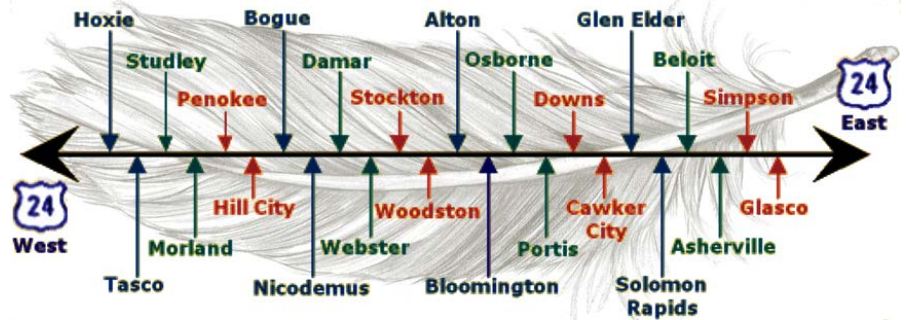
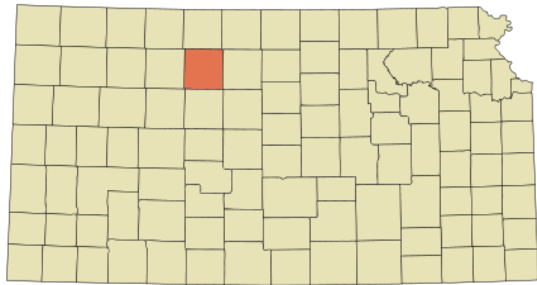




Stockton, Kansas

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A Brief History of Stockton

Settlement

Settlement in Rooks County began in 1871 along the South Solomon River, proceeding on up the valley to where the military trail going from Fort Hays, Kansas, to Fort Kearney, Nebraska, crossed the river. George Beebe, the first resident of Stockton's future town site, built a small general store to furnish supplies to the soldiers and buffalo hunters.

Five McNulty brothers had scouted the area when they were with the militia in 1861, seeing the wide open area for cattle grazing, the abundance of surface water for survival, and a large amount of limestone which could be used for building materials. In 1871, they and five other men from Washington County, Kansas, came back to homestead in the area: the five McNulty brothers—Joseph, Frank, Thomas, James, and John, John R. Wells, Tunis Bulis, John Powell, Seal Northup, and Captain J. Owens.

Joseph McNulty built a log home on his property which would adjoin the town site on the west near the juncture of the two trails, using it as a trading post and soon enlarging it for a hotel. It was later annexed to the town for the McNulty Addition. The hotel was razed in 1924 but in 1961 a replica was built and still stands across the street from the original location as a memorial to the pioneers who founded Stockton. As stock raising was the only industry, Stockville and Stocktown were suggested for the name of their town, but all agreed on John R. Well's proposal of the name of Stockton. The Stockton Town Company was chartered in August of 1872, with officers Joseph, Frank, and J. C. McNulty, John Russell, and G. E. Beebe.

When Rooks County was officially organized on November 26, 1872, both Stockton and the town of Rooks Centre near Medicine Creek, also started in 1872, wanted to be the county seat. Early settler newspaper reminiscences alluded to the fact that underhanded dealings helped establish the county and county seat. J. W. McConnell, one of the first homesteaders, stated "600 residents were required to organize a county so a census had to be taken. Sufficient names were obtained by listing cats, dogs and buffalo."

Thomas McNulty, who filed the first homestead claim on Stockton's future town site, recalled "the census taker accidentally enumerated 12 citizens of Osborne County to help out the number."

John Wells said "I sacrificed much to help organize the county and to make Stockton the county seat, at least 6 or 7 votes as we voted early and often and nearly all night to do it. Some of the area cattlemen had taken a fancy to the name Stockton and to the hospitality of the cattlemen

who had founded it. They rode in to see that all was regular with the election. Residence is after all a matter of intention and when the cow punchers upon whose ever ready Colts and needle guns rested what little safety there was in this new land, expressed an intention it was seldom disputed. That these contemporaries of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill should stand behind their friends was but to be expected. To have objected to one of these men voting, even if he had forgotten his name and the fact that he had already voted a time or two, might have resulted in an immediate vacancy on the election board. The election showed 52 votes for Rooks Centre and 95 for Stockton, ending a bitter controversy. The small vote showed how few settlers actually were in the county. The election was accepted with Stockton the county seat."

This poem by an anonymous early-day writer summed up the election:

NOW WE ARE THE COUNTY SEAT!

Election was being held and proved to be a battle
So what did one rancher do but give names to his cattle
His ranch hands voted many times that day
Using the cattle names and voting the right way
And that's how Stockton got the county seat back in the days of old.
It isn't in the history books but that's the way it's told.

The period 1872 to 1875 saw the destruction of the vast buffalo herds, leaving the Great Plains for the Texas cattle drives and open range for cattle and sheep operations. The years 1875 to 1880 were a chaotic period when the county population grew from 567 to 8,112, with people living everywhere: in crude dugouts, hastily thrown up soddies, in businesses, or on the floor in crowded hotels. Stockton had a population of 400 and was the only place of any size in the county. Lots were assigned to those who had improvements on them, most were flimsy and usually straddling boundary lines to include two lots. Even the tiniest of outhouses served the purpose. When families began to come during 1878 and 1879, the two great years of immigration, they were of an unusually high class, most of the young men were college educated and unmarried who had followed Horace Greeley's advice to "go west, young man, go west" and had come to homestead the free land. The local newspaper editor of the Rooks County Record noted one day in 1879 that he counted "83 unmarried young men sleeping in stores and offices on Main Street."

After Stockton was incorporated in April 1880, one of the first acts was to provide a courthouse in 1881, to which an addition was added in 1885 and a verandah in 1900, all of "elegant magnesium limestone from the quarry just across the street to the north which is very soft and can be quarried without need of a mason, was shaped with a hand saw and jointed with a file. Rooks County is the only place you can build a sod house of rocks." The dedication of the present courthouse was held April 20, 1923. The completed structure is a four-story neoclassical Revival constructed of granite blocks, the exterior made of Bedford stone backed with vitrified brick. Wainscoting and stairs are marble, floors are concrete covered with tile. Its Ionic columns combine to make it one of the most outstanding courthouse designs in Kansas. In 1974 an elevator was added.

Most of Stockton's first buildings were one-story ramshackle affairs built of cottonwood, which tended to warp badly. But there were several substantial Main Street structures built, such as the limestone businesses in the Opera Block (421 to 425 Main) erected by Thomas McNulty; the Higgins Business Block (502 and 504 Main) built in 1885, the first business block built of locally-made brick; the Commercial Block (401 to 407 Main), also built of brick in 1886, partially destroyed by fire in 1889; and the Bank Block (412 to 426 Main) built in 1887, the largest and most impressive block which includes eight brick businesses of the same design. Many other fine homes, businesses, churches, and schools were built during this time.

Building activity appeared to slow down after 1881 but an 1884 article pointed out that there was not one vacant building in town. Population was estimated at 700 and the need for a bridge across the Solomon River south of town and a railroad were noted. A new \$3000 bridge was ready for service in May 1885 and the Rooks County Railroad Company, later sold to the Missouri Pacific Railroad, reached Stockton from Bull City (Alton) in November of that same year but never went past Stockton, providing faster service to the east.

The agricultural economy of the area has been based on both livestock and grain. Cattle and sheep grazed in large numbers prior to the turn of the century and horse breeding was also important in the 1880s and 1890s. The area has always had considerable wheat acreage. Stockton survived and developed because of a symbiotic relationship with farmers and ranchers in the area,

providing valuable services, sources of supplies, and a market place. It cannot be separated from the land around it as its primary function is to serve the surrounding region, the town dependent on the countryside and the countryside dependent on the town. A decrease in farm numbers and/or a decrease in agricultural prosperity, as occurred in the 1890s, 1930s, 1980s, and at the turn of the century, always spelled trouble for the town. "As Agriculture goes, so goes Stockton."

Churches

The city of Stockton was blessed with pioneers willing to work and sacrifice to establish churches, setting the moral tone which exerted a powerful influence in the community and making Stockton a good place to live and rear a family.

The first **Catholic** services were in the home of Joseph McNulty in 1872. In 1878 Stockton's first church, St. Thomas Catholic Church, was built of native stone. During World War II, members bought war bonds to start a building fund for the native rock building completed in 1947 and the stained glass windows installed in 1966. In 1963, stone from the old church was used to build its replica in the Catholic cemetery.

The **Congregational Church**, organized in 1876, held services in any available building. A native stone church was built in 1881, destroyed by a storm in 1906, with the present brick church built in the same location in 1907. The Methodist Church organized in 1879 and in 1881 purchased an old frame school building to use until 1885 when a native stone church was built. Outgrown by 1910, it was torn down, services held in the courthouse until the 70x90 structure was built; the four-day dedication held in 1912. In 1971 a fellowship hall, chapel, kitchen, and bathrooms were added.

The **Christian Church** organized in 1885 with meetings held in the courthouse until the frame church was dedicated in 1886. The current brick Main Street Christian Church was dedicated in 1910. Stockton's African-American families first held services in their homes.

In 1897 they organized the Pleasant Green **Baptist Church** with services in a small building south of the depot. In the 1920s, with only 20 members, they built a church in the 400 block of South Second. In 1960 they disbanded, sold the building, and gave the money to the Southern Baptist Church which organized in Stockton in 1954 as a mission church when the Webster Dam was being built. They met in the Legion Hall until the former Christian Church building from Osborne was purchased and moved to Stockton that same year.

In 1918 the **Pentecostal Assembly** held prayer meetings in member's homes, later renting a storefront building on South Cedar. In 1944 they purchased land and bought the old grade school to use for material to build their church. In 1955 they became affiliated with the Kansas Councils of the Assemblies of God and became an **Assembly of God Church** with the Webster Church merging with them. In the 1970s they purchased the property across the street south, remodeled the house as a Church Annex for a Fellowship Hall and classrooms. St Paul Lutheran Church Wisconsin Synod was organized as a mission in 1963 with services held in the Legion Hall on Sunday evenings, building a new church in 1965.

Schools

The importance of education to the settlers of Stockton was shown by how quickly they established schools. The first recorded school was taught in 1872 in a one-room frame building. The **Stockton Common School District #6** was organized in 1873 and a two-story frame structure was built, called the Common School. In 1881 a native limestone two-story school with a cupola for a bell was built, called the Stone School, with 127 students that year. For more room they purchased and remodeled the two-story frame Globe Hotel just north of the railroad tracks called the Globe School. In 1907 it was sold and moved to build the New Globe School, a two-story brick structure with three classrooms on each floor. The new **Stockton Grade School** was built in 1941 of native limestone by WPA.

The **Stockton Academy** was built in 1887-1889 by the Congregational Churches of Kansas as a preparatory extension of Washburn College in Topeka. It also offered three years of normal school, a teacher-training state program. The City of Stockton donated the land and \$10,000 toward the cost of construction. The Academy had water and electrical systems which were not available in

some of the contending towns. Classrooms, office, and chapel were on the main floor, women's dormitory on the second, men's dormitory on the third, and the kitchen, dining room, and laundry in the basement. In the 1890s it provided the only business college and music conservatory in Northwest Kansas. But a few years later, during a time of drought and economic depression and as local high schools opened, the Academy graduated its last class in 1896.

Stockton High School was established in 1891, the first seven years held in the Common School, renting the Academy for a year, then back to the Stone School for a year, then purchasing it until a new high school was built in 1923. In the 1950s it was decided to use the middle school for grades four through eight and build a new high school just to the south, completed in 1957. In 1972 a vocational agriculture, wood-working, and auto mechanics building was added north of the high school. In 1980/81 a practice gymnasium was added. In 1994 the auto mechanics area was converted to a technology lab. In 1992 plans were started to build a new middle building and join the new structure with stone similar to the limestone grade school building, cafeteria and industrial arts, all with a central library. The work was completed for school to start in the fall of 1994.

Water Works

The original city well was located in the intersection of Main and Cedar prior to the new water works being established in 1887 when the City of Stockton issued \$33,000 in water work bonds. The 100' standpipe, 4 miles of mains, 24 hydrants, and the brick pumping station were completed and the water turned on July 4 the same year. The Sanitary Sewer System wasn't established until 1921. A steam-driven light plant connected to the water works was built by Charles Woods and purchased by the City in 1889. It was voted to be shut down in 1991 due to "expenses exceeding receipts, thereby saving the city a probable sum of \$70 per month." In 1908, \$12,000 in bonds were issued for another electric plant at the same location. And it was used until the current plant was built just to the east in the early 1950s. The old plant was converted to the Street Department shop.

Cemetery

In 1888 the Stockton Cemetery Association purchased land adjoining the town on the northeast. In 1953, due to building the Webster Dam, most of the 278 bodies moved from the Webster Cemetery were interred in the Stockton Cemetery.

Downtown

The Stockton City Building made of native lime-stone was a WPA project completed in 1940, which included the city clerk's office, fire department, and city hall. Prior to that time the clerk's office was housed in the basement of the Carnegie Library. Now the fire, police, and ambulance departments are in another building. The current city manager form of government was put into effect in 1921.

Stockton's first post office opened for business April 21, 1872. Stockton's Telephone Exchange started in 1900 upstairs at 502 Main, now the Methodist Thrift Shop building. The only telephone where calls could be made was from the drugstore at 424 Main, now Baxter's Bait and Tackle Shop. The Kansas Pipe Line & Gas Co. located in Stockton in the late 1930s.

Stockton was destined to become a typical Great Plains county seat country town, serving as a supply and market center for farmers and ranchers and the seat of county government, dependent on reliable transportation connections with distant population centers. Thus the railroad and highways were essential for maintaining Stockton as a viable community.

Highways

Highways developed with the invention of automobiles. The Beloit to Colby Cutoff was built in 1913, passing through Rooks County and Stockton following the South Solomon River. It was called the White Way as markers were white bands painted around the telephone poles. In 1917 it was renamed the Midland Trail, in 1921 changed to the Roosevelt Midland Trail, and in 1926 to U.S. 40-N. Not until 1931 was an asphalt surface laid on the road, the same year bricks were laid on Stockton's Main Street, which are still in use. In 1936 it was redesignated U.S. Highway 24.

Highway #1 went north and south through the town. In 1933 it was rerouted from Pine to Cedar Street, now Highway 183, which intersects Highway 24.

Over the years church and school groups and civic organizations have played a big part in keeping the community spirit alive and strong in Stockton. We know that each generation must have the courage to do its part, but perhaps we can draw strength by looking back in homage to those who came first. Yes, we are proud of our town and can say with William Allen White, "I am not afraid of tomorrow for I have seen yesterday and I love today!"

STOCKTON, KANSAS -- ROOKS COUNTY FREE FAIR

by Jean Lindsey

[The Rooks County Free Fair in Stockton is a popular and well-known part of the Solomon Valley heritage.]

IN May, 1876, Stockton's first newspaper, the Western News, stated "We are beginning an agitation for a county fair for Rooks County." It took three years but our current Rooks County Free Fair is an outgrowth of the Rooks County Agricultural Society founded in 1879 with the first fair held in October that same year just west of Stockton on the north side of the highway on rented land. This location was abandoned in 1896 due to the proximity of a hog farm. There was no report of a fair in 1877 or 1878, but fairs were held in 1884 and 1885. The next three years, 1886, 1887, and 1888, it was held in Plainville.

In 1889 the Society reorganized and became a corporation with a charter granted under Kansas Law and became the Rooks County Fair Association with 5000 shares of stock sold at a par value of \$2.00. Admission was 25 cents. But in 1890 a severe drought struck western Kansas and crop failures stopped the fair for the next five years, 1890-1894. In 1895, after receiving \$75 by passing the hat to use for expenses, it was held again. It has been a successful annual event since, one of the largest of its kind in the state and is an important institution in the history of Rooks County and Stockton. There were only three other times a fair was not held: 1917, because of WW I; 1923, due to the Stock Market collapse; and in 1943, canceled due to the polio epidemic.

In the early years, since there were no evening performances at the fair grounds, some of the events were on Main Street, such as a street carnival with Ferris wheel and merry-go-round. Stock companies sometimes came to the Opera House, presenting plays, vaudeville, and dramas such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Besides exhibits, some early entertainment included an encampment of the 4th Regiment of the Kansas National Guard, balloon ascensions with parachute jumps, man shot from a cannon, 90-foot high dive into a water tank, circular swing, carnival sideshows, a riding exhibition, shooting matches, fireworks, baby contest, ladies basketball games and equestrian riding contests, speaking contest, music by Plainville and Stockton bands, athletic events of 100 yard dash, hurdles, pole vault, shot put, and baseball games, and all kind of races—horse, harness, auto, runners, bicycle, motorcycle, and even puppy and rabbit races.

In 1896, the association purchased a 53½-acre tract south of town which still serves the same purpose today. In July that year, the newspaper reported "the new race track is completed and experts say it is one of the finest tracks in Kansas. Of course it is a little rough yet and needs packing. All citizens who have light vehicles can assist in this work by driving around the course and urge you to do so. Do not follow in the tracks of others, as it is apt to make ruts, but seek out the roughest places. By observing this rule, the track will soon become equally hard throughout." They also planned to build a grandstand 60 feet long with 10 rows of seats to accommodate 500 spectators, stalls for 30 horses, and 500 feet of board fencing for the west side of the track, but the lumber didn't arrive until Saturday night before the fair. Starting Sunday, 15 workmen completed it all by Tuesday night, sans the grandstand roof. In 1915, 1935, and 1970 additional land was also purchased for the fair. In 1918 the racetrack was rebuilt and advertised as the fastest and best horse, automobile, and motorcycle race track in Kansas. Following a fire that burned three livestock barns and the racehorse barn in 1935, the other old frame buildings were replaced and dedicated in 1937: a new grandstand to seat 3,500 people, retaining walls, horse and livestock barns were erected of native limestone from the hills south of town, all made possible by a government Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, the only one of this kind in Kansas. That year the site was deeded to Rooks County with shareholders relinquishing their investment. A director from all 25 Rooks County townships was selected. The fair became known as the Rooks and Adjoining Counties Free Fair.

A quotation from the 1951 fair book states "This fair will be held four days and be known as the Rooks County Free Fair. As space is limited in the floral hall, 4-H exhibits will be limited to those from Rooks County only." 4-H, FFA, and Scouting exhibits have long been a big part of the fair. The first 4-H livestock auction was in 1944.

In the last half of the 20th century grandstand performances included baseball games between the Kansas City Monarchs and The House of David and another year against the Stockton VFW Team, Tommie Holden's Thrill Drivers, Koshare Indian Dancers, famous skating stars, aerial acts, the Three Stooges, Baxter Black, and concerts by stars such as Minnie Pearl, Tex Ritter, Red Foley, Conway Twitty, Johnny Paycheck, Tom T. Hall, Mel Tillis, Ronnie Milsap, Eddie Rabbit, Mickey Gilley, Lee Greenwood, Martina McBride, Ty Herndon, Chris LeDoux, and Montgomery Gentry to name a few.

Momentous Occasions at the Fair

1979 - 100th year Centennial, Fair of Champions. Stars from the Grand Old Opry performed and a replica of the 1879 fair ticket was made for a belt buckle to sell.

1988 - The first pari-mutuel harness races in the State of Kansas were run for three days at the Rooks County Free Fair.

2004 - 125th anniversary - Special invitations were sent to area politicians to help with the celebration. Representatives Ralph Ostmeyer, Jerry Moran, Dan Johnson, and Rooks County Commissioners served cake to the fair goers. Moran, a Plainville native reminisced, "I grew up going to this fair and remembered selling concessions in the grandstand at a young age. The Rooks County fair was where Plainville boys met Stockton girls."

2006 - 100 years of motorcycle races were celebrated. The Rooks County Free Fair has a tradition of being one of the best county fairs in the state and we hope that each year we continue to grow and bring quality entertainment to western Kansas.

Stories Of Land Of Man Of Nature