OUIATENON AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NORTHWEST

by JEAN McGROARTY

Nearly 50 years before Tippecanoe County was founded, the American Revolution came to Indiana and the western territory. Ouiatenon, which had once been a prosperous trade center was, in 1778, a settlement of only 12 households. Despite its size, it still served as an important meeting place for Rebels, Indians and British at that time.

The Wabash Country

The Wabash River Valley during the Revolution was still mostly wilderness, with only three white settlements — Miamis, Ouiatenon and Vincennes. Thomas Hutchins, later to become civil geographer of the United States, wrote a description of the Wabash Valley while on an exploring trip to the interior in 1778:

The Wabash, is a beautiful River, with high and upright banks... The Stream of the Wabash, is generally gentle to Fort Ouiatenon, and no where obstructed with the Falls, but is by several Rapids both above and below that Fort, some of which are pretty considerable... The land on this River is remarkably fertile, and several parts of it are natural meadows, of great extent, covered with fine long grass — The timber is large, and high, and in such variety, that almost all the different kinds growing upon the Ohio, and its branches...may be found here.¹

Hutchins continues his description, discussing crops raised (Indian corn, wheat, tobacco, hemp, grapes, hops, apples, peaches, pears, cherries and melons, among others) and the animals bred in the Wabash Valley (horses, swine and black cattle²).
Ouiatenon itself was no longer the garrisoned military post it had been 40 years earlier during the height of French settlement. According to Hutchins, "Ouiatenon is a small stockaded fort on the western side of the Wabash, in which about a dozen families reside. The neighbouring Indians are the Kickapoos, Musquitos, Pyankishaws, and a principle part of the Ouiatennons. The whole of these tribes consists, it is supposed, of about one thousand warriors... The annual amount of skins and Furr, obtained at Ouiatenon, is about 8000."3 The few French who lived at Ouiatenon were a transient lot of fur traders, traveling up and down the Wabash, using the village only as a base of operations.

The importance of the Ouiatenon settlement obviously did not rest on the size of the French settlement, nor the wealth in furs traded there. Instead, Ouiatenon was important because of the many Indian villages surrounding it. As had been the case since the establishment of Ouiatenon in 1717, the Indians provided potential wealth and power for the white men. Their support meant a profitable fur trade, as well as manpower against the enemy. As the French and British had struggled to win the alliance of these Indians, so now were the Americans and British engaged in a similar conflict. Due to the power and number of the Wea tribe and its neighbors, their friendship was important to both sides.

The Indians

The story of Ouiatenon in the Revolution is basically one of the attempts to win (or buy) this friendship. In 1777, when British Lieutenant Governor Edward Abbott was sent from Detroit to command at Vincennes, he described the area and its Indians. His observations about the countryside are similar to Hutchins'. Abbott's assessment of the Indian tribes, however, was from a military point of view: "On its [the Wabash River's] banks are several Indian towns, the most considerable is the Ouija [Wea], where it is said there are 1000 men capable to bear arms. I found them so numerous, and needy, I could not pass without great expense... I believe it not thrown away, as I left them seemingly well disposed for His Majesty's service."4

Leonard Helm and Jean-Baptiste Celoron

Speculation as to the loyalty of the Indians was not enough to guarantee their support, even though such speculation was important to both sides. Henry Hamilton, Lieutenant Governor at Detroit, reported to the Governor concerning the disposition of the Indians: "As to the Savages of the Ouabash, it must be supposed they cannot relish the invasion of the Virginians."3 To keep the Wabash tribes well disposed toward the British, it was felt that an agent among them was necessary. Thus, in the spring of 1778, Jean-Baptiste Celoron was sent to live among the Weas at the Ouiatenon settlement.

Celoron's stay at Ouiatenon seems to have achieved its purpose; he was able to convince the Indians to stage attacks against the Rebels. Hamilton reports in April of 1778: "Monsieur de Celoron writes me word from Ouiatannong, that some parties to the number of 50 men, partly Quiquahoes, Mascontaingues, & Ouiattanongs are gone to war towards the Ohio, their success is not yet known. I have sent him some Ammunition & Arms & to gratify those among them who behave well."5

In the summer of 1778, Celoron returned to Detroit for a brief period. Hamilton sent him back to Ouiatenon on August 8, "with Belts for the Ouabash Indians whose deputies went from this place not long since, well satisfied with their reception."7 On August 26, it was noted that, "The situation of the Ouabash Indians is very favourable"8 for the British. Hamilton expressed his satisfaction with Celoron in a September letter to his superiors: "He will fulfill my intentions concerning the Rebels who have taken post Vincennes, he will accompany the Indians."9

Celoron's success was, however, unnerving to the small Rebel force which had recently captured Vincennes from Lieutenant Governor Abbott and the British. In the early autumn of 1778, about the time Celoron was ordered by Hamilton to attack Vincennes, Captain Leonard Helm asked his superior, George Rogers Clark, for authority to go to Ouiatenon and capture the agent. Permission was
granted, and Helm started up the Wabash from Vincennes with a party of French merchants.

"He set out by water with...Inhabitants of St. Vincents [Vincennes] and proceed up the Waubash," wrote Clark in his journal. "The French Merchants a long trading with the Indians on the way and Captn Speaking on publick affairs as if this was intended as a Visit he wished to pay them and that those with him attended in Complaisance and to see a little about their trade."10 Despite these precautions, Celoron was suspicious of the reports he received from the Indians, and he decided to escape upriver, taking some Indians and furs with him, shortly before Helm's arrival.

All the Rebel captain found at Ouiatenon were the French inhabitants and a party of Chippewa Indians who had arrived after Celoron's departure. As Clark related the story, "they arrive but a few minutes before our party hearing the news and finding their Friend gone they slipt into the Fort as a convenience to take some refreshments and hold a Counsell."11 This Chippewa party had carelessly forgotten to close the gate of the fort, and Helm and his men captured them.

Helm and the French businessmen saw a good opportunity to show their strength, as well as spread some useful Rebel propaganda. The Captain, in an act of strategic generosity, allowed the Indians to go free.

There was a great deal said to the prisoners but the whole amount said was this that the B K [Big Knives] never catch a prisoner sleeping and as that was the case in the present instance they the Indians was at liberty and might fight for the English as long as they pleased that if they again fell into the Hands of the B K they might expect what would be their fate the Indians gave a suitable answer to this seeming Generosity and declared that they never would fight against the B K again and I understood that these Indians frequently Mentioned this adventure and spoke much in our favour our Party returned in safety to the Opost [Vincennes] having Spoke with the greatest part of the Indians apparently much to the satisfaction of both parties.12

Even though Leonard Helm had not captured Celoron, and had not treated with the powerful Wea Indians, both he and George Rogers Clark saw this incident as a victory. Clark, in a letter written more than a year later, exaggerated the incident, saying that the Indians were "Assembled in a Grand Council," and that Helm made, "a valuable Treaty." With a note of pride, he wrote, "this stroke compleated our Interest on the Wabash."13

In the meantime, Celoron fell from Lieutenant Governor Hamilton's favor. In a letter to British authorities in Canada, just before his trip down the Wabash to Vincennes, Hamilton wrote:

Mr. de Celoron has a brother in the Rebel service, & I have no room to doubt his treasonable design in spreading reports that might delay us til next spring. When reinforcements from the colonies might effectually frustrate our attempts to regain the Illinois, or keep the Indians in our interest — double pay I take it has been his seducer, & as to his reward, I hope to have your Excellency's orders. I have ordered his suspension in the interim.14

Once Hamilton started on his trip to Vincennes, his attitude toward Celoron and his conduct seems to have softened, even though he was still bemused by Celoron's conduct. About a month after his previous letter, he wrote from Ouiatenon, "He might have stayed in perfect security a few leagues from this place where he might have found his fears were entirely groundless, and that he had fled from a shadow."15

Henry Hamilton on the Wabash

In August of 1778, Henry Hamilton received unexpected and unwanted news. George Rogers Clark had arrived in the Illinois Country. Hamilton wrote to Lord Germain in England: "The Rebels have sent a Detachment with an officer to Cahokia [Illinois] to receive the submission of the inhabitants, and the person who brought the account has no doubt but those of St. Vincennes are by this time summoned."16 Kaskaskia had also been taken by Clark.
Immediately upon hearing this news, Hamilton made plans to go to Miamis, then descend the Wabash River to recapture the posts which had been lost. In early October, he left Detroit, with canoes and militia.

On his trip south, he spoke to Indian tribes and inhabitants, seeking their support for the Crown. Finally, in December, the party reached Ouiatennon.

Hamilton was decidedly unimpressed with both the settlement and settlers at Ouiatennon. In a letter written from Ouiatennon, he gives this description.

The Fort (as it is called) at this place is a miserable stockade surrounding a dozen of wretched cabins called Houses. The Indians hereabout are numerous, there appear 96 of their cabins, which allowing five men to a house makes the number 480.

The French settlers are few and as inconsiderable as debauchery and idleness can make them—as to their attachments it is difficult to pronounce—formally administered the oath of fidelity to His Britannic Majesty, and left in the care of one honest man the H. George's Flag, to be hoisted on Sundays and holidays, giving the Indians to understand it was a signal of His Majesty having resumed his rights, and again taking them under his protection.17

Hamilton faithfully kept a journal on his trip to Vincennes. This record reveals that, despite the importance of and need for the Indians, he was still able to laugh at them. "At our encampment some principal men of the Ouiatennon (des consideres) made their appearance," he writes. "The names of the men of this nation are surely the most whimsical of any in the World — La Morve (snot) la mauvaise panse (rot gut) le grand Pin (Toledo) la mauvaise bouche (bad or rotten mouth) la gaine (The Sheath)"18 He also expressed his contempt for the French settlers and their influence on the natives. "The characters of most of the Europeans who have dealings with them are not likely to improve the morals, or remove the jealousies of the Indians, as in all remote posts are to be found the most faithless and abandond among the Traders."19

Most of Hamilton's time at Ouiatennon was spent conferring with local Indians. He gave them presents, war belts and speeches. They, in turn, reported events in the Wabash Valley, and tentatively promised their loyalty to His Majesty.

In his journal, Hamilton reports several such meetings. "Those who spoke, delivrd themselves as I could have wished," he wrote, "and appeared highly pleased at the sight of their friends [Hamilton's Party] as well as with their speeches, and promised to follow their example."20

After nearly a week spent at Ouiatennon, Hamilton felt his task was complete. He had, he was sure, obtained the loyalty of the Indians, and the fear of the French. "Those of this neighbourhood have promised to raise all their warriours next spring and to spread themselves in all directions on the frontiers," he reported to the Governor.21

Hamilton left Ouiatennon on December 5, 1778, and continued to Vincennes where he and his militiamen overpowered the handful of volunteers under Helm's command, and took control of the post. His victory was short-lived, however, because scarcely two months later, he was captured by George Rogers Clark and taken to Virginia as a prisoner. Ironically, Clark was aided by many of the same "inconsiderable", debauched and idle Frenchmen Hamilton detested so much.

Shortly after Hamilton's capture, Leonard Helm again visited Ouiatennon with a detachment of 50 men. Their mission was to intercept ten canoes filled with provisions and dry goods which were coming from Detroit for Hamilton. Their mission was successful. One volunteer described their return in his journal:

About 10 o Clock Capt. Helm arriv'd with his party took Seven boats laden with provision Bale Goods &c taken from the Enemy—with the following Prisoners—Mr. Dejean Grand Judge from Detroit Mr. Adimar Com'y with 38 Privates—Letters that was taken from the com'y dated at Detroit the 6th Feb'y says they are much afraid of our people.22

Once again, the Americans felt that they had scored a victory at Ouiatennon.

De Linctot at Ouiatennon

The spring and summer of 1779 constituted an eventful period for Ouiatennon inhabitants. Rumors flew about Clark's plans to march on Detroit. One British officer reported the following: "I have accounts that Clark is on the March to the Ouiat with 500 men followed by 200 oxen."23 In reality, Clark had planned to move up the Wabash. In May of 1779, Helm wrote to Clark. "It gives me great Satisfaction to think of your intention against Detroit. You must be the man to take that place. Send no man but yourself if you think proper of the Expedition. Weau [Ouiatennon] and Ome [Mamis] is ready to receive you with Joy.24"24

While readying himself for the march on Detroit, Clark sent a French Canadian, Daniel Maurice Godefroy de Linctot, to gather volunteers at Peoria, cross to Ouiatennon and join Clark in his advance. De Linctot, a trader whose influence with the Indians proved consistently helpful to the Rebel cause, was successful in his mission. However, Clark abandoned his plans to march on Detroit. De Linctot's march across the Illinois country caused the British much consternation and, though they tried to destroy the Indians' admiration for the Canadian, they could not. By August of 1779, de Linctot had gathered nearly 6000 Indians at Ouiatennon. A.S. DePeyster, a British officer, spoke to the Indians
The above illustrations are from *Proud Prisoner*, by Walter Havighurst, published by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
against de Linctot, as well as most of the other Rebel leaders. He later wrote this speech down in the form of a rather curious poem:

Clark, soon repulsed, will ne'er return
While your war-fire thus clear doth burn.
Exert yourselves, therefore, while you
Are favored by Manitou,
Else smoke will cease to greet the skies,
Sad omens yield such sacrifice!
In vain shall medicine kettles boil,
They'll not repay the juggler's toll;
Each path will soon be covered o'er
With briars, stones and human gore,
While troubled waters lash the shore.
Observe the wretched Kickapooose;
What have they gained by Linctot's news?23

De Peyster also fills his poem with explanatory notes. In reference to de Linctot, he says Linctot is a "runagate Frenchman who used to communicate every favorable event attending the enemy [Americans]."26

Once de Linctot had arrived at Ouiatenon and discovered that Clark had abandoned his march, he realized he was stranded. He was low on supplies and without reinforcements to help him handle the increasing number of Indians coming to join him. He sent to Vincennes for help and received a quick response, "As I understand by your letter, you are in a Distress'd scitation in regard to provisions, in Consequence of which I have send you some Corn and Grease," wrote Thomas Quirk, commanding at Vincennes. "I have thought proper to order Major Busron and Captain Shelby to Reinforce you with about 50 or 60 men and provisions."27

By August 24, the reinforcements had arrived. Though there was never a march to Detroit, the Rebels used their time profitably in making treaties with the Indians. In a letter to Clark, Captain James Shelby praised de Linctot's ability to deal with the Indians. "Captain Linctot have Settled them with his Good Talks I believe better than any other person Could considering our Poverty. I hope you look upon the Captain as a Particular Friend."28

De Linctot had indeed proven himself a particular friend of the American cause in the West. He had won the support of thousands of Indians, he had crossed hundreds of miles of wilderness territory to gather Indian reinforcements for Clark, and he had contributed a large amount of his personal fortune to the Rebels. Though he died barely two years later, his contribution to the American revolutionary effort had been great.

In October of 1779, De Linctot and Clark's men had left Ouiatenon. There is little evidence of their having returned to the small settlement, but their brief appearances in 1778 and 1779 must certainly have caused excitement in the normally dreary lives of the French inhabitants.

The next action seen by Ouiatenon was nearly a year later. Augustin Mottin de la Balme, a French soldier of fortune who appears to have acted under no particular authority, decided to capture Detroit from the British. He had gathered a large company of volunteers at Kaskaskia and marched to Vincennes, where much enthusiasm was shown for his plan. A company was to be formed at Vincennes under the leadership of Major LeGras, a former soldier under George Rogers Clark.

Unfortunately, the Vincennes volunteers lost interest in the plan and were slow in forming their company. La Balme soon grew impatient and marched up the Wabash with his Kaskaskia volunteers to wait for the Vincennes militia. They chose Ouiatenon as their place of encampment. They remained there for three weeks, where La Balme drilled his company, completed his plans and issued appeals for more recruits. The Vincennes detachment did not show, so La Balme proceeded to Miamis.29

La Balme suffered a tragic death and defeat at the hands of Indians fighting for the British shortly after his arrival at Fort Miamis. His defeat aroused pro-British sentiment among the Miami Indians, who had until that time remained neutral.

Conclusion

After the La Balme episode, Revolutionary War activities in the West slowed considerably. At Ouiatenon, they nearly came to a halt. George Rogers Clark had gone; La Balme and De Linctot were dead. Frenchmen went back to the more immediate problems of making a living. The West was considered to be in American hands, with little chance of the British retrieving the Illinois posts, or those on the Wabash.

Though there was no Battle of Ouiatenon, or dramatic capture of Ouiatenon during the Revolution, the tiny settlement still had its moments in the events of the late '70s and early '80s. Whether or not its inhabitants fully realized the significance of the events is a question which cannot readily be answered. The constant comings and goings of spies, militia, officers and Indian tribes after a decade of inactivity must have been a source of excitement and interest for those living there, and perhaps the speeches and actions of Helm, de Linctot and others instilled sympathy for the American cause.

Names of heroes like de Linctot, Helm and La Balme were as familiar to Wabash Valley inhabitants as those of Patrick Henry and George Washington were in the Colonies. The lack of a permanent military garrison did not diminish Ouiatenon's participation in the Western Revolution, nor did it lessen the loyalty of the Free Frenchmen toward the new American cause.
Sequence of Events

1778

Spring According to Hamilton, Clark is at Vincennes with 86 men. Clark speaks of an agent at the Ouia who has many goods to regain the support of the Indians. Clark authorizes Helm to take him.

June 29 Council is held at Detroit by the British to prepare the Indians for war against the Virginians.

Aug. 8 Celoron sets off with 600 men for the Wabash. Wabash Indians help maintain the British defense lines.

Aug. 26 Hamilton speaks of the situation of the Wabash Indians as being a good one for capturing Rebel vessels on the Wabash River.

Sept. 5 A list of officers of the Indian Department of Detroit lists: Monsieur de Celoron as Commandant, and Le Fevre as the Smith.

Sept. 16 Hamilton feels that the Wabash Indians are averse to the Rebels.

Sept. 22 Hamilton prepares to make his descent of the Wabash River.

Oct. 4 A report received from Celoron by Hamilton’s party states that 200 Virginians and 200 Frenchmen were within a day’s march from Ouiatenon.

Oct. 6 Celoron reports that he was in attendance at a meeting between Dagenet, Indian interpreter for the British, and the Indians at Ouiatenon. Celoron brings a full report to Hamilton, stating that the Rebels are on the march, and wished the Indians to remain quiet, as the war did not concern them.

Oct. 14 According to reports received by Hamilton, rebels had not yet arrived at the Ouia.

Oct. 16 Two British sympathizers report that the Rebels are at Ouiatenon. Instead of 400 men, there are only 25 Virginians and 25 Frenchmen. They have confiscated some of Celoron’s property, mostly kitchen utensils.

Autumn Captain Leonard Helm arrives at Ouiatenon with 100 men to treat with the Indians. Celoron escapes shortly before their arrival, leaving a few Chippewa Indians (who seem to be quite careless) to greet Helm. Helm makes a treaty with them, giving them their liberty. “This stroke compleated our Interest on the Wabache,” states Clark in a letter to Mason.

Nov. 12 According to Bosseron’s account book, 5 ells of red serge and 3-3/4 ells of green serge were purchased, and Madame Goderre was paid to make the flag used by the French Americans.

Nov. 27 Indians from Ouiatenon inform Hamilton’s party that 200 of their warriors are ready to join British forces.

Nov. 28 Hamilton’s party arrives at Ouiatenon.

Dec. 1 Wea Indians pledge not to allow Rebels to set foot on their lands. Women of the Six Nations admonish women of the Wea and Kickapoo tribes not to be idle, but to raise much corn while their husbands are at war.

Dec. 4 Hamilton writes from Ouiatenon, that he has scolded the Indians for turning to the Americans. Described Ouiatenon as a miserable settlement with a few cabins.

Dec. 5 Hamilton’s party leaves Ouiatenon.

Dec. 13 According to Bosseron’s account book, couriers were sent this day to the Ouia from Vincennes.

1779

Jan. 29 Gibault had been at Vincennes and the Ouia and had forced 600 inhabitants to swear allegiance to the Congress, etc.

Feb. 24 Hamilton surrenders to Clark at Vincennes.

Feb. 27 Helm, Bosseron and Legras are sent up the Wabash to capture ten provision-loaded boats. They themselves had three boats.

Mar. 5 At 10:00 a.m., Helm party returns to Vincennes. They captured all the boats and many letters destined for Hamilton, 150 miles above Vincennes on the Wabash River, near Ouiatenon.

May 9 Helm writes to Clark that the Wea and the Miami Indians are ready to receive Clark. Clark feels that the tribes on the Wabash have adhered to the treaties made, except for a few bad Indians.

Summer De Linctot is sent to the Illinois country to intercept the British.

July 18 In a letter from Lorraine to Lernoult, it is learned that Linctot left for the Illinois, and has changed his course for the Ouia. They will build a fort there as a store house, 50 Bostonians and 50 French were left there.

Aug. 9 De Peyster has had reports that Clark is on the March to the Ouia with 500 men followed by 200 oxen. Linctot is marching to the Ouia. Actually, the change in Linctot’s course made the British worry that the Rebels were marching on Detroit. Linctot leaves Peoria for the Ouia with 30 men.

Aug. 22 Express arrives at Vincennes from Ouiatenon, from de Linctot, saying he is in need of supplies. Quirk sends Bosseron and Shelby to reinforce Linctot with 50 or 60 men and provisions. The main provisions are corn and grease.

Aug. 23 British reports say that there are a few Rebels at Ouiatenon, but none on the March. This information is from Indian Scouts.

Sept. 8 Shelby writes to Clark. Many Indians are flocking to Ouiatenon to treat. Linctot gets along very well with the Indians, despite the poverty of the Rebels.

Oct. 10 It is seen from letters written that Shelby had returned to Vincennes.

1780

Summer La Balme takes possession of Ouiatenon.

Autumn Vincennes and Ouiatenon residents address a petition to Crusat, the Spanish governor. Indians are attacking them and they are in need of help.

1781

July 12 Ouia have entered into the British cause, according to the British. They have attacked a party of Rebels led by McCarty, killed the leader and taken three prisoners.

1782

June 13 According to the British, the Indians promise well, but come to Detroit only for trade.
Notes


2Ibid., pp. 7-8.

3Ibid., p. 8.


5Collections of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, Vol. IX, Vol. IX, p. 430. Hereafter, this will be referred to as *MCH*.


10*Illinois Historical Collections*, Vol. X, p. 259. Hereafter, this will be referred to as *IHC*.


14*Wisconsin Historical Collections*, Vol. XI, p. 181. Hereafter, this will be referred to as *WHC*.


19Ibid., p. 131.

20Ibid., p. 137.


23Public Archives of Canada, B Series, Vol. 122, p. 228


28Ibid., pp. 380-81.


Suggested Reading


Jean McGroarty has written numerous articles on the history of Fort Ouiateneo, stemming from her tenure with the Tippecanoe County Historical Association as Research Historian. She received the Bachelor of Arts degree in French Education and Master of Arts in French Literature, both from Purdue University.

1982