

Menominee Nation Honored for Assisting Victims of Peshtigo Fire

Posted on Nov 07, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



November is National Native American Heritage Month, and we remember the service and sacrifice of the Menominee Nation for their history of helping victims of the Great Peshtigo Fire of 1871.

MADISON - On October 8, 1871, an intense firestorm roared through the village of Peshtigo, Wisconsin and the surrounding area. The Great Peshtigo Fire burned parts of northeastern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan on the same night as the Chicago Fire, however there are little similarities between the two fires.

The prolonged drought and extreme summer heat made conditions in the region tinder dry. Combine that with the 50 miles an hour winds that whipped the area, it was perfect conditions for a firestorm.

Flames from the Peshtigo Fire reached a thousand feet into the sky. The intense heat melted the church bell, turned sand into glass, and caused trees to literally explode into flames. The fire burned a total of 2400 square miles, which is larger than the state of Delaware.



While 250 people lost their lives in the Chicago Fire, the Peshtigo Fire took the lives of an estimated 1,500 people. Some reports note it is possible as many as 2,500 souls perished. The Peshtigo Fire remains the most costly in loss of life in American history.

That fateful autumn, Menominee tribal members knew the forest was too dry. Back in the spring, the Menominee worried they would not have enough food for the winter. Elders warned the settlers large fires were on the way, but few paid attention to the words of the Natives.

One settler, named Abraham Price, defied convention. He married a Menominee woman, Elizabeth. They had one son, Henry. He built a trading business in a Menominee village. Even though some of his white neighbors looked down on him, Abraham was considered a “substantial citizen” owning 800 acres of land. The tribe and his family worked closely, with Mr. Price respecting Menominee knowledge.

Mr. Price took great care to heed the Elders’ warnings of possible large fires. He and his extended tribal family prepared for the risk of fire by plowing large circles of land around their home to form a barrier between it and the forest.

As the firestorm approached, Mr. Price and his extended family protected their house by covering the roof with water-soaked burlap bags and blankets. One of the tribal members pumped water steadily for nine hours showing “an endurance possessed by very few white men.”

When the Great Fire receded, only one building was left standing – the home and trading post of Abraham Price and his Menominee extended family.

That lone-standing building became the center of recovery efforts. Mr. Price and the surviving members of the Menominee Nation welcomed other survivors regardless of their race. His home became a field hospital and the tribe provided emergency care for victims. Later, the home

became the survivors' protection for the fast-approaching winter.

The history of the tribe assisting the victims of the Great Peshtigo Fire has largely gone unrecognized. However, in October, the city of Peshtigo recognized the Tribe.



At a recent public hearing of the Legislature's State Tribal Relations Committee, our Chairman, Representative Jeffrey Mursau, presented long-neglected honors to Tribal Lawmaker Representative Gary Beesaw.

In accepting the recognition, former Tribal Chairman Beesaw said, "We are all related... all tribes understand there are the four colors of [peoples] in our prayers – red, yellow, white, and black. We are all related. When we say our prayers and when we have our ceremonies, we pray for all of us because it is important that we do that. The Creator loves all of us, so we do that. Sometimes it seems like we have disagreements politically, and those pale compared to something like this that speaks of what really is important."

Every November, we celebrate National Native American Heritage Month. We remember and celebrate the achievement and contributions of our Native people. We remember our ancestors who benefited from the kindness and service of our Native Heroes.

We also celebrate the work of Tribal members today. These Native Heroes work tirelessly to create communities of support. We are deeply grateful for our Native Tribal members who teach children Native languages and culture, serve our veterans (who are disproportionately from Native Tribes), care for our Elders and those suffering from addiction and mental illness. And we owe profound gratitude for Tribal members work tirelessly to protect Mother Earth and all its riches.

We are blessed by their service and sacrifice.

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