



# HOOSIER PATRIOT



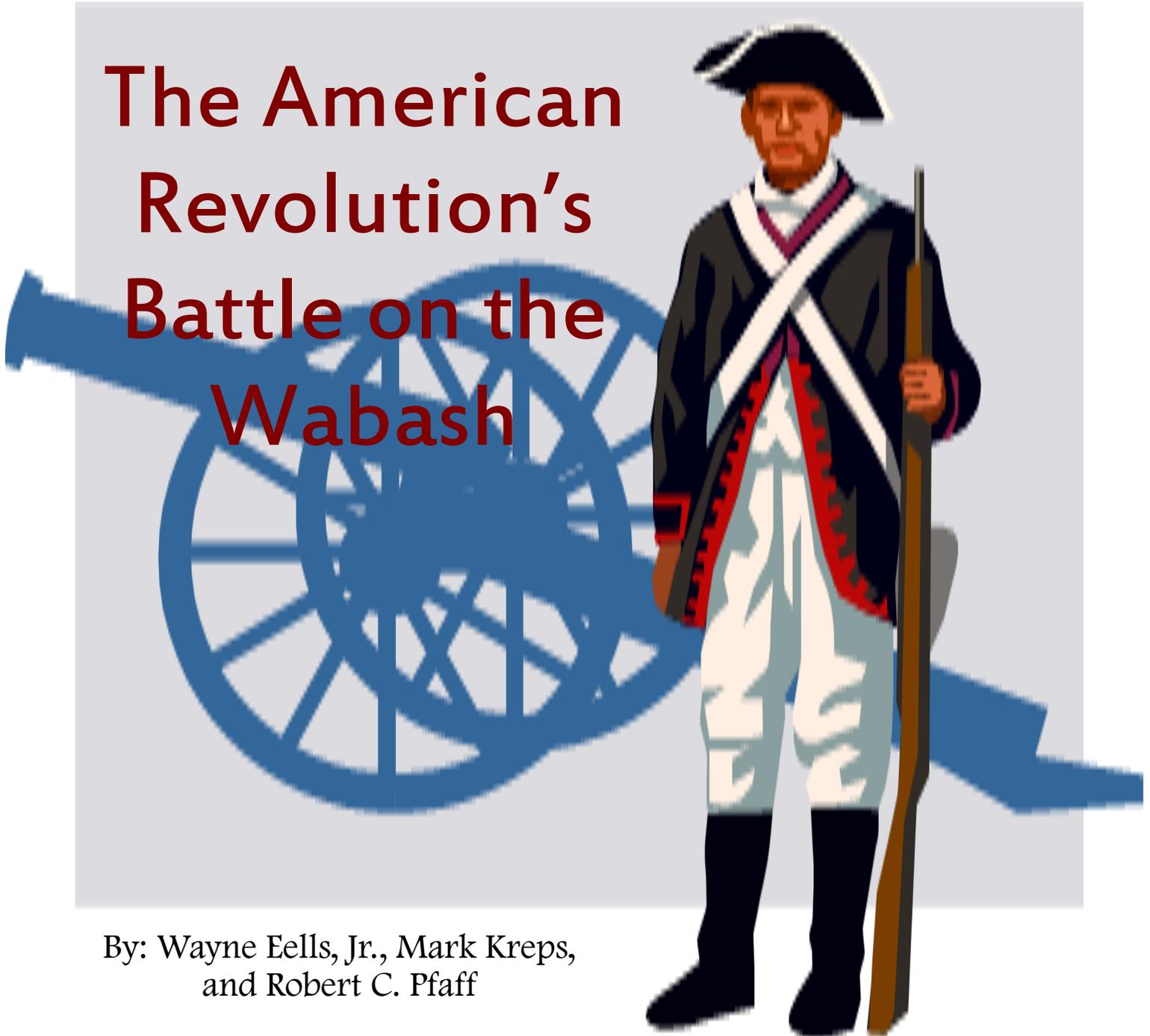
Special Edition

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Indianapolis, Indiana

The Hoosier Patriot is a quarterly publication of the Indiana Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. While the editors and contributors strive to provide accurate and timely information, please consult local chapters and the Indiana Society web site for updated and additional information concerning specific meetings and events.

## The American Revolution's Battle on the Wabash



By: Wayne Eells, Jr., Mark Kreps,  
and Robert C. Pfaff

Indiana's history in the American Revolution is full of rich experiences thanks to the many militiamen serving under Col. George Rogers Clark. Honoring his leadership, a memorial stands today in Vincennes, Indiana. Each year the Sons of the American Revolution take time to preserve his memory with laying of wreathes and a color guard procession.

Many years ago a small blue historical sign was placed on the east side of Highway 41 in Sullivan, Indiana by the Sullivan County Historical Bureau. While standing some distance from where the Wabash River now flows, it provides interesting information with a unique claim; "Western Most Naval Battle of the Revolution." The historical information continues by sharing how on March 2, 1779, Captain Leonard Helm, dispatched with three boats and 50 volunteers, captured a reinforcing British fleet of seven boats and 40 soldiers with supplies and Indian trade goods. Additionally, the claim is made that this small naval battle completely destroyed the British military strength in the Wabash Valley.

However, is it true? Is there any contemporary evidence that supports this claim of this one sign sitting on the side of the road? There must be some records of this event in order to support this claim.

W.H. English (INSSAR member #001) provides us with the first piece of evidence from the Journal of the Proceedings of George R. Clark from the 27th January, 1779, to March 20th inst. [1779], written by Major Joseph Bowman. Bowman's notes reveal the success of Capt. Helm, and detail the spoils of war. One note of interest is the enemy letters originating in Detroit revealing the British fear of a spring attack.

March 1st. The officers discharged on parole. Nothing extraordinary.

2d, 3d and 4th. Wet weather.

5th. About ten o'clock Captain Helm arrived. His party took seven boats, loaded with provisions and bale goods, etc., taken from the enemy, with the following prisoners: Mr. Dejean, grand judge of Detroit; Mr. Adimar, commissary, with thirty-eight privates. Letters taken from the enemy, dated Detroit, the 6th February, say they are much afraid of our people in the spring. Pray Governor Hamilton to come back again. War was not as yet declared between France and England. Sent off a party of volunteers to Kaskaskia (English, 1896).

Henry Hamilton, Lieutenant Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs at Fort Detroit, describes Capt. Helm's naval excursion in his notes. He reveals that Detroit's acting Justice of

the Peace was one of the prisoners of war. Additionally, official letters he had been carrying with him were captured, displeasing Hamilton.

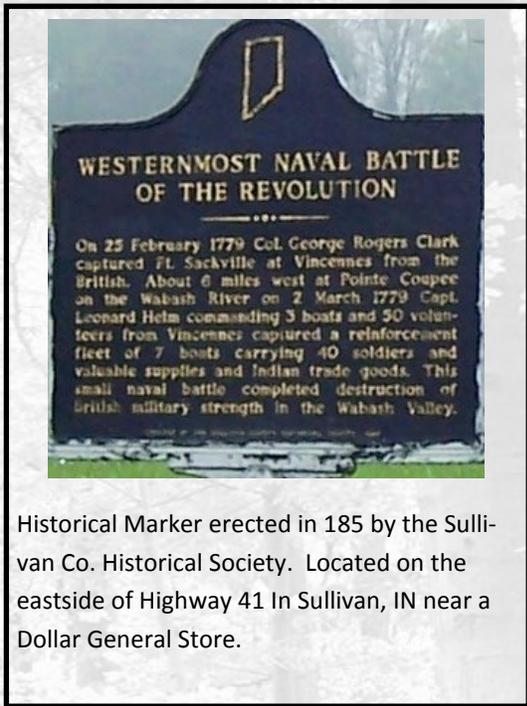
March 5th. The Party under Captain Helm returned having got possession of the convoi of Provisions from the Miamis—

To my great surprize I saw Mr. Philip Dejean who had acted as Justice of peace at Detroit who was taken prisoner with a packett of letters for me, which he had not the presence of mind to destroy tho the day before he had information of St. Vincennes being in the hands of the Rebels— with this convoy came cloathing and private Stores for myself and the other officers, every article of which Colol. C. made prize of never offering us the smallest part, not even asking us to drink a glass of our own wines—

Before our setting off I found that some of the Soldiers and even others of whom I had conceived a better opinion, had made their terms with Colol. Clarke without saying anything to me, & even did not come to take leave when we set off. CC L. &ca—Joseph l' Italien behaved better than most, tho' I had entertained but an indifferent opinion of him whilst at Detroit—

I was shown about this time those articles of the treaty of alliance between France and America that the Congress thought proper to have printed and dispersed, these were sent to C. Clarke by the Governor of Virginia together with a commission authorizing him to act as commanding officer of the Eastern Illinois— (Barnhart & Hamilton, 1951).

Hamilton had surrendered Fort Sackville on February 24, 1779. It was renamed Fort Patrick Henry a short time thereafter. Somehow, Clark had learned of a scheduled shipment of supplies and reinforcements. Two days after the surrender of the Fort, Clark ordered Captain Helm north on the Wabash to intercept the boats. The mission was successful. Several miles up the river they captured the British soldiers and very valuable supplies (Fort Sackville, n.d.).



Historical Marker erected in 185 by the Sullivan Co. Historical Society. Located on the eastside of Highway 41 In Sullivan, IN near a Dollar General Store.

Hamilton had been expecting a convoy of boats with provisions from Detroit about this time. On February 26, Clark sent Captain Helm with fifty men to intercept them. The convoy was surprised a few miles south of [Fort] Ouiatenon, near the present Lafayette, and the entire force of forty-seven men and seven boats laden with supplies was captured. This booty, valued at \$50,000, was distributed among the soldiers. As the captured property at Fort Sackville was disposed of in a similar manner, Clark's followers were now "rich," except the officers who were not allowed to share in the spoils. Three days after the capture of Fort Sackville, the *Willing* arrived, the crew much chagrined that they were unable on account of delays to take part in the capture of the Fort (Lambert, 1940).

Another account reads,

... Finding that ten boats loaded with goods and provisions were daily expected down the Wabash [by the British]... on the 26th Captain Helm, Majors Bosseron and Legras, with fifty volunteers, were sent in three armed boats in pursuit of them.

On the 27th our galley arrived all safe...

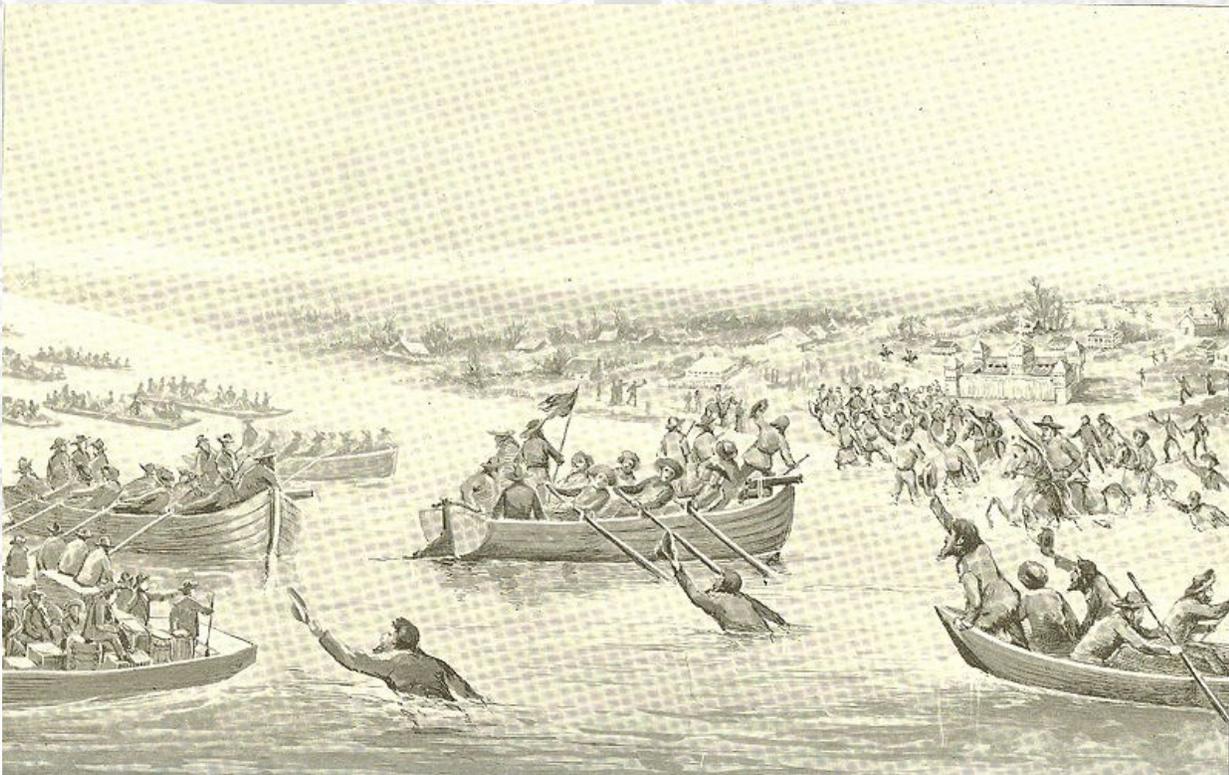
March 5th, Captain Helm... returned from their journey up the river with great success... (Bennett et al., 1997).

We are fortunate to find these detailed records from both the American and British records. Clearly, two days after Fort Sackville was surrendered without a shot fired, this new naval mission was ordered. Capt. Helm attacked the British nearly 140 miles north of Fort Sackville. If we believe the events as detailed by William English, it is possible that the naval battle was also won without the firing of guns.

March 5th, Captain Helm, Majors Bosseron and Legras, returned from their journey up the river with great success. They came up with the enemy in the night, discerning their fires at a distance; waited until all was quiet; surrounded and took the whole prisoners, without the firing of a gun. Those (British) gentlemen were off their guard, and so little apprehensive of an enemy in that part of the world that they could hardly persuade themselves that what they saw and heard was real. This was a valuable (prize) seven boats loaded with provisions and goods to a considerable amount. The provisions were taken for the public,

and the goods divided among the whole except about £800 worth (of) cloth (for?) the troops we expected to receive in a short time. This was very agreeable to the soldiers, as I told them that the state should pay them in money their proportion, and that they had great plenty of goods. This reservation was a valuable idea, for the troops, on their arrival, what few there were, (were) almost entirely naked (English, 1896).

Only one question remains. Was the battle on the Wabash the “Western Most Naval Battle of the Revolution?” Pamela Bennett, Director of the Indiana Historical Bureau (IHB), tells us she believes the battle information is correct. As to the accuracy of the blue historical sign’s title she advises that additional research is required to make that determination. The IHB no longer makes those types of superlative statements on markers, as they require detailed information to be completely accurate (Bennett, 2013).



“Captured boats on the Wabash” - Americans returning to Vincennes during the American Revolutionary War after capturing British boats on the Wabash River. The artist is unknown. It appears in the book “*Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio*” by William English, vol. 1.

It should be noted that William English is shown as INSSAR member #001.

Indiana's history is full of many events. Its role in the American War for Independence is well documented. Sadly, Captain Helm's contribution is dwarfed by the capture of Fort Sackville. Had he failed in his mission to stop the British reinforcements from Fort Detroit, the story of George Rogers Clark and his militiamen may have had a different ending.

While we cannot make the claim that Indiana's naval battle is the "westernmost", we can use it as a tool. The next time you are discussing Indiana history with others, ask them if they know about the Revolutionary War Naval Battle in Indiana. The majority of people have no idea of the event. Even if we cannot prove it is the furthest west, we cannot afford to ignore this naval battle which is a part of Indiana history. Captain Helm, who gave us the George Rogers Clark flag (Bosserson, 1778), ensured that Fort Sackville remained in the hands of the Americans. We have a unique story about Indiana's history, and it must be shared.

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For more information see the special edition on  
George Rogers Clark & Indiana Revolutionary History at  
<http://www.in.gov/history/files/fallfortsackville.pdf>

## Indiana Society Color Guard

The Indiana Society Color Guard is probably best known for the color and pageantry their uniforms and flags bring to a parade, grave dedication or other community event. Emotions can range anywhere from children's questions and smiles to tears from a veteran's pride and memories. While all of this is true and important, one cannot overlook the wonderful side effect of fellowship with others who share common interests and passions.

New members are encouraged for local and statewide participation. There are loaner uniforms available and participation and travel is limited only by your own time and energy. Please consider serving in the Color Guard and experiencing the fellowship of your compatriots and the appreciation of your community.



## INSSAR LADIES AUXILIARY



The Indiana Ladies Auxiliary Sons of the American Revolution, assists Indiana Society with programs, fund raising, historical education and carrying out its mission of

inspiring patriotism and informing others of the contributions of our patriot ancestors. Membership in the Auxiliary is open to the wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces and other women relatives of members of the Sons of the American Revolution.

The Auxiliary meets quarterly during the INSSAR House of Delegates meetings. In addition to conducting business, the ladies often have their own programs and speakers. The Indiana Ladies Auxiliary website:

[http://inssar.org/sar\\_auxiliary.aspx](http://inssar.org/sar_auxiliary.aspx)

Indiana Society of the Sons of the American Revolution [www.inssar.org](http://www.inssar.org)

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**Patriotism**  
Participate in community events and patriotic celebrations.

Symphony on the Prairie, 3-5 July 2013

Established 1889  
A historical, educational, and patriotic "lineage" society comprised of male descendants of patriots who supported the cause of American Independence during the years 1774-1783.

EVENTS CALENDAR  
Jun 2013 Today

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Full Calendar:  Search

FOLLOW US!

An estimated 3,500 veterans of the American Revolution are buried in the State of Indiana. The Indiana Society Sons of the American Revolution has cataloged over 2,200 such graves and posted relative information at <http://graves.inssar.org>.



April Legler, Martha Barnhart and Dixie Oberlin receive medal of service awards from the Indiana Society Sons of the American Revolution. INSSAR State Vice President Stuart Hart presents the ladies with their awards.

The *Hoosier Patriot* is a publication by and for the compatriots of the Indiana Society. Contributions of original, previously unpublished materials are welcomed and encouraged. Photos must have at least a paragraph describing the depicted event. Deadline for submitting material is 45 days prior to the upcoming quarterly House of Delegates meeting.

If you no longer wish to receive the *Hoosier Patriot*, please reply to this email with "Unsubscribe" in the subject line.

*Hoosier Patriot* Editor: Jeff Hornung, 4632 W 1120 N, New Palestine, IN 46163: Email: [jeff-hornung@comcast.net](mailto:jeff-hornung@comcast.net)