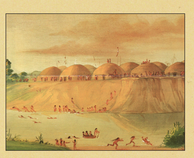
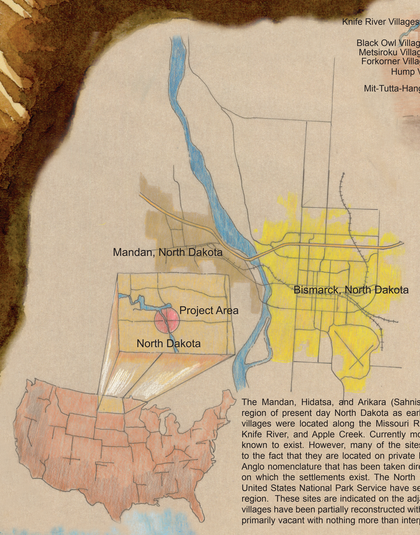
Reconnecting the Tribes of the Upper Missouri

Native American tribes settled throughout the Central Plains of North America more than eight centuries ago. Hundreds of villages and settlements have been lost over time due to pressures from Euro-American settlers, diseases, and migration to reservation lands. Several distinct Native American groups existed in what is now North Dakota. These groups include the Lakota, Dakota, Assiniboine, Cheyenne, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (Sahnish). Each of the tribes embodies a unique culture and way of life. Many of the groups were nomadic peoples following the massive bison herds across the prairie. Other tribes such as the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara were primarily sedentary people that depended on an agricultural lifestyle raising corn, beans, squash, and tobacco. The nomadic tribes came to rely on the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara for food and occasionally shelter during harsh winters. An extensive trade network developed among Canadian fur traders and the Native People with the Mandans being at the center of much of the trade activity. The trade network also brought hardships to the tribes of the Central Dakota Plains. Several smallpox epidemics decimated entire villages and thousands of Native People that were unable to cope with the new diseases brought upon them by the white man. Over the years as the number of surviving tribal members dwindled. The Mandan and Hidatsa banded together in the late 18th Century, intermarried, and began to form a new culture together at Like-A-Fishhook Village near present day Washburn, North Dakota. The Arikara tribes also faced extreme devastation from smallpox outbreaks. Records indicate in the late summer of 1862 following two successive crop failures and years of harsh times the surviving members of the Arikara joined the Mandans and Hidatsa at Like-A-Fishhook Village.

Much of what is known today about the Native Americans has been taken from journals written by explorers like Pierre Gaultier de Varrennes, sieur de la La Verendrye, who first visited the Mandan Native American tribe near the Menoken Village in the fall of 1738. Likewise the journals of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and other members of the Corps of Discovery written during their journey through the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase between the years of 1804 and 1806. Maximillian, Prince of Weid-Neuwied, a German explorer visited several tribes along the Missouri River from 1832 to 1834 with Karl Bodmer, a Swiss-born artist. Bodmer was able to capture the intimate details of the social organization, lifestyle, and nuances of the people and places he visited. Another artist, George Catlin, also ventured into Native American territory in 1832 with the help of fur traders he was able to fearlessly enter villages and spend a great deal of time learning about the cultures and way of life unique to the Native People. Catlin's journals and paintings offer a first-hand account of never-before-seen ceremonies performed by the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes.



These images are examples of the watercolor paintings done by Karl Bodmer and George Catlin during their visits to the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes in the 1830's.
Images taken from People of the First Man, D. Thomas 1975



The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (Sahnish) tribes settled throughout the central region of present day North Dakota as early as the 13th century AD. Many of the villages were located along the Missouri River and its tributaries, the Heart River, Knife River, and Apple Creek. Currently more than twenty village site remains are known to exist. However, many of the sites are restricted from public access due to the fact that they are located on private land. In fact, many of the villages carry Anglo nomenclature that has been taken directly from the private land owner's name on which the settlements exist. The North Dakota State Historical Society and the United States National Park Service have secured seven village sites throughout the region. These sites are indicated on the adjacent map with a red circle. Some of the villages have been partially reconstructed with replica earth lodges while others remain primarily vacant with nothing more than interpretive panels and a gravel walking path.

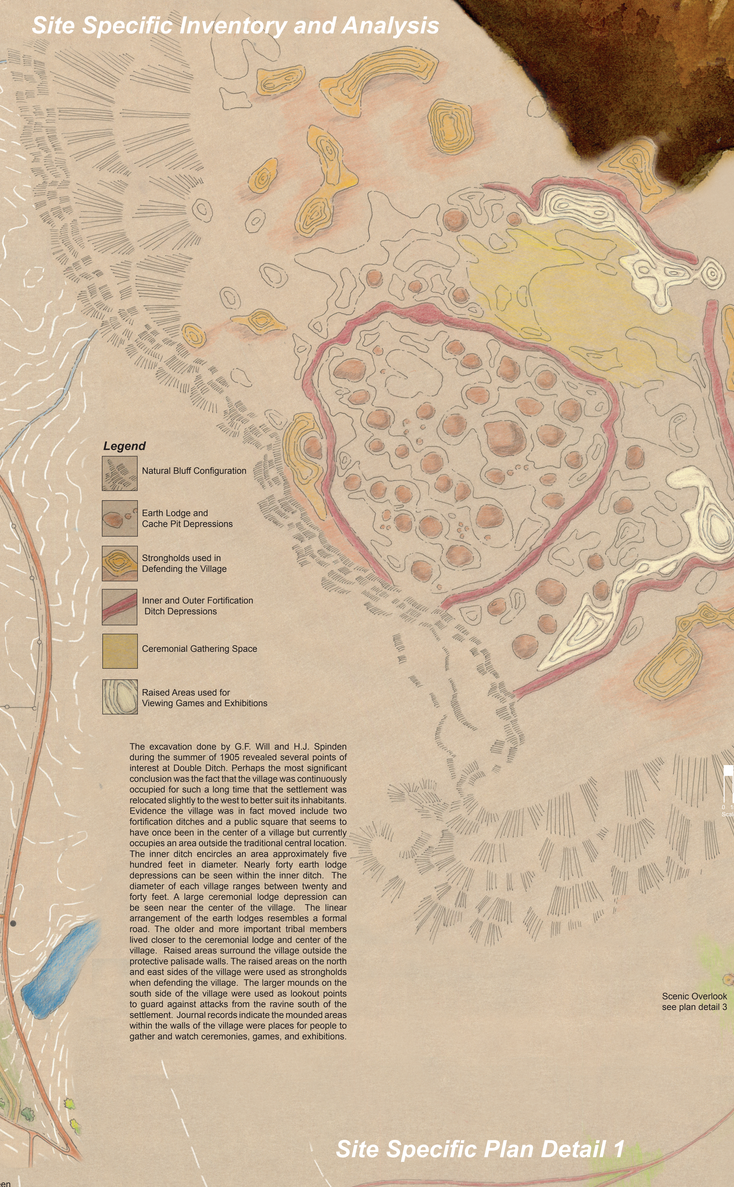
Double Ditch Native American Village

Double Ditch Village is situated atop a steep bluff overlooking the Missouri River along ND Highway 1804 nearly eight miles north of Bismarck, North Dakota. Archeological excavations indicate the village is one of the largest archeological sites in North America and it was continuously occupied for more than three hundred years. The village remains cover nearly twenty acres and is marked by more than forty earth lodge depressions, huge midden mounds or refuse piles, and two prominent fortification ditches that encircle the village on three sides. The western boundary of the village is located directly atop an impassable bluff more than fifty feet above the Missouri River. Historians believe more than 1,000 people could have inhabited this settlement at any given time. Journal records indicate the fortification ditches used to protect the village were nearly twenty feet wide and over fifteen feet deep. The village was surrounded by an eighteen foot high piquet-style fence to keep intruders at-bay. Various earthen mounds surround the village as well. Some of these mounds were undoubtedly used as strongholds in defense of the village during an attack by neighboring tribes. The larger mounds were also used as viewing areas for the various games and exhibitions held by the Mandans. The goal of this project is to demonstrate how the scattered remains of the various villages along the Missouri River and its tributaries can be reconnected and preserved to tell the stories about the Native Americans and their unique culture and heritage.

These images were taken at the Double Ditch Native American Village site in the summer of 2005. Currently there are a few interpretive panels and an undeveloped walking trail around the site, and a small gravel parking area off ND Highway 1804. Personal photos 2005.

Site Plan

Site Specific Inventory and Analysis

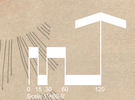


In the summer of 1905 a group of Harvard Archaeological students carried out a six-week series of historical studies and archeological investigations at the site then known as the Bourgois Site. Much of what is known today is a direct result of their tireless study and interpretation of artifacts, culture, heritage, and dialect of the Mandan. Hundreds of artifacts including pottery remains, animal and human bones, vegetable seeds, hand-milled tools including rakes and hoes, stone objects used as tools and game pieces, and various textiles were collected and analyzed by the group. These items have helped historians understand the unique lifestyle of the Mandans. Along with the journals of previous explorers a true understanding of the Mandan culture and heritage can be achieved.

Legend

- Natural Bluff Configuration
- Earth Lodge and Cache Pit Depressions
- Strongholds used in Defending the Village
- Inner and Outer Fortification Ditch Depressions
- Ceremonial Gathering Space
- Raised Areas used for Viewing Games and Exhibitions

The excavation done by G.F. Will and H.J. Spinden during the summer of 1905 revealed several points of interest at Double Ditch. Perhaps the most significant conclusion was the fact that the village was continuously occupied for such a long time that the settlement was relocated slightly to the west to better suit its inhabitants. Evidence the village was in fact moved include two fortification ditches and a public square that seems to have once been in the center of a village but currently occupies an area outside the traditional central location. The inner ditch encircles an area approximately five hundred feet in diameter. Nearly forty earth lodge depressions can be seen within the inner ditch. The diameter of each village ranges between twenty and forty feet. A large ceremonial lodge depression can be seen near the center of the village. The linear arrangement of the earth lodges resembles a formal road. The older and more important tribal members lived closer to the ceremonial lodge and center of the village. Raised areas surround the village outside the protective palisade walls. The raised areas on the north and east sides of the village were used as strongholds when defending the village. The larger mounds on the south side of the village were used as lookout points to guard against attacks from the ravine south of the settlement. Journal records indicate the mounded areas within the walls of the village were places for people to gather and watch ceremonies, games, and exhibitions.



Scenic Overlook see plan detail 3

Inventory & Analysis

As visitors approach the site a gentle incline will bring them up to the visitor center. A series of natural log timbers mimicking a palisade fence used to protect villages from enemy attacks lines the entry mall. Visitors may not realize the significance of the palisade initially, however, upon departure from the site guests will have a thorough understanding of the means by which the Native Americans protected their settlements.

The primary goal of developing the Double Ditch Native American Village was to immerse the visitors in the Native American culture and way of life while simultaneously having a minimal impact on the overall site. In addition, development of this area needed to be a unique experience in such a way that visitors will have an opportunity to fully understand the culture and way of life after visiting all the villages along the Central Dakota Plains.

The entry sign helps to welcome visitors to the area. The shape and design mimic an eagle's wing. Much of the ceremonial dress worn by the Mandans incorporated extensive feather decoration.

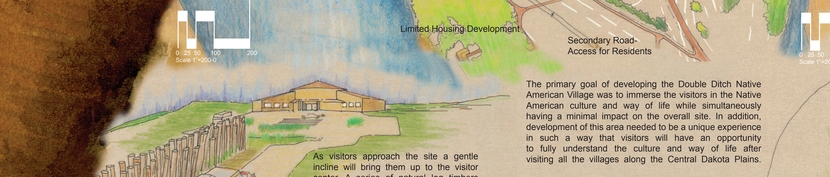
Visitors to the Double Ditch Village site will find themselves immersed in the traditional ways of the Mandan Indian. The Visitor Center will house a collection of artifacts from recent archeological digs conducted at the site. Additionally a series of temporary residences can be found within the building for archeologists working on interpretive excavations throughout the summer months.

Detail 2- PolyPavement

The scenic overlook will allow visitors a chance to look down on the village remains from the highest natural point on the site. An arbor that resembles a traditional earth lodge entryway is constructed from log poles and sandbar willow branches will offer shade and relief while providing interpretive panels that guide the views of the guests over the village remains and northwest towards Square Buttes, the northern boundary of Mandan territory.

Interpretive panels and seating elements are modest and constructed from native tree species found along the Missouri River lowlands. The dual-sided interpretive panel provides shade and protection form the natural elements while mimicking traditional Native American construction techniques and materials.

Plan Detail 3- Scenic Overlook



Section 1-

The Double Ditch Native American Village Interpretive Center is a two-story structure integrated into the natural landscape. The Visitor Center is located on a former gravel excavation pit south of the village remains. The deck and seating area off the second floor provide an ADA accessible ramp that transitions into an interpretive walking trail leading up to the former village site. The building is covered with a sandstone veneer that will allow it to cohesively fit into the natural prairie landscape that surrounds it.

Visitor Center Plan Detail 2

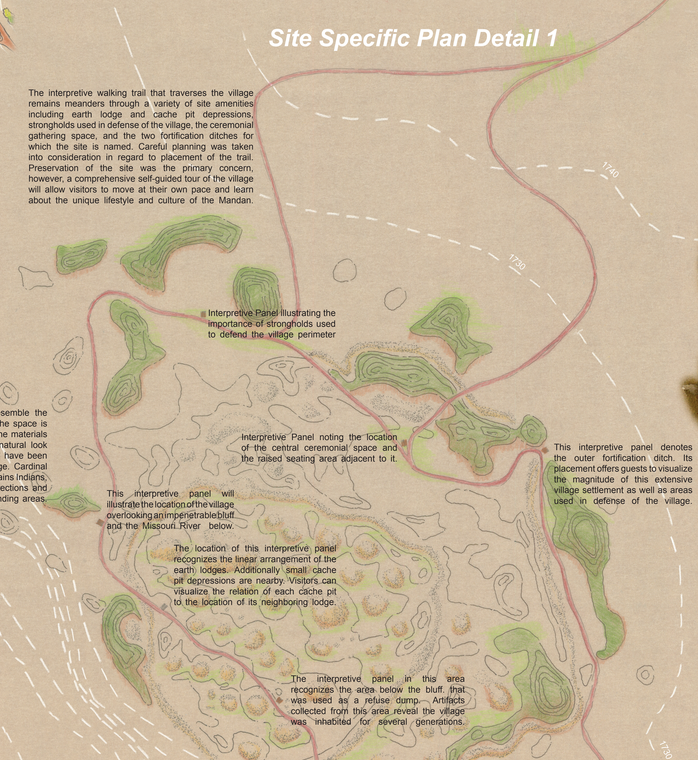
The Double Ditch Native American Village Visitor Center has been designed to have a minimal impact on the integrity of the site. The location of the building is tucked below the village remains which allows visitors to experience the entire village without any invasive man-made structures looming in the background. The shape and facade of the building mimic traditional earth lodges commonly associated with the Mandan tribe that once inhabited this area. To help conceal the 2-story structure the earth has been regraded to mesh with the building giving the appearance that the building is molded and integrated into the natural landscape.

The second story finished floor elevation at 1702 allows for an ADA accessible interpretive path that leads up to the village remains. See Section 1

The entry plaza has been designed to resemble the area in front of a ceremonial earth lodge. The space is open and free from obstruction. Natural stone materials and tinted PolyPavement give the area a natural look resembling the hard-packed soils that would have been common in large gathering areas of a village. Cardinal directions play a large role in the lives of the plains Indians, the center of the plaza represents these directions and to help orient visitors to the site and surrounding areas.

The parking area allows ample room for large vehicles such as tour buses and RVs as well as spaces for 20 standard size automobiles. Traditional curb and gutter systems have not been implemented in the parking lot. This will reinforce the feeling of immersion into a Native American village. Parking areas will be delineated by islands and small berms of native grasses. Again the natural look of soil will be achieved through the use of tinted PolyPavement material which binds the natural soil already in place into a material stronger than traditional asphalt and environmentally sound. See Detail 2

Site Specific Plan Detail 1



The interpretive walking trail that traverses the village remains meanders through a variety of site amenities including earth lodge and cache pit depressions, strongholds used in defense of the village, the ceremonial gathering space, and the two fortification ditches for which the site is named. Careful planning was taken into consideration in regard to placement of the trail. Preservation of the site was the primary concern, however, a comprehensive self-guided tour of the village will allow visitors to move at their own pace and learn about the unique lifestyle and culture of the Mandan.