

**“FLAMES BLAZING ABOUT FINISH
ONCE PROSPEROUS TOWN.”**

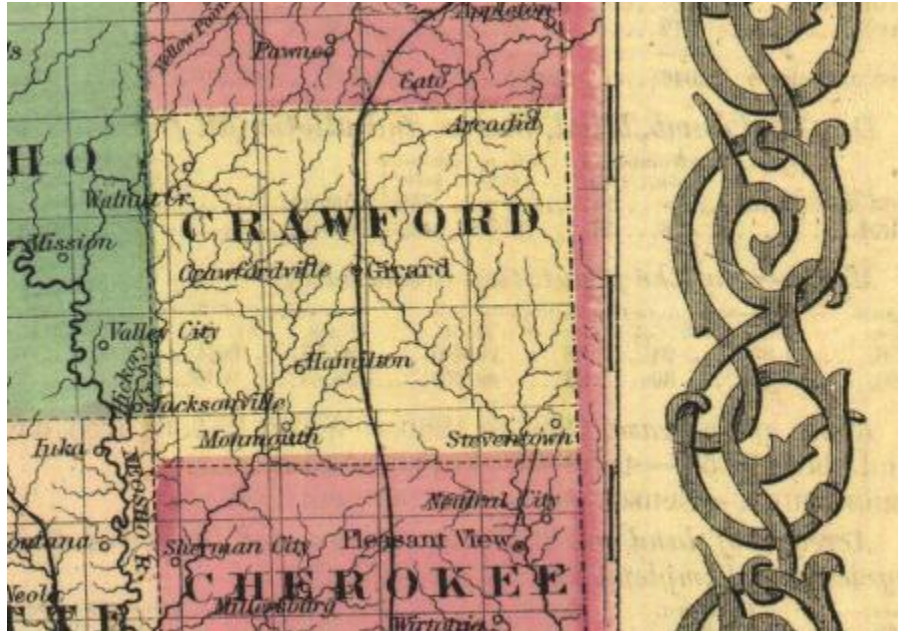


Figure 1: 1869 Colton's Kansas Map showing Jacksonville in the extreme southwest corner of Neosho County. Source: Wichita State University-Special Collections.
<http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/maps>.

Dane Roberts
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On December 17, 1881, the abandoned school in Jacksonville, Kansas, was destroyed by fire. This spelled the end of a small southeastern Kansas community. Jacksonville was located 12 miles northeast of present day Parsons, Kansas, and 10 miles southeast of St. Paul, Kansas, in Lincoln Township, Range 34, in present day Neosho County. Jacksonville grew near the four corners of Neosho, Labette, Cherokee and Crawford counties. In fact, the only existing plat map of the town identifies it originally as being in Labette County. Like many dream towns in Kansas, the plat below shows streets and blocks of houses never occupied.

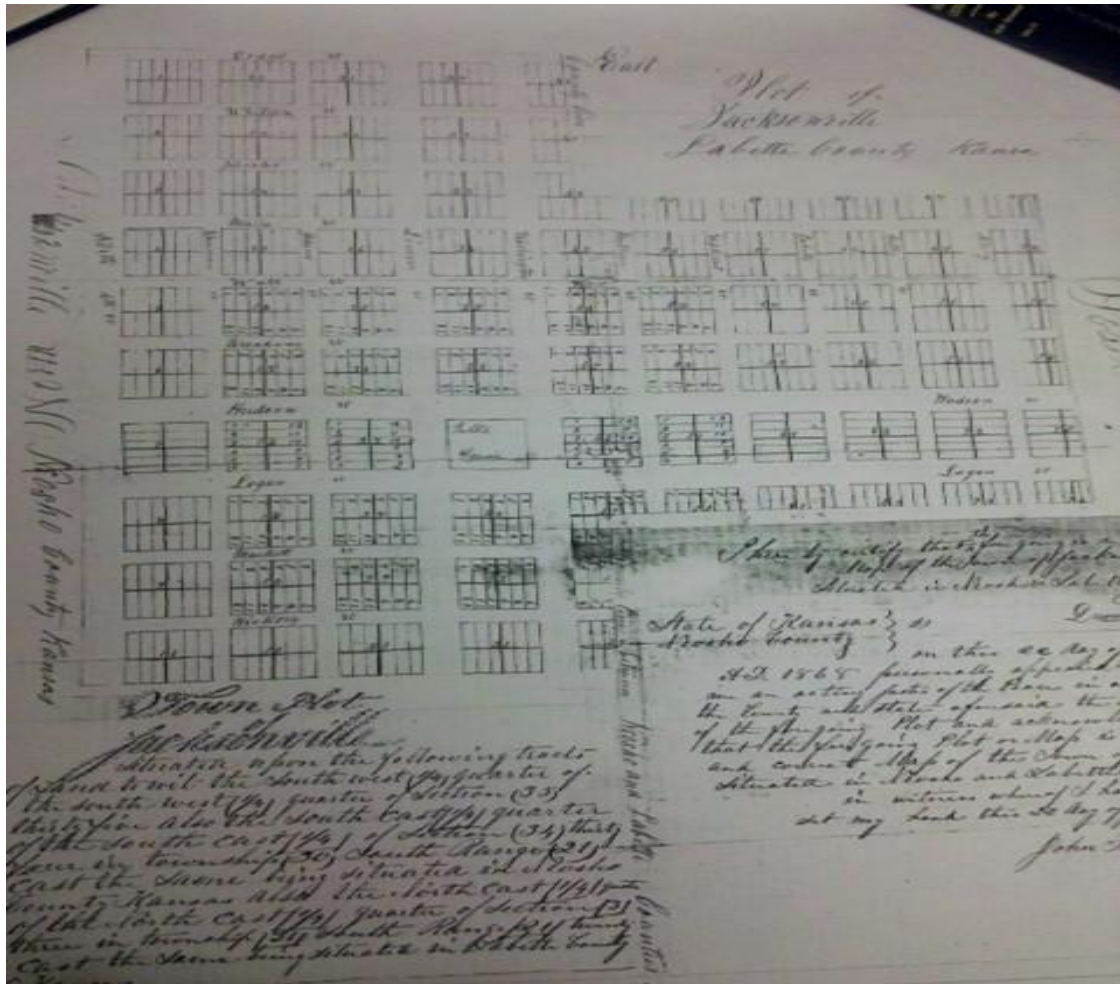


Figure 2: Town Plat of Jacksonville Kansas. Source: Osage Mission-Neosho County Museum, St .Paul, Kansas

An early newspaper account of the 1860s described the area:

“It is beyond doubt the best in all of south-eastern Kansas for grazing and agricultural purposes. For many miles around Jacksonville the county is not surpassed, for beauty of location and richness of soil, the black sandy soil ranging from two to five feet in depth. The immediate vicinity is abundantly supplied with good timber and stone for excellent quality building purposes.”¹

Going to Jacksonville, I didn't know what to expect. After doing all my research, I knew there was a town somewhere but just didn't know exactly where it originally was located or what I was going to come across as we journeyed through the town itself. Growing up just twelve miles away in Parsons, I figured I would have heard of or at least known of Jacksonville. Yet as I discovered, the town collapsed over 130 years ago, leaving only a few traces. A local guide and resident, Mr. Parsons, was kind enough to take me to the old area. I was shocked as we entered the town site and Mr. Parsons had told me we were now entering Jacksonville, Kansas. The first thought that came through my mind was that I had passed this place hundreds of times and never realized it was once a booming town with houses, streets, school house, shops, and a main street. Now I saw only gravel roads, lush wheat fields, hay meadows, tall standing timber, and plowed fields being prepared for planting. There were literally no signs of a town called Jacksonville, founded in 1868. Yet as we drove through the original town site, Mr. Parsons pointed out where different places were: “That little mound over there was the old school house.”² Yet the only actual structure remaining in this town is Jacksonville Cemetery.

¹ *Neosho Valley Eagle*, May 9, 1868.

² Field notes and informal interview, Mr. Parsons, Neosho County, Kansas, March, 2012.

A BRIEF LIFE SPAN

In 1866 M.L. McCaslin, with a covered wagon for his store, began a business that started the town of Jacksonville. Its growth at first was rapid and encouraging. Jacksonville was once the second largest town in Neosho County. The *Neosho Valley Eagle*, the first newspaper in the county, was started here May 2, 1868. In its issue of May 9, the editor wrote, “The town is but little over a year old and is improving rapidly, having a little less than 600 population. There are six stores, a cabinet shop, carpenter and blacksmith shops and boot and shoe shops, all of which give the place a lively appearance. We have a hotel which would do credit to larger towns, besides a good post office.”³ Jacksonville was thought to be a church community but there is no report of a church building ever having been erected in Jacksonville. However, a letter in the *Neosho Valley Eagle*, May 9, 1868, says, “In Jacksonville, there are three organized churches, the Methodist, United Brethren and O.S. Presbyterian; we have a sermon every Sunday and often two.”⁴ These early “churches” may just have been groups of people meeting informally. In the same issue it also mentioned that the Methodists started a movement to erect a church in the fall of 1868, but that the church was not built.⁵

A brief history of the town states, “The Jacksonville post office was established July 8, 1867, with Marion L. McCaslin as postmaster.”⁶ Marion McCaslin was the man who began a grocery store in the back of his wagon. Five postmasters succeeded him, with the last a woman,

³ W.W. Graves, *History of Neosho County*. (St. Paul, Kansas, 1949) 472-480.

⁴ Graves, 473.

⁵ *Neosho Valley Eagle*, May 9, 1868.

⁶ Graves, p. 476.

Catherine A. Logan, serving in 1881. The post office was discontinued November 27, 1882 because the Humboldt-Baxter Springs stage passed that way and delivered mail to Baxter Springs in Cherokee County rather than to Jacksonville. “For a time when the town was flourishing, a special carrier made trips between there and Osage Mission. The contract had been awarded to H.C. Owens, of Jacksonville, who was the carrier in 1878 at \$399 per year.”⁷ Stage coach runs and settlement trails helped the town to grow, but not for long.

The coming of the first railroad, a narrow gauge line in the eastern part of Neosho County with a station at Osage Mission, stopped the growth of Jacksonville. “When the ‘Frisco’ built west from Arcadia in 1879, it passed three miles south of Jacksonville, and the towns of McCune and Strauss were started. Soon most of the Jacksonville business houses moved to McCune, and in a few months little was left of Jacksonville. The closed school house and old neglected cemetery only remain to mark the spot.”⁸ This closed down schoolhouse lasted only a few years as well.

Today, the cemetery is still unkempt and forgotten. The gravestones are broken off and perhaps many are gone. There are a total of 29 marked graves, shown in an early listing at the end of this paper. The old Jacksonville Cemetery is completely overgrown with brush and timber, some of the trees being of a saw log size about eight feet in length. Perhaps it has been sixty years since there has been a burial in the cemetery. Practically all the graves have lost their identity, as there are very few stones still standing in the original position. Death dates on the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

stones I could find were from 1861 to 1885, about the life span of the town. I learned that many of the remains had been removed from the Jacksonville Cemetery and taken to a better kept burial place.⁹ The only known history of Jacksonville points out, “These were the rough pioneer days in old Jacksonville. The pioneer country was extremely unhealthy, and medical service was little better than none and many people died during the first few years.”¹⁰ One of those deaths was the four year old daughter of M.L. McCaslin, who founded the town.¹¹

JACKSONVILLE’S NOTORIOUS CRIME

Like other towns in frontier Kansas, Jacksonville experienced some Wild West events. Even though it lasted barely 20 years, “no history of Jacksonville is complete without the story of the lynching of John Pierce.” A family crime in which John Pierce shot and killed his own father-in-law led to a mob lynching and hanging. The murder happened in 1874, in the back part of McCaslin’s store, right in town. The mob may have been as high as 100 people from the area around Jacksonville. After the crime, “Mr. Pierce had vanished and was heading toward the timber where he swam the [Neosho] river and finally was caught by three pursuing men.” Pierce was held prisoner in the Jacksonville school house. The mob broke in and took him to Hickory Creek, where they hung him from a large tree. “He hung there all night, his feet almost touching the ground, until about ten o’clock the next day, when Pierce’s own father cut him down. Pierce

⁹ Mr. Parsons, informal interview, Neosho County, Kansas, March, 2012.

¹⁰ Graves, 479-480.

¹¹ See “Burials on farms in Jacksonville Cemetery,” McCune Osage Township Library & Museum, McCune, Kansas.

was taken to the cemetery and laid to rest by his father.”¹² Although a trial was eventually held at Osage Mission, with three men as defendants, the trial had no legal outcome. One story says the prosecuting attorney dismissed the case. One other story states that the trial ended when about one hundred men rode up and hitched their horses outside the courthouse. “When they did so, the lawyers and judge disappeared out of the back and the trial was over.”¹³

Jacksonville was formed as a frontier town in an unsettled country. The people were pioneers. There was “much excitement” during the early days of the town and community, but the 1949 history of Neosho County states, “Now all is quiet and peaceful.”¹⁴ In the 1870s, Jacksonville was a bustling town with ambition for being the county seat. But after the competing towns of McCune and Strauss were established in 1878, many people in Jacksonville “picked up and moved to McCune.”¹⁵ Finally, a week before Christmas in 1881, the closed Jacksonville school burned down. This seemed to be the final tragedy for the town. A headline announced, “Flames blazing about finish once prosperous town.” The community of Jacksonville, begun in 1866 out of the back of a covered wagon, went up in smoke. There was no slow decline for Jacksonville.

Shown below is a photograph of the only actual records that survive of the town: a listing of the names on the cemetery gravestones, compiled in the twentieth century. The listing, available at McCune-Osage Township Library & Museum, McCune, Kansas, states that these were “Burials on Farms in Jacksonville Cemetery.”

¹² “A Horrible Tragedy,” *Neosho Valley Eagle* March 27, 1874

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Graves, 480

¹⁵ Graves 480-481

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JOHNSON, cont'd
Sarah 9 Sep 1876 2y 9m 13d
John T. 30 Jun 1873 9m 9d
(2) Children of W. R. & M.

McCASLIN, Sylvia E. 14 Dec 1870 - 7 Jan 1872
Lucy Webb 25 Aug 1877 6m 10d
Daughter of F. R. & S. O.

WANDS, D. J. 13 Sep 1879 5Dy 5m 11d
Osage Marble works
Julia E. 25 Mar 1864 - 1 Aug 1870
David E. 7 Jun 1869 - 23 Jul 1870
Children of D. J. & Ellen A.
WIM, William G. D. 17 Apr 1861
Melvin D. 17 Nov 1863
Children of J. B. & C.
Caroline 1 Mar 1835 - 23 Jun 1873
Wife of J. B.
Joseph 16 Jan 1825 - 21 Mar 1865
WHITSON, Rachel E. 23 Jul 1850 - 27 Apr 1875
Wife of Charles
WILSON, J. R. 1 Jun 1870 - 1 Jan 1870
Martha Bell 15 Sep 1869 - 15 Jul 1870
Daughter of J. R. & M. A.
WYRK, Lilly 11 May 1881 9y 9m 6d
Daughter of S. & D.

FARMS AND UNUSUAL PLACES

Figure 3: Sample page from "Burials on farms in Jacksonville Cemetery". Source: McCune Osage Township Library & Museum, McCune, Kansas

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