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## The Flint Hills: A Major Chapter in Potawatomi Migration

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CHIEF WABAUNSEE  
*Charles Bird King*

## *The Flint Hills: A Major Chapter in Potawatomi Migration*

As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, I am proud to be a direct descendant of two great-great-grandfathers who were considered Headmen or Tribal Leaders of the Potawatomi in Kansas. In the mid-1800's, a large portion of the northern area of the Flint Hills was within the boundaries of the Potawatomi Indian Reservation.



Historically, there is evidence that a group of Algonquin-speaking Indians known as the Bodewadmi, now called the Potawatomi, date back well before the 13th century. At that time, we considered ourselves to be the Nishnabé or Original People and were living in what is now Eastern Canada and northern Maine. The Nishnabe was an alliance of the Odawa (now the Ottawa Indians); the Ojibwe (now the Chippewa); and the Bodewadmi (Potawatomi). In our Tribal culture

and teachings, this alliance still exists today. When the three tribes eventually decided to go their separate ways, the Odawa assumed responsibility as keepers of the trade; Ojibwe were keepers of the medicine; and the Potawatomi became the Keepers of the Fire, or People of the Place of the Fire.

Over the following decades, the Potawatomi migrated west and south through the St. Lawrence River Valley to enter the Great Lakes region. One of our early prophecies was that we would

eventually find our final destination in an area where food grew on water. The area we found was the land of wild rice.

We continued to roam the Great Lakes region — moving due to aggression or poor hunting. In the late 1500's, the Iroquois, who invaded the region from the east, forced the Potawatomi to the west of Lake Michigan. Shortly afterward, another prophecy, to encounter a people who came in peace, was realized. In 1634, we made contact with French trappers traveling southward from Canada and now Wisconsin in search of furs. They proved to be peaceful and their primary interest in us was expansion of their fur trapping. We quickly became partners with the French and engaged in a successful fur trade business. To ensure a lasting alliance, Tribal leaders encouraged the French to marry the Potawatomi women and to begin families. Hence, there are a significant number of French names that exist in the Tribe today.

During this period and later, the Potawatomi were not recognized Bands

or nations as today, but identified by regions or family settlements. The core of today's tribe was known as either the Mission Potawatomi, because of their acceptance of Catholicism, or the St. Joseph Potawatomi for their settlements on the St. Joseph River.

Both Potawatomi groups had settled in what is now Northern Indiana and Southern Michigan.

As a result of the westward expansion during the 19th century, the Potawatomi lost several million acres of land which accounted for most of their holdings in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan through treaties with the U.S. Government. In total, the Potawatomi have been party to 44 treaties with the federal government. The last treaty was executed in 1867.

Under President Andrew Jackson, Congress passed The Indian Removal Act, which promoted treaties with all Native American tribes east of the Mississippi to cede or trade their homelands for tracts of land in the

Western Territory comprised of what today is Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. In 1836, President Jackson signed a treaty with the St. Joseph and Mission Potawatomi resulting in loss of their remaining lands in Indiana and Illinois for approximately \$8,000 compensation and new land in Indian Territory with transportation, food, and shelter provided. At this point, Kansas did not exist.

The settled Potawatomi in Indiana were very reluctant to leave their homelands. Tribal leaders made two trips to Washington City to meet with then President Van Buren, the War Department (responsible for Indian affairs), and members of Congress in an attempt to revoke the treaty. Although reception was sympathetic and respectful, our leaders were unsuccessful in revoking the treaty. Chief Wabaunsee, for whom the Kansas county is named, participated in the first of these efforts in 1836. A young man who was later to become my great-great-grandfather, Joseph Napoleon

Bourassa, accompanied him on that trip. Wabaunsee returned to Washington City in 1845 with a delegation of Potawatomi from Iowa. Legend has it that due to a stagecoach accident, he did not return and subsequently died.

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In August 1838, members of the Mission Potawatomi were forcibly removed from their homes and held captive prior to a forced, guarded march later to be called the Potawatomi Trail of Death.

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Within weeks, over 850 men, women, and children were forced to relocate 660 miles to the south and west. Conditions were harsh, if not brutal on the road, and death was common.

After nine weeks of arduous travel, 756 Potawatomi arrived at "Pottawattomie" Creek, a reservation occupied by several hundred Osage

and Potawatomi who had been removed earlier from northern Illinois. A few days later they moved to the Sugar Creek Reservation located just south of Osawatomie. The original relocation agreement promised houses upon their arrival. However, there were none. The first winter at Sugar Creek was brutal. Over the next eight years, more than 600 Potawatomi would be buried at Sugar Creek.

Included in the names of those who completed the Trail of Death is my great-great-great-grandfather, Daniel Bourassa II and an annotation that he was accompanied by nine members of his family. His oldest son, my great-great-grandfather, Joseph Napoleon Bourassa had relocated a year earlier. Another son, Jude, who later was to reside in Wabaunsee County, did not arrive until 1840. Joseph later lived near Valencia, an early settlement on the Kansas River in Shawnee County. My other great-great-grandfather, Louis Ogee, who also arrived later, would purchase a stone

house just east of Silver Lake that is still lived in today.

In 1835 to 1836, prior to the Trail of Death, the United Band of Ottawa, Chippewa, and Potawatomi of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin were removed and detained on land between the Missouri and Little Platte Rivers, near what is now the area of the Kansas City Airport. This group included Chief Wabaunsee. Subsequently in 1837, the Prairie Potawatomi were relocated again, this time north to a reservation near Council Bluffs, Iowa.

We remained at Sugar Creek until 1846 when the Tribe was once again relocated by treaty to the Kansas Reserve west of present day Topeka. The Kansa Indians had previously occupied this area. A year later, the Jesuits who had served us at Sugar Creek relocated and established their Mission and Manual Labor School, founding what is today St. Mary's. The Baptists and Methodists established academies on the south side of the river. Today, the Baptist



BISHOP BRUTÉ AND FATHER PETIT SPEAKING TO  
POTAWATOMI INDIANS ON "TRAIL OF DEATH"

*Sketch by George Winter from his Journal, 1838*

*Courtesy of Tippecanoe County Historical Association, Lafayette, Indiana*

Academy structure is located next to the Kansas Historical Society Museum and is still in use. We were co-located on this reservation with the Prairie Band Potawatomi from Council Bluffs who were again relocated. The merging of these two groups resulted in nearly 4,500 Potawatomi living on this reservation.

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In an attempt to assimilate Native Americans into the ways of the white man, the U.S. Government created a program of allotting reservation land to individual tribal members.

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This reservation encompassed 900 square miles. The eastern boundary is present-day Gage Boulevard in Topeka and extended south to 45th St. The western boundary was just east of Alma; the northern boundary just south of Holton. Much of the Flint Hills in Northern Wabaunsee County

and Southern Pottawatomie County were within these boundaries as well as the western portions of Shawnee and Jackson Counties.

From 1840-1860, the Tribe did not prosper, but instead eked out an existence on Federal annuities and commodities. However, several individuals did quite well. Among these were Louis Vieux and Peter Bourbonnais, who operated toll bridges on the Oregon Trail near St. Mary's while Lucius Darling and John and Louis Ogee operated ferries across the Kansas River. Jude Bourassa operated a gristmill and boarding house on Mill Creek between Maple Hill and Willard. Others sold cattle and traded horses. Joseph Bourassa was an attorney, and served on the Tribal Business Committee as did Louis Ogee.

With the increasing number of white settlers passing through the reservation on the Oregon and California Trails, the Potawatomi were exposed to smallpox and cholera. Many of these Potawatomi lived in and around Uniontown just



JUDE BOURASSA, JOSEPH N. BOURASSA, LOUIS HENRY OGEE  
*Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center*



MAP OF THE STATES OF KANSAS AND TEXAS  
AND INDIAN TERRITORY, 1867  
Engineer Bureau, War Department

east of present day Willard. According to a first-person historical account, at least 35 Potawatomi are buried in a mass grave in the Uniontown Cemetery, which has recently been placed on the National Registry of Historical Sites in Kansas. Researchers believe that possibly

hundreds of other victims are buried in fields that surround this tiny cemetery. This cemetery is the last of Uniontown, which was completely burned following the second epidemic in 1854.

In an attempt to assimilate Native Americans into the ways of the white

man, the U.S. Government created a program of allotting reservation land to individual tribal members. The Treaty of 1861 contained provisions for Tribal members to be given an allotment of land in exchange, and unless otherwise deemed ineligible, these individuals would be granted U.S. Citizenship. We were the only tribe to have this opportunity for citizenship; hence the name Citizen Potawatomi was later adopted. It was not until 1924 that the other Native Americans in the United States received their citizenship. In 1867, Potawatomi leaders entered into our last treaty to sell our land holdings on the Kansas Reserve to the railroads, and

to use the proceeds to purchase a new reservation in Indian Territory, which is now Oklahoma. This reservation is just south of Shawnee, about 30 miles east of Oklahoma City.

Our migration to Oklahoma began in 1871 and continued for over 30 years. This relocation differed from the earlier ones as we relocated in small groups,

sometimes just individual families. In many cases, families or parts of families elected to remain in Kansas. Today, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation is the 9th largest Native American Tribe in the country with over 28,000 members. Approximately 3,000 of those reside in Kansas while nearly 7,000 live in Oklahoma.

A significant episode in our Tribal history is the period of time that the Potawatomi lived in Kansas and the Flint Hills. Citizen Potawatomi members still live in this region, continue to produce achievements, and to create history.

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*Jon Boursaw, a native Kansan, is a graduate of Washburn University where he was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force and served for over 24 years. Following his retirement as a Colonel, Jon worked in the health care management industry. Jon was the Executive Director of the Prairie Band Potawatomi for over 6 years, and then became the Director of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation's Cultural Heritage Center for 2 plus years before retiring in November 2008. Jon and his wife, Peggy, live in Topeka.*