

The First Inhabitants of the Great
Lakes Region
in North America

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First Inhabitants of the Great Lakes Region

As archeological discoveries of bone fragments and fossils continue to support the existence of homo-sapiens in North America prior to the arrival of Indo-European explorers in the 15th century, this paper will attempt to explain chronologically, which Native American inhabitants lived or migrated throughout what is known today as the Great Lakes Region. This region includes lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Ontario, & Erie as well as surrounding U.S. state territories including Michigan, a significant portion of Wisconsin, small portions of Minnesota & Indiana, a small part of Illinois and the Canadian province of Ontario toward the north. In terms of chronological dates, this paper will analyze the quaternary period, specifically the “Holocene epoch from 8000 B.C. to Present; the last 10,000 years” (Quimby 2), since this epoch involved the fundamental evolution of mankind to the present. It is important to realize that the late Pleistocene epoch had a dramatic affect on the migration patterns of homo-sapiens reaching “the Americas by 14,000 ago” (O’Brien 12), after large portions of North America encountered the last ice age, which through glaciation and glacial retreat affected the date of arrival and presence of indigenous people throughout the Great Lakes Region.

Shortly following the glacial retreat of the upper Great Lakes region around 11,000 B.C., the flora and fauna in the region began to develop prior to and upon the arrival of the “Paleo-Indian tribe, circa 7000 B.C. to 4500 B.C.” (Quimby 6). Between this time period, in 6000 B.C., the basins of the upper Great Lakes became entirely ice free and moraines and depressions began forming the shapes of the lakes when water from glacial retreat eventually filled the lakes due to rapid climate alterations. Although the first generations of spruce and fir trees began to grow abundantly, the Paleo-Indian tribe “used fluted points of chipped stone surrounding the lakes for the spearing of large animals including mastodons as a primary source of food.” (Quimby 6) The fact that no actual dwelling sites nor artifacts other than fluted points have been discovered; historians and archaeologists strongly believe that the Paleo-Indians were a nomadic tribe, constantly on the move as land and environmental conditions changed. Archaeologists have also speculated that the Paleo-Indians may have been “direct descendants from the early Archaic and Mongoloid culture, perceived to be the first homo-sapiens to set foot in North America by crossing the Bering Strait in the early Holocene epoch.” (Kubiak 12) Because the oldest fluted points have been found along the western shores of Lake Superior and more recent points along the southern banks of Lake Huron, historians have theorized that the Paleo-Indian group may have gone through a “transitional phase, moving from the northwest toward a southeastward direction” (Quimby 33), proof of their existence as a nomadic tribe.

Within close proximity of the Paleo-Indians, another group of indigenous people emerged and migrated

along the shores of glacial and post-glacial lakes on the northern and eastern shore line of Lake Huron, as well as southern Ontario.” (Quimby 6). These people, referred to as the Aqua-Plano were hunters and gatherers who used various kinds of lancets or pointed, double-edged blades. The Aqua-Plano inhabited the area in a nomadic fashion, that is moving and settling temporarily wherever fish or mammals became available. The Aqua-Plano tribe remained along the northern shores of Lake Huron between 6000 B.C. and 4500 B.C.. This was a time when flora was changing as mature spruce began to decline in quantity and coniferous pine from the south began growing more toward the north, withstanding extremely cold winters and semi-mild summers. Nearing 4000 B.C., the fauna south of the Great Lakes region, were also migrating northward as the glaciers receded “modifying fauna from primitive mastodons to giant beavers, elk and caribou when new mammals migrated further northward” (Quimby 24) and became a major source of food for the Aqua-Plano people. Besides hunting game with lanceolate blades, the Aqua-Plano were also known for working “quartzite quarries in the northern part of Lake Huron,” (Quimby 5) as well as the region now referred to as the Georgian Bay shores of Ontario. Since the Aqua-Plano were rather isolated from the landscape further south, they had no interaction with indigenous groups developing in southern regions like the future Iroquois. Interaction periods of Great Lakes Indians with southern indigenous people occurred primarily in the Late Woodland Era (800A.D.- 1600 A.D.) as will be described later.

The next group of Indians to inhabit the Great Lakes region, particularly the southern portion of Lake Huron in the vicinity of current Port Huron and Pontiac, Michigan, were the Borea-Archaic. The Borea-Archaic, otherwise referred to as the “Ancient Boreal Hunters” (Quimby 6), inhabited the upper Great Lakes region from 5000 B.C. to 500 B.C.. The "Ancient Boreal Hunters" were considered an advanced group of hunters and gatherers who placed an emphasis in “using wood from the southern deciduous forest to their advantage.” (Quimby 6) They established several small villages and campsites on a temporary basis using terrain adjacent to a river along stream networks branching off the lake or simply along the shores of Lake Huron. Their infrequent encounters with other indigenous groups south of Lake Huron, provided the Borea-Archaic ample time to specialize their development in the usage of stone and wooden tools such as “gorges, axes and adzes.” (Quimby 7) They also used stones surrounding the lake to build “polished stone tools” (Quimby 7) as weapons for defense and hunting purposes. Abundant vegetation and wood gathered from medium sized deciduous trees was used by the Borea-Archaic to construct temporary “cove-shaped dwellings” prior to the winter season. The “Ancient Boreal Hunters” frequently constructed woodworking tools such as “gouges, axes and adzes.” (Quimby 7) They also used stones surrounding the lake to build “polished stone tools” (Quimby 7) as weapons for defense. Though their encounter with other indigenous groups was seldom to none, they did use the presence of abundant vegetation and bark from deciduous trees to construct temporary “cone-shaped dwellings” (Quimby 7) as refuge shelters to endure winter seasons. In addition, they would often store the carcasses of captured bison, deer and caribou as primary food sources in smaller dwellings, within close access of their living quarters. “Wooden poles were used as a framework to support these structures and spread pine needles on the ground to avoid dampness.” (Kubiak 14) Whenever possible the Borea-Archaic use the hide of animals as mats to

insulate the dwellings” (Kubiak 14) and the dwellings often had a hole for smoke to escape when setting fires to provide warmth or for cooking purposes. Despite the frequent development of these living arrangements, it is important to note that the Borea-Archaic remained nomadic basing their brief stay on the presence of wild game and natural sources available, therefore never settling permanently in a single place for a long period of time.

Another group of Native Americans referred to as the Old Copper tribe also existed in the period between 5000 B.C. to 500 B.C.. The Old Copper tribe frequented the southern Lake Superior shore line between what today we call the cities of Duluth, Minnesota to Ashard, Wisconsin. This southern portion of Lake Superior had a high content of copper in the soil, which the “Old Copper tribe frequently mined and extracted copper for use in their tool and weaponry manufacturing.” (Quimby/Spaulding 192) The Old Copper tribe were considered the “first fabricators of metal in the Americas” (Quimby/ Spaulding 192) and like the Archaic Borealis, they also relied heavily on hunting caribou, deer, elk and bison for survival. During the latter part of the Old Copper tribe existence, the period of pine forest reached its peak capacity, whereas “southern portions of the region declined in pine forest as sparse oak-chestnut forest and grasses became dominant” (Quimby 6) to develop the flat area we know today as the Great Plains, once former territory of the Algonquin nation.

As the Old Copper tribe was nearing extinction, a new indigenous group emerged inhabiting a grand part of Wisconsin, northeast Illinois, northern Indiana, and northern Ohio. This group were referred to as the Red Ocher people who lived between 1000 B.C. and 500 B.C.. Like the Old Copper tribe, the Red Ochers also used an enormous amount of copper to construct “awls, celts, knives, and points.” (Ritzenthaler/ Quimby 248) They also “made flint points, and large ceremonial blades as long as 19 inches in length.” (Ritzenthaler/Quimby 246). Artifacts and remnants of Red Ocher Culture have been discovered from eastern Iowa to central Ohio and from southern Ohio to the Manitoulin District of Ontario. Further west and south, artifacts of the Red Ochers have been found in “southeastern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, northern Indiana and the southern half of the lower peninsula of Michigan.” (Ritzenthaler/Quimby 246) In much of this area, the “Red Ochers were co-occupants with the Old Copper tribe” (Ritzenthaler/ Quimby 247) before both eventually became extinct at nearly the same time. Similar to the group before, the Red Ochers were also a group of hunters and gatherers but what makes them unique were their burial rituals and the burial grounds they developed. Anthropologist Robert E. Ritzenthawler and historian George I. Quimby from the Chicago Natural History Museum described a typical burial site of the Red Ocher as consisting of the following: “flexed burials in pits or ridges of sand, gravel or loess, with powdered red ocher in grave, “turkey tail” blades of chipped blue grey flint, rather large lanceolate ceremonial knives of whitish flint and caches of ovate triangulated points.” (Ritzenthaler/ Quimby 253) As one can tell from their burial rituals, the Red Ochers seem unique for their time and place in using ceremonial blades, marine shell beads; gathered from the lake shores, and copper beads; gathered from the ground to symbolize or represent some type of spiritual affection to accompany the deceased.

Directly following the Red Ochers, were Early Woodlands peoples who became the dominant indigenous

group in the Great Lakes region circa 500 B.C. to about 100 B.C. The Early Woodlands “migrated from southern Illinois along the Illinois River until reaching the western shores of Lake Michigan.” (Quimby 6) During the spring and summer seasons, they would build temporary dwellings, referred to by historians as sod houses slightly submerged underground. They would use the “bark from cedar, ash, elm, spruce and fir trees” (Quimby 73), depending on the area, since they were known to frequent the western shores of Lake Michigan between Green Bay, Wisconsin and what is known today as Chicago, Illinois. From among the Early Woodland peoples, a subculture group developed known as the Hopewell Indians. The Hopewellian Indians existed from “500 B.C. to 700 A.D. and they originated from points further south along the Mississippi River valley.” (Quimby 7) The Hopewellians were famous for “developing the first trade and commerce system within the Early Woodland era.” (Quimby 7) Though the Early Woodland Indians were expert hunters of wild game” (Quimby 17) within the boreal forests, the “Hopewellian brought an abundance of furs and clay pottery from points further south to commence a trading procedure in exchange for copper, fish, and game gathered by the remaining Early Woodlands. As a whole, the Early Woodlands were famous for “constructing elaborate burial mounds over the dead using pottery of fired clay brought on by the Hopewellians.” (Quimby 7) Thanks in great part to the Hopewellian Indians, new artistic achievements were developing among the Early Woodlands with “the use of clay, copper and the abundance of wood to build long canoes from birch trees with the attempt to spread their trade and commerce to points east of Lake Michigan.” (Quimby 6) Unfortunately, the Early Woodlands were never as successful as the Late Woodlands in terms of trade, travel and the exchange of goods since new technological advances and faster mobility would end up favoring the Late Woodlands Indians by far. We shall now see why.

The final and most recent group of Native Americans to inhabit the Great Lakes region were the Late Woodland Indians. Anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians have obtained a significant amount of information of these people because they were the ones residing in the Great Lakes region during the time of European exploration and settlement in the 17th century. The Late Woodland Period is rather complex because the Late Woodlands are broken down into several distinctive indigenous groups or subcultures since the majority came from southern locations along the Mississippi Valley and Great Plains. A “warm climatic spell around 1000 A.D.” (Quimby 7) favored this as the commencement of the Late Woodland tribal groups started in 800 A.D. and lasted up to 1600 A.D.; until they encountered European settlers. Then their population swiftly declined as will be explained. U.S. and Canadian explorers began to classify the Late Woodland People into eight specific tribal groups based on their geographical location and cultural features. With the French exploring and trading goods with several indigenous groups scattered along the shores of the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario, the French made an attempt to translate the native tongue of the Indians into French and English comprehension. By the “mid 17th century, European settlers had established the following indigenous tribal names to exist among the Late Woodland Period; they include: the Miami, Fox, Sauk, Potawatomi, Ottawa, Huron, Chippewa, and the Winnebago.” (Kubiak 12) What made the Late Woodland Indians different from their past indigenous ancestors was the fact that these

groups developed “innovative agricultural techniques,” in correlation with their area of settlement; instead of solely relying on the duties of hunting and gathering. Between 1000 and 1600 A.D., several historians claim that “many Upper Great Lake Indians traded their goods with their adjacent neighbors and with the Algonquin nation further south.” (Quimby 44) This report will now conclude by describing in detail, the eight major Great Lake Indian tribes that existed throughout the Late Woodland Period.

The Miami occupied the western portion of Michigan and their main village was situated along the banks of the “Kankakee River, which rises in northern Indiana and flows westward through northern Illinois.” (Kubiak 105) This village, pertaining to the Miami was visited by Sieur de La Salle, a French explorer in 1643, who described the village as “having crude forts with brush and trees for protection from Iroquois warriors,” (Kubiak 105) among which the Illinois were believed to have posed the most threat to the Miami. The remainder of “the Miami were found in northeastern Illinois, northern Indiana, and northwestern Ohio, where three rivers would later be named after them.” (Kubiak 105) European settlers described the Miami men to be of “medium height, well built, heads rather round, composure agreeable, and swift runners. The women wore deerskins, while the men were usually tattooed from head to foot.” (Kubiak 111) By 1765, the Miami population declined to a measly “1,250 persons and by 1885 only 57 Miami were still reported to be living in Indian territory.” (Kubiak 113)

The Sauk, "people of yellow earth" were located in the Saginaw Bay region and were thought to have occupied the entire Saginaw River Valley from Lake Huron to Lake Michigan, but “were in constant warfare with the Chippewa Neighbors to the north and the Potawatomi tribe to the south.” (Kubiak 153) The Sauks were famous for designing and using the “tomahawks made of blue flint and making moccasins built from animal hide.” (Kubiak 154) The Sauk also built a variety of “log houses using tree bark from spruce and elm trees. On average, their log houses measured 20-30 feet in length and only 20 feet in width.” (Kubiak 154) Inside the dwellings, coniferous Pine needles were used to insulate the ground and holes were placed on the roof to allow smoke to escape when setting campfires. “By 1834, the Sauk population had declined to an estimated 2,500 people.” (Kubiak 160)

The Fox tribe was actually an English nickname for the Meshkwakihug tribe which stood for “red earth people.” (Kubiak 63) Fox legend states that at one time “the Fox lived along the southern shore of Lake Superior and were forced out of their territory by the Chippewa.” (Kubiak 63) The Chippewa were therefore considered their worst enemies. The Chippewa, who otherwise called themselves the “Anishinabe,” (Kubiak 47), meaning “First Man,” (Kubiak 47) arrived to the upper region of Lake Huron at an early time and later divided into three distinct tribes, the other two called the Ottawa and the Potawatomi. “The Chippewa tribe was considered to be one of the largest tribes north of Mexico and the largest subculture of the Algonquian stock.” (Kubiak 47) All three, the Chippewa, Ottawa and Potawatomi tribes frequently traveled west, with the largest group settling on the western side of Lake Superior and a “separate small group settling to the north of the lake into the area presently known as Thunder Bay, Ontario.” (Kubiak 49) The Chippewa, Ottawa and Potawatomi tribes were notorious for being considered some of the “bravest tribes of the eastern Algonquian region, frequently armed with wooden bar

clubs, bows and arrows, knives and round moose hide covered shields.” (Kubiak 50) The Chippewa group in particular were considered experts in constructing birch bark canoes and sailed throughout a grand portion of Lake Superior for fishing and trapping purposes. They also hunted on shore using their bows and arrows to kill deer, caribou and buffalo as a source of food and clothing. For dwellings, these Late Woodland Indians constructed a combination of “cone-shaped or dome-shaped wigwams, made of birch bark or spruce firs,” (Kubiak 50) depending on the location and season. The Chippewa wore attire made of “deer hide and foot moccasins all year round.” (Kubiak 50) They wore their hair very long, “oiling it often with bear grease and braiding it with considerable taste.” (Kubiak 51) They were also different from the groups mentioned before because the Chippewa wore unique “hood like caps and turbans made of fir” (Kubiak 52) as decor and to insulate themselves from cold temperatures. By “1764, their population ranged at 15,000,” (Kubiak 57) but drastically declined from there on upon the arrival of European settlers.

Another major indigenous group in which a Great Lake was named after were the Huron tribe. The name "Huron" originated in the beginning of the 17th century when these Indians were “first spotted by a Frenchman at a French trading post situated along the northern banks of the St. Lawrence River.” (Kubiak 173) This tribe originally called themselves the "Wendat" and their territory the "Wendake" stood for: “in the islands.” (Kubiak 173) It was an appropriate name in the sense that their villages existed south and east of the Georgian Bay scattered throughout small islands bordering the Ontario province of Canada. The Hurons remained mostly neutral in their relationship with adjacent tribes, though at times they settled at points further east, “encountering violent resistance from the Iroquoian tribes who were starting to inhabit areas on the north bank of the Saint Lawrence River.” (Kubiak 175) The Hurons had very few weapons, their most efficient being the “war club.” (Kubiak 176) Unfortunately, their battle tactics were no-match for the Iroquoians who developed a sophisticated firearm weaponry system and bartering with French explorers further upstream. By 1649, a violent battle broke out between the Hurons and the Iroquoians, which resulted in the Hurons losing many of their kin in a devastating manner. From that battle on, the Huron population nearly went extinct. Nonetheless, much was learned through the retrieval of artifacts, particularly hunting apparel. During seasons of milder temperature, the Hurons “wore robes of breech cloth, and leggings if needed. The men's (the Braves) duties included fighting, hunting, fishing (using long narrow canoes that could haul up to 15 men) , witch doctoring, trading and building miniature log houses and canoes. The Squaws (female Indians) of the Hurons worked the field, gathered firewood, tanned hides for clothing, did housekeeping chores and made items of clay pottery.” (Kubiak 178) The Hurons held a burial ritual every decade or twelve years by storing decomposed bodies for extended periods of time. They would then mourn the dead in ceremonial rituals “by carrying human bones in beaver pelts to large communal burial pits, where after feasting for three days, they would place the bones besides the previously buried.” (Kubiak 180) Remnants of these pits have been found along “Manitoulin Island and near Parry Sound, Canada.” (Kubiak 180) Unfortunately, due to the Huron’s constant enemy attack and the outbreak of small pox disease, the Huron population quickly diminished to only “1,000

Indians by the War of 1812.” (Kubiak 182)

The final inhabitants of the Great Lakes region to be discussed in this essay include the "Winnebago" which stands for “people of the filthy water.” (Kubiak 237) In 1634, they were discovered by Frenchmen on the shores of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Many historians theorize that the Winnebagos inhabited territory in Wisconsin stretching from Green Bay to Lake Winnebago. It is not known for how long they have actually resided within this area, but historians speculate that they along with Siouan tribes (Siouan- translated to mean: "Snake Like People), may have migrated “from the Dakotas to points eastward and south along the Mississippi River valley, even as far as Alabama and Mississippi.” (Kubiak 238) The Winnebagos stayed in close contact with the “central Algonquians including specific tribes known as the Iowa, Oto and the Missouri” (Kubiak 237) to the south. All of these groups shared similar dialects and cultural customs. The Winnebagos were very crafty and used the convenience of water travel to their advantage. Many of the Winnebagos were considered belligerent warriors who engaged in constant warfare with the Illinois tribe. A European explorer named Jonathan Carver wrote the following description of a Winnebago village he visited in 1766, “On the 25th, I arrived at the great town of the Winnebagos, situated on a small island just as you enter the east end of Lake Winnebago. The Winnebagos can raise about 200 warriors. Their town contains about 50 houses, which are strongly built with palisades and the island on which it is situated is nearly 50 acres. It lies 35 miles, reckoning: according to the course of the river from the Green Bay.” (Kubiak 238) During the War of 1812, the Winnebagos supported the British and allied with other tribes who gathered in Detroit, Michigan. By 1827, the Winnebago were in fierce battle with the Chippewa and by 1836, “the tribe contracted a severe case of small pox disease as more than one quarter of the Indians perished following the increasing settlement of Europeans in the 18th century.” (Kubiak 240) By 1840, the Winnebagos “relinquished all their land east of the Mississippi River” (Kubiak 240) and they were forced to move further west to various reservations established by the U.S. federal government. In 1806 their population staggered to an estimated “4,500 and by 1860 their population declined rapidly to less than 1,750 souls.” (Kubiak 240)

In conclusion, it appears rational to assume that the arrival and settlement of Indo-European immigrants into the Great Lakes region of North America dramatically altered the population and life expectancy of indigenous life as many groups were forced to fight gruesome battles with the attempt to save territory but encountered massive resistance, retaliation, displacement, famine and in many cases total extermination as a result of European colonization in the centuries to follow. Today the only remnants of actual living Native Americans are likely to be found scattered in reservations set aside by the U.S. federal government. Ironically, the only Indian reservations present today in the Great Lakes region (such as the Stockbridge, Isabella, Cattaraugus and the Bay Mills) appear to be far aloof from the region’s main attraction, the lakes themselves; and to make matters worse, their names seem to have no relevance whatsoever to the original indigenous inhabitants mentioned throughout this report. This led me to conclude that Indian life in North America was without doubt, altered if not completely destroyed of its dignity, prosperity and self-worth ever since the arrival of the white man to this very day.

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