

Removal of Indians from Michigan Precursor to Negotiations with the Potawatomi

Although politicians in Washington generally thought of removal in terms of relocating Indian tribes to the vast expanses of land west of the Mississippi River where whites had not settled, parts of the Old Northwest Territory were also seen as potential Indian territories. As late as 1825 the Secretary of War suggested removing tribes in Ohio, New York, Indiana, and southern Michigan to land west of Lake Michigan and north of Illinois; today's Wisconsin and Michigan's upper peninsula. Because the Chippewa and Odawa lands were initially of little interest to white settlers, the government had not waste energy seeking to relocate these two tribes. Rather, government relocation efforts focused on Michigan's Potawatomi. The Potawatomi occupied fertile agricultural land in southwestern Michigan that in the 1820s and 1830s had become sought after by whites for farms.

Efforts to remove the Potawatomi and other Great Lakes tribes were complicated. In particular the Great Lakes region posed difficult military problems because of the possibility that the Indians might ally themselves with a hostile European power. In the South there was no potential European ally to whom Indians could turn when the federal army ruthlessly assembled and removed them. In contrast, the Great Lakes tribes had easy access to British Canada. The Indians of the region had largely sided with the British both during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The British remembered and continued to cultivate this support. Well into the 1830s the British military annually presented "gifts" to their former Indian allies, both those living in Canada and those who lived in the United States. In the Great Lakes region, the American government had to consider the unsettling possibility that should an Indian war occur His Majesty's army might directly or indirectly support the Indians.

Further complicating removal in Michigan was the policy begun in 1817 of granting "reserves" to tribes as part of treaties they signed. In the many land cession titles of the era a "reserve" was simply a relatively small tract of land within the tribe's historic area of occupation over which Indians continued to exercise control. Although the federal government quickly came to regret agreeing to reserves, tribal negotiators were adamant that they be included in all future treaties. So strong was the Indians sentiment that, despite President Jackson's wishes, in 1833 Secretary of War Lewis Cass (former territorial governor of Michigan) instructed the commissioners authorized to negotiate a removal treaty with the Potawatomi to grant reserves if essential to obtaining the treaty:

Decline, in the first instances, to grant any reservations either to the Indians or others, and endeavor to prevail upon them all to remove. Should you find this impracticable, and that granting some reservations will be unavoidable, that course may be taken in the usual manner, and upon the usual conditions."

By 1828 the Potawatomi had surrendered much of their land to the federal government. However, the tribe still held significant amounts of land in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. In 1832 the Potawatomi surrendered virtually all of their remaining claims in these four states. To obtain this concession, however, the federal government was forced to include in the treaties one hundred and twenty Potawatomi reserves. Because this large number of reserves was so obviously at odds with President Jackson's removal policy, the federal government called for a new treaty, to be negotiated in the fall of 1833 at Chicago.

Removal

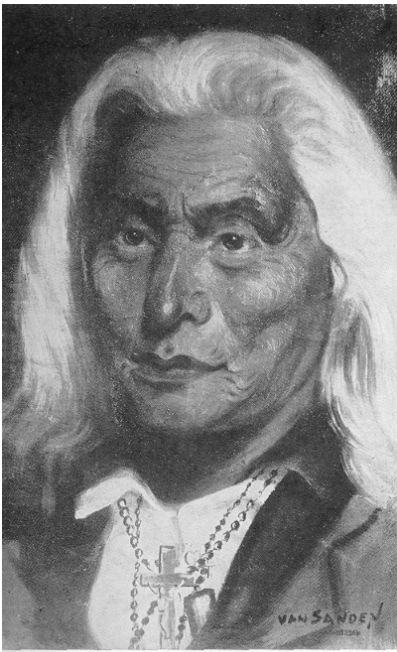
In 1833 approximately 6,000 to 7,000 Potawatomi lived in Michigan. Over the next several years some Potawatomi left Michigan for the western United States. Approximately 1,200 joined with their western kin and relocated to the Sugar Creek Reservation in eastern Kansas. Although some descendants of these migrants still live in Kansas, most of the Potawatomi at Sugar Creek were again relocated in the 1860s to Oklahoma.

Perhaps 1,500 to 2,500 Michigan Potawatomi fled to Canada. Immigration to Canada became particularly attractive in 1837. In that year the British government, honoring longstanding American complaints, finally agreed to stop giving annual presents to Indians resident in the United States. However, to partially mitigate the results of this policy, Britain invited these American Indians to live in Canada. British officials invited the Michigan Potawatomi to settle on Manitoulin Island on Georgian Bay. Although the Potawatomi generally disliked that barren island, many Potawatomi settled with other Native Americans on Walpole Island, on the Sarnia reserve, on Kettle Point, and on Parry Island.

Other Potawatomi avoided relocation by hiding in Michigan. Some took refuge in remote places such as the marshes along the lower Galien River in Berrien County or the headwater of the Kalamazoo River. Others fled north. Hiding was a temporary solution. Eventually those who fled either migrated to Canada, moved west, or quietly returned to their old homes after the federal soldiers were gone.

Negotiating the Chicago Treaty

The Potawatomi gathered in Chicago were sharply divided on the question of removal. The Prairie bands of Wisconsin and Illinois, accustomed to prairie life, were willing to negotiate on the point. In contrast the Michigan Potawatomi were determined to avoid removal. Opposition to the idea was so strong among the Michigan Potawatomi that, according to one white traveler,



CHIEF LEOPOLD POKAGON

Chief Leopold Pokagon

the tribal members accompanying those appointed to negotiate the treaty had been ordered by village meetings to assassinate anyone who might agree to removal.

Ultimately the Michigan bands broke ranks. Some Michigan Potawatomi agreed to relocate with the Prairie bands. However, Leopold Pokagon, representing three villages from southwestern Michigan, refused to yield.

He became an effective spokesperson for those Potawatomi seeking to stay in Michigan.

The situation was sufficiently complicated that two treaties were signed. On September 26 the Prairie Potawatomi agreed to cede their remaining reservations and relocate on land west of the Mississippi River. On the 27th, the Michigan bands signed a separate treaty in which they agreed to cede their remaining reservations and relocate west within three years. However, a supplementary article gave a minority of the Michigan Potawatomi the right to remain in Michigan if they relocated to the Odawa community of L'arbre Croche.

Four scattered Michigan Potawatomi communities were covered by this provision. Three were found in the St. Joseph River Valley and were led by Pokagon. A fourth community, led by Mkwago, Wabimanido, and Ashkibi, was near Nottawa but had recently migrated there from the Detroit River area. Collectively these four communities became known as the Pokagon band, but in actuality the link between the four was that each community had accepted the Catholic faith.

The Pokagon Band

The most determined and successful resistance to removal came from the Pokagon band.

In the treaty of 1833 the Pokagon band, or more correctly four villages of Catholic Potawatomi, retained the right to live in Michigan by joining with the Odawa at L'arbre Croche. However, for various reasons this union never happened. The success of the Pokagon band in avoiding removal rested largely on the wiles of its leader Leopold Pokagon. During the 1830's and until his death in 1841, Pokagon emerged as the spokesperson and strategist for these four villages.

By in the 1820s, Pokagon had come to realize that unless he and his followers developed a strategy to stay in their homes, eventually white settlers would force them from the St.

Joseph River valley. Pokagon understood also that federal policy largely focused on "civilizing" Indians. By becoming "civilized" the Pokagon and his band could remain on their ancestral land. But this strategy had its price. It meant in practice that the Indians must adopt American farming techniques, work habits, and accept the concept of private ownership of land.

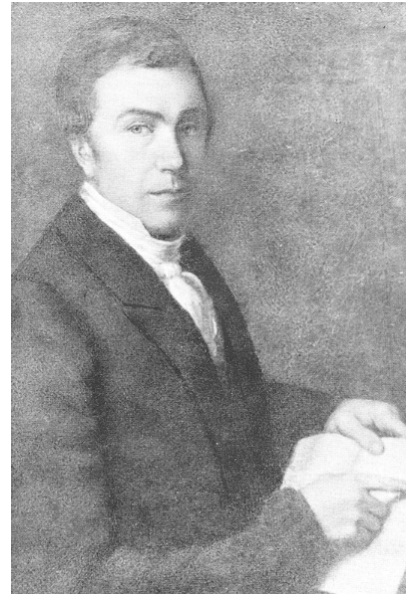
In addition the Indians must become Christians. Despite this cultural loss, Pokagon was determined to stay and in the 1820's he explored the possibility of conversion to Christianity with Rev. Isaac McCoy, at the Baptist Carey Mission at South Niles. McCoy, however, was a firm believer in re-location of Indians to the west. When Pokagon learned this he stopped his visits to Niles and sought a new sponsor.

Pokagon found sponsorship among Roman Catholic missionaries who were seeking to re-establish the long-abandoned French Catholic mission on the St. Joseph River. The Catholic priests wished to establish a new mission amidst a stable, agrarian, Indian community.

Pokagon's Potawatomi band sought to become a Christian farming community to demonstrate their new found "civilization" and thus remain in the St. Joseph River valley. In 1830 Pokagon approached the priests

seeking instruction in the faith and conversion. Given both sides interests, it is not surprising that the process went very well and very quickly.

At the same time that Pokagon and his band were embracing Catholicism, Pokagon was also moving to obtain fee simple title to the land on which his people lived. Rather than trust in treaty granted, "reserves," Pokagon used money received at the 1833 treaty signing as well as federal annuity funds saved from earlier years to purchase land at the



Isaac McCoy

federal land office in Kalamazoo. By 1838 the tribe owned in fee simple 874 acres on Silver Creek, near Dowagiac, and had resettled on this property.

According to the Treaty of Chicago, Pokagon's band was to relocate in 1836 to Odawa land at L'Arbre Croche. However, it took the United States Senate two years to actually ratify the Chicago Treaty, thus delaying any enforcement. Finally ratified by the Senate in 1835, the relocation clause to L'Arbre Croche became a dead letter a year later when 1836 the Odawa ceded this land to the federal government. After several years of inaction, in 1840 the federal government became serious in its efforts to enforce the Treaty of Chicago. General Hugh Brady was sent to Detroit to oversee the removal of the Potawatomi from Michigan and Indiana using whatever means necessary. His agents rounded up perhaps 500 Potawatomi to be shipped west. Many Potawatomi fled General Brady's troops but the Pokagon band stood their ground at Silver Creek.

Pokagon obtained from Judge Epaphroditus Ranson, then an associate judge of the Michigan State Supreme Court, an opinion stating that as Christian, land-owning farmers, the Catholic Potawatomi were protected from forcible relocation by rights found in Michigan law. Should the army remove Pokagon and his band west, the judge threatened to issue a writ of habeas corpus, which would require the army to return the band to Michigan. Given the army's treatment of Indians in the south and President Jackson's general disregard for Supreme Court opinions regarding Indian affairs, it might be anticipated that Brady would have ignored Ranson's opinion. However, when Brady received word of Judge Ranson's legal opinion he immediately wrote a "pass," exempting the Catholic Potawatomi from relocation. Brady's pass represented the final triumph of Pokagon's long effort to avoid relocation.

Indian Removal: A Survivor's Account

The following account of a Potawatomi woman whose Indiana village was relocated in September 1838 was recorded many years after the event by Simon Pokagon. Simon was the son of Leopold Pokagon. Father and son both served as the leader of what became known as the Pokagon band of the Potawatomi. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, Simon became concerned that the Potawatomi's traditional beliefs and contemporary stories were being lost. To preserve them he attempted to record and print as many of the tribe's stories as possible. This story appeared in *Queen of the Woods*, which was published in 1899 after Simon Pokagon's death.



On the morning of that sad day at Twin Lakes, of which you speak, Sin-a-gaw, my husband told me that a stranger had been around, informing all the Au-nish-naw-bay-og (Indians) that our Christian priest wished all the tribe to meet him at Au-naw-ma-we-gaw-ming (wigwam church), and desired me to go with him. But being au-keezee (sick), I remained at home. He faithfully promised me he would be back by the middle of the afternoon; but night came on, and neither he nor any of those I had seen going to church in the morning had yet returned. I felt impressed, deep down in my heart, that something awful had happened.

As I was sadly brooding over my thoughts, the door was wide open flung, and in came a little boy of the white race, who was a playmate of au-nish-naw-be o-nid-gan-is (Indian children), and who loved Sin-a-gaw, my husband, and me. As he rushed into our wigwam, all out of breath, he was crying, "Murder! murder! murder! O dear, dear!" He could say no more, falling exhausted on the floor. In a few moments he raised up, and stammered out, "O dear, dear! Lots and lots of white men I never seed before, all dressed in blue, have got all the Injuns in the church tied together with big strings, like ponies, and are going to kill all of um. Oh dear, dear! Do run quick and hide!" I said, "Hold on, Skiney. Do tell me if you saw Sin-a-gaw among them?" He replied, "O dear! Yes, me did; and me hear somebody say, "Skiney, come here," and it was Sin-a-gaw. And he talk low, and say to tell you to hide in the big woods a few days, then go to the old Ot-ta-wa trapper's wigwam, and if he not get killed, meby he get loose and find you. Do run quick! Dear, dear, they will get us! Me do wish I could kill em all." I gathered up what few

clothes I had and left our home, never to return. I ran across the great trail to your wigwam; no one was there. I heard several going past on the run. I heard some one speak in a heavy voice. It was Go-bo. I never heard him talk excited before. He said the whole country was alive with white warriors catching Au-nish-naw-bay-og, to kill or drive them toward the setting sun. All doubts of Skiney's story were now removed. I ran north into a desolate swamp, which I had been taught from infancy was the home of jin-awe (rattlesnakes) and maw-in- graw-og (wolves), and there hid myself in the hollow of a fallen sycamore tree. It was an awful ne-tchi-wad te-be-kut (stormy night); wolves howled in the distance, as if following on my track; me-she-be-she (a panther) near by me screamed like a woman in dire distress. In the morning Loda, that girl was born! [the narrator was pregnant. Loda was her daughter.] I there remained one week, keeping aw-be-non-tchi (the infant) wrapped up as best I could. On the morning of the seventh sun I started northward to find the old trapper. I was weak and hungry, as all I had eaten while there was a small piece of jerked venison not larger than my hand, and a few beechnuts; but, thanks to the Great Spirit, I found in my journey an o-me-me (a young pigeon) so fat it could not fly. I sat down on a log and ate it raw. It tasted good, and gave me strength. In four days I reached the old trapper's wigwam, where myself and child were kindly cared for. I there first learned the fate of my people, and was told tchi ki das-sos (that you were trapped) in the church with many others, and driven far westward. Late in wintertime my husband returned, and found my and our little one. He had traveled on foot and alone across the great plains from far beyond the "father of waters," [Mississippi River] and was so broken down in health and spirits that he seemed all unlike himself. He sought to gain new life by drinking "fire-water" more and more; but alas, in a few years it consumed him, and he faded and fell, as fall the leaves in autumn time.

I have lived since then among the Ottawas up the great Sebe. ...