

Many British traders continued their dealings with the Indians in the United States in spite of great efforts to exclude them. Among these one of the best known and most influential was Robert Dickson, who had traded in the region between the Mississippi and the Missouri since 1786, and was reported to have ascended both of those great rivers nearly to their sources. In the autumn of 1811 he once more succeeded in evading the vigilance of the American officials and arrived at his customary trading station on the Mississippi with a large supply of goods. He found that the Indians there were in great distress, as all their crops had failed, owing to the excessively dry weather during the preceding summer, which had also driven all the big game of the prairies northward in search of pasture. During the winter he generously distributed among them his whole stock of goods and provisions, preserving the lives of many and greatly strengthening his hold on their affections. A great number of the people of the plains, however, perished miserably. It is stated that Red Thunder, a principal chief of the Sioux, living near the Missouri, when on his way to Prairie du Chien in the early spring, discovered that six lodges of his tribe had died of hunger and cold, and forty-five others had disappeared and were supposed to have famished on the plains. The starving wretches had even pounded up for food the dry bones of buffaloes which had lain undisturbed on the prairies for years.

On the 18th of June, 1812, as Dickson was returning to Montreal, he was met at the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers by a messenger from Captain Glegg, Military Secretary to General Brock, bearing a letter dated at York on the 27th February, informing him that war with the United States might be expected, and asking information as to the number of "his friends that might be depended on."

In reply Dickson stated that all his "friends," whose numbers he estimated at 250 or 300 warriors, would assemble at St. Joseph about the 30th of June. Punctually to the day he arrived there himself, accompanied by 130 Sioux, Winnebagoes (Pauents), and Menomonees (Folles Avoines), commanded by their principal chiefs. The garrison of that post then consisted of a sergeant and two gunners of the royal artillery, and three officers and forty-one non-commissioned officers and privates of the 10th Royal Veteran Battalion, mostly infirm and worn-out men who were considered unfit for any service except garrison duty, under the command of Captain Charles Roberts of the latter