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Author(s): Jacques W. Redway

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GENERAL VAN RENSSELAER AND THE NIAGARA FRONTIER.

JACQUES W. REDWAY, F. R. G. S., MT. VERNON, N. Y.

So far as the State of New York was concerned, the lines of military activity in the War of 1812 were confined mainly to the lower end of Lake Champlain, and to the frontiers of the St. Lawrence and Niagara Rivers. The accession of the country north of the Ohio River had been followed by a great emigration, and inasmuch as the Niagara frontier was the chief gateway of commerce between the prairie lands of the West and the Atlantic seaboard, the loss of the frontier, or the interruption of the traffic through it would have been a severe blow to the Americans; it therefore was bound to become a seat of military operations.

At the head of Niagara River was the village of Buffalo, a lively centre of trade with a population of about five hundred. It was then fighting its fight with its rival, Black Rock, for the control of the lake trade. A treacherous current in the river, however, was an important factor in turning the tide of commerce to Buffalo, and the latter has long since swallowed and digested its rival of former days. Lewiston, at the lower end of the gorge, was built on the margin of an old beach of Lake Ontario. It is to-day the head of navigation; for above it are the rapids, while below, the river is an estuary of the lake. Directly opposite Lewiston is the village of Queenston, then partly fortified. Commercially it was less important than Lewiston, from the fact that another Canadian village, Newark, was about as large as Buffalo and Black Rock combined. The commerce of Lewiston at that time was very great. Traffic for the West was assembled at Albany; carts and batteaus got it thence to Oswego; and from that point it was landed at

Lewiston. Thence it was transferred to vessels plying on Lake Erie, or else conveyed by ox-teams to the Ohio River. Lewiston was therefore a place of commercial, as well as of military importance. Its military importance lay very largely in the fact that Queenston, hardly more than a stone's throw in distance, had a British garrison of both militia and regulars. The main force of British troops, however, was at Fort George, at the mouth of the river, on the Canadian side.

The American forces at Lewiston were under the command of Major-General Stephen Van Rensselaer. Van Rensselaer's military education had been very limited; in fact, he had had practically none at all, and no training beyond the sanguinary prognosis of a dress parade, or a night attack on the café of the old Fort Orange Hotel at Albany. At the time when he assumed command at Lewiston, where his troops were assembled, it was very fortunate that an armistice was in progress. As for the personnel of the army, it is doubtful if a more wretchedly equipped lot of men were ever assembled in the country. In number, the army was about one thousand; in effectiveness, nothing at all. There was foot-wear for about three-quarters; suitable clothing for one-half; and arms for less than one-quarter. Of ammunition, there were less than ten rounds per musket; one cannon was in evidence, but there was not a single trained gunner.

The interim of the armistice was scarce a month, but in this time General Van Rensselaer used every possible effort to whip this motley crowd into the semblance of an organization. In clothing, feeding, and training the troops he used his own funds freely; and while he was making ready to meet his enemy in front, he was harrassed by a more unscrupulous enemy in the rear.

Early in September he received orders from General Dearborn to move into Canada, but to have obeyed the orders at that time would have been more than foolhardy. During that month, however, his cousin, Solomon Van Rensselaer, joined him; a few days later he was reinforced by Colonel Christie and a few regulars. Solomon Van Rensselaer was a soldier of experience; he had made a fine record under General Wayne, and for about ten years he had been Adjutant-General of the militia of the State. In the latter part of September Brigadier-General Alexander Smyth with

1,700 regulars arrived at Buffalo. Van Rensselaer fully expected the co-operation of Smyth, but he was informed by the latter that Buffalo was the proper headquarters for the campaign. Van Rensselaer asked for a council of war, but was given to understand that a Brigadier-General of the Regular Army could not be expected to place himself under the command of a militia officer; so Van Rensselaer began the preparations for the campaign without the assistance of Smyth.

About this time two incidents occurred which helped to precipitate matters. The Americans who had been taken prisoners when General Hull surrendered Detroit, reached Queenston, and could be seen across the river. Moreover, Republican politicians at Albany were setting up a hue and cry that Van Rensselaer, who was a Federalist, was delaying matters in order to hurt the prospects of the Republicans at the forthcoming election. Both the soldiers and the politicians, therefore, demanded that Van Rensselaer should begin the attack on Queenston without further delay — just as soldiers and politicians in 1861 forced General Scott into the disaster at Bull Run. So, between the devil and the deep sea, Van Rensselaer made ready to move on the enemy.

The progress of the campaign that followed would make a fine theme for a comic opera. On the 10th of October, near midnight, the attacking party was counted off in boats. Just after the first boat shoved off and was well out in the stream, it was discovered that there were no oars for the rest of the boats. It was alleged that the officer in command of the first boat took them purposely, but inasmuch as about fifty oars were required, it is difficult to understand how twenty-five men and twice as many oars could find room in a boat that could scarcely hold the men alone. The rest of the attacking column remained on the American side of the river, in a drizzling rain, waiting to be taken across. The first boatload stood off the Canadian shore in a storm that was equally drizzling. They all waited until they got tired, the dull northeast storm being the only thing that apparently was not inoculated with weariness. By early daylight, however, all hands concluded that coffee was more exhilarating than war, and the attack was called off.

The next day, just before dawn, operations were resumed again — this time without hitch as to oars. Thirteen boatloads, aggre-

gating more than 300 men, advanced in two columns across the river. The regulars were under Colonel Christie; the militia were commanded by Solomon Van Rensselaer. General Van Rensselaer remained in charge of the American side. In spite of a treacherous current, a good and orderly crossing was made. The approach was discovered, however, and the advancing columns were received with a well-directed fire. In spite of the fusillade, the attacking columns made a landing and drove the British troops back from the narrow shelf that skirts the shore. In the meantime, the boats were carrying more troops across, and the first column was at the top of the cliff, pushing the enemy back towards Queenston. But the British were soon reinforced and, rallying, began to press the Americans back towards the cliff. At this moment the first misfortune occurred. Colonel Christie was carried out of the way by a disabled boat, and could not reach a landing place. Colonel Van Rensselaer was at the front, where the fighting had become pretty hot, and there was no one to command at the landing place. Thus began the confusion that soon was to be worse confounded.

But even then an incident occurred that would have meant victory had it been known and its advantage realized. Captain Wool, with a boatload of regulars, was carried either by accident or by design, to a point directly under the fortifications. It was thought impossible to scale this escarpment, and, therefore, the troops had been withdrawn for service on the firing line. Wool and his handful of men nevertheless did scale the height and drove out the guard that held it, among them, the British Commander, Brock. Brock returned with additional men and twice essayed to retake the height, but in the second attempt, was shot through the heart. Had Captain Wool's position been known, and had he been supported, the day might have been saved. But unfortunately there was no one to take advantage of the circumstance. Solomon Van Rensselaer had his hands full at the front; Christie was temporarily out of the fight; and General Van Rensselaer, if he knew of Wool's stroke, could not help him.

There were several hundred men who had crossed to the Canadian shore, but for want of a leader, they had not been in action. These men became frightened and many of them slunk away into the ravines that indent the cliffs. When Van Rensselaer found

himself losing ground, he went in person to the shore and endeavored to lead them into action, but not a man of them would stir. He then crossed to the American side, while General Van Rensselaer went to the front, and implored the remaining troops to show a little courage; but not a man would move. They stood on their constitutional rights and denied the right of the President of the United States to order them off American soil. In chagrin at the cowardice of the militia, Van Rensselaer, who had been wounded four times, fell from exhaustion and loss of blood. General Van Rensselaer reached the front only in time to see the men who had borne the brunt of the fight surrounded and captured. Among the men who were made prisoners that day were three who in after years became famous — John E. Wool, Joseph G. Totten, and Winfield Scott.

For his work that day, the only thanks that Colonel Van Rensselaer received was a most humiliating letter from General Dearborn and a public denunciation from the same officer. Dearborn called him "an ignorant militia officer jealous of the regular service." Van Rensselaer's wounds disabled him from further service, and he was relieved at his own request. This disgraceful affair was the beginning and ending of fighting along the Niagara River during the year. The rest of the campaign was an exhibition of how not to do it.

General Smyth was then ordered to take command. His first effort was a proclamation so full of conceit and bombast that it has scarce a parallel in the annals of literature. Among the militia officers, however, was a very level head on the shoulders of one Peter B. Porter. Porter came into command of what practically was a new militia, for the men who had disgraced themselves at Lewiston had been sent home. Through Porter's efforts about two thousand men, nearly all from Western New York, had enrolled themselves, and they were fairly well equipped; moreover there was an opportunity to get them into training. In the meantime, General Smyth had been waging a vigorous warfare on paper by means of various proclamations; it then remained for him to make good. His first effort was an attempt to spike the guns of a battery near Fort Erie, but on making ready, a signal from the battery disclosed the fact that the enemy had discovered his in-

tent; so the attack was put off. The following day, the attempt was renewed. One detachment made for the battery, while another was sent to destroy the bridge across the Chippewa River. The guns were duly spiked, but a bugle call scared the first detachment so badly that they took to the boats, leaving the men who were sent to destroy the bridge without means of escape; they were, therefore, captured. In spite of this mishap, Porter was ready to make the crossing for an attack, when Smyth ordered him back.

Porter and his men were furious, and during the day a spirit of mutiny became apparent among the troops. Smyth was freely denounced and the soldiers began to clamor for Van Rensselaer. One militiaman drew a clever caricature of Smyth, which he labeled "Come-on-my-Heroes Van Bladder." So Smyth named another day for the attack. This time another bugle call gave warning as Porter was about to start, and Smyth again called the expedition off. Porter was beside himself with rage and denounced his superior in public as a coward. That Smyth was not lacking in personal courage may be inferred from the fact that he challenged Porter to a duel and exchanged shots with him. The public, which then, as in 1861, assumed to direct military affairs, looked upon Smyth's actions as cowardly rather than prudent. He was hooted and derided whenever he appeared on the streets and in Buffalo a militiaman shot at him. By this time he must have realized that his usefulness was at an end, for he very shortly afterward returned to Virginia. The militia were sent to their homes and the regulars went into winter quarters. Thus ended one of several campaigns of the War of 1812, each of which, as we read about it, seems more disgraceful than the others. As an exhibition of incompetency, each was picturesque.

It is hardly fair to call such a miscarriage as the operations on Niagara River a campaign; it would better be styled "unexpected results of vicious political maneuvers." The first factor in the affair was Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York. That Tompkins was an able and capable chief-executive of the State no one will deny. There have been governors of the Empire State whose names are engraved on the milestones of history for their honorable and enduring statecraft; there also have been gover-

nors whom we remember with shame only. Tompkins belonged to neither class; he was first and last a partisan of his party, loyal to the political machine which he then controlled. The political machines of the State were vicious then; they are not less so now. When Tompkins was planning for his re-election, at the beginning of the war, he saw danger in one man only, and that man was Stephen Van Rensselaer. With the latter as a candidate, Tompkins's success was by no means sure; with Van Rensselaer side-tracked, his election was fairly certain. So when the President of the United States called on Governor Tompkins for the New York quota of troops, the latter promptly detailed Van Rensselaer as their commanding officer. It may have been a somewhat foxy piece of statecraft, but it enabled Tompkins to carry the election. It was considered legitimate politics then; it would be considered so now. There were men of military training in New York who would and could have organized the motley crowd at Lewiston into an effective fighting machine; but to have put one of them at the head of the militia, or to have sought the services of a regular army officer, would not have got Van Rensselaer out of the way. It has been alleged also that Masonry was a factor in the matter, but of this there is not the slightest evidence. Governor Tompkins was a prominent Freemason, it is true, and Masonry was unfortunately in politics at that time. But as both the Van Rensselaers were Masons, we may safely dismiss the charge. Perhaps Freemasonry of to-day would not have been attractive to Governor Tompkins; there is also the suspicion that the Governor might not be attractive to Masonry, as it is to-day. The last few years of Governor Tompkins's life were bitter. He was defeated in his political aspirations; moreover, in an evil hour he pledged his private fortune to save the credit of the State, and the State allowed him to make good the obligation. He was never repaid, and he died a poor man. To this day he rests in a grave almost unknown and practically unmarked.

The most unique character of the campaign was Alexander Smyth. He was a Scotch-Irishman by birth and Roundhead in political heritage. But all the Oliver Cromwell seems to have been squeezed out his composition. He studied and practiced law in Virginia, but his practice was not financially successful, nor was he regarded as a strong political leader. In the reorganization

of the regular army, just before the war, a regiment was raised in the South and Smyth was made its commander. His legal rather than his military knowledge made him useful, however, and at the beginning of the War of 1812 he was made Inspector-General of the army with the rank of Brigadier-General. Just how he came to be put in command of a brigade, or why he was sent to the Niagara frontier is not clear. This also has been laid to the door of Governor Tompkins, but there is not a particle of evidence to support the charge. After his ridiculous fizzle he was set upon by the press, but he proved a pretty clever fighter with the pen. He unhorsed his critics by telling the truth about the militia; and on the whole, demonstrated that he was better fitted for shedding ink than gore. After the affair at Buffalo became generally known, President Madison dismissed him from the service without either charges or court martial — an unnecessary injustice. But whatever may have been his merits or his demerits as a soldier, his State, Virginia, was loyal to him. Shortly after his retirement, he was elected to the Congress; and of this body he was a useful and honored member up to the time of his death, some eighteen years afterward.

Of all the men prominent in the campaign of the Niagara frontier, the Van Rensselaers leave the pleasantest flavor in historical literature. Stephen Van Rensselaer was the last Patroon of Van Rensselaer Manor. He was, first of all a successful farmer, and he was moreover, endowed with great business ability. Educated at Harvard College, and being a born leader, it is not surprising that political offices sought him. At this time he had filled several offices, among them, that of Lieutenant-Governor. At the various political headquarters he was regarded as the normal candidate for Governor on the Federalist side. Unfortunately or fortunately at that time he was holding a commission as Major-General of the militia of the State. So when Governor Tompkins ordered him to the command of the forces at Niagara, he did not openly demur, although he must have realized that it was his political undoing. A man less loyal might have declined the command without losing his political prestige, but Van Rensselaer was not one of that sort; throughout an honorable lifetime his integrity was not questioned.

Solomon Van Rensselaer was of the same sort of stuff as his cousin. That the troops failed him in the time of emergency was no fault of his. The primary cause was lack of discipline and training. Good soldiers cannot be made in a day, nor a month; nor can they be trained by anyone who is without military education. General Dearborn was to learn this a little later, when his troops also refused to cross the Canadian border and move upon Montreal. Indeed, among the militia on the Canadian frontier, discipline worth the name at no time existed. In the ranks, doubtless the raw material was good enough, but there were few capable officers. As a nation we have had this lesson often enough, but we have not yet learned it. The cowardice of the troops at the river landing was due to battle scare, and for this Colonel Van Rensselaer was not in any way to blame. Had Colonel Christie been at the landing to hustle the men off to the firing line, there would have been little if any skulking. Men exposed to the fire of the enemy without being able to reply are pretty apt to become demoralized, and this is exactly what occurred. Such a thing is a part of the history of about every war. We may safely admit that General Van Rensselaer was at fault in not providing for such an emergency. But no one can justly blame Solomon Van Rensselaer for any shortcoming on his part. It can be said of him as was told of Bret Harte's hero, "he done his damndest."