

IN 1812, A SMALL SETTLEMENT AT FORT DEARBORN WAS LOCATED ON THE south side of the Chicago River, near its entry point into Lake Michigan. When war erupted in June between the United States and Great Britain, Fort Dearborn was quickly threatened both by outside attack from the British and from internal dissension. The August 15 abandonment of the fort and the subsequent deaths of dozens of American soldiers and sympathizers at a scene called both the Battle of Chicago and the Fort Dearborn Massacre constitute the only military operation ever to take place at Chicago.

A frontier outpost, whose inhabitants included not only American soldiers and their families, but British allied traders, Indians, and long-established

French traders, Fort Dearborn was built in 1803, named after the secretary of war Henry Dearborn. Each group of residents had extensive, intersecting networks beyond Chicago. For instance, the Potawatomi traveled, traded, and intermarried with other Potawatomi at Milwaukee and St. Joseph, along the Fox River, and south along the Illinois River. They traded with the British at Detroit and Michilimackinac, and with the French and Métis at Peoria, St. Louis, and River Raisin. They negotiated with American soldiers who came from Fort Wayne and Detroit.

When the War of 1812 broke out in June, the fragile society at Chicago was torn apart. Tecumseh called area Indians to ally with the British. Some did.

1812

Elgin Marbles to England; Beethoven composes Symphonies nos. 7 & 8

January: First Mississippi River steamboat arrives in New Orleans

March: Congress commits first foreign aid, to Venezuela after an earthquake; Congress authorizes first war bonds

a *Background:* At Fort Dearborn, the American soldiers and their families lived within the palisaded fort. To the south were the homes of the factor, interpreter, agent, merchant, and armorer. Indians in the area generally lived beyond the narrow confines of this map.

b Rebekah Wells was the niece of William Wells, the adopted son of the Miami Little Turtle. She married Captain Nathan Heald shortly after he was appointed commander of Fort Dearborn in 1811.

c The Healds were taken captive by the British following the battle on August 15. When a friend saw some of their belongings, including this distinctive hair comb, on sale in St. Louis, he assumed they were dead. He sent the items to Rebekah's family in Louisville. Months later, the Healds were released and made their way to Rebekah's family home. The comb remained among Rebekah's possessions until her death.

d John Kinzie was a skilled silversmith as well as a trader. Items such as this silver cross, which he made in 1820, were among those traded with local Native Americans at Fort Dearborn.

e A young Victoire Mirandeau Porthier lived near Fort Dearborn in 1812, but left for Milwaukee before the massacre. She described herself in 1883: "My mother was an Ottawa woman; my father was a French-man. He was a good scholar, a very handsome man, and had many books. He taught us children to speak French, and We all learned to speak Indian. . . ."

f The Kinzie house, built by Jean Baptiste Point DuSable in the 1770s. John Kinzie moved here in 1804, and this house served as the base for his far-flung trading operations. Kinzie lived among the Potawatomi for long stretches, primarily in what is now Michigan. His wife, Eleanor, grew up among the Seneca as a captive.

g Black Hawk, a Sac leader traveling east to join Tecumseh's forces, arrived in Chicago just after the massacre. He later explained: "They had a considerable quantity of powder in the fort at Chicago which they had promised to the Indians; but the night before they marched, they destroyed it. I think it was thrown into the well! If they had fulfilled their word to the Indians, I think they would have gone safe."



Captain Nathan Heald received an order of evacuation on August 9, and four days later Captain William Wells of Fort Wayne arrived with a Miami contingent to escort the evacuees. On August 14, Heald gave a growing number of Indians all of the fort's factory goods except arms, ammunition, and liquor. The following morning, the contingent headed south along the lakeshore. After about one and a half miles, they were attacked by a force of between 400 and 600 Indians. In under an hour 15 Indians and 52 members of the military contingent were dead. The remaining 41 returned to Fort Dearborn as prisoners, where several more lost their lives. The following morning the victorious Indians burned the fort and disbanded their prisoners.

Some of the prisoners taken by Indians were ransomed through agents at Peoria and St. Louis; others were held by the British at Michilimackinac and Detroit. Others spent months with Indian groups throughout the Midwest. Some of the French traders remained in the area. The Kinzie clan removed for a time back to Detroit. In 1816, the Americans returned, rebuilt the fort, and began to divest the area's Indians of their land.

Simon Pokagon, son of a Potawatomi participant in the events of August 1812, criticized their designation as a massacre: "When whites are killed it is a massacre; when Indians are killed, it is a fight."

Ann Durkin Keating

April: Louisiana admitted to union

June: United States declares war against Great Britain; Napoleon invades Russia

July: British attack on Sacketts Harbor on Lake Ontario; United States surrenders post on Michilimackinac

October: American forces defeat British at Ogdensburg, N.Y.

CHICAGO in 1812.

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