

Fredonia and the War of 1812
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2012

There are a number of exciting events during the War of 1812 which involved Fredonians. However, what is most interesting is the way in which accounts of those incidents were added to, embellished and sometimes combined as time passed.

The incidents, in chronological order, were 1) the stationing of a company of militia at the mouth of Canadaway Creek; 2) the 4th of July 1812 celebration in Fredonia; 3) British depredations near Silver Creek around 23 September 1812; 4) attempted landing of British on 26 September 1812; 5) British raid at 18-Mile Creek and their return to Canadaway Creek; and 6) Salt boats pursued into Canadaway Creek.

The first incident is a fairly simple one. In preparation for hostilities, a company of militia were stationed at Portland and another group of some 45 men at the mouth of Canadaway Creek. The move had two purposes, according to an 11 July 1812 letter written by William Peacock, Holland Land Co., sub-agent at Mayville, to his superior, Joseph Ellicott. One purpose was to calm the fears of the inhabitants and keep them from moving away. The other purpose was to interrupt the illicit trade going on between some local entrepreneurs and the British. Peacock reported that some Fredonia merchants were “unprincipled Characters. Hale, Lovejoy &c., had 379 Barl [barrels] of Flour and a number of Barls of Pt [Pot] & Pearl Ash Stored in a Barn at the mouth of Canadaway Cr. . . . there were boats hovering about that place in order (as some of the Inhabitants believed) to take the property away in the night — on the morning of the 30th of June last, the guarding of the Flour &c became popular & patriotic [news of the declaration of war had just reached this area], and about 40 men volunteered their services to take Charge of the property in order to prevent Hale &c. to disposing of it to our Enemy, the British. . . . I understood yesterday [10 July 1812] that the property is still under guard.”

In other words, from 30 June at least through 10 July 1812 a group of some 40 men stood guard at the mouth of Canadaway Creek. This account may cast some light on the oddly sly remark made by Levi Risley in an 1880 letter to the editor of the *Censor*: Arnold Russell and James Brigham “were in the *battle* at the mouth of the creek when the British vessel, ‘Queen Charlotte,’ sent soldiers on shore to see why Mr. Ebenezer Johnson should have so large a barn.”

The second event may actually be a part of the first. In *The Fredonia Censor* of 21 July 1858, a man signing himself “Pioneer,” wrote a long description of the 4th of July 1812 celebration he attended in Fredonia. After morning salutes, breakfast and a dance in the loft of Hezekiah Barker’s log cabin, about at today’s 1 Park Place, everyone repaired to Judge Zattu Cushing’s huge barn to listen to his oration scheduled for 11:00 a.m.

The Judge was just finishing his opening remarks “when a messenger came up to the door, almost out of breath, and cried out, ‘The British are landing at the mouth of the creek! Every able bodied man turn out!’ The reader will be reminded that we had just commenced the scuffle with John Bull at that time, and this was the first alarm.”

“The Judge stopped pronouncing his oration” and the men and older boys raced off. “After about fifteen minutes, order was restored, and the Judge finished his oration to the ladies and such boys as remained to hear.” After that the boys swam in the creek and played ball “while the old soldiers in knots and groups around the common, fought the Revolutionary battles over again.”

In 1864, O. W. Johnson wrote a memoir of Zattu Cushing, whom he had never known, which included an account of that 4th of July celebration. “In the midst of the oration the roar of

artillery and muskets announced that a battle had commenced at the mouth of the creek.” This barrage of Johnson’s replaced the out-of-breath messenger. The men in the audience raced to the battle, and, said Johnson, “the orator was at the scene of danger as soon as any of the audience.” In his 1875 *History*, Andrew Young added that it was a salt boat that had taken refuge in Canadaway Creek that the British were after, that is was Mrs. Cole who rode to Fredonia with the warning, and that “after her return, she was actively engaged in carrying food and drink to the little army,” the 40 man detachment. In 1960 Miss Crocker wrote an article, “Two Courageous Women,” in which she repeats Young’s version adding “Mrs. Cole further showed her great patriotism by melting her pewter, including her precious tea pot, into bullets, which were used as ammunition by one of her sons for the purpose of repelling the British while he and the neighbors patrolled the area about the mouth of the Canadaway Creek.”

To return to “Pioneer’s” account, with the orator still at home, by evening a vigilance committee had set up a plan for sentry duty along the lakeshore. “The guard for each station was two men and two boys of the larger class. As it happened to fall to the lot of two men and another boy, with your humble chronicler, to stand guard on the night of the day above mentioned, we marched cheerfully, though very tired, about nine miles to our place of destination.”

If we can combine these two, we have a preliminary group standing guard at the mouth of Canadaway Creek from at least as early as 30 June 1812. On 4 July 1812 an alarm is sounded and a messenger rides to Fredonia to round up more men. Following that, small groups of “sentries” are posted along the shore of Lake Erie which brings us to the next event. Dr. Jacob Burgess of Silver Creek wrote in a letter of 4 August 1812 that “we have met and elected officers and raised a company of volunteers.” Around the 23rd of September 1812 the British landed 8 to 10 miles east of Silver Creek and plundered some three or four houses of pork, bedding, whiskey and clothing. They lay off shore for two or three days with a ship and three boats and “took one of our salt boats.” (Salt was a precious commodity on the frontier and there was more than one attempt at a raid to make off with a supply.)

The next major engagement occurred late in June 1813. Some of the details are in Peacock’s annual report to Ellicott dated 2 July 1813. “They [the British] have committed depredations in several places upon the frontier settlements, mostly at, and near, to the 18 Mile Creek; they entered the Cattaraugus Creek but returned without effecting anything; then came into Canadaway Creek, with a Flag of truce, in order, as they said, to return the goods they had plundered from the Inhabitants at the 18 Mile Creek &c.” (Peacock believed they were actually just snooping around to find more goods.) “The Inhabitants living nigh there rallied and met them on the beach — fired one Gun, and shot one of the sailors through the calf of the leg. — While the Lieutenant was in conversation with Judge Cushing and others on the shore, seven of the Sailors gave his Majesty leg bail, took to the woods and left behind an old Negro & the Lieutenant to run the boat back. The deserters were apprehended the next day [and] carried to Erie.”

In a letter of 24 June 1813, Olive H. Perry noted that on 23 June the ship Queen Charlotte and the brig Lady Prevost “were at anchor off Canadaway yesterday” and that three of the deserters sent to him at Erie had provided useful information about the disposition of the British fleet on the lake.

In 1843 Samuel A. Brown gave a lecture on the history of Chautauqua County which included an account he had obtained from Leverett Barker himself about the June 1813 event. The British had rifled Lay’s Inn “this side of Buffalo,” but then agreed to return what had been

taken. It was packed up and put on board the “British Queen” an armed vessel of some 10 or 12 guns and sent to Chadwick’s Bay. Under a flag of truce a Lieutenant and thirteen men brought the goods ashore with twelve of the thirteen immediately deserting. “Four of the citizens of Pomfret (from one of whom I received this information) went to Dunkirk and had an interview with the Lieutenant. While they were conversing, a party of militia, from the present town of Sheridan, repaired too near the spot and not knowing who they were, nor seeing the white flag, but seeing two British red coats, they fired.”

Which explains how the shooting occurred under a flag of truce. That also explains why Cushing happened to be there, along with Leverett Barker and two other delegates from Fredonia, although Downs, in his *History of Chautauqua County* (1921) claims that Cushing was already there because he had just filled his wagon with a load of salt and was about to drive the oxen home when the men with a flag of truce came ashore.

The next event also involved salt. “Some boats loaded with salt started from Buffalo to go up the lake. A British armed schooner of 8 or 10 guns laying at Fort Erie, discovered them and gave chase. The boats for security, ran into Canadaway Creek, west of Dunkirk. A boat from the schooner, with 18 or 20 men were sent ashore to capture the salt boats. In the mean time, the militia, seeing the armed vessel approaching the shore, hastily repaired to the place where danger was apprehended. The sailors landed and while on shore were *unceremoniously* fired upon. Three of them fell, but were picked up by their comrades, and the whole party made for the ship with as much speed as possible. The schooner then commenced firing toward the place where the salt boats lay, and continued it for about an hour. Many of our citizens were afterwards led to the spot to gratify curiosity, to witness the trees and shore hit by the cannon balls. This vessel was afterwards taken by Perry, and the crew sent to Buffalo. They stated that three of their number were severely wounded in this encounter, but no one killed.”

In his 1846 *History*, E. F. Warren, giving full credit to S. A. Brown, writes about the encounter, paraphrasing Brown’s account. However, when he gave a lecture on the same subject in April 1865 to the Fredonia Historical Society, he added to the salt boat episode that “Mrs. Cole, now deceased, who lived near, and had a plain view of the whole scene, asserted that she saw six of their number fall.”

Later embellishments include that by William Risley, writing in 1871, about the salt boat raid. “This [the mouth of Canadaway Creek] was at that time the only place where small boats could enter and unload salt and other merchandise. It was supposed that the British were in want of salt, and a trial was to be made to get some. When the boat got near to the mouth of the creek, there being a sufficient number to guard the place concealed in the woods on the bank, our men all arose and fired towards the boat, which turned the enemy about, and they were soon out of reach. . . . At this time James Mullett and D. W. Douglass, who were clerks in this place, hearing that a boat was in sight, got one horse and both got on. In riding over the rough roads Douglass slipped off behind, and Mullett reported that he had ‘fallen in the service of his country.’”

William Risley’s brother Levi went him one better in an 1880 letter about the old days. “[Arnold] Russell and [James] Brigham were in the *battle* at the mouth of the creek when the British vessel “Queen Charlotte,” sent soldiers on shore to see why Mr. Ebenezer Johnson should have so large a barn and they returned minus three men who deserted them and ran for the woods. This was the time D. W. Douglass used to say ‘that he fell in the cause of his country.’ While two (Douglass and Horace Spencer) were riding one horse and running him over the rough road of stumps and roots, the poor horse fell, and dumped them both into a mud hole.”

Some of these differences are probably due to the fact that at the time of the salt boats

episode William Risley was about 10 years old and Levi was 7. They had been living in Ohio for a few years, returning in May 1814, so what we may be hearing are second-hand accounts told years later. However, in this 200th anniversary year, we should express our appreciation for those who did their part in difficult times, whether embellished or not.