

# Introduction

**People** sometimes say that Kansas is in “the middle of nowhere.” Actually, Kansas is in the middle of everywhere! The geographic center of the mainland United States (the part that does not include Alaska or Hawaii) is in northeast Kansas. Kansas is a day’s drive from both Mexico and Canada. And of course, it’s only a short tornado ride to Oz.

Kansas is shaped like a graham cracker with a nibble out of the northeast corner. The eastern and western parts of Kansas are very different. The west is flat, dry plains. The east gets more rain and is filled with trees. The first white explorers and settlers often did not know what to make of the Kansas landscape. Those who saw the east thought it was beautiful. Others, traveling through the west, thought it was a wasteland that would never be good for farming.

Native Americans lived in Kansas for thousands of years. Many of them hunted buffalo that roamed in huge herds. In the mid-1800s, white settlers started to arrive. Residents of Kansas then had a big question to answer: Would it be a slave state or a free state? Supporters on both sides arrived by the thousands, trying to tip the balance.

Kansans chose not to allow slavery, a decision that affected the entire United States. Meanwhile, the state’s economy exploded through wheat, oil, and aviation. Drive down a Kansas highway and you’ll see signs that read, “One Kansas farmer feeds 128 people and you.” Look beyond the signs, and you’ll see how all Kansans have helped build their state and their country.

# Chapter 1



## THE GEOGRAPHY OF KANSAS



“Shark!” If you are in Kansas and someone yells that, don’t panic. It’s probably just a paleontologist who has found a fossil. Sharks don’t live in Kansas anymore, but about seventy million years ago, they did. Kansas was underwater then. Thousands of creatures lived in this warm and shallow sea, including sharks and mosasaurs, which were huge marine reptiles. Now fossils of these animals are found in the layers of rock that cover Kansas. That huge sea evaporated a long time ago. Now Kansas has another kind of sea—one made out of grass. If you weighed all the different plants in Kansas separately, the winner would be grass!

### **The Land**

Most people’s image of Kansas comes from the landscape in the western half of the state. These are the high plains. Miles of short grasses cover this flat land. There is little water. Few trees stop the powerful winds in this part of the state.

To the east of the high plains are the Smoky Hills. This region is filled with ancient limestone and sandstone. Settlers often built things from limestone because it was easier to find than wood. South of the Smoky Hills are the Red Hills. These hills have ribbons of iron