

# Kansas Historical Society

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Following the end of the Civil War, Kansas newspaper editors and publishers sought a way to record the founding of the state and its heroic role in the fight against slavery. A committee of the Kansas Editors' and Publishers' Association met December 13, 1875, and formed the Kansas Historical Society to collect newspapers and manuscripts on the territorial period. These early newspaper publishers began a tradition of donating copies of all newspapers published in Kansas to the Kansas Historical Society. Publishers became members of the historical society by donating issues of their newspapers. For all others, the annual membership fee was \$2. Consequently, the historical society today has one of the most comprehensive collections of state newspapers in the nation. The collection now includes those that are solely digital. Many of the pre-1923 newspapers have been digitized through a partnership with Newspapers.com and made available free of charge to Kansans online, with a verification using their driver's licenses.

At first the historical society stored its small collection in a bookcase on the fourth floor of the south wing of the Kansas State capitol. In 1879 the state enacted legislation that recognized the historical society as "the trustee of the state" for the purpose of maintaining the state's history. Within 10 years, the historical society had collected more than 16,000

books and pamphlets and more than 3,700 bound volumes of newspapers and periodicals.

"Kansas has the fullest collection ever made by any state in its early years, because this was the first Society that began its career by collecting and preserving every copy of every newspaper published in the state," said Secretary George Martin, in his 25th annual address of the historical society in 1900.

The historical society collections continued to grow. In 1893 the legislature authorized the historical society to occupy three rooms in the south wing of the statehouse. The board of directors reported that collections filled "every nook and corner of the main room of the Society from floor to ceiling; they occupy cases in the corridors, and they occupy three rooms in the cellar of the State House."

In 1905 the Kansas legislature passed a bill establishing the historical society as the repository of official government records. Thus, the historical society became the state archives for Kansas, receiving non-current government records that need to be retained permanently. A \$90,000 Civil War claim from the federal government and a legislative appropriation helped to solve the historical society's immediate space concerns. On September 27, 1911, President William Howard Taft was the honored guest at the laying of the cornerstone of the new Memorial Building. Built as a monument to the Union veterans of the Civil War, the building opened in 1914. The historical society moved more than 440,000 objects and effects to the new quarters, shared with the Grand Army of the Republic, a Civil War veterans organization.

The responsibility of collecting records of enduring value continues today with the relatively new challenge of preserving and providing access to state government electronic records. The historical society has partnered with Ancestry.com to digitize some of these records, like state census, and made available





**The exterior of the Kansas State Capitol building, where the Kansas Historical Society operates the Capitol Visitor Center, Topeka, Kansas. Courtesy Kansas Historical Society.**

free of charge to Kansans online, with a verification using their driver's licenses.

The historical society added a new type of collection in 1901 with the acquisition of Pawnee Indian Village. Accepted by the legislature, the site was reportedly the first raising of the American flags in Kansas by explorer Zebulon Pike in 1806. Subsequent research showed that original claim to be in error, but the site's archeological history provided further understanding of the Pawnees and this seventeenth-century village. In 1927 the annual meeting report celebrated the addition of "Shawnee Mission in Johnson County, [and] the old Capitol at Fort Riley . . ." Other historic sites have been acquired over the years. Today the historical society operates 16 Kansas State Historic Sites: Constitution Hall, Lecompton; Cottonwood Ranch, Studley; First Territorial Capitol, Fort Riley; Fort Hays, Hays; Goodnow House, Manhattan; Grinter Place,

Kansas City; Hollenberg Pony Express Station, Hanover; Iowa; and Sac & Fox Mission, Highland; John Brown Museum, Osawatomie; Kaw Mission, Council Grove; Marais des Cygnes Massacre, Trading Post; Mine Creek Civil War Battlefield, Pleasanton; Pawnee Indian Museum, Republic; Pawnee Rock, Pawnee Rock; Red Rocks, Home of the William Allen White Family, Emporia; and Shawnee Indian Mission, Fairway. Several of these are operated in partnership with the local community. In 2015 the Last Chance Store in Council Grove was donated to the state. Built in 1857, this was the final supply point before heading West on the Santa Fe Trail. It will be reinterpreted and operated jointly with Kaw Mission in the coming years.

In addition to growing collections, the historical society expanded its programs. Archeology, historic preservation, and museum services were added. In 1973 the Kansas legislature approved the purchase



The Last Chance Store in Council Grove, Kansas. Courtesy Kansas Historical Society.

of the Potawatomi Mission northwest of Topeka and the surrounding 81 acres for the purpose of building a museum on the grounds. The mission was built on the site in 1847 as a boarding school for Potawatomi children who lived on the reservation. The mission closed in 1861 as the Civil War began. Many of the Potawatomis were removed to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The building was later converted to a barn.

Ground was broken near the site of the former mission on August 29, 1981, and construction began in early 1982. The museum and education departments moved to the new building in 1984, establishing the Kansas Museum of History.

In partnership with the Kansas Anthropological Association, the historical society established the Kansas Archeology Training Program in 1974. Each year the program draws hundreds of volunteers, from 10 years of age and up, to work alongside professional and avocational archeologists. Participants

spend from one day to two weeks assisting with surveys for archeological sites, excavating sites, and cleaning and cataloging artifacts in the lab. The 2018 field school was held at Kaw Mission in Council Grove in June.

The historical society established a website in 1993, one of the first historical societies to do so. In 2004 the historical society launched a digital site of collections and interpretation focused on the Bleeding Kansas era, *Territorial Kansas Online*. Then in 2007 the society introduced an online digital archive, *Kansas Memory*. The site contains nearly 600,000 images.

Construction began on the west Topeka campus for a new facility to house the historical society's remaining departments. In 1995 the library, archives, manuscripts, newspaper, archeology, historic preservation, and administrative functions moved to the complex. The Kansas legislature separated the functions of the



**The headquarters of the Kansas Historical Society in Topeka, with the Potawatomi Mission in the foreground.** *Courtesy Kansas Historical Society.*

historical society in 2001. The membership, retail, and fundraising portion of the organization became the Kansas State Historical Society, Inc., dba Kansas Historical Foundation. In January 2001 a third storage bay was added to the state archives building, providing an additional 22,000 square feet of space for storing mainly archives collections. The historical society's collections include more than 4,000 archeological and ethnographic artifacts; nearly 500,000 books and pamphlets, 12,000 manuscripts, 33,000 maps and architectural drawings, 50,000 microfilms, 120,000 museum artifacts, 600,000 photographs and audiovisual materials, and 45,000 state archive materials. Additionally, the historical society oversees 121 historical markers and maintains 58 buildings and structures across the state.

The Kansas Historical Society operates as a state agency supported by state appropriations. More than 12 million individuals benefit from in-person or online

programs and services each year. All activities and programs are conducted by the private organization and the historical society's divisions: administration, cultural resources (comprising archeology, historic preservation, and historic sites), education and museum, and state archives. The historical society is supported by more than 500 volunteers each year who contribute more than 20,000 hours of service.

Education is a key component of the historical society's mission. This state agency provides curriculum materials on state history and government to our K-12 schools, helping them meet their state-required coursework. Tours of the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka include guided and self-guided experiences for class visits geared to specific grades and standards. Guided historic and dome tours are also provided for the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka. Students around the state can take advantage of learning opportunities through the traveling resource trunks,



**The Kansas Museum of History, Topeka.** *Courtesy Kansas Historical Society.*

virtual tours, lesson plans, reading cards, and the seventh-grade textbook on Kansas history.

The preservation office was created in 1969 to administer the National Register of Historic Places. Through legislation in 1977 the program expanded to add a state register. These preservation initiatives continue to bring economic development to communities across the state. Programs include administering the National Register of Historic Places in Kansas, the Register of Historic Kansas Places, Historical Preservation Fund grants to assist with local preservation activities, Heritage Trust Fund grants to reimburse expenses for qualifying projects that preserve or restore historic properties, federal tax credits, and state tax credits. Today more than 1,600 properties are listed in the National and State Register. The State Historic Preservation Office launched the Kansas Historic Resources Inventory in 2008, which allows individuals to contribute information and photographs

to an interactive online database of survey records, which has more than 65,000 entries.

The Kansas Historical Foundation, a nonprofit corporation supports the work of the state agency. The foundation offers membership to the public and institutions, manages grants for the state agency, operates the museum and historic sites stores, and provides fiscal support for various programs, including the historical society's award-winning scholarly journal, *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*. Past publications include a children's magazine, *Kansas Kaleidoscope*, and popular history magazines, *Kansas Heritage* and *Reflections*, highlighting the historical society's collections.

During the past century, the historical society's role expanded beyond its original emphasis on collecting and publishing research. Today the historical society continues these fundamental activities and has added a broad array of interpretive and educational programs





**The garden at Red Rocks State Historic Site, Home of the William Allen White Family, in Emporia, Kansas.** *Courtesy Kansas Historical Society.*

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that combine with historic sites, technical assistance, and field service programs. Through collections, exhibits, programs, and services, the society enriches the lives of thousands and serves in understanding and valuing the heritage of Kansas.

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