

Fort Shelby and Fort McKay

After the return to St. Louis of Lieutenant Hamilton and his command from Fort Madison, the propriety of rebuilding the post was earnestly discussed, but a plan to do this was abandoned.

Meantime, Robert Dickson had become the most active and able British agent in recruiting Indian allies in the Upper Mississippi Valley. He made a flying visit to Prairie du Chien where he recruited some three hundred warriors — Menominee, Winnebago, and Sioux. Rumors that Americans were planning to ascend the Mississippi and occupy Prairie du Chien were as frequent and caused as much alarm among the inhabitants as did rumors at St. Louis that Dickson with his Indians might descend the Mississippi at any moment to attack the settlement. Indeed, what was to prevent him now that Fort Madison was abandoned? But Dickson had other plans. With his Indian allies he hastened away to Green Bay and Mackinac leaving a company of local militia under the command of Captain Francis Michael Dease to reassure the frightened inhabitants of Prairie du Chien.

The rumor that the Americans were coming up the Mississippi River was not an idle boast; on

May 1, 1813, some two hundred men in five barges, under the command of Governor William Clark, left St. Louis for Prairie du Chien. Nothing unusual happened until the flotilla reached the mouth of the Rock River. There some hostile Sauk, who opposed the progress of the expedition, were fired upon, some canoes were taken, and the frightened Indians sued for peace. When news of the approach of the Americans reached Prairie du Chien, the local militia, as well as the inhabitants, fled into the country. The Americans landed and took possession of the place without firing a shot. As soon as the troops had gone ashore, word was sent to the inhabitants to return to the village; and when the latter learned that they would not be molested, most of them came back to their homes.

Leaving Lieutenant Joseph Perkins in command of sixty regulars on shore and Captains John Sullivan and Yeizer in command of some one hundred and twenty volunteers on two of the largest armed boats of the flotilla, Governor Clark returned to his duties at St. Louis. The regulars, assisted by the volunteers, began to erect a stockade on a mound in lower Prairie du Chien, which they christened Fort Shelby in honor of Isaac Shelby, Governor of Kentucky. Late in June, Captain Sullivan with his company of militia and thirty-two men from the gunboat *Governor Clark* — their term of service of sixty days having expired — returned to St. Louis. He reported that Lieutenant

Perkins with the regulars occupied Fort Shelby which had been finished and armed with six cannon; and that Captain Yeizer, who commanded the *Governor Clark* on the river off Prairie du Chien, had his vessel fully manned and ready for service.

As soon as the British at Mackinac learned of the presence of Americans at Prairie du Chien immediate steps were taken to capture the place. Dickson was already at Mackinac with the three hundred natives he had previously recruited at Prairie du Chien. Half of these were assigned to the expedition outfitting to dislodge the Americans; two companies of volunteers were enrolled from Canadian *voyageurs* at Mackinac, dressed in British uniforms, and equipped with arms from the garrison storehouse. They were named "Michigan Fencibles" and placed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William McKay. Sergeant James Keating of the Royal Artillery was assigned to accompany the motley army with a single three-pound gun.

This force consisting of seventy-five Michigan Fencibles in barges and one hundred thirty-six Indians in canoes left Mackinac on June 18, 1814. At Green Bay, another company called "Mississippi Volunteers" was enrolled bringing the white command up to some one hundred twenty men. Other Indians joined the force at Green Bay and at the Portage until the redskin contingent numbered somewhat over five hundred warriors.

The little army followed the Fox-Wisconsin waterway and arrived at Prairie du Chien at noon on July 17th. Colonel McKay found Fort Shelby, consisting of barracks fenced in by strong oak pickets with two substantial blockhouses on opposite corners, defended by six guns and supported by a gunboat well supplied with artillery. Although he had only a single three-pounder, McKay summoned Lieutenant Perkins to surrender within an hour or defend "to the last man." Perkins refused to surrender and the attack began. Sergeant Keating opened fire on the gunboat; and Captain Yeizer, fearing capture, cut his cable and escaped down the Mississippi leaving the fort to its fate.

On the next morning the attack on the fort continued — the bombardment by Sergeant Keating lasting all that day and the next. Throughout the attack the Indians were of little help. They fired a few useless shots from a distance, then ran off to pillage nearby farms and the village, killing cattle, stealing anything that was loose, and breaking up articles that could not be carried off.

In the evening of the third day, as Colonel McKay prepared a new assault on the fort, Lieutenant Perkins offered to surrender if the British commander would protect his officers and men from the Indians. Colonel McKay agreed to the surrender terms; and the next morning the American garrison marched out of Fort Shelby turning

over their arms and the contents of the Fort. The British took possession of the post and renamed it Fort McKay in honor of their commander. The prisoners were paroled and sent to St. Louis by boat.

Before the news of the disaster at Prairie du Chien had reached St. Louis, Governor Benjamin Howard sent a force of forty-two regulars and sixty-five rangers under the command of Lieutenant John Campbell up the Mississippi in July to replace the volunteers at Fort Shelby. The expedition, consisting of three fortified keelboats and two supply boats, reached Rock Island without mishap. The next day a heavy gale made progress upstream difficult and Lieutenant Campbell's boat in the rear was forced into shallow water alongside an island with a high grass covered bank and a fringe of willows along the shore. Here a horde of Sauk Indians began a savage attack on Campbell's troops. Lieutenants Jonathan Riggs and Stephen Rector turned their boats downstream to assist their beleaguered and wounded commander. Rector with a boatload of wounded, including Lieutenant Campbell, dropped downstream and headed for St. Louis.

Captain Yeizer, coming downstream from his defeat at Prairie du Chien, arrived at the scene of the battle in time to assist Lieutenant Riggs and to help salvage the two supply boats. Together they returned to St. Louis. Sixteen Americans had been

killed and twenty wounded in this engagement, and to this day the site has been known as Campbell's Island.

With the return of the ill-fated Campbell's expedition, the authorities at St. Louis determined to send a formidable force upstream to chastise the Indians at Rock Island. Early in August Major Zachary Taylor was dispatched for this purpose with three hundred and thirty-four officers and men in several fortified boats. This expedition reached the mouth of the Rock River without any hostile demonstrations by the Indians.

Meantime, Captain Thomas G. Anderson at Prairie du Chien, who had succeeded Colonel McKay as commander of the fort when the latter returned to Mackinac, responded to requests for help by sending Lieutenant Duncan Graham with thirty soldiers and three small guns to assist the Sauk Indians. Over a hundred Winnebago and Sioux Indians also joined their friends at Rock Island. Consequently when Major Taylor arrived at this place a force of from 1,000 to 1,500 warriors supported by Graham's soldiers was ready and eager to attack the Americans.

The subsequent engagement took place on the Iowa side of the Mississippi at Credit Island, now a park in the city of Davenport. About four o'clock in the afternoon of September 5, the fleet was forced to anchor alongside a small island just above Credit Island; and the Indians could be seen

on both sides of the river. Not a gun was fired during the stormy night that followed; but, as soon as it grew light, Major Taylor formed his troops for action. The British opened fire from Credit Island with their three-pounder manned by Sergeant Keating. Taylor was compelled to drop downstream. He had eleven men badly wounded; and in conference with his officers it was decided that their force was inadequate to cope with the enemy. The departure of the Americans for St. Louis left the British in undisputed possession of the Upper Mississippi area.

The same Sergeant Keating, who with a single three-pounder had been an important factor in the capture of Fort Shelby, was again largely responsible for another American defeat. He was promoted to a lieutenancy for his services and Lieutenant Graham became a captain.

The expedition of Major Zachary Taylor was the last thrust of the Americans toward Prairie du Chien during the war. Captain Anderson continued in command of Fort McKay until the autumn of 1814 when he was replaced by Captain A. H. Bulger. From his arrival until the end of the war, Captain Bulger found his task of commanding the post a difficult one aggravated by disputes with Robert Dickson, the trader, who had returned to Prairie du Chien. Bulger was planning to carry the war to St. Louis when he received word that peace had been restored between the United

States and Great Britain by the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814.

On May 22, 1815, two days after he received official word of the treaty, Captain Bulger assembled the Indians in a general council and informed them of the situation. His fears of an uprising were groundless as the chiefs accepted the news stoically, and at the conclusion of the council smoked the pipe of peace. The firing of a royal salute at the fort concluded the ceremony. Two days later Captain Bulger and his command evacuated Fort McKay taking with them the artillery and other public stores, and leaving the fort itself in ashes. British rule in the Upper Mississippi Valley was ended.