



Menninger Hill, pp. 1-5

Historical Highlights
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The Red Brick Buildings on SBA Hill: a retrospective part one

by Paul Post

The following will be printed in two separate editions of the Historical Highlights due to length.

Martin's Hill, Cedar Crest, SBA Hill, the Menninger West Campus: these are the names by which the prominence west of Topeka has been known from 1856 down to the present day. Overlooking, as it does, the Kansas River Valley just to the north, and in the distance to the south, the Wakarusa Valley, this geographical landmark has maintained a close nexus to Topeka since shortly after the founding of our city. Its connection to the Topeka community continues to this day: first with the construction in 2001-2002 by the Security Benefit Group of its national headquarters at the site from which that company originally began its work with admittedly a decidedly different mission in the first decades of the 20th Century; second with the recent announcement by SCL Health, current owners of the iconic "Tower Building," of its intent to move forward with demolition of this national historic landmark if the property could not be transferred to someone interested in renovating and developing the building.



The precipice upon which the Tower Building now sits has been prominent all throughout Topeka's history, not only in its physical sense, but as an important cultural symbol for the city's founders, entrepreneurs, and visionaries in their attempts to persuade the Topeka citizenry of the great potential for growth and progress exiting within their community. Let us spend a few moments, then, to look back at the imposing hill west of Topeka and its role in the growth and development of the capital city of Kansas.

I. Inauspicious beginnings.

The hill west of Topeka rises nearly 150 feet above the Kansas River valley, and guards the western approach to the capital city. As a prairie landmark visible for miles, it was known to both the native Kanza Indians and the migrating Potawatomi, with both tribes residing but a short distance from the hill. At the foot of the hill was the old Baptist Mission, which was built both to

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Work Day for KHI Benefited the Historical Society

Employees of the Kansas Health Institute helped clean up the grounds at the Ritchie house. Not only did they clean in late June, they also learned a little history of the place. They scrubbed floors, cleaned windows, vacuumed floors and cleaned the toilets. Many hands make light work and even though it was quite hot on June 20...the work was all done with a smile. A big round of applause to them!



Board of Trustee Meetings

Meetings are held on the third Wednesday of the month at the Cox Communications Heritage Education Center, 1118 SE Madison Street, Topeka. Meetings begin at 5:30 p.m. Guests and visitors are always welcome!

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serve the native tribes, and to convert them to the white man's religion. Early reports from pioneers passing through the area to Oregon and other points west suggest that the hills west of Topeka were at one time barren of trees, with only grass on the summits and possibly a few clusters of oak and walnut along the streams. Perhaps here and there a lone red cedar rose above the native blue stem grasses. This would have been the scene in the 1850's as travelers made their way west. The Oregon Trail ran along the north plain of the Kansas River Valley, with the crossing at Pappan's Landing (in present day North Topeka) being on the main route. Some travelers, however, chose to follow an alternate, less traveled route, which took them to the Mission and the nearby Smith's Ferry crossing of the Kansas River. First known as "Martin's Hill", the name was derived from the land's original and perhaps most prominent owner, John Martin of Tennessee. Martin was a southerner and a Democrat, who first came to Kansas to help settle the pro-slavery enclave of Tecumseh in April 1855. He became involved in territorial and county affairs, was a lawyer and later a judge. When Kansas was admitted as a free state in 1861, the fortunes of Tecumseh declined while those of Topeka, the newly named capital city, rose. Martin moved to Topeka. In 1873, he acquired a 240-acre farm located in Mission Township. Later, in 1893, Martin was appointed to finish the term of deceased Senator P.B. Plumb.

United States Senator P.B. Plumb, became Kansas' first Democratic senator. Martin was obviously more interested in building his political fortunes than in land development and speculation, and until 1887 Martin's Hill remained nothing more than farmland.

II. "Boston of the West"

In May of 1887, the *Topeka Weekly Capital* and *Farmer's Journal* reported a "gigantic deal" whereby a Boston syndicate had made large purchases of land west of Topeka, including the 240 acres comprising Martin's Hill. Judge Martin received \$35,000.00 for his acreage, which was no

small sum for the time. Other Topekans who sold land to the syndicate included Judge J.B. McAfee (194 acres for \$51,367.00); C.W. Jewell (100 acres for \$50,000.00); G.G. Gage (90 acres for \$45,000.00); and C.F. Kendall (160 acres for \$48,000.00). The total land purchased was in excess of 1,500 acres for an aggregate price of \$520,200.00). The newspaper reported that the "prime movers in the enterprise are G.F. Parmelee, president of the National Loan and Trust Company, and Colonel J.H. Broadus, two gentlemen, who, it is well known, have the necessary capital behind them to carry out their undertakings." A reporter from the *Topeka Daily Capital* interviewed Colonel Broadus, who told him that:

Our syndicate has already purchased over a half million dollars' worth of lands, and the contemplated improvements and manufacturing enterprises will require the expenditure of from \$2,000,000.00 to \$3,000,000.00. We are confident that Topeka has a bright future, that our city has a solid foundation for steady growth. We have purchased the franchise of the Circle Railway, which has been granted the right of way through your city and for a distance of four miles west of the city, and we propose to begin the construction of the road at an early day. It is the purpose of the company to make a beautiful summer resort out of Martin's Hill. A grand boulevard will be built out to the hill and around it, where a large hotel, botanical and zoological garden and an observatory station will be established, an artificial lake constructed, and other improvements made which will make it one of the most attractive summer resorts in the west. The property was not purchased for speculative purposes, but it is our intention to improve it in the manner I have indicated, and to develop it by establishing extensive factories. In short, we are not "boomers"; we invest because we know Topeka is a growing city; it has everything which goes to make up a great business center.(3)

The syndicate membership included Frank R. Cordley, a member of the Boston banking firm of Cordley, Murray and Young, which group was described by the reporter from the *Capital* as "among the wealthiest capitalists in the east." They were known among financial circles to be "among the heaviest capitalists in the country . . . who did not invest their money in Topeka

without being thoroughly acquainted with the city. They have examined the statistics, have noted the marvelous growth of the city in population . . . [and] have found that Topeka is a railroad and commercial center of the west." The article stated that "total clearings of the banks yesterday amounted to the unprecedented sum of \$474,707.16, which is almost double the previous record made by our city. It is a marvelous day's business, and shows that after all Topeka is the greatest commercial center of the west. Kansas City can scarcely equal it."

An article 40 years later, in the *Topeka Daily Capital*, reported that "the real estate men of today, who lay out suburbs, subdivision and 'developments,' are pikers. There isn't anywhere near Topeka today, and it is safe to assume that there will not be in the future, a project as gorgeous, pretentious and as evanescent as the dream of the Boston Syndicate which . . . started out to make Topeka the second Boston of the west." Unfortunately, the depression of 1890 intervened, and laid waste to the grand visions of the Boston Syndicate. Some work had been done between 1887 and the early 1890's before the arrival of the depression. The Syndicate specialized in developing transportation systems, and acquired the "Belt Line" railroad which ran from the western terminus of the Topeka Street Car Company, just west of College Avenue and Sixth Street. While the Topeka Street Car Company was a horse car line, the Belt Line operated a steam locomotive which pulled small lead-colored cars at speeds between 12 and 25 miles per hour. The Belt Line ran west toward Gage Park along present-day Eighth Street, went through the center of the park, and terminated at a round house at the foot of Martin's Hill. The Syndicate had also acquired the West Side Circle rail line, and combined in with the Belt Line. They had constructed a hotel and were in the process of constructing a college to be known as Methodist University on the site of present day Mount Hope Cemetery.

An article in the *Topeka Daily Capital*, appearing July 11, 1890, page four, described the ongoing construction work underway at the

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new Methodist University. The reporter assured his readers that the excavations for the foundations had been completed and that a "large force of men were at work." The article also stated that "the trustees are determined to build in Topeka a great university of the west." The reporter waxed eloquent:

For a number of years, the opinion has prevailed that Topeka affords the best location for a great institution of learning. While it is the political, commercial, and railroad center of Kansas, its healthful moral tone, its controlling religious sentiment, and the absence of evils which exist in other great cities, mark it as a place peculiarly fitted to be the home, temporary or otherwise, of young men and women.

Four hundred acres surrounding the campus have been platted for residence purposes, to which the name of University Place has been given. The intention of the board of trustees is to make this the most beautiful suburban property in the vicinity of Topeka. Broad streets and avenues have been laid out, which will be parked and planted with rows of trees on either side and cultivated under the direction of a committee on improvements for three years from the time of planting.

Unfortunately, when the entire Boston Syndicate development fell apart in 1894 with the coming depression, only a large hole where the foundation excavations were undertaken remained. (3)

The abbreviated attempt at development launched by the Boston Syndicate between 1887 and 1894 captured the imagination of Topeka during those years, and has become almost legendary as the years have passed. The story is periodically resurrected by the local news media as a hallmark of the capability of the capitalist mentality. Never mind that the venture failed — it was an idea ahead of its time. The 1924 piece in the *Daily Capital* described the concept as a "gigantic dream" to make Topeka the "Boston of the West." A 1961 article in the *Topeka State Journal* opined that the "big boom envisioned by a group of Boston developers for the Wanamaker area just west of Topeka may be about to blossom." That second piece noted that "before the early day development fizzled, Wanamaker had a hotel and

country club, a going industry in the form of a sugar mill, and a couple of local steam railroads out from downtown Topeka."

One hundred years after the announcement of the land development by the syndicate, Zula Bennington Greene, "Peggy of the Flint Hills," recalled the event in one of her columns appearing in the *Topeka Capitol Journal* and described it as a "marvelous dream that had taken hold of the people [of the city] in 1884 and mesmerized them into the belief. . . that Topeka was destined to be a great, powerful city, extending clear to Martin's Hill."

The coming depression ended the Syndicate's development work in Topeka. The Belt Line and West Side Circle railways ceased operations, and the developers planned to take up their tracks to salvage the steel in the rails. Local residents obtained an injunction, but despite that, the rails were mysteriously removed in the night. The Methodist University building got no farther than the foundation excavation. The bank holding the mortgage on Martin's Hill foreclosed, but even the bank eventually went out of business. Shortly thereafter, Frank Pitts MacLennan obtained title to 60 acres on the east slope of Martin's Hill.

III. Cedar Crest – a hunting lodge.

Of Scottish descent, MacLennan was born in Springfield, Ohio, in 1855, and moved to Kansas at age 15 along with his family. He graduated from the University of Kansas, and found employment at an Emporia newspaper, becoming a part owner in 1880. At a sheriff's sale in 1885, he purchased the bankrupt *Topeka State Journal*, and remained its owner and publisher until his death in 1933.

Sometime around 1905, he constructed a log house on Martin's Hill, which he intended to use as a hunting lodge. Legend has it that the structure was constructed from telephone poles specially shipped for the purpose, and was roofed with hand-hewn shake shingles. He named the cabin and the surrounding 60 acres "Cedar Crest" and turned it into a farm complete with a bass pond. The cabin was described as a *commodious one . . . with a wide porch extending entirely around it. A profusion of cedar trees surrounds the*

cottage. The large living room with its massive fire place is the acme of rustic beauty. . . Here is a cool retreat on the hottest days, and the big porch is a popular resort for the folks who live in the cottage and for those from the other buildings who come to enjoy its hospitality.

Warren J. Newcomer's reminiscence, in his historical column appearing in the September 6, 1975 edition of the *Topeka State Journal*, of the MacLennan's Cedar Crest hunting lodge, described the structure as "the site of many picnics and parties since its construction 70 years ago." Newcomer noted, however, that "even in the early 20th century the art of shake-shingle roofing was fading, and the rain poured in on MacLennan's guests, forcing them to huddle under umbrellas." Newcomer noted that the original shake roof was replaced with a "more functional tin one in 1930." MacLennan was not alone in his desire to have a lodge in the country. Many well-to-do Topekans around the turn of the century enjoyed a weekend or country home, often near a river or lake. Frequently, land owners built their rustic vacation homes together, forming in the process a community or communal resort — the best known of these being Lakeview in Douglas County, which had been established along a Kansas River ox-bow. Opposite Martin's Hill, on the north bank of the Kansas River, was a row of cabins called Camp Mattingly. If the country property possessed significant acreage, the landowner on weekends became a "country gentleman."

A MacLennan contemporary, Thomas F. Doran, a Topeka attorney of note, lived in a grand Edwardian house on Western Avenue, but also raised livestock at Dornwood, his farm east of Highland Park. As for MacLennan, a 1912 biographical sketch in *Kansas: a Cyclopaedia of State History*, described the Cedar Crest life:

On this farm he spends a great deal of his time during the summer months and entertains friends at all seasons of the year. Here he keeps cows, giving his family a supply of pure milk, cream

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Paul Post is a former practicing attorney in Topeka and is now a local historian.

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and butter, raises poultry and vegetables, and finds relaxation from the busy cares of the city. On the farm is a tract of twenty-five acres of timber, and he has constructed a fish pond of two acres in extent, where he raises some fine bass.

Walt Mason, an Emporia poet, paid homage to Frank MacLennan at Cedar Crest, as follows: "The sun was rising in the West, and shed its beams on Cedarcrest, where pensive goat and sportive cow were perched upon the cedar bough. There Frank MacLennan watched his flocks, and slugged the gentle sheep with rocks, and drove his hens to lakelet's brim, that they might dive, and bathe, and swim. The pigs were climbing elms and firs, the hired man gathered cockleburs; a doctor passed on horse's back and all the ducks called loudly: 'Quack!' The fruit tree agent asked to stay all night; the horses whinnied 'Neigh!' Peace hovered o'er the prairie wide; the cattle lowed, the horses highed; and sounded through the village smoke, the bark of watchdog, elm and oak. And he who owned these rustic scenes, had seeded down his farm to beans."

IV. A Mutual Benefit Society

This idyllic spot did not escape the attention of others. In 1917, a Topeka-based fraternal organization, the *Knights and Ladies of Security*, explored the possibility of establishing for its membership a community farm, which would be self-sufficient, and which would include a hospital, an orphanage, a school, and a retirement home. The idea was to acquire a location somewhere in the center of the United States, so that members from around the country would have equal access to the facility. Cape Girardeau, Missouri and Topeka were the finalists, with the Kansas capital city being the eventual winner of the competition. In 1918, the society, which had become the *Security Benefit Association*, purchased 62 acres of MacLennan's Cedar Crest, including the rustic cabin.

The concept of the "mutual benefit society" was one product of the populist wave of the early 20th Century. The *Knights and Ladies of Security* was just such an organization, and it convened a commission to devise a method of providing and delivering health care to its membership. In a sense, the *Knights*

and *Ladies of Security*, and other similar mutual benefit organizations, became the originators of "managed care" in the early decades of the 1900's although the concept was not labeled as such until the latter part of the century. For the *Knights and Ladies of Security*, the idea was to create and maintain a home for aged members of the society, to establish an orphanage for children of deceased society members, and to build a hospital for current members of the organization. The overall concept was to create a mutual cooperative farm which would provide a continuum of care to members and dependents from the youngest child to the oldest pensioner.

In 1917, the first voluntary contributions to the *Knights and Ladies of Security* were in the amount of five cents per month per member. More than 50,000 nickels were sent in during the 10 days following the announcement by the Society of plans to construct a mutual cooperative farm in Topeka. The facility was officially known as "the Knights and Ladies of Security Home and Hospital Association." The farm was marketed to the citizenry of Topeka as

having a great potential for further economic development for the city, and accordingly, a fundraising effort was undertaken by the Society directed at Topeka residents.⁽⁸⁾ The deed granting the land for the farm to the Society specifically recited that the land was conveyed "upon the express condition that the grantee [the Society] shall expend not less than \$100,000.00 in improving the same within 36 months," and that if this did not occur, the Society would forfeit the land and also be obligated to pay \$32,000.00, this representing the "funds raised by the citizens of Topeka for the purchase of said land." The deed was dated July 2, 1918. Thus, the link between Topekans and the future mutual benefit farm and its structures was direct.

End of Part 1. The next part of this presentation will be in the next edition of Historical Highlights slated for the fall.



(1) Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin No. 46, To Martin's Hill by Steam in Sixteen Minutes, article by Philip W. Whitcomb.

(2) Topeka Weekly Capital and Farmer's Journal, May 5, 1887, p. 5

(3) Bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society, No. 53, Rise of the City: Topeka's Metamorphosis, p. 241

(4) <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/frank-pitts-maclennan/19331>

(5) Pages 160-162 from volume III, part 1 of Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc. ... / with a supplementary volume devoted to selected personal history and reminiscence. Standard Pub. Co. Chicago : 1912. 3 v. in 4. : front., ill., ports.; 28 cm. Vols. I-II edited by Frank W. Blackmar. Transcribed December 2002 by Carolyn Ward. This volume is identified at the Kansas State Historical Society as microfilm LM195. It is a two-part volume 3.

(6) The Knights and Ladies of Security Newsletter, October 1919, p. 2; <https://kansashistoricalsociety.newspapers.com/image/519084717>

(7) The Topeka State Journal, March 25, 1922, page 12.

(8) The Topeka Daily Capital, Wednesday, May 4, 1887, page 5.

NOTE FROM OUR SCHS LEADER

With the COVID-19 pandemic apparently in our rear-view mirror, things are getting back to normal for the Shawnee County Historical Society.

The *Ritchie House* in May hosted visits from 234 people, including 54 adults and 180 students. That marked its highest attendance since it saw 234 visitors in February 2020.

Thirty-five people took part in May in our walk-through presentation at Cedar Crest featuring Doug Mauck talking about the Oregon Trail.

Now we're gearing up for the **Historic Homes Tour**, which will probably be in mid-October.

The committee putting the tour together began meeting in mid-June and discussed three possible scenarios for the 2022 tour. We're working to figure out which works best this year.

Stay tuned.

Tim Hrenchir



*A Special
"Thank You"
to
Carol Yoho*

With this issue of the Shawnee County Historical Society's newsletter, *Historical Highlights*, we want to thank **Carol Yoho** for being our newsletter Editor for the past 6 years. As Trustees, we want to thank Carol who has given us a Generous amount of her time. This is the second time Carol has donated her talents and both times, we have been pleased to benefit from her efforts.

Carol is a strong member of the Shawnee County Historical Society and her assistance in making the organization better is appreciated. Thank you, Carol.

Taking over as Editor is a new member to the board, Lisa LaRue-Baker.



First Sunday Walking Tour A Success

We tried something new this past May. We held a walking tour of the Oregon Trail ruts at Cedar Crest. Noted historian Doug Mauck gave a walking tour May 15 at Cedar Crest in Topeka on the Oregon Trail. The trail, which began with 750 pioneers on May 22, 1843, has various routes through Shawnee County including the path on Cedar Crest. Mauck has been studying the Oregon Trail for over 23 years and gave an informative tour of the areas where the trail. You can hear and see the discussion at the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-vj0-EpqW8>

Other walking tours are planned for the future including a review of the Tiffany Glass windows at Mt. Hope Cemetery.





Do you know someone who you would like to be a member of the Shawnee County Historical Society?

Just pass this along to a person you think is qualified to be a member.

Have them fill out the following information below and send it to **PO Box 2201, Topeka, Kansas 66601** or send by email to **shawneecountyhistory.org**

We would love to have them join us in preserving the History of Shawnee County.

I want to support:

- Heritage Education for kids \$ _____
- Shawnee County Preservation \$ _____
- Historical Programs/Lectures \$ _____
- Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) \$ _____
- Ritchie House restoration and maintenance \$ _____

I also want to renew my annual membership:

- General Membership \$35 \$ _____
- Patron Level Membership \$50 \$ _____
- Renovator Level Membership \$100 \$ _____
- Sustaining Level Membership \$150+ \$ _____

Total \$ _____

Credit Card _____ Exp. ____/____ Plus the CVV Code _____

Historic Lithographs for Sale



The Shawnee County Historical Society continues to offer for sale lithographs from the 1870's. These are Birdseye views of Topeka and Tecumseh as well as a map of the plains in the early 1860's. Copies are available for sale for **only \$15** with members getting a discount. If you would like to know more about these lithographs, please call **(785) 234-6097**.

In addition, we have many requests for past bulletins and they are being sold for \$25.



Contact us also by email: **shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com**



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Building Heritage Culture*

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*Mark Your
Calendars*



*Plans:
2022*

Society Events July - December 2022

- August** Walking tour: Hicks Row Houses at 6th and Tyler
- October** Historic Homes Tour
- December 4** Annual Membership Meeting, 12 pm, site to be determined