

The People's Blacksmith

John Crisp and the Rural Farmers of Rock Creek
Township: Chalk Mound, Wabaunsee County,
Kansas, 1850 to 1950

Michael Spachek

with

**Research assistance from Benetta Foster
and editorial assistance from M.J. Morgan
Chapman Center**

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Kansas State University

Spring, 2016

This paper will tell the story of Chalk, Kansas, from the initial settlement in the 1850s to the last business closing in 1956. It will focus on the story of blacksmiths in Chalk and specifically John Crisp, the blacksmith in business there for fifty years. The three blacksmiths who served the Chalk Mound area supported a landscape of black and white farming and ranching. Rock Creek Township in Wabaunsee County was home to a racially integrated community between 1880 and 1900, and Chalk held isolated rural farm families together. The closing of the post office in 1907 ended Chalk's development. This study uses plat maps, newspaper articles, two important newspaper columns, site studies, and informal interviews.

On a quiet fall day driving along Chalk Road in southern Wabaunsee County, Kansas, it is possible to stop and feel history come alive. Chalk Road runs east to west between Old K-4 Road and East Chalk Mound Road in the south central region of Rock Creek Township. Today all that remains is an old school house and a cemetery, but prior to 1907, there was a small thriving town named Chalk (also known as Chalk Mound).

The story of Chalk Mound is the vital role it played in supporting the farming community in an isolated part of the Flint Hills. This paper will examine the history of Chalk as well as explore the reason for its early success: the services and material goods available to farmers in the Rock Creek area, including a colony of African American farmers. In particular, the services of blacksmiths – at one time, as many as three – ensured the survival of this tiny community, evolving over time on two levels. Chalk will be explored in four main areas: the physical geography, the early history from 1850 to 1880, the golden age from 1880 to the 1920s and the decline of Chalk starting in 1907. Although the town was ever very small, Chalk seemed to create a positive feeling in the people of Wabaunsee County: “The country in and around the Mound is well settled by men who make farming a business, and from the appearance of thrift and energy noticeable on all sides, they make it pay.”¹

The first step in understanding the history of this community is to understand the physical geography of the area. Driving to Chalk south of Alma, the first thing you will notice is its remote location. Chalk lay almost exactly 15 miles (20 miles by earliest roads) from both the large towns in the area, Alma and Alta Vista, a considerable way to travel in a horse-drawn wagon. Along with the distance to larger towns, Chalk is in one of the hillier areas of

¹ See “Local intelligence,” *Alma Enterprise*, Sept. 5, 1885.

Wabaunsee County; even with modern roads, it is a challenging location to reach. To this day, cell phone coverage is lost in the area, and many a vehicle has suffered a flat tire on the flinty gravel of country roads.² It is not hard to imagine how isolated farmers and townspeople would have felt before the automobile made it easier to travel, as shown in the image below.

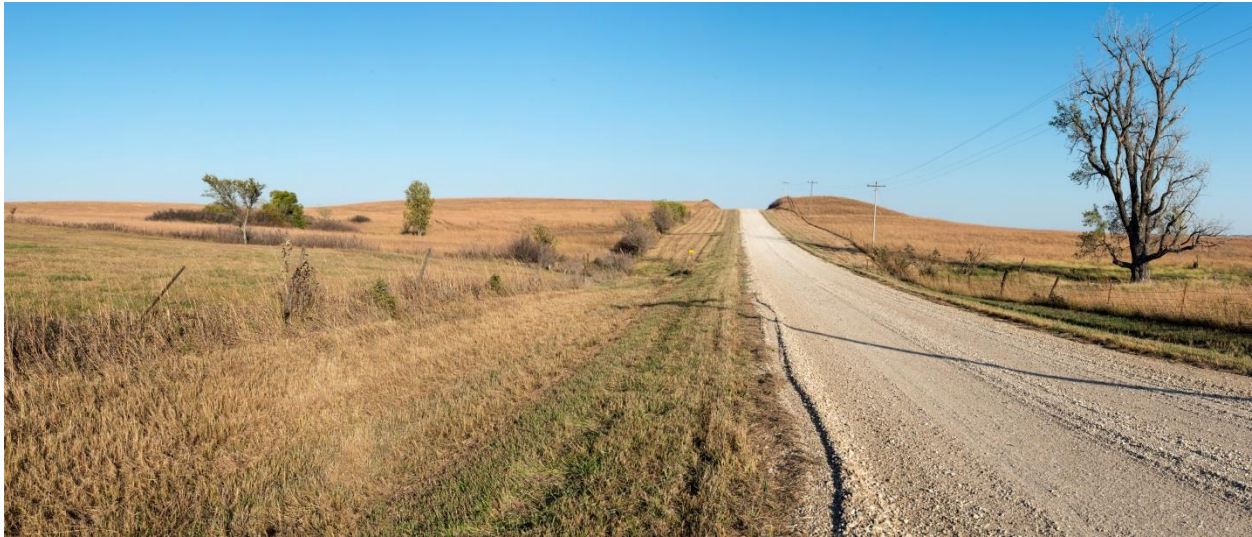


Fig. 1. Looking uphill to the area of Upper Chalk, Rock Creek Township. Photo by Tom Parish, October, 2015.

Once a settler arrived in south-central Rock Creek Township, he would have seen the beautiful natural limestone deposits of the Flint Hills. So striking was this early stone and so available that it gave the town its name. According to Benetta Foster, a local historian writing about Chalk, “Chalk takes its name because of a chalk like rock formation found west of Chalk. Children used to fill their pockets with chalk pieces to write on their slates.”³ Limestone deposits also provided building material for barn and home construction, stone walls marking property boundaries, and many other uses, such as wells, cisterns, and farm outbuildings.

² Communication to author from Benetta Foster.

³ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I,” in *I Love These Flint Hills*, *Flint Hills Independent*, Sept. 5, 1991.



Fig. 2. An undated photograph of the original barn on the Paul homestead south of Chalk Cemetery. Notice the limestone foundation. One of the men on horseback is Horace Paul, one of the original settling family. SOURCE: Private collection of Carolyn Paul Zerbe.

Yet despite the limestone resource, settlers would have noted only a small amount of fresh running water. The closest source for the town was the east branch of Rock Creek, which curves through the bottomland about a mile from the Chalk school house. This branch is also identified on some maps as Horse Creek. Lower Chalk likely evolved in proximity to this water source, but farms on the upland had to depend on springs and wells. The other noticeable feature is that the town has two tiers, Upper and Lower Chalk. Upper Chalk developed at the top of a ridge, with land better suited for grazing cattle because of the rocky soil. Lower Chalk has better farm land because of the buildup of soil from the flooding of Rock Creek.⁴ The geography of upper and lower Chalk played a significant role in the history of the town. Different clusters of stores and businesses opened and closed over the years in both places, but eventually, the blacksmith

⁴ Personal communication to author by Gary Rowley, Rock Creek Township trustee and landowner, August, 2015.

services stayed in Upper Chalk, where horses and machinery could more easily approach a forge.⁵

Early History of Chalk: 1850-1880

In the 1850s, early settlers came to the area that would first be named Chalk Mound and later just Chalk. The land they chose was described as being “fertile bottom land” located along Rock Creek.⁶ Local stories mention a family passing by on the Santa Fe Trail to the south and losing a mother and children to cholera. The Exon cemetery, today on private land, likely holds the remains of this family.⁷ Possibly the father, one John or William Exon, remained in the area, as the first recorded name of Chalk was Exonville.⁸ It is easy to tell why the original settlers of Chalk decided to stay in this area. Even a modern-day map makes it clear that Rock Creek is the only source of running creek water for miles around. The Wabaunsee County Atlas of 1885 does pinpoint at least five springs on farms around the Chalk Mound area, but Rock Creek is the only stream.⁹ Even before the Civil War there is evidence that shows how Chalk supported the farm community. It is known that a general store had opened in the late 1850s serving Chalk and the surrounding area. Owned and operated by George Vanatta, this store -- only a log cabin at first -- helped the farming people of Chalk survive. Vanatta also served as the Chalk postmaster from 1873 to 1894, housing the post office in his shop.¹⁰ Chalk Mound was shortened to Chalk in 1894 as well. The history of Chalk goes cold during the Civil War with little to no information

⁵ For instance, see the *Wabaunsee County Atlas of 1900* for the clusters of businesses in Upper and Lower Chalk.

⁶ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I.”

⁷ Personal communication to author, Gary Rowley, August, 2015.

⁸ See entry for “Chalk Mound” in Melvin D. Bruntzel, *Quick Reference to Kansas* (Belleville: The Print Schop, 2010). A William Exon is listed as a member of the first Chalk school board in 1867, along with George Vanatta. This information courtesy of Benetta Foster.

⁹ See “Rock Creek Township” in *Wabaunsee County Atlas* (Chicago, Illinois: Gillen and Davy, 1885).

¹⁰ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I.”

about how the people in the community reacted to the war. After the war the character of the people in Chalk and the farms around the town began to shine.

One aspect of the Chalk Mound community that emerges during the late 1870s and early 1880s is the arrival in Farmer and Rock Creek Townships of a colony of former slaves, Exodusters, most from Mississippi. These poor farmers, 31 families, likely 57 persons all told, were given 40 acre tracts by their sponsors, both the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Organization and Quaker and Baptist benefactors. One tract lay in the northwestern corner of Rock Creek Township. While the farmers were said to be "self-sustaining" by the end of the 1880s, not many stayed on the 40-acre farms; there were few water sources in the rocky uplands. Evidence suggests some of the more successful black families moved to the Chalk Mound area. After this initial wave, other black families came in, with the Abbot family being especially prominent; they later moved into the Eskridge area.¹¹ One researcher studying black churches in Wabaunsee County believes that the black families of Rock Creek Township held church services in a general store, although the store is not named. Earliest white settlers commonly did the same thing, appropriating a single building for many uses.¹²

It is well documented that during the 1870s and 1880s, one-room schools were quickly built in the area surrounding Chalk Mound. From August 1, 1870 when a bond for \$900 was issued to build a school in Chalk Mound to 1886 when Mount Pleasant, the last school, was opened, a total of seven schools opened in Rock Creek Township. The farmland provided for these schools was

¹¹ See for instance, the Kansas State Census of 1885 for Eskridge, listing Abbot families.

¹² For a good overview of the Rock Creek Township Exodusters, see Rebecca Bush, "Landscape of Faith: Black Churches in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, 1881-1981 and The Black Baptist Church in Eskridge, Kansas, 1887-1963," posted to K-REX, Kansas State University Research Exchange. Published by Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Kansas State University, 2010.

donated by farmers who insisted on education for their children, no matter how remote the area. The land for Chalk School came from Mrs. Jane Pardee Paul, described as “the benefactor of Chalk Cemetery and School.”¹³ The seven area schools were Chalk Mound, #23; Mansfield, #47, opening June 23, 1873; Parkdale, #25 opening April 18, 1874; Des Moines, #53, opening in 1878; Pleasant Ridge (also known as Nixon) #61; and South Pole, #62, opening April 16, 1881 and June 10, 1881 respectively. The last school to open was Mount Pleasant, #78, in 1886.¹⁴ The explosion of schools being built in an area with an estimated population of 500 people in 1884-1885 is impressive.¹⁵ The farthest school from Chalk was Mansfield, #47, at approximately five miles away. Most African-American children in the township are documented as attending either Parkdale or South Pole school, closest to the original Exoduster settlement to the northwest.¹⁶ The largest school house is the only one still standing today: Chalk School, shown below in a modern photograph. This was the second Chalk school building.

¹³ See Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I.”

¹⁴ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I,” based on the research of Debi Taylor.

¹⁵ The estimated population of 500 people in 1884-85 comes from the Polk Business Directory and is almost certainly a number given for the surrounding township and not the town itself.

¹⁶ See School District records for Rock Creek Township schools at Wabaunsee County Courthouse, Alma, Kansas.



Fig. 3. Chalk Mound School, District #23, as it appears today. Photograph by Tom Parish, October, 2015.

The number of schools in the community around Chalk clearly points to the people who settled there prioritizing education for their children, like many other early settlement areas in Kansas. The 1885 atlas for Rock Creek Township lists most of the farmers as having come from the North Midland states of Ohio and Indiana, with some from New York as well.¹⁷ These states placed a high cultural value on education. They were also strong abolitionist centers and Union supporters before and during the Civil War. The integrated landscape of Rock Creek Township may well attest to these values.

¹⁷ See “Patrons Directory” from Rock Creek Township, Wabaunsee County Atlas of 1885.

School houses were also important meeting places for the rural communities, as box socials, elections, graduation ceremonies, and Bible study groups all used rural schools as meeting places. There is some clear evidence that both black and white farming families attended these functions at one-room rural schools in Wabaunsee County.¹⁸ While rural schools around Chalk supported a growing farming population in Rock Creek Township, the town itself also continued to develop throughout the 1870s and 1880s. The close of 1879 found Chalk with several schools in the area and a two-level community.

The Golden Age of Chalk: 1880-1907

The earliest population count for Chalk is 300, according to the Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1880.¹⁹ However, it is very likely that the population of Chalk itself was less than reported due to farmers outside of town having a Chalk mailing address. According to the 1884-1885 Polk Directory, the town had grown to 500 persons.²⁰ While both population counts are not reflective of the number of people actually living in town, they are indicative of the growing community that surrounded Chalk. In 1880, the town was important enough to have a constable and a justice of the peace, as well as a lawyer. The backbone of Chalk's economy was the farmers who had located in a six or seven mile radius around the two-tiered town. They were shippers of corn, hogs, and cattle, although the nearest shipping point was still Council Grove. The best example of a business that served the farmers of the area were the three blacksmiths who operated in Chalk.²¹ Below is the earliest – and also the only – known

¹⁸ For instance, see Jamie Schendt's discussion of Bean School, District #3, near Alma, where an African-American farmer led both white and black residents in Bible study. Jamie Schendt, "District School #3: Alma, KS (1893-1925) A Case Study of Integrated Schooling." Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Kansas State University, Fall, 2008.

¹⁹ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1880.*

²⁰ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1884-85.*

²¹ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1880.*

photograph of the small bottomland community of Lower Chalk. The Woodman Hall is across a dusty, curving road from what is probably the general store and post office. This photograph makes it evident how small Chalk really was.²²

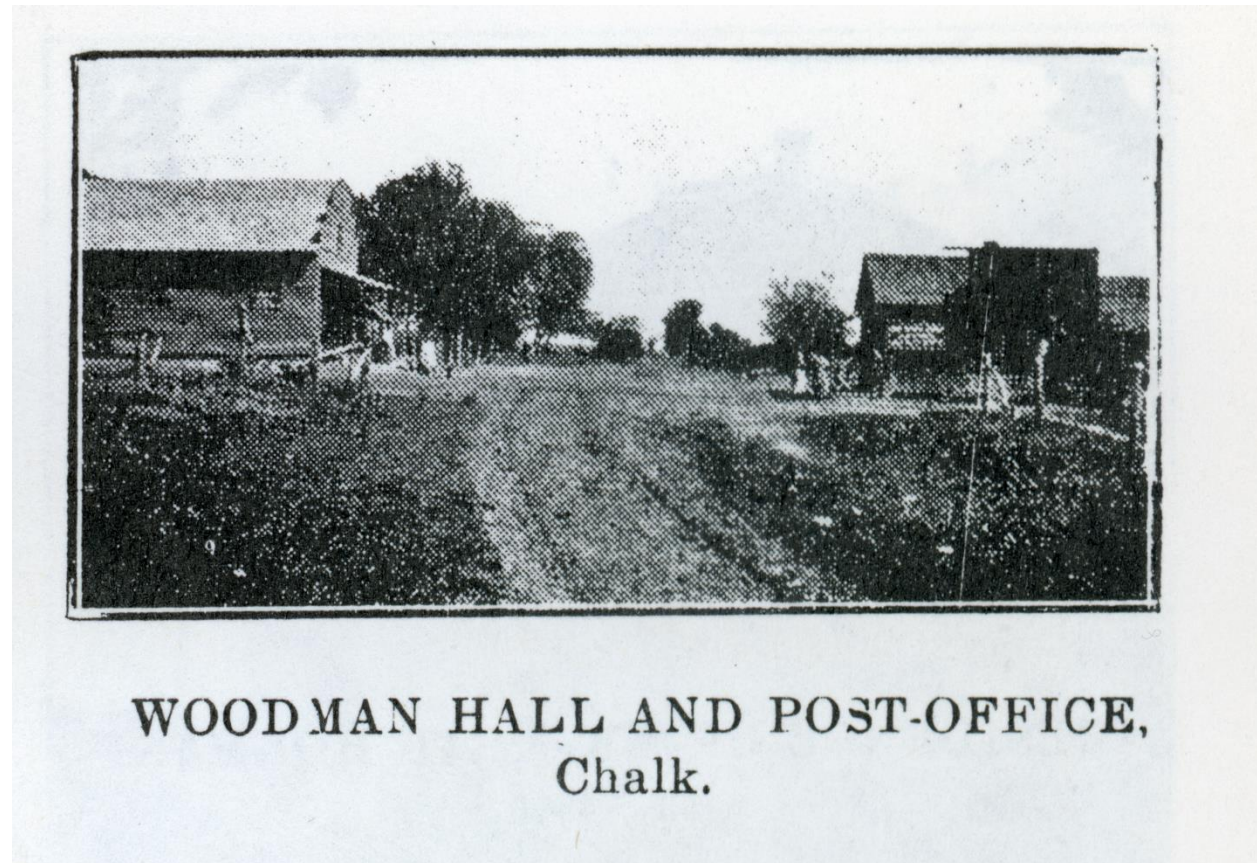


Fig. 4. The only known historic photograph of Lower Chalk, circa 1900. SOURCE: Matt Thomson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas, with stories of pioneer days and glimpses of our western border*. Alma, Kansas, 1901.

Between 1878 and 1880 the first blacksmith, J. W. Wyman, had set up shop in Chalk. Little is known about J. W. other than he was the first blacksmith and that he had left the

²² Photograph appears in Matt Thomson's 1901 *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas with stories of pioneer days and glimpses of our western border...*

business by 1884 when F. Cooper is shown to have been the blacksmith for Chalk.²³ At that time the blacksmith shop was located on the road adjacent to the property of Benjamin Riggs.²⁴ Today, the location of his shop/store is about a quarter mile west of the standing school house on Chalk Road. By the mid-1880s, Chalk had grown to need two physicians to serve the surrounding community. Twice-weekly stagecoaches came south from Eskridge, bound for Council Grove; and stock and grain shipping could now occur out of Eskridge as well. Local specialist Benetta Foster has identified this early stage road as one called by residents “the South West Trail.” “This road which was sand, then later gravel, later became known as K-4 Highway during the 1920s.”²⁵ Even with such rudimentary transportation, Chalk Mound must have been a bustling and active rural community. Occasionally, human interest stories about it appeared in the *Alma Enterprise*, such as the 1887 account of a rogue black bear that had escaped from a ranch and was “playing havoc with the watermelon patches near Chalk Mound.”²⁶

Demand for expert blacksmithing continued to rise in the farms of Rock Creek Township. The final blacksmith to come to Chalk was John Crisp. The earliest record of Crisp in Chalk comes from the *Alma Enterprise*, October 21, 1898, when the paper addressed local news: “John Crisp of Comisky, has moved his blacksmith shop to White’s store at which place he will always be found ready to do your work. Give a call if you have anything in his line. We understand he is a first class workman.”²⁷ It is important to note that Alma is about 15 miles away from Chalk (Polk Directories give the distance as 20 miles); but it had a wide circulation range. A positive

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Rock Creek 13 South Range 12 East of 6th Principal Meridian*. 2 inches to a mile. In *Atlas of Wabaunsee County Kansas*. (Chicago, Illinois: Gillen & Davy, 1885), p. 34.

²⁵ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1884-85*; for the South West Trail, see Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I,” *I Love These Flint Hills*.

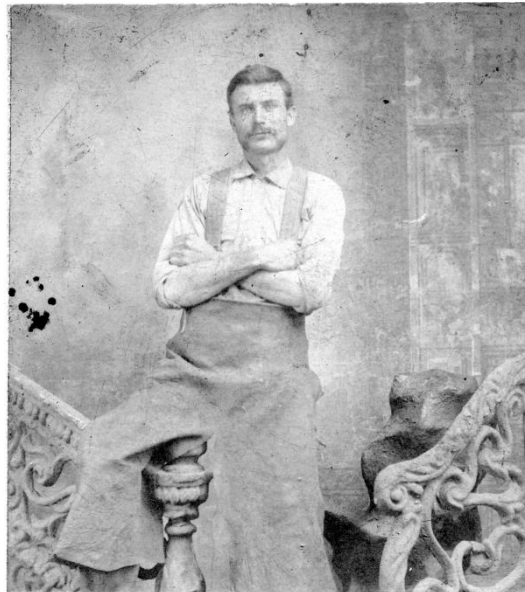
²⁶ Reported in the *Alma Enterprise*, September 9, 1887.

²⁷ “Chalk Mound.” *The Alma Enterprise*, October 21, 1898.

<http://www.newspapers.com/image/99979803/?terms=%22john%2Bcrisp%22> (accessed 12/18/2015).

note from the *Enterprise* would have been free advertising, potentially providing Crisp with a lot of customers who were too far from an Alma or Eskridge blacksmith. These customers would have formed the foundation of Crisp's business. In 1900, the actual population of Chalk was 100, but it had three general stores and two barbers, in addition to a specialist in bee hives and a shoemaker.²⁸

Figure 5 shown below is a photograph of John Crisp taken in a studio. He is shown standing in what appears to be a formal studio setting, dressed in the leather apron he would have worn in his blacksmith shop. In this photo he is a young, vital family man. Although when he first began work in the Chalk area, he had but two small children, over the long years the Crisp family lived in upper Chalk, the family expanded. The federal census of 1920 lists seven children in addition to the oldest daughter, who had left home – a total of five daughters and three sons. All of them attended Chalk school.²⁹



²⁸ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1900.*

²⁹ Federal Census of 1920, Rock Creek Township, Wabaunsee County, Kansas.

Fig. 5. A photograph of long-time Chalk blacksmith John Crisp. SOURCE: Kansasmemory.org. Original repository: Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

Even though it is not certain who actually took the photograph, it is known that there was a local photographer named William McCoy who may have opened a photographic studio in Chalk. There is a good chance it was McCoy who photographed John Crisp.³⁰ We can see that Crisp is obviously proud of his vocation. The story of John Crisp and his blacksmith shop is one of the keys to understanding the history of Chalk itself.

Like the town he lived in, John Crisp made his living serving the farm neighborhood around Chalk. Evidence of this comes from the *Alma Enterprise* in September, 1899. It simply says that Crisp had been successful and he was expanding his store.³¹ By May of 1901, the *Enterprise* reported in local news about Rock Creek Township that “John Crisp, our blacksmith, turns work away nearly every day, being unable to do it all. Another shop is needed at Chalk and would pay well.”³² This statement about John Crisp is extraordinarily important to understanding how vital John Crisp, along with Chalk, was to Rock Creek Township. When the unknown writer calls John Crisp “our blacksmith” it clearly shows how wide his customer base was. Crisp was then the sole blacksmith operating in the township. Over approximately 66 square miles and with three or four landowners per square mile, the scale of Crisp’s clients would have been overwhelming for one person. This is confirmed with the report that Crisp was turning away business and the plea for a second shop in Chalk. Crisp made a strong impression on people who

³⁰ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I.”

³¹ “Chalk Mound.” *The Alma Enterprise*, September 8, 1899.
<http://www.newspapers.com/image/99981659/?terms=%22john%2Bcrisp%22> (accessed 12/19/2015)

³² “Rock Creek.” *The Alma Enterprise*, May 17, 1901.
<http://www.newspapers.com/image/99953214/?terms=%22john%2Bcrisp%22> (accessed 12/19/2015)

knew him. Despite the number of clients he had, Crisp's actual shop appears to have been small. Figure 6 shown below captures the remnants of at least part of the shop.



Figure 6: The 1990s photograph above shows part of the brick wall and what appears to be a stove pipe at one end. The ring of stones may have been the old forge location of the Crisp blacksmith shop in Upper Chalk. SOURCE: Private collection of Linda Crisp.

Several memoirs written in the 1990s tell stories of John Crisp: his refusal to use anything but white handkerchiefs despite the dirt and smoke of his profession, or his passion for woolen long

johns worn at all times of the year! “He insisted that as a breeze came through, there was a cooling effect with the wool that he never found with any other fabric.”³³

With several other businesses that were opened during this period, a picture of Chalk being the nucleus of the rural neighborhood is clear. Reminiscences mention barn dances and country fiddlers as well as Saturday night dances held upstairs at the Chalk store. When it was operated by the Kerseys in the 1880s, the store used ice cut from nearby Rock Creek.³⁴ There was also a country store at “Upper Chalk” for a while, across from the Crisp blacksmith shop. Clubs and organizations often met in stores, school, and outdoor venues. The *Alma Enterprise* reported in September, 1897, that a benevolent society, the Knights and Ladies of Fireside, held a picnic at Chalk. And it is from this time period that a photograph was likely taken of the Chalk Band, probably all local farmers.³⁵

³³ Carl Kersey, longtime area resident, whose recollections were published by Benetta Foster, “Carl Kersey and Chalk Revisited,” *I Love These Flint Hills*, the *Flint Hills Independent*, May 21, 1992.

³⁴ Carl Kersey, in Benetta Foster, “Carl Kersey and Chalk Revisited.”

³⁵ The *Alma Enterprise*, September 10, 1897.



Fig. 7. A photograph of the Chalk Band, date unknown. SOURCE: Kansasmemory.org. Original repository: Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

The Decline of Chalk 1907-1950

Despite the success of John Crisp and other store owners, the town of Chalk started its slow decline after 1900. The population of Chalk in 1894 was only 60 and by 1900, the population had only increased by 40.³⁶ With the advent of rural mail routes in the early 1900s, the need for Chalk to serve as a key rural post office ended. Although there had been discussion of a proposed “interurban” rail line between Council Grove and Topeka, passing through Eskridge

³⁶ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directories* of 1894 and 1900.

and Chalk, it was likely never going to happen; the hilly terrain around Chalk made building a rail line extremely expensive.³⁷ The post office officially closed December 14, 1907. The last day of the post office and the town were documented by the *Alma Enterprise* on December 13, 1907:

One by one the old time land-marks disappear. It is now said that the post office at Chalk on Rock Creek, will be discontinued tomorrow. Perhaps it is not needed anymore but we hate to see it go. We were hot 10 or 12 years ago when they changed it from Chalk Mound to just plain Chalk, and we continued to put the “Mound” on every time we wrote it for a year or more afterwards, but it did no good, so we finally accepted the contraction. There is much of the history and many memories connected with the name and we are sorry to say goodbye to it.³⁸

Even though it is not specified, the author of this article is clearly saying goodbye to Chalk for all of Rock Creek Township. The author shows people today how the community at large felt about Chalk and captured the mournful tone that would go along with the nucleus of the community ending. A year later, a newspaper writer described the tearing down of “the old city hall of Chalk Mound,” so it is clear that when the post office closed, the town declined quickly.³⁹ Yet the Chalk neighborhood community stayed intact for several more decades, with many social functions still taking place in the area. In May of 1910, for instance, a notice appeared in the *Alta Vista Journal* about an upcoming ice cream social at the Chalk Mound school house.⁴⁰ Benetta Foster, who has written extensively about Chalk for local newspapers, lists many organizations that met in Chalk over three decades: the Woodman’s Lodge, the Knights of Pythias, GAR Post #348, 4-H, Extension Homemakers Unit, Masonic Lodge, Chalk Ladies Aid

³⁷ See “Council Grove-Topeka Line Estimated at \$1,164,415,” in the *Alma Signal*, Feb. 12, 1904.

³⁸ “Out of Town Notes.” *The Alma Enterprise*, December 13, 1907.

<http://www.newspapers.com/image/99949015/?terms=%22Chalk%22%2B%22post%2Boffice%22> (access 12/19/2015)

³⁹ *Alma Signal*, Sept. 18, 1908.

⁴⁰ *Alta Vista Journal*, May 27, 1910.

Society and the Rock Creek Watershed. There was also a baseball team in the 1910s and 1920s.⁴¹ The school remained open, as shown from the 1923 photograph below, originally appearing in “Chalk Part Two,” by Benetta Foster. This school is the original Chalk school building.



Fig. 8. A 1923 photograph of the original Chalk School. SOURCE: “Chalk Part Two,” by Benetta Foster.

The rural community stayed strong. Local correspondents wrote columns about the Chalk area for years, sending news of the neighborhood to the *Alma Enterprise* and *Signal*.⁴² Some examples of ongoing social functions include church services on the second floor of the Button General Store in the 1920s and the yearly programs and ceremonies of Chalk school.⁴³ Later

⁴¹ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part II.”

⁴² See, for instance, the column “Chalk Dust” in the *Alma Enterprise* and then *Signal*, written by Barbara Rowley.

⁴³ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part II.”

owners of the store provided outdoor movies and dances on a concrete pad or “dance platform” north of the old cream station.⁴⁴ During the 1920s as well, the Model T came to Chalk and as a result, a gas pump was installed next to the general store. Also around that time, a new creamery was built to make it easier for the farmers to sell their cream and eggs.⁴⁵ When the Great Depression began in 1929, it made times extremely difficult for the people of Chalk area, as for most other remote, rural places in the United States. During this decade, however, many rural blacksmiths actually saw an increase in business as farmers brought in their plowshares to be sharpened almost weekly. The dryness of the 1930s made their farmland too hard to easily plow.⁴⁶ Across the 1930s, John Crisp’s shop in Upper Chalk continued to serve the drought-stricken farmers of Rock Creek Township.

The community struggled, but there are a couple of interesting notes about Chalk in the Depression years. The first was a local project of the Workman’s Public Assistance Program founded by President Franklin Roosevelt. Local researcher Debi Taylor describes the project:

The Community Well was built in 1933 by the Workman’s Public Assistance (WPA). The W.P.A was one of the first government relief programs instituted in the early 1930’s to help the many people affected by the crash of the Stock Market and the effects of the drought and dust bowl that followed. The W.P.A workers received \$1.00 a day to build the Rock Creek Community Well, which at the time was a decent wage. Many of the ranchers and farmers in Rock Creek felt they were overpaid and they gave the project the nickname “We Piddle Around,” as it seemed to take workers twice as long to accomplish a job as it probably should have.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Communication to author from Gary Rowley, August, 2015; see also Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part II.”

⁴⁵ Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part I.”

⁴⁶ See this discussion in “Dust Bowl Damage to Broughton in the 1930s,” M.J. Morgan, *Portrait of a Lost Town: Broughton, Kansas, 1869-1966* (Manhattan: Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Kansas State University, 2010).

⁴⁷ Debi Taylor’s unpublished history of the Chalk area is quoted in Benetta Foster, “Chalk Part II,” *I Love These Flint Hills*, Sept. 12, 1991.

Another interesting event in Chalk during the Depression was that a theater opened on the second floor of Claude Button's Store. The only thing known about the theater is that it closed after only two years for financial reasons.⁴⁸ After WWII, the Chalk area gained electricity for the first time in 1950. Cecil Paul, a resident in the area, recalled turning on every light in his home and going outside to admire the view. It was a dramatic change in the community.⁴⁹ The last Chalk business to close was the blacksmith shop of John Crisp in 1956. The blacksmith who had worked so hard in the early 1900s, serving both white and black farmers, finally retired his bellows after over fifty years of operation. Once Crisp's shop closed, the last official remnant of Chalk was gone.⁵⁰ Despite Crisp closing operations, the sense of community lived on. The Chalk 4H club, for example, did not end until the 1970s according to Gary Rowley, longtime resident of Chalk.⁵¹

For sixty years the town of Chalk Mound, usually just "Chalk," served as a vital link to the farmers in the area and the outside world. Initially it provided a post office, general stores, doctors, law enforcement, transportation, and schools; and Chalk School was the voting site for Rock Creek Township, a fact preserved today in a wooden election box found in the attic of the school. African-American farmers, denied voting rights in the Reconstruction South, cast ballots along with white farmers here. For the short years they farmed in the township, they also brought in their horses and farm tools to the early blacksmiths of the Chalk area; those blacksmiths were documented here as early as 1880, the year the Wabaunsee Colony Exodusters settled in Farmer and Rock Creek Townships. By 1885, several African-American farmers were

⁴⁸Benetta Foster, "Chalk Parts I and II," *I love These Flint Hills*, Sept. 5 and 12, 1991.

⁴⁹Foster, "Chalk Part I."

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Personal communication to author, Gary Rowley, April, 2016.

still in the area, including the family of Peter McCutcheon, who owned 160 acres two miles to the northwest of Chalk. Another notable African-American landowner in Rock Creek Township was Nathan Warner. He was free before the Civil War, and when he lived in Shawnee, Kansas, was drafted into and served in the Union Army.⁵² He later bought a farm northeast of Chalk, as seen in the map of Rock Creek Township African-American landowners, **Attachment #1**.

Memoirs and newspapers accounts establish that African-American farmers held a presence around the village of Chalk for quite some time. The memoir of Ed Cooper, “My Life,” mentions that the McCutcheon children attended Parkdale School with him, and that he played with them often. He especially recalls hunting with Henry McCutcheon.⁵³ In 1897, McCutcheon’s daughter Mariah married Richard Michell [Mitchell]; both are described in the newspaper account as being from “Chalk Mound.”⁵⁴ Although not many African-Americans owned their own farms at this time, census research establishes that families and single men did live in the township and make a living there. For a list of African-American residents of Rock Creek Township, 1880 -1905, see **Attachment #2**. Below is a photograph of the wooden voting box discovered at Chalk School.

⁵² Consolidated Lists of Civil War Draft Registrations, 1863-1865. NM-65, entry 172, 620 volumes. NAI: 4213514. Records of the Provost Marshal General’s Bureau (Civil War), Record Group 110. National Archives at Washington D.C.

⁵³ Ed Cooper, “My Life,” unpublished 1958 reminiscence of growing up in Rock Creek Township. Copy available in the private collection of Benetta Foster.

⁵⁴The McCutcheon farm is shown on the plat of Rock Creek Township, Wabaunsee County Atlas of 1885. For marriage of Mariah McCutcheon, see *the Alma Enterprise*, Jan. 29, 1897. The McCutcheon family history is told in the 1980 book by Fanny Howe, *White Slave the Heartbreaking Novel of Peter, a Man with a Missing Past and a Captive Future* (New York: Avon Books). For a good study of the hardships facing African-American farmers in Wabaunsee County, see Michael Spachek, “Tracking Success of African American Landowners in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, circa 1900: A Case Study of African American Farmers at the Turn of the Century.” Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Kansas State University, 2015.



Fig. 10. The handmade wooden voting box found in the attic of Chalk School. Photograph by Michael Spachek, March, 2016.

The real value of Chalk was the sense of community the town brought to a widespread rural township with poor, hilly, and often, impassable roads. When the post office closed in 1907, Rock Creek Township lost one of its most important central places. No other small town took up the responsibility of serving the farmers of this rocky Flint Hills neighborhood. Eskridge became the nearest market town then, but into the 1950s, Chalk School and John Crisp's blacksmith shop continued to hold together a commonly known and well understood landscape that many rural people called home.

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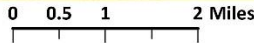
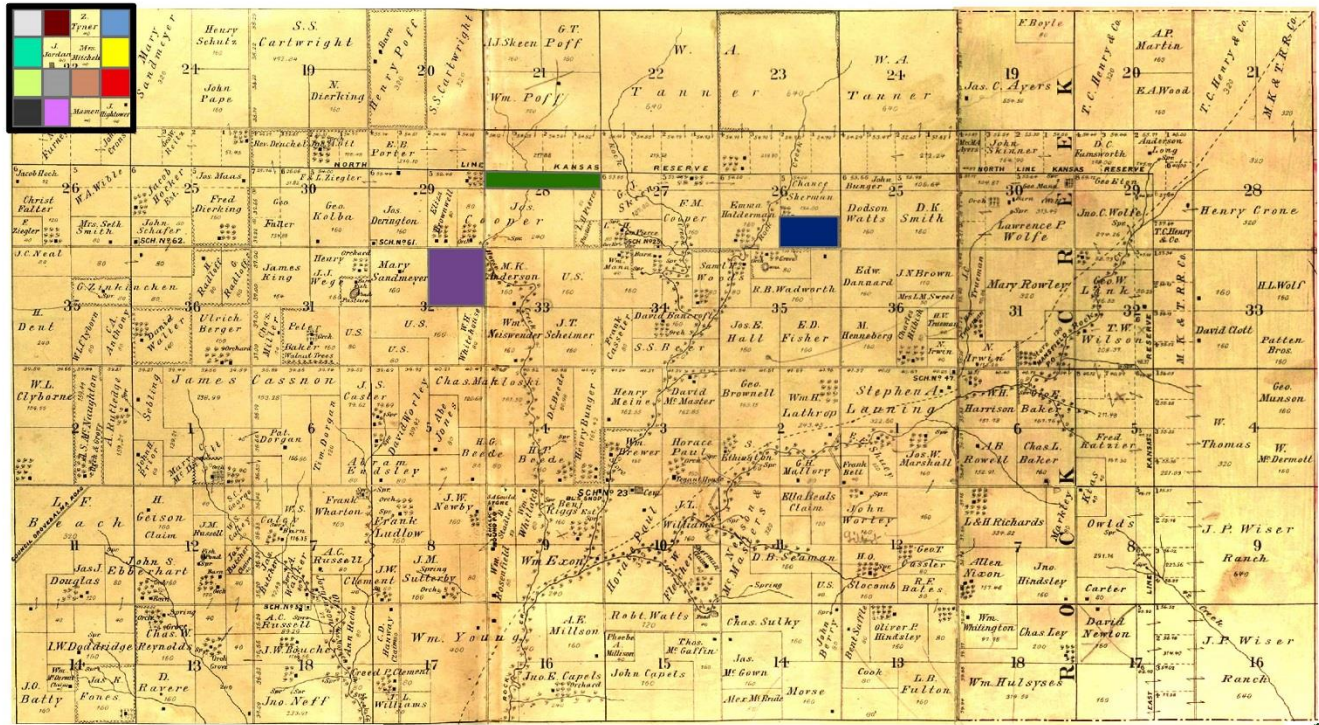
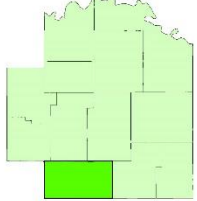
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Attachment #1: A Map of African-American Land Owners, Rock Creek Township, 1880-1905. Research by Michael Spachek, Map by Katie Goerl.

African American Landowners in Rock Creek Township, Wabaunsee Co., KS, 1880-1905

 Exoduster colony, est. 1879	 Collins family, 1880-1885	 Thomas family, 1880
 Riley family, 1880-1885	 Washington family, 1880-1885	 Thompson family, 1880-1885
 Woods family, 1880-1895	 Stewart & Ball, 1880-1895	 Warner family, 1880-1895
 Tolliver family, 1880-1885	 Fisher family, 1895	 McCutcheon family, 1880-1895
 Lucas family, 1880-1885	 Milton Jones family, 1905	 Shaffer family, 1900-1905



SOURCE: 1880 & 1900 Federal Census; 1885, 1895, 1905 Kansas Census; 1885 Wabaunsee Atlas; Wabaunsee County deed records. Researched by Michael Spachek. Compiled by Katie Goerl. Produced by the Chapman Center for Rural Studies.



Attachment #2. A List of African-American Residents, Rock Creek Township, between 1880 and 1905. Research by Michael Spachek.

Federal Census of 1880	
William Riley	(M) Age 62
Sarah Riley	(F) Age 62
Peter McCutcheon	(M) Age 54
Charity McCutcheon	(F) Age 42
Rhoda McCutcheon	(F) Age 18
Henry McCutcheon	(M) Age 14
Maria McCutcheon	(F) Age 12
Cynthia McCutcheon	(F) Age 9
Ella McCutcheon	(F) Age 5
Eddie McCutcheon	(M) Age 3
Peter Thomson	(M) Age 55
Carolina Thomson	(F) Age 70
Thom Thomas	(M) Age 40
George Ann Thomas	(F) Age 40
Milton Woods	(M) Age 49
Clia Woods	(F) Age 27
Thomas Woods	(M) Age 7
Charley Woods	(M) Age 6
John Lucus	(M) Age 56
Eliza Lucus	(F) Age 39
William Lucus	(M) Age 15
John Lucus	(M) Age 14
Grant Lucus	(M) Age 12
Emma Lucus	(F) Age 9
Sarah Lucus	(F) Age 7
Oliver Lucus	(M) Age 5
Cyrus Lucus	(M) Age 2
Washington Tolliver	(M) Age 32
John Collins	(M) Age 46
Minnie Collins	(F) Age 46
Lousia Collins	(F) Age 15
Lizzie Collins	(F) Age 8
John Collins	(M) Age 4
Joseph Hightower	(M) Age 40
Carolina Hightower	(F) Age 41
Georg Washington	(M) Age 63
Becky Washington	(F) Age 28
Claeborn Steurt	(M) Age 38
Sarah Ball	(F) Age 40

Kansas State Census of 1885	
J. Irwin	(M) Age 15
M. Woods	(M) Age 6
I. Woods	(F) Age 5
D. Woods	(M) Age 1
S. Lucus	(M) Age 6
A. Lucus	(M) Age 9
M. Tolliver	(F) Age 60
O. Tolliver	(F) Age 12
A. Collins	(F) Age 12
I. Collins	(M) Age 6
M. Hightower	(F) Age 7
J. Hightower	(M) Age 10
A. Hightower	(M) Age 9
George Washington	(M) Age 75
R. Washington	(F) Age 30
Peter Thompson	(M) Age 35
V. Thompson	(F) Age 35
A. Fisher	(M) Age 60
E. Fisher	(F) Age 55
J. Fisher	(M) Age 15
A. Fisher	(M) Age 12
Nathan Warmer	(M) Age 48
Kansas State Census of 1895	
Ei McCutcheon	(M) Age 17
Charles Woods	(M) Age 20
Arrena Woods	(F) Age 2
Moses Woods	(M) Age 14
Harry Woods	(M) Age 12
Matthew Woods	(M) Age 9
Florence Woods	(F) Age 6
Ellen Woods	(F) Age 5
Andrew Jackson	(M) Age 70
Jack Jackson	(M) Age 14
Hattie Jackson	(F) Age 12
Isaac Wimfrey	(M) Age 29
Lulu Wimfrey	(F) Age 28
Eddie Wimfrey	(M) Age 12
Nancy Wimfrey	(F) Age 7
Rebecca Collins	(F) Age 7
Federal Census of 1900	
Morris Shaffer	(M) Age 42
Rebecca Shaffer	(F) Age 42
Nelson Shaffer	(M) Age N/A
Kansas State Census of 1905	

Milton Jones	(M) Age 37
Lizzie Jones	(F) Age 25
Vera Jones	(F) Age 5
Avre Jones	(M) Age 2
Adie Johnson	(F) Age 14
Andrew Jones	(M) Age 46
Annie Jones	(F) Age 37
Henry Jones	(M) Age 17
Lora Jones	(F) Age 15
Harote Jones	(F) Age 13
Everett Jones	(M) Age 9
Arnold Jones	(M) Age 2