

Blood Along the Niagara is a guide for tourists to Niagara Falls who desire to know more about the many battles fought within an hour's drive of Niagara Falls during the War of 1812. It is also essential for residents of western New York and nearby Canada who want to know more about the war in their area. The book covers the U.S. invasion of Canada at Queenston, during which Gen Brock was killed, the taking of forts George, Niagara and Erie, the burning of what is now Niagara-on-the Lake and Buffalo, the humiliating defeat of American troops at Stoney Creek, Canada, the U.S. attack on Toronto and the bloody battles of Chippawa and Lundy's Lane in and near Niagara Falls.

## **Blood Along the Niagara**

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# Blood Along the Niagara



A Guidebook  
to Battles of the War of 1812  
within an hour's drive  
of Niagara Falls.



Joseph P. Ritz

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: The Road to War .....	5
Chapter Two: The Battle of Queenston Heights .....	11
Chapter Three: Fort George Changes Hands - The Burning of Niagara-on-the-Lake .....	19
Chapter Four: Flames Across the Niagara .....	31
Chapter Five: The Men In Gray - Fort Erie, Chippawa and Lundy's Lane .....	37
Chapter Six: Britain Abandons its Promise and Aims .....	49
Further Reading .....	53
Portraits & Photographs .....	55

## **Introduction**

For most Americans the imprecisely named War of 1812 has long been America's forgotten war. Even Americans living near Canadian border areas where most of the battles occurred have forgotten it, or reluctantly admit they have never heard of it.

In the 1980s the Buffalo NY Chamber of Commerce put out a brochure commemorating "200 years of peace between Canada and the U.S." apparently unaware that in 1813 British and Canadian troops and their Indian allies burnt down the city.

Even many Canadians express only a vague knowledge of the war, although it was the last fought on Canadian soil. Nevertheless, nearly all the monuments, battlefields and structures dating from the war are to be found on the Canadian side of the Niagara.

It produced the country's most famous military sailing vessel, the U.S. Constitution ("Old Ironsides"), boarded annually by thousands of visitors where it floats in Boston harbor. It inspired the gray uniforms still worn at West Point in honor of an important victory on the Niagara River, where for the first time American troops beat a British force of equal size. In short, the war showed the world that America was an independent nation, growing in power and was not to be trifled with by the major powers. As such, it has been called America's second War of Independence.

It also served to stiffen the resolve of Canadians to become an independent nation, not part of the United States or under the domination of Great Britain.

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This book tells about the battles fought within an hour's drive from Niagara Falls. They have many stories to be told, tales of horror, bravery, incompetence, overconfidence and revenge. Most are important for the understanding of the conduct of the war, which was largely fought in the region. This book also aims to give visitors to the Niagara Frontier an idea of the landscape in which the battles were fought.

It points out where surviving structures from the war can be found, including three historic forts. As well, it is a guide to the locations of battlefields, graveyards and not to be missed monuments, including the world's second tallest column honoring a war hero and what may be the most unusual and historic hazard on a golf course.

Because many parents will have children accompanying them as they search out the battle sites within a short drive of the falls, I have enlisted the help of my 12-year-old grandson, who shares my name and my birthday. His view of the places and recreations of battles and as well as military demonstrations are included.

The book is divided by location of sites to enable visitors to visit them with the least amount of driving. As a result, the section of the book dealing with battles and events is divided into those north of the falls, those south of the falls and those in New York State. Fortunately, the division largely parallels the historic course of the war in the Niagara Region. The one exception, is the bloody battle of Lundy's Lane, located within the present limits of the Canadian City of Niagara Falls.

We are also aware that measurements of distance are different in the U.S. and Canada. For this reason, distances are given in both miles and kilometers.

The intention of the writer is that the reader will find this small book not only instructive, and useful but a good and fun read.

*Blood Along the Niagara*

To better understand the nature of the battles and the hardships and bravery of those involved, it's useful to understand the tactics and weapons in use at the time.

First, the British “redcoats” and even the Canadian militia were better trained and disciplined than the Americans at the beginning of the war.

Neither side had a large military force in North America. Because of money pinching on the part of many in Congress, the U.S. regular army at the start of the war had only 11,744 officers and men, including 5,000 recruits enlisted in January. when it became apparent that there would be another war between Britain and the U.S. The combined British and Canadian forces were even smaller in numbers — about 7,000.

It should be remembered that both the U.S. and Canada were sparsely settled. The U.S. population was about 7,700,000. The total population of Canada was a little below half a million. The woods which mostly covered the countryside in 1812 have been cut down, swamps have been drained, nearly all the houses which you see now were built long after the war, the vast commercial activity, the restaurants, hotels and amusements on the river's banks were not there. The Niagara, however, has changed little in the last 200 years.

In 1812 both armies mainly used the weapons and tactics from the War of Independence. Battles were fought at extremely close range — about 30 feet apart. The inaccurate musket was still the principal weapon. While rifles were sometimes used, they were slower to reload than the musket. The idea was to rip the enemy apart by blasting them with muskets from hundreds of guns. The soldiers would then rush forward at those of the enemy still standing and impale them with bayonets. The men had to be taught to quell their fears of death and pain and line up in ranks shoulder to shoulder. One row of soldiers crouched and reloaded while another line fired

*Joseph P. Ritz*

over them. If the soldier in front was hit by a musket ball, another one stepped forward to take his place. British soldiers practiced the drill endlessly until it became an automatic reflex. At the war's beginning, that idea was largely foreign for the Americans who had recently enlisted.

What is remarkable about those who fought is not that many soldiers deserted the army or fled the battlefield, but that so many persevered.



## **Chapter Two**

### **The Battle of Queenston Heights**

Five kilometers (about 8 miles) downstream from Niagara Falls, on the Canadian side of the river, a statue of British General Sir Isaac Brock looks down the treacherous and swiftly moving stream from atop a 184-foot column, the second tallest such structure in the world. Only the statue of Admiral Nelson in London's Trafalgar Square is taller. Surrounded by floral gardens, the column marks the location of the final phase of the Battle of Queenston Heights.

It is mid-October; the red, yellow, orange and brown leaves are falling from the forested trees on both sides of the border.

The war is four months old. The British and Canadian forces have the only victories. They are virtually bloodless victories. The Americans have yet to fight.

At the Lewiston, N.Y. side of the river are massed some 7,000 troops awaiting the word to invade Canada. Of them, 1,700 are regular army soldiers. The rest are militia. On the Canadian side, are some 1,700 British soldiers and 600 Canadian militia.

They are thinly scattered along the 36 miles (50 kilometers) of the river except for a few hundred at Fort George outside of the rustic village of Newark, now the upscale cultural and garden community of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Augmenting the British troops are five hundred Mohawk Indians, not a large force, but they strike terror into the hearts and minds of the Americans.

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The American forces have been camped near Lewiston since August. Most are untrained militia fresh off the farm who clamor to be allowed to cross the river and defeat the British. It is rainy, windy and chilly. There are not enough tents or even blankets. Sanitation is poor. Many of the American soldiers are too sick to fight. Many are armed only with the muskets they have brought from home. Others have no shoes. Most have not been paid the \$8 monthly pay for a private that Congress has allotted — up from \$5 monthly before the war.

To encourage enlistment, Congress is also offering a recruitment bounty of \$31 plus three months pay and 160 acres of land.

The American troops waiting on the eastern bank of the Niagara, however, have not only not been paid but some have been fed very little. They demand to fight or they will go home. The number of deserters increases daily. The impetuous challenge of the raw soldiers is in part provoked by Peter Porter, now quartermaster of the New York militia, who spreads rumors that their leader, Stephen Van Rensselaer, is a coward, afraid to engage the enemy.

Indeed, Van Rensselaer, the last Dutch patroon in New York, a man who controls a vast estate outside of Albany, opposes the war. He is a leading Federalist politician, who wants to become governor. Despite having no military experience, he has been appointed by Governor Daniel Tompkins to head the invading force. It is a political masterstroke. Van Rensselaer cannot refuse the post without hurting his political ambitions. If he is successful, he will not be able to resign his command honorably. If he loses, he will be disgraced.

The attack is planned for Oct. 11, but has to be delayed two days when an American officer deserts and makes off with all the oars for the boats.

*Blood Along the Niagara*

The initial objective is Queenston heights, a steep bluff rising some 300 feet just south of the village of Queenston, only five miles downstream from the falls. They will have to cross the dangerous, swiftly moving river in row boats.

The American force is too big not to have been noticed by the British.

Brock has strengthened the force in Queenston and put a large cannon high on Queenston Heights commanding a view of the river.

The river is 1,250 feet wide at the point of crossing and once the troops succeed in crossing the swirling water, they will have to ascend rocky and heavily wooded slopes on the Queenston side -- all under cannon and musket fire.

At 3 a.m. on Oct.13th, the Americans take to the boats and begin crossing the river in a heavy rain. There are some 600 men in the first wave.. They are in two large boats, each holding 80 men, and a dozen large rowboats, each holding twenty-five.

The British sight them before they land. The Americans are met with a hail of musket fire and shrapnel from cannon fire both in Queenston and from the heights.

Ten of the boats make the beach, the others are swept downstream. The 300 or so American troops who have landed at Queenston are being killed and wounded from musket and cannon fire. Especially deadly are the balls and grape from the cannon on the heights.

The Americans are pinned on the beach. But, a 23-year-old captain, John E. Wool, has heard of a narrow fishermen's path which leads up the heights. Despite being wounded, he finds the path and leads his men up it. As dawn breaks, they find Brock himself directing the cannon fire with only handful of soldiers, the rest having been sent to down to help repulse the invaders in Queenston. The British troops, led by Brock, hurriedly spike the cannon and flee down the heights.

*Joseph P. Ritz*

Brock retreats to Queenston where he rallies 200 men to follow him up the heights. He leads a charge. But the Americans have been reinforced. There are now several hundred American troops on the heights. The British charge fails. Brock leads a second charge. An American soldier sends a musket ball through his heart. The British retreat carrying Brock's body with them.

Brock's aide, Col. John Macdonell, acting attorney-general of the providence, leads yet another attempt to retake the heights. But like his general, McDonnell is killed leading the charge and the British again retreat.

Lt. Col. Winfield Scott, a six foot, five-inch giant, a regular army officer who will emerge as one of the heroes of the war, takes over command of the heights from the wounded Wool.

The Americans appear to have won the battle. They occupy the village and the heights. All that is required is that the reserve force of a couple of a thousand New York militia cross the river and join the battle.

But the militia, who had been clamoring for a fight a few hours before, now remember that their enlistment requires them only to protect New York State.

America's Founding Fathers had not contemplated invading another country. The state militia, under a strict interpretation of the law, can only be used in defense of the nation.

The militia will not cross the river to fight in a foreign country despite the pleas from their officers. They have seen the dead and wounded being returned by boat, men with missing legs and arms, some blinded, some with their guts hanging out of their stomachs. They have heard their screams of pain and the war hoops of scalping Indians.

*Blood Along the Niagara*

The British still have cannon capable of hitting anyone crossing the river. They include a massive 24-pounder at what is now Vrooman's Point, a few miles north of Queenston.

The New York militia have lost their taste for battle.

On the heights, the Americans are doomed. Without needed reinforcements from the New York side of the river and running short of ammunition they have no choice but surrender. They are all taken prisoner, including the 26-year-old Scott.

So ends the Battle of Queenston, an inglorious ending for the Americans, a triumph to be celebrated by the British and Canadians.

Today, visitors can climb the 235 steps inside the Brock monument for a spectacular view of the area where the two sides fought and of Niagara Falls to the north. The monument and park are just north of the famous floral clock. They are hard to miss if you drive along the splendid, scenic Niagara Parkway, that follows the path of the military road used in 1812.

The park, beribboned with planted flowers in warm weather, is now a place for families to picnic. You can buy food at a nearby snack bar. Or you can dine in the upscale and much praised Queenston Heights Restaurant in the shadow of the monument. It serves excellent food and wine and a gorgeous view high above the river.

A wading pool for tots is set in the middle of grass-covered mounds, all that remains of Fort Drummond, occupied later in the war by soldiers from both sides as they continued to fight over the heights.

Among the plaques in a wall near the restaurant is one honoring the "Colored Corps," a force of free blacks and escaped slaves who, fearing being returned to their masters in the United States, fought with the British during the Battle of Queenston. Among the other plaques is one honoring Sir Roger

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Hale Sheaffe who took over command of the British-Canadian forces after the death of Brock and led a flank march which eventually drove the Americans from the heights.

Continuing a few hundred yards along the Niagara Parkway is a scenic parking area overlooking the river. To the left of the parking area is a path and a wooden staircase that leads to the site of the redan which held cannon captured by the Americans.

A replica of the cannon is located on the site. At the bottom of the steep incline off Queenston Road to the right is a stone monument with a British Union Jack flying over it. It marks the place where General Brock died. In a glass case nearby is a scaled-down statue of Brock's horse, Alfred.

In Queenston are a few houses that were present when the battle was fought. One of them is the Laura Secord House, named after a Canadian heroine of the war.

Born in Massachusetts, Laura Ingersoll came to the Niagara Peninsula with her parents after the American Revolution and married James Secord, a member of the Canadian militia who was seriously wounded during the battle. When the fighting ended, Laura brought her husband back to their home and nursed him to health.

Laura became a legend a year later when, when she learned the Americans were planning to ambush a small British force 20 miles (32 kilometers) away. The 38-year-old mother of five, walked and ran through dense woods and a dangerous swamp to warn the British. The young man in charge, Lt. James Fitzgibbon, laid a trap for the Americans and after a fierce engagement was successful in bluffing the much larger American force into surrendering on the belief they were outnumbered. There are several stories of how Laura learned of the planned American attack. She herself told many versions, among them that the Americans were dining at her house. (At

*Blood Along the Niagara*

the time the U.S. forces were temporarily in command of the area, after having taken Fort George. That battle is described in the following chapter. ) What is certain is that Laura emerged as a hero north of the border. Americans might look on her differently.

While you are in Canada, try Laura Secord candies. They are delicious!

The restored Secord home, at Partition and Queen streets in Queenston, is open during tourist season from April to October. Guides in period costume describe the house and tell of her adventure. Admission is charged.

To see the river shore where the American troops landed, take the road leading to the boat ramp at the end of Dunfries Street. The steep riverbanks are covered with brush and trees much as they were in 1812. A dirt and gravel road near the northern end of Queenston Street also leads to the river.

Three miles further north on the Niagara Parkway is a plaque marking the location of Vrooman's Battery. There is, alas, little on the U.S. side of the river to mark where VanRensselaer's army encamped before embarking for Queenston.

But then, Americans lost the battle.

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