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Many consider Fort Dearborn a Chicago tragedy and controversy

On a hot, steamy morning, Saturday, Aug. 15, 1812, about 90 inhabitants of the Army fort on the Chicago River, just west of Lake Michigan, left the fort and headed for Fort Wayne, Indiana Territory. The Army ordered them to evacuate because the government thought that, with the beginning of the War of 1812, it was impossible to defend the post against either the British or American Indian tribes living around Chicago. The commandant, Capt. Nathan Heald, knew that hostile forces would almost certainly attack the column. For days area Indians had camped around the fort expecting to receive promised goods, firearms, ammunition and whiskey. They became angry when they realized that Heald ordered the firearms, ammunition and whiskey destroyed.

At what is now Prairie Avenue and 18th Street, about 500 warriors attacked the column, defended by 54 soldiers and 12 militiamen. The battle lasted perhaps 15 minutes. At least half of the evacuees were killed. Afterward the warriors killed some of the prisoners, including those who were badly wounded. On Aug. 16, 1812, the victors burned down the fort.

This event is known as the Fort Dearborn Massacre. A little-known incident of the War of 1812, it is still unfamiliar to those outside Chicago. Most Chicagoans are at least vaguely familiar with the story. Anyone seeking to learn details should read Jerry Crimmins' historical novel, "Fort Dearborn" (Northwestern University Press 2006).

One commemoration of the bicentennial will be at the site of Battle of Fort Dearborn Park, 18th Street and Calumet Avenue on Sept. 8.

Earlier today, The Fort Dearborn Bicentennial Initiative (fortDearborn.US) hosted a ceremony at Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive, the site of the fort, followed by a walk to the battle site.

And the Chicago History Museum hosted a small Battle of Fort Dearborn Bicentennial on Saturday, with a "reconciliation and memorial program" at the museum in the morning and an all-day encampment of the War of 1812 re-enactors nearby in Lincoln Park.

Perhaps we are afraid to commemorate it with additional events because the use of "massacre" has become so controversial. Many American Indians prefer the term "Battle of Fort Dearborn," the term used by the Chicago Park District when it erected a plaque on the historical site in 2009. Undoubtedly there was a "battle" — a conflict between opposing military forces.

The term "massacre" — meaning the indiscriminate killing of people, such as prisoners who have surrendered— has been used since the beginning. But was it really a massacre? Today we would call many of the warriors' actions "war crimes" — violations of the rules of war giving rise to personal culpability. In the 21st century, we use the term "war crimes" to describe acts that in the 19th century would be called a "massacre."

The worst war crime committed that day was certainly one warrior's killing of 11 children in a wagon. White people condemned this as a "massacre." But so did the warrior's comrades, whose code of honor held there was no merit in killing children. So far as I can tell, there was no general order to "kill everyone."

If there was a hero that day, it was a warrior named Mkedepoke, or Black Partridge. The soldiers of Fort Dearborn and the settlers honored him as a distinguished leader of the Potawatomi and friend of the whites. He warned Heald against evacuating the fort, warning that there were many warriors angered by the steady encroachment of the whites upon the land long held by the tribes and by the many promises the whites had broken. He returned a medal given him by whites and said he could no longer wear it, that he must be with his own people. During the battle, he saved Margaret Helm, John Kinzie's stepdaughter and the wife of an officer, by pretending to drown her but turning her face out of the water so that she could breathe.

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If there is a second hero of that day it is Capt. William Wells, a white officer and sometime Indian agent called Apekonit by the Miamis who kidnapped him as a boy and with whom he lived until manhood. Torn between two different worlds, he never fully enjoyed the trust of whites. He, too, had warned Heald against obeying the order to evacuate when they were surrounded by a force that vastly outnumbered them.

Yet he painted his face black to denote his acceptance of his coming death and tried to defend the women and children. When the warriors who killed him cut his chest open and ate his heart, they were not desecrating his body, but seeking to absorb the courage of a valiant foe.

> *"Whatever we call the events of Aug. 15, 1812, it was a tragic day in Chicago history."*

The warriors spared the civilian trader of the fort, John Kinzie, as well as his stepdaughter and son-in-law, Margaret and Linai Helm. Heald and his wife, both wounded, survived the battle. Apparently, Kinzie arranged for the Healds to be transported to Michigan.

Today, Chicago remembers Kinzie and Wells with street names and Heald with a square. Yet where is Chicago's memorial to Black Partridge?

Why did the warriors attack that column? The conventional answer is that they were angry over the destruction of the promised firearms, ammunition, and whiskey, which they could have used that winter. I think the answer is to be found in the broader context of the relationship between the white settlers and the indigenous peoples whose lands they were settling. First, the War of 1812 showed that the Americans and the British were fighting each other for lands the indigenous peoples thought were theirs.

Second, the relationship between the whites and the natives had been deteriorating in the southern area of Lake Michigan for many years. Raids, counter-raids, broken promises — all contributed to the natives' conclusion that the whites, if not stopped, would drive the tribes out of the area and "to the west." In that, they were right. After the war, the Americans rebuilt Fort Dearborn, and more white settlers arrived. When the Blackhawk War ended in 1832, the Indians living in Illinois were driven across the Mississippi.

When Chicago became a town in 1833, the first Chicagoans were scarcely a memory. One of the stars on the Chicago flag stands for Fort Dearborn. Whatever we call the events of Aug. 15, 1812, it was a tragic day in Chicago history.

The author thanks Victor Salas for his assistance.