

Jabez Smith

Jabez Smith was one of the largest slave-holders and slave speculators in all of the state of Missouri and lived in Independence, Missouri. His estate/plantation was located where William Chrisman High School is today (24 Hwy & Noland Road). The home was still standing in the 1930's. In a short time frame in April 1851, Asiatic cholera was recorded in Independence and it affected, emigrants, local citizens, and the Smith plantation where up to 200 or more slaves' loss their lives to this outbreak. Records indicate that many slaves were all buried in at least two mass graves; one in a Persimmon Grove near one of the many road branches of the Santa Fe Trails routes coming into Independence. It could be one of the largest mass graves of slaves in the state. While some neighbors of these areas and a few historians know of these locations, in general, we have been somewhat quietly protective of these locations. We're afraid, now and after a few generations, little will be done to protect these areas. The most vulnerable area is in an unincorporated area of the county where little is done for review and control of development. Both these areas were platted and developed for residential development with no regard for what was buried below. With the poor track record of just general historic preservation and preservation planning in Independence, sites such as these are always vulnerable. The community's record in the preservation and interpretation of African-American history is even worse. Where we once had two full-time professional preservation staff and a budget for them to actually do things, we are now down to only one "part-time" and "acting" preservation professional with essentially no budget. We also have no local not-for-profit advocacy group. It's just a matter of time before these areas will be negatively impacted by development and the stories will be discounted and forgotten of how enslaved African-American, through their sacrifices of bondage and forced labor, were prominent characters in the Great Western Migration during the Trails period. These properties would be eligible for the National Historic Registry and worthy of marking with interpretive signs but we seem to be content to not change the status quo.