

**A Model Frontier Community: America City  
1857-1932  
Nemaha County, Kansas**



**Figure 1.** Photograph of the entrance of America City's cemetery, located a few miles west of Highway 63 on a gravel road in southern Nemaha County. The cemetery contains the graves of some of the earliest settlers in the county. SOURCE: Photo taken by author.

**Jessica Hermesch  
Chapman Center for Rural Studies  
Spring 2014**

This study illustrates the lost town of America City in Nemaha County, Kansas, from its hopeful founding to its imminent decline. Originally built at what would become the southern edge of the county, America City's history exhibits an almost perfect case study model of frontier settlements in Kansas. This study includes newspaper references, an early plat map of the town, and photographs of present-day America City.

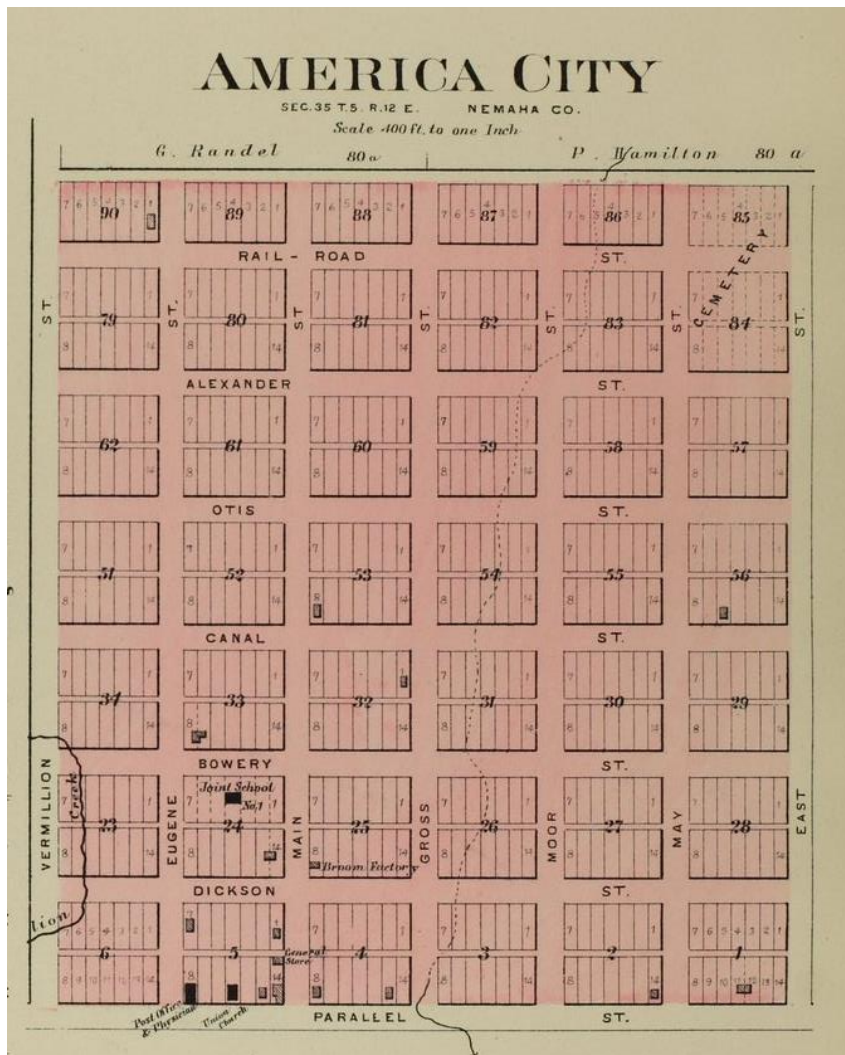
Tucked away among the trees in the Red Vermillion Township of Nemaha County, Kansas, sits the last remnants of a town that once thrived and prospered. Based on the facts of the town, from how and where it was settled, the town's businesses, and the factors that brought about its end, America City's history represents Kansas's own version of frontier America at the time. Aptly named, America City's history contains major elements common to most of Kansas's early frontier settlements. Studies of towns like America City are perfect for illustrating the multiple factors that characterized many of Kansas's frontier communities. Why towns like America City, with nearly identical characteristics as other nearby towns, died out while others persisted can also be explained through studies such as this one.

## **The Beginning**

Based on modern-day locations, the original America City town site is about six miles southwest of the town of Corning, 50 miles west of Atchison, and about 20 miles south of the Nemaha County seat, Seneca. The Kansas Territorial Legislature approved an area of 380 acres for the America City town site on February 14, 1857, and the site was officially laid out in 1858 with its southern border marked by a road now referred to as "The Parallel."<sup>1</sup> Locals say that the road received its name because it marks the border between Nemaha County and Pottawatomie County; however, historical research provides a more complex background, which will be discussed later in this section. During America City's lifetime, the road was called "Parallel Street," as shown in Figure 2 below.

---

<sup>1</sup> Melvin D. Bruntzel, "Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths," *Quick Reference to Kansas*, accessed April 29, 2014, <http://kansasquickref.omeka.net/items/show/1>.



**Figure 2.** Plat map of the original America City town site. This plat map is a “paper town” map, or a dream map of what the town could be, because America City never actually filled the whole area. Note that the majority of businesses were located at the southern edge of town, near Parallel Street. SOURCE: Meacham’s Illustrated Atlas of Brown and Nemaha Counties, Kansas, 1887; <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/223979/page/91>

According to the *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, the vegetation in the region where America City was plotted was mainly Bluestem Prairie.<sup>2</sup> This means that the rolling, treeless hills of this part of the state were covered in tall grasses characterized by a blue coloration at the base of the

<sup>2</sup> *Native Flora of Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 5

plants.<sup>3</sup> A different map in the atlas shows that the town was also laid out in the Glaciated Region of Kansas, meaning that while there was fertile soil for farmers, there were also a large number of rocks to dig out of fields.<sup>4</sup> The town site was plotted just east of the Red Vermillion River, which would have given the town's residents constant access to fresh water for themselves as well as their livestock and gardens.

How the town itself came to be is a common situation in Kansas history. As soon as Kansas became a territory in 1854, settlers were eager to push west and find new land, which caused a boom in new communities in the eastern portion of the state. America City founders, N.B. McKay, MD, and his two partners, were among countless men sent to locate sites for new towns for these pioneers.<sup>5</sup> Newcomb Ireland, an Atchison businessman, and Samuel Dickson are also mentioned in many sources as founders and are likely the other two names associated with McKay.<sup>6</sup> Ireland inspected the America City town site, which was called America until "City" was added in 1861, and he was then in charge of advertising and gathering settlers.<sup>7</sup> He did this by meeting with immigrants in Atchison, Kansas, which was at the time the first stop for many traveling west because of its perfect location for steamboat and overland staging traffic on the westward curve of the Missouri River.<sup>8</sup>

Like so much else about America City, the residents who eventually settled there can also exemplify historical trends. By 1890, large groups of people just south of the America City site

---

<sup>3</sup> "Big Bluestem," *USDA*, accessed February 2, 2014, [http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg\\_ange.pdf](http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_ange.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Landforms of Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 3

<sup>5</sup> William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883), p. 965

<sup>6</sup> Tom McFarland, "Founding of America City" in *Kansas and Her Pioneers*, (copy at Nemaha County Historical Society, 1886-60, 1870-74), n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Bruntzel, "Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths".

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Morgan J. Morgan, "Lost Kansas Communities," (lecture, Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Kansas State University, Fall 2013).

were identified as Irish immigrants.<sup>9</sup> This corresponds with the significant number of Irish immigrants who traveled north on the Missouri River from New Orleans to escape the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1853.<sup>10</sup> The settlements of Blaine and Holy Cross in Pottawatomie County just to the south of America City were also established by Irish immigrants, who would have followed a similar path.<sup>11</sup> This cluster of predominately Irish communities seems to suggest a settlement area and shows early pioneers' tendency to travel and settle with people with similar beliefs and cultures as their own.

America City's settlers would have been greeted upon arrival in Atchison by Newcomb Ireland, "...who put forth all of his eloquence in describing the country as the garden of Eden, where food stuff was equal if not better than that in Moses time and grew on bushes or fell from the heavens."<sup>12</sup> Ireland's advertising skills paid off when he convinced 13 families of homesteaders to return to the America City site with him; they then traveled by covered wagon across the prairie to the Red Vermillion Riverbanks.<sup>13</sup> America City's earliest residents arrived in May of 1856 with their wagons pulled by teams of oxen, then staked claims to their new land using squatter's rights and built their dirt-floored cabins while using their wagon canopies as tents.<sup>14</sup> This means of transportation across the prairie and early shelter is another strong pattern of town start-ups on the Kansas frontier. Recorded names of the original America City settlers included Dan Benson, Jim Scritchfield, Garrett Randall, Dan Arnold, Harve Randall, W.R. Dean

---

<sup>9</sup> *Group Colonization in Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 42

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, "Lost Kansas Communities"

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Murray, "Lillis, Blaine, and Holy Cross, Marshall and Pottawatomie Counties," *Lost Kansas Communities*, accessed May 20, 2014, <http://lostkscommunities.omeka.net/items/show/146>.

<sup>12</sup> McFarland, "Founding of America City" n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> McFarland, "Founding of America City" n.p.

and Sanford Eddy.<sup>15</sup> In another example of America City as a frontier community model, these early settlers' names have been passed down through generations and can be found in Nemaha County and the surrounding area to this day.

## **The Middle Years**

Like most other Kansas frontier communities, the first few public structures built in America City were a post office and a general store.<sup>16</sup> These linked the town with news from the outside world and also supplied the residents with goods that they couldn't produce themselves. A school and a church were also constructed right away, showing that education and religion were important to the town's residents. The church was built on Parallel Street at the south edge of town, and is labeled "Union Church" on the plat map in Figure 2. However, the denomination that operated the church is unclear. One source sites that it was a Methodist church, and was built in 1861.<sup>17</sup> References to the town's school refer to a United Brethren Church whose members were present from the founding of the town and built a church soon after.<sup>18</sup> In addition, there are meeting minutes from the forming of the Union Church of America City in 1884. H.B. Channell, John Mills, Isaac McKee, R.D. Cook, N.B. McKay, L. Brenner, J.H. Armstrong, Geo. Blanckly, John Young, E.M. Neiman and John Alexander are all listed as the original church corperate (sic) for that church.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that it was a United Brethren Church, which is closely tied to Methodism, and later combined into a single Union Church in 1884. Whatever denomination

---

<sup>15</sup> "Early Day City of Aspirations Now Lone Store", *Topeka Capital Journal* (Topeka, Kansas), November 6, 1927.

<sup>16</sup> Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Bruntzel, "Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths".

<sup>18</sup> F.F. Crevecoeur, *Historical and Biographical Early Pioneer Sketches: Pottawatomie and Nemaha Counties From Earliest Settlement to the Year 1877* (Printed in the Onaga Republican-Winter 1901-1902) p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Meeting Minutes Forming the Union Church: America City, Nemaha County, Kansas, October 11, 1884, *Topeka Genealogical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 18: p. 15, Kansas State Historical Society.

claimed the church, the structure was at some point moved north next to the school building where it sits today, as seen in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3.** Photograph of the dilapidated remnant of America City’s church, which now sits next to the abandoned school building. Notice that the steeple was removed and large doors were added so the structure could be used as a garage at some point. SOURCE: Photo by author.

Any official records from or about the America City school are very hard to discover. This may have been because the school was referred to as a “Joint District,” which meant that it was not under the jurisdiction of Nemaha County, leaving record keeping and storage up to the town. The two America City school district officers listed with the county officers in 1913-1914

were J.S. Armstrong, Treasurer, and W.H. Higgins, Director.<sup>20</sup> The first school building recorded in the town of America City was a log school house built in 1857, the first year the town was incorporated. Like most other frontier Kansas communities, education and religion were one in the same and the school building was considered a logical public gathering place. The United Brethren Church of America City is recorded to have held church services in the building between 1858 and 1859, before their church was constructed. As the town grew and prospered, the need for a larger and more modern building became apparent. Between 1864 and 1865, bonds were voted to the amount of \$1,100 for a new school. Residents Charles Grover and Orrin Foote did the work building the school, which was constructed using native lumber and doors and windows that were brought in from Leavenworth.<sup>21</sup> When finished, this walnut-sided structure served the town's residents and their children until the loss of residents forced school consolidations. The building still exists today, and is seen in Figure 4 below.

---

<sup>20</sup> W.R. Anthony, County Superintendent, *School District Officers and Teachers of Nemaha County, Kansas, 1913-1924*.

<sup>21</sup> F.F. Crevecoeur, *Historical and Biographical Early Pioneer Sketches*, p.56.





**Figure 4.** Photograph of the south side and probably main entrance of the America City school building. The roof appears to have been redone with tin sheeting at some point, which has preserved the structure fairly well for being abandoned for decades. SOURCE: Photo by author.

When it came to other businesses in America City, the town's location is revealed to be much more purposeful than just to be near a river. The "Parallel Road" that area residents refer to today was actually originally an overland trail. The trail ran across the state from Atchison to Denver in a mostly straight line, so it was called the Parallel Road trail.<sup>22</sup> Founding America City along the trail immediately established it as a part of the carrying trade, which involved all aspects of transporting people and freight west across Kansas, since railroads hadn't reached that far yet. Being placed along the trail provided traffic for America City businesses, as well as a need for specific kinds of goods and services. By 1878, there were three general stores, a hotel, a harness and shoemaker, a wagon-maker, a horse dealer, and a blacksmith shop. All of these early

---

<sup>22</sup> Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide*, p. 34.

businesses would have made a major income from people traveling and working along the Parallel Road trail.<sup>23</sup>

N.B. McKay also went on to help found the town of Old Corning, and then Corning, six miles to the north, but he continued to live and serve as a country doctor in America City.<sup>24</sup>

McKay and his partner, Newcomb Ireland, both served as post masters for the town as well.<sup>25</sup>

Railroads eventually began to stretch across Kansas, and the Central Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad was built through Corning, missing America City by six miles. However, the town still thrived for awhile from the still-popular Parallel Road trail. On March 26 of 1870, Tom McFarland and two other young men arrived in Corning on the Central Branch. Their goal was to end up south of Topeka to find work, but along the way they stopped to stay with friends at America City, which McFarland referred to as, “at that time the hub of civilization.”<sup>26</sup> However, America City’s luck couldn’t last for long.

## **The End of a Carrying Trade Town**

America City was one name on the long list of towns deeply damaged by the construction of railroads across Kansas. Towns with railroads suddenly had a boom of business and economy from travelers and workers on the railroads, while towns without tracks running through them were often bypassed completely. In cases like America City, once the railroads came along and offered faster and safer transportation, the need for overland routes and trails died out, and the carrying trade industry collapsed. The Parallel Road trail became obsolete in the 1870s, but

---

<sup>23</sup> Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler’s Guide*, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* p. 965

<sup>25</sup> Bruntzel, “Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths”

<sup>26</sup> Tom McFarland, *Kansas and Her Pioneers*, (Nemaha County Historical Society, 1886-60, 1870-74), n.p.

America City's residents remained hopeful at first.<sup>27</sup> The *Seneca Courier* printed an article in 1878 that stated, "the extension of the Kansas Central Railroad west from Leavenworth has hurt the prospects of the town as a trading point; but there is an excellent country surrounding America City, and the farmers and stock raisers are all of an enterprising kind, and will continue to prosper."<sup>28</sup>

Around the time that the railroad was built through Corning, America City had been offered a proposition for a small railroad to be built through the town, but the settlers declined, probably because they thought their Parallel Road trail brought in enough business already. Unfortunately, this meant that the Narrow Gauge Road was built four miles to the south instead, near the town of Havensville in Pottawatomie County.<sup>29</sup> America City settlers persisted for awhile on farming and the last few overland travelers moving west on the Parallel Road trail, but eventually the competition with Corning and Havensville took a major toll. Business owners were forced to relocate to where they would attract more customers, and the loss of population caused the town's school to close. The final blow for America City was the Great Depression, which took the last bit of rural farming economy that the residents had managed to maintain, and the town's post office closed forever in 1932.<sup>30</sup>

Over the following decades, the land on which America City had grown was bought and sold by various people and mainly used as farm land and storage. The late Morris Molineux of Nemaha County owned the property for many years, beginning not long after the post office was closed.<sup>31</sup> Being native to the area, it is likely that Molineux knew many stories of America City and its people, but like many of Kansas' lost towns, the stories were lost over generations. In

---

<sup>27</sup> Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide*, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> *Seneca Courier* (Seneca, KS), March 1, 1878.

<sup>29</sup> McFarland, *Kansas and Her Pioneers*, n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide*, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Rodney Cole, e-mail message to author, March 7, 2014.

addition to the large, hilly cemetery northeast of the original town site as it appeared on the original plat map, the only remaining structures of America City's existence are the original church and a deserted school. At some point in time, someone had attempted to convert the school building into a home and used the church structure as a garage, but both buildings have long since been abandoned. This practice of converting structures for new and totally different purposes is commonly seen across rural Kansas, and often extends the lives of these buildings for at least a few more years. In this case, the church's steeple was removed and now lies decaying next to the building, while the structure itself is in surprisingly solid condition, as shown in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5.** Photograph of the church steeple that was removed from America City's church when it was moved from its original location. The inside of the church contains garage and shop equipment along the walls, but the original architecture and wainscoting are still apparent. SOURCE: Photo by author.

The school building has deteriorated over time as well, but also still preserves signs of its past. The entryway features a long coat rack for the former students, and two chalkboards are still intact on the walls of the main classroom area. Figure 6 and Figure 7 below show some more of the interior details of the building.



**Figure 6.** Photograph of one of the two chalkboards still on the walls of the abandoned America City school building. This chalkboard hangs next to the back door in the north half of the main classroom. SOURCE: Photo by author.



**Figure 7.** Photograph of the convertible wall made of folding doors that divided the main room of the school in half. The building still contains a variety of furniture left behind by an owner who attempted to convert the structure into a home. SOURCE: Photo by author.

True to frontier Kansas community tradition, the America City cemetery appears to hold some of the most complete records and evidence of the lost town's existence. A simple sign with an arrow directing the way can be seen from a highway, and is the only reference to America City most people native to the area have ever noticed. The cemetery itself is spread out across a wide lot lined with trees on two sides, with the other two facing rolling farmland. The names of approximately 460 people who have come and gone are carved into stone there; defying against the years that have tried to bring an end to the memory of their hometown. Husbands, wives and children all record the arrival and settlement of a hopeful community in the earliest years of the Kansas frontier and their descendents. The headstones, in all different levels of intricacy, can show an outbreak of disease that wiped out large groups of residents, mainly children. They can also tell the story of widowers and remarriages, while the symbols and inscriptions on the stones represent the life the person buried below. Examples of the different headstones and how they represent the lives of the original settlers and their families can be seen in Figure 8 and Figure 9 below.



**Figure 8.** Photograph of an elaborate headstone in the America City Cemetery. Notice the name Higgins at the bottom; this was likely a close relative of W.H. Higgins, an early America City resident involved with the town's school. SOURCE: Photo by author.



**Figure 9.** Photograph of a headstone in the America City Cemetery that was damaged by a fallen tree limb caused by a storm in the winter of 2013-2014. This grave appears to be that of a child of N.B. McKay, an America City founder, and his wife Chloe. Headstones like these illustrate some of the struggles and heartache of the early frontier Kansans. SOURCE: Photo by author.



The history of towns like America City, towns founded in the initial rush of excitement for new, open land in Kansas, often seem to follow the same themes. America City's history can stand as a model of these traits and be used to illustrate what the world was like for Kansas's earliest residents. America City being built along a trail and thriving on the business it brought is not an uncommon story. The migration pattern of its residents, their occupations, and even the railroad that condemned the town are not a unique occurrence. However, the people that lived there, as well as their stories, are exclusive to them and deserve to be recorded and remembered. The history of towns like America City helps us better understand what motivated people to settle in the newly opened Kansas territory with such big dreams, despite the hardships. The businesses, school and church demonstrate what was important to the townspeople, and looking at the surrounding area today will show how these values have persisted through generations, even after the town was gone. In cases like these, studying the past can explain the present and give people a greater understanding of the world around them. America City, and thousands of other towns like it, may be gone forever, but their significance in Kansas's history and how they paved the way for future generations will not be forgotten.

## Bibliography

- Anthony, W.R., County Superintendent, *School District Officers and Teachers of Nemaha County, Kansas, 1913-1924*.
- “Big Bluestem,” *USDA*, accessed February 2, 2014,  
[http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg\\_ange.pdf](http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_ange.pdf)
- Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivias and Truths*. Kansas State University: Chapman Center for Rural Studies, 2010. <http://kansasquickref.omeka.net/items/show/1>.
- Cole, Dr. Rodney, e-mail message to author, March 7, 2014.
- Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas*. Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883.
- “Early Day City of Aspirations Now Lone Store,” *Topeka Capital Journal* (Topeka, Kansas), November 6, 1927.
- F.F. Crevecoeur, *Historical and Biographical Early Pioneer Sketches: Pottawatomie and Nemaha Counties From Earliest Settlement to the Year 1877* (Printed in the Onaga Republican-Winter 1901-1902).
- Fitzgerald, Daniel. *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler’s Guide*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988.
- Group Colonization in Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- Landforms of Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- McFarland, Tom. *Kansas and Her Pioneers*. Nemaha County Historical Society, 1886-60, 1870-74.
- Morgan, Dr. Morgan J. “Lost Kansas Communities,” Class lecture at the Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Kansas State University, Fall 2013.
- Murray, Stephanie, “Lillis, Blaine, and Holy Cross, Marshall and Pottawatomie Counties,” *Lost Kansas Communities*, accessed May 20, 2014,  
<http://lostkscommunities.omeka.net/items/show/146>.
- Native Flora of Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- Seneca Courier* (Seneca, Kansas), March 1, 1878.