



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History April 4 - 10, 1854 (2004)

In early April, Shawnee tribal leaders met to consider selling their reserve. The land they'd occupied for thirty years stretched in a long rectangle south of the Kansas River from Missouri to a point near today's Topeka (different maps give different western boundaries.) Most Shawnee lived near Missouri where they had easy access to the American goods they had come to rely on. Sparsely settled western lands, the outlet, were primarily used for autumn hunting expeditions.

In 1854, the major area of Shawnee settlement was near Gum Springs, a watering spot that had long attracted travelers. Named for a grove of "gum trees" (probably Sweet Gum), a landmark in the grasslands, the settlement was west of three Christian missions that competed for the souls of the natives. The largest was Thomas Johnson's Methodist Mission and Manual Labor School on 2,000 acres near the Missouri line. Substantial brick buildings housed mission staff, slaves and boarding students, not only Shawnee but children from other tribes and Missouri white families. A few miles west was the smaller Baptist Mission, managed in the 1850s by Francis Barker. A mile further was the Quaker Mission run by Richard Mendenhall. Politics and ambition, as well as religion, created dissension among the personnel at the various missions. The Methodists, who had sided with the Southern Methodists in the national split of 1844, maintained a pro-slavery compound. Barker's Baptist Mission offered refuge for settlers dedicated to the free-state cause, as did Mendenhall's Friend's Mission, strongly anti-slavery on Quaker principle.

New Englander Sara Robinson spent a few weeks at the Baptist Mission in the spring of 1855. It seems from her description that a fence bounded a group of log buildings. One entered by climbing over a stile, a staircase, rather than by walking through a gate. "After the road turns from the California road, it descends slightly...skirted with timber on either side...A large yard was enclosed by a high fence, with stairs by way of entrance. Some four or five steps were on the outside of the fence, a platform, perhaps two feet in width, above it and as many steps on the inside. The occasion of such an uncouth arrangement I cannot divine, although it prevails all through the country....Several dogs gave us greeting as we alighted from the carriage and stumbled over the stairway."

Take a short tour of the white presence in the Shawnee settlement by following Johnson Drive from I-435 east to State Line. The intersection of Nieman Road and Johnson Drive is the heart of the Gum Springs settlement (now named Shawnee.) An old single-story brick building a bit north on Nieman is one of the few remaining 19th century buildings standing. Continue on Johnson Drive past Merriam until you reach Shawnee Mission North High School (61st & Hemlock), which was built on the site of the Quaker Mission. A mile or so east on Johnson Drive in Mission turn left on Walmer. At the corner of 55th Street, two memorials note the site of the Baptist Mission on a slight rise in the landscape (now the yard of a suburban house.) Return to Johnson Drive and continue east until it ends; then drive on Highway 56 (Shawnee Mission Parkway) to Mission Road. Turn left to see the Shawnee Methodist Mission Historical Site, the most tangible remnant of the days of the Shawnee in Kansas. (562)

Sara T.D. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: 1856) Pp. 28-29.

Attach my photo