

The Rise and Fall of the Township along the Republican: Mulberry Township, Clay County, Kansas



Figure 1: Aerial shot of Mulberry township, circa early 1900s. Source: Clay County Historical Society

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If you were to ask a Kansas native to locate the township of Mulberry in Clay County on a map, chances are it would be a difficult task for most. Even the task of searching online for information in regards to this lost place would prove to be quite difficult. However, one should not be discouraged by the lack of information on the web; although Mulberry may be a smaller, quieter township of Kansas, it was once filled with such rich history and optimistic people. What is now considered to be a modest township was once the place where many men and women found success both commercially and socially. A series of unfortunate natural disasters eventually led to the decline of the township called Mulberry.

Mulberry is today a 37.5 square mile township located in the northwestern portion of Clay County.¹ Mulberry Township was settled shortly after Kansas's statehood by J.G. Haynes and his family on October 19, 1863.² Mulberry was actually named after a creek that ran near the place of settlement. The development of Mulberry was slow paced, with the second family settling a few years later in 1866, headed by a man named Norman Brooks.³ It was not until 1870 that the first schoolhouse was constructed for the children who lived throughout the northwest Republican River Valley.⁴

The first store was opened in Mulberry in 1871. The store began by carrying a pretty general stock of merchandise, but it eventually turned into one of the largest trading enterprises in the Republican River Valley.⁵ The owner of the store was a man named William Funnel Sr., and he brought his large family to Mulberry. William Funnel Sr. was a highly esteemed person in Mulberry who was "known for his integrity, and estimable lady and the concourse of his sons and daughters."⁶ He was described as the pioneer who greatly assisted in building Mulberry township up to a permanent standard, both

commercially and socially. At one point during his life in Mulberry, he served as the postmaster for the Clay County post office.⁷

The children of William Funnel Sr. were also prominent figures in Mulberry township who can be credited to the economic development of the town. C.C. Funnel was one of those children who played a major role in the lumber industry. C.C. Funnel became one of the largest lumber dealers in Mulberry who distributed lumber throughout the region. It was noted that C.C. Funnel was also involved in real estate and actually owned one of the nicest residences in Mulberry.⁸ Another noteworthy member of the Funnel family is William Funnel Jr. who started his own company, Funnel and Son; he continued the mercantile trade. Geo Funnel Jr. was another son of William Funnel, a big-time stock dealer in town who conducted most of the market.⁹

With such industry and growth taking place in and around the township, it is hard to believe that such a place would suffer a decline. There are multiple reasons that play a part in the decline, most of which were beyond the control of the citizens of Mulberry township. Like many other towns across the United States, The Great Depression was a major factor in the decline of Mulberry township.¹⁰ During the Great Depression, consumers were buying a lot less, leaving industry in Mulberry in a lull. Drought hit Clay County as well during the 1930s. Another factor that played a part in the decline of the township was the mechanization that was taking place on many of the farms throughout the Midwest.¹¹

Two world wars and a depression took a toll on Mulberry, but it was natural disasters that ultimately sealed its fate. Two outstanding tornadoes widely separated in time passed through Mulberry township and left devastation. One of the tornadoes was early, on April 30, 1896, in

which six people were killed and several others injured.¹² The local newspaper described how every headstone at the Mulberry Cemetery but one was overturned, and how the trees were uprooted from the ground. A later tornado did much damage as well.

Though the tornadoes may have destroyed many homes in the town, it was the flooding of the Republican River that kept many families away from Mulberry forever. There were five major floods of the Republican River that can be held responsible for the large numbers of farmers who chose to move away permanently. One of the most noteworthy floods took place in 1935, which left Mulberry and the surrounding areas completely devastated. The flood resulted in the river's waters standing 20 feet above normal; the water overflowed to a width of three miles, leaving farmers out of work for quite some time.¹³

Although today it would be hard for many Kansans to locate Mulberry township on a map, this does not take away from the many efforts of settlers to try and make Mulberry a prosperous place. It was once a community where there were many thriving stores, hotels, and other businesses. It was a

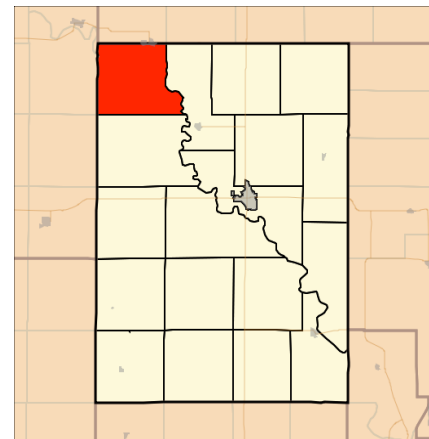


Figure 2: Mulberry Township, Clay County, Kansas (in red)

place where settlers could come with new ideas and business and see those ideas thrive. Though there were economic successes taking place in Mulberry, those successes are shadowed by the tremendous destruction caused by tornadoes, floods, and the 1930s drought. The decrease in population in Mulberry and its eventual decline were primarily due to natural disasters, not lack of effort by the settlers.

Endnotes

1 “A Continued Story of Clay County Townships, Mulberry,” *The Clay Center Times*, 10 June 1899.

2 “Clay Center and Clay County.” *The Clay Center Times*, 5 January 1882.

3 Ibid

4 Ibid

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Clay County Historical Society, “Mulberry,” in Clay County Kansas Heritage, (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1990), 81.

11 Ibid

12 Ibid

13 “Flood of the Republican River.” *The Economist*, 5 June 1935.

Sources

The Clay Center Times, Clay Center, Kansas.

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The Economist, Clay Center, Kansas.