

## *The Border War and American Liberty*

Hanging in a corner of the Kansas state Capitol building in Topeka is John Steuart Curry's mural "The Tragic Prelude." A wild-eyed, bearded John Brown, arms out-stretched, clutches a Sharps rifle in one hand and the Bible in another. On either side of him, armed men advance toward each other. One side carries the Union flag, and the other, the Confederate flag.



THE TRAGIC PRELUDE  
*John Steuart Curry*  
Kansas State Historical Society

---

A dead soldier from each army lies at Brown's feet. On Brown's left, a slave mother and child crouch in the shadows while a black man grapples with a southern soldier. In the background, a tornado touches ground and a prairie fire sweeps across the plains as if the fury of nature itself has been set loose by Brown's frenzy.

Curry's painting makes several statements about the war on the Kansas-Missouri border in the 1850s. First, with his over-sized figure that dominates the



picture, John Brown is central to the conflict. Secondly, the repeated Union/Confederate imagery drives home that the Kansas-Missouri border war instigated the national Civil War. Finally, African-Americans are peripheral figures in the story--almost hidden from view behind both Brown and the white Southerners.

The abolitionist John Brown certainly played a role in the Border War. The murders of five proslavery settlers in 1856 by Brown's men helped set off the

## *Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area*

Freedom's Frontier is a "story ecosystem."  
The power of the stories does not arise from a specific place or point in time, but is formed by an understanding of how the area's landscapes, individual stories, and perspectives were connected.



Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area  
Go to [www.freedomsfrontier.org](http://www.freedomsfrontier.org) for more information and sites.

Stretching over four river valleys and parts of two states, the region was the epicenter of conflicts, partly stemming from the Missouri Compromise and westward expansion, that defined American values and the struggles to achieve them. The repeated, forced movement of Native American nations and the inspiring resilience of those nations in the face of oppression, the voluntary immigration of settlers along the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails, the abolition of slavery, the arduous treks and tenuous settlements of African-American "Exodusters," and the final resolution of racial segregation in our public schools a century later—all of

these stories belong in the larger context of Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area.

Over two centuries and thousands of square miles, the landscape of rivers, plains, and forests had a critical effect on the location of trails, settlements, towns, and points where people with differing definitions of freedom would come into contact. By connecting our stories with the land, we help visitors and residents understand the importance of natural history and ecology in shaping human events. There are 55 sites with individual stories, but we have provided six of these historical sites for the reader within this Field Journal.

## Early Day Cattle Drives

The big Texas-to-Kansas trail drives in the open-range era that followed the Civil War gave birth to the cowboy and helped to establish Kansas as one of the premier cattle-raising states in the nation. From 1866 to 1885, over six million longhorns made their way north.



EARLY CATTLE TRAILS  
Wade Parsons

Many thousands of these Texas cattle found their way into the Flint Hills and were being pastured there at least as early as 1868. By no later than the mid-1870s, Flint Hills cattlemen were going to Texas, buying cattle, and bringing them home to graze on the tallgrass prairie. Cattle drives from Texas, however, began long before the Civil War, and Flint Hills cattle were being marketed in eastern and Midwestern markets during the war itself.

Texas cattle were being transported to eastern cities by ship soon after Texans



had successfully rebelled against Mexico to establish their own nation. Probably the earliest overland movement of Texas cattle north occurred in 1846 when a man named Edward Piper bought a herd of cattle and trailed them to markets in Ohio. Within two years after that, the Shawnee Trail (known initially as the Kansas Trail) had been established. This trail started at the Rio Grande River near Brownsville, went north through the Fort Worth-Dallas area, then headed northeast to Baxter Springs, Kansas. From there, the trail split into

## *The Claussen Archaeological Site: Prehistory Of The Flint Hills*

On a warm afternoon in May 2000, I was walking along Mill Creek in Wabaunsee County inspecting soils and sediment exposed in a steep stream bank that stands about thirty feet above the creek. It is a common routine for me. Most of my research involves reconstructing the geology, paleoecology, and archaeology of stream valleys, so I look for places where creeks and rivers have cut into their own deposits. These cutbanks are my “windows” into the past.



CLAUSSEN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE  
MILL CREEK, WABAUNSEE COUNTY  
*Steven Perry*

---

---

The stream bank along Mill Creek was one of those windows. When I looked down the steep face at the southern end of the exposure, I noticed mussel shells, pieces of flint, and fire-reddened rocks sticking out about eight feet below the land surface - a buried archaeological site.



Streams frequently deposit sediment on their floodplains, so it's not unusual to find the remains from prehistoric people far below the land surface. Given what I know about rates of sedimentation, I suspected that the buried archaeological horizon was approximately 1,000 years

## *Art of the Flint Hills*

We'll never know who created the first art of the Flint Hills. It was made, no doubt, hundreds of years ago when a roaming Native American grabbed a piece of flint to etch onto a rock the vastness of the tallgrass prairie as far as he could see and ride.



Research by our editorial team uncovered the 1840 Expedition sketches of William Fairholme, who may possibly be the first European to capture the Flint Hills in art.

More recently, hundreds of amateur and professional painters and photographers have flocked to the Flint Hills for inspiration, to convey the same expanses the Native Americans had discovered.

As we think about who might have been the first to photograph or paint the Flint Hills in more modern times, we must remember that life on the prairie was hard. The necessary supplies may have been forsaken and the skills

forgotten on the journey as homesteaders struggled against brutal summers and winters while raising families.

The daily hardships may have been transcended only on those springtime sunrises when awakened by roosters and fresh possibilities, and on those autumn sundowns knowing that harvest had been completed.

The first photograph of the Flint Hills may have been made in 1867 of Fort Riley by Alexander Gardner, who was hired by railroads to document their sites. One of the earliest paintings of the Flint Hills was done in 1927 by John Noble, an eccentric Wichita painter who traveled in Europe.



ROAD TO THE SKY  
*Robert Sudlow*  
Courtesy of Barbara Sudlow