

History of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska



Revision 3, updated October 2007

Indian Lore Merit Badge Requirement 1

Give the history of one American Indian tribe, group or nation that lives or has lived near you. Visit it, if possible. Tell about dwellings, kind of life, tribal government, religious beliefs, family and clan relationships, language, dress, food preparation, means of getting around, how they played, if they were warlike or peaceful, where descendants of the group now live, and how they live.

History of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska

Omahas Are Descendants of the Eastern Woodland

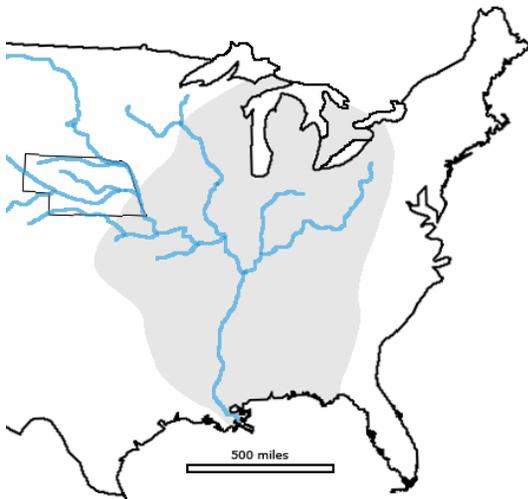
In 200 B.C. many groups of people lived in North America. We call the peoples living in eastern and east central North America the woodland culture. Other people lived across the continent including the Southwest, West and Atlantic Coast.

In the area we call today eastern and northeastern Nebraska eventually became the lands of the Omaha and Ponca. The ancestors of the Omaha and Ponca came from the eastern woodland.

Central and west central Nebraska eventually became the lands of the Pawnee. The Pawnee were first in Nebraska, inhabiting river areas on and around the Platte some time before Columbus in the 1500s. The Omaha/Ponca traveled up the Missouri River near the time of the Pilgrims in the 1640s.

How the Omaha Came to Be

200 B.C. to 450 A.D.

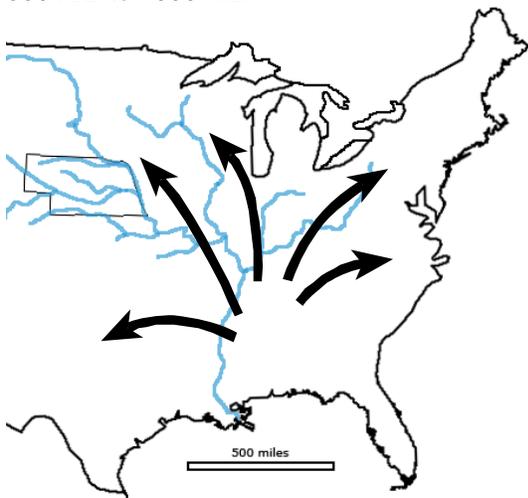


Hopewell (Middle Woodland)

A civilization of woodland people flourished during this time. These people centered in the Ohio valley, but lived from lower Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Appalachian Mountains to the tip southeast tip of Nebraska.

These people are called the Hopewell, named after the farmer on whose land ruins were discovered during the 1800s. The Hopewell traveled and traded throughout the continent, and built complex mound cemeteries.

350 A.D to 1000 A.D



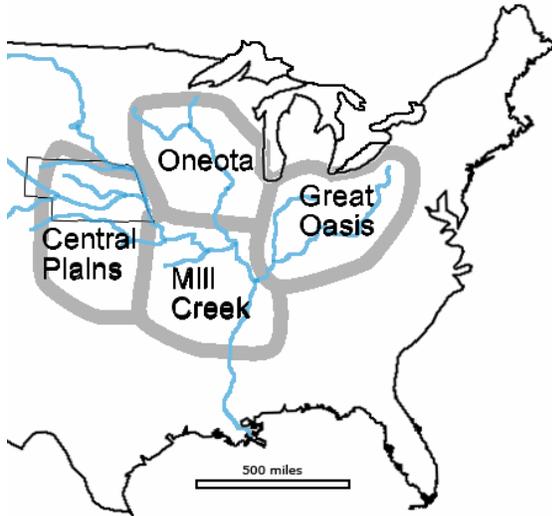
Mound Builders (Late Woodland)

By 350 A.D., a culture of people centered in the Mississippi valley appears to have grown and overtaken the Hopewell, possibly by war. The population increased during this time, but continent-wide trading ended, civilization split into tribes and settlements and the people became dispersed and nomadic.

We call these people Mound Builders, even though the many cemetery mounds were simpler than those of the Hopewell.

It is from this time that the earliest bows and arrows are found in the Midwest.

1000 A.D to 1650



Late Prehistoric

The Mound Builders tribes developed into four cultures.

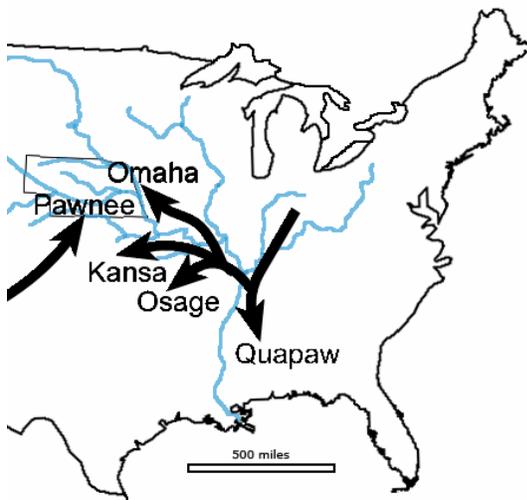
Great Oasis, Mill Creek, and Central Plains (Plains Village)

Three cultures emerged first. The Omaha ancestors were part of the Great Oasis culture. The Mill Creek and Central Plains cultures began to adapt to the Midwest and became dependant on bison.

Oneota (Village Farmers)

From 1050 to 1300 groups of people stopped being nomadic and began to rely on agriculture. The Oneota culture sharply decreased in later years due to warfare, climate changes or disease. The Winnebago, Oto, Iowa, and Missouri tribes are related to the Oneota.

1500 to 1640



Pawnee and Dhegiha Groups

During the end of the late prehistoric times, two separate peoples came to Nebraska.

The Pawnee

The Pawnee moved into Nebraska from the south central plains. They settled along the central Nebraska waterways of the Republican, Platte and Loup Rivers.

The Dhegiha Group

Starting from the Great Oasis culture, the Dhegiha moved from the Ohio and Wabash Rivers near present-day Cincinnati. Once down the Ohio they split into four groups: The Quapaw continued south down the Mississippi, the Osage and Kansa who moved west along the south side of the Missouri River, and the Omaha (still including the Ponca) who traveled north of the Missouri river to northeast Nebraska. The name Maha or Omaha means "those going against the wind or current."

1640 to 1700



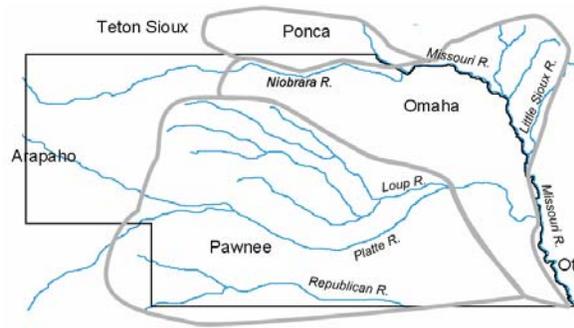
Proto-Historic

In 1640 it is estimated that 1 million Indians from 300 tribes inhabited America when white settlers began to arrive. During this time, many tribes moved, lost their lands to settlers, and many died from diseases from Europe.

The Omaha remained at Bow Creek. The Omaha lands stretched from the Niobrara River, onto Pipestone, Minnesota, along the Big Sioux River in Iowa, and down to Rulo, Nebraska.

Still, the Omaha were peaceful and friendly with the Pawnee who were also peaceful but noted warriors. The Pawnee were stronger and helped protect the Omahas from wars with the Teton Sioux.

1650 to 1700s



Omaha and Ponca Split

By 1650, the Ponca split off from the Omaha and moved to the Black Hills.

Around 1750, the Omaha encountered the first European fur traders in the Bellevue area. At the end of the century these fur traders married into the Omaha tribe. By 1770 Omahas hunted with horses, nearly 100 years before the Lakota.

Chief Blackbird (d. 1800)

By the end of the 1700s, the Omaha controlled the fur trade in the upper Missouri River. This was largely due to the shrewdness of Chief Blackbird. Now at the height of their history, the Omaha traded arms, ornaments and silver, and became wealthy, politically and militarily strong. The Omaha raised good crops and people lived into their fifties.

Blackbird was fierce and cruel. He was ruthless in war, and would poison warriors who disagreed with him. Blackbird died of the smallpox epidemic in 1800. This disease ravaged the Omaha from a population of nearly 3,000 down to 300 by 1802.

1800 to 1867



The Decline of the Omaha

Smallpox and the death of Blackbird marked a turning point for the Omaha. The tribe lost ground on all fronts, becoming poor, unable to sustain themselves, and never living beyond the age of thirty. In spite of this, the history of the Omaha is marked by friendliness to white settlers and heroically patient during tremendous hardships.

The remaining years until the final reservation treaty ceding their lands in 1865 and Nebraska statehood in 1867, the Omaha were lead by forward thinking leaders.

Big Elk the Elder (1765 – 1846)

Big Elk became the leader upon the death of Blackbird. In 1804 Lewis and Clark met with the Omaha. Facing dwindling food and hostilities from other tribes, Big Elk negotiated treaties with the U.S. in 1815, 1821 and 1837. In the last two he traveled to Washington D.C. Big Elk was a spellbinding speaker known for his bravery, kindness, and wisdom.

By 1829 the Omahas numbered 1,900.

In 1846, Big Elk met with Brigham Young who was in a winter stopover while forging the Mormon Trail. Big Elk permitted the Mormons to stay on Omaha lands for two years. A group lead by Bishop George Miller wintered near the Omaha the first year on the Niobrara River.



Big Elk the Younger (d. 1853)

Big Elk the Younger was the son of the chief. In 1843, three years before becoming chief, Big Elk the Younger proclaimed Joseph La Flesche son of a Frenchman and a Ponca, to be his “oldest son” and his successor.

Big Elk the Elder died of a fever after hunting alone in the winter of 1846, and was buried in Bellevue, Nebraska.

Upon his father’s death, Big Elk the Younger became Omaha chief. Near the end of his life he began preparing to negotiate the broadest treaty with the U.S. to sale the majority of the Omaha lands. Big Elk died the year before the treaty in 1853.

Seven Omaha Chiefs

The Omaha tribal organization consists of subgroups called gentes. In 1854 the U.S. government invited seven Omaha chiefs to sign a treaty that gave away Omaha lands. The two most important chiefs are where not full-blood Omahas: Joseph La Flesche and Logan Fontenelle.



Joseph La Flesche [Iron Eye] (1820 – 1888)

Joseph was a son of a Frenchman and a Ponca. Though uneducated and unable to speak English, Joseph encouraged education and temperance with alcohol. He believed that survival meant adapting to white culture. As the last leader under the old rituals, his leadership was filled with strife. Joseph’s conversion to Presbyterianism ultimately cost him the position of chief.

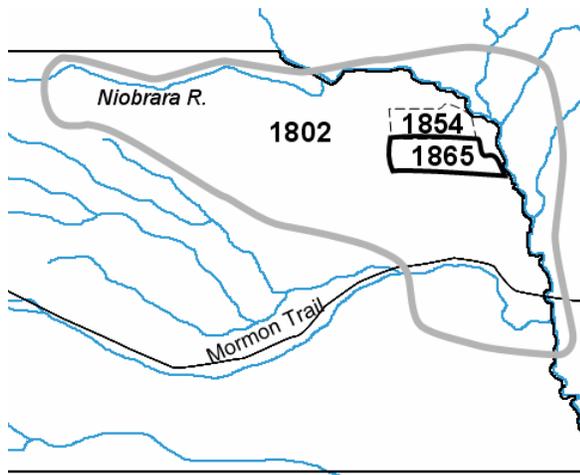


Logan Fontenelle (1825 – 1855)

Born in Kansas to a Frenchman and an Omaha, Logan was educated in St. Louis and moved to Bellevue, Nebraska as an interpreter for the U.S. government from 1840 to 1853. Not a chief by blood, Logan was elected chief in 1853. In addition to leading the seven chiefs in Washington for the 1854 treaty, he promoted education and agriculture during his short tenure.

Two years after signing the treaty, Logan was killed in what was reportedly a skirmish with Sioux in northeast Nebraska. Logan Fontenelle was buried in what now is Fontenelle Forest north of Bellevue, and later disinterred and reburied in Macy, Nebraska.

Logan Fontenelle’s life’s actions are still not well understood. Instrumental in delivering the treaty of Omaha lands to the U.S. government, his name was celebrated by those who took over the land that became Nebraska. Roads, housing, a hotel, a forest and other landmarks are named after him. In life, his rise to chieftain, his role in the treaty, and the events of his death are among the intrigues of a colorful life.



Secession of Lands

The Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed on May 30, 1854 as congressional battle between slave-holding and non-slave states, and to pave the way for statehood.

The Indian treaty signed in June 1854 sold all but 300,000 acres for \$850,000 (or about 11 cents an acre).

In July the newly organize Omaha City began giving away lots to those who would improve them.

In 1855, 1,200 Omahas moved to the reservation in Dakota County.

In 1865, another treaty was signed by the Omaha to sell part of the reservation to the U.S. for the Winnebago tribe who where being relocated from Minnesota.

In 1867 Nebraska was granted statehood.

More Land Sold, Omahas Granted U.S. Citizenship

Until 1880, the Omaha were governed by selecting two principle chiefs from a single subtribe.

In 1872 and 1874 over 50,000 acres were sold from the reservation to the U.S. and Winnebagos.

In 1882 due to the efforts of Alice Fletcher (a non-Indian), congress granted 160 acres to each Omaha family. Five years later congress passed the Serveralty Act of 1887 granting U.S. citizenship to the Omaha.

The Omaha Tribe Today

The Omaha Tribe of Nebraska & Iowa consists of over 5,000 enrolled members, 3,000 residing on the Omaha Indian Reservation headquartered in Macy, Nebraska. The reservation covers parts of Thurston, Cumming, and Burt Counties in Nebraska, and a portion of Monona County in Iowa. The tribe is governed by a seven-member council that is elected every three years by resident members.

More information may be found at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omaha_tribe

1868 to 1887

Today

Traditional Dwellings

The Omaha abandoned bark huts shortly after arriving in Nebraska. They lived in tepees in the summer and earthen lodges in the winter. Tepees were made of buffalo hide and cedar poles. The Omaha lived in villages for 8 to 15 years and then moved on.



Way of Life and Food Preparation

The Omaha were hunters and planters, in accordance with the seasons. During the planting season the men would clear the fields in preparation for planting, whereupon the women would actually do the planting. Hunting was the primary responsibility of the men, with buffalo, deer, bear and small mammals being the targets. Birds and fish were also a part of the Omaha diet. The women would also gather roots and plants like ground nuts, artichokes and mushrooms. The principal crops grown were beans, maize, squash and melons. Omaha women were also skilled craftspeople. They made pots, wove baskets and made tools from bone and wood.

Clothing, Arts and Crafts

The Omaha dressed in typical Plains Indian fashion. The men wore buckskin leggings and shirts which were embroidered and fringed. On their feet they would wear moccasins. The men wore their hair long and loose. Men would also wear ear rings.

The Omaha were a musical people. From an early age children were taught to make instruments, as well as to play them. The pow wow was a highlight of the Omaha social calendar.



See also: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/omhtml/omhome.html> and <http://www.mnisose.org/profiles/omaha.htm>