

# THE PAPERS OF WILLIAM POLKE, 1775-1843

By CECIL K. BYRD

WILLIAM POLKE WAS an active and effective participant in the early development of Indiana from a territory to a productive agricultural state. He moved from Nelson County, Kentucky, to Knox County in Indiana Territory in 1806, when the territory was largely Indian land, with fringe white settlements along the southern boundaries. When he died, April 26, 1843, at Fort Wayne, the Indians had been dispossessed and the state was open for settlement from the Ohio River to Lake Michigan.

Polke was born September 19, 1775 in Brooke County, Virginia. His family moved to Nelson County, Kentucky, in 1780. In 1782, Polke, his mother and his three sisters were taken prisoners by raiding Indians. They were taken to Detroit (where Polke's mother gave birth to another son) and released to the British. About a year later, following the peace of 1783 which ended the American Revolution, they were given over to Polke's father and returned to Kentucky.

In 1842, Polke wrote an account of the captivity, which was published in installments in the *Fort Wayne Times* in 1842, republished in the *Logansport Gazette*, 1842, and again republished in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, Volume X, June, 1913. The manuscript, in Polke's hand, is in the Lilly Library. Unfortunately, part of the narrative is missing at the beginning and ending.

Until the Indians were pacified or removed west of the Mississippi, it was usual for all able-bodied fron-

tiersmen to serve in the militia, which involved periodic campaigns. Polke was no exception, and participated as a member of a battalion of spies in Anthony Wayne's campaign which culminated in the Battle of Fallen Timbers, 1794. He was at the Battle of Tippecanoe, 1811, as a ranger under William H. Harrison. During the War of 1812, Polke related that he was "Part of the time in the service of the government and part in pursuits of straggling parties of Indians who were prowling around our frontier."

There is no record that Polke ever boasted of his military service or used it for political purposes. One specific reference is contained in a letter to the *National Intelligencer*, February 13, 1840, in defense of Harrison: "... and I must be permitted to say I have had some experience in Indian warfare having in early life been taken captive by the Indians near the conclusion of our Revolutionary War from Kentucky and acted as one of Major Prices Battalion of spies in the memorable Battle of Gen. Wayne on the 20th August 1794."

In a period when fear and indifference toward the Indian were common, Polke demonstrated his concern for their sad plight on many occasions. For eighteen months, he served as a missionary to the Ottawas in Michigan.

Polke married Sarah Cooper in 1798. In 1806, he moved his family to Knox County in Indiana Territory. A friendly man, he became acquainted with community leaders quickly; he was an ardent Baptist, trustworthy, and comparatively speaking, educated. Little is known about the extent of his education; he had learned practical surveying in Kentucky; in composition, his sentence structure was clear though almost totally lacking in punc-

tuation. The quality of his handwriting can only be described as scrawly.

Many of the positions Polke held in the Territorial, state, and Federal service were appointive. Chronologically, these were justice of the peace, Knox County, 1808; associate circuit court judge, Knox County, 1814; deputy surveyor of Indiana, 1819; commissioner relating to the navigation of the Wabash River, 1823; commissioner for the Michigan Road, 1830; postmaster, Chippeway, Fulton County, 1832; conductor for removal of the Potawatomie Indians west of the Mississippi, 1838; register of the land office at Fort Wayne, 1841.

The appointive positions were the result of political alliance. The Polke collection contains many letters written in reply to Polke's epistles from the Indiana delegation in Washington discussing political and legislative affairs as they related to Indiana. Polke meticulously kept open his lines of communication on the political front. He was an active supporter of his long-time friend, William H. Harrison, who was the Whig presidential nominee in the "Hard Cider and Log Cabin" campaign of 1840. After the Whig victory, he was made register of the land office in Fort Wayne.

On three occasions, Polke was elected to public office: the territorial legislature, 1814; delegate to the Constitutional Convention, 1816; two terms as state senator from Knox County, 1816-1822. In 1822 he was an unsuccessful candidate for lieutenant-governor in the campaign which resulted in the election of William Hendricks as governor. There is no evidence in Polke's papers that he sought an elective office after 1822.

No records of Polke's elective political career are extant in his papers. It is particularly unfortunate that



not a single scrap of paper remains relating to the Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1816, about which we have scant knowledge. Polke served on five important committees during the Convention: rules and regulations, distribution of the powers of government, committee on the executive department of government and the committees on education and the elective franchise. If he ever recorded his activities relating to this historic affair, such writings have failed to survive the ravages of time.

In November, 1823, Polke and his family joined Isaac McCoy at the Carey Indian Mission, Niles, Michigan, as missionaries to the Indians. Polke wrote that he was a "teacher to the Ottawas." This decision to mission work may have been influenced by family ties as well as by his Baptist convictions and his genuine concern for the Indians. His younger sister, Christiana, was the wife of McCoy.

The Polkes remained with the Carey Mission until July, 1825. McCoy, in his *History of Baptist Indian Missions* (1840) wrote of the departure of the Polkes from the Mission: "On parting, we gave to them, and they to us, written assurances of friendship and esteem. Through life, Mr. Polke's talents and piety had made him prominent in both civil and religious society, and it was our prayer that the evening of the lives of our brother and sister should continue tranquil and happy."

Polke kept a journal of his activities as a missionary. An excerpt from it was published by McCoy in his *History*, but the journal is not among his papers.

The Polke papers which are preserved in the Lilly Library are fragmentary, and relate primarily to his career after 1830. More specifically, they are concerned with his work on the Michigan Road, 1830-1839; his role in the removal of the Potawatomi Indians west of the

Mississippi, 1838; the attempted removal, 1839; his work as register of the land office in Fort Wayne, 1841-1843; and his land purchases and struggles to meet his financial obligations during the depression following the Panic of 1837. The collection is not large in bulk: counting copies of letters received, various memoranda, drafts of his letters and correspondence of his immediate family, the total number of items is 969.

The Michigan Road curves up across Indiana from Madison to Michigan City via Greensburg, Indianapolis, Logansport, Rochester and South Bend. It was largely constructed in the years 1831-35. The cost was defrayed by selling lands along the route. Until the coming of the railroads, it was the chief road for the transportation of goods from the Ohio River to central Indiana and the main route for settlers to reach their new homes in northwestern Indiana. The road is still in use as part of the Indiana state highway system.

William Polke was as responsible as any man for the successful completion and financing of the Michigan Road. He was engaged in this work from 1830 to December, 1839. By an act of the Indiana General Assembly Polke was appointed one of three land commissioners for the Road in 1830. In 1831 he was made sole land commissioner and in 1832, the positions of land commissioner and contract commissioner were combined under Polke. His duties involved selecting, surveying and numbering the lands along the road and selling these lands at public sale, plus keeping a record of the lands sold by purchaser and the prices. Beginning in 1832, he was also responsible for contracting construction of the Road.

The manuscripts in the Polk collection pertaining to the Michigan Road consist of surveyor's field notes, 1830-32; a diary for 1831; part of a letter copybook,

1834-41; drafts of many of the reports he was required to make to the state; and drafts of newspaper releases replying to criticisms of the methods of road construction employed on some sections of the Road. These manuscripts and Polke's official reports which are published in the journals of the General Assembly give a fairly comprehensive picture of Polke's activities during the years of his supervision of the Michigan Road.

The Potawatomi Indians were beguiled and intimidated to cede all claims to their land in Indiana in a series of treaties with the US. By terms of the treaty of 1836, the Indians agreed to yield possession within two years and to remove at government expense west of the Mississippi River. In August, 1838, seven to eight hundred Potawatomis were herded together by John Tipton and a band of volunteer militia and began the long journey which was to end in eastern Kansas in the neighborhood of the Osage River.

William Polke was appointed conductor of the removal by Abel C. Pepper, Superintendent, Emigration of Indians. In a letter of August 29, 1838, Abel wrote Polke:

. . . I beg leave to direct your attention to the importance of calling into action all your previous acquaintance with the manners, customs and management of Indians.

You will transmit a copy of your weekly journal to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at the end of every week; and you will report to this office once a week and oftener if necessary, every occurrence the knowledge of which can be useful.

The route to be travelled is designated in the enclosed advertisement inviting proposals for furnishing rations.

Some of the material relating to the removal of 1838 has been published. The official journal covering the period August 31 to November 10, 1838, was published



from a copy in the Fort Wayne Public Library in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, Volume XXI, December, 1925. The continuation of the journal for the period November 11 to December 1, 1838, from the copy in the Lilly, was edited by Dwight L. Smith and published in Volume XLIV, December, 1948 of the same magazine.

In 1839, another removal was planned. Polke was again involved. His diary and some of the correspondence relating to the abortive removal attempt have been published in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, Volume XLV, March, 1949.

The manuscripts in the Polke collection relating to the Potawatomi Indians reveal that Polke was genuinely concerned with the welfare of the Indians and, disclaimers to the contrary, personally did everything he could to supply food, clothing and render medical assistance in the exercise of his official duties.

Like many of his contemporaries, Polke speculated in the cheap land available in Indiana. He associated himself with a number of men in land transactions. With James Blair and John Sering, he formed a company and developed the present town of Plymouth. He also actively engaged in land deals with his son-in-law, John Barron Niles, and with Calvin Fletcher and James Franklin D. Lanier, to mention a few. These activities are partially recorded in his collection of papers.

The Panic of 1837 and its aftermath led to a severe depression in Indiana and left Polke, along with many others, in stringent financial circumstances. His struggle to meet his financial obligations in the last years of his life is revealed in his correspondence. This draft letter of January 5, 1842 to Calvin Fletcher may be typical:

Now in respect to myself I reside here as a transient sojourner attending solely to the Business of my office and

have made scarcely any new acquaintances the Business of the office is but trifling in selling of land but the great sales of former times requires all my time in the office in searching for and Delivering patents for which I receive no Compensation the profits of the office after paying house rent fuel & C will barely afford me a support this year unless the Miami land that have been surveyed should be brought into the market in which event it will be worth something handsome and will enable me to satisfy some pecuniary obligations which I am now unable to do. . .

CECIL K. BYRD is a Professor, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.