

Mahaska, Kansas: The First 100 Years

1887-1987



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On June 12th, 1987, surveyors from all around the country gathered one mile west and north of Mahaska, Kansas, to celebrate a significant event in American history.¹ It was at this site in the mid-1850s that the American dream of westward expansion and land ownership became a reality. The “Initial Point” at Mahaska became the beginning of all land surveys in Kansas, Nebraska, three-fourths of Colorado, most of Wyoming, and a small part of South Dakota. The division of land made it possible for settlers to own land and settle in the West. This current-day marker symbolizes the frontier mindset of Americans in the early to mid-1800s.²

Mahaska, caught in the wake of rapid westward expansion, became the quintessential frontier town. It symbolized the spirit that has been woven through the fabric of America since its inception. Currently, Mahaska is located in Union Township, in the northwest corner of Washington County, Kansas, twelve miles north of U.S. Highway 36.

If readers looked at the area where Mahaska developed in the mid-1800s, they would find rolling plains sparsely dotted with native shrubs and trees, covered with true prairie grasses such as big bluestem, Indian, and switchgrass. As the country expanded westward, families traveled on several trails through the prairie lands of western Kansas. The first wagon crossed through the county in 1823 on its way to Santa Fe, and from this time forward, other wagon trains frequently traveled the same route.³ Over the next few decades, over 2,000,000 people passed over the Oregon Trail, which ran 25 miles east of present Mahaska, and the Mormon Trail, which crossed the state line two miles east of present Mahaska.

¹“ Marker gets interpretive sign,” n.d., possible circa 1987. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Mahaska History*, (Mahaska, Kansas, 1976), p. 3. Copy at Washington County Historical Society.

When the Kansas-Nebraska Act created the territories of Kansas and Nebraska in 1854, the land had to be surveyed before settlements could be established.⁴ In May, 1855, Charles A. Manner surveyed the land west of the Missouri River at 40” north latitude, one mile west and north of Mahaska.⁵ Over the next year, Manner surveyed westward 108 miles, establishing the baseline, the Initial Point of the Sixth Principal Meridian.⁶ As stated earlier, a survey allowed settlers to buy land with a legal description, file claim, and make the rolling plains of north central Kansas their home.

The Settlement Begins

Incoming settlers had very few personal belongings. Since lumber was sparse, settlers lived in “dugouts,” or ground caves made with sod and grass.⁷ Once settlers had made this land their home, they had to travel 75 miles to the nearest land office to gain land ownership papers. Gaining title was often difficult, as settlers had to agree that all of the land would be plowed before seed could be planted. Even though “break-plowing” the virgin prairie sod was a cumbersome and a time-consuming task, the settlers discovered that the soil was fertile.

As the frontier spirit grew, westward expansion was driven by the development of railroads. In the 1870s, multi-car “immigrant trains” brought families through north-central Kansas. Before the town-site was officially laid out, the railroad was built through the area of Mahaska. The railroad was built from Jansen, Nebraska, to Bellville, Kansas, and to the west. The railroad

⁴ Professional Surveyor’s of the Sixth Principal Meridian, inscription on marker, The Initial Point of the Public Land Surveys of the Sixth Principal Meridian Marker Surveyor’s Monument, Washington County, Kansas, 1987.

⁵ “Mahaska gets Interpretive sign.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Mahaska History*, p. 4.

was originally named Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska.⁸ It was later named Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific, and finally, the Rock Island. As potential settlers traveled westward on the rails, they would pass by the beautiful, open, but uncultivated land around Mahaska. It was only a matter of time before settlers would move into this area as well.

In 1865, Burchen Beeson and his wife, Eliza were the first settlers within the boundary of present day Mahaska.⁹ Since there was a lack of lumber and materials to build a house, they first built a dugout near a creek-bed. In 1875, the Beeson family built a log cabin. As the Beeson family cultivated the land, the rich soil produced an abundant crop harvest. Residents settled on this land at a rapid rate, and in 1872, Union Township was formed.¹⁰ Because of the vast richness of the soil and subsequent agriculture success, the population of Union Township grew rapidly over the next decade. The population of Union Township grew from 211 in 1874 to 535 in 1880.

The adjustment to this new land was not entirely smooth. The early settlers met Indians while riding around the prairies around Mahaska.¹¹ While friendly, when the settlers would transfer grain from the land to the grain mill in Reynolds, Nebraska, there were instances of Indians taking small amounts of grain. Horse thieves, known as “bloodhounds,” were also common, traveling back and forth across state lines to avoid being caught.¹²

⁸ *Mahaska History*, 33.

⁹ *Mahaska History*, 8.

¹⁰ *Mahaska History*, 8.

¹¹ “Residents Remember Mahaska as it was,” *The Western Observer*, 1987. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

¹² “Residents Remember Mahaska as it was.”

A Town is Formed

In order to accommodate potential settlers moving westward, the Rock Island Depot was built on the line passing through Union Township. Building the depot was significant because it allowed the area around the depot to be divided into town-site plans. On October 5, 1887, Isaiah and Dollie Bonham signed the following document indicating the town-site plans for this community:

The undersigned Isiah Bonham and Dollie Bonham, owners of S.E. ¼-6-1-1 Union Township Washington County, Kansas, lying south of the right of way and depot grounds have plotted the same into blocks and lots, street and alleys under the name of Bonham. Streets and alleys indicated in said plots are dedicated for public use, and blocks and lots herein are reserved for sale.¹³

The town was first named Bonham, after these original founders. As an official town, a post office was built to bring mail to the town's residents. When the Bonham post office registered with post office department, the name was rejected because there was another town named Bonham in the state.¹⁴ As was very common in Kansas post office history, the town name needed to be changed. In 1887, several men gathered at the Speers' store to decide on a name for the post office. As discussions commenced regarding the new name, Mr. Woodman saw a bag of Mahaska coffee on the store shelf and suggested, "Why not call our post office Mahaska? We had a Mahaska County in Iowa where I came from."¹⁵ The motion passed unanimously and the post office was renamed Mahaska. While the name Mahaska came from a bag of coffee,

¹³ *Mahaska History*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Mahaska History*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Davison, Hayley, "Mahaska: Early History," *The Linn-Palmer Record*, n.d., possibly circa 1987. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

research reveals that the name “Mahaska” referred to an Indian chief of the Iowa Indians.¹⁶ It was known that Chief Mahaska was a good chief who was loved by his people. According to the language of the Iowa Indians, the word Mahaska meant “White Swan.” The decision to rename the post office, as seen in the photograph below, had ramifications. Having different names for the town and the post office created a lot of confusion for residents and visitors. To avoid further confusion, the town was also renamed Mahaska.



Figure 1. Mahaska Post Office in the late 1800s. Source: Washington Museum and Historical Society.

Mahaska: The Early Years

From the early 1880s to the mid-1890s, Mahaska experienced tremendous growth. There were two primary reasons for this growth. First, the addition of the depot in 1887 allowed potential settlers access to this new community. Second, fertile soil and the success of the wheat and corn crops attracted settlers traveling westward. Between the years 1889-1891, the area experienced a tremendous surge in corn harvest.¹⁷ This is likely because the 1880s were known as the “Wet Eighties” in Kansas history, a time of abundant rainfall. During these plentiful years of harvest, three grain elevators were built on the railroad sidings, one west and two east of the

¹⁶ *Mahaska History*, 9.

¹⁷ *Mahaska History*, p. 32.

depot.¹⁸ Grain elevators, as seen in the photograph below, became an important part of the economy of Mahaska.



Figure 2. Grain Elevator the late 1800's. Source: Washington Museum and Historical Society.

After the town-site was laid out in 1887, the vision of the original settlers was coming to fruition. Their hard work created a town that was known for its booming agriculture. Residents who wanted to share in the frontier dream swarmed to Mahaska. The area that was once covered with prairie grasses was transitioning into a developing community whose streets were filled with new homes and businesses. The first house in the newly formed town of Mahaska was built in 1887 by William Newton.¹⁹ One of the first businesses that lined the streets was the livery stable owned by Dick Westkirk. This was followed by E.A. Woodman's lumber and coal business in 1887, E.A. Moorhead's general store in 1890, C.H. Coonrod's hardware store in 1893, and A. M. Allredge's mercantile business in 1894. In order to accommodate the many visitors traveling westward, Colonel G.E. Stowe built a two-story hotel on the west side of Main Street in 1891.²⁰ In the first seven years following the formation of the town-site plans, the once

¹⁸ Davison, Hayley, "Mahaska: Early History."

¹⁹ *Mahaska History*, 9.

²⁰ "Always Interested in Mahaska History, Clyde Miller Completed Hotel's History Two Days Before His Death," *The Fairbury Journal*, 1958. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

sparse plains of north-central Kansas transformed into a self-sustaining town with a strong economy and proud residents who called Mahaska home.

A Season of Growth

Between 1895 and 1905, Mahaska saw little to no growth.²¹ The great 1890s drought and the Panic of 1893 and ensuing depression exacted a toll. This changed around 1905, as several farmers who succeeded in agriculture made Mahaska their place of retirement. As the town's population continued to grow, there was a need to have a weekly report of community news. The town's first newspaper, the *Mahaska Leader*, fulfilled this need. It was first published in 1905 and was published weekly. Like all small town newspapers across Kansas, this paper became the voice of the town, reporting all of the events of this growing community.

On July 8, 1909, the town of was officially incorporated.²² This empowered the residents to be more involved with community decisions, as they now had the opportunity to vote for town officials. The residents elected John Deegen as the first mayor, P.J. Christenson as Police Judge, and I.C. Upton, C.H. Coonrod, M.A. Hatch, A. Allredge, and W.G. Arnold as town councilman.²³

The newly elected officials wasted no time with making decisions to improve the town. They voted to construct sidewalks, which were completed in 1910. The officials and residents also discovered a need for a jail, as seen below, which was completed in 1912. To accommodate the need for a water supply, two cisterns were installed on Main Street 1914.²⁴

²¹ *Mahaska History*, 13.

²² *Mahaska History*, 13.

²³ *Mahaska History*, 13.

²⁴ Davison, Hayley, "Mahaska: Early History."



Figure 3. Mahaska Jail facing east.
Completed in 1912. Source: photo
taken by author.

Residents of Mahaska were now taking ownership of the town, making it a family-friendly environment with the amenities of the bigger cities. For example, the residents needed a park where they could gather and families could spend time together. In 1917, the land for the city park was purchased on Main Street, one half block south of the east and west highway on the east side of the street.²⁵ In many ways, the city park became the center of the community, providing an open space for families take their children to play or to hold community events.

Modern utilities gave businesses the ability to accommodate the needs of the community and provided families the comforts of a contemporary city. In 1922, a contract with the Electric Development Company allowed electric service to Mahaska. In 1925, the city well for water was drilled on Main Street and a pump was installed so that residents and visitors could enjoy a cool drink of water. In the fall of 1931, the Kansas Pipe Line and Gas Company installed a distributing system in Mahaska so residents could receive natural gas.²⁶ Mahaska continued to develop during these decades.

²⁵ *Mahaska History*, 18.

²⁶ *Mahaska History*, 19.

In the 1930s, when cars were becoming more of a staple in American culture, there was a need to upgrade the roads into and out of Mahaska. In 1934, the newly graveled highway through Mahaska to K15 east of the town became the first all-weather outlet to the Kansas Highway system.²⁷ In addition, a standard grade was built between Mahaska and Highway 36 the same year.



Figure 4. The Water Tower facing West. Completed in 1940. Source: photo taken by author.

One of the most important upgrades for the residents of Mahaska, as seen in the photograph above, was the construction of the Mahaska water tower. In 1940, two water wells were drilled in the city park, and soon after a modern water system and a water tower were installed. There was a formal dedication for the water tower: music by the Mahaska Band and a fireworks show.²⁸

²⁷ Davison, Hayley, "Mahaska: Early History."

²⁸ "Dedication Ceremony Evening, July 4," n.d., possibly circa 1940. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

Schools

As families settled westward and communities were established, one significant value of these new towns was the education of its children. The new residents of Mahaska embraced this ideal by creating new schools. Until a schoolhouse could be built, school was held in the Presbyterian Church.²⁹ In 1907, a two-room schoolhouse was built. The first two years of high school were introduced in Mahaska in 1908 and 1909, with the final two years introduced in 1916 and 1917. A Rural High School District was formed in 1926, with bonds providing the funds for completion of a new school building in 1927.³⁰ In the early fifties, some of the rural grade schools closed and the students were bused to Mahaska Grade School. In a few years following, all of the country schools closed and all students attended the Mahaska schools.

Population Decline

Despite all the promise of its early rapid development, Mahaska eventually faced the same problems as thousands of other small Kansas communities. By the 1960s, the population of most rural towns was in decline. Mahaska was no exception. Across the post war decades, town population fell to just 200 residents in 1957; in 1978, Mahaska had only 140 residents...³¹ The decline had a significant impact on the community. According to Mahaska resident Cal Livingston, the school that was the center for all rural schools in the area closed, with the last class graduating in 1966.³² When the school closed, Mahaska, Haddam, and Morrowville organized into one school district, District #221.³³ High School and kindergarten students were

²⁹ *Mahaska History*, 26.

³⁰ *Mahaska History*, 26.

³¹ "Editor Writes of Visit He Pays Hometown Mahaska," *The Bellville Telescope*, 1983. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

³² Livingston, Cal. Interview with author, February 25, 2012, Mahaska, Kansas.

³³ *Mahaska History*, 26.

bused to Haddam. In 1967, the High School at Haddam was transferred to Morrowville. At this time, the grade school students moved to the former high school building.³⁴ The 7th and 8th grade students were transferred to Haddam in 1972, with the rest of the students being transferred in 1974.³⁵ The superintendent's office remained at the high school building until 1975, when it was also transferred to Haddam.³⁶

Another reason for the decline was the closing of the railroad. As cars became a staple in the American family, the railroad passenger trains runs diminished, resulting in travelers not stopping in Mahaska on their way across the country. In 1966, the final passenger train, the Rocket, cancelled its stop in Mashaska, and since then, no passenger train has gone through the little prairie town... The Rock Island Depot in Mahaska was closed in 1969, as all business was shifted though the Bellville agent.³⁷

Finally, the decline of the agricultural community impacted the population. Earlier in the century, residents noted that people could make a good living on 80 to 160 acres of land.³⁸ By the 1970s and 1980s, it became more difficult to make a living farming this kind of acreage. As a result, families sold their holdings to large agricultural companies and moved to larger, thriving communities.³⁹ This caused a ripple effect in the town, as grocery stores, doctors, and dentists closed their doors because there were not enough people to support the businesses.

³⁴ *Mahaska History*, 27.

³⁵ "Mahaskans spent year planning Bicentennial," *The Washington County News*, n.d., possibly circa 1977. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

³⁶ *Mahaska History*, 27.

³⁷ "Mahaska Rock Island Depot Closes Door," n.d. possibly circa 1969. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

³⁸ Cal Livingston. Interview with Author.

³⁹ Barb Livingston, Interview with Author, February 25th, 2012, Mahaska, Kansas.

A Town Revived

However, the family values and pioneering spirit that permeated this town continued into the 1970s and 1980s. This was evidenced by the upgrades to the utility services. One significant addition to the town was switching to direct dialing telephones. For over 67 years, from 1904 to 1971, the Mahaska Telephone Company provided services to its residents. When residents wanted to use the phone, there were likely five or six others on the party line.⁴⁰ In order to distinguish callers, everyone in the community had a different ring. The JB&N Telephone Company of Kansas purchased the Mahaska Telephone Company in 1971.⁴¹ Another significant upgrade to the town occurred in 1983, when a new water system was installed with the assistance of a \$264,850 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.⁴²

During this time, there was desire to regain the close-knit community feel that defined Mahaska for several decades. On March 22, 1977, the new community center, financed by a \$160,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was opened to the public. Today, the Mahaska Community Center is located on the east side of Main Street near the post office.⁴³ This building, pictured below, became the new organizing center of the town, allowing residents to hold community gatherings and activities. Since opening its doors, the community center has served as a community meal site, meeting house, and auditorium for Mahaska.

⁴⁰ Cal Livingston. Interview with Author.

⁴¹ "Dial Phones Com to Mahaska," *The Washington County News*, 1971. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

⁴² "HUD Approves Mahaska Grant," 1983. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

⁴³ "Mahaska Makes Moves to New Community Center," n.d., possibly circa 1977. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.



Mahaska Community Center
facing East.

The Centennial

When the Beeson family settled on this land in 1865 and the Bonham family registered the town in 1875, they could have only hoped that the town would last to its centennial anniversary. Across its 100 year history, Mahaska has exhibited resilience and strength during its times of rise and decline. Mahaska celebrated its 100th anniversary with a jubilee on July 3-5, 1987.⁴⁴ This glorious event was put on by Mahaska residents. The weather was ideal for the occasion and helped to attract several hundred people. The celebration was highlighted by a parade on Saturday afternoon which included 92 entries. People dressed in costumes from the late 1880s, and in addition to a costume contest, there was also a beard contest to highlight the fashion of the period. Local residents Katheryn Tuma and Leslie Cossart were voted Centennial King and Queen. The centennial celebration concluded Sunday night with an ice cream social and a fireworks display.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ "Mahaska Celebrates Centennial," n.d., possible circa 1987. Copy at Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Surveyors Monument

In 1963, Walter Schneelee found a chunk of the original sandstone marker of the Initial Point Survey while driving a tractor in a nearby field. The rock carried the numbers 8 and 5 and the letters R and W inscribed in it. It was thought that the numbers meant “1850,” and that the letters were from the words “North” and “West.” About 25 surveyors found the bottom half of the marker in 1986. On June 12th, 1987, with surveyors from all over the country present, the Professional Surveyors of the 6th Prime Meridian dedicated a memorial honoring the Initial Point.⁴⁶ The 7-foot tall monument is five-sided to represent the significance of the five states. The state names and state seals are etched onto the sides. The monument’s base, shown below, is made of rubble stone from Wyoming and red granite from Colorado.



Figure 7. Surveyors Monument. Source: <http://www.washingtoncountyks.net/mahaska.html>

Mahaska, an area originally covered with rolling hills, became a bustling town filled with a growing population and supported by a successful farming community. During the town’s rich history, generations have proudly filled the homes, churches, businesses, and schools that once stood in Mahaska. Many families still call Mahaska home, adding to the proud history that has

⁴⁶ “Mahaska gets Interpretive sign.”

defined this town for the last 125 years. Like the families before them, they will leave their imprint for the future generations.

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