

Charles E. Kearney

Outfitter

1820-1898

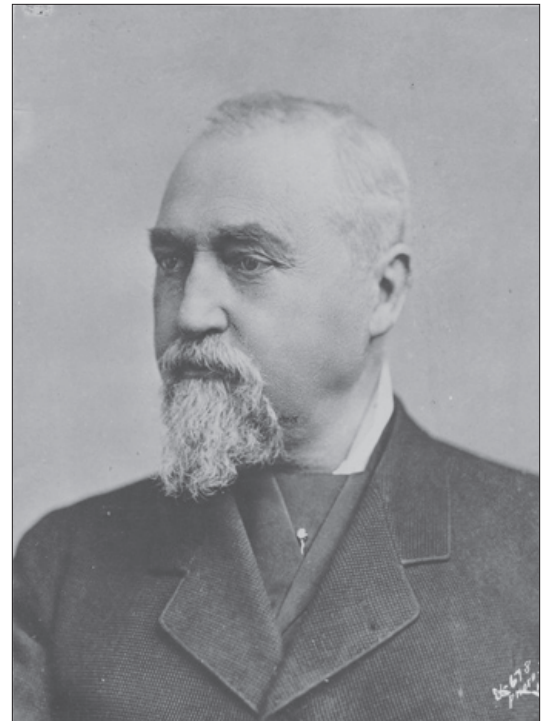
by Daniel Coleman

Charles Kearney, who reportedly as a youth left Ireland on the day Queen Victoria was crowned, could not have chosen a more appropriate time to set sail for the New World, where many storybook elements of nineteenth-century America's wildness and romance colored his life. He was a former Texas Ranger who drove the last spike in the railroad line connecting Kansas City to the East, but Kearney was propelled foremost by his business sense, which was so acute that it helped establish his home town as a center of regional commerce.

Charles Esmond Kearney was born March 8, 1820, in County Galway, Ireland. His parents, military officer Matthew Kearney and Lady Anna Esmond, died before Charles reached age 17. He immigrated to the United States to join his brother William in Corpus Christi, Texas, and earned a living clerking for various merchants in Mobile, Alabama, and New Orleans during the early 1840s.

In 1846, as war between the U.S. and Mexico ignited in Texas, Kearney enlisted in Samuel H. Walker's famous Texas Ranger regiment. Under the command of General Zachary Taylor, Kearney saw action at Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Monterrey, and Saltillo. After he was discharged, Kearney made his way up the Mississippi River to St. Louis and then traveled to Independence, Missouri. His entrepreneurial personality and knowledge of the Southwest translated to quick success in the booming Santa Fe Trail trade in which freighters shipped manufactured goods overland via wagon train to be exchanged in Santa Fe for Mexican commodities such as wool and silver.

After only three such trips, Kearney's established a headquarters in Westport, which was replacing Independence as the key point of departure for those doing business in the West. He boarded at the Harris House hotel and soon was courting Josephine, one of proprietor John Harris's seven daughters, whom he married in 1852. By 1854 he had formed a partnership with William R. Bernard,



the husband of Josephine's sister, Susan. The firm of Kearney & Bernard operated out of an office next door to the Harris House and lifted trail trade to new heights, sending over 800 wagons to Santa Fe in 1854 and 1,217 in 1855. Kearney's profits from these ventures allowed him to quit the trade in 1856 and travel extensively in Europe. Among his destinations was Ireland, where he was reunited with his sister and other family members.

Returning to Westport, Kearney invested in several new business ventures. He was a partner in the West Kansas Land Company, which purchased acreage in the West Bottoms to be resold later when the land became Kansas City's primary industrial district. In addition to staples, his riverfront wholesale grocery business, which was said to be the largest such outfit west of St. Louis, offered "fancy goods" such as pickles and fruit imported from the East. Kearney's operations thrived until the economic paralysis of the Civil War, during which he moved to New York City and suffered significant financial losses.

Nevertheless, Kearney greatly influenced Kansas City's post-Civil War destiny as a railroad investor and promoter. Under his leadership, the Kansas City & Cameron Railroad built a connecting line between the two young towns. Along with civic boosters such as Theodore Case, Robert T. Van Horn, and Kersey Coates, Kearney led the push for a bridge to extend the railroad across the Missouri River. The resulting Hannibal Bridge brought an economic boom to Kansas City and fostered its rapid growth into a major commercial metropolis. For his tireless work on the project, Kearney (along with town founder William Gillis) was awarded the honor of hammering the bridge's ceremonial last spike.

In the mid-1870s, Kearney moved with his wife and four children into the southern colonial-style mansion of his father-in-law, John Harris. Because Kearney occupied the home for several decades before his own death at age 78 on January 3, 1898, it became known as the Harris-Kearney House. This historic structure serves today as the museum home of the Westport Historical Society.

Sources

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