TRACK TO THE PAST

The route of the Burroughs Creek Trail began with the rails of the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston

Today's Burroughs Creek Trail follows the route originally laid out by the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston Railroad in 1867. As the name suggests, its ultimate goal was to build southward to the Texas Gulf Coast.

The LL&G was Lawrence's second railroad. It came after the Union Pacific, Eastern Division, which had arrived in 1864 via a route running along the north bank of the Kansas River that remains in operation to this day.

The fact that there are no longer any trains running south from Lawrence underscores the tenuous nature of the LL&G's route and business prospects. The line faced many hurdles – financial, legal, and geographic.

But there were also reasons for optimism. Lawrence was already located on a growing east-west trunk line, and LL&G promised to give the town a hinterland to the south. In the end, the LL&G didn't produce the expected bonanza, though this route did have a modestly useful life until the mid-20th century. Its frustrated purpose tells us much about the speculative nature of early railroads, the ambitions of the cities and counties that invested in them, and why Lawrence failed to become the railroad hub of the region, a distinction that Kansas City would realize and retain.

The LL&G was Lawrence's second railroad. Ultimately absorbed by the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe, it had a moderately useful life until the mid-20th century.

Following a series of mergers, this line became a part of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway in 1899. AT&SF was a Kansas success story, founded in Atchison, based in Topeka for decades, and eventually stretching from Chicago to California and the Gulf of Mexico.

It recruited settlers from as far as Russia to its rich land grants in the Cottonwood and Arkansas River valleys, indelibly changing the face of Kansas and making it the nation's breadbasket.

The story of the former LL&G was not so illustrious, however. The line was a backwater in the vast AT&SF system, though it did provide local freight and passenger service between Lawrence and Ottawa. Passengers could change to mainline trains at both cities to reach distant destinations. With the advent of good roads, marginal lines like this were doomed, and Santa Fe abandoned it in 1965.

[Image Credit: Library of Congress]

Over the River. This famous 1867 photograph taken by Alexander Gardner shows the LL&G's first locomotive on a temporary bridge between the Union Pacific, Eastern Division, tracks and the south bank of the Kansas River. The locomotive is named Ottawa, for the Franklin County seat that was the LL&G's immediate goal. Two things about this photo suggest the precarious state of the LL&G's finances. First, there was no money for a permanent bridge at the time, so the train is on a temporary structure that would be demolished once the construction supplies had come across. Second, some of Ottawa's design features indicate that it was built in the 1850s, which means that the LL&G acquired it secondhand. Still, the postures and dress of the men who've crowded aboard Ottawa indicate that this was an occasion for celebration.

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]

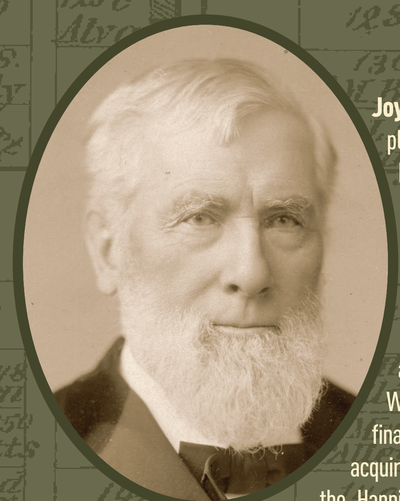
A Public-Private Partnership. Railroads are expensive to build. Surveys, grading, stone ballast for drainage, and rails themselves are all costly – to say nothing of locomotives, cars, and the labor to run them. In a developing economy like 1860s Kansas, capital was hard to come by. That's why railroads often looked to the taxpayers for assistance. The LL&G was no different. In a public vote on Sept. 12, 1865, the citizens of Douglas County approved a $250,000 bond issue. The money was used to buy stock in the LL&G, thus supporting its construction to the southern border of the county. The next year, Franklin County voters kicked in an additional $125,000 to get the railroad to Ottawa.

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]

The Checkerboard. The federal government aided railroad construction, most famously in the form of land grants, generally made in alternate sections of land along the line. Railroads typically sold the granted lands to settlers in order to pay the cost of construction. Grants were made to many Western railroads, and the concept was sometimes controversial. Opponents disliked the idea of giving the land away, but supporters countered that remote Western lands would never be settled without good transportation to get crops to market. In the 1860s, the Republican Party supported railroad land grants, just as it supported the Homestead Act that granted land to individual settlers. Party loyalties in Kansas were thus cemented early. Railroad land grants were repaid many times over, since they were made on condition of reduced transportation rates to the federal government, a practice that continued until 1946.

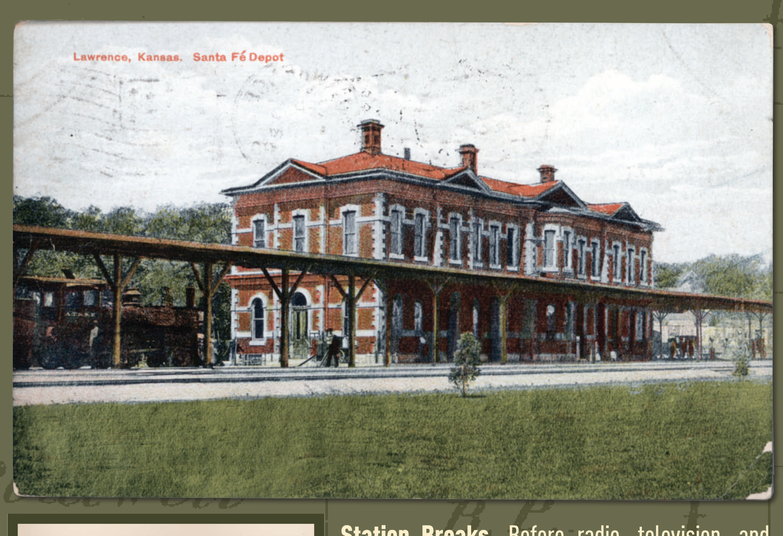
The Race. LL&G was one of three railroads striving to reach the border between Kansas and Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). The others were the Missouri River, Fort Scott & Gulf (seen on this map with its earlier name, the Neosho Valley), which built south from Kansas City and Olathe; and the Union Pacific, Southern Branch, which built south from Junction City. Only the first railroad to reach the border would be permitted to build through Indian Territory and on to the Gulf. UPSB won the race in 1870 and changed its name to the Missouri, Kansas & Texas. The LL&G arrived in Coffeyville the next year, but it could go no farther. Its future lay in consolidation with another railroad.

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]



Joy's Story. James Frederick Joy played a major role in limiting Lawrence's future as a regional railroad hub. New Hampshire-born and Dartmouth-educated, Joy had become one of the nation's most prominent railroad attorneys by the 1850s – as well as a friend of Abraham Lincoln. With the backing of Boston financier John Murray Forbes, Joy acquired several railroads, including the Hannibal & St. Joseph, which later became part of a Midwestern giant, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. Joy later consolidated several Kansas railroads as well. He acquired the LL&G in 1869 and merged it into the Missouri River, Fort Scott & Gulf, which he already controlled. He then diverted LL&G's traffic away from Lawrence, and routed it through Olathe and Kansas City instead. Joy's decision to bypass Lawrence and Leavenworth was mainly a matter of geography – and the economic decisions that came about as a result. For railroad traffic to reach Lawrence from the east, it would have to cross two rivers, the Missouri at Leavenworth and the Kansas at Lawrence. By contrast, traffic bound for southern Kansas would only have to cross one river, the Missouri, if it went through Kansas City. That's why Joy's Hannibal & St. Joseph went to Kansas City instead of Leavenworth, and that's why Kansas City became one of the nation's major railroad centers, a status it retains today.

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]



[Image Credits: Kansas State Historical Society]

Station Breaks. Before radio, television, and air conditioning, families in small towns often wandered down to the railroad station after dinner to watch trains go by. It was free entertainment, and it nurtured dreams of far-away places that they might visit one day. Two Lawrence depots on East 7th Street served this rail line when it was part of the AT&SF. The first (above) was built in 1883 and torn down in 1955. The second (left) was constructed in 1956 and is now the Amtrak station.

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]

Mexican Session. La Yarda, located between 8th Street and Santa Fe's small railroad yard, was a largely Mexican district. In the early 20th century and beyond, Mexicans were often employed in track maintenance work. La Yarda had its origins in the Shopmen's Strike of 1922, a nationwide labor action that saw thousands of "Anglo" workers lose their jobs. Railroads sometimes hired Mexicans to replace them, particularly for unskilled labor. It was a start, and many of them went on to better positions with the railroads. Roughly a dozen track workers called La Yarda home, along with their families. They were flooded out in 1951 and were displaced.

The Burroughs Creek Trail Project is being developed by Sunflower Republic, LLC, under the auspices of the Lawrence Public Library and the Watkins Museum of History. The project is funded by generous support from Dolph and Pam Simons, The Kansas Health Foundation, and Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area, with in-kind assistance from the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas.