

Chapter 2:

Early History to 1902

PREHISTORY

Little site-specific information for the Platt District exists prior to the 1800s. Evidence of human habitation of the area around the district (i.e., Murray County) dates to Early Archaic times, as early as 7,000 years ago, and to Late Archaic times, approximately 4,000 years ago. About 1,000 years ago, the area was inhabited by groups assigned to the late Woodland times. Unlike the Early and Late Archaic occupants, these Woodland inhabitants were early agriculturalists who brought pottery, bone tools, and arrow points to the area.¹ Archeological sites at the Lake of the Arbuckles area, south of the district, have confirmed habitation of the CNRA dating to the Woodland period.² An early archeological survey done in 1942 by H.R. Antle, at a site approximately 100 feet south of Antelope Springs was the earliest true archeological study in the Platt district and also confirmed prehistoric occupation of the area. This site was reinvestigated in 1968 and 1982, and it was concluded that the occupation relates to either Woodland or Plains Village times.³ This site may also be an indication of the earliest human use of the springs.

NATIVE TRIBES DURING EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT, 1500-1700

By the mid 1500s, when the early Spanish explorers De Soto (who entered the Gulf Region to the east of the Platt District) and Coronado (who explored the western plains to the west) arrived, the area was associated with the central and southern Caddoan-speaking Plains tribes, including Caddoes and Wichitas, who settled in agricultural villages. The Osage, Apaches, and Comanches also hunted and followed migratory herds across the area.⁴ Early historical accounts also place Kickapoo tribes in the area, and according to the early 20th-century author A.A. Abbott, the Kickapoos were

the first to use the Platt district's springs, forty-one years before Coronado.⁵ However, this may be local folklore, since prior to European contact, the Kickapoo lived in Illinois, Wisconsin, northwest Ohio and southern Michigan.⁶

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE AND INDIAN REMOVAL, 1700-1870

By the 1700s, Oklahoma was claimed by France as part of Louisiana, which was then ceded to Spain in 1760. During this time few lasting European settlements arose in the area, though Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes began hunting and trading west of the Mississippi as early as 1719.⁷ After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States, under President Thomas Jefferson, determined a policy of removing all eastern Indian tribes to Louisiana. This policy culminated in the Indian Removal Act of 1830 under President Andrew Jackson. Southern Oklahoma was awarded to the Choctaw under a patent issued by the United States. In 1832, the Chickasaw ceded their homelands east of the Mississippi and in 1837 settled on lands occupied by the Choctaw.

Historical descriptions of southern Oklahoma (then known as Indian Territory) in the years before the Civil War focus on political and social conditions, and early descriptions of the physical character of the area or the nature of settlements are limited. The tribes farmed, raising corn, cotton, and livestock. Homes, schools, small businesses, and grist and lumber mills were also constructed.⁸ Historians Opal Hartsell Brown and Richard Garrity describe the nature of the settlements:

All tribes held their land in common, each member occupying and utilizing that not claimed by another. The Choctaws built log homes with clapboard roofs, dirt floors, stick and clay or stone chimneys. Later, they built double log houses with "puncheon floors," corn cribs, smoke houses, and slave cabins.⁹

There is one early description of the springs dating to about 1848. A "cowman," H. H. Allen, settled on a ranch near Sulphur in 1882, but recalled visiting the springs in the 1840s:



Figure 2-1. The Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations in southern Oklahoma, 1889. Note locations of railroads and Tishomingo, the Chickasaw tribal capital. (This figure is based on information from the *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* by John Wesley Morris.)

That was about ten years after the Indians had emigrated here from Mississippi. Where your pavilion springs now are was a perfect loblolly of mud and water. This was a favorite place for great herds of buffalo that roamed over the rocky hills and valleys at that time. They would coat their furry hides with a plaster of mud in order to free themselves from insect pests. After completely plastering themselves with mud, the buffalo would stand around the wallows and sup up the water, so I presume this is how the springs came to be called "Buffalo Suck." During my first visit to the springs I shot buffalo on the hills south of the pavilion. Deer antelope and wild turkey were to be seen in great herds and flocks.¹⁰

In 1851 Fort Arbuckle, located about fifteen miles to the west of the current Platt District, was constructed by the U.S. government on Wild Horse Creek, near the site of a Kickapoo village. The fort protected the newly settled tribes from marauding Plains tribes and, until 1870, was the headquarters for government surveying parties. The fort joined Fort Washita, located about ten miles upstream from the junction of the Red and Washita Rivers. A road and stage route between the two forts was established, and this north-south route passed only a few miles west of the Platt District.¹¹ Although Indian

Territory is often described as having a "network of trails," few of these were mapped.¹²

The Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations separated in 1854, and the Chickasaw Nation was established in south-central Oklahoma, with Tishomingo as the tribal capital (Figure 2-1). The future Platt District was located more or less in the middle of the Chickasaw Nation.

When the Civil War broke out, the Chickasaw sided with the Confederacy, and the war years were characterized by shortages of food and shelter. Following the war, cattle became a major industry in the Chickasaw Nation, with livestock grazing on the prairies and wooded ravines of the western part of their territory. Texas ranchers also drove their cattle north to the railroad in Kansas.¹³ To the east, cotton farming was more common.

SULPHUR SPRINGS, 1870-1902

Although the history of its early establishment is somewhat sketchy, Sulphur Springs, on the site of the current Platt District, was in existence by 1870. The earliest reference to the town is in an account by George Conover, who described a cholera outbreak at a U.S.

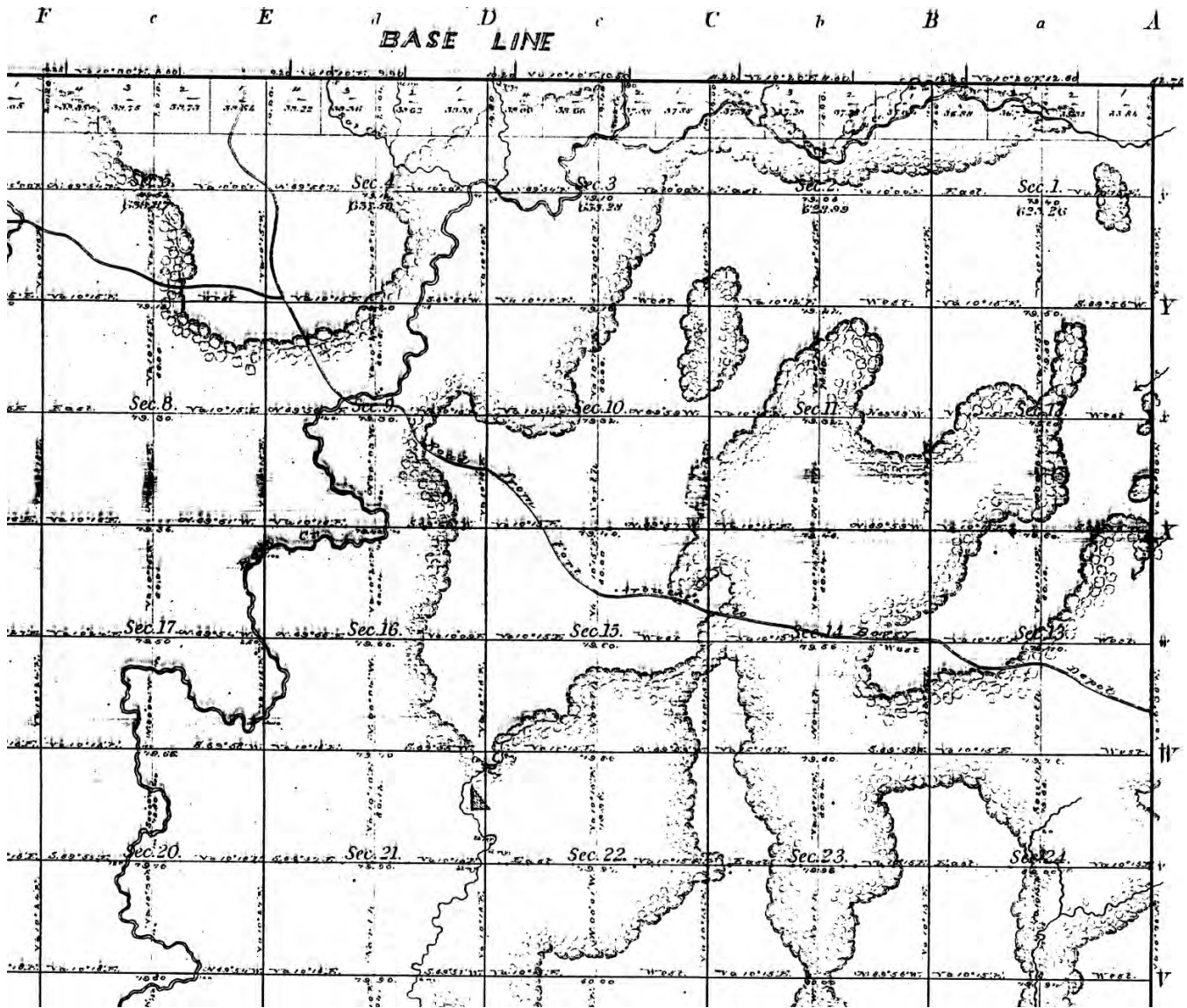


Figure 2-2. 1870 Survey Map of Township No. 1 South, Range No. 3 East of the Indian Meridian. The Platt District is located in the northern portions of Sections 1 and 2. Map courtesy of the Archives Division, Oklahoma State Historical Society .

Army encampment located between Sulphur Springs and Davis.¹⁴ The area, however, was still largely unsettled, since Conover noted that there was not one house between the town of Stonewall and Fort Arbuckle.

Following on the heels of Conover's description is perhaps the earliest map of the area, the 1871 Land Survey map (Figure 2-2). The Platt District is located in what was then Township Number 1 South, Range Number 3, East of the Indian Meridian. The township map shows no town where the Platt District now lies, only a stream labeled "Rock Creek" meandering on an east-west line through the area. The fact that Sulphur (now Travertine) Creek is not labeled may also be indicative of a general

lack of detailed knowledge about the area. The stream is located within a wooded zone, variably described in the survey notes as "first-rate" or "second rate" timber. Areas appearing on the map as white space generally correspond to descriptions of "first rate" or "second rate" prairie. Slopes of the terrain are also indicated in the surveyor's notes. Within the entire township, only three tiny areas in the southern half of the township are shown as agricultural fields. South of Rock Creek, a single road running northwest-southeast is labeled "Road from Fort Arbuckle to Boggy Depot." Boggy Depot was a well-known trading center just over the border in the Choctaw Nation to the east.



Figure 2-3. The first structure located on the site of the future Platt National Park was the ranch house built on the Noah Lael place, later purchased by Perry Froman. Sturm's Magazine Collection, courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, negative 5198.



Figure 2-4. Big Tom, prior to construction of the pavilion at the seven springs, circa 1893. Note town landscape with buildings, fences and trees.

However, other transportation routes developed rapidly and opened the area to settlement. In 1871-72, a freight and mail line ran from Boggy Depot to Fort Sill, passing near Sulphur.¹⁵ In 1872, the Missouri Kansas and Texas Railway was constructed on a southern line through the Choctaw Nation, passing just fifty miles east of Sulphur Creek (Figure 2-1).¹⁶

By the mid- to late 1870s, the area around Sulphur Springs was open range, collectively owned by the tribe. While the Chickasaw allowed individuals to claim land, the range was largely unfenced, and creeks were used to water livestock. During the summer, Indian families would camp along the creeks.¹⁷ White settlement increased throughout the 1870s. Although white settlers required a permit to enter the area and run a business or

lease land from the Chickasaw government, some entered the Chickasaw Nation illegally, while others married Chickasaw women to lay claim to lands. Some mixed blood families established ranches, some of which were quite large.

The earliest ranch at Sulphur Springs was established by Noah Lael, a former mail carrier from Gainsville, Texas. Lael married the daughter of the Chickasaw Governor Cyrus Harris, according him the ability to claim land for use. The center of the "Diamond Z Ranch" was a four-room "pole house" erected just south of Pavilion Springs in 1879.¹⁸ In 1882, the ranch was sold to Perry Froman, a white settler who had married a Chickasaw widow. The ranch, described in the bill of sale as "a certain place lying on Rock Creek, Tishomingo County; known as the Noah Lael 'Sulphur Springs Place' and all the improvements belonging to said place" was said to be four miles square and was sold for \$350. Froman had the claim on the land until 1903, when the government took possession. The ranch house (Figure 2-3) was said to be the first structure erected on the site of the future park, and was later removed by the government.

Sometime around 1885, the first store opened near the former "Buffalo Suck" (see quote by Allen, above) which eventually became known as "Seven Springs" and then "Pavilion Springs." Accounts vary as to whether this was Brookshore or Webster store.¹⁹ The settlement itself became known as Sulphur Springs, and by 1889, it probably consisted of some small buildings clustered around springs encased in hollow logs.²⁰ In 1887, the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad was constructed south from Kansas through the Chickasaw Nation into Texas, passing just nine miles west of the burgeoning settlement. By this time, the springs were already well-known for their medicinal qualities, and both whites and natives flocked to the area as visitors or potential residents

Throughout the early 1890s, the town expanded. Buildings and businesses (including homes, stores, hotels, dining and drinking establishments, bathhouses, a livery, a blacksmith shop, and a bank) were primarily constructed by white settlers, but were all built on lands leased from the Chickasaw. The early town was a primitive landscape with dirt streets and wood and log buildings. Visitors gathered around the seven springs, which were encased in wide diameter tiles, encircled by a low stone wall (Figure 2-4). In about 1894, Graves Leeper established a lumber yard and built a stone house a little

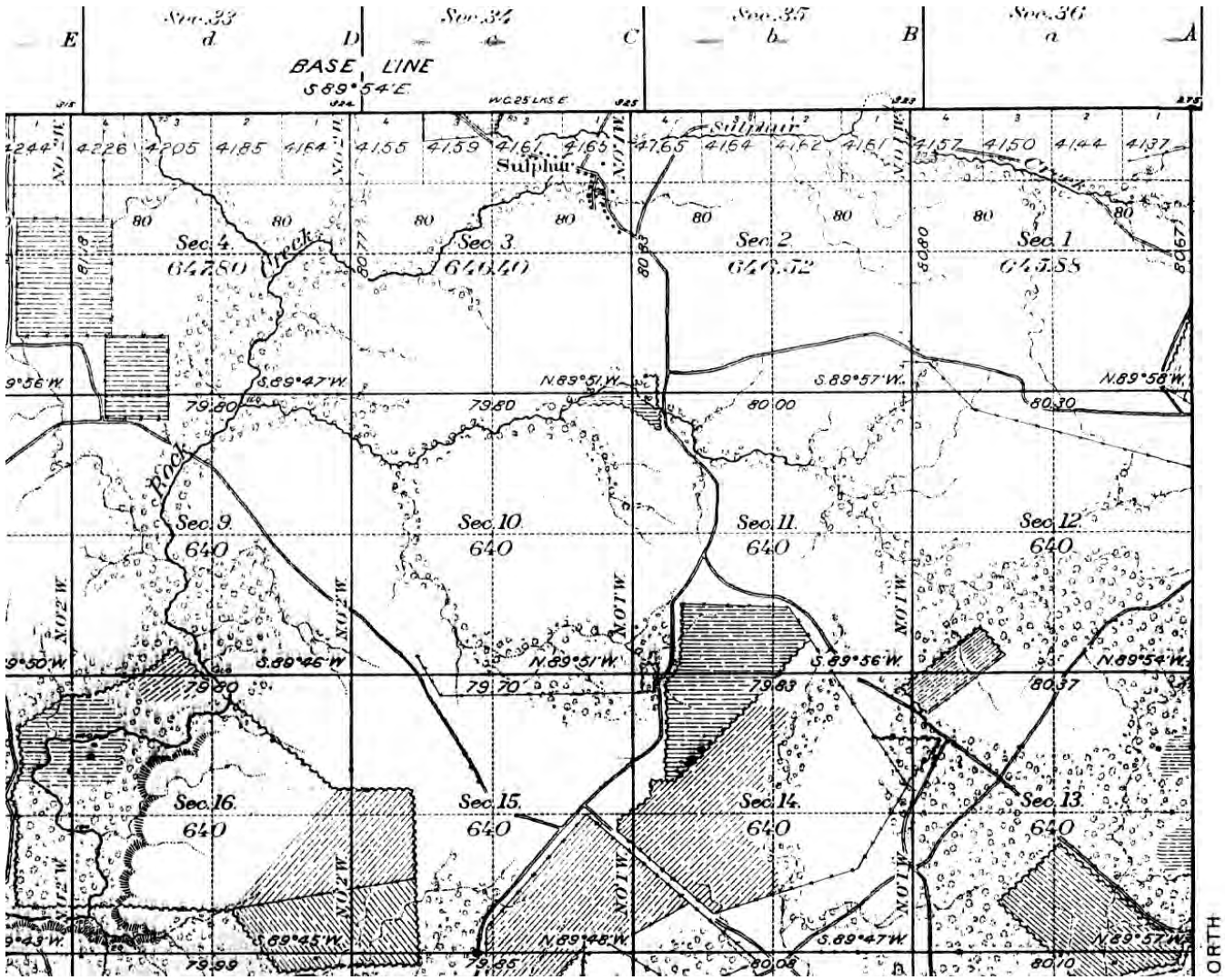


Figure 2-5. 1899 Survey Map of Township No. 1 South, Range No. 3 East of the Indian Meridian. The Platt District is located in the northern portions of Sections 1 and 2. Map courtesy of the Archives Division, Oklahoma State Historical Society.

south of the community. The stone house would later become the park headquarters. In 1895, a post office was established.

Also in 1895, R.A. Sneed organized a group of investors as the Sulphur Springs Improvement Company to incorporate the town. The group bought a tract of land—or at least its occupancy rights—that included the town and the seven springs, from Perry Froman. They surveyed the area and divided into lots²¹ and after the passage of the Curtis Act of 1898, the town was incorporated. The new town, named Sulphur Springs, was conceived as a health resort of sorts; by 1895, the springs were already being hailed by local newspapers as “the great health mecca and summer resort.”²²

Graphic documentation of the town improves for the years around 1900. In 1899, the town was included in a second government land survey. The 1899 Land Survey Map (Figure 2-5) shows “Sulphur” located in section 3 of Township Number 1 South, Range Number 3 East of the Indian Meridian. On this map, a smattering of buildings are shown along an abbreviated network of streets just south of the confluence of Sulphur and Rock Creeks. In contrast to the 1871 Land Survey Map (Figure 2-2), the banks of the creeks are shown as much less wooded, presumably due to the removal of trees for building construction in the intervening 28 years. Further south in the township, many more agricultural fields are also seen in the landscape, indicating increasing numbers of farms as well as a dissolution of shared, open Chickasaw range land in favor of allotted land ownerships.

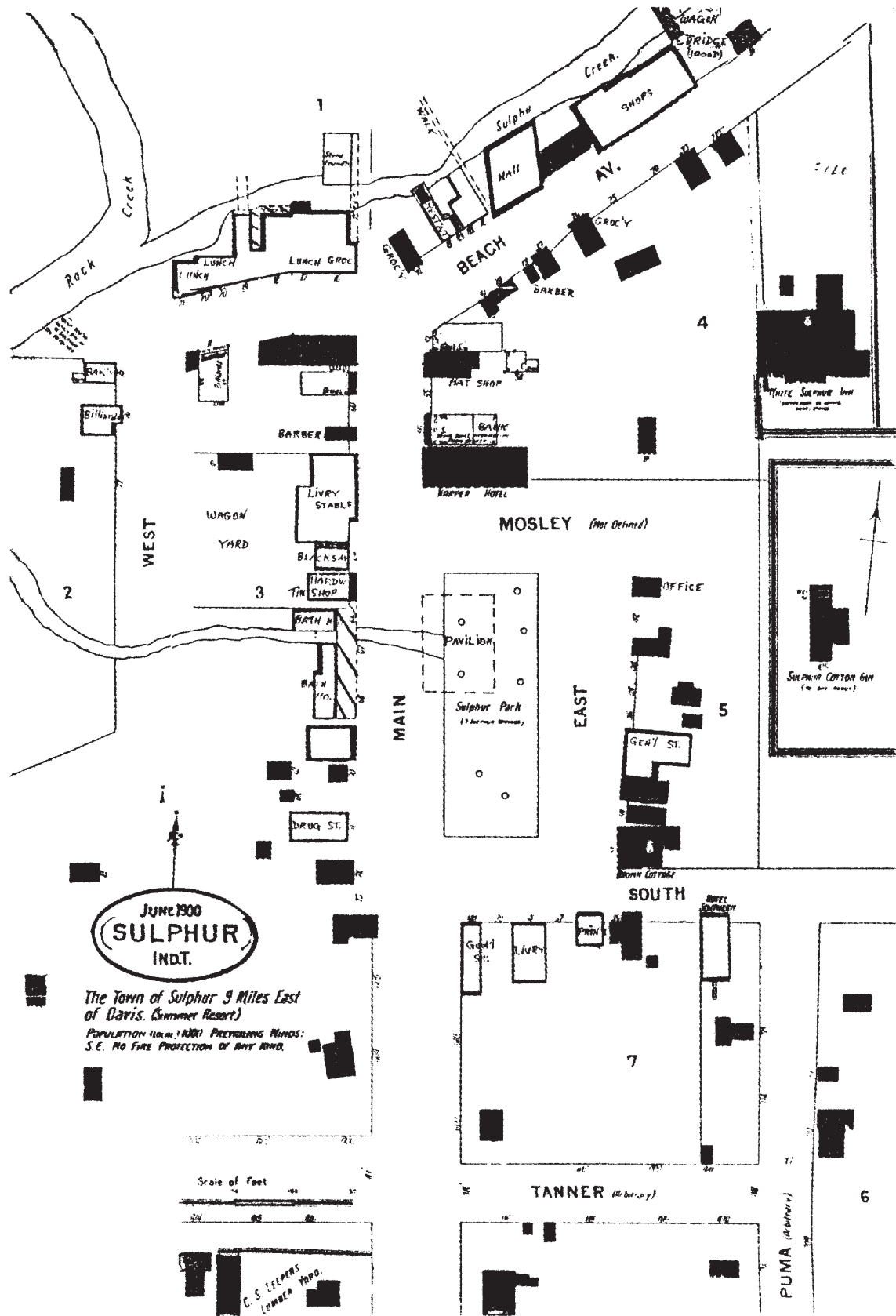


Figure 2-6. June 1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, showing locations of buildings, springs, and creeks in Sulphur Springs.



Figure 2-7. View of Sulphur Springs, looking north down Main Street toward the Harper Hotel (in the center distance), circa 1900. The first pavilion over the springs is the white, two-story framed building on the right. Joseph Swords Collection, courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, negative 2153.39.



Figure 2-8. Despite the handwritten text, this photograph is East Street, east of the pavilion, circa 1900. Compare this image with the plan view of the area in the Sanborn map (Figure 2-6). The building on the far right is the Brown Cottage. Joseph Swords Collection, courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, negative 2153.32.



Figure 2-9. “Shanty Row,” circa 1901. Town buildings were constructed of wood, logs, or stone and were located in close proximity to one another. Joseph Swords Collection, courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, negative 2153.25.

The growth of Sulphur Springs following its incorporation in 1896 is also evidenced in the production of a Sanborn Fire Insurance map for the town in 1900 (Figure 2-6). Sanborn maps were originally produced for insurance underwriters to determine risks and establish premiums, and the map for Sulphur Springs evidences the increasing investment in the town. The map shows the town organized around the Seven Springs, now located in a defined, rectangular area labeled “Sulphur Park.”

On the Sanborn map, a large pavilion is shown situated in the middle of the park. This building was built in 1895 or 1896 by C.J. Webster, the town’s first banker, along with some other promoters.²³ A somewhat crude and massive, timber-framed structure, the pavilion had two stories (Figure 2-7). The springs were located on the ground floor, and a dance hall was located above. Over time, the pavilion acquired advertisements on its exterior.

The Sanborn map also shows a series of offices, a meat shop, and the “Brown Cottage” across the street from the pavilion on East Street. On the west side were a number of hotels, bath houses, and boarding houses, along with the town livery. To the north, lining both sides of Beach



Figure 2-10. Three residential houses just outside of Sulphur Springs’ central “business district.” Note the larger lots and frame houses, as well as the large deciduous trees, probably oaks, behind the structures. Joseph Swords Collection, courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, negative 2153.22.

Avenue along Sulphur Creek were a number of food and drinking establishments; there was even a “canvas bowling alley.” Directly north of the pavilion, in close proximity to the springs, was a large hotel. Buildings in the town ranged from wooden lean-tos to more substantial stone buildings, all constructed side-by-side (Figures 2-8 and 2-9). In contrast, the area around the rest of the town, away from the center, was less densely settled, with homes and outbuildings located in larger lots (Figure 2-10).

By 1900, the population of the town was 1,198.²⁴ It had two newspapers and a telephone exchange, and in 1900 the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway constructed another rail line, this one just seven miles east of Sulphur. A short spur was laid into Sulphur from the town of Scullin in 1903.

The booming town soon began to threaten the resource around which it had been built, both in terms of pollution, due to a lack of sanitary facilities in the town, and due to the springs’ potential for commercialization for the profit of a few. Although Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock had visited the area in 1897 and recommended that the springs be made a federal reservation, over the years no action was taken

on his suggestion.²⁵ It was not until 1901, as the town began to be surveyed and platted, that the notion of reserving the springs from development arose in a serious manner.²⁶ Senator Orville Platt took up the idea and under the auspices of the Dawes Commission, Indian inspectors were sent to present the idea to the Choctaw and Chickasaw governments. Eventually, the two tribes agreed to cede an area up to 640 acres, to be reserved from platting and allotment for the town, to the U.S. government at a price of \$20 per acre. This agreement, creating Sulphur Springs Reservation, was signed by the native tribes in March 1902, and ratified by the U.S. Congress in July.

Notes to Chapter 2

¹ Anonymous, "Platt-Ar buckle Archeological Research Management Plan" (draft report in CNRA files, n.d, circa 1968).

² Katherine Sallee, "An Expanded Narrative of the Platt District" (xerox copy in files of the Level 1 Cultural Landscape Inventory), 1.

³ Wyckoff, Don G. "Oklahoma Archaeological Site Survey Form, Site MR-89, Murray County, 18 October 1982" (report in CNRA files).

⁴ Rennard Strickland, *The Indians in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 3.

⁵ Opal Hartsell Brown, *City of Many Facets* (Oklahoma City: Western Heritage Books, 1981), 3.

⁶ Muriel Wright, *A guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951) 167.

⁷ Wright, *A guide to the Indian Tribes*, 10.

⁸ Sultzman, Lee. "Chickasaw History," (text document, revised 10/11/99, part of "First Nations Histories," on website *First Nations Issues of Consequence*), <http://www.dickshovel.com/chick.html> (accessed August 8, 2003) and www.tolatsga.org/chick.html (accessed February 19, 2004).

⁹ Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 5.

¹⁰ Perry Brown, "A History of Platt National Park" (unpublished manuscript in Chickasaw National Recreation Area Archives, n.d., circa 1956), 10.

¹¹ Brown, "A History of Platt National Park," 9; Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 6.

¹² Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 4.

¹³ Sallee, Kay, "An Expanded Narrative of the Platt District," 4.

¹⁴ Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James W. Steely, "National Historic Landmark Nomination" (draft nomination form, completed September 2002), 35; Sallee, "An Expanded Narrative of the Platt District," 4.

¹⁷ Palmer Boeger, *Oklahoma Oasis: from Platt National Park to Chickasaw National Recreation Area*, (Muskogee, Okla.: Western Heritage Books, 1987), 33.

¹⁸ Brown, "A History of Platt National Park," 10-11; Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 7-8.

¹⁹ Boeger, *Oklahoma Oasis*, 38.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jacilee Wray and Alexa Roberts, "Chickasaw National Recreation Area: Ethnohistory of Associated Park Use and Values," (unpaginated draft report, February 2000), chapter entitled "'Free to All Comers in Perpetuity: ' Sulphur Springs Reservation,'" n.p.; Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 9; Boeger, *Oklahoma Oasis*, 42. Brown and Boeger's accounts differ slightly as to the date and amount of land purchased. Wray and Roberts present another account, probably more accurate.

²² Boeger, *Oklahoma Oasis*, 42

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Brown, *City of Many Facets*, 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Wray and Roberts, "Ethnohistory of Associated Park Use," chapter entitled "'Free to All Comers in Perpetuity: ' Sulphur Springs Reservation,'" n.p. Wray and Roberts present the most detailed account of the negotiations that resulted in the reservation of the lands, one which relies on original correspondence to reveal the motivations of the various individuals involved. The account is interesting in that the reservation is seen as not simply a benevolent gesture of the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations, but also as a bit of enlightened conservation on the behalf of the Department of Interior.

