Smoke rose from burning Delaware and Miami towns along the Mississinewa River of northeastern Indiana in mid-December 1812. The time was about a year after the Battle of Tippecanoe near Prophetstown on the upper Wabash River in the Indiana Territory. A military force representing the United States government was executing a de facto policy of burning dwellings, destroying stored grain, killing cattle, and confiscating horses of the Native American people in the Mississinewa valley. Meanwhile, some men of the towns, largely Miamis, gathered to confront the government’s troops. There was a brief conflict resulting in casualties on both sides. Shortly afterwards, the government force’s commander decided to order his men to return to their home base in Ohio instead of continuing their campaign of destruction in the Mississinewa valley.

These events can be seen as part of the aftermath of the Battle of Tippecanoe in November 1811. William Henry Harrison, Governor of the Indiana Territory, led an army of about a thousand men on a long march up the Wabash River into the northern third of present Indiana. Harrison departed Vincennes, the territorial capital, on 26th September and arrived at Prophetstown on 6th November. Undoubtedly, the residents of Prophetstown saw the arrival of Harrison’s army at Prophetstown as the culmination of an invasion of lands occupied by Native Americans. All Anglo-American settlements in the Indiana Territory were located in the southern third of present Indiana far from Prophetstown. Attempting to preempt an attack on Prophetstown by an evidently hostile force, the town’s men besieged Harrison’s nearby encampment in the morning of 7th November. Both sides suffered relatively heavy casualties. Harrison’s troops burned the evacuated Prophetstown on the day after the battle and then rapidly marched southward back to Vincennes. Apparently in reaction to the destruction of Prophetstown, Native American men launched a short offensive largely involving sieges of United States fortifications in the
Great Lakes region, for example, Fort Harrison (in present Terre Haute, Indiana) and Fort Wayne (Indiana). Each siege began in the first week of September 1812, lasted a few days, and caused minimal casualties in the fort garrison. Later in 1812, the government authorized military campaigns against Native American towns in the Indiana Territory (Barnhart and Riker 1971:387–392, 401–2). One of them was the campaign against the Delaware and Miami towns on the Mississinewa River.

The paper discusses the impact of perspective on history using examples of biases found in historical sources on the Mississinewa events. The paper notes that the perspective of an historical document, essay, or book reflects its author’s concerns by providing answers to questions of interest to its author. An historical source omits or gives relatively little attention to questions and answers of no interest or of less interest to its author. Thus, the government’s commanding officer, who was most concerned about the experience of his troops in combat, wrote an official report focusing on the armed conflict aspect of his Mississinewa campaign. Likewise, histories of Indiana tell the story under the heading “Battle of the Mississinewa.” Most secondary sources on the topic take a perspective featuring the battle. The paper shows that it is possible to look at the Mississinewa events from a different viewpoint. One can ask questions reflecting concern about the activity and the fate of the Native Americans. In that perspective the burning of the Miami and Delaware towns moves to the center of the history and other questions arise, for example, how were Native Americans affected by such devastation? The paper gives other instances of the role of perspective in the history of the Mississinewa events.

The influence of perspective in historical documents can be seen in an official report of the Mississinewa military expedition, i.e., “Lieutenant Colonel John B. Campbell to General William Henry Harrison, 25 December 1812” (Esarey 1922:253–262). Lieutenant Colonel Campbell commanded the 19th Regiment United States Infantry composed of about six hundred soldiers, including many horsemen. They were under General William Henry Harrison’s orders to eliminate Native American towns in present northeastern Indiana. In his report Campbell noted: “...early in the morning of the seventeenth [December 1812], I reached undiscovered an Indian town on the Mississinewa inhabited by a mixture of Delawares and Miamis.” Then he stated: “The troops rushed into the town, killed eight
warriors, and took forty-two prisoners, eight of whom are warriors, the residue women and children" (Esarey 1922:254–5). The words reflected the standpoint of a military officer succinctly describing and explaining the outcome of a mission. The document answered unstated questions. What occurred? Why? Campbell did not intend to ask and answer questions about the demographic characteristics of the first town that he reached on 17th December. What was the composition of the town’s population in terms of numbers, genders, and generations? If one takes a viewpoint different from Campbell’s and asks such demographic questions, one finds some answers to them in Campbell’s statement. An approximation of the town’s population can be made using Campbell’s figures. He gave numbers for categories of people killed and captured without indicating that their total was fifty. The report noted eight men killed and forty-two others captured. The town’s population was probably little more than fifty. Surely, few people escaped the town given the circumstances described by Campbell. The people of the Mississinewa town were not forewarned, unlike the Prophetstown residents who evacuated that place under threat of attack. Campbell revealed that there were about sixteen men in the community by referring to the eight men killed and the eight men taken prisoners. Further, he made a vague reference to gender and generational differences by writing “the residue women and children.” In short, Campbell’s account showed that the town’s population was composed of about sixteen men and thirty-four women and children (forty-two total captives less the eight male prisoners).

Lieutenant Colonel John B. Campbell gave his view of the initial events of 17th December. How must those events have appeared to the Miamis and the Delawares? Again, the answer can be inferred from Campbell’s report and other sources. The towns’ people were surprised as the attack on their few dwellings began “early in the morning” and suddenly without warning. Campbell stated that he had arrived “undiscovered.” Some sixteen men and thirty-four women and children saw up to six hundred soldiers, many of them mounted on horseback, as they “rushed into the town” killing men and taking prisoners.

While military documents gave relatively little attention to the scorched earth policy, military orders and reports nevertheless showed that the destruction of the Mississinewa towns was Lieutenant Colonel John B. Campbell’s basic goal and that Campbell spent most of his time in the
Mississinewa River valley attempting to achieve that military objective. After describing the success of his early morning assault on 17th December, Campbell reported: “I ordered the town to be immediately burnt, a house or two excepted, in which I confined the prisoners, and ordered the cattle and other stock to be shot” (Esarey 1922:255). Later in the same day, Campbell’s army proceeded down the river where it destroyed empty Miami towns evacuated as the troops approached. Reporting that part of the expedition, Campbell stated: “I burnt on this excursion three considerable villages, took several horses and killed a great many cattle, and returned to the town I first burnt, where I had left the prisoners, and encamped” (Esarey 1922:255). The Lieutenant Colonel intended to resume his advance down the river but the next day’s events ended his campaign against the Mississinewa valley towns.

On 18th December some local native men confronted Lieutenant Colonel Campbell’s army at its encampment. The ensuing conflict was described by Campbell, who wrote: “...about half an hour before day, my camp was most furiously attacked by a large party of Indians preceded by and accompanied with a most hideous yell” (Esarey 1922:256). Campbell estimated the number of men facing him. “From the length of our line simultaneously attacked by them,” he reported, “I am persuaded that there could not have been less than three hundred of the enemy.” He added, “They fought most bravely” (Esarey 1922:260–1).

Naturally, perspective had its place in shaping perception of the Mississinewa events on 18th December. Looking at the scene from the standpoint of a United States military officer, John B. Campbell saw Miami men as the enemy attacking. Miami people saw the same events from a different perspective. An account of those events survived as part of the Miami oral tradition. Francis Godfroy was the original source of a Miami version. Evidently, he was the leader of the local Miami men who confronted the military camp. The story was passed down from Francis Godfroy to his great-grandson, Clarence Godfroy, who was a principal leader of the Miamis around Muncie, Indiana in 1950. At mid-century, Clarence Godfroy related the traditional account to Ross F. Lockridge, who published it in a history of Indiana (Lockridge 1951:177). While Campbell guessed that there were at least “three hundred,” only about forty men and boys besieged the military encampment according to the Miami tradition. Apparently the local men acted on a strategy to make Campbell overesti-
mate their numbers. The Miami, who were adept at ventriloquism, shouted and projected their voices (Lockridge 1951:177). Campbell’s report was in accord with that part of the oral tradition. The officer noted that the siege was accompanied by “a most hideous yell.” The Miami created an illusion of larger forces by spreading their numbers over a broad front. Thus, Campbell was misled and intimidated. He concluded that “there could not have been less than three hundred” judging by “the length of our line simultaneously attacked by them” (Esarey 1922:260–1). The Miami action made Campbell alter plans.Immediately he ordered his men to return to Ohio from the Mississinewa valley.

The story about the burning of Mississinewa towns was neglected in documents authored by whites and in secondary sources based upon those documents. White men died in the battle and thus it was seen as a life and death matter to whites writing primary and secondary accounts, while for whites the devastation of Indian towns was marginally interesting. For instance, the Mississinewa paragraph in the standard multi-volume Indiana history only mentioned the towns’ destruction in a parenthetical phrase (Barnhart and Riker 1971:404–5). Likewise, authors of other secondary sources featured the battle in their discussions of Mississinewa events. For examples, see bibliographical references to Bert Anson, John D. Barnhart and Donald F. Carmony, Murray Holiday, and Stewart Rafert.

On the other hand, what Mississinewa events were crucial from an Algonquian viewpoint? The scorched earth campaign was an immediate concern to Delawares and Miamis in 1812–13. Burning towns were accompanied by the losses of dwellings, grain, cattle, and horses. Undoubtedly in retrospect, Native Americans saw the dire implications of the scorched earth campaigns. The devastation done by the Campbell expedition and others like it shortly presaged the end of most organized Native American life in Indiana. The Delaware, Kickapoo, Piankashaw, and other native groups, excepting the Miami and the Potawatomi, were removed from the State of Indiana by Federal mandate during 1816–21. Miami and Potawatomi removals occurred in the 1830s and 1840s (Barnhart and Carmony 1954:1:200–219).

What was the Algonquian experience in the Mississinewa area during the four years after the Battle of Tippecanoe? The question represents a Native American perspective. The answer in some general respects can be deduced from written documents. Surely, native community life was disrupted by military expeditions. Some native people did without usual
shelter and food. General health deteriorated and mortalities rose in the Native American population. Perhaps a fuller story of that experience can be developed through further study of oral traditions, use of archeological and anthropological methods, and more careful examination of biased documents.

The Delaware and Miami living along the Mississinewa River rarely encountered whites in 1812. Indeed, like most Native Americans at the time, they had lived most of their lives in circumstances devoid of whites. While whites were absent from most Native American past experiences, whites were made ever present in Indian histories based upon documents written by whites. Reflecting their primary concern with white experiences, such written histories focused on Indian/white contacts and basically depicted Delaware, Miami, and other Indian groups as the whites’ allies, enemies or victims. Facts about Indians were almost always colored in some degree by the white authors’ biases. Thus, relatively little can be learned about the separate and independent existence of Native Americans through study of historical documents authored by whites. Yet bits and pieces of knowledge about the Native American past aside from white contacts were buried in such documents. For example, as previously noted, the Mississinewa documents yielded information about an Algonquian town’s demographic characteristics regarding population size, gender composition, and generational distribution.

In another such instance, these records revealed that the first Mississinewa town destroyed by military forces had multi-ethnic and multi-racial dimensions. Sometimes Algonquian people of different cultural heritages shared the same community by 1812. Lieutenant Colonel Campbell’s report provided a documented example of an early 19th century pan-Indian community when it stated that the Mississinewa town was “inhabited by a mixture of Delawares and Miamis.” Further, some early documents made bare references to the roles of Native Americans as refuge providers for black persons. One of them was William B. Northeutt’s “War of 1812 Diary” (Northcutt 1958:56:256–262). Northeutt was a twenty-two-year-old member of the Mississinewa military expedition. He wrote that “one big negro” was among the local men killed by troops attacking the town on 17th December (Northcutt 1958:56:257). Occasionally during the early 19th century and before Algonquian communities northwest of the Ohio River provided sanctuary for persons of African descent who were fugitives from
slavery in lands to the southeast. Was the black man a fugitive slave? Northcutt did not say, but merely revealed his presence in a phrase.

Still, other kinds of information fragments about discrete Native American life can be scavenged from documents largely about whites. What were the roles of women in Algonquian societies? William B. Northcutt’s war diary gave a momentary glimpse of a skillful woman. The diary indicated that a few local people managed to cross the river during the attack on the occupied Mississinewa town. Then Northcutt recorded:

We dashed over the river after them but only Killed one or two of them and took some prisoners. One young man took a Squaw on the other side of the river and put her in a Canoe to Bring her Back to the town, and when he started with her the Canoe turned down Stream and he could not get it straight for the other side with his paddle, when the Squaw put out her hand and at a few liks with her hand she Straitened and Brought it Right over to the great merriment of the Boys that were looking on at them. [Northcutt 1958:56:257-8] 

The woman was an expert canoe navigator. Was her command on water typical of her gender peers? Again, Northcutt did not say. Comparatively few facts expressly about Indians can be derived from any one of these documents, but the documents have their place in learning Native American history.

In conclusion, the paper calls attention to the impact of perspective on the study of Native American history, but certainly it is not the first to do so. Other historians discussed the issue with greater eloquence and effectiveness. As the latter 20th century passed, an increasing number of historians became aware of bias in the corpus of documents and literature about Indians and tried to compensate for it. In 1950s, William N. Fenton pointed out that Indian stereotyping in historical literature was a partial consequence of authors’ dependence on biased documents. Fenton observed: “Virtually all that we know of Indians at the time comes to us through the eyes and pens of white men whose interests and values differed from those of the Indians” (1957:17). In the 1970s, Francis Jennings urged those studying Indian themes to recognize and grapple with their own perspectives. Jennings wrote: “The historian cannot wholly free himself from the outlook of his own cultural tradition. In perceiving and reflecting upon the interaction of two cultures, he necessarily adopts a viewpoint somewhere in his own.” Apparently addressing non-Indians, he suggested: “Because of this inescapable bias of outlook,... it seems desirable to make a special effort of imagination to see things as Indians might” (Jennings 1975:14).
Yet, with exceptions, those who wrote Native American history continued to use biased documents and to identify with their authors’ values and concerns. In the 1980s, Frederick E. Hoxie noted that American history textbook authors “either ignore Indian motives completely, or Native Americans appear in the narrative as irrational primitives clinging tenaciously to a doomed way of life” (1985:20). While Hoxie’s comments were confined to textbooks, Christopher L. Miller and George R. Hamell pointed out that his description of Indian stereotyping in textbooks accurately characterized Indians’ treatment “in most historical literature” in the 1980s (Miller and Hamell 1986:312). By the end of the century, more historians than ever before had faced the problem of bias in written sources concerning Native Americans and found new insights. Among them were William Cronon, R. David Edmunds, Francis Jennings, Neal Salisbury, and Anthony F. C. Wallace. But such successes remained exceptional.

REFERENCES

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