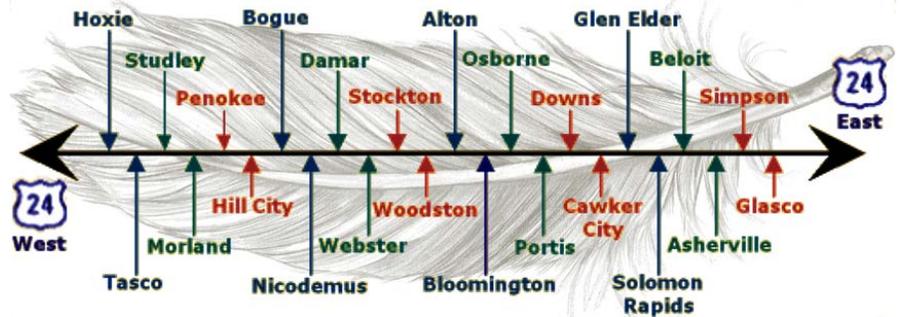




Cawker City, Kansas

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History of Cawker City

by Steven Richardson

Cawker City began when Colonel E. H. Cawker built a house in 1872. The federal land office was located there, 1872-1874. The town was incorporated in 1874. By 1880 the population peaked at 2,000. One of its historic buildings is featured here.

The historical Hesperian Library in Cawker City is undergoing restoration for use as the local museum. Built in 1884 and listed on the national register of historic places, the Victorian building is made of local limestone and has three ornate gables projecting from a mansard roof. The entrance portico and interior furnishings are similarly decorated with Victorian gingerbread.

The origins of the library began in 1874 with a group of 16 local men who formed the "Hesperian Library Association" (hesperian pertains to "the west"). Membership dues were used to procure magazines, periodicals, and books which could be circulated among its members. According to an 1897 article, in the first ten years, the men had spent \$225 for 500 books of which only 200 books were to be found!

In 1883, the local "Woman's Club" saw an opportunity to offer their organizational skills for the care and maintenance of a public library. Begun as a political and cultural organization, the "Woman's Club" was dedicated to elevating the educational and cultural offerings of the community.

To help the women in their efforts, Dr. George Wilberforce Chapman donated a room in his building, rent-free for one year. The women set forth to move the books from the law office of "Smith and Tucker," making necessary repairs, and cataloging each item. Dr. Chapman was an interesting individual whose involvement with the organization led directly to the library building project.

Dr. Chapman was born in 1818 in England. At age eight, he fell from a cherry tree, which resulted in an injury requiring amputation of one leg. At twenty, he left for Canada where he studied medicine and law. In 1871, Dr. Chapman settled at the town of Waconda, located at the fork of the Solomon River just south of Cawker City. He established a shoe store and later sold drugs too. He was also a geologist and had a large private collection of specimens, which included the "Waconda

Meteorite." The gable of his home at Waconda was decorated with interesting geological specimens which he had collected. However, as the economic fortunes of Cawker City grew, Waconda dwindled to the point that even Dr. Chapman resigned to relocate his residence, shoe business, and mineralogical collection to Cawker City.

The meticulously kept minutes of the "Woman's Club" show that on February 5, 1884, the organization "moved and carried that [we] petition Dr. Geo. Chapman to contribute his valuable specimens (of minerals) to the Woman's Club and that we will pledge ourselves to care for it and give our earnest efforts towards the erection of a suitable building for them and for a public Library in the center of town."

The contract to build a stone building was given to John H. Rodgers for \$950.00, and the cornerstone was laid on Thanksgiving Day, November 27, 1884. G. H. Dyer was the carpenter and Reverend William Foster was the stone mason. Although the building was completed by the end of January, it was not dedicated officially until the 4th of July, 1885. With the new building completed, the Women's Club was reorganized and granted a new charter as "The Woman's Hesperian Library Club." The name hesperian was retained to pay tribute to the original library association. However, in Greek Mythology, the name takes on added meaning: The daughters of Hesperus watched over the garden of the golden apples in the Isles of the Blest.

The success of the new Public Library can be seen by the number of books added each year. By 1911, shelving space had become such a problem that half of the original cabinetry was modified and stacked on the western wall. New floor to ceiling shelves were added on the eastern wall. One window on the North side was encased for shelving.

When Cawker City celebrated its centennial in 1971, the library had been given a more spacious home in the recently converted city auditorium building. Historical items were collected and the old library building opened as the new city museum.

The goal of the present restoration is to return the building to its original condition and adapt it for the preservation of historic artifacts of local interest, including Lincoln Park and Waconda Springs. The task has been divided into four phases: (1) roof, (2) walls, (3) interior furnishings, and (4) landscaping. Phase one, restoration of the roof, is nearing completion. Of particular interest are the metal shingles used to cover the sloped portions of the mansard roof. At the top of the original, thin tin shingles is embossed "Patd. 4 April 1882." New replacement shingles are virtually an exact match but are made of heavier gauge metal and have a high-tech color coating. The missing ornamentation of the roof will be faithfully recreated using historic photographs.

Using a historical inventory as well as Dr. Chapman's diary, each rock in the mineral collection will be reidentified and reorganized for display in the original and reconstructed glass display cabinets.

There remains a lot of work ahead, but the red roof and white trim of the Cawker City Museum have already given a new polish to an architectural and historical gem. When you visit Cawker City to see the World's Largest Ball of Twine and the SV24 kiosk across the street from the ball of twine, take a few more minutes and see this outstanding historic building, located one block north of Highway 24 from the corner east of the ball of twine, which is Lake Drive. Another historic item is the oldest church organ in Kansas at the United Methodist Church in Cawker City. A major attraction in the area is Waconda Lake, which covers the site of an important landmark, Waconda Springs.

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