

**Beneath the Surface of Tuttle Creek
Reservoir:
The Town of Garrison in Pottawatomie
County, Kansas, 1880–1959**

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The town of Garrison in Pottawatomie County, Kansas is one of the most interesting towns of the Blue River Valley, with distinct and determined people. Founded around 1880, Garrison was destroyed in 1959 to create Tuttle Creek Dam and Reservoir. This study uses plat maps, oral interviews, and historical letters to give some life to a town long gone. Although one study of Garrison exists, most of the people who can remember it are also gone. Yet there is enough information to give a fair description of this river village that was once part of a twelve-town Blue River Valley community .

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The water rose above the streets and railroad tracks. It sloshed across sidewalks and rose up the side of buildings, stores, and homes until they were covered by the waters of Tuttle Creek Reservoir. By July, 1962, the town of Garrison in Pottawatomie County, Kansas, was completely submerged¹. Garrison was one of the most interesting towns of the Blue River Valley, with distinct and determined people. In 1880, Garrison had a population of 145, with most of the residents coming from Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio². A few came from England, Germany, and Ireland, determined to make good. Except for one small book, mostly a collection of original photographs, not much is known about this town, and the information found is scattered; but there is enough to give a fair description of this Blue River Valley community. I will explain what the area around the town of Garrison looked like, what the town was like, who the townspeople were, and finally, how the town fought as part of the Blue Valley Association against the building of Tuttle Creek Dam, and how that fight failed.

When the settlers of the town of Garrison started out to find and stake claims, there were two logical Kansas communities that they may have started from, in my opinion. One would have been from Manhattan in Riley County, Kansas at the mouth of the Big Blue River³. By 1880, there would have been a Kansas Pacific/Union Pacific train line into Manhattan from points east. This would have been the best arrival point, as settlers would have just traveled up the Big Blue River before coming to the location of Garrison. The travel would have been quite

¹ US Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, last modified May 2, 2011 <http://www.nwk.usace.army.mil/tc/History.cfm>.

² "KSU Libraries Terms and Conditions by ProQuest", last modified May 6, 2011, http://www.proquest.com/en-US/site/terms_conditions.shtml, <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/census/>

³ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 22.

easy as they would have been traveling on the Big Blue River's flood plain, and they would have seen all the rich farmland, just ripe and waiting to be planted. The second way would have been from Westmoreland in Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Westmoreland was linked to the Oregon Trail, so settlers and travelers would have been familiar with and heard about this overland route winding through the northeast corner of Pottawatomie County.⁴ What would early Garrison settlers have seen if they left from Westmoreland?

Upon setting out from Westmoreland, and not continuing along the Oregon Trail, a settling family most likely would have taken a northwestern direction, as the hills of the area would have been easier to travel over in that direction. They would have traveled across the seeming endless bluegrass prairies to the town of Olsburg in Pottawatomie County, Kansas, a journey that possibly took them a day's ride, but would have brought the settlers of Garrison close to their final destination⁵. From Olsburg, the settlers would have headed southwest, and would have come upon the impressive limestone valley walls, as shown in Figure 1 at the end of this paper. The determined settlers found the easier rolling Flint Hills (also shown in Figure 2 at the end of the paper) that would have led them to a creek and then ultimately the location along the Big Blue River where Garrison was founded. Here was a low level flood plain, rich farmland on which farmers envisioned growing wheat, corn, and a variety of other crops; there were also upland prairies for raising livestock.

⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁵ Ibid, 5.



Figure 3. Map of Pottawatomie County, Kansas, c. 1899

Garrison was established in 1880, if one uses the official start date of the post office, and sat right along the shores of the Big Blue River, as seen in Figure 3 above⁶. However, the town was actually mapped out in 1879 and named after C.K. Garrison, president of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad⁷. When I reviewed the plat map for Garrison, it reminded me of the plat map for Broughton in Clay County, Kansas, another railroad community. Both towns had a railroad that ran at an angle to the basic setup of the town (in fact, Broughton lay between two rail lines). However, where the Rock Island Railroad ran on the north end of Broughton, the Leavenworth, Kansas, and Western Railroad (L, K, & W) ran right down the middle of Garrison Main Street and Garrison, as shown in Figure 4 at the end of this paper.

Railroads connected the towns in the area of Blue Valley and the Flint Hills. In the 1880s, the Kansas Pacific Railroad, for example, ran along the western edge of the Big Blue River and

⁶ "Kansas State Historical Society Research Policy," last modified April 30, 2011, http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_search/search/placename:Garrison/county:PT/submit

⁷ Philip E. Meyer, "Tuttle Creek Dam: A Case Study in Local Opposition" (MA diss., University of North Carolina, 1962).

connected Garrison with Randolph up river and Manhattan down river.⁸ The Kansas Pacific didn't actually run through Garrison, as Garrison was on the east side of the Big Blue River, but it still connected with Garrison where it and the L, K, & W railroad crossed. The L, K, & W railroad came into Garrison from Olsburg to the east, passed through the heart of Garrison, and then ran west across the Big Blue River and on to Leonardville. The Olsburg connection is shown in Figure 2 on the previous page, and the connection to Leonardville is shown in Figure 5 at the end of this paper. In 1908, the Union Pacific Railroad purchased the L, K, & W Railroad and made it part of its line⁹. New towns were usually mapped out and constructed around rail lines, because farmers and ranchers needed to be able to get their crops and livestock to a town that could ship the goods to a city for processing. So new towns in the 1880s and 1890s needed to be formed near or around rail lines; and without them, a town wouldn't survive.

By the 1890s, the town had reached its settling point. There weren't a lot of new settlers, as in the 1880s when the population of the town reached nearly 400, but people weren't leaving either as the population stabilized to around 160 people around 1910. Most of the population was made up of farmers who raised livestock and grew wheat, with most farms being farmsteads where an entire family lived and took care of the farm. When the wheat was ready for harvest, everyone would get involved.

“Thrashing Time” with all the family and neighbors gathered to work together just sounded romantic. In reality it was just plain hard work for all the family and gathered neighbors. – Leila Larson Hope, “Harvest in the Early 1920s”¹⁰

⁸ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 30

⁹ “Creative Commons Security” last modified March 6, 2010, <http://utahrails.net/up/kansas-central.php>.

¹⁰ Leila Larson Hope, “Harvest in the Early 1920s”, *Wheat People: Celebrating Kansas Harvest*, www.kshs.org/p/harvest-tales/10770.

With everyone working together, it would have made families closer and stronger. Neighbors would have become like family. Ultimately, this would have helped Garrison develop a strong, close bond between the people living there and the people in the farms that surrounded the town. These bonds would have spread throughout the Blue River Valley, which would explain why it was easy for all the communities to work together when the valley was threatened.

The largest threat to the valley didn't come from the advancement in technology that brought about the automobile. It didn't come from neighboring communities or people moving out of the area. Instead, it came from the United States government. In 1938, Congress authorized the building of the Tuttle Creek Dam.¹¹ Understanding this threat requires a look into events that would have caused the government to affect the lives of the people in the Blue River Valley.

The Blue River Valley was prone to flooding, but most river valley people will say that any river running through their valley is prone to flooding. Many river valley residents accepted flooding as a way of life¹². The government, however, saw the Blue River Valley as large cause of the Kansas River flooding as well. The Kansas River runs through Topeka, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, which are major economic areas of the Midwest. These were urban areas that the government wanted protected because of the economic damage from flooding, especially since the country was still recovering from the Great Depression.

¹¹ Philip E. Meyer, "Tuttle Creek Dam: A Case Study in Local Opposition" (MA diss., University of North Carolina, 1962).

¹² "The Tuttle Creek Story" video, last modified April 30, 2011, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/208840>.

Yet the flooding of the Kansas River would affect so much more than the economics of two cities. It would affect the possible flooding of the Missouri River, which flows into the Mississippi River and could create flooding there as well. These three rivers have so much farmland connected to them, that if they were to flood the effect would be devastating to the country's food suppliers as well. The cost of the 1951 flood in Kansas and Missouri was over \$935million¹³. However, it was the Corps of Engineers that had the most effect on Congress approving the building of Tuttle Creek Dam.

The Corps' original plan was to raise levees around Kansas City, but this was contested by the railroads. In order for the railroad to still reach the industrial areas of Kansas City, they would have to raise railways and bridges, causing them to spend large amounts. Without this plan, the Corps developed another plan that would involve building a dam on the Kansas River, which would have been west of Topeka. The problem with this plan was the \$60 million price tag, but out of this plan spawned the plan for two dams to be built, one on the Republican River, northwest of Junction City, Kansas, and one on the Big Blue River, north of Manhattan, Kansas¹⁴.

This plan is what worried the residents of the Blue River Valley and caused them to form the Blue Valley Association, as they need a collective voice to speak out against this plan. The Corps knew there would be opposition but still pushed the plan. The Blue Valley Association wasn't formed until after the 1938 approval of Tuttle Creek Dam. Until then, the Blue River Valley residents were unaware of the plan for their valley. Primarily involved in the discussions

¹³ "Wikimedia Terms of Use", last modified April 25, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Flood_of_1951.

¹⁴ US Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, last modified May 2, 2011 <http://www.nwk.usace.army.mil/tc/History.cfm>.

was the Kansas City Committee that formed to protect its interests, but of course, there was little concern with what would happen to those upstream.

The concerns of the Kansas City Committee, though valid, were squarely focused on what would happen in Kansas City if the Kanas River flooded. They wanted a solution that would protect the factories and industries located along the river, and they didn't care what it took. The committee stood as another obstacle for the Blue Valley Association. How were they going to overcome studies by the Corps of Engineers and the Kansas City Committee? Who could they get to listen?

The Association wasted little time. Behind in the fight, but full of determination and energy to defend their homes, they took to writing letters to congressmen and newspapers. For the next seven years they would write their letters and look for alternatives to building the Tuttle Creek Dam, to prevent flooding. The women of the valley even took upon themselves to travel to Kansas City for a meeting with then President Truman. The women went to Truman's hotel and demanded a meeting with the President. They were granted five minutes, but at least they were making some headway¹⁵.

While the women of the valley were traveling to see the President, the men of the valley were putting together a document. The document, called "Keep Our Soil Home", explained ways to prevent flooding. Farming techniques for soil conservation and flood prevention was the base of the document¹⁶. Make no mistake, though; this was to combat the studies and plans of the Corps of Engineers. Then, the worst thing that could happen did.

¹⁵ "The Tuttle Creek Story" video, last modified April 30, 2011, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/208840>.

¹⁶ "Kansas State Historical Society Research Policy," last modified April 30, 2011, www.kansasmemory.org/item/220307.

In the summer of 1951, the people of Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas experienced rains that caused major flooding along the Mississippi, Missouri, and Kansas rivers. The flooding wasn't limited to just these rivers, as the Republic and Big Blue rivers rose out of their banks as well. The flooding was so severe that my grandparents can still tell me stories about how my grandfather had to drive from St. George, Kansas, up into Nebraska to cross the river and then make it down to Manhattan for work. He would stay in Manhattan all week before heading back the same way to return for the weekend. It was this flood and the flood that followed the two years later that hurt the fight by the Blue Valley Association the most.

The flood in 1953 probably hurt the most, as it devastated Abilene, Kansas, home of new President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The women of the valley had gone to see Eisenhower at his campaign headquarters in Denver, Colorado in 1952, and had come back hopeful¹⁷. However, just as the residents of Blue Valley were fighting for their home, President Eisenhower was going to fight for his. One act that he authorized as President was for the Milford and Tuttle Creek dams to be built. Eisenhower had seen his home town devastated. The residents of the Blue Valley were going to have to move and start again, but could they salvage anything?

Garrison was fought for its own life, as were all the communities in the Blue River Valley, but it ended in defeat with construction on the Tuttle Creek Dam, which began in 1959¹⁸. Residents of Garrison had to find new homes and start new lives. Was there anything they could take with them? Aside from their possessions, there was nothing. The cemetery of Garrison was combined with the cemetery of Carnahan to form the Carnahan-Garrison cemetery, as Figure 6 at

¹⁷ Philip E. Meyer, "Tuttle Creek Dam: A Case Study in Local Opposition" (MA diss., University of North Carolina, 1962).

¹⁸ US Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, last modified May 2, 2011 <http://www.nwk.usace.army.mil/tc/History.cfm>.

the end of this paper shows. “There was a huge fight about moving the graves of that cemetery,” as Loraine Schurr of St. George, Kansas recalls.¹⁹ The post office was closed in 1959, as construction of Tuttle Creek Dam began²⁰. Now, Garrison is just part of a cemetery and a home for fish.

In my search for information on Garrison, I drove around the area and could see the culture and reason to fight for such a beautiful area. I was with my grandfather, who told me about a bridge that we used to fish from that had been on the road to Garrison. I don’t remember fishing from this bridge, but I was very young when we did. A few weeks before, I had gone on a drive with my son, looking for traces of the old Garrison townsite. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find anything but the cemetery. I may not remember fishing from the bridge, but I will not forget how memories of Garrison stay in the minds and hearts of the people I spoke with, a town that was gone long before I was born.



Figure 6. Picture of the Carnahan-Garrison Cemetery marker, placed at the entrance to the cemetery in 1959.

¹⁹ Schurr, Loraine, In person interview by author, St. George, KS, March 30, 2011.

²⁰ “Kansas State Historical Society Research Policy,” last modified April 30, 2011, http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_search/search/placename:Garrison/county:PT/submit

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