

K Esther Swirk Brown (1917-1970) Collection, 1994  
0971 0.01 cubic feet  
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#### INTRODUCTION

The collection contains a memorandum by Paul Brown summarizing the life of Esther Swirk Brown and her involvement in civil rights activities during the years 1948-1951.

#### DONOR INFORMATION

The memorandum was donated by Paul Brown to the State Historical Society of Missouri on 11/9/2007 (Accession No. KA1568).

#### COPYRIGHT AND RESTRICTIONS

The Donor has given and assigned to the State Historical Society of Missouri all rights of copyright which the Donor has in the Materials and in such of the Donor's works as may be found among any collections of Materials received by the Society from others.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1917. She married Paul Brown in 1943, and the couple settled in Merriam, Kansas, where they had two daughters, Susan and Leslee. Esther Brown's long involvement in civil rights commenced in 1948 with the passing of a bond issue for a new white elementary school in South Park while insisting that the African American residents settle for the adjacent dilapidated school building. With the school board refusing to fund much needed improvements, Brown filed a lawsuit and appealed to the NAACP, with Franklin Williams, a colleague of Thurgood Marshall, assigned to work on the case. While legal briefs were being prepared, Brown led a boycott against the elementary school and helped the South Park black community raise funds for establishing shoestring private schools in churches and homes. Her perseverance resulted in a landmark decision by the Kansas Supreme Court mandating not only that the South Park elementary school admit African Americans but also that the Shawnee Mission North High School desegregate as well, thereby sparing African American children the ordeal of riding decrepit buses to commute to Kansas City, Kansas high schools.

Despite a setback in losing a desegregation lawsuit in Wichita, Brown rebounded with her involvement in the pending desegregation case in Topeka that commenced with contacting potential litigants, which included Oliver Brown on behalf of his daughter Linda. Indicative of her active and visible role, Brown subsequently became known as "the white Mrs. Brown" of the landmark case.

Following the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, Brown remained engaged in various civil rights activities, namely in promoting the appointment of Robert Wheeler to become Kansas City's first black Superintendent of Schools; in mobilizing efforts which eliminated discriminatory fraternities and sororities throughout Missouri high schools; in helping to establish the Panel of American Women, a civil rights organization whose membership peaked at 1400; and finally in leading the fight against political efforts to move Penn Valley Junior College from its present central location to a less desirable site on the eastern fringes of Jackson County. A victim of breast cancer, Esther Brown died on May 24, 1970.

#### SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of a 1994 memorandum by Paul Brown summarizing Esther Brown's life and involvement in civil rights activities, primarily during the years 1948-1951. The composition was prompted by a news interview commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Supreme Court verdict of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that neglected Esther Brown's role in the case. However, the *Brown* case receives less mention in the memorandum than other lawsuits, such as the action leading to the desegregation of South Park elementary school.

#### PREFERRED CITATION

Specific item; box number; folder number; *Esther Swirk Brown (1917-1970) Collection (K0971)*; The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-KC].

#### INVENTORY

f. 1 Memorandum biography, 1994

#### LOCATION NOTE

The collection is stored offsite (021644) and will need to be retrieved before viewing.

#### SUBJECT TERMS

Political activists  
School integration  
Segregation

*Processed 02/2016.*