

# **THE FRENCH AND BRITISH AT THREE RIVERS**

**ST. MARY, ST. JOSEPH & MAUMEE RIVERS**



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After the discovery of America, four European states, England, France, Holland, and Spain, laid claim to various portions of the North American continent. The French claims were largely based upon the discovery of the St. Lawrence by Cartier in 1521, and subsequent exploration of the interior of the Continent by Champlain, La Salle, and other Frenchmen. Ultimately, the territory which the French pre-empted included the St. Lawrence Valley, the Great Lakes region, the territory extending southward to the Ohio River, the territory immediately west of the Mississippi River, and that part of the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico adjacent to the mouth of the Mississippi River. The French exploited the fur-trading and fur-producing possibilities of this vast empire; French priests sought the conversion of the Indian inhabitants to the Catholic faith; French military forces established a chain of forts or posts extending along the Great Lakes, down the Wabash River, and along the Mississippi River to the Gulf. Numerous Frenchmen came to this interior region, but few Frenchwomen accompanied them; consequently, French settlements were relatively few and weak. Many Frenchmen formed temporary or permanent unions with Indian women, and in the next generation a considerable number of half-breeds were born of these unions. Important French posts in the area were Presque Isle, Mackinac, Detroit, Post Miami, Vincennes, New Orleans, Kaskaskia, and St. Louis.

The environs of the Indian village of Kekionga, located in the present Lakeside section of Fort Wayne, were selected by the French for the location of Post Miami, because of combined strategic, economic, and geographic significance. The village was located at the confluence of the St. Joseph and St. Mary's Rivers. It was, therefore, on water highways connecting with Lake Erie and tapping the interior of Michigan and Ohio. Kekionga was only a few miles from the Wabash River with the St. Lawrence-Mississippi watershed lying between the two. A shallow lake, since drained out of existence, extended southwest from Kekionga to present-day Waynedale, and was navigable by canoe during part of the year. These factors inevitably made the confluence of the rivers a portage for east and west traffic between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. Pelts and trade goods, passing back and forth from the East to the Southwest, and in reverse, could travel by canoe all the way between Lake Erie and New Orleans with the exception of a few miles at Kekionga. This short break in navigation made the portage necessary; the geography of the rivers made it possible. Here men were forced to carry canoe and cargo from the navigable waters at the confluence of the rivers to the headwaters of the Wabash River.

The portage at Kekionga brought relative prosperity to the Indian rulers of this region, because a tribute for portage was levied upon every canoe load of pelts and trade goods. Possession of this valuable location afforded the Miami Indians at Kekionga political importance, too, because economic advantage always makes for political interest. The political

power controlling the portage, therefore, dominated the commercial intercourse of the area.

The French immediately sensed the importance of Kekionga and located their post nearby at a very early date. The date of the coming of the first white man to this area is unknown; some believe that Champlain saw Three Rivers as early as 1614 or 1615. The earliest extant map, dated 1632, indicates that the Maumee River was then known to French cartographers. Other maps drawn in 1654, 1656 and 1674 chart the rather thorough exploration of the territory by the French. There is a possibility that La Salle was on these rivers during the period between 1679 and 1681, for he seemed to have known about the Wabash - Maumee Portage.

The Frenchman came on a peaceful mission. He sought trade with the Indians and brought valuable commercial articles, which were strange, new and desirable to the red man. The Frenchman was usually willing to live with the Indian on terms of equality, and to take an Indian woman in marriage. He wanted no occupation of the land; he did not seek to dispossess the Indian; his missionaries sought no material advantage. At first, these practices won the friendship and confidence of the simple child of the forest, and the relations between Frenchman and Indian were usually amicable.

French influence, then, in the interior of America and in the region known today as the great Middle West, was paramount in the beginning because of primacy of arrival. Meanwhile, the land-hungry English on the Atlantic Coast rapidly expanded over the entire seaboard driving out the

Indians. The Appalachian Mountains long proved a barrier to English expansion westward. Not until the English could acquire a suitable beast of burden for conveying freight and merchandise across the mountains would French influence in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys be jeopardized.

The date of establishment of the first French Post at the confluence of the Rivers is veiled in the mists of the past. We only know, as these mists lifted, that the French were located here in a small fort, block house, or trading post which was named Post Miami. Probably of greater commercial and religious, rather than political importance, it was situated on the St. Mary's River near the present crossing of the Nickel Plate Railroad. The French Officer Bissot may have been stationed here as commandant in charge of French interests as early as 1697. Cadillac passed through the portage on his way southward from Detroit in 1707; already English influence was beginning to be felt in the area. The Miami Indian population in and about the village approximated 400 persons. They subsisted from their plantings along the Maumee River, from forest products and hunting, and from their trade with the French.

Francois Margane succeeded Sieur Bissot as commandant at Post Miami. He extended French influence and power by establishing, first, Post Ouiatenon at the present location of Wabash, Indiana, and later, Post Vincennes on the present site of the city of Vincennes. During the first quarter of the eighteenth century the English began seriously to undermine French influence with the Indians. This rivalry became more bitter and culminated in an Indian uprising against the French who were not destined

to dominate the portage much longer. Soon they learned that the English had erected a stronghold on Laramie Creek, a few miles from the present site of Sidney, Ohio.

Chief Sanosket, known also as Chief Nicolas of the Hurons, fell under British control; he made war against the French, and attacked a number of French posts on the frontier. In alliance with the Miamis, the Ottawas attacked Post Miami and partially burned the buildings. Ensign Douville, the commandant, was absent in Detroit. The eight men forming the garrison were captured, although two of them later escaped to Detroit. To a certain extent, the French and Miamis soon adjusted their relations because of mutual need for trade. However, the relationship thereafter was never sincerely friendly. The ruined fort was partially restored but gave much evidence of neglect. Father Jean de Bonnecamps recorded his observations of the fort made in 1749. Griswold's Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, vol. 1, p. 46 quotes the priest as follows:

"The fort of the Miamis was in a very bad condition when we reached it. Most of the palisades were decayed and fallen into ruin. There were eight houses, or, to speak more correctly, eight miserable huts which only the desire of making money could make endurable. The French there number twenty-two; all of them including the commandant, had the fever. Monsieur Raimond did not approve the situation of the fort and maintained that it should be placed on the bank of the St. Joseph a scant league from the present site. He wished to show me the spot, but the hindrances of our departure prevented me from going hither. All I could do for him was

to trace the plan for his new fort. The latitude of the old one is 41 degrees and 29 minutes."

Captain Raimond lost little time in relocating his fort. The site he chose is the high ground near the present intersection of St. Joe Boulevard and Delaware Avenue. The old buildings of the original French fort served as a nucleus for a settlement and were now occupied by the few Miami Indians who still remained on friendly terms with the French. The little village came to be known as Coldfoot's village, in honor of Miami Chief Coldfoot.

In the face of waning prestige, the French made one spirited attempt to check the English. Under the leadership of Charles Langlade, a few Frenchmen and two hundred Chippewas and Ottawas moved down from Detroit to attack Fort Pickawillany. Assembling their forces at the portage near Kekionga, they turned into the St. Mary's River, and thence marched overland unheralded toward Pickawillany. After a surprise attack the fort was reduced. In celebration of the victory, and in vengeance for his friendship with the British, the Indians enjoyed a cannibal feast on the body of La Demoiselle, chief of the Piankeshaws. This victory temporarily restored the prestige of France with the Miamis at the portage. The defeat of Braddock in 1755 still further diminished the influence of the English among the Indians. Thus, the battle of propaganda and bribery for the favor of the Indian tribes seesawed back and forth. The pendulum, however, was swinging in favor of the British.

During the next few years British political emissaries and traders



made ever-increasing trouble for the French; these machinations foreshadowed the destruction of French power in the Ohio Valley. The small French garrison, and French half-breed families living in the present Spy Run Avenue neighborhood, led a precarious existence. The local Indians, aided and abetted by the English, and well-fortified with whiskey (hitherto denied them by the French) now liberally dispensed by the British, increasingly harassed their former French allies.

In 1756, the Seven Years' War, known in American history as the French and Indian War, broke out between France and England. One of the prizes at stake in the contest was the domination of the North American continent. After the fall of Quebec, concomitant with the defeat of General Montcalm by General Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, French authority in North America passed to the English. Shortly thereafter, the garrison at Detroit surrendered to the English. In December, 1760, Lieutenant Butler, commanding a detachment of twenty English soldiers, received the surrender of Fort Miami. Thereafter, the Union Jack flew over the Maumee portage.

During the period beginning in 1760 and ending with the termination of the Revolutionary War, British policy seems to have emphasized commerce and conciliation with the local Indians. British military forces were never strong in the area, and now that the French were vanquished, the stockade no longer possessed military value. Fort Miami fell into decay.

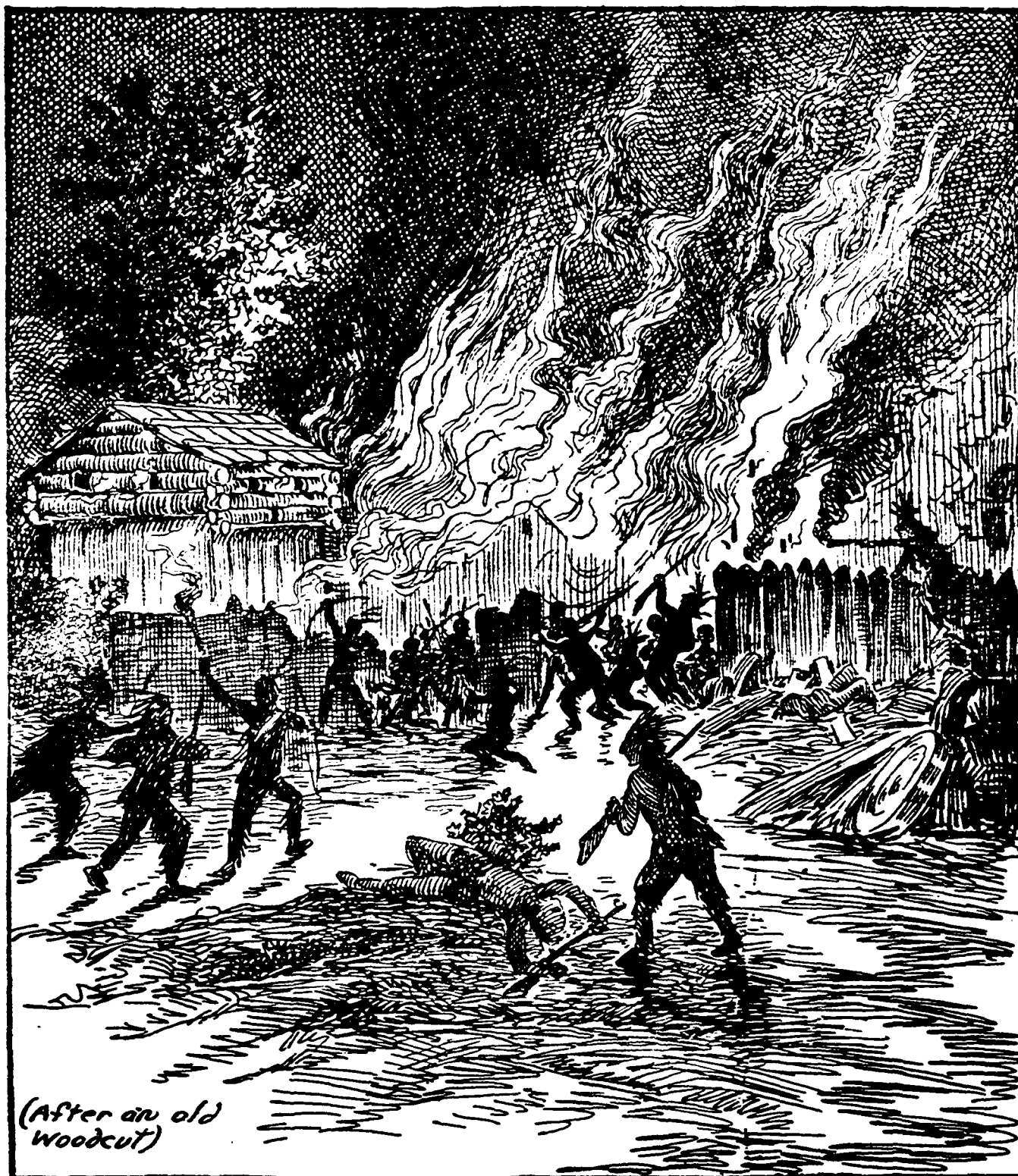
A brief era of good feeling between the Indians and the British followed. Soon, however, there were stirrings among the red men. The great

Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas, a man of superior intelligence and great skill in statecraft, began inciting the Indians to expel the British from the entire western country. For a long time the conspiracy and war preparations continued in secret; not until 1763 were they revealed. Soon the Indians attacked and laid siege to all the British forts on the entire frontier; they captured Forts Sandusky, St. Joseph, Michilmackinac, Ouiatanon and Miami.

At least one romantic but tragic incident occurred in connection with the attack on Post Miami. Ensign Holmes, English Commandant at the isolated British fort on the St. Joseph River, was a young and very lonely man. Rumor has it that he shared few common interests with the men of his garrison. He sought feminine companionship and found favor in the eyes of an Indian maiden who reciprocated his affections.

Let Parkman tell the story:

"On the 27th day of May, a young Indian girl, who lived with the commandant, came to tell him that a squaw lay dangerously ill in a wigwam near the fort, and urged him to come to her relief. Having confidence in the girl, Holmes forgot his caution and followed her out of the fort. Pitched on the edge of a meadow (in present-day Lakeside), hidden from view by an intervening spur of woodland, stood a great number of Indian wigwams. When Holmes came in sight of them his treacherous conductress pointed out that in which the sick woman lay. He walked on without suspicion, but, as he drew near, two guns flashed from behind the hut and stretched him lifeless on the grass. The shots were heard at the fort and the sergeant



**BURNING OF THE FRENCH POST MIAMI (SITE OF FORT WAYNE) 1747.**

During the period of the Chief Nicolas conspiracy, in 1747, while the commandant, Ensign Douville, was absent at Detroit, the savages attacked the post situated on the St. Mary's river in the present city of Fort Wayne and partially destroyed it with fire. The post was rebuilt, and later, in 1750 a new fort was established on the left bank of the St. Joseph river. The drawing is after an old woodcut.

From Griswold's Pictorial History  
of Fort Wayne, Indiana



rashly went out to learn the cause. He was immediately taken prisoner, amid exulting yells and whoopings. The soldiers in the fort climbed upon the palisades to look out, when Godefroy, a Canadian, and two other white men, made their appearance and summoned them to surrender, promising that if they did so their lives would be spared."

Ultimately Pontiac's Conspiracy was quelled and uneasy peace was restored on the frontier. At the beginning of the American Revolution the British were confronted with the problem of retaining the Indians as allies against the Americans. The savages realized the need of British subsidies and soon became genuinely attached to the redcoats.

In October, 1778, Governor Hamilton's army, advancing from Detroit against the forces of George Rogers Clark in southern Indiana, passed over the portage. The only military action, however, which occurred here during the Revolutionary War is known as La Balme's Massacre.

Augustus La Balme, one of the volunteer French officers who had accompanied the Marquis de LaFayette to America, was commissioned a colonel in General Washington's army. In October he appeared at Kaskaskia, then under American domination since its capture by George Rogers Clark. He gathered a considerable force of Frenchmen and Indians and advanced northward, his objective being the expulsion of the British from Detroit. Arriving at the Indian settlement at Three Rivers, La Balme and his men plundered the village and destroyed a great deal of property. At close of day he retired with his 103 men and camped on the Aboite River. In the dead of night an Indian force under the leadership of Little Turtle attacked

the invader, destroyed nearly a half of the little force and compelled the remainder to flee. The incident has little significance except as the initial engagement in a series of bloody victories won by Little Turtle and the Miami Indians against the Americans.

The Treaty of Paris in 1783 made the United States nominally paramount in the Ohio Valley. However, the British, on the pretext of bad faith on the part of the American Government, continued to occupy forts in the area which they had contracted to evacuate under terms of the treaty. Among the forts they still held illegally were Presque Isle, Mackinac, Detroit, and Fort Miami near Toledo.

From the vantage point of these forts, British military officers and diplomatic representatives continued friendly relations with the local Indians. By moral suasion the Indian was influenced to believe that his friends were British rather than American. Through gifts of food, equipment and arms, the Indian was relieved of problems of logistics which might place him at a disadvantage with any American military force. The Indians massacred hundreds of American settlers on the western frontier, and burned and pillaged their homes. Under the leadership of Little Turtle and others in 1790 and 1791, Indian warriors inflicted overwhelming defeats upon the armies of American Generals Harmar and St. Clair.

American influence and prestige were at a low ebb, indeed, and it appeared that the Ohio Valley with the portage at Three Rivers might fall by default to the British after all. In order to prevent this calamity, General Wayne undertook his campaign westward into the Indian country from



The above likeness of Chief Little Turtle (Me-she-kin-no-quah) was made from a cut out of a very old book which had been reproduced from a painting made for him while in Philadelphia. This painting was destroyed when the Capitol building at Washington was burned by the British in the war of 1812. Head dress on the forehead, contains three rattles from at least three rattlesnakes; has always been considered a splendid likeness of the famous Chief.





Pittsburgh. He soundly defeated the Indians at Fallen Timbers in 1794. Wayne's expedition culminated in the building of the fort which bears his name and in the formal occupation under the American flag in September and October, 1794.



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