On August 1, 1831, Michigan territorial governor Lewis Cass formally resigned to become U.S. secretary of war. President Andrew Jackson chose Cass to join his cabinet because the governor was a popular and capable administrator. Before leaving for Washington, DC, Cass was honored at a public dinner by the citizens of Detroit. One man declared that Cass had found the territory “weak from the devastation of war,” but had “left it strong.”

The claim was true. When Cass was appointed governor in 1813, the Michigan territory was in dismal shape. Detroit and Mackinac Island were the territory’s two main settlements, and both were occupied by the British during the War of 1812. Shortly after the war ended, Territorial Justice Augustus Woodward reported, “The desolation of this territory is beyond all conception.”

During his 18 years as governor, Cass worked hard to improve Michigan. In the summer of 1820, he explored the territory by canoe. The 4,200-mile trip gave Cass firsthand knowledge so that he could tell people in the East that Michigan was a good place to live.

Cass also negotiated treaties with Native Americans to obtain the land. He then persuaded...
Detroit was a bustling city when William James Bennett painted View of Detroit, 1836.

The federal government to survey the Michigan wilderness and prepare it for settlers. Cass also convinced the federal government to build roads.

By the time Cass left Michigan in 1831 the territory was booming.

During the 1830s, Michigan’s population grew faster than any other state or territory in the Union. In 1830 fewer than 32,000 people lived in Michigan. Ten years later, more than 212,000 people lived here.

Hundreds of ships arrived at Detroit throughout the summer months. A British visitor was impressed with the “perpetual bustle, variety, and animation” of all the boats she saw in the harbor. Boats brought merchandise and goods, but most carried passengers.

Many of those passengers were families who had come to Michigan to live.

After arriving in Detroit they moved inland. In 1837 one observer noted that a wagon filled with settlers left the city every five minutes. Many of these pioneers purchased land. In 1836 more than four million acres of public land was purchased in Michigan.

Michigan’s most important event of the 1830s was becoming a state. One man who worked hard to make that happen was Territorial Governor Stevens T. Mason.

Mason came to Michigan in 1830 when his father, John, was appointed territorial secretary. A year later, John resigned and President Andrew Jackson appointed Stevens as his replacement. When Michigan’s territorial governor died in 1834, the 22-year-old Mason became the territory’s acting governor.

The campaign to make the Michigan Territory a state began in 1835 when Governor Mason announced that Michigan had enough people to be a state. Nicknamed the “Boy Governor,” Mason soon discovered that the job would not be easy.

Both Michigan and Ohio claimed the mouth of the Maumee River, including
the site of the present-day city of Toledo. This disagreement led to the Toledo War in the summer of 1835. No one was killed in this war, but it caused President Jackson to fire Mason and appoint a new territorial governor.

In the fall of 1835, Michigan voters elected Mason governor of the state of Michigan. They also elected a state legislature and adopted a state constitution. However, in the eyes of the federal government, there was no “state” of Michigan.

For six months, Michigan’s request to become a state was debated by Congress. Some congressmen were upset with Michigan’s insistence that it be allowed to join the Union.

Others thought Michigan was being treated unfairly. Congressman John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts declared that never in the course of his life “had he known of a controversy in which all the right was so clear on one side and all the power so overwhelmingly on the other.”

In June 1836, Congress announced a compromise. It gave Toledo to Ohio and Michigan would receive the western Upper Peninsula. Many Michiganders were upset with this decision. One politician believed that the western Upper Peninsula was a “sterile region on the shores of Lake Superior, destined by soil and climate to remain forever a Wilderness.”

Michigan finally accepted the compromise. It had little choice. Ohio was politically stronger than Michigan and President Jackson supported the proposal. On January 26, 1837, Jackson signed the bill making Michigan the nation’s twenty-sixth state.

Michiganders were excited about becoming a state. They expressed that enthusiasm by building railroads, schools and towns. Michigan had come a long way since those dark days following the War of 1812.