

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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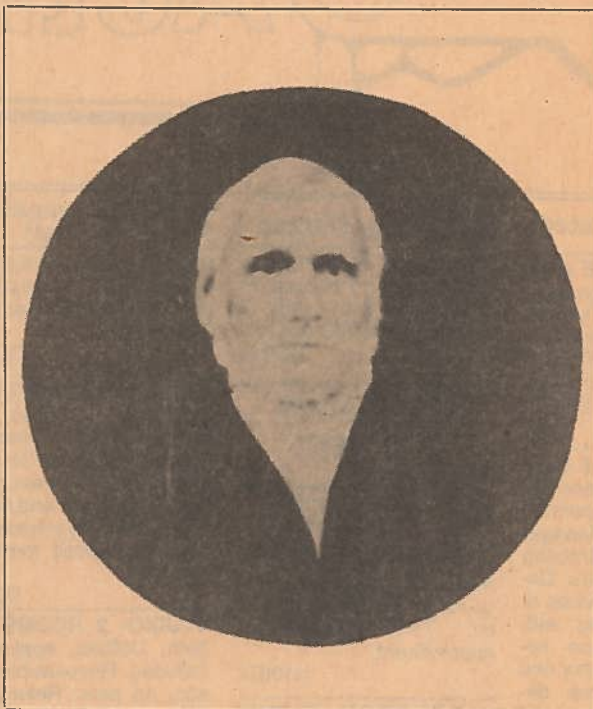
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THE FORT ERIE CONNECTION Part II

A call was issued on September 1, 1814 for local militia to reinforce the troops defending Fort Erie under Gen. Gaines. Patriotism compelled every able bodied man to march toward Buffalo. Upon arriving at Fort Erie the men fought in dense underbrush and severe rains which covered the ground with mud and rendered many muskets inoperable because the priming had become wet; thus much of the fighting was hand to hand. Many local men served here including Mr. John Proctor (pictured here) who had warned the settlers of impending British in 1813. Mr. Proctor was wounded in the hand and had several bullets pass through his clothing. Mr. Howe was killed and Ptolemy Sheldon was severely wounded in the shoulder, from which he never fully recovered. Moses Bacon was shot through the neck and taken prisoner by the British to Halifax. To pass the time while imprisoned, Mr. Bacon took up carving. One figure carved by him was made from a horse bone, after he had eaten the meat from it for his survival. This figure is now housed in the D.A.R. Chapter House in Albion.



The militia consisted of all able bodied white male citizens between the ages of 15 and 45. The first Monday of each September every Company was obliged to assemble within its geographic limits for training. The picture of militia men remembered by a member describes them as: "...barefoot, carrying their boots and soldier clothes in a bundle. They included cobblers, tailors and plough boys from hamlets who were short, tall, fat, skinny...armed with old flint lock muskets, horsemen's carbines, long squirrel rifles, double barreled shot guns, bell muzzled blunderbusses with side arms of as many different patterns from the old dragoon sabre to slim basket-hilted rapiers. The officers were selected for their handsome appearance and martial bearing and shone with certain elegance..."

The militia system was well developed in Orleans County. Gaines was one of the sites for drills held in August and the Ridge Road was the line of march. The more elaborate maneuvers took place on the fields of James Mather and John J. Walbridge, to the north and south of Gaines on Oak Orchard Road, today's Route 279.

For his bravery, General Gaines was promoted to major general, thanked by Congress, given a gold medal, votes of thanks from five states and

swords from Virginia, New York and Tennessee. The Towns of Gainesville in Texas, Georgia and Florida were named for him, as well as the Town of Gaines, Orleans County, New York.

"Today, reminders of the violence of the long-ago war are surfacing at Snake Hill, where the archaeologists are uncovering skeletons laid in rows. Buried in Christian style, with folded arms and heads to the West, they may not be the remains of those who died before the guns of "Towson's Lighthouse", for there were too many killed that awful night to to allow such neat burials. They may be, instead, soldiers who died in the weeks of skirmishing after the Battle of Fort Erie, or in the American Sortie.

"That wasn't a battle situation where you were faced with a large number of bodies, all at once, with no time to bury them individually", says Lt. Col. Robert Trotter, head of the U.S. Army's mortuary affairs division." And that's right where you would bury the bodies."

--Buffalo Evening News 11/12/87

Indeed, some of those very skeletons may well have been militia men from Orleans County.

My sincere appreciation goes to Delia Robinson, Gaines Historian for extensive help and motivation in preparing this article.