



Decorated cartouche from John Mitchell's 1755 map of North America used during the 1783 peace treaty in Paris.

Fort Washington and the Harmar and St. Clair Expeditions of 1790–1791

by William H. Guthman

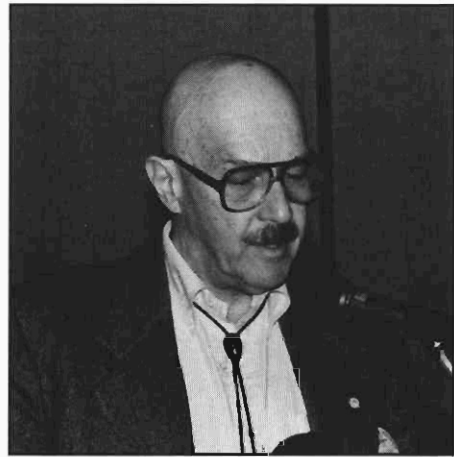
At the close of the American Revolution the infant United States was in the midst of a deep depression. The decentralized government of the Confederation could not solve the economic problems, for each of the thirteen states jealously guarded its privilege to tax its inhabitants within its own borders. Together, the thirteen states prevented the Confederation from obtaining the power to raise money through taxation. Then an unexpected solution developed. Because of a cartographic mistake that occurred during the mapping of North America in 1755, the United States benefited from a huge windfall of land at the 1783 peace negotiations. Congress then saw a way to relieve the financial worries of the United States through the sale of this newly acquired land.

When the formal negotiations for peace between Great Britain and the United States were being conducted in Paris in 1783, John Mitchell's 1755 map of British possessions in North America was used to establish the boundaries. Because of errors in the map, Great Britain relinquished over a quarter of a million square miles of unexplored wilderness, an area four times as large as both England and Wales, to the United States. The area, inhabited by hostile Indians and lawless squatters, was called "The Territory Northwest of the Ohio River" or simply the Northwest Territory. Today that region consists of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and most of the Great Lakes.

Before the land could be sold it had to be surveyed. In order to efficiently expedite the sale of land once it was surveyed, Congress encouraged the establishment of private land companies that would purchase huge tracts of land and sell smaller parcels to individual settlers. The companies advertised the land by promoting a new and promising life to those who would settle the land. The government also set aside a certain portion of the land as bounty for veterans of the late war for whose services it could not afford to pay.

However, while the government and private promoters were painting a promising and peaceful picture of this new frontier, many Eastern newspapers carried accounts from families that had already moved to the territory, telling about flaming arrows, flashing tomahawks, and bloody scalping knives. The logical solution was a military force to protect the Northwestern frontier and its inhabitants, as well as the surveyors sent out to divide the land.

The new Federal army was the result of a compromise with necessity. The young nation did not want a large

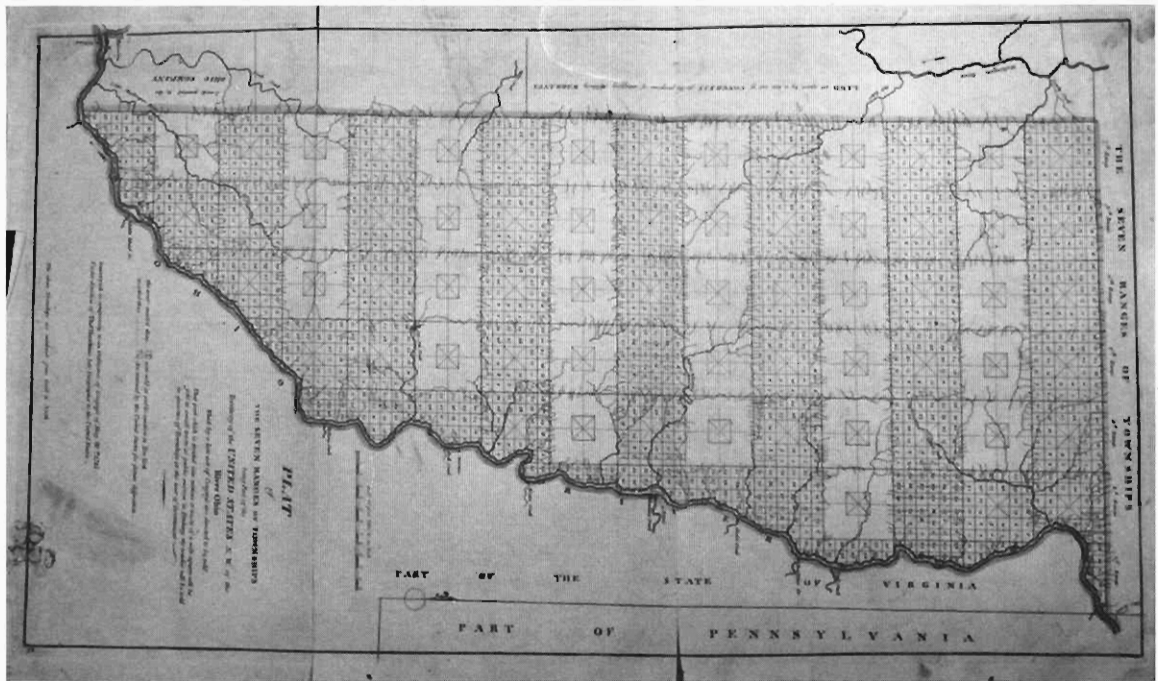


standing army, but wanted instead to maintain local militias controlled by each individual state. However, because of the need to raise money to pay debts incurred by supporting the previous army during the last war, Congress established a small and ineffective regiment to do a job that actually called for several well-trained and equipped regiments.

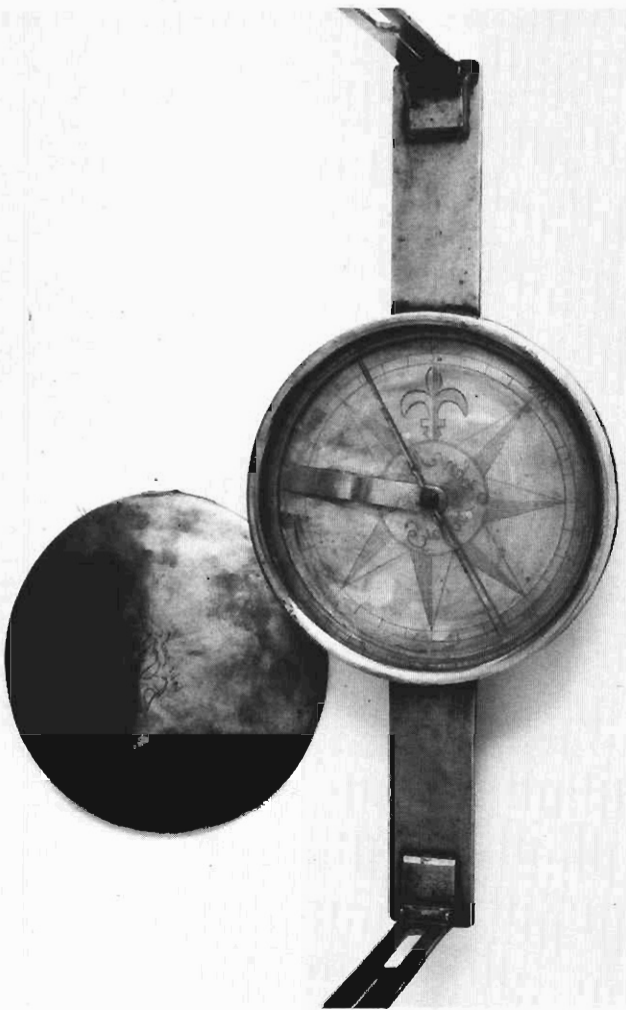
On June 3, 1784, Congress passed a resolution establishing a regiment of 700 men to be furnished by four states, limiting expenditures by recommending that the four states "most practically situated" furnish the men: Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, and New York. (The day before, June 2, 1784, Congress had passed a resolution disbanding the remnants of the Continental Army except for a company of artillery at West Point and a detachment at Fort Pitt—a total of 80 men.) The basic structure of the new organization was the same as that of the old Continental army, which had been prescribed in the Articles of Confederation adopted November 15, 1777.

The command structure remained in the hands of representatives of the thirteen states in Congress until after the Constitutional Government of 1789 became effective. The army was ragtag and ill-trained, particularly for warfare against the capable Indian warriors of the wilderness. Clothing and supplies were either late or never materialized at all, rations were inferior, and for the First American Regiment the quality of camp life was Valley Forge all over again. The details of this first United States Army may be found in my books, *March to Massacre* and *U.S. Army Weapons, 1784-1791*, from which this talk was excerpted.

I would like to proceed from 1784 to 1790,



The land in the Northwest Territory was to be surveyed and divided. This is a surveyors' plot of the Seven Ranges of Townships surveyed in 1785 in what is now Ohio.

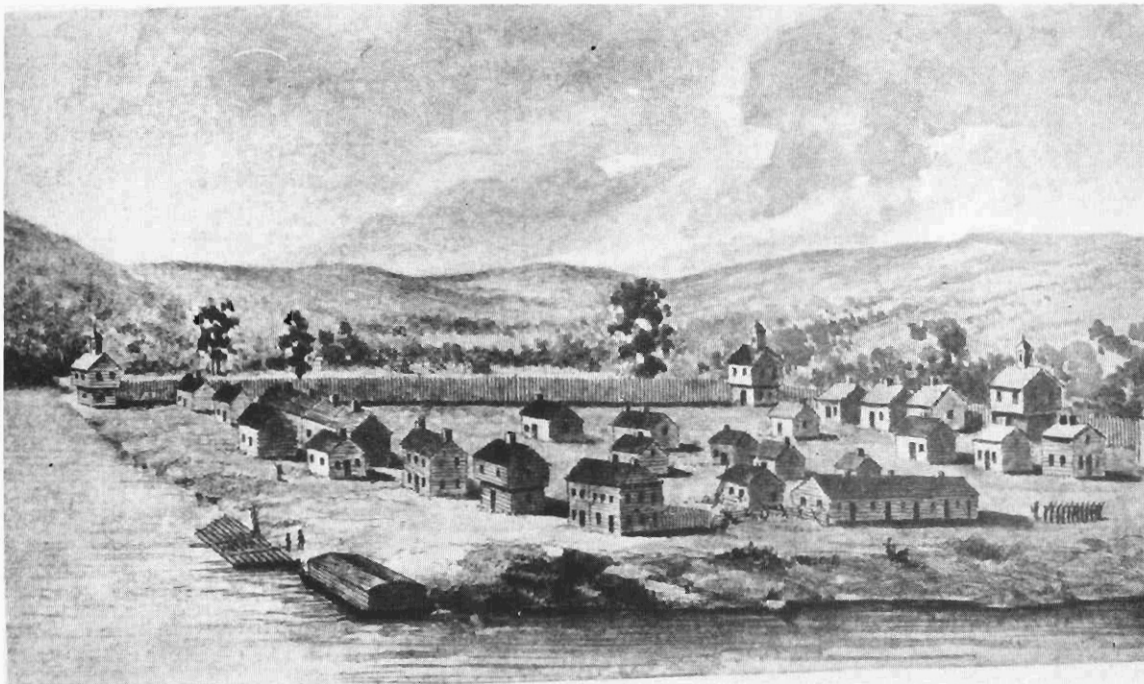


Surveyor's compass of the period, made by John Avery, Preston, Conn.

when Fort Washington was built. The men spent as much time constructing a string of forts as they did on any other duty. Josiah Harmar, a colonel during the Revolution and commanding officer of the regiment, supervised the building of Fort Washington. On January 14, 1790, Harmar wrote to Secretary at* War Henry Knox, "This will be one of the most solid substantial wooden fortresses when finished, of any in the Western territory—it is built of hewn timber, a perfect square two stories high, with 4 block houses at the angles." Erected on the the site of an earlier blockhouse at a settlement called Losantville, the fort stood between what are now Third and Fourth Streets in Cincinnati. The artificer's yard occupied a three-acre enclosure on the river bank with workshops, dormitories, and a two-story building for the Quarter Master General, then known as the Yellow House. Behind the fort, Colonel Winthrop Sargent, Secretary of the Northwest Territory, cultivated an extensive garden. The court martial was accommodated in a rented room in George Avery's tavern near a large frog pond and a marsh interspersed with elder bushes. This room was permanently equipped with pillory, stocks, and whipping posts.

Fort Washington, constructed by Major John Doughty, was the first structure in what is now Cincinnati. It is remembered as the fort at which preparations for two campaigns took place, and from which two armies embarked, one in 1790 and the other in 1791. Both armies were equipped with surplus weapons left over from the huge supply remaining after the conclusion of the American Revolution. On January 3, 1784, Henry Knox, Secretary at

* This was his title at the time.



Typical town that resulted from the surveys: Marietta, Ohio about 1790.

War, had proudly told Congress that his mind was “filled with rapture” to think of the large quantities of cannon, which he labeled “War Trophies” that had been “wrested by the hand of virtue from the arm outstretched to oppress it.”

With the aid of France and Holland, many thousands of these weapons had been purchased in Europe during the Revolution and either shipped directly to the United States or to ports in the West Indies where they were then transferred to ships bound for America. Hundreds of English and Hessian weapons had also been captured during the war and reissued to American troops. Early in the war various branches of the Committee of Safety gave their local gunsmiths contracts to manufacture muskets patterned after the British Brown Bess (both collectors and dealers today over-abuse this fact terribly by misapplying and/or attributing the Committee of Safety label.) Continental armorers and local gunsmiths continued to manufacture new muskets or reassemble old weapons from existing parts until the end of the war. During the war teams of officers were also periodically dispatched throughout the countryside to purchase (or confiscate from Tories) privately owned local firearms. After the war, this heterogeneous group of muskets, pistols, rifles, fusils, carbines, and so on, all requiring different caliber ammunition and different size bayonets, ended up stacked like cordwood in various arsenals scattered throughout the thirteen states.

Henry Knox maintained that storage facilities for the weapons were not adequate and urged Congress to take measures to preserve the vast store of weapons, which comprised approximately 15,000 muskets, rifles, smooth rifles, carbines, pistols, rampart arms, and wall pieces alone

between 1785 and 1792. In *US Army Weapons 1784-1791*, I emphasized the repairing of arms and showed illustrations of how the armorers employed by the government improvised, using parts from different weapons to make a single weapon serviceable, thus extending the use of many weapons.

When the Constitution was adopted in 1789 control of the army passed from the individual states to a central



A drum of the period.

ing terms, viz. to deliver up their leader, M'Gilvrey, and retire further back into the Country.

N E W - Y O R K, October 2.

Extract of a letter from an officer commanding at fort M'Intosh, to a gentleman in Philadelphia, dated fort Pitt, Sept. 13, 1786.

“ Three men from Sandusky, say the Indians are in general disposed for war, and that there are 700 warriors collected at the Shawona towns, and more are expected. That they were informed by two white men who had been there, that they had brought in thirteen scalps and four prisoners, two men and a Mrs. Morr and daughter; the two latter they burned before the men, and told them that was to be their lot in a few days. The above persons say that the Indians are determined to strike at Capt. Hutchins, surveyor, and those with him; also at a settlement called Wheeling, about 170 miles from this: But General Clark, we hope, is ere this gone into their country with 1500 men, which will cut them out some other work than the butchering our defenceless inhabitants.

“ I had almost forgot to tell you that the Indians say they will not disturb the whites if they will confine themselves within the bounds of Pennsylvania or

Newspaper account, 1786, of Indian depredations against surveyors and settlements in the Northwest Territory.

command under the President, as Commander-in-Chief. Even so, preparing for Harmar's campaign of 1790 found contractors delivering supplies and ammunition late, inadequate clothing supplies, and poorly trained troops. Because enlistments fell behind quotas, untrained militia had to be counted upon to make up the difference in manpower.

The British, in the meantime, had belatedly realized

the extent of the territory they had given up. As a result, they refused to relinquish control of the key forts in the region and encouraged resident Indian tribes to carry out raids against the settlers and the small army, supplying their Indian allies with weapons, ammunition, food, and other necessities to carry out a campaign to prevent the United States from taking over. At stake for the British were the fur trade, timber lands, and trade routes.

In April 1790, the United States increased the size of the army and moved toward a showdown with the hostile Wabash tribes. With supplements of militia from Virginia and Pennsylvania, Josiah Harmar led a force of barely trained recruits from Fort Washington to face seasoned warriors of the Miami and other Wabash tribes with the objective of chastising them. The army began its march at the end of September, and continued day by day to head for the Miami villages located at the headwaters of the Miami River, where the St. Mary's and St. Joseph Rivers formed a junction. Naively, Knox suggested that a messenger be dispatched to the British commandant at Detroit informing him of the real objective of the expedition and assuring him of the pacific disposition of the United States toward Great Britain. By notifying the British, the United States played right into their hands, for the British immediately notified their Indian allies, who were then well aware of the United States expedition.

The site of the village that they reached after eighteen days of travel is, today, the city of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Upon their arrival, the army found the settlement vacant and most of the houses burned. The militia wandered around the town looting and searching for plunder, killing several lingering Indians. They spent the next three days destroying the remainder of the houses and the crops. Although it looked as if the Indians had left in a hurry, they were in fact close by, hidden in ambush. Under the leadership of Miami Chief Little Turtle, the cunning Indians led the troops into an ambush that ended with the loss of the lives of twelve officers and 171 noncommissioned officers and privates, the wounding of thirty-one men, and the loss of thousands of dollars worth of weapons, munitions, accouterments, horses, and other supplies.

The cost to the Indians was negligible in comparison. At the outside they lost 120 warriors, and this figure was probably exaggerated, since there was no accurate method of substantiating the figures survivors estimated. Burned huts and wigwams could be easily rebuilt and the loss of the burned corn crop meant only that the tribes had to depend more upon hunting for food and on the British, who undoubtedly substituted other foodstuffs for the lost crops. There was, however, a psychological negative for the Indians, who for the first time had to fight on their home

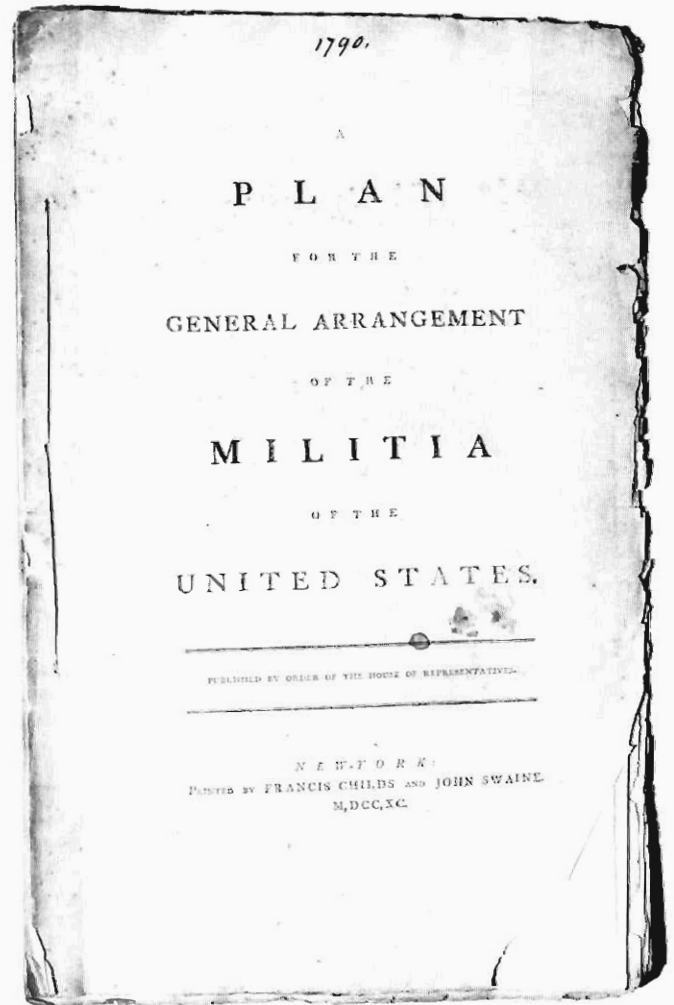
territory rather than raiding settlements along the Ohio River.

In 1791 Arthur St. Clair, a major-general during the Revolution and governor of the Northwest Territory, assumed command of the army. In the meantime, settlements along the Ohio were under repeated attack from Indians angered by Harmar's unsuccessful expedition. Rufus Putnam, leader of the Ohio Company settlement at Marietta and a judge of the Northwest Territory, sent President Washington a frantic letter for help after one of the Ohio company settlements had been wiped out and others attacked. On March 3, 1791, with plans for a new campaign against the Indians, Congress finally authorized the raising of an additional infantry regiment. The newly recruited regulars and the six month levies raised to assist the two regiments were to rendezvous at Fort Washington in July of 1791. The main objective of the campaign was the establishment of a strong permanent garrison at the Miami village, with as many posts of communication along the way as St. Clair thought necessary.

The troops were to be completely assembled, clothed, and accoutered at Fort Washington by the 10th of July. Timing was extremely important, since the levies had been enlisted for a period of only six months and since forage for the horses would disappear with the advance of cold weather late in the fall, as it had in the Harmar campaign. All of the provisions and supplies were to be on hand and ready to move out on that July date, and a compatible group of officers had been suggested by both the executive and military branches of the Federal government and the executive branches of those states contributing the militia and levies.

However, the officers originally suggested were not available for one reason or another. Whether this factor led to jealousies that later developed in the upper echelon of command is pure speculation, but the expedition was destined for doom the moment it passed from the planning stage to reality. Preparations degenerated into frantic corrections and substitutions. Recruiting, as in the Harmar campaign, was not a process of careful selection of picked men but rather a hurried and futile attempt to gather together whatever willing specimens the recruiting officers could find. Schedules soon became outdated and a race against time developed with an almost fanatic attempt on the part of St. Clair, under pressure from his superiors, to begin the campaign. "The President of the United States still continues anxious that you should at the earliest moment, commence your operations" Secretary at War Knox wrote to St. Clair August 4, 1791, when preparations were already a month behind.

On the 25th of August, Knox again wrote of the



America limited the size of the army because they were afraid of a large standing army and preferred a strong militia system, as shown in Henry Knox's plan, 1790, for the U.S. Militia.

President's anxiety, saying, "The President laments exceedingly, the unfortunate detention of your troops on the upper parts of the Ohio [river] for which no reasons sufficiently strong have been assigned." On September 1, Knox wrote to the Quartermaster, Samuel Hodgdon, about the preparations and closed with, "I hope, In God, that the troops may not have been detained at Fort Pitt for want of boats, or any other thing in your department." It was not until past mid-September that Knox assured St. Clair that troops for the expedition were on their way to rendezvous at Fort Washington.

The force being recruited for the campaign fell short of the original estimate and the shortage had to be made up. St. Clair was given a choice of volunteer mounted troops from Kentucky or "militia draughts." St. Clair felt mounted volunteers would not submit to discipline or the slow movement of the army which had to cut through forests to make roads and built forts along the way. The



A strong militia was popular, as shown on this liverpool jug of the Boston Fusiliers.

mounted men received two-thirds of a dollar a day and were under the command of their own officers, while the militia footmen received but \$3 a month and were under martial law.

The first of the new recruits did not arrive at Fort Pitt until August 26, and St. Clair told Knox that the First Regiment was inexperienced and that "no pains have been spared to instruct them so far as it is possible, but I beg leave to observe the same steady service is not be expected from any part of the army as from men who have been long accustomed to the restrains of discipline." Many of those new men had to assume other duties, such as those of artificers and workers in the laboratory manufacturing cartridges and preparing the artillery ammunition. Neither the quartermaster nor the second in command were as yet on hand to help in the preparation of supplies that generally arrived later than anticipated and were found on receipt to be of inferior quality, broken, too large, or too small. St. Clair had to assume personally all of the duties required to ready an army for battle as well as officiate in the time-consuming post of Governor of the Northwest Territory.

One of the reasons the troops were delayed in arriving at Fort Washington is that the contractor, William Duer, had mismanaged \$85,000 advanced for provisions. Thus when they arrived at Fort Pitt the men could not be given traveling rations. Hodgdon, the quartermaster, was apparently also incompetent, because there was a lack of tents, knapsacks,



Martial music was an important part of the fledgling army and the militia.

camp kettles, cartridge boxes, and pack saddles—and those that did arrive were of inferior quality. Many of the arms that had been shipped to Fort Pitt were improperly inspected and were unfit for use, requiring repair before being issued to the recruits. As late as July guns were being assembled at West Point from new shipments of gunstocks and spare ramrods.

At Fort Washington, because cartridges for the artillery and shells for the howitzers could not be filled in barracks that were heated by an open fireplace, the artificers had to work in an inadequate blockhouse that was also being used as a storehouse. The arms were in bad repair, St. Clair said, and great numbers of “axes, camp kettles, canteens, knapsacks, kegs for the musket cartridges, spare cannon balls, and boxes for the fixed ammunition had to be made, and cordage of various kinds, and the cartridge boxes had to be repaired.” He added that the splints for the wounded that had been sent from Philadelphia were useless and that new ones had to be made of “half-jacked leather” prepared on the spot. Furthermore, gun carriages used in the Harmar campaign were in poor condition and it was also discovered that the carriages of the guns sent from Philadelphia were unfit for service and the pieces had to be “new mounted.” In short, said Harmar, “almost every art was going forward, and Fort Washington had as much appearance of a large manufactory on the inside, as it had a military post on the outside.”

On August 4, Know told St. Clair that the 5½ inch shells requested would not arrive in time for the campaign and that the quartermaster had failed to obtain 200 additional shot and shells for each piece of artillery. The quartermaster ordered four-pound shot when three-pound cannon had been ordered for the expedition, and he ordered only 100 axes when 1,000 were needed for the construction of just one fort alone. Major William Ferguson



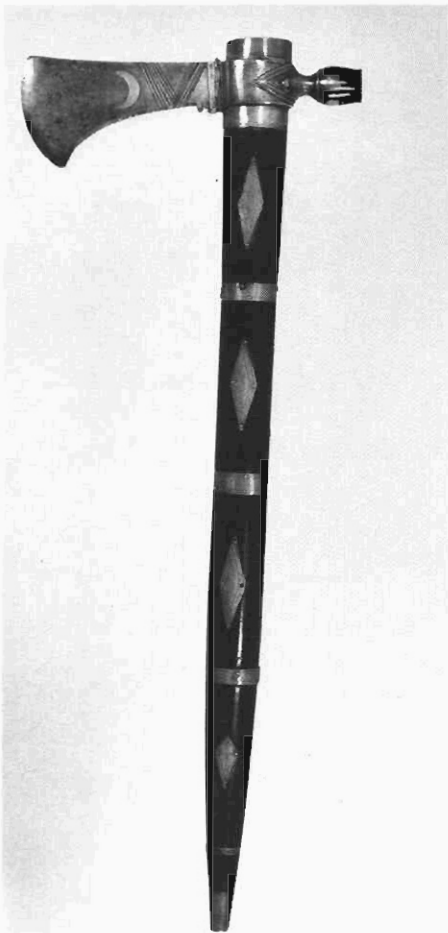
Most of the thousands of weapons left over from the Revolution had to be repaired. This surcharged British Brown Bess was repaired at the wrist.



A butt from another musket had to be spliced onto the butt of this French musket.



Weapons that had not been surcharged during the Revolution were surcharged during the Federal period.



Many of the frontiersmen in the Northwest Territory carried pipe tomahawks as sidearms.



A Pennsylvania rifleman carried this tomahawk with the inscription, "To Your Arms Soldier and Fight."

complained "of the want of almost every kind of entrenching tool, particularly axes, and recently there was only one axe to three men, so that, consequently, two must look on and only work by turns."

The army that marched was woefully under strength. Congress had authorized a corps of 2,000 levies, but only 1,574 were recruited. This was to supplement the regular army of two regiments, which was to consist of 2,128 troops. However, the total of both regulars and levies came to only 2,437. Added to the 262 old members of the First Regiment, the force amounted to 2,699 men in readiness for the campaign on the Ohio. Of these, 699 had to be deducted for sickness, garrison duty at the post, artificers, and noneffectives, which left only 2,000 fighting men for the campaign. To those must be added 418 Kentucky militia (800 were called for) making a total of 2,418 men. Of that number, just 262 (the old enlistees of the First Regiment) had military experience.

The portion of the army that began to move out on September 6 was from the beginning under strict surveillance set up by the Indian Council under the leadership of Miami Chief Little Turtle. Shawnee Chief Tecumseh led the group of Indian spies who carefully followed every movement of the army, communicating constantly with the main force and thus enabling Little Turtle eventually to execute his deadly ambush with masterful perfection. Major David Zeigler described the march to the Miami River from Fort Washington: "The delay in marching was occasioned by the difficulty clearing the road, in making bridges; one day the army marched but a mile and a half; added to this there was so small a stock of provisions on hand, that had the army moved on, they must have eaten their fingers."

Reaching the Miami River on September 15, the men began construction of Fort Hamilton. It was nearly completed by the 30th, so St. Clair ordered a detachment to remain at the fort and the rest of the army to move on forty-three miles to the next post to be constructed, to be named Fort Jefferson. The evening before they departed Indians stole fifty-seven army horses, so upon their arrival at the site of the new fort on October 14, the men observed strict order of encampment in order to be prepared for a surprise attack.

The weather was so cold that a thin surface of ice formed. This severely damaged forage for the horses and cattle (the army had to travel with cattle in order to supply meat to the troops). These factors, along with poor weather conditions and a shortage of proper tools, made progress on the the new fort slow. The army wasn't able to proceed from Fort Jefferson until the 24th of October.

The army that was to have begun its expedition on July 10 with a force of 4,128 men was now three months

behind schedule and had a force of only 1,700 men. Winter was fast approaching, and this was a disaster period for any military operation on the frontier, miles from bases of supply. The army had scarcely three days' supply of food, and had to make up the deficiency by increasing the quantity of beef, with which "they were plentifully supplied" at this point.

This army of 1,700 men presented an enormous caravan moving through the otherwise quiet wilderness. Pack horses and camp followers (washerwomen, mistresses, wives, children, pets, and partially tamed captured animals) followed the regular soldiers behind columns of carts and an assortment of irregularly dressed militia and levies. A small party of riflemen preceded the army, with the surveyor marking the course of the road. There were no guides to be had and the entire march was made upon a compass course, "conjectural indeed, but which proved to be sufficiently correct as it brought us into a large path leading to the Miami towns about twenty miles from them." The army moved ahead, cutting the road and rumbling through the forest, oblivious to the Indians who were scouting every movement.

Proceeding under severe weather conditions, the army arrived exhausted at the banks of a creek [the Wabash River] on November 3, after marching eight miles in light snow that day. Since scouting parties saw no signs of the enemy it was agreed to encamp, even though the area was cramped and did not allow for proper defensive positions. And because the men were so fatigued, St. Clair allowed them to retire before they established proper defenses. The militia encamped on the other side of the creek, further reducing the size of the force by splitting the manpower into two camps. By this time the force was reduced, due to sickness and desertion, to only 1,400 effectives.

The militia, who knew the woods better than the regulars, were ordered to scout the countryside for signs of the enemy. Because they were fatigued—and stated that in any case they were not enlisted for common duties—they did not obey the orders. Later that night, however, Captain Slough of the levies led a scouting party and discovered several large groups of Indians passing. Fearing an attack, Slough reported to his superiors. His commanders told him to wait until the next morning to make his report.

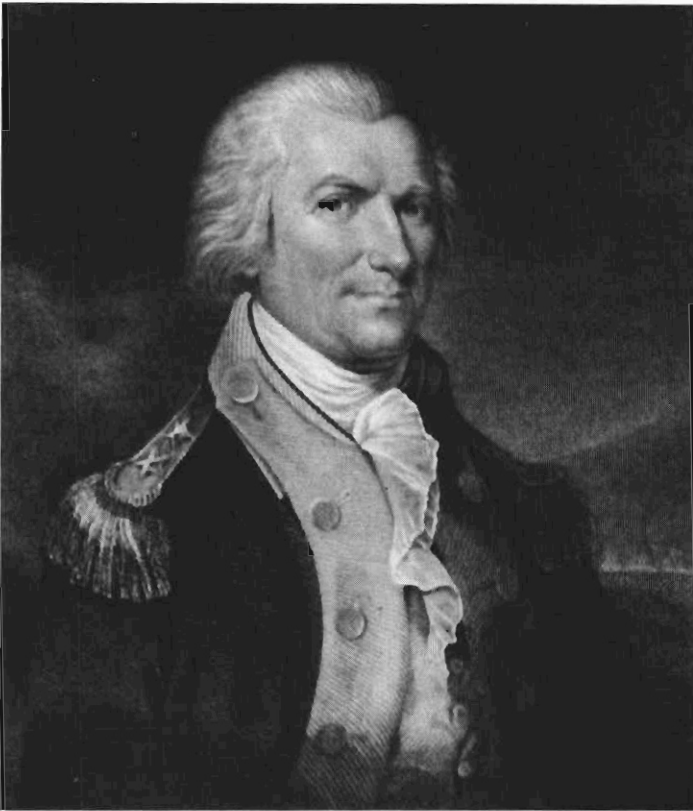
Before sunrise on the 4th of November, Little Turtle's forces attacked. The corps fought for two hours "before retreat was thought of," said Adjutant Winthrop Sargent.¹ The Indians attacking included Miamis, Delawares, Wyandots, Shawnees, Ottawas, Kickapoos, Chippewas, Pottawatomies, some Mohawks from Canada, and a few Creeks from the South. Their leaders were Little Turtle of the Miamis, Blue Jacket of the Shawnees, and Buckongahelas of the Delawares. In his diary, Sargent stated



Many of the swords carried were of the period of the Revolution, but many were manufactured abroad during the Federal period with patriotic motifs.



Close-up of a Federal Period eagle on a sword blade.



General Arthur St. Clair.



Secretary at War Henry Knox. (National Archives)

that, "Concealed as the Indians were, it was almost impossible to discover them and aim the pieces to advantage." He went on, "In this desperate situation of affairs, when even hope, the last consolation of the wretched, had failed the army...the General took the resolution of abandoning his camp and attempting a retreat."

Even the retreat required the most strenuous effort on the part of the officers attempting to gather the covering men together. Sargent said, "Having collected in one body the greatest part of our troops and such of our wounded as could possibly hobble along with us, we pushed out from the left of the rear line, sacrificing our artillery and baggage, and with them we were compelled to leave some of our wounded. The conduct of the army after quitting the ground was in a most supreme degree disgraceful. Arms, ammunition and accoutrements were thrown away and even the officers divested themselves of their fuses and cartridge boxes, exemplifying by this conduct a kind of authority for the most precipitate and ignominious flight. The road for miles was covered with firelocks, cartridge boxes and regimentals."

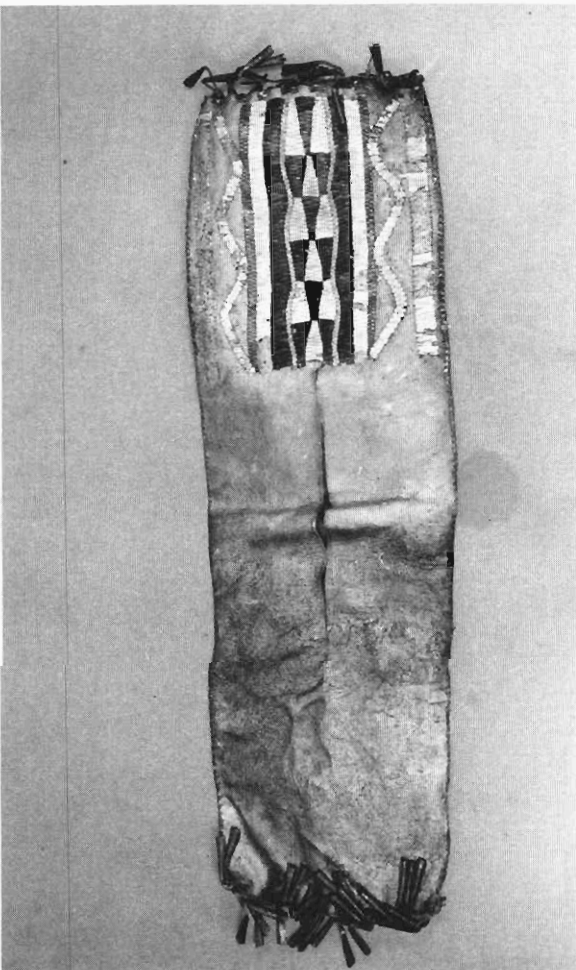
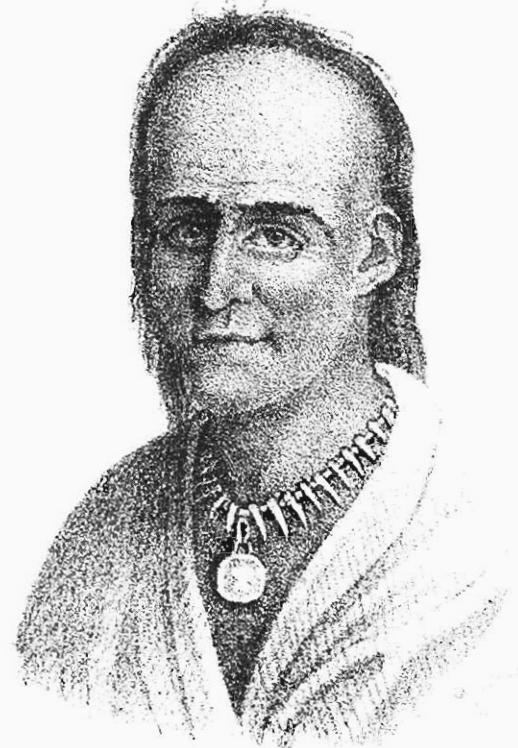
The men made their way back to Fort Jefferson, and eventually to Fort Washington. The defeat was not St. Clair's fault entirely, but due to the poor performance of the contractor supplying the army (Wm. Duer), the poor performance of the Quartermaster, Samuel Hodgdon, and the inexperience of the troops, as well as the long delay of the start of the campaign. There was a Congressional investigation of the defeat but St. Clair was absolved of blame but never forgiven by George Washington.

The exact number of Indians has never been determined, but knowledgeable estimates at the time guessed that not more than 1,500 took part in the ambush. They were supplied by the British and their ranks were bolstered by renegade whites such as Simon Girty, French traders, and possibly British officers and Canadians. One surviving officer counted thirty-seven officers and 593 enlisted men killed, plus thirty-two officers and 252 enlisted men wounded. Another account stated that 637 were killed, 263 wounded, and only 500 (of the original 1,400) escaped. The dollar loss of weapons and accouterments came to \$33,000. This was the worst defeat ever suffered by the United States Army. A broadside published in Boston after the tragic defeat stated, "A Horrid Fight there hap'd of late, /The Fourth day of November, /When a vast number met their fate, /We all shall well remember, /'Twas on renown'd Ohio land, /And fatal prov'd of old, / Sad to relate! /Our Federal Band, /Were slain by Indians bold!"

1 Winthrop Sargent was a Revolutionary artillery officer from Massachusetts during the American Revolution (major in Continental artillery) and served as aide de camp to Gen. Howe from June, 1780, to the close of the war. He was Secretary of the Northwest Territory (St. Clair was Governor of the NW Territory) and became Adjutant General of the army in 1791. He retired from the Continental Army as Colonel and lived, as secretary of the NW Territory, adjacent to Fort Washington. He was wounded during the Nov. 4, 1791 "massacre" and his quotes are from his diary published by the Ohio Archeological & Historical Society Publications, Vol. 33.

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This talk is based on information in the speaker's book, *March to Massacre* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1975), in which an extensive bibliography lists sources of information.



Quill decorated hide shot bag, Great Lakes, of the period.

Miami Chief Little Turtle. (Smithsonian Institute)

"COLUMBIAN TRAGEDY", a broadside published in Boston after the massacre of the U.S. Army on November 4, 1791, under the command of General St. Clair. The confederation of Indian tribes under the leadership of Little Turtle caused the worst defeat of the United States Army in history.



Figure 1. Short land pattern Brown Bess musket.

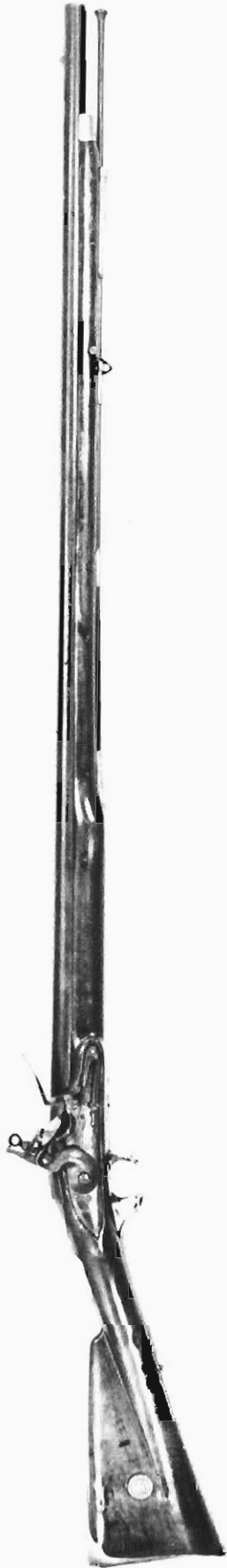


Figure 2. Long land pattern Brown Bess musket.



Figure 3. Model 1766 French Charleville musket as updated 1770-1773.