

LITTLE TURTLE AND WILLIAM WELLS:

A UNIQUE FRIENDSHIP

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October 5, 2018

Little Turtle (or Meshekinnoquah) was born about 1750. Most historians agree he was born in a village in today's Whitley County, Indiana, now Churubusco. His parentage has long been debated among tribal and American historians, but it is agreed that he was destined to become the greatest of all Miami war chiefs in the Northwest and the greatest in peace.

William Wells was born near Jacob's Creek, Pennsylvania in 1770. His father, Samuel, was a captain in the Revolutionary army; and he had four older brothers and one older sister. His mother, Ann Farrow Wells, died when William was nine years old after his father had retired and moved the family to Kentucky where they settled on Beargrass Creek near today's Louisville. Shortly thereafter, Wells' father was killed in an Indian ambush and William was taken into the care of a family friend, Colonel William Pope.

At the age of 14 while hunting in the woods at Roberts Pond near the Pope home, Wells and three companions were captured by Indians. The three companions escaped, but Wells was taken to the

Wea Miami Indian village known as Snake-fish Town on the Eel River about five miles north of present day Logansport. There he was adopted by chief Gaviahatte (the Porcupine) and renamed Apekonit (meaning Carrot) due to his red hair.

Wells learned Indian ways and became a skilled young warrior and hunter. He accompanied the Indians on many raids against the American settlers and often lured river travelers to their death along the Ohio River by pretending to be a lost white boy in Indian territory. At some point in the late 1780s, the Porcupine and his wife told Apekonit that his education was complete; and he was old enough to be a man. As a final ritual he was left alone in a cabin by his adopted father to fast for several days. After the Porcupine returned for him, he was taken home, bathed in cold water, his head shaved, served a meal and presented to the village population as a man. At this time the Miami changed his name from Apekonit to Blacksnake since he exhibited the characteristics of keen sight, sagacity, skilled hunting, quickness and elusiveness.

The “white Indian”, as Wells was known along the frontier by the American settlers, was introduced to Little Turtle by the Porcupine. They soon became friends.

Little Turtle became the war chief of the Indian confederacy by defeating the French military adventurer, Augustin de La Balme in 1780. La Balme had plundered the principal Miami village of Kekionga (present day Fort Wayne) as part of his campaign to attack the British in Detroit. When La Balme left Kekionga and set up camp along the Aboite Creek, he was on Little Turtle’s home ground. Little Turtle led an attack on La Balme’s camp, killed La Balme and 30 of his men. This brought an end to La Balme’s campaign and established Little Turtle’s reputation as an outstanding war leader. Through the 1780’s Little Turtle led raids against American settlements in Kentucky, fighting on the side of the British who were engaged in doing all they could to disrupt the new American government in settling the Northwest Territory.

In the Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolutionary War, the British had ceded the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River to the United States. The Northwest Territory was formed and the land north of the Ohio River was divided by the United States for settlements. The Indians, however, did not understand or accept that the British had ceded the land to the United States. It is probable that many Indians had never heard of the Revolutionary War or the Treaty of Paris. It was their land. The Native Americans resisted the settlers moving west, violence escalated and the Northwest Indian war began. The Indian confederacy had the goal of keeping the Ohio River as the boundary between Indian lands and the United States. Little Turtle was one of the leaders of the confederacy which included the Miami, Shawnee and Delaware Indian tribes among others.

In 1790 General Josiah Harmar was sent by President George Washington to completely defeat the Indian Confederacy and end the border war. Little Turtle and the Miami as well as Shawnee won two

victories against Harmar's forces and the Kentucky militia in Kekionga. It is likely that Wells participated in Harmar's defeat.

It was late 1790 or early 1791 after the defeat of Harmar that Little Turtle became more closely associated with William Wells, who would soon marry his daughter, Manwangopath (meaning Sweet Breeze).

William Wells had previously married a Wea Indian woman and fathered a son. There had been an attack by Harmar's soldiers under the command of Colonel James Wilkinson on the Wea village of Snake-fish Town where Wells and his Wea family lived. His wife, child and adopted Indian mother were captured. Wells and the majority of Indian warriors were away from the village at the time. Because Wells' wife was captured, there was no barrier among the Miami tribe to Wells taking a second wife. Sweet Breeze was eighteen years of age and it was time for her to marry. Whether Wells and Sweet Breeze had any romantic interest is unknown. Little Turtle could possibly have promoted the marriage because he liked and admired Wells. His intention was to deepen his friendship with Wells and to

learn the ways of the Anglo-American race. Whatever the case, the attachment was lasting not only between Wells and Sweet Breeze, but, also, between Wells and Little Turtle as Little Turtle learned to love Wells as his son. The marriage lasted until the death of Sweet Breeze in 1805. Wells and Sweet Breeze had three daughters and a son. Some historians say that there were two sons, but one died at an early age.

Later in 1791, the United States launched another campaign to defeat the Indian Confederacy of the Northwest. A force of 2,000 men under the command of General Arthur St. Clair moved north from Fort Washington (now Cincinnati). Little Turtle led a coalition force of 1,000 warriors to defeat St. Clair's forces in a battle near the headwaters of the Wabash River (which is present day Fort Recovery, Ohio).

William Wells at this time was fully assimilated to the ways of the Miami Indians, having learned their language, adopting their way of thinking and their manner and methods of warfare under Little Turtle's mentoring. In the battle against St. Clair Wells was chosen by Little

Turtle to lead a band of select Miami warriors to kill St Clair's men who were stationed in the artillery positions to fire cannons. This band of warriors was very successful and the cannons were never fired. Had the cannons been fired, heavy casualties would have been inflicted on the Indians.

The surprise attack against St Clair and this Indian victory remains the worst defeat the Americans would ever suffer at the hands of the Indians: 623 soldiers were killed and another 258 wounded. William Wells is quoted as saying that he had killed and scalped American soldiers until he couldn't raise his arms to his head. The victory over St. Clair further bonded William Wells and Little Turtle and so the trust and friendship between the two men was firmly established.

The carnage that occurred in this battle, however, caused Little Turtle and Wells to rethink their lives but for different reasons. Little Turtle had actually been so moved by the slaughter on that fateful day, November 4, 1791, that he had ordered an end to the killing by the Indians. Both Wells and Little Turtle realized that the American



settlement of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan was inevitable. The surge of the American western movement was unstoppable even in the face of Little Turtle's military victories.

Wells could not forget his Wea family that had been captured by Wilkinson. Nor could he fully walk away from his heritage and early childhood upbringing. He was torn between two cultures, and, in addition, he knew that his brother Samuel commanded a company of militia under St. Clair. Wells was haunted by the idea that he very well could have slain his own brother in that bloody battle. He struggled with wanting more for his wife, Sweet Breeze and their children than the harsh, insecure life that the Miami Indian life would provide. He sought comforts, stability and the ability to accumulate wealth for himself and his family. Wells, at this point, went to Louisville to his brother Samuel's home. He did so to wait for the return of General Putnam who had the authority to release the Indian captives at Cincinnati where his Wea Indian wife, child and mother were being

held. When General Putnam arrived at Cincinnati, he did release the prisoners.

Wells learned that General Putnam needed an interpreter, and Wells agreed to serve in this capacity and join the United States Army. Wells soon proved to be an invaluable employee for Putnam. He informed the general of the place where the Indians had buried St. Clair's captured cannons and he urged Putnam to open peace negotiations with the Indians.

It is thought that between the defeat of St. Clair by the Indians in 1791 and General Anthony Wayne's victory over the Indians at the battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 that William Wells and Little Turtle met several times. It is believed they hoped to bring peace between the races and agreed that Wells would continue his service to the Americans and work for peace as best he could by trying to influence them in that direction while Little Turtle tried to sway the tribes to seek peace with the settlers. This theory is supported by the continuing

friendship of the two and the fact that they both advocated peace until their deaths.

Repeatedly during the years from 1792 to 1794 peace was offered to the Indians. However, at the same time, a major military campaign was being prepared under General Wayne. If the peace offers were refused, a battle would be fought. A council meeting attended by William Wells was held in August of 1793. but proved to be unproductive. The Indians were willing to make peace if the Americans met their demands of a firm boundary of the Ohio River and the settlers being held to this line. The Americans refused this option and the order went out from President Washington for General Wayne, the commander of the Western army, to advance his war effort and destroy the whole Indian Nation of the Heartland. Wells, by this time, was reporting directly to General Wayne.

Wells was commissioned by Wayne as a captain and commanded a company of scouts and spies to gather intelligence about the Indians

and take prisoners. Each member of the 20-member company was picked for their knowledge of the Indians and for their prowess in war.

Now the die was cast. Wells sent his wife and children to live with his brother, Samuel, in Kentucky. They would be safe while he was away fighting Sweet Breeze's own father.

Wells threw himself into leading his party of scouts that would act as a spearhead for General Wayne's army. He had made the decision to leave his Indian life behind. He made the painful decision to bid Little Turtle farewell. The story of Wells' sad farewell to Little Turtle is one of the most moving in frontier history. Wells took his father-in-law to a large elm tree called the "Big Elm" that grew two miles east of the Miami village of Kekionga. Standing with Little Turtle at the "Big Elm", Wells told the chief he must return to his own people. He then pointed to the sky and told Little Turtle they would be friends until the sun reached that position in the heavens, then from that time onward they would be enemies; and if they ever met in battle, Little Turtle could kill him; and he would take his father-in-law's life if possible. Wells then

turned and walked away into the forest no longer a “White Indian”, but now an enemy to the very people he had come to love as his own. It could be possible, however, that whatever agreement was reached between Wells and Little Turtle to work for peace was still in place as both men continued to fight for their own race.

The British continued to urge the Indians not to make peace with the Americans and to supply them with arms, ammunition and provisions to continue the battle. Little Turtle, however, was becoming more and more distrustful of the British and their promises. He openly urged his fellow chiefs to make peace with the United States. He was rebuked for his advice and lost his preeminent position among the tribes.

Little Turtle, recognizing that Wayne was a better leader than Harmar or St. Clair, whom he had surprised and readily defeated, is quoted as saying, “Think well of it. There is something whispering to me. It would be prudent to listen to General Wayne’s offers of peace”. He is also said to have called Wayne “the General who never sleeps”.

With these words Little Turtle withdrew as war chief of the combined Indian Confederacy.

On August 20th of that year, Blue Jacket of the Shawnee took over as the war chief and led 900 warriors in an intense battle near present day Toledo, Ohio that lasted about an hour. Wayne had over 3,000 men in his army divided between the well-trained men of his Legion and the Kentucky Militia of Major General Charles Scott. The casualties were minimal on both sides of the battle. Anthony Wayne's troops defeated the Indians who retreated and acknowledged the American victory. The battle was given the name Fallen Timbers after the downed trees in that area. In just a few hours the strategic advantage and the honor gained by Little Turtle and his warriors against Harmar and St. Clair were lost. The most important moment came when the British troops, in their recently constructed Fort Miami on the Maumee, refused to aid or open their doors to the retreating Indian warriors. The British had abandoned the Indians. The Indian resistance crumbled and peace negotiations were now possible.

Historically, the battle of Fallen Timbers was one of the decisive battles of the American military experience.

The Treaty of Greenville which followed the Battle of Fallen Timbers the following year completely ended the Indian dominance of the territory they had possessed. Little Turtle spoke eloquently at Greenville through his interpreter and son-in-law, William Wells. (Little Turtle and Wells had reconciled as Little Turtle understood it was prudent for Wells to leave the Indian life and take up his life as an American.

At first, Little Turtle rejected the terms of the treaty. He explained that the lands on the Wabash and in Ohio belong “to me and my People”. He proposed an alternative boundary and offered documents signed by President Washington guaranteeing certain lands. He made demands about trading posts and traders. Wayne did not budge on the boundaries, but he did make concessions with regard to trade.

After a few days and further deliberations with Wells acting as the interpreter, the 1,130 Indians agreed to the Treaty of Greenville on

August 3, 1795. Little Turtle is quoted as saying “I have been the last to sign this treaty. I will be the last to break it”. Little Turtle from that time forward lived by these words. Subsequently, President Washington approved and the Senate ratified the treaty.

Little Turtle responded to the American victory by urging his people to adapt to the Anglo world, take up farming, lead a more sedentary life and to strive for peace and goodwill. The great war chief of the Miami had resigned himself to the authority and rule of the Americans. He believed the two cultures could live side by side and that his people would be assimilated. Little Turtle and William Wells began formulating a plan to gradually sell off Miami land to finance a civilization program for the Miami tribes and at the same time retain enough land so that their fellow tribesmen, when ready, could make a living by agriculture. Had Anthony Wayne lived beyond 1796 he may have helped Wells and Little Turtle with their plans as he had respect for both men. However, Wayne died in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1796; and, as it turned out, the plan that they conceived was thwarted as



Little Turtle and Wells were never able to gain enough government control to implement the program. They were also continually trying to persuade the hostile Indians to give up the fight against the advancing American settlers north of the Ohio River, up the Wabash and both up and down the Maumee.

In the winter of 1797-1798, the middle-aged chief, accompanied by William Wells, met with President John Adams in Philadelphia, the capital of the United States at that time. That was the second trip to the capital as they had met with President Washington in November 1796. When Little Turtle met with Washington, he was presented with a ceremonial sword as evidence of the president's esteem and friendship.

In 1801 Thomas Jefferson was elected President and Little Turtle and Wells, on two different trips, went to the capital, which was now in Washington DC, to make requests on behalf of the Indians. Wells and Little Turtle made a request of the President for a council house and a trading center to be built in Fort Wayne. Little Turtle requested a

blacksmith and farm implements to be placed in the hands of William Wells for distribution. He emphasized that the sale of liquor to the Indians must be forbidden. He said it was truly a matter of survival.

Little Turtle requested that reputable traders be sent to the Indian villages and that Wells be appointed as the agent in Fort Wayne. As a result of these meetings, Congress did pass a resolution stating that with the President's approval, liquor should be prohibited to the Indians. The prohibition lacked enforcement and had little effect. A government trading house was established at Fort Wayne, but not under the control of Wells. The Secretary of War appointed John Johnston to the position. Little Turtle's civilization program was entrusted by the president to the Quakers. No real achievement was made even after several efforts were attempted to teach the Indians the white man's agricultural methods and convince them that the farming should be done by the men of the tribe and not the women as was their custom. Could Wells and Turtle have succeeded had they been entrusted by the Jefferson administration to implement the plan,

we will never know. The plan was achievable and was in accord with Jeffersonian philosophy. However, Jefferson's subordinates were allowed to act on their own judgement and so the plan was never placed in the hands of Little Turtle and William Wells.

It was after the purchase of nearly one million square miles from Napoleon in 1803, known as the Louisiana Territory, that Jefferson abandoned any thoughts he may have had about a plan to civilize the Indians. He ceased to believe that they would ever be assimilated and advocated the removal of the Indians from their native lands to land beyond the Mississippi or beyond the Missouri.

William Wells remained the Indian agent and he and Little Turtle continued to work to retain as much land as possible for the Miami. However, William Henry Harrison, the governor of the Indiana Territory at the time, convinced Jefferson that the salvation of the Indians rested upon the selling of the Indian hunting grounds to the United States. Harrison negotiated multiple treaties with Jefferson's approval to achieve this goal. He secured millions of acres of valuable land

through treaties at unfair, low prices, sometimes as low as 2 cents an acre. These unfair treaties and unfair land sales contributed heavily to the collapse of any good American and Indian relations that Wells and Little Turtle had established. These treaties intensified the hatred that the Indians had for the Americans and for the westward expansion. This was especially true among the Shawnees and their war leaders, Tecumseh and The Prophet.

War with Great Britain was declared by the Americans on June 18, 1812. One of the major causes of the war was the intensity of the Indian frontier violence encouraged by the British. James Madison was President when war was declared.

Shortly thereafter, Little Turtle died at the age of 65 on July 14, 1812 at the home of his son-in-law and loyal friend, William Wells. He was buried with full military honors as well as a proper Indian burial in his ancestral burial ground on Wells' farm near Spy Run in Fort Wayne. His death silenced the most powerful voice of moderation among the tribes.

Wells had lost his good friend and ally and his strongest tie to Kekionga. He further realized that Little Turtle's death diminished his usefulness to the Americans. He resigned as Indian agent and made plans to return to Kentucky where his white family lived and where his children by Sweet Breeze were living with his relatives. Harrison begged him to stay in his post at Fort Wayne due to the escalating hostilities arising among the Indians along the Great Lakes. Wells decided to stay to help protect the settlement of Fort Wayne.

Remaining in Fort Wayne at Harrison's request and shortly after Little Turtle's death, Wells learned of the danger facing Fort Dearborn (present day Chicago). Wells' niece, Rebecca, was married to Nathan Heald, the commander of Fort Dearborn; and so, Wells, with a group of about 30 Miami Indian warriors, headed to that post to help with the evacuation that had been ordered by General William Hull. The procession of women, children and soldiers leaving Fort Dearborn numbered about 100 and the hostile Potawatomi Indians, under the influence of the Shawnee leadership of Tecumseh, numbered perhaps

400.

The Indians set a trap for the evacuating party that was led by Wells. Wells was dressed as an Indian, with his face painted black as it was the Miami custom when facing certain death. He was one of the first to be killed in the ambush. The Indians chopped off his head and placed it on a lance, cut open his chest and removed his heart. Hoping to gain the dead man's courage, the Indian warriors divided the heart among themselves and ate it.

The tragedy in all of this does not come in the death of Little Turtle or William Wells, but rather in their inability to implement their plan for the peaceful acceptance and assimilation of the Indians. Their failure resulted from factors beyond their control. They were caught between deceitful government practices and officials and the hostile Indians who tried in vain to cling to the way of life they had known for centuries and the land they loved so much.

In 1912 Little Turtle's grave was disturbed during a construction excavation. At that time, the sword that George Washington had given

Little Turtle as well as other artifacts were discovered. These can be viewed at the History Museum here in Ft. Wayne.

His remains were reinterred and a stone was placed on his grave which reads: This site honors the great Chief of the Miami, Meshekinnoquah, the Little Turtle, son of the great Chief Acquenacque. He is held in the hearts of his people, allies and foes with the greatest of honor and respect for his courageous valor and peacemaking.

Now may I conclude with a poem that I feel reflects this chapter of history.

Did we not own this glorious land

Each forest, lake and river

Were they not from Thy sacred hand

Our heritage forever?

Where tombs arise and harvests wave

Our children used to stray

We cannot find our fathers' graves

Our fathers where are they?

Like snow before the fiery glance

Like dew in the garment's ray

Like bubbles that on the ocean dance

Our tribes were swept away

Anonymous



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Vol 106 Number 2

June 2010

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