

Tallgrass Prairie

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve
Strong City, KS



Flint Hills: First Peoples

The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.



Kansa Chief Wa-shun-gah, c. 1902

Artifacts found in the Flint Hills region date the human presence in the area to over 10,000 years ago. By the time of contact with European explorers in the mid-1500s, the Pawnee, Wichita, Osage, and Kansa had already established flourishing grassland cultures, becoming quite familiar with the tallgrass prairie and the ways necessary to succeed on it. Many of these adaptations would influence incoming American settlers, as well as present-day Flint Hills residents, helping to establish living connections to the past.

The Kansa

As westward expansion continued across North America, the Kansa, Kaw, or “People of the Southwind” had already established themselves in what would later become the state of Kansas. Earlier treaties with the United States, the Kansa, and other tribes enabled passage of the Santa Fe Trail, increasing travel and settlement. As a result, the Kaw were removed to reservation lands near Council Grove, KS in 1847. Less than 30 years later, over the objections of Kansa Chief Al-le-ga-wa-ho, the Kansa were removed from Kansas to what would later become the state of Oklahoma, where they live today as the Kaw Nation of Oklahoma.



Kansa Meach-o-shin-gaw, c. 1870-90



Kansa Chief Al-le-ga-wa-ho, c. 1867



Group of Kansa by George Catlin, c. 1860-79

Sharing the Land

The Flint Hills were at one time a communal bison hunting ground for the Pawnee, Osage, Wichita, and Kansa, who knew that the area was good grazing ground for bison. Using the abundant flint, or chert, found close to the surface, arrowheads and other tools could be made by *knapping* the stone, striking it to form sharp edges on the resulting pieces.



Bison hunting party

Living with the Land

Being keen observers of their environment out of necessity, these tribal peoples saw that bison and other grazing animals were attracted to the tender, new plant life that grew immediately after lightning had set vast grass fires. They adapted this natural process to attract bison and other grazing animals to their Flint Hills hunting grounds by setting grass fires of their own and waiting for bison and other grazing animals to find the tender, new plant life.

In some ways, the lifestyles of the native peoples of the Flint Hills region and the incoming American settlers shared remarkable similarities. For example, both peoples established stable populations near water sources. The incoming settlers took up the Native practice of using fire to improve plant growth and encourage grazing by their cattle herds. And finally, both peoples cultivated gardens and croplands as additional food sources. However, their similarities were dramatically overshadowed by their differences, often resulting in misunderstanding and violent confrontation.



Kansa tree bark lodge



Wichita grass lodge



Kansa village near stream

Early Explorers



Francisco Vasquez de Coronado



Zebulon Pike

Early tallgrass prairie explorers encountered what was to them a unique and intimidating landscape. Spaniard Francisco Vasquez de Coronado was one of the first Europeans to describe in written records the interior of North America, exploring into what is now central Kansas in the middle 1500s. Not finding large cities of gold and other riches in North America's interior, Spain moved south and west into what is now Mexico, bringing not only the Spanish language, but also horses, cattle, and the foundations of cattle culture to North America.

American explorer Zebulon Pike inadvertently coined the term "Flint Hills." Passing through the area in September 1806, ten miles south of the present day preserve, he made this journal observation: "Passed very ruff flint hills. My feet blistered and very sore." Today, "Flint Hills" refers to a large area of east central Kansas encompassing around 20-25% of the state. Although the Flint Hills supports a wide diversity of plants and animals, early settlers were unaccustomed to its ways and referred to it as part of the "Great American Desert."

For More Information



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Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is a public/private partnership between the National Park Service (the primary land manager) and The Nature Conservancy (the primary land owner).

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