



## **Kansas Counties and Identity**

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Kansans love their counties. In a place like Kansas, where power and identity is decentralized, local identity is important. The decentralized nature of Kansas has resulted in over 100 counties, each with a strong sense of local pride.

Not all places have that attachment to county. Arizona, which is larger in area than Kansas, functions just fine with only 15 counties. There, the county is little more than an administrative unit and there does not seem to be much of a hang up between the citizens of Maricopa County, where Phoenix exists, as opposed to their neighbors next door in Pinal County. By contrast, Kansans pay close attention to that little two letter code on the license plate. We notice a car with a tag from three counties over and wonder what they are doing here.

The county itself has a unique status in Midwestern life. In part, this is because of the rural nature of the region, and in many ways the Midwestern county and the Southern county share important roles in their respective regions. In the Midwest, the county is no mere administrative and judicial unit. It is a cornerstone of local identity. Kansas identity is county based. Perhaps it is because we can see the seat of county government. We can get to it easily, compared to a long trek to Topeka or an even greater journey to Washington, D.C.

That may be why determining which city got to be the seat of the county courthouse prompted intense rivalries, as the citizens of both Anthony and Harper still remember. In that great reality TV show called the nineteenth century West, countless battles, some involving bloodshed and many involving corruption or at least bombastic editorials, raged over who was the rightful custodian of the courthouse. Many of our high school football rivalries are continuations of these earlier county seat fights.

The next task was to construct a building grand enough and prominent enough to represent the pride of the county. Only the courthouse was the single, common structure for the whole citizenry of the country. It was the one building that could only be one building. This might mean a county like Chase building an impressive Second Empire-style building that evoked the boulevards of France even as cattle drives were coming through not that far away. Later on, the work for architect George Washburn emerged at a time when the courthouse was the supreme symbol of county and local government, the heyday of the "agricultural Elysium" of small town America. His Romanesque arches recalled the great cathedrals of Europe, suggesting that these structures are for the American Midwest what Chartres and Westminster Abbey were for Europe. Later on, a new set of courthouses, such as that of Reno County, evoked the more fashionable Art Deco of the twentieth century. Several grand Victorian courthouses are gone, replaced by 1950s modern buildings. It is tempting to decry this loss. Yet, we need to remember that fifties modern was appropriate for its time and place and, as much as we may prefer the

elegance of the Romanesque Revival, Postwar contemporary has just as much a right to be a part of our landscape.

Calling this structure a courthouse is, in some ways, a misnomer. Law is only one of its functions. It is to the county what the capitol building is to a state or national government. County courthouses have also been social centers, places of gatherings, celebrations, militia drills and community events, and symbols of local pride. In a place like the United States, where law is local and we often raise up judges and legal officials from our own ranks, there is a long tradition of courthouses being, somehow, ours.

We live in changing times. Today, with the shifts in population towards larger cities and the decline of small towns, we are starting to visit whether counties need to be combined or at least have combined services. The decentralized, county-based pattern of life that was so well suited to era of Ulysses S. Grant seems worlds away from the highway based, corporate farmed, cellphone-linked world of today. When forms are downloaded PDFs, where we take care of business by sending an e-mail to the county clerk and social events are coordinated through social media, one may wonder about how useful a big masonry structure is to our everyday lives.

Perhaps this is when we need to turn back to one of the original uses of the courthouse: public gathering space. It is the place where all of us, resident and visitor alike, can approach, connect with one another, and simply reflect on our local identity.

*This transcript of "Kansas Counties and Identity" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*