

How A Man, His Plan, and His Company Created The Early History of Americus, Kansas 1857-1897

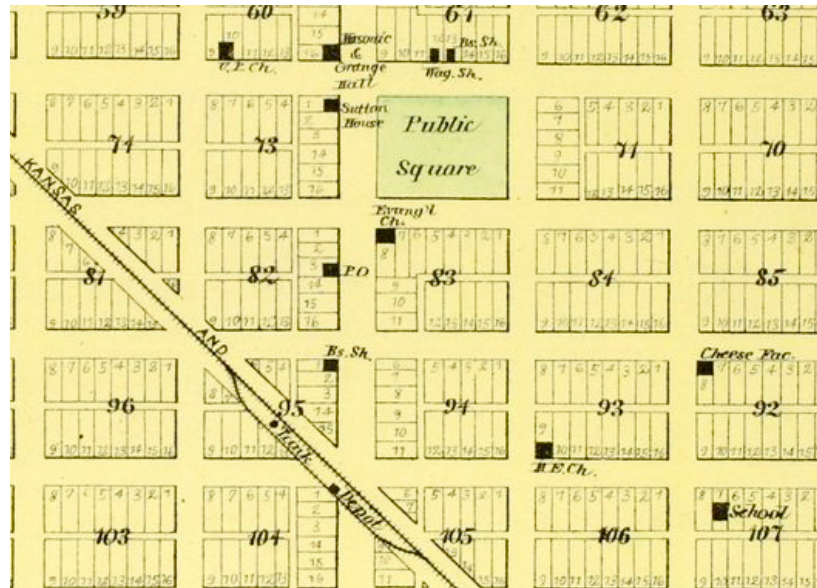


Figure 1: Portion of the 1895 plat map showing the town of Americus located in Emporia Township, Lyon County, Kansas. The Sutton House, Evangelical Church, Cheese Factory, School, as well as the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT) Railroad can be seen in this section of the plat map. Source: KansasMemory.org

Halston Ladd

History 533

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Fall 2012

This essay portrays the founding of Americus, Kansas, and how it became one of the proudest populations in late 19th century Kansas. Through the ambitions of Arthur Baker, and the other fifteen members of the Americus Town Company, Americus thrived. This study includes early maps of Americus, articles from the town newspaper, and photographs of Americus town site.

On an elevated slip of land located on the north side of the Neosho River, overlooking a beautiful scope of country, Judge Arthur Inghram Baker picked the ideal location to let his imagination thrive. Baker laid off a plot of land the size of one square mile, containing 640 acres, the southern tip lying two miles from the banks of the Neosho River¹. If you refer to Figure 4, you will see the proximity of Americus to the Neosho River. Arthur Baker formed The Americus Town Company to stake out the future of a town that would satisfy his ambition for expansion. Although Americus persists today, it is a small community; I will be focusing on the time period from 1857 to 1897, tracing the founding and business vision for the original town. After the 1920s, automobiles decreased traffic into Americus significantly, depleting the population. This once extremely active society has diminished to just over 500 people, but the spirit of Arthur Baker and his ambitions still ring true throughout Americus today.

Judge Arthur Inghram Baker, born in 1824 in Iowa, was the second child of Joshua Wells Baker and Agnes Miller Inghram². Arthur originally came to Kansas to work as a blacksmith and an agent on the Sac and Fox Indian Reservation. Upon learning that Kansas would be opened for settlement, Arthur and his wife, Susan Sewell, and daughter Sarah, moved to Breckenridge County (now known as Lyon County), settling on Rock Creek in 1854³. Baker soon became interested in establishing a county seat and decided the best action to take to complete the task was to establish a team of men, to scout out land for the county seat. Baker selected fifteen members from the community of Rock Creek to assist him in his endeavors. The members of the company included: G.H.

¹ Ted McDaniel. *Our Land: A History of Lyon County Kansas*. 1976. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia Kansas. Pg. 2.

² T.J. White. *The Americus Sesquicentennial Book 1857-2007*. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia, Kansas. Pg. 132.

³ Ibid.

Reese, E. Yeakley, J. Moser, E. Columbia, Wm. Grimsley, E. Goddard, N.B. Swisher, J.W. Voak, W. Thompson, B. Barrett, J. Voak, and officers Thomas C. Hill treasurer; David Swim secretary; and Arthur Baker president. Thus, The Americus Town Company was established, with Baker serving as president.

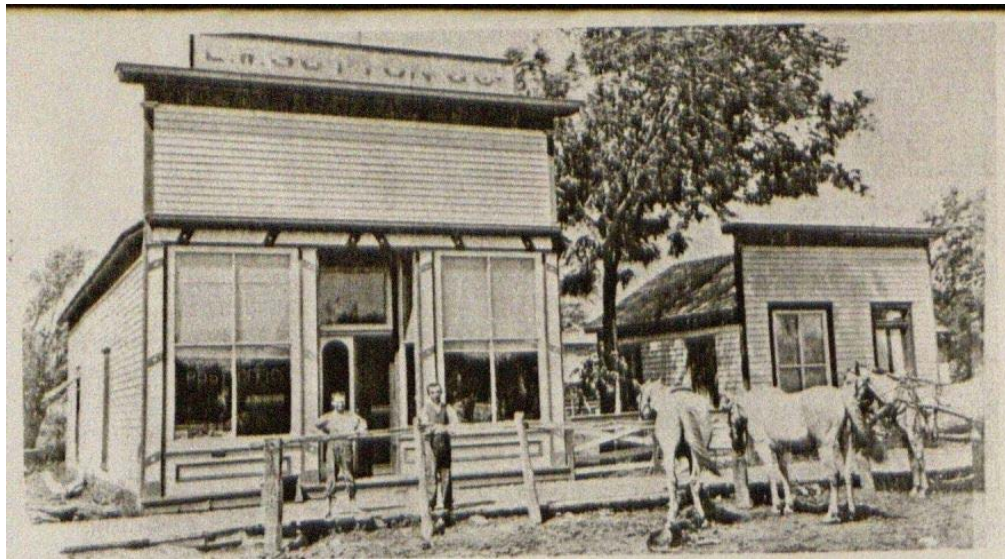


Figure 2. Post Office of Americus, KS, or otherwise known as the L.W. Sutton Building. The building was located southwest of Americus Public Square. Source: Lyon County Historical Archives.

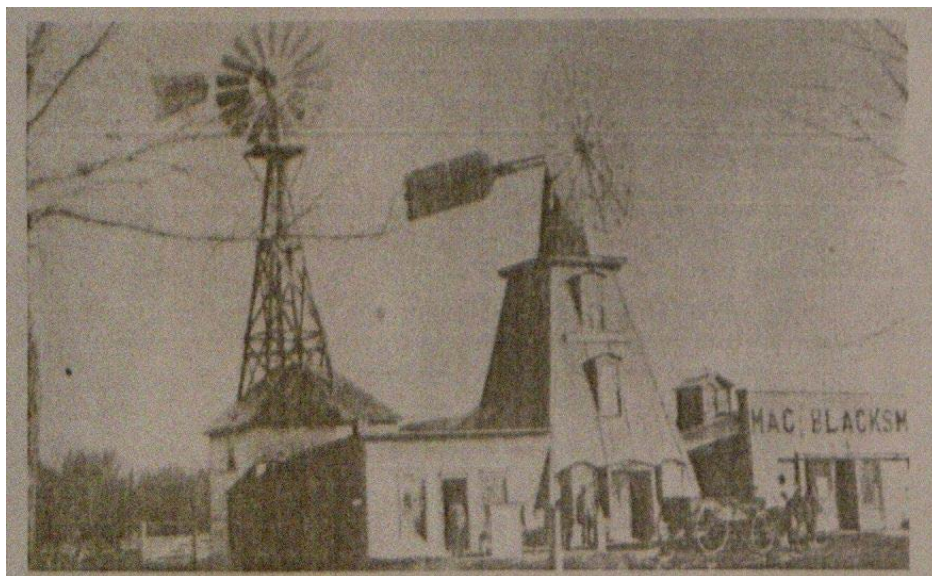


Figure 3. Wind-powered Grist Mill, located on Broadway, between Main Street and 5th Ave., north of Americus Public Square. Source: Lyon County Historical Archives.

The land was purchased on March 10, 1857 at the land office of Lecompton, and Baker ensured that every investor had frontage property on Main Street of Americus⁴. Among the first buildings constructed were the post office, owned by L.W. Sutton (Fig. 2), a grist mill to provide feed for livestock (Fig. 3), and a hotel called the Americus House (later known as the Sutton House). Miss Alberta Pantle, a librarian at the Kansas State Historical Society said of the beginnings of the town: “Water is obtainable at a moderate depth. A saw mill will soon be on the ground, so that lumber can be easily had. Building stone is abundantly had in the vicinity. This opening is favorable to the person who wishes to invest and live in a Kansas town”⁵. The last of this quote speaks exactly of Baker’s ambition for the town. He wished the town to be somewhere that a family would want to live, raise children, and live out the rest of their lives.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Laura French. *History of Emporia and Lyon County*. Heritage Books, Inc. 1929. Copy at Lyon County Archives. Pg. 129.

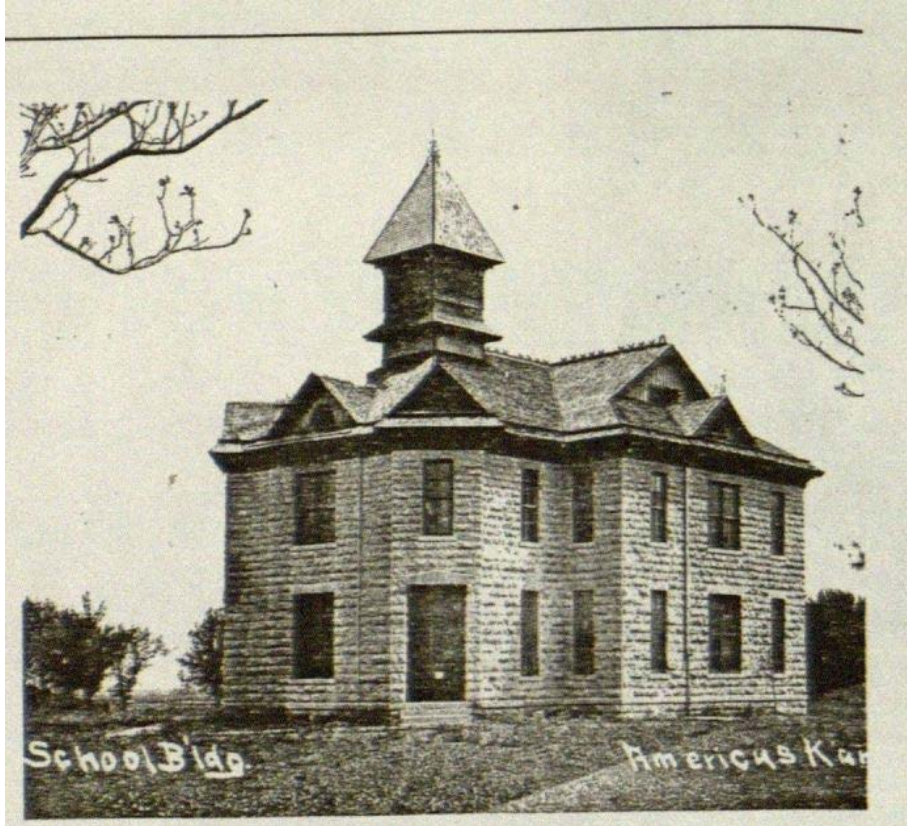


Figure 4. Old Americus Grade School Building in 1869. Source: Lyon County Historical Archives

In 1858 School District No. 2 was organized within Americus and G.W. Torrance became the school's teacher. The log schoolhouse was replaced the next year by a framed building made of bricks (Fig. 3)⁶. In the fall of 1895, C.A. Kent (Fig. 4) arrived in Americus to serve as the grade school principal and to teach the seventh and eighth graders⁷. Other seventh and eighth grade teachers had earlier taught some high school subjects to students who wanted to go further than the eighth grade, but Mr. Kent created a printed leaflet which offered two years of high school work to "win a high school diploma"⁸. Only a handful of students took the opportunity of the high school diploma,

⁶ Ted McDaniel. *Our Land: A History of Lyon County Kansas*. 1976. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia Kansas. Pg. 24.

⁷ Ted McDaniel. *Our Land: A History of Lyon County Kansas*. 1976. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia Kansas. Pg. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*

but the students had to provide their own means of tuition, so two years later, lack of funds caused the program to fold in 1897. Although funds for the high school were low, the grade school remained active. Economics were a priority for Arthur Baker and his comrades, so the town set out to find other ways to invest.

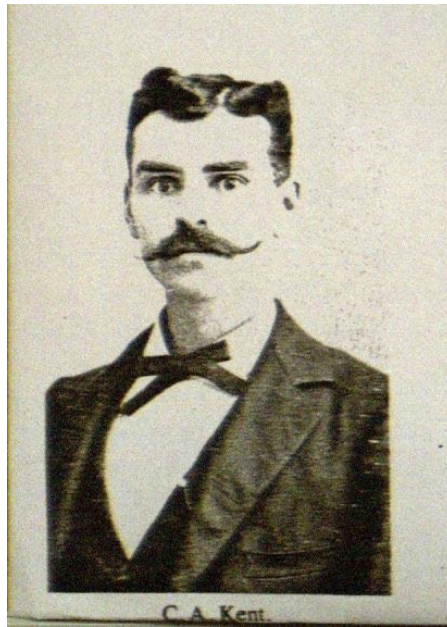


Figure 5. Photo of C.A. Kent: Principal and teacher of Americus grade school beginning in 1895.

Source: Lyon County Historical Archives.

After the city was organized and the town site laid out, there came a gradual growth of population. By the early eighties the town had grown to a population between 400 and 500 people. This brought the demand for certain types of economic and civic advancement⁹. Many of the people wanted laws and the enforcement of them. Others wanted city streets, sidewalks, and some kind of herd law that would control loose livestock. As all of this took money, the citizens wanted to organize in such a way that they could levy taxes and sell bonds¹⁰.

⁹ Ted McDaniel. *Our Land: A History of Lyon County Kansas*. 1976. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia Kansas. Pg. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The introduction of railroads into Kansas would bring the business to Americus. The first railroad cars of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad reached Americus on November 29, 1869. Progressing at about a mile per day, the MKT railroad continued southward and made connections with the Sedalia division on February 4, 1871. The people of the town said it was the first time you could live in Americus and get out of the state without walking. Though the MKT was built with the help of economic tycoons, the railroad has been listed as one of the most important events in the life of Americus. As we have learned in Dr. Morgan's lectures, the railroad truly revolutionized small towns, by providing loads of mass-produced goods for consumers¹¹. The railroad provided a steady income for Americus, until the introduction of automobiles in Kansas after 1900. Streets became much improved and by the 1920s paved roadways emerged, providing people the ability to travel from town-to-town on their own accord, not having to depend on the train. The increase in motor traffic became a competitor to the railroad, and the rail lines began to lose business. The emergence of automobiles led Americus to a slow decrease in growth.

The Americus Town Company and its leader deserve to be remembered, although Arthur Baker lived only five years in Americus. Baker had unfortunately come in contact with a family called the Andersons, who disagreed with a few of his ideas. In July of 1862, the Andersons set Baker's store ablaze with Baker inside. A shot was heard from inside, leaving the town to believe Baker shot himself to avoid burning to death¹². Dead at age 38, Baker left no known descendents. All records of his daughter, Sarah, stop at the

¹¹ Morgan Morgan. *Effect of Railroads on Small Towns*. Lecture. Nov 2012.

¹² T.J. White. *The Americus Sesquicentennial Book 1857-2007*. Copy at Lyon Archives, Emporia, Kansas. Pg. 132.

¹³ Ibid.

1860 census¹³. Although his time in Americus was brief, Arthur Baker left a lasting imprint on the history of Americus, Kansas.

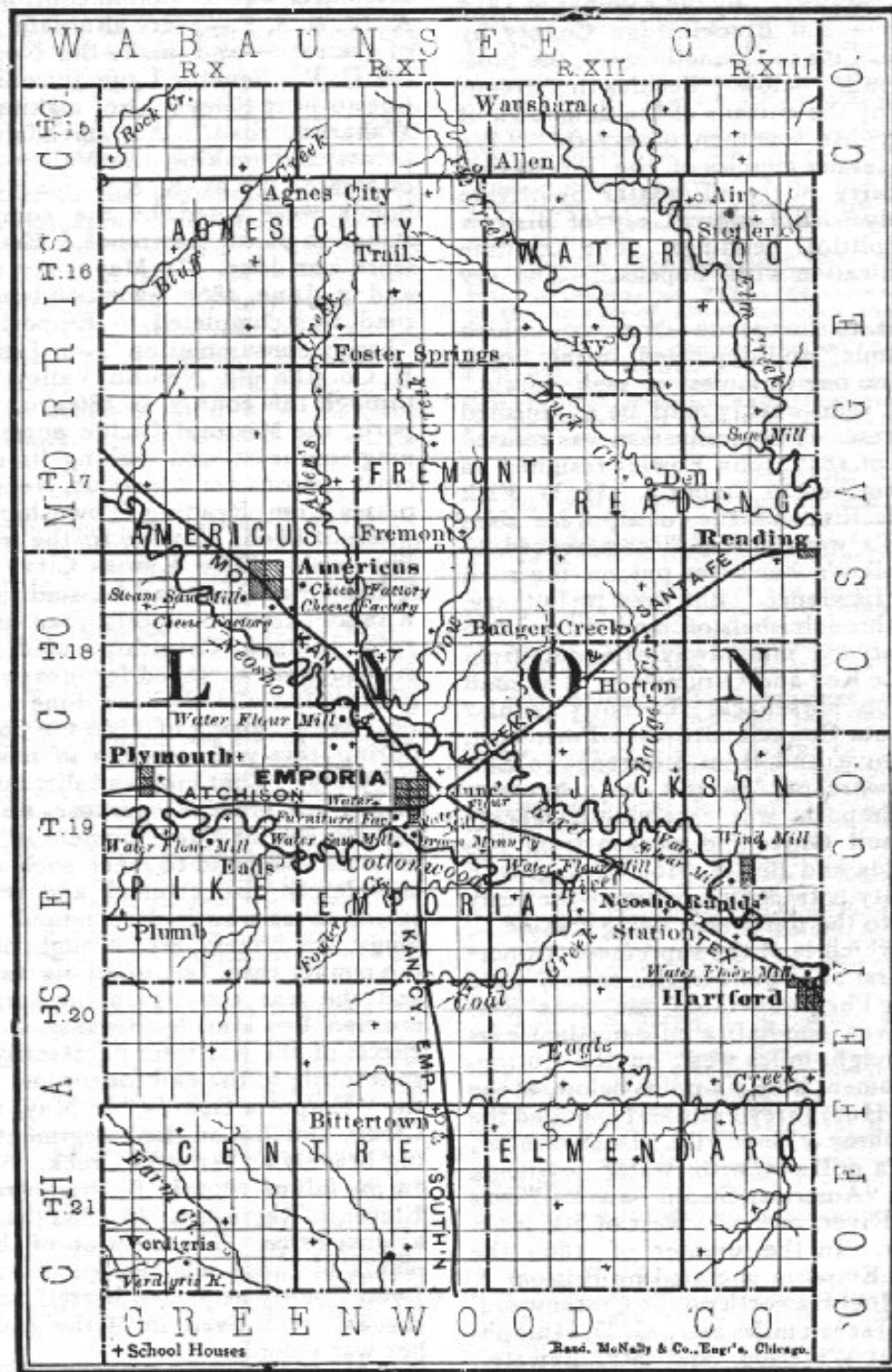


Figure 6. Plat map of Americus, Lyon County, KS. Circa 1883. Found at
<http://minerdescent.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/lyon-county-kansas-1883.jpg>

Bibliography

Americus Plat Map. <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209380/page/29>

Americus Plat Map. <http://minerdescent.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/lyon-county-kansas-1883.jpg>

French, Laura M. *History of Emporia and Lyon County*. Heritage Books, Inc. Bowie, MD., 1929. Copy at Lyon County Historical Archives.

Morgan, Morgan, Dr. "Effect of Railroads on Small Towns." Manhattan, KS. Nov. 2012. Lecture.

T.J. White. *The Americus Sesquicentennial Book 1857-2007*. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia, Kansas. Copy at Lyon County Historical Archives.

Ted McDaniel. *Our Land: A History of Lyon County Kansas*. 1976. Copy at Lyon County Archives, Emporia Kansas.