

Arthur Allen Fletcher as a Washburn University senior. Portrait from the 1950 KAW Yearbook courtesy of the University Archives, Mabee Library, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.

THE KANSAS ROOTS OF ARTHUR ALLEN FLETCHER: Football All-Star to the “Father of Affirmative Action”

by Mark A. Peterson

Arthur Allen Fletcher, the self-described “father of Affirmative Action,” was many things during his long and productive life. He achieved early recognition in Kansas as the state’s first African American high school football player of the year. Fletcher went on to become a graduate of Topeka’s Washburn University, a member of Kansas Governor Fred Hall’s election team and subsequent administration during the 1950s, U.S. assistant secretary of labor in the Richard M. Nixon administration, and the chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission during the George H. W. Bush administration.¹ This essay focuses on Fletcher’s Kansas years and assesses how his education and early political career in the Sunflower State affected his personal and professional development. Although he was born elsewhere and moved from the state in the late 1950s, Fletcher spent some twenty years—from age thirteen to thirty-three—in Kansas, and this prompted him, sometimes with regret, to declare the state his home. When he died on July 12, 2005, at the age of eighty, he left behind an enviable and illustrious public career as a politician, bureaucrat, entrepreneur, advisor to presidents, and mentor to young people. Given the social and economic conditions of his youth, the color of his skin, and his infatuation with athletics, an objective observer of the boy might not have guessed the measure of the man.

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1. “Arthur A[llen] Fletcher,” in *Current Biography Yearbook 1971*, ed. Charles Moritz (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1971), 133–36; see also *Current Biography Yearbook 2005*, ed. Clifford Thompson *et al.* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1971), 635–36; for a brief summary of his later life and career, and Fletcher’s obituary, see *New York Times*, July 14, 2005.

Arthur Fletcher was born December 22, 1924, in Phoenix, Arizona, and was raised alternately by his mother and his aunts in Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Oklahoma City. It was in Oklahoma City, while attending Douglass Junior–Senior High School, that Fletcher had a revelatory moment that stuck with him all his life. It occurred during a school assembly in the spring of 1938 that was called to hear an address by Mary McLeod Bethune, a nationally recognized black entrepreneur and educator and friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. Bethune was at that time director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, a New Deal executive branch agency. According to Fletcher, that day Director Bethune delivered a message of hard work and dignity in the face of adversity as the way for children of color to succeed. She had become famous in the black community for, among other things, pressing the case, first with Mrs. Roosevelt and then the president, for equal employment opportunities for blacks during the hard times of the Great Depression.² Fletcher asserted throughout his adult life that hearing her message at that assembly gave him the inspiration and early guidance he needed to follow the path that led to his service in four Republican presidential administrations.

In 1938 Fletcher’s parents, U.S. Ninth Cavalry trooper Andrew Fletcher and Edna Miller Fletcher, were posted to Fort Riley, Kansas, and the young Fletcher was soon enrolled as an eighth grade schoolboy in Junction City, the town adjacent to the fort.³ From that point forward the story of Arthur Fletcher becomes relevant to the history of race in modern America. This lanky schoolboy who had, as he put it, “been moved so many times, and lived with whoever would take me, that I could barely spell my name,” was about to have his name recognized throughout the state of Kansas, thanks to his athletic prowess.⁴

2. Rackham Holt, *Mary McLeod Bethune: A Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964). Bethune of course was not alone in this matter as many others including Walter White of the NAACP and A. Phillip Randolph, the leader of the highly visible Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had also pressed for government intervention in racially discriminatory hiring practices.

3. On March 31 and April 1, 2003, the author together with three colleagues, all of Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas, interviewed Dr. Arthur Fletcher at the university. The interview transcript and DVD (hereafter cited as “Fletcher interview”) are in the Mabee Library Archives, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas. Fort Riley, Kansas, was at the time of Fletcher’s youth the headquarters of the two African-American units of horse cavalry in the U.S. Army, the so-called Buffalo Soldiers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries. Andrew “Cotton” Fletcher was, according to his son, the best farrier, or horseshoer, in the U.S. Army.

4. Fletcher interview.



The thirteen-year-old Fletcher came to Junction City in 1938, when his father, a trooper with the U.S. Ninth Cavalry, was posted to Fort Riley. The next year Fletcher became a Junction City High School Blue Jay and over time established himself as a formidable athlete, going on to be chosen as the first African American player on the Topeka Daily Capital’s All-Star Team. Fletcher is pictured (top center), in the Junction City High School Pow Wow yearbook, with some of his 1942 teammates.

By the time young Arthur Fletcher came to Kansas the American economy had been through a long and devastating economic depression. The nation, and certainly the American military, was aware of rising international tensions and the threats of war in East Asia and Europe. Economic hard times had threatened many Americans with poverty and moved the politics of the nation generally to the left since the election of the Seventy-first Congress in 1930. Moreover, segregation and second-class citizenship remained the norm for African Americans. A plethora of institutions, practices, and laws throughout the country forced an inferior status on people of color. Life in the South was changing slowly, but for blacks economic and cultural conditions remained generally as they had been since Reconstruction ended in 1877. In the North, Manhattan’s Harlem Renaissance had seen its day, and Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Kansas City, St. Louis, and other cities had experienced a substantial influx of southern blacks thanks to the economic changes that had taken place primarily in cotton cultivation in the Mississippi delta and the availability of cash-wage jobs in the steel and automobile manufacturing industries. Out west few vestiges of the frontier remained to surrender to modernity.⁵ Among those vestiges, however, were the

5. On the combined effects of the mechanization of southern cotton farming and northern industrialism on the Afro-American population of the early twentieth century see Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

Ninth and Tenth Cavalry regiments of the U.S. Army, posted to duty stations across the western plains from Fort Huachuca, Arizona, to Fort Riley, Kansas. These units, artifacts of a long-segregated U.S. Army, were comprised of Buffalo Soldiers, black troops commanded by white officers.⁶

Junction City was and still is a “base town.” Directly adjacent to the fort, it provides domiciles and services for the thousands of soldiers and their dependents temporarily stationed at or passing through Fort Riley. The fort dates to the mid-nineteenth century when the U.S. Army’s mission was to pacify the Plains Indians clearing the way for western settlement and the transcontinental railroads. Today it is home to the Big Red One, the U.S. Army’s First Infantry Division. The town sits at the confluence of the Republican and Smoky Hill rivers where they form the Kansas River. A quick drive through the town demonstrates its relationship to the military: uniform alterations shops, tattoo parlors, and “10% off with military ID” signs are easily found. When Art Fletcher’s family moved to Fort Riley in 1938, Junction City probably sported more after-hours joints, pool halls, and brothels than it does today, but serving the military remains its primary purpose.⁷

Upon arriving at Fort Riley the Fletchers settled into camp life and enrolled their children in school. Public education was readily and amply available, and, because Junction City was not large enough to be classified by state statute as a first-class city, of the type that could legally segregate its public schools, the town’s schools were integrated. Although the military remained a deeply segregated institution, integrated public education in Junction City nevertheless brought a diversity of cultural and regional types into the town.⁸ It was an exciting and constantly changing place as soldiers and materiel ebbed and flowed into and out of Fort Riley in the build up to the Second World War. Onto this scene came Art Fletcher, a big, street-smart kid with a bright smile and very fast feet.

6. Lucian K. Truscott, Jr., *The Twilight of the U.S. Cavalry: Life in the Old Army, 1917–1942* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

7. Fort Riley and Junction City have a significantly distinct history and a cultural diversity that markedly differs from other Kansas communities. Susan Lloyd Franzen, *Behind the Façade of Ft. Riley’s Hometown: The Inside Story of Junction City, Kansas* (Ames, Iowa: Pivot Press, 1998); see also Truscott, *The Twilight of the U.S. Cavalry*, 75–104.

8. Under a school law passed by the state legislature in 1879, public education was racially integrated. An exception was made for cities of the first class, with populations of 15,000 or more, which were permitted to operate separate schools for black and white students through the eighth grade if the local school board chose to do so.

The *Junction City Union* reported on September 4, 1939, that Junction City High football coach Henry Shenk saw fifty-nine “men” checkout football gear for the coming season. One of the freshmen named in the roster supplied to the paper was Arthur Fletcher. From that September through to the end of his high school career, Fletcher focused on and eventually excelled at athletics, playing all four years and lettering in three sports: football, basketball, and track. By his own account, he easily could have become caught up in problematic activities and behaviors, but he beat the odds, stayed in school, became an outstanding multi-sport athlete, and gained statewide recognition in football.

It is instructive to look at both his high school athletic career and the surrounding context of life in central Kansas to gain a sense of how Fletcher’s views and character were shaped in the crucible of sports competition. His performance during his freshman and sophomore years was unremarkable, as he learned the skills necessary to excel in football and basketball. His sophomore year was also shaped by a widespread outbreak of polio, which forced schools across Kansas to remain shut until late September, thus substantially reducing the 1940 football season.⁹

After the football season, Fletcher played basketball. An uneven season of Junction City Blue Jays basketball came to a close in March 1941. Coach Ike Emrich announced that eleven ball players would be participating in the regional tournament including sophomore guard, Arthur Fletcher, who, at 6’2” and 195 pounds, was

“Integrated” higher grades often meant, as they did in Topeka in the pre-*Brown v. Board* era, segregated classes within the same high school. Junction City, being only 8,507 in population according to the official U.S. census of 1940, was legally barred from segregating its schools, although Fletcher’s stories about the placement of Afro-American students’ photographs in the high school annual certainly belies any notion of total racial comity and integration. See James N. Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State: Review Essay,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Autumn 2002): 25; Paul E. Wilson, *A Time to Lose: Representing Kansas in Brown v. Board of Education* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 35–43; “Yearbooks Tell Story of Segregations [sic], Integration in Junction City,” *Junction City Union*, May 28, 2000.

9. “Health Board Urges Delay in Reopening Schools Due to Polio,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 3, 1940; and “High School Elevens Not Now Practicing Cannot Play Games September 20,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 10, 1940. Then, “Topeka Schools Will Open Monday,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 14, 1940, noted that Junction City schools were now scheduled to open September 23. This meant that the earliest date for a football game would be October 7.

beginning to manifest his athletic prowess.¹⁰ After a surprisingly strong showing in the regional tournament, the Blue Jays went on to Topeka for the state tournament. Fletcher went with them as a reserve player.

On trips like these throughout his high school sports career, Fletcher later recalled, he and other non-white players for the Junction City squads were dependent on people such as the coach's wife to transport them back and forth to game sites because there were no overnight accommodations available for them.¹¹ Fletcher's personal experience was a tiny demonstration of the vastly more significant de facto racial segregation that existed in the state and nation at large. Other examples, some with higher stakes, abound. The same month Fletcher and his teammates went to state, for instance, the *Junction City Union* carried a front page Associated Press story concerning the state legislature, which was in session in Topeka: "The legislature was asked today by Rep. William Towers (R-Wyandotte), Negro lawmaker, to condemn 'unfair and un-American practices intended to be invoked against Negro citizens of Kansas by North American Aviation, Inc.'" The proposed censure was a result of a March 17 statement by the company, which was opening a bomber assembly plant at the Kansas City, Kansas, airport, that said plainly: "Regardless of Negroes' training, we will not employ them in the North American plant. It is against the policy of the company to use Negroes as mechanics or aircraft workers. We intend to maintain the same policy in Kansas City, Kansas."¹²

Track followed basketball and Fletcher continued to impress. Just as he was coming into his own, however, Junction City High School's athletic department underwent a change in personnel. At the end of the

10. "Blue Jays to Regional Meet," *Junction City Union*, March 11, 1941. Later in life Fletcher was an even bigger man, at 6'4" and 260 pounds by one 1965 account. See "Athlete Assumes Y Post," *Tri-City Herald* (Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland, Wash.), April 12, 1965.

11. Bob Honeyman, "Bits of Honey," *Junction City Union*, April 26, 1984.

12. "Race Question to Legislature," *Junction City Union*, March 19, 1941. Representative Towers's action in the state legislature was a reaction to statements made by J. H. Kindelberger, the chief executive of North American Aviation, Inc., which were printed in the *Kansas City Star*. See also Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, rev. ed. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993), 39–43; Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939–1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 115–17. The Kansas Historical Society devoted an entire volume of *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, volume 17 in the spring of 1994, to the state's World War II experience, with particular attention given to the roles and experiences of both minorities and women. See also Richard Macais, "'We All Had a Cause': Kansas City's Bomber Plant, 1940–1945," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Winter 2005–2006): 244–61; see also *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, Kansas), March 21 and 28, April 18, May 16, and October 17, 1941.



When traveling to away games during his high school career, Fletcher and other non-white players on the Junction City squads were dependent on coaches' wives and team supporters to transport them back and forth because there were no overnight accommodations for them. At the same time Fletcher encountered de facto segregation, he also saw what life was like for black men in the U.S. Army, having watched his father, his friends, and a few black celebrities make their way in the military. Fletcher was living in Junction City, for instance, when heavy-weight boxing champion Joe Louis (at the microphone) visited the local recreation center for servicemen and factory personnel pictured here in the early 1940s.

1940–1941 school year Coach Shenk announced that he would be leaving Junction City, and the football and track squads would have new coaches in the fall. In late August the new football coach, Bob Briggs, told the *Junction City Union* sports writer that he did not have high hopes for the coming year's football program.¹³

The 1941 football season marked the start of Fletcher's junior year. The Blue Jays went 5 and 4 with 1 tie for the season and held fourth place in the eight-team Central Kansas League.¹⁴ Fletcher was positioned initially at tight end and in the surprising season opener caught two passes as the upstart Blue Jays defeated a reputedly much stronger Lawrence High School team. Fletcher mostly sat on the bench for the next month and a half. Then in a game against Salina played November 8, and described by a metaphorically inclined reporter as being "as tight as a bargain shirt after the first washing most of the way," Fletcher played for the first time in

13. See, for example, "Jays Compete in Invitational Meet," *Junction City Union*, April 25, 1941; and "Grid Outlook is Only Fair," *Junction City Union*, August 27, 1941.

14. The eight teams of the Central Kansas League were Herington, Manhattan, Abilene, Clay Center, Salina, McPherson, Chapman, and Junction City according to *The 1940 Pow Wow*.

five weeks, but with no particular distinction.¹⁵ A week later Coach Briggs had Fletcher at halfback, and he went fifty-five yards for a touchdown in a 13 to 0 victory over Herington. Then on November 27, "led by Art Fletcher, who skipped for touchdowns on runs of 78, 42 and 29 yards, the Junction City Blue Jays scored a 27-12 victory over a fighting crew of Chapman Irish here."¹⁶

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor came ten days later. Daily the newspaper carried stories of the expansion and construction of military facilities at Fort Riley and other locales in Kansas. Daily the newspaper told of impending rationing and shortages of materiel of one sort and another. The list of marriage licenses issued by the Geary County Clerk's Office grew with each passing week. The names of individuals from the community being inducted into the military became a common feature of the *Junction City Union*. In short, war now heavily shaped the future of America, and soon, the life of Arthur Fletcher as well. Although still only a high school boy, Fletcher understood what life was like for black men in the U.S. Army, having watched his father and his friends make their way in the military. Fletcher also saw how black celebrities who had joined the military were treated, when athletes such as Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson came to the Kansas fort in the early 1940s.

The swelling tide of troops, their dependents, and civilian workers was making Junction City an even more interesting and dynamic place to be. A search of the 1942 editions of the *Junction City Union* for news of Fletcher's school-related accomplishments also provides a picture of what life in the wartime town was like for African Americans more generally.¹⁷ In the spring of 1942, as one example, the *Union* carried an advertisement that offered locals the opportunity to turn out and "dance with Earl 'Father' Hines and his Orchestra on 2 Big Nites [at the] Municipal Auditorium." That Hines, a well-regarded black bandleader who played big venues nationwide, stopped to perform in Junction City says something about the draw of military bases such as Fort Riley. May 7 was designated as the night for "White People," while the following evening was for "Colored People." Tickets were \$.90 in advance or \$1.10 at the door. The

15. "Jays Upset Lawrence Foe: Outplay Lions to Win 20-13," *Junction City Union*, September 20, 1941; and "Jays Lose Salina Game," *Junction City Union*, November 10, 1941.

16. "Jays Cinch Fourth Place," *Junction City Union*, November 28, 1941. Later in the article, Fletcher is described first as "the slender Fletcher" and then "the willowy Fletcher."

17. Franzen, "The Most Sinful Place in Kansas," in *Behind the Façade of Fort Riley's Hometown*, 147-55.

same edition of the paper carried an article about the appeal of "Colored Band Leader Jimmy Lunceford" at many college campuses across the country, most notably, and perhaps oddly, at southern schools such as the University of Texas and the University of Virginia. He would be in Junction City, the paper noted, May 9 for a "colored dance."¹⁸ Such notices highlighted both the increasingly cosmopolitan character of the city as well as the racial divide that existed across many aspects of its community life.

The 1942 football season was the peak of Fletcher's athletic career at Junction City High School. In an eleven-game season the Blue Jays lost the opener to the Lawrence High School team and tied another rival two weeks later. All the other games that season were wins. Fletcher scored nine touchdowns over the course of the season while rushing and catching passes. He played end and halfback and accumulated impressive yardage even in those few games where he did not score. The culmination of it all was summarized in the December 14 edition of the *Junction City Union* on page 2 under the headline "Arthur Fletcher on All-Kansas Team: Junction City High School Boy One of Two Best Football Ends in the State." In taking note of the honor accorded by the *Topeka Daily Capital*, the *Union* reported that "Fletcher is the first Negro to make the paper's all-star team." The narrative published in the *Daily Capital* read:

ARTHUR FLETCHER, 195-pound Negro end, was the spark, brain and all-round handyman of a Junction City team that lost only to Lawrence, 7 to 0. Fletcher started as a back but after the Lawrence reverse he was shifted to end where he became the standout player of the Central Kansas League. Junction City won nine games, including all its league contests, and Fletcher was the leading spirit as well as the signal caller and ace performer in all of them. He scored fifty-four points, many of them on passes. Often he was called into the backfield when yards were needed in close games. One of the state's leading

18. *Junction City Union*, May 4, 1942, for the Hines advertisement. The Lunceford "article" appeared in the May 6, 1942, edition. Placing stories aimed at raising black morale and dampening white race anger was one of the responsibilities of the U.S. War Department's Office of War Information. See Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing GI Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' during World War II," *Journal of American History* 89 (December 2002): 958-83.

dash men, Fletcher took the hard knocks a Negro boy is subjected to and becomes the first lad of his race to make the All-Kansas team. "He's the greatest football player I've ever coached," was Coach Bob Briggs' salute to his six-foot-two senior.¹⁹

By the time Fletcher's senior season commenced, his name and accomplishments were well known throughout Junction City and central Kansas. Around the same time, as Fletcher indicated in a lengthy interview with the author and three of his colleagues at Washburn University in 2003, the young athlete became more aware of the civil rights issues affecting him and his classmates.²⁰ It was customary for the black students at Junction City High to be included in the school yearbook in group photographs with their athletic teams and among the choirs and clubs in which they took part, explained Fletcher. But the portrait-style pictures of black graduating seniors were printed on a separate, segregated page at the back of the senior section. Fletcher recalled organizing the other black seniors in his 1943 graduating class to boycott the Junction City High School annual, *The Pow Wow*. An inspection of the 1943 yearbook reveals no Afro-American seniors, and the last photo page of the senior section, where blacks were normally arrayed, instead shows white students with last names ending in W and Y plus the added feature of a photo of Miss Betty Mar, "First Chinese girl to graduate from this high school."²¹ The protest had an effect: a few years later, after he had returned to Junction City a wounded WWII veteran, Fletcher was spotted on the street by the high school principal who demanded that the former student athlete get in his car. They drove to the high school, and the principal eagerly showed the black war veteran the newly issued 1946 yearbook and its fully integrated senior photo section.²²

19. Gene Kemper, "Topping Captains All-Star Prep Team," *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 13, 1942.

20. Fletcher interview; Alex Poinsett, "Watchdog for U.S. Labor," *Ebony* 26 (April, 1971): 97. For a specific discussion of Afro-American-white race relations in Junction City see Franzen, "The Long, Slow March to Civil Rights," in *Behind the Façade of Fort Riley's Hometown*, 131-39. The high school annual boycott is discussed on p. 132.

21. Inspection of the 1942, 1943, and 1946 editions of *The Pow Wow*, all "edited and published by the SENIOR CLASS of The Junior-Senior High School, Junction City, Kansas," indicates that the boycott of the senior class photos that Fletcher referenced was not a one-time event. *The 1942 Pow Wow* lists the senior class members from Jim Acker to Wilbur Zernichow without including any Afro-American faces and then concludes with a final page showing the photographs of three young Afro-American women plus the names of two young men, one of whom, Emanuel Ray, is later pictured in other activities.

22. Fletcher interview; *The 1946 Pow Wow*.

During World War II the swelling tide of troops, their dependents, and civilian workers gave Junction City a more cosmopolitan character and drew bigger-name entertainers to town. On May 4, 1942, as one example, the Junction City Union carried this advertisement, offering locals the opportunity to turn out and dance with the well-known black bandleader Earl "Father" Hines and his orchestra on "2 Big Nites [at the] Municipal Auditorium." The performance on May 7 was open to "White People," while the following evening was for "Colored People." Tickets were \$.90 in advance or \$1.10 at the door.

Upon graduation from Junction City High School, Fletcher, who had turned eighteen the previous December, was inducted into the U.S. Army on June 18, 1943. Once again, reflecting the curious way that signals the profound differences between white and black at the time, the *Union* carried a front-page story noting local military inductions in its May 22 edition:

The names of two groups of selectees ordered to report to the Fort Leavenworth induction center were announced today at the draft board's headquarters.

A group of white registrants will report to Fort Leavenworth June 3, and a small colored group on June 18.

The names of the white inductees were published below the text. The names of the "small colored group" did not appear in this or subsequent editions of the paper, despite the fact that Art Fletcher was the most publicly known man of either group.²³

Fletcher's war was relatively short, but eventful and dangerous. He served as a combat military police in Patton's Third Army. On March 21, 1945, as the push for Cologne, Germany, was being initiated, German small arms fire struck Fletcher's ribcage; one round traversed his body, exiting through the hip on the opposite side. After exploratory surgery, more than thirty stitches, stateside evacuation, more operations, and months of recuperation at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Colorado, Fletcher was discharged and sent home to Junction City.²⁴

Back in Kansas, the twenty-year-old veteran took up the role of husband and father, having been married to Mary Harden less than a month before going off to war.²⁵ Fletcher decided that his athletic abilities and the GI bill might provide the meal ticket his young family needed. Having been an all-state football standout, and now with the experience of playing some football against college-athlete draftees in the service while training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, Fletcher set his sights on an athletic scholarship from a prestigious college football program.

23. "Announce Two Selectee Lists," *Junction City Union*, May 22, 1943.

24. Fletcher interview.

25. Marriage license number K2895 issued on May 18, 1943, in the probate court of Geary County, Kansas, over the signature of Jasper P. Coleman, probate judge; Arthur Fletcher, age eighteen, and Mary Harden, age seventeen, were married on May 26, 1943.

The dominant football conference in the Midwest was the Big Six Conference, the predecessor to today's Big Twelve and formally incorporated during the 1940s as the Missouri Valley Independent Athletic Association. The universities of Nebraska, Iowa State, and Kansas State had no reservations about a black athlete, but Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri were all whites-only football programs, and Missouri and Oklahoma would not play schools that fielded black players. This racist policy was known in genteel fashion as "the gentlemen's agreement." Its existence meant Fletcher could not expect to play football even at Kansas State, as he would not be allowed to play in over half the season's games.²⁶

Fletcher, however, had other options. During his high school days in Junction City, he was employed after school and during the summers with the local ice company owned by Ray McMilin. Fletcher, the high school football star, was a well-known figure around town and renowned for being able to carry two-hundred-pound ice blocks, which he picked up with tongs and slung over his back. McMilin had a more famous cousin, Bo, who at the time was head football coach at the University of Indiana in what was then the Big Nine Conference. So it was there, with the efforts of one McMilin cousin influencing the other, that Fletcher obtained an opportunity to play collegiate football. The Big Nine school offered a scholarship, but when Fletcher traveled to Bloomington to check out his gear and register for classes, he discovered that, due to their race, his family would not be able to obtain housing in the community.²⁷

When word of this unsatisfactory outcome reached Junction City, Fletcher's former coach, Bob Briggs, suggested that he get in touch with Dick Godlove at Washburn University. Fletcher was not altogether interested in returning to Kansas and certainly did not think that the little school in the Central Independent College Conference was going to provide the entrée to the "big time" that he hoped for. Nevertheless, his family needed housing and income, and he believed that

26. The details of these race policies, their enforcement, and subsequent rescission can be found in the following: Charles H. Martin, "The Color Line in Midwestern College Sports, 1890-1960," *Indiana Magazine of History* 98 (June 2002): 85-112; Kristine M. McCusker, "'The Forgotten Years' of America's Civil Rights Movement: Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939-1945," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Spring 1994): 26-37; see also Aram Goudsouzian, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?: The Kansas Years of Wilt the Stilt," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Autumn 2008): 150-73, available online at http://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2005autumn_goudsouzian.pdf.

27. Fletcher interview.

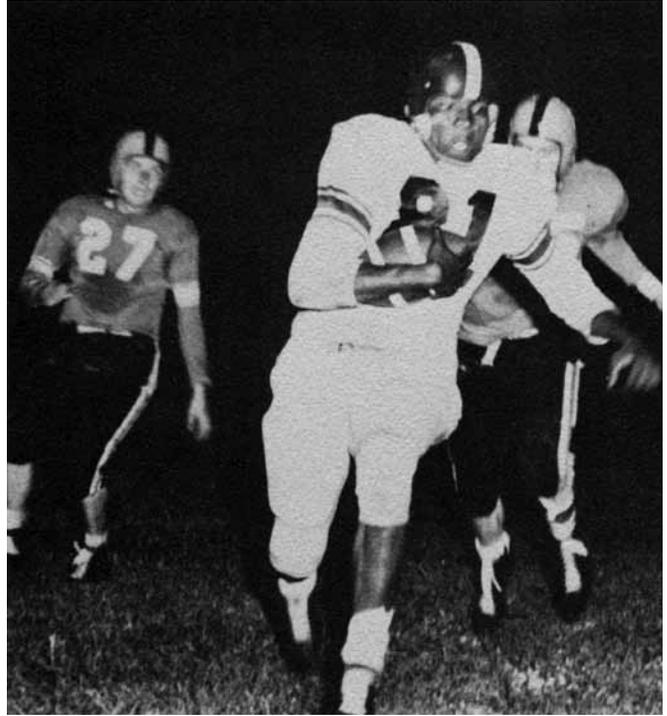
something positive could come of it. As he told the story in 2003, "I had a wife and two children then and my wife was pregnant with another child. So when I came back, they found a place for me to live here [in Topeka], and I enrolled in Washburn. . . . Going to Washburn was the greatest decision I ever made."²⁸

The value of Washburn, as it turned out, came both on the gridiron and in the classroom. On the football squad Fletcher was moved from the end position he had played in high school to halfback. During his freshman season in 1946 the Washburn Ichabods' football record was 7 wins, 2 losses, and Fletcher earned little notoriety behind more senior varsity players. In 1947, however, the Ichabods enjoyed a 7 and 1 record with Fletcher consistently scoring and earning big yardage. The 1948 *KAW*, the school's yearbook, characterized Fletcher's running style as "harder to stop than a Santa Fe Streamliner." The 1948 season saw several heartbreakers and the team finished with a record of just 3 wins, 4 losses, and 1 tie, although the Ichabods outscored their opponents in total points, 178 to 117. Fletcher's photograph in the 1949 *KAW* has the caption "Art Fletcher, pile-driving back, ranked third in national rankings for yards gained rushing in small college football." In one game that season against St. Benedict's of Atchison, Fletcher scored five touchdowns in the team's 53 to 0 rout. By the 1949 season, the team had a 7 and 2 record and won the co-conference championship. Fletcher averaged over five yards per carry and was elected by unanimous vote to the all-conference team for the third year in a row.²⁹

Life on the gridiron proved to be a reprise of experiences Fletcher had had while playing with the Junction City High School team. When the Ichabods traveled to schools in Missouri and south beyond Emporia, Kansas, arrangements had to be made with African-American

28. *Ibid.*

29. The recounted athletic accomplishments are taken from the 1947, 1948, 1949, and 1950 *KAW Yearbooks* of Washburn University. In 1946, a year after Fletcher began at Washburn, a young black, Sam Jackson, became a Washburn student and aspiring journalist. Jackson wrote of Fletcher's accomplishments on the field for the campus paper and yearbook. Much of his copy was used by the *Topeka Daily Capital* as well. According to Jackson's widow, whom the author interviewed in 2009, when Jackson graduated he approached the *Daily Capital* about a job as a sportswriter. He was rejected on color. He was so irritated by the rebuff that he decided to go to law school in hopes of later suing the paper for discrimination. Although that did not happen, he did complete law school, began a successful law career in Topeka, and became active in Republican politics like Fletcher. In the 1960s Jackson was among Lyndon Johnson's initial appointees to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and went on to serve as an assistant secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Nixon administration. Arguably, Jackson's press coverage helped give Fletcher some of the notoriety necessary for his chance at professional football.



Upon graduation from high school, Fletcher joined the army. He was wounded in Germany in 1945 and, after surgery and months of recuperation, he was discharged and returned home to Junction City. He took advantage of the GI bill and signed on to play football for Washburn University in Topeka. During his time playing for the Ichabods, the 1948 *KAW Yearbook* noted, he was "harder to stop than a Santa Fe Streamliner." Fletcher is pictured during his senior year making for the goal line against Doane College of Crete, Nebraska. Photograph from the 1950 *KAW Yearbook* courtesy of the University Archives, Mabee Library, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.

families in the area to take the black football players in as guests and overnight boarders while the rest of the team stayed in local commercial accommodations. Some college cafeterias served the integrated team, but only when the dining hall was closed to the general student population or in a separate dining room. Crowds were usually raucous in their verbal abuse, and at Fort Hays State, where Washburn won 47 to 14 in 1947, tied 6 to 6 in 1948, and triumphed again 35 to 13 in 1949, Fletcher was personally targeted when he was burned in effigy in campus pep activities the week before the games.³⁰

30. For similar experiences of other black Washburn athletes see interviews with Jack Alexander and Joe Douglas in Collection 251, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* Oral History Collection, State Archives and Library Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; see also Robert Beatty and Mark A. Peterson, "Covert Discrimination: Topeka—Before and After Brown," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 27 (Autumn 2004): 149–50, available online at http://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2004autumn_beatty.pdf.

For Fletcher campus life and academics made Washburn “a desegregated island in the city of Topeka.” The university, started by abolitionist members of the Congregational Church, had been open to black students since its founding at the end of the Civil War. Although in 1946 it was a public, municipal university, the school remained outside the larger university system of the state of Kansas and made its own rules.³¹ It also had a reputation for being a teaching school where those with less than stellar primary and secondary educations could find empathetic and encouraging faculty that would help any student who showed a willingness to work on overcoming his or her educational deficiencies. Art Fletcher certainly fit that category. In his 2003 interview he noted that like many athletes, development of his intellect came a distant second to the sharpening and strengthening of his sports skills. Lettering in three high school sports had meant Fletcher spent most of his time on the playing field and only a few of his waking hours developing his mind. But, just as with his athletic ability, Fletcher demonstrated intellectual raw talent, and he and his teammates were encouraged to study by their coaches. Fletcher noted, for example, that in high school it was the policy, first of Coach Shenk and subsequently of Coach Briggs, that no man received a game uniform on the Thursday before a Friday game without first presenting a card signed by each of the player’s teachers indicating a current grade of at least a C in their courses.³²

Washburn proved to be “a refiner’s fire” for Fletcher.³³ He recalled that two faculty members in particular, Professors Dorothy Luber in political science and Merton French in philosophy, taught him to write a clear sentence and parse an argument. They also opened an expanse of knowledge to which the young Fletcher had not yet been exposed. He took to his college studies so well that he completed his course work a semester early, and held a B average his last two years.³⁴ The caption to his photograph in the 1950 *KAW* reads: “Arthur Allen Fletcher, Junction City, Kansas, Major Sociology; Degree: A.B.; Activities: Newman Club, ‘W’ Club, *Who’s Who in American Colleges and Universities*, 1950; Football—1946–1949; Co-Captain, Track—1947–1949.”

31. Roy Bird, *Washburn Through the Years* (Topeka, Kans.: Washburn University, 1997), 83–107.

32. Fletcher interview.

33. The motto of Washburn University is *Purificatus Non Consumptus*.

34. Fletcher interview.

Because the 1940s and 1950s were a patriotic time in America, and, more importantly for Fletcher, in Topeka, many notable individuals in the capital city paid attention to the needs of returning GIs. The effects of such care can be seen clearly in the turn Fletcher’s life was about to take. When he expressed concern to an influential acquaintance, noted local black attorney Elisha Scott, that he was having a hard time supporting his family and keeping up with his studies, Scott went to Governor Frank Carlson directly and prevailed upon his highly placed friend to intercede and find a position for the young veteran. That petition landed Fletcher his first job in Kansas state government: he soon had work during the 1947 legislative session as a doorman and messenger. Shortly after Scott’s intercession, Fletcher got a second job as a waiter at the Jayhawk Hotel in downtown Topeka. At the time, the Jayhawk was the principal informal gathering place for lobbyists and legislators. Fletcher learned about the process of crafting legislation and making deals to tie up votes by carefully observing the goings on in the private dining rooms of the hotel and the halls of the state capital.³⁵ Another eminently helpful individual was Justice William A. Smith of the Kansas Supreme Court. Smith was known for his generosity, both with money (something that would almost certainly violate collegiate athletic rules today) and in arranging patronage employment with the state. It was Smith who found Fletcher a job as a laborer for the State Highway Commission and introduced him to Frederick Lee “Fred” Hall, who would become over time Fletcher’s biggest political benefactor during his years in Kansas.³⁶

35. Scott and his two sons, Charles and John, would become important in the national race struggle a few years later when they served as the local attorneys, along with Charles Bledsoe, that carried the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, lawsuit through its developing stages in the federal district court on behalf of the local NAACP chapter. Charles and John Scott were law students at Washburn during Fletcher’s time on campus. Carrie Bledsoe, wife of Charles Bledsoe, was vice-president of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a black sorority on the Washburn campus active during the time Fletcher was at the school. See the 1947, 1948, and 1949 editions of the *KAW*; Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 385–92; “*Brown v. Topeka Board of Education: The Washburn Connection*,” *Washburn Lawyer* 42 (Spring/Summer 2004): 4–7; Ronald C. Griffin, “*Brown Revisited*,” *Washburn Lawyer* 42 (Spring/Summer 2004): 8–11; Fletcher interview. It should also be noted that no official record of Fletcher’s legislative employment was found. Neither the *Daily Journal* of the Kansas House of Representatives, nor the state senate’s *Journal* record Fletcher’s name, and the payroll records for the 1947 session do not survive.

36. James Concannon, former dean of the Washburn Law School, wrote in the Spring/Summer 2003 edition of the *Washburn Lawyer*, “William A. Smith ‘14, the school’s second Justice, served for 26 years, beginning in 1930, and was Chief Justice for ten months in 1956. . . . Smith was a legendary figure in Republican politics, even while on the Court.” See also Charles William Sloan, Jr., “Kansas Battles the Invisible



At Washburn Fletcher had a hard time supporting his family while keeping up with his studies. When he turned to an influential acquaintance, noted Topeka attorney Elisha Scott, it resulted in no less than Governor Frank Carlson's intervention. Fletcher soon had his first job in Kansas state government as a doorman and messenger during the 1947 legislative session. Fletcher also found a second job as a waiter at Topeka's Jayhawok Hotel, the principal gathering place for lobbyists and legislators. There, in private dining rooms such as that of the state senate, pictured here in the late 1940s, Fletcher learned about the process of crafting legislation and making deals to tie up votes.

As he continued to work various state jobs to make his way through college, Fletcher began to be attracted to the larger arena of partisan politics. In the late 1940s, as it has been throughout much of Kansas's history, the Republican Party dominated state politics. Even after the presidential election of 1936, in which African Americans nationwide had, for the first time, voted overwhelmingly for a Democratic Party candidate, the Republican Party continued to hold the allegiance of African Americans in Kansas, at least of those who participated to any great degree in state politics. For most African Americans in

Kansas, the Democratic Party, which was largely without power in the state, was the party of segregation, Jim Crow, and white southern bigotry, while the Republican Party was the party of abolition and Lincoln. Fletcher, who was already "a good race man," was also highly individualistic and ambitious, and these qualities further attracted him to the free enterprise, low-tax, pro-military policy positions of the post-war Republican Party. It did not hurt, either, that the party offered a real prospect of gainful employment. During his time at Washburn he served as vice-chairman of the campus

Empire: The Legal Ouster of the KKK from Kansas, 1922–1927," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 40 (Autumn 1974): 393–409. Justice William Smith's willingness to assist young men seeking the means to pursue their educations was apparently widely known and remarked upon. At a public session of the Kansas Supreme Court on April 3, 1961, convened to honor the retired chief justice, court reporter William A. Dumars was called upon to present a biography of Justice Smith in

which he said in part, "He [Smith] has always extended a willing hand to needy athletes and has secured employment for them, making it possible for them to stay in school and to participate in sports." Other comments in the same record echoed those thoughts. *Kansas Supreme Court, In the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas: Proceedings in Honor of Chief Justice William A. Smith Upon his Retirement* (Topeka, Kans.: State Printing Plant, 1961), v.



Fletcher made other influential acquaintances during his Washburn days. While at the school Fletcher came under the wing of William A. Smith, a Washburn alumnus, Republican from Valley Falls, and justice on the Kansas Supreme Court. Smith, shown discussing strategy with Fletcher and another Washburn player in his role as school booster, was known for his generosity to college athletes. It was Smith who found Fletcher a job as a laborer for the State Highway Commission and introduced him to Fred Hall, who would become Fletcher's biggest political benefactor during his years in Kansas.

College Republicans and then as vice-chairman of the state Young Republicans.³⁷

One fellow of particular interest to Fletcher was a young social liberal in the party, Fred Hall. A Dodge City lawyer and one-term Ford County attorney, Hall was a close acquaintance of Justice Smith, who had been of assistance to Fletcher in the past. By the time Fletcher graduated from Washburn in May 1950, the political scene in Kansas was warming up for the biennial gubernatorial and legislative elections. The Republican nominee for governor would be Edward F. "Ed" Arn. Although gubernatorial candidates could and did endorse particular individuals for lieutenant governor, that office was independently elected and often highly

sought after. In 1950 the lieutenant governor's race was a political melee, with eight men announcing their intention to seek the Republican nomination for that office. When the thirty-four-year-old Fred Hall entered the race on the last day of filing for statewide office, he made it nine.

Hall was not endorsed by Ed Arn, but after he succeeded in obtaining the nomination, he won the general election contest in the fall. He quickly proved his liberal credentials and demonstrated his willingness to stand behind controversial ideas to the consternation of Republicans and Democrats alike. One of the positions he ardently supported was the establishment

37. The *Plaindealer*, the black newspaper published for decades in Topeka and then Kansas City, Kansas, ran stories consistently throughout the immediate postwar period and into the early 1950s that praised and criticized the Republican Party, drew special attention to black Republicans such as Representative Towers and party vice-chairman Prentis E. Townsend, and provided many column inches of

endorsement editorials for statewide Republican candidates. While the Truman administration received much coverage, mention of the state Democratic Party mainly consisted of stories about the annual Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners. See, for example, *Plaindealer*, November 1, 1946; March 26, April 30, October 15, and November 12 and 26, 1948; see also Fletcher interview.



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of a statewide agency to support fair employment practices. This further motivated Fletcher's support for the young, rising politician. The more conservative governor actively worked against Hall's reelection in 1952, but Hall was renominated by 15,000 votes over a candidate running at Governor Arn's behest and won a second term. In 1954, in spite of opposition from the Arn forces, which included twenty-two of the thirty-five incumbent Republican state senators, and with the endorsement of Justice Smith and the grand old man of GOP politics in Kansas, Alfred M. "Alf" Landon, Hall won the governorship by a margin of 40,000 votes.³⁸

38. For a concise description of these events see, Marvin A. Harder and Russell Getter, *Electoral Politics in Kansas* (Topeka: The Capitol Complex Center, University of Kansas, 1983), 46–51; see also Homer E. Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 200–204.

Hall was especially attractive to Fletcher because he was young, socially progressive, and a proponent of fair employment practice commissions. The largest black population in Kansas outside the three big cities of Kansas City, Wichita, and Topeka is located in the southeastern counties surrounding Pittsburg, Fort Scott, and Chanute. In the 1950s blacks in this area were largely without political voice. Most of the families had come to the area following the Civil War to work in the coal mines owned by the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad Company and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. During the late summer and fall of 1954, Fletcher, who had become vice-chairman of the Kansas State Republican Central Committee, used his political connections and the notoriety derived from his athletic career at Washburn to meet with and mobilize members



Hall was especially attractive to Fletcher because he was young, socially progressive, and a proponent of fair employment practices. During the late summer and fall of 1954, when Hall was in his first race for governor, Fletcher used the political connections he had formed as the vice-chairman of the Kansas State Republican Central Committee and the notoriety he had derived from his athletic career to mobilize thousands of black Kansans to vote for Fred Hall. Fletcher—pictured at far right during a Hall campaign event in Dodge City, Hall’s hometown—benefited from Hall’s victory, receiving his first professional position in public service as a spokesperson for the Kansas State Highway Commission.

of that isolated black population.³⁹ In the course of a few months, Fletcher said, with \$5,000 in campaign money and a salary of \$75 a week from Hall’s campaign war chest, he motivated ten thousand heretofore non-

participating black adults to register and then vote for Fred Hall for governor.⁴⁰

As a benefit of Hall’s victory, Fletcher received his first professional position in public service as spokesperson for the Kansas State Highway Commission. His performance in that capacity is actually less relevant and interesting than the undertakings he initiated to supplement his modest state pay. While working for the state Fletcher became a successful entrepreneur in two capacities that were helped along by his public employment. First, he worked as a used-car dealer,

39. Under pressure from the NAACP and after the black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters president A. Philip Randolph’s demand that blacks be afforded every opportunity to participate in the vast wartime expansion of the American workforce to satisfy defense materiel needs, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941, condemning employment discrimination and authorizing the formation of a federal Fair Employment Practices Commission. Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 217–31. The idea of establishing such commissions at the state level spread after the war. Robert P. Schuwerk, “The Philadelphia Plan: A Study in the Dynamics of Executive Power,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 39 (Summer 1972): 723–60; William J. Collins, “Race, Roosevelt and Wartime Production: Fair Employment in WWII Labor Markets,” *American Economic Review* 91 (March 2001): 272–86; *Current Biography Yearbook* 1971, 134.

40. Betty Wells, “Ex-Kansan Bucks Odds in D.C. Mayoral Race,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 25, 1978. The popular vote for Hall in the 1954 gubernatorial election was 329,868, while his Democratic Party opponent, George Docking, received 286,218 votes. The margin was 43,650 votes in Hall’s favor. Two years later, Docking ran again; this time successfully. Paul R. Shanahan, Secretary of State, *Thirty-ninth Annual Report of the Kansas Secretary of State, 1953–54* (Topeka, Kans.: State Printing Office); Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors*, 206–8.



The beginning of the end of Fletcher's time in Kansas came in the summer of 1956, when Fred Hall lost the Republican gubernatorial primary. Still harboring political ambitions, Governor Hall resigned his office on January 3, 1957, with just over a week left in his term. Lieutenant Governor John McCuish became governor and immediately appointed Hall to a vacancy on the Kansas Supreme Court created by the retirement of Hall's friend and Fletcher's former benefactor, Justice Smith. The public's reaction to this "triple play" was not positive, and what little credibility Hall had with the state Republican Party was lost. Along with it went Fletcher's future in Kansas politics. Pictured are Hall supporters, gathered in Wichita to view a 1956 gubernatorial debate on televisions set up outdoors.

offering deals and financing especially to military personnel at Forbes Field in Topeka and Fort Riley. As Fletcher described it, he would solicit credit union members who might be in the market for a vehicle, inquire about the type of vehicle they were seeking, and "pre-qualify" them to determine their ability to make payments. His job with the Highway Department enabled his travel to various automobile auctions in Kansas City and Missouri to acquire cars that fit the expectations of his clients. Once Fletcher acquired a car, he arranged the financing, processed the titles and liens expeditiously, and collected his profit. The business grew.⁴¹

41. Fletcher interview. R. L. Polk's city directories for the years 1950 and 1954 through 1958 provide evidence of the Fletcher family's fortunes; see *Topeka City Directory* (Kansas City, Mo.: R. L. Polk & Co., 1950, 1954–1958). The 1950 directory records that Arthur A. Fletcher and his wife Mary L. resided at 901 East 13th Street in Topeka and listed his occupation as laborer for the state highway commission. There is no listing for the Fletchers again until 1954 (the interim period covers the

Fletcher's second enterprise benefitted not only from his state employment but also from his personal contact with retired army non-commissioned officers associated with the Ninth Cavalry's American Legion Post in Junction City. They put him in touch with the booking agencies that had formerly brought entertainers such as Earl "Father" Hines, Cab Calloway, Count Bassie, and Duke Ellington to Fort Riley to entertain the troops. Because of his position with the state, Fletcher had access to National Guard commandants in Kansas and every state surrounding it. These connections made it possible for him to book well-known bands and solo performers into National Guard armories throughout the Midwest.

time during which Arthur was striving to make his mark in professional football). In 1954 they are back in Topeka at 1220 Locust Street, with Arthur listed as a laborer. In the 1955 through 1958 directories the vocational information lists "public relations director" or "assistant public relations director" for the state highway commission.

Fletcher booked the acts, promoted the events, and split the ticket, parking, and concession proceeds with his venues, rather than having to pay lump sum cash amounts to hold the dates and sites.

The legality of these activities may have been subject to challenge, but their importance to the economic viability of the Fletcher household was beyond doubt. Things changed in the summer of 1956, however, when Hall lost the Republican primary election in his attempt to win a second term as governor. "Next thing I know, Fred gets beat," explained Fletcher, "and when Fred gets beat, the bands—the word went out, and the next thing I know, I couldn't get an auditorium anywhere."⁴² With no prospect for reelection, but harboring continuing political ambitions, Governor Hall resigned his office on January 3, 1957, with just over a week left in his term. The lieutenant governor, now governor, John McCuish immediately appointed Hall to a vacancy on the Kansas Supreme Court created by the retirement of Hall's friend and Fletcher's former benefactor, Justice William A. Smith. The public's reaction to this escapade was not positive, and what little credibility Hall had with the state Republican Party was lost. Along with it went any protection or prestige for Fletcher that might have come from his association with the now tainted Hall.⁴³

With the inauguration of Democrat George Docking as governor on January 14, Fletcher lost his state employment and the influence of his personal connections. Both the used-car and band booking businesses evaporated and Fletcher was stuck having to pay substantial cancellation fees for booking commitments he had previously made. Even though he was now in debt for the staggering sum of \$12,000, or over \$90,000 by today's standards, he did not file for bankruptcy. As Fletcher himself described it, he went from a rising young political star on the make to the best educated black coal and iceman in Topeka, Kansas. Dick Godlove, Fletcher's former football coach at Washburn, hired Fletcher in the spring of 1957, and during the 1957 and 1958 seasons Fletcher served as equipment manager and assistant coach for the football team.⁴⁴ With

only part time labor at Washburn and delivery work to feed his wife and now five children, Fletcher found his former friends and connections unresponsive or hostile, and the world a fairly grim place.

Fred Hall resigned his position on the Kansas Supreme Court in the spring of 1958 to run again in the Republican gubernatorial primary. The Republican electorate had other ideas and handed Hall a resounding defeat in that summer's primary. Obviously finished on the Kansas political scene, Hall departed for California to become director of management control for Aerojet General Corporation, but he did not forget his friend, Art Fletcher. Soon after taking his executive position, Hall arranged to hire Fletcher as an efficiency analyst, and the family moved to California, settling in Oakland. The job was more show than substance, according to Fletcher, and he soon left it. He attempted to obtain licensure to teach school, though even in this it seemed his political past held him back. In his 2003 interview he firmly asserted that individuals back in Kansas who were contacted by California state authorities and potential employers for information about his bona fides consistently sabotaged him. There were others in Kansas, however, whom Fletcher remembered fondly, and with whom he kept in touch after leaving the state. These Kansas connections—with former classmates and a small group of senior black Republicans such as A. Price Woodard, Sam Jackson, and Leroy Tombs, who remained lifelong friends and associates—would become important later in Fletcher's life.⁴⁵

When Fletcher left Kansas for California in 1958, he was not even thirty-five years old, yet his family's finances were in ruins and his first few years in his new state saw enough misery to bring a man down. In October 1960, his wife Mary committed suicide, leaving behind her husband and five children as she leapt from the Oakland Bay Bridge. Fletcher struggled to raise his children alone. Over time he improved his situation,

42. Fletcher interview.

43. This bit of political theater became known as the "triple play." See Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 320–21.

44. The copy of Fletcher's university labor contracts for 1957 and 1958 show he was paid \$1,250 each season to work as an assistant coach and equipment manager. This was paid over five months each year, equaling \$250 per month at a time when the median monthly wage in the Midwest was roughly \$309. See "Fletcher Files," Mabee Library Archives, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas; U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements," <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/p05ar.html>.

45. Woodard and Jackson were Washburn contemporaries: the former became mayor of Wichita; Sam Jackson was appointed to the first U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and in 1969 he became an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Tombs had capitalized on his experience as a cook on U.S. Navy submarines to become a minority subcontractor to Greyhound Corporation providing food service to the construction workers on the Alaska oil pipeline project. Fletcher and Tombs were business partners in that enterprise and remained close friends until Fletcher's death in 2005. "Bonner Springs Loses A Leading Citizen: Leroy Tombs Sr. was Co-founder of 20 Good Men," *Kansas City Star*, May 12, 2006.



With the inauguration of Democratic Governor George Docking in January 1957, Fletcher lost his state employment. He went, in his words, from a rising political star to the best educated black coal and iceman in Topeka. He also worked alongside his former Washburn football coach, Dick Godlove, as an equipment manager and assistant coach for his alma mater. The 1959 KAW Yearbook shows Fletcher on the 1958 coaching staff with (from left to right) Head Coach Godlove, Ralph Brown, and Marion McDonald. Late in 1958 Fletcher left Kansas for California and still later moved to Washington State, where he entered local politics. He caught the attention of President Richard Nixon, who invited Fletcher to join his new administration as the assistant secretary of labor for wage and labor standards. Fletcher would go on to become the “father of Affirmative Action” and an advisor, diplomat, spokesperson, and administrator for four Republican presidents. Photograph courtesy of the University Archives, Mabee Library, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.

advancing his career with more education, remarrying, and accepting a “War on Poverty” position in Pasco, Washington. He entered local politics and was elected to the city council. In 1968, the same year Richard Nixon was elected president, Fletcher lost a bid to become lieutenant governor of Washington State. Nixon and his advisors took notice of Fletcher and soon invited him to join the new administration where he became the assistant secretary of labor for wage and labor standards.

He would go on to become “the father of Affirmative Action,” and variously an adviser, diplomat, spokesperson, and administrator for four Republican presidents in the post-World War II era. In the period following his service in the Nixon administration, Fletcher served eighteen months as the chief executive of the United Negro College Fund. In that capacity he molded the work of the noted American advertising agency Young

and Rubicam in its creation of one of the most famous slogans in American advertising history, “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste.” When he left that position he began consulting and advised General Electric and other “Fortune 500” companies on affirmative action compliance. When Nixon resigned and Gerald Ford became president, Fletcher returned to government service as President Ford’s deputy advisor for urban affairs. When the Ford administration ended he joined with a friend from Bonner Springs, Kansas, Leroy Tombs, and built a successful minority-owned food service and sanitation enterprise. His last public position was as President George H. W. Bush’s appointee as chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, a post he held from 1990 to 1993. In a move that demonstrated the weight of his ideological loyalties, Fletcher broke away from the mainstream Republican Party in 1995 to run a short-lived

presidential campaign, when party leaders and would-be candidates, including eventual nominee Senator Robert J. “Bob” Dole of Kansas, repudiated affirmative action in advance of the 1996 primary season.⁴⁶

Arthur Allen Fletcher made a lasting impression on the Kansas communities that shaped his growing-up years. In 1968 the city of Topeka honored Fletcher, naming November 2 “Art Fletcher Day.” In subsequent years he would be inducted into the Washburn Sports Hall of Fame, be honored by the Washburn Alumni Association, and in 1990 he received a doctor of humane letters honor from his alma mater.⁴⁷ And Kansas, of course, made a lasting impression on Fletcher. The confidence that came from his athletic successes in Junction City, the encouraging and nurturing environment of Washburn University for the wounded war vet, and the help he found as he entered politics and navigated life as a black man in the slowly integrating Midwest built a foundation from which he could develop into the prominent and influential political figure he became. Kansas did not make it easy for Art Fletcher, but Kansas made it possible

for Art Fletcher. There were enough encounters with people who chose to help him, showing him a measure of respect seemingly out of character with the prevailing hostile attitudes favoring segregation, that despite his failures he was, in the end, a success.

In his later life his early experiences shaped Fletcher’s continued support for the Republican Party, his ongoing promotion of affirmative action, and his ability to shake off bad experiences and keep moving toward his goals. Art Fletcher knew that the dream Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed was just that: a dream. The reality was that the white man and the black man were locked in an intense struggle that was often not civil at all. Given the choice, only a few white men were going to give a black man a break. And few blacks were likely to be foolish enough to trust a white man unquestioningly. Civil society, Fletcher believed, could be a place where all Americans, black and white, could accomplish their dreams. He knew it could work that way, but Kansas also taught him that, as he liked to put it, “sustained effort” and the resilience to get back up after a fall were the keys to success. KH

46. Fletcher was angered by the “efforts of some Republican contenders [Bob Dole included] to attack affirmative action and interject racism into the campaign” (“Presidential Campaign Like No Other,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 14, 1995). Fletcher’s principal campaign slogan was, “Send 5 to keep AA alive!” See John F. Harris and Kevin Merida, “On Affirmative Action, New Perspectives Strain Old Alliances,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 1995; “Arthur Fletcher Breaks Long Link with Senator Dole on Affirmative Action,” *Jet* 87 (April 10, 1995): 38; *Current Biography Yearbook 2005*, 635.

47. This recognition, given in a proclamation by Topeka Mayor Charles Wright on November 2, 1968, was for making “political history by becoming the first candidate of his race to run for a state’s second highest office . . . on a major party ticket” and “for his meritorious record of public service in Kansas, California, and Washington.” In the 1968 race for Washington State lieutenant governor, Fletcher nearly upset the popular Democratic incumbent. “Art Fletcher Day Proclaimed,” *Pictorial Times* (Topeka), October 30, 1968; “GOP aide Arthur Fletcher, who pushed affirmative action, dies,” *Seattle (Wash.) Times*, July 14, 2005.