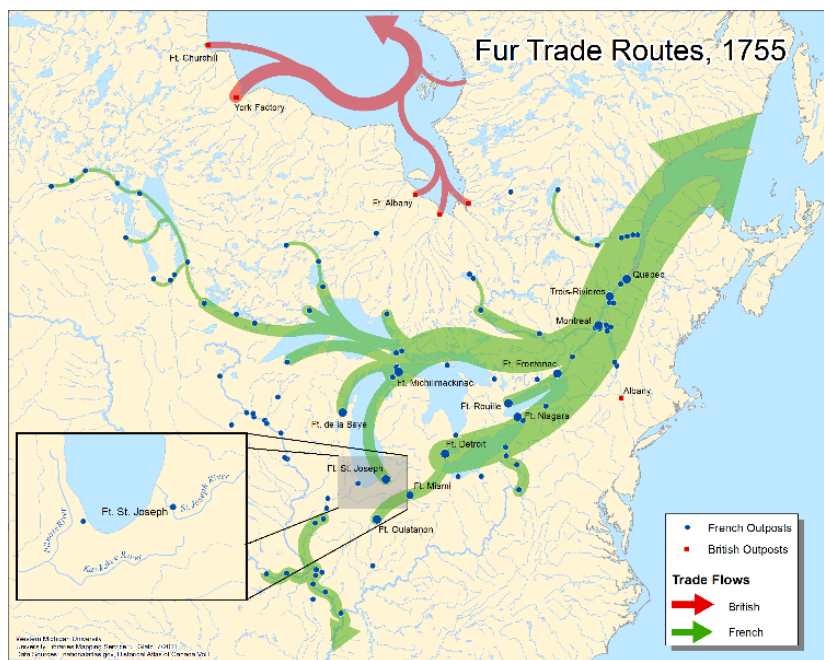


# Traversing the St. Joseph River

## Highways of Yesterday

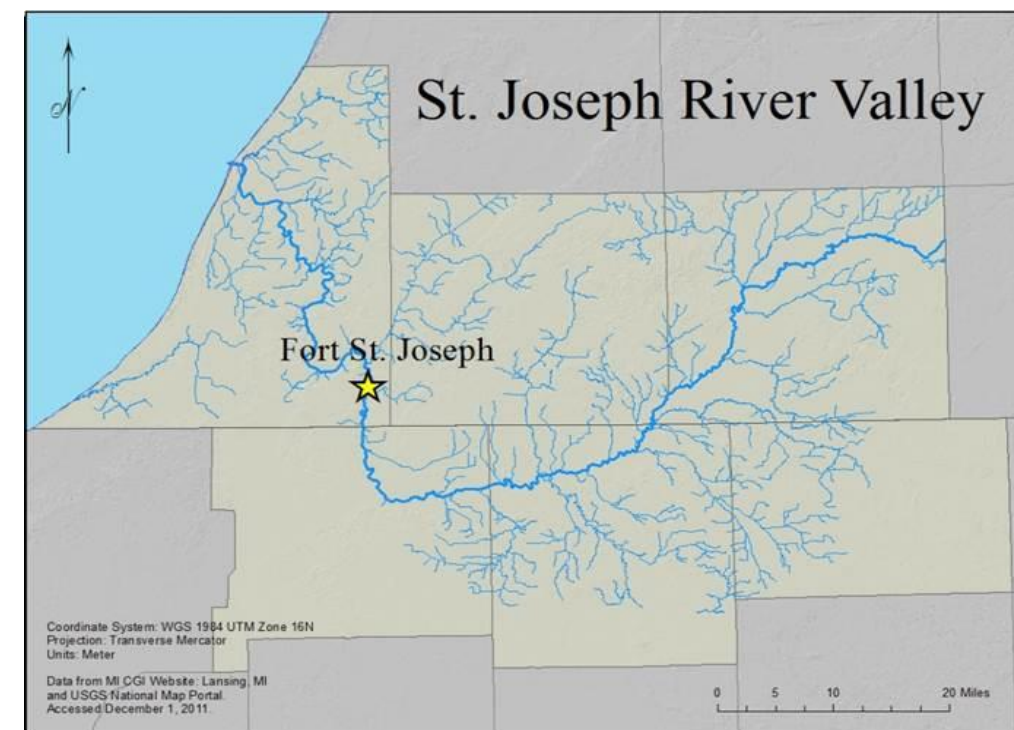
Native Americans and Europeans used rivers and lakes to navigate throughout the region—much like highways today. In southwest Michigan the St. Joseph River was a major water route for the fur trade. People and goods were transported along rivers and waterways in canoes and over land by portages—trails that circumvented falls or connected two bodies of water. The portage near Fort St. Joseph led to the Kankakee River and the Mississippi River drainage.



The fur trade depended on rivers and waterways to transport people and goods. Furs from Fort St. Joseph were taken to Montreal and Quebec by canoe before shipment to Europe. Map by Jason Glatz, WMU University Library Mapping Services.



Two men portaging their canoe over the rapids in 1673. Portaging was necessary to travel over land between water sources and also to get around falls, fallen trees, and other obstacles. From the Granger Collection, New York.



Map showing Fort St. Joseph on the St. Joseph River and its many tributaries that were used to traverse the region. Courtesy of Allison Kohley.

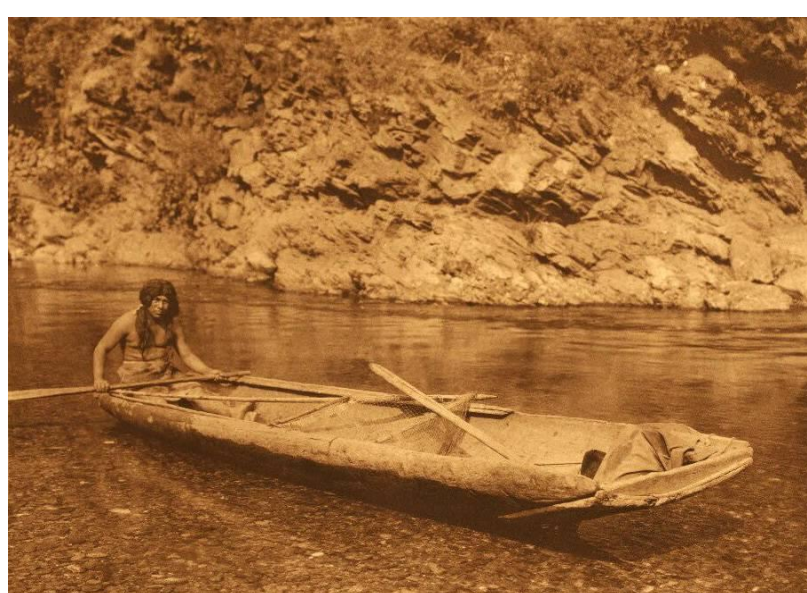


Bark was harvested from birch trees in the dark yellow areas and shipped along rivers and waterways to Native and European settlements in the pale yellow areas. Note the location of Fort St. Joseph in proximity to a birch habitat.

## Plying the Waters of the St. Joseph River

Archaeological evidence, artwork, and ethnographic sources indicate that several different types of watercraft were used to navigate the St. Joseph River. For centuries Native Americans were using birch bark canoes produced from birch trees in central and northern Michigan. These canoes were light and easy to portage. Natives also used dugout canoes, made from a solid log.

Type	Length	No. of Paddlers
Montreal Canoe	33-40 ft.	8-16
Bastard Canoe	29-33 ft.	6-8
North Canoe	24-28 ft.	4-6
Half-size Canoe	18-24 ft.	3-4
Fishing Canoe	15-18 ft.	2
Indian Canoe	13-16 ft.	2



A native man sitting in a dugout canoe which was heavy and not easily portaged. These canoes were made in areas where birch bark was not available. Photo by Edward S. Curtis.



Birch bark canoes were light enough for a single person to portage. A Native American is depicted in this watercolor by Winslow Homer called "The Portage."

## Settlers and Canoes

Europeans adopted Native technology to travel on rivers and waterways. Longer distances required larger canoes to carry more goods for potentially greater profit. Settlers learned to make dugout canoes, which were similar to rafts, and were guided by a large oar. Dugout canoes could carry over 2,000 pounds of trade goods and provisions, such as dried peas, corn, and flour.

Settlers used two other main types of canoes: the Montreal canoe and the North canoe. The Montreal canoe was 33-40 feet long and was used on the Great Lakes and larger rivers like the St. Joseph River during the fur trade. Because Montreal canoes were too heavy to portage, voyageurs would move their goods into North canoes in bundles weighing about 90 lbs. each. North canoes were common on smaller rivers west of the Great Lakes.



A Montreal canoe. *Shooting the Rapids*, painted by Frances Anne Hopkins (1863).



A North canoe tipped on its side, with trade items scattered about. Some of these goods might include glass beads, brass kettles, iron tools, and cloth. *Voyageurs at Dawn*, painted by Frances Anne Hopkins (1871).



This reconstructed North canoe is 26' long, could hold 4-6 men, and required two men to portage. From the Canadian Canoe Museum, photo by Michael Cullen.

Canoes used in the eighteenth-century fur trade were distinguished by size, with Montreal canoes being the largest. They were used to transport goods from Montreal to the Great Lakes. Smaller canoes were used to take goods into the interior of the continent and returned with furs. Fishing canoes were used by both settlers and Native Americans. Indian canoes refer to both birch bark canoes and dugouts. Courtesy of Kenneth Sarkozy.