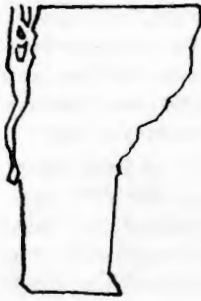


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Was Tippecanoe, a “battle which could have been avoided,” less decisive than popular tradition has regarded it?

George P. Peters' Version Of The Battle Of Tippecanoe (November 7, 1811)

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In 1840 Vermont cast her seven electoral votes for William Henry Harrison, the candidate whose “log cabin and hard cider” campaign skillfully and successfully substituted image for substance. Using every device at their disposal, Harrison’s managers hailed the Virginia-born gentleman and long-time public servant as the Whigs’ answer to Andrew Jackson, a symbol of frontier expansion and the aspirations of common folk everywhere. Of all the images of heroic simplicity that the Whigs, with Harrison’s approval, let loose upon the American electorate, none proved more popular or enduring than that of Harrison in the role of “Old Tippecanoe,” the courageous commander who, on November 7, 1811, decisively defeated the minions of Tecumseh and made the Old Northwest safe for white settlement. However, as his association with log cabins and hard cider, Harrison’s “victory” over the Indians was much misrepresented.

Harrison himself initiated the myth. As Governor of Indiana Territory, Harrison gained a reputation for adept negotiations in winning Indian land cessions, but by 1811 his career in dispossessing Indians was being challenged by an articulate and dynamic Shawnee leader. Backed by the religious message of his brother Tenskwatawa (The Prophet), Tecumseh was forging tribes into an alliance designed to prevent further white encroachments on Indian lands. While Harrison coaxed pliable Indians to sign treaties of cession, Tecumseh travelled widely proclaiming that no tribe could cede lands that were the common inheritance of all Indians.¹ By 1811 hundreds of disgruntled warriors from diverse tribes had assembled at Tecumseh’s headquarters, a village known as Prophets Town at the confluence of the Tippecanoe and Wabash rivers.

Harrison, and westerners in general, viewed Tecumseh's activities with increased concern. In the summer of 1811 Harrison determined that action was necessary. Knowing that Tecumseh would be away trying to secure support among southeastern tribes and that the less competent Tenskwatawa would be in charge of the village, Harrison (with only the most ambiguous approval from Washington) rounded up a force of regulars and militia. On September 26 he began an advance (illegal under the provisions of the 1795 Treaty of Greenville) through unceded Indian lands toward Prophets Town. Given the Indians' awareness of Harrison's clear intention to draw them into battle or at least to scatter them and destroy their village and crops, it was not surprising that a clash occurred.

A month after the battle Harrison declared that "the Indians have never sustained so severe a defeat, since their acquaintance with the white people."² In reality, however, this battle which could have been avoided was less decisive than Harrison wanted his superiors to believe. It was not Harrison but rather the tribal factionalism which Tecumseh everywhere encountered and the envelopment of his cause by the larger Anglo-American conflict which broke into open war the following year that defeated Tecumseh's dream of Indian unity and an Indian homeland. Harrison's "victory" did not even bring peace to the frontier. Deprived of their winter stores and scattered throughout Indiana Territory by Harrison, bands of Kickapoos, Shawnees, and other warriors increased their raids against white settlements. Most galling, perhaps, was that some of Harrison's own countrymen, criticizing his high casualty rate and on-site judgments, had the audacity to question the military glory which the Governor was heaping upon himself. Harrison responded to such criticism by expanding on the impressiveness of his victory. He was still doing so in 1840. The greatest significance of the Battle of Tippecanoe was that its constant retelling produced a President of the United States.

Harrison's report of November 18, 1811, to the Secretary of War remains the principal source for the details of the battle. Not unexpectedly, the report gives Harrison and his soldiers the benefit of all doubts. Occasionally, other eyewitness accounts (both white and Indian) come to light to provide details and a perspective lacking in the commander's communiqué. One such account has recently been unearthed in the collections of the Vermont Historical Society in a letter of January 17, 1812, from J.R. Peters of Troy, New York, to his uncle, James Whitelaw of Ryegate, from 1787 to 1804 the Surveyor-General of Vermont.³

Hurrying through current business news, the writer proceeds to quote a letter from his brother George P. Peters who was with Harrison on that historic November morning. George Peters was born in Wentworth, N.Y., in 1789, the son of General Absalom Peters of New Hampshire and the former Mary Rogers of Bradford,

Vermont, whose sister Susannah became James Whitelaw's second wife. The 40th cadet to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy, Peters served in the Old Northwest when Harrison conceived his Tippecanoe adventure. In that battle the young lieutenant was wounded. Later distinguishing himself in the War of 1812, Peters was apparently always available when Indian-fighting generals embarked on controversial but potentially self-glorifying missions. He accompanied Andrew Jackson's invasion of Spanish Florida ostensibly to punish renegade Seminoles. How Peters might have translated his military experiences into political support when his two famous commanders became national spokesmen for rival political philosophies will, alas, never be known. Marrying Lorraine Allen Hitchcock (a descendant of Ethan Allen) in 1814, Peters died childless at Fort Gadsen, Florida, in 1819.

Peters' account of the Battle of Tippecanoe is understandably preoccupied with his own situation. His letter does provide details not found elsewhere but does not contradict accepted versions of the battle. Its straightforward narrative makes clearer what Harrison probably had in mind when he wrote that Lieutenant Peters and five other officers "were placed in situations where they could render most service and encounter most danger, and those officers eminently distinguished themselves."⁴ Refreshingly, Peters makes no attempt to canonize Harrison or glorify the battle. Peters is his own hero.

. . . I have just rec'd a letter from George P. in substance as follows — he says after marching alternately through thick Woods & extensive Prairies from Vincennes 280 milés we reached the Prophets Town on the evening of 6 Nov. without having been molested. Our numbers 500 Militia & about 300 Regulars. One Company of which I had the honor to command during the expedition.⁵ The Commander approached the Town in Order of Battle while the Indians lined their breast Works of Logs thrown up for their defense & which completely surrounded the town — as we approached their lines 3 of their chiefs advanced to the Gov'r — asked his business and begged that their town might not be destroyed — a mutual agreement was finally made that neither party should disturb the other during the night & that they would hold a council the next day.* The

* The fact that the Indians initiated the attack shortly before dawn the following day has given rise to charges that the Indians violated this agreement and thus acted treacherously. Perhaps so, but such an argument ignores several important facts about Harrison's expedition and the Indians' reaction to it. Reluctant to authorize any action that might precipitate a frontier war, President Madison and his advisors seemingly contemplated no stronger move from Harrison than a "peaceful march" to the borders of Indian country. From the beginning, however, Harrison's intentions were hostile. Convinced that war was imminent and that a stroke of boldness would forestall or prevent it, he took it upon himself to prepare an expedition against Prophets Town during Tecumseh's absence. Three weeks after the march began, Harrison reported to the Secretary of War that the firing upon his sentries near Terre Haute by Shawnees who allegedly sought refuge in the Indian village called "for measures of a more energetic king" than Washington had in mind. The Governor's earlier correspondence shows that this was only a pretext for an offensive action already decided upon. Once Harrison crossed the Wabash he was trespassing

Gov'r then drew off his Army at the distance of a Mile & encamped for the night⁶ — the guards were mounted fires were made & *the men lay down to Sleep in fancied Security* — though as usual they slept on their Arms.⁷ The Night was one of the darkest I ever saw — the Wind blew it was cold and the Rain pour'd down in Torrents.⁸ Such was Our Situation. I commanded the front guard consisting of Militia posted about 200 Yards in front of the Camp (42 Privates & 4 Non Coms. officers) nothing was discovered till about half past 4 O'C'K on the morning of the 7th a Gun was fired by one of my Sentries on which the Indians immediately rose up within about 30 Yards from my line of Sentries and fired on my Guard as they were forming — Killed two & wounded Several & giving their war yells rushed forward with dreadful fury. My Guard ran (in spite of my exertions to detain them) some even leaving their Arms behind. Thus finding myself alone I seized a Rifle & Slipping behind a Tree waited the approach of the terrible enemy. I had Scarcely taken my post when an Indian flash'd his piece at me within the distance of a rod — his rifle missing fire perhaps saved my life.⁹ I then thought it time to discharge my Rifle at my antagonist & make Tracks for my own Safety. The balls & arrows were whistling past me as I ran to the Camp. The line of Militia which were formed to on the angle of the left flank in front & should have rec'd the attacks I found retreating before the Indians who rushed'd into the Center of the Camp. I pass'd said Militia & as soon as I reached my Company (which were encamp'd in the center of the rear line — 150 Yards from the Front line) I found them form'd. I wheeled them instantly & marched up to support the retreating Militia. Two other Comp'ys of the Regulars were order'd to in the same manner — we pass'd the confus'd retreat & met the Indians & charg'd on them Outside of the Camp & halted at the line — during this charge I rec'd a wound in my right thigh from a Rifle Ball which pass'd about 8 inches through my flesh — the bone & cords were not injured & I bound my Hchf. round it & continued with my company during the Battle — by this time the Indians had surrounded the Camp (which was nearly a hollow square) & kept up a continual fire about 2 hours which was return'd with redoubled warmth from the Camp. In front of my Comp'y the Savages were covered by a Small ravine at the distance of about 3 Rods which with the darkness of night in thick woods so completely so secured them that we had to direct our fire at the blaze of their guns only — thus without cessation of firing we kept our ground until day

on unceded Indian lands. He had become the aggressor, a violator of the Treaty of Greenville (1795) which protected the Indians from such invasions and allowed them to make reprisals. Indeed, a strict interpretation of the treaty probably required the government to assist the Prophet in resisting Harrison's advance. In 1810 Tecumseh had told Harrison to his face that if American troops should ever enter unceded lands "it will be productive of consequences."

Yet even though the Indians had moral and legal justification for attacking Harrison, it appears that the Prophet, cautioned by Tecumseh to avoid avoid trouble during his absence, was reluctant to initiate hostilities. While Harrison was moving up the right bank of the Wabash, an Indian delegation was proceeding down the left bank to halt his march through negotiation. (Harrison later reported that the Indians intended to attack him at various points on his march.) Even during the night of November 6-7, most historians agree, the Prophet advised against beginning hostilities until pressured by the Winnebagos into giving his consent. Like the question of the shot fired at Fort Sumter, the question of who was responsible for the initiation of fighting at Tippecanoe Creek must consider the context in which the battle was fought. If that is done, most of the blame must be accorded Harrison.

light & as soon as it dawned upon us we made a general Charge upon the enemy & forced them to retreat from their lurking places — they fled in every direction before the Bayonets of the regular Troops.¹⁰ The field of Battle now presented a gloomy Spectacle. 48 of our men lay dead & 130 groaned with their wounds — 2 were kill'd & 11 wounded in my Company.¹¹ Some of the bravest & best officers were laid in the dust & of necessity without ceremony¹² — The Prophets loss — 50 kill'd & about 100 wounded — they were about 700 strong arm'd with Rifles, Tomahawks, Bows and Warbonnets¹³ — we sacked their town on the 8th — found & destroyed much property this being the largest Indian Town which has been visited by Whites.¹⁴ The rest of the wound'd & myself came in wagons 70 miles & 200 in boats to this place [Vincennes] where I shall remain for the Winter &c. &c. — my wound's fast healing &c. &c. . . .

As beauty is often in the eye of the beholder, until recently the views of White-Indian relationships have been largely from the white vantage point. Only recently has this perspective begun to be modified.

NOTES

¹From time to time popular biographies of Tecumseh (such as Allan W. Eckert, *The Frontiersmen: A Narrative* [Boston, 1967], p. 444) state that the Shawnee leader visited Indians as far east as Vermont and Massachusetts. The usual date given for such a trip is 1802. Unfortunately, the editor has never found any documentation, in such narratives themselves or in any other place, for the alleged visit. If any reader knows of sources showing that Tecumseh did indeed visit Vermont, he would appreciate receiving the information.

²Harrison to William Eustis, Vincennes, December 4, 1811, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs* (Washington, 1834), I, 789.

³MSSO, No. 14, Vermont Historical Society.

⁴Harrison to William Eustis, Vincennes, November 18, 1811, *Ibid.*, p. 778.

⁵Peters' figures correspond with Harrison's own estimate that his strength was "very little above seven hundred non-commissioned officers and privates" not including two troops of dragoons (about 60 men). *Ibid. Other estimates range from "about nine hundred effective troops" (Benjamin Drake, Life of Tecumseh [Cincinnati, 1841], p. 148) to "about a thousand" (Glenn Tucker, Tecumseh: Vision of Glory [reissue; New York, 1973], p. 218). Peters was in command of "the late Captain Wentworth's company, serving with the 4th United States Infantry."*

⁶Strangely enough, Harrison allowed the Indians to choose this site; but equally puzzling, if the Indians had seriously contemplated an attack, is the reason they selected the place they did. One historian who has visited it describes it as "the nearest to being impregnable of any place in north-central Indiana." (Tucker, p. 223.) The two officers who first examined it reported that "the situation was excellent," but Harrison later wrote that upon inspection he had found "the ground . . . not altogether such as I could wish it." As a prospective battlefield the site offered advantages and disadvantages for both sides (*American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 777).

⁷Harrison, evidently feeling less secure than Peters, explained that "for a night attack, the order of encampment was the order of battle, and each man slept immediately opposite to his post in the line." *Ibid.* According to one campaign biography, Harrison told his officers that he was confident the Indians would attack him before morning and so "directed his men to lie down with their clothes on, and their arms by their sides." Was Harrison hoping for a fight? *The Life of Major-General William Henry Harrison* (Philadelphia, 1840), p. 29. Harrison, the General Patton of his day, arranged his camp in the shape of a triangle in the belief that he would then be following the ancient Greek maxim, "A safe leader is better than a bold one" (Tucker, pp. 222-223).

⁸Harrison reported the night was "dark and cloudy," and Benjamin Drake (p. 150) indicates that it began to "drizzle" after midnight. Peters appears to be the only observer on whom "torrents" of rain fell.

⁹The Prophet himself, never a proponent of war, urged Indians not to use firearms. When Harrison's troops ransacked Prophets Town on November 8 they discovered British muskets that had never even been unwrapped. A large number of the Indian attackers carried only bows and arrows (Tucker, p. 228).

¹⁰Peters' account of the battle, insofar as it describes the general course of events, substantially agrees with other reports. Harrison, however, while noting the failure of the guards to repulse the first attackers, wrote that even when the Indians first broke through his lines "the men were not wanting to themselves or to the occasion" (*American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 777). Peters presents a more vivid, and perhaps credible, picture of the confusion that undoubtedly first overtook Harrison's force — mainly composed of raw troops.

¹¹Harrison's final casualties were 62 killed and 126 wounded. *Ibid.*, p. 779.

¹²When the Indians later returned to the site of the battle they dug up the American bodies and scalped them. General Samuel Hopkins buried the remains at the beginning of the War of 1812, but once again the Indians dug them out. In 1821 they were again reburied, and in 1830 all the bones were placed in one large coffin on which brass nails proclaimed: "Rest, Warriors, Rest" (Tucker, p. 228).

¹³The number of warriors present and the casualties they suffered are difficult to determine, especially since they carried both dead and sounded comrades from the field. Harrison himself reported that "I am possessed of no data by which I can form a correct statement," although he went on to say, "I am convinced there were, at least, six hundred" (Harrison to Secretary of War, Vincennes, November 18, 1811, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, p. 778). It is possible, of course, that Harrison inflated the number of the Prophet's forces to make his own behavior more understandable. Some historians state that there were only 300 to 400 Indian warriors, and one of Tecumseh's followers later reported that the Indians planned to send 100 warriors charging into the camp to kill Harrison (Tucker, pp. 224, 226). Regarding the Prophet's casualties, Harrison was at first "convinced . . . that the Indians lost many more men than we did," a statement he later elaborated by reporting at least 51 dead and 11 wounded just among the Winnebago and Kickapoo contingents (Harrison to Secretary of War, November 18, 1811, and December 4, 1811, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 779, 780). Scholarly estimates of the Indian dead range from 25 to 40. An accurate determination of Indian losses will probably never be made.

¹⁴Harrison did not pursue his attackers, and they thus lived to fight another day. Although Harrison had not thrown up entrenchments before the battle, he did so after the Indians had scattered. When the Americans entered Prophets Town on November 8, they destroyed the recently harvested corn and burned the houses and furniture.

After learning of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga on October 17, 1777, Major John Bowater of the British Army stationed in New York City was very upset by the loss of his friends in Burgoyne's army and wrote in disgust to his patron Lord Denbigh,

"... I every day curse Columbus and all the discoverers of their Diabolical Country, which no Earthly Compensation can put me in Charity with."

—November 17, 1777, quoted in Marion Balderston and David Syrett, eds., *The Lost War* (Horizon Press: New York, 1975), p. 147