Trailing History on Walnut Street in Blue Springs, Missouri. Written by Greta Carol Hoener

On the way through Missouri
When her statehood was new
Ran a tributary off the river
Known as springs from the Little Blue.
The color they would say,
"Had a beautiful hue!"
One of the trails the first pioneers followed,
Made by native feet and hooves from long before,
Became the trail of commerce and worship,
Residence and restlessness. But, so much more.
The trail took caravans to the top of the hill
Where they camped and got some rest.
From the campsite you could see how the trail
Would split - to the south and the northwest.
Up to 400 wagons might roll through per day
It took 8 – 10 weeks to get there each way.
Freighters, Traders, and Families traveled they say
Through Blue Springs Missouri's Trail to Santa Fe.

That trail eventually became our Walnut Street in Blue Springs, Missouri. There are many Walnut Streets across the state, each one unique. Before our Walnut Street was Walnut Street, what was it? Writings and documents from earlier than 1821 support travel of pioneers, doctors, and settlers who took this route on this historic Trail. Our goal is to get a marker placed on Walnut Street with an official Santa Fe Trail sign posted remembering the rendezvous site in Blue Springs, Missouri.
Trailing Down History on Walnut Street *(Story Tidbits That Are Pretty Neat!)*

Let's start at the beginning. The intersection of what is now State Hwy 7 (going N and S through Blue Springs) and Walnut Street going west. 7 Hwy was known to be part of the missionary roads. Some missionaries traveled to New Mexico on the Santa Fe Trail. The trail went west passing through the springs. The beautiful blue springs.

As we go west on Walnut Street, some notable stops and stories on Walnut Street will be pointed out. Public art along the path will also be brought to your attention. The walk is about one mile long.

If you start at 10th street and Walnut, you will notice the community garden known as Central Park. A kinetic sculpture installed at the park and is called *Life Force*. In this park is the depot that served the Chicago Alton Railroad. The depot was saved by the community and history minded folks. It was moved off the tracks to this new location in 2012 and restored. It was built in 1924 after the first (two story) depot burned down. It is one of few from the Chicago Alton Railroad depots that survived the train era from the past.

Walking west at the 11th St. intersection of Walnut, look north to see two more pieces of public art. One on east side of the City Hall called *Providence* and there is one across the street (all red!) titled *Oh*.

Westward over the Railroad Bridge! The Chicago Alton Railroad came through this area in 1879. This was about 50 years after the first settlers made their homes around the “Y”. (Known now as Woods Chapel and Walnut circle.) The original town was settled near the springs in the valley. The steam engines would have a hard time climbing up that big hill after stopping in the valley. To accommodate the train, the town moved(!) up Walnut Street east- a mile and a quarter up the hill. A bridge was built on Walnut that went over the tracks near the NEW town of Blue Springs. The first bridge was made of wood. They say the kids used the bridge hill for some great sledding when it would snow!

Moving west past 15th, just south of the Dillingham-Lewis Historical House and Museum, keep walking a few blocks to 16th and 17th streets and you will see two very large Victorian houses on the south side of Walnut. The first of the two
statuesque houses was built in 1882 by E.B. Field who ran the One-Man Bank on Main Street. Mr. John Henry Moore bought the house and the bank in 1889 and started the Blue Springs Bank. This home is nearly 140 years old. It was built one year after the town was incorporated. You are now walking in the heart of the historical homes.

At 19th and Walnut is a Pastors retirement community on the south side. Started in 1909, 13 houses were built on the 10-acre tract. A local Kansas City philanthropist, William Volker, gifted money for the project. His former house still stands at the front of the street. It was Volker’s summer home and it was built in the early 1900’s. William Volker was one of the first trustees on the Nelson (Atkins) Estate Museum planning board. Very large pine trees stand majestically on this stretch of Walnut. The trees are said to have been planted by the John Lewis Family in the 1880’s.

On the north side of Walnut walking west to 22nd street is one of the oldest houses in the area. Owned and built by Jeremiah Woods in 1837 it is said to be only one of two structures that survived the burning of the town of Blue Springs by Order #11 during the Civil War. Although not on the historical list, it is still a historical treasure. It is also documented that Jesse James hid out in the house after he robbed the train at the Selsa Station. This house is privately owned. It is just east of the Blue Springs cemetery.

Next stop is the Blue Springs cemetery on the south side of Walnut. It was started in Blue Springs in 1834. Descendants of many first families were buried here. Early settlers Rhoda Harris, her husband, William, and their 15 children have a large monument dedicated to their family on the west side of the cemetery. Rhoda’s father, Jeremiah Burnett, is the only American Revolutionary Soldier buried in this cemetery. In about the middle of the cemetery, there is also a dedicated memorial to fallen soldiers from other American wars.

During the Civil War, one of William Quantrill’s very young riders lost his life during the Border Wars. He is buried on the west side of the cemetery with the tragic story written on his family memorial.

Before this high bluff was a cemetery, it was a place where many pioneers caravans and wagons would pass through on their way west. Historical figures like Hugh Glass, a mountaineer who was mauled by a bear out west, left for dead by
fellow explorers, and yet survived. A doctor named Rowland Willard had an encounter at the campsite with Hugh Glass. * Mr. Glass survived many other dangerous encounters, including with Indians and Pirates! Many travelers would gather at the top of the hill and the campsites would be crackling. The stories of their adventures one after another... Can you imagine that?

After a good night sleep, they would hit the trail again. Down the hill to the rendezvous, the “Y” in the road like a wheel of destiny.

The settlers that stayed in that area built the town of Blue Springs around that “Y” in the road. A church was built, a mill, a post office and more residents moved in and around the area. The church would later be used as a hospital in the Civil War.

The land on the north of the “Y” on Walnut would be Burrus Old Mill Park. It is named after the early settlers of the Burrus Family. The Burrus family ran the mill and were involved in building the city. The Park today features a splash park, a skateboard park, and basketball courts. More public art is located at the south corner of the park. It is called Tree in the Park. There is also another sculpture placed in the park called Tapped. It is installed on a tree. See if you can locate that sculpture!

Now, are you wondering, “Why was the trail named Walnut Street?”

Well.... Around here they say that Rhoda Harris planted walnut trees along her property line. We know there are a few still around, maybe offspring from the first original trees. Just like some of the first families that settled here shortly after Missouri joined the United States.

Before it became known as Walnut Street, it was also known as the Rendezvous, a place to meet on the way to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

If you know a little more now about Walnut Street in Blue Springs, then you know that the way to Santa Fe trailed through Blue Springs as well!! (It started the same year as the anniversary of our state. 1821!!)

*The Travel Diaries and Autobiography of Dr. Rowland Willard by Joy Poole
Missouri Territory
Opens Up!
Rhoda and William Harris
and Family
Blue Springs MO