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TURKEY RIVER WINNEBAGO INDIAN SUBAGENCY

Historical Site: 13WH111

The Winnebago Indians were impacted by several treaties between 1825 and 1837. Early treaties established inter-tribal boundaries in and around Wisconsin as part of the eventual government effort to acquire all Indian land on the east side of the Mississippi River

TREATY OF 1825

This treaty established a “neutral line” that ran east and west across present day Northeast Iowa. This line separated the Sioux to the north from the Sauk & Fox to the south.

TREATY OF 1830

Due to continued fighting between the Sioux and the Sauk & Fox, this new treaty established 20-mile-wide strips on both sides of the neutral line forming what was called the “neutral ground”. This space was to keep the tribes apart from each other.

TREATY OF 1832

Through this treaty, The Winnebago tribe gave up their land around the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers in Wisconsin for a portion of the ‘neutral ground’ in Iowa.

TREATY OF 1837

When the Winnebago did not move into the neutral ground due to their sacred burial grounds existing back in Wisconsin, this treaty was then signed requiring the tribe to give up all land claims they had on the east side of the Mississippi River.

YELLOW RIVER WINNEBAGO INDIAN SUBAGENCY

A small group of Winnebago had settled near the Yellow River in present-day Allamakee County in the early 1830s. Due to this action, the government established a subagency site and erected buildings there in 1833. This subagency existed until the government decision was made to move the Winnebago into the neutral ground in the year 1840.

TURKEY RIVER WINNEBAGO SUBAGENCY

Construction of the military post of Fort Atkinson within the ‘neutral ground’ began during the summer of 1840. At the same time, Yellow River subagent, David Lowry, chose the new subagency site three miles southeast of the military post and $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile west of the Turkey River around a natural spring. In the spring of that year, the Winnebago were escorted by military troops into the neutral ground. In 1839, Reverend Lowry, a Presbyterian minister, was appointed as the first agent in charge of the Turkey River subagency.

FUNCTIONS OF THE SUBAGENCY

Fourteen buildings were eventually erected at the subagency site. Functions of the subagency included hiring doctors to provide health care to the Indians, and operating a school to teach white culture to Winnebago. In 1842, the agency school had over 100 Winnebago students who attended classes on music, Christian religion, and reading English. The girls were taught how to sew and make clothes for the younger children, while the boys were taught how to farm. School enrollment was 166 students by the year 1845, and 249 students in 1847.

THE MODEL FARM

A model farm was established with five agricultural fields. Apparently the attempt was made to teach the Indian men and boys to farm, whoever this activity was unpopular with the Winnebago men since they were hunters. While Winnebago women apparently did most of the farm work, by 1846 it was reported that some of the Indian men had become interested in plowing & cultivation of the land.

ANNUITY PAYMENTS

Another factor that enticed the Winnebago to move into the 'neutral land' was the government's promise of monthly annuity payments and supplies. The Indians needed these supplies and funds to survive since a normal life of hunting would be difficult. Blankets, pipes, sewing supplies, livestock, guns, and other materials promised to the Indians by the government were distributed at the subagency. Cash payments could be used to purchase additional supplies from licensed traders allowed into the neutral ground.

THE SUB-AGENTS

Lowry was subagent until July 5, 1844, when he was replaced by James R. McGregor. Jonathan E. Fletcher replaced McGregor on June 2, 1845.

Subagent Fletcher reported that approximately 2400 Winnebago, living in 22 detached bands, existed with the 'neutral ground' in 1846.

Winnebago encampments existed throughout the neutral ground and included separate villages of Little Decorah, Waukon Decorah, & Winneshiek, each on the Upper Iowa River, then known as the Iowa River.

DURATION OF THE TURKEY RIVER WINNEBAGO SUBAGENCY

The Turkey River Subagency lasted from 1840-1848. In the latter year, the Winnebago were moved into central Minnesota. Once the buildings at the subagency site were abandoned, settlers quickly took advantage of the cleared land, established roads, and existing buildings by purchasing the former subagency land for their own settlement.

TURKEY RIVER SUBAGENCY SITE RECORDED AS AN OFFICIAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

In 1988, the Turkey River Winnebago Indian Subagency Site was recorded as an archaeological site in the state of Iowa. It was given the official site number of 13WH111 ("13" represents Iowa; "WH" represents Winneshiek County; 111 is the designated site number within Winneshiek County).

Winnebago Tribal Historian Visits the Subagency Site

On July 19, 1995, David Lee Smith was escorted to the military post and the 1840s subagency site by members of the Fort Atkinson Historic Preservation Commission. Smith is director of Indian Studies at Little Priest Tribal College, Winnebago, Nebraska, and also serves as Tribal Historian of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. David Lee Smith is an accomplished Winnebago professional storyteller. During the year long celebration of Iowa's Sesquicentennial in 1996, Smith conducted traditional Winnebago oral history story-telling activities at the Sept. Ft. Atkinson rendezvous that year. On the day preceding rendezvous, identified as "School Day", Mr. Smith shared tales of Winnebago myths & legends as well as historical & cultural information about the Winnebago Indians to over 1300 students from Iowa Schools.

WINNEBAGO INDIANS

The Winnebago people called themselves Hochungra which means “People of the Parent Speech”, or “Big Fish People”. The origin of the tribe is not known although some theory supports the idea that the Winnebago’s migrated into North America from Middle America around 1000 B.C., and later arrived in Wisconsin about A.D. 700. Historical records from the French fur traders indicate that their first recorded contact with the Winnebago Indians occurred in Wisconsin in the early 1600s. At that time, the Winnebago numbered about 20,000 with most living around Lake Winnebago in the Green Bay area.

Around the year 1630, the Winnebago’s were at war with the Huron nation. Jean Nicolet, a French Jesuit, was sent to Lake Winnebago to help make peace between the tribes. Five years later, the Winnebago tribe contracted smallpox and shortly their population dropped to 16,000. In 1637, a smallpox and measles epidemic hit the tribe reducing their numbers to 8000.

In 1820 it is reported that the tribe consisted of 900 warriors, 1300 women, and 3600 children for a total of 5800 people. In 1834, yet another large smallpox epidemic killed off approximately 1500 members of the tribe.

Between 1825 and 1837, the government worked to acquire all the Indian lands on the east side of the Mississippi “River through a series of treaties made with the Winnebago. With the Treaty of 1837, the Winnebago gave up their final claim to land on the east side of the Mississippi River.

In the year 1840, the tribe was escorted by U. S. military soldiers into the “neutral ground” located in the Iowa Territory (what is now northeast Iowa). Total numbers of the Winnebago population and the number of villages they were located in within the ‘neutral ground’ is somewhat conflicting.

According to a Winnebago Census taken in the year 1842 by J. W. Hancock, superintendent of the Turkey River Indian subagency school, the Winnebago’s totaled 2183 in number living in 13 different villages.

Subagency school superintendent, J. W. Hancock, listed the following Winnebago band chiefs, and the number of men, women and children within each village:

Chief	Men	Women	Children	Total
Bent Nose	25	25	20	70
Big Nose	47	61	61	169
Whirling Thunder	50	64	63	177
Little Hill	68	114	158	340
Winoshink	74	105	150	329
Little Soldier	43	50	40	133
Yellow Thunder	51	52	40	143
Big Thunder	50	36	34	120
Nak-hawn	55	66	82	203
Big Canoe	40	58	50	148
Kisch-??	43	44	54	141
Little Thunder	40	50	40	130
Little Decorie	28	30	22	80
/	/	/	/	/
TOTAL	614	755	814	2183

Note: regarding the above chart – Nak-hawn is possibly ‘Waukon’.

In a letter dated August 15, 1846, sent from J. E. Fletcher, subagent at the Turkey River Subagency, to James Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Fletcher reported that the Winnebago Indians numbered about 2400, living in 22 detached parties or bands. Fletcher also reported that each band had a chief, and that there were also about 75 half breeds living among the Indians at that time.

When Iowa became a state in December, 1846, the Winnebago were the only Indians “legally” remaining in eastern Iowa.

While each Winnebago band had its own chief, supposedly Chief Winneshiek was appointed (by the U.S. government) to lead the entire tribe. Chief Winneshiek remained a leader of one of the twenty-two bands.

Another band-chief was Chief Waukon-Decorah. David Lee Smith, the current Winnebago Tribal Historian on the Winnebago Reservation in Nebraska, is the great-great-great grandson of Chief Waukon-Decorah.

CHIEF WINNESHIEK

The principal home for Chief Winneshiek was located on the Root River located about seven (7) miles west of the village of Houston, Minnesota.

Winneshiek located his winter home on the Iowa River (now called the Upper Iowa River) so as to be closer to the sub-agency (located 3 miles south of the military post of Ft. Atkinson) where the members of his band could obtain monthly annuity supplies during the winter.

While Winneshiek, at first, served as the chief of one of the twenty-two bands of Winnebago, in the year 1845, at the Turkey River subagency, he was appointed the overall tribal chief.

Chief Winneshiek was called “Wa-kon-ja-good-gah”, which means “Coming Thunder”.

Military records indicate that he was a very shrewd, wise, and stubborn man, but free-hearted. No person ever left or entered the great chief’s lodge without receiving something to eat.

Winneshiek had four wives, who with himself and family, lived in one lodge.

Winneshiek County was legally named on February 27, 1847 with its boundaries then described. The name was in honor of the Winnebago tribal leader, Chief Winneshiek.

On January 15, 1851, an organizing act was approved by the Iowa governor, and Winneshiek was recognized as an organized county of 468,000 acres.

During the celebration of Iowa’s sesquicentennial in the year 1996, the Winneshiek County Sesquicentennial Commission adopted an official county flag that depicts Chief Winneshiek.

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**Events from
1838-1855**

- 1838 - Cherokee Indians made “Trail of Tears”; removed from Georgia to Oklahoma
- 1840 - William Henry Harrison elected President of U. S.
- **1840 - Construction of military post of Fort Atkinson begins**
- **1840 - Winnebago Indians of Wisconsin given military escort into the “neutral ground” of the N. E. Iowa Territory**
- **1840 - Turkey River Indian Subagency established**
- 1841 - John Tyler (VP) became President of the U. S.
- **1841 - 1st Company of dragoons (horse mounted soldiers) arrived at Fort Atkinson**
- **1841 - According to J. W. Hancock, superintendent of the Turkey River Indian subagency school, the Winnebagoes within the “neutral ground” totaled 2183 in number living in 13 different villages**
- **1843 - A Catholic Mission was established next to a Winnebago village east of Fort Atkinson**
- 1844 - First message over first telegraph line sent May 24 by inventor Samuel F. B. Morse from Washington to Baltimore: “What hath God Wrought!”
- 1844 - Jim Beckwourth discovered a pass through the Sierra Nevada Mountains that led to California and the Pacific Ocean
- 1844 - Telegraph put into operation
- 1845 - James Polk inaugurated as President of the U. S.
- 1845 - Texas became the 18th state
- 1846 - Great Britain and the U. S. agreed to divide Oregon between the two countries at the 49th parallel of latitude
- 1846 - Discovery of ether as an anesthetic
- 1846 - Sewing Machine is patented
- 1846-1848 - U. S. War with Mexico

- **1846** - **Iowa enters the Union**
- **1846** - **Ft. Atkinson troops sent to fight in the Mexican-American War**
- **1846** - **According to J. E. Fletcher, subagent at the Turkey River Subagency, the number of Winnebago Indians in the “neutral ground” totaled about 2400 living in 22 detached parties or bands**
- 1847 - Frederick Douglas publishes an anti-slavery newspaper in New York called “The North Star”
- 1847 - First adhesive U. S. postage stamps on sale July 1st
- 1847 - Mormon migration to the Great Salt Lake
- 1848 - Zachary Taylor elected President\
- 1848 - Gold discovered in California
- **1848** - **Winnebago Indians removed from Iowa & taken into Minnesota**
- **1848** - **The government abandoned the Turkey River Indian Subagency**
- 1848 - Seneca Falls, New York Convention for Women’s Rights
- 1849 - Harriet Tubman escapes from slavery; becomes a conductor on the “Underground Railroad” helping other slaves escape to freedom
- 1849 - Gold Rush to California
- 1849 - Walter Hunt invented the safety pin
- 1849 - Elizabeth Blackwell became the 1st U. S. woman to graduate from a medical college
- **1849** - **In February, the last company of infantry left Ft. Atkinson and the military post was abandoned**
- 1855 - On April 21, the first train crossed the Mississippi River on the rivers first railroad bridge which was between Rock Island, Illinois and Davenport, Iowa
- **1855** - **The Fort Atkinson military post was sold to private owners by public auction and the buildings were torn down**