

River Raisin NBP

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River Raisin
National Battlefield Park
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General William Henry Harrison described the battles of the River Raisin as a “national calamity.” In one of the worst defeats Americans experienced during the War of 1812 as many as 357 Americans soldiers were killed in combat or the violent aftermath. The battles commenced near the mouth of the River Raisin and Lake Erie in Frenchtown, present-day Monroe, Michigan. The second battle unfolded on January 22, 1813. Approximately five hundred British troops and 800 of their Indian allies overwhelmed Americans who, two days earlier, drove a small Canadian force out of Frenchtown. Only 33 of the nearly 1,000 American soldiers who fought in the battles escaped death or capture. The killing of wounded soldiers by Indians on January 23, 1813, shocked people throughout the region and Nation. The battles became a furious rallying cry for the rest of the war - - “Remember the Raisin.”



“Remember the Raisin!”

Becoming a National Park

Until recently, the River Raisin battlefield site was occupied by a large abandoned paper mill. Realizing the significance of the American sacrifice on the hallowed grounds of the battlefield, in the 1980’s the Monroe Historical Society, City of Monroe, Port of Monroe, Monroe County, State of Michigan, and many others began waging a new battle to preserve the River Raisin Battlefield. Tremendous investments in the Battlefield’s restoration resulted in the United States Congress authorizing the creation of the River Raisin National Battlefield Park in March of 2009. In October of 2010, the first 30 acres of Battlefield land was donated to the National Park Service creating the nation’s 393rd National Park. The Battlefield continues to be restored and opened for the benefit of current and future generations.

The Battles at the River Raisin

During the summer of 1812, the River Raisin militia was called into service to build a military road which was to link Detroit with Ohio. In July, General William Hull, commander of the U.S. forces in the (Old) Northwest, invaded British-held Canada with the goal of capturing Fort Malden\Amherstburg, Upper Canada (today, Ontario). But the British and their Indian allies repelled the attack and Hull was forced to withdraw to Detroit. General Hull surrendered all of the Michigan Territory when confronted with a large army of British and Indians and knowing more Indians from the upper Great Lakes area were on their way (August 16, 1812).

The local River Raisin militia, along with other American forces, had gathered at Frenchtown to repel an expected Indian attack a few days before Hull’s retreat. They were shocked to find out that Hull surrendered and that they had been included in the terms of capitulation.

In preparation for an expected American invasion, in November of 1812, a detachment of Canadian militiamen, armed with one small cannon moved into Frenchtown. In January of 1813, a few River Raisin French settlers left their village to inform the approaching American army of the British position and to request help.

More than 600 American men, under the command of colonels William Lewis and John Allen, were dispatched by General Winchester to the Raisin on January 18, 1813. The Americans quickly routed the 63 British/Canadian soldiers and approximately 200 Indian allies out of Frenchtown.

The Americans set up camp among the homes on the north side of the River Raisin and were reinforced by troops under the command of revolutionary war veteran General James Winchester, bringing the number of American troops to nearly 1,000. Meanwhile, the British and Indians prepared a counterattack across the Lake Erie ice at Fort Malden.

On the morning of January 22, 1813, nearly 600 British and Canadians and about 800 Indians attacked the sleeping American soldiers along the River Raisin. Although surprised, the Americans quickly returned fire.

In just 20 minutes, the right flank, where the U.S. 17th Infantry was stationed in an open field, was routed and forced to run across the frozen waters of the River Raisin towards Ohio. Of the 400 Americans who ran, about 220 were killed and 147, including General Winchester, were captured. Meanwhile, the American left wing, which included nearly 500 militiamen, continued to fight from behind the Frenchtown picket fence. Successfully repulsing British attacks, the Americans expected the British to ask for a cease-fire when they saw them waving a white flag. The Americans were shocked to find out that the British had instead carried a message of surrender from their General Winchester. After a short negotiation, the remaining American forces surrendered.

The British quickly withdrew due to heavy casualties and the expectation that the Americans were soon to be reinforced by General William Henry Harrison's troops, who were along the Maumee River near present-day Toledo. When the British departed, they left the Americans who were too wounded to walk in the homes of Frenchtown inhabitants under the guard of a small British detachment and Indians.

The morning after the Battle, Indians returned to the River Raisin plundering and burning homes, killing and scalping many of the remaining Americans, and taking others as personal property. Official U.S. estimates of the aftermath include a dozen named individuals killed and up to 30 more who were probably killed in this manner. British estimates put the number at about six.

Upon hearing the news, Americans throughout the country rallied to the flag with the battle cry "Remember the Raisin!"

Frenchtown was a desolate settlement for eight months following the battle. American dead were left unburied due to Indian threats; and more homes were burned and plundered. The River Raisin was liberated on September 27, 1813, when Colonel Richard M. Johnson's Kentucky cavalry, guided by men from the Raisin, rode into the settlement. The Americans continued their march north, liberating Detroit and destroying the British-Canadian-Indian coalition in the west at the battle of the Thames, or as Canadians call it, the battle of Moraviantown (near present-day Chatham, Ontario), on October 5, 1813. Though the lower Michigan Territory was liberated by the Americans in the fall of 1813, the settlement at the River Raisin remained impoverished for years after the end of the fighting.

