

WHAT IF THE AMERICANS HAD WON THE WAR OF 1812?

by christine darragh

History is riddled with significant circumstances never expected, seldom anticipated, but always enlightening. It's true the course of history has been known to turn on a dime. Or, as we find here in these writings on the War of 1812: a prophetic walk to alert a command post, an untimely illness before shipping off to the front lines, a strategic decision to limit the number of militia, and a refusal to admit defeat long after troops have left the battlefield.

But first, a little background. The War of 1812 has become a war remembered mostly by Canadians. It is generally regarded only in passing by the British, who were busy fighting Napoleon in France at the time. Same thing with the Americans, who do not consider it momentous when compared to their Revolutionary War. It would be fair to say its identifiable historical importance has somewhat faded over time, perhaps due to one main outcome: it simply resulted in a stalemate. Nothing really gained, nothing really lost.

The Treaty of Ghent, signed December 24, 1814 by negotiators in the neutral Belgium city of the same name, merely served to reinstate the status quo, dividing territories between Canada and the U.S. along boundaries exactly as they had been before the war started. By the time news of the pact made its way across the Atlantic and eventually to the battlefield in February 1815, the final Battle of New Orleans had been decisively won by the Americans, but had been fought for virtually no reason. ›

T

his was the culmination of a two-and-a-half-century military analyst Carl von Clausewitz called “the fog of war.” In spite of this, Canada is usually viewed as victor, since they won no real overall progress by either militia or army. Living in the Niagara Region, we are surrounded by military campaigns of the war, the Americans sacked in York, capital of Upper Canada (now Toronto), and burned the parliament buildings as they invaded. In June, it will be just one year from the bicentennial of the beginning of the War of 1812. Consequently, in anticipation of the wide range of planned programs and activities intended to raise our awareness of the war’s significance, we asked local historians for insight into an interesting, “What if the Americans had won?”

An undeniable fact, however, is that the conflict sparked the first fires of nationhood on both sides of the border. For Canadians, a war that initially offered solidarity with the British Empire to help defend colonial interests, ended in a newfound sense of honour and pride for their efforts to protect themselves. Rough warfare they had gained an important individuality from Britain, and the war helped galvanize a feeling of autonomy that only continued to grow in the next decades.

Stateside, the end of combat proved to be a critical psychological turning point for the United States. Emboldened by the confidence of organized military might and power, they forged a new idealism that truly united separate states for the first time under the same national flag. By their account, they had fought twice now for their independence, once again resisting a second attempt of British rule. Banding together in a democracy, they would no longer be subservient to anyone.

North American native peoples were not so fortunate. Tribes saw the war as a means to secure their territories and ways of life in areas not yet completely settled in the new frontier. And the majority fighting alongside the British allies to guarantee continuous supplies and weapons against hostile American encroachment, they gained absolutely nothing tangible for their involvement at war’s end. They would continue to witness their land stripped unceremoniously from them by both colonial tries over ensuing years. Sadly, First Nations are often forgotten victims in the conflict and have most painfully felt its ramifications afterward.

Following almost two hundred years, judging clear winners with Chauncey’s help, Brown was absolutely confident he

Was it one man’s illness that saved Ontario from American conquest during the War of 1812?

What if Commodore Chauncey had been feeling in the pink?

contributed by **Sherman Zavitz**

On July 8, 1814, three days after the decisive American victory at the Battle of Chippawa, the British and Canadian forces withdrew to Fort George at present-day Niagara-on-the-Lake. The following day the Americans, commanded by Major General Jacob Brown, reached Queenston where they made camp. From atop Queenston Heights, Brown had a distant but clear view of not only Fort George but Lake Ontario as well. It was important, since on July 10th he was expecting to see the white sails of Commodore Isaac Chauncey’s American fleet, which was based in Sackets Harbor, New York.

could take Fort George. Continued naval assistance would allow him to capture Burlington Heights and then sweep along the north shore of Lake Ontario all the way to Kingston, thus completing the conquest of Upper Canada, now known as Ontario.

But there was no sign of the fleet.

Chauncey, it was later learned, was ill with a fever—too ill to command and unwilling to let anyone else take his place. Days went by. Brown, finally realizing he was not going to receive help from the navy and concerned about the safety of his supply lines, marched his men back to Chippawa on July 24. The bloody Battle of Lundy’s Lane took place the very next evening, following which the Americans retreated, first to Chippawa and then to Fort Erie. By the end of the year, they were

“Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies. Those whom God has so joined together, let no man put asunder.” *John F. Kennedy*

back in the United States. Their attempt to conquer Upper Canada had failed.

It’s interesting to speculate: If Commodore Chauncey had been feeling just fine, he would have possibly co-operated with Jacob Brown. If that had happened, the outcome of the war might well have been far different.

Sherman Zavitz is the official historian for the City of Niagara Falls and the Niagara Parks Commission. A retired teacher, he and his wife, Ann, live in Niagara Falls where he is a weekly columnist for the Niagara Falls Review and conducts annual walking tours of historic events and places. He has written several books about the history of Niagara Falls: It Happened At Niagara, The Niagara River: The Ontario Shore, and Niagara Falls: Historical Notes.

What if the Americans had won?

contributed by **Jim Hill**

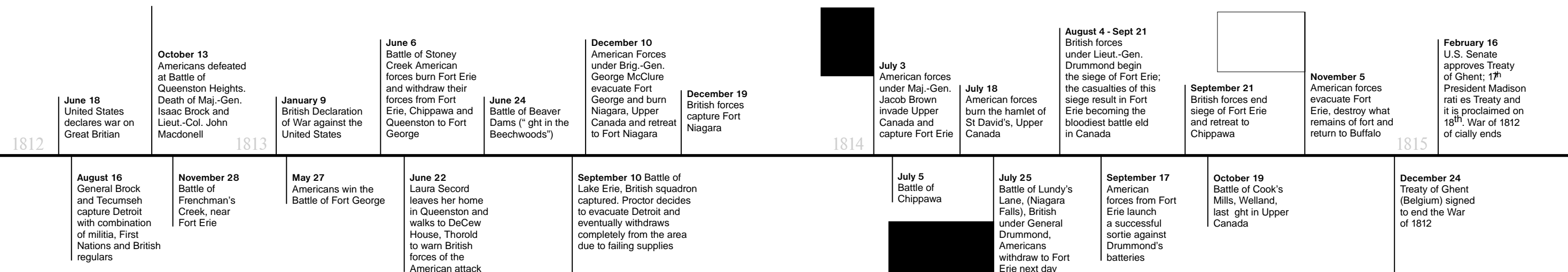
Thomas Jefferson is always quoted from a letter he wrote on the eve of the War of 1812. “The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching, and will give us the experience for the attack on Halifax, the next and final expulsion of England from the American continent.” Jefferson was probably referring to Quebec City and not the Ontario/Quebec border.

The odds certainly favoured the United States. Only 900 British soldiers were posted to Upper Canada in 1812, with 2,500 in Lower Canada and 2,000 more in the Maritimes. The British had to contend with the threat of Napoleon’s million-man *Grand Armee* and Canada was not a priority.

In Upper Canada, a few thousand Canadian militiamen could be armed but they were poorly trained, not very reliable and scattered around the province. A few hundred native warriors would provide a small but psychologically powerful force. Although if they and their non-native neighbours resisted invasion, “instant destruction would (be) their lot,” U.S. General Hull announced in his public proclamation to Canadians.

The U.S. Army could send over 5,000 men into Upper Canada, and the New York militia alone could put 10,000 men into the field for a few months. The militia of six or seven nearby states could also add another 10,000 volunteers for the summer of 1812. If an overwhelming attack came along the St. Lawrence River, the British forts of Upper Canada would be cut off and forced to surrender. The garrison of Montreal would retreat to Quebec City and the small but effective U.S. Navy could bottle up the mouth of the St. Lawrence and capture the fortress of Quebec, just in time for winter.

By the spring of 1813, the Americans could march on Halifax



and with that the last of the Redcoats would go home. Derwent the Last Indian." Once considered terrorist savages, we now racy would ourish. e appointed leaders of Canada, put acknowledge and celebrate the bravery of this once great race. place by a lunatic King, would be sent packing. e health Superintendent of Heritage for the Niagara Parks Commis- and welfare of a free republic would be secured from European Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery and can be seen in the interference, once and for all. stars

What if the Americans had succeeded? How many stars would appear on the U.S. ag today? Would they have handed Canada back to Britain after the end of hostilities as many American historians now claim? What about the Underground Railroad, or the fate of native people, and what about a distinct francophone identity? Would we celebrate this short but important con ict at all? Would anyone miss Canada? It could very well have read like this:

2012 - Bicentennial of the Liberation of Canada. In honor of this important event, the State of Ontario, in the Greater United States of America, has announced this year of 2012, will mark the rst time African-Americans will be allowed to vote in all sixty States. is fall, the celebration will shift to the city of Mount Royal in the State of Kwebec where former French people will honor their past culture and language with their cousins from New Orleans. Later this year, the American Mounted Police will provide an honor guard at the "Grave

the-Last Indian." Once considered terrorist savages, we now racy would ourish. e appointed leaders of Canada, put acknowledge and celebrate the bravery of this once great race. place by a lunatic King, would be sent packing. e health Superintendent of Heritage for the Niagara Parks Commis- and welfare of a free republic would be secured from European Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery and can be seen in the interference, once and for all. stars

What if... the Americans had lost?

contributed by **Thomas A. Chambers**

W hen asked about the War of 1812, most Americans respond with stunned silence, indifference, or maybe a vague reference to the Star Spangled Banner, our national anthem sung lustily at sporting events. If told that the United States lost the War of 1812, the average American would likely respond, "Really?!" And for the most part, that incredulity is correct.

From my perspective as a historian of early America, it's hard to argue that the United States lost the war. e war's putative causes—British meddling among native peoples in the southern Great Lakes and the impressment of American sailors on the high seas—had been largely resolved before the con ict even began. e Treaty of Ghent ended the ghting but no land changed hands and the pre-existing border between the United States and Canada—both Upper and Lower—solidi ed after the war. In other words, nobody won, at least in a military sense.

But if we look at the war's long-term consequences, the United States emerges as the clear victor. Most signi cantly, native peoples along the Niagara frontier no longer could move freely across European-imposed borders, and their ability to defend themselves militarily was greatly reduced, allowing American settlers to more easily dispossess Indians in the Midwest. e war proved the importance of a well-trained military and professional o cer corps, which helped the U.S. conquer Mexico and much of the West. e secure borders and lasting peace after the War of 1812 also allowed the building of the Erie Canal, creating boom cities such as Bu alo, Rochester, Syracuse, Cleveland, and Detroit. Niagara Falls, the paragon of North American tourism, gained popularity in the 1820s in part because people could travel to this region in safety.

e advance of American settlement and industrial capitalism remained unchecked by the results of the War of 1812. Perhaps southern Ontario would have been incorporated into the Midwestern economy more quickly, or perhaps goods and people would have owed more freely across the Niagara River, as they did before 9-11. But other than using an extra "u" or preferring Tim Horton's to Dunkin' Donuts, the di erences between Canada and the United States are small if viewed historically. At best, Great Britain won an overtime shootout victory. But I just used a hockey metaphor, so maybe the Canadians won after all.

Thomas A. Chambers is Associate Professor of History and Department Chair at Niagara University in New York. His

current book project analyzes battlefield tourism and commemoration during the early nineteenth century, and includes a chapter on War of 1812 sites along the Niagara River. He can see Canada from his office.

What if... Laura Secord stayed in bed

contributed by **Alun Hughes**

T he story is familiar. In late June 1813 Laura Secord led an American plan to launch an attack from Fort George on a British outpost at the DeCew House in orold. e British had to be warned. And so, at daybreak on June 22, began a long trek from her home in Queenston to the DeCew House, arriving just after dark, and informed the o cer in charge James FitzGibbon. Two days later, the advancing American army ambushed by Mohawk and Caughnawaga warriors hidden in the beechwoods of orold Township and were defeated at the Battle of Beaverdams. Many consider this a turning point in the War of 1812 (at least as far as 1813 is concerned), for later that year Americans abandoned the Niagara Peninsula altogether.

But what if Laura had stayed in bed? Would the Battle of Beaverdams still have taken place? Or would the American army have advanced undetected to destroy the DeCew House? Would it have led to further defeats of the British, and even an American victory in the War of 1812? Would Obama not Harper be governing us now?

Most of these questions are impossible to answer, but we can address the one about the battle. It is a legitimate question that historians in the past have expressed doubts about the significance of Laura's walk. In the 1920s and '30s some asserted that it made no difference at all, that the battle would have happened anyway. eir arguments seemed to make sense at the time, but later evidence discovered since reveals that they were awed.

However, one lingering doubt remains. After Laura reached the DeCew House on the 22nd, FitzGibbon put his troops on alert overnight. When the Americans failed to show (they had yet left Fort George), FitzGibbon relaxed his guard. e next day eventually came on the 24th, and as they passed St. David's Island seen by native scouts, who promptly informed FitzGibbon that an attack was imminent. e question then becomes: were the scouts at St. Davids because of Laura's warning (in which case her walk was crucial), or was it a routine reconnaissance operation (suggesting the opposite)? A ne distinction perhaps, but worth considering. Personally, I feel that the battle was indeed a result of her warning, though I need to do more research to be absolutely sure.

Whatever the import of Laura Secord's decision not to sleep there is no doubt that she did her walk and deserves every credit for what was an extraordinarily brave and noble act.

A graduate of the Cambridge University, Alun Hughes has been a geography professor at Brock since 1969. His teaching area is geomatics, but his research now lies entirely in local history. He has written on a wide range of topics, ranging from canal terrorists and the meaning of Niagara, to the grape and wine industry and Laura Secord. NM

Making the War of 1812 App-licable

A new application for the iPhone has been released, just in time for the bicentennial celebration of the War of 1812. This innovation marks the dawn of a new era in learning history, combining heritage tourism and 21st century technology to create an engaging experience that intertwines old with new. The iPhone app was created by Dr. Kevin Kee, a Canada Research Chair and Brock University history professor, and his team of Niagara residents and Brock University students in collaboration with nGen-Niagara Interactive Media Generator. Funding was provided by the Ontario Media Development Corporation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

The application has a number of functions, but it can best be described as a historical, interactive tour of Niagara-on-the-Lake and the village of Queenston. The iPhone becomes the user's tour guide, taking the visitor to the town's historic sites and providing interesting facts and stories that relate to the period. For example, the guide will lead you to Niagara-on-the-Lake's apothecary (drugstore), one of the oldest in Canada, and describe how asthma patients were encouraged to smoke cigars to combat their asthma. The GPS tour also lets users know of shops and restaurants in the area, making it easy to navigate the historic towns.

Another interesting aspect of the application is the quest, which allows users to solve a historic mystery. The quest incorporates significant landmarks in a guided walking tour, and makes users feel as though they are immersed in a story that took place in a different historical era. The latest release, Niagara 1812: The Bomber's Plot, tries to uncover the culprits behind the bombing of Brock's Monument, which was destroyed in 1840. The monument has since been rebuilt, but those responsible were never brought to justice.

In creating storylines for the quest games, Kee takes inspiration from the Shaw Festival, an annual festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake dedicated to producing the works of George Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries. Shaw himself took issues of the day and made them into entertaining stage performances. Kee and his team try to accomplish this through storylines for the quest mode, taking history and making it more accessible and engaging. Also available on iTunes: Niagara 1812: Return of the Fenian Shadow, compatible with iPhone 3G, 3GS and 4. For more info: www.ihistorytours.com

Kevin Kee has a vision for current technology and how to make it applicable as a teaching tool. He is the Canada Research Chair in Digital Humanities and Associate Professor at Brock University. Jordan Mulligan is Internal Marketing Associate for nGen-Niagara. Anthony Perri was the artist for the iPhone project.

NEW PBS Documentary – "The War of 1812"

Nearly two centuries after it was fought, The War of 1812 is the first comprehensive film history of this two-and-a-half year conflict to air on public television. This significant event is explored from four divergent perspectives of American, British, Canadian and North American native tribes. The war shaped North America in the most literal way possible: had a few battles gone a different way, a map of the continent today might look shockingly different. The U.S. could well have included parts of Canada, but could just as easily have lost parts of the Midwest, perhaps even the entire West. The fires of this war forged emotional bonds in the British provinces of Canada that were vital to its sense of unity, bringing it a long step closer to becoming a nation; at the same time, the result tolled the end of native tribe dreams of a separate nation in the Northwest. And a United States that had teetered on the verge of collapse during the war was now ready to announce its arrival as a global power. In the process, Washington, D.C.; Buffalo, New York; Toronto's forerunner, York; and numerous other border towns and native villages would be burned to the ground. And at the Battle of Fort McHenry, in Baltimore, Francis Scott Key found inspiration for *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

The film includes interviews with 26 leading American, British, Canadian and native historians. Powerful first-hand accounts combined with evocative cinematography, battle re-enactments and period artwork help bring this defining war to life. Beyond the battlefields, the film recounts dramatic human stories including those of both ordinary citizens and eminent historical characters like the doomed warrior Tecumseh and the flashy but courageous first lady Dolley Madison.

This two-hour HD documentary for PBS investigates the way we remember and often change history to justify and celebrate our national cultures and heritage. For it is not just what happens in history that matters, but how it is remembered, and forgotten. This program is slated to be broadcast on PBS stations in October or November 2011. Air date to be announced this spring. Check WNET Buffalo/Toronto for details. Contributed by WNET Buffalo/Toronto www.pbs.org/war-of-1812

OFFICIAL WEBSITES

With the Bicentennial of the War of 1812 fast approaching, there are plenty of upcoming events, lectures, re-enactments and exhibitions to get the community geared up and involved. Here are a few websites to find what's happening this year and next.

www.visit1812.com, www.discover1812.com
www.war1812celebrationsontariofestivalsvisited.ca
www.1812niagaraonthelake.ca
www.niagarafallsmuseum.ca/bicentennial.html