

Documents

THE VINCENNES DAYS OF ZACHARY TAYLOR

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Foreword

Four chief executives of the United States have been intimately associated with the growth and glory of Indiana. The first of these outstanding men, William Henry Harrison, was Governor of the Territory and a hero at Tippecanoe; Harrison's messages and military papers have been collected and ably edited; his Indiana years have been properly stressed. A second occupant of the White House, Abraham Lincoln, spent a quarter of his life on Indiana soil; Indiana's influence on Lincoln has been traced and retraced by seasoned scholars. Another President, Benjamin Harrison, was an Indiana citizen in 1888 at the time of his triumph over Grover Cleveland; he represented Indiana in the United States Senate, passed his declining years in the city of Indianapolis, and his name has always been identified with Indiana.

In marked contrast to these eminent leaders, the fourth member of this distinguished company is but rarely associated with Indiana. Yet, both before and during the crucial War of 1812, he rendered important service to the people of Indiana as an officer in the Regular Army, stationed in Indiana Territory. He helped Governor Harrison defend Indiana settlers against the Indian forces of the one-eyed Prophet, brother of Tecumseh. At old Fort Harrison, north of the present city of Terre Haute, he raised for himself—in the opinion of Major General Samuel Hopkins—"a fabric of character not to be effaced by my eulogy."¹ It is the aim, in the present foreword, to emphasize a part of the Indiana record of Captain and Brevet Major Zachary Taylor, who later at Monterey and Buena Vista captured the imaginations of Americans and became the twelfth president of the Republic.

Zachary Taylor was born in Orange County, Virginia, on November 24, 1784, the third son of Lieutenant Colonel Richard Taylor and Sarah Dabney Strother Taylor. When a babe eight months old, he was taken to Jefferson County, Kentucky, and there on the family farm across the Ohio River from Indiana he grew to sturdy manhood. In 1808,

Taylor entered the Army as a First Lieutenant of the Seventh Infantry. He was serving as a Captain on July 1, 1811, when Major George Rogers Clark Floyd² ordered him to proceed to Vincennes and there take command of Fort Knox.

In the letter of July 6, 1811, which Captain Taylor addressed to Secretary of War William Eustis,³ the young officer referred to an "unfortunate occurrence that took place at this post on the 24th of June." He had reference to Captain Thornton Posey's fatal shooting of Lieutenant Jesse Jennings, the consummation of a long-standing personal feud between the two Kentuckians.⁴ Army records indicate that Posey was ultimately cleared of guilt in the tragic affair. Indeed, he won promotion to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel before the end of the War and received an honorable discharge in 1815.⁵ Nevertheless, Captain Posey was the commandant of Fort Knox at the hour of Jennings' death, and the fatal quarrel between the officers had its natural effect on the morale of the private soldiers. Floyd ordered Taylor to the Post for the purpose of restoring discipline. The new commandant succeeded so well that, when William Henry

¹ Major General Samuel Hopkins to Governor Isaac Shelby, November 27, 1812. Logan Esarey, Ed., *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* (1922), II, 234.

² George Rogers Clark Floyd, a native of Kentucky, was the second son of Colonel John Floyd who was an intimate friend of General Clark and named his infant son in that great soldier's honor. He was commissioned Captain in the Seventh Infantry in 1808. Two years later he became a Major. He saw battle action under Harrison at Tippecanoe, when the yells of the Indians awakened him from slumber and he rode into the fight clad only in his night dress. Shortly after the outbreak of the War of 1812, he won promotion to a Lieutenant-Colonelcy. Owing to the rigors of the Tippecanoe campaign, his health declined and he resigned from the Army in 1813. He died in 1821. His brother, John Floyd, Jr., was Governor of Virginia. His nephew, John B. Floyd, was Governor of Virginia, Secretary of War in President Buchanan's Cabinet, and a general in the Confederate Army. See F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register of the United States Army from . . . September 29, 1789, to September 29, 1889* (1890), 270; William Floyd Tuley, *The Tuley Family Memoirs* (1906), 71-72.

³ Dr. William Eustis, a Revolutionary War veteran, headed the War Department from 1809 to December 3, 1812. A leading Massachusetts Jeffersonian, he was not a successful administrator. He was more effective as a political campaigner than as Secretary of War. He also served as a member of Congress and as Minister to Holland, and, in 1825, was enjoying his second term as Governor of Massachusetts when he died at the age of seventy-two. Claude M. Fuess, "William Eustis," *Dictionary of American Biography* (1931). Dr. Fuess errs in stating that Eustis became Secretary of War in 1807.

⁴ Governor William Henry Harrison to the Secretary of War, July 2, 1811, Esarey, *op. cit.*, I, 527-528.

⁵ Heitman, *op. cit.*, 528.

Harrison reached Vincennes, he sent a glowing report to the War Department: "Captain Z. Taylor has been placed in command at the Garrison near this. To all the qualities which are esteemed for an amiable man he appears to unite those which form a good officer. In the short time he has been a commander he has rendered the Garrison defensible—before his arrival it resembled anything but a place of defence."⁶

Taylor's own report to Secretary Eustis highlights some of the problems with which he was forced to cope, as well as furnishing latter-day Hoosiers with a vivid picture of frontier conditions. The letter is printed here for the first time, exactly as it appears in the files of the National Archives in Washington:

Fort Knox Indiana Teritory July 16th 1811

Sir,

Owing to the unfortunate occurrence that took place at this post on the 24 of June I received an order from Maj. G.R.C. Floyd bearing date Louisville (Ky) July 1st 1811 to repair to this place and take command of the Garrison. Agreeable to which order I arrived here on the 9th Inst and on the 10th assumed the command of the Post. I have had an inventory taken of all the public property on hand a copy of which is hereby enclosed. Owing to the defenceless state of the Garrison and the alarm of the inhabitation [*sic*] of this Territory from the appearance of hostilities from the Indians & there being no M Agent here I have thought proper to appoint Lieut J. W. Albright⁷ Asst M Agent in order that the Garrison may be furnished with the necessary articles [*sic*] for putting it in the best possible state of defence. I think if the appointment of Lieut. Albright should be confirmed there will be no cause of complaint so long as he may continue to act. We are extreemly in want of a number of articles I found neither Paper Quills Inkpowder or wafers here on my arrival. The men here are extreemly in want of Clothing so much so that if they were ordered to march to any place at this time they must do so nearly naked unless they could be furnished befor they moved. There is more than half there Summer Clotheing due them at this time. I would have furnished an acct. of the clotheing due the men here but I have been informed that accts has been made out and forwarded previous to my arrival here I have likewise enclosed you an inventory [*sic*] made out by the Surgeon of the Garrison of the different

⁶ Governor William Henry Harrison to the Secretary of War, August 6, 1811, Esarey, *op. cit.*, I, 548.

⁷ Jacob W. Albright, a native of Pennsylvania, entered the Army in 1806 as an Ensign of the First Infantry. He was a Second-Lieutenant in 1811, and during the latter part of his military career served as district paymaster, paymaster, and major paymaster. He resigned from the Army in May, 1823, and died the following month. Heitman, *op. cit.*, 82.

kinds of Medcines [*sic*] & hospital stores that are wanting at this place which he says will be necessary for him to have as soon as possible as the sickly season is now at hand

With great respect
I am Sir Your [torn]
ZACHARY TAYLOR Capt
7th Inft, Commanding^s ..
ZACHARY TAYLOR Capt.

Hon. W. Eustis

Four months after the penning of this letter, Governor Harrison defeated the Indians in the bloody battle of Tippecanoe—the battle which established Harrison's reputation for courageous generalship and helped to elect him to the presidency over Martin Van Buren in 1840. Contrary to his anticipation, Captain Taylor was not with Harrison at Tippecanoe. The War Department ordered him first to Maryland and then to Kentucky. However, he returned to Indiana Territory in the spring of 1812 and was in charge of Fort Harrison in June of that year when the United States declared war against powerful Great Britain.

Taylor's heroic defense of Fort Harrison in September, 1812, was followed by promotion to the grade of Brevet Major and by his participation in two comparatively unimportant expeditions led by General Hopkins, one into Illinois Territory and the other into what is now northwestern Indiana. Taylor spent a sick leave near Louisville, after which he was entrusted with superintending the Regular Army's recruiting service in the territories of Indiana and Illinois. The letter of April 14, 1813, the original of which is in the possession of the writer of this comment, was written by Taylor on April 14, 1813⁸ (Taylor erroneously dated it "1812"). It was addressed to Brigadier General Thomas Humphrey Cushing,¹⁰ Adjutant General of the Army, and is

⁸In 1934, when the present writer obtained a photostat of this letter, the original was in the possession of the Organization Records Section, Old Records Division, Adjutant General's Office, War Department. It is now in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁹In April, 1812, Taylor was a Captain. He did not become Brevet Major until after the defense of Fort Harrison. The fact that this letter is signed "Z. Taylor, Maj.," therefore is conclusive proof that it could not have been written in April, 1812. In the spring of 1813, Taylor was stationed at Vincennes in charge of recruiting, and this letter deals with recruiting. There is no evidence that Taylor was at Vincennes on April 14, 1812, though he was shifted from Louisville to Fort Harrison in that month.

¹⁰Cushing, like Eustis, was a native of Massachusetts and a veteran of the Revolution. He served under Arthur St. Clair and on Lake Champlain, and was commended for bravery and gallant conduct. Upon

of particular interest to modern military men by reason of its striking portrayal of ills inherent in the Ranger establishment.

Like the 1811 letter, this second letter is reproduced now for the first time. It appears exactly as it was written, replete with errors in grammar and punctuation:

Vincennes, I.T., April 14th 1812 [1813]

Sir,

I arrived at this place, about 9 days since to take charge of the recruiting district, that has been assigned me. There are two officers employed in recruiting in the district, one in this and the other in the adjoining Territory. I have only returns from the officer here, who has forwarded you weekly returns and I presume the other officer has not enlisted a single man. Of cours you are able to judge of the prospect there is for raising the number of men contemplated in the district. Nor is our bad success to be wondered at when we take into view, the small number of inhabtance [*sic*] in those two Territories, and the number of ranging companies that are authorized to be raised in them. And the prefference that is given to that kind of service If the 200 men were to be raised as Rangers I have no doubt but they could be enlisted in eight or ten days nor can it be expected that men will enlist for five years, or during the war, when they know they will be subject to strict discipline, and made to do the duties of a soldier, at eight dollars pr month, when they can get thirty as a ranger, be subject to no subordination, and do but very little duty. The rangers are not employd or have not been more than one thenth [*sic*] of their time in actual service. The officers & privates board at the best public houses in this place they eat drink and play cards with each other, in the most familiar manner, and unless a man is personally acquainted with the officers, he cannot distinguis [*sic*] them from the privates, there is one private keeping a public house here at this time, another has been working journey work as a sadler and several instances where they have not done a single tour [turn] of duty for two months at a time and in every instance musterd [*sic*] as mounted rangers, and this done when in all appearance they are in perfect health. On the other hand there are about 50 regulars here fit for duty, who are now employd in erecting a large fort for the protection of the inhabtance of this place & should the Indians make an attemp on this town in the course of a mont or six weeks (which is generally believed will be the cas) the fort will be of little use as the works progress very slow & but little done as yet for part of those regulars that are fit for duty are generally employd on command. While a number of those gentlemen soldiers or rangers idle away whole months at taverns without performing one single part of a soldiers duty. Nor do I believe if the enemy were in ten miles of this place

resigning from the Army he became Collector of Customs in New London, Connecticut, retaining this position for the remainder of his life. *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (1904).

that they would be made to assist in raising a pickett or blockhouse. They are considered here a kind of state troops (but what kind I have not been able to learn) only the regular officers are informed by Col Russell¹¹ that they are not to be treated in the same manner as soldiers who are enlisted for five years or during the war. I have made those observations in order to shew you that the Ranger establishment has put an end to all prospect of recruiting in my district. And whether the officers employd in recruiting this district and the funds placed in my hands could not be disposed of to more advantage in some other part of the Union. Previous to the ranging establishment I had flattered myself that we should have succeeded very well here, but now all prospects are vanished owing to reasons above stated. There are two men left here by the 4th Regt who were sick when they left this one by the name of Eli Boyd of Capt Browns Compy enlisted by Capt Lamb & Jesse Elum of Capt Cooks company as there is no descriptive list of them here nor no account of what time they drew their pay to. They have not received either pay or Clothing since the 4th Regt left this. If any expeditions is carried on from this place against the Indian Towns on the Wabash I am in hopes I shall be permitted to accompany it as I have but little to do here

I am Sir very respectfully

Your Obt Servt Z. TAYLOR Maj

7th R. U.S. Infty

Genl. Thos. H. Cushing

7th R. U.S. Infty

Between April 14, 1813, and the termination of the War, Zachary Taylor passed many months in Indiana Territory. His wife, *née* Margaret Mackall Smith, whom he had married in 1810, joined him at Vincennes. And there his second daughter was born on March 6, 1814. The baby's parents named her Sarah Knox Taylor—*Sarah* for her paternal grandmother, *Knox* in honor of the fort commanded by her father. In the fullness of time Miss Taylor was to develop into a gay and gracious young lady, the belle of Fort Crawford in what would one day become the state of Wisconsin, and also to become the bride of Lieutenant Jefferson Davis whom destiny chose to preside over the fortunes of the Confederacy during four war-torn years.

Brevet Major Taylor himself left Vincennes in the spring of 1814 to take charge of all United States troops in Missouri

¹¹ William Russell was one of the distinguished Kentuckians of his day. He fought in the Revolution, explored wilderness trails at the side of Daniel Boone, was subordinate to Anthony Wayne, and distinguished himself at Tippecanoe. In 1808 he became Colonel of the Seventh Infantry, Taylor's regiment, and headed it throughout the War, 1812-1815. (Information supplied by Mrs. Jouett Taylor Cannon, Secretary of the Kentucky State Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky.)

Territory, and to lead regulars and volunteers in the battle of Credit Island on Rock River in what is now the state of Illinois. Taylor never fought again in Indiana. Yet, by reason of his honorable Indiana record and because of his residence within our borders, he deserves to rank with Lincoln and the two Harrisons as one of four American presidents significantly linked with the Hoosier past.