

BEAVERDAMS

1812-14 ~~1812-14~~ 1912-14

by

F. H. KEEFER, K. C.

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Beaverdams



1812-14 ——— 1912-14



LAURA INGERSOLL
Wife of James Secord, a Canadian Heroine

183232

BEAVERDAMS



*" Dulce et decorum est
Pro Patria mori."*

F. H. KEEFER, K. C.

THOROLD, CANADA

PREFACE

Acknowledgement should be made of the use of the data compiled in the Jubilee History of Thorold, written by M'iss Margaret Hubner Smith, who was then of the teaching staff of the Thorold High School. Mr. John H. Thompson of the same place collaborated and published that volume.

I am also indebted to Mr. John H. Thompson and Mr. George H. Shaw of Thorold for the loan of photographs.

F. H. K.

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THOROLD, CANADA

BEAVERDAMS

ON Christmas Eve., 1814, at Ghent, in Belgium, the treaty of peace concluding the war of 1812 was signed between Great Britain and the United States, and this is the year of the commemoration of the one hundred years of peace.

During that war a remarkable victory was obtained by the Canadian militia at Beaverdams, which engagement was the result of the historic and heroic journey of Laura Secord.

To revive interest in this engagement, the following facts are recalled: General Vincent, the then British commander, lacking in men and ammunition to sustain an unequal conflict, was obliged to withdraw from Fort George, and leave Old Niagara in the hands of the invading forces, who, for want of a better name, are usually referred to as Americans (though this name is equally applicable to all of us on this continent). They had come up in their fleet from the lower end of Lake Ontario, and, after landing and attacking York, crossed Lake Ontario to the mouth of the Niagara river, and united with the land forces in the attack on Fort George.

The British were compelled to withdraw from

Fort George, Chippewa and Fort Erie, and, retreating, concentrated at Beaverdams, leaving the Niagara frontier in possession of the enemy. The invaders, 3,000 strong, were following Vincent's force of 1,600, and he therefore retreated from Beaverdams to Burlington. Vincent's men, however, were eager for battle, and, after reconnoitring a detachment of the United States army numbering about 3,750 men (encamped for the night at Stoney Creek), a night attack was planned, which resulted most successfully to the Canadians, and the bewildered foe retreated to Fort George on the Niagara River. This battle has been suitably commemorated by the monument dedicated last year at Stoney Creek.

Along the Niagara frontier, however, life was hardly worth living for the hardy U. E. Loyalists and other Canadians then settled in that district, as marauding bands of invaders were searching everywhere for plunder.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Fitzgibbon, formerly of Brock's old regiment, the 49th, obtained permission to raise a volunteer company of scouts and to lead them into the peninsula. Most of those who volunteered to accompany him were from the 49th, and the total number of his followers was also 49. Owing



CAPTAIN DECOU'S HOUSE
Fitzgibbon's Headquarters

to the green facing on their tunics, they were known as "Fitzgibbons' Green 'Uns," or the "Green Tigers." This little company acted as a mosquito force, harassing and intercepting the enemy's line of communication between Fort Erie and Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake), and had their headquarters in the old stone house, still standing near DeCew Falls, built by Captain DeCou. Captain DeCou had been taken prisoner and carried into the interior of the United States, and his home was turned into a soldiers' barracks by Fitzgibbon whilst on their venturesome expeditions. This strategical position guarded the way to Burlington Heights, and the invading general decided to dislodge these troublesome "Green Tigers" and open the way through Burlington to York (now Toronto), and to Detroit and the southern part of Ontario. Owing to want of care, the enemy's plans became known, especially among their own troops. Two United States soldiers asking for food at James Secord's house at Queenston openly spoke of the plan. Secord, having been wounded at Queenston Heights, was at home on parole. It immediately entered into the minds of this loyal Canadian couple that Fitzgibbon must be warned of the intended attack.

Secord being on parole, and wounded, his wife decided to make the attempt.

The story of this remarkable journey is part of the folklore of Canadians, and remains indelible in their history as a striking evidence of what the early Canadian women, with their men, did to retain this country as part of the Empire. To briefly repeat: As her husband could not go, she decided to leave next morning, and, under the pretext of milking an apparently refractory cow, she managed by judicious prodding to force it beyond the picket line. Casting away the milking-stool and pail, she took to what was then swamp beneath the Niagara escarpment (now the vineyard of Canada), and began her long and perilous walk—perilous in those days, as the country would be similar to what portions of New Ontario, with its scattered settlement, now is. There were not only wild-cats, rattle-snakes and Indians to avoid, but wandering patrols of the enemy, and also other dangers incident to a woman travelling through a forest alone. Working her way around to the Twelve-mile Creek (now St. Catharines, formerly called Shipman's Corners), and tramping some nineteen miles in order to cover what in a direct line would only have been twelve, she reached DeCou's

house, and was received right royally by Lieut. Fitzgibbon.

After parading his men, and presenting arms to her, she was carried to the house of a friend of hers in a hammock improvised from an army blanket, being carried by two Indians with a soldier walking on each side as guard. Thus Fitzgibbon received warning of the intended attack, and was able to turn what otherwise possibly would have been the capture of his little force into an important victory for Canada.

Fitzgibbon, first sinking his stores in a pond behind the DeCou house, so that the enemy might not profit by them in case of his defeat, made due preparation for the attack, which meanwhile the invaders were likewise doing. The United States officer in charge was Colonel Boerstler of the 14th U. S. infantry or Maryland regiment, a gallant officer eager for active service; and the force under his command consisted of between 500 and 600 men, including a company of light artillery with two field-pieces, twenty dragoons, the remainder consisting of militia and infantrymen of different United States regiments. One report has it that his force all told was 673 men.

The engagement was opened on the south limit

of the present town of Thorold, by the Mohawk Indians from the Grand River, under the leadership of Captain Kerr and Young John Brant. Captain Brant was the son of Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea), and was then only a youth of nineteen. Fitzgibbon, by good strategy, after the enemy had been adroitly surrounded, and fired on from different points by the same sharpshooters in the woods, tied a white handkerchief to his sword and advanced, and found Colonel Boerstler ready for a parley, and demanded the surrender of his force. This Colonel Boerstler at first refused to do, but finally, when Captain Hall, attracted by the cannonading, came up with about twenty dragoons from Chippewa, and believing himself to be surrounded by a superior force, he surrendered.

Then there was really a very embarrassing moment for the British, as they had not enough men to take charge of the prisoners; but this was overcome shortly, as Major De Haren, in response to a despatch sent by Fitzgibbon, soon arrived on the scene with some supports. Articles of capitulation were duly drawn up and signed, which provided for the surrender of the commanding officer and 541 United States troops; officers retaining their arms, horses



Rocky Trail under Niagara Escarpment, on Laura Secord's route



Present state of same route, showing Vineyards of Canada

and baggage; the non-commissioned officers and men laying down their arms and becoming prisoners of war. There then passed into the hands of the British, besides the prisoners, two field-pieces, two ammunition carts, and the colors of the 14th regiment of the United States army. Several of the invaders had been killed in the skirmish, and many more were wounded, among the latter being Colonel Boerstler himself. The battle has been very tersely described by Captain Norton, an Indian officer, in the following words: "The Mohawks did the fighting, Fitzgibbon got the glory, and the Caughnawagas secured the plunder."

This event was important, not only because of the superior numbers of the enemy, but because the surrender influenced the subsequent course of the war. By it the invaders, who then occupied most of the Niagara peninsula, were driven back to and concentrated all their force at Fort George. The engagement is also an outstanding memorial of the co-operation of the loyal Six Nation Indians, many of whom, like other United Empire Loyalists, came into Canada at the time of the War of Independence to be under the British Crown. We still have the descendants of some of these Indians as regular

militiamen and officers in Canadian regiments, drilling side by side at the annual camps at Old Niagara with the descendants of their white U. E. Loyalist confederates. As such, they interested General Ian Hamilton at his official inspection last summer at the Niagara Camp, and won his praise at the review before him.

During the construction of the third Welland Canal, alongside of which is now being built the fourth, workmen came upon sixteen bodies of United States soldiers (as evidenced by their buttons), who had fallen at this Battle of Beaverdams. Their remains were re-interred on the east bank of the canal, just south of the Niagara Central Railway bridge where it crosses the canal at Thorold. Through the generosity of two or three leading citizens of Thorold, a modest stone was erected on the spot in 1874. The inscription at the base of the shaft is simply:

Beaverdams,
24th June, 1813.

A patriotic lady from the United States on Decoration Day last Spring came to Thorold and covered this little monument with flowers, a suitable duty to those who gave their lives for their country. Canada

as yet has not even marked the field, and allowed its centennial last Summer to pass unnoticed.

At the time of the battle, little children of the late George Keefer, who was President of the Company which, in the years 1824-7, built the first Welland Canal, were playing where at present the Grand Trunk railway station stands in Thorold. Their father as captain was with his company at Stoney Creek, serving the colors. They saw a spent cannon-ball bounding down the hill, and, picking it up, took it home, where it was preserved and duly engraved, and was for years used as a weight on the chain of one of the gates of their family home.

In the summer of 1913, when excavating for one of the electric light poles, on the streets of Thorold, an old cannon-ball was found at the corner of Claremont and Ormond streets.

Therefore, the battle undoubtedly took place within the limits of the present town of Thorold, and, save the simple stone to mark the burial-place of the United States soldiers found some sixty years afterwards, no public recognition has been made by Canada of this important engagement.

An excellent opportunity is still open, without much expense, for the Country to recognize in a

suitable manner the stirring events that then took place. The new canal is now being constructed through the same historic spot. The government owns part of the land on the east bank where the present memorial stone stands, and will create an island out of the opposite portion of the said field, comprising some twenty acres in extent, and this, if not protected and secured now, may subsequently be used for railway sidings or other industrial purposes.

Rapidly are the landmarks of Canadian history disappearing in this way. Fortunately, the city of Toronto has preserved its old fort. Such should have been done at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River, where Fort William now stands, before the old stockade, or fort, with all its memories of Lord Selkirk and the early days of the two rival fur companies, was obliterated for coal-docks and freight-sheds for railway purposes.

As part of the land on which the Battle of Beaverdams was fought is now owned by Canada, surely enough National spirit can be aroused to urge upon the authorities that this small tract, still vacant, and intact, be set aside and dedicated as one of the Battlefield Memorials of the Country.



Lock 24, at Thorold, on the Eighteen-Seveny Canal, Dynamited by Fenians April 21st, 1900, showing headgates under repairs. United States soldiers' remains were discovered adjacent to this in the canal construction, re-interred, and monument erected.

The Battlefields Commission, established by the Dominion Government, are doing excellent work on the Plains of Abraham. So likewise is the Dominion Parks Branch of the Department of the Interior of Canada, particularly at the National Park at Banff. Could not their scope, if necessary, be enlarged to take in this historical Beaverdams site? It lies in the centre of the historic struggle of the Niagara peninsula: to the northwest, but a few miles, is the battlefield of Stoney Creek; to the northeast, likewise a few miles, is that of Queenston Heights; to the southeast, about a similar distance, is that of Lundy's Lane—names that are dear to every Canadian. Beaverdams seems to have started, after Stoney Creek was fought, the beginning of the retirement of an invading foe from British soil.

Then, again, we have no event in Canadian history that stirs the imagination so much as that remarkable journey of a Canadian woman through the wilds of the country to give warning to the small British force of the intended attack.

The site is also becoming one of exceptional interest at the present time, due to the construction of the New Welland Ship Canal, and it will be the Mecca of many visitors, just as the Panama Canal

has been during its construction days. Fifty million dollars is being expended by the Country for the construction of this gigantic waterway, locking down the Niagara escarpment and through the fertile valleys, which, at the time of the Battle of Beaverdams, were but a wilderness.

Canada is spending many millions on the Atlantic Coast for harbor purposes; likewise on the Pacific Coast; and hundreds of millions have been and are being spent across the continent to connect these two oceans by the lines of steel bands, to bind together the far-flung provinces and consolidate the whole Dominion. At Quebec, Montreal, Toronto and the "Gateway" at Port Arthur—Fort William, large sums are similarly being spent to develop those harbors. The Georgian Bay canal, involving huge amounts, will also in time be an accomplished fact. These expenditures and works are but in keeping with the greatness of the country, and in harmony with its future possibilities, and they seem to be a prophetic fulfilment of Pope's conclusion to one of his Moral Essays:

Bid harbors open, public ways extend;
 Bid temples, worthier of the God, ascend;
 Bid the broad arch the dangerous flood contain,
 The mole projected break the roaring main;

Back to his bounds their subject sea command,
And roll obedient rivers through the land;
These honors peace to happy Britain brings;
These are Imperial works, and worthy kings.

But surely, with all this expenditure, the necessary few dollars can be set aside with general approval for the beautification and retention of what is dear in history to many. Great works, great enterprises, never hold a Nation together so well as the development of the National sentiment; and can we do this better than by perpetuating in a seemly manner the early struggles of those who held this Country, in the dark days of its commencement, for the British Crown, and whose descendants, and those who have joined them therein, have since made it one of the brightest jewels thereof?

The writer therefore confidently expects that all that is necessary is to bring to the attention of the public the facts relating to this unmarked field of glory—glorious in the heroism displayed by the Canadian women of the time; glorious in the valour of the men of the time.

The place and the time are opportune. Should not something Nationally be done?

Concerning the place: Should not the ground before referred to, now belonging to the Canadian

Government, be set aside as a park and beautified, to which visitors coming to see the new gigantic canal works will naturally turn with pleasure and pride? Should there not be erected in this park, situated where the four different historic Welland Canals will converge to one point, a suitable National monument to commemorate the important event in which both British women and men took such a prominent part for Canada? On this monument should be engraved not only what was done by Laura Secord, and by Fitzgibbon and his small band, but also what the Indians did to help win the remarkable victory.

Respecting the time: We are all rejoicing now on the Centenary of Peace between the two Countries, and planning to suitably commemorate its anniversary. This is most befitting, and everything rightly should be done to cement and strengthen this Peace and make it what all believe it to be, i. e., Perpetual. But we should not forget those whose bravery laid the foundations for this Peace. Will we not therefore now definitely settle, as a Nation, the plan for the preservation of Beaverdams Battlefield, and commemorate the glorious memory of its participants before Christmas Eve., 1914?

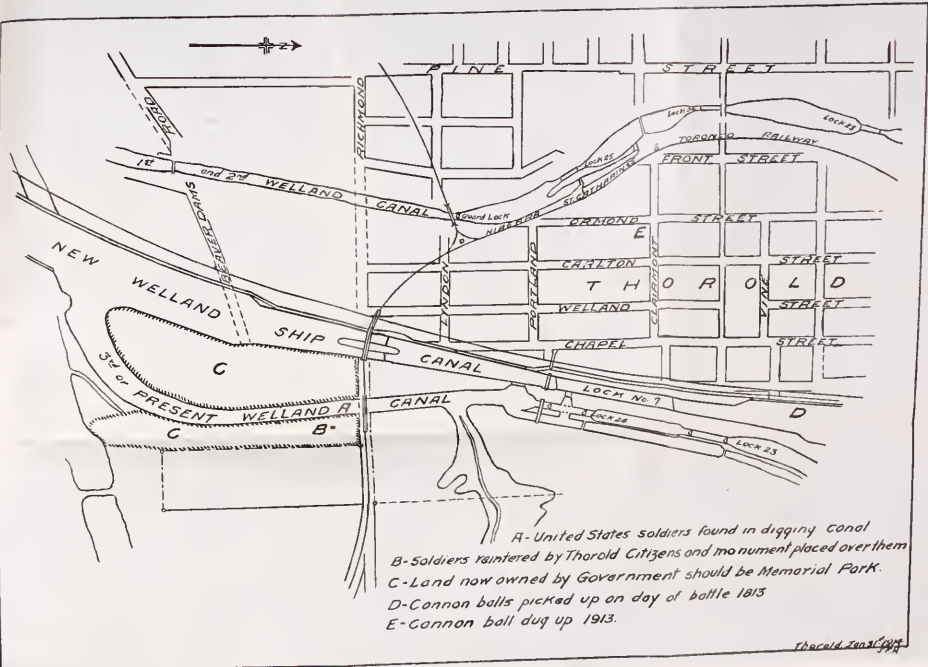
FRANK H. KEEFER.

Thorold, January 26th, 1914.



Monument erected on Beaverdams Battlefield by Thorold citizens over the bodies of United States soldiers.





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