

The Sin City of the 19th Century: Squiresville, Johnson County, Kansas, 1857-1868

Emmalee Laidacker

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Kansas State University

Spring 2015



A politician named A.B. Squires established a large hotel in his new town, which eventually became a destination for Union soldiers during the Civil War, as well as for guests from the nearby stage line. This study includes census data, military records, newspaper articles, and photographs of the town site.

“...The bluestem waved and the flowers wild
 Nodded and beckoned as the stage went by
 (In the soft June days) and when autumn came
 The fires of the prairie lit up the sky,
 And after the ride was a rest for a spell,
 For the passengers here at the old hotel...”¹

There is a vacant grass field located at the intersection of two dirt roads in Spring Hill, Johnson County, Kansas. With just a few scattered buildings in the vicinity, it is difficult to imagine that from 1857 to 1868, it was once a loud and lively town, full of drinking, gambling, and other vices. For this reason, the hotel became a popular destination for Union soldiers during the Civil War as well as for travelers from the nearby stage line. When soldiers were decommissioned after the war and a railroad bypassed the stage route, the number of guests staying at the hotel became few and far between. Inevitably, the hotel was not able to sustain itself, buildings began to close, and Squiresville became a part of history after just eleven years of life. In its short life, however, this small town managed to leave behind a story that is characterized by scandal, adventure, and a melancholy ending.

A Fascinating Founder

A man by the name of A.B. Squires founded Squiresville in an effort to immortalize his name on the map.² He ran stages stretching 112 miles from Westport to Fort Scott, for which he

¹ Ed Blair, “The Old Hotel”, The Kansas Collection. <http://www.kancoll.org/books/blair/blchapter07.htm>.

² *Fort Scott Tribune and The Fort Scott Monitor*, October 30, 1907.

charged an eleven-dollar fare; it was on this stage route that Squires would eventually designate the location of his new town (see Figure 1 below). It was located nine miles west of the Kansas-Missouri border in modern-day Spring Hill, two miles east of another small town named Ochiltree. Squiresville was just as complicated as the man who founded it. Squires could be described as someone who simply wanted to be remembered. He was a southern gentleman with a competitive side, who enjoyed race horses, drinking cocktails, and playing poker. Squires was originally from New York but eventually settled in Spring Hill with his wife, Nancy, and their children.³

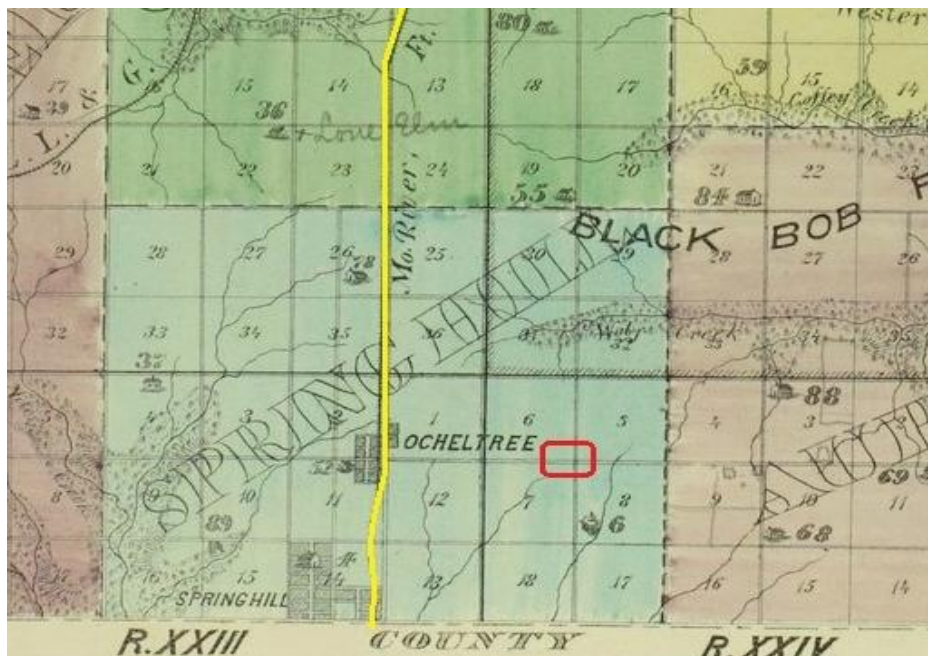


Figure 1. Plat map of Johnson County in 1874. Squiresville town site is indicated by the red box. The Missouri River, Ft. Scott, and Gulf Railroad that bypassed the old Ft. Scott stage line is indicated by the yellow line. Source:

Kansas Historical Society available at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/223964/page/6>

Squires later constructed a large hotel and stage barns, which were followed by a general store, and blacksmith shop, with the post office opening on December 8, 1857. Little information

³ Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925. Kansas State Historical Society.

exists on the population, but for a time, Squiresville's was "considerable"⁴. Along with founding a town, Squires had political aspirations as well and was soon elected as county treasurer in 1860⁵, the very first Johnson County had ever had. However, this appeared to be another attempt by Squires to make a name for himself. Shortly after his victory, he placed his duties in the charge of his deputy in Olathe and returned to Squiresville to continue running his stage business, playing poker and drinking cocktails.⁶ Every Saturday, Squires would travel eight miles north to Olathe with his associates and collect the funds from his deputy that had been paid in for the week. He later admitted to spending \$17,000 of public funds. However, the real amount could not be determined because the records had been disposed of. For this reason, Squires was never charged with any crime. Needless to say, he did not hold his county treasurer position for very long and lost the subsequent election in 1862.⁷

The Captivating Chronicles

The town's founder is not the only reason why Squiresville gained a less-than-perfect reputation. First, goods that had been stolen from Missouri were freely auctioned off in Squiresville.⁸ In an incident that occurred in January of 1862, troops from the 7th Kansas Cavalry stole eleven horses and two mules from a slave-owning family and sold the livestock at an auction, pocketing the proceeds. The family's slaves were also seized. In addition, the large hotel Squires established became a house of prostitution and an oasis for Union soldiers,⁹ where they were free to drink and gamble. The hotel was even a home to deserted soldiers. It also

⁴ *Fort Scott Tribune and The Fort Scott Monitor*, October 30, 1907.

⁵ Johnson County Election Office, "Elected Officials by Office." <http://www.jocoelection.org/archives/History/H-ElectedOfficials.htm#Treasurer>

⁶ *Fort Scott Tribune and The Fort Scott Monitor*, October 30, 1907.

⁷ *The Olathe Mirror*, May 22, 1862.

⁸ Tom A. Rafiner, *Caught Between Three Fires* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2010), 147.

⁹ Johnson County History, "Squiresville Kansas History." <http://www.jocohistory.org/cdm/squiresville/>

became the rendezvous for Colonel Charles Rainsford “Doc” Jennison, who rose to prominence as an anti-slavery hero during “Bleeding Kansas,” the infamous leader of the Kansas Jayhawkers. Although Jennison did not live in Squiresville -but instead lived in a residence nearby- it is safe to say that during the war, for all intents and purposes, Squiresville was his home. In fact, while Jennison had an entire regiment in his charge, he spent the majority of his time playing poker at the hotel while his men were in the field. Lt. Col. Daniel Anthony, his second in command said that after being colonel of his regiment for six months, Jennison had not given his troops a single command.¹⁰

Another military figure who left an impressionable mark on the town’s history was none other than the notorious William Quantrill. Squiresville was not on Quantrill’s original itinerary, however; he was there by chance. He passed through Squiresville in an attempt to evade Union soldiers after he got word that several companies had just arrived at Spring Hill, where he had just killed a civilian.¹¹ This led Quantrill to detour eastward, away from his final destination in Lawrence, to his penultimate stop.

Once there, Quantrill probably stole supplies and took a much-needed break so his men could regain their strength. He had also taken prisoners from previous towns he had raided; some of these prisoners were newly-recruited Union soldiers while others were simply male civilians.¹² Although these men were only civilians, they were living in a free state that was an enemy of the Confederacy, which to William Quantrill, was sufficient justification to hold them hostage. Quantrill eventually released the civilians, but ordered that any man affiliated with the 12th Kansas Regiment stay behind. He confined the remaining men to a storage shed near the grocery store, where the owner, Andy, kept a barrel of molasses and some crackers. The hungry

¹⁰ Donald Gilmore, *Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border* (Gretna: Pelican, 2005), 141.

¹¹ Ed Blair, *History of Johnson County, Kansas* (Lawrence: Standard, 1915).

¹² *Ibid.*

prisoners helped themselves. Upon finishing his own breakfast, Quantrill had all the prisoners line up in front of him and said that, over breakfast, he had been debating whether or not to shoot each of them; many feared it was the end. To the prisoners' relief, Quantrill expressed his plans to spare the men as killing them might have drawn more attention from authorities, which would jeopardize his mission. Before releasing the men, Quantrill made them swear an oath to never again take up arms against the Confederacy. After the oath was administered, the prisoners were released from Squiresville, and made it to Olathe around noon later that day, exhausted and famished, yet lucky to have escaped with their lives. Quantrill's forces, 450 strong, would soon raid Lawrence, where they would murder more than 150 townsmen and destroy 200 homes.¹³

The End of a Town

Five years after Quantrill's raid, Squiresville's post office closed in September of 1868. There are very few possible factors that may have led to the death of the town; the construction of a railroad seems to be the primary reason. The Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad came through just south of the old Fort Scott stage line where Squiresville was located and began operations in 1868. The railroad passed through Olathe and Fort Scott¹⁴ and would have rendered A.B. Squire's stage business obsolete, probably putting him out of business. However, records¹⁵ show that Squires joined a state-organized militia in 1863 and was enlisted in the military as of 1869, a year after the post office closed. The same records also show that in 1869, he was joined by a family member, C.K., who was most likely his son. It is my estimation that his son ran the

¹³ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1988), 28; Catharine Floyd, "Following in Quantrill's Footsteps." William Clarke Quantrill Society. <http://wcqsociety.com/lawrence-article/>. 2014. Accessed April 20, 2015.

¹⁴Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1988), 30.

¹⁵ Kansas State Historical Society, *Muster Rolls of the Kansas State Militia*, Vol. 5,14,15.

stage business while his father was away, and when the business went under in 1868 due to the construction of the railroad, he joined his father in the military soon after. With the stage line business no longer in existence, the amount of traffic the town saw each day would have been reduced significantly, leading to a decrease in the number of guests at the hotel. Since the hotel was the heart of Squiresville, a lack of travelers from the stage line staying there would have been enough to close the hotel (as this was the case in Spring Hill)¹⁶, and led to the decline of the town. In addition, the ending of the Civil War in 1865 would have reduced traffic through the hotel also. Because Union soldiers frequented the hotel so often, their discharge and return to home in other parts of Kansas, Missouri, and states farther east certainly would have been detrimental to the hotel's business. Eventually, it closed its doors.

Today, Squiresville is mostly grassland where horses graze nearby, very much unlike the way it was 150 years ago (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2. Photograph of Squiresville as it appears today, now Spring Hill Township, Johnson County. Photograph by author, facing west at the northwest corner of current day 199th and Renner Road intersection. March, 2015.

¹⁶ Ed Blair, *History of Johnson County, Kansas*. The Kansas Collection. .
<http://www.kancoll.org/books/blair/blchapter07.htm>.

Regarding the infamous Squiresville hotel, no information exists today, not even so much as a name. However, Spring Hill, the nearby town, also had a large hotel, called “Old Traveler’s Rest.” Like the Squiresville hotel, the Spring Hill hotel was the town’s first building, yet no longer exists today. It was also constructed in 1857,¹⁷ with the post office and general store being built later that year. It was a two-story hotel, and was described as having a “stage line run by its door”¹⁸. Furthermore, a stage barn with eight horses lay one-hundred feet northeast of the hotel. Although Squiresville’s old town site is now located in modern-day Spring Hill, it is not likely these two hotels were the same building. Nonetheless, the similarities are intriguing.



Figure 3. Photograph of “Old Traveler’s Rest”, the Spring Hill hotel, taken c. 1860’s. The Squiresville hotel most likely resembled this. Source: The Kansas Collection, available at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/blair/blchapter07.htm>.

¹⁷ Spring Hill Historical Society, “Spring Hill- The First 50 Years.” Springhills.com.

¹⁸ Ed Blair, *History of Johnson County, Kansas*. The Kansas Collection. <http://www.kancoll.org/books/blair/blchapter07.htm>.

The poem included earlier- called “The Old Hotel” by Ed Blair- describes the story of Spring Hill’s hotel. Since both hotels met the same end, this excerpt from the end of the poem appropriately describes Squiresville’s hotel as it began to lose business and its original vitality began to fade:

“...The years that have flown, yes, by the score.

So the old hotel, with its sinking sills,

Calls back to the pioneer days of yore,

A slab in the woods with but few to tell

Of its history now--is this old hotel.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Ed Blair, “The Old Hotel,” The Kansas Collection. <http://www.kancoll.org/books/blair/blchapter07.htm>.

References

- Blair, Ed. *The History of Johnson County*. The Kansas Collection. 1915.
<http://www.kancoll.org/books/blair/blchapter07.htm>. Accessed April 15, 2015.
- Blair, Ed. "When Quantrill Raided Olathe". In *History of Johnson County, Kansas*. Lawrence, Kansas: Standard Publishing Company, 1915.
- "Col Charles R Jennison". Ranger95.com. Accessed April 29, 2015.
- Floyd, Catherine. "Following in Quantrill's Footsteps." William Clarke Quantrill Society. William Quantrill Society. <http://wcqsociety.com/lawrence-article/>. 2014.
 Accessed April 20, 2015.
- Gilmore, Donald L. *Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border*. Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 2005.
- "History of Elections and Elected Officials." Johnson County Election Office. March 5, 2014.
<http://www.jocoelection.org/archives/History/H-ElectedOfficials.htm#Treasurer>
 Accessed April 22, 2015.
- "Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad: A Brief History." Tacnet.missouri.org. June 2, 2008.
 Accessed May 13, 2015.
- "Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925." Ancestry.com. March 1, 1875. Accessed May 6, 2015.
- Lee, James. "Squiresville." Ghosttowns.com. 2013. Accessed April 26, 2015.
- Rafiner, Tom A. *Caught Between Three Fires*. Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris Corporation, 2010.
- Socolofsky, Homer Edward, and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2nd ed. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.
- Spring Hill Historical Society, and Spring Hill Chamber of Commerce. "Spring Hill- The First 50 Years." Springhills.com. 2000. Accessed May 6, 2015.
- "Squiresville, Kansas." Johnson County History. <http://www.jocohistory.org/cdm/squiresville/>
 Accessed April 26, 2015.