

Epic Triumph, Epic Embarrassment, or Both? Commemorations of the War of 1812 Today in the Niagara Region

Timothy S. Forest

Volume 104, Number 1, Spring 2012

Special Issue: The War of 1812

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065390ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065390ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

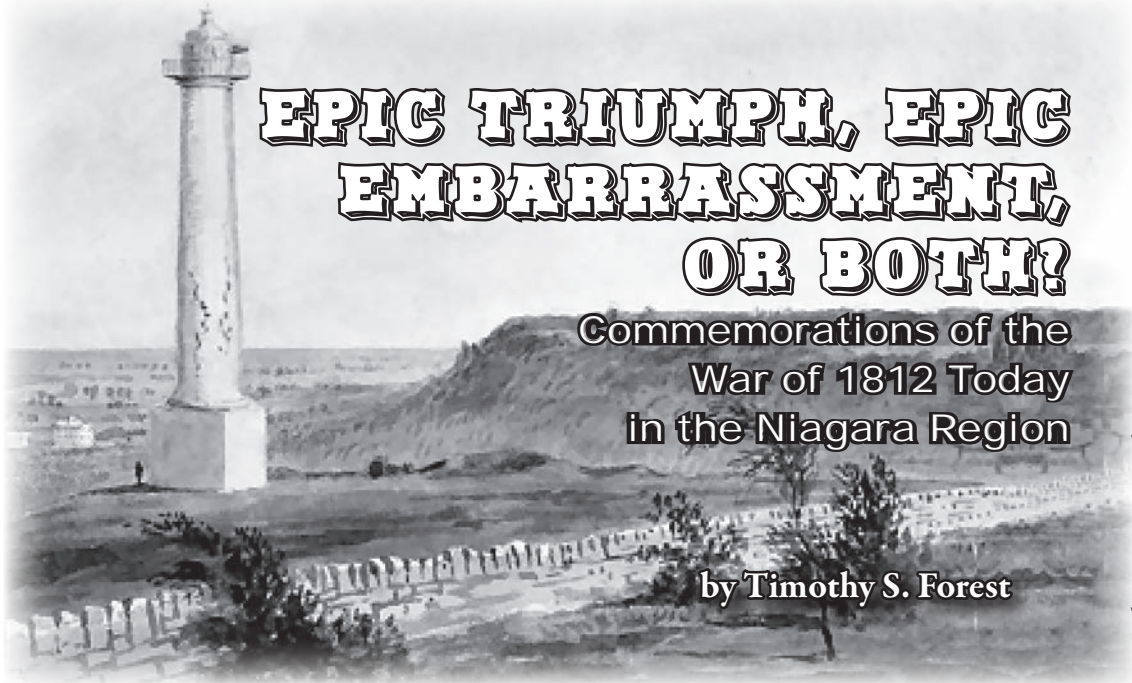
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Cite this article

Forest, T. S. (2012). Epic Triumph, Epic Embarrassment, or Both? Commemorations of the War of 1812 Today in the Niagara Region. *Ontario History*, 104(1), 96–122. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065390ar>

Article abstract

Widely divergent national and local historiographies about the War of 1812 have been created on both sides of the Canadian/American border. This has special significance for the Niagara region, where the two belligerents directly confronted and still confront each other. On the Canadian side of the Niagara River, the Niagara Peninsula has been transformed into a center of regional and national pride. Military leaders, troops and battles are celebrated and events commemorated in a grandiose and triumphant manner. Across the river, Western New York has largely downplayed or outright ignored its role in the very same conflict, to fit in with both the national and local amnesia surrounding the war and the region's self-conceptualization as a "good neighbour". This article focuses on public commemorations on both sides of the Niagara to uncover the historical, geographic, economic and demographic explanations as to why the war has been transformed into an epic victory for some, a defeat for others, and an embarrassment best ignored for many.



Original monument to Brock

EPIC TRIUMPH, EPIC EMBARRASSMENT, OR BOTH?

Commemorations of the War of 1812 Today in the Niagara Region

by Timothy S. Forest

The War of 1812 is one of those episodes in history that makes everybody happy, because everybody interprets it in his [or her] own way. The Americans think of it primarily as a naval war in which the pride of the Mistress of the Seas was humbled by what an imprudent Englishman called ‘a few fir-built frigates manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws.’ Canadians think of it equally pridefully as a war of defence in which their brave fathers...saved the country from conquest. And the English are the happiest of all because they don’t even know it existed.¹

This quote, by Canadian historian C.P. Stacey, sums up much of the ambiguity that surrounds the War of 1812. Unlike conflicts from which a clear-cut victor emerges, 1812 can best be characterized—from a military and a diplomatic perspective—as a stalemate. The Treaty of Ghent that ended the war in 1814 essentially reaffirmed the antebellum status quo between the United States and Great Britain. Because

no clear-cut winner or loser emerged, all combatants, once hostilities ended, were able to claim a victory of sorts. From the perspective of most Canadians, the Americans were thwarted in their attempt to conquer their northern neighbour. The Americans likewise celebrated their victories over the most powerful navy in the world at the time, and their ability to defend themselves against the British for a second time.² Each of these

¹ Donald Graves, *The Battle of Lundy’s Lane: On The Niagara in 1814* (Mount Pleasant, SC: The Nautical and Aviation Company of America, 1993), 205.

² It is also evident in the title of Walter R. Borneman’s *1812: The War that Forged a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004). What the title omits is that in many ways the War of 1812 forged two nations. The wave of American euphoria that Borneman and others correctly point out swept the country following Ghent was more than matched by a British-Canadian hybrid nationalism that emerged, particu-

histories, which quickly became the respective national standard, focuses on the protagonist being an underdog, defeating a larger and more powerful enemy. Here, however, is where the similarities end.

This recasting of history along strikingly divergent lines is especially evident in the bi-national Niagara region. This area consists of the northwesternmost parts of New York State (Erie and Niagara Counties) and the Niagara Peninsula in southern Ontario (the Regional Municipality of Niagara).³ The region experienced significant military action during 1812. Many of the skirmishes and battles fought there determined in large part the war's outcome. Like the conflict itself, however, these contests are commemorated today in vastly different ways, depending on which side of the Niagara one is on. Each combatant has created and perpetuated its unique and oftentimes contradictory history of the War of 1812. While many Canadians, and Ontarians es-

pecially in Ontario, out of the defeat of the "Yankee" invaders. One title that treats that topic is Mark Zuehlke's *For Honour's Sake: The War of 1812 and the Brokering of an Uneasy Truce* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2006).

³ For purposes of clarity, I will hereafter use the term "Niagara region", "Niagara", or "the region" in lower case to refer to both the portions of New York State and Ontario that border the Niagara river. When I use the terms "Niagara Region", "the Region" in upper case or "the Niagara Peninsula", I am referring to the Canadian side only. Likewise, the term "Niagara Frontier" only applies to the New York side of the river. "The Niagara" will refer to the Niagara River.

Abstract

Widely divergent national and local historiographies about the War of 1812 have been created on both sides of the Canadian/American border. This has special significance for the Niagara region, where the two belligerents directly confronted and still confront each other. On the Canadian side of the Niagara River, the Niagara Peninsula has been transformed into a center of regional and national pride. Military leaders, troops and battles are celebrated and events commemorated in a grandiose and triumphant manner. Across the river, Western New York has largely downplayed or outright ignored its role in the very same conflict, to fit in with both the national and local amnesia surrounding the war and the region's self-conceptualization as a "good neighbour". This article focuses on public commemorations on both sides of the Niagara to uncover the historical, geographic, economic and demographic explanations as to why the war has been transformed into an epic victory for some, a defeat for others, and an embarrassment best ignored for many.

Résumé: L'historiographie de la guerre de 1812 diffère largement des deux côtés de la frontière canado-américaine, tant à l'échelle nationale qu'à l'échelle locale. Ceci est surtout important pour la région de Niagara, où les deux belligérants se sont affrontés, et s'affrontent toujours, directement. Du côté canadien, la péninsule de Niagara est devenue un centre de fierté régionale et nationale. Les chefs militaires, les soldats, et les batailles de 1812-14 sont célébrés et commémorés d'une façon grandiose et triomphale. De l'autre côté de la rivière, l'Ouest de l'État de New York a largement oublié son rôle dans le même conflit, ce qui est compatible avec une sorte d'ammésie, tant nationale que locale, et avec la conception que cette région a d'elle-même d'être un "bon voisin". Nous examinons ici les commémorations des deux côtés du Niagara, pour chercher les facteurs historiques, géographiques, économiques, et démographiques, qui pourraient expliquer pourquoi la guerre a été transformée en victoire épique pour les uns, en défaite pour d'autres, et, pour beaucoup de gens, en souvenir embarrassant qu'il vaut mieux supprimer.

pecially in this case, take pride in defeating the American invaders, and celebrate it quite publicly, the New Yorkers across the river for the most part conspicuously downplay or outright ignore the fact a war was even waged there. These varying depictions reflect and promote 1812's part in Canadian, Ontarian, American and New York national, state/provincial and regional consciousnesses—a significant role in the former two, a negligible one in the latter pair.

They also reflect, promote and bolster different approaches to history, public memory, and historical tourism. For starters, the Niagara Frontier has positioned itself as a beachhead of sorts for Canadian business and tourism. As its industrial base wound down in the late twentieth century, it increasingly turned to Canadian firms and visitors, especially those from southern Ontario, to offset these losses and to help rebuild its economy. Consequently, the region has cast itself in part as a “good neighbour,” which naturally involves avoiding potentially controversial topics such as 1812. Southern Ontario's economic and geographical situation, however, is considerably different. Just as many Americans refer to the Buffalo area as the “Niagara Frontier,” a phrase that speaks volumes, many Canadians consider the Niagara Peninsula to be part of the “Golden Horseshoe,” the economic and cultural centre of Ontario and by some definitions Canada. As such, the Niagara Region has significant eco-

nomie, political and cultural prerogatives that propel and perpetuate how 1812 is memorialized. Gilbert Collins, author of a definitive guide to sites that honour the conflict, provides empirical evidence of this. He lists twenty-two commemorations of the War of 1812 along the Niagara Parkway alone in the Niagara Region. Many of these are either national or provincial parks, reflecting the prominent role the conflict plays in Canadian, Ontarian and local history and memory. The official website of Niagara Parks, the organization in charge of maintaining the provincially-owned sites, lists fifty-three plaques, markers, and monuments dedicated largely or wholly to the conflict.⁴ In stark contrast, across the Niagara, in the whole of Western New York, there are twelve such commemorations still extant, marked only by state historical plaques.⁵

As far as history and public memory are concerned, the War of 1812 and what it represents today reflects the role of the conflict in greater national and local narratives. In Canada, 1812 traditionally plays a key role in the shaping of the new nation. Significant aspects of the Canadian national identity centre on a repudiation of many things American. The War of 1812 is a very physical and visible (and successful) rejection of the United States. Often, and again reflecting and promoting the “underdog” myth—not to mention multiculturalism—the inferior numbers of British, Canadian and Indian troops are shown as countering and defeating the much larger

⁴ <http://www.niagaraparks.com/heritage-trail/>, accessed 7 July 2011.

⁵ *Guidebook to the Historic Sites of the War of 1812* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998).

and apparently homogenous American army. Sentiments such as “no one could have predicted that by the end of 1812 Upper and Lower Canada would survive unconquered” and “how was it that a tiny population, badly divided... was able to ward off continued attack by a powerful neighbour with vastly greater resources?” are often present in Canadian histories of the war.⁶ The United States also employs this same image—when remembering the American Revolution. Many Canadians, from a nation that conceives of itself as sleeping next to the elephant (to quote Pierre Elliot Trudeau) enjoy seeing an example of men rushing to arms to stop the creeping expansionism and “manifest destiny” long associated with the United States.⁷ Thus, the Niagara Region is filled with monuments, museums, plaques and legends that celebrate the heroes and battles of that area and their contribution to this “victory”, and what their significant contributions are to local, provincial and national pride.

On the other hand, 1812 is a war many Americans would like to forget, especially in Western New York. The United States supposedly was created out of a revolution in which thirteen colonies banded together in a rebellion against a vastly superior power to defend their liberties. This is a powerful imagery that captures the imaginations and hearts of most Americans, and it serves as its own

David-vs.-Goliath legend, its foundational myth, just as 1812 does for many Canadians. The War of 1812 carries no such attachments for Americans, especially in the Niagara Frontier. Here, the US failed in its attempts to take Canada, and its attempts to conquer the Niagara Peninsula were from any perspective a failure. Third, most of the claims that America “won” the war rest on the notion of respect. The United States fought the world’s leading power to a draw. Thus, America was able to assert its independence from foreign influence. This version of events makes it more palatable for Americans to rally around this war as a pillar of national identity, when they do. Generals and admirals such as Andrew Jackson and Oliver Hazard Perry are portrayed as valiant heroes who stood up to the larger, better trained and out-fitted British forces, and defeated them. But neither man, nor the US as a whole, played out this scenario in the Niagara region. James Mayo argues, “public...memorials are used to emphasize both sacredness and utility.”⁸ To Americans, the War of 1812 in the Niagara region, where two failed invasions of Canada originated, was neither sacred nor useful to local or national interests. 1812 produced scant war heroes, no glorious reasons to come to arms, and few concrete victories, especially in the Niagara theatre. Even though the US Military Academy (“West

⁶ Wesley Turner, *The War of 1812: The War that Both Sides Won* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1990), 59; Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980), 26.

⁷ Turner, *The War of 1812*, 130.

⁸ In *War Memorials as Political Landscape: The American Experience and Beyond* (New York: Prager, 1988), 5.

Point”) mentions on its website that its famous “dress grays” that all cadets wear derive from those worn by American troops led by Winfield Scott in the Niagara Region campaign of 1814, the fact that this information is, outside of certain circles, probably not well-known by many Canadians or Americans attests to the limited legacy of the region’s role in 1812 to American, New Yorker and local memory.⁹ As a result, many Americans look to other wars to fulfill these needs. Reflecting these differences in perspectives, Lawrence Hott, producer (through the Buffalo PBS affiliate WNED) of a 2011 American documentary entitled *The War of 1812*, recalled that “the working title for the film was ‘1812: The War We Forgot’... Our Canadian consultants, who have a very different perspective, objected. They never forgot the war.”¹⁰

This article draws attention to the differences in how and why each side commemorates the War of 1812. It starts with a brief history of the reasons for war from both national and local viewpoints and the key battles and campaigns fought in the Niagara region. Following this, the article will then analyze some of the myths and legends that surround the “heroes” who emerged from the region, and

then how the “story” of 1812 is told there in a few key museums, memorials, plaques and cemeteries today, and how these legends and depictions today both reflect and serve distinct local and national purposes. In doing so, this piece hews closely to arguments made by Patricia Jansen in her analysis of tourism in the region in the early nineteenth century. She focuses on how tourists seek “a series of ‘pseudo-events’ or ‘dreamlands,’ resulting in good part from the ‘commoditization’ of places and cultures that occurs as they become targets of mass consumption.”¹¹ The Niagara region today is a glaring example of how actual historical events can become “pseudo-events,” recast in deliberate ways to perpetuate and reinforce national and local myths and identities.¹²

The Road to War – Divergent Perspectives

Canadian historian Wesley Turner deemed the War of 1812 “the ‘Incredible War,’ and there were indeed many incredible aspects to it—including the very fact that it happened.”¹³ Why then did war erupt in 1812? One reason many Americans offer was perceived British infringement of American sovereignty on the high seas. The most

⁹ *West Point Fact Sheet*, <http://www.usma.edu/dcomm/presskit/FactSheets/CadetUniforms.htm>, accessed 9 January 2012.

¹⁰ “The War that Shaped Niagara,” in *The Buffalo News*, 7 October 2011, <http://www.buffalonews.com/entertainment/gusto/television/article585097.ece>, accessed 17 January 2012.

¹¹ In “Romanticism, Modernity and the Evolution of Tourism on the Niagara Frontier, 1790-1850,” in the *Canadian Historical Review*, 72:3 (1991), 302.

¹² An excellent book that analyzes the plethora of myths that surround most of the key battles, campaigns and personalities of the War of 1812 is Donald Hickey’s *Don’t Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

¹³ Turner, *The War of 1812*, 12.

prominent example of this concerned the routine British impressment, or the forced enlistment, of American sailors into the Royal Navy. British vessels also routinely boarded American ships and confiscated goods they felt were bound for France, its greatest enemy. Americans were not subjects of the British Crown, nor was the United States involved in the larger (and for Britain far more consequential) Napoleonic Wars being waged at the time. As Canadian historian Pierre Berton summarizes:

The [American] man on the street finds it intolerable that British boarding parties can seize sailors from American ships on the pretext that they are Royal Navy deserters... [this] is a flagrant attack on national sovereignty... but to Britain, impressment is a necessity... she cannot man her ships with volunteers. Worse, thousands of British soldiers are deserting to American merchantmen, lured by better conditions and better pay.¹⁴

A recent article on the rhetoric used by Americans to justify their involvement in 1812 centres on the phrase “free trade and sailor’s rights.” Impressment and the infringement of American rights as a neutral and sovereign nation figure squarely in both clauses.¹⁵

Another reason Americans often cite for their declaration of war was British agitation in the American west. The

Treaty of Paris ending the American Revolution in 1783 ceded title to all former British territory east of the Mississippi River and south of the Great Lakes to the United States. As the population grew, an increasing number of white American settlers colonized this “frontier.” This brought them into direct conflict with the First Nations. When fighting erupted between them over land, many Americans chalked up First Nation resistance to their encroachment of their lands to the British, who were supposedly inciting their “allies” as a means of reasserting their control over the “West”. This became self-fulfilling, because many First Nations did in fact partner with the British in the months preceding the war, especially following the American defeat of the Shawnee at the Battle of Tippecanoe in present-day Indiana in 1811.¹⁶ This battle directly led to the Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, to openly ally with the British against the Americans. For many Americans, British infringement on their sovereignty in their west and on the high seas could only last for so long.

Many Canadians, however, point to a different aspect of American expansionism as a root cause for 1812. Former US President Thomas Jefferson famously asserted, “the acquisition of Canada will be a mere matter of march-

¹⁴ Berton, *The Invasion of Canada*, 37

¹⁵ Paul A. Gilje, “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights’: The Rhetoric of the War of 1812,” in the *Journal of the Early Republic*, v. 30 (Spring 2010), 1-23.

¹⁶ Heidler, D.S., and Heidler, J.T., *The War of 1812* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), xii; Berton, *The Invasion of Canada*, 45, 77; John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1972), 26, 27.

¹⁷ J. Mackay Hitsman, Donald Graves and Sir Prevost Christopher, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History* (Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 2000), 3.

ing.”¹⁷ The British and the “Loyalist” population alike were alarmed by statements made by Americans like Jefferson and the Speaker of the US House of Representatives Henry Clay, who asserted that “I trust I shall not be deemed presumptuous when I state that I verily believe that the Militia of Kentucky are alone competent to place Montreal and Upper Canada at your feet.”¹⁸ The first American constitution, the Articles of Confederation, specifically provided for the admittance of Canada. Additionally, the years before 1812 saw a large influx of American settlers—and speculators—into the Niagara Region. The loyalty of some of these immigrants to the British Empire was in doubt—some viewed them as a “Fifth Column” of sorts.¹⁹ Furthermore, one of the first actions the Americans undertook in their previous conflict with Great Britain was their failed invasion of Lower Canada in 1775, which was also based on a false (and ultimately fatal) assumption that the Canadians would welcome the Americans as liberators rather than oppressors. Based on this evidence, once war finally broke out, it was almost inevitable that the

Niagara region quickly would be a major theatre of operations.

The Outbreak of Hostilities in Niagara, 1812-1814

The Americans invaded Canada soon after declaring war on the British Empire on 18 June 1812.²⁰ On 13 October, Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer, commander of the New York militia, sent his troops to attack Queenston, downstream from Niagara Falls. The Americans tried to take the strategic heights that overlooked the village. They were briefly successful, but by the end of the day they were defeated, with 300 killed and 900 captured. They did, however, manage to mortally wound General Issac Brock, making him a martyr to the British-Canadian cause.²¹

In the spring of 1813, the Americans invaded Canada again. On 25 May, General Winfield Scott and Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry mounted a successful assault of Fort George, the British regional headquarters just north of Queenston.²² In their exhilaration, however, the Americans allowed the British to retreat and regroup further west. The Americans realized their error and sent a detachment

¹⁸ Quoted in Richard V. Barbuto, *Niagara 1814: America Invades Canada* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 9.

¹⁹ Even the first commander of the British forces in the Niagara Peninsula, General Issac Brock, lamented that the Canadians were “either indifferent to what is passing, or so completely American as to rejoice in the prospects of a change of governments.” Quoted in Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989) p. 73.

²⁰ Robert Malcomson, *A Very Brilliant Affair: The Battle of Queenston Heights, 1812* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003), 59, 60.

²¹ Barbuto, *Niagara 1814*, 59-63; A.J. Langguth, *Union 1812: The Americans Who Fought the Second War of Independence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 209-18.

²² Barbuto, *Niagara 1814*, 75, 76; Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 139, 140.

to confront Brigadier General John Vincent's forces. They set up camp in Stoney Creek (near present-day Hamilton). On 6 June, Vincent ambushed the camp. Although the Americans suffered fewer losses than the British, they ultimately retreated to Fort George.²³

The Americans next attempted to launch a surprise assault on a British detachment led by Lieutenant James FitzGibbon in Beaver Dams. FitzGibbon's men, despite facing a numerically superior force, held firm, and forced the surrender of 484 Americans on 24 June.²⁴ For the remainder of 1813, a stalemate emerged. The Americans could not be ousted from Fort George, but they could not break free from there either.²⁵ With the winter setting in, the Americans decided to abandon Fort George on 10 December, but not before burning down the neighboring town of Newark (present-day Niagara-on-the-Lake).²⁶ The British quickly retaliated. Nine days later, they seized Fort Niagara, the main American garrison directly across the river from Newark.²⁷

1814 witnessed the most devastating battles of the conflict in the region. On the morning of 3 July, the Americans launched an attack on Fort Erie, directly

across the Niagara River from Buffalo. The fort fell by noon. The Americans quickly advanced northward to the village of Chippewa, which they took in a day. At this battle, as American drummer boy James Frary Hanks observed, "British soldiers and officers, who had been victorious at Waterloo, under... Wellington... turned their backs upon the grey-coated American Militia... and fled in terror."²⁸ The British retreated north, with the Americans giving chase.

The two sides ultimately confronted each other at Lundy's Lane near Niagara Falls on 25 July. As American colonel James Miller observed, this battle was "one of the most desperately fought actions ever experienced."²⁹ The Americans, stuck without fresh supplies, eventually retreated south to defend Fort Erie. On 3 August the British launched a retaliatory attack across the Niagara at Black Rock on Conjocta Creek (within present-day northern Buffalo), but they were repelled. The following month the British attacked Fort Erie. Here they succeeded, but only after a two-month siege, and after the retreating American forces blew up the fort. This would be the last significant battle of the war in the region.

²³ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 141.

²⁴ Pierre Berton, *Flames Across the Border: The Canadian-American Tragedy, 1813-1814* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1981), 91.

²⁵ Turner, *The War of 1812*, 77.

²⁶ Graves, *The Battle of Lundy's Lane*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ Donald Graves, ed., *Soldiers of 1814: An Enlisted Men's Memoirs of the Niagara Campaign* (Youngstown, NY: Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc., 1995), 33.

²⁹ Quoted in Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 188.

Long-Term Effects of 1812

Both Canadians and Americans in the years following the conflict experienced waves of nationalism and euphoria, particularly in the Niagara region.³⁰ Yet, its long-term effect on the psyches of the United States and the Niagara Frontier proved fleeting. Quoting American historian Donald Hickey:

The War of 1812 is probably our most obscure war... One reason is that no great president is associated with the conflict... no one like George Washington, Ulysses Grant, or Dwight Eisenhower emerged to put his stamp on this war and to carry the nation to victory. Another reason... is that its causes are shrouded in mystery... The United States has won most of its wars... But the War of 1812 was different. Far from bringing the enemy to terms, the nation was lucky to escape without making extensive concessions itself.³¹

For starters, the war was not popular in many sections of the United States, particularly the northeast. One of its most ardent advocates, local congressman and magnate Peter Porter, observed that, “for God’s sake, arouse and set forth the energies of the entire nation. The poor but patriotic citizens of... the frontiers of New York are... alone called out because their march to the frontier is shorter... while the rich inhabitants of Pennsylvania are lolling in security and ease.”³² Many New Englanders openly advocated either their secession from the United States or the expul-

sion of the western states from the Union if the war continued. In fact, by 1814 several states in New England were so upset with a war that was damaging their trade with Britain that they sent delegates to Hartford, Connecticut to discuss the possibility of seceding from the United States (the so-called Hartford Convention).

Second, no matter what the motivation for the American invasion of the Niagara Peninsula—whether it be to merely hold Canada temporarily as a bargaining chip to force the British into negotiations, as many Americans claim, or as part of the “manifest destiny” of the United States to conquer North America, as many Canadians point to—by any account it was a failure. The American forces were never able to proceed more than forty miles (sixty kilometres) from the border. Every success they had was followed by a major setback. By 1814, the British clearly had the upper hand. They had either burnt or outright occupied most of Western New York. Any American preconceptions that occupying the Peninsula would be “a mere matter of marching,” or that most Canadians would welcome the Americans as liberators, were rapidly dispelled. Perhaps to assuage a wounded pride, a quiet yet deliberate amnesia settled in for most Americans regarding the unsuccessful invasion of Canada, and the War of 1812 in general.

This stands in stark contrast with

³⁰ Turner, *The War of 1812*, 11.

³¹ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 1, 2.

³² Quoted in Turner, *The War of 1812*, 31. Of course, one must consider the source here, for unlike most western New Yorkers, Porter favored the war as a chance to eliminate the competition of the Canadian portage around Niagara Falls to his American route.

the plethora of commemorations of 1812 across the Niagara. Quoting William Kirby, boasting at the unveiling of a monument honouring the war dead at Lundy's Lane in 1895:

'STAND FAST! STAND FAST! STAND FAST!' a mighty cry
 Rang from the British line at Lundy's Lane.
 'CLOSE UP YOUR RANKS! STAND FAST!' the foes again
 Swarm up the hill where our brave colours fly.
 And [British Lt. General] Drummond shouts, 'To conquer or to die.'
 'Mid roar of guns, that rend the heavens in twain,
 Our flashing bayonets back upon the plain
 Hurl down their columns, heaps on heaps they lie;
 And Canada, like Greece at [the Battle of] Marathon,
 Stands victor on the field of freedom won.
 This Pillar fair, of sculpted stone, will show
 Forever, in the light of glory, how
 England and Canada stood fast that night
 At Lundy's Lane, and conquered for the right.³³

According to Wesley Turner,

reaction to the war strongly affected the society and politics of Upper Canada for many years after 1814. Anti-American feelings increased and were combined with a greater sense of patriotism or British-Canadian 'nationalism.' These legacies have faded but not disappeared entirely.³⁴

Consequently, a copious amount of folk-

lore and hero-worship developed out of the exploits of Britons and Canadians in the Region. Issac Brock and Laura Secord (to be discussed in further detail later) have become icons. Battles such as Lundy's Lane, Beaver Dams, and Queenston Heights are essential entries in most national, provincial and local history books.³⁵ Quoting Donald Hickey,

the war... contributed to the growth of Canadian nationalism... in 1812 the various provinces in Canada were little more than the outposts in the British Empire populated by a jarring combination of French-Canadians, native-born British subjects, Loyalists... and Americans... the War of 1812 helped cement these groups into a nation.³⁶

More recently, Canadian Heritage Minister James Moore was quoted as saying that the battles that were fought in the Niagara Region "remind Canadians of the importance of the War of 1812 in the development of Canada... this was the fight for Canada."³⁷

National Icons from the Niagara Region—Canadian vs. American

1. Laura Secord

Almost everywhere in Canada, one encounters the name of Laura Secord. Besides it being attached to a mass

³³ Source: *An Account of the Battle of Lundy's Lane, Fought in 1814, Between the British and the American Armies from the Best and Most Authorised Sources* (Niagara Falls, ON: Niagara Falls Publishers, 1947), 13.

³⁴ *The War of 1812*, 126.

³⁵ It bears worth pointing out here that a popular history on the War of 1812 and its impact on American patriotism was published in 2004. See Borneman, *1812*.

³⁶ *The War of 1812*, 304.

³⁷ "Ottawa to Tread Carefully in War of 1812 Commemorations," in *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 16 July 2011, A13.

chocolatier, Secord is also known as one of Canada's most famous heroines. Her heroic status rests on the widely-accepted story that Secord overheard plans for the impending American ambush of the British-Canadian forces at Beaver Dams. She left her home in Queenston to warn Lt. FitzGibbon of this. As a result of her actions, the planned assault failed. A pamphlet written in 1891 by S.A. Curzon summarizes Secord's actions:

So confident were the Americans of their ultimate success in annexing Canada... that they were heedless of certain precautions in an enemy's country... for hints of the intended night's surprise fell from the lips of certain of the American soldiers in the home of Secord... Secord, rising to the occasion, essayed a task from which strong men might justly shrink... leaving her home, her sick husband and young children... the brave woman set forward on her journey.³⁸

Curzon continues, writing, "there was no reward for Laura Secord, whose self-denying devotion to her king and country led to it. Nor did she look for reward."³⁹ Even today, her trek is commemorated in epic prose. A 2010 travel brochure providing an overview of 1812 historical sites contains the following description:

In June 1813, following the capture of Fort George, American officers were billeted at the Secord home. Laura overheard them talking of their plans for a surprise attack...

She walked from Queenston through St. David's, Homer and Shipman's Corners (now St. Catharines), along the valley of the Twelve Mile Creek, and up the steep Niagara Escarpment to the British headquarters at DeCew House on the west edge of Thorold... FitzGibbon's audacious bluff resulted in victory at the Battle of Beaver Dams, and enshrined him, his Iroquois allies, Laura Secord, and DeCew House in the annals of Canadian history.⁴⁰

But is this an accurate portrait of Ms. Secord? Wesley Turner posits, "historians do not know for certain whether or not her mission affected the battle of Beaver Dams, but she deserves to be known for her loyalty and courage."⁴¹ Pierre Berton goes further. He argues, "Laura's story will be used to underline the growing myth that the War of 1812 was won by true-blue Canadians—in this case a brave Loyalist housewife who single-handedly saved the British army from defeat."⁴² However, when looking at the evidence, Secord herself casts doubt on the full integrity of her story. This is indicated by the fact that she never indicated who told her of the American plans.

On this detail she is vague and contradictory, telling FitzGibbon that her husband learned of it from an American officer; telling her granddaughter, years later, that she herself over-heard it from enemy soldiers who forced her to give them dinner in Queenston. Her exhausting odyssey is even

³⁸ "The Story of Laura Secord – 1813" (Toronto: Williamson and Co., 1891), 10,11,12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14, 15.

⁴⁰ Niagara 1812 Legacy Council, "Bicentennial Map" (2010). It should be pointed out that the Legacy Council is supported by six Canadian governmental bodies, from the national government to the Niagara Region. No American governments are listed as official sponsors.

⁴¹ *The War of 1812*, 73.

⁴² Berton, *Flames Across the Border*, 83.

more baffling because it is undertaken on the most tenuous of evidence—an unsubstantiated rumour... On June 21 the Americans have made no firm plans to attack De Cews... Who are these Americans in Queenston on June 21? They must be [Dr. Cyrenius] Chapin's guerrillas... yet Chapin, by his own statement, knows nothing of any attack of De Cew's.⁴³

Despite this, Secord's story still rallies numerous Canadians. Many travel to the Niagara Peninsula, either to her house or to see numerous plaques and monuments devoted to Secord there, to learn more about her.⁴⁴

Her home is today open to the public, a place where visitors can learn more about "Canada's most famous heroine," according to the museum's official website.⁴⁵ The inconsistencies in her story are by and large overlooked. Rather tellingly, on 20 November of last year, a story ran in *The Buffalo News* on Betsy Doyle, a woman who trekked with her children from Fort Niagara to Albany on foot to escape the invading British/Canadian troops. Three days later, *The National Post* ran a story on Page One entitled "Surprise Attack: U.S. Scholar Takes Shot at Laura Secord." The author of the rejoinder, Randy Boswell, perhaps surprised that an American knew about Ms. Secord, won-

dered, with the discovery of Ms. Doyle's exploits, whether "history enthusiasts [will] be treated to a Laura-vs.-Betsy battle for the title of top heroine" of 1812.⁴⁶ Clearly, for many, the pure and valiant Laura Secord known today cuts an inspirational and symbolic figure, as reflected in her status in local lore then and now.

2. General Sir Issac Brock

There are few figures more celebrated in the Niagara Region than Issac Brock. Many towns throughout the Peninsula in some way honor Brock the "brother-hero," as a 1923 biography of the man deems him.⁴⁷ A major university in St. Catharines bears his name. Most of Brock's fame derives from his capture of Fort Michilimackinac and Detroit in present-day Michigan in the earliest days of the war, but his reputation achieved immortality—at least in Canada and in the Niagara Peninsula—with his heroic death at the Battle of Queenston Heights.

Relics of Brock abound. Replicas of the uniform he wore when he was killed are in museums in Niagara-on-the-Lake and Niagara Falls, and in the Brock University library.⁴⁸ Cameos, medals, locks of his hair, his silhouettes—in short, al-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 83, 84.

⁴⁴ According to Gilbert Collins, the Niagara Peninsula has four museums and monuments that are solely or overwhelmingly dedicated to Laura Secord. Source: *Guidebook*.

⁴⁵ "Laura Secord Homestead," at <http://www.niagaraparks.com/heritage-trail/laura-secord-homestead.html>, accessed 16 January 2012.

⁴⁶ Source: Thomas J. Prohaska, "Battle Shapes Up Over War of 1812 Heroines," in *The Buffalo News*, 11 December 2011.

⁴⁷ Walter Nursey, *The Story of Issac Brock: Hero, Defender and Saviour of Upper Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Publishers, 1923), 172.

⁴⁸ The original is at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

most anything that can be considered a depiction or an effect of the general are displayed throughout the Region. Walter Nursey's biography of Brock glorifies the general in numerous passages:

Not until every boy in Canada is thoroughly familiar with 'Master Issac's' achievement will he be qualified to exclaim...'THIS IS A MAN.' (8)

[Canadian] yeomen forsook ploughshare and broadaxe, seized sword and musket, and rallied to the standard of Brock (98)

[His last words were] 'my fall must not be noticed, nor impede my brave companions from advancing to victory.' (181)

Brock's life... kindled an unexpressed determination to follow his high example and cultivate the nobler purposes of life... [his] high manliness, fixity of purpose, and well-ordered courage and defence of the right. (201)⁴⁹

Brock died only four months into the war. However, via the efforts of Nursey and others, the British general became "the saviour of Upper Canada."

However, is this Brock more fiction than fact? Much evidence points to the romanticizing of his life. Ontarian historian Ludwig Kosche has uncovered only two portraits that are actually of the general. He argues that a locket housed in the special collections at the Brock University library is actually a cameo portrait of Brock's older brother, James. Kosche also discounts many other portraits of

the general.⁵⁰ Interestingly, other historians rejected one of the two portraits he identified as genuine because it shows a gargantuan, obese man with facial blemishes. This image does not fit with the heroic, gallant Brock commemorated ever since his death.⁵¹

Along the same lines, there is a great deal of controversy surrounding the general's last words and his military prowess. The *Kingston Gazette* published an account of his death that shares no dissimilarity with Nursey's account:

General Brock; watchful as he was brave, soon appeared in the midst of his troops, ever obedient to his call, and whom [he] loved with the adoration of a father, but, alas! Whilst collecting, arranging, forming, and cheering his brave followers, that great commander gloriously fell when preparing for his victory—'Push on, brave York volunteers,' being then near him, they were the last words of the dying hero—Inhabitants of Upper Canada, in the day of battle *remember Brock*.⁵²

This glosses over the fact that his old battalion, the 49th Regiment, surrounded him when he died, not a volunteer Canadian militia.⁵³ Local historian Robert Malcomson mentions "some accounts of Issac Brock's death state he was able to speak to his troops before he died. Perhaps he did, but there is no doubt that his death came quickly."⁵⁴ Additionally, there is the logistical question of Brock's charge against the American-held Nia-

⁴⁹ Nursey, *Story of Issac Brock*.

⁵⁰ "Contemporary Portraits of Issac Brock: An Analysis," in *Archivaria* 20 (September 1985), 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵² Quoted in Berton, *The Invasion of Canada*, 252, 253.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁵⁴ *Burying General Brock: A History of Brock's Monuments* (St. Catharine's, Ontario, Canada: Peninsula Press, 1996), 34.

gara Escarpment (locally called Queenston Heights). The Americans, atop the bluffs, were able to mow down the British troops who were scaling the heights, troops Brock led into a dangerous situation. Wesley Turner states “[Brock’s successor Roger] Sheaffe actually won the battle, but this achievement was overshadowed by Brock’s foolishly heroic charge that led to his death.”⁵⁵

Lastly, there is the question of his true loyalty to the nation and region that adores him today. Pierre Berton comments on the transformation of Brock as follows:

The picture of Brock storming the heights at Queenston, urging on the brave York Volunteers, and saving Canada in the process is the one that will remain with the fledgling nation. He is the first Canadian war hero, an Englishman who hated the provincial confines of the Canadas, who looked with disdain on the civilian leaders, who despised democracy, the militia and the Indians, and who could hardly wait to shake the Canadian mud from his boots and bid goodbye to York, Fort George, Quebec, and all the stuffy garrison town inbetween. None of this matters.⁵⁶

All of this can be rewritten. Brock’s death sealed his image as a hero, one that could be used—and manipulated—as Canadian and regional priorities did. Berton

continues:

By Confederation [1867], the field on which he and McLean did battle has become, in the words of the *Canadian Monthly*, ‘one of Canada’s sacred places’ and the battle, in the description of the Canadian nationalist George Denison, is ‘Canada’s glorious Thermopylae.’ So Brock in death is as valuable... as Brock in life. He will not be remembered for his real contribution to the country... When Canadians hear his name, as they often will over the years, the picture that will form in their minds will be of that final impetuous dash, splendidly heroic but tragically foolish, up the slippery heights of Queenston on a gloomy October morning.⁵⁷

3. American Heroes?

Unsurprisingly, no American hero, military or civilian, emerges out of 1812 from the Niagara Frontier.⁵⁸ Even the re-discovery of Betsy Doyle’s exploits were a surprise to local scholars, and certainly to the people of the Niagara Frontier. There are numerous reasons for this. One is the aforementioned focus of most American histories of the war on victories elsewhere, notably in naval battles on Lakes Erie and Ontario and the defenses of Baltimore and New Orleans from British attack.⁵⁹ Ask many Canadians about Oliver Hazard Perry’s victory in the Battle of Lake Erie or Andrew Jackson and the Battle of

⁵⁵ *The War of 1812*, 53.

⁵⁶ Berton, *The Invasion of Canada*, 253.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁸ Perhaps the most famous American general who saw action in the Niagara region was Winfield Scott. However, his fame mostly derives from his exploits as one of two US generals commanding invading forces in the Mexican-American War; few Americans would place him as a veteran of 1812.

⁵⁹ An article that deals with monuments to the War of 1812 in Baltimore, and the huge outpouring of support and pride they engendered upon their construction, is Mary P. Ryan’s “Democracy Rising: The Monuments of Baltimore, 1809-1842,” in the *Journal of Urban History*, 36:2 (2010), 127-50.

New Orleans and one will likely get the same blank stare that the mention of Issac Brock or Laura Secord would elicit in the US. Additionally, the War of 1812, and the Niagara campaign especially, is not as central to American and New York State memory. Americans by and large neither gained nor lost anything from the war, except arguably additional respect in European circles. Even when heroes from 1812 are acknowledged, such as Jackson, Perry, William Henry Harrison or Zachary Taylor, their fame occurred at battles far removed from the Niagara theatre.⁶⁰ Thus, the Niagara Frontier cannot offer up a heroic equivalent of a Brock or a Secord.

The War of 1812 in the Niagara Peninsula Today

1. Fort George, Niagara-on- the-Lake, Ontario

Fort George, arguably the crown jewel of the War of 1812 museums in the Niagara Region, is owned and operated by Parks Canada as a National Historic Site. The first fort, built between 1796 and 1802, was destroyed by the Americans in 1812. It was rebuilt in 1813 by the Americans as a base for their Canadian operations. This second incarnation

would not last. It was abandoned in the 1820s, in favor of the more strategic (and closer to Toronto) Fort Mississauga. Fort George quickly decayed. Due to growing public interest in 1812 and in historic tourism, however, the Canadian government restored it to its original specifications in the 1930s. It opened to visitors in 1950.

The main aim of Fort George, according to local Parks Canada superintendent Ron Dale, is to tell the “story” of 1812.⁶¹ He attributes this to the short lifespan of the fort. He stated that if Fort George had been functional for a longer period of time, then it would probably tell a broader story than it now does. He also points out that all sides that took part in the war—British, Canadian, First Nations, and American—are represented in the exhibits there. However, Dale admits that 1812 is what brings visitors to the fort.

The guide directing visitors through the fort depicts the war from a British/Canadian perspective. The large Union Jack flying from the center of the fort (the only flag flown) is clearly visible from across the Niagara. The guide has a stylized portrait of Brock on its cover—although Brock never personally commanded the fort. The first page sets the tone of the fort’s exhibits.

⁶⁰ “War of 1812 Anniversary Poses Dilemma,” in the *Lawrence Journal World* (Kansas), 3 October 2011, accessed on line at <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2011/oct/03/war-1812-anniversary-poses-dilemma>, accessed 16 January 2012.

⁶¹ The fact that Fort George is run by Parks Canada as a national historical site is rather telling of the importance of 1812 and the Niagara Region to local, state/provincial and national public history. In contrast, Old Fort Niagara, the leading (and only) rebuilt fort in the Niagara Frontier (to be discussed in further detail below), is run by a private self-funding local organization, only in conjunction with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historical Preservation.

This guide will introduce you to a major British fort on the Niagara frontier as it prepared for war with the United States nearly two hundred years ago. In defending against invasion, Fort George helped prevent the Niagara area, and indeed all of British North America, from falling into the hands of the Americans during the War of 1812.⁶²

Throughout the self-guided tour, there is no mention of the American conquest and occupation of Fort George.

At times the story of the fort changes. In one of the blockhouses, a plaque reads: “The [Canadian] militia was composed of civilians and served as an auxiliary force... With only 1200 British soldiers in Upper Canada, the militia was needed to insure the protection of the province’s 80,000 inhabitants. When the War of 1812 broke out, the militia was ready.” The plaque connotes that the militia were housed in the fort. (In reality, they lived at home nearby.) Yet another plaque, in a different blockhouse, asserts “the declaration of war in 1812 posed several logistical problems for the defence of Canada. Along the Niagara frontier, the limited number of British troops and Canadian militia were strategically located to protect an extensive and exposed border.” Therefore, we have a “ready” militia that faced “several logistical problems.” Yet Fort George is characterized as an “imposing new fort” in another Parks Canada brochure, one entrusted (along with several others) for defending an “extensive and exposed border.” Such inconsistencies may leave the

visitor a bit perplexed. These contradictions are consistent, however, with the local and national mythology surrounding 1812, when a small and far-from-homogenous nation (as Berton pointed out) bravely banded together against all odds in order to defeat the larger, more powerful and united Americans.

Dale explains that the fort toes a tight line in what it is commemorating and what it is celebrating. He points out that most nations want to celebrate their national victories, and forget or ignore their defeats. The history of Fort George is notably ambiguous in this regard. For most of the war, the fort was in the hands of the Americans. Its return to British control came not from a gallant storming of the walls, but by default, despite the fact that the Parks Canada website for Fort George points out that it “was retaken in December.”⁶³ The record of the fort between 1812 and 1814 does not recommend it as a place to commemorate a triumph. That said, its dramatic location above the Niagara River, clearly visible from the U.S., lends the fort a certain physical *gravitas* that masks these losses.

These inconsistencies are manifestations of the tensions behind the messages the fort and its exhibits attempt to impart, and how they are in turn reflective of broader conflicts within Canadian history as a whole. Fort George, importantly, is a Parks Canada museum. Its *raison d’être* stems from how the fort and the events that took place there are instru-

⁶² Parks Canada, “Fort George National Historic Site Walking Tour” (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1999), 1.

⁶³ <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/on/fortgeorge/index.aspx>, accessed 11 June 2011.

mental in creating the story of Canada as a whole. Thus, Parks Canada is well aware of the centrality of Fort George to creating and maintaining its place in the greater, victorious, and celebratory local and national historical narrative.

2. Old Fort Erie, Fort Erie, Ontario

Fort Erie, some 25 miles (41 kilometres) southeast of Fort George, is also a museum. Unlike Fort George, Fort Erie is maintained by the Niagara Parks Commission, run by the Province of Ontario. According to Bill Colclough, the former collections specialist for the fort, the structure the visitor sees today is actually a mix of architectural styles. It has to be, because the fort was only partially completed when the American army seized it in 1814, and it was blown up shortly before they departed. The two prominent redoubts behind the fort did not exist during the War of 1812—they are an addition inspired by American military

technology from that time. The officers' and soldiers' quarters, however, are British in style. Additionally, the drawbridge that serves as the entrance to the fort was added for effect years later. A plaque within the fort reads, "It is doubtful that a draw bridge originally existed at Fort Erie because standard methods of construction [at the time] tended to produce truss bridges." The fort contains numerous other anachronisms. The artillery stocks in the south quarter building of the fort are from the 1870s. Also, the heavy cannon pointing at the United States at the entrance to the fort (in front of the drawbridge) is actually Russian; the British captured it in the Crimean War.

Barring this, Colclough states that the displays in Fort Erie "try to be fair to all three sides [counting the British]." Most of the displays are centered on the role Fort Erie played in the war. In the main displays upstairs, the visitor is immediately confronted with two display cases—one showcasing the Stars and Stripes, the other the Union Jack. The



Above: Old Fort Erie. Right: The memorial to the officer killed during the siege of Fort Erie, including Col. Scott and Lt. Cols. William Drummond and John Gordon. Photos by the author.

display case dedicated to the Americans at the fort contains the following summary:

The Army of the United States in 1812 was relatively young and still heavily influenced by the ideas and leaders of the American Revolution. Throughout the war, the United States was able to field an army larger than the British forces in North America. However, the first two years of the war were a disaster and a series of invasion attempts were defeated by British, Canadian and Native forces... It was not until July 5th, 1814 at the Battle of Chippewa... where fellow [Indian] warriors are actually fighting each other... that the US army experienced victory on an open field, in a foreign country, against equal numbers, when it beat a British brigade in a pinched battle. The Battle of Lundy's Lane and the Siege of Fort Erie were indecisive and costly for the American war effort but no one could question the leadership, discipline and fighting skill of the United States army.

Not only is there a recognition that First Nations fought for the Americans as well as the Canadians, but next to this case lies one that articulates the British/Canadian perspective:

The British Army of 1812 had been established since the 1680s and had its own long-standing regimental traditions. It was stationed around the world to protect the British Empire, and Canada was just one theatre of war. The main focus of the British Army at this time was in Europe against the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte. In July of 1812 there were only 1200 British soldiers in Upper Canada defending a 1500 km frontier and British commanders had to rely on local militia troops and Native allies. By July

of 1814 there were over 3000 British troops defending the Niagara River alone, but they were still outnumbered by the enemy... The campaign along the 'Niagara' was as bloody as any in Europe but it is only remembered as an obscure battle honour of the Regiments back home.

The two views are apparently neutral and self-critical in nature. In fact, one of the main displays at the fort deals with the discovery of the buried corpses of American soldiers at Snake Hill (.25 miles or .4 kilometres from Fort Erie) in 1988. This display was created in Buffalo and was exhibited at the Buffalo Marina before making its way across the Niagara.

Yet even here, visitors get the sense of the prominent role that Fort Erie and the Niagara Region as a whole played in the War of 1812 fits in an overall triumphal narrative in Canadian history. According to the 2010-11 Fort Erie (Ontario) Visitors Guide, "The War of 1812 was the first of many important steps in creating the independent Canada that we know today. Much of the war was fought in the Niagara/Fort Erie area and Old Fort Erie was the site of the bloodiest battle on Canadian soil in our history."⁶⁴

3. Brock's Monument and Queenston Heights, Queenston, Ontario

"[Visit the] resting place of Major-General Sir Issac Brock, saviour of Upper Canada." This proclamation, in a Parks Canada brochure, sums up the significance of not only the man, but also the monument to

⁶⁴ "Fort Erie, 2010-2011 Visitors Guide" (Thorold, ON: Niagara This Week, 2009), 23.



The Brock monument as a twentieth-century tourist attraction. (Courtesy of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 972.275.26b)

Niagara Escarpment, where the Battle of Queenston Heights was waged. It was intentionally massive because, to quote a Parks Canada pamphlet, the monument and the battlefield are “instrumental in demonstrating the determination of the Crown and the populace to defend British North America, and in contributing to the development of Canadian national consciousness.”⁶⁶

Ironically, the monument crowns the heights that Brock himself died trying to capture. Today, this entire area, like Fort George, is a National Historical Site. There is a walking tour around the Heights, with five stops that commemorate different aspects of the battle. The official description of the Battle of Queenston Heights, as listed on the Parks Canada website for Brock’s Monument, is almost as epic as the general himself:

All seemed lost for the British until General Sheaffe, summoned from Fort George, marched with his men of the 41st Regiment, militia and Native forces and gained the rear of the Heights. With one line charge the Americans were routed. This tactical movement ensured a victory for the British and gave the inhabitants of Upper Canada new hope and commitment to the British cause.⁶⁷

A plaque on the wall that surrounds the monument employs similar language. It

him. Visitors to Brock’s Monument may be amazed at the sheer scale of the monument, considering the rural setting of Queenston. Indeed, its height of 56 metres/185 feet—at the time of its construction the second tallest structure of its kind in the world—was intentional.⁶⁵ It was to be a permanent reminder of British patriotism to Canadians and to the Americans across the river in Lewiston, who could clearly see the monument. (Just as the Union Jack that flies over Fort George can be seen across the river today as well.) The statue sits atop a massive limestone column, which itself is above a large base that contains a museum dedicated to the general. Beneath that base is Brock’s final resting place. All of this crowns the

⁶⁵ Robert Malcomson, *Burying General Brock: A History of Brock’s Monuments* (St. Catharines, ON: Peninsula Press, 1996), 9.

⁶⁶ “Experience the National Parks, National Historic Sites and National Marine Conservation Areas in Ontario,” at www.parkscanada.gc.ca, accessed 7 July 2011.

⁶⁷ “Brock’s Monument History,” at <http://www.niagaraparks.com/heritage-trail/brocks-monument.html>, accessed 19 July 2010.

reads:

The village below you and the heights on which you are standing were the stage for the famous battle of Queenston Heights. It took place during the Anglo-American conflict 1812-1815 known as the War of 1812. During the early morning hours of October 13, 1812 an American invasion force camped at Lewiston crossed the Niagara River and gained control of the heights of Queenston. After many hours of fierce combat, they were crushed by a combined force of British regulars, Canadian militia and Indian warriors. This victory had a great significance. It prevented for sometime the Americans from establishing a foothold in Canada and it inspired confidence in Canadians that they could defend an immense territory despite their meagre human and material resources.⁶⁸

Surrounding the monument is a self-guided walking tour, with five stops. The plaques that mark these pauses are titled “The Attack,” “A Treacherous River Cliff,” “The Capture of the Redan and the Death of Brock,” “The Counter Offensive Takes Shape” and “The Decisive Battle.” By their language, these markers are all monuments to British/Canadian perseverance in the face of an American onslaught. Despite the immediate loss of the Heights, the plaques reveal that a combined multinational and multiethnic alliance ambushed the invaders from behind and captured 925 Americans. The massive memorial and the commemorative plaques combine to convey to their audience a pride in the victory achieved by their diverse forces—both then and now—over the monolithic American in-

vaders.

4. Lundy’s Lane Battlefield and Historical Museum, Niagara Falls, Ontario

Unlike the aforementioned battlefields and memorials, there is no park or museum solely dedicated to the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, the largest battle in the Niagara Region based on numbers of combatants. This is most likely due to the fact that Lundy’s Lane today is the main commercial street of Niagara Falls. The most extensive commemoration of the battle is the Drummond Hill Cemetery, which sits atop part of the battleground overlooking the city. This cemetery has many small monuments to both Canadian and American wounded. Most of the tombstones, especially those of an earlier age, express British-Canadian views of the conflict. One monument, dedicated to British Lieutenant General Sir Gordon Drummond, bears an inscription that reads:

throughout the previous night this hill had been taken and retaken in the bloodiest, most hard fought battle of the War of 1812-14... The Americans, exhausted, withdrew to Fort Erie... Drummond and his troops had successfully maintained British sovereignty in the Niagara Peninsula.

Another monument, tying the story of Laura Secord with the “against-all-odds” story, proclaims:

To Perpetuate the Name and Fame of Laura Secord, who walked alone nearly 20 miles

⁶⁸ “The Battle of Queenston Heights,” at <http://www.niagaraparks.com/heritage-trail/historic-plaques-markers.html>, accessed 20 July 2010.

by a circuitous and perilous route through woods and swamps and over miry roads to warn a British outpost at De Cew's Falls of an intended attack and thereby enabled Lt. FitzGibbon on the 24th June 1813 with less than 50 men of H.M. 49th Regiment, about 15 militiamen and a small number of Six Nation and other Indians under Captains William Johnson Kerr and Dominique Ducharme to surprise and attack the enemy at Beachwoods (or Beaver Dams) and after a short engagement to capture Col. Boerstler of the US Army and his entire force of 542 men with two field pieces.

Even the dead raise their voices in telling the living their story of events; in this respect, a story that bolsters British-Canadian pride.

Just down Lundy's Lane lay the Lundy's Lane Historical Society. This name is somewhat of a misnomer; the museum focuses on the history of Niagara Falls overall rather than the battle/street. Consequently, the War of 1812 is confined to a third of the ground floor. This museum shows the war from a pro-British viewpoint; a giant Union Jack serves as the backdrop for the exhibit. Most of the display centers on Brock. A replica of his field jacket is proudly displayed, along with other reported personal effects of the general (a medallion, a miniature Brock and a lock of hair being the most notable examples).

Unlike the other municipalities where the aforementioned commemorations are located, Niagara Falls is significantly less dependent economically on historical tourism. Thus, like the Ameri-

cans across the river, many of whom cross the Niagara to visit the city's many non-1812-related tourist attractions, the city contains way fewer blatant commemorations of a Canadian "victory" in the war that might alienate visitors. Unlike the Niagara Frontier, however, this story is by no means almost altogether absent—it is just harder to locate. Both the cemetery and the society recast 1812 to promote local, provincial and national pride—just in a more circumspect manner and one in line with the city's self-conscious image as a family-friendly tourist destination, one that attracts many Americans and Canadians alike.

The War of 1812 in Western New York Today

1. Old Fort Niagara, Youngstown, New York

Old Fort Niagara, situated where the Niagara River empties into Lake Ontario, is one of the premier military museums in Western New York.⁶⁹ The fort has a long and turbulent history. In 1678, the French established a temporary garrison; a permanent fort was constructed in 1726. However, this fort was built more for commercial than military reasons; it was an entrepôt for trade with various Indian nations in the area and beyond. The fort remained under French rule until 1759, when it fell to the British after an eighteen-day-long siege during the French and Indian/Seven Years War.

⁶⁹ Unlike the recreations across the river, Fort Niagara is owned and operated by the Old Fort Niagara Association, a not-for-profit private concern.

The British possessed the fort through and beyond the American Revolution; it was not relinquished to the Americans until 1796. It saw little action until 1812. On 19 December 1813, however, a British force captured the fort in a surprise attack.⁷⁰ For the remainder of the war, the British used Fort Niagara to launch raiding parties throughout Western New York. After the Treaty of Ghent was signed, the fort was transformed into a barracks. It was expanded in preparation for the American Civil War, yet it never saw any further military action.

The history of the fort is important. For starters, it provides quite the contrast to its counterparts across the river. The Historic New York plaque that welcomes visitors to the fort barely mentions 1812. It focuses instead on its French origins and the Anglo-French tensions indicated above.⁷¹ It reads:

following an American invasion of Canada in the War of 1812, British forces captured Fort Niagara on December 19, 1813. The peace treaty of 1814 returned the fort to the United States. Old Fort Niagara stands today as a memorial to soldiers who served here under three flags.

1812 is reduced to a mere phase in the fort's history, rather than its *raison d'être*. Also, the last sentence indicates that fort depicts itself as it was under "three flags"

—the French, the British and the American. Indeed, all three flags fly over the fort—in contrast to the sole Union Jack towering over Fort George.

Eric Bloomquist, interpreter programs manager at the fort, elaborates. He states that the fort purposely does not focus on 1812 to avoid duplication, because the Canadian forts already cover it. Also, he notes that most visitors are more interested in the American Revolution and the French and Indian/Seven Years War, so it concentrates on those events. Indeed, the fort's exhibits are designed so that the visitor puts 1812 in a broader military context that spans three centuries. An example of this is the powder magazine. Only one case out of nineteen concentrates on the conflict. This downplaying of the significance of 1812 to the Niagara Frontier is embedded in its Statement of Purpose. The brief document announces that the "education function" of the museum is "to foster, encourage and promote a deeper understanding of Old Fort Niagara and its significance to the history of the Niagara Frontier, the State of New York, the United States, and Canada."⁷²

The main exhibit of the fort is the "French Castle," a three-story testament to the French presence in the region. It contains recreations of a Catholic chapel, a boulangerie, and a trading room. The

⁷⁰ As Eric Bloomquist, the fort's interpretative programs manager, told me, the British learned the American access codes to the fort after capturing an American soldier who was occupying an outhouse. In addition, both armies wore the same grey coats and had similar accents, so it was easy for the British troops to pass as American soldiers. This piece of information is important in light of the purportedly unique "dress grays" touted by the U.S. Military Academy mentioned earlier in this article.

⁷¹ It should be pointed out here that none of the museums, battlefields and plaques that commemorate the War of 1812 in the Niagara Frontier are established or run by the US federal government; they are entirely state or local in nature.

⁷² "Support Fort Niagara," at <http://oldfortniagara.org/support/ofna.php>, accessed 9 January 2012.

monuments around the fort largely celebrate its French founders. Additionally, in stark contrast to Canadian depictions of the conflict, there is no sense of any multi-ethnic contribution to the “home” troops. African-American and First Nations are conspicuously absent from this recreation, in line with a supposedly more American tendency towards a homogenous identity and historiography. The one notable memorial in the fort that deals with US-Canadian relations celebrates the Rush-Bagot Treaty of 1819 that essentially demilitarized the Great Lakes. Tellingly, the website of Old Fort Niagara touts on its homepage touts that the fort “played an important role in the struggles of France, Great Britain, and the United States to control the Great Lakes region of North America, and also helped shape the destinies of the Iroquois (Six Nations) peoples and the nation of Canada.”⁷³ This statement epitomizes the museum’s mission of subsuming the fort’s involvement in 1812 within a broader narrative, of downplaying the conflict in favour of focusing on the French and Indian/Seven Years War, and on creating an image of “neighbourliness” that stresses the shared history and experiences of the Niagara region.

It is worth noting that, in stark contrast with the museums, monuments and battlefields along the Canadian side of the Niagara, Old Fort Niagara is owned by the State of New York, although its administration is handled by an entirely

private venture, the Old Fort Niagara Association. According to information provided on its website, the Association is “almost entirely self-funding.” The park does not receive public assistance from the federal government or the State of New York Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, outside of competitive grants.⁷⁴ Rather tellingly, on 1 January 2012, to commemorate the commencement of celebrations commemorating the bicentennial of the conflict, cannon fire was exchanged between Old Fort Niagara and Fort George. While Fort George was open all day to mark the occasion, Old Fort Niagara was closed to the public.⁷⁵

2. War of 1812 Cemetery, Town of Cheektowaga, New York

Most people in Western New York, if asked, might not know that there is a cemetery in their midst dedicated solely to honoring the veterans of 1812. Part of this is due to its location. The War of 1812 Cemetery is located on a small plot of land in an industrial part of the town of Cheektowaga behind the Buffalo International Airport. Unlike the Drummond Hill Cemetery, it has no individual monuments. It contains twenty-one wooden crosses, and a cannon in its center. On the cannon is a plaque that celebrates the friendship between Cana-

⁷³ “Old Fort Niagara,” at <http://oldfortniagara.org>, accessed 16 January 2012.

⁷⁴ Source: “Support Fort Niagara,” accessed 9 January 2012.

⁷⁵ “New York, Ontario Sites to Kick off War of 1812 Events,” in *The Buffalo News*, 29 December 2011, accessed via www.buffalonews.com, accessed 16 January 2012.



The War of 1812 cemetery in the Town of Cheektowaga, New York. Photo by the author.

da and the United States.

This cemetery is no bigger than a fifth of an acre. There is no clearly visible indication that it honors the veterans of 1812. This commemoration is in line with American depictions of the war itself in the region. It is a small memorial, practically buried in a remote part of Cheektowaga, without any plaque or monument that would attract public attention to the site. The statement attached to the cannon, like the monument at Fort Niagara, highlights the friendship between Canada and the US.

3. Museums?

These are about the only two popular non-plaque depictions of 1812 in Western New York. Surprisingly, the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, the main history museum in the city of Buffalo, *did not have one single exhibit* that dealt with the conflict as of May 2010. The burning of Buffalo, the aborted invasion of Black Rock in 1814 by British

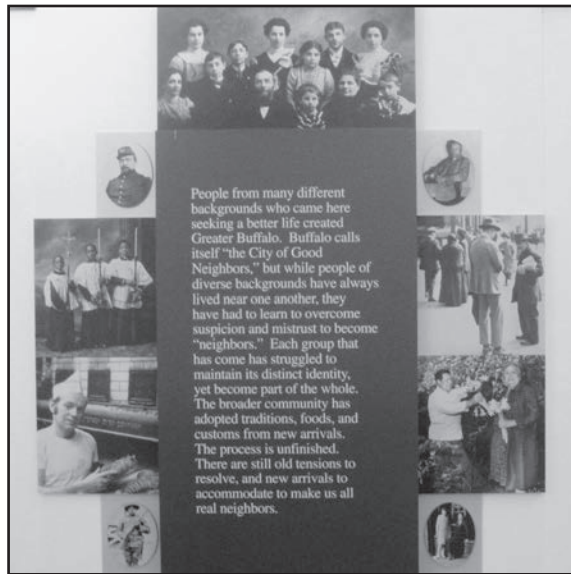
forces, the training of American troops by Winfield Scott, the area's importance as a staging ground for invasions of Canadian territory—none of these are commemorated. Throughout Western New York, there are scant reminders a war was even fought in this region. Unlike across the river, there is not a single historical site in the region owned by the National Park Service or another branch of the U.S. federal government that deals with 1812. (In fact, the only National Historic Site in the region is the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site, which commemorates a period in time when the city of Buffalo was at its most triumphal.) Additionally, there is a noticeable absence of Historical New York plaques that deal with the conflict, and not a single national commemoration of the conflict. Most of the old forts in New York long ago returned to the soil. Museums routinely ignore the conflict in their collections. Commemorations, where they exist in the Niagara Frontier, focus on the friendship between

Museum labels in Buffalo seldom speak of the War of 1812, but only of neighbourliness. Photo by the author.

the two nations, instead of dwelling on a nasty conflict that meant little, from an American point of view.

Conclusions

The oral historian Alessandro Portelli once remarked that “war myths and war narratives are one way of shaping ideas of manhood and identity.”⁷⁶ Both parts of the Niagara region have their reasons for presenting their unique versions of the War of 1812. One of these is tourism. The Niagara Region is a major tourist destination. Besides Niagara Falls, the Peninsula also crafted another attraction to lure visitors. 1812 is naturally focused on as a source of pride that can be publicly depicted from a British-Canadian perspective. This can be contrasted with the United States, which on the whole has numerous key battlefields from the American Revolution and the American Civil War that it can commemorate in a more “glorious” fashion. Indeed, as Donald Graves laments, “the Civil War sounded the death knell for the [observation] tower operators [at Lundy’s Lane] as American tourists now had more recent, and closer, battlefields to visit.”⁷⁷ The monuments and plaques in the Niagara Region reflect a vision of history that many Canadians want to hear. Noted American historian Eric



Foner remarked that Friedrich Nietzsche once said, “[there are] three approaches to history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical (the last defined as ‘the history that judges and condemns’). Nearly all historical monuments, of course, are meant to be flattering to their subjects... But one can expect accuracy and honesty, and... much of our public history fails.”⁷⁸

From the same conflict, both Canada and the US constructed divergent histories to serve particular local and national interests. As cultural historian Carl E. Schorske noted when he studied the reconstruction of Vienna in the late 1800s, the newly ascendant liberal elites “projected their image” of the modern city

no less consciously than the managers of the Chase Manhattan Bank... proclaimed their character in what they called the ‘soar-

⁷⁶ *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), xi.

⁷⁷ *The Incredible War*, 247.

⁷⁸ *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 29.



As W.H. Barlett's 1840 painting makes clear, Brock's monument was created to be seen prominently from the American side of the river.

ing angularity' of their New York modular skyscraper. The practical objectives which redesigning the city might accomplish were firmly subordinated to the symbolic representation of function.

Schorske further observes that, through this deliberate incorporation of an upper-class liberal aesthetic into the inner city of Vienna, "Ringstrasse Vienna' has become a concept to Austrians, equivalent to the notion 'Victorians' to Englishmen, *Gründerzeit* to Germans, or 'Second Empire' to the French," instilling the lessons and mindsets intended by their architects broadly defined into passersby.⁷⁹

This is no less true in how the War of 1812 is depicted in the Niagara re-

gion. Both Canada and the United States chose different battles and locations from which to construct their "histories." For many Canadians, the Niagara Peninsula has been transformed into a center of regional and national pride. Military leaders, troops and battles from the war are feted and events commemorated in a celebratory manner. Across the river, the Niagara Frontier has largely downplayed or deleted its role in the very same conflict, in line with both the national and local general amnesia surrounding the War of 1812 and the region's self-conceptualization as a "good neighbour."

All of this is even reflected in the

⁷⁹ *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 24-26.

amount of public resources granted to commemorate the war's bicentennial. The Canadian Government has earmarked \$28 million dollars to fund up to one hundred different reenactments and other public commemorations. Its American counterpart, on the contrary, has offered no public assistance for the bicentennial, nor has the state of New York, nor has Erie County, the home of Buffalo. Niagara County, New York has authorized \$37,500 to give to Old Fort Niagara to help commemorate the bicentennial, but only out of monies generated from the casinos within the county.⁸⁰ The governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, said that in vetoing the creation of a state bicentennial commission, that "although cultural and historical tourism is an important industry, the Commission's activities are estimated to cost the State over \$350,000 annually, and \$1.4 million over the lifetime of the Commission."⁸¹ In fact, Keith Herkalo, the president of the Battle of Plattsburgh Association, an organization that honours an American victory over the British in another theatre in New York State, is planning on asking for financial assistance from the state of Maryland, which has authorized a War

of 1812 Bicentennial Commission and earmarked up to \$25,000,000 to promote the war. The mission statement of the commission is to celebrate "a multi-year cultural tourism and educational initiative to commemorate Maryland's unique contributions to the defense and heritage of the nation including the pivotal clash that ensured American victory, an iconic flag, and our national anthem, The Star-Spangled Banner."⁸² Unlike the Niagara Frontier, the State of Maryland, far removed from the Canadian border, closer to the economic and political centre of the United States, and with concrete victories over the British to celebrate, commemorated in the American national anthem, has concrete reasons to memorialize and perpetuate its role in 1812, for reasons similar to those operating in the Niagara Peninsula.

The differing attitudes between these entities in how they should publicly commemorate the War of 1812 reveal how governments, museums and even individuals in the Niagara region, using the same corpus of knowledge, have used and manipulated it not only to serve, but also to create, significant local, state/provincial and national identities.

⁸⁰ "For War of 1812 Bicentennial, Indifference from Albany," in *The New York Times*, 24 November 2011, A30; "War of 1812 Has Lots of Connections to Us," in the *Lockport Union-Sun and Journal* (New York), 17 December 2011, at <http://lockportjournal.com/local/x907914608/War-of-1812-has-lots-of-connections-to-us>, accessed 16 January 2012.

⁸¹ "Governor Vetoes War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission," from WRGZ-TV (Buffalo, New York), 27 September 2011, at <http://niagarafalls.wgrz.com/news/news/59570-gov-vetoes-war-1812-bicentennial-commission>, accessed 22 January 2012.

⁸² "War of 1812 Bicentennial"; "Star Spangled 200: Official Website of the Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission," at <http://starspangled200.org/About/Pages/Welcome.aspx>, accessed 22 January 2012.