"My Father . . . Named Me William Tecumseh": Rebutting the Charge That General Sherman Lied About His Name

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ARTICLE

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"My Father . . . Named Me William Tecumseh": Rebutting the Charge That General Sherman Lied About His Name

Carl R. Schenker Jr. (bio)
Rooted firmly in Ohio's frontier history, the name William Tecumseh Sherman is one of the most famous and evocative in all of American history. Who gave it to him, and when? These questions, seemingly simple and perhaps even trivial at first blush, actually pose an intriguing puzzle, the solution of which is well worth attempting. The puzzle: In 1886, Sherman himself stated that "my father . . . named me William Tecumseh." It appears that things rested there until 1932. For the last seven decades, however, historians have ignored or disputed Sherman's statement, reporting that, at birth, Sherman was named simply Tecumseh, after the renowned Shawnee leader. By these modern accounts, Sherman did not acquire the name William until age nine or ten, after his father died. Some biographers have seen this supposed name change as a trauma sufficient to cause Sherman to block out or lie about the subject. This essay shows how the historical community first disputed and then largely lost track of Sherman's testimony about his own name, substituting for it a more colorful but apparently erroneous story about a nonexistent name change with necessarily nonexistent consequences. This fresh look at the widely accepted, but doubtful, lore about Sherman's name should vindicate the word of one of Ohio's most famous sons, sharpen our understanding of his formative years, and remind us how readily historians can stumble in trying to recreate the past.

The Disparate Accounts of Sherman's Naming and Their Significance

William Tecumseh Sherman was born in Lancaster, Ohio, on February 8, 1820. In the second edition of his Memoirs, published in 1886, Sherman states expressly that it was "my father" who "named me William Tecumseh." Notably, from 1864 through 1929, at least fifteen extended chronicles of Sherman's life assumed or stated expressly that he was named William Tecumseh at birth; this author has found no published Tecumseh-at-birth account dating from that period.
Over the course of the last seventy years, however, at least six Sherman biographers have ignored or disputed Sherman's account of his own naming and proclaimed that he was named simply Tecumseh at birth. These biographers report that the name William was imposed on Sherman only later, at age nine or ten. When his father died (June 24, 1829), Sherman was informally adopted by Thomas and Maria Ewing and baptized into the Catholic faith (after an infant baptism in the Presbyterian faith). With some variations, four of these biographers give this account of the baptism in the Ewing home: Someone told the officiating priest that the baptismal name was to be Tecumseh. But the priest insisted that a Christian (or scriptural or saint's) name must be used, and seized upon William simply because it happened to be St. William's Day.

The Tecumseh-at-birth biographers and their books include: Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (1932); James M. Merrill, *William Tecumseh Sherman* (1971); John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (1993); Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (1995); Stanley P. Hirshson, *The White Tecumseh: A Biography of General William T. Sherman* (1997); and Lee Kennett, *Sherman: A Soldier's Life* (2001). Tecumseh-at-birth accounts appear in many other places as well. Indeed, the Web site for the important collection of Sherman Family Papers (SFP) at the University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA) announces to each researcher there, "It was [only] within the fold of the Ewing family at the insistence of Maria Boyle Ewing, a devout Roman Catholic, that [Sherman] received the baptismal name William, having been named Tecumseh after the famous Shawnee chief by his father."²

Similar Tecumseh-at-birth accounts, building on the Sherman biographies, appear in an ever-widening circle of traditionally published works and are proliferating on the Internet as well. This author has not found any modern source taking issue with the Tecumseh-at-birth theory, independent of his research. To the contrary, the Tecumseh-at-birth theory appears to have become the received...
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