

Native American Guns, From London to Mackinac Island Battlefield

Scholars have long discussed whether the British in Canada deliberately tried to interfere with American sovereignty over the upper Great Lakes during the years leading up to the War of 1812. While this region was nominally part of the United States during this time, the region's primary economic ties were with the British and the French-Canadians in Montreal. New scholarship has uncovered evidence that bears on this longtime question.

A recent survey of "chief's guns" by James A. Hanson, of Nebraska's Museum of the Fur Trade, indicates that about 1790 a new and improved weapon was offered to the Native American friends of the British. The King had signed away his legal right to the upper Great Lakes country in the Treaty of Paris in 1783, to the horror of his Indian allies, who had begun to sense that the new North American nation was a deadly threat to their hunter-gatherer way of life. The tribes were eager to help the British retain economic and de facto control of Michigan Territory.

Hanson has tentatively identified a separate type of "chief's gun," light, sturdy, and well made, with shipments into the Great Lakes country by the Michilimackinac Company, the British "front group" organized in the 1780s by Montreal-based North Westers to maintain the fur trade and the British ties with the local natives. Although the 39-inch barrel of this "Type IV" chief's gun bore a stamp indicating that the gun had been made and sold through the private sector, the gun's hardware shows that it was designed by the king's armorers.

In the years running up to the War of 1812, the American flag flew over Fort Mackinac, but the surrounding tribes were friends of the English; and London was making and handing out guns to friendly Indians that could be used to shoot at Americans. In 1812, at Fort Dearborn (Chicago) and at Detroit, these shots rang out. A similar scene at Fort Mackinac was barely avoided when the fort's commander, the hapless Lt. Porter Hanks, surrendered his fort within hours of being invested.

More than half, 300 of 500, of the war party that surrounded Fort Mackinac were Native Americans, with 150 traders and militiamen and barely 50 British regulars. This was to set a pattern for the British on the



A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

Native American Guns

Great Lakes; they were to fight hand in hand with their Indian allies throughout the conflict, with the Natives playing an equal or greater role in the actual fighting. In Canada the frontier, in 1812, was still on the St. Lawrence; few farmers had reached the northern Great Lakes to fight for the British flag.

It was thus essential for London to arm its Indian allies in the defense of Upper Canada; as well as to try to recapture the Old Northwest. The outbreak of war in 1812 produced the largest run of "chief's guns" ever produced in England, with more than 26,000 guns produced in all for distribution to Indians and First Nations peoples, more than 10,000 of which were chief's

guns. Unlike the "Type IVs," these guns were openly designed, made, and marked with the King's crown and broad arrow. The pattern pieces for these guns continued to be made at the king's armory in the Tower of London, but most of these guns were actually manufactured by contractors in and around Birmingham. By this time many Great Lakes Natives had practically become members of the King's army; and when an American flotilla arrived at the Straits of Mackinac in July 1814 to try to recapture the Island, British and Indians stood shoulder-to-shoulder to defend it.

It was a scene, in 1814, far different from the stereotype created by Hollywood: the fort on the hill, with its blockhouses

and walls, co-defended by Indians, with the Americans on the outside, trying to capture it. The British, with the help of Islanders of French and Indian heritage, had dug and raised an earthen redoubt on the topmost point of the island to further defend the strongpoint. They named the earthworks "Fort George," after King George III.

On August 4, the American war party landed and attempted to march inland. What happened on that summer day can be pieced together from contemporary dispatches and from a recent archeological survey of the battlefield. The Americans deputized a flanking party under Major Andrew Holmes, and these troops advanced southward, probably on the double, along what is now the ninth fairway of the Wawashkamo Golf Links. They came under a harsh crossfire from a band of Natives positioned in the adjacent Mackinac Island woods; Holmes fell; and the failure of this flank attack led, in stages, to the retreat of the entire American expedition from British Landing all the

way back to Detroit.

The man who claimed credit for killing Major Holmes was a chief of the Winnebago nation, Yellow Dog. It is probable, and even likely, that Yellow Dog was carrying one of the 10,000 chief's guns distributed by the British army. And so a story that had begun in the Tower of London ended on the Battlefield of Mackinac Island in August, 1814.

In 1815, the British Empire gave back much of the Upper Lakes country to the United States, as a result of the Treaty of Ghent. The British government's armory records show that the procurement of "chief's guns" ended in early 1816. The lands north of Lake Superior continued to be part of Canada, but the day of the North West fur traders was almost over as well; they would soon be driven out of business by their London-based rivals, the Hudson Bay Company. The H.B.C. followed a different business model, and did not encourage the handing out of free guns to Canadian First Nations people.

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