

## Native American Trail

A network of Native American trails once crisscrossed the land in or near what is now downtown Ann Arbor, linking to areas far to the east and west. The foot paths made by Native people followed high ground, and there was wisdom in their placement, so much so that when road builders came they used the Native trails to create many of Michigan's roads and expressways in use today.

**Welcome to the Native American Trail in West Park!**

**Who walked here before you?**

**"Aanith, Boozhoo!"** Greetings from the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi - the Anishinabae people of the Three Fires Confederacy. The footpath before you is part of an extensive system of trails that connected diverse groups of Native peoples in the Great Lakes region and beyond. At one time varied greetings could be heard on this trail.

**"Kwe,"** from the Wyandotte, a band of the Huron tribe. Long before there was an Ann Arbor, a vibrant Native culture lived here in harmony with the rhythms of the seasons.

**"Ho,"** from the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo nations. Native peoples traveled the trails to trade furs, maple sugar, agricultural products, and precious salt from the springs of what is now known as Saline.

**"Aya,"** greetings from the Miami people. These were the same trails the original people took to reach social and political gatherings. Native people lived and raised their families here, buried their loved ones here; they were the caretakers of this land.

As they traveled these paths, the local Anishinabae people would greet one another saying:

**"Aani ezhi-bimaadiziya?"** How is your path in life? Today, your footsteps walk in their footsteps. Remember those whose stories began long ago, and their descendants who remain, keeping the stories alive. May you walk in balance with Mother Earth.

The foot paths made by Native people followed high dry ground. Road builders would use these trails to construct the important Michigan roads and expressways of today. Do you recognize any of the highways you travel?

This path in West Park went from Allen Creek to Dexter and connected to the Grand River Trail that led all the way to Lake Michigan. This map clearly shows the network of Native American trails in Washtenaw and Wayne Counties. Native Villages are designated by triangles, mounds by dots, and burial grounds by cross inside circles.

W.B. Hinsdale Map courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library

Migwetch, thank you to the many students, parents and teachers of Ann Arbor Open and Community High School, who caretake the trail to preserve this history; to the Natural Area Preservation staff of Ann Arbor for their commitment to maintain the trail; and to members of the Native American community for keeping the history and native languages alive.

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A piece of one of the Native American trails runs as a foot path in the wooded bluff along the southern border of West Park. The trail heads west a short distance from this Native American Trail sign at the Chapin Street entrance to the park and goes almost to Seventh Street. Running alongside a stretch of open water, it meanders up to higher ground and at times back down to the 'toe of slope' – where the bluff meets the flat land.

Sign placed in West Park in 2011. [1]

The foot path originally began a little to the east at Allen Creek (now invisible in underground drain pipe) and went to Dexter, where it connected to the Grand River Trail that led all the way to Lake Michigan.

A vibrant Native culture was alive in the area long before Ann Arbor was so named. Native people lived and raised their families here, buried their loved ones here. They were the caretakers of this land and had been so since far, far back in time.

The trail in West Park was once part of Native people's extensive system of trails

connecting diverse groups in the Great Lakes region and beyond. Travelers on the path would have included the Anishinabae people of the Three Fires Confederacy (the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi); the Wyandotte (a band of the Huron tribe); the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo nations; and the Miami people. They traveled the trails to reach social and political gatherings and to trade furs, maple sugar, agricultural products, and more.

In 1807 the Native nations and tribes in the area were forced to formally cede (relinquish) their lands. Facing armed conflict, decades of struggle, and laws excluding them from being able to own land, Native peoples fought and took risks to remain in their homeland and maintain their traditional lifeways. Despite the efforts of forced removal in the 1800s, with perseverance and holding the land in their hearts these Native nations and tribes are still here today.

In the late 1920s Ann Arborites paid tribute to the Native peoples' trail system as an important and significant part of Ann Arbor. With approval from the Parks Board and the City Council a large stone marker was placed on what was then termed 'the old Indian Trail through West Park'. On the stone marker was a plaque that read:

This Stone Placed  
February 12, 1929  
by the  
Ann Arbor Council  
Boy Scouts of America  
and  
Marks an old Indian Trail  
Plainly visible at that date [2]

Care for the trail and its visibility to the community stepped up about twenty years ago when it became a central focus for an on-going public school program designed for students to authentically learn about Native American history and lifeways. Called the Little Buddies (students from Ann Arbor Open) and Big Buddies (students from Community High School) program, it was created in 2001 by two public school teachers motivated by a desire to create a space of authentic learning of history and current real-life living, with students involved in a real project with real consequences.

Denise Chacon Lontin, a 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade (mixed level) teacher at Ann Arbor Open, and Cindy Haidu-Banks, a 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade (mixed level) teacher of United States History & Geography at Community High School, teamed up to design and teach a program centered around students learning by walking and caring for the Native American Trail in West Park.

Buddies work together creating community. Younger and older buddies are paired up as pen pals communicating throughout the school year, collaborating on projects, joining together on field trips, and visiting each other's classrooms. A lot of primary sources are used, and Margaret Noodin and her fellow Native American associates have served, in Denise and Cindy's words, as kind and patient primary voices guiding them.

When the program started the trail was in a rough state of neglect, but the little buddies saw the need for better care and passionately appealed to the high school big buddies to do something. And do something they did. With students' diligent petitioning, resource support was secured for their work caring for the trail.

As part of the program, traditionally near the end of the school year, the little buddies and big buddies team up to work to clear the trail of trash and debris, cut back vegetation blocking it, and help bolster eroding spots. Since 2007 they have been supported in these efforts by Natural Area Preservation (NAP). The big workday has traditionally culminated in a barbeque picnic for both classes and NAP assistants, with folks bringing their own blankets to sit on and celebrating by gathering together with food. The Summer assignment is then given – to walk the trail... it's the only way the trail can continue to live!

The West Park sign for the Native American Trail is an outgrowth of the Little Buddies and Big Buddies program. When West Park reopened in 2011 after major renovations, the buddies gave walking tours of the trail and realized a sign was needed – they found that people who had lived next to West Park for decades had no idea the trail was there.

The buddies' desire was for a sign from Native American perspective. The buddies program had to find money for the sign; both schools gave funding, and City Park Planner Amy Kuras secured a grant for them. They worked with a graphic designer. The sign was a big project, and it took time for it to come together. Erected in 2018, the interpretive sign stands fully guided by Margaret Noodin and her fellow Native American associates.

The Native American Trail calls out for feet to walk it --to keep it visible and alive. Don't be mistaken by the sandy path that runs alongside the children's play area. Head into the woods that cover the bluff and walk the trail you find there. The trail also calls out to imaginations to come along with the feet and sense walking alongside the Native peoples who walked it. It is a trail that speaks to the adventurous and young at heart. It is a way of connecting with Native peoples, using the trail sign to learn languages and cultural perspectives.

**Note**

1. The sign for the Native American Trail in West Park is the result of collaborative efforts in research by Margaret Noodin and her fellow Native American associates and by Denise Chacon Lontin (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Ann Arbor Open at Mack), Cindy Haidu-Banks (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> mixed level teacher at Community High School), and their students in their Little Buddies and Big Buddies program. Amy Kuras (City Park Planner) helped secure grant funding for them to work with a graphic designer to create the sign.
2. The Park Department has been diligent in supporting park history by placing a similar stone and plaque in the location of the originals when they succumbed to vandalism.