

Canada's Defining Moment: Battle of Stoney Creek



By Tess Bridgwater Photos by Mike Davis except where noted

The Battle of Stoney Creek on June 6, 1813 was the defining moment of the War of 1812. It is termed "a near death experience for Canada," by James Elliott, author of *Strange Fatality*, the definitive book on the battle. Without a victory here, Canada would have become another state of the Union.

▲ In June 1813, the American forces marched toward Burlington Heights on the Niagara Escarpment, reaching Stoney Creek, the furthest point they would push into British North America, the future Canada. Here, re-enactors fire a cannon during an annual commemoration of the Battle of Stoney Creek. PHOTO COURTESY OF TOURISM HAMILTON.



The Americans, who had declared war on Britain in June 1812, advanced a force of about 3,500 men from Detroit towards Burlington Heights on the Niagara Escarpment and a smaller force of about

800 British and Loyalist members of Natives. This area commanded a crucial view over Lake Ontario, an entry point to Upper Canada and a narrow escape route across both frontiers.

Yet the British were

demoralized after the Battle of Queenston Heights on the Niagara peninsula in October 1812, when the British commander Major General Isaac Brock was killed and some Native warriors had withdrawn their support.

In a skirmish at Fort George, Niagara, in May 1813, the Americans had been the victors, but morale was low in both camps. By summer, transportation points,



▶
Battle of
Stoney Creek



▲ Early in the morning of June 6, 1813, the British soldiers unexpectedly attacked the American camp which had set up on Gage Farm at Stoney Creek. RE-ENACTMENT PHOTO COURTESY TOURISM HAMILTON.



▲ Reproductions of 1812-era British uniforms, on display in Gage House.



▲ Buttons, buckles and bullets from the battle. The portrait is of a Colonel Taylor, who was wounded at Stoney Creek but survived and became a judge. On the right are a bayonet, a cannonball, musket ball and grapeshot, all used to inflict damage. Above the portrait are uniform buttons and belt buckles. These period artifacts are on display in Gage House.



▲ The monument for the Battle of Stoney Creek rises on top of a hill near the Niagara Escarpment, which was called the mountain by 1812 soldiers.

farmland and communities had been destroyed; settlers were suffering hardships and troops were weary. Yet 3,000 Americans reached Stoney Creek on June 5.

In need of rest, they happened upon a large farm belonging to the Gage family, in the lee of the Escarpment, overlooking Lake Ontario and only 300 yards from the thoroughfare along which they were marching, now known as King Street. They requisitioned the property for their camp. Mary Gage and her family were confined to the cellar of the farmhouse when the battle began.

At nightfall, the Americans, certain that the British would not attack in the dark, settled down for the night. But they badly misjudged the British force.

Surprise Attack

Back on the Heights, British commander Lieutenant Col. John Harvey, prepared to reconnoitre the encampment with some Native warriors, led by Mohawk War Chief John Norton. Catching the Americans by surprise, in the early hours of June 6, a 45-minute battle ensued, during which field guns and two American Generals were captured, with casualties



▲ A cannon near the monument points to Gage House in Battlefield Park, Stoney Creek.

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▲ Mary Gage was on the property during the Battle of Stoney Creek, but she and her children were kept in the cellar of their house throughout the fighting. This portrait of Mary hangs on a wall in Gage House today.

2 Important Landmarks

Battlefield House Museum and Park has been spruced up for the anniversary.

The Gage house will have special events, displays and activities.

The park is open year-round for family activities with a trail leading onto the Bruce Trail.

It is also the 100th anniversary for the tower, which was paid for by the ladies of the Wentworth Historical Society in 1912. The monument has undergone restoration and will re-open for the anniversary with a rebuilt viewing platform. Open for escorted tours, there are information plaques inside.

The main anniversary celebrations will take place over the weekend of May 31 to June 2, 2013. More than 1,000 re-enactors and merchants are expected to take part in a gala re-enactment on June 1 and 2.

Getting to Battlefield Park, site of the Battle of Stoney Creek:

Located at 77 King Street West, in Stoney Creek. Take Centennial Parkway south from the Queen Elizabeth Way and follow the signs. The park is about a one-hour drive from Toronto or Niagara Falls and the U.S. border.

More Information: battlefieldhouse.ca, tourismhamilton.com



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▲ The public can meet re-enactors and explore the encampments at battle commemorations. PHOTO COURTESY OF TOURISM HAMILTON.



▲ A 200-year-old period flintlock musket displayed in Gage House.

on both sides. Many of the dead lie buried in nearby Battlefield cemetery. Although the war limped on for another year, the Battle of Stoney Creek signalled the end of a decisive moment in Canadian history.

In a telephone interview, James Elliott explained “It was the furthest incursion of the

invading army of the entire war. If, in 1812, the Americans had gained control of Upper Canada, along with Michigan, New York and other border areas, Upper Canada would have become part of America.”

Battlefield Park commemorates the 200th Anniversary of this event on



and original paintings, while an annex contains uniforms from regiments that took part in the war. Special exhibits are planned for the re-enactment of the battle on June 1 and 2.

From the first re-enactment in 1981, it is now the longest running War of 1812 re-enactment in North America. For two days every year, hundreds of volunteers recreate the historic battle. Craig Williams, the “American commander” who co-ordinated the event a few years ago, helped make the surroundings feel authentic.

Fritz Steele of Brampton, a retired teacher and history buff, does about 32 re-enactments a year as Ships Carpenter. His tent is furnished with genuine artifacts relating to his trade, collected over time. “All re-enactors have an interest in history,” he says, “but I think there were more interesting personalities then.” He plans to be there for the 200th anniversary celebrations.

The re-enactment appeals to all ages, from young families to retirees. Mingling among the busy encampment as the red and blue-coated troops muster, officers command, privates march, camp followers and vendors mill around, children and dogs play and musket and cannon fire drifts over the horizon, it is a day to step back in time into a living history lesson and reflect on... what might have been... if the outcome had been different in the dawn light of June 6, 1813. **NEV**

Cambridge writer Tess Bridgwater is a history buff who enjoys writing historical features for local magazines and newspapers.

For other War of 1812 features see “Who was Sir Isaac Brock?” by Chris Mills, Autumn 2012, and “DeCou’s House of Heroes” by Adam Shoalts, Winter 2011.

June 6, 2013, but it too, has had a battle for survival. Sara Calder, a granddaughter of Mary Gage, and the ladies of the Wentworth Historical Society purchased the site for \$1,900 in 1899. They made it a museum and raised funds for a monument, now a symbol of peace, overlooking a spectacular view. Sara envisioned something like the Isaac Brock Monument at Queenston Heights. Although not as impressive, it is a notable local landmark. Closed for several years, it will re-open for the 200th anniversary of the Battle this year.

June Re-enactment

Battlefield House Museum and Park is now a National Historic site at the north end of Stoney Creek. The original Gage farmhouse, where the family lived from 1796 to 1835, has been restored and furnished with period furniture