

3.3 17th and 18th Centuries (1650 - 1800) Summary

Tribes of the Time

When the first Europeans arrived in the Grand River watershed, several villages were occupied by various tribes of the Anishnabeg people: Potawatami in the southern portion, Chippewa or Ojibwe in the east, and Ottawa in the west. There were more than 3,000 apple trees and almost 2,500 acres of corn and vegetable crops in the Grand River valley.

The first European settlers in the area arrived in 1650 and established trading posts near tribal villages. The main villages on the lower Grand were Nowaquakezick's (Noon Day's), where downtown Grand Rapids now sits, and Mukatasha's (Blackskin's), which was a few miles to the south at the bottom of the former rapids.

In 1764, over 4,000 Ottawa, Potawatami, and Chippawas came to the Grand River to celebrate their annual pow-wow. At other times of the year, the number of Native Americans might be closer to 300-400.

Describing the River

At the rapids, the Grand River has cut down through the streambed to the bedrocks. Limestone, sandstones, slate, shales, and "plaster rock" or gypsum was found at many points along the river, covered from sight in most places by debris from the surrounding hills. (*Source: Illustrated Atlas of Kent County.*)

Names of the Grand River

The Anishnabeg people named the river Owashtenong (far away water or long flowing river). When French explorers mapped the area in 1688, they called the river "Grande Riu, Ou Riu De Sakinand," or the Grand River to the Saginaw River. Early English maps referred to the Grand as "Great River," a translation of the French "grande."

Trade and Travel

The first European settlers in the watershed established trading posts near tribal villages. These settlements relied on the river for the transport of goods from Lakes Huron and Erie via the portages on the Shiawassee and Huron rivers.

Trading posts were operating on the Grand River as early as 1742. They traded cooking pots, cloth, and beads for fish, game, and furs.

French maps show the "Portage de Sakinand," a route that connected the Saginaw River system to the Grand by way of a short portage (land travel) from the South Branch Bad River to the Maple River. Another portage route was established between the Big and Little Portage Lake chain northeast of Jackson through the Portage Lake Swamp to the "Raux Ours," the current-day Huron River.