

Bicentennial of the War of 1812 – or The Fight for Canada

Battlefield conservation and interpretation as a boost for inward investment and heritage tourism for the domestic and overseas markets

(A Briefing Paper by Howard Simmons of the Battlefield Trust)

1. Background and context

June 1812 marked the opening of hostilities between Britain and the USA with the invasion of Canada by American armies. Despite both sides anticipating a speedy conclusion, the war in fact dragged on for over two and a half years until 1815. The last battle in that year saw, sadly, many casualties amongst veterans of Wellington's Peninsular campaigns when British and West Indian troops made a frontal assault against entrenched American positions at the southern city of New Orleans.

Ironically the war had technically finished some six weeks before this engagement when the USA anxiously pressed for the signing of a peace treaty at Ghent in Belgium which restored the status quo ante bellum. This came about largely because by then the American economy had been brought to the verge of ruin; Washington, the American capital, had been captured and the major public buildings burnt; and a number of American States were seriously considering breaking away from the fledgling United States.

In terms of the Bicentennial then June 2012 marked the launch of a wide ranging commemoration of the War of 1812 in both Canada, where this has received recognition and funding from national and provincial governments, and the United States where Federal and State funding has also been allocated. In Britain, by contrast, there has been very little recognition or comment apart from the publication of the first major British study of the War for over 50 years by Professor Andrew Lambert of Kings College, London, entitled "The Challenge – Britain against America in the War of 1812".

Taking up the story of 1812 then Britain was locked in a massive conflict with Napoleonic France and most eyes and attention then (as, indeed, now) were firmly focussed on Continental Europe with Napoleon's invasion of Russia and the British contribution to the struggle in the Iberian Peninsula under Wellington. Britain was bound to regard the war in North America as an irritant and a sideshow.

However, to the United States the war was in deadly earnest. In fact Napoleon had for some time been trying to encourage the Americans to enter the conflict recognising the challenge to the British colonies and inevitable distraction an American war must cause to both British land forces and most particularly the Royal Navy.

The trigger for war was precisely the simmering American resentment of British naval policy that allowed for the stopping and searching of merchant vessels for contraband trade with Napoleonic Europe and the impressment of any British sailors found on board such ships into the Royal Navy to help meet the enormous demands for crews to ensure British ships could maintain fighting effectiveness.

While “Free Trade and Sailors Rights” might be a focus for the American popular press, the calculation in the White House was that Napoleon would defeat Russia and an isolated Britain would then be forced to negotiate a peace from a position of weakness. What better time to invade and take over Canada and add this large land mass to the United States? Britain had only a small garrison of regulars in Canada spread thinly over several thousand miles of land frontier and the conventional American view was that seizing control would be “a mere matter of marching” and could be achieved “by a corporal’s guard”.

The actual events of the war turned out to be very different indeed. The small garrison force of British regulars (led brilliantly until his death in action by General Isaac Brock) co-operated with the very effective Canadian Select and Embodied militia units, native American tribes in a confederation led by the charismatic Tecumseh (until his death in action), and units such as Runcney’s Corps of Free Men of Colour, to turn back and defeat the several American invasions across the Canadian border. Indeed many Canadians regard the War of 1812 as a defining moment in their history when the basis for an independent and culturally distinct Canada was forged.

2. The Theatres of War

There were three main theatres of war :-

(A) The Canadian border with the United States.

This was the chief area of operations stretching from Detroit in the West to Halifax in the East with a major focus on the Great Lakes and Niagara peninsular.

A wide range of land battles were fought from Mackinac Island, Detroit, Fort Dearborn (Chicago), Queenston Heights (all in 1812); Raisin River, York (Toronto), Fort George, Sacket’s Harbour, Stoney Creek, Beaver Dams, the Thames River, Chateaugay, Crysler’s Farm, Fort Niagara (all in 1813); Fort Erie, Chippewa, Lundy’s Lane, Fort Niagara, Fort Erie, Plattsburg (all in 1814).

Alongside this was a major naval war on the Great Lakes and inland waterways as both sides rushed to construct naval vessels and conducted a fierce amphibious warfare seeking to destroy the enemy shipyards and naval supplies. The naval race saw great rivalry to build larger vessels with the largest constructed being the 110 gun British vessel the HMS Saint Lawrence launched at Kingston in 1814. Individual ship-on- ship actions and significant small fleet actions took place on, for example, Lake Ontario (1812), Lake Erie (1813) and Lake Champlain (1814).

(B) The Chesapeake Bay and Eastern Coast of the United States

As the war progressed and the imminent threat of invasion of Canada receded while Napoleon faced defeat and exile in Europe, the British were able to deploy more ships and troops from the European theatre. This resulted in the gradual building up of the naval forces operating from Halifax in Nova Scotia and Kingston in Jamaica and

the expansion of the land forces with the addition of experienced battalions from Spain and Portugal.

The “Blue Water” or open sea actions in the early part of the war had seen ship-on-ship victories for the heavy American frigates which were not only handled well by their commanders but were significantly bigger with larger crews and more guns than their British counterparts.

In 1812 the USS Constitution took HMS Guerriere and the USS United States took HMS Macedonian in actions which were reported in the American press in a patriotic frenzy as clearly indicative of the war’s outcome.

Britain’s response was to steadily build up her sea power throughout 1813 and 1814 to create a very effective economic blockade of all American ports stretching along the entire Atlantic coastline from New Brunswick to Mexico. At the same time escorted convoys were established for trans-Atlantic British merchant shipping to counter the threat of American privateers.

American shipping was now either trapped in port or risked capture and by the war’s end some 578 American ships had been seized effectively crippling American trade and severely damaging the American economy. Furthermore the American frigates had been neutralised being either bottled up in port or captured – HMS Shannon taking the USS Chesapeake in 1813 and the capture of the American flagship USS President occurring in 1815.

At the same time during 1813 and 1814 Admiral Cockburn was given instructions by the British Admiralty to mount extensive raids against coastal settlements around the Chesapeake Bay area. Cockburn proceeded to create havoc in Maryland and Virginia through lightning attacks made by British landing parties throughout the area.

The British established a base on Tangier Island in the Chesapeake and here trained the new units of Royal Colonial Marines formed from escaped black slaves. These troops soon earned a reputation for bravery during amphibious operations while stirring fear in the American tidewater plantations of a major slave revolt.

Significant land operations came with the landing of a small British army under General Robert Ross in August 1814 at Benedict in the Chesapeake Bay. The British marched on Washington, the newly-built American capital, and on the 24th August defeated an American army twice their size at the battle of Bladensburg before occupying Washington and burning all the major public buildings and the important Navy Yards. The subsequent whitewashing and painting of the scorch marks on the damaged President’s house gave rise to the name of the White House.

The British next moved on to attack the major city and port of Baltimore which was a key ship building centre and base for privateers. In September 1814 British troops were landed at North Point on the Chesapeake Bay in order to make a concerted attack on the landward side of the city in conjunction with the fleet attacking the harbour. The British at first proceeded to push back the initial American troop dispositions. However, the small British landing force of 3,000 then met strongly prepared defence works with more than 186 cannons in earthwork batteries and a

garrison of 11,000 while the naval bombardment of Fort McHenry at the harbour mouth proved ineffective.

The British wisely withdrew and in October 1814 set sail for Louisiana in the south. The attack on Baltimore did, however, leave one lasting legacy which was the poem by Francis Scott Key, a Baltimore lawyer, entitled "The Star Spangled Banner" which set to the music of an 18th century British drinking song described the British bombardment "and the rocket's red glare" and was to become later the American national anthem.

(C) The South - New Orleans and the Mississippi River Valley

The British had recognised the strategic and economic importance of New Orleans and its command of the Mississippi River Valley and in December 1814 a British expeditionary force of Peninsular War veterans under Major General Sir Edward Pakenham (Wellington's brother in law) was landed to capture the city. Unfortunately Pakenham delayed attacking the city allowing the American commander Major General Andrew Jackson valuable time to prepare strong defensive positions and artillery batteries. When the frontal attack was made across open ground in January 1815 it was repulsed with severe casualties and a week later the British withdrew.

Ironically the battle need never have been fought as the war had been ended six weeks before with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814 but news of this did not reach North America until eight weeks afterwards.

3. The Bicentennial Programme for the War of 1812

Planning for the Bicentennial commencing in June 2012 began several years beforehand in both Canada and the United States and both national and international projects have been developed alongside regional and local ones in a programme lasting up until 2015.

In the first place both the Canadian and the US Governments supported a joint CBC and PBS Television documentary programme on the War of 1812 developed in conjunction with Parks Canada and the National Parks Service which was shown on prime time TV to critical acclaim. This has been made available as a DVD and podcast and a number of War of 1812 web sites have been developed for information and promotional purposes alongside this. In addition a high quality and accessible publication on the War of 1812 has been produced to accompany the Bicentennial.

Canada

The Canadian Government has given a clearly stated high political priority to supporting the commemoration and furthering the understanding of the War of 1812 and its significance for the present day. This has been led by the Prime Minister and Heritage Minister but also endorsed by the Business and Education Ministers. A wide ranging and ambitious programme has been developed:-

- (i) Permanent War of 1812 Monuments have been commissioned for major Canadian cities
- (ii) Infrastructure Investments are being made in 40 historic sites (examples include a new \$3 million visitor centre and museum for Fort George, \$4 million museum and interpretation centre for the battle of Lundy's Lane, \$2 million visitor centre and displays for Fort Erie, \$1.5 million heritage centre for Crysler's Farm etc.)
- (iii) 100 Historical Re-enactments recalling key moments in the War of 1812 ("Living History" is seen to have great educational and tourism value)
- (iv) National Education Plan with war studies curriculum (Considering the impact on civilian life, the role of women, the contribution of different cultural and ethnic groups)
- (v) 1812 Education/Teachers Resources Web site
- (vi) National touring/mobile 1812 Exhibition
- (vii) \$28 million Programming and Marketing Plan (including grants for local publications and research, support for local heritage groups concerned with the War of 1812, battlefield archaeology and the material culture of 1812, heritage and battlefield signage and interpretation, guides, maps, walking, cycling, driving tours etc.)
- (viii) War of 1812 for Business – the role of Heritage Tourism (including Heritage and Events, Retail and Hospitality, Tours, Transport and Accommodation, planning for domestic and overseas tourists etc.)

A considerable amount of activity has been stimulated in relation to the material culture of the War of 1812 with new and renovated museum displays and further archaeology at a number of historic sites and battlefields.

The prolific military historian and former curator at both Parks Canada and the Canadian War Museum, Rene Chartrand, has produced a two volume set of books on the material culture of the war entitled :-

“A Scarlet Coat – Uniforms, Flags and Weapons of British and Canadian Forces in the War of 1812”

“A Most Warlike Appearance : Uniforms, Flags and Equipment of the United States in the War of 1812”

Interestingly a broad community campaign has arisen involving veteran's groups, family history and civic organisations seeking to get “battle honours” granted for the standards of those modern Canadian military units that can trace their lineage back to the formations that fought in the War of 1812.

The United States

In the USA, investment in the Bicentennial of the War of 1812 has been in the context of helping to stimulate the economy in a period of recession with a belief in the economic value of heritage and battlefield tourism.

While there has been some financial assistance to key heritage sites run by not-for-profit organisations such as Old Fort Niagara there has also been investment in the National Parks Service who conserve and manage historic sites and battlefields. This has been particularly in the Baltimore and Washington area where a new \$5 million Visitor Centre and Museum has been developed at Fort McHenry.

Equally a programme of marine and battlefield archaeology is planned between the Baltimore Historical Society, Smithsonian and Annapolis Naval Museum to investigate, record and conserve a number of sites where skirmishes, raids and amphibious assaults took place in the Chesapeake Bay area including the excavation of the British base on Tangier Island.

The Chamber of Commerce has been active sponsoring self driving, cycling and walking tours of historic sites associated with the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake Bay and more generally Maryland and Virginia.

Celebration of the Bicentennial started with a “Sailabration” at Baltimore in June 2012 in commemoration of the importance of the city as a maritime centre and port in 1812. The event included both living history events and a major procession of tall ships from around the world as well as serving warships from Canada, Britain and the USA. This attracted many American and overseas visitors and was deemed a very significant success in inward investment and tourism terms.

In New Orleans investment is being made in the National Parks Battlefield Centre – still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. The major activities will be in 2015 but a full programme is being developed including better interpretation of the battlefield, an upgraded museum and visitor centre and some further archaeological work. All this is being included in the regeneration, inward investment, tourism and promotional plans for the city and region generally.

4. So Who Won the War of 1812?

Not such a silly question as both Canada and the United States are commemorating the Bicentennial.

The Canadians are clear that they won the war since most of the land battles along the Canadian border were victories for British and Canadian forces and the American attempt to conquer Canada self evidently failed. Canadians regard the War of 1812 as a very important stage in the development of an independent Canada and their national identity.

The British are clear that they won the War as none of the stated American war aims were achieved and the underhand attempt to conquer and occupy Canada was clearly defeated. The Americans sued for peace at Ghent because the British naval blockade was bringing the USA to the verge of bankruptcy and the war had become so unpopular in some States that they were threatening to leave the Union. An occupied and burnt national capital in Washington and a captured flagship in the USS President symbolised at the time a clear victory. However, today the War of 1812 with America tends to be “the forgotten war” as nearly all attention on the period remains focussed on the global struggle with Napoleon and France.

Interestingly the Americans also feel they won – or at least did not lose – the war. The early ship-on-ship single actions which saw a string of American victories are still celebrated today and are the stuff of naval legend. The war on the Canadian frontier is often inverted with the view that the Americans were fighting a second War of Independence and the battles were to stop the British from crossing over from Canada to destroy the infant United States. Similarly the defence of Baltimore is seen as a great victory and deliverance (the British raids in the Chesapeake and on Washington being clear evidence of British barbarism). Finally the American victory at New Orleans is seen as clear proof of American virtue and British vice while the fact that the news of the peace treaty only arrived after this victory proves that the British gave in as a consequence of it.

5. Lessons from the North American Experience

The Bicentennial is being developed by a broad alliance and partnership of local history, educational and heritage organisations, veterans and military history groups, community and civic bodies, chambers of commerce and business interests and has entailed a great deal of voluntary effort and hard work alongside fund raising activities. Tens of thousands of people are being involved as organisers, participants and spectators and the economic impact in terms of inward investment and job and training opportunities through heritage and battlefield tourism is considerable.

At the same time the role of local, regional and central government has been crucial in providing visible political leadership and the will to make the whole thing happen and facilitating the partnerships between heritage, community, educational and business sectors. Canada Parks and the US National Parks Service have been key and some funding streams as catalysts have obviously been important but most important has been the vision and recognition that heritage and battlefield tourism can play a key role in economic growth, inward investment and the development of the domestic and overseas tourism industry.

Despite the difficult economic climate – or perhaps because of it – the Canadians and Americans have supported and invested in a wide ranging heritage and cultural programme with the clear expectation that this will not only bring educational benefits but a real economic and business growth return. In Britain there is, perhaps, a challenge to and a role for the DCMS to explore this approach and provide a similar facilitation and leadership role to encourage the development of heritage and battlefield tourism for themes such as the “Wars of the Roses”, the “English Civil

Wars” and the “Jacobite Rebellions” not forgetting significant commemorations such as the upcoming ones for the centenary of World War 1 and the medieval development of parliamentary democracy linked to the signing of Magna Carta and the revolt of Simon de Montfort. The Battlefield Trust is certainly willing to assist in and contribute to this endeavour.