

Early Mills as Vanished Communities in Territorial Kansas: Bourassa's Mills, Territorial Wabaunsee County, Kansas

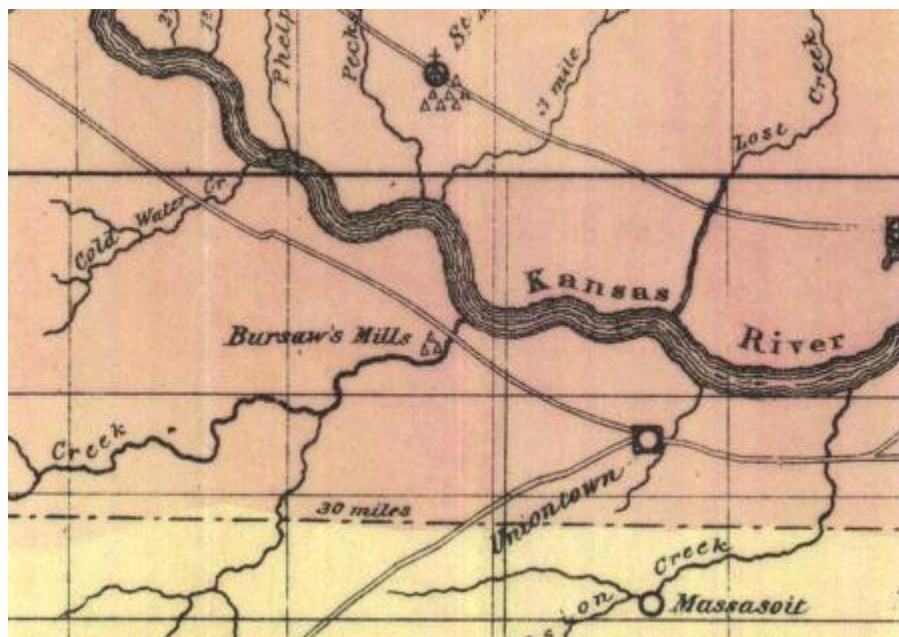


Figure 1 :1856 map of Eastern Kansas showing location of Bourassa's Mill. The area in pink is Potawatomi Indian land at the time. Source: Wichita State University, Special Collections.

<http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/maps/detailsframes.asp?offset=10&var=1856-0014>

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Government Grain: Jude Bourassa's Grist Mill on Mill Creek

The old Bourassa mill site is hard to see and even harder to get to if it is muddy at all. On a section of a ranch ¹currently owned by Dr. and Mrs. William Brethour, one travels out through the pasture along Mill Creek about a mile southeast of downtown Maple Hill, in township 11 south, range 13 east, section 19. At the first point, one half-walks and half-slides down the slope to the creek bank, where a natural table rock and a few strutting bits of iron rod are the only items left of the mill site. At another site, there are remnants of another mill owned by Bourassa, this time a long pipe level to the ground, where a tree has grown up around it; and, along the bank, still sits a pile of rocks that had been transported there to help operate the mill²

Originally owned by Jude W. Bourassa, a half-French, half-Indian whose brother was leader/translator Joseph Napoleon Bourassa³, the mill (or mills) probably was not in operation more than a few years. Not much is known about the grist mill that Jude operated, and accounts are just vague enough to be frustrating to a historian today. From genealogical records, it is known that Jude came west to Kansas from New York after the Indian removal known as the Trail of Death, in August 1840. In 1846, the Potawatomi Tribe was once again relocated, moving west of Topeka into what would become Wabaunsee County. It is in this spot that Jude Bourassa did rather well for himself, operating the mill that served the Indians as well as travelers on the Oregon Trail. In a 2010 speech given by descendent Jon Boursaw at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society Annual Meeting, Mr. Boursaw revealed that his great-

¹ See Figures 1 and 2 for image, description and date taken.

² See Figure 3 and 4 for image, description and date taken.

³ NOTE: I have encountered several spellings regarding the names of these two brothers, including Bourassa, Bursaws, Barsaws, Boursaws, Bourissa, and even the Potawatomie Indian name Ke Kahn. For simplicity, references will be made using the 'Bourassa' spelling, unless directly quoted from a source.

great-great uncle Jude Bourassa “operated a grist mill and boarding house on Mill Creek between Maple Hill and Willard”.⁴

The Potawatomi Indians on the reservation were originally from Indiana, where they lived a comfortable, farming lifestyle and were a natural part of the community. When the government gave orders for their removal, the Indians found it difficult to part with their way of life. “Since we had become [an] integral part of the community, [and] the church, and several had businesses in the area we were reluctant to leave,” and two attempts at swaying the government’s decision were made during the two year ‘grace period’; both attempts were unsuccessful.⁵ Then comes the most chilling part of the Potawatomi story, and the beginning of the Trail of Death:

“Beginning on August 30, 1838, with no advance notice, members of the [Potawatomi] Tribe were invited to the Church at Twin Lakes, IN to meet with Gen John Tipton, the local Indian Agent. Once in the church the leaders were informed that the Tribe was to be relocated within a few days. Armed soldiers were sent out to forcibly remove other Potawatomi from their homes and take them to the Church at Twin Lakes. They were held in the Church by armed guards for 4 days. During this period their homes, crops and businesses were burned to ensure that we had nothing to return to. On September 4th, the Tribal Leaders were placed in chains and loaded in to wagons, elders were placed in wagons and the march, later to be called the Potawatomi Trail of Death, began.”⁶

Born on April 19, 1814 in Galien River, Michigan, Jude attended the Baptist Theological Institute at Hamilton, New York, which is today Colgate University. Upon coming to Kansas, Mr.

⁴ Jon Boursaw, typescript of speech. *History of the Potawatomi Indians and the Potawatomi Trail of Death*. Wabaunsee County Historical Society Annual Meeting, 5 June 2010. Wabaunsee County Historical Museum, Alma, KS.

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

Bourassa was a wealthy citizen, a former landowner in Indiana, and was well educated, according to a letter written by William H. Hutter, Kansas' first territorial governor. Hutter describes how he "tarried several days at the house of Jude Bourassa, a French half-breed, about one mile from the Pottawatomie payment post [Union Town]," and how Bourassa had a "comfortable double Indian House, of logs of course" complete with "two good beds, a blazing fire in the chimney, and imported carpet on the floor and a handsome modern Piano in the room."⁷

With a youth and young adulthood spent in states like Indiana and New York, both part of the Great Lakes watershed and fingered with many strong streams and creeks, Jude Bourassa would have seen large numbers of grist and lumber mills. He would certainly have known their potential. As they had been since earliest colonial settlement, grist mills were still powered in the 1850s by water and were located along rivers and creeks where there was a constant enough water flow to turn an enormous wheel. Mill Creek provided just enough water flow to power Bourassa's Mill for the few years that it was in operation. It is likely, based on research into nineteenth century mills, that the mill wheel was of the type known as *overshot*. Overshot wheels could operate with 30% more efficiency than undershot wheels, especially on smaller streams with inconsistent water flow.⁸ Because mill stones wore down yearly, specialized knowledge of how to keep them sharp-edged was important. This was called dressing the stones. Jude Bourassa or another family member would have had to have had stone-dressing

⁷ Louise Barry, ed., *Scenes In (And En Route To) Kansas Territory, Autumn, 1854: Five Letters by William H. Hutter*, (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, 1969), http://www.kancoll.org/khq/1969/69_3_barry.htm (accessed October 17, 2011), pp. 312-336.

⁸ William Fox, Bill Brooks, and Janice Tyrwhitt, *The Mill* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1976), p. 36.

knowledge as well as understanding of how to construct an overshot wheel with its series of gears and gearshafts.⁹

The only reference to a community or town surrounding Bourassa's Mill was the Potawatomie Indian Reservation and scattered, earliest residents of the Maple Hill area. Settled first in 1844, this rich creek area was first inhabited by people of French ancestry, as the community was connected to the Potawatomie Reserve, and "chief among these French people was a large family of Bourassas, of which Mr. Eugene Bourassa seems to have been the head. They built grist-mills and saw-mills and the old dams are still to be found on Mill Creek."¹⁰ The site of Bourassa's Mill indicates a point on the north-flowing creek where the flow would have been greatest, approaching the Kansas River. The mill attracted early grain farmers, French and French-Indian peoples, who left very few records. Later, "one of the first marriages on record is that of Isabella Bourassa and R. H. Watterman in 1859."¹¹ Isabella was one of Jude's daughters, and she was married at age 23.¹² The Wabaunsee County Directory and History also indicates that a Eugene Bourassa was the sole pupil of the new schoolhouse, at this time a young man, 24 or 25. It is not certain where this schoolhouse was located or how long it was in operation. The extended Bourassa family featured prominently in the early settlement of

⁹ *The Mill*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Kansas Directory Company. *Business Directory and History of Wabaunsee County*. (Topeka: The Kansas Directory Company, 1907), 73.

¹¹ Kansas Directory Company, *Business Directory and History*, 74.

¹² Ancestry.com RootsWeb, "Famille Poissant Family Tree-Genealogy of Descendants of Jacques Poissant dit Lasaline," Ancestry.com, <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=poissant&id=I1895> (accessed October 13, 2011).

northern Wabaunsee County and in the settling of the Potawatomi Indian Reserve that was supplied by Bourassa's Mill.

It is difficult to say exactly how long Bourassa operated the mill on Mill Creek, but it would have been for no more than ten years, and even that number is generous. A map produced in 1856 shows "Bursaw's Mills" on Mill Creek (see title page). Genealogical records show Jude passed away in 1858, although there is some question as to the precise year. Apparently, "it is said Jude caught smallpox and died after giving hospitality to a family of immigrants. This would have been somewhere between 1856 and 1859."¹³ In addition, stream flow in the Flint Hills can be adversely affected by dry years and by stream-side timber removal, farming and stock watering.¹⁴ The mill might have been compromised in such a way, especially after the rapid influx of Euro-American settlers after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. But while it was operational, Bourassa's Mill was a valuable piece of Territorial Wabaunsee County. And it is more than probable that it gave its name to the most important waterway in Wabaunsee County south of the Kansas River.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ See the 2011 Kansas Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies, Kansas Environmental Conference. <http://www.kdheks.gov/sbcs/Presentations/2011/Gaggero%20Jaime.pdf>. Last accessed August 18, 2012.

Attachments



Figure 2: Piece of pipe parallel to the ground. A tree has grown up around it, blocking it off from the creek. Photo taken by author October 16, 2011.

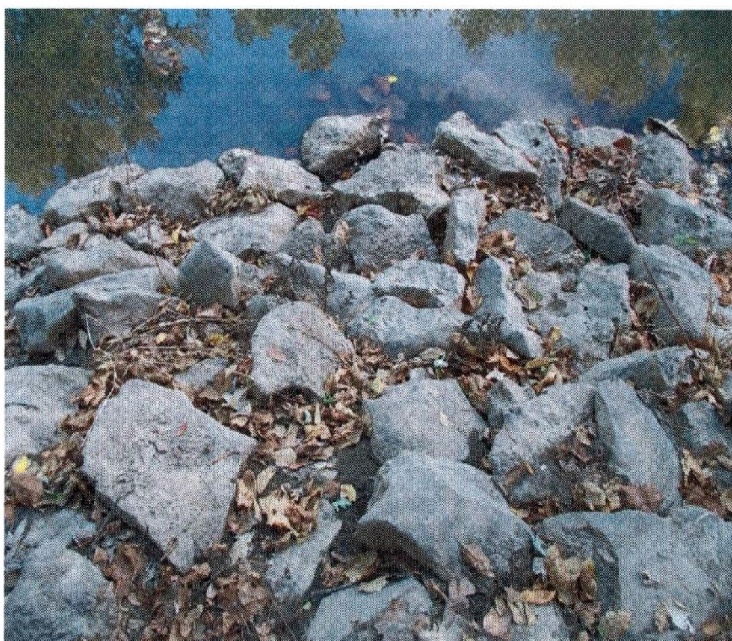


Figure 3: Rock pile along the bank of Mill Creek, on Dr. Brethour's ranch. Photo taken by author October 16, 2011.



Figure 4: Natural table rock formation stretching across Mill Creek, on Dr. Brethour's ranch. Photo taken by author October 16, 2011.



Figure 5: Bits of iron strutting from the rock, remnants left from the grist mill, on Dr. Brethour's ranch. Photo taken by author October 16, 2011.

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Wichita State University Special Collections.