

Native American Life

A Self-Guided Tour of Pope Farm Conservancy



Tour Length: One and a half hours

Please note—tour trail covers moderate to steep terrain.

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Welcome!: This self-guided tour will take you on a journey back and forth through time to celebrate the Native American history of Pope Farm Conservancy and its environs.

Station 1: Native American Heritage Garden (AD 1000)

The heritage garden furthest from Old Sauk Road (closest to the hill) is a recreation of the kind of garden planted by Native Americans in Dane County 1,000 years ago. That was a special time in Wisconsin's farming history. Wisconsin's Native peoples began to garden over 2,000 years ago. They grew crops native to the Midwest, like sunflowers, squash, gourds, goosefoot (a relative of quinoa), may grass, little barley, marsh elder, and erect knotweed. They did not grow corn. Corn was first domesticated and planted in Mexico, and spread slowly northward from garden to garden until it reached Wisconsin around AD 1000. As corn gained favor, some of the older crop plants were forgotten. This heritage garden represents the brief period of time when both old and new crops were grown together.

The center of the 1,000-Year Garden is occupied by a small ridged field. At that time, Native American farmers shaped their garden plots into parallel earthen ridges. If you are visiting in mid-to-late summer, the ridges may be hidden under squash and gourd vines. The leaves of the squash and gourds help shade the soil, protect it from erosion, and hold in moisture, which benefits the corn.

Station 2: Trade and Travel (AD 1000 – AD 1850)

Walk to the picnic area by the upper parking lot (the grassy lawn with picnic tables in it). Once there, turn and look past the upper parking lot to the valley beyond. The first Euro-American surveyors found a deep trail running from Madison's lakes through this valley and westward to the Blue Mounds. Effigy (animal-shaped) mounds once spaced along the trail confirmed that it was created at least 1,000 years ago. Travelers heading west followed the trail to the Mississippi River. Travelers heading east found themselves at the northwest shore of Lake Mendota, where another trail segment forked northward to the portage between the Wisconsin and Fox rivers.

Looking at the valley today, can you imagine groups of excited children, chatting women, or weary travelers walking along the trail? The women might be traveling to gardens or planning to visit relatives in the villages around Lake Mendota. Perhaps the children are heading out to hunt small game. The travelers could be laden with packs containing valuable trade goods like copper, pipestone, obsidian, sea shells, or cloth woven from bison fur.

Surveyors, lead miners, and settlers followed this trail westward into the Lead District of southwestern Wisconsin. Soldiers used it to travel from Fort Winnebago (modern Portage, Wisconsin) to Fort Crawford (modern Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin), giving it its later name: "The Military Road".

Station 3: Hunters (6000 BC – AD 500)

Walk to the Native American signs and stone circle in the picnic area. The sign labeled "*12,000 Years of Human History*" in the Native American circle features photographs of ancient artifacts found in the Conservancy. These are not arrow points. They were used to tip long, flexible 'darts' thrown with atlatls (spearthrowers). The largest stone tool may have been a flint hoe. If so, it is the oldest evidence of farming in what is now Pope Farm Conservancy, made sometime between 2,000 and 1,000 years ago).

Most of the dart points found here are not broken. This suggests that they were lost by hunters instead of being thrown away. Errant darts that landed in deep snow or tall prairie grass were very hard to find again! The oldest dart point found here was made between 8,000 and 5,000 years ago. The youngest was made about 1,500 years ago.

Small chips of chert (also called flint) found on the top and sides of this hill suggest that hunters rested here while they re-sharpened damaged dart points and other stone tools.

The signs in this interpretive circle provide additional information about the Native history of Wisconsin. Please take a moment to read them and then enjoy the view.

Station 4: History in View (11000 BC to AD 1800)

Next, go to the top of the hill. Turn away from the gardens and parking lots and take in the view of the Black Earth Valley. You are looking at 12,000 years of history! At the end of the last ice age, Black Earth Creek was a swollen, gravelly, braided stream, milky with pulverized rock dust. Lake Mendota and its sister lakes were part of a much larger lake known as Glacial Lake Yahara. Looking towards Glacial Lake Yahara, you might have seen herds of caribou being pursued by hunters, or mammoths protecting a newborn calf from a pack of wolves.

As the climate warmed and forests returned, Native peoples adapted. They learned which plants were good to eat, and where tool stone and other raw materials could be found. They settled into a seasonal routine that took them to lakes, rivers, and marshes in warmer weather and into uplands to harvest hickory nuts in the fall. Temperatures continued to rise, and oak savannah and prairie spread across Wisconsin. When the climate began to cool again, Wisconsin's residents set prairie fires to keep the forests from returning.

By AD 1000, the Madison area was home to a large community of effigy mound builders. Hundreds of mounds ringed the lakeshores and topped the hills surrounding them. Gardens, villages, and trails were proof that Dane County was a good place to live.

Then, around that time, strangers from the vicinity of modern St. Louis brought a new religion, new tools, and new ways of farming to Wisconsin. The effigy builders of central Dane County moved a short distance south and joined other Wisconsin residents in a series of booming farming villages on the shores of Lake Koshkonong. The Madison area remained largely abandoned for centuries, until Ho-Chunk settled here in the early 1800s.

Station 5: Winter (11000 BC to AD 1920s)

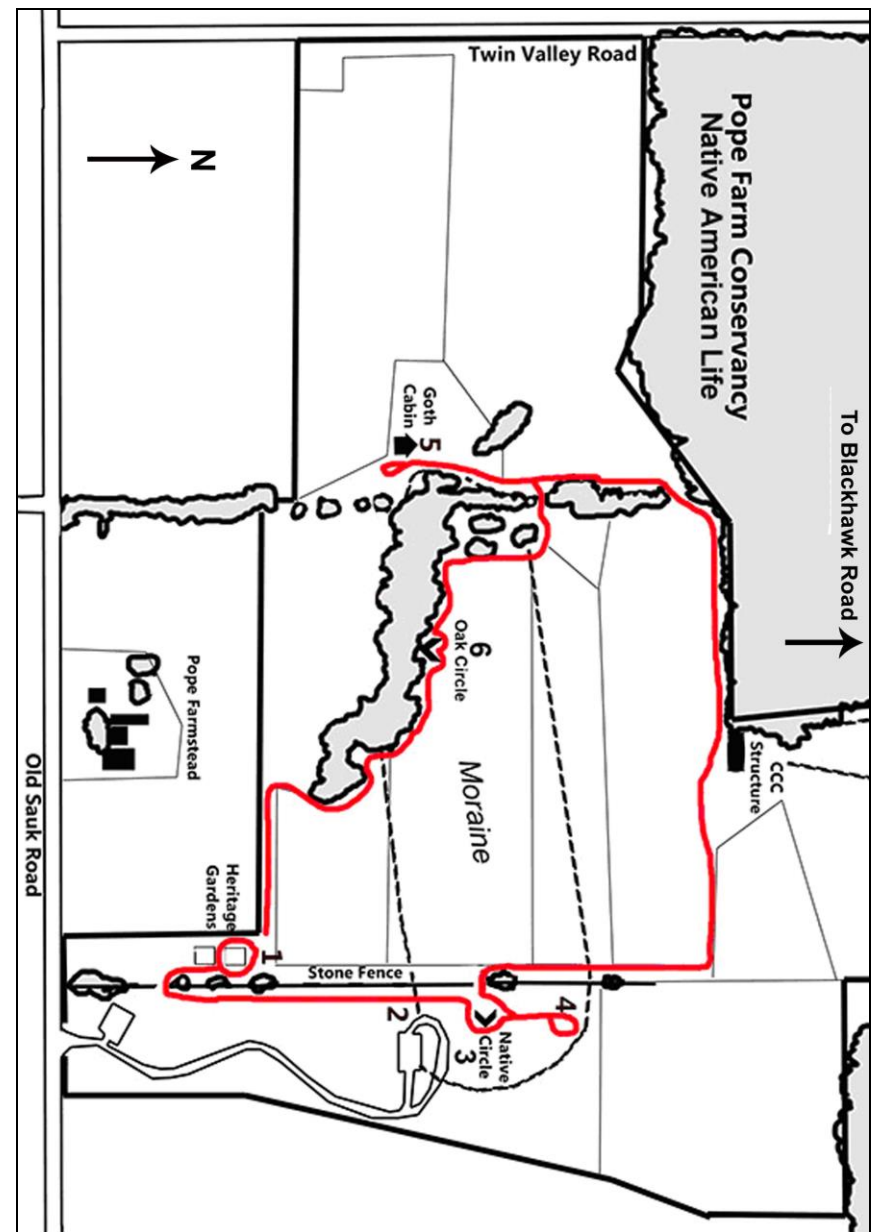
Go through the gap in the fence and walk down the hill towards the Black Earth Valley. At the bottom of the hill, turn left and walk past the forest and circle around the back side of the hill. On the far side is a little valley. This valley was home to the Goth family—tenant farmers who built a small cabin and planted an apple orchard. They probably chose this valley because it faced south and provided shelter from Wisconsin's cruel winter winds. Find the sign that depicts the cabin and you can learn more. Wisconsin's Native peoples faced the same choices, and survived 13,000 winters in small, sheltered valleys much like this. A lucky few groups in western Wisconsin made rock shelters their homes. Those living in areas the glaciers covered, however, had less substantial roofs over their heads. Archaeologists have found the marks left behind by bent-pole wigwam-type structures at some ancient sites. Most of the houses were only big enough to hold a small family. They would have been covered with reeds, mats, bark, or furs, and heated by a small fire in the center of the floor.

Station 6: Nuts and Prairie Fires (8000 BC to AD 1830s)

Walk back the way you came until you see the first trail to your right. Turn right, and keep turning right until you reach the stone circle in the oak grove on the hill. These trees are a remnant of the oak savannah environment that once covered much of southern Wisconsin. Though Wisconsin's savannahs and prairies are often described as 'natural', southern Wisconsin's climate actually favors the growth of scrub and closed canopy forest. Native peoples created and maintained Wisconsin's open prairies and savannahs by setting periodic prairie fires. Over many thousands of years, their fires created a crazy-quilt pattern of oak and hickory groves, maple groves, prairies, savannahs, lowland forests, and wetlands. The diverse patchwork of environments provided all that Wisconsin's Native residents needed—all within short walking distances of their homes. This patchwork was also good for a wide range of game animals, from deer, to turkey, to elk and even the occasional bison, making Wisconsin's hunting lands some of the best in the region.

Thank You for Taking This Tour!

The Pope Farm Conservancy exists to help people learn about our heritage and our land. We are fortunate that it preserves so much of Wisconsin's history. Thank you for visiting, and we hope you come again!



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