

William Henry Harrison (1773-1841) during the War of 1812

William Henry Harrison was born on February 9, 1773, at Berkeley, Virginia. Attending several schools before being admitted to the University of Pennsylvania at the age of seventeen to study medicine, Harrison was left without funds to complete his education upon the death of his father. With few prospects available, Harrison joined the US Army as an Ensign and was later promoted to Lieutenant, at which rank he fought in his first battle at Fallen Timbers on August 20, 1794. Upon his resignation from the army, Harrison engaged in a political career and was made an Indian treaty commissioner before election to the House of Representatives from the Northwest Territory in 1799. Harrison resigned from Congress in 1801 upon his nomination to Governor of Indiana Territory by President John Adams. This appointment brought Harrison into even greater contact with the frontier Indians, particularly Tecumseh of the Shawnee, with whom he attempted to negotiate treaties securing Indian lands and for public safety against attacks. These failures directly led to open hostilities that by 1811 culminated in Harrison presiding over the defeat of Tecumseh's Confederacy at the Battle of Tippecanoe near the Indian center of strength at Prophet's Town on November 9, 1811. This victory catapulted Harrison to national prominence on the eve of war with Great Britain.

The Army of the Northwest was formed after the US declaration of war upon Great Britain in July of 1812. Harrison, now a regular army Major General, replaced Major General James Winchester in September at the behest of President James Madison and was assigned to offensive operations against the Canadian western flank. An advance on Canada was out of the question, as the British had already captured Detroit in August 1812, and Harrison felt the army he inherited was too small to attempt a recovery of the city. Harrison stood on the defensive in Ohio a few miles from the Michigan Territory frontier and drilled his army for future operations.

General Harrison sought to ensure the safety of the Ohio country while establishing a point of logistical support for an offensive campaign and, by February 1813, finished construction of Fort Meigs. It was there on May 1, 1813, that Tecumseh faced Harrison again when his Indians, stiffened by British regulars and artillery under Major General Henry Proctor, initiated a siege of the fort. Refusing General Proctor's call to surrender, Harrison struck back by having most of his reinforcing Kentucky militia, under Brigadier General Green Clay, flank the British battery emplacements while a second detachment from the fort created a distraction by attacking the enemy front. In confused fighting on May 5, Harrison successfully raised the British siege but at the loss of substantial numbers of the Kentucky militia who were led into the woods near the fort where most were massacred or surrendered. Despite this setback, Harrison was strong enough to follow the British back to their base at Detroit where their position was made indefensible by the American naval victory of Put-In Bay, during the Lake Erie campaign, on September 10, 1813. Harrison spent little time in Detroit and continued his advance across the Detroit River into Canada. Attacking the heavily outnumbered British and Indian forces in front and flank at the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813, Harrison pushed the regulars from the field and drove off the Indians while also securing the death of Tecumseh during the firefight. The combined effects of Harrison's victory at the Battle of the Thames and the naval successes on Lake Erie effectively brought large scale action on the northwest frontier to a close.

After his return to the defenses of Detroit and the opening of the 1814 campaigning season, Harrison was beset by controversy with Secretary of War John Armstrong. Harrison felt slighted by his lack of military promotion for his services and differed with the secretary over war contractors and Armstrong's direct communications with Harrison's subordinates. On May 11, 1814, Harrison resigned from the army and was immediately appointed as an Indian treaty commissioner by President Madison. In this capacity he won support for the United States from several northwestern Indian tribes in a re-signing of the Treaty of Greenville in July 1814 from the original treaty that Harrison had also signed, along with others, after the battle of Fallen Timbers in 1795.

With the conclusion of the War of 1812, William Henry Harrison reentered the House of Representatives from Ohio (1816), lost the election for Governor of Ohio (1820) but later served as Senator from that state (1825-1828). Earning great respect within the government, Harrison left the country to take a diplomatic post in Bogota, Columbia, returning in 1829. Losing a bid for President in 1836 to Martin Van Buren of New York, Harrison ran again four years later. With running mate John Tyler of Virginia, Harrison banked heavily on his public stature as a military hero for his victory at the Battle of the Thames for which he earned a gold medal from Congress in 1818. But it was his victory over the Indians at Tippecanoe that gave his campaign the famous rallying cry of "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too!" Harrison became the ninth president in the election of 1840 beating incumbent President Van Buren. President Harrison pushed himself hard at the outset of his tenure, giving the longest Inaugural Address of any president before or since, meeting with office seekers, and attending to his cabinet appointments. At age sixty-eight, one of the oldest men ever elected, William Henry Harrison died on March 17, 1841, due to complications of pneumonia after only thirty days in office. As the first president to die in office, there was confusion over the succession before John Tyler was confirmed as president and served the remainder of Harrison's term. Harrison was survived by his wife, Anna Symmes, and by four of his ten children, including John Harrison, the father of Benjamin Harrison who became the twenty-third President of the United States in 1888.

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See Also:

Detroit, surrender of; Lake Erie, campaign of; Madison, James; Meigs, fort; Prophet's Town; Shawnee Indians; Tecumseh; Thames, battle of.

FURTHER READING:

Owens, Robert M. *Mr. Jefferson's Hammer: William Henry Harrison and the Origins of American Indian Policy*. Norman, OK:University of Oklahoma Press, 2007.

Stuart, Reginald C. *Civil-Military Relations during the War of 1812*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2009.