**Single Biggest Defeat Ever Inflicted by Indians on the United States**

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Article 2

**Introduction**

The Battle of Greasy Grass (Battle of Little Bighorn) was the last victory Indians had against the United States army, and although a great victory, immortalized in books, articles, and movies, it was not the single biggest defeat ever inflicted by Indians on the United States. That victory belongs primarily to Little Turtle of the Miamis, Blue Jacket of the Shawnees, and Buckongahelas of the Lenni Lenape (known by the English name Delawares). The battle was offensive compared to the defensive Battle of Greasy Grass. The unfortunate outcome was a renewed effort by the United States to drive the Indians out of Ohio and the Northwest territory.

**Northwest Ordinance**

The Congress of the Confederation was the governing body of the United States from March 1, 1781 to March 4, 1789, and issued a land ordinance in July 1787, known as the Northwest Ordinance (formally An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-West of the River Ohio). The Northwest Ordinance was a format for the expansion of United States and a standardized model of statehood. Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin eventually entered the United States from the territory established by the Northwest Ordinance, and 30 states entered the United States through the process it established.

Personal interests of those who stood to prosper enabled passage of the Northwest Ordinance. The Ohio Company of Associates secured 5 million acres of land. The Ohio Company of Associates was formed in Boston, Massachusetts, by a group of wealthy and/or influential individuals. The company directors were General Samuel Parsons, Reverend Manasseh Cutler, and General Rufus Putnam. They advocated for passage as an opportunity for settling the West and paying down the national debt. Cutler sold shares to leading government officials, including Arthur St. Clair, President of the Congress of the Confederation, and William Duer, Secretary of the Confederation’s Treasury Board. Duer was a political and business associate of Alexander Hamilton, the first United States Secretary of the Treasury, and became his assistant secretary in the Treasury Department of the United States.

The Northwest Ordinance was a justification for violence against the Indians, and the rhetoric of good intentions was a fallacy that permeated Indian policy. The Northwest Ordinance stated that the United States shall never take Indian land without the Indians’ consent, and no disturbance or invasion shall occur unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress. The problem, however, was that most Indians in Ohio were not parties to the Northwest Ordinance.

The Governor of the Northwest Territory was Arthur St. Clair. He fought in the French and Indian War, and in the American Revolution. He was in his 50s, and stricken with gout, when he became Governor of the Northwest Territory. He also was an owner of Ohio Company of Associates’ land. He established the territorial seat at Marietta, Ohio, a model town developed by the Ohio Company of Associates, on the mouth of the Muskingum River. St. Clair named the area Washington County.

**Events Leading up to the Defeat**

Washington moved quickly for the United States to acquire the Indians’ land in the Northwest Territory. Washington ordered St. Clair to avoid war with the Indians, but to punish them severely if they persisted in their hostility. In other words, force the Indians to give up their land, and if they refused, completely destroy them. Washington and his Secretary of War, Henry Knox, underestimated the extent of the Indians’ resistance north of the Ohio River. The Indians fighting for their homeland included the following: a) Iroquois, b) Miamis, c) Shawnees, d) Kickapoos, e) Ojibwas, f) Ottawas, and g) Potawatomis. St. Clair agreed with Knox that it was time to launch an invasion and punish the Indians. St. Clair took the same position as Washington and Knox, that the Indians plundered, pillaged, and ravaged at the expense of others, and that the Indians refused to entertain treaties when invited with the United States. St. Clair was appointed Major General of the Army on March 4, 1791.

Knox dispatched Brigadier General Josiah Harmar of Pennsylvania with a militia from Pennsylvania and Kentucky to destroy the Indian villages at Kekionga (the primary center of Miami Indians, located on the confluence of the Saint Joseph River, Saint Mary River, and Maumee River near present-day Ft. Wayne, Indiana). Kekionga was empty when Harmar reached it on October 17, 1790. Indians often abandoned their villages and buried their corn, when faced with an overwhelming invading force. Harmar burned everything he could. After burning five other villages and destroying 20,000 bushels of corn, Harmar began his march back to Fort Washington (present-day Cincinnati, Ohio). The Harmar expedition suffered a major defeat when Harmar sent major John Wyllys with 340 militia and 60 regulars to attack the Indians as they returned to Kekionga. Harmar’s command lost 200 men, a third of their pack horses, and much of their equipment. Washington, who appointed Harmar, accused Harmar of being a drunkard, though unproven, and used it as an excuse to justify the defeat.

Washington realized now that the only way to defeat the Indians was to fight them on their home land in order to prevent them from attacking the frontiers. Thomas Jefferson concurred. Knox requested, and Congress authorized, an expansion of the army. Washington appointed St. Clair, as commander of the army. The army was to assemble at Fort Pitt (present-day Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), and then float down the Ohio River to Fort Washington. St. Clair would then march to Kekionga, and build a fort in the heart of the Miamis. Washington gave the Miamis advance notice, and offered them a chance between civilization or death. The Indians were prepared for war, and moved their villages downriver to an area known as the Glaize.

In 1791, Washington ordered General Charles Scott to assemble men, and take captive Indian women and children as hostages. In May 1791, Scott destroyed a group of Wea villages, known as Ouiatenon, and other villages, in the Wabash Valley, meeting no opposition. St. Clair dispatched Lieutenant Colonel James Wilkinson with troops on a second raid of the Wabash Valley. Wilkinson burned a cluster of villages, and then reburned the rebuilt Ouiatenon villages.

**St. Clair’s Struggles**

St. Clair was supposed to advance into Indian country on the heels of Scott’s campaign, but St. Clair was delayed by illness, and did not reach Fort Washington to assume command until mid-May 1791. The start date of July was abandoned. The start date was further delayed due to incompetence and corruption in supplying the army. Theodosius Fowler was awarded the provision’s contract, but transferred the contract to Duer. Duer was no longer the assistant secretary of the treasury, and instead, entered into a new career in contracting and speculating. Duer received more than $75,000 in cash advances from the United States to purchase army supplies, but used some of the money to pay off personal creditors, and invested some of the money in land speculations. Duer loand $10,000 to Knox, and they formed a secret partnership speculating in land in Maine. Knox appointed a friend and associate, Samuel Hodgdon, as quartermaster general, and Knox’s younger brother, William, as Hodgdon’s chief assistant.

Hodgdon was supposed to establish contracts and inspection in Philadelphia, buy boats and horses, arrange for the manufacture of artillery shells at Pittsburgh, and have everything shipped downriver to Fort Washington before Hodgdon departed for the same location. Numerous problems arose with the supplies. Clothing was poorly made and slow to reach Fort Pitt. Knapsacks ripped and leaked. Shoes were too small and tore apart after a few day’s wear. Packsaddles were too big. Tents were suitable only for the summer. Firearms were in poor condition, and some were unfit for use. Gunpowder was packed in casks that leaked and let in moisture. Cartridge paper was flimsy. Beef supplies were insufficient and sometimes barely edible. St. Clair had to employ local coopers, carpenters, wheelwrights, and gunsmiths in Cincinnati while waiting for Hodgdon and the supplies to arrive.

St. Clair expected 3,000 men, but by summer, St. Clair was significantly short of men. Many of the men he did have were levies (volunteers for six-month terms). The problem, however, was that the levies were primarily social outcasts, and not fit for military duty and discipline. St. Clair drafted 1,000 reluctant Kentuckians because so few men and officers volunteered. These men had little or no experience for a campaign into Indian country.

Troops trickled into Pittsburgh during the summer. Low water levels on the upper Ohio River prevented General Richard Butler, St. Clair’s second-in-command, from moving the troops downriver to Fort Washington. Washington was unhappy. Washington felt the delay would jeopardize the campaign. In August 1791, Washington ordered Butler to immediately descend the Ohio River. They arrived at Fort Washington on September 10, 1791.

Washington needed a victory, and pressured St. Clair to commence the campaign. St. Clair ‘s gout was so bad he could hardly walk. St. Clair started out on September 17, 1791, and reached present-day Hamilton, Ohio, where he built Fort Hamilton (named in honor of Alexander Hamilton) to serve as a supply depot, and the first link in a chain of forts that St. Clair intended to build for American expeditions against Indians living along the Miami River, the Auglaize River, and the Maumee River. Fort Hamilton took a little over one month to complete. Knox wrote St. Clair on September 1, 1791, that Washington expected St. Clair to press on with the campaign.

St. Clair finally reached the east bank of the Wabash River (near present-day Fort Recovery, Ohio) on November 3, 1791, and made camp. The trek experienced numerous problems. Sixty men deserted on March 30, 1791, intending to plunder the convoys of provisions that were following the army in the rear. Major Hamtranck took 300 men to apprehend the deserters. St. Clair constructed a supply route with a series of garrisoned posts at intervals along the way, sending supplies forward from each post as the troops advanced. The army made slow progress, advancing only a few miles each day, and frequently halted waiting for supply wagons to catch up. Soldiers were miserable due to the poorly made clothes and shoes, and the tents leaked and were not warm enough to keep out the cold. Disease and steady desertion thinned the ranks. Those on levies left when their time expired. St. Clair was so sick, he sometimes was carried on a litter. St. Clair punished soldiers via courts-martial, floggings, and hangings, further reducing morale.

Many additional problems plagued the trek. An incompetent pack master kept losing horses, with little luck in retrieving them. In addition, the Indians stole so many horses that not enough remained to carry the essential supplies of the Army. Rain was relentless, bringing sickness and demands for immediate discharge. Butler resented St. Clair’s power, and jealousy infused the officer ranks. St. Clair now only had 1,400 men, but expected no resistance in reaching the Miami villages, where he planned on building a fort.

When the Shawnees and Miamis got word of St. Clair’s invasion, they sent war belts and painted tobacco, calling on other nations to join them in protecting their land. The Indians responding to the invasion included a) Delawares, b) Shawnees, c) Kickapoos, d) Miamis, e) Wyandots, f) Ottawas, g) Ojibwas, h) Potawatomis, i) some Conoys and Nanticokes, j) Mohawks from Canada, and k) few Creeks and Cherokees. On October 28, 1791, 1,040 warriors set out to do battle with St. Clair.

**St. Clair’s Defeat (sometimes referred to as The Battle of the Wabash)**

St. Clair made camp on November 3, 1791, believing the camp was on the St. Mary River, about 15 miles from Kekionga, The men were hungry, exhausted, and cold, so St. Clair did not construct breastworks or dig entrenchments. St. Clair, instead, wanted a fortified baggage depot built the next day at daylight, and then continue marching toward Kekionga. Few guards were posted as the men huddled around campfires or shivered in their tents. St. Clair believed the Indians were neither near or capable of standing against his army, though he had no idea the location of the Indians. The troops pitched their tents in two parallel lines about 350 yards long and 70 yards apart. Forest and higher ground surrounded much of the site. The Kentucky militia was encamped across the river ahead of the regulars and levies to hinder their propensity to desert.

St. Clair made a serious error in his belief he was at the St. Mary River; instead, he was on the headwaters of the Wabash River, 60 miles from Kekionga. Furthermore, St. Clair had no intelligence reports on the Indians whereabouts. The Indians, though, were well aware of St. Clair’s expedition. The Indians were kept abreast of St. Clair’s trek through scouts, one of which was a young Shawnee named Tecumthè (often, and incorrectly spelled, Tecumseh; the è is silent), soon to become the greatest ever Indian leader. The Indians also arrived in the area on November 3, 1791. They proceeded to advance through the woods at night to the outskirts of the St. Clair’s position.

During a meeting in Lieutenant Colonel George Gibson’s tent that evening resulted in Captain Jacob Slough taking 12 men in a reconnaissance mission to catch some Indians attempting to steal horses. The men departed at 10:00 P.M., going across the river to the Kentucky militia’s camp. The Kentuckians saw and heard signs of Indian activity, and Colonel Oldham pleaded with the men to abort the mission, though, not heeded by Slough. Slough then advanced his men a mile north, and deployed his men on both sides of an Indian trail. Shortly thereafter, 6-7 Indians approached to within 15 yards of Slough’s location, and the men commenced firing. The Indians scattered, but then a larger body of Indians moved around Slough’s flanks, coughing in the darkness in an attempt to draw fire. Slough abandoned the mission and retreated back to camp.

Slough attempted to report the incident to Colonel Gibson, who was retired for the evening, and declined to hear the report. Slough then approached General Butler, who was awake and warming himself by a fire. Butler took the report, but did not inform St. Clair. Butler also did not inform St. Clair the next morning. The Indians, however, were lined up in a crescent or half-moon formation preparing for the attack. The Shawnees under Blue Jacket (Waweyapiersenwaw), the Delawares under Buckongahelas, and the Miamis under Little Turtle (Mishikinaakwa) occupied the center. The Ottawas, Ojibwas, and Potawatomis took the left wing. The Wyandots and Iroquois took the right wing. Little Turtle was overall in command of the force.

The Indians attacked just before the sun was up after the soldiers were dismissed from parade. It was routine for the troops to parade ten minutes every morning before daylight. The men were dismissed at an earlier hour than normal except for those who needed to collect horses, and those who were needed to erect some works. The majority of troops were huddled around their campfires after a cold, snowy night.

The Indians routed the Kentucky militia, and sent them reeling into the other battalions, creating chaos and disorder. The Indians quickly surrounded the army in a matter of minutes. The Indians fired from behind the trees, picking off officers and the artillery crew. The artillery batteries on the high ground recovered first from the initial shock of the attack, and began firing toward the Indians, but shot too high. Blue Jacket rallied his men forward, and breached the perimeter of the camp. Some soldiers mounted a bayonet charge with no effect, as the Indians disappeared until the chargers lost momentum, and then the Indians recommenced their target shooting. Most of the officers fell, including Butler, who had bullied the Shawnees into accepting the American terms at Fort Finney. Butler was seriously wounded and propped up against a tree by his two brothers. Butler was then tomahawked, scalped, and had his heart taken out, eaten later by the Indians. St. Clair had two horses shot out from under him, several bullet holes in his clothing, and a lock of hair shot away.

St. Clair ordered a retreat around 9:30 A.M., quickly turning into a rout. The soldiers successfully broke through the encirclement behind a bayonet charge led by Colonel Darke, reaching a road the troops had cut on their way from the south. Their escape was due in large part to the pause of the Indian attack in which the Indians looted the tents in camp, and killed and tortured the wounded. Soldiers ran for their lives discarding anything that impeded their escape, such as muskets and cartridge boxes. Stores, equipment, artillery, wagons, horses, and wounded were abandoned to the Indians. Most of the survivors made it to Fort Jefferson (in present-day Darke County, right across from the Indiana border) by sunset, and some arrived the next day. The entire army staggered back to Fort Washington on November 8, 1791.

The army lost 630 men (37 officers and 593 enlisted men), and the wounded were 32 officers and 252 enlisted men. Indian losses were approximately 20-30 killed and 40-50 wounded. All the women camp followers except three were killed. Apparently, there were at one time approximately 200 women camp followers, along with their children. The women accompanied the troops as laundresses, nurses, cooks, wives, mistresses, and prostitutes. Most reports state that at the time of the attack, there remained only 33 women, and the 30 women killed were tomahawked and scalped, sometimes before they were dead. It was proportionately the severest defeat the United States ever suffered, and the biggest victory the Indians ever won. The United States’ only army lay in ruins.

The Indians gave up the chase of the fleeing troops after about five miles. The men who survived reached Fort Washington hungry, tired, and dirty. They were not given time to recuperate, and instead, were ordered to put up tents along nearby Deer Creek, while the officers sought rooms in Cincinnati. Few of the levies showed up for duty or obeyed their officers. Morale was further worsen when St. Clair ordered the men to pay for their lost firearms and new clothing. Desertions became rampant.

Washington was livid when informed of the battle. He instructed St. Clair before the campaign begun to beware of surprise, and upon learning of the defeat, stated that St. Clair was worse than a murderer, and the blood of the dead was on his hands. Lieutenant Colonel William Darke, who fought in the battle, and whose son died from the wounds of the battle, published an anonymous diatribe against Washington in February 1792, for having sent an infirm and bedridden general into battle. St. Clair, though, was exonerated from blame for the defeat, and remained as the Governor of the Northwest Territory until 1802, though at the direction of Washington, resigned from the Army on April 7, 1792.

**Conclusion**

Shawnees began migrating west of the Mississippi River following the American Revolution. More followed after the Indian Removal Act of 1830. By the early nineteenth century, Shawnee groups lived in what is now Ohio, Indiana, Ontario, Missouri, and Texas, before most came together again, first at a reservation in Kansas and then in Oklahoma. There are historic Shawnee village sites identified in at least sixteen different states, and as far apart as Maryland and Mexico. The Shawnees today are composed of three branches in Oklahoma: a) Loyal Shawnee; b) Absentee-Shawnee; and c) Eastern Shawnee. The Wyandots, in 1843, were the last Indians to leave Ohio.

**References**

The information provided within is recorded history, and numerous books and articles, often overlapping with the same information, were written about the Ohio country Indians struggle to maintain their homeland. Interestingly, on some minor points, there are unexplained differences in the information. Several books and articles were researched for this paper, but the following offer the most extensive information, and are recommended for further reading.

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