

The “Un” town  
A Portrait of Early Town Founding  
Gatesville–Siding, Kansas



Angela Schnee  
Dr. Morgan  
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There is a common misconception about what made up a town on the early western frontier. Often one pictures a quaint little town with a wide main street lined with shops of all sorts, or the “wild west” towns like Abilene and Dodge City, filled with raucous cattle men. These types of towns were a common occurrence in early settlement patterns of the plains, but there were



many other types of towns as well. One such being the “un” town, or a town that appeared on maps and had all the makings of a successful town, yet no physical town was ever platted out and

established. An example of such a town can be found in Gatesville–Siding, Kansas.

The town of Gatesville was nestled on the eastern bank of the Republican River in southeast

Figure 1 This is the area where Gatesville was located. The homesteaders located their homes up on the hills, and the railroad followed the river below where the picture was taken. SOURCE: Photo taken by the author.

Clay County, Kansas. The geography of Clay County is unique when compared to other counties in Kansas. This is due to the fact that the Republican River flows from the northwest to the southeast corners of the county and springs and creeks are found in great abundance throughout the county. Water was an essential resource to early settlers, and it was thought at the time that the high-prairie was uninhabitable due to a lack of water. The land itself is has smooth undulating hills that gently slope into the rich fertile bottomland of the river. The river provided ground that was excellent for farming, and the creeks and streams provided the necessary water, that made settlement away from the river possible. The Gatesville area also had higher ground where houses and permanent structures could be built and protected from the river when it flooded. An area such as this is exactly what early settlers would have been looking for when choosing a site for their homesteads.

The area that was called Gatesville was originally known as Mt. Pleasant and is found on the 1859 Gunn's New Map of Kansas.

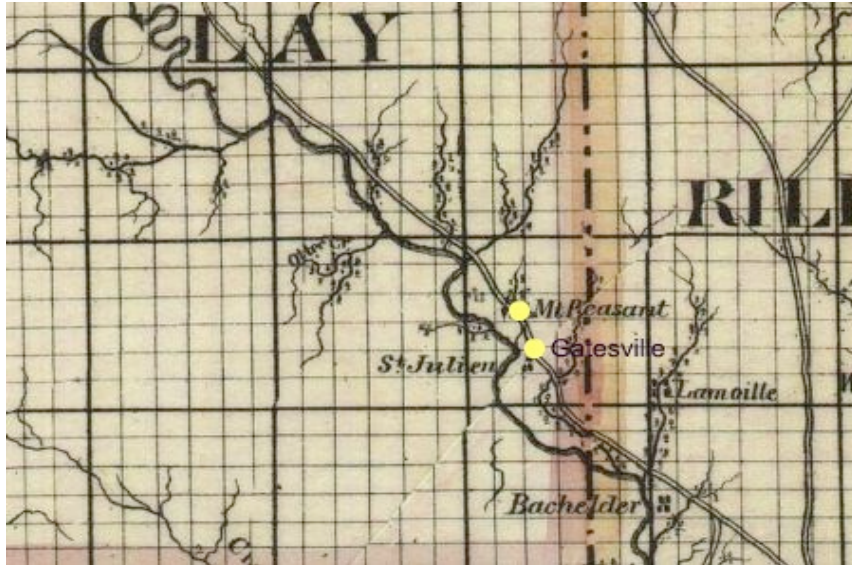


Figure 2 A portion of the 1859 Gunn's New Map of Kansas, shows the town of Mt. Pleasant. The map was manipulated to also show the location that would become Gatesville. Presumably Mt. Pleasant was absorbed by the town of Gatesville when Gatesville gained a post office. SOURCE: Wichita State University Libraries- Special Collections Digitized Kansas Maps. <http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/maps>



Mt. Pleasant was a couple of miles northwest of where Gatesville would eventually be located. According to a 1983 Clay Center Dispatch article, "Mt Pleasant was...in section 21 and it was a voting precinct with headquarters in the Isaiah Scott home. Also, Mt. Pleasant was the predecessor to Gatesville."<sup>1</sup> The 1859 Gunn's map is the only map reference to Mt. Pleasant and is replaced by Gatesville on Johnson's Missouri and Kansas map dated 1865.

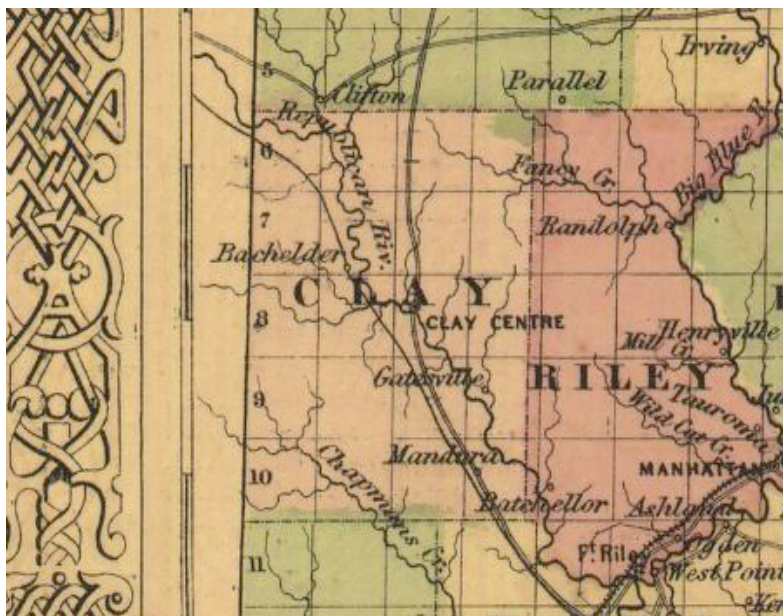


Figure 3 1865 version of Johnson's Missouri and Kansas Map. This map shows Gatesville as a town located in Clay County Kansas. It also shows that there were only three other towns of importance at that time. Gatesville was one of Clay County's earliest towns. SOURCE: Wichita State University Libraries- Special Collections Digitized Kansas Maps. <http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/maps>

With the appearance of a town marked as Gatesville on early maps one might picture a typical frontier town, with a general store, a blacksmith shop, a tavern, and perhaps a livery. This would not be the case for Gatesville. The

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<sup>1</sup> "The Village of St. Julien." Clay Center Dispatch (December 8, 1983)

town of Gatesville never developed any sort of business district. It essentially became a community which encompassed a wide undefined area of land. It wasn't defined by an exact physical location. People considered themselves from Gatesville if their children went to the Gatesville School. This was not uncommon in rural Kansas. Most areas that homesteaders identified as their "town" wasn't a conventional town but an area often centered on a school, church, or post office.

Gatesville was named for Lorenzo Gates, who settled on Mall Creek in the fall of 1857. Lorenzo was a key leader in the organization of Clay County. The Kansas: cyclopedia of state history, notes that Mr. Gates was appointed as one of the county commissioners, by the governor in 1866 and he was later elected to represent the county in the state legislature, making him Clay County's first representative.<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Gates also held a post office in his home which served the area residents and this is likely how the name Gatesville arose. The Kansas Post Office Database lists the post office at Gatesville as being in operation from 1862 to 1888.<sup>3</sup> However according to the diary of Fidella Dunham, a Gatesville resident and teacher at the Gatesville School, they were using the post office at Rosevale also known as Broughton in 1885.<sup>4</sup> In her diary

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<sup>2</sup> KANSAS: A Cyclopedia of State History. Frank M. Blackmar. Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> Baughman, Robert. "Post Offices." <http://www.kshs.org/p/post-offices/11307> (accessed 01/2011).

<sup>4</sup>Dunham, Mabel. Dunham Family History. 1986.

there is no explanation as to why they were using the neighboring post office. Perhaps the post office had stopped service but was not removed in government documents until later.

In 1873 The Union Pacific put a rail line through the county. Gatesville was one of the stops and this is where the Siding part of the name comes from. There was no depot here; instead there was what is called a railroad siding, which is a little chute off of the main track where cars could be loaded and unloaded. What makes this particularly interesting is that at Gatesville there were cattle pens adjoining the siding, which were used as holding pens for cattle being sent to market.<sup>5</sup> This detail is very telling. It shows that farmers in the area were highly engaged in livestock production, and not solely crop farming. Gatesville was essentially the shipping hub for livestock in the county. This detail deepens the mystery of why no “town” was ever built.

There is very little written record of the town of Gatesville, what is known is that there was a school, a post office, and a railroad, which are all the things that were essential for town survival. One can only speculate as to why Gatesville never got established as a town. One reason may be that Lorenzo Gates never intended to actually build a town and the name of Gatesville was only taken for the post office. Another factor that surely affected the building of the town was location. Gatesville was very close to Clay Center and Rosevale. In

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<sup>5</sup> Haney, Cathy, field notes of author. Spring 2011.

Fidella Dunham's diary she writes that they made trips to one of the towns nearly every other day. <sup>6</sup>So they were close enough that traveling to the other towns for supplies was not a burden. Another factor that may have had an influence is that area residents were highly dependent on their land and no one was willing to give up a portion of their farm to dedicate as a town site.

Whatever the reason no physical town ever existed, yet people from the area still claimed to live at Gatesville. One might ask the question: If no physical town ever existed why is it considered a town at all? The answer is the people. To the people of Gatesville it was their home, and they were proud of where they lived. Although not a traditional town it was an area where people bonded together to form a community. This was a common occurrence in rural Kansas and is still found to some extent today.

At the center of this community was the school which is pictured below.



**Figure 4 Gatesville school 1945-46. This building was built in 1884, and was an unusual school building for the area as it was made of stone. This demonstrates the importance of the school to the community. SOURCE: Clay County Historical Museum.**

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<sup>6</sup> Dunham et.al



The school was the institution that brought the people together. Fidella Dunham writes in her diary about the events and happenings at the school, and it shows that the school provided a place for the people of the community to meet and socialize. It was not just used for school events, but also as a community building.<sup>7</sup> The school was the heart of the town. According to the Clay County, Kansas Heritage Book, "Gatesville School District #10 was organized in 1870...The school house was a frame building standing near a cemetery (Gatesville Cemetery) and Fort Riley–Fort Kearney Trail which angled across the county to Clifton. In 1884 the district was divided...Gatesville built a new stone building a mile northwest of the original frame building."<sup>8</sup> Classes were held at the Gatesville School until 1958 when it was closed due to school consolidation. The building stood vacant until a few years ago when it was torn down, and the location is now occupied by a hog farm.

Although the only physical reminder that remains of the town of Gatesville is the cemetery, people still refer to the area as Gatesville. Part of the town is now located under Milford Reservoir, and the adjoining wetlands have been designated as a recreation area for hunting and fishing. The people that live in the area still say that they live out by Gatesville, and anyone from the area knows exactly where that is. This is the reason that Gatesville should be

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<sup>7</sup> Dunham et. al

<sup>8</sup> Clay County Historical Museum, Clay County, Kansas Heritage Book. Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1990.

called a “un” town. The town didn’t follow any conventional rules about town founding or building. It was “un” like the normal town in that technically it never existed; yet to the people of Clay County it was a viable and thriving community.

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