

History of the Battle of Tippecanoe

Native American Settlement

Early man and many Indian tribes roamed this part of the Wabash Valley before the thriving trading post of Keth-tip-pe-can-nunk was established in the eighteenth century. Known to many as "Tippecanoe", the village thrived until 1791, when it was razed in an attempt to scatter the Indians and open the land to the new white settlers.

Seventeen years later a new Indian village was established on or near the old Keth-tip-pe-can-nunk site at the Wabash/Tippecanoe River junction. Known as "Prophet's Town", this village was destined to become the capitol of a great Indian confederacy -- their equivalent to Washington, D.C.

The town was founded in May, 1808, when two Shawnee brothers, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa (the Prophet), left their native Ohio after being permitted to settle on these Potawatomi and Kickapoo-held lands.

The Protagonists

Tecumseh and the Prophet planned to unite many tribes into an organized defense against the growing number of western settlers. Through this union they could defend the lands they had lived on for thousands of years.

In addition to being a seat of diplomacy, Prophet's Town became a training center for the warriors, with a rigorous spiritual and athletic regimen. As many as one thousand warriors were based in the capitol at its peak.

The white settlers of the Indiana territory were disturbed by the increasing activities and power of Tecumseh's followers. In the late summer of 1811, the governor of the territory, Gen. William Henry Harrison, organized a small army of 1,000 men, hoping to destroy the town while Tecumseh was on a southern recruitment drive. The regiment arrived on Nov. 6, 1811, and upon meeting with representatives of the Prophet, it was mutually agreed that there would be no hostilities until a meeting could be held on the following day. Harrison's scouts then guided the troops to a suitable campsite on a wooded hill about a mile west of Prophet's Town.

The Battle

Upon arriving at the site, Harrison warned his men of the possible treachery of the Prophet. The troops were placed in a quadrangular formation; each man was to sleep fully clothed. Fires were lit to combat the cold, rainy night, and a large detail was assigned to sentinel the outposts.

Although Tecumseh had warned his brother not to attack the white men until the confederation was strong and completely unified, the incensed Prophet lashed his men with fiery oratory. Claiming the white man's bullets could not harm them, the Prophet led his men near the army campsite. From a high rock ledge west of the camp, he gave an order to attack just before daybreak on the following day.

The sentinels were ready, and the first gunshot was fired when the yells of the warriors were heard. Many of the men awoke to find the Indians upon them. Although only a handful of the soldiers had had previous battle experience, the army bloodily fought off the reckless, determined Indian attack. Two hours later, thirty-seven soldiers were dead, twenty-five others were to die of injuries, and over 126 were wounded. The Indian casualties were unknown, but their spirit was crushed. Angered by his deceit, the weary warriors stripped the Prophet of his power and threatened to kill him.

Harrison, expecting Tecumseh to return with a large band of Indians, fortified his camp soon after the battle. No man was permitted to sleep the following night.

Taking care of their dead and wounded, the demoralized Indians left Prophet's Town, abandoning most of their food and belongings. When Harrison's men arrived at the village on November 8, they found only an elderly Indian woman, whom they left with a wounded chief found not far from the battlefield. After burning the town, the army began their painful return to Vincennes.

The Aftermath

Tecumseh returned three months later to find his dream in ashes. Believing the reconstruction of the confederation to be too risky and the chance of Indian survival under the United States government to be dim, he gathered his remaining followers and allied himself with the British forces. Tecumseh played a key role in the War of 1812, being active in the fall of Detroit, but he was killed at the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813, at the age of forty-five.

Scorned by the Indians and renounced by Tecumseh, the Prophet took refuge along nearby Wildcat Creek. Although remaining in disgrace, the Prophet retained a small band of followers, who roamed with him through the Northwest and Canada during the War of 1812. He died in Wyandotte County, Kansas, in November, 1834.

Gen. Harrison remained governor of Indiana Territory until September, 1812, when he was assigned command of the Northwestern frontier in the War of 1812. He was in command at the capture of Detroit and the Battle of the Thames, where Tecumseh was killed. At the close of the war, Harrison returned to public life at his old home in North Bend, Ohio. He served in the Ohio state senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, and the U.S. Senate.

The Battle of Tippecanoe is considered by many to be one of the opening battles of the War of 1812. For more information on bicentennial events related to the War of 1812 see the www.visit1812.com website.

The Rally

Harrison was an unsuccessful Whig candidate for President in 1836, and four years later his followers were still determined to land him in the White House. After he clinched the nomination a second time, the Whigs prepared a massive rally at the Tippecanoe Battlefield on May 29, 1840. Over 30,000 people followed the poor roads and trails or the winding rivers to sing the praises of "Old Tipp"! Roast beef and pork were everywhere, the stew and bread were free, and the hard cider flowed. Catchy campaign songs capitalized on that great political slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too!". Bands, floats, stump speeches, and majestic tales of the battle added special color to the event. The Tippecanoe rally and

similar events were successful, and Harrison landed the coveted office. He died just a month after assuming the Presidency, but the hoopla at the battlefield and other places lives on as the modern, festive political campaign.

The Methodists

By the 1850s, the battlefield was already attracting visitors and picnickers. A refreshing artesian spring was discovered, and the Louisville, New Albany, & Salem Railroad laid its tracks along the eastern edge of the battlefield. A large wooden frame refreshment stand was erected on land adjacent to the battlefield to serve the growing number of visitors.

The stand and surrounding acreage became the property of the Northwest Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church in 1857. The building served as a school -- the Battle Ground Collegiate Institute -- until 1862, when it was replaced by a larger structure.

In 1873 the battle site was enclosed by an iron fence, which survives. Two years later the land just north of the fence was developed as a Methodist campground. The boarding house was remodeled into a hotel, and a 2500-seat tabernacle was erected. The Battle Ground campground became extremely popular, and as many as 10,000 persons attended special programs.

By the early 1920s the campground had become basically a retreat area for youth.

The camp was active through the early sixties and new buildings were erected to replace the old. A sesquicentennial celebration in 1961 attracted 10,000 people to Battle Ground, but interest in maintaining the old camp and the battlefield dwindled after the event. Although great plans were made for the area, the camp eventually shut down and the grounds were neglected.

The Monument

The battlefield was in disarray for many years after the conflict, although there was sporadic attention given to the site. Nearly two decades following the battle, serious motions were begun to preserve and mark the battlefield. In 1834 the Indiana General Assembly authorized the acceptance of the sixteen-acre campsite from its owner, battle veteran John Tipton. The tract was formally presented on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the conflict in 1836. The return of Gen. Harrison to the site in 1835 inspired toasts to the raising of a monument commemorating the battle. It would be seventy-three years before this was accomplished.

Increasing activity at the site, by attendees at the Methodist Campground in the late 1800s, brought new urgency into erecting a suitable memorial to the battle. An association organized in 1892 worked the state and national representatives into funding a monument. It wasn't until 1908 that the 85-foot marble obelisk was finally erected, at a cost of \$24,500.