

1812:

THE ART OF WAR























The Fife and Drum

The Newsletter of The Friends of Fort York and Garrison Common

v. 16 No.1 March 2012



Contents

- 1 Kill Conquer Rule: Charles Pachter on the War of 1812
- 2 "A very unpromising prospect" Thomas Plucknett and the Sir Isaac Brock
- 4 Defending a Nation
- 5 Bicentennial Timeline
- 6 Administrator's Report
- 6 A New Look in One of Toronto's Oldest Buildings
- 7 *Finding the Fallen, The Battle of York Remembered*
A New Museum Services Exhibit
- 8 Upcoming Events



Kill Conquer Rule: Charles Pachter on the War of 1812

Commemorating military anniversaries, in this case of a war that took place 200 years ago, can be problematic. Faded memories and revisionist histories often gloss over the grim realities of long-past conflicts.

I am equivocal about how today's re-enactors portray soldiers from 200 years ago. At any given historic site, most of the emphasis is on crisp uniforms, polished rifles and boots, immaculate white triangular tents, and more on what they wore, than on the suffering and horrors of battle.

During a re-enactment I witnessed in 2010 at Fort Erie, a few "soldiers" actually passed out from the August heat. Imagine what the real thing must have been like on the battlefield in 1812 in those itchy woollen uniforms!

Add MOSQUITOES and MALARIA to MISERY. As many soldiers died from disease as got wounded. A whole lot of blundering, plundering, pilfering and pillaging, went on, as well as scalping and eviscerating, amputating of limbs, and other body parts. Not to mention starvation. And not one inch of territory got exchanged when it was all over. Two emerging settler nations, white tribal cousins, many former compatriots, killing one another for power and turf. The real losers, of course, were the First Nations peoples.

After reading various histories from the Canadian side—the Rev. William Withrow, Castell Hopkins, Pierre Berton, Gerald Craig, and JMS Careless, I then read Pulitzer prize-winning American professor Alan Taylor's new book *The Civil War of 1812*, (NY: Knopf, 2010) a refreshing addition to the list, as Taylor provides the reader with well researched detail on the major players, and doesn't take sides.

(For our review please see March 2011 issue of *The Fife and Drum* <http://www.fortyork.ca/newsletter.htm>)

Based on these readings, I completed a new series of paintings called DRESSED TO KILL.

These paintings are less about the Horrors of War—I leave that to Goya and Daumier—as about the peculiar military fashion of the times. Those high heavy hats, those tailored woollen coats with tails (!), those coarse linen trousers... How could anyone survive in the forest—winter or summer—or any season for that matter, in those clammy getups?



Brock's Premonition

I painted the icons on the British side—General Isaac Brock, hero of the battle of Queenston Heights, who died while scaling the heights even though the battle was won by the British, Laura Secord, a young Niagara area housewife who traipsed through the woods and swamps to Beaver Dams to warn the British of an impending American attack, and the Shawnee warrior chief Tecumseh, a charismatic and respected leader who fought with the British

because they had promised him and his tribes their own buffer nation in territory that now includes the American states of Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois. But it was not to be. Tecumseh was killed by the Americans while fighting in Upper Canada. And it was the beginning of the end for Indian hegemony in North America.

From the pioneer settler's perspective, add to the atrocities of war the destruction of private property, the stealing of livestock, burning of barns, homes, pilfering of grain, vegetables, clothing, etc. and you get some idea of the futility of it all.

Human depravity at its worst... But in one painting, *Neighbor to Neighbour*, I chose to depict two young American and British soldiers, in an idealized, formal but friendly confrontation,



Laura Secord



Tecumseh



Dressed to Kill



Neighbor to Neighbour

softened by the sands of time. The painting is an allegory about military prowess, but in the best of all possible worlds, enemies can and do become friends.

Much will be made in the months to come of this conflict that finally put an end to the fighting between two restive nations in the making. And, lest we forget, the senseless sacrifices of

so many led eventually to the peaceful co-existence that we now take for granted between our two great democracies in the twenty-first century. May that peace abide.

Charles Pachter is a Toronto painter, printmaker, sculptor, designer, historian, and lecturer.

“A very unpromising prospect” *Thomas Plucknett and the ship Sir Isaac Brock*

by Gary M. Gibson

In November 1812 the 24-gun *Madison* was launched at Sackets Harbor, New York. The Americans would now control Lake Ontario in the spring unless the British built at least one new warship.

In mid-December 1812 Acting Deputy Quartermaster General Captain Andrew Gray wrote Governor General Sir George Prevost asking permission to build a ship at York to carry 30 guns. A week later Prevost approved Gray's request and appointed Thomas Plucknett, “an experienced Officer in the Kings Naval Yards,” to build new warships at York and Kingston. While at York Gray chose a building site for the new ship. He planned to personally supervise shipbuilding at Kingston and send Plucknett to York to manage things there.

Plucknett himself had recruited over 120 shipwrights and carpenters at Quebec and Montreal. When they arrived at Kingston at the end of December, 50 men remained to build a 22-gun ship and the rest went with Plucknett to York.

The new ship at York would be armed with twenty-six 32-pound carronades and four 18-pound long guns. It would be the most powerful warship on Lake Ontario.

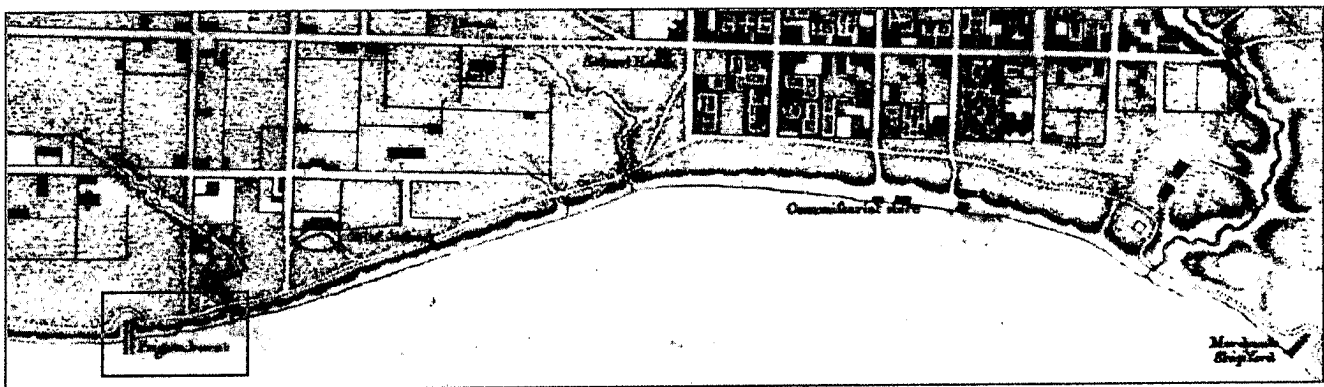
Gray told Prevost that the new ship at Kingston would be launched in April 1813. However, he heard there were “some difficulties” at York which might delay that ship's completion.

Difficulties there were. Plucknett inspected the site Gray chose to build the new ship, now named *Sir Isaac Brock*, and he did not like what he saw. That place was too level and too

shallow off shore to launch the *Brock* in the usual way. Gray's solution was to build the ship on a wooden platform 100 feet wide, 25 feet high at the shoreline and extending 500 feet offshore. Plucknett travelled to Fort George and informed Gray's superior, Acting Quartermaster General Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Myers, that it “would be highly imprudent and dangerous to build the Ship on it.” Plucknett found a better place a “short distance higher up the Harbour.” He then directed the workmen to abandon Gray's site and begin work at the new location.

Two weeks after meeting with Plucknett at Fort George, Myers and Royal Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Bruyeres visited York to see how things were going. They were not going well. Apparently both men had concerns before they arrived but once there they found “a very unpromising prospect” that the *Brock* would be ready in time and the reason was Plucknett. While they were not competent to determine if Plucknett was a “regular ship builder or not” they definitely knew that “he wants system and arrangement.” They recommended that Prevost replace Plucknett with someone “whose judgment and skill may be relied on as a builder.” That never happened.

By mid-March it was clear that the launch of the *Sir Isaac Brock* would not occur until mid-May at the earliest. Plucknett blamed the foreman, John Dennis. Dennis would have been discharged if not for Assistant Quartermaster General Alexander Clerk at York who recognized that the real problem was Plucknett and took steps to retain Dennis.



Detail from George Williams' map of York made in Nov. 1813 shows the slipway for the frigate *Sir Isaac Brock* slightly west of Bay Street where Union Station stands today. Chief Justice Thomas Scott's mansion was at the foot of Yonge Street where the Sony Centre is now located. Credit: Library & Archives Canada C-15981