

Blackhawk War

Naperville Heritage Society History Stories

Long before white men settled the prairies and woodlands of Northern Illinois, Native American tribes hunted and roamed the countryside. In what would become DuPage County, the Potawatomi Tribe was predominant. This tribe and two others, the Ottawa and the Chippewa, formed a confederation called, "The Three Fires," for protection and support. Originally, these tribes were located east of Lake Michigan, but were driven to Wisconsin and Illinois by the Iroquois and their allies.



Native Map

The tribes of The Three Fires journeyed as far west as Iowa where they met with the Sioux tribes, who promptly defended their hunting grounds leaving the three tribes the lands of Wisconsin, Illinois and parts of Indiana.

For hundreds of years, the Potawatomi, Ottawa and Chippewa tribes seasonally migrated north and south along the Illinois, Fox and Rock rivers from as far north as Minnesota to as far south as Lake Peoria in the center of Illinois. Numerous instances have been recorded of friendly relations between the tribes of The Three Fires and white settlements. However, in 1809, an aggressive Potawatomi chief, *Main Poche*, turned his war path of pillaging and destruction attentions from Osage and Piankashaw tribes of southern Indiana toward pioneer settlements along the Illinois River towards Missouri. These actions led to a series of treaties and restrictions against all tribes in the Illinois Territory, especially as the question of statehood approached.

During the War of 1812 in which the British tried to return America to its fold, Native American tribes took sides. One of the bloodiest days in Northern Illinois occurred when the Potawatomi learned of the abandonment of Fort Dearborn on August 9, 1812. A band of Potawatomi warriors, 500 strong, descended on 66 regular and militia troops as they left the fort. Thirty-eight men were slaughtered. This event nearly stopped the future settlement of Northern Illinois.

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During the 1820s, the Sauk and the Fox tribes were also in conflict with the Potawatomi. The Three Fires, through a series of treaties and agreements, agreed to vacate land to the settlers provided annuities would be paid thru 1828. These treaties and agreements gave the tribes of The Three Fires protection from hostile tribes, guaranteed annuities and nearly 5 million acres west of the Mississippi River. Joseph Naper began surveying Cook County in 1829 in anticipation of the land sales that the government could now conduct freely.

It was during one of these survey assignments that Naper, a ship builder, owner and captain, came in contact with the Potawatomi still living in the area. Many tribe members had inter-married with white settlers and adopted “white man’s ways.” Some continued to live traditionally in and around Chicago and in 1835 a newspaper notice asked for “10-40 ox teams” for the removal of Indians. The Potawatomi were friendly toward Naper and realizing this, among other reasons, such as a ready water supply and fertile land, Naper set about to build a town along the DuPage River. Naper and his party of about 60 settlers arrived in the summer of 1831, which coincided with the time period when Chief Black Hawk was mobilizing the Sauk and Fox tribes against white settlement and the federal government.

During the Black Hawk War of 1832, the Potawatomi tribe favored and even protected white settlers. Chief Shabbona, though a member of the Ottawa tribe, was a powerful, respected leader of The Three Fires. He persuaded Chief Waubensee of the Potawatomi not to join Black Hawk and his warriors. Shabbona even went so far as to send his son to warn the settlers at the new Naper’s Settlement of attacking Fox tribes. For many years, Shabbona lived near Morris, Illinois, and would frequently travel to see the wonders of Chicago or to visit his friends in Naperville.



Chief Shabbona

Today, the history and memory of these Native Americans individuals is preserved still in the various place-names, schools and parks located in and around Naperville and DuPage County.

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