

This Day in History... September 4, 1812

Siege of Fort Harrison Begins

On September 4, 1812, the Siege of Fort Harrison began. It would end 11 days later in the first American land victory of the War of 1812.

En route to their battle at Tippecanoe, General William Henry Harrison's army camped along the Wabash River. Harrison and his men built a fort, which was named for the general, on the site to protect the army's supply lines as well as the Indiana Territory's capital at Vincennes.

When the War of 1812 broke out, Captain Zachary Taylor was placed in command of Fort Harrison. Following a series of American losses at the start of the war, Native Americans in the area were motivated to attack remote US outposts.

Captain Taylor received a warning from a band of Miami on September 3 that a large force of Native Americans was planning to attack the fort. With just 50 men in his fort, and all but 15 of them sick, Taylor prepared for the attack the following day. Five local settlers joined the fight and all were issued 16 rounds of ammo. Later that day, a force of 600 Potawatomi, Wea, Shawnee, Kickapoo, and Winnebago warriors approached the fort under a flag of truce. They requested to meet with Taylor the next morning to parley, and he agreed.



The fort protected supply lines and the territory's capital

However, a lone warrior snuck into the fort that night and set a fire that destroyed most of the food and made a wide hole in the outer wall. At the same time, the rest of the force attacked the other side of the fort, but the soldiers managed to drive off the initial attack. The fire quickly spread, igniting whiskey stores and burning out of control. While the fire caused extensive damage, it was useful in lighting the dark night to reveal the attackers.

Taylor later admitted that his situation appeared hopeless, but he warned his attackers that "Taylor never surrenders!" He then set some of his men to putting out the fire. When it was under control, they successfully repelled the attack.

The garrison managed to hang on through an eight-day siege, until a 1,000-man relief column arrived on September 12 and drove off the attacking natives. The battle is considered America's first land victory of the war.

However, the day after the siege ended, a supply train bringing much-needed flour and meat to the fort was ambushed by a Potawatomi war party on a part of the trail known as The Narrows (near present-day Fairbanks, Indiana). The horses ran away with the supply wagon and all but two of the 13 men in the party were killed. Another supply party set out two days later, unaware of this attack and was also attacked by the Potawatomi. They retreated after the initial attack, suffering seven men killed, with eight returning to Vincennes.

In the coming days, US forces retaliated against the Potawatomi and drove them out of Indiana Territory. Fort Harrison later became known as "The Fort of Two Presidents" because of its connections to both William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor.



From the 1938 Presidential Series



This stamp was most often used on letters to Europe.

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