

Creation/Origin Stories

Because a culture's creation story is such an essential part of understanding how they understand themselves, this lesson starts with how the Neshnabé, or Original Man, came to be and some of the teachings he received.

After this orientation, students will learn about how the Potawatomi, once part of a larger tribe called the Anishinaabe, moved to the Great Lakes region to find the prophesized food that grows on water.

One of the goals of this series of lessons is to help students think through how different Nations have different relationships to the land, and that those relationships have varied over time as the Nation has moved from place to place, whether because they chose to move or because of forced removal. Starting at the beginning, this lesson introduces some of the ways that Bodéwami are oriented towards the world.¹

Students and teachers should be mindful that Bodéwadmi traditions have primarily been handed down orally. Because of this, as well as the context of settler colonialism attempting to erase indigenous histories and cultures, students and educators may have interacted with different Potawatomi creation stories or may encounter them in the future. It is important to remember they are just different stories, not incorrect.

Review before lesson:

- potawatomisheritage.com/360-virtual-tour
(lesson focuses on the first gallery and the first part of the second)
- youtube.com/watch?v=em6-F7DFasM
- youtube.com/watch?v=MriSxRI4YMU

Preparation: Building Connection to Curriculum

Connection to Students and Previous Lessons:

Previous lessons and connections could be a discussion of what creation stories students may already be familiar with, or on whether students have had to move before.

Guiding Questions for the teacher:

- What will the students ponder?
- What will guide the lesson?
- What do the students already know?
- What are some of their misconceptions?
- What will students be able to discuss without Googling it?
- What is the relevance to the students and the teacher?
- What stories does this lesson tell?

¹Potawatomi is the anglicized version of Bodéwadmi, and both are used interchangeably throughout the lesson. Like with a lot of the language, alternate spellings students may come across are not necessarily incorrect, just different.

Introductory Activities to Engage Students

These three videos tell part of the creation story:

- youtu.be/jM2VBjDAK14
- youtu.be/TR_Y0n9zmd4
- youtu.be/uFcjLeI_sRw
- Vocab sheet/pronunciation guide

Students should watch these 3 videos and use the associated vocabulary handout to help them understand the stories. Potential discussion questions: why is it important that these words are in Potawatomi? What questions do you still have about the videos? Do you see any similarities between this and other creation stories you may know?

Applied/Extended Experience-Building Real World Connections

Ask students to read through Seven Fires handout, focusing on the first Three Fires.

As they read, they should find the places mentioned on google maps so they can see the path Potawatomi took to find their homeland where the food grows on water.

If time allows, students should take the virtual tour potawatomiheritage.com/360-virtual-tour



KEDWNEN

VOCABULARY

Click on the Potawatomi words to view the dictionary entry and hear the pronunciations.

Mamogosnan	Creator
Segmekwé	Mother Earth
Wéch ksenyek	North
Wéch gshaté	South
Wéch mokek	East
Wéch bgeshmok	West
Ke	Earth
Mbish	Water
Noden	Wind
Shkodé	Fire
Nokmes	Grandmother
Dbekgises	(Grandmother) Moon
Gises	(Grandfather) Sun
Neshnabé	Original Man
Mnokme	Spring
Niben	Summer
Dgwaget	Fall
Bbon	Winter
Mo'ewé	Wolf
Séma	Tobacco



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SEVEN FIRES

The prophecy of the Seven Fires is memorialized in the Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center. This prophecy and other Potawatomi history can be explored in the virtual tour of the Cultural Heritage Center. [Click here](#)

1st Fire

The journey begins – leaving our coastal home:

Responding to the prophecy, the Neshnabék¹ began a mass migration to the west. Guided by the sacred Megis shell of the Midewewin Lodge, the people gathered at a promised turtle-shaped island (Moniyak) near present day Montreal.

The Neshnabék continued their journey, following the Megis to a resting place at Kche Nisajewen (Niagra Falls). It was here that three related but distinct groups formed, the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Bodewadmi. Joined through heritage and spirituality, each group served the Neshnabék as a whole.

2nd Fire

The Megis is lost – a young boy leads the way:

The Second Fire was realized at the (present day) Detroit River. The people continued west and camped between Lake Erie and Lake Huron, but the Megis was lost. Struggling to locate the correct path, the Neshnabék again settled and increased. As numbers grew, spiritualism and the teachings of the Midewewin became secondary to survival.

As predicted, a boy was born who led the Neshnabék to the spiritual and physical stepping stones to the future. Continuing north along Lake Huron, the Neshnabék discovered a chain of islands. On Manitoulin Island our people rested. Here the Midewewin Lodge resumed its strength.

3rd Fire

Seeking the western path – A land where food grows on water:

Energized from their cultural and spiritual revival, the Neshnabék were again led by the sacred Megis to their next stop at Senajwen (Sault St. Marie). Mamogosan (Creator) provided an abundance of food and the people flourished.

The Neshnabék finally continued their journey west. At the shore of Lake Superior they separated, one group went north around the water and the other south. Years later, the two groups met at the western end of the lake. The sacred shell rose from the waters at the sixth stop, Spirit Island. They had found the food that grows on water, menomen (wild rice).

Realizing that their migration was concluding, the Neshnabék sought out the promised turtle-shaped island that would signify their journey's end. Remembering a place nearby, the people returned to an island (Madeline Island) off the coast. Our spiritualists placed tobacco on its shores and the Megis again rose from the water – proclaiming the peoples coveted destination.

¹As a language that was primarily oral until contact with settlers, Potawatomi has many different spelling variations in written works. An astute student may notice these, and variations are just different, not incorrect.

4th Fire

Two Prophets, two paths – Europeans: Friend or Foe?

Two prophets arrived together, predicting the coming of the light-skinned race as either friends or foes. These strangers could bring marvels and friendship, or they could rain death and destruction on everything they touched. This, then, was at the center of all the prophecies. It was the great turning point predicted for our future.

Contact with the light-skinned race occurred at different times for the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi. The Potawatomi met the French in 1634, at present day Green Bay, Wisconsin. French traders offered new, valuable trade goods. As missionaries and soldiers followed, a powerful alliance formed between our nations

However, North American control fell to Britain and later to the Americans. The Fourth Fire came to light. Neshnabék and other Native nations were being displaced by white settlements, creating tension and war. Land disputes led to the American treaty era – the acculturation of Native America that ignited the Fifth Fire.

5th Fire

The path to salvation – near destruction of the people:

The Fifth Fire is interpreted as the acculturation of our people, resulting from the swift colonization of the Great Lakes region. Reliance on foreign trade goods created internal conflict among the Potawatomi and other Neshnabék groups. Traditional social and spiritual ideals were fractured. The instability led to regional and generational warfare that the United States exploited to execute peace treaties and land cessions.

6th Fire

Generations divided – the elders weep:

Introduced as a means to speed up assimilation, religious and government leaders enticed Native people to enroll their children in boarding schools. Whether enrolled by choice or by force, children were stripped of their Native identities, critically affecting Native languages, cultures, and spirituality for future generations.

7th Fire

A new people emerge – rekindling the sacred fire:

The seventh prophet that came to the people long ago was said to be different from the other prophets. He was young and had a strange light in his eyes.

Today we believe we are in the Seventh Fire, a revival of traditional culture, language, and teachings passed down to us by our elders. To honor those who have come before and fulfill this prophecy, we must embrace the knowledge, experience, and mutual past of our Neshnabék kinsmen. Through us our heritage lives on.



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