



About the Artist and Fabricator

Stephen Johnson is a versatile contemporary American artist living in Lawrence, Kansas, whose visually arresting and conceptually rich body of work forges connections between words, objects and ideas. His art spans a broad range of concepts, contexts and mediums including painting, collage, drawing, sculpture and installations which can be seen in museum and gallery exhibitions, site-specific public art commissions (visit his website—stephenjohnsonstudio.com), and his original award-winning children's books for which he adds a middle initial "T" to his name.

Cotter Mitchell of Vinland, Kansas, and coordinator of the Fine Arts Common Shop at the University of Kansas, has collaborated with Mr. Johnson on a number of public and private projects. The Artist, the Museum Director and the Board of Directors gratefully acknowledge the work of Mr. Mitchell whose skills and creative problem solving surrounding the fabrication of the rings and the repair of the historic windmill tower transformed concepts into reality.

The Artist and the Fabricator gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Clint Jennings, Robin Edmonds, Elizabeth Hatchett, Martha Parker, and the Board of Directors and all the volunteers involved in the planning and installation of Freedom Rings.

*photo by Jon Blumb

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Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum

Bloomington Park East
Clinton, KS 66047
Phone: 785-748-0800 /785-843-7665
www.wakarusamuseum.com

Freedom Rings

A Sculptural Composition
by Stephen Johnson

About Freedom Rings

The circular hoops establish physically and conceptually the relationship of the Underground Railroad to the area's ten extinct and extant communities. They encircle an historical windmill tower bequeathed to the Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum by local philanthropist Tensie Oldfather and which functions as the focal point of the site.

Each circle honors and represents the ten Wakarusa River Valley communities: Bloomington, Clinton, Kanwaka, Lone Star, New Belvoir, Old Belvoir, Richland, Sigel, Stull, and Twin Mound. These circular forms mark out their topographical locations.

The large hoop and windmill tower representing the Bloomington community on its original site form the focal point from which radiate the surrounding rings. The contrast between the rusted patina of the wind tower and the colorful metallic surface of the large ring brings to mind the sense of place--past, present and future.

At the top of the tower, symbolizing a beacon of freedom, a sphere reflects the sun's rays. The windmill tower is placed so that at night one can stand back and align the top of the tower with the North Star. In the course of a night, the Big Dipper and Little Dipper "revolve" around the North Star, bringing to mind the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd," the coded song that guided escaping slaves heading north, station by station along the Underground Railroad, to freedom.



The Power of the Circle

From this open, sculptural composition and the perspectives over the Wakarusa River Valley and Clinton Lake, one can draw out any number of ideas that derive from the power of a circle.

Play – How not to think of children splashing in flotation devices at Bloomington beach, playing with hula hoops, throwing Frisbees, shooting basketballs through hoops or communities conversing, singing, and dancing. The playful disposition of the sculptures invites visitors to discover, through parallax, various points of view both on the immediate environment of Clinton Lake and beyond.

Freedom – By day, the circles might evoke the wheels of wagons moving westward to establish communities in this river valley, or by night, the furtive, nocturnal journey of passengers on the Underground Railroad north to freedom. Through education beginning in Grammar School with Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic and then beyond, one can loosen oneself from the chains of ignorance to assume the responsibilities of freedom

Communities – While the hoops celebrate the topographical placement of the ten communities in the Wakarusa Valley as they energetically developed agriculture and commerce, they also celebrate the dynamic circles of families, friends, and community spirit that constitute free communities and a free state.

Democracy – Since all points on a circle are at an equal distance from the center, the rings might suggest equality, such as when we sing together "My Country 'tis of thee" and remember Martin Luther King's "Let Freedom Ring!"

Time – Like a gnomon on a sundial, the windmill tower casts a shadow that sweeps clockwise over the grass and rings marking out the sunny hours of a day; by night, the ever-changing counterclockwise sweep of constellations around the North Star mark out the months of a year. As the rotating Earth orbits the sun, we experience the cycles of seasons, growth, harvest, and renewal.

Map of Ring Arrangement

