

From High Hopes to Slow Decline: Ottumwa

Coffey County, Kansas

1855-1906

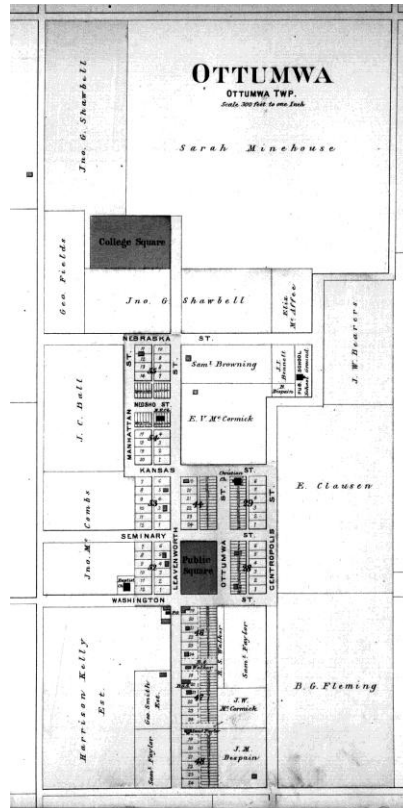


Figure 1: 1901 plat of the town of Ottumwa. SOURCE: www.kansasmemory.org

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The lost town of Ottumwa, Coffey County, Kansas was settled by migrants of the Northern Midland Migration movement who shared similar progressive values and beliefs. The town experienced a brief period of prosperity, in which the town was home to a small college. This study uses early maps of the county, newspapers, personal reminiscences, and visits to the townsite to provide a history of Ottumwa, Kansas.

Why did Ottumwa, Kansas die only a few decades after its founding, while Burlington, Kansas, less than ten miles away, continues to persist? Today, trees obscure the few houses left at the original townsite of Ottumwa, but within a decade after its founding it became a prosperous and promising community founded on a strong belief in education, equality, and religion. Less than a decade later, though, it would begin a decline that never ended. Ottumwa, located in Ottumwa Township, Coffey County, Kansas, was first settled in 1855 by an ambitious group of settlers on a rolling prairie of bluestem grasses and Oak-Hickory forests, approximately two miles northeast of where the Neosho River ran. On the north side of the townsite is a large hill that would become home to the lifeblood of the community. The core values and beliefs the settlers shared brought the town a brief period of boom and fortune, but this success did not last long.

Early Dreams

After uprooting his family from Indiana,¹ Dr. Hamilton Smith settled near what would become Ottumwa in April 1855.² Two years later migrants from the Northern United States of America began settling around Smith's home, eventually forming unorganized communities. These settlers mainly migrated from Northern Midland states, which include the states stretching from Delaware to Nebraska. Census data shows that most of Ottumwa's early residents' places of birth were in the North Midland states, particularly Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, and

¹ "1870 Federal Census, Ottumwa Township, Coffey County, Kansas," *Ancestry*, accessed December 12, 2012, http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=7163&iid=4264597_00141&fn=Rosetta&ln=Edwards&st=r&ssrc=&pid=18047291. This is based on Hamilton's wife and children being listed as being born in Indiana; it is possible Smith did not directly move from Indiana to Ottumwa.

² "An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Coffey County, Kansas," *Kansas Memory*, 9, accessed October 6, 2012, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/223986/page/2>.

Pennsylvania.³ This Northern Midland Migration pattern in Ottumwa is similar to the migration patterns of Kansas. In 1865, almost a third of Kansans were born in the Northern Midland States, substantially higher than any other culture area subgroup.⁴ As was common with the Midland Mainstream Migration, most of the settlers moved to the settlement as individuals or with their families, as opposed to organized parties.

One migrant that came to the budding community was Thomas Bowen. Bowen brought his family from Ottumwa, Iowa and built a cabin in the middle of the new settlement. At first the settlement was called Boonville, but when the town company was organized in 1857, Bowen insisted the town be named Ottumwa, in honor of his former residence.⁵ Since his cabin was built first, Bowen claimed, he deserved to name the new community.⁶ The other proprietors ceded to Bowen's request and Ottumwa, Kansas was born.

The early residents of the young town shared progressive values and principles that made Ottumwa a tight-knit community. In accordance with Zelinsky's Law of First Effective Settlement, the first settlers of Ottumwa stamped the community with its culture of having strong beliefs in the importance of education, Protestantism, anti-slavery, and equality for women and African-Americans. These values are common among most migrants from Northern

³ "1865 Kansas State Census, Ottumwa Township, Coffey County, Kansas," *Ancestry*, Accessed December 2, 2012, <http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/View.aspx?dbid=1088&path=1865.Coffey.Ottumwa.1>.

⁴ James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 10.

⁵ H.A. Fry, "Ottumwa was at First Called Boonville," in *Early Day History of Coffey County* (Burlington, Kansas: Coffey County Genealogical Society, 1985), 22-23.

⁶ "History of Coffey County", *Kansas Patriot* (Burlington, Kansas), July 4, 1868.

states.⁷ Education was truly treasured by the town's residents; when the community was first settled, there was not a school or teacher, so Hamilton Smith's wife, Rosette, taught her and her neighbor's children out of the Smith's home.⁸

The inhabitants of Ottumwa also strongly supported Kansas becoming a "free state", or a state that outlawed slavery. In May of 1856 Smith led a company, consisting mostly of Ottumwa residents, to help defend Lawrence, Kansas from an attack of pro-slavery vigilantes.⁹ Even though Lawrence was more than sixty miles northeast of Ottumwa, the women and children of the town, who were left alone, were terrified pro-slavery militias would ransack their community. To protect themselves while the men were absent, they all stayed with Rosette Smith and "pushed the furniture against the doors and windows and secured all the knives... that could be found and easy to reach."¹⁰ Though the women may have been overreacting, this story illustrates how strong the sense of community was in Ottumwa. Neighbors looked after each other and the residents' shared beliefs is what enabled them to become so gregarious and hospitable to each other.

Kansas experienced two different Frontier Mosaics, which are the interactions among multinational people, particularly North American Indians, who already inhabited the land. The settling and establishment of Ottumwa occurred during the First Frontier Mosaic, which was a mostly peaceful settlement that took place in Eastern part of the state. A peaceful settlement

⁷ Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains*, 41.

⁸ Nellie Louise Payne, "Grandmother's Life as a Pioneer," n.p., n.d., copy at Coffey County Historical Society.

⁹ "An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Coffey County, Kansas," 9.

¹⁰ Payne, "Grandmother's Life as a Pioneer."

did occur in Ottumwa and some of the town's citizens even became "well acquainted with the Sauk and Fox Indians whose reservation was a few miles to the North."¹¹ Some of the Sauk and Fox People provided patronage to Ottumwa's businesses and told Ottumwa settlers stories from their past.¹²

The founders and early settlers of the community were eager, driven, and optimistic. Hamilton Smith, Ottumwa's first settler, had grand visions for the young community. Energetic and ambitious, Smith became involved in every enterprise the town produced and always looked for a way to take control.¹³ He was determined to make Ottumwa the "largest city of Southern Kansas" with him as "its mayor and chief citizen."¹⁴ This ambition, though, was common among Ottumwa residents. Many saw this young community as an opportunity to build their own city on the hill, a municipality they could boast about and make people miles around envious of. Immersed in debt, Hamilton Smith took his own life in 1857, before his dream had an opportunity to become a reality. But the drive and visions of other Ottumwa citizens would make the community prosperous and booming, at least for a brief period of time.

¹¹ "The Story of the Big Flood, as told by H.H. Klock, Ottumwa, Kansas," *The Daily Republican* (Burlington, Kansas), June 2, 1976. Reservation confirmed by Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd Edition), (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 13. It should be noted the reservation was for the Sauk and Fox of *Mississippi*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "History of Coffey County."

¹⁴ Ibid.

The Good Years

To promote the value of education and Christianity, in 1860 the Methodist Church of Ottumwa decided to build an institution of higher learning in their own backyard. Plans were soon made to build the Methodist university on an unoccupied hill on the northern side of town, but in 1863 operations of the college were transferred to Ottumwa's Christian church.¹⁵ The college was then named the Western Christian University and a new two-story limestone building was erected that included a "belfry, finely located on high ground, and [could] be seen for many miles distant."¹⁶ The towns' citizens must have approved of the endeavor, as \$6,000 was raised by Ottumwa residents for the building's construction.¹⁷ The college, which was also used by the Ottumwa School district,¹⁸ earned a great reputation and amassed an enrollment of 130 students in its first year.¹⁹

Along with the college, the 1860's was a booming period for Ottumwa. A steam-powered saw mill, that cut 7,000-9,000 feet of lumber a day, brought pride to residents.²⁰

¹⁵ H.A. Fry, "The Old Ottumwa College," in *Early Day History of Coffey County* (Burlington, Kansas: Coffey County Genealogical Society, 1985), 63-64.

¹⁶ "Ottumwa," *Kansas Weekly Patriot* (Burlington, Kansas), August 15, 1868.

¹⁷ Carl Williamson, Untitled Personal Reminiscence of Ottumwa, October 1955, copy available at Riley County Genealogical Society.

¹⁸ Fry, "The Old Ottumwa College," 64.

¹⁹ "Coffey County," William G. Cutler's History of the State of Kansas, Accessed November 19, 2012, <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/coffey/coffey-co-p1.html#TOC>.

²⁰ "Ottumwa," *Kansas Weekly Patriot* (Burlington, Kansas), August 15, 1868.



Figure 2: The Shawbell family were early settlers to the town of Ottumwa. They traveled together from Pennsylvania to Kansas in 1855. Picture taken in 1890. Left to Right: Rear: Sarah Maria Shawbell-Minehouse, Lewis Evans Shawbell, Francis Marion Shawbell, Anna Weaver Shawbell-Browning. Left to Right Front: Maria Anna Evans-Shawbell, Clementine Sarah Shawbell-Delbridge, John G. Shawbell. SOURCE: <http://claudeshawbell.com/genealogy/ks/ottumwa2.html>

The J.G. Shawbell House was an inn known throughout the region for its hospitality. The community also became home to a grocery store, salon, drug store, another hotel, and a stage coach that ran from Ottumwa to Lawrence.²¹ All of these additions surely gave the visionary residents more hope that their dreams of a large, prosperous city would come true. The community had many of the same elements large towns or cities had, so citizens had little reason to believe their town would not thrive in the future. The college, with its commanding presence on the hill, was the pride and joy of Ottumwa; it exemplified many of Ottumwa's core

²¹ "Ottumwa," n.p., n.d., copy at Coffey County Historical Society.

values, education and religion, and made the community unique from the other communities in the region.

While the American Civil War stopped a lot of progress and advancement across the United States, Ottumwa was still able to experience growth while the war raged on. Ottumwa, though, was still affected by the war. In accordance with their core beliefs, residents were pro-Union and quite patriotic. When word reached Ottumwa in August 1861 that the Union Army need assistance to fight the Confederates invading Fort Scott, Kansas, the citizens responded immediately. The next morning 104 men left Ottumwa for the battle, more men than there were registered voters in Ottumwa Township.²² Citizens of Ottumwa provided free dinners to Coffey County soldiers and their wives who were returning from the war.²³ Despite the progress and success the town had experienced, the hospitality and sense of community still existed in the community. The values and beliefs that defined the town during its founding remained with the community years later, showing Zelinsky's Law did occur in Ottumwa.

Factors of Decline

The closing of the Western Christian University was a major factor in the decline of the town. The school's principal, J.M. Rankin, had provided excellent leadership for the college since he was hired to the position in 1864. Many give him credit for the school's excellent reputation, but when Rankin resigned his position in 1866, "the light went out of the University and the

²² "An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Coffey County, Kansas," 10.

²³ "Timeline," n.p., n.d., copy at Coffey County Historical Society.

board of trustees was unable to rekindle it.”²⁴ Though attempts were made to revive the college, insufficient funds forced the college to close in 1868.²⁵ The university was set to reopen in 1872, but a month before classes were set to begin, unknown arsonists burned the building to the ground.²⁶ Not only did the fire destroy any attempt at restoring the college, any hopes that Ottumwa would become a large and prosperous town or city were also lost in the fire. Though there were many reasons for the community’s collapse, the college represented the ideals and foundations of the town; without it, a defining feature of Ottumwa was lost. The loss of the schools caused the community to lose a large part of its identity, as well as its uniqueness.

The lack of a railroad in Ottumwa and the existence of Burlington, Kansas also were factors in Ottumwa’s demise. In 1858, while Ottumwa was first being settled, the Jefferson City and Neosho Valley Railroad Company were chartered to build a railroad that would travel through Ottumwa, with a depot also being built in the town.²⁷ These plans, though, were scrapped on the outbreak of the Civil War.²⁸ Not having a railroad was a main reason Ottumwa was not rewarded the county seat, with it instead being given to Burlington, less than ten miles away, to the southeast.²⁹ A railroad in Ottumwa would have very likely helped it persist longer; besides possibly becoming the county seat, a railroad would have allowed for farmers to bring

²⁴ H.H. Klock, “Sketch of Ottumwa,” in *Early Day History of Coffey County* (Burlington, Kansas: Coffey County Genealogical Society, 1985), 31.

²⁵ Williamson, Personal Reminiscence. Other sources simply state “financial embarrassments” as the reason for the school’s closing. See “Coffey County”.

²⁶ Fry, “Old Ottumwa College,” 64.

²⁷ “Coffey County.” See also “Timeline.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Ottumwa,” n.p, n.d., copy at Coffey County Historical Society.

crops and livestock into town to send on the trains. This of course would have brought in more business to the community. Many farmers from Ottumwa did in fact travel to Burlington to trade at their markets.³⁰ As a result, not only did businesses suffer, farmers had fewer ties and connections with the community. This also affected Ottumwa's decline; as fewer people felt connected to the town, fewer people exerted effort to make the town persist.

The population began to decline following the town's boom of the 1860's. Based on the 1870 Federal Census, Ottumwa Township had 833 citizens.³¹ Just eight years later, in an 1878 abstract census of Coffey County, the township dropped to a population of 651 citizens.³² This hefty population drop was caused by Ottumwa businesses closing or relocating, such as the sawmill moving to Greenwood County, Kansas. Some residents of Ottumwa moved to Burlington, perhaps for a job opportunity or the convenience of its location.³³ By the turn of the century, the roads around the community had long been deteriorating, and in July, 1906 the Ottumwa Post Office closed.³⁴ This effectively signaled the death of Ottumwa, Kansas.

³⁰ H.A. Fry, "Steam Mill Blow Up, Also Ottumwa History," in *Early Day History of Coffey County* (Burlington, Kansas: Coffey County Genealogical Society, 1985), 60-61.

³¹ "Coffey County."

³² *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Coffey County, Kansas*, 11.

³³ "Coffey County."

³⁴ "Timeline."



Figure 3: This is a photograph of the entrance to the Bowman section of the Bowman and Adgate Cemetery, 2007. Downloaded at findagrave.com. Many of Ottumwa's residents are buried there, including Hamilton Smith, the first settler.

Following the closing of the post office, a few houses and churches, along with a general store remained in Ottumwa. During the 1960's, the building of the John Redmond Reservoir forced the Ottumwa Christian Church to relocate to new Strawn, Kansas and the general store to close. Today some of the community's original streets remain and a small group of houses are still inhabited at the townsite. North of the townsite is the Bowman and Adgate Cemetery. Originally two separate cemeteries for the Bowman and Adgate families, many of Ottumwa's early settlers are buried here, including Hamilton Smith. It was Smith's ambitious desire to make Ottumwa a booming and thriving community, others who shared his dream helped turn Ottumwa into a prosperous town, for a short time anyways. Even though Ottumwa, Kansas did not persist and only thrived for a decade, Smith and the other early settlers had the tenacity and grit to migrate to an unfamiliar place and try to create their idea of a perfect home. Neither their bravery, nor the story of Ottumwa should be lost or forgotten. Instead, it should be remembered as another colorful story in the history of Kansas.

Attachments

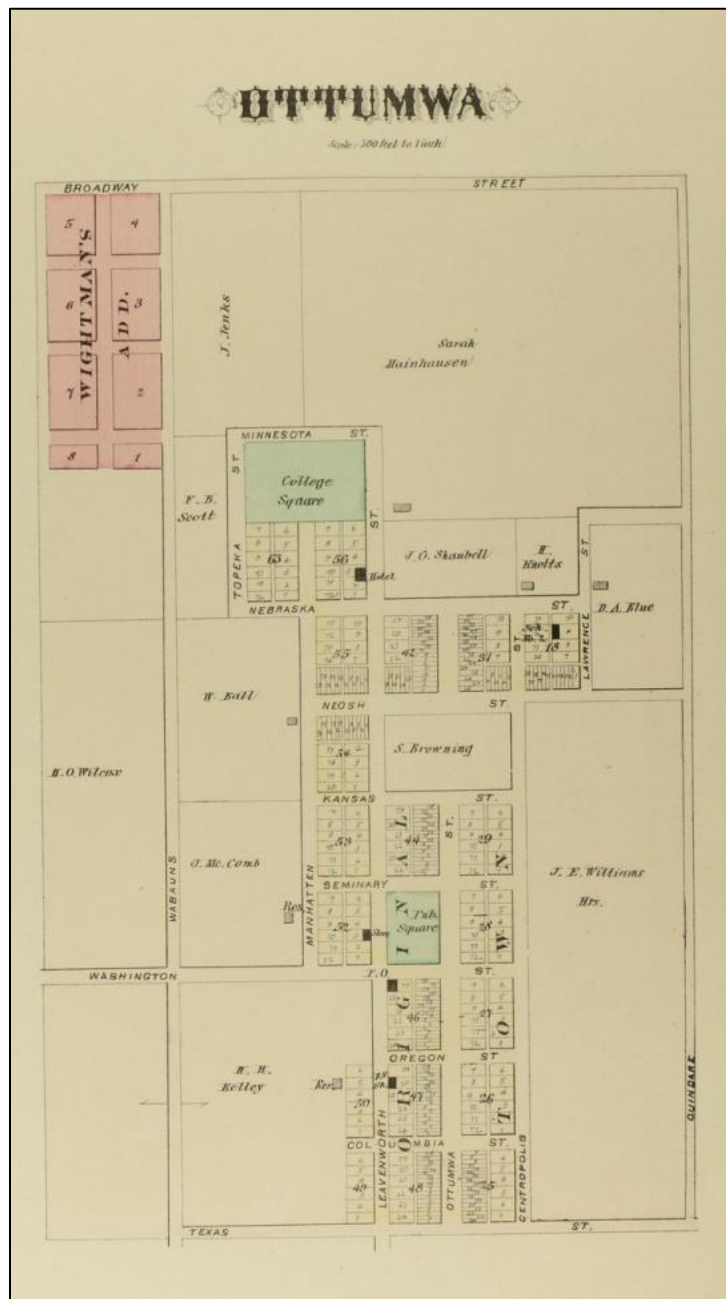


Figure 4: A Plat map of Ottumwa, Kansas, 1878. Notice that “College Square”, the previous home of the Western Christian University, is located on a hill on the north side of town, allowing for the building to be viewed from miles around. SOURCE: www.KansasMemory.org

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