How Lower Canada Won the War of 1812

Text of a speech to the Stanstead Historical Society at the Colby-Curtis Museum on April 14, 2012 by Desmond Morton, professor of history emeritus at McGill University in Montreal

Between the summer of 1812 and the fall of 1814, Canada was engaged in a strange war with its young neighbor, the United States. Tradition has named the conflict the War of 1812 and a further tradition has extended a debate about the winner. Largely because the war ended with some American military successes, at Baltimore and New Orleans, Americans have claimed the war as a national triumph. So have Canadians. Had not the Americans set out to conquer Canada? Their invasion failed utterly. The border, although vague in several places, continued as before. Americans might well boast of pillaging Gananoque and burning the Upper Canadian legislature in York or even burning Newark, a town Canadians now call Niagara-on-the-Lake, leaving its population to freeze in the winter cold, but the invaders retreated and suffered predictable reprisals. The White House is white because the British left the original presidential residence coated in soot as retribution for what happened at York.¹ American towns on the Niagara frontier soon shared the unhappy fate of Newark. Honors—or dishonors—were even.

The war had real causes

Students who read school textbooks may remember boring and confusing Anglo-American debates about the freedom of the seas, impressment of seamen, and even naval battles. These issues were mostly settled by the time the war began, although the news traveled too slowly across the Atlantic to affect the American declaration of war.² That was, at least in part, because the issue had been redefined by the US elections. In 1812, voters in the western and southern states had chosen James Madison as a Republican president and elected representatives labeled as War Hawks to Washington. The Hawks wanted a war with Britain because the British, albeit half-heartedly, had been supporting Aboriginal peoples like Tecumseh and his brother, Lolawauchika or “The Prophet,” who wanted to establish an Indian nation on land claimed by the United States. Worse, claimed the War Hawks, the Savages would bar Christian civilization and good government from the West. The land in question included western Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and most of Indiana and Tennessee. If you recognize the war aims of the War Hawks, it is easier to understand why a pro-Federalist New England was indifferent and even opposed to the conflict and that the floggings of alleged deserters by the Royal Navy was a poor substitute for negotiating an end to Navigation Acts and Orders-in-Council.³ Even the conquest of British North America was either irrelevant or ancient history. By that standard, there is no question that the War Hawks got what they wanted from the war and its peace treaty, the 1814 Treaty of Ghent.
While Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper may feel otherwise, news from the heritage front tells me that Americans will mostly ignore the bicentennial of the War. In these Tea Party times, tax dollars spent on commemoration will be resented. Canadians will have to spend on Queen Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee to please its royalists. Quebeckers will remember how badly the celebration of 1759 was received by the province and its people. Though the truth of what happened at the Plains of Abraham should have been immensely flattering to New France’s militia, it remains a secret, trampled in the mud so Sovereignists can promote a self-made image of national humiliation. Another stubborn fact remains: Lower Canada (Quebec’s name from 1760 to 1841), did more to save Canada from the Americans than did Upper Canadians. Ontario, of course, may continue to ignore its rather poorer showing and echo the myth fostered by the chaplain of the Family Compact, Bishop John Strachan, that “never, surely, was greater activity shown in any country than our militia have exhibited, nor greater valor, cooler resolution and more resolved conduct; they have emulated the choicest veterans, they have twice saved the country.”

Why Quebec turned loyal to George III

There was no accident about French Canada’s military competence. The French had settled New France with impoverished aristocrats who would become a seigneurial class. Seigneurs had commanded the colony’s defenders in the Seven Years War and those who had the necessary funds became creditors to France’s royal treasury as the long war emptied its coffers. Quebeckers inherited the bitter resentment that France in 1763 had preferred a few Spice Islands in the West Indies to Voltaire’s “quelques arpentes de neige.” Worse would follow. Versailles canceled and ignored its debts to New France’s wealthy, leaving Fleury d’Eschambault, the colony’s richest man virtually penniless. He and the proudest families of the colony were thrown back into the poverty they had fled France to overcome. The new British governor, James Murray did his best for the leaders who had defeated him twice, at the Butte à Neveu and at Ste-Foye, by protecting their seigneurial titles, their Catholic church, and the feudal laws that underpinned their role, and by recognizing them, in his words, as “the bravest and best people in the world.” Above all, Murray and his successors used the seigneurs to maintain and lead Lower Canada’s traditional militia system.

Both he and the French made it easier for Lower Canada’s military elite to switch loyalties from King Louis to King George. This has not been a state of affairs to be celebrated by Quebec Sovereignists or even by Ontarians. Seigneurialism was distinctly old-fashioned and often oppressive. The clerical–seigneurial alliance to back the British occupiers defied British law and frustrated the Protestant opportunists who flocked to Quebec or Montreal to get rich under cover of Britain’s anti-Catholic Test Act. The Quebec Act of 1774, reinforcing the policies of Murray and his successor, Sir Guy Carleton, became one of the “Intolerable Acts” that stoked the American Revolution.

When Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold led American armies to conquer Lower Canada in 1775, rank-and-file miliciens hesitated to turn out but the seigneurial class sent its most respected members to help defend the British forts at St. Jean and Chambly, and the British capital at Quebec. When their effort initially succeeded, miliciens rewarded it by returning to the ranks and marching south to Saratoga with General Burgoyne. True, the early hesitation would arm British sceptics about Canadien loyalty but crises favor stereotypes over more complex realities.

The American Revolution had few admirers, clerical, seigneurial, or habitant in Lower Canada. If France had assisted the Revolution by coming up the St. Lawrence instead of
occupying Chesapeake Bay, habitant loyalties might have been fatally stressed. They did not come. American invaders left bitter memories of fire and pillage. Nor did events in France after 1789 win sympathy in a province that took its politics from their landlords and their curés. After Louis XVI lost his head, George III inherited Canadian allegiance all the more easily. When war followed between Britain and France, the royal Prince Edward Augustus, later the Duke of Kent, commanded a regiment sent to Quebec and found a social life for himself and his mistress among the seigneurial class. When the militia was called out as a precaution, it performed with near unanimous fidelity. The father of the future Queen Victoria created two battalions of embodied militia from his Canadiens. The seigneurial class provided the officers for this increasingly professional force, and Prince Edward sent 10 or more of its most promising young men to Britain and paid for their military education and their commissions. Many joined the Swiss-officered 60th Royal Americans. Others completed the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and became gunners or engineers.

**A French, Basque and British officer**

Among the ablest of the group in the 60th was Michel d’Irumberry de Salaberry, son of a Basque seigneur who had fought at St. Jean in 1775. Michel was a big man, athletic and tough. Officers in the 60th included a number of Germans, one of them a keen duellist with sword or pistol. One day, this man announced that the battalion had one less foreigner: he had just killed one of de Salaberry’s fellow Canadiens, Lieutenant des Rivières. “You may soon have another victim” de Salaberry announced. A duel was quickly arranged. The German led, slashing de Salaberry’s head and the fight was interrupted while de Salaberry tied his handkerchief around his forehead to stop the blood from blinding him. Then he leaped into the fight, raised his sabre and cut off the German’s head. Another story recalled him arranging a boxing match with the regiment’s toughest and most troublesome soldier. In the match, de Salaberry ignored his officer status and beat the man “fair and square.” The public humiliation may or may not have changed the loser but it sent de Salaberry’s status soaring among his men. The Duke of Kent’s Royal Canadiens served in both Upper and Lower Canada but sharp economies in military spending which followed after Britain signed the war-ending Treaty of Amiens in 1801 soon forced the disbanding of both units. They would be missed but, as Benjamin Sulte noted in his history of the French-Canadian Militia, they would have a continuing importance. When the veterans returned to their villages and farms, they brought with them a professional knowledge of drill and eighteenth century soldiering. As instructors for the local militia, they brought the training that no other militia system in North America could boast. Clad in their grey wool coats, breeches, touques and colorful sashes, habitant militia resembled regular troops in appearance and, thanks to veterans of the Royal Canadiens, also in their maneuvering.

During the years leading up to 1812, the loyalty of Lower Canadians to their British conquerors was challenged and even denied by Governor Sir James Craig, a veteran of the Napoleonic wars who despised his French critics and was easily persuaded that they dominated his elected assembly. At a time when the United States and Britain drifted close to war over trade and maritime issues, Craig’s insensitivity and arrogance were luxuries Britain could ill afford. On the eve of the War Hawks dominating the new Congress, Craig was replaced by Sir James Prevost, a bilingual general with Swiss antecedents. With time pressing hard, Prevost undid as many of Craig’s blunders as he could. He also used a rich local talent pool to staff his province’s militia, beginning with Vassal de Montviel as adjutant-general and Lower Canada’s once-wealthy Fleury d’Eschambault as
Quartermaster General. The choices help explain the efficiency of the colony’s militia. When de Salaberry returned to Canada as ADC to the British commander for the tiny army garrison of the Canadas, Prevost arranged for him to organize and then command a newly embodied battalion of Lower Canadian militia, the Voltigeurs. De Salaberry’s success earned him promotion to colonel. Toussaint Pothier, son of a militia colonel and a senior manager in the fur-trading North-West Company, organized voyageurs into a unit that could guard the company’s vast and profitable fur-trading territories from War Hawk ambitions, aided by the ablest of Montcalm’s militia subordinates, Charles-Michel de Langlade, still known to some Americans as “the Father of Wisconsin.”

The war comes. Who will win?

War came on the decision of a deeply divided Congress. President [James] Madison yielded to the pressure. In 1812, news traveled by horseback and sailing ship. Supremely cautious on the Lower Canada front, Prevost understood the vital importance of winning early victories and trusted Lower Canadians to bring them off. Weeks before news of the war could reach the American garrison at Michilimackinac, British troops and Toussaint Pothier’s Canadien voyageurs besieged the fort. Terrified by their likely fate at the hands of Britain’s Native allies, the garrison surrendered. News of the British victory helped convert nervous neutrals across Upper and Lower Canada. On Lake Erie, the British-financed Provincial Marine was commanded by Lieutenant Frédéric Rolette, a Canadien who had served with Nelson at the Nile and Trafalgar. When his brig and its 10-man crew intercepted the American schooner Cuyahoga carrying arms, ammunition and news about the war to American garrisons on the south shore, Rolette responded in Nelsonian style and quickly seized the much larger ship and its 50-man crew, adding a minor but significant success by a Lower Canadian in Upper Canadian waters.

A major British victory followed at Detroit where US General William Hull had assembled a militia army and invaded the western tip of Upper Canada. When Isaac Brock and the Native leader, Tecumseh, arrived, Hull reeled back to the fort at Detroit. Sending Tecumseh’s warriors slipping through the bush around the fort, camouflaged but fully visible, reduced Hull and his garrison to terror. Like most American commanders, an aging veteran of the Revolutionary War, Hull feared for his daughter, who had accompanied him as his housekeeper. What would her fate be if the Indians attacked? He handed his fort and his army to the British almost as Brock was forming his troops and guns for an assault.

To the world beyond Detroit, this was a second palpable victory. The third would come two months later, at Queenston Heights. Brock was killed, leading an assault on an invading army that had occupied the Heights at Queenston, where his monument now stands. The subsequent British victory, which drove most Americans back across the Niagara River, leaving a thousand others to surrender, owed much to the fighting qualities of Voltigeurs as well as Iroquois warriors, led by French-Canadian officers and interpreters and recruited from Lower Canada.

The psychological impact of Native warriors on the Americans deserves an explanation. In his book, The Civil War of 1812, Alan Taylor, an American, reminds us that the War Hawks, like other, more modern Republicans, hated taxes and professional soldiers with equal vehemence. They believed instead in the part-time citizen soldier, untrained and often unpaid natural-born heroes who would elect their ablest as officers and leaders. Above all, the militia was cheap. The “militia myth” was not wholly groundless. The Kentucky cavalry that William Henry Harrison would lead into Canada late in 1813 to defeat the British at Moraviantown and to kill Tecumseh, had ample experience fighting
First Nations and full confidence in their leader, a future president. Ordinary state militia had no such training, experience or trusted commanders. The panic created by war whoops and scalping knives was contagious and usually disastrous.

Secord or Ducharme? Who won Beaver Dams?

Ill-trained regulars could match the militia in panic. In June 1813, the wife of a Loyalist living under American occupation near Queenston, crept out of her home at dusk and, despite boiling heat and driving rain, made her way across swamps and forest tracks, to De Cew House, at the heart of a small rural community now known as Thorold, south of St. Catharines. Laura Secord’s husband had listened to Americans boasting that they were coming to capture Lieutenant Fitzgibbon and his 50 British regulars. Though it does not undermine her sacrificial heroism, Laura’s news was erroneous. She predicted an attack on the 22nd, it did not arrive until the 24th. Mohawk warriors from Caughnawaga and other Iroquois from Lower Canada, commanded by Captain Dominique Ducharme of the Army’s Indian Department, had arrived earlier to help protect Fitzgibbon’s post. Ms. Secord could not know that the Americans had loaded themselves with heavy wagons and guns that came to grief in the vast swamp created by the beaver dams that gave the battle its name. Ducharme’s Iroquois knew. They had concealed the entrance to a viable road and detoured the Americans into a vast and sodden swamp. Exhausted from a 20-mile march in driving rain, their guns and wagons hopelessly mired in the swamp, Colonel Boerstler and his 14th US Infantry Regiment were easy prey to the terror of an Indian massacre. Indeed, they might have surrendered to Ducharme if he had only spoken more English. A nervous Colonel Boerstler surrendered to a British major who had brought up reinforcements, broke his parole and fled. Beaver Dams was a battle in which Ducharme was in full control. As Fitzgibbon freely admitted Lower Canadian Iroquois did all the shooting but Laura Secord received legendary credit as the sole female heroine of the war. Secord’s three appeals for financial compensation, all accompanied by cautiously supportive affidavits from Fitzgibbon, were ignored by military and political authorities. War of 1812 historians merely ignored the Lower Canadians.

Who defended Lower Canada?

What about Lower Canada? Frankly, it was not a prime American target. It goes without saying that eighteenth-century experience had demonstrated that Montreal and Quebec City were crucial to any British defence of Upper Canada. Troops, supplies, equipment, ammunition, even the materials to build a British fleet on the Upper lakes came via the St. Lawrence and were unloaded at Montreal. Food, smuggled into Lower Canada from sympathetic farmers and herders in New York, Vermont and New Hampshire, guaranteed that soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians across British North America did not starve. So did Fleury D’Eschambault, the ex-millionaire Prevost had chosen as Quartermaster General for Lower Canada in recognition of his business skills. However, American assaults were mostly half-hearted until the latter half of 1813. At the outbreak of the war, the Lower Canadian frontier had been the responsibility assumed by Michel de Salaberry. After his Voltigeurs scattered in companies to reinforce British troops in Upper Canada, he depended on embodied or full-time battalions recruited by ballot or voluntary service from the Lower Canadian militia.

Given the veterans who had served as their instructors, and given the determination to defend their own territory from alien and destructive invaders, the miliciens of Bas-Canada
performed with steady valour whenever they faced American invaders. The invaders, at least from the New York State militia, frequently insisted, as they had at Queenston Heights in 1812, that they had no obligation under State law, to cross the state boundary or to fight on the other side. Lower Canadians showed no such reluctance.

Late in 1813, the Americans finally attempted to develop a coordinated attack. Wade Hampton, who had proved himself in defensive battles on the American side of Lake Ontario, took command of a division of militia and regulars in upstate New York, part of the 9th military district commanded by a choleric and conspiratorial Revolutionary veteran, Major General James Wilkinson. While Hampton pushed up the Châteauguay River toward Montreal, a larger army under Wilkinson, removed from the Niagara frontier, would come down the St. Lawrence from Morrisburg. Wilkinson was also given the choice of attacking Kingston directly or indirectly through the American fleet on Lake Ontario.

This was the most serious threat to the British since the war began. Though President Madison approved the plan, no aide told him that Hampton and Wilkinson were bitter political and personal adversaries.

Meeting the double threat to Montreal

British command of the frontier was handed to the Swiss-born General de Watteville. Hampton crossed the border on the morning of October 21 with 4,000 infantry, 200 cavalry and 10 field guns. Every bridge, large and small, had been destroyed and the Americans moved slowly, delaying to allow slower-moving troops to catch up.

The Battle of Châteauguay, October 26, 1813

De Salaberry prepared a defensive position at a point where the river makes a sharp bend. A line of breastworks and log posts and blockhouses gave defenders both protection and a limited field of fire. Seven other lines formed behind the front line, to provide a literal defence in depth. For defenders, de Salaberry deployed about 150 Voltigeurs, plus local and Montreal-based embodied and sedentary militia companies and a reserve of militia and Aboriginal volunteers. He, himself, commanded from a large stump. Virtually all the troops under de Salaberry, from Voltigeurs to militia, were Canadiens. Meanwhile, Hampton had been told that there were only 350 militia, a small fraction of his own force. He ordered Colonel Purdy’s brigade to cross the river and take the Canadian position in the flank. This would have been a tall order in daylight but the Americans crossed the river in the dark of night and staggered through an unmarked forest, arriving at the river bank virtually level with de Salaberry’s front line. Hampton brought the rest of his division up for a frontal attack but delayed until Purdy could attack across a ford. Instead, under brisk fire from the militia, Purdy’s men would go no farther and soon retreated along the way they had come. So did Hampton’s main body. With only a few hundred miliciens and with his own bulky person to inspire them, de Salaberry’s miliciens had driven off an army four or five times as numerous. The Americans claimed 50 officers and men dead, severely wounded or lost. De Salaberry reported two killed, 16 wounded and three Fencibles taken prisoner. “I have won a victory, Salaberry wrote to his father, “mounted on a wooden horse.”

It was, indeed, a famous victory and both Generals de Watteville and Prevost showed up in time to write the dispatches and to claim the official credit for a victory that legitimately belonged to Colonel de Salaberry and to his Canadien militia. Indeed, as Mac Hitsman argued passionately in his Incredible War of 1812, “the most important thing to note about the Battle of Châteauguay is that all the successful defenders were Canadians, whether
they were English-speaking or French-speaking.”¹⁹ The defenders included a company of half-trained sedentary militia who fought as steadily and as well as the Voltigeurs and the Select Embodied Militia, both trained to the standard of British regular soldiers. With Châteauguay blocked, Hampton fell back to the American Chateauguay in New York State.

**And Crysler’s Farm, November 11, 1813**

Meanwhile Wilkinson had finally started to move his much larger force toward Montreal. He left Sacket’s Harbor on the night of October 17 with nearly 8,000 troops. Gales and early snowstorms forced the Americans to take shelter among the Thousand Islands until November 5 when it seemed safe to move again. Two of de Watteville’s British regiments, the 49th and 89th, followed them down river in bateaux and along a shoreline road. On November 9, Wilkinson ordered his rear-guard, 2,000 strong, to crush the British, now about 900 strong. The battle joined at Crysler’s Farm, not far from the Long Sault rapids. A skirmish line of Voltigeurs protected the main line of British infantry and received the brunt of the American attack. A piecemeal American assault was countered by disciplined British maneuvers and by day’s end, the American losses totaled 102 killed, 237 wounded and about a hundred taken prisoner. British losses were 22 killed, 148 wounded and nine missing, most from the Voltigeurs.²⁰

With news of Châteauguay and of Hampton’s retreat, Wilkinson now abandoned his advance, crossed back to New York and set up camp for the winter. Even in Washington, any hope of taking Montreal in 1813 had faded after de Salaberry’s victory. Once again, leaders struggled for glory. At Kingston, the Royal Navy’s Commodore Yew claimed credit for the British victory at Crysler’s Farm; Wilkinson insisted that Hampton’s cowardly retreat had saved Montreal from capture and that his subordinate’s cowardice had forced him to stop. The battle, planned and managed by Michel de Salaberry and bravely fought by his Canadiens had proved decisive. Canada was safe. In Europe, the ally that Washington had counted on to keep the British busy in Europe had lost the war. Napoleon Bonaparte was on his way to exile on the Isle of Elba. France had surrendered. War Hawks and a Republican president had waged a bungled war but their war aim of eliminating any Indian territory had succeeded. Aboriginals would have to make terms with their conqueror or make their way to the chilly charity of Upper or Lower Canada.

French-Canadians had played a decisive role, as officers and as fighting soldiers, in saving Canada from invasion. While British troops had played significant and even decisive roles in saving Upper Canada from American invaders, Canadiens had been decisive contributors to the vital victories at Michilimackinac and Queenston Heights in 1812; their victory at Châteauguay against astonishing odds, killed the most dangerous American offensive of the war. In 1814, Canadiens played no conspicuous part in Prevost’s failed invasion of up-state New York and no part at all in British operations against Washington and Baltimore or New Orleans. Simply put, they were not invited, and they played no role in the potential success or effective failure of any of these operations. Their descendants can take pride in their military achievements, and it is no exaggeration to claim that their ancestors saved both the Canadas in the War of 1812. As former secretary to Canada’s first Minister of Militia and defense, Sir George Étienne Cartier, historian Benjamin Sulte recognized that Lower Canada’s contribution of an efficient militia system had been overlooked by Bishop John Strachan’s noisy claims for Upper Canada’s often reluctant defenders. He also recognized in his lengthy series of biographies of French Canadian leaders in the war that the British policy of conciliating both seigneurs and clergy had given them a rich dividend in military expertise. Writing in 1897, Sulte reminded his readers:
There are currently eighty graduates of the Military College everywhere in the British Empire. Bring them home on any day that war is declared and we shall see how our militia perform under the direction of men who know the art of war.21

Georgeville, March 7, 2012

Notes


3. As a sad irony, within four days of Madison signing the declaration of war, the new ministry of Lord Liverpool had cancelled the offending Order. The British Minister’s plea for patience was in vain. On flogging as an issue, see Taylor, Civil War, pp. 134–40.


6. The stories are told in Benjamin Sulte, L’histoire de la milice canadienne française 1760–1897 (Montreal: Desbarats & cie., 1897, pp. 41–5).

7. On clothing, see René Chartrand, Quebec: Heights of Abraham, p. 3.

8. Sulte, L’Histoire, pp. 20–22, p. 24. (Sulte’s book, dedicated to Queen Victoria, is a paean of loyalty to Her Majesty at her Diamond Jubilee).

9. Ibid., p. 25.

10. Ibid., p. 36, pp. 41–42.


14. Stanley, ibid., p. 434 suggests that Hull may also have been moved by the appalling number of sick and injured who lay helpless in his fort.


Notes on contributor

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