SEQUENT OCCUPANCE IN KANSAS CITY, KAN.—A HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF STRAWBERRY HILL

JOSEPH MANZO

The view of geography as a succession of stages of human occupancy establishes the genetics of each stage in terms of its predecessor.—Derwent Whittlesey

THERE is a small area of land, much of it in slope, near the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers in Kansas City, Kan. (figure 1). Taking its name from the wild strawberries once found there, today the area, called Strawberry Hill, is synonymous with the Slavic individuals and families residing there. However, Strawberry Hill has been home to a variety of people of native American and Euro-American background. This article does not seek to repeat the details of what is already known about these people historically but offers a new perspective on Kansas people in a small part of one of their oldest cities. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of why each group chose the strawberry-covered hill for settlement and why each group gave up residence to the next.

Evidence indicates that in the case of historic native American groups environmental perception and white influence played major roles in Strawberry Hill settlement decisions. In the case of Euro-American settlements the links between human occupations are more subtle and include proximity to already established settlement, religious affiliation, government influence, and social mobility. An examination of the basis for settlement in the Strawberry Hill area provides a framework through which to view settlement in Kansas City and other urban areas in general.


3. See Grant W. Harrington, Historic Spots or Milestones in the Progress of Wyandotte County, Kansas (Merriam: Mission Press, 1935), Anton Kuhls, A Few Reminiscences of Forty Years in Wyandotte County, Kansas (Kansas City: Lane Printing Company, 1904); Peter Beckman, The Catholic Church on the Kansas Frontier 1850-1877 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1943); Joseph H. McDowell, Building a City, a Detailed History of Kansas City, Kansas (Kansas City: Kansas City Kansas, 1970).

4. Ronald N. Satz, American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). It should be noted that Indians had voluntarily moved west of the Mississippi river prior to 1830. As early as 1818, the Cherokee requested lands west of the Mississippi river for those members of the nation wishing to remain hunters. The majority of Kickapoos had crossed the Mississippi river and settled in southwestern Missouri under the treaty signed at Edwardsville in 1819. Furthermore, the Cherokee whose residence was south of the Ohio river held land in southern Kansas—Charles J. Kappeler, ed., Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1964), v. 2, pp. 177-183.


6. “Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs,” National Archives, microfilm roll 748. The major drawback to earlier Delaware settlement was the size of the area offered them, which they saw as too small.

7. Representative of Delaware feelings is the Wyandot report of 1837. The Wyandot, asked to accept a reservation in the Plate area of Missouri, described Missourians as “with a few honorable exceptions, the most abandoned, dissolute and wicked class of people we ever saw...” Missouri is a slaveholding state, and slaveholders are seldom friendly to Indians. A more worthless and corrupt class of whites to deal with and associate with than is to be found in...Ohio...” J. Otis Oliphant, ed., “Report of the Wyandot Exploring Delegation, 1831,” Kansas Historical Quarterly, Topeka, v. 15 (1947), pp. 250-257.
has come to be recognized as the northwest boundary of today's Strawberry Hill.

The Wyandot, from the upper Sandusky area of Ohio, were one of the last Indian groups to arrive in Kansas. Prolonged contact with the white man had greatly reduced their number, and intermarriage had occurred at such a startling rate that there were very few full-blooded Wyandot by the 1840's when they arrived in Kansas. It was natural, given the extent of white and Wyandot contact, that the Wyandot would refuse a reservation intended for them in western Kansas. Representative of Wyandot feeling toward the Western Plains is a passage from a letter written by Wyandot leader, Joseph Barnett, to Lewis Cass, secretary of war, "Must I give up my pursuits of agriculture and remove my family to western wilderness and commerce supporting by the chase ... and be excluded from civilized society and be compelled to raise up my children in ignorance and superstition." Thus, favoring land near civilization, the Wyandot negotiated for the easternmost section of the Delaware reservation, of which Strawberry Hill was a part, putting them near white settlements on the Missouri side of the river.

Generally, the Wyandot people prospered in the area by successfully involving themselves in a variety of occupations including farming, milling, and smithing. Yet, despite their success, the Wyandot were, of course, still Indians and as such were subject to demands for their reservation by Euro-Americans with a desire for land. In January, 1855, shortly after the Kansas territory had been opened for settlement, the Wyandot reservation was extinguished in favor of allotments given to responsible tribal members. The Strawberry Hill area was primarily the allotment of Mathias Splitlog, a miller by trade (figure 2).

The sale of allotment land was rapid throughout the area and most of the Indians either moved away or were further amalgamated through intermarriage. However, their mark on Strawberry Hill remains commemorated by the cross streets bearing the names Barnett, Splitlog, Northrup, Sandusky, Armstrong, and Ohio.

From the standpoint of historic native American occupation the Kansas and Delaware were drawn to the Strawberry Hill area for the same reason that had drawn the Indian to the eastern prairies since the end of the Pleistocene, the assurance of an adequate supply of wood and water, necessities often lacking in the West. The Wyandot, on the other hand, specifically wanted to be close to other settlements. This desire constituted the basis for their settlement of the Strawberry Hill area.

**The First** non-Indian groups in the Strawberry Hill area consisted of Irish and German people along with a lesser number of Poles, French, Czechs, Swedes, and Danes. The rate of their arrival, which was primarily from other states, varied with the social and economic condition of the country. The fiscal panics of 1857 and 1873, for example, were accompanied by dips in immigration. Ethnically different, these farmers, laborers, merchants, and craftsmen generally held two traits in common. As a group they possessed a desire to own land and the majority of them were of Catholic persuasion.

So desperate were these people for land that more than one historian has characterized their real estate appetite as "insatiable." In fact, a number of these individuals made their way into the Kansas territory prior to its being opened for settlement. Through the period of illegal and legal settlement people moved out-

---

8. There are several variations of spelling associated with this group including Wyandot, Wyandotte, Wyandots, and Ouaundot. One spelling has been chosen for consistency.—See "Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs," National Archives, record group 75.
10. By 1850, feeling secure separated from Missouri by the Kansas river and feeling pressure for removal, the Wyandot viewed eastern Kansas more favorably than they had northwestern Missouri even though the areas were but a few miles apart.—"Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs," National Archives, subrecord group M-334, microfilm roll 902.
12. Hiram Northrup was a white man who married into the tribe. Barnett, Splitlog, and Armstrong were Wyandot. Sandusky and Ohio represent the geographical origins of the Wyandot.—Early History Signified by Street Names, *Kansas City, Kansas, August 2, 1930,* p. 4.
Strawberry Hill—More changes are predicted for this area of Kansas City, Kan., which has been home for a variety of peoples throughout its history.

Irish and German people, mainly from other states, followed the first Indian settlers on Strawberry Hill in Kansas City. They brought a common desire to own their own land. A majority of these new settlers were of Catholic background, and the churches they established attracted another group of immigrants, the Slavs, who found employment in the meat packing industry nearby. At left is Holy Family Catholic church in Strawberry Hill.

Strawberry Hill was at one time home to Indians, Swedes, Irish, and Germans. The Slavs began arriving at the start of the 20th century. The new Slavic community brought a period of growth in small single family residences similar to the ones pictured at left. After World War II a series of events caused the Slavic people to move out of the area. The homes they built may be a factor in attracting new people to Strawberry Hill.

ward from "the transportation hub of the Missouri River," and quite naturally the Strawberry Hill area was one of the first places to be reached.15 A small but concentrated population resulted in the establishment of a post office in 1857.16 Within four years after the opening of the territory the population of the area in and around Strawberry Hill numbered over 1,200, and by 1860, over 2,600.17 It is under these first groups of mixed ethnic backgrounds, including Indians, that the town of Wyandotte, the forerunner of Kansas City, came into being on the bluffs above the junction of the Kansas and Missouri rivers.18 By 1869 a similar ethnic mix formed the Kansas City Town Company which established Kansas City on the Kansas river bottoms.19 The arrival of the railroad and the opening of the first stockyard on the Kansas river bottoms in 1870 further attracted people to the Strawberry Hill area.20 Catholic churches were numerous in early Kansas. The Catholic Church, having preceded white settlement in Kansas, was an attraction for Catholic migrants.21 St. Mary's, the Irish Catholic church, was moved to its present location within the bounds of Strawberry Hill in 1865.22 In 1880 St. Bridget's, an ethnically mixed Catholic church, was constructed on the Kansas river bottoms.23 In 1886 the German Catholics, previously served by the Irish St. Mary's church, separated to build St. Anthony's church located at present day Seventh and Barnett. The Poles erected their church, St. Joseph's, at present day Eighth and Vermont in 1887.24

18. McDowell, Building a City, a Detailed History of Kansas City, Kansas, pp. 2-4.
19. Wyandotte was later annexed by Kansas City, Kan., as were several other towns.
20. The term Strawberry Hill has not been traced to its origin. Joseph A. Lastelj, who was born in his parents' home on Strawberry Hill and who is now the Washington correspondent for the Kansas City (Mo.) Star, tells us the term originated with Slavic settlement. Yet, it is hard to imagine other English-speaking groups ignoring the fruit. It is even reasonable to suppose the Indians took advantage of the strawberries and referred to the area in such terms.—Joseph A. Lastelj, "As Homes Come Down Over Strawberry Hill."—Kansas City Star, June 9, 1957, p. 1H.
22. Ibid.
23. As the name implies, St. Bridget's, although mixed, was predominantly Irish.
24. Manuscript in the files of the Kansas City Public Library.
Within a few years after the construction of St. Joseph’s church, the country as a whole was invigorated by one of the largest mass movements of people in history. Kansas City would be home to some of the people in this new wave of immigration. The large and attractive brick and frame homes of the first Euro-American residents of Strawberry Hill, which were described by the new immigrants as mansions, would be given up to southern European Slavs. As the new residents moved in, many of the Swedish, Irish, and German families began to move out. (Figure 3 traces the development of Strawberry Hill prior to the arrival of the Slavs.) As can be seen the street grid had assumed its basic pattern by 1899.

The latest occupation of Strawberry Hill, and by far the most influential in terms of population, land tenure, and landscape change, has been that of the Slavs who began settling the area prior to the beginning of the 20th century. This group consists of Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs. The general heading Slav refers to the general patterns exhibited by the three groups, particularly the Croats who have always dominated culturally and numerically.

Initially drawn to Kansas City by employment opportunities in the meat packing industry, Slavic settlement followed the general settlement pattern of all new groups arriving at this time. This pattern consisted of finding available housing near industry. According to David Ward, “The central concentration of urban employment after 1850 strongly influenced the location and characteristics of the residential areas of new immigrants, most of whom sought low cost housing close to their places of employment.” Rising property values and the existence of the old Union depot and the Quality Hill neighborhood prohibited settlement there on the Missouri side. Given this restriction, there were several Kansas City sites that were suitable for settlement. What drew these people to Strawberry Hill was religion. Already present in the vicinity was the Irish Catholic St. Mary’s church, and the ethnically mixed St. Bridget’s church on the Kansas river bottoms close to the packing plants. St. Anthony’s church and St. Joseph’s stood on the periphery of the area. Thus, at the time of their arrival the Slavic immigrants found established Catholic churches in the immediate area. While these were not Croatian Catholic or Slovenian Catholic, one could, nevertheless, attend these churches and worship in the same general manner as in the old country.

Starting on the east side of Strawberry Hill in an area known as “the patch,” Slavic settlement was pushed up the bluffs by the flood of 1903 and the increasing size of their population. Moving into available housing their settlement became a more complete community with the establishment of Slavic oriented parishes. By 1910 St. John the Baptist, the Croatian parish, and Holy Family, the Slovenian parish, were operating and each had its own school. St. George’s Orthodox church was organized by the Serbs in 1906, and in 1917, a Russian Orthodox Catholic church was also available for Serbian attendance.

The growth of Slavic settlement can be further correlated with the growth of the meat packing industry. With over five million cattle and hogs slaughtered yearly, by 1923 employment was steady. By 1925 the nine packing houses on the Kansas river bottoms employed over 10,000 workers and constituted the second largest meat packing industry in the country.

The expanding Slavic community grew westward bounded by Minnesota and Central avenues, taking the name Strawberry Hill with it. During this period of growth small, single family residences and Slavic business enterprises began to dot the landscape. Figures 4 and 5 allow us to follow both its spread and

25. Lastelie, “As Homes Come Down Over Strawberry Hill.”
26. Several of the streets such as Durango, Third, Orr, and Emerson no longer exist.
30. Due to a small, local Serbian congregation, there were periods when St. George’s was without a priest. During these periods many Serbs began attending Holy Trinity church, the Russian Orthodox church. Similarly, due to the small Russian population there were periods when Holy Trinity was without a priest, and members of the Russian congregation attended St. George’s. Today, St. George’s, now located at Bethany and Lowell, is recognized as the Serbian church and Holy Trinity as the Russian church. However, their congregations are somewhat mixed.—Interviews with Father Hilary, Holy Trinity church, July 5, 1974, and Father Bujold, St. George’s church, July 9, 1974.
31. Kate L. Gowick, The Story of Kansas City, Kansas (Kansas City: Kansas City Kansas, 1924), p. 3.
32. Ibid.
Figure 1. Contemporary Strawberry Hill. Taking its name from the wild strawberries once found there, Strawberry Hill is a small area of land, much of it in slope, near the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers in Kansas City, Kan. This drawing showing the area as it is today is from the Kansas City Planning Department, 1968.

growth as the community weathered the depression and moved into the 1940's.

It was during the latter half of the 1940's that Strawberry Hill reached its peak as an ethnic community, as measured by the number of social clubs, religious attachment, personal investment, and areal extent. In 1947 Holy Family church had a record membership of approximately 250 families, and during the same period, St. John the Baptist became one of the largest Croatian parishes in the country with a membership of 760 families. Moreover, there were six different social clubs and auxiliaries, several schools, and approximately 30 Slavic operated businesses to cater to Slavic residents. There was also a small but steady flow of immigrants to bolster population and serve as models of traditional behavior. In the late 1940's, the potential of the Slavic occupation of the Strawberry Hill area appeared unlimited. However, this was to be its apex:

A series of events beginning in the Post World War II years, and directed from beyond the community...worked toward the dispersal of Slavic population from their original settlement area. The zoning commission continually viewed the single-family residence that predominated on Strawberry Hill as inefficient land use. State Highway construction and an awakening Black community...further served to detract and limit the physical size of the neighborhood. This loss of physical size and growth potential, combined with expanding shopping opportunities outside the neighborhood and local government attitude, encouraged families to relocate.

33. "St. John's Church Celebrates 40th Anniversary."—Kansas City Kansas, August 23, 1940.

(25)
Figure 2. Wyandot Allotments. Delaware Indians were the first settlers on Strawberry Hill, but they moved on toward Indian territory when they became dissatisfied. The Wyandot Indians from Ohio favored land near white civilization and negotiated for the eastern section of the Delaware reservation which included Strawberry Hill. Later, in 1855, the reservation was extinguished in favor of allotments given to responsible tribal members. This drawing shows the Wyandot allotments and the approximate outline of the area with the Huron cemetery and Kansas river as reference points. It is from Kansas Historical Collections, v. 15 (1919-1922), p. 158.

Figure 3. Strawberry Hill, 1899. By 1899 Strawberry Hill had been platted. This drawing shows the development of the area prior to the arrival of the Slavs. As can be seen, the street grid had assumed its basic pattern by this time. Note the pond between Northrup and Riverview, and several streets and street names which no longer exist. Drawing from Sanborn Insurance Index Map, 1899.
Figure 4. Settlement Pattern, 1920. Initially drawn to Kansas City by employment opportunities in the meat packing industry, Slavic people moved into Strawberry Hill seeking low-cost housing close to their places of employment. They were attracted to the area also by the Catholic churches already located there. Starting on the east side of the hill known as "the patch," the Slavic settlement was pushed up the bluffs by the flood of 1903 and the increasing size of their population which was growing as the meat packing industry grew. This figure shows Slavic households as far west as Sixth street in 1920. Note that one dot equals four households. Drawing from Polk's Kansas City, Kansas, Directory, 1920.

While the remaining Slavs are still socially strong, they are, by virtue of their age structure, which is dominated by older individuals, beginning to give way to a new population.35

Predicting the future is hazardous. However, in this case speculation based on local and national trends may provide some insight regarding the next residents of the Strawberry Hill area. Thus, the question asked is the following: with a decline in the strength of the Slavic community, what population or populations will take their place and what will draw the new residents to the region? A clue to the future lies in current national trends.

Since the early 1970's inner city residential historic preservation has been increasing in popularity, scope and scale in many American cities. Historic preservation has generated gentrification, a process in which higher income populations buy and move into houses in working class or low income neighborhoods.36

Gentrification is part of the Kansas City Planning Department's master plan for the Strawberry Hill area. It envisions people of higher income being drawn downtown to be nearer business and government agencies. Of course, the downtown area has also traditionally offered more amenities in terms of social and cultural pursuits. Should there not be enough available housing, the city is lending its support to any individual or group seeking to invest in the construction of housing, particularly medium-density, medium-priced units.

The major problem with this projection is finding well-educated, predominantly childless families in medium-to-upper income

brackets to move to Kansas City. While there is reasonable assurance that municipal and state employees might relocate in the area, one must keep in mind that Kansas City suffers from that most difficult to measure affliction, "image." Kansas City is more than a river's width away from Kansas City, Mo., in terms of population, shopping, and entertainment.

While it is too early to tell whether or not gentrification will take place, field work indicates the area is moving into a transitional phase. The new people are a mix of black, Mexican-American, and individuals who consider their ethnic backgrounds to be American. These individuals and families are of a lower socio-economic bracket than those groups projected by the city's master plan. They are spilling over from adjacent parts of the city, drawn by the relatively low priced, single family housing and low apartment rents. To these new home buyers, the single family housing represents a step up the ladder of social mobility.

Which group or groups will be successful in establishing residence in the Strawberry Hill area is, as previously noted, difficult to predict. What we can be sure of is that subtle links are developing between current and future residents.

**Strawberry Hill** has served as a base to people of varying backgrounds. To the earliest Indian groups the Strawberry Hill area was a small part of better wooded and watered prairies. To the last group, the Wyandot, the area was as close as they could get to the
Sequent Occupance, Geography of Strawberry Hill

civilization they had known east of the Mississippi river. Certainly the Euro-American played a role in the departure of the later native American groups.

The first non-Indians to reside in the area spilled over from the East. While representing an ethnic mix they held religion in common. The Catholic landscape they created helped bring the southern Slav, who found work in the meat packing plants, to the Strawberry Hill area. The homes built by the Slavs have become a factor in attracting new people to Strawberry Hill. Lower middle-income families find houses on Strawberry Hill sound, attractive, and reasonably priced. Who will follow the Slavs depends on a myriad of factors as each successive group paves the way for the next.