

RESEARCH GUIDE

KANSAS

by BETH FOULK



AT THE HEART OF AMERICA'S HEARTLAND, Kansas has played a pivotal role in shaping America's migration routes, the battle over slavery, and the cultivating of the nation's breadbasket. For those fortunate enough to have Kansas ancestors, a treasure trove of records and stories awaits your discovery.

JAYHAWKER HISTORY

Kansas became part of the United States along with the rest of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Prior to that, the area had been inhabited by various Native American tribes (including the Wichita, the Osage, the Pawnee, and the eponymous Kansa, or Kaw) but claimed for France, then Spain, then France again.

In 1830, the Indian Removal Act called for the forced relocation of Native American tribes from the east and southeast of the United States to designated federal lands across the Mississippi (notably in Kansas' neighbor, Oklahoma). But even before then, individual tribes such as the Delaware and Ottawa agreed to move from their ancestral lands into modern Kansas—often at the expense of tribes indigenous to the region.

Settlers were moving in even before treaties with the Native American tribes were signed, with the first permanent white settlement in Fort Leavenworth in 1827. As a result, the formal surveying process was delayed, and the Preemption Act of 1841 played an outsized role in the settlement of the state. Through it, settlers claimed preemptory rights to property long before the government could properly codify their land ownership.

It wasn't until the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed in 1854 (creating the Kansas and Nebraska Territories) that emigration

from the East Coast and Europe began in earnest. As the new territory opened for white settlement, Native American tribes were again forced off their lands, this time south to Oklahoma.

Notably, the Kansas-Nebraska Act also allowed for popular sovereignty to determine whether slavery would be legal in the territory. Waves of activists from both sides of the issue migrated to Kansas, eager to vote either for or against.

This set the stage for "Bleeding Kansas," a series of violent conflicts over the issue of slavery that some historians believe led directly to the Civil War. More than 50 people died in the well-publicized skirmishes between proslavery "Border Ruffians" and antislavery "Free-Staters." Kansas was ultimately admitted as a free state in early 1861, shortly before the Civil War began.

Emigration surged after the Civil War for two primary reasons. First, the Homestead Act in 1862 gave 160 acres to any settler who would remain on the land for five years and make improvements. Union Civil War veterans enjoyed an added bonus under the Homestead Act—they could deduct their years of service from the five-year occupation rule.

Second, the railroads were moving west—and fast. The Sante Fe Railway (officially the Atchison, Topeka and Sante Fe Railway) was chartered in 1859, and the Kansas Pacific Railway (originally the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division) broke ground in 1863. The railroads actively promoted settlement in Kansas to would-be pioneers in the East and immigrant-hopefuls in Germany and across Europe.

The railroad companies themselves also spurred migration. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 offered government

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1861

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1860 (as territory); 1870 (as state)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1911 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1913 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
KS Dept. of Health and Environment,
Office of Vital Statistics

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incentives to railroads in the form of miles-wide land grants on either side of the tracks. The companies, in turn, sold this prime real estate to settlers to recoup the costs of laying the rails.

German-speaking emigrants (both those from Germany proper and German-speaking minorities from other countries) were among the frequent buyers. Whole towns of German-speaking immigrants from across Europe sprung up, with other notable communities including Russian Mennonites, Scandinavians, French, Italians, Bohemians, Hungarians and former denizens of the British Isles. William H. Carruth's linguistic study of the state shows the diversity in European settlements <www.kansasmemory.org/item/220778/page/1>, and the Kansas Heritage Project tells their stories <fhsuguides.fhsu.edu/kansasheritage>.

Other notable migrant groups include the "Exodusters," formerly enslaved African Americans who left the South during and after Reconstruction. One prominent destination was Nicodemus, a town founded in 1877 that became one of the largest majority-Black settlements west of the Mississippi.

Between 1854 and 1929, more than 250,000 children from Eastern cities were sent west on "orphan trains" to find new lives with pioneer families. Kansas became home to 5,000 to 6,000 of them. While records of individual placements are almost non-existent, their stories are recorded at the National Orphan Train Complex in Concordia <www.orphantraindepot.org>.

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in eastern Kansas



HOMES ON THE RANGE

Kansas first kept statewide births and deaths in 1911, but cities or counties may have kept them earlier. Pre-1911 birth and death registers were most often recorded in city or county clerk offices. Not all records have survived, but the Kansas Historical Society has microfilm records of some <www.kshs.org/archives>; search *vital records* in the archive catalog.

Post-1911 records (i.e., those filed with the state) are not open to the public. However, the Department of Health and Environment does permit genealogy requests. Records prior to 1940 can be requested by a close relative, such as a cousin; post-1940 the records must be requested

TIMELINE

1541

Spaniard Francisco Vázquez de Coronado visits Kansas during his search for the Seven Cities of Gold

1762

Spain acquires France's land west of the Mississippi River; it cedes the land to France again in 1800

1803

Modern Kansas becomes part of the United States in the Louisiana Purchase

1820s

Native tribes in Kansas are removed from their lands to make room for tribes forcibly relocated from other areas

1821

Missouri becomes a state; modern Kansas (formerly part of Missouri Territory) becomes "unorganized territory"



by an immediate family member <www.kdheks.gov/vital/genealogy.html>.

FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> each have birth indexes for pre-1940 records; FamilySearch has digitized microfilmed images of some of them. Ancestry.com has an index of deaths and burials from 1885 to 1930 <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2570>.

Likewise, the state didn't record marriages until 1913, but earlier records were kept by the district court. The Kansas Historical Society has many of these records on microfilm. The society also sponsors an index of marriages from the territorial period (1854–1861) <www.kshs.org/p/kansas-marriage

index/11315>, and Ancestry.com has one for marriages 1854 to 1873 <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3444>. Note that Kansas marriage licenses do not include the parents' names unless the bride or groom were underage.

The state began keeping copies of divorce records in 1951, but the same privacy rules apply. Earlier records were kept by the territorial legislature's Sessions Laws (1855–1861) or the individual county district court (1861–1951).

COUNTING THE PEOPLE

Kansas first appeared in the 1860 federal census as Kansas Territory, then as a state in its own right in 1870. But genealogists interested in searching this early Kansas roots are

1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act creates the separate territories of Kansas and Nebraska; conflict over slavery leads to "Bleeding Kansas"

1861

Kansas becomes the 34th state to join the Union; western portions of the Kansas Territory become part of the new Colorado Territory

1868

Construction begins on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway

1893

Finney County annexes Garfield County, the last major shift in Kansas' county boundaries

1935

"Black Sunday": A massive dust storm crosses the southern Great Plains, typical of the Dust Bowl

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Kansas <www.cyndislist.com/us/ks>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Kansas <www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Kansas,_United_States_Genealogy>

Kansapedia <www.kshs.org/kansapedia>

The Kansas Collection <www.kancoll.org>

Kansas Memory <www.kansasmemory.org>

KSGenWeb Project <www.ksgenweb.org>

Linkpendium: Kansas <www.linkpendium.com/ks-genealogy>

Territorial Kansas <territorialkansasonline.ku.edu/index.php>

Publications

A Guide to Genealogical and Historical Research in Kansas by Mary Clement Douglass (Historical Matters)

Historical Atlas of Kansas by Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self (University of Oklahoma Press)

History of the State of Kansas by William G. Cutler (A. T. Andreas) <www.kancoll.org/books/cutler>

Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas by James R. Shortridge (University Press of Kansas)

Archives & Organizations

Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library <spencer.lib.ku.edu/collections/kansas-collection>

Kansas Historical Society <www.kshs.org>

Kansas State Library <www.kslib.info>

Mid-Continent Public Library: Midwest Genealogy Center <www.mymcpl.org/genealogy>

Midwest Historical and Genealogical Society <www.mhgswichita.org/wp>

National Archives at Kansas City <www.archives.gov/kansas-city>

Wichita State University Library <libraries.wichita.edu/home>

fortunate to have other rich enumerations draw upon. Start looking in Ancestry.com's collections of voting registers and elections lists from the mid-1850s.

Kansas also took state censuses every 10 years from 1865 to 1925, making them nice complements to the decennial federal census. While the state censuses are not as comprehensive as their federal counterparts, genealogists will still find excellent information in them: name, age, gender, race, relationship to head of household, marital status, birthplace, and (of course) place of enumeration. You can search these (as well as the territorial voting lists, which are sometimes called "territory censuses") in one Ancestry.com collection <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1088>.

Don't be surprised if you find a Missourian in these early voting lists and censuses! Many crossed the Missouri-Kansas border specifically to vote in Kansas elections in the hopes of swaying Kansas' vote on slavery.

A BREADBASKET OF RECORDS

Check out these other great records and documents for finding your Kansas ancestors:

- **Newspapers:** The Kansas Historical Society boasts a nearly complete collection of every paper published in the state <www.kshs.org/p/newspapers-in-kansas/11528>—fitting, since it was founded by early Kansas newspaper men. More than 300,000 pages are available free through the Library of Congress site, Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>. And subscription site Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> has more than 19 million pages of Kansas papers.

- **Land records:** Since Kansas is a public-land state, early land sales there were made by the government. You can obtain patents (first title records)—including for homesteaders—on the Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records website <glorerecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx>. Federal land entry files (the purchase application files) may be obtained from the National Archives using Form 84 <www.archives.gov/files/forms/pdf/natf-84.pdf> for a fee. Records of transactions between railroad companies and settlers are in county land track books or railroad company records, some of which are at the Kansas Historical Society.

- **Cemeteries:** In addition to massive sites Find a Grave <www.findagrave.com> and BillionGraves <www.billiongraves.com>, you can find Kansan tombstones at the Kansas Gravestones project <kansasgravestones.org>. D'Addezio.com <www.daddezio.com/cemetery/junction/CJ-KS-NDX.html> has a list of cemeteries in the state.

Beth Foulk is a Kansas native and proud descendent of Kansas pioneers. Stop by her website <www.genealogydecoded.com> if you're ever in the neighborhood.