

War of 1812
by Beth Carvey

The Sauk and Meskwaki and the War of 1812
Prelude to War

The War of 1812 was a significant event in Sauk and Meskwaki history and also for many other native nations who resided along and near the Mississippi River. The War of 1812 was actually two wars: an international war fought between the United States and Great Britain in the east and an Indian war fought in the west. This article is the first of a four-part series which will explore the War of 1812 in terms of native peoples' points of view, the military actions that occurred in the western frontier theater, and the consequences for the Sauk and Meskwaki that resulted from the American victory.

In 1812 the western frontier was comprised of the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri River regions, encompassing parts of present-day Wisconsin, Illinois, and northwest Missouri. More than ten different native nations, including the Sauk and Meskwaki, lived on these lands with an estimated population of 25,000 people. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the native people of the region had been growing increasingly unhappy with the United States. Four main reasons were at the heart of this unhappiness: arrogance and ignorance on the part of many American officials; illegal white settlement on native lands; a number of treaties that dispossessed tribes of their lands; and economic matters, specifically the fur trade.

The Sauk and Meskwaki had poor relations with the United States government since the signing of the fraudulent Treaty of 1804, whereby the two nations ceded over 50 million acres of land to the United States. The relationship had soured to such a degree by 1808 that the Sauk abandoned their southern villages and came to live together at Saukenuk, located two miles above the mouth of the Rock River. During the war Saukenuk became a center for warriors from many nations who supported and fought for the British. Black Hawk was a significant military leader within this faction.

Throughout the middle region of the eastern United States (present day Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) Americans were encroaching on native lands. After the Louisiana Purchase, more Americans began to move into northwest Missouri, onto lands claimed by the Sauk and Meskwaki. Americans were casting covetous eyes on the Sauk and Meskwaki lead mines on the Mississippi River near present day Dubuque and Galena.

In 1808 the United States began a concerted effort to drive British (Canadian) fur traders from American soil. The United States system of trading houses, called factories, was insufficient to meet the Indians' needs. The factories offered only cheaply-made American goods, refused to grant credit, and were too few and far between to serve the Indians' needs. British traders, on the other hand, brought desirable goods imported from Britain and around the world. The various tribes, for good reason, preferred to trade with the British.

In 1811 the United States closed its ports to British ships, bringing immediate, unfavorable consequences to the native people. The Indians' hostile feelings towards the United States increased. How was a man to feed and clothe his family without adequate trade goods? The British traders fanned these sentiments. War between the United States and Britain was imminent, and the Indians' loyalty meant a great deal.

The Battle of Tippecanoe in November 1811 proved to be the spark that ignited the native nations of the western frontier into armed warfare against the Americans.

In 1808, the same year Saukenuk was founded, two Shawnee brothers, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, founded a settlement called Prophetstown near the mouth of the Tippecanoe River in present-day Indiana. Tecumseh spread his message to tribes throughout the United States. His message was direct: all native nations must put aside their intertribal differences and combine to fight their common enemy—the United States. Prophetstown grew to be a center of anti-American sentiment, and by late 1811 between 700 and 900 native warriors from many nations, including the Sauk, were living there.

The United States recognized the threat that Tecumseh's movement posed. In November 1811 General William Henry Harrison, with a large military force, moved on Prophetstown. In the ensuing battle, known as the "Battle of Tippecanoe," the Americans were victorious, and many native warriors were killed.

The repercussions from this defeat were felt almost immediately on the Mississippi River. Within a month the Winnebago and Kickapoo began a wave of revenge killings of Americans. Even before war was formally declared between the United States and Britain in June 1812, the western frontier was already in flames.

Coming next, the progression of the war during the years 1812 and 1813.

The Sauk and Meskwaki and the War of 1812

This accounting occurs from 1812-1813.

War between the United States and Great Britain was declared formally on June 18, 1812. For the next three years thousands of native warriors living in the Mississippi River valley and Great Lakes region actively fought for the British. Some tribes, however, sought to stay out of the fray, wanting nothing to do with another white man's war. Within the Sauk and Meskwaki nations this political disagreement was played out, causing a rift within the two nations; a rift that never fully healed.

Months before war was declared, Sauk, Winnebago, and Kickapoo warriors were assaulting Americans living in the Mississippi River valley. In January 1812 they attacked an American lead mining operation located near the Meskwaki lead mines at Dubuque. The warriors destroyed all of the buildings and killed all but one of the Americans working there. In February an American family living at a settlement on the Salt River in Missouri Territory was attacked and killed. In early June Sauk warriors attacked a settlement near present-day Hannibal, Missouri. War parties harassed any American they found on the road.

In response to the hostilities the United States closed the trading posts at Fort Dearborn and Fort Madison, and by the end of June ordered all British traders to leave American soil. The retaliations were short-sighted. The native people depended on the trade goods for survival and the United States had no plan to supply them with the goods they needed. The people felt abandoned by the Americans. Moreover, the strategy did not work; soon British traders were smuggling huge quantities of goods into the United States. The promise of necessary goods caused many tribes to back the British cause.

On June 26 a great Council was held at Saukenuk. Representatives from nine different nations—Winnebago, Pottawatomie, Kickapoo, Miami, Otoe, Ioway, Shawnee, Menominee, and Dakota—attended. Each tribe had sent a wampum belt tied with red

ribbon, a sure invitation to war. The delegates agreed to ask their tribal councils to send warriors to aid the British in their military campaign in the Indiana and Michigan Territories. Thousands went, including Black Hawk, heading a Sauk delegation of 200 warriors.

By early September the situation was looking bleak for the Americans. Mackinac Island fell to the British on July 17, opening Lakes Michigan, Huron, and Superior to British control. Fort Dearborn, at Chicago, fell to a force of 400 Pottawatomie warriors on August 15, and the next day Detroit fell to the British and their native allies. Black Hawk was at the Battle of Detroit. Three weeks later Black Hawk had returned home and on September 5, with a force of Winnebago and Sauk warriors, attacked Fort Madison. The siege lasted for three days but the cannon fire from the fort finally forced the warriors to retire. Fort Madison was safe...for now.

The fall of Fort Dearborn and Detroit alarmed the Illinois and Missouri territorial governors, fearing it would mean thousands of hostile warriors pouring into their territories. The governors worried for a reason. There were few federal troops in the territories. The governors were forced to rely on state militias. The militias were made up of citizen soldiers with little to no training and an alarming lack of firearms.

In October Illinois Territorial Governor Ninian Edwards led a force of state militia on a pre-emptive strike on the large, pro-British Pottawatomie village on the Illinois River at Peoria. The village was burned to the ground. The Pottawatomie, Kickapoo, Piankeshaw, and Miami people who lived there fled to Saukenuk, swelling the forces of the pro-British ranks. There they waited out the winter and began to plan for the summer campaign.

Not all Sauk and Meskwaki favored fighting for the British. A significant number, led by the civil chiefs, wished to remain neutral. Nearly 1000 young men were members of the peace bands and Missouri Territorial Governor Benjamin Howard was anxious to remove them as far away from the hostile bands as possible. Accordingly, in February 1813, Howard sent Sub Agent Maurice Blondeau to hold council with the peace bands. Blondeau was half Meskwaki and was trusted by both nations. At Blondeau's urging the peace bands agreed to leave the Mississippi River. By September they were settled near the Missouri River where they stayed throughout the remainder of the war.

By April, Robert Dickson, long time British trader and newly appointed British Superintendent of the Western Tribes, again had smuggled in large quantities of trade goods, arms, and ammunition. Dickson met with his native allies at Chicago, Saukenuk, and Prairie du Chien, distributing trade goods along the way. Over the course of the spring Dickson enlisted 1400 warriors, sending them to Detroit to aid in fending off a planned American invasion of Canada. Black Hawk was among the warriors who went.

Meanwhile, pro-British warriors in the Mississippi River valley continued their assaults. In July, a second attack on Fort Madison was launched. For two months the native warriors laid siege to the fort, keeping up a constant barrage of attack. Bodies of American soldiers killed outside the fort could not be retrieved. The Americans burned several outbuildings to prevent them from falling into native hands. The besieging warriors finally withdrew in September. The Americans abandoned the fort, burned it to the ground, and retreated to St. Louis.

The close of 1813 found pro-British warriors in the Mississippi River valley still in the ascendant. As the Americans waited out the winter and planned their summer campaign,

newly appointed Missouri Territorial Governor William Clark thought the Americans needed to move on Prairie du Chien, drive out the British forces, and establish a strong American presence there. This, he thought, would bring the Mississippi River valley under American control.

Coming next: The Battles of Campbell's Island and Credit Island

The War of 1812

The 1814 Campaign and the Battles of Campbell's Island and Credit Island

By April 1814 American officials in St. Louis were laying their plans for the summer campaign. Their object was to gain control of the upper Mississippi River valley by driving the British out of Prairie du Chien, and establishing a garrisoned American fort there. If successful, this action would cut off communication between the British in the East and their native allies in the Mississippi River valley.

On May 1 Major Zachary Taylor, with a force of sixty one regular Troops and over 200 Missouri Rangers (militiamen), along with Governor William Clark, departed St. Louis. Upon their arrival at Prairie du Chien on June 2, the British abandoned their position, offering no opposition. Within a week the Americans began construction of a fort, soon to be named Fort Shelby. Satisfied that all was well, and jubilant that the Americans had met no resistance from the British and their allies, Clark returned to St. Louis. The American troops, 135 Rangers and a large gunboat were left behind. By June 20 Fort Shelby was complete enough for the Americans to move in and to mount two canons, one in each block house.

Upon Governor Clark's return to St. Louis, he made plans to reinforce and resupply the garrison at Prairie du Chien. He ordered Lieutenant John Campbell to lead a force of 33 regular troops and two regiments of Missouri Rangers, in three gunboats, to accomplish the task. Campbell left St. Louis on July 4.

By July 18 Campbell was twenty miles below the mouth of Rock River where he was met by a party of nine Sauk, bearing a white flag. They assured Campbell that the Sauk and Meskwaki were now friendly to the United States. The Sauk had come to escort Campbell and his men to Saukenuk for a council. Campbell agreed, but rather than go to Saukenuk, he proceeded past the mouth of Rock River and halted about four miles upstream at the foot of the rapids. A force of 150 warriors were waiting for him there. Campbell had reason to feel confident in meeting with the Sauk. On June 2, in a letter to Secretary of War John Armstrong, Governor Clark had written: "That part of the Sauks & Renards near the entrance of Rocky River, supposed to have been hostile to the U. States, have requested peace; which has been granted, on conditions, that they join against the enemies of the U. States and Commence hostilities against the Winnebago." Campbell reminded the warriors of their promise to fight with the Americans. A Sauk chief answered that the Sauk had never made such a promise but would agree to attack the Winnebago if the United States would arm them. The chief went on to say: "The Mississippi is a broad and straight road and the people of the United States will meet with no obstructions in traveling it." All seemed well to Lieutenant Campbell.

Campbell and his men remained at the foot of the rapids for three days, finally departing for Prairie du Chien on the morning of July 21. They began their ascent of the

treacherous nine mile stretch of rapids. As the boats neared the head of the rapids a fierce thunderstorm broke over them. The boats became separated, and Campbell's boat fell behind the other two. The wind was so high and the rapids were so rough that Campbell thought it best to put into shore. As he was attempting this maneuver, a huge gust of wind blew his boat onto the shore of an island where it became stuck. Campbell could do nothing until the storm abated. He posted two sentinels about 60 yards from the boat and hunkered down to wait.

Thirty minutes later, without any warning, Campbell was attacked by a party of between 400 and 500 native warriors, Black Hawk among them. The sentinels were killed. Campbell and his men worked furiously to get the boat off but the wind was too high. After two soldiers were killed and three wounded in the effort, Campbell ordered everyone onto the boat and told them to "defend her to the last extremity."

The other two boats were three miles upstream when they heard the sound of gunfire. They immediately turned back and within an hour had reached Campbell's position. One boat anchored 20 yards off shore from Campbell's position; the other boat landed about 100 yards below. The fighting raged on and finally the warriors were forced to draw back. During the lull in the fighting, the crew on the boat nearest to Campbell was able to rescue the soldiers on board and load up the dead and wounded. That boat then moved off downstream. At this point the warriors renewed their attack, setting fire to Campbell's boat. The remaining American gunboat fired on the warriors as they attempted to board Campbell's abandoned boat and drove them off. This last American boat finally was able to retreat downstream, though the warriors followed and harassed them until long after dark. Of the 33 regulars with Campbell, 14 were killed. Campbell limped back to St. Louis where he arrived on July 24.

This was not the only bad news Governor Clark received that week. On July 17 as Campbell was nearing the mouth of Rock River, Fort Shelby at Prairie du Chien was attacked by a force of 1200 British soldiers and their native allies. The Americans returned the fire. The gunboat that had been left to aid in the defense of the fort fired on the enemy for two hours then inexplicably turned downstream and moved out of sight...carrying all the ammunition stores with them. The boat never returned. The Americans kept up their defense of the fort for two more days but finally were forced to surrender on the morning of July 20, the day before the Battle of Campbell's Island.

That the warriors with whom Campbell parleyed on July 18 knew about the attack on the fort at Prairie du Chien is highly probable. In his autobiography Black Hawk states that the very next day the British sent six kegs of powder and asked for their assistance. While Campbell rested at the foot of the rapids Black Hawk and his warriors made their plans. They followed Campbell on his journey up the rapids on the 21st where fate put them at the Sauk warriors' mercy.

Governor Clark was furious. He decided that the hostile band living at Rock River must be punished. Within a few weeks Major Zachary Taylor, with eight boats and over 300 men, were dispatched to destroy Saukenuk. Taylor's forces arrived at the mouth of Rock River on September 4, only to discover their boats were too large to ascend it. Taylor ordered his boats to land on Willow Island (now called Pelican Island) on the west shore of the Mississippi, posted sentinels, and ordered his men to rest. Willow Island lay next to Credit Island. Taylor did not know that the two islands were separated only by a shallow ford. Three hours before daylight, while a thunderstorm raged overhead, a few

native warriors crept onto Willow Island and shot the sentinels. For the next several hours Taylor ordered his men to comb Credit Island for any trace of the enemy but none were to be found. Suddenly British cannon, mounted on the Iowa shore, opened fire on the Americans. The force that attacked Taylor's men was made up of about 1000 native warriors and perhaps as many as 100 British soldiers. The fight lasted only 45 minutes at which point the Americans retreated downriver and returned to St. Louis, beaten... again.

The American situation in the Mississippi River valley and Missouri Territory was desperate. On August 20 Governor Clark wrote Secretary Armstrong "The possession [of Prairie du Chien] & Mackanack has enabled the British to supply the Indians on the Mississippi and towards the Lakes, and they are spreading their influence to the Tribes of the Missouri..." On September 18 Clark wrote "The Enemy [are] in force 400 miles up the Mississippi River, where they are (as I am informed) building a fort at a point near the Mouth of Rock River. They are making great exertions to gain over the Osage, Kanzis, Otoes, & Sioux of the Missouri....the Object of the British is to destroy & drive off the American population in this territory, by the aid of their Indian Allies. We are much in want of arms..."

In mid-October British and American officials began negotiations to end the war. The Treaty of Ghent was signed December 24, 1814. But news traveled slowly in those days. Governor Clark and the British command in the Western theater along with their native allies knew nothing of the peace treaty, and hostilities in the West continued well into 1815. But in time those natives who had allied themselves with the British learned that though they had fought valiantly and were ascendant in the west, they had been abandoned by their British allies and left to their own fate.

Coming next: The effect of the War of 1812 on the Sauk and Meskwaki.

The War of 1812

Conclusion

On February 16, 1815, the War of 1812 came to an official end when the United States Senate ratified the Treaty of Ghent. The war was effectively a stalemate between Great Britain and the United States. For the native people living east of the Mississippi River, however, it spelled disaster. By 1840, just twenty five years later, every tribe had been removed from their native lands and relocated west of the Mississippi River.

In the two centuries of European occupation of North America, there had been no less than four different non-native powers vying for control of the continent: Spain, France, Great Britain, and the United States. During these power struggles, the four nations had allied themselves with different native tribes. Tribal head men had recognized the leverage they possessed and used it to further their tribes' political ends. It was in the interest of those non-native powers, including the United States, to court the good will of the native people. The end of the War of 1812 now found the United States in undisputed control of America, making it no longer necessary to placate or court the native people. The United States was free to practice a policy of unlimited land acquisition.

Between 1816 and 1829, forty four land-cession treaties were signed between the United States and several native nations living east of the Mississippi River. In 1830, the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act which allowed for the acquisition of all remaining native lands east of the Mississippi River in exchange for "unsettled"

federal lands west of the River. In the decade following the passage of the act, sixty one treaties of land cession were signed.

Over the next several decades those same tribes were moved, re-moved, and re-moved again. The Sauk and Meskwaki were victims of this policy. Between 1830 and 1842 they signed four treaties which led to the cession of all of their Iowa lands in exchange for land in “unsettled” portions of Kansas. The Meskwaki returned to Iowa but the Sauk remained. In 1867, the Sauk were forced to sign yet another treaty ceding their Kansas lands in exchange for “unsettled” lands in Oklahoma. The comments of one Sauk Chief at the signing of the treaty seem to sum it all up: “Of course I will be compelled to sign these papers but I sign them under protest, knowing in my own heart that there is no good in it for the Indians.”