

The Gift and Curse of the Missouri: Doniphan & the  
Grand Village des Canzes. Doniphan County, Kansas

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History 533

Spring 2012

This is a study concerning the disappearance of the Kansas Indian village of the “Grand Village des Canzes” and the destruction of the town of Doniphan. It is theorized that these two civilizations were created at the same site due to the location by the Missouri river. It is also hypothesized that the Missouri River caused the destruction at both of these establishments.

Underneath the ghost town site of Doniphan in Doniphan County, Kansas there is evidence of an abandoned, much less talked about site. From the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, this area belonged to the Kansa Indian tribe, also known as the “People of the Wind” and was called the “Grand Village des Canzes.” The essay will explore the historical significance of this particular Kansa Indian village as well as identify a key similarity between the Grand Village des Canzes and the ghost town of Doniphan, specifically pertaining to the settlement and abandonment of this area.

The town of Doniphan began as a simple trading post established in 1852 by a Kickapoo Indian agent named Joseph Utt. Not long after the trading post was created, a general store was built and by 1854 the Doniphan Town Company was organized. Doniphan was named after a Mexican War hero, Alexander W. Doniphan.<sup>1</sup> In 1857, The establishment of a United States land office brought an influx settlers seeking land in Doniphan. It is said that a single lot of land sold for as much as \$2,000.<sup>2</sup> The area in which Doniphan was established lies just west of the Missouri River and because of this, the town began to flourish as an important shipping point for grain, produce, and other commodities. Doniphan became a primary stopping point along the Missouri River for steamboats. With Doniphan becoming a prominent steamboat town, a hotel was built, several newspapers were established, and people began moving to Doniphan. The town’s reputation became one that only helped reinforce the idea that Doniphan was a thriving and prosperous town. “We say to the immigrant, Go to Doniphan. It is destined to be the great emporium of the Upper Missouri. The population is more than 2,000.”<sup>3</sup> The town was becoming

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, Daniel foreword by Snell, Joseph W. *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler’s Guide*. University Press of Kansas, 1988. Pg. 17

<sup>2</sup> Wedel, Waldo R. *An Introduction to Kansas Archeology*. United States Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. 1959. Pg. 98

<sup>3</sup> *Ghost Towns of Kansas* Pg. 18-19

so popular that in 1859, Abraham Lincoln decided to deliver a campaign speech there.<sup>4</sup> Around this time, the railroad industry began to take off, forcing the town of Doniphan to adapt and shift its major economic attraction to the use of railroads. Doniphan had begun to decline for roughly 10 years, until their first railroad was built in 1870. This was the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad. With the development of the town's first railroad, the future looked bright for the town which had initially prospered from the development of the steamboat trade.<sup>5</sup>

The Kansa Indians migrated from St. Louis, Missouri until settling just west of the Missouri River, as seen below in Figure 1.

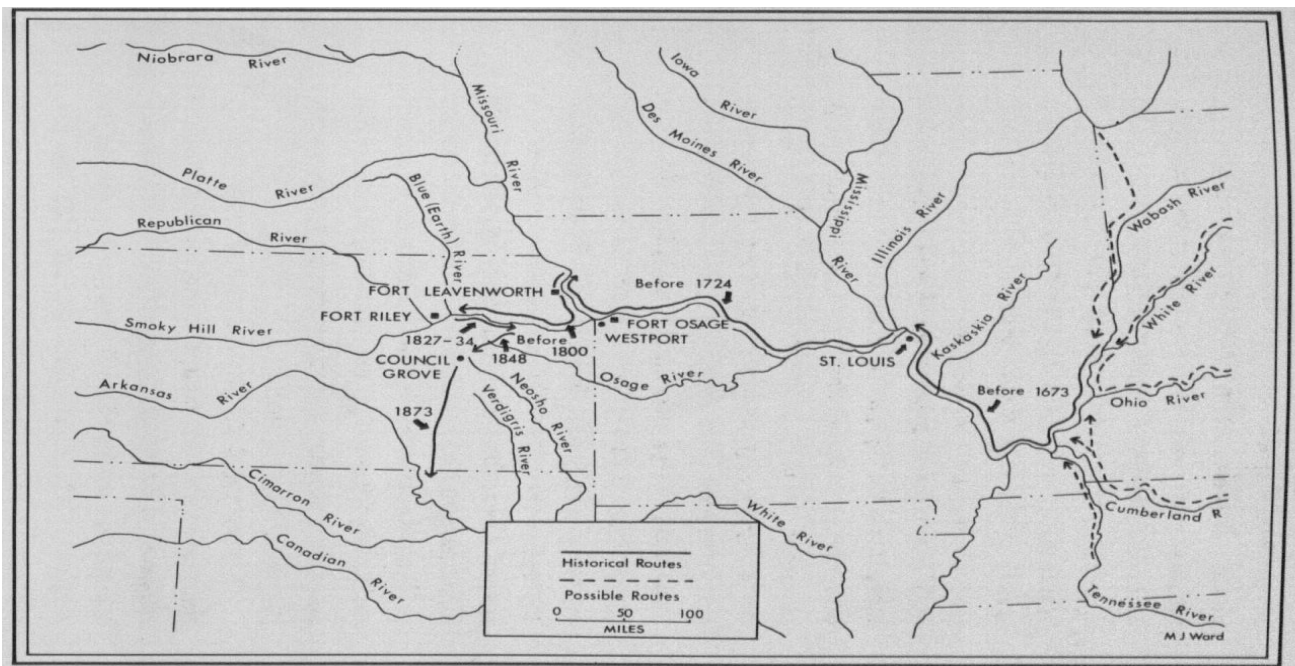


Figure 1. Map of Kansa Indian migration routes. SOURCE: Unrau, William E. *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673-1873*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.

This new location was believed to have been settled in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and was known as the Grand Village des Canzes.<sup>6</sup> It is believed the Kansa Indians settled here because of its

<sup>4</sup> *An Introduction to Kansas Archeology* Pg. 98

<sup>5</sup> *Ghost Towns of Kansas*. Pg.20

<sup>6</sup> Unrau, William E. *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1971. Pg. 5-6

convenient location near the Missouri River, and directly below what is known today as Independence Creek. With access to fresh water so readily available, it made life easily sustainable. Irrigation for crops, freshwater for drinking, and fertile land surrounding the Missouri River created an area of great resource for the Kansa Indians.<sup>7</sup> The village was discovered in July of 1724 by a French explorer and military leader, Etienne de Bourgmont. This village can be seen below in figure 2, at a location which overlaps the town site of the Doniphan ghost town.

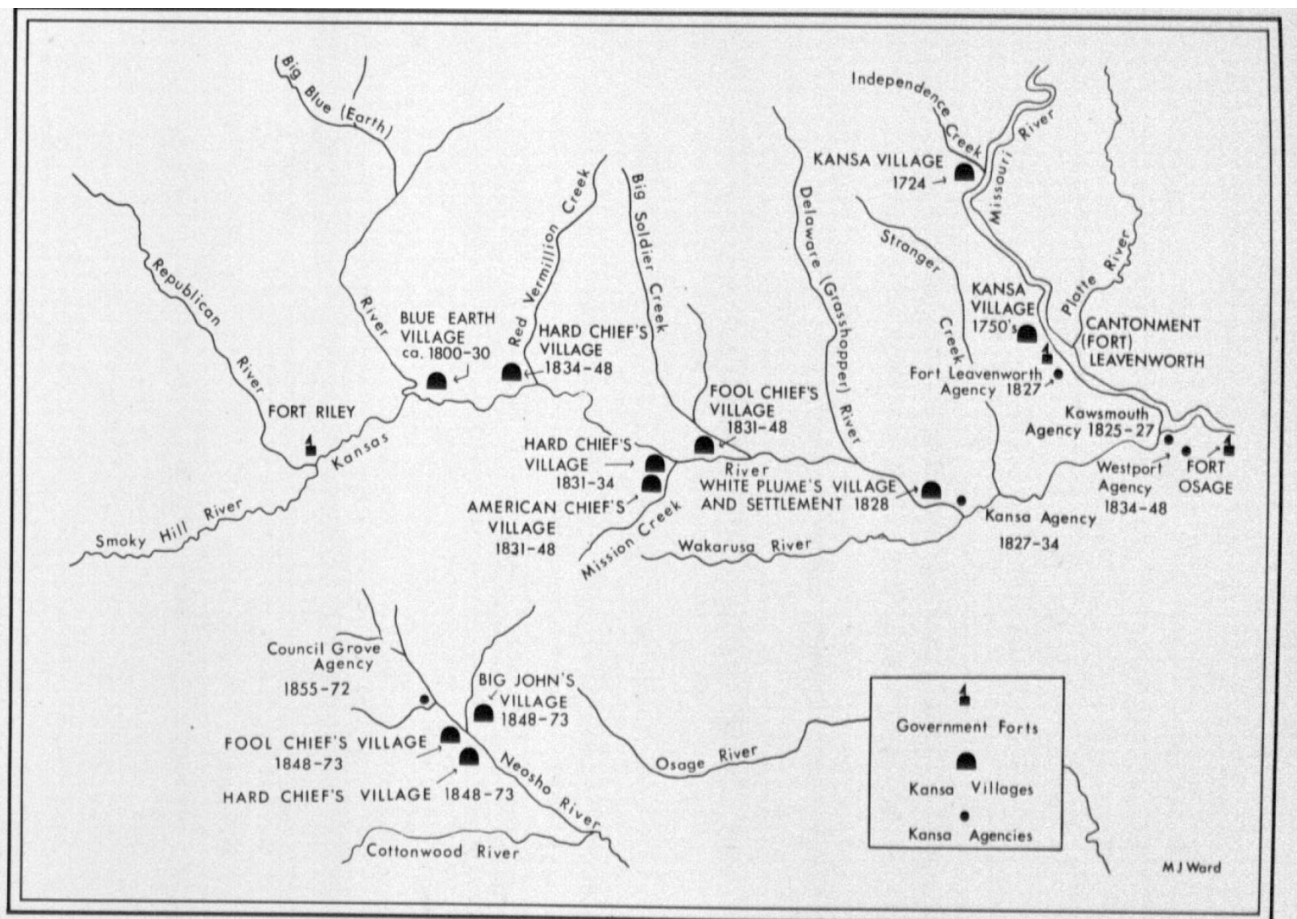


Figure 2. The map above shows the several settlements of the Kansa Indians. The plot labeled “Kansa Village 1724” correlates with the Doniphan town site. SOURCE: Unrau, William E. *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673-1873*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Taken From Interview with Field Archeologists, Dr. Donna Roper. May 10, 2012.

Prior to this, Bourgmont was given the name “Commandant of the Missouri River” and had come into contact with various Indian tribes on his journey west. There is great significance in Bourgmont’s encounter with the Kansa Indians at Grand Village des Canzes because it was the first contact the Kansa Indians had with any European explorers. In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish explorers traveling from the Southwest chose to turn back due to the harsh environment and terrain in this region. This prevented any contact between the Kansa Indians, also known as the Kaw Indians, and any Europeans up until the time Bourgmont arrived.<sup>8</sup> Bourgmont left a detailed account of his journey, including a description of the Kansa Indians in his personal journal. ““One dog drags skins to make a shelter big enough to sleep 10 or 12 persons’ along with their utensils, the whole load weighing about 300 pounds, and the women ‘carry as much as a dog drags. Girls of ten or twelve years carry at least 100 pounds, but it is true they can carry a load for only two or three leagues.’”<sup>9</sup> You can see a portrait of how a typical Kansa Indian would have looked in Figure 3 below.

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<sup>8</sup> Unrau, William E. *The Kaw People*. Indian Tribal Series: Phoenix. 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Norall, Frank. *Bourgmont, Explorer of the Missouri, 1698-1725*. University of Nebraska Press Lincoln and London. 1988. Pg. 51-58



Figure 3. A painting of a famous Kansa Indian warrior known as “The Wolf.” 1831-1832. SOURCE: *National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institute*. Taken from Unrau, William E. “*The Kaw People*” 1975.

The Kansa Indians were very kind to Bourgmont and his band of traveling warriors. They offered him food and supplies, along with horses and even more warriors. In one instance, they even offered the chief’s daughter to be Bourgmont’s wife, but she was much too young at the time. It had been agreed upon that in 10 years, if Bourgmont’s son agreed, the chief’s daughter would marry the son of Bourgmont<sup>10</sup>. This village continued to thrive until 1775 when the Kansa Indians relocated.

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<sup>10</sup> *Explorer of the Missouri*. Pg. 51-58

It is not known why the Kansa Indians continually relocated but from examining the history of the town of Doniphan and its abandonment, a conclusion can be drawn as to why both settlements did not last in this specific location. The ability of the town of Doniphan to grow and become economically stable completely depended on its location in relation to the Missouri River. It is believed that the Kansa Indians of the Grand Village des Canzes settled in this region because water was always readily available with the Missouri River sitting so closely to the east of their village. Why then, did both of these establishments disappear if they had obtained such a prime location to the Missouri River? It seems as though the Missouri river had been a double edged sword at this location. It provided fresh water for drinking and irrigation, as well as easy travel for trading and migration. The problems lay in the nature of the Missouri River itself. Like all rivers, the Missouri River would flood often. Most of the time the floods would be minor and had little to no effect on the old Doniphan and Kansa Indian site, but in 1881 the flood of the Missouri River was so severe that it had washed away the road bed in the town of Doniphan. The flood left Doniphan without a railroad system and in effect, diminished the entire economy of the town. The Missouri River had created and destroyed the Town of Doniphan. There could have been multiple reasons as to why the Kansa Indians left the Grand Village des Canzes. The Kansa could have hunted out most of their game or their relations with nearby tribes could have forced them to move west.<sup>11</sup> Although it cannot be confirmed, there is a high probability that the Kansa Indians left due to flooding on the Missouri River. Flooding in the exact same area that would cause not only the destruction of the Kansa Indian village but also the destruction of the town of Doniphan over 100 years later.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Dr. Donna Roper.

## Work Cited

- 1.) Fitzgerald, Daniel foreword by Snell, Joseph W. *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide*. University Press of Kansas, 1988.
- 2.) Norall, Frank. *Bourgmont, Explorer of the Missouri, 1698-1725*. University of Nebraska Press Lincoln and London. 1988
- 3.) Roper, Donna. personal interview. May 10, 2012.
- 4.) Unrau, William E. *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.
- 5.) Unrau, William E. *The Kaw People*. Indian Tribal Series: Pheonix. 1975.
- 6.) Wedel, Waldo R. *An Introduction to Kansas Archeology*. United States Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. 1959.