

Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures: Crime in Wabaunsee Township,  
Wabaunsee County, Kansas 1858-1921

Chapman Center for Rural Studies Spring, 2012

This study uses two Justice of the Peace record books to correlate patterns in early Wabaunsee Co., crime rates with major regional and national events. The results of this study show spikes in crime rates following events that put strain on the United States economically and socially. These spikes show economic and social stress in an area that otherwise had relatively low amounts crime.

History 533  
Aaron Melby

Dr. Morgan  
May 3, 2012

People are familiar with the classic crime motives of money, revenge, or love, but do major regional and national events play roles in influencing crime? Spikes in crime data from early Wabaunsee Township records show they do, but they also show that local values play a role as well. The Bluestem Prairie of Wabaunsee Township was settled by large numbers of immigrants from Germany and emigrants from the north eastern United States.<sup>1</sup> A prominent group of these settlers was the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony from Connecticut. They moved to Wabaunsee with the goal of making Kansas a free state, and brought with them strong values.<sup>2</sup>

Before getting into the trends in crime, the methods used in this paper need to be discussed. This is a case study using data from two Justice of the Peace books covering Wabaunsee Township, in Wabaunsee County Kansas, from 1858 to 1921, a page of which can be seen in Figure 2 in attachment on page 11. These

---

<sup>1</sup> 1865 Kansas State Census of Wabaunsee County (Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1982). Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS; Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, Historical Atlas of Kansas, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). 5.

<sup>2</sup> "Beecher Rifle Church," Kansas Genealogical Society, accessed April 7, 2012, [http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/b/beecher\\_rifle\\_church.html](http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/b/beecher_rifle_church.html).

books were used to complete a statistical analysis of crime, which was then combined with State and Federal Census data to determine yearly crime rates. There are also a couple of research problems to overview.

The first problem is Wabaunsee Township had two Justices of the Peace in 1859 and continued that pattern until at least 1881.<sup>3</sup> For that reason it is almost certain that this is only a partial account of the crimes committed from 1858 to 1921 and that there is another set of records covering other cases for this time period. Despite this fact, it is likely that the other Justices of the Peace would have had similar case loads, and therefore increases in crime should be discernible from one account. The next problem is that census data is not taken yearly, so the population must be estimated based on mean population growth, while in actuality population didn't likely increase constantly. Yet even with these problems it is possible to correlate spikes in crime with major regional and national events.

### Territorial Kansas to Early Statehood 1858-1868

---

<sup>3</sup> Matt Thompson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County*, Kansas. (Alma: n.p., 1901), 166.

<http://www.archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofwa00thom.>; Enoch Platt et al., *Justice of the Peace Record Book: Wabaunsee Township, Territorial Kansas and Early Statehood, 1855-1878* (Wabaunsee: n.p., n.d.). 90 and 103. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS

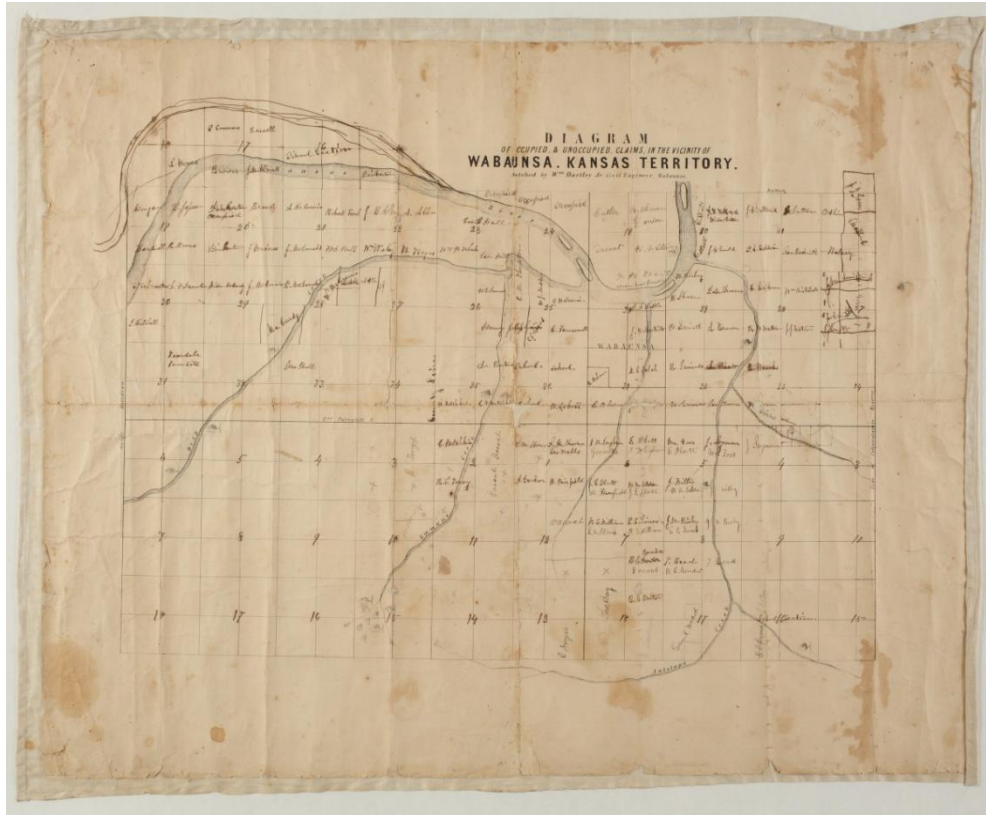


Figure 1. A map of the area of study during early settlement (circa 1856 to 1860), Source: Hartley, Wm. Jr., *Diagram of Occupied and Unoccupied Claims in the Vicinity of Wabansa, Kansas Territory* (n.p., n.d.). <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/226302>.

When Kansas became a Territory in 1854, people began to settle the area presently known as Wabaunsee Township. This northern township is located just south of the Kansas River, about 90 miles due west of Kansas City, Kansas in present day Wabaunsee County. In 1856, settlers started arriving to the area in large numbers. These settlers found an area with considerably smaller hills than the Flint Hills outcropping to the south, and a fertile river bottom. Most of the early settlers were from Connecticut and included skilled workers, doctors, and

ministers.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the first ten years of settlement, many settlers from Illinois, New York, and Germany had arrived and joined the original settlers.<sup>5</sup> This mixture produced tensions and especially, property disputes and debt.

In these first ten years the most interesting time period for crime is 1865 to 1866. In 1863 and 1864 no crimes of any type were reported; however, that soon changed. In 1865 and 1866 a string of assaults (violent crime) and robberies (property crimes) occurred that raised the crime rate, as seen below in Table 1. When compared to the average crime rates for this study there is no doubt that these numbers fall out of the normal range, but what caused these increases in crime? The increases in crime very well could be related to post Civil War tensions. The sociologist Gary Lafree found that postwar “Crime Booms,” tend to follow the pattern of increased murder and robbery rates.<sup>6</sup>

This pattern of increasing violent and property crime is very similar for Wabaunsee Township from 1865 to 1866, but why? Wabaunsee Township was staunchly antislavery; some settlers had moved halfway across the United States to help make Kansas a free state, and many local men fought for the Union in the

---

4 “Wabaunsee County,” Kansas Genealogical Society, accessed April 4, 2012, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/wabaunsee/1907/7.shtml>.

5 1870 Census Wabaunsee County. Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1984. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

6 Gary Lafree, “Violent Crime Rates in the 1990s: Predicting Crime Booms and Busts,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 145-68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223501>.

Civil War.<sup>7</sup> In fact a group of 112 men from Wabaunsee County's population of 1,050 volunteered to serve in 1861.<sup>8</sup> In 1865, right after the Civil War large numbers of soldiers were living in Wabaunsee Township, many who had likely just returned home from the war.<sup>9</sup> These men inevitably had contact with the settlers moving to western Kansas, some of whom would not have shared the same postwar sentiment. It is therefore unlikely that all these interactions ended peacefully, and that when their values were challenged, it instigated violence.

**Table 1 Postwar Crime Spike Table: Created from Territorial, State, and Federal Censuses as well as Justice of the Peace books.<sup>10</sup>**

Years	Violent Crime Rate	Property Crime Rate	Total Crime Rate
64 Year Average	0.04%	0.08%	0.38%
1865	0.50%	0.90%	1.40%
1866	0.70%	0.70%	2.20%

A prominent example of one of these altercations is the 1866 assault by William Wiley. William Wiley was a veteran who had served in Company K of Kansas's famous 11<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. Wiley fought with the 11<sup>th</sup> until he was wounded at the Battle of Lexington, Missouri, in 1864, and was later

<sup>7</sup> "Wabaunsee County," Kansas Genealogical Society, accessed April 4, 2012, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/wabaunsee/1907/7.shtml>.

<sup>8</sup> "Wabaunsee County Kansas Civil War Record," Kansas Trails, accessed August 17, 2012, <http://genealogytrails.com/kan/wabaunsee/civilwar.html>.

<sup>9</sup> 1865 Kansas State Census of Wabaunsee County (Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1982). Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

<sup>10</sup> For a complete list of census data and books used in table 1 and latter in table 2 see bibliography.

discharged.<sup>11</sup> The assailant William Wiley and the man he assaulted, E. R. McCurdy, were both from Zeandale Township, the township just west of Wabaunsee Township in present day Riley County.<sup>12</sup> There is no indication of why they were in Wabaunsee; perhaps they were both conducting business, for whatever the reason, when the two men met the situation turned ugly. The men exchanged words, and then the altercation went to blows. Wiley may have came out of the fight as the victor, but in court he was charged and convicted of assault.<sup>13</sup>

### Challenging Times: National Reconstruction 1869-1877

Unlike the spike of violent and property crimes that immediately followed the Civil War, during the time of National Reconstruction there are two time periods that show spikes in civil crime. As shown below in Table 2, these two periods were from 1871 to 1872 and 1874 to 1877, with only one year of decline between the two. The first period from 1871 to 1872 is likely the result of a drought. Geo. S. Burt wrote a letter saying, "...very little was raised by the settlers

---

11 "11th Regiment Kansas Volunteers Cavalry: Company K," Skyways, Accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.skyways.org/genweb/archives/statewide/military/civilwar/adjutant/11/k.html>.

12 1865 Kansas State Census of Wabaunsee County (Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1982). Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS. In the 1860s Zeandale was still part of Wabaunsee County.

13 C. B. Lines et al., Justice of the Peace Record Book: Wabaunsee Township, Territorial Kansas and Early Statehood, 1855-1878 (Wabaunsee: n.p., n.d.). 81-86, and 149-151 Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

in 1868 and still less in 1870.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that he calls them “settlers” implies that they are recent arrivals. That drought would have been especially hard on settlers new to the area, who would have already risked much financially by leaving their previous homes. The drought’s impact however was relatively short, and by 1873, recovery looked promising.

**Table 2 Civil Crime Rates during National Reconstruction: Created from Territorial, State, and Federal Censuses as well as Justice of the Peace books.**

Years	Civil Crime Rate	Total Crime Rate
64 Year Average	0.26%	0.38%
1871 to 1872 Average	1.20%	1.55%
1873	0.50%	0.60%
1874-1877 Average	1.28%	1.45%

Before September 1873, it must have looked like recovery was on the way, but then the Panic of 1873 hit. The panic was a stock market crisis that hit railroads, banks, and commodities very hard, and thus likely had an impact on

---

<sup>14</sup> Geo S. Burt, letter, n.d., Wabauensee County Historical Society, Alma.



most Americans, including those living in Wabaunsee Township. Though the statistical data on the Panic of 1873 is less than ideal, it ranks second only to the Great Depression in severity.<sup>15</sup> To add to the severe nature of the financial crisis, the area of Wabaunsee Township was affected by a prairie fire in 1873 that destroyed several homes, livestock, and stored grain.<sup>16</sup> This was not the end of area's misfortune; the year of 1874 brought with it a wave of destruction that would devastate people living in the Midwest.

That wave of destruction was swarms of grasshoppers that greatly affected the Great Plains from 1874 to 1876.<sup>17</sup> In 1874 the swarms were so bad they created a barren wasteland as they swept across the prairie. Not only did the grasshoppers devour all plant life, the sheer amount of their feces poisoned fish, and killed cattle that had drunk contaminated water.<sup>18</sup> The aftermath that the grasshoppers left in their wake was so severe that relief missions sent out by Fort Riley in Clay County, found cases of starvation and many more people in

---

15 Samuel Rezneck, "Distress, Relief and Discontent in the United States during the Depression of 1873-78," *Journal of Political Economy* 58, no. 6 (December 1950): 494-96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1827088>.

16 Matt Thompson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. (Alma: n.p., 1901), 329. <http://www.archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofwa00thom>.

17 Roger C. Smith, "An Analysis of 100 Years of Grasshopper Populations in Kansas (1854 to 1958)," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 57, no. 4 (December 1954): 399, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3625918>.

18 Matt Thompson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. (Alma: n.p., 1901), 329-30. <http://www.archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofwa00thom>.

desperate need of help.<sup>19</sup> In one fell swoop the livelihood of many farmers and ranchers had been destroyed, and thus their ability to cover the debts they owed.

George Burt was one of those many people hit hard during this time period, and as a result of being unable to pay his debt, he found himself facing one of those civil suits. It might be tempting to think that George was just incompetent with his finances, but the facts say otherwise; in fact, George was a real American success story. He walked from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Wabaunsee in November (winter) of 1859, and when he arrived, he had only ten cents to his name. In the following years George worked hard, and over time became a prominent member of the community. He conducted the 1870 census and served as a township trustee for eleven years. Before long, he had purchased 160 acres of fertile bottomland.<sup>20</sup> Yet despite his hard work and success, even he wasn't immune to the string of unfortunate events that came between 1873 and 1877.

The panic of 1873 and the grasshopper wave likely had an impact on George, but without a doubt, the prairie fire in 1873 was devastating for him and his family. George's stables and his stored grain were both consumed in the fire,

---

19 M. J. Morgan and students at Kansas State University, *Broughton, Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Town, 1869-1966* (Manhattan: Chapman Center for Rural Studies, 2010), 11-13.

20 Matt Thompson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. (Alma: n.p., 1901), 292.

<http://www.archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofwa00thom>.

and most of his farm was likely also destroyed.<sup>21</sup> That fire, coupled with the financial crisis and the grasshopper wave in 1874, almost certainly contributed to George's financial problems, and rendered him unable to pay his debts.

### The Utopia Years 1894-1900 and 1902-1910

In contrast to the assaults and robberies of 1856 to 1866, and the large number of civil suits in the 1870s, there were long periods of no crime in Wabaunsee Township. From 1894 to 1900, and again from 1902 to 1910 there was no crime reported in Wabaunsee Township. What was different during this time period that was keeping the crime at bay?

Gary Lafree lists education and public initiatives as having a significant impact on crime, and to the early settlers of Wabaunsee, those public initiatives were extremely important.<sup>22</sup> Some of the first tasks undertaken by these early settlers were the construction of both a school and a church. In 1860, not satisfied with only one school, Wabaunsee Township levied and invested \$200 into schools,

---

21 Ibid. 329.

22 Gary Lafree, "Violent Crime Rates in the 1990s: Predicting Crime Booms and Busts," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 155-56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223501>.

which was at least double that of other townships, and by 1862, Wabaunsee Township had three school districts.<sup>23</sup>

The strong influence on public initiatives can be seen in some of the crimes people were charged with, and the fines imposed on them as a result of their offense. The fine for selling liquor on Sunday was higher than most people received for assault, and the bail for incest was one thousand dollars in 1873.<sup>24</sup> Another factor to add to this list is community. During this period of low crime the population for Wabaunsee Township rarely reached over one thousand people, and most of them were related to early settlers.<sup>25</sup> The persistence of the settlers means that many of the locals almost certainly shared a common culture including traditions, values, and religion. The smaller population size implies that the people of this community had a larger amount of interaction, and therefore a greater sense of community. Roads likely facilitated and began to increase those community interactions around this time. In 1885 there was already a network of wagon roads connecting the surrounding farms to the town of Wabaunsee, and by 1902, there

---

23 Matt Thompson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. (Alma: n.p., 1901), 8, 53, and 318-21.

<http://www.archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofwa00thom/>; Wabaunsee Township schools, n.d. Wabaunsee County School Papers, Wabaunsee County Historical Society.

24 C. B. Lines et al., *Justice of the Peace Record Book: Wabaunsee Township, Territorial Kansas and Early Statehood, 1855-1878* (Wabaunsee: n.p., n.d.). 81-86, and 149-151 Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS. see also Enoch Platt et al., *Justice of the Peace Record Book: Wabaunsee Township, Territorial Kansas and Early Statehood, 1855-1878* (Wabaunsee: n.p., n.d.). 85-86 Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

25 "1895 Kansas State Census," Kansas State Historical society, Accessed February 19, 2012,

[http://www.kshs.org/genealogy/genealogy\\_censuses/search/surname:/fname:/city:Wabaunsee/county:WB/submit:SEARCH](http://www.kshs.org/genealogy/genealogy_censuses/search/surname:/fname:/city:Wabaunsee/county:WB/submit:SEARCH). Also see census of 1865, 1900, and 1905.

had be a modest expansion of wagon roads.<sup>26</sup> These wagon roads would have made it easier for rural residents to travel to town for supplies or to conduct business. The increased ease of travel means people likely “went to town” more often; thus increasing the amount of community interactions. Together these concomitant processes created a respectable community that helped to keep crime at bay.

Wabaunsee Township was settled by people with strong moral values that long out lasted the original colony. Throughout a sixty-three year period the area had only two major periods where crime spiked to high levels. These time periods were represented by some of the most challenging and destructive events of the Nineteenth Century, and equally took a toll on the people of Wabaunsee Township. Although major regional and national events played a role in crime rates, strong values and social factors had an immense impact on the area crime. Without the affect of desperate times on Wabaunsee Township, strong values were able to keep crime low, and for two long periods none existent.

---

<sup>26</sup> Geo A. Oble, *Standard Atlas of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. (Chicago: Geo. A. Oble & Co., 1902).

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209398/page/14.>; *Atlas of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. (Chicago: Gillen & Davy 1885).

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/224006/page/6>.

33

Geo E Weaver  
 J<sup>r</sup>  
 S E Pardee & Co Collectors

In justice court  
 in and for Wabaunsee  
 County County of  
 Wabaunsee Kansas

This is a civil suit brought to  
 collect money due on promissory note  
 in full of particulars filed by Geo  
 E Weaver & Co for plaintiff etc  
 and the summons issued after 26  
 the returnable Dec 4 at nine o'clock  
 till 11 1875

Dec 4<sup>th</sup> Court met present both  
 of the defendants  
 Principal Defendants confessed  
 judgment for the amount  
 of the note with interest and  
 costs of suit  
 Judgment is therefore rendered  
 in favor of plaintiff against  
 said defendants S E Pardee  
 both as principal and David Mc  
 Keith as security for the sum of  
 twenty nine \$<sup>00</sup> debt and three  
 \$<sup>00</sup> and interest  
 on the debt at five percent  
 and cost of suit  
 Ernie Staff

S E Pardee filed bond for stay  
 of execution with S M Shelby as security  
 settled in full this 21<sup>st</sup> of Dec  
 1875 Ernie Staff  
 money paid to plaintiff etc

Figure 2. A picture of a Justice of the Peace book covering 1875 to 1921, Source: Justice of the Peace book 1875 - 1921, copy available at Wabaunsee County Historical Society in Alma, Kansas.

## Bibliography

“11th Regiment Kansas Volunteers Cavalry: Company K,” Skyways, Accessed September 12, 2012,  
<http://www.skyways.org/genweb/archives/statewide/military/civilwar/adjutant/11/k.html>.

*1860 Territory Census of Wabaunsee County*. Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1982. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

*1865 Kansas State Census of Wabaunsee County*. Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1982. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

*1870 Census Wabaunsee County*. Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1984. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

*1880 Federal Census Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1970. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

1895 Kansas State Census,” Kansas State Historical society, Accessed February 19, 2012,

[http://www.kshs.org/genealogy/genealogy\\_censuses/search/surname:/fname:/city:Wabaunsee/county:WB/submit:SEARCH](http://www.kshs.org/genealogy/genealogy_censuses/search/surname:/fname:/city:Wabaunsee/county:WB/submit:SEARCH).

*1900 Census of the United States*. Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society Microfilms. K-34.

*1905 Kansas State Census*. Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society Microfilms. K-166.

*1915 State Census of Kansas*. Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society Microfilms. K-250.

*Atlas of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. Chicago: Gillen & Davy 1885.  
<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/224006/page/6>.

“Beecher Rifle Church,” Kansas Genealogical Society, accessed April 7, 2012,  
[http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/b/beecher\\_rifle\\_church.html](http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/b/beecher_rifle_church.html).

Burt, Geo, S. Letter. Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

Geo A. Oble, *Standard Atlas of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. Chicago: Geo. A. Oble & Co., 1902. <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209398/page/14>.

Hartley, Wm. Jr., *Diagram of Occupied and Unoccupied Claims in the Vicinity of Wabansa, Kansas Territory*. n.p., n.d.  
<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/226302>.

Lafree, Gary. “Violent Crime Rates in the 1990s: Predicting Crime Booms and Busts,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/223501>.

Line, C. B., J. M. Bisbey, Phil F. Johnson, L. P. Weaver, and J. P Evans. *Justice of the Peace Record Book: Wabaunsee Township, Territorial Kansas and Early Statehood, 1855- 1878*. Wabaunsee: n.p., n.d. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

Morgan, M. J., and students at Kansas State University. *Broughton, Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Town, 1869-1966*. Manhattan: Chapman Center for Rural Studies, 2010.

Platt, Enoch, J. M. Bisbey, A. H. Stiles, James F Peacard, John B. Thompson, and J. W. Weddle. *Justice of the Peace Record Book: Wabaunsee Township, 1878-1921*. Wabaunsee: n.p., n.d. Copy available at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS.

Rezneck, Samuel. “Distress, Relief and Discontent in the United States during the Depression of 1873-78,” *Journal of Political Economy* 58, no. 6 (December 1950).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1827088>.

Smith, Roger C. “An Analysis of 100 Years of Grasshopper Populations in Kansas (1854 to 1958),” *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 57, no. 4 (December 1954).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3625918>.



Socolofsky, Homer E. and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2nd ed.  
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

Thompson, Matt. *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*. Alma: n.p., 1901.  
<http://www.archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofwa00thom>.

“Wabaunsee County Kansas Civil War Record,” Kansas Trails, accessed August  
17, 2012, <http://genealogytrails.com/kan/wabaunsee/civilwar.html>.

“Wabaunsee County,” Kansas Genealogical Society, accessed April 4, 2012,  
<http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/wabaunsee/1907/7.shtml>.

Wabaunsee Township schools, n.d. Wabaunsee County School Papers, Wabaunsee  
County Historical Society.