

**A Town Between Enemy Lines:  
Lanesfield, Johnson County, Kansas 1858-1870**



Steven Angles

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Spring 2012

Lanesfield, Kansas was founded in honor of James Henry Lane, an infamous free-state leader, during a period of extreme violence and chaos in the 1850's. Lanesfield grew in the early years, but eventually disintegrated as people relocated closer to the railroad. This study includes a map of the area and field research on the development and downfall of Lanesfield, Kansas.

## Introduction

If you were establishing a town in the 1800's, what location would you choose to start it? In 1858, William Gans chose a beautiful 160 acre stretch of land in the Central Lowlands of Kansas with a vegetation of bluestem prairie and oak-hickory forest.<sup>1</sup> This area was a prime location because it was established along the Santa Fe Trail, which was regularly frequented by merchant-traders, soldiers, trappers, missionaries, and farmers.<sup>2</sup> William Gans named the town Lanesfield in honor of his friend and anti-slavery advocate James Henry Lane. Lanesfield is important not only because it has connections to the Civil War, but also because it demonstrates how different factors had an influence on rural towns in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Lanesfield survived political factors and initially grew into a successful town, but it quickly lost its momentum and disappeared when the Santa Fe Railroad opted to pass through Edgerton, a town located two miles from Lanesfield, instead.<sup>3</sup> The rest of this study will look at the establishment, development, and eventual decline of Lanesfield in McCamish Township in southwestern Johnson County, Kansas as seen in Attachment 1.

## Background

Slave state or free-state? That is the question that started a period now infamously known as “Bleeding Kansas.” The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 established the Kansas Territory and

---

<sup>1</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>2</sup> “Following Their Dreams.” *Gardner Junction National Historic Trails*. N.d. n.p.

<sup>3</sup> *Lanesfield Historic Site*. Edgerton, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

gave citizens the right to choose whether to become a slave state or a free state.<sup>4</sup> As you may expect, this led to disagreements between the opposing sides, and guerilla warfare soon broke out. Over the next decade, each side fought to preserve its ideals and many people died as a result of these battles.<sup>5</sup> In late August of 1856, a group of pro-slavery forces from Missouri came into Kansas and settled on the bank of Bull Creek. James Henry Lane, a converted leader of anti-slavery forces, heard this news and assembled a group of 300 to 400 men. Upon arrival, Lane realized he was greatly outnumbered and devised a plan to deceive the opposing forces. His plan was successful and after only a few shots were fired, the pro-slavery forces retreated as they believed they were greatly outnumbered. This famous battle is known as the Battle of Bull Creek. After the victory, Lane ordered that the cabin of Richard McCamish, a pro-slavery supporter who owned the land where the battle was fought, be burned.<sup>6</sup> James Henry Lane continued to be a passionate, and often violent, leader of anti-slavery forces. This event foreshadowed the rivalry between the towns of Lanesfield and McCamish that would ultimately ensue.

## Early Years

William Gans, as mentioned earlier, is the man who founded Lanesfield. Like Lane, Gans traveled to Kansas from Indiana.<sup>7</sup> Lanesfield quickly became the rival town of McCamish, each established on opposite sides of Bull Creek. Since the beginning, Gans had big plans for

---

<sup>4</sup> “James Henry Lane,” *PBS.org*, last modified 2001, [http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i\\_r/lane.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/lane.htm).

<sup>5</sup> “Freedom and Slavery: Conflicting Ideals.” *Johnson County Museum*. Shawnee, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Clayton, “Kansas 150: Traders used Santa Fe Trail for decades,” *KCCommunityNews.com*, last modified March 2, 2011, <http://www.kccommunitynews.com/johnson-county-sun-news/27041110/detail.html>.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

Lanesfield. His plans turned into reality as the town grew to a population of around 100 people, and it flourished as a small town. At one point, there were as many as three churches, a black smith shop, a school, a hotel, and 17 houses.<sup>8</sup> The school, which was constructed in 1869, is the only remaining building left. Before that, William Gans helped promote education in the area by holding classes at his house.<sup>9</sup> The census for McCamish township in 1865 shows that the population was about 75% white and 25% native with a few foreign and colored people.<sup>10</sup> This leads me to believe there were mainly white people in Lanesfield, but there could have been some diversity. One of the big reasons for the early success of Lanesfield is the prime location on the Santa Fe Trail. An image of this on map #17 in the Historical Atlas of Kansas clearly shows the Santa Fe Trail passing through the area where Lanesfield was located.<sup>11</sup> There is also more evidence of the Santa Fe Trail that can be seen in Attachment 2. A post office, originally named Hibbard, was also established in 1855 in the area. The name later changed from Hibbard to Lanesfield in 1861.<sup>12</sup> As a mail stop on the Santa Fe Trail, it received monthly mail. Without a doubt, the prime location was a key factor that led to the early growth and success of Lanesfield.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Lanesfield Historic Site*. Edgerton, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

<sup>9</sup> "Timeline of Lanesfield School." *Lanesfield Historic Site*. Edgerton, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

<sup>10</sup> "Johnson County Census." *Olathe Mirror*, copy at *Johnson County Museum*. Shawnee, Kansas. September 21, 1865.

<sup>11</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>12</sup> "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961," *Kansas Historical Society*, last modified 2012, [http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog\\_postoffices/search/placename:/county:JO/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH](http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:/county:JO/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH).

Although Lanesfield was in a prime location to succeed economically, it had to withstand political factors. It was located right in the middle of a border war between Missouri and Kansas. Many people point to the fierce battles between these two states as the beginning of the Civil War. In 1863, William C. Quantrill notoriously led 450 men through Kansas en route to Lawrence. The path he took went through the Lanesfield area. His purpose was to get revenge by destroying Lawrence and killing prominent Kansans. It is believed that Quantrill was targeting important political figures, such as Lane, who lived in Lawrence at time.<sup>13</sup> Although he did not succeed in accomplishing this, Quantrill carried out the surprise attack on Lawrence on an early morning in late August. This famous attack left 150 people dead, 30 more wounded, and around 200 homes destroyed.<sup>14</sup> Despite these ruthless battles between pro-slavery advocates and anti-slavery advocates, Lanesfield continued to thrive and succeed. The 1869 map that shows Lanesfield is evidence that people believed the town was there to stay. It should also be noted that James Henry Lane never actually lived in Lanesfield, which probably played an important role in the persistence of the town through the vicious battles.

### **Eventual Decline**

Although Lanesfield enjoyed a decade of prosperity in the 1860's, it was eventually doomed by the location of the newly constructed railroad. In 1870, Lanesfield residents were hopeful that the railroad would be built through their town. However, the Santa Fe Railroad decided to build a depot in Edgerton, which was located 2 miles from Lanesfield. As a result,

---

<sup>13</sup> "James Henry Lane," *PBS.org*, last modified 2001, [http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i\\_r/lane.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/lane.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 28.

most of the residents in Lanesfield moved their homes and businesses to Edgerton. At this time in history, a location near the railroad was vital for a successful business. Unfortunately, most of Lanesfield was gone within two years. All that remained by 1872 was the hotel, the school, and a few houses. The schoolhouse continued to operate as a rural schoolhouse until 1963.<sup>15</sup> It was then restored for historical purposes and is the only remaining building left from Lanesfield, Kansas. As quickly as it grew, Lanesfield disintegrated in 1870 as people relocated closer to the Santa Fe Railroad.

## **Conclusion**

William Gans came to Kansas in 1858 and had great ambitions for Lanesfield, Kansas. He named the town in honor of his friend and anti-slavery defender James Henry Lane. Lane had set the precedent of achievement in the area by outsmarting pro-slavery forces at the Battle of Bull Creek in 1856. In the early years of Lanesfield, this success had continued as the town grew, not only in population but also in the creation of stores, churches, and homes. Without a doubt, it was growing more rapidly than its rival McCamish. Lanesfield survived the political factors of the Civil War and utilized its prime location on the Santa Fe Trail for a little over a decade. In 1870, however, Lanesfield crumbled as the railroad was built through Edgerton instead of it. The town of Edgerton has persisted to the present day. This can only leave us wondering where Lanesfield, Kansas would be today if the Santa Fe Railroad had made a different choice back in 1870.

---

<sup>15</sup> "Timeline of Lanesfield School." *Lanesfield Historic Site*. Edgerton, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

## Works Cited

Clayton, Stephanie. "Kansas 150: Traders used Santa Fe Trail for decades."

*KCCCommunityNews.com*. Last modified March 2, 2011.

<http://www.kcccommunitynews.com/johnson-county-sun-news/27041110/detail.html>.

"Freedom and Slavery: Conflicting Ideals." *Johnson County Museum*. Shawnee, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

"Following Their Dreams." *Gardner Junction National Historic Trails*. N.d. n.p.

"James Henry Lane." *PBS.org*. Last modified 2001.

[http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i\\_r/lane.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/lane.htm).

"Johnson County Census." *Olathe Mirror*, copy at *Johnson County Museum*. Shawnee, Kansas.

September 21, 1865.

"Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961." *Kansas Historical Society*. Last modified 2012.

[http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog\\_postoffices/search/placename:/county:JO/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH](http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:/county:JO/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH).

*Lanesfield Historic Site*. Edgerton, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

Scolofsky, Homer E. and Self, Huber. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Norman, Oklahoma:

University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

"Timeline of Lanesfield School." *Lanesfield Historic Site*. Edgerton, Kansas. N.d.n.p.

Attachment 1 A map of northeastern Kansas in 1869 that shows Lanesfield, which is highlighted in yellow. SOURCE: Lanesfield Historic Site. Photograph by Steven Angles, May 19, 2012.





Attachment 2 A photograph of a rock at Lanesfield Historic Site that marks its location along the Santa Fe Trail. SOURCE: Lanesfield Historic Site. Photograph by Steven Angles, May 19, 2012.

