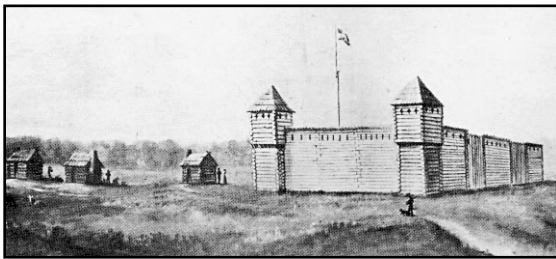


WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

The Battle of Fort Harrison



On Sept. 4, 1812 — 185 years ago today — a dramatic and desperate battle was waged at the site of the present Terre Haute Elks Club.

At stake was possession of Fort Harrison, the 150-foot square stockade erected in October 1811 by Indiana Territorial Gov. William Henry Harrison's army en route to the Tippecanoe battleground. In September

1812, a small company of the 7th U.S. Infantry and a few civilians, including women and children, were living there. Most — including fort commander Zachary Taylor — were plagued by fever, leaving only 15 soldiers well enough to share guard duty.

The War of 1812 was only 11 weeks old, but Great Britain — with Native American assistance — had already seized the American posts at Fort Mackinac, Fort Detroit and Fort Dearborn (now Chicago). Capturing Fort Harrison and Fort Wayne would give England total control over the Great Lakes area.

A coalition of Kickapoos, Weas, Shawnees, Potawatomis and Winnebagoes were the aggressors, orchestrated by the erratic Shawnee Prophet and his revered brother Tecumseh. Shortly before 11 p.m., Pakoisheecan — a Kickapoo chief known as “La Farine” — slyly ignited Fort Harrison's southwest blockhouse containing corn and combustible whiskey. On signal, more than 500 musket-bearing warriors converged upon the smoldering citadel and its 50 residents, attacking from the north and northeast.

Awakened amid gunfire and confusion, Capt. Taylor ordered the flames doused. Julia Lafferty Lambert, a petite woman, was lowered into the fort's arid well to fill gourds with water. Women and children molded rifle bullets. Roofs were removed to impede fire expansion. A temporary six-foot wall was raised to fortify the interior when the outside wall disintegrated.

Unable to overpower Taylor's garrison by dawn, the assailants resolved to starve the inhabitants, slaughtering horses and hogs and dispersing cattle and oxen. When Col. William Russell's 1200-man rescue infantry arrived Sept. 16 from Fort Knox in Vincennes, the occupants had not eaten for two days.

“Never did men act with more firmness and desperation,” Taylor asserted in a published report which made him a recognized national hero warranting Congressional honor. Amazingly, only three soldiers were killed during the 12-day siege. Historian Donald R. Hickey has singled out the episode as “the first American victory on land” during the War of 1812.

“The Fort of Two Presidents” endured as a key military post through 1818 before becoming an Indian agency. Besides Harrison and Taylor, other notables also administered there: Josiah Snelling, founder of Fort Snelling, Minn.; Williamson Dunn, who gave land to establish what is now Hanover College and donated land to Wabash College; and Hyacinth Lasselle, one of the founders of Terre Haute. Campaigns to make the site a national or state historic park ceased when the grounds were acquired by the Fort Harrison Country Club in 1919. Elks Lodge No. 86 purchased the land in 1937 and erected its clubhouse on the site of the old fort. The last of many pageants depicting the battle was produced for the Terre Haute Sesquicentennial in 1966.

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