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Memoirs of Captain Ephraim Shaler: A Connecticut Yankee in the War of 1812

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but a supposed person.”<sup>17</sup> So Higginson’s Sappho becomes a “supposed person”: the seated statue arises to take her place at the front of the classroom, and leaves her lyre behind.

<sup>17</sup> *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:412.

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MEMOIRS OF CAPTAIN EPHRAIM SHALER:  
A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN THE WAR OF 1812

EDITED BY JOHN C. FREDRIKSEN

**D**URING the War of 1812, New England enjoyed a well deserved reputation for opposing national policy. Of the five states, Connecticut was by far the most militant. In a move to thwart what was perceived as Republican encroachment upon state prerogatives, Governor John Cotton Smith, a leading Federalist ideologue, steadfastly refused to place his militia under federal officers. In a more serious confrontation with the national government, the State Assembly, at Smith’s behest, declared a federal conscription law unconstitutional, null, and void. The rising tide of resentment crested at the infamous Hartford Convention of 1814–15, after which the Federalist party began to decline.<sup>1</sup> While such events in Connecticut and its neighboring states, as well as the attitudes that engendered them, are viewed as having been detrimental to the war effort, historians have seldom appreciated that New England recruited some of the finest regular regiments for the national defense establishment. Vermont contributed the Eleventh U.S. Infantry, noteworthy for its role at the battle of Chippewa; Massachusetts the Twenty-first, immortalized by its charge at Lundy’s Lane; and Connecticut, the erstwhile Federalist stronghold, fielded the Twenty-fifth U.S. Infantry, which distinguished itself at both encounters.

<sup>1</sup> For a good overview of Connecticut Federalists during the war, see David Yacovone, “Connecticut Against the Tide: Federalism and the War of 1812,” *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 40 (1975): 1–7, and William E. Buckley, ed., “Letters of Connecticut Federalists, 1814–1815,” *New England Quarterly* 3 (1930): 316–31.

The activities of the Twenty-fifth Infantry during the 1814 Niagara campaign are well known, and by war's end the regiment was regarded as one of the most effective units in the American army. We lack information about the difficult, at times disastrous, first two years of the war, however. The memoirs of Captain Ephraim Shaler concerning his tenure as a second lieutenant in the Twenty-fifth Infantry offer important insight into those years.

Shaler's memoirs were published in the *Green Bay Republican* on 23 January 1844, while he was employed as lighthouse keeper at Fort Howard, Wisconsin. He had been wounded at Lundy's Lane in 1814 and, as a disabled veteran, was seeking a pension to assist him in old age. The extent of his injuries is not known, but Shaler's unenviable condition was typical of War of 1812 veterans. This revealing newspaper headnote accompanied his story:

The following sketch of the campaign of 1813 in the late war with Great Britain, we have been kindly favored by as worthy an old soldier, Capt. E. *Shaler*, as ever drew battle blade in the cause of a free country; yet the parsimonious Government of this Republic permits him, though in a mutilated condition, to languish on the very confines of poverty. He is allowed a small pension, and the wretched salary of a lighthouse keeper.

Although there is just cause for questioning the objectivity of pension testimony, Shaler's account noticeably lacks the hyperbole and self-glorification generally found in such documents. His is less a record of personal prowess in battle than a stirring recital of events by an old veteran still proud to have served his country. After considerable precautionary research, I have concluded that Shaler's narrative is largely corroborated by official accounts of the 1813 Niagara campaign. If we make allowances for Shaler's sentimental attachment to an old Yankee regiment, then, his memoirs may be regarded as reliable historical evidence.

In his recollections Shaler describes in detail and with candor the role of the Twenty-fifth Infantry at the American victory at Fort George and the subsequent defeat at Stoney Creek. This is important, for in its observation of preparations taken to receive the British attack at Stoney Creek, Shaler's record challenges traditional assertions that the Americans were completely surprised.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The most serious offenders in this respect are Canadian. For examples see Ernest A. Cruikshank, "The Battle of Stoney Creek and the Blockade of Fort George," *Niagara Historical Society Transactions* 2 (1898): 15-31, and John H. Land, "The Battle of Stoney Creek," *Wentworth Historical Society Transactions* 1 (1892): 21-27.

His narrative is full of Yankee wit and incisiveness, and it displays a martial enthusiasm that belies Connecticut's reputation for recalcitrance. Shaler's account of his experience, therefore, not only enhances our tactical appreciation of such obscure battles as Fort George and Stoney Creek but also provides a fresh perspective on Connecticut's contribution to the War of 1812. The account as it appears in the *Green Bay Republican* follows.



Fort George, with the beautiful village of Newark, Upper Canada, was taken by the Americans under Major Gen. Dearborn<sup>3</sup> on the morning of May 27th, 1813.

It was a lovely morning,—not a cloud to be seen, nor a ripple upon the noble lake, which spread out before us like a great mirror, reflecting the image of its maker, and which seemed to say in soft whispers, Man, calm your tumultuous passions; disturb not my sweet repose with the din of arms, nor stain my bosom with the blood of war.

The sun was just rising to call the husbandman to his labor and the soldier to his post, when orders came for all the troops to embark in open boats, which had been previously prepared for the occasion—each boat carrying about sixteen men, with their arms, ammunition and knapsacks. In the meantime, the fleet under Commodore Chauncey,<sup>4</sup> in order to cover our landing, had taken a position a little below the mouth of the Niagara river, and anchored in line opposite several batteries the enemy had planted on the bank of the lake to oppose our landing, and which had kept up a constant fire on our vessels as they were taking their stations: soon, however, the Commodore made signal for the whole fleet to open their broadsides upon the British batteries, and in one hour after the first broadside was fired, every gun of the enemy was silenced, and not a red-coat was to be seen near the bank. While this operation was going on, the troops had embarked and were moving rapidly to the point of landing. Colonel, now Major Gen'l Scott,<sup>5</sup> led the advance—which was composed of Riflemen and Light Artillery—the infantry following in regular line.

It was a grand and imposing sight to see 180 boats, carrying in all

<sup>3</sup> Henry Dearborn, 1751–1829.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Chauncey, 1772–1840.

<sup>5</sup> Winfield Scott, 1786–1866.

about 3000 men, gliding swiftly over the blue waters, to meet in a few minutes, in deadly combat, the proud sons of Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The leading boats soon passed the fleet, and as they reached the shore, the enemy again showed themselves and opened a heavy fire of musketry upon them, which could not be returned by the fleet without endangering the lives of our own men: the whole British line now charged down the bank with fixed bayonets, and drove our men into the water till it reached nearly their middle; but Yankees fought about as well in the water as on land. At this moment, a favorable breeze sprang up which gave a new impetus to the rear boats, and so rapidly did the boats move forward and gain the shore that we were soon enabled to drive Johnny Bull up the bank and take possession of several pieces of cannon, with other munitions of war, and in less than half an hour after all the troops had landed we were in full possession of Fort George and its dependencies—the enemy retreated, leaving their dead, and blowing up their magazine as they left the fort.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all the inhabitants in the village left at the same time. Major Forsyth,<sup>8</sup> with his riflemen, followed the enemy about two miles, dealing out death to them as they retreated; and had Major Forsyth been properly supported by a brigade of infantry, with two companies of Light artillery, the whole British force, amounting to about 2000 combatants, must either have risked a battle or surrendered prisoners of

<sup>6</sup> Another participant was less impressed with the deployment: "Why the forces were made to tread on each other's heels in this manner, giving the enemy a chance of repulsing us in detail, and a certainty of making every shot tell as that which missed one squadron would be most sure of a hit at its follower; instead of throwing the whole line, excepting the advance and the reserve, ashore at the same time, thus distracting by necessarily extending the defense; the young wisecracks are left to guess. The enemy must have chuckled among the bushes to see us thus approaching, one after the other, like segregated Curiatti ready to be knocked off in succession" ("First Campaign of an A.D.C.," *Military and Naval Magazine of the United States* 2 [1834]: 15).

<sup>7</sup> This is an understatement on Shaler's part. According to one observer, "The action was very close and warm for about ten minutes after we landed, when the enemy gave way and broke in confusion. Gen'l Boyd's division landed at the same point and on the heels of the van about the close of the action and in place of extending the line to the right or the left, they rushed up the bank among the light troops and all became one solid mass of confusion. It was well for us that the enemy was beaten before this took place for our superiority in numbers was rendered useless for the space of about twenty minutes" (Manuscript diary of Col. George McFeely, War of 1812 Collection, New-York Historical Society, New York, N.Y. Quotation by courtesy of the Society).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Forsyth, 1760(?)–1814.

war, in less than twenty four hours. But instead of following them up (*Napoleon-like*) and pressing closely on their rear, the Riflemen were recalled from the pursuit, and the enemy left to take their own time for reaching Burlington Heights, where it was understood, they arrived on the 2nd of June, and were fortifying themselves by throwing up intrenchments, and making other preparations to receive us should we dare approach within range of their shot. The loss of the enemy in taking Fort George amounted to between three and four hundred killed and wounded. The Americans lost 49 killed and 112 wounded.

The idea of following the enemy to the head of the lake whither they had gone, was given up for the present; and Col. Porter,<sup>9</sup> or as some called him, "Old Blow Hard", was ordered with his battalion of Artillery to take possession of Fort George,—the rest of the troops to encamp a little below the Fort.

Myself, with several other officers, while passing from the field of battle through the village the enemy had just left, stepped into a house which seemed to be a boarding house for the officers, for we there found a sumptuous breakfast spread out before us on an elegant mahogany table, extending nearly across the room, covered with a clean damask cloth on which was a large plate of *smoking beef steak*,—three or four large plates of toast,—a large roll of butter,—*tea* ready to be poured out, and knives, forks and plates set for about twenty persons.— Believing that those for whom this breakfast was prepared would not return in season to partake of it, and feeling our appetites pretty keen (for we had not yet breakfasted) we sat down and commenced operations; every man helping himself in his way. Feeling ourselves greatly refreshed after eating the breakfast prepared for our enemies, we looked about the house to find someone to make our bill and receive the pay, (for we felt disposed to pay for so good a meal, although I think it might properly be considered as lawful plunder) but finding none in the house but ourselves, we left it with all things pretty much as we found them, except the eatables and drinkables.

On the 3rd of June, Generals Chandler and Winder,<sup>10</sup> with their brigades, were ordered to follow on after the enemy to the head of the lake. About 3 o'clock, P.M. of the next day, our advance guard fell in with a strong British picket who were stationed near the

<sup>9</sup> Moses Porter, 1755–1822.

<sup>10</sup> John Chandler, 1762–1841, and William H. Winder, 1775–1824.

road to watch our movements,—a skirmish took place between them which resulted in the retreat of the picket, and the capture of several of their wounded,—no lives were lost on either side. Night coming on, the troops were encamped forming a hollow square, with the artillery and baggage wagons in the centre.

Early next morning (5th June) we were on our march, moving in column of platoons, with front and rear guard and a suitable number of flankers. While passing near the foot of the mountain suddenly a war whoop was heard and then the discharge of about twenty muskets by a party of Indians stationed on the top of the mountain concealed from our view, till they had delivered their fire, which proved ineffectual, for not one man was killed, and but two or three wounded:—a company was despatched immediately to drive the red skins from their high elevations; which was soon accomplished, and we moved on without any further molestation till we arrived at Stoney Creek, which was a little before sunset, tired and hungry, myself not having taken any food that day. We were now within six miles of the main body of the British troops, who were posted within their entrenchments on ground judiciously selected for the purpose, and every way well calculated to repel a direct and open attack. But night coming on and the weariness of the men, it was thought prudent to postpone the attack till morning: the several regiments composing General Chandler's brigade were therefore ordered to encamp; every regiment selecting its own ground to encamp on. This was a great military blunder and the first I had discovered since we left Fort George. Being in an enemy's country and within a few miles of a large body of well disciplined troops (besides militia and Indians, who had been hanging about us all day, though generally at a respectful distance) the whole brigade should have been encamped in regular military order, having a *rallying* point designated by the commanding General, to be understood by every commandant of a regiment; but unhappily for us, no such point was designated.

The 25th Regiment to which I belonged marched into a very wide lane, stacked their arms and lay down upon the grass: the cooks built their fires along in the centre of the lane, and made preparations for cooking their supper, which consisted of a very large, fat ox found in the neighborhood, drove into the lane, butchered, cut up, divided and was soon in the hands of several cooks.

I directed my boy to cook me some of the liver of which I was very fond; but not a mouthful of it did I ever get, nor any of the more solid parts of the animal.

General Winder with his brigade had encamped near the lake shore about a mile from us, and was in the same unprepared state to meet an attack as ourselves. We had soon after our arrival posted a chain of sentinels around the camp to guard their sleeping comrades as they lay scattered here and there, ready to be butchered at anytime the enemy might chose to pounce upon them. The night was calm but quite dark.

Col. Joseph L. Smith,<sup>11</sup> who commanded my regiment, and who still is well known to many of the good citizens of Green Bay, came to me about 11 o'clock and said we must get the men up and move them out of the lane, for we shall be attacked before morning—there have been spies in the camp and they know the position of every regiment, and if we remain where we are, we shall be cut to pieces.<sup>12</sup>

I went with the Colonel and aided him in rallying the officers and men, and soon got them on their feet with their arms and ammunition. We then moved the regiment out of the lane into the road,—marched up the road about sixteen rods and turned into an open field of elevated ground, and formed in line of battle directly opposite and parallel with the lane we had just left. The men were then ordered to load their muskets and lay down if they chose, but not a man to leave his place without permission. (I will here remark that our cartridges that night contained each twelve buck shot and no ball; which in the sequel will account for the maintaining our last position, and repelling every charge made by the enemy.) About the time of our last movement, General Chandler also

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Lee Smith, 1779–1846. A native of Connecticut, Smith was something of a cause célèbre in the law profession. As keynote speaker at the famous Litchfield festival of 6 August 1807, Smith, a staunch Republican, made several derogatory remarks about the Federalist state supreme court. He was censured and lost most of his legal practice but following the war was appointed chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court. Smith was father of Edmund Kirby Smith, the Confederate general of impeccable Yankee lineage. See Samuel H. Fisher, "Why Two Connecticut Yankees Went South," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 18 (1939): 32–45.

<sup>12</sup> Mordecai Myers noted other, more tangible signs as well. "This was the evening of the 3rd of June and the 4th being the birthday of King George III, the enemy felt in good spirits, no doubt, and determined to precipitate our attack" (*Reminiscences, 1780–1814, Including Incidents in the War of 1812* [Washington, D.C.: 1900], p. 30).



changed his position, and had his marker pitched a few rods from the left of our line, his horse standing nearby ready to be mounted at a moment's warning, and two small field pieces for his defense. All things being now ready for anything that might happen by the way of night fighting, I went back to the lane to get a few things I had left there, and to see how the cooks were getting along (for we had left them to prepare food for the morrow) when, just as I was about to leave the lane to go up to my regiment (it being at this time between one and two o'clock in the morning) I heard one of the most dreadful shrieks that ever fell on mortal ear, and which seemed to come from one of the sentinels. I observed to an officer nearby that a sentinel had been shot with an arrow, and the Indians were then tomahawking him, which I have no doubt was the fact, for not a gun had then been fired: in an instant, however, the war whoop was given and the air seemed rent with the yell of Indians, which was quickly followed by every sentinel discharging his piece and retreating to the main guard. I immediately started for my regiment, when turning my head in the direction of the gate that led into the lane, discovered a column of British bayonets within twenty feet of me. I lost no time in making my way to the regiment. It was, however, a narrow escape,—a moment later and I must either have felt the cold steel or been made a prisoner. The enemy charged furiously through the lane, upsetting in their way camp-kettles and mess-pans, and killing several of the poor cooks, and driving the rest out: and finally succeeded in taking quiet possession of—what? Not of the 25th Regiment, for it contained too many Yankees to be caught in such a trap, but they took possession of the bright fires the cooks had made and per force left. Between these fires and the 25th Regiment the British General (Vincent)<sup>13</sup> formed his line of battle, which extended nearly the whole length of the lane; but before he had completed his line, we gave him to understand where he could find us, and he lost no time in returning the compliment. A heavy fire of musketry was opened from both sides.

Directly, the British General was distinctly heard giving orders for his whole line to "Charge the d\_\_\_\_\_d Yankees."

Thrice this order was attempted to be carried into execution by breaking our line; and thrice did his bleeding ranks fall back to their first position without affecting their object; for such was the effect of our buckshot, at close quarters, that no troops, however

<sup>13</sup> John Vincent, d. 1848.

well disciplined, could long stand before such a shower as was poured upon them from the gallant 25th. The cannon near the General's tent had been discharged several times, when the enemy made a charge and captured both pieces; and, as is supposed, took General Chandler prisoner at the same time; although this circumstance was not then known to us. When the enemy had failed in his last attempt to break our line, the firing on both sides had nearly ceased, but was shortly after renewed with fresh vigor; and in a few moments the voice of General Chandler was heard, coming from the direction of the enemy, ordering the 25th to cease firing. This was the first intimation we had of his being a prisoner. His order, however, was promptly obeyed.

At the commencement of the attack, the whole brigade was immediately under arms, ready to act as occasion might require: but no one knew where to go in the darkness of night, surrounded (as one might suppose from their yells) by all the Indians in Canada—there being, as I have before said, no rallying point designated, none could distinguish friend from foe; consequently all concert of action was lost, and confusion ensued:—our men often firing upon each other by mistake. The brigade was composed of gallant men and officers who were ready and willing to engage the enemy if they had known where to begin the work of death.

A detachment of the 16th Regiment, (I think it was) made a gallant charge on the enemy, and re-took the cannon we had lost in the early part of the action. While all these movements were going on, General Winder, on hearing the firing, rode up from the shore of the lake where he had encamped his brigade, to see what the difficulty was; having with him his aide and several men, dashed into the midst of his enemies and was made prisoner.

The enemy having both our generals, made off as fast as possible, leaving their dead and some wounded on the field.

The enemy's loss in this battle is not accurately known; but when daylight appeared the ground was literally covered with the dead. The Americans lost between fifty and sixty killed and wounded.<sup>14</sup> A flag was sent in early in the morning for permission to bury their dead.—Col. James Burn, the senior officer, now took command and, having early in the morning received an express

<sup>14</sup> Official losses were: British, 23 killed, 136 wounded, and 55 missing; American, 17 killed, 38 wounded, and 99 missing. Despite the initial surprise, the Americans gave a good account of themselves, thanks in part to the splendid stand of the Twenty-fifth Infantry.

from General Dearborn at Fort George, directed the troops to return to that place as soon as possible,<sup>15</sup> as it was expected the enemy would attempt to re-take the fort, we were soon underway, retracing our steps and arrived at Fort George on the evening of the 8th of June, tired and hungry.<sup>16</sup>

During the hottest part of the battle, I happened to be standing near a brave young Irishman who was loading and firing away as fast as he could when a ball struck the barrel of his musket while he was in the act of ramming home the cartridge, which so indented the barrel that he could not get his ramrod out: finding his gun would be useless, he exclaimed with an Irish oath—"I will give them ramrod and all", and fired away. I then gave him the musket of a soldier who had just been killed, and he went early at his work again.

<sup>15</sup> Several officers tried and failed to persuade Burn to counterattack at once: "Col. Schuyler asked for permission to follow the retreating enemy with our regiment [the 13th] but the Council of War would not consent. If it had done so we might have retaken our two generals and, perhaps, many prisoners, for General Winder told me when he returned on parole that at twelve o'clock the enemy had not collected five hundred men, they were not three miles from us and they expected an attack every moment" (Myers, *Reminiscences*, p. 31).

<sup>16</sup> Although tired, the troops were still full of fight: "The army was anxious to make a new essay with the enemy. All were full of wrath and retaliation, and many thought it would be well not to let the sun go down on their high temperature, but to strike while the iron was hottest" ("First Campaign of an A.D.C.," p. 280).

John C. Fredriksen, a *Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of California at Los Angeles*, is compiling a definitive bibliography of the War of 1812.