

An International Forest in Small Town Kansas: Waterloo, Kansas, Kingman County, 1875-1930

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Figure 1. A photograph of Waterloo stores and post office c. 1910. This photograph was taken looking south on Main St., now known as NE Waterloo Ave. None of these buildings stand today. SOURCE: Waterloo - Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas by Irene Bergkamp

Following is a brief but engaging history of the community of Waterloo, Kansas in Galesburg Township of Kingman County and its arboretum that still persists today. This study uses photographs, newspaper articles, maps, and written histories.

Today, travelers on Highway 17 speed by without a second glance at the small sign pointing off the main path and towards Waterloo. Located in northeastern Kingman County in Galesburg Township, the Waterloo that is left today makes it difficult to imagine the thriving little town it once was. Very few structures remain and only a few residents still call Waterloo home. However, Waterloo is still alive and well in the memories of its past residents and in the stories left behind by a towering forest of trees in the northeastern corner of town. Kingman County is located on a high, rolling prairie supplied by many streams and full of easily cultivated, porous soil that would lend itself well to the success of Waterloo.¹

Early Settlers – The Beginnings of Galesburg Township and Waterloo

Imagine arriving on the vast, empty plains of Kansas in 1875, finding a small creek, and deciding to settle down and make a home. This was the experience of A.B. Torrent, the first settler of Galesburg Township, in which Waterloo, originally known as Stanford, is located. He wasn't to be alone for long however, as many other settlers soon followed including the Endicotts – a well-known family from Waterloo.² According to James Halladay, one of the early settlers of the township and Justice of the Peace in Waterloo,³ many of the settlers came from the area of Illinois in hopes of escaping the flooding there and finding better, drier land in Kansas. Most were successful – *The Kingman Courier* article of February 27, 1885 titled “Galesburg” describes several settlers who found success growing fruit trees and grape vines in the early years despite droughts in the area.⁴

The fertile area soon filled up and by 1878 nearly all of the land had been settled and new arrivals had to purchase their land instead of homesteading.⁵ As more settlers entered the area, communities began to form, and on March 5, 1878, Simon F. Utley became postmaster

¹ “Kingman County, Part 1,” accessed December 13, 2016, <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/kingman/kingman-co-p1.html#TOC>.

² Stout, H. & Foley, John C., “Galesburg”, *The Kingman Courier*, February 27, 1885.

³ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1880.

⁴ Stout, H. & Foley, John C., “Galesburg”, *The Kingman Courier*, February 27, 1885.

⁵ Bergkamp & Shippen, “Galesburg Township”, in *Kingman County: A Township by Township History* (1977), 24.

of the newly opened pony express station of Stanford, which he operated out of his dugout. This post office was not to last for long however, closing its doors on September 28, 1881 in favor of the Waterloo Post Office which was established on September 28, 1880 and was also run by Postmaster Utley.⁶

Waterloo was a diverse community from the start, boasting churches of three different denominations. The first church in Waterloo was Pleasant Valley Presbyterian Church, established on February 25, 1878, two years before the town had even been officially founded. Because there was not a church building in which to worship, services were initially held in the homes of members. A church was finally constructed in 1892, pictured below, and was used until December 1959 when the church and its land were sold due to lack of membership.⁷



Figure 2. A photograph of Pleasant Valley Presbyterian Church c. 1920, founded on February 25, 1878. Notice the landscape around the church and the well-established trees. John Riggs attended this church and donated the trees planted on the grounds. SOURCE: Waterloo - Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas by Irene Bergkamp.

⁶ Bergkamp & Shippen, "Galesburg Township," in *Kingman County: A Township by Township History* (1977), 24.

⁷ Bergkamp, Irene, *Waterloo – Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas*.

Waterloo was also home to St. Louis Catholic Church, built in 1882. Unfortunately, this first building was blown away before the dedication but another was built in its place. With more Catholic families moving into the area in following years, a larger building was needed and the present-day church, which can be seen below, was constructed in 1901. Next door, a Catholic school house was built in 1910 and classes were taught by the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother until the school's closing in 1966.



Figure 3. A photograph of St. Louis Catholic Church taken in 1971. The church still stands today and looks much the same as it does here, nearly 50 years earlier. SOURCE: Waterloo - Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas by Irene Bergkamp.

Finally, a third denomination established itself in Waterloo with the building of Lebanon Methodist church in 1886 on land purchased from J.P. Cawthon. Not much else is known about this church except that it was closed in 1929 and that the building was then moved to Abbeyville.⁸ A photograph of the building when it was still located in Waterloo can be seen below.



Figure 4. A photograph of Lebanon Methodist Church taken c. 1915. The care taken in the construction of this building by the residents of Waterloo can be seen in the church's beautiful details.

Despite being home to three denominations, Waterloo has only one cemetery, located in the northeastern part of town. Even though they are buried within the same boundaries, Catholics and Protestants are separated into the southern and northern halves, respectively.⁹ The first burial in this well-kept cemetery was Lulie McCormack, eight-day old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William McCormack, in 1878.¹⁰

In 1885, just five years after its founding, Waterloo was a well-established community with a plasterer, livestock dealer, school house, hotel, two churches with another to be built

⁸ Bergkamp, Irene, *Waterloo – Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jones, Valla McCormack, *Ninety Years of Life of Mr. and Mrs. William McCormack*.

the following year, and several other commercial structures.¹¹ The population was 80 at this time¹² and would continue to grow over the next ten years to reach a peak of around 100.¹³ In these days there was a wonderful condition known as prosperity that was prevalent throughout the area:

“Prosperity is contagious all through the Smoot’s creek valley. A man can’t reside there a whole year without catching the desirable disease and experiencing a fullness in his worldly possessions and an inordinate swelling of his bank account. But the people do not seem to mind it. They are not particular about getting cured. They do sometimes abate the fullness of their possessions by selling off a few hundred dollars’ worth of stock or grain, and they reduce the swelling of their bank account once in a while by buying another piece of land. But such remedies afford only temporary relief. The disease almost always breaks out in a new place.”¹⁴

This contagious condition would happily continue to infect the residents of Waterloo for several decades.

The Sprouts of a Forest

The treeless, open prairie around Waterloo was quickly becoming populated and being broken up for farming, but something happened in these early days of settlement that would forever change the landscape of Kansas. In 1879, a nurseryman known as L.M. Smith arrived from Illinois. With the help of local residents he soon planted twelve thousand trees. As is recounted by Mrs. William McCormack and recorded by her daughter Valla, this work was a blessing for many residents:

“This was certainly a streak of good luck for us as Pap got a job hauling this nursery stock thirty-two miles out to Waterloo and then got it all planted. He took his pay in fruit trees excepting a dollar now and then when we needed groceries. While working for this man, Pap had two meals a day furnished him. That helped us out a great deal, as food was scarce then.”¹⁵

Smith continued to operate in Kingman despite stiff competition from other nurseries and tree vendors, but he would not find the success of a later nurseryman still to come.

¹¹ Stout, H. & Foley, John C., “Galesburg”, *The Kingman Courier*, February 27, 1885.

¹² *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1884-1885.

¹³ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1894.

¹⁴ Stout, H. & Foley, John C., “Galesburg”, *The Kingman Courier*, February 27, 1885.

¹⁵ Jones, Valla McCormack, *Ninety Years of Life of Mr. and Mrs. William McCormack*.

In 1885, a young family led by their father and husband John Walter Riggs, arrived in Kansas from Indiana and settled into the county seat of Kingman for several years before finally moving to the thriving little town of Waterloo.¹⁶ Riggs, a school teacher at the time, would soon become part of the nursery movement that was begun by Smith. Upon his arrival in Waterloo, Riggs became a strong proponent for the education system, helping to establish monthly meetings of teachers to discuss educational practices in area schools.¹⁷ It wasn't until the 1890s that Riggs began to explore botany full time.¹⁸

Many settlers of the open plains in Kansas were driven away by the strong winds that swept across the land. After the plowing of the prairie sod to accommodate farming, the winds also carried clouds of choking dust that sent many people packing to return to their homes left behind in the east. The only way the settlers that remained could find to stop these incessant winds was with hardy trees and shrubs. Tree vendors began to pop up all over Kansas but most lacked the botanical experience and scientific approach required to succeed in the business.¹⁹ This is what would make John Riggs one of the few successful nurserymen.

During the 1890s, Riggs spent much time traveling through the south and southwestern parts of the country to collect plant samples for his Waterloo tree station. Although he started by growing mostly deciduous trees, it was his hope that coniferous trees would prove to be useful on the dry plains of Kansas. Riggs also got some exotic species through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.²⁰ At the Waterloo station, Riggs experimented with many species, including fruit and nut trees. His ideas that coniferous trees would survive

¹⁶ *J.W. Riggs Kansas Botanist and Nurseryman: A History of the Waterloo Tree Station* (Lindsborg: Barbo/Carlson Enterprises, 1998), 5-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 11-15.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 17-19.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 25-26.

well in Kansas proved to be correct and many old home sites in the area still feature old pines or arborvitaes from the Waterloo nursery.²¹

The End of Waterloo and the Growth of a Forest

The twentieth century brought about many changes for the town of Waterloo. The population had shrunk considerably to only 25 by the year 1900 but many businesses such as the general store, blacksmith shop, and grocery store still existed²² as did the public and Catholic schools. This was by no means the end of Waterloo, as the population once again rose to 65 by 1912. Although by this year many of the businesses, including the post office, had closed, Waterloo was still home to a tight knit community that refused to be snuffed out by nearby competition.²³

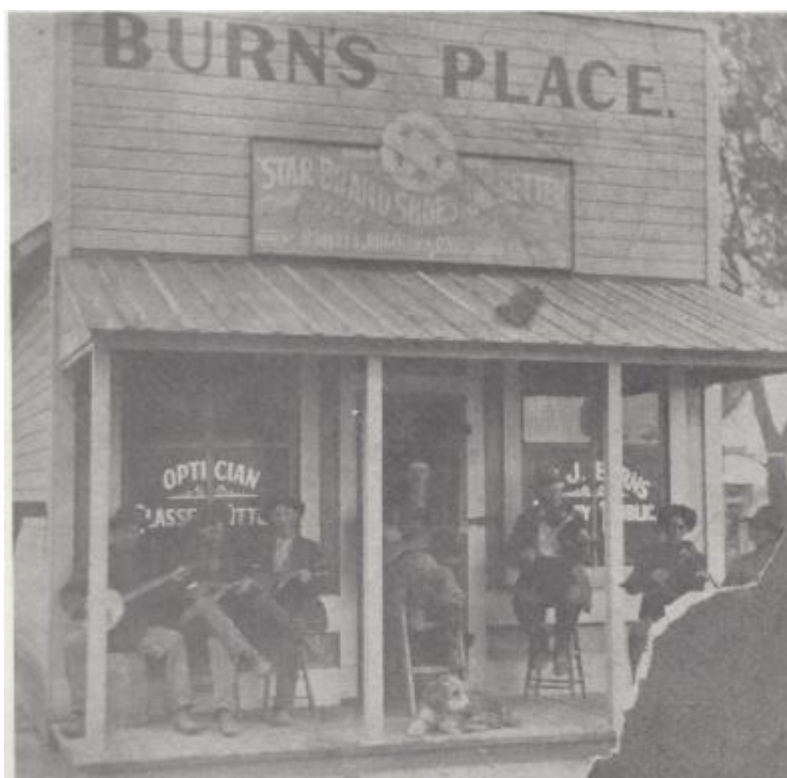


Figure 5. A photograph of Burn's Place and the Waterloo String Orchestra taken on October 26, 1907. Even as it entered its decline, the community of Waterloo remained tight-knit. SOURCE: Waterloo - Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas by Irene Bergkamp.

²¹ Ibid, 29.

²² *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1900.

²³ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1912.

The railroad would have greatly benefitted Waterloo, providing them with easy access to shipping for the abundant crops they grew and the trees from the Riggs' nursery. However, Waterloo lost the battle for the railroad to Murdock, Kansas, another small community five miles to the south, whose depot was built in 1883.²⁴ Waterloo also had hopes of becoming the county seat but lost the battle to Kingman²⁵ in 1874.²⁶ Despite these challenges, Waterloo survived and thrived for many years and was home to the Riggs Arboretum which would see great success in the twentieth century.

In 1901, the nursery started by John Riggs was officially declared as a government experimental forestry station. This support from the government brought in many new tree species.²⁷ By 1909, the arboretum had expanded to thirty-five acres, was home to over five million plants, and was frequented by visitors wishing to admire the beauty of the specimens there.²⁸ Because of its size and large variety of plants, the Riggs Arboretum was chosen as the place to purchase trees for the beautification of Wichita parks. In 1911, the commissioner of parks from Wichita visited the Waterloo nursery and selected 879 plants to be used in Wichita parks. None of the plants purchased required artificial watering which is very important in an area without a lot of readily available water. According to the commissioner, they had purchased only about one-fiftieth of the available varieties.²⁹

The Riggs Arboretum continued to be successful for many more years, bringing a constant string of visitors to the tiny community of Waterloo and helping to keep it alive. Tragically, John Riggs died on January 23, 1930 in a house fire caused by a coal oil explosion. Along with Riggs' life, the fire took all records and experimental notes concerning

²⁴ Bergkamp, Irene, *Waterloo – Galesburg Township Kingman County, Kansas*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "County History," accessed December 14, 2016, <http://kingmancoks.com/2154/County-History>.

²⁷ "Government Forestry", *The Leader Courier*, February 28, 1901.

²⁸ "The Kingman County Forestry Station", *The Leader Courier*, August 5, 1909.

²⁹ "Rare Trees to Beautify City's Park", *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, April 28, 1911.

the nursery as well as his well-known magnolia tree which was the only one known to grow in the state.³⁰

Waterloo Today



Figure 6. Heading south on Highway 17, a sign points passersby towards what remains of the town of Waterloo. SOURCE: Photograph by author, November 21, 2016.

Today, the town of Waterloo still exists, although many of the structures are gone. The Endicott family – one of the first to arrive – is the only original family still residing there. Both schools still stand although neither are operational and the public school has since been turned into a home. The Riggs Arboretum still exists, however, and is overseen by descendants of the original owner and operator, J.W. Riggs. It is no longer used as a nursery with trees for purchase but has developed into a beautiful forest, a living memory of the man who started it all. Below, several pictures can be seen of Waterloo today.

³⁰ “Exploding Coal Oil Fatal to J.W. Riggs”, *The Leader Courier*, January 31, 1930.

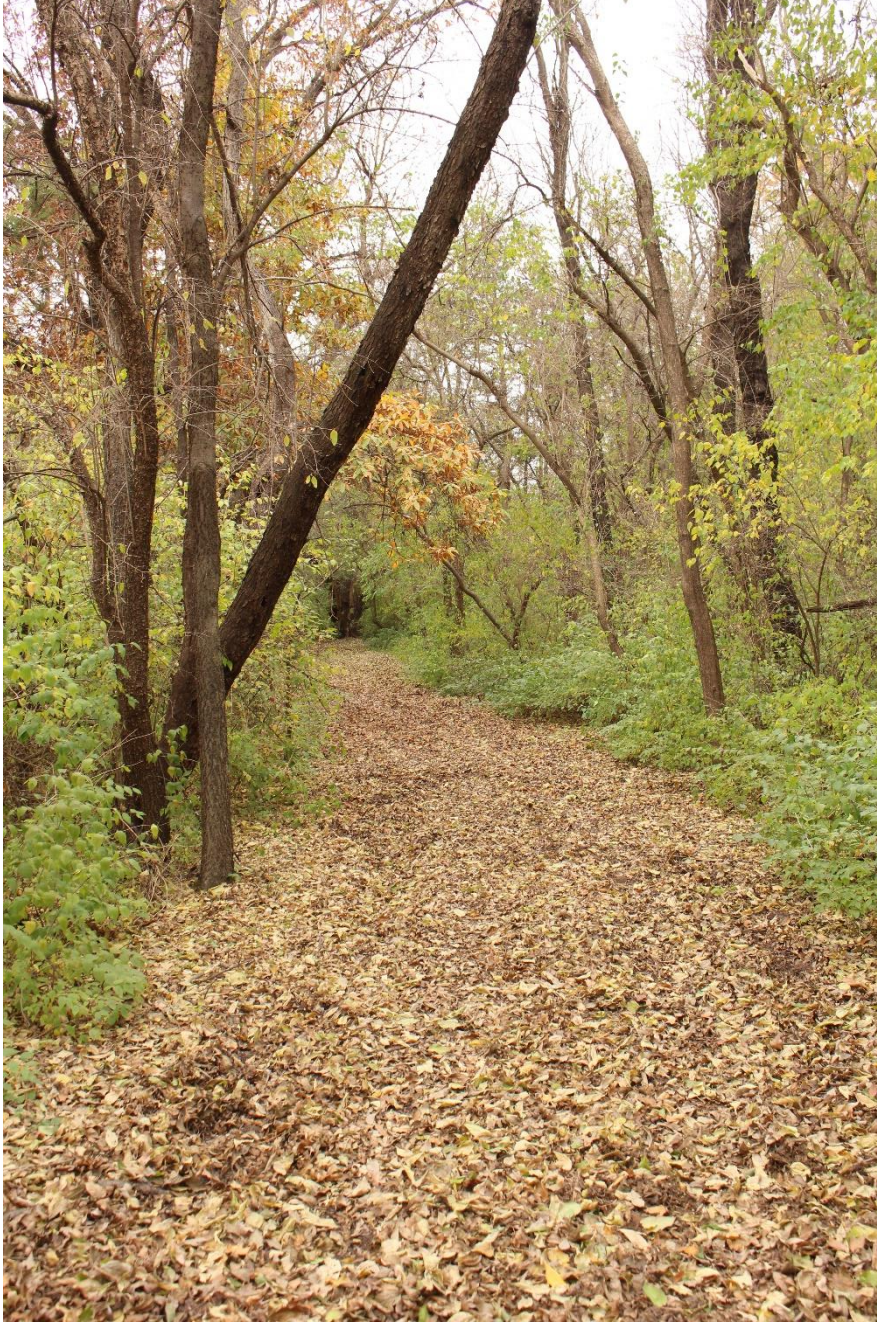


Figure 7. Today, there are many paths through the arboretum offering visitors the chance to explore the extensive collection of trees still growing in the arboretum. Signs are posted along the way, giving information about many of the species, including when they were planted. SOURCE: Photograph by author, November 21, 2016.



Figure 9. A photograph of what used to be the public school house in Waterloo. Today, the school has been converted into one of the few remaining homes in Waterloo. SOURCE: Photograph by author, November 21, 2016.



Figure 8. A sign welcomes visitors and reminds them of the Riggs Arboretum. Today, community members hold work days to clean and update the extensive network of trails that cuts through the arboretum. SOURCE: Photograph by author, November 21, 2016.

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