

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

CHIEF LEOPLOD POKAGON & THE POKAGON POTAWATOMI

Chief Leopold Pokagon was born in 1775, and spent his adulthood in Southwestern Michigan. His life story is, also, the historic saga of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Native American Indians who lived in Cass, Berrien, and Van Buren Counties, Michigan. To understand Leopold as the hero he was, one must grasp the precarious nature of the lives of his people after the white man came to lower Michigan's dense forests and the St. Joseph River Drainage Basin.

The Potawatomi of Southwestern Michigan belonged to the Algonquian Nation of Native Americans. They were hunters and gathers who roamed the Upper Mississippi River Region that includes the land surrounding Lake Michigan and its tributary rivers. The Potawatomi were part of the Council of Three Fires (Potawatomi, Ottawa and Chippewa), and known as the "keepers of fire." Cass, Berrien and Van Buren Counties, Michigan were historically their hunting grounds and permanent home bases.

When the French first made contact, there were ten thousand Potawatomi living within the Upper Mississippi Region. Militia from Great Britain and Spain invaded the area and numbers started to decrease. French fur trappers established trade routes and introduced illness. English frontiersmen began to explore lower Michigan, bringing alcohol as a bargaining tool, which poorly influenced family life. Early settlers contributed to the tragedy with added conflict and disease. Numbers were further reduced in battle, as military troops forced compliance. The Indian way of life was slowly stolen from them. Finally, only four thousand people remained.

This was a dangerous era in lower Michigan for everyone. The Potawatomi fought back, trying desperately to stop the flood of invaders. In the Battle of Fort Dearborn, near Chicago, five hundred Potawatomi warriors, attempted to drive the white man out. They attacked and killed many civilians and militia trying to evacuate the region. Both sides had losses.

Unknown to the Potawatomi, white leaders in the Michigan Territory were anxious to lure settlers into the area, which would reduce the Indian domain and change their life styles forever. Land ownership would become the tax basis by which the new government was financed. The desire for statehood required settlement and an increased population which would reduce hunting grounds. Plans for development demanded voters, willing workers, and an infrastructure that was foreign to the Indians.. The Potawatomi of Southwestern Michigan, without understanding the consequences, were facing an influx of Eastern Americans and European Immigrants seeking the wealth of rich land. Eastern loggers envied the timber of Michigan's mighty virgin forests, and would reduce natural woodland habitats to farm land. The abundant water supply was a great temptation, that would lead to conflict over water rights. Rivers and sylvan thickets teeming with wild life beckoned white hunters and settlers, that would force competition for food sources.

The local Potawatomi were, eventually, coerced into signing eleven different treaties of land cession. With each treaty and each new settler, their territory was reduced to smaller and smaller parcels. Even that lesser amount of property was coveted by the white man.

The Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi lived in a village near Niles, Michigan. They had been reduced to less than two hundred and eighty people, and were lead by Chief Leopold Pokagon. They were a peaceful tribe. Like the Indian Village that had prospered in Dowagiac, they had learned to live harmoniously with their white neighbors. Unfortunately, this was a time in history when an even worse disaster struck. In some ways, it was more devastating than what these Native Americans had already endured.

The Congress of the United States passed the Indian Removal Act. It had been signed into law by President Andrew Jackson on May 26, 1830. Federal troops were sent far and wide to carry out a forced removal of the Native American Indians, from coveted areas, to lands west of the Mississippi River. It took approximately, fifteen years to fulfill the President's orders. Forced marches to reservations out west were agonizing endeavors. Federal troops arrived in Southwestern Michigan under strict orders. A number of bitter confrontations followed, and far to many walking trips to western lands were forced on local Indian people.

It is gratifying that many of Southwestern Michigan's white pioneers resisted the government troops, who attempted to round up the local indigenous Native American population. By this time, the Indian and white man in lower Michigan had developed a stable trading relationship. There was a local tolerance, with a "live and let live" sentiment. Trust, trade, mutual survival, and certain friendships were strong motivators. A large number of Cass, Berrien and Van Buren Potawatomi hid from the militia, or were helped to disappear from the sight of the soldiers by certain settler's subterfuge.

Tragically, too many Potawatomi were caught and forced to march the "Trail of Tears." Frighteningly, one such march was called the "Trail of Death" by the Potawatomi, because forty children died on a forced walk to Kansas.

Chief Leopold Pokagon was not willing to accept this kind of treatment for his tribe. With a brilliant mind, and strategic planning abilities, he made the decision to change his tribe's current destiny. With cunning logic, he took steps to save his people. He knew he had to fight on the government's turf and within their rules. He moved his people to Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. That area is now bordered by Leach Road. He already had the advantages of an education given to him by local Catholic Priests. His allegiance to that religion, prompted him and his tribe to build a log cabin church there in 1838. He then deeded it and forty acres to the Catholic Bishop of Detroit. By the 1840s, Holy Cross Fathers of Notre Dame, Indiana were ministering to this congregation of Native Americans Indians. Leopold lead his people to live upstanding lives, create alliances, and contribute to the local community.

Then he made a stunning move. Chief Leopold Pokagon renegotiated an amendment to the Treaty of Chicago. That amendment protected his people from the Indian Removal Act, so they could continue to live on the land of their people. The political connections he created, and the religious affiliations he made were powerful credibility tools. He agreed to the concession that his people would abstain from the use of alcohol. His alliances with local influential whites strengthened his position even more. Finally, his brilliant legal negotiations, won the Pokagons their freedom.

The Chief used money that the Potawatomi received from the Treaty of Chicago to buy his tribe's ancestral land, complete with a legal government sanctioned deed. By the time the smoke of the tribe's camp fires cleared, the Pokagons owned one thousand acres of Silver Creek Township land, free and clear. The Pokagons were the only Potawatomi, in Southwestern Michigan, to not have to walk "The Trail of Tears." He had saved his people from those dreaded western reservations, and the grueling journeys to reach those lands. There should be no doubt that Chief Leopold Pokagon was a true hero.

Leopold Pokagon died in 1841. He and his wife "rest in eternal peace" beneath the very church he founded so long ago, the Silver Creek Township, Sacred Heart of Mary Catholic Church. He was 66 years old at his passing. His log cabin church was replaced in 1861 with a white frame church. When that building burned down in 1866, the church was rebuilt with a beautiful brick structure that still stands today. For many years the bell tower rang its lovely tones before services each Sunday.

In conclusion, Chief Leopold Pokagon was a hero to his people, and he earned the right to be recognized as a significant figure in Cass County, Michigan's early history. What happened to the Potawatomi Native American Indians of Southwestern Michigan is a classic scenario that has been repeated throughout history, when a larger and more aggressive culture invades a smaller one and destroys it. However, because of Chief Leopold Pokagon, that is not exactly true for the Pokagons. Leopold took a desperate situation, and turned it into a glorious win. His negotiation skills, logic, and command of strategy was nothing short of brilliant. He is a true local hero.

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RESEARCH

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