

Resources of the St. Joseph River

The St. Joseph River has been a habitat for various biotic resources that were important to Native Americans and French settlers in the region. Particularly rich information is available from documentary, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence, including the remains of plants and animals that once lived in or adjacent to the river.



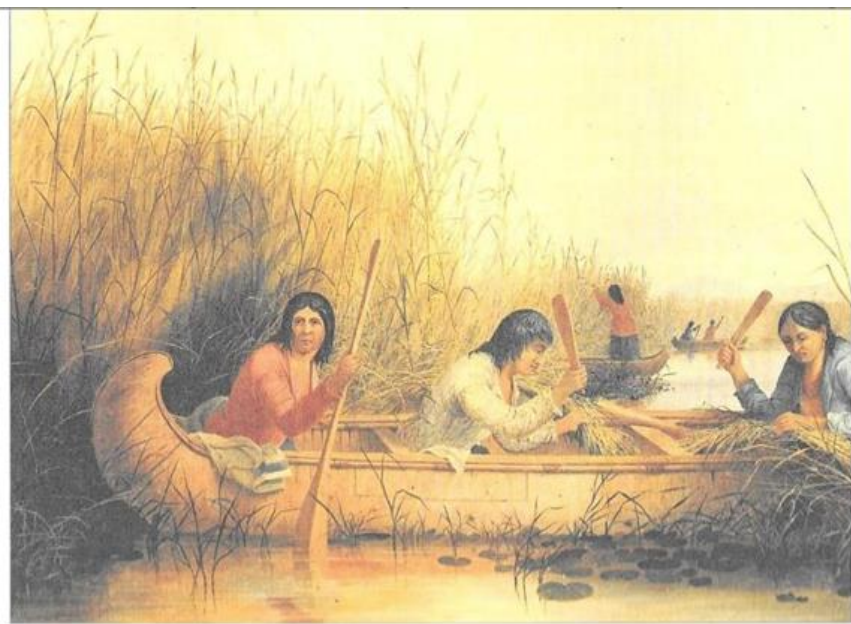
Rebecca Stoddard and Joe Hearn analyzing animal bones recovered from Fort St. Joseph. Photo by Austin George.

Aquatic Plants

Though plants seldom preserve in the archaeological record, ethnographic evidence indicates that the Potawatomi used aquatic plants for various purposes.

Wild rice (*Zizania palustris*) was once plentiful in the river and an important plant resource for Native Americans. It was made into soup, eaten with sweets, incorporated into other dishes, and sometimes gathered and stored for winter use. Native Americans and ecologists are currently making an effort to restore it throughout the state.

Cattail (*Typha latifolia*) had economic benefit to Native peoples. The Potawatomi harvested the stalks in the fall, dried them out, peeled off the outer layers, and sewed them together into mats to cover wigwams. Cattails were also made into medicine to ease inflammation, and the Natives used fluff from them to make an early form of diaper for infants.



The Potawatomi would paddle a canoe alongside stands of wild rice, bend the tops of the plant into the canoe, and pound the stalks to loosen the rice. Painting by Seth Eastman.

Aquatic Animals

Lake Sturgeon spawn upriver in the spring and were plentiful in the St. Joseph River. Often exceeding 10 feet in length, sturgeon were a subsistence resource for both Native Americans and European settlers. The presence of numerous sturgeon bones at archaeological sites along the river like Moccasin Bluff and Wymer West are evidence of their dietary importance.



In addition to serving as a food resource, the brains and oils of sturgeon may have been used in the processing of pelts. Drawing by Rick Hill.

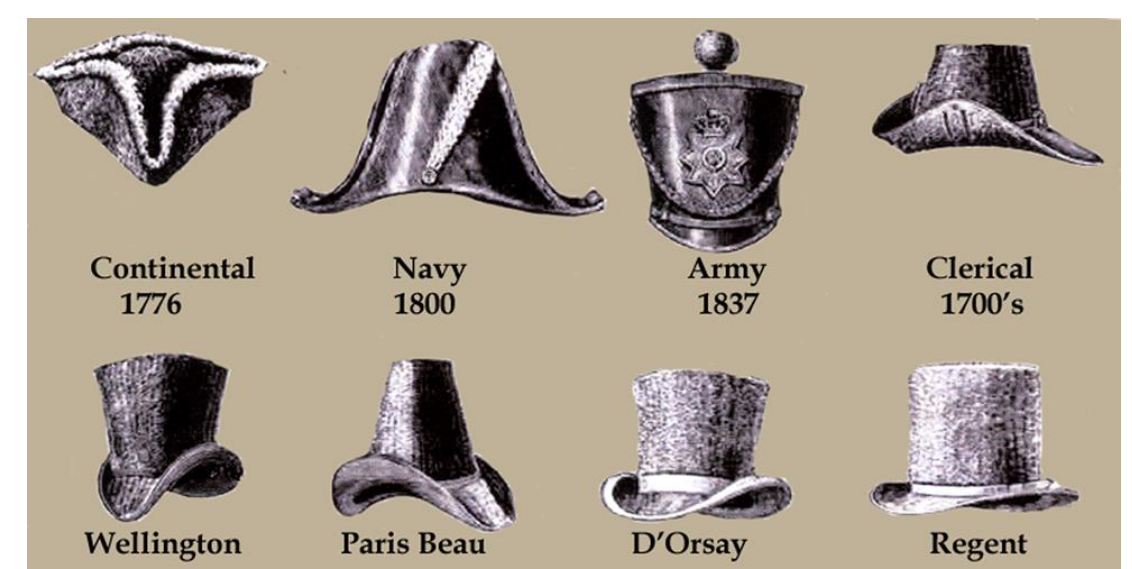


Clams were exploited before the button industry developed in Niles in the 1930s. These shell specimens were recovered in excavations from Fort St. Joseph. Photo by John Cardinal.

Various species of **freshwater clams** have been recorded in the St. Joseph River. Many of the shells that have been recovered from archaeological deposits at Fort St. Joseph may have been used to scrape deerskins in processing hides for the fur trade in the eighteenth century.

This table lists many of the species that were present in and along the St. Joseph River.

<p>Birds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canada Geese* Trumpeter Swan* Ducks (several species)* Sandhill Crane* 	<p>Clams</p> <p>23 native species including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Elliptio dilatata</i>* <i>Lampsilis cardium</i>* <i>Actinonaias ligamentina</i>* <p>2 invasive species (Zebra Mussels and Asian Clam)</p>
<p>Fish</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suckers* Bowfin* Gar* Northern Pike* Lake Sturgeon* Catfish Bass (smallmouth & largemouth) Pickereel Walleye 	<p>Plants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wild Rice (<i>Zizania palustris</i>) Cattail (<i>Typha latifolia</i>) Purple Loosestrife (<i>Lythrum salicaria</i>)
<p>Mammals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muskrat* Beaver* Raccoon* Otter 	<p>* Indicates that remains of species have been found in archaeological deposits at Fort St. Joseph.</p>



Once the pelts were processed by the Natives, they would be traded to the French and sent to Europe where they were felted and made into a variety of hats, like those shown here.

Beaver was initially the preferred fur-bearing animal because their hides were in high demand in Europe for making felted hats. Hats made from beaver were so popular that the fur trade led to overexploitation in some areas.

Muskrat was popular in the fur trade because of its dense fur, but only became important at Fort St. Joseph when beaver became scarce.



Remains of trumpeter swans (shown here) have been recovered from Fort St. Joseph. Photo by Ty and Ida Baumann.

Birds, particularly migratory species, were among those present in the faunal remains from Fort St. Joseph. The diversity of birds is consistent with animal exploitation patterns at other French colonial sites in the region such as Fort Michilimackinac and Fort Ouiatenon in Indiana.

Muskrats were also an important food resource for Catholics who could not eat meat on certain days. The muskrat was not prohibited for consumption, however, because it was considered to be a fish. Photo by Luke Ormond.

