

Meskwaki Nation



From the Meskwaki Education NetWork Initiative located at <http://www.menwi.org/meskwaki-nation.html>

The Meskwaki were created from the red earth by the Elder Brother. Indigenous to the St. Lawrence Seaway region of the Western Great Lakes, the Meskwaki speak a dialect of the same Algonquian language spoken by their cultural neighbors the Sauk and Kickapoo. Their first encounter with Europeans occurred in the mid 17th century, while residing in the Green Bay area of Wisconsin. A group of Meskwaki came in contact with French explorers, who ascribed to them the name 'les renards', what the English translated as "the Foxes." Although this is the name by which the Meskwaki were most commonly known throughout the post contact period, the Meskwaki have, however, always identified themselves as Meskwahkihaki, or simply Meskwaki - 'people of the red earth.'

Though the fierce independence and resistance to outside encroachment exhibited by the Meskwaki was unlike other peoples the French had encountered in the region, the Meskwaki were nevertheless quick to recognize the advantages of European technologies, establishing trade relations around 1665. Although the Meskwaki occasionally settled near trading posts and military garrisons, they were resistant to missionaries and adamantly opposed to French attempts at limiting intertribal warfare and establishing fur and firearm trade relations with their enemies. In an effort to regulate trade, the Meskwaki requested that the French pay tolls for passage along those river sections they controlled.

Resistant to Meskwaki tolls and persistent in their attempts to trade with Meskwaki enemies, the French eventually raised their ire. As distrust emerged between the two parties, the Meskwaki worked to block French trade routes, resulting in a series of battles between 1710 and 1742, commonly referred to as the "Fox Wars."¹ Indeed, the Meskwaki were so effective that in 1728, the French declared a state of war to exact extermination of the Meskwaki, believed to be the only edict of its kind in the history of European and American Indian relations. In May 1712, during a battle with the French,



Pemoussa, a Meskwaki war chief, shouted a defiant warning to his enemy, stating that the Meskwaki were “immortal”, that no matter how great the odds, the Meskwaki would ultimately prevail. **2**

Fleeing from French organized assaults, in 1733 the Meskwaki sought refuge among the Sauk in what is now the state of Wisconsin. Under increasing pressure, the two eventually relocated south through Illinois and into Iowa. Although the two groups share historical affiliation, language, and aspects of cultural heritage, they have always maintained separate political and geographic identities. Upon relocation, the Meskwaki occupied smaller settlements in Iowa along the eastern side of the Mississippi River, while the Sauk occupied the area at the confluence of the Mississippi and Rock Rivers. Regardless of their distinction, terminology established by the United States government during 1804 negotiations mistreated them as a political unit, the “united Sac & Fox tribe.”**3**

Hobbled by a lack of tribal leadership, in the spring of 1846 repercussions from the so called Black Hawk War of 1832, increasing encroachment from Euro-American settlers, as well as the treaties of 1837, 1842, and concomitant land cessions resulted in the joint relocations of the Meskwaki and Sauk to a reservation in northeastern Kansas. Located near the headwaters of the Osage River, the sparse flora and fauna of the sandy prairie residence laid in stark contrast to the rolling temperate woodlands and black loam of east central Iowa. Reluctant to leave, a number of Meskwaki refused to relocate and took refuge along the Cedar River near the site of the present Amana Colonies. **4** The Meskwaki who followed their temporary leader, Chief Poweshiek, to Kansas grew to despise their new home. Suffering from epidemics, lack of subsistence, and intertribal conflicts, many grew wary of further removal south to Indian Territory, what is now Oklahoma. After only two years in Kansas, and under increasing pressure from discontent, Chief Poweshiek relinquished chieftainship to the nation’s hereditary successor, Mamenwaneke, who was by then deemed old enough to assume the position. **5**

1. see Edmunds, R. David and Peyser, Joseph L. 1993. The Fox War: The Mesquaukie Challenge to New France. Norman:

- University of Oklahoma Press, 1993; Richard White. 1991. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region. 1600-1815.* New York: Cambridge University Press; 149-175.
2. Edmunds and Peyser 1993: 70.
 3. Green, Michael D. 1983. "We Dance in Opposite Directions": Mesquakie (Fox) Separatism From the Sac & Fox Tribe. *Ethnohistory* 30(3):129-140; 130.
 4. Waseskuk, Bertha. 2000 (1966). *Mesquakie History – As We Know It.* In *The Two Worlds Between Two Rivers: Perspectives on American Indians in Iowa. An Expanded Edition.* Gretchen M. Batalie, David Mayer Gradwohl, and Charles L.P. Silet (editors). Pp. 60-68. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press (Originally published in ditto form in the official program for the 51st Anniversary Mesquakie Indian Powwow, August 1966_; 68
 5. Waseskuk 2000:65.

