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Happenings Between the Fox and Wisconsin: Historical Analysis of Portage, Wisconsin

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Abstract:

This article explores the town of Portage, Wisconsin's Native American history and the significance of the town as a historical site. Located between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, the town of Portage is home to many noteworthy events in Wisconsin's history. The site of the town also shares a history with many historically famous people. Portage is the site of Fort Winnebago and an Indian agency. These early people, constructions, and the construction's inhabitants, have shaped the town's history and the present people's historical consciousness.

In conclusion, the town of Portage does have a very unique and diverse history. Fueled by the fur trade, the site of the town was once the center of European, Native American, early American involvement. However, to this day, much of the town's historical identity is formed from the personal account of the Indian agent's wife, Juliette Kinzie. Her historic narrative, although interesting and inspiring, was misguided and created a mistakenly nostalgic historical identity.

Introduction

Portage, Wisconsin, situated between the Wisconsin and Fox rivers, is possibly one of the state's most overlooked but oldest historical sites. The geographical position of the town made it possible for it to become the location of many important historical events. The significance of the town's history is often ignored or misrepresented.

The distinct and diverse history of Portage, Wisconsin, has shaped the present town's identity and is a source of pride for its residents. This historical consciousness and pride is evident in the town's Chamber of Commerce Web site, which is meant as a guide and welcome display to visitors. The Web site boasts its historical sites for tourists and displays a "Charrette," or an idea book, which suggests, using historical references, to booster gateway entrances and recreational areas (Portage Area Chamber of Commerce: 2004). In fact, the representation of two men "portaging," or carrying their canoes, is an icon the town uses to represent itself.

Portage's history can be broken down into different points of pride for the town. The first point is the many historical figures that have come into its contact. These people include notable Native Americans, early explorers, and military personnel. Their historic interactions with the town are revered and used as promotional tools by Portage. Another point of pride is the town's connection to Fort Winnebago. Its history and remaining structures are used as tourist attractions. Portage is also home to an old Indian agency house. This place is a point of pride for the town in many ways. The historical significance of the agency house is used to attract visitors to the town. Also, the Indian agent's wife, Juliette Kinzie, wrote a book about her time spent in the area. This book was used in a campaign to restore the site and spark interest in its historical importance (Cronon 1-8). The book has also been used as a historical teaching tool to

gain understanding about the early days of the town. However, Kinzie's writings are her own personal views and are often misinforming and misleading. Even so, Portage's history is very substantial and still has a major effect on the town today. Much of this history revolves around its Native American connections.

Native People of the Portage

The early Native American inhabitants of the Portage area are a symbol of the town's diverse history and are used to complement its promotional qualities. This can be observed in the books *Portage: A Sesquicentennial History* by Michael J. Goc and *Early Days at the Fox-Wisconsin Portage* by Ina Curtis. These books were designed to celebrate the town's history. They focus on noteworthy Native Americans and even the Native American history before and leading up to European contact.

The region of southeastern Wisconsin up to La Crosse and to the northernmost areas of Illinois, were once considered to be in control of the Ho-Chunk Nation. The Chippewa, who were enemies with the Ho-Chunk, lived further to the north. Starting at the portage and moving northeast belonged to the Menominee. These bordering people were of Algonquin descent while the Ho-Chunk were of the Sioux (Curtis 15). In summer periods the Ho-Chunk stayed together in large villages. They supported themselves with agriculture: growing corn, beans, and squash until the winter months. At that point they would separate into smaller groups, consisting of extended families, and migrate to different hunting camps (Goc 17).

The eighteenth century meant a challenging time for the Ho-Chunk. The fur trade brought an infiltration of French and their Native American associates. It also brought an infiltration of diseases that, along with war involving neighboring Illinois tribes, worked to practically eradicate the Ho-Chunk. This was the origination of a tribal story about a single man who was left unharmed to repopulate the Ho-Chunk people. This devastation also brought cultural change (Goc 17).

The once self-sufficient people began to rely on the fur trade and its foreign authorities. They also gave up their culture for a hybrid society of Ho-Chunk and fur trader culture. Use of this practice was not unique amongst the Ho-Chunk but was prevalent among all of the Great Lakes tribes. The Ho-Chunk, however, did not prosper under their new ways. They were the subordinates in the fur trade industry. They exchanged their services for trade goods distributed to them by the fur companies. On many occurrences they were neglected and insufficiently paid. The fur trade brought many changes among the Ho-Chunk people, yet it did not affect the affinity they had for their lands. This became problematic as American forces took control of Wisconsin and miners began intruding on lands in southwest Wisconsin (Goc 15).

The forts located in Wisconsin changed occupiers from the French to the British, and after the War of 1812, control of the fort belonged to the Americans (Curtis 18). This brought American miners into the areas known as the "Lead Region" in the 1820s (Goc 17). Although the United States government recognized the Ho-Chunk's claim to the land, they permitted white settlers to occupy the area (Goc 17). Tensions arose as the Ho-Chunk resented the white settlers who had stolen their land, and they were also suspicious of any actions by soldiers occupying the forts (Curtis 18-19). This eventually led to the conflict with Red Bird.

Tempers flared among the Ho-Chunk after hearing rumors that two of their men had been killed by Chippewas as a result of interference by American soldiers

(Curtis 19). Although the two men later returned unharmed, the Ho-Chunk had already held a council and determined to kill two white settlers as retribution (Curtis 19). Three men, Red Bird, We Kaw, and Chichonsi, were sent to kill a French farmer, Registre Gagnier, residing on Ho-Chunk lands (Curtis 19; Goc 17). They killed both him, his farm hand, and also scalped the farmer's eleven-month-old daughter (Curtis 19). His daughter, however, miraculously survived and was given part of a silver dollar to replace the area of her skull lost in the attack (Curtis 20). The daughter, Marie Regis, lived a long life and was known for charging people to see her scars from the incident. After the attack, other Ho-Chunk began attacking boats along the Mississippi River. Fear and panic spread amongst the white settlers in the area. The government released several troops in response to the uprising. Eventually, Red Bird and We Kaw peacefully surrendered (Goc 17-18). The affair with Red Bird started many events in motion that would change the course of history for the Ho-Chunk. Indian Agent Kinzie had a strong impression of Red Bird saying that,

“he certainly was the best looking Indian in the Nation...of all the Indians I ever saw, he is, without exception, the most perfect in form...I never beheld a face that was so full of all the ennobling, and at the same time, the most winning expression...During my attempted analysis of this face, I could not but ask myself, can this man be a murderer? Is this the same man who shot, scalped, and cut the throat of Gagnier” (Goc 18)?

Red Bird's actions ignited the government's decision to assimilate the Ho-Chunks and to acquire their lands. However, the assimilation ceased and removal began when the conflict known as the Black Hawk War started (Goc 19-20).

Although Black Hawk never actually visited the Portage area during the conflict, his actions made a lasting impression on Portage's celebrated history. Many of the happenings of the Black Hawk War impacted Fort Winnebago, the Indian Agency, and their inhabitants. The Sauk leader also made quite the impression on the agent's wife, Juliette Kinzie, who was quoted as saying,

“It may seem wonderful that an enemy so few in number and so insignificant in resources could have created such a panic, and required so vast an amount of opposing force to subdue them” (Thayer 3).

Black Sparrow Hawk was not a chief of the Sauk/Fox people as many people might believe. He was, like his father and grandfather before him, a very important person in his village (Marshall J. and Marshall M. 9). An unusual transaction inspired the treaty of 1804, ceding all Sauk/Fox lands to the United States Government. The cessation of Sauk/Fox lands and the War of 1812 brought white settlers into the region (Marshall J. and Marshall M. 34-36). As the settlers felt more threatened by their Indian neighbors, requests for protection were sent to Washington (Marshall J. and Marshall M. 40). With President Jackson's Indian Removal Act, Native Americans were ordered to relocate west of the Mississippi River (Marshall J. and Marshall M. 42). Black Hawk refused to go peacefully. Instead of moving west, he traveled north to Wisconsin in hopes of inspiring the Potawatami and Ho-Chunk to stay and fight with him (Marshall J. and Marshall M. 50-59).

Although Black Hawk was able to recruit a small number of Ho-Chunk, it was not enough to continue the resistance. His retreat west of the Mississippi River was

accompanied with constant attacks by militia men and army troops (Goc 20). Black Hawk himself survived the attacks but he eventually surrendered and was imprisoned (Goc 20). However, he managed to make his presence felt at Fort Winnebago before doing so.

The majority of troops stationed at the portage left to pursue Black Hawk and his people. This left the fort utterly defenseless. Word spread of a growing band of Ho-Chunk who were sympathetic to Black Hawk and waiting to attack. Three thousand men were sent back only to discover no immediate danger to the fort. However, as the troops rested at the portage for the night, their horses were stampeded. This foul up was a setback that would prolong the Black Hawk War (Goc 20).

The end of the war meant even more trouble for the Ho-Chunk. The tribe as a whole was punished for the deeds of a few. They were required to give away their remaining lands. This was extremely dishonorable as many Ho-Chunk had fought on the American side. Also, the Ho-Chunk turned over any of their insurgent people (Goc 20). This action was ordered by Major General Winfield Scott, who wrote to the Winnebago Nation,

“I have heard with great regret, that many Winnebagos have been engaged in this lawless war against the Americans...For these causes, I demand that the Chief’s head men and principal Warriors of the Winnebago Nation, who are under the agencies of Prairie du Chien, Fort Winnebago, and Rock River, meet me in council...bring with them all Sacs, Foxes, Kicapooos and others of Black Hawk’s band” (Thayer 309-311).

A large number of Ho-Chunk still refused to leave their land. They were led by prominent members of the tribe known as Dandy and Yellow Thunder. Many efforts were made to persuade them to depart from their land. This spanned over a thirty year period starting in 1840. The Ho-Chunk who persevered were finally permitted to stay under the Indian Homestead Act of 1874 (Goc 21). The sad history and trials of the Ho-Chunk in the Portage area all began with the exploration of Jean Nicolet.

Explorers of the Portage

Portage, being the tract of land to traverse in order to cross from the Fox to the Wisconsin River, became an important checkpoint for early Europeans of Wisconsin. For the early explorers and fur traders, the water route that Portage now connects was an extreme necessity. Portage credits the famous explorers, Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette, as being the first Europeans to set foot at the portage. There is a sign in Portage today marking their journey onward to the Wisconsin River.

In 1673, an expedition led by Louis Jolliet and accompanied by a Jesuit missionary, named Father Jacques Marquette, departed to search for the Pacific Ocean, or at least a waterway to the great body of water (Curtis 8-9). Together, the two men traveled up the Fox River to the area that is now Portage (Curtis 8). There they made the now famous act of carrying their canoes across to the Wisconsin River and continued their journey on to the Arkansas River (Curtis 9). However, their time spent between the two rivers was the first of many future portages. Their explorations created opportunities for French fur traders to take advantage of the water route.

As the eighteenth century began, so did the time of fur trade domination in Wisconsin (Curtis 10). This period also brought a period of war (Goc 11-12). Control over the area first changed from French to British, however the British eventually lost control to America (Goc 11). This event was followed by a series of battles involving British and Indian forces allied against America (Goc 11-12). During and after these periods, the area of the portage was inhabited by several notable military figures.

Military Presence at the Portage

Another source of pride for Portage is the famous military officials who were once stationed at Fort Winnebago. One of the consequences of the Red Bird conflict was the construction of Fort Winnebago at the portage. Major David Twiggs led troops down from Green Bay to build and occupy the fort in 1828 (Goc 19). Twiggs later became a general during the Mexican and Civil Wars (Kleist 3). Jefferson Davis, who is said to have personally overseen the cutting of logs for the fort, once served there (Kleist 3). He also ordered the fort to be sold to private owners in 1854 (Kleist 3). Later he became President of the Confederate States. Many other men who served at Fort Winnebago continued to have prominent roles in the Civil War (Curtis 33-40). Fort Winnebago became a major part of Portage's history.

Fort Winnebago

Although the entire fort no longer remains today, the Surgeon's Quarters, which is the only remaining building of the fort, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Portage Area Chamber of Commerce: 2004). It is open to the public and is considered one of the area's main attractions (Portage Area Chamber of Commerce: 2004). The Surgeon's Quarters is maintained by the Daughters of the American Revolution and serves as a museum of the fort's historic days (Portage Area Chamber of Commerce: 2004).

Four thousand acres of land that had been bought from the Ho-Chunk (as a repercussion to the Red Bird conflict) was used to hold Fort Winnebago (Goc 29). The fort itself was built from natural resources in the surrounding area (Curtis 22). Around it were different buildings, such as: stables, shops, a commissary store, ice house, bath house, and living quarters (Curtis 23). A military road connected it to Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien and Fort Howard in Green Bay (Kleist 40). The fort was only occupied by military personnel for seventeen years. Although the population shifted from a majority of Ho-Chunk to a majority of white settlers, yet the need for a military fort declined. In 1854, it was deserted of soldiers and sold to private owners (Curtis 23). The experience of life at the fort has been preserved through the book by the Indian agent's wife, Juliette Kinzie.

The Indian Agency

Another historical site in which Portage takes pride is the Indian Agency. As the Ho-Chunk's assimilation process into American culture began, the government issued an Indian Agency at the portage. They also hired a blacksmith and a farmer to teach them American ways of life (Goc 19). John and Juliette Kinzie moved to the Portage area while the fort was in construction (Curtis 28). Eventually the Indian Agency House was built for them to live and perform their duties (Curtis 29). John

Kinzie was chosen for the job because of the skills he acquired working with Indians in the fur trade. Juliette was said to be articulate, educated, and favored among the Ho-Chunk (Curtis 28). Throughout Juliette's book, the Ho-Chunk are said to have referred to them as "Father" and "Mother."

During the winter the Ho-Chunk kept their traditional practice of dividing into groups consisting of extended families in order to live at different camps. Much of their summers were now spent at the portage area collecting their land payments while dealing for winter supplies (Kinzie 59). Kinzie described the Ho-Chunk as intelligent dealers who were seldom cheated and often attempted to deceive Kinzie and the soldiers who distributed their payments (54-55, 59).

More and more Indians began leaving the area as they were pressured to sign treaties giving up their land. As the necessity for an Indian agent lessened, John Kinzie decided to relieve himself of his position. In the year 1833, Juliette left for Detroit as John traveled to Chicago to seek permanent residence (Curtis 31). Kinzie describes her departure as a truly sad day for their Ho-Chunk friends (1992: 262).

Captain Robert McCabe resigned from his post at Fort Winnebago to act as the new Indian agent (Curtis 31). After only a year of service, McCabe ended his term after suffering a stroke (Curtis 32). The following agents were whoever were currently in charge of the fort. It is said that the following fort commanders detested the job (Curtis 32). The Indian Agency House itself served many functions after the removal of the Ho-Chunk. It was once a tavern, trading post, hotel, and residential house; the house still stands as a revered historic site (Curtis 32-33). The Indian Agency House is considered a tool to help people learn about Portage's history. Much of this history is viewed in a glorified manner. The sad history of the Ho-Chunk is often omitted from the stories of Portage's past. Many people are misinformed about the events that led to the loss of Ho-Chunk culture and their removal from the land. The main cause for the misinformation comes from Juliette Kinzie and her book, *The Wau-Bun*. The book has already proved its influential powers with the restoration of the Agency House. Those who campaigned to save the building used the stories in the book to justify its importance and create fascination with the site (Cronon 1-8). Also, the book's influence is evident as many authors frequently cite it in their own works. Kinzie's memoirs are now being taken as historical facts, so it is true that first-hand witnesses are often the best sources. However, as a witness, Kinzie was misinformed or ignorant to what was occurring around her.

The Ho-Chunk faced extinction as the fur trade brought new diseases to Wisconsin. They struggled to preserve their cultural identity long before American policies of assimilation began. Kinzie did not understand that the Ho-Chunk were once a proud nation of people. They were dependent on her and her husband because of European and American contact. Although Kinzie displayed a sense of pity for the Indians, she also thought of them as being on the same level as children. This was evident as she and her husband instructed the Indians to call them "Mother" and "Father." However, this may have been a display of Kinzie's ignorance. The Ho-Chunk were most likely a matrilineal clan. Although there is little evidence of this, there have been documented occurrences that point to such a practice. For example, Kinzie recalls a story of a Ho-Chunk woman that married a Musquaquee man. She explains that as the custom of the tribes instructs, the husband goes and lives with the wife's family (Kinzie 186). Calling

the Indian agent “Father” would not be gesture of respect as the father figure is not one of authority in a matrilineal system.

Another display of Kinzie’s ignorance was her thoughts toward Ho-Chunk assimilation to American ways. She believed that all Ho-Chunk problems would be solved through assimilation. Kinzie recounts a story of a chief proudly wearing American clothes. She explains that an Indian’s first step toward civilization is wearing a white man’s decorated hat (Kinzie 55-56).

The Ho-Chunk also resisted American assimilation. John Kinzie once tried to persuade the Ho-Chunk people to send their children to a school in order to receive an American education (Kinzie 63-64). He explained that this would greatly improve the wealth of the tribe (Kinzie 64). Of course the Indians would only have to give a part of their annual payments to take part in this privilege. After the agent’s promotional speech, one of the chiefs explained to Kinzie that since God had not made them white men, they would not try to act as one (Kinzie 64). In reality, American policies and the processes of assimilation would never solve the Ho-Chunk’s problems. Rather, they were the cause in the first place.

Kinzie’s thoughts and actions recorded in her memoirs represent her sense of superiority over the Ho-Chunk. At the time, these thoughts may have been justified. The appropriation of Ho-Chunk lands had made them dependent on their new white neighbors. The Ho-Chunk culture had been eroding away since the days of the fur trade. Assimilation made them a people between two cultures. They would never completely incorporate all American ways of life, but they could never go back to their traditional ways either. Juliette Kinzie may have witnessed the indigenous people of the portage area, but she never encountered the true indigenous culture.

Conclusion

Located between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, Portage, Wisconsin, was the center of many historical events in our state. Starting with early explorers, the area of the portage has always been an important site for the early people of Wisconsin. The fur trade made the area into a place of business where one could make money for oneself. To protect this business, Fort Winnebago was constructed. This protection was mainly intended for white settlers against the Native Americans; however, the fort eventually became a place of more importance to the Native Americans than it did for the white settlers. The Ho-Chunk Indians, or the Winnebago as they were then called, went to the fort to receive their land payments from the Indian agent. However, the fort, agency, and frontier way of life, ended in the area with the removal of the Ho-Chunk to the west of the Mississippi River.

The town of Portage has a compelling history, which it regards with extreme pride. It uses this history to distinguish itself from other communities. The town proudly displays its past with historic markers and decorations that depict past life in the area. Portage also uses its history to promote tourism and improve its image to visitors. Portage’s history is a source of pride, identity, and extreme importance to the community.

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