

Considering a different Canada

Part 2 of an article by local history enthusiast Zig Misiak

Published: Thu, 16 Dec 2010

brantnews.com

The following column is Part 2 of an article by Zig Misiak examining the potential outcome if American General Duncan McArthur had held his ground on the west side of the Grand River when he attacked the county and Six Nations Territory in November 1814.

On Sept. 17, the British attack to take back Fort Erie fails and the entire western frontier remains under the control of the Americans.

On Oct. 21, Britain offers peace on the basis of “uti possidetis,” which under international law means that at the end of a conflict whatever territory is occupied belongs to the occupant.

What do you think General McArthur’s thoughts might have been under these potential terms? I think he saw an opportunity to avenge his surrender to Brock in 1812. I think he felt that he could quickly move in and attack Six Nations villages, cross the Grand and hit the British from the rear as they were moving in on Fort Erie.

I think he felt that most of, if not all of, Upper Canada could be under American control prior to the final draft of a peace treaty.

On Oct. 22, McArthur left Detroit, taking a northerly route to hide his intended target for as long as he could. He reached Moraviantown on the Thames on Oct. 29.

Soon after, on Nov. 5, he faced a small group of defenders at the Grand River near D’Aubigny Creek and Brant’s Fording Place.

McArthur got news that the Americans had abandoned Fort Erie and chose not to cross the Grand. He turned south, staying on the west side of the river, rolling over a larger number of militia at Malcolm’s Mill.

Here’s another “what if?” What if American ships landed troops at the mouth of the Grand River, Port Dover and Turkey Point? What if McArthur was supplied artillery pieces and had an army coming in support from Fort Detroit by land, as well? What if the Americans stayed in Fort Erie and pushed the British more aggressively?

What if the thousands of American sympathizers west of the Grand River formed militia groups and moved up along the Grand’s western bank in support of McArthur? What if the Six Nations negotiated to stay neutral? What if the Six Nations allied themselves with the Americans, like their cousins on the other side of the Niagara River?

If McArthur stayed and erected fortifications he could have created a major standoff, as the British still did not have the power to cross the river and defeat him. Reinforcements were on their way

from Ancaster, but it's likely that they would have set up a defensive position along the river rather than attack. McArthur would have been in control of an important food supply, as our area was a "bread basket" for Upper Canada.

The recently reoccupied Fort Erie could not send reinforcements, as they were still outnumbered by American forces on the opposite side of the river. Nor was the already weak British army about to leave Burlington Heights and expose its eastern and southern flanks.

It is December 2010. You are crossing the Lorne Bridge. You roll down your window at a security station and a polite officer says: "Passport please. What's the purpose of your visit?"

Ahead of you a big sign reads: "You are now entering McArthurville, U.S.A."

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