A Blow to the Spirit: The Kaw River Flood of 1951 in Perspective

Before beginning, I’d like to extend my thanks to Dr. Kimball for allowing me this forum, my third such opportunity in less than two years. I must admit, however, that I accepted his invitation with some reservations. When Dr. Kimball first suggested another talk, he thought I should revisit my Boston study, which greatly impressed so many people in Kansas City. I was unsure since you can visit new ground only once. At the time, I was following up my original study with research on industrial development in the Kaw Valley, including the effects of the 1903 and 1951 floods on economic development in Kansas City. Given the events of this past summer, and what I saw as a lack of historical perspective regarding the 1951 Flood, I accepted the opportunity.

Historians have a peculiar aversion to discussing contemporary events, one generally ascribed to an unwillingness to predict outcomes based on past experience. As Charles Glaab, an important urban historian, once wrote, “the value of the historian’s work diminishes as it approaches the present ... there is a point impossible to locate exactly – as our studies approach the present day, at which the usefulness of historians’ work diminishes relative to the usefulness of contributions by other social scientists.”¹ Given my own reservations, I must admit that historians, like all good social scientists, avoid making themselves an influence on the processes they study. While I understand this hesitation, I confess that I do hope to affect your perspective on these fundamental issues of urban development.

Fortunately, Kansas City escaped a major flood during the past summer, but I was disheartened last July that the public seemed to misapprehend the very real potential for disaster. This attitude reflects profound changes in the city’s structure since 1951, the most important being that so few people live near areas inundated by past floods. I also think this reveals a great deal about our sense of the metropolitan area.

My goal today is not to recast the flood in a different mold, nor to debunk local myths about its relevance and Kansas City’s rebound from adversity, nor will I simply recant the events of July 13, 1951. My objective is to examine the history of the Kaw Valley and what it has meant to Kansas City’s development, what it has been to its inhabitants. In doing so, I think we will learn a great deal about our basic assumptions about the character of our region, our delicate

balance as actors in a complex ecosystem, and our tenuous belief that technology can, and indeed must, rule nature. In this, I am indebted to the work of historian Kenneth S. Davis, whose landmark study has deeply affected my own perceptions of the subject.  

The actors in this story are not heroes; the narrative is not tragedy. This lecture, I hope, will develop a context in which to begin to comprehend Kansas City in relation to its hinterland and as part of the industrial economy of the Midwest. This story is fundamentally about the Kaw Valley as an ecological system, in the sense that the watershed is a biological system of which humans, and their technology, have long been an important part. Given my focus, this is largely the story of the industrial towns that became Kansas City, Kansas, and the continuing decline of that city, which has been much noted in the past few months, although the underlying change has been evident for more than a few years. By the end of this talk, I hope to have stirred you to examine your assumptions about the contemporary status of Kansas City in the region, and Kansas City, Kansas, within the metropolitan area.

**Defining the System**

I’d like to begin by discussing the nature of the Kaw Valley and the Kaw River as an ecological system. The Kaw is the heart of a complex system formed at Junction City in central Kansas by the convergence of the Republican and Smoky Hill rivers. The Big Blue River enters the Kaw at Manhattan, and the Kaw itself empties into the Missouri River at Kansas City. The Kaw is a minor system on a national scale, but is among the dominant systems in our region. The river itself drains over 5,500 square miles of territory and with its tributaries drains an additional 55,000 square miles of land.

The Kaw Valley includes both the geodetic and the geographic centers of the continental United States. In 1950, more than a million people lived within this basin; 54 percent of the population living in rural areas and the remainder living in the cities, especially Kansas City. Agricultural workers accounted for nearly 30 percent of the 1950 employment in the Kaw Valley; 25 percent worked in white collar positions, and another fourth worked in blue collar industries, mostly in and around Kansas City, Topeka, and Manhattan.

The Kaw River enters the Kansas City metropolitan area south of Bonner Springs, just east of the junction of Leavenworth, Wyandotte and Johnson counties. From this point, the Kaw flows easterly, swinging north and south as it approaches the Missouri River. A few miles above this confluence, commonly known as Kawsmouth, the Kaw swings to the south, then east, then abruptly north, skirting the state line before finally flowing into the Missouri River. Within this hookshaped curve are lands that have been home to human populations for more than three centuries.

**Early Populations**

The earliest civilization in the Kaw Valley arose in the late 18th century, with the arrival of the Kansa nation near Junction City and Manhattan. For reasons unknown, approximately 7,000 members of the tribe emigrated from their ancestral homes at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The etymology of the Kansa name is unclear, although scholars suspect it is

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3 Once again, these ideas are derived largely from Davis, 35-67, 85-128.
4 Davis, 36-41; *The Kansas Basin: Pilot Study of a Watershed* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1956), 79, 81, 88.
derived from various terms describing the wind. We can be certain, however, that the tribe used the same word to describe the river. The first contact between the tribe and Europeans occurred in 1703, when Charles Le Seur led a French mining expedition to this region. Because of competition with other Native American tribes, and disease introduced by European settlers, the Kansa dwindled to fewer than 1,600 by 1835. In 1872, only 200 members of the Kansa nation still lived in Kansas. Later, all were eventually relocated to Oklahoma.5

After President Andrew Jackson mustered through the infamous Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Delaware tribe resettled on lands that now comprise Wyandotte and Leavenworth counties north of the Kaw.6 In 1831, Moses Grinter, a federal agent, was dispatched to operate a ferry across the river, just east of present-day Edwardsville and Muncie, Kansas. This ferry became one of several stations on the military road developed southward from Ft. Leavenworth to protect the demarcated Indian frontier. His wife, Anna, was a member of the Delaware tribe. In 1857, Grinter built his home, which still stands on a hill overlooking the Kaw Valley in central Wyandotte County.7

In December 1843, the Wyandotte nation was uprooted from its ancestral home in the Ohio Valley and forcibly removed to the Indian Territory, which at that time included the region that eventually became the state of Kansas. The federal government arranged a treaty between the Wyandottes and the Delaware for three sections of land in the fork of the Kansas and Missouri rivers; the Wyandottes eventually purchased from the Delaware nation an abutting 36 sections of land.

With the treaty arrived 700 tribal members, diminished by disease along the journey. Sixty more would die while camped in the West Bottoms, awaiting final settlement in Kansas. The land in the Kaw Valley was held in joint tenancy by the entire tribe. The Wyandotte established small farms and engaged in simple commerce with traders at Westport, some four miles to the southeast. The nation established a ferry across the Kaw near the current location of the 18th Street Expressway Bridge in Kansas City, Kansas, and settled mainly on the bluff overlooking Kawsmouth.8

The 1844 Flood

The settlement of the Wyandottes in the Kaw Valley prefaces the first significant natural disaster recorded in the Kaw Valley. The forested bluffs and bottom lands on which the Wyandotte settled were among the most dramatic vistas in the region. Here, towards Kansas City, the rolling plains gave way to precipitous bluffs sculpted by the scouring action of winding

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7 Eloise Frisbie Robbins, “The Original Military Post Road Between Fort Leavenworth and Fort Scott,” Kansas History 1, 2 (Summer 1978): 90-100, 94; Larry K. Hancks and Meredith Roberts, Roots: the historic and architectural heritage of Kansas City, Kansas (City of Kansas City, Kansas, 1976), 7, 32-33.
rivers. Occasionally, however, history had shown this majesty to be precarious, as evidenced by floods in 1782 and 1826.

Accepted legend, however, describes the 1844 Flood as the worst disaster in the history of the region. John McCoy, the founder of Westport, provides a graphic account of the disaster in his journal. “The Missouri River at about the 13th of June,” he wrote, “was only a few feet over the bottom lands, but the great volume of water that came down the Kansas River madly rushing against the mighty Missouri caused the seething waters to pile up at the mouth .... The seething, foaming flood of water was not only dashing madly onward in the river channel, but it swept across the heavily timbered bottoms of west Kansas from bluff to bluff with a roar almost deafening.9

Among the casualties of the 1844 Flood was the property of Louis Tromley, who lived in the West Bottoms. As McCoy recalled, “During the night of the fifteenth, and the next morning, from time to time, loud cries of distress were heard over at Wyandotte, in the direction of Louis Tromley .... Those who listened to those cries knew full well that the old man was in deep trouble as well as deep water ....” The next day, according to McCoy, Mr. Tromley was found perched in a tree, and was rescued by a group of Wyandottes. A few hundred yards away, in another tree, they found Tromley’s wife, and on the roof of their house, the Tromleys’ son. On the ferry back to Wyandotte, the Tromley’s were aghast to see their house drift past, upon which sat the family dog. Yes, the tale does seem a bit stretched.

McCoy was prominent in Westport, and for good reason. During the flood, he later acknowledged, he and his companions “spent the long, dreary hours of the night in roasting bacon and hams, and telling marvelous tales of blood curdling scenes that never happened, probably.”10

Stewards of the Valley

The Wyandotte nation did little to dramatically alter the forested landscape of the Kaw Valley near Kansas City. They had possessed this land for barely 10 years when pressure for western expansion resulted in the opening of Kansas Territory to settlement in 1854. Within two years the Wyandottes would negotiate with white Americans from Kansas City, among them John McAlpine, T. B. Eldridge, and Thomas H. Swope, to sell a portion of their lands on the bluff. In partnership with Silas Armstrong and Isaiah and Joel Walker, tribal members, these investors established the Wyandotte Town Company and began selling land on the bluff to new settlers. The town soon developed as a small commercial supplement to nearby Westport Landing and Westport itself.11

The next several years saw an important boom that, driven by immigration into Kansas, forged the victory of Westport over Independence as the seat of regional trade. Among the settlers to ferry through the Kaw Valley during these pivotal years were the settlers of the New

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9 Theodore. S. Case, History of Kansas City, Missouri (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1888), 42.

10 Quoted in Harrington, Historic Spots, 261-263. McCoy’s diary is among the few recorded accounts of the 1844 flood. Unfortunately, this throws into question the reliance of engineers, from Octave Chanute to the Army Corps, upon apocryphal measures of river depth and velocity during the flood. This point has been acknowledged by engineers N.T Veatch and Verne Alexander. N. T. Veatch, “The Kansas Flood of 1951,” American Water Works Association Journal 44, 9 (September 1952): 765-779, 765; Verne Alexander, “Reappraisal of flood control objectives indicated by Midwest flood of July 1951,” Civil Engineering 21, 11 (November 1951): 34-37, 34.

11 Ibid., 238-241.
England Emigrant Aid Company, the Boston abolitionists led to Kansas by Eli Thayer, who passed via schooners from the mouth of the Missouri on their way to settlements that eventually would become the towns of Lawrence, Topeka, and Osawatomie.\(^{12}\)

Silas Armstrong, Matthias Splitlog, and John Armstrong, among other tribal leaders, quickly acclimated to the customs and dress of their new neighbors, and were among the wealthier residents of Wyandotte. Lucy Armstrong, John Armstrong’s widow, gained title to the bottom lands south of Wyandotte and along the left bank of the Kaw in 1859.

Throughout the 1860s, this land was subdivided and sold to German immigrants and others, who settled their families onto small farms among the cottonwood trees lining the Kaw.\(^{13}\) Land on the Kansas side of the West Bottoms was platted by Silas Armstrong and his partners in 1858.\(^{14}\) Less than 10 years later, these investments were supplemented by those of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, parent company of the Hannibal and St. Joseph.\(^{15}\)

**Railroad Developments**

In 1864, the Kansas legislature, after heated debate, declared the Kaw River unsuitable for riverine navigation, and authorized the construction of bridges over the channel. The declaration marked a triumph of railroad promoters over steamboat interests, although the decision remained controversial and was eventually overturned.\(^{16}\) The declaration nonetheless contributed to the expansion of major rail systems into the frontier. Railroads drove the emergence of towns and industry and, in Kansas City, the first, and crucial, railroad development was the construction of the Kansas Pacific Railroad eastward, through the Kaw Valley from Lawrence. The line began service December 19, 1864, nearly five years before the completion of the Hannibal and St. Joseph Bridge across the Missouri.\(^{17}\)

The emphasis of town boosters on the Hannibal Bridge legend obscures the fact that the first railroad bridge in Kansas City was a prefabricated Howe Truss bridge, purchased in Chicago and assembled across the Kaw by Thomas F. Oakes, the local manager of the Kansas Pacific Railroad.\(^{18}\) Kansas City’s first railroad connection thus arrived from the west, not the east! In the West Bottoms, the Kansas Pacific joined the Missouri Pacific, which likewise built eastward to St. Louis.

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\(^{13}\) Patent, Competent Class “A”, June 1,1859, United States to Lucy B. Armstrong, Wyandotte County, Patent Record Book, 44.


\(^{16}\) *Kansas (Kaw) and Missouri Rivers. Letter from the Secretary of War, in response to Senate resolution of February 8, 1904, Reports of a Board of Engineers on establishment of harbor lines in Missouri and Kansas (Kaw) Rivers in vicinity of Kansas City, Mo., and on the subject of obstructive bridges across, and of flood conditions in, Kansas River at and near its mouth.* United States, 58th Congress, 2d Session, Senate Document No. 160. Serial Set 4590:7 (hereafter Senate Document No. 160).

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 112-113.

With the development of the Union Pacific, Eastern Division, as the Kansas Pacific became known, Wyandotte County experienced its first wave of urban growth. In 1871, the railroad built a town named for Silas Armstrong on the bluff south of Wyandotte. Within a decade, railroad commerce in Wyandotte County spurred the development of Tiblow (later to become Bonner Springs), Edwardsville, Muncie, and Turner, all to the west of Kansas City. Topography and economy dictated much of the specific routes. Given the dramatic bluffs and craggy valleys in the region, railroads followed these natural grades along creeks and rivers. Thus, natural systems dictated the path of this artificial vehicle across the Plains, and the Kaw Valley thereby persisted as the region’s central artery of transportation and commerce.

The second railroad through the Kaw Valley was the Kansas City, Topeka, and Western, which began in Topeka and snaked along its 67-mile route toward Kansas City in the mid-1870s. Recognizing the increasing prominence of Kansas City over Atchison, and even St. Joseph and Leavenworth, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway leased the line in 1875. Within three years, the general superintendent of the Santa Fe, Charles Fessenden Morse, had extended the line to Kansas City’s West Bottoms, rebuilding much of the trackage between Topeka and Lawrence in the process. The arrival of the Santa Fe near Kansas City also marked the birth of Argentine, the industrial hamlet which owes its name to the silver smelter established there two years later.

Morse, as many of you will recall, was a native of Boston, who began his career as a civil engineer and was apprenticed with a prominent Boston architect. After meritorious infantry service during the Civil War, he headed west to positions in railroads tied to John Murray Forbes’ Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy system, the parent railroad of the Hannibal and St. Joseph. Morse arrived in Topeka in 1874 at the peak of an agricultural depression in Kansas caused in part by interminable seasonal plagues of locusts, which undermined harvests and set back growth.

By the fall of 1875, the depression had waned, and Morse reported to his old Army comrade, Boston financier and philanthropist, Henry Lee Higginson, that prosperity had returned. “People are beginning to forget the grasshoppers,” he wrote. Within three years, Morse would report that a boom was underway. “People are pouring into the state,” he said, “and there is a strong and healthy movement of grain, stock, and other freight.” In December 1878, Morse decided to leave the Santa Fe and take charge of the Kansas City Stockyards for his old friend and Boston associate, Charles Francis Adams. He quickly reported the news to Higginson.

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19 Keith L. Bryant, Jr., History of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 54-55.
21 Morse’s career in Kansas City is thoroughly described in my earlier lecture, Boston Investors and the Early Development of Kansas City, Missouri (Kansas City: Midwest Research Institute, 1992).
23 Charles F. Morse to Henry Lee Higginson, February 13, 1878, Volume XII, Folder 1-65, Higginson Collection.
“You must make up your mind,” he advised, “that the Kansas City, Topeka, and Western is the real outlet of the Santa Fe, and interest yourself in it accordingly.”

**Industrialization and Town Building**

Within two years, Morse became the most influential character in the history of the Kaw Valley. As company superintendent and general manager, he would launch the substantial physical expansion of the Kansas City Stockyards that led to Kansas City’s emergence as the nation’s second packing center. Within the West Bottoms, the yards were expanded and improved, and Morse soon succeeded in attracting several prominent meat packers to Kansas City by offering subsidies of cash, land, and company stock. While boosters like Joseph McCoy argued that Kansas City’s prominence in the livestock industry was accounted for by the city’s railroad connections, the development and expansion of the stockyards and meat-packing in Kansas City is testament to the entrepreneurial and managerial skill of Morse and the company’s directors.

From speculative investments in the railroads and a small factory that became the Kansas City Refining and Smelting Company, Morse took on the task of managing land investments for Adams, the most important of which was the development of the town of Armourdale on the broad floodplain south of Wyandotte, adjacent to the Union Pacific and opposite the Kansas City Stockyards. Morse chartered a town company to build a wooden bridge across the Kaw and sell land in the bottoms, converting the nearly 1,500 acres of small farms to a thriving industrial town within three years.

From a preindustrial population of only a few dozen, Armourdale became home to nearly 1,500 merchants and skilled laborers and their families, enough to be classified as a second-class city. Armourdale developed its own schools, churches, banks, retail and wholesale merchandise houses. Soon German, Irish, and Swedish immigrants arrived to work in the packing houses and associated industries, including a cooperage, soap factories, and dessicating works.

Despite its material growth in the early 1880s, Armourdale lacked paved streets and formal sewers, and among the several dozen ordinances passed by the city government were prohibitions against “swine running at large,” appropriations for the construction of wooden plank sidewalks, and tax levies for fire and flood protection. Armourdale was also distinctive in that it was a dry town, prohibition being instituted by city ordinance in 1882. The city was home to active labor organizations, including a brotherhood of railroad workers who organized a local chapter of the Knights of Labor.

The development of meat-packing in Kansas City did much to increase the profits and success of the Kansas City Stockyards, whose revenues were determined by the volume of livestock sold on the local market. The Armour beef plant, built in 1892, was heralded as a

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factory killing machine; the plant itself served as the core mechanism in the technology of slaughter. The progress in packing was not without its price, however. The old adage that “the packers used everything of the pig but the squeal” overlooks the pollution generated by slaughtering. The few unusable remnants of meat-packing at Armour and other plants were dumped directly into the Kaw River.

The concentration of air- and water-borne industrial pollutants in the West Bottoms heightened the stigma already attached to the immigrants living and working there. In 1879, 2,000 people had camped near the Armour plant, and eventually settled in the Patch, a row of shanties behind the factory. Along with other immigrants, they constituted the principal labor on the killing floors. After the turn of the century, these groups were supplanted by a sizable population of Serbs and Croats, most of whom eventually relocated to Strawberry Hill.28 The ethnic, social, and political background of these groups contrasted sharply with the nearby residents of Kansas City’s Quality Hill.

By the mid-1880s, a significant industrial population had settled in Armourdale and the West Bottoms. In 1886, Kansas Governor John A. Martin, spurred by Wyandotte merchants and with the approval of the state legislature, issued a proclamation consolidating Armourdale, Armstrong, Wyandotte, and the West Bottoms, into the new city of Kansas City, Kansas. Although the measure was widely disfavored, Governor Martin’s proclamation recognized the value of industrial capital in the Kaw Valley, and sealed the city’s fortunes as a working-class town. As labor historian Leon Fink has noted, “There were probably few more socially heterogeneous places in America than this industrial city on the edge of the prairie.”29

The 1903 Flood

By 1903, the West Bottoms, Argentine, and Armourdale comprised the central manufacturing district of the Kansas City metropolitan area, and were home to the bulk of the city’s working class. While working and living conditions were far from ideal, the communities in the floodplain could rely on steady work and commuting access to the entire metropolitan area, thanks to the Metropolitan Street Railway. But the heavy rains that plagued the Kaw Valley beginning that May demonstrated the force and volatility of nature’s hand. In one month, Kansas City saw three times its normal rainfall, and in four days alone, precipitation approached the monthly total. On Friday, May 29, the Kaw began to rise rapidly. By the following day, water flowed from open sewers in Armourdale, and by Sunday, May 31, the Kaw had overflowed its banks, topping the makeshift levees and abutments designed to hold it back within a period of three hours.30

28 Susan Greenbaum, Strawberry Hill: A Neighborhood Study (City of Kansas City, Kansas, 1978), 4-10.
29 Leon Fink, Workingmen’s Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 115; Harrington, Historic Spots, 244-247. Wyandotte merchants began the campaign to consolidate the industrial towns into a single city in the mid-1870s. The action was contested in several lawsuits and calls through the end of the 19th century for deannexation. In 1897, Armourdale merchants presented a petition to the Kansas Legislature describing consolidation as an unjust act. Committee of Thirty, “To the Kansas State Legislature” (1897), in Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka. Fink notes that boosterism, especially as reflected in the new city’s name, played a prominent role in the consolidation decision. Fink, 117-118.
Damage worked by the disaster was catastrophic. The 1903 Flood destroyed every bridge on the Kaw from Argentine to Kawsmouth, 16 in total. The sole exception was the Missouri Pacific Bridge, which was sustained by the weight of multiple steam locomotives. The vital Flow-Line Bridge, which carried the city’s water supply from the Quindaro waterworks across the Kaw, was among those destroyed, depriving Kansas City of water service for 12 days, and shutting down for the same period the city’s street railways, and local gas and electrical service. Because the bridge failures effectively isolated the city from external commerce, the team of Kansas City engineers, led by J.A.L. Wadden, were forced to rely on local resources for repairs to the Flow-Line Bridge.32

The greatest damage wrought by the 1903 Flood, however, was the devastation to the communities of the Kaw Valley. The most significant flooding occurred at the junction of Turkey Creek with the Kaw, immediately south of the stockyards, near the present site of the American Royal Arena. At James Street in the West Bottoms, water levels ranged from 5 to 10 feet, and when the waters receded, tons of silt, along with dozens of animals from the stockyards and packing houses, lay behind.

The damage to Kansas City’s economy was pronounced, as reflected in the effect on the city’s core industries. Charles F. Adams, Jr., was devastated by the 1903 Flood, coming as it did during a period of relative prosperity after the turbulent 1890s. “Financially,” he later said, “it was for me as a brick falling on the head as I walked along a familiar street. The loss was never recouped.”33 And significantly, Adams also noted, the 1903-1904 period was the only fiscal year since the company’s inception that it failed to pay out an annual dividend. Conservative estimates put damage to infrastructure and industry in Kansas City at $34 million. Realistic damages were much higher, since losses of residential structures, small businesses, and losses from business interruption were not among the tally.

Like Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, however, Kansas City overcame adversity to build again, re-establishing the basic infrastructure on which the city’s commercial greatness was founded. The 1903 Flood occurred at a period in which Kansas City’s material progress was generally assured. There had been no shifts in the national economy; there had been no significant changes in technology; and the economics of transportation still dictated that manufacturing and distribution industries, including meat-packing, be located within close proximity to the railroads. As a result, Kansas City eventually recovered from the 1903 Flood, but not after having endured the disaster itself, and being transformed in the process.

The 1903 Flood devastated Armourdale with water 5 to 20 feet, deep drowning the residential core. One observer reported that some houses could not be found after the flood, and some found later had not been there beforehand.34 As a result, the merchant class relocated to higher ground, leaving behind the few substantial homes undamaged by the flood. Social conditions in Armourdale suffered significantly after the flood, due largely to the district’s lack

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33 Charles Francis Adams, Jr., An Autobiography (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1915), 188.
34 Kansas City Star, June 1, 1903.
of basic infrastructure.\textsuperscript{35} In total, the 1903 disaster uprooted the nearly 23,000 residents of the West Bottoms, Armourdale, and Argentine, and accelerated suburbanization in the southern part of Wyandotte County. The flood was also responsible for the relocation of the Union Depot from the West Bottoms to the south side of Kansas City, along the valley of O.K. Creek, where Union Station would be built less than 10 years later.\textsuperscript{36}

**Flood Planning after 1903**

The most significant effect of the 1903 Flood was the response of the Corps of Engineers. In 1893, a report issued by the Chief of Engineers had argued that the Kaw channel was insignificant for navigation and that calls to improve the channel, which would require the construction of costly and perhaps infeasible dams, were motivated largely by attempts to create riverine competition to undermine the railroad freight-rate system. The report concluded that improvements to levees, at most, were warranted, although the danger of a cataclysm resembling the 1844 Flood seemed remote.\textsuperscript{37}

The engineering response to the 1903 Flood was encapsulated in a proposal known as the Gary Plan, which called for clearance of debris and abutments from the channel and maintenance of navigable harbor lines of 600 feet.\textsuperscript{38} Over the 30 to 40 years of development in the Kaw Valley at Kansas City, the channel, which was estimated to have been about 800 feet wide through most of its course in Wyandotte County, had been narrowed by abutments created to reclaim land from the channel to supplement the holdings of various landowners. The current was also impeded by makeshift bridges, whose shoddy piers were supplemented by piles of stones.

Among the chief culprits, according to the Chief of Engineers, was the Kansas City Stockyards Company. The company’s manure dump adjacent to the Missouri Pacific Railroad was built upon riprap to reclaim more than 100 feet from the Kaw channel. The company’s bridges, which connected the main yards to the quarantine yards and the Swift and Cudahy plants in Armourdale, sat on oversized concrete piers surrounded by tons of rock. Railroad bridges remained in the channel after the 1903 Flood, further impeding normal flow.\textsuperscript{39}

Hearings held in Kansas City to discuss the proposal demonstrated considerable resistance on the part of the railroads and industry, especially the Kansas City Stockyards.\textsuperscript{40} The

\textsuperscript{35} Elmer, “Armourdale: A City within a City,” 9, 33-35.

\textsuperscript{36} William H. Wilson, The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City, second edition (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1990), 96-98.


\textsuperscript{38} Harrington, Historic Spots, 266-270.

\textsuperscript{39} “Report of the Board upon the flood conditions in Kansas River at and near its mouth,” in Senate Document No.160, 10.

\textsuperscript{40} “Proceedings before Board of Engineers...”, Senate Document No. 160, 43-133, especially pp. 93-96 (testimony of Charles F Morse).
1903 Flood was followed by a less severe flood in 1904, which increased the pressure to take action. Still, the Stockyards and railroads resisted change, and resumed the construction of pile bridges. The inadequacy of their construction was demonstrated regularly, as in the winter of 1903-1904, when an ice floe swept away the wooden pile bridge that carried the Metropolitan Street Railway from Armourdale to Argentine. The loss left Argentine isolated, as the bridge provided the only direct commuter transportation into the city.41

Little action was taken over the next decade, despite minor floods on the Missouri River in 1908 and 1909. In 1914, the Chief of Engineers submitted a report claiming that the impediments had increased, that the significant debris of collapsed bridges from the 1903 Flood remained, and that other developments in the channel were impeding the flow of current in the river.42 The important fact to note in all of these developments is the underlying thesis of the engineers: man-made obstructions, not the extremes of nature, were largely responsible for the 1903 disaster.

The railroads continued to resist, resulting in lawsuits and legislative deliberations. The Kaw Valley Drainage District, chartered by the Kansas legislature in 1905 to monitor flood control activities in the Armourdale and Argentine districts, eventually succeeded through litigation to clear the channel of most obstructions.43 By the 1920s and 1930s, levees were being built along the left bank of the Kaw River to protect Armourdale. The assumption that levees and channel improvements would prevent another disaster prevailed in the short term, but would soon be supplanted by a comprehensive approach, the cost and benefits of which remain in dispute.

Pick-Sloan: Engineering Nature

By the early 1930s, the Interior Department’s Bureau of Reclamation began to consider various alternatives to remedy the drought conditions that plagued the Midwest during the Great Depression. This planning would culminate in a scheme named for William Glenn Sloan, a bureau director, which proposed to provide water for irrigation in massive reservoirs throughout the Missouri River Basin. This proposal followed, by a few years, congressional authorization for construction of levees and dams on the Missouri River and its tributaries, and eventually the Sloan plan would be merged with the flood control plan named for Colonel Lewis A. Pick of the Army Corps of Engineers.44

Time does not permit me to examine the political aspects of these proposals at any length, but the important point is that divergent forces led to the development of each proposal, and the merger of the two resulted in a massive change in federal policy toward flood control, with dramatic implications for the Kaw Valley. The plan was authorized by Congress in 1944, and by the late 1940s, appropriations estimates ranged from $800 million to $2 billion, depending on how the expenses were itemized.

41 “Argentine Bridge Goes Out,” Kansas City Times, January 16, 1904, 1.
43 Harrington, Historic Spots, 267-284.
Deliberations over Pick-Sloan demonstrated potential flaws in the plan’s logic and feasibility. A 1937 report by San Francisco consulting engineer Frederick H. Fowler to the Flood Protection Planning Committee, a Kansas City-based steering group, urged the construction of two massive reservoirs on the Republican and Big Blue Rivers, along with channel and levee improvements. “In short,” Fowler concluded, “reservoir control would permit continuance of the normal business and community activities throughout the valley, even in the severest flood years.”\(^{45}\) Ten years later, the committee submitted a $6 million appropriation request to Congress, arguing that this investment would prevent up to $32 million in damages due to the possibility of a repeat of the 1903 Flood.\(^{46}\) Other groups argued to the contrary that any attempts to engineer the river would prove futile and that the appropriate course (as is argued today) would be to divert industrial and residential development from the Kansas and Missouri River floodplains.

Despite the controversy over the efficacy of Pick-Sloan’s two-pronged approach, construction on upper Missouri River dams began in the mid-1940s. By 1951, control reservoirs had been constructed on the Republican River, a Kaw tributary, the most important being the Kanopolis Dam southwest of Salina, Kansas.\(^{47}\) Neither the proposed Milford nor Tuttle Creek dams would be built before 1951, leaving Kansas City’s sole source of protection some 370 miles upstream. Unfortunately, Pick-Sloan would avoid its greatest test case, as little of the original plan would be in place to prevent the 1951 deluge.

**Black Friday**

The spring of 1951 was unseasonably wet; like 1903, rainfall that May and June surpassed normal levels by two to four times. The Kaw rose quickly. By early June, levels on both the Missouri and Kaw exceeded flood stage, although seemingly not enough to endanger either Kansas City. But from July 9-13, three intense storms inundated the most crucial part of the watershed, the stretch from Manhattan to Kansas City, almost as if Providence acted deliberately and with haste.\(^{48}\) During the evening of Thursday, July 12, the Argentine levee was breached, resulting in an onslaught of water 30 to 50 feet deep in some locations. The torrent drove nearly a thousand residents from their homes, and submerged the Santa Fe yards, the Sinclair Refinery and the Kansas City Structural Steel Plant. When the water finally receded, damages in Argentine alone amounted to $62.5 million.

At 5:15 a.m. Friday, July 13, the Kaw overtopped the levee on its left bank just past the Colgate-Palmolive Company in Armourdale. Within two hours, water from 12 to 30 feet engulfed the entire district. The drama of the event, the final blow in a last ditch effort to save the levee and prevent a recurrence of the 1903 Flood, is apparent in the log kept by the engineer on watch. “Eight hundred feet below the bridge,” he wrote, “south of the bridge it is washing in under the tracks. The Army has pulled their men out. They had to fall back as they couldn’t get

\(^{45}\) Frederick H. Fowler, “Report on Kansas Floods to the Flood Protection Planning Committee of Greater Kansas City” (San Francisco: March 1937), 3.

\(^{46}\) Flood Protection Planning Committee for Greater Kansas City, Flood Protection for the Kansas Citys (May 1947).


\(^{48}\) Corps of Engineers, United States Army, Interim Report on Storms and Floods in the Kansas City District, May-July 1951 (Kansas City, Mo: Office of the District Engineer, October 1951), 4. All details on flood damages are derived from this source.
the sandbags in fast enough. They had a 200-foot gap there. Everybody is running right now. It will start pouring in within 15 minutes. She is beyond the stage of saving her. The levee is boiling under the tracks. Somebody just told me to get out of here.”

The incredible current that swept over Armourdale eventually reached the West Bottoms. Ironically, the East Armourdale levees, built to hold back the Kaw, actually contained the water within the district. Engineers were aghast the following day, when water inside the levee flowed like a waterfall back into the Kaw. Up to 3 feet of silt were deposited throughout Armourdale, even on the altar of St. Thomas Catholic Church, 12 feet above street level. Most residential structures, which were wood-frame houses, were washed into the streets and alleys. When the water finally receded, damages in Armourdale exceeded $120 million.

The levees protecting the central industrial district were topped at about 10:30 a.m. Friday morning, and water levels quickly reached a depth of 32 feet. Little was spared by the raging current, including the stockyards and packing houses. Approximately 200 dwellings in the West Bottoms were also destroyed, displacing hundreds of inhabitants. Two engineers working on the levee drowned, four people suffered heart attacks, and several more sustained minor injuries. Along Southwest Boulevard and the Turkey Creek Valley, an oil tank broke loose from Phillips Petroleum Company, came into contact with a high-tension power line, and erupted into flames. The resulting fire persisted for nearly five days, largely due to the fact that the Turkey Creek pumping station in the Kaw Valley was under water. By the time it was extinguished, the fire had destroyed $10 million worth of property.

The 1951 Flood seriously disrupted business in the bottoms for nearly two weeks, and it was more than two months before the Kansas City Stockyards were able, in a limited fashion, to reopen for business. Economic losses caused by the work stoppage were estimated at $35 million. All told, 17,550 people were driven from their homes in Armourdale, Argentine, the West Bottoms, and near Fairfax. When the waters receded, the economic toll of Black Friday exceeded $840 million throughout the Kansas City district along both the Missouri and Kaw, 10 times the toll projected by proponents of flood control during the previous decade.

The Kansas City Spirit

Almost immediately, civic leaders led a campaign to repair the devastation wrought by the disaster. Teams of engineers and civil defense workers cleared debris and controlled fires, while volunteers offered food, shelter, and clothing to those displaced by the flood. As had been the case in 1903, the prompt response of Kansas Citians was canonized as another demonstration of the Kansas City Spirit. Later that year, at the behest of Hallmark founder Joyce C. Hall, Norman Rockwell and a local artist painted “The Kansas City Spirit,” an emblematic incarnation of civic pride. Like the reconstruction of Convention Hall, the city’s victory over nature’s adversity has since been celebrated as a demonstration that little can impede, let alone stop, Kansas City’s material progress.

In surveying the aftermath of the 1951 Flood, it seems clear that Black Friday crystallized a turning point in Kansas City’s development as a regional economic center. The flood has been viewed, quite equivocally, as both a disaster that Kansas City would easily surmount and as the

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49 Area Engineer Flood Report, Armourdale Unit, 5:30 am., July 13, 1951. 1951 Flood Area Engineer Reports, Armourdale Unit, 1951 Flood, Kansas City Area, Box 17. Records of the Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District Office, Record Group 77. National Archives-Central Plains Region, Kansas City, Missouri.
beginning of the end of Kansas City’s heyday as a livestock and meat-packing center. Some even trace the decline of Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City manufacturing generally, to the disaster.

The first and most immediate impact of the 1951 Flood was the virtual assurance of political support for Pick-Sloan appropriations. The debate remained fevered, but within a few years, construction was under way on several Kaw reservoirs. Over the next 15 years, approximately 80 percent of the improvements called for by the Corps of Engineers were implemented in the Kaw Basin, despite protestations from valley communities. In the words of Kenneth Davis, man abandoned one environment, no less natural, no less affected by humankind, the agricultural environment of the middle landscape of Kansas, in favor of the urban environment of the eastern third of the watershed. In sum, agricultural lands were permanently submerged to protect Kansas City against another flood.50

While Kansas City stood to benefit greatly from these improvements, many questioned whether the reservoir-levee combination would foreclose the possibility of another 500-year flood. In 1953, engineers N. T. Veatch, Abel Wolman, and Louis R. Howsan argued that even full implementation of Pick-Sloan could not have prevented the 1951 Flood. As Veatch noted, had the July 9-13 storm been centered a few miles further north, flow rates on the Kaw at Kansas City would have increased by 35 percent. Their alternative proposal carried a price tag of $200 million, less than half to a fifth of Pick-Sloan, depending on the estimates used.51 The Veatch proposal met with considerable sympathy from other engineers. As engineer Verne Alexander would later argue, “absolute protection is only an optimistic hope and cannot be economically justified.”52

These reservations were overcome by political fervor to prevent a recurrence of the disaster. As Alexander explained, the region adopted the slogan, “This must never happen again.”53 By 1975, the general parameters of Pick-Sloan were implemented, resulting in the construction of Milford, Tuttle Creek, Clinton, and Perry dams, among others, marking a significant change in the landscape and geography of Kansas.

**Convergence: Economic Turbulence after the Flood**

Unlike the 1903 Flood, the 1951 disaster happened at a time in which Kansas City’s industrial economy was beginning a subtle, though eventually dramatic, transformation. In August 1951, the Cudahy Packing Company announced that it was closing its plant, since managers considered the plant’s technology obsolete, and felt that repairs therefore made little economic sense.54 Within 20 years, all of the major plants, including Swift, Wilson, and Armour, would be shut down, replaced, or substantially decrease production capacity and employment.55 These developments have suggested to many that the flood itself was the precipitating factor in

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53 Ibid, 34.
54 *Kansas City Star*, October 12, 1951, 9.
55 *Kansas City Star*, January 29, 1968, 1; July 30, 1968, 1; June 18, 1971, 1; *Kansas City Times*, October 4, 1975, 4A.
this decline and transformation of the metropolitan economy. Is this presumption valid, and was the flood likewise an omen foretelling the decline of the Kansas City, Kansas, economy?

To the contrary, I would argue that the convergence of the 1951 Flood with broader economic factors was responsible for this transformation. During the 1920s and 1930s, trucking became as important to the Kansas City Stockyards as the railroads had been during its formative years. By the 1950s, interstate highways permitted the decentralization of population and industry. The economics of transportation thereby favored newly developing suburban and rural areas. The demise of the railroad freight-rate system, in tandem with the development of the diesel truck, freed industry from its reliance on centralized distribution facilities. Trucking made it cheaper to transport livestock directly from the feedlots, and also made the shipment of packed meats cheaper than the shipment of live animals.

At the same time, the labor-intensive technology of the meat-packing plants in Kansas City was quickly outdated by automation. The plant, in concert with workers on the floors, was the killing machine, but in Kansas City and elsewhere these plants still relied on late-19th century processes. For Armour and others, it made more sense to abandon these obsolete plants and replace them with mechanized factories. The result was displacement of significant numbers of medium- and low-skilled labor, a process that actually predates the flood. In December 1950, for example, the Wilson plant eliminated 60 percent of its work force (1,154 jobs), and all of the major plants reduced employment by an additional 1,750 workers the following June, just a month before Black Friday.56

Other labor-related factors contributed to the relocation of meat-packing from Kansas City. The 1940s were marked by very significant strife at Kansas City meat-packing plants. A 1947 strike at Armour was suppressed by the National Guard, and a year later, a strike at the Wilson plant resulted in violence. As part of what has become known in labor history as the Greenbelt philosophy, large-scale industries began to emphasize relocation and decentralization of mechanized facilities to lower cost rural labor markets. This process was accelerated by the changes in transport economics, since transportation costs in rural areas were also lower.

The convergence of the 1951 Flood with these macroeconomic impulses works against the mythology of the Kansas City Spirit. The city indeed rallied in time of crisis, but the economic realities of the postwar age dictated new developments in the following decades. Industry, history shows, was no longer bound to proximity to railroads to perform effectively. Trucking and interstates made it possible to develop industry anywhere, especially away from union-ridden, high-tax, aging infrastructure areas. The effects of this process, which were subtle through the end of World War II, seem particularly pronounced in the aftermath of disaster.

The Decline of Kansas City, Kansas

What did the 1951 Flood mean for Kansas City, Kansas? I think more than anything, the resulting transformation of the local economy underscored the significant class divisions in the metropolitan area, which have their roots in the 19th century. It had long been a staple of Kansas City boosterism, driven largely by nativist sentiment, to downplay the presence of the foreign-born element in Kansas City. This was a simple thing for Kansas City boosters, since most immigrants lived not in Kansas City, Missouri, but in Kansas City, Kansas. The concentration of industry in the Kaw Valley in Kansas City, Kansas, tied that city to an industrial work force and

56 Kansas City Star, October 26, 1950, June 10, 1951.
population base, while the Kansas City, Missouri, economy diversified. The resulting nativist and class bias is reflected by the commonly unstated, but nonetheless callous, attitudes of the general public.

In the early 1950s, two sociologists visited Kansas City to determine what Kansas Citians at different levels of society thought about each other and themselves. In the words of an unidentified Kansas City journalist, “We here in Kansas City, Missouri, think of Kansas City, Kansas, about like Manhattan people think about the Bronx or Brooklyn. It’s a place you wouldn’t live in if you could help it.” This attitude was even found among residents of Wyandotte County, as in the case of the wife of a Kansas City, Kansas, union leader. “We’re not too proud of this town,” she said. “Men are always telling my husband we ought to move out of here, but he feels very strongly that it would be wrong to live in a different neighborhood from the men he represents.”

These attitudes are certainly still with us, and I don’t mention them to issue any judgments. In a historical context, they reveal a great deal about the racial, social, and class divisions within the metropolitan area. They also represent a significant misapprehension of history, and have led historians and the general public to overlook the development of Kansas City, Kansas, and other industrial areas, such as the Blue River Valley, as part of the city’s historical fabric. Our unwillingness to openly acknowledge this bias has contributed to our apprehension about the decline of our urban core.

More importantly, the 1951 Flood dispossessed several thousand people of shelter and employment. The blue collar job losses mounted, and the process of decentralization, which had been ongoing since the end of World War I, was given additional impetus. Factories in the Kaw Valley weren’t rebuilt, and those that were integrated new and labor-saving technology that supplanted the industrial work force. Armourdale’s population never recovered. From a peak of approximately 18,000 in the early 1920s, Armourdale had declined to around 10,000 by the 1951 Flood, and today the population numbers less than 3,500. Armourdale’s decline was hastened by the indecision of city government, which wavered from a 1951 proposal to rebuild the community’s residential core, to the eventual decision to abandon the area as a residential district. This ambivalence contributed to the disintegration of social institutions, the abandonment of churches, schools, dozens of homes, and the relocation of hundreds of residents, many of whom were Hispanic or African-American.

Conclusion

I’ve painted with some fairly broad strokes this afternoon and, in doing so, I’ve had to overlook significant details. I don’t claim to have done justice to the flood planning process before 1951, nor to the full story of the disaster itself. I certainly haven’t offered an adequate assessment of flood prevention since 1951. I do hope that I have, nonetheless, made clear the central influence of the Kaw Valley as a channel of commerce in Kansas City. The Kaw Valley has long served this region as a means of navigation, transportation, and economic development. The Kaw River is, has been, and continues to be paradoxically a source of drinking water, a natural sewer, the lifeline of agriculture, and the dumping ground for industrial by-products. But

58 This point is addressed in my previous MidContinent Perspectives monograph, An Intentional Community: History and Local Identity (Kansas City: Midwest Research Institute, 1992).
just as our appropriation of the river and the landscape of our region has varied over time, so has
our attitude about the nature of the channel.

In early days, the river was allowed to run its course, due mainly to man’s lack of
engineering know-how. By the end of the Civil War, the channel was abandoned as a navigable
stream, but remained crucial with the development of railroads and associated industries. In the
late 19th century, business proved indifferent to abuse of the channel, with shoddy construction
of makeshift bridges and abutments and widespread industrial pollution. This lack of respect was
all the more prevalent after nature’s hand swept away these obstructions in 1903.

By the early 20th century, residents of the Kansas City area viewed the Kaw as but
another aspect of nature over which man would eventually triumph. Nature foiled man’s grand
schemes again, acting more swiftly and decisively than could political institutions, undermining
all of the flood planning underway since 1903. But the 1951 Flood did little more than harden the
resolve of our appointed stewards over the channel. Among our final misjudgments, the central
defect of our approach to replanning the channel after the 1951 Flood, was the brazen
assumption that Kansas City would, just as in 1903, recover from this adversity. But the
changing economic realities of the industrial Midwest proved this to be an eventual
impossibility.

This story underscores one decisive fact: no matter how well planned, no matter how
shrewd the execution, engineering still remains an unequal match for nature. This summer we
should have relearned how precarious is our relationship to the Kaw, one of the central arteries
of our self-identity. What a former generation assured us would come to pass no more, has not
only arrived, it looms as an omnipresent reality on the horizon. In neglecting to respect the Kaw
as a geological force equal to or even greater than ourselves, we risk the folly of repeating our
previous mistakes. Of all the lessons to be learned from the past, this counsel should not be
disregarded. Thank you.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**QUESTION:** Would Kansas City be better off without the rivers, since in many respects
they are not responsible for most of the commerce here?

**ANSWER:** One hundred years ago, Kansas Citians would have argued the contrary. In
their view, the rivers put Kansas City on the map, and the wisdom of God’s hand in crafting the
streams sealed the city’s destiny as a center of commerce. Certainly the rivers put Kansas City on
the map, but man has had a bit to do with the development of commerce here. The rivers were
the crucial determinants of frontier town-building, however, and were certainly necessary as a
source of potable water and as a means of sanitation. Moreover, the railroads could never have
thrived in Kansas City if it weren’t for the natural streams. Kansas City was an unlikely
contender for railroads, given the city’s rugged topography. Without the bottoms, without the
natural grades carved by nature, Kansas City couldn’t have served as any kind of nexus for
anything.

We tend to be fairly oblivious to the degree to which engineering has allowed us the
mobility we have. Just a few hundred yards from here, seven bridges cross Brush Creek. Thomas
Morse, Colonel Morse’s youngest son, told me that crossing Brush Creek was something of an
adventure for Hyde Park residents on their way to the Kansas City Country Club on Sunset Hill.
Just imagine trying to mount Wornall Road by foot, by horse, or by early motorcar, and consider again that the hill and the winding road have been significantly graded in the last 75 years. Without the natural grades worn by the area’s creeks, streams, and rivers, I don’t think industry could have persisted here. Kansas City wasn’t the ideal location for either railroads or industry. The valleys of our regional rivers and streams mitigated that shortcoming.

QUESTION: How would you evaluate the engineering processes on the river?

ANSWER: Not being an engineer, having a background in history and political science, I am not an authority. I have developed insights by reading the work of Kenneth Davis and others, who argue in a broader context, as I have tried to do here today, about the relationship of engineering to nature. Without engineering, civilizations would not have flourished, and without engineering on the Kaw, industry would have relocated away from the floodplains long ago.

I wouldn’t take the view, however, that the quality of engineering has been such that we saved ourselves money in the long run; given the expense of Pick-Sloan, that’s certainly a debatable question. I would argue that we shouldn’t be so guided by the assumption that we can surmount all of the natural obstacles, that disaster can’t and won’t happen again.

One of the things that disturbed me most about this summer’s flooding was that few seemed to realize how close we really came to a significant natural disaster in Kansas City, so long after the implementation of Pick-Sloan and years of assurances that the risk had been eliminated. Communities within the metropolitan area nearly lost their water supplies, and given the fact that the Missouri River services southern Johnson and Jackson Counties, the entire metropolitan area stood at risk. I have to take issue with the view that we have indeed become the masters of our own destiny when it comes to our relationship to the rivers. We remain oblivious to the real dangers our own shortsightedness can impose.

Pictures included in the lecture publication.

page 1 | page 2 | page 3 | page 4
Daniel Serda is a research associate in the Department of History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, under a grant from the William T. Kemper Foundation. This is his third address on local history in the Midcontinent Perspectives lecture series. At the conclusion of his current appointment with the university, he intends to pursue graduate studies in urban planning. Mr. Serda, who received his A.B. degree in government from Harvard University in 1992, is a lifelong resident of Kansas City, Kansas.

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Initiated in 1974 and continuing until 1994, the sessions of the Midcontinent Perspectives were arranged and convened by Dr. Kimball at four- to six-week intervals. Attendance was by invitation, and the audience consisted of leaders in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The lectures, in monograph form, were later distributed to several thousand individuals and institutions throughout the country who were interested in MRI and in the topics addressed.

The Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, in cooperation with MRI, has reissued the Midcontinent Perspectives Lectures in electronic format in order to make the valuable information which they contain newly accessible and to honor the creator of the series, Dr. Charles N. Kimball.