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Native Milwaukee

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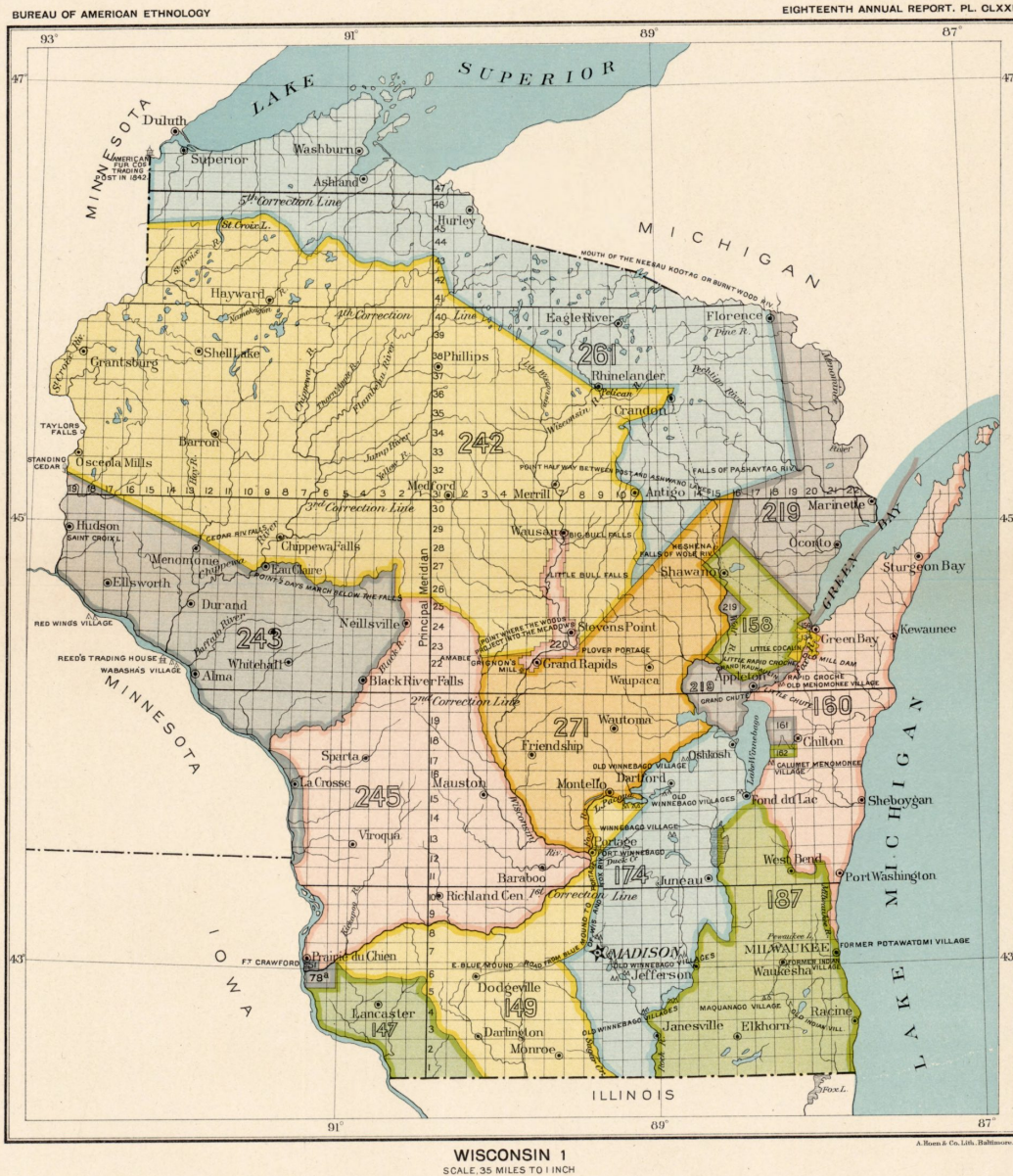
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Native Milwaukee



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The Indigenous Peoples of North America have always claimed Milwaukee as their own. Known as the “gathering place by the waters,” the “good earth” (or good land), or simply the “gathering place,” Indigenous groups such as the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa (Ottawa), Fox, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sauk, and Oneida have all called Milwaukee their home at some point in the last three centuries. This does not include the many other Native populations in Milwaukee today, ranging from Wisconsin groups like the Stockbridge-Munsee and Brothertown Nation, to outer-Wisconsin peoples like the Lakota and Dakota (Sioux), First Nations, Creek, Chickasaw, Sac, Meskwaki, Miami, Kickapoo, Micmac, and Cherokee, among others. According to the 2010 census, over 7,000 people in Milwaukee County identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, making Milwaukee the largest concentration of Native Peoples statewide. Milwaukee, then, is—and has always been—a Native place, home to a diverse number of Indigenous Americans.

Native Milwaukee's Creation Story is thousands of years old, when the Mound Builders civilizations, also known as the Adena, Hopewell, Woodlands, and Mississippian cultures, flourished in the Great Lakes, Ohio River Valley, and Mississippi River Valley between 500 BCE to 1200 CE (some scholars even suggest 1500 CE). It is estimated the Mound-Builder civilization spread to southeastern Wisconsin in the Early Woodland Era, sometime between 800 and 500 BCE, and flourished during the Middle Woodland Era (100 BCE to 500 CE). For thousands of years, the Mound Builders occupied southeastern Wisconsin and erected conical earthworks and effigy mounds that are still visible today, like the Aztalan mounds in Jefferson County. These civilizations were semi-sedentary, mixing the cultivation of corn, squash, and beans with hunting, gathering, and fishing along the western banks of Lake Michigan. The Mound Builders also established elaborate exchange networks penetrating as far south as the Gulf of Mexico and as far east to the Hudson Valley, navigating waterways like the Mississippi, Illinois, and Wabash Rivers to trade with other Indigenous groups. The mounds themselves were a central part of these peoples' lives, as physical and totemic representations of their spiritual worldviews and practices, burial sites, ceremonial grounds, and territorial boundary markers. These mounds remain visible testaments to the Indigenous occupation of southeastern Wisconsin for thousands of years.

While little is known about what became of the Mound Builders, it is assumed that they dispersed to other parts of North America or were incorporated into other Indigenous groups that relocated to southeastern Wisconsin between 1200 and 1600 CE. Foremost among those who took the place of the Mound Builders were the Ho-Chunk (Siouan language family) and Menominee (Algonquian language family), who similarly practiced a mix of agriculture, hunting, gathering, and fishing in semi-sedentary communities during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. The Ho-Chunk and Menominee traded and at times occasionally warred with the nearby Sauk, Fox, Mascouten, Iowa, Santee Sioux, and Illinois peoples, who also lived or moved about southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. By the seventeenth-century, though, groups of Algonquian (*Anishinaabe*) peoples, such as the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa, relocated from eastern North America to the Great Lakes, due to their internecine warfare with the Iroquois. The arrival of these Algonquian migrants created further conflict with the Ho-Chunk and Menominee, which ultimately prompted the majority of Ho-Chunk peoples to remove to western Wisconsin while the Menominee largely migrated to northern Wisconsin. By the turn of the eighteenth-century, Milwaukee was mainly an *Anishinaabe* space, occupied predominately by the Potawatomi, who together with the Ojibwe and Odawa formed the Council of Three Fires (*Niswimishkodewin*), an alliance of Algonquian peoples encompassing the Great Lakes. Like those before them, the Potawatomi and other Native peoples in southeastern Wisconsin constructed seasonal, semi-sedentary settlements at Milwaukee, where they mixed the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash with hunting, gathering, and fishing.

The arrival of Jean Nicolet and the French at Green Bay in 1634 dramatically changed the landscape of Native Milwaukee. The French partnered with the Indigenous Peoples of Milwaukee in the fur trade, which brought Native groups into conflict with France's rivals, the Dutch, and their Iroquois allies. In addition, contact with the French exposed Native Milwaukee to epidemic diseases like smallpox, which reduced the population of groups like the Ho-Chunk by as much as 90%. To cope with the threat posed by European trade, warfare, and germs during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Odawa of Milwaukee welcomed and incorporated migrants from the Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sauk, Fox, Mascouten, Miami, Huron, Kickapoo, and Illinois into their societies. These groups flocked to southeastern Milwaukee for access to European trade—using waterways that linked to the Great Lakes and upper Wisconsin—or sought refuge from Dutch-Iroquois raids or epidemic diseases. By the mid-1700s, the entire Great Lakes region was a convergence point for the Algonquian, Siouan, and Iroquoian peoples of North America.

Native Milwaukee emerged as one of many way stations for the fur trade in the eighteenth-century, due to its strategic location along the waterways of southeastern Wisconsin, facilitating Native-French exchange between Green Bay and Chicago. While some scholars suggest that the French established a trading post at Milwaukee in 1742-1743, it is more likely that French *coureur de bois* simply migrated to southeastern Wisconsin and were incorporated into Native societies, serving as go-betweens in the fur trade. Inter-marriage between Native Peoples and the French provided the basis for what historian Richard White calls the "Middle Ground," in which kinship ties and ritual rules of reciprocity maintained the alliances and trade relations between Indigenous Peoples and the French. It was within this "Middle Ground" that Milwaukee evolved into one of the sites for the fur trade, part of an expansive exchange network that stretched all the way from Montreal down to New Orleans, and across the Atlantic to Europe.

On account of the alliances and trade with the French, southeastern Wisconsin was drawn into conflicts with the English, most notably in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). As British traders penetrated the Great Lakes and Ohio

River Valley by mid-century, the Potawatomi, Odawa, Ojibwe, and other Native groups mobilized in support of the French. Although France was eventually defeated by the British and forced to withdraw from the Great Lakes in 1763, the peoples of southeastern Wisconsin continued to oppose the British advance. Indigenous groups gravitated toward Neolin, the Delaware Prophet, who—in a vision from the Master of Life—advocated for Native Peoples to return to their ceremonial traditions and ways of life, divesting themselves of European attachments, and expelling European settlers from their lands. Neolin's message sparked a pan-Indian resistance movement in the Great Lakes and Ohio River Valley from 1763-1765, led by the Odawa headman, Pontiac, who enjoyed support from the Potawatomi and Ojibwe of Milwaukee. The resulting conflict, known as Pontiac's War, forced the British to reevaluate their policy toward the Indigenous Peoples of North America, and conform to the "Middle Grounds" that characterized interactions in the Great Lakes. Between 1765 and 1776, the fur trade reemerged as the defining feature of southeastern Wisconsin, and as fur-bearing animals migrated south during the late eighteenth century, increasing numbers of Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa, Sac, and Fox peoples congregated at Milwaukee.

With the onset of the American Revolution, the peoples of Native Milwaukee were once again forced to choose sides in a war not of their own making. While groups like the Menominee and Ojibwe largely supported the British, the Potawatomi of Milwaukee—led by Siggenauk (also known as Blackbird and Le Tourneau) —allied themselves with the Americans, despite other Potawatomi communities in Michigan and Wisconsin mobilizing for the British. When George Rogers Clark and his expeditionary force reached northern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin in 1779, it was Siggenauk and the Potawatomi of Milwaukee who provided logistical and military support for the Americans. In retaliation, the British sloop *Felicity* was sent to western Lake Michigan to try and seize Siggenauk, which not only failed, but encouraged other Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe peoples to besiege the British fortification at St. Joseph (Michigan).

It was in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War that Native Milwaukee first experienced permanent European settlement. In 1785, French trader Alexis Laframboise erected a trade post in Milwaukee, and this was followed by a second store established by Jacques Vieau in 1795, on behalf of the Northwest Fur Company. For the most part, Laframboise and Vieau adhered to the dictates of kinship and reciprocity that defined the "Middle Ground" of the Great Lakes. Vieau himself married Angelique, a Potawatomi woman, and conducted trade through her relations. Eventually, Vieau's own daughter, Josette, married a French-Canadian trader for the American Fur Company, Solomon Juneau, who inherited Vieau's store in 1825. And in 1846, Juneau founded and served as the first mayor of Milwaukee. Throughout this time, the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa, Menominee, and other Native peoples continued to facilitate the fur trade in southeastern Wisconsin, although the trade itself declined significantly in the 1830s as fur-bearing animals migrated away from southeastern Wisconsin. It was at this point that Euro-Americans poured into the new city during the 1840s-1850s and forever transformed Native Milwaukee.

The Indigenous communities of southeastern Wisconsin were not passive victims to the changes in the area. The Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Odawa all joined the Western Confederacy, a pan-Indian coalition from the Great Lakes and Ohio River Valley, that resisted American expansion, famously forcing the surrender of two U.S. armies in 1790 and 1791. In 1795, the Potawatomi of Milwaukee attacked a local settlement—Belleville (Wisconsin) —which precipitated retaliatory violence between Native Peoples and local whites throughout the 1790s and 1800s. When the Shawnee Prophet, Tenskwatawa, and his brother, Tecumseh, spearheaded a second resistance movement in the late 1800s and early 1810s, the Potawatomi of Milwaukee, along with other Ojibwe, Odawa, and Menominee peoples in southeastern Wisconsin, mobilized in support. In June 1812, on the eve of war between the U.S. and Britain, Indigenous groups from Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois descended upon Milwaukee to determine a course of action in the conflict, where it was decided to join the British, and they afterward besieged Fort Dearborn (Chicago). Despite such support for the British and Tecumseh's confederacy, the American victory in the War of 1812 opened the floodgates to a Euro-American settler invasion of Wisconsin.

Between 1815 and 1833, the United States negotiated treaties and land cessions with the Native Peoples of Wisconsin—the Potawatomi alone signed twelve treaties in seventeen years—to pave the way for expansion into the Great Lakes. While the peoples of Native Milwaukee refused to take part in the negotiations at Prairie du Chien in 1825, the Potawatomi and other groups in southeastern Wisconsin faced incessant pressure by U.S. negotiators to cede their lands. By 1833, the accumulated factors of local white hostility, debts from the declining fur trade, and factional divisions in Native leadership cultivated by U.S. agents, prompted the Potawatomi to agree to the Treaty of Chicago (1833), thereby signing away their remaining lands including Milwaukee. This occurred against the backdrop of the Black Hawk War (1832-1833), which further fueled local resentment toward the Native Peoples of southeastern Wisconsin. By 1836, the territorial census counted over 11,000 settlers living in Wisconsin, from other parts of the

United States, and Europe, particularly Germany, Ireland, Belgium, Scandinavia, and Netherlands. That census did not count the Native American population, which has been estimated to be twice as large at the time. As Potawatomi headman, Metea, reflected on this development, "The plowshare is driven through our tents before we have time to carry out our goods and seek another habitation." To compound matters, the U.S. forcefully removed the Potawatomi to Missouri, Iowa, and Kansas in 1838, which the Potawatomi to this day call the Trail of Death. However, several families managed to escape removal and fled to Canada, Mexico, Michigan, Indiana, and—specific to the Forest County Potawatomi—northern Wisconsin. By 1865, the residents of Milwaukee had largely purged the city of its Indigenous origins.

For the remainder of the nineteenth-century, the Native Peoples of Wisconsin continued to grapple with treaties of dispossession and removal, confinement to reservations, allotment and sale of reservation lands, and endured the trauma of boarding schools. For instance, treaties in 1837, 1842, and 1854 divided the Ojibwe into different bands and reservations: Lac Courte Oreilles, Bad River, Lac du Flambeau, Red Cliff, St. Croix, and Sokaogon (Mole Lake), not to mention groups in Minnesota, Michigan, and Canada. The Ojibwe faced their own removal crisis in 1850, when the United States attempted to lure the Ojibwe to Minnesota with annuity payments to Minnesota, which resulted in hundreds of Ojibwe deaths, and to this day is called the Sandy Lake Tragedy. Meanwhile, Native migrants from New England and New York, composed primarily of Oneida but also Stockbridge, Munsee (Delaware), and Brothertown Indians, were pressured by the federal government to relocate to Wisconsin in the 1820s and 1830s, a product of fraudulent treaties negotiated with the Iroquois.

Following the Civil War (1861-1865), the Native Peoples of Wisconsin faced renewed attempts by the United States to further reduce their land base, using the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 to divide up reservations into 160-acre plats assigned to male heads of households, with all remaining "surplus" lands open to purchase by non-Indians. To make matters worse, the federal government partnered with Catholic and Protestant institutions to create boarding schools, where Native children were taken from their families, stripped of their language, religion, and culture, forced to adapt to Western standards of education, and subjected to a violence and sexual abuse that continues to haunt Indigenous communities today. Boarding schools in Wisconsin included the Oneida Indian School, Tomah Indian Industrial School, Wittenberg Indian School, Hayward Indian School, and Lac du Flambeau Indian School, among others.

Native communities in Wisconsin remained resilient, though, and during the early to mid-twentieth century reasserted a presence in Milwaukee. In contrast to the poverty and disparity of reservations, urban centers like Milwaukee offered economic opportunities, particularly when it came to the tourism industry and employment in defense industries during the World Wars. As early as 1904, a group of Ojibwe from Lac Courte Oreilles constructed a mock "Indian" village at the Wisconsin State Fair, where they "played Indian" by performing dances and other musical demonstrations to paying customers. The Menominee replicated such labors in 1906. Afterward, the "Indian" village and annual "Indian Pageant" became recurrent attractions at the West Allis fairgrounds in the early to mid-twentieth century. By the 1930s, Native Peoples—especially the Oneida—increasingly relocated to Milwaukee and established organizations like the Council Fire of American Indians and Consolidated Tribes of American Indians, which emerged as vehicles for mutual aid and social activity. These organizations provided a sense of identity and community for Native Peoples in Milwaukee, and fostered inter-tribal fellowship, cultural engagement, and reservation-to-urban connections.

This resurgence of Native Milwaukee continued into the 1950s-1960s, despite the federal government's efforts to eliminate tribal sovereignty through a policy of "Termination," as well as dismantling reservations by relocating Native Peoples to urban centers like Milwaukee. For those Potawatomi, Oneida, Menominee, Stockbridge-Munsee, Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, and other Native families who relocated to the city, the decision was often motivated by economic incentives, job opportunities, or kinship ties to relatives already living in Milwaukee. However, the experience of getting to the city and finding housing or work proved frustrating for most Native households, often forced to live in substandard housing, without any federal assistance—despite promises to the contrary—employed in menial low-wage jobs, and disconnected from the reservation and family. Such experiences, though, motivated these new arrivals to seek community and support with those already established in the city, frequenting taverns like Indian John's and Thunderbird Tap to solicit help, find housing and employment, and enjoy one another's company. They also joined the Consolidated Tribes of American Indians and a new organization, United Indians of Milwaukee, which promoted a fledgling powwow culture that evolved into the Annual Greater Milwaukee Area Powwow. By 1953, the population of Native Milwaukee topped a thousand, which then increased to nearly three thousand by 1960, and in 1973 numbered more than four thousand people, the majority of whom lived on the north and south sides of the city.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Native Milwaukee mobilized in support of civil rights, tribal sovereignty, and Indigenous self-determination. New organizations such as the American Indian Information & Actions Group (a local chapter of the National Indian Youth Council), the Milwaukee branch of the American Indian Movement (AIM), Determination of Rights and Unity for Menominee Stakeholders (DRUMS), and the Native American Student Movement were at the forefront of the Red Power movement in Milwaukee; staging protests, rallies, marches, and occupations of the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center, First Wisconsin Trust Building, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee Area Technical College, among others. The most well-known demonstration by these organizations was Milwaukee AIM's 1971 occupation of the McKinley Park Coast Guard Station (1600 N. Lincoln Memorial Drive), in their demands citing the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) that stipulated abandoned federal property reverted to the control of the original inhabitants. The station thereafter became the site of the Indian Community School (ICS), which is today located in Franklin, Wisconsin. Other successes of the Red Power movement in Milwaukee were the creation of American Indian Studies (AIS) educational programs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), revitalizing interest in language preservation projects, establishing the Milwaukee Indian Health Center and Indian Urban Affairs Council to provide health and social services, founding a Milwaukee Area American Indian Manpower Council Inc. for employment and job training, among others.

Native Milwaukee continued to grow with the advent of gaming and state-tribal compacts in the late 1980s and 1990s. Based on their historical occupancy in Milwaukee, the Forest County Potawatomi secured rights to build a bingo hall in the Menomonee Valley, which later evolved into the Potawatomi Hotel & Casino (1721 W. Canal St.). In addition to diversifying the Potawatomi economy—with investments in a heavy equipment excavation firm, a construction company, a logging cooperative, convenience stores, and gas stations—the casino invested in the expansion of the Indian Community School and the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center. Today it provides housing support as well as medical, dental, and mental health insurance to Potawatomi members, as well as hosting an annual intertribal gathering—the Hunting Moon Pow Wow—along with language and cultural revitalization efforts. The Oneida were also one of the first to sign gaming compacts with the state and used the revenue to invest in the Nation's infrastructure. This includes a convention center, convenience stores and gas stations, business park and electronics firm, as well as housing, utility, and health services for Oneida members. As importantly, the Oneida use casino monies to support Oneida Nation schools, a public museum and library, programs for elders and language, the reconstruction of a longhouse for ceremonial purposes, and repurchasing nearly 11,000 acres of land allotted away from the Nation by the state and federal governments. And to support those Oneida living in Milwaukee, the Nation established the Southeastern Oneida Tribal Services (SEOTS) office, located at 5233 W. Morgan Avenue.

Today, there are a wealth of organizations and institutions dedicated to serving Native Milwaukee. In addition to the AIS program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, there exist the American Indian Student Services department and the Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education. Similarly, MATC sponsors several Native-centered initiatives to support recruiting and retention among Indigenous students. And because Native students have very high dropout rates in Milwaukee (K-12), additional educational enterprises include the Milwaukee Public Schools' First Nations Studies program, Spotted Eagle High School (closed in 2012), and Indian Community School. In terms of health and social services, the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center (930 W. Historic Mitchell St.) opened in 1999, succeeding the Indian Health Center founded in the 1970s. As for Native Peoples who practice a blend of traditional ceremonial practices and Catholicism, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee supported the formation of the Congregation of the Great Spirit (1000 W. Lapham Boulevard). Other community organizations that support the needs of Native Milwaukee are the American Indian Chamber of Commerce, Native American Literary Cooperative, Spotted Eagle Inc. Workforce Development (930 W. Historic Mitchell St.), Indian Council of the Elderly, United Indians of Milwaukee Inc. (3126 W. Kilbourn Avenue), First Nation Women's Professional Leadership Group, Milwaukee First Nations Health Coalition, among many others. Yet the defining characteristic of Native Milwaukee—one that embodies the diversity and resiliency of the city's Indigenous communities—is the Indian Summer Festival, held annually on the Summerfest grounds, one of the largest intertribal gatherings in the United States. This resurgent Native community is why the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) hosted its 74th Annual Convention in Milwaukee in October 2017, a testament to the vitality of Native Milwaukee today.

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Footnotes [+]

For Further Reading

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