

SHAWNEE PROPHET'S GRAVE AND WHITE FEATHER SPRING, 1836

3818 Ruby Avenue

Kansas City, Kansas Historic Landmark: July 28, 1982

Register of Historic Kansas Places: July 1, 1977

National Register of Historic Places: August 27, 1975

White Feather Spring derives its name from Susan White Feather, the first owner of record of the property following the parceling out of the Shawnee Indian Lands in 200-acre allotments as a result of the Treaty of 1854. The spring was a watering place for both the Shawnee and early settlers in the Argentine area. But its chief significance is that it marks the site of the last resting place of the Shawnee Prophet.

Tensquatawa, called the Shawnee Prophet, was the younger brother or half-brother of the famous Shawnee war chief, Tecumseh. He was born in the spring of 1775, the child of a Creek mother, Methoataske, and a Kiscopocoke Shawnee war chief, Puckeshinwa, slain in the Battle of Point Pleasant in Kentucky the previous October. First named Lalawithika, the Noisemaker, he was reportedly one of twins or triplets, but that may be purely legendary. (Contrary to some accounts, he was not the twin brother of Tecumseh, as Tecumseh was born in 1768.) He had a stocky, robust build, and the loss of an eye coupled with a thin, drooping mustache gave him a rather sinister appearance in his later life.

During his early years, Lalawithika reportedly led a dissolute life, drinking heavily and being an object of contempt among his fellow Shawnee. In this same period, American settlers began pushing onto lands north of the Ohio River that were supposedly reserved for the Indians. By 1805, Lalawithika had experienced a spiritual awakening. Changing the life he had been leading, he took the name Tensquatawa, the Open Door, and began preaching an alliance of all Indians against the American encroachment. He condemned the use of alcohol and inter-tribal violence, claiming that the Americans who fostered these things were the children of the evil spirit, the Great Serpent. He further stated that no chief should have the right to sign away his tribe's lands, and no tribe should have the right to sign away lands used by all in common. His influence grew rapidly among the Shawnee and Delaware, but he was strongly opposed by such traditional chiefs as Black Hoof of the Shawnee, Capt. William Anderson of the Delaware, and the famous Miami chief Little Turtle.

Some of Tensquatawa's preachings would not have seemed out of place at a Methodist camp meeting, and he reportedly enjoyed good relations with the Quakers and Shakers in the area. (It should be noted that both sects were strongly pacifist.) Tensquatawa was nevertheless violently anti-Christian as far as his own people were concerned. On March 15, 1806, Delaware at Woapikamunk began to kill Christian converts at Tensquatawa's instigation, accusing them of witchcraft. Among those killed was the elderly Delaware Principal Chief, Tetepachksit, who (although not a Christian) was struck with an ax by his own son and thrown into a fire. The aged chief Hockingpomsa narrowly escaped the same fate.

The Delaware witch hunt lasted until mid-April. The following month, Tensquatawa visited a number of Wyandot villages in northwest Ohio. His preaching influenced a number of the younger Wyandots, and four women were marked for execution only to be freed by the angry intervention of the Wyandot Principal Chief, Tarhe.

Tensquatawa next erected a village for his followers at Greenville in western Ohio, and here his fame reached a new peak. Somehow, perhaps from an English or American almanac, he discovered that there would be an eclipse of the sun on June 16, 1806. Prophesying this event to his followers, he succeeded in convincing them of his power.

Over the next two years the Prophet's influence spread among most of the Indian tribes of the old Northwest Territory. His older brother Tecumseh, while not necessarily a convert to the

Prophet's beliefs, began to take an active role in the movement. It was Tecumseh's goal to shape the movement toward more rational political ends, specifically a grand alliance of the tribes to halt American expansion.

In the first week of April, 1808, the Prophet and his followers abandoned their village at Greenville and journeyed west into Indiana Territory. They established a new village, called the Prophetstown, on Tippecanoe Creek near its confluence with the Wabash in north central Indiana. This move generally pleased the Americans but was opposed by Little Turtle and the other chiefs who did not want the Prophet nearby. The Americans would have been less pleased if they had known that on June 8, Tecumseh met with the British at Amherstburg in Upper Canada, requesting their assistance. Two months later, Tecumseh met with William Henry Harrison, the territorial governor of Indiana, at the territorial capital of Vincennes. The meeting ended on a friendly note as the Americans did not yet feel threatened.

The growth in the Prophet's influence was not without setbacks. As a community consisting mostly of warriors from various tribes and with fluctuating numbers, Prophetstown often had difficulty feeding itself. The winter of 1808-09 was particularly harsh, leading to starvation and disease. By chance most of the dead were northern tribesmen rather than Shawnee. As a result the Ottawa and Ojibwa, convinced of treachery, planned to attack Prophetstown and destroy it. Ironically they were finally dissuaded by General William Hull, the governor of Michigan Territory at Detroit.

The Americans were not totally unwary, however. In the spring of 1809, Governor Harrison sent two spies to Prophetstown. Their report confirmed his suspicions of anti-American activity.

The mutual distrust was given a major impetus that fall. On September 30, the government forced the Miami, Delaware and Pottawatomie to sign the Treaty of Fort Wayne, ceding over 3,000,000 acres of tribal land in Indiana and Illinois to the U.S. Tecumseh and Tensquatawa immediately denounced the treaty. They threatened the chiefs that signed it with death, and vowed that its provisions would never be carried out.

Conflict between the Prophet and the traditional chiefs continued into 1810. Tensquatawa asked his Wyandot followers to bring the Calumet, the Great Pipe of the old Northwest Confederacy, from its place at Brownstown in Michigan Territory to Prophetstown. This was done despite Tarhe's opposition, and shortly thereafter Wyandots near Lower Sandusky killed two elderly women (presumably Christians) for witchcraft. On June 1, the elderly Wyandot chief Leatherlips, an ally of Tarhe, was captured near Columbus, Ohio, by a group of Wyandot dissidents, followers of the Wyandot war chief, Roundhead. Leatherlips was accused of witchcraft and killed because of his refusal to join Tensquatawa and Tecumseh.¹

In August, Tecumseh again met with Governor Harrison at Vincennes. In the nine days of discussions Tecumseh frankly explained his political aims. The meeting ended with harsh words on both sides, and open conflict was narrowly averted.

¹ The actual executioner was Peter Gould, a Michigan Wyandot; Roundhead was not present. William Walker, Jr. did not believe that Roundhead knew in advance of the murder, or would have condoned it if he had known.

The winter of 1810-11 again saw deteriorating conditions at Prophetstown and a melting away of Tensquatawa's followers. The spring was spent by Tecumseh and the Prophet in the gathering of new recruits. The Pottawatomie, led by a chief called Main Poche (Black Hand, or Shadow Hand), were only marginally allied to the brothers, and began on their own to attack settlements in what is now southern Illinois. The Indiana territorial militia was called out, and Tecumseh again met with Harrison in an attempt to calm the situation.

Shortly thereafter, Tecumseh began an extended journey into the southeastern United States, with the goal of drawing the Five Civilized Tribes into the alliance he was attempting to form. Before he left he warned Tensquatawa against any rash actions in his absence. Nevertheless, reports from Prophetstown soon began to alarm Harrison, and he started assembling a mixed force of regulars and militia to meet the perceived threat.

In October, Harrison's troops marched north from Vincennes. By November 6, 1811, the force had reached Prophetstown and established an entrenched camp across Tippecanoe Creek from the village. Emboldened by Tensquatawa's oratory and convinced of their own invincibility, the Indians launched an attack on the camp the next morning. The Battle of Tippecanoe was essentially a draw, but the Indians were demoralized when the Prophet's powers proved to be illusory. They withdrew from Prophetstown and the Americans burned the abandoned village, a "victory" that was to eventually propel Harrison into the White House. For the next two weeks Tensquatawa was held prisoner by angry Winnebago followers before being released. Tecumseh returned from the south in mid-January, 1812, to find his work in ruin.

The brothers were not entirely without hope, as the approach of the War of 1812 gave them a major ally against the Americans. In February, 1812, Isadore Chaine, a Wyandot working for the British Indian Department, met secretly with the brothers, promising them British aid. In mid-May a multi-tribal council was held on the Mississinewa River to discuss the impending war. The chiefs in their speeches put Tecumseh and the Prophet on the defensive, but the secret negotiations with Chaine continued.² Three hundred warriors again gathered at Prophetstown, only to run out of provisions by early summer.

Congress declared war on June 17, 1812, the "War Hawks" convinced that a conquest of Canada could be easily achieved. (The New England states were generally opposed to the war, and even considered secession.) An invasion launched by General Hull from Detroit soon stalled, and by mid-August, the Americans were under attack throughout the Northwest. On the 15th, Main Poche's Pottawatomies massacred the garrison that had just abandoned Fort Dearborn (Chicago) on Hull's orders, and General Hull handed over Detroit to the British the next day.³ On September 4, the Prophet's followers unsuccessfully attacked Fort Harrison in Indiana. Harrison himself, now a Brigadier General, was appointed commander of the Army of the Northwest in place of Hull on September 17. His troops raided throughout northern Indiana, forcing Tensquatawa and his outnumbered followers to again abandon Prophetstown. The Prophet and his few remaining followers finally crossed into Canada in mid-December, joining Tecumseh who was already with the British.

² The half-French Chaine was convinced that he, as head of the Wyandots' Deer Clan, should have been chosen Wyandot Principal Chief following the death of Half King, rather than Tarhe.

³ After sitting out the remainder of the war comfortably in Canada, Hull was tried by court martial for cowardice, and only his service during the American Revolution kept him from being shot.

For the first four months of 1813, Tecumseh and Tensquatawa were again in northern Indiana trying to gather new recruits. Their task had been made somewhat easier on January 22 when a force of British and Indians under Col. Henry Procter decisively defeated the detached left wing of Harrison's army at Frenchtown on the River Raisin, some 30 miles south of Detroit. (Harrison arrived in the area too late to prevent the disaster; Procter was promoted to Major General for his victory.) On April 16, the brothers arrived with their followers at Fort Malden in Upper Canada, where they joined forces with Maj. Gen. Procter. In May and again in July, the combined forces besieged Fort Meigs in northwest Ohio, but failed in both attempts to take the fort. In the interval, Tensquatawa returned to Canada and established a small village, a new Prophetstown, about twenty miles south of Detroit. He remained there through the second siege of Fort Meigs, and seemed to become increasingly discouraged with the war.

By the end of August 1813, Harrison was at last ready to take the offensive. Commodore Perry's defeat of the British fleet at Put-in-Bay on Lake Erie on September 10 gave the Americans control of the lake and opened the way for a successful thrust by Harrison into Canada. Fort Malden had been stripped of its guns for the British squadron, and they were now in American hands or at the bottom of the lake. In the aftermath, Tecumseh and Roundhead confronted Maj. Gen. Procter at the King's Council House between Amherstburg and Fort Malden. Although not noted as an orator, Tecumseh made a long, sarcastic address in which he accused the British commander of cowardice. In reply, Procter stated that he intended to abandon Fort Malden and make a stand inland, up the Thames River.⁴

On September 27, Harrison's army occupied Fort Malden, and two days later, Detroit was retaken. Harrison then determined to pursue Procter and Tecumseh into Upper Canada. By October 2, 1813, many Indians were deserting Procter, and Walk-in-the-Water led his Wyandots over to join Tarhe with Harrison. On the 5th, the British attempted to make a stand near Moraviantown on the Thames River in what is now south central Ontario. In the subsequent Battle of the Thames, there were Shawnee, Delaware and Wyandots on both sides of the fight. Procter and Tensquatawa fled after the first American charge, leaving Tecumseh trying to rally his warriors. Tecumseh was slain, and with him died the last hope of a unified Indian resistance to American expansionism.

The war dragged on for another inconclusive year, with Tensquatawa and his few remaining followers sitting it out in their Prophetstown south of Detroit. On September 8, 1815, most of the Indians who had fought in alliance with the British signed the Treaty of Spring Wells and were allowed to return to their homes in the United States. The Prophet, with perhaps justifiable fear for his own safety, refused to sign and remained in Canada with a handful of followers, including Tecumseh's widow and son. Within the next year, these few would desert their erstwhile leader and also return, leaving Tensquatawa in increasing isolation for the next eight years.

⁴ William Walker, Jr. claimed that the speech had been composed the night before by three Wyandots, Isadore Chaine, Walk-in-the-Water and the Grey-Eyed Man, at the Macomb house on Grosse Ile in the Detroit River.

By 1824, Tensquatawa had become alienated from the British, and the Americans were trying to encourage the removal of the Shawnee remaining in Ohio and Indiana to lands west of the Mississippi. In the summer, these factors led to a meeting between Tensquatawa and Governor Lewis Cass at Detroit.⁵ There the Prophet agreed to encourage the removal of the Shawnee in return for being allowed to return home. It is also probable that he hoped to undermine his old enemy Black Hoof, who was still chief of the largest band of Ohio Shawnee, and to thereby regain his lost authority.

The following year the Shawnee again refused removal. Tensquatawa then began to travel among them in the late summer and autumn actively supporting the American proposals. Only Colonel Lewis of the Lewistown band agreed, but the task became suddenly easier on November 7 when the Missouri Shawnee signed a treaty agreeing to move from their homes near Cape Girardeau to a large reserve in the newly established Indian Country west of Missouri. By 1826, many of the Missouri Shawnee were settled south of the Kansas River in what are now Wyandotte and Johnson Counties in Kansas, where they were soon joined by some of the Lewistown band.

Still unable to convince the majority of Ohio Shawnee, Tensquatawa left for Kansas with over 250 followers on September 30, 1826. Traveling overland, by February, 1827, the emigrants had reached Pierre Menard's Indian Agency at Kaskaskia on the Mississippi. The Shawnee were destitute and their horses starving. Menard allowed them to camp on his lands and turn the horses into his fields, and appealed for aid from St. Louis. In April, Tensquatawa and several others met with General William Clark at St. Louis, then set out for Kansas to examine the Shawnee Reserve. They had returned by July, and the Prophet's followers reached St. Louis from Kaskaskia on August 6 and 7. On September 8, they left St. Louis and established a second winter camp at the confluence of the Osage and Niangua Rivers in central Missouri.

The second winter proved to be as hard as the first. The band again set out for Kansas on April 25, 1828, and finally reached the Shawnee Reserve on May 14. A journey that should have taken no more than four months had stretched into twenty, and the sufferings of the emigrants had again reduced Tensquatawa's reputation among the Shawnee to a low ebb. With a few followers, he established a new Prophetstown near the present South 26th Street and Woodend Avenue in Kansas City, Kansas. Although somewhat active in tribal affairs, he was eventually abandoned even by Tecumseh's son. Following the death of Black Hoof, four hundred additional Shawnee from Ohio arrived on the reserve in two groups in 1832 and 1833, but their coming did nothing for Tensquatawa's fortunes as they included many former enemies.

In the autumn of 1832, Tensquatawa posed in his house for the famous painting by George Catlin, the second of two known portraits. Where the house was is a matter of some dispute, for sometime between 1831 and 1835 (authorities differ), Tensquatawa moved from Prophetstown to a small cabin near White Feather Spring in the present Argentine area of Kansas City, Kansas.

In this cabin the Shawnee Prophet lived out his remaining time, scorned by his own people and a curiosity to his old enemies, the Americans. In November, 1836, he fell ill, and was visited by Dr. C. A. Chute of Westport. A letter describing the visit was found among the papers of Rev. Isaac McCoy:

⁵ In December, the first of two known portraits of the Prophet was painted at Detroit by local artist James Otto Lewis.

"In November last there died in the country of the Shawnees, a few miles from this point, the Shawnee Prophet Tensqu(atawa), generally reputed to be a twin brother of Tecumseh. He had been sick several weeks when he sent for a gentleman connected with the Baptist mission to visit and prescribe for him. At the same time with this gentleman I also called to see him. I went accompanied by an interpreter, who conducted me by a winding path through the woods till we descended a hill at the bottom of which, secluded apparently from all the world was the Prophet town of (Four?) huts, built in the ordinary Indian style, constituted the entire settlement. A low portico covered with bark, which we were obligated to stoop to pass under, was erected before it, and a half starved dog greeted us with a growl as we entered. The interior of the house which was lighted only by the half open door, showed at the first view the taste of one who hated civilization. Two or three platforms built against the wall served the purpose of bedsteads, covered with blankets and skins. A few ears of corn and a quantity of dried pumpkins (a favorite dish of the Indians) were hanging on poles overhead; a few implements of savage domestic, as wooden spoons and trays, pipes, etc. lay scattered about the floor, everything indicating poverty. One corner of the room, close to an apology for a fireplace, contained a platform of split elevated about a foot from the floor and covered with a blanket. This was the bed of the Prophet. Here was fallen savage greatness. I involuntarily stopped for a moment to view in silence the spectacle of a man whose word was once law to numerous tribes, now lying on a miserable pallet, dying of poverty, neglected by all but his own family. He that exalted himself shall be abased. I approached him. He drew aside his blanket and disclosed a form emaciated in the extreme, but the broad proportions of which indicated that it had once been the seat of great strength. His countenance was sunken and haggard, but appeared - it might have been fancy - to exhibit the soul within. I thought I could discover, in spite of the guards of hypocrisy, something of the marks which pride, ambition and the workings of a dark designing mind had stamped there. I inquired of his symptoms, which he related particularly and then proposed to do something for his relief. He replied that he was willing to submit to medical treatment, but was just then engaged in contemplation, or study, as the interpreter called it, and feared that the operation of medicine might interrupt his train of reflection. He said his study would occupy three days longer, after which he should be glad to see me again. Accordingly in three days, I repaired again to his cabin, but it was too late. He was speechless and evidently beyond the reach of human assistance. The same day he died."

The grave went unmarked for over sixty years. Then in 1897 E. F. Heisler, editor of the *Kansas City Sun*, went to Indian Territory and persuaded the Rev. Charles Bluejacket to return to help locate the grave. Rev. Bluejacket, a licensed Methodist Minister who had been elected Principal Chief of the Shawnee Nation in 1862 and had served in that position for several years, had been present at the Prophet's burial as a young man of 20. He arrived in the town of Argentine on September 24, 1897, and was greeted by a gathering of old settlers and distinguished citizens which had been organized by the Wyandotte County Historical Society.

A procession was formed to the spring where the Prophetstown had been. Rev. Bluejacket then told the assembly that the Prophet's last dwelling and the grave itself were located near White Feather Spring about a mile to the northwest. The next day, the 25th, Heisler and Rev. Bluejacket went to White Feather Spring in an attempt to locate the grave. The following account was given by Mr. Heisler:

"When we had located the White Feather spring Blue Jacket said this was the place. He went up onto the south bank a few rods from the ravine and said - 'The house stood right in here. We carried him out in this direction,' said he, pointing to the northwest. Then he walked out towards the northwest, possibly a distance of seventy-five or a hundred yards and stopping said - 'We buried him right in here.' Thus was the grave of the Prophet located within a radius of a few rods. Near enough for an Indian buried in his blanket more than sixty years before."

An iron rod was driven into the ground to mark the location designated by Rev. Bluejacket, but no permanent marker was ever erected and the exact grave location was again lost. An historic marker was erected in front of the property by the City in 1978, but most people remain unaware that the grave of a major figure in American history lies somewhere in the backyard of a house on a quiet, dead-end street in Kansas City, Kansas.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barry, Louise. The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West 1540-1854. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, no date (1972).

Bird, Harrison. War for the West: 1790-1813. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Caldwell, Martha B. Annals of the Shawnee Methodist Mission and Indian Manual Labor School. 1939. Topeka: The Kansas State Historical Society, 1977 (Second Edition).

Draper, Lyman C.: selected Wyandot documents from the Lyman Copeland Draper Manuscript Collections, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, including Series U (Frontier War Papers), Volumes 1-7 and 11 (microfilm rolls 54, 55 and 57), and Series YY (Tecumseh Papers), Volume 11 (microfilm roll 120). Of particular interest is the material from Series U, Volume 11, "Notes and Letters on the Wyandots 1852-1882," which includes Draper's long correspondence with William Walker, Jr. and his 1868 interviews with Walker, Eveline Barrett Walker and Adam Brown, Jr. Residing at Amherstburg with the other Brownstown Wyandots during the War of 1812, Walker (born in 1800) knew many of the individuals first hand, including Tensquatawa, Tecumseh, Roundhead and Procter.

Edmunds, R. David. The Shawnee Prophet. Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

----- . Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership. Boston-Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, no date (1984). Some of the information in this title seems to contradict information in the same author's more scholarly work on the Prophet.

Harrington, Grant W. Historic Spots or Mile-Stones in the progress of Wyandotte County, Kansas. Merriam, Kansas: The Mission Press, 1935.

----- . The Shawnees in Kansas. Kansas City: The Western Pioneer Press, 1937.

Roy, Jerry C. and Lois Nettleship. The Shawnee Indians in Johnson County. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Johnson County Center for Local History, 1985.