Prehistory

To learn about people and places, we study prehistory and history. Prehistory is the time before the events of the past were written down. History is a story about the past.

Before Kenosha became a city, Native Americans lived on the land on which you are now standing. About 12,500 years ago Paleo-Indians lived here and survived by eating animals and fish found in this area. One of these animals was the legendary wooly mammoth.

How do we know this happened so many years ago?

Old mammoth bones were found on farms in Kenosha County, proving that wooly mammoths once roamed the land. The bones that were excavated, or dug up, showed markings of being butchered. We can assume the Paleo-Indians then ate the meat and probably used the fur for clothing or blankets.
The Potawatomi People

The Potawatomi are a group of Native Americans who have lived in Wisconsin for hundreds of years. The Potawatomi are an Eastern Woodlands people. It is believed they were the first people to live in the place we now call Kenosha. "Potawatomi" means "keeper of the fires," a name and a duty that they believed was given to them by Gitchie Manito. They believe Gitchie Manito is the creator of earth, its creatures, and people.

The Potawatomi who lived in this area used the trees from the forests to make their homes, called wigwams. They made birch-bark and dug-out canoes from trees. Wood was used for making all kinds of household items and weapons.

Many methods were used to obtain food. Tribe members fished in Lake Michigan and the Pike River. They gathered wild fruits, nuts, seeds, and other plants, which were also used for medicines and dyes. Gardens were planted with corn, beans, and squash—otherwise known as the “three sisters.” Pieces of dead fish were planted with the seeds to act as a fertilizer, which helped crops grow faster. They also hunted deer and birds and trapped small mammals.

The skins from the deer were tanned, made into leather, and used to make clothing and blankets. During the winter men wore deerskin leggings, shirts, and moccasins. The women wore deerskin dresses and moccasins. The fur on their coats was often left on the deer and buffalo skin for added warmth.

The Potawatomi people still live in Wisconsin today. There are two Potawatomi communities in Forest County, Wisconsin. Other groups or bands of Potawatomi live in Michigan, Indiana, and Kansas.
Pioneers

On a December night in 1834, people went to the home of John Bullen Jr. in Hannibal, New York. They talked about going west to find a place for a new town. To raise money for the trip, they started the Western Emigrating Company. People bought shares of the company for $10 each. The shares meant they owned part of the company.

In spring 1835 Warters Towslee, Sydney Roberts, and Charles Turner took a boat to Detroit. From there they walked to Chicago following Indian trails. Then they rode in a boat to Milwaukee. Later they went south to what is now Kenosha.

In June they reached Washington Island (now called Simmons Island) and the mouth of Pike Creek. This place had two important things for a town—a good harbor and land for farming. A harbor is a sheltered body of water where boats can find safety from a storm.

John Bullen Jr. arrived a week later. He had been unable to make the first trip. Soon Mrs. Gardner Wilson came with two wagon loads of men. Within a few weeks they built small cabins. This was the beginning of Kenosha. John Bullen Jr. was credited with founding Kenosha on June 12, 1835.

The winter of 1835 was hard on the settlers. They had arrived too late to plant crops, so they had little food to eat. The heavy snow made it hard to bring in supplies. By spring people were suffering from hunger. They kept from starving by catching fish. Some people were tired of struggling and went back East. The hardy ones stayed and built Kenosha.

Activity/Questions

1. Using a map trace the pioneer’s trail from Hannibal, New York, to Kenosha.
2. What qualities does it take to be a pioneer?
3. Do you think you could be a pioneer? Why or why not?
City Name

Long before the settlers from New York came to what we now know as Kenosha, a group of Native Americans lived along the shores of Lake Michigan where our town now sits. The Potawatomi had settlements along a large creek where they caught fish to feed their families. The fish were called **pike**. The Potawatomi name for pike was Kenozia. The name "Ke-no-sha" came from this word.

When John Bullen Jr. and his group came here, they settled in the area which we now call Harbor Park. These people started a village and called it Pike. At the time there were only 32 people living in Pike. One year later the size of the town had more than doubled to 84 people.

Ships brought supplies to this growing town. People began calling the area a **port**. A port is a place on a waterway, like Lake Michigan, that provides a harbor for a city. They changed the name from Pike to Southport because it was the farthest port south on Lake Michigan in Wisconsin.

On February 8, 1850, Southport became an official city. Over 3,000 people lived here then. The original name, Kenozia, was taken again. Today we know it as the city of Kenosha.

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**Questions**

1. What would you name our city?
2. Why would this be a good name for our city?
Early Businesses

Early businesses in Kenosha were started to meet the needs of the settlers. People needed blacksmith shops, carpenters, sawmills, and clothing stores. Kenosha also had a bakery, a brewery, and a foundry that built farm equipment.

One early business was started by Samuel Resique and John Noble. When Resique and Noble first reached Simmons Island, they built a small cabin. Some of the Western Emigrating Company did not want them to build there because they knew the land was valuable.

One day Noble was alone in the cabin. Some men came to the island with axes. Noble was frightened, but the men did not hurt him. They just cut down some trees. They split them into rails and built a fence around the cabin so Resique and Noble couldn't claim more land on the island. Resique and Noble took the fence down, rail by rail, usually at night, and eventually claimed half of Simmons Island. They opened a tavern and hotel on the island. A special meeting took place in 1837 at Resique's Tavern to change the town name from Pike to Southport.

Another early business in Kenosha was the Bain Wagon Works. It was first known as the Mitchell Wagon Works. Edward Bain bought it in 1852. Each week six wagons were made—all by hand. People bought the wagons for travel, to carry supplies, and even to fight fires. The company started as a small repair shop and eventually grew to be the world’s largest maker of wagons. The company’s last big sale was to the country of France. The French bought wagons to use in World War I.

Question

1. Why were businesses started in Kenosha?
Early Businesses

One day Alvin French was mowing marsh hay on his land. He met a stranger who had walked here from Chicago. His name was Nathan Allen. Allen liked the location of Kenosha and the friendly people, so he decided to stay here.

Allen built a tannery where the Municipal Building now stands. A tannery makes animal skins into leather. This tannery became one of the largest in the world. At one time over 1,000 people worked there. They made 25 million pounds of finished leather each year.
Harbor
(Looking Southeast from the Allen Tannery)
Early Businesses

Zalmon Simmons had worked on a dairy farm in Kenosha that made cheese. The cheese was sent to nearby towns in boxes that were bought in Chicago. The boxes were very expensive, so Mr. Simmons decided to make the boxes himself. He hired nine people to help him do this.

Later his factory moved toward the production of wire bed springs and other metal bedroom furniture. In the 1920s he developed the Beautyrest Mattress. It became very popular. In 1960 the Simmons Company moved to Munster, Indiana. The company made its final move to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1975.
Early Businesses

M. H. Petit started a malting company in the early days of Kenosha. Malt is grain that is used in making beer. His company produced 50,000 bushels of malt per year for the brewing industry. The Malt House burned to the ground in 1914. The building was never rebuilt. The Heritage House now stands at this location on Eighth Avenue.

The Peter Pirsch Company did not always make fire equipment. In 1857 they made buggies and wagons. Then in 1890 there was a huge fire at the Allen Tannery. It almost destroyed the whole north side of Kenosha. Peter Pirsch saw that better equipment was needed to fight fires.

Peter and his father made the first horse-drawn fire cart for Kenosha. Peter later made the first motor-driven fire truck. He was always thinking of ways to make the equipment better.
Early Businesses

The Sterling Bicycle Company was another early business in Kenosha. In 1900 Thomas Jeffery bought the building and started making cars. His first car was the Rambler. He later made the Jeffery Quad, which was a truck used in World War I.

In 1916 Charles Nash bought the Jeffery Company. He started Nash Motors. Through the years Nash acquired the Hudson Motor Company, and it was renamed Nash-Hudson Motor Company. Later American Motors Corporation bought the company. American Motors cars, such as the Rebel, Javelin, and AMX, were very popular. In the 1980s the factory was known as Renault-AMC and built cars like the award-winning Alliance. Today the auto company, Daimler-Chrysler, makes engines for vehicles like the Jeep Grand Cherokee at the Kenosha Engine Plant. In the 1990s Daimler-Chrysler specialized in making engines for their cars at the Kenosha engine plants.
Early Businesses

*Extra! Extra! Read all about it!* Kenosha has been in the business of reporting the news since 1840. One of the newspapers was called the *Southport Telegraph* and was founded by Charles Sholes. His younger brother, C. Latham Sholes, would go on to invent the typewriter after working for the newspaper.

In 1894 the *Kenosha Evening News* was being printed. It was called the evening news because the paper was delivered to homes and businesses when the “paper delivery boys” returned home from school. The newspapers were delivered (by boys and girls) in the evenings until 1991. In 1991 the *Kenosha News* became a morning paper and changed its name from the *Kenosha Evening News*.

**Question**

1. Why were these businesses important to the residents?
Early Settlers

Some early settlers came to Kenosha by accident. Charles and Catherine Durkee were traveling on Lake Michigan from Chicago to Milwaukee when a sudden violent storm caused them to stop in Kenosha. Mrs. Durkee suffered from seasickness and was glad to be on land. They were so enchanted with this area that they stayed here instead of going to Milwaukee.

The Durkees built a cabin on the southern end of town, which was later donated to the city. Today it’s known as Library Park. After Mrs. Durkee’s death in 1838, her husband gave the city more land for a cemetery, now known as Green Ridge Cemetery. The first grave there was Mrs. Durkee’s. She had asked to be buried there because she loved the beautiful view.

When Wisconsin became a state in 1848, Charles Durkee was elected as a United States Senator. After his term was up, he built a mansion near the lake for his second wife. He became ill with asthma and had to move to a better climate. When he moved, he donated the property to the Episcopal church. The church turned it into a school for girls in 1871 and called it St. Claire’s School. It later became known as Kemper Hall, named after Bishop Kemper, who was the first Episcopalian bishop in this area. After it closed in 1976, it was sold to the county and is now known as Kemper Center.

Question
1. The Durkees gave land to the city of Kenosha. How is the land used today?
Early Settlers

C. Latham Sholes, who was from Kenosha, invented the first **typewriter**. A typewriter is a machine with a keyboard that prints the alphabet and numbers by striking an ink ribbon on paper. Why did he come up with this invention? Mr. Sholes was ill for many years, so Mrs. Sholes did many of the heavy chores. This left her little time to answer letters from relatives and friends. Mr. Sholes decided to help by creating a machine that would make her letter writing quick and easy.

He looked at many machines that printed words. There was something wrong with each one, so he invented a machine to make writing faster. He gave each letter of the alphabet a separate key and put the most frequently used letters in easy-to-reach places. By punching the keys with the fingers, the letters were stamped on paper. In 1873 the typewriter was ready to use. Three years later, hundreds of people saw it at the World’s Fair in Philadelphia. This is the same keyboard we use on our computers today. It is known as a QWERTY keyboard. *(Why do you think it’s called QWERTY?)*

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**Question**

1. **What impact does Sholes’s invention have on the writing technology of today?**