Potawatomi

Potawatomi, a word of uncertain meaning. The commonly ascribed translation, "People of the Place of Fire" or "Keeper of the Fire" is probably apocryphal and refers to their traditional obligation to maintain a council fire uniting them with the Ottawas and Anishinabes. Their own self-designation was Weshnabek, "the People." In the early 17th century, roughly 8,000 Potawatomis lived in southwest Michigan. Potawatomi is an Algonquin language.

The people may have recognized a chief deity that corresponded with the sun. Religion was based mainly on obtaining guardian spirits through fasting. Sacred bundles were probably part of religious practice from prehistoric times on; at some point they became associated with the supernatural power of clans. There were three types of shamans: doctors, diviners, and adviser-magicians. The people observed the calumet (peace pipe) ceremony. Other festivals included the midewiwin dance, the war dance, and the sacred bundle ceremony.

There were clan chiefs, but the decision makers were generally the clan's warriors, elders, and shamans. Chiefs of semiautonomous villages, who were chosen from among several candidates of the appropriate clans, lacked authority, since the democratic impulse was strong among the Potawatomis. There was no overall tribal chief, although a village chief, through his personal prestige, might lead a large number of villages. The chief was aided by a council of men. Women occasionally served as village chiefs. There was also an intratribal warrior society that exercised police functions in the villages.

At least thirty patrilineal clans owned certain supernatural powers, names, and ritual items. Over time, the clans died out, and new ones were created. They were a source of a child's name as well as part of his or her personal spirit power. A dual division by birth order had significance in games and some rituals. Lacrosse was a popular game, as were the woman's double ball game and dice games.

After the harvest, people generally broke into small hunting camps for the winter. Polygyny was common. Marriages were formalized by gift exchange between clans and by the approval of senior clan members. Babies were named after a year and weaned after several years. Both sexes were recognized as adults at puberty when they went through a time of isolation, women during their periods and men to fast and seek a vision. Young women might also have visions at this time. Corpses were dressed in their best clothes and buried in an east-west alignment (one clan practiced cremation) with considerable grave goods that included food, tools, and weapons.

Summer villages, numbering up to 1,500 people of several clans, were built along lakes and rivers and often contained members of the Anishinabe and Ottawa groups. Small winter camps lay in sheltered valleys. Some villages may have been palisaded. Summer houses were bark-covered rectangular structures with peaked roofs. The people built smaller, dome-shaped wigwams with mats covering a pole framework for their winter dwellings. They also built ramadas with roofs of bark or limbs for use as cooking shelters. Rush-mat menstrual huts were built away from the main part of the village.
Women grew corn, beans, squash, and tobacco, and they gathered wild rice, maple sap for sugar, beechnuts (which were pounded into flour), berries, roots, and other wild plant foods. Men fished and hunted buffalo (especially from the 18th century on), deer, bear, elk, beaver, and many other animals, including fowl. People made bark food storage containers, pottery, and stone or fired-clay pipes with wooden or reed stems. Pictographs on birch-bark scrolls served as mnemonic devices.

Potawatomis used both dugout and bark-frame canoes. The latter were up to 25 feet long; construction and ownership of these vessels were limited. A litter slung between two horses could carry materials or ill people; woven rush mat saddlebags also held goods. Clothing was made of skins and furs. Men were tattooed, and both sexes painted their bodies. The Potawatomis wore personal adornments made of Native copper and shell.

Tradition has the people, once united with the Anishinabes and the Ottawas, coming to their historical territory from the northeast. Driven from southwest Michigan around 1640 by the Iroquois, Hurons, and others, the Potawatomis took refuge in upper Michigan and then the Green Bay area, where they met other refugee groups and built advantageous alliances and partnerships, notably with the French but also with other tribes. At this time they occupied a single village and became known to history as a single tribe with their present name.

By the late 17th century, however, having consolidated their position as French trade and political allies, the single village had collapsed, mainly under trade pressures. Forced by Dakota raiding parties, Potawatomi groups began moving southward to occupy former lands of the Illinois Confederacy and the Miamis. By the early 18th century there were multiclans Potawatomi villages in northern Illinois and southern Michigan. By the mid-18th century, southern groups had acquired enough horses to make buffalo hunting a significant activity.

The French alliance remained in effect until 1763. The Potawatomis fought the British in Pontiac's Rebellion. They also joined the coalition of tribes to administer the final defeat to the Illinois about that time, evicting them from northern Illinois and moving into the region themselves. The Potawatomis fought on the side of the British, however, in the Revolutionary War and continued to fight the American invasion of their territory in a series of wars in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that included Little Turtle's War (1790–1794), Tecumseh's Rebellion (1809–1811), and the Black Hawk War of 1832. By that time, many southern Potawatomis had intermarried with non-natives.

After all these Indian losses, the victorious non-natives demanded and won significant land cessions (the people ultimately signed at least fifty-three treaties with the United States). The Potawatomis were forced to remove west of the Mississippi River. Bands from the Illinois-Wisconsin area went to southwest Iowa while Michigan and Indiana Potawatomis went to eastern Kansas. In 1846, both groups were placed on a reservation near Topeka, Kansas. Some remained in Michigan and Wisconsin, however, and some managed to return there from the west. Others joined the Kickapoos in Mexico, and still others went to Canada.

Some of the Potawatomis in Kansas became relatively successful merchants and farmers. In 1861, a group of these people formed the Citizen Band as a separate entity from the Prairie Band. They were moved to Indian Territory in the 1870s, and their land there was allotted by 1890. Since much of the land was of marginal quality, however, people tended to leave the community in the early to mid-20th century. Many Citizen Band Potawatomis were educated in Catholic boarding schools in the early 20th century.
The Prairie Potawatomis remained in Kansas. Despite their strong resistance, lands along the Kaw River in Kansas were allotted by 1895. The tribal council disbanded by 1900, and all government annuities ended in 1909. By 1962, less than one-quarter of their former lands remained in their possession, and much of this was leased to non-natives. The tribe rejected the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act and was able to avoid termination in the 1950s.

Among those who refused to leave their home-lands, a large group of Potawatomi refugees was still in Wisconsin in the mid-19th century. These people had been joined by several Ottawa and Anishinabe families. With the help of an Anishinabe man, they obtained land and money to build a community, called Hannaville, in the 1880s. The U.S. Congress purchased additional land for them in 1913. The community adopted an IRA constitution and bylaws in 1936. Most people were farmers, and many also worked seasonally in the lumber industry. By the early 20th century, the land was exhausted, the lumber industry had declined, and the state refused them all services, contributing to the onset of widespread poverty and exacerbating anti-Indian prejudice.

In 1839, the Huron Potawatomis who had escaped removal purchased land for a community. The state of Michigan added another forty acres in 1848. The Methodist Episcopal church served as the focus of community life. Near Watervilet, Michigan, members of the future Pokagon band bought land near Catholic churches. They continued a subsistence economy based on small game hunting; gathering berries, maple sap, and other resources; and small-scale farming. They also worked on nearby farms when necessary. They created a formal government as early as 1866, which later pursued land claims against the United States. They and the Huron Potawatomis were denied federal recognition in the 1940s based on an arbitrary administrative ruling.

Further Reading


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