

draft as of April 29, 2015

CHAPTER 3. Historical Development

Knowledge of the past historical development of an area is often important to an understanding of its future. Factors which influence growth or change may extend their effects for decades. For example, once established, roads remain a pattern that endures for generations — the location of one-third of the streets and highways in the nation were laid out before the automobile was even invented. The structure and purpose of a building may change over time, but its location remains a focal point to attract further development.

The following account of the formation and development of Sterling was prepared for this plan by deriving information from *Sterling, Rice Co. Kansas*, reprinted by Ross W. Zimmerman, *Sterling Centennial*, printed by the Sterling Bulletin in 1972, and *Main Street Sterling, The History of Sterling, Kansas* by Max Moxley.

History of Sterling

It was on March 3, 1863, that President Abraham Lincoln signed the railroad land-grant bill that would eventually give three million acres of land to the then budding Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. With a stroke of his pen the President opened up a whole new section of the west, making possible such pioneer settlements as Sterling and its forerunner, the tiny Quaker village of Peace.



Broadway Avenue in Sterling

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After 1822, when William Becknell pioneered the Santa Fe Trail, thousands of travelers crossed Rice County, but few chose to stay. The Railroad Act of 1862 gave the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railway ten years to extend its track to the Colorado line, which seemed to be reasonable; but an affair called the Civil War occurred which interrupted this expansion. It was not until 1868 that the first spike was driven at Topeka.

By 1871 the railroad line had reached Newton. In the fall of that year a company was formed in Topeka known as the Agricultural Colony of Kansas. This group wanted to locate a community of farmers somewhere along this new railroad line — "237 miles southwest of Atchison". The initial exploration trip was made toward the end of December 1871, and the town of Peace was surveyed on January 15, 1872.

The surveyors showed very little imagination. The town site was exactly one mile square, Cleveland to Garfield and First Street to Eleventh Street, with Broadway, the principal street, located on the half-mile line.

The town was originally called "Peace", out of respect for Mr. Ninde, a Quaker, who was the town's first land agent. His headquarters was a strange building hauled here by wagon from Peabody and located south of town, across the road from what is now known as Sterling Lake Park. This structure housed a store, hotel, post office, surveyor's office, and the land office.



By 1876 the town of Peace was called Sterling, though the reason for the name change is something of a mystery. When the county was organized in 1871 there were only six townships, and one of them, Sterling Township, included all the southern part of the county. There was also a tiny settlement near Peace called Sterling, which had a post office. In May of 1876 the proud people of Peace decided that they needed a more progressive name for the fast-growing city, and the town was incorporated as a city of the third-class under the name of Sterling.

Looking back, it seems a wonder that the town got underway at all. It was founded in 1872. A nationwide financial panic hit in 1873, and the grasshopper plague followed in 1874. The town developed faster than the countryside. The sod had to be broken, and crops planted. For the first two years the farmers lived largely on profits from buffalo bones, which were gathered from the prairie and sold for \$8 a ton.

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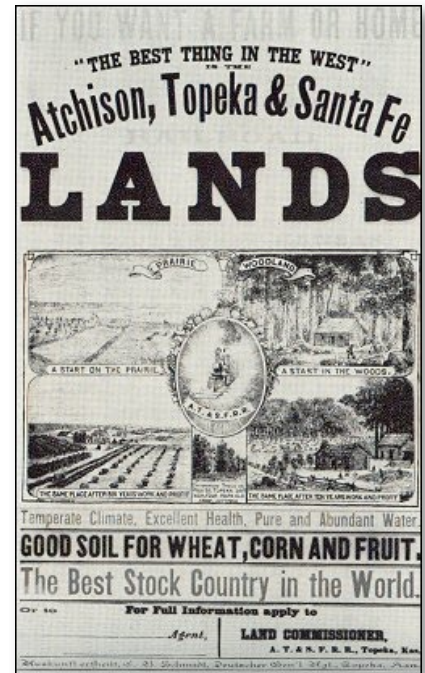
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It was the policy of the railroad to locate a town about every ten miles, in order to sell lots and to populate the area with potential passengers and freight customers. Essentially, the entire geography was based on the five-mile-an-hour gait of the horse, a fact which eventually had much to do with the town's future, and ultimately its decline.

During the first five years there was much moving around and shuffling of the Rice County inhabitants. The town of Atlanta was doomed to fade once its location on the Santa Fe Trail was no longer of importance. Several buildings from Atlanta were moved to Sterling. A very large building was moved to Sterling from Union City, a settlement on Cow Creek south of Lyons. With major additions, it became the Green Mountain House, Sterling's principal hotel.

Sterling and Raymond, a town northwest of Sterling, were the oldest towns in the county. Raymond bloomed quickly under the illusion of a future in cattle, but faded fast as the Texas cattle trade eventually made its way to Dodge City. Several Raymond businesses then moved to Peace, bringing not just the proprietors, but also their buildings. Henry Sherman and T. C. Magoffin were among these mobile businessmen. Magoffin's Hall became one of the leading institutions in Sterling; both church meetings and dances were held in the same upstairs room.

The first school district in Rice County, District No. 1, was organized in the Green Mountain House hotel. The first school house, a frame structure 25 by 40 feet in size, was built on what was called College Square, where the present grade school still stands. The original school building was replaced in 1878, by a large brick school on the same block. Much later, additional grade schools were built on South Broadway, and the Adams Street school was erected at Ninth and Adams. In 1911, a new high school followed on North Broadway. Sterling's present high school was built in 1954.



Sterling Grade School

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Located on the mainline of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, Sterling grew rapidly and became the principal trading point for a wide area. The "Kinsley cutoff" or "bow-string" of the Santa Fe railroad was not built until 1887. Until then, Sterling served as a retail center, particularly for lumber, for the entire area to the southwest, including Sylvia and Stafford. Lyons did not get a railroad until 1880, with the construction of the McPherson-Ellinwood branch.

The year 1876 was a significant one. Peace changed its name, and Rice County held an election to determine the location of a new county seat. Two sites were proposed: Peace and a new town to be called "The Centre" and located in the exact center of the county. When Rice County was originally organized in 1871, it included five townships which are now in Reno County — Hays, Walnut, Medford, Salt Creek, and Grant. With the election pending, politicians at Atlanta persuaded the legislature to give these townships to Reno County, 115,200 acres of land, in order that Peace would be too close to the southern line to be a practical location for the county government. As a result, Peace lost to "The Centre", which later became Lyons, by a vote of 457 to 336.

As in most pioneer towns, the majority of the original buildings were one-story frame structures with false fronts. Sterling lost some twenty of these buildings in four major fires in the years 1880 to 1882. Three of the conflagrations were on Broadway, between Main Street and the railroad tracks.



Tracks' end, near Hutchinson, 1872

The first train in Peace arrived on the Santa Fe Railway at 4:00 p.m. on June 26, 1872. It was a construction train of about forty cars. On the morning of that day the smoke of the engine could be seen east of town, and by the evening of the 27th the crew was camped two miles west of the city. The grade had already been prepared, and track was laid at the rate of about three miles a day. Later, in western Kansas, as much as ten miles of iron was laid in a day.

Many of the original farmers, having come from Iowa, Illinois and Ohio, had expected to be able to grow corn here, but it was not to be. Rainfall was too sparse. As an experiment they turned to sorghums, which led to some unusual local industries. Encouraged by E. Branson Cowgill, editor of the *Rice County Gazette*, they established a molasses mill, a sugar cane mill, and most importantly, a broomcorn industry. Sterling gained national attention as a "Broomcorn Capital", shipping not just carloads but trainloads of brush to New York. A dwarf corn that grew well in the sandy land southwest of town was shipped to Schenectady, N.Y. where it was used in making whisk brooms. (Even the "dwarf" corn was twelve feet tall!)



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Another early industry was the Sterling salt plant established in 1888 by banker T. H. Brown. It was a brine plant that operated until sold to Morton Salt in 1929.

From almost its first year, the town counted flour milling as a major industry. The city's first merchants, Landis and Hollinger, built the Keystone Mill and Elevator on South Broadway in 1873. This was followed by the International Roller Mill in the 1800s, located near Seventh Street along the railroad tracks. This large mill burned at the turn of the last century, and the all-concrete Arnold Mill was erected in 1922. The Arnold Mill was sold to the Farmers Co-op in 1955, and the mill shut down.

The Farmers Co-op Union has continued to expand through the years and is now a county-wide operation, one of the largest in the state, and with headquarters in Sterling. Equally important and still so today, was the establishment in 1887 of Cooper Memorial College by the Synod of Kansas of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. The venture, promoted by the Sterling Land and Investment Company, was essentially a business move. A group of civic leaders, most of whom were members of the Congregational Church, offered a \$25,000 endowment. The men hoped to recoup their investment by selling lots in the north end of town. Most lots were never sold, but the school opened and survived, and changed its name to Sterling College in 1920.



The 1890s were perhaps the town's best years. Such structures as the Masonic Temple, the new Methodist Church, the D.J. Fair home at 6th and Monroe, and the Smyser (Zimmerman) home on West Main and 7th Street were erected.

In 1905 the J.S. Dillon Company was founded in Sterling. The first establishment was a wagon shop and furniture shop on West Main Street. The store eventually expanded its stock to include dry goods, furniture, hardware and second-hand items. From this beginning has bloomed an operation of over 300 stores across the country for the Hutchinson-based Dillon's Stores. Though not in its original form, Dillon's is still a staple of the Sterling community.

In 1916, bonds were issued by the City to purchase the George Morris Electric Light Plant from George Morris, and to improve both the plant and the distribution system. Sterling continues to be a public power community.

In 1920, Broadway was paved from Cleveland Avenue south. The City carried 33% of the financing for the project and property owners along the route paid the balance. In 1923, Broadway was paved from Cleveland Avenue north to the city limit.

Street lights were first installed in 1921.

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A sanitary sewer system was first installed in 1923.

The City Manager/Commission form of government was inaugurated in 1924, and Sterling became one of the first professionally managed communities in the country.

Sterling escaped some of the trauma of the 1930's Depression by the discovery here of oil in 1928. There has been exploration and production in the area continuously since that time.

Vital to the community was the introduction of irrigated farmland in the 1960s, from a supply of water in gravel beds 60 to 100 feet below the surface. Also, cash grain has been supplemented with cattle raising by most local farmers.

Several industries have been important additions to the economy, including a plant for the manufacture of front end loaders for tractors, a chemical plant, and a former drilling company which is now the location of a water filtration manufacturer called United Industries.



Other major local employers include Sterling Presbyterian Manor, as well as Sterling College.

For a time, Sterling gained statewide recognition as a medical center through the Trueheart Clinic and its pioneer work in the treatment of skin cancer. Dr. P.P. Trueheart and his son, Marion, were the first in the Midwest to use X-rays and radium for this purpose. The first hospital was opened in 1902, and new facilities were added in 1909 and again in 1953. The hospital eventually closed in 1976.

In the 1960s, school unification resulted in a strong local school system with a substantial tax base.

The early 1970s saw the establishment of a medical clinic housing three doctors, a nurse practitioner and one dentist. Improvements to the Rice County District Hospital located 9 miles north in Lyons have been undertaken through tax support from citizens. Hutchinson Regional Medical Center and Summit Surgical LLC both serve the City with major medical services and are both located in Hutchinson, approximately 20 miles away. One nursing home, Sterling Presbyterian Manor, is located within the community.

Municipal services and infrastructure have kept up with the times and seen major improvements such as a new water tower, fire station, swimming pool, upgraded water lines and electrical distribution system, a new sewer lagoon, and the addition of a Veterans' Memorial and other extensive park improvements. A major streetscape improvement was completed in 2000, and new grass greens at the Sterling Country Club golf course have boosted the membership.



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The Sterling Chamber of Commerce supports "The Old Fashioned Fourth of July Celebration", including an annual parade that has continued for over 115 years. The event draws large crowds, especially for the turtle races which have taken place for 74 years straight, and for the magnificent fireworks display presented each year at Sterling Lake Park.

Educational institutions have made marked facility improvements in recent years. The local school district, Sterling USD 376, embarked in 2008 on a \$20 million bond issue for improvements, including the addition of storm shelters and a brand new grade school. In addition, Sterling College has renovated a major administration hall, added two dorms, renovated the theater, and is looking at the addition of another dorm to bolster its record breaking enrollment in the mid 2010s.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the City undertook annexation efforts, including the addition of forty units of lake-side recreational development southwest of the city, known as Cottonwood Lake.



Efforts began in 2010 to work toward a long-term solution to affordable housing in Sterling, particularly for employees of the growing local economic sector. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of housing units in the community declined by thirty.

Sterling's population has remained fairly steady over the years. For 100 of 120 years it has always been near or just above the 2,000 mark in population. The census of 2000 reported Sterling's population as 2,642, which by the 2010 Census had decreased to 2,328.



As Sterling moves through the 21st century, questions arise about its future, and the future of all small Kansas cities. Planning for the future, Sterling hopes to continue to thrive.



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Historic Preservation

Sterling has a remarkable inventory of charming older homes, as well as a number of historical commercial buildings in the downtown area along Broadway. These structures and neighborhoods give Sterling character, and an extraordinary sense of place.

Three buildings in Sterling are listed in the National Register of Historic Places: Cooper Hall on the campus of Sterling College, the Shay Building, and the Sterling Free Public (Carnegie) Library.

Three other buildings in and near Sterling are listed as potentially eligible for listing on the National Register: Wilson Hall and Campbell Hall (both on the Sterling College campus), and a 19th-century farmstead on 18th Road between Avenues U and V.

Additional information on Sterling's historical buildings is available from the *Kansas Historic Resources Inventory* database, at <http://khri.kansasgis.org>.

Sterling Buildings Listed on the National Register of Historic Places

Cooper Hall — *on Sterling College campus;
west of N. Broadway, north of Cooper Avenue*

Cooper Hall was built in 1887 by George H. Evans of Topeka, based on plans by architect William Gall of Arkansas City. The rough-hewn limestone blocks used in its construction were quarried at Strong City in Chase County.

The three-story Gothic-influenced building is still used as the College administration building and for classrooms. A focal point on the campus and a landmark in Sterling, it was listed in the National Register in 1974.



*Cooper Hall
Sterling College*

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Shay Building — 202 South Broadway Avenue,
on the southeast corner of Broadway and
Monroe

Built in about 1881, just five years after the City was incorporated, the two-story brick Shay Building is an example of late 19th-century vernacular commercial styling. It was an early focus of business activity in Sterling, and is the only original building still remaining on what was historically Sterling's most important intersection.



*Shay Building
Sterling, Kansas*

Erected and owned for many years by T.C. Magoffin, an early Sterling merchant, it was purchased by R.J. Shay in 1892. The Shay family continued to own the building until 1965.

In 1906, the building was redesigned. The brick on the main facades was parged with stucco, with lines scored in the stucco to make it resemble cut stone. An ornamental metal cornice was added along the roof line, including the word "Shay" on the pediment above the main corner entrance. This was apparently an attempt by the owner to keep pace with the newer, more impressive buildings that had been constructed on the other three corners of the intersection — the Mincer Building (lost to fire in 2002), Citizens State Bank (demolished in the mid-1960s), and First National Bank (demolished in 1968).

Approximately 10,000 square feet in size, the Shay Building has two first floor commercial storefronts, and nearly a dozen rooms upstairs used in the past as both professional offices and apartments. Over the years, the building has housed dry goods and grocery stores, social clubs, a photography studio, a dentist, a cobbler, and a hardware store. Starting in the 1930s the first floor became a pool hall, which was active for 70 years; when it closed in 2003, the building was unoccupied for the first time in its history.

The Shay Building has endured for a century without major structural changes, and has been recently rehabilitated in accordance with national restoration standards. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2010.

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Sterling Free Public (Carnegie) Library —
*132 North Broadway, on the southeast
corner of Broadway & Jefferson*

Constructed in about 1917, the Library is a one-story brick building with limestone details, and a tiled roof. It incorporates Jacobethan design elements, including steep roof gables and light stone trim around the door. The architect was George P. Washburn of Ottawa, who designed nine Kansas Carnegie Libraries.



*Sterling Free Public Library (a Carnegie Library)
Sterling, Kansas*

Scottish-American industrialist Andrew Carnegie significantly influenced the development of public libraries around the world. Between 1886 and 1921, in the United States alone, funds from his Carnegie Foundation helped build 1,681 city libraries, as well as 108 college libraries. Before Carnegie, many communities had no library, and those that existed were typically circulating libraries, available only to those who could afford a subscription. The system of publicly supported libraries we take for granted today, free to all users, is largely a result of Andrew Carnegie's vision and generosity.

At the time, public libraries were a relatively new building type, and many early Carnegie libraries were expensive Beaux Arts buildings with impressive exteriors and extremely inefficient floor plans. Then in 1910 the Carnegie Foundation began providing the first widely circulated guidelines for public library design — *Notes on Library Buildings*. These guidelines established many of the standard design elements still regularly used in libraries today.

A Library Association was organized in Sterling in 1902, and by 1916 had won their \$10,000 Carnegie Library grant. Sterling's Library reflects the model specifications and floor plans included in the *Notes on Library Buildings*, and functioned well for the community. Eventually additional space was needed, and in 1982, a 1700-square-foot addition was constructed at the back of the original 1848-square-foot Library building.

The Sterling Free Public Library was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1987, as part of the "Carnegie Libraries of Kansas" thematic resources nomination. It is one of 63 Carnegie Libraries built in Kansas between 1900 and 1930, and one of only 28 that still retain enough of their original character to be on the National Register.

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Other Historic Buildings in Sterling

Other buildings in the community may have the potential for listing on the National Register, should their owners ever decide to pursue such recognition. The First United Methodist Church, on the southwest corner of Broadway and Jefferson, is one example of such a building. It was originally constructed in 1901; an addition was added in 1932. In 1991, that addition was removed and replaced with a new addition, and the basement was filled in. The main portion of the church still retains enough historical integrity that it may qualify for listing.



First United Methodist Church — 1921



First United Methodist Church — 2015