

Peoria

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Peoria, one of the earliest towns in Franklin County, was named for the Peoria Indians who resided along with the the Weas and the Piankeshaws in their reserve in eastern Franklin County and western Miami County. It is beautifully situated on a promontory projecting between the valleys of Hickory Creek and the Marais des Cygnes river—about six miles east of Ottawa. The old wagon trail from Ft. Scott passed through Peoria and the area was a part of the state's early turmoil. Peoria was an early county seat for a short time. The first Free-State meeting in Franklin County was held in Peoria, where P.P. Elder was nominated for Prosecuting Attorney and Judge Curtis was named Delegate to the Territorial Convention.

According to original grants from the U.S. Government, early settlers were in Peoria Township pre-empting on lands as early as 1854.

Thomas Taylor, Jr. was the first of the Taylor family of Pennsylvania to arrive in Peoria in 1854. His family members followed in the fall of 1857 and made camp across the road from the present Peoria Cemetery. Thomas Jr. was across the river in the Imes area when the family arrived and swam his horse across the rain-swollen river to meet them. He died four days later of pneumonia and was buried across the road from the camp. The Taylors settled the land where they camped and later gave the land where they buried their son for a town cemetery.

In 1989, Mae Taylor Chappell, who was 89 at the time, wrote a note about Quantrill and his ride through Peoria that had been related by her mother. "Mother's folks heard that the 'Bunch' was coming from the east and going to Lawrence to destroy it. So the folks put all their money and valuables in jars and buried them down by the river and when the Raiders were gone they went to get their valuables and never were able to find them" (Mae's handwritten note remains.)

Alfred Johnson, born in Indiana in 1833, came to Lawrence in 1856 and took an active hand in the Free-State party. In March 1857 he came to Franklin County and was one of the organizers of the townsite of Peoria, founded in 1857. He opened the first general store, took as a partner William Bateman, and then served as recruiting officer for Co. D of the 12th Kansas Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, and rose to the rank of captain. After his return to Peoria, he served as Peoria's first postmaster and first county assessor. Early records show that David Johnson joined his brother Alfred in 1860 and ran a hotel in Peoria for 21 years.

Bateman was a farmer and stockman, and as a partner with Johnson had 1200 acres. Bateman also served as postmaster and was elected to the State Legislature in 1872.

Jacob Sumstine also came to Peoria in 1857, and later operated a mercantile store, a two-story building that included a meeting hall on the second floor. Sumstine was Franklin County superintendant of schools before Kansas was admitted to the Union and assisted in organizing the county's school districts. He served as Franklin County Register of Deeds (1862-64) and in 1867 he was appointed third Probate Judge, serving through 1873.

In 1859, Peoria entered the contest for county seat which was then at Minneola, contesting with Ohio City, Mt. Vernon, and Minneola. Peoria was successful on the first vote, but Minneola forbade the removal, a lawsuit followed, and Minneola won.

Other early settlers were David Burton, farmer/wagon maker and free-state advocate who came in 1857 and also had a mercantile business (1858-60). Edmund Lister came in 1859 and John F. Lamb in 1871.

D.M. Valentine arrived in 1860, moved to Ohio City when it was named county seat, and then to Ottawa where he practiced law. In 1864 Valentine was nominated and elected judge of the District Court. In 1868 he was elected an associate Justice of the Kansas Supreme Court and moved to Topeka.

Many early Peorians recall Aunt Jane Robinson and her husband Uncle Bill who came to Peoria in 1872. Jane and Bill were slaves before the Civil War. According to notes from Lynne A. Wilson, a former Peoria resident, there never was anyone who was kinder and more helpful for sick neighbors and helping others than Aunt Jane. She died in 1916 and it was the largest attended funeral in the town's history.

The old rock school house thought to be built in 1855 when District 14 was organized was later used as a blacksmith's shop. Peoria Rural High School opened in 1916, graduating only four students in its life span. Three of the graduates became teachers and the other a school superintendent.

Early churches included the old rock Methodist Church in use as early as 1869, and the First United Brethren Church also of rock built in 1872. Both are gone.

Peoria was disappointed when the Missouri Pacific Railroad built south across the river through Imes. Peorians petitioned the railroad but were unsuccessful.

For a number of years, Peoria manufactured lime and sold it throughout the area. The lime kilns were built in the banks of a ravine down by the river. A large cattle and hog feeding lot was also located just south of Peoria proper. It was protected by timber, had a well for water,

and bottom land produced abundant corn and hay for feed. These animals were fed out and taken to the stockyards in Imes a mile to the south, to be shipped to Kansas City markets.

In 1882 Peoria Township's population was listed as 300. In 1910 the city of Peoria had a population of 125.

Catherine Jane Richards, 1993, and Deborah Barker, 2011