



HB2384 Testimony
Committee on Federal and State Affairs
February 25, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As the owner of the property in question, our agency opposes HB2384 which would transfer Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site to the Shawnee Tribe.

Shawnee Methodist Mission was founded in 1830 near Choteau's Trading Post, not far from current day Turner in Wyandotte County. Chief Fish of the Missouri Shawnees had requested a missionary through their Indian agent, and Reverend Thomas Johnson was appointed. The first mission served the Shawnee and Delaware tribes, but Johnson proposed building a bigger, more central school that could serve many tribes. The current site, which was then on a trail branch that served both the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon-California Trail, was selected and the school opened in 1839. Indian children of many tribes, including the Kaw, Munsee, Delaware, Ottawa, Chippewa, Otoe, Osage, Cherokee, Peoria, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Wea, Gros Ventre, Omaha, Shawnee, and Wyandot, were sent to the school to learn basic academics, manual arts, and agriculture. Although the Quakers and Baptists also operated missions in the area during this time, the Shawnee Mission was the largest, consisting of more than two thousand acres with 16 buildings and an enrollment of nearly two hundred boys and girls from ages five to 23.

In 1854, Kansas Territory was established. Andrew Reeder, newly appointed territorial governor, had his offices at this mission. Following their adjournment from the first territorial capitol, now a part of Fort Riley and also a State Historic Site administered by KSHS, the first territorial legislature met at this mission. It was during this session that the so-called "bogus laws" were passed in an attempt to perpetuate slavery in Kansas. The manual training portion of the school ceased in 1854. In 1858, Johnson turned the school over to his oldest son, Alexander, who ran the mission until it closed in 1862. During the Civil War, Union troops were barracked at the mission and fought against Price's Confederate army at the nearby battles of the Big Blue and Westport.

Concern for preserving Shawnee Indian Mission, which had been owned by private individuals following the Civil War, developed in the early 1920s. In 1922, W.H. Eisele wrote a letter to William Connelley, then Secretary (director) of the Kansas Historical Society, requesting that the mission "should be looked after and taken care of" and related that he was 80 years old and had been born in the mission in 1842. In 1923, KSHS formed a committee on the preservation of historic sites, and the following year the committee recommended that KSHS pursue legislation to purchase and preserve the fifteen (twelve) acres and the three remaining buildings from private owners. The proposed acquisition also had substantial support from the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, the Daughters of 1812, the Daughters of the American Colonists, and the Shawnee Mission Indian Historical Society. Finally, in 1927 the legislature enacted a law authorizing acquisition of the property, appropriating \$48,230 for its purchase and \$1000 each for fiscal years 1928 and 1929 for restoration and maintenance.

However, there was one hitch: several people who owned portions of the north property refused to sell and appealed the condemnation proceeding which followed. A few years earlier in 1921, the Kansas legislature had approved a measure extending the power of eminent domain “to any tract or parcel of land in the state of Kansas, which possesses unusual historical interest.” The Johnson County District Court, the Kansas Supreme Court, and ultimately in 1929 the United States Supreme Court upheld the validity of the condemnation proceedings under eminent domain. This was the first and only time in Kansas history that a property was acquired under eminent domain for historical preservation purposes. Here is the language in the statute:

K.S.A. 76-2009. Same; history. Said land and the buildings standing thereon constitute the buildings and site of the Old Shawnee Mission, established by the Methodist church in the year 1829. That they were the first buildings of any pretention of substantial construction built in the territory that is now Kansas. That for many years they constituted the farthest permanent outpost of western immigration. That in 1855 they became the residence of Governor Reeder and the first territorial officers; and in that year housed the first legislature of Kansas, which legislature named the first permanent capital of Kansas. That they were the barracks of federal troops during the civil war. That they were the headquarters for early Indian campaigns, and were the center around which waged the border warfare. That this mission was the first point in Kansas on the Old Santa Fe trail, and was the mobilization center on the Oregon trail, later made famous by "the covered wagon." History: L. 1927, ch. 205, § 2; February 10.

It is important to note that the 1927 statute emphasizes the site’s significance to Kansas territorial history and early statehood. William Connelley stated it more succinctly: “No more historic site is to be found in Kansas, or the West for that matter. . .”

In the ensuing 98 years the Kansas Historical Society has preserved these three buildings so important to our state’s history and founding to the highest preservation standards known at the time. The site was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 (immediately after the register was created) and in 1968 as a National Historic Landmark, the highest designation in the country and one of only 26 in Kansas. Since those listings, we have worked closely with the National Park Service to ensure that all work follows the Secretary of Interior’s *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.

Since 2016 the Historical Society has partnered with the City of Fairway to operate the site, and we are currently finalizing a new three-way partnership with the City of Fairway and the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation which will enable sufficient funding to operate the site for the next ten years. All three entities are committed to telling a complete history of the site, including that of all the tribes associated with the mission. Within the past year and a half, we have held two consultation meetings with all of the tribes invited. We will continue to consult with the tribes to better tell their story when we re-interpret the site in the coming years.

And finally, I want to acknowledge the recent support by the legislature for our stewardship of the site by appropriating an additional \$350,000 in our budget last year to replace the wood shingle roofs on the three buildings at the site. You can read more about the extraordinary lengths we took to preserve the historic plaster in the attic of the East Building in the current issue of *Zephyr*, our bimonthly newsletter.

Thank you for your time this morning. I will be happy to answer your questions.

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