



25 NORTH DAKOTA FREEDOM MINUTES FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS



As our nation approaches **America 250**, the 250th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, **ND250** highlights North Dakota's unique role in the American story.

This milestone invites reflection on our shared history while inspiring the next generation to understand and shape our nation's future. To support classroom engagement, ND250 offers 25 one-sentence "Freedom Minutes"—ready-to-use facts designed to spark brief, meaningful conversations that connect North Dakota's history, heritage, and contributions to the broader story of the United States.



The 25 Facts

Unit 1: Back Through Time (Paleozoic – 1200)

1. North Dakota sits on top of one of the biggest underground bowls of rock in North America called the Williston Basin – and over millions of years, plants and tiny sea animals buried there turned into oil, natural gas, and coal that people still use today.

Source Link: [*The Williston Basin*](#)

2. North Dakota's rivers are geological teenagers – they're still young in Earth's history! Because the Missouri and Red Rivers are so new, the Red River Valley is super flat (great for farming), and the Missouri River sometimes has valleys up to six miles wide from its long formation story – all thanks to glaciers and ancient lakes.

Source Link: [*The Missouri River and the Red River*](#)

3. The first known people to enter what is now North Dakota came here about 13,000 years ago just as glaciers were melting, stopping near present-day Beach long enough to make stone tools, then kept moving while hunting giant animals like mastodons.

Source Link: [*The People and Their Tools*](#)

4. Ancient people in what is now North Dakota did more than trade nearby – they exchanged stone tools, food knowledge, shells from the ocean, and even copper with groups far away, showing that wide trade networks connected many places long before towns and highways existed.

Source Link: [*Making A Living - Trade*](#)

5. The oldest known village in North Dakota was called Naze Village, where around 400 B.C. people built log houses, made pottery, dried meat, and lived together near good water – kind of like an ancient neighborhood on the plains.

Source Link: [*Ancient Villages*](#)

6. Long before North Dakota was a state, the earliest people who lived here were nomads – they moved around 12–20 times a year hunting and foraging food, water, and shelter before some finally settled down in villages around 1200 A.D.

Source Link: [*Migrations to North Dakota*](#)

7. Ancient people in what is now North Dakota sometimes built palisade walls—tall log fences around their villages—because they expected possible fights over things like food and hunting land long before Europeans arrived.

Source Link: [*Conflict Among Ancient People*](#)

Unit 2: A Time of Transformation (1201 – 1860)

8. North Dakota is like a giant staircase of land — the ground starts super flat in the Red River Valley in the east, gets a little bumpier in the Drift Prairie, and ends up highest in the Missouri Plateau with badlands and hills all the way in the west.

Source Link: [*The Three Regions of North Dakota*](#)

9. A fur trader named Alexander Henry the Younger lived at a small fort on the Pembina River around 1800 and kept super detailed journals about the animals in northern North Dakota — even climbing a tall oak tree each morning to watch bison herds and wildlife before trading their hides.

Source Link: [*Section 1: Introduction | 8th Grade North Dakota Studies*](#)

10. On the Great Plains, tribes like the Lakotas, Mandans, and Hidatsas organized big summer hunts every year because bison weren't just food — tribes used nearly every part of the animal for meat, tools, clothes, shelter, and even toys.

Source Link: [*Making A Living - Bison Hunting*](#)

11. Long before North Dakota had towns, explorers like Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de La Vérendrye and later Lewis and Clark came here mostly by boat or on foot to map rivers, plants, animals, and Native villages — helping others know where water, food, and good routes were long before railroads or farms grew up.

Source Link: [*Explorers of North Dakota*](#)

12. When Europeans first met Native peoples, they traded more than cloth and horses — they also unintentionally passed along deadly germs like smallpox, which spread to Native communities that had no immunity and caused huge outbreaks in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Source Link: [*Alliances and Conflicts*](#)

13. The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes formed a strong alliance on the Northern Plains by living close together—sharing villages, trade, and protection—long before North Dakota was a state.

Source Link: [*The Three Tribes*](#)

14. When the U.S. bought the Louisiana Territory in 1803, President Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore it — and part of their mission was to make friends and trade with Native tribes along the Missouri River! But even though they gathered lots of info and avoided big fights, they didn't totally understand how powerful and smart the Teton Dakota traders were.

Source Link: [*Diplomacy, Trade, and War*](#)



Unit 3: Waves of Development (1861-1920)

15. When North Dakota and South Dakota became states in 1889, President Benjamin Harrison signed the papers in secret and shuffled them so no one would know which state became official first – so to this day, we don't know whether North Dakota or South Dakota was admitted first.

Source Link: [*Territories and State Boundaries*](#)

16. The capital of Dakota Territory was originally in Yankton, but in 1883 political leaders and railroad boosters secretly moved it to Bismarck – even stopping their commission before it reached Yankton by calling a meeting early on the train so Yankton residents couldn't block the vote.

Source Link: [*Relocating the Capital*](#)

17. In the 1800s, some explorers labeled the northern Plains a “Great American Desert,” but after the Homestead Act of 1862, farmers proved the land could produce massive wheat crops – earning North Dakota the nickname “King Wheat.”

Source Link: [*Making A Living - Farming*](#)

18. On North Dakota homesteads in the late 1800s, women often did far more than cook and sew – they milked cows, raised chickens, tended gardens, kept financial records, and sometimes even filed homestead claims in their own names, playing a direct role in building the state's farming economy.

Source Link: [*Women and Farming*](#)

19. In the late 1800s, North Dakota's bonanza farms sometimes covered 10,000 acres or more and were operated by investors using hired managers and large crews. Their scale and organization made them some of the most efficient wheat-producing operations in the nation at the time.

Source Link: [*Bonanza Farms*](#)

20. The very first county fair in North Dakota was held in Fargo in 1873 – and farmers used fairs to show off their vegetables, livestock, and crops, proving that farming really could succeed on the northern Great Plains.

Source Link: [*Fairs and 4H*](#)



Unit 4: Modern North Dakota (1921 – Present)

21. After years of terrible droughts and floods along the Missouri River in the 1930s and 1940s, engineers finally built Garrison Dam in central North Dakota to control flooding and store water – creating Lake Sakakawea, one of the largest lakes in the United States.

Source Link: [Garrison Dam and Diversion](#)

22. Just like North Dakota was once known as the wheat frontier, today it's on the energy frontier – with huge amounts of lignite coal, shale oil, and even enough wind power potential to replace all the U.S. power plants.

Source Link: [Energy](#)

23. On some North Dakota reservations, tribes turned long-standing economic challenges into opportunity by creating their own businesses – including manufacturing companies and other industries – that help provide jobs and skills for tribal members, showing that tribal entrepreneurship goes well beyond just casinos.

Source Link: [Casinos and Tribal Industries](#)

24. North Dakota farmers and neighbors formed co-ops – businesses owned by the members themselves – so they could pool their money and buying power to get better prices on supplies and services like electricity or groceries, even in tiny towns.

Source Link: [Cooperatives](#)

25. During the Cold War from the 1950s to the 1980s, North Dakota became a major part of America's defense – with over 300 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) hidden in silos across its plains! Even though these missiles were never fired, seeing them in farm country made the Cold War feel very real for people here.

Source Link: [The Cold War in North Dakota](#)



**FOR MORE
INFORMATION**

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