

CURIOUS KENOSHA: Who were the American Indians that settled in Kenosha?

Terry Flores

Apr 25, 2018

Curious Kenosha, a project of the Kenosha News, is a venue for people to ask questions about the community, and then join reporters in discovering the answers. Visit www.kenoshanews.com/curiouskenosha to submit your question and read what others have submitted.

Terry Flores

Native Americans have been in Wisconsin for at least the last 10,000 years, according to state historical records, pre-dating the first European settlers who arrived in the state as early as the 1600s.

One of our readers wanted to know about the American Indians who settled in Kenosha.

“I was always interested in the American Indians that lived around this area. Where they lived? Who were they? Where were their homes. etc..”

We at Curious Kenosha asked local experts and found out that there were at least three known local settlements.

‘Kee-neau-sha-Kau-ning’

In Kenosha, the predominant American Indian settlements were established by the Potawatomi, according to Dan Joyce, archaeologist and executive director of the Kenosha Museum system.

“There were three village sites that were within 3 square miles, and the main village Kenosha was one at the Pike River not far from the harbor,” he said. “It was a pretty extensive village that stretched about a half mile, with 200 to 300 people living in it.”

According to an 1880s letter from the Peter Vieau, son of a fur trader who traveled throughout southeastern Wisconsin as young man, the village was known as “Kee- neau-sha-Kau-ning,” meaning “Pickerel’s abiding place or the pickerel’s place or resort.” The letter also mentions that the village on the Pike River “was noted for the abundance of fish ... surpassing all other rivers and streams around Lake Michigan.”

In fact, tribes from Chicago and other parts of Lake Michigan “made it a general rendezvous every spring (at) maple sugar time, (and) put up their supply of fish” for the winter, according to letter excerpts provided by Joyce.

Joyce said two other settlements had no names, with one not too far from where Green Bay and Washington roads intersect today and the other in the southeastern part of town around 85th Street and 45th Avenue.

“They were all Potawatomi villages,” he said.

They didn’t stay in one place, moving with the seasons. In the winter, the Potawatomi moved inland and built domed houses covered with elm bark. During the summer, they would move closer to the rivers and to Lake Michigan, constructing rectangular houses with flat roofs, Joyce said.

The museum has on exhibit representations of a Potawatomi village.

When the Potawatomi signed the Treaty of Chicago in 1833, they ceded the land to the U.S government, and three of the signers were actually from the then Kee- neau-sha-Kau-ning village, he said.

The Potawatomi generally were located in southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois, Joyce said.

Many tribes along shore

There were many tribes along the lakeshore from Milwaukee to Chicago.

“It wasn’t just the Potawatomi. There may have been Ojibwe and Ho-Chunk and Menominee,” he said. The lakefront was like a highway.

By the 1800s, many moved around due to “disruption” from Euro-Americans who also began to settle in the area.

“Where you get more traffic you get more cultural mix,” he said.

The Potawatomi had five years to move out west after the treaty was signed. In 1838, the last of them officially moved to reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma.

“Right now there’s a band in Kansas, and, of course, there are the Forest County Potawatomi in northern Wisconsin,” he said “At one point they were in Michigan and Oklahoma, but they didn’t end up staying there.”

Joyce said those who stayed behind became known as “strolling Potawatomi” because they no longer had a permanently settled area or land rights. They ended up becoming the Forest County Potawatomi around the time of World War I

Some of the native peoples from villages in Kenosha, Waukegan and Racine settled in Canada around the Georgian Bay on Lake Huron in Ontario, he said. They often settled with Ojibwe people there, but some also moved back to Wisconsin after a while.

Visit www.kenoshanews.com/curiouskenosha to submit your question and read what others have submitted.

By Terry Flores