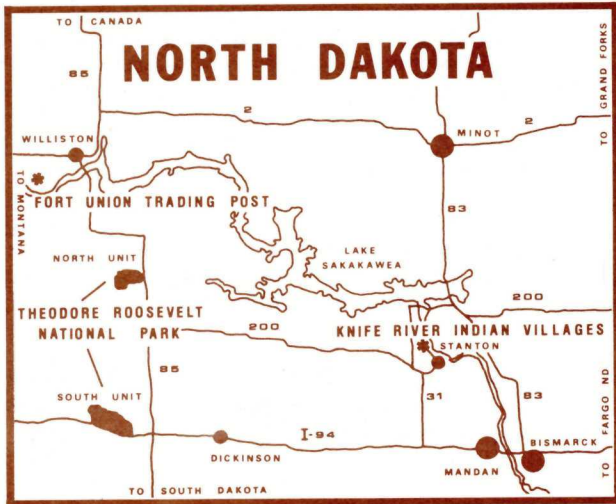
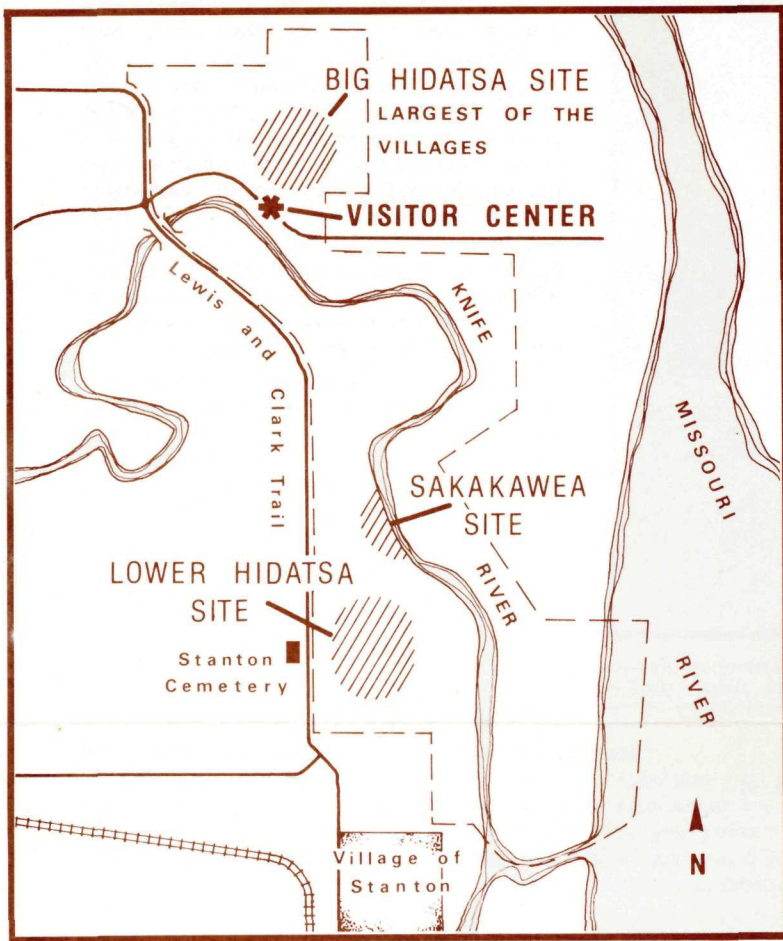


Administration

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site near Stanton, North Dakota, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The Superintendent of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, Medora, ND 58645, is in charge. The area manager's local park office address is Box 175, Stanton, ND 58571.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island Territories under U.S. Administration.

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The cover illustration and drawing on the opposite side are from paintings by Carl Bodmer who visited here in 1833-34.



Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site



The Hidatsa Indians, along with their Mandan and Arikara neighbors, were living along the Missouri River when European-American explorers discovered them during the 18th century. Living in villages, these Indians sowed gardens and hunted for game as their ancestors had done. Federal protection was established over the remains of their earth lodges, cache pits, and fortifications when this area became Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site in 1974.

The villagers here on the Knife River were the most successful gardeners in northwestern North America, but they also depended for survival upon hunting buffalo and gathering wild foods to supplement their diet. Their domestic garden crops included beans, corn, squash, and sunflowers. On the terrace rims above the river, they picked village sites for fishing and flood plain horticulture. Buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, waterfowl, and various small game animals were hunted on the terraces and bluffs beyond.

Some scholars believe that the Hidatsa arrived from the east during the 16th century. Others suggest that they resided here for a much longer period. The ancestors of the Mandan, and possibly of the Hidatsa, too, were well established by the 13th century in villages between the Knife and Heart Rivers. They clustered their rectangular lodges in small unfortified villages.

By the late 15th or early 16th centuries, the small villages with rectangular houses had evolved into larger, more compact and sometimes fortified villages with circular earth lodges. The biggest of these villages had more than 100 lodges. By 1800, more people probably lived along the Missouri River in North Dakota than live in the same area today.

The circular earth lodges at Lower Hidatsa probably were inhabited by 1675, either by Hidatsa or Mandan. The Hidatsa cannot be distinguished from the Mandan in the archeological record. This cultural distinction, it is hoped, will be developed through future archeological examination of Knife River Indian Villages.

In 1797, when explorer David Thompson visited the Hidatsa tribe, the Knife River Villages were developing into the main stronghold of the Hidatsa Indians. The increasing presence of European-Americans reinforced and expanded intertribal trade, and the village tribes of the Missouri River experienced a wave of prosperity and affluence. The Hidatsa and Mandan acted as middlemen, or brokers, between the Crow of the upper Yellowstone; the Cheyenne and Arapaho of the Plains to the Southwest; and the Assiniboin, Cree, and Dakota of the northeastern plains. The trade networks themselves can be traced back to the prerecorded period despite varying patterns and objects of trade, social interactions, and the pressures of changing times.

In October of 1804, the Lewis and Clark Expedition stopped at the three Hidatsa villages on the Knife River. They wintered through April of 1805 at Fort Mandan a few miles below the Knife River Villages. There Toussaint Charbonneau and his Shoshone wife, Sakakawea, joined the expedition. The route Lewis and Clark followed up the Missouri River was used afterwards by traveling writers, scientists, and artists. Through the drawings of such artists as George Catlin and Carl Bodmer, we have visual documentation of the villages and lifeways of the Hidatsa and Mandan.

George Catlin painted this view of the Hidatsa Village earth-covered lodges in 1832. It is reproduced by permission of National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution.

The Hidatsa Indians enjoyed a final period of prosperity through trade; then suffered the tragedy of cultural disintegration. With Europeans came diseases which decimated the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara tribes. Several smallpox epidemics broke out between 1780 and 1856. In the epidemic of 1837-1838, the mortality rate of the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara may have reached 60 percent of the population.

At the time of the Lewis and Clark visit, Big Hidatsa, Sakakawea, and Amahami villages were occupied. In 1834, Sakakawea and Amahami village were destroyed in a Dakota Indian raid. It is likely that Big Hidatsa was still occupied in 1843 when observed by John J. Audubon. In 1845, most of the Mandan and Hidatsa banded together and founded Like-a-Fishhook Village about 40 miles northwest of the Knife River Villages at Fort Berthold, North Dakota. Here they were joined in 1862 by the remaining Arikara. Members of these tribes live today on the Fort Berthold Reservation.

