# "Doing What Came Naturally: The Birth of Ottawa"

By John Mark Lambertson

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is a brief history of Ottawa. The city will celebrate the 125th anniversary of the signing of its charter in 1989. The actual signing was September 6, 1864.)

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Before its founding, there was little on the future townsite of Ottawa except prairie grass and a fringe of trees along the river. Its most important feature was a natural ford, where Hickory Street is now, which allowed horses and wagons to cross the Marais des Cygnes with ease.

Consequently, several main trails of the area met at this point.

The site was near the heart of the Ottawa Indian reserve, established in the 1830s. John T. ("Ot-taw-ay" or "Tauy") Jones was the principal leader of the tribe by the early 1860s, and he established a store just south of the ford, near a favored spring. North of the river, near Chief John Wilson's creek, a log school was built for the Indian children and taught by a white woman.

By 1864, the white and Indian trustees of the proposed Ottawa University had negotiated with the tribe the transfer of deed for 20,000 acres of the reserve. This treaty allowed the area encompassing present-day Ottawa to be opened for settlement, and a town company was quickly established.

By March of 1864, a small colony of settlers had pitched their tents on the site and the streets were surveyed and graded. The original town boundaries were Logan, Cherry, Seventh and Ash streets. The first frame house was erected by J.C. Richmond, March 31, 1864, on the northeast corner of First and Walnut.

The town company was led by the great energy and shrewd business mind of Rev. Isaac S. Kallock and also C.C. Hutchinson, later founder of the city of Hutchinson. These extraordinary town promoters knew what features it took to make their infant city survive and thrive, and set out at once to secure them/

They founded the town's first church, today's First Baptist, to meet the residents' religious and social needs, and a school. The college partly was begun due to a commitment made to the Ottawa Indians, and partly to add prestige to the new village.

The town and college actually were a "chicken and the egg" creation, with Ottawa University being in the planning stage as early as 1860. The city was an afterthought by which the college, and the college trustees, could make money by selling lots.

Another important step to keep Ottawa on the map was to wrestle the county seat away from Ohio City, a now extinct town in the Princeton area. Ottawa, with its centralized location in the county, won that vote in August of 1864. All of the official county records were simply loaded into a crate or two and hauled to the new county seat in the back of a wagon.

The city fathers were so effective in promoting the little crude burg that Ottawa hosed its first state convention, the Kansas Baptists, when it was only six weeks old.

The town's most prominent structure in the early days was the old territorial capital building from Minneola, near Centropolis. It was taken down, rebuilt in Ottawa on the northeast corner of Second and Main, and served as the city's first church, first school and meeting hall.

Another building, merely a large barn, was Ottawa's first hotel. Located on the southeast corner of Second and Walnut, it later was a train depot and finally, a stable. This same structure was used briefly to shelter the town's women and children in October 1864, when a Confederate Army raided the east edge of Kansas and panicked the state.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, a flood of new settlers into Kansas prompted a boom for Ottawa. Houses and businesses sprang up at a furious rate all over town, and the local sawmills worked at full capacity. Ottawa's first brick structures also were erected.

By 1872, Ottawa had a population of 4,000 and boasted of being "the largest city of its age" in Kansas. It was only eight years old.

The boom went bust, however, with the nation's financial "panic" or recession in the mid-1870s. A second blow was the enormous grasshopper plague that devoured Kansas crops.

This period also saw the college building (Tauy Jones Hall) gutted by fire, and temperance efforts closed down the town's saloons by 1878. Certain provisions allowed drug stores to sell alcohol, for "medicinal purposes," after that date.

By the end of the 1870s, better times brought more money and growth and the city moved ahead once again. One notable result of this second period of growth through the 1890s was the replacement of the original wooden business buildings downtown with the brick Victorian ones enjoyed today.

Many of the more prominent structures of this period were designed by local architect George P. Washburn. The town's crown jewel, the Franklin County Courthouse, was completed in 1893.

This was also a time of seeing to the town's aesthetic and cultural needs. From the earliest days, the forest of trees on the north side of the river had been preserved as a public park, and College Park, now known as City Park, was laid out with plantings.

Tree enthusiasts, led by Dr. Milan Ward of OU, planted hundreds of saplings along Ottawa's streets. Their efforts led to the beautiful shady arbors Ottawa was famous for until the Dutch Elm disease plague of the 1960s.

Streets were macadamized to reduce the mud, and one by one several new school buildings were added to the educational system. Ottawa University also added new structures to its campus and developed a stronger academic curriculum. Through the years, the college's faculty has given significant leadership to the city's cultural, church, governmental and civic organizations.

The nucleus of the present Ottawa Public Library was also being formed during this period, having been started in 1873 by eight ladies who contributed one dollar each to purchase books.

Ottawa was fortunate, too, in receiving the generosity of Samuel B. Rohrbaugh. He provided to the city a fine performing arts hall and when it was destroyed, he built an even greater theater. Both were the forerunners to the building erected as a memorial to the World War I soldiers, now known as Ottawa Municipal Auditorium.

Nothing, however, could surpass the cultural feast of the Ottawa Chautauqua. Begun in 1883, it was patterned after the New York Chautauqua and drew thousands of people to Ottawa every summer. Lectures, musical events, religious instruction and children's programs brought nationally noted figures to this, the second-oldest and second-largest Chautauqua in the nation.

This notable period of development into the 20$^{th}$ century brought the creation of a gas plant, water works and one of the earliest electric plants in the Midwest. Ottawa even had a horse-drawn streetcar system for a few years.

Numerous important businesses were created, including the Warner Fence Company and Bennett Creamery, which began as an ice business. The Santa Fe shops, begun in 1872, was one of the city's major employers for 70 years.

Perhaps the most prominent business to be "born" in Ottawa was the Underwood and Underwood photography studio. Begun in 1883 by two brothers who sold stereographs door-to-door, the company came to have offices in nearly every major city around the world. They are perhaps most notable for pioneering in the fields of photo-journalism and aviation photography.

Undoubtedly the greatest recurring setbacks in Ottawa's history have come, ironically, from the same source which prompted the city's location—the river. Repeatedly, "Old Mary" has flooded the town, leaving sticky mud and heavy losses.

The 1898, 1909, 1928 and the worst one of them all, 1951, are just a few of the major flood years. It was the flood of 1914 which tolled the funeral bell for the Ottawa Chautauqua.

The flood issue finally was resolved in the late 1950s and early '60s, with the creation of Pomona Reservoir and the levy and flood gate system along the river through town.

Ottawa's growth has been minimal during this century, its changes slow, but steady. The major events in Ottawa's past 70 years have been the same as in other Kansas communities. The Depression brought the same kind of frugality and "pulling on bootstraps" that was being exercised elsewhere, and when recovery and good economic times returned, business hummed.

The city participated with patriotism and sacrifice during the various wars, conducting scrap drives, rolling bandages and mourning its dead. At war's end, Ottawa's celebrations mirrored thousands of others across the country.

Like those communities, Ottawa has followed and joined the world's finest technological advances and silliest fads. There is at least one area of change, however, that this city has resisted. While the state of Kansas has liberalized its drinking laws, Ottawa remains largely dry.

While the flooding problem was being controlled, Ottawa also moved to the fast lane with the construction of Interstate 35, making a major financial impact on the community by both bringing business to town and by draining business away.

The development of Ottawa's Industrial Park paralleled the other improvements, bringing such manufacturers as King Radio and Havens Steel.

I-35 continues to have a major role in the business growth, as the 1980s have seen expansion on South Main Street. South also has been the direction of most residential development, with flood plains and industrial areas limiting movement to other areas.

In the past decade, Ottawans have spent millions of dollars improving it infrastructure: Replacing bridges; improving arterial streets; improving Skunk Run, which drains much of the city; expanding the electrical and sewage treatment plants, and building one of the best water plants in the state.

The downtown area has been revitalized with street and utility improvements and Victorian-style streetlights, a new look that brings to mind old Ottawa, and recognizes that the city's past successes are the foundation of its future.