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The native inhabitants of the Strafford area were the Osage, which used this area mainly as a hunting ground. This area was part of Louisiana, which in the 1600's and 1700's was alternately controlled by Spain and France. Although the Spanish explorer DeSoto explored some of Missouri in the 1500's, it is generally believed the first Europeans to explore this area were French Voyagers looking for minerals in 1785. The United States purchased Louisiana from France in 1803, which set the stage for settlement in this area.

In 1812, Missouri Territory was organized and at that time the Kickapoo tribe moved in this area under treaty from the United States Government. The first explorer to record his travels in this area was Henry Schoolcraft in 1818-19. Schoolcraft was not the first person of European decent to come into the area, because he records his encounters with various settlers in the White River watershed subsisting by hunting and trapping.

In 1819, potential settlers begin traveling to the area of what is now Greene County from Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia to survey potential future homes. However, Missouri is still a territory, not a state and not open to settlement in this area.

Upon Missouri statehood in 1821, the United States Government begins a systematic survey of the lands in southwest Missouri, which takes several years, as a step to the sale of land to individuals. In 1822 the Delaware tribe moves into the area under treaty with the United States Government. Also in 1822 the first settler of European decent, Mr. Davis, settles approximately 5 miles southeast of present day Strafford near the confluence of Davis Creek and James River. Mr. Davis is reportedly killed by Indians a short time later.

About 1822, Jeremiah Pierson moves into the area with his Delaware wife and with the permission of the Delaware tribe establishes a water powered grist mill at present day Danforth (Powell) spring on Pierson creek. The site of Pierson's mill is approximately 4 miles southwest of present day Strafford. Pierson operates his mill providing service to the Delaware inhabitants and newly arriving settlers until selling out to Josiah Danforth in 1834. About 1829 John Bearden constructs a distillery on Pierson Creek near Pierson's mill.

In 1829, Andrew Bass arrives in the area from Tennessee with his family and initially settles approximately at the west edge of present day Strafford. Upon learning that this land is still under control of the Delaware tribe and not open to settlement, he moves to a site approximately 6 miles north of Strafford. Later in 1829, the Delaware tribe is removed from this area by treaty with the United States Government.

The removal of the Delaware now opens the area for settlement with an influx of immigrants Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina beginning in 1830-31. The primary route of these immigrants is crossing the Mississippi River near Cape Girardeau and traveling through Caledonia, Massey Iron Works (St. James) and Waynesville using the "Virginia Warriors Trail" which soon becomes the St. Louis – Springfield Road.

In 1833 Greene County is formed encompassing most of southwest Missouri. The Federal land sales office opens in Springfield in 1835 and Federal land surveys are complete by 1837. This now allows those who have settled or those immigrating to apply for land patents to purchase land, with the first land sales beginning in 1839-40. With the influx of immigrants, in the late 1830's a post office is established at Walnut Forest, believed to be about 2 miles northeast of present day Strafford. It is reported that Walnut Forest is the second post office established in Greene County, following Springfield. However, the post office ceases to exist following the establishment of Strafford almost 40 years later.

The St. Louis – Springfield road passed approximately 1 ½ miles south of present day Strafford, generally following present day Farm Roads 104 and 112. This road is significant, not only for being major route of immigration and commerce with St. Louis, but it also was one of the overland routes of forced Indian migration known as the Trail of Tears. During the period from 1837 to 1839, the United States Government began the forced relocation of Native Americans from the southeastern part of the United States to Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma). Many groups, primarily Cherokee, traveled the overland route just south of present day Strafford. Some of the journals maintained by the “conductors” record stops at the Danforth farm about 4 miles southwest of present day Strafford.

The area around present day Strafford begins to populate in the 1840's and 1850's leading to the establishment of area schools. These early schools provided primary education for a few months of the year and were supported to some extent by the collection and distribution of county taxes. Township school districts were formed in the 1850's. The earliest of these township schools in the area was held at Yancy Greene Warren's place about 1 mile southeast of present day Strafford. The Locust Prairie school about 4 miles north of Strafford traces its roots to a township district established in 1853.

With the expansion of new technology in the telegraph, a line was constructed from St. Louis through Springfield to Ft. Smith, AR for both civilian and military uses. Along the route of the telegraph line constructed about 1859 an improved road was also constructed. This road became known as the “Military Road”, “Wire Road” or later the “Old Wire Road”. This new road became the main overland route to Springfield from Rolla. By this time, the construction of the railroad was almost complete from St. Louis to Rolla, and the new road provided an improved route for military and commercial transportation than the old St. Louis – Springfield Road. The Old Wire Road followed present day State Hwy. DD passing just north of present day Strafford and continuing southwest along present day I-44 / Route 66 and connecting with the St. Louis – Springfield road about present day Farm Road 112 east of Farm Road 199.

With the developing Civil War, both Union and Confederate troops moved though the present day Strafford area on numerous occasions using both the Old Wire Road and the St. Louis – Springfield Road (which became known as the Springfield – Marshfield Road). The primary movements were Union troops traveling from Rolla to Springfield prior to the Battle of Wilson Creek and the Union retreat following the battle in 1861. Also the retaking of Springfield by Union forces in 1862 and the retreat of Confederate forces following the Battle of Springfield in 1863.

As the Civil War began, residents of present day Strafford volunteered for both Union and Confederate causes. However, Union force organization was more prevalent in the area in 1862, with many volunteers comprising Company E of the 72nd Enrolled Missouri Militia. The only armed conflict in the area was a skirmish along the Old Wire Road at present day Strafford, February 2, 1862, with two Confederate killed and a few wounded on both sides. This skirmish occurred as Union forces were on their way to retake Springfield from the Confederates, which they had held since the Battle of Wilson Creek.

With the Civil War over, construction resumed on the railroad from St. Louis to Springfield, which had progressed to Rolla before the outbreak of hostilities. Following financing issues and reorganization, the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad began construction activities in 1870 in the present day Strafford area. The railroad was completed to Strafford and the town of Strafford was platted by the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad April 1871 . It is reported the town was named for Strafford, Connecticut, the home of a management employee of the railroad.

The town of Strafford was platted by the railroad to serve as a shipping and receiving point and as maintenance headquarters for the section of line. The railroad had ambitious plans for the new town of Strafford, platting 16 blocks containing 201 lots ranging from 2000 to 7500 square feet each. However, in the mid 1870's about half of the blocks are vacated to be sold as larger tracts.

In Strafford's first decade, the town prospers and grows with the immediate establishment of a post office, public hall in 1873, primary school about 1873, Baptist Church in 1876, Masonic Lodge in 1877, Methodist Church in 1880 and several business and professions. The railroad constructed a depot, section sheds, water tower, stockyards and pens. However, growth is hindered by a major fire in 1877, which destroys some businesses.

The 1880's bring further growth to the town with the major activity centered on railroad traffic and the growing agricultural community in the area. In the 1890's a planning mill is constructed in town. However, again a major fire in 1899 sets the business community back.

The early 1900's usher in a commercial growth in Strafford. Following a fire in 1910 which destroys the public hall, the Bank of Strafford is established in 1911 with a new building which also provides space for a lodge hall on the second floor. The Strafford Times newspaper is established in 1913. There is an increase in commercial business during this period, including hotels, farm equipment dealerships and establishment of a telephone system in town. The most significant event for Strafford in the early 1900's was the formation of Strafford Consolidated School District Number 2. In 1913 residents petitioned the County Superintendent of Schools for an election to create a consolidated high school district. Voters overwhelmingly approved the consolidation of the primary districts of Strafford, Lamb, Potter, Flint Hill and Oak Hill. A new high school building was completed in 1914. The new district continues to operate Lamb, Potter, Flint Hill and Oak Hill as grade 1-8 schools. Danforth Colored School, which was part of the Oak Hill district, continues operation under Strafford C-2.

Citizens of Strafford participated greatly in World War I with many area men serving in the United States Army during the conflict. There was also great participation in war bond campaigns led by prominent businessmen of the area.

The 1920's bring major changes to Strafford. With the popularity of the automobile and the grading of Missouri Route 14, which travels Pine Street in Strafford, the town prepares for a new age. In 1926 the United States Government designates Route 66 from Chicago, IL to Santa Monica, CA. This new route goes through Strafford and most paving and improvements are completed by 1930. New businesses spring up including a hotel, cafes, service stations, garages and an automobile dealership keeping pace with the new technology. It is at this time that some businesses do an "about face" from Pine Street to Main Street (the new Route 66) or establish "two front doors". Farm equipment dealerships also expand to sell tractors and related implements. During this period the new technology of electricity is gaining popularity in small towns. Strafford has a few privately owned light plants operating until Empire District Electric establishes electric utility service in the late 1920's. Canning operations are established in Strafford in the 1920's to process and can tomatoes, which are popular at that time.

The 1930's is a period of both expansion and decline. Traffic along Route 66 provides business opportunities even during the Great Depression. The local economy, previously based on local agriculture, is now impacted by travelers and tourists. Several tourist courts or "camps" are opened along Route 66 east and west of Strafford. However, the automobile has its impact on the railroad with scheduled passenger train service at Strafford ending in 1930, the town becomes a "flag stop" for passenger service. Freight business is still good for the railroad, as trucks have not yet impacted the freight business. In 1934 Strafford C-2 School District constructs a major addition to the high school including a gymnasium. Prior to this construction, a building was rented from a local businessman for use as a gymnasium in the 1920's. With the addition to the school building, the outlying primary schools (Lamb, Flint Hill, Potter and Oak Hill) are closed and local businessmen purchase school buses and contract with the school district to transport students to Strafford.

Strafford C-2 School District closed Danforth Colored School in 1940, sending the remaining students to Springfield. For the first half of the 1940's, World War II overshadowed everything, with many local men providing military service to their country. Following the war, prosperity and expansion returned. In 1949 voters approved a reorganization plan in which Strafford C-2 School District was combined with primary districts of Locust Prairie, Ingram, Plummer, North Star and Holman. The new district known as Strafford Reorganized School District Number 6 (Strafford R-VI) expands by moving in and converting a surplus building from O'Reilly Army Hospital and the Ingram school building. By 1952 all students in the district are attending class in Strafford.

Growth and change continue in the 1950's. The Missouri Highway Department constructs a by-pass for Route 66 around the north side of Strafford about 1952. This diverts traffic from downtown and begins the decline of highway related business in the downtown area. Strafford R-VI constructs a new elementary building, in 1956, including for the first time a cafeteria providing each student a hot lunch daily. Strafford Rural Volunteer Fire Department is formed in 1957 following two significant dwelling fires and a major commercial fire in town. The department is supported by membership fees and donations and purchases a new fire truck. Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. acquires the local telephone exchange and begins to provide dial telephone service in 1958. Strafford begins a transition to a bedroom community for Springfield with the platting of Redwood Heights Subdivision in the late 1950's.

Strafford is incorporated as a village in 1961 and now has a town government. In 1964 Strafford becomes a Fourth Class city. Construction activities abound in the 1960's. With the passage of the Federal Interstate Highway Act, construction of Interstate 44 begins with construction of a divided four lane highway and overpass on the north side of Strafford. Weigh stations are also constructed just east of town. The Eastgate motel, restaurant and service station is built northeast of the new interchange in the early 1960's. Two additional service stations are built south of interchange to serve the increasing traffic on the new interstate highway. Strafford R-VI School District builds an industrial arts building, two elementary additions, gymnasium and bus garage in the period from 1959 to 1967. Construction of a city water system begins in 1968 with a bond issue approval by voters.

With the completion of I-44, increased truck traffic leads to the construction of a major truck stop in Strafford by Union Oil Company (now known as T/A) in 1970. Strafford celebrates its centennial in 1971. On December 11, 1972, fire destroys the Strafford High School building during a major ice storm. The building destroyed was the original high school building constructed in 1914 and expanded in 1934. Classes continue to meet in the converted bus barn and every available space in town until a new high school is completed in 1974. As the town continues to grow, planning and zoning regulations are initially adopted in 1974. Also in response to growth, Strafford R-VII School District constructs an addition to the elementary school in 1975. Improved transportation to Springfield and the continued transition of Strafford as a "bedroom" community results in a decline in retail and agricultural related business.

The Strafford Fire Protection District is formed in the 1980's, succeeding the rural volunteer fire department, providing a taxing authority to purchase equipment and provide improved fire protection for the growing community. In the 1980's there is commercial development on the north side of Strafford due to the proximity and exposure to I-44. Growth is stalled by the absence of a city sewer system in the 1980's. However, the construction of the sewer system in 1989 leads to rapid growth in the 1990's with additional commercial retail business growth related to interstate traffic, population growth and the expanding trucking related business. Residential growth expands with the platting of several new subdivisions. Strafford R-VI School District expands elementary, middle school, high school and gymnasium facilities in the 1990s to accommodate rapid growth in enrollment.

The new millennium ushers in a growth period of residential housing and retail trade. The Strafford R-VI School District constructs early childhood facilities in 2000 and a middle school expansion and fine arts facility in 2006 to accommodate this growth.

The history of Strafford is based on its location, not in proximity to natural resources, but to transportation routes. Early immigrant routes, the Trail of Tears, commercial overland trade with St. Louis and civil war era military traffic impacted the area before the founding of the town. The town of Strafford owes its founding and initial growth to the economic engine of the late 1800's, the railroad. However, its long term survival and status today is the product of the automobile. Route 66 and its successor Interstate 44 has shaped the town to its present form.

Author's Note: The intent of this document is to provide a brief and condensed history of the Strafford area in a general chronological order. There are numerous individuals and families which played significant roles in the history of the area. It is not the intent to overlook their contributions, but in the interest of brevity, not detail them at this time. There is a tremendous amount of detailed information from numerous sources that exist which hopefully at some time in the future may be compiled in to a detailed chronological history of the area.

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