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Early Settlements In Wabaunsee County

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Hessdale, Wabaunsee County
Mark Feiden

EARLY SETTLEMENTS IN WABAUNSEE COUNTY

The enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act on May 30, 1854, signaled a new era in the politics and demographics of what became the state of Kansas.

Demographically, the act provided for the opening of Kansas to white settlement. The land that is now Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma was for decades a dumping ground for the federal government’s removal of Native Americans from all of the eastern United States. At the time of the creation of the Kansas Territory, there were more than a dozen Native American tribes that owned reservations within its borders. The plan for Kansas statehood called for the territory to be divided into one-mile squares, specifically designed for white settlement, and that plan called for the removal of the tribes who had made their homes in Kansas.

Politically, the act allowed for the admission of two new territories, Kansas and Nebraska. More importantly, the law settled the question of whether the two territories, should they be admitted to the union as states, would allow human slavery. The answer to that hotly contested question was found in the concept of “popular sovereignty,” which allowed the slavery status of the two states to be determined by a popular vote of the people residing in the territory at the time of statehood. Popular sovereignty became the kindling in Kansas for a fiery confrontation that would consume the nation.

The first permanent white settler who came to Wabaunsee County was 29-year-old John P. Gleich. He arrived in 1853, squatting a claim on the south branch of Mill Creek in what

became Farmer Township, about four miles south of Alma. Gleich's first task was to cut enough trees along the meandering stream to construct a small log cabin.

With the official opening of the Kansas Territory in the summer of 1854, a steady flow of settlers from the East arrived, staking their claims on any property that was not occupied by settlers. The Preemption Act of 1841 allowed "squatters" to claim up to 160 acres of land, which would become theirs if they resided on the land for fourteen months. The Preemption Act was replaced with the Homestead Act of 1862 and a series of revisions to that law, which opened 160 million acres of land to the public for settlement. Like the Preemption Act, settlers could claim 160 acres of land under the Homestead Act if they made improvements to the property and resided there for five years within a seven-year period after staking their claim. Squatters who were living in Kansas when the Homestead Act became law in 1862 were required to purchase their land from the federal government for \$1.25 per acre.

The creation of the Kansas Territory also brought political divisions and boundaries to the eastern sections of Kansas in the form of counties, and by the end of 1856, all of the state had been surveyed. What is now Wabaunsee County was named Richardson County Territory.

The first settlement of European-American people in Wabaunsee County

was established in the summer of 1854. On the south branch of Mill Creek, Ed Krapp and his brothers-in-law, Peter Thoes and Joseph Thoes, staked claims. Joseph Thoes wrote in later years that the three men constructed three log cabins on Mill Creek in three weeks. The need to construct shelter prior to the onset of the Kansas winter was of utmost urgency, and log cabins offered the quickest and easiest solution to the settlers' plight.

In Wilmington Township, George M. Harvey and Samuel B. Harvey settled in 1854, constructing a log cabin on Dagoon Creek. Just to the north of Farmer Township, Gottlieb Zwanziger opened a flour mill near the confluence of the west and south branches of Mill Creek in 1856. Ten years later this settlement became Alma.

To the west of Alma Township, Joseph Grimm, Michael Fix, and other settlers built cabins along the west branch of Mill Creek in Washington Township during the late 1850s, as settlements formed along the stream.

On Mission Creek a settlement near Keene was established with the arrival of the Mossman family in 1856 and the Beach family in 1857. The first store was established in 1858. Joseph Little, a latecomer who arrived on Mission Creek in 1866, wrote of the settlement in a December 1901 letter to *The Alma Enterprise*: "I came here thirty-five years



Alma 1910-1920
kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society

ago and found twenty-three log houses on Mission Creek with twenty-five families living in them. Also, three log schoolhouses and school going in each and preaching in one every Sabbath. All of this was within a distance of nine miles. I helped to build four log houses after I came here, in 1866 and 1867.”

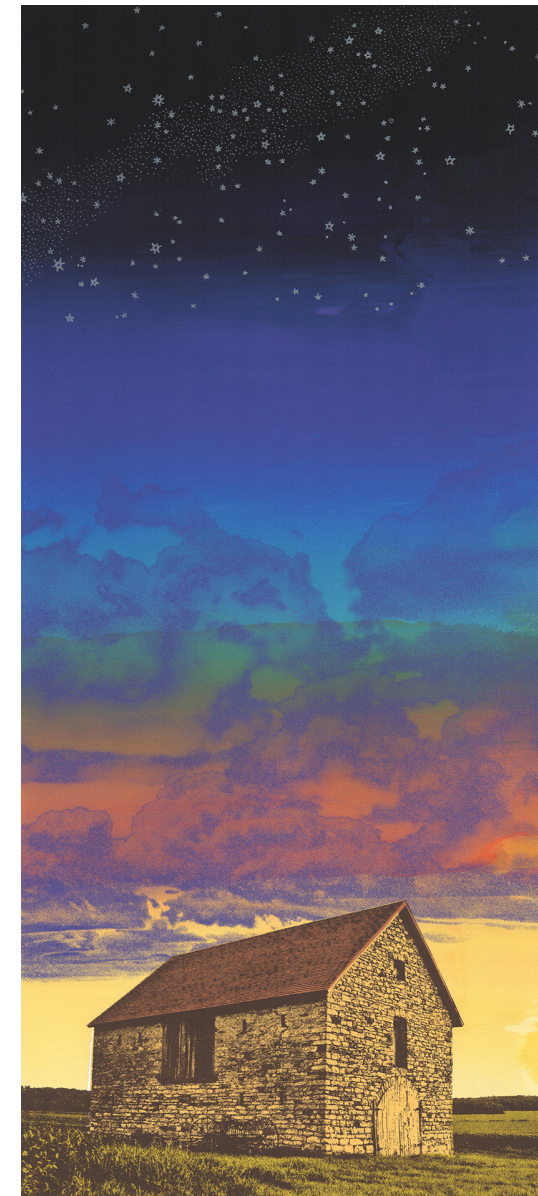
In 1856 a new breed of settlers came to Richardson County, members of the New Haven Colony from Connecticut, more commonly known as the “Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony.” These seventy-three colonists, including sixty-four men, four women, and five children, found fifty-nine settlers already residing in Wabaunsee. While most of the members of the Beecher group planned to make a new life on the Kansas frontier, the impetus that prompted their arduous trip to the Flint Hills was the desire to become voters in Kansas to ensure that it would be admitted to the union as a free state. Other settlers from northwestern Missouri were making a much shorter trip to Kansas to claim their pro-slavery vote. The arrival of the New Haven Colony brought the population of the Wabaunsee settlement to 132 residents, making it the largest early settlement in Richardson County.

For the first ten years of European-American settlement in Wabaunsee County, most of the northeast quarter of the county was occupied by the Potawatomi Reserve. In the 1860 census, more than

200 Native Americans lived in that section of the county. After passage of a new treaty between the government and the Potawatomi tribe in 1868, the reservation was reduced in size from 3 million acres to 30,000 acres. Soon after, the reserve in Wabaunsee County was opened to white settlement, and the Potawatomi were forced to abandon their homes for the remaining reserve in Jackson County or move to Oklahoma.

The days of early white settlement in Wabaunsee County were difficult and fraught with political upheaval, yet the influx of new settlers showed no signs of waning as statehood arrived in 1861. With the coming of homesteading, the county’s population grew in leaps and bounds every year until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Greg Hoots is a community historian and author specializing in the Kansas Flint Hills. Hoots operates *The Flint Hills Special Digital Magazine* and maintains a digital archive of historic Kansas photographs.



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