Dakota and Ojibwe History

European immigration history is well known but a less known history shows the first historical inhabitants of the St. Croix valley were the Dakota (part of the Great Sioux Nation). Their vast homeland stretched throughout the Upper Mississippi valley and into the St. Croix valley. This land of their fathers represented one of the largest and richest regions of the North American interior. The Dakota structured their lives around natural hunting and fishing cycles, harvesting native plants and fruit, and by seasonal migration. For centuries this migratory life style supported a great nation and a great people. As the Sioux Nation expanded westward to include the Northern Great Plains, the Dakota became less able to protect their traditional lands in the St. Croix valley from Ojibwe immigrants who eventually came to populate most of the valley, first by early forays into the region, by trade with the Dakota, and then by larger migrations, sustained by force.

In ancient times the Ojibwe inhabited lands near the Atlantic Ocean. With the push of east coast European settlement and encroachment of the Iroquois Confederation, they migrated slowly westward to the Great Lakes region and occupied lands stretching from the shores of Lake Erie to rivers and lakes west of Lake Superior, an area even larger than the homelands of the Dakota. Unlike the Dakota, the Ojibwe lands did not have herds of elk and buffalo to sustain them, but they did have fish for protein, white tail deer, and plenty of smaller animals. They were among the first interior tribes to become engaged with the fur trade, dominated by French and English fur companies.

Through the seventeenth and early eighteenth century the Dakota and Ojibwe peaceably co-existed, with the Dakota providing the Ojibwe with furs and permitting smaller Ojibwe bands access to their lands. Eventually the Dakota came to resent Ojibwe incursions and commerce with other tribes that were hereditary enemies of the Dakota. Violence between the

Photos: Bill Neuman (left, upper right; John Runk, Minnesota Historical Society (lower right)

Ojibwe and Dakota began slowly in the 1720s and escalated to a full, prolonged war in 1736. In the more than a century and a quarter that the Ojibwe and the Dakota were locked in warfare, European traders repeatedly tried to arrange truces, but not for humanitarian reasons. Warfare between the tribes was bad for business and the fur trade was not producing the profits companies knew it would with the conflict ended. It turns out the entire history of the fur trade in the St. Croix valley took place under a cloud of bloody, violent conflict.

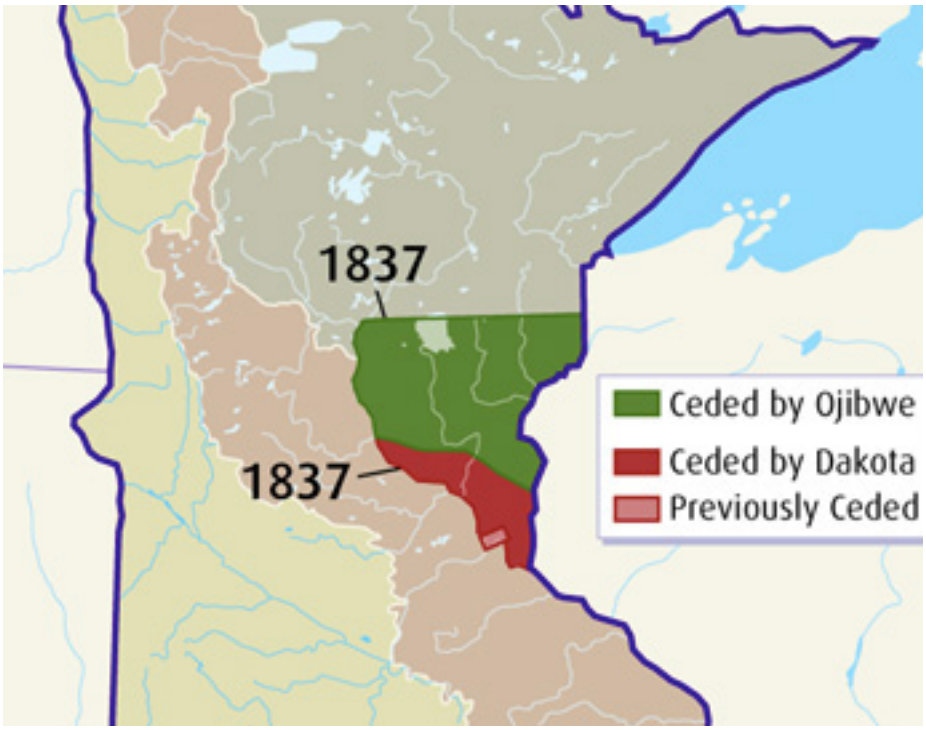
The French, who controlled the Lake Superior region, were naturally aligned with the Ojibwe and worked to ease tensions between their trading partners and the Dakota. On the St. Croix this led to the Dakota recognizing Ojibwe rights to the valley from its headwaters to the mouth of the Snake River. In 1727 the French began trading directly with the Dakota and playing the two tribes against each other. Relations between the Dakota and Ojibwe began to sour and the truce finally ended after the French announced their Lake Superior trading area included the entire St. Croix River valley. The Dakota felt betrayed by the French and they feared new attacks from the emboldened Ojibwe. The Dakota now felt the Ojibwe were stealing territories that belonged to them. The 1750s and 1760s saw ongoing conflict between the tribes in the St. Croix valley. Sometime about 1770 one of the greatest battles of the long war was fought at the Dalles of the St. Croix, in the heart of what is today the Immigrant Trail District of the St. Croix Scenic Byway.

The Dakota, with their former enemies the Fox, engaged a massive Ojibwe force gathered from across a region that would later include northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. The two armies of warriors entered into combat at the Dalles of the St. Croix River, a narrow gorge with fierce rapids that today looks much the same as it did at the time of the battle. Modern visitors walk along the cliffs and survey the spectacular rock formations that, with the river, bisect the two Interstate State Parks of Wisconsin and Minnesota, but few know about or reflect on the importance of the site where two great nations once entered into such deadly conflict.

Well into the Battle of the Dalles nearly 240 years ago, the Ojibwe were near defeat when a war party of Sandy Lake Ojibwe suddenly arrived on the battlefield, and this turned the tide of battle for a final time against the Dakota. Dakota warriors were sent into a headlong retreat and “many were driven over the rocks into the boiling (rapids)” of the St. Croix River. The Ojibwe and Dakota suffered heavy losses but it was the Fox who left the most dead amid the rocks and crevices of this battlefield. The victory temporarily secured for the Ojibwe control of the Upper St. Croix valley. An informal boundary was fixed between the Dakota and the Ojibwe around the mouth of the Snake River.

Treaties later entered into with the federal government in 1825, 1837, 1851 and 1854 established new tribal boundaries, none more so than the 1837 treaty that ceded all Dakota and Chippewa (Ojibwe) land between the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers to the federal government. The 1837 treaty also served as a pretext for European squatters to take up residence throughout the region. The Pre-emption Act of 1841 legitimized ownership of lands already taken by settlers. The 1854 treaty ceded all Chippewa (Ojibwe) lands in the deep northern timberlands and future iron-rich north country between the north shore of Lake Superior and the Red River. In the four years from 1854 to 1857 more than five million acres of former Indian lands were sold in the great rush for land. The Homestead Act of 1862, which offered cheap land to settlers, finished the business of converting tribal lands into private ownership, except for a few remaining reservations that could hardly substitute for the vast tracts of wilderness that had once nurtured tribes and their way of life.

(As the saying goes, 'history is usually written by the winners.' Ultimately, Europeans, mostly Scandinavians, recorded the enduring written history of the St. Croix valley. Byway travel in the Immigrant Trail District offers another way to understand history, and provides an opportunity to stand on the same rocks, looking across the same rapids at the narrow gorge of a river and imagine what it must have been like for the great Dakota and Ojibwe nations to fight over territory as plentiful and beautiful as what we see today. To understand the rich and complex history of the Dakota and Ojibwe, we must explore further to imagine how the lives of these first inhabitants and early immigrants, respectively, compare with later immigrant histories with which we are more familiar. This brief history of the Dakota and Ojibwe is excerpted from several sources, including the book *Time and the River: A History of the St. Croix*, by Eileen M. McMahon and Theodore J. Karamanski. The complete text of the book is available at stcroixscenicbyway.org/book.shtml on the St. Croix Scenic Byway website). A short history of important events, culture, and traditions of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe is available at www.millelacsojibwe.org/Page_History.aspx on the Mille Lacs Band website.



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