

Removal of the Grand River Odawa

Fourth Article in the four part exploration of the Fur Trade in Lowell

By: Shantell Ford

When we think of Indian removal we think of the 1830 Act of Indian Removal by President Andrew Jackson. This resulted in tragedies all over the country, the most remembered being the Cherokee removal known as the “Trail of Tears.” However, right here in Lowell Michigan, the Odawa residents had their lives uprooted and forever changed because of this policy. At the same time, *“the Michigan Odawa were not passive victims of the removal policy. They identified the forces operating both for and against their remaining in Michigan and used them to their benefit.”*ⁱ

The basic premise behind the Indian Removal policies was the thought that American Civilization could not happen alongside Indian ‘savagery.’ Many even believed *that ‘their innate inferiority as a race was an insurmountable barrier to civilization.’*ⁱⁱ American officials believed that the two lifestyles were completely incompatible. American settlers had begun arriving at a rapid rate. In 1820 there were only 8,765 non-native people in the now Michigan area, but by 1836 that population had grown to 174,543.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Treaty of Greenville in 1794 showed the Native people that the Americans wanted their land. The Americans convinced Native people who did not live in current Michigan, to cede land including Michigan. When the British made one last stand against the Americans in the War of 1812, some native people fought with the British hoping to be rescued from the American taking of their land. With the British surrender in the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, all hope of the British rescue was lost.

The Treaty of Chicago in 1821 saw the Michigan land south of the Grand River ceded to the Americans. One local Chief, Keewaycooshcum, participated in the signing. Later he was murdered for it.^{iv}

When the Odawa north of the Grand River went to Washington in 1836 they were under a lot of pressure. Many others had signed treaties, the fur traders were pushing for repayment of credit they had allowed the Odawa to extend, government officials wanted them to sign, and the settlers were coming.

The Odawa delegation had no intention of ceding land in the Lower Peninsula, but that is exactly what happened. In exchange for over thirteen million acres of land north of the Grand River they received annual payments, reservations within the territory, money for missions, agricultural equipment, money for medicine, tobacco and provisions, and trader loan pay offs. Money was also allotted for chiefs, heads of families, and for the Metis population who did not have to go to reservations. The local fur traders who profited were Rix Robinson, Daniel Marsac, and Joseph La Framboise Jr. After the chiefs had signed and returned home, the U.S. Senate added a stipulation that the reservations could only be used for five years, and then anyone removing to the west would be given land there. When the Chiefs and Traders gathered on Mackinac Island to ratify the changes and realized the addition, they were outraged, but still felt forced to sign as nothing was to be given until it was ratified. Of the over 100 recognized Ottawa and Chippewa Chiefs in Michigan, only 21 signed the treaty. Though the Treaty of 1836 nearly guaranteed eventual removal to the west, already by 1837 the Michigan legislature began petitioning Congress to move Michigan Indians west. In the next five years, because of this fear of being forced west, many native people fled to safety in British controlled Manitoulin Island and Canada.

The Odawa people’s ability to stay in Michigan was the result of several things. There are within the Odawa and especially the Metis community many leaders who were termed ‘**cultural mediators.**’ These were those who encouraged their people to learn when education was available, and hone their agricultural skills in order to become ‘civilized.’ While it was not an acceptance of the ‘superiority’ of the American ways necessarily, it was seeing what the Americans wanted and adapting to that for their own benefit. They encouraged their people to do what needed to be done to survive in the American world.

Removal of the Grand River Odawa (Continued)

The national election of 1840 brought big changes in the country. These changes were very beneficial for the native population in Michigan. Those with strong removal priorities were out of power. Henry Schoolcraft was out as Indian agent, replaced by Robert Stuart. As early as 1841 the Odawa petitioned the Michigan legislature to aid them in their attempt to remain in Michigan and grant them citizenship status. The Michigan legislature in turn petitioned the U.S. government to grant citizenship status to native people who had farms. The 1855 Treaty of Detroit determined the land allotments that were not included in the 1836 Treaty. Odawa along the Grand and Flat Rivers were given land in Oceana County Michigan. The threat of western removal was over.^v

The Flat River Odawa, Cobmoosa's band, left in 1857 although he did not join them until the Spring of 1862. Cobmoosa's grandson Rodney Lewis Negake, named after Rodney and Lewis Robinson, told of the removal journey years later in a trip to visit Lowell. He had been eight years old at the time but remembered clearly. *"The tribe numbering 250 to 300 people left Lowell in 1857, canoeing to Grand Rapids where they took the river steamer Michigan to Grand Haven and then the lake steamer Papola to Pentwater."*^{vi}

An eyewitness report describes watching a family during their removal *"they only had a few crude cooking utensils and tools; a bundle of clothing, furs, beautiful baskets and blankets. Also cornstalks to which were tied some chickens, loudly protesting their fate. The Indian and his squaw plodded along in silence. To them it was death in life. To the whites along the trail, bidding their departing friends goodbye, the scene was too pathetic to be told."*^{vii}

The decisions made nearly 200 years ago must be seen in the context of their time. That the Odawa were not sent west, but were *"successful in their struggle to remain in their homeland, by adapting to the expanding American economy and political system often on their own culturally defined terms"*^{viii} presents a different resolution to a complex issue playing out across the country.

Today Lowell has memories in the newspaper and historical reports, and some landmarks reminding us of the Odawa people who were here. The block proudly proclaiming *"Negonce"* in big lettering, currently is the home of Century Post Pub, Fans In The Stands, Gary's Country Meats, and Riverbend East Salon. There is a home in the city that Cobmoosa had built for one of his wives, and we have a street named for Chief Segwun. We also have a museum dedicated to preserving the lives and stories of Lowell's past.

iOttawa Adaptive Strategies to Indian Removal, James M. McClurken, Michigan Historical Review Vol. 12 No. 1, on JSTOR through Central Michigan University

iiRites of Conquest, The History and Culture of Michigan's Native Americans, Charles E. Cleland, University of Michigan 1992

iiiRites of Conquest The History and Culture of Michigan's Native Americans, Charles E. Cleland, University of Michigan Press, 1992

ivHistory of the City of Grand Rapids, Albert Baxter, Munsell & Company, New York and Grand Rapids 1891

vMasters of Empire, Michael A. McDonnell, Hill and Wang New York 2015

viLowell Ledger, August 10, 1916

viiUnidentified Grand Rapids Paper, Scrapbook Box 239, Grand Rapids Public Library, Michigan & Family History Division

viiiOttawa Adaptive Strategies to Indian Removal, James M. McClurken, Michigan Historical Review Vol. 12 No. 1, on JSTOR through Central Michigan University

**We gratefully
acknowledge these
Memorial gifts**

Randy Gould

Kim Harding