

The Mandan Trail

Brandon Fort to Missouri River

BEFORE – AND SHORTLY AFTER – EUROPEANS made contact with aboriginal peoples in the Turtle Mountain area, a First Nation group called the Mandan traded in the region. Artifacts such as grinders and pestles that have been found in the area were used exclusively by the agricultural Mandans and prove their trading presence in this area at one point.

Unique among North American First Nations, the Mandan lived for centuries along the Missouri River in permanent, fortified villages out of which they practiced agriculture.

In 1785 Pine Fort was built by the North West Company (NWC) on the bank of the Assiniboine River. It was in that year that trading expeditions from the Assiniboine began seeking out the Mandans to engage them in trade. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was slower to begin trading relations with the Mandan. Their activities didn't move into the Assiniboine Valley until 1793 when they built Brandon House to compete with Pine Fort, only a few miles away. The HBC sent expeditions to the Mandan until 1817.

During this time – from 1785 to 1818 – the Mandan villages along the Missouri saw over 70 trading parties arrive from the Assiniboine River forts. The Mandan had a few commodities that were of interest to the traders. For one they had furs and bison robes. For another they had horticultural products such as beans, squash, and corn. Lastly, the Mandan were ideally situated on the northern plains to become a center for horse trading. The Mandan villages became an important source of horses for Canadian traders.

Trading expeditions travelled

regularly from the Assiniboine River southwest across the plains to the Missouri River and the Mandan villages. The 400 mile journey to the Mandans and back took around 20 days of travel.

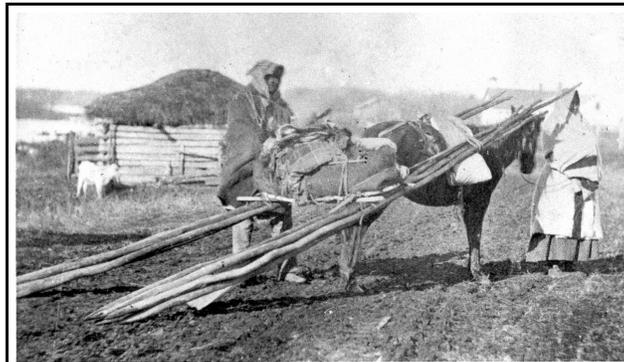
The traders remained with the Mandans anywhere from a few days to several weeks or even months to negotiate the terms of trade.

Several trails were used to reach the Mandan villages. One of the main routes skirted the western slopes of Turtle Mountain and has come to be known as the Mandan Trail. The

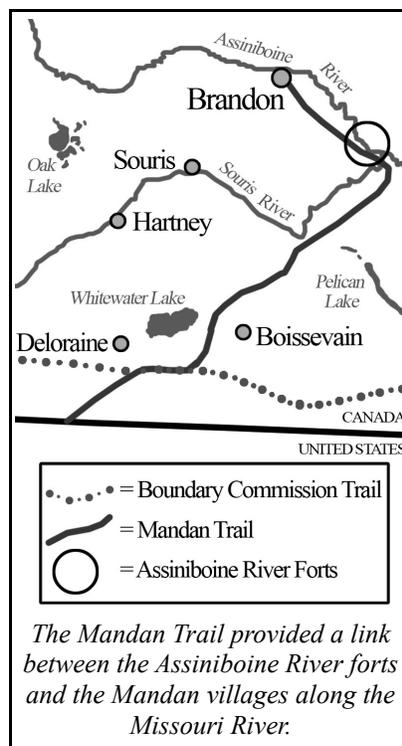
land in and around the trail was likely a migration route for bison, and the path would have been heavily used by First Nations in their pursuit of the animals on which they subsisted. It was also used by the Mandan and other First Nations as a travel and trade route prior to the European presence in North America. The impression of the trail was in fact created by the varying widths of the First Nations' travois: the mode of transportation used to carry furs and personal belongings using first dogs and then

horses (after 1600 AD when horses were introduced to North America). The explorer Pierre de LaVérendrye also used this trail on his expedition to visit the Mandan villages in 1738.

Today the remnants of this trail have been mostly obliterated.



The impression of the Mandan Trail was created by horse-drawn travois.



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