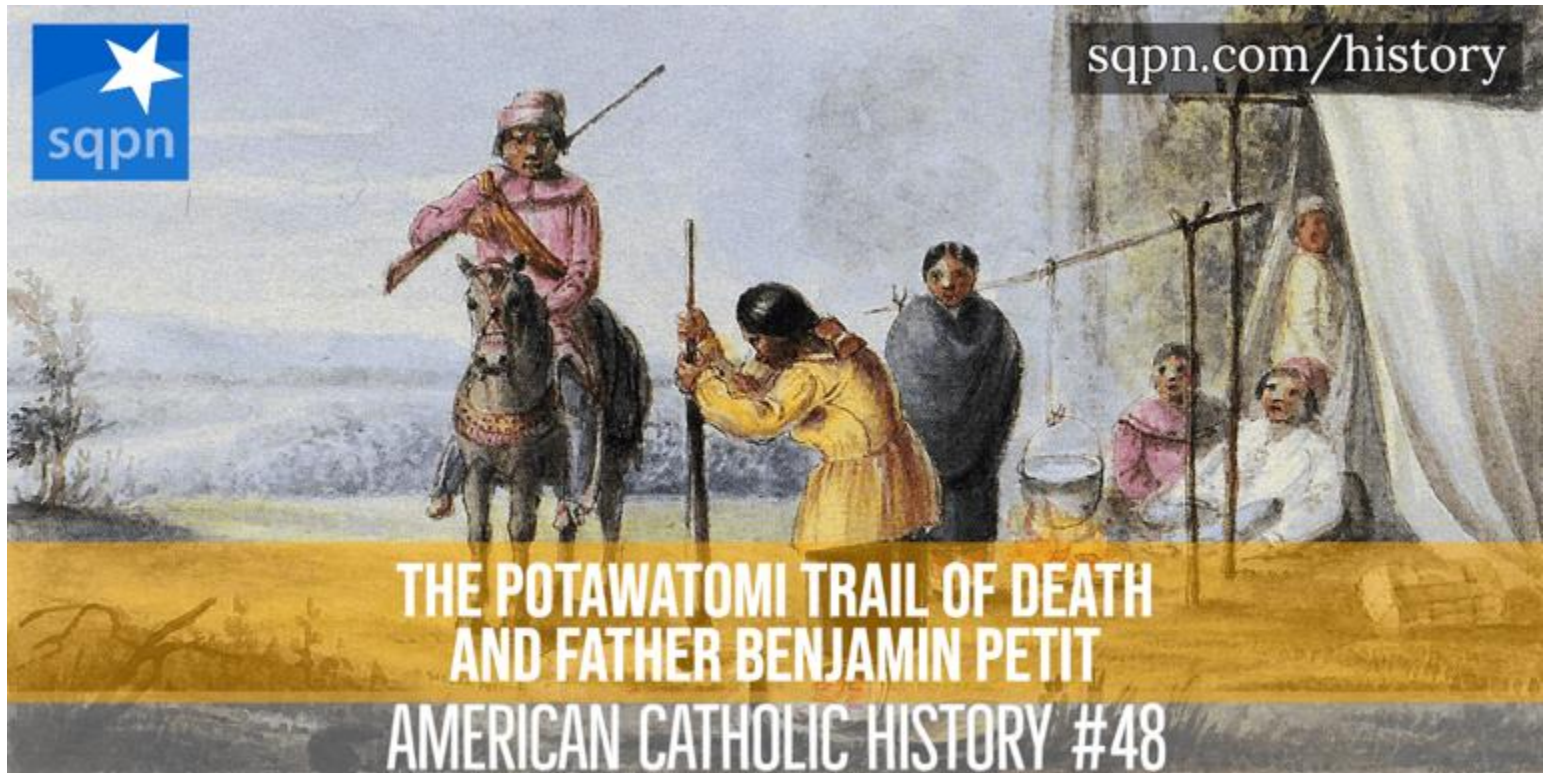


We hope you enjoy these messages that contain a little information about aspects of American Catholic history that are often little known and unexpected. We've also included links for you to find out more and to subscribe to the podcast, *American Catholic History*, which gives you a bit of history in about 15 minutes a week. Enjoy!

The Potawatomi Trail of Death and Fr. Benjamin Petit



The **Potawatomi** were Native Americans who lived for hundreds of years around Lake Michigan in present day Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, and many were evangelized by French Jesuits who came down from Canada and they became Catholic. Unfortunately, when the British took control of the area--and the new United States took control from them--the French Jesuits were expelled and these Christians were forced to retain their faith without the priesthood and most of the sacraments for many years.

In the early 1800s, white settlers were moving into the region and wanted their land and so tribal leaders had signed treaty after treaty handing over more and more of the land. When the US government came again between 1834 and 1836, they now wanted the rest of the Potawatomi land and for the tribes to be moved west of the Mississippi onto reservations. But one group under the leadership of Chief Menominee refused to even negotiate. It was no matter as his signature--an X on the treaty-- was forged.

Now, Menominee and his tribe were Catholic and they had been able to again get help from missionary priests, including the French-born **Fr. Benjamin Petit**, of the Diocese of Vincennes, Indiana, who arrived newly ordained in 1837. He cared deeply for these people he called "My

Christians," and dove into the work of providing the sacraments and preaching with vigor. He also spent much time advocating on their behalf against their unjust treatment, all the way to Washington, DC, even meeting with President Martin Van Buren. But it was for naught.

In September, 1838, the state of Indiana ordered that the terms of the forged treaties be honored. The state militia closed the missions--forcing Fr. Petit to leave--and then took the tribal leaders hostage, while the militia surrounded the Potawatomi encampments, forced them to pack, and escorted them out of town across country to Kansas.

About 860 Potawatomi began the 660-mile march across Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, and they were joined by Fr. Petit whose bishop saw his heartfelt love for his flock and let him go. The march was brutal. Over the next two months, 42 people would die on the trail. That wasn't the end of their suffering. Upon their arrival at the reservation on the cusp of winter, there was no housing prepared for them and they had to survive as best they could in rude huts through the brutal months.

Meanwhile, the harsh conditions and tireless manner in which he served took its toll on Fr. Petit. After staying in Kansas with his people for two months, recovering, he set off for home in Vincennes. He made it as far as St. Louis where he died at just 27 years old.

Today, the Potawatomi Trail of Death is a Regional Historic Trail, and every five years a caravan makes the journey, beginning at the statue of Chief Menominee near Plymouth, Indiana, and ending at the St. Philippine Duchesne Park in Kansas. If you're ever in that park you will find that one of the markers commemorating the Potawatomi Trail of Death is dedicated to Father Benjamin Petit, who is considered a martyr of charity.

For more about the Potawatomi and Fr. Benjamin Petit, listen to [American Catholic History, Episode 48](#).

American Catholic History, hosted by [Tom](#) and [Noelle](#) Crowe, finds the hidden gems and compelling stories of Catholic Americans who have contributed to their nation by virtue of their faith over the past three centuries. In less than 10 minutes per episode, American Catholic History will introduce you to the amazing men and women who came to these American shores and were born here and contributed in ways both great and small, celebrated and unheralded. **Send us your feedback at history@sqpn.com**

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