4 The Removal Order and the Wisconsin Death March

In late fall of 1848, a contingent of Chippewa Indians including chiefs representing sixteen Lake Superior bands traveled to Washington to try to end any additional talk about their removal to the West (*Detroit Daily Free Press* 1848). Early in 1849, they presented a petition to the members of Congress (*Fig. 16*). "Our people," they said, "desire a donation of twenty-four sections of land, covering the graves of our fathers, our sugar orchards, and our rice lakes and rivers, at seven different places now occupied by us as villages." The chiefs requested the establishment of a "permanent home" for their people at Vieux Desert or Old Garden (three sections), at Trout Lake (four sections), at Lac Courte Oreilles (four sections), at La Pointe (four sections), at Ontonagon (three sections), at L'Anse (three sections), and at Pequaming[34] (three sections). "We do not wish," they declared, "to be driven north of the British line, nor West among the wandering and vicious tribes which infest the plains and the mountains stretching from the Mississippi to the Pacific" (Head Chiefs 1849, 1-2).

The press in the Great Lakes region kept residents informed of the activities of the Chippewa delegation in Washington (*Detroit Daily Free Press* 1848, 1849; *Green Bay Advocate* 1849a, b). Iowa Senator Augustus Dodge, who heard the Indians address Congress, summarized their presentation as follows:

> They come here . . . to ask of this and the other branch of Congress that the resting-places where the bones of their ancestors repose may be continued to them; that the Government of the United States would grant them a small portion of its vast domain among the fastnesses and marshes of Lake Superior, where their villages are situated, and where they have been enabled to obtain a precarious subsistence by gathering wild rice, cranberries, and other productions of that distant country.

In addition to speaking before Congress, the delegation visited President James K. Polk, Secretary of War William L. Marcy, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Medill. According to Senator Dodge, "everywhere their mission was approved by all who became acquainted with them, and everywhere they excited the best sympathies of the human heart" (U. S. Congress 1849, 536). President Polk assured the Indians of "kindly feelings" on the part of the United States government. He promised to read the petition and other documents they presented him and stated, according to one newspaper editor, that "if they behaved themselves they might expect good treatment in {the} future" (*Detroit Daily Free Press* 1849).

When the Chippewas began preparations to return to Wisconsin, they found it necessary to appeal to Congress for financial assistance. Their trip to Washington had not been approved in advance by Commissioner Medill, so no funds were on hand in the Indian Office to cover their expenses. Senator Dodge of Iowa spoke in favor of a joint resolution in their behalf. Claiming that when the Chippewas reached Green Bay on their long journey home it would still take many of them a month

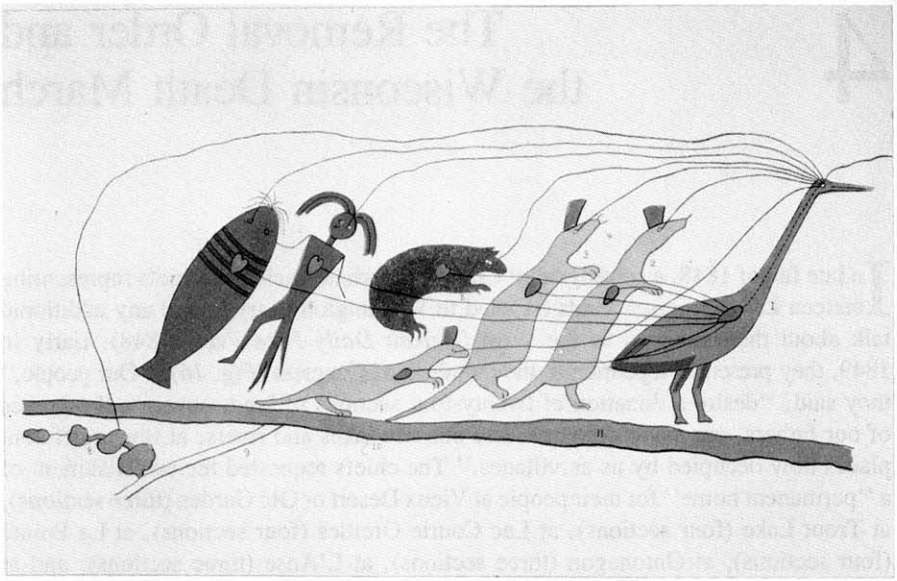


Fig. 16. *Symbolic Petition of Chippewa Chiefs, 1849.* Drawing by Seth Eastman from Schoolcraft, *The Indian Tribes of the United States,* Vol. 1 (1851). The chiefs who went to Washington in 1849 requested a "permanent home" in Wisconsin; they carried this pictograph with them. Animals representing various clans travel eastward along Lake Superior (the dark line across the pictograph). Their unity of purpose is depicted by the lines linking together their hearts and eyes to a chain of wild rice lakes in ceded territory south of Lake Superior. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. WHi(x3)34127

to snowshoe to their villages, Dodge helped to persuade his colleagues to provide the necessary funds. In doing so, he shared some information:

> . . . If you were to go into a calculation as to the millions of acres of land, the valuable lead and copper mines that you have acquired from these very tribes, specimens of which are to be seen at the War Department, and calculate the cost of these, as compared with their value, there would be a fearful balance against us. These Indians are now many thousand miles from home. Philanthropic gentlemen in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, have loaned them sums of money to enable them to reach here. These debts they wish to pay, and to have money enough to pay their way home. (U. S. Congress 1849, 536)

Dodge's efforts assisted the Indians in securing funds for their return trip. As the delegation left Washington, the fate of the Wisconsin Chippewas became entangled with national and state politics.

Chippewa bands in Wisconsin represented a political opportunity to Whig politicians in newly created Minnesota Territory (March 3, 1849). The Minnesota Whigs had helped capture the White House for their party in the presidential election of 1848, and they eagerly awaited the transition to the new administration, which occurred just weeks after the Chippewa delegation met with President Polk.

The idea of removing the Chippewas from Wisconsin to Minnesota Territory had special appeal for some Minnesotans. Removal would mean transferring annuity

payments to the new territory where Alexander Ramsey (*Fig. 17*), recently appointed governor and the titular head of the Whig party, would garner a considerable number of patronage jobs from Democratic Wisconsin. After gaining statehood in May of 1848, Wisconsin had cast nearly twice as many ballots for Whig opponents in the presidential election that year than for Whig candidates. President Zachary Taylor was under considerable pressure to open opportunities for loyal, patronage-hungry Whigs. The transfer of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the War Department to the newly established Interior Department under the direction of Ohioan Thomas Ewing and the selection of Kentuckian Orlando Brown as commissioner of Indian affairs indicated the extent of the politicization of Indian affairs. Ewing had opposed rotation in office while the Democrats were in power and was now thirsting for the opportunity to use his patronage powers to clean house; Brown, with no knowledge of Indian affairs, was little more than a liaison between Kentucky "kingmaker" John J. Crittenden and President Taylor (Hamilton 1951, 113, 132, 151, 173; Satz 1975, 164; Trennert 1979a, 42-46; White 1954, 310).

The 1848 annuity payment at La Pointe may have actually helped to trigger a series of events that played into the hands of Minnesota politicians and traders. A reporter for the *Cleveland Herald* who visited La Pointe in 1848 later charged that there was a direct connection between "the swindle" he witnessed there and the subsequent effort to evict the Chippewas from Wisconsin. The 1848 payment, like many others, began much later than the announced time. As a result, "thousands of Indians traversed many miles of forest, wasted six weeks' time, and lost the crop of wild rice upon which they depended for their winter's subsistence." Traders, who charged what the Ohio reporter called "exorbitant rates" for "the necessaries of life," claimed their profits were "moderate." Yet, for every pound of pork or flour Indians purchased on credit to feed their families, the traders required them to spend an equivalent amount on "dry goods and gewgaws" as well as other "trash" that "had no value for them." By the time the annuity funds arrived, traders "raked" more than eighty-five percent from the payment table; only a few thousand dollars remained to be divided equally among the Indians, who received about one dollar each. According to the reporter, "it was whispered that . . . {the traders} were using all their influence to have the future payments made at some point so far West that competition would not force them to be content with moderate profits." These were the reasons, the reporter observed, "it was necessary to remove the Chippewas further West" (*New York Times* 1851b).

Before the end of 1849, Interior Department officials learned that the newly formed legislative assembly in Minnesota Territory had passed resolutions in favor of revoking the usufructuary rights of the Chippewa Indians on lands ceded in 1837 and 1842. Upon the recommendation of Indian Commissioner Orlando Brown, President Taylor—who had once served as commandant of forts in Wisconsin and Minnesota—issued an executive order on February 6, 1850[35] that revoked the usufructuary rights of Chippewa Indians not only in Minnesota but also in Wisconsin and in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and ordered the removal of all of the Chippewa Indians in these areas to unceded lands in Minnesota (*Fig. 18*). Indian Office personnel in Washington and in Minnesota Territory offered four reasons for the presidential Removal Order and their emphasis on "prompt action" in carrying it out: (1) the Chippewas had to be removed in order to prevent "injurious contact" with the advancing white population; (2) the Indians had to be removed

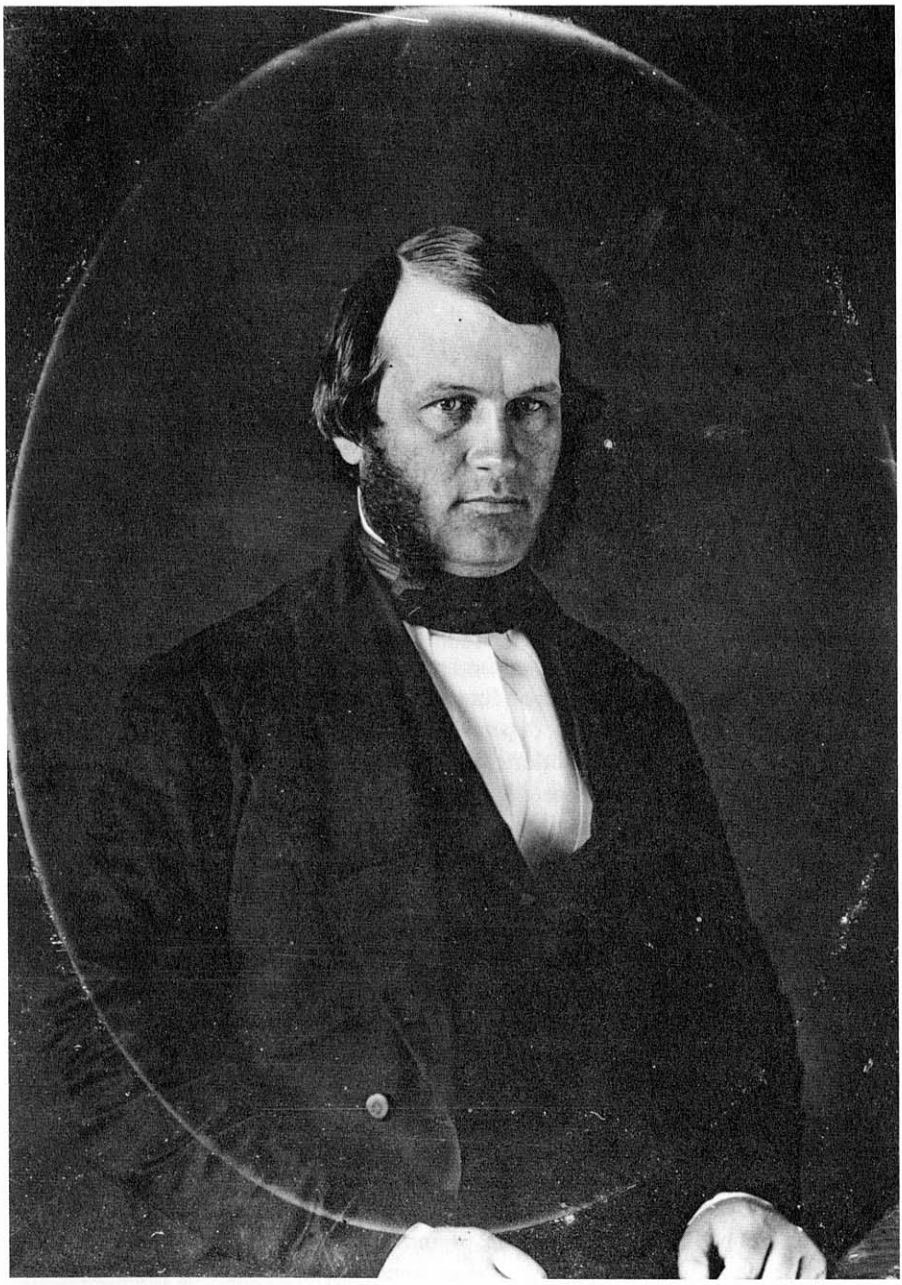
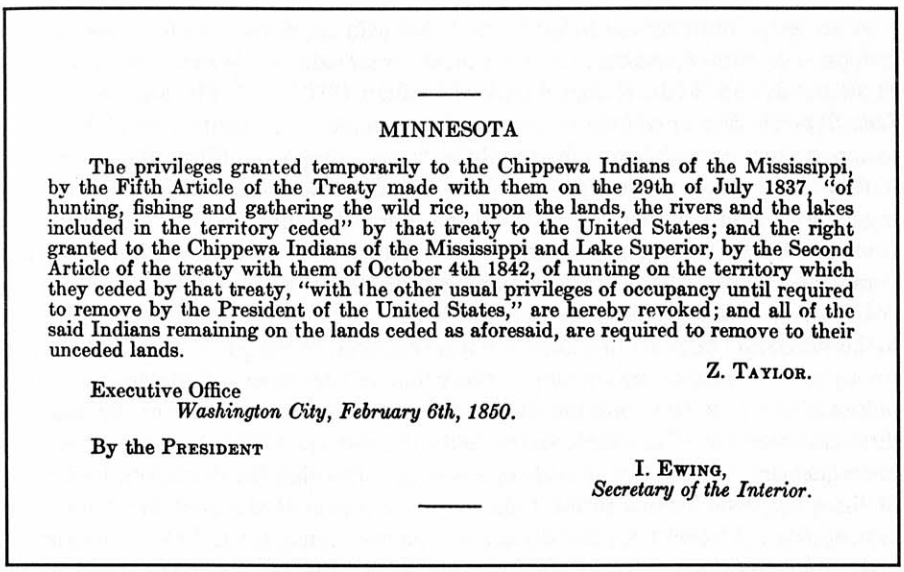


Fig. 17. *Alexander Ramsey, Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Minnesota Territory.* Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

from areas where there were "ample facilities for procuring ardent spirits;" (3) whites needed to be relieved of the "annoyance" and "evils" of having Indians as neighbors; and (4) removal to the West would provide opportunities for congregating the Chippewas together for purposes of promoting their "civilization and prosperity" (Kappler 5: 663; Lea 1850, 4-6; 1851a; Ramsey 1850, 54-55).



MINNESOTA

The privileges granted temporarily to the Chippewa Indians of the Mississippi, by the Fifth Article of the Treaty made with them on the 29th of July 1837, "of hunting, fishing and gathering the wild rice, upon the lands, the rivers and the lakes included in the territory ceded" by that treaty to the United States; and the right granted to the Chippewa Indians of the Mississippi and Lake Superior, by the Second Article of the treaty with them of October 4th 1842, of hunting on the territory which they ceded by that treaty, "with the other usual privileges of occupancy until required to remove by the President of the United States," are hereby revoked; and all of the said Indians remaining on the lands ceded as aforesaid, are required to remove to their unceded lands.

Z. TAYLOR.

Executive Office
Washington City, February 6th, 1850.

By the PRESIDENT

I. EWING,
Secretary of the Interior.

Fig. 18. *President Zachary Taylor's Executive Order of February 6, 1850.* This typescript copy of President Taylor's Removal Order is reproduced from attorney Charles J. Kappler's compendium of Indian laws and treaties (5: 663), where it appears under the heading "Minnesota" because the order was issued in response to officials from that territory. Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Media Development Center.

News of the Removal Order shocked the Lake Superior Chippewa people. According to Subagent Watrous, it "created much excitement and disatisfaction" because the Indians believed "they would not be required to remove until the present generation should pass away" (Watrous 1850, 89). As noted earlier, the Wisconsin Indians understood they had ceded only copper rights—not land rights—in 1842 and that under the 1837 and 1842 treaties they would never be forced to leave Wisconsin unless they acted improperly—i.e., made war or otherwise acted violently against whites. And there were no white demands for Chippewa lands for settlement. In fact, when Daniel H. Johnson of Prairie du Chien attempted to obtain information for the 1850 Census in La Pointe County (later La Pointe and Douglas counties), he found the region "remote and difficult to communciate with" and inhabited primarily by individuals who spoke either French or Ojibwa. The Lake Superior country was, he reported in a certified affidavit, a "thinly settled and half civilized region." Only about five hundred whites had settled in that area (Johnson 1858, 2).

Chief Buffalo of La Pointe and other chiefs who "obstinately" opposed removal responded to the news by sending messengers to every Chippewa village to ascertain if any depredations had been committed against whites. Failing to uncover any incident that might have sparked the president's action, they convened councils throughout the ceded territory to discuss the situation and plan their strategy for opposing "the sudden order" of the U. S. government (Watrous 1850, 89; *Lake Superior News* 1850a, b; Buffalo *et al.* 1852; Armstrong {1892}, 287-88).

A vigorous lobbying campaign of the Wisconsin legislature, various missionary groups, regional newspapers, and many local whites aided the Wisconsin Chippewas in their resistance to the Removal Order (Vennum 1988, 259). The Sault St. Marie *Lake Superior News and Mining Journal,* for example, responded on May 22, 1850, to reports that agent Watrous had told the Indians they would lose their annuities if they remained in Wisconsin and Michigan by observing, "this is a new and ingeniously contrived way of effecting the removal of the natives." As far away from the La Pointe Agency in the Great Lakes region as Detroit, this editorial comment received support from regional editors (*Detroit Daily Free Press* 1850). A follow-up article in the Sault Ste. Marie newspaper on June 12, 1850, referred to the Removal Order as "uncalled for by any interest of the government—uncalled for by any interest of the Indians." The editor of the paper concluded that "this unlooked for order has brought disappointment and consternation to the Indians throughout the Lake Superior Country, and will bring upon them the most disastrous consequences." The paper issued reports highly favoring the continued residence of the Chippewa Indians in the Lake Superior region (*Lake Superior News and Mining Journal* 1850b). Cyrus Mendenhall, an eyewitness to the 1842 treaty parley and mining entrepreneur associated with the Methodist Episcopal Mission Society (Kappler 2: 544; Clifton 1987, 21), rallied ministers, physicians, local officials, merchants, mine foremen, lumbermen, and other influential citizens between Sault Ste. Marie and La Pointe for support of the Chippewas. Ohio Whig Congressman Joshua R. Giddings forwarded to President Zachary Taylor a petition circulated by Mendenhall and signed by him and many other men "of high moral Character and respectability." Declaring any removal of the Chippewas from the lands ceded in 1842 "uncalled for by any interest of the Government or people of the United States, and . . . in a high degree prejudicial to the welfare of the Indians," the petitioners urged the president to rescind his order (Giddings 1850).

Mendenhall's petition arrived at the White House after President Taylor's unexpected death on July 9, 1850. Millard Fillmore, who had served as president for only a few weeks, replaced the entire cabinet (Hamilton 1951, 401-02) and then referred the petition to the Interior Department. On August 3, 1850, the Secretary of the Interior Ad Interim asked Commissioner of Indian Affairs Luke Lea,[36] who was just finishing his first month in office, to prepare a report on the issue (Giddings 1850). In the meantime, regional newspapers reported that "arrangements to remove the Chippewa Indians from Lake Superior are producing much dissatisfaction among the Indians and the Whites. The Indians are loth to remove, and the Whites to let them go" (*Detroit Daily Free Press* 1851). Sympathetic eastern newspapers reprinted articles from Great Lakes newspapers accusing Agent Watrous of perpetrating an "iniquitous scheme" to remove the Indians against the wishes of "the entire population of the Lake Superior country" (*New York Times* 1851a, b). Northern Wisconsin mine owners and whites who employed the Chippewas as fishers, sailors, guides, and hunters raised what Minnesota Governor Ramsey called "almost insuperable" obstacles to their removal (Ramsey 1851, 162).

Not all non-Indian residents of the Lake Superior country openly opposed the government's efforts to remove the Chippewas to Minnesota Territory. Missionaries residing among the Indians found themselves in a vulnerable position. As happened in the Indian removal crisis in the South during the Jacksonian era, they were torn between their interpretation of their duty to their Indian charges and their obligation

to civil authorities. In the early 1850s, as in the 1830s, federal officials used the fierce competition for government subsidies for Indian mission schools to their advantage (Satz 1985, 395-401; 1975, 55). The withdrawal of federal funds for the support of Indian mission schools in Wisconsin and the prospect of the restoration of those funds in Minnesota led some missionaries to resign themselves to accepting the inevitability of the removal of the Chippewas (Watrous 1852b, 48; Armstrong {1892}, 291 n. 6).

During the summer of 1851, *Copway's American Indian,* a new weekly newspaper published in New York by Canadian-born Chippewa George Copway[37]—one of the best-known Indians in the eastern United States—carried a report from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) about the operations of missionaries Leonard Wheeler at La Pointe and Sherman Hall at Bad River in Wisconsin. While hoping that "no compulsory means" would be used to evict the Indians from the state, the ABCFM governing board in Boston envisioned some benefits that relocation might bring the Wisconsin Chippewas. The board had learned valuable lessons during the removal crisis of the 1830s in the South and predicted the removal of the Chippewas "will cause considerable excitement among them," but "their removal will concentrate them more, and render them more accessible to the means of instruction and improvement" (*Copway's American Indian* 1851, 1; Berkhoffer 1965, 104-05). Missionary Hall had already advised ABCFM officials to make the best of the situation and to seek federal funds for a mission boarding school in Minnesota Territory before other Protestant or Catholic missionary societies secured them. "Whatever we may think of this policy," Hall wrote in 1850 shortly after President Taylor had issued his Removal Order, "if we wish to continue our missionary efforts for the Ojibwas, we had better conform to it" (Hall 1850a, b; 1852).

Hall's conversion to "conformity" with the presidential order was the result of the efforts of officials in the Interior Department in Washington: Minnesota Territorial Governor Ramsey who openly argued that in dealing with Indians "it would be indisputably the duty of government to impose such terms as should seem proper, and by duress or otherwise compel their observance" (Ramsey 1850, 49); and La Pointe subagent John Watrous. These men actively conspired to lure the Chippewas to Minnesota from northern Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. To accomplish their goal, they had moved the payment site for the 1850 annuity from La Pointe to Sandy Lake on the east bank of the Upper Mississippi River, a location that was some three to five hundred difficult canoe and portage miles from the various Chippewa villages in Wisconsin. They had also refused to provide services required under the 1837 and 1842 treaties at any location other than at Sandy Lake. In the fall of 1850, Watrous urged the Chippewas to bring their families to Sandy Lake for the payment, but neither he nor other federal officials made adequate arrangements to feed, shelter, or otherwise provide for the Indians there. Indeed, deliveries of annuity goods and rations were delayed until the "pelting rain and snows of autumn" nearly trapped the several thousand Chippewas who had traveled to that remote location (Watrous 1850, 89; Armstrong {1892}, 288; Buffalo *et al.* 1851; Buffalo *et al.* 1852; Watrous 1852b, 48; Pitezel 1859, 298-300; Clifton 1987, 1, 19-25).

In his annual report of November 27, 1850, Indian Commissioner Lea claimed he sought the removal of the Chippewas from Wisconsin in order to isolate them

in the West from "injurious contact" with whiskey peddlers and the like and to prevent them from suffering "destitution and want" in Wisconsin as the game on which they depended became exhausted (Lea 1850, 4-5). But many Wisconsin Chippewas were destitute and in want by the end of 1850 precisely because Lea lured them to Sandy Lake in Minnesota by transferring the payment of their annuities to that location.

Governor Ramsey, who boasted that a removal plan had been "fully matured" in his office, acknowledged that any such efforts undertaken after the first of November would lead to "much hardship" for emigrants (Ramsey 1850, 60-61). By forcing the Chippewas to reach Sandy Lake in October in order to collect their annuities, Ramsey set into motion a series of events culminating in what anthropologist James Clifton has recently called "The Wisconsin Death March" of 1850-1851. The Indians waited six weeks at Sandy Lake for the arrival of their subagent only to discover that he had come empty-handed because Congress failed to appropriate funds in a timely manner (Clifton 1987, 24-25). Seemingly trapped in Minnesota as the winter weather made travel back to Wisconsin extremely difficult, the Wisconsin Chippewas suffered what Governor Ramsey conceded was "a distressing mortality" (Ramsey 1851, 161).

According to missionary eyewitnesses, the federal government's "unwise course" of action in handling the annuity payment at Sandy Lake, especially its failure to provide adequate provisions for the Chippewas who traveled there, had serious consequences. Infectious diseases appeared in the makeshift Chippewa camps and spread rapidly when food supplies ran out shortly after the arrival of the first contingent from Wisconsin. The Indians traded their annuity claims for spoiled food and other shoddy provisions merchants sold at highly inflated prices. As winter set in, many Indians burned their canoes for firewood and returned to Wisconsin carrying their belongings on their backs (Hall 1850b; Pitezel 1859, 299-301).

Although the mortality figures cannot be determined precisely, Chippewa eyewitnesses from La Pointe and from the interior bands reported that some four hundred Indians, mostly able-bodied men, died from illness, hunger, and exposure—170 at Sandy Lake[38] and another 230 on the return trip (Buffalo *et al.* 1851; Buffalo *et al.* 1852; Clifton 1987, 1, 25). Methodist Episcopal missionary John Pitezel, who traveled to Sandy Lake from Michigan and recorded his observations some months later, saw "evidences of a terrible calamity every-where" as he approached the annuity payment site. "All over the cleared land graves were to be seen in every direction, for miles distant, from Sandy Lake; they were to be found in the woods {too}. Some, it is not known how many, were interred by their friends on the way home." Sickness and death were everywhere. "So alarming was the mortality," Pitezel commented "that the Indians complained that they could not bury their dead" (Pitezel 1859, 300-01).

Anxious to deflect any criticism of his handling of the annuity payment at Sandy Lake, Governor Ramsey wrote a long defense of his actions to Indian Commissioner Lea. "Far from famine or starvation ensuing from any negligence on the part of Government officers," he claimed, "the Chippewas received all that Government was under treaty obligations to furnish to them, except their money; and this, as every one is aware, who is at all familiar with the thriftless habits of the Indians, and the fatal facility with which they incur debts whenever opportunity presents, is usually all of it due to their traders." Ramsey, who had directed the Indians to

travel to Sandy Lake for their annuity money in the first place, told Lea that he had found it necessary to spend half of the funds on provisions for the Indians. "Had the residue been so invested, which the scarcity of supplies rendered impossible," he asserted, "it would not have subsisted the large number congregated at the payment an additional fortnight" (Ramsey 1851, 162).

Subagent Watrous admitted a "great mortality" had occured as a result of the circumstances surrounding the annuity payment and reported that the Chippewas referred to Sandy Lake as a "grave yard" and that they had "a particular dread and horror for the place" (Watrous 1852a). According to a recent study of the incident, "the Ewing-Brown-Ramsey-Watrous plan to lure the Lake Superior Chippewa west and trap them there successfully removed some twelve percent, by killing them." The tragic loss of such a large number of people weakened the Wisconsin bands. Many of their able-bodied men had died. They had also lost capital equipment—their canoes, as well as valuable time that could have been devoted to subsistence work and other productive economic activities. Dependent upon traders for food, the Chippewas who returned to Wisconsin found it necessary to encumber their unpaid and future annuity funds in order to survive the winter of 1851 (Clifton 1987, 25). The tragic events associated with the annuity payment at Sandy Lake strengthened the resolve of the leaders of the Wisconsin bands to resist all efforts to remove them to Minnesota.