THE BATTLES AT PLATTSBURGH: SEPTEMBER 11, 1814

Keith Herkalo is the City Clerk of Plattsburgh, NY and a founding member and current president of the Battle of Plattsburgh Association which operates the War of 1812 Museum in Plattsburgh. He is an amateur historian whose research has been the catalyst behind the archaeological re-discovery and preservation of the 1812 camp site known as "Pike's Cantonment". Mr. Herkalo is the author of "The Battles at Plattsburgh: September 11, 1814" (History Press, 2012), editor of the early 1800's "Journal of H.K. Averill" (Battle of Plattsburgh Assoc. 2001), has contributed numerous articles in regional publications, and has been a frequent speaker in historically-related venues for many years.

Keith Herkalo est le greffier de la Ville de Plattsburgh, NY et un membre fondateur et actuel président de la Battle of Plattsburgh Association qui gère le Musée de la Guerre de 1812 à Plattsburgh. Il est un historien amateur dont la recherche a été le catalyseur de la redécouverte archéologique et de la préservation d'un site de 1812 connu sous le nom de « Pike's Cantonment ». M. Herkalo est l'éditeur de *The Battles at Plattsburgh: September 11, 1814* (History Press, 2012), l'éditeur d'un journal du début des années 1800, le *Journal of H.K. Averill* (Battle of Plattsburgh Assoc. 2001), a contribué de nombreux articles dans des publications régionales, et a donné de nombreuses conférences liées à l'histoire depuis de nombreuses années.

ABSTRACT

The British government's plan to end the conflict in the Americas was first expressed in 1812 but not acted upon before the defeat of Napoleon. The effects of the 1814 Plattsburgh campaign weighed heavily in the negotiations at Ghent. The ensuing 200-year friendship between Canada, Britain, and the United States is the lasting result of the War of 1812.

RÉSUMÉ

Le plan du gouvernement britannique visant à mettre fin au conflit dans les Amériques a été exprimé en 1812, mais on ne lui a pas donné suite avant la défaite de Napoléon. Les effets de la campagne de Plattsburgh en 1814 a pesé lourd dans les négociations à Gand. Les 200 ans d'amitié qui ont suivi entre le Canada, la Grande-Bretagne et les États-Unis est le résultat durable de la guerre de 1812.

The summer 1814 attacks on Washington and Baltimore by a British force of approximately 4,500 and the fateful 1815 attack on New Orleans are widely known to have been diversions executed at the Prince Regent's direction. The well documented June 1814 "secret order" from Bathurst, Britain's Secretary of War (made public shortly after the Treaty at Ghent) is one of four key documents which expose British planning for the end of the war. Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain, the focus of the British plan, was to see the war's largest concentration of British troops. Just across the border north of Plattsburgh some 14,000 British troops were gathered for the invasion of the United States. A feint at Sackets Harbor, attacks upon the eastern coastal villages, the "invasion" of Baltimore, and an attack on New Orleans were diversions meant to draw American attention away from the Lake Champlain region and the occupation of Plattsburgh, the single most strategically crafted event of the British War plan. Often overlooked by scholars, Bathurst's plan, the gist of which was first proposed in late 1812 by Sir John Borlase Warren, Commander in Chief of the North American Station in letters to Viscount Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, is to me, one of the most interesting aspects of the war.

Through the summer and the fall of the year 1811, tensions between the United States and Britain raised calls for war from the Congress of Madison's government. The disruption of trade, the capture of American ships, and the impressments of U.S. seamen stirred angry sentiments. The British army had massed troops in Portugal and surrounded *Ciudad Rodrigo*, trapping the French troops within it, and stranded U.S. goods in the markets of Lisbon.

There was virtually no standing army or navy to defend the U.S., let alone take any offensive actions. A looming unrest fermented along the northern U.S. border. The growing U.S. population pushed north and west into the territorial home and hunting lands controlled by the tribal chiefs Tecumseh and Pontiac. Tecumseh sought Britain's aid in securing his people's territory against the encroaching U.S. population. The new Governor-General Prevost instructed Major-General Sir Isaac Brock to "... find a clear but delicate way of letting the Indians know that in case of war, we expect aid of 'our brothers' ".

The alliance between the Native Americans and the British fanned the flames of Congressional furies. In November, Madison informed Congress on the state of affairs in Europe, the presence of British war ships "hovering on our coasts", and the need to increase the security of the country by expanding the country's military force.

A State of War was declared on June 18, 1812. Through the summer and fall of 1812 increasing military activity took place in the Niagara area. In the following two years, with the exception of two misguided and failed "invasions" of Canada from Plattsburgh under Generals Hampton and Wilkinson, and a British raid on an undefended Plattsburgh, military actions in the Plattsburgh area could be termed minimal and defensive.

In the first six months of 1814 the Plattsburgh community was alarmed by news of inrcreasing British actions to the north and the movement of large numbers of military vessels, equipment, and stores to Plattsburgh. American General Wilkinson led still another failed "invasion" into Canada at LaColle Mill. The American naval force was building at Vergennes, Vermont; the British, at Isle aux Noix.

Bonaparte was defeated and Britain began the withdrawal of her troops from the Portuguese Peninsula. The situation in the Americas, heretofore only a distraction, could now be dealt with. In April, British newspapers reported that part of Lord Wellington's army was "already under orders for America" and told of the movement of elements of Wellington's army to America. The Corbett Register proclaimed,

> *"... The Americans have no experienced officers. They have no discipline. They will, too, I dare say, think, that because they beat England in the last war, they can do it again... They will, if our troops really should land in their country, have to contend with those who have defeated French armies, with skill of all sorts; experience in the men as well as the officers; with courage, discipline, and the habit of victory. All these will require something more than the Americans have yet thought of...".*

On the 20th of May, Bathurst issued "secret" orders to General Robert Ross to create a "... diversion on the Coast of the United States of America in favour of the Army employed in the defence of Upper & Lower Canada"

On June 3rd Bathurst wrote in "secret" to Prevost informing him that thousands of troops and supplies would shortly arrive in Canada. Writing separately to General John Coape Sherbrooke, Bathurst ordered troops from Halifax to mount an attack "to occupy the part of Maine which at present intercepts the Communications between Halifax and Quebec".

Prevost was to use the largest British force to assemble on the American continent during the war to secure the route through the St. Lawrence and invade the United States, gaining control of Lake Champlain. "These operations will not fail to effect a powerful diversion in your favor", Bathurst wrote to Prevost. The first objective was to provide immediate protection through the "… entire destruction of Sackets Harbor and the Naval Establishments on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain… Should there be any advanced position on that part of our frontier which extends towards Lake Champlain, the occupation of which would materially tend to the security of the Province, you will if you deem it expedient expel the Enemy from it, and occupy it by detachments of the Troops under your command, always however taking care not to expose His Majesty's Forces to being cut off by too extended a line of advance". Drawing the American army toward Kingston would place an ill-defended Plattsburgh within Prevost's grasp.

The British Navy attacked the Chesapeake as Prevost ordered Major-General James Kempt's Brigade to move westward to Kingston for the diversionary attack on Sackett's Harbor. The threats initiated, the stage was set. The 11,000-man army remaining at Montreal included a large percentage of Britain's seasoned troops. U.S. Secretary of War Armstrong reacted to the Sacket's Harbor threat by ordering that General Izard at Plattsburgh move his army and provisions west to counter the British action.

In late August, Izard turned command of Plattsburgh to Alexander Macomb leaving "... two incomplete companies of artillery, all the sick, [...] a working party [pioneers] of between three and four hundred men [...] and any detachments of infantry..." which Macomb could raise. Macomb requested that local militia General Mooers call out the New York volunteers, and request militia assistance from the State of Vermont and such citizens who would remain to help with the forts.

With the British plan to attack or effect a siege of Sackets Harbor; and their army poised to enter and burn Washington—Bathurst's plan had been implemented. The British government waited only for the news that the diversions had been effective in convincing the United States' War Department to draw strength away from

Plattsburgh without reinforcement. Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain would become their prize, a strategic bargaining point strengthening their position in negotiations at Ghent.

"Our whole force does not exceed 1500 effectives [...] My troops are the remnant of Gen. Izard's Army, invalids and convalescents, except about 600 men", Macomb wrote to his father.

The American naval commander, Thomas Macdonough, noted the naval situation as near parity in metal but there was not a full complement of sailors or officers existing in either lake navy. Macdonough's vessels would be fully fitted and exercising at the end of the month while the British flagship Confiance was still under construction.

The first British brigade crossed the border and encamped at Champlain on the 1st of September. Macdonough gathered his fleet within Cumberland Bay adjacent to the village of Plattsburgh. Macomb cobbled together the available American land force, ordered 250 infantry to board Macdonough's ships as acting marines (and allowing 50 prisoners to be selected for fleet duty), and made assignments for the rising defenses of the village south of the Saranac River: Forts Brown, Moreau, and Scott. The block house north of the fortifications would be defended by "convalescents"; the blockhouse at the mouth of the Saranac River by a detachment of artillery. By the 4th, British General Robinson's army had moved south to Chazy leaving the 70-man 39th Light Company as he marched farther into the American countryside.

Plattsburgh's reporting militia forces amounted to only 700. Vermont volunteers were streaming into the encampments south of the forts; some 2,500 would eventually cross Lake Champlain to Plattsburgh.

Macomb deployed an "advance guard" north and west of the village and a number of untested NY militia to the road from Beekmantown.

On the 6th at daybreak and as expected General Power's brigade, half of General Robinson's brigade, part of Gen. Brisbane's brigade, and four light companies took the inland road toward Beekmantown. The remainder of the force under Robinson's command, including the remainder of General Brisbane's brigade proceeded through the Cedar Swamps near the lake.

After minor skirmishes, the right column entered Plattsburgh by late morning; the left column with the artillery arrived late in the afternoon, briefly challenged by American gunboats along the northern end of Cumberland Bay. General Prevost would wait for the British Navy before commencing an offensive action.

The largest British invasion force to exist on the American continent during the war was preparing to move as the U.S. Secretary of War resigned his office. From the 6th to the 11th, Macomb continued building his defenses.

British Navy Capt. Downie's fleet wore into Cumberland Bay at approximately 8:30 am on September 11th.

General Brisbane commenced a diversionary action within the village at 10:00 am as the main force under Generals Robinson and Power proceeded west and then south, fording the Saranac River at Pike's Cantonment (a former U.S. winter encampment site) to gain the American left flank and the rear of Macomb's unfinished fortifications.

Macdonough's fleet was at anchor and in a line slightly out of range of the British batteries. Downie had only two means of entering the Bay: south around Crab Island, wearing north between the island and the mainland shore, leaving him little maneuvering room between the shore and the island and dangerously close to the guns of Fort Scott; or straight into the bay, avoiding the rocky underwater topography of Cumberland Head and Crab Island, directly into range of Macdonough's waiting broadsides. In choosing the latter, Downie would play into Macdonough's plan. The deck guns of both fleets would soon spew forth their iron loads in a thunderous two and a half hours of smoke-filled horror.

As he entered the bay, the steady north breeze which had filled Downie's sails on the open lake, was now a confounding mix of eddies inside the bay. The north/south current within the bay runs counter to the lake's south/north current. The combination of the unexpected wind pattern and contra-current frustrated Downie's ability to maneuver to anchor. The British fleet, with their complement of 30 long 24-pounders could have stood off in the deeper waters of the broad lake outside the bay and beyond the effective range of all but Macdonough's 14 long 24's.

Almost immediately, the effect of Downie's decision for close action was apparent. The British fleet was completely within range of Macdonough's twenty-nine 32-pound carronades (British: 13) and six 42-pound carronades (British: 0). Within minutes, Confiance's sheet anchor was shot away, and the spare anchor cable and best bower spring line were severed. Downie, his ship finally anchored, directed the first broadsides from the Confiance but was killed within fifteen minutes.

The fleets' released broadside after broadside; none of the eight ships sank. The British fleet, badly damaged, was unable to maneuver as Macdonough wound his ship and the American ship Eagle re-anchored presenting two full broadsides with devastating effect. With the disastrous end in sight, the British struck their flags. The thundering exchange on the lake turned silent, the wafting smoke of the Saratoga's last broadside and the cries of the wounded remained.

On land, with the exception of the right battery within range of the guns from Fort Moreau, the British artillery

and rocket batteries were mostly undamaged throughout the day. Robinson's column found itself lost in a labyrinth of logging roads as they moved south. Speaking of Prevost's leadership Robinson later wrote, "It appears to me that the army moved against Plattsburg without any regularly digested plan".

At the expected ford point on the Saranac, Macomb's militia forces worked at night, from the 6th to the 11th, disguising roadways leading east to the American forts and opening a roadway south to militia General Mooers' headquarters at Salmon River Settlement. Macomb ordered two six pound cannon there.

The New York militia would occupy the western side of the roadway, engaging the British from the woods, strategically retreating toward the Settlement. The Vermont militia on the eastern side of the roadway was not to fire until they heard the American cannons from the Settlement. Macomb's anticipation of the British flanking route was prescient; preparations for their reception had paid off.

The militia forces of New York and Vermont performed as Macomb instructed: leading the British column south to the Salmon River Settlement, over one and one half miles due south of the ford at the Pike's Cantonment, and a mile west of the lake.

The British force had been successfully drawn south away from the American forts into a pocket of small arms fire from a mostly unseen force, of unknown size on both flanks, and into the path of American cannon muzzle. The invading column, formed in the open on the roadway, was the target for those hidden behind the rocks and trees. Prevost, from his vantage point on the northern side of the river watched for Robinson's column to come from the west – he waited [...] and waited.

With the lake suddenly silent, Prevost could hear the far-off small arms and cannon reports from an area he knew to be too far south and west of where Robinson and Power should have been. The rising smoke would provide the realization that the column was engaged and nowhere near the American fortifications.

The situation must have heightened Prevost's sense of alarm: Why are they to the west? What's happening? Are they surrounded? Bathurst had cautioned against risking the land force; Prevost issued a recall and retreat. Prevost reported to Bathurst of being deprived "... of the cooperation of the fleet without which the further Prosecution of the Service was become impracticable [...] the most complete success would have been unavailing, and the possession of the Enemy's Works offered no advantage to compensate for the loss we must have sustained in acquiring possession of them".

Christie spoke of the American foe as having "numerous reinforcements which momently crouded in", giving to Macomb "a great disposeable force, whose superiority in numbers was such that a delay of a few hours might have placed the British in a critical situation". Stanley notes that Prevost, believing that the fate of his assault was most affected by the defeat of the navy, missed, completely, the fact that there were so few casualties in the land skirmishes. Where was the great and superior force south of the Saranac River? Pierre Berton referred to Macomb as a believer of military deception. Had Macomb grown his nuumbers in the eyes of the British commanders with the aid of smoke and mirrors?

Throughout the rainy night the British army worked to disassemble their batteries. The lack of sufficient wagons and carts and the poor condition of the crude roadways frustrated their efforts. Those stores and ordnance which could be destroyed or dumped without consequence were disposed of. In the light of the assumed British victory and apparent winter occupation plans, the baggage, stores, munitions, and ordnance buildup from the 6th to the 11th was so significant that the means for immediate withdrawal did not exist; indeed, it was not planned for.

Bathurst understood the strategic importance of Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain.

Theodore Roosevelt and Winston Churchill acknowledged the significance of the events at Plattsburgh as hastening the peace negotiations at Ghent, the treaty being signed Christmas eve, 1814.

What have we learned?

"Status quo ante bellum": back to the way it was? [...] for national borders, maybe.

Some refer to a "second war of independence", with the United States finally establishing a capable army and navy.

The British luster, somewhat tarnished, survived, and Britain shared a new position on the world economic and military stage.

Canada is said to have gained a sense of identity: a unification of Canadian pride evidenced in heroic figures; e.g., Sir Isaac Brock and Laura Secord, etc.

Uninterrupted trade is of major importance to any nation.

Ultimately, Native American and First Nation's peoples, seemingly abandoned by both combatant nations, emerged the most negatively affected.