, May 4, 1928.

¹⁶ *The Monitor*, Mar. 9, Apr. 20, 1923.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, June 6, 13, 1924.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 13, 1924.

¹⁹ Elsie and Cecil Rose, interview by author, Oct. 4, 1988, at the Rose Ranch, on Sheep Creek (formerly Spoon Hill Creek), Wyoming. The Roses ranch and farm on land which encompasses much of what was formerly the Empire community.

²⁰ *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 6, 1924, 2; *The Monitor*, Nov. 7, 1924.

²¹ *The Monitor*, May 30, June 6 & 12, July 4, 1924; "We Are At It Again," *The New Era*, Oct. 17, 1924; *The Monitor*, April 9, 1926, Mar. 16, 1928. Taylor's stand on segregation and school board candidacy put him at odds with the Reverend John Albert Williams, a close friend of many years who had, in fact, performed the wedding ceremony that united Russel and Henrietta in Omaha in 1899. Williams's wife was Henrietta's bridesmaid. In addition to his preaching, Williams was the influential editor of *The Monitor*. This prominent Omahan was passionately committed to integration, and opposed to doing anything the way it was done in the South—especially, perhaps, segregating the schools. In spite of their differences, the two families remained friendly and shared Thanksgiving dinner at Russel and Henrietta's in 1927. *The Monitor*, June 25, 1926, Dec. 2, 1927; *The New Era*, Oct. 17, 1924.

²² *The Monitor*, Aug. 24, Nov. 23, 1923, Nov. 5, 1926.

²³ *Ibid.*, Oct. 20, 1921, Oct. 22, Dec. 8 and 15, 1922; Mar. 9, Apr. 20 and 27, July 13, 1923.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 3, 1921, June 2, July 28, 1922, July 13, 1923, Sept. 12, 1924.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 12, Apr. 20, 1923, Nov. 25, 1927.

²⁶ Quoted in Norton, et al., *A People and a Nation*, 591.

²⁷ *The Monitor*, Oct. 3, 1924; *The New Era*, Oct. 10, 1924, and "We Are At It Again," Oct. 17, 1924.

²⁸ *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Apr. 22, 1924; *Morrill Mail*, Jan. 3, May 1, 1924; *The Monitor*, Aug. 23, 1924, Jan. 14, 1927; Ava Speese Day papers, 11.

²⁹ Ava Speese Day papers, 6.

³⁰ *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Apr. 22, 1924; *Morrill Mail*, Jan. 3, May 1, 1924; *The Monitor*, Aug. 23, 1924, Jan. 14, 1927; Ava Speese Day ms, 11.

³¹ Jeanetta Owens, telephone interview by Larry Armstrong, director, Torrington Homesteader Museum, Sept. 9, 1994.

³² See also *The Monitor*, Feb. 25, 1927.

³³ Paul Taylor, Sr. (Russel Taylor's youngest son), telephone interview by Larry Armstrong, director, Torrington Homesteader Museum, Oct. 31, 1994; Jeanetta Owens, telephone interview by Larry Armstrong, Sept. 9, 1994; Jeanetta Owens, telephone interview by author, Dec. 7, 2000; *History of the Presbyterian Church in Nebraska* (n.p., 1924). The author has been unable to determine the year and place of Taylor's death, which Owens declined to discuss.