

Exit 260, No Services

Niles, Ottawa County, Kansas: 1866 – Present



Figure 1. Photograph of Exit 260 that marks the route into Niles, Kansas. Today, for most people this is nothing more than an exit. To a small few, it is the road that leads to home. Photo by author.

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The tiny town of Niles, originally Arcala then Nilesville, located in the Lincoln Township of Ottawa County, Kansas was first settled by families traveling in fifteen covered wagons from Illinois. They arrived in 1866 and although not as strong as it may have once been, Niles persists today. Nestled on the banks of the Solomon River and built around the Union Pacific Railroad, Niles has been able to hang on for almost 150 years through the tests of time. This study includes personal interviews, analysis of early and current maps, census research, as well as photographs from past and present.

Exit 260 off of Interstate 70 West reads, “Niles Road.” To most, this is nothing more than an exit with no services and most keep along their journeys. However, six miles northeast and around a bend lies the town of Niles, Kansas. This tiny town was founded on the basis of putting trust into the unknown. Niles is a town that never really took hold and succeeded like other towns did. Even though it had two things going for it, a railroad and a river, these factors were not enough to turn Niles into the booming town some had hoped for. Today, Niles barely holds on. My family, the Sullivans, have lived in Niles almost since the beginning. I would like to think that they have been a part of Niles’ persistence and helped it to hang on for as long as it has. The first families arrived in 1866 and with my grandparents’ accounts, I am able to span all the way into present day.



Figure 2. Photograph of Main Street, present day 250th Road, in Niles Kansas. One can see the bell tower of the school above the tree tops and the church in the distance. To the left is the Bank, General Store and Hotel set along the wide street. Circa 1900. Photo courtesy Ottawa County Historical Museum.

The Commencement of Niles

Fifteen covered wagons set out from Illinois to what they hoped would be promising land. Through the treacherous journey some families became discouraged, some turned back and some did not make the distance. However, seven families pushed on and arrived in what would become Niles in the year 1866. The town is located in Lincoln Township in the very bottom right corner (extreme southeast) of Ottawa County. Ottawa County was organized in the early years shortly after the birth of Kansas. Counties were often settled into regions along lines of railroad construction as with Niles.¹ According to Cutler's *History of the State of Kansas*, "It is one of the best counties in Central and Western Kansas, having a rich soil, desirable location, being most admirably watered, and possessing a good supply of timber, and an abundance of excellent building stone, red sandstone, and limestone"² The first families who settled in the area had some adjustments to make when they arrived. In the beginning homes were mostly dugouts rather than traditional wood houses they were accustomed to. In one instance a woman saw her home, which was half log cabin and half dugout, and wept and begged to return home.³ Although they were not used to some of what Kansas had to offer, there were positives to the land they had settled. Being on the banks of the Solomon River offered them access to a water source and possibility for fertile land. As said in Socolofsky's Atlas, "The Solomon, with a broad and exceedingly fertile valley, flows diagonally from the northwest to the southeast, through the center of the county, affording extensive water power."⁴ That rings true today as Lincoln Township especially remains a mostly agricultural area.

¹ Socolofsky, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, (2nd Edition), 1988.

² Cutler, William J, *History of the State of Kansas*, 1883.

³ *Ottawa County*, Ottawa County Historical Museum.

⁴ Socolofsky, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, (2nd Edition), 1988, p. 39.

When the town was first settled it was called Arcala, although it was never on a map as such. The name changed to Nilesville when the post office arrived in 1885.⁵ After only two years, in 1887, Nilesville seemed to be too lengthy of a title and was shortened to the present title of Niles.⁶ Niles had a twin town which was known as Georgetown. It was founded by George Carbaugh who was also a player in the development of Niles. Georgetown was located just a half a mile away from Niles which caused quite a bit of competition between the two. Surprisingly enough, Niles was the town that won out and Carbaugh moved Georgetown to the site of Niles instead. Not only was the Solomon River at the foot of the town, but it was also nestled on the edge of the Union Pacific Railroad and thrived because of it during the successful years of railroads. The Union Pacific helped bring goods into the town so that it could have the types of businesses they desired such as hotels, groceries and merchandise stores.

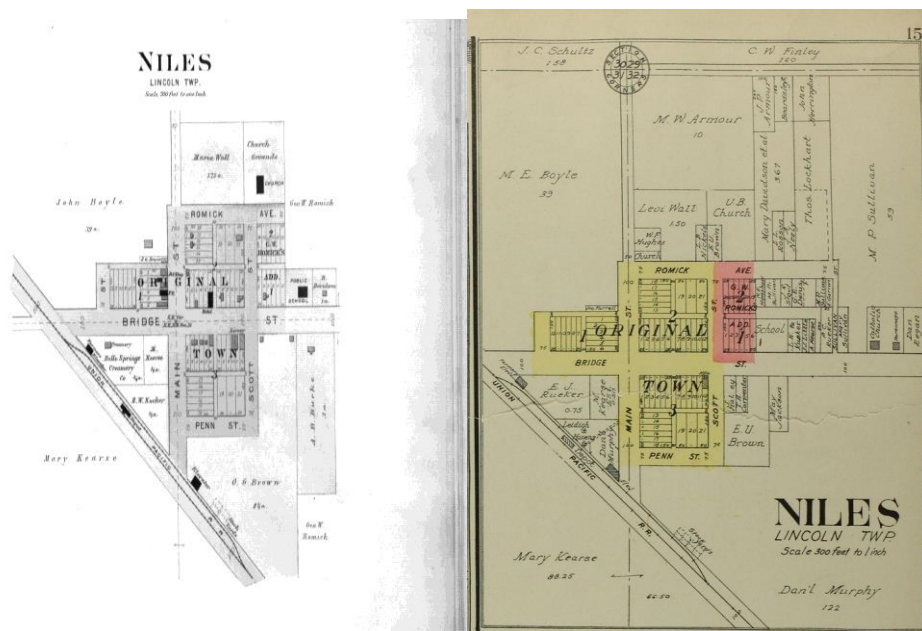


Figure 3 (left) and Figure 4 (right). The 1902 Plat map (left) shows Niles in its early years along the Union Pacific Railroad. Right, is the Plat Map from 1918 showing the town's expansion east. Today, the town remains extremely similar to how it appears in 1918.

⁵ Ottawa County, Ottawa County Historical Museum.

⁶ Kansas Historical Society, Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961.

The Casebeers, Thomas and Elizabeth, were also extremely influential in the upbringing of Niles. The Casebeers offered to give a portion of their land to the town of Niles to use as the cemetery. Today, their land is still home to Greenville Cemetery on what used to be Main Street in Niles.



Figure 5. Photograph of the sun setting on Greenville Cemetery off of 250th Road, previously Main Street, in Niles, Kansas. The cemetery holds grave markers from as far back as 1868. Photograph by author.

The “Boom” Years

Over the years settlement progressed, but the town remained small. In fact, Ottawa County reached its maximum population by the year 1890, just a couple of decades after the county was organized. The counties of North Central Kansas, such as Ottawa, could be argued as

the face of the homesteading frontier.⁷ The area of Lincoln Township is mainly farmland with Niles taking up just a small portion of the lower left hand corner of the township. Agriculture was a contributing factor to the density and size of the town. Most individuals lived on their own farms on their land away from the organized town. One of the most surprising aspects is that Niles looks today much like it did almost 150 years ago. Niles has remained relatively small throughout the years, while the rest of the land in Lincoln Township has been used for farming.

Niles had various Post Office spots throughout its career. The last Post Office closed in 1974. After that Niles became an unincorporated town as it is today. However, one of the first locations of the Post Office was inside of P.B. Hampton & Sons General Store around 1885. After that, around 1909, it was moved to the home of Mary and Leda Keuker who were also in charge of the telephone exchange as well. Through my research I made an interesting discovery. When I was younger, I was always extremely curious about what was going on with everyone else around me. I gained the nickname 'Leda Keuker' and because I had heard it since I was little, I always believed it was a term used by everyone for an individual who was unusually inquisitive. When I saw that name on the photo in the museum it all made perfect sense, Leda Keuker was in charge of the Post Office as well as the telephone exchange which meant she was always in the know. I was finally able to understand where my nickname came from and feel a connection with a person in the history of Niles.

⁷ Socolofsky, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, (2nd Edition), 1988, pg 60.



Figure 6. Photograph of the Post Office and telephone exchange. On the porch stands Mary Keuker (left) and Leda Keuker (right). Dated 1909. Photo courtesy Ottawa County Historical Museum.



Figure 7. Photograph of the old Niles Post office and telephone exchange in present day. The old house is recognizable as what used to be the information hub for Niles. Photograph by author.

Even though the population had peaked early on, Niles continued with its small town happenings. While school was once held in a dugout, eventually a schoolhouse was built and the children had access to education in the town itself.



Figure 8. Photograph of Niles School. Students stand outside the school located on Bridge Street, presently Arrowhead Road, in Niles, Kansas. The school boasts two chimneys and an elaborate bell tower. Dated 1910. Photo courtesy Ottawa County Historical Museum.

The Sullivan History

Niles is home to my grandparents, James and Joan Sullivan. Together, they have called it home for almost sixty years. When I was young I played in the streets of Niles so I, too, have a connection with this little piece of Kansas history. My grandfather's family has lived in the area since the beginning of the town's history. In fact, the Sullivan name can be traced back as early as 1902 where their names are found on the plat map of Niles.

I was lucky enough to talk to my grandmother about her take on the history of Niles. She remembers details quite vividly, a time where Niles was not the pass-through town it is today. My grandmother, Joan, stated that, “it was a very busy town at one point in time” which seems like a dream now.⁸ My grandmother and grandfather live in the oldest house in Niles, one that was built by one of the founding members of Niles.

Joan also remembers when there was not just one, but a few, grocery stores in town. There used to be a hotel and a meat locker, as well as Niles Bank and the Implement store which were both owned by Sullivans. At one point there was even a skating rink. She talked about how when the Union Pacific was there, it was a great way to bring goods in as well as help with the town’s success. When I asked her if the thinning out of the use of railroad contributed to the decline of Niles, she quickly replied that it was not that, but in actuality another factor. That factor was automobiles. She told me, “Once the car came the town changed so much. After that began a world of a difference in Niles.”⁹ Niles is located right on the border of Saline County which situates it extremely close to bigger cities like Solomon and Salina. It is also located near the Ottawa County seat of Minneapolis which provides easy access to bigger city commodities and services. The car changed the way that people lived, especially in Niles. Yet although there were significant changes in Niles, tear down factors such as this did not cause it to fail completely.

The town has been a part of our family history for generations. Throughout this process I have felt more connected to this town than I originally thought I would. Like most of these small towns, Niles carries its own unique history. However, this one is just a little more special to me.

⁸ Sullivan, Joan, Interview, Monday, April 29, 2013. Salina, KS.

⁹ Sullivan, Joan, Interview, Monday April 29, 2013. Salina, KS.

While there is no big story or event that caused Niles to lose momentum, the story is still an important one.



Figure 9. Photograph of Sullivan Hardware and Implement Store. The traditional flat front building was located on Main Street and shows my family's involvement in the history of Niles, Kansas. Circa 1900. Photo courtesy Ottawa County Historical Museum.

Niles in Transition

As the years passed by, the already small town became more minute with each passing year. The development of automobiles and moving away from the railroads transitioned this town from a once busy community to a quiet, sleepy one. The popularity of agriculture in the township has led it to remain extremely rural even today. Yet if someday Niles no longer stands, I will always have a special place in my memory for the little town that has played such a large

part in my family's history.



Figure 10. The view of what used to be Main Street, Niles, Kansas. A vast difference of what used to stand. Photograph by author.

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