

## Documents

### THE EXPEDITIONS OF MAJOR-GENERAL SAMUEL HOPKINS UP THE WABASH, 1812 THE LETTERS OF CAPTAIN ROBERT HAMILTON

When the War of 1812 began, Indiana was an exposed frontier. It was inadequately protected by Fort Harrison near where Terre Haute was to arise, Fort Dearborn at the site of Chicago, and Fort Wayne at the head of the Maumee River. Far to the north Fort Mackinac was taken by the British, July 17. The evacuation of Fort Dearborn and the massacre of many of its troops occurred on August 15, and on the next day Detroit was surrendered to General Isaac Brock by General William Hull. The war was then carried into Indiana. The Pigeon Roost massacre took place south of a line drawn from Vincennes to Cincinnati, and Forts Harrison and Wayne were attacked, all in the first week of September. Panic seized many of the frontiersmen, but the forts were held and troops of militiamen and volunteers came from Kentucky. Among these was a Captain Robert Hamilton from Bourbon County.

Major General Samuel Hopkins of the Kentucky militia soon had four thousand men under command. He advanced from Vincennes to Fort Harrison early in October and on the fifteenth marched from the latter supposedly on his way to Prophetstown. Evidently he was ambitious to "clear out all the Indian tribes" along the Wabash and Illinois rivers. After four days of marching the morale of the army broke and on the twentieth it started to return to Fort Harrison, not having seen or met the enemy. Hamilton referred to sickness among the soldiers when they were encamped at Vincennes and at Fort Harrison. There were many desertions just before the army left the fort. Discontent became widespread on the fourth day of its march. A grass fire probably started by the Indians and a mistake by the guide were evidently used as pretexts to return. The men were discharged at Busseron, Hamilton on October 30.

While Hopkins was on this ill-fated expedition, Colonel William Russell with two companies of regulars marched to the Illinois River where he assisted Governor Ninian Edwards of Illinois Territory in an attack on the Kickapoo town at Lake Peoria.

Hopkins, however, was not willing to be defeated by his own men for he organized a smaller army and in November marched to Prophetstown. Captain Zachary Taylor, who was then in command of Fort Harrison and who later became President of the United States, led a detachment of regular troops. Three towns including Prophetstown were destroyed and a small engagement was fought with the Indians. Cold weather seemingly prevented a larger battle. The army left Fort Harrison on the eleventh of November and returned before the end of the month.

The letters of Robert Hamilton give evidence of the low morale of the volunteers who participated in the first expedition. His company was inactive in camp at Vincennes and at Fort Harrison from September 25 to October 15. Hamilton thought that the delay was due to improper conduct of the head officer. The quotation from *Niles' Register* mentioned excessive rains. Hopkins blamed the failure on the men and named only one officer as involved in the disaffection. The officer condemned was not Captain Hamilton. From Hopkins' letter to Governor Shelby and from the letters of Hamilton, it is evident that the privates chose the lesser officers and that the commanding officer was dependent upon the pleasure of the lesser officers. Hopkins second foray into Indian country was more successful, although it was not crowned with a victorious battle. Perhaps it indicated that the failure of the first was not to be explained simply by improper conduct of the commanding officer.

When William H. Harrison went to the relief of Fort Wayne, he too experienced the faults of the militia system. He wrote of "the impolicy of relying upon Militia, for the prosecution of the war."<sup>1</sup> The next year Harrison carried the war into Canada and so relieved the Indiana frontier.

The quotations from *Niles' Weekly Register* are reprinted in order to place the letters of Captain Hamilton in their proper setting. They serve also to confirm, supplement, and, perhaps, to correct the impressions of Hamilton. It is interesting that his troops reached Vincennes over the Buffalo Trace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Logan Esarey (ed.), *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* (2 vols., Indiana Historical Collections, VII and IX, 1922), II, 405.

To Polly Hamilton wife of Robert Hamilton living on McBride Creek  
Bourbon County Kentucky to the post office at Millersburgh  
Vincennes 30 Sept—

Vincennes Indi taritory Sept 30th 1812

affectioned wife & children I take this oppertunity of leting you know that I am well through the mercy of kind providence; trusting in God that these lines may find you all well: I left home the 16th of this [?] and encampt with in fore miles of Georgetown; 17th day I passed through Georgetown and Frankfort & encampt on fork of Benson, 18th I went through Shelbievill and encampt at Capt Taylors 19th I passed through Middletown & Leuisville; & crossed the ohio river and encampt on the bank of the river. Sunday the 20th I marched 30 miles and encampt at the forks of blue river; 21st I marched 32 miles and encampt 2 miles from the french lick 22nd I passed through Sd lick & crossed the east fork of white river and encampt 2 miles in this side 23 I crossed the weast fork of white river & encampt 6-1/2 miles from the place; 24th day I marched into vincenns & stayd untill evining & marched out 2 miles & encampt and my campt was allarmed by Indians on sd night, at which time my men acted with a great deal of courage; 25th day agreeab[le] to general orders I marched into town and had all our horses guns & aquipigeges valued by two [distinterested?] men on oath made a return to the inspector general; and marched 2 miles up the river wabash and encampt at the head of the mounted volunteer line 26th day lay in campt; 27th I made out 3 muster roles & marched my company into town & was inspected by the inspector general & was [received?] into the united Staes weasteren army under the comand of Major General Samuel Hopkins; 28th day my company lay in camp & attened my Self at vincenns to elect our Major 29th day my company lay in camp I attened at vincenns to Elect our Colonel the day I have recead general orders to march at 10 oclock for the Stoney profets town their is 2100 mounted riflemen & 1800 foot men—we have one sixpounder—ther is upwards of one hundred men lying in the ospitle at this place of the six months men from Ky—three men died the last 24 hours; one was buried with the honors of war—the; people in this country is all livig in forts except the Town the Indians is very troublesome now when I shall return home is very uncrten the Lord onely knows the route we expect to take is or follows 1st to the profets town, 170 miles; 2nd to — towns a long side of lake meshaga 3rd—over into the Illinnoise river where there is 7 or 8 Indians towns and then home; I dont expect to get home before the last of november, you will not gether John Keiths corn make every other necessary prepa-tion for the winter Season—I have been well eversince I left home onely troubled with the tooth eake, my Company are all well—my zeal & anciety to do Something [for my] country is so great that in the day it over comes all my [?] troubles but at night when my thoughts returns home to you & the children & to the things belonging to God my cheeks are often wet with tears if oppertunity offers I will write again — I will bid fare well one more Robert Hamilton  
N B tell John Eward I have seen Moses & Steward Michell they are boath well

R Hamilton

Fort Harrison Indianne Tarritory Octo 12th 1812

Dear Polly I once more Sit down to let you know that I am well thorough the mercys of God—it would be too teaddiou for me to let you know the reasons why we are detain'd her I shall onely say it is through improper conduct of our head office there is agreat many Sick and 200 deserted and I expect hundreds more will desert this day and tomorrow—we expect to march this evining or to morrow morning for the Illinnois River—it is about 150 miles to the Illinnoise river where there is three verry numerrous tribes of Indians liv[ing] we drew provition for ourselves & forrege forrege for our horses—we have a very good Presbiterian Preacher of our Chapling by the name of Gray—tell Charrity Hamilton Misses Burnaugh & Misses Ruth [Keith] that thir Sons are all well when I shall re[tur]n home again God onely knows though my [duty] is far from you my thoughts is uppon you I think the Lord is about to accomplish some thing perhaps a Scouge; I feel perfectly resigned that the will of the Lord should be don—time would fail me to write any more—tell all my good friends for me that I am well—I would bid you and the children fare well perhaps for the last time — —

Robert Hamilton<sup>2</sup>

A letter from Gen. Hopkins, dated at Vincennes, Sept. 29, to governor Shelby, says—"My present intention is to attack every settlement on the Wabash, and destroy their property, then fall upon the Illinois; and I trust in all the next month to perform much of it. Serious opposition I hardly apprehend, although I intend to be prepared for it." Excessive rains had prevented gen. H. from acting with that rapidity he desired. The probability is that he will *clear out* all the Indian tribes within the great scope he has marked out for his operations. Sad the necessity, as detestable the *influence*, that compels the extirpation of the greater portion of this unfortunate race of men, within our territories.<sup>3</sup>

It is reported that gen. Hopkins, with 2000 mounted volunteers, has returned to Vincennes after a fruitless excursion in hunt of the savages—having seen only three on his route. He was about to start for the Prophet's settlements on the Wabash, with his men dismounted. So says the report.<sup>4</sup>

Frankfort, (Ken.) Nov. 7, 1812.

*Copy of a letter from major-general Hopkins, to his excellency governor Shelby, of Kentucky, dated,*

Fort Harrison, 6th Oct. 1812.

*My dear sir*—The expedition of the mounted riflemen has termin-

<sup>2</sup> These letters of Robert Hamilton were contributed by Mrs. Mary F. Hamilton of Indianapolis, Indiana. Robert Hamilton was born June 17, 1768, in Pennsylvania. He emigrated to Bourbon County, Kentucky, with his parents in 1789. He enlisted September 18, 1812, and was discharged on October 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register* (1811-1837, Baltimore, Maryland), III, 170-171 (November 14, 1812).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 190 (November 21, 1812).

ated. The Wabash was recrossed yesterday, and the whole corps are on their way to Busseron, where the adjutant-general will attend, in order to have them properly mustered and discharged; and where their horses may get forage during the delay necessary for this object.

Yes, sir, this army has returned, without hardly obtaining the sight of an enemy. A simple narrative of facts, as they occurred will best explain the reasons that have led to this state of things, The army having finished crossing the Wabash on the 14th inst. marched about three miles and encamped. I here requested the attendance of the general and field officers and captains, to whom I imparted the objects of the expedition and the advantages that might result from a fulfilment of them. The nearest Kickapoo villages were from eighty to one hundred miles distant, and the Peoria not more than one hundred and sixty. By breaking up these, or as many as our resources would permit, we would be rendering a service to all the territories. That from their numbers, this tribe was more favorable than any near us; and from their situation and hostility, had it more in their power to do us mischief; of course to chastise and destroy these, would be rendering real benefit to our country. It was observed by some officers, that they would meet the next morning, consult together and report to me their opinions; desiring at the same time to be furnished with the person on whom I had relied for intelligence of the country.

This council was held, and all the intelligence furnished that had been requested, and I had a report highly favorable to the enterprise. This, to me, was more gratifying, as early as our encampment at Vincennes, discontents and murmurings, that portended no wish to proceed further. At Busseron, I found an evident increase of discontent, although no army was ever better or more amply supplied with rations and forage than at this place. At Fort Harrison, where we encamped on the 10th, and where we were well supplied with forage, &c. I found on the 12th and 13th many breaking off and returning without applying to me for a *discharge*, and as far as I know, without any notification to their officers: Indeed I have every reason to suppose the officers of every grade, gave no countenance to such a procedure.

Thinking myself now secure in the confidence of my brother officers and the army, we proceeded on our march early on the 15th, and continued it four days, our course near north in the prairie until we came to an Indian house, where some corn, &c. had been cultivated. The last day of the march to this place, I had been made acquainted with a return of that spirit of discontent, that had, as I had hoped, subsided, and when I had ordered a halt near sunset, (for the first time that day) in a fine piece of grass in the prairie, to aid our horses, I was addressed in the most rude and dictatorial manner, requiring me immediately to resume my march, or his battalion would break from the army and return!—This was a major *Singleton*! I mention him in justice to the other officers of that grade. But from every information, I began to fear the army waited but for a pretext to return! This was afforded next day by our guides, who had thought they had discerned an Indian village on the side of a grove about ten miles from where we encamped on the fourth night of our march, and turned us about 6 or 8 miles

out of our way. An almost universal discontent seemed to prevail, and we took our course in such a direction, as we hoped would best atone for the error in the morning. About or after sun-set, we came to a thin grove affording water; here we took up our camp; and about this time arose one of the most violent gusts of wind I ever remember to have seen, not proceeding from clouds. The Indians had set fire to the prairie, which drove on us so furiously, that we were compelled to fire around our camp, to protect ourselves. This seems to have decided the army to return: I was informed of it so many ways, that early in the next morning (Oct. 20th) I requested the attendance of the general and field officers, and stated to them my apprehensions, the expectations of our country, the disgrace attending the measure, and the approbation of our own consciences.—Against this, I stated the weary situation of our horses and the want of provisions, (which to me seemed only partial, six days having only passed since every part of the army, as was believed, was furnished with ten days in bacon, beef or bread stuff) the reasons given for returning; I requested the commandants of each regiment to convene the whole of the officers belonging to it, and to take fully the sense of the army on this measure; report to commandants of brigades, who were requested to report to me in writing; adding that if 500 volunteers would turn out, I would put myself at their head, and proceed in quest of the towns; and the balance of the army might retreat in *safety* to Fort Harrison. In less than one hour the report was made almost unanimously to return. I then requested that I might dictate the course to be pursued that day only, which I pledged myself should not put them more than six miles out of the way, my object being to cover the reconnoitering parties, I wished to send out for the discovery of the Indian towns. About this time the troops being paraded, I put myself in front, took my course and directed them to follow me; the columns moving off quite a contrary way. I sent captain Taylor and major Lee to apply to the officers leading the columns, to turn them. They were told it was not in their power. The army had taken their course and would pursue it. Discovering great confusion and disorder in the march, I threw myself in the rear, fearing an attack on those who were there from necessity, and continued in that position the whole day. The exhausted state of the horses, nor the hunger of the men retarded this day's march; so swiftly was it prosecuted that it was long before the rear arrived at the encampment. The generals Ray, Ramsey and Allen, lent all their aid and authority in restoring our march to order, and so far succeeded, as to bring on the whole with much less loss than I had feared; indeed I have no reason to think we were either followed or menaced by an enemy. I think we march at least 80 or 90 miles in the heart of the enemy's country: had he possessed a design to fight us, opportunities in abundance presented. So formidable was our appearance in the prairie, and in the country (as I am told) never trod before by hostile feet, must impress the bordering tribes with a sense of their danger. If it operates beneficially in this way, our labor will not be altogether in vain.

I hope the expence attending this expedition will be found less than usual on such occasions. I have consulted economy in every in-

stance; subject only to real necessity has been the expenditure; the forage has been the heaviest article.

To the officers commanding brigades, many of the field officers, captains, &c. my thanks are due; many of the old Kentucky veterans, whose heads are frosted by time, are entitled to every confidence and praise their country can bestow. To the adjutant, quarter-master-general, and the members of my own family, I feel indebted for ready, able and manly support, in every instance. Let me here include our friend George Walker, our judge advocate general; who lived with me, took more than a common share of fatigue and toil, and who did all in his power to further the service in the corps of spies and guides, under the direction of major Dubois, and the two companies of Kentucky and Gwatkin, who encamped near me, and were under my immediate orders. I experienced an alertness and attention highly honorable to them: These corps were ready to have gone on to execute any service; the whole amounted to about 120, and deserve honorable mention.

Mr. Barron and Messrs. Lacelly and Le Plant, interpreters and guides, deserve well of me; I am certain we were not 20 miles from the Indian village when we were forced to retire, and I have many reasons to prove we were in the right way.

I have myself (superadded to the mortification I felt at thus returning) been in a bad state of health from first to last; and am now so weak as not to be able to keep myself on my horse.

A violent diarrhea has pursued me 10 days past, and reduced me extremely low; I had resolved to continue with the line of march a little, if unable to ride. There are yet many things of which I wish to write; they relate substantially to prospective operations. Soon again shall I have the honor to address your excellency, in the mean time be assured of the perfect consideration and high regards of your obedient friend and servant.

SAMUEL HOPKINS

*Governor Shelby.*<sup>5</sup>

LEXINGTON, (Ky.) Nov. 13.

*Extract of a letter from a gentleman in Russelville to the editor of the Reporter, dated Nov. 11, 1812.—*

"Inclosed you have a detail of a battle fought with the Indians on the Illinois river, which I have copied from a piece handed to the printer in this place. I have no doubt of its correctness."

*Important.*—We have received information from the Illinois territory which we deem correct, stating col. *William Russell* of the 7th U. S. regiment, has defeated a party of Indians at the Peoria towns. It will be recollected that general Hopkins ordered colonel Russell with two companies of rangers, from Vincennes and to take the command of the regular troops and militia of the Illinois territory, to march up the Illinois river. The colonel collected a force of about 400 men, with

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 204-205 (November 28, 1812). The date of this letter must be a misprint.

which by rapid marches he got within one mile of the Indian town, where he met one warrior who was shot down, and a brisk charge made upon the town defended by about 150 Indian warriors, who were put to flight with the loss of 25 found dead, besides a number carried off.

The women and children fled to a swamp at the first approach of our men, and the warriors soon took shelter under the same covert. We had only three men wounded. Four prisoners were taken, and about 60 horses prepared to remove the women and children with all their plunder fell into our hands. It appears that the Indians of the neighboring towns had heard of gen. Hopkins crossing the Wabash, and 700 warriors marched to meet him, leaving 150 in charge of the women and children, who were preparing to move off when col. Russell arrived about 10 o'clock in the morning. He destroyed every thing in the town which he could not bring away, and left it on the same evening; 7 scalps taken in September, near Fort Harrison, and also several Indians wounded during the late attack on that place, were found in the town.

It appears that the expedition of gen. Hopkins, has had the good effect of drawing the attention and force of the Indians from the Illinois river, which afforded col. Russell an opportunity of surprising and destroying their towns.<sup>6</sup>

*Copy of a letter from major-general Samuel Hopkins to his excellency governor Shelby.*

"On Wabash, near the mouth of  
Pine Creek, Nov. 27, 1812.

MY DEAR SIR—By Col. Richard Taylor, quarter-master general, who goes on as quick as possible to Frankfort, I have it in my power to give you general information of the movements of the army since my last.

On the 11th the army marched from Fort Harrison on the road formerly made by governor Harrison's army, and the boats set out at the same time. The length of time the enemy had expected us made it necessary to guard ourselves in an especial manner. The rise of the waters, from the heavy fall of rain preceding our march, and some large creeks, left us no doubt of considerable difficulty and embarrassment; insomuch that not until the 14th did we pass Sugar creek, three miles above the road.

From every information, I had no hesitation in moving on the east side of the Wabash. The Vermillions, Pine Creek, and other impediments on the west side, superadded to the presumption that we were expected, and might more easily be annoyed and ambuscaded on that rout, determined me in this measure. The boats too, with our provisions of rations, forage and military stores, could be more easily covered and protected, as the line of march could be invariably nearer the river. Lieutenant-colonel Barbour, with one battalion of his regiment, had command of the 7 boats, and encamped with us on the bank of the river almost every night. This so protracted our march that we did not reach the Prophet's town until the 19th. On the morning

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.



of this day I detached 300 men to surprize the Winebago town lying on Ponce Passu creek, one mile from the Wabash and four below the Prophet's.—This party, commanded by general Butler, surrounded the place about break of day, but found it evacuated. There were in the main town about forty houses, many of them from 30 to 50 feet in length, besides many temporary huts in the surrounding prairie, in which they had cultivated a good deal of corn. On the 20th, 21st and 22d we were embarked in the complete destruction of the Prophet's town which had about 40 cabins and huts, and the large Kickapoo village adjoining below it on the west side of the river, consisting of about 160 cabins and huts; finding and destroying their corn, reconnoitring the circumjacent country, and constructing works for the defence of our boats and army. Seven miles east of us, on the Ponce Passu creek, a party of Indians were discovered; they had fired on a small party of ours on the 21st and killed a man by the name of Dunn, a gallant soldier in captain Duval's company. On the 22d upwards of 60 horsemen, under the command of lieutenant-colonels Miller and Wilcox, anxious to bury their comrade as well as gain a more complete knowledge of the ground, went on to a point near the Indian encampment, fell into an ambuscade, and 18 of our party killed, wounded and missing. Among these are three hopeful young officers and one private from the 8th (Wilcox's) regiment, viz. Mars, Edwards, Murray, and the private Webb, presumed to be killed; the other 14 were of the rangers. On the return of this party, and the information of a large assemblage of the enemy, who, encouraged by the strength of their camp, appeared to be waiting for us, every preparation was made to march early and engage the enemy at every risque; when, from the most violent storm and fall of snow, attended with the coldest weather I ever saw or felt at this season of the year, and which did not subside until the evening of the 23d, we were delayed until the 24th. Upon arriving on the ground, we found the enemy had deserted their camp before the fall of the snow, and passed the Ponce Passu. I have no doubt but their ground was the strongest I ever have seen—the deep rapid creek spoken of was in their rear, running in a semi-circle, and fronted by a bluff 100 feet high, almost perpendicular and only to be penetrated by three steep ravines. If the enemy would not defend themselves here, it was evident they did not intend fighting at all. After reconnoitring sufficiently, we returned to camp, and found the ice so accumulated as to alarm us for the return of the boats. I had fully intended to have spent one more week in endeavoring to find the Indian camps; but the shoeless, shirtless state of the troops, now clad in the remnants of their summer dress; a river full of ice; the hills covered with snow; a rigid climate, and no certain point to which we could further direct our operations; under the influence of the advice of every staff and field officer, orders were given and measures pursued for our return on the 25th.

We are now progressing to Fort Harrison through ice and snow where we expect to arrive on the last day of this month. From Vincennes I shall have the honor of addressing your excellency again; but before I close this, I cannot forbear expressing the merits of the

officers and soldiers of this command. After leaving [at] Fort Harrison all unfit for duty, we had in privates of every corps about one thousand—in the total twelve hundred and fifty or thereabout. At the Prophet's town, upwards of one hundred of these were on the sick report. Yet, sir, have we progressed in such order as to menace our enemy, free from any annoyance; seven large keel-boats have been covered and protected to a point heretofore unknown in Indian expeditions; three large Indian establishments have been burnt and destroyed, with near three miles of fence, (and all the corn, &c. we could find) besides many smaller ones; the enemy have been sought in their strong holds, and every opportunity afforded them to attack or alarm us; a march on the east side of the Wabash, without road or cognizance of the country, fully one hundred miles perfected; and this has been done with a naked army of infantry, aided by only about fifty rangers and spies. All this was done in twenty days—no sigh, no murmur, no complaint.

I certainly feel particular obligations to my friends general Butler and colonel Taylor, for their effectual and ready aid in their line; as also to captain Z. Taylor, of the seventh United States regiment; Messrs. Gist and Richeson, my aids-de-camp, and major J. B. Breckenridge, my secretary, for a prompt and effectual support in every instance. The firm and almost unparalleled defence of Fort Harrison, by captain Z. Taylor, has raised for him a fabric of character not to be effaced by my eulogy. To colonel Barbour, for his officer-like management, in conducting and commanding the boats, my thanks are due, as also to colonels Miller and Wilcox, and to majors Hughes and Shacklet, and to the captains and subalterns of the army generally. From lieutenants Richeson, Hawkins and Sullivan of the United States troops, I have to acknowledge my obligations for their steady and uniform conduct, as well as captain Beckers, of the rangers, captain Washburn, of the spies, and the staff generally.

Let me refer your excellency to colonel Taylor for more minute information; and believe me with high regard and consideration, to be, your most obedient servant,

SAMUEL HOPKINS.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 264-265 (December 26, 1812).