

Johnson County: How a settlement in a new territory became a great place to live for more than 160 years



The Rev. Thomas Johnson, left, founded the Shawnee Methodist Mission in Fairway in 1839. Below: a Monticello family is shown in 1901.

By GERALD HAY AND MINDI LOVE

Spanning 479 square miles and home to many different cultures and people, Johnson County is the most populous county in the state of Kansas. Today we attract 8,000 to 10,000 new residents per year.

Since 2006 our population has increased by 60,000 residents. To put that in perspective, that's the population of Manhattan, the eighth largest city in Kansas.

What attracts people to Johnson County, Kansas, virtually the geographic center of the United States? Why did they come 160 years ago, and why do they still come today?

The birth of Johnson County

As the Shawnee Indians and other tribes moved to this area through a series of federal treaties, Christian missionaries followed. Rev. Thomas Johnson, a Methodist minister, came to the Shawnee Indian Reservation in 1830, and soon after his arrival, he established a school to serve many Indian tribes, opening the Shawnee Methodist Mission and Indian Manual Labor School in Fairway in 1839.

The Shawnee Indian Reservation included all of what is now Johnson County, and totaling about 1.6 million acres, stretched



all the way to Topeka. Those lands were reduced to 200,000 acres with a new federal treaty on May 10, 1854. Twenty days later, the U.S. Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, establishing the Nebraska and Kansas territories, and opening up the areas for Anglo settlement.

Johnson County was created as one of the original 33 counties founded on Aug. 25 by the Legislative Act of 1855 in the

Territory of Kansas. Rev. Johnson was elected president of the state's first territorial legislature and Johnson County was named in his honor. Bitter fighting broke out, known locally as the Border Wars, as settlers located in the new Kansas Territory were left to decide their fate. Would Kansas enter the Union as a free or slave state?

On Jan. 29, 1861, President James Buchanan signed a bill admitting Kansas into the Union as the nation's 34th state, as a free state.

Rev. Johnson did not live long afterwards to enjoy his notoriety as the county namesake. He was shot and killed on Jan. 2, 1865, at his home near Westport, Mo., many believe based on his role in the Border War.



In 1940, Johnson County had 2,082 farms with more than 263,300 acres, representing about 86 percent of the total land, according to the federal agriculture census. In 2012, there were 571 farms with more than 99,000 acres, representing roughly a third of the land.

Settling land and building railroads

Johnson County Government was officially organized on Sept. 7, 1857. Newly elected commissioners established townships, approved requests to build roads, licensed new businesses, and set fees for ferries to cross streams. By 1860, the first federal Census of Johnson County listed a population of 4,364.

Towns living and dying

The first railroad in Johnson County was built in 1869. Within the next decade, four railroads crossed the county, and towns sprung up near track lines.

A railroad could make or break a town as Gardner, Spring Hill, and Olathe grew while pre-rail towns such as McCamish, Lanesfield, Ocheltree, and Monticello faded off county maps entirely.

A different type of rail came with the start of the 20th century when William B. Strang Jr., founder of Overland Park, founded the Missouri and Kansas Interurban Railway, nicknamed the “Strang Line,” from Olathe to Kansas City, Missouri. The interurban railroad line opened in 1906.



The Strang Line operated from 1906-1940.

By 1921, when Strang died, he had also platted several subdivisions, which became the core of Overland Park when the city incorporated in 1960. The Strang Line closed in 1940.

Growing with farming economy

Prior to 1940, farming was the economic mainstay in Johnson County. Fields along the floodplains of the Kaw River, near towns like De Soto, created prize farmland for Irish potatoes, cantaloupes, watermelons and sweet potatoes. Shawnee excelled as a truck farming town, supplying vegetables,

fruits, and flowers to local markets. Lenexa became the “Spinach Capital of the World.”

A strong farming foundation and expanding communities helped to build slow-but-steady growth in the first 90 years of Johnson County’s history. The county had an almost eightfold increase in population from 1860 to 1940 when the Census stood at 33,327.



The Olathe Naval Air Station (left) and Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant attracted thousands to Johnson County in the 1940s.

Booming in World War II and the post-war era

Johnson County's population boom began in the early 1940s in the midst of a world that was at war when the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant near De Soto was commissioned and activated.

Opened in 1942, the plant produced smokeless powder and other propellants for the nation's military. The plant attracted waves of new citizens searching for better jobs who flocked to the facility for the unheard of wages it offered — more than \$1 per hour. At its peak employment in 1945, the plant had 12,067 employees and operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Home building soared after WWII, along with incorporating cities.

Dropping anchor by 'Prairie Navy'

At the same time, the Olathe Naval Air Station was created at the edge of Gardner to train "Prairie Navy" fighter pilots during the war and for several years after. During its heyday, the military complex was a beehive of activity and was commissioned to house approximately 2,000 enlisted men and 100 officers.

Both military-related facilities attracted tens of thousands of plant workers along with military personnel and their families, who made their homes in Johnson County and then stayed after the fighting ended.

The era of the 1950s, which has often been called "the Fabulous '50s," was a time of increased economic prosperity, locally and nationally. Following WWII, the population in Johnson County almost doubled between 1940 and 1950, and more than doubled again in the following decade.

The GI Bill stimulated an unprecedented building boom by providing housing and educational benefits to returning veterans; buying a home was more affordable than ever before and families flocked to new housing developments in Johnson County.

Incorporating cities

Many of the new residential neighborhoods and developments were located in northeast Johnson County. Prairie Village was originally platted in 1941 by J.C. (Jesse Clyde) Nichols, a Johnson County native and well-known Kansas City developer of the Country Club Plaza and Mission Hills. As communities grew in unincorporated Johnson County, communities sought to incorporate as cities for better services. Eleven cities were incorporated in Johnson County from 1948 to 1972.

The quality of life was enhanced in Johnson County in the 1950s with a focus on organizing and building a countywide park system and community libraries to benefit a growing population.



The Lanesfield School in Edgerton is the oldest surviving one-room schoolhouse in Johnson County. The stone structure, built in 1869, is the only building left from the community of Lanesfield, founded in 1858. The school closed in 1963 and has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1988. Now a part of the Johnson County Museum, the Lanesfield School Historic Site opened in 1989.

Putting education at the head of the class

If you look back to the 1880s, Johnson County children were being educated in roughly 100 original common school districts, mostly in one-room schools scattered throughout the county.

By the mid-20th century, the population grew in the northeast part of the county and rural populations declined.

Forming new districts

In 1963, the Kansas Legislature passed the School District Unification Act which reduced the number of independent school boards statewide from 2,794 to 311. The legislation created the Blue Valley, Olathe, De Soto, Spring Hill, and Gardner-Edgerton-Antioch (later shortened to Gardner-Edgerton) school districts. Shawnee Mission School District was formed in 1969.

Johnson County also saw the need for higher educational opportunities with the opening of Johnson County Community College in 1967 with classes taking place in various locations in Merriam. Classes at the current campus in Overland Park began five years later.

Many suburban residents point to high quality schools as a primary reason for choosing to live in the suburbs — forty years ago, and today.



Johnson County Community College began in 1967 in Merriam and opened at its present location in Overland Park in 1972.

Blue Valley’s 2014 graduates posted the highest ACT and SAT composite scores of Kansas City metropolitan area school districts.

Olathe School District is the fastest growing district in the area.

Ever since 13 individual school districts unified in 1969 to become the Shawnee Mission Unified School District No. 512, the district has consistently been ranked among the finest school districts in the nation.

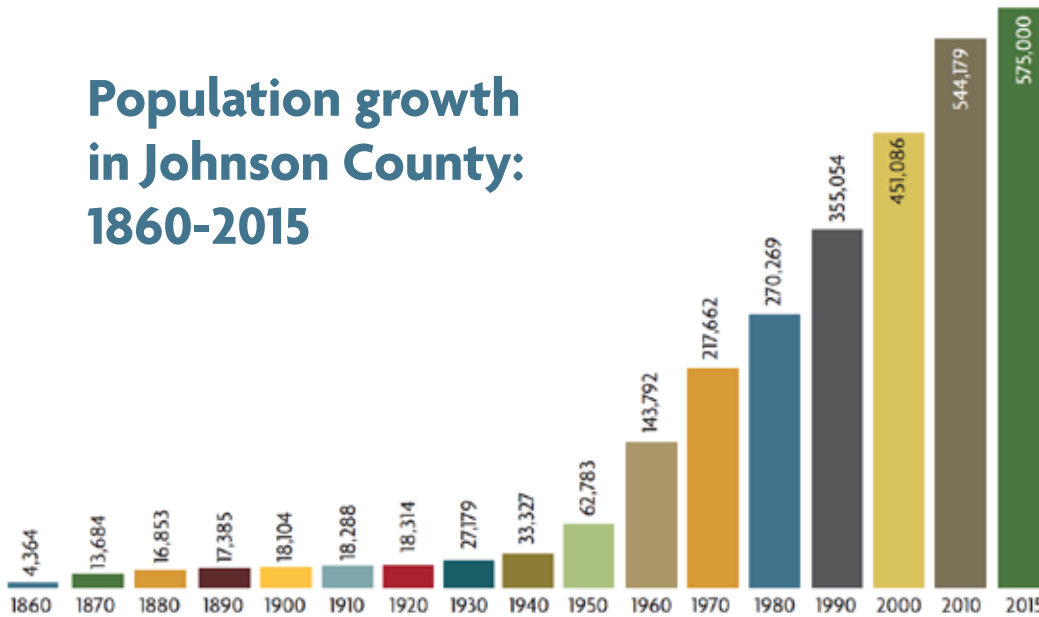
De Soto, Spring Hill and Gardner-Edgerton are award-winning schools as well.

Winning blue ribbons

Johnson County now has 46 schools on the elite list of National Blue Ribbon Schools identified by the U.S. Department of Education. That’s approximately 40 percent of all the Blue Ribbon Schools in Kansas.

All six public school districts are providing Johnson County students with quality and innovative educational opportunities, and continue to be one of our community’s most important assets that attracts thousands of new residents each year.

Population growth in Johnson County: 1860-2015



The population of Johnson County is 144 times larger since its founding on Aug. 25, 1855 in the Territory of Kansas when the federal census counted 4,364 residents in the newly-created county. Johnson County's current estimated population is 575,000, making it the most populous county in Kansas. Johnson County has approximately 20 percent of the total state population.

Working to preserve a 160-year legacy

Johnson County remains a county rich in history and full of vibrant communities for those new to the area and residents who go back multiple generations.

While old towns and schools have disappeared, military facilities closed for new beginnings, and urbanization of Johnson County has spanned to approximately 60 percent of the land as cities have grown and expanded; some of the past footnotes in history are still very present.

Naming legacies

The Shawnee Indian Tribe and railroad legacy is embedded in the history of Johnson County and some of its cities.

Olathe is the Shawnee Indian word for "beautiful." Shawnee changed names from Gum Springs to Shawneetown and later shortened to its present name in honor of the Indian tribe. Lenexa was named after Na-Nex-Se, a Shawnee Indian woman and wife of Chief Black Hoof.

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Telecast Live From King Louie West Lanes, Overland Park, Kansas

The cities of Edgerton (originally named Martinsburg) and Merriam (originally called Campbellton) were renamed after railroad officials.

'Seeking the Good Life'

The Johnson County Museum, currently located in Shawnee and slated to move into the Johnson County Arts and Heritage Center (the former King Louie building in Overland Park) in 2017, offers long-term and changing exhibits, including the "Seeking the Good Life" exhibit, which explores Johnson County beginnings to its rise as one of the nation's more successful suburban counties.

A collaborative website between the Johnson County Museum, Johnson County Library and other partners is JoCoHistory.net, which offers a wealth of easily accessed

information about the history of the area. More than 40,000 photographs, maps, and other materials document the history and heritage of Johnson County. 🌞

Photos courtesy of Kansas Historical Society, Johnson County Museum, and Legler Barn Museum.