

A Persevering Community:

Waco, Sedgwick County, Kansas 1870 – 1905

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Figure 1. A photograph of present day Waco city limit sign on southbound Highway 81. Photo courtesy of Google Images Street Viewer.

This study examines the town of Waco, in Salem Township, Sedgwick County, Kansas. It was classified as a town between the dates of 1870 and 1905, but it continues to survive as a community to this day. The town declined due to restricted access to key services, like a bank or railroad, and was unable to compete with the city of Wichita. The included material is based on a variety of sources including photographs, newspapers, and historical accounts.

Introduction

Fifteen miles south of Wichita on Highway 81 lies the small community of Waco, Kansas. The town is located on Cow Skin Creek, for which the town was originally named. The area around Waco is flat and the soil is sandy. Nearly 150 years ago this land likely had never been plowed but was still quite fertile and somewhat drought resistant due to its proximity to the Arkansas River. Trees were quite sparse in the area when it was first settled and William Cutler, in his state history, guessed that no more than one percent of the area was dedicated to trees.¹ Somber houses and a multitude of trees now are current occupants of the once-bustling town that contained many different businesses, including a general store and a mill. The center of the community, the school, no longer stands. Despite the town's desolate appearance, I estimate 100 people still call this community family. It is their commitment and pride in the community that has allowed the town of Waco, Kansas to persevere into the twenty-first-century.

The People

According to Melvin Brunzel's history of lost towns, the people that settled in Waco, Kansas were most likely of German descent.² When I traveled to the Waco Cemetery there seemed to be split in the ethnicity of the last names. While German names were represented in the cemetery, there were also a number of English names. As suggested by the tombstones, about half of the population was English and the other half German. The Polk directories confirm this, indicating an influx of English descendants in the later years of the town. In the 1884-1885 edition of Polk, the first year that started listing the owners of the businesses, of the

¹ William G. Cutler, "Sedgwick County" in *History of the State of Kansas*, (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883).

² Melvin D. Brunzel, "Waco" in *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places*, (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010).

ten surnames listed, all but two of them are German in origin.³ However, in the 1900 edition of Polk, the last edition that lists the town of Waco, ten business owners are still listed but only half of the surnames are German and the rest are either British or Irish.⁴ Therefore, Waco saw a gradual diversification with regards to its population over its lifetime.



Figure 2. A photograph of present day Waco Cemetery facing north-east. Note that the tombstones in the foreground are part of the newer half of the cemetery and those at and past the cedar trees on the left side are dated from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Photograph by author.

³ R. L. Polk, ed. "Waco" in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume IV*, (Detroit: R. L. Polk and A. C. Danser, 1884-1885).

⁴ R. L. Polk, ed. "Waco" in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume IX*, (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co., 1900).

The total population of Waco, Kansas has never really been clear. The 1895 Kansas census provides little in the way of specific details and only mentions the total population of Salem Township as a whole, which was 767.⁵ To find an approximate modern population, I counted the number of houses that were within Waco city limits and assume that every house was inhabited by an average size family of four. This leaves me with a predicted population of just over 100 for Waco.

With the population being too low to support a newspaper, Waco was dependent on Wichita for all of its news, specifically the *Wichita Eagle* and associated publications. Waco, Kansas avoided the limelight and was rarely mentioned. When the town was mentioned, the announcements were often politically charged statements or local announcements. But these bits of news are critical to establishing the views and opinion held by the inhabitants of the town.

The newspaper articles indicate that Waco held education in high regard. One of the articles in the *Wichita Eagle* talks about a Math Contest between multiple townships. This shows that the residents are not only proud of their children's education but also willing to pay for teachers and transportation for their kids.⁶ Not only was the schoolhouse important for education, but it was also a critical social hub that was utilized for many other purposes. Another article calls for a monthly Republican meeting at the schoolhouse in Waco.⁷ The citizens of Waco were staunch Republicans and frequently held political rallies in the

⁵ "1895 Kansas State Census," *Kansas Historical Society*, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁶ M. M. Murdock, "Mathematical Contest," *The Wichita Eagle* (Wichita), February 3, 1889.

⁷ M. M. Murdock, "Republican Meetings," *The Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita), October 25, 1891.

schoolhouse.⁸ An 1884 article that stated “[Voters still believe] in the honest intention and correct principles of the Republican Party” is indicative of Waco’s culture.⁹ In the late 1880s the area also had one of the highest quantities of Alliance men, members of a political movement that wished to reform many aspects of farming and taxes.

Waco the Town

Waco was founded in 1870 and originally named Cow Skin. This name never showed up in any official records though, and was perhaps only a pet name for the town primarily known as Waco. The early history of the town was not very well documented and businesses only started to show up, according to the Polk directory, after 1884. It seems unlikely, though, that the town existed for fourteen years without even a general store. By 1884, Waco was documented to have most of the common businesses like a general store, post office, and flour mills.¹⁰ The area also enjoyed a notary and a blacksmith or two, but the town lacked a railroad station and residents had to travel to other nearby towns to access rail transportation. In 1882, the closest railroad access point was the Topeka & Santa Fe station in Derby, Kansas.¹¹ This station was five miles to the northeast of Waco which was quite a journey when horse and buggy was the only mode of transportation. Another business that Waco lacked was a bank, and there was no quick access to a bank. The nearest bank in 1884 was Wichita, fifteen miles to the north. Over time the conditions and access to key services improved little. In 1905, the closest rail access was in Haysville, four miles directly north. The Chicago, Rock Island and

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ M. M. Murdock, “Societies,” *The Wichita Eagle* (Wichita), October 31, 1884.

¹⁰ Polk, “Waco” in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume IV*.

¹¹ John P. Edwards, *Historical Atlas of Sedgwick County, Kansas*, (Philadelphia, F. Bourquin, 1882).

Pacific Railroad stopped in Haysville and passed about a mile and a half to the west of Waco.¹² Banking was still difficult and residents of Waco had to travel between five and eight miles depending on the current status of the various nearby banks.

Access to the schoolhouse was one thing the residents of Waco didn't have to worry about because the school sat on the western edge of the town. Since the schoolhouse was so important to the townsfolk it makes sense that the school was inside the city limits. Just beyond the schoolhouse to the northwest was the cemetery which served the city of Waco. Despite the town's small size, the cemetery is quite large, I estimate the size of the cemetery to be around 300ft by 600ft. It is still being utilized today and dates on the tombstones range greatly, covering the late nineteenth-century to the twenty-first-century. Most of the older tombstones are on the far side of the cemetery but in a few places there are headstones from the 1890s within a few paces of headstones from the twenty-first-century.

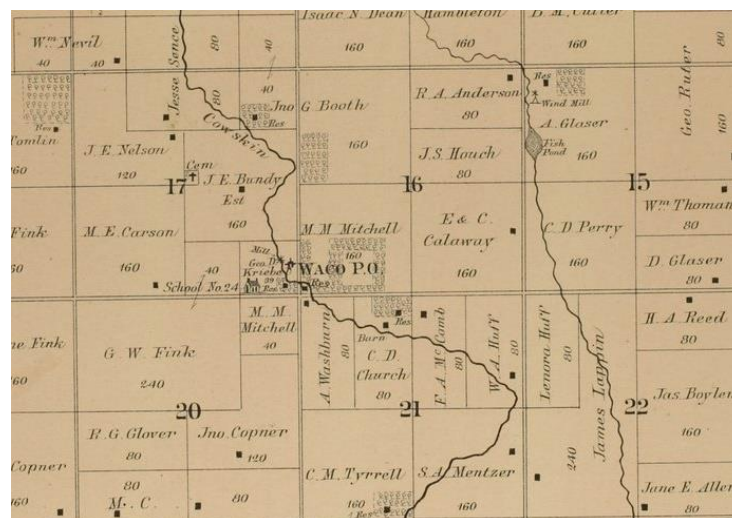


Figure 3. A copy of the Sedgwick County plat map from 1882. Notice the school that is about a quarter of a mile to the west of what will become Highway 81 and E. 95th street. Courtesy of KansasMemory.org.

¹² *Standard Atlas of Sedgwick County, Kansas*, (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1905).



Figure 4. A photograph of present day Waco Cemetery facing south on the far north side of the cemetery. Notice the more scattered graves with a few nineteenth-century tombstones visible. Photograph by author.

The Decline

The town itself didn't seem to change all that much in the course of its existence. In a quick period of time though, the post office and businesses closed, and Waco seemed to just fall off the map. Waco was present and accounted for in the Polk directory for 1900, which listed at least ten businesses in and around the town.¹³ In just five short years the town had lost its post office. It also fails to make an appearance on the 1905 plat map.¹⁴ The only thing that remained of the town was a few houses next to the school and cemetery. Waco also does not appear in the 1912 edition of Polk.¹⁵ Even though the community lost its city status, the people

¹³ Polk, "Waco" in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume IX*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ R. L. Polk, ed., "Waco" in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume XII*, (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co., 1912).

stuck together and continued to live in the same area and continue to live there to this day.

This community has persevered.

When looking at the decline of Waco I think that many different factors played into this story. The largest factor in my mind was the town's lack of key services like a rail station and a bank. Even in the later days of the town when the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad was just four miles to the north, this trip would take a great deal of time for horse-drawn wagons to transport all of the grain and goods to the station. This was the closest the railroad ever got to Waco and, coming only five years before the town disappeared from the plat map, it seems it was too little too late. The distance was only greater before that and time to ship goods was only longer. The bank situation was often worse for the town than the railroad situation. For nearly fifteen years of the town's life, the residents had to go to Wichita receive money which would've likely taken the better part of the day. These long trips were not only inconvenient for those that had to undertake them, but it also hurt their productivity.

The second primary reason for the decline of the town has to do with the lack of amenities in Waco. Over time, as people saw that Waco couldn't compete with the larger towns they started to move closer to a bigger community. This further reduced the draw to Waco. The slow movement of people away from the town reduced its ability to sustain businesses and compete with other cities, culminating in the abrupt closing of businesses in Waco.

The last critical reason that Waco failed as a town is simply bad luck. To the west, just over a mile and a half away from the center of Waco, the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad passes on a south-southwest slant. The reason for this slant is to cross the Cow Skin Creek as few times as possible as a direct path from Haysville would require crossing the creek

multiple times. If it weren't for the creek, the railway may have passed through Waco and the town's history would be very different. Or, if the town would've been just one mile to the west, Waco would've gotten a station and might still have a post office today.

Conclusion

The town of Waco was built around education and a sense of community. The town itself drew the short straw and due to factors of location and geography, the town collapsed. But the value of community stayed fast; even though the businesses couldn't stand in the town the community could. Even today a few residents are still faithful to that bond and call Waco home. Sitting on the corner of 95th street and Highway 81 is a quiet hamlet. That place is a home to its people and its people call that place home; Waco, Kansas.

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