

THE WYANDOT AND THE RIVER

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Three hundred years ago, Wyandots and other native people had already inhabited the Detroit area for one millennium. The flat pancake of Wayne County was once almost all bog and marsh. The Huron River was a great drain. Gibraltar was a delta. Beaver and their dams occupied over a thousand square miles. The original people of Detroit spent their lives on the edge of waters teeming with wildlife of every kind. Living on the Detroit River was an earthly paradise.

Contrary to recent shortsighted celebrations, three hundred years ago when the Wyandots brought Cadillac by canoe the length of Lake Huron from Fort Mackinaw, it was not to discover Detroit. It was to see if what the natives said about the abundance of the region could possibly be true. Cadillac wanted to know if the beaver were as plentiful as the Wyandots claimed. Beaver was the rage in France, and the beaver trade would make French fur traders rich.

The Wyandot Indians had lived on the Detroit River for centuries. The river was their home. They fished, swam, raised families, built canoes, gathered cranberries in the bogs, and played their games on this river they loved.

The story of the Detroit River and the story of the Wyandot are one and the same, but much of the Wyandot story has been "written out" of Michigan history. The Wyandot were not here to tell their story since most of their tribe was forcibly removed from Michigan. Others kept their heads down as there was no advantage to being identified as an "injun."

The French called the Wyandot (Wyandotte, Wiandotte, Wendat, and Quendake) the "Huron" because the first Wyandot they encountered had a

unique hairstyle. Their heads were shaved except for a strip down the middle, which stood straight up (with the oil of bear grease). When the French saw them, they were amused by the hairstyle and responded by calling them "Hures," which meant "wild boars." The word "hure" was also seventeenth-century French slang for "uncouth" or "backward." When anglicized it became "Huron." The present-day Wyandot of Anderdon prefer to be called "Wyandot."

The Wyandot had the misfortune of being on the losing side in the wars Europeans fought in this region and found themselves powerless after being on the losing side three times in a period of 125 years.

In 1842, the Wyandot from Michigan, Ohio, and Canada were forcibly removed to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma and Kansas. The Ohio Wyandot, who had settled on the south side of Lake Erie in present-day Sandusky where Chief Oronotony's band established villages around 1736–38, were removed from Ohio in July 1843 because they were granted a stay of one year. Most of them were taken west.

Place names, the early archaeological record, and oral history show that the Wyandots had strong ties to the Detroit River. The story of their relationship with the Detroit River is a powerful one.

Wyandot Villages on the Riverfront

The Wyandot Nation lived along the Detroit River on both sides—present-day Canada and the city of Detroit (figure 2.1). The Wyandot name for Detroit was "Oppenago"—"the place where the waters meet." The Wyandot were slash-and-burn agriculturalists who relied on the "three sisters" for survival—corn, beans, and squash. Every ten to twelve years when the soil became depleted, they moved their villages to a location nearby (Demeter 1993, 3).

The present-day cities of Ecorse and River Rouge had Wyandot and Potawatomi villages side by side on the riverfront. The Wyandot village was called "Tonquish." The Potawatomi village was called "Robichec."

Just a few miles south of Tonquish, the Wyandot lived at the village of Maguagon, which today is the city of Wyandotte. Present-day Bob-Lo Island, called Bois Blanc by the French, was named "Aticeironnon" by the Wyandot. In Iroquois, the language of the Wyandot, Aticeironnon means "the place of the white ash tree people." Wyandot villages stretched from the St. Clair River down the Detroit River all the way to Monroe. Monroe was called "Numma Sepee" or "the place of the Sturgeon" (Zeiser 1969, 8).

who had died in the previous decade. The “kettle” ceremony was accompanied by the “The Feast of the Dead.” This was a happy time in Wyandot society because it meant the long period of mourning was over.

The second ceremony confirmed the release of a Wyandot’s second soul. The first soul had left the remains at the time of a person’s death and traveled to the western door or the spirit world on the wings of a sacred red-tailed hawk. The feast of the dead meant the second soul had also reached the spirit world. This was cause for celebration.

There is archaeological evidence of the Wyandot’s ossuary burial pits up and down the river. Along the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers there are designated archaeological sites where Wyandot ossuary pits are found—among them are the Bussinger, Riviere au Vase, Gibraltar, Younge, Missionary Island, and the Libben sites (Stothers 1999, 194–210).

The Wyandot always located their ossuary pits across a body of water from their villages. They believed the first soul could not travel across water to snatch the person’s second soul before the feast of the dead occurred. The two burials were required for a person to rest forever in peace.

The archaeological Younge site, at the western basin of Lake Erie, had at least three longhouses, the common house type of the Wyandot (and all the Iroquois of the northeast). Skulls with holes drilled into them were found, which also suggested a Wyandot burial. Several days before final interment, the mummy bundles of the Wyandot (from their first burial) would have been unwrapped and the remains would have been put on display in the family’s longhouse. This could have required holes in the skulls to mount the remains on the display poles. Since the Wyandot were the only people who practiced this burial type, one could conclude these were Wyandot ossuary burials on the Younge site.

The life spirit that lives in every person was called the Aki soul. The second soul, which was released at the feast of the dead, was called the Asken. The bones of the dead were called Aatiskan and were sacred.

Wyandot people who knew they were dying often painted their face so they would look beautiful when they went to greet their relatives in the Western Door (the Spirit World), the Village of the dead. This paint was found at the mythological Big Rock. Present-day Brownstown and the city of Gibraltar were named “Toh Roon Toh” (Big Rock) by the Wyandot. There was a huge boulder at the edge of the Detroit River at Gibraltar (Babcock 1837; Knopf 1960; Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society 1895; Lowrie and Clarke 1832). This Big Rock called “Ekarenniondi” was spiritually and symbolically associated with the Big Rock in Gibraltar. Big Rock is



Figure 2.1. The Spiritlog Band (1880) of the Wyandot of Anderdon Nation (Lil Splitlog).

Wyandot Burials

The Wyandot Indians had a unique form of burial that makes their burial grounds easy to distinguish from other tribes. The large burial pits of the Wyandot are called ossuary burials. There were two burials for each person, the first occurring three days after death. The body was wrapped tightly in the deceased’s finest fur skins or robes (beaver was the preferred burial skin). The body was placed on the reed mat he or she had died on. The reeds came from the river’s edge. The face of the deceased was painted red and black. The family would “keen” for the dead. Community members would prepare a feast. Relatives and friends from faraway villages would arrive bearing gifts to honor the deceased. The funeral would begin at sunrise on the third day. Four men carried the body to the individual burial site. The deceased was placed in a bark coffin on a platform four feet from the ground. The mourning period for close family members lasted one year.

The second burial took place ten to twelve years later. All of the people who had died during that period would be buried a second time in a large ossuary pit called “Yandatssa” (“cooking kettle”). The spirits of the dead were symbolically “cooked” together, which released the spirits of all those

also the site of an ossuary burial of the Late Woodland (A.D. 600–1000) people and the Wyandot of long ago, indicating this area had always been a spiritual place to native people.

Village Site in Present-day Gibraltar

The early site of Toh Roon Toh was chosen as the site for a Wyandot village based on the spirituality of the Wyandot and because of a creek and a turtle pond there, which made this site special. The Wyandot are the children of the turtle. Five of their twelve clans were named for various kinds of turtles.

The village of Chief Adam Brown, "Tahounehawietie" in Iroquois, was the site of several historical Indian councils during the 1700–1800s. The Wyandot were the "Keepers of the Council Fire," a prestigious and powerful position in native society. The "United Indian Nations" council was held at Brownstown in 1786 (Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society 1888).

The upper Great Lakes of Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and Lake Superior are connected to the lower lakes of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario by three important bodies of water. Lake St. Clair, the St. Clair River, and the Detroit River were important transportation routes and village sites of Late Woodland native people and all Michigan's native people.

Wyandot Spirituality Connected to Economic Lifeways

Everything in nature was linked as binary opposites, which also linked the twelve matrilineal clans of the Wyandot to everything that lives. Fish were linked to the river, fields were linked to mountains, air was linked to the sky, as the owl was linked to the eagle. This interconnectedness of all things was considered a sacred bond.

The Wyandot connection to the Detroit River was also a sacred bond. They believed that the Spirit that lived in the fish was called "Oki." In each fish house there was a medicine man skilled in talking to the fish, who would tell the fish that they were respected. Respect would be shown to the fish by the burial of their bones rather than burning them. The Wyandots considered the burning of bones, human or animal, to be a disrespectful act. Medicine men would thank the fish in advance for giving up their lives so that people could eat and live. Native people believe that all things must die so that something else can live. The way a living being dies and the way in which its body is treated after death are important.

Water also figured in the spiritual lives of the Wyandot. Tobacco would

be placed on the water as an offering to the spirits that lived in the water, which was a way of thanking the water for giving people life. The water, it was believed, gave life to all things. Water represented life and purity. There were many ceremonies involving the use of water and honoring of this precious resource.

Fishing was done in a variety of ways, either with a spear or with fish-hooks and line, which were used for small fish. A barbed head that had been whittled and ground out of bone was attached to a wooden spear for spear-fishing. Hooks were made from wood with a bone barb attached. Sturgeon bones were often used in making the barbed heads on spears and fishhooks.

Fishing was also done with nets on the open water. Fish fences or weirs were often placed where creeks or streams emptied into the larger river. The Wyandot villages were near the creeks or streams because the fishing weirs guaranteed a constant food supply. Otter Creek and Stony Creek in Monroe were both village sites.

In October and November, the Wyandot fished for Atsihiendo, or lake trout. In the spring they fished for walleye, whitefish, bass, and sturgeon. All fish were called "Leinchataon."

Fishing was also done in the Detroit River with nets. Each fishing party had its own leader. The fishing parties would build small bark cabins on the islands in the river when the fish would be spawning.

The fishing parties set their nets in the evening and pulled them up in the morning. Once the fish were pulled up they were immediately gutted (except for freshwater cod called burbot) and spread on racks to dry in the sun. Some of the fish would be smoked over a fire and then packed into bark containers to be eaten all year-round.

Fish were also boiled for the oil, which was used as a seasoning for sagamite and other corn dishes. The Wyandot also mixed the oil with paints for painting their bodies.

Burbot was used as a flavoring in corn soup, a Wyandot favorite. They were caught from nets cast from the shore. They were hung up to dry in bunches beneath the longhouse roofs. Burbot could then be eaten all winter. Children were given cod liver oil to drink because the Wyandot believed it was good for their health.

The Wyandot traveled back and forth across the Detroit River in their large canoes made only by the Sea Snake Clan. Smaller canoes for personal use were often obtained through trade with the Potawatomi. These two peoples, Wyandot and Potawatomi, had a reciprocal relationship based on need

and friendship. Travel across the Detroit River from the Canadian side to the island of Grosse Ile was common.

Catholicism and the River

Many of the Wyandot had converted to Catholicism and went to the mission chapel on Bois Blanc until it was burned down, and later to Detroit. Both the mission of St. John the Baptist in Amherstburg (1802) and the old mission of L'Assomption in the Township of Sandwich, Ontario (1790s) were also Wyandot parishes. In the late nineteenth century many Wyandot Catholics would pull up their canoes at the foot of present-day Church Street on Grosse Ile to hear mass at St. Anne's chapel on Sundays and Holy Days. The Wyandot Green Corn Ceremony, held the first week in August, brought many Catholics from across the river back to St. John the Baptist. Church records indicate that it was a common practice for Wyandots to bring their babies back across the river to be baptized.

The Wyandot called the north stretch of the Detroit River Tsugsagron-die, meaning "where beaver is plentiful." They called the lower half of the river that included Teuchsay-Grondie (Grosse Ile) and the ten islands chain Erige Tejocharontiong, which means "the place of the Erie people where there are many beaver dams" (Zurel 1961, 10).

Wyandot Games

The frozen Detroit River became a playground for the Wyandot. Father Gabriel Sagard, who arrived with the French fur trappers, was the first person to document a game still popular today—hockey. Father Sagard was a Jesuit missionary who worked among the Wyandot Indians from 1625 to 1650. He wrote annual reports to the superiors of the Jesuit order in France, which were published as *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. These books give the earliest written accounts of the lives of native people in the Americas.

Sagard and other Europeans often reported on Native American game playing, calling it "excessive" or "brutal." They failed to recognize that many skills that native people valued—endurance, speed, strength, stamina, agility, and intuition—were taught through these games. The games of hockey, lacrosse, snow snake, skinny, and double ball were all played by the Wyandot. The Wyandots' version of hockey was very rough and no padding was worn. Father Sagard reported many broken legs and arms. He reported that

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boys and young men "play a game with curved sticks, making them slide over the ice and snow, and they hit a ball of light wood." Sagard was fascinated with the game, as he had never seen it played on the river. Even the game of hockey tied the Wyandot to the river in a symbolic relationship.

Warfare among the Tribes

The Wyandot were closely related to the Erie Nation, who spoke Iroquois. There was a great deal of intermarriage and interaction between the two people. The Erie, like the Wyandot, were decimated by the warfare with the Iroquois that lasted from 1649 to 1700. The warfare was a result of the Dutch West Indies Company's arming the Iroquois with guns and sending them out against the Tionnontati, Neutrals, Nipissings, Chippewa, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Wyandot, Erie, and Susquehanna. The Dutch wished to control the fur trade after depleting the numbers of beaver, fox, and other fur-bearing animals in the eastern half of the northern United States.

The remnant band of the Erie asked to be adopted by the Wyandot because they knew it would be difficult to survive with fewer than two hundred people. The Wyandot adopted the entire remaining Erie in 1653. The Erie dropped their names and took Wyandot names at the adoption ceremony. Today the name of Lake Erie is our reminder of the tribe once known as the Erie. The Wyandot territory then came to include the region on the south side of Lake Erie in present-day Ohio, which had been Erie territory. During the French and Indian Wars of 1689–1763, the Wyandot sided with the French, against the British. The British eventually won and Wyandot territory then became British territory.

During both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, the Wyandot sided with the British. The Wyandot found themselves on the losing side of three wars.

Wyandot land claims, both at Brownstown and at the U.S. Treaty of Fort Harmar, had recognized Monguagon (Wyandotte) and Brownstown (Gibraltar and Brownstown Township) villages in 1789. These claims to the villages were later inadvertently rescinded when the Wyandot chiefs from Detroit arrived late for the signing of the Treaty of Greenville in 1795 (Burton 1908, 101). "Mad" Anthony Wayne ("Blacksnake" to the Wyandot) later agreed to give back to the Wyandot the important Detroit River villages. But Wayne never put this agreement in writing and he died the next year (Fuller 1928a; Fuller 1928b; Jefferson 1809; Greeley 1810; Walker 1816). No one knew of his agreement except for the Wyandots.

The Wyandot were angry over the loss of their two largest villages on the Detroit River and petitioned Congress and the president on February 28, 1812, asking for reconsideration to terms that had been put forth by U.S. government. Chief Walk-In-The-Water of Monguagon and Chief Roundhead of Brownstown went to Washington, D.C., to speak with President James Madison about getting their villages back (Hathon 1836; Bland 1989, 6). Secretary of War Henry Dearborn was against the idea and the Wyandot lost all hope of having their villages of the Detroit River returned to them. Angry and worried about basic survival of the Wyandot Nation, the chiefs returned to Michigan. The consensus was to fight alongside the British after the betrayal by the Americans.

Brownstown's position, directly across from Amherstburg, was strategically located for the British and their Wyandot allies (Carter 1934, 125). The British could bring their troops and supplies across the frozen ice to Brownstown in winter. The Wyandots could use their large seagoing canoes to move men across to Amherstburg or blockade the Detroit River when necessary. U.S. General Hull had built a supply road from Ohio north to Detroit. The Wyandots and their Indian allies successfully blocked the supply line to Detroit for two weeks.

The great war chiefs Roundhead and Splitlog led the Wyandots, and Tecumseh, the great chief of the Shawnee, and his warriors had arrived at Brownstown to aid the Wyandot. The people of Frenchtown (present-day Monroe) had been under pressure to join with the Wyandot against the Americans. Chiefs Roundhead, Splitlog, and Walk-In-The-Water sent this message to the people of Frenchtown: "Friends, Listen! You have always told us you would give the Wyandot any assistance in your power. We, the Chiefs of the Wyandot, call upon you all to rise up, and bring your arms along with you. Should you fail this time, we will not consider you in the future as friends, and the consequences may be very unpleasant" (Bland 1989, 6). Despite these pleas, the Frenchtown citizens sided with the Americans.

In July 1812, over five hundred chiefs and warriors of the Midwest Indian nations held their last great council at Brownstown on the Detroit River. The Wyandot remained in Brownstown only one more year until 1813. Public sentiment was building against the Wyandot. They not only had been merciless in warfare, but also white men wanted their valuable land along the water on both sides of the Detroit River. The Wyandots were removed from their beloved Detroit River in 1816 and were placed, along with some Shawnee, Potawatomi, and Ottawa living with them, on a reservation along the Huron River in Flatrock. Even though they were living on

a river, they cut a path back to the Detroit River that is present-day Sibley Road (Garriston 1897, 16–25).

Removal to the West

By 1818, all of the prime waterfront land of the Wyandot had been lost to white settlers. During the removal period, thirty-four tribes were forcibly taken from the east to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma and Kansas. This tragic period is most poignantly recalled by "the trail of tears," which was a genocidal removal of the five large tribes of the southeast. The Wyandot and other tribes walked their own trail of tears.

The removal in 1842 took most of the Wyandot to Kansas (and twenty years later to Oklahoma). The U.S. government had promised the Wyandot 160,000 acres on which to resettle. But the Wyandot who survived the forced march to Kansas found no land waiting. The Delaware people gave the Wyandot thirty-six sections of land because they recalled the Wyandot letting them "lay their blankets down" more than a century earlier when the Delaware had been driven from the east and found refuge in Wyandot territory in Ohio.

Wyandot in Michigan Today

There was a small group of Wyandot who were not driven to Kansas. They hid on the islands, fled to Canada, and later returned to Michigan. Some Wyandots were allowed to stay if they had "legal" title to land. This group remained in Michigan and is the Wyandot of Anderdon Nation. Today the Wyandot of Anderdon, who have remained on the river, continue to view the river as their ancestors did—a sacred place to be honored, respected, and used by everything that needs clean water to live. Today many still live along the Detroit River.

There are over nine hundred members of the Anderdon Tribe of Wyandot living in southeastern Michigan, many in the Downriver Detroit community that they occupied for a millennium. They belong to almost every hunting and fishing club in the region. The membership rosters of environmental organizations, including the Friends of the Detroit River, are full of Wyandots.

The Wyandot use of the water included not only transportation, but a *lifeway*. The Wyandot canoed across the river to have children baptized, fished for their favorite fish from the river, buried their ancestors next to the river, and gathered on the water's edge for celebrations and ceremonies.

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