

RESOURCE PROTECTION PLANNING PROJECT
PATTERNS OF WHITE SETTLEMENT IN OKLAHOMA, 1889-1907

REGION ONE

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1986

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SUPPORT

The activity that is the subject of this publication has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior.

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The purpose of this study is to provide a historic context for the interpretation of white settlement patterns in Oklahoma. While one cannot overlook the significant role of Indians, Blacks, and other ethnic groups in populating and developing the state, their contributions merit separate attention. This work, therefore, focuses on the conditions, stimuli, and processes that determined rural settlement and urban development in the state between 1889, when the area was opened to white settlement, and 1907, when Oklahoma was admitted to the Union.

Prior to the Civil War, the United States government set aside the present state of Oklahoma as an Indian preserve. Only those white people who married Indians or who obtained special permits would be allowed to reside legally on tribal lands. In the 1820s and 1830s, the Five Civilized Tribes--the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles--were forced to cede their territory in the Southeast in return for land in Oklahoma. Fierce nomadic tribes, however, controlled the western plains, and the Five Civilized Tribes settled only the eastern half of the region. The Indian custom of holding land in common, which persisted in Oklahoma, allowed each individual to exploit the amount of tribal land that suited his interests. While the full bloods kept to themselves on small subsistence patches, mixed bloods and adopted whites

operated farms, ranches, and plantations that often encompassed thousands of acres. The traditional Indian town, previously a communal center with adjacent common fields, declined in Oklahoma. Settlements functioned as trade, political, or educational centers, but they did not contain significant concentrations of population.

During the Civil War, the Five Civilized Tribes allied mainly with the Confederacy. As a penalty for secession, in 1866 the federal government forced them to accept new treaties that hastened the demise of Indian isolation and ultimately precipitated the opening of their land to white settlement. Among the provisions of the new agreements was the requirement that the tribes cede large portions of their western territory, upon which the United States would relocate other tribes, and the stipulation that they grant railroad rights-of-way across their domains.

During the 1870s and 1880s, railroad corporations constructed lines through the territory that facilitated the exploitation of natural resources in the Indian nations, provided greater access to regional and national markets, and stimulated increased agricultural activity. (For further information on the construction of railroads in Oklahoma, see the transportation historic context.) Section points along the rail lines became commercial and distribution centers and fostered the establishment of towns. Vinita, Miami, McAlester, Atoka, Durant, Ada, and Ardmore became significant railroad towns, service centers,

and the foci of areal agricultural development. The expansion of the rail facilities spurred the development of valuable bituminous coal deposits in Indian territory, principally in the Choctaw nation. Attracting thousands of workers, mining towns such as South McAlester, Krebs, Coalgate, and Lehigh comprised some of the most important population clusters in the Indian territory.

Concomitant with rapid economic development after 1870 was the dramatic increase in the number of white residents in Indian country. At first, most apparently obtained the required permits and engaged in legal activities. Many, however, were illegitimate "intruders." In 1889, the agent in charge of the affairs of the Five Civilized Tribes estimated that in a population of 175,000 there were 108,000 white residents, including 35,000 intruders. The number of illegal residents continued to rise in subsequent years and intensified the pressure upon the federal government to open Indian lands formally to white settlement.

During the 1870s, a rising tide of farmers, speculators, and businessmen streamed into the American West. A growing number of whites viewed land in the Indian territory as the last frontier and increasingly demanded the opening of the Unassigned Lands to white settlement. Many "boomers" refused to wait for official government sanction, organized colonization schemes in neighboring states, and carried out invasions of the Unassigned Lands

in defiance of federal authorities. Although the "boomers" failed to establish any permanent settlements, their encampments at locations such as those on the North Canadian River at the site of present-day Oklahoma City and on Boomer Creek near Stillwater did attract many settlers after the area was opened. The publicity that attended their activities, however, helped make the Oklahoma movement a national issue.

Events in the 1880s significantly advanced the boomers' designs. In 1887, the Santa Fe completed a line from Kansas to Texas directly through the Unassigned Lands. The company established station points at approximately ten-mile intervals, making such places as Alfred, Guthrie, Edmond, Oklahoma Station, and Norman prime future townsite locations. In 1889, the government of the United States acquired final title to the nearly 2,000,000 acres in the Unassigned Lands and authorized the president to open the area for white settlement. Because the number of expectant settlers far exceeded the approximately 12,000 sites available, the Department of Interior devised a procedure to give each person an equal chance--a land run. When the cannon blasts signalled the beginning of the run at noon on April 22, 1889, an estimated 60,000 people raced to stake a claim. By late afternoon, nearly all the land had been claimed--frequently by several persons. Almost as rapidly, urban clusters at Guthrie, Oklahoma City, Kingfisher-Lisbon, Orlando, Lexington, Crescent, and

elsewhere began the process of organizing towns.

White settlement in Oklahoma was not restricted to the Unassigned Lands for long. In 1889, the federal government negotiated treaties with Indian tribes (excluding the Five Civilized Tribes) who relinquished their exclusive claims to reservation lands and agreed to accept 160-acre allotments. After distribution of the individual parcels, the government purchased the remaining lands and opened them for general settlement.

The Organic Act of 1890, which provided formal political organization for the newly created Oklahoma Territory, annexed the Public Land Strip (the Oklahoma Panhandle) and stipulated that all reservation lands in the western Indian region would be incorporated into the new territory as they were opened to whites. Between 1891 and 1906, approximately 13,500,000 acres of land were opened by a series of runs, lotteries, sealed bids, and public auction. Those areas opened by land runs usually duplicated the process of settlement in the Unassigned Lands. Those opened by lottery, sealed bids, and public auction were more orderly. But in either case, the establishment of farms and the formation of towns largely followed the patterns and vicissitudes that characterized the initial opening.

Homesteaders who succeeded in obtaining land staked their claim, located the corners of their quarter section, made rudimentary improvements on their tract, and filed at

the land office as soon as possible. The settler's first home was small and crudely built of whatever material was available. After securing their own shelter, they then proceeded to plow their land, plant a crop, build a shed for the live stock, and set out a few fruit trees. If the land was productive and the farm thrived, a more substantial, multi-room wood frame or stone house (see, for instance, the old Herbert farmstead southeast of Mulhall) replaced the more primitive family quarters.

Many of the new settlers were not farmers and had no intention of becoming farmers. The urban impulse in Oklahoma Territory was almost as compelling as the hunger for land. Although not completely unique in American frontier experience, a significant characteristic of the settlement of Oklahoma Territory was the creation of instant cities and towns. The "boom towns" of Guthrie, Oklahoma City, Lawton, and Enid literally sprouted on the prairie on the day of the opening and contained 10-15,000 or more people by nightfall. Railroad towns evolved from stations or locations along the major lines and enjoyed the advantages of transportation and communications facilities. Inland towns--those settlements that had no initial connection to rail lines, such as Stillwater, El Reno, and Altus--were created to serve the needs of the rural population and in hopes of becoming thriving communities in their own right. The success and durability of these ventures largely depended upon a variety of

factors, the most important of which was the success of their efforts to secure the interest of a railroad. Many aspiring communities, such as Ingalls, Lawrie, or Paradise, just "bubbled up" after an opening and then collapsed almost as quickly.

The business district of the average town, at first comprised of from four to twelve stores along the main street, was the heart of the settlement. The earliest stores were often located in tents, but frame buildings replaced the temporary quarters as soon as possible. As the town prospered, brick, stone or concrete structures gradually supplanted many of the wooden buildings.

Between 1890 and 1907, a tremendous increase in the white population of Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory generated almost irresistible pressure on Congress to admit Oklahoma to the Union. The population of Oklahoma Territory grew from nearly 61,000 in 1890 to almost 400,000 in 1900. A special census in 1907 set the population at over 722,000. By statehood, the population of Indian Territory had risen to over 690,000 inhabitants, with non-Indians outnumbering the Native Americans by seven to one. Before admitting Oklahoma, however, Congress insisted that Indians accept the concept of the private ownership of land. The Dawes Commission was authorized to survey the lands of the Five Civilized Tribes, enroll allottees, and determine eligibility. Ultimately, 101,526 persons received land allotments of 160 acres in Indian

Territory. The remainder was assigned to townsites, schools and other public purposes, and segregated coal and timber lands. There was no surplus land for homesteading. On November 16, 1907, Oklahoma's nearly 1,500,000 inhabitants entered the Union as citizens of the forty-sixth state.

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN REGION ONE

The three counties of region one, commonly called the Oklahoma Panhandle, form a rectangular strip of land encompassing 3,657,000 acres. Lying entirely within the High Plains, elevation in the area ranges from 2000 feet in eastern Beaver County to nearly 5000 feet in western Cimarron County. Its extensive range of short and mixed grasses makes excellent grazing land for cattle; annual rainfall varies from about twenty-two inches in the eastern section to less than sixteen inches in the far west. The relative aridity of the Panhandle enhances the significance of its two principal waterways and their tributaries. The Cimarron River flows through northeastern Beaver County and northwestern Cimarron County; Beaver Creek traverses the entire strip except for a small section that dips into Texas below Cimarron and Texas counties. Except for cottonwoods and willows along the north bank of the Beaver, there are few trees and shrubs in the region. Homesteaders

and ranchers alike relied mainly upon sod, adobe, or native rock and stone to build their homes.

The Panhandle is unique in Oklahoma history because it is the only portion of the state that did not lie within Indian territory. Prior to 1850, the region belonged to Texas. In November 1850, however, Texas, a slave state, ceded the area to the United States government in accordance with the Missouri Compromise, which banned slavery above 36'30" north latitude. Thus, this tract of 5670 square miles, lying between the 100th and 103rd meridians and between 36'30" and the 37th parallel, was not included in any existing state or territory. Officially it was known as the Public Land Strip, but most called it No Man's Land.

Although the region was ignored by settlers until the late 1870s, it did not remain completely isolated from white contact. Traders followed the Santa Fe Trail across the western end of the Strip. In 1865, Kit Carson established Fort Nichols (which is on the National Register of Historic Places) in far western Cimarron County to protect traffic along the trail from Kiowa and Comanche raids. After the Civil War, thousands of Texas cattle, as well as freight and travellers, followed the Jones and Plummer Trail through the Strip to Dodge City, Kansas. In 1879, Jim Lane established a supply station at the point where the trail crossed Beaver Creek. He built two sod houses, a corral, and a stable. Lane operated a store and

post office in one of the soddies and lived in the other. Lane's cabin is on the National Register.

During the late 1870s and early 1880s, the vacant lands of the Public Land Strip became the exclusive domain of cattlemen, who were attracted by the area's proximity to Kansas railheads, extensive grasslands, and water. By the mid-1880s, cattle companies grazed hundreds of thousands of cattle on open ranges. Later, in 1888, the Rock Island railroad extended its line seven miles into the Strip from Liberal, Kansas, to capitalize on the ranching activity. The town of Tyrone soon developed at the terminus of the tracks.

By 1885, however, a variety of factors combined to weaken the cattlemen's exclusive control and attract homesteaders to the Panhandle. Devastating blizzards in the winters of 1883-1884 and 1885-1886 forced many operators to abandon their ranches or greatly reduce the size of their herds. In 1885 and 1886, a rising tide of homesteaders began to flood the recently opened lands of southwestern Kansas. As settlement reached the saturation point, land hungry "nesters" turned their attention to No Man's Land. In October 1885, the Commissioner of the United States Land Office informed a resident of Englewood, Kansas, that the Public Land Strip was part of the public domain and, therefore, subject to occupation under squatter's rights. Soon, a trickle of settlers established themselves between the Kansas line and Beaver Creek in the

eastern portion of the Panhandle; in 1886, a more extensive migration followed.

Seeing an opportunity to establish a town to serve the squatter settlements, a group of "boomers" in Wichita, Kansas, formed the Beaver City Townsite Company. In March, 1886, representatives of the group arrived at Jim Lane's store at Beaver Creek crossing to survey a townsite. Recognizing his prior claim under squatters' rights to the 160-acre tract, they offered him two choice blocks in the proposed city if he would surrender his claim. Lane accepted, and Beaver City was platted. The government would not recognize the company's survey or claim because the federal survey of the Public Land Strip was incomplete, and the area could not be homesteaded. The promoters and other newcomers selected choice claims to establish their prior rights when the region was formally opened. Within a year, Beaver City was a thriving town of between 600 and 1000 inhabitants. Its commercial district soon included a hotel, dance hall, saloon, livery stable, general store, dry goods store, blacksmith shop, hardware store, a boot and saddle shop, lumber yard, and several groceries. It also contained two or three doctors, two ministers, a church, a school, and a newspaper. The Beaver Presbyterian Church, built in 1887, is on the National Register.

In addition to Beaver City, a number of sod towns sprang up in 1886 and 1887, primarily in the eastern third of the Strip. Townsite companies founded Gate City on the

eastern edge of No Man's Land, and Neutral City, about four miles west of Gate. Sod Town, a wide open hangout for criminals, was located on Kiowa Creek near the Texas border. Other early settlements in the eastern section of the Panhandle included Benton, Rothwell, Alpine, Blue Grass, Riverside, Paladora, and Grand Valley. In the central portion, hamlets existed at Hardesty, Optima, Beer City, and Tyrone. In the far west, Carrizo (later named Kenton), near Black Mesa, and Mineral City, where the discovery of a small coal vein in 1886 had created a modest boom town, provided mail service for cattlemen in that area. Most of these settlements were little more than a small cluster of sod houses surrounding a larger building selling merchandise. Some contained a dozen or more houses, several stores, a church, a school, and perhaps even a hotel. Frequently, a single sod house served as a residence, post office, store, church, and school. In 1887, some contemporaries estimated that between 12,000 and 15,000 squatters lived on the Strip.

The initial agricultural settlement of the Panhandle coincided with one of the region's cyclical wet periods. In 1886 and 1887, squatters enjoyed good crops, even on land away from the streams. Those who prospered were able to improve their living quarters and businesses by enlarging their soddies or replacing them with more substantial homes of native rock, stone, or wood that they freighted in from Kansas.

During this time, however, no laws governed No Man's Land. Post offices and "Star" routes constituted the only vestiges of official government contact with the area. Squatters made numerous requests to add the Strip to Kansas or New Mexico, but legislation continually failed. Without law or lawmen, claim jumping, horse stealing, intimidation, banditry, and murder threatened the settlers' security. Illegal activities flourished in several towns on the Strip. Kansas had prohibited the sale of liquor in 1881. Beer City, just across the boundary from Liberal, Kansas, was notorious for its saloons, gambling halls, and prostitution, as well as running alcoholic beverages into "dry" Kansas border towns. Several towns conducted "bootleg" operations; Alpine manufacturers of tobacco evaded federal taxes on their products; and Sod Town was a generally recognized center of various illicit activities. In order to curtail lawlessness and secure clear title to their land, a group of settlers attempted to organize the Strip as the "Territory of Cimarron" in March 1887. Although they chose a full slate of officers, named Beaver City as territorial capital, elected a legislature, and sent a delegate to Washington, the federal government refused to recognize the organization.

In 1888, the Panhandle entered a dry cycle that would last until 1894. As hot winds seared their crops, many squatters became disheartened and left No Man's Land. In April 1889, after the federal government opened the

Unassigned Lands for settlement, 6000 "Strippers" joined the race for homesteads. By mid-1889, less than 3000 settlers remained in the region.

In 1890, the Organic Act, which created Oklahoma Territory, incorporated the Public Land Strip into the territory as the seventh county (Beaver); Beaver City became the county seat. The Homestead Act did not apply immediately to Beaver County, however, because the government survey had designated only township boundaries. In 1890 and 1891, the county was surveyed into 160-acre tracts, and a government land office opened in Beaver City. Normally, before they could acquire title to their claim, homesteaders had to reside on the land for five years. In Beaver County, however, squatters could count up to three years' residency prior to 1891 toward the five-year requirement when they proved up on their claim and acquired a patent.

Territorial status did not immediately attract settlers to Beaver County. The extended drought and additional land openings, especially the Cherokee Strip in 1893, continued to drive the population from the area. Few settlers were willing to face the constant hardships during the remainder of the nineteenth century. In 1894, only 2 percent of the land available for homesteading was claimed in Beaver County. That percentage rose slowly in subsequent years: 5 percent in 1896; 12 percent in 1899; and 17 percent in 1902.

After 1902, settlement of Beaver County increased significantly. By that year, most of the good land in the rest of Oklahoma Territory had been claimed, and homesteaders looked more favorably on the Panhandle. In 1902, the Rock Island completed its line across the Strip. Slicing diagonally from northeast to southwest, the railroad stimulated the creation or expansion of such towns as Tyrone, Hooker, Optima, Guymon, Goodwell, and Texhoma. Farmers could take advantage of more direct access to markets, and businessmen eagerly anticipated new commercial opportunities. The acreage under cultivation expanded, and profit grew as settlers adopted crops suited to the High Plains such as drought-resistant strains of wheat; they also raised Kaffir corn, maize, African millet, broomcorn, sorghum, hay, and, for a short time, canteloupes.

While the railroad brought new life to some towns, it spelled the death of others, such as Central City, Lavrock, and old Hardesty, the original site of which is on the National Register. In later years, the construction of additional railroads in the Panhandle and changes in mail service led to the demise of scores of other pre-statehood towns such as Meridian, Alpine, Floris, Willowbar, Blue Grass, and many others. Even Beaver City, lacking a rail connection, lost its preeminent position to Guymon before 1907.

The population of the Panhandle grew slowly during the first decade after its incorporation into Oklahoma

Territory. A special census in 1890 placed the population at 2,982; it declined to 2,216 in 1893. In 1900, the entire region contained only 3,051 people; Beaver City had shrunk to 112 residents. Between 1900 and 1907, especially after the development of the railroad and renewed interest in homesteading in 1902, the number of settlers in Beaver County rose to 35,739. In 1907, the Oklahoma Constitution divided the Panhandle into three counties and designated Beaver City (Beaver), Guymon (Texas), and Kenton (Cimarron) as the county seats. At the time of statehood, Beaver County claimed 13,364 residents; Texas County had 16,448 inhabitants; and Cimarron County counted 5,927 people. The Panhandle's four largest incorporated towns were Guymon (839), Hooker (448), Beaver City (271), and Texhoma (262). Since statehood, region one's population has declined by approximately 25 percent, and the Panhandle remains the most sparsely settled portion of the state. In this area of large wheat farms and extensive cattle operations, few towns have populations that surpass 1000 inhabitants.

PROPERTY-TYPE ANALYSIS OF WHITE SETTLEMENT
STRUCTURES IN REGION ONE

From the late 1880s to 1907, whites established squatters' settlements and farms, homesteads, and towns in region one, especially in Beaver and Texas counties. Any cursory survey of the region will reveal the following property types: 1) townsites, 2) commercial buildings and structures, 3) non-commercial buildings, 4) homesteads and related structures, 5) houses, 6) churches, 7) schools, 8) cemeteries, and 9) land office sites. The relative paucity of studies and surveys of sites related to white settlement demands that preservationists not only make exceptional efforts to locate existing sites but also apply to them the National Register criteria for determining the significance of specific properties. The National Register criteria are as follows:

- A: Properties that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B: Properties that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C: Properties that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.
- D: Properties that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

1. Townsites: Scores of townsites were established before 1907. Townsites in region include those that are of mere archeological interest (such as Sod Town in Beaver County), those that are virtual ghost towns (such as Kenton in Cimarron County), and those that continue to function as vital social and economic units.

2. Commercial Buildings and Structures: Towns contained a variety of commercial buildings. Most began as sod houses, which were later replaced by wood frame, stone, brick, or cement block buildings. Stone buildings were most common in the western half of region one. In the days of settlement, commercial buildings were used for stores, hotels, restaurants, banks, newspaper offices, pharmacies, doctors' offices, saloons, blacksmith shops, feed and grain stores, and a variety of other business purposes. Typical commercial structures within the towns included livery stables and stock yards. Depending upon the area, some also had grain elevators and, less frequently, cotton gins. Few of the remaining buildings contain the original enterprises for which they were built.

3. Non-Commercial Buildings: Non-commercial buildings typical of early communities include jails, post offices, and, in a few instances, lodge meeting halls.

4. Homesteads and Related Structures: Because of climatological, topographical, and economic factors, many original homesteads were relinquished or sold to form more extensive pasture or farm lands. Many original claims,

however, can still be located. In addition to the rural home, on the homestead site one would expect to find such structures as barns, sheds, silos, windmills, and fences. Many stone structures remain in salvageable condition.

5. Houses: Settlers built a variety of types of houses during the early period. Initial shelters included sod or adobe houses, dugouts, half-dugouts, rock dwellings, and small frame houses. The most common early type of residences throughout region one were sod houses, which also frequently served as stores, post offices, churches, and schools. In the western portion of the region, however, native stone provided the most frequent source of local building materials. Climatic conditions and inadequate maintenance have undoubtedly destroyed all but a few of the adobe and sod houses and other crude shelters, but some remaining examples may be found. In both towns and the rural districts, stone, brick, or wood frame houses remain from the period before 1907.

6. Churches: A few fine examples of churches built before 1907 are scattered through the region. Churches also functioned as centers of social and cultural activities as well as religious services. They included small sod or wood frame buildings and substantial structures of stone or brick. Representative churches reflect not only some of the most important aspects of town life, but they are also significant elements of the rural landscape as well.

7. Schools: Like churches, schools dotted the rural landscape and served important social, as well as educational, functions in the towns. While the old sod school houses have largely disappeared, preservationists should encounter a number of representative wood-frame, stone, and brick school houses.

8. Cemeteries: Cemeteries were significant components of the urban and rural environment. Frequently a cemetery was located near, but outside the townsite limits on land donated by a homesteader. Lots within a townsite were set aside for cemeteries as well. It was also common to place a cemetery beside a rural church. At some sites, the only reminder of previous occupation is an abandoned cemetery.

9. Land Office Sites: Three federal land offices were established at one time or another in region one. These land offices were located at Buffalo, Beaver City, and Guymon.

WHITE SETTLEMENT SITES IN OKLAHOMA

REGION ONE:

Beaver County:

1. First Presbyterian Church, Third Street and Avenue E, Beaver, OK (National Register, 1974)
2. Jim Lane Cabin, Main Street and Avenue C, Beaver, OK (N.R. 1974)
3. Old Corner Cafe, Second and Douglass Streets, Beaver, OK
4. Elmwood School, Sec. 24, T 2 N, R 23 E, Elmwood, OK
5. Lawrence Friends Academy Site, NE 1/4, Sec. 26, T 3 N, R 28 E, Gate, OK
6. Benton County Banner, N 1/2, Sec. 31, T 4 N, R 26 E; 6 miles west and 6 1/2 miles south of Knowles, OK

Cimarron County:

7. Clapboard Residence, Block 16, lots 1, 2, and 3, Kenton, OK
8. Ice Cream Parlor, Block 5, lot 10, Kenton, OK
9. Kenton Bank Building, Main Street, Kenton, OK
10. Kenton General Store, Main Street, Kenton, OK
11. Dr. Lane's Residence, Block 2, lots 10 and 11, Kenton, OK
12. Post Office Building, Main Street, Kenton, OK
13. Union School and Teacherage, Main Street, Kenton, OK

Texas County:

14. First National Bank of Texhoma, 222 West Main Street, Texhoma, OK
15. Post Office, 109 and 111 South Second Street, Texhoma, OK

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