

# 1814: Last, **Bloodiest** Year of the War

Written & photographed by Chris Mills

The year 1814 would prove to be the bloodiest of the War of 1812-14 between the United States and Britain over the land that would become Canada.



▲ Explosive finale of 2013 re-enactment of Siege of Fort Erie, which had lots of explosions and fierce fighting. The 200th anniversary this year is expected to attract the greatest number of participants.

**B**y late 1813, the British forces were in Burlington having abandoned southwestern Ontario and the Niagara Peninsula to the Americans. News arrived that Montreal was under attack and they prepared to sail back to Kingston to help.

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## Commemorating the Final Year of War of 1812

“You can imagine some general describing (the American attack on Canada) as a win-win-win war,” says Jim Hill, heritage director of Niagara Parks. “They could stop the emerging Underground Railroad, they could stop the British from selling guns to Native leaders out west, and they could kick out the British and gain some real estate.”

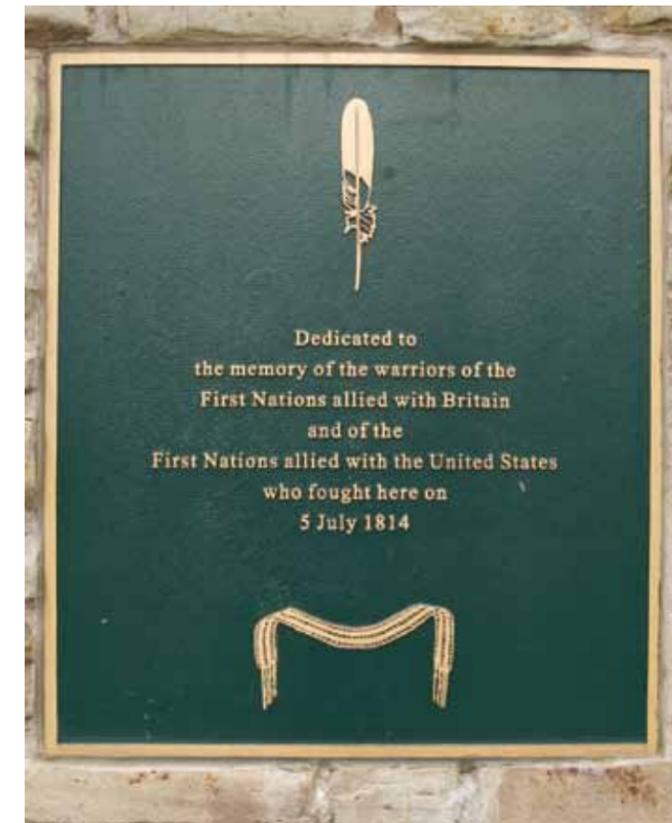
- ▶ July 5 & 6: 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Chippawa. Hundreds of participants expected.
- ▶ July 25: Thousands are expected to march through Niagara Falls, Americans from the south, British from the north, to meet at Drummond Hill Cemetery. You are invited to join the walk. At Drummond Hill Cemetery you can also visit the Battle Ground Hotel, formerly a tavern, now a museum
- ▶ Niagara Falls History Museum will have an exhibit of the War of 1812 with an emphasis on the Battle of Lundy’s Lane.
- ▶ Drummond Hill Cemetery has gravestones dating hundreds of years ago, a commemorative monument to the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, a monument to Laura Secord, and a monument to unknown U.S. soldiers who died in the battle.
- ▶ Aug. 9 & 10: The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great Siege of Fort Erie. A thousand re-enactors will participate in storming the fort. This event is a spectacle and will be even more impressive for the bicentennial siege.
- ▶ October 18 & 19: Re-enactment of Battle of Cook’s Mills
- ▶ Starting December: celebrations in communities along the Niagara River with themes aimed at the new peace.

For all these events, see [www.discover1812.com](http://www.discover1812.com).

Commemoration to Lieutenant-General Sir Gordon Drummond at Drummond Hill Cemetery, Niagara Falls. ▶



▲ Re-enactors’ camp in 2013 at Old Fort George, Niagara-on-the-Lake. Along with the Navy Yard and Butler’s Barracks, the fort was destroyed by cannon fire from U.S. ships in 1813. Only the fort’s stone magazine at the east wall survived intact. It’s now considered the oldest surviving building from the war. All have been rebuilt.



▲ The memorial site for the Battle of Chippawa includes a dedication to Natives who fought alongside both British and U.S. soldiers. The re-enactment this July 5 will feature American and Canadian participants.

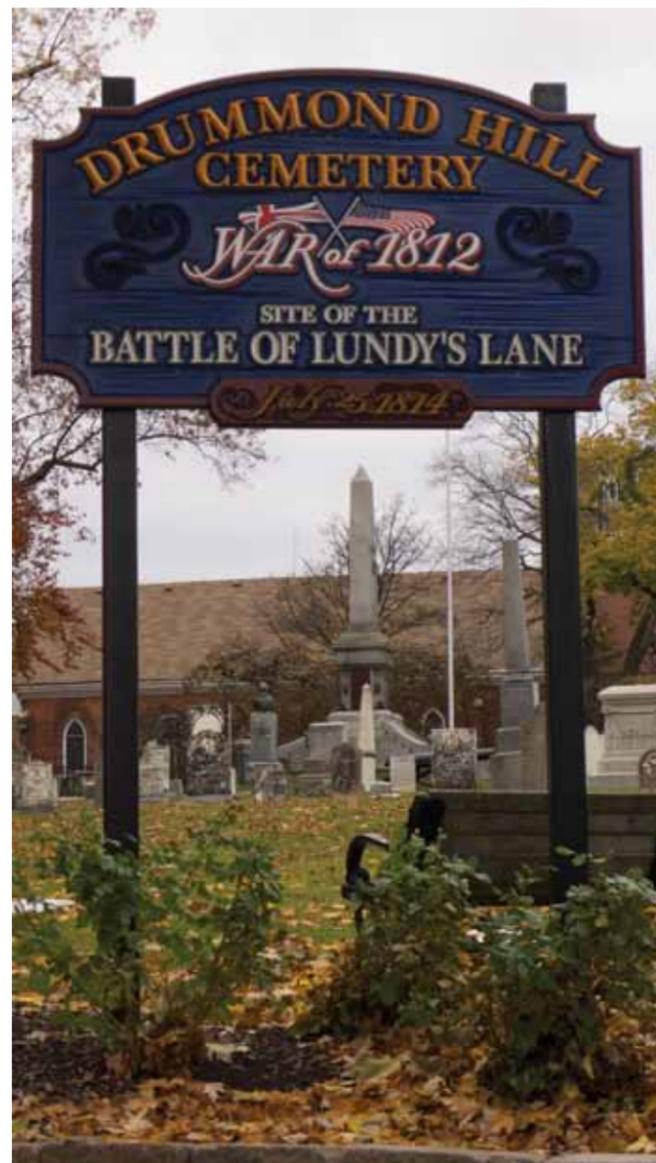
In December 1813, a young Lieutenant General Gordon Drummond, the new Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada (now Ontario), arrived in Burlington to take over command and, aware that the British had in fact defeated the Americans at Chateauguay and Chrysler’s Farm, ordered an offensive force back to Niagara.

Like General Sir Isaac Brock, who’d died at Queenston Heights in October 1812, Drummond believed in taking the offensive and going bold.

The American leaders at Fort George heard of Drummond’s approach and abandoned the fort in December 1813. They’d had enough for the year. Winter had arrived and the enlistment contract for most of their garrison ended in a few weeks. They’d suffered defeats in Lower Canada south of Montreal, and faced further difficulty replenishing supplies. So they retreated to Fort Niagara across the Niagara River in New York.



▲ The gates to Drummond Hill Cemetery, the highest point in Niagara Falls, where the single bloodiest battle of the war took place over six hours on July 25, 1814.



▲ East entrance to Drummond Hill Cemetery, site of the Battle of Lundy's Lane.

Before they left, though, they burned the Town of Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) to the ground.

It was an unparalleled atrocity to burn civilian homes.

Thus when Drummond's troops and natives arrived, they promptly rowed across to New York under cover of darkness, and took Fort Niagara with only a handful of British lives lost. They killed or captured more than 400 Americans that December 19.

But in retaliation for Newark, they then marched up the east side of the Niagara River and

burned everything on the way.

Jim Hill, heritage director for the Niagara Parks Commission, calls it the beginning of the end for New York's exclusion from hostilities.

"After the torching of Newark, American soldiers and civilians knew that the British and native warriors would come back with a vengeance," says Hill. "The massacres expected by the Americans didn't happen. Instead the American civilians saw this coming and most fled."

### Battle of Chippawa

The following summer, the Americans returned with a vengeance. In fact, says Hill, "In Niagara for the 1814 campaign, this was the best American army put into the field during the war."

On July 3, 1814, the Americans captured Fort Erie again and marched down river where they fought 2,100 British, Canadian and Native forces in a farmer's field beside the Niagara River, in what became known as the Battle of Chippawa.

The British had been used to defeating under-trained and easily frightened militia with

a few musket volleys, but this time the 2,200 U.S. soldiers had undergone serious training and discipline.

It proved to be one of the bloodiest engagements because both sides refused to back down. American commander Winfield Scott used his artillery to great effect firing canister blasts at almost point blank range.

The Americans killed, wounded or captured hundreds of British and Natives, almost doubling the number killed versus Americans. Hundreds were wounded on each side. The British withdrew. It was the first

time that the Americans stood toe to toe with the British and won.

"Even Napoleon's troops would have been envious," says Hill. "In any victory before Chippawa, the U.S. had overwhelming numbers. But the real significance for the Americans was that they realized they needed to build and equip a standing army to defend themselves and launch offensives."

### Battle of Lundy's Lane

It also gave them confidence in their abilities because two weeks later, both sides would

meet again along Lundy's Lane among the tombstones of a small cemetery on the highest point in what is today the City of Niagara Falls.

British General Riall, who'd suffered so many losses at Chippawa, heard of 1,800 advancing Americans and began to fall back. Lieutenant General Drummond, however, turned him around and prepared for a fight.

The Americans arrived at 6 p.m., July 25, 1814, and attacked. In a battle that

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involved thousands of men on each side facing each other so close that they could use bayonets, it became a desperate blood bath.

The screams and carnage has been described as the closest to Hell they'd ever encountered, lasting until past midnight so that the combatants saw each other only in the fog of cannon smoke and the flashes of musket fire.

The Americans reached the graveyard at the hilltop, drove the British back down the other side and captured British artillery. But in a case of misunderstanding orders, the American forces withdrew, abandoning not only the captured British cannon but their own artillery.

The tally for this single battlefield engagement was more than 1,800 dead, wounded and missing.

"This was the worst battle

in Canada in the War of 1812," says Hill. "There were more killed and wounded than in any other single battle. And it was terrifying by all accounts. Lots of bayonet to bayonet fighting, incidents of friendly fire shooting their own side, and some trickery on both sides to shield losses and to try to draw each other out."

But in total, the U.S. army was gutted, says Hill. They had only one general remaining who was unwounded.

### War's End

What followed was the six-week-long Siege of Fort Erie fought in the rain and mud of late summer and early autumn of 1814. As Americans dug in with their backs to Lake Erie, the British vainly threw their troops at the fort. The brawl at Fort Erie cost almost 3,000 men killed and wounded until, exhausted and running out of supplies, General Drummond withdrew September 21.

The U.S. rebuilt their forces so that the largest contingent of American troops on the Niagara Peninsula were in Canada for the Battle of Cook's Mills in October where, as in the past, the British held their ground.

Hill concludes, "After the Cook's Mills battle, U.S. General Izard withdrew to Fort Erie and after blowing up the fort they left Canada. With their shipping bottled up, the treasury depleted, and a chunk of Maine in British hands, the Americans were exhausted and bankrupt."

The war shifted into the United States and included the burning of Washington, D.C. A peace treaty was signed Christmas Eve 1814, and finally signed and approved by both sides in February 1815. **NEV**

*Chris Mills is a Niagara-based writer and photographer whose article and pictures about Laura Secord appeared in our Autumn 2013 issue. He can be reached at [www.chrismills.ca](http://www.chrismills.ca).*



▲ Fralick's Tavern, constructed in 1836 on the site of the Battle of Lundy's Lane, is now a museum.



▲ Memorial to the U.S., British, local and Native fighters who died in the Battle of Lundy's Lane, Niagara Falls, 1814.