

Wakarusa Wetlands Indigenous History

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Abstract

The Wakarusa River Valley and wetlands have had an interconnected history with the various Indigenous groups throughout history that have called this region home. There are six sections that I would like to outline within this work, the first being traditional homelands, tribes who without any European intervention, came to call this area home. The second is the emigrant tribes, those who were forced to use the Wakarusa Valley as a point on their removal journey. The third era of the wetlands would come from the United States Indian Industrial Training School, modern-day Haskell Indian Nations University. The fourth era would be the 1968 Baker University buyout of the wetlands, which took control of the majority of the wetlands from Haskell. The fifth discernible era would be the controversial South Lawrence trafficway that cuts through the wetlands. The last era that must be discussed is our modern one, where there are individuals who want to develop the wetlands versus those who want to protect the wetlands' rich biodiversity.

The reason there is such a push from my end to have this portion of the Wakarusa River Valley represented is due to the fact that most of this region's residents do not know the Indigenous history attached to the land. It is easy for people who do not have a cultural connection to an ecosystem to make decisions about it. Still, it is markedly less easy for those same people once you add human connections to that same region. Indigenous history is already a subject that is poorly represented within Western spaces, so with good ethics in mind, we must demonstrate this history through our work.

I. Intro

Indigenous history within the region is one that is both long-standing and an ongoing process. When we have these discussions over the Wakarusa River Valley and the future of this ecological habitat and the future of Douglas County in general, it is a good point of reference to look at what came before. There is a rich and diverse human history of Indigenous tribes prior to European and United States colonization in the region. There are three major tribes and one large tribal confederacy that have this type of history in Douglas County and the Wakarusa region. Some histories are interconnected, while most others naturally form by themselves in the area. Many of these tribes did not live sedentary lifestyles but were semi-nomadic, following long-held routes of travel that would seasonally bring tribes and bands back to the exact location.

II. Traditional Homelands

Within the traditional homelands section, there will not be a strict timeline for the tribes prior to European contact. The histories of these tribes were passed down through oral traditions, and specific dates were not necessary within these cultures. Sometimes, things were counted by generations, or were left ambiguous about the date. The lack of a concrete date is not a fault but a feature that shows the cultural differences between Western European and Indigenous cultures of North America. The histories and stories themselves are so strong that they could withstand the test of time through word of mouth from one generation to another, creating an almost impervious chain that linked ancestors to their descendants. So, to reiterate it for this section, there will be no specific dates but multiple cascading approximate timelines of different tribes that intertwine at some stages and are isolated at others.

In the discussion of traditional homelands, we are going to start with two tribes who have an interconnected history in their journey to this region. These two tribes are the Kansa or Kaw and Osage nations. These two tribes trace their origins to the Ohio River valley in the late Woodland period, where a large and diverse tribal group known as the Dhegiha Siouan Tribes lived (Hunter, 2019). The Dhegiha Siouan tribes spoke in different dialects of the Dhegiha language. The dates of this migration are not fully agreed upon by both tribes, but 1000 CE marks a median point between various timelines for the migratory period for the Dhegiha Siouan Tribes, where they began their Southern migration following rivers such as the Missouri River and tributaries.

The tribes of this larger group would split off at key points, leaving the Osage and Kansa as the final traveling tribes. They would splinter at the merging of the Kansas and Missouri rivers. This event occurred around 1300 CE. The Osage would occupy western Missouri, including the Ozarks, and the Kansa pushed farther westward

along the Kansas River toward the Kansas plains. The Wakarusa River Valley would exist thoroughly within these two tribes' distinct territories, being used for hunting ranges and seasonal travel. The Osage and Kansa were sedentary groups that had semi-nomadic practices, but both had permanent villages and agricultural practices. Over the years, treaties with the United States would drastically reduce their land bases. Sadly, both tribes are now located in Oklahoma, and they were forced to move there due to forced land-ceding treaties with the United States. It would be a 1870 bill from Congress (*Text - H.R.998*, 2025) that would remove the Osage Tribe in its entirety from the Kansas reservation in 1871. Similarly, "on May 27, 1872, over the strong protests of Chief Allegawaho and his people, a federal act moved the Kanza to a 100,137-acre site in northern Kay County, Oklahoma." (THE KANZA PEOPLE, 2022)

A brief point needs to be made for the Kanza people due to the importance of their impact on the region and the state of Kansas as a whole. Kansas gets its name from the Kanza Tribe. Similarly, in the discussion over the Wakarusa River Valley, it is a good time to mention where the name Wakarusa comes from. The name itself is derived from "Wa-ha-roo-sa," the Kansa word for swamp milkweed or its scientific name, *Asclepias incarnata* (Staab, 1995). This plant was abundant in the wetlands and was a food source for the Kansa people.

This section will talk about the Otoe-Missouria Tribe, with the Otoe calling themselves the Jiwere (jee-WEH-ray) and the Missouria calling themselves the Nutachi (noo-TAH-chi), a pair of twin tribes that migrated together from the Great Lakes region to their land base in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas around the early 1600s. The tribes were largely nomadic and hunter-gatherers within the region, with the area able to fully support the tribes themselves. The Tribes would move throughout the Wakarusa region in a nomadic lifestyle, hunting bison or other game. Sadly, with the ongoing US colonization of Kansas in the 1800s, treaties would, over time, chip away at the reservation of the tribes to the point they were forced to the Big Blue Reservation. The Tribes would officially leave Kansas in 1881, moving down to Red Rock, Oklahoma, where their Tribe is still located today (*History*, n.d.).

In this last tribal group of traditional homelands, we will be looking at the Oceti Šakówiŋ, which translates to "the Seven Council Fires," also known as the Sioux confederacy. However, the Sioux name is an exonym given to them by the Ojibwe people. The whole word is Nadowessioux, which meant "people of the snake-like river" but was misinterpreted by the French to say "little snakes," and the French adopted the use of the name for the Tribe. The Oceti Šakówiŋ is a confederacy of 3 major tribes: the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota. (Sioux Native Americans, 2021) The three are then broken into seven bands: the Wahpekute, Sistonwan, Ihanktown, Ihanktowana, Tetonwan, Wahpetonwan, and Mdewankanton. As for the history of the Oceti Šakówiŋ in the Wakarusa River Valley, there is no sustained connection to the Wakarusa. But it is known that some bands would follow bison herds going South that would go into the Wakarusa area; though this was for a limited time, it was recurring enough to make note of their interactions here.

Finally, it is key to point out that Indigenous peoples have been within this region for thousands of years. Rivers such as the Kansas and the Wakarusa would have been highways of trade and travel. We know that there were Indigenous groups within the modern-day state of Kansas, with direct evidence dating back eleven thousand years ago; however, it is not the official beginning of Indigenous groups in the region. It is still a necessary point to make known that people have inhabited or, at the very least, hunted these lands for a significantly long time, even before any groups listed in this document. The lands of Kansas and this area of Wakarusa were not barren landscapes where people had never walked before Europeans. These lands have a long-standing and diversely rich Indigenous history that must be discussed.

III. Emigrant tribes

Throughout the early to late 19th century, the United States government had a policy of coercing or forcing tribes to move from their traditional homelands, many of whom were forced to move to Oklahoma, as noted in the last section of Kansas' specific traditional homelands. But within this discussion, it is key to look at emigrant tribes that were forced to go through the Wakarusa River Valley region to reach Indian Country, modern-day Oklahoma. The Tribes themselves have current reservations that are sovereign from the state of Oklahoma. But this section is necessary because, unlike those who came before, who chose this land because of its beauty and its splendor, these emigrant tribes were forced to walk here through mud, sweat, and, sadly, the loss of life and loved ones.

Beginning as one group in the Great Lakes region, the Kickapoo tribe was forced westward to Illinois due to European intervention in the area. It was the 1832 Treaty of Castor Hill (Treaty with the Kickapoo, 1832) that would fully push the Kickapoo tribe out of its completely cohesive state and split into multiple tribes. The treaty provisions lay out the Kansas reservation, and this reservation exists today. The Kickapoo tribe of Kansas is one of the four federally recognized tribes of Kansas. However, with the movement to Kansas, many of the tribes' citizens continued onward to Texas, which at the time was controlled by Spain, seeking to be outside of the sphere of United States government influence. This journey would have taken them through the Wakarusa River in their travels South, most likely the first river that needed to be passed over. Today, there exist three distinct Kickapoo tribes: the Kickapoo tribe of Kansas, the Kickapoo traditional tribe of Texas, and the Kickapoo tribe of Oklahoma.

The second group within the emigrant tribes we'll be looking at is the two bands of the Potawatomi Nation, the Prairie Band Potawatomi and the Citizen Band Potawatomi. The Tribe's traditional homelands were around the Great Lakes, most notably Lake Michigan. 1830 would mark a turning point for the Tribe, though after decades of conflict with European nations, the United States. The US president, Andrew Jackson, would pass the American Indian Removal Act. In 1833, the Potawatomi tribe was forced out of their homelands, and the splintering effect happened with the bulk of the Tribe going to set up Missouri landholding, though in

1846, they would be forced into their Kansas reservation. Still, others tried to hold out in the Great Lakes region or flee to Canada. The journey to Missouri was especially harsh, with multiple groups going at different times. One particular group would be exceptionally harsh in the year 1838, with this event being known as the Trail of Death that led to the loss of over 40 people (Willett, 2021). However, after 1846 in Kansas, the Pottawatomie would filter into two different groups: one that would be considered the Prairie band and another referred to as the Mission band, which would take up more Western agricultural practices and religious teachings.

This reservation was located near present-day Jackson County, Kansas, and it would be due to the signing of the Treaty of 1867, which would mark a complete fracture of the Tribe in its current setting (Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, 2025). The Mission Band, now officially called the Citizen Band Potawatomi, would make their way down to Indian country, modern-day Oklahoma, and, similar to the Kickapoo tribe, their journey would have made them cross the Wakarusa River South of Topeka, being one of the emigrant tribes to do so. Today, the Citizen band Potawatomi and the Prairie band Potawatomi exist as two distinct tribal entities with their own reservations, with the Prairie band still inhabiting the Kansas reservation.

Whenever it comes to an emigrant tribe with a land base that directly connects to the Wakarusa River, we can look at the Shawnee tribe, whose Kansas reservation encompassed the entire Wakarusa River at certain times. The tribe's traditional homelands lie within the modern-day states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania, with migration among other neighboring states. By the late 18th century, certain groups of the Shawnee Tribe would emigrate to Missouri. 13 would spark another fraction point where the progenitors to the eastern band of Shawnee would create a separate Tribal group. The Shawnee Kansas reservation would be created with the 1825 treaty with the Shawnee, totaling 1.6 million acres. This reservation would completely cover the Wakarusa River. By 1831, the Eastern Band would move to Oklahoma with a band of Seneca, and in 1832, would become the "United Nation of Senecas and Shawnees". However, in 1867, the treaty would split them up, with the Eastern Shawnee becoming their own tribe again.

Being the largest waterway within their reservation, the Shawnee would have used the Wakarusa River area for hunting or fishing. The Tribe also employed sedentary farming practices in agriculture and was known to be quite adept at the skill. In 1854, a treaty would shrink the western boundaries of the reservation, now encompassing 30 miles into Kansas from the Missouri line, with a total of 200,000 acres. Before the signing of this treaty, a band of Shawnee would leave and not be present for the signing of the reservation's new boundaries. This band would be known as the Absentee Shawnee and would move down to Indian country, modern-day Oklahoma. During the US Civil War, the remaining Shawnee Tribe in Kansas would ally itself with the Union states, being known as the "loyal" Shawnee. Though sadly, this state of alliance did not help the tribe out for long. Following the Civil War, Kansas was trying to open up all tribal lands to white settlers and pursuing tribal

removals to Indian country. After heavy encroachment by white settlers on Shawnee territory throughout the 1860s, the Loyal Shawnee were left in dire straits. In 1869, an agreement was reached between the Loyal Shawnee and the Cherokee Nation, where the Shawnee would join the Cherokee Nation. This group of roughly 722 citizens would be known as the Cherokee Shawnee, and in 2000, would regain their self-governance and would become federally recognized as the Shawnee tribe once more. Today, the Shawnee tribe, the Absentee Shawnee Tribe, and the Eastern Shawnee Tribe are all located in Oklahoma and have their own distinct sovereign headquarters and nations.

There are other noteworthy tribes in the region that would have interacted with the Wakarusa River Valley throughout the extent of their emigration across the US. Historically, areas West of Kansas City housed multiple Kansas tribal reservations. The proximity alone would lead to a connected trade in the region going through the area. Tribes such as the Wyandot and Delaware Tribes, with the Delaware Tribes' Kansas reservation, marked the intersecting point between the Wakarusa and Kansas rivers. This reservation was created with the treaty with the Delawares, 1829 (*Treaty with the Delawares 1829*, 2025). Sadly, a treaty in 1866 would have moved the tribe down to modern-day Oklahoma. (*Removal History of the Delaware Tribe*, n.d.)

Additionally, Franklin County, directly South of Douglas County, housed reservations for the Tribes and bands of the Pawnee, Missouri, Muncie, Osage, Ottawa, Kansa, Teton, Ojibwe, Shawnee, and the Sac and Fox (Visit Ottawa, 2021). The journeys these tribes took to modern-day Franklin County would have seen them go through the wetlands and the Wakarusa River. These tribes would have had at least a moderate amount of interaction with the Wakarusa River, even if it was just due to the migration of different animal and plant species. Though sadly, all the tribes listed within this paragraph no longer have a reservation standing in Kansas, with many of them also moving to Oklahoma.

IV. United States Indian Industrial Training School

This section will entail the story of Haskell Indian Nations University, which is a key point because the development of the Wakarusa River Valley directly mirrors that of Haskell Indian Nations University. The stories these two share are almost symbolic; they are intertwined at the same time with the traditional ways of the students being torn away from them, the natural way of the land being tilled out of the soil.

Opening its doors in 1884, the United States Indian Industrial Training School had its first year of classes, starting with 22 students. Still, enrollment quickly grew from its original 22 students to over 308 by the end of 1884." The training school was a place that was meant to assimilate Native students away from their traditional cultures and into the dominant European American Society (Haskell History, n.d.). It is key to mention how cruel this place was; it took every facet of life and broke it into pieces. If you were caught using your native language, your food was withheld, your hair was cut whenever you arrived, your clothes were either thrown away or sold, everything

was on a military regiment time, and many students were removed from their homes and forced to attend here. To truly show how prison-like the conditions are, it is key to look at the genuine prison for students: "In the period from 1910-1933, they would have been incarcerated in the Haskell jail, but before its construction, fruit storage cellars were used to punish students." (HHHCCM, n.d.) The youngest student in the first year was age 11, and throughout the years of the boarding school, children as young as three or four would be forced here. A famous Haskell photo titled "Haskell Babies" shows this horror. In 1887, the boarding school was renamed to Haskell Institute. Many students were known to try to escape from Haskell, going directly into the wetlands to try and find their way home, and according to many people and elders, the wetlands are some of those students' final resting places.

Haskell Institute was a place made to assimilate Native students, and one way of doing so was to force Western agricultural practices onto a new generation of native Americans. This was in the twisted goal to sever them from their traditional means of sustenance. During this time, Haskell Institute drained the wetlands and tilled the soil using raised earthen beds, destroying over 700 acres of wetland. Students were forced to do manual labor throughout most of the day, harvesting the crops that were then sold by the campus. This development would also spark neighboring wetlands owned by Kansas residents to become agricultural land. In 1922, three large-scale drainage ditches were constructed throughout the Haskell wetlands. It was not until Dr. Henry Roe Cloud, a citizen of the Winnebago tribe, began to oversee Haskell as its Superintendent in 1933, that the winds of change would hit the soils of Haskell. Dr. Cloud would put an emphasis on traditional practices and arts at Haskell, and by 1937, Haskell's agricultural sector would be removed.

However, the Haskell farmlands were then leased to local farmers for their own crop rotations. Haskell slowly moved out of its boarding school era of primary and secondary education. Starting in the 1930s, Haskell offered a post-secondary vocational trade school. The last high school graduating class would leave Haskell's doors in 1965, fully marking an end to its traditional boarding school ways. In 1970, Haskell Institute was accredited as Haskell Indian Junior College, where it offered two-year degrees and continued vocational schooling. Then, in 1993, Haskell officially became Haskell Indian Nations University, and in 1998, the first Haskell baccalaureate graduates left with their diplomas (SHHINU, 2016).

V. Baker Buyout of the Haskell Wakarusa Wetlands

Following the 1930s termination of the agricultural practices of Haskell and the leasing of farm-developed wetlands, the next era of Indigenous history within the Wakarusa Wetlands comes from forced paternalism. Haskell Indian Nations University exists under the Department of the Interior, and this has always been an area of contention. Haskell has never been given an adequate sense of self-autonomy; any actions need to be run by the Bureau of Indian Education, then through the Department of the Interior. But the opposite is not true; the Department of the Interior can make decisions on Haskell without consulting with Haskell itself. This system led

us to the late 1960s, when the Department of the Interior marked Haskell's wetlands as surplus lands that Haskell did not need. What does Haskell's community consult on in this decision? No. Over 70% of Haskell's prior land base was relinquished due to the interventions of the Department of the Interior.

Going further then takes us to the federal government's 30-year Quit Claim deed with Baker University. The land was given to the General Services Administration and then further to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare without Haskell's input. A series of closed-door discussions happens between officials at Baker University, Kansas University, and government officials above Haskell. In 1968, Baker University was given the deed on the Haskell wetlands free of charge (*The Wetlands*, 2023). The 30-year time limit was a stop for revenue. Thirty years had to be used for only educational purposes, and in 1998, that opened the door for commercial usage of the region. Looking into the South Lawrence trafficway, this happened, as well as an unsuccessful apartment development deal in 2024

It is necessary to point out that Haskell has been against selling the wetlands since the very beginning of these leasing and title agreements. Haskell still holds that it has a traditional claim to the overall wetlands, which many still call the full Haskell Wakarusa wetlands. In a recent letter from the Haskell board of regions to the president of Baker University, it is clearly shown that the forced relinquishment of land from Haskell is still a continued issue. The letter states, "By the end of the 20th century, approximately 70 percent of Haskell lands had been given away by paternalistic acts of mismanagement that took precious land secured for the education of the people of our Tribal Nations." Alongside the fact that "Tribal Nations had no part in these decisions — that were made for us — in the bad old days of Federal Indian Affairs." And finally, the board asked for the lands to be returned, saying they "would encourage the Baker University to return all their ill-gotten Haskell Wakarusa wetlands to Haskell Indian nation university in an exemplary act of land back"(Clark, 2024).

VI. South Lawrence trafficway

Beginning in the 1980s as a development project to put a 2-lane county road through the wetlands, the project quickly spiraled into an event that Haskell to this day regrets, the Building of the South Lawrence trafficway. Groups already opposed the early version of this roadway project in the 80s, with a famous advertisement for Agnes T. Frog, intending to be a write-in for county commissioner. The frog itself was a fictitious frog wanting to stop the bypass going through the wetlands. By the 1990s, it would turn into a full highway project that was adamantly opposed by both environmentalists and the Haskell community. Groups like The Wetlands Preservation Organization, the Haskell board of regents, allies from the University of Kansas, and Baker University were all working to stop this trafficway.

The trafficway would be a disagreement that would split the Lawrence community right down the middle. But by 1996, under heavy scrutiny, the western portion of the South Lawrence trafficway would come to a halt due to successful legal

battles against it. Being stopped at an area colloquially known as "the bridge to nowhere." The state of Kansas would, during this time, bring on an individual who caused a large amount of contention for Haskell Indian Nations University. Brought on as an "interpreter" between the state of Kansas and Haskell, Mr. Pirtle was not well received by the Haskell Board of Regents. With Regents president Mimi Rupnik going on to say Tribes should be insulted the way Mr. Pirtle is speaking for them, as if we need an interpreter in this day and age," she said. "We are not back in the 1800s, in treaty time. The majority of tribes now are highly educated and understand the legalities. I think the state of Kansas did a backdoor thing by bringing Mr. Pirtle in." (Pierpoint, 2001)

Another common area of concern that was raised by Haskell was the effects on the possible grave sites of Haskell students and the history of Haskell's Wakarusa wetlands being lost due to this development. By 2000, Haskell and its supporters would win after an environmental study returned saying that the trafficway should not be built. The original plans put the expansion on 31st Street, which would go through Haskell's lands. Many thought the highway was dead at this point, but this did not last. By 2001, the state of Kansas struck a multimillion-dollar mitigation deal with Baker University to have a whole roadway built South of 31st St. (Lawhorn, 2016), and another 11 years of legal battles ensued. Still, in July of 2012, it was confirmed that the road could be built. By 2016, the roadway was finished, and the South Lawrence trafficway would cut Haskell off from the full wetlands. And for the Haskell wetlands would be left in a disarray, cut off from many of the environmental systems that kept it alive.

The completion of this would leave Haskell in a saddened state; despite 25 years of fighting, it would be viewed as a moral failure on behalf of Lawrence and the State of Kansas. Bob Eye, an attorney against the trafficway, would say, "If the history of this is written in a careful way, it will be hard to see how Indigenous people's interests weren't pushed to the side here." (Lawhorn, 2016) Another longtime fighter and proponent of the wetlands, Dr. Wildcat, a famous professor at Haskell Indian Nations University, noted, "I think this will go down in the annals of environmental history as a mistake." (Lawhorn, 2016)

VII. Modern-day Haskell fights for the Wakarusa wetlands

The effects of the South Lawrence trafficway are still felt today; the trafficway works as a barrier to biodiversity. With the eastern, western, and northern areas around the Haskell wetlands being urban development and the highway cutting off the vast majority of migration from the South, the Haskell wetlands are left in a very precarious state. One where, if left to its own vices, it would not be able to heal itself properly. But it is here that we get to talk about individuals such as Courtney King, who fight tooth and nail every day of the week to help heal the wetlands using Indigenous methodologies. Alongside the Haskell greenhouse crew and a wider Haskell community who support them, they do amazing work in the wetlands, cleaning out overgrowth and monoculture species that have propagated over the years.

Frequent Haskell wetlands cleanup crews go out and clean multiple acres of land of harmful plants while reseeding native species. Alongside being good caretakers of the wetlands, the Haskell community is a routine advocate for the betterment of the Haskell wetlands. Community meetings set up to voice concerns and propose efforts to help heal the land routinely happened.

Other Actions seek to reconnect the Haskell and Baker wetlands into one large Wakarusa wetland. Actions such as the Board of Regents letter to Baker University, as noted earlier in the text, asking for the return of the Baker wetlands to Haskell, are other cases of Haskell trying to regain the wetlands. More minor but no less critical efforts, such as interconnections between the Baker wetlands and the Haskell wetlands crews, seek to find common ground and work together.

The community itself is preparing for its next fight against the Lawrence 2040 plan. Individuals and groups are talking about the issues that it may cause to the wider Wakarusa Wetlands. The wetlands' overall health is one area that the Baker Wetlands crew and the Haskell Wetlands crew see eye to eye on and work to prevent. Coalitions of Haskell students and Lawrence advocates are starting to stand together and voice their displeasure with the proposals. Multiple individuals noted that they feel like the advancement of Lawrence development past the trafficway is breaking one of Lawrence's promises to Haskell. Buhler, former county commissioner, republican state senator, and proponent of the trafficway, described it as a way of stopping progress from going any further South. His quote on saying that the road was not made for developers but in fact "that will not prove to be the case. You wouldn't pick that route if you're trying to be a developer. You would have built it further south. And that would have given you a lot more land to work with." (Lawhorn, 2016) The people who work to keep the wetlands alive and those fighters who defended them for 25 years are hailed as heroes and Haskell legends. And it seems abundantly clear that no matter what the future holds, the Haskell community will still be here fighting for the wetlands.

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