

This Day in History... October 5, 1813

Harrison's Victory at Battle of the Thames

On October 5, 1813, future president William Henry Harrison defeated a British force and its Indigenous allies at the Battle of the Thames in Upper Canada. The victory restored US control of Detroit and the Michigan Territory, weakened Britain's position in the western Great Lakes region, and brought the death of Shawnee leader Tecumseh.

The battle grew out of the difficult first year of the War of 1812. In August 1812, British Major General Isaac Brock captured Detroit with support from Tecumseh and warriors from several Native nations. The surrender gave Britain control of Detroit and strengthened its influence along the western frontier. It also alarmed Americans living in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Kentucky.

William Henry Harrison, then governor of the Indiana Territory, was appointed commander of the Army of the Northwest. He faced serious problems. His army needed food, weapons, transportation, and a way to move safely across the Great Lakes. Britain's control of Lake Erie made it difficult for the United States to supply troops or attack Detroit.

That changed in September 1813. On September 10, Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry defeated a British squadron in the Battle of Lake Erie. Perry's victory gave the United States control of the lake. It also cut the British supply route to the forces holding Detroit, Amherstburg, and Fort Malden in Upper Canada.

The British commander in the west, Major General Henry Procter, now faced a dangerous situation. His soldiers had limited food and ammunition. Tecumseh and his followers had supported the British because they hoped Britain would help protect Indigenous lands from US expansion. They were unhappy with Procter's retreat and with the British failure to provide supplies. Still, Procter decided to abandon Detroit and Amherstburg and move east along the Thames River.

Harrison entered Detroit on September 29. He then sent a force of about 3,500 men after the retreating British. His army included regular soldiers, Kentucky mounted riflemen, and militia. The Americans moved quickly. Procter's exhausted force could not maintain its distance.

By early October, Procter chose a defensive position near Moraviantown, a Christian Delaware community on the Thames River in present-day Ontario. His British regulars stood in a thin line between the river and a swamp. Tecumseh and roughly 500 Indigenous warriors took positions in the woods and swampy ground to the British right. Procter had fewer than 1,000 men in all. Harrison's force was far larger.

Harrison reached the British position on October 5. He quickly decided that a direct mounted attack might break the narrow British line. Colonel Richard Mentor

Johnson led Kentucky mounted troops against the British regulars. The charge succeeded. The British line collapsed in only a few minutes, and hundreds of British soldiers surrendered. Procter escaped the field, but his army was effectively destroyed as a fighting force.

The battle continued in the wooded area where Tecumseh's warriors resisted the American advance. The fighting there was harder and more confused. Tecumseh was killed during the engagement. No one can state with certainty who fired the fatal shot. Johnson later claimed that he had killed Tecumseh, but the evidence is inconclusive.

Tecumseh's death was a major loss for the Indigenous confederacy he had worked for years to build. He had sought to unite Native nations in defense of their homelands and had opposed US settlement beyond existing boundaries. Many of his followers ended their cooperation with Britain after the battle, although Indigenous resistance and treaty negotiations continued in the region for years.

The Battle of the Thames did not end the War of 1812. British forces still held Fort Mackinac, and fighting continued elsewhere along the Canadian border and the Atlantic coast. Yet the victory secured Detroit and the Michigan Territory for the United States for the rest of the war. It also ended the immediate danger of a British-led offensive across the Northwest frontier.



Harrison later used his victory at the Thames, as well as other battles to bolster his presidential campaign.



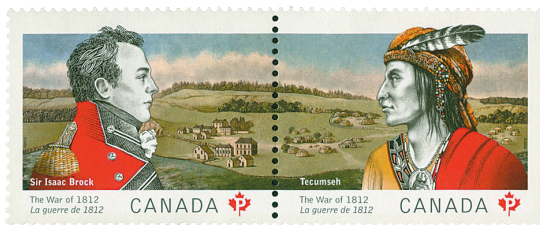
Perry's victory on Lake Erie cut British supply lines and let Harrison move troops and supplies safely toward Detroit.



Detroit was the key gateway to the western Great Lakes. Its recovery after the Battle of Lake Erie gave Harrison a base to pursue the retreating British army into Upper Canada.

Harrison used the victory to negotiate armistices with several Native nations, though the agreements did not protect them from later pressure to surrender land or move west. The war ended with the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, which largely restored the prewar boundary between the United States and British North America.

For Harrison, the battle became an important part of his public reputation. Nearly three decades later, when he ran for president in 1840, supporters invoked his earlier victory at Tippecanoe with the campaign slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." The Battle of the Thames was less famous in popular memory, but it was the campaign that removed Britain's western field army and changed the balance of power around the Great Lakes.



2012 Canada stamps featuring Sir Isaac Brock and Tecumseh.

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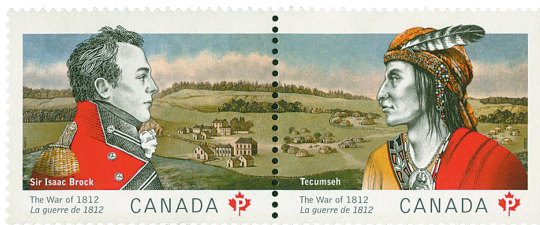
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