



Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet. George Catlin, who painted this portrait in 1831, called Kenekuk a "very shrewd and talented man" and the "champion of the mere remnant of a poisoned race," the Kickapoo Indians. Courtesy of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet

Joseph B. Herring



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In memory of
Walter Rundell, Jr.

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have taken part against us, had resided with Black Hawk for several years," Scott informed Secretary of War Lewis Cass. "Several lodges of this tribe broke off & returned to the Wabash, before actual hostilities commenced." In the midst of the crisis, the Indian agent William Marshall had even given Kenekuk's people permission to hunt on federal lands in Illinois, as long as they continued to act "peaceably and amicably." Indeed, the peace-loving Kenekuk would never permit his followers to engage in violence of any kind. His mistake was in providing a haven for refugees from Black Hawk's camp, because panicky whites would ever be suspicious of the "true" motivation that rested behind his act of kindness.

Despite official assurances from General Scott and others that the Vermillion Kickapoos were innocent, citizen demands for their removal intensified. The whites were indignant, even in Indiana, where the *St. Joseph Beacon* had attempted to restore calm by pointing out that there was "no more probability of an invasion by Black Hawk's party than there is from the Emperor of Russia."²⁷

By the end of the month, the effects of Jackson's removal law and the shock of the Black Hawk War had begun to overwhelm the Vermillion Indians' valiant effort to remain in Illinois. On August 31, William Clark advised the Kickapoo Prophet to seize "this opportunity of leaving a country where you have long been looked upon with suspicion, and where you will shortly be treated as enemies." The superintendent told Kenekuk that he hoped "the Great Spirit will open your ears to my advice and enable you to act with prudence." The white man assured the skeptical Indian leader that although Clark himself had never personally inspected the new land in the West, he knew it was ideal for resettlement: "Your Great Father, the President, does not wish your

people to be permanently placed on land incapable of supporting them comfortably. He wishes to see his Red Children contented and happy. But your people will lose nothing by removing to the country assigned to them."²⁸

Kenekuk, who had listened to such empty promises many times before, knew they meant nothing; but with Governor Reynolds and the white citizens clamoring for the Indians' removal, he had no choice but to yield. Finally, on October 24, at Clark's St. Louis home, the prophet capitulated and signed away his followers' lands. In the Treaty of Castor Hill the Vermillion people surrendered their Vermillion River lands, while the Prairie Kickapoos of Missouri relinquished their holdings along the Osage.²⁹ It was the first time that Kenekuk had ever sold Indian lands. Perhaps the Great Spirit would consider the circumstances and cleanse Kenekuk's soul and not punish his people for violating the sacred command never to abandon the graves of their ancestors.

The Kickapoo Prophet had failed, for his people had to leave their cherished homeland. Despite all that Kenekuk had done to protect their rights, in the end it had proved of no avail. It mattered little that the Vermillion people were peaceful, sober, industrious, devout, and all the things the whites demanded that they be; they still had to move. Kenekuk's followers had adapted themselves to white society—they had acculturated—but had not assimilated. To the settlers, they were still different, for they had Indian ways and red skins, and whites refused to accept the Indians as equal members of the overall community. Their most unforgivable offense, however, was that they occupied fertile lands that white settlers coveted and were determined to have. Even the Great Spirit apparently lacked the power to stop this tragedy.

In the early autumn of 1832 about four hundred Vermillion