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Introduction

Chicago in the Indian Country of the Western Great Lakes

When the United States declared war against Great Britain in June 1812, the hope was for a quick invasion of Canada. Instead, British forces, with the help of Indian allies, took Michilimackinac and Detroit with little fighting. Buoyed by the quick success at Michilimackinac, at least a thousand Potawatomis and their allies gathered around Fort Dearborn by early August 1812. It was an easy target, far from U.S. help and racked by internal dissension. After Captain Nathan Heald received orders to withdraw to Fort Wayne, he distributed food to the Indians but destroyed the stockpiles of alcohol and ammunition after consulting with John Kinzie, the most influential trader at Chicago.

On August 15, 1812, Captain Heald led the evacuation of 56 U.S. soldiers, 12 militia members, 9 women, and 18 children south along Lake Michigan from Fort Dearborn to Fort Wayne. Kinzie and William Wells, the former Indian agent at Fort Wayne, accompanied the group with some Miami warriors. They all came under attack by 500 Potawatomi warriors a mile and a half from the fort. In under an hour, Wells, some of his Miami escort, and 52 of 95 members of Heald's group were dead. The Potawatomi warriors claimed those still alive as prisoners of war, burned Fort Dearborn, and returned to their villages. Kinzie, with the help of Potawatomi warriors Black Partridge and Topinbee, ransomed Captain Heald and his wife, while his neighbor Archange Ouilmette protected Kinzie's stepdaughter Margaret Helm.

Within weeks U.S. officials and newspapers were reporting the battle as a massacre. The use of the word "massacre" by Americans made great sense, as it assigned blame for the event squarely at the feet of a savage enemy, neatly ignoring the fact that it was a battle lost by the United States. It turned the rout at Chicago into a rallying cry for raising support for the War of 1812, especially for recruiting volunteers for western militia units.¹



Figure 2. Mrs. John H. (Juliette) Kinzie, after the publication of *Wau-Bun*. (Chicago History Museum, ICH, 10968)

Perhaps even more problematic, now nearly two hundred years later, most still remember it as a "massacre." It remains a potent image in Chicago's mythic past. The first star in the Chicago flag represents Fort Dearborn, and the battle in August 1812 has been memorialized many times in history and in fiction. No version is better known than Juliette M. Kinzie's 1856 reminiscence, *Wau-Bun: The "Early Day" in the North-West*.

Recounting the stories of her husband's family around August 1812, Juliette Kinzie wove a fanciful tale of intrigues, shifting loyalties, as well as personal and professional betrayals. Not surprisingly, Juliette highlighted her father-in-law, John Kinzie, and the heroic actions of her sister-in-law Margaret Helm, who was married to a young lieutenant at Fort Dearborn

and was taken prisoner in the attack. At the height of the battle, Margaret remembered that "a young Indian raised his tomahawk on me. . . . I was dragged from his grasp by another and older Indian . . . Black Partridge."²

Helm's recollections served as the basis for the 1893 monument, *The Fort Dearborn Massacre*. Originally located near the site of the battle on Prairie Avenue at Eighteenth Street, for more than fifty years it was the first and largest image of Chicago history that visiting schoolchildren encountered at the Chicago Historical Society (now the Chicago History Museum). However, since 1998 the monument has been out of public sight and largely out of mind.³

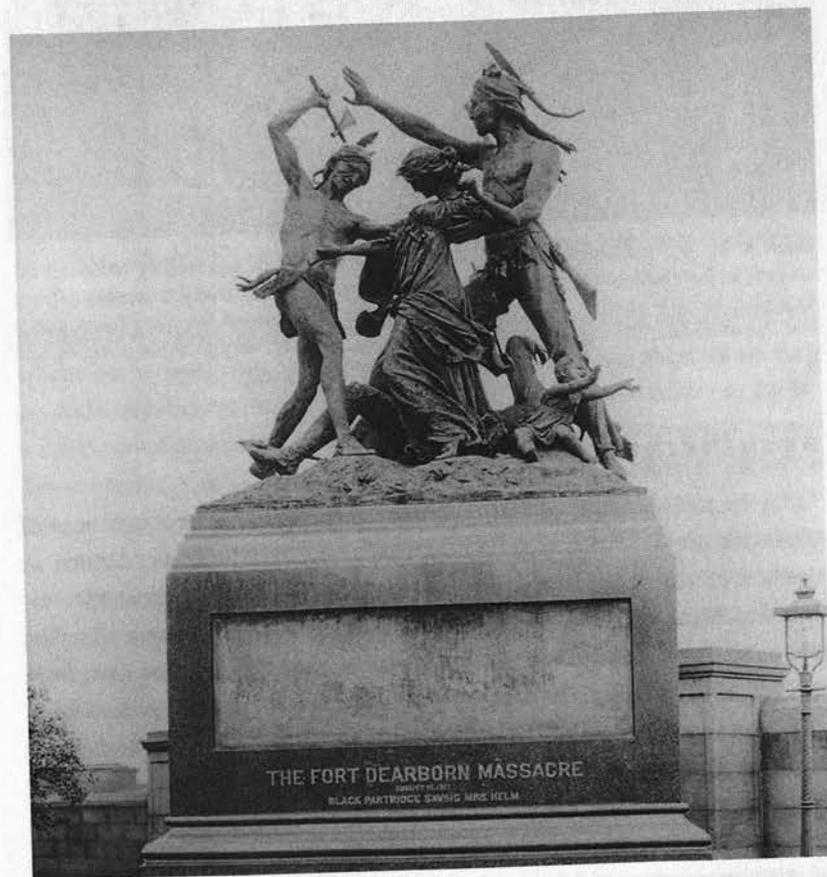


Figure 3. *The Fort Dearborn Massacre* monument at its original site at Prairie Avenue and Eighteenth Street. (Chicago History Museum, 38949)



Figure 4. In 1931 the Chicago Historical Society (now the Chicago History Museum) installed *The Fort Dearborn Massacre* monument (without its base) in the entranceway of the new Lincoln Park building. In 1987 the historical society returned the monument, and it was installed near its original site on Prairie Avenue in 1987, only to be de-installed and placed in storage in 1998. (Chicago History Museum, ICHI-36553)

RETHINKING AUGUST 15, 1812

Today historians often breeze over 1812 as prelude to their accounts of Chicago's dramatic rise with the railroad and industrialization, much as the War of 1812 itself is marginalized in U.S. history. The August 1812 attack at Chicago is dismissed as "too remote to have a decisive effect on the outcome of the war."⁴ The critical actions took place to the east, from Detroit across the Great Lakes to the St. Lawrence River. In turn, the War of 1812 was itself a side story in the nearly two decades of European fighting known as the Napoleonic Wars. During the summer of 1812, Napoleon led half a million soldiers into Russia, while French armies continued to fight against the British in Spain.⁵

Still, this Indian victory remains interesting as the only battle fought

at Chicago for at least 250 years, most certainly through the whole of the time that the United States has claimed the region. Moreover, the U.S. military lost that battle badly. Hiding the monument and forgetting the episode seems self-serving to a local and national history that focuses on the successes of the United States and its political and economic systems.

The Potawatomis and their allies who fought against the United States at Chicago in August 1812 had their own motivations that were related to, but not the same as, those of the United States or Great Britain. They were fighting to reduce the influence of the United States in their country by driving the United States out entirely—or at least those settlers intent on destroying Indian Country. The Potawatomis and their allies did not see the arrival of American settlers and institutions as progress, but as catastrophe.

From this perspective, Chicago did not develop first from a resource-rich agricultural hinterland that "called forth" a great city. There were no railroads or stockyards or steel mills. Instead, Chicago emerged from the imperial rivalries of the trans-Appalachian West—at the crossroads of multi-racial and multi-ethnic communities. It is not a story of the heartland, but of a time when Chicago was part of the borderland between competing colonial and tribal claims. The Chicago that emerges from this story results from a uniquely American mix of peoples and shifting circumstances, whose advantages only came into focus when American sovereignty successfully overcame alternatives like a permanent Indian Country or an extended period of British colonial rule. Chicago developed because of American conquest. It is as much a part of the narrative of manifest destiny as the vast expanses of the Great West.⁶

Over the last few decades, scholars have created a rich literature about Native Americans, borderlands, and the trans-Appalachian West. They suggest that we look at the region around Chicago not just as the Northwest Territory, but also as an Indian Country that was highly contested. The western Great Lakes during these years were, historian Andrew Cayton suggests, "the cockpit of the continent."⁷

To study Chicago in Indian Country requires, as historian Michael A. McDonnell has recently noted, an "imaginative leap of perspective" to see back to the last indigenous era in Chicago history. Taking that imaginative leap allows us to reconsider the events of August 15, 1812, as a crucial victory in

an attempt by local Indians to stave off American conquest and invasion and to maintain Chicago in Indian Country. To make this leap, we must begin to see the region around Chicago not as empty, uninhabited space, as portrayed in textbooks and histories, but as an ever-changing weave of native villages and colonial outposts that together made up Indian Country in and around Chicago in August 1812.⁸

To be sure, this was not yet Chicago. In fact, there were no urban places across the western Great Lakes that we would recognize today as cities. Today we purchase real estate and build permanent structures—for our homes, our work, and our institutions. We organize our lives and our world around the order of places.

The Indian Country in the western Great Lakes was dramatically different. Villages regularly relocated in the face of changing seasons and conditions. People built housing not to last for a lifetime or more, but for a season or two. Real estate was not bought and sold. Instead, the control of resources ordered society (and led to many of its conflicts).

The general absence of a permanent built landscape did not mean, however, that the Native and non-Native peoples who lived in this Indian Country did so without dense webs of relationships. In fact, Indian Country was built on deep tribal, national, personal, and trade networks. As people moved around the region, their locations changed, but their relationships were not necessarily broken. Of course, this is as true today as it was back then, but permanent places often blind us to these connections, which are indeed the real sinew that holds our urban lives together. We think of where we live and work as basic definers of ourselves. But behind these places that we can mark in the landscape are human relationships and connections, much the same as those found in the Indian Country of the western Great Lakes.

One of the imaginative leaps that we must take to understand this Indian Country is to step away from the usual kinds of questions we ask—where someone lives or works—and instead focus on the relationships that individuals cultivated over their lifetimes. Most people who lived in this Indian Country moved easily across it, forming and re-forming networks of family, trade, tribe, and visions of the future. Understanding the complex weave of these relationships is essential to understanding Indian Country.



Map 1. Indian Settlement Pattern in the Chicago Region, circa 1830. Rather than an uninhabited region, the Indian Country around Chicago was an ever-changing system of villages and colonial outposts. This map is a snapshot of the region in 1830 and is based on a map by Michael Conzen and Helen Hornbeck Tanner in the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Dennis McClendon, Chicago Cartographics)

CHICAGO IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Before the arrival of Europeans in North America, there was no such thing as Indian Country, because the whole of the continent was under Native control. The idea of Indian Country emerged to describe that territory not under the direct power of Euro-American colonies. This Indian Country evolved from the first arrival of trade goods and then Euro-Americans into a middle ground, still controlled by local Indians but influenced by Euro-American currents through the fur trade, missionary activity, and ongoing colonization.

Even before the arrival of Joliet and Marquette in this region in 1673, the fur trade had begun to shape the Indian Country in the western Great Lakes. The Iroquois Confederacy, a major partner of the Dutch and then the British in the fur trade, pushed many Algonquian tribes westward into the Great Lakes in their quest to control the available supply of beaver skins. Groups like the Potawatomis, who had lived around the St. Lawrence River, found themselves refugees on the western shore of Lake Michigan. The French offered aid from Green Bay, eventually the Iroquois threat was quelled, and the Potawatomis and their allies moved southward and eastward.

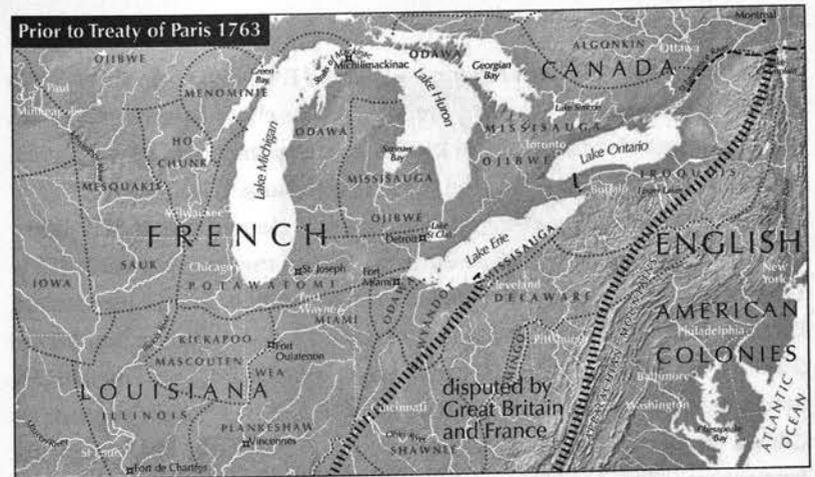
During the first half of the eighteenth century, Britain, France, and Spain vied for colonial control of the western Great Lakes, while Indian groups repopulated the area. The British influence emanated from its colonies along the Atlantic seaboard from Maine to Georgia. The French claimed a far-ranging territory that included Canada (centered at Quebec along the St. Lawrence River), Louisiana (with New Orleans as its hub), and the Illinois Country (with St. Louis established in 1764). The Spanish colonial authority was strongest in Florida and west of the Mississippi River.

In the North American theater of the Seven Years' War (1754-63), fighting radiated from the Indian Country north of the Ohio River and south of the Great Lakes. In the 1763 treaty ending that war, the French relinquished

Map 2. European Colonial Claims in North America before 1763. The European claims are overlaid on tribal spheres of influence. (Dennis McClendon, Chicago Cartographics)

Map 3. European Colonial Claims in North America after 1763. (Dennis McClendon, Chicago Cartographics)

Map 4. Euro-American Colonial Claims in North America in 1796. Based on maps by Helen Hornbeck Tanner and Miklos Pinther. (Dennis McClendon, Chicago Cartographics)



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all colonial claims in North America. While the French gave up these lands and withdrew their troops, many French civilians chose to remain in North America—east of the Mississippi River in territory then held by the British, or west of the Mississippi River in Spanish Louisiana.

Detroit was one of a string of forts across Ohio and the Illinois Country established by the French and turned over to the British as part of the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Other forts included Fort Edward Augustus (Green Bay), Fort Sandusky (Toledo), Fort St. Joseph (near Niles, Michigan), Fort Miami (Fort Wayne), Fort Ouiatenon (near Lafayette, Indiana), and Fort Michilimackinac. However, before the British could take control, Pontiac, an Odawa war chief, led a pan-Indian force that included Odawas (Ottawas), Potawatomis, Ojibwas (Chippewas), and Wyandots to try to expel the British as well. Pontiac was moved into action by the Delaware prophet Neolin, who called for the Indians to drive out all Euro-Americans as well as their goods and customs. While Pontiac did not win the war against the British, the British came to understand that it was best to make the Indians allies instead of a subject people in an Indian Country.⁹

THE PEOPLE OF INDIAN COUNTRY

Miamis

While the colonial story is often viewed from the perspective of the French, British, Spanish, and American occupations, Pontiac's War is a clear reminder of the peril of ignoring the perspective from Indian Country. Indian tribes swept in and out of the western Great Lakes over the eighteenth century, reshaping the pattern of settlements. By 1768 the Great Lakes had become home to many groups, from the Ho-Chunks (Winnebagos), Sauks, Illinois, and Kickapoos to the west, to the Shawnees and Delawares to the east. By then, the Miamis controlled much of what would become Ohio and Indiana.

The Miamis, along with many other Algonquian-speaking neighbors, had been pushed westward under waves of attacks by the Iroquois before 1700. The area between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes saw a dramatic population decline during these Iroquois onslaughts.

The Miamis were among the Algonquian-speaking groups who clustered in a wide circle around Green Bay until the French brokered peace with the



Figure 5. Little Turtle, longtime Miami leader. (Joseph Kirkland, *The Chicago Massacre of 1812* [1893])

Iroquois in 1701. Then the Miamis began moving slowly eastward into the Ohio River Valley.¹⁰ This may seem counterintuitive, but the Miamis and other Algonquian-speaking groups moved east over the eighteenth century. By the 1780s, Miami villages dotted northern Indiana and western Ohio. At the same time, American expansion into western Pennsylvania, western Virginia, Kentucky, and southeastern Ohio meant that Indian refugees from those areas, especially the Shawnees and the Delawares, settled into the same lands in western Ohio as the Miamis. Delaware, Shawnee, and Miami villages soon were interspersed across the region.

Little Turtle (Meshekunnoghquoh) was born in the late 1740s at a Miami village in northeastern Indiana. He grew up during the Seven Years' War and witnessed the British wrest control of Detroit and other western outposts from the French. During the Revolutionary War, as Little Turtle came to adulthood, he showed his alliance with the British by wiping out

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a detachment of French soldiers set on capturing Detroit from the British. After this successful attack, Little Turtle became a war chief among the Miami.¹¹

Potawatomis, Odawas, and Ojibwas

Like the Miami, the Potawatomi, Odawa (long identified as Ottawa), and Ojibwa (long identified as Chippewa) had been pushed into the western Great Lakes during fighting with the Iroquois in the late seventeenth century. Over the first half of the eighteenth century, they began moving eastward, planting villages across southern Michigan and trading with the French. After the withdrawal of the French from North America following the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the Potawatomi continued to trade—but now increasingly with the British and then Americans. Some of the Potawatomi converts also traveled great distances to seek out Catholic priests at Detroit, Cahokia, and St. Louis.¹²

There were at least half a dozen Potawatomi villages along the St. Joseph River and the Elkhart River inland from the southeastern shore of Lake Michigan. Each village had between ten and forty men, making for general populations of between forty and two hundred people in each. Topinbee



Figure 6. Potawatomi Camp Scene, Crooked Creek, painted by George Winter in late summer 1837. (Tippecanoe County Historical Association, Lafayette, Indiana)

CHICAGO IN THE INDIAN COUNTRY OF THE WESTERN GREAT LAKES

and his half-brother, Chebanse, were the most prominent chiefs at St. Joseph. The two brothers often worked closely with Five Medals, an older chief, and Metea (Sulker), a younger warrior who rose up as an orator.¹³

While many Potawatomi warriors resisted Euro-American incursions into their region, they lived amicably among villages established by other tribes. The Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwa shared control of Lake Michigan by 1800. The Ojibwa villages were primarily centered in a small arc southeast and southwest from Mackinac. The Odawa villages were primarily on the northeast side of Lake Michigan along the shore, especially at outlets of rivers. There were Odawa villages every thirty to seventy miles along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan from Mackinac to the Kalamazoo and Grand Rivers. Then the Odawas and Potawatomi shared villages south to the St. Joseph River, after which Potawatomi clustered along the southern lakeshore. The Potawatomi also had a string of villages on the western shore of Lake Michigan. Plotted about thirty to seventy miles apart (something of a mirror image of the Odawa settlements on the eastern shore), these villages extended from the Door Peninsula to the Calumet region in what is now northwest Indiana.¹⁴

While conflicts did occur, most of these groups lived peaceably alongside one another. The Odawas, Ojibwas, and Potawatomi shared population within many of their villages, especially along the western shore of Lake Michigan. As historian Helen Tanner has explained, Indian villages were “always composed of people from more than one tribe, even though they generally identified with only one particular tribe.”¹⁵ Because of long-standing ties to Odawas and Ojibwas, Potawatomi villages often contained members of these groups.

Shabbona was an Odawa who journeyed into Illinois on horseback as a young man with two Odawa prophets. They were promoting a nativist religion that called for the renunciation of European culture and institutions. During these travels, Shabbona married the daughter of a Potawatomi village leader, Spotka, on the Illinois River. Upon Spotka's death, Shabbona became a village chief. He was an Odawa, tied by family and career to the Potawatomi, and drawn to nativist teachings throughout all of his life.¹⁶

The Potawatomi also moved south and west, creating villages beside the Fox, Illinois, Kankakee, and Tippecanoe Rivers in what would become Indiana and Illinois. Essential to this extension was the widespread in-

roduction of horses among the Potawatomis that came at the end of the Seven Years' War. Until then the Potawatomis moved on foot or used canoes across rivers and lakes. After 1763 they acquired horses in large numbers from retreating armies (both British and French). With horses, the Potawatomis began to abandon "their frail bark canoes," and few "were willing to travel in them if they had horses." Western Potawatomis began to use horses to hunt buffalo, stage Indian raids against their enemies, and establish villages at a distance from their base in southern Michigan.¹⁷

The area between the St. Joseph River on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan and south to the portage at the Kankakee River grew as a center for Potawatomi settlement. There were concentrations of Potawatomi villages outside Detroit along the Huron River and around the shores of Lake Michigan from the mouth of the St. Joseph River on the southeast to all along the lakeshore west and northward to Green Bay. By the early 1790s, the Potawatomis controlled eighteen million acres of land in a wide band running from Detroit across Lake Michigan to Milwaukee.

The Potawatomis expanded village by village, along the Wabash, Tippecanoe, Kankakee, Des Plaines, and Illinois Rivers, into areas that had once been home to the Illinois and other Indians. Throughout this western growth, the Potawatomis maintained the autonomy of individual villages. There was no central authority. Concerted action required cooperation among the leadership in different villages.¹⁸

For instance, Gomo was also among the first generation of Potawatomis who traveled on horseback to the Illinois River from St. Joseph. He built a substantial village nestled into "the timbered sections along the rivers and creeks" near present-day Peoria. Gomo's own lodge was quite substantial, "a bark building 25 by 50 feet inside, tenanted about 30 people." Scaffolds all along the walls of the lodge served as places for Gomo and his family to sit and sleep. Gomo maintained connections with Potawatomis and traders from St. Joseph years after he moved west. However, he also made new links to traders in Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and St. Louis.¹⁹

Ho-Chunks, Sauks, and Kickapoos

By the late eighteenth century, the Ho-Chunks (long known as the Winnebagos), were northern neighbors of the Potawatomis and shared some villages around Milwaukee. The Winnebagos had many villages in southern Wisconsin and along the Rock River in northern Illinois. They spoke a

Siouan language, which was quite distinct from the Algonquian language spoken by the Potawatomis, Odawas, and Ojibwas. In contrast to the Potawatomis, the Winnebagos did not give up their canoes for horses. One observer attributed Winnebago success in battle to the fact that "should they be attacked they can immediately embark in their canoes and go up or down a river, or into a swamp or marsh."²⁰

Nearby the Winnebago villages and stretching westward across Illinois were Sauk villages. With the deep decline of the Illinois Confederacy after the Seven Years' War, the Sauks moved into an area around the Rock River and soon overlapped in territory with the Potawatomis, Winnebagos, Fox (Mesquakie), and Kickapoos. Saukenauk was their great settlement at the confluence of the Rock and Mississippi Rivers. More than a thousand Sauks gathered there in the late spring, rather than in the smaller villages favored by the Potawatomis. Of central importance to all Sauks, Saukenauk was "where they held their most important feasts and festivals, and where their dead were laid to rest on the brow of a long ridge that arose just beyond the town."²¹

Among the most notable of Sauk leaders was Black Hawk. Born in 1767, he was "an unyielding traditionalist," cherishing "the old customs and ways, never wearing white people's clothing or tasting their alcohol in any form." While supporting pan-Indian movements that offered self-determination, Black Hawk also found friendship with traders and agents who passed through his lands.²² He was not old enough to remember Neolin's vision and Pontiac's War, but Black Hawk embraced their strong call for pan-Indian solidarity throughout his lifetime.

The Kickapoos also lived along the rivers of Illinois, generally to the south of the Sauks around the Illinois River at Peoria and the Sangamon River. Some of the Kickapoos moved eastward toward the Vermilion and Wabash Rivers in Indiana during the late eighteenth century. They spoke an Algonquian language closely related to that of the Sauks and Potawatomis. And like these tribes, the Kickapoos seized horses from Spanish, American, and French traders and settlers when the opportunity arose. With horses, they transformed their lives on the Illinois prairie.²³

Together these groups inhabited an Indian Country in the western Great Lakes. The estimated population of the Miami, Ojibwas, Odawas, Potawatomis, Sauks, Winnebagos, Kickapoos, and Illinois living in the western Great Lakes was around thirty thousand in 1768 (sixty thousand across the

Great Lakes more broadly). Over the following decades, Indians relocated across this region, but the general population remained about the same.²⁴

It was not a static place, but one constantly changing and evolving, responding both to internal change as well as to wider colonial currents. With the American Revolution, the United States became another colonial partner in this Indian Country. However, unlike the French and British periods in the western Great Lakes, where the fur trade fostered a rich Indian Country, the American government and its settlers would challenge the existence and continuation of Indian Country.

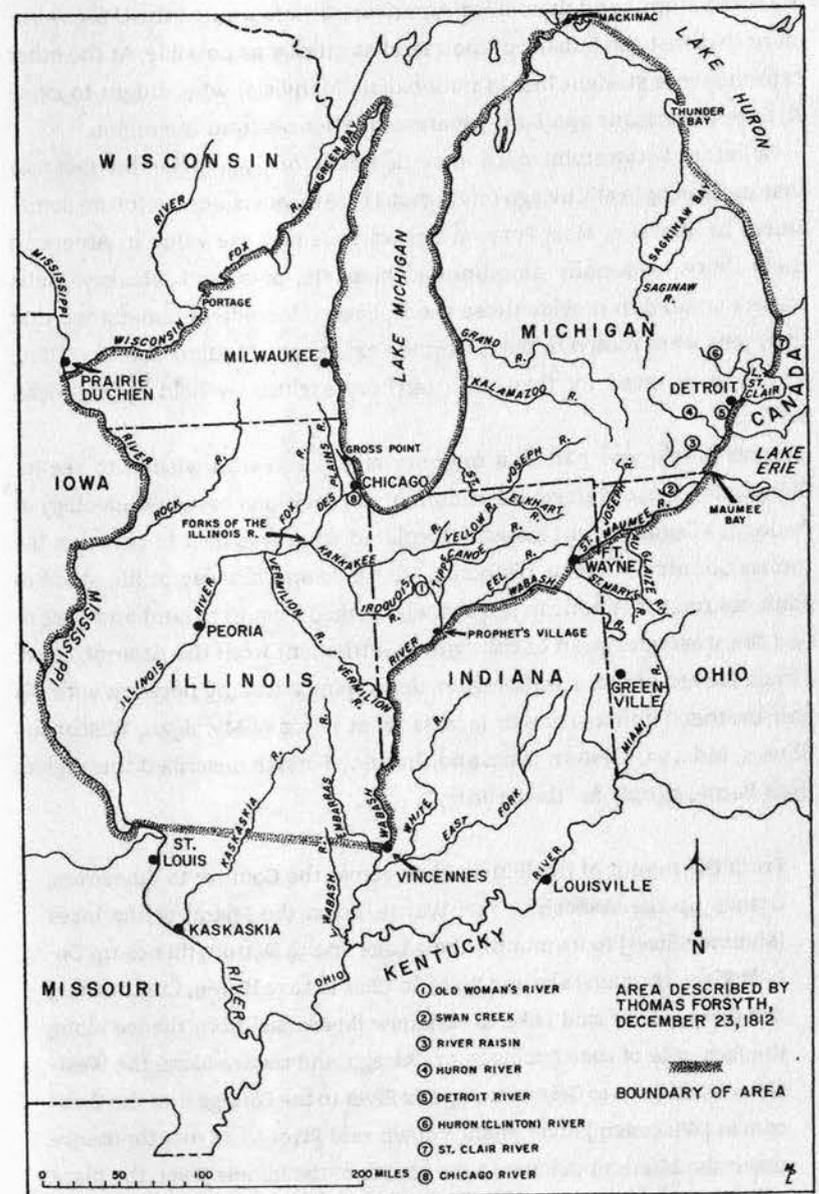
BEFORE CHICAGO WAS CHICAGO

Set in this context, the battle of August 15, 1812, at Chicago was part of a much larger struggle for regional control that served as a victory for the Potawatomis within the wider American conquest of Indian Country. Most centrally, this book is concerned with the transfer of the western Great Lakes from Indian to American control through a combination of treaties and military conquest.²⁵

In 1795, after the Greenville Treaty, Chicago was a small U.S. reserve in Indian Country. In 1804 the U.S. government completed Fort Dearborn as an outpost at the mouth of the Chicago River. For years it was an island in Indian Country, but during the War of 1812, Potawatomi warriors tried to push the United States from the region. While the western Indians won the battle at Chicago in August 1812, they lost the wider war when the British abandoned them to negotiate on their own with the United States.

Between 1815 and 1833, the Potawatomis ceded all of their lands, some five million acres, to the United States. They accepted reservation lands in U.S. territory, while only forty years before the U.S. government had sought outposts in Indian Country. In 1795 the Greenville Treaty reflected a sense that "two peoples could inhabit America as neighbors." The 1833 Chicago Treaty replaced that vision with the idea that "everyone was better off with a lot of distance between them."²⁶

In retrospect, this story seems inevitable, as the United States would eventually become a continental empire. However, this was not at all certain at the time, either to the people living within this Indian Country or to the American farmers heading west. What was evident was that the region could not accommodate both the visions of American settlers and that of



the Potawatomi and their allies. American settlers wanted the U.S. government to divest the Indians of their land as quickly as possible. At the other extreme were strident Indian nationalists (nativists) who sought to expel all Euro-Americans and Euro-American influences from the region.²⁷

Whether Potawatomi warrior, métis trader, or U.S. soldier, the fact was that most people at Chicago on August 15, 1812, envisioned a future somewhere in between. Most Potawatomi warriors saw the value in American trade items, especially ammunition, blankets, pots, and whiskey. Métis traders wanted to provide those goods. Even U.S. soldiers understood that their jobs were rooted in the continued existence of Indian Country. There would be no need for them in a territory exclusively held by American settlers.

John Kinzie was part of a majority at Chicago who wished to see Indian Country maintained. He seldom made decisions based on ideology or national allegiance, but instead calculated what was best to preserve the Indian Country that was his home. His skills and his way of life stood in stark contrast to American settlers who staked a claim to land and continued the westward push of contiguous settlement from the Atlantic coast. Kinzie moved across a wide region, developing a trading network with his half-brother Thomas Forsyth (across what is today Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, western Ohio, and Ontario). Forsyth described this region, their home, simply as "the Country":

From the mouth of the Illinois River across the Country to Vincennes, thence up the Wabash to Fort Wayne, down the Miami of the lakes [Maumee River] to its mouth, along Lake Erie to Detroit, thence up Detroit River, through Lake and River St. Clair to Lake Huron, thence along the West side of said Lake to Makinaw [Mackinac] from thence along the East-side of Lake Michigan to Chicago, and thence along the West-side of said Lake to Green Bay, up Fox River to the Portage into the Ouisconsin [Wisconsin] River, thence down said River to its mouth; thence down the Mississippi River to the Mouth of the Illinois River, the place of beginning.²⁸

Neither Forsyth nor Kinzie were much concerned with who held colonial control. They cared primarily that the colonial power would protect Indian Country.

PART ONE

The United States and the Indian Country of the Western Great Lakes