Central North Dakota is rich in archaeological remains of prehistoric and historic villages occupied by peoples known today as the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras. Most of these sites were communities where people lived from the AD 1200s until the 1800s. Populations numbered between 300 to 2,000 or more people depending on the village and period in time.

Together, these villages chronicle the history of the tremendously 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. Prehistoric village sites along the Missouri River number in the hundreds. On their infamous journey, Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1804-1805 near the last five independent Mandan and Hidatsa settlements at the Knife River, and the ruins of several older Mandan villages near the Heart River. Several of these significant sites are now preserved on state or federal land and are open to public visitation. We encourage you to use this guide as you travel along your historic journey.

Highways to Prehistory

Central North Dakota is rich in archaeological remains of prehistoric and historic villages occupied by peoples known today as the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras. Most of these sites were communities where people lived from the AD 1200s until the 1800s. Populations numbered between 300 to 2,000 or more people depending on the village and period in time.

Together, these villages chronicle the history of the tremendously 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. Prehistoric village sites along the Missouri River number in the hundreds. On their infamous journey, Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1804-1805 near the last five independent Mandan and Hidatsa settlements at the Knife River, and the ruins of several older Mandan villages near the Heart River. Several of these significant sites are now preserved on state or federal land and are open to public visitation. We encourage you to use this guide as you travel along your historic journey.

To travel the Highways to Prehistory, two routes are suggested, the Northern Tour and the Southern Tour. 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.

For the Northern Tour, from Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village proceed to Double Ditch Indian Village, then Fort Clark, and finally to Knife River Indian Villages. For variety and a beautiful view of the last unflooded segment of the Missouri River valley, you may return to the Bismarck/Mandan area by way of Highway 1806 that passes through Cross Ranch Nature Preserve on the west side of the river. This tour can easily take a full day, or two if you wish to hike at Cross Ranch.

For the Southern Tour, after leaving Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village take I-94 to Mandan (exit 155), go south on Highway 1806 (6th Ave NE) within the city of Mandan, and visit Huff Indian Village, farther south. Plan on at least a half-day to see these two sites, and longer if you wish to visit the cavalry and infantry posts at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park.

Northern Tour
- Menoken to Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village
- Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village to Double Ditch
- Double Ditch to Fort Clark
- Fort Clark to Knife River Indian Villages
- Knife River Indian Villages to Cross Ranch Nature Preserve
- Cross Ranch Nature Preserve to I-94/Mandan

Southern Tour
- Menoken to Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village
- Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village to On-A-Slant Village
- On-A-Slant Village to Huff Indian Village

TIMELINE OF EVENTS AND SITE OCCUPATION SINCE AD 1100

1100 1200 1300 1400 1500 1600 1700 1800 1900 2000

Plains Woodland, Nonfarming Lifeway

Earliest Plains Village Settlements

Mandan Villages

Hidatsa Villages at Knife River

Fort Berthold Reservation, Three Affiliated Tribes

Legend

- Menoken Indian Village
- Chief Looking’s (Ward) Village
- Double Ditch Indian Village
- Fort Clark
- Knife River Indian Villages
- Cross Ranch Preserve
- On-A-Slant Village
- Huff Indian Village
Menoken Indian Village State Historic Site

This small settlement is tucked away on a bluff overlooking an abandoned meander of the Missouri River. The most prominent feature at the site is a fortification ditch that encloses a small group of lodge depressions. The ditch forms a highly regular arc around a center point at one corner of the village, and has four prominent bastions along its arc. Oval-shaped lodges occur in the village, and we know from recent study that many lodges burned at the time of abandonment. Once thought to have been the site where the French explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de la Verendrye, first made contact with the “Mandanis” in December 1737, Menoken Village is now known to date in the AD 1200s. Menoken is one of the oldest fortified sites in the region. Research has revealed important details about the origins of the Plains Village lifeway in the Missouri Valley.

Access—The site is directly off I-94, 11 miles east of Bismarck. At Exit 157, go north (right) on ND Hwy 1806 for 2.9 miles. Then turn right (east) on the frontage road (30th Ave NE); go one mile, then turn left (north) on 171 St NE; proceed 0.1 mile and turn right (east) at the sign for Menoken. Vehicular access is by car to a gravel interpretive trail. Portions of the site may be closed at times. Site hours are year-round. Visitors to this site will find the view magnificent and the sense of history profound.

Aerial photo of Menoken Indian Village State Historic Site

Double Ditch Village is probably the most spectacular archaeological site in the Northern Plains. The site sits on a high terrace overlooking the Missouri River, with a commanding view downstream toward the mouth of the Heart River and upstream to Squaws Buttes, a feature that marked the traditional boundary between Mandan and Hidatsa territory. This settlement covers about 22 acres. Vast refuse piles, some standing more than ten feet in height, attest to a very long period of occupation. It is estimated that this settlement was occupied continuously for nearly 300 years. At its peak, perhaps 2,000 people lived here. The well-preserved fortification ditches and recent evidence for two more attest to the fate of this thriving community, which shrank dramatically as diseases of European origin and assaults from enemies devastated its population. Double Ditch Village lay in ruins when Lewis and Clark passed this point in 1804 and 1806; making grim notation in their map that the village had been "killed by the Sioux." 

Access – From Chief Looking’s (Ward) 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 Hwy 1804 for 3.9 miles; Double Ditch is on the west (left) side of this highway.

On-Site Interpretation—Signs are in place. The site is open to the public and the year-round. Visitors to this site will find the view magnificent and the sense of history profound.

A reconstructed earthlodge at Knife River Indian Villages

Double Ditch Village State Historic Site

Here, is the location of one of the most significant historic locations in 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 Maximilian, known to us as Fort Clark Village, at this location in the early 1820s. They lived there until decimated by smallpox in 1837. The abandoned Mandan village was taken over by the Hidatsas in 1838 by the Nez Perce, who lived here until 1861. Fort Clark Trading Post, one of several important Upper Missouri trade centers, was built near the Mandan village by 1830 and was on the main road west from St. Louis to the Rockies. At the beginning of the Civil War, portions of a fortification system, trails, and the foundations and outlines of structures and enclosures that were part of each trading post. For many of the lodges, remains of the entryways are visible on the ground. Like many earthlodge villages and historic sites, this location should be respected as a cemetery, containing the remains of hundreds of people who lived and died there.

Access – From Double Ditch turn north (left) on ND Hwy 1804 for 22.9 miles. At ND Highway 83 turn left; Washburn is 7.1 miles from this point. Turn left on ND Hwy 1800; proceed west for 14 miles. Turn right (north) onto ND Hwy 1806. At ND Hwy 1806 turn right (north) onto Fort Clark is one mile north. On-Site Interpretation—Interpretation includes signs with information from past and recent excavations. The site is open to the public year-round.

Double Ditch Village State Historic Site

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site

This 1,700-acre archaeological park is managed by the National Park Service. Congress created this historic site in 1974 for the purpose of preserving and interpreting the rich archaeological remains at the mouth of the Knife River. Three historically significant settlements established by ancestors of modern Hidatsa people 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 a period of 250 years. The Hidatsas abandoned Lower Hidatsa Village, and eventually resettled at nearby Sakakawea Village around 1795, living there in about 40 lodges until it was sacked by the Sioux. In 1834, Big Hidatsa Village was established by the “People of the Willows” around AD 1600, when this subgroup of the Hidatsa moved upriver after living for a time with the Mandans at the Heart River. Hidatsa Village (Burke County) was the largest settlement in the park, with visible remains of 113 earthlodges, as well as trails and mysterious linear ridges that emanate like spokes from the village. Lewis and Clark visited Sakakawea and Big Hidatsa villages in 1804-1806 as did George Catlin, Prince Maximilian, and Karl Bodmer nearly 30 years later.

Access – From Fort Clark, return to 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.

Cross Ranch Nature Preserve and State Park

The Nature Conservancy maintains a 6,000-acre nature preserve at the confluence of the Knife and Missouri Rivers. The preserve has more than 100 recorded archaeological sites, including several major villages, bison kill and processing areas, linear mounds, camps, effigies, and camp sites up to 6,000 years old. Archaeological studies have been published for several sites on the preserve.

Access – From Knife River Indian Villages return to ND Hwy 200. Turn left on ND Hwy 200 for 7.5 miles; then turn right (north) on ND Hwy 1806. The Nature Conservancy and Cross Ranch State Park are approximately 2.5 miles north. On-Site Interpretation—Year-round, the preserve offers activities such as day hiking and cross-country skiing. Preserve pamphlets and natural trail brochures are available at the visitor center, where there are restrooms, picnic facilities, and interpretive materials. The visitor center is open year-round.

Cross Ranch Nature Preserve and State Park

Huff Indian Village State Historic Site

This is a prehistoric Mandan settlement dating to about AD 1450, perhaps the last before Euroamericans arrived in the Missouri Valley area. The village is a very large, well-planned community where perhaps 1,000 or more people lived. The site is protected, the condition, and the community layout is easily seen on the surface. Depressions marking the locations of more than 100 lodges are arranged roughly in rows, paralleling the river into recontoured river banks. It is estimated that the village had 2,000 people living about in the depressions on the large. A cavernous natural cave faces an open plaza near the center of the settlement. The entire setting is similar to Anasazi homes. The earthlodge village was consisting of a ditch more than 2,000 feet long with 10 well defined basins. Huff Village was probably occupied for a short time before abandonment. The village was occupied by the clan of the village plan and lack of evidence for rebuilding and trash accumulation. In this regard, it contrasts strongly with settlements such as Double Ditch Village.

Access – Leaving Fort Abraham Lincoln turn left (south) on ND Hwy 1806. Proceed south for 15.3 miles. The site is on the east side of the highway just south of the town of Huff. On-Site Interpretation—Interpretation includes signs with information about the site from excavations. The site is open to the public year-round.