

Built to Last: Community and Persistence in Volland, Kansas, 1887-2016

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Volland was a town that almost met its end when the railroad it heavily depended on for commerce and revenue became obsolete due to new technology. Against all odds, however, the town would survive and experience a rebirth. This study incorporates information from new and old photographs, interviews, and newspaper articles.

Nestled in the Flint Hills of Wabaunsee County, Kansas, in Washington Township, is a small, seemingly vacant town. The Old K-10 highway connects this town to its two neighbors, Alma and Alta Vista, both just eight miles away in opposite directions. There are prairie grasses stretched as far as the eye can see with several trees scattered throughout the single-street town. A branch of Mill Creek meanders just to the south, along the railroad. Prior to 2005, there was also an abandoned brick building in this quiet town. The roof of this large, two-story structure had collapsed into itself and every window was gone. It appeared so forgotten and still; it was difficult to imagine this structure was once a loud, thriving, beloved place for locals to come together and socialize. It served only as a monument of bygone days and livelier times. One may have thought this building's best days were long behind it and it would continue to wear away until completely forgotten, like all other abandoned buildings, but that assumption could not be further from the truth. This structure did not meet the fate of other derelict buildings- it was not demolished or left to deteriorate into oblivion- it was restored, resurrected, and reopened years later in 2015. This building was originally a general store that belonged to a small town called Volland.

“Railroads have built cities, and have made some cities and have dwarfed others, killing many villages.”¹

¹ "Early Railroad History in Kansas: Railroads in Kansas." Kansas Heritage. 5 Oct. 2006. <http://kansasheritage.org/research/rr/rrhistory.html>

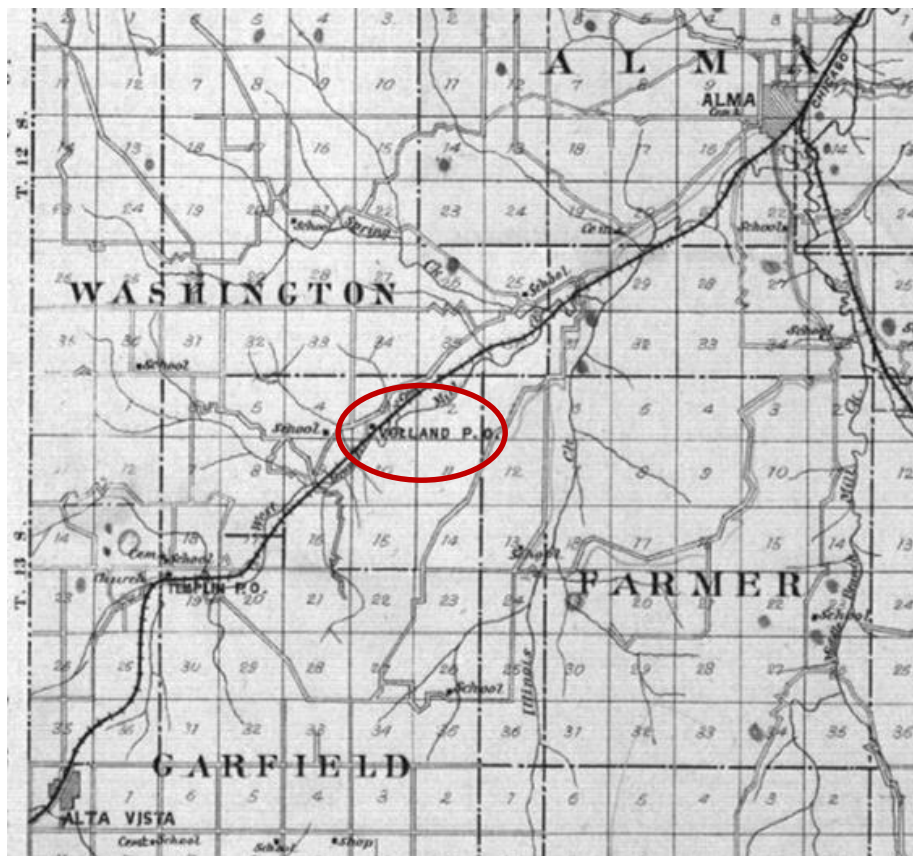


Figure 1. A plat map of Wabaunsee County from 1902. Volland is indicated by the oval. Alma and Alta Vista can also be seen.
SOURCE: Kansas Memory available at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209398/page/3>

Like many towns, Volland was created out of necessity. In the 1880s, railroads were the emerging mode of transportation, and their construction was rapidly making its way across the United States. Steam locomotives required significant amounts of water and coal for power and therefore stops were needed about every eight miles or so to refuel.² In addition, railroad tracks took a beating on a regular basis and required maintenance crews. The answer was to establish small towns with depots along the way. These towns would serve as refueling stations as well as places from which the maintenance crews could operate. The Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railroad needed a town halfway between Alma and modern-day Alta Vista in order to fill a

² Joyce Mae Thierer, "Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community", MA thesis, Emporia State University, 1986, p. 17.

fifteen-mile gap between depots.³ As a result, in 1887, the company established this depot town on an open piece of land and selected the name “Grafton”. However, this land was owned by German immigrants Heinrich “Henry” and Juliana Barbara Volland, who, along with local residents, quickly petitioned for a name change; the new name, “Volland,” seemed highly appropriate. The train would bring commerce to Volland in the form of cattle, the primary cargo that was shipped to and from the little community. Cattle from the southern states were transported to Volland stockyards and taken to the Flint Hills to graze before being sent to markets⁴. Manufactured goods and supplies were also imported to Volland after cattle began being shipped by truck rather than by train.

The town also had a school where children of all ages were invited to learn. A blacksmith shop would also appear. However, Volland did not have an easy start by any means. A prairie fire, persistent droughts, and the severe economic depression of 1893 would hinder its growth.⁵ Volland would also see many serious train collisions in the following years. The most serious occurred in 1907 after an eighteen-year old boy had lied about his age and experience, or lack thereof, in order to be hired as a railroad telegraph operator. His third day on the job, two passenger trains collided at the Volland station, taking the lives of an estimated thirty-three people and injuring another fifty-five.⁶

With railroad towns, the fate of the railroad and the town were often intertwined with one another, and Volland was no exception. During the golden age of locomotives, towns prospered; when other modes of transportation took the steam engine’s place, these towns suffered.⁷

³ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 16-18.

⁴ Hoots, Greg. Volland Memories: The Kratzer Films. Wabaunsee County Historical Society, 2015. DVD.

⁵ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 16-18.

⁶ Robert Jay Nash, *Darkest Hours (Nelson-Hall, 1976), p. 738.*

⁷ I.E. Quastler, “Emphatically a Rock Island Town,” Kansas Historical Society, 2004.

Unfortunately, Volland was heavily dependent on the railroad; it was the town's primary source of visitors and revenue, but while the railroad had essentially created Volland and was indeed a valuable asset, it would also be a cause of hardship and pose as a threat to the town's very existence.



Figure 2. View of Main Street, Volland, circa 1905.

SOURCE: Kansas Memory available at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/306589>. Courtesy of the Kratzer Photograph Collection, curated by Greg Hoots, Alma, Kansas

“Volland comes pretty nearly being a one-man town and the Kratzers are the whole show.”⁸

⁸ *The Alma Enterprise*, October 24, 1913.

As is true with many towns, the general store was often the first establishment, but for Volland, the presence of this store would prove to be essential.⁹ In 1900, John William “Bill” Kratzer, a man with clerking experience from Alma, purchased the general store from the previous owner, Jim Cromer, and was soon joined by his younger brother, Otto.^{10, 11} The brothers not only ran the store but performed banking, post, and other important functions for the town. Otto quickly earned a reputation as the town’s unofficial photographer and began collecting thousands of photographs he had taken of the town and its residents. Greg Hoots, a local historian, has been an active figure in the movement to preserve Volland and its history; his efforts include digitizing Otto Kratzer’s photographs. “Otto Kratzer had this dynamic, flamboyant personality...He was a community leader and he was also a guy that was always very involved with his neighbors, with his customers. He took a real interest in the community,” said Hoots.¹² The dynamic duo and their store quickly became beloved fixtures in the town, and with the store being so successful and becoming the town hub, it was only natural that it also became a social forum for Volland. Because farmers were usually isolated in the Flint Hills, and often cut off by poor roads and steep hills, they craved social interaction. With the Kratzers encouraging visiting and conversation in the store, their business flourished.¹³ Volland was a very small community that numbered a mere thirty-five residents¹⁴; everybody knew everybody. Volland also had strong German roots, which provided a unique culture and shared values. Many Volland residents were Lutheran and would either attend service at the church in Alma or in

⁹ “American History: Old-Fashioned Country Stores,” *Legends of America*, 2003.

<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-countrystores.html>

¹⁰ Wabaunsee County Historical Society, *New Branches from Old Trees: A New History of Wabaunsee County*, 1976.

¹¹ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 35

¹² Greg Hoots, interview by Emmalee Laidacker, 5 Feb 2016, Wabaunsee County Historical Museum, Alma, KS.

¹³ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 37

¹⁴ R. L. Polk & Co.'s *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory* (R.L. Polk and Co., 1904) p. 1093

nearby Templin, which was closer than Alma. All this, coupled with the Kratzer general store, created the perfect recipe for a palpable sense of community.

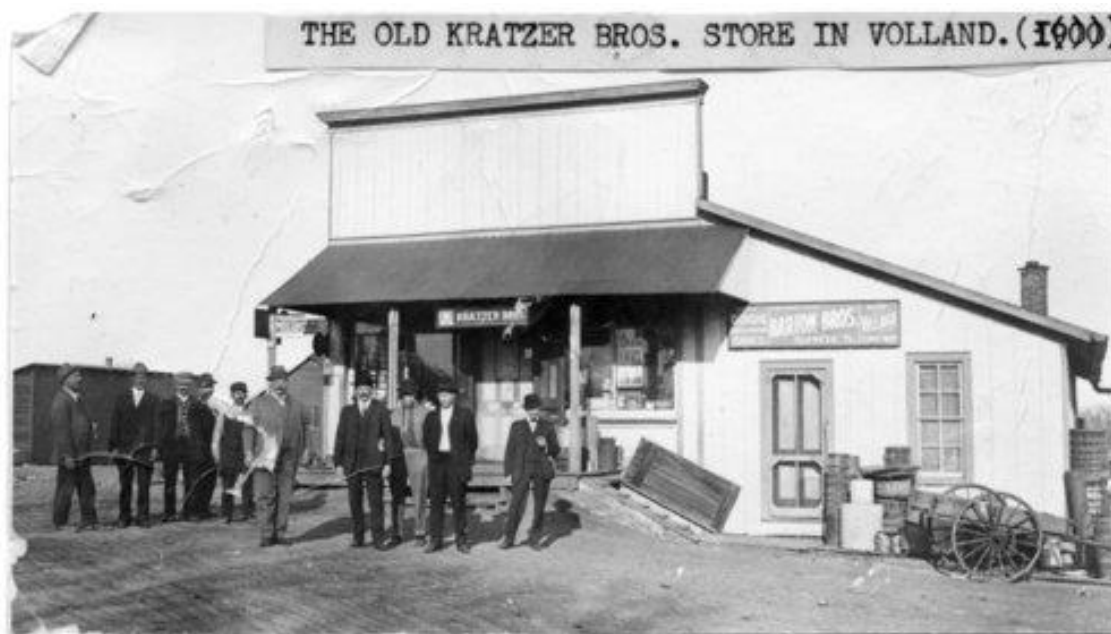


Figure 3. The Kratzer brothers, among others, stand in front of the original general store in 1909. SOURCE: Kansas Historical Society available at <http://www.kshs.org/km/items/view/306655>. Courtesy of the Kratzer Photograph Collection, curated by Greg Hoots, Alma, Kansas.

Before long, the store became overcrowded with locals and was lacking shelf space on which to place new, high-demand products. So with the town booming, the Kratzer brothers decided that Volland was ready for a bigger and better store. Located across the street from the previous wood-frame store, this new store would be built with stronger materials, such as brick and stone, to endure the test of time. In the fall of 1913, after taking a year to complete and requiring as much as \$8,000 (more than \$190,000 in adjusted dollars) to construct, the highly-anticipated new store was complete.¹⁵ With its two-story brick walls, large cement porch, and

¹⁵ *The Alma Enterprise*, October 24, 1913.

modern interior, it was hailed as “one of most attractive buildings in Wabaunsee County”.¹⁶ Five hundred guests from all over Wabaunsee County attended the extravagant grand opening celebration.¹⁷ The event made front-page news. Women shopped and socialized, Men gathered in the basement to discuss politics, and the children played in front of the store.¹⁸ It seemed as if nothing but good days lay ahead for Volland and its new store. There was something for everybody.

“It was a great day for Volland, the like of which they will probably never see again.”¹⁹

The store’s patrons consisted often mostly of women. They relished the opportunity to leave the isolated farm and socialize with other women. During the 1920s, the role of women began to change with advances in technology. Many farm tasks could now be completed solely by the men of the household, meaning women no longer had to work in the fields which gave them more leisure time opportunities. By this time, with the arrival of the automobile, many Volland women were already leaving the home in search of jobs, and began to have more contact with one another. Furthermore, organizations dedicated to the advancement and networking of women were becoming more accessible to women in rural communities. Around the same time, due to a need for more railroad labor, there was an influx of new residents in Volland; many were immigrants from Mexico and many were Americans from the far corners of the United

¹⁶ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 40-41.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 40-42

¹⁹ *The Alma Enterprise*, October 24, 1913.

States.²⁰ In addition to women and Hispanics, African-Americans were also among the under-represented population in Volland, as many settled in Kansas after the Civil War. During the 1920s and 1930s, another wave of African-Americans migrated to Kansas in search of employment opportunities after the mechanization of labor and the Depression had left many jobless.²¹ The Volland general store, along with town social events, brought people of different backgrounds together and exposed them to new and unfamiliar ideas.



Figure 4. Photo of an African-American cowboy, taken by Otto Kratzer.

SOURCE: The Volland Store available at <http://thevollandstore.com/brief-history-of-volland/>.
Courtesy of the Kratzer Photograph Collection, curated by Greg Hoots, Alma, Kansas.

²⁰ Joyce Mae Thierer, "Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community", p. 60

²¹ Kansas Historical Society, "African-Americans in Kansas".

“The people of Volland found themselves becoming more tolerant of those who were different from themselves, as their sense of closely bonded community stretched to incorporate a new diversity.”²²

In truth, the opening of the second store marked the end of an era for Volland; the forthcoming days would not be so lively. The booming economy of the roaring twenties did not have the same effect in small towns as it did in large cities. Urban areas prospered while rural economies often suffered. There was a glimmer of hope when the Rock Island railroad company constructed an additional railroad track along the original, making it a double track. This lessened the economic downturn by creating local jobs and bringing in revenue from the influx of new visitors. Volland was bustling again. However, the stock market crash in 1929 seemed to be an omen of worse things to come. The telegraph operator, Frank Munzer, committed suicide.²³ This was followed by another train wreck and the coincidental burning of Otto Kratzer’s home. It is suspected that because Otto’s home was so close to the railroad, an ember from the train made its way to the roof of the home Otto had built with his wife, Mabel, starting a fire.²⁴ All that is left today is the stone foundation. The year after, in 1930, Bill Kratzer died, leaving Otto to work the store without his business partner and brother.²⁵

With the unwelcomed arrival of the Great Depression and commencement of the Second World War, Volland’s population declined. Steam locomotives were replaced by newer, more efficient diesel-powered engines which meant that trains did not have to stop as often to refuel.

²² Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 60.

²³ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 60.

²⁴ Greg Hoots, interview by Emmalee Laidacker, 5 Feb 2016, Wabaunsee County Historical Museum, Alma, KS.

²⁵ Joyce Mae Thierer, “Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community”, p. 52.

This led to the closing of Volland's depot in 1942, essentially cutting off the town's commercial connections to the rest of the world; the end of Volland was imminent. Railroad workers and their families were relocated, leading to a sharp decline in population. The post office and school closed. The cattle trains ceased to transport livestock and the stockyards closed. Yet the Volland Store remained in business. Remarkably, it had endured the hard years and stood strong while the town around it was crumbling. It was alive, but only just; the grand, awe-inspiring store had been reduced to a humble "mom-and-pop" shop.²⁶ Business was growing slow with each year, but the store managed to scratch its way along until the death of Otto Kratzer in 1971. About a month after his death, the store was bustling yet again. Only this time, the leftover merchandise and old equipment was being auctioned off to crowds of eager bidders. Within hours, the store was empty for good, everyone assumed. That day was a far cry from the festive grand opening less than sixty years before.

"Volland, with the loss of the depot, school, and store, died by degrees until it ceased to exist as a town."²⁷

With Volland merely a ghost town and the community almost non-existent, the empty store was neglected. It was locked up, with some of the unsold merchandise still on the shelves, and left to deteriorate. Otto Kratzer's descendants made efforts to preserve the historic structure, but this soon became troublesome as they lived too far from Volland. The store fell apart; the windows lost glass panes and were boarded up. In the 1990s, the roof fell into the second floor.

²⁶ Joyce Mae Thierer, "Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community", p. 52.

²⁷ Joyce Mae Thierer, "Volland: A Flint Hills Trading Community", p. 88.

The second floor gave way and a domino effect ensued, and before long, all the debris from the entire building had fallen into the basement. Only the strong brick walls were still intact.²⁸

The situation was not hopeless, however. A couple from Kansas City, Jerry and Patty Reece, would become enamored with the Volland store and breathe new life into a dying community. Karen Durso, the granddaughter of Otto Kratzer, had a prospective buyer who was interested having the store demolished in order to salvage the bricks from the exterior. Yet still wanting to save the store, she requested that Greg Hoots locate another buyer with intentions to preserve the store. He was given thirty days to do so. He contacted Jerry and Patty Reece who had already owned and restored a few homes in the area. Jerry had been at the helm of the successful real estate company, Reece & Nichols, while Patty Reece, an accomplished photographer, had seen the Otto Kratzer photographs and had come to appreciate them. The couple could see the dilapidated store's promise and jumped at the opportunity to purchase the property.

After a long four months of clearing out the debris from the store basement, the renovation began. Because efforts were made to preserve as much of the façade as possible, the original brick exterior surrounds the new, modern interior. The store reopened in June 2015, serving as a venue for a wide variety of community events such as art exhibits, concerts, weddings, reunions and more. The gallery on the first floor features artwork and photographs while the second floor is now a loft that guests can rent for overnight stays. Despite Volland currently having a population of just one person, the revived store has not only prevailed as the victor in a long battle against time, but is also on its way to becoming the vibrant social center it was a hundred years ago.

²⁸ The Volland Store, "A Brief History of Volland."

"The railroad still runs by but does not stop."²⁹



Figure 5. Photo of the Volland School as it appears today. Photograph by author, taken January 2016.

²⁹ "Volland." Interview by Anne Anderson, Jason Aune, Krisena Maas, Jared Schultz, and Virginia McKim. Wabaunsee County Historical Museum.



Figure 6. Photo of the Volland store during the 100th anniversary celebration in 2013.
SOURCE: *Volland Memories: The Kratzer Films*.



Figure 7. Photographs taken of the Volland store during the grand opening in 1913.
SOURCE: *Volland Memories: The Kratzer Films*. Courtesy of the Kratzer Photograph Collection, curated by Greg Hoots, Alma, Kansas.

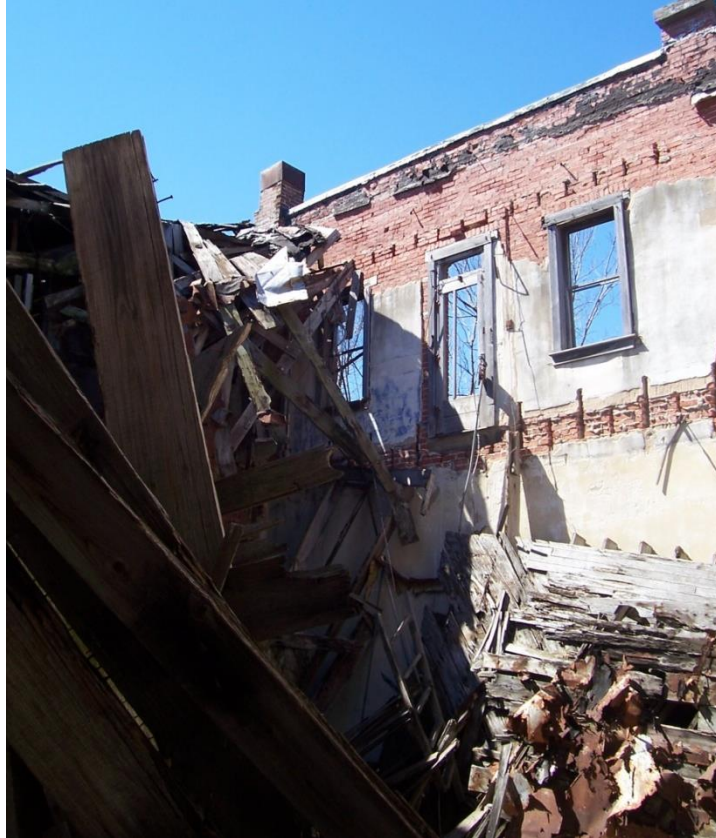


Figure 8. Photo taken inside the Volland Store before its restoration. Courtesy of Greg Hoots.



Figure 9. The stone foundation of Otto Kratzer's home. This is all that remains after a fire destroyed the home. Photo taken by author, January, 2016.



Figure 10. The Volland Store as it appears today, taken during an event. Photo taken by author, February 2016.

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