
Transformation and Transition: American Indians and the War of 1812 in the Lower Great Lakes



John P. Bowes

Abstract

To better understand American Indian participation in the War of 1812 it is necessary to step away from the narrative constructed by men like President James Madison and General William Henry Harrison, who saw a dangerous British-Indian alliance wherever they turned. Similarly, it is helpful to avoid using the Treaty of Ghent as a narrative endpoint. Therefore, instead of seeing the War of 1812 as a singular event and its conclusion as an end point, this article places the conflict and its Indian participants within a broad chronological context. Such an extended framework helps to explain why Indians were divided in response to the war and to illustrate how it connected developments that came before and after. Rather than addressing some type of composite Indian story, the article focuses on the Wyandot communities in the Old Northwest, whose lives were intertwined with those of their native neighbors and whose histories reveal that while the War of 1812 was undoubtedly transformative, it is best viewed as a transition rather than as a conclusion.

On 1 June 1812, President James Madison sent what was termed a “war message” to Congress in which he detailed the current state of affairs with Great Britain. The message might best be described as an inventory of grievances. The list began with the British practice of impressment on the high seas and the legacy of the 1807 *Chesapeake* affair. President Madison also reminded Congress and the American people that the British continued to interfere with the neutral shipping of American

John P. Bowes is an Associate Professor of History at Eastern Kentucky University. Cambridge University Press published his first book, *Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West*, as a part of its series “Studies in North American Indian History.” His current research project, *Northern Indian Removal: An Unfamiliar History*, is under contract with University of Oklahoma Press.

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merchants. The British desire for a trading monopoly and the rejection of American sovereignty could not be tolerated much longer. Not until about two-thirds of the way into these remarks did Madison address American concerns regarding American Indians. "In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States," he wrote, "our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare just renewed by the savages on one of our extensive frontiers—a warfare which is known to spare neither age nor sex and to be distinguished by features peculiarly shocking to humanity." Madison referred, of course, to events of recent years that had culminated in the Battle of Tippecanoe in Indiana Territory only eight months before, in November 1811. "It is difficult to account for the activity and combinations which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons," the President commented, "without connecting their hostility with that influence and without recollecting the authenticated examples of such interpositions heretofore furnished by the officers and agents of that Government." In short, the nature of British involvement with American Indians in the Great Lakes region had long been suspect and made it necessary for the United States to take definitive action to protect its interests and its citizens in the Old Northwest. For many Americans, especially those living in Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana Territory, the final declaration of war could not come too soon.¹

Several events unfolded during the next two and a half years of conflict that seemingly supported conclusions reached about both an unholy British-Indian alliance and Indian savagery. Most notable were the roles played by Potawatomi warriors in the death of evacuees from Fort Dearborn near present-day Chicago in August 1812 and the attacks on wounded American soldiers left behind by the British after the disastrous defeat of General James Winchester's army on the River Raisin in southeastern Michigan in January 1813. These and other incidents made the acting governor of Indiana Territory, John Gibson, assert that, "the aborigines, our former neighbors and friends, have become our most inveterate foes. They have drawn the scalping knife and raised the tomahawk, and shouts of savage fury are heard at our thresholds." William Henry Harrison, commander of the Army of the Northwest, warned that, as of the spring of 1813, the Americans were "now at war with all the Indians, which formed the confederacy that was opposed by the army under General Wayne [in 1794], with the addition of Several numerous and warlike Tribes and the whole of this savage force directed by the skill of British officers and supported by the steady valour of British veterans." Everywhere he looked Harrison saw the combined strength of long-time enemies threatening American soldiers. But it was the actions of Tecumseh, the famous Shawnee warrior and political leader who tried to build a pan-Indian confederacy and then died while fighting Harrison's forces on the Thames River in October 1813, that Americans believed most validated their ideas about British instigation of Indian resistance.²

1. Madison's address in *Annals of Congress*, 1st sess., Appendix, 1713–1719.

2. Gibson quote from *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, ed. Logan Esarey, 2 vols. (1922; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1975), 2:346–49; Harrison quote from *ibid.*, 2:387–92.

As portrayed by Madison, Gibson, and Harrison, the War of 1812 was one more chapter of a decades-long struggle that pitted Americans against the British and their Indian allies. But their words promote a misleading narrative. Harrison understood that the actions of American Indians in the War of 1812 were very much connected to past developments, such as the formation of the confederacy that fought General Anthony Wayne and the Legion of the United States in 1794. He also recognized that Indian actions in the War of 1812 were not simply the upshot of the more recent activity of Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa, also known as the Prophet. Yet despite his knowledge of Indian affairs, Harrison, like his colleagues, failed to grasp the full extent of American Indian engagement with the war that erupted in the summer of 1812. The Indians who fought in that Anglo-American conflict did not act merely under the impact of outside influences. And for every Indian warrior who joined either the Americans or the British, there were many men, women, and children who became engulfed in a struggle that they did not want or care about. Therefore, to better understand Indian participation in the War of 1812 it is necessary to step away from the narrative constructed by men like Madison, Gibson, and Harrison.

Abandoning that narrative is only the first step, because the War of 1812 has often played a particular role in more recent historical scholarship as well. Because of its association with the Treaty of Ghent which brought the war to a close, the year 1815 has long provided a perfect end point for those who have studied American Indians in the Great Lakes region. Even a brief glimpse at book titles reveals the popularity of 1815 in this regard, as the War of 1812 has frequently been utilized as the final destination of narrative arcs covering various facets of Indian affairs and history. In his work on the spiritual foundations of Indian diplomacy and resistance in the 1700s and 1800s, Gregory Evans Dowd concludes that the “War of 1812 stands as pan-Indianism’s most thorough failure, its crushing defeat, its disappointing anti-climax.” Richard White’s notable study of the complex relationships in the Great Lakes region created by the interaction of Indian, French, and British participants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries similarly concludes with a discussion of that conflict. “The imperial contest over the *pays d’en haut* ended with the War of 1812,” he writes, “and politically the consequence of Indians faded.” The war, as Colin Calloway has also observed, was the end of an important era on many levels. It signaled the forced withdrawal of the British from a part of the continent in which they had long been interested. And the Treaty of Ghent “opened the way for the United States to bring the Indian tribes of the Great Lakes under her control by treaty and coercion.”³

3. Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 183; Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 517 (the French *pays d’en haut* or Upper Country referred to the Great Lakes region); Colin G. Calloway, “The End of an Era: British-Indian Relations in the Great Lakes Region after the War of 1812,” *Michigan Historical Review* 12, no. 2 (1986): 4; see also, Colin G. Calloway, *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations, 1783–1815* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

This is not to say that these scholars and others have viewed the War of 1812 as a simplistic event, however. The works of Alan Taylor and Timothy Willig offer additional examples of those who have acknowledged its complexity. For Taylor, the choices faced and the decisions made by Indian individuals and communities fit well within his larger argument framing the conflict as a civil war. For the Shawnees and Iroquois in particular, the war proved incredibly divisive as they struggled to choose sides. Taylor is also quick to assert that even though the war was more than just a conflict between the British and the Americans, it “reveals an ultimate American victory that secured continental predominance.” Willig focuses on the diversity of British-Indian affairs. More specifically, he examines the differences between the Indians of the southern Great Lakes as opposed to the Indians residing further north. In the process he finds that the relationship between the British and the Indians of the southern Great Lakes region was in trouble before the war began. The betrayal of the British at Fort Miamis at the time of the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 had left a bitter taste in the mouths of many Indian leaders, including Tecumseh. The subsequent Treaty of Greenville had also led to more than a decade of general peace between Indians of the southern Great Lakes and Americans, a truce that weakened British influence. In addition, the warfare of the 1790s and treaties signed in the early 1800s had proven destructive of tribal infrastructure. This meant that during the war, in spite of American beliefs to the contrary, the British had little to no control over the Indian warriors led by Tecumseh and other Indian allies gathered from the tribes living in Ohio, Indiana Territory, and southern Michigan. For the Indians of the southern Great Lakes, then, the war represented the last gasp of more than a century of a particular brand of British-Indian diplomacy.⁴

The works of the scholars we have discussed, though certainly more sophisticated and objective than the assertions of Madison, Gibson, Harrison, and other contemporary Americans, still utilize the war in a particular manner. And while it may be unfair to criticize their dependence on a common end point like 1815, since every narrative needs a finale, it is nevertheless useful to see what happens when that end point is shifted in the analysis. Instead of seeing the war as a singular event and its conclusion as an end point, this article places it within a broader chronological context. It will be argued here that employing a wider scope helps to explain why Indians were divided in response to the war and to illustrate how the war connected developments that came before and after the war. Rather than addressing some type of composite Indian story, the main focus

4. Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 437; Timothy D. Willig, *Restoring the Chain of Friendship: British Policy and the Indians of the Great Lakes, 1783–1815* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 243–48. The British had constructed Fort Miamis in northwestern Ohio in 1794 to act as a barrier against a suspected American attack on Detroit. At the time of the Battle of Fallen Timbers that same year between the Indian confederacy and American troops under Gen. Anthony Wayne, the Indians had appealed to the British at Fort Miamis to help them but the British had refused.

will be on the experiences of Wyandot communities in the Old Northwest, whose lives and actions were intertwined with those of their native neighbors and whose histories reveal that while the War of 1812 was undoubtedly transformative, it is best viewed as a transition rather than as a conclusion.

In a letter sent to the President and both houses of Congress in February of 1812, Walk-in-the-Water and seven other leading men of the Wyandot villages of Brownstown and Monguagon on the Detroit River in southern Michigan expressed their concerns over the possibility of losing the land on which their people resided. In contrast to their understanding of the Treaty of Greenville signed seventeen years earlier, it had reached their ears that the American government now asserted that the Wyandots had the right to live along the Detroit River for a period of only fifty years. The Indians wanted to make sure this did not happen. Toward the end of their petition, however, the Wyandots made a telling statement. "We are told that there is to be war between our Great Father and the British. We are also told," they continued, "that there has been a battle between Governor Harrison's army, and those Indians who are under the influence of the Shawnee prophet." Indeed, the mention of the Battle of Tippecanoe and the possibility of war came across as afterthoughts compared to the larger issue at hand, which was the concern over their lands.⁵

The Battle of Tippecanoe did not appear to loom large for the Wyandot Indians living along the Detroit River in 1811. It was not because the Wyandots had no interest in the event nor was it because they had had no contact with the Shawnee Prophet and his teachings. Quite to the contrary, a prominent Wyandot chief and several other Wyandots were killed during the course of the witch hunts inspired by Tenskwawata's movement. And Walk-in-the-Water along with other Wyandots from the Detroit River villages would initially side with the British in the coming conflict. However, the turmoil created by the rise and fall of the Shawnee Prophet as well as the War of 1812 was enveloped by a more enduring transformative crisis within the larger Wyandot community that spanned more than three decades, from the 1790s to the 1820s and beyond. As a result, it would be both difficult and misleading to focus on the impact of the War of 1812 on the Wyandots when it was only one event within a more extensive sequence of changes and challenges.

One way to examine the history of the Wyandots from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century is to address three basic and overlapping phases that signaled important transitions in their politics, diplomacy, and culture. While these phases are by no means definitive, they offer a framework which enables us to situate events like the War of 1812 in a more substantial context. The first of these episodes begins during the militant resistance of the Northwest Indian Confederacy and is tied to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794—specifically that battle's impact on the very foundations of Wyandot leadership. The second stage is not marked so clearly by a single event. Instead, it is the manner in which the

5. "Address of Wyandot," in *American State Papers, Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States Class II, Indian Affairs*, ed. Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke, 2 vols. (Washington, 1832), 2:795–96 (hereafter *ASPLA*).

different Wyandot leaders and villages dealt with American and British interests from the Treaty of Greenville to the end of the War of 1812. The third and final phase commenced in a critical three-year period following the war. Between 1816 and 1818 the Wyandots lost two prominent headmen, welcomed the Methodist missionary John Stewart, and signed a treaty with the United States that set the stage for multiple land cessions in the decades that followed.

Wyandot Indians were integral to the Indian confederacy based on the Auglaize River in northwestern Ohio in the decades after the American Revolution. This was particularly true of the Wyandots living in the region in villages at both the lower and upper reaches of the Sandusky River. The central location of these Sandusky River settlements had long made them notable during times of peace and war. Indeed, many of the records of Wyandot settlements at Sandusky in the mid- to late-eighteenth century come through the reports of captives. For example, Colonel James Smith, a captive of the Delaware Indians in the mid-1750s during the Seven Years' War, passed through Lower Sandusky with his captors. He spoke of the rich soil of the flood plains near the Wyandot town of Sunyendean, located just south of the mouth of the Sandusky River. Less than a decade later an Englishman named John Montresor described the Wyandot villages near present-day Upper Sandusky. He noted that these Indians lived in a bountiful place that was "covered with Game." In addition, the land was "extremely rich, interspersed near the borders of the Rivers and lake with large tracts of meadow." This location along the Sandusky River allowed the Wyandots to lead a plentiful existence and also gave them access to the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. They were located in a very central position. This, along with the designation of the Wyandots as Uncles and keepers of the council fire of the Northwest Indian confederacy, explain why the Upper Sandusky region was important to Indians throughout the Old Northwest in the late eighteenth century. Sandusky served as the seat of the confederacy of western Indians that fought to maintain resistance to the new United States at the end of the American Revolution. And while the settlements along the Auglaize River became the center of the militant resistance in the 1790s, Lower Sandusky became the intended site of diplomatic negotiations with American commissioners in 1793.⁶

A Wyandot chief named Tarhe, who resided at Lower Sandusky, was a dominant force among the Wyandots from the late 1780s until his death in 1816. He became the sachem among the Ohio Wyandots in 1788 and was a member of the Porcupine clan. His ascendancy indicated a shift in the locus of Wyandot

6. Montresor's journal quoted in "Old Fort Sandoski of 1745 and 'Sandusky County,'" by Lucy Elliot Keeler, *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society Publications* 17 (October 1908): 390-95; Colonel James Smith, *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life of Colonel James Smith . . .* (Lexington, Ky., 1799), 44; "Transactions with Indians at Sandusky, August 26 to September 8, 1783," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* 20 (1892): 174-83 (hereafter *MPHC*); Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 84; "The British Indian Department and the Abortive Treaty of Lower Sandusky, 1793," *Ohio Historical Quarterly* 70 (July 1961): 189-213.

leadership. Half King, whose death in 1788 brought Tarhe to the fore, had been a member of the Deer clan. This clan, alone among the twelve traditional Wyandot clans, had exercised the hereditary right to name the next sachem. However, Tarhe received that honor because of his ability and because no member of the Deer clan appeared ready and able to assume this position in 1788. It was after the Battle of Fallen Timbers that the situation changed dramatically. William Henry Harrison reported that only one Wyandot chief who fought in the battle survived. That man was Tarhe. According to interviews with Wyandot elders in the late nineteenth century, after the battle, during which the Deer clan in particular lost a significant number of warriors, the Porcupine clan pushed to remove the ancient right to name the sachem from the Deer clan's purview.⁷



Tarhe [in William Alexander Taylor, *Centennial History of Columbus and Franklin County, Ohio* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing, 1909), 71]

This effort had two distinct consequences. First, it laid the foundation for ongoing debates over the validity of such a shift, as the Deer clan continued to protest its loss of status into the late nineteenth century. Second, the movement was an initial displacement of the Wyandot leadership that would only grow more controversial in the years that followed. And this fracture came at a crucial time for the Wyandots living in the Ohio country and the vicinity of Detroit. Although they were no strangers to the negotiations made necessary by the presence of Euroamerican powers, from the Battle of Fallen Timbers to the War of 1812, the Wyandots had to navigate British and American disputes that dominated the region.

The council at Greenville indicates where these relationships stood in 1795. General Anthony Wayne used that council to hammer away at the British mistreatment of their Indian allies. He read aloud the treaty of 1783 which brought the American Revolution to an end in order to highlight the betrayal of the Indian cause by the British and then pointed out how the continued British presence in the lands ceded to the Americans showed their infidelity to treaties in general. He finished off the British with a flourish by then reading the text of Jay's Treaty of 1794 in which the British once again agreed to specific boundaries

7. "Monuments to Historical Indian Chiefs," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society Publications* 9 (July 1900–April 1901): 5-6; William Elsey Connelley, *Wyandot Folk-Lore* (Topeka: Crane, 1899), 29-31.



between Canada and the United States. This treaty council marked a substantial turning point for Tarhe and the Ohio Wyandots. “I view you lying in a gore of blood,” the Wyandot sachem said to Wayne, “it is me, an Indian, who has caused it. Our tomahawk yet remains in your head; the English gave it to me to place it there.” Tarhe then declared the Wyandots’ intention to bury the tomahawk deep in the ground and cultivate a strong relationship with the United States. And on the final day of the treaty council Tarhe made a more official declaration of his intentions. “You see we all now acknowledge you to be our father,” he declared, “I take you by the hand, which I offer as a pledge of our sincerity, and of our happiness in becoming your children.”⁸

Yet Tarhe did not speak for all Wyandots, and while there is no doubt that a focus solely on prominent men is an imperfect way to describe the attitudes of a larger population, the decisions made by several Wyandot leaders provide insights into the movements and attitudes of different segments of the Wyandot people. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Wyandot villages could be found in several different places in the region. On the Canadian side of the border, approximately two hundred Wyandots lived on a reservation between Sandwich and Amherstburg on nearly 24,000 acres set aside by the British government in

8. All quotes from council proceedings in *ASPLA*, 1:570–80.

1790. Amherstburg, some 16 miles south of Detroit, was the site of a British fort. Another 1,300 Wyandots lived in the nearby villages of Brownstown and Monguagon along the Detroit River on the opposite bank from Fort Amherstburg. Finally, approximately 1,500 Wyandots resided in Ohio, primarily in the villages at Upper and Lower Sandusky. Though related and familiar to each other, the Wyandots at each location acted on their particular interests and not necessarily according to the wishes of Tarhe.⁹

Throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century, both British and American officials, along with the Shawnee Prophet and his brother Tecumseh, attempted to keep track of shifting Wyandot affiliations and alliances. The increasing influence of Tenskwatawa among Indians of the southern Great Lakes following his spiritual revelations in 1805 was of particular concern to Harrison. The territorial governor made it a point to remain informed about the Indians who joined the Prophet's settlement, and as the numbers grew, Harrison commented that, "the circumstances in this affair which has surprised me most is the defection of the Hurons or Wyandots." He further reported that the Wyandots had recently asserted "that they looked upon everything that had been done since the Treaty of Greenville between the white people and Indians as good for nothing and that they would unite their exertions to the Prophet's" to gather all the Indians together and resist American expansion. Such talk was a matter for concern, not only because it meant Tarhe's friendly assertions did not encompass all Wyandots, but also because it came from the tribe who retained the wampum belt that symbolized the Northwest Indian Confederacy, now centered at Brownstown.¹⁰

But Harrison's anxiety about what he viewed as a Wyandot betrayal was not grounded completely in reality. Like so many American Indian communities of the time, including the Shawnees, the Wyandots did not hold a unified opinion about the Shawnee Prophet. Between-the-Logs, a Sandusky Wyandot in his mid-twenties, who just a few years earlier had traveled to New York to find out more about the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake, spent most of 1807 with Tenskwatawa to find out about his teachings. His experience led him to the conclusion that the Wyandots should not join this movement and should stay true to the Americans. That was a sentiment shared by Tarhe, who continued to advocate peace and adherence to the Treaty of Greenville. But not all the Wyandots living in the Sandusky villages shared these sentiments. Most notably, a warrior chief named

9. Sallie Cotter Andrews, "Timeline of Wyandot History," found on Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma website at <http://www.wyandotte-nation.org/culture/history/timeline/1534-1842/> (accessed 28 October 2011).

10. For more information about the Shawnee Prophet and his movement, see R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Harrison to Secretary of War, 14 June 1810, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 1:423–24. Harrison's reference to the Wyandots as Hurons was not misplaced. The Wyandot people were a remnant of the Huron confederacy that had once resided on the north shore of Lake Ontario and had been obliged to migrate further west with the defeat of their French allies in the Seven Years' War.

Roundhead led a group of Wyandots to join the Prophet's entourage at Greenville, Ohio in May 1807. Roundhead would become one of the more well-known supporters of the Prophet, even joining Tecumseh and Bluejacket on a diplomatic mission to Governor of Ohio Thomas Kirker in September of the same year. Even as William Henry Harrison and the United States government continued to gain sizable land cessions through agreements like the Treaty of Fort Wayne in 1809, other Wyandots from Sandusky began to question the logic of Tarhe's loyalty to the Americans. In June 1810, followers of the Shawnee Prophet executed Leatherlips, another Wyandot chief who supported an American alliance and had been accused of witchcraft. Shortly thereafter a party of Sandusky Wyandots left the Ohio villages to join the Prophet's followers in Indiana.¹¹

This scattered response to Tenskwatawa meant that there were relatively few Wyandots among the Indians at Prophetstown when the Battle of Tippecanoe occurred in November 1811. In the days after the battle, however, the Shawnee Prophet and his family found refuge at a small Wyandot settlement on the western banks of the Wabash River not far from the battle site. Outside of this small settlement of twelve to fifteen individuals, however, most Wyandots had apparently gathered in and around the Brownstown and Monguagon settlements south of Detroit. In contrast to the aftermath of Fallen Timbers, the Wyandots had not suffered substantial losses.¹²

But in the months that followed Harrison's victory at Tippecanoe, the Wyandots and their neighbors struggled to figure out where matters stood and whether or not this would be the end or just the beginning of violence in the region. Two Kickapoo chiefs told Harrison that, "all the Tribes who lost warriors in the late action attribute their misfortune to the Prophet alone." In fact, Tenskwatawa ended up at the Wyandot settlement because the Kickapoos had already turned him away. This division within a once strong movement became clear in the late spring of 1812 when representatives from twelve different tribes met in council at the confluence of the Mississinewa and Wabash rivers near present-day Peru, Indiana. The Wyandot delegates from Brownstown, who functioned as the elder brothers at the council, opened the discussion by advocating an end to all bloodshed. And they noted that the British had "advised all the red people to be quiet and not meddle in quarrels that may take place between the white people." The Wyandots were aware that isolated outbreaks of Indian violence had exacerbated already tense relations in the region. In response, the Potawatomi delegates at Mississinewa claimed that the Potawatomi warriors accused of

11. Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 59-61; Harrison to Secretary of War, 14 June 1810, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 1:422-30; Harrison to Secretary of War, 18 July 1810, in *ibid.*, 2:446-47. Bluejacket had been the preeminent Shawnee war chief before the advent of Tecumseh and had led the victorious Indian contingent at the Battle of the Wabash (St. Clair's Defeat) in 1791.

12. Harrison to Secretary of War, 4 December 1811, in Esarey, *Messages and Papers*, 1:656-58; Map 21 in Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*, 105-6.

killing a white family in northern Indiana Territory were “foolish young men” who had “ceased to listen to the voice of their chiefs, and followed the counsel of the Shawanoe, that pretended to be a prophet.” Tenskwatawa had clearly lost favor. Tecumseh, on the other hand, remained an influential figure. Yet even his statements revealed the cracks within the confederacy. “It has constantly been our misfortune to have our views misrepresented by our white brethren,” he began. Those misrepresentations were the work of “pretended chiefs of the Potawatomes and others, that have been in the habit of selling land to the white people that did not belong to them.” Before the heated rhetoric could escalate any further, the Delaware delegates, viewed as the respected grandfathers by all present, stepped into the fray. They spoke for peace, making clear that from their perspective, “both the red and white people had felt the bad effect of his [the Shawnee Prophet’s] counsels.” The Delawares, along with the Wyandots in attendance, believed the most important task at hand was to keep the peace with the Americans.¹³

But avoiding violence was neither a simple nor necessarily a desired approach for the Indian communities of the southern Great Lakes in 1812. Events of the previous thirty years, especially the rapid western expansion of the United States in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, led some Indians in the Old Northwest to turn to the British in spite of their misgivings. A Wyandot named Isidore Chaine from Brownstown reportedly informed British officials that all the Indians “are aware of the desire the Americans have of destroying the Red people and taking their country from them,” and Tecumseh clearly expected the Americans to use the impending war as a pretext for moving against Indian villages. In a speech directed to British Indian agent Matthew Elliott one month after the council at Mississinewa, the Shawnee leader stated that he and his people would welcome the “Big Knives” if they came in peace. If any Indians were hurt by the Americans, then the Shawnees would “defend themselves like men.” And if word reached Tecumseh that an Indian had been killed by American soldiers he would “immediately send to all the nations on or towards the Mississippi, and all this Island will rise as one man.” Rather than waiting to see what the Americans might do, the renowned Shawnee traveled to Fort Amherstburg in late June and declared his support for the British.¹⁴

Even without the troubled history recounted here, geography alone made it nearly impossible to stay out of a war in which British and American officials desperately wanted to know which flag the Indians would follow in the battles to come. A delegation of Shawnees, Winnebagoes, and Kickapoos visited Fort Harrison on the Wabash River in mid-June to declare their friendship to the American cause. General Harrison refused to recognize their offer as sincere, not

13. Harrison to Secretary of War, 4 December 1811, in Esarey, *Messages and Papers*, 1:656–58; William Henry Harrison to Secretary of War, 14 April 1812, in *ibid.*, 2:32–34; Speeches of Indians at Miassassinway, 15 May 1812, in *ibid.*, 2:50–53.

14. Chaine quote in [British Indian agent] William Claus to [British Gen. Isaac] Brock, 16 June 1812, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 2:61–62; Tecumseh to Elliott, 8 June 1812, in *ibid.*, 2:60–61; William Wells to Harrison, 22 July 1812, in *ibid.*, 76–77.

only because he believed they only wanted food, but also because they allegedly had allowed a war party of nearly six hundred men to pass by their villages unmolested. Overall, Harrison chose to treat every Indian with skepticism. He may have best explained his position in a letter describing American military expeditions against Potawatomi and Miami villages in northern Indiana in the fall of 1812. "Many of the chiefs are no doubt desirous of preserving their friendly relations with us," he wrote, "but as they are unable to control the licentious part of their tribe it is impossible to discriminate." Villages must burn, corn must be destroyed, and the Indians must be taught the folly of opposing the United States. Under the circumstances, Potawatomis, Miamis, Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, and other Native inhabitants of this war zone could not afford to be passively neutral or indifferent to events around them. Men like Harrison would not allow it.¹⁵

The Wyandot residents of the Brownstown and Monguagon settlements knew that neutrality would be impossible to maintain. But it did not mean their alliances would remain constant. Roundhead and Walk-in-the-Water were two of the prominent Wyandot leaders residing in these southern Michigan villages. Splitlog led the Amherstburg village on the British side of the Detroit River. Though all three men began the war as allies of the British, the changing circumstances of the war brought changes in allegiance. In the late summer of 1813, Tarhe and two other Wyandots from the Sandusky villages traveled to Brownstown in an attempt to persuade their relatives to abandon the British. At a council held in the presence of British officials, the Wyandots present rejected this effort. Roundhead stayed committed to the British and later died while scouting Harrison's army in the fall of 1813. Walk-in-the-Water, however, did not share Roundhead's commitment. He sent a secret message to Harrison stating that he had decided not to fight the Americans. Instead, when Harrison's army advanced, Walk-in-the-Water planned "to seize the Huron church at Sandwich with all the warriors he could engage to assist him." After Harrison successfully defeated the British at the Battle of the Thames, Walk-in-the-Water was one of the signatories of the armistice the American general signed with the several Indian tribes in which all agreed to a "suspension of hostilities" as of October 14, 1813. Splitlog stayed faithful to both the British and the Prophet. In October 1814, a year after Tecumseh's death at the Battle of the Thames and the armistice signed by Walk-in-the-Water, Splitlog led a small force of the Shawnee Prophet's followers into battle against the Americans along the Grand River even as the Prophet himself stayed out of the fray.¹⁶

As illustrated in part by the actions of Roundhead, Walk-in-the-Water, and Splitlog, there was not a singular Wyandot experience in the War of 1812. Those Wyandots living along the Detroit River who did not support their headmen found

15. Harrison to Secretary of War, 7 July 1812, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 2:66–67; Harrison to Secretary of War, 21 September 1812, in *ibid.*, 2:143–47.

16. Harrison to Secretary of War, 8 September 1813, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 2:537–39; Harrison to Secretary of War, 10 October 1813, in *ibid.*, 2:573–75; Armistice with the Indians, 14 October 1813, in *ibid.*, 2:577–79; Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 137–40, 148–49.

themselves trapped in the middle of a difficult situation. This was particularly true for the family of William Walker, Sr. The forty-two-year-old Walker had lived among the Wyandots for over thirty years. Captured by Delaware hunters in Virginia in 1781, Walker's adoption by the Wyandots was facilitated by Adam Brown, another white captive. William learned the language and married a Wyandot woman named Catherine Rankin. The young couple settled just south of Brownstown in 1790 where William turned his attention to farming and raising a family. At the time war was declared the Walkers had a sizeable farm and seven children.¹⁷

As of 1812 William Walker, Sr. had also established a reputation as a dependable interpreter. According to his son, William had Catherine to thank for this, because she was fluent in several Indian languages and a significant asset for Indian diplomacy in the region as well. William became a valuable mediator and American officials appointed him as a Special Indian Agent at the outbreak of war with the specific task of keeping the Wyandots at Brownstown and Monguagon neutral. The problem Walker faced was not necessarily the intractability of his people, but the simple fact that their settlements rested just across the river from the village of Malden and Fort Amherstburg, the centers of British power in the region. His troubles were compounded in July 1812 when the British attacked the Wyandot settlements under the pretext of capturing boats filled with supplies for the American army. Although Walker and other Wyandots initially repulsed the British attack, they could not defeat the force that finally arrived. The British soldiers destroyed Walker's farm and took his family prisoner. By October, William, Catherine, and their seven children were captives in Detroit, now in British hands after General William Hull's infamous surrender the month before.¹⁸

The experiences of the Walkers over the next several months illustrated the difficulties confronting their family in particular and the Wyandots in general. William was initially placed in a prison cell. His oldest son, John, who had been wounded while defending Brownstown, was supposed to travel by ship to Quebec with other American prisoners. Both men avoided their fates by breaking free from their respective imprisonments, but neither managed to escape unscathed to American lines. John fled Detroit in early October and headed to Fort Defiance in northwestern Ohio only to be accosted by American soldiers who assumed the young Wyandot was a British spy. They then placed John in strict confinement. It took a few more months for William to manage his escape. Like his son, he headed toward the American positions at Fort Defiance. He had no identification papers on his person and therefore suffered the same fate as John. Their troubles ended only when respected citizens verified their identities and thus validated their loyalty to the United States. For the remaining Walkers, freedom had to

17. William E. Connelley, ed., "The Provisional Government of Nebraska Territory and the Journals of William Walker," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, 2nd series, 3 (1899): 5–14; "Notes on Wyandot and Gen. William Walker," 11U13, Draper Manuscripts, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter Draper MS); Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*, 101–6.

18. "Notes on Wyandot and Gen. William Walker," 11U13–14(1–2), Draper MS.

wait until the fall of 1813. Catherine and the six children were released when the British evacuated Detroit. But they could not return to Brownstown. Their home had been destroyed and they instead moved to the Wyandot settlements at Upper Sandusky in northern Ohio, where they lived for the next three decades.¹⁹

Yet the Walkers' journey south did not free them from the war. Although the Wyandot, Delaware, Seneca, Mohawk, and Munsee villages on the Sandusky River were a fair distance from the Detroit-Malden corridor, their inhabitants lived in an area contested by British and American military forces throughout 1813. This meant that they lived under very watchful eyes. William Henry Harrison warned his superiors in the early spring of that year that the friendship of the nearly three hundred Indian warriors living in the vicinity of Upper Sandusky was "by no means unequivocal." All it would take is the appearance of a British army with Indian allies for "nine-tenths" of the Delaware, Wyandot, and Munsee warriors to abandon their trusting American allies. Yet two failed attempts by the British to take Fort Meigs on the Maumee River in May and July 1813 seemed to shift the war in the Americans' favor even as it did not eliminate suspicions. Harrison found himself wondering what to do with the sixty Indians who offered their services to him that summer. His hesitation was in part because their "professions of the greater part are I fear hollow and made under the belief of the prosperous state of our affairs." Indian agent John Johnston had more faith in such offers and reported that approximately four hundred Wyandot, Mingo, Shawnee, and Delaware Indians were prepared "to continue with the army during the campaign" that would ultimately take them into Canada.²⁰

Just as the War of 1812 was not simply about warriors on the field of battle, the Walkers were not the only people who sought refuge in the Sandusky region during the conflict. Hundreds of Americans fled to the relative safety of Lower Sandusky from their homes on the shores of Lake Erie as the war began. They received permission from the officer commanding at Fort Stephenson to settle and improve their new lands, a necessary step because it was Wyandot territory. According to Thomas L. Hawkins, a former Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, this procedure "was by each succeeding officer sanctioned and each Refugee found protection until the Reservation became thickly populated." American settlers were not the only refugees. Many Indians also began to fear that their location might be susceptible to attack by the British and their allies. Tarhe turned to

19. The details of John Walker's escape are provided by his younger brother in a series of exchanges with Lyman Draper. Less is known about the manner in which William Walker broke free. See "Notes on Wyandot and Gen. William Walker," 11U14(3-8), 72-73, Draper MS; Benjamin Stickney to William Henry Harrison, 7 April 1813, as quoted in *Letterbook of the Indian Agency at Fort Wayne, 1809-1815*, ed. Gayle Thornbrough (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1961), 195 note 89.

20. Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*, 106-7, 115-18; Harrison to Secretary of War, 27 March 1813, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 2:400-4; Harrison to Secretary of War, 23 July 1813, in *ibid.*, 2:494-95; John Johnston to Secretary of War, 3 August 1813, in *ibid.*, 2:509.

American officials in the expectation that they would help protect those Indians who remained friendly. "I hope you now will listen to me," he stated, and "send on to me men to build a garrison large enough to hold the Windots Seneca and [illegible] at my town upper Sandusky." The situation had only worsened once General Hull surrendered Detroit in August 1812. According to the Moravian missionary Abraham Luckenbach, the "Wyandottes in the Lower Sandusky fled to the Upper Sandusky, as did also the Senecas. They drove their cattle before them and everybody had to look out for himself."²¹

By the end of the war, then, American and Indian refugees had established homes on former Wyandot lands along the Sandusky River. More important, the Wyandots faced a problem when they sought to return to their former settlements. They had been overrun, and now the Americans who had sought safe haven wanted to stay and hoped that the federal government would negotiate for the land. Indeed, everyone involved believed that government entities would provide these families with preemption claims once the war was over. Instead, a presidential proclamation by James Madison issued on December 12, 1815 commanded "all persons who have unlawfully taken possession of or made any settlement on the public lands as aforesaid forthwith to remove therefrom," and asserted that any who did not remove would be punished as the law directed.²²

But this surprising presidential proclamation did not remain the policy for long, and the continued presence of these refugees meant that there was more than one issue that needed to be resolved at the end of the war. The first order of business was the negotiation of treaties with Indian leaders to establish the terms of postwar relationships. From the Wyandot perspective, the second step would have to involve dealing with the Americans who continued to live on their lands. In the end, these two concerns were combined directly through a treaty signed in 1817 that explicitly connected the War of 1812 to the persistent assault on Wyandot land ownership in Ohio in the decades that followed.

In the late summer of 1815 William Henry Harrison and two other appointed commissioners held a council with those Indians who had stayed loyal to the Prophet and the British. Harrison had requested that Tarhe attend as well so that the Wyandot chief could speak on behalf of both the Americans and those Indians who promoted friendship with the Americans before, during, and after the war. In his opening statement, Tarhe addressed the Wyandots who had remained

21. Thomas L. Hawkins to William Crayton, 24 January 1816, in *Lower Sandusky 1815–1824*, Rutherford B. Hayes Papers, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library, Fremont, Ohio (hereafter RBH); Excerpt from "Autobiography of Abraham Luckenbach, Moravian missionary," in *Lower Sandusky 1810–1814*, RBH; Paul Butler to Governor Return J. Meigs, 24 August 1812, in *ibid.*; Tarhe's Speech at Lower Sandusky, 13 August 1812, in *ibid.*; Excerpt from "Autobiography of Abraham Luckenbach, Moravian missionary," in *ibid.*

22. James Madison: "Proclamation 22—Ordering Unauthorized Persons to Remove from the Public Lands," 12 December 1815. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65888> (accessed 7 July 2012).

allied with the British and described them as people who “seceded from your tribe.” While obviously the reflection of one perspective, the word choice revealed the continued divisions within the larger Wyandot community. More important, however, were the statements Tarhe made one week later as the council came to a close. He noted that the late war had been devastating, especially in respect to what it had done to the council fire maintained by the Wyandots at Brownstown. “When this unfortunate circumstance took place,” Tarhe declared, “all the Indian nations took part with one or the other, until all were distracted and so disunited that no one nation could say that it was entirely on one side.” It had been especially true for his people, as the alliances of different village leaders had taken their followers on perilous journeys during the conflict. But Tarhe had hope that as long as the Wyandots and other Indians were more cautious in the future they could survive as a more unified community. He declared:

All, far and near, are now travelling in this peaceful road of our forefathers. We must bear in mind that our white fathers may again fall out; and our British father has ever been most ready to give us the tomahawk. Let us join neither of them hereafter. If they fight, let us retire to one side. They quarrel about things of which we know nothing, and in which we are not interested. They quarrel for a time, then make friends, and we make friends also, and join hands again as fast as ever.

The words were strong, but perhaps overly optimistic. Even as Harrison hoped to profit from Tarhe’s words he found that most of the pro-British Indians had absented themselves from the council grounds by the last day of the session. They had apparently traveled to a council held by British agents at the same time.²³

It would appear that Tarhe’s words had limited influence in a council dictated largely by American expectations. He died one year later in 1816. The following year, Walk-in-the-water also died. The passing of these two influential figures signaled the end of relatively smooth transitions for the Wyandots in terms of sachems and prominent headmen. This was particularly true for those at Sandusky. Yet it was not simply the loss of men who had led for nearly three decades that affected the Sandusky villages. Instead, it was that the loss coincided with the entry of a disruptive force into their lives. Some of the disputes about leadership and treaties that arose in the late 1810s and into the 1820s grew out of the growing strength of Methodism, a religion that had arrived at Sandusky with the missionary John Stewart in the 1810s. As a result, the battles of the 1820s over who should lead the Wyandots were complicated by the conflict of external religious influence with traditional religious practices. And if those two factors did not provide enough tension, more treaty commissioners soon entered the mix.²⁴

23. Council records found in *ASPLA*, 2:17–25.

24. Martin W. Walsh, “The ‘Heathen Party’: Methodist Observation of the Ohio Wyandot,” *American Indian Quarterly* (Spring 1992): 189–211; Robert E. Smith, “The Clash of Leadership at the Grand Reserve: The Wyandot Subagency and the Methodist Mission, 1820–1824,” *Ohio History* 89 (Spring 1980): 181–205.

In 1817, the federal government determined that the time had come for the Wyandots to make a choice about their future relationship with the United States. That future would begin with a treaty that did more than discuss diplomatic affairs. "The negotiations should be founded," Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs George Graham stated in the spring of 1817, "on the basis that each head of a family who wishes to remain within the limits ceded should have a life estate in a reservation of a certain number of acres...and that those who do not wish to remain on those terms should have a body of land allotted to them on the west of the Mississippi." During the ensuing treaty negotiations the Wyandots ceded territory between the southern shores of Lake Erie and the northern boundaries of Upper Sandusky. Both the Senecas and the Delawares living along the Sandusky River were party to the treaty and ceded land as well. In each case the three different Indian communities retained a small reserve on which to live.²⁵

This agreement marked two distinct ways in which the War of 1812 served as a transitional point for the Wyandots and their Indian neighbors. One of the important motivations for the treaty came directly out of military concerns. Throughout the war, Harrison and other American military officers found reason to complain about the absence of passable roads in northwest Ohio. More than just an inconvenience, the horrendous roads and the presence of what was called the "Black Swamp" were viewed as an extremely dangerous weakness that could cripple American efforts in future wars. The land cessions from the Indians were therefore viewed as necessary to avoid wartime disasters. But Graham alluded to a second and more important motivation for the land cessions. Although the term did not end up in the treaty, he had advocated that those Indians who did not choose to have land in fee simple should leave for territories further west. It was not the first time such an idea had been proposed. In the late winter of 1814, the Governor of Michigan Territory, Lewis Cass, and a number of Ohio congressmen advocated the relocation of Indians from Ohio. As reported by Secretary of War John Armstrong, the reasoning for such action came straight from the ongoing war. Separating the Indians from the American populace would be "useful," because "so long as their [the Indians'] settlements and ours actually touch each other collisions are to be feared." The war had clearly provided lessons to American policymakers.²⁶

The push for land cessions did not end in 1817, a trend aided by an American diplomatic victory evident in what was missing from the Treaty of Ghent. In the early stages of negotiations to end the war the British had insisted on the establishment

25. George Graham to Lewis Cass, 23 March 1817, *ASPLA*, 2:136; George Graham to Lewis Cass and Duncan McArthur, 19 May 1817, *ibid.*, 2:137; "Treaty with the Wyandot, etc., 1817," in *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, comp. and ed. Charles J. Kappler, 7 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 2:145–55.

26. Harrison to Secretary of War, 4 January 1813, in Esarey, *Messages and Papers*, 2:293–99; Lewis Cass and Duncan McArthur to George Graham, 29 September 1817, in *ASPLA*, 2:137–38; Armstrong quote from Secretary of War to Harrison, 3 March 1814, in Esarey, *Messages and Papers*, 2:631.

of a territory located between the United States and British Canada that would be exclusively for their Indian allies. But instead of holding firmly to this notion, the British sacrificed a promise made to the Indians of the Great Lakes region and agreed to an article stating that the Indians “shall enjoy all the rights and privileges they enjoyed before the war.” It was a vague and empty statement that in no way served to protect the rights and interests of Native peoples. Consequently, the treaty signed by the Wyandots and their Sandusky neighbors in 1817 marked the next phase of a broader push by the United States for the removal of Indians from the landscape of the Great Lakes region. For American officials it also represented a transition from dealing with a powerful and dangerous British-Indian alliance to protecting the interests of both land-hungry American citizens and weakened Indian villagers. Or, in the words of the War Department, the federal government now needed to arrange for the relocation of Indians so that an “efficient white population will supply the place of their feeble society.” The Indian Removal Act may not have become law until 1830, but its foundations were crafted throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century.²⁷

Despite the hopes and intentions of American officials, however, Indians also shaped the transition that marked the end of the War of 1812 and they continued to have a voice in the events of ensuing decades. A delegation of Wyandots, Senecas, and Delawares traveled to Washington City in the late fall of 1817 to complain about the recent treaty that distributed their reserve lands along the Sandusky River only in fee simple plots. They lobbied for, and received a new agreement that instead established those reserve lands as communal property. Less than a year later Lewis Cass reported that the Wyandots, Shawnees, Senecas, and Ottawas responded to his suggestion in council regarding removal “with such strong symptoms of disapprobation that we did not think it proper to urge them too far upon the subject.” Militant resistance may have ended with the demise of the confederacy led by Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, and the War of 1812 may have irreparably damaged the relationship between the British at Amherstburg and their Indian allies, but the tribes in the lower Great Lakes region continued to find ways to counter American interests and promote their own.²⁸

27. Dwight L. Smith, “A North American Indian Neutral Zone: Persistence of a British Idea,” *Northwest Ohio Quarterly* 61 (Autumn 1989): 46–63; C. Vandevanter to Lewis Cass, 29 June 1818, in *ASPLA*, 2:175–76.

28. John Johnston to Lewis Cass, 5 November 1817, in Huron 1817, Tribal Document Collection, Great Lakes–Ohio Valley Ethnohistory Archives, Glenn A. Black Archaeology Laboratory, Bloomington, Indiana; Treaty of 1818, Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, 2:162–63; Lewis Cass and Duncan MacArthur to John C. Calhoun, 18 September 1818, in *ASPLA*, 2:177.

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