

Past Cultures of the Upper Mississippi River

"That portion of the Mississippi which extends from Prairie du Chien to Lake Pepin is the most mountainous and truly beautiful on the whole river, and may with strict propriety be called the Alpine Region. The river here varies from a quarter to a full mile in width, and on either side throughout the whole distance is a range of mountains which sometimes actually bend over the river, and sometimes recede into the interior for several miles. The Mississippi here is rather sluggish, but perfectly translucent and completely filled with islands which are covered with a variety of forest trees found between Kentucky and the Great Lakes"

(Charles Lanman, 1846)



Pleistocene

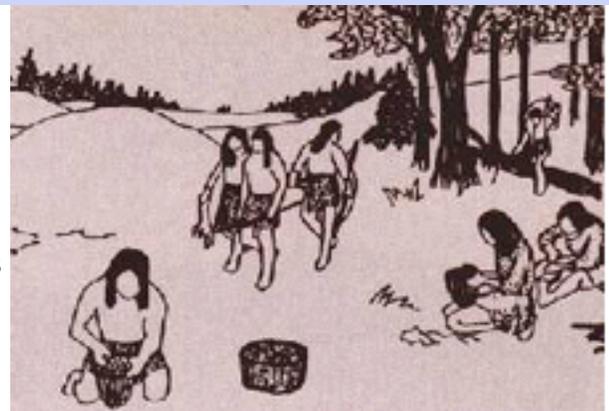
About 12,000 years ago, glacial ice reached only to northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. A variety of large animals, called megafauna, lived on it's margins. These animals included the woolly mammoth, mastodon, caribou, horses and the 6-foot-long giant beaver.

Melting ice sheets released vast amounts of water that flooded the Mississippi Valley. These floods scoured the valley from the bluff to bluff, spilling meltwater miles back into tributary valleys. The flooding alternately eroded and then partly refilled the valley with sand and gravel outwash. When the floods subsided, the river began to downcut into the outwash sediments. The narrowed channel left terraces tens of feet above the new floodplain. Without vegetation, winds easily eroded the sandy terraces creating dunes. Fine particles carried by these winds covered the bluff tops.



Altithermal

By 9,000 years ago, the climate began to dry. This warm/dry period, called the Altithermal, lasted for several thousand years. The period peaked around 7,000 years ago. The Altithermal saw the expansion of prairies and prairie animals, including bison, well east of modern ranges. The long drought undoubtedly affected the Mississippi River. During this time, its flows probably diminished to a trickle, further cutting into the outwash deposits.



Recent Holocene

After 7,000 years ago, the climate slowly shifted to a more moist pattern. Conditions gradually changed until they were similar to the present. By 4,000 years ago, the Upper Mississippi River floodplain had become a resource-rich corridor. Europeans documented this lush valley with the first written descriptions some 300 years ago.

"With much pleasure and without hindrance, we had been examining the Colbert (Mississippi) River to find out whether it was navigable at its upper and lower reaches. Our canoe was loaded with seven or eight big wild turkeys, which are plentiful in this country. We did not lack buffaloes, deer, beavers, fish or bears, which are killed when these animals were swimming across the river" (Father Louis Hennepin, 1680)

Throughout this period, the river offered a wealth of natural resources. It supported a wide range of human populations, including the first farmers some 1,000 years ago. These farmers were perhaps more sensitive to minor climatic changes than were hunters. During this time, the climate changed several times. A warm/moist period, called the NeoAtlantic (A.D. 1250-1450). Warm/moist conditions recurred for a short time, but much cooler/moist conditions, called the Little Ice Age (A.D. 1550-1850), followed.



Paleo-Indians: Big Game Hunters

Early: The first known people along the Upper Mississippi River Valley were Paleo-Indians. They arrived 12,000 years ago to a world hardly recognizable today. Called the Big Game Hunters by archaeologists, these people hunted and scavenged large mammals along the glacial front. Because of their need to move in search of food, Paleo-Indian groups were probably nomadic bands of perhaps 25 people. Consequently, their sites are small and far between. What's more, the long time span since their arrival has allowed many aspects of their culture to disintegrate. Some of the few preserved Paleo-Indian artifacts are stone tools. Their distinctive "fluted" spear points occur across much of the United States, occasionally with killed mammoths.

Archaeologists know of fluted points from uplands in Minnesota and Wisconsin within a few miles of the Mississippi River. Numerous mastodon and mammoth bones have also been found in this region. However, due to severe conditions within the Mississippi River valley, including meltwater floods, it is unlikely that Paleo-Indian sites exist in the modern floodplain.

Late: The mass extinction of most megafauna species coincided with the retreat of the glacier. The cause of these extinction's is not clear, but the Paleo-Indian hunters may have played a role. By 10,000 years ago, the people of the Upper Mississippi Valley adapted to a new prairie environment. The appearance of unfluted spear points of the Cody Complex, reflected the change to bison hunting on the northern plains. Some of these long slender points have been found on Upper Mississippi River terraces, indicating perhaps the earliest human use of the valley itself.

Archaic: Hunters and Gatherers

Early:Sites from the peak of the dry Altithermal are extremely rare in the northern portion of the Upper Mississippi Valley. To the south, contemporary spear point styles evolved into large stemmed and notched forms. There are very few examples of these points known for the Upper Mississippi Valley above Illinois. Have river sediments just buried these sites so deep within today's floodplain that archeologists have yet to find them? Or was it so dry during the Altithermal that the resources upon which people depended became too scant to support more than a small population?

Late:As moisture increased, Archaic bands began to settle into regional niches. Each year, these people moved from winter rock shelters to summer camps along rivers. Their projectile points reflect an array of side-notched, stemmed, and corner-notched points. The differences in these point styles may be due to geographic or temporal variations. These points are very common on upland ridges, terraces, and occasionally on islands along the Mississippi River. The latter represents the first clear human use of the Upper Mississippi River bottoms. The use of the floodplain suggests an increased reliance on its resources.

About this time, regional exchange networks developed. These networks brought marine shell, copper and exotic stone materials into the Upper Mississippi River Valley. The Archaic people often used these materials to accompany the dead in special mortuary settings. One innovation was the use of copper for manufacturing tools and weapons. Burials were in cemeteries, with individuals sometimes adorned with red powder and accompanied by ceremonial artifacts such as large knives made of flint from southern Indiana or Illinois.

Woodland: Potters and Moundbuilders

Early:About 2,500 years ago, the first ceramics appeared in the Upper Mississippi Valley. The use of pottery marks the transition from the Archaic to Woodland cultures. The earliest vessels were crude, thick-walled pots. However, thin-walled vessels with incised decorations soon became popular. Numerous Early Woodland sites, occupied during the warm seasons, exist on islands in the Upper Mississippi River. Some of these sites were shell middens, where Woodland people gathered clams and discarded the shells.

Middle:About 2,000 years ago, the unique and flamboyant Hopewell Culture spread out from southern Ohio and Illinois across much of the Upper Midwest. Hopewell was an elaborate mortuary system that incorporated non-utilitarian artifacts made of exotic materials with burials beneath round earthen mounds. Hopewell artifacts in the Upper Mississippi River Valley include imported ceramic vessels, drilled bear canine pendants, copper ornaments and tools, and large chipped-stone blades of Rocky Mountain obsidian. For unknown reasons, Hopewell ended about 1,600 years ago. After Hopewell, local societies continued to hunt and gather in seasonal rounds, but they constructed smaller mounds lacking exotic artifacts.

Late:Beginning about 1,200 years ago, a substantial shift occurred in the Woodland cultures of southwestern Wisconsin. Here some mounds began to be constructed as long linear forms or in distinct animal shapes. Potters now decorated pots with cordage pressed into the rim. The small triangular shape of projectile points reflects the discovery of the bow and arrow. By 1,100 years ago, corn horticulture was first practiced in the region. Archaeologists now recognize these changes as the beginnings of the Effigy Mound Culture in southern Wisconsin and adjacent areas. Late Woodland groups in the northern Upper Mississippi River did not construct animal-shaped mounds, suggesting the people were becoming territorial.

Mississippian: Farmers

Middle: About 1000 years ago, tensions rose with the rapid growth of the "city" of Cahokia near St. Louis. At this time, Cahokia's influence spread northward, including attempts at colonization. Perhaps due to opposition from local Late Woodland populations or internal problems at Cahokia, evidence for Middle Mississippian involvement decreased dramatically in the northern valley after 850 years ago. Nonetheless, local populations adopted some Mississippian technologies. Archeologists refer to this culture as Oneota.

Oneota: Shell-tempered ceramic jars, triangular arrowheads, and numerous end scrapers are features that distinguish this culture. Between 950 and 700 years ago, the Oneota established several large mound and village complexes on high terraces near Red Wing. There they hunted deer, elk and bison. They also relied heavily on the Mississippi River floodplain for fish, turtles, clams and plant foods. The Oneota cultivated fields of corn, beans and squash with hoes made of bison shoulder blades.

From about 750 to 650 years ago, the Oneota shifted downriver to new settlements at LaCrosse. For the next two centuries, Oneota occupation of LaCrosse was intensive. However, just before French exploration along the Upper Mississippi River, the Oneota abandoned LaCrosse. Perhaps due to agricultural failure from the Little Ice Age, disease, population pressures from the East or the lure of bison hunting, the Oneota left the Mississippi River Valley and moved west into Iowa and southern Minnesota. It was in these areas that the French first made contact and recorded them as the Ioway Tribe.

Upper Mississippi River Archeology

Interstate Park Bison Site: In 1936, a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crew discovered nearly 300 bones of the long-horned Bison Occidentals beneath a 3-4 foot layer of peat at this site. Apparently, the crew also discovered two stone projectiles and a long copper awl with the bones. This site may represent a Middle Archaic bison hunting/butchering station dating to about 7,000 years ago.

Red Wing Locality: Archeologists found several large mound and village complexes on a series of sandy terraces along both sides of the Mississippi River near the mouth of the Cannon River. Between A.D. 1000 and 1300, Oneota horticulturists grew fields of corn, hunted elk, deer and bison and exploited the many resources of the adjacent floodplain.

Trempealeau/Parrott Park: The Trempealeau bluffs have attracted people for thousands of years. Mound building Woodland cultures in particular occupied this area. Early archeologists recorded major mound groups and associated camps. Excavations at some sites found exotic artifacts of the 2,000 year old Hopewell Culture.

La Moille Rockshelter: In the 1880's, a small cave was located in the bluff opposite the Trempealeau. Prehistoric inhabitants carved its walls with numerous glyphs of birds, buffalo, fish and other symbols. Nearby, a second shelter contained pottery, animal bones and other artifacts dating back to the Early Woodland stage, some 2,500 years ago.

La Crosse: The terraces at La Crosse became the major center of Native American activity along the Upper Mississippi River after the Oneota shifted downriver from Red Wing about A.D. 1300. Here, Oneota settlements sprawled across the landscape in agricultural communities. They also continued to rely heavily on the Mississippi River floodplain for fish, mussels, turtles, waterfowl and other resources. About A.D. 1650, the Oneota left La Crosse to settle west of the Mississippi River. There an agent of French explorer Nicholas Perrot met and recorded these people as the Ioway Tribe.

Effigy Mounds: Many mounds once dotted the bluffs and terraces at the mouth of the Wisconsin River near historic Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Some of these were round and typical of the Hopewell Culture. Many others were animal shaped earthworks, distinctive of the regional Effigy Mound Culture, from about A.D. 400 to A.D. 1200. Visitors can see preserved examples of these mysterious symbolic representations at the Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa and at Wyalusing State Park in Wisconsin.

Mill Pond Site: The discovery of a series of campsites on floodplain islands near Prairie du Chien in the late 1970's prompted new interest and insight into the past use of the Upper Mississippi River. Artifacts from these sites indicate repeated occupation since at least the Archaic stage, 5,000 years ago. Archeologists identified sealed layers of discarded clamshells and associated harvest materials during excavations at several of these sites, including the Mill Pond Site. These sites represent specialized warm season encampments in the floodplain by a succession of cultures.

Osceola Site: In the 1940's, fishermen observed artifacts eroding from a riverbank and contacted archeologists. Subsequent excavations found a layer of Woodland Culture artifacts over an Archaic cemetery. With the burials were distinctive spear tips and copper implements that indicate association with the Old Copper Culture of about 3,000-5,000 years ago. Old Copper sites are most common in eastern Wisconsin, and Osceola may represent a community involved in copper trade from its source at Lake Superior down the Mississippi River.