

Highways to Prehistory

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Southern Tour—Half Day

- ① Menoken Indian Village
- ② Chief Looking's (Ward) Village
- ③ On-A-Slant Village
- ④ Huff Indian Village

Northern Tour—Full Day

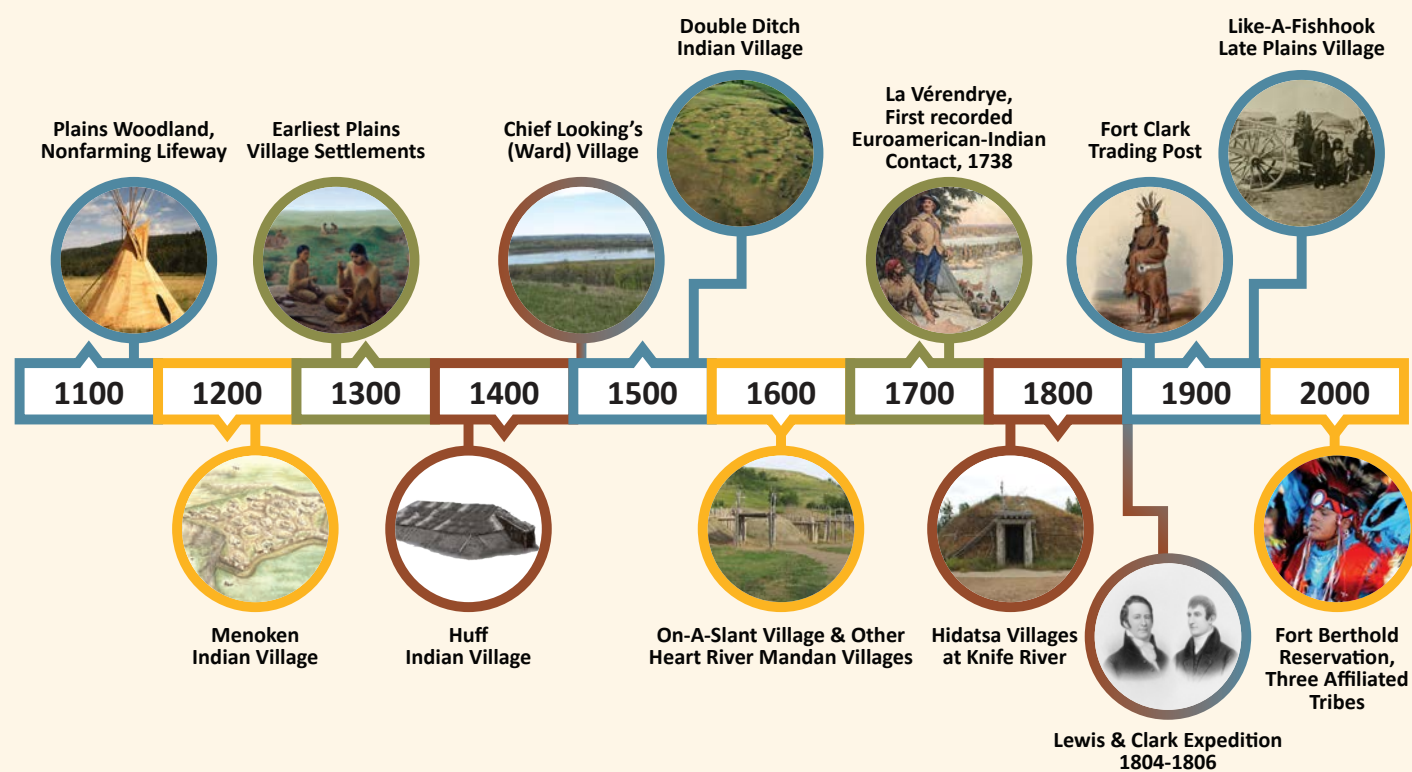
- ① Menoken Indian Village
- ② Chief Looking's (Ward) Village
- ⑤ Double Ditch Indian Village
- ⑥ Fort Clark
- ⑦ Knife River Indian Village
- ⑧ Cross Ranch Nature Preserve



Artist's rendition of Double Ditch in about 1550. View the full mural at the ND Heritage Center & State Museum.

Explore archaeological remains of prehistoric and historic villages occupied by the Mandans, Hidatsas, Arikaras, and their ancestors. Please respect and protect the resources as you visit these historic treasures.

Events & Site Occupation Since AD 1100



Central North Dakota is rich in archaeological remains of prehistoric and historic villages occupied by peoples known today as the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras. They lived in these communities of mostly 300 to 2,000 or more residents from the 1200s until the 1800s.

Hundreds of prehistoric village sites are located along the Missouri River. Together these villages chronicle the history of rich farming and bison hunting cultures that once dominated the Missouri River valley. This way of life eventually gave way to the tide of change brought by Euroamerican explorers, traders, and settlers. Among them, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark spent the winter of 1804-1805 near the last five independent Mandan and Hidatsa settlements at the Knife River and the ruins of older Mandan villages near the Heart River.

Use this guide to visit several significant sites along your historic journey. Select from two options to travel the Highways to Prehistory—the Northern Tour and the Southern Tour (See map on back). All sites are easily accessible by highway. Both tours begin at Menoken Village, followed by a visit to Chief Looking's (Ward) Village in northwest Bismarck.

1. Menoken Indian Village State Historic Site

This small settlement is tucked away on a bluff overlooking an abandoned meander of Apple Creek, a small tributary of the Missouri River. Menoken is one of the oldest fortified sites in the region. Look for the most prominent feature at the site,



Menoken Indian Village State Historic Site

a fortification ditch that encloses a small group of lodge depressions. The ditch forms an arc around a center point at one corner of the village. Find four prominent bastions along its arc. Once thought to have been the site where the French explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de la Vérendrye, first interacted with the "Mantannes" in 1738, Menoken Village is now known to date in the 1200s. Many of their oval-shaped lodges burned at the time of abandonment.

Access: The site is off I-94, 11 miles east of Bismarck. At Exit 170 on I-94 go north, then immediately right (east) on the frontage road (30th Ave NE); go one mile, then turn left on 171 St NE; go 0.1 mile and turn right (east) at the sign.

Follow the signs to learn about this important place and findings from excavations. Open year round.

2. Chief Looking's (Ward) Village

This village is preserved within Pioneer Park in Bismarck, setting on a hilltop with a breathtaking view of the Missouri River below and the city of Mandan to the west. This prehistoric Mandan settlement dates to around 1500.

The village was protected on all sides by a ditch with bastions and steep drop-offs into ravines. Look for a row of rectangular house depressions on the north side of the village. Circular house depressions can also be found throughout the site. Chief Looking's Village may hold the key to understanding the timing of a change from the rectangular lodge (early) to the circular house form (late) and other related changes in Mandan culture triggered by population growth and outside influences.

Access: The site is off I-94, within Bismarck. At Exit 157, go north (right) on Tyler Parkway, then left (west) on Burnt Boat Drive. Proceed 0.3 miles, turn left at the "Mandan Indian Village Site" sign and follow the road to the site.

Follow a walking path with interpretive markers. Open to visitors from early spring to late fall.

3. On-A-Slant Village at Fort Abraham Lincoln

On-A-Slant Village is one of several traditional Mandan settlements occupied for many generations near the mouth of the Heart River. On-A-Slant Village was settled in the 1500s and was occupied for at least 200 years. Several excavations here from the 1930s to 2001 have provided information about Mandan history during their critical period of increasing contact with Euroamericans. Lewis and Clark camped across the river from this village on October 20, 1804, and on August 18, 1806. They recorded that the settlement was in ruins, abandoned for about 25 years. Mandan Chief Big White (Shahaka Sheheke) was born here in the 1760s. He accompanied Lewis and Clark on their return trip to Washington, D.C. You can find lodge depressions at the site, along with six reconstructed earthlodges built and rebuilt several times since the 1930s. Also within the park are remains of the military posts Fort McKean and Fort Abraham Lincoln (1872-91), headquarters of the Seventh Cavalry and the Sixth and Seventeenth Infantries.

Access: From Chief Looking's Village return to I-94. Go west to Exit 155 (Mandan city center); turn left on 6th Ave SE. Follow this road (turns into ND Hwy 1806) for seven miles.

In the summer, take guided tours at On-A-Slant Village. A large constructed earthlodge on site shows the size of a community ceremonial structure. Five smaller reconstructed dwellings surround the plaza. Within the state park are a museum with exhibits about Mandan archaeology and several reconstructed military buildings. Campgrounds and nature trails are available.

4. Huff Indian Village State Historic Site

This prehistoric Mandan settlement dates to about 1450, perhaps 200 years before Euroamerican influence reached the area. About 1,000 or more people once lived in this large, well-planned community. The site is in pristine condition, and the community layout is easily seen on the surface. You'll find depressions marking the locations of more than 100 lodges arranged roughly in rows, paralleling the riverbank. The rectangular shape of houses is evident in these depressions. A large ceremonial lodge faced an open plaza near the center of the settlement. The entire settlement is surrounded by a massive fortification system consisting of a ditch more than 2,000 feet long with 10 bastions. Huff Village was occupied for a short time (perhaps 10 to 30 years), as indicated by the clarity of the village plan, lack of evidence for rebuilding, and trash accumulation.

Access: Leaving Fort Abraham Lincoln, turn left (south) on ND Hwy 1806 and drive 15.3 miles. The site is on the east side of the highway south of the town of Huff.

You will find signs with information about the site and findings from excavations. Open year round.

5. Double Ditch Indian Village State Historic Site

Double Ditch Village is one of the most spectacular archaeological sites of the Northern Plains. The site sets on a terrace overlooking the Missouri River, with a view downriver toward the mouth of the Heart River. Upriver see Square Buttes, a feature that marked the traditional boundary between Mandan and Hidatsa territory. This settlement covers about 22 acres. At its peak, perhaps 2,000 people lived here. Vast refuse piles, some standing taller than 10 feet, attest to nearly 300 years of occupation. Two prominent fortification ditches and evidence of two others attest to the fate of this thriving community, which shrank dramatically as diseases of European origin and enemy assaults devastated its population. Double Ditch Village lay in ruins when Lewis and Clark passed this point in 1804 and 1806. They noted that the village had been "killed by the Sioux."

Access: From Chief Looking's Village turn left on Burnt Boat Drive and turn right at the stop sign on River Road. Follow this road for 4.7 miles and then turn left on ND Hwy 1804. Follow ND Hwy 1804 for 3.9 miles; Double Ditch is on the west (left) side of the highway.

Follow signs along walking paths to learn about this site and enjoy magnificent views. Launch a canoe here in summer. Open year round.



Fort Clark State Historic Site

6. Fort Clark State Historic Site

This is one of the most significant historic locations of the Northern Plains. After the Mandans left their homeland at the Heart River, they resettled near the Hidatsas at the Knife River. One Mandan subgroup established the village of Mih-tutta-hang-kusch, known now as Fort Clark Village, here in the early 1820s. Smallpox decimated the village in 1837. Arikaras took over the abandoned village in 1838 until 1861. Fort Clark Trading Post, one of several important upper Missouri trade centers, was built nearby by 1830. The post was supplied by steamboats from St. Louis until it burned in 1860. A second trading post, Primeau's Post, was also built near the village. You can see remains of 86 circular earthlodges and some of their entryways, probably from the Arikara occupation, portions of a fortification system, trails, and the foundations and outlines of structures and enclosures that were part of each trading post. Please respect this site as a cemetery, as it contains the remains of hundreds of people who lived and died here.

Access: From Double Ditch turn north (left) on ND Hwy 1804 for 22.9 miles. At ND Highway 83 turn left; Turn left on ND Hwy 200; proceed west for 14 miles. Turn right (north) on the access road; Fort Clark is one mile north.

You will find signs with information and a picnic area. Open year round.

7. Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site

This 1,700-acre archaeological park is managed by the National Park Service. U.S. Congress created this historic site in 1974 to preserve, study, and interpret rich archaeological remains at the mouth of the Knife River. Three historically significant settlements established by ancestors of modern Hidatsa peoples are within the park, along with more than 50 less-visible sites including older villages, trails, cemeteries, and a linear mound complex. Of the three large villages, Lower Hidatsa Village is the oldest, preserving the remains of about 60 earthlodges rebuilt many times over 250 years. The Hidatsas abandoned Lower Hidatsa Village and eventually resettled at nearby Sakakawea Village around 1795, living in about 40 lodges until it was sacked by the Sioux in 1834. Around 1600, Big Hidatsa Village was

established by the "People of the Willows," a subgroup of the Hidatsas who moved upriver after living for a time with the Mandans at the Heart River. Big Hidatsa Village is the largest settlement in the park, with visible remains of 113 earthlodges as well as trails and mysterious linear ridges that rise like spokes from the village. Lewis and Clark visited Sakakawea and Big Hidatsa Villages in 1804-1806, as did Prince Maximilian and artists George Catlin and Karl Bodmer nearly 30 years later.

Access: From Fort Clark, return to ND Hwy 200; proceed west (right) for 8 miles. Turn right on ND Hwy 31. The visitor center for Knife River Indian Villages is 2.5 miles north of this intersection, just past the town of Stanton.

The National Park Service maintains an interpretive center year-round within the park; contact site for hours. In summer a reconstructed earthlodge features programs. Walking paths lead through the major villages with interpretive markers.

8. Cross Ranch Nature Preserve and State Park

The Nature Conservancy maintains a 6,000-acre nature preserve on the former Cross Ranch containing native prairie, floodplain forests, and wooded draws bordering the Missouri River valley. The preserve encompasses more than 100 archaeological sites including several major villages, bison kill and processing areas, linear mounds, cairns, effigies, and camp sites up to 6,000 years old. The sites are not interpreted.

Access – From Knife River Indian Villages return to ND Hwy 200. Turn left (east) and proceed for 16.5 miles; then turn right and proceed 5.8 miles. Then turn left and proceed 4.6 miles. Turn left on ND 1806. The Nature Conservancy and Cross Ranch State Park are approximately 2 miles north.

Year-round, the preserve offers activities such as day hiking and cross-country skiing. Preserve pamphlets and nature trail brochures are available. For primitive camping, log cabins, and an interpretive center, visit nearby Cross Ranch State Park.



Double Ditch Indian Village State Historic Site