

Missouri History through the Art of Our State Capitol

Written by Bob Priddy

Native Americans

People have lived in this place we call Missouri since the days that Mastodons and Giant Three-Toed Sloths roamed the land. Those people hunted the mastodons for their meat and the sloths for fur that they turned into clothing.

The ancient peoples who lived here as much as 14,000 years ago left no written word of their existence. We know them through the remnants of their campfires and settlements and the stone tools they used. They are considered hunter-gatherers, people who hunted animals and gathered fruits and berries for their food. There are no specific tribal names for these first ancient Native Americans who lived here. Scientists call them Paleo-Indians.

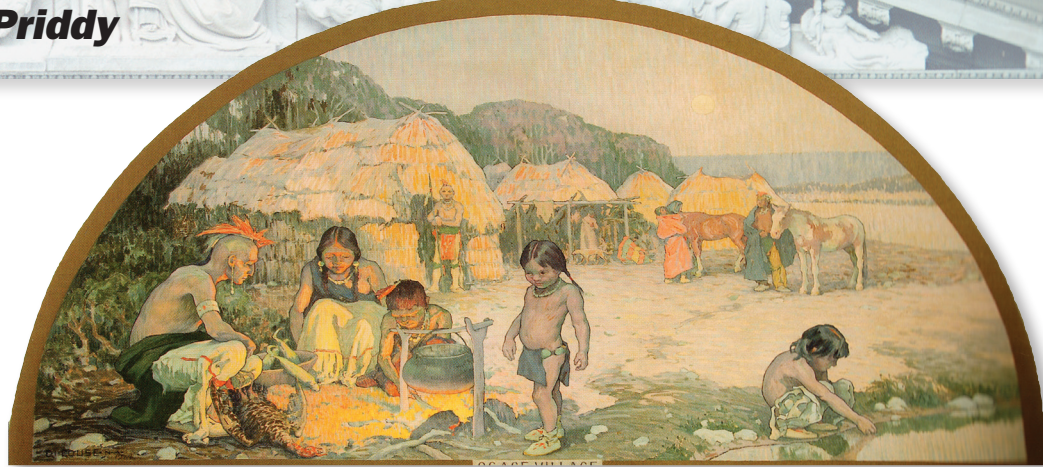


“Sacagawea” by William J. Williams, is based on photographs of Shoshone women. The bust is in the Hall of Famous Americans on the third floor. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

About 3,000 years ago, people we call the Hopewells lived here. They built large mounds, only a few of which remain today, where they held ceremonies. They knew how to make clay pots in which they stored things or cooked food. They made more advanced tools. We also know from the things they left behind that they traveled and traded with people in other areas.

Our rivers became greater lifelines to those of a later time, the Mississippian people who became Missouri’s first farmers. More than 1,000 years ago they were raising beans, corn, squash, and other foods. Members of this long-existing civilization were the first Missouri Native Americans to see the first European explorers to reach middle America when the military expedition of Spain’s Hernando DeSoto reached the Mississippi River Valley.

By the early 1700s, when more European explorers came to our region to start the first southeast Missouri lead mines, several groups of Native Americans had moved into this area. They had names for their groups, or tribes. The Ioway lived in a small part of north central Missouri. The Illini settled along the Mississippi River from our present border with Iowa to the area as far south as where



The first recorded meeting of European explorers and Missouri’s Native Americans might have happened near a peaceful village of the kind portrayed in this lunette by E. I. Couse in the Southwest hallway of the second floor. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

Cape Girardeau is today. The Chickasaw and the Quawpaw occupied southeast Missouri. The Osage lived in southwest and south-central Missouri, and were the dominant tribe of this land of ours. Their empire also stretched into Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Many other tribes settled in Missouri or passed through



Osage Indians, such as these hunters portrayed by E.I. Couse, were the dominant tribe in Missouri when the white settlers began to move in. The lunette is in the southwest hallway of the second floor. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

the state for more than a century, including the Sac, Fox, Delaware, Cherokees and the Missouriis.

Despite their long history in the place that is now our state, it is believed the Native American population when the European explorers and settlers arrived was only about 20,000. In a few short years, however, the flow of white settlers (with, in many cases, their slaves) crowded the Indians out.

The Osages gave up their lands in a treaty with the U. S. government in 1808, five years after this area became American territory. Within 30 years, Native Americans who had populated this area for 12,000 years or more had no more lands in Missouri.

The departure of the last tribe through the Platte Purchase of 1836 ended the Indian occupation of Missouri and gave the state the area that is now our northwest corner that was quickly occupied by settlers.

We remember their long occupation of this place by many of the words they left

behind such as Neosho, Seneca, Arrow Rock, Hahatonka, Pemiscot, Tarkio, Puxico, Wakenda, Wyaconda, Moniteau, Niangua and, of course, Missouri.



Artist Allen Tupper True wanted to capture the dignity and strength of Missouri’s Native Americans in his portrait of an Indian Chief, on the third floor Dome. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

Bob Priddy is a veteran Missouri Capitol reporter and co-author of “The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone.”

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