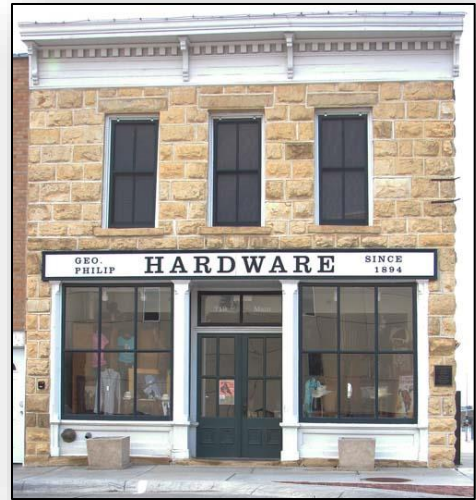


Written in Stone

Central Kansas had few native trees for building material, so limestone served as a long-lasting alternative for purposes both simple and grand. These images are but a few examples from the Smoky Hill River basin, each a short drive from Interstate Highway 70 and US Highway 40 in western Kansas, which generally parallel the Smoky Hill Trail and its successor, the Kansas-Pacific Railroad, both established in the 1860s as the shortest route to Denver from the Missouri River. *Latest update:* 3 December 2013 [Mark Eberle Webpage](#)

Federal Buildings



Fort Hays Blockhouse, Fort Hays State Historic Site, Hays, Kansas

Completed in 1868, the limestone blockhouse served as the post headquarters and library. Its other function as a defensive structure was never tested. As with most posts on the Great Plains, Fort Hays had no defensive wall because Plains Indians rarely attacked a sizable concentration of well-armed soldiers at a developed post. The soldiers stationed at Fort Hays were more likely to be attacked away from the post while performing their primary duty of protecting railroad workers and settlers. The limestone guard house and 2 officer's quarters can also be visited at [Fort Hays State Historic Site](#).

Directions: Fort Hays SHS is on the US Highway 183 Bypass on the south side of Hays. From downtown Hays, go south on Main Street across Big Creek and turn right at the stop sign on the bypass (the fort is on the left, across from the small bison herd). From I-70, take exit 157 and follow the bypass south past Fort Hays State University (the fort is on the right). [Fort Larned National Historic Site](#) is about 55 miles south of Hays on US Highway 183 in a rural setting, with buildings constructed largely from local brown sandstone.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 29 May 2009

Federal Land Office/George Philip Hardware, Hays, Kansas

Before its century-long run as George Philip Hardware (1896–1997), this 1874 building, originally a dry goods store, served as a Federal Land Office in 1875–1877, where homestead and timber claims in the region were filed.

Directions: Follow Old US Highway 40 (8th Street) into downtown Hays to Main Street. From I-70, take exit 159 (Vine Street) and travel south across the railroad tracks to 8th Street, then turn right (west) to Main Street.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 25 May 2009

Homesteads



Volga-German Haus, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas

This building is a furnished replica of the typical limestone home built by Volga-German settlers around Hays. Emigrating first from Germany to the Volga River valley in the late 1700s at the invitation of Catherine the Great, the Volga-Germans began emigrating to North and South America in the 1870s. The first of these settlers in Ellis County arrived in 1876 and established towns based on their hometowns in the Volga River valley. The house is part of the exhibits at the [Ellis County Historical Society](#) in downtown Hays.

Directions: Follow Old US Highway 40 (8th Street) through Hays to Main Street, then turn south to 7th Street (the museum is on the right). From I-70, take exit 159 and travel south to 8th Street, then turn right (west) and travel to Main Street, and turn left (south) to 7th Street.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 25 May 2009

Cottonwood Ranch State Historic Site, Studley, Kansas

The ranch house was begun in 1885 by the Pratts, immigrants from England. After living in a dugout, the Pratts eventually constructed the limestone ranch house and several outbuildings on the Yorkshire style, in which the buildings also served as segments of an enclosure for livestock. The ranch house and buildings form the centerpiece of [Cottonwood Ranch State Historic Site](#).

Directions: From I-70, take exit 128 at WaKeeney and travel about 25 miles north on US Highway 283 to Hill City. Turn left (west) on US Highway 24 and travel about 17½ miles at Studley. The site is on the right. [Nicodemus National Historic Site](#), an exoduster town founded in 1877 by freed slaves from Kentucky and Mississippi is about 13 miles east of Hill City.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 29 May 2009

Community Buildings



Lincoln County Courthouse, Lincoln, Kansas

The courthouse was completed in 1900. Lincoln has one of the greatest numbers of native limestone buildings in the region. Several of these buildings have been restored as museums, an art center, and a theatre.

Directions: From I-70, take exit 221 and travel 15 miles north on Kansas Highway 14.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 25 May 2009

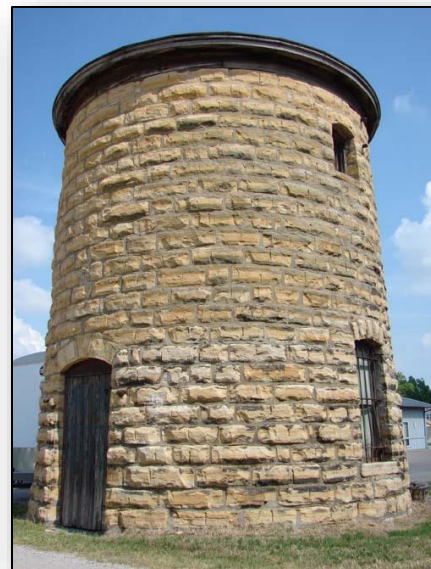
St. Fidelis Church (“Cathedral of the Plains”), Victoria, Kansas

The Volga-Germans who settled the region around Hays built churches of native limestone, and several are still in use. The church in Victoria was constructed from 1908 to 1911. William Jennings Bryant referred to the church by the romantic, if not technically accurate, name of “Cathedral of the Plains” on a visit in 1912. Built in the shape of a cross, the length of the church is 220 feet, and its widths are 110 feet at the transepts and 75 feet at the nave. The twin towers are 141 feet high. The church seats 1,100 people. More information about the church and its history is available at the [St. Fidelis Church website](#).

Directions: From Old US Highway 40, turn north toward Victoria and then left onto Cathedral Avenue across the railroad tracks (at the gravesite memorial to railroad workers killed by Cheyenne Indians in 1867). From I-70, take exit 168 and travel south about 1½ miles on Kansas Highway 255 (Cathedral Avenue). The [City of Hays website](#) has a brochure of area limestone churches and information on other sites.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 30 May 2009

Storing Water (and People)



Limestone Water Tower, Paradise, Kansas

The Paradise water tower was constructed through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1938. The structure was recently renovated and is still in use. Height: 35 feet. Diameter: 17 feet. Capacity: 58,000 gallons.

Directions: From I-70, take exit 184 and travel 18 miles north on US Highway 281, then 3 miles west on Kansas Highway 18.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 24 May 2009

Limestone Water Tower (and Jail), Wilson, Kansas

The Wilson water tower was constructed about 1911. Water was stored in the upper portion of the structure. The town constable used the lower part of the tower to temporarily house prisoners for transfer to the county jail. Height: ~20 feet. Diameter: 18 feet.

Directions: The alley between 25th and 26th Streets and E and F Avenues, 1½ blocks north of Old US Highway 40 (27th Street) in Wilson. From I-70, take exit 206 and travel south on KS Highway 232 to Wilson; turn right on 25th Street and left on Avenue E (water tower is down the alley on the right). The town of Wilson has several other old limestone buildings, including the Midland Railroad Hotel (1899).

Photo by Mark Eberle, 25 May 2009

Crossing Water



Fort Fletcher Stone Arch Bridge, Ellis County, Kansas

Fort Fletcher Bridge was constructed through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during 1935–1936. It was named for the nearby site of the short-lived Fort Fletcher, precursor to Fort Hays. The length of the bridge is 156 feet, with 4 arches 35 feet wide. The recently renovated bridge over Big Creek is still open to traffic. For more information on stone arch bridges and other historical bridges in Kansas (and elsewhere), go to the [Historic Bridges of the United States website](#).

Directions: From Old US Highway 40 in Walker, turn south on Walker Avenue (toward I-70) and travel about 4¾ miles (4½ miles south of I-70 exit 172). It is a gravel road south of I-70 to the bridge.

Photo by Mark Eberle, 30 May 2009

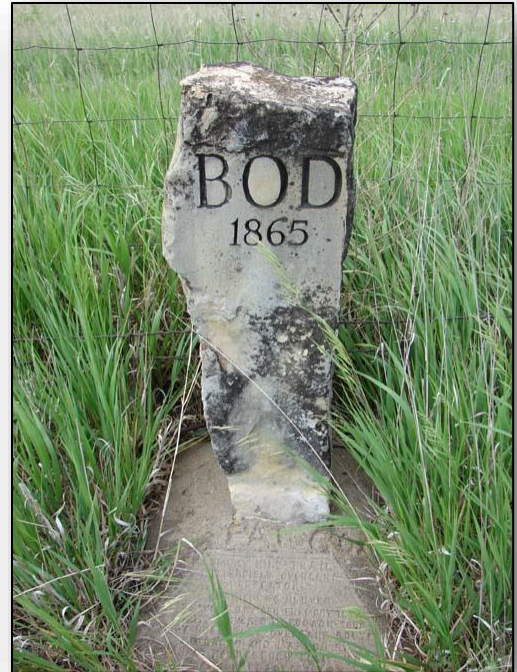
Union-Pacific Railroad Stone Arch Bridge, Logan County, Kansas

This is one of the few stone arch bridges on the railroad paralleled by US Highway 40 across northwestern Kansas. The Union-Pacific Railroad, Eastern Division (Kansas-Pacific) was the first railroad completed across Kansas to Denver during the 1860s, immediately following the Civil War. Construction of the railroad brought the Federal troops, who drove the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and other Indians from the Smoky Hill River basin.

Directions: On the north side of US Highway 40 about 1½ miles east of Page City (west of Oakley).

Photo by Mark Eberle, 29 May 2009

Post Rocks



Limestone Fence Post, Ellis County, Kansas

Fence posts cut from a layer of “post rock” limestone and other local formations were initially used during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and hundreds are still in use, although they are often replaced by steel or wooden posts. For more information, see the [Post Rock Museum \(LaCrosse, Kansas\) website](#).

Photo by Mark Eberle, 24 May 2009

Smoky Hill Trail (BOD) Marker, Russell County, Kansas

Some of the limestone fence posts received new life as markers for the Smoky Hill Trail from the Missouri River in northeastern Kansas to Denver. The Butterfield Overland Despatch (BOD) began operations in 1865, but the railroad replaced the coaches in 1870. In 1963, the Kansas Legislature approved the placement of markers along the route of the old trail, and 138 were engraved and set in special concrete bases at sites from Fort Ellsworth (Ellsworth County) to the Kansas-Colorado border. Maps of the route that can be followed across western Kansas by passenger vehicles are available as pdf files elsewhere on [my website](#).

Photo by Mark Eberle, 24 May 2009

[Mark Eberle Webpage](#)