

2.3 Pre-settlement - Grand River 12,000 BCE to 1650 CE Summary

12,000-8,000 BCE

The Grand River Valley formed approximately 12,000 years ago by melting glaciers. Native Americans have been present in the Grand River watershed since its formation. Paleo-Indians traveled north as the glaciers melted. They were hunter-gatherers who traveled in small groups. At their campsites, archeologists have discovered stone tools, animal hides, and distinctive fluted spears, which are evidence of mastodon hunting.

8,000-6,000 BCE

Hunting and fishing was the way of life, and Indian communities were drawn to the Grand River area for its natural resources. Indians hunted moose, caribou, deer, and bear.

6,000 – 3,000 BCE

People started to form villages along the Lake Michigan shores. Hardwood trees began to replace conifers, and nuts, berries, and fish became important parts of the diet.

3,000 – 1,000 BCE

Natives traded with groups of people in other regions. Michigan copper from this time has been found in the Eastern United States and Canada, and items from the Gulf of Mexico have been found in the Great Lakes area. The people living during this time hunted and fished. Spears were used to take sturgeon, pike, and suckers in the shallow waters of lakes and streams, while fishhooks and gorges made from copper or bone were probably used on boats or fishing through the ice. Agriculture of native plants also began.

The Woodland Period 1,000 BCE-1650 CE

The Hopewell Indians, also known as the mound builders, began moving into the southern part of Lower Michigan around 100 BCE. The burial mounds that they constructed are still present in many areas, including the lower Grand River watershed.

Artifacts found in these burial mounds document the animals used by the Hopewell. Items found in the Norton mounds near Grand Rapids include spoons made from mussel shells (e.g., pocketbook, fat mucket and spike), bowls made from turtle shells (usually Blanding's turtle) and pins made from the bones of animals such as elk and deer. The most common items not native to the area were dippers, or cups, made from conch shells imported from the Gulf Coast. The ability to make ceramic pots to store foods was developed.

Residents of the Woodland Period moved seasonally as food was available.

- The river valley margins provided nuts and acorns from oak-hickory forests in the fall and deer during the fall and winter.
- Waterfowl were hunted during the peak migrations in the spring and fall.
- Floodplain lakes were a good source of fish when, during spring spawning runs, they were trapped as spring floodwaters receded.
- High-yielding seed plants such as lambs-quarters, sumpweed, and knotweed were harvested and possibly planted as crops. Crops like squash and sunflowers were first cultivated, and corn, beans, and squashes became more common

Prior to settlement, 30 percent of the watershed was beech and maple forests, while 18 percent was a mixture of wetlands and open water. The Grand River's flow was unchanged by man and the floodwaters helped to provide fertile soil for the Native Americans to grow their crops on.