

# Spring Hill Historic District (1887-1888, 1903-1905)

## Main Street - Spring Hill

### *Register of Historic Kansas Places*

#### ***Remembering a Not-So "New Town"***

Spring Hill's Historic Business District offers a wonderful glimpse into the role of railroads in commercial architecture and the development of small Kansas towns at the end of the 19th century.

During the initial surge of railroad development in the state during the late 1860s and early 1870s, Kansans increasingly resented the economic power the



Looking north from Hale Street, the east side of Main Street as it appeared circa 1906. At the time the east side housed a hardware store, bank, meat market, two grocery stores, a furniture dealer and undertaker, department store, and the Independent Order of Oddfellows Lodge. *Johnson County Museum Collection.*

railroads held over local farmers and businessmen. Like many small Johnson County communities at the time, Spring Hill was expected to pay the Missouri River, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad \$15,000 to cover the construction costs of building a line to the town and establishing a station there. After refusing to do so, the railroad, begun in Kansas City in 1866, "punished" Spring Hill in 1870 by running its track one half mile east of the town and putting a depot two miles away in Ocheltree. Despite this inconvenience and economic hardship, the town of Spring Hill refused to lie down. The townspeople simply picked up and moved the town east of its original site, referred to after that as "Old Town," toward the railroad. The business district of this "New Town,"

centered on Main Street, became the heart of the town's commercial and residential life until the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Situated on both the east and west sides of Main Street, between Nichols and Hale Streets in downtown Spring Hill, the seventeen buildings which now make up the Spring Hill Downtown Historic District were constructed around 1900. Three were most likely built closer to 1880. Typical of small towns in this era, "New Town" originally was home to a post office, newspaper, bakery, barber, bank, mercantile stores, hardware store, millinery shop, theater, and other commercial enterprises. The Spring Hill New Era, one of Johnson County's oldest newspapers, began operations in 1883 on Main Street.

The district itself is a typical turn of the century "one-part commercial block" with three "two-part" commercial buildings among them. Characteristic of downtown business districts constructed around this time, it consists of a row of nearly identical "one-part" brick masonry units. Built to meet the immediate demand for services with a comparatively small investment in money and time, most of the buildings are of a single story, simple box style with a minimally decorated facade.

These facades are comprised of plate glass windows and an entry way topped by a simple brick cornice. The large wall area between the windows and cornice, the buildings' most distinguishing feature, represent the decline of the one-story "shop" of the 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the growth of a new commercial philosophy accompanying industrialization and urbanization. For optimistic businessmen anticipating "New Town's" continued prosperity, the facade fulfilled the basic need to advertise while simultaneously giving the appearance of larger, more permanent building and a more urban setting.



Built in 1891 on the corner of Main and Nichols, the Spring Hill Grange # 279 Co-Operative Store was regarded by many as the "cornerstone" of Main's commercial and social activity. *Johnson County Museum Collection.*

### ***The Color of Money***

On July 4, 1903, the corner stone for the new Spring Hill Banking Company and local Masonic Lodge building was laid. In that cornerstone was a time capsule containing the history of Lodge #56 from 1867 to 1903, a history of the Covenant Chapter #98 of the Eastern Star, and a history of the State Bank of Spring Hill. The structure at the corner of Main and Hale Streets was completed early the next year. The two organizations shared the cost of the building, the lodge paying \$2,492.25 and the bank \$2,428.75, for a total of \$4,921.00. The "two-part commercial block" is typical of bank and fraternal hall architecture in the late Victorian era. In particular its two stories are taller than normal, there is greater consistency in treatment between stories, and there is minimal ornamentation. \_

Perhaps the most exciting event in Spring Hill history began in this building in June 1920. After loitering around town all day, a young man named Alfred (or Albert) Gantert of Olathe held cashier Ray Smith and assistant cashier Edna



This circa 1906 photo of the west side of Main Street features the newly completed Spring Hill Banking Company & Masonic Lodge in the foreground. North of the bank are the seven buildings completed together in 1896 after a fire destroyed the entire block earlier that year.  
*Johnson County Museum Collection.*

Lemen up at gun point. The masked Gantert locked the two in the vault, stole nearly \$1,000, and fled north up the alley behind the bank on foot. Smith utilized the electrical burglar system installed fifteen years earlier to set off the alarm from inside the vault. Several Main Street merchants who kept guns in their stores for just such emergencies, poured onto the street and gave chase. Gantert, who had robbed the Martin City, Missouri, bank a month earlier, initially hid in a deserted farm house northeast of Main. But after being spooked by his pursuers, he fired a couple of shots and ran through a nearby pasture. It was there that Ralph Hines, Main Street

butcher and grocer, shot and killed the bank robber. All but \$300 of the stolen money was found tucked into Gantert's shirt. After his mother refused to come from Olathe to claim the body, Gantert was buried in an unmarked grave in the Spring Hill cemetery at the county's expense. For his part Hines received rewards totally well over \$1,000 from the Kansas Bankers Association, the Missouri Bankers Association, and the bank's insurance company.

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