

## A Tale of Two Counties: Parallel, Kansas, 1863-1854

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Figure 1: The town of Parallel, Kansas

The town of Parallel as it exists in 2016, with the abandoned gas station, an abandoned house, and the sign at the entrance to the town. Source: Photo taken by Author, fall, 2016.

The town of Parallel existed in Lincoln Township, Washington County, Kansas. Its unique geography included being located along the border between Washington and Riley County. The town officially existed until 1905 but continued to have residents until at least the 1950s. To create this sketch of Parallel, the author used business records, on-site photography, and research at Washington County Historical Society.

If you were to leave the KS-9 highway near the town of Barnes, Kansas, traveling south along the All-American Road and follow it until you reach its end at the intersection of the Parallel Road, you will find yourself in the remains of what was once the town of Parallel, Kansas. Located at the northern edge of the Flint Hills, the landscape matches much of the rest of the area with soft rolling hills and few natural trees, with most of these trees growing along Fancy Creek, winding near the old town site. What follows is a history of the town of Parallel from the various sources of two counties, Riley and Washington.

The town of Parallel was made officially into a town in 1863, during the United States Civil War, and it served as a post office town for most of its time.<sup>1</sup> The name of the town, as well as the name of the Parallel Road, comes from the fact that the town and road are located along the First Standard Parallel, a map line that runs across the entire state of Kansas and served as a surveying marker for the state. For this reason, the Standard Parallel is used as the basis for dividing farms, roads, and even serves as the county line for almost every county along the line. This is where Parallel was founded, along the border with Washington County, Kansas in the north and Riley County, Kansas in the south. The town site itself rests firmly on the Washington County side of the line but the close proximity of Riley County played a role in the history of the town, to the point that some maps show the town of Parallel in Mayday Township on the Riley County side of the line rather than in Lincoln Township in Washington.

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin D. Bruntzel, *A Quick Reference to Kansas* (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010).

The major family of the town seems to have been the Pickett family, who may have been the founding members of Parallel; the Pickett family lived there since its beginning, according to my research. They initially came from Ohio and after initially living in Topeka and then Manhattan for several years, they moved to Parallel in the late 1860s.<sup>2</sup> William Pickett, the father, had brought his family to the Parallel town site, and son Richard Picket was married while living in Parallel, with this marriage being recorded as December 2, 1870, “in Parallel, Kansas.”<sup>3</sup> Another prominent individual tied to the town of Parallel was a man named Clamor A. Johnsmeyer. He had been the son of a German baron who, after his compulsory service in the military of Hanover, traveled to the United States to make his own life separate from his father’s. He arrived in Kansas circa 1865,<sup>4</sup> having traveled by rail from New York City. He then took a wagon the rest of the way, from eastern Kansas to Jackson Township in Riley County. While he would live most of his life in Randolph, firmly in Riley County territory, he did own a tool shop in Parallel during the 1890s that was named Champion Harvesting Machines, as shown in Figure 2.

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<sup>2</sup> Riley County Genealogical Society, *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie* (Manhattan: RCGS, 1976), p. 428.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*, p. 372.



Figure 2: A photograph of Johnsmeyer tool shop, Champion Harvesting Machines, in Parallel, Kansas circa 1890. The location of the shop within the remains of the town is unknown. Repository: Washington County Historical Society.

The early town was known by its name along the Standard Parallel, but also by its post office, like many other small towns within the state of Kansas. This post office, rather than being a single permanent building, would move its address with each new post master while still officially being the Parallel post office. This can be seen when tracking the movements of the post office; research reveals that it regularly jumped the county line when it was still in service, starting in Washington County when it was founded in 1863, then moving to Riley in 1867, then back to Washington again, although the exact date is unknown. My source gives two different dates with 1867 on one entry<sup>5</sup> while having 1869 on another.<sup>6</sup> In 1877, the post office moved back to Riley County before finally staying in Washington from 1882 until it closed in 1905. This movement could account for the fact that Parallel will appear in Mayday Township on some

<sup>5</sup> Melvin D. Bruntzel, *A Quick Reference to Kansas*, "Riley County."

<sup>6</sup> Melvin D. Bruntzel, *A Quick Reference to Kansas*, "Washington County."

maps and Lincoln Township in others, as the official location of the town would be with the post office.

This can be seen in the first Polk Business Directory listing the town, 1880, when the post office would have been on the Riley County side of the line, as the town is said to be in “May Day Township.”<sup>7</sup> These directories also provide a general overview of the state of Parallel though its golden years from the 1870s through the early 1900s, with five entries between 1880 and 1912. The first entry in 1880 contains very little information, but the entry in 1884-85 gives the first details, speaking of nearby Methodist and Baptist churches and also a nearby district school, none of which are named, unfortunately. Research has established, however, that the Parallel school children attended a joint school shared with families from the town of Ober, to the west:

The first schoolhouse in the district was stone and situated west of the present Fancy Creek Evangelical United Brethren Church. Later it was torn down and another stone building erected where the last school was located. This school was called the Parallel School. In 1903 the last frame school was built. The carpenter was Mr. Roepke. At the school meeting they named the school Ober, taking the first part of the name, Oberhelman, because that was the name of the family living near the school.<sup>8</sup>

The Polk Directory 1884-85 also gives the railroad shipping point as Waterville, although this would later change to the town of Barnes to the north, and gives a town population of 30, which also remains consistent.<sup>9</sup> The 1894 edition shows that Parallel had a surprisingly robust commercial base for a town of its size, where in addition to the livestock and grain of the farms,

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<sup>7</sup> “Kansas Memory”, *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1880*, p. 737.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Bogart, *The Rural Schools of Riley County, Kansas* (Manhattan: Riley County Historical Society and Museum, 2004), p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> “Kansas Memory”, *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1884-85*, p. 114.2

there are listed businesses in the form of a carpenter, a blacksmith, a stone mason, a general store, a dedicated hardware store, well diggers, and even a barber.<sup>10</sup> An archived photo also shows that at one point, the town included a cornet band, as shown in Figure 3. However, we then see the population begin to dip. In the 1900 Polk Directory, the population of Parallel has been cut in half, from 30 to 15, the first sign that Parallel was reaching its end, only five years before its post office would close. Parallel doesn't show up in the 1912 Polk Directory at all.



Figure 3: The Parallel Cornet Band, Circa 1890.

A photo of the Parallel Cornet band. They likely played for formal events within the town or the surrounding area. SOURCE: Repository: Washington County Historical Society

Although in 1900 the town began its decline, there is a sign within the town itself that Parallel citizens attempted to revive, even with the loss of the post office. Residents constructed one of the most prominent buildings in the town, and one of the few that still

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<sup>10</sup> "Kansas Memory", *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1900*, p. 841.

exists: the filling station on the corner of the Parallel Road and the All-American Road, shown in Figure 4 as it exists today. As the automobile began to make its way into prominence on the farms of Kansas, a filling station would have drawn in people for the general store and could have breathed life back into the town. However, after this point, information becomes scarce and hard to find. There is a single, small entry from an unknown newspaper in the archives of the Washington County Historical society that talks about the “service station and grocery on the Parallel” being sold to new owners as the original owners wanted to return to their farm. Another small newspaper entry from Jan. 28, 1954, speaks of the store from the previous article being closed. Only a single picture of this Parallel village exists, circa 1930 or 1940, where we see the station, a single house, and a barn, as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 4: Parallel Filling Station

A photograph of the remains of the Parallel Filling Station, taken in 2016, a single room station with only one island for gas pumps. The architecture suggests a 1930s station. SOURCE: Photo taken by author, fall, 2016.



Figure 5: Town of Parallel, Circa 1930.

The lone picture of the town of Parallel, showing the filling station, a single house, and a barn likely owned by owner of both of the other buildings. Repository: Washington County Historical Society.

The town to the north in Washington County, Barnes, where we began our journey, would have likely served as a rival town to Parallel as they were only ten miles apart and started with a roughly similar population of 30 people in 1880.<sup>11</sup> However, Barnes received a railroad line, the Missouri Pacific, and this caused its population to explode in relation to Parallel's. While Parallel never grew beyond 30 people, the town of Barnes went from 30 to 60 in 1884,<sup>12</sup> exploding to

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<sup>11</sup> "Kansas Memory", *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1880*, p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> "Kansas Memory", *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1884-85*, p. 194.



500 by 1894,<sup>13</sup> staying at 500 in 1900,<sup>14</sup> and then ending with 454 in 1912.<sup>15</sup> Barnes also included a bank and a grain shipping company, two businesses that would have drawn in a large number of people. In fact, Barnes, Kansas, is a viable community yet today.

Before the automobile, Parallel would have still been able to survive, because of the limited distances that a horse-drawn wagon could cover in a single day, but with the automobile, this was no longer the case. The filling station in Parallel suggests that area farmers would have tried to capitalize on the new automobile craze of the times, but as cars improved, the need for such neighborhood stations went away. As previously pointed out, the station and grocery store in Parallel closed in 1954. Unfortunately, the information available for the town of Parallel is limited, but what information does exist shows a town that was unique and a product of its location in time and the wider world. Yet because of its name, people still ask about it and recall that Parallel once defined the northern prairies of Riley County, its post office jumping back and forth across the county line.

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<sup>13</sup> "Kansas Memory", *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1894*, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> "Kansas Memory", *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1900*, p. 134,

<sup>15</sup> "Kansas Memory", *Kansas Historical Society, Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1912*, p. 126.

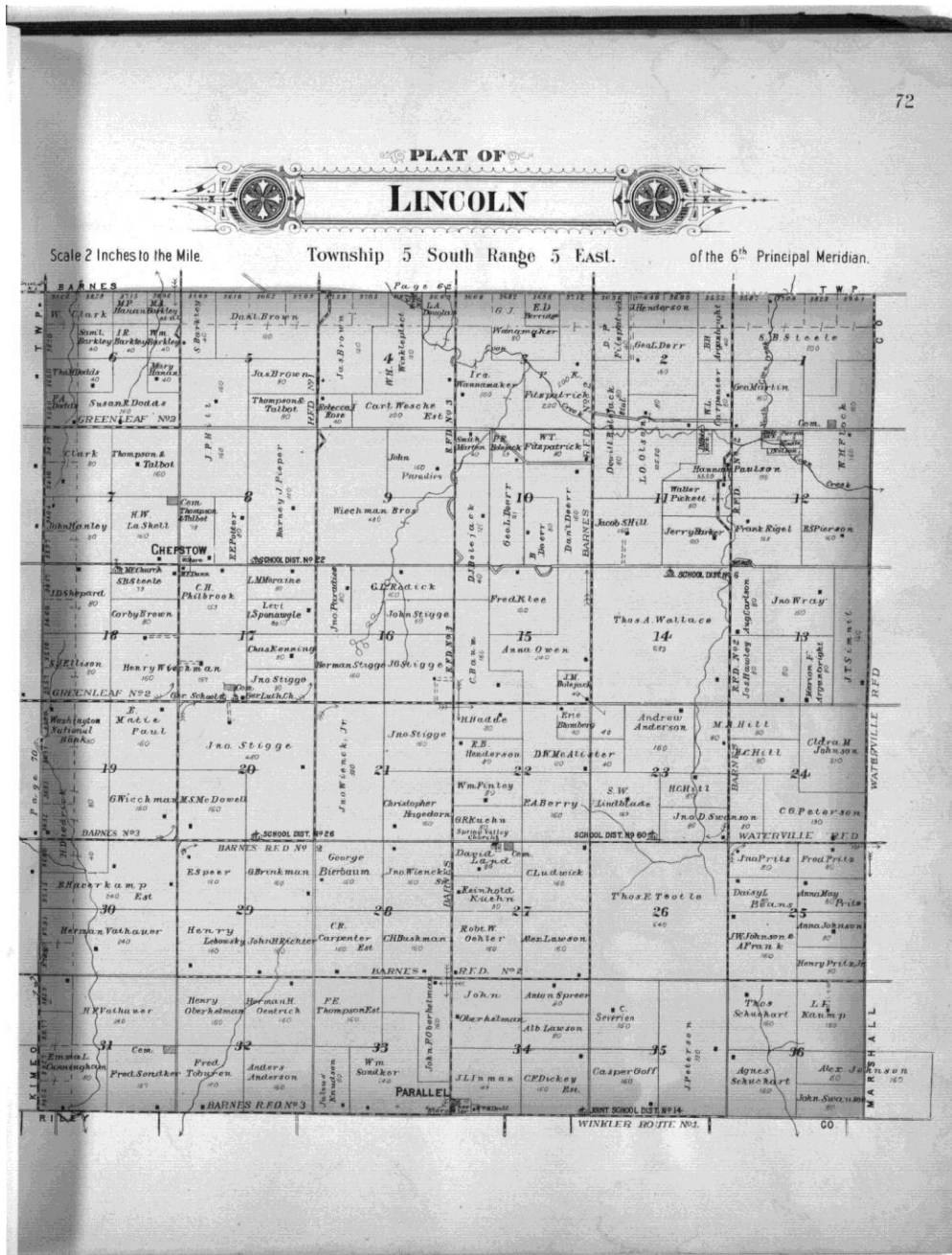


Figure 6: Historical Atlas of Washington County, Kansas, 1906.

A plat map of Lincoln Township including the town of Parallel. Parallel is located on the southern edge of the map in Section 34. SOURCE: *Historical Atlas of Washington County, Kansas, 1906.*

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