



An Analysis of the Urbanization Process of Kansas City (1765-1940)

Yiyue Tu

College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 1328219970@qq.com

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Abstract

Kansas City initially accumulated strength through trade, relying on its superior port conditions. After the first railway was built into the city, it entered a period of rapid urbanization, with a large number of people flocking to Kansas City in search of development opportunities. To meet housing needs, the government expanded the city scale multiple times. Population mobility and technological progress gave rise to frequent trading activities, which in turn drove economic prosperity and promoted the continuous improvement of urban infrastructure and surrounding road construction. Thus, Kansas City rose to become one of the core cities in the Midwest. However, following the nationwide urbanization stagnation after the Great Depression, Kansas City entered a stage of population outflow to the surrounding areas and expansion by annexing neighboring regions.

Subject Areas

History

Keywords

Kansas City, Urban History of the United States, Urbanization, Urban Planning

1. Introduction

Kansas City's urbanization trajectory from 1765 to 1940 encapsulates the dynamics of American Midwestern urban growth: rooted in geographic advantage, propelled by transportation revolutions, shaped by economic booms and crises, and transformed by social and cultural shifts. This study examines how a frontier trading post evolved into a regional hub, exploring the interplay of geography, infrastructure, politics, and society in driving urbanization.

This research draws on three primary categories of sources, each contributing

distinct insights. First, archival records—including documents from the Kansas City Public Library, Kansas Historical Society, and University of Kansas Library—provide foundational data on early land transactions, city charters, and administrative decisions (e.g., 1850s street renovation ordinances and Pendergast-era bond records). These primary sources offer unmediated accounts of policy-making and urban expansion. Second, contemporary newspapers such as the *Kansas City Star* and *Kansas City Business Journal* capture real-time observations of economic activity (e.g., steamboat cargo volumes) and public discourse (e.g., debates over the Santa Fe Trail). Third, secondary works—including Wang Xu’s studies on Midwestern urbanization, Hou Shen’s analyses of Kansas City’s environmental and social changes, and Barbara Magerl’s research on founding residents—frame the case within broader historical contexts, enabling comparisons with other Midwestern cities.

Sources were weighted to balance empirical rigor and contextual depth: archival records anchor specific claims about population growth and infrastructure timelines; newspapers illuminate public perceptions and economic trends; and secondary literature situates Kansas City’s experience within national patterns of urbanization.

The study concludes in 1940 to capture a complete urbanization cycle. By 1940, Kansas City had transitioned from a marginal trading outpost (1765-1820s) to a thriving transportation and commercial hub (1850s-1920s), weathered the Great Depression, and consolidated its territory through annexation—forming a metropolitan area spanning Missouri and Kansas. This endpoint marks the culmination of 175 years of growth driven by river trade, rail expansion, and post-crisis adaptation. Beyond 1940, urbanization patterns shifted dramatically (e.g., suburbanization accelerated by postwar automobile culture), making 1940 a natural boundary for analyzing the “classical” phase of Midwestern urbanization.

Urbanization is defined here as a multidimensional process involving population concentration, spatial expansion, economic diversification, and cultural transformation. This study employs two theoretical lenses:

Transportation-driven urban growth: Following Wang Xu’s framework, infrastructure (rivers, railroads, aviation) acts as a “growth pole,” attracting population and economic activity.

Political economy of urban expansion: Urbanization is shaped by power dynamics—from early merchant networks to Pendergast’s machine politics—where elites and institutions mediate resource allocation and spatial development.

2. The Founding and Early Development of Kansas City

2.1. Formation of Settlements and Village Construction from the Late 18th to the Early 19th Century

2.1.1. Settlement Formation

Located in the western plains of Missouri, at the border between Missouri and Kansas, Kansas City is geographically positioned at the center of the United States

and is the 23rd largest city in the country by total area. Its climate is a modified continental type, characterized by rapid changes unaffected by any topographical barriers. The terrain ranges from flat to gently rolling hills, where eastern forests meet western grasslands [1]. The first recorded person to arrive at the location of Kansas City was the French explorer Étienne de Veniard, Sieur de Bourgmont, who was also the first European to explore the lower Missouri River. In 1713, he wrote *Exact Description of Louisiana*, and in 1714, *The Route to Be Taken to Ascend the Missouri River*. These two travelogues documented the ports, lands, and rivers of these areas, as well as the Indian tribes occupying the region, and the resulting commercial benefits and advantages of establishing colonies.

According to the 1763 Treaty of Paris, the Spanish took over the Louisiana Territory, but apart from taxing ship traffic on the Missouri River and issuing permits, they carried out no constructive activities. In 1764, after Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau obtained Spanish permission to found the City of Saint Louis on the upper Mississippi River, they ventured inland to trade with Native Americans and explored as far west as the Rocky Mountains. However, their activities were rarely documented, leaving much of their established trade unknown. Since 1821, François Chouteau has established a “Kansas Village” trading post at the mouth of the Kaw River, which later developed and was rebuilt into an important trading center for Missouri and nearby Indian tribes, attracting French settlers [2].

2.1.2. Establishment of Kansas Town

In the second half of the 18th century, Native Americans and European merchants and hunters opened the Santa Fe Trail through the southwestern United States. After the United States acquired Louisiana in 1803, it publicized and improved the trail, connecting it to Mexico. Against this backdrop, John Calvin McCoy opened an exchange in Kansas City to serve trail travelers and named the location Westport. In 1833, he expanded the exchange and developed the surrounding land into Westport Town, which quickly rose to establish trade links with multiple parties and became an important trading center for nearby Indians. However, due to its lack of significant development for many years, Westport faced some and ridicule in its early stages. Nevertheless, Senator Benton foresaw its trade potential, stating: “It is destined to become the largest commercial center west of St. Louis, with trade almost expanding to three miles around the city.”

Although the U.S. suppression of trade with Mexico in 1843 impacted Westport, which relied on Indian trade, the revival of Santa Fe Trail trade in 1845 allowed Kansas Town to gradually replace Westport as a new trading center its natural port advantages. Despite its development speed not yet able to compete with Westport and Independence, it had attracted a large number of merchants and the aggregation of warehouses and stores [3].

2.2. Construction of Kansas City in the 1850s

2.2.1. Founding and Early Development of Kansas City

In June 1850, Jack County officially recognized Kansas Town as a city, which was

then declared by Missouri in March 1853 and renamed Kansas City, with a population of 2500. The early municipal elections elected 67 representatives, and the city covered an area of 0.70 square miles (1.8 square kilometers). In 1852, conflicts between slave states and free states began, affecting trade and development, leading to frequent social unrest and violent incidents, which continued until 1857. In 1856, merchants spontaneously established a Trade Committee, which was transformed into the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce in 1857, chartered by the city's legislative body and becoming an important driving force for the city's early development. Chamber members included local leaders such as the mayor, and the chamber's income was contributed by its members to promote public utilities and commercial development, advance railway system construction, and lead the spirit of public improvement, assisting in the improvement of city streets, roads, and bridges [4].

2.2.2. Urban Construction

Between 1857 and 1858, the Kansas City government revised the city charter twice to expand the city boundaries to accommodate commercial growth, population increase, and construction needs. However, the 40 acres of land in the east were ultimately not included, and the provision of a bicameral city legislature was abolished a year later. Around 1861, after experiencing rapid development, Kansas City attached great importance to street and transportation construction, competing with surrounding cities to improve roads to new settlements and trade areas. Among them, the road to Westport, though delayed, was finally improved in 1858 through the construction of Shawnee Road and bridges. During the winter of 1856-1857, under Mayor Colonel Payne, Kansas City launched street renovations, widening levees and leveling and resurfacing multiple main streets. In 1859, a road repair ordinance was passed, while the courthouse on the square began construction in 1856, and the market building was completed in 1860 [5].

After the U.S. House of Representatives rejected Kansas as a slave state in 1857, Kansas City's trade volume surged, ranking first among cities of the same size. Meanwhile, urban development accelerated, making it an important distribution center for goods and immigrants. In 1857, there were 125 ships on Kansas City's levee, unloading more than 75 million pounds of goods. During these years, the **Business Journal** once described the appearance of the port levee as: "It is so exaggeratedly piled with various goods, like a grand bazaar. This was the great steamboat era on the Missouri River, and everything entering the upper region came by steamboat." [6]. The gradual improvement of Kansas City's facilities accelerated economic and social development, urban expansion, transportation and infrastructure improvement, the prosperity of finance and insurance, and the establishment of various associations, churches, clubs, and educational institutions. By 1860, the population had increased to 4,418, making it a model of trade and commercial development.

3. Urbanization Process of Kansas City from the Late 19th to the Early 20th Century

3.1. Construction and Development of Kansas City from the Mid-Late 19th to the Early 20th Century

3.1.1. Development of Railway Transportation

In the mid-late 19th century, Kansas City rapidly emerged as a railway and commercial center in the American Midwest by virtue of railway transportation construction, particularly the rise of the Missouri Pacific Railway and the Kansas Pacific Railway [7]. These two railways not only laid the foundation for Kansas City's early development but also, with government support and cooperation from surrounding areas, became important transportation hubs connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, greatly promoting the city's economic prosperity and population growth, enabling Kansas City to achieve rapid development in the following decades. According to the **Business Journal**, between 1865 and 1866, no fewer than 600 new houses were built in Kansas City. In 1868, the population of Kansas City was estimated at 28,000, and 2,000 houses were built that year. 1869 was one of the most prosperous years in Kansas City's history, with the population increasing to 30,000, 4.5 miles of streets built, and seven railways in operation, with trade ranging across most of the United States [8].

3.1.2. Rapid Development of Animal Husbandry

In the 19th century, Kansas City became an important animal husbandry center in the American Midwest due to its rapid development in livestock transportation, animal husbandry, and animal product processing. With the development of animal husbandry in the western region, Kansas City gradually became a distribution center for livestock trading. Despite early difficulties such as incomplete railways and war impacts, with the advancement of railway construction and the promotion of entrepreneurs like Joseph McCoy, animal husbandry in Kansas City rose rapidly. The establishment of the Kansas City Joint Stock Company in 1871 further promoted the improvement of the livestock market, attracting numerous buyers and investors. Since then, the Kansas City stockyards have continued to expand, becoming the second largest livestock market in the United States, and attracting many related enterprises including stockyards, meat packing plants, factories, railway docks, and commission companies, forming an interconnected industrial ecosystem.

Meanwhile, the animal product processing industry in Kansas City also developed vigorously. Led by livestock slaughter and processing, modern livestock slaughterhouses and animal product packing plants were gradually established, making Kansas City an important animal product packing center in the United States [9].

3.1.3. The "City Beautiful Movement" in Kansas City

The "City Beautiful Movement" refers to a reform movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in parts of the United States, led by landscape architects, ar-

chitectural designers, sculptors, etc., with widespread participation from urban residents, to update urban planning and beautify the urban environment [10]. Its aim was to solve urban problems of dirt, disorder, and poor hygiene and improve social morality and order. Figures such as August Meyer and George Kessler promoted the development of this movement in Kansas City, achieving significant improvements in the urban environment through the construction of a park system and a boulevard system. As chairman of the Park Commission, Meyer collaborated with Kessler to draft a detailed planning report that not only considered factors such as the city's terrain, transportation, and population but also proposed a bold plan to utilize natural resources for urban transformation.

As an urban planner and landscape designer, Kessler combined aesthetics with the practicality of urban planning, creating a green sanctuary for Kansas City and promoting the development of real estate and quality housing [11]. This movement not only reshaped Kansas City's urban image but also influenced urban planning across North America.

3.2. Urbanization Process of Kansas City from the 1920s to 1940s

3.2.1. Urban Management and Development in the "Pendergast Era"

In 1925, Tom Pendergast became the ruler of Kansas City, and his term as mayor is known as the "Pendergast Era" in Kansas City. During this period, Kansas City experienced a stage of rapid urbanization. Pendergast greatly expanded his power by amending the city charter and implementing a ten-year plan bond. He made Kansas City a national aviation hub, constructed most of the downtown buildings, and promoted the development of inner-city culture. However, there were also discordant voices during this period, such as the inability to enforce the national prohibition law in Kansas City and serious problems of violence and corruption [12].

Pendergast also promoted the City Beautiful Movement and infrastructure improvements, enhancing the city's image and status. During the Great Depression, he provided job opportunities for the unemployed through the "Ten-Year Plan" and constructed many important public buildings, including the Municipal Auditorium. As the "Kansas City Star" declared, through "giving Kansas City a lasting and impressive monument to public spirit," the architects and developers of the Municipal Auditorium made the city one of the nation's recognized best such facilities. These efforts not only helped Kansas City weather the economic difficulties of the Great Depression but also made it a city with a unique liberal tendency, tolerance, and racial diversity.

3.2.2. Urban Annexation

After Pendergast's death, the Kansas City government established a Citizens' Association to eliminate political corruption and promote urban expansion. In 1939, the new mayor, John Gage, formed a reform committee to conduct a comprehensive review of the city and hired the renowned city manager, L. Perry Cookingham, to oversee urban construction. Cookingham introduced modern bidding procedures, planned urban expansion, avoided the marginalization of the city

center, and constructed suburbs and an international airport. Under the 20-year management of Gage and Cookingham, Kansas City transformed from one of the worst-administered cities in the United States to one of the best.

From the late 1930s to the 1940s, due to changes in transportation methods and post-war population mobility, Kansas City accelerated land annexation, expanded its urban scale, formed the Kansas City metropolitan area spanning the two-state border, and became an important regional urban center [13].

3.2.3. Urban Cultural Construction

In the early 20th century, Kansas City began to attach importance to urban cultural construction. In 1918, the “Kansas City Journal” proposed building a monument to commemorate those who served in World War I, and the city council then established a “Committee of 100” to oversee the matter, successfully raising funds. Construction of the monument began in 1921 and was inaugurated by U.S. President John Coolidge in 1926. Since then, Kansas City has continuously improved the environment around the monument, forming a famous cultural landscape [14].

Starting with the construction of the Liberty Memorial, Kansas City launched a series of cultural activities and constructions. Meanwhile, affected by the “Great Migration,” the black population increased significantly, establishing prosperous commercial districts and factories, and musical cultures such as jazz emerged and were supported by the black middle and upper classes, leading to the vigorous development of black culture in Kansas City. In addition, women’s organizations in Kansas City also rose, and fashion shows became a highlight of urban culture. These activities together promoted the development of Kansas City’s culture, making it a city with rich cultural connotations.

4. Conclusions

The urbanization process of Kansas City has significantly promoted its development in multiple aspects such as the city itself, population, and economy, and driven the rise of surrounding suburbs and satellite cities. As an important transportation hub in the American Midwest, Kansas City has also promoted the exchange and development of other midwestern cities. In the early days, Kansas City experienced a population surge due to railway construction, becoming one of the important cities in the United States. With the advancement of urbanization, Kansas City annexed surrounding areas, and both the urban area and population increased significantly.

Meanwhile, the development of Kansas City has also driven the rise of surrounding areas such as the Westport District and Independence, which have become important components of the Kansas City metropolitan area. In addition, as a transportation hub, Kansas City has increasingly close exchanges and development with other midwestern cities, promoting the common prosperity of the regional economy [15].

The urbanization process of Kansas City demonstrates several characteristics of urban development in the American Midwest. Most of these cities rose by virtue of the transportation industry after the Industrial Revolution, rapidly achieved urbanization, and expanded to the surrounding areas. However, after the Great Depression in the United States, their urbanization process stagnated. During this period, the government gradually realized the importance of urban infrastructure construction and environmental construction and actively advocated for urban residents to participate in urban construction. Association organizations independently formed by urban residents have developed well, contributing importantly to the prosperity of urban humanistic culture, promoting the enrichment and development of urban cultural connotations, and laying a humanistic foundation for the city's sustainable progress, enabling Kansas City to present unique development trajectories and styles in different development stages, becoming a typical example for studying urban development in the United States and providing valuable reference samples for academic research and urban planning practices in related fields.

Its development experience is of great enlightenment for understanding the opportunities and challenges, advantages and disadvantages in the urban development process, helping other cities draw experience and lessons in the development process, so as to better plan their own development paths and achieve the goal of sustainable development.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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