



**Testimony to
House Committee on Federal and State Affairs
HB 2268
February 16, 2015**



Last Chance Store, Council Grove

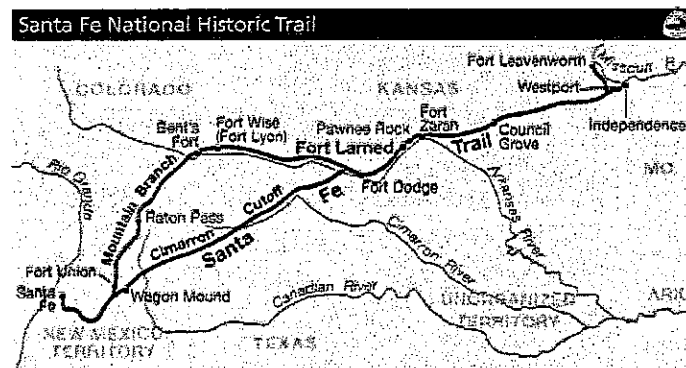
Summary

The Last Chance Store in Council Grove was built in 1857 to serve travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. The property became part of a National Historic Landmark designation in 1963 and was individually placed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1966. The current owner of the property wishes to donate The Last Chance Store to the Kansas Historical Society. The Kansas Historical Society does not have general statutory authority to accept land and buildings therefore specific legislation is required. HB 2268 conveys the property to the Kansas Historical Society. The agency is in support of this bill.

Property History

The Last Chance Store was erected in 1857 by Tom Hill on the north side of the Santa Fe Trail, some five blocks west of the Neosho River crossing at Council Grove. At the time it was the last store in the settlement going west on the trail, hence its name. It was also one of the first stores in the settlement.

The Santa Fe Trail was the most important international trade route to the West from the Missouri River to Mexico (now Santa Fe, New Mexico), before the era of the railroads. It was used extensively by traders, freighters, those headed to Pikes Peak, and the military. Of its approximate 850 miles, two-thirds of the route is in Kansas. It also passes through portions of Missouri, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico.



Unlike the Oregon-California Trail, which also cut across Kansas but was a highway for settlers, the Santa Fe Trail's traffic was mostly traders and the military. In addition to traders' caravans, stage and mail lines often followed the trail and set up stations along the route. The completion of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway to Santa Fe in 1880 ended the trail's reign in the West.

For 23 years the Last Chance Store in Council Grove served as the last opportunity for freighters bound for Santa Fe to pick up supplies for their journey. For this reason it was well-known by trail travelers. It was also a place where the Kaw Indians from the nearby reservation could trade for manufactured goods. The building housed post office facilities for several years and also served as a government trading house. On August 2, 1858, it was a polling place when the people of Kansas Territory voted on the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution.

Uniqueness and Value of the Property

The Last Chance Store retains enough of its original fabric and appearance to make it an effective tool in interpreting the history of Kansas and the United States. It is unique as one of the only commercial buildings of this period still standing on the Santa Fe Trail. The Last Chance Store would allow the state to interpret the importance of commercial retail and trade during this critical period of U.S. history. It would be of great value to the schoolchildren of Kansas who would be able to visit this unique property to learn history, geography, and economic lessons.

Since 1951 the Kansas Historical Society has owned and operated Kaw Mission State Historic Site (K.S.A 76-2023-2024), which is within blocks of the Last Chance Store. As part of the Kansas Historical Society's long-range plan the agency intends to raise private funds to convert the historic Kaw Mission into a commerce and transportation museum. The theme of the museum will be "Trails, Rails, and Highways" with an emphasis on the sites proximity to the Santa Fe Trail. Indian trails, the Santa Fe Trail, railroad lines, and highways all historically have served the same purpose. The interpretation will also look at the relations between the tribes of Kansas (particularly the Kansa), American settlers and Spanish traders, particularly in regards to trade and commerce. The possibility of acquiring the Last Chance Store would greatly enhance this story.

It is the intent of the Kansas Historical Society to use these two closely connected properties to help revitalize tourism on the Santa Fe Trail in Kansas, boosting economic opportunities for communities on the trail. The Last Chance Store will also provide the Kansas Historical Society with a unique opportunity to work with school children on economic lessons in an historic context. Understanding such concepts as supply and demand, want vs. need, and methods of trade are all critical concepts in developing financial literacy.

Financial Viability of the Last Chance Store Becoming a State Property

The current owner of the Last Chance Store is offering to donate the property to the Kansas Historical Society so there is no cost to acquire the property.

Operational Expenses:

It is the intent of the Kansas Historical Society to operate the Last Chance Store and the Kaw Mission as one historic site. The Kaw Mission is just a few blocks away and already has modern conveniences such as bathrooms, heat, air conditioning, and water. The Last Chance Store would be operated as it was in the 1850s without electricity, gas, or direct water hook-ups so there would be minimal need for modern utilities.

In studying past attendance at the Kaw Mission there is a significant decrease in visitation during the winter months, therefore we would most likely operate the site on a seasonal basis allowing us to adjust staffing needs. Even with seasonal hours we would be able to accommodate limited special events and tours during the winter with advanced notice.

These strategies would allow the Kansas Historical Society to operate the Last Chance Store within the current budget of Kaw Mission State Historic Site. For this reason we are confident

that the conveyance of the Last Chance Store would have no additional fiscal impact on the operations of the Kansas Historical Society.

Capital Improvement Needs:

The Kansas Historical Society looked at the cost of capital improvements for the Last Chance Store. The current owner should be commended for her preservation of this unique historic site. The 158 year old building is in relatively good shape and maintains much of its original integrity. We estimate that roughly \$25,000 in repairs will be needed to open the building to the public.

- Repair two masonry chimneys
- Exterior Masonry Repairs
- Repair and repaint exterior wood doors windows and trim
- Rebuild wood porch

The Kansas Historical Society has existing funds that will enable us to make these repairs without requesting additional dollars from the State General Fund.

Conclusion

After careful review of the Last Chance Store, the staff at the Kansas Historical Society has come to the conclusion that the conveyance of the property to the agency would better allow us to tell the story of the Santa Fe Trail. HB 2268 will ensure the long term preservation of one of the state's most valuable historic resources. The Last Chance Store will provide an historic place to teach thousands of Kansas schoolchildren about one of the most significant eras in America's history and will give them the opportunity to learn valuable economic lessons from the past that will assist them into their future. This project will also serve as an economic stimulus for heritage tourism in the state.

For these reasons we are in support of HB 2268 and urge you to give the bill serious consideration.

Jennie Chinn
Executive Director
Kansas Historical Society
jchinn@kshs.org
(785) 272-8681 x 205

Patrick Zollner
Director of Cultural Resources
Kansas Historical Society
pzollner@kshs.org
(785) 272-8681 x 217