

People of the Plains

American Indians of Central Kansas

Arapaho. Apache. Osage. Kiowa. Cheyenne. Comanche. Pawnee. Quivira. Wichita. All of these tribes lived in this region before Euro-American settlement, drawn to the land's bountiful wildlife, wild fruits, greens, and tubers (such as the prairie turnip), water, and rich soils. Each bore its own distinct heritage—from the tattooed Wichita, who lived in conical thatched houses and grew corn, squash, beans, and pumpkins, to the nomadic Plains Apaches, tipi-dwellers who migrated with the bison they hunted. The sophistication of their culture ranged from the elaborate Sun Dances of the Arapaho and Kiowa to the finely crafted baskets and pottery of the Pawnee.

In the early 1800s, in its efforts to remove native tribes from lands east of the Mississippi River, the U.S. government declared Kansas "Indian Territory," a permanent home for American Indians. In 1854, when the government opened the Kansas Territory to white settlement, the stage was set for conflict. Settlers clashed with the tribes here, often in bloody battles.



Osage Indian Boys
Kansas State Historical Society



Pawnee Rock/Ted Lee Eubanks

Pawnee Rock

Pawnee Rock projects above the flat prairie along the Santa Fe Trail, 10 miles southwest of Great Bend. For centuries, it served as an important landmark, vantage point, and trail marker for American Indians, pioneers, traders, and the military. Kit Carson shot his mule here, mistaking it for an Indian. Indians captured Buffalo Bill Cody near the "Rock," and Robert E. Lee passed by during the Mexican War of 1848.



Captured Cheyenne Indians/Kansas State Historical Society

Motion and Change

By the mid-1800s, cholera and small-pox epidemics and tribal warfare had taken their toll on Kansas tribes. Conflicts with settlers and the U.S. military further depleted their numbers. By the late 1800s, most remaining American Indians of central Kansas had been moved to reservations in Oklahoma.



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