

A LETTER FROM COLONEL JOHN ALLEN

BY EDGAR B. WESLEY

John Allen, author of the following letter, was the son of James Allen and was born in Rockbridge County, Virginia, on December 30, 1772.¹ The family moved to Kentucky, in 1787, and settled near the present Hustonville, Lincoln County. John experienced the usual excitements of the frontier, and on one occasion pursued a band of Indians down Rolling Fork into what is now Casey County.² About 1790, the family moved to Simpson's Creek in Nelson County. Young Allen was sent to school at Bardstown and then to Staunton, Virginia, to study law. He returned and opened his law practice at Shelbyville, in 1795, and became unusually successful within a short time. On October 19, 1799, he married Jenny Logan, daughter of Benjamin and Sally Logan.³ In 1808, he made the race for governor against General Charles Scott, and in spite of his youth, being about thirty-six, and his lack of military fame, he made a creditable showing.⁴

¹ *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Kentucky*, 411; Charles K. Gardner, *Dictionary of the Army of the United States*, 37.

² William B. Allen, *History of Kentucky*, 340-341. The author was a nephew of Colonel John Allen, but he pays surprisingly little attention to his uncle.

³ "Marriage Bonds of Shelby County," in *Ky. State Hist. Soc. Register*, XXIII, 74. The records show that the girl's name was Jean. Benjamin Logan was one of the most famous of Kentucky pioneers. He was in Lord Dunmore's War, in 1774, visited Kentucky in 1775, and moved in the following year and founded Logan's Station, one mile west of Stanford, Lincoln County. He took part in many Indian expeditions, was a member of the conventions of 1792 and 1799, and served repeatedly in the Legislature. He moved to Shelby County, Kentucky, about 1785.

⁴ Allen, *op. cit.*, 77.

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The opening of the War of 1812 found Allen ready and eager to offer his services. The regiments under the command of Colonels Allen, John M. Scott and William Lewis rendezvoused at Georgetown on August 15. On the next day they were reviewed by Governor Scott, and Generals James Winchester and John Payne, and then treated to one of Henry Clay's stirring orations.⁵ The army then started northward toward Cincinnati.⁶

Allen's letter gives a fairly connected account of events up to October 3. Just after that date a threatened revolt in his regiment was prevented by the tactful and patriotic appeal of the popular Harrison.⁷ The part of the army under Winchester advanced to the lower Maumee and built blockhouses for their winter quarters, and Harrison enlarged his scheme of attacks. Early in January, 1813, the inhabitants of Frenchtown appealed for protection, and Lewis and Allen responded to the call with several hundred men, and on the eighteenth won the notable Battle of Frenchtown. On the twenty-second, when the British army attacked the unsuspecting and unprepared Winchester, Allen was within the stockade, but he sallied out to rally a retreating group. In the fighting he was separated from his companions and was wounded. He ran for some two miles and sat down upon a log to rest. An Indian demanded that he surrender, and a second approached with threatening ges-

⁵ Robert B. McAfee, *A History of the Late War in the Western Country*, 103-105.

⁶ For a parallel account of this journey from Georgetown to Defiance see Milo M. Quaife, ed., "A Diary of the War of 1812," in *Miss. Val. Hist. Rev.*, I, 272-278. This diary assists greatly in assigning definite dates to events.

⁷ Mann Butler, *History of Kentucky*, 356-358; McAfee, *op. cit.*, 146.

tures. Allen instantly killed the second but was immediately shot dead by a third.⁸

Allen wrote frequent letters to his wife during the campaign, the last of which was written on the twenty-first of January, evidently on the evening before the fatal battle. In it he said: "We meet the enemy tomorrow. I trust that we will render a good account of ourselves, or that I will never live to tell the tale of our disgrace." There was no disgrace, but his life was one of the many whose loss has made the "Raisin" one of the most tragic words in American history. His body was probably among those buried by the troops on October 15, 1813, upon their return from the Battle of the Thames. If so, his remains rest at Frankfort.⁹ His name is honored in a unique manner, for three counties are named after him, one each, in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky,¹⁰ so in a large sense he belongs to all three states.

LETTERS FROM COLONEL ALLEN

Camp at Defiance¹¹

Dr. Sir¹²

2nd Octr. 1813.

After leaving Geo Town in Kentucky we had incessantly

⁸ There are numerous accounts of the closing scene of Allen's life, but all are tantalizingly brief and uncertain. Caleb Atwater, *A History of Ohio*, 206-208, is as satisfactory as any single one.

⁹ A. C. Quisenberry, "A Hundred Years Ago, the River Raisin," in *Ky. State Hist. Soc., Register*, XI, 26-27.

¹⁰ Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio*, I, 341; Quisenberry, *ob. cit.*, 25; Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne*, 212; H. S. Linap, *History of the Maumee Valley*, 378.

¹¹ Fort Defiance was built by Wayne in 1794, but was little used after his campaign. Winchester's army tried two or three locations and finally settled a few miles below the site of Wayne's fort. A. A. Graham, "Military Posts in Ohio," in *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society Publications*, III, 307.

¹² This letter was addressed to Judge William Logan, Allen's brother-in-law. It passed into the possession of Thomas T. Crittenden, Allen's grandson, who presented it to the Missouri Historical Society in 1873. Acknowledgments are due the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, for its generous permission to use the letter.

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wet weather until the day we arrived at Newport,¹³ The arms then became a subject of notice — This with the quartermasters department and who should command¹⁴ &c took up a few days the two latter of which difficulties grew out of the information that Detroit was taken — Before the adjustment thereof Genl. Harrison came up & took the command — directed the army to march to Dayton & delayed himself to arrange with the qr Master as to provisions & — Near Dayton we were joined by Genl. Harrison & directed to March to Picqua¹⁵ — to which the army were progressing when information arrived that Ft. Wayne was besieged by the indians¹⁶ — & was in great Danger of being taken I was then ordered with my regt. to leave our heavy Baggage — draw amunition & proceed to Ft. Wayne under which order I Left the army and marched with my regt. to Picqua where I recd a second order to stop until I recd. three companies detached from Scotts & Lewis's regmts to be joined with mine with whom I was again proceeding haste when I recd. a further order from Genl. Harrison that in consequence of information of a force sent from Malden¹⁶ to take Ft. Wayne The enemy would in all probability be too strong for the numbers I had with me and therefore to proceed to St. Marys¹⁷ & wait for the whole army which he was bringing up, which was done — from St. Marys the army proceeded to Ft. Wayne — The Indians had got possession of the town only & from the houses were pressing the Ft. closely — The Captain¹⁸ of the garrison found means by an Indian boy to Burn some of the houses & the Indians burned the residue and fled — we came up while the ruins were smoking — Thus the Fort was once saved by us

Genl. Harrison then detached Colo. Wells¹⁹ with the regulars & Colo. Scotts regt. to Destroy the Pottowattomy Town on the

¹³ The main army left Georgetown August 19 and arrived at Newport on August 23. All writers note the rainy weather.

¹⁴ The issue was between Harrison and Winchester. Technicalities favored Winchester temporarily, but Harrison soon won out because of his popularity on account of Tippecanoe.

¹⁵ Piqua was located a few miles above the present city. Allen reached there on September 3.

¹⁶ Fort Malden, or Amherstburg, was on the east side of the Detroit River near its mouth, and some fifteen miles south of Detroit.

¹⁷ Allen's regiment reached the St. Mary's River at Girtystown on September 8. The army marched down the St. Mary's to Fort Wayne which they reached and relieved on September 12.

¹⁸ James Rhea.

¹⁹ Samuel Wells with about one thousand men was sent out on September 14. Further particulars may be found in McAfee, *op. cit.*, 129-130; Quaife, *op. cit.*, 276-277.

Elkhart river waters of lake Michigan about 60 miles from Ft. Wayne & the Turtles Town about 15 miles from Ft. Wayne also detached Genl. Payne with Colo. Lewis's & my Regts to destroy the Towns about the Forks of the Wabash — We did our work and returned a good deal fatigued the thickets thro which we had to force our way nearly wore out our cloaths and the swamps & thickets very much jaded our horses — for besides the minor swampings they were occasionally so deep that we had to throw ourselves off and let them scuffle out²⁰ — on our arrival at Ft. Wayne on our return we found Colo. Simrall²¹ with his regnt of horse — afterward Colo Wells returned having destroyed the Town on Elkhart but for the want of provisions had not delayed to destroy the Turtles town — Colo. Simrall & his horse were then sent off who destroyed that town & returned²² — Genl. Harrison then gave up to Genl. Winchester the troops then at Ft. Wayne (except Simralls horse) This had nearly produced a revolt but by the exertion of the officers all was got smothered again²³

during all this we had heard nothing further from the British detachment from Malden — which we had heard was Mj. Chambers²⁴ with 200 to 300 British & some pieces of Artillery & Tecomsah (who they had made a Brigadier Genl.) with from 600 to 900 Indians — Genl. Harrison set out to return to St. Marys to forward on Colo. Jennyns²⁵ with provisions for us to the mouth of The Auglase where Fort Defiance had stood — (say 60 miles from St. Marys) — Genl. Winchester with Colo. Wells's Colo. Scott's — Colo. Lewis's & The rifle regt. under my command & Capt. Garrards²⁶ troop of horses set out for Defiance say 47 or 50 miles from Ft. Wayne — Capt. B. W. Ballard²⁷ — Leut. Harrison Monday of Capt. Kerleys Company of my regt. Ensign James Liggett of Colo Wells's²⁸ regt. & 60 men chiefly from my regt. were organized into a Spy Company & detached on that

²⁰ Payne's division left on the fourteenth and returned on the eighteenth just ahead of Wells's expedition.

²¹ James Simrall with 320 men arrived at Fort Wayne on September 17. Butler, *op. cit.*, 350.

²² Simrall's expedition left on the eighteenth and returned on the next day.

²³ For a fuller account see McAfee, *op. cit.*, 131-135.

²⁴ Chambers was captured in the Battle of the Thames and imprisoned in the penitentiary at Frankfort in spite of British protests.

²⁵ William Jennings.

²⁶ William Garrard.

²⁷ Bland W. Ballard.

²⁸ Harrison Munday of Capt. Jeremiah Kertley's Company from Madison County, Kentucky.

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service — We proceeded slowly having the road to cut — On the Evening of the 25th. Ulto Capt. Ballard came to camp to draw provisions to report & to receive orders if any further were to be given — also informed me that Ensign Liggett with four others had left them to proceed to Defiance which gave us both unassessing — on the next day several alarms had delayed us much — Capt. Ballard returned with the spies with him & informed that Liggett & the four men with him had been killed & scalped²⁹ that the Indians were about them so strong that he was unwilling to give them battle and therefore had returned & was closely pursued — From what afterwards appeared he made a very masterly retreat or he would have been cut off for they were not only beyond him in numbers but Many of them mounted he also reported that many of them were dressed in blue The same Evening Lieutenant Monday with part of the Spies with him had fallen in with another party of Indians apparently too strong for him but being evidently near a larger party & he in a situation not likely to escape if then seen — Made a bold and desperate charge which made the Indians run which gave him an opportunity to gain advantageous ground & run & so he & his party escaped with a very hard race³⁰

Next morning Capt. Ballard with 45 Men & Capt. Garrards horse were sent out to Bury the dead to spy & report & c — The horse were directed to Keep behind the foot Spies about 200 yards so as to be in supporting distance & at the same time not be so near as by their noise to interrupt his hearing & c They had a deep difficult creek to pass — which retarded the horse so as to throw them nearly a quarter of a Mile behind — at this difficult place the Indians attempted an attack on Ballard but he having crossed at a place not exactly suiting their ambuscade they were obliged to show themselves in part — both parties Run to gain the highest ground — The Indians gained it & the Battle Began one of our men of Capt. Edmonstons³¹ Company of my regmt was wounded in the ankle which was all the injury we then sustained the fire of our men were so well directed that I believe nearly Every Shot hit two or three were seen to fall — The Charge made by Ballard & his Company & the noise of the horse coming to his support made the Indians give way — They were pursued and driven across the Miami River³² — From the best account

²⁹ Liggett and his four companions were killed on September 25.

³⁰ This convincing account of Munday proves that Brice (*History of Fort Wayne*, 222), was mistaken in saying that he was courtmartialled, and left for Kentucky after resigning. Brice continues his account of Munday's activities as though nothing had happened to him.

³¹ John Edmonson.

³² Maumee, of course; formerly called the Miami of the Lakes.

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I can get of those in different places in & near the action there were about 100 Indians — The dead who had been previously killed were buried — The next morning a firing by the Spies in front of the March This with the large trails & indian signs induced a suspicion that they intended to fight us — none of our spies were hurt but they found Indian blood — we were then in an old trace & had the Miami to Cross & from appearances & council held it was supposed they were ready for us at the fording & would attack us in the river which was deep — This caused us to wheel off & cross the river at a different place higher up — Immediately on gaining the Bank we discovered a large trail & marks of waggon wheels which at first was supposed to be Colo. Jennings Regt with our provisions which had gone down altho a little out of its way — But the Mistake was soon discovered They turned out to be a large party of British & Indians going with artillery towards Ft. Wayne But about opposite the place where Ballard had departed the party they had turned round & gone Back had escaped in an advantageous place below the fording & waited for us but on being defeated in their intention at the river they had decamped put their artillery in some kind of craft & had hurried off³³ — At that time we were out of flour & nearly out of beef so that we could not pursue I have not tasted bread since our last Beef has been killed & we are on the Brink of being out of provisions. Something had delayed Colo. Jennings & in addition to this his spies having discovered so much appearance of Indians where we now are that he had stopped to build a Blockhouse we sent an Escort & this Evening (a few minutes ago) some flour arrived — Thus we a second time have saved Ft. Wayne for there is now no doubt with us it was the party of British & indians we had heard of with Chambers & Tecomsah who were thus on their way to take Ft. Wayne It so turned round by us Their spies had killed our friend Liggitt & the our others with him who were fine young men of Capt McCrackins³⁴ Company of my regt. (My feelings are much hurt & raised by the incident.)

3rd. Octr 1812

Same Camp

Last night Genl. Harrison arrived in Camp having left near 1000 horsemen encamped within a very few miles of us — He had an Express from Ft. Erie Apprizing him that about 150

³³ For further facts about the repulse of the hostile party on Septer ber 27, see McAfee, *op. cit.*, 136.

³⁴ Virgil McCracken, who was killed at the Raisin.

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British from 2 to 300 Canadians & 2000 Indians with Artillery²⁵ &c having set out from Malden to take Ft. Wayne and feared for our situation Besides this he had been informed about the same time that they had fronted us that we were nearly out of provisions & fortified but not in a situation to fight them and were thus in imminent danger of being cut off — This latter part of the tale is incorrect — It is true we were nearly out of provisions and our men hungry — that we had evaded an ambuscade which was laid for us that we had as usual every evening fortified our camp — But it is also true that we were willing to fight and anxious to come up with the enemy — all regretted that we had not provisions to justify a pursuit & indeed many were anxious to give chase even without provisions But observe at this time we had not heard from Jennyns we were not certain that he had set out or if set out we did not know but that he was cut off and the provisions taken — we were then sixty miles from St. Marys where the provisions were deposited without plans and with only about 3 days beef In pursuing the enemy we should have been going farther from the provisions and so endangering the men

My time fails I must stop for the present — My love to my Jenny & our children also respects to my friends

JOHN ALLEN.

[Address on outside]

Judge William Logan
Shelby County Ky

²⁵ McAfee (*op. cit.*, 136), gives the numbers as 200 régulars, 1000 Indians and four pieces of artillery.

