



Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site



The Hidatsa Indians, along with their Mandan and Arikara neighbors to the south, were village Indians living along the Missouri River at the time of the first Euro-American contact. They gardened and hunted along the Missouri River from the 10th through the 19th centuries. Preserved at the newly established Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site are house rings of their earth lodges, cache pits and fortifications.

The villagers here on the Knife River were the northwestern-most effective gardeners in North America, but they were heavily dependent upon buffalo hunting and the use of other wild foods. Their ability to survive in this area was due in part to their use of other available foods in addition to the beans, sunflower seeds, squash and corn that they grew. Villages on the terrace rims were centrally located for fishing and flood plain horticulture. Buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, waterfowl, and various small game animals were hunted on the terraces and bluffs.

Some scholars believe that the Hidatsa were late comers to the Missouri River, arriving from the east during the 16th century. Other scholars argue for an earlier arrival, suggesting that the Hidatsa have a much longer well-developed cultural tradition on the Missouri River.

Indian settlers were well established by the 13th century in villages between the Knife and Heart Rivers. Their early rectangular lodges were clustered in small open villages. The Knife River Village of Buchfink (see map) is believed to be similar to these early sites.

By the late 15th - early 16th centuries the small villages with rectangular houses were replaced by larger, compact and sometimes fortified villages with circular earth lodges. Such villages ranged in size from those with a few to those with over 100 lodges. In fact, when these villages were lived in the population was likely greater than it is now in this area of North Dakota.

The earliest circular earth lodges at Lower Hidatsa (see map) were probably occupied by 1675. However, this early occupation may have been Mandan rather than Hidatsa. The Hidatsa cannot be distinguished from the Mandan in the prehistoric records. The key to this separation lies in part in the Knife River Villages and will have to be verified by archeological work at the site.

The first recorded Euro-American visit to the Missouri River Village tribes was made by the explorer la Vérendrye in 1738 with a visit to the Mandan. The first documented contact with the Hidatsa was by the explorer David Thompson in 1797.

By the late 18th early 19th centuries the Knife River Villages were the main bastions of the Hidatsa Indians. Intertribal trade was fortified and expanded by the influence and presence of Euro-Americans within the Villages. During this time the village tribes of the Missouri River rode a wave of prosperity and cultural changes. The Hidatsa and Mandan were middlemen, or brokers, in a trade network between the Crow of the upper Yellowstone; Cheyenne and Arapaho of the Plains to the southwest; and the Assiniboin, Cree, and Dakota of the northeastern Plains. Although the patterns and objects of trade, resulting social interactions, and pressures changed through time, the trade networks themselves can be traced back through the prehistoric period.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition, arriving in October 1804 at the three Hidatsa villages on the Knife River, wintered through April of 1805 at Fort Mandan, a few miles below the Knife River Villages. Toussaint Charboneau and his Shoshone wife Sakakawea joined Lewis and Clark at Fort Mandan. The Lewis and Clark expedition was followed by a series of travelers, writers, scientists, and artists. Through the artists we have graphic documentation of the villages and lifeways of the Hidatsa and Mandan.

While the history of the Hidatsa through the late 18th-early 19th century is a story of prosperity through trade, it is also a tragedy of cultural disintegration. With the Europeans came diseases and epidemics which decimated the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara. Several smallpox outbreaks occurred between 1780 and 1865. For example, in the epidemic of 1837-38 the mortality rate for the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara may have averaged 60 percent of the population.

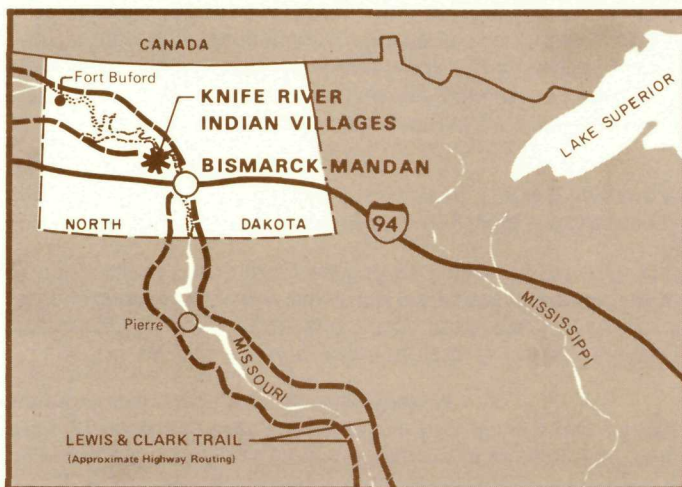
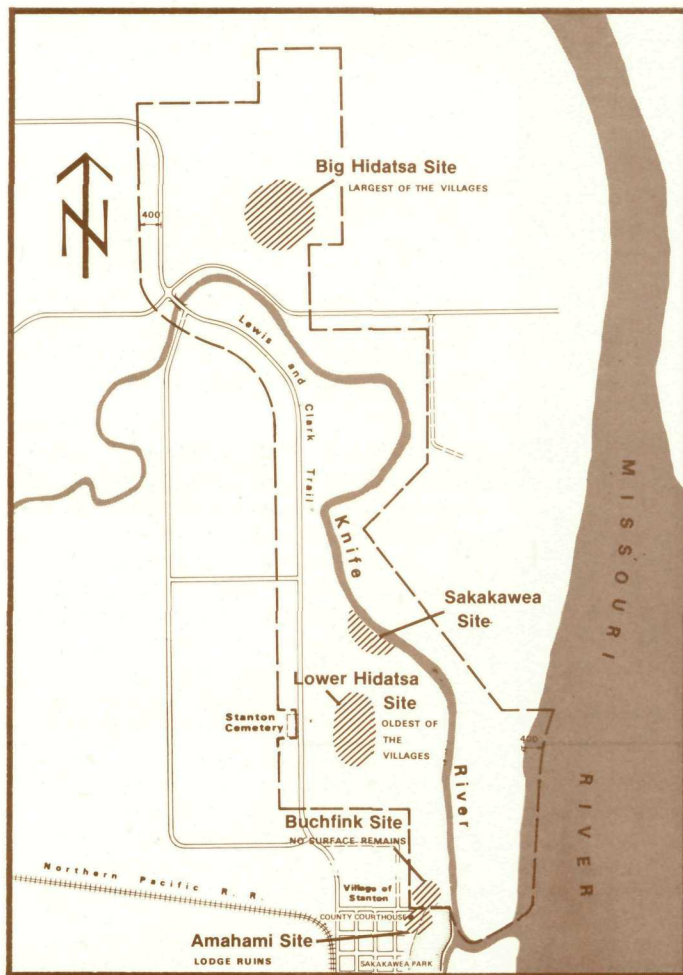
At the time of the Lewis and Clark visit to the Hidatsa, Big Hidatsa, Sakakawea, and Amahami villages were occupied, but Sakakawea and Amahami were destroyed in 1834 by a Dakota Indian raid. It is certain that Big Hidatsa was still occupied in 1834 when observed by John J. Audubon. In 1845 most of the Mandan and Hidatsa banded together and founded Like-a-Fishhook Village about 40 miles northwest of Fort Berthold, North Dakota. They were joined there in 1862 by the remaining Arikara. Some members of these tribes live today on the Fort Berthold Reservation.



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 Memorial Park, Medora, ND 58645, is in charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park and recreation resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.



The drawings in this folder are from paintings by Carl Bodmer who visited here in 1833-34.



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