

The War of 1812



In St. Thomas and Elgin County

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-The Preliminaries to War-

The War of 1812 was a conflict between Great Britain and the United States. It evolved from the Napoleonic Wars in which Great Britain and France vied for naval supremacy. In 1806, Napoleon issued the Berlin Decree which ordered all ports under his control to be closed to British ships and demanded that all neutral and French ships would be seized if they entered a British port en route to a continental port. The British retaliated with Orders-in-Council which stipulated that all neutral ships obtain a licence before sailing to Europe. The British began to stop and search American ships for contraband and to press American citizens into service on the British ships.

The culmination of these tactics was the Chesapeake Affair. In 1807, several British sailors deserted their ship the HMS Leopard that was patrolling along the shore of Chesapeake Bay between Maryland and Virginia. They enlisted in the American navy on an American ship also named the Chesapeake that was in the area. When the British ship the Leopard attempted to board and search the Chesapeake, consent was refused. The Leopard opened fire, killing three and injuring eighteen of the Chesapeake's crew.

The dispute over maritime rights might have been settled by diplomacy except for interests in the United States that advocated war. Major General Dearborn had presented President Madison with an analysis that in the event of war, Upper and Lower Canada would be easily overtaken and indeed such an invasion would be welcome by the settlers. An influential group of Republicans from the south and west known as the "War Hawks" were Anglophobic and nationalistic. They encouraged war in retaliation for the economic losses caused by the British blockades and seizures and in the belief that the British were encouraging the First Nations to resist American expansion in the west.

Upper Canada was under British rule and thus Elgin County was brought into the conflict when war was declared on June 18, 1812. The majority of the battles were fought in the Niagara region and along the border across from Detroit. The fighting in Elgin County was largely restricted to skirmishes and raiding parties coming up from Detroit. Some of these marauders were residents of the Talbot Settlement, who driven by their dislike of Colonel Thomas Talbot, defected to the American side. They were employed as scouts and guides for the American raiding expeditions. The majority of the raids on the Talbot Settlement occurred in 1814. While on these raids the partisans engaged in the destruction of dwellings, property, crops, and livestock. Relatively few settlers were killed. Local officers would be taken hostage so as to disorganize the militia and to be held for ransom. Colonel Talbot was sought as a prisoner.

The most notorious of the deserters were Andrew Westbrook, Simon Zelotes Watson, Daniel Norton, Samuel Doyle, and James Pelton. Both Westbrook and Watson were known to have vendettas against Talbot. Andrew Westbrook has been described as "... a man of great strength and stature and animated by an insatiable desire for revenge ... most formidable and merciless." Watson had aspired to become a partner with Talbot in the settlement of the area. Talbot refused and contemptuously declined Watson's challenge to a duel. The above mentioned deserters were later listed on a document of "Names of Persons who have been attainted of High Treason committed in Upper Canada, or who have been returned as having absconded from the Province during the late War with the United States of America." A number of the renegades who were not killed in action would later be tried as traitors. Most of them chose to reside in the United States to avoid prosecution and to live in what they believed to be a more favorable political climate.



Colonel Thomas Talbot 1771 - 1853

1812

February 27 – Sir Isaac Brock appoints and deputizes Colonel Thomas Talbot to defend and to secure the loyalty of Upper Canada. Talbot is placed in charge of the Middlesex Militia and has supervision over the regiments of the London and Western Districts.

Talbot is not confident that Upper Canada can defend itself against the American invasion as the invaders have a population twenty times greater and they possess industrial capacity. Upper Canada (which is now Ontario) is sparsely settled and agrarian in nature. Garrett Oakes, a contemporary settler of Yarmouth Township, observed that the war “...nerved the Canadians to use seemingly superhuman exertion to protect the country, although often apparently against hope.”

June 18 – America, under the leadership of President Madison declares war against Great Britain.

July 12 – General William Hull leads American forces in an invasion of Upper Canada at Sandwich which is now part of Windsor, Ontario. Andrew Westbrook and Simon Zelotes Watson accompany the American army as scouts. It is reported to General Brock that Westbrook has been circulating Hull’s edict urging the local inhabitants to surrender.

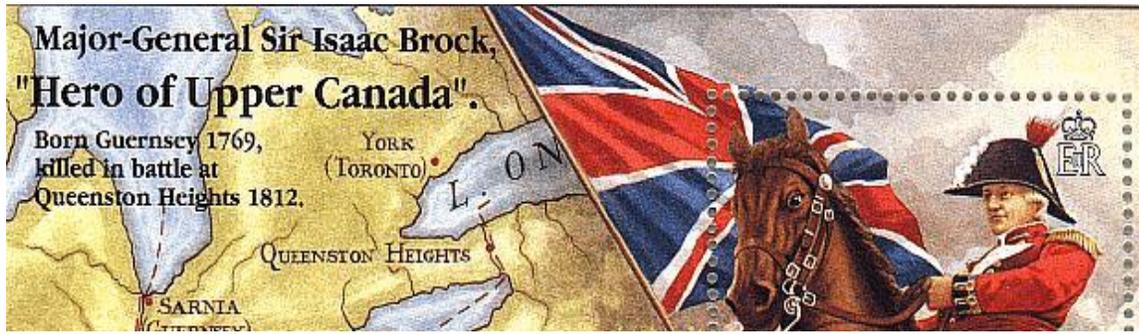
July 25 – Talbot travels to Long Point and secures 100 volunteers from the Norfolk Militia to reinforce Moraviantown where Brock intends to establish a post against raiders coming up from Detroit. However, when the volunteers realize that they would be leaving their farms during harvest and their property and families undefended, many refuse the command to march. This scenario is repeated by the Oxford Militia and no more than sixty men can be provided by the Middlesex Militia.

August 10 - Despite difficulties in recruitment Talbot musters upwards of 350 men. A small fleet of boats docks at Port Talbot to transport the volunteers.

August 16 – Major General Isaac Brock with British forces and Talbot’s recruits capture Fort Detroit.

September 12 – Talbot is instructed to recall several companies of men that he had sent to Fort George on the Niagara River.

October 13 - The British win the Battle of Queenston Heights. Brock, who had brilliantly planned the territory’s defence, is mortally wounded.



1813

January 9 - The British declare war against the United States.

April 27 - The town of York (present day Toronto) surrenders to American Major-General Dearborn. In the aftermath, York is burned.

September 10 – The Americans under the command of Captain Perry defeat the British fleet in the Battle of Lake Erie at Put-in-Bay. Since the onset of the war, the British had control of Lake Erie and had been able to capture Detroit. This victory enables the Americans to take this control from the British, recapture Detroit, and to have a strategic advantage at the crucial Battle of the Thames.

October 5 - Now that the Americans dominate Lake Erie, the opportunity for a new assault on Upper Canada materializes. In late September, the American forces reclaim Detroit. The British troops, their Indian allies, and the Upper Canada militia men retreat up the Thames River to 50 miles east of Detroit. American scouts track the retreat and on October 5, 1813, when they report that the British lines are very thin, General Harrison leads a cavalry charge with over 3,000 Kentucky troops against the 1,200 British forces. The Battle of the Thames takes place at Moraviantown. The native leader Tecumseh falls in this battle, and the Kentucky recruits kill many of the Indian allies.

Tecumseh 1878 - 1813



1814

February - The centre of control for Talbot is his farm at Port Talbot. Along with the port, the community around it contains mills, shops, and farms. For these reasons and the desire to capture Talbot, it increasingly becomes a target for the invading forces. During this month, the Americans led by Captain Holmes intend to attack Port Talbot but due to poor roads and resistance from Talbot's militia they abandon this plan and attack Delaware at the battle of Twenty Mile Creek along the Longwoods Road. Consequently, the British abandon Delaware thereby making Port Talbot the next objective.

May 20 – Port Talbot is attacked by thirty riflemen under the command of Andrew Westbrook. Other deserters, Daniel Norton, Samuel Doyle, and James Pelton participate in this raiding party. Simon Zelotes Watson helped to plan this foray against his adversary Talbot, but as topographical engineer to the general staff on the American side, he was not able to accompany the group.

The objective of this attack is the capture of Colonel Talbot who is at Long Point at this time. He left Lieutenant-Colonel Mahlon Burwell in charge. Burwell hears rumours of the Americans' movement. A local named McLemans warns Burwell of their approach before they reach the Talbot Road. When the raiders arrive at Port Talbot at approximately 6:00 p.m. they find it abandoned. The settlers have gathered at the Rapelje* farm in Yarmouth (near the Old St. Thomas Church) and two groups of militia head out to intercept the marauders. However, poor communication prevents the two parties from meeting and co-coordinating their defence against the raiders.

Once at Port Talbot, the raiders go immediately to Talbot's house. Finding themselves unopposed at Port Talbot and with no Talbot available for capture, the raiders head to the nearby blacksmith where they capture Captain Leslie Patterson of the Middlesex Militia. They continue up the road to the mill which is central in Port Talbot. Here they capture Captain Gilman Wilson also of the Middlesex Militia and the miller, Walter Galbraith. Along the Talbot Road, they come upon Thomas Mathews, a private in the Middlesex Militia who may have been on his way to the Rapelje farm and take him captive as well. The Americans now take to plundering anything of value that is portable. While they are engaged in this, Walter Galbraith, the miller escapes and heads to Rapelje's farm. Fearing that Galbraith would warn the militia and that their retreat would be cut off, the raiders release the prisoners and flee with their stolen property along the Talbot Trail to Detroit. When the defending militia did finally arrive at Port Talbot, the Americans had left and little property damage had occurred.

May 23 to June 21 – The “Ancaster Bloody Assizes” are held. At these trials for high treason, fifteen men are convicted and sentenced to be hanged and quartered. Seven of the individuals had their sentences commuted to deportation and the remaining eight were executed by hanging at Burlington Heights on July 20. None of the deserters from the Talbot Settlement were tried here but Andrew Westbrook was indicted for treason at the trials.

July – A party of 200 infantry and 80 horsemen again come to Port Talbot seeking to capture Colonel Talbot. Once again Talbot is absent. During this foray, many of the crops of the settlers are destroyed. The intruders stay overnight with the intention of moving further into the settlement and causing similar damage. They retreat upon hearing that Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton, the British commander at Burlington Heights, has dispatched the Oxford Militia and some native allies to check their actions.

Raids are continuous through the summer. All portable valuables are stolen. Houses, barns, and crops are burned. Some settlers are murdered and others are taken prisoner as the traitors take revenge against former neighbours.

*Daniel Rapelje came to present day St. Thomas in 1810. He and his family were the first settlers of St. Thomas. In 1821, he donated the land on which the Old St. Thomas Church and the cemetery are found.

July 25 – The Battle of Lundy’s Lane takes place at Niagara Falls in Upper Canada. The British militia is greatly reduced thus further exposing the Elgin County settlers to the actions of the Americans.

August 16 –On this date, American militia and some of their native allies arrive at Port Talbot with the intent of taking Colonel Talbot to Detroit and extorting a high ransom for his release. They also plan to ravage the settlement. This time Talbot is in residence and narrowly escapes. Talbot notices a large group of natives approaching and assumes that they are British supporters. Fortunately he sees that they are accompanied by Americans. Captain Leslie Patterson is with Talbot at his home and encourages him to escape out the back door. Talbot has a reputation for dressing like his settlers. Attired in his farm clothes, he puts on an old hat, takes a staff and walks slowly towards the ravine at the side of his house, descending the hill and crossing the creek. One of the Indians sees him and takes aim. Patterson seizes the rifle barrel and ingeniously tells him that his target is the Colonel’s old shepherd and that calling him is futile as he is deaf. The Indian believes him and Talbot remains a free man. Talbot’s livestock is slaughtered and other valuable property is carried off. The wily Talbot had hidden two quart pots of gold plate under the front of his house which remain undiscovered.

Captain Mahlon Burwell, Talbot’s surveyor does not fare as well. He is bedridden with ague, an illness similar to malaria that is common to Upper Canada. The raiders take everything in his house that they can carry and destroy the rest, buildings included. Burwell is forced away from his family who are now homeless. Along with other prisoners he is marched to Chillicothe, Ohio. He remains here until he is paroled on December 21st, 1814. He unites with his family who are living in Fort Erie with relatives and returns with them to his land near Port Talbot. Burwell is later compensated for his time in captivity and is able to claim the losses incurred during the raid on his property.



Mahlon Burwell 1783 - 1846

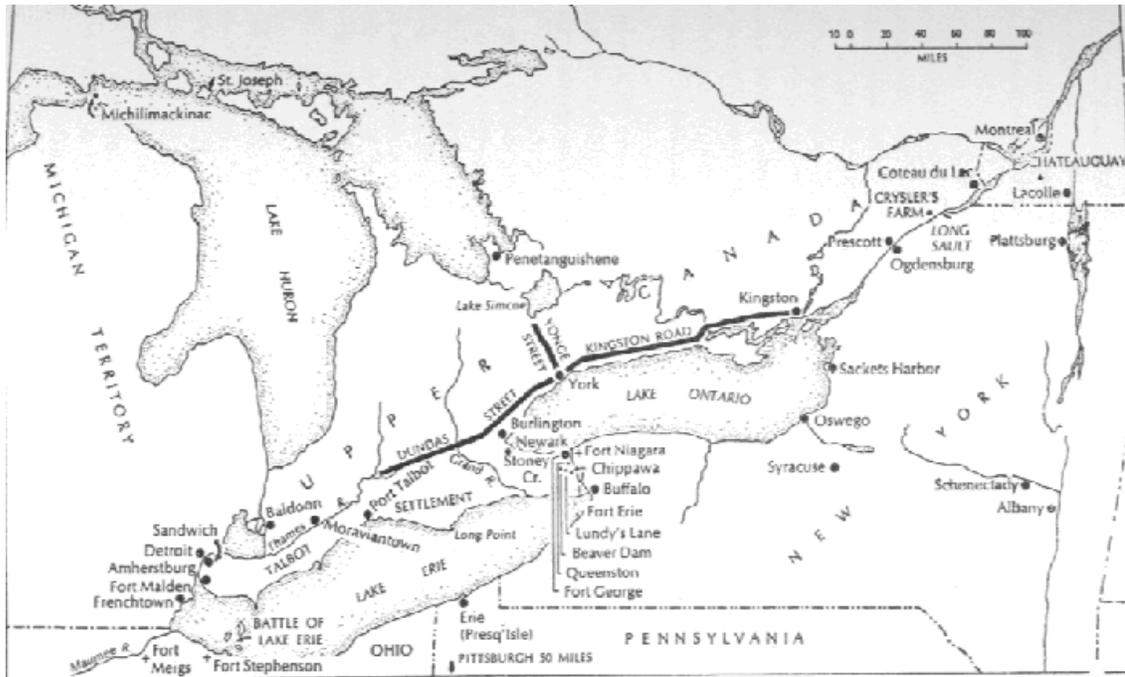
August 25, 1814 - British forces are able to penetrate far enough into the United States to burn Washington D.C.

September 9, 1814 – General McArthur, accompanied by Andrew Westbrook invades Port Talbot with 600 undisciplined mounted Kentucky soldiers, 50 U. S. rangers, and 70 Indian allies. In the absence of Talbot and the Canadian militia the settlement is completely plundered; the grist and saw mills and many houses and barns are burned, crops and livestock destroyed, and all the flour in the settlement ruined. The settlers are left with little but the clothes on their backs.

From here, the invaders move east along the Talbot Road to Rapelje’s farm in St. Thomas. En route, they take anything that they can carry, destroy weapons, crops, and livestock, and burn homes and barns. Daniel Rapelje and his son are away on militia service leaving his family at the mercy of the marauders. The Rapelje farm, livestock, and crops are destroyed and the fences torn down and used to fuel huge bonfires. The family is unharmed but left in desolation. *The American flag flies over the present*

site of St. Thomas. Talbot has entrusted the family with a box of his valuables to be kept safe. When Mrs. Rapelje observes the incoming invaders she removes the box from under a bed and hides it in a hemp patch between beehives. The valuables are never disturbed.

December 24, 1814 – The Treaty of Ghent is signed in Belgium and the War of 1812 ends.



Battle Sites of the War of 1812

The Importance and Effect of the War of 1812

The unrelenting raids on the Talbot Settlement left the residents with ruined crops and stolen or slaughtered livestock. The houses, barns, and other buildings on many farms were destroyed. Much of the personal property of the settlers had been pilfered. Public property that was essential to their livelihood such as the saw and grist mills had been burned to the ground. Talbot's settlers suffered greatly for their loyalty and attempts to defend Upper Canada.

Their tenacity and bravery had enabled them to hold back a larger, aggressive invading force. While the men were away serving with the militia, their wives and children had been left to run the farms, harvest the crops, and to defend the homesteads. In some instances the war had become personal as deserters took out vengeance on their neighbours and Colonel Talbot. Ultimately, the removal of these malcontents left a loyal, cohesive population. This first sense of community was integral for the development of the future nation of Canada. After the war, a Crown Commission took charge of the lands owned by the rebels, and petitions to buy their lands were entered by the adjacent settlers. In one instance, Andrew Westbrook's property of 4,040 acres was sold to his former neighbour, Daniel Springer of Delaware Township, in 1823. Typically, the traitors relocated in the United States to avoid prosecution. Westbrook settled in Michigan where he became a supervisor of highways and a county commissioner in Marine City.

Like his settlers, Colonel Talbot endured great losses. His farm was destroyed and his mills had been burned. He was unable to give his customary aid to disadvantaged immigrants who began to arrive in increasing numbers after the hostilities ceased. Consequently, Talbot prohibited new arrivals from settling in Dunwich and Aldborough Townships. He claimed these townships as his reserves, an action which brought him into conflict with many of the immigrants. Officials complained to the Home Government about Talbot's discrimination, but he won an appeal and his actions were sustained. Hereafter, there was little control over his administration of the settlement.

When peace was declared in 1815, the most urgent need of the community was a mill. Daniel Rapelje had lost everything but his land during the September 1814 attack. When he proposed to build a mill on his land, the community willingly turned out to help with the construction. A dam was erected on the flats south of his new cabin on the hilltop near the Talbot Road. The settlers dug a long mill race between the dam and the mill. It followed the contour of the flats along the base of the hill, around a smaller hill and ended where Mill Creek converges with Kettle Creek.

The Loyal and Patriotic Society of Upper Canada sent over three thousand dollars to Talbot to meet the urgent needs of his settlers. The Society also gave funds to many individuals but it was based on the recipients' position in Upper Canada society. The government established a commission to investigate war losses claims and to provide compensation. However, Britain which had fought and paid for the war against Napoleon was not forthcoming with reparation to claimants in Upper and Lower Canada as they believed that they had not endured the losses or suffering that the British had. Consequently, there was little compensation to the settlers of Upper and Lower Canada. Talbot was eventually compensated £3,630 by the government for his personal losses. However, he did not receive the first quarter of this payment until 1824. The Nova Scotia legislature made grants to many settlers in the Long Point area who had originally come from Nova Scotia. The veterans of the War of 1812 did finally receive payment for their service. The government has allotted \$50,000.00 as payment and when all the claims were in, each militia man received \$20.00 for their effort and losses. Garrett Oakes, a settler of Yarmouth Township describes it as "arrearage of pay" as "(c)ircumstances prove that the reward due to the veterans of Canada was withheld to give time for death to settle the account." He compared it unfavorably to the generous settlement that the American veterans received.

The loyal settlers of Elgin County suffered great losses in the defence of their lands and later had to rebuild their homesteads and communities. Since Britain was occupied with the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, the settlers were fundamentally responsible for no loss of Canadian territory. The war had left them with a sense of identity separate from Britain, and without their heroic efforts Elgin County would be flying the American flag.

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Donna Hanson of the St. Thomas Public Library
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