During the early months of 1833, Kenekuk and about four hundred followers, including over a hundred Potawatomi converts, settled along the west bank of the Missouri River, a few miles north of Fort Leavenworth. They immediately constructed their traditional bark wickiups and fashioned tables, chairs, and beds out of rushes that grew along the river bottoms; that spring they planted fields of corn, beans, squash, and other crops. A short time later, a white visitor found their village situated in “a retired, rural spot, shut out from the world, and looked as if it might have been free from its cares also.”

This idyllic description, however, was far from accurate during those early days in the new land. About one mile upriver lived the Prairie Kickapoos, recent arrivals from Missouri who had also surrendered their lands in the 1832 Treaty of Castor Hill. Long standing differences between the two bands, aggravated by their new proximity, resulted in frequent bickering and strife. They quarreled constantly over moral, financial, and legal matters. While Kenekuk’s men farmed and generally remained close to their village, the Prairie Kickapoos preferred more traditional ways; they shunned agriculture and white civilization. A traveler described the Prairie Kickapoos as “a forlorn-looking set” with “swarthy features and dingy blankets contrasting strikingly enough” with civilized society. A Presbyterian missionary observed that these Indians were “opposed to religion, schools etc., get drunk and gamble, [while] there are but few of the Prophet’s band that engage in these hobbets or wickedness.”

Governmental officials, meanwhile, were not concerned about the essential incompatibility of the two Kickapoo bands. Their major concern was that the Kickapoos acknowledge the “benevolent” nature of the removal policy and not hold a grudge against the Jackson administration. The optimistic commissioner of Indian Affairs, Elbert Herring, wanted the bands to “consider us friends and not wrongdoers,” for if content, “they would remain at peace, cultivate the arts of social life and advance in civilization.” Herring’s attitude was typical of federal administrators who held little regard for Indian customs and believed in the total superiority of white culture. Presumably, now that the Kickapoos were living in isolation west of the Mississippi, they could, in some mysterious manner, learn the ways of “civilization” with little difficulty. Such baseless assumptions naturally proved overly optimistic.

By the spring of 1833, Kenekuk’s followers seemed to be happy with their new homes as they tended their crops and participated in tribal religious ceremonies. Upriver, at the Prairie Kickapoo village, however, signs of discontent were evident as Chief Kishko complained that the land was “not equal to his expectations.” The new territory, moreover, was less than half the size of their former range in Missouri. To make matters worse, the Prairie Kickapoos felt uncomfortable living so close to Kenekuk’s pious followers.

When these complaints reached Washington, Commissioner Herring ordered the special
governmental envoys Henry Ellsworth, John Schermerhorn, and Montford Stokes to visit the Kickapoo, examine their lands, and make any reasonable adjustments to satisfy the bands. The three commissioners had been assigned by President Jackson to travel among the newly relocated tribes in present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska, and to make sure that the Indians were settled comfortably. Herring informed the agents that the Kickapoo situation must be handled delicately. It was very important, he wrote, “to convince [the Kickapoos] that their removal was urged upon them to promote their own welfare, and that, under the pledge of protection guarantied to them, by the Government, it acknowledges the duty, as it is their desire, to study the true interests of the different tribes, and to advance their prosperity and happiness by all proper and consistent means.”

On a late summer morning in 1833, Commissioner Henry Ellsworth, with his son Edward serving as secretary, left Fort Leavenworth on horseback to visit the Kickapoo villages; the other two commissioners were ill and unable to travel. Accompanying the Ellsworths on the four-mile ride was the aspiring writer John Treat Irving, a nephew of the popular novelist Washington Irving. Since his arrival in early August, the Kickapoos had fascinated Irving, who was anxious to see how they lived. He had often observed these “pretty hard customers” carrying furs and skins and “driving bargains” with the fort sutler. “There were many manly forms among them,” he noted later, “and some of their females were even beautiful. Scarce a day elapsed that we did not catch a glimpse of the gaudily dressed figures of some band, their tin trinkets glistening in the sunbeams, and their bright garments fluttering in the wind, as they galloped over the prairie towards the garrison.”

For more than an hour the men rode leisurely through forest and over prairie, crossing several streams until they reached the apex of a high bluff overlooking the two Kickapoo villages. The view was quite picturesque. “At our feet lay a small green prairie, dotted with clusters of wildflowers,” Irving noted. Three sides of the prairie were enclosed by a ridge of hills, and the men could see a clear stream shaded by many large trees, as well as flowers of countless varieties ornamenting the abundant valley grass, and a dense woods bordering the Missouri River.

As they ventured down toward the two villages, the white men took with them the typical nineteenth-century preconceptions about Indians. To Irving and the Ellsworths, tribal culture was inferior and Indians were lazy and shiftless. “The troops of naked children who followed at our heels,” wrote Irving, “convinced us, that among the sundry and manifold cares of the world, this tribe had not forgotten to perpetuate their race, and not withstanding their laziness, had contrived to start a fresh growth of papooses, that constituted the ‘rising generation’, and were then undergoing the education, usual to the Indian child.” He had little doubt that these children would inherit the slothful ways of their parents.

The parents, moreover, were themselves mere “children of the forest” who lacked Christian morals and values. Irving’s description of Kickapoo life was, more than anything else, a reflection of his own prudish morality:

Here and there, winding through the woods, or strolling over the prairie, might be seen a couple of cooing, greasy lovers; full of affection and slovenliness; unwashed but devoted. What a fund
of affection there must have been to have overlooked such a world of defects. A loud cry broke out in one of the hovels, and a couple rushed out. The first was a fat blowsy squaw. After her followed a diminutive, spiderlegged Indian, who looked as if he had withered away under the gall of his own disposition. He was the lord and master of the lady. In his hand he flourished a stick, with which he had been maintaining that discipline, by some deemed proper in a family, and which he now seemed inclined to continue. The woman, however, escaped and made for the woods. The bystanders paused for a moment to look on, for there was an agreeable excitement about this, which did not occur every day, and which therefore was not to be lost. Upon the escape of his wife, the little man looked around, as if he longed for some other object, upon which to vent his anger and wrath; but finding none, he disconsolately entered his dwelling.\(^9\)

A meeting with the Vermillion Kickapoo leaders Pashacheha, or Jumping Fish, and Kenekuk forced Irving to modify his opinions somewhat. “The former was a corpulent man,” noted Irving, “and in his youth must have been peculiarly handsome.” The sophisticated easterner was quite taken with the Kickapoo Prophet, who greeted Irving after setting aside a long rifle that he was carrying. Kenekuk’s stately bearing and eloquent speech made a deep impression on the white man: “There is an energy of character about him which gives much weight to his words, and has created for him an influence greater than that of any Indian in the town. From the little we saw it was evident that the chief yielded to him, and listened to his remarks with the deference of one who acknowledged his superiority. There was however no appearance of jealousy or heart burning between them.”\(^10\)

On September 2, Commissioner Ellsworth convened a council to discuss the Prairie Band’s dissatisfaction with the new lands. Ellsworth began by praising the location, pointing out that the Missouri River allowed the Indians easy access and transport for agricultural and other trade goods. Nearby Fort Leavenworth, moreover, protected the Kickapoos from their enemies; what more could they want? He ordered the contending bands to live together peacefully, for the government would never approve of a tribal separation. “Your great father considers the Kickapoos a brave nation, and wishes all the warriors together,” he sanctimoniously announced. Stay on this land, he advised, “and your great father will make good all his promises. The Great Spirit knows what has been said is true.”\(^11\)

A discontented Prairie spokesman named Muscahtewishah countered that their new reservation was too close to white settlements. The young men suffered from the effects of the “wicked water” that traders brought over from Missouri, and the Indians wanted to move to a more isolated location on the Marais des Cygnes River to the southwest. He talked on, pointing out the differences between the Prairie Kickapoos and Kenekuk’s followers. The prophet had exercised a confusing influence over the Indians; his preachings had caused tribal factionalism to flare up. “Our young men and the chiefs do not agree, as they did some time ago; some wish one thing, some another. Some wish to go to the Prairie, where there is game.” Others wanted to remain and raise corn. “We are like fish, we jump at whatever is thrown. I cannot get settled in my own mind.”\(^12\)

Chief Kishko led those who wanted to relocate on the Marais des Cygnes, and he adamantly insisted that the Kickapoos be allowed to move.\(^13\) He pointed out that many
Prairie Kickapoos already lived south of the Kansas River on the Shawnee reserve, “occupied I think in drinking and rioting”; those Indians needed his leadership. At the present reservation on the Missouri, moreover, the women and children might freeze during the winter, or a cholera epidemic might break out. The government should resettle them all on new lands before it was too late.

Kenekuk’s followers, in contrast, had few complaints. They realized that game was relatively scarce along the Missouri River, but it had been in Illinois as well. The present location possessed fertile soil, capable of producing abundant crops, and the band would depend largely on agriculture for subsistence. The rich pasture, moreover, could support large numbers of ponies and cattle, and there was enough wood for fuel and building purposes. For these reasons, Chief Jumping Fish turned to the Vermillion people and proclaimed: “I was the first to come and settle on these lands after the others had signed the treaty; I then thought that the minds of all had been settled. The land is good, and I like it.”

The council ended with the Prairie Band still dissatisfied. The next month, Ellsworth called the Kickapoos to Fort Leavenworth and told them that their present site was “most favorable”; and he warned Kishko and his followers to remain on their reservation. Kishko indignantly replied that he only wanted to hunt game along the Marais des Cygnes, not to stay there permanently; a short time later, however, the disgruntled chief and several of his followers left and eventually joined kinsmen who were living in Texas and Mexico. With them gone, the opposition leadership was temporarily weakened, and those who favored the present reserve were in the majority. Expressing the prevailing sentiment, Kenekuk and Jumping Fish declared that they were “willing to accept the land, and say no more about it.” On November 8 the gratified Ellsworth relayed the news to officials in Washington “that the Kickapoo dissatisfaction with their land is removed . . . the land is good and water communication most easy. The chiefs have accepted the land and are now anxious to have the things [farming tools and a gristmill] promised in the treaty.”

Commissioner Ellsworth’s assessment of the situation was far from accurate. When Kishko left, an Indian named Pashishi assumed the leadership of the remaining Prairie Kickapoos. “He is a savage in the full extent of that term,” the Jesuit Peter Verheagen said of Pashishi a few years later; “He paints his face black, with a little red around the eyes, and he glorifies in the fact that he has adopted no single article of the white man’s dress.” The chief and his Prairie Band followers were still angry that the officials had assigned them land that lacked sufficient timber and game, and they resented governmental interference in tribal affairs. Never enamored of white civilization, the Prairie people resisted governmental efforts to change their traditional ways, and they continually left the reserve to hunt and wander where they pleased. In April 1834, Agent Richard Cummins informed Superintendent Clark that the Indians remained dissatisfied and were still demanding to be relocated.

Over the next few years, Cummins found Kenekuk’s followers “well disposed” and easy to manage, but he had his hands full when it came to the Prairie Kickapoos. To his dismay, the Prairie tribesmen often squandered their treaty annuities on gambling and whiskey. Visiting the villages on May 21, 1835, the agent found the band in a “deplorably drunken condition.”
Making matters worse, Kenekuk’s sober followers had difficulty protecting women and children from the drunken revelers. The men were prevented from working the fields for fear of having their wives and daughters molested in their absence. Cummins decided to stay around to make sure that the situation did not deteriorate further, but to his disappointment, the debauchery continued. “During the night I could hear them whooping in every direction,” he related. In the morning he hurried off to Fort Leavenworth, seeking assistance.  

Cummins returned that afternoon, accompanied by a squad of troops. When they found and destroyed fifteen gallons of whiskey, the agent mistakenly believed that the crisis was over. “During the night if possible they were more noisy than they were the night before,” he lamented. Determined to teach the transgressors a lesson, he returned again to the fort.

On May 23, Capt. Matthew Duncan, with forty-five wellarmed cavalrmymen, stormed into the Prairie Kickapoo village. Pandemonium ensued, as drunken Indians scattered into the nearby brush with the troops in hot pursuit. Soldiers combed the village but were unable to find any whiskey. They then grabbed one frightened Indian and threatened to throw him into jail if he refused to uncover the contraband. He quickly revealed the hiding place, whereupon the soldiers destroyed fifty gallons of liquor and made two arrests. Afterward, Captain Duncan reported regretfully that one of those in custody was the brother of Pashishi, “the principal chief, who had the magnanimity to inform on him.”

Although Duncan assured his superiors that “whiskey will not again be introduced to the same extent” among the Prairie Kickapoos, who would “now devote themselves to the cultivation of the small crops which they have on hand,” the Indians continued their usual ways. Their behavior often shocked whites. When a steamboat docked near Fort Leavenworth, a passenger noted that the Prairie Kickapoos, who “instantly flooded” aboard, demanded and received tobacco and brandy. “They greeted the boss of the station affectionately,” the traveler related, “wringing his hand and calling him ‘papa, papa.’ They played cards with great enthusiasm and even passion, and remained on board very late that night; and three young Indian women remained on board all night! . . . and with the consent of the chief of the tribe.”

The Kickapoo Prophet considered such behavior reprehensible, and he admonished Pashishi’s people to “be wise and behave” and to stop “running after liquor.” Kenekuk realized that their rowdy actions and drunkenness threatened tribal unity and made both bands vulnerable to attacks by aggressive whites intent once more upon taking the Kickapoos’ lands and possessions. He threatened to invoke his supernatural powers to destroy Pashishi if the latter failed to reform; the prophet would “blow into a flame that would not be easily smothered, [and] perhaps cause his death.”

Pashishi paid little heed to Kenekuk’s bluff, however, and when word of the Seminoles’ triumph over American troops under Maj. Francis Dade in Florida reached the villages in the spring of 1836, the Prairie Band staged a boisterous “victory” dance that quickly got out of hand. Consuming several casks of whiskey, the celebrants began to rejoice that “the time was near at hand when the white people would all be subdued, and red men restored again to their country.” When drunken Indians rode through Kenekuk’s village, molesting women and
destroying property, the prophet rushed to Fort Leavenworth, seeking aid from the soldiers.

Outraged by the Indians’ celebration of an American defeat, the officials brought charges against Pashishi and his band. Calling the Indians together at the fort on June 13, 1836, Captain Duncan informed them that their behavior was an “insult” to the United States. After all the “favors” the federal government had done for the Kickapoos, Duncan scolded, they should “be grateful” and not hostile. “You have heard the charges against you,” he shouted. “What have you got to say to them? Are these things true or are they false?”

Pashishi was in an unrepentant mood; he refused to admit to any wrongdoing. “I deny it all,” he heatedly replied. “It is not true . . . we all deny that there is any truth in this account.” Launching into a tirade against William Clark, Pashishi charged that the superintendent had deceived him by forcing his people to live close to the prophet’s band.22 “Our red-headed father at St. Louis [Clark] picked out this place for us to live on, and our chiefs moved with us here. But now we are here we find a great deal of contention between our chiefs.” If Clark “had told me about the bad wind that is always blowing about the land at my village, he could never have persuaded me to move to it. He said that my father [Duncan] at this Garrison had very big eyes, and that he would see all my enemies, and defend me against them. But instead of this my father are watching me to see if I do anything wrong, . . . [and] he writes it down and sends it off to his General.”23

Pashishi admitted that the celebration had been held, but he wondered why the officials made such “a great deal of fuss” over a simple religious ceremony. “It is the right of all people to dance,” he pointed out, “the white as well as the red man dance. When we had this dance we did not expect any fuss about it.” He demanded that the agents and soldiers stop interfering in Kickapoo affairs, and he resented efforts to stop the flow of whiskey to the villages. “It was the white people who first made whiskey and brought it among us,” the chief insisted, “and as soon as we began to love it, you prohibited them and all others from bringing it among us.”

When Pashishi had finished speaking, it was the Kickapoo Prophet’s turn to vent his anger. But Kenekuk’s displeasure was with the Prairie Band, not with the federal government.

I know one thing, that is, if all my chiefs and young men would . . . be wise and behave themselves, they would never hear of the bad wind that Pashishi talks about.

All I wish is that my people will never again interfere with bad things. If they never had acted badly they would not now [have] been called to this place. And I do wish that when we are again called here it may be for some good purpose. I look up to my great father for advice, and whatever he wishes me to do, I will try to do it, and what he wants my young men to do I want them to do it also. I will not change my mind and will always look up to my great father. I would be glad to see all these things settled. My chiefs have taken you [Duncan] by the hand and I hope all will be well in the future. You will let our great father know about his red children.24

The council ended with Kenekuk and Pashishi still bickering over the consequences of the dance. But the officials decided not to pursue the matter further. “That there was something wrong about the dance I have no doubt,” Duncan wrote to Gen. Henry Atkinson, “but whether it was intended to celebrate the defeat of Major Dade and his party, I cannot pretend
to say.” It was widely known, he continued, that Kenekuk was a “religious enthusiast” who had frequently threatened to drive away the Prairie Kickapoos for refusing to adhere to his moral tenets. Because the Prairie Indians meant no harm to the white people, officials were content to forget the incident altogether.25

Kenekuk was determined to settle matters in his favor, and throughout the following years he held firm rein over his followers, admonishing them to live according to the Great Spirit’s commands. His people refrained from carousing and riotous behavior, and they adhered to a Protestant-like work ethic. Because the government was slow to provide adequate farm equipment, they used primitive tools to plow their fields; they planted corn, beans, and other crops, and sold their surpluses at the fort. Although they insisted on their communal ways and refused to consider individual land ownership, many whites acknowledged that the Indians were making progress. The Baptist missionary Isaac McCoy believed that “the Prophet’s influence has made them more industrious than they formerly were.” The Methodist minister Nathaniel M. Talbott conceded that the Kickapoos “raise more corn and try harder to live than most of the tribes.” A government-employed schoolteacher praised his young Kickapoo charges: “Their intellect is strong and lively, their memory quick and retentive, their morals good, their manners pleasant, and they are remarkably active and industrious.” A trader counted Kenekuk’s Potawatomi converts as “among the best Indians we have: industrious, sober, and most of them religious.”26

Agent Cummins glowingly reported that the Vermillion Band almost equaled whites in government, farming, and religion. On January 31, 1838, he wrote Superintendent Clark that Kenekuk’s people worked so hard that it was “astonishing” to observe the progress they had made since their arrival in Kansas. A few months later the agent told Clark that he had lived near Indians since he was a boy, “and I am sure I never knew any that made such proficiency in agricultural pursuits as the Kickapoos (Kennakuck’s band) has in the last four years, and they evince a determination of perseverance, they are at this time truly in the spirit of work, if they continue to progress . . . the next four years as rapidly as they have the last they will be ahead of any Indians in this section of the country.” That fall, Cummins informed Commissioner of Indian Affairs Carey A. Harris that Kenekuk’s followers “attend closely to their church discipline, and very few ever indulge in the use of ardent spirits.”27

While Kenekuk’s followers were prospering, many Prairie Kickapoos continued to suffer from alcoholism. Cummins pointed out that white people, apparently “void of all conscience,” traded whiskey to the Shawnees, Delawares, and Kickapoos. Unscrupulous border settlers plied the Indians with “ardent spirits” and then stole their horses, guns, and blankets. “Some freeze to death when drunk,” the agent reported in October 1839, and “several drunken Indians have been drowned in the Missouri River this season, aiming to cross when drunk.” He urged the passage of more stringent laws to suppress the many “dishonorable and dishonest” whiskey peddlers who “condescend to the meanest of acts.”28

Pashishi admitted that his people needed to change their ways, and he regretted that they had failed to get along with Kenekuk’s band. He agreed with the prophet that if “it was not for the difficulties growing out of drinking and stealing we could live together as brothers,
and not be ashamed to look at one another.”

The constant bickering between the two bands, however, eventually proved too much for the Prairie Indians, and by 1839 most of them had emigrated to Indian Territory, Texas, or Mexico. In that year, Pashishi and several Prairie Kickapoo families moved to a new location on the reservation, about twenty miles from Kenekuk’s village. With them gone, the Kickapoo Prophet held firm command and was free to continue the mission work that he had begun over twenty years earlier. But although he had outmaneuvered his Indian rivals, Kenekuk realized that even greater stumbling blocks lay in the path to true success for his people. Among these obstacles were the many missionaries who flocked to the Kickapoo village, hungry for converts to Christianity and to the ways of the white man.