

By the Kansas Historical Society

Indian Removal to the “Great American Desert”

When Europeans first arrived in the New World they did not “discover” an empty land. Thousands of people already lived in this place. Each group of American Indians had adapted to the conditions where they lived. Some were farmers and some were hunters. Some lived in permanent villages and some were nomadic. Some lived in forested woodlands and some lived on the open plains. American Indians believed that the land, like the air and the sunshine, belonged to all people. They only borrowed it as a place to live and to hunt.

By the 1800s land in the eastern United States was becoming scarce. Americans wanted new opportunities and more land. The purchase of the Louisiana Territory had doubled the size of the United States. Major Stephen H. Long was the leader of a scientific expedition across some of this newly acquired land.

Long published an atlas of the United States in 1822. This popular volume included a map of the territory that was to become Kansas. Across Kansas Long wrote the words “Great Desert.” He went on to say, “The Great Desert is frequented by roving bands of Indians who have no fixed place of residence but roam from place to place in quest of game.” Little did he know the impact this would have on American Indians.

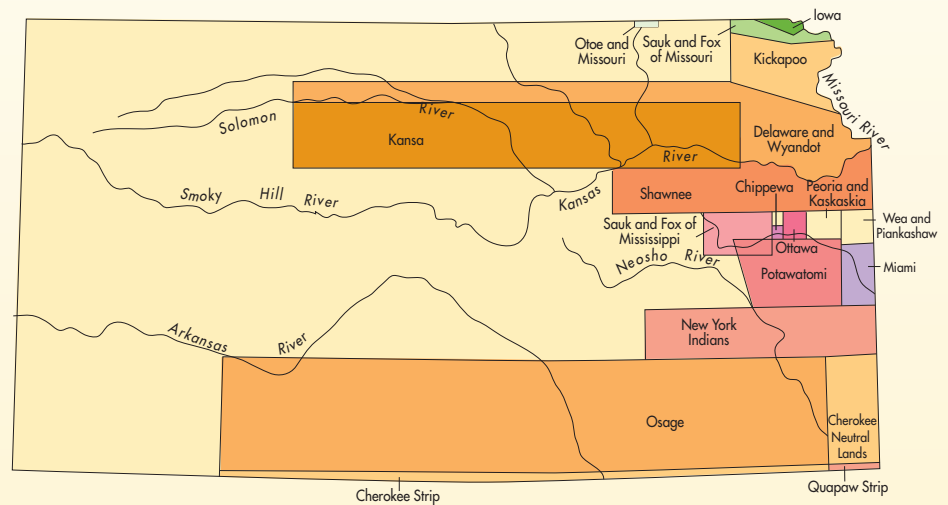


In 1830 it took three weeks to travel from New York City to the Mississippi River at St. Louis. The Mississippi River was seen as a natural boundary. Many people believed that settlement would never go beyond that boundary.

Long convinced Americans that this land would never be suitable for agriculture and settlement. For many it made sense that this desert land could become Indian Territory. President Andrew Jackson asked Congress for the right to remove eastern Indian tribes to the "Great Desert."

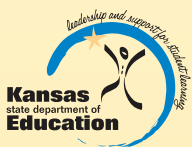
The Indian Removal Act of 1830 gave President Jackson new power. As president he could use treaties to force American Indians to leave the homes of their ancestors. Earlier treaties allowed the U.S. government to gain land by purchasing it from the tribes. This time the goal was to remove tribes entirely from all land east of the Mississippi River.

First, tribes in areas west of the Mississippi River had to give up part of their lands for eastern tribes. Treaties with the Kansa and Osage in 1825 forced these tribes onto restricted spaces within their traditional homelands. The new land was to be divided into reservations for the eastern tribes. This land was guaranteed to be theirs forever.



Through the Indian Removal Act, the U.S. government would pay eastern tribes for any improvements they had made to their lands. This included structures they had built and fields they had prepared. The government would pay expenses for the tribes to move. As protection for the tribes, the government declared that only government appointed traders, the military, and missionaries could live with the Indians on these new reservations in the west.

The Indians who refused to move and remained east of the Mississippi would be forced to give up their traditional lifestyle. They would become citizens of the state in which they were living.



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