

Draft
Undated

7. Description

The Eldridge K. Gibson store, 230 Main Street, Stilwell, is a detached rectangular one-story commercial building. Originally, the interior had an open plan except for a wood-frame partition wall separating the main front from a smaller rear storage area. With that wall removed, the interior now has no partitions. The storefront is divided into three bays by two ornamented cast-iron posts supporting the storefront lintel. The main walls of the building are constructed of brick masonry laid in common bond and the rear wall is wood-frame construction. The foundation is constructed of rubble stone. There is a low rear-sloping roof and stepped brick parapet side walls.

The storefront has a recessed central entrance with a glazed paneled entrance door. The entrance is flanked by display windows with wooden bulkheads and large wooden transom panels. There is a cast-iron storefront sill. A concrete step extends from the front of the building to the sidewalk. Since the sidewalls are blank and unornamented, the most important decorative element is the brick cornice. It has a raised belt course, corbeling, and a toothed panel surmounted by an upper belt course.

Interior

The ceiling is constructed of grooved and molded wooden boards. The floor of the rear section is raised above the main level.

Alterations

It appears that the original storefront shown in an early twentieth century photograph survived until ca. 1976 when the Smith Grocery closed. There were wooden bulkheads and large four-light display windows. This storefront and a shed-roofed awning were removed by 1980. The existing storefront has been reconstructed of modern materials in a similar pattern. There is a decorative stained-glass panel above the entrance and a modern wooden sign above the lintel. An arched basement entrance at the southwest corner of the building has been covered. In the early 1970s, a large wood-frame addition was constructed at the rear of the historic brick block. It is covered with metal sheathing. In the rear section of the east brick wall, an air conditioner has been installed in a modern opening.

The only interior partition wall has been removed. The rear wood-frame wall is sheathed with plywood. All the original plaster has been removed from the brick sidewalls. The floor of the main section, which was probably wood, is now concrete covered with vinyl flooring. The floor of the raised rear section is carpeted.

8. Statement of Significance

Criterion C, architecture, example of commercial building type

The Eldridge K. Gibson store, 230 Main Street, Stilwell, is significant under Criterion C, architecture, as an example of a late nineteenth-century commercial building. The building type is distinguished by its narrow rectangular form and a prominent storefront with display windows and ornamental facade detailing. The type was designed to conform to a narrow town lot in a row of continuous commercial building fronts. Constructed of brick, the Gibson store has survived while other historic commercial buildings in Stilwell that were wood-frame construction have not. There is a modern addition extending from the rear, but it does not diminish the overall integrity of the building. The building may be significant under Criterion A for its historical association with the development of Stilwell. At this time, a local historical context for this association has not been developed.

The Gibson store is one of the few surviving buildings associated with the early history of Stilwell. There were two major fires--one ca. 1925 and another in 1941--that destroyed most of the wood-frame commercial buildings in the town's small business district. The town was established one-half mile east of the earlier settlement of Aubry when the Missouri Pacific Railroad constructed a branch line from Kansas City to Paola. The railroad was completed December 1, 1886 and the town was platted by Michael O'Keefe, John Larkin, William A. Kelly, and A.J. Norman as Mt. Auburn on November 30, 1886. Later, the name was changed to honor Arthur E. Stilwell, a Missouri Pacific conductor.

O'Keefe, Kelly, and Larkin may have built the store building to promote business in the new town. On January 15, 1890, those three proprietors recorded a mortgage of \$900 from D.L. and Emma Robinson of Worland, Missouri for Lot 7, Block 18. Such a high value for a single lot indicated a building standing on the property. Also, the Robinsons agreed to keep the property insured for the benefit of the owner. However, the Robinsons sold the property May 22, 1890 to E.K. Gibson for \$1700. Gibson assumed the mortgage of \$900 and renewed it early in 1891 for another year. The mortgage was finally released on January 22, 1892. Possibly, the difference of \$800 in the second transaction represented the stock of goods housed in the building.

Eldridge K. Gibson began his career in Aubry as a storekeeper in partnership with William M. Moon. They moved the business to Stilwell after the railroad was constructed. While Gibson continued in general merchandise, Moon established a hardware and implement store on the opposite side of Main Street. In the early twentieth century, E.K. Gibson was a member of the board of directors of the State Bank of Stilwell which was chartered in 1907 and closed in 1933. In addition to his importance as a businessman in Stilwell, E.K. Gibson was prominent in the community. He twice served as postmaster--from January, 1889 to March, 1893 and from

May, 1897 to October, 1910. Gibson was a charter member in 1897 of Stilwell Lodge Number 480 of the Independent Organization of Odd Fellows. He served as treasurer of the Stilwell School Board for ten years. Gibson was instrumental in the building of the Baptist Church in 1909 at the southwest corner of Main and Park Streets. The Gibson family lived in a large house built about 1890 on the northeast corner of the same intersection.

Although Eldridge Gibson died in November, 1933, the family maintained ownership of the property until December 29, 1962 when J. Paul Gibson sold to Charles Carpenter and Edna Baker. From the mid 1940s to the mid-1970s, the business was operated for thirty years by Wiley and Ethel Smith as a grocery and general store.

References

- Deed book 2-43. M. O'Keefe, et al-Town of Stilwell, plat.
- Mortgage book 4-205. Mortgage, January 15, 1890, Robinson to O'Keefe et al.
- Deed book 60-546. Robinson to Gibson May 22, 1890.
- Mortgage book 9-525. Mortgage January 15, 1891. E.K. and Lee Gibson to Kelly.
- Deed book 57-230. November 10, 1933. E.K. and Emma Gibson to Gibson and Mundell.
- Deed book 478-153. December 29, 1962. J.Paul Gibson to Carpenter and Baker.

Blair, Ed. History of Johnson County (Lawrence, KS: Standard Publishing Co., 1915)

Tebbe, Anita M. "The Community of Aubry-Stilwell," (1980).