

Follow the Tracks Through Adversity

Early Perry, Jefferson County, Kansas, 1854-1954

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Fig. 1 A street view photograph of a business street in Perry, Kansas. Circa 1908.
SOURCE: kansasmemory.org.

This study analyzes the early development of Perry, Jefferson County, Kansas. Early on, Perry faced leadership problems as the principal town of Kentucky Township, but it was propelled to prosperity by the Kansas Pacific/Union Pacific Railroad it was founded on. Methods used include a brief town history, newspapers, historical atlas plats, and an 1883 Kansas history

Some might look at Perry, Kansas and not see all the struggles it has been through. Platted on the east bank of the Delaware (Grasshopper) River, near where it flows into the Kansas River, Perry had some important factors of sustainability. The fact that it still exists today is a testament to the strength of Perry. It has not always been the most prosperous town, going up and down in population, but in comparison to so many other nineteenth century Kansas towns that are no longer alive today, Perry has made it. Perry, located in Kentucky Township of Jefferson County, experienced tremendous business growth in the century between 1854 and 1954, but due to the lack of perseverance exhibited by employers and employees alike, many promising businesses dissolved or were abandoned. Perry's one-hundred-year history shows a pattern of promising businesses falling victim to a lack motivation, a lack of follow-through, or a lack of leadership. The optimism that was displayed in many of these Perry investments was not initially matched by the leadership necessary to traverse through times of hardship. Cutler's *History of the State of Kansas* described Perry in 1883 as "a thriving business point." Then, Perry had 600 people, but by WWI, it had lost over 200 persons.¹ However, the town of Perry evidently learned from early struggles and embraced development in later decades. It is this characteristic that is responsible for the presence of Perry today.

Perry is the principal town of Kentucky Township, and its foundation is very similar to many of the Kansas communities that were founded around that time. It was surveyed and platted by the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company in 1865, and while that company was laying down the train tracks, the first store in Perry was built. This is no coincidence as it was the railroad itself that allowed Perry and so many other towns of that era to have an opportunity to

¹ William Cutler, "Perry, Jefferson County," in *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A.T. Andreas and Co., 1883).

prosper. Once it was decided that a railroad would be built right through Perry, it was only a short matter of time until businesses in the area started to appear. The next business to be instituted was the post office.² At that point Perry had a train station, a grocery store, and a post office. Those three businesses were the cornerstone of any growing Kansas community in the mid-nineteenth century; they proved to be the foundation of the still standing town of Perry, Kansas.

The founding of Perry was preceded by a violent dispute over the condition of Kansas between free-state and pro-slavery sympathizers. Initially, it appeared as if Kansas would be won over as a slave state. Pro-slavery supporters were enacting some dishonest tactics that gave them leverage in the free/slave state issue. Slave owners and slavery sympathizers were moving in from Missouri just to cast votes in Kansas in favor of slavery. They concentrated in the early eastern counties, including Jefferson. One of the first settlers in the county was a slave owner who brought in slaves.³ Pro-slavery settlers were also intimidating free-state constituents and attempting to move all opponents of slavery out of Kansas. This worked to an extent because many free-state supporters were discouraged from voting or otherwise furthering their free-state cause. As a result, Kansas initially had a largely pro-slavery legislature, and almost gained statehood as a slave state. Luckily, the people of Kansas adopted a free-state constitution; and the secession of slave states from the Union that preceded the Civil War caused all the pro-slavery

² William Cutler, "Perry, Jefferson County," *History of the State of Kansas*.

³ *Ibid.*

delegates to leave the Kansas legislature. Consequently, Kansas was inducted into the Union as a free state in January of 1861.⁴

After Kansas gained statehood in 1861, communities quickly began to be developed as county lines were constructed. As stated earlier, in 1865 the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company laid down tracks going right through Jefferson County and everything north of that railroad and directly east of the Delaware River came to be known as the town of Perry, as seen in Figure 1. The town was named after John D. Perry, who was the president of the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company. In 1865, before the town was built, his company platted Perry (a nearby village called Perryville was also named for him). This is why the town layout appears to be more well-planned than organically developed. According to an 1899 plat map of Jefferson County, John Perry didn't actually own any land in Perry, even though it bears his name. The decision to name the town after him probably stems from the development of the town based on the railroad laid down by his company.⁵

⁴ Elmer Bates, *The Story of Perry, Kansas- One Hundred Years of Progress from 1854 to 1954*. Perry Centennial. <http://perrykansas.us/history/history.pdf>. Last accessed December, 2015. For events of Bleeding Kansas and the Wyandotte Constitution, see Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

⁵ William Cutler, "Jefferson County," *History of the State of Kansas*; Elmer Bates, *The Story of Perry, Kansas- One Hundred Years of Progress from 1854 to 1954*, 4,8; *Descriptive Atlas of Jefferson County, 1899*.

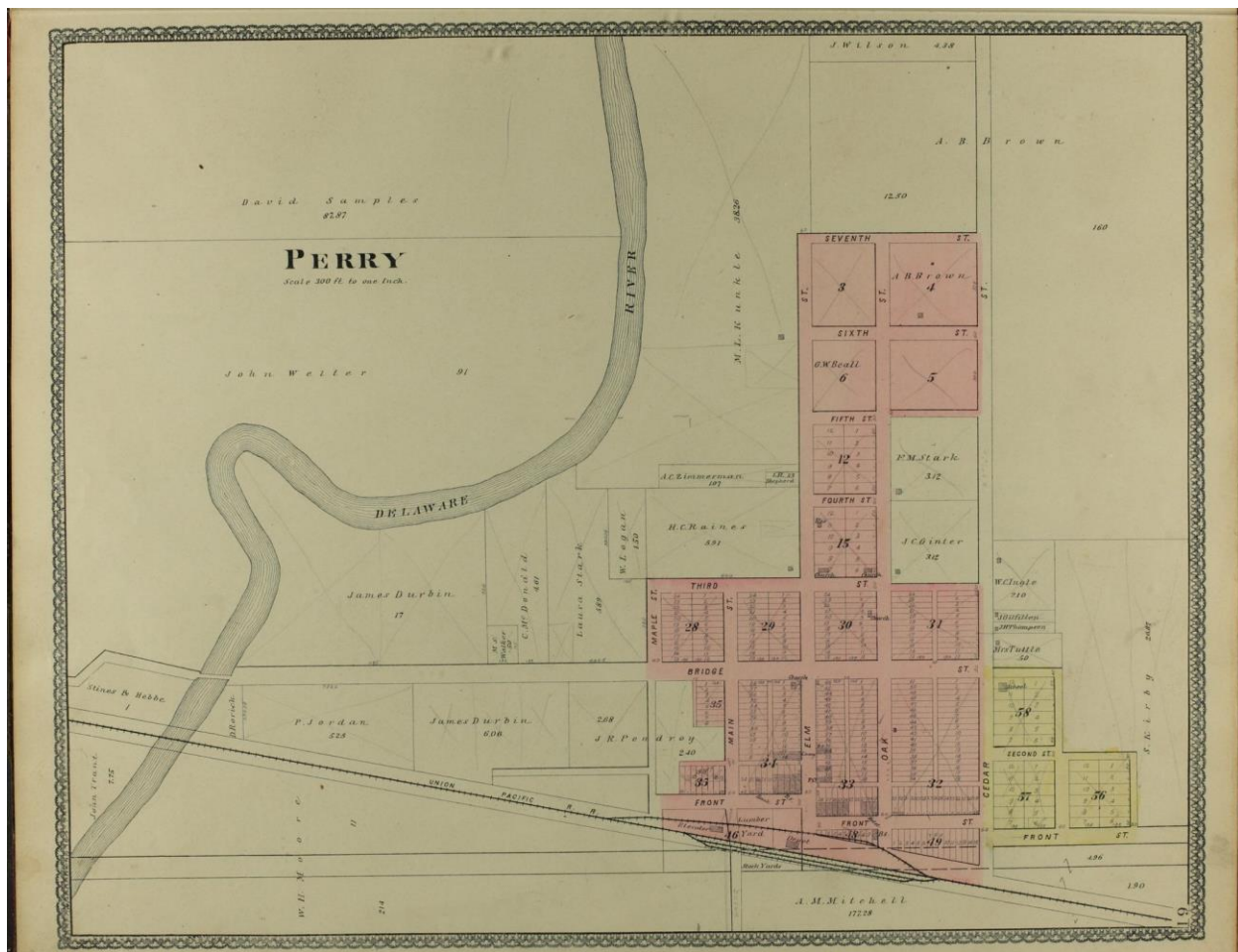


Fig. 2 Plat map of Perry, Kansas, circa 1899.
SOURCE: Descriptive Atlas of Jefferson County, 1899.

As stated earlier, Perry is a town whose history is marred by early business struggles - so much so that the survival of Perry up until this day is a wonder itself. Although it was incorporated in 1871, for twenty years, between about 1885 and 1905, Perry's population stayed the same: 500, with approximately 25 different businesses. An analysis of these businesses shows considerable turnover in ownership.⁶ The problems that plagued Perry businesses are various but can perhaps all be summed up as one issue: a lack of leadership. Examples of failed business endeavors include the repeated attempts at running a local newspaper business. Several

⁶ See *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directories for 1884-85, 1894, and 1900.*

newspaper presses were erected during the early history of Perry but could not continue to print for more than five years consecutively. Perry did not even have a newspaper from 1884 until 1898 when *The Perry Mirror* was resurrected and continued to be printed for the next fifty years.⁷ This slight hiccup in production is only an indication of some of the obstacles that Perry faced, but does not quite compare in significance to other instances of complete failure that the citizens of Perry experienced.

In the early 1900s, Perry was plagued by fires that took much of the town's businesses down. It would have been up to the firefighters to extinguish those fires, but they believed they lacked the ability, or maybe it was the leadership. Either way, in 1910 when a Perry restaurant was in danger of burning to the ground, the firefighters were so intimidated and frustrated by the fire they could not put out that they actually decided to push their one and only firefighting apparatus (the 1910 equivalent of a firetruck) into the fire. It burned up along with the rest of the restaurant. It isn't possible to say for sure that the firemen lacked motivation in this instance; they may have lived in Perry and eaten at that restaurant. In addition, without that one firefighting apparatus they, as firemen, would likely be out of a job. So it isn't the motivation that was the likely missing component. It was the lack of leadership. They needed a head fireman to not allow them to give up, and even if they did give up, direct them on how to do so with dignity instead of throwing a tantrum and purposely destroying their own equipment. One must think of the

⁷ *Descriptive Atlas of Jefferson County, 1899*, p. 61; Library of Congress, *US Directory Search Results* (Perry), http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/results/?state=Kansas&county=Jefferson&city=Perry&year1=1690&year2=2015&terms=&frequency=&language=ðnicity=&labor=&material_type=&lcn=&rows=20. Last Accessed December 2015.

apparent attitude this incident conveys. It takes a true leader to have the kind of direction necessary to save a building. Clearly the Perry Fire Department did not have that kind of leadership.

The kind of attitude displayed by those firemen in 1910 was not uncommon in Perry and actually resulted in much more serious situations than a restaurant being burned to the ground. As a matter of fact, 25 years earlier, we find a deadly example of what can go wrong from a poorly conducted business in Perry. In 1885 a stone-fencing company run by two brothers came to an abrupt halt. The two brothers, George and Morgan Cockrell, worked together under a questionable division of labor. George would load and deliver the stones, and Morgan would lay them to build the fence. A better leader would recognize that they did not have the man power to divide labor, and that maybe they should both work side by side, but for whatever reason that decision was not made, and it proved to be costly. One day while Morgan was already working, George delivered more stones to him and said he was going home after this. This understandably made Morgan upset because while his partner/brother was at home relaxing, he would still be laboring all day by himself. After arguing, scuffling, and finally separating, George began to make his way home, but not before Morgan picked up a shotgun, pointed it at his brother, and pulled the trigger - killing him instantly.⁸ Obviously there is no defense for the vile actions of Morgan, but just imagine how the situation may have been different if George had decided to show true leadership. Maybe the two brothers could have restructured their business in a way that was fair to both brothers. Perry did not seem to have useful leadership models.

⁸ Elmer Bates, *The Story of Perry, Kansas- One Hundred Years of Progress from 1854 to 1954*, 13; H.J. Russel, *The Bronson Pilot*, 8.

So the question arises: if the populace of Perry was victim to bad decision making and poor leadership, how did it continue to exist? In 1912, the *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory* listed Perry as having a population of 400, five churches, a grain elevator company, and a bank capitalized at \$10,000.⁹ Nearby, the little town of Rising Sun had long ago dwindled; its inhabitants moved to nearby Medina, renamed Perryville and then eclipsed by Perry.¹⁰ So why did Perry outlast Rising Sun, Medina, and Perryville even with all its problems? The answer is the same as the reason Perry was founded in the first place: the Kansas Pacific Railroad, which became the Union Pacific Railroad Company. Rising Sun was initially prosperous for its location on the Kansas River, with all its steamboat travel, but when Kansas began to lay down railways in the 1860s, steamboats became obsolete. Since Perry was home to a train depot and smaller towns nearby were not, the business, population, and prosperity quickly shifted towards Perry. Although Perry had significant early issues of leadership and town organization, it had life support in the form of the Kansas Pacific/Union Pacific Railroad and depot. Investors knew that with the location of Perry on a major railroad and a river, it could not fail. That is why they chose it as the principal town of Kentucky Township.¹¹

The town of Perry was able to overcome the characteristic setbacks that I have outlined and continued to grow well into the twentieth century. The town even managed to expand up until the Great Depression that was felt throughout the country; after the 1930s, Perry bounced right back. In the 1920s, Perry experienced improvements in its education system and its road

⁹ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1912.

¹⁰ Melvin D. Bruntzel, *Quick Reference to Kansas* (Belleville: The Print Schop, 2010). See “Rising Sun/Perryville/Medina,” Jefferson County.

¹¹ H.J. Russel, *The Bronson Pilot*, 8; see also William Cutler, “Jefferson County,” *History of the State of Kansas*.

system, which was significant because of the growing popularity of automobiles. Then in 1931 an ordinance was passed giving the Kansas Pipe Line and Gas Company the authority to lay a pipeline that would provide gas for the entire city. After that growth, Perry stalled for some years as residents waited out the Depression. As our nation's economy got back on track, Perry continued to improve itself. In 1948 a bill was passed by the voters to institute a running water system in Perry. After such signs of growth and prosperity, no one expected what was coming next.¹²

In 1951 two floods devastated Perry and the rest of the Kaw Valley to an extent that had never been seen before in Kansas. First, on June 22, the city was overtaken by a flash flood that resulted in the entirety of property of many families being destroyed as their houses were completely flooded. This flood also resulted in the death of one man who was trying to save as much of his earthly possessions as he could. Before the town could completely recover from the devastation of the first flood, they were hit with another flood the very next month when the Kansas River overflowed its banks. The damage done to Perry by both floods was almost too much for a town to overcome. Entire farms had been flooded, as seen in Figure 2, destroying all the crops during the growing season, and the water hadn't receded until it was too late to replant.¹³ This obviously caused a shortage of food, and there was no immediate help in sight. This kind of adversity is the kind that can prove to be fatal to any community, but not to Perry.

¹² Elmer Bates, *The Story of Perry, Kansas*, 15,16.

¹³ Elmer Bates, *The Story of Perry, Kansas*, 15, 16; "1951 Flood of Northeast Kansas," Jefferson County, Kansasmemory.org.

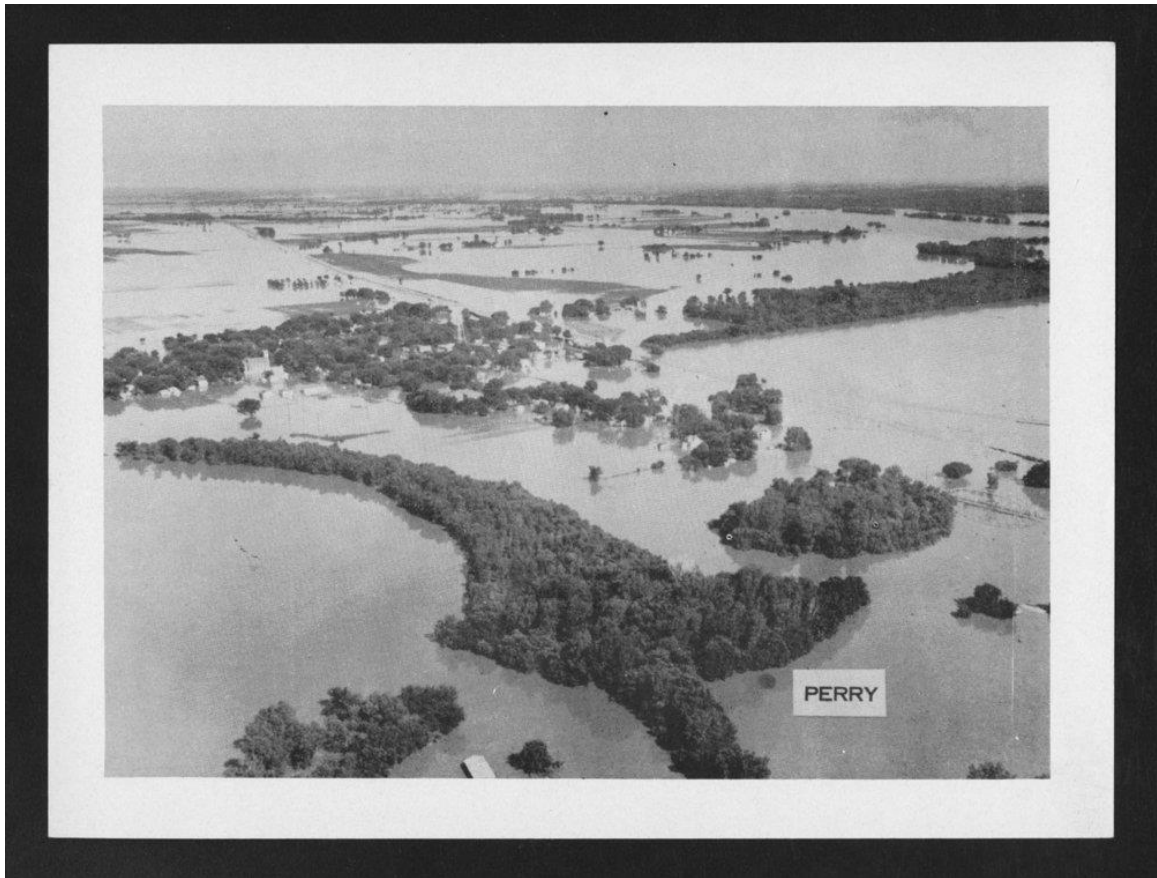


Fig. 3 A photograph of Perry which is largely submerged in water from the floods, circa June/July 1951.

SOURCE: "1951 Flood in Northeast Kansas," Jefferson County, Kansasmemory.org.

The town of Perry still stands today; it has double the population it had one hundred years ago. The Federal Census of 2010 listed 929 people living in Perry, and it is now considered part of the Topeka, Kansas, Metropolitan Area.¹⁴ Early on in its life span, Perry appeared to have characteristic issues that were exemplified through the lack of leadership, but it overcame adverse situations time and time again. Perry's early history provided lessons for the future.

¹⁴ Federal Census of 2010, "Perry, Jefferson County, Kansas."

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