

# **War of 1812 Brief History**

By Susan L. Conklin, Genesee County Historian

In 1811 while Canada supplied reinforcements to the Niagara River area, the United States made no comparable effort to strengthen its undermanned Fort Niagara. However, in 1809 Joseph Ellicott, Resident-Agent for the Holland Land Company, had built a temporary arsenal in Batavia and Daniel D. Tompkins, the Governor of New York State, agreed to supply weapons to improve the defense west of the Genesee River.

In 1812 Western New York was composed of five counties; in the south, Allegany, Chautauqua, Cattaraugus and in the north Genesee (which included all of Orleans, Wyoming and the western sections of Livingston and Monroe) and Niagara (which included Erie). On June 18, 1812 the United States Congress declared war on Great Britain. The causes of the war included trade tensions, British support for Indian raids and U.S. territory expansion. The news of this declaration caused great concern and dread among the settlers of Western New York. All able-bodied men were summoned to fight and join the militia, leaving only a few behind to manage the crops. Seneca warriors from the Tonawanda Reservation also volunteered and provided support to the local militia.

For a year and a half there had been fighting along the Niagara River and in the later part of 1813 both sides of the river were controlled by the American troops. On December 10, 1813 General George McClure, who had been left in charge of the garrison at Fort George, on the Canadian side, attacked the Canadian Village of Newark (renamed Niagara) which was located one mile north of the fort. The American forces burned eighty buildings leaving some four hundred women and children homeless. The justification for the attack was to eliminate any hope for wintering in the vicinity of Fort George.

The British gathered a large force to revenge this destruction and burned the settlements along the Niagara River of Youngstown, Lewiston, Manchester, Schlosser and the surrounding farms. All the flourishing villages and settlements on the Niagara River north of Buffalo were laid to ashes. More than 200 houses were destroyed and the property owners reduced to poverty. Fort Niagara fell to the British on December 19, 1813 and remained in their possession until the end of the war. The British campaign of retribution concluded on December 30, 1813 with the burning of almost every building

in Buffalo. The militia attempts to oppose the British advance on Buffalo failed.

According the Gazetteer and Biographical Records for Genesee County: “We (in Pavilion) were told that when an engagement was taking place at Buffalo or Fort Erie, every peal of cannon could be heard and it was common for dishes to be jarred by the concussions.” The British invasion of Western New York in the middle of winter caused great damage and hardship. From Joseph Ellicott (Resident-Agent for the Holland Land Company): “...the burning of every building in the Village of Buffalo and massacre not only of men but women and children filled the inhabitants of the two Counties of Genesee and Niagara with terror and dismay”.

In a petition to Albany on behalf of the refugees the following was described: “Niagara County and that part of Genesee which lies west of Batavia are completely depopulated. All the settlements in a section of country forty miles square and which contained more than twelve thousand souls are effectually broken up. Our roads are filled with people, many of whom have been reduced from a state of competency and good prospects to the degree of want and sorrow...”

From Tuner’s Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase: “Batavia became the headquarters, the final rallying point for the remnants of an army; and a halting place for the fleeing homeless of the frontier. The most valuable effects of the Holland Land Office were taken beyond the Genesee River, the home of Joseph Ellicott was converted into quarters for army officers and his office a hospital; private homes, barns and sheds were occupied; families that were separated in the hasty departure from Buffalo became united there”.

Batavia also has the distinct honor of providing Brigadier General Winfield Scott, with shelter while he recovered from serious wounds received in the battle at Lundy’s Lane near Niagara Falls, fought on July 25, 1814. In December of 1814 the American Army on the Niagara Frontier succeeded in protecting Western New York and gained victories before the war ended with the Treaty of Ghent.

For nearly 200 years the United States and Canada have shared the longest boarder in peace between two countries. The Peace Garden in Batavia is part of the Bicentennial Peace Garden Trail and is a fitting reminder to us all

of the peace we have enjoyed with our Canadian neighbors. In commemoration of the Bicentennial of the War of 1812, the Genesee County History Department has created a resource which includes eleven binders that document the war. Records were copied from the New York State Archives, and include the two arsenals built in Batavia and claims filed by soldiers and warriors. If you are interested in the War of 1812, please visit the Genesee County History Department located at 3837 West Main Street Road in Batavia.