



# NEWS

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**By Barbara Brackman**

## **Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History December 5 - 11, 1854**

Land along the south bank of the Kansas River, west of the mouth of Shunganunga Creek, was filling with settlers as winter began in 1854. (Americans then used the first day of the quarterly months to mark seasonal change, rather than using today's point of reference, the winter solstice.) Ten days into the new season, Pennsylvanian Cyrus Holliday wrote a letter to his wife from "Up the River," seated on a trunk, using a keg for a desk. He was "assisting in starting a new town. We are just about in the central portion of the settled territory...with perhaps the best landing and the most eligible site for a city in the entire country....Our food is mush, molasses and bacon mixed plentifully with dirt three times each day."

Charles Robinson, agent of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, had traveled with Holliday to the site at the foot of Papan's Ferry across the Kansas, where they met several members of the year's last group of emigrants sponsored by the Aid Company. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, the men gathered at a grass thatched cabin near the river to form a company for a town to be named Topeka. That week, the cabin roof caught fire, forcing the founders to seek shelter elsewhere. Within the month, the town association had decided to name the place after the Native American name for the river---"Topeka," a word referring to the wild potatoes growing on its banks.

The area had long been a western outpost of the French settlement known as the Illinois Country. What we now call North Topeka was a remnant of French colonies populated by migrants who traveled along the Mississippi north from New Orleans or south from Quebec to establish a New France with cultural centers in Kaskaskia and Sainte Genevieve on the Mississippi River. Unlike the English model, the French and Spanish concepts of colonization did not include extensive female migration to provide a wife of European descent for every pioneer. Frenchmen often found their wives among the native tribes, creating a half European, half Indian culture where people spoke both European and native languages with ease, supported themselves by trading between the two cultures and sent their daughters to schools in St. Louis to learn the niceties of European manners.

Napoleon's sale of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 had little effect on French-speaking frontier towns so far from the governments that ruled them. By 1854, however, communities like the small settlement on the north side of the Kaw sixty miles west of the state of Missouri were facing change.

Four brothers, Joseph, Ahcan, Louis and Euberie Papan, had left the city of St. Louis in the early 1840s to earn a living on the western trails in the Indian Territory. Sons of a French Canadian, the Papan brothers each married a Gonville sister, also children of a French-American, Louis Gonville, who had traded goods to the Konza tribe for decades. The Gonville sisters, Julie, Pelagie, Josette and Victoire, were children of two Konza sisters, daughters of White Plume named Wy He See and Hunt Jimmy. Each daughter's dowry included a 640-acre tract of land along the Kaw River. The Papan-Gonville family made their money with a ferry across the Kaw, first serving traders on the trail to Santa Fe, then immigrants on the California and Oregon trails. They also maintained a toll bridge across Shunganunga Creek.

Among the settlers living on the south side of the Kaw River when the New England Emigrant Aid Company decided to form a town company there were Clement and Ann Shattio. Clement Shattio, another Frenchman from St. Louis, came west to trade with the tribes at Uniontown, a community that grew up around a ferry site west of the Papan's enterprise. There he met Ann Davis who had been born a free black in the state of Illinois. As a child she was kidnapped into slavery in Missouri and eventually brought to Uniontown where she purchased her freedom in 1849. In 1854, four years after their marriage, the Shattios bought a Native American's claim along the Shunganunga. (684 words)

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Cyrus K. Holliday, letter to his wife, December 10, 1854. Manuscripts Collection, Kansas State Historical Society.

George A. Root, "Chronology of Shawnee County," *Bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society*, Volume 1, Number 1, December, 1946. Pg. 15.

Samuel F. Tappan letter, December 22, 1854, published in the *Boston Journal*, January 22, 1855.

Papan genealogies from Familysearch.com.