

The St. Joseph River: Lifeline of Native Peoples

Native Americans have sacred beliefs about waterways. The St. Joseph River provided resources and an artery for travel that attracted Native settlements for millennia.

Sacred Rituals, Beliefs and Native Names of Rivers

Many Anishinabek (Algonquin) people believe that a dark and dangerous underworld exists beneath the earth's waters. Beings that inhabit this place include *Mishikinebik* (a huge horned serpent) and *Nampe'shiu* (a horned panther with a dorsal spine, feared for maliciously drowning people and whipping up violent storms with its huge thrashing tail). The most feared of all, *Kegangizi*, is described as a great horned fish invoked by shamans for evil purposes.

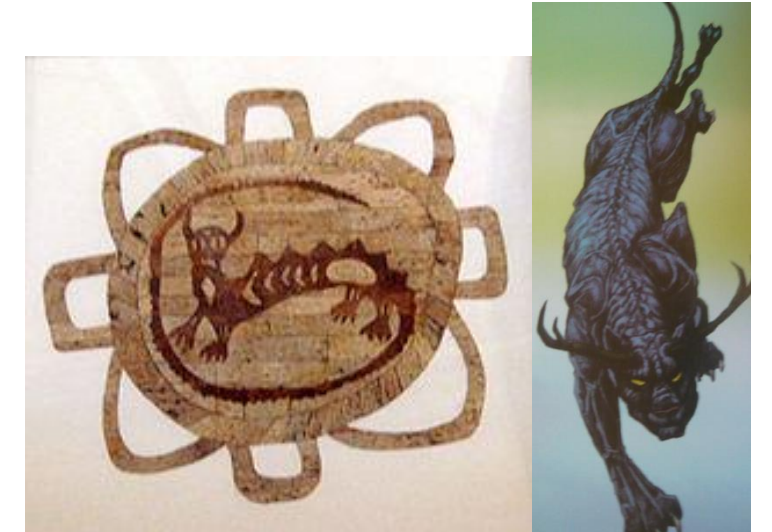


This beaded bag, made by the Potawatomi (ca. 1890), held tobacco that may have been used for water rituals and other ceremonies.

Native Americans have given many names to the St. Joseph River. The Potawatomi call the river *Senajowan Zibe* ("difficult current"), whereas the Miami call it *Sakiwasipi* ("outlet river"). Potawatomi placed an offering of tobacco in the river to give thanks for water in daily life and to ensure safe travel. Native women have the sacred ceremonial responsibility for protecting water from pollution and economic exploitation. Are these traditional beliefs generally upheld by Americans today? Are we good stewards of our rivers?



Eighteenth-century Eastern Woodland Indians in birch bark canoes. Painting by Robert Griffing.



Artistic depictions of an Underwater Panther by Norval Morrisseau (left) and Finlay Cowan (right). From the National Museum of the American Indian.

The River's Inheritance

The Potawatomi obtained fish from the river. They speared fish from birch bark canoes and also used nets and weirs (tiny dams made of sticks or rocks). Flood waters enriched the soil providing lush vegetation along the river where they grew maize, beans and squash, known to Natives as the "*The Three Sisters*." The river also supported wild rice, medicinal plants, and cattails that were used to make baskets and mats to cover wigwams. Mussel shells made good spoons and ladles.

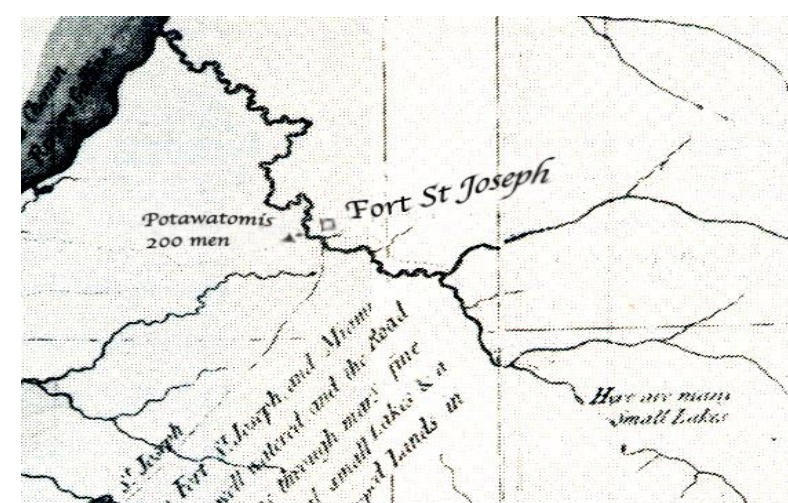


Native Americans, shown on the Fox River in Wisconsin, speared fish by torch light—a technique probably used by the Potawatomi and their neighbors. Painting by Paul King.

Beavers were common along rivers and their tributaries and were hunted extensively for the fur trade. They were processed by Native women for furs and meat. Goods were transported using birch bark and dugout canoes. Birch bark canoes were light enough to carry (portage) around falls and other obstacles and became the preferred mode of transportation.



Natives harvesting wild rice from a birch bark canoe. Painting by Arnold Lorne Hicks (1935).



This map by English surveyor Thomas Hutchins (1778) shows the location of Fort St. Joseph and a large Potawatomi village of perhaps a thousand people including 200 men along the river.



Fish weirs, like this one on the Eel River in Wabash County, IN, were used by Native Americans to catch fish.



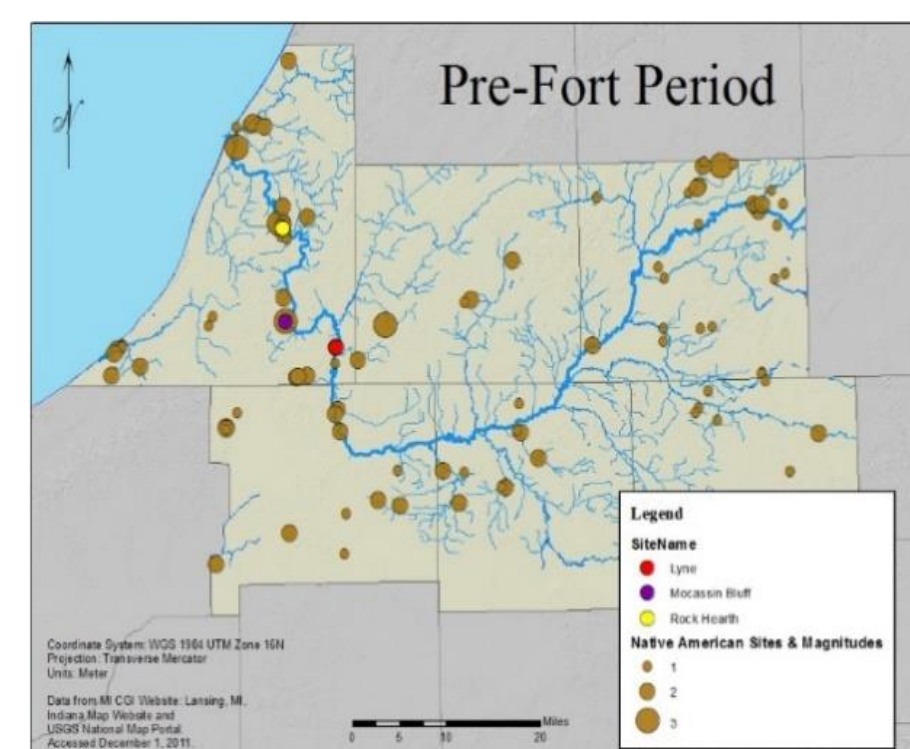
A Great Lakes Indian woman sewing birch bark panels onto a canoe. Courtesy of Palace of the Governors Photo Archives.



Modern day Algonquin-style birch bark canoe approximately 15 feet long. Built by François Rothan (2010)

Waterways: Magnets for Native Settlement

Native Americans have been living along the St. Joseph River for millennia. Archaeologists have investigated some of these sites to learn what resources were exploited and the activities that took place there.



This map shows the location of Native settlements on the St. Joseph River and its tributaries from A.D. 600-1690 including Lyne, Moccasin Bluff, and Rock Hearth. Map by Allison Hook (2016).

At the Moccasin Bluff site, just downstream from the fort, archaeologists have recovered evidence of various aquatic animals and plants including beaver, muskrat, Canada goose, duck, swans, turtles, catfish, walleye, mussels, and water-lily. Sturgeon was particularly plentiful. Similar species were found at the Rock Hearth site. Closer to Fort St. Joseph, the Lyne site demonstrates the close interactions between the French and Natives in the fur trade in the form of trade goods and smudge pits used for tanning hides. These are just a few of the many sites that were located on the St. Joseph River, showing the importance of the river to Native lives.