

Before financial panic gripped nation, John Knox built his castle

Monument to the good times

One of the most dramatic examples of rise and fall in Topeka is the story of the Rev. John D. Knox.

He arrived in Topeka in 1865 on the coach that carried the news of the death of President Lincoln.

"As he stepped to the front of the old First Methodist Church on Quincy Street to preach his first sermon, he dramatically told Topekans their first word of the assassination of the great president," the Topeka Daily Capital reported in a 1924 story about his famous home north of Potwin Place.

Knox was employed by the Kansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Topeka for three years, the newspaper reported, but after an illness, he retired to Topeka.

Knox then discovered a talent for making money and made a fortune by buying tax sale certificates and building up considerable property in the state.

By 1871, he was president of Capitol Bank in Topeka, resigning in 1873 to become head of John D. Knox and Co., Bankers and Loan Agents.

Knox decided to tour Europe, and when he returned, the United States was in the midst of a financial panic.

The Topeka Daily Capital, on Aug. 10, 1898, reported Knox's filing for bankruptcy:

"The Rev. John D. Knox, erstwhile capitalist, banker and investor, has gone into the bankruptcy court asking relief from his mountain of debts. He filed schedules of his assets and liabilities with the United States District Clerk Sharitt yesterday. His assets are nil; his debts aggregate over \$500,000.

"There are about 575 separate claims against the Rev. Mr. Knox. Nine out of 10 of them are held in the East. Ohio, Massachusetts, New York and New Hampshire are the states most mentioned as the home of creditors.

"There is one creditor in Asiatic Turkey. He is William P. English, and his claim is a large one. Another creditor hails from Puebla, Mexico. Several are Englishmen. There are between 40 and 50 Topekans whose claims are scheduled in yesterday's petition.

"Knox had a wide acquaintance among Methodist ministers in the East, and 87 of them are his creditors. Even a New Hampshire Methodist conference appears in the list with a considerable claim. The University of Syracuse, in New York, one of the largest of eastern

Methodist colleges, gave Knox \$16,000 to invest. That is one of the largest claims listed.

"The claim of the American Freehold Co., which is for \$31,349.94, is the largest that is scheduled. Other principal creditors are George B. Phelps, administrator, Watertown, N.Y.; the Mutual Insurance Benefit Life Insurance Co., of Newark, N.J.; G.F. Oliver and L.H. Baker, executors, Shelby, Ohio; and the Bank of Topeka.

"Belvoir, the palatial suburban home of John D. Knox, which with adjacent 50-acre grounds cost nearly \$100,000 in boom times, is the sole relic of his prosperity. There is a mortgage of \$7,500 upon it, contracted, it is said, to pay taxes upon it. The petitioner claims the home and \$500 in household furniture and farming implements as exempt under the homestead law. He acknowledges a \$50 equity in three suburban lots in Topeka as his only asset within reach of a creditor."

Topeka's castle

The Topeka State Journal told this story of the home on Nov. 6, 1915:

Out in the northwest part of Topeka, just a few blocks from the Potwin school, stands Knox Castle, a massive, three-story house surrounded by a 7-acre field. The nearest house is the little tenant house wherein lives the family that has charge of the big one-time home of a wealthy banker.

Except for the fact that there is no high wall or deep moat around the place, it might be taken for an English castle of medieval times, with its balconies, turrets and pillars.

The castle is kept open at all times for visitors, and thousands of sightseers have tramped through its halls and large rooms, up its broad staircases and around the balconies on the second floor and on the roof. There are a number of rooms, however, that are kept locked securely against the curious throngs that flock to the old mansion.

The building is in a remarkable state of preservation considering the immense number of people who have been through it since the time when John D. Knox, the builder of the castle, lost everything in a financial panic. The old house has been empty for many years, and most of the time it has been used only for an occasional dance or a Halloween party. It is an ideal place for an affair of the latter named variety.

Not marred by vandals

It is a peculiar fact that of all the vast processions of people who have been allowed to roam through the castle, very few acts of vandalism have been practiced. That may be due to the feeling of awe that steals over

you when you enter the massive portals of that cavernous tomb, of a fortune lost in one rush of money-mad people clamoring for the safety of their savings in the bank with which Mr. Knox was connected.

The walls in several of the rooms are marked with initials of parities who, through a peculiar turn of mind, have a penchant for getting their names before the public, in this probably the only opportunity offered them. Several doorknobs, carried away for souvenirs, are missing and in some places the rich hand-carving on the staircases has been marred, by accident or design. The paper, of course, is falling from the walls and ceilings, and the outside decorations are cracking and deteriorating, but the light fixtures are still in place and the plate mirrors about the numerous fireplaces are still intact.

Builder was wealthy man

A long story of the rise to prominence and power, the downfall, the years of poverty within the walls of the castle, and the final death of the builder of the mansion is easily realized when one stands within the large front hall and gazes into the many vacant and silent rooms, once gay and echoing with the laughter and talk of happy parties; the footsteps of children and the soft cooing of lovers before the fireplace.

Many years ago, John D. Knox was one of the wealthiest and most prominent bankers of this part of the country. He was president of a large trust company in Topeka. Then came the panic, and Mr. Knox lost everything with the exception of the home. The family lived in the castle for several years after this. Mr. Knox was agent for a book firm for a short time preceding his death.

The castle stands on the summit of a slight hill in the center of a 7-acre tract of land. The ground slopes away from the building on all sides. The old weather-beaten, faded mansion is one of the best-known landmarks of the city and is one of the few old residences left within the limits of Topeka.

From the balcony around the central turret, an excellent view of the surrounding country may be had. The Kaw River may be seen winding away to the west from the lofty perch above the roof of the castle. Far away to the southeast can be seen the buildings of the Industrial Institute, and the forbidding heights of the Calhoun Bluffs are visible to the northeast.

In more fortunate days, the castle boasted every convenience, every conceivable modernity. A lighting plant, private waterworks and a system of electric bells operated by home generated electricity were among the many features of this famous home.

Several plans whereby the old building might be utilized have been suggested, but the castle is still used only for parties and for the delectation of sightseers.

Recently when the Methodist Church Society was planning for a new old peoples home, the proposition of using Knox Castle was introduced but the plan was thought to be unfeasible. The society built a more modern building, and the old mansion remains as a monument to the memory of the man who built it during the climax of success and who died poor within the walls of the castle.

The house, which cost \$40,000 to build in 1884, was sold for \$23,000 to Herman Baumer. It was demolished in 1924 and the lumber used in a dozen bungalows that were built in its stead.

JOHN D. KNOX

The Rev. John D. Knox was considered one of the pioneer ministers of Kansas. The Topeka Daily Capital in 1906 invited Knox to recount his first venture north of the Kansas River, not long after his arrival in Topeka in 1865:

"The town at that time was full of cowboys and desperate characters, so I hired a guard to protect me, and we crossed over to North Topeka on an old pontoon bridge that had been constructed, and with my guard near me, I delivered the first sermon ever preached in North Topeka from the platform of the old Union Pacific depot. The seats and benches in the waiting room of the depot were brought out and a large and attentive crowd gathered. I was not interrupted during the service. A large crowd was waiting at the depot for the midnight train and after the service I overheard two young ment talking. One of them said, 'And to think they have preaching way out here.' The other one replied, 'Yes, and I was expecting this to be a long and tiresome wait, and now it is after 10 o'clock already. I am glad he came along.' "

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