

The Future of Mountain Pioneers Looked Grim 200 Years Ago

In the month of October two hundred years ago, Loyalist refugees, having trekked northward to escape what was considered the radical political forces of the American Revolutionary War, found that their flight to Upper Canada may have been in vain. Twenty years of work resettling themselves along the Mohawk Trail and around the villages of Ancaster and Dundas was suddenly in jeopardy as the military forces of the new American Republic advanced towards them from the southwest in 1813.

This was not the first time that their future had been threatened that year. Just a few months earlier in June, an American invasion of the Niagara Peninsula had been checked by a skirmish at Stoney Creek. Then, just two days later on June 8, 1813 while reforming at their field camp at the mouth of the Forty Mile Creek (Grimsby), the powerful American army was confronted by the arrival of the British Naval Squadron transporting reinforcements and supplies. British naval control of the lake presented a serious amphibious threat to the American rear and its supply / communication lines. They abandoned their Niagara Peninsula campaign, making a hasty retreat to the Niagara River.

Now in the autumn of 1813, the "shoe was on the other foot". Commodore Perry's September 10th victory over the British Naval Squadron on Lake Erie, had given the Americans full control over the southwest region of Upper Canada. British General Proctor, rather than face total isolation and starvation, abandoned Fort Detroit and Fort Malden (Amherstburg) on the Detroit River. He withdrew eastward up the Thames River towards present day London. Native leader Tecumseh and his Indians warriors had no choice but to follow him. Overtaken by American General Harrison on October 5th at Moraviantown, the British were defeated and Tecumseh was killed. With his death, the Indian forces melted away into the wilderness. The newly constructed Governors Road and the Mohawk Trail leading to the settlements at the western end of Lake Ontario were now wide open. It was one of the darkest periods in early Canadian history. Governor Prevost instructed the British forces under General Vincent at the head of Lake Ontario to retire to Kingston. The settlers along the Mountain's Mohawk Trail and the villagers of Ancaster and Dundas, were about to be abandoned.

Then, miraculously, General Harrison turned around and went back to Detroit with his victorious army. Why? The answer is the same as it was at Grimsby in June 1813. The British Naval Squadron was still in control of Lake Ontario. The American Naval Squadron had failed to defeat the British on September 28, 1813, at the naval battle called the Burlington Races. For the time being the settlers in the area seemed safe but there was still a measure of instability in the southwest part of the colony, giving rise to treason, culminating in a May 1814 trial known as the Bloody Assize at Ancaster.

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British retreat along the Thames River
October 1813 by Peter Rindlisbacher.

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