

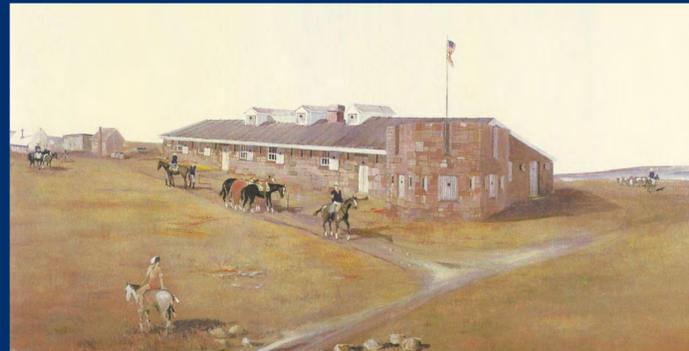
Danger on the Frontier

Danger comes in many forms

Central Kansas and the frontier carried many different meanings for people. Before the Santa Fe Trail was established in the 1820s, it meant home to Plains tribes like the Kiowa. As the trail brought a steady flow of merchants, settlers, and travelers, it came to mean danger for both tribes and settlers. However, for many settlers it also meant great possibilities and even escape from religious persecution or racism. All these ideas mixed together as the area changed over time, though they still hold some weight today.

Native American Conflict

While treaties with Native American tribes in eastern Kansas provided some protection for wagon trains and settlers on the Santa Fe Trail, tribes like the Kiowa in central Kansas continued to raid travelers along the Santa Fe Trail. As a result, a series of forts was established along the trail, including Fort Zarah in 1864, east of present-day Great Bend. The fort was impressive, with sandstone walls over a foot thick and holes cut in the walls for defense, in addition to two hexagonal towers. While the fort successfully defended against an attack of 100 Kiowas in 1868, it was decommissioned a year later, just five years after being built. Its buildings were taken apart and abandoned, and the land was later sold to settlers. Early settlers also had to defend themselves. Living in sod houses and dugouts, they added holes in their walls from which to shoot.



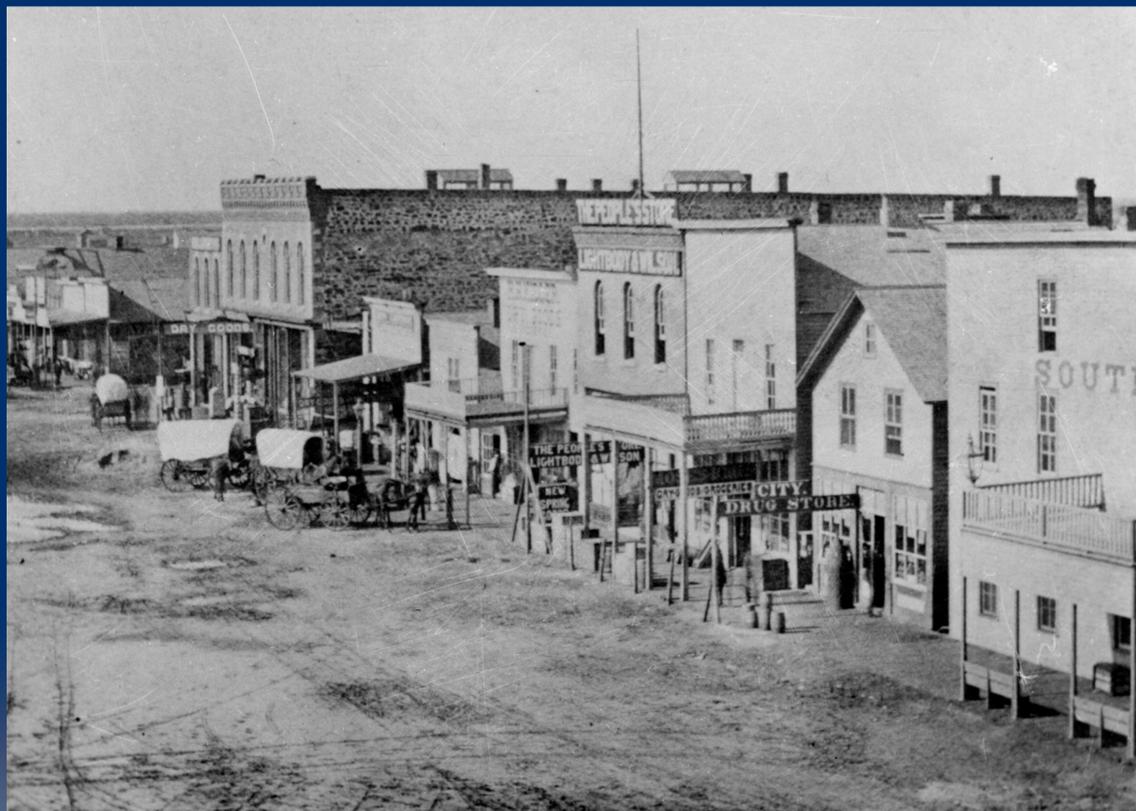
A painting of Fort Zarah rendered from original blue prints and memories.



The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company depot in Great Bend.

Cowtowns and Violence

As more people began settling the area in the 1870s, they discovered Native American raids were not the only danger on the frontier. In 1871, Great Bend was founded west of Fort Zarah, on the Santa Fe Trail, in anticipation of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, which came through the following year. Robbers were not uncommon in the isolated west; one early Great Bend business owner traveling for goods was never heard from again and assumed to be murdered for his money. By 1873, Great Bend had become a cattle shipping point. This stimulated local business, but it also brought along saloons, violence, and shoot-outs. Great Bend continued as a cowtown until Kansas restricted Texas cattle in 1876. As the cattle trade shifted, so too did the cowboys and other rowdies that were little tolerated by “peaceable” people, though violence still periodically erupted.



Great Bend during the height of the cowtown's violence, 1870 – 1880.



The tornado of 1906 on East Broadway in Stafford.

Natural Disasters

The area's weather proved its own danger. In 1882, a tornado destroyed Stafford, along with its ballot box during the second of four elections for the Stafford County seat. Undaunted, Stafford recovered and replaced buildings within a year. In 1919 and again in 2001, Hoisington was struck by tornadoes. The 2001 F4 tornado carved a path 5 miles long. It killed one and injured 28, in addition to destroying 200 homes and 12 businesses and damaging another 285 homes. The city again quickly recovered, but the tornado's path is still visible from the air. Fire too was dangerous. In 1878, Great Bend suffered a downtown fire, while Hudson suffered multiple fires from 1904 to 1921.

Natural disasters could also come in the form of disease. In Great Bend, a small pox epidemic broke out in December 1882 causing the entire town to be quarantined. Everything was canceled and closed, including mail delivery, churches, schools, and society meetings. People were not even allowed to assemble. Despite these precautions, 30-some people caught small pox and 15 died. However, through the perseverance and hard work of its people and communities, towns on the Byway survive despite these and other disasters including blizzards, pests, and floods.



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