

“Visiting Indians,” Nursing Fathers, and Anglo-American Empires in the Post–War of 1812  
Western Great Lakes

*By Elspeth Martini*

In the aftermath of the War of 1812, the western Great Lakes remained an Indigenous world where U.S. and British officials negotiated as “fathers.” This diplomatic kinship role diverged most obviously from Anglo-American constructions of gender and paternity when Native “children” requested liquor as “milk” from their fathers’ breasts. As the United States and Britain sought to establish bordering settler colonial regimes in the region, imperial officials attempted to substitute a political paternity in which they, as prohibitionist rather than nursing fathers, determined the future of supposedly childlike Native domestic subjects. But for nearly three decades, they failed. Britain’s wartime Native allies residing in U.S.-claimed territory defied U.S. dictates and traveled across the imperial divide to British posts, pressuring the British to honor their promise of ongoing fatherly generosity despite London policymakers’ efforts to stop provisioning “visiting Indians.” U.S. officials’ endeavors to end these visits also drew them toward a fatherhood more aligned with Indigenous expectations than their own authoritarian ambitions. But Anglo-American officials’ aspirations to an unambiguously masculine paternity portended a future in which Native nations would have to deal with British and American fathers who justified colonial rule by imposing on them a perpetual state of wardship.