

Knife River Indian Villages

Knife River Indian Villages
National Historic Site
North Dakota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



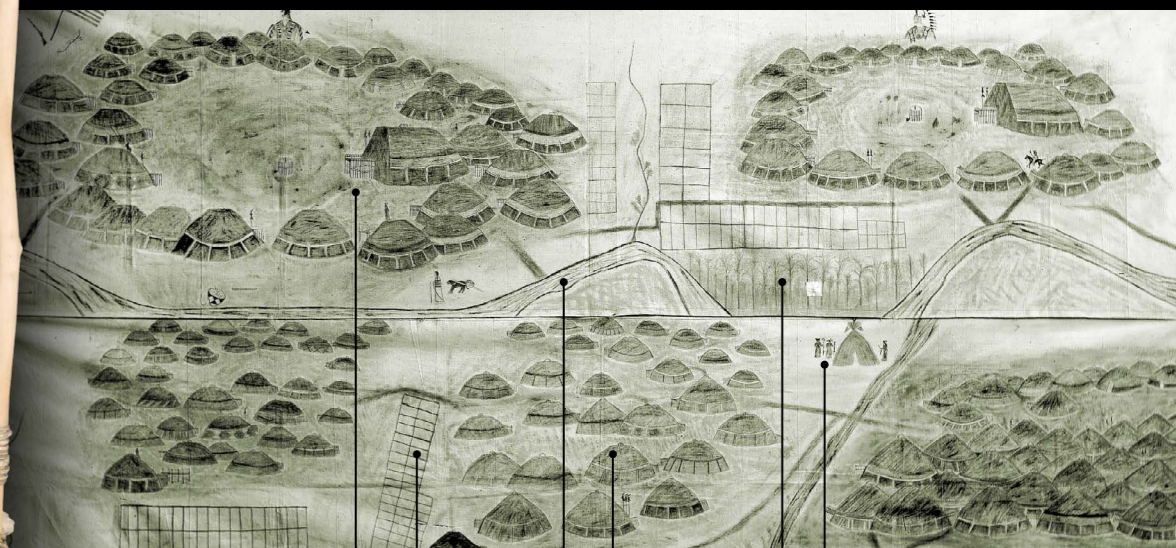
Sakakawea Village site
along the Knife River
NPS

Traditional corn
from 200-year-old seeds
NPS / DARIAN KATH



Hidatsa Village, Earth-Covered
Lodges, on the Knife River,
George Catlin, 1832
SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Bison shoulder-
blade hoe
NPS



Compilation of map by Sitting
Rabbit (Mandan), ca. 1906-7,
showing the five villages
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NORTH DAKOTA
SHSD 673 & 800

Mandan village
Garden plots
Hidatsa village
Missouri River
Visitors
Cottonwoods

Sometimes I come here to sit, looking out on the big Missouri near my birthplace. In the shadows, I can still see the Indian villages, with smoke curling upward from the lodges, and in the river's roar, I hear the yells of the warriors, the laughter of little children as of old.

Maxidiwiac (Buffalo-Bird Woman), early 1900s
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY / GILBERT B. WILSON



That's how Buffalo Bird-Woman remembered her home, in a bustling earthlodge settlement perched on a bluff above the Knife River. For over 300 years these villages thrived, full of Hidatsa families living with the land, trading their products, and welcoming travelers of all backgrounds. Things began to change in the mid-1800s. Reduced in number by devastating smallpox outbreaks

and forced out of their villages by unfair government policies and actions, the people moved. But still they remain connected to this place, to their home.

What makes a home? Is it the people you live with? The place where you live? For members of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation—the descendants of the people who once

lived here—a home is that and more. It is the connection to this land, to the sacred place where their people originated.

Part of the National Park System since 1974, Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site protects their home and offers opportunities to study and learn about life in the earthlodge villages.



Fancy Shawl Dance
NPS

Sacagawea, here with son Jean Baptiste, became a symbol of peace for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Sacagawea, 1805.
© MICHAEL HAYNES



This map shows the course of the Missouri River in the 1890s with the historical location of Mé?chi?ashish Awadí, "the five villages." The Tribal language is Hidatsa unless indicated by M (Mandan) or A (Arikara).

Meeting of Cultures

Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara opened their villages, their homes, to visitors. From the mid-1700s on, explorers like David Thompson and Prince Maximilian of Wied and artists like Karl Bodmer and George Catlin brought news and exposure to new cultures and traditions while documenting village life.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition spent winter 1804-5 at nearby Fort Mandan (map, far right). Sacagawea was living among the Hidatsa when she was asked to accompany the expedition along with her husband Toussaint Charbonneau, hired as a guide and interpreter. Sacagawea's experience with the people, languages, and lands farther west made her a valuable member of the expedition.

Visitor records add important detail to our understanding of the history and culture of Northern Great Plains peoples. But the interactions also led to tragedy. Smallpox outbreaks in 1780 and 1837 devastated Hidatsa and Mandan populations and caused residents to abandon several villages. In 1845 they moved to Like-a-Fishhook Village, their last traditional earthlodge village, on the present-day Fort Berthold Reservation. They were joined in 1862 by the Arikara, who had suffered another smallpox outbreak in 1856.

Communities were forever changed as people adjusted to life in a new home.



Eh-toh'k-pah-she-pée-shah,
Black Moccasin, aged Chief
[Hidatsa], George Catlin, 1832
SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

One of about nine fur-trading posts in the area, Fort Clark (below and map, far right) was built in 1831 to encourage trade with the five villages to the north. The fort was next to

the village of Mí?ti Úqtahákt (Awatinataka, or "end village," in Hidatsa). First Mandan and then Arikara lived in the village. Both Fort Clark and the village were abandoned in 1860.

Young members of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation
NPS



Point made of
Knife River flint
© EUGENE M. GRUBA

Life in the Villages

From about 1525 to 1845 the five villages near the confluence of the Knife and Missouri rivers teemed with life. Up to 3,500 residents lived here. Children played. Dogs barked. Horses roamed. Adults cooked, sang, visited, and protected the villages from rival Tribes. Hidatsa families, joined later by Mandan and Arikara, made their home in semi-permanent earthlodge communities (map). They hunted bison and grew corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers in the fertile ground. They quarried high-quality Knife River flint to make projectile points, blades, and other tools. Part of a vast trading network stretching from the Gulf Coast to the Rocky Mountains, they traded their abundance for animal hides and furs. It was a time of prosperity for the villages and, eventually, drastic change.

Traditional varieties of corn and squash in the Hidatsa garden
© JERRY HENDRICKS



Mih-Tutta-Hang-Kusch [Mí?ti Úqtahákt],
Mandan Village, Karl Bodmer, 1834
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM

Today

The people of the earthlodge villages are not gone. Their descendants, members of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, are forever connected to this land, to this sacred place where their people originated. It is their home too. Their traditions, stories, and songs—passed from generation to generation—link them.

The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara are survivors—of disease, colonization, unfair policies. They adapt and evolve. They remain as vibrant and resilient as the corn that grows from 200-year-old seeds (photo at top). Discovered in an early 1800s food cache, this corn, once a dietary staple, passed through the hands of Tribal members to a seed bank in Iowa. Now it grows again on the banks of the Knife River.

Explore Knife River Indian Villages



Archeological evidence shows people have lived here since the Paleo-Indian period beginning around 11,000 BCE (before common era). Artifacts tell the story of Northern Great Plains Indigenous culture and lifestyle.

Above, left to right: Hidatsa tchung-kee game stone; reproduction bison-hide basket, clay pot, Four Bears Exploit robe, and copper pot

STONE, BASKET, POTS—NPS / EMILIE FRANKLIN; ROBE—NPS / SIERRA MOEYKENS



Tribal Connections

Tribal members come to the park to hold ceremonies and share their traditions through music, storytelling, and demonstrations. Students participate in land-restoration projects. Tribal members share heirloom seeds and plant and harvest traditional crops in the Hidatsa garden. Their connection to this land remains strong.

Animal and plant names are in English and Hidatsa.



Bullsnake
iixiita

© JOSH GRAMLING

Bison, midéegaadi, once essential to village inhabitants, no longer roam wild in the park.

© PHILIP MERCIER



Visit the Park

The park is 60 miles northwest of Bismarck, North Dakota. Stop at the visitor center for a film, bookstore, and exhibits. The park is open sunrise to sunset daily. The visitor center is closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1; check the park website for hours.

Earthlodge and Village Sites Visit the reconstructed earthlodge (below) near the visitor center. Ask a ranger for a 20-minute guided tour. Walk the 1.3-mile Village Trail to Lower Hidatsa (Awadixáá Xie) and Sakakawea (Awadixáá) villages. Stop at the Hidatsa garden, open seasonally, to learn about the crops and techniques village residents used. Visit Big Hidatsa Village (Mirahaci Awadish).

Programs Park staff and Tribal members demonstrate traditional practices. Check the park website for a schedule.

Knife River
Mé?chi?aaashish

© LAURA GARDNER

Earthlodges, built and owned by village women, were the center of family life. Multiple generations cooked, ate, visited, and slept inside. Earthlodges themselves mirror family life. The four center poles, made of cottonwood, and surrounding upright posts work together to keep the earthlodge strong. If one falls, the lodge

can fail. Considered living beings, earthlodges remain sacred places where families come together to share traditions, stories, and songs. Today Tribal members honor the reconstructed earthlodge, ensuring it will continue to stand strong like the people themselves.

EARTHLODGE—NPS / EMILIE FRANKLIN

Eastern cottonwood
máhgu

© GARY P. FLEMING, VADCR-DNH



Black-billed magpie
iihbe

© REBECCA MARSHALL/NATURALIST



Eastern amberwing
dragonfly
mawúa?idaahga

© KEN SLADE

Choosing Present ... or Past?

Flooding and erosion of the banks along the Knife River, northern pocket gopher activity, and growing vegetation expose artifacts, making them vulnerable to weather damage and looting. With over 50 documented archeological sites in the park, how do we choose what to protect? Can we let nature take its course and still save this irreplaceable evidence? Today scientists use state-of-the-art techniques to identify areas for further study and protection so we can continue to learn from the past.



Northern pocket gopher
náagcahci

© BILL THOMAS

Mixed-grass prairie

© ROBERT PAHRE PHOTOGRAPHY



Eroded bluffs along the
Knife River

NPS



Eastern kingbird on
buffaloberry, maahishi

© JANET E. HILL



North

P Parking

Village site remains

0 1 Kilometer 1 Mile

Black-billed magpie
iihbe

© REBECCA MARSHALL/NATURALIST

Hiking Experience native prairie and bottomland forest on nature recreation trails. North Forest Trail: 2.2-mile loop. Two Rivers Trail: 6.2 miles roundtrip. Crosscountry ski or snowshoe trails in winter.

Birding Get a bird checklist at the visitor center.

Fishing Fish for northern pike, walleye, catfish, and trout in the Knife and Missouri rivers. Follow North Dakota state regulations.

Explore More Use the official NPS App to guide your visit.

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

Regulations and Safety Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. • For firearms regulations check the park website. • Using remotely piloted aircraft like drones is prohibited. • Be careful on uneven and slippery trails and walkways.

Emergencies call 911

More Information
Knife River Indian Villages
National Historic Site
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Stanton, ND 58571-0009
701-745-3300
www.nps.gov/knri

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www.nationalparks.org

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Prairie rose
micgabá

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