

“The Rise And Fall Of A State Capital”  
The Legend of Minneola, Part I  
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(EDITOR’S NOTE: The following is the first of a two-part series on the legend of Minneola and its importance in the infancy of Ottawa, as researched by local historian John Mark Lambertson.)

When Kansas was still a territory its capital had not yet been established in Topeka. Quite the contrary, the seat of government was bounced around from town to town as the Legislature fought over the issue of slavery.

During most of those pre-statehood years the capital was yoyoed between Lecompton, a pro-slavery headquarters, and Lawrence, which was settled by anti-slavery sympathizers.

At one point, however, a new issue was brought into the picture of where to establish a permanent capital: Greed. It was that greed that briefly brought the capital of Kansas to Franklin County.

The year was 1858. An Indian agent and one of the founders of Centropolis, Perry Fuller, and some of his cronies had purchased 14 quarter-sections of land just east of Centropolis. The purchase price was \$3,131.

They platted 320 acres of the land for a town, printed stock certificates, and drew up an elaborate map of the place. The map showed what a splendid capital, great commercial center, and major railroad hub their town was going to be.

It didn’t seem to matter that at the time the nearest railroad line ended at Jefferson City, Missouri.

When the Legislature met in Lawrence in January of that year, Fuller and friends were on hand to have the paper town of “Minneola” officially declared the capital of Kansas. In a masterful stroke of genius, the promoters gave away certificates in the Minneola Town Company, and almost overnight the majority of the legislators found themselves having a financial interest in the non-existent town.

The clever coup worked. On February 10, 1858, Minneola was made the capital of Kansas, over the governor’s veto, by a vote of 32-3.

A flurry of activity followed to transform the acres of prairie into a real city. In six weeks houses and stores were built. A post office was established and a legislative hall and governor’s “mansion” erected. It has been recorded that the cost of the hotel, saloon and liquor bill, all for the benefit of the legislators, came to \$10,000.

On the morning of March 22, 1858, the Kansas Legislature was called to order in its new quarters and Gen. Jim Lane was elected president. Promptly thereafter, a motion to adjourn was made.

This ruse allowed the subject of Minneola’s rather “smelly” creation by legislators’ greed to be aired. Lane instigated the debate as he wanted Leavenworth to be the capital instead.

After a break for lunch, the debate became hotter with Lane and others charging the Minneola supporters with bribery and tagging the issue as “The Minneola Scandal.” In rebuttal, impassioned defenses were made to boost the new town.

By evening the furor had not waned, and candles were lit and placed on nails driven at random into walnut and oak walls. All night the marathon debate raged, with no breaks to eat or sleep.

Finally, well after dawn on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, a weary Minneola man suggested that they ought to get on with other business and a motion to adjourn to Leavenworth was successfully passed.

History does not record who the man was who “threw in the towel,” but in that moment Minneola was dealt its fatal blow. The designation of “capital” was removed, land values plummeted, stores closed, and people abandoned the site.

The community did not immediately dry up and blow away, for it briefly served as the county seat of Franklin County. But within just a few years what once was the capital of Kansas had grown up again in prairie grass. Cattle grazed where, for a day and a night, the territorial legislature argued Minneola’s fate.

Today the site is divided by several farms, with the lane at the Ted Nelson place reportedly being a portion of one of the old city streets. Old foundation stones of some of Minneola’s building still are occasionally dislodged by a plow.

As a footnote, it’s interesting to speculate: What if the Minneola promoters had won the debate that night in 1858?

It’s quite possible that today Franklin County would encompass a sprawling capital city of 120,000 people. Centropolis would have long ago been buried by the asphalt and concrete of an urban center. And Wellsville, Ottawa and Pomona would probably be suburbs to which thousands of commuting state employees would return each evening on a maze of freeways and boulevards.