

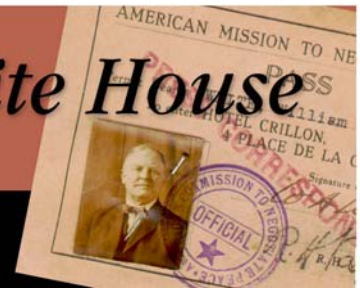


William Allen White House

STATE HISTORIC SITE



Kansas State Historical Society



Brief History

As editor and publisher of his hometown newspaper in Emporia, Kansas, William Allen White gained great prominence during the early twentieth century. He commented on a wide range of topics from politics to every day life and became a respected political analyst. Numerous American publications carried his skillfully written editorials. His friendships with well-known politicians, including Theodore Roosevelt, helped to place Kansas in a national spotlight.

White was born to Allen and Mary Ann Hatten White in Emporia in 1868. The family soon moved to El Dorado, where Dr. White served as country merchant, doctor, and mayor. William began his first job at the age of fourteen as a printer's devil for the *El Dorado Democrat*. When he was sixteen, his father died, and after graduating from high school, William and his mother moved back to Emporia.

After attending the College of Emporia and the University of Kansas, White worked on newspapers in El Dorado, Topeka, and Kansas City. He married Sallie Moss Lindsay in 1893, while working for the *Kansas City Star*. During this time White also began writing short stories with Kansas settings where he could make political commentaries outside his journalistic reporting. He decided to leave the city and sought a small town newspaper he could purchase. He considered several before buying the *Emporia Gazette* in 1895 for \$3,000.

On June 3, 1895, White wrote an introduction to the *Emporia Gazette* readers by saying that "the new editor hopes to live here until he is the old editor . . . His relations with the people of this town and country are to be close and personal. He hopes that they may be kindly and just." White continued to take an active interest in the events of the day, sharing his thoughts with readers through frequent editorials.

White became involved with the Republican Party, which was in the midst of a disagreement with the emerging Populist movement. His editorial on August 15, 1896, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" attacked the Populists for their negative influence on the state.

What's the matter with Kansas? Nothing under the shining sun. She is losing wealth, population and standing. She has got her statesmen, and the money power is afraid of her.

Members of the National Republican Party quickly distributed the editorial among the nation's newspapers, putting White in contact with the party's leaders. Because of his rising fame, and his book of short stories, *The Real Issue*, released in 1896, White became acquainted with

many influential people of the day including Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt.

In July 1899 William Allen, Sallie, and Mary Hatten White moved from their modest home at 602 Cottonwood Street to Red Rocks at 927 Exchange. At first the family rented, then finally purchased the house in May 1901 for \$6,000. White's mother continued to live with William Allen and Sallie until her home at 923 Exchange was completed around 1904. William Lindsay White was born in 1900; Mary Katherine White was in 1904.

White became a regular contributor to national publications such as *McClure's*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. Newspapers from across the nation carried his editorials.

The family suffered tragedy in May 1921 when their daughter, Mary, died at the age of sixteen in a horseback riding accident. White's memorial to Mary was carried across the nation and continues to be read today. In it White wrote: "My baggage for the short trip into posterity, which I may possibly take, will probably consist of one article less than a thousand words. It would please Mary that she and I should go, hand in hand, together, in our little visible journey, before our road turned into oblivion."

White's views occasionally were in opposition with that of his friends. In an effort to quell railroad strikers, Governor Henry J. Allen supported the new state law prohibiting picketing. When White protested on the basis of free speech and posted a strike placard, his friend, Governor Allen, had him arrested. In response, White wrote the editorial, "To An Anxious Friend," in July 1922, which received much national distribution and a Pulitzer Prize.

The growing Ku Klux Klan population in Kansas was of great concern to White. In July 1921 he began a series of anti-Klan editorials to fight the secret society's influence over state and local politicians. In the 1924 governor's race, the incumbent, Governor Jonathan M. Davis, and the Republican candidate, Ben Paulen, both refused to openly oppose the Klan. In September 1924, six weeks before the election, White decided to run as an independent candidate on an anti-Klan platform. After a spirited campaign, he came in third place but received much national and international attention for his fight.

White became acquainted with many famous writers, including Upton Sinclair, who called him "a mild and benevolent liberal." Many well-known figures visited the White family at Red Rocks. Novelist William Dean Howells told John S. Phillips of *McClure's Magazine*, "I do not know any pleasanter place to visit in the world." Five presidents visited Red Rocks—Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover.

From a national perspective, White influenced politics and public opinion. He served the Republican Party in many capacities including war chairman, national committeeman, and chair of the resolution committee. President Woodrow Wilson appointed him delegate to the Russian Conference at Prinkipo. President Herbert Hoover asked him to serve on the President's Commission to Haiti. Although his stand on prohibition came in conflict with other Republican leaders, White continued to advocate for "dry" laws in Kansas. He also

became involved in discussions pro and con for Roosevelt's New Deal and he urged the formation of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. He became the chair of this group, known as the White Committee, for the purpose of promoting public opinion. White also was a co-founder of the Book of the Month Club and was a lifetime member of its editorial board.

Ever a student of history, White applied his political commentary to biographies of presidents—covering Presidents Coolidge and Wilson, among numerous other books of non-fiction, essays, novels, and short stories. By the time of his seventieth birthday, celebrated in national magazines and newsreels, it was apparent that the Sage of Emporia had become a folk hero; his hometown belonged to the nation.

White began writing his autobiography in the last years of his life. He had completed the chapter on Mary's death when he died on Kansas Day January 29, 1944. His son, William Lindsay, edited and published his unfinished autobiography in 1946, which received a Pulitzer Prize. Sally died in 1950.

William Lindsay served as editor of the *Gazette* until his death in 1973. The *Emporia Gazette* continues to be owned by the White Walker family.