

A Brief History

This is an overview of the Straits of Mackinac region for background for use by teachers.

The Straits of Mackinac is the crossroads of the upper Great Lakes. Connecting lakes Huron and Michigan and only 50 miles south of Lake Superior, Mackinac has been a strategic waterway for centuries. Many thousands of years ago the first people appeared in the wooded areas of Michigan. As their numbers increased, they formed into tribes which roamed far and wide in search of fish and game. As time passed, these peoples started growing corn and other food crops which enabled them to be less dependent upon searching for food. They could then settle in one place, living in their bark-covered huts. In the spring the tribes made nutritious sugar from the sweet sap of the maple trees. The bark of the paper birch made an ideal covering for their swift canoes, which turned the Straits into a natural highway.

The native people living in this area over five hundred years ago were mainly of the Algonquin family consisting of three tribes: the Ojibwa (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa) and Potawatomi -- sometimes called the "Three Fires" or Anishnabeg, collectively. The majority of Michigan's American Indians today are descendants of these same three tribes.

In 1634 French paddlers first rippled the waters of the Straits of Mackinac. Jean Nicolet, in search of a water route to the riches of China, passed this way. He never found China, but he discovered that Great Lakes streams were rich with fur-bearing animals. By the 1660s, French fur traders constructed a small trading village at St. Ignace on the north side of the Straits, called Fort DeBaude. During the winter of 1670-71 Jesuit priests Jacques Marquette and Claude Dablon established a mission to the Huron Indians on nearby Mackinac Island. The following year, they moved their mission to the mainland near the trading village. The fort was also soon abandoned.

In 1715 the French followed the Odawa Indians to the southern shore of the straits where they built Fort Michilimackinac. The palisaded village of Michilimackinac was the hub of an international fur trade that extended from the Mississippi River to Europe.

For decades the fur trade followed a seasonal cycle that was repeated year after year. Traders set out from Michilimackinac every winter to collect furs from American Indians trappers who lived near streams and lakes. The traders returned to Michilimackinac in the summer to exchange their furs for supplies and merchandise needed for the next winter. Voyageurs brought trade goods to Michilimackinac in 40-foot

long birchbark canoes each spring and returned to Montreal loaded with furs. From there, the furs were shipped to Europe where they were made into hats and garments.

Great Britain took control of Michilimackinac in 1761 following their victory in the French and Indian War. Although the French inhabitants did not welcome the arrival of the British, most of them remained. Neighboring Indians grumbled when arrogant British officers reduced their annual gifts, and they feared and resented white settlers moving westward over the Appalachian Mountains. Hostility erupted on June 2, 1763 when the Ojibwa and Sac, while playing baggatiway (like lacrosse) during the celebration of King George III's birthday, suddenly attacked and captured the fort. The attack was part of a larger scheme known as Pontiac's Rebellion. The Ojibwa soon abandoned the post and British troops returned the next year.

In addition to commanding the King's troops, the British commandant at Michilimackinac also supervised the civilian population and the fur trade. Under the protection of the British military, the fur trade thrived. Traders of various nationalities including Alexander Henry, Alexis Serjourné and the German Jewish settler Ezekiel Solomon kept small stores in their homes at Michilimackinac.

During the long, cold Michilimackinac winters, soldiers and civilians stayed close to the stone fireplaces in the drafty, log homes. A single fireplace consumed over 17 cords of wood each winter. The need for huge amounts of firewood prompted woodcutters to venture as far as Mill Creek, some three miles south of Michilimackinac, to gather firewood.

The outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 disrupted Michilimackinac's commerce and renewed old British distrust of their Odawa and Ojibwa allies. Fearing a possible American naval attack, Lt. Governor Patrick Sinclair decided in 1779 to move the garrison and community to the more defensible cliffs of nearby Mackinac Island. For the next two years the residents labored to move their possessions and some buildings across the ice and on board vessels such as the sloop **Welcome**.

The British used Mackinac Island's rich deposits of limestone to construct their new fort. The civilians, excluded from the stone fort, established a village around the bay below. Several buildings, including Ste. Anne's Church, were moved from Michilimackinac and rebuilt



on the village's two narrow streets.

The island's new buildings created a great demand for sawn lumber. The traditional method of hand cutting boards with a pit saw could not keep up with the need for lumber. To meet this market, a sawmill was erected on the one stream in the Straits of Mackinac with sufficient drop and enough water to power a mill. The man who built and operated the sawmill at Mill Creek was Robert Campbell.

Following the American victory in the Revolution, the Straits of Mackinac became United States territory. American soldiers marched into Fort Mackinac in 1796 as British troops moved about 40 miles northeast to build Fort St. Joseph, just inside the Canadian boundary.

War broke out between the United States and Great Britain once again in 1812. On the night of July 16, 1812, British troops from Fort St. Joseph sailed to the back of Mackinac Island and dragged a six-pound cannon to the high ground behind Fort Mackinac. Unaware of the outbreak of hostilities, American soldiers were completely unprepared to defend the fort. The British easily captured the post as the Americans surrendered without resistance. This was the first major military encounter of the War of 1812.

Two years later, as the war raged on, American troops tried to recapture Fort Mackinac. Following an unsuccessful naval assault in which they were repelled by British artillery, American troops landed on the north side of the island and advanced towards the fort. British soldiers quickly marched from the fort and ambushed the invaders in a bloody skirmish that left 13 Americans dead including Major Andrew Hunter Holmes. What American soldiers failed to do on the battlefield in 1814, the Treaty of Ghent accomplished in 1815, and the British reluctantly returned the fort to the United States.

As peace returned to Mackinac, the fur trade remained the dominant industry. John Jacob Astor located the headquarters of the American Fur Company on Mackinac Island. Furs gathered from throughout the Great Lakes were shipped to Mackinac Island where they were counted, sorted and baled for shipment to the East Coast and Europe. Millions of dollars worth of furs passed through the island in the 1820s. The sawmill at Mill Creek continued to produce lumber as the island village expanded with the prosperity of the fur trade. A small

grist mill was also constructed at Mill Creek for grinding grain into meal.

Medical history was also made on Mackinac Island during the heyday of the fur trade. In 1822 a young voyageur, Alexis St. Martin, was accidentally shot in the abdomen while in the American Fur Company's store. The fort surgeon, Dr. William Beaumont, nursed St. Martin back to health, but the wound never completely closed. For several years, Dr. Beaumont conducted experiments and discovered the process of human digestion through the hole in St. Martin's stomach.

By the mid-1830s, the fur trade declined and the American Fur Company moved west. The Straits of Mackinac's economy changed and in 1839, the Mill Creek complex closed. Fishing soon replaced the fur trade as the prime industry in the area. Fishermen from throughout the upper Great Lakes brought their catch to Mackinac Island where the fish were packed into barrels and shipped to Chicago and Detroit. During the Civil War, Island soldiers went south to fight the Confederate Army, but in 1862 three high ranking Confederate officials were held prisoner by militia troops at Fort Mackinac.

Following the Civil War, tourism became the dominant industry on Mackinac Island. In response to the island's growing popularity, the federal government created Mackinac National Park in 1875. This was America's second national park established just three years after Yellowstone. The commandant of Fort Mackinac became the superintendent of the park and a second company of soldiers joined the garrison to help develop the park.

In 1895 Fort Mackinac was abandoned and, along with the National Park, transferred to the State of Michigan. Since 1895 the Mackinac Island State Park Commission has preserved the island's natural and scenic beauty while a ban on automobiles in 1898 protected its turn-of-the-century charm.

The Commission began its historic preservation efforts in 1958. Today Straits area history comes alive at several sites including Colonial Michilimackinac, Historic Mill Creek, Fort Mackinac and Mackinac Island State Park. Preservation combines the efforts of archaeologists who unearth the physical remains of the past, historians who examine documents, designers who plan restorations and exhibits and interpreters who bring the past to the public.

