

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Blue Jacket – Shawnee Chief

One of the most revered Native American chiefs was Blue Jacket of the Shawnee. Little is known of his early life, but he was a key figure in the battle for the Ohio Country, also known as “the dark and bloody ground”.

The Shawnee homeland territory (the Ohio River Valley) in the 1740s and 1750s was claimed by both New France and the British colonists. Native Americans were allies of both sides during the nine-year French and Indian War (1754-1763). At the end of this conflict, France ceded all territory east of the Mississippi River. Blue Jacket was too young to take part in this war, but he learned that Europeans were suppliers of trade goods, and he became familiar with the territory, towns, trails, and forts of Ohio and environs.

British Americans began to move west, following what they considered their manifest destiny. They traded with Indians, surveyed the land, and set up land offices and settlements in present day Ohio and Kentucky. The influx of surveyors, hunters and others led to clashes over property. Skirmishes between settlers and Native Americans were common on the frontier. The Shawnee viewed the newcomers as destroyers of the land. Though they traded with one another, each was wary of the other. The Native Americans harassed the new garrisons as the pioneers cleared more and more land. The Shawnee were allies of the British during the American Revolution, but when the colonists were victorious, Great Britain lost control of the territory south of the Ohio River (Kentucky). Soon after, disputes about Ohio lands began, with American raids and Native American resistance.

Blue Jacket was born about 1743, and his first name was Big Rabbit, but he later changed it to Whirlpool, as was accepted practice in those days. How he got the nickname Blue Jacket is unknown. Later Blue Jacket became chief of a band of Shawnee, yet adapted some of the traits of the settlers. He traded and farmed, and had two wives, neither of whom were full blooded Indians. He raised his children with “command of a dual world”, educating his son in both the Shawnee and English languages. He became known as a brave warrior. When peace treaties were broken and American settlers continued to encroach into Ohio, some Shawnees emigrated west, but Blue Jacket and members of other tribes (including the Delaware, Mingo, and Miami) elected to defend their lands. Blue Jacket led the effort to create a Native American confederacy for this purpose.

In the meantime, President George Washington dispatched General Harmar to subdue Native Americans in the area. Several battles resulted in victories for the Native American confederacy, and the campaign became known as Harmar’s defeat. The next year (1791) Arthur St. Clair (governor of the Northwest Territory) and 1000 troops convened for battle at the Wabash River in Indiana. The Native Americans, led by Blue Jacket, Little Turtle (Miami) and Buckongahelas (Delaware) led a surprise attack on the Americans and soundly defeated them. This was the worst loss ever suffered by U.S. forces against Native American warfare. The confederacy had triumphed. This was Blue Jacket’s greatest victory and the high-water mark for the unified tribes.

The United States was so alarmed at this disaster that a new army was created: The Legion of the United States. Led by General Anthony Wayne, it was well trained and outfitted. In summer 1794, it was victorious against the combined Native American forces led by Blue Jacket and others at the Battle of Fallen Timbers near present day Toledo. It was Blue Jacket’s last battle. The aftermath was the 1795 Treaty of Greenville which ceded most of present day Ohio to the U.S. Signed by Blue Jacket and other members of the confederacy, it ended the war and established a boundary between the indigenous peoples and the Americans.

Blue Jacket relinquished his role as war chief after twenty years, and spent his later years farming and trading while sharing time with family and friends in Wapakoneta OH and then Wyandotte MI. He died about 1810. He was one of the most influential Shawnees of his era and was a success in both military and diplomatic endeavors. Though his attempt to save Ohio for his people failed, his ideas of a Native American confederacy, of tribal unity were later adopted by Tecumseh, another noteworthy Shawnee leader.



*The Signing of Treaty of Greene Ville
by Howard Chrissy, hanging in
the Ohio Statehouse*

John Sugden’s biography Blue Jacket: Warrior of the Shawnees was a source for this article.