

## **Searching for the Angel of the Swamp:**

**The Enigma of Place Identity and Place Name  
Of Swamp Angel,  
Blue Township, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, post – 1863.**

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Along the Kansas River in Pottawatomie County is a road sign that would seldom catch any attention by passersby if not for the nearly strange connotation that it may stir in the imagination. This sign marks Swamp Angel Road, a simple dirt track that extends south from the Military Trail Road (Old Highway 24) to the Kansas River, running through the corn and wheat fields that cover the floodplain. Few maps, modern or otherwise, even acknowledge this section of road or recognize Swamp Angel as a geographic place and this is where the mystery begins, or perhaps deepens. Additionally, the name itself seemingly has little relation to any event, family, or person in Kansas history. Despite the lack of acknowledgment of Swamp Angel on physical documentation in modern times, this place name has obviously created enough of a lasting impression to warrant some recognition.

This place, Swamp Angel, lies in Blue Township of Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Roughly half the distance between the towns of Manhattan and St. George, the place lies directly in the flood plains of the Kansas River, directly east of the confluence of the Republican and Big Blue Rivers that constitute the Kansas River. To examine the landscape today in terms of how it must have historically appeared takes little imagination. Simply removing the fence rows and a few trees would provide the viewer the ability to imagine how great prairie grasses must have once grown along the tree lined river where now corn and wheat are harvested. Swamp Angel seems to have changed little in the decades since the settlement of Kansas and since the Kansa tribes roamed the river valley; a couple of homes and a grain elevator along the railroad line give any indication of settlement.

Yet, the name itself remains to give meaning to this place. And it is the name of Swamp Angel that may give the greatest meaning as to the history of this place. I contend that the identity of Swamp Angel is inherently tied to the historical significance of the term ‘swamp angel’ in description of the cannons used in the bombardment of Charleston, South Carolina during the American Civil War. More importantly is the similarities between landscapes that may have been perceived by those who graced this place along the Kansas River with the moniker reserved for a short-lived gun used in one our nation’s bloodiest conflicts. It is this power of landscape identity that can help us understand how the places of the past and even those of the future, have an altogether human identity attributed to them.<sup>1</sup>

### **Interpreting the Past**

In terms of how to interpret the convoluted history of Swamp Angel or the lack of history as will be apparent, I refer to David Lowenthal, who asserts that ‘The past we know or experience is always contingent on our own views, our own perspective, and above all our own present’.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between what is known and what can be interpreted can be based on how we choose to view the details of what we are attempting to explain. In this case, very little is known or can be accurately triangulated about the place in question. Historically, Swamp Angel is seemingly an enigma in comparison to other local communities that have very detailed histories with substantial remnants of their existence still available to view, whether in the form of photographs, written accounts, or even physical structures.<sup>3</sup> With Swamp Angel a history and meaning must be interpreted by what can be deduced from the information available.

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<sup>1</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 159.

<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 217.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler’s Guide* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), xiii.

What is known is that Swamp Angel is a modern un-incorporated place with only the tell-tale road sign (Figure 1) to establish the location of where a settlement may have been. The place itself consists of a road (Figure 2) leading between five houses and a grain silo, crossing the railroad tracks and leading across the floodplain where it dead ends at the Kansas River.



Figure 1: Swamp Angel Road sign. Located south of Highway 24 along Military Trail Road, Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Fall, 2010. Photo by author.



Figure 2: Swamp Angel Road. Looking South towards the Kansas River. Note the few buildings gathered where the town site or school may have been. Fall 2010. Photo by author.

As far as any historical reference attributed to Swamp Angel, the only indication as to what the location refers to has come from historical interpretative maps by Huber Self. In his book *The Historical Atlas of Kansas* and in a map provided by the Riley County Historical Museum (Attachment 1), Self identifies Swamp Angel in both instances as an un-incorporated place and as a school district (Attachment 2).<sup>4</sup> This could be interpreted to mean that this community was historically focused on a rural school district and one of Kansas' many one room school houses.

Within documentation, the references made by Self are the only two that could be obtained. Countless searches through documents in the historical societies of Riley, Pottawatomie, and Wabaunsee counties provided no references, however vague, to lend credence

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<sup>4</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 57.

to Self's assertions. Questions posed to historical society employees and lifelong residents of the area also proved fruitless. Those residents who call Swamp Angel Road home that were contacted were also unable to provide any information to clarify the mystery of what or where specifically Swamp Angel was in the past. Census records were also unable to provide any information. Despite the lack of evidence, the enigma of the name Swamp Angel perhaps can be interpreted. By doing so, perhaps a more theoretical approach as to why Swamp Angel has become a place name in Kansas can be derived.

#### **Place Name and Identity**

Wilbur Zelinsky interprets place names originating in the cultural heritage of those that initially settle a place.<sup>5</sup> As with his work in the Northeast United States and the progressive movement of settlement westward during the mid to late nineteenth century, place names in Kansas often also have distinctive qualities associated with the cultures that have originally settled specific places. Furthermore, place names may be established as a means of description of the physical environment as much as a reminder of a far-away homeland.<sup>6</sup> Swamp Angel, in this context, may be no different than towns such as Lindsborg with a Swedish heritage or Wamego adopted from the Kansa natives. Therefore, the question arises as to where the moniker Swamp Angel is derived.

In August of 1863, Union troops built a massive battery in the marshes outside of Charleston, South Carolina (Figure 3). Using a 16,500 pound Parrott cannon nicknamed 'the

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<sup>5</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, *Exploring the Beloved Country: Geographic Forays into American Society and Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 431.

<sup>6</sup> Zelinsky, *Exploring the Beloved Country: Geographic Forays into American Society and Culture*, 411.

swamp angel', Union Forces began the eighteen month siege of Charleston.<sup>7</sup> Firing only thirty-six rounds, the Swamp Angel cannon exploded early in the siege but became legendary for the accuracy and damage that it represented.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, the Swamp Angel cannon became infamous and now has a place of honor in Trenton, New Jersey.<sup>9</sup> The importance of the Swamp Angel cannon to a place name in Kansas is due to what followed the Civil War.

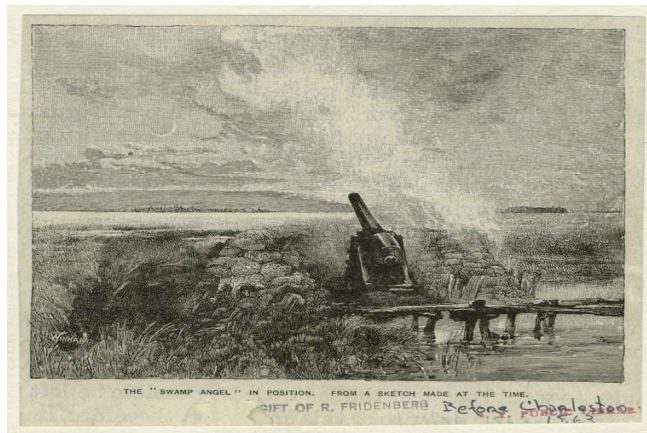


Figure 3: Sketch of the Swamp Angel Gun and Battery during the Battle of Charleston, 1863.  
SOURCE: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/>

The proximity to Swamp Angel in Pottawatomie County to the Military Trail is a major clue as to how this place may have received the mystery moniker. Following the Civil War, the Military Road stretched from Leavenworth, Kansas westward to Fort Riley in Geary County, Kansas. This road became a major route linking newly settled communities and a major

<sup>7</sup> Stephen R. Wise, *Gate of Hell: Campaign for Charleston Harbor, 1863* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>8</sup> G. T. Beauregard, Defense of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1862, 1863 and 1864. II *The North American Review* Vol. 142, No. 355 (Jun., 1886), pp. 564-571; University of Northern Iowa; Page 571. Accessed: 11/12/2010

<sup>9</sup> Wise, *Gate of Hell: Campaign for Charleston Harbor, 1863*, 206.

transportation route for soldiers assigned to outposts in the Western Territories.<sup>10</sup> It is undoubtedly likely that Union soldiers familiar with the Swamp Angel cannon and the battle of Charleston passed along this very trail.

It is assumptive to presume that this is definitively the way that the moniker was established. However, the physical landscape does provide some additional weight to this theory. First, the proximity to the location of the Military Trail cannot be discounted. Secondly, if one is to view the current landscape of the Swamp Angel area and attempt to perceive how that landscape most likely appeared over one hundred years ago, it is plausible that the prairie grasses along the river bottoms of the Kansas River would look very much like the grassy coastal marshes outside of Charleston, SC. And third, the topography of the flood plain itself is very similar to the topography of the landscape surrounding Charleston. The Charleston River, like the Kansas River has cut into the landscape creating bluffs along flood plain. Visually, the combination of grasses, marshy low-lying areas, and the subsequent bluffs in the distance combine to create a very plausible likeness between the two landscapes.

Assuming that the individuals traveling along the Military Trail were familiar with the events taking place outside of Charleston and the physical landscape, it is indeed plausible that a soldier and his family or a group of soldiers moving westward after the Civil War would view this landscape in the Kansas Territory and attempt to give it personal meaning using the name Swamp Angel. Perhaps a full-fledged community did not spring up in this place so distant from the salt marshes of South Carolina, but the concept of homeland or perhaps the experience of such an event that would be carried half way across the country may have remained present in

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<sup>10</sup> W.F. Pride, *The History of Fort Riley* (Fort Riley: Fort Riley Historical and Archaeological Society, 1987), 53-54.



the minds of those who initially were to settle this particular place. Thus, the effect of lived experience or cultural identity could have influenced those who christened Swamp Angel along the Kansas River after the Civil War.

### **Conclusions**

Although it may seem presumptive to adhere to the proposed theory concerning Swamp Angel, there is little evidence to disprove the proposed meaning of this particular place identity. Clearly, there are some valid arguments that support the theory, not the least of which is the historical validity of the Military Trail and the increased settlement of Kansas following the Civil War. Furthermore, the focus here lies on the ‘reading’ of the landscape. To evaluate the landscape in terms of historical appearance, gathered from geographic and biological accounts of how the landscape of this particular region of Kansas appeared during the mid to late nineteenth century, is to filter the assumptions and to begin to triangulate how this particular place most likely did resemble a distant remembered landscape. In this regard, J.B. Jackson laments that modern American society has lost the imagination to see how the landscapes of the past can encourage new conversations about how we, as a society, have grown and how our cultural identity of place may be lost.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, despite the loss of the cultural places of our past some of those lost landscapes may still speak, particularly those that stoke the imagination with a name such as Swamp Angel. Despite a lack of concrete data that details the history of this particular place there is some evidence that suggests that this is a historically valuable entity of the Kansas frontier. The survival of the name alone allows those who may pass by the little dirt path along the Kansas

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<sup>11</sup> Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, vii-vix.

River to stop and reflect on what type of place this could be or perhaps was to be named so romantically.

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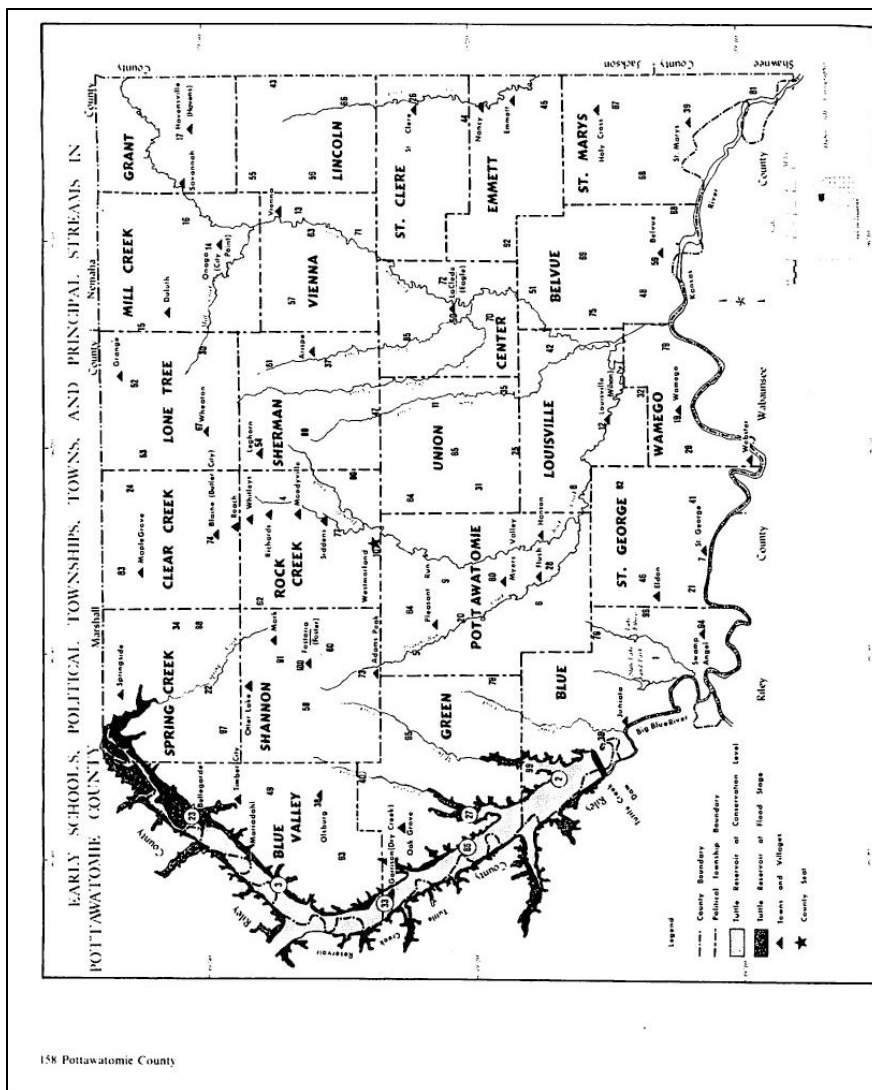
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Attachment 1: Map of Pottawatomie County showing historical towns and schools. Note Swamp Angel in lower center of Blue Township. Huber Self, Cartographer.  
SOURCE: Riley County Historical Museum



Attachment 2: Listing of Historical Post Offices and School Districts within Pottawatomie County. Key to Attachment 1. Note Swamp Angel school district, 94.  
SOURCE: Riley County Historical Museum.

## Post Offices

NAME	EXISTENCE	FIRST POST MASTER
Adams Peak	1870-1884	Hiram Fink
Arispie	1871-1903	George McManis
Bellegarde	1872-1879	James P Shannon
Belvue	1871-	George Meens
Blaine	1874-	Dennis V Cox
Broderick	1891-1903	Edmund Atkinson
Duluth	1912-	Bertha T Kolterman
Eagle	1871-1874	Squire K Foot
to Laclède		
Eldon	1858-1860	Derastus Torrey
to Saint George		
Emmett	1905-	William E Glynn
Float	1874-1876	John G Huntington
Flush	1899-1927	Henry J Floersch
Fostoria	1884	Mark D Keeney
fr Mark		
Garrison	1880-1959	Frank B Landon
Grange	1875-1880	Robert H Bell
Hanson	1882-1885	William H Hanson
Havensville	1878-	James P Dewitt
(Havensville)		
Holy Cross	1884-1894	Kate O'Farrell
Holycross	1894-1910	Edward Mulligan
Johnson	1872-1873	Andrew V Johnson
Juniata	1855-1856	Seth Childs
to Tauromee		
Laclède	1874-1906	Leonard C Prunty
-fr Eagle		
Leghorn	1870-1883	Sargent Moody Jr
-to Wheaton		
Louisville	1867-	Asa P Smith
fr Rock Creek		
Maple Grove	1874-1880	William R Benton
Mariadahl	1876-1903	Oscar Fagerberg
Mark	1884-1884	Mark D Keeney
to Fostoria		
Moodyville	1879-1927	Edwin M Moody
Myers Valley	1870-1903	John Vance
Nancy	1870-1874	Peter Dunn
Oak Grove	1874-1882	Geo M Gilliford
Olesburgh	1873-1887	Ole Trulson
to Olsburg	1887-	Mark D Keeney
Onaga	1877	Amos E Landon
Otter Lake	1870-1886	James P Chase
Pleasant Run	1870-1886	John Collins
Rock Creek	1856-1867	John L Wilson
to Louisville		
Saint Clere	1874-1953	Geo W W Derry
Saint George	1860-	Geo W Gillespie
fr Eldon		
Saint Marys fr	1878-	Seth P Angle
Saint Mary's	1855-1878	Luther R Palmer
Mission		

## School Districts

1. Elbow	53. Trowbridge
2. Fairview	54. Belleville
3. Riverside	55. Lone Tree
4. Moodyville	56. Fairview
5. Sales	57. Rolling Prairie
6. Deane	58. Fairview
7. St. George	59. Belvue
8. Gasser	60. Cree
9. Jenkins	61. Excelsior
10. Westmoreland	62. Huff
11. Pauline or Adams Creek	63. Victory
12. Louisville	64. West Union
13. Vienna	65. Broderick
15. Duluth	66. Grandview
16. Pleasant Valley	67. Wheaton
19. Wamego	68. Pleasant Valley
20. King	69. Lost Creek
21. Glenwood	70. Tannerville
22. Spring Creek	71. Independence
23. Bellegarde	72. Red Hen
24. Berg	73. Adams Peak
25. Greenwood	74. Blaine
26. St. Clere	75. Davis
27. Carnahan	76. Weltsch
28. Rockenham or Old Flush	77. Church
29. Pleasant Hill or Salzer	78. Twin Mound
30. Bunker Hill	79. Red Top
31. Glendale	80. Myers Valley
32. Rock	81. Mount Vernon
33. Garrison	82. Prairie View
34. Wymore	83. Flint Hill
35. Pleasant Hill	84. Loux
36. Cedar Creek	85. Eureka
37. Arispie	86. Hillside Academy
38. Olsburg	87. Rock
39. St. Mary	88. Schoemann
40. Oak Grove	89. Union Ridge or Fox
41. Fairview	90. White Eagle
42. Line	91. Merrymount
43. Pleasant Ridge	92. Buckeye
44. Saxon	93. Dry Creek
45. Reilly or Holy Cross	94. Swamp Angel
46. Elm Slough	95. Galilee
47. Star Union	96. Mount Vernon or Zion
48. Half Moon	97. Richland
49. Shannon Creek	98. Bluff Creek
50. Laclède	99. McIntyre
51. White Chapel	100. Fostoria
52. Pleasant Hill	

## Post Offices

NAME	EXISTENCE	FIRST POST MASTER
Savannah	1867-1878	George H Cain
Springside	1870-1899	James B Wicklin
Timber City	1862-1863	Jacob Van Brunt
Unadilla	1858-1862	Edward W Newell
Vienna	1862-1883	Jacob Mensch
Wamego	1866-	Leonard C Prunty
Westmoreland	1858-	John McKimmans
Wheaton	1883-	Claiborne Stone