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.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>No. of Paddlers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montreal Canoe</td>
<td>33-40 ft.</td>
<td>8-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bastard Canoe</td>
<td>29-33 ft.</td>
<td>6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Canoe</td>
<td>24-28 ft.</td>
<td>4-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half-size Canoe</td>
<td>18-24 ft.</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing Canoe</td>
<td>15-18 ft.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Canoe</td>
<td>13-16 ft.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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.

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.

Canoes were 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.

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."

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.

Canoe use included "The Portage," 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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.