

Michigan Every Day By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

Sept. 4, 1838

Potawatomi forced from state; Indian "trail of death"

General John Tipton rounded up 859 Potawatomi Indians, including approximately 150 from Michigan, for a forced move to prairie land west of the Mississippi. The fertile land around the Great Lakes was coveted by white settlers most of whom wanted the Indians removed. In response, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830. But the Potawatomi did not want to abandon land so rich in fish, game, and sugar-producing maple trees.

Tipton tricked many of them, including Chiefs Menominee, Black Wolf, and Peepehawah, by calling them to a council. He then surrounded them with troops. The march west, prodded by soldiers' bayonets, began Sept. 4, 1838. Father Benjamin Marie Petit, a French priest called the relocation a "trail of death."

Although records differ about the march's death rate, one estimate puts the dead at one in five. The disaster prompted many Potawatomi who managed to remain in Michigan to migrate to Canada. Others fled to Northern Michigan to blend in with bands of Ottawa or Chippewa, or hid in denser forest in the south of the state.

Governor William Woodbridge, the state's second governor, appealed to the federal government for troops to root out the remaining Indians. Eventually the federal and state governments shifted their position, allowing the remaining Indians to stay.