

Oronoque: Out of the Ashes

Oronoque, Norton County, Kansas 1885-1935

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Note added 2024-0-25 by the Chapman Center for Rural Studies: The Oronoque Cemetery was most likely not moved due to the construction of the Norton Dam and the creation of Keith Sebelius Lake. According to the Norton County Historical Society, there is no evidence of this cemetery being moved. Instead of the cemetery moving, it looks like parts of the Burlington and Rock Island Railroad were moved north.

I chose to write about this town because western Kansas is often overlooked and forgotten. I wanted tell the story of a small Kansas town that once thrived and had importance. The history is there and should not be forgotten. I was able to learn about a town that I never even knew existed and can now share its story. My study includes; newspaper articles, photographs, and an informal interview.

What comes to mind when you think of northwestern Kansas? Is it the rolling hills, prairie grass, fields of wheat and corn, or flowing streams? This paints a scene of Oronoque, Kansas. Ten miles southwest of Norton off of Highway 383 we find the remains of what was once the town of Oronoque. All that remains is a single house, the rubble of previous ones, a cemetery, and the old lumber company. Looking at it today you may not have thought it to be the image of success and enterprise. Venture back to 1885 and you would get a new picture entirely, one where farmers plowed their fields and the blacksmith pounded out a horseshoe. Listen as the whistle blows, alerting the town that the train is coming through. Hear the wind blow through the trees on a windy afternoon and hear the birds chirping their tunes of joy. The story of Oronoque is filled with trials, of fire and depression, but more than its trials, this town tells a tale of perseverance. This is a story of a group of people not deterred by Mother Nature, but stronger than the trials they faced.

In 1885, the Burlington Railroad was built through to Oronoque. The new railroad required a western terminus and Oronoque was the spot chosen. The Lincoln Land Company owned the land and promoted it.¹ Oronoque resides within Norton County in the Leota Township. Before the platting of Oronoque, there was a battle for which town would obtain the county seat. There were two towns that battled for the position to be the county seat; one was Norton and the other was Leota. Both towns were relatively the same size at the time and both wanted nothing more than to claim the seat. Leota was a hustling town and had many boosters who worked to get the county seat in every way possible. One thing that separated

¹ See "Oronoque," in *From a Covered Wagon Ride to Community Pride: Norton Centennial, 1872-1972* (Norton, Kansas. Souvenir ed. , Norton Centennial Historical Committee, 1972).

Norton from Leota was its frame house. Leota did not have one and Norton did. To remedy this, a local man from Leota traded for the house and, to everyone's surprise, moved it to Leota. They brought out oxen and horses and put it on rollers and rolled it all the way to Leota. Neither town had a newspaper, so Leota hired an editor to start one. This was still not enough and Norton ended up winning the county seat. After the Burlington railroad was built through Norton and they had lost the county seat, what was left of the town moved to Oronoque. In the beginning, lots were being sold for \$150.²

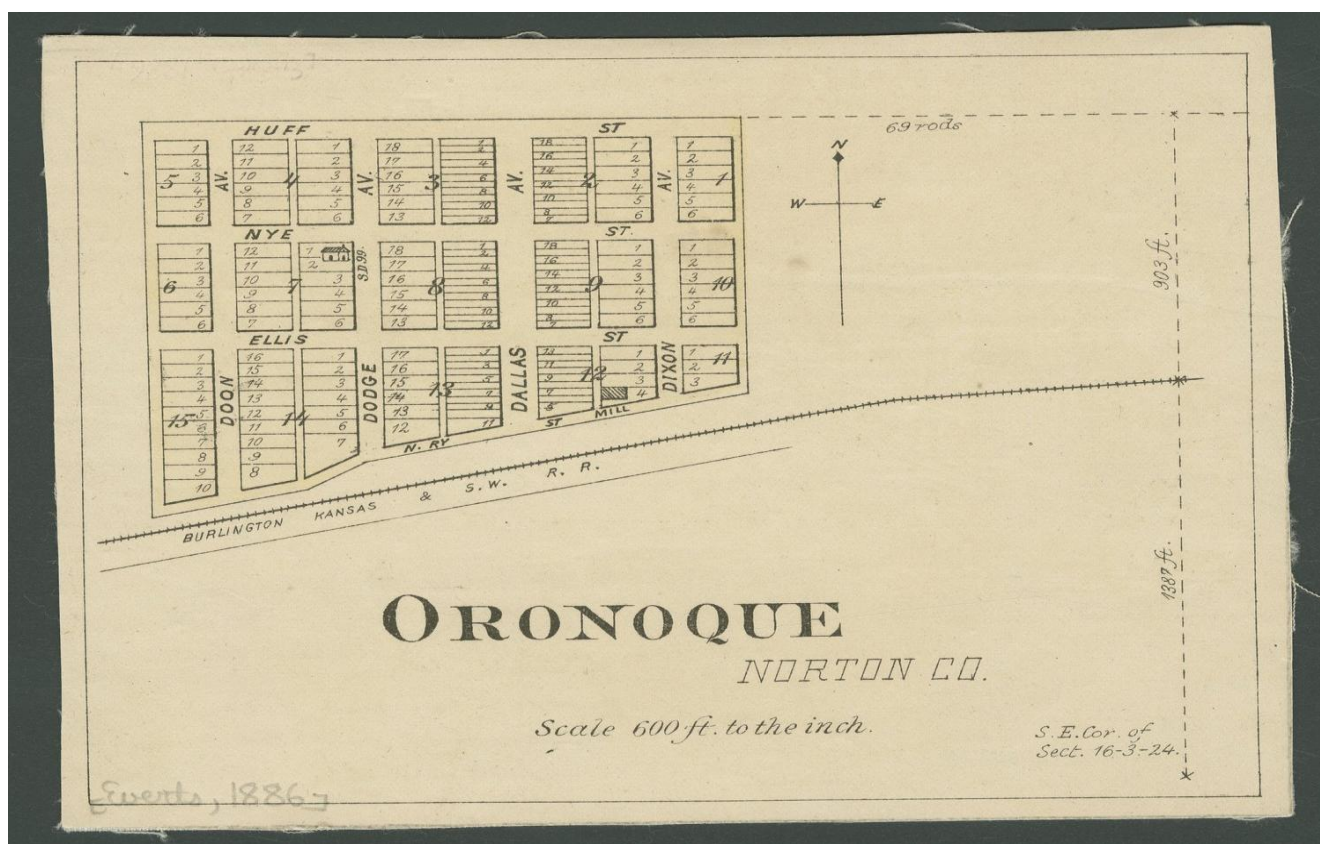


Figure 1. Platted map of Oronoque from 1886, just one year after Oronoque was founded. Source: Kansas Memory the Official State Atlas of Kansas found at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/305692/page/438>

² "Oronoque," in the *Norton County News*, n.d. Copy at Norton Public Library, Norton, Kansas.

Oronoque did not take long to start growing. An article dated December 30, 1885, from *The Topeka Daily Capital* reported that there were 75 men at work putting up buildings.³ The Oronoque Post Office was established on November 4, 1885. Before the it opened, however, there was an area called Dallas. It had a post office that was established September 4, 1879, but it was discontinued when the Oronoque post office moved in.⁴ *The Topeka Daily Capital* listed post office changes throughout Kansas. In the November 12 issue, it notes a name change from Dallas, Norton County to Oronoque.⁵

A great many businesses have sprouted up in Oronoque throughout its existence. There was a sorghum mill which offered an old-fashioned “taffy pull.” There was a hardware business which was passed down until 1916 when the family transferred their business to Norton. There was also a meat market and grocery which was operated before 1909; it returned in 1916 until 1935. There was also a blacksmith shop in Oronoque. A newspaper was first published in 1885. It lasted around five months and was discontinued when the editor passed away. Another newspaper, the *Oronoque Orient*, was there until 1909 when it was destroyed. There was also a lumber yard in Oronoque which was operated from 1915 to 1934. This is one of the few remaining buildings which standing from Oronoque’s past. There was even a hotel that flourished for a while.⁶ The Oronoque Hotel and the livery stable were both run by one R.S.

³ *The Topeka Daily Capital*, Dec. 30, 1885.

⁴ Ancestry.com http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ksnorton/Oronoque/oronoque_history.htm

⁵ *The Topeka Capital*, Nov. 12, 1885.

⁶ D.N. Bowers, *Seventy Years in Norton County Kansas, 1872-1942*, excerpt by Ernest M. Wheeler (Norton, Kan.: *Norton County Champion*, 1942).

Palmer. According to the *Norton County News* article, “he serves as good meals as are to be found at any hotel in the country.”⁷

Oronoque had a number of churches that were founded across the years. The first church services took place in R.W. Ellis’ home until the Hopewell church was built. R.W. Ellis homesteaded there in 1875 and built part of the Oronoque Hotel. The Porter “dugout” is where the Adventist group held their services. The Oronoque Christian Church was organized in 1905 and a church building constructed in 1907. The pastor was Clarence Huff, also the editor of the *Oronoque Orient* until the fire destroyed it. The Oronoque Baptist Church was established in 1906. It was discontinued and its building is now part of the Norton Baptist Church.

The Hopewell sod church was where the first school in the Oronoque-Dellvale community was held; it was a subscription school. Some places did not have enough money to start an official school. When there were enough students, each one paid a “subscription” to go to school. District No. 40 held its first sessions in the Porter “dugout” located east of Oronoque. Eventually, it became a frame schoolhouse, established in 1882. The Oronoque District No. 99 was organized in 1885 and a school house was erected. A larger, two room school house was later built in 1917. The *Salina Evening Journal* documents the plans to build the two room school house in April of 1916. It had been discussed and the people found it was

⁷ “Oronoque,” *Norton County News*, n.d.

an inadequate place to meet the needs for the district. They voted to erect a new building which would be ready by the fall term.⁸



Figure 2. A photograph of the Public School in Oronoque Kansas. More than likely this is the two room school house erected in 1917 due to its frame and structure. Source: Special Collections and University Archives – Wichita State University Libraries found at http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/kw/images.asp?xfile_name=kw_oronoque_norton_ks1.jpg.

Oronoque encountered a few hardships throughout its existence. The first and one of the hardest was the fire of 1909. An article in the *Olsburg Gazette* informed the readers of a fire that took place in Oronoque. Dated October 15, 1909, this short paragraph mentions the burning in the business district in Oronoque. According to the newspaper, the damages totaled \$20,000.⁹ Although the newspaper article was dated October 15, the fire happened on October

⁸ *Salina Evening Journal*, April 18, 1916.

⁹ *Olsburg Gazette*, October 15, 1909.

first. It burned down nearly all the business district.¹⁰ This did not deter the people of Oronoque, however; they rose from the ashes and rebuilt most of the business district. Some businesses did not survive the fire, however; one of these was the *Oronoque Orient*, discontinued after the fire. Ernest M. Wheeler, a teacher who wrote “The History of Oronoque” as part of D.N. Bowers’ book *Seventy Years in Norton County Kansas 1872-1942*, surmises that the fire of 1909 marked the end of an effort to promote the growth of Oronoque.¹¹ So whereas the people of Oronoque rebuilt businesses there, the fire had a profound effect on its continuing growth.

Another fire took place in 1920. The *Bronson Pilot* account tells of a fire that burned the precious wheat crop of farmers. It was between Oberlin and Norton and spread as far as Oronoque. It burned the harvested crop on three thousand acres of land. Damages were estimated to be around \$150,000. Apparently many farmers had to abandon the attempt to save their crops in order to fight the fires near their homes.¹²

New business arose after the 1909 fire. One such business was the opening of the State Bank of Oronoque. This bank was incorporated and opened for business on October 9, 1915.¹³ A newspaper clipping from the *Salina Evening Journal* from September 30th of 1915 is titled, “Frolic on Hand for Bank Opening.” The writer promised a happy time at the festival for the

¹⁰ “Oronoque, “ *Norton County News*, n.d.

¹¹ Bowers, *Seventy Years in Norton County Kansas*, excerpt by Ernest M. Wheeler.

¹² *The Bronson Pilot*, July 23, 1920.

¹³ “Oronoque,” *Norton County News*, n.d.

grand opening. Businesses and stores offered special bargains that day and street fair attractions were set to take place.¹⁴

The Great Depression affected many people in the Oronoque area. I was informed that many of the farmers in the area, especially during the 1930s and 1940s, could no longer afford to farm there and packed up and left. In the *Wichita Daily Eagle*, an article states that a man in Oronoque traded his store and a stock of general merchandise for a second-hand automobile. It then quips that, “No wonder Oronoque is but a speck on the map.”¹⁵ It is fascinating that a man would trade his store away for a second-hand automobile!



Figure 3 Photograph of the Oronoque cemetery facing south. Photograph taken March 21, 2015 by author.

¹⁴ *The Salina Evening Journal* September 30, 1915.

¹⁵ *The Wichita Daily Eagle* November 17, 1907.

One of the remnants of Oronoque is its cemetery. The place at which it stands now is not where it originally stood. The Keith Sebelius Lake was created in 1964 with the completion of the Norton Dam. When they put in the lake they were unsure of how far it would back up. As a precaution, they moved the cemetery uphill and north of the railroad tracks. The cemetery was originally located southwest of where it is found today.

As you can see, many factors went into the beginnings of Oronoque. From the conception of the Burlington Railroad to Leota losing the county seat, these factors drove the birth of Oronoque. We also saw the hardships it encountered and the adverse effects it had on its growth. Oronoque, against all odds, persisted, even after facing multiple fires. Although the post office closed permanently in 1934, Oronoque persists even to this day: it is alive in our memories and in the few structures that remain standing on the windy prairies of Norton County.

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