The Sixty Years War for the Great Lakes
by David Curtis Skaggs*

The Great Lakes world of 1750 was one of great expanses of forests and water. Interspersed with Native American villages along its major waterways were occasional small French outposts located at critical junctions — Fort Frontenac (modern Kingston, Ontario), Fort Niagara, Fort Detroit, Fort Michilimackinac, and Fort La Baye (Green Bay, Wisconsin) were among the most significant of these. Soldiers were few at these “forts,” fur trading the most common occupation of the Frenchmen who dared to work their way along the many water passages that provided access to the North American interior from the major French settlements along the lower St. Lawrence River. That river, which drained all the Great Lakes, constituted the economic tie for the region with the trans-Atlantic world that lay beyond. The furs of beaver and muskrat and the hides of buffalo and deer were its principal exports.

Seventy years later we find that 1750 world dramatically changed. The political suzerainty the Native Americans and the French enjoyed was gone. Instead, sovereignty was divided between a young republic and the British Empire. Economically the centers of power were concentrated in a series of Euro-American settlements on both sides of the lakes. The southern side witnessed American migration into central New York, the Ohio Valley, and the fringes of the upper lakes. Rochester, Buffalo, Erie, and Cleveland emerged to rival the traditional centers of economic development at Oswego, Detroit, Mackinac, and Green Bay. On the Canadian side, Toronto emerged as a new emporium of Lake Ontario, displacing Kingston. Grain, not furs, became the area’s most profitable export. At the center of this transformation was a conflict lasting some sixty years that changed forever the regional balance of power.

Only three of the stages in this long struggle were totally confined to the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley — Pontiac’s Rebellion (1763-65), Lord Dunmore’s War (1774), and the Maumee-Wabash Confederacy War (1786-94). The other three — the French and Indian (or Seven Years’) War (1754-63), the War for American Independence (1775-83), and the War of 1812-14 — were part of worldwide conflicts having significant impact upon this region. The last phase — the War of 1812 — was the most fiercely fought conflict ever focused on the Great Lakes region. Like the 30 Years’ War and the 100 Years’ War, it contains conflict, tension, peace, and renewed warfare in a variety of phases.
In 1750, the French claimed that their provinces of New France and Louisiana controlled the vast drainage regions of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi valleys. But the Native Americans also had regional sovereignty claims that, for them, were more real than any emanating from Versailles. The Algonquian peoples of the lakes and rivers between the Ottawa and Ohio rivers felt themselves sovereign in their homelands. On the other hand, the Iroquois Confederacy, headquartered in the Finger Lakes of upstate New York, claimed jurisdiction over the Algonquians and, because of their Covenant Chain of Friendship with the British, gave that nation’s ever-greedy colonial governors a claim to the trans-Appalachian west.

By mid-century these claims were being actively broached by the three most ambitious of colonies — New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. New York’s western claims came not so much from any charter territorial grant, but rather from the Iroquois’ dubious claim to suzerainty over the Algonquian region southward into modern Kentucky. Virginia asserted that her charter of 1609 gave her title to lands between her boundary with North Carolina westward to the Mississippi River and northward to the lands of the Hudson’s Bay Company. … In the midst of all these provincial designs were assertions by various private land companies for territory in the trans-Appalachian west. These included a large number of claims in the Ohio River Valley by Virginia and Pennsylvania speculators under such titles as the Mississippi Company, the Greenbrier Company, the Loyal Land Company of Virginia, the New Wales Company, and the Ohio Company.¹

But it was the Franco-Algonquian presence that was the most dominant. In 1749, the governor-general of New France sent Captain Celeron de Blainville to reestablish their position in the Ohio Valley. He found himself opposed by Chief Memeskia at Pickawillany and reported that Indians in the Miami River Valley favored the British. Such an affront could not be tolerated. In 1752, young Charles Michel Langlade of Michilimackinac led an expedition of thirty Frenchmen and 210 Indians to Pickawillany, where they destroyed the local trading post, killed or captured

several British traders there, and boiled and ate Chief Memeskia. Such a resort to terror only proved the weakness of French control of the region. Such actions alone would not stop British commercial intrusions. …

[After the British victory in the Seven Years’ War], the Peace of Paris of 1763 dramatically reoriented political power in the North American interior. France ceded her vast Mississippi empire to the British and the Indians lost their ability to play two European empires off against one another in their efforts to retain control of what their homeland. Remaining in the region were the French-speaking habitants of the former New France; the Anglo-Americans from New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia; and British government officials and merchants who moved into New France; and the Indians. Their various claims and ambitions could not be easily satisfied.

Among the Native Americans various splits arose. Initially it appeared the Iroquois Confederacy had won out since they had long been British allies. But a century of warfare along the Anglo-French frontier had taken its toll on the people of the longhouse, and the British were no longer dependent upon them for protection. Instead, the more numerous Algonquian-speaking peoples of the western Great Lakes — particularly the Miamis, Shawnees, Ottawas, Potawatomis, Sauks, Foxes, Ojibwas (Chippewas), and Menominees — now held the balance of Indian power in the region. Traditionally allied with the French. They now confronted both the military power of the British and the aggressive land-grabbing designs of the colonists of British North America.²

Their attitude of independence was best expressed in the words of Ojibwa Chief Minavavana, who told the first Englishman to reach Fort Michilimackinac: “Englishman, although you have conquered the French. You have not yet conquered us! We are not your slaves. These lakes, these woods and mountains were left us by our ancestors. They are our inheritance; and we will part with them to no one.” Ottawa Chief Pontiac relayed his vision from the Manitou, or Great Spirit: “This land, where you live, I have made for you and not for others. How comes it that you suffer the whites on your lands? ... I love them not, they know me not, they are my enemies and the enemies of your brothers! Send them back to the country, which I made for them! There let them remain.” From such attitudes came the second phase of the Sixty Years’ War, known to us as

Pontiac’s Rebellion. ...³

The British found they could not dictate to the Great Lakes tribes and they concluded the Pontiac conflict with a series of concessions. In many ways these concessions constitute the best testimony we have of the power the Indians still possessed. The first was the Proclamation of 1763, which forbade white settlement beyond the Appalachian Mountains. It also placed all negotiations with the tribes in the hands of an imperial Indian superintendent, rather than the provincial governors. Recognized by all as a temporary measure, the British saw this proclamation as granting them breathing space before they concluded concessions from the Indians and formulated a policy for white settlement across the mountains. For the Great Lakes, it placed the region in a vast Indian country. Trying to appease both some Indians and some land speculators, in 1768 Indian Superintendent Sir William Johnson negotiated the Treaty of Fort Stanwix with the Iroquois, which opened up land in central New York and south of the Ohio River. Still reserved as Indian lands were western New York and the area north of Ohio. For the Native Americans of the Great Lakes, the maintenance of the Fort Stanwix line on the Ohio was to be the core of their diplomatic and military efforts for over four decades. ...

The Great Lakes played a minor role in the dramatic worldwide conflict that began on Lexington Green. Still, we remember many of the exploits of the region — the Indian-Loyalist raids out of Niagara into the Cherry and Wyoming valleys, the destruction of the Iroquois homeland by John Sullivan’s Continentals and the New York militia; George Rogers Clark’s famous expedition into the Illinois Country; Indian raids deep into Kentucky; the establishment of an American outpost at Fort Laurens in southeast Ohio; the shame of the Gnadenhutten massacre; the defeat of the Sandusky expedition led by Colonel William Crawford; and the tortured execution of this one-time agent for George Washington by the Delawares abetted by a Loyalist named Simon Girty. The region had become a dark and bloody ground.⁴…


But more important than the campaigns, struggles, tears, wounds, and death were the geopolitical consequences of this fourth installment of the Sixty Years’ War. [In the treaty that concluded the American Revolution, the British had ceded the territory north of the Ohio and south of the Great Lakes to the Americans, but maneuvered behind the scenes to support the Indians and attempt to use them to create a buffer state against American expansion into the region.]

This led to the fifth installment in the Great Lakes war — the battle for the Ohio River line between the United States of America and the largest Native American confederacy ever assembled on this continent. This phase has no name. U.S. Army Indian Wars campaign streamers label it “Miami.” The designation is deceptive. Certainly Chief Little Turtle and his Miamis were at the center of it, but the coalition assembled against the army and Kentucky militiamen, 1789-94, was far broader than this one tribe. The Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, Ottawas, and Kickapoos joined them and British Indian agents and fur merchants spurred them on. Some call it the Old Northwest Indian War, but perhaps it is best entitled the Miami Confederacy War.5

Little Turtle and his allies administered two disastrous defeats on U.S. Army expeditions sent into the Maumee Valley. The first, in 1790, at Kekionga (modern Fort Wayne) saw an expedition headed by Brigadier General Josiah Harmar decimated. The second, in 1791, resulted in the crushing defeat of Major General Arthur St. Clair's forces at the battle of the Wabash (modern Fort Recovery, Ohio). This latter engagement constitutes the most significant defeat ever inflicted on the United States Army by the American Indians. …

[Gen. Anthony] Wayne destroyed Little Turtle’s confederacy in the battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. The first consequence of Wayne’s campaign was the concession of the Ohio River line in the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. But there were others. The British had deserted the Indians in 1794 when they refused to support them from their outpost at Fort Miami in modern Maumee, Ohio; and a year later they agreed to evacuate the Great Lakes forts at Niagara, Detroit, and Mackinac in Jays’ Treaty. The United States finally and fully claimed the territorial grant it had received in 1783. The direct and indirect support the British government and Canadian citizens had

provided Little Turtle’s confederacy embittered the Americans.

The Indians knew they had been betrayed and resented it. They now had to make a critical choice. Could they adapt their lifestyle and live on small acreages like the Euro-Americans, or would they continue to oppose the white onslaught by military means? Two camps emerged among the Natives.

One group, the accommodationists, sought to live with the whites. Betrayed twice by the British and at the mercy of the Americans, former war chiefs like Little Turtle of the Miamis, Buckongahelas of the Delawares, Black Hoof of the Shawnees, and Tarhe of the Wyandots joined this camp, along with the Yale-educated William Anderson of the Shawnees, to form a group which remained either neutral or favored the American side in subsequent struggles. One of the most notable individuals seeking a way out of the white-versus-Native dilemma was Handsome Lake of the Seneca. Also counseling moderation in negotiations with the United States was Joseph Brant, or Thayendanega, of the Iroquois, who moved his followers over the Niagara into modern Ontario. The accommodationists’ problem was whether there was a possibility for a peaceful coexistence of white and Native peoples within the Great Lakes-Ohio Valley basin. There were a variety of persons of Native, white, and mixed ancestry who believed that such a peaceful option was possible.

On the other side, led by the famous Shawnee prophet Tenskwatawa and his war chief brother, Tecumseh, was the nativist faction. They controlled only a minority of the Shawnees, but were able to find like-minded allies among the Wyandots, Potawatomis, and Ottawas. To the northwest, British fur trader Robert Dickson formed alliances with the Sioux and Chippewa from his post at Green Bay. For these peoples the Native lifestyle and religion required them to seek a military solution to their differences with the United States rather than a negotiated settlement. Without active British support their efforts were doomed, as the Shawnees found out at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811.6

The American declaration of war against the British in 1812 brought on the sixth and last phase of the Sixty Years’ War. For the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Native Americans the conflict presented a glorious opportunity to revise the line-of-lakes boundary of

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6 Those interested in the intra-Indian debates following the Fallen Timbers defeat should consult Anthony F. C. Wallace, The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); White, Middle Ground; Dowd, Spirited Resistance; Allen, His Majesty’s Indian Allies; Kelsay, Joseph Brant; Carter, Little Turtle; Sugden, Tecumseh. Most of these also have relevance to the War of 1812.
1783. …

Any success for the British-Indian alliance required control of the lakes themselves. Although the British initially had naval supremacy on the lakes, the Americans devoted considerable energy to revising this situation. They succeed on Lake Erie in 1813 and the naval war on Lake Ontario ended in stalemate.

[Major General Isaac Brock led a combined British and Indian force that captured Fort Mackinac in upper Michigan, as well as Detroit, and Fort Dearborn, which is now the site of Chicago.] The British use of Indian allies embittered and united the westerners against both. Two incidents emphasize the rationale for the virulent anti-Indian sentiment.

The loss of Mackinac Island caused [American] General Hull to order Captain Nathan Heald to evacuate Fort Dearborn. Little Turtle’s son-in-law, Captain William Wells, brought fifty Miami warriors to assist in the evacuation. As a boy Wells had been taken prisoner by the Miami and adopted into the tribe. The western Potawatomis took up arms and hurried toward Chicago where they ambushed Captain Heald’s small force outside Fort Dearborn. All but twenty of the soldiers were killed. Among the dead was Captain Wells. His death prompted the Miamis to change sides. The remaining soldiers surrendered. The Indians cut off Captain Wells’s head, tore his heart from his body, and ate it in front of their captives. Then they killed several of the surrendered soldiers, threatened their civilian captives, and took the survivors as prisoners to various Indian villages.

News of the ambush and its aftermath affected both sides. For the western Americans, it increased their resolve and willingness to exert extraordinary effort to win the war in the West. The center of this renewed military fervor was in Kentucky. There, Revolutionary War hero Isaac Shelby, the state’s governor-elect, began coordinating a major western campaign in conjunction with Indiana Territory's young governor, William Henry Harrison, and Ohio’s governor, Return J. Meigs Jr. …

The anti-Indian tendency became more intense following the mistreatment of prisoners taken in the Battle of the River Raisin (Monroe, Michigan) in January 1813. Here Colonel Henry Procter captured a large number of Americans and withdrew from the village of Frenchtown, leaving many of them under Indian guard. The Natives executed between thirty and sixty of them (depending upon the source). The U.S. press labeled this event the “River Raisin Massacre” and “Remember the River Raisin” became an American battle cry. Procter's failure to protect the prisoners brought severe censure upon him by many of his own officers as well as his opponents.
Americans were now more than ever unified in their efforts to destroy Indian power and control in the Old Northwest. For both the Long Knives and the Native Americans this would be a war for survival.\(^7\) …

To ensure their Great Lakes lands were not lost. The United States mobilized its ground and naval forces to re-conquer what had been lost in 1812.

The successes of Oliver Hazard Perry on Lake Erie and William Henry Harrison at the Thames, which reclaimed the Old Northwest and allowed the seizure of part of modern southwestern Ontario for the United States, should not mask the strategic failure of the Americans to secure the more important Lake Ontario basin in 1813. … The key to any American hope to rectify the 1783 Great Lakes boundary lay with success in either or both the Lake Champlain and the Lake Ontario theaters. …

A year and a day after Perry’s victory, [Thomas] Macdonough fought a superior Royal Navy force [on Lake Champlain] with an intensity that one British sailor asserted made Trafalgar “a mere flea bite in comparison.” No less an authority than Sir Winston Churchill called Macdonough’s dramatic victory “the most decisive engagement of the war.” Without naval superiority, [British commander Sir George] Prevost withdrew his vastly superior ground troops. … Along with news of the British defeat at Baltimore, knowledge of this setback contributed significantly to the decision by both sides to end the conflict at the status quo ante bellum.

The American version of the Peloponnesian War was over. The geopolitical division of the Great Lakes became an accepted fact and the numerous boundary disputes between the British and Americans were settled through negotiations. Navigational improvement of the lakes and rivers would be perpetually tied up in international negotiations. In all probability we will never fully develop the economic potential of the region because of the diplomatic problems inherent in such development. On the other hand, the beginnings of the Anglo-American rapprochement that dominates the world of the twentieth century followed.

The Indians residing inside the United States no longer had an outside ally. Neither accommodation nor nativism worked. The war created a powerful anti-Indian faction in the national government headed by Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, Henry Clay of Kentucky, William Henry Harrison of Ohio, and Lewis Cass of Michigan. All would become presidential nominees and two became presidents. All sought the removal the region’s original inhabitants. Even though the secretary of war wrote in 1818 that the western tribes had “in a great measure, ceased to be an object of terror, and have become that of commiseration,” virtually all the Indians of the region save the Iroquois, Ottawa, Chippewa, and Menominee would lose title to lands east of the Mississippi. Most would end up on reservations far from the lakes and woodlands of their native region and find themselves on the rolling hills and grasslands of eastern Kansas. The First Nations of Canada fared little better in the years that followed.  

For both the United States and Canada this final phase of the Sixty Years’ War left lasting legacies. …

The Sixty Years’ War left a geographically cohesive region divided politically and economically. Through its six stages, the world of 1750 had been altered dramatically.  

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8 For a comparative approach to the fate of the Natives, see Roger L. Nichols, Indians in the United States and Canada: A Comparative History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1998).