

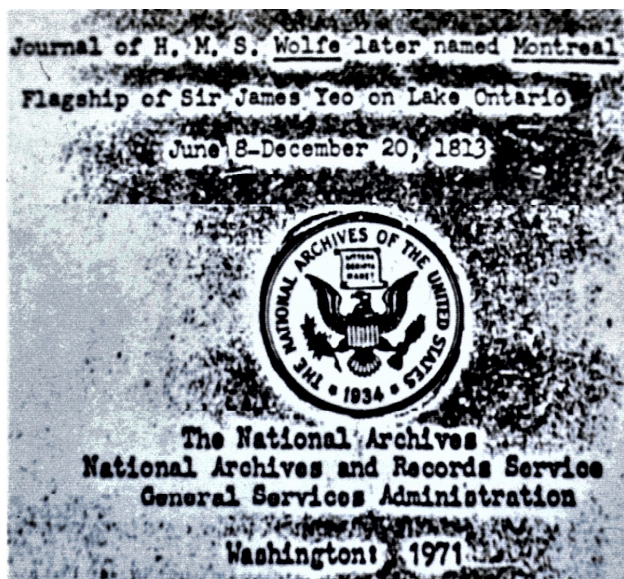
## SOLVING AN 1813 HISTORY MYSTERY

MOUNTAIN RESIDENT AND NAVAL HISTORIAN, ROBERT WILLIAMSON EXPLAINS GAPS IN OUR LOCAL HERITAGE.

Every summer on the weekend closest to June 6, the Battle of Stoney Creek is commemorated as a turning point in the War of 1812. However, there were other military engagements at the Head of Lake Ontario during the summer of 1813 that influenced the future of our nation, but why do they receive very little attention in our history books?

Few people know the answer to that question. Herein lies the tale. The logbook record of HMS Wolfe, Commodore Yeo's flagship on Lake Ontario during the summer of 1813, disappeared in 1814. That logbook contained all the recorded details of the 1813 naval war on Lake Ontario. Consequently the naval aspect of the war was underplayed in our history books, giving American historians a free hand in writing their version of events. Solving the mystery of how the logbook, containing so much valuable Lake Ontario history, was lost and the importance of its discovery makes a significant contribution to our perception of Canadian history.

Like any good detective story one must work from the known to the unknown to solve a mystery. A coincidental breakthrough would help this process. That bit of serendipity came in 1971 when the Wolfe's log came to light by accident in the Washington D.C. Naval Archives during research by Dr. Dan Nelson of St. Catharines who was looking for information that would help him locate the lost 1812 American naval schooners, *Hamilton* and *Scourge*.



How the logbook of the *Wolfe*, shown here, found its way to Washington was the next part of the puzzle. On September 07, 1999, the national archives in Washington confirmed to me that the Wolfe's log was received there on December 02, 1814 from Captain Thomas Macdonough of Plattsburgh, New York. Therein lies the link with Captain George Downie on Lake Ontario who, in June 1814, was appointed to command *HMS Wolfe* or *Montreal* as she had just recently been renamed. The name change and the re-commissioning would have made the former log of the *Wolfe*, dated June 8 - December 20, 1813, an Admiralty archival record to be safeguarded by the captain until it could be forwarded to the British Admiralty.

At the end of August 1814, Captain Downie was hurriedly re-appointed to the Isle-aux-Noix shipyard on Lake Champlain to command the newly launched frigate *HMS Confiance*. On September 11, 1814, Downie was killed in action and his squadron surrendered to Captain Macdonough at the Battle of Plattsburgh. It is almost certain that Macdonough found the log of the *Wolfe*, awaiting delivery to the admiralty, in Downie's personal effects. Before being sent to Washington, the log was inspected and signed by Commodore Chauncey, Macdonough's superior officer at Sackett's Harbor.

A copy of the log was brought back to Canada by Dr. Nelson, providing historians with opportunities to resolve unanswered questions. It clearly established how naval control of Lake Ontario played a major role in preserving Canadian sovereignty during that definitive conflict.

Consequently in 2013 the Hamilton Historical Board including myself and three other members of the Mountain Heritage Society, installed a commemorative plaque on Van Wagner's Beach Waterfront Trail at the Lakeview Banquet Centre. Correcting 200 years of misinformation, it is titled "From Fancy to Fact" and explains how we won a major naval battle at the head of Lake Ontario on September 28, 1813. Because of that naval battle, called the Burlington Races and the Battle of Stoney Creek two months earlier, we are all Canadians today.

*Mountain Memories* by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See <[Hamiltonheritage.ca](http://Hamiltonheritage.ca)>