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Canada's Fur Trade and the War of 1812

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

While the traditionally-known elements of the War of 1812 deserve recognition, they are not the whole story. The British fought to save the Canadas from conquest by the Americans, but they also strove to save and expand the territorial base of the fur trade, a vital element in the British North American economy, a goal shared by the North West Company. Since Fort William was located in Upper Canada and many NWC actions took place in Upper Canada, the roles of both the Company and the Fort are an integral part of Ontario history. This article examines actions at Sault Ste. Marie, the roles of the schooners Nancy and Perseverance, the development of Yonge Street and the route from Lake Simcoe to Wasaga, the struggle to maintain the fur trade canoe route between Fort William and Montreal, NWC involvement in the taking of Prairie du Chien and the decision made to take Astoria from the American Fur Company which led to British rule over the Columbia Department on the Pacific coast.

To promote the Interest and Security of the North West Company

Canada's Fur Trade and the War of 1812[1]

by Jean Morrison

Most Ontarians associate the War of 1812 with Sir Isaac Brock, Laura Secord and perhaps with Chief Tecumseh. The war may also bring to mind victories at Niagara, Crysler's Farm and Châteauguay. Little or nothing is known by the general public, however, of the Canadian fur trade's equally vital part the in the war, in its causes, conduct and outcome.

This can hardly be surprising. Magazine articles, school texts and museum displays on the war rarely mention its inextricable link to Canada's fur trade.[2] The War of 1812 exhibit at the Canadian War Museum, for example, focuses entirely on the Lower Lakes and the St. Lawrence River with no hint of fur trade involvement.[3] In response to this author's comments on its display, the Museum responded: "American victories at Queenston Heights or Châteauguay could have made Canada part of the United States, so these 'decisive' battles were highlighted to visitors."[4]

Equally "decisive" at the war's start, however, were the British seizure of Fort Michilimackinac by a combined military, fur trader and Native force and the Fort's continued occupation until it ended.

[1] Many thanks to *Ontario History's* anonymous reader whose constructive critique of this article's first draft led to much needed revision. Others who offered welcome advice and corrections include Brian S. Jaeschke, Mackinac State Historic Parks and Professor Emeritus Ernie Epp, Lakehead University. Peter Boyle, David Else and Joe Winterburn of Fort William Historical Park made useful comments and introduced me to David Hrycyszyn's well researched staff report of 1997, "The North West Company in The War of 1812". Thanks also to staff at Fort St. Joseph National Historic Site of Canada, McCord Museum, Nancy Island Historic Site; Sault Ste. Marie Museum and Sault Ste. Marie Canal National Historic Site for images and information. Special gratitude goes to *OH* editor, Tory Tronrud, for his help with maps and for his usual generous co-operation. My apologies to any agencies or individuals who inadvertently are not acknowledged.

[2] Stephen Marche's otherwise perceptive review of the war, "That Time We Beat the Americans: A citizens' guide to the War of 1812." *The Walrus* (March 2012), 24-31, fails to mention its fur trade connection.

[3] For text of CWM War of 1812 display, see www.civilization.ca/cwm/exhibitions/war of 1812.

[4] Dr. Dean F. Oliver, Director, Research and Exhibition, CWM to author, 19 December 2005.

Abstract

While the traditionally-known elements of the War of 1812 deserve recognition, they are not the whole story. The British fought to save the Canadas from conquest by the Americans, but they also strove to save and expand the territorial base of the fur trade, a vital element in the British North American economy, a goal shared by the North West Company. Since Fort William was located in Upper Canada and many NWC actions took place in Upper Canada, the roles of both the Company and the Fort are an integral part of Ontario history. This article examines actions at Sault Ste. Marie, the roles of the schooners Nancy and Perseverance, the development of Yonge Street and the route from Lake Simcoe to Wasaga, the struggle to maintain the fur trade canoe route between Fort William and Montreal, NWC involvement in the taking of Prairie du Chien and the decision made to take Astoria from the American Fur Company which led to British rule over the Columbia Department on the Pacific coast.

Résumé: *Les aspects de la guerre de 1812 qui sont traditionnellement discutés, quoique méritant d'être reconnus, ne constituent pas toute l'histoire de cette guerre. Certes, les Anglais ont combattu pour sauver le Canada d'une conquête américaine, mais ils ont essayé en même temps d'aggrandir la base territoriale de leur commerce de fourrures, qui était un élément vital de l'économie de l'Amérique Britannique du Nord. C'était un but partagé par la compagnie du Nord-ouest. Comme le Fort William se situait dans le Haut-Canada, et comme plusieurs combats auxquels la compagnie a participé ont eu lieu dans le Haut-Canada, le rôle de la compagnie et du fort fait partie intégrale de l'histoire ontarienne. Nous examinons ici les combats de Sault-Sainte-Marie, le rôle des goélettes Nancy et Perseverence, le développement de la rue Yonge et la route du lac Simcoe à Wasaga, la lutte pour maintenir la route de la compagnie par canoë entre Fort William et Montréal, la participation de la compagnie à la prise de Prairie du Chien, et la décision de saisir l'Astoria de l'American Fur Company, qui a mené à la domination britannique du département de Columbia sur la côte pacifique.*

Although some academic and popular historical works on the war make mention of Michilimackinac, its role remains generally unfamiliar.[5] And on the Pacific coast far beyond the Canadas, the North West Company's [NWC] purchase of Astoria and its subsequent capture by the Royal Navy were also "decisive" moments for Canada's future. Barely noted east of the Rockies, these events at Astoria led to Canada's dominion from sea unto sea.

Why Michilimackinac?

News that the United States Congress had declared war against Great Britain on 18 June 1812 reached Quebec City on 25 June "by an Express received by the North West Company."[6] British North America's Governor-in-Chief, Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, immediately sent a communiqué to Fort St. Joseph, the British military garrison on St. Mary's River and to Fort William, the North West Company's inland headquarters on Lake Superior. Prevost

[5] The excellent PBS documentary *The War of 1812* (2011) mentions Michilimackinac as does Donald E. Graves, "The War that Saved Canada", *Legion Magazine*, Jan-Feb 2012, 21-31.

[6] William Wood, ed., *Select British Documents of the War of 1812,* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1920), I, 428; McCord Museum, William McKay Fonds P178, McKay Memorial.

ordered both establishments to seize Michilimackinac, an island in the strait between Lakes Huron and Michigan, from the Americans without delay. The duty of the military, he told the St. Joseph's commander, Captain William Roberts, was "To promote the Interest and Security of the North West Company." For its part, the NWC assured Prevost "of their Cordial and active Cooperation... by every means in their Power."

Recognizing Michilimackinac's key role in Canada's defence before the war, Upper Canada's administrator, Major-General Isaac Brock urged that British forces seize the island, and Detroit, once the inevitable conflict began:

Before we can expect an active co-operation on the part of the Indians, the reduction of Detroit and Michilimakinack [sic] must convince that people, who conceive themselves to have been sacrificed, in 1794, to our policy, that we are earnestly engaged in the war.[7]

Ever since the British conquest of Quebec in 1759, maintaining Native alliances required much diplomacy, something the victors did not always practice. Quick to learn, however, were the Montreal-based fur traders. Before 1812, the fur trade dominated British North America's economy and in turn the North West Company dominated the fur trade. Not only was the trade dependent on Native hunters and trappers but, as NWC Chief Director William McGillivray contended:

> The fur trade is the link between the British Empire and the Indians whose 'fidelity & attachment are essential to the safety and integrity of British rule in North America.'[8]

One key to preserving good relations between Indians and traders and thus "the safety and integrity of British rule in North America" was Michilimackinac, site of a US military fort and customs facilities as well as assorted fur trade posts and depots. Also key to amicable relationships were the former "Indian Territories" now in the United States lying east of the Mississippi and south of the Great Lakes.

Before 1812

The struggle over the Territories began with the French and Indian Wars when France defended its North American Empire from Great Britain and her Atlantic colonies. Until 1759, France held the upper hand with support from such tribes as the Abenaki, Ottawa, Menominee and Wyandot. Natives helped safeguard France's domain from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Appalachians to the Mississippi. They did so to stop American colonists from settling on lands they considered as their own.

Native alliances were also crucial to the fur trade, the principal economic enterprise of New France. The French controlled the Great Lakes with six forts at

[7] The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Isaac Brock* (London: 1845), Ferdinand Brock Tupper, ed., Brock to Colonel Baynes, York, 12 February 1812.

[8] "Some Account of the Trade Carried on by the North West Company" (*Report of the Public Archives of Canada for the Year 1928*), 58.

strategic points.[9] Among them, Michilimackinac (then on the mainland) gave access to Lakes Superior and Michigan, the Upper Mississippi and the hinterland. A military fort, Michilimackinac also served as a major supply depot and stopover point for canoe brigades heading east and west.

In 1759, Britain's industrial supremacy and naval power ended French rule in North America. The Treaty of Paris of 1763 gave Britain dominion over lands east of the Mississippi. British merchants and adventurers assumed control of the French fur trade and the British military now possessed the six forts.

With the defeat of their French allies, the Natives faced new overseers who treated them with contempt. As an Ojibwa chief at Michilimackinac complained to Alexander Henry in 1761, "Your King has never sent us any presents, nor entered into any treaty with us." In 1763, several tribes under Chief Pontiac rebelled. Wielding scalping knife and tomahawk, they brutally attacked British military and trading posts.[10] During a game of *baggataway* (forerunner of lacrosse) at Fort Michilimackinac, Natives lobbed the ball over the palisade, rushed into the fort and "the bodies of the unsuspecting British soldiers soon lay strewn about, lifeless, horribly mangled and scalpless."[11]

The Pontiac Rebellion failed but it taught the British a lesson. They learned to treat the Indians with respect—and with presents of blankets, ironware, guns and liquor. In 1763, the Proclamation Act set aside the lands between Britain's Atlantic Colonies and the Mississippi as "Indian Territories." Here Native Peoples could follow their traditional ways and the fur trade could continue unmolested by land-hungry American colonists.

Adding the Territories to Quebec, the Quebec Act of 1774 maintained the ban on settlement. Quebec now extended to the juncture of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. American settlers who had helped defeat New France felt betrayed for they had coveted these lands themselves. This Act is considered as one of the causes of the American Revolution.

Traders from Montreal and Albany, however, welcomed the Quebec Act. They shared common cause with the region's tribes: to keep the Territories as a preserve for their mutual benefit. During the Revolutionary War, Mohawk chief Joseph Brant and four of six Iroquois Nations rallied to Britain's side.[12] By so doing, they expected to retain their traditional hunting grounds south of the Lakes.

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[9] See A. L. Burt, *The United States, Great Britain and British North America* (Yale, 1940), 82-105 for history of the six forts. Often described as '"posts" or "fortified posts", this paper uses "forts" to distinguish them from fur trade posts.

[10] Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures to Canada and the Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776* (1901; rept. 1969), 43-45.

[11] William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Press, 1984;1st pub. 1885), 204. According to Warren, no Frenchmen were hurt.

[12] Wilcomb E. Washburn, *Indians and the American Revolution* (www.americanrevolution.org/ind1.html)

The Boudary and Canada's Fur Trade

The newly founded United States of America not only spelled the end of Aboriginal autonomy east of the Mississippi but also threatened the fur trade in the Indian Territories. Several traders then followed earlier British adventurers into the *pays d'en haut,* north and west of Lake Superior. In 1783, some joined Montreal merchants in the North West Company, the name suggestive of the company's geographical orientation and its aim: to discover an overland Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean.

The boundary between the US and British North America created by the peace treaty of 1783 ran along the middle of the Great Lakes and west from Lake Superior up the Pigeon River to the Mississippi.[13] The Americans now owned the Indian Territories, called the "Old Northwest" by Americans but the "Southwest" by Canadians. The six forts, the carrying places circumventing Niagara Falls and St. Mary's River rapids and the nine-mile Grand Portage lay within United States territory.

The British occupied these holdings as long as possible, partly as defence from Native unrest. The peace negotiations had ignored Britain's Native allies. In 1781, the precarious nature of their relationships with Aboriginals led the British to move Fort Michilimackinac from the mainland to the island by that name. And, as noted later by General Brock, Native loyalty to the Crown became even more dubious when, deserted by the British, the Americans defeated their Confederacy at Fallen Timbers in 1794. For the survival of British rule and the Montreal fur trade, Native loyalty was imperative. One way to do this was holding onto Michilimackinac, a major distribution point for "Indian presents" and trade goods.

That year, Jay's Treaty required the British to surrender the forts by 1796.[14] As a result, they replaced Fort Michilimackinac with Fort St. Joseph at St. Mary River's exit into Lake Huron. The North West Company built a new Sault Ste. Marie post on the river's northern verges in 1797 and there cut a canal and locks for canoes and *batteaux*. In 1803, the Company moved its inland headquarters from Grand Portage to Fort William on Lake Superior, fifty miles north of the border.[15]

The Southwest Trade and the "Old" Northwesst

British traders still could operate on American soil but only on payment of US duties. At Michilimackinac, the customs agent levied import taxes and regulated commerce entering Lakes Michigan and Superior and their tributaries.[16] Eluding customs when possible,

[13] Burt, *The United States,* 16-41.

[14] Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Jay's Treaty: A Study in Commerce and Diplomacy* (Yale University Press, 1923; rpt. 1962), 2ff.

[15] "Some Account of the Trade....", 70.

[16] Bayliss Public Library, Sault Ste. Marie, MI. Steere Special Collection. Port Mackinac Records, 1789, 1802-1884, Finding Aid.

the North West Company and other Montreal traders continued trading south of Superior. From Fond du Lac at the lake's western tip, the company's Southwest Department oversaw many profitable posts.

The Nor'westers had good reason for operating on American soil. Annual returns for 1806 reveal that "South Lake Superior" in the United States yielded 361 packs of furs. That year, Athabasca's returns came to 297 packs and "MacKenzie" River's 79.[17] Unlike returns from US territory near Fort William, yields from the far northwest incurred exorbitant transportation costs. No wonder that the NWC was desperate to hang onto its southwest trade.

Inevitably, American traders began moving into US-owned fur-bearing lands. In 1808, the NWC received a serious blow when John Jacob Astor of New York founded the American Fur Company. Striving to oust Nor'westers from the "southwest", the AFC established competing posts south of the Lakes. By 1811, its strength was such that it forced the NWC's two firms of Montreal agents into a partnership called the South West Company.[18]

Meanwhile in the "Old Northwest," Native attacks on American military bases and frontier settlements continued unabated. Congress accused Britain of arming Chief Tecumseh's Indian Confederacy. The US defeated the Confederacy at Tippecanoe in 1811 but American citizens still sought revenge against their northern neighbours. On the frontier, settlers lived in terror of Indian brutality. Invading Canada and incorporating it into the USA seemed the logical solution for ending this menace. For their part, the Natives wanted revenge against the Americans for stealing their lands. When war came, Tecumseh and his warriors joined Great Britain in anticipation of regaining the Indian Territories from the United States.[19]

Upper Canada and the Fur Trade

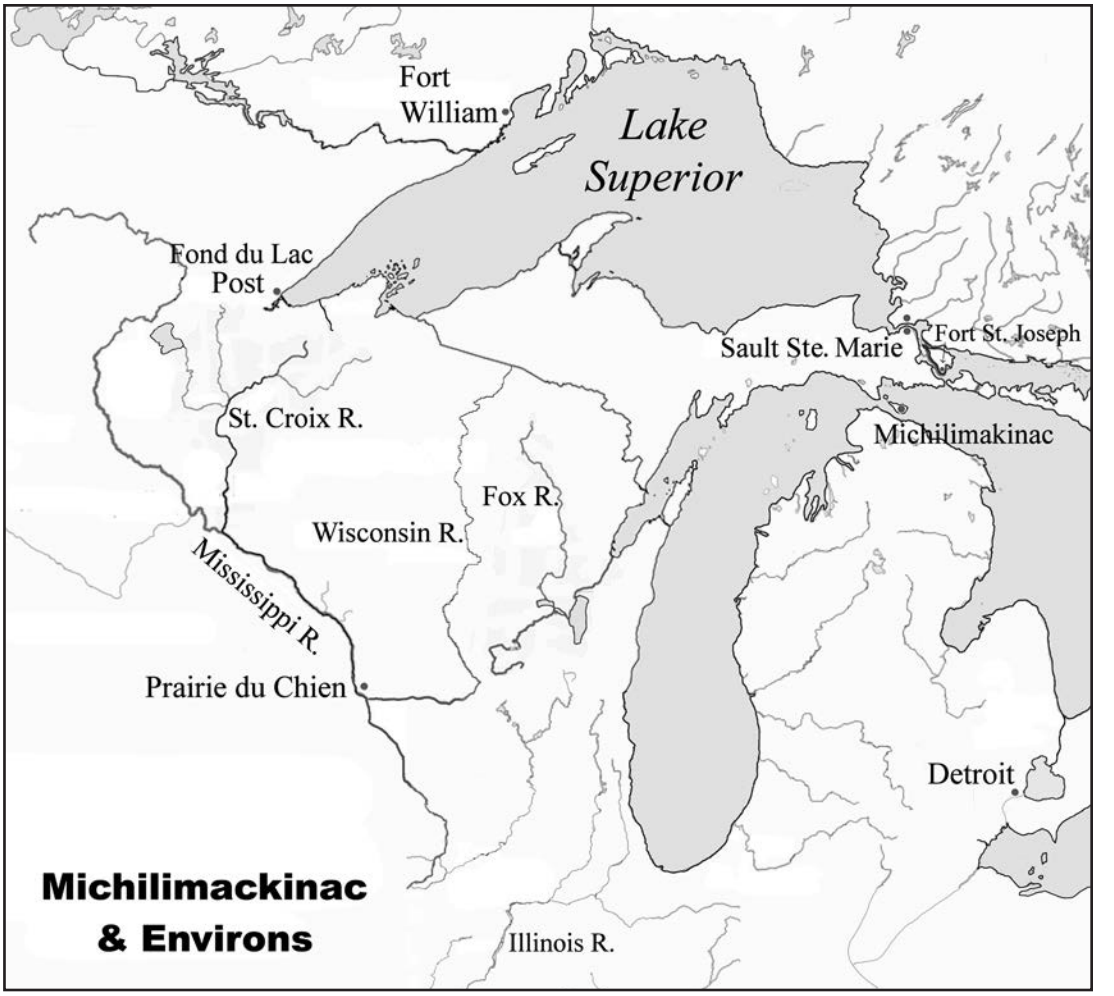
Guilty or not of fomenting unrest south of the border, the fur trade also impacted on developments in Upper Canada, home to Loyalist and other American settlers after the Revolution. Upper Canada's northeastern limits along the Ottawa River served as the major canoe route for transporting furs and goods between Montreal and Fort William. Defining its south and western margins, the Great Lakes carried schooners and *batteaux* laden with trade goods destined for Fort William or with fur packs for Montreal.[20] Forwarding such freight at transfer points along the Lakes became a profitable business for Upper

[17] Barry Gough, ed., *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814* (Champlain Society, 1988), I, 189-90.

[18] W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company* (Champlain Society, 1934), 268.

[19] For conflict between American settlers and Indians, see Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (Knopf: 2006).

[20] See Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto: 1930; rev. ed., 1962), 222-23.



Upper Great Lakes & environs. Courtesy: Tory Tronrud

Canadian merchants.[21] Schooner bills of lading and fur traders' journals reveal that Upper Canada's farmers, too, benefited from shipments of corn, grain, flour and livestock bound for Fort William and the northwest.[22]

As early as 1794, Upper Canada's Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe deemed war with the United States inevitable. Prodding Britain to take back the Indian Territories, he admonished, "Upper Canada is not to be defended by remaining within the boundary line."[23] Since shipping through the Lower Lakes and the

[21] See "Robert Hamilton", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (*DCB*), V.

[22] "Shipments to Fort William by Schooner" in Marie Taylor, "Fort William: Structures and Space", Fort William Archaeological Project (1976), Appendix V; "Diary of John Macdonell" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), 94

[23] Taylor, The Divided Ground, 287..

narrow Detroit River would be vulnerable to enemy attack, Simcoe conceived of an alternate route midway between the Ottawa River and the Lower Lakes. By linking Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay on Lake Huron, such a route would ensure the safe transport of cargo to and from Michilimackinac and Grand Portage.

The route's first leg was Yonge Street. Running between York and Lake Simcoe, it would allow military wares and fur trade merchandise to reach Lake Huron more quickly and safely than by the Lower Lakes.[24] Besides its military and trade advantages, Yonge Street would open up agriculture along its path. In Simcoe's view, it would "supply the North West Trade with such provisions as it may." Simcoe's dream of Yonge Street becoming a major fur trade route came to naught. Yet in war it facilitated military and fur trade transport and it did spur farming on adjacent lands.

Onset of War

As the Napoleonic Wars raged in Europe, the United States barred imports of British goods. Britain responded by impressing American sailors into the Royal Navy and impounding American vessels bound for French ports, actions provoking the United States into declaring war. Apart from mercantile reasons, for many in the US this became a war to expand northward and incorporate British North America into its fold. Among many imperial motives, for Great Britain the war would be a challenge to save what was left of its North American possessions. For Montreal's fur traders, it was a war to protect transportation routes and major sources of pelts; for the Aboriginals, it was a war to regain the southwest.

Around 1807, William McGillivray denounced the impact of the American Revolution on the fur trade: "There is no body of men in British America who have suffered so much by the political arrangements between Great Britain and the United States, as the merchants carrying on the fur trade of Canada."[25] The key to ending the sufferings of Montreal fur merchants was Fort Michilimackinac. In American hands during the coming war, it could intercept the flow of trade goods and furs between Montreal and the interior. It could threaten the Sault Ste. Marie canal, gateway to Lake Superior and beyond. It could neutralize local tribes. If held by the British, Michilimackinac would ensure the safe passage of trade goods and furs. It would secure the loyalty of Natives along and beyond the Upper Lakes and turn them against the foe. Michilimackinac would also enable Britain to re-possess the "Old Northwest" for the benefit of traders and Natives alike.

Seizure of Michilimackinac

When war came, it is not surprising that the government at Quebec

[24] Percy J. Robinson, "Yonge Street and the North West Company", *Canadian Historical Review* XXIV (March 1943), 253-265; F. R. Berchem, *The Yonge Street Story, 1793-1860* (Toronto: Natural History, 1977), chs. 1-3.

[25] "Some Account of the Trade", 70.

made Michilimackinac its first target. Bearing Prevost's order to seize the Fort, William McKay reached Fort St. Joseph's on 8 July after only eight days travel from Montreal.[26] A NWC shareholder and retired wintering partner, today McKay is one of the unsung heroes of the war. His many feats, however, did receive recognition at the time.[27] Prevost's message to St. Joseph's commander, Captain Charles Roberts, was likely the same message Roberts received from Major-General Isaac Brock, commander of British forces in Upper Canada. Brock saw the necessity of taking both Michilimackinac and Detroit: "Unless Detroit and Michilimackinac be both in our possession at the commencement of hostilities, not only Amherstburg but most probably the whole country, must be evacuated as far as Kingston."[28] Brock advised Roberts to use his own judgment. He had already instructed Robert Dickson to bring Native reinforcements from the Upper Mississippi to St. Joseph's. An independent trader well connected to Montreal's fur merchants, Dickson wielded enormous influence over the tribes west of Lake Michigan, much to Canada's benefit. He had no trouble recruiting almost two hundred Indian "friends" for the assault on Michilimackinac.[29]

Despite his under-staffed and under-equipped garrison, Roberts was determined to take Michilimackinac, some fifty miles away. He requisitioned South West Company supplies and supplemented his small, aging and, according to Roberts, alcoholic detachment with traders, voyageurs and Indians. He also "secured" North West Company canoes, batteaux and schooner, the *Caledonia*, as his invasion fleet. "With Consequences favorable to the Security of Upper Canada,"[30] his forces seized the Island of Michilimackinac and its fort on 17 July without a shot. Michilimackinac remained in British hands throughout the war. Its captors, however, endured a precarious existence as supplies of provisions and goods dwindled, Native allies vacillated, and fur traders and voyageurs

[26] McKay Memorial.

[27] "William McKay", *DCB* VI.

[28] Cited in Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada, 1812-13* (Toronto: 1980), 101.

[29] Wood, *Select British Documents* I, 429-31."Robert Dickson" in *DCB*, VI; John Abbott, et al*, The History of Fort St. Joseph* (Dundurn, 2000), 93.

[30] Wood, *Select British Documents* I, 443,Prevost to Liverpool, 14 August 1812. See *Ibid*., I, 429-37 for reports by Roberts and other documents related to the seizure of Michilimackinac.

Michilimackinac on Lake Huron by William Dashwood, oil on canvas, c. 1820. Depicts island and fort following battle of 1814 with captured US ships the Tigress and Scorpion. Courtesy: Mackinac State Historic Park, Mackinac Island, Michigan.

left for far off posts.[31]

After leaving St. Joseph's, William McKay arrived at Fort William in the midst of the North West Company's annual meeting. The partners immediately complied with Prevost's mandate but their arms, ammunition, provisions and men reached Michilimackinac two days after its capitulation. Roberts welcomed the supplies but bemoaned the men's return to their trading duties. At Fort William, the Nor'westers' main concern was getting the annual returns safely to Montreal. Expediting the quick shipment of furs gathered at Rainy Lake, they sent "as many Indians as could be induced, to accompany us for the safeguard of the Company's Furs to the French River", the canoe link to the Ottawa River and Montreal. The furs reached Montreal without incident.[32]

On 16 July, "Mr." McKenzie wrote from Fort William to the North West Company agent at Sandwich (now Windsor, Ontario) that of 1,200 "young gentlemen and engagés" mustered, one hundred would depart the next day along with a hundred Indians and that

[31] *Fort St. Joseph*, 92-5; George S. May, *War 1812* (Mackinac State Historic Parks, 1962), 5-16.

[32] Wallace, ed., *Documents,* 261.

Colonel William McKay, 1816, oil on canvas. Attributed to Levi Steven. Courtesy: McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal. M17684.

five thousand inland Indians were in reserve.[33] McKenzie's letter fell into the hands of the Governor of Michigan, General William Hull. On 12 July, Hull had invaded Canada and taken Sandwich with little resistance from the inhabitants whose confidence in British victory was shaky at best.[34] Hearing of Michilimackinac's capture by the British, Hull hastily retreated back to Detroit. His flight gave a badly needed boost to the patriotism of Upper Canadians and the loyalty of Natives to the British cause.

Another boost to Upper Canadian morale came with Brock's capture of Detroit. Mindful of horrific assaults by Natives on American settlers in the past, Hull panicked at news of Michilimackinac's surrender and of an enormous expedition of Natives heading for Detroit from Michilimackinac under North and South West Company direction.[35] Rather than face such a fearsome force, Hull surrendered Detroit to General Isaac Brock, this feat facilitated by Chief Tecumseh and his warriors. Later Hull would be court-martialed for his actions. He had succumbed to Brock's admonition:

> It is far from my inclination to join in a war of extermination, but you must be aware that the numerous body of Indians who have attached themselves to my troops will be beyond my control the moment the contest commences.[36]

Corps of Canadian Voyageurs[37]

Beyond historical re-enactment circles, little is known of the Corps of

[33] *Report of the Trial of Brig. General William Hull* (New York: 1814), 46-48.

[34] In Brock's view, "The population, believe me, is essentially bad." Cited in "Sir Isaac Brock", *DCB* V.

[35] Wood, *Select British Documents*, I, 442.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] For more about the Corps, see Walter Prettie, "The Corps of Canadian Voyageurs, The North West Company and the War of 1812", Old Fort William Staff Report, 1987.

Canadian Voyageurs, a military troop made up of North West Company partners, clerks and voyageurs. Before the war, the government considered forming such a unit since, if captured by the enemy, commissioned NWC traders would be treated as prisoners-of-war and not as "free-booters, or plunderers."[38]

The Corps was embodied 1 October 1812 with Lieutenant-Colonel William McGillivray in command. All NWC partners, its officers had the authority to enrol in specified parishes "those who are now or have been voyageurs."[39] According to Captain William McKay, the Corps numbered 510 voyageurs who fought in battle and manned *batteaux* employed on the St. Lawrence and the Lakes.[40]

The Corps' first engagement took place on 23 October at St. Regis across the St. Lawrence River from Cornwall. On Montreal's line of communication with the Great Lakes, this was an important target for the invaders. Here Ensign Pierre Rototte, Sr. died in action along with his sergeant and six men.[41] St. Regis fell into American hands but one month later British forces recaptured this strategic spot on Canada's main transportation highway between Montreal and the Great Lakes.

On 20 November 1812 some five thousand US troops invaded Canada by Lake Champlain, the same route taken by the Continental Army when it occupied Montreal in 1775. At Lacolle, an American detachment of six hundred men mistakenly exchanged fire with another US unit. Joined by Captain William McKay and the Corps of Canadian Voyageurs, British forces under Colonel de Salaberry repulsed the demoralized invaders. Prevost and Salaberry later thanked McKay for "keeping his ground."[42] Salaberry also gave his "approbation of the alacrity with which the Corps of Voltigeurs, Voyageurs, the Battalions of Embodied Militia... repaired to their different posts

Canadian Corps of Voyageurs. Volunteer re-enactors depicting the unmilitary stance of the original Corps privates. Photo courtesy: Fort William Historical Park. [note that Corps re-enactors have changed their name slightly from that of original Corps.]

[38] Wood, *Select British Documents* I, 285. Captain A. Gray to Prevost, 13 January 1812.

[39] LAC, MG 19 E1, Selkirk Papers (hereafter Selkirk Papers), 2096-97.

[40] Robert Malcolmson, " 'Nothing could be more uncomfortable than our flat-bottomed boats': Batteaux in British Service during the War of 1812," *The Northern Mariner* (Oct. 2003), 25.

[41] See Wood, *Select British Documents* I, 668-69 for pension granted to Rototte's widow.

[42] William McKay Memorial.

to repel the threatened invasion."[43]

In recognition of the Corps' exploits, Governor-General Prevost appointed McGillivray to the Lower Canada Legislative Council on 25 January 1813. With high praise for "their zealous and disinterested service," however, he disbanded the "Militia Corps of Voyageurs" just six months after its formation.[44] As the theatre of war moved to the Great Lakes, the need for these defenders of the St. Lawrence perhaps had vanished. Or could it be that its voyageurs "proved extremely inefficient & totally defective in point of discipline," as alleged by Lord Selkirk?[45] Since its founding in 1811, Selkirk's Red River Settlement had been in collision with the North West Company over company canoe routes and Métis buffalo hunting within Settlement limits. Selkirk thus had nothing good to say about the Company or its wartime activities. McGillivray's mixed-blood son, Lieutenant Joseph McGillivray, also disparaged the voyageurs for their unbecoming behaviour. He had no quarrel with their fighting ability, however:

> ... They completely set discipline at defiance, and the volatile volunteer broke out into all the unrestrained mirth and anti-military familiarity of the thoughtless voyageur. ... Notwithstanding these peculiarities the voyageurs were excellent partisans, and, from their superior knowledge of the country, were able to render material service during the war.[46]

But were North West Company's motives in raising the Corps entirely patriotic? Selkirk described its creation as "ingenious". Disbanded two months before navigation opened in 1813, the voyageurs remained in Montréal on government pay and thus were on hand for the summer journey to Fort William. This saved the Company the cost and trouble of finding manpower during a time of wartime labour shortages. The Nor'westers countered Selkirk's denunciations. Pointing to their service as officers "without emolument," they proclaimed that they had raised the Corps at their own cost.[47]

While many privates resumed their duties as NWC voyageurs after being discharged, some balked until legally forced back to their canoes by NWC personnel serving as militia officers.[48]; others ran *batteaux* for the British Commissariat and then for the Provincial Commissariat Voyageurs.[49] But the Corps name continued. In May 1814, a general order extended William McGillivray's commission and those of two other officers to "the Indian and Conquered Countries,"[50]

[43] Wood, *Select British Documents* I, 676.

[44] Selkirk Papers, 2088.

[45] Selkirk Papers, 12715.

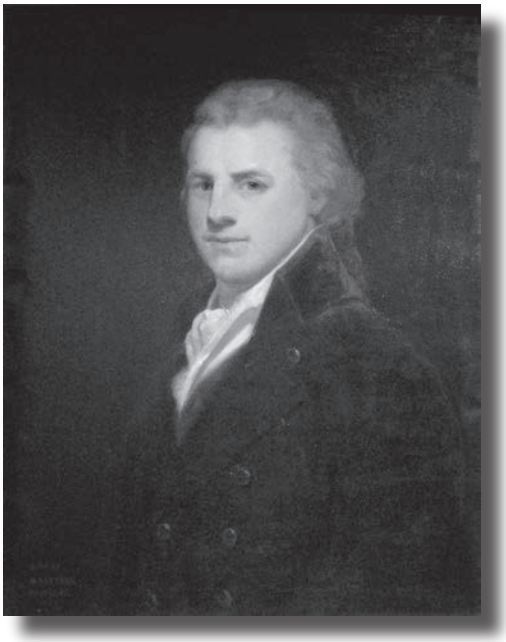
[46] Ross Cox, *The Columbia River* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1957; lst pub.,1832), 357-8.

[47] [Willcocke], *A Narrative of Occurrences In The Indian Countries of North Americ*a (London: 1817), 134.

[48] Jean Morrison, *Superior Rendezvous-Place: Fort William in the Canadian Fur Trade* (Toronto: 2001; rept. 2007), 75-6.

[49] *Canadian Military History Gateway*. www.cmhg-phmc.gc.ca.

[50] Selkirk Papers, 12716.



Portrait of William McGillivray copied by W. Raphael. Courtesy of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society

lands taken from the US or beyond Upper Canada's northwest limits. After the war, the Corps was again disbanded by orders of 1 March 1815 listing units of "Embodied Militia."[51]

Some NWC partners who had not served in the Corps, along with those who had, also received new or renewed commissions, but by what authority became controversial. At Selkirk's instigation, their "Militia and Provincial Rank in the Indian and conquered Countries" was cancelled and annulled on 17 August 1816 long after hostilities had ceased.[52] Selkirk had taken umbrage at uniformed North West Company partners flaunting their assumed authority as Corps officers far from the war zone in his Red River Settlement.

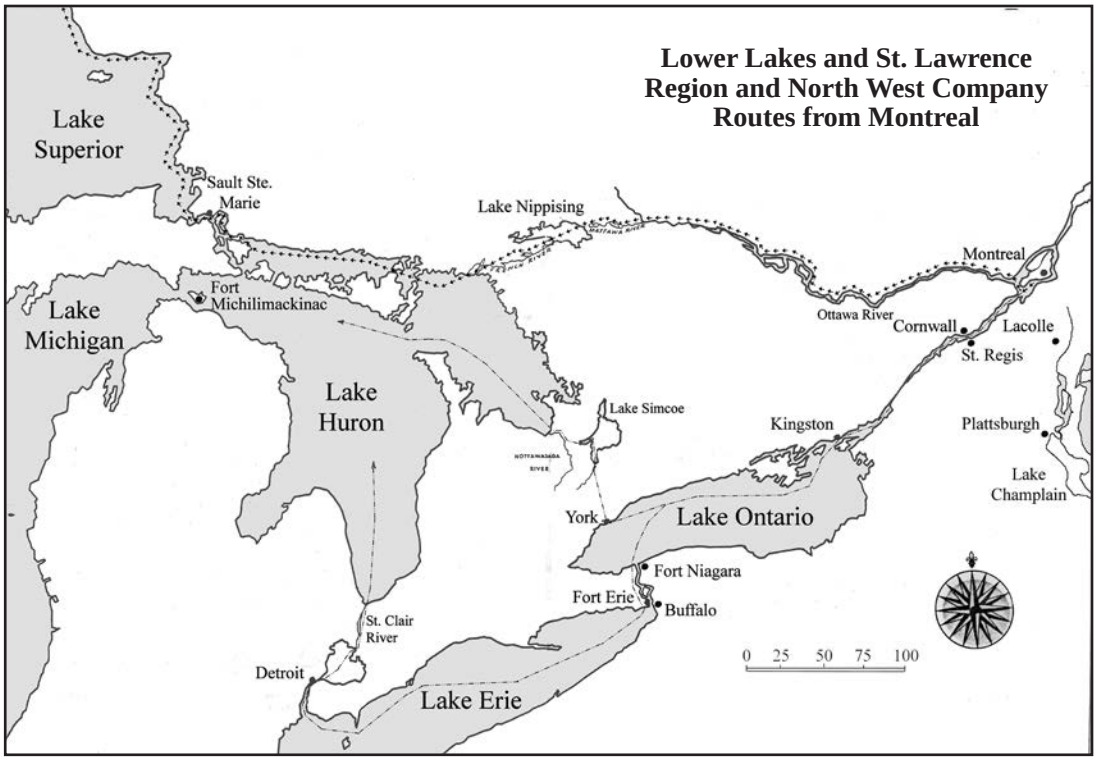
By raising the Corps of Canadian Voyageurs, the NWC received "praise of superior patriotism," undeservedly in Selkirk's view. In war, its motives for forming the Corps may have been patriotic or commercial or both; its employment of uniformed wintering partners on the Red River does seem somewhat suspect however.[53]

WAR ON THE LAKES

After the war, William McKay proclaimed that it was he who had requisitioned the "ships &c of the North West Company for the use of the Government." One of these ships may have been the *Caledonia*, the NWC schooner Captain Roberts appropriated for his seizure of Michilimackinac. Launched at Amherstburg in 1807 to transport North West Company goods and furs between Lake Erie and St. Mary's River, she also carried supplies and troops for the British military. Unfortunately for the Company and the Navy, a US gunboat seized her in the Niagara River on 9 October 1812. She became the US *Caledonia*. On 14 November 1812, the Gettysburg *Centinel* [sic] reported:

> The Caledonia was loaded with furs belonging to the north western company and the cargo is estimated at 160,000 dollars. The prize money to each of the brave sailors will be about 5,000 dollars.[54]

[51] LAC, RG8, C1171.
[52] Selkirk Papers, 2540.
[53] For events on the Red River see "The Pemmican War" in *Superior Rendezvous-Place,* 81-6.
[54] According to *The Centinel* (4 November 1812), before the *Caledonia* captain surrendered, his



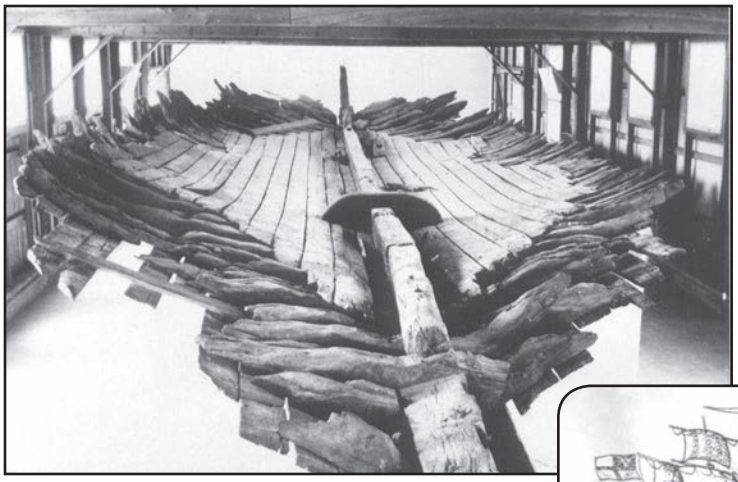
Lower Lakes and St. Lawrence region. Courtesy: Tory Tronud

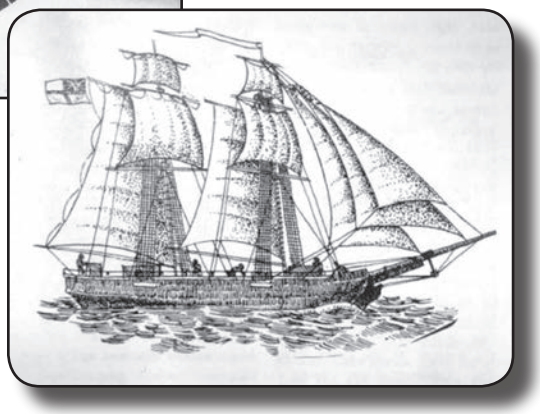
Another NWC schooner, the *Nancy,* had a worse fate.[55] Built in 1789 at Detroit for Forsyth, Richardson & Company of Montreal, the *Nancy* came into North West Company possession around 1800 to carry furs and merchandise on Lakes Erie, Huron and Michigan. When hostilities began, she served as a naval transport and on 30 July 1812 participated in the capture of Detroit. After this, she resumed service on Erie and Huron as a carrier of military and fur trade supplies. The *Nancy* was at Michilimackinac on 9 September 1813 when the British fleet met disastrous defeat on Lake Erie. She was subsequently the only British naval ship left on the Upper Lakes. When she reached St. Clair River on 5 October, Detroit and Amherstburg were in American hands. Coming under attack, she escaped to Sault Ste. Marie where she stayed the winter.

That year conditions at Michilimackinac worsened as provisions ran low

American captor cut off his ear. http://genealogytrails.com/main/military/warof1812_atsea.html. Associated Press, 31 March 2011 reports that a Lake Erie schooner wreck believed to be the *Caledonia* was the subject of a lawsuit over ownership between New York State and its discoverer. The judge decided in favour of the state. http://www.leaderherald.com

[55] The story of the *Nancy* is well summarized in *The War of 1812 and the Nancy* (http://www.wasagabeachpark.com).





Below: The Nancy. Left: Hull of the Nancy. In 1911, Mr. C.J.H. Snider found the Nancy's sunken hull. In 1928 it was raised and placed on an island formed by its wreckage. In 1928, 114 years after the schooner's gallant defense, the Nancy Museum was officially opened to commemorate this episode in the war of 1812. Photo courtesy: Wasaga Beach Provincial Park

and Natives proved unpredictable. On Prevost's orders, William McKay helped relieve the situation in late 1813 by delivering "Indian Presents" from Montreal to Mackinac for the Mississippi. When Roberts resigned as commander due to stress, his replacement was Captain Richard Bullock. McKay later claimed that he saved "the Garrison" as Bullock was "making preparation for evacuating the Post."[56] Before that could happen, Prevost's former aide-de-camp, Captain Robert McDouall,[57] took charge. That winter, McKay had guided McDouall and his soldiers up the arduous Yonge Street-Lake Simcoe route to Nottawasaga. Bearing rations for its near starving inhabitants, the party reached Michilimackinac on 18 May 1814. McKay then supplemented these supplies with two more round trips to Montreal and back. Throughout the war, he travelled over 19,000 miles carrying dispatches and marshalling supplies.[58]

Prairie du Chien

Before assuming command at Michilimackinac, McDouall sought the advice of William McGillivray on fur trade and Indian affairs.[59] On arrival, he learned from the principal chief of the Sioux that American forces under Missouri Governor William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame) had occupied Prairie du Chien.[60] Deep within US territory at the Mississippi River's juncture with the Fox-

[56] McKay Memorial.

[57] Wood, *Select British Documents*, III, Part 1, 253-54.

[58] See McKay's Memorial.

[59] "Robert McDouall", *DCB* VII.

Wisconsin, Prairie du Chien was the hub of the region's flourishing fur trade and its link to Michilimackinac via Green Bay and Lake Michigan. From there the British traders controlled the Upper Mississippi and fostered alliances with local tribes. To maintain British influence, they depended on supplies forwarded from Michilimackinac.

Learning of the area's strategic importance, perhaps from McGillivray, McDouall determined to counter the Americans. After Robert Dickson declined to lead the assault since he felt that too few men were available for success, McDouall then assigned William McKay, one "well acquainted in the mode of managing Indians." Although the expedition would weaken Michilimackinac's limited defences, McDouall deemed it necessary. If United States forces were not driven out:

> ... tribe after tribe would be gained over or subdued, & thus would be destroyed the only barrier which protects the Great trading establishments of the North West & the Hudsons Bay Companies.[61]

Nothing then could stop the enemy, he warned, from gaining access to the upper Mississippi and then the Red River all the way to Lake Winnipeg, the Nelson River and York Fort on Hudson Bay.

As Lieutenant-Colonel, McKay took charge of the Michigan Fencibles, a unit embodied earlier by Roberts and raised by Dickson from "[French] Canadians enlisted from the service of the Traders." With an assortment of voyageurs and Indians, McKay and his Fencibles left Michilimackinac on 28 June 1814. Gathering reinforcements on the way, the party finally numbered some 650 men. At Prairie du Chien, they found a new American stronghold named Fort Shelby. With considerable brutality on both sides, McKay forced the Americans to surrender. Fort Shelby was now Fort McKay, a tribute to the Nor'wester who ensured "British superiority in the Wisconsin area and on the Waters of the Upper Mississippi."[62] Maintaining British superiority, however, may be attributed to the "Sauks, Renards and Kikapoos" who repulsed an US Calvary counterattack with much cruelty.

Attacks and Counter-Attacks

McKay's success, however, would have little consequence if the Americans re-possessed Michilimackinac. And on 3 July, five US naval vessels, including the US *Caledonia*, left Detroit to do just that. Unable to locate their first target, the British depot at Matchedash (Penetanguishene) Bay, the flotilla headed for St. Mary's River., They torched the abandoned British garrison on St. Joseph's Island. They also seized the North West Company's *Mink* laden with 230 barrels of flour.[63]

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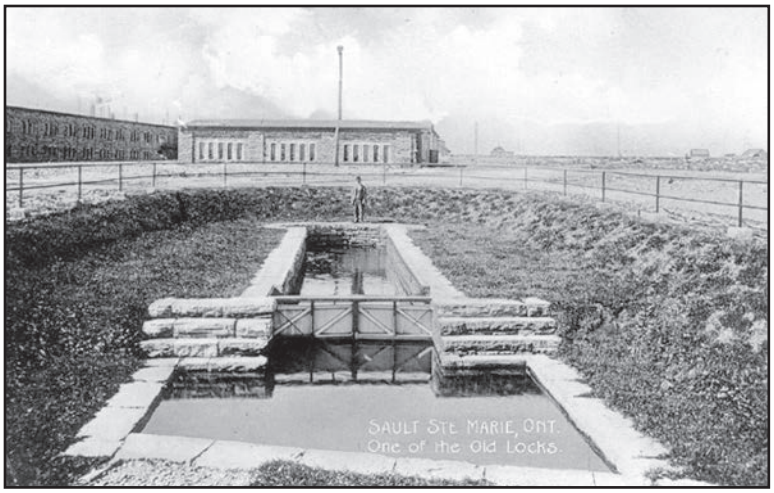
[60] Wood, *Select British Documents*, III, Part I, 253.

[61] *Ibid*., 254.

[62] See McKay to McDouall, 27 July 1814, *Ibid.*, III, Part 1, 257-65.

[63] Barry M. Gough, *Fighting sail on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay: the War of 1812 and its Aftermath* (Naval Institute Press, 2002), 90.



Sault Ste. Marie canoe locks. Built by North West Company, c. 1798. Destroyed by US forces, 1814. Photo c. 1920: Courtesy, Sault Ste. Marie Museum. Below: monument at SSM to the first canal. (Thunder Bay Museum 972.275.26)

Then to Sault Ste. Marie where they pillaged the North West Company's workshops and warehouses, set fire to the post and sawmill, demolished the locks and canal and then crossed the river to destroy the storehouses of the independent trader John Johnston.[64] Above the locks lay the *Perseverance,* the NWC's Lake Superior schooner, laden with flour for Fort William. To prevent her capture, Captain Robert McCargo set her ablaze but the Americans quenched the fire, removed the cargo and sent her down the rapids where she filled with water. The US captain ordered the ship beached and burned.[65]

At Michilimackinac on 26 July for the expected *coup de gras*, the American ships exchanged fire with the Fort's artillery. Mishaps and bad weather delayed an invasion until 4 August when some seven hundred US troops landed fully expecting to overwhelm the smaller force of two hundred defenders. Confusion reigned on both sides until a band of Menominee Indians attacked the invaders and killed their commander. As members of other tribes joined the Menominee, the enemy withdrew. Two American ships sailed back to Detroit but the others headed to the Nottawasaga River.

Earlier, the Royal Navy had built a supply depot and *batteaux* building premises at Nottawasaga to facilitate the delivery of goods and personnel to Michilimackinac. Here lay the *Nancy* laden with goods and provisions ready to sail for the island. Also at Nottawasaga was the new commander of naval operations on Lake Huron, Lieutenant Miller Worsley,[66] who had arrived by the Yonge Street route. Hearing of the

[64] "John Johnston", *DCB*, VI.

[65] For US Lieutenant Turner's official report, see J. B. Mansfield, ed., *History of the Great Lakes.* II, (1899) www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/documents.

[66] See "Miller Worsley" in *DCB*, VI.

John Jacob Astor, 1794. Oil painting by Gilbert Stuart. (The Brook Club, New York).

impending attack, Worsley had the *Nancy* taken up river and hidden from sight, but in vain. Upon its discovery and bombardment by the enemy, he attempted to scuttle her but she succumbed to US gunfire and sank.

Emboldened by this devastating blow to Michilimackinac's supply line, the US ships headed for their main destination. Meanwhile, Worsley and his men eluded the Americans and made it safely to Michilimackinac by canoe and boat. McDouall's tiny force and his own cunning gave Worsley his revenge for the *Nancy's* demise. He captured the enemy vessels and put them into Royal Navy service. Two hundred Indians under Robert Dickson also took part in this triumph. Lake Huron and its environs had been secured for Britain and its fur trade.[67] Without this "decisive" battle and without the seizure of Prairie du Chien, Upper Canada and perhaps today's Canadian west may well have fallen into American hands.

Astoria

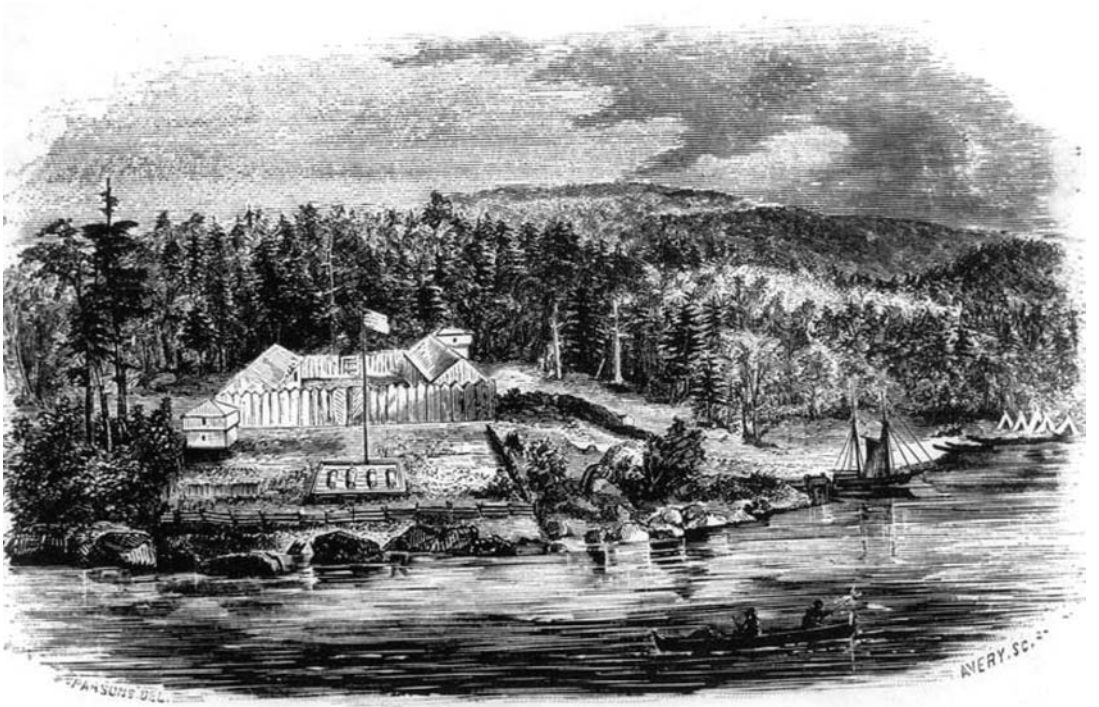
Far from the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes war zone, the North West Company scored another victory over the Americans with no combat. In July 1812, William McKay's arrival at Fort William with news of war had coincided with David Thompson's arrival from the Pacific Ocean with news of discovery. Thompson had located the long-sought Northwest Passage to the Pacific. No matter that, on completing his voyage down the Athabasca Pass to the Columbia River and the sea in 1811, he found already established, as half expected, the Pacific Fur Company entrenched at Fort Astoria. The declaration of war presented the NWC with an opportunity to rectify the situation.[68]

US President Thomas Jefferson and New York fur baron John Jacob Astor had long held a vision of founding a post on the Pacific. In 1802, Jefferson read Sir Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal* in which the NWC explorer recommended the discovery of an overland passage to the Columbia River whereby Britain could obtain "the entire command of the fur trade."[69]

[67] Wood, *Select British Documents*, III, Part 1, 277-81.

[68] Wallace, *Documents*, 271-2. See also *Superior Rendezvous-Place*, 76.

[69] W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 415-8; James P. Ronda, *Astoria & Empire* (Nebraska University Press, 1990), 29-30.



Astoria as it was in 1813. Project Gutenberg EBook of Gabriel Franchere, Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America in the years 1811, 1812, 1813, and 1814.

Aiming to forestall the Nor'westers, Jefferson directed Lewis and Clark to seek such a route across lands newly acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. Fulfilling their mission in 1806, they urged "the establishment of a trading post at the mouth of the Columbia River, for expediting the commerce in furs to China," a proposal John Jacob Astor intended to carry out. Founding the Pacific Fur Company in 1810, he commissioned sea and land expeditions to the mouth of the Columbia River and there established Astoria.[70]

From its beginnings, the North West Company also aimed to seek an overland passage to the Western Sea. Mackenzie and Simon Fraser had crossed the Rockies to the Pacific in 1793 and 1808 respectively but by routes unnavigable for canoe traffic. Then in 1810, alarmed at news of Astor's plans, the company ordered its partner David Thompson to resume his explorations to the coast. In 1812, Thompson reported his success to the Company meeting at Fort William.

The Nor'westers immediately dispatched two expeditions to the Columbia, one by land, the other by sea. John George McTavish, who had accompanied Thompson from the Pacific to Fort

[70] Ronda, *Astoria & Empire,* 59.

William, now headed back to the coast with a party of Nor'westers. Donald McTavish and John McDonald of Garth left Fort William for England. Crossing the Atlantic on the *Isaac Todd*, they obtained a Royal Navy escort for their voyage. Reaching Astoria first, the overland group convinced the Pacific Fur Company partners to sell the post and its contents to the North West Company rather than surrender to the Royal Navy on its way. With no other choice, the Astorians complied on 16 October 1813.

HMS *Raccoon* reached the Columbia on 29 November with McDonald on board. Although Astoria was already in North West Company hands, the *Raccoon's* captain determined to take it as a prize of war. He raised the Union Jack, claimed Astoria for the Crown, and renamed it "Fort George" for George III. In spring 1814, McDonald left for Fort William by canoe eighteen days before Donald McTavish reached Fort George on the *Isaac Todd*.

After two years, McDonald was back at Fort William. Informing the partners that the NWC had purchased Astoria for $80,500, he retired and left for Montreal. Near Michipicoten on Lake Superior, his party met a small canoe carrying Captain Robert McCargo and the *Perseverance* crew. McCargo told McDonald of American destruction of the Sault post and locks and of the fate of the cargo-laden *Perseverance*.[71]

PEACE AND ITS AFTERMATH

In 1814, the NWC had much to celebrate despite loss of property and ships, despite supply shortages and despite intensified competition from the Hudson's Bay and American Fur Companies. The company deemed the purchase of Astoria and its stock as "highly advantageous."[72] It could now equip its western posts with goods close at hand rather than from far away Montreal. It could also realize its long-held ambition to trade with China from its own Pacific port.

The company looked to the end of the war with optimism. As its 1814 minutes record, it agreed to join the Montreal firms of McTavish & McGillivrays and Forsyth, Richardson in a "Trade to the South" defined "either by a new Boundary line, or by rendering the Territory of the Indians neutral."[73] Such a "buffer state" was not to be. In December 1814, the Treaty of Ghent ending the war returned all captured territories to their original owners.

After all he and his comrades had done to regain Michilimackinac and the Upper Mississippi for Britain, Colonel McDouall was "penetrated with grief at the restoration of this fine Island."[74] William McGillivray was equally dismayed.

[71] L.F.R. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest ...* (New York: 1960; lst pub. 1889-90), II, 112-13.

[72] Wallace, *Documents*, 282.

[73] *Ibid.*, 291-2.

[74] Robert McDouall, *DCB*, VII.

The "unfortunate Cession of the Fort and Island of Michilimackinac to the United States" will destroy the relations of Canadian traders with the Southern and Western Indians, he warned Prevost. In his view, the friendship of Natives now irrevocably in American territory must be preserved, not only for the protection of the fur trade but for the safety of Upper Canada. To that end, McGillivray urged a strong military presence near Michilimackinac. Such a "frontier post" would allow trade and friendship to continue with tribes from the Mississippi, the Missouri and "southward".[75]

In 1816, US Congress forbade foreigners to trade with Natives on American soil. The North West Company reluctantly gave up its southwest posts, leaving them in American Fur Company hands. By then, the NWC had already begun the downward path to its demise. Although compensated for some wartime losses, it had borne enormous costs from the destruction of its vessels and properties, especially its Sault Ste. Marie facilities.[76] The Corps of Canadian Voyageurs had further drained the company's finances as did lower fur returns ensuing from a scarcity of imported trade goods brought on by war at sea.

The HBC and Lord Selkirk now joined in inflicting more blows, the HBC by attacks on NWC posts and Selkirk by occupying Fort William for nine months following the Seven Oaks "Massacre" of 1815 on the Red River. By lopping off its lucrative southwest trade, the Treaty of Ghent merely hastened the NWC's inevitable merger with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821. The fur trade's slow decline throughout the nineteenth century was part of a larger historical process in which the onward march of settlement relentlessly pushed it aside along with the Native Peoples upon whom it depended.[77]

After the war, ownership of Astoria remained in dispute. Did it belong to its purchasers, the North West Company? Or should it be returned to the Americans as a prize of war? In 1818, the Joint Occupancy Treaty gave Britain and the United States equal access to the Columbia Department, the region between Russian Alaska and Spanish California. The North West Company's successor, the Hudson's Bay Company, however, held sway there until American settlers began moving into the Oregon Country in the 1830s. In 1846, the Oregon Treaty extended the border along the 49th parallel from the Rockies to the Strait of Georgia. Without the North West Company's purchase of Astoria, though, would any of the Columbia today be Canadian?

Conclusion

Who won the War of 1812? In a sense, the North West Company and its Indian allies won the war but lost the peace. In vain had Natives and trad-

[75] Wood, *Select British Documents*, III, Part 1, 527-30.

[76] The Admiralty awarded the Company £2,200 for the *Nancy*; £1,243 for her services and £1,000 for the *Mink*. Gough, 149.

[77] Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 179.

ers joined British forces in occupying Michilimackinac and Prairie du Chien. Never again could the Indians claim sovereignty over lands south and west of the Lakes. Never again could the Canadian traders go south of the border in search of pelts.

Yet Canada itself did survive. Native and trader involvement with British forces at Michilimackinac, Detroit, Prairie du Chien and elsewhere were among the "decisive" factors that preserved Canada from absorption into the US. By mobilizing the Corps of Voyageurs, donating its vessels for naval transport and empowering William McKay to serve King and Company, the North West Company had a considerable role in this achievement, regardless of its motives.

For War of 1812 scholars, much of the above will be familiar. This, however, cannot be said of the wider community. Back in 1812, British authorities and traders deemed it vital to possess Michilimackinac and Astoria for reasons both imperial and commercial. Their success helped shape the Canada of today. In 2012, bi-centennial observances of the conflict should recall this aspect of a critical episode in Canadian history.