

## LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES: WHITE-INDIAN RELATIONS IN WESTERN MICHIGAN IN THE ERA OF REMOVAL

by

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In the spring of 1836, Mumford Eldred, a newly arrived settler from Vermont, carefully selected federal land for purchase in Michigan Territory. He chose an oak opening—a grassy, treeless, and highly fertile expanse in Martin Township, Allegan County, the western-most of the third tier of counties north of the Indiana border. When Eldred moved his family to the tract, however, he found it already occupied by people who shared his appreciation of its agricultural potential but not his understanding of private property. The small band of Potawatomi Indians in residence had just completed planting, and they declined Eldred's summary invitation to decamp. Eldred then tore up their fields. When his horse and hogs disappeared, he felled a large tree into their lodges. Chastened, the Potawatomi agreed to leave if first allowed to care for their dying chief. After their departure, Eldred burned the Indians' settlement. A year later, he cremated the chief, whose corpse the band had left sealed in a roofed log pen near Eldred's cabin, to the distress of his wife, "who could not step outside . . . without looking in that direction." For years thereafter, Eldred's crops and livestock suffered regular depredations.<sup>1</sup>

Mumford Eldred's encounter with the Potawatomi tells a familiar story in white-Indian relations: the Anglo-American's easy assertion of cultural superiority, backed by the authority of the federal government, over a dispossessed people. By the time that an anonymous editor wrote up the anecdote some forty years later for the *History of Allegan and Barry Counties*, the "old settler" and his Potawatomi adversaries no doubt were remembered locally simply as colorful relics of bygone days. Closer examination reveals, however, that Eldred's

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of Allegan and Barry Counties, Michigan, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Their Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Philadelphia: D. W. Ensign & Co., 1880), 270-71.

encounter was an episode in a complicated story. The Potawatomi did not abandon their fields at Eldred's demand. They first attempted to accommodate him; when that failed, they retaliated not once but repeatedly. For Eldred and the Potawatomi, the struggle for the oak opening in the spring of 1836 was only the first of a series of encounters. The anecdote in the county history only hints at the larger story.

Part of what is missing, this essay argues, is the fact that the settlers' assertion of cultural superiority masked a great deal of cultural uncertainty. The values that Anglo-Americans unhesitatingly applied to the deficiencies of the Indians were, in reality, in flux. Scholars of the trans-Appalachian West have variously depicted settlers as yeoman farmers seeking to preserve their status as independent landowners, or as capitalists, intent on practicing highly commercialized agriculture. They have viewed the frontier as a site of conflict within Anglo-American culture.<sup>2</sup> This conflict was the result of massive economic upheaval. The revolution in transportation, national market integration, industrialization, and westward expansion all contributed to a fundamental reconfiguration of American society and economy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Social and economic change of such magnitude threatened old cultural verities and promoted new ones. For more than a decade, therefore, historians of the early republic have been engaged in the complex task of explaining why some white Americans embraced and others resisted the emerging capitalist order.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1-64.

<sup>3</sup> Key works include Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History* 5 (1977): 42-77; James Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 35 (1978): 3-22; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979): 169-89; Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); and Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992).

As Mumford Eldred's encounter with the Potawatomi attests, the frontier was also an arena of intense cross-cultural conflict. How divisions within Anglo-American culture affected relations between settlers and the native peoples they had come to displace has been little explored. This essay examines the interaction between white settlers and Native Americans in western Michigan in the three decades before the Civil War; there, sustained contact resulted from the peculiarities of federal Indian and land policies, the timing and geography of white settlement, and economic crisis—the panic of 1837-1839 and the ensuing economic depression. Economic crisis halted the flow of white settlers into the region, and curbed the federal program for the removal of native peoples. These circumstances gave the Ottawa, and to a limited extent the Potawatomi, the means of survival in the midst of white settlement. At the same time, the settlers found themselves living under frontier conditions far longer than they had expected. They were suspended between two economic worlds: a pre-capitalist past and a capitalist future. Neither was at face particularly accommodating to the Indians, but in the interstices lay the possibilities of a relationship based on mutual need and congruent values.

Mumford Eldred acted out his callous assertion of the primacy of private property on a stage set by the intersection of federal land and Indian policies. His 1836 encounter with the Indian band took place three years after, in which the Potawatomi ceded their remaining claims to land in western Michigan, and two years before the federal government moved forcibly to deport the Potawatomi west of the Mississippi River. It occurred the same year as the Treaty of Washington, in which the Potawatomi's neighbors to the north, the Ottawa, ceded their lands in the lower peninsula from the Grand River to the Mackinac Straits. These cessions coincided with, and were prompted by, the massive land boom of the 1830s.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The effects of the policy of removal in the Old Northwest have received far less attention than has the removal of southern native peoples. Works relevant to Michigan Indians are: Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); and Satz, "Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era: The Old Northwest as a Test Case," *Michigan History* 60:1 (Spring 1976): 71-93; Elizabeth A. Neumeyer, "Indian Removal in Michigan, 1833-1855" (Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, M.A. thesis, 1968); and Neumeyer, "Michigan Indians Battle Against Removal," *Michigan History* 55:4 (Winter 1971): 275-88. On federal treaties with Michigan Indians, see Alpheus Felch, "The Indians of Michigan and the

Cheap, rapid transport west via the Erie Canal and steam-powered traffic on the Great Lakes spurred the boom. Like Mumford Eldred, most white emigrants to western Michigan were Yankees—New Englanders or their descendants living in upstate New York. Yankee westward migration in the 1830s was channeled to Michigan by the water route. Disembarking at Detroit, the emigrants drove wagons west along the Chicago Road skirting the Indiana border. The road was authorized in 1821 in the Treaty of Chicago, in which the Michigan Potawatomi made their first cession of land to the federal government. White settlers thus approached western Michigan from the south, occupying in succession the St. Joseph and Kalamazoo River Valleys, and entering the Grand River Valley shortly before the collapse of the boom during the panic of 1837-39. The boom peaked in 1836, the year that Mumford Eldred purchased his oak opening in the Kalamazoo River Valley.<sup>5</sup>

The federal government's program for the dispossession of native peoples and their removal from western Michigan, however, was as incomplete as Eldred's victory over the Potawatomi band was partial. Indeed, Eldred's difficulties were symptomatic of the failure of the federal program. He was able to drive the band from his real property, but at the cost of his chattels, as then and for years to come,

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Cession of their Lands to the United States," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 40 vols. (Lansing: Robert Smith & Co., 1900-1929) (1894) 26: 274-97 (hereafter *MPHC*); and Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883* (New York: Interland Publishing Co., 1972), 198-201, 283-84, 372-75, 410-15, 450-56, 725-31.

<sup>5</sup> On Yankee migration to Michigan, see Gregory S. Rose, "South Central Michigan Yankees," *Michigan History* 60 (March-April 1986): 32-39; John C. Hudson, "Yankeeland in the Middle West," *Journal of Geography* 85:5 (September-October 1986): 195-200; and Hudson, "North American Origins of Middlewestern Frontier Populations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78:3 (Fall 1988): 395-413. On the land boom, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 235-49; statistics of land sales may be found in U.S. Congress, Senate, *The Report of the Commissioners of the General Land Office, in Answer to the Resolution of the Senate of 22 January 1847*, S. Ex. Doc. 41 (30-1) 508, 30th Congress, 1st Sess., 1848 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1848), 156-65, 251-53. On the pattern of settlement in western Michigan, see George N. Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan: A Study of Settlement of the Lower Peninsula During the Territorial Period, 1805-1837* (Lansing: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., State Printers, 1916), viii, 1-37, 244-420.

the Indians raided his crops and his livestock. As brutal as the military-style round-up of the 1838 removal was, the federal government managed to deport only about 600 of the 2500 Potawatomi then living in Michigan. Of the rest, one band of Catholic Potawatomi, the Pokagons, obtained exemption from removal under the 1833 treaty; the remainder either fled to Canada, from which some later returned, or moved north to live among the Ottawa, with whom they already were intermarried.<sup>6</sup> As for the Ottawa, they were assigned five tracts on which they were to live for five years, pending removal, unless the federal government granted permission to stay longer. The Grand River Ottawa, who customarily ranged as far south as the Kalamazoo River (their traditional boundary with the Potawatomi) were expected to relocate to a reserve near present-day Manistee. Few actually did so, and there the matter rested for twenty years; the federal government was unwilling either to prosecute its program of removal or to assign permanent lands to the Ottawa.<sup>7</sup>

The inconsistency of federal Indian policy, combined with the location and the timing of white settlement in western Michigan, resulted in sustained interaction between native peoples and Anglo-Americans. This was particularly the case in the Ottawa-dominated area between the Kalamazoo and the Grand Rivers. These lands were the last to be occupied by Anglo-Americans before the panic of 1837-39 and ensuing depression effectively curtailed federal land buying and reduced white settlement to a trickle until well into the 1840s. Under the terms of the 1836 treaty, the Ottawa were permitted to continue hunting and planting on lands not taken up by white settlers. As Mumford Eldred's encounter with the Potawatomi band demonstrated, however, cultural misunderstandings and unequal power relationships limited interaction between Yankee settlers and the people they threatened to displace.

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<sup>6</sup> Neumeyer, "Indian Removal in Michigan," 22-30; Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 135-38; and James A. Clifton, *The Pokagons, 1683-1983: Catholic Potawatomi of the St. Joseph River Valley* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984), 53-76.

<sup>7</sup> George M. Blackburn, "Foredoomed to Failure: The Manistee Indian Station," *Michigan History* 53:1 (Spring 1969): 37-50. On the Kalamazoo River boundary between the Potawatomi and the Ottawa, see Tanner, *Atlas*, 63; and Isaac McCoy, *History of the Baptist Indian Missions* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), 206.

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Photo courtesy Clarke Historical Library, reproduction by David Danst.  
Painting by Lt. TIDBALL, U.S.A., in H.R. Schoolcraft, *History, Conditions, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of The United States*, vol. 5, facing p. 94.

#### Ottawa Canoe

Eldred saw his claim to the oak opening as absolute, backed as it was by the authority of the federal government. No attempts by the Potawatomi band, through accommodation or retaliation, could persuade him otherwise. His nephew, Stephen Eldred, a settler in Climax Township in Kalamazoo County, also invoked the authority of the federal government in his dealings with the Potawatomi. When the settlers shot Indians' dogs that had killed their hogs, the dogs' owners demanded compensation of between \$20 and \$30 per dead canine. Eldred put an end to these "annoyances" by telling the Potawatomi that "he would report them to the Indian agent at Detroit, and they would get no more presents from the federal government"—that is, the flow of annuity monies and goods established by treaty would be shut off.<sup>8</sup>

This story is revealing for several reasons. The first is that both the settlers' hogs and the Indians' dogs were free ranging; the former were, in their own way, as destructive as the latter. The settlers were accustomed to paying for livestock depredations to crops, but only if it could be proved before a justice of the peace that the animals had broken into a well-fenced field.<sup>9</sup> Climax Township, which contained a small prairie, was the site of a well-established Potawatomi encampment before the arrival of the first white settlers in 1833.<sup>10</sup> The Potawatomi may well have set their dogs on the settlers' hogs because the swine were uprooting the Indians' unfenced fields, and they may have set the damages as high as they did to compensate not only for the dead animals, but for the loss of their crops. Eldred, however, did not recognize the legitimacy of the Potawatomi's claims. If the Indians did not fence their fields, they deserved the damage, and in any event,

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<sup>8</sup> A. D. P. Van Buren, "Indian Reminiscences of Calhoun and Kalamazoo Counties," *MPHC* (1886) 10: 156.

<sup>9</sup> Richland Township Justice of the Peace Dockets, 1841-1859, Regional Historical Archives, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo (unpaginated). Cases of replevin (the return to a person of goods or chattels wrongfully taken or detained) include *Czar Giddings v. Hilda Barrett*, 20 April 1842; and *Roswell K. Goodwin v. James S. Waldron*, 17 July 1848.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel W. Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Philadelphia: Everts & Abbott, 1880), 325.

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they planted in the township only on sufferance. They were squatting on federal land soon to become the property of a white settler.<sup>11</sup> Eldred saw no need to arbitrate the Indians' claims informally. He simply summoned the authority of the federal government.

Despite the settlers' claim to the whip hand of the federal government, however, interactions between Yankee settlers and native peoples were not unremittingly hostile. Indeed, relations between Yankees and Ottawa, and to a lesser extent Potawatomi, rested on a broad base of mutual benefit. Economic exchanges between settlers and Indians shaped both long-distance trade and more intimate dealings between individuals. For Yankees, the exchanges proved an invaluable subsidy to white settlement. For the Indians, they were a way of claiming a physical and social place for themselves in the midst of white settlement. For the Ottawa in particular, economic relations with Yankee settlers became a key element in their campaign to avoid removal and to remain in Michigan on their own terms.

The Ottawa's efforts to remain in Michigan have been well documented. The panic and depression of the late 1830s temporarily relieved the pressure on the Indians to abandon their lands to white settlers. Ottawa political organization was decentralized, which frustrated attempts of federal negotiators to achieve agreement among the Indians on a new location outside Michigan. The two divisions of the Ottawa, the Grand River and the L'Arbre Croche Indians, disagreed frequently with each other. They were at one only in their determination to avoid removal. Within the divisions, moreover, the Ottawa lived in small, autonomous bands that seemed to white settlers to pose little threat. Finally, the Ottawa worked aggressively to demonstrate their ability to coexist with Anglo-Americans. In this endeavor, they sought white allies not only among Indian traders, who were deeply interested in the Ottawa's treaty annuity monies, but also among Yankee settlers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For an example of adjudication by a justice of the peace of damages committed by a hog owned by a white settler to a poorly fenced, but privately owned, Indian field, see George Nelson Smith, Memoranda Book, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (unpaginated), 12-13 June 1843.

<sup>12</sup> James M. McClurken, "Ottawa Adaptive Strategies to Indian Removal," *Michigan Historical Review* 12 (Spring 1986): 29-55; and Neumeyer, "Michigan Indians Battle Against Removal."



The Ottawa understood well the real and symbolic value of land in fee simple in their resistance to removal. As landowners, and thereby state and local taxpayers, they demonstrated their adaptation to Anglo-American ways despite their status as wards of the federal government. Hence, they enlisted settlers' help in purchasing land with annuity monies. Many of the settlers were evangelical Protestants who saw assisting the Ottawa as an exercise in benevolence, as a way of encouraging the Indians on a path to "civilization." All three of the Ottawa's permanent bases between the Kalamazoo and Grand Rivers after the Treaty of 1836 were Protestant missions: the Baptist Slater Mission, just over the Kalamazoo County line in Barry County; the Episcopalian Griswold Mission in Allegan County; and the Old Wing Colony, near present-day Holland, led by George N. Smith, a Congregational clergyman. All three missions resulted from Ottawa purchases of federal land with the assistance of white allies. The Old Wing Colony, for example, was the fruit of a joint meeting of Ottawa and Yankee settlers in 1838 to discuss the formation of a permanent Indian colony. The meeting produced the "Western Michigan Society to Benefit the Indians," of which Smith, formerly associated with the American Home Missionary Society, was appointed agent.<sup>13</sup>

The Ottawa might have been less successful in their recruitment of white allies had they not shared with them an interest in economic exchange. The nature of this interest has been little explored, except from the standpoint of adjustments that Ottawa made in their way of life to remain in the midst of white society. More was at stake in these exchanges, however, than the satisfaction of material need, as undeniably useful as this was to both parties. Both Native Americans and Anglo-Americans understood—in congruent, if ultimately dissimilar, ways—that economic exchanges structured social relationships. For both, they were a way of incorporating individuals with communities.

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<sup>13</sup> On the Protestant missions, see McCoy, *History of the Baptist Missions*, 494-97; Mrs. Etta Smith Wilson, "Life and Work of the Late Rev. George N. Smith, a Pioneer Missionary," *MPHC* (1905) 30: 190-212; and Charles A. Weissert, "The Indians of Barry County and the Work of Leonard Slater, the Missionary," *Michigan History* 16:3 (Summer 1932): 321-33. The best primary accounts are George Nelson Smith, *Journal 1842-45*, and *Memoranda Books, 1840-48*, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (both unpaginated). The Bentley also contains miscellaneous papers of James Selkirk, missionary at the Griswold Mission.

Limited long-distance trade and a system of local exchanges that operated with little cash money characterized the settlers' frontier economy from the beginning. In the early 1830s, these two aspects of economic life seemed to the settlers temporary inconveniences; a decade later, however, they appeared all too permanent. Encouraged by the land boom and by the territorial and then state government's grandiose internal improvement scheme—three east-west railroads linked to canals—most settlers threw their available capital and labor into quickly preparing as much land as possible for production. The internal improvement scheme, however, collapsed with the land boom in the panic of 1837-39. Although the Michigan Central Railroad was completed as far west as Kalamazoo by 1846, regular rail service throughout the region was unavailable until the 1850s.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of viable transport, long distance trade was limited to produce such as grain and salted meats that the settlers could load into "arks," or flatboats, and pole down the St. Joseph, Kalamazoo, and Grand Rivers to Lake Michigan for shipment around the lakes. Manufactured goods arrived from the East by the same route. Consignment merchants never knew whether produce would reach the East and, if it did, whether their profit would be eaten up in shipping charges. They did know that settlers would be unable to pay cash for manufactured goods purchased with the proceeds of shipments, and would offer instead more produce for consignment.<sup>15</sup>

The settlers' lack of cash was chronic. Any financial resources brought from home were quickly exhausted. The peculiarities of the long distance trade made reliance on a return from the year's crops difficult in the best of times, and impossible when Eastern prices for wheat tumbled after the panic. Such cash as was available, moreover,

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<sup>14</sup> A good general account of Michigan's economy in the late territorial period and early years of statehood is Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., rev. ed., 1980), 261-86. On internal improvements see William L. Jenks, "Michigan's Five-Million Dollar Loan," *Michigan History* 15 (Autumn 1931): 575-633; and John Lauritz Larson, *Bonds of Enterprise: John Murray Forbes and Western Development in America's Railway Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 31-52.

<sup>15</sup> A detailed account of the riverine trade from a merchant's perspective is E. Lakin Brown, "Autobiographical Notes," *MPHC* (1905) 30: 455-60.

was often unreliable, because wildcat banking in the late 1830s ruined Michigan currency for much of the next decade.<sup>16</sup>

The correspondence of clergymen employed by the American Home Missionary Society nicely documents this nearly cashless world. Newly formed churches supported by the society were expected to contribute to the maintenance of their ministers, but to the clergymen's chagrin, they rarely did so with cash. Why they did not tells a great deal about the settlers' response to the frontier economy. In the early 1830s, the settlers invested such money as they had in their farmsteads. By mid-decade, as the land boom reached its height, many also had engaged in speculation. With the onset of the depression in the wake of the panic, few had cash for any purpose. As the Reverend Hiram Smith wrote to the secretary of the American Home Missionary Society in 1840, "A few years ago, people here were in a rage to get rich; now the chief concern of many is how shall we get a living." His colleague, Justin Marsh, gave a particularly poignant example of the effect of the boom's collapse upon settlers. Investigating a slackening of attendance at Sabbath services, he discovered that his congregation was reluctant to appear unless respectably dressed. "Clothing is cash here, and many cannot obtain cash to buy it."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For New York wheat prices, see Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), 263; and U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of Finances for the Year Ending June 30, 1863*, 11. Ex. Doc. 3, 30th Congress, 1st Sess., 1864 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 284-382. For local wheat prices, see the *Michigan Statesman*, 26 March 1836, 3; *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 28 October 1837, 2; and 6 October 1843, 2. For a settler's explanation of why wheat could not profitably be shipped east without better transportation, see "A Farmer," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 8 September 1838, 2. On wildcat banking, see Alpheus Felch, "Early Banks and Banking in Michigan," *MPHC* (1890) 11: 111-24; and H. M. Utley, "The Wildcat Banking System in Michigan," *MPHC* (1884) 5: 209-22.

<sup>17</sup> Hiram Smith to Milton Badger, 1 July 1840 and Justin Marsh to M. Badger, 1 June 1840, Papers of the American Home Missionary Society in Michigan, 1825-1846 Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, (unpaginated). See also William A. Jones to Absalom Peters, 15 January 1833; L. J. Porter to Absalom Peters, 27 February 1834; Silas Woodbury to Absalom Peters, 5 May 1836; George N. Smith to Absalom Peters, 5 November 1837; Sylvester Cochrane to AHMS, 3 March 1840; L. M. S. Smith to M. Badger, 8 September 1843; and Anson Smyth to M. Badger, 12 December 1845.

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Settlers found themselves enmeshed for some twenty years in an economy in which long-distance trade was tenuous and local exchanges were transacted with little cash. To survive in such a world, they were forced to adapt to a complex, multi-faceted trade in which the Potawatomi, and particularly the Ottawa, had long proved adept. First, the settlers accommodated themselves to the fur trade as it had evolved in western Michigan since 1806, when the previously untapped region was opened to fur gathering. The American Fur Company consolidated, extended, and intensified the fur trade in 1821 by establishing the Grand River outfit with posts as far south as the Kalamazoo River. By the time that significant white settlement had advanced into western Michigan, the heyday of the American Fur Company had nearly passed. In 1834, John Jacob Astor sold out of the company; two years later, the Grand River outfit was abandoned, and the head of the outfit, Rix Robinson, received a hefty claim in the Treaty of Washington, which he had helped to negotiate.<sup>18</sup>

After the departure of the American Fur Company, which had exercised a monopoly over fur gathering in Western Michigan, intensely competitive, private individuals took over the trade in less valuable pelts and skins such as muskrat, deer, and raccoon. In this late phase of the trade, lasting into the early 1850s, furs were not the Indians' only salable commodity. Barrels of cranberries and huckleberries were shipped to Buffalo from Lake Michigan ports at the mouths of the St. Joseph, Kalamazoo, and Grand Rivers. Maple sugar, consigned to merchants in Boston and New York, was "packed in 'mokirks' (also 'mococks') which were small baskets or boxes . . . weighing from one to sixty pounds. The small 'mokirks' were often elaborately decorated by squaws with fancy headwork." There was also a small trade in beaded moccasins.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ida A. Johnson, *The Michigan Fur Trade* (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1919), 127-53; John E. McDowell, "Madame LaFramboise," *Michigan History* 56:4 (Winter 1972): 271-86; George H. White, "Sketch of the Hon. Rix Robinson; a Pioneer of Western Michigan," *MPHC* (1887) 11: 186-200; and Douglas Dunham, "Rix Robinson and the Indian Land Cession of 1836," *Michigan History* 36:4 (December 1952): 374-88. A good first-hand account of the Grand Rapids outfit is Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard, *The Autobiography of Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1911), 81-124.

<sup>19</sup> Dwight Goss, "The Indians of the Grand River Valley," *MPHC* (1905) 30: 185-86.

The trade in the 1830s and 1840s in furs, berries, and maple sugar testified to the persistence of a distinctive Indian economy, supported in no small part by the Ottawa's acquisition of private property and the founding of the missions. Conservation of a native way of life was hardly what the Yankee settlers who promoted the missions had intended. The mission were an opportunity for the Ottawa to obtain the rudiments of white civilization: Protestant Christianity, reading and writing in English, male techniques of settled agriculture, and female domestic skills. As the Reverend George N. Smith proudly concluded when Ottawa at Old Wing bid successfully on a county road contract, the band was striving to act like a "company of white men."<sup>20</sup> The Ottawa, however, were far less interested in becoming like white men than in learning to live as Indians in the midst of white settlement. For them, the missions were less cradles of civilization than bases from which to pursue a seasonally migratory economy.

The Indian economy in western Michigan combined horticulture—cultivation of corn, beans, and squashes—with hunting, fishing, and the collection of wild plant foods. Villages attained their largest populations during the planting and harvesting seasons, then split up for winter hunting, followed by visits to maple groves for sugar making, to rapids for spring fish runs, and to trading posts. Contact with whites in the latter half of the eighteenth century introduced new technology such as guns and traps, and new domestic plants and animals, but did not fundamentally alter the subsistence economy. The Ottawa, for example, acquired seeds from the French for apple and peach orchards, and the Grand River Valley became a provisioning ground for traders and military personnel at the Straits.<sup>21</sup> The record of the Ottawa at Old Wing shows the continuing adaptation of white ways to the seasonally migratory economy. Private property the

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, Memoranda Book, 10 January 1841. On Indian indoctrination to white civilization, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); and Virgil J. Vogel, "The Missionary as Acculturation Agent: Peter Dougherty and the Indians of Grand Traverse," *Michigan History* 51:3 (September 1967): 185-210.

<sup>21</sup> Tanner, *Atlas*, 133; Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 128-41.

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Indians may have had, with fenced fields worked by oxen and plows, but they refused to live on their farms year round. The missionary Smith's efforts to preach and teach were regularly interrupted when the band left Old Wing to hunt, fish, make maple sugar, gather cranberries, and carry their harvest to Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, or Chicago to exchange for such Anglo-American provisions as white flour.<sup>22</sup>

Yankee merchants entered readily into the trade in furs, berries, and maple sugar. Whereas the traders accustomed to dealing exclusively with Indians apparently stocked only a few goods of interest to the settlers, such as tea and ammunition, Yankee merchants quickly adjusted their wares to the needs of a mixed clientele.<sup>23</sup> Indian commodities soon took their place alongside white produce poled on flatboats down river. Unlike many whites, moreover, at least some of the merchants' Indian customers could pay cash for goods. It is, of course, well known that much of the government annuities went directly to the Indian traders, squandered in liquor or in payment for inflated debts in goods.<sup>24</sup> But not all of the silver half dollars—the denomination of the government disbursements—were so captured. At both the Old Wing and Slater Missions, for example, Ottawa and missionaries both drove off traders who had come to sell liquor to the Indians after the distribution of annuity monies.<sup>25</sup>

How valuable the Indian trade in commodities and coin was for the Yankee merchants of western Michigan is hard to determine. The few surviving accounts of merchants are retrospective, reminiscences of old pioneers. Moreover, while the annuity payments amounted in

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Smith, *Memoranda Book*, 12 April 1840; 14 June 1840; 1 March 1841; 11 June 1841; and 20 September 1841.

<sup>23</sup> Jesse Turner, "Reminiscences of Kalamazoo," *MPHC* (1891) 18: 576, 580.

<sup>24</sup> On the rapacity of Indian traders, see Robert A. Trennert, Jr., *Indian Traders on the Middle Border: The House of Ewing, 1827-54* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). A good first-hand account of the operation of Indian traders at the first disbursement of government annuities at Grand Rapids following the Treaty of Washington is Douglas H. Gordon and George S. May, eds., "The Michigan Land Rush in 1836," *Michigan History* 43:4 (December 1959): 455-75.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Memoranda Book*, 27-28 November 1841; 5, 8 December 1841; 18 January 1842; Weissert, "The Indians of Barry County," 331.

*toto* to large sums—the Ottawa, for example, received \$18,000 per year—disbursements to individual Indians were quite small. At Grand Haven in 1843, 172 members of the Old Wing Band shared \$1564.50, a figure consistent with the \$8 to \$10 per person distributed annually at the Slater Mission.<sup>26</sup> As precariously situated as the Yankee merchants were, however, living from boatload to boatload of produce, the availability of Indian commodities surely had a stabilizing effect on their operations. Similarly, although there is no way of knowing how many of the Indians' silver half dollars went into circulation, any source of coin in this economy was welcome.

From the hindsight of the merchants' perspective, therefore, how much the trade was worth depended on the standard applied—either an absolute monetary reckoning, or a recognition of the role of the trade in the frontier economy. A. H. Scott of Bronson (later Kalamazoo), for example, flatly asserted that the Indians' "trade was of little value." His sometime partner, E. Lakin Brown, remembered otherwise: the Indians were of "some importance to the business of the early traders." After receiving their government payments, they "sometimes had considerable sums of money, always in silver half dollars, which they paid for goods. The fur trade was of considerable value at Bronson."<sup>27</sup>

Despite this divergence of perspective, the merchants' recollections do provide clear evidence that they and their Indian customers applied different standards of value to their transactions. The merchants understood value as a fluctuating market price, calculated in money. Value for the Indians meant that one good could be exchanged for another, and money was simply one good among many. That the merchants grudgingly tolerated the discrepancy supports the notion that the trade was valuable on both their and the Indians' terms. Scott remembered that,

[t]he trade . . . was mainly an exchange (or as they called it, "swap") of their furs, venison, berries,

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, Memoranda Book, 30 September 1843; Weissert, "The Indians of Barry County," 331.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with A. H. Scott in Van Buren, "Indian Reminiscences," 165-66; Brown, "Autobiographical Notes," 459-60.

dressed deer skins, moccasins, blackberries, cranberries, etc. for flour, salt, tobacco, powder, lead, sugar, and all the articles the Indians used to clothe themselves. I never knew an Indian to sell to white people any part of the carcass of a deer except the ham. The price . . . was always two shillings . . . whenever we sold a squaw any goods that had to be made up into any of their garments a needle and a thread for each garment must be given; only goods for one garment could be bought or swapped at a time. It required a good knowledge of their ways and much patience to be a successful trader with the Indians. We frequently sold them goods on credit and found them about the same kind of paymasters as the white men; some paid promptly, some after a long time, and some never paid . . .<sup>28</sup>

What puzzled Scott was the Indians' insistence on fixed values for the goods they exchanged. The ham of a deer, for example, always sold for two shillings. Some of these fixed values were the result of the fur trade, in which pelts and skins were weighed by hand and sold by the pound at prices that remained constant year after year.<sup>29</sup> Scott did not comment on how his involvement in the fur trade shaped his business practices. Instead, he found it curious that the Indians were not, in a strict sense, his customers; he could not set prices for his goods in accordance with market demand. Nor did the Indians behave as trading partners. They did not try to sell many cuts of deer, or adjust the price of the hams that they did sell. They did not bargain to acquire more goods (additional yardage, needles, and thread) in a single transaction.

In short, Scott found the Indians lacking in business acumen. Although no more or less honest than white settlers, they seemed ill prepared to participate in a market economy. Worse, the Indians' dealings with whites were ultimately destructive. Scott was convinced that contact with whites corrupted Indian "character." He referred

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<sup>28</sup> Van Buren, "Reminiscences," 164-65.

<sup>29</sup> Goss, "The Indians of the Grand River Valley," 186.



particularly to the trade in whiskey, "watered and drugged for their special use."<sup>30</sup> The evidence for the trade in liquor needs to be carefully assessed. Merchants such as the notorious H. B. Huston of Kalamazoo did indeed sell bad whiskey, and Scott was not alone in seeing Indian drunkenness as proof of the fundamental incompatibility of white and Indian cultures.

The accounts of merchants such as Scott and Brown, who renounced their sales of liquor and thereby exchanged their profits for superior virtue, go beyond an unwillingness to bear responsibility for another's degradation. Many whites in western Michigan by the late 1830s opposed all traffic in liquor, and their efforts to stamp it out sometimes put them at violent odds with their fellow settlers.<sup>31</sup> To ardent temperance advocates, consumption of alcohol seemed more a proof of human degradation than of Indian immorality. They were encouraged in these views in the 1840s when a number of the Ottawa themselves converted to abstinence. Indians at Old Wing, for example, took a temperance pledge, formed a temperance society, and responded favorably to a citizens' petition urging them to complain if anyone attempted to sell them liquor. The missionary Leonard Slater successfully sued traffickers in liquor in the local justice of the peace court on behalf of the Ottawa.<sup>32</sup>

Merchant A. H. Scott's commentary on his trade with Indians also ignored the extent to which it resembled his dealings with whites. He could not demand prompt cash payment from his white customers, and he often had to accept goods that he did not want on terms detrimental to relations with his own creditors. Such also had been the fate of local merchants in New England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Customers treated merchants as they did their neighbors, with whom they engaged in an endless round of exchanges in goods, services, and small amounts in cash. Exchanges were face-to-face and reciprocal, although years often passed before accounts were settled.

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<sup>30</sup> Van Buren, "Reminiscences," 166.

<sup>31</sup> John Fitzgibbon, "King Alcohol: His Rise, Reign, and Fall in Michigan," *Michigan History* 2 (1918): 737-46; Dunbar, *Michigan*, 352-53.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Memoranda Book*, 27 April 1844; 31 August 1844; 24 December 1844; 13 May 1845; Richland Township Justice of the Peace Dockets, *Leonard Slater v. William Weller, Jr.*, 30 May 1842; *People of Michigan v. Antas Barney*, 26 September 1844.

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These exchanges not only satisfied mutual economic need and allowed farming communities to maintain a high degree of self-sufficiency and independence from the external market; they also structured social relations by linking individual households in a complex web of communal interdependence.<sup>33</sup>

By the generation before the Civil War, market integration had advanced sufficiently in the northeastern United States to allow merchants to gain the upper hand over their customers, as signaled by refusals to extend long-term credit, unwillingness to accept certain goods in lieu of cash, and demands for cash payment. A new business ethic had emerged alongside customary neighborly exchanges. Yankee settlers brought both sets of values with them to the Michigan frontier. Their behavior in farm-building was predicated on the assumption of the rapid profitability of commercial agriculture, yet they also greatly valued an ethic of "neighborliness," perhaps even more highly than they had been accustomed to in New England. Frontier circumstances thus forced them to defer for a generation their expectations of market integration.<sup>34</sup>

Although settlers were in many ways intolerant of Indian culture, hostile, as Mumford and Stephen Eldred were, to any perceived infringement on their absolute right to private property, they did understand neighborly economic exchange. "Neighborly" was their highest praise for Indians. As Mrs. L. W. Lowell, Stephen Eldred's sister, recalled:

We could not have done without the Indians. They were our market men and women. They brought us venison, huckleberries, maple sugar and many other things that we in a new settlement needed.

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<sup>33</sup> The literature on market integration in New England is now voluminous. The most recent entry is comprehensive, and contains a useful historiographic introductory chapter. See Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-75, 197-226.

The Indians, she continued,

were friends and very kind neighbors to the early settlers. They treated us so much like kith and kin, that we called them our "country cousins." Although extremely *backwoodish* in habit and mode of living, yet we could not wish for kinder more accommodating neighbors . . . The Indians were often a great help at raisings; a log house or barn could not at times, have been raised without their aid.<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Lovell's use of familial metaphors—"kith and kin," and "country cousins"—to describe the special quality of the Indians' neighborliness is telling. Algonquian peoples such as the Potawatomi and Ottawa had long incorporated outsiders, both Indian and white, into their local political and economic orders through both fictive and adoptive kinship relationships. Reciprocal exchanges of political allegiance and worldly goods cemented the relationships and supported tribal society.<sup>36</sup> It was on this point that white and Indian understandings of the value of economic exchange between them converged, but did not meet. Both whites and Indians understood exchanges as the satisfaction of mutual economic needs. Both understood that what they exchanged were equivalencies of value unmediated by market demand. And both understood that economic exchanges structured social relationships. Yankees, however, did not view these exchanges as expressions of an intense loyalty and reciprocity that went far beyond the exchanges themselves. Neighborly exchanges did not create familial relationships. Although many exchanges did, of course, occur among members of Yankee families, they were like those between unrelated parties. Communal self-sufficiency was the ideal of independent farming households.

In the end, Indian and white paths in western Michigan diverged. By the early 1850s, the flow of white settlement resumed, and the open

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Mrs. L. W. Lovell in Van Buren, "Indian Reminiscences," 157. For the family reference, see the *Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo, Allegan and Van Buren Counties, Michigan* (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1892), 728.

<sup>36</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 94-119.

countryside in which Indians had hunted was carved into fenced farmsteads. As economic prosperity returned and transportation links with the East advanced, the old promise of profitable commercial agriculture seemed finally realizable. In January of 1851, the editor of the *Kalamazoo Gazette* happily reported the belated arrival of the capitalist order:

[o]ne of the most gratifying symptoms in the business transactions in our village is that the unhallowed "dicker" traffic is in great measure going out of use. There is scarcely any produce which the Farmer now brings to market, but that he may readily exchange it for cash.

What a relief, he continued,

that a healthy and legitimate manner of doing business is being restored, and men may once again calculate with some certainty their progress in business, and make their calculations on a reliable basis. There is not one evil which can afflict a community in a business point of view more calamitously than the "swap and dicker" operations which have reigned among us for the last twelve years.<sup>37</sup>

Business restored after twelve years? "Dicker and Swap" had characterized the frontier economy of western Michigan from the beginning. Still, the editor saw rightly the magnitude of the change: the settlers were no longer suspended between two economic worlds.

Later that month, the editor inadvertently shed light on what such change meant for Indians, who had played such a large role in the dicker traffic. Great quantities of venison, he observed, were available for sale that winter in Kalamazoo. One man had reported killing sixty deer in little over a month. This crucial element in the Indians' economy had been under assault for some years. In the 1840s, for example, a glove factory operated near the Slater missions was supplied by settlers who ruthlessly killed deer for their hides, abandon-

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<sup>37</sup> *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 3 January 1851, 2.

ing the carcasses. The editor, however, did not remark on the passage of a way of life; he mourned instead for the deer. "Such wholesale slaughter," he warned, "must soon depopulate our forests of this noble animal."<sup>38</sup>

Faced with combined economic and demographic pressures, Indians finally abandoned the Kalamazoo and Grand River Valleys. The Old Wing Mission moved north to Grand Traverse Bay in 1848; the Slater Mission closed in 1852. Three years later, the federal government set aside a tract of land considerably north of the valley for the Grand River Ottawa. In anticipation of the Dawes Act, enacted in 1887 to impose ownership in severalty on communally held Indian reservations, the federal government allocated eighty-acre parcels for heads of household and forty-acre portions for individuals. The emigration of the Ottawa thus began in 1857.

The pattern of white settlement combined with economic circumstances, the vagaries of federal Indian policy, and congruent, if ultimately dissimilar, understandings of the value of economic exchange had kept native peoples and Yankee settlers in close contact for a generation. For settlers, the interaction had clearly been beneficial. They could well afford to wax nostalgic in their pioneer reminiscences and county histories; the continuing presence of Indians in western Michigan had subsidized white settlement. As for the Ottawa and at least some of the Potawatomi, they had avoided removal west of the Mississippi, postponed relocation for a generation, and given the lie to the proposition that white and Indian societies were always incompatible.

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<sup>38</sup> *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 17 January 1851, 2; Weissert, "The Indians of Barry County," 331.