

Keene, Wabaunsee County, KS: More than a Highway Sign



Figure 1: Photo of Keene Store during the 1950s. Source: Wabaunsee County Historical Society

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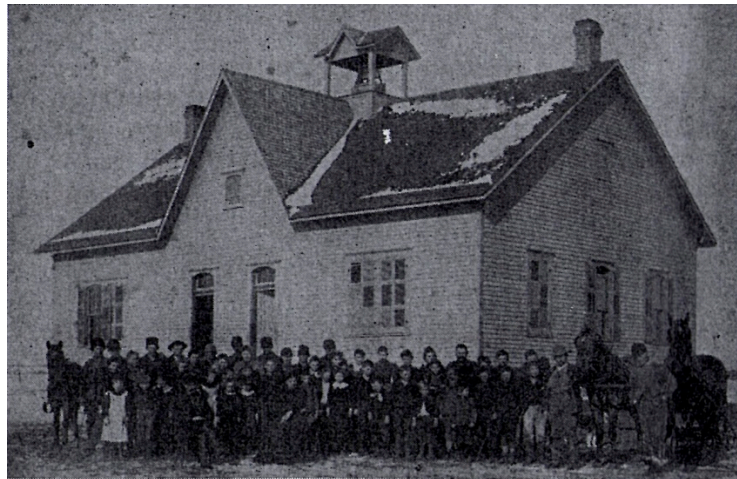
If a person drives westward from Topeka along Kansas Highway 4, they might unknowingly pass through the remains of Keene in Wabaunsee County, Kansas. The only object notifying them of their arrival into this tiny community is a small sign reading: “Keene; Unincorporated.” Upon seeing this sign, the driver might wonder where exactly the town was and then realize that they had just bypassed Keene. Nothing now remains of the once thriving town except a small sign. But, there is more to this town than that sign, if we choose to study its past.



Figure 2: Sign indicating location of Keene, Kansas. Source: Photo taken by author.

Keene was established in 1856 when the first group of settlers arrived, supported by the Beecher Bible and Rifle Company. In 1858, a store was opened and served as an important economic and social center for several years¹. The original store was replaced in 1874 by a second one located one-half mile west and owned by a Mr. G. A. Eberhardt². Until its closure in 1956, Eberhardt’s store served the bustling community. In the mid-1990s the store building burned due to an electrical problem and now only a vacant lot remains.

Besides the store, Keene also had what was considered a large school at the time. Although most schools in small towns contained only one room, Keene School boasted two rooms. An interesting feature of this schoolhouse was the ability to combine the two rooms into one large room if it was deemed necessary. A large divider could be lifted up and down by a pulley system³. The school population ranged from sixty-four students at the height of the community in the late 1800s to nine students in 1961⁴. In 1962 the school closed and Keene merged into what is now USD 330 Mission Valley. Children living in the area now attend school in Eskridge, KS. Below is a photo of the school at Keene.



Keene School District 56

Figure 3: Keene School circa early 1900s. Source: Wabaunsee County Historical Society.

The closing of the school mirrored a process of decline that had already begun years earlier. Keene began feeling the fatal pains of the twentieth century with the closure of the general store in 1956. In the late 1950s, the United States Department of Defense

had a missile silo built on the outskirts of the town. The remaining residents hoped it would bring jobs for locals but, instead, the Department of Defense brought in people from Washington D.C. and California to run the operations of the silo. Although the silo increased Keene's population for a time, it was eventually decommissioned in March of 1965. Over time, residents continued to move away, leading to the slow death of Keene.

Contrary to appearances, Keene, KS is not just a small grouping of houses and an inconspicuous highway sign. It was once a booming little town with a rich history that deserves its own page in the history books. The history of Keene is like that of many rural Kansas communities who disappeared as their populations dwindled, but should never be forgotten.

End Notes

¹ “History of Keene”

² “History of Keene”

³ N.A., “*New Branches from Old Trees*” *A New History of Wabaunsee*, 1976 pp 841-845
Wabaunsee County Historical Society.

⁴“School Rosters/Census of the Keene School from 1893-1961.” From the Register of Deeds of Wabaunsee County Court House, Alma, KS.

Sources Cited

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“School Rosters/Census of the Keene School from 1893-1961.” From the Register of Deeds of Wabaunsee County Court House, Alma, KS.

Wabaunsee County Historical Society, “*New Branches from Old Trees*” *A New History of Wabaunsee*, pp 841-845