



DOUGLAS COUNTY, KANSAS

WAKARUSA RIVER CROSSINGS

The Wakarusa River, a tributary of the Kansas River, flows generally eastward through Shawnee and Douglas counties, and flows into the Kansas River near Eudora. Two routes of the combined Oregon and California trails followed along the south side of the river. Both routes needed to cross the Wakarusa River. One branch crossed the river near the junction of the Wakarusa and Little Wakarusa rivers. That route on the southeastern edge of present-day Lawrence entered Lawrence on the east and then coursed westerly-northwesterly across the area of that present-day city. The other branch of the Oregon-California trails, considered the main route, continued farther west before crossing the river directly south of the present-day city of Lawrence. The eastern crossing was called the Lower Wakarusa Crossing, or Bluejacket Crossing. The western crossing was known as the Upper Wakarusa Crossing. As time passed, Charles Bluejacket established a ferry and then a bridge at the Lower Crossing, and Napoleon Blanton constructed a bridge at the Upper Crossing.

In 2014 the Upper Wakarusa River Crossing was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Due to a variety of reasons, different cut ramps into a riverbed could be used at different times. This Wakarusa National Register property includes two distinct cutdowns along the north bank of the river. These two cutdowns are about 320 feet apart. Accompanying remnants on the opposite side of the river are no longer apparent.

William Patton, Wesley Brown, & Edward Perry

1843 May 15-16

“[camped near the] lower ford [and because of delays camped the next night at the] upper ford...”

*****Louise Barry, a prodigious researcher at the Kansas State Historical Society, claimed this quote to be the first known reference to two different crossings across the Wakarusa in the vicinity of present-day Lawrence.

Source: Barry, Louise. *The Beginning of the West*. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972, quote on p. 472.

Matthew C. Field

1843 October 18

“... Made the Wakaroosi—Wahka—Roosi—Wahkaosi, or “Big Elk,” at noon, 10 miles, where I remained behind to mend my leather pants and got lost following camp by an Indian trail. Found our own trail, fortunately, before dark, and got to camp about an hour after the blackest night set in that I ever saw.

The first creek we crossed this side of the Kaw is called “Acorn Creek”—about 6 or 8 miles from Pappin’s [Ferry].

Made 23 miles.”

*****New Orleans journalist Field and fellow travelers were headed eastward, from Fort Laramie to Westport, Missouri. In 1843 Field had accompanied Sir William Drummond Stewart on a Rockies excursion for pleasure. After crossing the Kansas [Kaw] River in the area of Pappin’s Ferry in what is now Topeka, his group then crossed the Wakarusa River on the southeastern side of what is now the city of Lawrence. **Source:** Field, Matthew C. *Prairie and Mountain Sketches*. Collected by Clyde and Mae Reed Porter. Edited by Kate Leila Gregg & John Francis McDermott. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1957, quote on pp. 212-213.



Joel Palmer

1845 May 10

“...a stream called the Walkarusha, extending back from which, about two miles in width [may be excessive mileage], we discovered a fine bottom covered with heavy bur oak and black walnut timber. After passing through this bottom, the trail strikes into a level and beautiful prairie, and crossing it—a distance of four miles [may be excessive mileage]—rises gradually to the ridge between the Walkarusha and the Caw, or Kansas river.”

*****Researcher Ronald Becher thinks this describes one cutdown at Bluejacket Crossing. **Source:** Becher, Ronald. “Oregon Trail Fords of the Wakarusa River,” *Overland Journal*, 8(1): (1990): 2-10, quote on p. 6.

Virgil Pringle

1846 May 7

“[after leaving Lone Elm and headed to Wakarusa River] ...half the emigration missed the road and crossed about four miles above.”

*****Researcher Ronald Becher thinks the travelers heading toward the Wakarusa missed their intended route and ended up following the southern route to the river and crossed at the Lower Wakarusa Crossing. **Source:** Becher, Ronald. “Oregon Trail Fords of the Wakarusa River,” *Overland Journal*, 8(1): (1990), 2-10, quote on p. 6.

Edwin Bryant

1846 May 14 & 15

“May 14--...Throughout the day the travelling [variant spelling] has been very fatiguing to our oxen, the wagons frequently stalling in the mud-holes and the crossings of the small branches. Three or four hours were occupied in fording a diminutive tributary of the Wakarusa creek. The banks on the eastern side are so steep, that the wagons were let down with ropes, and the teams were doubled sometimes quadrupled, in order to draw team up on the other side.

The largest portion of our train reached the banks of the Wakarusa about 5 o'clock, and encamped on a sloping lawn in a curve of the stream, carpeted with verdant and luxuriant grass. A grove of small trees (oak, hickory, dogwood, and willows) nearly surrounds our camp. Their foliage is the deepest green, and flowers of all the brilliant, and the softer and more modest hues, enliven the landscape around us....

A number of wagons being behind at dark, a party was formed and returned on the trail to their assistance. We found two or three of the wagons stalled in deep mud, and the tongue of one of them...was broken. After great exertions they were all drawn out and up to the camp, but it was near midnight before this was accomplished. Distance 15 miles.

May 15—...

In the afternoon we crossed the Wakarusa creek, and encamped on the opposite bank in a grove of large timber. Several Shawnee Indians came to our camp in the evening; one of whom, calling himself John Wolf, spoke English. They begged for whiskey. Distance 1 mile.”



*******Source:** Bryant, Edwin. *What I Saw in California*. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1985, quote on pp. 36-37. Accessed online at Google Books on March 29, 2020 [clicked on preview as no ebook available].

George Curry

1846 May 15

“...a beautiful encampment on the Wakanisha River...for three miles before reaching the elevated ground on which we are encamped, it was a complete swamp.”

***** Researcher Ronald Becher thinks this describes one cutdown at Bluejacket Crossing. **Source:** Becher, Ronald. “Oregon Trail Fords of the Wakarusa River”, *Overland Journal*, 8(1): (1990), 2-10, quote on p. 6.

Charles Glass Gray

1849 May 6

“After we descended the 45-degree banks of the [Wakarusa] creek we put on 24 oxen [12 teams] to a wagon and then with hard cries and yells urged the poor beasts up the hill.”

*******Source:** Marshall, Ross. “River Crossings”, *Overland Journal*, 9(3): (fall 1991), 14-24, quote on p. 18.

Lorena L. Hays

1853 May 3

“May 2nd Just stopped to camp. We pass over very beautiful prairie. See but little to relieve the monotony save emigrants and herds of cattle and occasionally a few Indians who want to beg something. I walk some every day ...--we have left pleasant villages, farmhouses and cultivated farms. ...

3rd To Day have not had quite so good road. Crossed the Waukalousa. Came out of our way some to ford it. Found very good ford. Are not on the other road yet. ...”

*****Lorena Hays’s extended family was in a wagon train of families that left Barry, Illinois to go to California. Lorena says she walks some every day. That means she also was riding some every day. Was she riding a horse or riding in wagon the rest of the time? **Source:** Hays, Lorena L. *To the Land of Gold and Wickedness: The 1848-1859 Diary of Lorena L. Hays*. Edited by Jeanne Hamilton Watson. St. Louis: Patrice Press, 1988, quote on p. 153.