

Irish Immigration in Springdale, Alexandria Township, Leavenworth County, Kansas 1860-1907

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The year is 1860. Abraham Lincoln has just been elected President; the nation is rumbling down the track toward civil war, and in a county named Leavenworth in the territory of Kansas, a new town called Springdale is founded on 24 September 1860¹. The town is located in a lush, hilly area on the banks of Big Stranger Creek, only a few miles northwest of the city of Leavenworth and close to the Missouri River². With so much water, Springdale is home to a lot of farmland, which is no doubt a big reason the town became so attractive to population groups who were heavily agricultural by nature. One of these groups, which began settling the area shortly after the Civil War, was Irish Catholics. These Irish settlers were all mostly family groups from the same parts of Ireland, who mostly fled their native land during the great Irish Potato Famine of the late 1840's and began an amazing exodus across the United States before finally settling for good in the Springdale region. But while colony settlements in Kansas often didn't survive, the town of Springdale shows that Kansas was a safe haven for Irish settlers.

Springdale was the second town founded in Alexandria Township in the northwestern corner of Leavenworth County, after the short lived town of Alexandria. Alexandria itself was founded by primarily pro-slavery men who founded the town in the belief that the area held rich coal deposits. The Alexandria coal mine and post office were both opened in 1856. However, no coal was ever extracted from the mine, and the post office and mine were both closed in 1857. The few remaining settlers were driven from the town later that same year when Free Staters put it to the torch and burned the town completely to the ground. The town of Springdale was founded at the end of 1860 by Quaker settlers from Pennsylvania, built on the

¹ Kate Battles, "Springdale, Kansas 1855-1994" (Diss., 1994).

² George A. Ogle, *Standard Atlas of Leavenworth County, Kansas* (Chicago: Ogle and Company, 1903).

western side of Big Stranger Creek in Leavenworth County³. This location was most likely chosen because it lay on the Fort Riley mail road, which had become especially important in 1858 when Albert Sydney Johnson, the commander of Fort Leavenworth and future Confederate general, commissioned the construction of a covered wooden bridge across Big Stranger Creek in the area of what would become Springdale⁴. The town was situated on the Fort Riley road, which served as the main mail route between the city of Leavenworth and settlements further west, thus giving it a huge advantage over neighboring towns before the railroads came through.

Although Springdale was originally settled by Quakers, Irish settlement exploded in the region shortly after the end of the Civil War. By 1883, the town was thriving. The town was laid out in a typical plan with four streets running east to west between two major north-south roads (see Fig.1 below). It had three stores, a hotel, a lodge hall, two steam operated saw and grist mills, two churches (one Quaker and one Catholic), a blacksmith shop, two schools and several residences. At its height, the population of Springdale was 1,152, a number it kept until 1905. After this year the population dropped sharply to 908, and continued a steady decline throughout the rest of the century. This population decline is almost certainly what led to the closing of the Springdale post office in 1907 and the slow, but sure, death of the town⁵. Further blows to the town occurred when the St. Thomas Catholic Church was destroyed by fire in 1949⁶, the Springdale general store also was destroyed by an accidental gas explosion in 1950⁷, and when the famous covered bridge, the oldest in Kansas, was also destroyed as a result of a

³ Ogle, *Standard Atlas of Leavenworth County, Kansas*.

⁴ Albert H. Hindman, "Wooden Bridge Dating From 1858 Still Carries Kansans Across Stranger Creek," *Kansas City Times*, June 14, 1952.

⁵ Battles, "Springdale, Kansas 1855-1994."

⁶ Battles, "Springdale, Kansas 1855-1994."

⁷ "Springdale General Store Burns." *The Leavenworth Times*, May 2, 1950.

lightning strike in 1959⁸. As of 2010, there are no longer any businesses or organizations (with the exception of the Springdale Friend’s Church) in Springdale, and only a few residents still call the area home. The Springdale Friend’s Church and five houses are the only buildings that still stand in Springdale.⁹

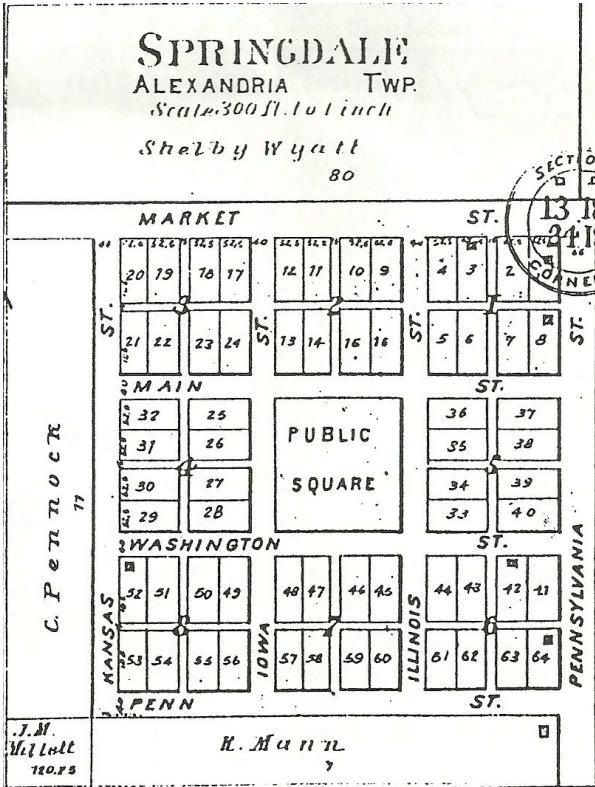


Figure 1: Map of Springdale.

SOURCE: George A. Ogle, *Standard Atlas of Leavenworth County, Kansas*.

The town became the focal point of Irish settlement after the Civil War, when a wave of Irish immigrants began settling in the area in the 1870’s. Most of these Irish settlers

⁸ "Old Bridge Destroyed By Flames." *The Leavenworth Times*, 1959.

⁹ Author’s Field Notes, Springdale.

were family groups, primarily Mohan's, Courtney's, and McQuillan's¹⁰. Surprisingly, the Irish Catholic settlers integrated well with the Protestant Quakers, and soon over took them as the largest population in Springdale. These Irish settlers founded the St. Thomas Catholic Church and Cemetery in 1879, which lasted until 1949, when a fire caused by lightning caused the building to burn to the ground¹¹.

To get a sense of what kind of journey these Irish settlers went through, let's look at the Mohan family. John Mohan and his family came to America from County Armagh, Ireland, in 1852 and headed for Iowa. They moved to the Springdale area in the 1860's and were one of the first Irish families to settle in the farm land around the town. They were quickly joined by several other members of the Mohan family and the Mohan's cousins, the McQuillians. John's children briefly left Springdale for Colorado to mine ore, but came back to the area after three of his children died. The family remained in the area until the 1980's when most of the younger generation moved to Leavenworth.

It may seem amazing that the Irish came in such droves as families, but it is quite plausible considering the fact that they had fled everything they had ever known and come to a strange country in which they knew nothing and no one. As such, it is unsurprising that so many Irish immigrated in family groups and settled in the same general areas. These colony settlements helped make the people in them to feel safe in an environment of familiarity. But unfortunately, they also brought doom upon the regions they were located.

The death of the town of Springdale was, in hindsight, hardly a surprising phenomenon. The introduction of the railroads rendered the Fort Riley mail road unnecessary,

¹⁰ Ogle, *Standard Atlas of Leavenworth County, Kansas*.

¹¹ Battles, "Springdale, Kansas 1855-1994."

the colony type settlement of the Irish and Quakers was a far less effective means of settlement when compared with cumulative towns, and the fact that the town was located so near the much larger city of Leavenworth were all events that conspired to bring about the death of Springdale. However, Springdale's settlement also shows that the great wealth of farmland in Kansas was of enormous appeal to Irish immigrants fleeing the hunger and destitution brought on by the potato famine and offered a land of new opportunity for farming and a better life. And so, in the end, while Springdale was a failed town, it shows that Kansas was a land of opportunity for millions of people seeking a better life.

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