

CHAPTER 1

First Residents



Europeans found three primary tribes in Michigan: the Ojibwa, Odawa, and Potawatomi.



“A chief was not a man with power to command but a leader who demonstrated humility, generosity, and ability.”

—Professor Charles E. Cleland,
MSU Department of Anthropology

Shortly after the last glacier retreated and created the familiar face of the future state of Michigan, the first inhabitants arrived. The earliest evidence of human life in Michigan occurred more than 11,000 years ago, although the archaeological evidence is “pitifully meager—a few broken stone tools, a spear point, an animal bone or two, the remains of a fire hearth.”¹

About 7,000 years ago, evidence exists of man-made copper objects. Working in shallow pits, prehistoric Indians used hammer stones that weighed between 10 and 36 pounds (sometimes attached to a handle) and chisels to break off pieces of copper from a larger rock. By hammering and reheating (called annealing), the Indians worked the copper into various shapes. According to former state archaeologist John R. Halsey, “Depending on what artifact was being produced or what finish was desired, additional

steps of grinding, cutting, embossing, perforating and polishing were employed.” Native Americans craftsmen created “tens of thousands of useful and artistic items, ranging from dozens of varieties of projectile points, knives, harpoons and awls to decorative gorgets, bracelets and beads.” These items then were “widely traded” and have been found as far away as Florida and the Canadian prairies. The location of prehistoric Indian mining pits also aided miners in locating copper deposits during the Copper Boom of the 1840s.²

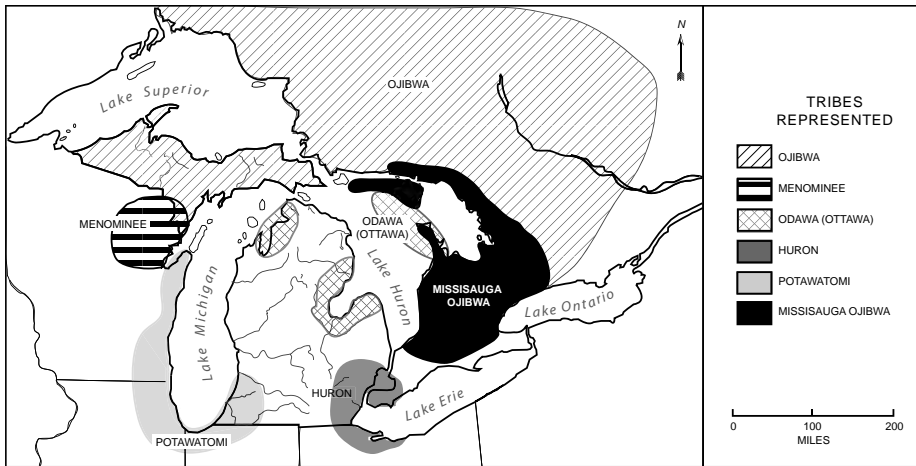


Artifacts found in burial mounds provided important information on the culture of the Hopewell Indians.

— The Hopewell

Among the earliest Michigan settlers was a group of prehistoric people called the Hopewell who lived in the western and southern part of the Lower Peninsula. The Hopewell, named after an Ohio farmer who discovered burial mounds on his land, were part of a huge trading network that stretched across the central United States. Elaborate decorations and jewelry made from Michigan copper, North Carolina mica, and shells and pearls from the Gulf of Mexico were discovered in Hopewell burial mounds. Carved obsidian (a volcanic rock) from the Rocky Mountains and sharks’ teeth from Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay also have been found. The most ornate artifacts were in Ohio mounds. Michigan artifacts, such as pots and bowls, are simpler. Archaeologists believe the Hopewell also traded furs and food. In their eating habits, the Hopewell fit between hunter-gatherers and farmers; they may have grown some plants, but they were not a full-time farming people and they also hunted. Little evidence remains of Hopewell houses, which scientists believe had wooden pole frames covered with animal skins, grass or herb woven mats, or bark.³

Burial mounds were an important part of the Hopewell legacy. The Hopewell built their mounds in Michigan from 10 BCE until about 400 CE. No one knows why they stopped building mounds or where the Hopewell went after 400 CE. Today, seventeen Hopewell Mounds (called the Norton Mounds) still lie in a forest outside Grand Rapids. Another group of mounds, called the Converse Mounds, sat in downtown Grand Rapids, but in the mid-1850s, farmers, construction workers, and curious people dug them up.



When the French arrived, these primary tribes lived in the region.

When the French arrived in the early to mid-seventeenth century, they found approximately 100,000 Native Americans, representing nine different tribes, living in the Great Lakes area.⁴

— The Huron

The Hurons, the largest group, were among the first to greet the French as they explored the interior of North America. The French even gave this tribe their name. The word *Huron* comes from the Huron hairstyle that reminded the French of a wild boar (*hure* in French). The Huron called themselves the Wendat (pronounced Wyandot). This name may mean “islanders” or “peninsula dwellers” and comes from the peninsula between Georgian Bay and Lake Huron, near where the Huron once lived. The Huron were farmers, harvesting so much corn that they traded it to other tribes. An observer once noted that the Huron he was visiting had so many crops that “it was easier to get lost in the corn field” than in the surrounding forest. The Huron lived in large, palisaded villages consisting of long rectangular houses. Shaped much like the modern-day Quonset huts with a door at each end, these houses were covered with bark and stood up to 130 feet long and 30 feet wide. The house was divided into compartments where families lived and fireplaces stood along a central aisle. Families living in a long house were related. Among the Hurons,

a child took the name of his mother's clan. (In the Algonquian system, it was just the opposite.) In a marriage, the new husband resided with the wife's family. The maternal uncle (mother's brother) educated the children (not the father), which meant "the father was in many ways a stranger in his own home."⁵

Although the French befriended the Huron, they also brought diseases that decimated them. More than 50 percent of all Huron died from diseases in the first twenty years after the French arrived. The Huron also suffered when their long-standing rival, the Iroquois, forced them to move to western Lake Superior. Eventually, the Huron moved back east, settling around the Straits of Mackinac. After the French founded Detroit in 1701, the Huron resettled there. After Michigan became a state, many Huron were forced west to Kansas and Oklahoma.

With the exception of the Huron, the tribes most easily associated with Michigan belonged to the Algonquians. Although the Huron and Algonquian tribes shared certain traits, like farming, the Huron spoke an Iroquoian language, described "as different from Algonquian as English is from Russian." Algonquian comes from the word *Algomequin*, meaning "people across the river." Michigan Indians moved here from the east. The Ojibwa (also called the Chippewa) were among the largest groups of American Indians. They along with the Odawa (more commonly called Ottawa) and Potawatomi formed the Three Fires Confederacy, also known as the Anishinabek. The Ojibwa were the "older brothers," the Odawa the middle brother, and the Potawatomi the youngest.⁶

— The Ojibwa

The exact meaning of the word *Ojibwa* is unknown. One explanation is "to roast until puckered up," which describes the process of fire-curing the seams of moccasins worn by the Ojibwa. When the French arrived in the Great Lakes, an estimated 30,000 Ojibwa lived along the southern shore of Lake Superior and western Lake Huron. The Ojibwa were excellent hunters and fishermen. The French called the Ojibwa living along the rapids of the St. Mary's River (present-day Sault Ste. Marie) *Saulteurs* (People of the Rapids). During the warmer months, the Ojibwa settled in villages near the fishing grounds. Each village included a group of related families living in dome-shaped wigwams covered with birch bark. During the winter months, the Ojibwa abandoned the fishing areas and headed inland, surviving the cold months by hunting and eating dried fish and other storable foods like

blueberries. In the spring they gathered maple sugar before heading back to their familiar fishing areas. Living in northern Michigan was difficult, especially during the winter. Tradition assigned the tasks. Men hunted and fished, women prepared the food and sewed the clothes, and children collected food and babysat their younger siblings. “All Ojibwa recognized bonds of kin and kindred.” If a family suffered a food shortage, Ojibwa shared. “If anyone in a Ojibwa camp had food, everybody had food.” According to Michigan State University anthropologist Charles Cleland:

Among the Ojibwa there were a number of ‘superfamilies,’ called clans. Each child belonged to a clan of his father. The people belonging to a specific clan felt themselves to be closely related no matter where they lived. Although the exact number of Ojibwa clans is unknown, at least twenty are recorded among them the Loon, Raven, Beaver, Turtle, Crane, Pike, and Eagle clans. Members of one clan were required to marry another clan, resulting in a cross-cutting system of clan membership between villages. Marriage, therefore, tended to make family of strangers by uniting people of one village with people of another until the whole of the tribe was linked by a feeling of kinship.

Leadership among the Ojibwa, “as in other Michigan tribes,” was achieved by respect because “no individual had the power to dictate to another.” According to Cleland, “Leaders were revered for their generosity, wisdom, skill, and most of all, for their humility. Ambition, drive, and political calculation did not constitute a path to leadership.”⁷

The Ojibwa allied themselves with the French during the French and Indian War and later with the British during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Some Ojibwa were removed west of the Mississippi River (especially to Minnesota) during the antebellum years. Today, tens of thousands of Ojibwa live in nearly 150 different bands in the United States and Canada. In Michigan, about 3,000 members of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan live on a Mt. Pleasant reservation.

— The Odawa

As the “middle brother” of the Three Fires Confederacy, the Odawa were skilled traders. When the French arrived, approximately 3,000 Odawa lived east of the Straits of Mackinac in the area of northern Lake Huron. The Odawa traveled hundreds of miles exchanging goods with other tribes. Like

the Ojibwa, they allied themselves with the French in the French and Indian War and with the British during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Some Odawa were later sent west and their descendants live in Oklahoma today.⁸

Two notable and contrasting Odawa were Pontiac and Blackbird. The exact date and location of Pontiac's birth is uncertain, but most authorities agree his father was Odawa, although his mother may have been Ojibwa. Shortly after the British defeated the French in the early 1760s, Pontiac led a rebellion against the British who had enacted harsher trade policies. Although early historians gave Pontiac more credit than he deserved in this uprising, Pontiac's Rebellion was a formidable uprising that failed. Pontiac eventually left Michigan and was murdered by another Indian near St. Louis, Missouri, in 1769. Born in present-day Harbor Springs about 1815, Blackbird was an Odawa chief and the son of an Odawa chief. The family name, Mackadepenessy, means "black hawk," but was later mistranslated to mean "blackbird." After studying at Twinsburg Institution in Ohio and present-day Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Blackbird became an interpreter at the Protestant mission at L'Arbre Croche. During the late 1850s, he served the U.S. government as an Indian interpreter and as Harbor Springs postmaster. In 1887, Blackbird published his *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan*, which is free of the bias found in similar books about Native Americans written by white authors during the period.⁹

— The Potawatomi

When the French arrived in the western Great Lakes an estimated 4,000 Potawatomi (the name has various spellings) lived in the southern Lower Peninsula. The Potawatomi were farmers in the summer and hunters in the fall. They also traveled west to the prairies to hunt buffalo in the spring. The Potawatomi were assigned the task of guarding the sacred fire of the Three Fires Confederacy. They were peacemakers who brought together rival tribes for feasts and to arbitrate disputes. The Potawatomi were among the most docile and affectionate Indians toward the French. As with the other tribes of the Three Fires, the Potawatomi sided with the French during the French and Indian War and the British during the American Revolution and War of 1812. With the 1833 Treaty of Chicago, many Potawatomi were forced to move west of the Mississippi River; other Potawatomi ended up in Oklahoma and Canada. The Potawatomi who followed tribal leader Leopold Pokagon

escaped the horrors of the Trail of Tears by becoming taxpaying, land-owning Christians in Berrien and Cass Counties. Today, the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi Indians is a federally recognized Indian Nation in a ten-county area in southern Michigan and northwestern Indiana with its tribal headquarters in Dowagiac, Michigan.¹⁰

Leopold Pokagon's son, Simon, was nicknamed the "Red Man's Longfellow" after writing several publications. In these works, Pokagon waxed nostalgically about the "vanishing" race of Native Americans. Speaking about the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he declared, "On behalf of my people, the American Indians, I hereby declare to you, the pale-faced race that has usurped our lands and homes . . . [While] your hearts in admiration rejoice over the beauty and grandeur of this young republic and you say, 'behold the wonders wrought by our children in this foreign land,' do not forget that this success has been at the sacrifice of our homes and a once happy race."¹¹

— Other Tribes

Several other tribes lived in parts of Michigan or its fringes when the French arrived.

An Algonquian tribe, the Menominee lived south of the Straits of Mackinac when first discovered by the earliest French explorers to the Upper Great Lakes. The name Menominee comes from an Ojibwa word meaning "wild rice people." Wild rice was an important staple for the Menominee, whose customs were similar to the Ojibwa. The Menominee numbered several thousand people when the French arrived. After selling their lands to the U.S. government in several pre-Civil War treaties, the Menominee were removed to a reservation in Wisconsin. By 1870, deadly diseases (smallpox, typhoid, influenza, and dysentery) had killed more than half of the tribe's 4,000 members. Today, the Menominee Indian Reservation, which is located in a Wisconsin county bordering Michigan, is about 354 square miles in size and is home to 3,000 people.¹²

Other tribes that lived in the Great Lakes area included the Fox, an unusually warlike Algonquian tribe, and the Sac (also Sauk), a Woodlands tribe associated with the Algonquians, who temporarily resided in the Saginaw Bay area before settling in present-day northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. As Americans headed west after the American Revolution, the Fox and Sauk formed an alliance. Both suffered great losses caused by Euro-American disease before being relocated in Iowa and Oklahoma.¹³

— Legends

Since Indians do not have a written language, legends play an important role in their culture. According to the legend of the Anishinabe, the all-powerful Creator, Kitche Manido first made the four basic elements—rock, fire, wind, and water. Then he fashioned the sun, the stars, and the Earth. Next, came the trees, plants, animals, and humans. From Kitche Manido, everything received a spirit and a purpose in the Circle of Life. The plants provided the food and medicines; the trees gave shelter; the animals sacrificed their lives to provide food and clothing for humans—the Anishinabe. The Anishinabe first lived along the Atlantic Ocean but made their way west, eventually settling in the Great Lakes. Once their journey ended, the Anishinabe separated into three groups (Ojibwa, Odawa, and Potawatomi) that settled in different part of the Great Lakes.¹⁴

Another well-known legend explained how the Great Manitou created the Sleeping Bear Dunes and the nearby islands of North and South Manitou. As the story was told, a mother bear and her two cubs lived peacefully on the western shore of Lake Michigan. One summer night there was a big thunderstorm and lightning set the forest on fire. The mother gathered her cubs and jumped into the lake to escape the flames. All through the night, they swam toward the distant shore and away from the fire. The cubs grew tired. First, the younger one sank beneath the waves, and then the older cub disappeared. The mother bear could not save them, but she made it to shore and fell into a deep sleep on the beach. As she slept, the Great Manitou whispered to her, “Because you always remembered me with thanks, I will take you to the Land of the Spirits. Your cubs are already there.” The Great Manitou created two islands to honors the cubs—they are North and South Manitou. The Great Manitou then covered the mother bear with a blanket of white sand. Today, she rests under the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.¹⁵

According to anthropologist Charles Cleland, the Indians of the Upper Great Lakes shared three central cultural principles. First, “no man had the right to determine another man’s fate.” Group actions were “grounded on the idea of consensus.” A chief was chosen to follow because he “had demonstrated humility, generosity, and ability.” Second, Indians believed in sharing “all things, including goods, labor, and food.” A person earned greater prestige and status by sharing, especially with those in need. “Generosity was expected.” Finally, the principle that guided man on Earth was that “no crea-

ture was superior to any other, and all were unalterably linked in the great web of life.” Exploiting the Earth’s resources was forbidden because “these were not objects but living things.”¹⁶

— European Contact and Beyond

There is no doubt the arrival of the Europeans to the Great Lakes in the seventeenth century proved detrimental for the Indians. The French viewed them as un-Christian but treated them with more respect, even allowing intermarrying. The British held Indians in contempt and used them as cannon fodder in the wars against the Americans. Although the Michigan Indians became reliant on European trade goods (guns, metal knives, and beads), it was not a completely one-way relationship. The Indians introduced the Europeans to the birch-bark canoe—essential to the fur trade and the primary means of travel in the Great Lakes area (excluding walking) for nearly two centuries after the first French arrived. One mid-eighteenth century observer may have been exaggerating, but he claimed the French voyageurs would not have traded the birch-bark canoe for “several barrels of gold.” More than introducing Europeans to lightweight, easily reparable canoe, these tribes trapped animals whose furs ended up as hats that sat on the heads of European men.

For Native Americans living in Michigan, the arrival of settlers in the 1820s introduced more dramatic changes. Michigan settlers wanted the Indians’ land and then wanted them to go away. In 1806, the Indians “owned” almost all of Michigan’s future 57,900 square miles of land. Fifty years later, they owned 32 square miles. The treaties used by the U.S. government to acquire the land marked “one of the more disgraceful chapters in Michigan’s history.” Forced to sign these agreements, the Native Americans received cash, unrestricted fishing and hunting rights, annuity payments, and the services of teachers, agricultural experts, and blacksmiths. Sometimes the treaty conditions were fulfilled, but “many other” times they were ignored or later struck out of the agreement without telling the Indians. Annuity payments, “often timed for political advantage, drew a crowd of white merchants and whiskey sellers, so these monies soon returned to white hands.” Indians were defrauded out of their land allotments guaranteed by the treaties. In 1889, the Burt Lake Ojibwa lost their claim to 890 acres of Cheboygan County, deeded to them “forever,” after a wealthy lumber baron who wanted their land convinced the county sheriff to burn the Indians’ homes for nonpay-

ment of taxes. It was one “of many such cases.” After treaties transferred ownership of the land, the government adopted a re-settlement policy. Some Michigan Indians, especially the Potawatomi and Wyandot who lived in the southern Lower Peninsula, suffered the infamous “Trail of Tears.” Other Michigan Indians were more fortunate, especially those living in the then-sparsely settled northern part of the state or others who accepted a British offer to relocate in Canada.¹⁷

Today, about 140,000 Michiganians claim Indian descent, ranking Michigan tenth among the states. Of Michigan’s eleven reservations, the largest are in Isabella and Baraga counties. Too often today, any awareness of Michigan’s rich Indian heritage consists of casinos (Michigan has about two dozen) or the places carrying an Indian name. (But beware, Henry Schoolcraft mixed Indian, European, Latin, even Arabic syllables to create pseudo-Indian names.) Fortunately, efforts to understand and keep Indian culture alive are being undertaken by the Native American Institute at Michigan State University. Founded in 1981 by Professor George Cornell, the institute assists North American Indian organizations and tribal governments while promoting and enhancing the general public’s awareness of Michigan Indian communities, history, and culture. The institute also seeks to achieve a better understanding of the Indian past through its American Indian Studies series published by the Michigan State University Press.¹⁸