Kinloch: Missouri’s Forgotten City

The rise and fall of Missouri’s first black city were an unfortunate incident, or was it? Is it a coincidence that the once thriving and self-sufficient all black city is now a ghost town? Or was its demise planned behind closed doors by racist extremists, in high places? In this paper we will explore how the city of Kinloch came to be. We will also show how much of a staple for the community it was. Finally, we will analysis how it came to its demise.

The city of Kinloch was the first black community to be incorporated in Missouri. It is located within St. Louis County, approximately 5 miles northwest of the City of St. Louis. It began as a commuter suburb developed in the 1890s, inhabited by all white families. These white families did however leave a small portion of Kinloch for blacks as servants. The city of Kinloch was very impressive; and housed a golf and country club, an airfield, and a horse racing track. The first black family to purchase a home there did so through a white friend, due to it being illegal to sell homes to blacks at the time. The selling of the home upset a lot of whites in the area, which caused a phenomenon. The white families in Kinloch participated in what is now referred to as “white flight”. White flight was a way that whites attempted to maintain residential segregation by moving to other areas. The white families quickly started moving out of Kinloch when they realized there was a black family amongst them. Also, other white families refused to move into Kinloch which strengthened the divide. Real estate agents used a method referred to as “blockbusting” to capitalize on the racial zoning trend. These agents would convince white homeowners to sell their properties below market value in efforts to sell it quickly. In turn, they would sell that same property to middle class black families that wanted to live in the area. All these factors resulted in all the white families eventually moving to surrounding areas, and blacks being left to reside in Kinloch. The city of Kinloch was officially incorporated in 1938, and alas the first black city was born.

The city of Kinloch has a very rich history and was the home of many firsts. The book Kinloch: Missouri’s First Black City by John Aaron Wright, does a great job in listing many of the historical events that took place in the city. As stated in the book, Kinloch was the home of the first International Air Meet in America, and it was also the place where the first airmail letter was also sent from. Theodore Roosevelt was the first president of the United States to fly in an airplane, and that was in Kinloch Park. The city of Kinloch also produced Missouri’s first black superintendents, blacks board of education, and black school board member. Kinloch was also one of the three school districts, required by court order, to desegregate. There are several notable people that are products of Kinloch. Such as California congresswoman Maxine Waters; American film and television actress Jenifer Lewis; American recording artist Ann Peebles; Silicon Valley pioneer Roy Clay; and professional football player Barrett Brooks. Several former citizens have noted that although the city was small, it was self-sufficient. Kinloch housed many different locally owned businesses that encompasses a sort of “one stop shop”. In the documentary “Kinfolk: A Kinloch Documentary” Mary Carter reflects on how the city once had a high school, elementary school, Catholic school, grocery store, furniture store, teachers, doctors, and many more businesses.

Many questions have been raised in reference to the diffusion of the black Kinloch families by the City of St. Louis. According to the website www.kinlochmo.org, the City of St. Louis began to buy out property in Kinloch as part of the expansion of Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. This buyout ended up taking around 80 percent of Kinloch’s population. In the documentary “Kinfolk: A Kinloch Documentary” Mary Carter reflects on how several of the residents resisted being bought out and did not want to leave Kinloch. However, they ended up giving in as others accepted the money and left the city. She also reflects on how quickly the houses were diminished to piles of rubble the day after a family moved out of their home. Consequently, a city that once housed thousands of black families was reported to only have 298 citizens, according to the 2010 census. According to the Historical Population chart published by the U.S. Decennial Census, the city of Kinloch went from having 5957 residents in 1950, to having 263 residents in 2020. Many continue to wonder if Kinloch’s demise was another example of systemic racism, put in place by white people in high places. The airport has yet to do anything instrumental with the land they purchased in Kinloch. Instead, the land is left with abandoned buildings, endless piles of trash, broken foundations, and overgrown grass. It is still unknown if the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport truly had intentions on utilizing the land for their expansion, however the result of the buyout was detrimental to the black community. The people of Kinloch have yet to rise from the ashes that was left behind in their historical city, however there is hope that one day they will.

