

# From Prairie Schooners To Locomotives

Travel along the Oregon and California trails increased in the 1840s with the cry of “Westward Ho.” When the 1848 discovery of gold was made at Sutter’s Mill in California, the desire to reach the gold fields ahead of others intensified quickly—pushing gateways deeper into the frontier and further north along the Missouri River. Twenty years later, the era of emigrant wagon trains along these routes nearly vanished with completion of the transcontinental railroad.

This sudden impact of western expansion resulted in newly revised treaties with the local American Indian tribes—treaties that opened the “Great Plains” to settlement. By the 1850s, land surveyors were busy platting and surveying land for new communities in eastern Kansas.

In 1857, the nearby community of Gardner was established. Jacob Victor, one of the first settlers to see the potential of this unique location, established a claim to build a hotel near a spring east of here on the Santa Fe Trail. Following the Civil War, freight wagons traveling through the junction to and from Santa Fe became less common as railroad lines quickly spread across the Kansas frontier.

Gardner continued to grow through the remainder of the 19th century as routes once used by overland

wagons gave way to stage coaches, railroads, farm equipment, and eventually fuel powered motor vehicles. At the outbreak of World War II, the U.S. Navy broke ground on the former Victor homestead to build a Naval Air Station pilot training center. It later became the Command Center for one of the twelve U.S. Army Nike Missile sites in the Kansas-Missouri area.

William Sublette’s 1827 discovery of this trail junction did more than help pioneer emigrants find a land route to the west, it established a “landmark” that otherwise might have been “just another stop on the trail.” “Where the Trails Divide” is the city of Gardner’s motto. It recognizes this important site and Gardner’s place in the settlement of the American west.



Construction work nears completion on the U.S. Naval Air Station Administration Building in 1942. It was located two miles east of Gardner Junction. Photograph is courtesy of the former Olathe Naval Air Museum and the Johnson County Museum.

