

By the Kansas State Historical Society

The French in Kansas: The Story of Silksville

For a little while, Kansas was part of France. France is a country in Europe. France sold the Louisiana Territory, which included most of Kansas, to the United States in 1803. France needed the money and wanted to prevent England from taking over Louisiana. The United States doubled in size with the addition of the Louisiana Territory. After Kansas became a state, French families began to settle here.

Why did they leave France?

Before Kansas became a state, there was great political fighting in France. Many French left their homeland. Some moved to French-speaking countries like Belgium, Switzerland, or Canada. Others moved to the eastern United States. Eventually some of these French immigrants moved to Kansas.

Many French families were looking for a better life. Many wanted land or better jobs. Kansas offered them both.

Why did they come to Kansas?

The French were like other immigrants. They were looking for good economic opportunities. They heard that land was good and cheap in Kansas. Some immigrants were also interested in Kansas because they believed that it was a place without discrimination.

Ernest de Boissiere was a rich Frenchman. He left France because he did not like the political changes taking place. He moved first to New Orleans. But when he gave money to African American children, he found his neighbors were unhappy with him. This made him mad and he moved to Kansas, where he believed people would be more tolerant.



The Continents



What did they find in Kansas?

In 1869 Ernest de Boissiere bought land in Franklin County. He founded Silkville. He encouraged other Frenchmen to join him. He dreamed of a community that lived and worked together.

The business of Silkville was silk production. Silkworms were imported from France and Japan. The worms made a strong stretchy thread. This thread was woven into silk fabric and used for clothing.

French immigrants came to live in Silkville. Together they produced 300 yards of silk fabric a day.

What happened to Silkville?

It takes a lot of work to make silk. Eventually the cost of making silk became too high. It cost more to make than the price people would pay for it.

Many of the workers left Silkville and settled in other parts of Kansas. Ernest de Boissiere returned to France.

