

# “Death, Hell, or Canada”

Simon St. Laurent

<http://livingindryden.org/1812/>



1836 engraving based on sketch by British Major James B. Dennis

The History Center  
November 8, 2014

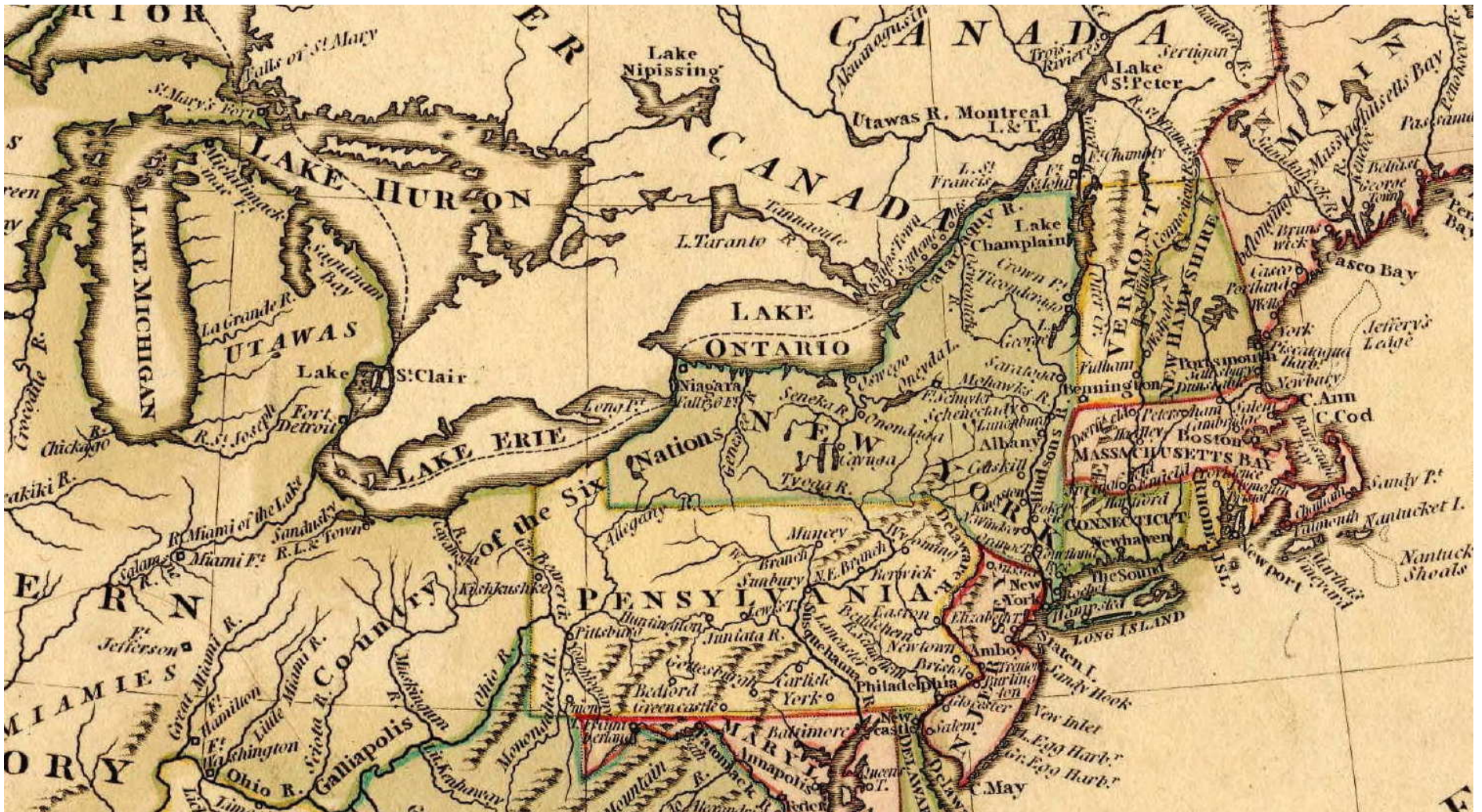
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# Why the War of 1812?

- American neutrality in the Napoleonic Wars
- British lack of respect for American concept of citizenship – impressment of sailors.
- American frontiersmen's demand for land
- French cause us less trouble than the British
- Miscommunication (would it have helped?)

# A Complicated Frontier



A MAP OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, with part of the adjoining provinces from the latest authorities. T Conder Sculp. London. Published June 2d. 1794 by R. Wilkinson, No. 58 Cornhill.

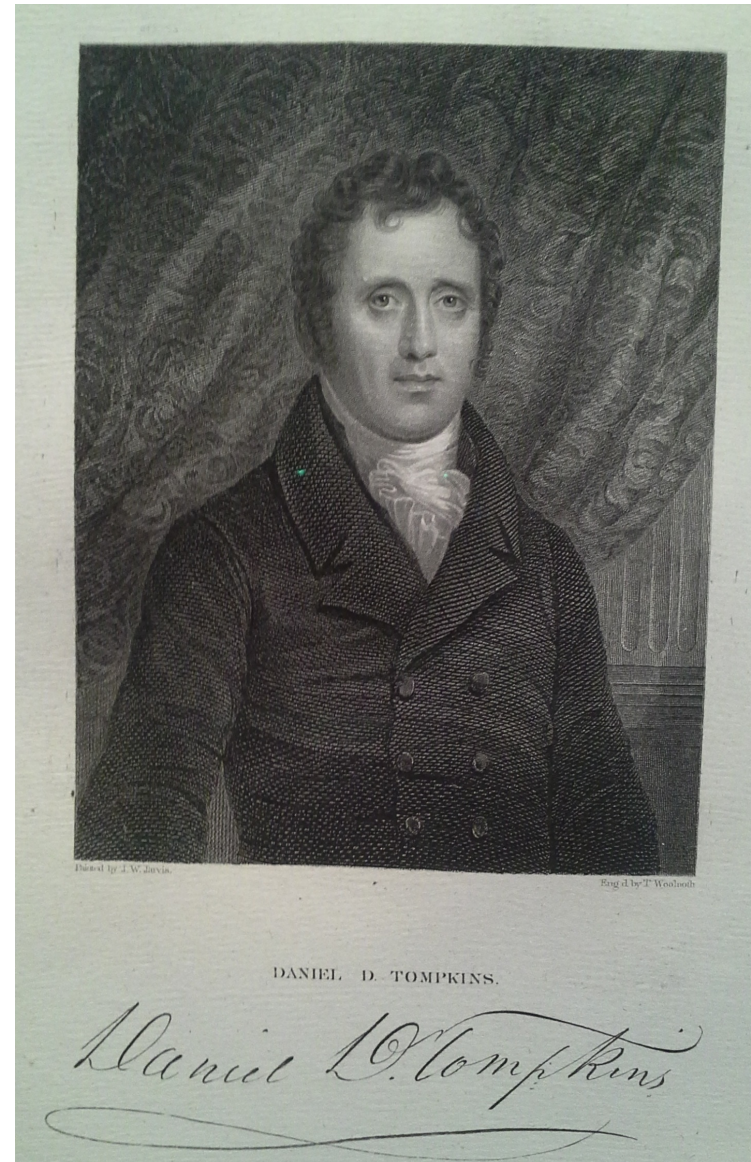
# New York State (and Nation) Divided

- Democratic-Republicans generally pro-war, Federalists generally anti-war.
- Factions and splinters.
- State Legislature just as reluctant to pay for anything as federal government.

# Daniel Tompkins (1774-1825)

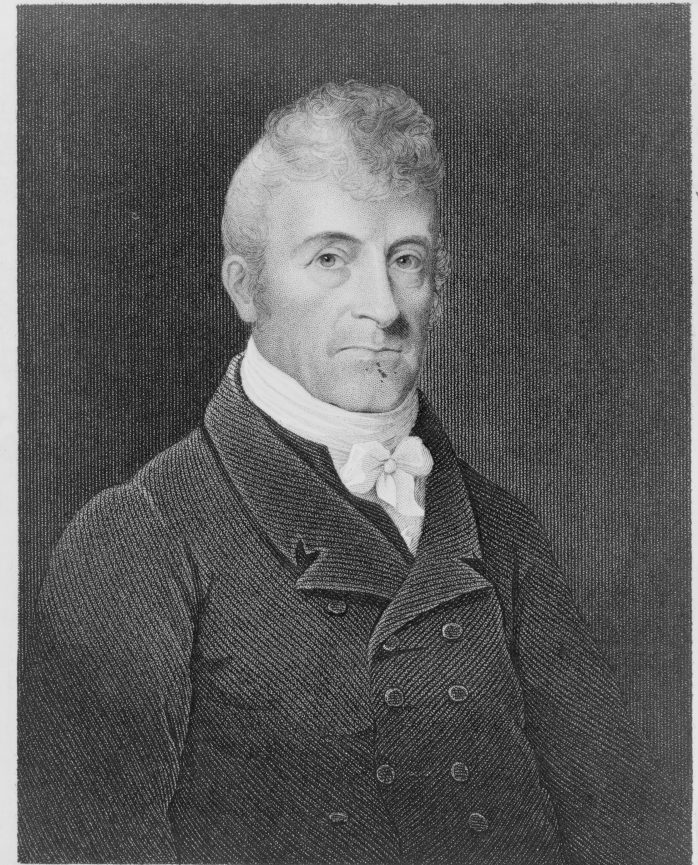
- Democratic-Republican Governor of New York, 1807 to 1817
- Financially supported War of 1812, suffered
- Vice President under Monroe, 1817 to 1825
- Tompkins County named for him.

Photo by Simon St.Laurent of an engraving at Tompkins County Legislature.



# Stephen Van Rensselaer (1764-1839)

- Patroon and Federalist
- State Militia Major General
- 10<sup>th</sup> richest American of all time
- “Anti-Rent wars” break out after his death.



Engraved by G. Parker from a Miniature by C. Fraser

STEPHEN VAN RENSSELAER.

*S. Van Rensselaer*

Engraving by G. Parker after  
miniature by C. Fraser

# DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828)

- Democratic-Republican rival to Tompkins
- Ran for President as Federalist in 1812, lost to James Madison 89 electoral votes to 128
- Elected Governor when Tompkins elected Vice-President
- Famous for Erie Canal



Rembrandt Peale's portrait of DeWitt Clinton, 1823.

# Dryden in 1812

- “two grain mills and carding machines... some congregations of Baptists and Presbyterians ... 4 or 5 school houses.... in 1810 the population amounted to 1890, ... 310 families and 213 senatorial electors.... whole taxable property, as assessed in 1810, \$84,099.... 3 turnpike roads ... inhabitants are principally farmers whose farms and looms supply much of their common clothing.” – *Spafford's N. Y. State Gazetteer*, in Goodrich, 33-4
- Southern end of Cayuga County (Tompkins formed in 1817)



# Dryden in 1812



Pioneer Farmstead, 1809, Genesee Country Museum, Simon St.Laurent

# Dryden in 1812



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Pioneer Farmstead, 1809, Genesee Country Museum, Simon St.Laurent

# Dryden Militia

“[George Robertson] was afterward a captain of the State militia and the field opposite the present residence of his son, Mott J. Robertson, upon which this log house was built in 1798, was the training ground for the early yeomanry of Dryden, who were here required to be annually drilled in military tactics.” – Goodrich, 16

# And from Lansing

- Capt. William Armstrong\*
- Charles Bloom
- Gen. Henry Bloom
- Charles Hagin
- Ephraim LaBarre
- Capt. John Leavenworth\*
- Charles McGuigan\*
- Maj. Gen. Daniel Minier\*
- Capt. Joseph North
- Robert J. Shaw
- Col. Daniel Thorpe\*
- Caleb Tichenor
- Brig. Gen. John Tillotson\*
- Lt. Ira Tillotson\*
- Matthew N. Tillotson\*
- Capt. Jas. Townley
- Capt. Thomas Wilbur\*

\* - from the part of Lansing that became Genoa, Cayuga County

# Preparation

“Our ancestors were poorly prepared for either conflict with the mother country, supplied as she was with powerful armaments and standing armies, and it was only the necessities of the occasion which seemed to suddenly call forth and develop in them the courage and heroism which enabled them to succeed. History affords but few instances where an inferior number of untrained men, called suddenly and unexpectedly to arms, have overwhelmingly defeated trained soldiers.”

– Goodrich, 30

# Local Enthusiasm

- “When a call was made for troops in 1812, [Peleg Ellis] marched out on the 26th of August, 1812, in command of the Dryden company for the frontier. The entire company, instead of waiting to stand the draft, volunteered, except one who was unable to go.”  
– *Landmarks of Tompkins County*, 248
- “When the British burned Buffalo in 1813, the militia was very generally ordered out, as before stated. Captain Slater received his orders and there was much local excitement. The company departed, but after a march of a day and a half reached Canandaigua, where they received notice that the danger was passed and they could return.”  
– *Landmarks*, 380

# Local Enthusiasm

- In Trumansburg, Colonel Hermon Camp recruited and led a cavalry company that served on the Niagara Frontier, “the only cavalry in the war”. – Lydia Sears, *History of Trumansburg*



# Not Just Settlers

“For a few years after the locality around Slaterville was settled by a number of families, a small party of Indians came each fall to hunt in that vicinity. They were Oneidas and were led by one whom the settlers called Wheelock. This Wheelock was killed in the war of 1812, while fighting with the Americans; after that the Indians came to the town no more.” - *Landmarks*, 274

## And Less Enthusiasm

“Several of the Virginian settlers [in Caroline] before described, notably Dr. Joseph and John J. Speed, were members of the company, and, being Federalists, were opposed to the war.

They, however, furnished substitutes....”

- *Landmarks*, 380

# Fluid Loyalties

“Charles Hagin, a native of Ireland, born in 1793, who came to America as a soldier in the British army in the war of 1812, being seized in the streets of Belfast and pressed into service.

Reaching Canada, he made his escape to the American side, and a few days later lost his arm in the battle of Lundy’s Lane, in the American cause. After leaving the hospital he came to Lansing, where he taught school.”

- *Landmarks*, 274



Marker at Laura Secord House,  
photo by Simon St.Laurent

# Meanwhile, in Canada

- George Prévost, Governor General of Canada, based in Lower Canada (Quebec)
- Issues strict orders for defense only.
- Upper Canada (Ontario) an unsettled mix of loyalists, Americans, traders, and trappers.
- Upper Canadians not especially eager for war, often take leave for harvest and other work.

# Isaac Brock

- British Army since 15
- Canada since 1804
- Commander and executive, Upper Canada
- Far more bellicose than Prevost, circumvents defensive orders.
- Soldiers loved him, civilians not so much



# A Different World

- Communications
- Supply lines
- Weapons and tactics
- Parole for captured soldiers
- Little cavalry
- War on the cheap

# Bad News from the West

- Fort Michilimackinac ambushed before Americans received word of war, surrenders. Gives British control of route to Lake Michigan
- Disaster at Fort Detroit. After brief invasion of Canada, General William Hull retreats to Detroit, freezes, surrenders to British troops under Isaac Brock. Reinforcements arrive after surrender.

# Nothing from the East

- Little movement on the St. Lawrence
- Instead of moving up the Champlain Valley, General Dearborn wanders to Boston to try to talk with Federalist Governors about sending their militia. Fails.
- Temporary truce negotiated between Canadian Governor-in-Chief Prevost and General Dearborn.



# Why the Niagara?



By Pfly, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0

# The Setting: The Niagara River

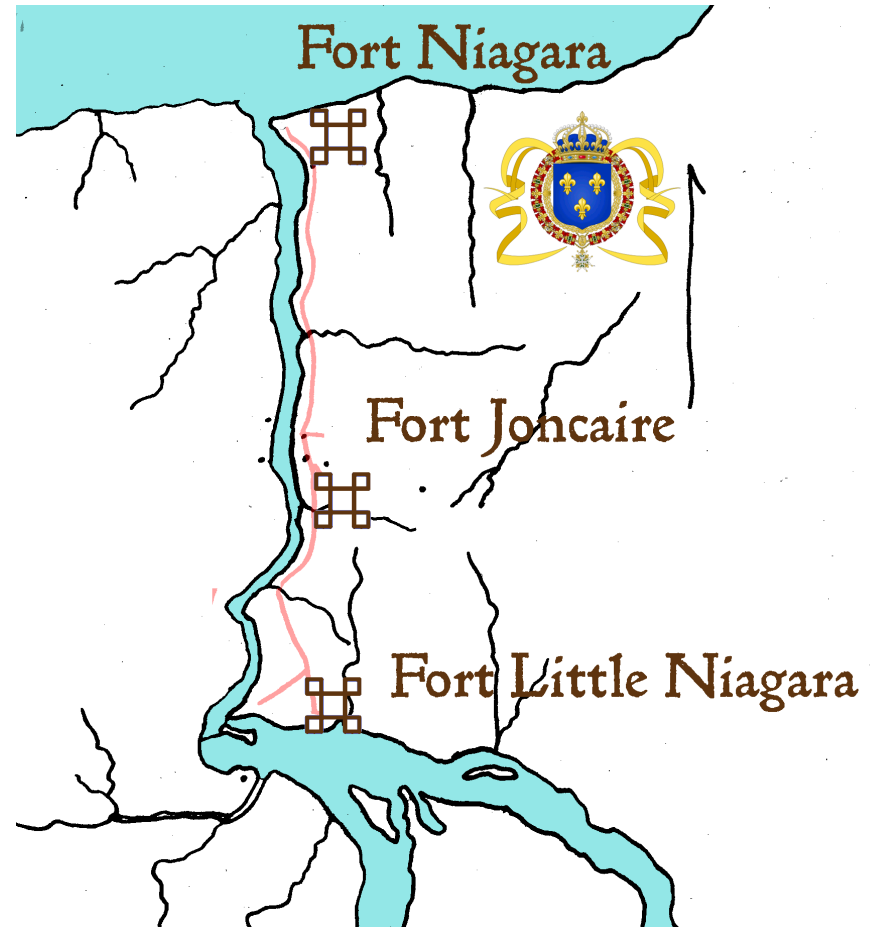
- Key connection from the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario to the interior Great Lakes.
- Natural US-Canada border, with falls, gorge, rapids.
- Because of fur trade, more developed than most of Western NY and Upper Canada.



Niagara Falls, Simon St.Laurent

# French Forts on the Niagara, 1678-1759

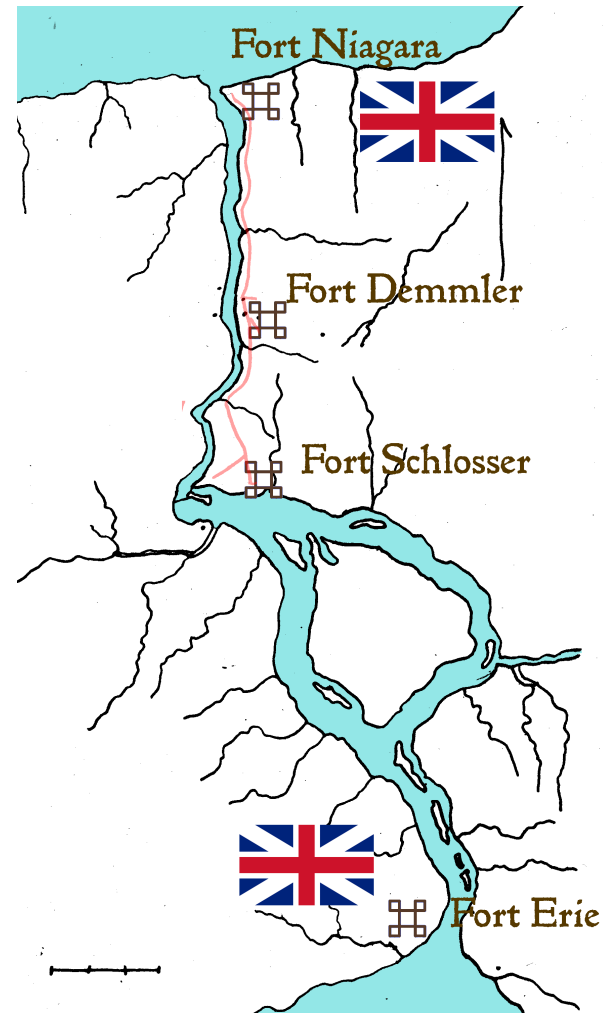
- Critical water connection to the Great Lakes
- But, the Falls
- So, fortify existing portage route, starting above the falls: Fort Little Niagara, “upper landing”
- And ending just across the Niagara Escarpment: Fort Joncaire, “lower landing”



Map by Simon St.Laurent, based on *Map of the Niagara Frontier*, Benson J. Lossing, 1869.

# British Forts on the Niagara, 1764-1796

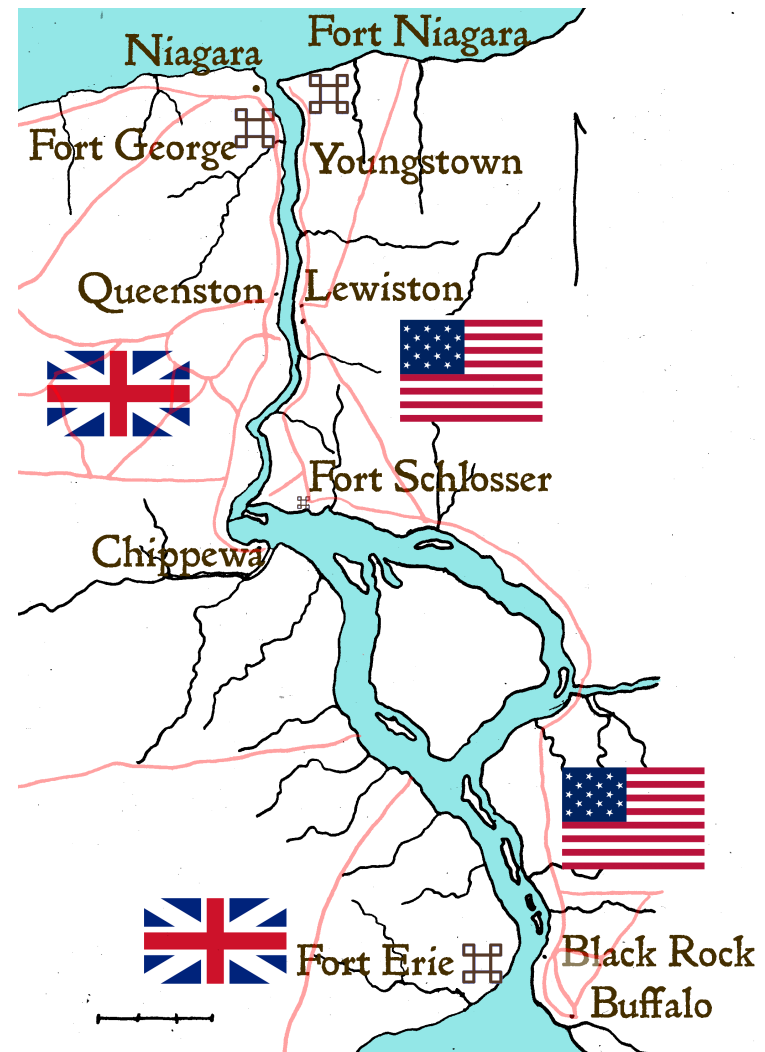
- After the French and Indian War, the Niagara is British.
- Most fort names change, and Fort Erie is built.
- Lewiston is first easy access to river north of Niagara Escarpment. British built “cradles” tramway at Fort Demmler.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, based on *Map of the Niagara Frontier*, Benson J. Lossing, 1869.

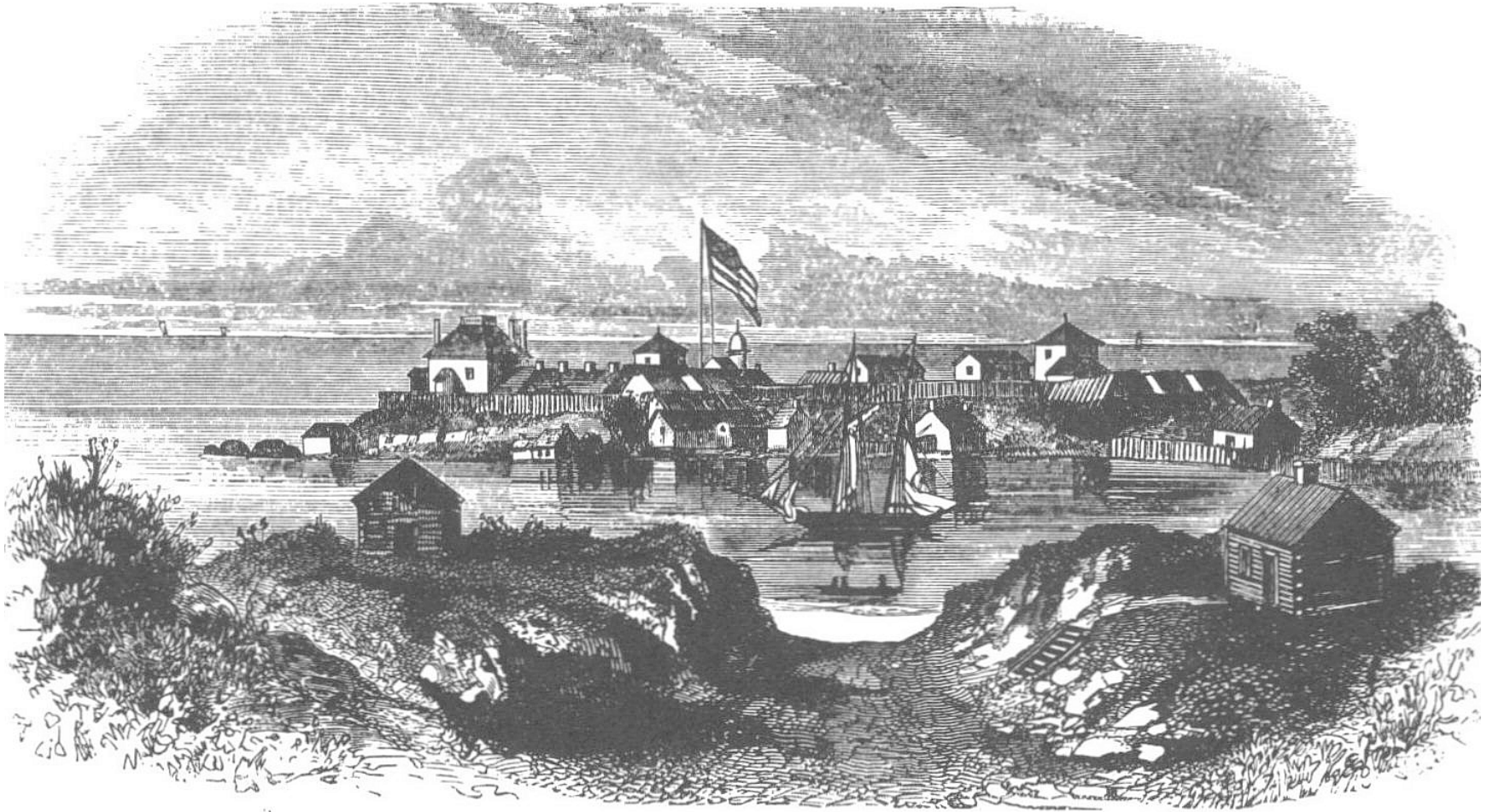
# British and American Niagara, 1812

- The British were supposed to leave Fort Niagara etc. in 1783 but only depart in 1796, after Jay's Treaty.
- Fort Demmler becomes Lewiston.
- Construction boom on the Canadian side: Fort George, Chippewa to Queenston portage.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, based on *Map of the Niagara Frontier*, Benson J. Lossing, 1869.

# Facing Off Across the River



Fort Niagara from Fort George, Benson J. Lossing, 1869.

# The Niagara Campaign, Fall 1812

- Both sides use the truce to arm and fortify.
- Truce ends September 8<sup>th</sup>.
- Americans seize the *Caledonia* and *Detroit* from Fort Erie October 8<sup>th</sup>.
- Van Rensselaer orders attack October 10<sup>th</sup>, but cancels it after terrible weather and loss of Lieutenant Sims' boat with all the oars.
- Americans face persistent lack of basic supplies.

# How Many Troops on the Niagara?

Malcomson estimates:

- American

2484 regulars

4070 New York militia

160 Pennsylvania militia

5206 total

- British

1224 regulars

813 militia

300 Grand River Nations

2337 total



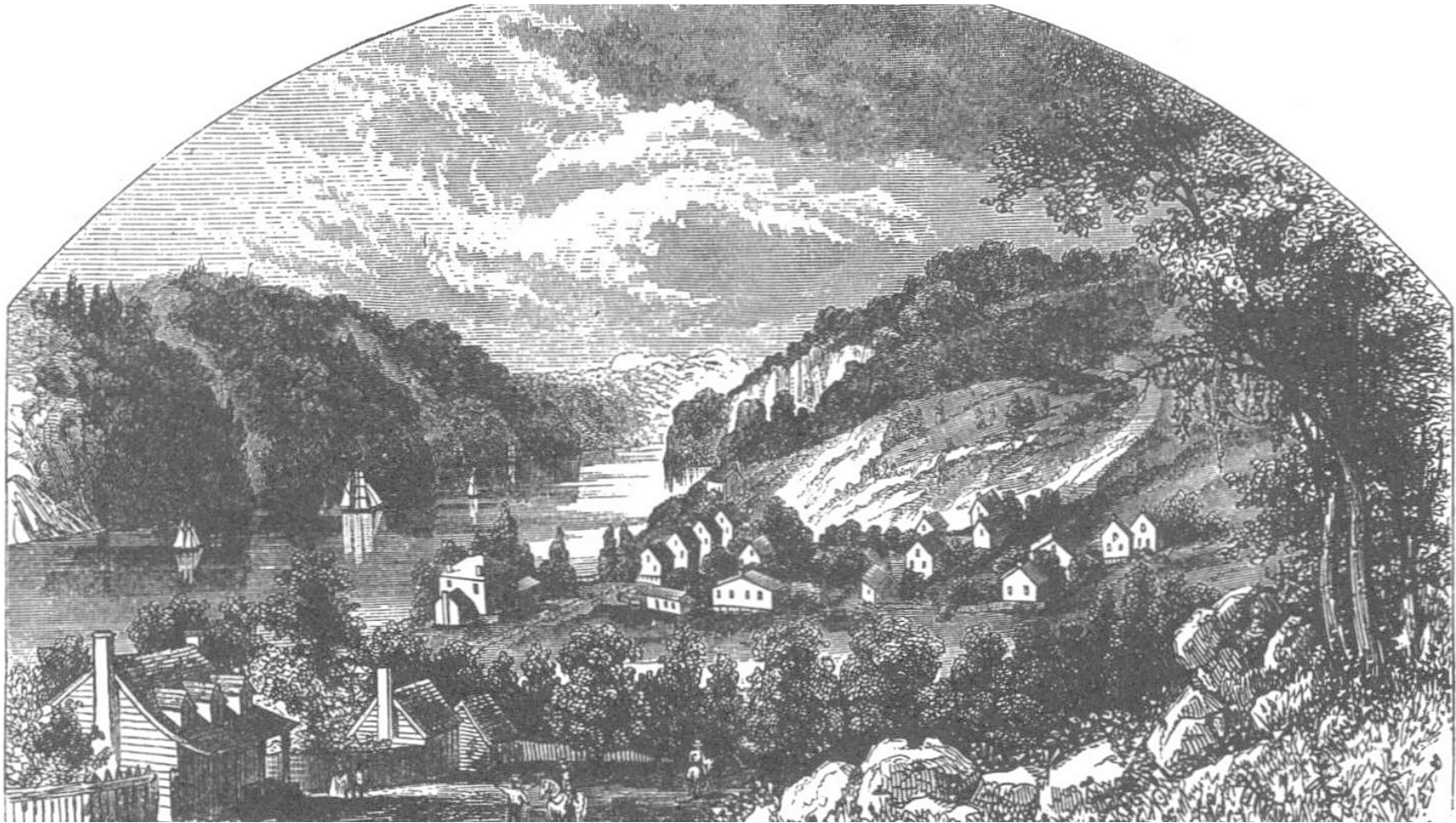
# British Queenston, 1812

- The Lower Niagara, with parallel portages and forts.
- Regular crossings between Fort George and Fort Niagara, Queenston and Lewiston.
- Queenston a hub because of the portage route.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, based on *Map of the Niagara Frontier*, Benson J. Lossing, 1869.

# Queenston, 1812



Queenston, Benson Lossing (1869)

# Queenston, 1812



Laura Secord House, Simon St.Laurent

# Queenston, 1812



Laura Secord House, Simon St.Laurent

# The Battle of Queenston Heights

- Van Rensselaer “became satisfied that my refusal to act might involve me in suspicion, and the service in disgrace.”
- Abandons plans for a diversion.
- Races to reassemble troops, cross river.

# Gathering Troops and Supplies

- Only 13 batteaux. 39 hauled from Oswego and more at Fort Schlosser remain unused.
- Basic supplies arriving at the last minute. Regular arguments between Van Rensselaer and Quartermaster General Peter Porter.
- British notice something up – Evans and “Toock”.

# Regulars, Militia, and the American Chain of Command

- Brigadier General Alexander Smyth – started toward Lewiston with 1200 for initial attack in rain, turned around when cancelled, won't come out from Black Rock again.
- Lieutenant Colonel Winfield Scott – arrives late. Van Rensselaer won't include him in crossing, but sets up guns in Lewiston. Crosses later, assumes command by end of battle.

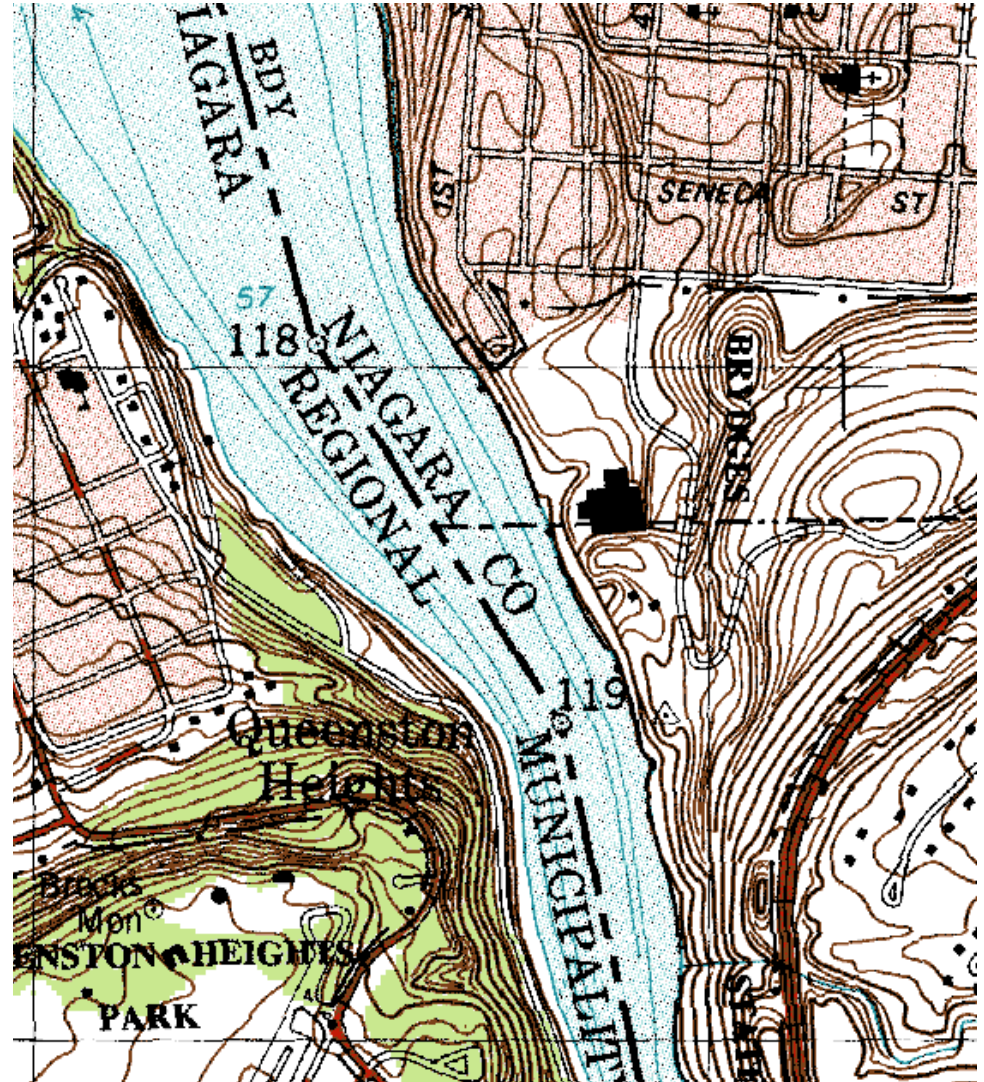
# Lieutenant Colonel Henry Bloom's 19th

- Bloom, from Lansing, commands Cayuga County's 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Wadsworth's 7<sup>th</sup> Detached Brigade.
- 409 men, according to the muster.
- Called to Niagara August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1812 by Van Rensselaer.
- September 1<sup>st</sup>, VR hopes they brought tents.
- September 27<sup>th</sup>, "protect the boats in Gill Creek."
- Left Niagara Falls at 9pm on October 12<sup>th</sup> for Lewiston.



# Challenging Landscape

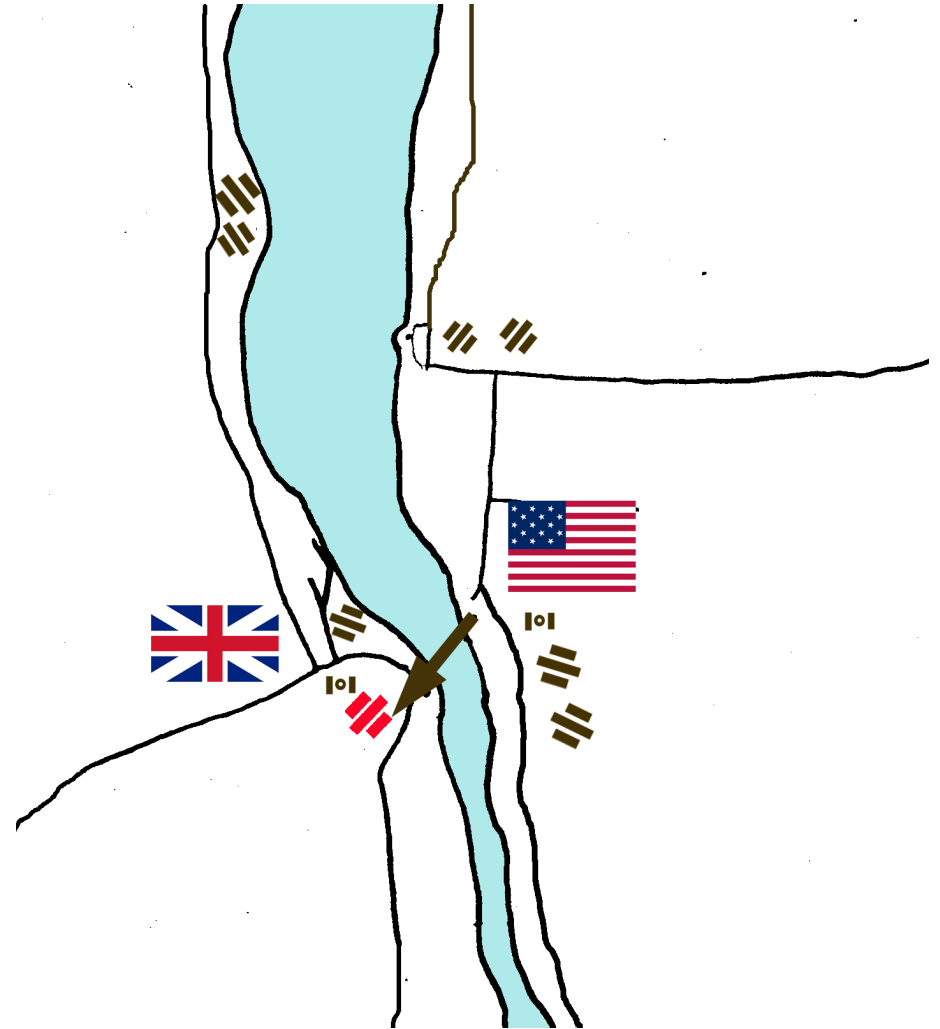
- Niagara Escarpment just south of both Lewiston and Queenston.
- The slope to the Niagara River is often steep.
- Niagara River isn't rapids, but swirls with unusual currents.



US Geological Survey Map, 1980

# Artillery

- Canadian artillery at two mile intervals, arrived in July.
- American artillery brought to new Lewiston docks and “Fort Gray” on escarpment for battle.
- Mortars, 6, 9, 12, and 18-pound guns.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 122

# Launch from Lewiston Lower Landing

- Historic marker for battle at main Lewiston docks, but starting point a mile south.
- Lower Landing now part of Artpark; signs, but tricky to find. Forts Joncaire and Demmler have signs.



# Why the Lower Landing?

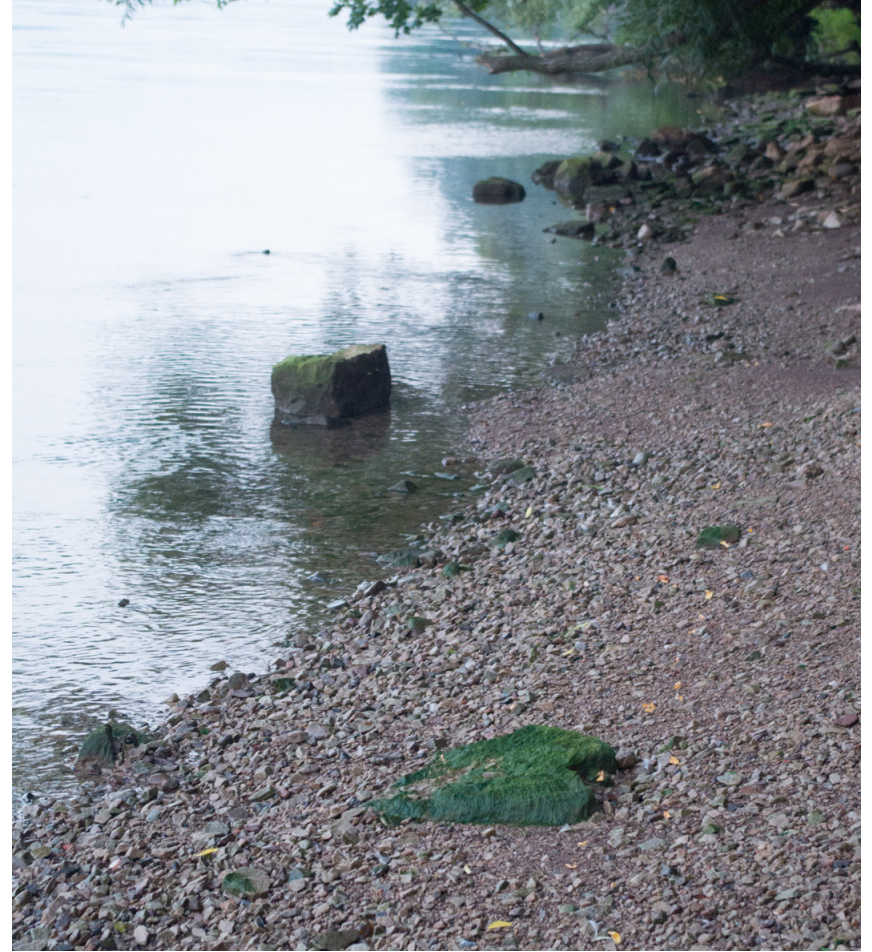
- “Experienced boatmen were procured to take the boats from the landing below to the place of embarkation.”
- British artillery controlled the river further north.
- Distance to Queenston shore much shorter.
- Lower Landing still fairly established.

# The Departure Site



Artpark, Lewiston, NY, Simon St.Laurent

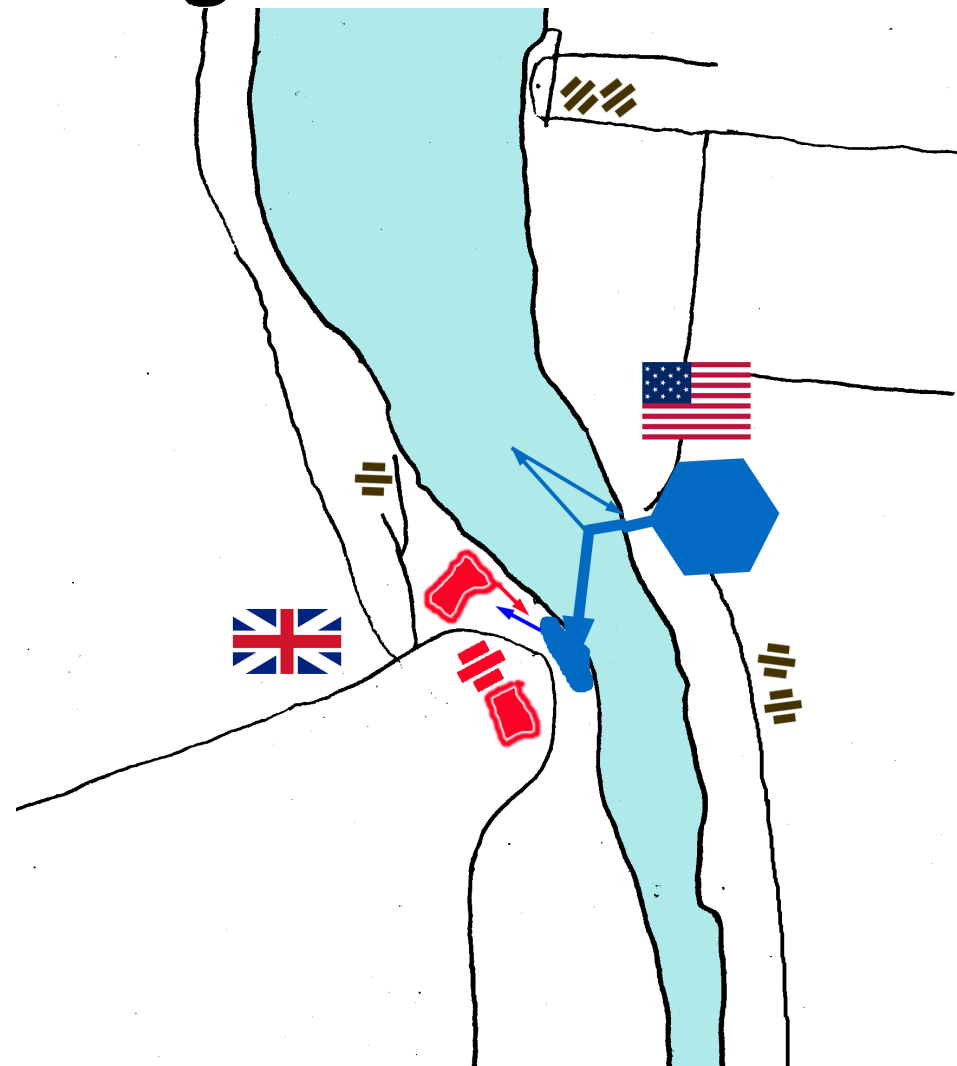
# Launching from the Shore



Artpark, Lewiston, NY, Simon St.Laurent

## 3 to 5 am: Establishing a Beachhead

- First wave nearly all regulars (by accident).
- 13 boats, 300 men, landed 500 yards upriver from Queenston.
- Discovered, fired upon.
- 1 boat (Chrystie) meanders.
- Officers injured or killed, but beachhead safe from artillery fire established.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 139

# The Queenston Heights Shore

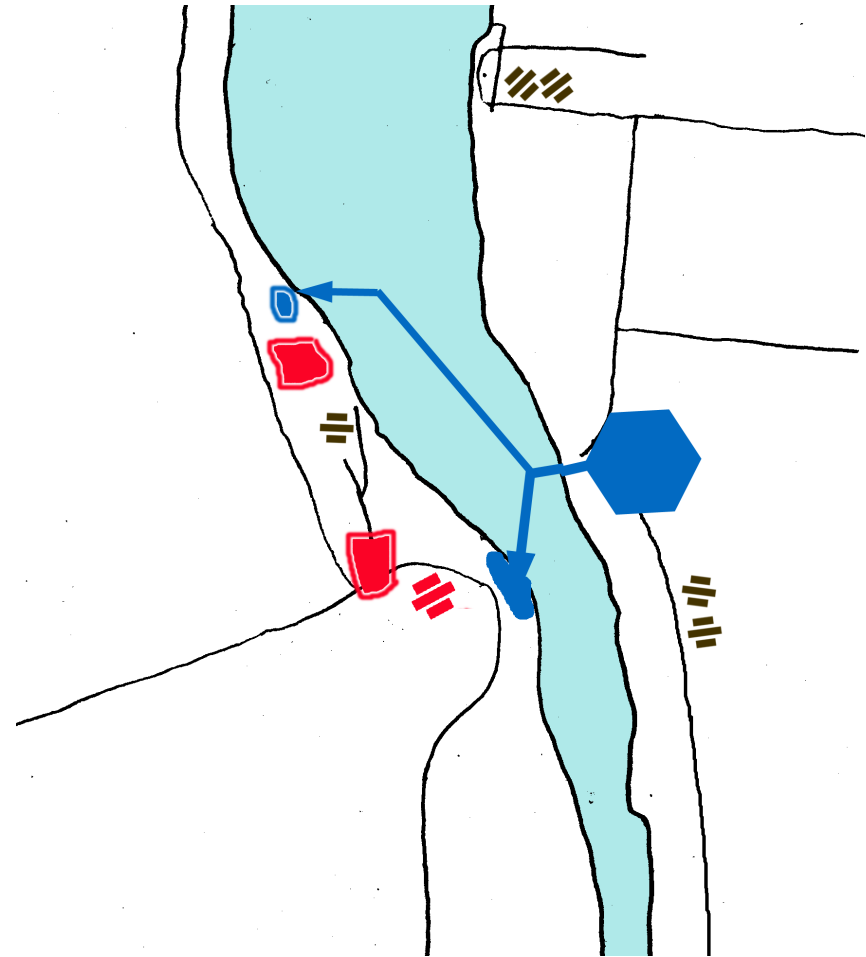


Queenston Heights from Artpark, Lewiston, NY, Simon St.Laurent



# 6am: Second Wave

- “On my return to the upper ferry, I found there a scene of confusion hardly to be described. The enemy concentrated their fire upon our embarking.”
- More regulars come across.
- Wayward boats land downstream; fight goes badly. Some escape.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 149

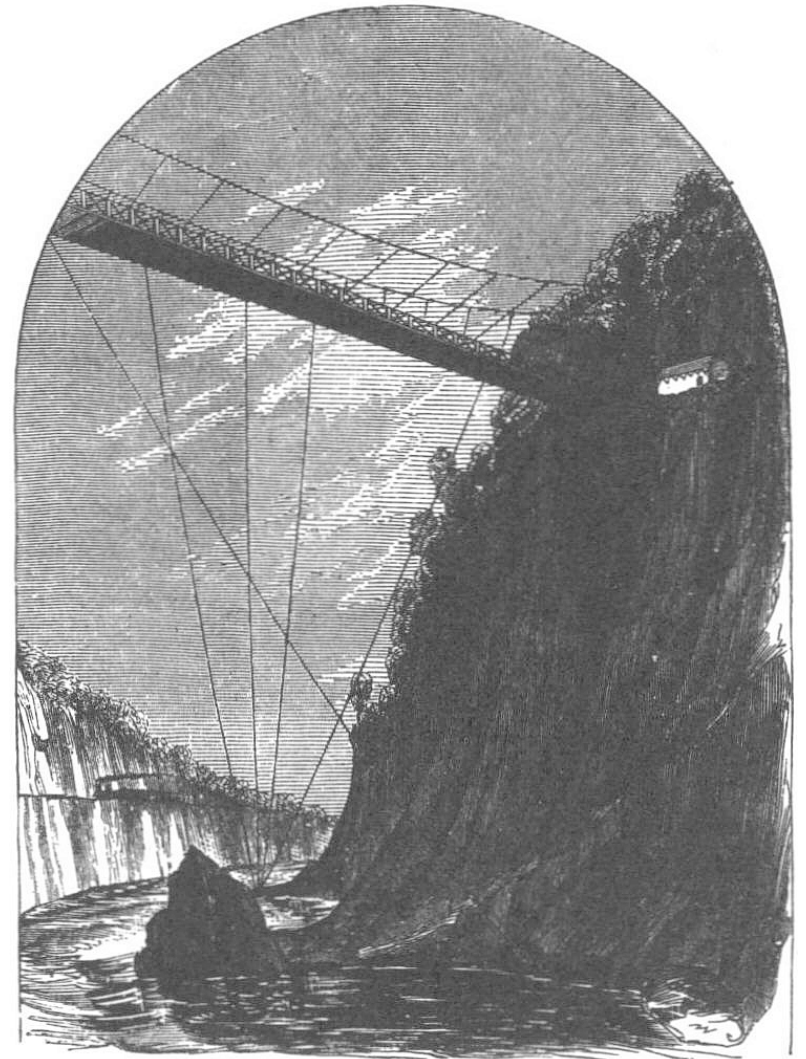
# Lewiston Landing from Queenston Heights



*View from Queenston Heights Walking Tour, Simon St.Laurent*

# 7:00 am: Up the Cliff to the Redan

- Led by Captain John Ellis Wool, regulars scale “a fisherman’s trail” that has since disappeared.
- A 2012 reenactor scrambled up cliff; took about an hour.
- Largely unnoticed until troops reached the top, because British considered the cliff impassable.



Approaching Queenston Heights,  
Benson Lossing (1869)

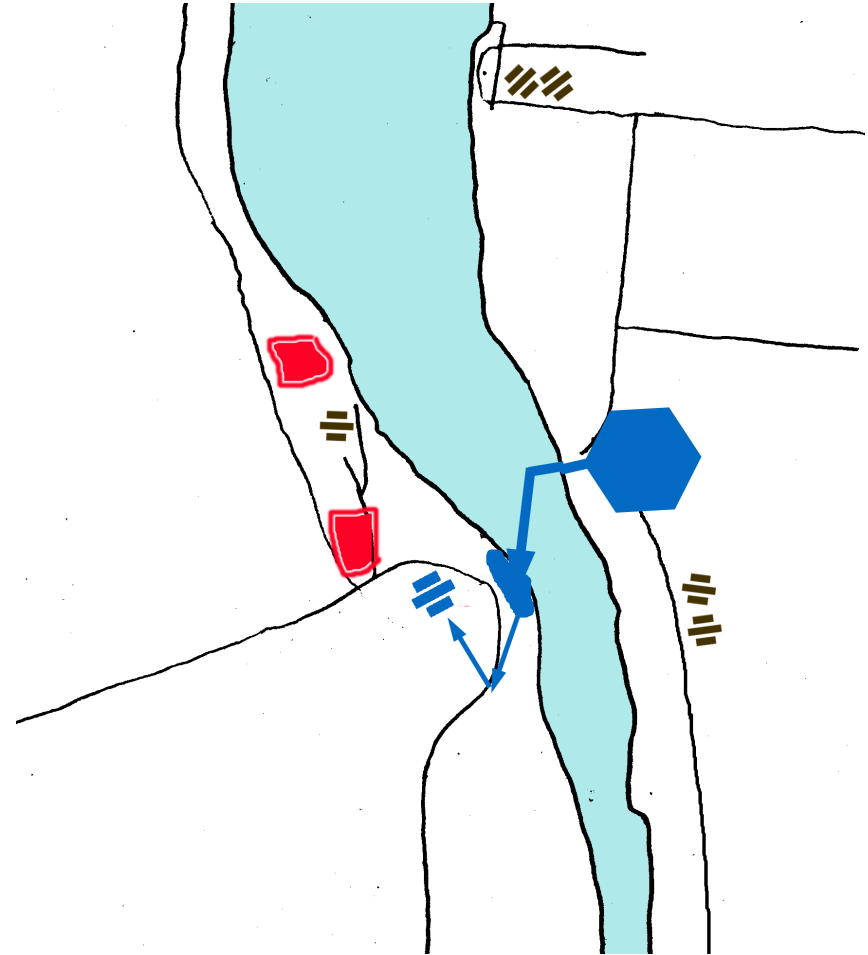
# The Redan



18-pounder on Queenston Heights Walking Tour, Simon St.Laurent

# 7:00 am: Brock's Arrival

- Major General Isaac Brock, hero of Detroit, races from Niagara, aides following.
- Brock reaches the redan just before Americans surprise and seize it.
- Canadians had retreated to village, leaving redan lightly defended.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 149

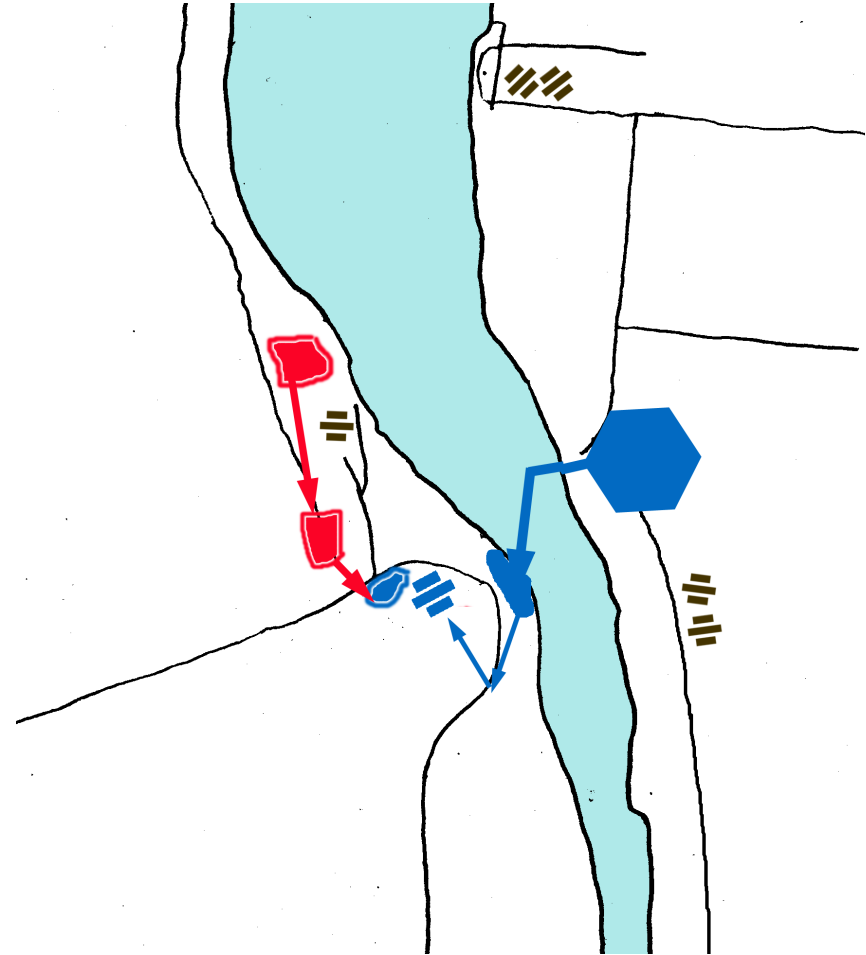
# Redcoats Firing



Photo by Simon St.Laurent

# 7:30 am: Brock's Charge

- General Brock escapes to village, prepares charge.
- Leads charge personally – rare successful single shot kills the general.
- Canadians retreat. Second charge under Macdonnell has same result.
- Canadians retreat from Queenston village.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 154

# Brock's Death, Re-imagined



*General Brock at the Battle of Queenston Heights*  
by John David Kelly (1862 - 1958). Published 1896.



## 9 am: Third Wave

- Probably when the Dryden militia went over.

“Aaron Cass, one of the Dryden company from near Ellis Hollow, was struck on the head by a British cannon ball and instantly killed while the regiment was crossing the Niagara river in boats to take part in the battle of Queenston. Cass had been a distinguished soldier of the Revolution from Connecticut, was a brother-in-law of Aaron Bull, and settled in Ellis Hollow in 1804.

Other soldiers of the Dryden company were Aaron Genung, from near Varna; Arthur and Stephen B. June, Marcus Palmerton, Jonathan Luce, George McCutcheon and Peter Snyder.” – Goodrich, 32

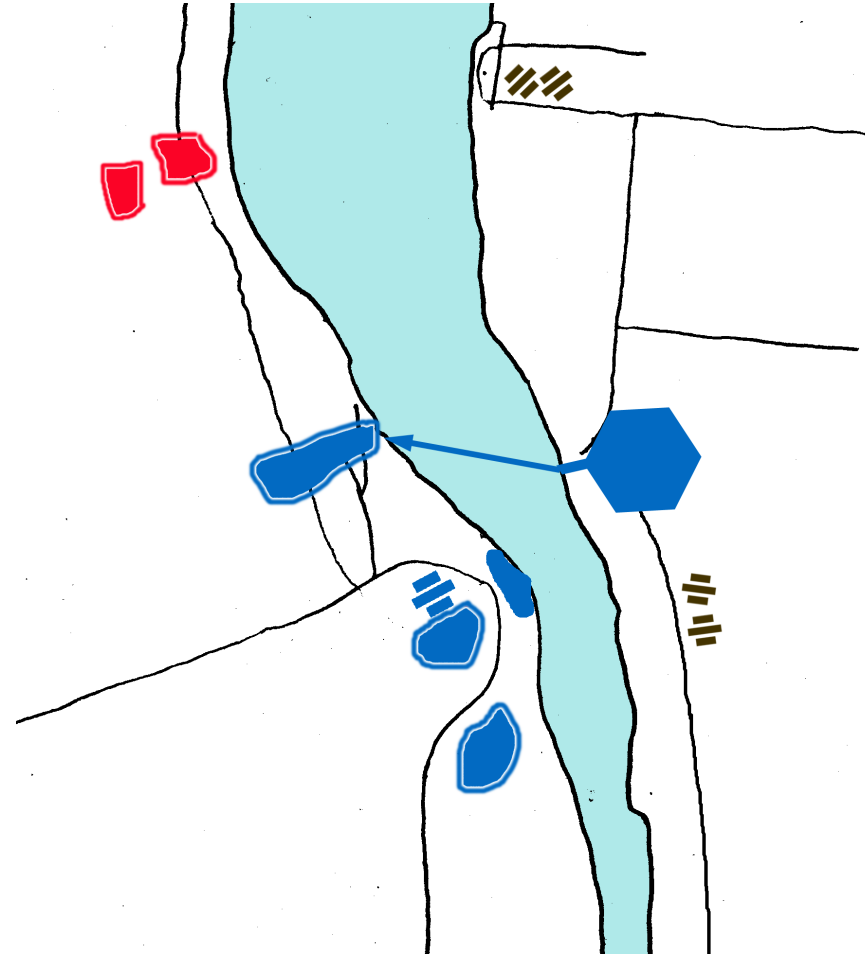
# “Death, Hell, or Canada”

“As the Dryden company were crossing the Niagara river to the Canada side, Stephen B. June, impressed with the importance of the occasion and boiling over with the true martial spirit, arose in his boat and swinging his hat defiantly called out as the watchwords of the expedition: “Death, Hell, or Canada.”

This was early in the morning of the day when everything was hopeful and few of the enemy were in sight. The battle of the morning was successful. A landing on the Canada shore was effected, the Queenston Heights were gallantly scaled and captured and the Commanding General Brock of the enemy was mortally wounded in the conflict.” – Goodrich, 32

# 10am to 1 pm: Unsteady Victory

- Chaos continues at the boats.
- Orders to fortify Queenston position fail because no entrenching tools available.
- Some American supplies to Queenston village landing.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on *A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 175

# To Queenston Village



From Lower Landing to Queenston waterfront, Simon St.Laurent

## 2 pm: British regroup

- British artillery target American artillery.
- Grand River Nations arrive from south, commanded by John Norton and John Brant.
- War-whoops terrify Americans on both sides of river.



*John Brant*

John Brant, Mohawk leader  
Benson Lossing (1869)

# Grand River Nations



Photo by Andres Musta at 2012  
reenactment. (CC license)

# Bombardment Along the Niagara

- Apart from the battlefield itself, artillery starts firing up and down the river.
- British Fort Erie vs. American Black Rock. Black Rock magazine explodes, ending duel.
- American Fort Niagara vs. British Fort George.



Photo by Simon St.Laurent, taken at Fort George

# With the Roof Off



*A Soldier's Wife at Fort Niagara.*  
Photo by Simon St.Laurent, taken at Fort Niagara



# Fort Niagara's Secret Weapon

- Shot oven heats cannonballs so they'll still be hot on arrival.
- Much of Niagara-on-the-Lake burns.



At Fort Niagara, Simon St.Laurent

# Saving the Fort George Magazine



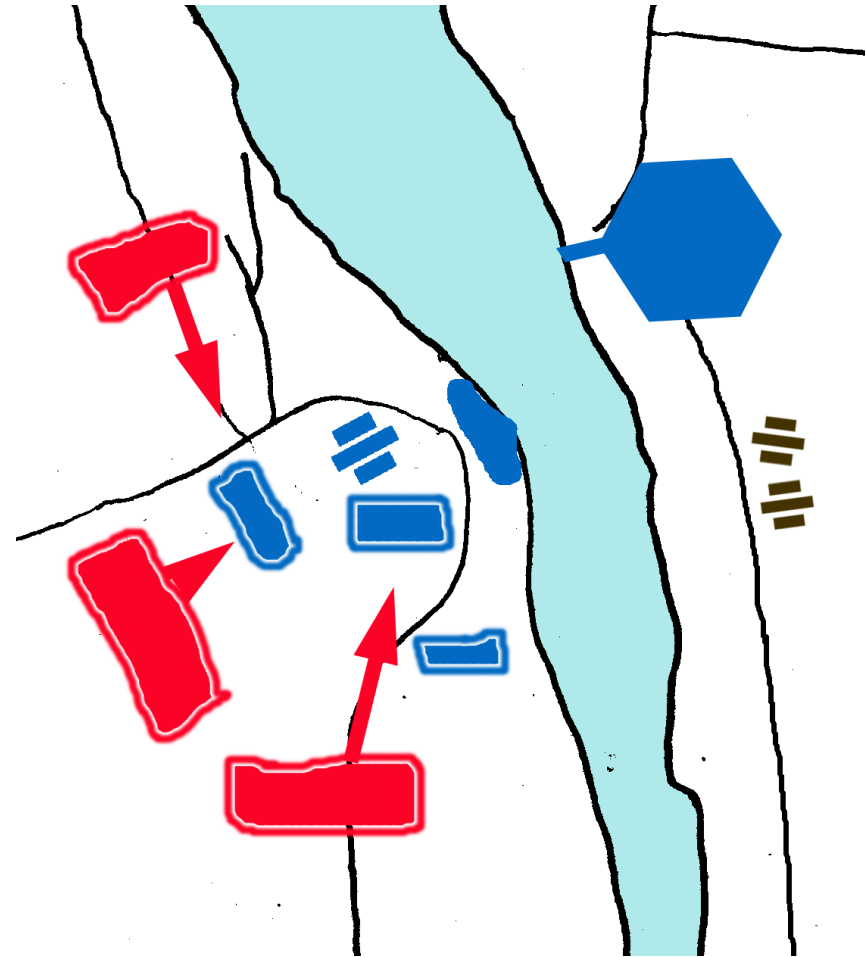
Picture on display at Fort George

## 2 pm: No Reinforcements

- American militia won't cross. No new regulars.
- Wounded Lt. Col. Bloom crosses back, exhorts militia to cross. Returns to battle alone.
- “All this transaction took place in fair view of two thousand militia on the opposite shore (poor dastardly wretches) who would not come to our assistance – had they come we might have held our ground...” – Jared Willson, 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment

## 3 pm: Sheaffe's Approach

- British General Sheaffe gathers troops, goes around to attack from south.
- British regulars (41<sup>st</sup>) from north.
- Norton, regulars, and militia from west.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 190

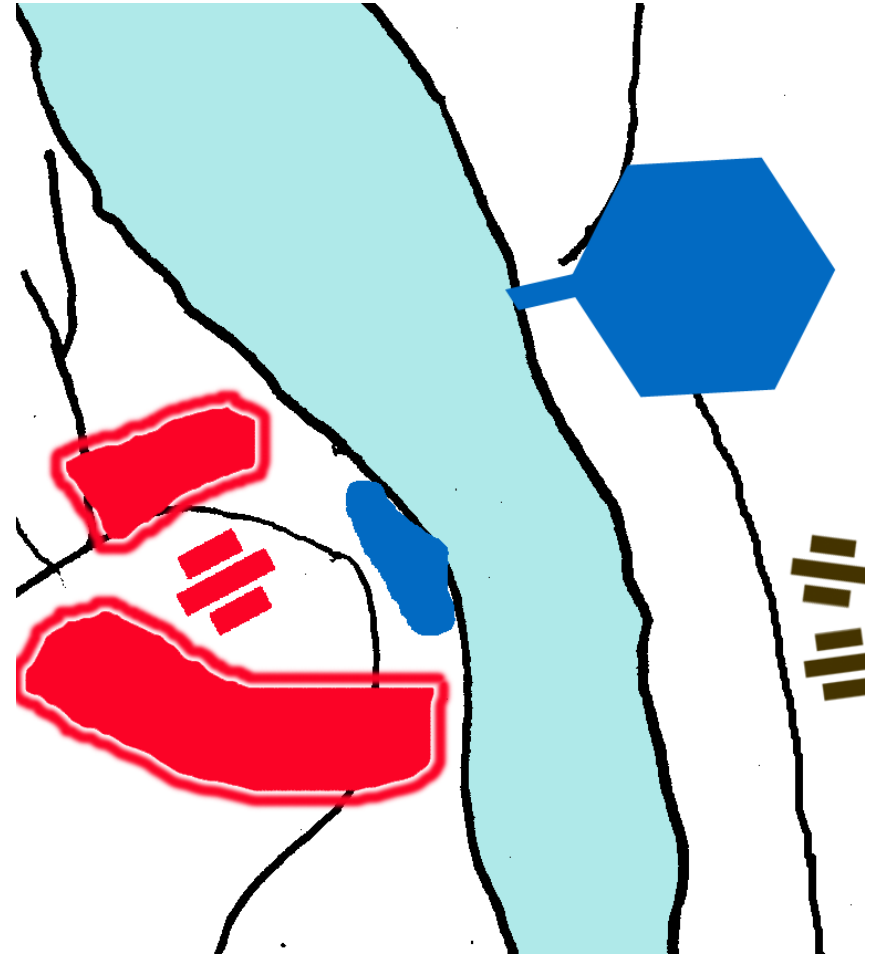
# Final Battle



Photo by Andres Musta at 2012  
reenactment. (CC license)

# 4 pm: Surrender

- Americans forced down to original beachhead
- In chaos of battle, takes three attempts to surrender.



Map by Simon St.Laurent, loosely based on  
*A Very Brilliant Affair*, p. 190

# How Many Troops in the Battle?

Malcomson estimates:

- **American**

613 regulars crossed  
371 NY militia crossed  
369 NY militia possible  
103 regular artillery  
71 militia artillery  
Total around 1530

- **British**

613 regulars  
613 militia  
40 regular artillery  
40 militia artillery  
100 Grand River Nations  
1366 total

# Aftermath

“Not seeing his townsman, Stephen B. June, among the prisoners, Captain Ellis went back on the battle field to look him up, and after searching found him very severely wounded by a ball which had entered his mouth and passed out of the back of his neck, just below the base of the skull, fortunately missing the spinal cord.

Finding that June was alive and still conscious, although fearfully wounded, Captain Ellis asked him which it was now, “Death, Hell, or Canada,” to which the wounded soldier feebly but firmly replied: “I can’t tell quite yet, Captain, which it is, but when the British bullet struck me I thought I had them all three at once.” June lived to return home and, if we are not mistaken, some of his family descendants are still inhabitants of the town.”

- Goodrich, 32/3



# How Many Casualties?

- 60 known American dead, 170 wounded.
- 436 American regulars captured, 489 militia.
- 20 British dead, 85 wounded.
- 5 Grand River Nations militia killed, many wounded (including John Norton).
- Isaac Brock

# Parole and Continuation

- Militia (including 40 Dryden men) paroled quickly with a promise not to fight until exchanged for British prisoners.
- Governor Tompkins arrives October 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Brigadier General Alexander Smyth (regular) takes command of the Niagara.
- Truce until November 20<sup>th</sup>.
- Smyth's attempts on Fort Erie and Chippewa fail November 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>.

## Governor's Race, 1813

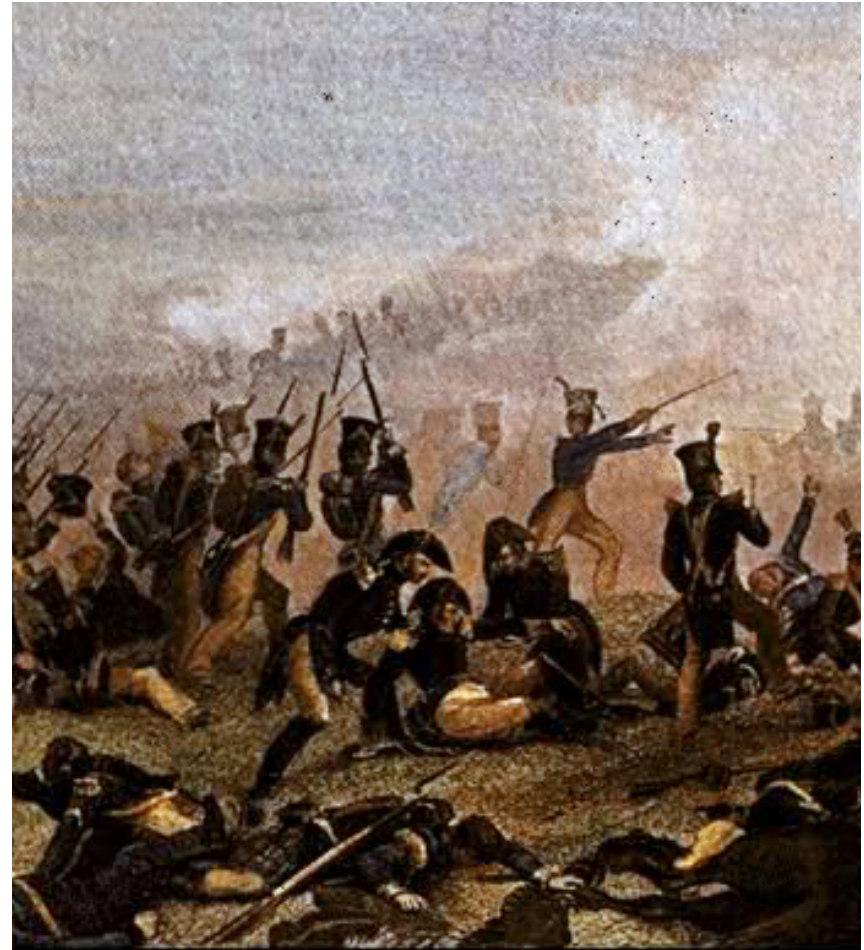
- Tompkins: 43,324
- Van Rensselaer: 39,718

# Niagara: 1813

- May: Americans take Fort George and Fort Erie, control western shore.
- June: British/Canadian victories at Stoney Creek and Beaver Dams halt American momentum.
- December: Americans abandon Fort George, Fort Erie. British take Fort Niagara, burn American settlements from Lewiston to Buffalo.

# Niagara: 1814

- July: Americans retake Fort Erie
- July: British and Canadians halt Americans at Battle of Lundy's Lane
- August: Americans withstand siege of Fort Erie
- November: Americans evacuate Fort Erie.



American Infantry attacks, Lundy's Lane

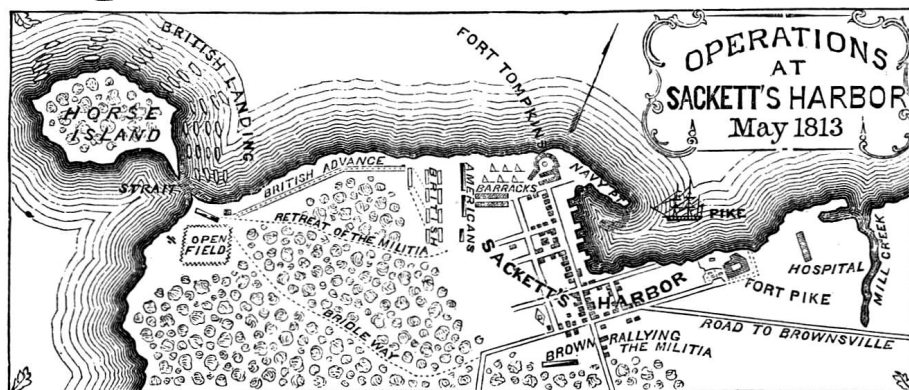
# War on the St. Lawrence



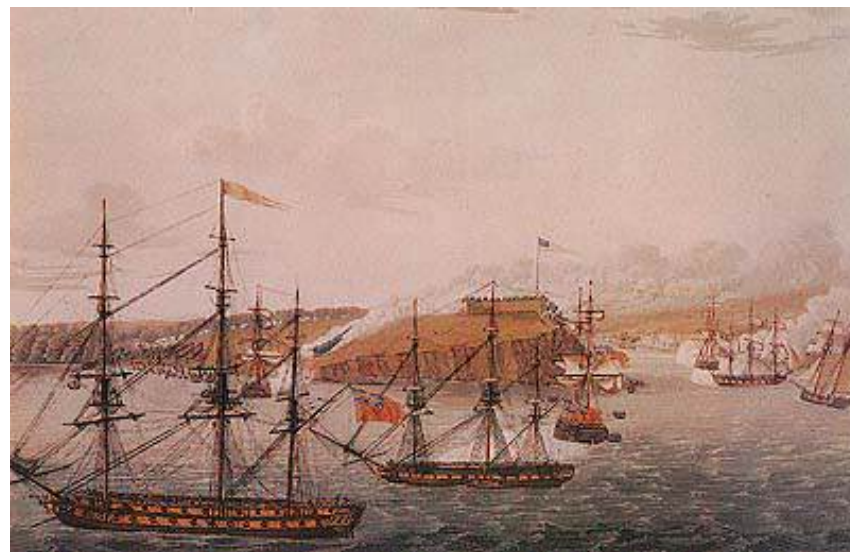
Cape Vincent re-enactment.  
Photos by Susan Verberg, used by permission

# New York through the War

- Lake Ontario never really under American control, though Toronto (York) burns.
- Oswego attacked by British; Sackets Harbor unstable base.
- “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” Oliver Hazard Perry gives US control of Lake Erie. Points west follow.
- Plattsburgh and the Battle of Lake Champlain end British invasion September 1814.



Plan of Battle of Sackett's Harbor, from Lossing's *Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* (1868)



"The attack on Fort Oswego, May 6, 1814".  
Drawing by L. Hewitt, engraving by R. Havell

# At Sea, American surprise

- Holds its own against the most powerful navy in the world
- Don't win every battle, but win enough to raise American spirits and lower British ones.



USS Constitution and HMS Guerriere  
by Michel Felice Corne (1752-1845)



# Rockets' Red Glare

- British take the Chesapeake Bay in 1814.
- Burn Washington as retaliation for York.
- Bombard Fort McHenry but don't invade Baltimore.
- “The Star-Spangled Banner” our main memory.



A VIEW of the BOMBARDMENT of Fort McHenry, near Baltimore

# Peace

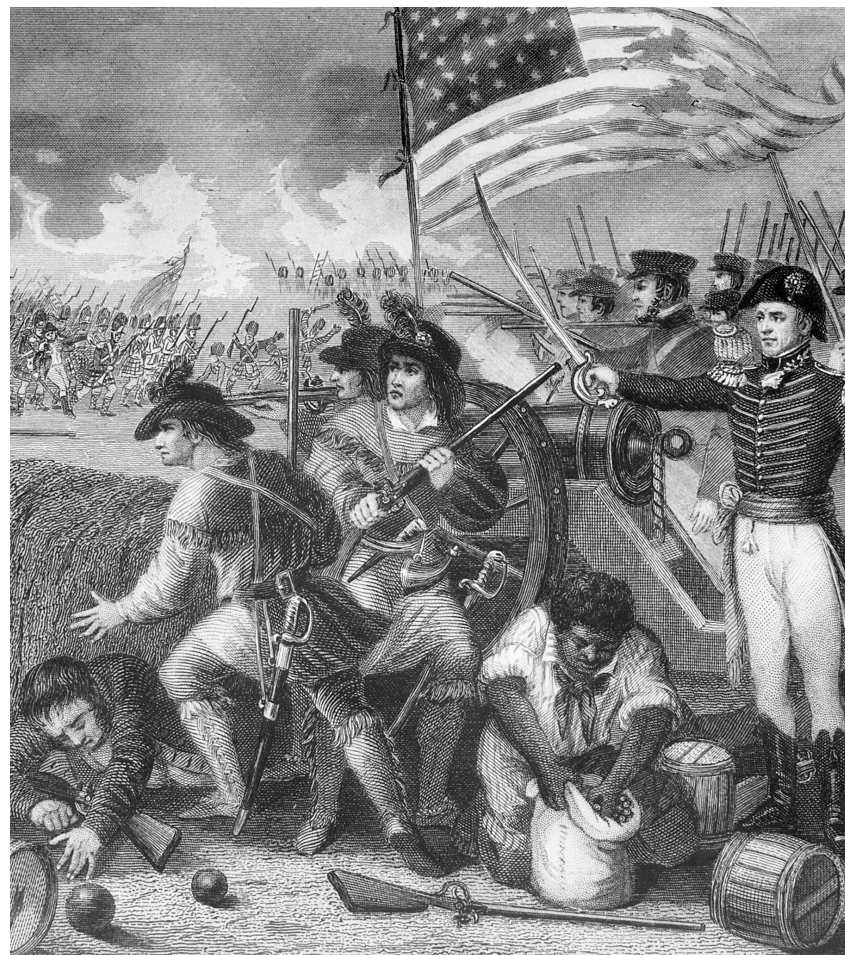
- British slow to negotiate; feel they have advantage.
- Americans default on debt, flirt with bankruptcy.
- Treaty of Ghent signed Christmas Eve, 1814. Restores original borders.
- Ratified February 1815.



*Amédée Forestier, The Signing of the Treaty of Ghent, Christmas Eve, 1814*

# A Little More War

- British assault New Orleans January 8, 1815.
- American victory after peace treaty signing establishes Andrew Jackson's reputation, gives Americans happier conclusion to indecisive war.



The Battle of New Orleans  
by Henry Bryan Hall  
after William Momberger

# Slow Recovery for Some

- “grandfather of Bradford Almy [had] patriotic blood in his veins, and in 1812 he enlisted, served honorably, and was twice wounded at Lundy’s Lane. In the then primitive condition of surgery, the bullets could not be removed from his body, though he passed much time in hospitals and suffered several operations. He died in Ithaca, at No 53 North Aurora street, in May, 1823.”



Medical Kit at Fort George, Simon St.Laurent

# Dryden After the War

“The census of 1810 having shown a population in the town of 1890, that of 1814 shows an increase to 2545, while that of 1820 returns a population of 3995, showing a very rapid increase and reaching, near the end of the first quarter of the Century Period, a number slightly exceeding that of the present population, the highest number ever reached being 5851 returned in 1835”

- Goodrich, 33-35

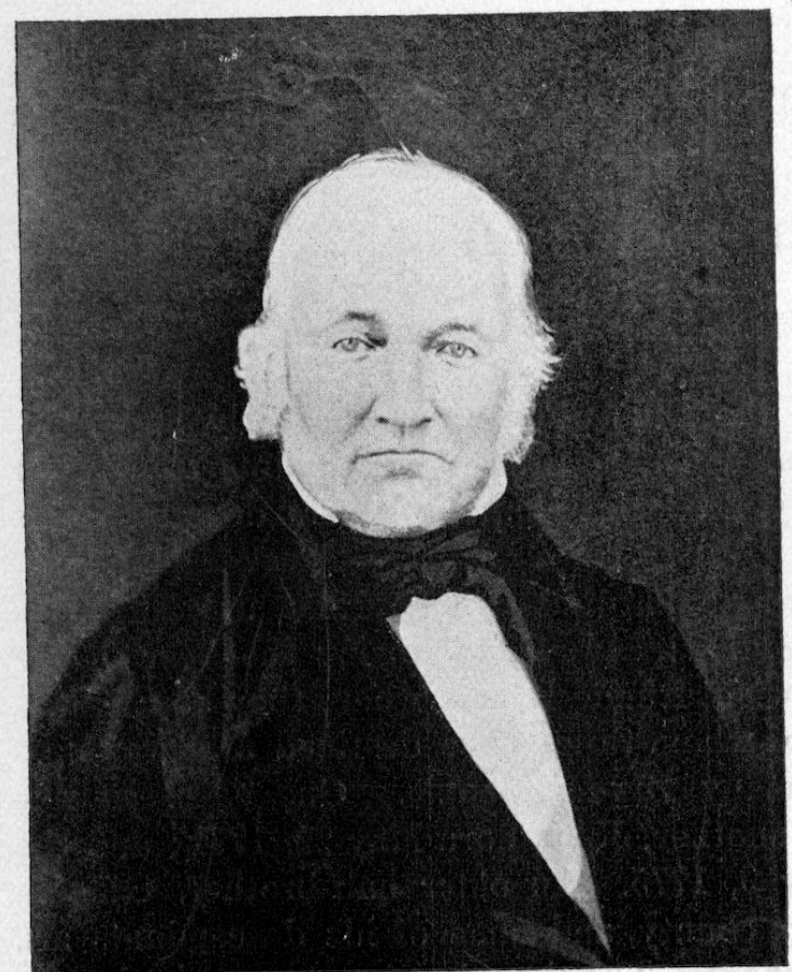
# Peleg Ellis After the War

“At the conclusion of the battle, together with about forty of the Dryden men, was among the prisoners of war; but they were immediately paroled and sent home.

Like some others, Major Ellis acquired in his army experience the habit of the intemperate use of intoxicating drink and in after years when he indulged too freely his martial spirit manifested itself, and he would go through the manual of arms, in imagination commanding his company as of yore, with all the preciseness and dignity of actual military service.”

# Peleg Ellis After the War

“As his years grew upon him, however, he came to realize that his intemperate habits, first acquired in the army, were a detriment to him, and with a resolution stronger than many men of our times can muster, he suddenly broke himself of the growing habit and his last few years were characterized by his strict sobriety and a religious life.”  
- Goodrich, 1934



MAJOR PELEG ELLIS.

*From an old picture in the possession of the family.*

Photo from Goodrich, p. 192

# Memory

- Canadians venerate Brock as founding hero.
- Americans have national anthem and a few parks.
- Native Americans / First Nations remember.



Brock cenotaph and monuments, Queenston, Simon St.Laurent



# For More

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