

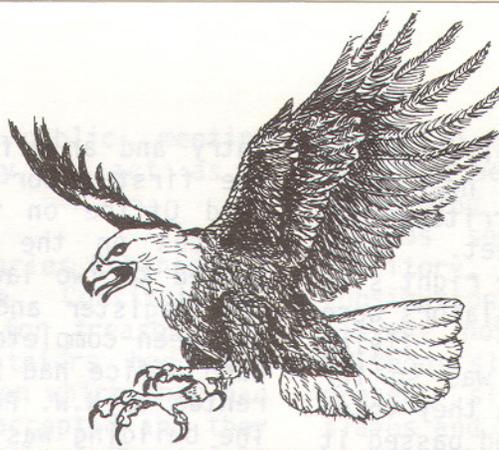
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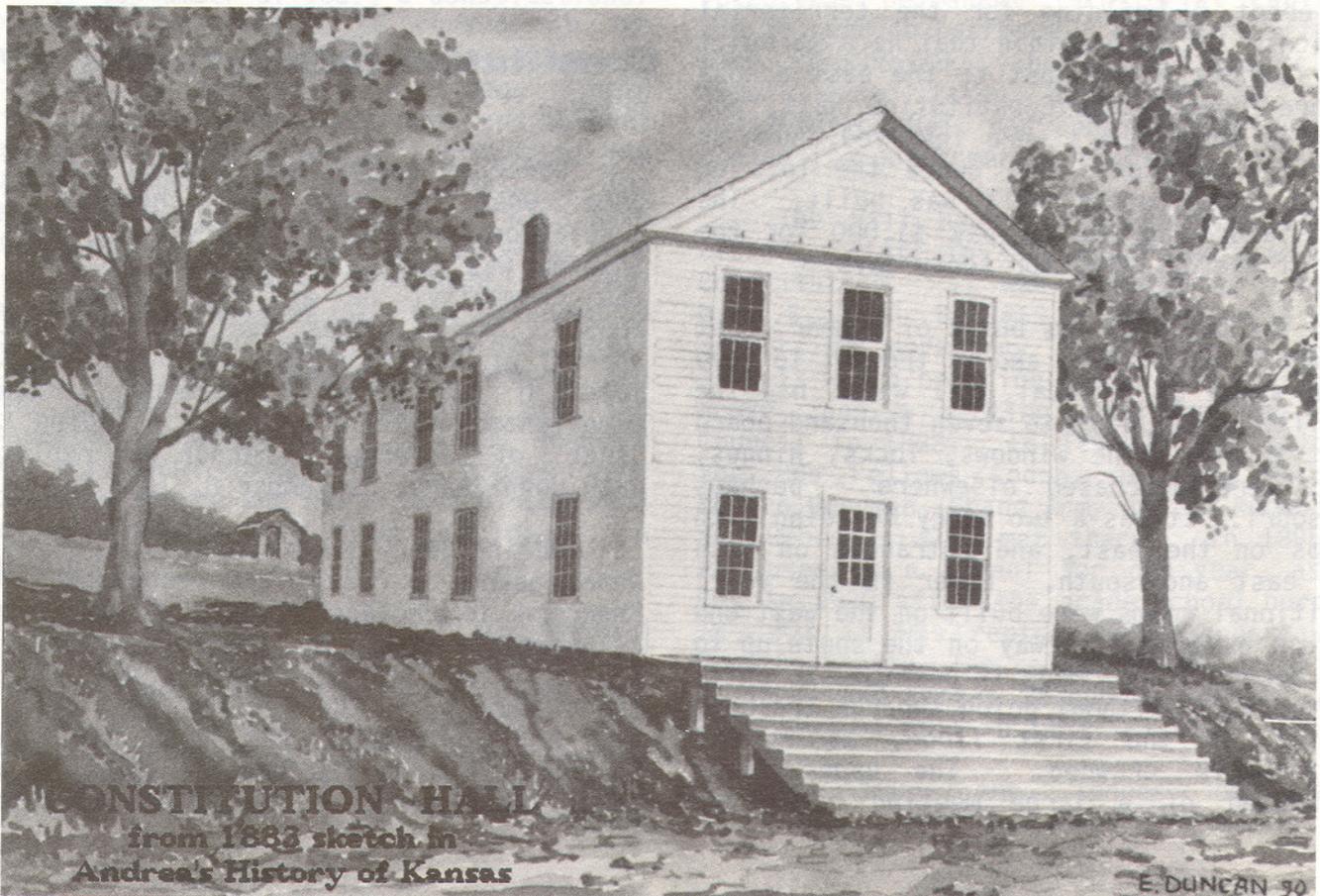




VERY OLD, BUT WITH A NEW BEGINNING Constitution Hall

Kansas became a territory in 1854 by an act of Congress. Under that bill the boundaries of the area comprised: Missouri on the east, the fortieth parallel on the north, the Rocky mountains on the west, the Territory of New Mexico on the southwest, and the thirty-seventh parallel on the south. The United States Congress and President were to select a governor for the region, who was to organize the territory as other states had been prior to their statehood.

Andrew Reeder was selected the first governor, July 7, 1854, but he did not arrive in the territory until October 7, 1854. He had been instructed to use the city of Leavenworth as his center of operation. He found no empty buildings there, so he went to the near-by Fort Leavenworth for accommodations. It was so noisy and crowded there, that when he found space at the Shawnee Mission near present day Kansas City, he moved to that place. At that point he found that politics and



CONSTITUTION HALL
from 1883 sketch in
Andrea's History of Kansas

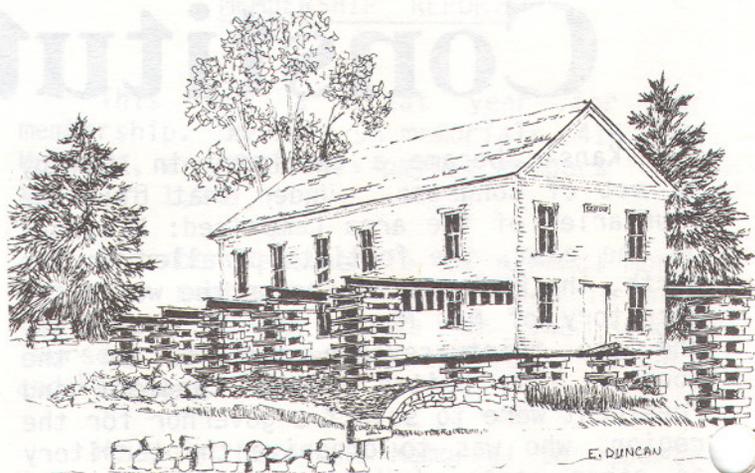
religion did not mix too well, so he suggested Pawnee, a new town near Fort Riley, as capital of the territory and where the legislature was to meet. There was a new stone building of the right size for the meetings, but the legislators were dissatisfied with their living accommodations and the fact it was so far from Missouri. After three days they voted to return to Shawnee Mission and passed it over the governor's veto.

On their return, they were told of a town about fifty miles to the west, called Lecompton, that had several hotels and seven saloons. These would provide living quarters for the Territorial Legislature when it met. The saloons would care for those people who could not find hotel rooms to rent. They would provide food, and at night when the last customer was gone, the tables washed, and the floor covered with new sawdust, one could rent a table for sleeping or pile down on the floor.

The legislature voted Lecompton as the first permanent capital of the territory and also the county seat of Douglas County. William Nace had come to the area with Secretary of the Territory Woodson and as he had had considerable experience as a builder, he was selected to go to Lecompton to erect a building for the territorial offices. It is possible that he also built the Council Hall, just to the east across Elmore street from Constitution Hall, but records show others were involved, such as Sheriff Sam Jones who owned the lots on which Constitution Hall was built. The Legislature agreed to pay \$1,000 for the use of the building for forty days.

The building was built of lumber, most of which was walnut, and is thought to have been sawed by a local mill which had the ability to saw five to seven thousand board feet a day. The windows, locks, hinges, etc. were purchased elsewhere - perhaps Missouri. It was a two story building with steps on the east, and entrances on both the east and south. Later in the year, additional rooms were built on the west end and an outside stairway on the south up to the second story, made it possible to enter the building without going through the Land Office on the first floor, as it was continually crowded. The upper floor consisted of a large meeting room, and

entry and an office room on the northwest. The first floor had a large room for the Land Office on the east and four smaller offices on the west, two of which were rented to two lawyers and two were used by the register and receiver. The building had been completed in 1856 but by 1860 the Land Office had been removed and that area rented to N.W. Perry a dry goods merchant. The building was heated by wood stoves and had an outside well and plumbing (pit



Constitution Hall-November 1990 privy).

Governor Reeder rode through Lecompton once when he was out checking the population of the Territory, but Wilson Shannon was the first governor to live in the community, he arrived September 7, 1855. Samuel Jones had been appointed Sheriff of Douglas county and he instigated much of the trouble Governor Shannon experienced while in office, including the "sack" of Lawrence. Shannon was replaced with John Geary, September 8, 1856.

During Geary's term in office, Sheriff Jones asked to resign and recommended Mr. Sherrard to replace him. When Geary was reluctant to accept Mr. Sherrard because of his drinking habits, Sherrard met him in the anteroom of the legislature, spat on him and threatened him with his guns, following him to the outside platform and down the stairs. Sherrard was later

fatally wounded at a public meeting concerning his eligibility to act as a sheriff.

On May 16, 1856, Charles Robinson, a leader of the Topeka Constitutional Convention, was arrested for treason. He and several other free-staters had felt that the Topeka Constitution which they had helped author, would be accepted and they would be the state officials. The trials were held in September in Constitution Hall and the eyes of the nation were focused on them. When they were declared innocent, the north applauded but the south did not. The legislature could not seem to work with Geary; they threatened him and he resigned March 26, 1857, and with the help of some Free State people slipped secretly out of Kansas. R. J. Walker was named governor December 18, 1858.

Upstairs in Constitution Hall, some of the most important events in Kansas Territorial history occurred. The second Territorial Legislature convened there in January and February of 1857, at the same time a "Law and Order Party" convention met and organized the first Democratic party in Kansas. They held Democratic conventions there in January and May 1857.

In September of 1857, a Constitutional Convention was slated to convene in the Hall, most of the delegates being of Pro-slavery persuasion. Upon their arrival, they found James Lane and several hundred Free State people surrounding the building and barring entrances. The delegates feared a confrontation with them would result in a battle, leaving many injured and the town destroyed, so they appealed to the army at Fort Leavenworth for help. Troops could not be sent until October, so the meeting was postponed. The army troops came in October and the convention took place. Several hundred soldiers with brass field pieces were stationed around the Hall, this discouraged further interruptions from the Free State hordes.

John Calhoun, a friend of Abraham Lincoln and former surveyor general of Illinois, and now of Kansas Territory, was elected president of the convention. The Constitution that was written was patterned after the Missouri Constitution and closely

resembled every other state constitution that had been framed, except in the clause concerning slavery. It provided that when it was submitted to the people of the territory, they could vote for the constitution with slavery, or without slavery not for the constitution alone. "Without slavery" was so stated as to mean present slave owners could keep their slaves and their progeny, but no new slaves could be brought into the state.

The constitution was submitted to the people December 21, 1857 and as the Free State people did not vote, it was accepted. It was sent to Congress, but was not immediately acted upon. President Buchanan endorsed it, but when it was sent to the congress, they referred it back to Kansas for another vote, as it was not believed to have been an honest vote the first time.

The new legislature that had just been elected met at Leecompton and called for a new election on the constitution. It was held August 2, 1858 and had a vote record of 11,813 against it and 1,926 for it. So that constitution died.

From that time on the legislature, which was then predominantly Free-state, would convene at Leecompton (as it had been voted the permanent territorial capital) and adjourn to Lawrence. The court offices were also moved. The tables, chairs and desks were taken away and by 1861 Constitution Hall had been cleaned out and ceased its governmental functions.

The Hall had many uses after Kansas became a state in 1861 under the Wyandotte Constitution. It was promoted as a hotel by F.B. Hill in 1865. It became a Lane University dormitory from 1865 to 1894. Then it was a boarding house, and apartment house, and a meeting room for the City Council in 1888. In 1894 it was sold to the Odd Fellows Lodge, and the Masons, Modern Woodman, Grand Army of the Republic, and Rebeccas also met there. In 1896 it was used as a school for one year, as it was in 1920 after the grade school burned. In 1902 it was rented to an undertaker, Fred Bartlett. The telephone office of the Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company used Constitution Hall in 1905 and 1906.

In 1906 the lodges did some

remodeling. The rear of the building was raised, as it had sunk, the exterior stair case removed, windows changed, the upstairs plastered, the front porch deck replaced, the inside stairway enclosed and an upstairs closet built in 1909. It became a "Carriage Repository" for Hugh Larimer (1909-1912). A retaining wall and concrete walk were constructed on the south side (1911), electric lights added (1912-1914), part of the ground floor cemented and the remainder replaced with new flooring (1913). It was a public voting place until 1986. The newspaper reporters from near-by cities came to Lecompton when there was a presidential election to get the vote count. They maintained that the Maine and Lecompton vote totals usually indicated who would be the next president. Now the voting is done in the Community Building and the votes are counted in Lawrence by mechanical means, so the reporters no longer come.

In 1920 the United Brethern sold the Lane chapel to the local school district to be used as a high school. They then frequently used Constitution Hall for many church activities as well as Sunday meetings. Since about 1880, the ladies of the church have served Thanksgiving dinner to the town, and as the Hall was the only place that could accommodate that large a group it was served in the lower story. They also held their bazaars there. From 1924 to 1927 the Alumni association held their annual banquets in the same room.

The lodges and the churches were the center of all social activity in the town. The Hall was used by the secret orders when they had public dances. It was the only building in town where dancing was permitted. One local family remembers an incident that occurred in 1916 or 1917. One of the lodges planned an oyster supper for their families at the Hall. Their children were so excited and discussed it at length at school. Just imagine, their fathers cooking a meal: it was something they'd never seen them do. They'd seen them walk through the kitchen, but cook, never! They were to use frozen oysters brought from Kansas City on the evening train called the "Plug". The night of the event, their mothers took them to the first floor meeting room, they were seated at a long table and served a large bowl of soup with small round oyster crackers. When the

mothers saw all were served, they nodded, so they all picked up their spoons and dived in. At the first bite a slight "face" was made and they all laid down their spoons. Some cook had thoroughly scorched the soup! The mothers again signaled them to eat their serving. It got slightly better as they became accustomed to the taste. They were also allowed to take out their oysters and eat them without the soup. They couldn't make it to an empty bowl, but did eat enough to fool their fathers into believing the soup was all right.

In 1884, William Leamer, a local merchant, was given a deed for Constitution Hall in payment for a loan. As before stated he sold it to the Odd Fellows in 1894. They kept ownership until they exhausted building funds in 1946 and transferred the property to the Rebecca lodges. Over the years it became in need of complete restoration, so in 1986 the Rebeccas sold it to former Senator Winton Winter, Sr. and Senator Franklin Gaines. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976 and was put on the National Register of Historic Places. These gentlemen gave it to the Kansas State Historical Society on Territorial Day, June 28, 1986. The Rebeccas were requested to stay there until late summer of 1987.

The Historical Society had a preliminary Architectural-Emergency report prepared in January 1986. In October 1990 bids were taken for the restoration of the building.

A local arthitect-builder and K.U. professor, Dan Rockhill, was given the contract and is at present working on the first phase of the restoration and stabilization of the structure. The first phase of the restoration is quite extensive structurally. Using I-beams and construction jacks the entire building has been hoisted off its foundation about 18 inches. Some work of an archaeological nature is being conducted on and in the earth immediately beneath the building. Following that, a 2/3 basement will bedug with a crawl space only in the back part. This basement will house heating and other utility facilities. The original foundation has been preserved and will be repaired using the original stones as far as they were found to be still present.

Matching stones will be added to places when the original ones are missing. A new supporting foundation will be constructed inside the original one to give the restored Constitution Hall sufficient support!

The first floor joists will be repaired or reinforced and as much of the original flooring as still exists will be relaid in its proper position. The windows will be repaired and reglazed where necessary. The exterior siding will be scraped, repaired (or replaced) and painted to increase its weather proofness.

Around the immediate exterior extensive regrading and the installation of a proper drainage system will be completed. All native stone in connection with the original structure has been preserved, numbered and will eventually take its original position, as will each brick from the chimney.

This will complete the first of three phases for the complete restoration of Constitution Hall and is being conducted by Dan Rockhill and Sons, a local contractor. [Ed Note: Information on phase I was gathered from Dale Watts of the State Historical Society, Paul Bahnmaier, Dan Rockhill, and Ione Paslay.]

Iona Spencer and Sara Walter

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THE LECOMPTON UNION - 1856

A.W. Jones & R.H. Bennett, Editors
Lecompton, K.T. Nov. 20, 1856

There is not a more prosperous or thriving little village in the Territory, than Lecompton--and it bids fair in a short time to be one of the largest places in it. The country around is rich as any in the world--well timbered--and the Kansas river affords an abundant supply for all purposes--and in addition to its natural advantages--it will have all the artificial circumstances--that adds importance and strength to a place. This is the head quarters of government. The Governor resides here, the Legislature meets here, the Land Office is here, and the Judges will hold their Courts here. So far it has grown under every disadvantage, situated in Douglas county, the hot-bed of abolitionism in the territory, it felt more seriously the effects of the disturbances and was stunted and crippled in its growth. In addition, other places in the territory have attracted the attention of the public, and capitalist have gone through it and around it without investing a cent in it. But we are happy to state that things are assuming a more cheering aspect--the sound of the axe, saw and hammer, is heard from morning until night, and frequently we rise in the morning and walk over a lot, without the vestige of a house on it, at night we see erected upon it the hull of a good and comfortable building.

Notwithstanding this, the cry is still "house room," and the demand far exceeds the supply. As an evidence of this fact, houses that cost from two to four hundred dollars to build, are renting for from \$250 to \$300, and selling from \$600 to \$1,200. Within the last two months eight or ten new houses have been built and there are at present fifteen or twenty nearly completed or under contract. Lots that sold for \$100 four weeks ago, cannot be bought for less than \$200. All that it wants is workmen of every kind and men of capital. Come gentlemen, there is room for speculation.

Christmas Tree Ornaments

A new tradition is being started by the Lecompton Historical Society. Anyone interested is invited to donate a family ornament (handmade or other varieties) to be used to decorate our trees with ornaments for years to come. Attractive ornaments are sought and will be catalogued into the museum. We hope to hear from in-state and out-of-state, member and non-member persons who want to participate in this unusual expression of the Christmas spirit.



PRESIDENT'S REPORT

As 1990 draws to a close it is appropriate to review the many positive things that have happened and have been achieved by the Lecompton Historical Society and Lecompton Community this year. These events are collectively a tribute to the great people of this community and the former residents who continue to cherish Lecompton.

1. New water distribution system for Lecompton.
2. Northeast Education Cooperative located in the Lecompton High School building has increased employment by 11 to 18 persons and received nearly \$1,000,000 in grants.
3. Beginning of the restoration of Constitution Hall.
4. Naming of Eisenhower Memorial Drive and improvements in the road base by the Douglas County Commission.
5. The Lecompton Historical Society membership has reached 1,049.
6. Completion of the addition to the Lecompton Elementary School.
7. Restoration of the Lecompton Roadside Park by the State of Kansas.

8. Improvements underway to the road west of Lecompton.

9. A tremendously successful Territorial Day through everyone's volunteer help.

10. A unique reenactment of the Eisenhower Wedding and Reception.

11. A play "Ida" about the lives of Ida and David Eisenhower was a great production given on several occasions.

12. The construction of new horse-shoe pits in Rowena Park.

13. The reenactment of the Battle of Fort Titus was great historical education and entertainment.

14. The painting and planting of 100 flower barrels.

15. The sewing of "WELCOME" flags for the City of Lecompton.

16. The United Way Campaign reached 300% of its goal.

17. Hand-carved and painted Bald Eagle for the front of Lecompton City Hall.

18. Historic Lecompton sign painted for downtown Lecompton.

19. A successful CROP Walk by the Lecompton U.M.C. Youth Fellowship.

20. The Lecompton Alumni Banquet had a large attendance and great program.

21. Contribution and placement of many items in the Lane University Museum continues to be something in which we can take pride.

By any reasonable measurement, 1990 has to be considered a good year. It is the spirit of community and pride of heritage that drove most of these accomplishments to fruition. Lecompton continues to be great place to live!

The following people have donated items or contributed in some way to benefit the Lecompton Historical Society:

1. A.K. and Charlene Winter have accepted

the responsibility for conducting tours at Lane University Museum.

- 2. Campaign buttons by Brian Walter.
- 3. Eisenhower Centennial Memorabilia by Evelyn and Don Willis.
- 4. Photo of Willie Henry by Doris Matney.
- 5. Antique jewelry and other items by Lavina Hanna.

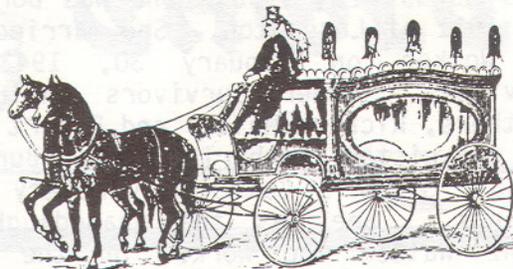
6. Skip Cook donated the material and helped install a protective glass cover for the miniature farm with the help of George Simmons.

7. Marguerite Bowman, Arloene Simmons, Opal Goodrick, Jeri Skinner and Helen Norwood for a great amount of time spent re-cataloging the museum artifacts.

8. Karen and Rich McConnell, George and Arloene Simmons, Iona Spencer and Marguerite Bowman for representing Lecompton at an educational conference on history.

9. World War I uniform of K.B. Logan by relatives of Elmer Wilson.
Paul Bahnmaier

Obituaries



Ronald E. Jones, 66, of Kewanee, Illinois died September 26, 1990. He had worked 34 years for J.C. Penney Company. He was a Navy veteran. He was born March 31, 1924, in Ozawkie; the son of Leo and Belle Marker Jones. He was graduated from Perry High School and Washburn University. He was a member of the United Methodist Church and Rotary Club of Kewanee. He married Phyllis Good September 13, 1946. She survives. Other survivors include two daughters, Janice Smith and Sally Lamp, a son, Ronald L. Jones, a sister, Leona B. Runkow and 4 grandchildren. Burial was in Oak Ridge Cemetery at Perry. He was a descendant of an original worker on the

THE LECOMPTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Lecompton, Kansas 66050 is a non-profit corporation for the preservation of historical sites. We are eager for continued membership and new members!

Individual membership is \$3 per year, from December to December, while couples membership is \$5. Life membership is \$50 per individual. Contributions are tax deductible. Checks should be made payable to the Lecompton Historical Society, and mailed to Mrs. Iona Spencer, R.R. #1, Lecompton, Kansas 66050.

***** Please Clip And Mail With Your Check *****

- _____ \$3 Annual Individual Membership
- _____ \$5 Annual Household Membership
- _____ \$50 Individual Life or Memorial Membership
- _____ Other Contribution \$ _____

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