

## The Great Absence

### The Dispossession of Native Peoples

#### Doctrine of Discovery

The Doctrine of Discovery is the international law upon which Western European and United States colonialism is based. This law defined the process of how European nations acquired sovereignty to the lands they “discovered” on the Western continent and justified the indigenous inhabitants’ loss of their natural rights and land to European monarchs.

To understand what ensued after the arrival of Europeans to the Western continent, we need to understand how the exceptional beliefs and assumptions embodied in Doctrine of Discovery defined the Western European and America mind. The history of dispossession of Native peoples and slavery of Africans begins with this Doctrine. For more information, [see here](#).

#### French Domination

**1609: Violent encounter with Iroquois tribe.** The French explorer Champlain first encountered the Iroquois people along the southern shore of Lake Ontario. The French used firearms against them, which threw them into a panic as it was their first experience with this weapon. This violent first encounter caused the lasting enmity of the Iroquois Federation with the French. The Federation denied the French use of the southern shores of the Great Lakes. Thus, the French did not explore southern Michigan. Instead they explored and claimed the land north of the Great Lakes and Georgian Bay.

**1620: First European footprint in Michigan.** Etienne Brule, a French explorer seeking a water route to the Orient, was the first European known to have stepped on land that would later become Michigan. He arrived by the way of the St. Mary’s River.

**1641: First Christian Service in Michigan.** Jesuits held the first Christian religion service ever held in Michigan at Sault Ste. Marie. The French Jesuit’s mission was to carry out the will of God, forego all sensual pleasure, and unceasingly labor to convert heathen and pagans to the Christianity.

**French fur trade – 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century:** The French exploited Native peoples to trap fur-bearing animals in exchange for liquor, guns, and metal utensils. While the French never colonized the Great Lakes region, they severely disrupted the indigenous culture through the introduction of diseases, Christianity missionaries, and European weapons. The French fur traders preyed upon the susceptibility of Native peoples to alcohol addiction.

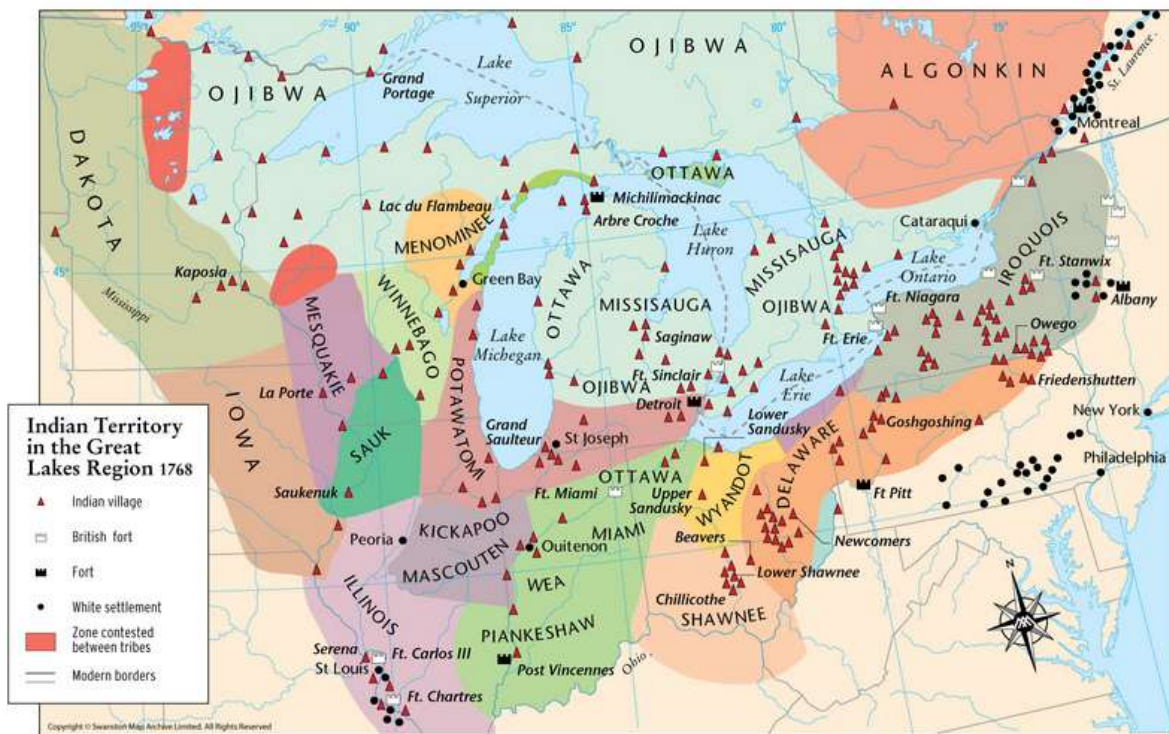
By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, beavers, the primary fur traded, had all but disappeared from the Eastern Great Lakes region, which drove the fur traders ever further west for fresh stocks and deeper into indigenous lands.

**1670:** First French to set foot in area of Detroit: While paddling to the Upper Peninsula from the southern shores of Lake Erie, priests saw on the Detroit shore a stone idol that the indigenous

people worshipped for safe passage across Lake Erie. The priest came on shore and demolished it.

**1701: Founding of Detroit.** Antoine Laumet de La Mothe Cadillac got permission from the French king to establish a French fort and colony along the Detroit River, a strategic point to control southern access to northern Great Lakes. Native tribes wanting protection from Iroquois attacks settled near the fort. The colony came to include Jesuit missions to convert the indigenous people to Christianity.

**1736: French Census of Detroit.** Native peoples established villages above and below the fort. According to a 1736 census of Detroit, 200 Ottawa, 200 Huron, and 100 Potawatomi warriors with their families all lived near this important fur trading center.



**Figure 10. Potawatomi Villages Ranging from Detroit into Wisconsin in the mid-1700's.** Reprinted from "Indian Territory in the Great Lakes Region, 1768," by M. Swanson & A. Swanson, n.d.

**1756-1763: French and Indian War.** Conflicting British and French land claims over the Ohio Valley fueled the French and Indian War. American colonists encroached upon Native territory beyond the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains, which the French and Native people resisted knowing that settlers would destroy the fur trade and hunting grounds by clearing the forests and pushing Native People off their land.

**1763: Treaty of Paris.** In the treaty, France lost its North American empire. Britain gained all of the French claims east of the Mississippi River. Spain, a British ally in the war, gained New Orleans and all French claims west of the Mississippi River.

**1763: Proclamation of 1763.** The British proclamation reserved all land west of the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains for Native peoples. Nobody could purchase any of this Native land except through an imperial agent. This proclamation nullified all the thirteen colonies' land claims west of the mountains.

**1763-1764: Pontiac Uprising.** A Delaware nation prophet proclaimed that Native peoples across Turtle Island had to purify themselves and to return to their ancient ways to drive the whites off their land. Tribes from the St. Lawrence to the Ohio Valley responded to this call for action. Pontiac, Chief of the Ottawa, held a war council at an Ottawa village outside of Detroit, which was attended by Ottawa, Huron, Potawatomi, and Chippewa chiefs. In 1763, Pontiac led a siege against Detroit. The St. Ignace fort was captured. Pontiac's actions inspired other Native peoples. By July 1763, tribes had captured all the British forts except Detroit, Niagara Falls, and Fort Pitt (Pittsburg). Potawatomi warriors overwhelmed a small British garrison at Fort St. Joseph.

**1763: Battle of Bloody Run.** In an attempt to break Pontiac's siege of Fort Detroit, about 250 British troops attempted to make a surprise attack on Pontiac's encampment. Pontiac was ready and waiting, possibly alerted by French settlers, and defeated the British. However, when Pontiac learned in October 1763 that the French had ceded their claims to the British, he accepted failure. By 1764, British troops had "pacified" the western tribes and convinced them that further resistance was futile.

### The Great Dying

A century after the arrival of Christopher Columbus, some 90% of Indigenous Americans had perished.

"The supposed truism that more native people died from disease than from direct face-to-face killing or from gross mistreatment or other concomitant derivatives of that brutality such as starvation, exposure, exhaustion, or despair is nothing more than a scholarly article of faith." - David Stannard, *American Holocaust*

### British Domination

**1764:** British take control of Detroit and St. Ignace, the only two military posts in Michigan.

**1774 – 1783: Indian War** – Despite the intention of the Proclamation of 1763 to close the western territories to Europeans, colonialists continued to encroach on Native people's farmland and hunting grounds. The Native peoples responded by chasing out land surveyors and raiding settler farms. Virginia Governor John Murray mobilized the Virginia militia to invade the Ohio Valley and instructed it "to proceed directly to [the Native peoples' towns], and if possible destroy their towns and magazines and distress them in every other way that is possible." The Virginia governor made peace with accommodating Shawnee leaders,

demanding all of the tribe's hunting grounds. This peace agreement was rejected by the tribes, which opened a decade-long war of white settlers against the Shawnee nation and its allies, led by the great chief Tecumseh.

**1774: The Quebec Act** extended the province of Quebec west to the Mississippi River and south to the Ohio River. The thirteen colonies considered the act coercive. It was the only British Act mentioned specifically in the Declaration of Independence. It was viewed as an invalidation of the western land claims of Virginia, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

**1776-1783: American Revolution.** During the war, the Native People fought against the American colonists and sided with the British who protected them against white settler encroachment. Although the area of Michigan did not have any battles, the Michigan area tribes joined other tribes in attacks against white settlements throughout the Upper Ohio Valley that were established in violation of the Proclamation of 1763, and drove hundreds of settlers back East, attacks which the British encouraged. The Detroit British governor offered a bounty for colonists' scalps brought back from Kentucky and Virginia.

**1777-1779: Shawnee War.** The Continental Congress ordered an offensive against the Shawnee Nation, which organized the coalition of tribes attacking white settlements. 1,500 rebels and militia destroyed hostile native towns to "terrify the savages and check their ravages on the frontier."

**1779: Ohio Settlement.** Ottawa, Potawatomi, and other native chiefs declared their future neutrality in the American rebellion and ceded lands west of Pennsylvania and north of the Ohio River. Both the Algonquin and Iroquois nations openly repudiated the Ohio Settlement and declared they would cede nothing to the whites. Native and settler raiding parties continued until U.S. military action against the hostile tribes ended the attacks on settlements.

**1783: Treaty of Paris.** At the end of the American Revolution, the United States had gained military control of Kentucky and Illinois country while Britain had firm control of the Great Lakes region, including Michigan. By the Treaty of Paris, Britain ceded all of its territory between Canada and Florida east to the Mississippi River. The northern international boundary between the U.S. and Britain went through the Great Lakes.

### **United States Domination**

**1785: Treaty of Fort McIntosh.** Iroquois chiefs ceded to the U.S. government all its claims to the Old Northwest Territory. In the Midwest, Chippewa, Ottawa, and Wyandot (Huron) chiefs ceded all their lands in the present state of Ohio except from reservations. The tribes of these chiefs, however rejected the treaty, especially the Shawnee.

**1785: Land Ordinance of 1785.** The very first act passed by the Continental Congress, and preceded the writing of the U.S. constitution, revealed the motives for those wanting independence. The act ordered the surveying of all the land ceded by the tribal nations before the sale of land to settlers. The act detailed the surveying of land into townships and sale of land at auction for one dollar per acre.

**1786: Treat of Fort Finney.** Under threat of further U.S. military action, Shawnee chiefs ceded its Ohio land. However, this treaty was also repudiated as soon as the chiefs had returned to their settlements.

**1789-1795: Indian War.** The Secretary of War Henry Knox ordered the army commander of Fort Washington (Cincinnati) that “no other remedy remains but to extirpate, utterly if possible, the Banditti”. The Fort Knox commander recruited 500 Kentucky mounted rangers, primarily squatters. The military force burned and looted Miami towns and fields along the Wabash River. It captured women and children as hostages to force terms of surrender.

**1794: Battle of Fallen Timber.** This initial military action using untrained settlers did not deter the Miami nation’s hostilities against settlements. President Washington turned to a professional army operation instead of relying on a settler militia. The military operation to end native hostilities in the Northwest Territory was turned over to “Mad” Anthony Wayne who led trained troops and destroyed food supplies and murdered non-combatants: women, children, the old. At the Battle of Fallen Timber, Wayne overpowered the main Shawnee fighting force and laid waste to Shawnee villages and cornfields in a 50-mile swath of destruction. The Native tribes were further discouraged from further resistance when the British, who still controlled forts nearby and had encouraged native resistance, did not support the tribes in the battle even though they occupied a fort within miles of the battle.

**1795: Treaty of Greenville.** By treaty, the Ottawa, Chippewa, and Potawatomi pledged they would make no more war against the Americans. The tribes ceded all their Ohio land except a strip along the southern shore of Lake Erie for a reservation. The United States conquest of Ohio was achieved.

**1795: Jay Treaty.** Even after the Treaty of Paris that ended the American Revolution, Britain remained in control of Michigan territory, which it administered as a province of Quebec. It was reluctant to relinquish the lucrative fur trade. In the Jay Treaty between the United States and Britain, Britain agreed to evacuate all of its posts in the Northwest Territory by 1796.

**1796: Detroit turned over to United States.** Detroit had a population of 500 when the flag of the United States was raised over the fort and settlement.





**1807: Treaty of Detroit.** The Treaty of Detroit was the first major land cession in Michigan. The Detroit territorial governor was ordered by President Washington to negotiate a treaty to subdue rising tribal resistance to the influx of settlers. Signed on November 17, 1807 in Detroit, the Ottawa, Chippewa, Wyandot, and Potawatomi chiefs ceded to the United States eight million acres, the southeastern quarter of Michigan, which included the territory that would become Washtenaw County.

In return, the tribes received \$10,000 in goods and money and an annual payment of \$2,400. This amounted to roughly 1.2 cents per acre, which is equivalent to 23 cents per acre in 2021 constant dollars.

In the treaty, the tribes reserved the lands upon which their villages

were located at the time of the 1807 Treaty of Detroit. The tribes retained the right to hunt and fish on the land as long as it remained public land.

**1809: Wyandot Tract.** Congress gave the Wyandot tribe possession of a tract of land in southeast Michigan, which they gave up in the Treaty of 1818 in exchange for a 5,000-acre tract along the Huron River in Wayne County. In the Treaty of 1842, the Wyandot were moved into Ohio and relinquished all claims to land in Michigan.

**1811: Prophet Town founded.** See Tecumseh sidebar

**1811: Battle of Tippecanoe.** Indiana Territorial Governor Harrison led an attack on Prophet Town

### Tecumseh

Tecumseh, chief of the Shawnee, and his brother, known as the Prophet, founded Prophet Town, northeast of Indianapolis, as the capitol of a new tribal alliance to challenge squatters on tribal lands in Indiana and Illinois territories. The Prophet had claimed that the people of tribal nations needed to return to traditional ways of life and drive out the whites from their hunting grounds. Tecumseh had the vision of uniting all native people east of the Mississippi, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf, and called for the end of land sales. Thus began a pan-indigenous movement, which combined spirituality and politics.

**1812: War of 1812.** The greatest support for the War of 1812 came from the southern and western Congressmen seeking expansion. Britain had been encouraging tribal resistance, and the U.S. had eyes on Canadian land. At the war's end, the native tribes lost strategic military value in siding with combatting with European nations.

**1813: Tecumseh killed.** The great chief was killed in the Battle of the Thames by U.S. forces, destroying Tecumseh's army. The Thames River in Ontario flows into Lake St. Clair, opposite Detroit.

**1814: Treaty of Ghent.** The treaty restored the pre-war boundaries between U.S. and Canada.

**1815: Surveying of land begins in Michigan.** None of the land acquired through the 1807 Treaty of Detroit could be sold, except within the immediate vicinity of the Detroit and Mackinac forts. The 1785 Land Ordinance made it impossible for individuals to obtain legal title to any land taken from Native peoples until tribal claims were extinguished and the land surveyed. Land surveys of the land acquired through the 1807 Treaty of Detroit were postponed until after the War of 1812 and completed by 1825. Until the land was sold to individuals, Native peoples retained the rights to hunt, fish, and farm the land.

**1818: First Michigan Land Sale.** Michigan's first land sale of taken tribal land began with an auction in Detroit. The minimum bid was set at \$2/acre, with an average sale price of \$4/acre. The tribes had received 1.2 cents/acre from the U.S. government. At the Detroit land sale office, land prospectors could obtain maps of land parcels still available. The buyer investigated the land and then came back to the office to buy the land.

**1823: Chief Justice Marshall's Cherokee Trilogy.** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that native peoples were inferior as a matter of law and did not own the land under their feet; that the relationship between the U.S. and native peoples was that of a guardian and ward; and that only Congress could make laws for native peoples.

**1824: Purchase of Ann Arbor Land.** John Allen and Elisha Rumsey purchased 640 acres of land for Ann Arbor at the reduced price of \$1.25/acre.

**1830s: Removal of Native People.** Early treaties with the tribes included provisions that permitted them to remain in in the ceded territory on lands reserved for their use. However, by 1830s the U.S. Government had adopted the policy of moving all Native people, including those in Michigan, to areas west of the Mississippi River.

President Jackson believed that Indians had no special constitutional or legal status. Congress, in his view, was authorized to create an "Indian Territory" and unilaterally order the removal of all Indians to that place. Although Jackson denied he intended to use force to implement his removal policy, politicians of the day generally agreed that only military action could remove all

the eastern Indian tribes to the west. The removal bill was controversial, but in 1830 it became law. Government negotiators set out to negotiate, and enforce, treaties for the removal.

**Fate of the Potawatomi:** In 1833, approximately 6,000 to 7,000 Potawatomi lived in Michigan. Between 1838-1840, government agents rounded up approximately 1,200 Potawatomi and forced them to take the long walk west. The government first settled them in Missouri, but two years later moved the tribe to Iowa, near Council Bluffs. They were moved shortly afterwards to the Sugar Creek Reservation in eastern Kansas. An additional relocation in the 1860s moved some of the tribe to Oklahoma.

The Treaty of Chicago of 1833 granted an exemption to Leopold Pokagon, a devout Roman Catholic, that allowed his band to stay on two permanent reservations in western Michigan. These two tribes have federal recognition today: Pokagon Band of Potawatomi and Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians.

Perhaps 1,500 to 2,500 Michigan Potawatomi fled to Canada. Immigration to Canada became particularly attractive in 1837. Other Potawatomi avoided relocation by hiding in Michigan. Some took refuge in remote places such as the marshes along the lower Galien River in Berrien County or the headwater of the Kalamazoo River. Others fled north. Hiding was a temporary solution. Eventually those who fled either migrated to Canada, moved west, or quietly returned to their old homes after the federal soldiers were gone.

### **For Ann Arbor, the Great Absence of Native peoples had arrived.**

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Ann Arbor 2023

#### **The Great Absence Timeline Resources**

[Clark Historical Library](#)

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