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THE GENESIS OF A STATE'S METROPOLIS

An address delivered by Frank H. Betton¹ before the twenty-fifth annual meeting of the Kansas State Historical Society, January 15, 1901

“The first faint wash of waves where soon shall roll a human sea.”

In tracing the growth of any old-time city of our Eastern seaboard, the marks of development are distinct, and the leisurely progress enables us to clearly note the changes wrought by each succeeding generation. The cities of Kansas have no “generations”; their perspective is limited; the pilgrims of 1856 are not yet wholly engulfed in the “human sea,” and a general “round up” of these pioneers would still fill an average Kansas opera-house.

Here and there among our own fifty-odd thousand of population lingers a citizen who assisted at the birth of the city and helped prepare its swaddling clothes. They were here before Minnesota avenue was marked out, and when the slope from Fifth street to the river was occupied with meadows and cornfields. From 1843 until the dawn of the year 1857 Wyandotte was simply a rallying point. Here the individual members of the nation, whose farms were scattered all over the reservation from Barker's tank to Muncie, gathered for consultation. The council-house stood on Fourth street, near the location of Dunning's hall, for years after the city was started – a small one-story frame building, utterly devoid of architectural pretensions.² A road, starting or ending near the only store – a two-story frame, still standing on the north side of Nebraska avenue, between Third and Fourth streets – wound its way around by the council-house, on past the Armstrong homestead, near the corner of Fifth and Minnesota, along the ridge to near the southern boundary of Huron Place; then, bending northward and passing to the north of the little frame church and parsonage of the South Methodists, located at the corner of Seventh and Minnesota, it passed on out through the reserve to the government road leading to Fort Leavenworth.

The house of Silas Armstrong, a large, substantial two-story brick farmhouse, stood near what is now the northwest corner of Fifth and Minnesota, and his farm lands surrounded it, stretching to the lands of his brother John McIntyre Armstrong, whose old homestead yet stands just back of the Northwestern depot. Ike Brown's log house stood on the slope towards the river, east of Fourth and near State avenue. Across Jersey creek was the large log residence of Governor Walker, and on the

¹ Frank H. Betton was born in Denver, Rockingham County, New Hampshire, August 1, 1835. His father's maternal grandfather, Mathew Thornton, was president of the colonial convention which met at Exeter in May, 1773, to organize a provisional government, the following year a member of the Continental Congress, and was one of the signers of the declaration of independence. At the age of fourteen, Mr. Betton went to Boston, and, after some years, spent as a clerk in stores there and at Petersburg, Va., he came to Kansas in 1856. He lived for a time in Pottawatomie, Jefferson and Leavenworth counties, and finally located in Wyandotte. He engaged in the lumber business, and for several years owned and operated sawmills. In 1895 he was appointed state labor commissioner. In 1874 he was elected grand master of the Odd Fellows of Kansas. He was also grand chancellor of the Knights of Pythias. His home is on a farm near Pomeroy in Wyandotte county.

² See Connelley's "Provisional Government of Nebraska Territory."

site of the Fowler mansion was the rambling story-and-a-half brick residence of his brother Matthew. Uncle Charles Garrett lived just across the creek, on the road leading to Quindaro.

Good, old Father Barnett lived in the South Methodist parsonage, near Seventh street and Minnesota avenue, and for some time had served the Wyandottes as the representative of his branch of the church. After the town started, as it was the only place of worship, the newcomers and the Wyandottes united, and on Sundays the little church was thronged. To most of the congregation English was the native tongue, but not to all, and I remember that Silas Armstrong would usually ascend the pulpit and act as interpreter for the few Wyandottes present who were unable to understand.

The line of Minnesota avenue from Fifth to Seventh street was across a deep hollow, and was not opened for some years after the town was settled. The fill for these two blocks was a heavy one, as can be seen by examining the extensive basements on the north side of the street.

One of the Kansas City, Mo., newspapers not long ago, in noticing the death of one of our early settlers, stated that when she came here, in 1857, this country was a savage wilderness, or words to that effect, and this statement was only a sample of what is dished up by the average reporter in writing of the conditions here at that time. There seems to be no excuse for this ignorance, for records are accessible in abundance, and it seems to me that a reporter who don't take the trouble to acquaint himself with local history is hardly fit for his position. As a matter of fact, when the Wyandottes moved here from Ohio in 1843, and settled on land purchased from the Delawares, they were as far advanced in civilization as were their white neighbors on the other side of the state line. The farms they opened and the houses they built were of the same class, and the schools and churches they established were as good as the average of similar institutions along the frontier. And in 1857 there were many fairly extensive farms scattered through the reserve. The Mudeater farm, now partly within the city limits, was in as advanced a state of cultivation, probably, as are the best managed farms in the county today, and there were a number of others nearly as good.

In 1855 the Wyandottes made a treaty whereby they were to receive their land in severalty, and whereby those who so desired could become United States citizens. This treaty was signed on the part of the Wyandottes by Silas Armstrong, Matthew Mudeater, Geo. I. Clark, John Hicks, and, on the part of the government, by the commissioner of Indian affairs, Geo. W. Manypenny. As already stated, the Wyandottes were, as a rule, farmers, and in opening their farms sought the lands back from the river, because the surface was less broken. The exceptions to this were Silas Armstrong and the Walkers, who were engaged in merchandizing in Kansas City, Mo., and wished to be near their business.

The late H. M. Northrup was a resident of Kansas City at the time the 1855 treaty was made, and was required to select his wife's allotment and to live on it. Naturally anxious to get as close to the ferry as possible, he made his selection for a building site not far from where the court-house now stands, and brought men from Kansas City to clear away the brush. While thus engaged, Ike Brown rode up and told him that it was his aunt's claim, taking him to where four saplings had been cut and placed on the ground forming a square; and this was of appropriating claims was the rule in the early days here in Kansas. Mr. Northrup said he did not know of the prior claim, and would look elsewhere, but this was just what Ike did not want; he agreed to make it all right with his "aunt" for twenty dollars. Mr. Northrup said he knew it was a clear case of "hold up," but he gave Ike the twenty dollars as the quickest way out of it, and this is what his part of the future metropolis of Kansas cost him.

The promoting of cities during the years 1856 and the early part of 1857 was a popular industry in the young territory, and, as a natural result, the idea of establishing a "commercial emporium" at the mouth of the Kaw on Kansas soil was not left long in abeyance. There were plenty of such

enterprises seething in the brains of the Lawrence settlers, and recently acquired lands by individual Wyandottes were ripe and ready for exploitation. Gaius Jenkins³ and W. Y. Roberts⁴ were born promoters, and leaguings with them Thomas H. Swope⁵, a young Kentuckian, and John McAlpine, recently from Pennsylvania, both looking for profitable investments in this new country, they had no trouble in enlisting three of the leading Wyandottes whose allotments partially covered the prospective site, and Armstrong and two of the Walkers cast in their lot and incidentally their land. Ike Brown's farm was bought, probably with money furnished either by Swope or McAlpine; at any rate, rumor had it that Isaac could show a pouch containing an even thousand of twenty-dollar gold pieces, and I remember reading a few years ago the story of an Irishman, who claims to have slept on them all winter; at any rate, they did not stay with Isaac very long. The map of Wyandotte City includes the lands of Mrs. Lucy B. Armstrong, Matthias Splitlog, and H. M. Northrup these lands were all platted into streets and lots along with the rest, and formed part of the city, on paper; but a close inspection of the original city map shows a series of dotted lines marking the boundaries of these tracts, although as a matter of fact the town company had no control over them.

The primary organization of the town company reads as follows: "At a meeting of the above men, namely, Silas Armstrong, Gaius Jenkins, John McAlpine, W. Y. Roberts, Thomas H. Swope, Isaiah Walker, and Joel Walker, held at the house of Isaac Brown, on the 9th day of December, 1856 the company organized by the election of Silas Armstrong as president; W. Y. Roberts, secretary and Isaiah Walker, treasurer." The new town was duly advertised, subscription books were open, John H. Miller was engaged to lay out the town, and finally the 8th day of March, 1857, was fixed as the date for the first sale of shares.

In company with a number of others, I left Leavenworth on the day preceding, to be present at the sale. The Armstrong residence had been converted into a hotel by Robert L. Ream⁶ and on the

³ Gaius Jenkins settled on his claim adjoining Lawrence in the fall of 1855, having located it in the previous autumn. During the preceding year he had been proprietor of the American House at Kansas City. He at once identified himself with the free-state cause. May 10, 1856, he assisted Governor Reeder in his escape from Lawrence to Kansas City. The same month he was indicted by the grand jury of Douglas county for treason, and arrested at Lawrence May 21 by Deputy United States Marshal Fain, and confined with Governor Robinson and other free-state men at Lecompton. May 25, 1857, he signed, with other free-state men, an open letter addressed to Secretary Stanton, offering to overlook the past and participate in the election for delegates to the Lecompton constitutional convention, provided a correct census was secured. June 3, 1858, Mr. Jenkins was killed, in a dispute over the title to his claim, by Jas. H. Lane.

⁴ William Y. Roberts located with a colony at Big Springs, Douglas county, in the summer of 1855, from Fayette county, Pennsylvania. He was a native of that state, and had served several terms as a member of its legislature. October 5, 1855, he participated in the Big Springs free-state convention, and served as a member of the constitutional convention which met at Topeka the 23rd of the same month. The schedule of members gives his age at 41, farming as his occupation, and his politics as democratic. He was elected lieutenant-governor under the Topeka constitution. His practical judgment prevented an open conflict with the border ruffians at the time of the Dow murder, though his party of free-state men first gave the ruffians a realizing sense that Yankees would fight. His company was the second to be mustered into the war of the rebellion from Kansas – company B, First Kansas – and was led by him in the battle of Wilson Creek, Mo., August 10, 1861. He was soon promoted to the position of major, and then to the rank of colonel, in which capacity he served during the war. After the war he resumed the occupation of farming, doing some editorial work on the Lawrence *Tribune* during the summer of 1868. He died on his farm, near Lawrence, February 9, 1969, after a lingering illness.

⁵ Thomas Hunton Swope is a native of Kentucky, graduating from Central College, at Danville, in that state, in 1848. The following year he became alumnus of Yale. Some years later he removed to Kansas City, Mo., and November 9, 1857, his name is found among the charter members of the chamber of commerce. In 1895 he gave to that city Swope Park, a tract of 1400 acres. He presented, in Marcy, 1902, the sum of \$25,000 to Central University, Danville, Ky., for the purpose of erecting a library building.

⁶ Robert L. Ream, chief clerk in the surveyor general's office, and father of Mrs. Vinnie Ream Hoxie, the noted sculptress, was born in Center county, Pennsylvania, in October, 1809. He died in Washington, November 21, 1885. Another of his daughters married Perry Fuller, a noted Indian contractor in the early days of Kansas. The daughter Vinnie was born in Madison, Wis. In 1863 she began to develop great talent as an artist. In 1856 Congress commissioned her to execute a marble statue of Lincoln, over eight competitors. In 1874 she was awarded a contract by the government for a statue of

morning of the sale we organized a procession some fifty strong, and headed by a fife and drum and the stars and stripes, marched from the hotel around by the council-house to the store, who proprietor was Isaiah Walker, the treasurer of the company.⁷ This building is still standing, on the north side of Nebraska avenue just below Fourth street. The store was for years used as our only court-room, and David J. Brewer, now a justice of our United States supreme court, was one of the judges who held his court there. There was an outside stairway leading to the second story, and this was utilized on more than one occasion as an impromptu gallows. There are many thrilling incidents connected with this old building, but these in the words of Mr. Kipling, are another story. The upper story of the building was one large room, and the gathering crowd became so great that there was fear of collapse, but no accident happened, and each eager unit of the crowd pushed anxiously forward, impatient to exchange the twenty-five double eagles (for these were our principal "currency" during the first few months of 1857, but they all disappeared long before the first frost) for a paper calling for ten lots in the embryo city. These lots were supposed to be located somewhere out on the brush covered site, but I doubt if half a dozen of the eager buyers ever knew just where the lots they bought were located. I know I never did. After 100 shares had been sold – mine was No. 92 – the sale was postponed for two weeks, and it was announced that the price per share would then be \$750. [Annotation: America's largest circulating gold coin was the Double Eagle or \$20 piece, born in the exciting years of the great California Gold Rush. The new mines yielded the greatest mass of gold in recorded history. Vast quantities of the yellow metal helped to speed development of the American West and had far-reaching effects on the world's coinage.]

I did not stay long in the prospective city, but took a boat for Leavenworth the next morning, and when I returned, in September, six months later, I found Wyandotte City in full blast. People had flocked in from all directions, one company coming from Pennsylvania and another from Ohio. M. W. Delahay, a relative of Lincoln, and for years judge of our United States district court, had started a paper, and F. A. Hunt had picked up an old steamboat, the St. Paul, and had converted it into a wharf-boat and hotel. Mrs. Garno had moved from Leavenworth and built the Garno House, on the corner of Third and Minnesota.

Area Hotels - <http://www.kckpl.lib.ks.us/kscoll/lochist/thennow/TN63.htm>

Garno House Hotel - <http://www.kclibrary.org/resources/sc/list.cfm?list=sub&SubjectareaID=1527>

Admiral Farragut, over twenty-one competitors. She became a very famous woman, spending much of her time in Rome, engaged in this class of art.

⁷ The town of Wyandotte, thus started, was, by the legislature of 1885, consolidated with the towns of Kansas City, Kan., and Armourdale, which had developed adjoining, under the name of Kansas City, Kansas. The federal census of 1900 gave to the consolidated city 51,418, and the county of Wyandotte 73,227. The state census of 1901 made the population of the city 53,626, and that of Wyandotte county 74,267. The federal census of 1900 gave the city 492 manufacturing establishments; capital, \$18,633,475; employing 10,544 wage-earners, and a payroll of \$4,886,259 annually. These manufacturers used raw material to the value of \$70,386,491, and the value of the output was \$82,768,943. The increase from 1890 to 1900, in value of products was 87.8 per cent. The great Kansas City stockyards are located in this city. The official receipts of live stock in Kansas City, Kan., for the year 1901 were: 2,000,165 cattle; 126,410 calves; 3,716,404 hogs; 980,078 sheep; 96,157 horses and mules; in all, 134,958 cars. In the week ending July 27, 1901, 4217 cars were employed. With but an area of 153 square miles, Wyandotte county has 97.17 miles of railroad, and Kansas City, Kan., has 179.25 miles of railroad side-track.