

‘The Journey of a People:’

The Potawatomi of Indiana After the Trail of Death

Abigail Gratzol

abigailgratzol@gmail.com

University of Indianapolis

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Dr. Edward Frantz

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“The marvel of a basket is in its transformation, its journey from wholeness as a living plant to fragmented strands and back to wholeness again as a basket. A basket knows the dual powers of destruction and creation that shape the world. Strands once separated are rewoven into a new whole. The journey of a basket is also the journey of a people.”

— Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

In various books and articles concerning Indian Removal or the history of Indiana, the story of the Trail of Death— wrapped up in anywhere between ten pages to a single paragraph— is typically this: Menominee was a Bodéwadmí wkama of a village at Twin Lakes, on the Yellow River, where he owned a large reservation along with three other wkamek.¹ In 1836, these three wkamek— Mackahtahmoah (Black Wolf), Notawkah (Rattlesnake), and Pepinawah— supposedly signed a treaty surrendering the reservation to the United States and promising the departure of all Potawatomi people within two years. Menominee’s name was not on this treaty, and he vehemently protested its legality. His appeals went unanswered, and the Yellow River Band was forcibly removed to Kansas in 1838. The ill-planned journey claimed the lives of at least forty-three Potawatomi— mostly infants and children. For this reason, it is known as the Potawatomi Trail of Death.²

This common narrative is one of many which have been echoed with little variation for over a century. The cause will vary depending on the story— the Treaty of Greenville, the War of 1812, Black Hawk's War, the Treaty of Chicago, the Indian Removal Act, etc.— but the outcome is typically the same. Such stories treat these events as “defeats” of Indigenous peoples and the “death

¹ *Wkama* is the Bodéwadmimwen word for “leader” and *wkamek* is its plural. W. Ben. Secunda, “To Cede or Seed? Risk and Identity Among the Woodland Potawatomi During the Removal Period,” *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology* 31, no. 1 (2006): 57.

² Thomas J. Champion, “Indian Removal and the Transformation of Northern Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 107, no. 1 (2011): 51-52; John P. Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 169; R. David Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 260-271; James H. Madison, *Hoosiers: A New History of Indiana* (Indiana University Press, 2014), 121-122.

knell of Indian presence” east of the Mississippi.³ The narrative, which noticeably cuts off at these “defeats,” constructs an artifice that subtly implies the death or disappearance of Indigenous people. Kevin Bruyneel terms this, “necro-Indigeneity,” defined as “the presumption of death already enacted, or to be marked for death that is not premature but overdo” and “thereby constructs Indigeneity today as eliminated or to be eliminated— marked for death by settler life.” Necro-Indigeneity is a key component of “establishing the status and belonging of whiteness on territories dispossessed from Indigenous peoples.” This phenomenon is not unique to the Trail of Death or just the topic of Indian Removal. Bruyneel identifies in his analysis of the historiography of Bacon’s Rebellion a similar occurrence, which he identifies as a “common narrative” displaying “persistent settler memory patterns” that disavow indigeneity.⁴

The “common narrative” of Indian Removal has lived with impunity for over a century, only being challenged in recent decades. New generations of scholarship have sought to underline the agency of Indigenous peoples in their dealings with the United States government, and correct settler memory patterns. As of yet, these new perspectives have not been applied to the telling of the Trail of Death story, and little to no attention has been given to the role of such narratives in Indiana. Until now, white historians have largely portrayed the Potawatomi of Northern Indiana as hapless victims of cosmic injustice, and have thus separated themselves and present society from the mechanisms which caused that injustice.

Bringing a better understanding of the people who call Indiana, Michiana, the Great Lakes, or the United States home is pivotal in forging a path forward. Ignorance and fetishization of Indigenous peoples that has prevailed in the US has led to a state of being that is becoming increasingly more unsustainable under the forces of climate change and racial confrontations. Although it will not solve

³ John P. Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8.

⁴ Kevin Bruyneel, *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 22, 30.

the myriad of problems our society faces, reconciliation of the past is a vital step to reconciliation of the present and future. The foundation of the United States is the exploitation and dispossession of Black and Indigenous people. This injustice cannot be isolated to a single event, a chapter of a book, or just a few pages. It is an ongoing process that is aided by the ignorance of the people who still operate in and contribute to such systems. The story of Indiana is indelibly tied to the stories of all Indigenous people who were ripped or pushed out of their homes within its borders, and those stories continued long after they left this place. This paper is an attempt to reorient the telling of this story in a way that refuses settler memory, recognizes the agency and personhood of Indigenous people, and highlights their ever-continuing integration, kinship, and reciprocity with each other, the land, and the world they inhabit. In doing so, it demonstrates that the Potawatomi Nation always continued to resist assimilation and decide its own fate despite mechanisms of oppression and that the Potawatomi's connection to Indiana and all their homelands is still strong and is relevant in today's social and political climate, as Americans struggle to understand how best to care for the land and for each other.

Because the full story can not fit within the confines of this paper, these points will be highlighted through three examples: the evidence of Menominee's life and resistance, provided in large part from the letters of Reverend Benjamin Marie Petit; the adaptive strategies employed by the displaced Potawatomi in Kansas; and contemporary revitalization of the Potawatomi Nation. The story of the Trail of Death is not a story of a people who refused to acquiesce and whom civilization passed by. It is a story of a people deliberately thwarted, and an indication of the lengths to which the federal and state officials were willing to go in their efforts to ethnically cleanse Indiana, all while creating myths of opportunity for other groups that they deemed more desirable.

Central to the Trail of Death narrative is the wkama, Menominee, who was the leader of the village at Twin Lakes and is largely credited with initiating the resistance that accumulated there. The facts about his life are sparse, filtered almost entirely through the eyes of Euro-Americans. According

to the Linn County, Kansas, burial register, Menominee died on April 15, 1841, at about 50 years of age— placing his birth at around 1790. From the St. Mary’s Church register, it is also known that he was married to Angélique Sagike and had a daughter, Mary Ann, who was born in 1835.⁵ According to his descendants, he had other children who had grown by this time.⁶ In August 1834, Menominee was baptized by Father Louis Deseille in the Yellow River under the Christian name Alexis. His signature can be found on four treaties between 1818 and 1834. Because of this, he must have become a leader by the time he was at least twenty-eight years old. By age thirty-one, Menominee had attained a reputation as a preacher among his people, gaining the attention of Isaac McCoy.⁷

A Baptist missionary from Kentucky and staunch advocate for Indian Removal, McCoy made himself a key player in the fate of the Potawatomi in Michiana, establishing a mission school in Ft. Wayne in 1820. He believed that the vices of white settlers were actively harming and impeding the civilization and Christianization of Indigenous peoples, and that their best chance for survival was removal to the western territories.⁸ He had trouble attaining the amount of influence he desired because many of the Potawatomi he encountered in Northern Indiana had adopted a strategy in line with the federal government’s Civilization Fund Act of 1819.⁹

The Civilization Fund Act created appropriations which provided the means for creating missionary establishments but it was merely a confirmation of the notion of the “necessity of overhauling” Native life. It didn’t change the larger belief that they were obstacles to progress. By the time the act was passed, the notion of “civilization” was already outdated, falling in favor of removal as advocated for by those like McCoy.¹⁰

⁵ Benjamin Marie Petit, “The Trail of Death,” ed. Irving McKee, *Indiana Historical Society Publications* 14, no. 1 (1941), 12; Susan Campbell and Shirley Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death: 1838 Removal from Indiana to Kansas* (Rochester, Indiana: Fulton County Historical Society, 2003), 320-321.

⁶ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 324.

⁷ Isaac McCoy, *History of Baptist Indian Missions* (United States: Morrison, 1840), 95; Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 321; Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire*, 222-223.

⁸ Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians*, 60-61; Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 140-141; Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire*, 222-223.

⁹ Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians*, 57

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

In the early nineteenth century, the Potawatomi Nation was composed of several bands, defined as “village coalitions, alliances, or networks shaped by internal factors and interests that a given village’s leader(s) successfully articulated.” Villages were formed around leaders, or *wkamek*, who demonstrated the ability to provide for their followers. Such was the case with Menominee.¹¹ The nature and composition of the Potawatomi bands is a muddled topic for historians and archaeologists. Such distinctions, however, are necessary to understand if one is to comprehend how different groups of Potawatomi interacted with one another and with the US government as well as the lineage of the bands that eventually came to comprise the Potawatomi Nation today.¹²

Much of the difficulty with categorizing the Removal Period Potawatomi is that, as Ben Secunda puts it, they “lived at a crossroads of place and time.” The Potawatomi Nation was not confined by state or even national lines, with villages scattered across the western Great Lakes region. Additionally, the political climate of the United States during Removal necessitated constantly shifting dynamics between villages and even individuals as their interests changed. Because of this, band affiliations were never stable, contingent, and protean.¹³

Secunda, Mark Schurr, and Michelle Pribbernow— in their 2002 investigation of historic Potawatomi villages in Northern Indiana— provide an overview of several proposed organizational models and submit their own, which retains the best elements of the previous models while resolving their inconsistencies. In their archaeological and historical survey of LaPorte, Elkhart, Marshall, Kosciusko, Fulton, and Miami counties (which contained the majority of Removal Era Potawatomi residences in Indiana), they discovered two axes that the settlement pattern of the Potawatomi appears to have followed: reservations with at least one or multiple cabins and/or villages throughout the Tippecanoe River Valley and along the Michigan Road, with the corridors of habitation meeting

¹¹ Secunda, “To Cede or Seed,” 60.

¹² According to US law, the word “bands” in this sense refers to “tribes.” Christopher Wetzel, *Gathering the Potawatomi Nation: Revitalization and Identity* (United States: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 155n1.

¹³ Secunda, “To Cede or Seed,” 58,

near the borders of Marshall and Fulton County.¹⁴

The Michigan Road band, often referred to as the St. Joseph River band, is generally recognized as the more “civilized” of the Potawatomi, and strongly opposed removal. Wkamek in this band emulated Leopold Pokagon’s strategy of acculturation and self-sufficiency, as part of what Secunda terms an “adaptive resistance movement.” In a period when the federal government was forcing Native communities to be increasingly dependent on annuities, Pokagon ensured that he received relatively small annuities and negotiated for compensation in the form of blacksmiths, craftsmen, and livestock, which would allow his people to provide for themselves. The Potawatomi living around the St. Joseph River in Michiana tended to be more acculturated, having engaged in over a century of exchange with French traders. Among all of the Potawatomi existed an influential Métis population, whose French and Indigenous heritage afforded the position as cultural brokers between Euro-American and Indigenous populations.¹⁵

Members of the Wabash and Prairie bands along the Tippecanoe River, on the other hand, tended to be more conservative and traditional, engaging less than their northern counterparts in Christianity and intensive agriculture. Because of this, they were more likely to acquiesce to removal. Having invested much less labor into their lands and— recognizing the approach of invasive white settlement and the retreat of game on which they relied to sustain themselves— it made more sense to the leaders in central Indiana to accept the state’s offers to relocate to what they believed would be better land they would have a stronger and more permanent claim to.¹⁶

The St. Joseph or Michigan Road Potawatomi, however, had already made concessions to Euro-American ideals of civilization, practicing Catholicism, agriculture, and animal husbandry.

¹⁴ William B. Secunda et al., *Investigations of Historic Potawatomi Villages in Northern Indiana*, Archaeology Laboratory, Report of Investigations 2002-1, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, 5, 27.

¹⁵ Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire*, 234-235; James A. Clifton, *The Prairie People: Continuity and Change in Potawatomi Indian Culture, 1665-1965* (United Kingdom: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 272-273, 276-278; Secunda, “To Cede or Seed,” 59; Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians*, 178.

¹⁶ Secunda, “To Cede or Seed,” 65-66.

Having already made these significant investments into their land and acculturation efforts, they were much more resentful at the sudden change in policy that called for their removal west, regardless of their level of acculturation.¹⁷

Menominee is recognized as having been a part of this “civilizing band.” Attempts to assess the degree of acculturation of inhabitants of Menominee’s village archaeologically have unfortunately been stunted by the fact that those cabin sites were quickly reoccupied by American settlers after the forced removal, resulting in the mixing of older and later cultural deposits.¹⁸ Schurr and Secunda contend, however, that Menominee's village was so acculturated that it was not recorded as a Potawatomi village by surveyors.¹⁹ Therefore, Menominee’s interest in McCoy was founded, not on primitive fascination as McCoy seemed to believe, but on an intelligent strategy on Menominee’s part. From his repeated requests for missionaries to be sent to his village, it is clear that Menominee was actively pursuing the civilization strategy shared by Pokagon farther north. It is ironic that, although McCoy was desperate to be the spiritual authority of the area, he ignored Menominee’s invitations. The only missionaries who would step up to the task were the Catholics.

Catholicism had been introduced to the region in the seventeenth century and was what Menominee, his followers, and many of the Potawatomi in the Great Lakes practiced. This created tension between the Potawatomi *wkamek* and Anglo-Americans. The Potawatomi would have preferred a Catholic priest over a Baptist missionary, but between December of 1821 and the summer of 1822, McCoy petitioned the White House and Secretary of War, Lewis Cass until he was appointed teacher of the Potawatomis and Ottawas. However, even after he was allowed to establish Carey mission in 1823 near Niles, Michigan, Leopold Pokagon and most of the Potawatomi in the

¹⁷ Ibid., 68; David A. Nichols, “Potawatomi Resistance, Renewal, and Removal,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 117, no. 2 (June 2021): 73.

¹⁸ Schurr, “Archaeological Indices of Resistance,” 54.

¹⁹ William B. Secunda and Mark R. Schurr, *Comparative Surveys of Menominee Village Locations in Marshall County, Indiana*, Archaeology Laboratory, Report of Investigations 2005-1, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, 85-86.

area remained Catholic.²⁰

Once McCoy visited Washington in 1829 to plead for the Indian Removal Act before Congress, the band firmly cut ties with him, immediately requesting the Archdiocese of Detroit for a Catholic priest. After the Indian Removal Act was signed in 1830, Carey Mission was closed as McCoy moved to Kansas to prepare for the arrival of displaced Great Lakes Natives.²¹

McCoy concludes the account of his time at Twin Lakes by lamenting the Baptist church's "criminal neglect" of poor Menominee and his party of "dear, artless people," since his party "dwindled away" just a year prior to his writing. It is telling that McCoy completely misrepresents the fate of Menominee's people, saying that they all either died or "returned to the vices which they denounced," rather than the truth—that Menominee's village became one of the most prominent and successful in the area (without McCoy's assistance) before being unjustly taken from him and that he and his people were forced from their homes at gunpoint under the act that McCoy himself helped create and enforce.²²

Following McCoy's departure, the door was left open for the Catholic priests requested by Pokagon to enter the area. Father Stephen Theodore Badin came to reside at Notre Dame and near Niles, followed soon after by Father Deseille, who baptized Menominee in 1834. The arrival of these missionaries prompted the erection of new chapels in the region's villages. Menominee gifted the Catholic church half a section of his land for a chapel as well as another half section for a school (the latter was never built). This was seen by Indian Agent, Colonel Abel C. Pepper, as a threat to the government's removal policy and, by January 1835, he became suspicious of Deseille. When the priest made requests for an appropriation from the Indian Civilizing fund to be used on the Yellow River reservation, Pepper saw it as a confirmation.

²⁰ Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians*, 60-61; Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire*, 223.

²¹ Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians*, 177-178; Campion, "Indian Removal and the Transformation of Northern Indiana," 45; Secunda, "To Cede or Seed," 73-74.

²² McCoy, *History of Baptist Missions*, 106; Schurr, "Archaeological Indices of Resistance," 48.

On August 5, 1836, Pepper obtained a treaty ceding Menominee's reservation; this treaty had never been *seen* by Menominee let alone signed by him, and he protested the government's claim immediately.²³ His band sent a letter of formal protest to Pepper on November 4, followed by multiple appeals to president Martin Van Buren and Lewis Cass. Officials blamed Native defiance on Father Deseille, claiming that he incited and supported their resistance. Lewis H. Sands, an assistant superintendent of the emigration, visited the Yellow River in spring 1837 and wrote to Pepper that he was "perfectly convinced that [Deseille] has made this band of Indians believe that they have not sold their reservation." This prompted Pepper to order Deseille off of the reservation or be prosecuted for disturbing the peace. The priest walked north to Pokagon's village, where he became sick and died on September 26.²⁴

Following Deseille's expulsion, the Potawatomi of the area requested that Bishop Bruté send another Catholic priest. This position was filled by the newly ordained Benjamin Marie Petit, who had recently arrived in the country from France. Petit arrived at his mission on the Yellow River Reservation, which he called *Chichipé Outipé*, on November 3, 1837, and, within twenty-one days, had baptized eighteen adults and blessed nine marriages.²⁵ Though his time with the Yellow River village was relatively brief, the invaluable content of his letters and the quality of his character ensured that he made a lasting impression on history.

²³ Despite their names appearing on the treaty, Mackahtahmoah, Notawkah, and Pepinawah maintained that they hadn't signed any treaties at all that year for fear of being tricked into ceding land, to the point that they had even refused to receive annuities. Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 76.

²⁴ Edmunds, *The Potawatomi: Keepers of the Fire*, 264-64; Petit, "The Trail of Death," 19-24.

²⁵ *Chichipé Outipé*, a francization of Bodwéwadmimwen words, *shishibé wtapik*, meaning "duck's head." Until recently, the meaning of the phrase was unknown, but assumed to mean "little duck." In a presentation given for the Marshall County Historical Society on March 3, 2023, Dr. John Houghton reports how he was told by members of a Potawatomi language Facebook page that the long mysterious Outipé is most likely a francization of the Bodwéwadmimwen word, *wtapik*, meaning "head." This is confirmed by a March 25, 1838, letter in which Petit uses the phrase in a Bodwéwadmimwen sentence followed by its translation: "I, the Black Robe, called the 'duck's head,' I greet all the Black Robes from the mouth to the source (Vincennes)." From this, it appears to be a nickname for both the mission and Petit himself, possibly because of the association of the white stripe on a mallard's neck with the white collar worn by Catholic priests. Ibid., 34, 35, 62; "Shishibé," *Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center*, Potawatomi Dictionary, accessed November 12, 2023, <http://potawatomidictionary.com/Dictionary/Word/6459>; "Wtapik," *Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center*, Potawatomi Dictionary, accessed November 12, 2023, <http://potawatomidictionary.com/Dictionary/Word/7447>.

It is quite clear to see when reading his letters that Petit loved his work and the people at *Shishibé Wtapik* dearly and saw them as family.²⁶ Still, the threat of removal weighed heavily on him, lamenting in one letter that the mission is “menaced by approaching destruction,” causing him to “live between fear and hope.”²⁷ In many of his letters to Bruté, he repeatedly pleads to be permitted to accompany the Potawatomi to Kansas if and when they are removed. In one such case he refers to them as “Christian Indians (no longer savage: they are less so than most of these coarse American woodsmen).”²⁸ Such a claim serves as a testament to the Potawatomi’s success with “civilizing” as well as Petit’s unique point of view as a French immigrant.

To protest their unjust removal, a delegation of Potawatomi *wkamek*, including Menominee, went to Washington D.C. in the hopes of speaking with the president, Martin Van Buren. They arrived by March 3, 1838 and returned with no results. In July, Petit wrote a report of the trip to Bruté, saying it was “useless,” and that the president had refused to speak with the *wkamek*. Until then, lawyers had been optimistic that the Potawatomi could successfully plead their case in court but now they admitted that such a trial could not take place as the government refused to be party to it. It was then that hope was lost.²⁹

The Potawatomi took this blow in different ways; according to Petit, even as many became resigned to their removal, many older people refused to speak of it, seemingly in a state of denial. A council was held on the reserve with Col. Pepper and other emigration officials that turned tumultuous. It was here that Menominee is said to have delivered this rousing speech:

Members of the Council: The president does not know the truth. He like me has been imposed upon. He does not know that your treaty is a lie, and that I never signed it. He does not know that you made my young chiefs drunk and got their consent, and

²⁶ Within three weeks of his arrival, Petit conveys a feeling of profound attachment to the people of Menominee’s reservation in letters to his family in Rennes, France, and Bishop Bruté: “it is only by weeping and rending my heart that I tear myself away from their touching farewells, carrying off in my heart something of the sentiment which I knew for the first time two years ago when I left my mother and brothers.” Petit, “The Trail of Death,” 76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

pretended to get mine. He does not know that I have refused to sell my lands and still refuse. He would not by force drive me from my home, the graves of my tribe, and my children who have gone to the Great Spirit, nor allow you to tell me your braves will take me, tied like a dog if he knew the truth. My brother, the President, is just, but he listens to the word of the young chiefs who have lied; and when he knows the truth he will leave me to my own. I have not sold my lands. I will not sell them. I have not signed any treaty and will not sign any. I am not going to leave my lands and I don't want to hear anything more about it.³⁰

His use of the phrase “my brother, the president,” if translated accurately, attests to Menominee’s intelligence and prowess as a leader. Most often, Indigenous people are recorded as referring to American government officials as “fathers” as a sign of respect.³¹ Here, Menominee places himself in equal standing with Van Buren, asserting his authority and legitimacy as a leader. The potential significance of the exact translation makes a review of McDonald’s necessary.

Although Menominee was determined to stand his ground, Petit was at the mercy of his Bishop. A white American settler had made a preemptive claim on Petit’s house that went into effect on August 5. Thus, the chapel held its last service on August 4, after which Petit dismantled it to prevent it from being defiled by white settlers. The next day, he said goodbye to Chichipé Outipé for the last time.³² He would later be permitted to join the emigrating party and see that they were taken care of when they arrived in Kansas. Once he saw that they would be in the hands of a Jesuit missionary there, he left to rejoin Bishop Bruté in Vincennes. The journey took an immense toll on his health, however, and he died in St. Louis on February 10, 1839, before he was 29 years old.³³

The situation at Twin Lakes deteriorated quickly after Petit’s departure. Pepper held another council with the Potawatomi on August 7, in which they apologized for the rowdiness of the last, but

³⁰ Daniel McDonald, *Removal of the Pottawattomie Indians* (Plymouth, Indiana; D. McDonald & Co., 1899), 19.

³¹ An example of this is at the 1833 Treaty of Chicago negotiations, when Pokagon is recorded as saying, “You have, my fathers, asked us to sell our *Land* to our Great father [President Andrew Jackson].” Secunda, “To Cede or Seed,” 57.

³² Petit, “The Trail of Death,” 86.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90, 105, 114.

nothing would resolve the issues between the Natives and white encroachers with preemptive claims. Tensions sparked into violence when, on August 11, some Potawatomi took up arms, attacking one squatter's cabin door with an ax. In retribution, the squatters burned a dozen Potawatomi cabins. This was the excuse the authorities were waiting for.³⁴

On August 27, Tipton received authorization from Governor Wallace to raise a militia of 100 volunteers under the guise of preventing bloodshed or further violence. Five detachments strategically and stealthily surrounded the villages while many Potawatomi were at the chapel. It was a premeditated sneak attack. Tipton's general order was to swiftly seize the "poor deluded Pottawatomies [sic]" and "compel them to a proper observance of the Treaties [...] peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must."³⁵

In his letter reporting the successful operation on August 31 to Governor Wallace, he almost literally waves off the violence of the squatters, arrogantly writing,

"When I arrived, I found Col. Pepper in Council with a number of the Chiefs and principal men of the Pottawatomies [sic] east of the Mississippi. I explained the object for which the volunteers were Sent to the village. They made a brief but indefinite reply— could give no Satisfactory reason for the assault committed on the houses of this vicinity a few days ago— complained of the whites having burned their cabins etc etc. In fact they displayed no disposition either of a hostile character or of a wish to leave the Reservation. One Said he intended to remain on it."³⁶

From this and later correspondence in which they defend their actions to the governor, it seems that Tipton and Pepper did not receive express permission to round up and forcibly emigrate the Potawatomi. Once they had the militia at their disposal and the Potawatomi wkamak cornered, however, they pounced at the opportunity. Tipton and Pepper ordered the volunteers to scour the

³⁴ Irving McKee, "The Centennial of 'The Trail of Death,'" *Indiana Magazine of History* 35, no. 1 (1939): 38; Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 208-210; Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 78; "The Pottawatomies." *Logansport Telegraph* (Logansport, Indiana), September 08, 1828; "Removal of the Potawatomies." *Logansport Telegraph* (Logansport, Indiana), September 15, 1828.

³⁵ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 194, 195-196; Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 78

³⁶ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 197.

countryside and round up all of the Potawatomi they found.³⁷ Writing to Governor Wallace on September 3 to vindicate his actions, Tipton declares,

“Everything seems to justify the belief that these unhappy people will yet learn to appreciate the interest which government has ever manifested in this affair, and teach themselves that a willing compliance to such interest, will but secure the comfort and enjoyment which for years they have failed to experience in Indiana.”³⁸

Tipton’s optimism was immediately revealed to be unfounded. Two days later, he complains about the myriad of problems he was facing in arranging the trip, writing, “every thing [sic] under the old plan of emigration has failed.”³⁹ Suffice it to say, the ill-planned journey caused untold suffering for the Potawatomi. There were not enough wagons or horses, disease was rampant, rations and water were scarce, and the heat was oppressive. About one hundred of the original eight hundred Potawatomi who embarked on the trip did not arrive, most of them having escaped and fled. Petit’s letters at this time aptly demonstrate the deplorable conditions the Potawatomi were subjected to. In all, over 40 Potawatomi lost their lives, at least twenty-eight of that number being children.⁴⁰ Given what became of Petit as a result of his participation in the trek, it is likely that many more passed of their illnesses acquired on and exacerbated by the journey after arrival in Kansas.⁴¹ This is all without mentioning the emotional scars for survivors, who had lost their loved ones or had to leave them behind, not knowing if they would ever meet again. These people had been forced to leave behind their homes, their livelihoods, and the graves of their ancestors which they knew would be desecrated, or at best, plowed over and disturbed.⁴² The depth of emotion they must have felt is

³⁷ As Bowes points out, it is revealing that subsequent review of their actions by their superiors were motivated by frustration at the process of discerning the pay due to volunteers, and not Pepper and Tipton’s misconduct. Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 78.

³⁸ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 204.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴⁰ Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 78-79.

⁴¹ Also note Petit received special treatment throughout the journey. Because he was a priest, he was taken in by fellow clergy or Catholics at many stops on the trail. There are several instances of him recuperating in people’s homes. He doesn’t mention such a thing, so it is doubtful that the Potawatomi on the trail were given the same consideration. Petit, “The Trail of Death,” 101-102.

⁴² Secunda and Schurr, *Comparative Surveys of Menominee Village Locations in Marshall County, Indiana*, 73.

unimaginable for most white Americans.

In the end, it took blatant trickery, fraud, and a military sneak attack to force the Yellow River Potawatomi away from their land. Until then, Menominee and his people had taken every opportunity for resistance they could. For years, as other parties of Potawatomi all around Twin Lakes departed for Kansas, Menominee stood his ground and avoided being pressured into predatory deals with the government. He actively pursued civilization efforts, building a chapel and trying to raise a school on his land.⁴³ When other wkamək threatened the resistance of the other leaders, Menominee was one of the anti-removal wkamək that took a stand, threatening the lives of those who would sell their lands.⁴⁴ He took legal action and even ventured to the nation's capital to protest the fraudulent treaty. He sought reassurances from government officials. In the end, he couldn't win. One cannot win a game by playing by the rules if the other team ignores or changes them. Once officials realized that Menominee was capable of outsmarting them— of playing by their rules— they knew that the only way to beat him was to play dirty.

The history of the Potawatomi's experiences after the Trail of Death is vast, complex, and varied. What follows here is unfortunately not a comprehensive history of the Potawatomi after removal from Michiana. It is, however, an overview which will demonstrate the continuity of Potawatomi existence throughout time and place and will do more than most histories which focus on Indiana. Overall, the Potawatomi destroyed whites' expectations that they would die out and disappear. They thrived in a new place, rebuilding, restoring, and healing.⁴⁵

Once they reached the western bank of the Marais des Cygnes River, on November 4, they

⁴³ *Potawatomie Chiefs to Elbert Herring*, April 14, 1836. Letter. From National Archives. *Letters Received By the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-81*. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/163978450?objectPage=686> (accessed December 9, 2023).

⁴⁴ In a panicked and lengthy letter to President Jackson, the Wabash wkamək plead for protection from the “Catholic and hostile British Indians” of the St. Joseph River who threatened to kill anyone who ceded more land. *Letter of the Chiefs as transmitted to the President*, October 18, 1836. Letter. From National Archives. *Letters Received By the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-81*. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/163978450?objectPage=689> (accessed December 9, 2023).

⁴⁵ David A. Nichols, “Potawatomi Resistance, Renewal, and Removal,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 117, no. 2 (June 2021): 80–81.

were placed into the care of the local Indian Agent, Anthony Davis, and the Jesuit Father Christian Hoecken. Their new home was near Osawatomie, Kansas, on Pottawattomie Creek. By Petit's (who departed for Vincennes on January 2, 1839) advice they immediately constructed a chapel, 40 feet long and 22 feet wide. For temporary shelter, they raised shanties of wood, bark, and canvas. Almost immediately, they decided that they should establish a settlement separate from the one at Osawatomie. After surveying the area, they decided on Sugar Creek in Linn County for its "quantity of timber, its sugar, and its distance from the Americans and from the other tribes who were addicted to liquor," according to Father Hoecken. Once they were able to move in March, 1839, one of their first actions upon arrival was to build a log chapel, the original location of St. Mary's Mission.⁴⁶ As John Bowes points out, Indigenous emigrants to Kansas viewed it as their new permanent home.⁴⁷ But the ever-growing land hunger of whites meant that they would face multiple additional removals throughout the nineteenth century.

Once the Yellow River Band arrived in Kansas, it was clear that the US government had not held up their end of the bargain. Now in an altogether different environment with little to no supplies at the start of winter, the situation was desperate. Even worse, they had lost their most passionate advocate, Petit, who succumbed to illness from the journey like many in his congregation. No tools or materials were provided to construct cabins in the tree-sparse land. The Potawatomi had to resort to living in simple bark shanties on the shores of the creek for their first winter. Given their time of arrival, they also had no time to raise crops and establish means for their own subsistence. Therefore, they were forced to rely almost entirely on the aid of the inefficient government.⁴⁸

Despite the government's neglect and meddling, the Potawatomi managed to carve out a place for themselves in the frontier. Historian of Potawatomi history, R. David Edmunds, argues that

⁴⁶ McKee, "The Centennial", 38-39; Joseph F. Murphy, *Potawatomi of the West: Origins of the Citizen Band*, ed. by Patricia Sulcer Barrett (United States: Citizen Band Potawatomi Tribe, 1988), 68.

⁴⁷ Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 107.

⁴⁸ Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 240-241.

the Potawatomi in this period should be viewed as pioneers, people who shaped the West. John P. Bowes expands on this premise in *Exiles and Pioneers*, in which he broadens the narrative of nineteenth century American pioneer history to include Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, and Potawatomis. Both Edmunds and Bowes highlight the agency and survival of the Potawatomi who survived the Trail of Death and refuse to exclude them from settler narratives of broader American history.⁴⁹ As Kelli Mosteller highlights, the Potawatomi were never a broken or defeated people.⁵⁰ Scholarship such as this reveals that the Potawatomi of Michiana continued their strategy of adaptive resistance long after it seemingly “failed” with the Trail of Death. They maintained close relationships with the Catholic church and adopted many Anglo-American customs, earning themselves the favor of clergy and government officials. Their success as traders for travelers on the Oregon trail afforded them further praise from Indian agents who lauded them as examples to other Indigenous groups.⁵¹

The divisions among the Michiana Potawatomi before removal influenced the way they organized themselves in their new locales. A split analogous to that of the Michigan Road and Tippecanoe Potawatomi emerged among those in Kansas, creating the Mission and Prairie bands. The Mission Band, named for their affiliation with St. Mary’s, attracted those Catholic Potawatomi originally from the St. Joseph and Michigan Road who were more readily amenable to acculturation, while the Prairie Band would largely consist of the Potawatomi who had come from the Prairie and Wabash bands from northern Illinois, southern Wisconsin, and Indiana. In 1846, 2500 Prairie Potawatomi who had been living in Council Bluffs, Iowa, throughout the 1830s and 40s joined the Mission Band at the Potawatomi’s new singular reservation on the Kansas River in present day

⁴⁹ Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 3-4; R. David Edmunds, “Indians As Pioneers: Potawatomis on the Frontier” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 65 (Winter 1987-1988): 342.

⁵⁰ Kelli Mosteller, “The Cultural Politics of Land: Citizen Potawatomi Allotment and Citizenship in Kansas and Indian Territory, 1861-1891,” *Transcripts* 1 (2011): 82-83.

⁵¹ Edmunds, “Indians As Pioneers,” 351-352

Pottawatomie, Jackson, Shawnee, and Wabaunsee counties.⁵²

The differences that divided the bands of the Potawatomi still impacted them on their unified reservation. This became most apparent when the Federal Government offered them the chance to accept land allotments and become US citizens. Fearful that they would lose their lands if they continued to hold them in common— and, no doubt confident in their ability to adjust to the demands and eager to reap the benefits of land ownership and citizenship— many Mission Band members pursued this new strategy, becoming the Citizen Band. The decision would prove to be disastrous. Once again, a series of broken promises and predation on the government’s part lead to the dispossession of most of the Potawatomi who had accepted land allotments. After nearly two decades of struggling for support from the federal government for those stranded and landless in Kansas, the Citizen Band all finally moved to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, where its headquarters remain to this day.⁵³

One of the most valuable resources on the Potawatomi and the Trail of Death has been a book published by the Fulton County Historical Society in Indiana, edited by Susan Campbell and Shirley Willard. Campbell is a genealogist whose fourth great grandfather was among those forcibly rounded up by the militia in September 1838 and she writes that her family passed down no information or stories about their removal. All of the information she has gathered has been gleaned from various other sparse sources.⁵⁴ Willard is a former middle-school teacher who has dedicated her life to studying and sharing the history of the Trail of Death since 1976.⁵⁵

Their book, *Potawatomi Trail of Death: 1838 Removal from Indiana to Kansas*, contains the letters of Petit, Tipton, Pepper, and others connected to the Trail of Death, as well as personal essays,

⁵² Herring, *The Enduring Indians of Kansas*, 121; Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 240-241; Edmunds, “Indians As Pioneers,” 349

⁵³ Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers*, 247; Mosteller, “The Cultural Politics of Land,” 82-84, 90-96.

⁵⁴ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, vi-x.

⁵⁵ “A Beacon of History: Shirley Willard,” *Daughters of the American Revolution*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.dar.org/national-society/american-spirit-magazine/beacon-history-shirley-willard>.

short biographies, and images. It also contains two short autobiographies written by descendants of Menominee, Jim Thunder and Don Perrot, that relate family memories that had never been shared before.

Menominee's sons were part of the forced emigration but kept a low profile in order to stay safe. Jim Thunder's great grandfather, Kawsat, was a son of Menominee. His grandfather told him that his parents escaped and fled to Mexico to live with the Kickapoo people until they were forced back into the country by American troops. His grandfather vividly remembered being forced from Mexico and how, when the soldiers were drinking, some of the people made a narrow escape and headed to the reservation in Kansas. Thunder taught Potawatomi language and culture until he walked on in December 2022.⁵⁶

Don Perrot's great-great grandfather, Nsowakwet, was Menominee's nephew. He led a group of Potawatomi back to Michiana, planning to gather other escapees and find some land near their old home. They were unsuccessful because all of the land had been claimed and the militia was still searching for "runaways" or "strolling Indians." His family eventually settled in Wisconsin. Raised in a community in which few spoke English, he began school speaking only Potawatomi. Today, Perrot is a prominent Potawatomi language teacher and has written several books.⁵⁷

In his analysis of the Potawatomi Nation's revitalization, Christopher Wetzel identifies Perrot and Thunder, among others, as "national brokers," culturally fluent individuals "who occupy structural roles that enable them to build intra-national networks." These contemporary cultural brokers occupy a similar position as the historic Métis, being comfortable operating in both Indigenous and settler worlds, and access to cultural, social, political, and economic resources to which many Indigenous people in their tribes lack access.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 332-334; "Potawatomi Elder, Language Teacher Walks On," *Citizen Potawatomi Nation*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.potawatomi.org/blog/2023/02/09/potawatomi-elder-language-teacher-walks-on/>.

⁵⁷ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 335-339.

⁵⁸ Wetzel, *Gathering the Potawatomi Nation*, 76-77; 90-91; 93

In his book, Wetzel details how the Potawatomi have shifted the narrative around removal over time in relation to their status as a nation. Before the 1980s, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the Treaty of Chicago as a watershed moment in the nation's history. This was in relation to their identity as a tribe of many individual bands. At the time of the treaty, government agents exploited differing interests of these bands to weaken the nation. This dissension continued into the 1950s during the ICC's trials. Different bands made differing claims from the government based on their interpretation of the Treaty of Chicago. The bands that remained in the Great Lakes Region (the Eastern Potawatomi) had not received the same degree of government recognition as those who were now located across the Mississippi River. The Eastern Potawatomi claimed payment for the lands that had been taken by the Treaty of Chicago on the grounds that the treaty had been signed on behalf of the Potawatomi Nation as a whole. The Citizen and Prairie Bands, however, argued that the Potawatomi Nation was a group of autonomous communities and that the Eastern Potawatomi bands were likewise an independent community.⁵⁹

Despite these circumstances, which one might presume would ignite resentment between bands, whatever tension existed during the hearings quickly dissipated once they ended. The Potawatomi would not formally collaborate again until the 1980s, however, when they were all called together to discuss a possible living history center on Baugo Creek in St. Joseph County, Indiana. Over time, working on more historic projects that reconstructed the tribe's collective past, the focus of Potawatomi history shifted from the Treaty of Chicago to the Trail of Death. Rather than emphasizing the ways in which divisions or conflicting interests had once existed, Potawatomi people began to place more importance on the collective injustice their ancestors experienced at the hands of the federal government. Additionally, language revitalization projects were a key factor in stimulating communication and collaboration between bands' governments after the Baugo Creek meeting in the 1980s and 90s and culminated in the creation of the first annual Potawatomi Gathering

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32-37.

in 1994. Originally conceived as a culture and language learning event, the Gathering now connects all bands as a yearly festival celebrating Potawatomi heritage and unity.⁶⁰

While only a portion of all Potawatomi in the region were present on the Trail of Death, every Potawatomi person is likely to have some connection to it today. After removal and after reservations were established, Indigenous people did not just stay put. They traveled back and forth across several states and, sometimes, the whole country, visiting relatives, settling, or working. Prairie Potawatomi fled to Canada, Canadian Potawatomi visited relatives in Michigan, Wisconsin Potawatomi moved to Oklahoma, Mexico Potawatomi returned to Kansas, and every way, in every combination. Even if bands were politically autonomous, their people never were. That is why two descendants of Menominee were raised in two different bands in two different states. The Potawatomi people may have been separated by space, but they still constituted a whole people that maintained social and cultural ties informally for a century before revitalization.

Today, the Potawatomi west of the Mississippi River are divided into two federally recognized tribes, the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation of Kansas and the Citizen Potawatomi Nation (CPN) of Oklahoma. The federally recognized tribes in the east include the Forest County Potawatomi (FCP) in Wisconsin, Hannahville Indian Community in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, The Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band (also known as the Gun Lake Tribe) in southwest Michigan, and Nottawaseppi Huron (NHBP) and Pokagon bands in southern Michigan. Additionally, there are the Bkejwanong (Walpole Island) First Nation, Keewaadinozagnin (Northern Lakes) Potawatomi, and the Wasauksing First Nation in Canada among others. Although they are recognized by the divisive language of the federal government as "tribes," these political bodies recognize themselves as *bands* of the Potawatomi *Nation*.⁶¹

Overall, more than one-third of Potawatomi refused to comply with the removal agreements,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39, 118-122, 137-138.

⁶¹ Wetzel, *Gathering the Potawatomi Nation*, 155n.

some of which were fraudulent. After removal, forty to fifty percent of Indigenous people remained in the Great Lakes region.⁶² Despite very clear evidence of continued Native presence in and around the state, many Indiana historians tell stories in line with the settler narrative and perpetuate the idea of necro-Indigeneity. In James Madison's *Hoosiers*, the latest standard of Indiana history, he briefly mentions that "only scattered Indian people" remained in the state by the end of the Pioneer era, but they typically chose to assimilate and pass as white. This oversimplified portrayal of the topic is problematic, as it upholds outdated perceptions of Native-white relations in the period of removal in addition to obscuring the present day reality.⁶³

Ask some in northern Indiana about the Trail of Death, and one will receive enthusiastic reply. Ask most others, and they will tell you that they had never heard of it. A common denominator is shock, bewilderment, and sometimes outrage from born-and-raised Hoosiers as to how they could have possibly not known about such an important event that took place in their own backyard. There are efforts to correct this. Since 1976, the Fulton County Historical Society has held the annual Trail of Courage Living History Festival on its grounds in Rochester as a celebration of the survival of the Indigenous Americans and the history of northern Indiana. The Trail of Death Commemorative Caravan was founded in 1988 (for the 150th anniversary of the 1838 removal) through the efforts of George Godfrey, Shirley Willard, and others who have dedicated their lives to producing literature about Potawatomi history, organizing events in remembrance, and lobbying education boards to revise their curricula. Every five years, they lead a caravan along the route following the trail. A deeply emotional and often spiritual experience, for some, it is an act of honoring the hardships and survival of ancestors. For others, it is an apology for the actions of theirs.⁶⁴

⁶² Nichols, *Peoples of the Inland Sea*, 174.

⁶³ Madison, *Hoosiers*, 123.

⁶⁴ Campbell and Willard, *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, 360-368; Lauren Fox, "'Emotional and fulfilling': Caravan retraces Potawatomi Trail of Death through Kansas," *Kansas Reflector* online, September 23 2023, <https://kansasreflector.com/2023/09/23/emotional-and-fulfilling-caravan-retraces-potawatomi-trail-of-death-through-kansas/>.

At the council negotiating the Treaty of Mississinewa in October 1826, Lewis Cass gave a speech that reiterated all of the talking points that would become common to the Removal Era; he encouraged the Potawatomi and Miami leaders to cede their land and move to the western territory. To him and other government officials at the time, removal was the only solution for the problems Indigenous peoples of the eastern US were facing. As the leaders considered their response, he told them, “You must go before long.—You cannot remain here.—You must remove or perish.”⁶⁵ Cass was wrong. Isaac McCoy was wrong. They were all wrong. Even after everything that happened, many Potawatomi remain in the Great Lakes region. In spite of centuries of acculturation, hardship, and separation, the Potawatomi have maintained a distinct national identity and connection to each other, their history, and their homelands. As demonstrated in the stories of Perrot and Thunder, the distant bands of Potawatomi were not quite so disconnected from one another as it may seem. Constant migrations of individuals meant that the disparate bands and nuclei of Potawatomi were never really separate. Through blood, memory, and culture, a commonality between communities has never truly been lost. Today, there are Potawatomi people living all over the country and even the world. Their connection to Indiana and all of their homelands is still present and is all the more relevant in the climate of today, as American Hoosiers struggle to understand how best to care for the land. Although many had to move away, a great portion came back at one time or another to reunite with loved ones. They were never fully exiled. Many did and still do remain here. The Potawatomi did not perish.

⁶⁵ Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians*, 98.

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Focuses on the Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, and Potawatomis after their removals west of the Mississippi, placing them in the context of a battle with the United States for geographic and political space and emphasizing their continued influence and participation in regional and national history.

———, *Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal. New Directions in Native American Studies*. Vol. 13. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017.

Describes the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands as an act of all-encompassing violence and the early histories written about the topic as “literary genocide.” Stressing the lack of scholarship on Removal north of the Ohio River, Bowes highlights the conflicts and treaties that enabled the US to conduct removal there as well as the adaptive strategies employed by Indigenous Americans to resist.

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