

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY AND PERRY'S VICTORY SEPT. 10, 1813.

To fully realize the importance of Perry's Victory on Lake Erie we must first attempt to get a mental photo of conditions in our county and at Presque Isle (now Erie) from about 1679 down to and including September 10, 1813. This I will cover briefly.

The colonial settlers along the Eastern seaboard and the Gulf of Mexico discovered and mapped the water courses of this country as the only logical means of transportation and the only practical lines of communication for the development of the interior. Along the great Lakes transportation was blocked on the west by Niagara Falls unless a route to Lake Erie by water could be established by a short over-land portage from the headwaters of the Allegheny River leading to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Detroit, at the westerly end of Lake Erie, was also an early established trading center in the belief that the location was convenient for transportation over land and to the Mississippi River. Also Detroit was excellently located for trading with the Indians along Lakes Huron and Superior.

We have now the picture of the most important trading points and routes open for communication prior to 1825 when the Erie Canal was completed, namely- Lewiston, Barcelona, Presque Isle and Detroit.

In 1679 LaSalle, on a Lake Erie trip, first saw the Chautauqua area from a boat, and in 1681 or 82 he journeyed west from Onondaga County, and after about fifteen days traveling "came to a little lake six or seven miles south of Lake Erie." This was believed to be Chautauqua Lake from a short notation of his in a report which he made to his government. LaSalle died in 1689, and there are no further records of French or English exploration for sixty years.

In 1749 France sent Captain Beinville DeCelleron, a Chevalier of the order of St. Louis, from LaChine in Canada with 214 Canadian voyagers (White), and 55 Abenakies and Iroquios Indians to take formal possession in the name of his country. He coasted along the south shores of Lake Erie and landed at Barcelona July 16, 1749. From thence they followed the trails to Chautauqua Lake, arriving at the head of the lake on the 22nd. They (on the 23rd) camped near Lakewood, and the 24th at Jamestown, making the trip on the westerly side of the Lake. In 1753 Marquis su Quesne sent 250 Frenchmen to Barcelona under Barbeer. There they commenced to construct a long fort on the westerly side near the mouth of Chautauqua Creek. Later Sieur Marin, first commander of the expedition, with 500 arrived, stopped the construction, and under military orders moved to Presque Isle. Forts were then built at Erie and LeBoeuf (now Waterford) and also at Franklin, PA. It is assumed that the purpose of finding a better grade for the movement of troops and materials from Lake Erie over the divide to Pittsburgh rather than for any other purpose. This assumption is supported by the fact that on October 30, 1749, 1200 men in a French expedition were assembled at Barcelona. They were supervised by Hughs Pean, who afterward became a Knight of the Order of St. Louis. This expedition cut a wagon road to the mouth of the Chautauqua Lake, and, while cutting the road, they watched by two men representing the English. These two men reported their observations and Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia sent George Washington, then a young English army officer, to Fort LeBouf (Waterford), where he negotiated for five days with the French commander, St. Pierre. These negotiations resulted in widening the gap between the French and English, and are considered to have been the immediate cause of the French and English seven year war, being extended to Europe. It has been said that a letter written by George Washington would indicate that he had

crossed the New York State line on this trip to Waterford, and that consequently he became a temporary visitor to the county in 1749. This statement I have not been able to corroborate.

The next evidence of a white man's visitation to the county which is to any extent authoritative was the survey commended in 1793 by engineers for the Holland Land Company.

Next came the first settlement (purchase of land, clearing of 10 acres and erection of a cabin house), by James McMahan, my great grandfather, who had been one of the Holland Land Company Surveyors at Westfield, on what is now U.S. Route 20, in 1802. The cabin was built very close to one of the Indian trails leading from Lake Erie to Chautauqua Lake.

The settlement from 1802 to 1812 was rapid for in 1812 a Chautauqua County regiment of 300 men was recruited for service in the war.

As shown, the English clearly intended, after the capture of the Southern Shore of Lake Erie, to confine the people of the United States to the territory east of the Allegheny, south of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi, thus establishing the western boundary of our country either through Chautauqua County from Barcelona or through Erie County, Pennsylvania from Presque Isle through Waterford to the Ohio River.

This picture of the situation on the land, with the French and English War, will convince you as to the necessity of the control of the southern shore of Lake Erie by the people of our young republic, the United States, and as to the importance to our country of the naval battles of Lake Erie which established the southern line of English colonial possessions in North America, and east of the west end of Lake Superior.

In 1813 (according to the records of our Supervisors) the paralyzing effects of the war on the improvements of our county were apparent. Emigration to the County almost wholly ceased, while the timid and the desponding, who had the means to remove, returned east or removed from the frontier. The varied successes and losses of our armies by land appeared discouraging. A few of our citizens condemned the war as unjust, yet the body of the people in our Chautauqua wilderness responded promptly to the quotas of volunteers required by the government. Mills and stores of supplies along our shore of Lake Erie were burned under military orders as the government feared capture and confiscation by the English. Detroit had already been captured by the enemy and the Niagara Frontier was in grave peril.

The Americans, through superior ship building ability and facilities gained in 1813 complete control of Lake Ontario and thereby assured almost complete control of our Niagara frontier and of Lewiston and Fort Niagara.

Captain Oliver Hazard Perry had been assigned command of the Erie and the upper Lakes. Up to that time the English had had complete control of Lake Erie and the five American ships had been blockaded in the Niagara. These ships- Caledonia, Somers, Tigress, Ohio and Trippe, after the American Victory at Fort George and the retreat of the British, finally ran the blockade and reached Presque Isle (now Erie). At that point two 20 gun brigs were being constructed by Capt. Perry and three other schooners, the Ariel, Scorpion, and Porcupine were also built

The harbor of Erie was good and Spacious, but had a bar on which there was less than seven feet of water. Hitherto this had prevented the enemy from getting in; now it prevented the two brigs from getting out. Captain Robert Heriot Barclay had been appointed commander of the British forces on Lake Erie; and he was having built at Amherstburg a 20-gun ship, meanwhile he blockaded Perry's force, and as the brigs could not cross the bars with their guns in, or except in smooth water, they of course could not do so in his presence. He kept a close blockade for some time; but on the 2nd of August he disappeared. Perry at once hurried forward

everything; and on the 4th, at 2 P.M., one brig, the Lawrence, was towed to that point of bar where the water was deepest. Her guns were whipped out and landed on the beach, and the brig got over the bar by a hastily improvised "camel."

"Two large scows, prepared for the purpose, were hauled along-side, and the work of lifting the brig proceeded as fast as possible. Pieces of massive timber had been run through the forward and after ports, and when the scows were sunk to the water's edge, the ends of the timbers were blocked up, supported by these floating foundations. The plugs were now put in the scows, and the water was pumped out of them. By this process the brig was lifted quite two feet, though when she got on the bar it was found that she still drew too much water. It became necessary, in consequence, to cover up everything, sink the scows anew, and block up the timbers afresh. This duty occupied the whole night."

Just as the Lawrence had passed the bar, at 8 A.M. on the 5th, the enemy reappeared, but too late, Captain Barclay exchanged a few shots with the Schooners and then drew off. The Niagara crossed without difficulty. There were still not enough men to man the vessels, but a draft arrived from Ontario, and many of the frontiersmen volunteered, while soldiers also were sent on board. The squadron sailed on the 18th in pursuit of the enemy, whose ship was now ready. After cruising about some time the Ohio was sent down the lake, and the other ships went into Put-in Bay. On the 9th of September Captain Barclay put out from Amherstburg, being so short of provisions that he felt compelled to risk an action with the superior force opposed. On the 10th of September his squadron was discovered from the mast-head of the Lawrence on the northwest.

Perry's Squadron, contained the 7 vessels named and the 2 large brigs, the Lawrence and the Niagara, and the English Squadron, under Barclay, contained 6 vessels. American guns 57, English 30. American tonnage 1, 671, English tonnage 1, 460. Weight of American broadside 936 lbs. and of English broadside 459 lbs. showing greatly superior American force.

At daylight Sept. 10th Barclay's squadron was discovered and Perry at once gave chase with the Lawrence leading in a very light wind. At 11-45 the Detroit, English Boat, opened fire and her second shot went crashing through the Lawrence and then the action became general on both sides with the Lawrence between the two largest English brigs. Of the 103 men on the Lawrence, 83 were either killed or wounded. Every brace and bowline was shot away and the brig was almost completely dismantled. Perry then remodeled his line of attack and the Niagara uninjured pulled in behind the Lawrence and Perry shifted his flag. Leaping into the row boat with his brother and four seamen he rowed, under fire, to the fresh brig, arriving at 2-30. The Lawrence with 14 sound men aboard drifted away, and by the recommencement of the action, avoided capture. The breeze stiffened and Perry bore down on the crippled British ships and forced a surrender by Barclay at three o'clock. The engagement having lasted three hours and fifteen minutes. The American loss was 27 killed and 96 wounded, of whom 3 died, and the British loss was 41 killed and 94 wounded. Captain Barclay was among the wounded.

Theodore Roosevelt in his book "Naval War of 1812" says in part as follows: "In short our victory was due to our heavy metal. As regards the honor of the affair, in spite of the amount of boasting it has given rise to, I should say it was a battle to be looked up as in an equally high degree creditable to both sides. Indeed, if it were not for the fact that the victory was so complete, it might be said the length of the contest and the trifling disparity in loss reflected rather the most credit on the British, Captain Perry showed indomitable pluck, and readiness to adapt himself to circumstances; but his claim to fame rests much less on his actual victory than on the way in which he prepared the fleet that was to win it. Here his energy and activity deserve

all the praise, not only for his success in collecting sailors and vessels and in building the two brigs, but above all for the manner in which he certainly out-generalled Barclay; indeed the latter committed an error that the skill and address he subsequently showed could not retrieve.”

The months of July, August, and to and including September 10th, 1813 covered the period which, once and for all, established the northern line of the United States as against further British aggression, and September 10th should never pass unnoticed by the States along our northern States along our northern frontier.

We of the Southern Lake Erie Shore, should cherish and memorialize each anniversary of that date. The conflict with Labor Day as a National Holiday has abolished the “September 10th Fireman’s Day” which I used to enjoy in my boyhood, and something should be done, in my opinion, to annually commemorate the event.

No better contribution could come from this Chautauqua County Coin, Stamp and Curio Club than to sponsor and urge the issuance of a fitting commemorative Postage Stamp by the Post Office Department on September 10, 1937. We have a full year in which to bring this about. We have our Roscoe Martin, ex-president of the American Philatelic Society, to help through this organization, and the anniversary is entitled to be considered as important as any heretofore similarly recognized by our Government.

Arthur S. Tennant
Attorney at Law
Westfield, New York

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY WESTFIELD, NY 2012