

## **Napoleon in Ohio**

**Thomas R. Schuck**

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There is a Napoleon in Ohio – in Henry County in the northwestern corner of the state, 26 miles from the location of the Battle of Fallen Timbers, at which Tecumseh’s Indian confederation was defeated by General “Mad” Anthony Wayne in 1794. The city was founded in 1832 and named for the French Emperor. However, that connection with Bonaparte is not the subject of this paper. Rather, I’m concerned with the Ohio connection to veterans of Napoleon’s Grande Armée.

### **Part 1: The Grande Armée**

Napoleon Bonaparte formed the Grande Armée in 1805 from the army that he had assembled on the coast of the English Channel for his proposed invasion of Britain. In an eerie parallel with decisions made almost 150 years later, he abandoned that campaign and moved the army east to deal with threats from Austria and Russia; the Austrians because of their support of French royalists, and the Russians because of the Czar’s mercantile relationship with Great Britain. Between 1805 and 1812, Napoleon achieved a series of victories over the Austrians at

Ulm in present-day Bavaria, over the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz in the present-day Czech Republic, and over the Prussians at Jena and Auerstedt in Thuringia, located in the east-central part of today's Germany. At its height, the Grande Armée was comprised of a million men, of whom 680,000 participated in the Russian campaign of 1812. It included not only French soldiers but 95,000 Poles, 35,000 Austrians, 30,000 Italians, 24,000 Bavarians, 20,000 Saxons, 20,000 Prussians, 17,000 Westphalians, 15,000 Swiss, 10,000 Danes and Norwegians, 4,000 Portuguese, 3,500 Croats, and even 2,000 Irish as well.

This conglomeration of nationalities was the result of Napoleon's military and diplomatic achievements. For example, following the Imperial Recess of 1803, the map of Germany was redrawn: small ecclesiastical and free city-states virtually disappeared, and the lesser nobility lost their independence as their territories were absorbed by larger states such as Bavaria, Wurttemberg, and Baden. After the Battle of Austerlitz, almost 70 smaller states were absorbed into the territories of Napoleon's clients, especially on the west bank of the Rhine; and the members of the landholding German nobility whose territory had escaped annexation in 1803 lost their sovereign rights in the old Holy Roman Empire, which was dissolved in 1806. This disruption resulted in many displaced men entering the army.

Napoleon invaded Russia on June 24, 1812 by crossing the Neman or Memel River in Belarus. In the nineteenth century, this river was considered by the Germans to delineate the eastern border of their land.

The Russians retreated in the face of the Grande Armée and adopted the same scorched-earth tactics that Stalin employed in the face of the Wehrmacht in 1941, but Napoleon caught up with them on September 7 near the village of Borodino, 70 miles west of Moscow. The battle that followed was the bloodiest single-day action of the Napoleonic wars, resulting in 72,000 casualties and a narrow French victory. The Russians withdrew the following day, leaving the French in possession of the field but without a decisive victory. Napoleon entered Moscow a week later.

The French dallied in Moscow for a month, awaiting a peace offer from Czar Alexander that never came. On October 19, the Grande Armée left Moscow and marched southwest, where the Russians met them at Kluga. The Battle of Maloyaroslavets on the Luzha River on October 24 resulted in 6,000 casualties. Although the Russians withdrew following the battle, they achieved a strategic victory by convincing Napoleon that he would never be able to force them into a decisive battle and that his best course of action that late in the year was to retreat west to

Borovsk on the Protva River, where his artillery and commissary parks were located. This decision was reinforced by the Russian victory at Tarutino near the Chernishnya River on October 18, where the French lost 2,500 dead and suffered 2,000 prisoners.

As Napoleon retreated, the Russians dogged his heels, sometimes circling around the Grande Armée in an attempt to split it into its constituent parts and capture its baggage and supply trains. On November 15, the Russians gave battle at Krasny, 67 kilometers southwest of Smolensk. Marshal Michel Ney broke their lines by means of a frontal assault, enabling 3,000 men to escape over the frozen Berezina River at night. Of those, only 800 made it to Orsha in Belarus. In all, the Grande Armée lost 380,000 dead and 100,000 captured in Russia.

## Part 2: Moscow, Ohio

The catastrophe in Russia emboldened Napoleon's enemies, resulting in additional campaigns in 1813 and 1814 and culminating in the capture of Paris by the Allies and Napoleon's abdication on April 6, 1814. Napoleon entered exile following his abdication, only to return to France in February, 1815. His defeat at Waterloo on June 18, 1815 ended his military adventures.

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Moscow, Ohio is a small village on the Ohio River in Clermont County. Its population peaked in 1890 at 591, when it was the largest village in Washington Township; and now stands at approximately 190, including three registered sex offenders. The village was platted in 1816 and a post office was established in 1826. When the village was laid out, U.S. Route 52 did not exist; Moscow was intended as the site of a commercial ferry across the Ohio River. All the roads ran away from the river, and Moscow was connected to the outside world principally by the river and a road running northeast to Point Isabel (established around 1838) to intersect the road between Felicity (1817) and Point Pleasant (1813), the hometown of General Grant (Ohio Route 756). Thus, if you travel past Moscow on U.S. 52, you will observe across from the entrance to the village a street sign for Moscow Cemetery Road. The cemetery is at the top of the hill on the east side of present U.S. 52, which runs mostly north and south in that part of Clermont County, because that was the highest point away from the river. In 1817, two brick houses were erected in Moscow to serve as a store and a hotel; the first school was established in 1823. The village was nearly wiped out by a tornado on March 2, 2012, damaging or destroying 80% of the structures and killing three persons. It has valiantly attempted to recover, but with an

estimated per capita income of under \$25,000 and no significant business or industry other than the Zimmer power station located immediately west of the village, it struggles to survive.

Moscow was allegedly founded by French immigrants who were veterans of the Grande Armée. In 1816, Clermont County was only sixteen years old, and the county seat was still in Williamsburg. The last battle with the Shawnee, at Grassy Run on the east fork of the Little Miami River, was less than thirty years in the past, and Wyandots lived in the area until 1811. Thus, it was no mean feat for immigrants to float down the Ohio in 1816 and locate a place in the wilderness where they could begin anew.

### Part 3: Count Damon

These French veterans were not the only survivors of the Battle of Moscow to start new lives here, however. Veterans not only of the French but also the German armies emigrated to the United States following the Napoleonic wars and settled in Ohio. One such family was that of John Count Damon, a former *graf* in southern Germany whose family was disenfranchised during the aggregation of the small German states in the early 1800s and who found himself first in the French and then the German armies throughout the Napoleonic wars.

John Count Damon was born in 1789, the son of a general in the German army. His family's holdings were absorbed by the larger German states in the early 1800s, while John was a student at Heidelberg University. Having lost his patrimony, John joined the Grande Armée and was part of the army that marched to Moscow. He participated in the great retreat and swam the freezing Berezina River in Belarus in November, 1812 to escape the Russians. John was among the fortunate few who survived the retreat, but he was unable to reclaim his aristocratic inheritance. The Count ended up in the German army and fought against the French at Waterloo in 1815. He was wounded during the battle and lay on the field that night when the French systematically bayoneted all the bodies to see who moved, whom they then shot. John survived and was taken across the Rhine to recover from his wounds. He was taken in by the Westermann family of Hattingen in Westphalia in the Ruhr, where he recovered his health. Having lost his patrimony, he took up the tailoring trade and married Anna Katherine Westermann, a daughter of the family. They had a son, Nicholas, in 1818 and a daughter, Katherine, in 1825, as well as two sons later. In 1830, Count John decided to take his family to America, together with the Westermanns and a family named the Hooks. They landed in New York City and traveled west to Columbiana County, Ohio where the Count purchased virgin land in Hancock County in

northwestern Ohio. They spent some years in Columbiana County, where another son, William, was born in December, 1836 in Lisbon, Ohio. The Damons, the Westermanns, and the Hooks moved to Hancock County in 1836 to the land deeded to Count Damon in the north-middle part of Biglick Township, 10 miles east of Findlay and near what was then the Tiffan Road, now U.S. Route 224.

What they found when they arrived in Hancock County was virgin forest, covered with huge hardwood trees. They set about clearing the land and building cabins. One huge walnut was cut at a height suitable that the stump could be used for a table, around which the Damon cabin was built. The Westermanns and Hooks built cabins nearby, one to the north and one to the south of the Damon cabin. One barn served all three families. Each cabin soon had its own orchard, the land was cleared, and the newcomers began their life in the new land.

Among the nearest neighbors were the Ruckman family from Virginia, the Leffersons from New Jersey, the Crabills from Vermont, the Metzkers and Swiharts from Germany, and the Thomases from Ireland. A log schoolhouse was built on the northwest corner of the Ruckman farm, directly across from the Damon farm, around 1839 or 1840. When a new schoolhouse was built, the old log schoolhouse was moved diagonally across the road and near the frame house

that Count Damon had constructed to replace his log cabin, and he moved his tailoring shop into the old schoolhouse. Raised a Lutheran in Germany, Count Damon became a Methodist in Ohio. He practiced his tailoring trade until his death in September, 1848 at the age of 59, never having fully recovered from his injuries during the Napoleonic wars. By this time, Billy Damon, the youngest son left at home, took over the farm and bought out his brothers. He also took the title "Count."

William Count Damon lived in the area for the rest of his life, marrying four times. He died in 1919 and is buried under a monument in the form of an orb of purple marble approximately four feet in diameter, with one of his four wives buried on each of the cardinal points around the ball. His last wife was Phoebe Hogue Edwards, a daughter of the Thomas family. They had a daughter, Edith Mary, born in 1888, to whom I am indebted for this history of the Count. Unusual for her time, she completed a master's degree in Latin at The Ohio State University and taught the language for most of her adult life, while keeping house on a farm near the village of Vanlue, 12 miles southeast of Findlay.

I am indebted to Edith Damon Schuck for my love of history and my interest in scholarship. She was my paternal grandmother. Count John Damon was my paternal great-

great-grandfather. So German was my grandmother in outlook that when my father finished the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the 1930s, she added a “c” to her husband’s surname following the “S” because she thought it looked more Germantic. We have retained it in her honor.

So this is part of my family story and its connection to Napoleon Bonaparte and his Grande Armée. I am not, however, related to any of the registered sex offenders who live in the village on the Ohio River founded by Napoleon’s French veterans.

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