

Battle for Supremacy:

Kickapoo, Kickapoo Township, Leavenworth
County, Kansas 1855-1910

Zach Baker
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This essay discusses the founding of the Town of Kickapoo, Kickapoo Township, and examines Kickapoo's battle with Leavenworth and Delaware for the county seat of Leavenworth County. It details how the loss of this competition caused the slow but steady decline of Kickapoo, culminating in the closing of the post-office in 1910.

The old town site of Kickapoo rests in the sleepy Salt Creek Valley in the northeastern edge of Leavenworth County (Fig.1). Very little of the town remains today¹, but 150 years ago, it was the largest political and economic rival of the City of Leavenworth². The town derived its name from the Kickapoo Indians, who had been settled on a government reservation in the area which was later moved to the southeast³. The first European settlers in the area were the French, who established Fort de Cavagnial in 1744 (Fig. 2). The fort, which was no more than 80 feet square, was built to stamp France's claim to the region and to facilitate and protect the fur trade with the natives in the region. The fort was later abandoned after the French ceded the territory to Spain in 1764. Lewis and Clark would later pass by the ruins of the old fort on their journey west in 1804⁴.



Figure 1: Map of Kickapoo Township
SOURCE: George A. Ogle, *Standard Atlas of Leavenworth County, Kansas*

¹ Author's Field Notes, Old Kickapoo town site, Leavenworth County, KS, 31 March 2012

² Daniel C. Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: Volume III* (Holton: Bell Graphics, 1982). pg. 26

³ Jesse A. Hall, and Leroy T. Hand, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas* (Topeka: Historical Company, 1921). pg. 137

⁴ Bob Spear, *Leavenworth: First City of Kansas* (Leavenworth: Spear's Mint Editions, 2005). pp. 4-6



Figure 2: Artist rendition of Fort de Cavagnial seen on an historical marker
SOURCE: Author's Collection, photo taken 15 April 2012, Kickapoo Cemetery, Leavenworth County, KS

The land remained unsettled until a Catholic mission, led by Father Van Quickenborn and Father Hoecken, was established in 1833⁵. Father Van Quickenborn had come to the region earlier, visiting the various native tribes there, including the Kickapoos. The chief of the Kickapoo tribe attended a Mass held by the visiting priest and was so impressed with the service; he requested Father Van Quickenborn send a priest to live with the tribe⁶. The father wasted no time in securing permission and a \$1,000 government grant to establish a mission building in the area. Father Van Quickenborn also began to build the first church in Kansas, Sacred Heart in Kickapoo⁷. When Bishop John Miege arrived in Kansas in 1851, he was undecided about whether he wished to establish his cathedral in Kickapoo or Leavenworth⁸. He finally settled on Leavenworth, an oddly prophetic decision that would be echoed by the Kansas Legislature a few years later when choosing which city would be granted the county seat.

⁵ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 138

⁶ Todd Habiger, *The Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas* (Strasbourg, France: Editions du Signe, 2000). pg. 93

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

In 1844, a trading post was established near the mission by Major Robert Wilson, which he later sold to Major M.P. Rively in 1852⁹. Rively's trading post was hugely successful, and it made him one of the most prominent residents in the county¹⁰. The trading post under both Wilson and Rively also found itself in direct commercial conflict with Fort Leavenworth, an early foreshadowing of the future economic rivalry between Kickapoo and Leavenworth¹¹.

Before there was a Kickapoo town, or even a Kickapoo township, the area northeast of Leavenworth County was already becoming a hot bed of political activity. On September 20, 1853, a convention was held in the area where Kickapoo would be founded, probably at the old Catholic mission, which had been converted to a hotel by that time. The convention's aim was to select a delegate to urge Washington politicians to organize the Kansas and Nebraska territories¹². Nine months later, the town site of Kickapoo was surveyed, the town was built, Josiah Elliott was elected as Kickapoo's first mayor, and a post office was opened in 1855¹³. Kickapoo began on the west bank of the Missouri River and extended eight streets west and thirteen streets north to south. All streets were 80 feet in width, except for Main St., which was 100 feet in width. Each lot was 124 feet by 44 feet, with alleys 16 feet in width¹⁴. The town also had two Catholic Churches and the first Methodist Episcopal Church in Kansas (Fig. 2). The old Catholic mission underwent yet another change, becoming the first land office in the state (Fig. 3). These were promising signs that Kickapoo would one day become a stable, prosperous little town. There were dreamers, however, who wished for Kickapoo to become something even more -- something greater.

⁹ H. Miles Moore, *Atlas Map of Leavenworth County, Kansas* (Missouri Publishing Co. 1878). pg. 6

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 137

¹² Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 138

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 138

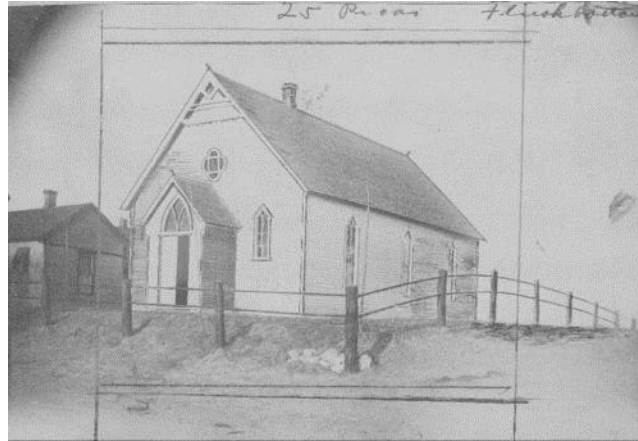


Figure 2: Methodist Episcopal Church of Kickapoo
SOURCE: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206831>

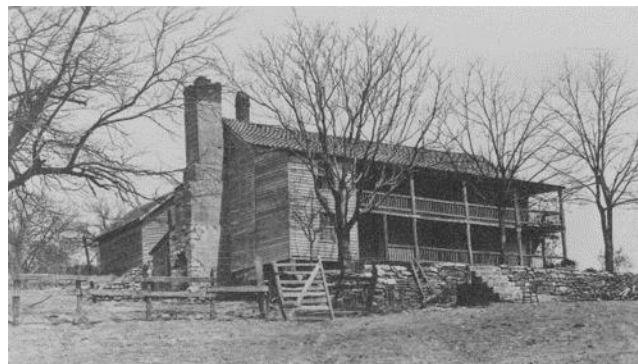


Figure 3: Kickapoo Land Office
SOURCE: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206850>

The town of Kickapoo seemed to have been planned as a competitor of Leavenworth City, although there is no solid evidence of this¹⁵. However, early Kickapoo did seem like the front runner in the race for supremacy. Kickapoo should have been at a disadvantage: it was far smaller than Leavenworth, with less industrial might than its larger neighbor to the south. Only one rail line ran through Kickapoo, while Leavenworth boasted three (Fig. 1). Leavenworth had a riverboat landing point, while Kickapoo did not. For all intents and purposes, Kickapoo should never have been a legitimate contender for anything, when compared to Leavenworth. The reason Kickapoo was able to compete lies with the state of Missouri. “Squatters” from Weston

¹⁵ Moore, *Atlas Map of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 6

poured across the river, flooding Kickapoo with pro-slavery activists who were in direct opposition with abolitionists in Leavenworth¹⁶. Now the economic rivalry between the two cities took on a new, political level. The influx of these Missourians led to a boom in Kickapoo's economy. A steam ferry was established between Weston and Kickapoo, allowing for easier emigration across the river¹⁷. Two steam mills were founded, which helped put Kickapoo closer to a level footing with Leavenworth¹⁸. The *Kickapoo Pioneer* was established as the city's first newspaper, one with a decidedly pro-slavery slant¹⁹. The *Pioneer* lasted until 1885, although without the pro-slavery rhetoric of its earlier days.

Then there came the election of October 1855, which was to determine which city would become the seat of Leavenworth County. Despite the official population being 500, the results from the election showed that Kickapoo boasted a population of a little less than 1,000²⁰. Even with the influx of new "residents" (Fig. 4), Kickapoo was unable to secure the county seat, although the *Pioneer* erroneously declared otherwise²¹. That honor instead went to the town of Delaware, which sprang into existence the year of the election, also established by pro-slavery supporters from Missouri²². Although the number of ballots cast had Delaware winning the election (with Leavenworth coming in dead last), it only became the county seat for a few years²³. Suspecting foul play in the election results, the Kansas Legislature ordered another election held in October 1857²⁴. This election saw Kickapoo winning with just 36 votes over Leavenworth. Once again, foul play was suspected, and a third election was held in January

¹⁶ Moore, *Atlas Map of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 7

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ A.B. Hazzard, "A.B. Hazzard, editor and proprietor," *Kansas Pioneer*, February 28, 1855

²⁰ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 138

²¹ A.B. Hazzard, "Great Triumph! Kickapoo City the County Seat of Leavenworth," *Kansas Pioneer*, October 10, 1855

²² Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 143

²³ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 142

²⁴ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 143

1858. To ensure no fraudulent votes were cast, Governor Denver dispatched troops from Fort Leavenworth under the command of the U.S. Marshall to oversee the polls. Although the troops counted 400 votes cast, the returns showed the number cast was 905²⁵. Knowing for sure there had been fraud committed, the entire case went into litigation²⁶. Eventually Leavenworth won the county seat, permanently²⁷. This was the death knell for Delaware, which disappeared within a couple of years. Kickapoo also began to lose influence as popular opinion in Kansas swung more and more towards an anti-slavery “Free State” attitude²⁸.



Figure 4: Voting at Kickapoo, Kansas Territory 1855
SOURCE: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/207959>

After the loss of the county seat, Kickapoo began to experience a steady decline. Many Missourians returned to their homes leaving a large section of the town on the banks of the river deserted. This part of Kickapoo was the first to go, as flood waters reclaimed the area²⁹ (Fig.5).

²⁵ J.W. Morris, “Kickapoo,” *The Leavenworth Times*, January 9, 1858

²⁶ “Looking Back: Leavenworth: Competition for County Seat,” *The Leavenworth Times*, January 28, 2010

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Hall, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 143

²⁹ Moore, *Atlas Map of Leavenworth County, Kansas*. pg. 7

The remaining residents of the town began to migrate to the country, leaving more and more of Kickapoo abandoned. This is not to say that Kickapoo died off as quickly as Delaware had before it. The steam and saw mills continued operations for the next four decades. The steam ferry continued its operations as well.



Figure 5: Kickapoo Bottoms today
SOURCE: Author's Collection, Photo taken 15 April 2012,
Old Kickapoo Town site, Leavenworth County, KS

Kickapoo returned to the spotlight in the 1870s and '80s, due to one of its most prominent citizens and his world famous son. Isaac Cody was one of the earliest settlers in the Salt Creek Valley region, arriving in 1854³⁰. He established a hotel, farm, and a small store just outside of town. So popular was his hotel in political circles that it became known as “Cody’s precinct,” a title it retained until the hotel was accidentally destroyed by fire³¹. If Isaac Cody was popular, he didn’t hold a candle to his son, William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, the famous Indian fighter and entertainer. Buffalo Bill visited the family homestead numerous times, even after his parents died.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

The limelight was short lived, however. More and more people began leaving both the town and township of Kickapoo. Farms were sold out to others, businesses closed, the ferry ceased operation, and the population continued to fall. The land office closed in 1875, causing more settlers to leave.³² By 1910 there were only 200 residents living in town, down from the 1,000 of 60 years ago. That same year, the post office closed its doors. In the eyes of the government, Kickapoo was dead. As of today, there is nothing of Kickapoo town remaining except a small neighborhood of privately owned homes, Sacred Heart Catholic Church (which is only used for midnight mass on Christmas Eve -- Fig.6), and the cemetery³³. It is hard to imagine, seeing what little remains of Kickapoo that this town was once a major player in early Kansas politics.

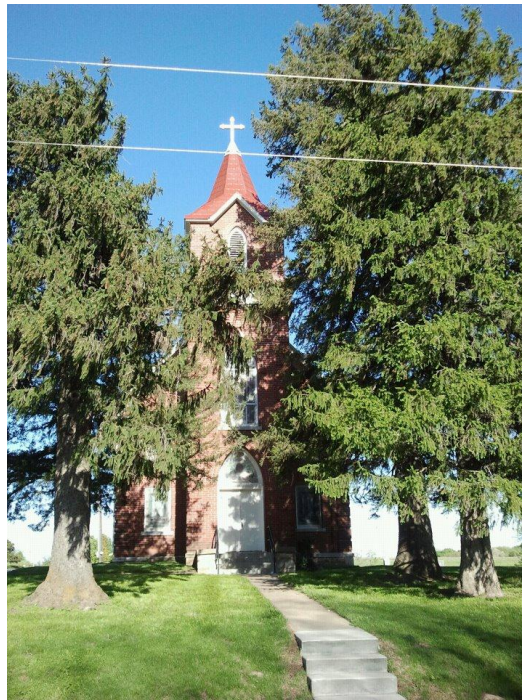


Figure 6: Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Kickapoo
SOURCE: Author's Collection, photo taken 15 April 2012,
Old Kickapoo town site, Leavenworth County, KS

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Author's Field Notes, Old Kickapoo town site, Leavenworth County, KS 31 March 2012

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