

History of the Forks of the Wabash area

The physical appearance of the Forks area, and of most of Indiana, was shaped by glaciers, which ground the earth flat as they advanced, then left mounds and ridges of sand and gravel behind as they retreated. During the last retreat, while the glacier blocked the St. Lawrence waterway, the Wabash Valley was the channel for all the rains and glacial melt flowing into the Lake Erie basin. At its peak, a river a mile wide and more than a hundred feet deep flowed over the Forks.

The human history of the Forks area can be traced back 12,000 to 14,000 years, to the end of the last glacial epoch. Spear points dating to that era have been found nearby, probably left by nomad hunters who were following mastodon, bison, or other game.

During the next 10,000 years, Native Americans passed through the area often, and perhaps established temporary villages here, but the only record we have at present is the spear points and other artifacts found on the surface. The area still awaits serious archaeological work to trace this history in more detail.

The recorded history of the area begins with the arrival of French traders in the late 1600s. At about the same time, the Miami Indians settled in the area of Kekionga (Fort Wayne) and all along the Wabash River, having moved into this area from Wisconsin and southern Michigan. For the next 100 years, Indiana and western Ohio were considered the home territory of the Miami and their Algonquian allies.

During the time they were in Indiana, the Miami were divided into three groups. One group settled where the St. Joseph and St. Marys Rivers join to become the Maumee River. A second settled in the vicinity of present day Lafayette, and the third near present day Vincennes. While all were called Miami, the Kekionga (Fort Wayne) group were the Miami proper, the Lafayette group were the Weas, and the Vincennes group the Piankashaws. A group closely related to the Kekionga Miami settled in the vicinity of present day Columbia City, and were known as the Eel River Miami. Another group closely related to these two settled along the Mississeniwa River.

After the American Revolution, American frontiersmen and traders began to explore the newly won country to the west and made contact with the Miami. Following them came settlers, first into the area of Ohio and then into Indiana. The search for land for the settlers triggered a series of conflicts between the Americans and the Miami, which, in the 1780s, broke out into open warfare. The Americans sent a series of generals to try to subdue the Miami, all of whom failed until Anthony Wayne took command. The Miami, for their part, turned to the same man each time a new American force entered the field: Little Turtle. Little Turtle, who has been called the greatest military man Native Americans ever produced, was not only a master strategist but had the considerable political skills necessary to assemble armies from all branches of the Miami Nation and from the larger group of Algonquian allies. His defeat of Harmer at Kekionga, and a year later his total destruction of St. Clair's army at Fort Resolution in 1791, made the Americans realize they were up against a very determined and very capable foe. Whereas previous generals had been essentially politicians out to make a name for themselves, now the Americans turned to a career military man: Anthony Wayne. Wayne spent over two years drilling his men and assembling supplies and in 1794 decisively defeated the Miami coalition at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Little Turtle had only a minor role in this battle. He had seen the defeat coming and counseled against war, but had been overruled by the majority. Henceforth, he became a voice for conciliation between Miami and Americans and was a strong force for making the transition as easy as possible for the Miami.

Between 1795 and 1840 a series of treaties was negotiated between the Miami and the United States Government, by the terms of which the Miami gradually gave up all their territory and were removed to the West. Jean Baptiste Richardville was present at every one of the treaty negotiations and gradually became the dominant personality in the negotiations. He was Chief of the Village of Kekionga at the time of the earlier negotiations, and became Principal Chief in 1816. He displayed extraordinary skill as a negotiator. Undismayed by the overwhelming military strength of the U S Government and the dwindling resources of the Miami, he managed to retain possession of some of the land in the names of certain tribal leaders, to stave off removal to a later date than any other Midwestern tribe of Native Americans, and to secure exemption from removal for about half his people. He was also quite successful in his personal affairs. He controlled the Long Portage and charged tolls to all who traversed it. He was a businessman and trader, and amassed considerable wealth from his business enterprises. When he died, he was said to have been the wealthiest Native American of his day.

He was succeeded, in 1841, by Francis Lafontaine, who presided over the removal of the Miami to Kansas Territory. Lafontaine probably possessed as much negotiating skill as Richardville, but did not have as much opportunity to use those skills. He did manage to delay removal for a year beyond the date specified in the last treaty. He accompanied those who moved to Kansas Territory in 1846, then returned to Indiana. He became ill on the return journey and died in Logansport in 1847.