

Where is Usher Kansas?

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September 2007, St. Martin Newsletter

According to the Church's first constitution it is located in Usher, Kansas. There is no Kansas map today that identifies any city, town or village by Usher. So where did this name come from?

The "Usher" is from John Palmer Usher. John Palmer Usher was the first non-Indian owner of the 2,560 acres of land that encompassed section 19 in Wyandotte County. The first St. Martin's church building was built on the very northwest corner of that section in 1908 on the border of Wyandotte and Leavenworth Counties. By 1908, 132 acres of that northwest corner of section 19 was owned by Asmus Marxen who leased the land to the church for \$1 per year. Usher also owned the two sections of land in Leavenworth County directly West of section 19 covering an additional 5,120 acres. These three sections would be known as the Usher Farm or Ranch on which cattle were raised.

The church was in close proximity to two landmarks named for Usher: "Usher Station" of the Union Pacific Railroad in Wyandotte County, and a planned town of Usher in Leavenworth County, that was never formalized. Both were planned in the 1890's after his death, and by the time the church was built his prominence had declined. By the early 1900's the planned locations of both of these points had literally disappeared from the maps of both counties. How Usher came to own the land is the interesting story and shows how our church history is linked to Kansas history.

At the time of his death in 1889, Usher was a very prominent resident of Kansas. Born and educated in New York he moved to Indiana in the 1840s where he became associated with Abraham Lincoln while working together in the 8th Circuit Court. John Usher was a lawyer, one time elected congressman from Indiana, a former Indiana Attorney General, a Kansas Judge, businessman and land owner, Solicitor General of the Union Pacific Railroad Executive, the Mayor of Lawrence Kansas from 1879 to 1882, and most importantly the Secretary of the Interior under President Abraham Lincoln from 1863 to 1865. His home in Lawrence is a historical landmark and the gown his wife wore at Lincoln's Inaugural Ball is on display at the Kansas Historical Museum.

In 1854, Kansas was opened to settlement, and by 1860 Leavenworth was a boom town. With a population of almost 8,000 it was the largest city between St. Louis and San Francisco. Because of this quick development some Leavenworth businessmen saw this as an opportune time to put a rail line between Leavenworth and Ft. Riley by way of Lawrence and Topeka; they created the Leavenworth, Pawnee and Western Railroad Company (LP&W). To construct a railroad, you need money and the owners of the LP&W were essentially broke due to some bad business decisions and the 1857 depression. Worse yet for them they found their planned rail line blocked East of Lawrence by lands owned by the Delaware Indian Nation and West of Lawrence by the Pottawattamie Nation. They needed to come up with an inexpensive, and if possible no out-of-pocket cost, way to get the lands and right of way for this rail line.

By this time in American History just about every method conceivable had been used to defraud American Indians of their land and because of this almost every Indian Nation in the United States had a treaty with the U.S. Government where the federal government held the lands in “trust” for their benefit to protect them. The LP&W came up with a new method to get Indian land. They, a private company, “negotiated” a separate treaty with the Indians and then by using lobbyists in Washington convinced the U.S. Senate to ratify it. In September 1861, while serving in the Department of the Interior, John P. Usher was contracted by the LP&W “to work for the immediate ratification of the new treaty and amendments by the Delaware Chiefs”.

The LP&W specifically contracted Usher, because of the success Usher had in 1859 when he was hired by the Delaware Nation to represent them against the LP&W. His work for the Delaware’s essentially put a stop to the LP&W taking advantage of Delaware Nation in 1859.

Usher took the contract with LP&W, and he worked as hard and diligently for them, as he had done against them two years earlier. So well that after some very convoluted political maneuvers and treaty modifications, what resulted was the LP&W getting 123,996 acres of Delaware land to sell or mortgage at no cost to the LP&W and 340,000 acres of Pottawattamie land at \$1.25 an acre for which they did not have to make a single payment to the Indians for three years. Within a year the LP&W was selling this same land for up to \$10 an acre for a nice tidy profit. Shortly after this the LP&W became part of the Union Pacific Railroad.

What did John Usher get for all his lobbying effort for the Delaware and the Pottawattamie Treaties? Direct from the LP&W 10,000 shares of stock valued at \$500,000, and the ability to purchase the Indian's land. The best of the land was bought by Usher, Hugh McCullough, Secretary of the Treasury; and William Dole, Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Usher was given a portion of some additional 2,000 shares of LP&W stock, valued at \$1,000,000, that according to the LP&W stock distribution was “given to Henry Bennett, of Elmira, N. Y., for H. Bennett, J. P. Usher, Caleb Smith (the Secretary of the Interior prior to Usher), and R. W. Thompson.”

The Sac and Fox Nation also had land in what now are Osage and Franklin Counties. In 1864 the Sac and Fox were forced off their lands by yet another treaty lobbied for by Usher in order to make way for further “white” settlement. The Sac and Fox lands were purchased by Usher, Dole, McCullough, and Lincoln's personal secretary John Nicolay.

By the time he left Washington Usher owned hundreds of thousands of dollars in Union Pacific Stock and substantial tracts of land in Shawnee, Douglas, Osage, Franklin, Leavenworth and Wyandotte Counties, much of which was along railroads. For war-time political reasons, including the “Kansas Land Deal” Usher was forced to resign his post, but did not actually leave his post before Lincoln’s assassination (he was present at Lincoln's deathbed). He moved to Lawrence, Kansas, where he began working as Chief Council for the Union Pacific Railroad. Usher continued to work for the railroad throughout his life even while serving as a Judge and the Mayor of Lawrence. At the time of his death in he had come up with yet another scheme to build a rail line at no cost by coercing farmers to grant them a right of way, or else they would not be able to ship their

products. This fell apart after his death.

Usher's prominence in Kansas history disappeared fairly quickly. A biographical record of famous Kansans published in 1899 literally sings his praises for three solid pages. In the five volume History of Kansas published in 1918 his name is relegated to a single sentence where he is described as a "speculator" who "preyed" on the Indians. In the 1928 edition of the same history he is not even mentioned. Today you can still see his home at 1425 Tennessee Street in Lawrence; it houses the University of Kansas chapter of the Beta Theta Pi Fraternity.