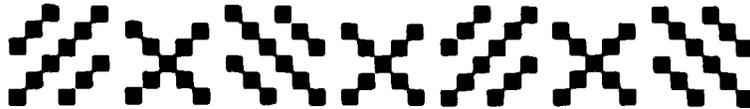


“Designing Men, Seeking a Fortune”:
Indian Traders and the Potawatomi Claims
Payment of 1836

*R. David Edmunds**



The two decades following the War of 1812 were not happy years for the Indians of the Old Northwest. With the collapse of Tecumseh's confederation after the American victory in the war, all armed resistance to the white settlers who flooded into the region was gone. Not only did the new pioneers settle on lands formerly claimed by the tribesmen, they also depleted the diminishing game population, depriving the Indians of a major source of subsistence. Attempting to ameliorate conditions, the government urged the Indians to settle on small farms and adopt an agricultural life similar to that of the settlers, but few of the Indians seemed interested and most continued to wander throughout their old homeland, barely able to feed their families.

During the 1820s federal officials abandoned their efforts to transform the Indians into small yeoman farmers in favor of removal of the tribesmen to “unoccupied” areas west of the Mississippi. As white settlers continued to pour into Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, state and local spokesmen clamored for the removal of the Indians, and the federal government attempted to purchase the remaining Indian lands in these states, hoping to force the tribesmen west. By the mid-1830s Indian affairs in northern Indiana were entangled in such a bureaucratic and economic morass that some Indian agents despaired of ever removing the Potawatomis from the area.¹

* R. David Edmunds is associate professor of history at Texas Christian University. He is the author of *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire* (Norman, Okla., 1978) and is currently writing a biography of the Shawnee Prophet.

¹ The historiography of the removal period is quite extensive. For examples, see Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman, Okla., 1932); *The Last Trek of the Indians* (Chicago, 1946); Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman, Okla., 1941); F. P.

In Indiana, much of the problem resulted from the government's lack of foresight in negotiating for Potawatomi lands. In the late 1820s and early 1830s federal officials had purchased large sections of northern Indiana from Potawatomi leaders,² but, because the Indians had been reluctant to sell, the purchasing agents had allowed two dozen village chiefs to retain fifteen small reservations of from one to thirty-six sections surrounding their villages. The government envisioned these small reservations as temporary devices, designed to placate the village chiefs and to insure their compliance with the transfer of large tracts of Potawatomi lands to the United States. Federal officials also believed that only the few tribesmen living in each chief's village would occupy these "village reservations" and that the reservations could later be purchased inexpensively. They were mistaken. The officials assumed that all Potawatomis living within the recently purchased areas, but not members of the small reservation villages, would be forced to move since these Indians no longer held lands in Indiana. To their dismay many of the tribesmen opposed to removal simply moved onto the village reservations.

Disgruntled, Secretary of War Lewis Cass in 1834 instructed Indian agents to purchase the village reservations but warned them that President Andrew Jackson wanted the tracts bought as cheaply as possible.³ During the next two years Indian agents William Marshall and Abel C. Pepper met with the village chiefs and used all their influence to induce the leaders to sell. They achieved mixed results. In December, 1834, Marshall acquired four small village reservations in north-central Indiana, proudly reporting back to Cass that he had purchased the lands for about fifty cents per acre, or about one-fourth their actual value on the open market. Pepper also

Prucha, "Andrew Jackson's Indian Policy: A Reassessment," *Journal of American History*, LVI (December, 1969), 527-39; and Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln, Neb., 1975). Allotment is discussed in Mary Elizabeth Young, *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks: Indian Allotments in Alabama and Mississippi, 1830-1860* (Norman, Okla., 1961), and Paul W. Gates, "Indian Allotments Preceding the Dawes Act," in John G. Clark, ed., *The Frontier Challenge: Responses to the Trans-Mississippi West* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1971), 141-70.

² The treaties can be found in Charles J. Kappler, ed. & comp., *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883* (2 vols., New York, 1972), II, 273-77, 283-84, 294-97, 353-56, 367-70, 372-75.

³ Lewis Cass to William Marshall, July 12, 1834, "Letters Sent by the Office of Indian Affairs," National Archives Microfilm Publication M21 (hereafter cited as M21), roll 13, frames 172-74; Elbert Herring to Marshall, September 12, 1834, M21, roll 13, frame 382.

met with Potawatomi leaders and by late summer, 1836, had bought six small reservations scattered along the Tippecanoe and Yellow rivers. Although Pepper was forced to pay about one dollar per acre, the lands were worth at least twice that amount.⁴ Pepper was less successful in persuading other village chiefs to sell. Several Potawatomi leaders, including Ashkum, Checawkose, Weesionas, and Kinkash, had been awarded small reservations through treaties signed in 1832, and they stubbornly refused all of Pepper's offers. Although the Indian agent offered them the market value of their land, these chiefs were determined to retain the reservations.

Angered by their recalcitrance, Pepper turned to other Indians. In September, 1836, the agent met with tribesmen whom he described as "the chiefs, warriors, and head men of the Patawattamies of the Wabash." This second group of Indians was heavily in debt to George W. and William G. Ewing, brothers who headed a trading company in Fort Wayne. The Ewings used their influence in Pepper's behalf, and during mid-September the Wabash chiefs sold the remaining small village reservations to the United States government. The Wabash chiefs had no legal right to sell the lands, since the 1832 treaties specifically had awarded the reservations to Ashkum and the other village chiefs. But Pepper rationalized that the more cooperative Indians were "paramount chiefs" and therefore had the power to sell any Potawatomi lands in Indiana.⁵

The chiefs' indebtedness to the Ewings reflected the economic deterioration of their tribe. By the mid-1830s the small village reservations were being surrounded by white settlement, and the three thousand Potawatomis remaining in Indiana were hard pressed to support themselves. They still hunted, trapped, and planted small fields of corn, but such traditional economic ventures no longer provided an adequate

⁴ Marshall to Herring, December 23, 1834, "Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs," National Archives Microfilm Publication M234 (hereafter cited as M234), roll 355, frames 186-87; Marshall to Cass, January 1, 1835, M234, roll 355, frames 203-205. Also see Cass to Abel C. Pepper, April 27, 1836, M21, roll 17, frames 458-61; Pepper to Cass, April 27, 1836, "Documents Relating to the Negotiations of Treaties," National Archives Microfilm Publication T494 (hereafter cited as T494), roll 3, frames 350-51; and Pepper to Carey A. Harris, July 8, 1836, T494, roll 3, frames 355-57. The treaties can be found in Kappler, *Indian Treaties*, II, 428-31, 450, 457-59, and 462-63.

⁵ John W. Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance at the Potawatomi Payment, September, 1836* (New York, 1837), 8; Kappler, *Indian Treaties*, II, 470-72. Also see Ashkum and others to Cass, November 15, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 712-14.

income. Although the Potawatomis received a yearly annuity from the past sale of tribal lands, the funds were insufficient to sustain them, and most of the money was spent long before the year ended. To provide for their families, Indian men purchased food and other necessities on credit, promising to pay frontier merchants from future annuity payments or land sales. Every autumn, when the tribe received its annuity, the traders presented Indian agents with vouchers for the tribal debts and the agents paid the bills, distributing the remainder of the money to the Indians. Such practices had originated in the late 1820s, but by 1835 the Wabash Potawatomis had so extended their credit that their annuities no longer paid for their accumulated debts. Frustrated, local traders vied with one another over whose bill should be paid. Other merchants presented greatly exaggerated vouchers, hoping to receive partial payment or to capitalize on the confusion. Bewildered by the turmoil, government officials in 1835 announced that they no longer would pay tribal debts from the annuity payments. Pepper attempted to negotiate between the tribesmen and their creditors, but many of the traders remained dissatisfied.⁶

To appease the traders Pepper persuaded those chiefs selling the village reservations during the summer and fall of 1836 to pay outstanding debts from the proceeds of the sales. The Potawatomi leaders agreed that they would accept payment for their lands in late September, when they received their usual annuity payment, and that they would appoint commissioners to examine past debts and to pay those that were valid. Therefore, during September, 1836, frontier entrepreneurs flocked to the Potawatomi "payment ground" on the Tippecanoe River. Some of the traders brought valid vouchers for goods actually sold. Others, less honest, envisioned the payments as a rare opportunity to turn a fast dollar. Some carried claims for merchandise the value of which was much inflated. Others held forged receipts for goods never delivered.⁷

The many traders wrangling over whose claims should be paid were not the only belligerents present at the payment grounds. Ashkum, Checawkose, and those village chiefs whose reservations had been illegally sold by other Potawatomis also were in attendance. Incensed over the sale of their villages,

⁶ John W. Edmonds to Harris, December 19, 1837, in John W. Edmonds, *Report on the Claims of the Creditors of the Potawatomie Indians of the Wabash in 1836 and 1837* (New York, 1837), 4.

⁷ Pepper to Cass, April 27, 1836, T494, roll 3, frames 350-51; Pepper to Harris, July 8, 1836, T494, roll 3, frames 355-57.

these tribesmen intended to protest the transaction. If their protest failed, they hoped to at least claim the lion's share of the proceeds from the land sales. They also planned to seek revenge against those Indians who had sold their lands. Led by Ashkum, the embittered village chiefs denounced those Potawatomis who had signed the recent treaties, calling them nothing more than "boys and hog-thieves." In addition, they threatened to kill Iowa, Pashpoho, and Kewaunee, leaders of the faction that had cooperated with Pepper.⁸

Ashkum's protest was encouraged by a group of traders operating along the St. Joseph River in northern Indiana and southern Michigan. Led by Alexis Coquillard, a merchant from the South Bend region, these businessmen traded extensively with Potawatomis from the protesting chiefs' villages. Although Coquillard attempted to curry the favor of Ashkum and his followers by verbally supporting the chief's claim that the reservations had been illegally purchased, he actually was more interested in receiving payment for goods he had sold to the Indians. Since the government had ignored the village chiefs in the purchase of the reservations, Coquillard and his friends feared that federal officials also might refuse to recognize the debts incurred by these tribesmen.⁹

Coquillard was particularly apprehensive over the manner in which the claims against the Potawatomis were to be adjudicated. In return for their cooperation Pepper allowed Iowa, Pashpoho, and the other Wabash chiefs to select the commissioners who would judge the validity of all claims against the tribe. Since the Ewing brothers had assisted the agent in concluding the recent treaties, Pepper did not protest when Iowa and his friends appointed George Ewing and Cyrus Taber, a friend of the Ewings, to serve as claims commissioners. A bitter rival of the Ewings, Coquillard complained loudly about the appointments.¹⁰

Pepper had scheduled the payments to begin on Sunday, September 25, 1836. When he arrived at the payment ground, he found the clearing crowded with people. Iowa and the other Wabash chiefs, supported by about three hundred of their followers, had assembled to collect their reward for cooperating

⁸ Wabash chiefs to Andrew Jackson, October 18, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 691-706; Harris to B. F. Butler, December 27, 1836, M21, roll 20, frames 338-39.

⁹ Alexis Coquillard to Edmonds, June 22, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 1041-47.

¹⁰ Pepper to Cass, October, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 678-86; Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 4.

with the government. Opposing the Wabash chiefs were Ashkum, Checawkose, and their kinsmen, still angry over the treaties and determined to disrupt the proceedings. The village chiefs and their supporters also numbered almost three hundred, and many of them were heavily armed. In addition to the six hundred Indiana tribesmen, about fifty Potawatomis from southern Michigan had arrived at the payment ground on Saturday, September 24. These Michigan tribesmen were opposed to removal and supported Ashkum against the Wabash chiefs. Finally, between three and four hundred traders swarmed across the payment grounds, eager to press their claims for a share of the spoils.¹¹

Coquillard's fears over the distribution of the payments were soon confirmed. On the morning of September 25, Iowa and the other Wabash chiefs assembled at the log council house on the payment ground. They were joined by George Ewing, Taber, and several of their friends. Meanwhile, about twenty armed guards, hired by the Ewings, surrounded the council house and prevented other claimants from entering. When Captain William Simonton, the military disbursing agent, turned over almost \$64,000 in land payments and annuities to the Wabash chiefs, the latter claimed \$16,000 for themselves and relinquished the remaining funds to Ewing and Taber. Although several hundred other merchants crowded around the council house, Ewing and Taber promptly processed their own and their friends' claims first. Out of the remaining \$48,000 the commissioners paid the Ewings' firm \$16,000 and Taber's firm \$8,000. Joseph Barron, a friend of the Ewings, also received \$8,000. Three other traders friendly to the commissioners were paid considerably smaller claims ranging from \$75 to \$2,500. Thus, after the first few minutes of the proceedings, more than \$50,000 was gone. Only \$14,000 remained to satisfy the claims of all the other traders.¹²

Not surprisingly, the unpaid claimants raised a storm of protest. Several traders, led by Nicholas Grover and Francis Comparet, peacefully entered the building and asked the commissioners to suspend the payments until all claims could be presented and their validity judged. Meanwhile, Coquillard

¹¹ Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 6, 8-9; Wabash chiefs to Jackson, October 18, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 691-706.

¹² Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 5, 9, 11. Some minor confusion exists over the exact amounts paid to the Ewings and their friends. The figures quoted in the text generally are rounded off to the nearest \$100.



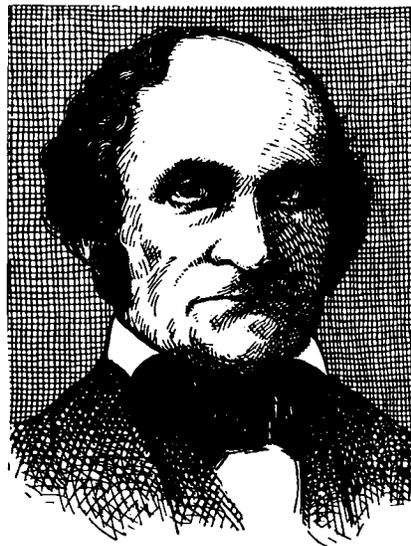
COL. GEORGE WASHINGTON EWING.



WILLIAM G. EWING.

GEORGE W. AND WILLIAM G. EWING (ABOVE) AND
CYRUS TABER (BELOW)

Reproduced from B. J. Griswold, *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana* (Chicago, 1917), 241, 259, 262.



CYRUS TABER.

complained to William Ewing, the commissioner's brother, who also was present on the payment ground. But the protests were ineffective. The commissioners ordered Grover and the irate Comparet from the council house, while William Ewing "made some insulting reply" to Coquillard and refused to intercede.¹³

Angered over their failure, the crowd resorted to stronger measures. Some tore away clapboards nailed over the log walls of the council house, trying to get a better view of what was taking place inside. Others shouted insults at the commissioners and threatened to tear the building down. Ashkum and the other village chiefs joined the mob, hoping to get at Iowa and his comrades, who remained cowering inside. Intimidated, some of the guards retreated into the building while others primed their weapons, fearing for their lives.¹⁴

Afraid that the village chiefs might fire upon the council house, Grover asked Coquillard to calm the Indians. To gain an elevated position Coquillard attempted to climb up to the roof of the building but slipped and fell when one of the support poles gave way. Before he could clamber up again, Pierre André, one of Ewing's guards, placed a musket to his head and threatened to "blow out his brains" if he repeated his efforts.¹⁵ Momentarily subdued, Coquillard retreated to a neighboring rooftop; from there he addressed the crowd, urging the traders to stop the payments and warning the Indians that the Ewings were "designing men, seeking a fortune." He also argued "that the Ewings were attempting to cheat them out of their money. I told them not to be still like boys, and let themselves be robbed; but to come out like men, and pay their honest debts, but no more." Coquillard was followed on the rooftop by Jean Baptiste Chandonnai, a mixed-blood Potawatomi from South Bend, who harangued his kinsmen in stronger terms. Widely known for his violent temper, Chandonnai charged that the government was stealing Potawatomi lands and that President Jackson was a "rascal" whose agents "lied to and cheated" the Indians. He admonished Ashkum to tear down the building and seize all the funds. The mixed-blood also labeled Iowa,

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5; Coquillard to Edmonds, June 22, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 1041-47.

¹⁴ Pepper to Cass, October, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 678-86; Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 6.

¹⁵ Coquillard to Edmonds, June 22, 1837, M234, roll 355, frame 1041-47; Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 6.

Pashpoho, and their cohorts traitors and urged his listeners to cut their throats.¹⁶

Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. Grover spoke to the crowd, asking them to remain peaceful but again demanding that the payments be suspended. Apprehensive of the crowd's mood, Allen Hamilton, a business partner of Taber, agreed to Grover's demands and promised to return the \$8000 awarded to the Taber-Hamilton partnership until all claims against the Indians had been investigated. Afraid that he might lose both his money and his life, even William Ewing reluctantly consented to Grover's proposal. Finally, both the Ewings and the crowd agreed that Pepper and Captain Simonton, the disbursing agent, should appoint new commissioners to investigate all claims and make the payments.¹⁷

While Allen, William Ewing, and the crowd were reaching an agreement, George Ewing, Taber, and Barron remained in the council house listening to the debate. Although George Ewing evidently felt obligated to honor his brother's promise, both Taber and Barron were reluctant to part with their newly acquired fortunes. Both men maintained residences adjacent to the payment grounds, and when they heard William Ewing and Hamilton agree to give up the money they slipped out of the council house, carrying their payments. Learning of the flight, an angry mob of traders followed the two fugitives to their houses, where the frightened Taber quickly surrendered his share of the money. In contrast, Barron armed several of his sons and threatened to shoot anyone trespassing on his property. Not intimidated, the mob gave notice that it would tear down his house and lynch him if he refused to relinquish the payment. Since the crowd also was well armed and greatly outnumbered his family, Barron wisely surrendered. When the traders entered the house, they found that, in addition to the original payment, Barron had absconded with an extra \$2000.¹⁸

The return of the money and Pepper's appointment of five "gentlemen of high character in the community" to serve as new commissioners did much to alleviate the traders' complaints. But Ashkum and the village chiefs remained on the payment grounds, still vowing to kill Iowa and his comrades if they dared to leave the council house. Inside the building, the

¹⁶ Coquillard to Edmonds, June 22, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 1041-47; Wabash chiefs to Jackson, October 18, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 691-706.

¹⁷ Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7, 11.

Wabash chiefs begged Pepper to defend them, reminding the agent that he had promised such protection when they had signed the recent land cessions. Concerned for their safety, Pepper assumed command of Ewing's guards and brought all the returned funds into the building. He also sent a message to nearby Logansport, asking local officials to call out the militia.¹⁹

Pepper, the Wabash chiefs, and the guards spent the night of September 25 without sleep, huddled together in the council house. The following afternoon, a force of about one hundred militia arrived from Logansport. Disgruntled, Ashkum and his followers abandoned the payment ground and returned to their villages. The siege had ended.²⁰

Accompanied by the militia, the new commissioners collected all the remaining funds and withdrew from the payment grounds. Judge William Polke, one of the new commissioners, lived only three miles from the council house, and the officials believed his farm would offer more security for the redistribution of the payment funds. Since the new commissioners were "surprised at the number and magnitude of the claims," before redistributing any of the money Polke addressed the assembled traders, informing them:

should they [the commissioners], through mistake, pay any one more than should thereafter, upon an investigation, appear to be just, the claimants would be required to pay them back; and further, that the undersigned [the commissioners] would recommend to the Secretary of War the propriety and necessity of instituting an investigation, by the appointment of a commissioner for that purpose, of all claims against the aforesaid tribe of Indians.

Following the speech, Polke and the other officials spent four days examining claims and making payments. Although some of the new commissioners also held small claims against the Potawatomis, they took precautions to guard against favoritism, and the money was parceled out as fairly as possible.²¹

If the redistribution of funds pleased more of the traders, it still engendered complaints from a sizeable minority. Most vocal were the Ewings, Taber, and Barron, whose original

¹⁹ Pepper to Cass, October, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 678-86.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; Coquillard to Edmonds, June 22, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 1041-47; Wabash chiefs to Jackson, October 18, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 691-706.

²¹ Commissioners to the Secretary of War, October 27, 1836, M234, roll 355, frames 784-85; Commissioners to Edmonds, June 8, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 949-51; Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 10-13.

payments were much reduced by the new commissioners. George Ewing charged that the redistribution was a plot fomented by "priests and degraded Frenchmen" working in the British interest. Further twisting the lion's tail, George Ewing singled out Coquillard, whom he described as a "British-hearted rascal" infamous for "insulting and torturing American prisoners, and practicing outrages upon their persons and their feelings" during the War of 1812. Ewing complained that since he had used all his influence to help Pepper negotiate the recent treaties his claims should be paid first. Moreover, he warned the government that he would advise the Potawatomis against removal, boasting, "Nor shall these Indians ever get out of Indiana until we are paid if it is in my power to prevent them."²²

But the Ewings' power was diminishing. Following the claims payment, the Wabash chiefs were so frightened of Ashkum and Chandonnai that they refused to return to their villages. Iowa, Pashpoho, and others spent the winter of 1836-1837 in Logansport, relying upon Pepper for protection. Meanwhile, the federal government attempted to placate the village chiefs, and during February, 1837, the dissidents visited Washington. Although the government refused to invalidate the recent treaties, it did reimburse Ashkum and his followers for the loss of their lands.²³ Yet the government's actions did little to diminish the hostility between the two factions of Potawatomis, and the Wabash chiefs still feared for their lives. Eager to leave Indiana, they asked for removal to the West, but they were afraid to share the new Potawatomi reservation in Iowa with their enemies. Finally, to facilitate their removal, the government established a second reservation in Kansas, setting aside a tract of land along the Osage River. In August, 1837, most of the Wabash chiefs abandoned Indiana for new homes in Kansas.²⁴

Meanwhile, federal officials responded to the new commissioners' request, and in April, 1837, the government appointed

²² George Ewing to Secretary of War, February 12, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 824-28; Ewing to Edmonds, June 27, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 28-29.

²³ Kappler, *Indian Treaties*, II, 488-89; Pepper to Harris, August 23, 1837, M234, roll 361, frames 179-80.

²⁴ Harris to Pepper, March 24, 1837, M21, roll 21, frames 209-211; Pepper to Harris, August 20, 1837, M234, roll 361, frames 173-74; Harris to John Tipton, July 17, 1837, Isaac McCoy Papers (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas). Also see Wabash chiefs to Jackson, October 18, 1836, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 32-39.

Judge John W. Edmonds of Hudson, New York, to investigate all outstanding claims against the Potawatomis in Indiana. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Carey Harris instructed Edmonds to examine the claims of those traders dissatisfied with the final 1836 payment and to meet with both the merchants and those Indians supposedly in their debt. Edmonds also was directed to investigate the circumstances surrounding the 1836 claims payment and to ascertain who was responsible for all the turmoil.²⁵

Edmonds journeyed to Logansport, Indiana, where he arrived in late May, 1837, establishing an office in the Washington Hall Hotel. During the next month he met with traders, Indians, and local politicians, examining claims and investigating the recent payments. The proceedings attracted large numbers of people, the crowd evidently anticipating further encounters between Coquillard and the Ewings, but the hearings progressed peacefully. On June 24, 1837, Edmonds concluded his assignment and moved on to Wisconsin, where he investigated similar claims against the Menominees.²⁶

Edmonds' report indicates that during his month in Logansport he examined 146 separate claims against the Potawatomis. The amount of the individual claims ranged from \$2.87 to over \$27,000 (the latter was one of several claims presented by the Ewings), with the total amount submitted by all traders and other individuals reaching \$169,446.64. After a short investigation Edmonds was able to prove that claims totalling almost \$84,000 were fraudulent. Of the remaining \$85,000 in valid claims, over \$62,000 already had been paid at the 1836 claims payment and at smaller Potawatomi annuity payments during 1837. Therefore, the Indians still owed the traders about \$23,000. Federal officials promised that these claims would be paid.²⁷

Edmonds' investigation satisfied most traders but brought a chorus of complaints from a few. Leading this overture were the Ewings, who again lamented that the government was unappreciative of their efforts and argued that all their claims should be paid. Ironically, however, Edmonds had been much more lenient in approving the Ewings' vouchers than those of

²⁵ Harris to Edmonds, April 20, 1837, M21, roll 21, frames 281-84.

²⁶ Citizens of Logansport to Edmonds, June 19, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 869-70; Edmonds to Joel Poinsett, June 20, 1837, M234, roll 355, frames 864-65; "Journal Written at Logansport," George Winter Papers (Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis). This is a typescript copy of Winter's journal. The original is in the possession of Cable G. Ball of Lafayette, Indiana.

²⁷ Edmonds, *Report on the Claims*, 8-13.

their competitors. Although he disallowed about \$7,900 worth of their statements, he did validate over \$35,000 in recent payments or in notes still held by the Ewings against the tribe. Still dissatisfied, the Ewings unsuccessfully spent the next ten years seeking further payments from the government.²⁸

After examining participants in the 1836 claims payment, Edmonds concluded that Pepper had purchased the village chiefs' reservations from Indians who had little claim to the lands. Sympathetic to Ashkum and his followers, Edmonds admitted that the dissident Potawatomis had threatened violence, but he pointed out that they had disbanded peacefully, causing no property damage or bodily harm. Although the State of Indiana eventually charged Coquillard, Chandonnai, and several others with inciting a riot, Edmonds observed that they had broken no federal statutes. The commissioner was very critical of the Ewings and their friends for grabbing the lion's share of the payment funds but conceded that, with the exception of Barron's seizure of the extra \$2000, they also had broken no law.²⁹

In retrospect, events surrounding the 1836 Potawatomi claims payments illustrate several facets of the traders' influence upon both Indians and government officials. Obviously, by the mid-1830s the tribesmen were mired in an economic morass of insufficient annuities and overextended debts. Since the Potawatomis relied upon the traders for the necessities of life, these merchants exercised considerable power over tribal politics. Such influence is apparent in the Ewings' ability to persuade the Wabash chiefs to sell reservations belonging to Ashkum and the other village chiefs. Pepper's reliance on the Ewings' assistance in negotiating the treaty indicates that government officials were aware of the traders' influence, and his willingness to allow George Ewing and Taber to serve as the original claims commissioners illustrates that Indian agents sometimes granted special favors in return for the traders' cooperation.

The investigation of the claims payment also suggests that considerable fortunes could be amassed in the Indian trade. Undoubtedly some traders lost money through credit extended

²⁸ *Ibid.* Correspondence regarding the continued attempts of the Ewings to obtain further payments can be found in M234, rolls 356-360, and M21, rolls 23-38.

²⁹ Edmonds to Harris, December 19, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Claims*, 3-7; Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, *Report on the Disturbance*, 3-20. The charges against Coquillard, Jean Baptiste Chandonnai, and the others later were dropped.

to the tribesmen, but Edmonds' investigation indicated that most merchants counterbalanced their losses with inflated prices and swollen vouchers. Prior to Edmonds' queries, the government made little attempt to judge the claims, and most vouchers evidently were accepted at face value. Although Edmonds was forced to examine over 140 claims in less than one month, he easily was able to prove that almost half of the claims were fraudulent.

Finally, the 1836 claims payment shows that many of the traders were willing to use questionable methods in championing their claims, regardless of the impact upon the Indians or the government. Given the characteristics of Jacksonian society, such opportunism is not surprising. Many Americans were after quick profits, and the traders were no exception. But the Ewings' threat that no Indians would be removed until all their claims were paid indicates a shocking selfishness, even by the standards of the 1830s. Ironically, later officials would harness such self-interest, and in the 1840s the government hired the Ewings to help remove some of the Miamis. Coquillard received a similar contract for a belated Potawatomi removal in 1851. Edmonds' analysis of the traders' importance was certainly perceptive when he reported back to Harris that "no influence over them [the Potawatomis] is stronger . . . and none . . . more powerful, for good or ill, as it may chance be exerted."³⁰

³⁰ Edmonds to Harris, December 2, 1837, in Edmonds, *Report on the Disturbance*, 18.