

Nibi

The Potawatomi people know our selves as the Keepers of the Fire. The sacred fire holds a central place within the ancient traditional ways of our ancestors, and these ways of the fire have remained as a source of strength for the People into modern days. The fire is used as a vehicle for prayer, a way to commune with the Creator and spirit helpers that roam Mother Earth and help the people. We feed our medicines to the fire, so that our people can remain strong and in balance with their mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional health.

Just as in the four directions of health, we honor four stages of life, four winds that bring teachings to us, and the four elements that give life to every single being: earth, wind, fire, and water. Our people continue to see the spiritual significance in every living being. We are brothers to the trees, plants, animals, and fish. Grandfather sun gives us the light we need to feel alive, so the trees can make air and the plants produce food. Water feeds everything. It nourishes our bodies and spirits.

A migration over a period of years brought many Native people down the Saint Lawrence Seaway to Michigan from the eastern woodlands. Historically, every major Potawatomi settlement has been near the water. It was central to our civilization, and vital as a means of survival. We were master canoe builders, using the bark of the white birch tree. This ability to use the water as a means of transportation, highly developed food source (through fishing and ricing), and avenue for trade, is what differentiates Potawatomi and other Algonquian tribes from Native Nations around the U.S.

- The Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, and Kankakee are some of the major rivers where our villages existed. In fact, some missionaries and historians have referred to the Pokagon Band as the St. Joseph Potawatomi.
- The Potawatomi movement throughout the Great Lakes made our territory south of the Grand River near Grand Rapids, Michigan into Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and north to the Door Peninsula in Wisconsin.
- The name Michigan is actually the Potawatomi word, michigami, meaning great body of water. Many of the Potawatomi that were forced to move west, dreaded this unknown land because they knew there was no water to live near.
- Our farming, food gathering, and fishing skills came from an understanding of the beauty of water. Our myths and associated figures such as underwater serpents remind us of the danger and destructive nature of water. There are positive and negative aspects within everything that must remain in balance.
- Clans (the system by which responsibilities are divided within the community) that are associated with water, such as turtle, sturgeon, or loon clan, are entrusted with being the teachers, peacemakers, and holders of plant knowledge within the Tribe.
- Women in the community still take care of the water. They gather and bless the water, as well as sing songs for the water during traditional ceremonies. Women are the givers of life, just as we all need water to live.

This short description of our People's connection and knowledge of water is only superficial. We want everyone to know that as caretakers of the Earth, some of the things the Pokagon Band still practices keep the sacredness of the common, everyday things alive. We continue these traditions even as we develop our communities and infrastructure for our growing population. Our environmental concerns come out of respect and necessity of keeping a healthy balance for all people on this Earth.



A view of the Lake at Gage Street