

The Near Miss: Twin Mound, Douglas County, Kansas 1857-1903

McKenzie Combes
Chapman Center for Rural Studies
History 589
Fall 2016



This is a brief history of Twin Mound in Douglas County, Kansas. It focuses on the life and near misses of the community from 1857 to the post office closing in 1903. This history utilizes newspaper articles, plat maps, and site research and photographs.

Imagine travelling for weeks by wagon with nothing but essential items and family and for most of the journey, seeing nothing but the desolate open plains of Kansas for miles. The sun is blazing in the hot summer months and the heat is unbearable. Eventually, the landscape changes to small gently rolling hills and in the distance you can see two large identical mounds, each easily a quarter mile long. This fertile land nestled between two creeks is the perfect place to stop and rest. This land is known to history as Twin Mound, Kansas. Twin Mound was a small community located in Douglas County in northeastern Kansas. The town site was triangulated between present-day Topeka, Lawrence, and Emporia, Kansas. This community was subject to several near misses for permanence, everything from the railroad to a university. Twin Mound had great potential but was blindsided by missed opportunities that ultimately led to the demise of such a promising town.

Founding and Early Years

Within the gently rolling hills and flat fertile land that made up the Kansas Territory before 1861 were two mounds, of identical shape and size that characterized the area; one is pictured below in Figure 1. This is what Henry Hiatt saw as he was travelling through Kansas with his wife and children. This is where he decided to settle: Twin Mound.



Figure 1. View of the one of the “twin mounds’ facing northwest. The second mound is a quarter mile to the south. Photograph by McKenzie Combes, November, 2016.

Hiatt was a Quaker from Ohio and a staunch abolitionist. He arrived in the area that would become Twin Mound in 1857 with his wife and children.¹ At this time, Kansas Territory was ripe with turmoil and conflict due to Bleeding Kansas. Hiatt’s Quaker beliefs played an important role in the shaping and development of the community. His values were reflected in the town through education and acceptance. Twin Mound soon became a stop on a stage line to nearby Emporia, Kansas. Travelers would often pause at the Hiatt House for a rest and a meal.² Soon, the community began to grow and take the shape of an actual

¹ “Henry Hiatt,” Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum.

² Ibid.

town. The post office was opened in 1858, just a year after initial settlement and was operated out of Henry Hiatt's house.³ Hiatt would eventually open a general store, and Twin Mound became a popular stop for all kinds of travelers.

Being a Quaker, Henry Hiatt truly believed in education. As early as 1858, Hiatt had the plans to build a college in Twin Mound. In 1858 the articles and doctrine of the college were laid out. The college was to be named Twin Mound Harmonic College and be open to all people.⁴ During this time in American history where slavery was an issue, where Native Americans were being purged, and where women were often in shadow behind men, the doctrine for this college stated:

An education which shall be open to all, and which shall bless all, regardless of Nature, or distinctions and prejudices of men; which shall be as free to the copper hue of the West, or the dark skin of the South, as the paler face of the East or North; and which, in particular, shall place every Woman by the side of her equal brother, Man, and thus help atone for the long wrong done to her.⁵

Twin Mound Harmonic College was years ahead of its time as demonstrated through the doctrine. All people could attend -- it did not matter what color or gender these people were. If they were ready to learn, they were accepted. But the college was never built. Perhaps the revolutionary thinking was what caused the college to fail. Nonetheless, there was stiff competition from the surrounding towns: Topeka with Washburn University, Lawrence with University of Kansas, and Emporia with Emporia State University. The undeveloped college became the

³ Robert W. Baughman, *Kansas Post Offices, May 29, 1828-August 3, 1961*, Kansas Postal History Society.

⁴ "Appeal of the Twin Mound Harmonic College Association," *The Kansas Herald of Freedom*, August 14, 1858.

⁵ Ibid.

first in several near misses for Twin Mound. Although Twin Mound Harmonic College never came to be, the town still built a stone schoolhouse in 1865 that is still standing today, as seen in Figure 2 below.⁶ This school became the main source of education for Twin Mound and has survived to this day. It was actually still in use in the 1950s!



**Figure 2. Twin Mound School as it stands today. Facing southwest.
Photograph by McKenzie Combes, November, 2016.**

Triumph and Tragedy

By the 1870s, Twin Mound was off to a lightning quick start but it had not yet reached its peak. In 1872, a wind-powered gristmill was built and the post office was

⁶ "Henry Hiatt," Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum.

relocated near the mill.⁷ This area with the mill, post office, and a general store would become the center of the small community. This mill was the heart of the town, generating jobs, revenue, and economy to the town. This small community was doing well enough in the 1870s to attract the attention of a cheese factory. In 1873, meetings were held in Twin Mound to decide if the factory would be established in the town.⁸ Sadly, the cheese factory was never built, the reasons unknown. Even though the community just missed having the factory, by the 1880s Twin Mound boasted a druggist, blacksmith, and hotel in the main hub surrounding the mill.⁹ Everything seemed to have worked out for the community until a catastrophe occurred in 1880. A fire broke out, burning the mill and general store to the ground. Nothing was left of the structures, and the town decided not to rebuild.¹⁰ Years of town building and economy were wiped out in a single night. The loss of business and industry was something that Twin Mound could never fully recover from. Once again, another near miss for Twin Mound.

Just five years after the fire, Twin Mound had reason to celebrate again. Their baseball team was considered the best in Douglas County. *The Lawrence Gazette* reported on the team and their several victories in 1885. The article even stated, “The Twin Mound ball club now claim the championship of Douglas County for this season.”¹¹ The team had several notable victories over teams from Lawrence and Topeka. Also during this time, money was being invested in the school. A new Webster’s Dictionary and several new

⁷ “Notes by the Way,” *Lawrence Daily Journal*, February 13, 1872.

⁸ “State News,” *The Girard Press*, August 7, 1873.

⁹ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1880.

¹⁰ *Topeka State Journal*, January 5, 1881.

¹¹ “Neighborhood News,” *The Lawrence Gazette*, November 5, 1885.

desks of the “automatic pattern” were purchased.¹² This proves what kind of people were living here. These residents cared about education and the youth of their town. Even though times were difficult, they invested money into making their children’s lives better. And although the town was struggling to find its feet again, the townspeople still took the time to enjoy the little things, such as amateur sports.

Twin Mound was the site of a possible railroad depot in the late 1870s. A railroad through town would have brought big business to Twin Mound and would have substantially helped the economy. Unfortunately, the railroad became another near miss for the town. The St. Louis, Lawrence & Western Railroad established a depot in Richland, Kansas, just five miles northeast.¹³ Five miles may not seem like a great distance, but it was easily a day’s ride by wagon. This small distance would mean disaster for little Twin Mound as travelers and businesses were now passing it right by.

Fading to the Background

Despite Twin Mound’s early successes, by the early 1900s the community had all but disappeared. This decline of town life truly started when the mill and store burned down. These businesses were the lifeblood of Twin Mound and when they were gone, the community lost an aspect of itself. Then, within a decade of the town burning, there was an outbreak of cholera in local farmers’ hogs.¹⁴ The outbreak of hog cholera destroyed what little commerce Twin Mound had left after losing the mill. With little commercial success, Twin Mound essentially became a farming community with hardly anything to

¹² “Twin Mound Items,” *Lawrence Daily Journal*, February 10, 1882.

¹³ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory 1878*.

¹⁴ “Important to Farmers,” *Lawrence Daily Journal*, December 25, 1881.

offer to the outside world. With a weakening economy, it was easy for larger, stronger cities such as Topeka and Lawrence to overrun Twin Mound further, pushing it into the background. The ever-shrinking community experienced another tragedy when Henry Hiatt died in 1900.¹⁵ Hiatt was Twin Mound's biggest supporter and leader, always dreaming of more for his beloved town. So when he died, the heart of the Twin Mound community died too. As a result, just three years later in 1903, the post office was finally closed.¹⁶ This event marked the death of Twin Mound as an actual town; however, people continued to live in the area for years to come.

Twin Mound could not overcome the missed opportunities of its past and the town eventually disappeared, just like those opportunities. School consolidation in the 1950s was the event that finally shut down Twin Mound for good; the school was closed in favor of the larger Wakarusa School nearby. People continued to live on the town site, but most were absorbed into the surrounding cities. The land is now all private property and is currently owned and lived on by the descendants of Henry Hiatt. Perhaps if the near misses of Twin Mound became successes, the town would have persisted. Despite a rich and full history, but one marred by missed opportunities and tragedy, Twin Mound became yet another near miss in the history of lost Kansas communities.

¹⁵ "Henry Hiatt," Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum.

¹⁶ Robert W. Baughman, *Kansas Post Offices, May 29, 1828-August 3, 1961*, Kansas Postal History Society.

Bibliography

- “Appeal of the Twin Mound Harmonic College Association.” *The Kansas Herald of Freedom*. (Lawrence, KS). August 14, 1858.
- Armstrong, Albert W. *Plat Book and Complete Survey of Douglas County, Kansas*, 1909.
- Baughman, Robert W. *Kansas Post Offices, May 29, 1828 – August 3, 1961*. Kansas Postal History Society.
- “Henry Hiatt.” Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum. Accessed November 2016.
<http://www.wakarusamuseum.org/images/PDFs/Henry%20Hiatt.pdf>
- “Important to Farmers.” *Lawrence Daily Journal*. (Lawrence, KS), December 25, 1881.
- “Neighborhood News.” *The Lawrence Gazette*. (Lawrence, KS), November 5, 1885.
- “Notes by the Way.” *Lawrence Daily Journal*. (Lawrence, KS), February 13, 1872.
- Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1878*.
- Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory 1880*.
- “State News.” *The Girard Press*. (Girard, KS), August 7, 1873.
- Topeka State Journal*. January 5, 1881.
- “Twin Mound Items.” *Lawrence Daily Journal*. (Lawrence, KS), February 10, 1882.