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William Wells and the Old Northwest, 1770-1812

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William Wells and the Old Northwest, 1770-1812

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in History from The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Introduction

As the sun rose over diminutive Fort Dearborn near Chicago on August 15, 1812, William Wells painted his face black, as was the Miami Indian custom when facing imminent death. Despite his premonitions and certain danger, Wells risked his life to help his kin. His own diplomatic efforts had failed, and now he resorted to his skills as a fighter to help Fort Dearborn’s inhabitants, including his niece Rebecca. An Indian friend had warned him that the fort would be attacked, but orders out of his control forced the whites to leave its protective walls and journey through the woods to Fort Wayne. At around nine, Wells led the procession on horse, carrying both his Kentucky rifle and Miami tomahawk. In his black painted face, Indian dress, and red hair he struck an ambiguous figure. He led both white militia and Miami warriors, and the inevitable attack came from several hundred Winnebagos and Potawatomis in the mid-morning heat. After killing several enemies he was shot and butchered, and several warriors divided his heart to eat, thus taking his courage and power into themselves. Wells’ death mirrored his tragic, exciting, and misunderstood life.

William Wells was one of the best-known federal Indian agents in the Old Northwest in the period between the Indian Wars of the 1790s and War of 1812. He was born Anglo-American but was adopted by the Miamis as a youth. He fought against then joined the American army, though he kept a tight relationship with the most notable

Miami chief, Little Turtle. However, his career was not without missteps. He made several decisions throughout his life which would alter the history of the Old Northwest. Sometimes, these decisions directly contradicted the federal government’s wishes. From the point of view of federal politicians, leaders, and intellectuals, Indian policy was easier to define than implement. The simple assumption has been that Indians rejected American policy. However, Wells sometimes was an obstruction to the policy he was hired to apply. If we explore this argument further, we will find that we cannot fully understand the Old Northwest’s Indian history without knowing William Wells. In this light, his story reveals that Indian-American relations in Indiana were less influenced by a national “Indian policy” design than by Wells’ on-the-ground decisions.

As Indian agent, William Wells was pivotal in navigating early American Indian policy. In the Old Northwest, Indian agents like Wells represented the Territorial government as well as the federal government for those natives living within their “agency.” Agents oversaw trade and provided goods and services on behalf of the United States. They were expected to report on the various tribes and their leaders. Most importantly, they were charged with overseeing the gradual “civilizing” of native peoples, mainly by introducing agriculture. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Henry Knox, and others positioned these men as agents to provide intelligence to territorial governors and other federal decision-makers. Jefferson and his colleagues sought expansion with honor to propagate enlightenment ideals and secure a favorable international reputation. But perhaps more importantly, they hoped agents would help prevent and settle the inevitable problems arising from Indian-American interaction and dispute over who belonged on the land. In addition, agents fulfilled treaty agreements,
namely annuity payment on a regular basis. The assortment of decisions and documents popularly termed “Indian policy” was only as good as the men like Wells who oversaw its employment. What agency did the Indians in the region have? How did Wells change policy? How can we understand the enigmatic decisions he made? What ramifications did those decisions have?

Wells’ story vividly illustrates how policy, rhetoric, and public opinion affected life on the borderland of the Old Northwest. The study of Wells allows the historian to pursue a central presence which shaped the region: native peoples. His correspondence with the highest government officials provides access to national, state and territorial government decisions; his dealing with common farmers and settlers offers another perspective. Wells represents the Old Northwest’s passing from borderland to statehood. He is a prism through which to view the critical time after initial explorers and traders made contact with natives but while control over the region remained in doubt. Understanding his life provides insight into how the region changed through a critical and dynamic era. However, he is not only a mirror for history, he created it. His influence was felt across the region and its diverse peoples, and only by understanding his position in history can we fully grasp Indian-American relations in that particular time and place.

The Old Northwest prior to the 1795 Treaty of Greenville endured chronic warfare as groups of people fought for ownership. Economic considerations had made the fertile valleys of the Northwest frontier attractive plums for France and Britain. Bordered by the wide and relatively tranquil Ohio River and the waterways of the Great Lakes, valuable resources such as deer skins and beaver pelts could be transported easily either south and west via the Ohio-Mississippi Rivers, or north and east via the Great
Lakes and Saint Lawrence. Additionally, early explorers reported fertility and abundance in the interior, which indicated future agricultural possibilities. For backwoods traders, the region represented unlimited riches; for rulers of empires, it embodied conquerable bounty and defendable land claims. For the Indians—Miamis, Shawnees, Potawatomies, Delawares, Wyandots, Ojibways, Sacs, Foxes, Ottawas, Wisconsins, Winnebagoes, Kaskaskias—the Old Northwest was home. Numerous in both designation and population, these peoples had been adapting to changing conditions for centuries. Controlling the territory’s resources was vital both for the native inhabitants and for European colonial aspirations. In the seventeenth century, the so-called “Beaver Wars” raged as Iroquois peoples attempted to monopolize the lucrative fur trade in the Old Northwest and elsewhere. Later the French and Indian War pitted Indian groups against each other in the mid-eighteenth century. Chronic warfare, in the form of both pitched battles and yearly raiding, precipitated a life in flux for Indians and Europeans alike.

William Wells’ position was in part an attempt to calm the perceived bellicosity of Indians as well as make them dependent on the United States, removing any impediments to United States expansion. Prior to Wells’ arrival, native peoples successfully resisted cultural degradation and were inventive in benefitting from European presence. Indians had the advantage of “playing off” European imperial powers, an ability which gave Indians the upper hand economically and militarily. This technique remained crucial even as those European powers changed. In the Great Lakes region, French and British interests collided and various Indian groups used the situation to control trade prices on the middle ground—a culturally distinct realm where individuals created common understandings and adjusted their differences to construct
mutually-beneficial realms of exchange.2 Trade did not simply flow from East to West. Rather, complex networks moved goods from French posts on the Great Lakes, British posts in the Upper Ohio Valley, and even Spanish sources via the Mississippi River and farther West. Additionally, this complex trade system included Indian producers of food and furs, and Indian traders as middlemen. William Wells was a vital player as this trade network broke down due to diminishing Indian economic and military power.

American leaders, especially after the 1795 Treaty of Greenville, feared the British in the Old Northwest as much as the Indians. Following American independence, British influence continued through trading posts, forts, and free-wheeling traders like Alexander McKee and Simon Girty. This British presence alarmed United States officials as many Indian groups traded with—and placed their loyalty in—the British. Wells’ advisors hoped he would secure Indian loyalties for the United States and help undercut the British in Upper Canada.

Wells had an ostensibly benevolent mission as well. Thomas Jefferson enunciated the wish that the Indians be taught agricultural techniques. He incorrectly asserted that Indians were purely hunters and thus required vast tracts of land to survive. In fact, most Indians in the Old Northwest lived on a varied diet of female hoe horticulture and hunting in a seasonal round. Jefferson wished to transform their subsistence to male plow agriculture, and his motives were twofold. First, he accepted that Indians could improve their condition and ultimately attain American citizenship.

2 The term “middle ground” was coined by historian Richard White. He states: “On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices—the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground.” In The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 (Cambridge, 1991), x.
Second, and more importantly, if the savages could give up their “hunter state” they would require less land and happily sell unused acres to white settlers. Possession of all-important land of course meant dispossession as well. Jefferson and his colleagues made several attempts to apply this rhetoric, which will be explored in the following chapters. Wells’ own success largely mirrored the success of Jeffersonian Indian policy. Historian Robert Owens aptly sums up Jefferson’s view on the Indians: “If they were not threatening, and if they acknowledged the superiority of Anglo-American cultural practices, Indians were worth saving. But the moment they resisted the Great Father’s teachings of demands, they ceased to be wayward children and instead became the other.”

William Wells was a central player in employing this rhetoric of progress and possession. His supposed goal was to civilize, protect, and influence the Indians in favor of the United States. His success varied.

William Wells must be understood as a product of his time. His story personalizes the middle ground, how it changed, and who changed it. Like many before and after him, he moved west as a settler with his family. American values centered on land as much as liberty and justice, and these values came under sharp scrutiny as conflicts raged in the Ohio River Valley. Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Jefferson were forming and rationalizing a national Indian policy as settlers poured across the Appalachian Mountain passes westward. To understand these policies we must understand the operating agents. William Wells’ story represents a crux among territorial expansion, policy, and Indians. Chapter One will provide an accurate and in-depth understanding of Wells’ early life by describing his path through the cultural frameworks

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in which he grew up. Next, his importance in both Miami and United States military history will be explained in the context of the Indian Wars of the 1790s. We will investigate his decisions such as his cultural switch from Miami to white American, and relate such decisions to his later work as Indian agent. Chapter Two will explore Jeffersonian Indian policy, and Wells’ significance to the land-through-treaty facet of Indian policy while agent at Fort Wayne, especially with his direct superior and future president William Henry Harrison’s ambitions. Chapter Three will examine Wells’ role in two intertwined developments, the Quaker agricultural missions and the militant nativist ideology spread among the Indians of Wells’ agency. The conclusion will probe Wells’ life after his dismissal as agent, and consider his effect on the region’s peoples following his death.

The most useful evidence for discussing William Wells is his firsthand correspondence. Government officials wrote to, from, and about Indian agents, and with particular zeal in regard to Wells. This correspondence reveals not only Wells’ actions but also differing opinions on central issues pertaining to Indian policy. Correspondence alone would lack depth, so other sources like census data, newspaper reports, and anthropological studies must be used to flesh out the man and his context. This thesis will illustrate how policy, personality differences, personal history, skills, choices, and conflict shaped lives in the Old Northwest.

Many historians have studied federal Indian policy and its change through time, but few have explained its function in the Old Northwest. Usually such studies examine only one side of Indian-American relations. Brian Dippie’s *The Vanishing American* posits American leaders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson against the entire
Indian “race” as it was considered in the eighteenth century. He considers the “rights” of Indians and the accomplishments of grand thinkers, but neglects the process by which white ideology met Indian principles.⁴ Reginald Horman’s *Expansion and American Indian Policy* neglects any British predecessors and claims that American policy began in the minds of Jefferson, Henry Knox, or others. Rather than account for the decades of British influence on middle ground politics, Horsman claims that “the desire for fair treatment of the Indians stemmed from the founding fathers’ belief in the righteousness of their Revolution.”⁵

Some historians bought into stereotypes and attributed Wells’ success as a frontiersman to his noble character. First-hand captivity narratives, such as Mary Jemison’s or Mary Rowlandson’s, exhibit white cultural stigmas and are more useful to studying American culture than Indians.⁶ Perhaps fortunately, Wells wrote no such account of his Miami life. Previous scholarship on Wells himself has varied widely as historical methods change. Wells’ first biographer painted him as a nearly mythical frontiersman, citing personal memory as a scout under Wells during General Anthony Wayne’s 1794 campaign in Ohio.⁷ A later historian began to piece together his life using documentary evidence while still clutching “interesting tales of the early days which he treasured up in his retentive memory and now utilizes in the preparation of this historical

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By 1927 a third account told brief and largely unreliable details concerning Wells’ youth and Miami life. These cursory works, which characterize Wells as hero or villain, remained the basis for understanding him until Paul Hutton’s 1978 article, which includes insight into Wells’ later life as agent but is primarily concerned with his military career. Mary Moyars-Johnson picked up Wells’ story by focusing on Harrison’s land treaties. Harvey Louis Carter built upon Hutton’s study in more detail, pursuing Little Turtle’s esteemed career in tandem with Wells. None have put Wells at the center of the critically dynamic eras both before and after the 1795 Treaty of Greenville and explored the various cultural systems that molded both Wells and the Old Northwest.

Too often historians either study the thought behind policy, or the effects which policy renders on Indians. What good is studying political thought if we ignore or misunderstand its effects? Why explore abstract generalizations if we disregard the concrete? Some scholars characterize policy as diffusing from politician’s pen to Indian’s ear without men like Wells. Such histories describe American intellectual history, but fall short of their aims to illuminate native history. Policy-makers could not simply write letters to Indian chiefs, nor could they meet with them in council. On rare occasions, influential Indian leaders visited the east coast, and even then, Wells was there screening as an interpreter. This thesis attempts to explain how one man, primarily

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8 Calvin M. Young, *Little Turtle (Me-she-kin-no-quah) the great chief of the Miami Indian nation: being a sketch of his life, together with that of William Wells and some noted descendants* (Evansville, Indiana: Unigraphic, 1972), 8 (published 1917).
9 Bert J. Griswold (ed.), *Fort Wayne, Gateway of the West, 1802-1813* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1927), 8.
employed as a messenger and observer, affected policy with his own motivations. In a very real sense, he is the understudied, misunderstood, or wholly neglected filter between the United States government and the Indians residing in its territories.
Chapter 1
William Wells and the “Big Elm,” 1770-1802

“White savages are harder to be civilized than Indians”1

Who was William Wells? His liminality posed problems for Anglo-American contemporaries as well as historians. Through capture and adoption he gave up his white life to live among the Miamis. After years as a Miami, he voluntarily gave up his Indian life to live as a white man. He could appear as European or as Indian as he liked. He could speak both English and Miami. He was raised as a white Kentuckian, then as a Miami. He fought against the American armies and later fought with them. This dual life intrigued white residents in the Old Northwest in the years after Wells’ death so much that a legend developed: after living with the Indians for years, Wells desired to separate from his Miami kin and reunite with white America. Wells met with his friend and father-in-law, Miami chief Little Turtle, under a big elm tree and the two agreed to separate forever at midday. They held no ill-feelings toward each other, but their futures were no longer linked.2 This legend allowed people to heroize Wells’ war exploits and mythicize him as a frontiersman because it firmly categorized him as a Euro-American and separated him from Indian loyalty. One must question this legend’s validity and scrutinize other evidence to understand Wells’ true identity, both before and after the

2 The legend appears in Allan H. Dougall, The Death of Captain Wells (Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County, 1954), unpaginated; Jacob Piatt Dunn, True Indian Stories with Glossary of Indiana Indian Names (Indianapolis: Sentinel Printing Company, 1909), 117; Wallace A. Brice, History of Fort Wayne, From the Earliest Known Accounts (Fort Wayne, IN: D.W. Jones & Son, 1868), 147-148; “Mr. Wentworth’s Address,” The Daily Inter Ocean, (Chicago, IL) Friday, May 19, 1882; pg. 5; Issue 44; col B.
supposed meeting under the big elm tree. However, the “Big Elm” meeting serves as a
useful metaphor for the series of decisions leading to Wells’ acceptance of his Euro-
American identity in tandem with his maintenance of the close relationship with his
father-in-law, Little Turtle. This relationship, termed a “Family Compact” by Little
Turtle’s biographer, provides a backdrop for Wells’ political life as an Indian agent. 3
The “Big Elm” transformation and the “Family Compact” relationship must be fully
developed and explored in the frontier context in which Wells lived.

Wells was first a frontier boy. His father, Captain Samuel Wells, moved his
family from Jacob’s Creek, Pennsylvania to Kentucky in 1779. Samuel and his children
Samuel, Jr., Carty, Charles, Margaret, Haden, William, and Elizabeth, established Wells’
Station about three and a half miles northwest of present Shelbyville, Kentucky. The
Wells’ new home state of Kentucky was a well-established hunting ground for various
Indian villagers, and Samuel Wells, Jr. later noted that an Indian path ran by their
homestead. 4 Only two years later, William’s father was killed by Indians while serving
in the Kentucky militia. William’s mother had died earlier, and so William lived with
Colonel William Pope, a family friend, William Wells’ great-uncle through marriage, and
fellow migrant from Pennsylvania to Kentucky. 5 In a few short years, William received
some schooling, although how much or what quality is speculation. His correspondence
later in life shows a fair grasp of written English similar to educated contemporaries like
the famous explorer William Clark. Little else is known about Wells’ upbringing.

5 Paul A. Hutton, “William Wells: Frontier Scout and Indian Agent,” Indiana Magazine of History LXXIV (September 1978), 183-184. Hutton claims that William’s father was named Samuel, but using the same evidence Carter claims that his father was named Hayden. (86n.2). Meuter, a descendant of Samuel Wells, Jr., insists that Samuel Sr. was the father, and Hayden was his brother, The Long Rifle, The Bow and the Calumet 21. Also, some authors claim Pope was Nathaniel Pope.
March of 1784 marked a profound shift in fourteen-year-old Wells’ trajectory. One day, Wells and three friends set out on a long walk to Robert’s pond, over an hour’s walk from the Pope’s home in Louisville. The hunting was good, and after shooting a bear cub, the boys set down their guns. One of them, William Linn, strapped the burden onto his shoulders for the six-mile walk home. Some Indians, possibly walking northwest to their homes after raiding an interior settlement, took the opportunity to capture the four young Kentuckians, and transported them to the Delaware towns on the White River. Here, the three other boys escaped and fled south. Wells, probably now the property of one man, was taken to Kenapakomoko, Kaweahatta’s Miami village on the Eel River.

Young Wells entered a new society and culture that he adopted, and that adopted him, quickly. As a fourteen-year-old boy, and by the only account available fond of hunting, he may have adjusted quickly to Miami life. As a Miami, he could memorize Miami traditions and stories and continue to hunt his whole life. As a Kentuckian, Wells would have faced a less stimulating future of learning grammar and mathematics and becoming a farmer. Also easing his transition was the fact that his white parents had died and he lived in a transitory state as a teen in another man’s house.

Kaweahatta (Porcupine) took Wells as his son. An elderly village chief, Kaweahatta was a contemporary of Coldfoot (Piedfroid) and La Demoiselle (Old Briton), the generation of leaders in the 1740s and 1750s. He may have accepted Wells as a

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6 Hutton, “William Wells,” 183-184; Carter, Little Turtle, 83. The four boys, Wells, William and Azael Linn, and Nicholas Breshears, were hunting at Robert’s pond six miles southwest of Louisville. Robert’s pond is near present-day Rockford Lane in Shively, KY, Meuter, Long Rifle, 45. The towns on the White River are present-day Muncie and Anderson, Indiana, Mann Butler, “An Outline of the Origin and Settlement of Louisville, in Kentucky” The Louisville Directory for the year 1832 (Louisville: Richard W. Otis, 1832), 104.
7 Carter, Little Turtle, 84.
replacement for a killed son, in which case Wells was painted in vermilion and treated kindly throughout. Or, whoever captured Wells may have given him as a gift to Kaweahatta. In either case, Wells accepted his Miami identity and apparently never attempted to escape to Kentucky. He probably helped the Miamis kill white settlers traveling down the Ohio River, luring them to the shore by calling to them for help. His Miami name was Eepikánita, or “Ground Nut,” supposedly because he enjoyed eating this particular food. Kaweahatta tutored Wells in Miami history, cosmology, language, and values. This education provided Wells with the skills necessary to succeed as a Miami man. Later, the United States desired Wells’ culturally-specific knowledge and employed him for his expertise.

Wells probably did not consider himself a Miami, but rather a member of the Kilatika, one of six divisions forming the cultural group termed Miami. By the early 1800s, this group became known as the Eel River tribe, largely through Wells’ own effort. The Miami divisions, living in various villages, had common bonds through language and traditions. Yet, to call the Miami a “tribe,” “nation,” or “confederacy” is a misnomer. These peoples felt strong kinship ties with each other, but sometimes acted as distinct political units. By 1820, the Miami remembered tribal migrations and splits, and

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9 Carter, *Little Turtle*, 84, 87n.13. Carter claims there is no reason to doubt John Johnston’s claim that Wells lured white boatmen to their deaths, but Johnston despised Wells and there is reason to question his words: “This evil disposed man [Wells] was taken prisoner by the Indians at 15 years old, sometime after we find him on the Ohio River, under the pretense of being a white man lost in the woods, inveigling boats ashore and murdering and plundering the defenseless emigrants descending that River.” Quoted in Leonard U. Hill, *John Johnston and the Indians in the Land of the Three Miamis* (Columbus, OH: Stoneman Press, 1957), 36.
10 Every account attempting to assign reason for this name (anglicized Apekonit) asserts that the word means “wild carrot” or some variation, and connect the carrot to Wells’ red hair. Most translate “Apekonit” as “carrot top.” Hutton, “William Wells,” 184; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 84; Meuter, *Long Rifle*, 48. Wells family tradition supports that the name is derived from his taste for the food, not his red hair. In his nineteenth-century study of Miami stories and language, Dunn notes that the ground nut is *apios tuberosa*, *True Indian Stories with Glossary of Indiana Indian Names* (Indianapolis: Sentinel Printing Company, 1909), 117.
called the Piankeshaw, Wea, Peoria, and Kaskaskia their younger brothers because of their past separation. These band distinctions created confusion in later negotiations, and deserve some explanation. In the legendary past, some people followed one Miami man from the over-populated St. Joseph’s area to the Tippecanoe River, near a whirlpool called Wuyaokeetonwee (singular Weeau, anglicized “Wea”). When this Wea band increased, another man left and established a camp at the mouth of the Vermilion River. This man had no slits in his ears, thus he was called Puyunkeeshaw (Piankeshaw).

Similarly, one of these Piankeshaws left for the lower Wabash, near present-day Vincennes. They called the village Tshipkohkeeoangee, “at the root,” (Kaskaskia). These bands form three of the later tribes stemming from the Miamis. Miamis had other fictive kin relationships, calling the Ottawa, Potawatomi, Ojibwa and Wyandot “elder brothers,” the Shawnee “brothers,” and the Delaware “grandfathers.” Miami identity centered on kinship and geography.

Leadership also centered on these factors. Civil leadership, like that held by Wells’ father Kaweahatta, was patrilineally hereditary. A civil chief led his own village in times of peace, while a war chief had sole authority of raiding parties. This long-established dichotomy was broken through Anglo-American negotiations. American war leaders conducted the treaty process and forced Indian war leaders to do the same despite this role traditionally being reserved for Indian civil leaders. American war leaders also excluded Indian female leadership, which was foreign to Anglo-Americans but often instrumental to Indian peace-making. Such differences broke Miami custom and caused debilitating confusion, as will be discussed. The Miamis, like the Americans,

12 Trowbridge, Meearmee Traditions, 13-14.
13 Trowbridge, Meearmee Traditions, 29
built relationships and recognized authority through traditional rules understood by all members. Increasingly, white Americans broke Miami rules through coercion, undermining established customs and forcing leaders into unfamiliar roles. These economic, military, and cultural forces wrenched the gears of Miami life. Leadership fought to maintain order and good relations internally and externally amidst unwanted fluidity and change.

Miami peoples also had to cope with devastating smallpox epidemics. Diseases such as smallpox and influenza ravaged native villages more than chronic warfare. By way of comparison, the Black Death was one of the major transformations in Middle Age Europe, killing approximately 30% of the population in many areas. In North America, native population loss from disease was around 95% by 1800. Smallpox epidemics swept through the Great Lakes between 1519 and 1524, and again in 1639. The Miamis numbered as many as 10,000 in 1682, but three major smallpox epidemics swept through Miami villages in 1715, 1733, and 1752. In the 1750s, the Miami people may have numbered around 2,000. The 1752 epidemic claimed Kaweahatta’s contemporary civil chiefs including Coldfoot.

Changes brought by treaty negotiations and epidemics were largely unnoticed by white officials. Yet, both Miamis and Euro-Americans knew something about each other, opinions based on over a century of trade and dialogue. Additionally, cultural frameworks were not simply “white” or “Indian.” Miamis understood differences

between French, Spanish, English, and Americans. Europeans sometimes, but not always, knew differences between the Miami and other native peoples. William Wells joined a Miami culture keenly aware of changing conditions and European policies formed by centuries of exchange. As a youth, Wells was equipped by his own observations and Kaweahatta’s experience to understand both sides of the cultural divide.

Miami Contexts

The Miamis, especially those east of Kenapakomoko at the village of Kekionga (present-day Fort Wayne, Indiana), lived in an ideal location to play off French and British trading interests. Starting around 1730, British traders supplied enough goods to enter the Old Northwest market for furs. To renew French possession of the region northwest of the Ohio River, the governor of New France sent Pierre Joseph Céloron de Blainville to bury lead plates along the river mouths. At the same time, the Six Nations Iroquois, living in present-day New York State, engaged in a long-lasting series of raids commonly known as the Beaver Wars. The Six Nations, to posture themselves as the preeminent tradesmen in the northeast, claimed by right of conquest all the land, peoples, and resources northwest of the Ohio River. Of course, any European or Six Nations “ownership” meant nothing to most native villagers, and most Miamis remained nominally allied to French interests while trading for higher-quality British guns and blankets. But the presence of two powerful and competing trade empires, France and Great Britain, led to debate among Miami leaders. La Demoiselle (Old Briton) led his pro-British Miamis away from those who supported French traders, led by Coldfoot

(Piedfroid). His new town near Pickawillany, in Ohio country, was eventually attacked in 1752 by a large French métis, Ottawa and Ojibwa group. The attack caused La Demoiselle’s pro-British Miami to return to their brethren in Indiana, closer to French traders. This Pickawillany attack taught the French that displays of force could coerce the Miami, and to solidify this power they built a series of forts throughout the region. These forts helped usher in the French and Indian War, in which the Miamis supported the French, helped annihilate Maj. Gen. Edward Braddock’s British army in 1755, and raided English settlers in Virginia. France’s ultimate defeat in 1758, however, brought relative peace to the Miami homeland. French traders continued to live and trade in Miami villages, and the métis Miami population grew. These places of exchange, such as Kekionga and Ouiatenon, formed “middle grounds” in which French and Miami traders accommodated each other through mutual misunderstandings and selective change.

Through the 1760s and 1770s, Miami life changed little, although distant border wars raged between Indians and white settlers. Though French and British traders were meaningful economically, they were small in numbers and Six Nations presence was minimal. British colonists, settlers moving west through Pennsylvania and Virginia, were more threatening. Eastern refugees moved to Ohio and Indiana as a result, living on Miami land. Also, the now firmly-established British could not afford to present lavish gifts after the costly French and Indian War. Britain’s North American military commander Lord Jeffrey Amherst ended ritual gift-giving. The new tenor of British-Indian relations, as well as the British possession of frontier posts at Detroit, Michilimackinac, Sandusky, Miami, Ouiatenon, St. Joseph, Green Bay, and Sault Ste. Marie, initiated distrust of British imperialism, and manifested itself in Pontiac’s

Rebellion in 1763. The Miamis sensed Amherst’s forceful tone and heard rumors of possible white settlement in their homeland. They joined Pontiac’s Rebellion and captured the small British garrison at Kekionga. Other tribes did the same, claiming Michilimackinae, St. Joseph, Miami, Ouiatenon, Sandusky, and others. 20

Meanwhile, British authorities tried to consolidate control, and plan the future settlement, of the trans-Appalachian frontier. The Proclamation of 1763 was one such attempt, banning white settlement west of the Appalachians and setting up representative districts. 21 But the French traders and villagers living among the Miami and other tribes disdained supposed British rule, and certainly tried to influence their Miami neighbors and kinsmen to do the same. Another attempt to consolidate control was the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, in which the Six Nations Iroquois ceded Kentucky to the British. Whereas Shawnee, Delaware, and Miami peoples inhabited the northern banks of the Ohio River, the southern banks offered a fertile and “open” frontier, and white land speculators flowed into the hunting ground. The Miamis’ eastern neighbors the Delawares and Shawnees continued raiding frontier settlements, but the removed and cautious Miamis did not participate in such raids until Lord Dunmore’s War in 1774, which took place on the upper Ohio River. 22

The American Revolution (1775-1783) brought violence to the Miami homeland and new leaders emerged. British agents advocated Indian violence in the 1770s to support their cause in the war. Most notably, Shawnees from Ohio raided into Kentucky. Miamis, largely neutral and convinced by neither British nor American speeches, were

20 Caruso, Great Lakes Frontier, 42-44
21 Caruso, Great Lakes Frontier, 43-45.
forced to react when French commander Augustine Mottin de La Balme raised a group of eighty French and Indians and destroyed Kekionga, the largest Miami village, in 1780. In response, a young Miami, Little Turtle, collected the refugee men and destroyed the French force. Additionally, both American and British agents gradually formed the conception of a great “Miami Confederacy” which served a backdrop to their actions in the next decades.23

Nearly perpetual and often brutal border warfare firmly entrenched many Indians and whites against each other as inveterate enemies. The British Crown authorized bounties for scalps in the 1754-1763 French and Indian War. In Ohio, Indiana and Michigan in 1780-1781, American Indian-fighter George Rogers Clark nicknamed Lieutenant-Governor Henry Hamilton “The Famous Hair Buyer General.”24 A brutal man himself, Clark executed countless Indians. Hamilton himself saw Clark tomahawk a young Ottawa chief’s head. The Ottawa then removed the weapon and “gave it again into the hands of his executioner who repeated the Stroke a second and third time, after which the miserable being, not entirely deprived of life was dragged to the river, and thrown in with the rope about his neck where he ended his life and tortures.” Hamilton personally knew the Ottawa chief (and the six others similarly tomahawked at the time) and sued for peace.25 Americans and British alike used the Indians in such spectacles to induce fear and surrender to onlookers. During the American Revolution, the British ordered their Indian allies to kill Indian enemies, including women and children, because

23 Anson, Miami Indians, 91-94.
24 Barbara Alice Mann, George Washington’s War on Native America (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2005), 115.
25 Mann, Washington’s War, 116.
“nits breed lice.” Many British leaders and settlers, and later their American children and grandchildren, maintained an aversion to the “savage” Indians.

The United States and the Miamis built upon their predecessors’ policies, or more correctly attitudes, and continued a history of official misunderstanding. As a young Miami man in the 1780s, Wells dealt with great tensions created by American Indian policy. The Miami civil leaders during this period were Pacanne and the younger Le Gris. Pacanne was likely the nephew of Coldfoot (Piedfroid), while Le Gris (or Le Petit Gris) was probably the nephew of the elder Le Gris (La Grue). Thus, like American policy, their decisions were also informed by their predecessors. Throughout the 1760s and 1770s when Pacanne and Le Gris led, British imperial policy did little to deter white squatters from entering Indian-controlled land. Old Northwest peoples learned that complaining to white authorities did not stop white encroachment. They had the choice to petition for government help, which had not helped before and would not help in the future. Or, they could kill the squatters. The Indians then faced the retaliation as outraged squatters or settlers from neighboring regions raided Indian towns. The usual result of this white settlement pattern was constant war from the 1740s to the 1790s. By the late 1780s when William Wells was probably joining raids near the Ohio River, Miami chiefs and young men had grown efficient in fighting the whites. Since the 1740s, Miamis took part in almost every war or negotiation between Europeans and Indians. Despite treaties signed to clearly define Indian and white boundaries, low-level war simmered across the frontier and especially in the Ohio River Valley.

26 Mann, Washington’s War, 6.
27 Rafert, Miami Indians of Indiana, 37-38. Both Coldfoot and La Grue were contemporaries of Wells’ father Kaweahatta, and both died in the 1752 smallpox epidemic.
28 Anson, Miami Indians, 95.
The new U.S. government knew that white squatters and settlers were one reason for such violence, and struggled to control them. The preemptive 1785 Land Ordinance and the 1787 Northwest Ordinance constituted a fundamental shift from peace treaties resulting from violence. Prior to the 1785 and 1787 ordinances, white settlers were considered squatters because the U.S. government did not assert its ownership. After the ordinances, Indian raids were direct challenges to the authority of the U.S. government. Such challenges were especially distasteful to a fledgling government desperate to shake its image as weak and powerless. The British helped the Indians take a stance against American encroachment by reminding the Indians that they had not been a party to the 1763 Treaty of Paris and prior treaties had not been negotiated with the tribes in union. At the same time as the Miamis and their neighbors hardened their stance against further American settlement, American officials consolidated their supposed power over the Old Northwest through the 1785 and 1787 ordinances.

The new American government hoped to secure the Northwest Territory to profit by selling new land to land-hungry settlers, and quickly got to work to control and protect those Americans already living in the Ohio River valley from both lawlessness and Indians. To sell frontier land, the United States had to officially own it. In the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution, the British relinquished their ownership of the Old Northwest.29 In the 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, the Iroquois ceded their claims to the Ohio country, which the Americans gladly accepted.30 To compel this decision, the treaty ground was surrounded by U.S. troops who held Indian

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29 Anson, Miami Indians, 97.
hostages at gunpoint. Of course, no Northwest Indians signed the document, and they did not agree that the Iroquois owned or controlled their homeland. However, George Rogers Clark now assumed United States dominion over the Old Northwest. In 1785, Clark negotiated the Treaty of Fort McIntosh with some Delaware, Wyandot and Ottawa chiefs. The treaty set a precedent by assigning a territory to the Wyandots and Delawares, then “allotting” this land to the tribes. The United States did not acknowledge Indian ownership. Shawnee residents who lived on this land were not party to the treaty, and for practical purposes it was useless.

Shawnee chiefs instead signed the 1786 Treaty of Fort Finney near Cincinnati, which gave much of southern Ohio and Indiana to the United States. They may have been influenced by George Rogers Clark’s display of force, General Josiah Harmar’s removal of 600 white families on the Muskingum in eastern Ohio, or the 15,000 squatters already in Shawnee country. Much like the Treaty of Fort McIntosh, the Shawnees recognized that the United States owned all the land relinquished by Great Britain in the 1783 Treaty of Paris which ended the American Revolution. Thus in the Treaty of Fort Finney, “The United States [did] allot to the Shawanoe nation, lands within their territory to live and hunt upon.” In these treaties, the Miami remained notably absent. The Shawnees and Miamis increased raiding north of the Ohio River. Unlike Anglo-American squatters, they adhered to the Treaty of Fort Finney’s Article Seven which stipulated that any whites in Shawnee country could not claim U.S. protection. The original Shawnee

signers represented only one faction, and this contributed to the treaty’s dismissal by most Indians and to heightened violence.

American officials responded to violence with treaties, but American vigilantes responded with violence of their own. In one retaliation effort, Clark himself led a campaign into the Miami homeland in 1786, the same year the Miamis rebuffed his efforts to parley. Eastern newspapers promoted such campaigns by reporting Indian raids as “massacres,” but federal officials were less supportive. These campaigns by backcountry squatters, or “white savages,” threatened federal authority as much as Indian raids did.  

When the Virginia legislature remained indecisive about the campaign, Kentuckians mounted a voluntary effort only vaguely approved by Virginia Governor Patrick Henry. These volunteers came from a rapidly growing Kentucky population. In the 1780s, around 15,000 to 25,000 Indians lived northwest of the Ohio River. Kentucky settlers numbered 45,000 in 1780 and 73,677 in 1790. The perceived heart of the Old Northwest on the upper Wabash were Miami villagers, whom President George Washington believed conducted “robberies and murder.” Clark’s expedition met disaster not from Indians but from his own haste and bad planning. By the time he reached Vincennes in southern Indiana, his militia were too few to continue. But Clark schemed to intimidate all the Indians, and while he waited at Vincennes before returning home to Kentucky, another American detachment marched through Ohio. Second-in-command Benjamin Logan attacked the Shawnee town Mackachack, whose residents still

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36 *A Century of Population Growth, From the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790-1900* (United States Government Printing Office, 1909), 9-10. Kentucky’s white population experienced a 64% increase in this decade. Indian estimates ranged from St. Clair’s 4,000 to Winterbotham’s 65,000, but Henry Knox’s estimate of 20,000 is more reasonable, 39-40, 54.
adhered to past peace treaties, and five months previously had been told that “the
Thirteen Great Fires were determined to hold fast the chain of friendship.” When the
Americans came into sight, the prominent and aged Shawnee chief Moluntha raised the
American flag in greeting. Mounted cavalry attacked the town, killing men, women, and
children. An American, Captain Hugh McGary, tomahawked and scalped Moluntha even
while the old man attempted to shake McGary’s hand.38 In 1787 and 1788 other
frontiersmen mounted similar campaigns. The Miamis, brothers to the Shawnees, took
lessons from these attacks. Both Indians and whites engaged in a kind of expanded blood
feud, and southern Ohio between the two Miami rivers became known as the “Miami
Slaughterhouse.”

The yearly raiding by both groups fostered mutual enmity of Indians and whites.
One notorious Indian-killer, Lewis Wetzel, was known to kill Indians when he saw them
on the spot, but at trial was acquitted immediately.39 Even by 1802, the Governor of the
Indiana Territory observed that settlers “consider the murdering of Indians in the highest
degree meritorious.” Another noted that to the uncouth settlers, killing an Indian “was
the same as killing a bear or a buffalo.”40 A young Kentuckian would have learned to
“hate an Indian, because he always hears him spoken of as an enemy. From the cradle,
he listens continually to horrid tales of savage violence.”41 William Wells lived in this
context, well-versed in frontier warfare in which Indian groups, namely Iroquois and
Ohio unions repeatedly defeated Washington’s best generals, and where his backyard was

38 Sword, President Washington’s Indian War, 36-41.
39 Wetzel wounded Indians at the Treaty of Fort McIntosh, Mann, Washington’s War, 118.
40 Quotes from Mann, Washington’s War, 5.
41 White, Middle Ground, 366.
called a slaughterhouse. Killing was almost the only communication; it was hardly a “middle ground” for the Miami and American villagers.

Yet, certain aspects of the middle ground remained. French, British, and Indian traders called Kekionga, the heart of the Miami homeland, home. Several Shawnee and Delaware villages were within a day’s walk. Around this time in 1788, eighteen-year-old Wells, Eepikánita, had been living as a Miami for four years. He had adopted Miami language, dress, and customs. That year, one of his former brothers, Carty Wells, helped supply the U.S. garrison at Vincennes. Somehow, Carty learned from the garrison’s commander, Colonel Jean Francois (John Francis) Hamtramck, that William lived at Kenapakomoko. Carty Wells went there in 1789, but William refused to return to Kentucky. Months later, William’s older brother Samuel arrived, and this time Wells agreed to visit Louisville. After a few days, Wells returned to Kenapakomoko and married a Wea woman, who bore him a child in 1791. Love may have helped persuade Wells to remain a Miami. He may also have realized that he could remain living at Kenapakomoko with his Miami family and still visit his Kentucky family under friendly circumstances. His choice to live in the Miami village was not, therefore, a severance from his former family.

Frontier Campaigns: Harmar and St. Clair

While William Wells seemed to find his place in the middle in 1790, the constant fighting between Indians and Kentuckians came to a head. The United States

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42 White, *Middle Ground*, 448-453.
government could not allow Indian depredations to continue, and wished to silence
Indian raiding once and for all. With President Washington’s consent, Secretary of War
Knox instructed his senior army officer, General Josiah Harmar, “to extirpate, utterly, if
possible, the said [Indian] banditti.” Harmar led an army of 320 regulars and 1,133
Kentucky volunteers. In mid-October, 1790, Harmar’s column burned the Delaware,
Shawnee, and Miami villages on the upper Maumee. Disappointed that the Indians had
evacuated, Harmar sent Colonel John Hardin with four-hundred men to find them. Little
Turtle led an ambush of Hardin’s men, who retreated to Harmar’s main army.
Stubbornly, Hardin requested another four-hundred men to attack Kekionga. When
Hardin reached the St. Joseph River, the Indians again attacked, this time with more
casualties to both sides. The river filled with bodies, and Harmar was forced to retreat.
Since Miami scouts reported on Harmar’s campaign and the whole region knew about
Little Turtle’s army, Wells probably gained valuable experience fighting in these battles,
and perhaps the twenty-year-old’s fighting came to Little Turtle’s attention.

After Harmar’s Defeat, the Governor of the Northwest Territory, Arthur St. Clair,
assembled an army meant to demoralize and destroy Indian opposition. In the spring and
summer of 1791, St. Clair first sent Gen. Charles Scott then Col. James Wilkinson to
some Wea and Eel River towns. In these raids, many Miami women and children were
captured, including Wells’ Miami mother (Kaweahatta’s wife) and Wea wife. While
these raids had been intended to cripple Indian morale, they may have had the opposite
effect. St. Clair’s army of 2,700 men assembled and began its march northward from

45 Quote in Rafert, Miami Indians of Indiana, 50.
46 Harvey Louis Carter, “A Frontier Tragedy: Little Turtle and William Wells,” The Old Northwest 6, no. 1
Cincinnati in September. St. Clair presumed, as did Secretary of War Henry Knox, “that disciplined valor will triumph over the undisciplined Indians.”[48] However, past successes garnered Little Turtle considerable prestige and momentum. The British made sure that the Indian soldiers were well supplied with arms and ammunition. More and more Shawnee, Delaware, Wyandot, Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Potawatomi men joined Little Turtle’s Miamis to meet the new American army. St. Clair plodded along, building forts at intervals along the way, leaving garrisons in these forts, and losing deserters. As a result, his 1,400 remaining men were completely surprised by Little Turtle’s 1,400 estimated men on November 4, 1791.[49] Wells himself led the sharpshooters assigned to Major William Ferguson’s cannons, and the white bodies piled up to the height of the cannon themselves.[50] In their retreat, the U.S. army abandoned the cannons for the Indians to seize and bury. On the day, St. Clair lost 630 men. Wells tomahawked and scalped until he could no longer raise his arm.[51] Wells later claimed that the Indians numbered 1,400, of whom only thirty died in battle and twenty died of wounds.[52]

Little Turtle’s rout of St. Clair offered a respite from fighting. Wells, now twenty-two, certainly wished to reclaim his family captured by Wilkinson’s 1791 raid on Kenapakomoko. Wells also married Little Turtle’s daughter Manwangopeth (Sweet Breeze). Miami custom did not bar men from taking a second wife, and Wells’ situation

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48 Sword, President Washington’s Indian War, 181.
49 Carter, “Frontier Tragedy,” 6-7; Carter, Little Turtle, 104; Anson, Miami Indians, 120-121.
50 Sword, President Washington’s Indian War, 181.
51 Hill, John Johnston, 36. Like Wells’ activity luring boats to shore on the Ohio River, his colleague and enemy John Johnston uses Wells’ actions as evidence of his evil character. Wells fought “with the savages against his American brethren under St. Clair, to use Well’s (sic) own account, he killed and scalped that day until he could not raise his arm to his head.”
merited the opportunity.\textsuperscript{53} It is unknown whether the two actually initiated the marriage. Little Turtle may have wished to ally himself with Wells to build his knowledge of white culture. Perhaps Little Turtle, after succeeding admirably in the victory of St. Clair, admired the young man and wished his daughter to marry him. Or, Wells may have felt admiration for Little Turtle and wanted to more formally tie himself to the great leader. In any case, a newly-married Wells took the peacetime opportunity to visit his brother Samuel in Kentucky.

The “Big Elm”—a Family Compact

Wells married Sweet Breeze and within weeks departed for Kentucky. This timing points to a vital moment for liminal Wells, and indeed for the history of the Old Northwest. After Wells’ death in 1812, when his fame was perhaps greatest, part of his legendary story included his departure from Little Turtle and Miami life. One common tale claims that Little Turtle and Wells met two miles east of Fort Wayne along the Maumee River, at a place called the “Big Elm.” According to legend, their hearts were torn by such a meeting. Wells had been calmly reflecting on his childhood in Kentucky, remembering a pleasant past, and worrying that he might have slain his own kin in battle. He resolved to detach himself from his tribe. Both Wells and Little Turtle understood they might never see each other again, except on the field of battle. At midday, when the sun reached its zenith, Wells would leave the Miamis and return to the whites. The “visibly affected” Wells said to Little Turtle, “From that time we will be enemies. If you want to kill me then, you may. If I want to kill you, I may.” At the appointed time,

\textsuperscript{53} Carter, \textit{Little Turtle}, 103.
Wells crossed the river. Little Turtle saw his departure as a bad omen, and from then on knew his Indian forces were doomed.54

The legend is critical not because it conveys a factual event, but because it illustrates a turning point which white Americans could accept. Whether one believes the romanticized story or not, it lends credence to a mutual agreement. This “Big Elm” version of the event, almost certainly a legend, served a purpose to those who told it and remembered it. Why did Wells give up his Miami life? He remembered how pleasant his Kentucky home was, and he could not risk fighting his brothers in battle. Was Wells sincere? He did cross the Maumee River, reflecting a frontier version of crossing the Rubicon. Also, everyone remembered or knew about Wells’ performance as a daring scout for Wayne’s army. The “Big Elm” story thus explains Wells’ subsequent actions to people who believed he was a war hero.

Captain Nathan Heald, William Wells’ nephew-in-law, later helped debunk the “Big Elm” story. In 1868 he stated that “Wells made an agreement with Little Turtle and a few others not to kill each other in war. Also to do what they could for peace. Wells and Little Turtle actually met several times during the Wars [years?] before 1795. Friendly meetings on neutral ground neither trying to learn anything from the other.”55 This inside information collected while the “Big Elm” story circulated helps discredit the legendary version but supports a mutual agreement. Additionally, this family tradition from Wells’ white descendant agrees with family tradition from Wells’ Miami descendants. Neither supports the commonly-held view that Wells suddenly realized he may have killed his white brother Samuel Wells, evidence relied on by Wells’ modern

54 Dougall, Death of Captain Wells, unpaginated; Dunn, True Indian Stories, 117; Brice, History of Fort Wayne, 147-148.
55 Quoted in Carter, Little Turtle, 112.
biographer.\textsuperscript{56} Probably, Wells and Little Turtle agreed that the Northwest Indians could not continue in a constant state of war. Wells, already tied to his own Miami family and connected to his Kentucky family, could serve a pivotal role as middleman between the two cultures. If Wells could establish his own influence in white culture, either through his distinguished white family, by faithfully helping the U.S. government, or through war exploits, he could help the Miamis as a white man better than he could as a Miami man. Wells did not plan on using deceit or espionage, but rather recognized that in the choice between war and peace, peace offered the more practical future personally and for residents of the Old Northwest.

One of Wells’ own statements supports the supposed agreement that he and Little Turtle would continue to fight for peace and to help the Miamis navigate American Indian policy. In Philadelphia in 1797-98, Wells claimed that the Indians gave no thought to the past or the future, but merely lived in the present.\textsuperscript{57} The man who recorded these thoughts, a French traveler named Constantin Francois Volney, took them in a somewhat philosophical context. Volney, and later historians, assumed that Wells enjoyed living with his brother Samuel in Kentucky, doubted Indian culture, and could more easily find happiness as a white American. In essence, Volney and other historians assumed that Wells was speaking abstractly.\textsuperscript{58} This may be misleading. Speaking to Volney in English, probably with Little Turtle in the room, it is equally probable that Wells meant a more concrete answer to Volney’s prodding about Wells’ apparent departure from Miami life. It is reasonable to suppose that Wells, responding to such

\textsuperscript{56} Hutton, “William Wells,” 190.
prodding, answered by explaining the Miami worldview. Wells said that the Miamis gave “little or no remembrance to the past, and hope nothing for the future.” The response makes sense in light of the “Big Elm” story and Heald’s statement that Wells and Little Turtle worked together through the years. If Wells became an advocate for the Miamis’ future as a U.S. citizen rather than a Miami man, one could view this as a “Family Compact” in which instead of departing from the Miamis, Wells cooperated with them through Euro-American avenues. Such a Family Compact is also supported by subsequent events and lifelong decisions and actions.

The formulation of this Compact, the sequence of events popularly conceived in the “Big Elm” story, occurred sometime shortly after St. Clair’s defeat. At that time, Wells hoped to reclaim Miami relatives captured by Wilkinson’s raid in 1791 and to see his brother Samuel in Kentucky. At Post Vincennes, Wells undoubtedly hoped to make inroads into white America and set up a new life. To this end, he met the peace commissioner recently sent to there, Brigadier General Rufus Putnam, to aid a prisoner exchange. Putnam’s was one of several peace-making missions throughout Indian country aimed at cooling tensions across the frontier. Sent by Secretary of War Henry Knox, Putnam negotiated to save white settlements from Indian raiding. Wells arrived before the prisoner exchange was ready, so he next visited his brother Samuel Wells in Louisville for a month. During this time, Gen. Putnam traveled to Cincinnati and called for Wells to help the prisoner exchange because no one could speak with the Miami prisoners. On July 13, 1792, Wells was reunited with his Wea wife and “his mother

59 Volney, View of the Soil, 372.
and sisters; who shed many tears at their meeting.”61 Putnam informed Knox that he employed “a young man of a respectable family by the name of Wells…. [H]e appears to be a young man of good natural abilities and of an agreeable disposition.”62 In July of 1792, Wells found the secretly-buried cannons taken by Indians from St. Clair’s army the previous summer. Putnam liked Wells, and paid him one dollar per day for his services.63 Wells’ employment allowed him to help Miamis recover the losses of war as he built white trust.

During the summer of 1792, Wells stayed in Cincinnati aiding Gen. Putnam as an interpreter.64 In August, Wells accompanied Putnam and four large boats full of Indian prisoners from Cincinnati to Vincennes.65 Only months removed from living at Kenapakomoko, Wells provided an interesting study for Putnam’s aide, a Moravian missionary named John Heckewelder. One day en route to Vincennes, Heckewelder observed curiously the young man approach a large black bear he had just shot. Wells had not killed the animal, which now “cried piteously” in injury. Wells, for all intents and purposes a Miami man, approached the bear calmly. Heckewelder watched as Wells stood mere feet from the wounded bear, conversationally talking to it in the Miami language and gently stroking its nose. When Wells turned away, Heckewelder asked what he said to the bear. “I have,” Wells replied, “upbraided him for acting the part of a coward; I told him that he knew the fortune of war, that one or the other of us must have

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61 Rowena Buell, ed. The Memoirs of Rufus Putnam and Certain Official Papers and Correspondence (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1903), 297; Sword, President Washington’s Indian War, 215; quote from Heckewelder, History, Manners, and Customs, 112.
62 Buell, Putnam Memoirs, 296.
63 Buell, Putnam Memoirs, 381.
64 Wells may have understood several Algonquian languages, including Shawnee, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi, but not Delaware. “(By Authority) By the President of the United States of America, a Proclamation Th: Jefferson; James Madison, Secretary of State,” The National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser, (Washington, DC) Monday, January 02, 1804; Issue CCCCCXIX; col D.
65 Heckewelder, History, Manners, and Customs, 112-114.
fallen; that it was his fate to be conquered, and he ought to die like a man, like a hero, and
not like an old woman; that if the case had been reversed, and I had fallen into the power
of my enemy, I would not have disgraced my nation as he did, but would have died with
firmness and courage, as becomes a true warrior.”\textsuperscript{66} The story helps characterize Wells
in his transition from Miami to Euro-American, and reveals that he did not, and probably
could not, shed Miami worldview.

Gen. Putnam, like Heckewelder, appreciated this insight into Indian culture and
listened to Wells’ advice on the Indians. Putnam informed Secretary of War Knox that
Wells thought “that the Weya and Eel River Indians [were] disposed for peace.”\textsuperscript{67} Knox
had decided shortly after St. Clair’s defeat that large-scale negotiations were necessary,
and Wells’ input helped bring Wabash peoples into the fold. Having used Wells’ aid
through much of the summer and fall of 1792, Putnam used him as an interpreter to
negotiate a treaty in which the Weas, Kaskaskias, Eel Rivers (Miamis living at
Kenapakomoko, Kaweahatta’s village), Piankeshaws, and Potawatomis agreed to another
lasting peace. The Vincennes Treaty recognized Indian title to land for which they held
“just claim,” and Article Four further stated that “the lands originally belonged to the
Indians; it is theirs, and theirs only. That they have a right to sell, and a right to refuse to
sell.”\textsuperscript{68} William Wells soon after informed Putnam that some Indians disclaimed the
Vincennes Treaty’s validity, claiming that the Indian signers had no right to sign, “and

\textsuperscript{66} Heckewelder, \textit{Manners and Customs}, 255-256. Wells quote is taken from p. 256.
\textsuperscript{67} Buell, \textit{Putnam Memoirs}, 297.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{American State Papers, 1789-1838}, I, Indian Affairs, 338. Interestingly, Putnam told the chiefs: “I
wish...to see your young men become industrious hunters.” While this remark was probably not planned
as anything more than a mark of goodwill, it contrasts sharply with the purported aims of later treaties, i.e.
forcing Indians to abandon hunting, p. 319.
that the lands belonged to all the Wabash Tribes in Common." President Washington was wary about Article Four, which “solemnly guaranty[ed]” the land the tribes claimed and did not stipulate U.S. preemption to the land should the Indians wish to sell. The U.S. Congress in Philadelphia disliked the treaty as well, and voted it down 21-4. Although the treaty asserted that the Indians could “sell, or refuse to sell” their lands, Congress rejected the treaty because it did not explicitly declare U.S. preemption. Apparently, they believed the Wabash Indians would eventually sell their land, and wanted to guarantee that the U.S. would buy it.

Congress rejected the Vincennes Treaty in January of 1794, years after St. Clair’s Defeat. The date is important because Secretary of War Henry Knox appointed Putnam to oversee this extended treaty process in 1792. At the same time Knox also invested in a rebuilt army. Even before Putnam had entered negotiations in 1792, Knox spent substantial time and effort to help an old Revolutionary general, Anthony Wayne, build a new western force. Whatever the outcome of Putnam’s negotiations, Knox wanted a stronger army in the West. Thus, in 1794 when Congress rejected the treaty, Wayne’s army was already formed, trained, and nearly ready to attack the Wabash peoples again. Putnam’s Vincennes Treaty accomplished nothing except giving the Indians the impression that they themselves owned their land, and that the U.S. knew and understood this point.

70 American State Papers, I, Indian Affairs, 338.
71 Sword, *President Washington’s Indian War*, 218.
In another important development, Wells advised Putnam to sue for peace with the Miamis at Kekionga and the Delawares. Putnam asked Wells himself to call these peoples into Vincennes for negotiations, promising him three hundred dollars, and another two hundred dollars should he succeed. Previously, these Indians had killed three such emissaries. The Miamis, Delawares, and Shawnees all did not sign the Vincennes Treaty, showing their confident and belligerent mindset following their victory over St. Clair. It certainly did not help Putnam’s peace mission that Gen. Wayne was establishing and drilling a large new military force in Ohio, close to Shawnee and Delaware villages. The Miamis’ refusal to negotiate also illustrates power structure. Even though by late 1792 Little Turtle probably sought peace, much like Wells at the same time, he could not bring his young men in line with his wishes. His authority rested in war exploits, not in civil leadership. Therefore the Indians did not join Wells in returning to Vincennes for peace talks. But this mission in the fall of 1792 was fruitful for Wells personally, because it indicated his trustworthiness and made Wells an official agent for the Americans.

Army Scout

Through late 1792 and 1793, Indians continued with little effect to harass supply lines to Wayne’s camp near Cincinnati, where his army drilled. Gen. Wayne desired intelligence from a council of tribes meeting in northern Ohio. Wayne’s Colonel Hamtramck hired Wells to reconnoiter the council on the lower Maumee River. Wells reported directly to Gen. Wayne in September 1793, and indicated that the Indians,

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73 Sometimes termed the “Miami proper,” and henceforward the “Miamis” because the Vincennes Treaty distinguished the Weas, Eel Rivers, and Piankeshaws as separate tribes.
74 Buell, *Putnam Memoirs*, 381.
gradually becoming unified against the Americans, would not negotiate. Wells also made sure to note that the Miami villagers did not agree with the council’s bellicose decision.\(^{75}\) That Fall, Wayne led his army north to Greene Ville, Ohio, (henceforward Greenville) where they encamped in the winter of 1793-1794. He also ordered Fort Recovery built on the site of St. Clair’s Defeat, and this garrison was protected by the cannons abandoned by St. Clair’s army, and found by William Wells. The British countered with the establishment of Fort Miamis on the Maumee River, finished in April of 1794. The fort, along with the strong persuasion of British agents like Alexander McKee, built Indian confidence in the upcoming confrontation.\(^{76}\) Little Turtle, however, concluded from talks with British officials that when actual violence occurred, the Indians could not count on British aid.\(^{77}\) Always successful in war, he thought peace a more favorable option.

Other Indian leaders refused his advice. Indian military leadership was not an authoritarian position, nor was it appointed. Rather, war chiefs held their status through reputation, prestige, and trust. Past military success and British promises convinced most Indians to remain bellicose, though Little Turtle continued to push for peace. Wayne sent a letter urging peace in January 1794. That same month, still working for peace, Wells reportedly told an Indian prisoner “that the United States were yet willing to treat.”\(^{78}\) In late July, 1794, Wayne’s army set out from Greenville heading north along St. Clair’s route. Wayne sent a scout to the Indians asking for peace, which the Indians debated. At

\(^{77}\) Carter, *Little Turtle*, 132.
this council, Little Turtle reportedly said, “The Americans are now led by a chief who
never sleeps…. We have not been able to surprise him. Think well of it. There is
something whispers me, it would be prudent to listen of his offers of peace.”79 The
arrival of a small group of Canadian rangers, along with reasons aforementioned led most
Indians to disregard Little Turtle’s pleadings. Blue Jacket, the Shawnee war chief, took
leadership of the Indian army, and Little Turtle took the lead of his Miami men.80 The
young men wanted to build on their past success, gain glory, and physically reject
American authority. Blue Jacket accepted this line in the sand, while Little Turtle sought
a new middle ground.

William Wells, meanwhile, provided invaluable aid to Wayne’s campaign. It is
possible that Wells advised Gen. Wayne to urge peace, even though prior efforts had
failed, knowing that Little Turtle would do the same. Wayne liked his skilled scout, and
in September 1793 wrote that Wells was a powerful Indian warrior, had aided in St.
Clair’s Defeat, and that “he faithfully executed the trust reposed in Him last fall by Genl
Putnam—& has faithfully that which was reposed in him by me upon the present
occasion!”81 Wayne obviously appreciated Wells’ invaluable services.

As a scout, Wells did not work alone. He led a small group of frontiersmen,
usually working in groups of three to five, including Henry and Christopher Miller,
Robert McClellan, William May, Dodson Thorp, and others. Of probably eighteen, all
but McClellan had lived as Indian captives.82 These men gained considerable fame

79 Carter, Little Turtle, 134.
80 Carter, Little Turtle, 134.
82 British agent Alexander McKee reported that Wells was one of eighteen whites who “dress and paint
themselves like Indians,” along with seventeen Chippewas from the south, Cruikshank, Simcoe Papers,
258. Carter gives some information about these scouts’ backgrounds, Little Turtle, 129, 133.
during the campaign for their exploits. One Ohio history book characterized them as “athletes of the woodes…. To them the yell of a savage, that was meant to be so terrifying, was empty bluster and vain bravado.”83 Another later account claimed that McClellan once “leaped over a road-wagon with the cover stretched over; the wagon and bows were eight and a half feet high.”84 At one time former Indian captive Henry Miller found his lost brother Christopher, who unlike his brother Henry had remained with the Indians as a boy. Henry convinced his brother Christopher to join Wells’ scouts.85 Wayne used white Indians like Wells against his enemies. Indians were still aware of the terrain and American movements, but the American army now had a similar advantage.

Wells effectively scouted the region, including Indian movements and possible routes for his army’s advance. At least four times Wells visited an old friend and trader John Kinzie, who gave Wells written intelligence.86 On August 9, 1794 the army started building Fort Defiance at the confluence of the Auglaize and Maumee Rivers, and Wayne sent Wells to scout the Indian army. Wells and a few scouts dressed and painted as Indians boldly entered the Indian camp on August 11. Unfortunately, one Delaware apparently recognized Wells colleague William May, and the scouts made a hasty escape. In the shooting, Wells’ wrist was hit and he probably lost some use of his left hand.87 The wounds took months to heal, and earned Wells a pension.88

After a final offer of peace on August 13, 1794, the Indians replied that they required ten days to deliberate. Wayne interpreted this response as a stall and advanced,

83 Who is Who In and From Ohio, I, (Cincinnati: Queen City Publishing Co., 1910), 130.
85 McDonald, Biographical Sketches, 184, 187.
86 Cruikshank, Simcoe Papers, II, 230.
87 McDonald, Biographical Sketches, 192-195.
88 Cruikshank, Simcoe Papers, III, 166; McDonald Biographical Sketches, 192-194.
ordering his troops to burn Indian camps and crops. An unanticipated rainstorm slowed Wayne’s march, but his 3,600 men met only 900 of approximately 1,600 Indian men, who retreated after about an hour of fighting.\(^{89}\) Wells may have advised Wayne to continue despite the weather, knowing that many Indians would return to their camps in the rain. Fleeing to the British Fort Miami only miles away, the Indians found the gates firmly locked. Outraged by this, some Indians including the notable Delaware chief Buckongahelas never trusted the British again. In this fight, dubbed “The Battle of Fallen Timbers” because heavy winds had felled many trees in the area, the Americans had 44 dead, the Indians about 50. The British claimed that the Shawnees were not present, and only 400 total Indians fought.\(^{90}\)

The Battle of Fallen Timbers effectively ended any confederacy, real or imagined, among the Old Northwest villagers until militants again took the fore in the early nineteenth century. The American army asserted its control through Wayne’s scorched-earth policy, which also points to Wayne’s knowledge that Miami subsistence centered on horticultural pursuits.\(^{91}\) After Fallen Timbers through the fall of 1794, Wayne ordered detachments to completely destroy Indian crops, thousands of acres of corn, vegetables, and orchards, certainly making the winter a bitter one for the Indians relying on these foodstores. He also continued to the now deserted Kekionga, where he instructed his men to build a Fort on the south bank of the St. Mary’s, ceremonially named Fort Wayne on October 22, 1794.\(^{92}\)

\(^{91}\) If one might skew chronology for the sake of argument, scorched earth policies could feasibly be plant or animal. For instance, in the 1860s, the U.S. Army under William Tecumseh Sherman intentionally sought to destroy the lifeblood of native culture, the bison herds. Danielle Moretti-Langholtz, personal communication.
Wells’ father, Kaweahatta, died sometime in 1794. Miami leadership still existed, with Pacanne and others as civil chiefs. However, Wayne also demanded war chiefs to be present at peace talks, something largely unknown to Old Northwest Indians. Formerly, civil chiefs or female chiefs took over in peace. Now, chiefs like Little Turtle and Blue Jacket were thrust into new positions of authority. Pacanne, the hereditary leader of the Miamis now that war had ended, asked that the peace talks be held at Kekionga. Gen. Wayne refused, and so Pacanne sent his nephew, Jean Baptiste Richardville (Peejeeeway, Wild Cat) in his stead to represent the Miamis.93 Through custom and the Greenville treaty process, Richardville and Little Turtle would become the most influential Miami leaders over the next decade.

The Treaty of Greenville

In the midsummer of 1795, the newly dispirited Indians collected at Fort Greenville to participate in the treaty process. Once energized by important battlefield victories, their retreat and dissolution at Fallen Timbers demoralized the chiefs and young men despite the relatively few casualties. Delawares, Ottawas, Potawatomis, and others had been waiting with Wayne since June, maintaining a council fire. As new chiefs arrived, they spoke to Wayne and often presented wampums, solemn and sacred historical texts told through beadwork. In late July the proceedings finally began. Over 1,100 village chiefs and warriors arrived to say their part. Each employed his highest ceremonial oratory, often thanking the Great Spirit and proclaiming friendship between all Indians and Americans. William Wells spent weeks interpreting for the various chiefs.

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93 Carter, Little Turtle, 145-146. Jean Baptiste Richardville was the son of a French trader and Pacanne’s sister, and amassed a large fortune, White, Middle Ground, 450.
and General Wayne. The various chiefs addressed Wayne as “elder brother” or merely “brother,” as they addressed the other chiefs during their speeches. Everyone felt ceremonial kinship, sometimes calling the Wyandots “uncles” or the Shawnees “grandchildren.” In an oratorical style heavy with tradition and metaphor, the council fire represented the meeting of minds, the calumet represented peace, and the chiefs spoke of the buried hatchet.

While the extended conference maintained a ceremonial tone, everyone knew the stakes. Little Turtle retained his antagonism throughout the process, and attempted to negotiate. He told Wayne on July 21 that he was surprised to hear that the British had ceded land on the Wabash in previous treaties. In his words, the land was enjoyed by his forefathers for “time immemorial, without molestation or dispute.” Little Turtle went on, citing as general knowledge “that my forefather kindled the first fire at Detroit; from hence, he extended his lines to the head waters of Scioto; from thence, to its mouth; from thence, down the Ohio, to the mouth of the Wabash, and from thence to Chicago, on Lake Michigan.” These, he stated, were “the boundaries of the Miami nation, where the Great Spirit placed my forefather a long time ago.” The speech was important because Little Turtle claimed a large homeland, in the language and style of former treaties.94 Tarhe the Crane, a respected Wyandot chief, changed the subject when he addressed Wayne, metaphorically removing “the tomahawk out of your [the U.S.] head; but, with so much care, that you shall not feel pain or injury.” He vowed to throw this tomahawk under the

94 Little Turtle’s speech marking Miami boundaries closely mirrors treaty speech, note “Treaty with the Shawnee,” Article 6, January 31, 1786, Indian Affairs, II, 16-18; “Treaty with the Wyandot, etc.,” Article 3, January 21, 1785, Indian Affairs, II, 6-8; “Treaty with the Wyandot, etc.,” Article 2, January 9, 1789, Indian Affairs, II, 18-23.
roots of a big tree where it “could never be found.” He continued about wiping tears, washing away blood, clearing clouds, and burying scattered bones.

Nearly two weeks later, after extended speeches and rhetoric, Tarhe informed the Indians assembled “that we do now, and will henceforth, acknowledge the fifteen United States of America to be our father.” On this turning point, Wayne stood and allowed interpreters to relate Tarhe’s words to the various assemblies then present. He “adopted” the Indians by giving out silver peace medals, made in 1793, which depicted George Washington extending his arm to an Indian who had dropped his tomahawk, while a farmer plowed his field in the background. Of course, Indians and whites accepted different patriarchal frameworks. Decades previously, the Algonquian “father” connoted a friend and giver. To white Americans, the term implied stern discipline and authority. Both groups knew the ceremonial usage; however the convention changed when Indians used the patriarchal terminology in defeat. This was neither a French father joined against the Iroquois nor a British father joined in the struggle after Pontiac’s Rebellion. The American father was not an ally joined to defeat an enemy; he was the enemy. The American father did not gain fatherhood through gift-giving or trade networks; he claimed fatherhood by invasion. Americans, through General Wayne, accepted their fatherhood and ritually adopted the Algonquians as literal children.

Perhaps the most emotional scenes of the treaty process involved the prisoner exchanges stipulated in Article Two. Of course, many “prisoners” had lived among the

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Indians for years, and this caused obvious drama. “I have been a witness to parents receiving their children, who have been absent 15 or 16 years,” an American observed, “and had grown to an adult state, but could not speak one word of English—likewise some of the Indians who had been with our people, and totally lost their mother tongue.” Children feared their biological parents. The white sons of one Kentucky father, previously captured by Indians, stole his horses and fled. “White savages are harder to be civilized than Indians,” the observer concluded.97 Wells must have felt intense emotions seeing families ripped apart or reunited as men, women, and children crossed the cultural divide.

On August 3, 1795, the interpreters read the treaty aloud and the chiefs signed it. Gen. Wayne stood regaled in a bright blue coat, white trousers, a tricornered hat and polished black boots. The Indians came equally resplendent in moccasins and breechcloths, feathers, quillwork, and silver armbands. Throughout the process William Wells stood in between. In the end, ninety chiefs from twelve tribes signed the treaty, Little Turtle being the last on August 12. After making his mark (x), Little Turtle remarked that he was the last to sign and he would be the last to break the treaty. Three days previously, Wayne had written that all the chiefs had “cheerfully signed” the manuscript.98

Wells and Little Turtle Reunited

After the treaty, Little Turtle returned home and reestablished his village, now called Turtletown, fourteen miles west of Fort Wayne. Wells occupied a position as

97 Quoted in Gaff, Bayonets in the Wilderness, 336.
98 Sword, President Washington’s Indian War, 330.
interpreter, and soon accompanied Little Turtle and other chiefs to the federal government in Philadelphia. Wayne praised Wells in a letter to Secretary of War James McHenry, and advised that a pension be given Wells for his disabled left hand. Wells and Little Turtle arrived in late 1796 and met George Washington who gave Little Turtle a sword in “esteem and friendship.”99 A famous Polish fighter, Thaddeus Kosciusko, gave Little Turtle a brace of pistols, and recommended that he “shoot dead the first man who comes to subjugate you or to despoil you of your country.”100 The famous physician Benjamin Rush inoculated Little Turtle for smallpox, and the famous artist Gilbert Stuart painted his portrait.101 Newspapers applauded the lasting peace signed at Greenville, evidenced by Little Turtle traveling with Wayne “to his now acknowledged father, the President of the United States.”102 But not everyone trusted Little Turtle’s affability, and rumors circulated that he refuted the boundary established at the Greenville Treaty, while supposedly a “large Belt from the Spaniards” was making its way through the western tribes. Should the Indians “lift their tomahawk” again, General Wayne would make those “tawny…Creatures of the woods…”‘bite the dust.’”103 Although a year later, at least one newspaper later praised Little Turtle for carrying out the Treaty “in the most particular manner,” the Greenville Treaty’s permanence was already challenged by hearsay.104

During their visit Wells also asked Secretary of War McHenry for an appointment in the Indian department, and left Philadelphia hopeful for such a job. The next year, Wells and Little Turtle again returned to Philadelphia, this time meeting President John

103 “Cincinnati, June 2,” The Newport Mercury, (Newport, RI) July 11, 1797; pg. 2; Issue 1839.
Adams, who was impressed with Little Turtle, “a remarkable man.” The duo visited again just one year later for multiple reasons. First, they probably wished to meet the new president and display their hopes and plans, and maintain a good relationship with the federal government. To this end, Wells was “sanguine as to the prospect of success” and promised the Americans “all the aid in his power.” Secondly, apparently Wells was unpaid for his temporary appointment as resident agent at Fort Wayne for the past year. Thirdly, Little Turtle had been a celebrity in Philadelphia in his previous visit, and probably enjoyed and marveled at life in Philadelphia.

Fourthly, the two had firm beliefs about the debilitating effects of alcohol. Little Turtle observed that liquor cost Indians money they could use for more worthwhile trade and caused extreme violence. Miamis were exposed to various alcohols by the French and English, but now Kentucky bourbon made from their own Miami corn was devastating. Little Turtle and Wells both drank moderately, and no one ever accused them of drunkenness. After working diligently through the treaty process to gain annuities, Little Turtle certainly did not want his people to waste this money on whiskey.

During their stay, the duo met a Frenchman named Constantin Volney, who took great interest in Little Turtle. Volney called him a “hero,” and recorded that Little Turtle was keenly aware that cultures differed greatly and on levels not obvious to most. When Volney told Little Turtle about the vastly different European power structure, Little Turtle replied, “For all that, they have, no doubt, pleasures of their own kind.” Before Wells and Little Turtle left, Adams appointed Wells as an Indian agent at a salary of 300

106 “From a Philadelphia Paper,” The Boston Gazette, (Boston, MA) March 26, 1798; pg. 1; Issue 2268.
107 Carter, Little Turtle, 158-160.
109 Volney, View of the Soil, 357, 382-383.
dollars per year. With a stable economic future, Wells returned to Fort Wayne to build a house for his family, orchards, fences for hogs, and cornfields.110

After three years, Congress created the Indiana Territory in 1800.111 Again, Wells and Little Turtle had multiple reasons to visit the federal government, now in Washington, D.C. They wished to meet the new president, Thomas Jefferson, and impress upon him their plans. They asked for a permanent government trading house at Fort Wayne, a blacksmith, a council house to distribute annuities, and for Wells himself to distribute plows and other agricultural implements. Wells brought letters of recommendation from former colleagues Colonel Hamtramck and the new governor of the Indiana Territory William Henry Harrison. Wells had served faithfully for Wayne, had necessary interpreting skills, and was born into an honorable Kentucky family. In Harrison’s words, he was a “sober, active, and faithful public servant.” Little Turtle also asked Jefferson to reduce the liquor trade, a “fatal poison.”112

To further their progressive agenda, Little Turtle and Wells visited Baltimore in December of 1801 to see the Quakers. Little Turtle mentioned the evils of liquor, and the Baltimore Quakers urged the government to prohibit its sale. Although Jefferson acted to stop the liquor trade, such prohibition lacked enforcement, and Miamis and other peoples continued to trade for it.113 The journey resulted in a general accord between Little Turtle, President Jefferson, and the Quakers. In the future, these three would work together to promote Indian progress as each saw it, but these three relatively liberal entities had little support. Jefferson’s liberal views on Indian progress had few backers,

111 Carter, Little Turtle, 161.
112 Carter, Little Turtle, 162-163.
113 Carter, Little Turtle, 163.
and few Miamis agreed with Little Turtle’s hopes for transforming their horticultural method into a more European-style agriculture, or giving up liquor. But Little Turtle had William Wells, a Miami man in the American government, to aid his leadership in the years ahead.
Chapter 2
Wells at Fort Wayne, 1802-1805

“Much mischief may ensue from his knowledge of the Indians”¹

William Wells entered the position of Indian agent at Fort Wayne in 1802. His high hopes echoed those of his superiors. Working directly under Indiana Territorial Governor William Henry Harrison, Wells’ job was to facilitate information exchange between native and United States leaders. In addition, he was to add his own expert, but passive, observations to help American decision-makers assess the political and cultural atmosphere in northern Indiana. At the same time, Wells continued his allegiance to his friend and father-in-law, Little Turtle. Soon, both Indians and Americans pressured Wells to become an active player in frontier politics.

The political and economic reality in the Old Northwest contrasted with the misperceptions of white officials, most notably Wells’ superiors William Henry Harrison, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, and President Thomas Jefferson. This contrast between daily realities in the middle ground and the United States’ agenda for the region illustrates how vital go-betweens like Wells functioned. Wells’ role was originally vague, but narrowed quickly as U.S. policy began to focus on land treaties. By the summer of 1805, three years after Wells’ appointment, Harrison advised Dearborn to remove Wells from his office, writing that “he has so entangled himself in the mazes of

his own intrigues that he cannot move.”² Only one month later, Harrison reversed his judgment, and cited full confidence in Wells’ abilities.³ Such an abrupt change of opinion raises questions concerning Wells’ job performance, fidelity, and actions as Indian agent. Additionally, the change highlights the important issues in Indian policy.

In the most simple analysis, Wells’ background created personal conflict between him and his government colleagues. Everyone knew Wells’ background, his life among the Miamis, and his continuing ties with them. His direct superior living in Vincennes, Governor William Henry Harrison, never quite knew what to make of Wells. Harrison’s own political ambitions eventually led him to pursue land purchases which Wells, to Harrison’s dismay, did not support. Another foil was John Johnston, Fort Wayne’s factor or trade official. Johnston was more representative of the government’s aims than Wells and constantly questioned Wells’ allegiance.⁴ To Wells, Johnston embodied the United States’ effort to fundamentally change Indian culture and push them west year by year. Much like Harrison, Johnston was a paternalist fully supportive of any American efforts to change and control the Indians. To him, Wells was an uneducated and obsolete frontiersman, a warrior without a war. Wells had deeply rooted empathy for the Indian position, and wanted to help Little Turtle carry out whatever he judged best for the Miamis despite his superiors’ wishes. Johnston, on the other hand, viewed Wells as a flawed character, proud and cunning, who hindered enlightened Indian policy. From its

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² Esarey, Messages and Letters, 1, 149.
³ Esarey, Messages and Letters, 1, 161.
⁴ Johnston wrote of Wells: “He has so long traveled in the crooked, miry paths of intrigue and deception, that he never could be made to retract his steps.” Later he questioned Wells motives, writing that “General Wayne…had to give him a considerable sum of money before he would act.” Again, Johnston discredited Wells’ character by stringing together his actions as a decoy for the “savages” along the Ohio River as a youth, his killing and scalping as a “savage” against St. Clair’s army, and his pension for fighting with Wayne’s army. Later still, Johnston wrote, “I will never consent to be associated in the public service with such a character as Wells.” Leonard U. Hill, John Johnston and the Indians in the Land of the Three Miamis (Columbus, OH: Stoneman Press, 1957), 28, 34-36, 56.
very beginning, the Fort Wayne agency was fraught with personal conflict. Wells, if left alone, might have exerted more control over policy, but Johnston found opportunities to vent his dislike for him to Governor Harrison, Secretary of War Dearborn, and others. Wells, Harrison, and Johnston all wanted to help the Indians, but each had his own methods. Of the three, Wells symbolized the Indians, while Harrison and Johnston personified U.S. policy. Therefore, the conflict between the men exemplified the problems between the Indians and the government.

But personal conflict is too simple to account for the deeply-embedded problems facing Wells as Fort Wayne’s Indian agent. Historians have naively imputed Wells’ decisions to his personality traits, much as his contemporaries did. His upbringing does shed light on his character and part of the context in which he lived, but does not illuminate his whole life nor the impossible policy forced upon him. His role at Fort Wayne between 1802 and 1805 revolved around two basic problems. First, Jeffersonian Indian policy entrusted to Wells was misguided and impossible to carry out. Second, the timetable given to carry out the policy changed, creating inconsistencies. Thus, as a flawed policy worsened, the troubling results became clear in the treaties signed during the period. Wells’ own part in government troubles should not be brushed aside, and he did take an active role in pressuring policy for Miami benefit. No contemporaries, however, could see the political difficulties, only that Wells was a prime candidate to take the blame.

Progress and Possession: Jeffersonian Indian Policy
The key to understanding Wells’ position in the Old Northwest lies in the ever-changing Indian “policy”—a term here used loosely for lack of a better one to relate the vague U. S. plan for the Indians. Opinions of Wells changed sometimes monthly, and always yearly. At times he was a seen as a crook, at other times an exemplary patriot. Such transient sentiments seem fickle and perhaps unimportant at first glance. Yet fleshed out and placed in context, such quick changes reveal the inherent problems with the era’s Indian policy. Wells, in effect, personified deep-seated defects in Jefferson’s policy. It is worthwhile to note that Jefferson himself never enunciated a resolute or realistic strategy. In separate letters he changed his views drastically. Sometimes he assured Indians that they would remain undisturbed. Almost simultaneously he urged his agents to change such tribes’ way of life, changes that brought on near total collapse of those cultures. Continual adjustment was the only guiding principle. Regarding the Northwest, by 1802 Jefferson began to privately espouse quick Indian assimilation and intermarriage, or else “the seizing [sic] the whole country of that tribe & driving them across the Missisipi, as the only condition of peace, would be an example to others, and a furtherance of our final consolidation.” He also encouraged “influential individuals among them” to run up debts which they could repay by selling land. Such sentiments were a far cry from the popular image of the benevolent and enlightened Jefferson, and contradict his statement to Little Turtle, through Wells’ lips, that “we consider ourselves as of the same family; we wish to live with them [Miamis] as one people, and to cherish

6 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 68-69.
their interests as our own.”7 White politicians changed their attitudes regarding Native Americans’ futures often, and veiled their intentions with benevolent rhetoric and messages.

Through agents like Wells and outposts like Fort Wayne, Jeffersonian Indian policy created unattainable demands in the Old Northwest. In the most basic terms, Indian policy sought to deal rationally with the Indians and end the chronic warfare ravaging the western edge of white settlement from the early colonial days. The strategy which developed brought together the enlightenment ideals of Thomas Jefferson, the foreign policy of Henry Knox, the military experiences of Gen. Philip Schuyler, and others. The result did not effectively merge the opposing views of these and other American thinkers, let alone help the Indians. Men like Jefferson, with the (to them) humanitarian and paternalist point of view that Indians were like children who could be led to civilization, wanted to transform the Indian way of life. Men like Knox wanted to establish the new nation’s international reputation by purchasing Indian land rather than taking it.8 Men like Schuyler rationalized these ideas to make them possible. Each derived his ideas from misinformation, dooming Jeffersonian Indian policy. Its success required incompatible factors: benevolence, progress, and possession. When such demands could not be coordinated, one took priority.

The scheme included two theoretical parts. First, American agents like Wells were to oversee a “philanthropic” process of cultural change in which Indian men would give up their hunting way of life for settled agriculture. To the college graduates on the

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East Coast who only vaguely remembered seeing Indians in their youth, gradual civilization was a slow but inevitable process that required only stability, willpower, and some financial help. Wells was responsible, in some vague way, for overseeing this transformation. He would distribute agricultural implements through existing trade networks and, somehow, encourage Indian men to use plows and build fences rather than leaving their already-existing crop fields to women. In turn, Indians would willingly sell their now unused hunting grounds to white settlers. Indian progress and land acquisition went hand in hand. For example, one unnamed village of Indians petitioned for U.S. citizenship in 1803, and Jefferson, “convinced of its soundness,” felt the idea “consistent with pure morality to lead them towards [citizenship], to familiarize them to the idea that it is for their interest to cede lands at times to the United States,” and of course, for white citizens to buy it.\(^9\) Congressional Indian Commissioner Samuel Holden Parsons wrote that the U.S. must appease “the Indians by purchasing such tracts as they will sell.”\(^10\) Knox agreed because treaty negotiations offered a cheap alternative to costly war. Also, “malignity of heart, and conduct,” was “reciprocally entertained and practiced on all occasions by the Whites and Savages,” preventing the two groups from being good neighbors.\(^11\) The process would establish a positive reputation for the United States while its treasury would grow by selling cheaply-acquired land at a profit to land-hungry settlers. Jefferson envisioned an agrarian republic in which Indians and whites would coexist, albeit in a recognizably Euro-American way.\(^12\) Less sanguine whites saw a

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12 Jefferson wrote to James Monroe in 1801: “However our present interests may restrain us within our own limits, it is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself
racially divided West. Both versions included white farmers living where Indians now lived, and each required land purchase. Such a large-scale cultural exchange occurred in frontier outposts like Fort Wayne, where flawed policy stemmed from white misjudgment of Indian economics.

Any understanding of Indian economics in the Old Northwest must begin with trade. The traveler walking into Fort Wayne in 1802 would see only a small fort and several log cabins where French traders lived and conducted business. Wayne strategically built the Fort at the confluence of the St. Mary’s and St. Joseph Rivers. A traveler canoeing up the St. Joseph could reach the semi-deciduous forests in the heart of present-day Michigan. The nearby Maumee River flowed northeast to Lake Erie, from which a traveler could easily voyage throughout the Great Lakes or to the St. Lawrence. Up the St. Mary’s River led to Shawnee country in Ohio, and a portage to the Great Miami River which flowed gently southward into the muddy Ohio River. Additionally, a short walk down a well-used trail led to the Wabash River, which flowed southwest through Miami villages in Indiana Territory until it reached white settlements near the Ohio River. The French had coveted the spot on which the fort stood, “possessing” it from 1702 to 1760 under the authority of the Miamis who lived there. Fort Wayne’s geographic position, desired by President Washington in the earlier Indian wars, was a microcosm of the Old Northwest. Indians could easily access the fort to trade, collect annuity payments, or attend councils. Washington had issued specific orders for General Wayne to stockade the place in 1794, judging its position as centrally important.

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Fort Wayne was also established between the relatively populous Miamis, Shawnees, Delawares, Potawatomis, and Piankeshaws and the British fort at Amherstberg, Upper Canada, just across the Detroit River. Therefore in terms of location, most Indians in Indiana and Illinois found it easier to trade at Fort Wayne than Detroit. In 1804, a two-story council house was built just west of the fort and was used as a meeting place. The fort itself garrisoned about forty troops. The once-bustling Miami town was now sleepy in comparison, and the white soldiers were regularly flogged for drinking and fighting until Congress abolished flogging in 1812.\(^\text{13}\) Little Turtle had called Kekionga, now renamed Fort Wayne, home for much of his life. He described it as “that glorious gate…through which all the good words of our chiefs had to pass, from the north to the south, and from the east to the west.”\(^\text{14}\) Both U.S. and Indian leaders recognized its strategic importance.

The sturdy log buildings represented not only political and military weight but also the region’s economic center of exchange. Along the Wabash River in the spring and summer, Miamis or other Indians pulled their pirogues, or long canoes, onto the sandy portage near the timber walls of Fort Wayne. Traders unloaded their packs of dry beaver pelts or deer skins collected the previous winter, where French middlemen offered European goods for them. Everyone tried to “get what he can either by fowle play or otherwise—that is by traducing one another’s characters and merchandise.”\(^\text{15}\) During a particularly pleasant or busy day, one might hear various dialects of Algonquian languages, English, and French spoken about the fort. Until the War of 1812 and after,


\(^{14}\) Quoted in Bert J. Griswold, *Fort Wayne: Gateway of the West* (Indianapolis, 1927), 3. For a short history of the spot, see Griswold, *Fort Wayne*, 1-3.

\(^{15}\) From Henry Hay’s 1790 account in Poinsatte, *Outpost in the Wilderness*, 18.
Indian and white traders transported skins and furs from the Old Northwest to public auction in Savannah, Washington, Philadelphia, and New York City. Continuing a long established network, the Old Northwest’s fur trade apparently did not slacken in the early nineteenth century. Materially, Indians allowed European products to pervade life, but trade was economic and did not change the fabric of Miami beliefs, cosmology, or subsistence. Indians adapted this trade to cosmology, and not the other way round.

Despite their input, few Indians profited by this system. The traveler might see a group of Indians entering the fort to collect their federal annuity payment, as agreed in various treaties their leaders had signed. William Wells dispensed the annuities usually in goods like blankets, knives, gunpowder, plows, or food. In 1802, the Miami, Delaware, and Potawatomi tribes received one thousand dollars in annual annuity payments respectively. At the same time, Fort Wayne’s factory overseer, John Johnston, was paid one thousand dollars yearly salary, plus $365 for subsistence. In return, Johnston stored the American or European-made goods at the trading house, or “factory,”

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17 Lord Dorchester, Governor of Canada, reported in 1790 that 2,000 packs of furs, weighing 200,000 pounds, and representing an income of £24,000 sterling came from the Miami region. His estimated number of packs at 2,000 doubled the next most profitable region, that north of Detroit to Lake Huron, Poinsatte, *Outpost in the Wilderness*, 17. Brice notes that £225,977 worth of furs and peltries were exported from Canada in 1786. Assuming 1786 and 1790 were relatively equal currencies, the Miami region accounted for 11% of the total Canadian fur trade. The Miami Region (Indiana) accounts for only 6.1% of the total land (taking the square kilometers of the Northwest Territory, the southern third of Ontario, and the southern third of Quebec, and neglecting all other fur trading regions which may have added furs and peltries to Canada’s export during the time. In sum, Indiana was particularly fruitful and lucrative, and after the agency at Fort Wayne’s establishment, these exports went through U.S. cities rather than Canada. In the later years between 1807 and 1811, ten factories existed in the U.S. Fort Wayne’s profit of $7,633.47 was the largest during this time and $27,547.07 worth of “furs and peltries” were received at the factory during these years, Griswold, 23-24. The profit of $7633.47 using a GDP deflator for 2007 U.S. dollars is $118,423.40. The trade of “furs and peltries” traded between 1807 and 1811 is $427,357.12. Samuel H. Williamson, “Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present,” MeasuringWorth, 2008. http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare (accessed December 14, 2008).

18 Griswold, *Fort Wayne*, 22.
for distribution. After the factory’s establishment in 1802, Secretary of War Dearborn explained its function to Harrison: “The provisions made by congress, under the heads of intercourse with the Indian nations, and for establishing trading houses among them etc. have for their object, not only the cultivation and establishment of harmony and friendship between the United States and the different nations of Indians, but the introduction of civilization, by encouraging and gradually introducing the arts of husbandry and domestic manufactures among them.”

By supplying agricultural implements through their agents, officials hoped the natives would need less land for hunting. Day-to-day economic transactions like the fur trade at Fort Wayne supported the notion that Indians must be weaned like children from nomadism.

A closer reading of Dearborn’s letter to Harrison reveals that officials were unsure about the timetable for cultural transformation. In 1802, perhaps leaders vaguely reckoned that within a few generations, the Indians could be “encouraged” and “introduced” to the “arts of husbandry and domestic manufactures.” The language explicitly called for an economic change; however it alluded to cultural progression as well. Economics and culture are intertwined concepts, both of which white officials misunderstood. Unfortunately for all, white officials built policy on flawed assumptions about both Indian economy and culture. In short, white officials believed that Indians were nomadic hunters. In this sense, U.S. officials used an erroneous perception of Indian economics to create a similarly flawed policy. They followed their English predecessors in discounting horticulture which did not conform to European norms. They overlooked permanent orchards, fields, and houses. For example, Miami women

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20 For a Jefferson example, see Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 213.
had developed a particular maize variant called “Miami White corn,” which was noted for its white kernels and the ease with which it could be turned into fine flour.\(^{21}\) The result was a food in high demand throughout the era; traded in high quantities.\(^{22}\) A field planted with corn, beans, and squash, however, did not connote civilization for early Americans, because the corn was not planted in rows and men did not tend it. Such a view even discounted numerous log cabins, 185 of which had been destroyed by Harmar’s campaign in 1790.\(^{23}\) Miami villages looked more similar to Pennsylvania and Kentucky than different.

Whites still purchased this corn in large quantities when it accompanied furs to places like Detroit and St. Louis. In fact, marketable horticultural produce fueled the fur trade by providing Indian and French trappers and traders a constant food supply. Additionally, Northwest Indians could supply large quantities of corn in a high and stable volume in response to an equally steady demand, whereas trapping or hunting might rise and fall each year.\(^{24}\) Evidence conveyed, then and now, that Miami horticulture thrived before Harmar’s, St. Clair’s, and Wayne’s frontier campaigns. In 1790, Harmar’s expedition destroyed 20,000 bushels of corn.\(^{25}\) Only four years later, Gen. Wayne noted that Miamis settled along the Maumee and Auglaize Rivers, and had never “beheld such immense fields of corn in any other part of America, from Canada to Florida.” These

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\(^{21}\) For a full discussion of Miami White corn, see Michael P. Gonella, “*Myaamia Ethnobotany*” (PhD diss., Miami University, 2007), 90-95.


particular fields covered over a thousand acres. In his 1794 campaign, Wayne burned the corn fields he came across and reduced the Miami corn crop for that year. Therefore after the 1795 Treaty of Greenville when more travelers, missionaries, and traders came to the Miami homeland, their reports possibly reflected a less settled society.

Although the previously important bison had moved West by the late eighteenth century, Indians adapted to find food. Miamis harvested wild foods like plums, strawberries, grapes, persimmons, crabapples, tubers, milkweed, wild onions, and honey, in addition to their corn, beans, squash, and wheat. Miamis also increasingly exploited riverine resources like mink, beaver, muskrat, and river otter. They trapped quail, chickens, and fish, and hunted duck, turkeys, and geese along with deer, bear, elk, rabbit, squirrel, fox, and possum.

Wayne’s scorched-earth campaign may have forced Indians to pursue game more actively, but peace restored the sedentary lifestyle, and the question of why men like Jefferson, Harrison, and Quaker missionaries insisted that Indians were nomadic hunters remains. Evidence they may have includes the high production of furs, which necessitated a mobile lifestyle. Also, the Miami engaged in intensive horticulture more sporadically than Euro-Americans. Sometime in early May, Miami villagers planted their corn crop. Then, they immediately turned to hunting the bison migrating east from the Great Plains to graze on prairie grasses. Miami women and old men stayed to tend the crops while Miami men hunted bison and deer. Also, Miamis spent approximately six lunar cycles actively cultivating corn in summer villages and six lunar cycles in

26 Sleeper-Smith, Indian Women and French Men, 86.
27 Stewart Rafert, The Miami Indians of Indiana: A Persistent People 1654-1994 (Indiana Historical Society, 1996), 64-65. Rafert notes that “there is no evidence of starvation or general hunger among the Miami in the period up to the War of 1812.”
winter hunting camps. Miami horticultural techniques offered more opportunities for mobility than Euro-American techniques.

Also, white officials like Harrison knew that white overhunting troubled the Indians, as he reported in 1801. He might have wondered how the Indians survived, with white settlers killing five times more game than the Indians. Possibly adding fuel to this misperception were Indian demands concerning annuity payments distributed in an ad hoc fashion in which those who asserted their claims received goods in return. Indian grievances concerning game scarcity helped cement the view that Indians relied on hunting and gained Jefferson’s receptive ear. Anglo-American contemporaries failed to look past game animals as a source of meat.

Northwest Indians hunted for trade as well as subsistence. Today, beaver pelts appear as the sole cash crop of northern North America, however deer, and later in the nineteenth century raccoon pelts, created significant income opportunities for Old Northwest Indian trappers and transporters like the Miami. Economically, the Northwest’s deerskin trade had grown in the 1740s through the 1780s until it was comparable to the more famous southern deerskin trade. In 1767, over 250,000 skins moved up the Ohio River through Pittsburgh alone. Another indicator illustrates how powerful the deerskin trade was: southern Indiana had one cotton mill, one nail machine,

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29 Esarey, Messages and Letters, 1, 24-27.
30 James P. McClure, “The Ohio Valley’s Deerskin Trade: Topics for Consideration,” Old Northwest 15 (1993): 115-133. White-tailed deer, the species common in eastern North America, have an amazing resiliency. When herds are left to procreate, their populations can bounce back within decades. However, Indian and white hunting, which killed more deer than hunting today, did not allow deer herds to replenish following the height of the Northwest deerskin trade in the eighteenth century. More land was devoted to large-scale farming which reduced cover. Deer numbers must have been low in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Michigan Department of Natural Resources, “White-tailed Deer Information (Odocoileus virginianus),” http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-10370_12145_12205-56904--,00.html#Michigan_History (accessed December 2, 2008).
18 leather tanneries, and 28 distilleries. The tanneries and distilleries serviced both white needs and the Indian deerskin and whiskey trade. Unfortunately for the Miamis, Little Turtle’s request to halt the liquor trade failed. Instead, Indians traded deerskins for whiskey, which resulted in further depletion of deer and an increase in drunkenness. For example, in 1806 factor John Johnston reported that a trader in Ohio traded a high volume of whiskey for 800 deer skins in three days.

Algonquians also infused hunting to their worldview, a point neglected by white contemporaries and historians. Northwest Indians ritualized the important cultural form of deer hunting. “The first deer a boy shoots proves the occasion of a great solemnity” traveling missionary David Zeisberger observed. “If it happens to be a buck it is given to some old man; if a doe, to some old woman…When they reach the village, they turn to the east, having the whole or part of the animal on the back, always with the skin, before entering the house and give vent to a prolonged call, which is the old man’s or old woman’s prayer to the Deity in behalf of the boy, that he may always be a fortunate hunter.” Black Hoof, the influential Shawnee chief, requested that President Jefferson stop whites “from killing our Game, at present they kill more than we do, they would be very angry if we were to kill a Cow or a Hog of theirs, the little game that remains is very dear to us.” Indians were unlikely to limit their own hunting which was important for time-honored rites of passage and a source of food and revenue, but were willing to blame white settlers for a lack of game. In turn, such complaints skewed white

31 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 166.
34 Hill, John Johnston, 19.
perceptions of hunting, causing many whites to believe that deer were the Indians’ only food source.

Indians did not only use the land to hunt, like Europeans did not only use the land for livestock. Both groups, Indians and Europeans, intertwined cultural beliefs and land use. To Europeans, land acquisition offered social mobility. Additionally, many believed that farmers followed a biblical mandate to cultivate the soil. In this view, Indians were wild, natural, and uncivilized. Jefferson and others thought that white Americans were helping culturally and economically inferior Indians by buying their land and forcing cultural “progress.” Of course, Indians had been altering the environment for centuries, and had developed and created cultural norms which made sense to insiders and astute outsiders. The culturally-embedded nature of the relationship between the Miami people and their homeland is illustrated by language. Ethnobotanist Michael Gonella notes that “the Miami language stem aweem-, literally translated as ‘related to’ or ‘relative’, is used to form Miami terms in a variety of ways,” including the flora and fauna of the Miami homeland. But U.S. thinkers disregarded this foreign cultural form which differed from their own. Instead, they focused on subsistence differences, namely hunting. Whatever the reasons, whites mistakenly and detrimentally labeled Indians as nomadic hunters, and the label stuck.

Among Indians, Jefferson’s policy was only nominally supported by a few influential leaders. In 1802, Wells, Little Turtle, and the Shawnee chief Black Hoof visited Washington D.C. and met with President Jefferson. In a gesture of friendship, they asked for farm implements to ease a transition to the “sedentary” lifestyle Jefferson

35 Horsman, New Republic, 106.
36 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 103.
envisioned. These men recognized the futility of continued rejection of cultural interchange but were not supported by all the Northwest Indians. However, their request was exactly what Jefferson wanted to hear. He told the chiefs, “These resources are certain, they will never disappoint you, while those of hunting may fail, and expose your women and children to the miseries of hunger and cold.”

The president authorized Quaker, Presbyterian, and Moravian missionaries to carry on the work in consultation with Wells.

Should Indians reject cultural change, and most did, white settlers would impose it. Gen. Philip Schuyler included overhunting in American Indian policy when he wrote Congress in 1783. He observed that when white settlers “approach their (Indians’) country, they (Indians) must, from the scarcity of game, which that approach will induce to, retire farther back, and dispose of their lands, unless they dwindle comparatively to nothing, as all savages have done, who gain their sustenance by the chase, when compelled to live in the vicinity of civilized people, and thus leave us the country without the expense of a purchase, trifling as that will probably be.”

This idea served as a menacing alternative to the willing cultural change Jefferson wanted and both Wells and Harrison dealt with Indian complaints regarding white overhunting.

The ideas behind such cultural change were philosophically sound but impractical because nobody could imagine the timetable for expansion, including the primary strategist, Thomas Jefferson. In his first inaugural address March 1, 1801, Jefferson called his fellow citizens to pursue “federal and republican principles” and

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“representative government.” Hopefully, Americans would inhabit the continent, “a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the hundredth and thousandth generation.” Jefferson, a leading scholar, could not fathom the special or temporal restrictions of the United States. His plan called for a change to sedentary living before the United States bought their land, but other factors necessitated a change in sequence

Harrison’s Land Purchases

Before flawed Jeffersonian Indian policy could gain momentum in Fort Wayne, Spain transferred the Louisiana Territory to France in the winter of 1802-1803. Fearing French imperial influence on the Indians, Jefferson wanted as much land northwest of the Ohio River as the United States could secure. The Louisiana Purchase accelerated the timetable for progress and possession in the Old Northwest, where land purchase precluded cultural change. Warning his agent in the contested area, Dearborn wrote to Harrison that French and Spanish agents were arousing hostility among the Indians. Jefferson similarly recalled former French-Indian alliances, writing that such influence “is already felt like a light breeze by the Indians…under the hope of their protection, they will immediately stiffen against cessions of land to us. we had better therefore do at once what can now be done.” Jefferson’s policy, which initially included long-term humanitarian efforts and some basic belief in Indian equality, took a backseat to the need for land acquisition. In 1802 and 1803, Jefferson called for quick and decisive land purchase by treaty. Armed with such with such a mandate, Governor Harrison got to

42 Horsman, Expansion, 145.
43 Quoted in Rafert, Miami Indians of Indiana, 68.
work after Wells was appointed permanently in 1802. With Harrison’s subsequent land
treaties, Indian policy’s timetable was shattered and Wells was left to pick up the pieces.

Indians remembered the time when their villages and game filled Ohio and
Kentucky. White settlers now inhabited both states, and Harrison expected to continue
the pattern. The combination of military toughness, political ambition, and executive
orders made Harrison a tough and speedy negotiator. Through land purchases, he could
advance American imperialism against the British and French; at the same time, he could
help “civilize” the Indians by buying their land. To help his aims, he motivated Little
Turtle with a personal annuity of $150 in 1802 before entering real negotiations. 44

In 1786, Jefferson had strongly asserted that the United States would never take
any parcel of land without their consent, and “the sacredness of [the Indians’] rights” was
“felt by all thinking persons in America as much as in Europe.” 45 But Jefferson changed
in the intervening years. In February of 1803, President Jefferson secretly wrote a letter
to Harrison which encapsulated the cunning mentality and self-serving compassion
characterizing Jeffersonian Indian affairs:

Our system is to live in perpetual peace with the Indians, to
cultivate an affectionate attachment from them, by everything just
and liberal which we can do for them within the bounds of reason,
and by giving them effectual protection against wrongs from our
own people. The decrease of game rendering their subsistence by
hunting insufficient, we wish to draw them to agriculture, spinning
and weaving….When they withdraw themselves to the culture of a
small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are
their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from
time to time in exchange for necessaries for their farms and
families. To promote this disposition to exchange lands, which
they have to spare and we want, we shall push our trading uses,
and be glad to see them run in debt, because we observe that when

44 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 64.
45 Ford, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 166.
these debts get beyond what they individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands.”

Harrison adopted this method. After receiving the letter, he signed six treaties with the Delawares, Miamis, and others in 1803-1804.47

In reality, Indian “progress” in the Euro-American sense could not coincide with their loss of land. First, most Indians held a worldview which relied cosmologically on a combination of hunting and horticulture. Harrison’s treaties left Indians feeling cheated out of land on which their economic and cultural autonomy rested. Indians were certainly not willing to agree to a white vision of agriculture in which cornfields and cow pastures covered the earth. Harrison’s tough negotiating style led Indians to sell land for a vision they did not accept. Most did not trust the white officials who seemed too eager to buy their land. This distrust hardened Old Northwest Indians against American agents trying to change their subsistence techniques. Despite their chiefs’ wishes, most Indians spurned agents trying to teach them new ways.

Second, buying land was an economic exchange, while gift-giving was a means of securing allegiance. Buying Indian land did not secure their allegiance, but rather left them feeling cheated. Gifts for influential Indian leaders helped bring these men to council and made them more receptive. But when Indians perceived that gift-giving, a universally-accepted mark of friendship, was misused, they further distrusted Americans. Third, allowing settlers to farm Indian hunting grounds increased Indian dislike for those settlers and by extension the United States. As discussed previously, Indians complained about white overhunting with the resulting lack of game. Indians were unwelcome on

46 Quoted in Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 76.
47 Treaties generally did not have useful titles. The titles used will therefore be colloquial titles relating to their date or place signed by Harrison and Indian chiefs. The treaties were then ratified during the next Congressional session, sometimes in the calendar year after their signing.
lands they sold to the United States. Most relationships between white settlers and Indians were cold at best.

Finally, Old Northwest Indians sold land for annuity payments to support and enhance existing ways of life, not because they accepted the Euro-American lifestyle promoted by Jefferson, Dearborn, Harrison, and Johnston. While most Americans envisioned future progress and change, most Indians saw a future built upon the past’s example. The most influential chiefs required time to convince their followers to change. Little Turtle, Black Hoof, and Buckongahelas, the most influential chiefs of the Miamis, Shawnees, and Delawares, respectively, accepted some aspects of Anglo-American culture. Little Turtle lived in a large log house, and Black Hoof worked vigorously to help Quaker missionaries promote agriculture. The three had allied to defeat St. Clair at Kekionga in 1791. However, Indian leaders were not despots, and their decisions were only as influential as their speeches and prestige merited. Yet with enough time to use practiced oratorical skills, such chiefs might have convinced their followers to accept the civilization process.

Harrison’s land treaties were formed and signed under the pretenses of flawed Jeffersonian Indian policy and accelerated by fear of French and Spanish influence. Additionally, he struggled to make his Indian constituents accept a new lifestyle or negotiating method. The problems he faced resulted from his own hasty negotiating style and the mandate under which he worked. As a result, Harrison’s 1803 and 1804 treaties with the Delawares, Piankeshaw Miamis, and others blemished his reputation. As the process unfolded, his process quickly became one of getting signatures first and asking questions later. By quickly negotiating binding contracts, Harrison could later coerce
other tribes into agreeing with them. In Indiana, the 1803 Fort Wayne treaty and the 1804 Delaware treaty were the first steps, resulting in later treaties clarifying the original agreements.

This process began in June of 1803, when Harrison invited many tribes to a council at Fort Wayne. He sought to buy land in southern Indiana considered jointly owned by the tribes, including the Miamis. Prominent chiefs, including Little Turtle and Richardville, signed away over one million acres. Importantly, The Weas, Eel Rivers, Piankeshaws, and Kaskaskias allowed representatives from Miami proper to sign for them instead of sending delegates themselves.\(^48\) Harrison’s strong-arm tactics, including a threat to withhold annuities and to allow white encroachment, won the day.\(^49\) However, Little Turtle and other influential chiefs signed away the land to support the civilizing efforts which some, notably Little Turtle and the Shawnee chief Black Hoof, espoused. Others may have signed to maintain their influence over their own people and Harrison.\(^50\) Since Little Turtle and Wells believed that the proper chiefs attended the Fort Wayne treaty, it may be safely concluded that they supported the agreement and sought to work with, rather than against, Harrison. Unfortunately for the Indian leaders, Harrison led them to believe the treaty was a clarification of the 1795 Greenville Treaty boundary lines, when in fact the Indians signed away an additional 1,152,000 acres for free, because it had been “found difficult to determine the precise limits of the said [Greenville Treaty, Article Four] tract as held by the French and British governments.”\(^51\) Encouraged by such success, Harrison built upon it. In August of 1803, he gained official

\(^{48}\) “Treaty with the Delawares, etc.,” June 7, 1803, Indian Affairs II, 64-65.
\(^{49}\) Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 78-79.
\(^{50}\) Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 80-81.
\(^{51}\) “Treaty with the Delawares, etc.,” June 7, 1803, Indian Affairs II, 64.
Piankeshaw, Eel River, Wyandot, and Kaskaskia support for the 1803 Fort Wayne treaty. Days later, Harrison bought eight million acres from the Kaskaskias, who numbered only thirty. Buying land first, Harrison then gave Indians the choice of consenting or losing any future negotiating leverage.

In 1804, two more treaties in Indiana secured more land along the Ohio River. Importantly, Harrison disregarded the proper channels, bought land from landless people, and excluded groups who had just claims. Harrison’s treaty in August 1804 bought land from the Delawares, a relatively recent arrival to Indiana from the East. Harrison knew this, as he noted that other tribes “Set a higher value on [the land] from their ancestors having resided on [it] for Many generations.” Shrewdly, Harrison met with Piankeshaw Miami delegates weeks later to preclude any white misgivings about the treaty. He gave them $700 down and $2,000 more over the next decade, and got their signatures.

Gaining Piankeshaw consent made the transaction seem fair to the U.S. government, but

52 “Treaty with the Eel River, etc.,” August 7, 1803, Indian Affairs II, 66.
53 “Treaty with the Kaskasia,” August 13, 1803, Indian Affairs II, 67-68; Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 80.
54 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 84-85; Carter, Little Turtle, 172; “Treaty with the Delawares,” August 18, 1804, Indian Affairs II, 70-72; “Treaty with the Piankeshaw,” August 27, 1804, Indian Affairs II, 72-73.

The August 18, 1804 Treaty with the Delawares read, in part, Article 1: “THE Delaware tribe of Indians finding that the annuity which they receive from the United States, is not sufficient to supply them with the articles which are necessary for their comfort and convenience, and afford the means of introducing amongst them the arts of civilized life, and being convinced that the extensiveness of the country they possess, by giving an opportunity to their hunting parties to ramble to a great distance from their towns, is the principal means of retarding this desirable event; and the United States being desirous to connect their settlements on the Wabash with the state of Kentucky...” Article 4: “The said tribe having exhibited to the above-named commissioner of the United States sufficient proof of their right to all the country which lies between the Ohio and White river, and the Miami tribe who were the original proprietors of the upper part of that country having explicitly acknowledged the title of the Delawares at the general council held at Fort Wayne in the month of June, 1803, the said United States will in future consider the Delawares as the rightful owners of all the country which is bounded by the white river on the north, the Ohio on the south, the general boundary line running from the mouth of the Kentucky river on the east, and the tract ceded by this treaty, and that ceded by the treaty of Fort Wayne, on the west and south west.” The Grouseland Treaty, in conversation with these articles, states in part: “And whereas, the Maimi tribes, from whom the Delawares derived their claim, contend that in their cession of said tract to the Delawares, it was never their intention to convey to them the right of the soil, but to suffer them to occupy it as long as they thought proper, the said Delawares have, for the sake of peace and good neighborhood, determined to relinquish their claim to the said tract, and do by these presents release the United States from the guarantee made in the before-mentioned article of the treaty of August, eighteen hundred and four.”
made many Indians including the Miamis rightly indignant. The two respective 1804 treaties with the Delawares and Piankeshaws, signed nine days apart, would prove troublesome to Harrison in the coming years.

Wells: Problem and Solution

The treaty with the Delawares and the treaty with the Piankeshaws, each signed in August of 1804, stirred opposition among Old Northwest Indians. It is unknown why Delawares found fault with the treaty so quickly after signing it, but this instance was neither the first nor the last of its kind in treaty negotiations. Perhaps the Delawares were ashamed of signing the treaty. The $300 in additional annuities assuredly played a role. In 1805 the Delawares asked some Moravians to translate the treaty, perhaps showing they did not know what they had signed.55 In any event, many Indians disliked the treaty, and Harrison was informed that some tribes refused to acknowledge United States possession.

Miamis and others criticized the Delawares and harangued Harrison for his deceit. Wells argued that the Delawares lived on Miami land and could not sell it without Miami consent. Wells asserted to Dearborn that for over twenty years, the Piankeshaws had transacted nothing of importance, to which Harrison countered that the Piankeshaws signed Putnam’s 1792 Vincennes Treaty (where Wells had interpreted). Additionally, argued Harrison, the Piankeshaws were autonomous “during the whole war with the Northwestern Indians,” therefore they were competent to negotiate treaties without Miami input. Wells also claimed that the land relinquished by the Delawares and

55 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 101.
Piankeshaws was Miami buffalo hunting ground, to which Harrison countered that no buffaloes had been seen there for many years.⁵⁶ Even though Wells had lived and hunted among the Miami, Harrison questioned the validity of his evidence.⁵⁷

Harrison certainly believed his own argument, but he also probably realized that Jefferson’s emergency maneuver to buy land and save it from the French had made his own treaty negotiations hasty. The 1804 treaties proved that quick land acquisition and harmonious relations were irreconcilable, and a point that nobody could understand. Harrison, unable to explain the Indians’ argument without admitting its validity, transferred possible blame to Wells. In his discussion of these treaties and Harrison’s role as Indian commissioner more broadly, historian Robert Owens treats Wells as a sidenote; yet, Harrison’s accusations against Wells saved Harrison’s reputation and in fact strengthened his negotiating position.⁵⁸ Harrison never thought that his treaties were flawed, only that Wells was not doing his job in hushing the Indian critics. He wrote to Secretary of War Dearborn that “Capt. Wells has certainly not exerted himself to pacify the Indians who have taken offense at the late Treaties with the Delawares and Piankeshaws.”⁵⁹ In fact, Wells expected that restitution would be made for Harrison’s error, which Harrison dismissed as a misunderstanding.⁶⁰ Furthermore, any council to

⁵⁶ American bison (buffalo) previously inhabited much of Indiana, but were driven out in the late eighteenth-century. According to a French account in 1718, there were buffalo herds at La Glaise (Defiance, OH) and countless buffalo surrounding the Miami cornfields at Ouiatenon. However, by the 1780s and 1790s, Joseph Buell and Arthur St. Clair separately noted their scarcity, Hiram W. Beckwith, History of Vigo and Parke Counties, Together with Historic Notes on the Northwest, gleaned from early authors... (Chicago: H. H. Hill and Company, 1880), 103-104. Harrison lays out both Wells’ and his own arguments in an unusually long letter to Dearborn, Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 76-84.

⁵⁷ Wells’ hunting argument illustrates its importance to the Indians; Harrison’s quick refute shows how whites viewed hunting as an illegitimate subsistence strategy. If hunting was akin to agriculture, then hunting ground would be analogous to farmland. Clearly to Harrison, hunting was inferior to farming.

⁵⁸ Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 101-102.

⁵⁹ Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 76.

⁶⁰ Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 80.
fully resolve the matter among the Indian leaders was impermissible to Harrison, citing the considerable expenses of further gifts.

Wells took an active role in opposing these treaties, secretly undermining Harrison’s authority among the surrounding tribes. Whether Wells created the opposition is impossible to determine, but he certainly had Little Turtle’s approval. Wells did not want Miami land, given to the Delawares, to be sold without Miami benefit. Both Little Turtle and Wells had staked their reputations on cooperation with Harrison in the 1803 Fort Wayne Treaty, and now they had motivation to dispute Harrison when he did not reciprocate. According to the Family Compact, Wells role was to make sure the U.S. government did not cheat the Miamis. However, if Wells was not in the decision-making loop, as he was not in the 1804 treaties, he had no input. By creating opposition among the Indians, writing directly to Dearborn, and bruising Harrison’s reputation, Wells could exert some political pressure.

To salvage the bad situation and downplay apparent insubordination, Harrison rebuked Little Turtle and Wells. He attributed Little Turtle’s actions to simple vanity. As for Wells, he probably acted on “some ridiculous spice of jealousy” toward Harrison.\textsuperscript{61} Harrison also knew that Little Turtle’s authority was limited, and challenged regional power he claimed. At the same time, he insisted that Wells and Little Turtle always concurred, and therefore Wells’ complaints represented few Indians. Harrison’s arguments convey some confusion. He grasped for a reasonable explanation, and could think of only personality differences. In reality, though, the incompatibilities of Jeffersonian Indian policy showed themselves in the flawed 1804 treaties and the problems that followed.

\textsuperscript{61} Esarey, \textit{Messages and Letters}, I, 80-81.
Moreover, Harrison found that the very Indians he was supposed to govern had a voice of alarming strength in Wells. Wells gave Little Turtle a place in the government bureaucracy. “Whether the idea of opposition to those Treaties originated with [Little Turtle] or with Mr. Wells I cannot determine,” he wrote, “but that the opinions of the one are always the opinions of the other…When Wells speaks of the Miami Nation being of this or that opinion he must be understood as meaning no more than the Turtle and himself.” Harrision was forced to dispute Wells’ authority or else admit that his treaties were invalid. To ensure Wells’ future fidelity, Harrison advised a reprimand for his conduct. Harrison’s trust in Wells’ judgment suffered a severe blow, and his only meager explanations were Little Turtle’s vanity and Wells’ jealousy. He also hoped that official admonishment would reestablish his authority over Wells. There were several results of this temporary confusion over the August 1804 treaties. First, Dearborn did not punish Wells for his pro-Miami stance. It is unclear how actively Wells worked against the treaties, but Harrison believed he played a vital role in stirring Indian criticism. Whether Wells wished to overturn or change the treaties, or merely test his job security, is unknown. It is possible that by showing discordance with Harrison, Wells could improve his prestige among his Indian constituents who disliked Harrison and the treaties. In any event, Wells kept his job. In fact, within a few months Wells petitioned for additional pay, and Jefferson consented to increase his yearly salary from $600 to $750.

The second result was that Congress ratified Harrison’s treaties and the United States increased its land ownership. Wells learned that treaties once signed were difficult to overturn, but the incident did not harden the Indians any more against new treaties.

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62 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 76-78.
Almost yearly, Old Northwest leaders sold land to Harrison in exchange for increased annuity payments. The administrative crisis of Wells’ noncompliance was overlooked but not fully resolved.

A third result also became clear: the dispute over the 1804 treaties proved that Indian political systems were difficult for U.S. officials to understand. The consequences were personally embarrassing for Harrison and potentially disastrous for Indian policy. How could Harrison establish land ownership? Harrison, Jefferson, and other American politicians cared little for who owned the land they bought. Advocating Miami preeminence over the Piankeshaws specifically, Wells asserted that power was not restricted to tribal leaders because the Miamis were an intertribal authority. He claimed, and Harrison knew, that the Miami tribe had clout over others like the Piankeshaws and Kaskaskias, who had (in Wells’ view, erroneously) signed separate treaties, or treaties as equals. Harrison, however, stressed a precedent established by Putnam’s treaty in 1792, which the Piankeshaws and Weas signed.

The argument about intertribal authority and chain of command deserves a closer look and a reclarification of Putnam’s 1792 Vincennes Treaty. Wells himself was an interpreter for Putnam through the negotiations. The treaty generously guaranteed the “Wabash and Illinois Indians all the lands to which they have a just claim; and no part shall ever be taken from them, but by a fair purchase…That the lands originally belong to the Indians; it is theirs, and theirs only. That they have a right to sell, and a right to refuse to sell.” Putnam’s interpreter, William Wells, said these statements to the chiefs in

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64 Harrison conducted twelve separate treaties between 1803 and 1809, Harrison signed three treaties in 1803, three in 1804, two in 1805, and four in 1809. Harrison’s treaties accounted for 48% of the twenty-five total treaties signed between 1803 and 1809 between the United States and various Indian tribes. *Indian Affairs* II, 64-105.
attendance multiple times. Indians either did or did not believe these assertions, and white leaders almost certainly did not. Yet in print, the treaty claimed that Wabash and Illinois Indians, not Delawares, owned the land. There is no record of who signed the treaty, only that 31 Wabash and Illinois Indians signed.65

The question of band or tribal autonomy was largely a political decision made by Indian and white leaders alike. At times, Indian leaders, including Wells, argued for Miami authority over the less-populous bands. Wells claimed that the Miamis were the oldest inhabitants of the region, stating that “the Eel River tribe, the Weas, Piankeshaws and Kaskaskias, are branches or tribes of the Miami nation.”66 His account matches the findings of modern historians and contemporary Miamis.67 The Weas and Piankeshaws had been considered bands within the Miami culture group since the earliest French accounts of the mid-seventeenth century. While there is evidence that Americans knew about Miami subdivisions, they were often just that.68 As subdivisions of the Miami, Miami “proper” leaders (like Little Turtle, Pecanne, and Le Gris) could more effectively deal with American negotiators and consolidate their power and prestige. At other times, Indian leaders argued for separate band autonomy, or full and equal tribal status. The Treaty of Greenville delineated Weas, Piankeshaws, Kaskaskias, and Eel Rivers, and offered $500 in annuities each.69 By declaring these bands’ autonomy, Indian leaders could increase the annuity per person because each “tribe” received its own yearly payment. Therefore, at times it was advantageous to give negotiating autonomy to

65 American State Papers, I, Indian Affairs, 338.
68 American State Papers, I, Indian Affairs, 338-240. Informed by Wells, Putnam considered the Weas part of greater Wabash tribes.
69 “Treaty with the Wyandot, etc.,” August 3, 1795, Charles J. Kappler, ed., Indian Affairs, II, 42.
peoples like the Piankeshaws, Weas, and others. But, when these peoples used their autonomy and sold land without Wells’ input, he stirred opposition. Harrison’s treaties in 1803 and 1804 reasserted these peoples’ tribal status by not including Miami leaders. Harrison benefitted because he could buy vast territories without Miami input. For example, in August of 1803, Harrison bought eight million acres from the Kaskaskias, who numbered only thirty. In 1804, he did the same with the Delawares and Piankeshaws—excluding the Miamis who believed they owned the land. Whatever Harrison really thought, he knew that Wells opposed him and wanted retribution in the form of additional annuities. Although Wells had a valid argument, Secretary of War Dearborn scolded him for it. In this instance, officials disregarded his knowledge and input because it did not support their wishes.

Problems stemming from the 1804 treaties with the Delawares and Piankeshaws continued to trouble Harrison. In the months following the treaties, Indians grew more disillusioned. Harrison did not particularly care whether Indians disliked the treaties, but he was disappointed that Wells did not censor his constituents. By the summer of 1805, Harrison changed his views about Miami dissatisfaction. Instead of seeing Wells as a passive supporter, Harrison now portrayed him as an active player. Realizing that the Indians would not forget the deceptive treaties, Harrison blamed Wells for keeping the conflict alive. Despite his support of Indian displeasure, Wells did not fabricate it. A group of Delawares wrote to Wells, “We have not in our power to sell land and more than that it is contrary to the articles of the Treaty of Greenville…let the President our Father know that the purchase is unlawful and that he may take such measure as will prevent it

70 Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 80.
from being settled.”72 Harrison read the letter but ignored it. He believed that the obstruction stemmed from Wells’ character flaws, not other factors. “I am convinced [Wells] will not rest,” he penned to Dearborn, “until he has persuaded the Indians that their very existence depends upon the rescinding the [sic] [1804] Treaty with the Delawares and Piankeshaws. My knowledge of his character induces me to believe that he will go any length and use any means to carry a favorite point and much mischief may ensue from his knowledge of the Indians, his cunning and his perseverance.”73 Harrison may have believed everything Wells said, but found himself caught between the President’s orders to buy land quickly and the problems which resulted. Always politically ambitious, Harrison could cope with Indian displeasure, but he could not allow their voices to reach Washington. By making Wells the scapegoat, Harrison effectively lessened those voices’ political punch.

Secretary of War Dearborn accepted Harrison at face value, and warned John Johnston that Wells was in league with Little Turtle and undermining Harrison. He explained his views plainly, writing, “each Territorial Governor (Harrison), being superintendent of Indian Affairs within his own jurisdiction (Indiana), it is highly important that there should be the greatest harmony between him and the Agents (Wells); otherwise the Indians will become suspicious, & lose all confidence in the Government.”74 Dearborn clearly had a misguided perception that Indians had confidence in the United States government. He also apparently never questioned the policy Wells and Harrison had such trouble carrying out, but merely tried to rein in Wells’ input.

72 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 117.
73 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 125.
74 Thornbrough, Letter Book, 16.
Harrison was dissatisfied with Wells’ service thus far, and he wished to clear the air. Rather than go to Fort Wayne and speak with Wells himself, which “would be a sacrifice of that dignity and authority which is necessary to observe in all our transactions with the Indians,” Harrison sent his close friends General John Gibson and Colonel Francis Vigo to report. On the way, they informed Indians at various towns that the treaties in question had been formally ratified and therefore it was folly to deny them. Gibson, who received conflicting reports concerning the treaty, concluded that Wells and Little Turtle were acting in union to destroy the treaty’s credibility. Additionally, Gibson and Vigo declared that the French trader Peter Audrain, whom Wells had contracted to furnish log rails for Indian fences, conspired with Wells. Most importantly, some Indians told Gibson and Vigo that “Mr. Wells addressed the Miamies and advised them to stick together and keep their right, that he Wells if he was a Miamie would do so.”

Their sleuthing is perhaps the only explicit written evidence concerning Wells’ allegiance. If one believes historian James Merrell’s statement that negotiators like Wells were “firmly anchored on one side of the cultural divide or the other,” then Gibson and Vigo found that Wells was anchored on the Miami side. They concluded that “no noise or clamor respecting the treaty last summer [of 1804] with the Delawares…would have been made had it not been occasioned by the Little Turtle and Wells, the latter of whom

75 Quoted in Poinsatte, *Outpost in the Wilderness*, 46. Both Gibson and Vigo were Harrison’s friends—Vigo had been appointed by Harrison as Colonel. In 1805, certain anonymous letters were sent to the Indian legislature, condemning Harrison for helping friends through political appointments and abusing his powers to maintain his power and office. The letters listed Vigo and Gibson as witnesses to these abuses, however the charges were never brought to court. Owens, *Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer*, 114-116.

76 Poinsatte, *Outpost in the Wilderness*, 46-47.

77 Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, I, 141-146. It seems that most Delaware men accepted the treaty, however some young men told General Gibson that they considered received goods not payment for land but rather payment for stolen horses. See note 3, above.

78 James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: Norton, 1999), 37. Pennsylvania negotiators of the 1750s and 60s were similar in many respects to their Indiana counterparts ca. 1790-1810.
seems more attentive to the Indians than the people of the United States.”79 This report set Harrison against Wells and confirmed his suspicions. Gibson and Vigo had clear evidence that Wells self-identified as a Miami. Beyond this subversion, Wells advised Miamis to form a cohesive front against Harrison’s treaty with Wells himself spearheading the sedition. Harrison reported the situation directly to President Jefferson. He described the situation by labeling Little Turtle as the primary antagonist who could be easily defeated if not for Wells.80

Governor Harrison now had a reliable report charging Wells for blatant disobedience, and he aired his misgivings freely. He characterized Wells as a cunning man who had been too caught up in “the mazes of his own intrigues” that he had no room to move. He went so far as to question Wells’ finances, citing a profit of over $6,000 for the year 1804, and he blamed Wells for keeping the Kickapoo tribe’s annuity for himself. His advice to Dearborn was to remove Wells from his position.81 John Johnston saw a golden opportunity to criticize Wells. He wrote a seemingly benign letter to Harrison subtly aimed at stirring his pride. “I mentioned that the Government as far as I could judge,” he innocently noted, “had made Mr. Wells independent of the Governor.”82

The results of this seemingly irreversible insubordination must have been surprising to Johnston, who relished the chance at running Fort Wayne without Wells. Dearborn responded to the financial issue with a slap on the wrist, advising Wells to keep better record of the agency’s expenses and turn his letter book in to Johnston to check.83 This was merely reinforcement of what Wells should have been doing. To avoid losing

79 Quoted in Poinsatte, *Outpost in the Wilderness*, 47.
his job and thus his hopes of aiding the Miamis and Little Turtle, Wells acted quickly to restore Harrison’s trust. In August of 1805 Wells and Little Turtle met Harrison personally at Vincennes, Indiana’s territorial capital. Wells’ shaky grasp of written English usually formed his relationship with Harrison. In a face to face meeting, his charisma along with Little Turtle’s presence swayed Harrison to maintain trust in him. More importantly, both worked with Governor Harrison to obtain a wide swath of land in southern Indiana ratified in the Grouseland Treaty. As part of the proceedings, Little Turtle agreed to support the previous treaties with the Delawares and Piankeshaws in 1804, thereby resolving former conflicts. The Delawares relinquished their claim to the land sold in 1804 to the Miamis, and the Miamis, Eel Rivers, and Weas, who “were formerly and still consider themselves as one nation…the United States do hereby engage to consider them as joint owners of all the country on the Wabash and its waters.” Importantly, Wells and Little Turtle agreed to the official break-up of the Miami bands. The decision was a political one, because each Miami group (Miami proper, Eel Rivers, and Weas) increased its own annuity and thus increased the annuity per person. Little Turtle and Wells now had more money with which to work, both for the tribe’s benefit and for their own prestige as annuity conduits. For Harrison, this process of reconciliation was especially sweet because he nearly had been defined by his inability to successfully resolve these treaties and buy land without conflict. He even increased Little Turtle’s pension by $50 annually and sent Wells to Kentucky to buy him a slave.

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84 Harrison apologized to Jefferson that he could not buy the land for less than one cent per acre, Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 106.
85 “Treaty with the Delawares, etc.” August 21, 1805, Indian Affairs II, 81.
86 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 164. No evidence indicates that Wells went to Kentucky to buy Little Turtle a slave. The suggestion seems odd, as slavery was illegal throughout the Northwest Territory, however Harrison was pro-slavery and had passed “An Act concerning the Introduction of Negroes and
In return for his help, Wells received only a minor admonishment from Harrison. Dearborn, doubtful during this rapid change in sentiment, found Harrison surprisingly optimistic concerning Wells. “With Captn. Wells I have had an explanation and have agreed to a general amnesty and act of oblivion for the past,” Harrison wrote. “I hope that this treaty will be ratified by you. I am convinced that both him and the Turtle will exert themselves to bring the present conference to a happy issue.” Only a month before Dearborn had read Harrison’s assertion that “measures ought to be taken to control this vicious inclination or to remove him from office and from the Indian country.” Everyone kept their jobs and breathed a sigh of relief. Yet the delicate situation proved that unknown forces could tear apart the fabric of Indian policy. The theory was centrally flawed because the United States officials wished to acknowledge Indian wants and needs, and for this job they hired William Wells. At the same time, these officials wanted to assert their control over Northwest Indians, and for this job they hired William Wells. Wells could either become a loudspeaker for the government, much like Harrison or Johnston, or he could give the Indian leaders a voice in government. He was nearly removed by his choice of the latter. As a result of the Grouseland Treaty negotiations, and Wells’ apparent loyalty, Harrison was now willing to forgive. But Wells’ past history and loyalty changes were difficult to forget. Wells had entered the process of land dispossession as a political agitator in the 1804 Treaty with the Delawares to help Miami leaders navigate Jefferson’s Indian policy regarding land purchase. The United Mulattoes into this Territory.” Owens, Mr. Jefferson’s Hammer, 100. Such inconsistencies permeated the Old Northwest’s politics.

87 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 161.
88 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 149.
States’ desire for land, under the name of civilization and defense, succeeded despite Wells.

It is important to remember Wells’ identity as he sought an active role in Old Northwest politics. The only surviving anecdote concerning Wells during these years of land treaties conveys the politics Wells deftly manipulated while Indian agent at Fort Wayne. One night, distant Indians stayed at Fort Wayne on their way to an Indian council.89 The Indians invited the fort’s officers to come and see a grand dance. Wells suspected something, and advised the fort’s commander not to attend. The commander, perhaps his nephew-in-law Nathan Heald, refused his advice but did bring the armed troops to the dance.90 Nobody but Wells saw the Indians enter the dance ground with rifles hidden under their blankets, but Wells waited, warily letting the situation unfold. After the preliminary dances and speeches, “a large and powerful chief arose” and danced, flourishing his tomahawk. The chief danced toward Wells, said something in his native language, and menaced Wells with his tomahawk. Immediately, Wells shouted a war-whoop and jumped to his feet. Wells grabbed an ox’s jaw-bone sitting nearby and proceeded in an even more vigorous dance than the chief had executed. Dancing toward the menacing chief, Wells told him that “he had killed more Indians than he had white men, and had killed one that looked just like him, and he believed it was his brother, only a much better looking and better brave than he was.” Apparently, Wells believed the signal was the menacing tomahawk dance, and Wells’ split-second decision confused the

89 Any guess about who these Indians were, where they were going, or what year this event happened, would be conjecture. It almost certainly happened between 1805 and 1809, because the woman who related the story was married at Fort Wayne in 1805, and Wells was removed as agent in 1809.
90 Heald commanded Fort Wayne from 1807-1810, and married Wells’ niece (Samuel Wells’ daughter), Rebecca.
Indians. “I had to meet bravado with bravado,” Wells said, “and I think I beat.” The anecdote demonstrates clearly that Wells was still a middle ground product occupying a space between, but his ability to participate in both Indian and Euro-American politics established his role as a cultural mediator. This liminality led him into the growing frictions among and between Indian leaders, white missionaries, and U.S. officials.

Chapter 3

Militant Nativism and William Kirk, 1804-1809

“Strongly suspected for having excited an opposition”¹

The tranquility at Fort Wayne created by Wells’ and Harrison’s compromise was short lived. Two developments heightened friction among the Old Northwest’s residents and leaders. These developments were William Kirk’s Quaker mission and the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenkswatawa’s rise to power. Kirk and the Shawnee brothers represented and promoted vastly different ideologies. Wells struggled to maintain his place at the forefront of Indian affairs, first by dismissing, then by slandering both Kirk and the Shawnee brothers. In the summer of 1807, the incompatible principles Kirk and the Shawnee brothers espoused converged on William Wells in a historical moment which also included heightened alarm over Anglo-American conflict. Despite the outside pressures, Wells advocated his own agenda and continued to alter Indian policy.

On September 19, 1807, residents of Ohio’s capital, Chillicothe, felt nervous excitement. Nearly 2,000 militia in the small town heightened tensions. For the past year, Indians from far and near had been moving to Greenville, Ohio to see a mysterious Shawnee prophet. Were these Indians coming to attack white settlements? Some families had moved away from the area in fear. Wells advised Ohio’s acting Governor Thomas Kirker to call out the militia and order the Indians to leave Greenville. Rumors proliferated that the British were supplying arms to the Prophet’s followers. As the summer wore on, Kirker decided to investigate the Indians’ intentions. Now on

September 19, four Indian representatives entered Chillicothe’s courthouse to speak. Blue Jacket, the former leader of the Northwest confederation against Wayne’s army, began the conference, recalling former treaties and battles with noteworthy oratorical flair. He explained that the Indians had no intention of taking up the tomahawk against their “white brethren.” Perhaps the Shawnee prophet’s own older brother, Tecumseh, could explain why the Indians gathered at Greenville. Tecumseh spoke vigorously, convincing the audience that the Indians only wished to pray. By all accounts, it was a remarkable speech delivered by a forceful man. The audience remained spellbound before his confident gaze. All were struck by his commanding words, except Wells. Tecumseh took the opportunity to affront Wells. “Congress has a good many men,” Tecumseh began. “Let them take away Wells and put one of them there. We hate him. If they will not remove him, we will!” Throughout the three-hour speech concerning white advances on native land and false accusations against the Greenville Indians, Tecumseh carefully maintained that the Indians remained peaceful. Governor Kirker agreed, and Chillicothe gave a unanimous sigh as audience members filed out of the warm courtroom.²

Tecumseh’s speech touched on all the key issues and driving developments in the eventful summer of 1807. He addressed land ownership, British influence, white fears, and changing Indian culture his brother, the Prophet, embodied. He also tied these issues to William Wells. Such a speech, in such a tense environment, could only result from serious changes in the Old Northwest. As a powerful speech of one of the leading men in

the region, the address and Wells’ place in it deserves closer attention. Tecumseh’s impassioned words beg the question: what had Wells done to earn this repudiation? The answer begins with the British.

Apparent in William Henry Harrison’s and Secretary of War Henry Dearborn’s correspondence was their concern about British activity largely caused by Wells’ intelligence-gathering. In the Northwest, violence between the United States and Great Britain stopped after the Revolution, but each nation continued trying to manipulate Indians. A speech given by the British agent Thomas McKee in 1804 to some Potawatomis illustrated that the British officials were working to undermine American influence through political discourse and that McKee recognized Wells’ potential weight in the equation: “My Children, I am told that Wells has told you, that it was your interest to suffer no liquor to come into your country; you all well know that he is a bad man, you all well know the injuries he done you before you made peace with the long knives, by taking and killing your men, women and children”3 The reference to Wells’ participation in Wayne’s campaign shows that Wells’ character was subject to discussion among British as well as American agents.4

McKee’s verbal attack also reveals that Wells’ British counterparts, in this case an influential trader and messenger, sought to discredit him and challenge his authority.

Wells was not the only white man who understood Indian culture. The British employed

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3 Thomas’ father Alexander McKee was an influential British agent in Upper Canada and a go-between similar to Wells and who influenced the Miamis while Wells lived among them. Thomas McKee was a Canadian-born agent recognized for his linguistic and political skill in the Northwest. Larry L. Nelson, A Man of Distinction Among Them: Alexander McKee and the Ohio Country Frontier, 1754-1799 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 180, 195n.1. Quote in Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 112.
4 John Johnston himself never trusted Wells in part due to his past military record. He claimed that Wells’ switch from Indian to white was in part due to his acceptance of “a considerable sum of money,” which Johnston viewed as bribery and fickleness on Wells’ part. Leonard U. Hill, John Johnston and the Indians in the Land of the Three Miamis (Columbus: Stoneman Press, 1957), 34.
several insightful agents who worked for British interests much as Wells was supposed to be working for those of the United States. Like American agents, the British kept a keen eye on their counterparts. In 1805 McKee told Indian listeners: “My Children, there is now a powerful enemy of yours to the east [the United States], now on his feet, and looks mad at you, therefore you must be on your guard; keep your weapons of war in your hands, and have a look out for him.”5 Such seemingly benign yet active alliance building was critical for both nations who hoped to secure military aid. Harrison and Dearborn constantly tied Indian actions and rumors to the possible British influence weighing heavily on their minds.

Quaker Missionaries

Despite American concern over British activity in the Northwest, there was no actual violence between the two, and the U.S. scheme of enacting land treaties and teaching farming to Indians continued. The 1805 Grouseland Treaty clarified past treaties and put Wells back in Harrison’s good graces. Secretary of War Dearborn and Fort Wayne’s factor John Johnston, whose careers were not tied to treaty success, remained wary of Wells. Of course, Wells did not fade to the background in treaty negotiations, and the same was true of the government’s civilizing efforts. Quaker missionaries traveled to Fort Wayne in 1804, and Wells interpreted their motivations to Little Turtle and others: “In coming into the Country of our Red brethren, we have come with our eyes open and...are affected with sorrow in believing that Many of the red people suffer much for the want of food and for the want of Clothing.” Certainly if the

5 Esarey, Messages and Letters, 1, 124.
Indians would only adopt their mode of agriculture, they would be less “attendant upon hunting.”\(^6\)

Quaker missionaries, led by Gerard Hopkins and working under Jefferson’s auspices, faced the same problem as Jefferson’s plan for Indian cultural transformation: most Miamis survived comfortably with their own modes of horticulture and hunting and found no need to change them. Days before the speech in 1804 the Quakers were treated to “an excellent dinner” of wild turkey and cranberry sauce, prepared by Wells’ wife Sweet Breeze.\(^7\) A closer reading of the Quaker account reveals how blind they were to Miami subsistence. On a tour of the area, Wells showed the men the fine land surrounding the Wabash tributaries. The Quakers thought the landscape exceptional, noting a creek which suited a mill, or cleared land where cornfields might grow. Additionally, Wells provided the Quakers a detailed history of each place to which they came, showing an intimate knowledge of the terrain, its resources, and historical use significance. As the sun set, Wells’ Wea friend Massanonga took fifteen minutes to kill a wild turkey, which afforded he “prepared and roasted for us in a very nice and expeditious manner, on which we fared sumptuously.”

Perhaps unbeknownst to the Quakers, Wells and Massanonga waited until dusk to save time, knowing that turkeys roost and would provide an easy meal. Despite the chilly evening, the Quakers slept well without fire or shelter. The men heard natural foods ripe for harvesting that night, including otter, deer, and more turkeys which “gobbled in all


\(^7\) Richter, “‘Believing,’” 602.
Quaker assumptions that Indians could not feed themselves were not based on evidence, and both Quakers and other officials fought an uphill battle to change Indian subsistence. Indians had a choice between toilsome intensive monocrop agriculture and the more leisurely diversified subsistence. Corn played a major role in Indian life but when easier meals provided themselves, as with the easily-harvested turkeys, there was no need to focus solely on corn. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wayne’s 1794 scorched-earth policy probably increased Miami reliance on hunting and gathering. Quakers were quick to impute Indian subsistence strategies to obstinacy, but contrary evidence proves that female hoe agriculture remained viable until the War of 1812.

In 1804, the first Baltimore Quaker group in northern Indiana returned home, leaving Phillip Dennis to start a farm in an uninhabited area twenty miles from Fort Wayne. Despite his success growing corn and various vegetables, the Baltimore Quakers did not send anyone to resume his work the next year. Dennis and his work did not repulse the Miamis per se, they simply had little interest. Moravian missionaries reported that the Indians told the Quakers “We do not need anyone to teach us how to work. If we want to work we know how to do it according to our own way and as it pleases us.” They may have been more receptive if hunger had required a new subsistence strategy. That the Quakers’ model farm on the Wabash did not take root must have frustrated Jefferson. His bright hope of civilizing the Indians at the meeting

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9 Wells showed Hopkins and others bones and skulls where the Miamis defeated Gen. Josiah Harmar’s army in 1790. Hopkins also noted that Fort Wayne’s carpenter was busy building the council house, and the blacksmith was repairing Indians guns. Hopkins, *Mission to the Indians*, 63, 67.
10 Richter, “‘Believing,’” 604-605.
with Wells, Little Turtle and Black Hoof in 1802 diminished. A great number of Miamis and Shawnees had rejected the agricultural mission.

This hitch did not stop Christian missionaries from traveling to the Old Northwest. In 1806, two more Baltimore Quakers, William and Mahlon Kirk, petitioned the federal government for a grant to establish a program of domestic and agricultural arts among the Miamis and Potawatomis. Jefferson granted William Kirk $6,000 and named him an “Agent of Civilization.” In April of 1807, Kirk led a small group of Quakers to the Indiana Territory, where he hoped to transform the Indians into “useful citizens of the Republic.”

Wells saw Kirk’s mission as a mark of the government’s distrust, and Kirk himself as another rival in Indian affairs. Previously, Wells’ only competitor in Fort Wayne was John Johnston. After Wells’ political missteps in the 1804-1805 excitement over the 1804 treaties with the Delawares and Piankeshaws, Dearborn and Harrison had reason to reduce Wells’ power. On top of the meddling Johnston, Kirk was another nuisance to Wells, who received money from the federal government to promote “civilization.” Prior to Kirk’s arrival, Wells’ prestige was bolstered by the annuities that flowed through his hands. Wells probably saw Kirk as a new Johnston, compounding his problems and reducing his power. Through treaties and daily correspondence, Wells and Little Turtle exchanged land and social capital for the ability to secure and distribute annuities as they saw fit. Jefferson now trusted a new agent, William Kirk, to do Wells’ job. Kirk posed a direct threat to Wells in his efforts to continue to hold authority at Fort Wayne and help Little Turtle navigate the civilization process.

Personal prestige was the most important factor in Old Northwest politics. A political message either succeeded or failed in inducing action depending on whether people believed and trusted the message bearer. Historian Gregory Dowd claims that the “main advocates of accommodation” in the region “were seriously divided, often for the most petty of reasons.” The problem here is that these people had vastly different goals, and their factionalism was not due to petty reasons. The problem ran deeper than that. The important personalities present in the Old Northwest—Little Turtle, William Henry Harrison, William Wells, and others—often had acutely incompatible ideologies.

Little Turtle wanted to sell his land to Harrison, but he wished to do so according to his own timetable, and he wished to secure proper return for such a valuable commodity. The fact that Little Turtle signed away Miami land meant either that he agreed with some aspect of the civilization process or that he was indisputably selfish. His unselfish actions over previous decades, like allowing Blue Jacket to take command of the Indian forces in 1794, suggest the former. That Little Turtle believed that agents like Harrison or Johnston worked in the Indians’ best interests is a stretch; yet, he accepted government aid if under his control.

Harrison wanted to buy land as cheaply and quickly as possible, and went to any length to do so. Harrison’s success in buying cheap land in treaties like the 1803 Fort Wayne treaty and that with the August 1803 treaty with the Kaskaskias gained him considerable prestige both in Washington and in Indiana.

More importantly, chiefs, agents, Quakers, and government officials did not sacrifice personal prestige, however measured, for the supposed common goal of

coexistence. The middle ground, in which economic and military capital was unknown or misunderstood to the other, no longer existed in the Old Northwest.

As a result of both men seeking to maintain prestige, Wells’ and Kirk’s relationship became one of mutual animosity. At their first meeting, Wells agreed to assist Kirk’s mission. Probably soon after, Wells began influencing the Indians to disregard whatever Kirk said. Kirk found supposedly-receptive chiefs like Little Turtle surprisingly impervious to his overtures. Wells claimed that Kirk had arrived too late (April 20) to begin a farm and besides, the Indians did not want him. According to Wells, Little Turtle created the idea that Miami annuities be used for an agricultural mission, and Little Turtle planned to inform the President. Wells declared that Kirk somehow heard the plan, “Hurried off to Baltimore,” and convinced the Quakers to endorse the idea. According to Wells and Little Turtle, Kirk put the idea “before the government as coming from himself in order to get him Self a Lucrative appointment and the money that was so Liberally apropiated…[T]he turtle and others took fire at this conduct.” Wells also reported that Kirk had spent over half of the $6,000 before reaching Fort Wayne.\(^{14}\) Perhaps Wells was candid, and naturally his mistrust for a rival agent inflamed his language. It is also possible that Kirk, unaware of the negative consequences, had gone ahead to fulfill Little Turtle’s wishes without malice. Such a scenario would injure Little Turtle’s pride and would explain Kirk’s surprise and dislike for Wells. This misunderstanding would also prove how the fragile Old Northwest’s power structure could quickly break down due to personality.

Kirk asserted to Dearborn that Wells wanted the $6,000 appropriation for himself, and that Wells was mistranslating. John Johnston also wrote a private letter to Dearborn

\(^{14}\) Quoted in Parsons, “Civilizing the Indians,” 210-211.
against Wells. By June of 1807, the frustrated and angry Kirk led his group out of Wells’ influence to Black Hoof’s band of Shawnees at Wapakoneta, Ohio. Wells pleaded to Harrison that only Wells himself was capable of carrying out Jefferson’s policies, but such empty statements did little to help Wells’ cause. In July, Wells received a letter of admonishment. Reports, including Johnston’s letter, reached Washington that Wells was causing trouble, and Dearborn’s secretary wrote to Harrison that he must “impress upon Mr. Wells the necessity of a change in his conduct in this respect; and the expediency, as it regards his own interest, of harmonizing with the other agents of the Government, in promoting its views.” The same day, he wrote pointedly to Wells that it was “strongly suspected that you have borne no small Agency in exciting this opposition.”

Under Kirk’s oversight, Black Hoof’s group at Wapakoneta increasingly acculturated, even thanking the government for sending the Quakers, who “have done a great deal for us in instructing our young men in a good way and how to use the tools we see in the hands of our white brothers.” Kirk’s success with Black Hoof, conspicuous to Harrison, Dearborn, and Jefferson, was a stark contrast to his failure with Little Turtle. Both chiefs wanted to accommodate the government so that they could continue to reap annuity benefits. The main difference was William Wells, who disliked Kirk. Kirk returned the sentiment. When Dearborn reprimanded Kirk for going beyond his funding and not reporting it, Kirk blamed “the opposition I met with at Fort Wayne…by a man

15 Edmunds, “‘Evil Men,’” 4.
16 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 218.
17 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 464.
18 Edmunds, “‘Evil Men,’’” 6.
whose influence with the chiefs would evidently operate to whatever might be his interests.”

Kirk’s failure with the Miami displeased Dearborn, who believed Kirk’s blame for Wells. Harrison and Wells each received letters from Dearborn’s office claiming Dearborn’s strong suspicion that Wells caused the mission’s failure. In response, Wells scribbled a desperate plea to the Secretary of War. Wells claimed an earnest desire “to promote the civilizing the Indians,” indeed he was “the only advocate in this country” for the job. Wells wrote that, in fact, nobody else had even tried before himself. Wells concluded that Kirk, a liar and deceiver, could and would never be able to civilize the Indians. Wells responded to each charge against him in turn, re-using terms from the letter. However, perhaps Wells read Dearborn’s letter to the point of memorizing it, for Wells read that he was “strongly suspected…in exciting this opposition.” Wells oddly misspelled this phrase, countering that “I am at a Loss to know the Instence of my conducted that could be suspected for exciting an opposistian.” Wells was a poor speller, so either Wells memorized critical phrases from the condemning letter, or was too flustered to look back and forth between the letter received and phrases he copied. In either case, the letter from Dearborn was gravely threatening and Wells took it seriously.

Wells had cause for this desperate and careful explanation. Before receiving Wells’ account, Dearborn had accused Wells of “subterfuge,” and cited Wells’ “conferences” with chiefs as damning evidence, supposedly meaning that Wells called these meetings explicitly to undo Kirk’s hard work. After explaining the circumstances
as he saw them, Dearborn wrote to Wells, “At all events, one of two things must be a fact, either that you possess no kind of useful influence with the chiefs in your agency or that you make an improper use of what you possess. In either case you cannot be considered as well qualified for the place you hold.”23

Wells may have packed his belongings, waiting for word that he would be removed from his position as agent. It certainly seemed that Wells had gone too far this time, and had totally lost the faith of his supposed colleagues Johnston and Kirk, and his superiors Harrison and Dearborn. But obvious treachery was not enough reason to remove Wells. He remained too important, despite his shortcomings. A cooler Dearborn called on Johnston to investigate the situation, claiming that Wells, “very intent on making money,” had lost his confidence.24

Dearborn had tempered his view. Believing that Wells was unqualified for his position, Dearborn did not remove Wells. This inconsistency should be attributed to Wells’ vital intelligence-gathering. Despite Wells’ repeated insubordination and defiance of government policy, Dearborn did not remove him because he was too important as an informant of British activity. The conflicting ideologies of benevolence versus progress were but one factor in Old Northwest politics, and Wells deftly used Anglo-American tension to bolster his importance. By securing intimate knowledge only he could offer, Wells found some latitude and job security. In June of 1807, as Kirk was settling into his new role among Black Hoof’s Shawnees at Wapakoneta, Ohio, Anglo-American relations changed drastically when the British warship Leopard fired on the American frigate Chesapeake. After the event, American officials had evidence to support their fears of

23 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 467.
British-Indian military alliance and consequently increased their efforts to secure Indian neutrality in any upcoming conflict. Alliance builders like the British McKee and American Wells took on new importance following the 1807 *Chesapeake* affair.

The British in Canada feared U.S. invasion, and they enlarged their presence and increased their promises among the Indians in the Old Northwest. Should war break out, the British agents employed their strongest alliance-building techniques by giving more gifts and making stronger speeches. The Americans and especially Governor Harrison, hearing such reports, perceived these actions as British provocation. After all, British-Indian alliances in the Northwest had wreaked havoc before in Pontiac’s Rebellion, the Revolutionary War, the continued raids throughout the 1780s, and the recent 1790s Indian Wars ending with the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. Again, Harrison’s suspicions seemed to take substance before his eyes. During this time of elevated Anglo-American tension, William Wells was central in determining the relationship’s tone. Peacetime ambitions like land acquisition and teaching civilization took a backseat federally, although not necessarily locally, following the 1807 *Chesapeake* affair. British and American officials did not meet on any regular basis, and therefore both British and American agents and traders who talked and traded with the Indians reported new developments. Thus, the sense of heightened British influence which characterized Harrison’s fears after 1807 came from Wells, who reported his observations and perceptions based on what his Indian friends told him. Increasingly, Wells’ information providing his own job security concerned a Shawnee shaman who polarized the Old Northwest.

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Important and influential chiefs such as the Miami Little Turtle and the Shawnee Black Hoof professed allegiance to the United States. Harrison had little substance to back up his fear that the Northwest Indians would support the British in any meaningful way should conflict turn to war. However, Wells soon pinpointed a threat which Harrison and Dearborn, remembering the disastrous defeats to pan-Indian forces in 1790 and 1791, could comprehend. Militarized Indian resistance against the United States did not begin from Little Turtle’s Miamis, but instead from Tenskwatawa, a Shawnee known as the Prophet.

Tenskwatawa the Prophet’s ideology totally discredited both civilizing efforts like Kirk’s, and land sales like Harrison’s. He addressed cultural disintegration with a charismatic and overtly-religious approach. Such cultural change grew increasingly prominent in Indiana during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Indians living hundreds of miles from white farmers continued their accepted and entrenched lifeways, namely horticulture and seasonal-round subsistence. However, as more land changed hands, settlers filled the frontier up to and over the boundary lines, game dwindled, and Indians grew more reliant on European trade goods, old modes of living became nearly impossible. Harrison’s treaties forced Indians to relocate their villages, to move in with relatives, to relinquish old hunting grounds, and to adapt lifeways which relied on large land areas. Because of Harrison’s treaties, Gen. Philip Schuyler’s 1783 vision of white settlement inducing Indians to “retire farther back, and dispose of their lands…and thus
leave us the country without the expense of a purchase, trifling as that will probably be,” was working.26

Tenskwatawa sought to combat this vision. He was the most well-known of those Indians who sought cultural revitalization. He successfully convinced many Shawnees, Delawares, Chippewas and others to shun white customs and return to traditional Indian practices and beliefs. As a religious figure, he argued that Indians who had allowed successful rituals and habits to fall into disuse allowed evil white habits to take their place.27

As Tenskwatawa gained support he became increasingly anti-American. He not only revitalized Shawnee culture but helped bring a spiritual unity to other Indians in the area. His vigor generated an energy lacking since the fractionalizing and demoralizing 1794 loss at Fallen Timbers to Gen. Anthony Wayne’s army. Harrison recognized the danger and kept close watch on the Prophet through William Wells, his primary informant. Wells had an established network of friends and allies among the various Indian tribes and could provide the best and most unique intelligence to Harrison. Wells’ intelligence-gathering became critical and boosted his job security. Recognizing this, Wells asserted repeatedly that the Prophet was a “British agent.”28 Thus, Wells’ importance was magnified in light of critical Indian allegiances and participation in a possible war with the British.

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26 Quoted in Reginald Horsman, Expansion and American Indian Policy (Michigan State University Press, 1967), 7.
28 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 499, 531.
Harrison relayed what Wells reported to Secretary of War Dearborn and thence to President Jefferson. As the Prophet’s vigorous blame and criticism of white culture took root in the Northwest in 1806 and 1807, William Wells subtly made himself important by making the Prophet an enemy. Dearborn, needing at least Indian neutrality, could not risk disposing of Wells if he was in fact telling the truth. Of course, Tenskwatawa discredited Little Turtle as an accommodationist chief. Wells, probably protecting his own prestige and Little Turtle’s politics, slandered the Prophet in return. By providing Harrison and Dearborn unique and exaggerated new developments concerning his new foe Tenskwatawa, Wells created a niche for himself and held his position notwithstanding his contrary role in the William Kirk debacle.

The Prophet’s following was remarkable in that Indians from all over the Northwest, not merely Ohio and Indiana, accepted his visions and joined him at the town he established at Greenville, Ohio. Separate villages or tribes could sustain low-level warfare, but an intertribal force was truly frightening. Tenskwatawa’s spiritual revitalization was one factor in a growing pan-Indian identity in the Old Northwest, and a relatively small group followed him. But his older brother Tecumseh was an even greater threat as a political leader. Tenskwatawa, drawing upon a shared history that had seen pan-Indian armies defeat English forces, even claimed to follow in Pontiac’s successful footsteps.29

The Prophet’s militant nativism soon eclipsed Little Turtle’s conciliatory and even-handed approach to Indian-American relations. Through experience, Little Turtle had decided to pursue gradual assimilation for his people. By accepting some U.S. aid, he could help his people negotiate the apparent change. A decade after the 1795 Treaty

of Greenville, many younger warriors and leaders including Tenskwatawa’s brother Tecumseh rejected Little Turtle’s philosophy. By their account of history, treaties and conciliation only produced hardship and suffering. Wells was a central player in a different conflict between two factions of Indian leadership. Generally, Little Turtle was a pragmatist while Tenskwatawa and his brother Tecumseh were idealists. Wells was firmly planted with Little Turtle, who had used land as a sellable commodity in return for annuity payments. Black Hoof was a significant and venerable Shawnee leader in the same vein. Starting in 1805, Tenskwatawa began spreading the nativist ideology that the land should never have been sold in the first place, directly contradicting the old leaders.30 Wells took pride in securing the best annuities for his Miamis and seeing Little Turtle’s wishes come to fruition. But the pan-Indian militants Teskwatawa and Tecumseh disagreed fundamentally with Little Turtle’s pacific and negotiable attitude. Wells’ job as Little Turtle’s agent was to destroy Tenskwatawa’s credibility.

The United States largely overlooked Tecumseh until 1807. Years earlier, he had begun building interpersonal alliances across the frontier and surrounded himself with like-minded families intent on maintaining what land they had left. As Tecumseh gained experience, he tailored his rhetoric and action to a more pragmatic political approach. Certainly his brother’s cultural revitalization was important and gained followers, but Tecumseh’s political talents and charisma were equally important resources in his vision of a pan-Indian alliance. This is not to say Tecumseh separated religion from the secular, which was impossible for an early nineteenth-century worldview.31 Instead, he slowly realized that he would need to understand and work with the American way of thinking.

30 Dowd, “Thinking and Believing,” 315-316.
31 Dowd, “Thinking and Believing,” 309.
Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh’s nativist ideology spurning many European goods and ideas emerged as both a powerful message for preserving Indian ways and an overt critique of white culture. It was not a coincidence that the white people coming to civilize the Indians by teaching them farming were also Christian missionaries. Moravian missionaries had successfully converted some Ohio Indians, notably among the Delaware, and had established Moravian Indian towns like Gnadenhutten. The story differed in Indiana. One Moravian mission in 1801 established itself near present Muncie in southern Indiana, but was abandoned after five years of failure. Importantly, Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh could not, and did not, separate their actions from their religious principles. One concept, recorded as early as 1751, argued that whites and Indians were products of two separate creations. The notion provided context to figures like Neolin and Tenskwatawa, as well as Black Hoof and Little Turtle. Tecumseh illustrated separate creation and religious astuteness when he asked Harrison, “How can we have confidence in the white people[?] when Jesus Christ came upon the earth you kill’d and nail’d him on a cross.”

Americans, both settlers and leaders, disliked the Prophet’s new message and its possible consequences. In the spring of 1807 Indians from far and near flocked to Greenville to hear the Prophet. Over four hundred travelled through Fort Wayne alone. The previous April, Harrison sardonically told the Delawares, “If he is really a prophet, ask of him to cause the sun to stand still—the moon to alter its course—or the dead to rise from their graves. If he does these things, you may then believe that he has been sent by

33 Quoted in Dowd, “Thinking and Believing,” 313.
34 Sugden, Tecumseh: A Life, 143.
God.” In response, Tenskwatawa called for the Indians to gather. He apparently caused the sun to stand still when, on June 16, 1806, the gathered Indians gasped, looking up to see a total solar eclipse. Few Indians now doubted the Prophet.

American leaders still had questions, and Wells continued to provide answers. Harrison and Dearborn retained little trust in Wells’ information, and even that degree of trust was misplaced. Wells, as an agent for Little Turtle, had no patience for Tenskwatawa or his visions challenging Wells’ and Little Turtle’s authority. Wells was thus placed between Tenskwatawa and Harrison, a position which allowed him to keep his position as agent for a while. Wells was not firmly planted on Harrison’s side, nor was Tenskwatawa firmly anti-American as Wells painted him. Tenskwatawa wrote to Harrison about a rumor which he “heard…from Mr. Wells, but I believe it originated with himself.” Wells reminded Dearborn that the Indians under his control were quite pleasant when compared to Tenskwatawa’s band. He knew he was on thin ice, and after the William Kirk incident he carefully characterized himself as acting on behalf of the government.

Kirk’s removal to Ohio in the summer of 1807 eliminated a threat to Wells while at the same time increasing his importance and job security. Kirk soon became entangled in the conflict between Tenskwatawa and those chiefs he viewed as government minions, in this case Black Hoof. The government had other agents to inform their decisions concerning Tenskwatawa, but none had the knowledge of Indian customs or the network of Indian friends that Wells had. Governor Harrison believed (on Wells’ observations)

35 Edmunds, Tecumseh, 86.
36 Edmunds, Tecumseh, 86.
37 Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 299.
38 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 510.
that the Prophet was being directed by the British “for some bad purpose.” In Tenskwatawa’s view, Kirk’s presence and funding represented the U.S. government’s renewed effort at introducing “civilization.” Therefore his presence at Wapakoneta among the Shawnees was in direct defiance of what Tenskwatawa stood for.

It was Tecumseh and Black Hoof who eventually came nearest to blows in 1807. In the relatively tranquil southwestern Ohio, an unknown raiding party killed several white settlers. The Prophet’s following at Greenville continued to scare Ohio’s white residents, especially as rumors of a British-Indian alliance circulated. This sparked a mild panic among settlers, some of whom fled toward the Ohio River. Ohio’s Governor Edward Tiffin called a meeting. Tecumseh and Black Hoof each brought a retinue of over sixty well-armed warriors. Each man accused the other, which nearly started a fight. Kirk stepped in to restrain both parties, and eventually the council disbanded, and blame was laid on a group of Potawatomis. Kirk worked at restoring the settlers’ faith in Black Hoof’s band, which throughout the summer of 1807 and the following years sectioned land with fences, planted cornfields with plows, and built log cabins.

After the affair, Wells returned to Fort Wayne and continued to provide intelligence concerning the Prophet. In August of 1807, two months after the Chesapeake affair, the Prophet camped at Greenville, Ohio. Wells wrote Harrison that “It is my opinion that the British are at the bottom of all this Business and depend on it that if we have war with them that many of the Indian tribes will take an active part against us…” A month later, Tecumseh blamed Wells for many of the Indians’ problems and threatened to “remove” him. In December, Wells wrote directly to
Dearborn with astonishing news. According to unnamed sources, British agents at Malden (Amherstburg, Canada) were “informing the Indians that their father King George had sent seven Large vessels to America loaded with soldiers to relieve his red children from oppression and restore their country to them again.” Wells added that the Prophet was undoubtedly serving the British. Weeks later, Wells reminded Dearborn that the Indians were restless, adding the underlined caveat “not of this agency”—” Wells continued by noting “it is believed by both Indians and white people that had any other person but my self been stationed at this place peace would not of been preserved—and I hope that I may be fortunate enough to have my conduct approved of by you—…The Indians of this country are too much scattered for the United States to civilize them and I assure you that it is nothing but a wast of money to attempt any thing of the kind in their present state.” In this letter, Wells told Dearborn that the Indians behaved under his guidance, that everyone wanted him to remain agent, and that he should send no one else to civilize the Indians.

Dearborn did not exactly believe Wells’ rhetoric; in the same letter Wells offered his own plan to help the Indians. Wells handpicked some chiefs, including the Stock Bridge chief Captain Hendricks, to oversee twelve settlements and teach the other Indians agriculture. Such a plan would only cost, by Wells’ estimate, $3600. In return, the Indians would sell their land, but would not “place confidence in a stranger…should the government think proper to adopt any plan of this kind among the Indians of this agency I Shall be happy to receive and execute its commands.” Such a plan must have struck

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Dearborn as odd, considering Wells had personally driven Kirk’s similar mission out of Wells’ agency. The key for Wells was that Kirk was a stranger, while Wells’ knew the Indians “customs and maners.”

Following Wells’ entreaty, Dearborn instructed Harrison to personally visit Greenville and Fort Wayne. Dearborn developed a sense that Wells did not deserve his trust, and was “too attentive to pecuniary considerations.” A month later, Dearborn ordered John Johnston to report on Wells. Through the winter and spring of 1808, Wells continued to report on the Prophet and assure him that nothing was left undone to stop such a menace. Unfortunately for Wells and Little Turtle, the Shawnee brothers moved their camp from the relatively distant Greenville, Ohio to nearby Tippecanoe Creek in Indiana. Little Turtle and Five Medals, a Potawatomi chief, vowed to kill Tenskwatawa if he made such a move. Tenskwatawa rebuked the chiefs. Now, Wells found himself in a war of letters and needed to hold his place by writing his own propaganda. He continued to paint himself with rosier hues. He wrote to Dearborn that he had secured the allegiance of the Potawatomi chief Main Poc, a militant tied to Tecumseh. Wells quoted Main Poc: “‘my friend you have caught me: like a wild Horse is caught with a Lick of Salt you have Hobled me—that I can no longer range the woods as I please.’”

Dearborn received reports less favorable for Wells’ reputation. Tenskwatawa and Blue Jacket informed American delegates in Ohio that they would remain neutral in

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45 Carter, Territorial Papers, 511.
48 Edmunds, Tecumseh, 125. Sugden describes Main Poc as a “truly terrible figure…a boorish, bloodthirsty, drunken savage….When in his cups, which was often, he sometimes rolled naked about the floor or tried to rape women.” Tecumseh: A Life, 163.
49 Carter, Territorial Papers, 556.
upcoming events, and that any split between themselves and the government was due to
Wells, and Tenskwatawa wrote to Harrison that Wells was fabricating rumors.50 Wells’
ability to deflect or endure his superiors’ criticism waned as the Shawnee brothers gained
power. However, Wells’ superiors did not remove him despite their mistrust. In contrast,
Kirk lost funding after only two years for overspending.51 Less than a week after his
dismissal, Dearborn informed the Stockbridge chief Captain Hendricks of his new $250
salary for “the purpose of assisting and instructing the Delaware Nation of Indians in
Agriculture & Domestic Arts.”52

In January and March of 1808, Wells wrote to Dearborn that the Indians in his
agency, not Miamis, were starving and in need more money for food. Dearborn replied
that if Wells had not impeded Kirk, the Indians would have their own food. Dearborn
also told Wells that if the Indians had not been farming “they ought to suffer for it.”53 By
asking for more money to help the Indians, Wells had given Dearborn more evidence to
cement his views that Wells wanted money and power. The correspondence also shows
why in 1809, Wells advised Harrison to starve the Prophet’s followers because they could
not find food for themselves. Wells was keeping with Dearborn’s wishes and hoping to
injure the Prophet. Harrison declined Wells’ advice to starve the Indians because he “did
not believe...that that was the Philosophy of the President.”54 Wells realized his
unsustainable position, and sought to meet Dearborn in Washington to clear the air.

50 Edmunds, Tecumseh, 96; Esarey, Messages and Letters, I, 299.
52 Parsons, “Civilizing the Indians,” 212.
53 Parsons, “Civilizing the Indians,” 212; Paul A. Hutton, “William Wells: Frontier Scout and Indian
Agent” Indiana Magazine of History, LXXIV, (Sept. 1978), 212.
54 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 640.
In September of 1808, Wells and seven chiefs, “the commanding trumps of this country,” including Little Turtle, Main Poc, and Black Hoof, travelled to Washington.\textsuperscript{55} The chiefs separately took issue with previous treaties, which Jefferson avoided by explaining the problems with establishing boundaries.\textsuperscript{56} Apparently neither the chiefs nor Wells accomplished anything substantial, and left in the early spring of 1809. On the trip home, Wells lamented that Main Poc’s drunken debauchery was “insufferable. He exceeds every thing I ever saw. He has even attempted to eat his wife.”\textsuperscript{57} Main Poc, an influential Potawatomi leader, war chief, and ally of Tenskwatawa, had trouble adhering to the reformist Nativist movement. Wells struggled to get Main Poc back to Indiana, and probably took little notice when the Delaware chief accompanying the group travelled back to Washington to complain to Dearborn about Wells. The chief stated that during his stay, Wells had refused to translate complaints about his agency, and sometimes did not pay the Delaware their annuity on time.\textsuperscript{58} This final stroke effectively ended Wells’ credibility for the already wary Dearborn. After more than five years of distrust, Wells’ missteps finally outweighed his contributions to Dearborn. Leaving office in March of 1809, one of Dearborn’s final decisions removed Wells from his position as agent and replaced him with John Johnston. As a final gouge, Dearborn did not write directly to Wells but to Johnston, who had the pleasure of delivering Wells’ dismissal.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Hutton, “William Wells,” 212.
\textsuperscript{56} Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., \textit{The Writings of Thomas Jefferson} XVI (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, Washington, D.C., 1904), 440-470.
\textsuperscript{57} Sugden, \textit{Tecumseh: A Life}, 163.
\textsuperscript{58} Hutton, “William Wells,” 213.
\textsuperscript{59} Esarey, \textit{Messages and Letters}, II, 648.
Permanently in the Middle

Wells did not receive the notice of his dismissal until after marrying Kentuckian Mary (Polly) Geiger. He and his family returned from Kentucky to Fort Wayne in April 1809, but no one was quite sure what to do with him. Wells did not give up his position willingly and launched a campaign for reinstatement. He continued reporting directly to Harrison as he had done the previous seven years and asked Gen. Wilkinson, Governor Harrison, and Fort Wayne’s commanding officer and his nephew-in-law, Capt. Nathan Heald, for letters on his behalf.¹

Wells never gained back his position, but he did remain an aide to Harrison. He interpreted for the 1809 Treaty of Fort Wayne, signed by Little Turtle, among others.² Although Harrison had asked for Wells dismissal in the past, he now had misgivings. Months after Wells’ discharge, Harrison wrote to new Secretary of War William Eustis that Wells deserved a hearing because of his “former services,” and if his removal was in fact due to “misrepresentations,” then the United States government would “find it to their account in placing him in it.”³ To further aid Wells’ cause, Harrison wrote another, more effective letter to Eustis, giving a brief and praiseworthy history of Wells’ services. True, Harrison noted, Wells had an unfortunate “disposition for intrigue” mixed with his “great zeal and industry,” but Harrison disapproved of Wells’ removal. He concluded that Wells could still render “very important service” and if he was not employed by the

² “Treaty with the Delawares, etc.,” September 30, 1809, Charles J. Kappler, Indian Affairs, II, 101-102, Carter, Little Turtle, 204.
United States, he would certainly work against it.\textsuperscript{4} Either way, the agent was an influential force in frontier politics.

Harrison employed Wells as a messenger, but not a decision-maker. As an interpreter, Wells earned a salary of $365, about half his salary as agent, and significantly less than another of Harrison’s interpreters.\textsuperscript{5} In 1810 and 1811, Harrison again dealt with Indian complaints, this time concerning the 1809 Treaty of Fort Wayne. The Miamis were outraged that the U.S. bought their land at two cents an acre while selling it to white settlers at two dollars an acre. This insult pushed perhaps half of the Miamis into the arms of the Shawnee brothers.\textsuperscript{6} At the same time, John Johnston continued to write letters against Wells’ employment to Secretary Eustis, forcing Eustis to enquire about Wells repeatedly. Harrison responded carefully in April of 1811, telling Eustis that he held somewhat “contradictory opinions” of Wells, considering his “superior talents” as well as a fear of “dispositions which might in some degree prove dangerous.”\textsuperscript{7} Harrison advised that Wells be appointed as agent for the Miamis and Eel Rivers, and Eustis complied.\textsuperscript{8}

Harrison certainly wanted Wells to remain in Fort Wayne for the same reasons he had been so important over the years—his ability to gather information. By 1811, Tecumseh was actively campaigning among various nations to create a pan-Indian confederacy to fight white encroachment. Tecumseh’s plan questioned the safety of all white residents in Ohio and Indiana, and Harrison had to undercut his prestige and reduce


\textsuperscript{6} Hutton, “William Wells,” 214.

\textsuperscript{7} Esarey, \textit{Messages and Letters}, I, 506-510.

\textsuperscript{8} Carter, \textit{Little Turtle}, 207.
his following in any way possible. Many Miamis supported Tecumseh, especially the Wea whom Wells no longer oversaw as agent. These militant Miamis travelled to Malden (Amherstburg) to gather arms and ammunition from the British. Apparently, Wells’ fears concerning pan-Indian militancy, nativism, and anti-Americanism under British influence had been correct. In September of 1811, Wells called a council of the Miami bands, and with only a few Wea exceptions, assured Harrison of these Miami’s peaceful intentions.9

Considerable personal animosity grew between Tecumseh and Harrison, and Harrison used Wells to keep Miamis from joining Tecumseh’s group. Wells’ influence over the Miamis, his strong ties to the peaceful Little Turtle, and his dislike for the idealist Tecumseh all favored Wells in this duty. On orders from a wary Harrison, in April of 1811 Wells went to the large pan-Indian village, led by Tenskwatawa, called Prophetstown, to inquire about suspicious murders on the Missouri River. Tecumseh denied guilt, but, in the discourse, the two apparently started a heated discussion concerning future white settlement. After Wells rebuked Tecumseh’s plan to stop white advancement, Tecumseh replied that Wells would be fortunate to live to see the plan enacted.10 The argument between the two men epitomized the Old Northwest’s building tensions throughout the summer. Finally Harrison, knowing that Tecumseh was recruiting Creeks and Choctaws in the south, decided to march an expedition of 1,000 men toward the militants’ village at Prophetstown. In late October, Harrison led his army across the Indian boundary line, violating Indian treaty rights.11

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Harrison ordered his men to remain dressed and ready while encamped on the Tippecanoe River near Prophetstown, and true to his intuition, the Indians attacked. The Prophet supposedly ordered the attack, claiming that his spiritual power was strong enough to ensure victory. Before dawn on November 7, the U.S. troops and volunteers rebuffed the Indian charge, although they suffered double the casualties. Harrison had succeeded in forcing Indian action, albeit illegally, and many of the frontier settlers supported the action. Also, the forced Indian action was at a distance from possible British aid, separating the two supposed foes. The 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe stirred tensions, but did not accomplish anything for the United States.

On the contrary, Wells foresaw that the battle would increase frontier raiding. Harrison claimed his army faced 700 Indians, but Wells knew the Indian force was no more than 350. Tecumseh claimed his intentions were peaceful, but Wells knew that Tecumseh was “determined to raise all the Indians he can, immediately, with an intention, no doubt, to attack our frontiers.” Faced with an increasingly hostile situation, Harrison hoped to gain support among pro-American Indian leaders. Wells was the perfect man for the job, and at the Mississinewa Council in the summer of 1812, he translated for representatives from the Miami, Wyandot, Ojibway, Potawatomi, Delaware, Eel River, Wea, Piankeshaw, Kickapoo, and Winnebago. His importance arose “from his influence over a few chiefs of great ability to effect more than any other person particularly with regard to the now all important point of obtaining information.”

14 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 27.
15 Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 69.
Wells’ peace conference, the Mississinewa Council, was not enough. War seemed certain as American populations on the frontier withdrew into stockades, including white Americans at Fort Wayne. Indians successfully attacked an American military detachment near Detroit and took over Fort Michilimackinac, building momentum and increasing the fear of the Old Northwest’s white residents. At Fort Dearborn in Illinois, Captain Nathan Heald, the husband of Wells’ niece Rebecca and former commander at Fort Wayne, was in distress. According to Heald, Tecumseh’s infuriated associates surrounded the Fort. Wells, with a group of Miami and white volunteers, first arrived at Fort Dearborn in mid-August. Wells hoped to settle the tensions and present gifts to the Indians in a mark of old frontier diplomacy. Heald held an opposing opinion, wishing to lighten his troops by destroying excess liquor and ammunition before fleeing to Fort Wayne. Wells acquiesced, and the whole contingent, around 100 friendly white soldiers, women, children, and Miami men, left the stockade in the early morning. Wells scouted on horseback, his face ritually blackened for his impending death. He led the column along the sandy hills near the shore of Lake Michigan. There are no reliable details of the fight, but after traversing a mile or two, the Miami Indians fled, and a group of up to 600 Winnebagoes and Potawatomis attacked the Americans. Wells, riding near the front of the column, saw the hostile Indians first and rode swiftly back, but the small U.S. party was no match. Each account avowed Wells’ bravery, perhaps best illustrated by the hostile Indians themselves, who killed Wells and ate his heart.

17 John Wentworth, Early Chicago: Fort Dearborn, An Address (Chicago Historical Society, 1881), microfiche, 19-21; Mrs. John H. Kinzie, Wau-bun, the Early Day in the Old North-West (Menasha, WI: National Society of Colonial Dames in Wisconsin, 1948), 170-180; Jacob Piatt Dunn, True Indian Stories
Several Americans escaped the “massacre” with their lives including Capt. Heald and his wife, Wells’ niece, Rebecca. Wells’ defense of white Americans quickly made him a frontier hero. One survivor noted that Wells formed the troops into a line and charged the enemy up a sand dune. The same man noted that an Indian stabbed Wells in the back and carried Wells’ scalp adorned with a black ribbon.\(^{18}\) Another story circulated that Wells, bleeding from both nose and mouth, asked Rebecca to inform his wife Polly that he had fought bravely.\(^{19}\) Another survivor remembered an Indian say in English, “See what I will do with your Captain,” and fixed his decapitated head on a pole.\(^{20}\) Much like his exploits as a scout, the story surrounding his death became well known to Old Northwest residents.

Wells was succeeded by his children, Ann, Rebecca, William Wayne and Mary (Polly) by Sweet Breeze, and Samuel and Yelverton by his white wife, Mary (Polly). Sweet Breeze died in 1805, and Wells married Polly Geiger in 1809. His first Wea wife and child were never mentioned. Also, he did not name in his will another daughter, born in 1808, named Jane Wells. Only two daughters, Ann and Rebecca, lived to write their own wills.

The Miami were the last native government remaining in Indiana. Their landholdings diminished, and they lived in eleven villages along the upper Wabash valley. With a new dependency on the cash economy, the Miami signed the Treaty of St. Marys, Ohio in 1818, selling most of central Indiana at 6.4 cents an acre but reserving

\[^{18}\text{Kinzie, Wau-bun, 177, 180.}\]
\[^{19}\text{Wentworth, Early Chicago, 19.}\]
\[^{20}\text{Esarey, Messages and Letters, II, 166.}\]
some winter hunting grounds. Their remaining land was surrounded by white settlement and farmland. The bulk of Miami wealth was given to signatories, those “civilized” Indians with names like Josetta Beaubien, Antoine Bondie, Peter Labadie, Francois Lafontaine, Peter Langlois, Joseph Richardville, and Antoine Rivarre. Annuity payments, cash in exchange for land and no longer furs, became the principle income for most Miamis.

The new Miami leaders after Little Turtle and Pacanne were French-Indian métis, Jean-Baptiste Richardville and Francois Godfroy. The U.S. government continued to search for answers to Miami poverty and cultural difference but only spent more money on missions. Miamis contracted farm labor with annuity money. At the same time, white Americans were hoping to urbanize northern Indiana. The Erie Canal and the National Road helped funnel white settlers into the region, and in 1826 the Miamis signed another treaty, this one at a high price to the U.S. government. Little land was ceded, but that land was extremely valuable to white developers. From 1830 to 1840, the white population north of the Wabash River grew from 3,380 to 65,897.21

Physically, Miami life changed drastically in subsequent decades, including moves to Kansas then Oklahoma. Seasonal-round subsistence largely stopped. Miami government and culture continues, however, and recent revitalization work meshes Miami history with the Miami present, making Wells and his farsightedness more meaningful. The War of 1812 came to the Miami as Little Turtle and Wells died, and ushered in a terrible era for the group. One historian argued that the middle ground returned to the Miami briefly as métis Miami played off government officials wanting

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21 Stewart Rafert chronicles Miami history from 1812 to the present in The Miami Indians of Indiana: A Persistent People, 1654-1994 (Indiana Historical Society, 1996). The information used is from pp. 77-113.
Miami removal with traders and land speculators profiting from Miami presence. But as Wells’ life shows, the middle ground was a passing equilibrium.

Wells’ story is a personification of the middle ground. Many frontiersmen remained firmly allied to their birth culture, but Wells’ actions suggest a dual identity. Many moved with the frontier, remaining on the cusp of settlement or trade, but Wells remained in Kekionga/Fort Wayne as the tide of white immigration approached and eventually passed him by. In this sense, Wells was among the last of his kind in Indiana, and among the Miami. Yet, in another sense, Wells’ defining liminality endured in those prominent Miamis who straddled the narrowing cultural divide. His life, purpose, and significance are tied inextricably to this liminality. As Indian groups lost their middle ground advantages in Indiana, Wells’ importance expired as well.

Wells’ was not only an indicator, but also an active player. How would Miami life have been different had Wells’ not brokered the two cultures? Certainly Little Turtle would have had less significance as an accommodationist leader without a trusted ally in the U.S. government bureaucracy. Perhaps Kirk would have succeeded in converting Miami men into farmers, factionalizing the Miami as Kirk did with Black Hoof’s Shawnees. Without Wells, Harrison might have felt less pressure to include the various Miami bands in his treaties, silencing their voice even further. Wells gradually became a lightning rod for political problems in the area, but without his presence, American officials might have found fault in their own policy rather than in the agent employed to enact it. While not the main actor in the Old Northwest saga, Wells certainly changed the outcome.

22 Rafert, Miami Indians of Indiana, 91.
23 Today there are two main divisions of the Miami, the federally-recognized Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and the state-recognized Miami Tribe of Indiana.
William Wells may be overlooked by historians, but he is not forgotten. His work can be seen most simply in the names of those states forming the Old Northwest. Under the original plans, Jefferson called for states named “Metropotamia,” “Polypotamia,” and “Pelisipia.” Instead, those places took decidedly Indian names like Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The region’s history, like that of the United States, was fundamentally shaped by American Indians. Over 3,300 Miami are registered with the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. Another 4,500 are registered with the Miami Tribe of Indiana, and 2,500 Miami still live in Indiana. Wells’ efforts helped the Miami community live on.

The Ohio Congressperson walking into the Ohio Statehouse sees William Wells daily. There, the Treaty of Greenville is depicted in a seventeen by twenty-two foot oil painting by Howard Chandler Christy, entitled “The Signing of the Treaty of Greenville.” Little Turtle stands on the left, bare-chested and offering a wampum belt. Gen. Anthony Wayne stands on the right in military regalia, accepting the peace. There in the middle, between Little Turtle, Blue Jacket, Buckongahelas, and Tarhe the Crane on the left, and Anthony Wayne, William Henry Harrison, William Clark, and Meriwether Lewis on the right, is William Wells. He stands permanently translating between the two, palms upturned, in the middle.

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Hoel, William B. “Little Turtle, the Miami Chieftain” (MA Thesis, Miami University, 1938)


Young, Calvin M. *Little Turtle (Me-she-kin-no-quah) the great chief of the Miami Indian nation: being a sketch of his life, together with that of William Wells and some noted descendants*. Evansville, Indiana: Unigraphic, 1972.
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Capt. William Wells
_Courtesy Fort Wayne Public Library_

“The Treaty of Greene Ville” by Howard Chandler Christy
_Courtesy Ohio Statehouse_
Map 7. *The Miami Domain*. This map shows the extent of the Miami Domain as outlined by Little Turtle in 1795. Also shown is the portage connecting the Maumee-Wabash Line of travel and the encroachment of other Indian tribes upon the Miami Domain.


1. Treaty of Greenville, August 3, 1795
2. Treaty of Fort Wayne, June 3, 1803
3. Treaty with the Delawares, August 18, 1804
4. Treaty of Grouseland, August 21, 1805
5. Treaty of Fort Wayne, September 30, 1809
6. Treaty of Fort Wayne, September 30, 1809
7. Treaty of Fort Wayne, September 30, 1809; validated by Kickapoos at Fort Wayne, December 9, 1809
8. Treaty of Fort Wayne (Kickapoos), December 9, 1809