



ARTICLE

# New Chances for the Last Chance Store-Council Grove, Kansas



Exterior of the Last Chance Store in Council Grove, Kansas.

*Photo courtesy of the staff at Kansas State Historical Society.*

This simple stone building, occupying a corner lot at 502 West Main Street in Council Grove, Kansas may not appear very imposing, but it is significant in the history of the American West. Situated on the north side of the Santa Fe Trail, some five blocks west of a crossing at the Neosho River, the Last Chance Store was built in 1857 and for a short time served as the last place where freighters and travelers could obtain supplies between Council Grove and Santa Fe, New Mexico, a distance of more than 600 miles.

The store stock was brought from St. Louis by boat to Westport Landing (in present-day Kansas City) and then by mule teams to Council Grove. Through the years the little building served as a trading post, residence, polling place, refuge for enslaved people, grocery store, corn crib, loan association building, antique store, and storehouse. The Last Chance Store was included in the Council Grove Santa Fe Trail-related National Historic Landmark listing in 1963 then added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1966.

Donated by Connie and Don Essington of Council Grove to the Kansas Historical Society (KSHS) in 2015 and approved by the state legislature, the Last Chance Store is now the newest Kansas State Historic Site. All three departments of the KSHS Cultural Resources Division (Archeology, Historic Preservation, and Historic Sites) cooperated during the summer months of 2016 to conduct physical and archeological investigations of the site in anticipation of opening the building to the public in the spring of 2017.

Each year, the Kansas state archeology staff in partnership with the Kansas Anthropological Association (KAA) and local sponsors hold a Kansas Archeology Training Program (KATP) field school during the month of June. The program pairs amateur archeologists and members of the general public with professionals in the field to survey and excavate a chosen site in Kansas. This year the Last Chance Store and its surrounding property became the focus of that field school.



Tom Rudkin of Los Gatos, California, instructs a young volunteer in proper documentation.

*Photo courtesy of the staff at the Kansas State Historical Society.*

The primary goal of the excavations was to reveal more information about the brief



time the property was used as a mercantile along the Santa Fe Trail. Principal investigator, Bob Blasing, led approximately 135 participants during the two-week program as they worked through a variety of components and classes. Excavation units were dug at locations on the property where previous remote sensing tests indicated possible underground features, but also included limited areas inside the Last Chance Store

Wood domino found under the floor at the Last Chance Store.

*Photo courtesy of the staff at the Kansas State Historical Society.*

itself. Floor boards inside the store were carefully labeled and removed to reveal a trove of artifacts, including a whisky bottle and a metal cup. Other units revealed interesting clues about the construction of the site or earlier restoration efforts, including a concentration of window glass and a glass-cutting tool on the east side of the yard overlapped with unused timber pieces and a concentration of nails. Collected artifacts were cleaned and processed by volunteers in a lab set up at the local high school. More study of the artifacts and further testing will help add layers to the known history of the site and will guide interpretation.

Once the KATP field school wrapped up on June 17, 2016, the site became the focus of the Kansas State Historic Preservation Office and the Kansas Historic Sites Office. Efforts are now centered on repairing the building to make it ready for public visits. A bulging stone wall in the cellar under the store will be reconstructed, and the building's native limestone walls require general repointing with compatible mortar. All five windows and four doors will be repaired and painted. The interior floor boards that were so carefully removed during the field school will be replaced once the underlying original, bark-covered log joists are strengthened with additional support. These and various other repairs are funded through an allocation of Historic Preservation Fund monies dedicated by the Kansas State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) for the project. Work should be complete by September 30, 2016, allowing the Sites staff to begin installation of exhibits and interpretive signage during the winter months. Soon, the Last Chance Store will once again welcome visitors along the Santa Fe Trail.

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