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Natives, Settlers, and the Unique Cultural Heritage of Kansas

2015, Kansas ... Just as the United States became a melting pot for cultures from around the world, Kansas is home to Native Americans, European immigrants and a diverse array of many other cultural heritages in the Midwest. This unique blend of cultures offers a plethora of diverse arts, shopping, dining and historic sightseeing experiences in the big and small towns of Kansas.

The People of the South Wind – the Kanza Indians – once inhabited the region now called Kansas. By 1846, thousands of American Indians representing 30 tribes had been forcibly resettled in Kansas. As western expansion pushed farther west in the latter half of the 19th century, many Indian nations were again forced to resettle, this time to Indian Territory, Oklahoma. However, four nations of the Iowa, Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi refused to give up their reserves in the eastern half of Kansas and remain in the state today.

Through interactive exhibits, American Indians tell stories in their own words. Museums include quillwork, baskets and other artwork of present day descendants of emigrant tribes. The Kaw Mission in Council Grove and the Shawnee Indian Methodist Mission in Fairway are also state historic sites. Some of the most exciting American Indian events can still be experienced today at colorful powwows. The Mid-America All-Indian Center Annual Intertribal Pow Wow in Wichita draws thousands of American Indian participants from across the nation. Every three years, Medicine Lodge hosts the Peace Treaty Pageant and Celebration to commemorate the 1867 treaty between the five Plains Tribes and the U.S. government. Along with re-enactments, the weekend also includes an Indian Heritage Village featuring ceremonial and handmade crafts. Powwows open to the public are also held in Topeka, Lawrence, and Mayetta.

After the Civil War, large numbers of European immigrants settled in Kansas, the largest groups being the Germans and Mennonites. German heritage can be seen in the magnificent churches they built including St. Fidelis, known as the “Cathedral of the Plains” in Victoria, and St. Mary’s in St. Benedict. The Mennonites were key in the development of Kansas, introducing Turkey Red hard winter wheat that led to the state becoming the leading wheat producing state in the nation. The Mennonite Heritage Museum in Goessel and the Kauffman Museum in North Newton are devoted to Mennonite history.

Wilson is known as the Czech Capital of Kansas because of the immigrants that settled there. Travelers can still meet citizens of Wilson who still speak their native language. In 1868 the Union Pacific Railroad moved west, opening the area to settlement, and in 1874,

Wilson became the home of the Czechs Bohemians. The Czechs are known for their hard work; which is represented in the quarried post-rock one finds in the buildings and fence posts. Today, 22 of those buildings are still standing -- many housing businesses more than 100 years later.

Nestled in the Smoky Valley region of north central Kansas, the community of Lindsborg was settled in 1869 by nearly 100 Swedish immigrant pioneers. They initially emigrated from Sunnemo and the surrounding parishes of Värmland Province in Sweden. With much anticipation, the first Lindsborg Swedes came to America, framtidslandet, the land of the future. A strict adherence to the Lutheran faith and an abiding love of music were at the center of their existence, although many of them in the early days were farmers. Many of the Lindsborg founders were craftsmen, educators, musicians, and people of crafty talents. Their passion for things cultural extends into the present day and is evidenced by the large percentage of well educated fine artists and musicians who reside in Lindsborg, today is a community of approximately 3,200 residents. Experience the special blend of history and culture in Lindsborg. Old World charm springs from rich Swedish heritage. Known as Little Sweden USA, Lindsborg has art galleries and studios, unique shopping and world-class chamber music – making it a special blend of history and culture set in the middle of Kansas wheat country.

The African-American heritage in the state of Kansas began before the Civil War and lives on today in many historic attractions and museums. Visitors can tour the places where the course of history was changed and learn about the people who changed it. In the mid-1800s, the Adair family helped famed abolitionist John Brown hide escaped slaves traveling the Underground Railroad. The Adair cabin near Osawatomie still stands and serves as the John Brown Museum State Historic Site. Lawrence also has several Underground Railroad sites in the city, including Fire Station No. 4, which was once Joel Grover's stone barn used to organize small groups of runaway slaves for their next move further west.

After the Civil War, freed slaves established all-black communities around the country. Nicodemus, established in 1877, is the only remaining all-black town west of the Mississippi River and is now a National Historic Site. The Township Hall serves as the visitor's center and wagon excursions through Nicodemus leave from the Livery Company. The Nicodemus Emancipation Celebration each July includes Buffalo Soldier re-enactors and African-American cuisine and entertainment.

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