



SHAWNEE COUNTY, KANSAS

UNIONTOWN FERRY

Lorena L. Hays

1853 May 7 to 9

“[May] 7th Came to the [Kansas] river this morning. It rained last night as was cold and unpleasant until now it has the appearance of clearing off. I dont [sic] know when we will get across. There are forty wagons here—Uncle has just got back from the ferry and **we are going to the upper middle ferry [as] Cant [sic] cross here.**

8th Sunday came up here yesterday. Came over very pretty country. Camped in a pretty place two miles from the river. Came to the river this morning. Some bad places in the road, but romantic scenery. Saw Indian graves and the Interpreter’s house, himself & family. He is the largest Indian I have seen. They all looked very well. This is the Potawatomi [variant spelling] tribe. Expect to cross to day [sic]. I am sorry we have to cross Sunday. Perhaps we will not get over—there so many cattle to cross yet before we do—It is pleasant to day. The Caw or Kansas is quite a pretty stream. A very narrow strip of timber along its banks, and beautiful rolling prairie in sight each side. **Two ferrys [sic] run here. There is another about five miles above called Union Town ferry, two below—**

Plains 9th Monday Crossed the river this morning. Came six or seven miles & found Uncle Adam’s camp. We came around a beautiful bend in the river. No trees this side around the bend, but beautiful prairie. ... I have been some alarmed about the smallpox as it is said to be along in some of the trains which have passed us and which we have passed several times.”

*******_This party did not cross at the Uniontown Ferry, but this quote does mention the nearby Uniontown Ferry. In the area of what is now downtown Topeka, a Pappan’s Ferry operated. This was called the lower ferry. Farther west was a Smith’s Ferry. Even farther west was the Uniontown Ferry, also called the upper ferry. Uniontown would have been east of the current Kansas community of Willard. Jeanne Watson, the editor of the Lorena Hays diary, tried to determine which ferry near Uniontown was used by the party described by L. Hays. Watson found that a Potawatomi National Ferry was about two miles west of Uniontown. She also found that two other ferries existed in 1853 within a quarter mile of the Uniontown Ferry. Watson thinks the above quote likely is describing one of those ferries quite close to the Uniontown Ferry, but she could not be certain (p. 358). The Uniontown Ferry was located about nine miles west of the Potawatomi Baptist Mission, the main building of which still stands on the grounds of the Kansas Museum of History at 6425 Southwest 6th Avenue in west Topeka, Kansas. The ferries which crossed in the area of the present town of Willard would have split from the main route of the trail in the area of Big Springs. The main**



trail continued toward the Pappan's Ferry while the trail that branched off around Big Springs swung around to the south and stayed on the south side of the Kansas River to cross at Uniontown or one of the other western ferries. Those crossing the Kansas River on one of those western ferries then intercepted the main route of the Oregon Trail on the east edge of the current town of Rossville, Kansas. **Source:** Hays, Lorena L. *To the Land of Gold and Wickedness: The 1848-59 Diary of Lorena L. Hays*. St. Louis: Patrice Press, 1988, excerpt on pp. 153-154.

Randolph B. Marcy
1859

“From Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe, by the way of the upper ferry of the Kansas River and the Cimarron.”

*****At the request of the U.S. War Department, Randolph Marcy compiled a guidebook for overland travelers. The author listed 18 possible itineraries. This one basic itinerary is listed on page 255, and the specific crossings and camps are given on pages 260 to 263. In what is now the Topeka area and to the west, the Uniontown Ferry also was known as the upper ferry. The Uniontown Ferry site is west of Topeka in the vicinity of the present community of Willard.

Source: Marcy, Randolph B. *The Prairie Traveler: A Handbook for Overland Expeditions*. Williamstown, Mass.: Corner House Publishers, 1968 [reprint of New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1859, 1st edition], quote on p. 255.