

Minnesota's Tragic and Hidden History: The Winnebago and the Knights of the Forest

It's a little known part of our state's history that for a brief time the Winnebago people lived here. It's hidden history because it is so shameful.

The Winnebago, also known as Ho Chunk, originally lived in what is now eastern Wisconsin. Due to the western expansion of settlers, wars and treaties, the Winnebago nation was split. One group got bounced to a Iowa reservation, and then to northern Minnesota. Then, in 1855, about 2,000 Winnebago got moved to Blue Earth County – their reservation including some of the state's best farmland.

Local businessmen and farmers wanted access to that land. Only seven years after the Winnebago arrived in Blue Earth County, the Dakota-U.S. War of 1862 broke out. The war raised tremendous fear of Native Americans among the settler population. While the Winnebago had nothing to do with the war, they became easy targets. At the urging of members from the Minnesota delegation, Congress passed a law exiling the Winnebago people from Minnesota. (So urgent was this measure that Congress passed it days before it passed the bill exiling the Dakota.)

A key part this ugly history is the story of the Knights of the Forest, a secret society in Mankato bent on getting the Winnebago land. According to Wikipedia, the [Knights](#) targeted the removal of all Indians from the state. Their secret pledge, made public only years later, read in part: "I will sacrifice every political and other preference to accomplish that object. ... the permanent removal of all tribes of Indians from the State of Minnesota."

City Pages ran a detailed piece: [Knights of the Forest: How Minnesota's Klan drove out the Ho-Chunk](#). The Knights started forming just after the hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato, on Dec. 26, 1862, according to the story.

Among the thousands in the audience that day, some viewed the spectacle through the windows of Mankato's Masonic Lodge across the street. A week later, a group gathered in secret to form the "Knights of the Forest." They had a singular goal: "To banish forever from our beautiful state every Indian who now desecrates the soil." ...

The Knights of the Forest's membership counted some of Mankato's most prominent citizens. Among them: Charles Chapman, a Harvard-educated East Coast man who served as Blue Earth County's auditor and official surveyor; and John Meagher and John Porter Sr., who would both be elected to the Minnesota Legislature.



According to information from the Blue Earth County Historical Society Review, quoted in the book [Last Standing Woman](#):

One noteworthy act of the Mankato [Knights of the Forest] lodge...was the employment of a certain number of men whose duty it was to lie in ambush on the outskirts of the Winnebago reservation and shoot any Indian who might be observed outside the lines.

William Lass, a former Mankato State University history professor wrote a helpful article titled: [The REMOVAL From MINNESOTA of the Sioux and Winnebago Indians](#). He wrote that one of Minnesota's U.S. Representatives, William Windom, introduced a bill in Congress specifically aimed at removing the Winnebago, and Minnesota Sen. Morton Wilkinson followed suit in the Senate. They were both Republicans, and had been embarrassed that President Lincoln had commuted the death sentences of so many Dakota fighters following the Dakota-U.S. War.

The intent behind the [Winnebago Removal Act](#) is clear, not only providing for relocating the Winnebago, *but also for selling their reservation lands to settlers*. It reads in part:

And be it further enacted, That upon the removal of the said Indians from the reservation where they now reside, it shall be the duty of the Secretary of the Interior to cause each legal subdivision of the said lands to be appraised....

And be it further enacted, That after the appraisal of the said reservation the same shall be opened to pre-emption, entry and settlement in the same manner as other public lands ...

Settlers were so ready to claim Winnebago lands, government leaders feared potential conflicts as settlers moved in too fast. According to Lass, in the spring of 1863, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs instructed the Winnebago agent to assemble the Winnebago for expulsion and "above all to disarm them." The commissioner feared "collision and possible bloodshed" because white settlers were eager to begin spring planting on the patches of ground cleared and cultivated by the Winnebago.

Mnopedia's entry on [Ho-Chunk and Blue Earth County, 1855-1863](#) says on April 25, 1863, the Ho-Chunk were notified that they would be moved to Crow Creek in South Dakota, the same reservation where the Dakota exiles were being sent.

A small group of Winnebago applied for citizenship to avoid removal but was denied. Many others resisted the government's orders and refused to leave. In early May, under threat of military force, over two thousand Ho-Chunk were moved to Camp Porter in Mankato and from there to Crow Creek. More than 550 Ho-Chunk died during their removal to South Dakota.

The move to Crow Creek was a disaster. Even though the Winnebago Expulsion Act said the Winnebago were to get "a tract of unoccupied land ... **well adapted for agricultural purposes**" [emphasis added] they did not. Many Winnebago moved to a reservation in Omaha, Nebraska. Others returned to their homeland in Wisconsin.