Emergency Housing at Lawrence, 1854

JAMES C. MALIN

IN the spring of 1854, along the Missouri and Iowa border, organization and settlement of the Indian country, then called Nebraska, had been agitated for about a decade. Thus, when realization of the dream appeared imminent prior to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act, the border men intensified their investigation of desirable locations in the promised land. The scarcity of timber focused attention upon the advantage of being first comers, especially the speculative advantage. Some activity of this sort antedated 1854, but the rush developed in earnest early in that year. Much of this activity began prior to the raising of the slavery issue in connection with the so-called repeal of the Missouri Compromise, but this perspective has been distorted by the later developments. Thus, in the northeastern part of what became Kansas, when the Indian agent took a delegation of Indians to Washington to make a treaty, a correspondent wrote, in May: "... Now there is not a grease spot left unclaimed. ..." The writer was of the opinion that the territory would be free, and congress could not make it otherwise, but his interest was in speculation, as he thought his claim would be worth $25 per acre as soon as entered at the land office. Cabins were already being built on these timbered claims—cabins of logs. Another writer, dating his letter from the territory, July 25, was of the opinion that "the scarcity of timber (enough, however, for present wants, and that of the best kind) is in a general measure obviated by the abundance of most excellent rock and clay. ..." Between the Kansas river and Fort Leavenworth, in June, 1854, an observer reported "tents and cabins are being erected."

THE SITE OF LAWRENCE AND VICINITY, 1854

The site of Lawrence, between the Kansas river and its southern tributary, the Wakarusa, was about 40 miles inland from the Missouri river. By midsummer, 1854, a large part of the more desirable

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1. A paper, "Housing in the Prairie-Plains Region," was presented at the annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, April, 1943, based upon a monograph of the same name, which has not been published. The present paper represents a part of that project, which has since been expanded and will be published as a part of Grassland Historical Studies, v. 3.

2. New York Daily Tribune, August 14, 1854, from Reading (Pa.) Gazette, August 12. The letter was dated Spring Hill Farm, Nebraska, alias Kansas, May 27, 1854.


4. Ibid., July 12, 1854, from Lexington (Ky.) Observer and Reporter, July 5. The letter from Kansas was dated June 18, 1854.
timbered claims had been marked for settlement, if not actually occupied. S. N. Wood, of Ohio, who was already on the ground, and later became identified with Lawrence, wrote, August 2, that timber was a little scarce, and some would return on that account, but “Log cabins are going up in every direction.”5 This letter recorded the arrival the day before, that is, August 1, of the first party of settlers sent out by the Emigrant Aid Company of Massachusetts. Writing home on the seventh day, on the site which was to become Lawrence, one member of the party made the significant comment: Where our new city was to be found the log habitations of some four or five settlers of from four to six months standing. They were of that class which exists in the west, who are pioneers by profession, and who seek to be always in the advance guard of the army which invades the wilderness.6

The conflicts over priority of claims to the townsite were eventually settled by a compromise in which 100 of the 220 shares were assigned to the four prior claimants.7

THE COLONISTS, INTERNAL CONFLICT, AND UNCERTAINTIES ABOUT LAND TITLE

The Emigrant Aid Company’s ideas about pioneer housing were brought out sharply when plans went wrong. The company had supplied tents, but only for temporary shelter:

We are somewhat surprised to find that even those who first went out are still living in tents—those tents were furnished . . . but temporarily only, until they [the colonists] could deliberately cast about, select their site & put up, for the time being a log hut, or other comfortable tenement, when they [the tents] were to be turned over to the next comers, for similar purposes, and afterwards to others, & so on, as long as they might be needed. It appears to me that they [the colonists] have committed some little oversight in waiting so long for lumber, with a full knowledge that winter was approaching in consequence that they must be subjected to some inconvenience, and the Parties that followed & are yet to go, may endure some hardships.8

This was the smug and self-righteous attitude taken by a company official, but the comforts of Boston were so remote from the realities of the Kansas situation. A letter writer at the site of Lawrence, August 17, reported that already “many” of the first New England

6. “Charleston” letter No. 4 from Kansas, Boston Journal, August 29, 1854.—“Webb Scrapbooks” (in library of the Kansas State Historical Society), v. 1, p. 106. S. F. Tappan wrote, October 24, that there were two cabins “upon what is now considered the city site, two miles square,” when the New England party arrived August 1.—Kansas City Enterprise, October 28, 1854. “Webb Scrapbooks,” v. 1, p. 208. J. Savage’s “Recollections at 1854” reduced the rival cabins to one, Western Home Journal, Lawrence, July 14, 1870. The differences in figures may be explained in part by the fact that the townsite boundaries were not surveyed, or cabins may not have been completed by all claimants. Tappan’s letter indicated a shifting concept of the size and location of the city site.
7. Kansas Free State, April 7, 1855.
party "had removed to their new estates, and, pitching tents, began in right good earnest their frontier life, by constructing log houses." The word "many" as used here was figurative rather than numerical, however, because the party consisted of not more than 29, and "several" of them had already returned to New England. Another letter, dated St. Louis, August 12, said: "The pioneer party are generally dissatisfied, and about half of them have already left, and more would leave, in my opinion, very soon, had they the means to get away." Still another was more specific about the reasons alleged: "More than half of the Massachusetts company have returned and more will do so, unless the company make arrangements for their comfort, as they promised to do." Thus, by any calculation the number was small who went out to their estates and built log houses; a total of 29, with less than half staying, meant possibly fewer than 10 or 12 men.

Before the historian can deal intelligently with the housing problems, it is necessary to describe certain facts that contribute toward a reconstruction of the situation under which individuals made their choices. The Springfield (Mass.) Republican, August 11, 1854, reported the return of Charles H. Branscomb, the man who acted as conductor of the first party to Kansas, and the story that followed this announcement was apparently based upon an interview or upon his authority. In this context the following paragraph is important:

A meeting of the pioneer party of emigrants to Kansas, was held at their camping ground, seven miles beyond the Wakarausa river, on the 1st inst., at which, after a full discussion as to the advantages and capacities of the encampment for a future town site, it was voted to make a stand at that place, and to proceed to make claims upon the land, with the understanding that the emigrant company at home would make the spot thus selected the base of their future operations, and would forthwith, or at as early a day as possible, forward men and money to carry out their grand enterprise. The party was organized by the choice of the necessary officers, and it was voted to commence making claims to be distributed by lot on the morrow [August 2, 1854].

This account did not specify exactly what units of land were being distributed by lot, whether town or farm land. An account of September 24, signed "J. B.," however, did throw further light upon the situation. Most of the second pioneer party, of about 135, including women and children, arrived at Kansas City, September 6,

and at the townsite of Lawrence between September 9 and 15. A controversy between the two pioneer parties had developed, in which the second challenged the monopoly over land claimed by the first. The first party was charged with holding claims, not only for themselves, but for their friends who were to follow. Being more numerous, the second party compelled the first party to disgorge under threat of setting up a rival town. The euphemistic account of the episode as reported for Eastern publicity follows:

A council of the two parties being called, a committee was appointed to devise some plan by which both parties might form one association, with equal advantages and privileges. This point on the Kansas river is undoubtedly the most favorable for a town or city location that can be found in this part of the territory, but was, together with adjoining lands, in the possession of, or claimed by members of the first party. The second party, having the population and funds to establish a town of some note, beside two steam saw mills to erect, could not consent to give all to this point, thus enriching the first party; themselves remaining as “outsiders” merely, but would sooner locate at some place less favorable even. But this difficulty was happily obviated, by the report of the Committee, which was unanimously agreed to, viz: The old party to throw up all claims, and to receive compensation for their time and improvements. Then, after reserving a city plot 2½ miles on the river, east and west, and 1½ from the river south, the company were to proceed in surveying farm lots one half mile square, equal to the number of claimants in both parties. The choice of these lots to be sold to the highest bidder; sufficient time being given for payment, to enable all to bid, whether rich or poor. Besides the farm lots, each person is to receive an equal share in the city property when surveyed. The bids for choice were from $1, (the lowest,) to $327, which was I believe the highest—the whole amounting to over $5000. Meantime, the parties formed an Association, adopted a Constitution, and elected officers. . . .

The association mentioned above was the second squatters association, or, as it was now called, “The Lawrence Association,” formed by the Emigrant Aid Company colonists. It had the appearance of a general squatters association rather than a town company. Charles Robinson was elected president of this Lawrence Association.13

The “Recollections of 1854” of Joseph Savage, published in 1870, described the formation of the Lawrence Association September 18, adding explanations that were not explicit in the constitution:

Seventy-nine members were that day enrolled on the books of the Lawrence association, as entitled to equal shares in the lots of the city. Anyone present that day could, by registering his name, have become a member of the association, and our titles to city lots still date back to this time.

After that time no one could become a member without buying his right, or being voted into the association as a member.

Savage described also the auction of the choice farm claims on September 21, 56 of them being sold, after which there were no further bids. Some ignored the regulations and took possession of claims. Later it turned out that none of the bid money was ever collected. On the same day, September 21, A. D. Searl was elected surveyor, and work was begun under his direction the next day, surveying farm claim boundaries with Main street (Massachusetts street) as the base meridian.14

The manuscript minutes, kept by John Christie Archibald, of the Common Council of Lawrence, September 22 to October 21, 1854, have been preserved, with a title page “Record of the Pioneers of the City of Lawrence.” 15 On October 16 the decision was reached that persons who had left the territory were entitled to city lots only if they returned for the territorial election for delegate to congress. On the following day, October 17, the committee on drawing of lots was selected and the list of names of persons entitled to participate was approved. Twelve lots were awarded to the first pioneer party, and the committee on adjustments between the first and second pioneer parties made awards to 14 persons. From the context of the secretary’s minutes, the impression is left that the proceedings applied only to city property. In any case, if any confirmation were needed, this record emphasizes the demoralizing effect of this situation upon construction of shelters against the winter which was already closing in upon the new settlement.

The third party of colonists, upward of 200, arrived in Kansas City, October 7, 1854. They were highly dissatisfied at difficulties encountered en route, at the lack of preparations to accommodate them at Kansas City, and at the news that they could not share equally with the first two parties in the Lawrence Association. Only about one third of this party established themselves in Kansas.16

S. F. Tappan wrote, October 14:

The city is designed to be two miles square, divided off into city lots of ½ of an acre each. After land has been reserved for public buildings, and other public purposes, something over 9000 lots will remain for distribution. The Emigrant Aid Co. are to have ⅜ of the lots, ⅔ are in the hands of a Board of Trustees, to be given away to persons that will build upon them within a year. Each member of the last party [third] is to receive two lots. Each member of the two first parties receives about thirty lots. Most if not all of the members of the three parties, have taken up farm claims containing 160 acres within ten miles of this city.17

15. This material was acquired by the library of the University of Kansas, in 1953, from a granddaughter living at Benson, Wt.
On the basis of this, the third agreement about distribution of land, the drawing of city lots was held October 17, 1854.\(^\text{18}\)

The fourth party of some 230 selected a site on Rock creek, in present Pottawatomie county for a new settlement, but the project failed. The fifth party arrived in Kansas City, November 19, and were accommodated in Kansas City and Parkville while a committee undertook to find a location. Apparently the members dispersed widely. The sixth party of 30 persons arrived in Lawrence in installments early in December, where they constructed living quarters. Several of these participated in founding Topeka.\(^\text{19}\)

Even at the expense of some duplication of information it may be profitable to narrate the land distribution story from the E. D. Ladd letters, because they provide continuity by one person, which is a variant from the others. The letter of September 19 described the adoption of the constitution and government of the "Lawrence Association of Kansas Territory," September 18, 19, and the merging of the first two companies:

The claims which had been made were to be surrendered, including a large number on fictitious names for the benefit of those who should follow, and the choice of them was to be sold at public auction, the proceeds to go into the city treasury. The members of the united party are to share equally in the city lots.

The city, extending two miles along the river, and one and one half miles deep, three square miles, was to be divided equally, in addition to their farm lots. The sale held that day, September 19, yielded $5,043, according to Ladd's figures, the first choice selling for $252.50; the second for $180; the 11th for $327, the highest bid of the sale; the 17th for $165; but when the 57th was offered no bids were made and the sale was closed.\(^\text{20}\)

In his letter of October 4, Ladd explained the city lot distribution as provided by a meeting of the Lawrence Association the previous evening. The estimate had been made that of the three sections of land, 1,920 acres, divided into city blocks and streets, the streets would occupy 604 acres, leaving 1,316 acres of lots. If the lots were 50 x 125 feet, there would be 9,212 of them. One fourth of the lots were voted to the Emigrant Aid Company, which expected to sell them at an average price of $50 per lot, or $100,000. One tenth of the remaining lots, or 99 acres, were assigned for city purposes, such as schools and three parks, one of which was to include 43 acres.


\(^\text{19}\) Louise Barry, loc. cit., pp. 145-155.

\(^\text{20}\) Milwaukee *Daily Sentinel*, October 4, 1854. A microfilm copy of these letters was acquired by the Kansas Territorial Centennial Committee from the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Some other accounts give this sale date as September 21.
Six hundred lots were set aside for donations to those who would improve them as specified by the city council. The remainder, 5,621 lots, were to be divided equally among about 90 men, or an average of 62½ lots (nine acres) each. The distribution, including those to the Emigrant Aid Company, was to be made according to three or four grades of desirability. Dissatisfaction was expressed that the number of donation lots was too small, but individuals were understood to be willing to contribute additions to that class.\textsuperscript{21}

Again on October 17 another change was made in the distribution plan: “Every alternate lot on the city plat is drawn for the members of the Association, leaving the balance alternately for the E. A. Co., and for gratuitous distribution. The first drawal, of one lot each in the first class took place a few days since [October 17], for the purpose of giving members a chance to build on their own lots.”

The second drawing of lots occurred just prior to the territorial delegate election of November 29 and the exodus of the next day. Some 450 lots were then distributed to members, which, at the same time furnished for gratuitous distribution one half that number. Thus step by step distribution was to be effected as the survey of the city site progressed.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus far the controversies described have been those within the New England Company group. The controversy with the four original claimants to the townsite was settled in April, 1855, by dividing the townsite into 220 shares; 100 divided equally among the four claimants, 110 held by the Lawrence Town Association, and 10 held by the Emigrant Aid Company.\textsuperscript{23} The Kansas Free State editorial, April 30, 1855, reported: “The shares have been made up and drawn so that all can see at once where their lots lie.” Furthermore, the editor remarked anyone could now improve, sell, or give away his lot. Thus one of the blights of uncertainty of which Editor Miller had complained, March 17, was removed. Also, he urged lot holders to adopt a liberal policy in order to hasten the development of the town. Lest it appear that this may have been only a reflection of the Josiah Miller and R. G. Elliot dissonance, a Herald of Freedom report of two days earlier pointed out much the same interpretation of the new agreement that the one fourth of the lots originally set aside for distribution to persons who would agree to build within 18 months structures costing $300 to $3,000, had been eliminated; and also,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., October 19, 1854.  
\textsuperscript{22} E. D. Ladd letter, November 30, 1854, ibid., December 17, 1854.  
\textsuperscript{23} Kansas Free State, Lawrence, April 7, 30, 1855.
that “for the future those wanting lots must buy them of the claimants. The site is owned by about one hundred and twenty persons, each holding from ten to two hundred lots.”

EMERGENCY SHELTERS

As the present study is concerned with the history of housing rather than land tenure, only enough of the land question is included here as seemed essential to indicate clearly the atmosphere of uncertainty, and its duration, within which an individual settler found it necessary to decide where, when, and how, if at all, he would spend his limited fund of money and labor in providing shelter. Of course, a large portion, but the exact figures are not available, abandoned Kansas altogether.  

The procedure of forcing the first party to disgorge must have disrupted housing plans, as well as have had a demoralizing effect upon those more self-reliant members of the first party who supposedly had built, or who were building, log cabins on their farm claims. Information is lacking, however, about who acquired such improvements, or about whether the original squatters were actually compensated. In view of the fact that bid money was not collected after the auction, there would seem to be a reasonable doubt about such payments. A letter writer, as of September 19, reported that “all here are still living in tents. . . .” In this quotation, the language is not clear whether the author meant “all here” of the party in Kansas, or “all here” on the townsite as distinct from those who might be living on farm claims. But, so far as housing on the townsite was concerned, E. D. Ladd described the next major makeshift resorted to by the company:

We have just finished [September 19] a large house which will be opened Monday next [September 25] as a boarding house; board for members is $2.50 per week. It is constructed of poles, the roof thatched with prairie grass, and the sides [inside?] and ends covered with cotton cloth. We are constructing another similar to it for the occupation of the pioneer party, as they must surrender their tents on the arrival of the large party which is to leave Boston on the 29th inst.  

These thatched tents or houses of the hen-coop type, were made by pinning together poles about 20 feet long, raised to make an “A,” and along the sloping sides were nailed horizontal ribs. Tall grass was mowed for thatching and was held in place by wire. The first of

24. Louise Barry’s careful research affords the best information available.
25. Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, October 4, 1854; and Boston Atlas, October 14, 1854, from the Milwaukee Daily Sentinel. The letter was dated September 19, 1854.—“Webb Scrapbooks,” v. 1, p. 192.
these was known as the Pioneer Boarding House, and the second as the Church or Meeting House, 20 by 48 feet, but both were used for general shelter and sleeping quarters. Other structures, not clearly described, were referred to in some narratives.

Ladd’s description provides some basis for difference in interpretation of the form of the Pioneer Boarding House. The reference to the sides being covered with cloth, might appear to mean vertical sides, with the thatched roof set upon these walls. Two other accounts are quite explicit, that of Mrs. C. I. H. Nichols (contemporary) quoted later, and that of Savage written in 1870, that the structure was “A” shaped and formed by poles extending from the ground to the point of the roof. The suggestion is made above in brackets, therefore, that the word sides may have referred to an inside lining of cloth.

The species of trees available for building material in the vicinity of the proposed town, according to John Doy, were “chiefly oak, black-walnut and cotton wood.” To cut this timber for frame houses, the company had purchased a sawmill, to be shipped from Rochester, N. Y. One of the colonists wrote, September 17, that on Monday they would go to work on the sawmill and expected to have it running in 30 days. On the basis of this program, settlers had been assured of lumber for cabins. On the day of the auction of farm claims, September 21, this pledge was repeated publicly by Pomeroy, and a price of $10 per thousand feet was quoted as an assurance to prospective bidders. Delivery of the sawmill was delayed, however, and the company bought an inferior used sawmill in Missouri. Early in October, Charles Robinson was quoted as expecting to have it in operation within three weeks. The Delaware Indians on the opposite side of the river had promised a supply of logs, and thus the settlers were supposed to have been assured of frame houses instead of log cabins. The informant doubted whether the sawmill would be in operation before winter set in. Incidentally, these reports represented developments just prior to the third agreement on land distribution and the drawing of lots October 17, which, as Ladd pointed out, made it possible, for the first time, for members to build shelters on their own lots. The three parties

sent out to Lawrence by this time, if all had remained, would have numbered about 320 men, women, and children.

As of October 24, S. F. Tappan wrote that each member had drawn lots a short time since, and commenced the erection of dwellings: "The first frame house was erected a short time since. It is owned by Rev. S. Y. Lum. Several log cabins are springing into existence. People are busily employed on hewing timber for frame houses. . . ." Tappan thought that the sawmill, with a daily capacity of 4,000 feet of lumber would be in operation in about two weeks. 32 The term frame house was used loosely in this instance and not in the professional architectural sense. Possibly, if not probably, some of the first of these frames had been hand hewn with the intention of covering the frame with rough sawed lumber, but the failure of the sawmill to materialize and the compulsion of cold weather forced the substitution of other material. In the Lum house, the framing timbers were hand hewn poles, to which horizontal cross pieces were nailed, and to them in turn, split oak shakes about four feet in length were nailed. The first cabins of shakes, but on the hen-coop plan similar to the thatched houses built by the company, only smaller, were erected supposedly about the time of the Lum house, or just a little earlier. Instead of being covered with thatch, the sloping walls were covered with shakes. 33 Doors were made of pole frames covered with cotton cloth. In some cases the roofs were made of cotton cloth, sometimes coated with tar.

As winter closed in, and temperatures dropped, protection against the wind and cold had to be made more effective. Apparently step by step with the increasing rigors of winter, but always short of adequacy, emergency experiments in weatherproofing were devised to meet the challenge. The two big company shelters, the Pioneer Boarding House, and the Meeting House, were protected at the gable ends by laying up sod, the only opening left being a door and a window, both covered with cloth. The sloping thatched roof (sides) of these "A" shaped structures were covered as a whole or in part (accounts differ) with sod; later with tarred cloth.

On November 2, Mrs. C. I. H. Nichols, a woman's rights advocate of some prominence, wrote from Lawrence:

I will not paint you the thatched cottages mingled with white tents and log huts—for framed houses of the worthy citizens are yet to be built. I will not speak of the house of religious worship, thatched from ridge-pole to base with prairie grass, nor of the two "stores" where almost everything but ardent spirits

is to be had. I might tell you of steam saw and grist mills nearly ready for use, and the large hotel, whose foundations are being laid; of streets staked out; of public squares, college and church grounds.\textsuperscript{34}

The fall and early winter of 1854-1855 had been dry and mild, but on November 11, a snow storm and cold wave hit Lawrence suddenly. In his letter of that date, Ladd criticized sharply the neglect of housing during the favorable weather. His little group had built a log cabin, 12 x 14 feet, and heated it with a stove brought from Wisconsin. But many lived in tents without heat:

Our city presents quite a gothic appearance in the style of its residences. Besides the tents, there are a number of houses of the same form, varying in size, covered with boards, as they are called here, that is, shingles, three to three and a half feet long, unshaved; then we have others of the same tent form, made of poles set in the ground, the tops meeting overhead and ribs nailed horizontally, in the same manner as those covered with boards, and then thatched with prairie grass; then again we have some in the usual form of a house, thatched all over, with cotton cloth, door and window, or without window, as the door permits the admission of sufficient light for ordinary purposes to the single-storied, single-roomed edifice. Before my window is a tent, with poles set over it in the same form, thatched. [First baby born here.]

But to return to my description of tenements. There are some log houses roofed with cotton cloth, tarred and sprinkled with sand; and others again in the usual house form covered with the shingles or boards of which I spoke, put on in the usual form of siding. On the gothic houses they are put on "up and down."

All this variety illustrates the old adage that "Necessity is the mother of Invention." The only sawed board door in the city is in our house. We have as yet no lumber. Our Sawmill is not yet in operation, having been delayed by unforeseen difficulties. It will be running in about a week. This delay has been the occasion of a very great deal of inconvenience and suffering on the part of settlers.

Lumber cost, at Kansas City, $55 per 1,000 feet, or delivered at $75, but teams could not be spared to haul it, even if they were willing to pay the cost. The sawmill was to furnish lumber at $15, or saw logs furnished privately at $5 per 1,000 feet: "The boards will be used as they come from the saw. Timber is too scarce to build log houses of it."\textsuperscript{35}

On November 30, 1854, Ladd included a continuation of his architectural treatise: "The residences of our city, of which I gave you a partial description in my last, have, since that time, put on a new and strange appearance. Most of the tent-shaped buildings have a covering of turf, cut up in square pieces and laid on; the former con-

\textsuperscript{34} Springfield Weekly Republican, November 18, 1854.—"Webb Scrapbooks," v. 2, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{35} Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, November 27, 1854.
dition not being considered a sufficient protection against the cold of winter.” 36

Several descriptions of Lawrence about December 1, 1854, have been written. John Doy wrote on that date that 33 houses had recently been erected, and that the sawmill was “actually running”:

Our houses are built in all styles. We have some good houses built of framed sticks, covered with oak boards four feet long; some are grass covered. We also have sod houses and log houses; others are willow built and mud covered; again, canvas is used, covered and tarred. We have, too, very substantial stone buildings.37

One reason for this date, December 1, being the basis of several descriptions was that many had determined to return to the East, some with the intention of bringing their families in the spring. But political considerations had intervened. The first election to be held in the territory was that of November 29, to elect a delegate to congress. The city of Lawrence put political pressure upon its members by enacting an ordinance declaring forfeit all interest in the city of anyone leaving prior to the election. November 30 became therefore the day of exodus, and with the arrival of these returned pioneers to their homes in the East, newspaper interviews and settlers’ stories filled the papers. Doy pointed out the reason for the ordinance and its relation to the exodus. Several of these descriptions ought to be printed, because each of them differs in describing the same thing, or aspects of the same thing, and apparently there were individual differences in the structures themselves as well as continuous changes in weatherproofing made in the hope of more effectively shutting out the cold.

A. O. Carpenter, a son of Mrs. Nichols, wrote home to Vermont:

Many build in a shape similar to hencoops; first by erecting poles like the rafters of a building, and then thatching them with prairie hay, or covering them with split oak shingles. But these are very cold tenements, for the wind blows straight through the thatch, and also through the cracks of the shingles, for they do not lay very even. We have a meeting-house, and eating tent, and two other buildings, built in the thatched fashion, by the Emigrant Aid Co., but they are all partly sodded up since the last cold snap.38

About the time of Mrs. Nichols’ return to “civilization” with the December 1 exodus, she wrote a similar description, but included some rather significant variations:

36. Ibid., December 12, 1854.
37. New York Tribune, December 14, 1854, letter dated December 1, 1854.—“Webb Scrapbooks,” v. 2, p. 92. This letter was printed in the second evening edition of the Tribune (University of Kansas file), but not in the morning edition (Kansas State Historical Society file).
When I arrived here, like all the new comers, I was taken to a lodging-house and supplied with plenty of prairie hay for a bed; and having come without bedding—in my ignorance of the customs of the country—it was kindly loaned me by a member of the city association. This lodging-house is made of poles or small timbers, and in form and size reminds one of the stray [w] roof of a huge warehouse. This pole-roof is thatched upon the outward side with prairie hay, and is all hay and poles to the view inside. Cotton cloth covers the gable ends, which have doors of the same material, nailed to pole frames. Since the weather has grown cooler, and the wind whistled uncomfortably through the hay roof, a laying of the dry, tough prairie sod has been put over the whole building, and windows introduced into one end as a substitute for the darkened cloth gables.

Later in her long story, Mrs. Nichols commented shrewdly:

Many have been sadly disappointed, not with the country, but in the means necessary to avail themselves of its advantages. Great improvement has been made in the appearance and the comforts of the place in the last two weeks. Some twenty tenements have been finished, or nearly so, in that time. Two thirds of these are of logs and frames, the clapboards and shingles being split, or riven oak—the others of sod, with thatched roofs, and lined to some extent with cotton cloth. The latter are the warmest and most comfortable to be had, till the saw-mill shall give boards that can be fitted and keep out the wind, as crooked split ones cannot. By the way, this saw-mill, whose long, though necessarily delayed operation has been the cause of more discomfort and vexation than anything else, has been fixed up and commenced regular work.

In this blunt comment on the sawmill, Mrs. Nichols was not indulging in damning the Emigrant Aid Company, because she closed with this tribute:

I have been very kind treated by the people here, and found the company's agents sympathizing and ready to share their accommodations and extend them as far as possible with their sparse materials, for the comfort of the emigrants.

Furthermore, Mrs. Nichols vented her wrath upon those young men with

less power of self-protection than the prairie mouse, having spent a single night in the settlement, returned to 'print it in the papers.' There was no need of suffering to any on the ground when I left, the 1st December, and I learn from letters just received from my sons that buildings have rapidly multiplied since I left.

The Lawrence sod house needs a detailed description by a builder of that type of structure. A. O. Carpenter's letter of December 3, from which one quotation has already been made, wrote:

Oh men of the East! who have often looked with contempt upon the mud cabins of the Irish railroad laborers, what would you say if you were to see

your friends who may have come to Kansas. I, my brother, and another young man and his wife, all live in a sod house, 12 feet by 15.—There are several such houses, or shanties, in the city, and about one half of the others have been banked up several feet with sods. They are built in the following manner: the ground is marked out to the size you wish your cabin, and then proceed to dig up all the sods inside the foundation, and lay them upon the walls; when all are dug inside then didylg outside, till the walls are laid up about five feet high, and two feet thick, then poles are procured and a roof put up, either two or four sides, and ribs or small poles are nailed once in a foot, and the whole is covered, first with prairie hay, and then with sods, with a skylight of cotton cloth at the top. These houses are the warmest of any description yet built.41

A substantial variant in sod house building procedure is described in the following, but it is evident that the technique was of a make-shift order, a spade rather than a plow being used to turn the sod:

In this city there are a few houses built of sods and sticks, which are the warmest places we can find on a cold windy day. The mode of building these sod cabins is very simple and cheap. First select a spot where good sod can be obtained easily; then with an ax cut the turf into blocks two feet square; then take a spade, put it under the surface about five inches, lift it up, and place it as you would a stone in building stone fences. When the walls are high enough lay on the rafters in the usual form; then lay sticks across from one rafter to another, about twelve inches apart; on top of these throw some hay, and on the hay lay the sods. Cut in a door and window, and a stove will make a comfortable house for the winter. A house of this kind all completed has been purchased for eight dollars. Families have lived, and are living in such houses here in Kansas.—Some of the cabins have nothing but cotton cloth for roofs; and the last snow storm was very severe. The snow blew through the roofs of several of the cabins; and when the inmates awoke in the morning every thing was covered with snow in the house—a rather hard time for the women and children.42

As the editor of the Herald of Freedom observed, January 13, 1855, the volume of cotton cloth sold indicated that it was used for purposes other than those customary in the East. Some purchasers were said to buy ten pieces at a time. References to cotton cloth appeared in several descriptions of emergency housing, not only as canvas tents, but as muslin to cover the gable ends of the Pioneer Boarding House, the Meeting House, windows, doors, and roofs. The article noted above indicated three major uses: (1) roofing, (2) inside finishing of walls, (3) doors. Until quite recently, the editor said, covering for doors was its principal use. As roofing, the muslin was coated with tar and a sprinkling of lime. As interior finishing, the purpose was only partly to improve appearances, that is, interior decoration, because if papered it was said to make a warm and comfortable ceiling or wall. The Missouri river towns

42. Herald of Freedom, February 10, 1855, letter to the editor.
must have carried a large stock of such material because river navigation was closed during the winter, and no complaints of shortage of muslin have been noted.

THE PASSING OF EMERGENCY SHELTERS

The passing of the emergency shelters came about in part from the casualties incident to their very character, and generally through replacement by more adequate structures. After a period of mild weather following the two-inch snow and cold wave of November 11, another cold wave hit Lawrence, January 21 and 22, 1855, with three or four inches of snow and near zero weather. Apparently the heating facilities were overtaxed, and about noon Dr. Robinson's office caught fire and burned: "It was built of sod and thatch, the latter a very combustible substance, hence the fire. One end of the tent was used as a school room." Mr. Fitch's free school had been in operation only a few days, having opened on January 16.43

The same day the cry of fire aroused the town again. This time, the Pioneer Boarding House was involved, the first of the Emigrant Aid Company hen-coop structures. Because of the vagueness of the language, and the difficulties of interpretation, the exact words of the report are given:

The roof was covered with tarred cloth, and the conflagration spread almost instantly over the entire building. . . . Notwithstanding all the efforts to the contrary, the roof and a portion of the interior was consumed. The cook-house was demolished, which prevented the flames from extending to that portion of the structure used as a dining saloon.44

The Herald of Freedom, and the Kansas Free State had not been clear about the exact dating of the two fires, but Ladd's letter of January 22 stated explicitly that both occurred that day. The source of the Robinson fire was described specifically: "The fire originated in the thatch around the stove pipe." Likewise, in the case of the Pioneer Boarding House: "It was covered with tarred cloth and took [fire] from the stove pipe. The whole of the second story with its contents was destroyed." Saved was "the boarding hall, covered with thatch, connected with the burning building by a cook house with canvass roof, and only some 12 or 15 feet from it. . . . Had the hall taken fire, another building of equal size, occupied by families, a few feet from the opposite end of it, must have been destroyed with it."45

43. Ibid., January 27, 1855; Kansas Free State, January 24, 1855.
44. Herald of Freedom, January 27, 1855.
45. Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, February 16, 1855.
Notes on the J. E. Rice Pen Sketches of Lawrence, Kansas

J. E. Rice, the artist who drew the two pen sketches of Lawrence, reproduced here, came to Kansas with the first New England Emigrant Aid Company party in the spring of 1855, arriving about April 1. Beyond the fact that he was credited to Roxbury, Mass., as his point of origin, Louise Barry in her study of Emigrant Aid Company parties of 1855 (Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. 12, p. 233) did not find anything about him.

The history of the original pen sketches is not known, nor whether they have survived. They are represented only in reproductions, those nearest the originals being albumin process prints, from which both of the present pictures are made. The general view, “Lawrence, Kansas, A. D. 1854-5” as reproduced here was made under the supervision of Prof. Robert Taft, by the Photographic Bureau of the University of Kansas from a copy, size 20% by 13% inches, owned by the Lawrence Public Library. The sketch of “Part of Lawrence, Kansas, 1855” is made by Wolfe’s Camera and Photo Shops, Topeka, from the better of two copies, size 13% by 8% inches, owned by the Kansas State Historical Society. So far as known to the present writer, the latter sketch has not before been printed. The general view of Lawrence, however, has been reproduced in half-tone, 8 by 4 inches, in Richard Cordley’s History of Lawrence, Kansas, published by E. F. Caldwell, at Lawrence, 1895, and again, from the same plate, by E. F. Caldwell, compiler and publisher, A Souvenir History of Lawrence, Kansas, 1898. All of these reproductions of the general view, including the present one, from the Lawrence Public Library copy of the albumin print, are modified from the original by the fact that the ferry at the foot of New Hampshire street was drawn in with black ink. In the original there is no indication that the ferry was shown at all.

The dates essential to a satisfactory interpretation of these sketches are wanting. When were the pen sketches drawn? When were the albumin prints made? According to Professor Taft, the albumin print process was used between about 1890 and 1885. According to these limiting dates, the present writer suggests that the Quarter-Centennial celebration of 1879 would have afforded a suitable occasion for such reproductions, but thus far the positive evidence is wanting. The critical question about these pen sketches, however, is the date and circumstances of the original drawings. Obviously, they could not have been done prior to Rice’s arrival in Kansas, about April 1, 1855. There is no reason to believe that Rice identified the buildings. The first identifications appear to have been supplied when the albumin prints were made, and the Caldwell labels did not agree altogether with the earlier naming. On the Lawrence Public Library copy of the general view, No. 8 was called Charles Robinson’s office, and No. 9 the Pioneer Boarding House. On the Caldwell reproductions, the identification of No. 9 was dropped out, and No. 8 was called the Pioneer Boarding House. The same doubt about accuracy of identification applies to the sketch of a part of Lawrence as relates to the Pioneer Boarding House, and the vertical side wall, shown so clearly there, adds to the doubt about the label. However, in showing vertical sides the artist might have erred, because fire had destroyed all or part of it. But, both Robinson’s Office and the Pioneer Boarding House, or one unit of connected
structures, had burned January 22, 1855. It is not unreasonable to suspect
that old settlers disagreed about these identifications. No. 2 was labeled the
Kansas Free State office, but on the earlier reproduction, No. 17 was described
as the old printing office of Miller and Elliott. The location of the Kansas
Free State at No. 12 Massachusetts street, near the post office, was recorded
by that paper July 2, 1855, but no mention has been found of when the struc-
ture labeled No. 2 in the sketch was built and the move made. Also, Paul R.
Brooks moved his store to the post-office building May 25, 1855, according to
an advertisement in the Kansas Free State, May 28. Furthermore, according
to the same newspaper, June 4, 1855, the ferry commenced business about
that week. A sketch drawn in April or May, 1855, would not have included it.

The conclusion is inescapable that the general view of Lawrence in the Rice
pen sketches does not represent exactly the appearance of the town at any
particular time, but combines in the same sketch, buildings of 1854 which no
longer existed, with structures built during 1855. Although it is important
not to take these details too literally, or too seriously, the pen sketches do
appear to visualize reasonably well the general appearance of Lawrence and
its buildings about April or May, 1855. The position of the artist would have
been at the New England Emigrant Aid Company Hotel, the present Eldridge
Hotel, at Seventh and Massachusetts streets, and the three streets shown, from
left to right, are Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, the Pioneer
Boarding House location being near the present Robinson Park at the river
bridgehead.

Identifications of structures shown in the J. E. Rice pen sketch, "Lawrence,
Kansas, A. D. 1854-5," from the Lawrence Public Library copy of the albumin
print:

"LAWRENCE, KANSAS, A. D. 1854-5"
1. First house built in Lawrence.—F. R. Brooks' store and Commission House.
2. Kansas Free State Office.
3. Herald of Freedom Office; the first newspaper, on the site of Simpson's
   Bank.
4. Emigrant Aid Office.
5. P. R. Brooks' Store occupied in part by the first Post Office.—C. W.
   Babcock, Postmaster.
6. S. N. Simpson's Land and Lumber Office; also used for Emigrant Aid Of-
   fice, 1st Sabbath School, 2 Secret Societies, Prayer Meetings, etc.
8. Dr. C. (ex-Gov.) Robinson's Office.
12. First Church.—S. Y. Lum, Pastor.
13. Emigrant Aid Mill.
15. S. N. Simpson's Residence.
16. St. Nicholas House.—S. Fry, Prop'r.
17. Miller & Elliott's Old Printing Office.
0. Ferry. Baldwin Bros. Props.

This is a printed legend at the bottom of the picture and not a part of the
original albumin print. It is pasted on separately.
LAWRENCE, KANSAS, 1854-1855

[The ferry is shown at the foot of New Hampshire Street, at the extreme right.]
The Herald of Freedom thought the boarding house would be in operation again within a few days. This leaves some question about just how much was destroyed, but also it suggests that the structure had already undergone a transformation not entered into the previous record. First, it had been thatched, then sod covered, and now it was described as roofed with turreted cloth, which, like the thatch was “a very combustible substance.” In any case, the structure does not appear to have been rebuilt.

On March 31, 1855, the Herald of Freedom expressed regrets at the poor accommodations that must be offered newcomers, but assured them that

Those who have just come among us, can form but an ill conception, from what they experience, of the discomforts experienced by the pioneers who arrived here late last autumn, without shelter of any kind, else in tents or huts of rude construction than any now visible, with the severities of the prairie winter before them.

Obviously, there was an important truth in this effort at optimism, but also, there were still visible evidences of that original crudeness of shelters. The same paper recorded, April 7, that:

The large cabin, technically known as the “meeting house,” in this place, has been lined in the inside with cloth, and put in a very good condition for the reception and lodging of those who come into the Territory with no other means of shelter. With blankets and buffalo robes, which must be supplied by the lodgers, a person can make himself very comfortable for a time.

Two weeks later Editor Brown felt impelled to issue a warning about the original emergency shelters still visible. There had been no spring rains, and “none of any account has fallen in the Territory since May last,” but he predicted that when the rain did come it would pour, and “Those occupying mud and straw-thatched cabins should take care to be out of them before a heavy rain falls.” The following week another fire was reported, burning an unoccupied thatched cabin. September 15, the Herald of Freedom recorded the burning, two days earlier, of the Meeting House. This was the last of the major examples of the original emergency architecture. Editor Brown had hoped that some one would take a daguerreotype of this “singular structure,” but it had not been done, and it was now too late:

We are conscious that many who shared the hospitality afforded by that tenement, cursed it and its originators, but it always looked to us like a child cursing its parent. Rude and uncouth as was that hay-thatched and partly-mud-covered hovel, it shut out the storm to a great extent when there was no other place to resort to for shelter. Houses, there were none.

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