

Zephyr

From the Kansas Historical Society

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**KAW MISSION: A REOPENING
YEARS IN THE MAKING**

(more on page 18)

Investing in History: Reopening Kaw Mission and Last Chance Store



There are many reasons to celebrate the opening of Kaw Mission and Last Chance Store State Historic Site in Council Grove. On September 16, 2023, after years of archeological investigation, fundraising, rehabilitation, and reinterpretation, the community gathered for ribbon-cuttings and receptions to mark the project's completion. Community trolleys provided rides for visitors to see both Kaw Mission and the Last Chance Store.

This was not the first time the community waited to view Kaw Mission. Patrick Zollner, Kansas Historical Society executive director, reminded participants that after the state legislature designated Kaw Mission as a state historic site in 1951, that year's flood caused major damage. The site was opened to the public in September 1952. "But there were few artifacts to display," Zollner said. His predecessor, Nyle Miller, asked "Kansans to consider donating items related to the site's history." Many responded.

Kaw Mission was the last of the Historical Society's 16 state historic sites to receive a comprehensive reinterpretation. The timing was right when Connie Essington of Council Grove donated the Last Chance Store to the State of Kansas in 2015. The store, positioned at the west edge of Council Grove on the Santa Fe Trail, now provides a unique opportunity to offer schools lessons in the economics of the trails.

Archeological investigations were conducted at these two locations to learn more about their usage. Rebuilding the chimney, masonry repair, and window rehabilitation were among the work

LEFT: Archeologist Bob Blasing; Ray Essington; Connie Essington; Tom Essington; and Tiffany Grassmuck, State Historic Sites Supervisor, cut the ribbon at the Last Chance Store opening.

RIGHT: Patrick Zollner, Kansas Historical Society Executive Director, welcomes visitors to the newly reinterpreted Kaw Mission.

completed at the Last Chance Store in preparation for visitors. The late Jennie Chinn, former Kansas Historical Society Executive Director, drafted the exhibit script working with Nate Forsberg, Historical Society Exhibits Designer, to present a modern interpretive museum within the confines of a historic house. Representatives from the Kaw Nation, Santa Fe Trail Association, and Council Grove provided information and resources throughout the project. Numerous donors contributed significant funding.

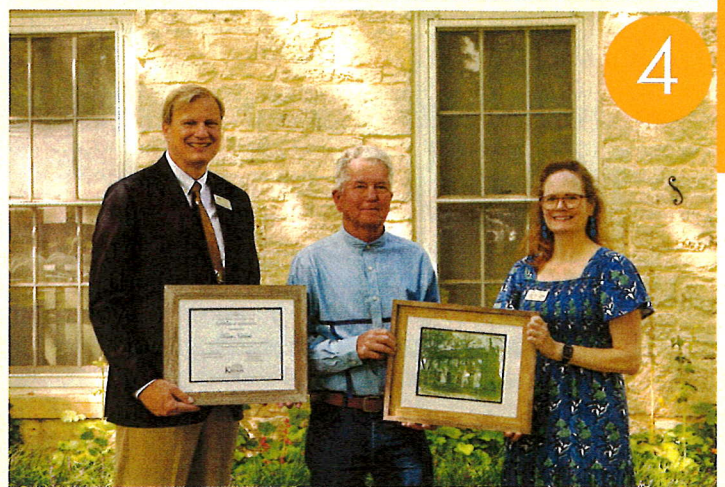
"We greatly appreciate the generosity and patience of all who have contributed funding, materials, artifacts, and information to this major project," Zollner said. "These new exhibits offer visitors an opportunity to understand the significance of this site to the Kaw people on whose lands it was built, the heavily traveled Santa Fe Trail, and the new settlers coming to claim lands in the west."

Zoey Bond, Executive Director, Council Grove Area Trade & Tourism Association, underscored the significance of the sites to the community today. "They bring substantial economic benefits," she said, "creating jobs, stimulating business growth, and enriching the lives of Council Grove's residents."



1

Mark Brooks, Kaw Mission and Last Chance Store Site Administrator, said it was his dream to work at Kaw Mission. “Growing up here where my father was active in the community, even giving tours here at the site, I developed a love of its history,” he said. “Now that we are able to offer free admission, we can share this history with an even larger number of visitors.”



Approximately 50 people attended the morning reception for donors, including former U.S. Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker. Zollner welcomed a group of 50 to the Last Chance Store ribbon-cutting earlier in the day, which included special recognition for Connie Essington. Former Representative Tom Moxley acknowledged the community’s years of support. Visitors included Arthur Harness of Delaware, a descendant of Charles and Jennie Harness, a formerly enslaved couple who had sought refuge in the store cellar during the Civil War before homesteading in Morris County.

Nearly 150 people attended the Kaw Mission ribbon-cutting. Robert Allen, Kaw Nation Tribal Council Member, represented the Tribe at the event. Council Grove American Legion posted the colors, high school students sang the National Anthem, and singer Annie Wilson provided afternoon music. Groups of visitors waited patiently to tour the mission’s new exhibits. They were enthusiastic in their comments about the stories included, the interactive displays, and the videos. Guests especially enjoyed hearing words in the Kanza language.

- ONE.** Patrick Zollner thanks attendees of the donor reception as they enjoy refreshments provided by the Kansas Historical Foundation.
- TWO.** Tiffany Grassmuck visits with former U.S. Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker at the donor reception.
- THREE.** Zoey Bond, Executive Director of the Council Grove Area Trade & Tourism Association, emphasizes the role of historic sites as economic drivers at Kaw Mission’s opening.
- FOUR.** Patrick Zollner and Tiffany Grassmuck recognize the Kaw Nation’s invaluable assistance during the reinterpretation with a presentation to Robert Allen, representing the Kaw Nation Tribal Council.

PLAN YOUR VISIT!

Kaw Mission
 500 North Mission
 Council Grove 66846
 Visit 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.
 Wednesday – Saturday;
 1 – 5 p.m. Sunday

Last Chance Store
 516 Main Street
 Council Grove 66846
 Schedule tours ahead by
 visiting Kaw Mission’s
 visitor center or calling
 620-307-2754