**Potawatomi Indian Fact Sheet**

**Native American Facts For Kids** was written for young people learning about the Potawatomis for school or home-schooling reports. We encourage students and teachers to visit our main [Potawatomi](http://www.native-languages.org/potawatomi.htm) website for in-depth information about the tribe, but here are our answers to the questions we are most often asked by children, with Potawatomi pictures and links we believe are suitable for all ages.

url: <http://www.bigorrin.org/potawatomi_kids.htm>



**Potawatomi Tribe**

***How do you pronounce the word "Potawatomi"? What does it mean? And how is it spelled?***
*Potawatomi* is pronounced "Poh-tuh-WAH-toh-mee." It means "fire keepers." That refers to their traditional role in the Council of the Three Fires (an alliance with their [Ojibwe](http://www.bigorrin.org/chippewa_kids.htm) and [Odawa](http://www.bigorrin.org/ottawa_kids.htm) neighbors.) Potawatomi was not originally a written language, so you may sometimes see it spelled Potowatomi or Pottawatomie instead.

***Where do the Potawatomis live?***
The Potawatomis are original residents of the eastern woodlands and prairie regions, particularly what is now [Michigan state](http://www.native-languages.org/michigan.htm). As more Indian tribes were forced westward into the Michigan and Wisconsin area, many Potawatomi people migrated into other parts of the Midwest, including Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Ontario, Canada. Some Potawatomis still live in this region today, while others were sent to Kansas and Oklahoma by the US government. Here is a [map showing Potawatomi and other Indian migrations](http://members.lycos.co.uk/brisray/th/thist2.htm).

***How is the Potawatomi Indian nation organized?***
Each Potawatomi community lives on its own ***reservation*** (or ***reserve***, in Canada). Reservations are lands that belong to Indian tribes and are under their control. Potawatomi Indian communities are called ***tribes*** in the United States and ***First Nations*** in Canada. Each Potawatomi tribe is politically independent and has its own government, laws, police, and services, just like a small country.

In the past, each Potawatomi village had its own chief. Usually the heads of leading clans became Potawatomi chiefs. Today a tribal chief is the political leader of an entire band, not just a village, and is elected by all the Potawatomi people.

***What language do the Potawatomis speak?***
Most Potawatomi people speak English, but some people, especially elders, also speak their native ***Potawatomi language***. Potawatomi is a musical language that has complicated verbs with many parts. If you'd like to learn some easy Potawatomi words, *bozho* is a friendly greeting and *iwgwien* (pronounced similar to "ee-gwee-EN") means 'thank you.' You can listen to some Potawatomi conversations [here](http://www.ukans.edu/~kansite/pbp/basicgrt.html) and read a Potawatomi picture glossary [here](http://www.native-languages.org/potawatomi_animals.htm).

Today Potawatomi is an ***endangered language*** because most children aren't learning it anymore. However, some Potawatomi people are working to keep their language alive.

***What was Potawatomi culture like in the past? What is it like now?***
Here's the homepage of the [Forest County Potawatomi Museum](https://www.fcpotawatomi.com/culture-and-history/). They have lots of information about Potawatomi traditions in the past and today, including traditional dancing and maple sugaring.

***How do Potawatomi Indian children live, and what did they do in the past?***
They do the same things any children do--play with each other, go to school and help around the house. Many Potawatomi children like to go hunting and fishing or camp outdoors. In the past, Indian kids had more chores and less time to play, just like early colonial children. But they did have [dolls](http://www.native-languages.org/dolls.htm) and [toys](http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/stones/toys/I15071.htm) to play with. Older Potawatomi kids played team ball games--[lacrosse](http://www.delvallacrosse.com/lacrosse_history.htm) for boys and men, and double shinny for girls and women. Like many Native Americans, Potawatomi mothers traditionally carried their babies in [cradle boards](http://www.native-languages.org/cradleboard.htm) on their backs--a custom many American parents have [adopted](http://www.dawson-family.org/images/8mo-w.jpg) now.

***What were Potawatomi men and women's roles?***
Potawatomi women were farmers and did most of the child care and cooking. Potawatomi men were hunters and sometimes went to war to protect their families. Both genders practiced story-telling, artwork and music, and traditional medicine. Unlike some tribes, the chief of a Potawatomi village could be either a man or a woman.

***What were Potawatomi homes like in the past?***
There were two types of dwellings used by the Potawatomis: dome-shaped houses called ***wigwams***, and rectangular ***lodges*** with bark covering. Here are some photos of [wigwams, birchbark houses, and other Native American homes](http://www.native-languages.org/houses.htm). Potawatomi villages usually included a sweat lodge, meat-drying huts, and a ballfield. Today, Native Americans only build a wigwam or lodge for fun or for ritual purposes, not for shelter. Most Potawatomis live in modern houses and apartment buildings, just like you.

***What was Potawatomi clothing like? Did they wear feather headdresses and face paint?***
Potawatomi women wore long deerskin dresses. Potawatomi men wore [breechcloths](http://www.native-languages.org/breechcloth.htm), leggings, and deerskin shirts. The Potawatomis wore [moccasins](http://www.native-languages.org/moccasins.htm) on their feet and robes in bad weather. Later, Potawatomi people adapted European costume such as cloth blouses and jackets, decorating them with fancy beadwork and ribbons. Here are some more photographs and links about [native dress](http://www.native-languages.org/clothing.htm) in general.

Traditionally, the Potawatomis didn't wear [feather war bonnet](http://www.native-languages.org/headdresses.htm#warbonnets) headdresses like the [Sioux](http://www.native-languages.org/dakota.htm). They usually wore a leather headband with one or two feathers standing straight up in the back. Potawatomi men sometimes wore otter-fur turbans. Both men and women usually wore their hair long, but in times of war, Potawatomi men would shave their heads in the [Mohawk](http://www.bigorrin.org/mohawk_kids.htm) style instead. Sometimes they added a [porcupine roach](http://www.matoska.com/roach_history.htm) to make this hairstyle more impressive. The Potawatomis painted their faces for special occasions. They used different colors and patterns for war paint, religious ceremonies, and festive decoration.

Today, some Potawatomi people still wear moccasins or a beaded shirt, but they wear modern clothes like jeans instead of breechcloths... and they only wear feathers or roaches in their hair on special occasions like a dance.

***What was Potawatomi transportation like in the days before cars? Did they paddle canoes?***
Yes--the Potawatomi Indian tribe used ***birchbark canoes*** (made of birch bark stretched over a wooden frame) and ***dugout canoes*** (made from hollowed-out logs). Here is a website with information about these [Indian canoe](http://www.native-languages.org/boats.htm#canoes) types. Canoeing is still popular within the Potawatomi nation, though few people handcraft their own canoe anymore. Over land, the Potawatomi tribe used dogs as pack animals. (There were no horses in North America until colonists brought them over from Europe.) Today, of course, Potawatomi people also use cars... and non-native people also use canoes.

***What*** ***was Potawatomi food like in the days before supermarkets?***
The Potawatomi Indians were farming people. Potawatomi women planted and harvested corn, beans, squash, and tobacco, as well as gathering wild rice and berries. The men hunted deer, elk, and wild birds and caught fish. The Potawatomis also tapped trees for maple syrup as Michigan people do today. Here is a website with more information about [Native American Indian food.](http://www.native-languages.org/food.htm)

***What were Potawatomi weapons and tools like in the past?***
Potawatomi hunters and warriors used bows and arrows and wooden clubs. Fishermen used spears and nets. Other Potawatomi tools included spouts and buckets for tapping maple sap, knockers for harvesting wild rice, and snowshoes for traveling in winter. Here is a website with [Native weapon](http://www.native-languages.org/weapons.htm) pictures and information.

***What are Potawatomi arts and crafts like?***
Potawatomi artists are known for their [quill embroidery](http://www.native-languages.org/quillwork.htm), [basketry](http://www.native-languages.org/baskets.htm), and [floral beadwork](http://www.native-languages.org/beadwork.htm). One style of bead embroidery, the [Potawatomi weave](http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art3378.asp), is even named after the Potawatomi tribe (though other tribes made beaded crafts this way too.) Like other eastern American Indians, the Potawatomi also crafted ***wampum*** out of white and purple shell beads. Wampum beads were traded as a kind of currency, but they were more culturally important as an art material. The [designs and pictures](http://www.nativetech.org/wampum/wamppics.htm) on wampum belts often told a story or represented a person's family.

***What other Native Americans did the Potawatomi tribe interact with?***
The Potawatomi were close allies with the [Ojibwe](http://www.native-languages.org/chippewa.htm) and [Ottawa Indians](http://www.native-languages.org/ottawa.htm). The Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi tribes called themselves the ***Council of Three Fires***. The Potawatomi tribe frequently fought with the [Iroquois Confederacy](http://www.bigorrin.org/iroquois_kids.htm) and the [Sioux tribes](http://www.native-languages.org/dakota.htm).

***What kinds of stories do the Potawatomis tell?***
There are many Potawatomi legends and fairy tales. Storytelling is very important to the Potawatomi Indian culture. Here is one legend about [the origins of the Potawatomi tribe](http://www.newsfinder.org/site/more/a_potawatomi_story/). Here's a website where you can read more about [Potawatomi stories](http://www.native-languages.org/potawatomi-legends.htm).

***What about Potawatomi religion?***
Religions are too complicated and culturally sensitive to describe appropriately in only a few simple sentences, and we strongly want to avoid misleading anybody. You can visit this site to learn more about [Potawatomi mythology](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=PokSupe.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all) or this site about [Native American religion](http://www.native-languages.org/religion.htm) in general.

***Can you recommend a good*** ***book for me to read?***
For young children, we recommend [Coyote In Love With A Star](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/0789201623/natilangofthe-20), which is a merry story by a Potawatomi author about the adventures of native trickster Coyote in modern-day New York City. Older kids may enjoy [Night of the Full Moon](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/0679872760/natilangofthe-20), an adventure story about two thirteen-year-old girls (one white, one Potawatomi) in 1840's Michigan. If you want to know more about Potawatomi culture and history, two interesting sources are [The Potawatomi](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0736813683/natilangofthe-20) (for younger kids) and [Potawatomi Indians Today](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1590846753/natilangofthe-20) (for older kids). A more thorough history book is [The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/080612069X/natilangofthe-20). You can also browse through our recommendations of [Native American books](http://www.native-languages.org/books.htm) in general.

***How do I cite your website in my bibliography?***
You will need to ask your teacher for the format he or she wants you to use. The authors' names are Laura Redish and Orrin Lewis and the title of our site is Native Languages of the Americas. We are a nonprofit educational organization working to preserve and protect Native American languages and culture. You can learn more about our organization [here](http://www.native-languages.org/faq.htm). Our website was first created in 1998 and last updated in 2015.

Thanks for your interest in the Potawatomi Indian people and their language!