

FR. NAT CRAIN  
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JOHNSON'S MOUNTED KY RIFLES

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to me I seem to myself to be aware of the sorrows of the blind and of those needing rescue from blindness.<sup>35</sup>  
Even then, at age seventy-two, this leader in Kentucky's fight against blindness was eager to continue the struggle. All Kentuckians may be grateful that she did, for today neither the disease nor the word trachoma are known in Kentucky. The eye hospitals have either disappeared or been put to other uses. Her effective combination of private effort and leadership with strengthened public agencies is an enduring model. The Kentucky Society to Prevent Blindness, revitalized in the early 1950s, continues as an affiliate of the National Society to Prevent Blindness eradicating other eye problems. Linda Neville left her Kentucky part of the world a better place.

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35 L. N., letter to E. B. Merrill, June 1914, Neville Collection, Group 1, Box 5.

### NAT CRAIN AND THE BATTLE OF THE THAMES

LOWELL H. HARRISON

In 1887 farmer Nat Crain lived near Hiseville in Barren County, Kentucky. Then nearly ninety-five years old, he was one of the few surviving Kentucky veterans of the War of 1812. A local newspaper asserted that the community patriarch "has always been held in the highest esteem by all who knew him. He is an old gentleman of irreproachable character and the most moral habits, and not withstanding his advanced age, enjoys excellent health. He rides about wherever he wishes to go; attends to his own horse, climbing up in the loft after oats and hay, and is very active for one of his years."<sup>1</sup>

Acquaintances also reported that Mr. Crain was mentally alert and that he had fascinating recollections of the early years of the century. Sometime in 1887 he was persuaded to dictate his memories of the War of 1812. His words were written down, read and approved by him, and then published in the Glasgow *Weekly Times*.<sup>2</sup> Unpretentious, succinct, devoid of any self-glorification, his plain, unvarnished account centered on his participation in the climactic Battle of the Thames on 5 October 1813.

I was born in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, September 29, 1792. I was the youngest of fourteen children born to my father and mother, John Crain and Fannie Pond Crain. When I was about 9 years old my father, with his entire family, came to

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<sup>2</sup> Mr. Crain's account was first published in the Glasgow *Weekly Times* of 28 September 1887. It was reprinted in the *Hart County Herald* of 9 October 1913, and a shortened version was included in Florence W. [unclear], ed., *Cyrus Edwards' Stories of Early Days and Others in What is Now Barren, Hart and Metcalfe Counties* (Louisville, 1940), 211-16. Nat Crain's recollections were called to my attention by Mrs. Emily Crain Olsson, formerly of Cave City, Kentucky, Nat's great-great-granddaughter. She now lives in Malmö, Sweden.  
<sup>3</sup> *Cyrus Edwards' Stories*, 212.

Kentucky by the "wilderness route," coming, as I now remember, through Cumberland Gap. He bought land about three miles from Perryville, in Mercer County, on which he settled and lived until death, about thirty years later. He was ninety-three years old at the time of his death.

My mother died about 1812, but I do not know how old she was. I worked on the farm with my father until about the first of May, 1813, when I volunteered for the company raised at Harrodsburg by the celebrated pioneer and Indian fighter, Captain Robert McAfee,<sup>3</sup> which joined the mounted regiment commanded by Colonel Richard M. Johnson,<sup>4</sup> and started at once on the march to join General Harrison's army in the northwest.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Robert B. McAfee (1784-1848) was a Kentucky lawyer and legislator whose *History of the Late War in the Western Country* (Lexington, 1816) was one of the first and one of the best histories of the area in which many Kentuckians fought. His diary of the 1813 campaign was published as "The McAfee Papers," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 26 (1922): 4-23, 107-36, 236-48. "Nathaniel Crane" was the 60th volunteer listed on the company roster, "First Enlistment 18th of May, 1813." *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>4</sup> Richard M. Johnson (1780-1850) was the first person born in Kentucky to be elected to the state legislature, to the Federal House of Representatives, and to the vice-presidency of the United States. Lawyer and soldier, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives (1807-1819 and 1829-1837) and the Senate (1819-1829). Andrew Jackson pushed him for vice president in 1836 but his election had to come from the Senate—the only time the Senate has ever elected a vice president. Although he never made that claim, Johnson was usually credited with killing Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames where he was severely wounded. His longtime cohabitation with a mulatto mistress attracted much attention. Thomas P. Abernethy, "Richard Mentor Johnson," *Dictionary of American Biography* (27 vols. to date; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928- ), X: 114-16; Stuart S. Sprague, "The Death of Tecumseh and the Rise of Rumpey Dumpsey: The Making of a Vice President," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 59 (1985): 455-61; Robert Bolt, "Vice President Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky: Hero of the Thames — Or the Great Amalgamator?," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 76 (1971): 191-208. (These should be used hereafter: DAB, FCHQ and Register.)

<sup>5</sup> William Henry Harrison was elected Governor of Indiana Territory in 1800, he was re-elected in 1801. He was appointed Governor of Indiana Territory in 1800, he tried to win the confidence of Indians while securing cessions of their lands for the benefit of white settlers. After clashing with Tecumseh and other Indian leaders, Harrison foresaw a general Indian war. In the War of 1812 Kentucky support was instrumental in making Harrison commander-in-chief in the Northwest theatre. He emerged from the war as a national hero. His political career was climaxed by his 1840 election as a Whig

We passed through Chillicothe and Fort Meggs [Meigs], and saw the full extent of the ravages of the previous year's conflict.<sup>6</sup> At the River Raisin, we saw the skeletons of Kentuckians slaughtered there a few months previous.<sup>7</sup> We pursued the British army rapidly into Canada,<sup>8</sup> but the regiment to which I belonged never had an engagement of the enemy until the fourth of October when we had a skirmish with a large force of Indians, during which Colonel Wm. Whitley, who was with the army as an independent volunteer, shot an Indian across the river, swam across on his horse and returned with the Indian's scalp.<sup>9</sup> On the following day (Oct. 4) we attacked the enemy on

president, but he died a month after taking office. Dorothy Burne Goebel, "William Henry Harrison," DAB, VIII: 348-52. See also Freeman Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe: William Henry Harrison and His Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939).

<sup>6</sup> Nine-acre Fort Meigs, built in early 1813 on the south side of the Maumee River, was named for Ohio governor, Return J. Meigs. It withstood British-Indian attacks in April-May and July 1813. Alec R. Gilpin, *The War of 1812 in the Old Northwest* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1958), 175, 188-90, 201-205.

<sup>7</sup> In the Battle of the Raisin River on 22 January 1813, General James Winchester's army of some 1,000 men was routed by General Henry Proctor's 1200-1400 British and Indian troops. The effective British use of artillery was a decisive factor. A number of prisoners were killed after Winchester surrendered and "Remember the Raisin!" became the western war cry. James Wallace Hammack, Jr., *Kentucky and the Second American Revolution: The War of 1812* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 47-54; G. Glenn Clift, *Remember the Raisin!* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Both sides recognized the strategic importance of the Great Lakes. After Oliver Hazard Perry's naval victory on Lake Erie on 10 September 1813, General Proctor withdrew, followed by General Harrison with a considerably larger army consisting largely of Kentuckians. Encumbered with excessive baggage, the British lost their lead and were brought to bay on 5 October 1813. John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972), 177-82; Gilpin, *War of 1812 in Old Northwest*, 243-246.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Crain's memory slipped; the Battle of the Thames was on 5 October 1813. He developed a large land holding between Crab Orchard and Logan's Station, but much of his time was devoted to fighting Indians. When Governor Isaac Shelby called for volunteers in 1813, sixty-four-year-old Whitley enlisted as a private in James Davidson's company of Richard M. Johnson's mounted riflemen. Some accounts have Whitley collecting three scalps and/or prisoners when he swam the river. On 5 October he was one of twenty volunteers (called "the Forlorn Hope") who led the advance against the concealed Indians to discover their position by drawing their

the river Thames. The British, under Proctor,<sup>10</sup> were drawn up in the open woods, with dry ground in front of them, and the Indians were posted on their right, with a swamp in front of them. Our regiment was divided into two battalions, my company being in that sent to the right under Lieutenant Colonel Wm. [James] Johnson to charge the British,<sup>11</sup> and the other, under Colonel Dick Johnson, moved to the left, through the swamp to charge the Indians under Tecumseh.<sup>12</sup> As we came in view of the enemy and saw the long lines of British regulars with their red coats and white vests, with their guns at a "present," and apparently as cool and collected as if on parade, it was a sight well calculated to cool the ardor of a youngster; but our officers were men, almost without exception, who had been brought up to war, and they instilled into the raw recruits an enthusiasm that made them irresistible. At the command to charge we dashed forward, and those who have seen a successful

fire. Whitley died there. He is sometimes credited with killing Tecumseh. Charles G. Talbert, "William Whitley, 1749-1813," *FCHQ* 25 (1951): 101-21, 210-16, and 300-316. See especially 101-115.

<sup>10</sup> Irish-born Henry Proctor (1763-1822) was commissioned in the 43rd Foot Regiment in 1781. He saw action in the New York area near the end of the American Revolution. In 1802 he joined the 41st Foot Regiment in Lower Canada, and by 1812 he was its colonel. Sent to Upper Canada upon the outbreak of hostilities, he was promoted to brigadier and then major general in 1813. Proctor was plagued by too few troops and supplies and unpredictable Indian allies, but his leadership "was less than inspired." Tecumseh berated him before the Battle of the Thames. Proctor's subsequent court-martial led only to a reprimand, but his career was ruined. He went to England in 1815 and lived in semi-retirement until his death in 1822. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (11 vols. to date; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966-), VI: 616-18.

<sup>11</sup> James Johnson (1774-1826), an older brother of Richard Johnson, served in the state House of Representatives from Scott County, 1808-1811. Elected to the U.S. House in 1824, he died in Washington, D.C., on 14 August 1826. James A. Padgett, ed., "The Life and Letters of James Johnson of Kentucky," *Register* 85 (1937): 302, 306-307.

<sup>12</sup> Tecumseh (1769?-1813), a noted Shawnee orator, sought to unite the settlement by forming a great Indian confederation. Harrison became his major opponent. After the war of 1812 started, Tecumseh was commissioned a brigadier general in the British army. As the war wore on he scorned Proctor's leadership. Who killed him on 5 October and what happened to his body are unknown. Katherine Elizabeth Crowe, "Tecumseh," *L&A*, VIII: 566-60. For a detailed biography, see P. David Edwards, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) and *Tecumseh and the Quest for Leadership* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984).

cavalry charge during the late war can imagine what followed. The British fought bravely as long as there was any chance for them, and only ran when utterly broken and routed on all sides.<sup>13</sup> The pursuit soon became a route, which continued for five miles, until night put a stop to the pursuit. We turned back and camped with our prisoners — about 600 — about two miles from the battlefield, and it was here just after dark that we first learned that our other battalion, under Colonel Dick Johnson, had routed the Indians, and that Tecumseh was killed.<sup>14</sup> We returned and buried our dead the next morning. I went over the Indian battleground and saw Tecumseh's dead body, then partly stripped of clothing, where he fell about forty yards from the edge of the swamp. He was wounded in three places, the fatal shot being in his right breast. It was reported that Dick Johnson killed him, but a comrade, John Lamb, and myself, who made a close examination of everything on the ground, thought that Brown, from Stanford, Kentucky, who lay dead near Tecumseh, had killed him.<sup>15</sup> About 120 warriors lay dead on the Indian battle-

<sup>13</sup> The "late war" was the Civil War. The mounted riflemen led by James Johnson broke through the two British lines so quickly that few of the redcoats got off more than one or two shots. British casualties were light (12 killed, 22 wounded according to one account), but over 600 surrendered. A reported 246 officers and men escaped. J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 156-57; Hammack, *Kentucky and the Second American Revolution*, 84. McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 388-94, describes the battle in some detail.

<sup>14</sup> The Indians, probably numbering about 1,000 warriors, put up a stiffer resistance than did the British regulars. Most accounts reported some 38 Indians dead on the battlefield, but the Kentuckians were convinced that the Indians carried away many of their dead and all of their wounded. Nat Crain's count of 120 was far too high. McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 394; Hitsman, *Incredible War*, 157; Anderson Chenuit Quisenberry, *Kentucky in the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1907), 22 or 23. *Annual Report of the War of 1812*, 211-20. Andrew Bovee (1824) 910-20. The reliability of War of 1812 statistics is discussed in James Russell Harris, "Kentuckians in the War of 1812. A Note on Numbers, Losses and Sources," *Register* 82 (Summer 1984): 271-80.

<sup>15</sup> The problem of who killed Tecumseh will probably never be solved. Most Kentuckians believed it was Richard Johnson; a smaller number maintained that it was Whitley. Crain and Lamb may have been the only ones who credited Brown. Although War of 1812 records are often incomplete, the soldier referred to was probably Private Joshua Brown of

ground. We had utterly ruined the British and Indians in the Northwest, and immediately returned home, reaching Harrodsburg in November, where on the occasion of our muster out, we were given a big barbecue. At this barbecue I got acquainted with Dr. C. C. Graham, and kept up the acquaintance until his death a few years ago. I visited him a few months previous to his death, and he showed me the gun carried by Colonel Whitley, above mentioned, who was killed at the Thames.<sup>16</sup>

I have been married twice — first in 1816 to Miss Sallie Lynch, of Washington county, and in 1838 to Mrs. C. A. Sharpsteen, of Hardin county, Ky., who died in 1883. My first wife had five children, four of whom lived to be grown, and my last wife, eleven children, all of whom grew up to man and womanhood. I lived in Mercer and Washington counties until about 1823, when I came to Barren County, and have since that time lived here, except for a few years in Hart and Hardin counties. I have all my life been a farmer and stock-man, with a particular fondness for fine horses.

All of my brothers and sisters have reached a good old age, one (John) dying at about 100 years. My health is good, and I can yet ride on horseback with perfect ease. The item lately published about me getting one of Tecumseh's pistols was a mistake, and I have told above all I know of Tecumseh. In my

Captain James Davidson's company. Tecumseh's body may have been mutilated by American soldiers, or it may have been the body of some other leader. Tecumseh's body was probably carried away during the battle or in the night. Harry L. Coles, *The War of 1812* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 134-35. John Lamb was the 73rd volunteer in McAfee's company on the first day of enlistment. "McAfee Papers," *Register*, 26 (May 1928): 126-27, 135; Minnie S. Wilder, comp., *Kentucky Soldiers of the War of 1812* (Columbus: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1969), 230.

<sup>16</sup> The man who started for home on 7 October, although some of the seriously wounded, including Colonel Richard Johnson, had to remain behind. After the war Christopher Columbus Graham (1784-1886) studied medicine at Transylvania University and began a long practice. He attended veterans' reunions in 1875, 1881, and 1883. Brent Altsheuler, "C. C. Graham, M.D., 1784-1885: Historian, Antiquarian, Rifle Expert, Centenarian," *FCHQ* 7 (1983): 67-87; G. Glenn Clift, *Notes on Kentucky Veterans of the War of 1812* (Anchorage, Ky.: Borderland Books, 1961), 20-21.

young days I was acquainted with many of the pioneers of Kentucky, including the McAfees, Magoffins, Logans, Harts, McGarys, Prestons, and others. I am as far as I know the only survivor of the War of 1812 in Barren or Hart counties. If there are any others I would like to know of them. I have been a member of the Methodist Church for about 60 years and am a strong believer in its doctrines.

I will celebrate my 95th birthday anniversary on the 29th, to which I have invited a few friends, and if I shall live five years longer I extend for my hundredth birthday a general invitation to all soldiers of all wars and to all the old ladies and gentlemen of Barren and Metcalfe counties.

Mr. Crain did not reach the century mark. He died at his home near Rock Spring Church on Monday, 18 March 1889 after a brief illness. Pneumonia was cited as the cause of death, but, as the local paper explained, "the decay incident to extreme old age had probably sapped his physical powers." The next day he was buried in the presence of a throng of relatives and friends. "Thus is laid to rest one of the best citizens and Christians and most noted characters of this section," a newspaper story concluded.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Glasgow Weekly Times*, 25 March 1889. The last two paragraphs of family and personal information were in the newspaper story on his recollections but were omitted in *Cyrus Edwards' Stories*.