

A turning point in local history

Column by local history enthusiast Zig Misiak

Published: Fri, 10 Dec 2010

brantnews.com

I chose to write a series of articles in order to stimulate interest in the War of 1812 and demonstrate the real impact it had on our communities.

Most of what I write about will be pretty much historical fact, but other articles will be based on “what ifs.” So here’s one that should raise a few eyebrows, as they say.

What if American Gen. Duncan McArthur held his ground on the west side of the Grand River when he attacked the county and Six Nations Territory in November 1814?

The War of 1812 was in its third year, with battles won and lost by both sides with no major victories. As in any war, each side tried to outsmart and out maneuver the other. We took a fort, they took it back. We burnt a town, they burnt one, as well. We destroyed a ship and, well, you get the picture.

The United States wanted to dominate Upper Canada and all First Nations territory near here, as well as out west. They referred to it as “Manifest Destiny.”

Even though greatly outnumbered, the British soldiers, militia and First Nations allies were doing quite well. But, suddenly, events changed, exposing the Grand River to a serious American attack.

Gen. Brock and Tecumseh laid siege to Fort Detroit. Upon its surrender in 1812, the British and their First Nations allies maintained a solid grip on the western territories, which was supported by a dominant British Navy on Lake Erie.

However, on Sept. 9, 1813, in what is called the biggest battle of the war on the lakes, the British fleet was defeated and captured by the United States.

Cut off from essential supplies and reinforcements, Gen. Proctor, the local British commander, abandoned the western part of Upper Canada. On Sept. 20, the Thames River was used to transport women, children, the sick and supplies to Chatham. Tecumseh and the western nation allies had no choice but to go with Proctor.

One week later, on Sept. 27, having control of Lake Erie, the Americans landed a force of about 4,500 soldiers near Fort Malden in Upper Canada.

The British and First Nations were retreating east toward the safety of Burlington Heights, where the British were fortified. Unfortunately, Tecumseh was killed en route during the Battle of the Thames on Nov. 5. Hopes of the western First Nations confederacy died with him.

After the battle, some of the western First Nations pursued peace with the Americans and the rest moved east toward Six Nations territory.

On July 13, 1814, the American Army captured Fort Erie. The Americans now had total control of Lake Erie and isolated the entire western part of Upper Canada. Six Nations territory and the surrounding counties were the only line of defence between the Americans and the British at Burlington Heights. If they were destroyed, then Upper Canada and possibly Six Nations territory were surely lost.

Read the continuation of Zig Misiak's column in next week's Brant News. To learn more about local history, visit www.realpeopleshistory.com.