

Kingston at the confluence of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River

At the outset of the War of 1812 the British enjoyed a decided advantage on the Great Lakes, as the result of a naval force known as the Provincial Marine of Upper Canada based at Point Frederick (present-day Royal Military College). This force was not, however, a regular navy, but primarily a transport service administered by the quartermaster general's department of the army. It was taken over by the Royal Navy in 1813.

The chief British supply route in the Lake Ontario region was by water from Kingston to Fort George at the mouth of the Niagara River. The British and Canadian military forces along the Niagara and Detroit frontiers were dependent upon this route for war materials and reinforcements, since land communications were slow and uncertain.

Early in the war fortified outposts were established at the windmill in Fredericksburgh (Howell's windmill), The Battery (two Royal Artillery guns – a six and 12-pounder) at the western point of Amherst Island, Snake Island, Herkimer's Nose (present-day Lemoine's Point), and Lake Ontario Point. Demaphore (communication) stations were established at various places – including Snake Island and Point Henry. A series of civilian watch-stations were set-up along the shore – include the Watch House (Purdy's) at Amherstview and Conrad Huffman's at the western end of Bath. Huffman's had been built in 1811 with six courses of brick on the front to withstand American cannon shot.

Thus, as the winter of 1812-13 approached, it was obvious by the American naval personnel that a decisive victory on Lake Ontario, accompanied preferably by the capture of Kingston, would virtually guarantee the success of their western armies and the capture of Upper Canada. An advocate of this theory was Commodore Isaac Chauncey, commander of the American squadron on the lake.

As Chauncey's fleet lay anchored at [Sackets Harbor] in the early part of November 1812, he received word that several British ships had gone up the lake to Fort George with troop reinforcements and that another military contingent at Kingston was waiting their return. Chauncey in a letter to the Secretary of the Navy stated his intended course of action:

As I have reason to believe the Royal George, Prince Regent, and Duke of Gloucester have gone up the Lake to Fort George...I have determined to proceed with the force I have ready in quest of the Enemy. My present intention is to take a position on the Canada shore near some small islands called 'The False Ducks; where the Enemy are obliged to pass, and where I will wait their return to Kingston ... I shall make an attack on Kingston for the purpose of destroying the guns and public stores at that Station...

On Nov 9th, 1812 the USS Oneida and six gunboats lay in wait off the False Duck islands in hope of intercepting the 22-gun corvette, Royal George. The following day, the Royal

George, commanded by Commodore Hugh Earle¹, and the Governor Simcoe were sighted on their way back from Fort George. Chauncey and his squadron gave chase through the Upper Gap. (between Amherst Island and the eastern-tip of Prince Edward County) into the Bay of Quinte.

As the American squadron passed through the Gap they fired upon by militia stationed at Howell's Windmill. During the War of 1812 cannon "frowned from the windows of this old mill." The windmill had been built in 1785 by Sgt. Major John Howell 2nd Bn King's Royal Yorkers.

This action raised the alarm of local citizenry and militia units. The inhabitants along the coast were ordered into the interior with their livestock. An example of militia movement comes from Adolphustown where Captain Thomas Dorland notified his men. Dorland, Ensign Christopher Hagerman, and Sergeant James Canniff led them toward Kingston where an attack was imminent.

On the evening of the 9th the wind was lost with the British boats resting east of Snake Island and the American squadron anchored on the north-shore of Amherst Island directly across from the village of Ernesttown (present-day Bath). In the morning of the 10th Chauncey spied a schooner, Two Brothers, moored at the wharves in Ernesttown. The US gunboat, Hamilton², under command of Lt. MacPherson was despatched to lay siege to the schooner. MacPherson's men were met with resistance from the 1st Addington Militia and British regulars (89th of Foot) garrisoned at the Academy. The schooner - property of Wm and Benj Fairfield - was seized by the Americans but "finding that she would detain" him in his pursuit of the Royal George and the Simcoe, Chauncey "order Lt. MacPherson to take out [the Two Brothers'] sails and rigging and burn her."

The Simcoe was chased but escaped by running over a bar between Snake Island and Herkimer's Nose. She received several shots and subsequently sank in Kingston harbour. The American squadron passed not far from the shore and Captain Dorland's field artillery moved along at an equal pace and firing was kept up between them. Sgt. Canniff was on duty at Herkimer's Nose where his artillery sent a ball through one of the enemy's vessels and saw her haul off from the rest. The American squadron fired back and he saw the first ball from them as it passed him nearby. The artillery and troops were marched to Kingston where they were paraded in a secluded spot behind the jail.

In light winds the Royal George continued to Kingston harbour where Commodore Earle sought refuge under the protection of the shore batteries at Massasauga Point and Points Henry and Frederick. Chauncey's squadron engaged the batteries and the Royal George for two hours until sundown when the Americans withdrew and anchored for the night at Four Mile Point.

¹ Commodore Hugh Earle was the son-in-law of Molly Brant and is interred in St. Paul's Churchyard on Queen Street in Kingston.

² The U.S. gunboat Hamilton had been lost in a squall 1813 and was discovered (Largely in-tact) in 1971 along with the Scourge near St.Catharines.

Chauncey reported that “it blew heavy in squalls from the westward during the night and there was every appearance of a gale of wind. The pilot became alarmed and I thought it most prudent to get into a place of more safety. I therefore (very reluctantly) deferred renewing the attack upon the ships and fort until a more favourable opportunity.

The American squadron returned to Sackets Harbor little the worse for the engagement and the Royal George was permitted the winter months at Kingston to refit and to repair her badly damaged rigging. (report from the Kingston Gazette)

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Heritage sites of interest west of Kingston

- Hagerman’s Point, Adolphustown (U.E.L, Centre & Park birthplace of Chris. Hagerman, Lt. Col. Morrison’s Aide-de-Camp at the Battle of Chrysler’s Farm Nov 11, 1813)
- Site of Mecklenburgh Court of Quarter Sessions (Adolphusown Hall, UELHCP – garrisoned 400 Glengarry Light Infantry – site of the marriage of Lt. Col James Fitzgibbon (49th Regt. of Foot), arguably one of the most celebrated heroes of the War)
- Burial place of Major Hazelton Spencer, County Lieutenant at the outbreak of the War of 1812, died suddenly in Feb 1813 from an illness brought on by over-exertion in discharge of his duties
- McDowell Cemetery, burial place of Col. Timothy Thompson, grandson of Sarah Kast Magin, Loyalist heroine of the American revolution
- Howell’s Windmill just west of site of Oliver Church homestead (OPG park); Return of Strength dated Jul 7, 1812 – to Capt. Cyrenius Parks from H. Spencer; listing 32 men of Fredericksburgh Twp – of which 10 were ordered to the Windmill
- Conrad Huffman’s Watch-House opposite The Battery on Amherst Island
- Finkle’s Tavern was rallying point for 1st Addington Militia and 1st Lennox Militia. (LeCouture’s journal???)
- Fairfield House (1796) and Davy’s Wharf (just east of the foot of Church Street)
- Bath Museum (artefacts from Two Brothers and War of 1812)
- Academy at Bath – following the War, Benj Fairfield sought damages “done by the 89 Regiment and others at different times.” The damage referred to the burning of rails and cedar pickets as firewood.
- Losee’s Tavern
- Fairfield House (Amherstview)
- Purdy’s Watch-House
- Herkimer’s Nose (first land grant - named for Johan Host Herchermer, Captain of Bateaux during the American revolution)