

Using Primary Sources to Investigate Local History: Pawnee County, Kansas 1877–1880

Scott Scheuerell

Primary sources provide students first-hand accounts rarely found in secondary social studies textbooks. Fortunately, there are many primary sources that students can leverage in their very own communities. Census reports and diaries, for example, successfully engage students in scholarship involving local history. Both of these provide valuable insights on local history topics that would be difficult to access elsewhere. Students are easily engaged in local history as they ponder what it was like to live in their area in the past. Today's students have the unique opportunity to share their local history findings with others online or via a community newspaper.

In their research, students can uncover bits about a community's past that were unknown or had long been forgotten. The example that follows illustrates how students can use a combination of census reports and diaries to learn about one Kansas community's past.

During the years 1877–1880, a Kansas teenager kept a diary describing the highs and lows of life on the Plains in Pawnee County. In 1880, the federal government took a census report of the same county. Both primary sources work in tandem to provide students with important clues about life in Pawnee County, Kansas, in the late nineteenth century.

Using a Census Report: Pawnee County, Kansas in 1880

In 1880, the federal government conducted a census, as it does every decade. Situated in west-central Kansas, Pawnee County was relatively new in 1880, created just eight years earlier when it acquired the minimum number of residents.¹ Kansas law mandated that a county have at least 600 residents to be officially organized.² By 1880, the federal census report indicated that the county seat's population had jumped to 1,063.³ The population had multiplied in a very short amount of time. Why did

this west-central Kansas county grow so quickly? The question does not have to be left to historians. Students can use the 1880 census report and secondary sources to answer the question.

With the U.S. federal census report, students can develop their own inquiries about life on the Plains in 1880. There are many possible questions: Where did the residents come from? Were most of the county's residents young or old? How did people make a living on the Plains? What challenges did these pioneers face?

Historian Kenneth J. Winkle⁴ argues that census reports are critically important to understanding local history. Each census report provides valuable clues to the history of a community. For example, the 1880 federal census report collected a wide-variety of demographic information on the residents of Pawnee County, Kansas. Some of these included: name, age, race, sex, occupation, and state or country of birth.⁵ Many of these clues from the past about a local community connect to larger issues of national consequence during the same time period.⁶

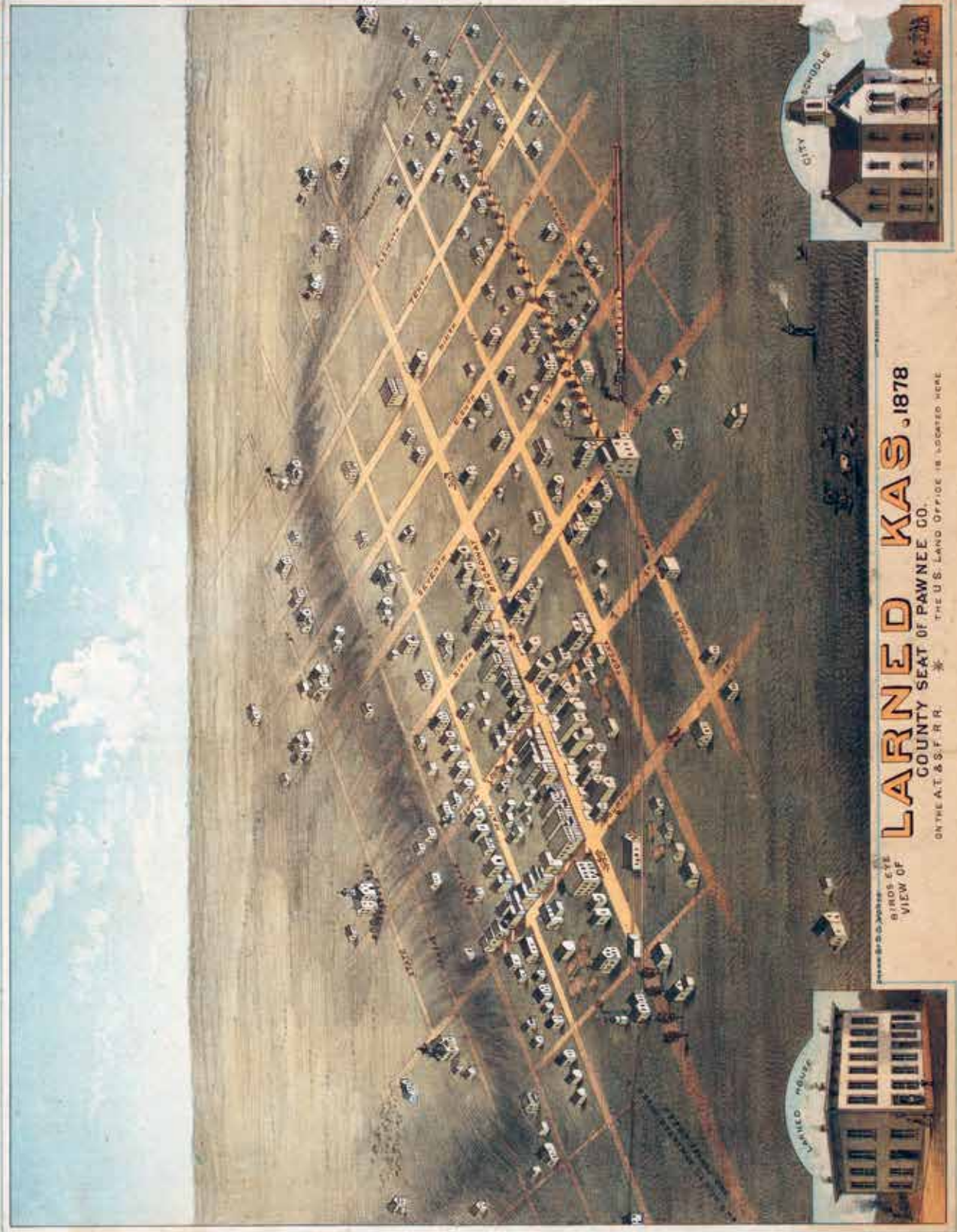
Demographics of the Residents in Pawnee County, Kansas, in 1880

The 1880 census report provides many interesting details about Pawnee

County's residents. Forty-four percent of residents were 15 years old and younger.⁷ Two federal government initiatives likely served as the impetus for the growth of Pawnee County and offer clues on why so many young people lived there in 1880. In 1862, the federal government passed the Homestead Act, which provided 160 acres to anyone who lived on the land and cultivated it for at least five years.⁸ Later in 1873, the federal government passed the Timber Culture Act, which provided 160 acres to anyone who planted 40 acres of trees and took the time to maintain them for a minimum of 10 years.⁹ Both the Homestead Act and Timber Culture Act were likely motivational factors for the young families that settled in Pawnee County.

In 1880, many of the residents had come long distances to settle there. In fact, less than 10 percent were actually born in Kansas.¹⁰ Together, 49 percent of residents came from either Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, or New York. It was not out of the ordinary either to find a foreign-born resident. There were residents from Germany, England, Russia, Ireland, and Canada, collectively representing 5 percent of the population.¹¹ The Homestead Act did have a provision that

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A postcard showing farmers harvesting hay near Larned, Kansas. Between 1880 and 1900.

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1880 U.S. Government Census Report of Larned, Kansas

Ages

0-5:	195
6-10:	156
11-15:	119
16-20:	99
21-25:	86
26-30:	88
31-35:	92
36-40:	81
41-45:	46
46-50:	30
51-55:	29
56-60:	22
61-65:	9
66-70:	8
71-75:	3

Careers

Hotel Keeper:	6	Shoemaker:	1
Clerk in Store:	28	Minister:	1
Housekeeper:	147	Banker:	8
Stock Raiser:	5	Restaurant Wor:	1
Printer:	3	Bank Clerk:	1
Laborer:	15	Farmer:	60
Photographer:	4	Boarding House:	4
Butcher:	6	Servant:	4
Telegraph Operator:	1	Blacksmith:	9
Harness Maker:	3	Merchant:	1
Drugman:	2	Lawyer:	10
Clerk in Land Office:	1	Teacher:	10
Land Agent:	1	Grocer:	11
Publisher:	2	Stone Mason:	1
Clerk in Court:	1	Reg. of Deeds:	1
Herder:	1	Carpenter:	18
Miller:	4	Real Estate:	2
Blk. Det. Court:	1	Brick Mason:	1
Baggage Waiter:	1	Servant:	4
Engineer:	1	Jeweler:	1
Feed Store:	1	Tailor:	1
Doctor:	3	Dentist:	1
Shoemaker:	4	Dress Maker:	3
County Surveyor:	1	Stable Keeper:	1
Gardener:	1	Railroad Clerk:	1
Stage Driver:	1	Well Driver:	1

Place Born At

Ohio:	172	Canada:	14
New York:	104	Virginia:	27
Indiana:	44	Missouri:	23
N.J.:	18	Mass:	16
Illinois:	134	Kansas:	88
Penn:	114	England:	12
Kentucky:	83	Russia:	5
Germany:	14	Ireland:	11
		Other:	191

Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, Part Two

Edited by Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant. NCSS Bulletin 116.

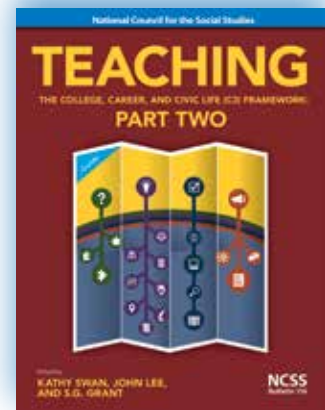
The powerful social studies inquiries in this book bring the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework to life. They are based on the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), a curricular approach that animates social studies standards and integrates the four dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc.

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Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies

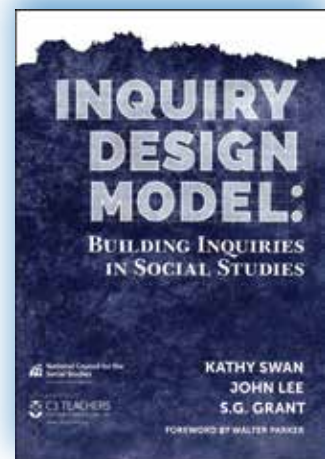
Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant. Foreword by Walter Parker. C3 Inquiry Series, co-published by NCSS and C3 Teachers, 167 pp.

This book is a comprehensive, in-depth guide for teachers who want to build classroom inquiries based on the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. The authors demonstrate how to construct effective Inquiry Design Model (IDM) blueprints that incorporate engaging questions, tasks, and sources. The book offers invaluable advice on how to formulate compelling and supporting questions, build disciplinary knowledge, and develop the ability of students to evaluate evidence, construct arguments, and take informed action.

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allowed foreign-born residents to participate as long as they declared their intent to become American citizens.¹² It is not surprising to discover so many immigrants were eager to carve out their home on the Plains.

Each of the immigrants to Pawnee County, whether they came from destinations back East or from Europe, brought with them a variety of work-related skills. The 1880 census report reflected a wide range of occupations that helped build the prairie community. Housekeepers, representing 13 percent of the population, and farmers, representing 5 percent, were the most frequently listed occupations.¹³ Farming would have been no easy task for these residents. James C. Malin, of the Kansas Historical Society, pointed out that many farmers who settled Kansas during this time period had prior experience farming back East.¹⁴ However, they needed to adapt quickly to farming on the Plains since there was much less rainfall compared to the East and different crops were needed to make a living in agriculture.¹⁵ Due to these challenges, many farmers likely decided to leave the county later on.

The western part of Kansas, where Pawnee County is located, had a significantly higher population turnover among farmers.¹⁶ In fact, in some of the surrounding counties, only 24 percent of the population stayed from 1875 to 1885.¹⁷ Pawnee County farmers would have encountered many hardships. The western two-thirds of the state was generally considered the most difficult place to farm in the late 1800s.¹⁸ Farmers had to deal with grasshoppers, drought, and economic depression, among other challenges.¹⁹ In order to purchase land and livestock, many farmers took out bank loans. Unfortunately, many of the farmers were then unable to pay off the loans. In Kansas, there were 11,000 mortgage foreclosures by the late 1880s;

subsequently, the banks took over this land.²⁰ It is likely that many of the farmers listed in the 1880 census report left Pawnee County just a few years later in order to make a living. Census reports have frequently been used to document how geographically mobile Americans were during this specific time period.²¹

Pawnee County, in 1880, can certainly be characterized as a rural community on the Plains. However, the census report documented that people were employed in jobs often associated with urban areas. In the town of Larned, Kansas, in Pawnee County, you could find people in occupations ranging from printers (3) to carpenters (18) and shoemakers (5). The census report also listed lawyers (10); hotel keepers (6); store clerks (28); laborers (15); butchers (6); a telegraph operator (1); publishers (2); a miller (1); doctors (3); a stage driver (1); a minister (1); bankers (8); and blacksmiths (9).²²

Insights from the census report also highlighted the promise of schooling associated with the community. As noted previously, there was a significant number of school-aged children in Pawnee County in 1880. Roughly 26 percent of the county’s population was between the ages of 6-15.²³ There were also 10 school teachers.²⁴ Interestingly, it was just seven years earlier that the first school district, Pawnee Number 1, was established in Larned, in 1873.²⁵

Using Census Reports in the Classroom

Census reports are a remarkably good source for inquiry-based learning. In particular, census reports provide historians with basic information about any community.²⁶ There is no reason why students cannot replicate the type of work that professional historians do with census reports.

Frequently census reports can be located at a local library, museum, or the state or county historical soci-

ety. Most census reports will be on a microfilm or microfiche machine. Increasingly, there are printers or electronic ways to capture the census report page-by-page from a specific community or county. In this example on western settlement of the Great Plains, students can record information specifically from the 1880 census report of Pawnee County, Kansas. The same could be replicated for most communities or counties in our nation in secondary classrooms.

The census report can provide some obstacles or challenges. In 1880, there was someone who wrote down all the information by hand. Students will frequently have difficulty trying to read what was composed on paper. There are also geographic places that students may be unfamiliar with. The 1880 census report identified Pawnee County residents who were born in foreign places such as Bavaria, Prussia, and Baden. Students can locate these places on the map and their connection to Germany today.

Many students may be curious to learn more about some of the occupations featured in the 1880 census report. Land agent, county surveyor, miller, and harness maker are examples of jobs some students will not be familiar with. Each of these occupations also provides insights into the community. There are many other careers that the students can relate to. The census report listed teachers, carpenters, lawyers, and a dentist.

The 1880 federal census report asked residents of the county a wide range of other questions that were recorded. Some of these may generate a great deal of curiosity among students. The census report listed whether an individual was single, married, divorced or widowed. In addition, the census report recorded whether someone was sick, disabled, blind, or deaf. Life was fragile on the Plains. The census report provides students with insights into the types of illnesses these pioneers faced.

For example, brain fever, measles, and paralysis were all recorded in the census report.

The same census report recorded educational information such as whether a person had attended school within the past year and whether he or she could read or write. Students could examine literacy trends in a county over a period of time by comparing and contrasting census reports decade-to-decade. Students could also compare/contrast literacy rates between different immigrant groups (for example, between Irish, English, and German settlers to a community).

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the census report is the names of ordinary people. Students relate more to the lives of ordinary people found in the 1880 census report than to the rich, famous, or political leaders found in their history textbooks. Many students can relate to someone from their own community's past who is identified in the census report. There is an opportunity for students to conduct additional research, using both primary and secondary sources, to learn about people listed in the census report. This type of biographical research can be highly appealing to students.²⁷ Students can use plat maps, county tax records, birth certificates, marriage records, and obituaries to learn more about someone identified in the census report. Some of them may have also been military veterans.

First-Hand Insights from a Teenager in Pawnee County (1877–1880)

Students can access the diary of John Talcott Norton online using an Internet site sponsored by the Kansas Historical Society. The Kansas Memory Collection features the teenager's transcribed diary at www.kansasmemory.org/item/40168. His diary described the family's move from Illinois to Kansas in 1877, the struggles of living

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on a Kansas farm from 1877–1880, and how he spent his spare time growing up on the Plains.

As noted previously, the 1880 census report from Pawnee County documented how the vast majority of residents came from outside the state of Kansas. John Talcott Norton was one example. He came to Kansas from Illinois in February 1877. In his May 6, 1877, diary entry, he wrote: “Oh what a long time since I wrote in this book. And now I am in Kansas. Pa and I started from Mason City (Ill.) on the 10 of February.”²⁸ Later in the same diary entry, John identified the Timber Culture Act, and the 160+ acres of Kansas farmland, as a significant factor prompting the family’s move to the prairie.²⁹

As previously noted, the census report identified many Pawnee County residents as farmers. John Talcott Norton’s diary gives students a first-hand description of a typical farm on the Plains during this period and the challenges farmers encountered. John’s diary entry of March 25, 1878, included a vivid description of the family farm:

It is now about one year since we commenced our barn. There were no improvements. We have a good warm barn, 14 × 28; a house with a shingle roof, floor upstairs and down, concrete chimney, grouted, 7 windows, a vestibule in front; dimensions 12 × 28. A correll (wire), 24¹/₆ acres of wheat, 10 of barley, 3 of oats, 1 of potatoes, sod henhouse started. Strawberries, asparagus and pieplant growing, a well with a pump, 36 chickens, a wagon, scythe, spade, sod plow, single corn plow, a half interest in a mowing machine and a cow, all got since we came here, and a mule not paid for. I think we have done well considering the means we had.³⁰

It is evident from the diary that John had a great deal of pride in the family farm. In particular, he seemed proud of

what the family had been able to accomplish in the short amount of time since their move from Illinois. Yet his diary also documented the challenges.

On more than one occasion the teenager shared that the family was worried about the lack of moisture and how it could impact the farm. For example, in his May 6, 1878, diary entry, John wrote “It is cloudy in the south as if it meant rain. I wish it would rain as the crops are suffering.”³¹ Two days later in his May 8, 1878, diary entry John again commented on the drought conditions, writing “Rain! Rain! Will it never come? Everything is as dry as a bone. The crops are suffering badly.”³² On May 13, 1878, John wrote about other work he and his family were doing. “There were six of my prairie chickens hatched but they all died. Ma has 2 young turkeys. Our sweet corn looks well but some of it did not come up. I replanted some yesterday. We got stone from the fort to wall our well.”³³

Life was not easy on the Kansas Plains for a teenager growing up on a farm. However, John Talcott Norton’s diary included many examples of how he liked to spend his spare time. John enjoyed baseball, hunting, playing with the family dog, and hanging out with friends. The diary included numerous accounts of his hobbies. Students will likely find that they have interests in common with this farm teenager who grew up on the Plains over 100 years ago.

Conclusion

The story of America is filled with ordinary people who are documented in the United States Census Reports. That was certainly the case in the 1880 census report from Pawnee County, Kansas. John Talcott Norton was an ordinary teenager, yet he provides students and researchers today with many important clues about the past. Pawnee County, Kansas, is just one example. There is a golden opportunity for students to conduct authentic historical research in their own community utilizing federal census reports and diaries from the past. ●

Notes

1. Kansapedia, Kansas State Historical Society, www.kshs.org/kansapedia/pawnee-county-kansas/15328.
2. Ibid.
3. U.S. Census Report of Pawnee County, Kansas in 1880.
4. Kenneth J. Winkle, “The United States Census and Community History,” *The History Teacher* 28, No. 1 (November 1994), 87–101.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. U.S. Census Report of Pawnee County, Kansas in 1880.
8. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas. A Land of Contrasts*. (Wheeling, Ill.: Forum Press, 1989).
9. Ibid.
10. U.S. Census Report of Pawnee County, Kansas in 1880.
11. Ibid.
12. Richmond, *Kansas. A Land of Contrasts*.
13. U.S. Census Report of Pawnee County, Kansas in 1880.
14. James C. Malin, “The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas,” www.kshs.org/p/the-turnover-of-farm-population-in-kansas/12658.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Richmond, *Kansas. A Land of Contrasts*.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Winkle “The United States Census and Community History.”
22. U.S. Census Report of Pawnee County, Kansas in 1880.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Kansapedia, Kansas State Historical Society, www.kshs.org/kansapedia/pawnee-county-kansas/15328.
26. Winkle “The United States Census and Community History.”
27. John Lee, Adam Friedman, Cheryl Mason Bolick, and Andy Mink, “Who Was Thaddeus Lee? Using the 1940 Digitized Census for Personalized Historical Inquiry,” *Social Education* 77, no. 2 (2013): 91–94.
28. Norton Diaries [1876-1895] / as copied and annotated by Helen Norton Starr. Microfilm. Topeka, Kans.: Kansas State Historical Society, 1983; roll MS 1190, lab no. 26176. (p. 6), www.kansasmemory.org/item/40168.
29. Ibid, 7.
30. Ibid, 43.
31. Ibid, 48.
32. Ibid, 48.
33. Ibid, 51.

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