

A Year in the Life of Early Atchison: 1855

Atchison, Atchison County, Kansas

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Lost Kansas Communities

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This study contains information about the first settlement called Atchison, Atchison County, in the year 1855. It includes historical accounts, both told by historians and in primary sources, and shows the earliest illustrations of the town. The study will be centered on the life of the small riverfront town during its first years as a pro-slave community and on the events that changed it from the pro-slave outlook to the free-state town you see today.

Picture yourself walking down a wood planked sidewalk, with muddy, rutted streets, toward a river filled with young men moving crates of good on and off steamboats and others walking towards you with everything they could carry on their backs. This sounds like a Hollywood scene right out of an old western, except this was reality to many settlers of the nineteenth century. This scene was early Atchison, in the Kansas Territory of 1855, on a bend of the west bank of the Missouri River. Atchison was founded and put on the map in 1854 by a group of settlers from Platte City, but not before one man, George Million, staked his first claim in the town. From here, Atchison grew and became a major stopping point for settlers and steamboats. However, for a short period of time, the town featured slavery and pro-slave activists. The time was short and had many small incidents of tension between the free-stators and the pro-slave men, but these incidents were not always negative and were able to shape the town many see today. The history of the pro-slave community isn't lost in time nor is it forgotten, but not many speak of this time in history, in fear of the image the information suggests about Atchison. However, I feel that this short time period is important and should be recognized. The very earliest years of a community are important, and people need to have the full picture.

Early History

After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, one man staked his plot of land on the west bank of the Missouri River. That man was George Million, a Missouri farmer who saved up money from his business of cutting wood and hauling it to the river to sell to steamboats going up river. In June, 1854, he "squatted" or made a claim to the land without any documentation,

on the present town site of Atchison. Million, in addition to his fire wood business, built a ferry and constructed docks on both side of the river.[1] At this point, men from Platte City, Missouri were making their way over to Atchison to stake claims to ensure that Kansas would become a slave state. Upon arrival, they came to the "south edge of the rim of the basin which circles around from the south line of the city, extending west by gradual incline to the divide between White Clay and Stranger Creek, then north and east around to the northern limits of the city." [2] It was here that the Missouri River made a westerly bend, giving the town of Atchison the advantage of being the farthest point west in Kansas Territory on the Missouri River. This indentation, later to be called "The Great Detour," would soon become the future site of Atchison. [3]

As the Missourians began to state their claims in Atchison, the town became ramshackle. The men coming over were mostly there for the land, giving them a vote in any election and decisions of the town. Among the men arriving from Missouri was David R. Atchison, for whom the town was named, a United States Senator and the story goes, U. S. President for one day. Soon after these Missouri men came to town, they gathered under a cottonwood tree, electing Peter T. Abell president of the Atchison Town Company. Abell was a southern man with southern views, including slavery, but he was also a lawyer and a man of judgment. Shortly after the town company was organized, the town was divided into 100 shares, giving five shares to each man of the group and thirty shares held aside for general distribution. In 1855, after the town had been fully surveyed, the members of the town company organized a meeting to build a hotel and establish a newspaper. That following spring, the National Hotel was built and in February of 1855, J. H. Stringfellow was issued funds to purchase a printing office for a newspaper. The newspaper,

the *Squatter Sovereign*, a pro-slavery paper, was born, bringing the issue of pro-slavery to Atchison. [4]

As 1854 went on, Atchison grew slowly. The construction of Million's Ferry led to several buildings along the river bend and homes sparsely scattered throughout the streets of the town. In 1855, a change began to erupt in the town. As will be discussed later, Samuel Pomeroy, a free-stator from New England, became mayor by the flip of a coin. He was sent to Atchison to lay a foundation for free-stators going west, but he decided to take the funds he was given and put them towards helping the people of Atchison. With the \$6,000 he received from the New England Immigrant Society, he paved roads, fixed water problems, promoted the city to new business, and did the things that made Atchison the best place to start the journey west. [5]

Nearly at the same time, another important event was happening that changed the outlook of Atchison and its society: the Mormon Migration. As 1855 rolled by, the town grew with the help of the Mormons and began to flourish, bringing in new people each day. Nearly 250,000 people were moving through at any given time. [6] At the end of 1855, the Mormons left Atchison, making their way to Utah, leaving behind a newly built town but with few business owners. In the year 1856, much of Atchison didn't change; it remained a starting point for many travelers heading west. In 1857, however, *Freedom's Champion*, a free-state newspaper, bought out the *Squatter Sovereign*, laying to rest the pro-slavery era of Atchison.

A Word Picture of Atchison: 1855

Many people passed through Atchison in the year 1855, giving life to a small river port town, full of different ethnicities, races, religions, and political backgrounds. Many of the settlers who came through Atchison were Upland Southerners: mostly uneducated, pro-slavery, poor, Protestant, with little experience of market economy. [7] The men who came to settle in Atchison were young, carried little money, and few brought livestock or even slaves.[8] In 1855 they found a bustling, organized chaos, with few buildings and muddy streets. The scenery of Atchison, to an arriving or traveling settler, would have started at one of the docks at either the foot of Atchison Street or the foot of Commercial Street. Above this rose the great Missouri River bluffs where the town spread out in later years. Near the Atchison Street dock, a settler would have seen the flat bottom ferry boat run by George Million. Another of those settlers, Luther C. Challiss, a dry goods and grocery store owner, left some account of Atchison. Looking through the eyes of Mr. Challiss, Atchison was filled with a hand full of wooden structures, beginning with his store on the corner of Levee and C Street. This first image is preserved in a yellowing town map, as seen in Attachment 1. As Mr. Challiss would walk out the front of his store, he would see Samuel Dickson, a merchant, politician, and auctioneer on the north side of C Street. William Null and Albert Schmitt ran a warehouse, carrying a general stock of merchandise at the corner of Second and C Street, also seen in Attachment 1. Messrs. Jackson & Ireland owned a contracting firm with a shop over Samuel Dickson's store, and looking further west on the corner of C and Third Street, was Uncle Sam's Clothing Store run by Jacob Saqui & Company. Continuing west on C street, Giles Buck sold stoves, O. B. Dickson was proprietor of the Atchison House, and Drs. J. Stringfellow and D. McVay were leading physicians.[9]

This Atchison community was pretty low key at the beginning of the year, giving a home to few rooted businessmen and not many buildings. Many of the businessmen advertised in the local city newspaper, including N. J. Ireland, carpenter and joiner; Henry Routt and W. Lamb, attorneys at law; J. Stringfellow, M. D.; W. Sumner; stone mason; Thomas Rhea, blacksmith; Burnes & G. Million, ferry and steam boat ferry; O. B. Dickson, owner and operator of the Atchison House; J. B. Ewell, resident Physician; George Challiss, general store owner; Gafton Thomasen, owner and operator of the steam saw mill; and the Atchison Institute, a school for the children of Atchison.[10] In 1855, this small-business scene would have been a more accurate vision than that of most aerial photos in archives today. The buildings that the incoming settlers would have encountered would have had fake fronts, like in old western movies, and they all would have been made of wood. Because of this, with wood stoves burning in the stores for heat, there were lots of fires.[11] As settlers would arrive in Atchison, they would need a place to sleep for the night, and one of the hotels was the National Hotel, sitting on the north side of Atchison Street and just east of Second Street, overlooking the river.[12] For much of this year in time, Atchison was simply muddy streets and wooden structures, occupied by small business owners and few residents. Its businesses served travelers.

The men who would have been seen in Atchison when the community was still young would have been Upland South emigrants, border ruffian men, and Mormons. The description of these men is somewhat vague, with most people recalling them as being dirty, tired, young, and wearing simple clothes of the era. Many of the travelers coming off the steamboats would have looked like much like these backwoodsman, not having much to say and not really caring about the political or economic status of the town. However, there were also businessmen and politi-

cians, many of whom were dressing in suits. Little is known about the population at this busy time, but we can assume that much of the country dressed in a style that fit their heritage. Each settler, male or female, would look nearly the same as others migrating west. Although the appearance of the settlers would have been rough, some of the men were definitely in Atchison for political reasons. Kansas was a state in which many joined the fight for a free or slave state, and the free staters were determined to win, as they did. [13] Consequently, the men that a settler may have bumped into would either be for slavery, such as slave owners, Missourians, and Upland South men, or anti-slavery, as many of the Mormons were and members of New England Emigrant Aid Companies passing through to points west. Along the docks was a diverse crowd of people. We don't have many pictures nor were there many artists to draw them, but we can get a sense of who they were from their political views.

A Change in the Air for Atchison

As previously stated in the early history of Atchison, the town was founded by Missourians and pro-slave activists, including David R. Rice. In Atchison at this time in 1854, slavery was legal and many of the residents owned slaves. [14] Although the town itself did not change fully from slavery to anti-slavery status until 1857, the swing came in the year 1855. In Atchison at the time there were roughly 250 citizens, and the town wasn't very organized. Much of the town was run by the founders, J. H. Stringfellow and the town company president, Peter Abell, both pro-slavery activists. Arriving Mormons saw that Atchison wasn't equipped with large enough warehouses to acquire the amount of supplies the Mormons needed to bring in. There-

fore, with the 250 citizens of Atchison, they all began to build and construct new buildings and warehouses. Economic concerns began to come to the forefront. When they moved on, the Mormons left behind buildings and the necessities Atchison need to survive and grow. And they also left their mark on early Atchison by leaving behind Mormon Grove, a campsite approximately three miles outside the city limits to the west, fenced in with earthen structures and walls. Because of the Mormons building these structures and sending word out to many free states to come to Atchison as a starting point, Atchison became a major trade point and travel destination in northeast Kansas. [15]

Although the Mormon Migration was a large part of the change in Atchison, the atmosphere of pro-slavery was still a musk in the air. In August of 1855, a “negro woman,” belonging to Grafton Thomassen, owner of the saw mill, was drowned in the Missouri River. J. W. B. Kelley, an anti-slavery lawyer, stated an opinion that if she were treated better by her master, she wouldn't have committed suicide. This statement angered Mr. Thomassen; he decided to take matters into his own hands, picking a fight with Kelley. The fight was soon broken up by a large group of Atchison people. Not caring about the size or power of either man, the people acted to resolve the conflict, issuing a demand that Kelley leave town for his remarks about pro-slavery men being ruffians and to never show his face around Atchison vicinity again. The people of Atchison during this trial of Mr. Kelley made resolved statements to the public, warning any other emissaries of the 'Aid Society' tampering with slaves to leave or face the same punishment as Kelley. The town applauded Thomassen's actions and felt that it was time to clean up the town, removing any abolitionists. They elected three men to carry out these orders. The people

published these resolved issues and passed them throughout the community, having them signed by every man. Those who refused were treated as abolitionists.

This story does not end here. A few days later, a minister of the Christian church, Pardee Butler, strolled into town to do some trading. He was an “uncompromising anti-slavery advocate,” filled with courage and never scared to express himself to the people of the community. Rev. Butler was outraged by the behavior of the town in forcing Kelley to leave and enforcing the other resolutions. He quickly upset the people of Atchison. Outraged by Butler’s remarks about the town and its decisions, the people tarred and feathered him and sent him down the Missouri River on a small raft. [16] These events show a strong potential violence in the pro-slavery society that consumed Atchison in its early years. However, a string of other small events soon lead to the dying out of the pro-slave community.

As the year 1855 drew to a close, the following years seemed promising to this rapidly growing town. In 1857, a man named Col. Milton Benton came to Atchison and was elected the town's first marshal. [17] Laws and regulations appeared. With the end of J. Stringfellow's pro-slavery newspaper, a change began to fall upon Atchison. Finally, in 1858, Samuel Pomeroy came to Atchison, as mentioned earlier. Despite Atchison still being a fairly strong pro-slavery town, Pomeroy decided to run for the office of mayor. When the election came, there was a tie among the commissioners: three votes from the free stators and three votes from the pro-slavery party. They decided to settle the dispute with the flip of a coin. Pomeroy won the toss and was the first mayor of the city of Atchison., "Pomeroy’s success at improving the community was the best thing to happen to Atchison County. As investors made money on their claims, it mattered less and less the politics of free state vs. pro-slavery." [18]

The city of Atchison grew, nearly booming overnight, adding new buildings such as the Tremont House, shown in Attachment 2, built on the southeast corner of Second and Main Streets around the end of the 1850s. Across the street on the corner of Second and Main Streets, the Massasoit House was built in 1858, where it served famous guests like Horace Greeley and Abraham Lincoln.[19] Atchison became the place to go if someone were looking to start over or to start on the trail west. Atchison held many geographical and trading advantages and grew larger in each coming year, going through many difficult times and bumps in its journey to the city that still sits on the west bank of the Missouri River today.

Attachment 1: Atchison, Atchison County Kansas plat map: 1857. Source: Atchison County Historical Society.



Attachment 2: Tremont House, southeast corner of Second & Main St. Source: Atchison County Historical Society.



End Notes

[1] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County Kansas*. Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[2] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County Kansas* Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[3] Welch, Ron. "Atchison's Early History" communication to author, May 1, 2011.

[4] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County, Kansas* Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[5] *Wonders of Atchison County*, Atchison County Historical Society 2011.
<http://atchisonhistory.org/WondersAtchisonCounty.html>

[6] Taylor, Chris. Executive Director of Atchison County Historical Society. Communication to author, March 25, 2011.

[7] Morgan, Dr. M. J. Lecture Notes. Kansas State University, Manhattan Kansas, February, 2011.

[8] Marion, Father. St. Benedict's Abby, Informal interview, Atchison Kansas. March 25, 2011

[9] Ingalls, Sheffield *History of Atchison County Kansas*. Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[10] *Squatter's Sovereign* Newspaper. 1855. March 23, 1855. Atchison Library Archives. Atchison, Kansas. March 25, 2011

[11] Taylor, Chris, Executive Director of Atchison County Historical Society. Communication to author, March 25, 2011.

[12] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County, Kansas*. Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[13] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County, Kansas* Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[14] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County, Kansas* .Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[15] *Wonders of Atchison County* Atchison County Historical Society 2011.
<http://atchisonhistory.org/WondersAtchisonCounty.html>

[16] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County, Kansas*. Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

[17] "Did You Know How Atchison County's Eight Townships Got Their Names?" *Atchison County, Kansas: Where the West Began*, publication in Atchison County Historical Society.

[18] *Wonders of Atchison County*, Atchison County Historical Society, 2011.
<http://atchisonhistory.org/WondersAtchisonCounty.html>

[19] Ingalls, Sheffield. *History of Atchison County, Kansas*. Standard Publishing Company. Lawrence, Kansas 1916.

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