



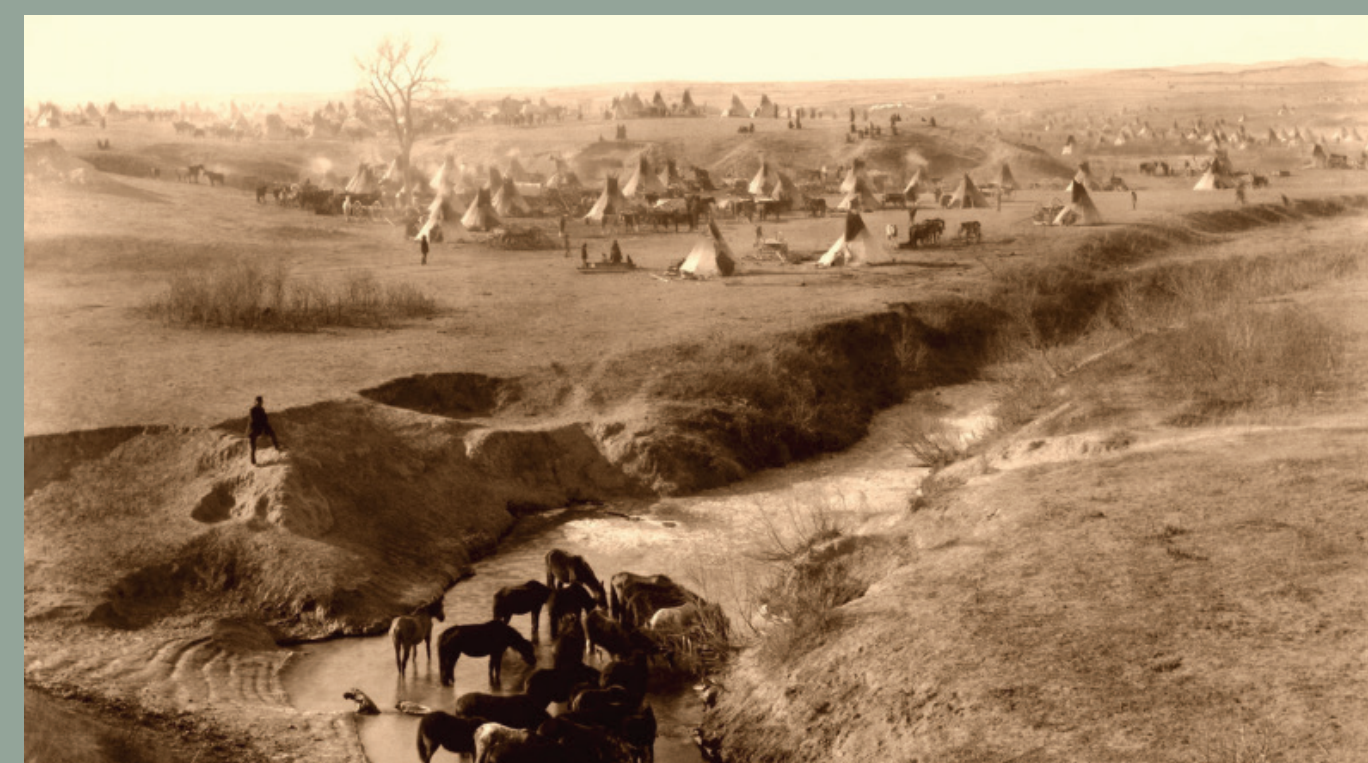
# History of Iowa's Prairies

## Land Acknowledgment

The Willowwind School is located on the homelands of the Ojibwe/Anishinaabe (Chippewa), Báxoje (Iowa), Kikapú (Kickapoo), Omãeqnomenēwak (Menominee), Myaamiaki (Miami), Nutachi (Missouri), Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> (Omaha), Wahzhazhe (Osage), Jiwere (Otoe), Odawaa (Ottawa), Pá<sup>n</sup>ka (Ponca), Bodéwadmi/Neshabé (Potawatomi), Meskwaki/Nemahahaki/Sakiwaki (Sac and Fox), Dakota/Lakota/Nakoda (Sioux), Sahnish/Nuxbaaga/Nuweta (Three Affiliated Tribes) and Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) Nations. The following tribal nations, Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> (Omaha Tribe of Nebraska and Iowa), Pá<sup>n</sup>ka (Ponca Tribe of Nebraska), Meskwaki (Sac and Fox of the Mississippi in Iowa), and Ho-Chunk (Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska) Nations continue to thrive in the State of Iowa and we continue to acknowledge them. The Willowwind School recognizes that it is our responsibility to acknowledge the sovereignty and the traditional territories of these tribal nations, and the treaties that were used to remove these tribal nations, and the histories of dispossession that have allowed for the growth of Iowa City, Iowa State, and the United States.



The above photograph was taken between 1880-1890 and shows a Meskwaki woman and child next to their wigwag, made from bark and grass.  
Photo via the State Historical Society of Iowa



Sioux Indian camp along the Missouri River in South Dakota's grasslands.  
Photo via the Library of Congress, Grabbill, John C. H., 1891

## Once Upon a Time

The Iowa prairie originated about ten thousand years ago, following the retreat of Iowa's most recent glaciers. The glaciers left behind a landscape that became a productive prairie ecosystem over time. Warm, dry climatic conditions favored the establishment of prairie plants throughout Iowa and much of the Midwest.



Can you guess what made the marks on this giant boulder? These striations were carved into the rock by the movement of glaciers in our region over 10,000 years ago.  
Photo credit: National Park Service

## Early Prairie Inhabitants

For thousands of years before European settlement, Indigenous people lived, foraged, and hunted on Iowa's prairies. The earliest evidence of people living in Iowa is about 13,000 years old. In time, these people grew crops, improved food-storage, built permanent houses, and created intricate social networks, making village-based life possible across the vast prairies of our state.

These Indigenous communities had a great respect for the land and wildlife that also called the prairie home. People and prairie communities flourished. As European settlers moved in, Indigenous tribes were pushed out of their prairie homeland to make room for the settlers' new way of life.

Today, there is only one federally recognized tribe in Iowa, the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi. Now part of the Meskwaki Nation, many members live on a settlement in Tama, Iowa. The tribe continues efforts to purchase and regain ownership of the land that their ancestors once inhabited.

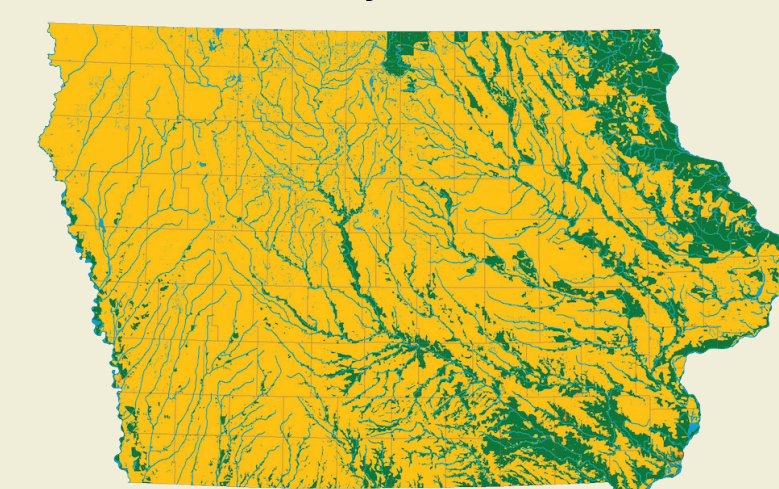
## Wildlife on the Prairie

Historically, Iowa prairies supported diverse wildlife specially adapted to life in the open grasslands. Large mammals like bison, elk, antelope, and wolves once thrived here. As Iowa prairies were converted to farms and towns, some wildlife became confined to small prairie remnants. Some species adapted to life in road ditches, farm pastures, and other areas of human development. Many did not. It is doubtful large prairie mammals will ever again roam freely in Iowa.



While not entirely free, buffalo herds still roam and graze on protected prairies in Iowa.  
Photo credit: National Park Service

Iowa Land Survey 1830s-1850s



■ Prairie (map 1) / Grass/Pasture (map 2)  
■ Woodlands/Brush ■ Wetlands/Rivers

1700s

European settlement increases, threatening Iowa's prairie land and its native tribes. At this time, about 80% of Iowa was prairie.

1804

The Louisiana Purchase results in the removal of many tribes from their native prairie lands. European settlement increases exponentially.

1837

The steel plow is invented and in the century to come, millions of acres of prairie will be converted to farmland.

2000s

Less than 0.01% of Iowa's original prairie remains today. About 90% of Iowa's land is now being farmed.

Iowa Land Survey 2009



Maps via INHF.org

## Years of Change

Prairies were largely ignored by early pioneer farmers because the thick mat of grasses and dense, deep root systems could not be worked by hand.

In 1837, John Deere invented the steel plow. This new device could cut through the dense prairie sod and by the 1850s, Iowa farmers were using the plow to farm some of the most fertile agricultural land in the world. This marked the end of the Iowa prairie as it was.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Iowa's prairies were essentially gone. Thirty million acres of prairie were converted to farmland in less than 80 years.



The Loess Hills in western Iowa contain some of the largest prairie remnants in the state. These areas were likely left untouched because the hills could not be farmed.  
Photo credit: National Park Service

## Prairies Today

Few true remnants of Iowa's vast prairies can still be found today. Many organizations and individuals throughout the state are working hard to reconstruct, revive, and protect our crucial native prairie spaces.

Although it is not possible to restore the extensive biological community that was once the Iowa prairie, we can, on a smaller scale, create spaces for native prairie plants and restore some of the lost habitat for wildlife that depend on it. Willowwind's prairie strips provide just a hint of the vast ecosystem that once thrived throughout our state.