



SHAWNEE COUNTY, KANSAS

PAPPAN'S FERRY

Peter H. Burnett

1843 May 27 & 28, from letter dated 1845 January

“On the 27th we held a meeting, and appointed a committee of three to make arrangements for crossing the river. The committee attempted to hire Papa’s platform (a Frenchman who lived at the crossing,) but no reasonable arrangement could be made with him. Before we had finished our platform, some of the company made a private arrangement with Pappa for themselves, and commenced crossing. This produced great dissatisfaction in camp. On the 28th Pappa’s platform sank, and several men, women, and children came near being drowned, but all escaped with the loss of some property.”

*****At first, travelers forded the Kansas River in the vicinity of what is now downtown Topeka. Then at least one ferry likely was established in the same area before the highly successful Pappan’s Ferry became a reality. A French Canadian Joseph Pappan had married Mary Josephine “Josette” Gonville, a French Kansa. This couple had children. This is the family who was running the Pappan Ferry. Nineteenth-century diarists spelled the last name in a variety of ways. The twenty-first century descendants of that family prefer the spelling “Pappan”. In 2001 researcher Jimmie Benbrook said the Burnett description is the earliest mention of Pappan’s Ferry that he had found at the time of his research. While this one quote from a letter speaks only of two days, Burnett’s memoir titled *An Old California Pioneer* says the large wagon train first crossed on May 26 and took five days to cross, as noted by Merrill Mattes in the *Platte River Road Narratives*. This wagon train has been called the Great Migration of 1843. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. “Pappan’s Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail,” *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 8.

Edward Henry Lenox

1843 late May, from 1904 memoir

“...We came to the edge of the Caw river. The river was considerably swollen on account of recent rains. There were no boats and of course no bridges then, but a Frenchman in the neighborhood had three dugouts made of logs. These my father secured the next morning and with them made a platform, fastening the dugouts about four feet apart, and on this very primitive craft the wagons were one by one ferried across. The better of two days was spent in crossing the river.... We rested a day at the Caw river because the rains were so heavy, and about Friday we started on again.... There were one hundred and twenty-seven wagons in our company and something over four hundred and fifty souls.”



*****Thomas Lenox was one of many who joined in the 1843 Great Migration headed west. His son Edward was 16 years old and drove a wagon during the entire trek. Edward did not write his memories of the trip until decades later in 1904. While many historians place the wagon train of the Great Migration as including around one thousand individuals, Edward Lenox places the number at less than 500, although Lenox may be speaking of only part of the wagon train. In 2001 Jimmie Benbrook, a researcher of Pappan's Ferry, said that an 1843 quote by Peter Burnett was the earliest reference he could find regarding use of Pappan's Ferry. The Lenox family actually was in the same large wagon train that included Burnett as a leader. The Burnett quote tells of some individuals who did not accept the wagon train company arrangements and made their own private arrangements for a ferry. The Lenox quote sounds like Edward's father was one of those who made private arrangements. George A. Root extensively studied Kansas ferries in the 1930s. Root does include the Lenox quote for Pappan's Ferry, but Root misspelled the name as "Lennox". **Source:** Root, George. "Ferries in Kansas, Part II, Kansas River, Continued," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 2(4): (November 1933): 343-376. Accessed online at www.kshs.org on March 16, 2018, online version does not have page numbers.

Overton Johnson and William H. Winter 1843

"The Kansas River is generally full in the Spring, but emigrants will probably hereafter be accommodated, by a Frenchman who resides at the crossing place, with a ferry-boat."

*****According to Merrill Mattes in the *Platte River Road Narratives*, these two adventurers were traveling in a small party separate from the Great Migration, but frequently were in contact with that large wagon train from time to time. Mattes also indicates that this small party occasionally was in contact with Sir William Drummond Stewart's party accompanied by William Sublette as a guide. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail," *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 9.

David Adams 1843 August 17

"[reached the] Cances Rivr [sic] crossing of mr [sic] papan"

*****David Adams kept a diary while he was part of a trade caravan headed for Fort Platte. Various early journals do tell of wagons fording the Kansas River in what is now downtown Topeka. At least one other ferry may have preceded Pappan's Ferry in what is now downtown Topeka, Kansas. Researcher Jimmie Brownbrook thinks the Pappan's Ferry first came into existence in late 1842. The 1844 Flood was massive on the Kansas River. Early ferry researcher



George Root did not find evidence for use of the ferry for two years after the flood, so he concluded the Pappan's Ferry was not back in use until 1846. Decades later Benbrook found evidence for 1844, 1845, and 1846, so he concluded the Pappan ferry was back in business the same year as the flood. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail," *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-12, quote on p. 9.

Matthew C. Field

1843 October 15 & 16

"... By the spreading daylight the prairie seemed an ocean of ice or snow, with the dew frozen white upon every blade and twig. **Reached Papin's [Ferry] at 8 in the morning, where we found Menard's party crossing.** Graham, Smith, Jeff Clark, Walker and Lowery started for Westport by the Shawnee trail, while I remained to wait for camp. 15m. fr. Muddy [creek], **making Papin's** [no period]

535 m. from Laramee [sic].

...Slept here on the floor, with Antoine and Alexi, 2 of the pretty women being in bed, with their husbands and children, in the same rude log cabin. Message from camp for corn.

Monday Oct. 16th. "**Papin's Cabin**"—A flashy looking clock pointing most resolutely at 10 minutes past 8. ...and five tender juvenillians [sic], of many colors, romped over and under and around everything to the infinite merriment and hearts's [sic] delight of their tender, copper colored mammas. Indian men and squaws were constantly coming in and out, ...

...When about to get us supper, the lady of the house pulled up a couple of planks from the floor, and jumping down, threw a pile of potatoes out, which were forthwith peeled and washed and put on the fire. Boiled pumpkin, cold & insipid, wild turkey, warmed in hot water, potatoes, nearly cooked, strong coffee, without sugar and unsettled, and flour biscuits, home-made, heavy and cold, were laid before us; and we fancied it was something like home, inasmuch as we sat on raised seats at a four legged platform.

Camp came to crossing at noon, and **we got everything over in a 40 foot pirogue of Charles Chouteau's by sundown.** ... Great trading of dried meat for corn—camp nearly out of provisions—**swam the animals over beautifully**—So much for Monday the 33rd Day frm. the Fort."

*****Field was in a party that was moving from west to east. Field and others left Fort Laramie heading east to Westport, Missouri. In 1843 Field had accompanied Sir William Drummond Stewart on a Rockies excursion for pleasure. **Upon arriving at the Pappan's Ferry, Field saw the Menard party crossing on that ferry. Field stayed one night and ate at least one meal at the home of one of the Pappan families.** French-Canadian Pappan brothers came to Kansas from St. Louis and married French-Kansa women. The use of the term "squaws" for American Indian



women was common during the nineteenth-century, but now is considered derogatory. **While Field and his fellow travelers are in the area of Pappan's Ferry, that group did not use Pappan's Ferry. Field notes that his group used Charles Chouteau's 40-foot pirogue to portage all belongings except for the animals that swam across the Kansas River. Source:** Field, Matthew C. *Prairie and Mountain Sketches*. Collected by Clyde & Mae Reed Porter. Edited by Kate Leila Gregg & John Francis McDermott. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1957, excerpt on 210-212.

Richard W. Cummins

1844 June 14

"[paid] J. Pappe—For ferriage of agent's horses, &c \$2.50"

*****Richard Cummins was an Indian agent. For decades historians have argued over the location of Pappan's Ferry. Some say it was at the foot of Craine and Harrison streets in what is now downtown Topeka, Kansas. In actuality, the location of the ferry changed over time due to a variety of reasons. The massive 1844 flood changed the river channel in that area. Obviously the location of the ferry could not be in the same location after the channel had changed. George Root, an early researcher of Kansas ferries, even concluded that at times more than one Pappan Ferry existed in two locations at the same time. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail", *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 9.

Joel Palmer

1845 May 12

"We were obliged to be ferried over it [Kansas River] in a flat boat; and so large was our company, and so slowly did the ferrymen carry on the necessary operations, that darkness overtook us before half the wagons had crossed the stream."

*****Palmer does not state the name of the ferry, but researcher Jimmie Benbrook thinks Palmer is describing Pappan's Ferry since the diarist in previous passages is describing a route that would have led to what is now downtown Topeka, Kansas. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail", *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 9.

Virgil Pringle

1846 early May

"The remainder of the company crossed the ferry, which consists of two flat boats, owned by a Shawnee Indian whose name is Fish."



*****Pringle crossed a Wakarusa River crossing in the vicinity of what is now Lawrence, Kansas on May 7th. Researcher Jimmie Benbrook says Pringle is in error when he states that Fish owned the ferry. Charles Fish was married to Rosalia Gonville, the half-sister to Joseph Pappan's wife Josette. Various family members worked for Joseph Pappan throughout the time of the ferry. Benbrook thinks in 1846 Fish was working for Pappan. However, in the late 1840s, a Fish Ferry separate from Pappan's Ferry did exist. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail", *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 10.

Jerry Quinn Thornton

1846 mid-May, from 1849 bill

"Near the ferry was a small cabin, the first one we had seen since we left the settlements of Missouri. It was occupied by a Frenchman who kept the ferry. His wife was a Kansas sqaw [sic]."

*****Thornton had been at a Wakarusa crossing in the vicinity of modern Lawrence on May 15th. While the term "squaw" often was used by diarists in the nineteenth century, today this is recognized as a derogatory term. Pappan was French Canadian, and his wife was French Kansa. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail", *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 10.

Joseph H. Ware

1849

"At the Kansas crossing, distance 100 miles, you will find a ferry owned by two Indians (French Kaws). The charge for crossing is one dollar for a wagon; horses or loose stock you can swim across. ..."

*****Joseph Ware includes this information about the Pappan's Ferry in *The Emigrant's Guide to California*, published in 1849. The owner Joseph Pappan was French Canadian, and he had married a French Kansa. **Source:** Root, George A. "Ferries in Kansas, Part II, Kansas River, Continued," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 2(4): (November 1933), 343-376. Accessed online at www.kshs.org on March 16, 2018, online version does not have page numbers.

William G. Johnston

1849 May 2

"When within a couple of miles of the Kansas River a half-breed Kaw Indian rode up and advised that we take the lower ferry crossing [Pappan's]. Soon after another came with the advice that we take the upper ferry [Uniontown Ferry]."



“A Frenchman and his two sons, who are half-breed Kaws, own and work the ferry. Their charge is two dollars for each wagon, twenty-five cents for a mule, and ten cents for each man.”

“By means of a rope, one end of which was coiled about a tree, the wagons were let down the steep banks of the river, and placed in the boat. Two wagons and twelve mules were taken over at a time, the boat being propelled by poles....Double teams were required to haul the wagons up the northern bank.”

*****This quote shows that the Pappan’s Ferry and the farther west Uniontown Ferry, 16 miles upstream, competed for business. While the term “half-breed” was used commonly in the nineteenth century, this term now is recognized as derogatory. In *Platte River Narratives*, Merrill Mattes says the William G. Johnston diary first was published as *Experiences of a Forty-Niner* in 1892 and then reprinted as *Overland to California* in 1948. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. “Pappan’s Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail,” *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quotes on p. 11.

2nd Lt. William D. Whipple?

1852 mid-May, from letter of August 28, 1852

“The [Kansas] river is crossed by the main traveled route from Fort Leavenworth to the Council Grove and by the Emigrant road from Independence to Oregon, &c, at the same point. Here we met hundreds of emigrants for California and Oregon, whose trains, and herds of cattle and sheep, lined the banks on either side.... I was surprised to find at the Kansas river Ferry a young Canadian Frenchman, apparently proprietor of the ferry, who, with note-book in hand, was all day long busily occupied in taking down the number of wagons, horses, mules, sheep, &c., crossed over in his boats. Between the emigrant trains and those belonging to our command you may be sure he had a task to attend to.”

*****In an *Overland Journal* article, Jimmie Benbrook identifies the letter writer as an army officer. In *The Beginning of the West*, Louise Barry says the letter writer may have been 2nd Lt. William D. Whipple of Major Steen’s Command (p. 1094). Researcher Jimmie Benbrook says that the army leaving from Fort Leavenworth heading to the Santa Fe Trail did not regularly cross at Pappan’s Ferry until a new Ft. Leavenworth branch to the Santa Fe Trail had been developed in 1850. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. “Pappan’s Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail,” *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 12.

George S. Park

1854 after the 15th of June

“We next saw Pappan’s Ferry. His house is on the right, in a fine timbered bottom....”



*****George S. Park was the founder of Parkville, Missouri and traveled frequently. In *The Beginning of the West*, Louise Barry says that from June 15th to the 22nd, Park was on the last run of the steamboat *Excel* from Weston to Ft. Riley. Park had boarded at Parkville and mentioned passing Pappan's Ferry. **Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail," *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 11.

Max Greene

1856

"Next is Pappan's Ferry; with Pappan's house on the right peeping cozily out from its environment of trees."

*******Source:** Benbrook, Jimmie G. "Pappan's Ferry and the Oregon-California Trail," *Overland Journal*, 19(1): (spring 2001), 2-21, quote on p. 11.