

A Small Community Stays Afloat: Ozawkie, Jefferson County, Kansas



Figure 1: Painting by Samuel Reader depicting Free Staters (including men from Ozawkie) gathering to battle pro-slavery forces at Hickory Point. Source: www.kansasmemory.org

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Ozawkie, Kansas, is a quaint little town located in west-central Jefferson County. It was formerly known as Osawkee when it was first established, then changed to Osawkie in 1883; in 1900 its name permanently became Ozawkie. The Ozawkie town website states the following about the origin of the name:

Originally named "Osawkee" it is believed that this Indian Village was named in honor of the Chief of the Sak (Sauk) tribe. Perhaps, you have been told that the name means, "People of the Yellow Earth", where "Wa-sae", meaning yellow, plus 'ah-kee meaning earth". However, contradicting statements argue that the name actually means, "People of the Outlet", in reference of the Sauk Tribe's Saginaw Bay, Michigan origin.¹

Both the land and its inhabitants have seen a large number of changes in the area since the creation of this community. Ozawkie was once located one mile east of its present day location prior to the development of the Perry Dam Project.

The location of the original town was right next to the Delaware River, which at the time was called the Grasshopper River. Because of the terrible grasshopper plague of 1874, residents changed the name of the river.²

¹ See <http://www.ozawkie.org/HistoryOfOzawkie.html>.

² Ibid.

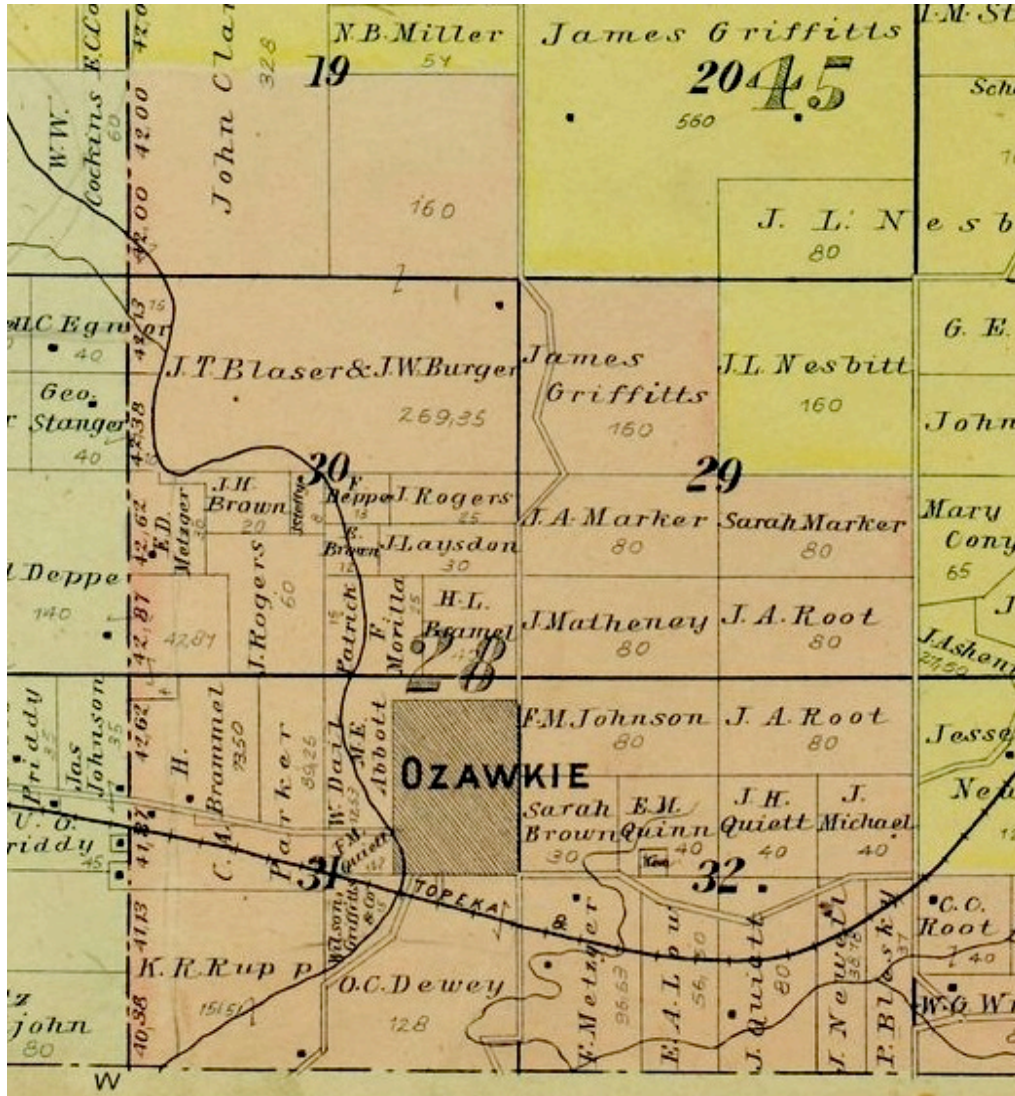


Figure 2: Portion of 1899 Atlas of Jefferson County, Osawkie Township plat map showing location of original town on the Delaware River. Source: www.kansasmemory.org

This area was previously inhabited by the Delaware Indians 22 years before the founding of Osawkee. By the year 1825, white men had moved into the area and a treaty was formed to furnish Indians with cattle, farming tools, and other things to aid them with agricultural life.

Daniel Boone was appointed to be the “Farmer for the Kansas Indians.” However, after several

years of grief with the government and disappointing farming results, the Delaware Indians relocated further west of the area that would soon become Osawkee.³

Following the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 there was a rush of new settlement in Kansas. One of the main roads through Jefferson County ran through Osawkee, the Fort Leavenworth-Fort Riley Military Road. Perceiving the opportunities of serving traveler needs as well as attracting trade with Indians, two brothers named George and William Dyer decided to build a trading post right along this road. This business resulted in the first building in Osawkee, and the Dyers were the first settlers of this small town. Osawkee was the first county seat of Jefferson County and housed the first election on November 29, 1854. This was the election of 1854 which led to the founding of a new town called Pleasant Hill by the Free Staters.⁴ Their small community was located across from Ozawkie. One hundred years later, old Pleasant Hill would become the new permanent home of Ozawkie. But at this time the community of Osawkee was primarily a pro-slave town. By 1855 Ozawkie built its first post office run by George Dyer.

³ Erma L. Steffey. *Ozawkie on the Delaware* 1854-1976, p. 2.

⁴ Erma L. Steffey, 14-15. Also located in "A Brief History of Ozawkie, Kansas." <http://www.ozawkie.org/HistoryOfOzawkie.html>.

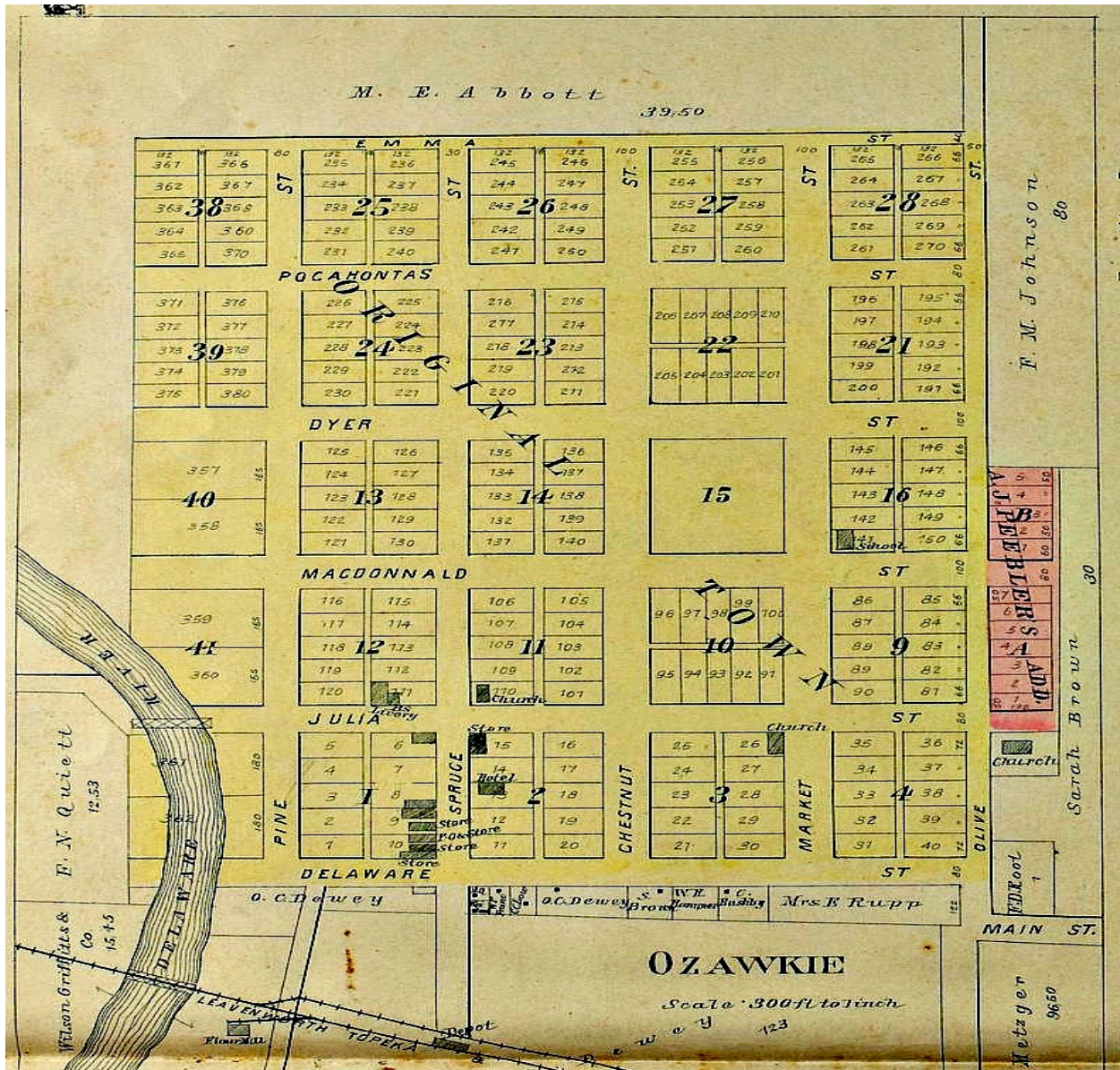


Figure 3: Osawkee Store and Post Office, operated by Fred Holler 1888–1890. Source: Jefferson County Historical Society.

In 1883, the railroad depot was completed for the Leavenworth and Topeka railroad that ran through the area. A period of rapid growth and development began. According to the Kansas State Census of 1895, Ozawkie Township then had 1,111 people, most from American Midwestern states.⁵ At this time the spelling of the town's name changed as well. During this decade the town was thriving with several businesses, including the first town newspaper, *The*

⁵ Kansas State Census of 1895, available online at kshs.org.

Ozawkie Times, initially published in 1885.⁶ By 1890 the United Brethren Church was organized and built. However, the first church building in the community was a Catholic Church.⁷ The first grade school was built in 1885 but later burned down in 1915. By 1916, the residents of Ozawkie had rebuilt the grade school and constructed a high school as well.



⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.ozawkie.org/HistoryOfOzawkie.html>.

Figure 4: 1899 plat of Ozawkie, shows location of businesses, schools, and churches. Source: www.kansasmemory.org

Due to the location of this community right along the Delaware River, the town suffered several devastating floods throughout its existence. Despite several attempts to keep this from happening by implementing drainage ditches, the city still encountered flooding. By the 1930s, rumors started floating through the town about the building of a dam along the Delaware River. In early 1948, Claude Brey was appointed to go to Washington, D.C. to propose the Perry Dam solution. It was not until 1954 that the Perry Project was approved.⁸ But the decades of the Great Depression and World War II had seen population drain from hundreds of small Kansas towns. By the time discussion of the town relocation came around in 1964, Ozawkie had only 200 residents and nine businesses.⁹ At that time Ozawkie was recognized as an “incorporated farming village” and was not funded to be relocated by the government. An organization of residents from Ozawkie came together to purchase land on Pleasant Hill, which is where the city sits today. Mr. and Mrs. Mell Metzger owned the first home that was moved out of Ozawkie in 1966.¹⁰ Several other homes were being built at this time, along with a water tower, business district, and a school. On August 27, 1967, the last church service was held in the old location of Ozawkie.¹¹

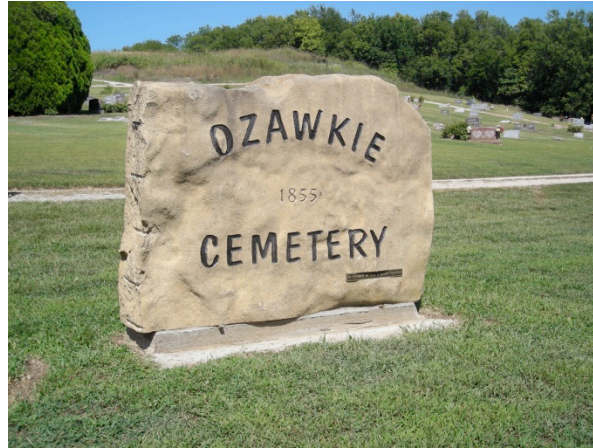
Ozawkie is now “the newest old town in Jefferson County.” The cemetery is still in the same location, now overlooking the new lake where a town once stood.

⁸ Steffey, 14–15.

⁹ Ibid.

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¹¹ Steffey, 112.



**Figure 5: Ozawkie Cemetery opened in 1855, one year after Kansas was opened for settlement.
Source: Jefferson County Historical Museum**

Like most cemeteries, it had been built on high ground. Names of early settlers such as Brammell, Puderbaugh, Kramer, Abbott, and Steffey are on the gravestones, marking the spot of old Ozawkie. The new community of Ozawkie, though small – 645 persons by the 2010 federal census -- is full of Kansas history and has survived some remarkable challenges.¹²

¹² United States Census, 2010. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010 City Population and Housing Statistics.

