

Across County Lines: The Dual Congregation of the early St. Joseph's Catholic Church

Geary County, Kansas, 1870-1930: Ashland and McDowell Creek Valley Pioneers



Figure 1: St. Joseph's Church on a cold March day, 2012. The church served parishioners until 1989. Photo by Thomas Morgan.

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Abstract: The Ashland and Lower McDowell Creek communities were settled towards the end of the 1800s, but contained a variety of cultural and economic differences. St. Joseph's Catholic Church worked as an agent to resolve these differences. This study, using census data, plat maps, tombstone inscriptions, and yearbook data, brings these differences to light, to show how St. Joseph's could bring together its congregation, revealing how early rural churches could act as a uniting force.

To anyone from Manhattan, Kansas, McDowell Creek Road might be a familiar name. This curving north-south road, paralleling the Kansas River for a good distance, is labeled the “Scenic River Route to Manhattan” by signs along the nearby interstate, but there is more to this road than just beautiful scenery. Within the McDowell Creek valley there are two historic communities: Ashland in Riley County (also known as Ashland Bottoms) and McDowell Creek in Geary County. The two groups that founded these settlements arrived with many differences between them but were generally united by their faith, Catholicism. This paper will explore how St. Joseph's Church overcame variances such as wealth and county lines, helping to bridge the divide between the Ashland and McDowell Creek communities.

The overall direction of this paper has come a long way from when it was first conceived. Originally it was thought that a general history of St. Joseph's church was needed to complement the ongoing restoration efforts undertaken by Geary County Historical Society. However, a comprehensive history was discovered at the historical society already, attached to the original report detailing the restoration project. Yet, a gem was uncovered in that history—Ashland in Riley County had a significant role in the founding and growth of the McDowell Creek community and St. Joseph's. From there it was determined that St. Joseph's provided services not only to the McDowell Creek settlers to the south but also to the Ashland Catholics farther north. This was an interesting conclusion, considering the divides between the two communities. From this, research has focused on how deep these divides were and how St. Joseph's played a role in bridging them. To aid in visualizing the location of these two adjacent settlements, and St. Joseph's Church, a map has been provided on the following page.



Figure 2: Map showing Ashland and McDowell Creek communities in relation to Manhattan, Riley and Geary Counties, Kansas. May 19, 2012. Created by author using maps.google.com.

Driving south along what has become known as Lower McDowell Creek Road supplies an exciting opportunity to experience firsthand the two communities and observe sights close to what settlers first arriving in the area would have seen. To the east is the rough highland of Konza Prairie (as it is known today, part of the outcrop of the Flint Hills). However, to the west lies the Kansas River floodplain, where the Ashland community would cultivate to make a living. Finally, to the south, the land dips into the lush valley created by McDowell Creek and

possibly long before that, the Kansas River itself. One of the first landmarks along the road is the Ashland community, whose only remaining physical evidence is the Ashland school and community church. Of course, when the first people of the Ashland Bottoms initially arrived there was nothing but a short spread of fertile floodplain. Johnson Williams, acting as a scout for the colony expecting to move to the area, saw an area hemmed by the stony Flint Hills and McDowell Creek feeding into the Kansas River.¹ Deciding this rich floodplain was a suitable spot, the rest of the colony came from Ohio and Kentucky and settled in 1855, choosing the name Ashland in honor of Henry Clay's plantation estate.² Arriving soon after this group was also the Irish Catholic Dempsey family, who are early burials in Ashland Cemetery.³

At its height, Ashland was a busy and significant town. In 1857, when Davis reached the required population to become a county (partially because of the influx of Ashland settlers), Ashland was chosen as the county seat.⁴ Furthermore, Ashland opened its post office in 1855, just a few months after settlement. However, it was closed just eight years later in 1863 as the community began to decline. The blow to Ashland came when it missed out on the Blue Valley Railroad, which was instead run through Manhattan, the hub of Riley County to the north and the more centrally located Junction City to the west.⁵ In 1860, the county seat was moved to Junction City, and in the Legislative Act of 1873, the order was given "to vacate the town of Ashland in Davis County."⁶ However, even though the town itself was gone, the surrounding farm community survived, as is evidenced by the Ashland schoolhouse and church, still in operation today. Another command issued by the Legislative Act of 1873 was a trade between Riley and

¹ Winifred Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*. (Manhattan, KS: Ted Varney's University Book Store, 1968), 112.

² *Ibid*, 113.

³ Author field notes, Ashland Cemetery, Riley County, Kansas, May, 2012.

⁴ Slagg, 111.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ *Ibid*, 113.

Davis counties. Ashland Township would be given to Riley and, in exchange, Milford Township would be given to Davis.⁷ The exchange had a significant impact on Ashland, as it divided the residents from one of their closest neighbors, the Lower McDowell Creek Road community.

Although both areas were open to settlement under the Kansas-Nebraska Act, many settlers into the McDowell Creek valley, especially those who would seek the services of a Catholic priest, arrived around 1859, five years later than early settlers into Ashland.⁸ However, one Irish Catholic settler, James Ryan, and his wife are listed on the 1855 Territorial Census; in 1870, the Ryans donated 3.57 acres of their land for the creation of a church and cemetery.⁹ One look at this lush, fertile valley created by McDowell Creek is enough to tell of its agricultural potential. In comparison, despite some good floodplain farm land, the stony Flint Hills of the eastern Ashland area were much less suited for strong agricultural endeavors.¹⁰ The referent often used today of ‘Lower McDowell Creek’ – perhaps arising before or after the official naming of the road, Lower McDowell Creek Road -- actually helps to perpetuate a geographical misunderstanding. Settlers into the valley in Geary County actually lived along *upper* McDowell Creek, as the waterway runs south to north. This is made clear in the title of a “wonderful autobiographical story”: *One Time on the Upper McDowell* (2009) by Helen Poole Tonish, who wrote of her 1930s childhood on Poole Ranch in the McDowell Creek valley.¹¹

As evidenced by the arrival of the Irishman William D. Poole into the McDowell Creek watershed, this initial settling group was made up of mostly single men from Ireland. Many had a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 117.

⁹ Damon Buldwivand, *St. Joseph's Catholic Church and Cemetery Geary County, KS.* (Junction City, KS: Geary County Historical Society, 2011), 4..

¹⁰ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas.* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 3.

¹¹ Margy Stewart and residents of Lower McDowell Creek Road, "Historical Companion: Lower McDowell Creek Rd.," self-published in Geary County, Kansas, 2005.

strong background in Catholicism. When they first arrived, services were performed by Jesuit missionaries operating out of St. Mary's Mission, about 30 miles east of McDowell Creek. These priests would usually hold Mass in one of the local homes.¹² This continued until 1870, when Michael Brannick, a stonemason and important community leader, organized the building of St. Joseph's Church.¹³ The single status of the men did not last long either, as most of them married quickly, several with the women of the Ashland community.¹⁴ As the McDowell Creek community continued to grow, so too did the church. In 1910, a second church was built in a Gothic-Revival style using limestone blocks, as the picture below shows.¹⁵



Figure 3: Photograph of St. Joseph's Church, Geary County, Kansas, built in 1910. Photograph by author, May 1, 2012.

¹² Buldwivand, *St. Joseph's Catholic Church and Cemetery Geary County, KS.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁴ Slagg, 117.

¹⁵ Buldwivand, 1.

The congregation of St. Joseph was, of course, a combination of McDowell Creek and Ashland residents. The Ashland community was made up of a variety of faiths, and the non-denominational Ashland Community Church serviced all of the beliefs represented in the area.¹⁶ After St. Joseph's was constructed, the Catholics of Ashland had a nearby church to attend Mass, and plenty of evidence shows that they did. For instance, Barclay tombstones appear in both the Ashland and St. Joseph's cemeteries. As it turns out, C.M. Barclay was one of the founding members of Ashland in 1855¹⁷, and he had a son, Robert¹⁸, who is buried in St. Joseph's.¹⁹ Furthermore, Robert lived in the same township (Jackson) as the Lower McDowell Creek Road community for much of his life,²⁰ but in his later years he moved back to his hometown of Ashland.²¹

Another example is Fredrick Schippert and his family. Like the Barclays, his land was in Ashland²² but he is buried at St. Joseph's.²³ Fredrick's daughter Mary, however, offers a particularly convincing example. Growing up, she attended school in Geary County, not Riley where her family lived, and in 1887 she married her childhood playmate John Brannick, a descendent of the Michael Brannick who built St. Joseph's.²⁴ Other families, such as the Toy and Fox families, owned land in both McDowell Creek valley and Ashland.²⁵ All of these factors contribute to the idea that these two communities were linked, despite their dissimilarities.

¹⁶ Slagg, 115.

¹⁷ Ibid, 113.

¹⁸ *1870 United States Federal Census* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), 19.

¹⁹ Robert E. Barclay, Inscription on Gravestone, St. Joseph's Cemetery, Geary County, Kansas.

²⁰ *1885 Kansas State Census* (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, n.d.), 14.

²¹ *1925 Kansas State Census* (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, n.d.), 10.

²² *Historical Plat Book of Riley County* (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, 1881), 68.

²³ Fredrick Schippert, Inscription on Gravestone, St. Joseph's Cemetery, Geary County, Kansas.

²⁴ "McDowell Creek Pioneer Observes Birthday Today," February 12, 1955.

²⁵ *Plat Book of Riley County*, 68 and *1880 Davis County Plat Map* (Junction City, KS: Geary County Historical Society).

Quite a few references have been made to these differences, but what were they exactly? As has been mentioned above, the most obvious difference was the county divide. Generally, it would be expected that each town would fall into the spheres of influence of the major cities within their counties, because they hold the county seat and jurisdiction of the town. This would mean that Lower McDowell Creek Road settlers would frequent Junction City, while Ashland residents would defer to Manhattan. However, evidence shows that this usually did not happen. A barely legible 1883 stone in Ashland Cemetery, for instance, carries the engraved name of the stone mason firm providing the gravestone: Baldwin & Damon, out of Junction City, not Manhattan.²⁶ The most convincing example, however, is the Sacred Heart Academy. Opened in 1908, Sacred Heart was a Catholic High School and the first high school in Manhattan.²⁷ Graduation lists in the lobby of the school today show names of families prominent in the Lower McDowell Creek Road area, such as Brannick, Toy and Bellinger. In fact, Marie Brannick, the daughter of Mary Schippert Brannick, graduated in 1917 and was a lifelong friend of the Cunningham family, whose many children also graduated from Sacred Heart. It appears that county lines were not a factor when considering where to school children or, as is shown above, which church to attend.

There was yet another important difference between the two communities—wealth. Evidence points to the McDowell Creek valley community being better off financially than the Ashland residents. For instance, St. Joseph's was built and financed largely from donations by McDowell Creek residents. A donation list shows large donations from prominent families there such as Brannick, Tully, and Toy, but few from Ashland parishioners.²⁸ Furthermore, the 1880 Kansas Agricultural Census records show that settlers in Ashland owned an average estimated farmland

²⁶ This research completed by Tyler Rudder, Angela Schnee, and Chloe Schnee, March, 2012.

²⁷ Susan Kongs, *The Roots of Seven Dolors—Sacred Heart Academy* (Manhattan, KS: 1983).

²⁸ *List of Donations to the St. Joseph's Cemetery Fund* (Junction City, KS: Geary County Historical Society, 1959).

value of \$2,100 and produced an average income of \$390 a year.²⁹ In comparison, the families of the McDowell Creek valley area across the county line owned an average of \$3,300 in farmland, and made approximately \$650 a year.³⁰ That means that the McDowell Creek farms -- and ranches -- in the valley farther south were more profitable than the Flint Hills farming region of Ashland. Additionally, it meant that McDowell Creek families there could afford more expensive schooling.

As mentioned above, several children from Lower McDowell Creek graduated from Sacred Heart Academy, whose tuition would have deterred families without extra funds. Running a farm or ranch is difficult, and every available hand is needed to help. Children sent to school were unable to help, incurring more cost as farm hands would have to be hired to fill in. For this reason many of the early graduates are women, because men were believed to be expected to take up the family industry and perform a majority of manual labor. This held true in the McDowell Creek community, as more women from the community graduated, proving that while landowners were well off, they could not financially send both sons and daughters to school. What is apparent, however, is that they had more wealth than Ashland residents, who could not afford expensive tuition rates for their children nor the cost of books, a separate expense.

Despite differences in wealth and county separation, the two communities of Ashland and Lower McDowell Creek Road area managed to retain connection, mostly due to the effects of St. Joseph's Church. Although founded at different times, one by Kentucky and Ohio natives, and the other by Irish immigrants, the two reconciled their cultural differences and united through faith. Even a wealth gap could not separate the two groups, as marriage and movement

²⁹ *Non-population Census Schedules for Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives, 1880).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

between the two areas remained a constant theme, likely until the closure of the church in 1989. Overall, St. Joseph's is an excellent example of how rural churches could unite a disparate community, as it remained the durable bridge throughout the years, bonding the dual congregation of Ashland Bottoms and McDowell Creek Valley.

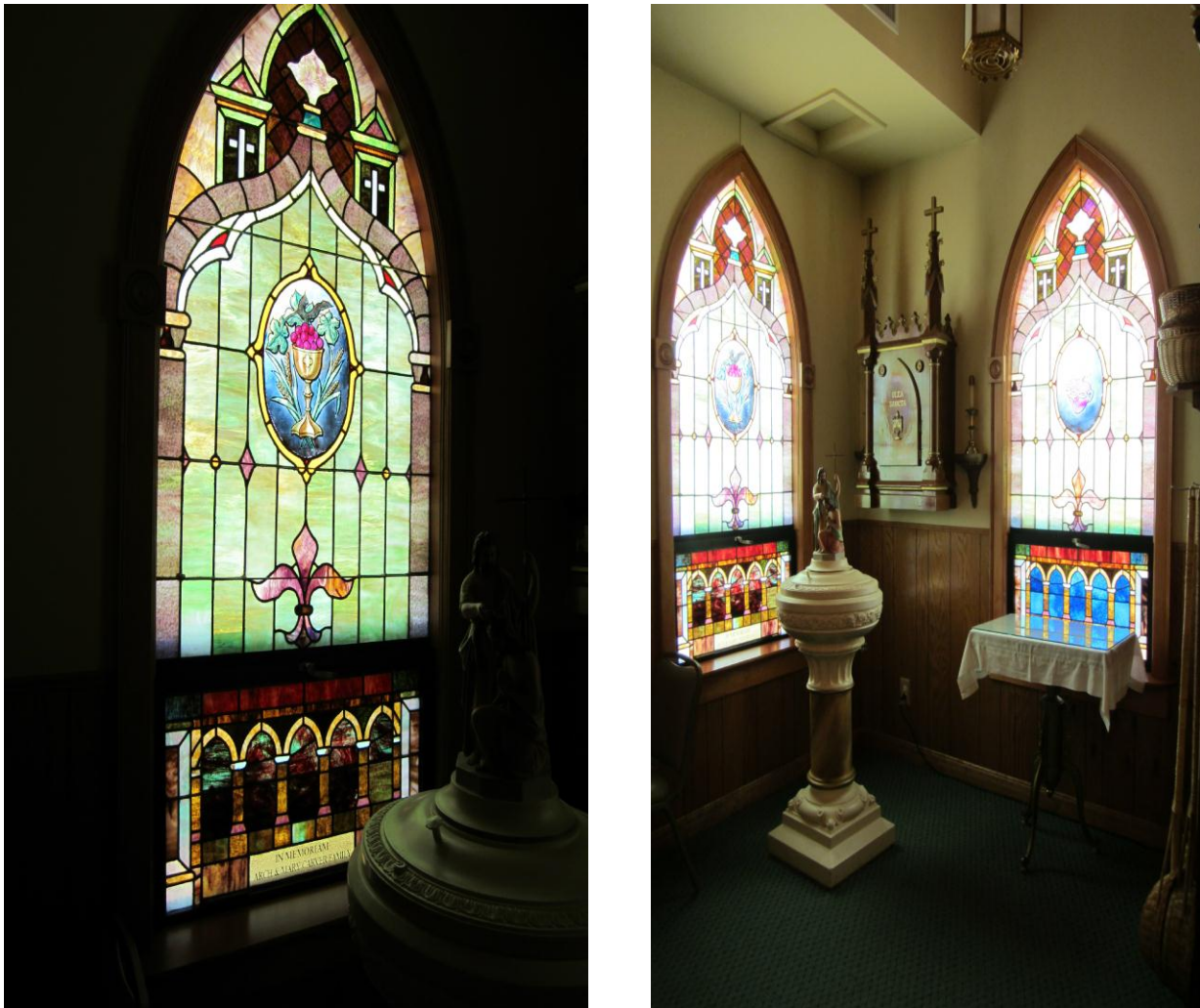


Figure 4: Two stained glass windows from St. Joseph's Church, now hanging in St. John Vianney Chapel, Maple Hill, Kansas. Photos by Thomas Morgan, July, 2012.

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