

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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THE FORT ERIE CONNECTION

Vol. IX 12-2-87 No. 47

"Orleans County was generally a wilderness during the war of 1812, and suffered little or nothing of the calamities that visited the settlers farther west, to some of whom it afforded a refuge." Historical Album of Orleans County, N.Y. 1879

With the recent discovery of a burial site at Snake Hill near Fort Erie, Ontario containing a number of casualties from the War of 1812, it seems timely to look at the Orleans County connection. After our nation's independence it took a number of years for other countries, especially Great Britain, to respect our American sovereignty. The War of 1812 was in essence a war of independence necessary to assert our rights as a nation. For Britain it was a nuisance war and a real distraction from the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. Nonetheless, the casualties went in the thousands on all sides.

"Neither the British nor the American armies on the Niagara Frontier could field more than 4,000 troops at a time—yet the British lost more than 3,000 soldiers and the Americans nearly 2,000 in 1814 alone, the final year of the war.

"An American invasion became an American bloodbath early in the war, at the Battle of Queenston Heights. In 1813, Americans first captured Fort Erie and Fort George and burned some buildings in Toronto, and a British bayonet assault took Fort Niagara. An American general abandoning Fort George as winter closed in at the end of that year, unnecessarily burned Niagara-on-the-Lake, a move so stupid that mobs in Buffalo threatened to shoot him.

"The British retaliated by burning Lewiston and Niagara Falls and Buffalo just before New Year's. American troops in turn torched Port Dover for revenge, and the British reacted to that Lake Erie action by landing in Maryland and burning the White House in Washington.

"And in 1814 on the Niagara Peninsula, there were the battles of Chippawa and Lundy's Lane near the Falls, and Fort Erie, and the bloodbath known as the "American Sortie".

—Buffalo Evening News 11/15/87

In August of 1814 General Edmund Pendleton Gaines took command of Fort Erie. During the late summer the regular troops on the Niagara Frontier totaled 1,000 and they were besieged by an army of 4,000 British troops and Canadian militia. On September 1, 1814 the militia in all the counties west of the Genesee were called out to reinforce the troops at Fort Erie. During the engagement several local volunteers were wounded, killed or taken prisoner. But on September 17 the enemy was repelled and the militia aided in taking 500 prisoners.

"General Gaines got here from Sackett's Harbor the day before the cannonading started. We'd been watching the British, spending more time swinging shovels than shouldering our rifles. If they'd only attacked, instead of lying siege, I don't know how we would have held out. Our earthwork outer defenses were flimsy, our artillery batteries were not yet complete, and the British had 4,000 troops to our 2,800.

"But they waited for the cannons from Fort George, and that gave us the time we needed. The sergeants, they worked us 'till we nearly dropped—but we strengthened the walls, and deepened the ditches, and widened the brush-work barriers. We had Towson's Battery built by August 10, three days after the cannonade started, and Douglass had a proper battery built between the fort itself and the shore.

"It was hot work, and the British gunners tried their best to pick us off. Maj. Morgan, who drove the British back from Black Rock, was killed in a skirmish. But our Indians went out and scalped every man in one of their pickets. One of our sergeants was killed while he was being shaved to go on duty—a cannonball landed inside the campground and ricocheted, taking off his head and the hand of the barber."

—A soldier's account