

The Potawatomi Trail of Death from Indiana to Kansas

The terms of the unethical “Whiskey Treaties” written between 1834-37 between the U.S. and Native Americans in the Great Lakes region allowed the government to relocate numerous groups of Potawatomi and other members of the Three Fires Confederacy to chosen sites west of the Mississippi River. Chief Menominee did not sign the Treaty of 1836 that was written in central Indiana, and he led a resistance movement from his village in northern Indiana that consisted of approximately 100 wigwams and cabins housing 850 Potawatomi. This led to the appointment of General John Tipton to forcefully remove the Potawatomi from this site.

At a meeting in Chief Menominee’s chapel in August of 1838, the chief was informed that he was under arrest, and squads of 100 volunteers rounded up all Potawatomi within a 30-50 mile radius. On September 4, 1838, Chief Menominee, who had been ““tied like a dog,”” and two other chiefs were placed in a jail wagon at the start of a procession of 849 Potawatomi that originated near Plymouth Indiana, crossed Illinois and Missouri, and ended at Potawatomi Creek, Kansas, a distance of about 600 miles (and an average distance of 15 miles per day of travel).

Of the Potawatomi who were forcefully relocated, many of them had been baptized by a young French priest named Benjamin Petit, who led a mass service for them in Logansport. Petit then accompanied them on their journey, and he cared for those who became ill. His letters about the relocation are with the Indiana Historical Society. He describes the order of the march, which included the U.S. flag carried by a soldier, an Army officer, the staff luggage carts, a carriage for the chiefs, a chief on horseback, followed by 250 to 300 horses carrying men, women and children. Petit was instrumental in getting the chiefs who had been treated as prisoners of war released from the jail wagon.

More than 40 tribal members died on the march to Kansas, which lasted from 9/4/1838 to 11/4/1838; most of them were children. Water was scarce, conditions were unsanitary, and

serious illness was common. Around 46 camping sites are known along the relocation route, and burials of tribal members occurred at many of them. Petit also writes that the sick were placed in baggage wagons under canvases at the rear of the procession, as if they were already dead.

When the final destination was reached in Osawatomie, Kansas, there was supposed to be housing for the Potawatomi, but none existed. Father Petit stayed with them, although he became very ill. He placed them in the care of Jesuit Father Christian Hoecken, and traveled to St. Louis on horseback with assistance from a Potawatomi who, at times, held him up on his horse. Father Petit passed away in St. Louis on February 10, 1839. In 1856, his body was returned to Indiana by the founder of Notre Dame University, Father Edward Sorin; Father Petit's remains are now beneath the Log Chapel at the university, and his baptismal records and journals are at the university library.

Although Chief Menominee survived the march to Kansas, he died about three years later, and was buried at St. Mary's Mission, Kansas. In 1909, a 17 ft. tall granite monument depicting him was dedicated near present day Myers Lake to commemorate the forced relocation of Chief Menominee and his followers. There is also a plaque attached to a large rock in Mueller Park, southeast of the Decatur Park District office, memorializing the day that the Potawatomi forcibly passed through the area. The message on the plaque states, in part:

POTAWATOMI TRAIL OF DEATH

Approximately 800 Potawatomi Indians passed here on September 26, 1838 during their forced march to Pottawattomi Creek, Kansas, after being driven from their land in northern Indiana at gunpoint.

Occasionally, groups gather around this memorial to pay their respect to those victimized.

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