



## TRACING OUR TRACKS

Trolley Tour Script

May 14, 2016

Welcome to the first Tracing our Tracks Trolley Tour! To start, I'd like to call your attention to the brief history of this neighborhood on the back of your map. The McKinley Residential Historic District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Register of Historic Kansas Places. There are several properties inside the district that are listed individually as well.

We will stop at several properties where I will share a little about the home or former residents.

As we get started I'd like to point out the Warkentin House and invite to tour the house museum and learn about the family. I'll add that the Warkentin House was built in 1887 and was home to Bernhard & Wilhelmina Warkentin. Bernhard was instrumental in the Mennonite migration to the region and to the establishment of the hard winter wheat that has made this area so successful in wheat production.

As we turn the corner here, I'd like to point out the home at 215 E 1<sup>st</sup>, this was the home of Carl Warkentin, son to Bernhard & Mina Warkentin. And, just an interesting bit to note, it was a common practice to move homes from one site to another. This home was once located across the street, but moved to this site in 1912.

## 305 E 1<sup>st</sup> Street – Reese House

Construction Date: 1879

The Reese House was commissioned by John Clark & Nellie Reese, in 1879 and built by Benjamin Hatfield. Born in Wales in 1838, John Clark Reese, Sr. came to the United States as a young boy. At the age of 16, he ran away from his Wisconsin home convinced that “gold was lying in lumps on the ground in California.” His travels brought him many adventures as he made his way west to San Francisco. During his time there, it is said he met many interesting individuals which included Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill Cody, W. S. Stratton and Samuel Clemens, who is better known as Mark Twain.

After about four years, Reese determined that finding gold in California was not as easy as he'd thought and joined the gold rush to Virginia City, Nevada in 1858. It is reported that he walked part of the way, then rode a stage coach the last 25 miles with 20 other individuals. It was Samuel Clemens, who was editor of the only paper published there, that befriended Reese and helped him to secure interests in one of the largest gold mines there. He later sold his shares and returned to San Francisco where he boarded a boat that was sailing around South America and up to New York. Shortly after, he returned to Wisconsin where he became involved in the drug business.

However, the adventures of his youth would not allow him to sit still and he longed to return to the frontier. This led him to Newton in 1873 where he established himself in the drug trade building the first stone building on Main Street on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Main. He married Miss Nellie Badger of Sedgwick in 1876. They had two boys, John Clark and Walter, who both became involved in the family business following graduation from the University of Kansas, as pharmacists. Nellie Reese passed away the summer of 1891. Mr. Reese was remarried in 1893 to Miss Harriet “Hattie” Riley. His son, John Clark, Jr., married and built a home nearby at 122 Harrison.

Mr. Reese retired from the business in 1920 leaving his two sons in charge. Both had been involved in the business for more than 20 years. On July 7, 1922, Mr. John Clark Reese passed on, leaving a legacy from the pioneer days of Newton.

This home was built in the Italianate style and has seen little change over the years with the exception of the removal of a cupola that once existed on the roof.

# 115 Harrison – Benfer House

Construction date: ca1930

This home, built around 1930, is a great example of the Tudor Revival architectural style. It was home to Mr. Chester "Chet" Benfer and his wife Grace. Benfer was a native Newtonian, born on May 11, 1895. He married Grace Woulfe. Together they had one daughter. Chet owned and operated Benfer Insurance-Real Estate and Loan Company. He was also served as a director of the First National Bank.

Chet Benfer's grandfather was Henry Benfer, who came to Harvey County from Pennsylvania in 1883. Henry had served as city commissioner, served three terms as mayor and 12 years as a county commissioner. He was part of the county commissioner when the 1906 Harvey County Courthouse was built.

If you've read *Newton Remembering Yesterday Today*, by Dudley Dodgion Toevs, then you may have come across a bit of interesting history on Mr. Benfer. According to Toevs, Chet was the favored grandchild of Henry. And it was reported that Henry bought the first automobile in Newton. The car had no top and no steering wheel. It had a stick that was used to guide the vehicle. Ever the politician, Henry realized he could not drive the car and wave to his constituents. So, he called upon his favored grandchild, Chet, to drive for him while he sat in the back and greeted those they passed by. When they first drove it down Main Street, it caused quite a stir. Horses reared up and bolted, children screamed, dogs barked, and people, in general, stopped to stare at the spectacle. Chester was only 13 at the time and it had a lasting impression on him and he forever had an interest in the automobile.

Another story shared by Toevs was the good Samaritan in Chet. As an adult, he was often responsible for random, and anonymous, acts of kindness. Toevs noted when Chet would come upon a youth in need of new shoes, he would stop into the nearest shoe store and ask the clerk to fit the child with a new pair and he would cover the cost, insisting he remain anonymous.

As of 1982, Chet Benfer was still living at this address, but his wife has preceded him in death in 1971. Mr. Benfer joined her in death at the age of 92 on November 4, 1987. Not only had he served as a director of the First National Bank, he also was an active member of the Masonic Lodge, the Wichita Consistory, Midian Shrine, the Elks Lodge of Newton and a former county agent for the Federal Land Bank.

## 209 Harrison – W. D. Congdon House

Construction Date: 1898

Mr. Windsor D. Congdon, a hardware merchant from Sedgwick, and his wife, Laura, came to Newton in June 1897. He moved his hardware store to 508 Main. He lived in the Dr. Gaston Boyd residence in the Highland Park. Highland Park was a small neighborhood located on West Broadway near Columbus. In July 1898, he traded this home with that of Frank Beers and moved to "neat cottage" on Allison. By August, he began construction on a new home behind him on Harrison and moved in January 1899.

Mr. Congdon moved his hardware business twice more. First to 206 Main in March 1898, then to 304 Main in December 1898. He added grocery items in September 1898 to expand his offerings. In January 1899, Mr. Congdon brought in former store clerk, Mr. H. G. Newton, as a partner. However, in May 1900, he completely stepped away from the business selling it to Brichler Brothers. The brothers moved all stock and inventory to Kechi where they reopened.

Mr. Congdon can also be credited with the establishment of the Harvey County Poultry Association in November 1896. He was successful in the organization, serving as president for several years.

Mr. Congdon passed away, unexpectedly, in June 1910 in Sedgwick, where he was staying with his brother while doing some mason work on a new bank building.

This home is a two-story Italianate dwelling. The exterior is clad in wood blocks with quoins at all corners. All of the windows have ornamental frames shaped like segmental arches with exaggerated keystones.

Following the death of Mr. Congdon, his son, Morris H. Congdon, a Santa Fe stenographer, resided in the home.

# Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital

Construction Date: ca 1903

According to the *Newton Evening Kansan-Republican's* 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition dated August 22, 1922, the "Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital was founded for the purpose of establishing the work of the 'Female Deaconate' as an expression of the love and devotion of the Mennonite people toward God, by ministering to Him and serving the suffering, the need, and helpless, and to express in the community and to fellow citizens and neighbors something of the gratitude of the Mennonites for the manifold blessing received in this country by the grace of God and the goodwill of man."

Construction began on the Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital building in 1907 with the dedication ceremony held on June 11, 1908. It opened under the direction of Sister Frieda Kaufman, the Deaconess Mother of the deaconess sisterhood and sister-in-charge of Bethel Deaconess Hospital. The establishment of the hospital and deaconess training owes its beginning to Rev. David Goerz, founder of Bethel College. He was a strong leader in the Mennonite Conference and believed in the deaconess work.

Bernhard and Wilhelmina "Mina" Warkentin were big supporters of the Bethel Deaconess cause providing "substantial contributions to the organization." In 1910, Mrs. Warkentin had the home built as a residence for the deaconesses of the hospital. She presented it as a memorial to her husband, who had been killed in a tragic accident in April 1908. An addition was made to the home six years later as the organization continued to grow.

In 1938, Bethel Clinic was formally organized and a wing was built onto the hospital along Pine Street in 1939. The campus continued to grow and additional construction took place across the street from the hospital on Pine Street. Eventually, Bethel Clinic merged with Axtell Clinic in 1988 to become Newton Medical Center. The buildings here were razed in 2001 as all services were relocated to the new hospital on Kansas Avenue south of Highway 50.

For a more complete history of the Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital, reference the *Newton Medical Center: Merging the Past with the Future* by Lana W. Myers.

## 308 E 1<sup>st</sup> Street – McKinley Elementary School

Construction Date: ca1885

In 1879, the first school building, the Third Ward School, was built at a cost of \$4,000. It was a six room brick building and was located on Pine Street between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets. Originally, the entire block had been purchased for the use of the school. The entire block had been bought a building site, but citizens felt this was too much and half of the block was sold.

In 1888, the smaller building was demolished and a new building was built at a cost of \$30,000. It was renamed McKinley School and operated solely as an elementary school. It was a two-and-a-half story brick building with the main entrance facing Pine Street and additional entrances facing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets. The building was 106 feet in length, 89 feet in width and stood 90 feet high. It was reported that 500,000 bricks were used in its construction.

This building served elementary children until 1938 when the community received a total of \$485,000 in WPA funds to raze this and the Cooper school buildings and build new, which is what exists today. It was designed by Wichita architect Lorentz Schmidt. It continued to serve as an elementary school until the administration offices relocated here in November 2000.

## 309 E 3<sup>rd</sup> Street – C. F. Claassen House

Construction Date: ca1885

This home was built for Cornelius F. Claassen and his wife Mary in about 1885. Mr. C. F. Claassen came to Newton from Germany in 1878. As a young man, he worked with his father, repairing shoes. He later worked as a carpenter, then as a clerk and “implement assembler” for Barnett & Foltz, a hardware store. He married, Miss Mary Ensz in December 1884. In 1885 he took a position with Newton National Bank and was sent to work in Brainerd as cashier of a small bank, which was managed by Newton National. Following the closure of the bank in Brainerd, he opened his own farm loan, real estate and insurance business, which he had until he became involved in the formation of the Kansas State Bank in 1902. This bank was located at 600 N Main. C. F. served as Vice President under Bernhard Warkentin, until Mr. Warkentin was killed in a tragic accident in 1908. At that point, Mr. Claassen was then elected president. His son, C. W. Claassen, became cashier of the Kansas State Bank in 1916. Following the death of C. F. in January 1941, C. W. was elected president of the bank.

The Claassen family lived in the home until at least 1943. The turreted porch was added sometime between 1909 and 1915, but overall the home is a beautiful example of Queen Anne architecture.

**333 E 3<sup>rd</sup>** - Just something to note, the property here at 333 E 3<sup>rd</sup> was the home of C. W. Claassen, the son.

## 314 E 4<sup>th</sup> Street – Edwards-Nicholson House

Construction Date: ca1885

This home, built sometime around 1885, is the former residence of J. W. Edwards, who is listed as the first resident of this property. He owned J. W. Edwards and Co., a coal and stone company, located at 311 N Main. He bought out W. P. Brown, who was a coal dealer, in the fall of 1877. Through the years, he had several partners in the business but he remained a constant until selling his interests in September of 1887 to focus on a new endeavor in furniture and undertaking. Also, of interest to note, J. W. Edwards appears to have been involved in the coordination of fireworks displays. Several articles in the Newton Daily Republican reference his skill at this activity.

Mr. J. D. Nicholson is listed at this address with his wife Mary in 1911. Mr. Nicholson was the treasurer of the Electric Power and Light Company. In 1893, J. D. Nicholson, with his brother J. C. Nicholson, operated the electric light plant under the name of James D. Nicholson and Brother. He maintained and repaired the all the wiring that was done. In 1895, as electric light began to replace gas, the gas and electric companies in Newton merged to form the Newton Light and Power Co, with J. D. Nicholson as manager.

The company grew as demand for electric power grew and in 1908, the gas portion of the business was sold to the Newton Gas and Fuel Company. The Electric Light and Power company continued and began operating on a 24-hour basis. In October 1911, the Wichita Gas & Electric Light Company purchased the Electric Light & Power but kept Nicholson in charge.

By the 1920s, Newton was a district office of the Kansas Gas & Electric Company with J. D. Nicholson serving as the district manager.

This home is a great example of the Victorian Stick architectural style with the steep pitch of the front-gabled roof and the application of decorative trusses at the apex of the gable and other decorative horizontal and vertical boards applied to the façade.

## 309 E 4<sup>th</sup> Street – Shepherd-Langan House

Historic Name: Shepherd-Langan House

Construction Date: 1890

This home was constructed in around 1890 by Jacob A. Shepherd for his daughter, Emma, and son-in Law, William E. Langan. Mr. Shepherd was the third owner of the Neal House having purchased it in 1888 from H. C. Ashbaugh. When Mr. Shepherd purchased the Neal home, *The Evening Kansan*, dated, May 26, 1888, stated the had just purchased one of the most desirable homes in the city. They went on to add that Mr. Shepherd "is the possessor of ample capital and great energy, and will be a valuable addition to our city." Shepherd was indeed a successful gentleman. He was a lumber baron and had served as superintendent of the Kansas City Terminals for the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Shepherd left Newton in 1894 for Joplin, Missouri, but still maintained property in Newton as he is reported on several occasions as returning to perform maintenance on them.

William E. Langan, was born in Missouri in 1855. He came to Newton with his family in August 1887 from Richmond, Missouri. He rented an old picture gallery at the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> & Main where he opened his photography business, serving as one of Newton's first photographers.

He operated his photography business aggressively, advertising often, and by November 1889, he expanded his business adding a printing room. Langan, however, did not remain in Newton. In August 1897, he moved to Nevada, Missouri with his family, selling his studio on Main Street to W. R. Murphy. The Langan's held onto their home for some time, not selling until 1911, to W. W. Regier.

The Shepherd-Langan House was built in the Queen Anne/Stick architectural style. It retains much of its historic integrity with its wrap-around porch and tower. The gables, along with the decorative band just below them, are clad with scalloped wood shingles. The wrap-around porch is supported by turned wood columns and decorative braces. The garage on the home is comparatively new, but is compatible to the historic home.

*Some information provided by the property owners, Barth & Betty Hague*

## 306 E 4<sup>th</sup> Street – M. L. Wood House

Construction Date: ca1885

This home is believed to have been built in the 1870s, but it is not original to this site. It was moved to this location around 1907-08. Initially, it served as a rental until it was purchased by M. L. Woods and his wife in 1919. Mr. Woods was an optometrist with his practice on the second floor of the Hanlin Building in downtown (6<sup>th</sup> & Main). The 1922 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition of the *Newton Kansan* calls his business the "finest equipped optical establishment in the state." M. L. and Maudie raised four children in this house. The current owners, Jerry and Karen Wall, were told by family members that it was loved and enjoyed for many years by the children and grandchildren of the family.

It was bought from the Mrs. Woods estate in 1971 by Eldo Anderson and turned into an apartment house. The upstairs being one unit and the downstairs another. In 1974, Kent and Karen Dove purchased this house for \$8,500. Kent, Karen and her father, Russ Werner, worked for nearly a year replacing plumbing, doing mechanical and electrical work and remodeling the kitchen. In 1985 Karen Dove changed her last name to Wall and repainted the house. The porch was rebuilt in the last five years. In the 90's a wash porch was removed and a dining/family room, gazebo, deck, and patio were added. Other changes have been made over the years, but keeping the original style and flavor of the house have been important to them.

This home is an example of Italianate/Queen Anne architecture. The Italianate is depicted in its cubic massing, offset entrance, tall narrow windows with peaked frames, and wide eaves supported by decorative brackets. But it also exhibits the Queen Anne style through the lower front gable ornamented with scalloped wood shingles, wrap-around porch, and the carved decorative brackets of the porch supports.

*Information provided by the property owners, Jerry & Karen Wall*

## 301 E 4<sup>th</sup> Street – Neal House

Construction Date: 1875

Jairus E. Neal was born in Onondago County, New York on August 18, 1818. He began teaching school when he was 18. In 1839, he studied law in West Point, Iowa, and opened a successful legal practice. Neal was first elected to the Iowa Legislature in 1854 and later, candidate for US Congress. He also served as a US district court judge. In 1868, he made a series of moves between Iowa and New York, before finally settling in Newton in June 1873 at the age of 55. He immediately established the Harvey County Savings Bank which was the first bank in the county. It was also the only bank to survive the Newton Panic, the real estate and banking crash, in the 1890s. Today, First Bank, located on the corner of Broadway and Oak, can trace their roots to his establishment, making them the oldest bank in Harvey County.

Neal organized and chaired the county's first Democratic Convention and was a Democratic candidate for the state senate in 1878 and 1880. He was an active Mason and was involved in organizing Newton's Masonic Temple and its construction at 700 N Main. Neal was a dedicated citizen, successful businessman, attorney and democratic politician, shaping the Democratic Party in the community.

Neal built this home in the fall of 1875, he and his wife moved in the first week of January 1876. It was described in news reports as a mansion and as one of the finest residences in this part of the state. Jairus E Neal passed away in 1882, reportedly leaving an estate worth over \$100,000. His family continued to reside in the home following his death until it was sold in 1884 to H. C. Ashbaugh, editor and publisher of the Newton Kansan. Ashbaugh resided in the home for a couple of years, selling it in 1888 to Jacob A. Shepherd. It went through a series of owners and experienced some remodeling over time, with the more significant changes taking place in 1928 when the wrap-around porch was removed.

It is built in the Italianate style and, today, remains a testament to its original resident, Mr. Neal.

**303 E 5<sup>th</sup>** – Special Note – This home was the residence of three town founders, but probably most well-known is Judge R. W. P. Muse. It is also believed to be the oldest property in the district, built in 1875, just a few months before the Neal house was built.

## 319 E 5<sup>th</sup> Street

Historic Name: Former J. C. Nicholson Home

Construction Date: ca1955

This is the newest home on our tour, but is it still considered a historic structure. It was built sometime in the 1950s as a duplex, but it replaced the Queen Anne brick and stone home once owned by town booster and attorney, J. C. Nicholson. J. C. Nicholson is most recognized as the driving force behind the placement of Newton at the "crossroads of America."

Nicholson, worked tirelessly to bring the "Meridian Highway," or US Highway 81, a paved road from Canada to Mexico, through Newton. He was also heavily involved in ensuring the "New Santa Fe Trail," or US Highway 50, which extended from the East Coast to the West Coast, went through Newton. He was successful in both endeavors and the highways crossed a Broadway and Main Street in downtown. Although both of these highways have been relocated, the economic impact to the growth of our community was tremendous.

What makes this property interesting is the materials used in the construction of the Nicholson home appear to have been "recycled" to construct this duplex. It is also rare to have a ranch style home listed as a historic property. But as ranch homes continue to age, their eligibility opportunities increase. This property certainly retains its original 1950s ranch style character and is an important example of this architectural style to the historic district.