

Michigan History of Philanthropy

The tribes that existed in what is now called Michigan held sharing as an important value that contributed to their existence.

The tribes that lived in Michigan were the Potawatomi, Wyandot, Chippewa and Menominee. The French explorers who traveled the area kept journals that contained statements describing the natives as peace-loving and generous people. The Native Americans served as guides, leading French explorers through the Michigan wilderness. The explorers were able to chart and map the land safely.

The Chippewas had a tradition of reciprocal giving. Reciprocal giving is giving to others as much as one could when one was able. This was an important part of their culture. If anyone tried to gain more wealth and goods for themselves, they were treated harshly.

There came a time when the settlers of Michigan were barely able to feed themselves. Michigan became known as the land of swamps and bad soil or "Land of Doom." Why? During the War of 1812, hundreds of soldiers died in Detroit of diseases like malaria. It was also a dangerous time to travel to Michigan because settlers had to travel by land. The steam ships had not been invented yet. Traveling by ship would have made the trip easier if they could have traveled through the Great Lakes but the Erie Canal had not been built yet.

But philanthropy prevailed. Potawatomi Chief Sag-e-maw helped settlers from Ohio become the first American settlers in Kalamazoo County. Even though there was a language barrier, the chief led this group to the best land.

Later when the Erie Canal was completed, the Great Lakes became the "Great Funnel" and people started moving to Michigan. They landed in Detroit and spread out across the state, building towns and cities. Most of the settlers came from New York State. The settlers were very religious and believed in hard work. They believed that they were to better themselves and lead a clean life.

The settlers felt that self-improvement could only come about through education. Many of the first schools and colleges in Michigan were built and supported by the church. Their beliefs were that the rich were to be rich and the poor were to be poor. The rich believed that it was their duty to guide the poor. Most of the philanthropic work was done from the churches. For example, the religious leaders in Detroit funded a smallpox vaccination for citizens who could not afford it.



Many of the state's earliest charity efforts focused on education. From the beginning, children from poor families were allowed to come to school without paying. However, many were too proud to accept. The first free schools appeared in Detroit in 1842, but it was almost 30 years before the poor chose to attend school without feeling they were "charity cases." Schools in small towns and cities were only open two or three months out of the year.

During the Civil War (1862) Michigan residents pulled together to show their support. Volunteers met in churches, schools and homes to sew clothing, battle flags and tents. Michigan's 2nd Infantry was the first to arrive in Washington D.C. Their arrival assured President Lincoln of their loyalty to the Union.

Another example of efforts put forth by Michigan residents took place in Marshall, Michigan. Marshall was a station on the Underground Railroad. The citizens were against slavery. In 1846, Kentucky slave chasers tried to capture enslaved Adam Crosswhite and his family who had escaped to Marshall. The citizens arrested the slave chasers from Kentucky and smuggled the Crosswhite family into Canada. The rescuers (citizens of Marshall) were convicted of "depriving a man of his rightful property" in Detroit Federal Court in 1847. They paid the fines but considered it a badge of honor.

The Crosswhite Incident is mentioned on several historical markers in the town. A few years ago the Marshall Historical Society marked Crosswhite's grave which lies near several of his rescuers. (Crosswhite returned to Marshall after the Civil War.)

A third example is Sojourner Truth (1799-1883) who moved to Battle Creek at age 57 to begin her third career. She was born Isabella Baumfree in Ulster County, New York. Sojourner belonged to several slave owners before she received her freedom by law. She began traveling as a preacher and later became an antislavery speaker. Sojourner gave a famous speech called "Ain't I a Woman?" Her friends and neighbors began to think of her as a feminist. Her response came about during a speech led by ministers blasting equal rights for women. She walked forward uninvited and spoke in defense of women. She pointed out that she was a woman and could work as hard as any man. She flexed the muscles in her arms to prove her point. Her reputation spread.

Sojourner Truth helped enslaved African Americans who were runaways fleeing from Virginia. She set up a job program that matched the former slaves with employers in New York and Michigan. Sojourner Truth requested that the U.S. Congress set aside land in Kansas for a freed people's settlement. However lawmakers refused. She lived the rest of her life in Battle Creek, Michigan.

