Why are forty-one counties in the middle of the United States so closely bound that they should be celebrated as one National Heritage Area? What is it about the region that fostered these stories we celebrate today? A complete understanding of the nationally significant events in Freedom’s Frontier is impossible without knowing the story of its landscape. The unique geography of the region directly influenced the stories found here. When this landscape blended with human activity, it fostered a political firestorm that tested the limits of freedom across an entire nation. It is this “power of place”—an emotional and intellectual understanding that this place is different from others—that inspires us today.

“Beautiful groves dot the prairie, and the dark line of timber that stretches along valley...fixed there as the land-mark of perpetual beauty—the meandering river, with its dark skirting forests of timber on the north—are all scenes in nature’s magnificent panorama...”

Quote Source: Organization, objects, and plan of operations, of the Emigrant aid company: also, a description of Kansas. For the information of emigrants. Boston: Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company. 1854.
Weaving Place into our Stories

The Power of Place is framed by the Mission and Guiding Principles of Freedom’s Frontier. For reference, these are included below with the pieces that tie directly to the Power of Place highlighted in bold text.

Mission

Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area (FFNHA) is dedicated to building awareness of the struggles for freedom in western Missouri and eastern Kansas. These diverse, interwoven, and nationally important stories grew from a unique physical and cultural landscape. FFNHA inspires respect for multiple perspectives and empowers residents to preserve and share these stories. We achieve our goals through interpretation, preservation, conservation, and education for all residents and visitors.

Guiding Principles

1. We will be tolerant and respectful of diverse stories from multiple perspectives.
2. We will respect property rights.
3. We will focus on authentic and engaging experiences.
4. We will honor the region’s peoples, past and present.
5. We will appreciate the unique cultural and historic assets within the nationally important landscape.
6. We will invest in community engagement, education and empowerment.
7. We will sustain and grow sense of place.
8. We will value and protect the natural environment.
9. We will consider future generations in everything we do.

Why did the people in our stories settle here?

The natural landscape has dictated settlement patterns for most of human history. For thousands of years, the heritage area’s Indian peoples relied upon water and footpower for trade, migration, and subsistence. For the first two centuries of the Native American/African-American/Euro-American co-existence on the continent, the landscape was an equal constraint. Reliance on the land continued into the nineteenth century. Of the nation’s families, 90 percent relied upon farming as their principal means of support and they often depended on rivers for transportation and quality cropland.

Source: Google Earth, Rumsey Maps Collection.

ABOVE: Views of Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area in 1786 (above) and 2008 (below). In 220 years, the heritage area has changed from a sparsely populated region of prairie to a home for millions - a network of farmland, cities, towns, lakes, and stories. This dramatic change is summarized in the Power of Place to explore the connections between stories over time and across the heritage area.
When farmers arrived in Freedom's Frontier, they settled on a landscape formed by unique prehistoric geological events. As non-native settlers began to pour into western Missouri and eastern Kansas, the country embraced the Industrial Revolution. For the first time in human history, people would use industrial machines to conquer the natural order. The new technology and infrastructure meant that settlers relied on a combination of machines and natural corridors for development. Frontier trails and rowboats gave way to railroads and steamboats.

Despite technological advances, non-native settlers remained subservient to the natural landscape. Principally, in this period of transition, proximity to navigable rivers and fertile soils was essential. The heritage area's four major watersheds—the Missouri, Kansas/Kaw, Marais des Cygnes/Osage and Neosho River Valleys—played a critical role in the political upheaval that came to be called the Missouri-Kansas Border War. This chapter summarizes the heritage area's natural history and its role in shaping stories.
According to the perspective of natural historians, forces of nature—water, mountains, glaciers, fire and wind—have shaped the natural landscape of Freedom’s Frontier for millions of years.

Exploring the geological events that created the heritage area’s natural landscape leads us to examine the region as a whole. The majority of the heritage area’s political boundaries—states and counties—are arbitrary, they have no bearing on its natural development or climate. For instance, the counties in northeast Kansas experience no less rainfall than the counties in northwest Missouri. The Heritage Area’s counties, on both sides of the border that separates Kansas and Missouri, have more in common with each other than with other counties in their respective states. This is because the region as a whole lies in an area of transition between the drier climates to the west and wetter climates to the east (see image below).

The heritage area’s fertile soil and pastoral landscape of water, trees, and grasses were the result of a process that continued over a period of time far longer than the core timeline of national significance. This section will show what processes occurred across the heritage area to form the landscape we know today.

**The Scale of Time**

The natural features unique to our region have been crafted over an extremely long period of time. A series of events stretching over millions of years formed the physical geography of the region.

How can we understand the scale of natural processes in our story? One way to visualize this immense span of time is to apply it to a commonly understood reference of a 100-yard football field. If the past 100 million years were stretched out over a 100-yard-long football field, the distance between each yard line would equal 1 million years. Glaciers, the most important shapers of our region’s existing geography, occurred in the final one yard of the football field (see right). Zooming in, the period of significance for Freedom’s Frontier would be less than the width of a single blade of grass. When the natural landscape is altered, the features that required 100 million years to create—and that greatly influenced the heritage area’s human history—are lost.

**Natural History**

The background of our stories where there was enough water to support farming and ranching. Going west, it is not until settlers reach California and Oregon that they find plentiful water for settlement. As a result, one of the shortest, least dry ways of going to the Pacific coast was through Missouri and Kansas via trails. It is this connection between natural history and our stories that this chapter seeks to explore.

ABOVE: Precipitation map of Kansas and Missouri. The areas that receive less rainfall and snow appear more orange (drier) than areas that receive higher amounts of precipitation. This is a result of natural history, and it is a major factor in the settlement of the region. People in the nineteenth century tended to settle in areas where precipitation was sufficient to support agriculture without deep drilling for water. This region was one of the farthest west where there was enough water to support farming and ranching.
The Power of Place

Above: The period of natural history reviewed in this document stretches over 100 million years. If the 100 million years were stretched out over a football field, each yard would equal one million years of time. Shown here is a single yard on a regulation football field. The most recent glacial event would be less than an inch from the goal line, while the entire period of significance for Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area would only be 0.008 inches from the endzone, less than the width of a blade of grass.
The Blank Canvas: Seas and Mountains

One hundred million years ago, eastern Kansas and western Missouri lay at the center of an immense inland sea named the Western Interior Seaway. For millions of years, the Western Interior Seaway deposited the region’s minerals, many of which later shaped mining, settlement, and economic development that are part of the Freedom’s Frontier story.

The inland sea evaporated sixty-five million years ago, and left behind an exposed, flat sea floor. At the same time, a major event occurred to the west which affected the region—the formation of the Rocky Mountains. The Rocky Mountains had an enormous influence in the Midwestern climate, particularly on the precipitation of this heritage area.

This climatic influence continues to be felt today. As air passes over the Rocky Mountains, it condenses and most of the moisture is removed. On the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains a near desert-like condition exists, with very limited amounts of rainfall or snow. Certain native cultures called this weather pattern a “Chinook”—or snow eater. These winds come down and remove the moisture from the ground because of the low humidity in the air. Precipitation increases eastward from the Rockies to the Mississippi River as the air begins to pick up more moisture from the land and vegetation.

The availability of water, due to the effect of the Rockies on weather patterns, is the primary force in shaping the environment in this particular part of the world. Everything is dependent on water. Water rules; it is the essence of life. The distribution and the power of water creates our landscape.
The Picture is Shaped: Glaciers

Glaciation was the biggest agent of change in the heritage area. Glaciers, like big snowplows, pushed material south with a grinding action. The four most recent glacial periods significantly affected the creation of our region. The glaciers brought new material and the strength of water to carve the ravines, valleys, and river ways. They created much of our landscape: a legacy of rivers and tributaries that continue to drain the area. These glaciers left deposits at their edges which created very deep and agriculturally productive soil, and some of the most unique topographic features in the world.

Forming Our Rivers

The Mississippi River valley, one of the largest in the world, was greatly impacted by the combination of the glaciers and the flat sea floor. Of the major rivers in the region, almost all of them developed at the edge of a prehistoric glacier (see right). The first glacier redirected most of the heritage area’s rivers and soils. The melt water from that glacier redirected prehistoric rivers and created the essence of the Missouri River. The third glacial advance created much of the Mississippi River along its eastern edge. Rivers are dynamic features which shift and flood across our landscape in broad valleys. It is these valleys where many of the first Indians and non-natives in the region settled.

Forming Our Soils

Water has multiple influences on the geography of Freedom’s Frontier. Not only does it fall from weather patterns and flow through rivers, it also erodes the rocks into soils and transports soil from one place to another. This movement creates our landforms.

In the heritage area, the “good soils”—the most productive agricultural soils—are the newest, because these rocks contain minerals that are the basis for fertility and supporting plant life. As the soil ages, it erodes and is depleted of mineral content. As a result the soil mantle (layer of soil) becomes increasingly sterile and devoid of organic matter.

This aging can be turned back with glacial activity. Soil fertility gets renewed when it is overturned and when new materials are deposited on top. Glaciers act as massive tilling machines.
This can clearly be seen at the end of the last glacier. As the glacier retreated, the leftover materials created some of the best agricultural soils in the world. That fertility was carried down through the rivers and drainage channels into our heritage areas.

These soil deposits are the reason we have such abundance of fertile soil in this heritage area (see left). The expression of the soil is the ecosystem that sits on top.

**Forming our Topography**

If we look at the way water can move land and soil, we can see its influence on the land itself. Topography is, essentially, the erosion of the soil; and the underlying framework is the rock structure below (see right). The plains to the north of the heritage area were glaciated most recently, with only 10,000 years of soil development, erosion, and land development. Thus, the land is very flat. Freedom’s Frontier, with 150,000 years of soil development, contains river patterns and low hills that are the result of erosion. Lacking the impact of the last two glaciations, the southern portions of the heritage area contains some of the more pronounced landforms of the heritage area, crafted in large part by erosion.

Another influence was the immense ice sheet that lay to the north of the heritage area. This massive sheet created cold, heavy air and cyclonic winds. It created weather patterns around the Midwest that influenced the development of soils. As these glaciers began to retreat, they created vast floodplains of sediment-laden water miles and miles wide. In the winter these floodplains dried up, and cyclonic winds whipped across the floodplains, picking up small pieces of silt and depositing it on the other side of the river. Over the course of thousands and thousands of years this cycle of river-deposited and wind-blown silt created what we call “loess soils.” In Freedom’s Frontier, loess soils cover thousands of square miles in the region due to ancient winds that came off ice age glaciers which blew dirt in the air that settled on the ground.

On the east side of the Missouri River, bluffs, created by wind-blown silt, rise up to 300 feet high. This wind-deposited landform occurs in only two places in the world, here in the Midwest and in China’s Loess Plateau. It is a unique characteristic of our physiological development and our soil development.

**Quick Reference Definition**

- **ecosystem**: the complex of a community of organisms and its environment functioning as an ecological unit.
- **loess soils** (alternatively pronounced ‘las or ‘lo-as): loose deposits of silt that have been deposited by wind.

A full glossary of terms can be found in the appendix.
ABOVE: Forming our topography. Loess soil deposition. A glacial high-pressure system was locked over present-day Canada, creating winds that ran clockwise to the edge of the glacial sheet (blue arrows), then blew west to east (red arrows). The deposition of the loess soils (shown in brown) occurred throughout Freedom’s Frontier, particularly on the east side of rivers.

The glaciers left behind a flat landscape that slowly eroded over time. The photograph at the top left was covered by glaciers 10,000 to 22,000 years ago and is exceptionally flat. The photograph to the bottom right was covered by glaciers around 650,000 years ago but has missed more recent glaciers. The resulting landscape of rolling hills can be seen throughout the region.

“The streets of this religious city are huge furrows in the hills, and are sunk to the depth of fifty feet and over. The cliff-like walls rise frowningly above the street pedestrians.”

Henry Morgan Stanley describing the bluffs of Kansas City, My Early Travels and Adventures (July 1867), 1895
Our Landscape: the Prairie

When European explorers first gazed on the tall grasslands of the Midwest, they had no word for “prairie.” There was nothing in Western or Central Europe that was comparable in terms of its scale. They originally used the Latin term Terra Patria, which meant “pasture land” because it reminded them of little pasture lands.

Vegetation is the function of temperature, altitude, and precipitation (see left). As we change those variables, we get different types of vegetation. The reason the plains are prairie is that the soils are shallow enough that they do not contain a lot of moisture and or support big forest trees. Moving east, increased precipitation allowed the great Eastern Forest to develop. The shallow soil mantle farther west and the lack of precipitation kept this particular area grassland or prairie.

The prairie is a unique feature, particularly in this part of the world where the Eastern forest meets the tall grass prairies. It is a common misconception that the prairie is a feature exclusive to Kansas. In fact, the pre-settlement prairie in Missouri covered most of the heritage area (see below left). Once settlers altered the vegetative pattern and the threat of fire was removed, forests grew.

The prairie is purely a vegetative expression shaped by water and fire. Rain sustains the prairie and fire burns across the prairie which renews it. The prairie is unique because it is a fire-sustained ecosystem. It has developed over thousands of years by natural burn-management.

The prairie is the third most biologically diverse ecosystem in the world, topped only by the rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef. A simple virgin prairie contains thousands of individual plants, all competing in a very complete and tight network, each finding a unique niche in which to compete in this grassland. Some prairie plants come up and flower early. Others will grow to greater height, but each of them has a unique strategy that relies on the symbiotic relationship of that setting in order to succeed in this diverse, biologically rich, and complex environment.

It is this biologically rich and abundant environment that gave us the ability to support habitat and animal life. It is the expression of that which allowed the large roaming animals to inhabit this area. It was the primary migratory stop for birds where part of the floodplain and swampland provided areas to rest and protect those species.
Another peculiarity of the prairie is, in places, its seeming horizontality, whereas it is never level: on an open plain, apparently flat as a man’s palm, you cross a long ground-swell that was not perceptible before, and on its further incline you come upon a chasm wide and deep enough to contain a settlement...The silvery cirri and cumuli of the upper air flecked the surface of the earth with spots of dark cool shade, surrounded by a blaze of sunshine, and by their motion, and as they trooped and chased one another, gave a peculiar liveliness to the scene: while here and there a bit of hazy blue distance, a swell of the sea-like land upon the far horizon gladdened the sight—every view is fair from afar.

-Richard Burton, *The City of the Saints*, 1861
Our Landscape: The River Valleys

Freedom’s Frontier is a collection of river valleys (see right). Each one is somewhat unique in its geography and its location, but it is this pattern of development that formed the basis of our heritage area. When we look at river valleys, they embody all those things that we have seen in the development of those natural resources: topography, moisture, and soils—the higher in elevation typically the less moisture in the soil and less organic matter. The greater the erosion, the narrower the soil mantle in the high ground. As we move down through the river valleys, the deposition of that erosion, the deepness of the soils, the higher amount of moisture availability changes the evolution of these ecosystems. In addition, the resources this vegetation provides attracted early settlers. It is largely the reason why people settled in or near river valleys first.

In the upland prairies sufficient moisture is not present to sustain trees. The soil mantle is shallow, the moisture is limited, and the hot summers bake moisture out of the ground. Moving farther down, with a little bit greater moisture content is the Oak Grassland. The Oak Grassland is where some of the sturdier Burr Oaks and White Oaks venture into niches where they can obtain water. They have developed so that they can sustain through some of the burns. Very little underbrush is found in the Oak Grassland because the burns of the prairie keep coming through and keep it clean.

Oak Grassland is the epitome of the landscape that American culture has tried to model: trees and grass. This landscape is simple, has great visual accessibility through it, is easy to read, and is monumental on the horizon. It is the formation of most of our early town developments. This is essentially the courthouse square, one or two great oaks sitting in a plain of grass.

Moving farther down, moisture and the amount of vegetation increases. In Pine-Fir-Birch forests, fire still cleans out some underbrush, but not at quite an integrated level so that the density of the plant material increases, along with shade and cover. It still is not very difficult to traverse these types of forests.

Moving farther down to the Maple-Linden forests in the bottom areas of river valleys, one finds a more layered canopy of maples, lindens, underbrush, and growth.

Ultimately in the bottom of the rivers, is the river margin edge, which contains plant material that has adapted to inundation and flooding over long periods of time. These areas are more fertile as flood waters bring sediments that renew and help break down the organic matter and make them very fertile and rich.

An Elemental Picture: Water, Fire, Wind, and Life

Millions of years of sedimentation, glaciation, and vegetative growth created a place like no where else—a place that not only provided a unique backdrop for the historical events that followed, but also helped shape nationally significant events in Freedom’s Frontier.

OAK GRASSLAND: Because they are sturdy, certain types of oaks, like Burr Oaks and White Oaks, can survive some of the prairie burns. At the top of the Oak Grassland, fires eliminate the underbrush. Farther down the valley, plant material is denser.
The Power of Place

MAPLE-LINDEN: This system supports maple and linden trees, as well as underbrush. Together, the layers of trees form a canopy.

FLOOD PLAIN & RIVER MARGIN: In this system, the plant material has adapted to inundation and flooding over long periods of time.

PINE-FIR-BIRCH: Transition system of birch and undergrowth.
Across the vast expanse of Freedom’s Frontier, natural history has shaped human events. Visitors can discover connections between topography and the location of a trail, between the four major river valleys of the Freedom’s Frontier and the siting of towns. We can begin to understand why some Border War conflicts may have happened in areas where opposing sides were brought together and how different types of agriculture in both Missouri and Kansas were dispersed (see below).

The federal enabling legislation for Freedom’s Frontier speaks of recreation and the conservation of natural resources. By understanding the connections between towns and rivers, American settler trails and Indian routes, we can also begin to understand better ways to bring visitors to these areas today. We can envision scenic and historic roads, trails and bike paths between them that can become priorities for conservation. We can also begin to find connections between an historic site’s stories with other sites that at first glance may seem to have little in common.

Mapping is a fundamental component of human thought. By taking maps into account we can fully appreciate our stories, how they are geographically connected, and why they occurred where they did.

Human Patterns

Over the next series of pages, we explore the historic human settlement patterns in Freedom’s Frontier that occurred from 1803 to the present day.

Partners in Freedom’s Frontier took part in a participatory mapping workshop during the partnership meeting in September 2008. The purpose of this exercise was to recreate the challenges and decisions that newcomers faced in establishing a settlement on unclaimed lands within the region during the early nineteenth century.

The settler groups reflected the range of people who came to Kansas and Missouri including planters, subsistence farmers, outfitters and merchants, and city builders. The exercise found that the decisions made by those in the workshop reflected the decisions made by settlers in the past (refer to the “Utopia” exercise in the appendix).
The Power of Place

1803–1829

This detail of a non-native settlement map of the heritage area shows the early mapping and settlement patterns in the region. The area was still one of exploration and early economic development. The major geographic feature in the map is the Missouri River and tributaries feeding into the river. This indicates both the extents of surveying and exploration in the region at the time.

What are “Influences on Settlement and Freedom?”

These are economic, political, and social events that affected settlement and the story of freedom in the heritage area during that period in history. It is not a comprehensive list of stories or story themes. These influences are only intended as a point of reference for the reader. Further exploration and review of many of these influences can be found in the Power of Story section.

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<th>Influences on Settlement and Freedom: 1803–1829</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Purchase</td>
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