



The Town of Kansas



Riverfront West

Just to the west of the Heart of America Bridge lies the Town of Kansas, the original settlement of Kansas City, Missouri. The City of Kansas City, Missouri, is in the process of preserving this historical resource and developing an urban archeological park. A state-of-the-art interpretive center will tell the story of Kansas City, the region and the opening of the American West. The Town of Kansas Archeological Park is a critical link not only in the overall riverfront development, but to our local and national heritage as well. The Port Authority will assist the City in the development of the interpretive center and the western riverfront site, which will include a pedestrian link the River Market area and new riverfront recreation.

The Town of Kansas Site to be a

Reality

by Orvis Fitts, former WHS President

John Calvin McCoy, 22 years old and the founder of Westport, had built a two-story log structure on what is now the northeast quadrant of the at Westport Road and Pennsylvania. He was operating a general store catering to the trade on the western trails which traversed on what is now Westport Road.

Merchandise for his store came up the Missouri River on steamboats which docked at the Wayne City Landing near Independence ... which forced McCoy to make a three-day round-trip in his wagons to get to Independence, load the new merchandise and return to Westport.

To shorten his trip, McCoy found a rock ledge outcropping on the Missouri River between what is now Delaware and Grand streets. In the spring of 1834 he persuaded the captain of what was probably the steamboat "John Hancock" to unload the goods at the new site. This new delivery point was an eight-mile round-trip, which McCoy's' wagons could traverse in one day! This new landing site on the river became known as Westport Landing.

That same year, Thomas A. Smart opened the first trading house at Westport Landing. By 1843, the town also had a tavern, a warehouse and two houses. The town didn't expand any further due to a legal question on the sale of the Prudhomme estate, but after the issue was settled, the town grew to eight houses in 1847.

Five years later, in 1839, McCoy platted a 15-acre town area at the Westport Landing site. He and 13 other men formed a town company that had purchased the 257-acre Gabrielle Prudhomme estate for \$4,220. It was the men of the town company who named the area Town of Kansas.

One of the most imposing brick structures in the Town of Kansas was the 46-room Union Hotel, and expansion soon began up the steep bluffs south of the river. As development proceeded south, the name of the bustling area was changed to City of Kansas in 1853 and then to Kansas City in 1889.

The site where it all began at Westport Landing was later abandoned. The buildings disappeared, weeds and trash accumulated, concrete covered the rock ledge, railroad tracks traversed the area, and a concrete flood wall was constructed. Modernization had forgotten this historic site. But in 1991, several men visited the site of Westport Landing and the Town of Kansas ... myself (a past president of WHS), Roy Ranck (a past president of WHS and then president of Native Sons of Kansas City) and George Hicks (a past president of Native Sons). We were appalled at what we saw: A bulldozer had been in the area and destroyed a lot of the original foundation stones. We decided to take action to protect this important site.

We wrote a letter to Lisa Briscoe, who was the Administrator of the Landmarks Commission, City of Kansas City, Missouri. The letter, dated April 2, 1991, recommended that immediate action be taken to preserve and interpret this historic site. Our early historical heritage and legacy must be preserved for this and future generations.

On February 27, 1992, a community meeting on the Town of Kansas for business leaders, historical organizations, and other interested parties was held under auspices of the City Planning and Development Department, Kansas City, Missouri. That past summer, an archeology dig had unearthed a number of artifacts, which were on display at the meeting. A Town of Kansas Workshop planning session was held on July 26, 1993. And during the following years, action was taken by the City of Kansas City to acquire ownership of the site.

On April 18, 1998, a stakeholders' symposium was conducted and additional archeological digs had been made, which recovered over 30,000 artifacts. In 1999 ICON and Associates Architects were hired to formulate plans to preserve and interpret the site. Five meetings were held between September 1999 and January 2000 to discuss the plans ... and of course George Hicks, Roy Ranck and I attended those meetings. And now, Dale Fowler, another past president of WHS, has joined our original group of three.

Much yet remains to be done, but it is most gratifying the City Planning and Development Department has aggressively pursued this project. Funds have already been raised, but more will be needed to make the Town of Kansas Archeological Park a historical site that will attract tourists, history buffs, school children, and citizens from all walks of life.