

# Chief Pontiac

The Odawa chief called Pontiac was known in his village as Obwandiyag. He was likely born about 1720 somewhere along the Detroit River. One of his parents was Odawa and he was raised in that tradition.

Descriptions of Pontiac as an adult are contradictory. Contemporaries described him as “remarkably well-looking,...of medium stature,” or “a tall man, not handsome.” He had several wives and at least one son.

By the age of 25 or 30, Pontiac was a powerful war chief and allied his tribe with the French. Britain’s domination of the Great Lakes after 1760 caused Pontiac to instigate regional efforts to defeat them. The most famous was “Pontiac’s Conspiracy,” native uprisings that occurred simultaneously at forts around the Great Lakes in 1763.

That unsuccessful rebellion represented one of the last concerted efforts to defend Native American supremacy in the North Country. After capitulating to the English, Pontiac was removed as chief. He was killed in 1769 at Cahokia, Illinois.



# Chief Pontiac's Detroit

At the time of Pontiac's childhood, the Detroit River was lined with several villages. They were inhabited by various bands of Odawa, Huron, and Potawatomi. Seasonally these towns swelled from a few hundred people to several thousand.

An Odawa village sat on the south side of the river near Wahnabezee (Belle Isle). Hurons gathered near the mission at Sandwich. Potawatomi occupied a site near Springwells. Other bands were frequent visitors.

The area's smallest settlement was a stockaded group of French homes and warehouses called Detroit. In 1740 there were perhaps two dozen troops in residence and roughly one hundred families lodged at the fort or scattered on narrow farms to the east and west.

1760 saw a British force of about 130 troops take charge of the fort, accompanied by perhaps 40 traders and their employees. The ever-expanding French population numbered several hundred households.



# Hero?

Pontiac is one of the most well-known Anishnaabek\* leaders. He orchestrated a military campaign against English forces occupying the North American Great Lakes region in 1763, consolidating a wide variety of tribes to assault multiple Forts spread over six states. That so many warriors from different tribes participated, including Odawa, Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Wyandot, Wea, Sauk, Seneca, Delaware, Shawnee and Menominee, proves the respect that each had for him.

For these independent bands to be coordinated – there were no central governments – demonstrated Pontiac's exceptional ability as a politician and war chief. Only a few generations earlier, the Odawa and Ojibwa tribes were embroiled in a vicious campaign against the Seneca. Under the leadership of Pontiac, these two warring factions set aside old hostilities to focus their efforts against a common enemy, the English.

Using a variety of ruses, trickery and decisive combat actions, the Indian forces took an amazing eight out of twelve English Forts in the Great Lakes and upper Mississippi regions in the matter of a few months.

Pontiac was a hero to many because he took action against imperial aggression and the ever-encroaching white population. He fought to preserve traditional ways of living and opposed those who disregarded Native rights as the original occupants of the land.

\**Anishnaabek* is the Odawa word for North American's original inhabitants.



# Villain?

Perhaps the greatest disappointment for his fellow Anishnaabek\* was Chief Pontiac's failure to accomplish his stated goal: He never succeeded in expelling the zhagonosh – English – from their homelands.

Pontiac's inability to capture Fort Detroit proved to be the turning point of the campaign to expel the English. With Detroit under English control, a counteroffensive resulted in the English retaking the Great Lakes posts that they had previously lost. Many different tribes were drawn to the campaign, but Pontiac received criticism for omitting or alienating some crucial players. Not included in his plans were fellow Odawas of the Little Traverse band. This group was numerous and had produced great war chiefs such as Sakima, Charles Lelanglade and the Trout.

Additionally, several of his allies sent delegations to Detroit and upbraided Pontiac for his vicious battle tactics. Kinonchamek, son of the Ojibwa chief at Michilimackinac, asked in his father's stead, "Thou hast taken prisoners upon the lake, and the river, and after having brought them to thy camp thou hast killed them, and drunk their blood, and eaten their flesh. Is the flesh of men good for food?"

Among the European population on the Great Lakes – both British and French – Pontiac was much reviled and feared. British officers who attempted to negotiate with him considered him duplicitous. Gradually he also lost the trust of his fellow Anishnaabek.

In 1766 Pontiac brokered a peace treaty with the British, after which he lost influence and authority and was removed as chief.

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