



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**For the Memorable Fight:
Mosaic Templars of America
Headquarters Building**

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Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters Building, Little Rock, Arkansas, ca. 1910

Photographs from the research files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, the Arkansas State Archives, and the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System.

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A Historic Context Written and Researched
By Holly Hope

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Introduction

The Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters Building in Little Rock was chosen, after surviving many years of neglect and threats of demolition, to be the site of the new Mosaic Templars Cultural Center. In 2005 work began in earnest on the rehabilitation of the headquarters for its new life as a museum under the Department of Arkansas Heritage (DAH), which would relate the excitement and vitality of the African-American business corridor in Little Rock known as the Ninth Street Business District.

In March 2005 a fire destroyed the Cultural Center, bringing to an end the physical manifestation of many years of work on the part of the Mosaic Templars Building Preservation Society and DAH to revive the symbol of African-American independence. Despite the destruction of the building, the mission of the center will continue, and DAH has vowed to erect a new building incorporating the remaining architectural feature, a Classical Revival pediment bearing the symbol of the Mosaic Templars, into its fabric.

The following is the text of the National Historic Landmark nomination for the Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters Building written prior to the fire.

Summary

The Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters Building (NR listed 04/19/90) on Ninth and Broadway streets in Little Rock, built in 1911, is significant on a national level for its association with John E. Bush, who constructed it to house the Mosaic Templars of America and to serve as the national headquarters of the organization. By the 1920s the Mosaic Templars would become one of the largest fraternal organizations owned by African-Americans in the United States, extending to 26 states and six Caribbean nations. The Templars would also come to control the largest aggregation of black capital in the United States, progressing to become the most important black business venture in the nation.¹ The period from 1882 to his death in 1916 was defined by Bush's dedication to providing economic and medical services for African-Americans as National Grand Scribe and Treasurer of the Mosaic Templars of America.

During that period he also worked full force as a Republican Party member to sustain national black political influence by fostering the support of Democratic and Republican officers amenable to African-American progress. John Bush's political appointments to the Arkansas Republican Party allowed him to engage in battle against the "Jim Crow" system. Although opposition efforts aimed at Democratic lawmakers at the Arkansas State House were futile, he established himself as an ardent civil-rights advocate by organizing black resistance to separate coach laws, streetcar segregation and separate school-tax funds through petitions, peaceful mass protests and boycotts. As Receiver of the United States Land Office in Little Rock, Bush educated black organizations on the ideal of self-help by using his post to train them in the acquisition of inexpensive public lands, increasing the numbers of African-American landholders.

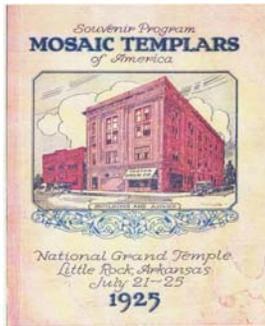
The Mosaic Templars building was considered a symbol of the advancement of post-Reconstruction black society because it was instituted, built and maintained entirely through African-American leadership and financial contributions. As such, it came to be a manifestation of Booker T. Washington's theory of black social progression through self-help. As a close friend of Washington's, John Bush would daily put into practice his beliefs, driving himself to fulfill the financial and political needs of the African-American

¹ John William Graves, Professor of History, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, Information provided through e-mail to author 18 December 2002.

community by battling for the means to provide independent black development. In a commencement speech to the graduating class of Tuskegee University, Bush said:

*It will be through the honest farmer, the skilled mechanic and the professional man that the Negro must work out his own salvation and solve his own problems...Let the world be better for your living in it; cultivate and encourage a friendly relation with your neighbor, be he black or white...Save your earnings, buy lands, get homes, be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*²

The majority of the many hours he devoted in working toward the realization of African-American advancement and organizing peaceful resistance movements were executed from his corner office in the Mosaic Templars building. The building also served as a central meeting place for black Republicans disillusioned by the broken



**Mosaic Templars
Headquarters**

promises of the party during the Progressive Era. Not only was the Mosaic Templars of America building the national headquarters for the order, which grew at the time of Bush's death in 1917 to encompass 2,000 lodges and 80,000 members in 26 states, Central and South America, and the West Indies, but it was also a safe hub of activity for African-Americans seeking to express their discontent with post-Reconstruction issues such as the separate coach law and the

poll tax. Thus, the national importance of the Mosaic Templars of America building and its founders lies within its dual roles as a symbol of interracial cooperation that enabled African-Americans to achieve independence economically and politically and as the organization's bulwark in the public fight against Jim Crow waged by the members and founders through mass protests, boycotts and petitions.

The Black Fraternal Organization in America

American history includes, but rarely acknowledges, the existence and numbers of African-American joint organizations within its borders. Many were formed as a result of prohibition from whites only associations, and others served as an outlet for expressions of racial communality and affirmation of self-worth. More than a provider of services for

² A.E. Bush and P.I. Dorman, *History of the Mosaic Templars of America – Its Founders and Officials*, (Little Rock: Central Printing Company, 1924), 57.

the particular needs of African-Americans during the slavery and Jim Crow eras, these associations also “furnished ...opportunities for companionship, professional networking, intellectual stimulation, and educational advancement, as well as artistic, literary, and spiritual expression. Moreover, many of the organizations served as outlets for social, economic, religious, and political discussions and often generated activism and reform.”³ In 1897 W.E.B. Du Bois commented that the church was the only institution within the black community that attracted more membership than fraternal societies. Such groups offered “pastime from the monotony of work, a field for ambition and intrigue, a chance for parade, and insurance against misfortune.”⁴

Early organizations formed by free African-Americans emerged in the 1700s, marking the awakening of ethnic identification and class position. Some of the initial black societies are suggested to have begun with the 1780 organization of the African Union Society in Newport, R.I., the Perseverance Benevolent and Mutual Aid Association followed in New Orleans by 1783, and the Prince Hall Masons organized in 1784. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries African-American men and women formed numerous societies under such mellifluous names as: The United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten, Independent Order of St. Luke, Twelve Knights of Tabor, Order of the Eastern Star, Colored Knights of Pythias, Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World and the Grand United Order of Moses, Grand United Order of Odd Fellows and Grand United Order of True Reformers.⁵



Prince Hall Masons

Three types of black organizations have been outlined: mutual benefit (benevolent) societies, secret societies and fraternal societies. Benevolent societies have

³ Nina Majagkij, ed., *Organizing Black America; An Encyclopedia of African American Associations*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), Introduction, VII.

⁴ David M. Fahey, *The Black Lodge in White America; “True Reformer” Browne and His Economic Strategy*, (Dayton, OH: Wright State University Press, 1994), 5-6.

⁵ Mjagkij, 62, 167, 234-235, 251-253, 267, 270, 543, 660, 665.

been differentiated from fraternal groups in that they did not engage in ritual and usually maintained a local membership, but many times they eventually merged into fraternal societies that placed the emphasis on economic rather than social functions. Such societies were responsible for issuing nearly half the life insurance in the United States by 1889. Secret ritual societies were distinguished from fraternal groups in the closeness maintained regarding their rituals, earlier charter dates and lack of emphasis on, or absence of, insurance. However, David M. Fahey argues that secret societies were not much different from benevolent and fraternal groups because the secrecy was mostly pageantry as rituals were often copyrighted, members joined several groups at one time and by the late nineteenth century they had begun to sell insurance as well. Many of the members of fraternal organizations came from broken families resulting from a life of slavery. Such uncertainty about their backgrounds and familial roots moved participants to embrace required initiation rituals calling upon them to perceive others in the group as brothers and sisters creating a “fictive kin.”⁶

The Mosaic Templars fit closely those characteristics seen in the multitude of groups formed by and for African-Americans, and its members and organizers took very seriously the munificent role expected of such associations. The formation of the group sprang from the needs of free blacks facing the transition of a country that was painfully resistant to the changes wrought by the Civil War.

The Reconstruction Era

The waning throes of the Civil War brought a wrenching change in the social order of the Confederacy. The institution of slavery in the South had been enveloped within the law and had been upheld by schools, churches and the steadfast belief of much of the Confederate populace in its righteousness. Now the freedmen could potentially gain social and legal access to the world of the white population, which compelled the former ruling classes to attempt a recreation of the world as they had known it prior to the war. Radical Senator Carl Schurz characterized this tendency as such:

The reason for all this is simple and manifest. The whites esteem the blacks their property by natural right, and however much they admit that the individual relations of masters and slaves have been destroyed by the war and by the

⁶ Fahey, 6.

*President's emancipation proclamation, they still have an ingrained feeling that the blacks at large belong to the whites at large.*⁷

Even the 1864 Unionist government installed in Arkansas under President Lincoln's Reconstruction plan (1863 Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction) did not totally abandon the prevailing negative treatment of the state's slaves. The new state constitution did renounce the Confederate debt, abolish slavery and reject secession, but at the same time it did not provide for suffrage and disallowed African-Americans not currently living in Arkansas to establish residency without the permission of the United States government or under a Presidential proclamation.⁸

So, though the freedmen were allowed two steps forward, the established hierarchy simultaneously forced them three steps back, a skirmish that would endure into the twentieth century. The Unionists lost their power base when their own supreme court struck down the state allegiance oath required of former secessionists, allowing the Confederate faction to overturn the Unionist Republican majority in the 1866 state elections and install a "rebel" state legislature. African-American Arkansans under the Unionist government had been given such concessions as the right to hold property, to sue and be sued in a court of law as well as to give evidence and to form legal marriages. However, the Democratic rebel legislature instituted "black codes" that refused them suffrage, school attendance and intermarriage with whites and denied them jury and military service. In addition, ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, guaranteeing black citizenship and equal legal protection, was denied.⁹

Upon Andrew Johnson's accession to the Presidency in 1865, he was openly vitriolic regarding the punishment of the planter class, an attitude attributed to his own humble origins. This hatred supplanted the goal of the radical Republicans: suffrage for freedmen. However, in the beginning of his administration Johnson emitted signals of being open to enforcing the elective franchise, when in reality, nationwide ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment was secondary for him to obtaining land for poor, uneducated

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, (New York: Atheneum, 1935), 136.

⁸ John William Graves, *Town and Country; Race Relations in an Urban-Rural Context, Arkansas, 1865-1905*, (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 8.

⁹ *Ibid*, 7-10.

whites from the southern landholders. In post-war conversations with radical Republican Charles Sumner, Johnson stated: “On this question (that of suffrage) there is no difference between us; you and I are alike.”¹⁰ It was not long into his administration, however, that Johnson came under the sway of the planters’ flattery, and thousands who had fought against the Union were pardoned and allowed to take seats in Congress. By 1865 he began to blatantly argue against suffrage. All doubt toward Johnson’s intentions was removed when he stated, “This is a country for white men, and by G-d, so long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men.”¹¹

The Reconstruction Era in Arkansas

The power struggle of the Rebel southern governments and the vestiges of their beliefs in the deserved treatment of freedmen had stirred northern voters to install Republican candidates in the fall 1866 Congressional elections. The Republican Congress, recognizing that Johnson was exercising a dangerously permissive attitude toward the South, proceeded to implement the Congressional phase of the Reconstruction program over the veto of the President. This phase (also known as Military Reconstruction) abolished existing rebel governments and sectioned the territory of the Confederates into five military districts by 1867, with Arkansas and Mississippi comprising the fourth district. Under a commanding general, a registration of voters, black and white, was required to take an oath of loyalty to the United States Constitution. When registration was completed delegates were selected to a constitutional convention, which would draft a state constitution. The goal of the newly created government was to approve the Fourteenth Amendment, affording citizenship to African-Americans and promising due process of law as well as equal protection under the law, which would qualify the state for readmission to the Union and representation in the Electoral College and Congress.¹²

A state constitution for Arkansas was thus ratified by 1868 under radical rule. Suffrage encouraged large numbers of African-Americans to lend their votes and install a Republican majority to the convention, which was considerate of black advancement and

¹⁰ DuBois, *Reconstruction in America*, 246, 249.

¹¹ Robert Cruden, *The Negro in Reconstruction*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 5.

¹² E. Merton Coulter. *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947), 119-120.

the Reconstruction program. Their support had also allowed the election of eight black delegates to Arkansas's radical constitutional convention. The persistence of these delegates prevented the establishment of whites-only voting provisions in the state's new constitution, providing continued entrée to African-Americans in the political machinery.¹³

These advances in the African-American political arena afforded by getting out the vote were met before the election with derision and subversive tactics by the white elite in Arkansas. Rumors about the true intent of registration files being used to re-enslave blacks were spread and some Democrats publicly denigrated the Republican promises to the freepersons for aid, while encouraging them to recall the "security of slavery." More overt methods were employed by some ex-Confederates and the Ku Klux Klan as they promised expulsion from the state and threatened the lives of



African-American polling station

freedmen for casting a vote. Black voters in a few counties responded to these violent strategies with low turnout while other areas witnessed masses of African-Americans descending on the polls. Such events afforded a luxury to freedmen as they experienced a previously unknown sense of power by joining together and contributing in the grass roots structuring of a new level of life through political participation.¹⁴ As a result, cabinet-level positions within the state were occupied by two black members and at least 20 had been elected to the Arkansas General Assembly by 1873. In the eastern Arkansas Delta counties where blacks held the majority, county and local offices would come to be held by numerous black residents.¹⁵

During the period of Radical Reconstruction from 1868 to 1874 civil rights for African-Americans in Arkansas were first and foremost in black leaders' minds. The Republican Party, while not exclusively the choice of freedmen, did receive from one-

¹³ John William Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader John E. Bush and the Origins of Segregation in Arkansas*, (Paper prepared by Graves for presentation to the Society for the Preservation of the Mosaic Templars of America Building, Little Rock, AR, 1998), 5-6.

¹⁴ Randy Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom*, (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 58-63.

¹⁵ Graves, *Town and Country*, 6.

half to two-thirds of its support from the black population of voters. As the party's largest constituency they were able to exercise influence in Republican policies and initiate programs designed to advance black opportunities.¹⁶ Author Robert Cruden points out that the special problem faced by African-American politicians in the South was that their efforts to achieve new levels of power were executed in order to gain socially unacceptable ends such as black schools, an end to racial violence and civil rights advances. They were keen enough, despite their inexperience, to realize that the best way to obtain these ends was to practice peaceful moderation through political action. Regarding civil rights, Francis L. Cardozo, African-American treasurer of South Carolina, stated:

*It is a patent fact that, as colored men, we have been cheated out of our rights for two centuries, and now that we have the opportunity, I want to fix them in the Constitution in such a way that no lawyer, however cunning or astute, can possibly misinterpret the meaning. If we do not do so, we deserve to be, and will be, cheated again...*¹⁷

In 1868 the Arkansas General Assembly, influenced by black legislators, gained passage of a law restricting refusal of services in public places and in transportation venues to blacks, subject to a fine and up to 12 months of imprisonment. While it was a beginning, the law did not make the hoped-for inroads against segregation, so the 1873 legislature passed a second, more powerful civil rights act requiring that proprietors of public carriers, hotels, saloons, restaurants and "places of public amusement" furnish "the same and equal" services to all persons, regardless of race. The outcome for noncompliance was a fine and imprisonment. This law also allowed for "like and equal" schools for black children.¹⁸

This was still not the cure-all that Reconstructionists had envisioned, but nevertheless there was evidence in contemporary accounts of blacks in Arkansas traveling and enjoying entertainment in non-segregated settings. Despite dual saloon facilities for blacks and whites, the *New York Herald* reported in 1875 that one could witness the state's black and white men enjoying a drink together. By 1885 both races

¹⁶ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 6.

¹⁷ Cruden, *The Negro in Reconstruction*, 105, 107.

¹⁸ Graves, *Town and Country*, 30-31.

also intermixed at vaudeville shows in Little Rock's Capital Theater, occupied public parks together and traveled on integrated railway cars.¹⁹ Black Arkansans would soon face heated battles regarding their civil rights, yet their newfound political voice gave them significant power over their previous life of deprivation and total exclusion. With the acquisition of voting rights and the passage of civil rights statutes, the growth of segregation was somewhat stemmed through the influence of black legislators, administrators, judges and congressmen. By the end of Reconstruction in 1877 grudging appeals to the African-American constituency and their leaders were being extended by white Democrats and Republicans alike.

Redistribution and Confiscation

In contrast to the political and legal opportunities opened to blacks in Arkansas by Reconstruction, they still did not achieve economic freedom and earning levels that would liberate them entirely from white control. During and after the Reconstruction era the main occupation of rural black Arkansans was as agricultural laborers on farms controlled by whites, keeping them in the same cycle of destitution and paternalism they had endured all their lives.

It was the opinion of many people, including northerners, Freedmen's Bureau officials, the freedmen themselves and even southern planters, that true independence for the former slaves could best be achieved through landownership. The idea of land acquisition through redistribution had been advanced since 1861 when congressional authorization allowed the seizure of Rebel property by the President in retribution for Confederate aid. During the Civil War President Lincoln and Congress had thrown their support behind redistribution plans executed by the army. In 1862 the military made available land seized for delinquent taxes on South Carolina Sea Island to African-Americans for purchase.²⁰ By 1864 plantation districts in Arkansas run by the lessees of abandoned plantations employing runaway slaves were formed by the general



Hoeing time in the field

¹⁹ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 7.

²⁰ Finley, *From Slavery*, 77.

superintendent of freedmen. White overseers and communal living on the plantation evoked a life little better than that under slavery. These arrangements did not allow the freedmen to be in control of the land, and the results of wage earning were not as inspiring to them as receiving the benefits of their own labor. Often those freedmen who were allowed to rent land worked with equipment loaned by the government demonstrated economic results equal to - and in some cases surpassing - those of white planters.²¹

Radical Congressman Thaddeus Stevens was one of the most vocal advocates for redistribution. In 1865 Stevens stated, "...The country would be well rid of the proud, bloated and defiant rebels....the foundations of their institutions... must be broken up and relaid, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain." His proposed plan was that the government should appropriate three 394 million acres of land from the 70,000 people in the rebel states who owned more than two hundred acres each. This land would be divided into 40-acre tracts for distribution to the freedmen.²²

Reconstruction Era Economic Opportunities for Rural Arkansas Sharecroppers

Redistribution and confiscation never achieved a following with the president or with northern Republicans. Andrew Johnson's initial grudging beneficence regarding the rights of slaves as citizens had completely waned by 1865 when he issued a Proclamation of Amnesty designed to return property to those southern landholders that had taken an oath of allegiance. This significantly reduced the amount of land available for rent. Business interests and upper class businessmen brought pressure to bear on redistribution as well, viewing the governmental confiscation of property as unconstitutional, not to mention posing a threat to their own effects.²³

Despite the failure of redistribution in the South and subsequent stalled efforts by black and white politicians to attain homesteads for freedmen, African-Americans could obtain 20- to 40-acre parcels of land sold at tax sales. Paying the taxes on the land was problematic though, since most black farmers were living at subsistence level. The difficulty of maintaining their own farms and the many pitfalls of the wage-earning system caused most blacks to turn to tenancy in order to survive. There were three

²¹ Graves, *Town and Country*, 72-73.

²² Dubois, *Reconstruction in America*, 198.

²³ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 10.

categories of tenancy in Arkansas: sharecropping, share renting and cash renting. Sharecropping required that half of the amount received for the cotton sold by the sharecropper be paid to the landlord. The other half was compensation to the sharecropper for working the land in lieu of wages. Equipment, housing, medical care and rations were provided by the landlord, but he would receive payment for these items by deducting it from the sharecropper's half or setting up plantation stores.

Share renters were those tenants who had savings enough to buy equipment and seed, but obtained shelter and acreage from the landlord. A share renter was not considered an employee so he did not get half of the payment for a crop as earnings, but he did turn over a certain amount of the proceeds as rent. The least common category of tenancy, fixed renting, allowed the tenant to exercise a great degree of freedom in managing his own land and required that a smaller amount of the profit from the crop be paid out.²⁴

While the tenant did enjoy some upward mobility through sharecropping, such as a feeling of independence and improved family stability, negative aspects remained. Needed improvements would not be economically feasible for the landlord or the tenant because they both received the same amount of profit within the system. However, the



Tenant family

planter would be more likely to get the best of the situation in other ways by adding charges for ginning and marketing the tenant's cotton and charging high rates of interest as well as extreme mark-ups for food and equipment. Any remaining debt after fees for such charges were taken from the crop return would be toted to the next season, which trapped the tenant in an unavoidable cycle that few could escape.²⁵ In 1899 a Hampton graduate made the comment regarding sharecroppers in Arkansas and Mississippi, "Their isolated life has rendered it impossible for them to know of a better way of living and having known no other they are content to exist in this miserable way with no effort at improvement."²⁶

²⁴ Ibid, 15-16.

²⁵ Ibid, 17-19.

²⁶ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998) 163-164.

The indebtedness of black farmers involved in the tenancy system rarely decreased as the books were maintained by the planter and the storekeeper. The landowners and businessmen of the South would often work together to take advantage of the poverty and illiteracy of freedmen and use it to maintain a semblance of the control they exercised before the war. Few would question the amount of the debt owed and those who did often encountered derision and violence. This circumstance came to be called “a condition of peonage,” meaning that if tenants tried to leave without paying their debt they could be arrested and returned against their will. Sometimes laborers could be acquired through this system by an arrangement between the local authorities and employers. When a black man was arrested on charges, whether real or fabricated, the employer would pay any fines or court costs and then have the prisoner sign a contract to work on their land under the watch of a guard. They were still essentially prisoners as they were locked up at night in the local jail just as they had been during slavery.²⁷

The post-Civil War method of maintaining a docile black work force through violence, limited opportunities, peonage and the crop-lien system has been likened to the paternal domination that produced the deferential antebellum dynamic between slaves and planters. The state of impoverishment that the majority of African-Americans were held to through tenancy and sharecropping was demonstrated in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century records of the Arkansas state auditor. The auditor’s report for 1896, the year after taxes began to be listed separately by race in Arkansas, disclosed that blacks represented the smallest amount of the total tax collections in Delta counties that contained black populations of 75 percent or more. The report for 1906, while revealing a degree of economic improvement among African-Americans in the Delta, still bore out the fact that few could - nor would they for many years to come - escape the level of poverty into which they had been born.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid, 130-141.

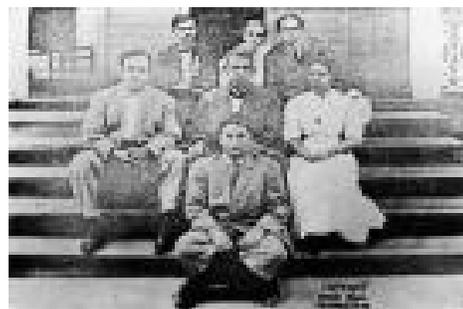
²⁸ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 12.

Growth of the Urban African-American Middle Class

In contrast to the dire situations of African-Americans in rural Arkansas, some of the state's larger cities offered advancement and business opportunities for blacks that sharecroppers and tenants could not hope to enjoy. During the last years of the Reconstruction era it was reported that African-Americans who owned their own homes in Little Rock were numerous and the state government was made up of several black officeholders. The political participation of the state's African-Americans continued into the 1880s, often with the help of fusion tickets that ensured leaders of black and white races governmental positions. The Redeemer faction (conservative Democrats) in the state, made up of former Confederate military heroes, came to dominate the political scene in Arkansas after Reconstruction. These men came from planter or business backgrounds with experience in dealing with African-Americans and they initially maintained good relations with black voters. The party competition between Republicans and Democrats aided in cooperation between the races as well because both parties realized they needed the black vote to accomplish their goals.²⁹ Frederick Douglass stated on a visit to Little Rock:

*It gives me a great deal of pleasure to find that the race, as a whole, enjoys a large degree of contentment at the relations existing between it and your own race. I find that the colored man is a citizen in feelings as well as in law and he talks Little Rock and Arkansas with a great deal of enthusiasm and expresses a profound faith in the future greatness of your city and state.*³⁰

The acceptance of urban blacks in Arkansas before the appearance of Jim Crow laws and the turn-of-the-century Progressive Era has also been attributed to the numbers of immigrants from Europe and the northern states who took up residence in Little Rock, bringing with them the capacity for racial tolerance and overlooking differences. The social situation for Arkansas blacks was slightly improved



Upper class African American family

²⁹ William Waddy Moore, "Black Disfranchisement in Arkansas", ed. John William Graves in *Arkansas in the Gilded Age, 1874-1900*, (Little Rock: Rose Publishing Co, 1976), 94.

³⁰ Graves, *Town and Country*, 130.

by the availability of educational opportunities. Despite a lack of financial backing, Little Rock schools were relatively superior to rural educational centers, as state expenditures per student there were two-thirds higher and a nine-month term was offered in comparison to the usual three months in other areas. High school departments for blacks offering English, Latin, French, German, drawing, vocal music, bookkeeping, the natural sciences and higher mathematics were offered in Little Rock in 1873. Three private colleges for African-Americans were situated in the capital city by the late 1880s, expanding the level of education available.³¹

The broadening world afforded to African-Americans by educational and political inroads in the more cosmopolitan areas of the state aided in the growth of a black middle class. While poverty and illiteracy was a pervasive state for the majority of blacks in urban areas, they were at least able to escape the crushing imprisonment of the peonage system, fining and laboring for shares. Black entrepreneurs were able to command the respect of white society if they demonstrated the capacity to accumulate wealth through hard work and the most prosperous among them came to be known as the “black aristocracy.” Often, visitors and newcomers to Little Rock were taken aback by the level of prosperity achieved by black businessmen and politicians as well as the degree of integrated business exchange that occurred.

John E. Bush

John E. Bush was grudgingly allowed to take his place among that aristocracy of Little Rock, overcoming a directionless life of poverty and a less-than-stellar reputation by acquiring an education, unflagging commitment to his work and political appointments and sharing his knowledge with other African-Americans in order to help them improve their lives. Bush was born in Tennessee in 1856 and was brought to Little Rock, AR, in 1862 to serve as a slave with his mother. After his mother’s death he became a homeless street child with a propensity toward trouble until a concerned citizen observed his circumstances and enrolled him at age 13 in Capitol Hill public school for black children.



John Bush

³¹ Graves, *Mosaic Templar Leader*, 25-27.

Bush soon embraced the educational process and became consumed with the goal of bettering himself. In order to earn spending money and continue his classes, Bush took a job as a brick molder.

The year before his graduation with honors in 1876, Bush took a job as a postal clerk in the Railway Service of Arkansas. He had become interested in the local Republican Party and decided against attending college in favor of following a course in business and politics. His proficiency as a postal clerk did not escape the attention of the Republican State Central Committee, which oversaw federal patronage in Arkansas. The committee endorsed him for the job of chief clerk in the Arkansas division of the Railway Mail Service, but he was not approved.

Continuing on in his position with the postal service at night, he took a second job for the next two years as principal at the Capitol Hill School for blacks in Little Rock, which led to a job at the African-American public school in Hot Springs, AR. Bush had been investing the money he earned at his various jobs in real estate, but the position in Hot Springs distracted his attention away from his business and his fiancée Cora Winfrey of Little Rock. In 1879 he resigned his position in Hot Springs and moved back to Little Rock to marry Cora. Winfrey came from a well-established family of free pre-Civil War African-Americans that were considered members of the black aristocracy.³² Bush was not easily admitted to their ranks even after his marriage to Winfrey, because of his former life on the streets and also due to the fact that many in this class felt insecure in their fledgling status as entrepreneurs and leaders.³³

John Bush, Co-founder and Leader of the Mosaic Templars of America

Bush was eventually able to infiltrate the aristocracy through his work ethic and his increasingly conspicuous standing in the local Republican Party. He proved himself many times over to the white and black upper classes through his myriad business accomplishments and political positions, but his most significant and widespread impact was through the co-founding of the Mosaic Templars of America, incorporated in 1883. The idea for the African-American fraternal business institution was born in 1882 when an elderly black woman requesting funds to bury her husband approached Bush and a

³² Calvin Smith, "John E. Bush: The Politician and the Man, 1880-1916," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 54, No. 2, (Summer 1995): 115-116.

³³ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 33.

white acquaintance on the street. The white man expressed his disdain of this practice stating that the black race as a whole wasted its money and was shamelessly dependent on society to bail it out when hard times struck. This comment was indicative of the ubiquitous attitude in the South toward African-Americans and their perceived inherent inferiority. The man's blanket impression of blacks motivated Bush and a friend from the railway mail service, Chester Keatts, to form the Mosaic Templars of America, an organization to provide life and burial insurance for African-Americans.³⁴

Bush, Keatts and 13 charter members gathered their funds, rented a building and placed advertisements for new members. The first Little Rock lodge, organized in 1882, was called Zephro Temple No. 1. After a year Articles of Incorporation were filed and the temple received an official charter under the name "Mosaic Templars of America," which licensed it to participate in financial transactions. An announcement in the *Arkansas Weekly Mansion* stated in 1883:



Chester Keatts

*J.E. Bush grand secretary of the order, has received applications to organize a temple and chamber each at Prescott and DeVall's Bluff, also two chambers in this city and one at Sweet Home, Ark. The society seems to be taking like wildfire among the people. Something new is all they want. This organization we are told is one of great value to its members.*³⁵

In the second month of its organization the Order had grown to "400 or 500 members."³⁶ Within the Order the member states would organize lodges, which were then split into local branches called Chambers for women and Temples for men. A third branch was called Palaces, which provided insurance coverage for juveniles up to 16 years of age.³⁷

Article II of the organization's constitution states the objects of the order as:

1.to unite fraternally ...persons of good moral character of every profession, business and occupation

³⁴ Ibid, 35.

³⁵ Dorman and Bush, *History of Mosaic Templars*, 134-135: *Arkansas Weekly Mansion*, 11 August, 1883, Vol. 4, #31.

³⁶ *Arkansas Weekly Mansion*, 18 August 1883.

³⁷ Mosaic Templars of America, *Proceedings of the National Grand Lodge of Mosaic Templars of America*, (Convened in National Mosaic Temple, Little Rock, Arkansas July Tenth to Thirteenth, 1917), 39: Dorman and Bush, *History of Mosaic Templars*, 134, 136.

2. *To give all possible and material aid in its power to members of the Order*
3. *To establish a benefit fund, from which a sum... shall be paid at the expiration of the life policy or death of each member in good standing, to his family, or as he or she may direct...*
4. *To establish a fund for the relief of sick and distressed members.*³⁸

John Bush served as the Templars National Grand Scribe and Treasurer from the inception of the Order until his death. As such under the rules of the constitution he was responsible for keeping reports of the Templars' proceedings. He prepared the annual for publication and submitted reports on the condition of the Order. Upon the death of a policyholder Bush would distribute the benefits. The seal, all books, papers of the Grand Temple and the maintenance of the Templars' financial statements were his responsibility.³⁹

Departments of the Mosaic Templars

The Endowment Department was created by the organization immediately after it received its charter. Profits from other departments were fed into this area and it formed the basis of all business performed by the Templars. Through the Endowment Department three policies were issued: class C, offering \$300 at death or maturity, class B, providing \$500 and a class A policy, offering \$2,000 at death or maturity.⁴⁰



Mosaic Endowment Department

The Monument Department, established in 1914, furnished a marble marker for deceased members. This department was the second largest financial area of the Order and it was funded by an annual 50-cent tax or assessment per member. Bush and Dorman stated in *History of the Mosaic Templars of America*, "At this point it can also be said that the Mosaic Templars boasts of being the first Negro organization to introduce the system of giving monuments to deceased

³⁸ Dorman and Bush, *History of Mosaic Templars*, 134-135, 141, 187.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

members and included as part of the benefits derived.”⁴¹ Soon after its organization the Templars formed the Mosaic National Building and Loan Association (MNBLA) to provide capital not obtainable from white banks. From 1884 to 1895, when the Order became financially solvent, the MNBLA offered loans for buying homes, mortgage relief and personal and commercial loans, all at low interest rates.⁴²

Other departments and business activities were the Juvenile Department, providing insurance coverage for those up to sixteen years of age, and the Medical Department, which proposed an African-American hospital in Hot Springs. A resolution was passed in 1917 for the construction of the building, but due to the onset of the Depression those plans were never brought to fruition. The Uniform Rank Department offered calisthenics training to African-American youth, and the Adequate Rate Department, organized in 1923, ensured that benefits would rise commensurate with the costs of current burial rates, yet premiums would remain reasonable. A national newspaper, *The Mosaic Guide*, was published by the Templars by circa 1885. This weekly paper replaced the *American Guide* published previously by Bush.⁴³



New Mosaic Templars Headquarters

The National Temple Department was formed in 1908 to provide for the construction of the Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters on the southwest corner of Broadway and Ninth streets in Little Rock. It was reported in *History of the Mosaic Templars of America*, “Up to this time no other Negro organization had especially provided for itself a headquarters and domiciled in such an imposing structure as was authorized and erected. The Mosaic Templars of America were the first to make this venture.”⁴⁴

The building was completed in 1911 and it soon came to epitomize the empowerment of the African-American race as an example of what could be accomplished through black initiative. The organization was founded before Booker T.

⁴¹ Ibid, 181, 184.

⁴² Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 36-37.

⁴³ Dorman and Bush, *History of Mosaic Templars*, 187-203.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 185.

Washington's self-help philosophy achieved national attention but it signified the same tenets. With the encouragement of Bush, Washington traveled to Little Rock in 1905 to speak on his philosophy. Bush again extended an invitation to Washington in 1911 to hold the annual meeting of the National Negro Business League. His final visit in 1913 brought him again to Little Rock for the dedication of the Mosaic Templars Headquarters attended by an audience of 2,000 blacks and 100 whites in the auditorium. In that year Washington also became a policyholder.⁴⁵

The red brick Templars Headquarters was said to have been constructed on the site of a small wooden house where Bush and Keatts held their first meeting to plan the formation of the organization in 1882. The building stretched for half a block and rose three stories exhibiting Neo-Classical and Art Nouveau influences. Storefronts occupied the first floor, which were rented by the Templars to supplement upkeep and construction funds. Officers of the Templars Order had offices on the second floor, and the third floor held an auditorium used for Grand Lodge meetings, dances, conventions, parties, commencements and games. The Headquarters was lavishly furnished and readily conveyed the sense of pride that African-Americans were beginning to feel through the small political and social strides they were participating in at the time. Symbols such as this would come to hold great importance, as those hard-earned advances were fast disappearing.⁴⁶

Political Activities of John E. Bush

By the end of Reconstruction, Republican leaders in Arkansas were holding a tenuous grip on their political survival by fostering federal patronage from national leaders that would provide lucrative jobs, which could be used for gaining the African-American vote. Bush retained patronage favors more than once for his unswerving loyalty to the party he considered the friend of the black community. He immersed himself in local politics because, as he stated, "I am a politician, first for the interest of my race, secondly because I like it."⁴⁷ Regarding the bureaucratic career of John Bush, authors A.E. Bush and P.I. Dorman stated:

⁴⁵ Todd E. Lewis, "Booker T. Washington and His Visits to Little Rock," *The Pulaski County Historical Review* 42, No.3, (Fall 1994): 57-62.

⁴⁶ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 38-39.

⁴⁷ Calvin Smith, *John E. Bush*, 117, 118.

*The “Hobby” of Mr. Bush was politics. He took as naturally to the political game as the proverbial duck would take to water. Even in years after, when fortune had smiled upon him, he was still active and fought harder than ever, first for the interest of his race and secondly because he loved fighting in this particular field, and throughout his long and honorable career few were the defeats that could be chalked against his record.*⁴⁸

The local administrative legacy of John Bush began in earnest in 1883 when he was elected representative of the sixth ward of Pulaski County at the Republican State Convention. This led to a position as secretary of the convention the next year and election to the first of five at-large positions with the Pulaski County Republican Central Committee. His allegiance to the party was cemented when he refused a nomination for Clerk of Pulaski County by the Agricultural Wheel - the Union Labor Party formed to secure state and local offices using the votes of discontented farmers and blacks. Bush preferred not to run because the Republicans also had a nominee in the running and he felt his presence in the race would be counter to the efforts of the party in their struggle to win offices against the state’s majority Democrats. In the late 1880s Bush was recruited by Republican Governor Powell Clayton to restore black faith in the party. For his efforts, Clayton threw his support behind Bush, resulting in his status as the highest-ranking African-American federal office holder in Arkansas and obtaining a position as the Governor’s chief black lieutenant.⁴⁹



Black leaders Joseph Booker, Emmett Scott, Booker T. Washington and John Bush

His connection with Clayton and the backing of the Republican faction in the state enabled Bush to fight the “Lily White” influence in the party, maintaining a black voice in state government. It also brought Bush a position as temporary chairman of the Pulaski County Republican Convention in 1892. In that same year he was elected as a delegate to the Republican National Convention and in 1894 he was listed as secretary of the county level convention.⁵⁰ His partnership with Clayton led

to an appointment in 1898 by President William McKinley to a federal position as

⁴⁸ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 23-24.

⁴⁹ Smith, *John E. Bush*, 118-120.

⁵⁰ Graves, *Town and Country*, 121.

Receiver of United States Lands (Monies) at Little Rock. A general movement had been gathering force to purge black occupants of federal jobs so the fact that Bush had attained this position brought him widespread attention and ... “Mr. Bush became at once a national figure among the members of his race.”⁵¹ The reaction to opposition for Bush’s bid for reappointment to that position in 1901 was indicative of the high regard with which he was held among Little Rock’s black and white leaders and businessmen. Endorsements for Bush came forth from white businesses, African-American leader Booker T. Washington and Governor Powell Clayton, while letters of recommendation to President Theodore Roosevelt poured in from every Little Rock bank, the board of trade, the bar association and the city’s mayor.⁵² Bush and Dorman wrote, “...he saw plainly the efforts being made to completely silence the colored man in the Republican party of his State with the advent of the lily white movement and he had determined to not surrender his people to this new challenge within the party. This was the patent cause for the memorable fight that he had made for reappointment.”⁵³

The level of support that he received enabled Bush to retain his position through the administrations of Presidents Roosevelt and Taft. The election of Democratic presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson in 1914 inspired a Democratic onslaught on Republican officeholders and the pressure mounted for Bush to resign. However, several months were still left in his term, which he vowed to fulfill and he stayed on. Eventually he realized his attentions were increasingly needed within the Mosaic Templars so he submitted his resignation. It had been noted that his desire was “to build the Mosaic Templar organization where it would take first place in the rank of colored fraternities of the world.”

Jim Crow in the Nation

Race relations in the nation after Reconstruction showed a promising start. African-American politicians held seats in local and state governments, and some larger communities in the South contained groups of upper-level blacks that exercised economic and social clout on a par with their white neighbors. This level of integration never inspired more than an uneasy tolerance from some southern whites and it soon fomented

⁵¹ Dorman and Bush, *History of the Mosaic Templars*, 27.

⁵² Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 41-42.

⁵³ Dorman and Bush, *History of the Mosaic Templars*, 43.

violent reactions. One manifestation of these feelings was the formation of terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of the White Camellia, the Society of the White Rose, the Pale Faces, Red Shirts and the Innocents. Groups such as these were formed for the purpose of dissolving black influence and ensuring that social equality did not occur. Cells within the organizations blanketed the South, whipping and lynching blacks for offenses such as voting, being present at public meetings, socializing between races and attempting to better themselves through the purchase of land or requesting higher wages. The focus of such activities was centered on groups or headquarters that represented black power and education.⁵⁴ Laws were passed in some states to offer protection from such intimidation but African-American advancement soon suffered new blows. The Supreme Court offered decisions that weakened the federal government's power to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. By the mid-1870s the House of Representatives was under a Democratic majority, and white conservatives stepped up an assault on southern states under Republican rule. Black politicians came under smear campaigns and any sympathetic white associates suffered boycotts at their businesses and experienced public castigation. Black laborers were denied jobs in favor of whites, and hatreds were fueled by rumors of African-Americans threatening their families and social standing by their political participation.⁵⁵

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 called for equal accommodations for blacks in public facilities but, with the 1883 evisceration of the act by the Supreme Court, the federal government essentially relegated the future of African-Americans to the vagaries of the states.⁵⁶ With this the Jim Crow Era began. Issues such as the growth of industry, alternating cycles of economic loss and gain, new inroads to the West and national expansion through colonialism inspired further detachment to the situation of African-Americans in the South.

It was stated in *Civil Rights and African-Americans*:

State after state throughout the South and border areas changed their constitutions and instituted statutory measures designed to deprive the

⁵⁴ Albert Blaustein, Robert L. Zangrando, eds., *Civil Rights and African Americans*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 333-338, 341.

⁵⁵ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Black Power U.S.A. The Human Side of Reconstruction, 1867-1877*, (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), 356-357.

⁵⁶ *Civil Rights Movement*, <http://blackhistory.eb.com/micro/129/80.html>.

*Negro of all opportunities for civic and political participation. Other laws imposed segregated facilities in education, travel, public accommodations, and the like; and the concept of Jim Crow was extended to all forms of public activity--frequently under the force of broadly structured laws, but also under the rubrics of "tradition" and "custom."*⁵⁷

The Jim Crow Movement in Arkansas

It was important to Arkansas's blacks in the late nineteenth century that men like John Bush retained their bureaucratic foothold, because the incipient presence of segregation had been gaining support in the Arkansas political scene by the early 1890s. Discontent among the state's poor white farmers over African-American social and political growth and competition for jobs opened them up to coercion by the Democrats who were facing the fears of a third rising Republican Party (the Union Labor Party). In order to lure white workers and farmers away from the Republican side, they played upon the racial hatreds that lingered from the Civil War and moved to disfranchise black voters. Using psychological tactics to fan the flames, state newspaper editorials depicted the farmer's revolt as a Republican ploy to intermix the races.

White supremacy was advocated by social and educational leaders who structured their sermons, lectures, magazine articles and speeches around propaganda concerning



Expulsion from the coach

the moral and intellectual inferiority of African-Americans. In the face of such a widespread and powerful movement the Republican Party withdrew its support of the South's blacks, and by 1891 Arkansas saw passage of its first segregation law.⁵⁸ The Democratic Party began the process in 1890 by pushing for segregation on the state's railroads. This led the Arkansas General Assembly to sanction the passage of the separate coach law authored by Senator J.N.

Tillman of Washington County. The proposed law required railroads to implement "separate but equal" waiting rooms and coaches for black and white passengers on the basis that close physical proximity to the state's African-Americans should not be borne

⁵⁷ Albert Blaustein, Robert L. Zangrando, *Civil Rights and African Americans*, 283.

⁵⁸ Berry and Novak, *The History of Arkansas*, 143.

by white rail customers. The underlying purpose of the law was to placate those white voters who would be negatively affected by the elevated social and economic positions of African-Americans through narrowing the possibilities for intermingling.⁵⁹

Bush had not yet retired from politics to take on the mounting duties of the Mosaic Templars when the struggle began against Lily White efforts to remove blacks from the Republican Party. Mass protest movements by African-Americans against their treatment were not unknown as the national presence of Jim Crow suppression efforts grew, but the intimidation and violence visited upon any protestors eventually served to lessen such movements in Arkansas and the South as a whole. However, John Bush remained straightforward about his feelings on the repressive direction that the state legislature was taking in following the trends of the South with the Separate Coach Law. Professor John Graves notes that the typical leaders of black opposition across the South “...were established spokespersons, well known for their moderation and advocacy of interracial cooperation. Their protest did not signal the appearance of some sudden fiery new militancy among blacks. Rather, it represented a desperate attempt by essentially conservative leaders to preserve a relatively open status quo, now seriously threatened.”⁶⁰

Bush served as primary organizer for a mass protest meeting in Little Rock of over 600 people in 1891. There, a special committee chaired by Bush and consisting of five prominent black community leaders prepared resolutions against the law.

The resolutions denounced the separate-coach proposal as caste legislation, warned that attempts to determine an individual's race could lead to embarrassing mistakes, and predicted that segregation would invite rudeness and incivility from conductors and “a certain well-known class of white persons.” As an alternative, it was stated that “An act to promote the comfort of passengers on railway trains can be better obtained, with honor to the state and justice to all concerned, by compelling the railway companies to provide first-class and second-class accommodations, with charges accordingly, by which means the respectable travelling public would be relieved of contact with objectionable

⁵⁹ William Waddy Moore, *Origins of Segregation*, 81-82.

⁶⁰ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 44, 50.

*persons of whatever race or class.”*⁶¹

Bush and his fellow protestors also presented white lawmakers with petitions pushing for defeat of the proposed bill. These efforts were dismissed, so Bush then headed a group of protestors that met at the Old State House in the Arkansas House of Representatives.

*John E. Bush and other urban black middle class leaders understood at once the true import and significance of the coach law and acted much in the fashion of W.E.B. DuBois’s “talented tenth,” galvanizing the black community into action and spearheading and articulating its demands. The race leaders moved with courage and resolution and deserve to be remembered for their stand. Yet in the immediate, pragmatic sense their efforts accomplished little. It may even have been counterproductive. During the protests some country editors were incensed by the meetings of the “colored ladies and gentlemen of Little Rock,” and one editor predicted that their actions would only serve to hasten the passage of the separate-coach bill.*⁶²

In spite of their best efforts, Tillman’s bill or the separate coach law passed both houses of the legislature.

Disfranchisement Efforts in Arkansas

A series of disfranchisement laws soon followed, among them the Election Law of 1891. Through the centralization of the Arkansas election system the Democratic majority was handed party control of every polling place and ballot box in the state. This law also brought to an end the casting of votes by illiterates. A poll-tax amendment to the state constitution, effective after April 1893, prevented the underprivileged lower classes from participating in the voting process, resulting in a reduction of 28 percent in ballots cast overall as well as a purging of black officeholders. These measures stemmed the rise of the agrarian party, fostered white supremacy and allowed the Democratic Party to predominate practically the entire state.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid, 44.

⁶² Ibid, 45.

⁶³ Ibid, 46.

With such a strong entrenchment, white lawmakers relaxed into complacency and segregation proposals in Arkansas slowed until the turn of the century when the legislature enacted the Arkansas Streetcar Segregation Act of 1903. This act was based on like measures seen in Virginia and Georgia and provided for delineated black and white streetcar seating, determined by the conductor. The state's African-Americans were unable to fight within the legislature, as disfranchisement had ensured that there were no black lawmakers present. In their stead Bush rose to organize another mass protest against this latest proposal. Peaceful boycotts of urban streetcar companies were employed by the black population as a way to voice their discontent with the new law without inviting violence. Actions such as these were undertaken on a regional scale and many prominent African-Americans refused to relax their vigil against such laws.

*Despite his publicly accommodationist racial stance, Booker T. Washington worked quietly behind the scenes to encourage the use of boycotts as a form of protest. During these years John E. Bush had emerged to become one of Washington's chief lieutenants in Arkansas. Bush's actions in organizing the Arkansas protests were clearly part and parcel of a larger effort.*⁶⁴

The Preservation of Black Education in Arkansas

By 1905 Arkansas Governor Jeff Davis had assumed office flaunting an openly racist plank. It was in this atmosphere - compared to that of James K. Vardaman's Mississippi - that John Bush finally found himself victorious in a fight against segregated school-tax revenues. Davis had persuaded state representative J.C. Burgess to introduce a bill in the House that would provide separate financing for black education through taxes collected solely from African-Americans. It was recognized by Davis and the African-American community of the state that passage of such a law would have easily brought black education to its knees, which again spurred Bush to action.⁶⁵

Bush assumed the helm of a crusade to destroy the bill by organizing a letter writing campaign fostering the support of influential black and white residents. Through an open letter to the *Arkansas Democrat* Bush pleaded that the state's senators and representatives recognize that African-Americans should not be forgotten for their role in

⁶⁴ Ibid, 50, 54-55.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 57.

carrying for the families of the white community and that of buoying the economy with the results of their work on the state's farms. Bush averred that passing the separate tax bill would result in a significant loss of labor, not only in the agricultural arena, but in virtually every income producing field of the state. The argument against the further loss of labor was persuasive enough to allow for the defeat of the Burgess bill and Bush was at last able to celebrate a victory against the Jim Crow system.⁶⁶

Despite Bush's sustained and much-publicized struggles for civil rights he continued to enjoy the respect of white politicians and businessmen within the state and the nation. He felt that African-Americans could achieve true freedom and the respect of the entire community such as he enjoyed through property ownership and economic culpability. Bush himself had accumulated \$30,000 worth of property in the area of Little Rock by 1907, and by 1910 he was worth \$100,000. Using his own success as an inspiration, Bush would utilize his position as Receiver of Public Lands to speak at black churches and public meetings regarding the accessibility of inexpensive but potentially valuable land. Through his information on the acquisition of such property, the numbers of black landholders slightly increased. As a charter member and National Executive Committee member of the National Negro Business League founded by Booker T. Washington, Bush further advanced his ideas that economic independence for African-Americans would elevate the black community out of the rut of being simply wage earners.⁶⁷



National Negro Business League

Bush lost his position as Public Land Receiver in 1912 when Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, became President. His health was failing but Bush then threw himself into his work at the Mosaic Templars Headquarters. As his condition worsened he would go to the office and there, "...in a buggy, drawn by a little pony, the property of his nephew...he practically opened office in this buggy and continued in this way personal contact with the office, depending largely on his younger son, A.E. Bush, to see that his

⁶⁶ Ibid, 61-62.

⁶⁷ Calvin Smith, *John E. Bush*, 128-130.

orders were carried out.’⁶⁸ In the last few months of his life he finally relinquished his position as National Grand Scribe and remained at home, where he died of a stroke in 1916. The news of his death was widely spread and messages of condolence came in from businesses and prominent spokesmen, both black and white. The mayor of Little Rock made a public statement on behalf of the city, and on the day of his funeral black schools in Little Rock were closed for half a day.⁶⁹

John Bush and the Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters Building

Bush once declared, “We must do something of our own and put it before the world.” This statement was indicative of the life of John E. Bush and the role he played in organizing and guiding the African-American community in the direction they must take to escape repeated assaults to their freedom. Bush was at the forefront of resistance movements against the oppressive measures undertaken by the government and much of the South to undermine any black political, social, educational or economic advances.

The Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters is a prominent remnant of a once thriving black commercial sector at Ninth and Broadway streets in Little Rock and reflects national significance for its association with organizer and National Grand Scribe, John E. Bush. The Headquarters was built in response to Bush’s desire to dispel the prevailing attitude of the white South that black America was not capable or desirous of performing on a par with whites. The fact that it was constructed and organized entirely through African-American direction and funded by African-American capital made it the standard for black pride and achievement during a period of prolific Jim Crow legislation.

The Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters Building at Ninth and Broadway in Little Rock is the only extant structure associated with the period of John E. Bush’s involvement with the nationwide and international fraternal organization and his life as a civil rights activist, beginning in 1882 and terminating at the year of his death in 1916. John Bush occupied an office in the building, fulfilling his obligations as National Grand Scribe and Treasurer. He also utilized the building as a planning center for his resistance movements and political attacks on racist assaults to African-American freedom. His

⁶⁸ Dorman and Bush, *History of Mosaic Templars*, 74.

⁶⁹ Graves, *Mosaic Templars Leader*, 64-65.

actions kept the hopes of the black community alive and served as an inspiration to other African-Americans in states across the nation that were faced with similar intolerance in the form of outright violence and covert bureaucratic actions.

The Headquarters was the hub of business activities for the various Templars' insurance departments spread across the United States, Central and South America, Panama and the West Indies. From a membership total of 400 to 500 within the first two months of business, it was reported at the National Grand Lodge meeting of 1917 in Little Rock that the total Mosaic membership in that year stood at 80,000. The reports of C.E. Bush, J.A. Davis and C.S. Johnson stated that since their last meeting three years prior in Tuskegee, membership had increased about 25 percent and assets stood at \$148,513.75, roughly \$100,000 above the total reported at the last meeting. From 1914 to 1917 the numbers of Chambers organized stood at 749, Temples at 184 and Palaces at 120.⁷⁰ The first fraternal meeting place of the Order was a small frame building situated on the southwest corner of Ninth and Broadway streets. By 1911 the dreams of the founders had culminated in the construction of a half-block-long, three-story, Neo-Classical, built by Massachusetts architect Frank Blaisdell on the location of the frame building.

Although Broadway remains a major traffic artery in the downtown area, Ninth Street to the west of the Headquarters, once a busy center of business and social activity for the black community, reveals few clues as to its vibrant nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial and recreational character. Up to the 1980s several deteriorated commercial buildings remained from the heyday of this African-American business nucleus; however, with the completion of I-630, an east-west corridor through the downtown area, demolition of more than half of the structures occurred and today only five of these original buildings still stand.

Sometimes referred to in the early twentieth century as "Bush's Hall," the building was the single administrative center in Little Rock for the organization until 1918, when it had grown to the point that more room was needed. To answer the need for more space, a two-story Classical Revival brick annex was built immediately south of the Headquarters at 904 Broadway. By 1927 the second floor of the annex housed the Mosaic

⁷⁰ Mosaic Templars of America, *Proceedings of the National Grand Lodge*, 27,31,37,39.

State Hospital, and in 1929 a nurse training school was installed in the building. Commissioned plans were presented for a large hospital and sanitarium in Hot Springs National Park at the 1917 Grand Lodge meeting, but despite the purchase of a seven-acre site the building was never constructed. In 1921 the two-story Mosaic Grand Temple was built at 906 Broadway to serve as Arkansas state temple and state headquarters building and later offered apartments for rent.⁷¹

Prior to 1990 the 1918 annex was destroyed in a fire but the Grand Temple remains. The building has been altered with the addition of historically inappropriate



Mosaic Templars Annex, c. 1980s

windows, which has detrimentally affected its architectural integrity. Along with the Taborian Hall (NR listed 04/29/82) at 800 West Ninth St. and 906 Broadway, the Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters building is one of only three remaining examples of African-American pride asserted in the form of high-style architecture during the Jim Crow

era. The three-story Taborian Hall built in 1916 in the Classical Revival style had reached a stage of critical deterioration by the 1980s, retaining virtually nothing of its original interior fabric. Currently, the building houses a successful flag and banner business and its historic exterior appearance has been preserved.

The Queen Anne/Colonial Revival residence that John Bush constructed for his family at 16th and Chester streets in Little Rock was the home of Cora Bush until her death in 1931. It was a single-family residence until 1942 when it became the Lena Jordan Hospital, a private African-American general hospital. In the early 1950s the house was razed during the Dunbar Slum Clearance Project, a federal initiative by the Little Rock Housing Authority. In 1954 The Dunbar Community Center was erected on the site of John Bush's house.⁷²

The Bush Memorial Hospital was located at 908 Arch Street in Little Rock from 1918 to 1927 and was described as “a two-story, frame building in a residential area.”

⁷¹ Ken Hubbell & Associates, Constance Sarto, Jameson Architects, Joyce Williams, *Master Plan for Mosaic Templars of America Center for African American Culture and Business Enterprise*, (Little Rock: Ken Hubbell & Associates, 2002), 27.

⁷² Cheryl Nichols, *Roots*, Internet article at www.arktimes.com/990212coverstory.html.

The articles of incorporation for the hospital were filed under the name Booker T. Washington Memorial Hospital in 1918 but the name was later changed in John Bush's honor. In 1927 the stockholders voted to dissolve the corporation and the property was sold.⁷³ The building is no longer standing but no information has been found on the date of its destruction. The east-west corridor Interstate 630 occupies the land less than a block south of 900 Arch St., which is a large, modern commercial building. If the hospital was not destroyed before the construction of the interstate, then it is likely that it was dismantled at the time of its extension through the downtown area. No survey forms on the building exist from the period that the interstate was being planned in the archives of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, so it was probably demolished earlier.

The Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters building functioned as a fraternal meeting hall and office until 1931 when the Mosaic Templars lost formal power as an organization and went into receivership, most likely due to premiums dropping off after the onset of the Depression. In the 1940s through the 1950s the building was used as offices, a nursing school, hospital and as a recreational venue for conventions, parties, games and dances. The building maintained its commercial character through the 1960s and 1970s functioning as a warehouse in addition to housing an automotive parts store on the first floor, but the upper floors remained vacant. By 1992 the owner was negotiating with the Backyard Burger restaurants to purchase the building, raze it and construct a franchise on the lot. In response to this, the Mosaic Templars Building Preservation Society was formed and incorporated as a 5013c. Through the efforts of this group the city of Little Rock purchased the building in 1993 and demolition plans were halted. Current plans are to restore the building with the help of the Department of Arkansas Heritage as a museum of African-American culture and business enterprise.⁷⁴

Summary

Even after John Bush's death in 1916 his name continued to be evoked by the African-American community as a symbol of the far-reaching effects of education, self sufficiency and non-violent assertiveness. Bush had begun his life's work of politically

⁷³ Edwina Walls, "Some Extinct Black Hospitals of Little Rock and Pulaski County," *The Pulaski County Historical Review* 34, No.1 (Spring 1986): 3-4. (the article states that Bush died in 1918, the year the hospital was incorporated under his name; however, the year of his death was 1916.)

⁷⁴ John W. Graves, telephone interview with author, Little Rock, Arkansas, 08 June 2002.

and economically aiding all levels of African-Americans nationally and locally long before the construction of the Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters, but the building came to embody John Bush's unwavering convictions and continuous civil rights efforts. The influence of the Mosaic Templars of America did not contain itself within the state of Arkansas and it did not strictly offer mutual aid. Nationally known African-American educator Booker T. Washington came to exercise a great deal of influence during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. He served as the President's chief consultant on Federal patronage appointments in the South and was a confidant and advisor to a circle of wealthy, influential American philanthropists. Washington became a member of the Mosaic Templars in 1913 and he pointed to the society in his writings as a working example of his philosophy of racial self-help and black economic advancement. John Bush was chosen by Washington to be national president of the National Negro Business League and Bush was considered to be as close to Washington as were his favored associates at Tuskegee University. By the 1920s the Mosaic Templars of America could boast of a membership into the thousands hailing from 26 states, six Caribbean nations (seven with the inclusion of the Canal Zone in Panama) and Central and South America. The organization was also the controller of one of the largest aggregations of African-American capital in the United States.⁷⁵

Although there was a multitude of black fraternal and benevolent associations prior to the formation of the Mosaic Templars, the founders of the Templars combined the familiar societal and mutual aid groups with that of a capitalist business venture available to thousands outside of the state as well. Besides the original intent of providing burial and life insurance for African-Americans, the Mosaic Templars also oversaw several commercial endeavors, the most important of which included: the operation of a building and loan association, publication of a newspaper, establishment of a hospital and creation of a nursing school. Though the Templars took their place within the historic tradition of African-American fraternal societies, its emphasis on business served to

⁷⁵ John William Graves, Professor of History, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, information submitted to author via e-mail, 18 December 2002.

showcase the Templars as one of the more unique examples for subsequent organizations⁷⁶

The Mosaic Templars of America Headquarters stands as a link to the early twentieth-century Ninth Street hub of black business and social activities in Little Rock. The situation of the Headquarters on Ninth Street provided the African-Americans of Arkansas with a sense of place through the rental of office space to various commercial services that they could not obtain otherwise. The building served as a planning center for collective resistance movements organized by Bush in the form of political strategy and peaceful economic assaults on discriminatory business practices before and during the Jim Crow era. Its role as the administrative center for a fraternal insurance company devoted to financially supporting African-Americans in need of burial assistance and health care, the Mosaic Templars Headquarters provided immeasurable psychological and economic aid not only to those at home but to the thousands of members in lodges formed throughout the world.

The Mosaic Templars after John Bush

The Mosaic Templars did not languish after Bush's death. The Templars sustained their position as an integral national organization through involvement in war bond drives during World War I and through the accumulation of a "patriotic fund" dedicated to the war effort. The officers saw to it that national and international membership continued to increase through the 1920s. Efforts to protect the civil rights of African-Americans persisted in the tradition that Bush had begun through the work of Scipio A. Jones, national attorney general for the organization. Jones served as chief legal counsel for 12 African-American men condemned to death for participation in the Elaine Race Riots of 1919. The Mosaic Templars coordinated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to raise funds for the men's successful defense and eventual release as obtained by Jones.⁷⁷

John Bush organized the Mosaic Templars with much more in mind than the monetary assistance that the society offered. He saw the provision of a sense of worth and racial cohesion as the greatest asset the group could offer to African-Americans. Bush's

⁷⁶ Information provided by John William Graves, Little Rock, Professor of History, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, 18 December 2002.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

political career earned him the respect and support of influential figures both black and white, and though his fight against those national movements designed to prohibit the equal growth of African-Americans took him away from Arkansas, he did not forget his home state and worked endlessly toward stemming the tide of discrimination in the nation so that all could benefit. Through its association with African-American politician and civil rights activist John Bush, and due to its standing as an architectural symbol of what the black community could achieve during a nationwide era of soul crushing discrimination, the Mosaic Templars National Headquarters building evinces national significance.



**Remains of Mosaic Templars
Headquarters, 2005**



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**For the Memorable Fight:
Mosaic Templars of America
Headquarters Building**

By Holly Hope
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