

# **Hollenberg Station, Washington County, Kansas**

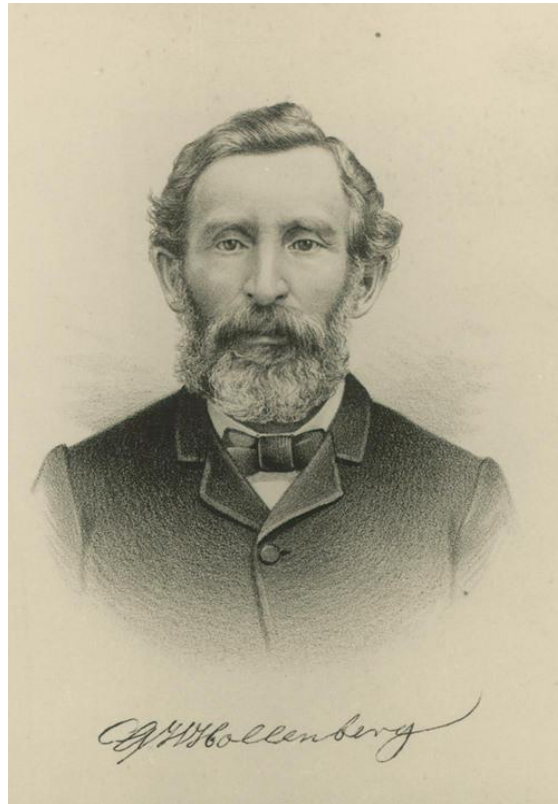


Figure 1: Great Hollenberg between 1860-1870. He was an early entrepreneur of Washington County.

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Sociology 823

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### **Introduction**

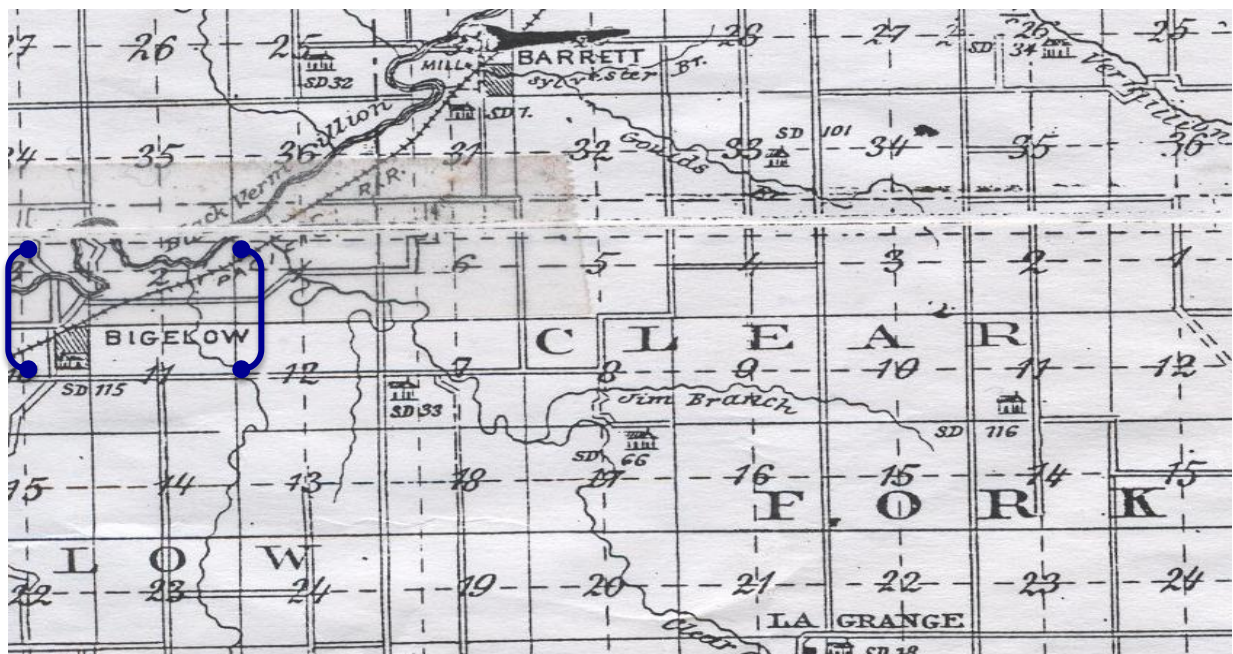
The Hollenberg Station on the Cottonwood River in Washington County, Kansas, served as a respite for travelers on the Oregon-California Trail as well as for riders of the Pony Express. While in operation, the Hollenberg Station represented one of the few places where goods and services could be attained along an otherwise desolate trail that traversed through what is now Northeast Kansas. Established between the years of 1857 and 1858, the station was one of many entrepreneurial endeavors undertaken by Gerat Hollenberg.



**Figure 1:** The Hollenberg Station as it appears today, looking to the southwest. It is the last of the Pony Express Stations to remain in its original location. Source: Ashley Rhodes, 2012.

## Hollenberg Brings Ambitions to Territorial Kansas

Gerat Hollenberg, a native of Hanover, Germany, led a very adventurous life. Having panned for gold in both California and South America, and gaining some wealth in the process, Gerat sailed for New York City. However, while in New York City, he developed a respiratory disease and was directed by his physician to head west where the air was cleaner and drier. Gerat arrived in territorial Kansas in the spring of 1854 and established a small ranch on the banks of the Black Vermillion River in what is now south-central Marshall County near the town of Bigelow (Skyways, 2012). This ranch was first known as the Mormon crossing on the Black Vermillion as it was located along the Mormon trail, but quickly became known simply as the Hollenberg crossing. Today, this crossing is known as the Bigelow Station.



**Figure 2:** SE quadrant of Marshall County, KS, mid 1800s. The bracketed area highlights the town of Bigelow and the site of Hollenberg's original ranch, which sat right on the Black Vermillion River just north of the town. Source: [www.kansasheritage.us.htm](http://www.kansasheritage.us.htm)

This initial establishment along the Black Vermillion River was important for several reasons. Not only did Gerat Hollenberg prove himself as a businessman and entrepreneur at this location, but also met Miss Sophia Brockmeyer. They were married on May 15, 1858. In the fall of that same year, the couple settled in what is now Washington County and established the first home built in the county. This home soon became an important stopover for travelers on the Oregon-California Trail, soldiers from Ft. Riley, and Pony Express riders (Durst, 2012).

### **Hollenberg Station**

Keeping in line with Gerat's entrepreneurial spirit, the Hollenberg's quickly set up shop in their new location in Washington County on the Cottonwood Creek, just five miles northeast of the present-day town of Hanover. This locale was ideal for several reasons. First of all, the lay of the land consisted of gently rolling hills, adequate water supply, and a good source of timber. In addition, native grasses grew readily supplying sufficient nutrition for grazing livestock. Wild fruits such as plums, strawberries, and mulberries were easy to find (Cutler, 1883).

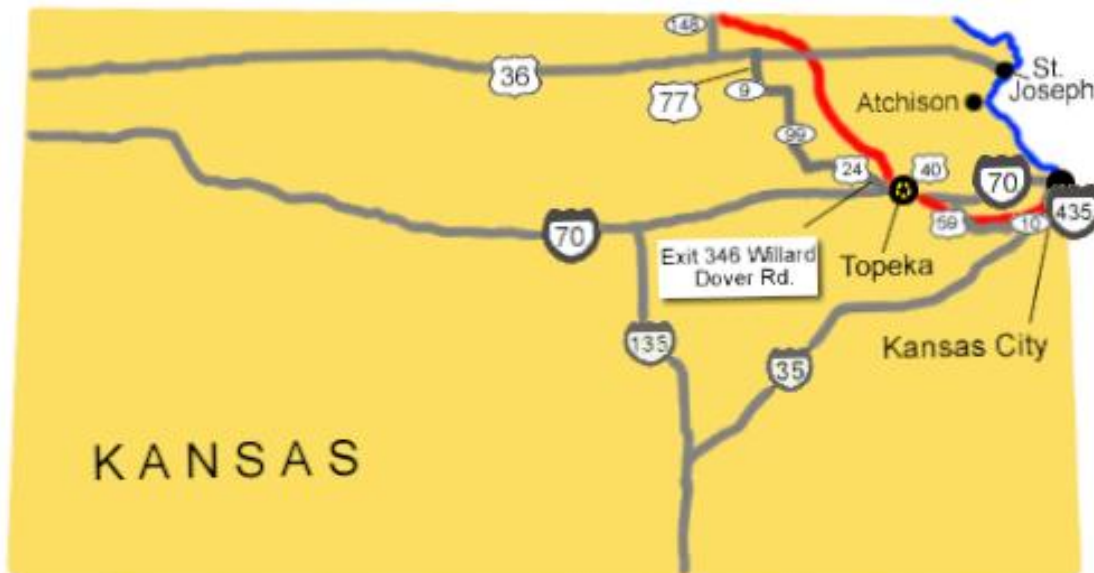


**Figure 3:** Oregon Trail travelers and Pony Express riders would have crested the hill shown in the middle of this picture, crossed the Cottonwood Creek below, to arrive at the Hollenberg Station. Picture taken from front door of Hollenberg cabin, looking southeast. Source: Ashley Rhodes, 2012.

However, being rich in natural resources was not the primary factor driving Hollenberg's decision to establish his new life here. Gerat Hollenberg was a businessman and a savvy entrepreneur. This particular location was ideal for business as it was situated squarely on an area representing the convergence of several branches of the Oregon-California Trail. While the jumping off points for the Oregon-California Trail changed over time, starting first in Independence, Missouri, and then moving north to St. Joseph, both branches of the trail converged near the Hollenberg's ranch. In addition to the numerous amounts of people traveling this trail, thousands of tons of freight was also hauled along this route as nearly all provisions for the western forts had to be hauled from ports on the Missouri River (Kansas State Historical Society, 2001). Establishing a business here meant

that Gerat Hollenberg could capitalize on the increasing amount of travelers heading out West.

The map below highlights the original Oregon-California Trail route (in red), which started in Independence, Missouri, and traversed through what are now the counties of Douglas, Shawnee, Pottawatomie, Marshall, and Washington in Kansas. Travelers beginning their journey in St. Joseph would have taken a more northern route, traversing through what are now the counties of Doniphan, Brown, Nemaha, and Marshall, before joining up with the Independence route near the Cottonwood Creek crossing where the Hollenbergs had settled. By the time travelers reached the Hollenberg Station, they were in need of supplies as most were a good 120 miles west of their starting point and still a good distance from the next major post, Fort Kearney, Nebraska, where supplies could be purchased and wagons repaired (Kansas Historic Trails, 2009). Thus, the Hollenberg Station represented a critical stopover for many travelers.



**Figure 4:** Oregon-California Trail route through Kansas. Source: [http://www.nps.gov/oreg/planyourvisit/auto\\_ks.htm](http://www.nps.gov/oreg/planyourvisit/auto_ks.htm)

Realizing the needs of weary travelers, the Hollenbergs converted their six-room dwelling into a grocery store, tavern, and even a post-office (Weiser, 2010). In addition, Gerat sold draft animals and fixed wagons while Sophia fed and hosted weary travelers. And while the wagon trains of the Oregon-California Trail were the main focus of the Hollenbergs between the years of 1858-1860, a new venture offering even more lucrative profits would soon capture Gerat Hollenberg's attention.

### **Hollenberg Pony Express Station**

The Pony Express represented a business venture between William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, William B. Waddell, and California Senator William H. Gwin. Springing from the real and immediate need to increase the speed at which pieces of correspondence could span the U.S. from the East to the West coast, it was believed that a horse express system could accomplish this goal faster than any other method of transport (Hill, 2010). Up to this point, stagecoaches were the only option for sending mail across the continental U.S. and it generally took two weeks to one month for mail to reach its destination (Durst, 2012). The founding members of the Pony Express believed they could do much better and that citizens as well as the U.S. Government would be willing to pay a premium for the service (Hill, 2010). Organized in less than two months time, the Pony Express officially began operations on April 3, 1860 (Durst, 2012).

The Pony Express carried mail between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California. Generally, it only took ten days for mail to reach the other side of the Pony Express route, beating the timing of stagecoaches by a substantial amount (Durst, 2012). However, the luxury of speed came at a price as 0.5 ounces of content cost \$5.00 to mail. It

is believed that this steep price ultimately led to the demise of the Pony Express just a short 18 months later in October of 1861 (Durst, 2012).

The Pony Express route mostly followed the St. Joseph branch of the Oregon-California Trail through northeast Kansas. Riders switched horses at “stations” frequently; they had to maintain a fast gallop while on the trail in order to make it to the other side of the country in the promised ten days. The Hollenberg ranch was perfectly positioned to become one of the many “stations” along the route (Durst, 2012). The physical location of a ranch was the most important factor for being selected as a “station” by the Pony Express. Even if a station could provide excellent grazing and a reliable water source, it still might not be chosen to be a Pony Express station if its location was too far or too close from other stations. According to Settle and Settle (1955), “The distance horses could maintain a grueling pace without injury to them was the determining factor in every case. Since it was believed that this was from 10-15 miles, the distance between relay stations was arbitrarily fixed” (p. 115). Because the Hollenbergs built their ranch on Cottonwood Creek in 1857, several years before the start of the Pony Express, it was simply a matter of serendipity that they happened to select a location that would not only serve weary wagon train travelers, but also Pony Express riders.





**Figure 5:** Map showing Pony Express route through northeast Kansas along with the towns and ranches serving as stations. Source: <http://www.xphomestation.com/xptrail5.html>

### **Daily Life at the Hollenberg Pony Express Station**

The Hollenberg ranch, because of its location, became a home, or relay, station for Pony Express riders in 1860 (Hill, 2010; Durst, 2012). Most riders covered an average of 45-50 miles per day, but the horses had to be switched every 10-15 miles in order to keep them as fresh as possible (Dust, 2012). The Hollenberg Station offered amenities that other, smaller, “swing” stations could not. For example, the Hollenberg Station maintained extra horses and various other types of livestock. In addition, the Hollenberg Station had its own blacksmith, contained several smaller outbuildings that could be used for various purposes, and even had a very large pole barn capable of housing up to 100 animals (Hill, 2010).

The Hollenberg Station was also a comfortable place for human travelers. Company employees, stagecoach passengers, Pony Express riders, and other visitors were provided with sleeping quarters in the attic of the large wooden cabin pictured below. Most Pony

Express riders spent two to three nights at the Hollenberg Station, enjoying a break from the grueling pace of their job. While smaller swing stations did not provide the necessary amenities to house riders for this extended period of time, the Hollenberg Station did.

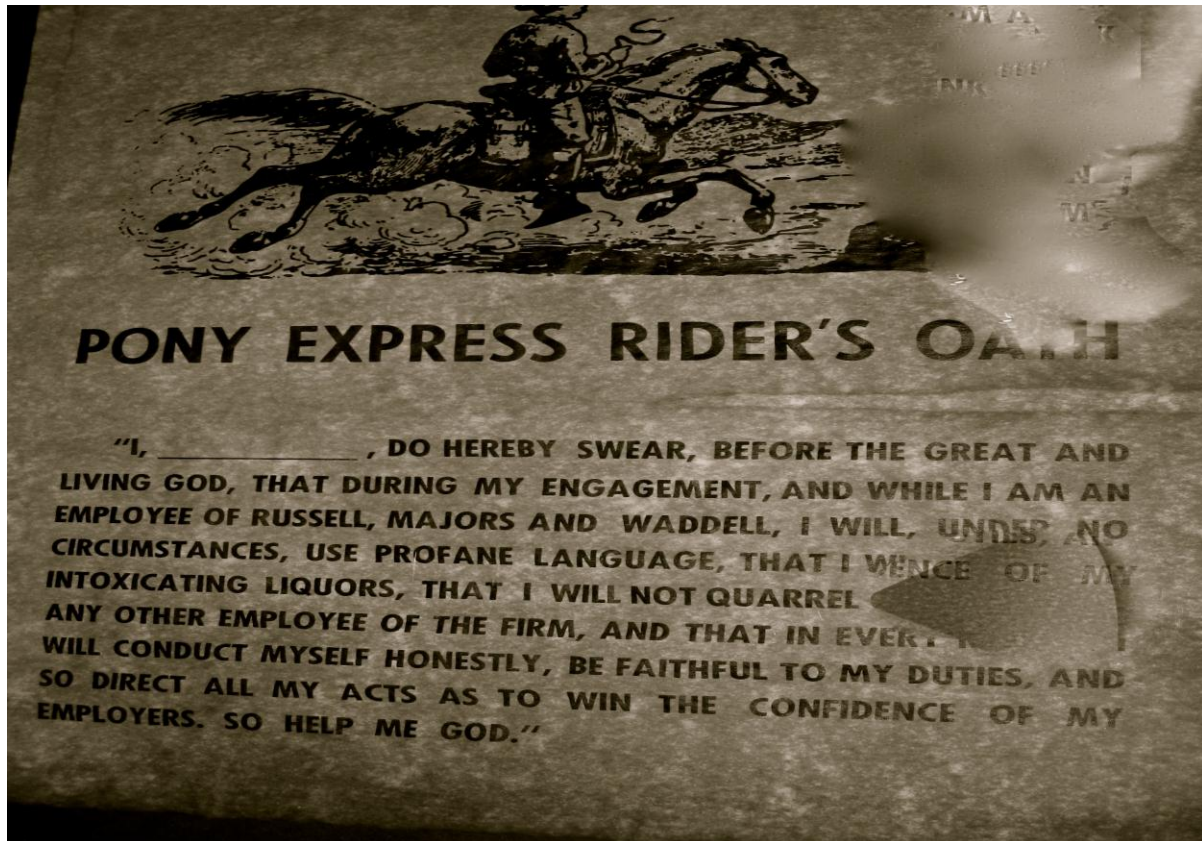
The main floor of this cabin served as the personal living quarters of the Hollenbergs and was also the site of a small mercantile (Hill, 2010). The earliest part of the cabin was built between the years of 1857 and 1858 and is reported to be the first home built in Washington County. In 1860, the cabin was expanded on both the west and east ends. The east end addition was used as a kitchen (Hill, 2010). Here, Sophia Hollenberg cooked hearty meals consisting of ham and eggs, potatoes, and bread. Oftentimes, Sophia's nieces would assist with the food preparation. For their efforts, the Hollenbergs charged 27.3 ¢ per meal (Durst, 2012).



**Figure 6:** The Hollenberg cabin as it appears today, looking to the northeast. The west-end addition is highlighted in this photo. Source: Ashley Rhodes, 2012.

As business grew, the Hollenbergs needed help. Gerat Hollenberg hired Ezra G. Perkins to work as a clerk at the Station as the Hollenbergs required extra help due to the success of their small mercantile. Occasionally, Mr. Perkins would also fill in as a substitute rider, carrying mail to the next station located in Rock Creek, Nebraska or even further to Big Sandy, Nebraska (Durst, 2012). Some descendants of Ezra Perkins can still be found in Washington County today.

Despite the wild and wooly image of the American West during this period, life at the Hollenberg Station was fairly peaceful. Perhaps some of this was due to the fact that the U.S. Army passed through frequently while traveling to Ft. Kearney from Ft. Riley. Although the Army's main purpose was the transport of supplies from one post to the other, they were also helpful for maintaining order on this particular part of the Oregon-California Trail and thus the area around the Hollenberg Station (Durst, 2012). In addition, the Native American tribes surrounding the area were quite peaceful. To the North were the Otoe Indians, to the West were the Pawnee, and to the South were the Kanza (Durst, 2012). And finally, the creed taken by all Pony Express riders prohibited them from swearing, drinking, or gambling. No doubt this helped maintain a peaceful atmosphere while they stayed at the Hollenberg Station.



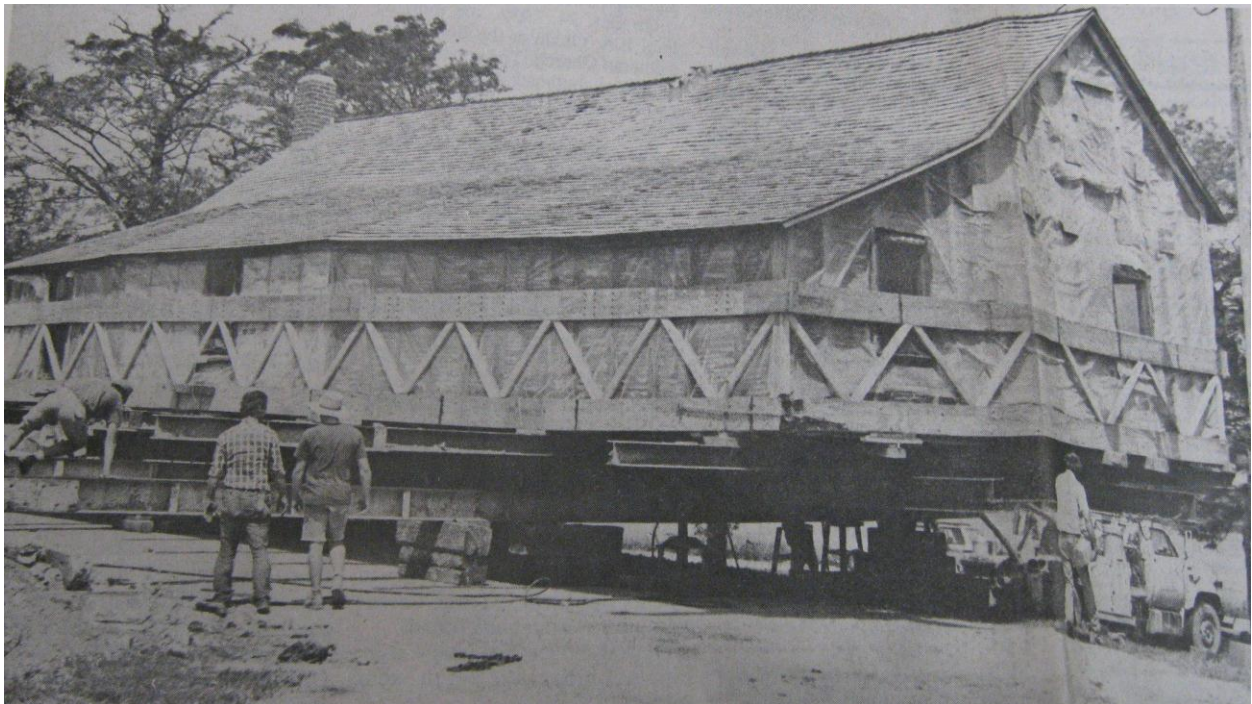
**Figure 7:** Oath taken by Pony Express riders. Source: Ashley Rhodes, 2012.

### **The Hollenberg Station as it Stands Today**

With the ending of the Pony Express in 1861, Gerat Hollenberg began focusing his attention on other endeavors. By 1869 he had founded the town of Hanover and the Hollenbergs left their life at the Hollenberg Station permanently. Once the town of Hanover had become fully established, the station became obsolete as more services and goods were eventually provided in town, attracting travelers, settlers, and soldiers. By 1874 a rail line had been laid through the town of Hanover and a railroad station located within the town facilitated easier travel for people and more efficient shipping of supplies

After the Hollenbergs left the station, other families moved in from 1869 until 1942, when the last family to live in the station finally moved out (Durst, 2012). Once the station was no longer used as a home, the State of Kansas purchased the house and an additional 7 acres for \$2500 and allocated another \$500 for restoration work (U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1964). Unfortunately, World War II broke out and the State's interest in preserving historical places was stymied due to the war effort. However, in 1963 the State Historical Society took over the care and upkeep of the station and purchased an additional 40 acres surrounding the property.

In 1991, the State Historical Society began a major renovation on the station which included the stabilization and restoration of the original wooden cabin. In addition, the project allowed archaeologists to catch a glimpse at the original foundation on which the building sat and to look for any artifacts that might have provided insight into the daily life at the station (Hanover News, 1991).



**Figure 8:** Restoration of the wooden cabin located at the Hollenberg Station. Photo: Washington County News, Thursday, June 6, 1991. Issue No. 12.

Today, the Hollenberg Station is a State Park maintained by mixture of state funding and a group of interested citizens serving on the Washington County Oregon Trail Association as well as the Friends of the Hollenberg Station.



**Figure 9:** The Hollenberg Station State Park includes a visitor center, trails, and a parking area. This photo shows the Hollenberg Station as it is approached from the East. Source: Ashley Rhodes, 2012.

## **Appendix**

### Timeline of Gerat Hollenberg's Life and Accomplishments

- 1823: Hollenberg born in Hanover, Germany
- 1849: Hollenberg participates in California Gold Rush
- 1852: Hollenberg leaves California, sails for Australia
- 1853: Hollenberg leaves Australia, sails for South America, then New York City
- 1854: Hollenberg leaves New York City, arrives in what is now Marshall County, KS
- 1857: Hollenberg moves to what is now Washington County, KS
- 1858: Hollenberg establishes Hollenberg Ranch Station at Cottonwood Creek
- 1858: Hollenberg marries Sophia Brockmeyer
- 1858-1860: Hollenbergs serve meals, house travelers on Oregon-California trail
- 1860-1861: Hollenbergs operate Pony Express station at Hollenberg Ranch
- 1869: Hollenberg plats town of Hanover
- 1872: Hollenberg plats town of Hollenberg
- 1874: Hollenberg sails for Germany, dies at sea

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