

“Tecumseh”

“The only way to stop this evil is for all the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be now—for it never was divided, but belongs to all.”—

Tecumseh, to William Henry Harrison (1810)

Tecumseh was a bold leader with great vision and compassion. But his dream of creating a Native American nation failed—in part because of his brother’s impulsiveness and in part because of the failure of the British to come to his aid.

Tecumseh (c. 1768–1813) was born near present-day Springfield, Ohio, the son of a Shawnee chief. When Tecumseh was not yet ten, his father failed to return home one day. Tecumseh found him dying, having been shot by whites. The event caused lifelong anger toward whites. When he was about 15, though, he was outraged to see some Shawnee burn a white settler at the stake. He thereafter treated his enemies humanely, and on occasion his force of will prevented atrocities.

He became a skilled warrior, fighting bravely at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. When various chiefs ceded much of Ohio, Tecumseh refused to sign the treaty. In the uneasy peace that followed, Tecumseh befriended a white woman, Rebecca Galloway. Learning to read English from her, he studied ancient and European history.

As whites continued to enter the Northwest, many tribes became weakened by disease and alcohol. One of those afflicted by drinking was Tecumseh’s brother. In 1805, however, he suddenly stopped drinking, changed his name to Tenskwatawa—“The Prophet”—and began to preach. He and Tecumseh gathered followers.

From a base in Indiana, Tecumseh traveled across the country rallying Native Americans to his cause: to unite all Native American tribes into one nation powerful enough to resist the advances of white settlers. He spoke eloquently. An American general said, “I have heard many great orators, but I never saw one with the vocal powers of Tecumseh.”

In August 1810, Tecumseh and The Prophet met with General William Henry Harrison, governor of Indiana Territory. Harrison wanted to buy more land. Tecumseh spoke of the folly of selling land and of the past mistreatment of the Native Americans. Next day, he demonstrated his point.

He sat on a log bench and invited Harrison to join him. As they talked, he moved along the bench, pushing Harrison until he fell off. When the general protested, Tecumseh replied that this was how the Native Americans were treated.

Tecumseh left the meeting to go south for more support. He warned The Prophet to avoid combat because the alliance was not yet ready. Harrison, meanwhile, was determined to attack the camp at Tippecanoe now that Tecumseh was absent. The Prophet yielded to the demands of some warriors and launched a surprise attack. Though losses were about even on both sides, the Native Americans abandoned their village. Harrison burned it to the ground and declared a great victory. Tecumseh was angry when he returned.

Tecumseh sought the help of the British. He fought valiantly in the War of 1812, joining in the capture of Fort Detroit. When the Americans won the Battle of Lake Erie, the British decided to abandon Detroit. Tecumseh felt betrayed. He compared the British to “the fat animal, that carries its tail upon its back, but when affrighted, he drops it between his legs and runs off.” He forced the British to take a stand at the Battle of the Thames in 1813, organizing both Indian and British troops in defense. The British lines broke at the American attack, but Tecumseh’s Native Americans held and fought fiercely until overwhelming numbers defeated them and Tecumseh was killed.

DBQs – Answer On Back

1. What do you think Tecumseh may have learned from studying European history?
2. Was Tecumseh’s plan a good idea for Native Americans?
3. Could Tecumseh have prevented the battle at Tippecanoe? Explain.
4. What was the meaning of the log bench incident? Explain Tecumseh’s reasoning behind it.