

HO-CHUNK HISTORY



The city of La Crosse occupies land that was once a prairie that was home to a band of Ho-Chunk. This tour explores Ho-Chunk history. Some stops include listening to a Hear, Here story, which you can find by looking for orange street signs (like the one shown here, to the left) and following the instructions.

DAN GREEN AND THE RIVERSIDE

PARK HIAWATHA STATUE

Phone: 1-844-432-7529, Location #1, Story #2

Web: www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/dan-green/

ROBERT "ERNIE" BOSZHARDY AND LOCAL

NATIVE AMERICAN BURIAL GROUNDS

Phone: 1-844-432-7529, Location #6, Story #5

Web: www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/robert-boszhardt/

SPENCE PARK AND FORCED REMOVAL

TOM JONES AND HO-CHUNK

BASKET WEAVING

Phone: 1-844-432-7529, Location #6, Story #6

Web: www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/tom-jones/

TRACY LITTLEJOHN AND

"CONFLUENCE" BY JOHN PUGH

Phone: 1-844-432-7529, Location #1, Story #5

Web: www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/tracy-littlejohn/

VOICES OF LA CROSSE

HISTORY TOURS USING HEAR, HERE STORIES

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Ho-Chunk History: From Ancestral Stewards to Modern Activists

Land Recognition Statement

This tour takes place on the occupied ancestral lands of the Ho-Chunk, who have stewarded this land since time immemorial.

The city of La Crosse occupies land that was once a prairie that was home to a band of Ho-Chunk. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in attempt to forcibly and often violently remove Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands located east of the Mississippi River to occupied territory west of the river. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Federal Government conducted a series of six attempts to forcibly remove local Ho-Chunk by steamboat via the Mississippi River to reservations in Iowa, northern Minnesota, southwest Minnesota, South Dakota, and finally to Nebraska. The historic steamboat landing where this took place is now Spence Park in downtown La Crosse.

However, many of La Crosse's Ho-Chunk found their way back to their homeland here in La Crosse. and eventually the federal and local governments moved on to new strategies to eradicate Indigenous folks and culture from the newly established United States of America. As of 2016, Wisconsin was home to over 8,000 members of the Ho-Chunk Nation, about 230 of whom live in La Crosse County.

Introduction

This tour is part of the Voices of La Crosse History Tours, a collaborative project between the La Crosse Library Archives & Local History Department (LPLA), UW-La Crosse (UWL), and Hear, Here. If you are unfamiliar with these groups, Hear, Here is a project that collects first-person narratives—or stories—that take place in the downtown area. Each of these stories is then made accessible through street signs (like the one pictured right) that list a phone number to call. When you call the number, you can listen to a story that took place in the location where you are standing. The LPLA collects, preserves, and makes accessible local history for the community. Most of the research for these tours was done at the LPLA.



Questions? Contact the Archives & Local History Department

(608) 789-7136

archives@lacrosselibrary.org

The Voices of La Crosse tours explore a variety of larger themes about the local community through personal narratives. The Voices of La Crosse Project was, in part, funded by the UWL Margins of Excellence Fund.

This tour focuses on La Crosse's local Ho-Chunk history. Each Hear, Here story leads into broader local, regional, and national history as contextualization. The four narrators will explore topics such as public art, disrupted burial grounds, parks, and basket weaving. stories explore topics such as Oneota burial grounds, and public art.

It is important to know that much of the written history about the Ho-Chunk has been authored and published by white scholars. Please note that this tour is a working document. We welcome critical feedback to improve the content, information, and language in this tour, especially from Indigenous people.

Stop 1: Robert “Ernie” Boszhardt and First Nations Burial Grounds

Go to: 498 2nd St. N.

Pre-History

Human history in Wisconsin spans about 12,000 years. Because it is unknown what early cultures identified as, one term archaeologists use to describe people from this era is “Woodland people.” Some of the first identified groups in the La Crosse, Wisconsin area are the Mississippian and Oneota cultures. These two cultures were Wisconsin's first farmers. The Mississippian culture was spread over a large area, from Missouri to Illinois to Wisconsin. They are known for large mound-building and an extensive trade system. Their culture existed in Wisconsin for about 600 years until about 1650 C.E. There are two major Mississippian sites, one is Aztalan, which is in between Madison and Milwaukee and another is in Trempealeau, Wisconsin.¹

The culture that was more local to La Crosse are called the Oneota by archaeologists. The Oneota culture came to Wisconsin around 1200 C.E. and by 1650 C.E., had likely joined other tribes in the region. The Oneota lived in large semi-permanent villages of over 100 people along lakes and rivers, where they farmed crops of corn, beans, squash, and tobacco. They harvested wild foods and hunted in the woodlands between settlements.² The Oneota culture is widely recognized through a unique pottery style. The Ho-Chunk claim descent from the Oneota people, with whom they shared a common settlement area around Green Bay.³

LISTEN: Robert “Ernie” Boszhardt’s Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #6, Story #5

Transcript: hearherelacrosse.org/stories/robert-boszhardt

Boszhardt began working as an archaeologist in the La Crosse region in 1982. In his story, he describes some of the locations of known Indigenous or Ho-Chunk settlements and burial grounds. These include a 5,000 to 7,000-year-old burial ground underneath the Oktoberfest Grounds and a much later settlement in downtown La Crosse.

There is a record of the disturbance on Indigenous burial sites. As Boszhardt explained, Ho-Chunk and other cultural sites were historically destroyed by settler colonialists and continue to be disrupted by development. These included places like an Indigenous cemetery at 2nd St. and Jackson that was disturbed in 1885, a Ho-Chunk cemetery at 5th St. S and Mormon Coulee Rd. in 1913, and an Oneota cemetery at Marion Rd. and Nottingham in the 1970s.⁴

Stop 2: Dan Green and the Hiawatha Statue of Riverside Park

Go to: 410 East Veterans Memorial Dr., in Riverside Park

The Shaping of American First Nations Stereotypes

When Europeans began their exploration of what would become the Americas, they encountered Indigenous peoples and cultures for the first time. Because they wanted to make a profit and eventually settle the land, the Catholic Pope in Rome granted permission to colonize non-Christian lands even if they were already inhabited. This was part of a concept called the Doctrine of Discovery. To reinforce the idea of European superiority, explorers and settlers drew and wrote about Indigenous peoples in their journals and records, focusing on their differences and inferiority to Europeans. As time went on, these ideas fueled another key concept of colonization and settlement: Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was an ideology that Europeans and Euro-Americans were destined by God to claim land west of the first thirteen states, land that had originally been put aside as “Indian Territory.”

The details that the explorers focused on in their records would later lead to further misinformation about First Nations in the newly named “Americas.” As time went on, the misrepresentations solidified into stereotypes that include ideas such as:

- the *primitive* or *savage Native*

- *Natives are an extension of the land*
- *Natives are a never-changing or dying culture*
- *Native women are hypersexual*

These stereotypes have survived through today in branding, media, and sports team names and mascots. The images seen in these cases condense the many diverse and unique Indigenous cultures that exist into a singular “Indian” form through the use of red skin, headdresses, moccasins, buckskin pants, feathers, peace pipe, *the crying Native*, etc.

The Ho-Chunk had a settlement near the mouth of the La Crosse River. They were lead by members of the Decorah family. Their oral history places the origin of their group on the Red Banks of Green Bay, WI. Ho-Chunk land stretched nearly 10 million acres from the Mississippi to Rock River.⁵ They relied heavily on subsistence agriculture, but also hunted and fished around and in the nearby lakes and rivers.⁶

The “Hiawatha” Statue

The “Hiawatha” statue has also been called the “Colossus of Kitsch” and the “Big Indian.” The statue originated from a desire by the Chamber of Commerce to create a landmark of a nationally-known figure to draw tourists to the downtown. Some La Crosse citizens wanted the statue to be named after a local Indigenous person, such as Decorah or Winnesheik, but the Chamber ultimately decided on the name “Hiawatha,” because it resonated with tourists who would have known of the poem “Song of Hiawatha” by Henry Longfellow and Disney’s cartoon series “Little Hiawatha.”

La Crosse resident and area art teacher Anthony Zimmerhagl created and designed the “Hiawatha” statue. It was mounted at its current location in October of 1961. Zimmerhagl was commissioned to build the statue by the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce in the 1950s.⁷ During its creation, he maintained that his statue was meant to be “in the likeness of” Aionwatha, who is more commonly known as Hiawatha. Aionwatha is credited for organizing the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which is “one of the first and longest lasting participatory democracies in the world.”⁸

The statue has proved divisive in La Crosse, there are those who support it and want it to remain standing in Riverside Park and those who would prefer that it be retired. Individuals who support the statue explain it was not intended to be offensive and was for the genuine purpose of promoting the heritage of La Crosse prior to European settlement. These supporters also point to the historical value of the “Hiawatha” statue as it has stood in Riverside Park for over 50 years.⁹

However, others, like local Ho-Chunk community member Dan Green, argue that the statue does not represent the Ho-Chunk. For one, some local Ho-Chunk activists contend that the statue has nothing to do with the La Crosse area and should, therefore, be retired. It is also argued that the statue does not represent modern day Ho-Chunk community members, and is rather a statue featuring the harmful stereotypes that arose with colonization in the Americas.

LISTEN: Dan Green's Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #1, Story #2

Transcript (and audio): hearherelacrosse.org/stories/dan-green

NOTE: Dan's story is only available thru phone lines on Tu., Thu., Sat., but is accessible on the website at all times.

Dan Green is a local activist and professor at the UW-La Crosse, where he teaches in the Ethnic and Racial Studies Department. He studies First Nations imagery and became an activist against the statue in the 1990s. Green has participated in protests locally and nationally to eliminate First Nations mascots and logos.

Stop 3: Spence Park and Forced Removal

Go to: corner of State & Front Streets

Impacts of European Immigration and Colonization

The Ho-Chunk first made contact with Europeans in 1634 when they met French explorer, Jean Nicolet in the Green Bay area. As Europeans and Euro-Americans emigrated to the newly conquered American territory, they pushed Native Americans out of their eastern ancestral lands making them refugees to territory in what is known by settlers as the Midwest and West. However, the only place for Indigenous refugees to go was land that was already the home of other Native American tribes. This led to inter-tribal warfare for the next two hundred years, warfare which the Ho-Chunk were not spared from.

In the late 1700s, the United States of America was established as a country and the Federal Government enacted policies that upheld ideas based on the Doctrine of Discovery. These policies included:

- *forced removal from ancestral land*
- *hunting and fishing restrictions*
- *the formation of reservations*
- *purposeful food restriction and starvation to pressure the signing of treaties*
- *the creation of boarding schools*

There were many other practices that governmental agencies used to attempt to eradicate America's Indigenous populations in the newly formed countries. For the Ho-Chunk, there are stories like the U.S. Federal Government sending food and relief in crates, only for the food to be completely spoiled by the time it was delivered. These were crates that sat on the decks of steamboats for weeks or months before arriving to their destination.¹⁰

Exact numbers for the Ho-Chunk before European intervention do not exist but their population has been estimated to be anywhere between 4,000 and 10,000. After Euro-American colonization, it dropped to 600 or 700. This devastating population decline, which is considered to be a genocide by some and an ethnic cleansing by others, forced the Ho-Chunk to change their lifestyle. They began living in smaller settlements and intermarried with other tribes as a means of survival and resilience. They also began to rely more heavily on fur trapping and hunting, while also continuing to do some farming.¹¹

After the War of 1812, a series of unfavorable treaties were brought to the Ho-Chunk by the Federal Government in an attempt to move them off their land. The Ho-Chunk were moved multiple times by the government in a pattern of forced removal of First Nations across the U.S. They were moved to:

- *Iowa (1830, 1840)*
- *Northern Minnesota (1846, 1848)*
- *Southern Minnesota (1855)*
- *South Dakota (1862-63)*
- *Nebraska (1863-1865, 1873)*¹²

The historic steamboat landing where these removals took place was here, in Spence Park, before Riverside Park was dredged. These removals are discussed in primary sources like "Recollections of a Pioneer Steamboat Pilot" and a secondary source that was written in the 1930s that is called *Indians and the Steamboats on the Upper Mississippi*.

In 1865, a reservation was created just north of Omaha, Nebraska. Though many were willing to stay here, others still wanted to return to their homeland in western Wisconsin. The tribe split into two, some remaining on what became Winnebago Reservation of Nebraska and some returning to Wisconsin. There were times when reservations were guarded by the U.S. Army, yet many escaped.¹³ This group formed the Wisconsin Winnebago Tribe.

Stop 4: Tom Jones and Ho-Chunk Basket Weaving

Go to: 324 Main Street

Aftermath of Forced Removal

In 1862, the Federal Government passed the Indian Homestead Act, allowing Native Americans to purchase 40-acre farms.¹⁴ The Ho-Chunk began buying back as much of their land as they could. In 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, which granted citizenship to any Native American born in the United States. Ten years later, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 was passed, which reversed one of the forced assimilation policies and allowed tribes to create governments and sovereign rights.

However, after the forced removal did not work for many of Wisconsin's Ho-Chunk, federal and local governments created new strategies to eradicate Indigenous peoples and cultures. One strategy was carried out by missionaries, who opened boarding schools across the U.S. The goal of these schools was to educate Native Americans in Euro-American and Christian culture with the purpose of erasing their own diverse cultures and identities. Children were punished for speaking their native language and enacting their traditional culture.¹⁵ The focus in these schools was "de-indianization," which would forcibly break familial and tribal ties.¹⁶ Children were taken from their parents and put in boarding schools from the mid-1800s to the 1930s, when the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs changed its policy of assimilation.¹⁷

The early 1900s saw the Ho-Chunk continue to struggle with low economic stability, disease, and weak government support. At this time, many were migrant workers.¹⁸ Some would go on to fight for the U.S. in WWI and WWII. By the 1950s, there was pressure from politicians to remove federal support for Native American tribes. The mid-1900s included a period of reconstruction of the Ho-Chunk as they dealt with an uninterested U.S. government and public. To support their families, some Ho-Chunk women began to use their skills as basketweavers. A small group of women sold their baskets in downtown La Crosse, at the corner of 4th and Main Streets for many years.

LISTEN: Tom Jones' Hear, Here Story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location Location #6, Story #6

Transcript: hearherelacrosse.org/stories/tom-jones

Tom Jones is a professor at the UW-Madison and a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation. He is a scholar of

art and studies the history of basket weaving to keep the skill documented in Ho-Chunk culture.

In his story, Jones describes Doerflinger's Department Store, which was located where the Duluth Trading Company is on the southeast corner of 4th Street and Main Street.¹⁹ Doerflinger's opened in 1903 and became a downtown staple as the largest retail store for the next 75 years. This corner was one of the busiest in downtown. Across the street was a variety of shops, including a popular pharmacy. On the northwest side of the intersection just down the street was the Rivoli Theater, which was used to attract people to spend a whole afternoon in downtown along with their shopping. This is likely one reason why Ho-Chunk women picked this corner to sell their baskets; they drew in tourists who would frequent the corner for the La Crosse experience.

Stop 5: Tracy Littlejohn and "Confluence" by John Pugh

Go to: 119 King Street

Contemporary Representation

In 2013, the City Arts Board commissioned an artist names James Pugh to paint a mural that celebrated the La Crosse community on the side of the Pump House. Pugh is an internationally-known artist who largely creates works in a style known as Trompe-l'oeil, which is a form of mural that appears as if the realistic images are three dimensional. Pugh has created many murals in this style all over the U.S. and worldwide.²⁰ He uses his murals to depict a story, by creating multiple layers of historical, social, and cultural ideas. The mural was created "to celebrate the role of La Crosse as a sacred place."²¹ It has been viewed as an important artistic interpretation because it works to represent the Ho-Chunk people as modern citizens, using their real images.

LISTEN: Tracy Littlejohn's Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #1, Story #5

Transcript: hearherelacrosse.org/stories/tracy-littlejohn

Littlejohn's grandfather was a code talker during the Second World War. These military units consisted of members of America's First Nations using their native languages to code messages. The most famous of these units was the Navajo code talkers, but they were not the only First Nations unit. This portion of the military was instrumental to the Allied success in the war and was largely unknown until files were declassified in the 1960s.

Conclusion

In 1993, the Wisconsin Winnebago Tribe changed their name to the Ho-Chunk Nation. Today, the Ho-Chunk Nation and the Winnebago Reservation of Nebraska are federally recognized as two separate sovereign nations and peoples. In recent years, the Ho-Chunk Nation has begun to focus on language and renewal of traditions for their future generations and is the largest employer in Sauk and Jackson counties. As of 2016, their population sits at about 8,000 citizens, who live in 14 different Wisconsin counties.²² La Crosse County is home to about 230 members of the Ho-Chunk Nation.

Endnotes

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2. "Early Cultures pdf," 32-41.
3. "Ancient Land and First Peoples," Wisconsin Historical Society, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS3584>.
4. Robert "Ernie" Boszhardt, "Native American Cemeteries" Local History, La Crosse Public Library Archives, <http://archives.lacrosselibrary.org/local-history/cemeteries/native-american-cemeteries/>.
5. "Ho-Chunk Nation," Wisconsin First Nations: American Indian Studies in Wisconsin, <https://wisconsinfirstnations.org/ho-chunk-nation/>.
6. "Ho-Chunk Culture," Indian Country, Milwaukee Public Museum, <http://www.mpm.edu/content/wirp/ICW-52.html>.
7. "Statue of Indian May be Erected in Park," La Crosse Tribune, 3 June 1958, in clipping file La Crosse -- Parks -- Riverside Park #3, La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, Wisconsin.; "Work Completed on Statue of Indian," La Crosse Tribune, 24 August 1961, in clipping file La Crosse -- Parks -- Riverside Park #3, La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, Wisconsin.
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9. Hiawatha No Native: Koch Objects to Idea for Riverside Statue," La Crosse Tribune, 29 June 1958, 1–3.; Mal Meyer, "Historic Hiawatha Statue Causes Controversy," WKBT News 8, 9 December 2017, www.news8000.com/news/historic-hiawatha-statue-causes-controversy/669925215.; Sam Shilts, "Controversy Renews over Hiawatha Statue," WXOW News 19, 8 December 2017, www.wxow.com/story/37029239/2017/12/Friday/controversy-renews-over-hiawatha-statue.
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11. "Ho-Chunk Culture," Milwaukee Public Museum.
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13. Diedrich, Ho-Chunk Chiefs, 130-131.
14. "Ho-Chunk Nation," Wisconsin First Nations.
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