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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2023 - Transportation in the Flint Hills

Flint Hills Trail State Park

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Recommended Citation

Pritchett, Katherine & Bender, Jeffrey (2023). "Flint Hills Trail State Park," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Gravel Series #7
Zak Barnes

FLINT HILLS TRAIL STATE PARK

One of the best ways to enjoy the spectacular vastness and beautiful little details of the Flint Hills is to travel slowly — by foot or horseback, as many Indigenous people and settlers did, or by bicycle.

One of the best ways to do this is by traversing the Flint Hills Trail State Park.

The park is a 118-mile corridor running from Osawatomie in eastern Kansas to Herington in the Flint Hills along the route of the former Missouri Pacific Railroad. The trail follows the general route of the historic Santa Fe Trail, which existed until rail lines succeeded in moving goods faster than wagons and pack animals.

The railbed that forms the Flint Hills Trail began life in the 1880s as part of the Council Grove, Osage City, & Ottawa Railway, subsequently purchased by the Missouri Pacific Railroad and, later, the Union Pacific Railroad as part of its network across the central and western United States. Operations continued until the 1980s, when the Union Pacific discontinued rail service and removed the ties and rails from the corridor, “railbanking” it in 1995. Railbanking is a voluntary agreement between a railroad company and a trail agency to use an out-of-service rail corridor as a trail until a railroad might need the corridor again for rail service.

Volunteer trail groups struggled to turn the right-of-way into a viable recreation and transportation corridor. The last such group was the Kanza Rail-Trails Conservancy. In 2014, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks stepped

in to assist with development and management.

The trail passes through Miami, Franklin, Osage, Lyon, Morris and Dickinson counties. In addition to Osawatimie and Herington, the trail visits the towns of Rantoul, Ottawa, Pomona, Vassar, Osage City, Admire, Allen, Bushong, Council Grove, Wilsey and Delavan. The last part, from Council Grove to Herington, is undeveloped at this time.

When the entire 118 miles is completed, the Flint Hills Trail will be the longest rail-trail in Kansas and the eighth longest rail-trail in the United States. The trail is a component of the coast-to-coast American Discovery Trail and is also a National Recreational Trail. NRT designation promotes some of the country's highest-caliber trails with the intention of providing recreation access to rural and urban communities, economic development through tourism, and healthy recreation opportunities.

The Kansas Legislature added the Flint Hills Trail to the state park system in 2018. The Department of Wildlife and Parks moved forward with development in phases, aided by grants from the Federal Highway Administration.

In 2022, the trail garnered a Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant for \$24.8 million to complete nearly

the entire length of the trail and install safety features. The project provides an opportunity to boost recreation and nature tourism, as evidenced by establishment of new businesses related to the trail.

The trail's miles tell many stories, connecting cultures and histories that shaped the state of Kansas and going through significant historic and ecological areas. As trail development continues, designated sections will pay homage to that history and rural cultures through interpretive signage:

Beginning at the eastern terminus of Osawatimie, the **Freedom's Frontier** section highlights the John Brown historic site, the history of the Jayhawkers (anti-slavery fighters in Kansas before and during the Civil War) and the Underground Railroad.

In the **Winding Waters** section, trail users travel next to the scenic Marais des Cygnes River along red oak bluffs and into the town of Ottawa, where the trail intersects with the Prairie Spirit Trail State Park. The City of Ottawa has developed Legacy Square, a multi-use community gathering place near the intersection.

The **Rail Towns** segment remembers towns past and present that provided regular water stops along the rail line.



Bazaar Black Beauty
Zak Barnes

The **Prairie Lakes** section highlights the town of Vassar and two lakes near the trail, Pomona and Melvern. Both lakes feature state parks (Pomona and Eisenhower) that offer camping or cabins and other amenities, including their own trails.

The **Coal Country** section tells of old mine shafts and mine tailings near Osage City.

The **Heart of the Hills** section heads into the heart of the Flint Hills, offering amazing views of the tallgrass prairie.

The **Kaw Nation Heritage** portion passes by the Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park, which was part of the original homeland of the Kaw (also called Kanza) tribe. The Kaw Nation holds occasional powwows at the dance arbor on the site. Trails on the site are open to the public.

The town of Council Grove is in the **Meeting Place** section, where merchant wagon trains gathered to head down the Santa Fe Trail.

The western section, **Westward Commerce**, completes the trail, ending at the town of Herington, with its connection to railroad commerce.

Users encounter abundant plant and wildlife species, spectacular views, historic sites and diverse recreation areas along the trail. Though the trail offers gentle grades and easy curves, it travels through varied terrain including riverside wooded bluffs, rolling farmland and riparian woodlands, as well as charming small towns and the namesake Flint Hills. On its east end, the trail traverses the Osage Cuestas, whose rivers and trees contrast

with the rolling hills of the middle section. On the west end, the landscape is flat-topped plateaus.

The Flint Hills Trail not only functions as a destination itself but also provides a transportation and recreation corridor to link the counties and communities the trail passes through, creating many supportive partnerships to promote and build the success of the trail.

Just as in decades past, the trail brings commerce to the area, hosting 81,000 visitors in 2020 and connecting communities to natural landscapes. In 2022, the trail won an Environmental Excellence Award for non-motorized and multimodal transportation from the Federal Highway Administration, one of 14 transportation projects recognized nationwide.

After retiring from a 34-year career with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, serving for many years as state trails coordinator, Katherine Pritchett continues to write for both the department and the public. She is the author of three novels and a nonfiction book.

Osage Region Supervisor Jeffrey Bender has spent his entire career in natural resources and recreation. In his 30-plus years with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, he has overseen development of both the Kaw River and Flint Hills Trail state parks.



Winter Field (detail)
Melanie Johnson