

Atkins-Johnson Farm:

a piece of **history** in our midst



By Krislin Fenner

On the edge of Gladstone lies a piece of history nestled among gently rolling hills. Today we refer to it as the Atkins-Johnson Farm, located at 6508 North Jackson, and it has survived for almost 200 years. Despite time, tornados, sprouting housing developments and forward progress of the city in which it stands, it has remained virtually untouched. Though it may appear to some as simply an old house sitting off the road a closer examination brings us face to face with the life and times of this area from its earliest beginnings.

The Atkins-Johnson Farm has taken an amazing journey from land grant to inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The house on this farm is recognized as one of the oldest continuously lived in homes in Clay County, built by the earliest of the pioneers in the late 1820's or early 1830's and remained occupied until 2004. This farm has seen births and deaths, prosperity and depression, civil war and celebration yet through it all it has remained as it always was, even as modern civilization crept up to its doorstep. To appreciate the depths of its significance we must start at the beginning.

A man by the name of William Allen came to Clay County and received land grants in 1824 for land in Section 19, Township 51,

Range 32 and another in 1829 for land in Section 20, Township 51, Range 32. This land encompassed a total of 240 continuous acres of land. It is assumed that he and his wife Rachel lived on and farmed this land. In 1830 he is listed as owning 10 slaves living with him on the land. Little else is known regarding William and Rachel Allen's time on the land. They did not remain there long as at least part of the land was sold in 1831 to John and Polly Hightower.

John Hightower purchased 130 acres from William Allen, 90 acres in Section 19 and 40 acres in Section 20. It is not known at this time if William Allen still owned the remainder of his land or if it had been sold to others. John and Polly Hightower owned and presumably lived on this land for the next three years. Sometime during these early years, a two-story log cabin was built. It is possible it was built by William Allen, but based upon the land value at the time of sale to John Hightower compared to the value when it was sold again three years later, it is more probable it was built during John Hightower's ownership. Since there are no records indicating when homes were built during these early days the best estimation is that the original cabin was constructed sometime between 1824 and the early 1830's.



1880

William Rockhill Nelson moved to Kansas City and started the Kansas City Star newspaper. Competitors included the Evening Mail, the Kansas City Times and the Kansas City Journal.

Nelson's editorials persuaded Col. Thomas H. Swope of the need for public parks, and Swope, while still living, donated his 1,344-acre farm to the city for that purpose. Swope Park, dedicated June 25, 1896, has since grown to 1,769 acres.





Isabella V Jenkins, Atkins' Grandmother

In 1834 John and Polly Hightower sold their land to Jonathan Atkins, excepting out the one acre, which had been deeded to the church. Jonathan Atkins came to Clay County from Woodford County, Kentucky and it was on this land that he and his family made their home. At the time they purchased the farm they had one child, born in 1833. By 1840, their family had grown to include 4 children, Joseph Robert, William Henry, Martha Ellen and Jacob Stone. Ten years later the family consisted of 8 children, John Howell, Fountain Waller (named after their neighbor), Reuben Tillery and Annie Mary being born by 1850. One more child, Ida Belle, was born prior to 1860.

Jonathan, along with his sons, was an enterprising man. By 1850 40 acres of his land had been improved and it can be assumed he grew hemp and wheat as the agricultural census shows he had two tons of dew rotted hemp and 20 bushels of wheat. He also had orchard produce and livestock that included milk cows and pigs. He is listed as a farmer in the 1850 census and it is said that at some point he had a blacksmith shop and livery stable. The blacksmith shop was said to have been located on the farm and in 1880 his son, Joseph Robert, is listed as living on the farm with an

occupation of blacksmith and farmer. In 1860, Jonathan is listed as a wool carder. The agricultural census of that year shows he owned 8 sheep and had 60 pounds of wool. By this time the acreage of his improved land had doubled to 80 acres. At some point, Jonathan operated a steam sawmill along with his son William in the partnership of Atkins & Sons. This mill was valued at \$200 at his death.



Ida Mary Atkins Webb (dark dress)

History is sparse regarding the time John Hightower owned this land. It is known that during his ownership, on March 9, 1833, he deeded one acre of the southeast corner of his property in Section 19 to the trustees of the Big Shoal Baptist Church. The Big Shoal Baptist Church was established around 1823 and had built a log church at this location by 1827. The deed for this transaction was not recorded until many years later when the trustees of the Big Shoal Baptist Church brought a quiet title action in 1859. The land given by John Hightower was used by the church as a meeting place and burying ground and is located along Pleasant Valley Road where the Big Shoal Cemetery is today.



1933

Nelson left his own legacy in the form of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art at 45th and Oak streets, opened Dec. 11, 1933, on the site of his former mansion. The east wing is dedicated to Mary Atkins, who had left her estate for an art museum before Nelson.



Verdie Atkins and Ida Mary Atkins

in Western Missouri in the 1850's. The field stone chimneys are important elements in identifying this time frame. The western chimney of the house has the date 1853 etched in the stone.

Jonathan Atkins died in 1866 at his home of cholera. He became ill and died within 9 hours. He is buried in the Big Shoal Cemetery directly south of his home. Mary Atkins continued to live on the farm with her children until her death in 1878. After her death, the farm was sold in partition of the estate with William becoming the eventual sole owner of the property.

William Atkins continued to operate the farm and the mill during his lifetime along with the help of his brother and sister. Joseph Robert, as mentioned earlier, held the occupation of farmer and blacksmith. William is reported in the 1880 census as being a farmer and lawyer. He was twice elected as judge in

Between the years of 1850 and 1860 Jonathan and Mary Atkins' property increased in value from \$1600 to \$7000. Based on the increase in property value during this time and other features present in the home it is believed this is the time frame the house was expanded from a two story log home to a larger I-House plan home. According to architectural historians, this type of home first appears

the Clay County court. William first married Elby Annie Grubbs in 1861. Elby died in 1870 at the age of 33, most probably associated with the birth of her son Jonathan. William and Elby had only two children, Jonathan and Estelle. William remained unmarried after Elby's death for 14 years. During this time his unmarried sister Annie remained on the farm with him along with his brother Joseph Robert, sister Ida and her husband, Samuel Mitchell. The mill was eventually moved to the farm and in the 1880 census a laborer is listed in the household indicating he also worked at the sawmill.



Jacob Stone Atkins

In 1884, William married his deceased wife's sister, Mary Grubbs. This is shortly after his sister Annie died and the marriage of his daughter. William died in 1902 after becoming ill and falling from his wagon. This fall resulted in a broken neck and paralysis and he died 9 days later. He was buried at the Big Shoal Cemetery following a funeral said to have been one of the largest ever held at the church.

During the Atkins ownership of the farm it was known as a social center of the community. It is said to have been used as a polling place in the early days of the county. The Big Shoal Church, immediately south of the farm, flourished during this time period. Every May a great bonnet show was held and women from all around would attend service and show off their new bonnets. It is said that during the bonnet show buggies lined the roadway for miles. Once every ten years the Baptist Association meeting would be held at the church lasting several days. Hundreds would attend these great meetings, camping on the adjoining farms.

1881

James Pendergast opens a working man's tavern and hotel, the Climax, in the West Bottoms. He attracts loyalty by granting favors such as cashing paychecks and occasionally giving a few dollars to those in need.



1887

Pendergast uses his friendships to run for alderman. He wins and remains on the City Council for 18 years.

The Atkins family owned and lived on this farm for 70 years. After William's death, the farm was sold out of the family to Rudolph Schroeder in 1904. Rudolph Schroeder was a truck farmer and grew vegetables, fruits and berries on a farm north of North Kansas City. This produce would be taken to the City Market in Kansas City and sold retail and wholesale. According to the grandson of Rudolph, the Schroeder's never lived on this farm. Rudolph had investment property and most likely this farm was used for investment purposes and possibly leased to a tenant farmer.

The Schroeders owned the farm until 1920 when it was sold to Mary Johnson, the wife of John O. Johnson. John Johnson had served in the Spanish American War and Mary Leavendusky Johnson worked as a chambermaid for Tom Pendergast prior to their marriage. They were married in 1908 and had five children, Louise, Emmet, Raymond, Ellen and Francis. In the words of Frank Johnson, a grandson of John and Mary, they "would make this a place of love and learning for all who came". The history of the house has been passed down through generations.

The entire family worked the farm. The Johnson's had crop land near Birmingham and their home farm was used primarily as pasture land for dairy cattle, beef cattle and pigs. The pigs were housed across the road and the large barn near the house was used for milking. A lane runs along the west side of the house yard where cattle were driven to the barn and the loading shoot. Just northwest of the cattle-loading shoot was the garden area and north from there stood the chicken coops. North of the house, across the stream, stands a pole barn used to house farm equipment and a truck barn with attached grain storage building. Directly behind the house stands a building that was used as a tool shed. The original purpose for this building is not known.

John and the three sons ran the farm until the oldest son, Emmet, bought them out. This was between 1932 and 1934 when Francis, the youngest son, went to work for the railroad. Raymond, the second oldest son, was the first to begin working for the railroad. It is said that one day he came in the front door and out the back door and didn't stop until he came to the rail yard in North Kansas City. He began working for the C B & Q railroad, which later became Burlington Northern, as a welder. He also ran the steam derrick when there was a train wreck.



Jacob Stone Atkins and granddaughters

The daughters, Louise and Ellen, never married and remained living on the farm all of their lives. They worked as billing clerks for the Davis Paint Company in North Kansas City. Emmet married his wife Lena and built a house in 1945 on part of the land on a hill just northwest of the main house. Francis and his wife Dorothy were living in North Kansas City when the flood of 1951 occurred.

1903

The West Bottoms area is engulfed by a large flood that brings train traffic at the Union Depot, on Union Avenue to a standstill. Officials had been discussing the need for a new train station; the flood provides additional impetus.



1905

Col. Thomas Swope donates land to the city for construction of a new General Hospital. Construction of the hospital is completed in 1908. Patients from the existing hospital at 22th and McCoy are transported to the new facility by horse-drawn ambulance. Horses, previously trained to pull fire wagons, continue to be used for ambulances until shortly before WWI.





They needed to leave North Kansas City after this flood and in 1952 moved into a house just across the pasture from Emmet and Lena, under the water tower. By this time all but one of John and Mary's children were once again on the farm living in three separate houses. Electricity was added to the house in the 1920's. The kitchen was the last addition to the house, but it is not known exactly when it was constructed, only that it was most probably an early twentieth century addition. In the 1920's the kitchen contained a large black wood cook stove and there was a coal stove in the living room for heat. Gas was not installed until the 1950's. In the early 1960's, Louise was diagnosed with cancer. When she became too ill to use the outhouse an indoor bathroom was finally installed. Ellen Johnson, daughter of John and Mary, was the last Johnson to live in the house. She died in 1991. After Ellen's death the house was leased.

The last family to live in the house was the Palmers, who leased the house until 2004. While living here they had the run of the farm and describe the spring that still flowed out of the rocks and the interesting vegetation, which grows on the land. Mulberries, asparagus, strawberries, honeysuckle, Virginia creeper, violets and red cedar all grow on the property. Sheri Palmer learned the medicinal qualities of many of these plants. A brick path was discovered outside the back door off the kitchen porch. Boy Scouts camped along the hillsides and explored the land. The children of the family were homeschooled and the farm became a learning experience for them. The Palmers say that during their time on the farm they embraced the historic significance of the property and loved every aspect of it.



The Johnson home pre-1955

Over the years pieces of the farm were sold for development but much of it remained intact. In 2005 the house and two acres were sold to the City of Gladstone. The property has since been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and is undergoing a restoration, eventually to be used as a living history museum and educational facility. Today, the house still stands much as it was in its earliest days. The original log cabin is encapsulated within the walls and can be seen in the attic and through small breaks in the plaster walls. The original hard wood floors run throughout the original parts of the home and early twentieth century wallpaper covers the walls. The three original chimneys built of native limestone still stand intact. The house still contains the original

January 29, 1907

An icicle falling 170 feet in the Richland mine shaft at Carterville instantly kills Jack Lavette, a young Kansas City man who had been at work just a week.

1908

William Volker helps fund the first public welfare board. Kansas City thus becomes the first municipality in the nation to do so and its board, named the Board of Pardons and Paroles, becomes a model for larger cities such as New York City.

knob and tube wiring and evidence of insulation with hay and straw can be seen in the attic. The one small bathroom is the only truly modern feature. The cellar and original outbuildings still surround the house and across the road stands a well dating back to the earliest days of the farm and it still contains water.

In today's modern world it is rare to find a piece of history so well preserved. The Atkins-Johnson Farm gives us a rare opportunity to step back in time and see life as it was over 100 years ago and imagine life in the earliest days of our county. It has been a place of life and learning for generations and due to the families who lived there and the people of Gladstone, it will continue as such for generations to come.

If history and the preservation of the past hold an interest for you, this is your invitation to take a walk through history and experience the restoration and preservation of this Nationally Registered Historic Site, a Clay County landmark. Consider becoming a member of the Friends of The Atkins-Johnson Farm. There is a graduated membership fee schedule that makes it affordable for everyone from students to senior citizens. Student and senior citizen memberships are \$10 each, individual memberships are \$20 and family memberships are \$30. You can be a supporter for a \$100 donation, a benefactor for \$500 or a corporate sponsor for \$1,000. Fees and donations are tax deductible. You can request a membership application or more information by visiting our website at www.atkinsjohnsonfarm.com, by emailing friends@gladstone.mo.us or by calling 816-423-4108.



Mary Leavendusky Johnson



The Johnson Home circa 1976



1908

The Board of Parks Commissioners approves a request from the Kansas City Zoological Society for a zoo in Swope Park. The board sets aside 60 acres and \$32,000 to build the main zoo building, which is dedicated in 1909.

1909

The City Work House, a minimum security facility for persons convicted of municipal ordinances, opens at 21st and Vine. Using inmate labor, the City builds the Leeds Farm in eastern Kansas City in 1911. The facility has one of the largest pig farms in the United States.