

BRUCE R. WATKINS

HIS LIFE AND CAREER

During his lifetime, Bruce R. Watkins made innumerable contributions to the development of Kansas City and toward the advancement of civil rights for African Americans.

The Bruce R. Watkins exhibit, *"His Life and Career,"* is designed to highlight those contributions and to give insight into the personal side of a man who cared so much for humanity.

Because his accomplishments encompass so many areas, the Watkins exhibit will be presented in six phases, each representing a different aspect of his life. Each phase will be displayed on a rotating basis in the Bruce R. Watkins permanent exhibit space.

Exhibit phases in chronological order are:

"Childhood/Family Life" - Bruce R. Watkins was born March 20, 1924 in Parkville, Missouri. He attended elementary school in Kansas City, Missouri and high school in New York City. He married twice and was the father of two sons, Bruce Jr. and Robert.

"Military Career" - Watkins earned the rank of second lieutenant while serving in World War II as a navigator and bombardier with the 99th Pursuit Squadron. He received his training at Tuskegee Institute.

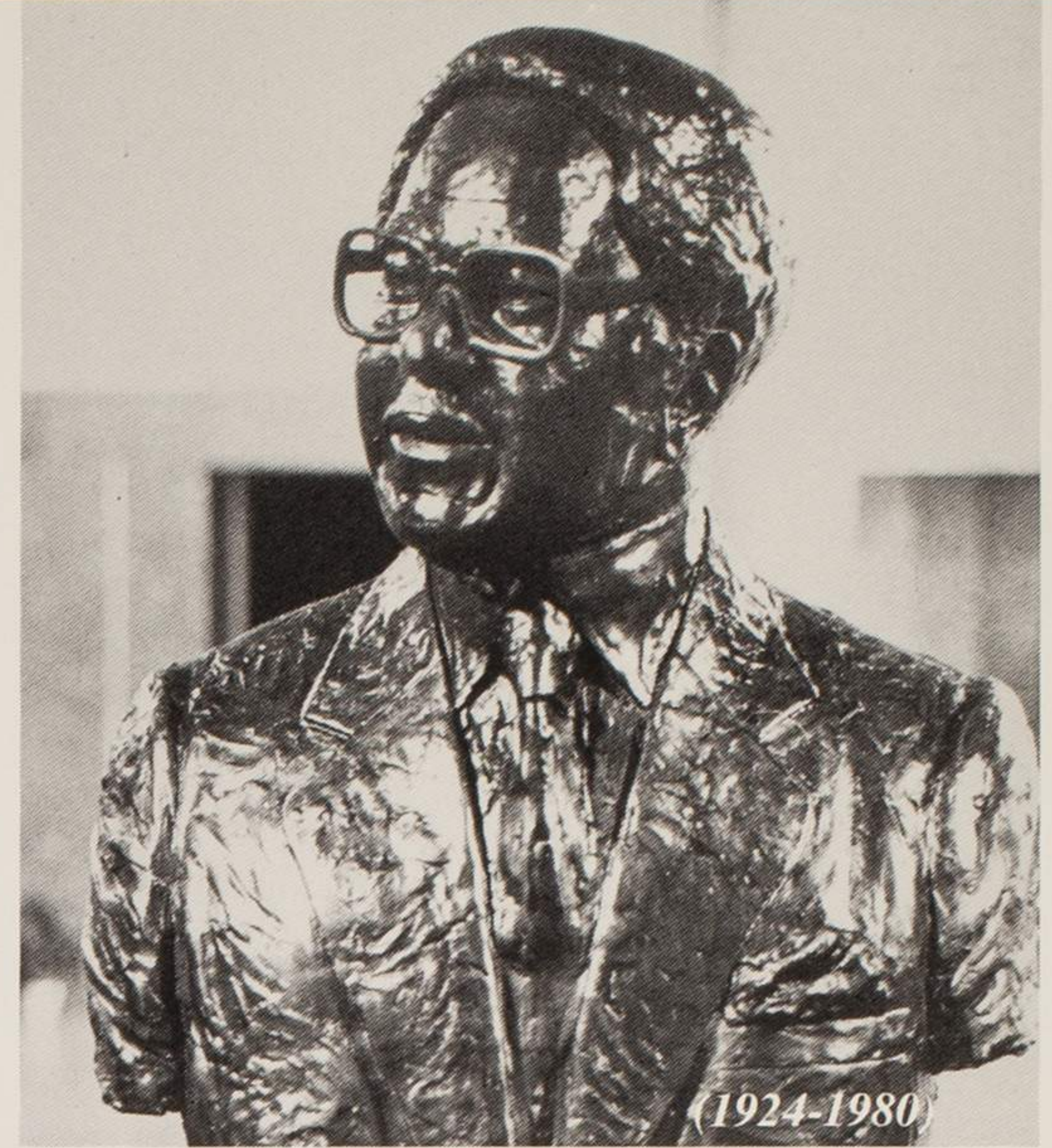
"Political Career" - Watkins' political career included two 'firsts' for African Americans. In 1963 he was one of the two first African Americans elected to the City Council of Kansas City, Missouri. He also was the first African American to hold a county-wide office when he was elected Circuit Clerk of Jackson County (1966), and the first to run for mayor (1978), although unsuccessfully.

"Business Career" - In 1977 Watkins became president of the family business, Watkins Brothers Memorial Chapel, Inc., and further established it as a household name in Kansas City.

"Community Leader" - Watkins' community involvement ranged from active membership in civil rights organizations to efforts to help meet the clothing, food, and transportation needs of needy and senior Kansas Citians. He was the brainchild of the Spirit of Freedom Fountain, but did not live to see the fountain completed.

"Human Rights Advocate" - Throughout his endeavors, Watkins worked to improve the quality of life for all Kansas Citians. He is credited with integrating the staff of the Jackson County Circuit Clerk's office and with sponsoring successful legislation on public accommodations.

The opening exhibit is a replication of Watkins' home office as it appeared in his home at 4616 E. 51st Street in the Sheraton Estates sub-division of Kansas City, Missouri. The office was an accommodation of his business, political and community involvement.



POINTS OF INTEREST

1. *Watkins won his golf bag during a Howard Hughes Invitational golf tournament in Las Vegas. An avid golfer, Watkins began the sport during an era when, with the exception of Swope Park golf course, African Americans were not allowed to utilize area golf courses. He found golf to be therapeutic and relaxing. His favorite golfing partner was longtime friend, Ollie Gates.*

2. *Leon Jordan was a close friend of Watkins. Much of their time together was spent in the back of Jordan's Green Duck tavern, which was located on 26th Street and Prospect Avenue. The men would meet in the back room of the tavern for hours at a time. It is believed that much of the strategic planning for Freedom, Inc., the political organization co-founded by Watkins and Jordan, was conducted during those meetings.*

3. *The photo, dated January 1, 1971, was taken outside the old Independence Courthouse when Watkins was sworn in for his second term as Jackson County Circuit Clerk. The county charter was changed after the election and the respon-*

sibilities of the circuit clerk were switched to the court administrator who is appointed by the Jackson County Circuit Court judges. An inscription on the back of the photo reads, "Bruce, I thought you'd like a memento of a historic day." It is signed by Bill Stone, an amateur photographer from Independence, Missouri. Stone didn't know Watkins but as the inscription says, he thought Watkins would like a memento of the historic day.

4. *During the '60s, Watkins championed public accommodations and fair housing legislation. The editorial cartoons on his office wall were published in the Kansas City Star during Watkins' civil rights campaign. The Adam Clayton Powell cartoon is original artwork signed by artist Bill Sanders. It reads, "To Bruce Watkins with best regards."*



Bruce R. Watkins

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