

The **M**aking of **M**ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 500 BC-Present

Native Americans

Ojibwe Man



*Ojibwe Woman
and Baby*



Potawatomi



Native American Rice Harvest Canoe

Connecting to “The Making of Milwaukee”

Video Chapters: #1 - Natives & Traders & #17 - Almost Yesterday

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - Early Milwaukee

Native Americans: Milwaukee's First People

If you look around Milwaukee today, you're aware that we live in a big, bustling city. We get around on superhighways, trains, planes, automobiles, and bicycles. Our city has unique neighborhoods, suburbs, historical landmarks, entertainment, libraries, museums, and shopping malls. Public servants like police and firefighters keep us safe. Our city provides sewers, streetlights, sidewalks, and schools. We have it all!

But what was this place we now call Milwaukee like hundreds of years ago? What was it like back in time, long before you were born, when only woods, rivers, natural wildlife, and Native people lived here? Imagine what life was like before your grandparents and even your great-grandparents were alive. Picture Milwaukee long before the French fur traders and Yankees began to explore this land. Imagine this place before multitudes of Germans, Irish, Italians, African-Americans, Hispanic, Asians, and Middle Eastern people immigrated here. What was this place like before there was a city called Milwaukee?

Milwaukee: A "Good Land"

Centuries ago the place where you live was covered by a heavy forest. The canopy of trees was so thick that it was hard for summer sunlight to penetrate through their leaves. There were oak trees and maple trees, green in summer and ablaze with the autumn colors in October. Eagles, hawks and dozens of other bird species soared in the sky. Wild turkeys ate nuts, seeds and insects. Deer, bear, beaver, muskrats, raccoons, porcupines, and rabbits were abundant. Then, as now, three rivers flowed from the land into Lake Michigan. The rivers were so sparkling and clear that you could see all the way to the bottom and watch fish swim.

No immigrants lived where Milwaukee stands today until about 1675. But Native Americans, the original people of this land, first appeared here almost 12,000 years ago. They were hunters who followed animals from place to place. They gathered fruits and vegetables that grew in the forests and in open places. Archeologists, scientists who study the objects and cultures of people who left no written history, call people who lived in this way, "hunters and gatherers".

About 1,000 years ago the "hunters and gatherers" began to settle down. They still fished, hunted, trapped animals, harvested wild rice in the marshes, ate plants that grew wild in the forest, and drank from that clear water. But they also began to plant seeds and raise crops like corn, beans, squash and melons. Archeologists have found pottery, beads, and rock spear points that these original Americans used every day. Their lives must have been very difficult. But they survived the snows of winter and the day to day challenges of getting enough food.

Early Natives in Southern Wisconsin left behind hundreds of earthen mounds. Some mounds were small and were built in very simple shapes like ovals or cones. Others were large and shaped like birds, panthers and turtles. Some large mounds were as long as 250 feet. Why did the Native Americans build mounds? Some mounds were built for burials. The reasons for others remain a mystery. But the mounds must have had important meanings for the Native people who worked so hard to build them. Today, almost all the mounds have disappeared. It is possible some remain buried under our current streets, parks, homes and businesses. There are now only two visible mounds left in our city: one in Lake Park at the eastern end of Locust Avenue and one very small mound at State Fair Park.

Newcomers Change Native American Lives

Around 1650, as more European immigrants came into the Eastern United States, they needed land for farms and cities. The newcomers began to push Native American tribes toward the West. Some came to the land and waters we now call Milwaukee. Nine different tribes lived near our three rivers at one time or another. The four largest tribes here were the Potawatomi, Chippewa, Ottawa and Menominee. Around 1674, the Native Americans' traditional ways began to change when French fur traders arrived. These men wanted to trade goods for the animal skins that the Natives trapped. Some Europeans liked hats and other clothing made from beaver fur. This created a demand for animal skins that Native Americans had always trapped for their own use.

Native Americans did not use money, so the traders could not buy beaver skins. But the Native Americans did want the guns, metal tools, clothing, and decorative items like beads offered in exchange for furs. Soon Native Americans and French fur traders were in business. The skins of beavers from our area began the long journey to Europe to become hats. The Potawatomi, Menominee and other Native American tribes became connected to the outside world.

In 1795, a man named Jacque Vieau was the first French fur trader to establish a home here. He lived in a cabin on the bluff above the Menominee Valley, where Mitchell Park is today. Soon other traders, missionaries and settlers moved to the area. And while the Potawatomi did have more tools and clothing than before, the white immigrants brought two things that were especially bad for the Natives: disease and alcohol. The disease called smallpox killed many Native people in 1831 and 1832.

Before long, the European settlers began to push Wisconsin Native Americans off land where they had lived for years. Some Native tribes tried to fight the European settlers to preserve their land and way of life. In 1832, a Sauk Indian chief named Black Hawk and his people even fought a war against U.S. militias or soldiers to protect their land. The Sauk's were defeated.

The Native tribes who lived along our rivers began to feel that it was useless to fight against multitudes of white settlers, soldiers and the U.S. Government. In 1831, the Menominee Indians agreed to give their lands, which were north and east of the Milwaukee River, to the United States government. Then, in 1833, the "Three Fires", the Potawatomi, Chippewa, and Ottawa, also agreed and gave up their lands. In exchange, the Potawatomi were given land in Iowa and Missouri. Three years later hundreds of Potawatomi packed their belongings and loaded them into wagons for a long trip to land west of the Mississippi River. This journey became known as Wisconsin's "Trail of Tears". We can only imagine the sadness of the Native people.

Native Americans Today

Today, the Potawatomi are the largest group of Natives living in Milwaukee. Their population is small compared to the vast numbers of immigrants who followed. However, their influence is very visible in our city. They own the Potawatomi Casino and entertainment center. They generously sponsor many community events. Milwaukee also has an Indian Community School for Indian children and youth. And every year Milwaukee citizens are reminded of the Native people who lived here first. Early in September tribes from around Wisconsin present the Indian Summer Festival in Milwaukee. It is a time to remember and honor the original inhabitants of Milwaukee; to taste Indian food, to see a Pow Wow, to appreciate Native American stories, arts and crafts, music and dance. After all, the name of our city, Milwaukee, comes from a Native American word. It means "good land."