

Challenges, Choices, Changes: DuSable in Checagou

When you read a history, you can learn a lot if you think about ideas.

What challenges did people make?

What choices did they make?

What changed because of those choices?

This is a history about a time in Chicago when a person faced difficult challenges. That person, Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, chose to stay and meet them. The choices he made affected people then and even affected people today. As you learn about this history, think about challenges, choices, and changes.

The History

Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable came to Chicago more than 200 years ago. Chicago was a very small place then, and living here was a struggle. Every day was a challenge. The environment was challenging—each season brought problems. Winters were harsh, full of snow and cold weather. Then came spring, and while it was warmer, it rained a lot, so it was a time of rain and mud. Then it was summer, and Chicago was hot and full of mosquitoes.

The weather wasn't the only challenge. There were no stores so if you needed something you had to bring it when you moved here or make it yourself.

There weren't any roads. There were paths that the Native Americans had made, but in winter those were icy and in spring and summer and autumn when it rained they were muddy messes.

So it was difficult to survive. When DuSable came to Chicago he probably knew about those challenges. But still he chose to stay. DuSable must have been a visionary, someone who sees possibilities.

When he came, Native Americans lived in the area. They traded with each other, but usually they made the things they needed. They built their own homes. They made their own tools.

DuSable chose to come to Chicago to start a business, a trading post, that would help the Native Americans and the people who moved to Chicago. At a trading post, you trade one thing for another. He built a home that he used for that business. He had to put that building together—there was no hotel, no place to stay. So he probably had to camp outside until he built it. At first it was just one room. But soon he built more rooms because his business did well.

At first, DuSable traded with the Potawatomi, Native Americans who had lived in this area for many years. He traded tools to them for furs they got by hunting animals, using spears, arrows, and traps. They would make fish nets to catch fish and use shells to get them to sink under the water. They would empty the shell and fill it with water so it would weigh the net down. Then when they caught their fish and were ready to leave, they would empty out the water from the shells so it would be easier to carry to nets

DuSable thought that pioneers would move to Chicago to settle. He was right—they did come here. DuSable traded with settlers who were moving to this area and brought hopes but also many needs. They moved here without all the tools and supplies they would need to build homes and survive in the challenging environment.

This a conversation a pioneer might have had with DuSable at the trading post.

Pioneer: "I hear that the Natives call this place Checagou. What does that mean?"

DuSable: "It means place of the smelly wild onion. They name this place Checagou because winter is so difficult here. The Natives dry food and store it for winter, but it's hard to get more food—when the lake is frozen you can't fish. So they hunt then. But still it's hard. In spring the first plant that shows up is the wild onion. It's the first fresh plant food to eat each year. So they named this place after that plant."

Pioneer: "That's going to be a problem for us, too. Can we trade you something for food. It's May now, but winter will be coming. And do you have any tools we can use to plant?"

DuSable: "Yes. What do you want to trade for the tools?"

The pioneers were able to stay in Checagou because of the trading post. Soon after DuSable opened his business, more and more pioneers moved to this location to settle. DuSable's vision was correct—Chicago was becoming a destination that would keep growing.

DuSable sold the trading post and moved on in 1800. He left a legacy, however. The trading post had been a kind of anchor of the growing community. In 1968 Chicago declared DuSable the “Father of Chicago”. I think that is a well-deserved tribute. DuSable is responsible for Chicago's start, so he enabled it to make progress. His trading post was the starting point for Chicago today. He started what would become the city in which millions live today.

What did you learn from this history?

- What **challenges** did people face?
- What **choices** did they make?
- What **changed** because of those choices?

You can ask those questions about this history and any history! Explain what you learned from this one.