

BUTTE DES MORTS LANDING

Term: Butte des Morts

Definition:

A French phrase meaning "Hill of the Dead" that was given to two different lakes in the Fox River valley. The larger is just northwest of Oshkosh where the Wolf River widens as it approaches Lake Winnebago; the smaller is about 15 miles northeast from there, at modern Neenah-Menasha. For the origin of their names, see the separate entry under each lake: Butte des Morts, Lake (the larger, near Oshkosh) and Little Lake Butte des Morts (the smaller, near Neenah-Menasha)

From Increase Lapham's 1844 *Geographical and Topographical Description of Wisconsin*:

"GREAT BUTTE DES MORTS LAKE, is an expansion of the Neenah [Fox] river, four and a half miles above Lake Winnebago; three and a half miles in length, and from one to two miles in breadth.

LITTLE BUTTE DES MORTS LAKE, is another expansion of the Neenah, immediately below the Winnebago rapids; about four and a half miles long, and one mile wide."

The larger of the two lakes named Butte des Morts is just northwest of Oshkosh, between that city and Winneconne. It was named not from a massacre (see Little Lake Butte des Morts) but rather from the use of a hill on its banks as a cemetery by local Menominee, Sauk and Fox Indians during the 18th century.

Fur trader Louis Porlier wrote "I always took an interest in these matters, and I never found an Indian who ever heard of such occurrences [battles] or such mounds [mass graves] at the Grand Butte. They locate all the contests at Petit Butte des Morts, including both of Morand's [Marin's] expeditions....

"Grand Butte des Morts (great hill of the dead) was so named by the French because it was a higher point of land than usual in this particular region of the Wolf valley, and was the principal burying ground for the Sacs and Foxes and the Menomonees after them; though the latter tribe had practically abandoned it as a general cemetery before the opening of the nineteenth century and buried their dead at various points wherever mortal disease or accident befell them. When the band was off upon its hunt and a member died, the deceased was hung up in a tree on a scaffolding of saplings and left there until his party set out for their return when they would gather the bodies of their deceased friends and bury them in the common field at Grand Butte des Morts. The brave was always interred in a single grave with his tools and implements

of the chase and the earth slightly rounded over the grave, as in the manner of the whites; no other mounds ever existed at this place or wholesale burial occurred under other circumstances."



Butte Des Morts (Historic Marker Erected 1955)

Fritsie Park, Menasha, Winnebago County

In 1730 the French government decided to destroy the Fox village on the shore of this lake because of the depredations of the Foxes on the fur traders. Capt. Morand came up the river with a large force of French soldiers and Menominee warriors. The soldiers were concealed under canvas until they were opposite the Indians gathered on the shore. Then they rose and fired into the crowd. The Menominees, meanwhile, attacked the village from the rear. The village was destroyed and its inhabitants slaughtered. The bodies were piled in a heap and covered with earth, forming the Hill of the Dead. In 1827 Governor Cass held a council here with the Winnebago, Chippewa, and Menominee tribes to fix their tribal boundaries. At this council Oshkosh was made chief of the Menominees.

This town was built near or on top of an ancient burial mound. By the early 19th century this and another mound a few miles away had acquired the name "Butte des Morts" or "Hill of the Dead" and were well-known to travelers. Fur trader Louis Porlier wrote that "When I came here

in 1830, there were several mounds there of varying sizes; the largest was on the North Menasha side and was about one hundred feet in diameter, rising gradually from the ground to a peak in the center which might have measured ten feet in height from the level ground. It was nearly circular. The Indians said it was made by the whites and was the burial place of Sacs and Foxes who had been killed in a great fight there and thrown in a heap to be covered with earth." [Wis. Historical Collections 15: 444-445]

Porlier referred to French officer Paul Marin de la Margue (1692-1753), who opened a trading post with the Menominee near Green Bay in 1729 and over the next two years attacked the Fox at various points along the Fox-Wisconsin waterway. Porlier reported that the local Indians "locate all the contests at Petit Butte des Morts, including both of Morand's [Marin's] expeditions." For several years prior to these expeditions, the Fox had attacked or harassed canoes of other tribes or of the French whenever they passed this narrow point in the river. They extorted furs, took hostages, and significantly disrupted the French fur trade. They had also been among the most combative opponents of French colonialism in the Great Lakes for more than a decade and Marin was ordered to punish them.

Augustin Grignon, who heard it as a child from some of the participants, later recalled the encounter that gave Butte des Morts its name. Marin's fleet of canoes "started from Green Bay up the river each canoe having a full complement of men, well armed, and an oil-cloth covering large enough to envelop the whole canoe, as was used by the traders to shield their goods from the effects of the weather. Near the Grand Chute, some three miles below the little Butte de Morts, and not yet within view of the, latter, [Marin] divided his party, one part disembarking and going by land to surround the village, and attack the place when [Marin] and his water division should open their fire in front. The soldiers in the canoes, with their guns all ready for use, were concealed by the oil-cloth coverings, and only two men were in view to row each canoe, thus presenting the appearance of a trader's fleet.

"In due time the Foxes discovered their approach and placed out their torch, and squatted themselves thickly along the bank as usual, and patiently awaited the landing of the canoes, and the customary tribute offering. When sufficiently near to be effective, the oil-cloth coverings were suddenly thrown off, and a deadly volley from a swivel-gun, loaded with grape and canister shot, and the musketry of the soldiers, scattered death and dismay among the unsuspecting Foxes; and this, severe fire was almost instantly seconded by the land party in the rear, and quickly repeated by both divisions, so that a large number of the devoted Foxes were slain"

Although Grignon could not confirm that the name came from this 1730 attack on the Fox, both the mound and the lake that it overlooked soon became known to French traders as Butte des Morts. Cartographer Increase Lapham wrote in 1844 that it was "named from hills or mounds

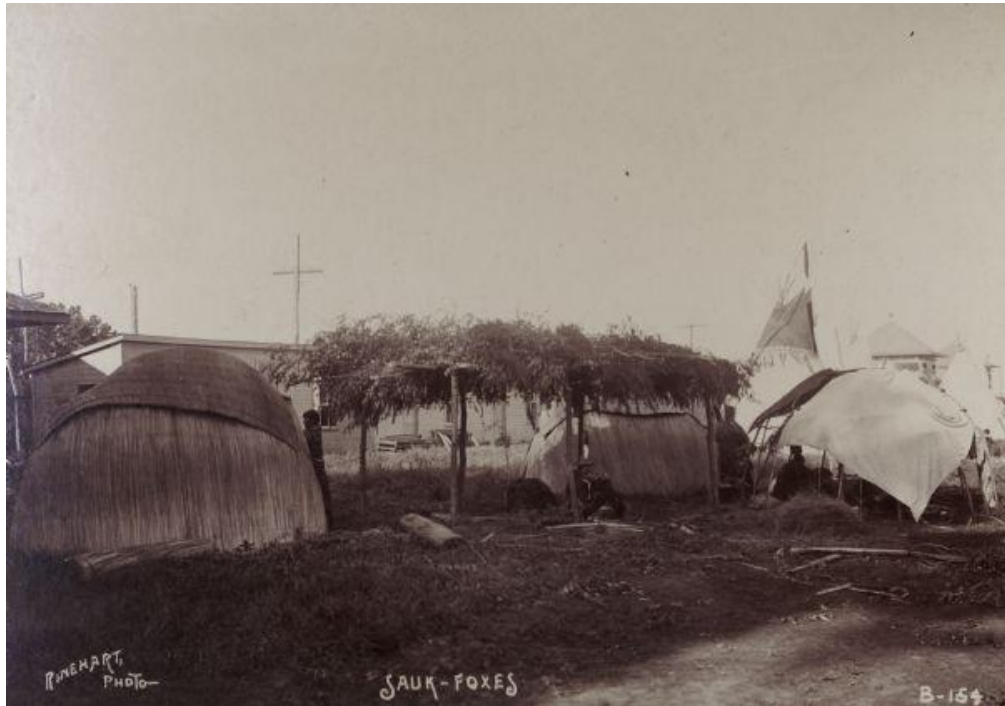
said to have been formed of the dead bodies of the Indians slain in some battle, which were thrown into heaps and covered with earth. They are now grown over with grass, and present much the same appearance as the ancient mounds so profusely scattered through the west."

Publius Lawson, who was mayor of Menasha as well as a respected historian, demonstrated that it was composed of both ancient and modern burials:

"The hill stood up boldly in plain view to all voyageurs," he wrote in 1900, "up and down the little gem of a lake, to which it early gave its name. It could be plainly seen in settlement days by the pioneers of Menasha and Neenah on the opposite bank of the lake. It was twelve feet high, sixty feet long north and south, and thirty-five feet wide. It stood in the midst of a wide prairie, 300 feet back from the lake shore, on a point of land that was thirty feet above the level of the lake, and the only high land on the west side of the lake.

"In 1863 the Northwestern railway constructed a pile bridge across Little Butte des Morts lake, and made a deep cut through this point on the south side of and within thirty feet of the mound. Subsequently they excavated and removed the gravel of the point over an area of about five acres to a depth of about twenty feet, and with it, regardless of tradition or respect for the grave, went the "Hill of the Dead" all in the same mixture. The skulls and bones and relics of ancient kings and glory were strewn along the right of way for miles...

"After one-third of this ancient monument had crumbled into the pit made by the busy pick and shovel, a large pocket full of human bones was plainly exposed near the base. All about the outer surface, in shallow graves, were hundreds of skeletons, possibly of later date, and so-called "obtrusive" burials, as not being the objects of its construction." Lawson concluded that the burial at the deepest point was very early, resembling the conical mound burials from 2,000 years ago, and that the skeletons nearer the surface were probably those of the 18th-century Fox and Sauk. "As I can find no burying ground anywhere that may be traced to the Fox Indians, who resided from 1712 to 1728 within a mile of the hill, I am inclined to suppose that some of the intrusive burials were of that tribe." [Oshkosh Northwestern, February 3, 1900]



Historic Spots in Wisconsin: Grand Butte des Morts,

Titus, William A., 1868-1951

Wisconsin Historical Society

A Hamlet with a History: This short piece summarizes the early history of the small Winnebago Co. town on the north shore of the Fox River, where it joins the Wolf. The Great Hill of the Dead for which it was named was a mortuary mound being used by the Ho-Chunk when the first French accounts were written in the late 17th century. By the early 18th century, the site was occupied by the Fox Indians who were expelled about 1740 by the French at the close of the Fox Wars. The Menominee then built a large village of 100 lodges near the site, and French traders established posts near them. Chief among these were Augustin Grignon (1780-1860) and Louis Porlier (1815-1899), whose careers are summarized. The article also discusses the 1827 council held there with the Ho-Chunk, Ojibwe, and Menominee, and the 1848 treaty signed with the latter tribe at nearby Lake Poygan. 1921-1922

The original article follows:

Historic Spots in Wisconsin

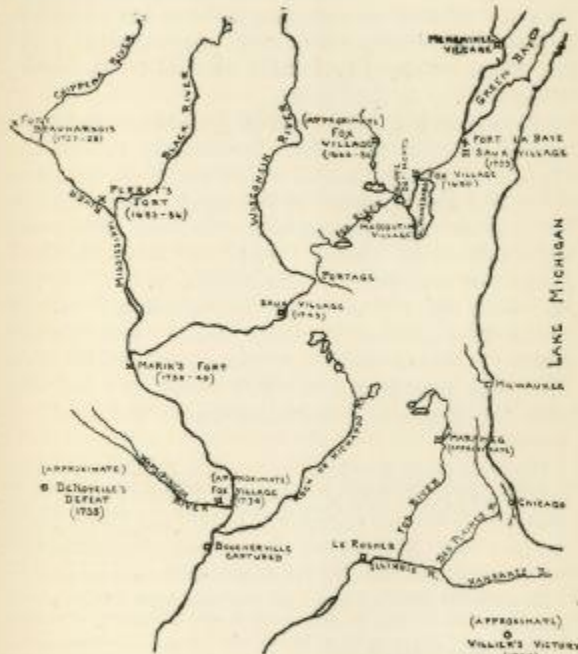
W. A. Titus

Grand Butte des Morts a Hamlet With a History

No more shall the war-cry sever, nor the winding river be red. Few locations in Wisconsin combine archaeological and historical interest to so great a degree as does Butte des Morts a hamlet in Winnebago County situated on the north side of the Fox River about a mile or two below its confluence with the Wolf. The present day village occupies the slightly curved summit of a broad natural mound that rises gradually and gracefully from the river bank. The view from this elevation is magnificent, on the one side is the river with its broad marshes and wild rice fields which harbor untold numbers of game birds, now as they did when the Indians were the only inhabitants. In the opposite direction the eye wanders over miles of fertile and highly cultivated farms which were covered with virgin forests a century ago. It is not remarkable that the aborigines were early attracted to a spot so favored by nature and of such strategic importance in the control of the great inland water way. The Indian could replenish his food supply with fish and fowl from the river in front and with deer and other game from the forests in the rear. In the Tribal Wars before the coming of the French explorers, the advantage of dominating this canoe route must have been considerable, and after hostilities began between the French and the Fox Indians the latter made this one of several fortified points that gave them control of the Fox Wisconsin waterway for many years.

Fox Indian Wars

posite origin.² Perrot, than whom none knew the Northern aborigines more thoroughly, reports that the Outagami were composed of two divisions, one named Red Earth, the other Renards, each with its own chieftain.⁴



Seat of the Fox Wars in Wisconsin and Illinois

The original habitat of the tribe is not certain. Of Algonquian origin, closely allied in language and customs to the

²*Id.*, II, p. 492; III, p. 203.

⁴Bacqueville de la Potherie, *Histoire de l'Amérique Septentrionale* (Paris, 1703), II, p. 174. Note also the meaning in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, III, p. 127.

Term: Butte des Morts, Village, Winnebago Co.

Definition:

A community in Winnebago Co. at latitude 440558N and longitude 0883914W

Description from John W. Hunt's 1853 Wisconsin Gazetteer: "BUTTE DES MORTS, P. V., Winnebago county, on section 24 in town of Winneconne, (town 19 N., of range 15 E.), 10 miles north west from Oshkosh, the county seat, and 85 miles

northeast from Madison. It is beautifully situated on a high bluff on the left bank of the Fox river, near the head of lake Butte des Morts, from which it takes its name. It offers many inducements to the settler, being a very healthy location, and surrounded by a good farming country. Lumber is plenty, immense quantities being rafted on the river. Population, 100; with 15 dwellings, 5 stores, 3 hotels, 1 steam mill, 2 religious denominations, and various mechanical shops."

Term: Butte des Morts, Town of, Winnebago Co.

Definition:

A civil town in Winnebago Co., created 8 Mar. 1839, in Brown Co., Set off to Winnebago Co., 6 Jan. 1840. Name changed to Winnebago, 1 Apr. 1843.

Term: Butte des Morts, Town of, Winnebago Co.

Definition:

A civil town in Winnebago Co., created 11 Feb. 1847. Name changed to Bloomingdale, 15 Mar. 1849.

Little Butte des Morts Lake derives its name from a large hill used as a burial site by Woodland Indians and, in modern times, by the Fox (Meskwaki) Indians following two massacres by the French.

In the early 18th century the Meskwaki (Fox) Indians resided on the west bank of the Fox River where it widens above Appleton, approaching Lake Winnebago. In 1716 the French found them living in a walled town upon a mound opposite the present city of Neenah, where according to French archives "they had 500 warriors and 8,000 women (who on these occasions fight desperately); ... their fort was fortified by three rows of palisades, with a ditch a foot and a half or two feet wide behind it." [Wisconsin Historical Collections 16: 343].