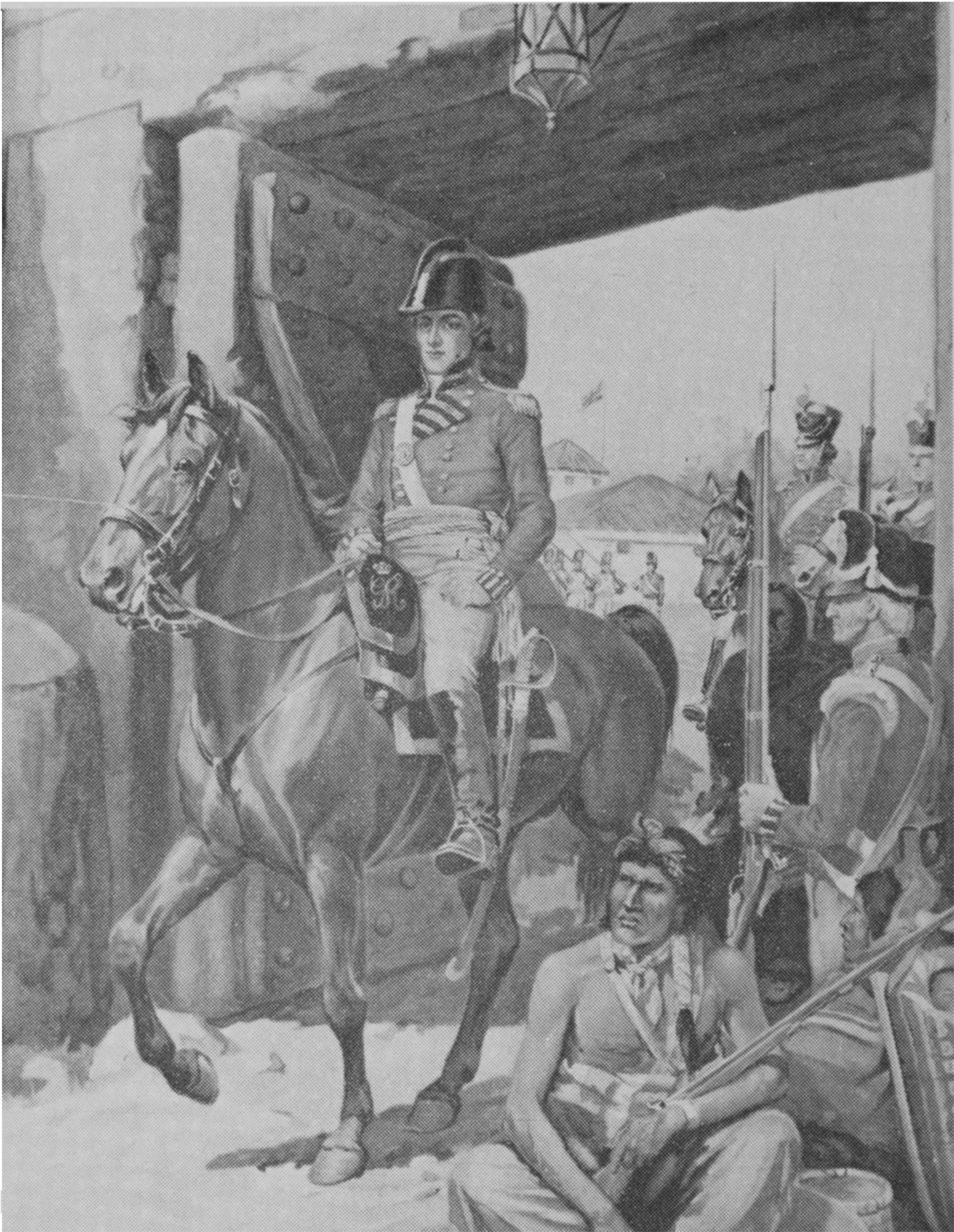


Ontario

Fort George National Historic Park



Major General Sir Isaac Brock, Knight Order of the Bath, 1769 – 1812, at Fort George, 1812. Painting by S. D. Kelly (Public Archives of Canada)



Brief History

In the mid-1930's the provincial and federal governments of Canada agreed to share the cost of the reconstruction of Fort George at Niagara-on-the-Lake, and in the spring of 1937 the work was begun by the Niagara Parks Commission. Although the project was completed in the summer of 1940, the official opening of the restored fort was postponed until the end of the Second World War. The site was formally opened to the public in June of 1950, in a ceremony attended by both Canadian and American military forces. In 1969 Fort George was transferred to the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and declared a National Historic Park. The fort has been reconstructed as it existed during the British occupation of 1796–1813.

The first Fort George was built between 1796 and 1800. Situated on the west (Canadian) side of the Niagara River, approximately one mile from Lake Ontario, the post was constructed to replace Fort Niagara, which the British were forced to hand over to the Americans in 1796 by the terms of Jay's Treaty. This first Fort George was not a very imposing work. It consisted of six small earth bastions connected by a line of cedar picketing, and, encircling the entire fortification, a shallow dry ditch.

Strategically, the post was located in a very poor position, since it neither commanded the entrance to the river nor protected Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake), the young capital of Upper Canada, in a report to the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Sir George Prevost, Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief of British North America, stated that Fort George was merely a temporary field work undergoing repair, and that even in its most improved state it could not make much resistance against an enemy in force, or withstand the cannonading of heavy guns. In spite of this, Fort George continued its role as military headquarters for His Majesty's Forces in Upper Canada, and on the outbreak of war with the United States in June of 1812 the post assumed a position of considerable importance.

During the War in 1812 Fort George engaged in artillery duels with Fort Niagara across the river, and in October of 1812 troops from Fort George inflicted a decisive defeat on the Americans at Queenston Heights, although the British suffered a crushing loss in the death of Major General Isaac Brock.



On May 27, 1813, the Americans launched a major bombardment and assault against Fort George. The guns of Fort Niagara, supported by the American fleet on Lake Ontario, directed heavy fire on the British post, almost levelling it completely. Every log building was burned to the ground, and the wooden picketing was totally demolished. Following the destruction of Fort George, an American contingent of 6,000 men landed at Mississauga Point under cover of a morning mist. The defenders, led by Brigadier-General John Vincent, were a mixed force, consisting of about 1,000 men of the 8th and 49th Regiments of Foot, Royal Newfoundland Fencibles, Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles, a group of ex-slaves from the United States known as Robert Runchey's Company of Coloured Men, and 300 militia. Although heavily outnumbered, the British fought gallantly, but were obliged to fall back under a tremendous fire of shot and shell from the American fleet, which so enfiladed and scoured the plains that it became impossible to approach the beach. A further hindrance to the British was the fact that the Americans were using the town of Newark as a protective screen, for the guns from Fort George were unable to fire over the town.

The British withdrew to a safer position and for about an hour awaited the approach of the enemy, but an attack was not forthcoming; the Americans contented themselves with an attempt to turn the British flank. Vincent, convinced that every effort had been made to maintain his position at Fort George, and seeing the contest so unequal, with no promise of further advantage for His Majesty's service, ordered the few remaining British soldiers at the fort to evacuate. The guns were spiked, and the ammunition and government provisions destroyed. Vincent's force then retired to Burlington Heights by way of Beaver Dams, and took up a new defensive position.

The Americans, now firmly in control of the wreckage of the old fort, as well as of the town of Newark, began the construction of a new fort to secure their gains. The remains of the British fort consisted only of the solid earth bastions and a stone powder magazine. The conquerors therefore built a second fort upon the north end of the original works. This fortification occupied about one-half of the old area. It contained five full bastions connected by earthen curtains – a much more substantial arrangement than the former British stockade. Inside the new defences were three log barracks for the troops and a crude earth and log powder magazine, for the old British stone building was left outside the new walls.

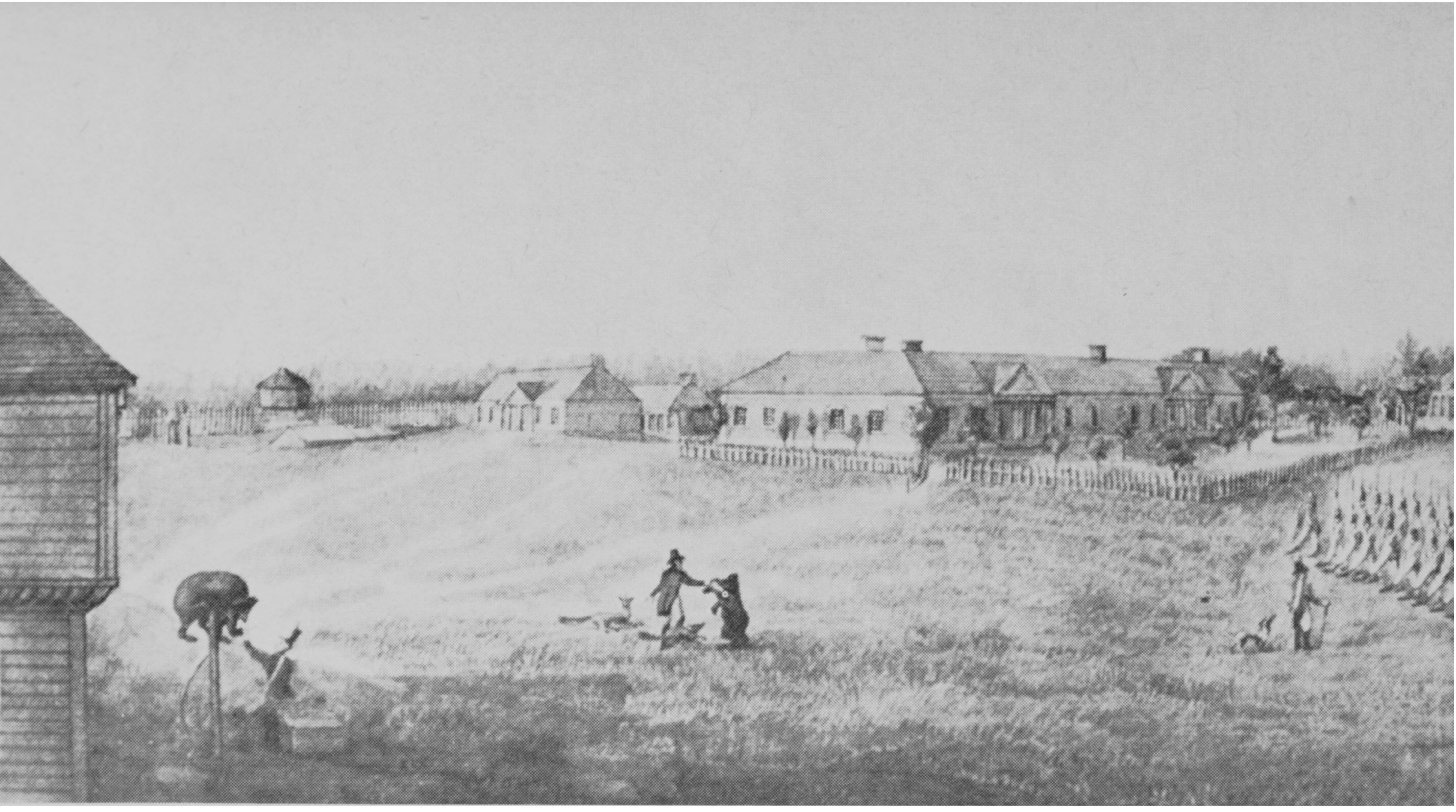
In addition to the new earthworks the Americans constructed a line of trenches extending from the northwest bastion along to St. Mark's Anglican church, then southeast to the river bank. The new fort thus formed the left of an extensive and well-protected enclosed camp. The main portion of the American army was bivouacked in a tent camp situated behind the trenches and between the fort and the church.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1813 the British, supported by Indian allies, succeeded in bottling up the Americans behind their new entrenched fort and camp. The American army, particularly after suffering reverses at Stoney Creek, the Forty, and Beaver Dams, had grown somewhat chary of venturing again into the inhospitable Canadian woods. In August Sir George Prevost came up to the Niagara frontier to gain some insight into the situation. He found 2,000 British soldiers and Indians on an extended line cooping up in Fort George an American force of over 4,000 men. However, Prevost noted that the enemy's entrenched camp was very strong and crowded with men, bristling with cannon and supported by the guns from Fort Niagara. Finally, no provocation would induce the Americans to leave the protection of their fortifications.

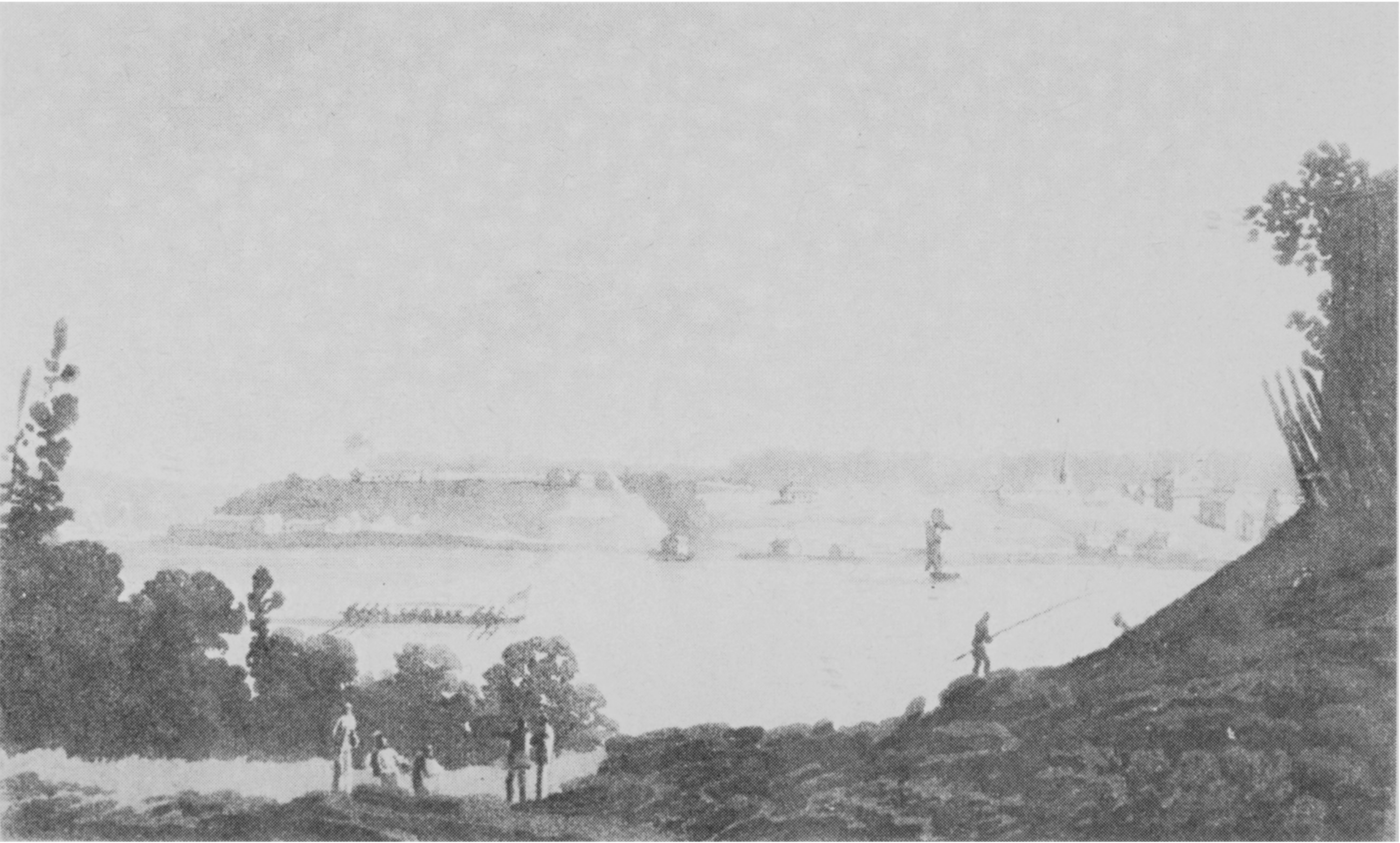
The besieging forces made no serious attempt to retake Fort George, but merely waited until winter. By December 1813 the American commanding officer, General McClure, had only 100 effectives to continue the defence of the place. The rest of the American army, composed mainly of militia, had drifted away on the expiration of their period of enlistment, or deserted because of cold weather, sickness and boredom. The British, aware of the American officer's predicament, advanced on December 10, 1813. McClure, having wisely concluded that the fort could not be defended, gave orders to evacuate Fort George and retire to the American side of the river. When the British entered the American lines they found the enemy tents still standing, the earthworks intact, and a hoard of provisions. The next day the American cannon were discovered, buried in the snow of the ditch, where they had apparently been thrown. Before departing, the Americans had fired the town of Newark, leaving the inhabitants in difficulty and want for the remainder of the winter. Later in December the British crossed the river and captured Fort Niagara. Then, in retaliation for the destruction of the town of Newark, they laid waste the American shore and burnt Buffalo.

For the duration of the war the British retained control of the mouth of the Niagara River. The capture of Fort Niagara was important because it allowed the British in the spring of 1814

The Esplanade – Fort George. Watercolour by Edward Walsh, 1805. (Clem-
ents Library, University of Michigan)



Fort George as seen from the American side. Sketch by British traveller George Heriot, 1806. (Public Archives of Canada)



to commence unhindered construction of Fort Mississauga opposite Fort Niagara. These two forts, together with Fort George, gave them a strong triangle of fortifications which effectively controlled the entrance to the river and allowed the landing of troops and provisions.

In July of 1814 the Americans, after their victory at the battle of Chippewa, advanced to within a half-mile of Fort George; but after desultory skirmishing and the exchange of cannon fire, the Americans decided to withdraw. The three fortresses were never endangered for the rest of the war. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1814 Fort George was used as a depot, receiving provisions and stores from Montreal and Kingston for the British army along the Niagara frontier. During these months two large, splinter-proof barracks and a new stone powder-magazine were built at the fort. No other improvements were made.

By the end of the War of 1812 most of the picketing and buildings of Fort George, the scene of so much military activity, were again in decay. In August 1815 Sir Gordon Drummond, Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Forces in Upper Canada, gave orders that the expense of keeping up the old and useless Fort George, already tumbling into ruins, be discontinued. Further labour and expense was reserved for the completion of the permanent brick fortifications at Mississauga Point. However, British troops were still quartered in the log barracks at Fort George, and it was not until 1826 that military headquarters in Upper Canada was transferred to York (Toronto). For years small detachments of troops continued to stay at Fort George, in spite of the fact that Fort Mississauga had replaced the historic and battered ruins of the older fort as the major military installation in the area.

In later years the Fort George plains were used as a race track and a Canadian army summer camp was later established and survived until 1965.

What to look for

North Redan – This triangular picketing in front of the main fort entrance was intended to screen the gateway from direct fire from an enemy, or to assist the garrison in the event of a sortie. The light wooden bridge across the ditch could be quickly and easily destroyed by the garrison.

Fort Entrance – The outward swing of the gates to assist the garrison in closing the gates against an enemy, is a standard feature of most forts.

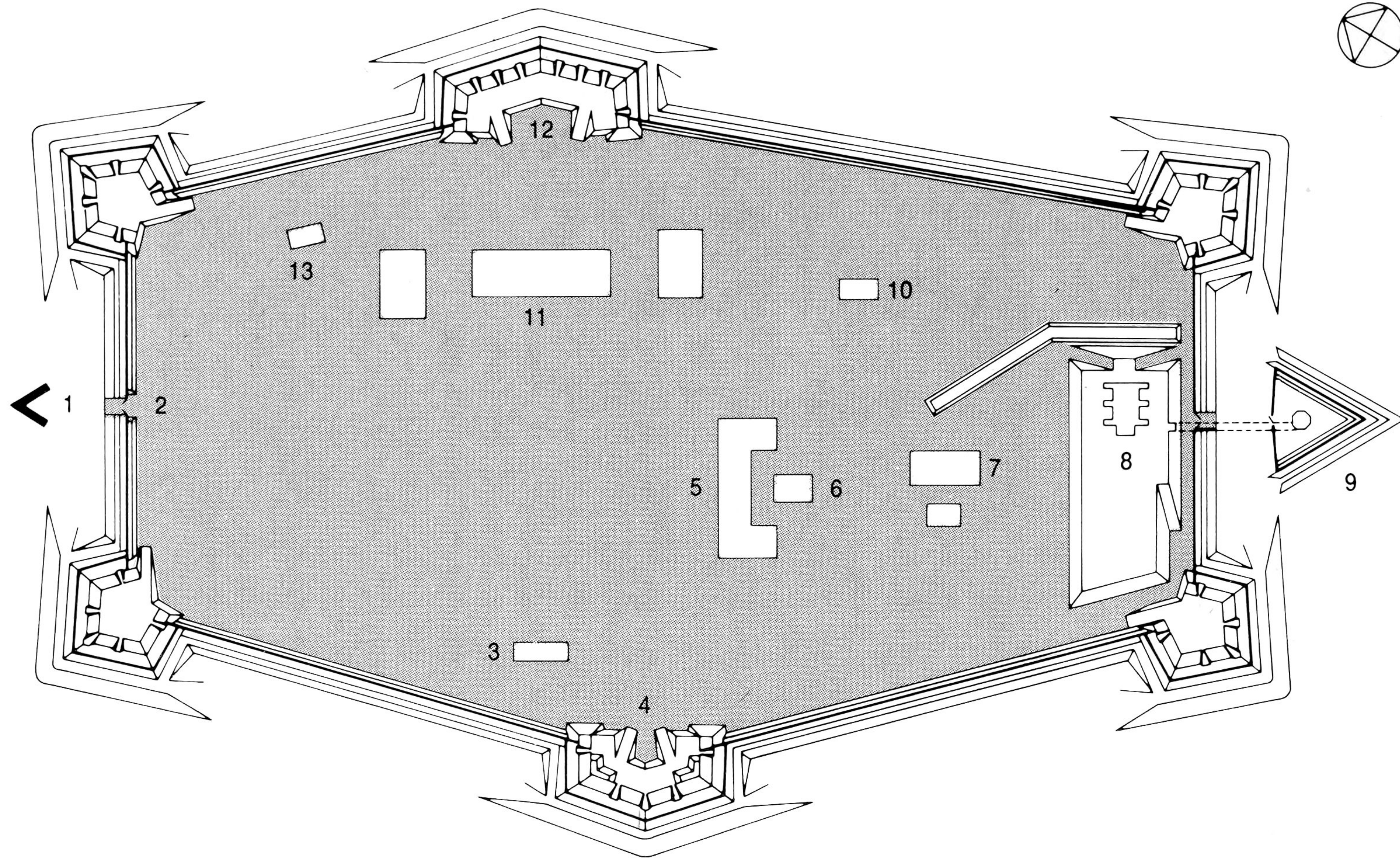
Guard House – The guard room in this building was used by on-duty soldiers who were responsible for the relief of the various sentry posts around the fort, and for the guarding of prisoners. The men could rest, fully dressed, on the long bench, and the racks and shelves were used for storing arms and equipment. In 1803, a mutiny at Fort George was quickly and easily crushed by Lieutenant-Colonel Isaac Brock, and the chief mutineers, as well as a number of captured deserters were locked in the log cells. These men were eventually transported to Montreal for trial, and the ringleaders were executed.

Southwest or Centre Bastion – This large, earth bastion complete with cannon embrasures, provides an excellent vantage point for viewing the Fort George plains. During the War of 1812, various militia regiments of Upper Canada camped there, and an Indian village was situated in the woods behind. The British recaptured Fort George in December of 1813, by attacking across these plains. In the years following, the Fort George plains were used as a race track, and a Canadian army summer militia camp was later established, and survived until 1965. In addition, the Butler's Barracks complex can be seen far to the right.

Officers' Quarters – A traditional story concerning the War of 1812 is associated with the large mess room of the officers. The 41st (Welch) Regiment was entertaining American officers from Fort Niagara across the river. While dinner was in progress, news was received that the United States had declared war on Great Britain. The British officers insisted that the evening festivities should continue, and upon completion accompanied their guests to their boats, where much hand shaking and sincere good wishes were exchanged, although they were soon to face each other as enemies. In addition to the mess room, an officer-of-the-day room, a mess room, the commanding officer's chamber, and six other bedrooms for other officers are included.

Officers' Mess Kitchen – Meals, including some of elaborate banquet style were prepared in the kitchen behind the officers' quarters.

Blacksmith's Shop – The large hand-operated bellow, the antique anvil, and the blacksmith's tools are typical features of a blacksmith's shop. In the original fort this was the site of the garrison hospital, but during the reconstruction this building was used as a general workshop. Door latches, hinges, and other garrison equipment was manufactured and repaired here.



**Fort George
“What to look for”**

- 1 North Redan
- 2 Fort Entrance
- 3 Guard House
- 4 Southwest or Centre Bastion
- 5 Officers' Quarters
- 6 Officers' Mess Kitchen
- 7 Blacksmith's Shop
- 8 Magazine
- 9 South Redan
- 10 Modern Sawpit
- 11 Blockhouse Barracks
- 12 Flag Bastion
- 13 Museum Building

Magazine – This British built stone building is the only original structure in Fort George which survived the War of 1812. The high bank of earth, or epaulement, was designed to protect the magazine from the fire of the guns at Fort Niagara. In October of 1812, during a heavy artillery duel between Fort George and Fort Niagara, an enemy shell set the magazine roof ablaze. It seemed certain that the 800 barrels of stored powder would blow up and, in the process, destroy much of the fort. Disaster was narrowly averted, however, owing to the heroic action of Captain Vigoreux of the Royal Engineers, who scampered up to the burning roof and assisted by others who followed his daring example, tore the metal covering away and extinguished the flames in the wood beneath.

South Redan – This work is similar to the north redan, but is constructed upon a slightly larger scale, and is surrounded by picketing on all three sides to form an enclosed stockade. In the centre of this triangle is a small two-storied octagonal blockhouse. This small outer defence is now accessible through an underground tunnel. Prior to the War of 1812 the south gate was closed permanently, and indeed there is no real evidence that the original British fort possessed such an elaborate tunnel, or outer enclosed stockade and blockhouse.

Modern Sawpit – This structure is not a part of the history of Fort George, except that the sawpit was built and used in the 1930's to produce the required logs and boards for the reconstruction of Fort George. Two men were required for the operation of the sawpit. One stood on top of the log, and the other was relegated to the pit. Successful operation of the pit-saw required more co-operation than was usually forthcoming to maintain friendship.

Blockhouse Barracks – During the reconstruction, three defensive barrack buildings which traditionally also served as quarters for the soldiers of the garrison, were built. However, original maps of the Royal Engineers show that as many as seven blockhouse barracks may have been built during the first British occupation of 1796-1813. The timber walls were ten inches thick, and could not be penetrated by musket fire circa 1812. The blockhouses are arranged to provide enfilading fire for each other, and cannon could be fired through the embrasures on the upper floors toward the Niagara River, or to support the bastions.

Flag Bastion – This is the largest of the six bastions at Fort George, and was redesigned and strengthened by Major General Isaac Brock in the spring of 1812, shortly before the outbreak of war with the United States. The present flagpole

stands approximately on the site of the original. The flag flown is pre-union and is notable by the absence of the diagonal red cross of St. Patrick which was not added until 1801 when the union of Ireland with Great Britain was completed. Thus, this flag represents the earliest period in the history of Fort George. Following the decisive British victory at Queenston Heights in October of 1812, and the lamentable death of Isaac Brock, “the hero and saviour of Upper Canada”, in Canadian folklore, this bastion was used as a burial ground for Brock and his aide-de-camp John MacDonnell. In 1824 their bodies were taken from this bastion, and placed in a vault beneath the Queenston Heights memorial.

Museum Building —Although a genuine early 19th century fort building, this small structure was not added until 1815. It was used as additional quarters for officers, or as a private dwelling for the senior officer.



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