

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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# Tecumseh

You've probably heard of westward expansion—when American settlers spread west throughout the 18th and 19th century, at first past the Mississippi River, then all the way to the Pacific Ocean. But did anyone try to stop westward expansion?

Tecumseh...unpacked.

Tecumseh was born into a time of conflict around 1768 in present-day Ohio. Early in his life, his father and older brother were killed by White frontiersmen who were pushing their way into land inhabited by Indigenous tribes. Tecumseh developed a deep hatred for settlers as the American government rapidly purchased land through treaties and by force. By the time Tecumseh had become a Shawnee warrior, he was focused on one thing: resisting westward expansion.

Tecumseh's reputation and influence grew quickly. Known for his fearlessness, compassion, and charisma as a speaker, he was a natural leader. All around him individual chiefs were selling or being coerced into selling land to the American government. Tecumseh was deeply opposed to this. He believed the land belonged to everyone, and that no one chief had the right to sell it. He worried Indigenous tribes were too divided and risked losing their home and culture to westward expansion.

By 1805, Tecumseh's brother, Tenskwatawa, began having visions. He became known as The Prophet and earned a religious following, encouraging Indigenous people to preserve their traditions and reject White norms. Tecumseh saw this as an opportunity to unify Indigenous people in a fight against westward expansion. The two brothers formed a confederacy and established a capital called Prophetstown in present-day Indiana in 1808. Tecumseh traveled far and wide to recruit and spread his message of unity.

Meanwhile, Governor William Henry Harrison was aggressively buying land for his Indiana Territory through treaties. Tecumseh, refusing to acknowledge these treaties, confronted Harrison at his home with his army. He told Harrison that the sales were illegitimate, and that no one had the right to buy or sell land created by

the Great Spirit for all people. Tecumseh's unwillingness to back down angered Harrison—he viewed the confederacy as a threat. While Tecumseh was away recruiting, Harrison ordered his men to surround Prophetstown. The Prophet ordered a preemptive attack. In what became known as the Battle of Tippecanoe, Harrison's army won easily, burning Prophetstown to the ground.

With their capital in ruins and the War of 1812 looming, Tecumseh and what was left of the confederacy joined the British army to fight the Americans. He believed a British victory would allow his people to keep their land. The alliance started off strong, but it didn't last. A year into the war, at the Battle of the Thames, the British and Tecumseh's troops were forced to retreat into Canada by none other than William Henry Harrison and his army. British defenses were quickly diminished, and their soldiers retreated further, leaving Tecumseh and his men to face Harrison's army alone. Greatly outnumbering Tecumseh's forces, American troops won easily and killed Tecumseh.

After Tecumseh's death, his confederacy crumbled, westward expansion pressed on, and Indigenous peoples lost nearly all of their land. Whether or not Tecumseh could have organized a unified front to resist westward expansion is unknowable. Nonetheless, his prediction was tragically correct.

Fast forward to 1840. Throughout William Henry Harrison's successful presidential campaign that year, he highlighted his victory over Tecumseh's confederacy in his campaign slogan: "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." By that time, Tecumseh's legacy had already made its way into American military history.

Tecumseh holds a unique position in American history. While he was alive, he was considered a dangerous threat to American expansion. After he was killed, he became known as a fearless warrior and a worthy adversary with a commitment to a noble cause and has even been commemorated with a bronze statue at the US Naval Academy.

Why do you think Tecumseh's position in American history shifted after his death?