

Flowing Back Through Time: The St. Joseph River in Historical and Archaeological Perspective

Water is essential to life. Throughout history humans have relied on rivers and waterways for resources, transportation, and energy. This exhibit documents the importance of the St. Joseph River yesterday and today.



People relied on aquatic animals like this beaver for millennia.



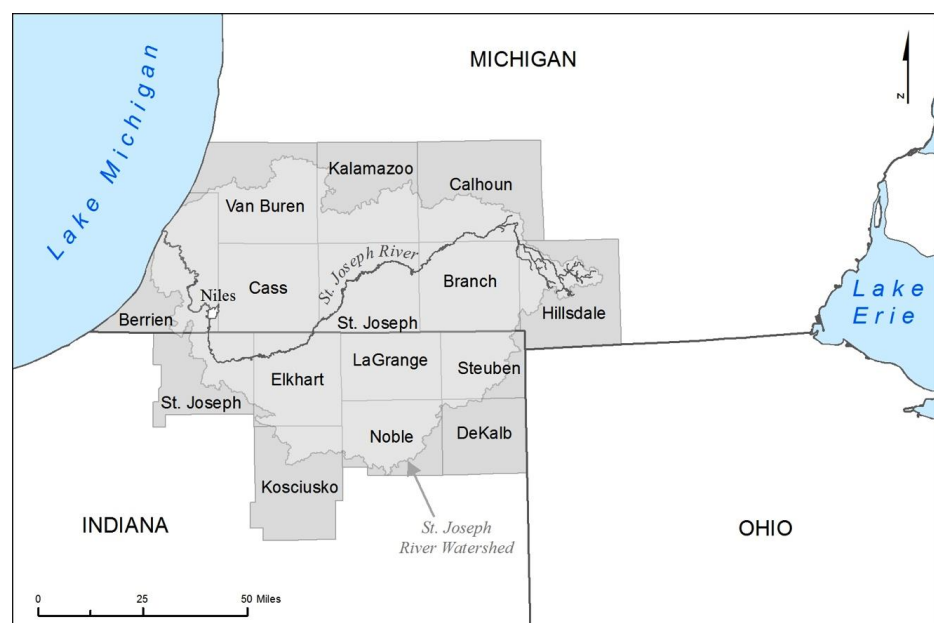
Water facilitated and impeded movement. To by-pass these 130-foot falls on the Pigeon River along the western shore of Lake Superior, fur traders used the Grand Portage—an 8.5 mile trail. Photo by Michael Nassaney.



The dam in Niles still produces energy and floods the site of Fort St. Joseph annually. Remains of the abandoned raceway can be seen to the left.

A Watery World

Rivers and waterways form an intricate network throughout eastern North America. The Great Lakes region is one of the largest fresh water basins in the world. The St. Joseph River has its headwaters in Hillsdale County and empties into Lake Michigan. It is approximately 206 miles long and its watershed drains some 4,685 square miles from 15 counties in southwestern Michigan and northern Indiana.



The St. Joseph River watershed drains much of southwestern Michigan and northern Indiana. Map by Jason Glatz.

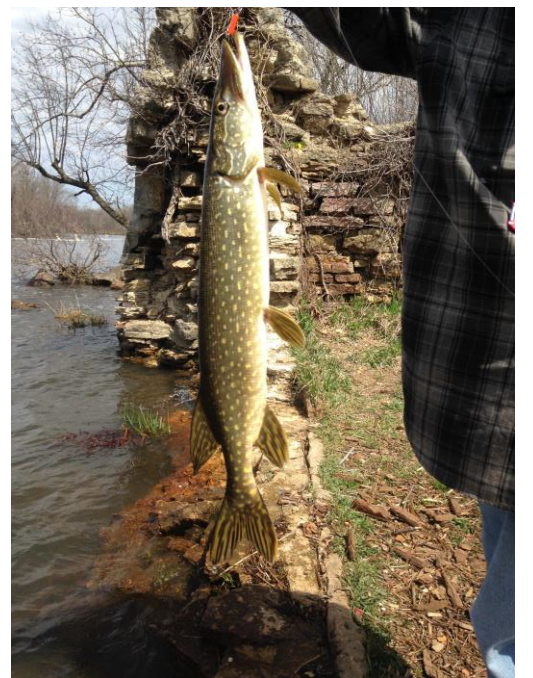
Resources and Transportation

Archaeological evidence indicates that Native peoples located their settlements adjacent to the St. Joseph River and its tributaries for millennia to exploit plant and animal resources and they used birch bark canoes to travel along waterways. The French established Fort St. Joseph along the river in the late seventeenth century and used water routes to expand their Empire into the interior of the continent.



Natives paddling in a birch bark canoe (left).

Fishing is still a popular sport along the St. Joseph River. This pike (right) was caught near the millrace (shown in the background) in Niles. Photo by Anne Volpe.



Painting by Eastman Johnson, 1856-57.

The Power of a River

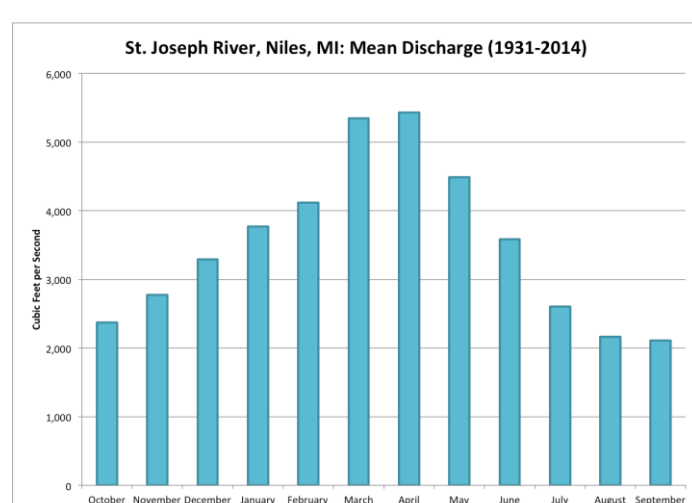
Nineteenth-century industries used waterpower produced by dams and raceways. Factories once lined the banks of the St. Joseph River in Niles producing paper, flour, and shell buttons. While most of these companies have long since disappeared, the river remains a source of power for the French Paper Company, a sixth-generation, family-owned mill. The river also attracts people of all ages for recreational kayaking, canoeing, and fishing.

A Blessing and a Curse

For nearly a century, the St. Joseph River hindered the discovery of Fort St. Joseph until 1998 when Western Michigan University archaeologists recovered remains of the fort. A high ground water table adjacent to the river is a nuisance for fort archaeologists because the water must be drained each summer to allow excavation. However, floodwaters cover the site for much of the year keeping it protected from unauthorized digging.



Pumps like this one are required to drain water from the fort site to allow excavation. Photo by Tori Hawley.



The St. Joseph River floods the fort site in winter and spring when its discharge exceeds 3500 cubic feet per second. Data from the USGS monitoring station in Niles.



An unusually wet field season in 2015 made it difficult to conduct investigations at Fort St. Joseph (left). Photo by John Cardinal.

British re-enactors view dry archaeological excavations at the fort (right). Photo by John Lacko.



Rivers in Your Life

The St. Joseph River has always been important to people who lived in the vicinity of Niles. How are rivers and waterways important to you? Do you live near a river or visit a body of water for rest and relaxation? What is the source of your clean water? What would you do if your water became polluted or you were no longer able to visit your favorite body of water? What roles do rivers and waterways play in your life?

This exhibit was created and designed by members of the Anthropology in the Community class (ANTH 5030) in Spring 2016 (Carole Davenport, Alicia Gregory, Alex Milnikel, Ryan Murdoch, Samantha Sprague, Julia Tanner, Margaret Truesdell, Anne Volpe, Antonio Wheeler, and Dion Wright under the supervision of Michael S. Nassaney). It was produced with support from the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project, a partnership between Western Michigan University and the City of Niles. Assistance was also provided by: Christina Arseneau, Rick Ladonski, Terrance J. Martin, Bob Myers, Donna Ochenryder, Sanya Phillips, Ken Sarkozy, Marcus Winchester, and Michael Worline.