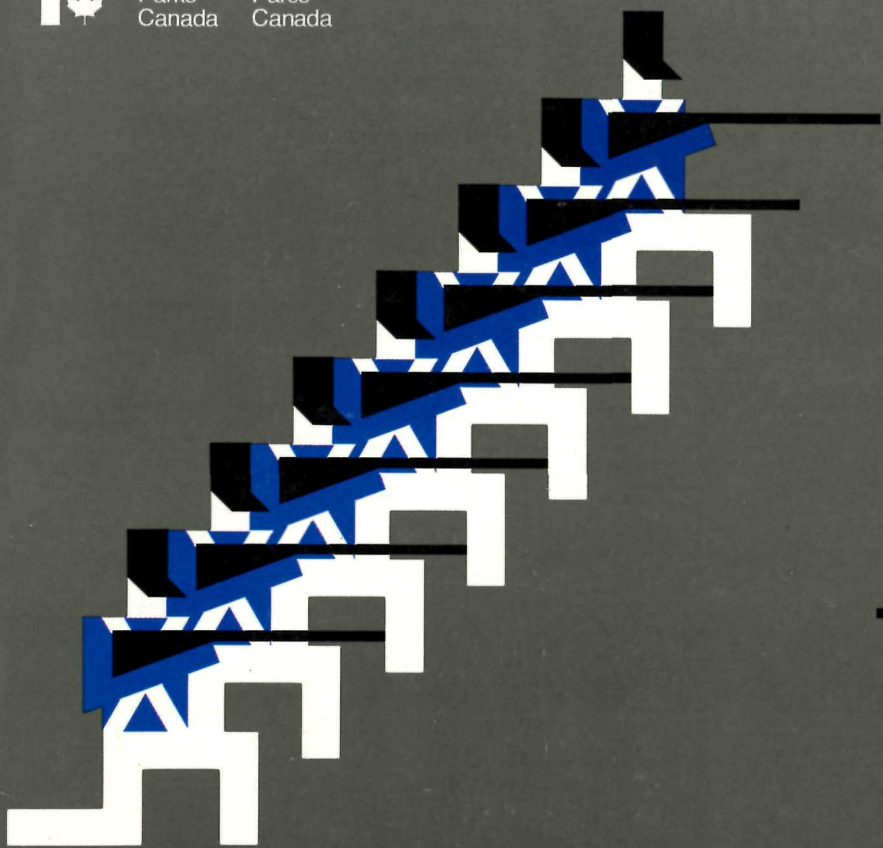


THE BATTLE OF QUEENSTON HEIGHTS SELF-GUIDED TOUR



Parks
Canada

Parcs
Canada



This brochure elaborates on the information provided on the plaques for the self-guided Battle of Queenston Heights walking tour. If you follow the tour, you will find it a pleasant walk of about 45 minutes; if you are unable to, you can turn to pages 11 to 14 for a detailed description of the five stages covered in the tour.

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THE WAR OF 1812

Causes

The War of 1812 was a by-product of the Napoleonic Wars that ravaged Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For several years, the British Navy had boarded American ships, impressed any sailors of British origin and sought to prevent the young republic from trading with France.

The Americans were pushing westward, but encountered strong resistance from the Indians. They accused the British of encouraging Indian opposition.

In Congress, more and more representatives were calling for an invasion of Canada, which was then a British Colony. On 18 June 1812, after years of growing tension, the United States, under President James Madison, declared war on Great Britain.



Strategies

The Americans wanted to take over all of Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec) in one swift, mass attack. In so doing, they would isolate, and could then seize, the stronghold of Quebec City. The invasion was to occur at four locations: across from Detroit, in the Niagara area, at Kingston, and south of Montreal.

The British strategy, in contrast, was purely defensive. Those in positions of authority were prepared to sacrifice Upper Canada and retreat to Quebec City to save their small forces.

Operations (June 1812 to January 1815)

- 1812*
- The United States declared war on Great Britain on June 8.
 - British victories at Michilimackinac (July 17), Detroit (August 16) and Queenston (October 13).
- 1813*
- American victories at York (Toronto, April 27) Fort George (May 27), Put-In Bay (Lake Erie, September 10) and Moraviantown (October 5).
 - British victories at Stoney Creek (June 6), on the Châteauguay (October 26), at Chrysler's Farm (November 11) and at Fort Niagara (December 19).



- 1814*
- American victories at Chippewa (July 5) and Plattsburgh, on Lake Champlain, (September 11). The Americans pushed the British back to New Orleans on January 8, 1815. (News of the signing of peace had not yet reached North America).
 - British victory at Lundy's Lane (July 25) and the sacking and burning of Washington (end of August).
 - Treaty to maintain the status quo signed on December 24 at Ghent, Belgium.

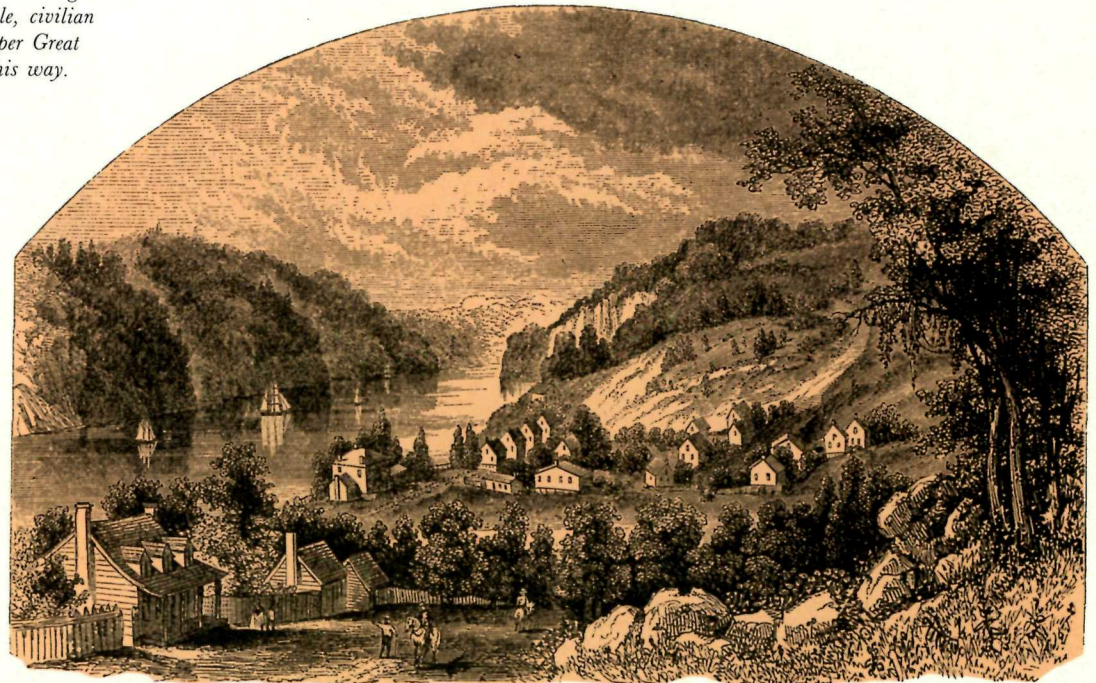
QUEENSTON IN 1812.

Imagine yourself at the field of battle, on the Heights overlooking Queenston on a fine October day in 1812. The Loyalist village comprised twenty or so houses scattered along the river. Barges were tied up at a dock, and horse and ox-drawn carts made their way along the winding hillside road. This scene in fact explained the importance of the location: Queenston lies at the beginning of a portage route that curved around Niagara Falls, ending at Chippewa. *All goods and all people, civilian and military, travelling between the upper Great Lakes and the rest of the colony pass this way.*

A Strategic Bridgehead

Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer, Commander of the American army in Niagara, observed the British movements from Lewiston. He knew that if he took Queenston he could cut off enemy supplies.

Furthermore, control of Queenston Heights would enable him to detect any movement of troops on the river as far as Lake Ontario.



Village of Queenston in 1812. From an illustration by Benson J. Lossins in his Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812 (1869).

THE FORCES ON THE SCENE

It would also be relatively easy for the Americans to cross the Niagara at Queenston because:

- there were greater numbers of Americans stationed here
- they could respond to the British artillery with their own cannon at Lewiston
- they were far enough from Fort George to have time to organize before taking on its garrison
- the river was narrower and less dangerous there than upstream.

Rough Terrain

The Queenston area landscape is quite steep. The Niagara Escarpment forms a 110-metre (about 360-foot) cliff against which Queenston was built. From there, the plain slopes gently northward to Lake Ontario.

At the time of the War of 1812, much of the region was covered with forest. A few positions were fortified and cannon installed on each side of the river, but control of Queenston Heights would give the invaders control of the region.

In theory, the American army massed along the Niagara border on the eve of battle could not lose. It comprised some 6,000 men. The British could only muster 1,200 men and were also counting on 250 of their Indian allies; however, the British troops were better trained.

The Regular British Army

This was an organized fighting force, hardened in part by years of training and battle experience. The army's strength lay in its unity, in its experienced command and in its steadfastness under fire. In Niagara, there were 600 men in the 41st and 49th Regiments.

The Canadian Militia

The militia was used to reinforce the regular army in the event of a crisis in its home territory. In theory, it was made up of all able-bodied men from 16 to 60 but, in practice, the number of "citizen soldiers" bearing arms was low. Training and discipline were less stringent than in the regular army. Nonetheless, there were permanent militia units that were more professional such as the Lincoln Militia and the York Volunteers. In October 1812, there were some 600 combat-ready militiamen in the Niagara area.



Officers and soldiers of the 49th, Brock's own Regiment, c. 1805.

The Regular American Army

The 3,000 regulars of the 13th and 16th Infantry camping near the river had, for the most part, never seen combat. The bulk of the American army consisted of raw recruits. Rivalry between officers of the regular army and those of the militia added to the lack of unity. The soldiers' enthusiasm at this first wartime engagement would not necessarily be enough to carry them to victory.

The American Militia

The Militia of the State of New York was estimated at 1,700 men who were stationed at Lewiston on the eve of the attack on Queenston. The troops were decimated by disease, malnutrition and, once the militiamen discovered that the war was anything but a Sunday outing, by desertion. Since there were not compelled to fight in foreign territory, many of them refused to cross the Niagara River.



The Indians: Circumstantial Alliance with the British

It was a circumstantial alliance that led the Indians to fight on the British side. In this white man's war, the Indians' own interests rather than loyalty to any flag, dictated their allegiance. For many years, the American colonists had been encroaching on their hunting grounds, and skirmishes with them had become increasingly frequent. The Shawnee Chief, Tecumseh, had been trying to organize a confederation of Indian nations for a number of years in order to resist this advance. He and his many followers thought that a British victory over the Americans would help their cause.

The British could not afford to dispense with the Indians' support, principally the Iroquois from the Grand River settlement. They were formidable warriors — not only because of their talents and their knowledge of the land, but also because of their ferociousness in combat. Their presence alone was enough to strike terror into the hearts of enemy ranks, especially when the enemy consisted of peaceable farmers acting the part of militiamen.

FIVE KEY FIGURES

A handful of men held the spotlight throughout the drama of October 13. Let us look at the roles they played.



Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, the hero of Upper Canada.

Isaac Brock

He was the daring commander of the British forces. Brock was born in 1769 in Guernsey (one of the Channel Islands) to a military family. Entering the army at age 16 he underwent his baptism of fire in the Netherlands in 1799. He was sent to Canada with the 49th Regiment in 1802. Rising in the military hierarchy he became Major General and Commander-in-Chief of the forces of Upper Canada in 1811. In this capacity, Brock planned the territory's defence brilliantly. Brock died on the field of battle and became a legendary hero.



Roger Hale Sheaffe

Unlike the daring Brock, Sheaffe was a strict military commander who closely followed prescribed military procedures. Sheaffe was born in Boston in 1763. He joined the British Army in 1778 and accompanied the 49th Regiment to Canada with Brock as a senior officer. When he heard of Brock's death in battle, he organized a classic counter-attack and was victorious. He retired to Edinburgh, where he died in 1851.

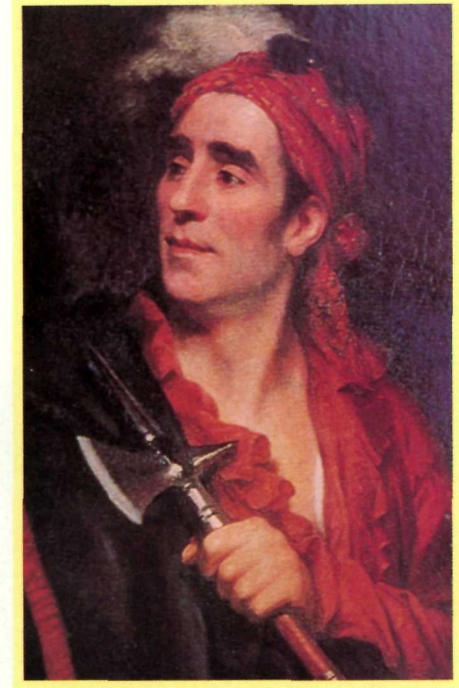
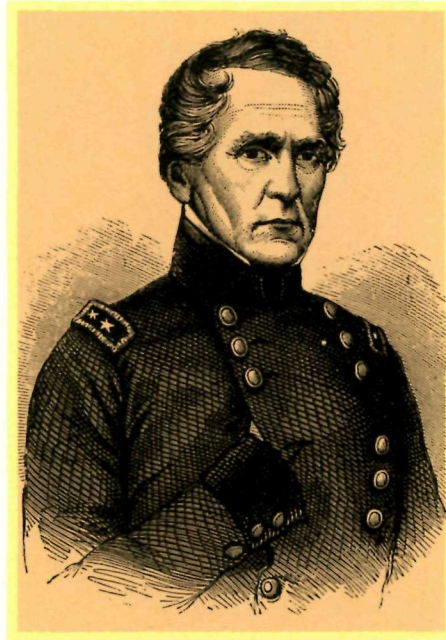


Stephen Van Rensselaer

He was a soldier despite himself. Van Rensselaer was born in 1764 in Albany, New York. He belonged to an old American family. He was opposed to the war even before it broke out, but participated in it out of respect for his country. Despite his lack of military experience, he was appointed Major General of the New York Militia. Following the American defeat of October 13, he resigned and continued his political career in Congress. He died in 1839.

John Ellis Wool

He was the surprise element in the battle. Wool was born in Newbury, New York, in 1784. He had just enlisted in the army, following several years in business and law. The importance of his role at Queenston was recognized only by a few, but he was noticed at Plattsburgh in 1814. A series of promotions propelled him to the highest ranks of the military. He died in 1869.



John Norton, or Teyoninhokarawen

He was an indispensable ally of the British. Norton was of mixed background, a Cherokee father, and Scottish mother, but was adopted by the Mohawk Chief, Joseph Brant. When Brant died, the Mohawks made Norton their war Chief and fought along with him in a number of battles.

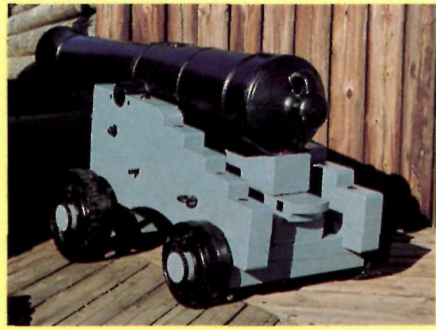
Courtesy of the Champlain Society, Toronto.

WEAPONS

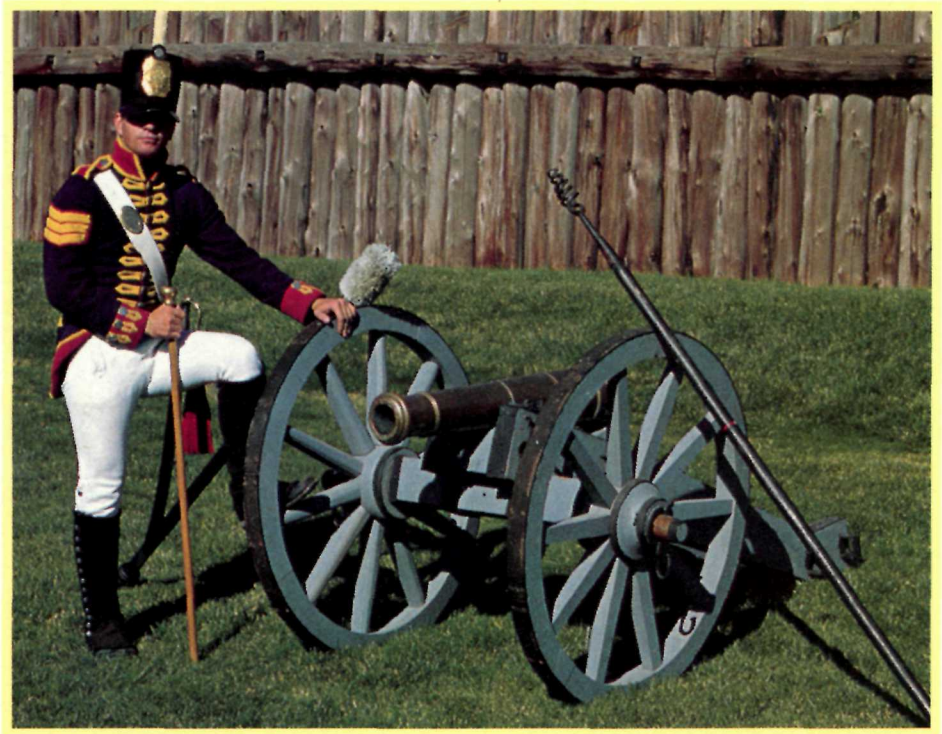
The weapons used in the Queenston Heights battle ranged from the 24-pounder gun to the simple bayonet. Each type of armament was effective at a specific stage in the course of the battle: the heavy artillery barrage was used when the two armies were at a medium or long distance from one another; the field artillery and musket were made for close-range fire; and cutting and thrusting weapons, bayonets, sabres and tomahawks were used in final hand-to-hand combat.

The 18-Pounder Gun

The redan near which Brock died was armed with an 18-pounder gun which took 18-pound cannon balls, grape shot, and exploding shells. Cannon of this size were powerful but unwieldy, and were used on fortifications and warships.



An 18-pounder garrison gun similar to the one which would have been at the Redan.



The 3-Pounder Field Gun

This type of field artillery is shown here on its carriage, ready for transportation to the battle site. On both the British and American sides, artillery was handled by a corps separate from the infantry.

The Flint-Lock Musket

This was the main weapon of the foot soldier in the War of 1812. The flint-lock musket used by both armies was the same, except for minor details (for example, the calibre of the British musket was slightly larger).

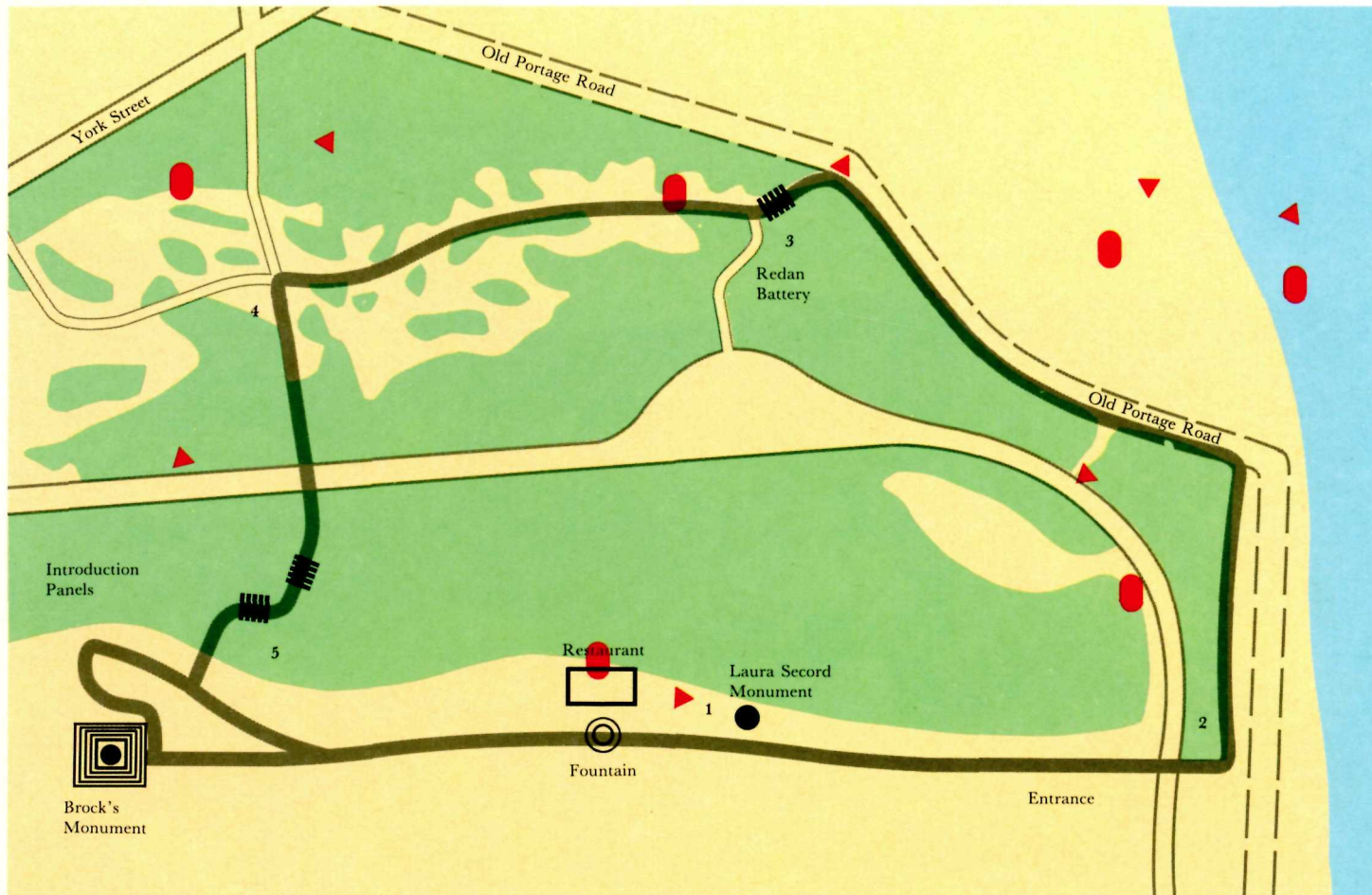


The American "Springfield" musket was copied from the French pattern.



Firing mechanism of British "Brown Bess" musket circa 1812.

THE WALKING TOUR





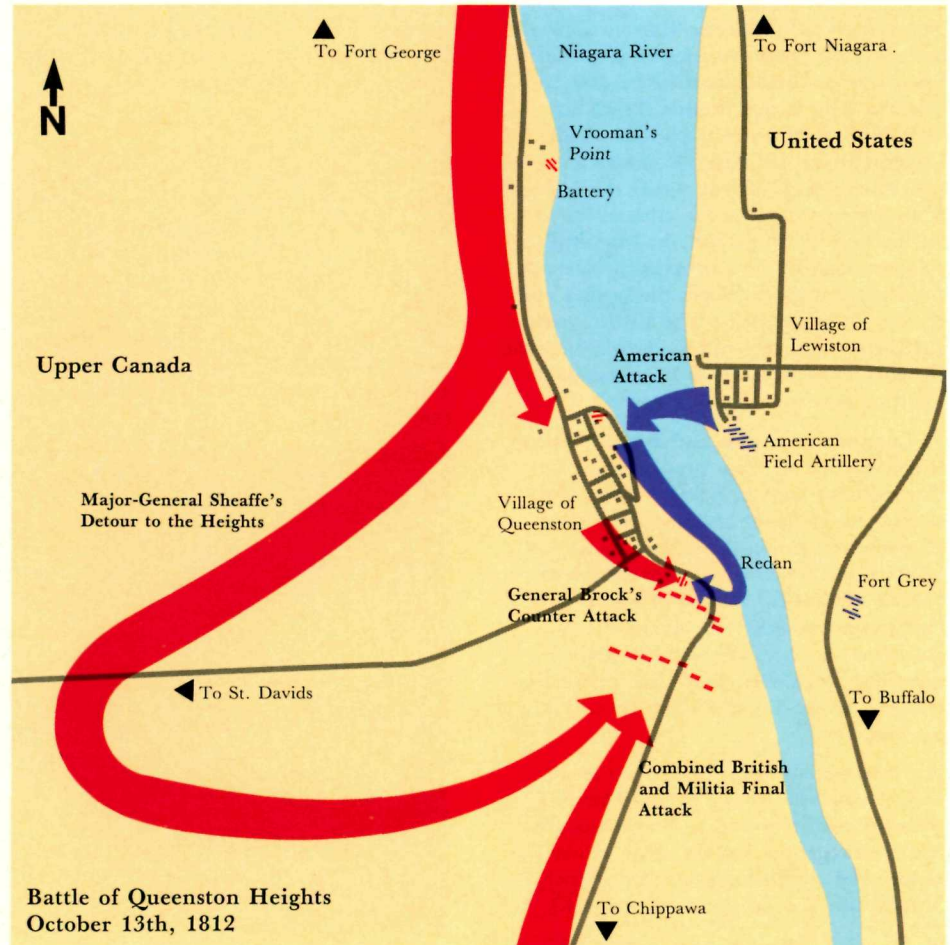
THE UNFOLDING OF THE BATTLE

The five stages described below correspond to the plaques posted at intervals along the self-guided tour.

1. The Attack

It was 3:00 a.m. on October 13; the drizzle and fine hail chilled to the bone. Six hundred Americans boarded a dozen boats and crossed the river. They could not count on the element of surprise, however, because 300 British troops were steadfastly waiting for them. It was an inferno: muskets blasted, cannonballs flew through the air, the sky was streaked with reddish light and the acrid smell of gunpowder hung in the air. A few soldiers landed, but were pinned on the beach by British fire. All the officers directly engaged were wounded, and reinforcements arrived a mere handful at a time.

This painting of the Battle of Queenston Heights was executed by a veteran of the battle, Captain James Dennis who was in command of the grenadiers of the 49th Regiment at the time of the attack. In the painting Queenston is on the right and Lewiston, with the American camp, on the left. The artist's attempt to represent all episodes of the battle was a common technique of war art of the period. Courtesy of the Weir Foundation Queenston.



CONSEQUENCES OF THE BATTLE

2. The Treacherous Cliff

The village of Queenston was too well defended, so the attackers had no choice but to try to climb up to the heights directly. This meant scaling the cliff, which rose in front of them like a wall. Captain Wool had heard of a small fishermen's path further upstream that led from the riverbank to the crest of the cliff. At the first light of dawn, he led sixty soldiers, making slow progress because of the steepness of the slope, the bushes and the overhanging rocks. The British were completely unaware of this move, since the Heights were assumed to be unassailable and therefore were left unguarded.

3. Loss of the Redan and Brock's Death

Wool reached the escarpment ridge. Through the bushes, halfway down the slope to the village, he spied the Redan 18-pounder cannon firing steadily on his compatriots. The cannon was protected behind earthworks shaped in the form of a half moon (redan), but was poorly defended. To one side stood Brock, directing operations. Wool led a bayonet charge and quickly dislodged Brock and his men.

Day had now broken, but heavy grey clouds were still rolling in and blending with the smoke of battle. Brock brought 200 men together and set off to retake the redan. His counter-attack failed; Brock himself was shot in the chest and died.

His aide-de-camp, John Macdonell, led another counter-attack but he too fell, mortally wounded. The British abandoned the position to the Americans.

4. Planning the Counter-Attack

The outcome of the battle now hinged on Major General Roger Hale Sheaffe. Earlier that morning, his troops of the 41st Regiment, Royal Artillery, and Militia, left Fort George and reached Queenston a few hours later. They were preceded by Norton and his 100 Iroquois, who were skirmishing with the Americans. The Americans were too disorganized to guard against the arrival of Sheaffe's reinforcements.

5. The Final Engagement

It was 3:00 p.m. Sheaffe's soldiers were nearing the top of the steep slope of the ridge, far enough west of Queenston to be beyond the Americans' view. Out of breath after their climb, they now had to regroup in the middle of the field. A cool breeze was blowing away the clouds.

The time was 4:00 p.m. Sheaffe was joined by 150 men from Fort Chippewa and now led a total of 1,000 men, impeccably turned out as if for parade. The entire British line fired a volley and advanced in a bayonet charge. The Americans had their backs to the cliff and had only two choices: jump off or surrender. They surrendered.

For the Americans, the toll was heavy: 300 men, perhaps more, had been killed or wounded and 925 had been captured. Worst of all, they had not managed to gain a foothold on the territory they had set out to invade!

For the British, casualties were not as high (14 dead, 77 injured, 21 missing) — except of course, for the loss of General Brock.

The victory at Queenston had a considerable effect. A portion of Upper Canada's population had been anxiously awaiting news of who would take Queenston in the war, but doubted that the militia and regular army could stand up to the invaders. The victory helped win over the undecided and gave Canadians the necessary strength to withstand the two long years of war ahead of them.



BROCK'S MONUMENT



From the top of his 56-metre column, Major General Brock looks out over the territory his troops defended. The builders of the monument made it as impressive as they did because the battle of Queenston Heights and Brock himself symbolized the continuation of their ties with Great Britain.

The first Brock's Monument as drawn by W.H. Bartlett c. 1840. It was destroyed by bomb shortly after the picture was made.

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