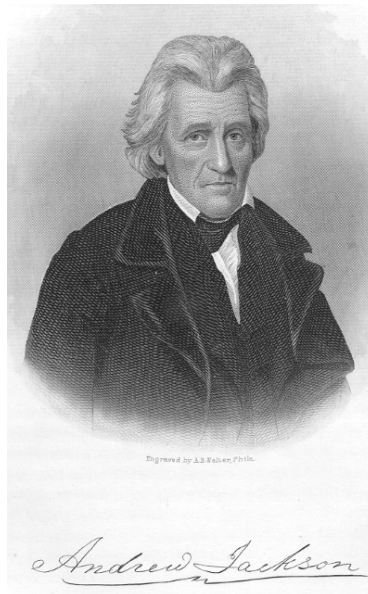


The Potawatomi Experience of Federal Removal Policy

In 1803 the federal government first considered the possibility of "exchanging" land with Indian tribes. The administration of President Thomas Jefferson hoped to move the Indians far to the west of white settlers and thus avoid the seemingly inevitable conflicts between Indians and whites. The idea, however, was not vigorously pursued. Rather a two pronged policy, focusing on "civilization" and, when possible, voluntary removal, was adopted. In general, "civilization," meant supporting Protestant missionaries who labored to convince Indians to adopt a non-migratory, agricultural lifestyle as well as the Christian faith. For those Indians unwilling to become "civilized" or where conflict with settlers existed, the government sought to convince the Indians to relocate west of the Mississippi River. In the 1820's various politicians, particularly those representing newly settled white constituents on the western frontier, began to



argue that "civilization" had proved unsuccessful. The only solution to the "Indian problem" that they believed would work was the removal of eastern Indian tribes to land west of the Mississippi River. Voluntary removal obtained by treaty was the preferred method for relocation. However, the most extreme elements among the western politicians argued that, if necessary, the army should be called out to remove Indians. Under the administrations of Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams the idea of using the military to relocate eastern tribes was ignored. Indian treaties and government policy continued to focus on "civilization" and voluntary removal. When Tennessean Andrew Jackson became president in 1828 he brought a "western" perspective to the White House. He quickly made clear his belief that Indian removal was essential. Jackson believed that Indians enjoyed no special constitutional or legal status. Congress, in his view, was authorized to create an "Indian Territory" and unilaterally

order the removal of all Indians to that place. Not surprisingly, Jackson's first message to Congress in 1829 called for a new Indian removal law. Although Jackson denied he intended to use force to implement his removal policy, politicians of the day generally agreed that only military action could remove all the eastern Indian tribes to the west. The removal bill was controversial but in 1830 it became law. Government negotiators set out to negotiate, and enforce, removal treaties.