

## War of 1812 Bicentennial Fact Sheet



**The Americans declared war on June 18, 1812.** It was a war about loyalty, land and power. More than 20,000 died before the British and the Americans both claimed victory.

### Early Battles

Early losses were a surprise to the Americans but boosted morale amongst the British forces and Canadian militia. The Americans lost to the British at Fort Detroit and Michilimackinac, and then again at Queenston Heights. The Americans were forced to replace incompetent generals, but they had learned invaluable lessons from British military strategies. They reorganized and resupplied their army and navy, and set their sights on York (Toronto); the capital of Upper Canada. The Americans attacked on April 27 and soon overwhelmed the out-numbered British forces. They only stayed a few days, but on their departure burned government buildings and storehouses.

### Battle of Fort George

After their victory at York the Americans set their sights on Fort George and the town of Niagara, the headquarters for the Centre Division of the British Army. Bombardment from guns across the Niagara River began on May 25 and left Fort George a smoking ruin. The invasion began early on May 27. It took place along the lakeshore of present day Niagara-on-the-Lake and US soldiers made their way through town to attack Fort George. Some 200 British, American and militia died during the battle; many were buried where they fell. The British forces were soon overwhelmed and retreated to Burlington Heights (Hamilton). A heroine of that battle was Mary Henry.

### Who was Mary Henry?

Mary was the wife of the lighthouse keeper Dominick Henry. She showed extraordinary bravery while tending to the wounded soldiers on the battlefield. A chronicler writes: "Suddenly they saw a vision. Walking calmly through the shower of iron hail came Mary Madden Henry with hot coffee and food, seemingly as unconcerned...Time and again she went and came back with more sustenance, apparently guarded by some unseen angel from the peril that menaced her every step. Those who survived never forgot that day, nor the courage of Mary Henry." After the war Mary Henry was recognized by the Loyal and Patriotic Society for heroism and bravery in the face of danger.

### Occupation of Niagara

The American forces were now in control of the entire Niagara frontier, all the way to Hamilton. Their plan was to use Niagara as a base to push the British forces out of Upper Canada. Most of the able bodied men in town had left with the militia and the British, leaving mostly women and children to the mercy of the Americans. Farms and homes were pillaged for food and supplies. Any men that stayed behind were taken prisoner by the US. During this time the Canadian Volunteers were formed.

### Who were the Canadian Volunteers?

In July of 1813 Joseph Willcocks, a resident of Lincoln County and a member of the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, offered his services to the Americans. He convinced a number of men to join him and they became known as the Canadian Volunteers. They were given quasi-police powers by the US forces and even began arresting their former neighbours. Many of these men retreated with the US forces late in 1813, and Willcocks himself was killed at the Battle of Fort Erie in 1814.

### Laura Secord

The Americans were eager to control the Niagara area, but their forces were continually harassed and challenged by British and Native forces patrolling the area. One of these forward patrol stations, under the command of Lt. James Fitzgibbon, was at DeCew house in present day Thorold. The American plan was to attack this small British garrison. While some American officers were having a meal at the Secord house in Queenston, Laura Secord overheard them talking about their plans. She then left early in the morning of June 22 to make her historic 30km trek to DeCew house and warn the British of the attack. The Americans were ambushed and defeated by Native warriors at the Battle of

Beaver Dams. American forces never left the confines of Fort George and Niagara during the rest of 1813 to engage in another major confrontation.

### **What happened to the large American force in Niagara?**

The invasion force of over 5000 in May of 1813 eventually dwindled to less than 100 men by December. Most of the force was being moved to other areas where battles were raging. Many of the militia found that their tours of duty were finished and returned home to their farms and businesses. Some of the American militia simply left. By some accounts the summer of 1813 was miserable. The weather was cold and wet, food was hard to come by, and the Americans suffered from sickness and disease while camped out in their tents.

### **The Burning of Niagara**

By November of 1813 the American commander in Niagara, General George McClure realized he could not spend the winter in Niagara and decided to remove his remaining forces to Fort Niagara across the river. Sickness, desertion and general lack of morale had taken its toll. The winter weather had been miserable and food was hard to come by. McClure's orders in case of retreat were vague: he was to deprive the enemy of food and supplies. On October 4, 1813, the US Secretary of War John Armstrong wrote to Gen. McClure: "Understanding that the defence of the post [Fort George] committed to your charge may render it proper to destroy the town of Newark, you are hereby directed to apprise its inhabitants of this circumstance, and to invite them to remove themselves and their effects to some place of greater safety." But did this mean he could burn private homes? He decided it did. He claimed he was depriving the British army of winter quarters from which they could launch an attack. It appears that he asked Joseph Willcocks and the Canadian Volunteers to do the deed. On December 10 residents watched as their houses were set to the torch. Only four buildings survived the destruction.

### **The British retaliate**

British forces and militia were not far away and could see the flames and smoke of the burning town. On arrival plans were quickly made for a retaliatory strike against the Americans. On December 17 British forces were able to capture Fort Niagara and proceeded down the river to burn Lewiston and all villages as far as Buffalo. This started a series of destructive attacks and burnings (St. Davids in 1814) by both the Americans and British that lead directly to the burning of public buildings in Washington and the president's house – today known as The White House.

### **The aftermath**

Niagara was a prosperous town and was able to rebuild in the years following the war. Many of the houses were larger than what had been there before the war and many fine examples still remain today. The town was spared from fighting for the remainder of the war, though major battles at Fort Erie, Chippawa and Lundy's Lane were yet to come in 1814.

### **The role of the Native Nations**

Loyalties were divided between the old ally of the Native Nations, Great Britain, and their new ally, the United States of America. Even the people of Grand River were divided about which side to support. Some favoured the British, but others favoured the Americans. The Americans wanted to remove the Native Nations from their ancestral land to make way for settlers, and the English promised to help them keep these lands. When war was declared the Crown asked the warriors to fight, ceremonially delivering the tomahawk to their hands, and pledging their support to the Hodinöhsö:ni. The Grand River Hodinöhsö:ni felt obligated to fight to defend their land and their ally. Their alliance gave the British an advantage in all battles. Yet after the war promises were broken and the Native Nations lost land, influence, and trust.

### **Flags**

The American flag that flew in Niagara during the occupation was an unusual one. It had 15 stars *and* 15 stripes, the only US flag to have more than 13 stripes. It is also known as the Stars and Stripes flag, the flag the US anthem was based upon. In Upper Canada the British Union Jack was the national flag. Canada's famous Maple Leaf flag would not be officially introduced until 1965.

[www.niagarahistorical.museum](http://www.niagarahistorical.museum)

P: 905-468-3912 | f: 905-468-1728