

George “Nash” Walker: The Unsung Favorite Son of Lawrence, Kansas

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*We want our folks, the Negroes to like us. Over and above the money and the prestige is a love for the race. We feel that in a degree we represent the race, and every hair’s breath [sic] of achievement we make is to its credit. For first last and all the time we are Negroes. We know it, the race knows it, the public knows it and we want them to keep knowing it.*¹

This was the last public statement of Afro-American sovereignty from George William “Nash” Walker, two years before his death in 1911. The power behind that proclamation and his personal narrative came from the remarkable people who raised him, as well as the unique place and circumstances in which he was born. Though he only lived thirty-eight years, Walker became one of the first Afro-American superstars to successfully defy the Jim Crow prescription of institutionalized inequity. This was accomplished, in part, because of his choice to “wear the [minstrel] mask,” as poetically described by his friend and collaborator Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906).²

1. *Chicago Inter Ocean*, January 17, 1909, 28.

Fashioned from a limited palate of options, this choice was designed to draw in crowds and utilize the liminality of the dramatic stage to subversively exploit the contextual difference between the satire of his brand of comedy and the mockery of the minstrel tradition, which was one of the first expressions of popular culture in the United States. Under the cloak of entertainment, Walker’s philosophy provided space to erode White exceptionalism that was (and is) a feedback loop of ignorance informed by the arrogance of unearned privilege. When people paid to see minstrel-style “coonin’g,” they surely got their money’s worth and much more. The “more” was Walker’s understandably problematic, yet unprecedented insistence that audiences receive a meticulously curated form of entertainment that was full of universal examples of the human condition told from a uniquely Afro-American perspective. What he and his colleagues hoped to reveal underneath the “mask” was the potential of the first and subsequent generations of Afro-Americans who were born after emancipation, free of the caveat and trappings of White exceptionalism. Since then, the minstrel show has fallen into disfavor and become a target for derision. In an environment where quick and easy answers to complex institutional problems abound, nearly free of context, Walker’s legacy has been lost in the proverbial shuffle.

George William Walker was born in Lawrence during the aftermath of the Civil War in what was still known as “Bleeding Kansas,” the launching point of John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia in fall 1859 and site of Quantrill’s Raid in summer 1863. Though Lawrence was Walker’s place of birth, his narrative began several years prior when his ancestors were held in bondage in Alabama, Kentucky, and Missouri. When incorporated into what is already known about him, his ancestral history gives greater contextual insight into his generation’s burden of holding to their values, while creating something new and unprecedented when such things were unthinkable to most Americans.

Since 1854, abolitionists had propagated the narrative that Lawrence was one of very few places in the region that was a safe haven for Afro-Americans. According to Rev. Richard Cordley, “The slaves escaping from the Missouri border made their way to Lawrence as if by instinct. They had heard of Lawrence in her early struggles. They knew how their masters hated her; consequently they loved her. They all felt it would be safe if they could only get to Lawrence.”³ While Cordley’s statement is true and somewhat naive, this idea of Lawrence fails to recognize the ongoing and complex experiment of social equity through which Lawrence and the United States continue to struggle at the expense of the collective potential of the republic. The national discomfort with that complexity

2. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1896), 167.
3. Richard Cordley, *A History of Lawrence, Kansas: From the First Settlement to the Close of the Rebellion* (Lawrence, KS: E. F. Caldwell, Lawrence Journal Press, 1895), 183-84.
4. Randall B. Woods, “Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The ‘Color Line’ in Kansas, 1878-1900,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1983), 181-98.

has resulted in the selective inclusion of enslaved Africans and their emancipated descendants into a limited and muted national narrative. This partial inclusion or outright erasure reflects the sliding scale of morality of Whites toward Blacks. What Cordley and others failed to consider is that the newly minted Afro-Americans knew that most White people, who worked vehemently to end slavery, did not endorse the idea of full citizenship for Blacks.

As a whole, the State of Kansas revealed itself to be more anti-Black than antislavery to Black newcomers and Lawrence was its saving grace. However, then as now, Lawrence was not free of problems associated with racism and other manifestations of White supremacy from well-meaning people. To that end, from an Afro-American perspective, Lawrence was the lesser evil in a largely demonic world, and any Afro-American who thought differently was little more than a nail to be hammered by someone who was asserting his or her “inalienable right” to do so. This was particularly true when Lawrence began to fill with refugees after the demise of Reconstruction in neighboring southern-leaning states and municipalities. Jobs in Lawrence were as scarce as access to liberty, so it wasn’t long before the veneer of Kansas as a promised land was eroded to expose the underpinnings of the reality of two Americas: one under the Bill of Rights and the other subject to the Thirteenth, and eventually the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, to the Constitution.⁴ This atmosphere allowed some denizens of Lawrence to embrace the idea of being on the right side of history, while regularly acting on the wrong side of the moment. Nevertheless, with the help of some charismatic elders, young George Walker grew to understand how to effectively navigate the hypocrisy of the social order, so that he could use the institutionalized underestimation of Blackness in Jim Crow America as a source of power to subvert it and eventually dismantle its demerit.

George Walker’s maternal grandmother, Sarah Hayden (1834-1907), was born in Boone County, Kentucky, and was emancipated in Harrisonville, Cass County, Missouri. It is unknown how she took the name Hayden. Records indicate that she was probably owned by former Boone County residents John Brady or Isham Majors, whose farms were near the Hayden farm in Harrisonville, Missouri. While in bondage, Sarah gave birth to two children, Sanford (1856-1906) and George’s mother, Alice (1857-1933), likely fathered by a man named Spencer.⁵ Shortly after the family’s liberation by the 7th Kansas Cavalry in winter 1862-63, Sarah gave birth to her third child, William Hayden (1862-1913), at Blue Mound, south of Lawrence in Wakarusa Township. At the time, she was listed in census records as married, living in a household with a family with the surname of Lewis, along

5. The surviving slave schedules, probate records and research provided by Tom Rafiner in *Caught Between Three Fires: Cass County, Mo., Chaos & Order No. 11 1860-1865* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2010), indicate that an enslaved man named Spencer Hayden lived/worked on a farm that was owned by Jarvis Hayden (d. 1852) in Cass County, MO that was very close to the farm where Sarah lived/ worked. Further, the 1905 City of Lawrence Directory (Lawrence Public Library) lists Sarah Hayden as the widow of Spencer.



Figure 1. Alice Myers with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in front of a home that he purchased for her in Lawrence in early September 1926. A series of fundraisers was organized in the East and Midwest by Robinson and Noble Sissle that raised a few thousand dollars for her in appreciation of the contributions made by her son, George W. “Nash” Walker. Photo in *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 25, 1926, 9.

with Sanford and Alice, and then listed as a widow about nine months later when the family moved north to Lawrence on New Year’s Day in 1866.⁶ Soon after their arrival, both Sarah and Alice took in laundry and worked as domestics (Fig. 1).⁷

George Walker’s father, Jerry Nashville Walker, was born on May 25, 1847, in Talladega, Alabama, where his parents had been owned by local physician Dr. James Simmons and were granted their freedom sometime before the Emancipation Proclamation. Walker left Talladega at the age of fourteen and served as a body servant for several commanding officers on both sides of the Civil War. After the war, he drifted to Texas and then to Lawrence, Kansas, in July 1867 where, early on, he acted as a guide for buffalo hunters.⁸ Soon after, he became a highly respected porter at the Eldridge House on Massachusetts Street, a position that afforded him high visibility among all socio-economic classes both Black and White.⁹ Eventually, he became a very good friend of Charles and Mary Langston, grandparents of Langston Hughes, as well as other prominent Black families in the area. As a testament to his status in the community, a news report cleared his good name from a false accusation: “We are requested to state that Nashville Walker was acquitted yesterday on the charge of creating a disturbance and displaying a pistol in the Methodist (Colored) church, Monday evening, it being proven that he was only acting as mediator, and had no pistol in his possession.”¹⁰

Details remain unclear as to how Jerry Walker and Alice Hayden met, and there is no indication that they were ever a couple who raised their only child jointly. Regardless, their son George William Walker was born on July 15, 1872, in Lawrence.¹¹ During George’s childhood, he lived with his grandmother and uncles on Mississippi Street between 4th and 5th in northwest Lawrence and at 1100 Pennsylvania Street in 1888 when he was sixteen.¹² Alice spent much of George’s childhood working as a domestic in Colorado.

8. *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), September 25, 1916, 25. Walker first served in the 10th Regt. Alabama Infantry as an officer’s servant. He also claimed to have served next with the Maryland 9th Regt. for three months in 1863, before his mother secured his release “for support at home,” probably due to the death of his father. After persuading her to allow him to rejoin, Walker joined the Massachusetts 5th Regt. Cavalry for nine months under Col. Cowdrey and upon disbandment, he was transferred to the 2nd New York Cavalry and served until end of the war as body servant to Col. Morgan H. Chrysler.

9. Abe Levy, an amateur actor and owner of a local clothing store (where he sometimes employed George Walker as a porter) wrote, “At the time of Walker Jr.’s birth, the elder Walker was the very popular porter of the Eldridge House and was known by the entire populace of Lawrence, both white and colored, and it did not take many years for the Walker youngster to become popular about town.” *Lawrence Daily World*, June 10, 1907, 2.

10. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, August 3, 1871, 3.

11. “Nash Walker Is Here” for his birthday, *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 13, 1908, 1.

12. Year: 1880; Census Place: Lawrence, Douglas, Kansas; Roll: 380; Page: 66D; Enumeration District: 067; 1885 Kansas Territory Census; Roll: KS1885_40; Line: 17 (Topeka: Kansas Historical Society); City of Lawrence Directories, 1873-74, 1879, 1883, 1888, and 1890-91, Lawrence Public Library.

13. Quoted in *Daily Gazette*, May 28, 1904, 2. While working in Colorado, Alice married a man named Frank Myers in Pueblo on March 24, 1894. Citing abandonment in 1910, she divorced him in 1912. Alice Myers succumbed to heart failure on April 22, 1933, and was buried in Maple Hill Cemetery in Kansas City, Kansas, in an unmarked grave.

14. *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), September 25, 1916, 25.

6. Sarah Hayden obituary in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, September 12, 1907, 1; 1865 Kansas Census, microfilm roll ks1865 3, line 19 (Topeka: Kansas Historical Society).

7. African-Americans in the 1865 Kansas State Census (Douglas County), compiled by Debby Lowery and Judy Sweets. Sarah Hayden’s stories from her time in bondage formed the foundation of *Bandanna Land* (1907-09), Williams and Walker’s final production with George Walker. The play was set in Georgia, but several characters were named after prominent Lawrencians. After Sarah’s death, attributed to heart disease on the morning of September 11, 1907, she was buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Lawrence.

According to Walker:

How well I remember, when but a mere boy, my dear, good mother left home and went west to find employment from which she could make money and send home to my grandmother to help her support me. How well I remember grandmother’s delight when messages, accompanied with money, would come from my dear mother. Then when mother would return home to joys and delights there were in our humble little home, when I used to sit and listen to the wholesome conversation between my mother and grandmother, and how they used to teach me to tell the truth, and be honest and make a good man, and be of usefulness in the world.¹³

Although his parents never married, Jerry seems to have taken his responsibilities as a father very seriously too:

When my boy was born, I began to think. I wondered what the future held for him. While it was true that slavery was now a thing of the past, it was also true that my race had a most terrible struggle to face in that there was but little hope for opportunities in a land still rife with bitterness and race hatred, with no chance for education and conditions but little better than they were before the war, excepting that slavery was now voluntary rather than forced. I had managed to pick up a little education myself, having studied diligently, and could read and write to a considerable extent (Fig. 2).¹⁴



Figure 2. One of only two surviving likenesses of Jerry Nashville Walker from very late in life. It was the focal point of his article “About Bettering the Condition of the Colored Race,” in which he succinctly outlines his remedy to the so-called race problem in the United States, in *The Denver Post*, August 20, 1916, 24.



Figure 3. Illustration of young Nash Walker by Margaret Rohe in *The New York World*, November 1, 1905, Evening Edition, 11.

Unlike his father, George remained illiterate through much of his early adulthood. As his colleague-composer Will Marion Cook recalled, “At twenty-eight [Walker] could not read a [musical] note and could hardly read his name, yet day and night he talked Negro music to his people, urged and compelled his writers to give something characteristic. Each year he wanted bigger and better things.”¹⁵

Indeed, George displayed his burgeoning musical talents and entrepreneurial spirit at age five in 1877 when he established the town’s first bootblack stand, a common occupation for poor children, particularly those who had little access to factories or farms. Most young bootblacks made the most of it by singing, dancing, selling papers and information along with shining shoes. As part of a growing Black presence in Lawrence (numbering 1,621 in that year), he conveniently located himself outside the Eldridge House, where his father worked and, because Jerry Nashville Walker was well liked, most people referred to George as little or young “Nash.”¹⁶ However, the town’s gentry also referred to him as a “ragged street urchin,” as well as “one of the most worthless and pestiferous little ‘Niggers’ that ever lived in Lawrence,” a moniker that many would later rescind as an example of their

collective underestimation of his potential for creating a money-making and, therefore, legitimate spectacle on the stage.¹⁷ It was reported that he partnered with Cornelius Carter who would shine one shoe while Walker would shine the other. Between them they carried a bottle for moistening their rags with a bold label that read, “Nigger spit rots shoes; we use water.”¹⁸

While it appears that young Nash Walker took little to no interest in school, as an adult, he fondly recalled Chapel School, located at the corner of 9th and Kentucky Street, a nine-block walk from his home on Mississippi Street.¹⁹ All the same, it stands to reason that the education Nash gained on Massachusetts Street through his own experiences and by observing his father’s experiential services to elite Whites at the Eldridge afforded him unprecedented visibility in Lawrence and access to some liberties that were otherwise denied to most Black children. As a result, young Nash took little to no interest in attending school. Instead, he spent most of

his days on the streets of Lawrence hustling for money, getting into mischief, and sowing the seeds of his future as one of the premier performers on Broadway. The only surviving likeness of Nash Walker as a child comes from the recollection of fellow Lawrencian Margaret Rohe (Fig. 3). Her older sister Alice recalled seeing him in New York City:

executing fancy dance steps, just around the corner, and the denouement of my tardy return home, so fascinating were the early accomplishments of the embryo half of Williams and Walker, is still painful to memory. . . . ‘The last time I saw him,’ I reflected, ‘he was shining father’s shoes for the sum of a nickel back in Lawrence.’²⁰

As an adult, he and others recalled this time as essential to his learning how to use entertainment as a means to circumvent the low expectations prescribed for him in the United States, in effect, turning a nickel into a dime and so on.

During Nash Walker’s childhood, the Langston family was especially prominent in Lawrence. The patriarch, Charles Langston, a friend of Jerry Walker, was deeply involved in local politics and operated a grocery store on Massachusetts Street, less than two blocks from the Eldridge House. With such a small degree of separation from the Langstons, young Nash learned that there was real work to be done on behalf of

Afro-Americans and that their lack of liberty in the United States was simply an opportunity disguised in work clothes. He was especially close in age to Carolyn Langston (Hughes Clark) (1873-1938), mother of Langston Hughes. According to Hughes, “My uncle Nat [Turner Langston] (before he died) had taught [Nash] music, long before I was born.”²¹ Further, it was said that he “used to loaf around music stores when he ought to have been at work.”²² As early as 1881, several music stores on Massachusetts Street sold minstrel songs, sometimes on sale for as low as five cents, the cost of a bootblack’s shine.²³ Young Nash also “sung in the pool halls for a living,” and in Black-owned businesses, operated by Jerry Walker’s Eldridge House colleague Mark Freeman, or Daniel and Curtis Stone’s saloon on north Vermont Street.²⁴

When William Allen White worked at the *Lawrence Journal* office in 1887, he recalled how “Nash was the singanddanciest [*sic*] Colored boy in Lawrence. . . . Nash used to come around and sing and we gave him a bit of lunch. He had just as many 60 candle power teeth then as I hear he has now.”²⁵ In 1917, White also recalled:

Nash never tried to kill us. But he sat at the reporter’s desk and grinned that incandescent smile of his while a drunken printer with a long-bladed knife came in one mid-night, while Nash was sharing our lunch, and chased us all over the room, out into the business office and through the stock room. Nash certainly had a sense of humor and the thought of a printer killing us, who had no special grievance other than that we had asked him for a quarter he had borrowed, while good and virtuous buglers whom we had libeled and slandered, had failed to wing us—the subtle humor of that situation certainly did give Nash a few merry moments.²⁶

During this time, young Nash entertained KU students and other local newsmen: “Many a time he has ‘shined em up’ for the editor of this [*Jeffersonian Gazette*] paper, and he always earned his ‘nick,’ and when he gave for us an entertainment a ‘buck dance’ or sang ‘Michael Levan,’ he always received a shower of ‘nicks.’”²⁷ Walker’s entertaining of students led to his becoming the cheerleader for the Phi Delta Theta baseball club, earning twenty-five cents a day, and he “accompanied them upon many of their escapades.”²⁸ Grant Mull of the post office also saw the “ragged and hungry boot black on the streets of Lawrence [and] helped the boy on many occasions,”²⁹ thus, encouraging him along that line.

Rather quickly, Walker’s innovative spirit took root in Lawrence, to the point of attracting the ire of the town fathers:

Our town is infested with boot-blacks, some of whom would make excellent farm hands. We don’t know as there is any method of preventing these overgrown Ethiopians from stepping in and compelling the little gamin or natural boot-blacks to step aside while they take in his nickels, but we would suppose that even the most ignorant would have pride enough to choose man’s work and permit the little boys to have their privileges.³⁰

As Nash Walker approached adolescence, he and his friends George Hart and Cornelius Carter spent a lot of time exploring all sides of life as typical truant boys in Lawrence. A common theme of lament of his adulthood was his run-ins with Officer John “Brock” Brockelsby, known for his brutal tactics, especially when confronting Black suspects, as well as with Officer Monroe, whom Walker gave “many a hot chase down the alleys ‘just off’ Winthrop [7th] Street.”³¹ Apparently, young Nash Walker’s feet rarely failed him. According to his future partner Bert Williams, “Why, way back in Kansas, when the larder got low, Walker would go out in the wheat fields, start a rabbit, and run him till his ankles caught fire, and, while the rabbit was burnin’ up, grab him.”³²

Through it all, there were plenty of periodic reminders of the reality of Blackness in the United States, especially when Pete Vinegar, George Robertson, and Ike King were lynched on the Kaw bridge, where Nash and many other children liked to swim, on June 9, 1882, just before Nash’s tenth birthday. Though Walker was most likely not present at the lynching, one can be certain that he heard about it as a cautionary tale of Black access to liberty, equal protection under the law, and due process. Nonetheless, as a matter of necessity, he publicly expressed his belief in the people around him in Lawrence by recalling:

Having been born in the town of Lawrence in the State of bleeding Kansas, it was my good fortune all of my life to be associated with White children who had never been trained to look at the complexion of the human skin with suspicion, therefore I can truthfully say, that they have no race or color prejudice, against me. And, as a child I played with White children and was treated merely as a child and treated other children as children usually treated each other. We played and frolicked about the town of Lawrence together and that was all

21. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 22-23.

22. Quoted in *Lawrence Weekly World*, May 19, 1898, 5.

23. For example, *Lawrence Daily Journal*, May 5, 1881, 2.

24. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily World*, December 8, 1908, 6.

25. “William Allen White Tells New York About ‘Nash’ Walker,” *Lawrence Daily World*, March 16, 1908, 1.

26. Quoted in “Ere In Our Life,” *Daily Gazette*, July 30, 1917, 3.

27. Quoted in *Jeffersonian Gazette*, July 24, 1902, 1.

28. *Lawrence Daily Journal*, January 18, 1900, 4; quoted in *Lawrence Daily World*, June 10, 1907, 2; “Baseball in the [acting] Profession,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, February 26, 1907, 7.

29. Quoted in “Remembers His Friends,” *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 26, 1904, 4.

30. Quoted in *Kansas Daily Tribune*, May 5, 1880, 4.

31. *Jeffersonian Gazette*, July 24, 1902, 1; Quote in *Lawrence Daily World*, May 4, 1908, 2.

32. Quoted in *Washington Times*, August 9, 1908, 2. This story was told as context for Nash Walker getting trounced in a foot race against Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a man who was world famous for taking on all comers while running backwards.

there was to it. Having left Lawrence at a very early age to seek my fame and fortune in the world—I have gained a little fame of which I am not ashamed, but fortune has not yet come my way, it has been my lot not only to meet but I have had to battle against a prejudice called, Race prejudice. This prejudice I have not found to be a superstition at all, but a misconception of the truth, for all humanity is one and the same.³³

Lawrence was a city of its time and, likewise, displayed its fair share of problems towards Black residents, including Walker. Despite having gained fame during adulthood, he also recalled another experience in Lawrence that reminded him of his place in Jim Crow America, when children “made uncomplimentary remarks about Darwin and his theory and even threw bananas and peanuts,” at him in South Park, after he served as the Grand Marshal in the Elk’s parade on July 4, 1902.³⁴

As in other US towns, Lawrence’s newest residents were compelled to establish their own separate places for worship. In spring 1883, what was to become Warren [Ninth] Street Baptist Church was purchased.³⁵ The church performed its traditional role of providing a much safer place for the expression of ideas, creativity, spirituality, and humanity that one might not even dare to express in the outer world. Nash Walker’s maternal relatives were members, and his mother, Alice, regularly sang solos during services.³⁶ Along with traditional worship, this church hosted Charles Langston’s Inter-State Literary Society in 1898 where political and social topics were discussed.³⁷ That kind of atmosphere would nurture the lion’s share of Afro-American performers throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

Walker’s growing sense of confidence within Jim Crow’s institutionalized constriction insured that he took part in his fair share of mischief, some of which was reported in local papers. One report mentioned that “The Colored boy named Walker, who fell from a cherry tree in North Lawrence, some days ago, breaking both wrists, is already recovering.”³⁸ In 1888, when he was sixteen Walker was accused of stealing a whip from George Washington in a local paper, but no outcome was reported.³⁹ The following year, two reports noted that Nash Walker and Will Copeland were arrested for breaking into Zook’s grocery: “The boys got in from the rear and took what cash there was in the drawer, amounting to \$2.55, and some tobacco from the shelves.” “Mr. Zook had suspected that the store would be entered and had left two of his clerks to watch.

The store had been entered a number of times before.”⁴⁰ The incident left a stain on his reputation, and the two boys were found guilty of petty larceny in Justice Sternberg’s court. As a result, “They were given six months each in the county jail, and will be given some exercise on the rock pile, and ere their time has expired they will be experienced rock breakers.”⁴¹

Eventually, Nash Walker would wait tables in Lawrence and try his mettle in Leavenworth and in Kansas City, where he sold the *Star* and the *Times* on Fifth Street.⁴² During his time in Kansas City, he met Joe Howard (1870-1961), a future vaudevillian who became famous for the hit song *Hello! Ma Baby*. At the time, Howard was a destitute runaway, and Nash Walker brought him back to Lawrence to live and even paid for his music lessons.⁴³ When reflecting upon his youth, Walker wrote, “I must admit that I know of only two good things concerning myself. First: I have never been in state prison. Second: I don’t know why I haven’t.”⁴⁴

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, young Nash Walker likely attended many Black minstrel shows that played frequently in Lawrence at a cost of twenty-five cents for children. Given that minstrels, managers, and advance agents often stayed at the Eldridge House, Jerry and/or George could have readily obtained free tickets from them or from the newspaper men across the street who received complimentary tickets in exchange for “puffing” troupes before and after performances. Whether or not Nash actually witnessed shows, he surely saw and participated in the noon-day parades down Massachusetts Street that preceded the performances each time minstrels came to town.⁴⁵ By far, the most important traveling minstrel to visit Lawrence was Billy Kersands (ca.1842-1915). He performed regularly in town from July 1873 through August 1890 at Liberty Hall (Bowersock Opera House after 1882).⁴⁶ As one of the few Black performers who bucked minstrel traditions by not using burnt cork, Kersands was known far and wide for wearing outlandish outfits and stuffing things into his abnormally large mouth when he wasn’t singing, buck-and-wing dancing, or telling jokes.⁴⁷ While it remains unclear whether Walker actually met Kersands in Lawrence, they eventually became friends, and many of the earliest photographs of Nash Walker in costume show a remarkable similarity to Kersands’ attire. Furthermore, Kersands often encouraged talented young people to pursue their dreams of transcendence via the stage, something Walker also did throughout his life.

In December 1891, around the time around the time that his father relocated to Denver, nineteen-year-old Nash Walker

30. Quoted in *Kansas Daily Tribune*, May 5, 1880, 4.
31. *Jeffersonian Gazette*, July 24, 1902, 1; Quote in *Lawrence Daily World*, May 4, 1908, 2.
32. Quoted in *Washington Times*, August 9, 1908, 2. This story was told as context for Nash Walker getting trounced in a foot race against Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a man who was world famous for taking on all comers while running backwards.
33. Quoted in “Defends His Race” to the Thirteen Club, *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 25, 1908, 3.
34. Quoted in “Had a Pleasant Visit,” *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 26, 1902, 4.
35. *Western Recorder*, May 31, 1883, 3.

36. *Lawrence Daily Journal*, May 14, 1887, 3. With the exception of Alice (who left Lawrence in 1931), the funeral services of the entire family were held there, including Nash Walker’s funeral on January 14, 1911, in *Iola Register*, January 16, 1911, 4.
37. *Lawrence Daily World*, December 29, 1898, 3; Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 24.
38. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, June 25, 1886, 3.
39. Lawrence Daily Democrat (Lawrence, Kansas) · Tue, Sep 25, 1888 · Page 4.
40. Quoted respectively in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, May 14, 1889, 3; *Evening Tribune*, May 13, 1889, 3.
41. Quoted in *Evening Tribune*, May 14, 1889, 3.

got his first big break when he performed with the Arcade Minstrels and was billed as “A second edition of Billie [sic] Kersands” (Fig. 4).⁴⁸ Before the evening show, they paraded down Massachusetts Street in the afternoon and featured their banjo solos, guitar and mandolin duets.⁴⁹ Newspapers urged audiences to “Go see Nash Walker and Jessie Hunter in their sporting song and dance,” while the Afro-American *Times-Observer* wrote, “So far Nash Walker has been their star, and it is said that he came as near imitating a monkey as a man could come to it.”⁵⁰

At last, Nash Walker, the second of his family to be born out of bondage, felt that he was ready for the next logical step. As he wrote, “I started out with the idea that it was possible for the black performer to do better. My associates shared my views to some extent, but to most of them the future offered little encouragement, and the longer I remained at home the more impossible it seemed for me ever to realize my ambition.” One sure way out of town was to join a traveling show. As he further recalled in 1906:

There were many quack doctors doing business in the West. They traveled from one town to another in wagons, and gave shows in order to get large crowds of people together, so as to sell medicine. When a boy, I was quite an entertainer. I could sing and dance, and was good at face-making, beating the tambourine and rattling the bones. I was not lacking in courage and did not hesitate to ask the quacks for a job. First one and then the other hired me. When we arrived in a town and our show started, I was generally the first to attract attention. I would mount the wagon and commence to sing and dance, make faces, and tell stories, and rattle the bones. I had to rough it, going across the country this way, and rough it I did. But I got there, and that was the main thing.⁵¹

The combination of his natural talent and the abolitionist ethos of Lawrence empowered Nash Walker to free himself from the confines of small-town life and he attempted to maximize his potential elsewhere. Having traveled the region with medicine shows, Walker left Lawrence for good in 1892 and drifted to San Francisco where he met his future partner, Egbert (Bert) Austin Williams (1874-1922).⁵²

However, Nash Walker’s love for Lawrence endured throughout his life. After marrying Aida Overton on June 22, 1899, he became one of the most famous cake walkers in the world (Fig. 5) and brought all five of his productions to the

42. “Ball and Banquet,” *Rising Son* (Kansas City, MO), January 16, 1903, 1.
43. Though Howard’s autobiography made no mention of Nash Walker, Howard gave “a touching tribute” to Walker who discovered him in Kansas City, in *Jeffersonian Gazette*, January 18, 1911, 3.
44. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 26, 1902, 4; *Lawrence Daily World*, July 28, 1902, 3.
45. In 1903, Nash Walker scored a hit with *Me an’ da Minstrel Ban’*, a throwback to the days of minstrel parades down main streets of American towns in the nineteenth century. It was sung in the first act of *In Dahomey*, the first Black production on Broadway.



Figure 4. Advertisement in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, December 8, 1891, 4.

46. For example, see ads or reviews in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 2, 1873, 3, November 30, 1876, 2, May 15, 1879, 4, August 22, 1883, 4, October 21, 1885, 4, March 30, 1887, 3, and August 14, 1890, 4.
47. Buck-and-wing refers to an amalgamation of two subversive dances that were first common on plantations and then in minstrel shows. “Buck” refers to a percussive, proto-tap style, while “wing” refers to a loosely percussive swaying of the limbs that was a precursor to popular dances like the Charleston and the Funky Chicken. A slightly modified combination of the two became the basis for the Cake Walk, the first Afro-American-inspired dance craze at the close of the nineteenth century, of which Nash Walker was the most famous practitioner. The dance-line on *Soul Train* is a direct descendant of the cake walk.
48. Jerry Walker left Lawrence for Denver in 1892 or 1893. In 1902 (the same year his son started production of *In Dahomey*), he became the founding president of the Colorado Colonization Society of Liberia, Africa. He spent the final twenty years of his life working to repatriate Black people to a 50,000-acre land grant in Liberia, Africa. He died on November 9, 1922 and is buried in Riverside Cemetery in Denver, Colorado, in an unmarked grave.
49. *Lawrence Daily Journal*, December 8, 1891, 4.
50. Respectively, quoted in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, December 7, 1891, 4; *Times-Observer*, December 5, 1891, 1. Walker specialized in “buffoon” or “heel” parts, until he traded roles with Bert Williams and became the duo’s straight man in April of 1896. With this success, they became one of the most popular duos on the American stage by 1900. They continued this formula until the end of their partnership in spring 1909, when Walker retired.
51. Quoted in *Theatre Magazine*, August 1906, 224-25.
52. *Theatre Magazine*, August 1906, 224-25.

Bowersock Opera House in Lawrence.⁵³ Every winter, Williams and Walker’s performances filled the hall to capacity with *The Policy Players* in 1900, *The Sons of Ham* in 1902, *In Dahomey* in 1903, *Abyssinia* in 1906, and finally *Bandanna Land* in 1908.⁵⁴

Having engaged the best Afro-American performers in the United States, Williams and Walker’s ensembles, with casts ranging from fifty to over seventy-five members, performed across New York, Boston, and Chicago, as well as London.⁵⁵ Between theatrical seasons, Walker returned to Lawrence in the summertime to visit family and friends and to recuperate from his hectic schedule. His love of Lawrence was so profound that he aspired to return permanently when his days in the theatre were over. In one of his love letters to Lawrence, he remarked:

But why, Oh, why is there always a fly in the ointment? Why must a thing be almost what you would have it be? Is Tantalus never to be blessed with a flood? Don’t you guess what I mean? I am talking about Lawrence’s theatre.

I am vexed because, when I talk to my professional friends, I must use much care in boosting my hometown. When I give tongue to my pride in Lawrence, I am usually reminded of its playhouse, and I do not like to feel that my feathers must fall peacock-like. Sarcasms about Lawrence make me, temporarily, an ‘undesirable citizen.’

If they only had a theatre at my home,
Gee. But ‘twould be a joy to me to come
And bring our troupe to make a show,
And tell them, ‘Yes, my home, you know,’
If they only had a theatre at my home.
If they only had a theatre at my home,
For one, I’ll help to boost a Bowersock boom.
More—if ‘twill help, I’ll not refuse
To come and once more shine his shoes
If he’ll only build a theatre at my home.⁵⁶

In July 1902, the same summer as the infamous “Darwin incident,” Walker bought two lots in the Pinckney neighborhood and eventually built a beautiful house for his mother and grandmother at 401 Indiana Street that still stands.⁵⁷ He hoped this home could function as a headquarters for a theatrical empire that he planned to erect through his fraternal organization called The Frogs.⁵⁸ In retirement, Walker wanted to help Lawrence

fully recognize its problem with Afro-Americans, especially with regard to personal liberty in the town: “Not many people really hate us . . . It is a matter of money, mostly—an economic question. Down here at Wiedemann’s Negroes are not served at all. That isn’t because Mr. Wiedemann hates black people, but because it would hurt his business to serve both races. It’s an economic question to him. So it is almost everywhere—a question of business.”⁵⁹

Alas, Nash Walker took ill in late 1908 and was forced to retire in March 1909. After his voice went hoarse, he lost his trademark coordination, began to forget his lines, and started acting out of character backstage and in hotel lobbies, first in Dayton, Ohio, and then in Louisville, Kentucky.⁶⁰ His illness was most likely due to late stage syphilis, an incurable disease at the time that ended the careers of many of his contemporaries, such as Will Accooe (1874-1904), Bob Cole (1868-1911), and Walker’s wife, Aida Overton Walker (1880-1914).⁶¹

During the early days of his illness, when the prospect of recovery was still on everyone’s mind, he stayed with his mother in Lawrence and took long walks in the country (to what is now Sandra J. Shaw Community Health Park), slept, loafed, and read his mail.⁶² In order to keep his name in the public sphere, his wife Aida, dressed in drag and performed his signature hit *Bon Bon Buddy* to critical acclaim.⁶³ While Walker was convalescing in Lawrence, Langston Hughes remembered that his mother Carrie had supper at the house on Indiana St., where they “ate from plates with gold edging.”⁶⁴ In the late spring, Walker returned to New York to attend to the business of his theatre company and attempt a comeback. In July, he checked into the St. Joseph Sanitarium in Mount Clemens, Michigan, and returned to Lawrence to rest periodically.⁶⁵ In September, he was reported to be “almost a physical wreck, being in worse condition than last spring when he was forced to leave the show for a month’s stay here.”⁶⁶ Again, he returned to Lawrence in December when it became too difficult to travel. In early January of 1910, St. Luke AME church at the corner of 9th and New York in Lawrence hosted a concert of phonograph recordings for the mortgage fund. Langston Hughes’ aunt was a member, and he attended with her. He later claimed that the concert was given by Nash Walker, but reports indicate that it was Nash’s mother Alice and private secretary William Moulton.⁶⁷

Nash Walker’s last documented public appearance in Lawrence was on January 21, 1910, to attend a performance of S.

53. *New York Journal and Advertiser*, June 24, 1899, 5.
54. Respective reviews in *Lawrence Daily World*, January 13, 1900, 3; *Lawrence Daily Journal*, January 13, 1902, 1; *Lawrence Daily World*, January 7, 1903, 3, October 23, 1906, 3, December 7, 1908, 4.
55. *New York Age*, September 21, 1918, 6.
56. “The Fly in the Ointment,” *Lawrence Daily World*, July 15, 1908, 3.
57. *Lawrence Journal*, July 12, 1902, 2; *Lawrence Daily World*, June 22, 1907, 3.
58. *New York Age*, July 9, 1908, 6. The Frogs, named after one of Aesop’s fables and the comedy by Aristophanes, was established in New York on July 5, 1908, with founding members: George W. Walker, president; J. Rosamond Johnson, vice president; J. A. Shipp, treasurer; and R. C. McPherson, secretary. House Committee—Tom Brown, chairman; R. C. McPherson, Lester A. Walton; Auditing Committee—Samuel Corker, Jr., chairman; Art Committee—Bert A. Williams, Bob Cole, Alex Rogers, historian; James Reese Europe, librarian.

59. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily World*, June 22, 1907, 3.
60. *Lawrence Weekly World*, February 18, 1909, 1, 3.
61. Aida Overton Walker was both choreographer and leading lady of the Williams and Walker company until George retired in 1909. She succumbed to kidney failure on October 11, 1914, and is buried in Cypress Hills Cemetery, Brooklyn, in an unmarked grave.
62. *Lawrence Daily Journal*, March 5, 1909, 2.
63. *New York Age*, March 18, 1909, 8.
64. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 23.
65. *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 17, 1909, 5, 6.
66. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily World*, September 18, 1909, 1.
67. “Nash Walker Is Here,” *Lawrence Daily World*, December 1, 1909, 1; *Cleveland Gazette*, December 18, 1909, 1. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 23. *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 7, 1919, 4.

H. Dudley’s Smart Set in *His Honor, The Barber* at the Bowersock Opera House. *The Daily World* reported:

The choruses in the show were extremely well gotten up, everyone in the show last night did his best to make good, for there in a box in full evening dress sat Nash Walker, the king of them all on the stage, and his mother and secretary. It was to the box where Nash sat, the envy of them all that the whole show played. The rest of the house was incidental. To the members of the Smart Set Company it was evident that Nash was the big part of the audience.⁶⁸

As Walker’s physical and mental health worsened, his mother could not continue to care for him at her home in Lawrence. In June 1910, he was sent to the New York State Hospital in Central Islip, where he eventually succumbed to paresis on January 6, 1911, at 7:00 p.m. Aida was on tour with the Smart Set, and Bert Williams was engaged with the Ziegfeld Follies, so his mother was the only loved one present when he passed. After a large wake with 30,000 in attendance in New York City that hosted a who’s who of the Afro-American theatrical world,⁶⁹ Alice and Green Henri Tapley accompanied Walker’s remains to Chicago for a small ceremony, where his close friend, collaborator, and fellow Frog Jesse A. Shipp was overcome at the sight of his emaciated corpse. By the time everyone made it to Lawrence for the burial, there were so many flowers from the New York and Chicago aggregations that a separate train car had to be secured.⁷⁰ The spectacle wasn’t lost on young Langston Hughes, who remembered “I got my hand slapped for pointing at the flowers, because it was not polite for a child to point.”⁷¹



Figure 5. Earliest known photograph of George W. “Nash” Walker from the cover of *A Hot Coon From Memphis, Coon Gossip*. Words by Bob Cole and Music by George W. Walker. Published by F.A. Mills, 1897. Courtesy of Daniel Atkinson.

Nash Walker’s funeral was held on Sunday, January 15, 1911, at 2 o’clock at the Warren Street Baptist Church, conducted by Rev. Jackson and assisted by Rev. Brown of Lawrence, Rev. Wilson of Topeka, and Rev. Montgomery of Kansas City, Missouri.⁷² The chapel was overflowing with people from all over Kansas and Missouri who wanted to pay their respects. As with the previous services in New York and Chicago, a moving poem was read aloud by Walker’s harshest critic and professional acquaintance, Sylvester Russell, theatre critic for the *Indianapolis Freeman*:

See that his grave’s kept green,
As to the west return, and sigh;
We chant farewell, though silently,
And bow with tear-dimmed eye.

See that his grave’s kept green;
Rejoice, be glad, and do not weep;
Prevent the wind’s breath soft and still—
That he in peace may sleep.

See that his grave’s kept green,
As he retires from the show,
George Walker, the genius of his day—
And ‘Nash’ of long ago.

See that his grave’s kept green:
For there, his soul looks from the sky;
The fairest angel ever seen—
Now bids the world goodbye.⁷³

The funeral train to Oak Hill Cemetery was one of the longest ever seen in Lawrence at that time, and Walker was laid to rest close to his uncle Sanford and his grandmother Sarah near the potter’s field. At the time of his death, he was financially destitute and his funeral expenses were paid for by his former partner Bert Williams, who never performed in Lawrence again after his final appearance in *Bandanna Land* (winter 1908). Williams cancelled a 1909 performance, because he thought “It would be like trampling on the grave of my partner. . . . I don’t believe Lawrence people would come out to hear me for they would resent me coming here when my reputation in Lawrence was as the partner of their fellow townsman.”⁷⁴

Nash Walker’s mark on the world was in a large way a result of his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas. His ancestors’ aspirations and life experiences channeled into action played a potent role in the development of his general demeanor and

philosophical approach to life as a Black man in the United States. This shared conundrum among recently emancipated people was later codified as “double consciousness” by W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke’s treatise on the “The New Negro,” among others.⁷⁵ Nash Walker’s fervent desire to divest Afro-American artists from White control, as guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, led subsequent generations of Black artists on a path toward attaining a somewhat more lasting and certainly far more authentic cultural sovereignty.⁷⁶ His high ideals and perseverance did not endear him to the powers that be, yet his work helped to form the foundation of the Harlem Renaissance, of which, his homeboy Langston Hughes was Poet Laureate. As a result, Walker has been all but forgotten, especially in his hometown. Regardless, with full understanding of the stakes and at his own peril, he worked tirelessly to prove how Afro-Americans might begin to match the personal potential that he and his collaborators demonstrated, as they battled institutionalized inequity subversively with resilience, charisma, and skill—laughing all the way for no other reason than to keep from crying. They showed the way!

70. “George William Walker,” by Sylvester Russell, *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 14, 1911, 5.
71. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 23.
72. “Funeral of Geo. Walker,” *Jeffersonian Gazette*, January 18, 1911, 8.
73. “George William Walker,” by Sylvester Russell, *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 14, 1911, 5.
74. Quoted in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, September 22, 1909, 2. Williams was known more for his acting prowess than his social courage, which endeared him to the power structure of that time, especially when compared to the activist tinge of Walker’s actions. This is, in part, why Williams was granted “honorary Whiteness” and in 1910 became the first and only Black person allowed in the Ziegfeld Follies. Avoiding confrontation, except when privately defending the honor of his former partner among Afro-Americans, made him a model subject for the kind of assimilation, disguised as integration that continues to the present day, as applied to Jackie Robinson, Sammy Davis Jr., Nat King Cole, Bill Cosby, Wayne Brady, Kevin Hart, and many others.
75. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *The Atlantic* (August 1897) and in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903), chap. 1; Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925).
76. *The Top of Bravery*, a play written by Jeremy V. Morris and directed by Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, premiered in winter 2017 at the Quill Theatre in Richmond, Virginia. The play explores the struggles of George Walker and Bert Williams.

68. “The Play Last Night,” *Lawrence Daily World*, January 22, 1910, 1.
69. “Death of George W. Walker,” by Lester A. Walton, *New York Age*, January 12, 1911, 6.

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