FALLEN TIMBERS 1794

The US Army's first victory

JOHN F WINKLER

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

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INTRODUCTION

After the Ohio Indians destroyed the US Army at the battle of the Wabash in 1791, President George Washington recalled Maj. Gen. Anthony Wayne from retirement to lead a new army against them. As Wayne trained his soldiers and devised new tactics and weapons to use against the Indians, the obstacles he faced multiplied. Ahead of him, British and Spanish armies seemed likely to join the Indians. Behind him, a French army of American volunteers in Kentucky and a rebel force in western Pennsylvania threatened to cut his army off from the United States. Within his ranks, a treasonous conspiracy led by his principal subordinate endangered his command and his life.

Wayne at last led his new US Army against the Ohio Indians, who for 40 years had defeated British and American armies sent against them. Deep in the Ohio wilderness, they awaited the Americans at Fallen Timbers. There, on August 20, 1794, Wayne led the US Army to the first victory in its history and secured for the United States a future west of the Appalachian Mountains.

THE STRATEGIC SITUATION

The Ohio River frontier

In 1792, the first term of the first president of the United States, George Washington, was approaching its end. Nine years before Britain had recognized American independence in the Treaty of Paris. Four years before, the 13 American states had created a federal government by adopting the US Constitution. In 1791 and 1792, two new states, Vermont and Kentucky, had joined the original 13.

LEFT
The Ohio River today, as seen from Marietta, Ohio. (Photograph by Wendy S. Winkler)

RIGHT
This reconstructed British trading post and stockade is at the site of Peckuwe, now George Rogers Clark Memorial Park near Springfield, Ohio. (Author's photograph)

About 4,000,000 Americans lived within the boundary of the United States that had been established in the Treaty of Paris. In addition to the states, American territory included two federal territories. The Southwest Territory would become the state of Tennessee. The Northwest Territory lay between the Ohio River, the Mississippi River, and the Great Lakes.

Almost 30 years before, Americans had begun settling in the endless forests that lay between the Appalachian Mountains and the Ohio River. By 1792, about 175,000 lived on the Ohio River frontier. Their largest urban centers: Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania and Lexington, Washington, and Louisville in Kentucky had populations of only a few hundred.

Most Americans on the frontier lived on scattered homesteads, often many miles from their nearest neighbors. Hundreds of miles of rough roads or horse trails through the mountains lay between them and the remainder of the American population. From Philadelphia, the American federal capital, a journey to the frontier was longer than one to London or Paris.

For almost 20 years, the Americans on the frontier had been at war with the Ohio Indians. The fighting, which had commenced in 1774 in Lord Dunmore's War, had continued into the Revolutionary War, in which most of the Ohio Indians had fought as British allies. During the Revolutionary War, American militia forces led by Brig. Gen. George Rogers Clark had captured Vincennes in 1779, defeated the Ohio Indians at Peckuwe in 1780, and driven the Indians from southern Ohio in 1782. Because of Clark's victories, the Treaty of Paris had given the United States western boundaries defined by the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River.

After the Revolutionary War, Virginia had granted to the United States the area that would be named the Northwest Territory. There, the federal government had expected to compensate Revolutionary War veterans with land grants and to generate from land sales profits that would reduce the national debt. By 1792, however, only about 3,000 settlers had moved into the territory. The main urban center, three-year-old Cincinnati, had a population of about 400. Other centers included Marietta, founded in 1788; Gallipolis, settled in 1790; and Vincennes, an older French settlement that was becoming American.

Continuing raids by the Ohio Indians had discouraged settlement beyond the Ohio. The Treaties of Fort Stanwix in 1784, Fort Macintosh in 1785, Fort Finney in 1786, and Fort Harmar in 1789 all had failed to produce peace on the frontier. Military operations had also proved fruitless. In 1786, Clark had assembled an army of 3,000 Kentuckians to end permanently the raiding of the Ohio Indians. A mysterious mutiny, however, had terminated his campaign and his military career. Subsequent campaigns by other Kentucky leaders had failed to stop Indian raids.

In 1790, President Washington had decided to use the US Army to suppress the Ohio Indians. Created in 1784, this American federal army had replaced the Continental Army Washington had led during the Revolutionary War. A 1790 US Army campaign by Brig. Gen. Josiah Harmar had failed. A 1791 campaign by Maj. Gen. Arthur St. Clair had ended in disaster. On November 4, 1791, the Ohio Indians had destroyed most of the US Army at the battle of the Wabash.

In 1792, what remained of the US Army garrisoned eight forts on the frontier. Between Fort Franklin on the Allegheny River and Fort Knox on the Wabash River, Forts Fayette, Harmar, Washington, and Steuben guarded the 705-mile long Ohio River frontier from Pittsburgh to Louisville. Fort Hamilton

and Fort Jefferson, built beyond the Ohio River during St. Clair's campaign, were the army's most advanced outposts. State militia forts, such as Fort Randolph at the mouth of the Kanawha River and Scott's Blockhouse at the mouth of the Kentucky, defended critical geographical positions. Small settlers' fortresses, usually called forts or stations, served as refuges from Indian attacks.

The Indians who had defeated St. Clair were drawn from a population of perhaps 15,000, who lived in what is now Ohio, Indiana, southern Michigan, and southwestern Ontario. Like the Americans, the Indians had arrived in the area during the 18th century. For decades before 1701, war between the Iroquois of upstate New York, a confederacy of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca tribes, and Indians as far west as the Mississippi River had made the area too dangerous for habitation.

During the subsequent repopulation of the area, interactions among members of formerly hostile Indian tribes, and with French, British, and American traders, settlers, and adopted captives, left many individuals difficult to categorize. By 1792, almost a century of life in the area had blurred genetic distinctions and cultural identities. Most of the Ohio Indians were, by traditional rules of patrilineal and matrilineal descent or by adoption, members of the Delaware, Miami, Mingo, Ojibwe, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Shawnee, or Wyandot tribes, and of subgroups within the tribes. They varied, however, in the extent to which they followed traditional patterns of Indian life.

This portrait by an unknown artist depicts Sir Guy Carleton, Baron Dorchester. (Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, C-002833)

Most Indians lived at least part of the year in villages in which one tribe predominated. Because the Ohio Indian tribes seldom claimed exclusive settlement areas, villages of different tribes were often concentrated in close proximity. Around them spread fields and orchards, where women, children, and slaves labored. From the villages, trails led south through tens of thousands of square miles of uninhabited forest, where Indian men hunted, to American settlements, where they raided.

To the north and northeast lay British Canada. In 1791, Britain had reorganized its largest North American colony, Quebec, into two provinces, Lower and Upper Canada. Sir Guy Carleton, Baron Dorchester, the governor of Canada, ruled both. The commander of British forces in North America at the end of the Revolutionary War, he had supervised the evacuation of the last British units and the relocation of loyalist refugees to Canada. The United States, Dorchester believed, was too unstable to survive for long.

By 1792, the British had secured by Indian treaties almost all of the land on the northern shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. There, in Upper Canada, about 15,000 settlers, many loyalist refugees, lived in homesteads much like those of the Americans. The province had two urban centers in the primary areas of settlement. Newark, now Niagara-on-the Lake, Ontario, served as the capital of Upper Canada. Far to the west, in an area of about 4,000 settlers, rapidly growing Detroit had a population of more than 1,500.

Three British forts protected the areas where population was greatest: Forts Niagara and Erie, garrisoned by the British 5th Regiment of Foot, guarded the area near Newark. At Fort Lernoult, usually called Fort Detroit, the 24th Regiment of Foot defended the area around Detroit.

The forts and settlements of Upper Canada, unlike those of the Americans to the south, could be reached by water routes from the Atlantic Ocean. From Montreal, watercraft could travel as far as Newark and Fort Niagara. After a short portage around the Niagara Falls, soldiers, settlers, and supplies could move by ship on the Niagara River and Lake Erie.

The photograph, taken from the site of Navy Hall, shows Fort Niagara in the distance, just to the right of the mouth of the Niagara River on Lake Ontario. (Photograph by Dale Benington)

From Navy Hall, the capitol of Upper Canada in Newark, Lt. Col. John Graves Simcoe ruled the province as Dorchester's lieutenant governor. Simcoe had served during the Revolutionary War as commander of the Queen's Rangers, a loyalist irregular unit. Like Dorchester, he believed that a renewal of the Revolutionary War was inevitable.

Both the British and the Americans had grounds for commencing hostilities. The insolvent US government had failed to pay amounts owed to Britain under the Treaty of Paris. The British had failed to surrender land due the United States under the treaty. British Fort Niagara, Fort Detroit, and Fort Mackinac in northern Michigan, all lay within American territory.

The Legion of the United States

On March 5, 1792, Congress created a new US Army, which would be called the Legion of the United States. To command its more than 5,000 officers and men, Washington considered many prominent Revolutionary War officers, three of whom lived on the Ohio River frontier.

The first, Lt. Col. James Wilkinson, was a Pennsylvanian who had moved to Kentucky in 1784. In 1786, he had founded Frankfort, which would become the state capital in 1792. In 1787, he had won wide popularity in Kentucky by traveling to New Orleans and persuading the Spanish to open the Mississippi River briefly to American commerce. In 1791, he had secured for himself an appointment as commander of the US 2nd Infantry Regiment.

The second, Maj. Gen. Charles Scott, had served as Washington's chief of intelligence. A Virginian, he had moved to Kentucky in 1787. After losing two sons in Indian raids, he had by 1792 become a leading Kentucky militia leader.

The third, Brig. Gen. Rufus Putnam, had commanded two Massachusetts regiments at Saratoga and served as Washington's principal engineer. In 1788, he had organized a company of prominent New England Revolutionary War officers to purchase land in the Northwest Territory. In 1792, he led the settlers to the Northwest Territory's first American settlement, Marietta.

St. Clair's resignation left Wilkinson as the highest-ranking officer in the US Army. The ambitious Wilkinson used what remained of the army to defend the most advanced American forts. In January 1792 he led a relief convoy to Fort Jefferson. On February 1 he briefly returned with a party to the site of the battle of the Wabash. He then built a new fort halfway between Fort Hamilton and Fort Jefferson, which he named Fort St. Clair. Wilkinson's US Army soldiers, however, could do little beyond defend their forts. On February 11, the commandant of Fort Jefferson lost a son when he dared to go hunting in the nearby woods. On April 27, Indians killed his successor.

This sketch by an anonymous British officer depicts Detroit in 1794. (Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library)

Beyond the walls of the forts, war raged between the Indians and settlers. On March 15, Indians killed three at Newbury, a settlement near Marietta that then was abandoned. At about the same time, 100 Shawnee led by Black Hoof battled 37 Kentuckians led by the famous frontiersman Simon Kenton at Salt Lick. Three Indians and two of Kenton's men fell before the Kentuckians fled.

To his bitter disappointment, Wilkinson did not receive his expected appointment as commander of the Legion, but only a promotion to brigadier-general. Washington instead chose Maj. Gen. Anthony Wayne to lead the Legion. After assuming command on April 13, Wayne went west to Fort Fayette, recently built to replace the decayed Fort Pitt. There he planned to train his arriving soldiers before commencing a campaign in Ohio in 1793.

When Wayne reached Fort Fayette on June 14, he first addressed the situation on the frontier. On May 22, Indians had killed or captured 11 settlers near Reed's Station on the Allegheny River. On May 23, they had killed two and captured two others near Fort Randolph. In May and June, they had killed or captured several men near Marietta.

Wayne dispatched soldiers to garrison a series of new US Army strongholds to protect the settlers. On the Allegheny, Wayne sent men to Mead's Station, Kittanning, and Reed's Station. On the Ohio, soldiers arrived at Beaver Blockhouse, Mingo Bottom, Wheeling, and Gallipolis.

Wayne also sought advice from two famous frontiersman: William McMahon and Samuel Brady. McMahon had accepted a commission as a major in the Legion. Brady, after serving with Wayne during the Revolutionary War, had become a legendary figure fighting Indians on the Ohio frontier. About to be tortured to death in 1780, he had escaped. Pursued by hundreds of Indians, he then had avoided recapture by "Brady's Leap," a prodigious, 25ft vault across a gorge in what is now Kent, Ohio.

McMahon and Brady recommended recruiting a corps of experienced scouts to patrol the woods along the frontier. Brady agreed to lead a company on the upper Ohio River. The famous frontiersmen Samuel Davis and Cornelius Washburn joined the scouts who would guard the area from Cincinnati to Washington, Kentucky.

As Wayne organized the defense of the frontier, others who had received commissions spread out across the United States to recruit soldiers. Many of the best American officers of the Revolutionary War had fallen at Wabash,

LEFT
Wayne received word of his appointment at Waynesborough, his family home, now a museum in Paoli, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy of Historic Waynesborough)

RIGHT
Aged 18 in 1792, Cornelius Washburn later would become a "Mountain Man," famous for his explorations in the Rocky Mountains. In 1793, he and Samuel Davis built as a base for their operations this cabin, which survives in Georgetown, Ohio. (Brown County Dept. of Tourism)

including Wayne's friend Maj. Gen. Richard Butler. But distinguished veterans like Putnam, and Wayne's close friend Brig. Gen. Thomas Posey, left retirement to join the survivors.

Promising younger men also came forward: 28-year-old Capt. William Eaton recruited a company of "Green Mountain Boys" for the army in the new state of Vermont; 22-year-old William Clark, a younger brother of George Rogers Clark, received a commission as lieutenant; 24-year-old Hugh Brady, younger brother of Samuel Brady, became an ensign.

The Americans, however, hoped to end the frontier violence without another campaign. Washington asked the Mohawk leader Joseph Brant, who had led the anti-American Iroquois during the Revolutionary War, to come to Philadelphia. Brant, a Freemason who had translated the Gospel of Mark into Mohawk, agreed to convey to the Indians the American peace proposals. Colonel John Hardin, a leading Kentucky militia leader, volunteered to travel under a white flag to Indian villages on the Sandusky River. US Army Capt. Alexander Truman, after recovering from wounds suffered at Wabash, agreed to go to villages on the Maumee.

In June, Kentuckians and Indians met at a prisoner exchange arranged by French settlers at Vincennes. The adopted Miami William Wells, who had led an Indian unit at Wabash, attended to secure the release of his wife, the daughter of the Miami commander Little Turtle. There he met his brother, Capt. Samuel Wells, a survivor of Wabash, who persuaded him to return to Kentucky.

Some of the Indians at the prisoner exchange agreed to attend a peace council in Vincennes in September. Putnam, who offered to serve as the American negotiator, sought from Philadelphia instructions on acceptable peace terms. Wells agreed to serve as Putnam's interpreter.

Through the summer of 1792, however, war continued on the frontier. On June 25, 15 soldiers ventured from Fort Jefferson to gather food for horses. At what would be remembered as the Haycutters Massacre, 50 Indians killed or captured them all. At about the same time, Scott led almost 1,000 Kentucky horsemen across the Ohio. Reaching the Eel River undetected, they attacked Miami villages, where they killed several Indians and captured more than 20.

Across the frontier, Indian raiders attacked American settlements in July and August. Near Cincinnati and Gallipolis, Dunlap's Station, Covalt's Station, and Washington, Kentucky, they killed and scalped. At isolated