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The Upper Country in the War of 1812: A Chronology

compiled by Russell Magnaghi and Ted Bays

Background: *Casus Belli*

1803-1812: British warships detain U. S. merchant vessels and impress American men for service on British ships; the British commit other acts—trade embargoes, firing on the U. S. ship Chesapeake—that insult the U. S. Great Britain is heavily involved in the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. Some U. S. elements harbor vague notions of annexing Canada amid more widespread and explicit visions of unfettered Expansion. Republican “War Hawks” elected to Congress in 1810 press for war. British fur traders continue to foment disaffection for the U. S. among the Natives.

1807-1812: The British encourage the Native nationalist Tecumseh and his brother the Shawnee Prophet, or Tenskwatawa, to form a confederation to oppose U. S. expansion. June 1812: President Madison sends a message to Congress detailing British offenses and the U. S. House and Senate send a declaration of war back to Madison, who signs it on June 18. Because none of the Federalist opposition party vote for the war declaration, some contemporaries call the war “Mr. Madison's War.” It has also been called the Second War of Independence, after Benjamin Franklin's observation that “The War of Revolution is won, but the War of Independence is yet to be fought.”

The War in Michigan Territory & Upper Canada

(Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) was upstream—i.e. southwest—of Lower Canada (present-day Quebec), on the St. Lawrence River.)

Pre-1812: Joseph Varnum, the Factor (government trading agent) at Mackinac Island since Nov. 1809, has been instructed to discourage Native trading with the British at Mackinac, St. Joseph Island, Sault Ste. Marie and elsewhere in Canada

1807: An Odawa leader named Le Maigouis (The Trout) at L'Arbre Croche in northwest lower Michigan begins to promote the nationalist ideas of Tecumseh and travels to the Mackinac Straits area to speak against the Americanization of the Natives there.

Early summer 1812: Life continues as usual for the Great Lakes and Upper Country. People cross the unguarded U. S.-Canada border frequently and freely to visit and trade. British traders are active at Sault Ste. Marie and Mackinac.

July-August 1812: Territorial Governor General William Hull loses the American ship Cuyahoga Packet, with strategic papers, to the British. Hull mounts an ill-conceived and poorly executed invasion of Canada, retreats, and surrenders Detroit to a smaller British force under Isaac Brock, Aug. 16. Hull also orders the evacuation of Ft. Dearborn (Chicago) to Fort Wayne in Indiana Territory, and those retreating are ambushed and massacred by Natives.

Jan.-Oct. 1813: General William Henry Harrison, replacing Hull as Commander of the U.S. Army of the North-West, leads an attempt to re-take Detroit. Some of his troops fall to the British at Frenchtown along the River Raisin south of Detroit and poorly guarded prisoners are massacred by Natives. Oliver Hazard Perry defeats the British on Lake Erie, Sept. 10; with Lake Erie supply lines cut, the British leave Detroit to American reoccupation later in Sept. Harrison defeats the British at the Battle of Thames River in Canada, Oct. 5, and Tecumseh is killed, ending the British-Native alliance.

The War in the Upper Country

Summer 1812: General Brock notifies the Scottish fur trader Robert Dickson of the war and advises him to gather Native allies at Fort St. Joseph, on St. Joseph Island in the St. Mary's River. Dickson, a trader in the Upper Country since 1786, assembles a force of 400 Natives from Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin, his vast field of influence. July 17, 1812: The British force from St. Joseph, commanded by Captain Charles Roberts, moves on Mackinac Island. In addition to the Natives, the force includes a Sgt. and two gunners of the Royal Artillery and 44 men and officers of the 10th Royal Veteran Battalion. They commandeered the trading ship Caledonia and on the night of July 16-17 succeed in an undetected landing on the north end of the Island at a site still called British Landing. The British force haul their artillery pieces 2 miles up the rugged slope to the heights above the American fort—a dominant position. The small garrison at Fort Mackinac, commanded by Lt. Porter Hanks, consists only of 61 soldiers, and no Native allies. When

Captain Roberts sends a demand for surrender, Hanks accedes and papers of capitulation are signed on "The Heights of Michilimackinac" that day. The march of folly has shed no blood on Lieutenant Hanks' watch. Hanks later reports "This, Sir, was the first information I had of the declaration of war." With communication, as with field generalship, British General Brock has again out-foxed the far-flung Americans. Captured, paroled, and returned to Detroit to await court-martial, Hanks dies when his prison cell is struck by British artillery.

Summer 1812: The British improve an earthen redoubt on the Mackinac Island Heights with a blockhouse, stockade, and powder house and name it Fort George.

Summer 1813: The British continue to hold Mackinac and Sault Ste. Marie but their supply lines falter. Natives gather at Mackinac to support the British and quickly exhaust supplies there. The British establish an intermediate supply depot on Nottawasaga Bay at the south end of Lake Huron's Georgian Bay.

January 1814: Lieutenant Robert McDouall, a Scotsman of the Royal Newfoundland Fencibles, makes his way from York (Toronto) to Nottawasaga Bay with a regiment, voyageurs and craftsmen. They build batteaux and when the ice leaves the waterways they paddle and sail to Mackinac Island with much-needed supplies.

Summer 1814: From Mackinac McDouall sends a small expedition to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin to retake the post there after American forces under General William Clark had taken it in early June

and built Fort Shelby nearby. The British retake the fort on July 20 after a brief siege.

July 3, 1814: A military force under George Croghan and Andrew Hunter Holmes leave Detroit in a small fleet commanded by Patrick Sinclair, to attack and retake Fort Mackinac. The 3 brigs and 2 gunboats search for the British supply base on Georgian Bay. Failing to find it, they proceed up the St. Mary's River to Sault Ste. Marie and burn the abandoned Fort St. Joseph on the way. At the Soo they raze the North West Co.'s warehouse, trader John Johnston's warehouses, and a small lock that by-passes the river rapids, on July 21. This attack cripples the fur trade and ends the old seigneurial society. The force of 700 includes regulars and Ohio militia. British Capt. Robert McCargoe hides his schooner *Recovery* in an Isle Royale cove still called McCargoe Cove. He sails to Sault Ste. Marie, arriving a day after the U.S. attack there, thus avoiding the destruction of his ship. The *Recovery* goes on to serve British Surveyor Henry Bayfield in his charting of Lake Superior, 1823- 1825. McCargoe goes on to serve the (British) North West Co. and Hudson's Bay Co., and the (U. S.) American Fur Co.

July 26, 1814: Croghan's force reaches Mackinac and attempts to bomb the fort with their ships' guns, but the cannons can't reach the fort up the slope. Fog precludes further action for a week.

Early Aug. 1814: Croghan returns and lands at British Landing on the north end of the island. McDouall anticipates this move and leads a force of 140 British regulars and 150 Menominee Indians to

a breastworks overlooking a field in the Americans' line of march and ambushes the American force. Thirteen Americans including Major Holmes and two other officers die in the action. The Americans retreat to their ships and sail back to Georgian Bay. A black slave in the American force hides Holmes' body; it is recovered later and given formal burial.

Mid Aug. 1814: The Americans find the British schooner *Nancy*. This ship, stationed at Mackinac Island in 1813, had thus avoided destruction by Perry in the Lake Erie battle. Refitted at Sault Ste. Marie in the winter of 1813-14, she returned south and shuttled supplies from York (the capital of Upper Canada) to Nottawasaga Bay. The Americans chance upon the ship, hidden up the Nottawasaga River, and attack. The British set fire to their own ship—and its 300 barrels of supplies—and retreated toward York.

Sept. 3-6, 1814: The British take the two American gunboats, *Scorpion* and *Tigress*, which had been patrolling the Detour Passage on the west end of Drummond Island to intercept rumored supply canoes heading from Canada to Mackinac. With 4 boats and 2 small cannon, Lieutenant Miller Worsley, a survivor of the *Nancy* engagement at Nottawasaga, lands on Drummond Island on Sept. 2, sneaks up on the anchored *Tigress* on Sept. 4, boards her and subdues the Americans. Two days later, Worsley sails the *Tigress* under American flag toward the approaching and unsuspecting *Scorpion*. When within gun range, the British fire a daunting volley, board the *Scorpion* and take her. A force of 200 Ojibwa natives in 19 canoes is kept in reserve.

October 1814: The *Scorpion* and *Tigress*,

appropriately renamed by the British *Confiance* and *Surprise*, return to Nottawasaga, load supplies brought there from York and sail back to an appreciative British garrison on Mackinac Island.

Dec. 24, 1814: Negotiators sign a peace treaty in Ghent, Belgium to end the War of 1812.

July 18, 1815: American forces move into Fort Mackinac. Fort George, on the Heights, is renamed Fort Holmes. The British withdraw to Fort Drummond—still in U.S. territory on Drummond Island.

Aftermath: *Status Quo Ante Bellum*

Dec. 24, 1815: The Treaty of Ghent returns all of the Upper Peninsula, including military posts, to the U. S. In general, the state of affairs before the war returns. Although not prohibited *de jure*, impressment of Americans by Britain's Navy is *de facto* over.

1815-1822: Boundary negotiations and surveys continue, peacefully. Henry Bayfield, a British Royal Topographic Engineer, surveys Lakes Superior, Erie and Huron, 1817-25, and charts much of the St. Lawrence. He sails in the *Recovery*, the North West Company ship saved by British Navy Captain Robert McCargo. The international border in the St. Marys River puts St. Joseph Island in British territory, while Drummond, Neebish, Sugar, Lime and 27 smaller islands are in the U. S. To the southeast, Cockburn Island and the large Manitoulin Island chain are British. Although ceded to the U. S. by the 1783 Treaty of Paris after the American Revolutionary War, Isle

Royale now comes under American, not British, control. 1816: U. S. law prohibits trading in U. S. territory by foreigners. Yet British traders at Soo Canada and on Drummond Island continue to attract Natives to trade.

1817-18: The Rush-Bagot Treaty, named for the U.S. and British negotiators, demilitarizes the Great Lakes (and Lake Champlain). This begins the longest peaceful border in the world, the U. S.-Canada border. Per treaty language, a few warships are permitted in the Upper Country: On the upper lakes, each country is allowed 2 vessels of no more than 100 tons burden each armed with 2 cannon of 18 pounds or less, each. 1818: The Treaty of 1818 establishes fishing rights (for the U.S. off Newfoundland and Labrador), small territorial cessions by both sides consequent on setting the 49th Parallel as the border, and the restoration of slaves.

1820: The British warships on the lakes are dismantled and housed in the Stone Frigate, an imposing building at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario.

1828: The British “fort”—military and civilian buildings intermixed—on Drummond Island is finally removed to Penetanguishene, on the southeast shore of Georgian Bay. Fort Drummond, also known as Fort Colyer, includes buildings salvaged from St. Joseph Island.

THE NATIVES: In 1814 Philadelphia banker Nicholas Biddle, (whose cousin Edward Biddle—his wife Agatha LaVigne a prominent Odawa—ran a fur trading house on Mackinac Island) publishes Merriwether Lewis' 1807 *Journal*, which includes this prescient prescription by the great explorer:

"...the first principle of governing the Indians is to govern the whites." Fur traders in the U. S. and Canada now have an unimpeded post-war path across the Upper Country all the way to the West Coast. Treaties and laws securing land to the Natives and banning alcohol and sharp dealing with them do little to prevent their steady decline, despite the healthy fur trade in the decade after the war. The Cass Expedition across the U. P. and Lake Superior (1820), then the Erie Canal (1825), plus growing population, provide the routes and impetus—and later the regnant notion of Manifest Destiny provides the justification—for Expansion and Land Ownership, with dire implications for the Natives.

CANADA: Although not a U. K. Dominion until 1867, Canada emerged from the War of 1812 with an enhanced sense of national identity and pride and at least two figures worthy of lasting memorials: Isaac Brock and Laura Secord, from Queenston Heights action. British regular soldiers, local Canadian militia and First Nation allies quickly gave the lie to U. S. President Thomas Jefferson's statement that conquering British Canada would be "merely a matter of marching." They dominated the Province of Upper Canada (The Upper Country and southern Ontario) throughout the war. In 2012, Canadians rated Canada's repulse of U. S. invasions in the War of 1812 as second only to national health care in the formation of a national identity.