

"William Henry Harrison and the Louisiana Purchase"

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Scholars and Lewis and Clark buffs have traditionally focused on the members of the Corps of Discovery, and its architect Thomas Jefferson, as the primary movers in Early American westward expansion - - and rightfully so. However, the exploration and settlement of western lands was not the dream of a sole individual, nor the work of a few men and women. A great many Americans, native and newcomer, participated in the saga. Today I will speak particularly about the role played by one man, Indiana Territory's governor, William Henry Harrison.

When thinking about the Louisiana Purchase and the Corps of Discovery, Harrison's name does not leap to mind. Yet he was an integral part of the overall plan of American territorial expansion in the early nineteenth century. A Virginian by birth, the son of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Harrison was in many ways the archetype of American values and concerns in the Early Republic. Virginians had been interested in acquiring new lands since Jamestown, and the generation immediately preceding Harrison's, including Jefferson and George Washington, had taken a keen interest in the lands of the Ohio Valley and beyond. William Henry Harrison rode the crest of this expansionist wave, and would prove a key official in securing these lands for the United States.

Harrison's association with the Corps of Discovery, or one of its leaders at least, dated back to the early 1790s. Lt. Harrison was serving as an aide-de-camp to General Anthony Wayne in the Legion of the United States, an army built specifically to defeat the Ohio Valley's Indians and force them to the treaty table. It was here that Harrison met Lieutenant William Clark, younger brother of the famed - and subsequently defamed - Revolutionary hero George Rogers Clark. Though they served in different regiments, the two lieutenants became friendly acquaintances, partly from shared experiences in combat, and partly from their similar circumstances. Both men came from distinguished Virginia families, with relatives whose celebrity far outweighed their own, for the time being. Both had chosen the army, and the West, as avenues to their own personal advancement. And, both men believed fully in America's right, America's destiny, to take and settle western lands.

Lieutenant Clark garnered the praise of General Wayne for his courage and skill in an engagement of May 17, 1794, when Clark's outnumbered dragoons

drove off an Indian war party with “a determined Charge.” Lieutenant Harrison likewise earned “Mad” Anthony’s approval in the pivotal battle of Fallen Timbers that August, when he repeatedly rode through gunfire to deliver the general’s dispatches. Wayne’s victory there led to the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, in which the Northwest Indian Confederacy ceded about three-fourths of what became the state of Ohio, and the United States agreed to a system of annual payments, annuities, to the participating tribes. Lieutenants Clark and Harrison watched Wayne’s treaty negotiations with considerable interest, as did another young officer, Ensign Meriwether Lewis.

The Greenville Treaty ushered in an era of relative peace such as the Northwest had not known since the early 1770s. No major combat broke out in the region until 1811. Indians also experienced several years’ respite from land cession councils with the Americans, though this period came to an abrupt halt in 1802-1803. This was the result of a confluence of two ambitious, francophone empire seekers, who nevertheless had drastically different styles: Napoleon Bonaparte and Thomas Jefferson.

When Spain secretly transferred the vast Louisiana Territory back to France in 1800, Napoleon saw an opportunity to re-extend French influence into the Americas. But Toussaint L’Ouverture and yellow fever combined to dash Napoleon’s hopes for North America. Louisiana quickly went from asset to hindrance in his mind. Needing some quick cash for his European schemes, Napoleon offered to sell the region to the fledgling United States.

Meanwhile, though Jefferson loved all things French, he saw any Napoleonic interest in North America as a clear threat to his own dream of a gradually expanding American empire, an “Empire for Liberty.” Jefferson would do anything, constitutional or not, to prevent France from hemming in the western frontier of the U.S. As rumors swirled that Louisiana had once again

Anthony Wayne Orderly Books, Book 6, p.51, Filson Historical Society; Wayne to Henry Knox, Aug. 28, 1794, in Anthony Wayne: A Name in Arms, Richard C. Knopf, ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1960), 353.

become French, in January of 1803, Jefferson sent his special envoy to France, authorizing him to offer \$10 million dollars for the port City of New Orleans. By mid-April, Napoleon would in fact offer all of Louisiana for \$5 million more.

Jefferson’s boundless ambitions for the West would not allow him to simply wait for an answer from the French. To protect the nation in a worst-case scenario, he envisioned a strong cordon of defense along the major rivers of the Trans-Appalachian frontier, especially the Mississippi. The president concluded that he needed to swiftly install a sizable population of white

Americans along the river, and to do so he would need to extinguish Indian land claims in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. To secure this, in February of 1803, the president wrote to the young governor of the Indiana Territory, William Henry Harrison.

Harrison had retired from the army as a captain and entered public service in 1798. Jefferson clearly saw Governor Harrison as the right man to handle the crucial question of Indian land cessions in the Ohio Valley. Earlier that same month, he had nominated Harrison both to remain as Indiana's governor – Harrison had originally been appointed by John Adams – and to serve as Indian Commissioner Plenipotentiary for the United States north of the Ohio River. The Senate quickly confirmed both nominations. At age 30, William Henry Harrison was now effectively the highest-ranking Indian agent in the western U.S., and President Jefferson wrote him a frank and private letter regarding his course of action.

While Americans were to be “just and liberal” towards Indians, the president wrote, this would entail forcing them to give up their vast hunting lands to American farmers. To do so, Harrison and other American agents were to push American trade goods, and even drive leading Indians into debt with the U.S., making them all the more vulnerable to large land cessions. Jefferson also instructed Harrison to keep these plans secret, as it would be best for the Indians if

Thomas G. Patterson, et al., American Foreign Relations: A History to 1920 (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1995), 60-63
The Papers of William Henry Harrison, 1800-1815, (microfilm) Douglas E. Clanin, ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1999), Jefferson to Senate, Feb. 2, 1803, note. Jefferson's decision to strategically secure western rivers is discussed in Anthony F. C. Wallace, Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

they did not foresee their future. The letter was strikingly devious, not to mention self-serving. It was practically, if not intentionally, malevolent.

In 1803, therefore, Jefferson launched Governor Harrison on an intense, aggressive campaign to extinguish Indian land titles. He would not be disappointed. President Jefferson's stated (if private) reason for unleashing Harrison on such rapid land purchases stemmed directly from his fears of Napoleon occupying Louisiana. In a tremendous stroke of luck for the U.S., however, Napoleon sold the entire territory to American commissioners on April 30, 1803, and the U.S. took formal possession on December 20, 1803. The fear of French expansionism no doubt influenced both Jefferson and Harrison, and their correspondence of 1803 must be seen in the context of looming military and diplomatic catastrophe. Yet after this threat ended, the rapid acquisition of Indian lands did not.

The Louisiana Purchase immediately drew praise for Jefferson's administration,

and it certainly was a tremendous bargain. For Harrison, it offered the excuse to renew his acquaintance with William Clark, now a captain. Clark was now near St. Louis, preparing for his great transcontinental trek with Meriwether Lewis. Harrison wrote Clark in November of 1803, thanking him for the map the two explorers had sent, and noting that he had made a copy of it. "I beg of you to let me know from Cahokia whether I can do anything for you in yr. absence." Harrison offered his respects to Captain Lewis, and invited him to stay in Vincennes a few days upon his return. He was thankful for their offer to send word occasionally, and passed on some information of his own. The previous evening's mail conveyed that the Senate had in fact voted in favor of the Purchase. Later that month Harrison forwarded the nine-page map, made by John Evans, "who ascended the Missouri River by order of the Spanish Government Much further than Any other person," to President Jefferson.

In March of 1804, Congress divided the Louisiana Purchase into the territory of Orleans and the District of Louisiana, and the latter became part of Indiana. The move was never intended to be permanent, as Indiana Territory, in square miles if not population, was already huge. Accordingly, Governor Harrison could not, and did not try to, micro-manage Louisiana. Harrison did have some knowledge of the territory, from his correspondence with its former governor, Charles De Hault Delassus. Still, it was something of a chore for Harrison to gather the information President Jefferson so eagerly sought. In June of 1804, he wrote the president a detailed account of his findings.

Louisiana brought with it many potential headaches for Governor Harrison, the most volatile being the added responsibility regarding Indian affairs. The biggest problem involved the powerful Osage Indians of Missouri, and the desire of other tribes to destroy them. In March of 1804, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn wrote to Harrison, noting that for humanity's sake, the U.S. should try to prevent wars between the Osages and their neighbors on both sides of the Mississippi. Formidable tribes like the Kickapoos and Potawatomis frequently attacked the Osages, and even the tiny Kaskaskias of Illinois tried to form a coalition against these "very Bad Indians." Aside from outright humanity, American officials tried to prevent these wars because American citizens and property could be caught in the crossfire.

In addition to securing title to the lands along the Mississippi River, Harrison anxiously sought treaties to bring Indian tribes into the American annuity system. Having purchased Louisiana from the French, Americans recognized that now they must also do so from the Indians, as a way of establishing peace and a means of control. The 1804 treaty with the Sauks and Foxes accomplished both in stunning fashion. Yet like many of his other treaties, the shockwaves continued long after the initial act was concluded.

Since at least early 1802, Harrison had sought to bring the Sauks, "a sizable nation who reside between the Illinois river and the Mississippi," into the

American treaty system. The Sauks and their close relatives, the Foxes, or Mesquakies, in fact occupied lands straddling the Mississippi, bounded by the Wisconsin River on the north and the Missouri on the south, the middle of present Illinois to the east and the watershed between the Des Moines and Missouri rivers to the west. "They are now extremely desirous to be put on a footing with the other tribes, and receive an annual present, and it appears reasonable that they should." Harrison had an additional motive for treating with the Sauks -- recovering the American captives the Sauks had taken in the 1790s. Harrison proposed inviting the Sauks to his Vincennes Indian council that summer, but the Sauks apparently declined. It was not until 1804 that Harrison got his chance to bring the Sauks and Foxes to council.

In the interim, tension between the U.S. and the Sauks and Foxes had increased considerably. First, the Sauks and Foxes were angered by the Kaskaskias Indians' large cession in August of 1803 -- the Sauks and Foxes both felt that they and the Kickapoos had some claim to the lands ceded. That a tribe of perhaps thirty people could cede nearly eight million acres of southern Illinois without any outside consent, angered the formidable Sauks and Kickapoos. Discontent continued in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase. The Purchase had complicated relations with these and other groups. Not only did it bring dozens of new tribes within American jurisdiction, but the new territory also contained a number of peoples who regularly made war on one another. Among other functions, wars could defend or take hunting grounds vital to the fur trade. When, in August of 1804, U.S. army officers stopped a party of 300 Sauks and Foxes intent on raiding the Osage Indians of Missouri, to the Sauks and Foxes it looked like the Americans were favoring the Osages, their nearest competitors in the fur trade. American policy was not so much to favor the Osages, but to break the cycle of tribal warfare that disrupted trade and put settlers at risk.

American settlers also encroached on Sauk and Fox hunting grounds on the Cuiivre River, in what is now Missouri. Jealousy of the Osages and anger towards the Americans burst forth later that month, when Sauk hunters murdered four Americans on the Cuiivre River. Returning to their homes, the hunters tauntingly threw the scalps in front of their shocked and agitated village chiefs.

Greatly alarmed by the murders, the Sauk civil chiefs denounced them, and the four southernmost bands removed across the Des Moines River in fear of retaliation. Both the Sauks and Foxes had quasi-executive councils, usually of about a dozen senior chiefs, who devised policy regarding the fur trade, the disposition of hunting lands, and diplomacy. In September of 1804, the Sauk council sent two chiefs to St. Louis to condemn the murders and to ask what compensation the U.S. required. They added that they hoped the innocent would not be punished with the guilty. American officials responded by demanding the Sauks give up the murderers, with a thinly veiled threat of war if

they did not. They also ‘invited’ them to attend a treaty council with Governor Harrison to decide just how the guilty would be delivered.

Accordingly, a small delegation led by Quashquame, the chief of a Sauk village (probably home to at least one of the murderers) set out for St. Louis in late October. Quashquame’s delegation was charged with settling the matter of the killings and precluding a war with the U.S. They were authorized by their nation on these matters alone. They brought one of the murderers with them, for trial and possible punishment. by the U.S. The Sauk delegation met with the Americans November 3, 1804. Quashquame bore no authorization regarding land cessions to the U.S. His counterpart, Governor Harrison, was not only authorized, but ordered, to seek lands from the Sauks. From this disparity began one of Harrison’s most controversial treaties.

Quashquame, and four other chiefs, (at least one of whom was a Mesquakie) marked the treaty of November 3, 1804. The treaty itself promised the Sauks and Foxes the protection of the United States, as well as the sum of \$2, 234.50 and an annuity of \$1,000. It stated, like the Greenville Treaty had, “that for injuries done by individuals no private revenge or retaliation shall take place,” but the issue would be taken before the U.S. government for a proper redress of grievances. Also echoing Greenville, the treaty promised to remove any whites that squatted on Sauk or Fox lands. These provisions pleased all concerned. Two additional provisions soon became controversial, and devastating for the Sauks and Foxes.

Article II noted the general boundary between the U.S. and the Sauks and Foxes [map]:

Beginning at a point on the Missouri River opposite to the mouth of the Gasconade River Thence in a direct course so as to strike the river Jeffreon at the distance of thirty Miles from its mouth and down the said Jeffreon to the Mississippi, Thence up the Mississippi to the mouth of the Ouisconsin [Wisconsin] river And up the same to a point which shall be thirty six miles in a direct line from the mouth of the said River, Thence by a direct line to the point where the Fox river (a branch of the Illinois) leaves the small lake called Sakaegan, Thence down the Fox River to the Illinois river And down the same to the Mississippi.

HD to WHH, June 27, 1804, Papers of WHH; Wallace, [Prelude to Disaster](#), 19-20. Kappler, ed., [Indian Treaties](#), 74-77; Wallace, [Prelude to Disaster](#), 20.

The Sauks and Foxes, the article continued, “do hereby cede and relinquish forever to the United States, all the lands included within the above-described boundary.” The language seems perfectly clear – the Sauks and Foxes agreed to

cede, forever, a huge territory to the U.S. But Article VII read, “As long as the lands which are now ceded to the United States remain their property, the Indians belonging to the said tribes, shall enjoy the privilege of living and hunting upon them.” The Greenville Treaty allowed Indians to continue to hunt in ceded territory until Americans settled it. Article VII’s wording seems to give the Sauks and Foxes perpetual use of the lands ceded, however.

Probably the Sauk and Fox delegation did not understand the ambiguously worded treaty as a land cession of most of their lands, and may well have seen the treaty as a symbolic transfer of ownership, not unlike those utilized previously with European powers. Spain, France, and Britain had claimed to rule vast territories, yet did comparatively little to interfere with Indians’ sovereignty within those territories. An interpretation of the cession as an empty gesture fit the Sauks and Foxes’ own land allotment system, if not Anglo-American land law. This interpretation gains strength when considering the rather small monetary compensation agreed to. The Sauks and Foxes combined brought an estimated \$60,000 worth of furs to St. Louis in 1804 alone, and it strains credulity to assert that they would give away so much of their valuable hunting territory for a relative pittance. As the Sauk leader Black Hawk would remark years later, “I find that, by that treaty, all our country, east of the Mississippi, and south of the Jeffreon, was ceded to the United States for one thousand dollars a year! I will leave it to the people of the United States to say, whether our nation was properly represented in this treaty? or whether we received a fair compensation.”

Kappler, ed., Indian Treaties, 74, 76.

Because the alleged murderer who surrendered was later pardoned, “it seems likely that an unwritten part of the bargain was the freeing of the prisoner. A second possible interpretation of the motives of the Indian representatives signing a treaty of ‘cession’ is that they were panicked into acceding to a land cession, defined as ‘wergild,’ under the threat of war and death of the prisoner if they refused.” Black Hawk later charged that the Americans got the Sauk and Fox delegation drunk and tricked them into the cession. While this is possible, it seems unlikely. This accusation first came about long after the treaty, leveled “by Quashquame at a time when he was sorely pressed to explain away the treaty as a thing for which he was not to blame.” The wording of Article VII could easily have been misinterpreted by the Indian delegation, sober or not, and the Americans, upon seeing a willingness to mark the treaty, would not have probed too deeply to ensure that Quashquame and the others really understood. Finally, at this point in his career, Governor Harrison was making sincere efforts to keep alcohol away from his treaty councils, and Quashquame’s and Black Hawk’s accusations do not fit the governor’s *modus operandi*.

The Sauk and Fox councils soon learned that Harrison and the Americans saw the treaty as giving away Sauk and Fox lands. This seemed cruelly ludicrous to them. Both tribes had an extensive, time-honored protocol that would have made land sales possible, and none of the requirements had been met. There had been no official invitation to treat, no subsequent announcement to the nation as a whole, no tribal council to discuss the proposed cession, no ratification with wampum, and no opportunity for the women of the tribe to caucus and express their views. The last was especially important in a practical sense, for women were the primary farmers for the Sauks and Foxes (and for most tribes east of the Mississippi), and had to be consulted when land was at stake. Further, the eastern boundary described in the cession actually exceeded the lands claimed by the Sauks and Foxes. In fact, it even exceeded Secretary of War Dearborn's instructions, which told Harrison to seek the lands south of the Illinois River in Illinois and a "considerable" session on the other side – not mentioning anything west of the Mississippi. When seeking land cessions, erring on the side of aggressiveness was becoming Governor Harrison's pattern.

Wallace, *Prelude to Disaster*, 21, 10 (quote, 21); Black Hawk's quotes, in *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, Donald Jackson, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 54, 51.

Wallace, *Prelude to Disaster*, 16, 20. *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, 54; quote, Wallace, *Prelude to Disaster*, 21.

The president was quite pleased with the treaty, and betrayed no misgivings concerning its validity or boundaries. It was, in fact, the first Indian land cession treaty to capitalize upon the Louisiana Purchase. In his December 31, 1804, address to the Senate, Jefferson noted that, "This cession giving us a perfect title to such a breadth of country on the Eastern side of the Missisipi [sic], with a command of the Quisconsing [Wisconsin], strengthens our means of retaining exclusive commerce with the Indians on the Western side of the Missisipi: a right indispensable to the policy of governing those Indians by Commerce rather than by Arms." The latter point provides superb insight into Jeffersonian Indian policy. He wanted to "govern" the Indians, but preferably not by force – a gesture at once both controlling and benevolent, or the very definition of paternalism. "Exclusive commerce" referred primarily to reducing the influence of the British traders that Jefferson and Governor Harrison were convinced agitated Indians against the U.S. The idea of controlling territory and people through "Commerce rather than by Arms" displays Jefferson's tendency to oversimplify complex phenomena, and seems to foreshadow his disastrous Embargo against foreign trade in 1808. Curiously, Jefferson did not mention the sizable portion of Missouri also included in the treaty.

Wallace, *Prelude to Disaster*, 6-7, 21; HD to WHH, June 27, 1804, in Papers of WHH.

Though they certainly saw the sale as invalid, the Sauk and Fox tribal councils proceeded to view the cession as an accomplished fact; they felt resisting it would put them at war with the U.S. Instead, they sought a redress of their grievances through diplomacy, as several Sauk and Fox chiefs did at the 1805

council in St. Louis. With Harrison and the Americans maintaining the validity of the cession, though, it became increasingly difficult for the chiefs to restrain their angry younger warriors. The confusion and discontent born of the November 3, 1804, treaty would eventually lead to the Black Hawk War in 1832.

Misfortunes continued to follow the Sauks in the wake of the treaty. Having handed over one of the alleged murderers, they nevertheless hoped for his release. The man did receive a pardon from President Jefferson, but it arrived in St. Louis about a week after the prisoner was shot while trying to escape. Historians, lacking much evidence, have jumped to the conclusion that the prisoner was in fact executed by soldiers, and the alleged escape was a cover-up. However, correspondence from Pierre Chouteau and other officials during the weeks in question make it clear that the prisoner did escape with what turned out to be a mortal wound. The Americans were surprised later to find his body about seven miles from the fort, all the while thinking he had successfully escaped.

Papers of WHH; Royce, Indian Land Cessions, tract 50.

Wallace, Prelude to Disaster, 22.

See Michael Sherfy, "Narrating Black Hawk: Constructing and Reconstructing a Native American Historical Subject," dissertation in progress, Dept. of History, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

The new Louisiana-Missouri Territory's governor, General James Wilkinson, had the unenviable task of explaining the unfortunate sequence of events to a Sauk and Fox delegation (which included the dead man's brother) in the summer of 1805. Wilkinson finessed the situation, explaining that the man's death, coming after he had been pardoned by the President, simply meant that the Great Spirit had intended for the murderer to die for "Spilling the Blood of his White Brethren, without Provocation." Wilkinson then gave the pardon to the deceased man's brother, bidding him to keep it both to remember his brother, and as a warning against "Bad Deeds." Wilkinson assured Secretary Dearborn that the Sauk man "received the paper with Evedent Marks of Pleasure." That winter Governor Wilkinson sent a stern letter to the Sauks for their continued attacks on Americans using the Missouri River. There were no further major developments between the Sauks, Foxes, and the U.S. during Harrison's tenure of government. His treaties, however, would help bring new trouble three decades later.

Governor Harrison's June 30, 1805, address to the Indiana General Assembly spelled out quite clearly the Jeffersonian Indian policy that he intended to implement with "These children of nature," in Louisiana. For white Americans, the Purchase had "secured the happiness of unborn millions who will bless the moment of their emancipation, and the generous policy which procured for them the rights of men." It also aided the current generation by ending the need to war against the tribes there. By supposedly ending Indians' contact with

troublesome foreign agents “and forcing them to procure from our selves their arms and ammuntion & such of the European manufactures as habit has rendered necessary,” the U.S. ensured not only Indians’ dependence and fealty, but also “the means of ameliorating their own condition.”

See Bruff to Wilkinson, Nov. 5, 1804, in Territorial Papers vol. XIII, Louisiana-Missouri Territory 1803-1806 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 76-77; Pierre Chouteau to WHH, May 5, May 8, May 10, 1805, and Benjamin Parke to WHH, May 8, 1805, all in Papers of WHH. Wilkinson to Dearborn, July 27, 1805, Territorial Papers vol. XIII Louisiana-Missouri Territory 1803-06, 165; Wilkinson to Sauks, Dec. 10, 1805, *ibid.*, 300-302.

The Americans, he continued, had passed laws to protect Indians, and spent great sums for “agents employed to humanize their minds and to instruct them in such of the arts of civilized life as are adapted to their situation.” Harrison did admit that it was American settlements that made Indians’ hunting so precarious, though true to form he neglected to mention Indian women’s farming skills. Providing for Indians’ well being, he insisted, “has been considered as a sacred duty.”

“It is with you Gentlemen, to divert from these children of nature the ruin that hangs over them; nor can I believe that the time will be considered mispent which is devoted to an object so consistent with the spirit of Christianity and with the principles of Republicanism.” These statements simply ooze the post-Revolutionary paternalism that defined the Early Republic. In his mind, and he was doubtless blessed with unanimous support in the legislature, Harrison had both *carte blanche* and a duty to negotiate Indian land cessions by any means necessary. He wasted little time in doing so.

Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory 1805-1815, Gayle Thornbrough and Dorothy Riker, eds. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1950), 39.
Ibid., 39, 40.
Ibid., 41.