



---

Colonel James Burn and the War of 1812: The Letters of a South Carolina Officer

Author(s): John C. Fredriksen and James Burn

Source: *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Oct., 1989, Vol. 90, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 299-312

Published by: South Carolina Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27568093>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



South Carolina Historical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*

JSTOR

**Colonel James Burn and the War of 1812:  
The Letters of a South Carolina Officer**  
John C. Fredriksen\*

The United States commenced the second year of the War of 1812 with a rigorous amphibious strategy on Lake Ontario aimed at adjoining targets on the Canadian shore. The first objective of the U.S. forces was York, the provincial capital, which fell to a well-coordinated assault on April 27, 1813.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, the Americans followed up this success by capturing the Niagara River bastion of Fort George on May 27.<sup>2</sup> With lodgings at both ends of the Niagara peninsula, strategic initiative had finally passed into American hands. Prospects were never better for reversing some of the disasters of the previous year, but at this critical juncture the American generalship became complacent. Although enjoying every advantage in men and materiel, they failed to pursue secondary objectives aggressively. Almost immediately their fortunes began to wane.

During the battle for Fort George, British forces were dislodged but allowed to escape into the Niagara hinterland. The Americans tottered nearly two weeks before dispatching an expedition against them, and this endeavor came to grief on the banks of Stoney Creek, June 6, 1813.<sup>3</sup> Here, the British suddenly turned on their pursuers in a surprise night assault. Though sorely pressed, the Americans successfully defended their encampment. But having suffered the loss of two generals captured, they promptly retreated back to Fort George with the enemy in hot pursuit. When British forces besieged that post, the Americans countered with a thrust at Beaver Dams, where enemy supplies were collected. Unfortunately, this detachment was surrounded by Indians and ignominiously surrendered on June

\*M.A in American Studies, University of Michigan, and M.L.I.S., University of Rhode Island.

<sup>1</sup>See Barlow Cumberland, *The Battle of York: An Account of the Eight Hours' Battle from the Humber Bay to the Old Fort in the Defence of York on 27th April, 1813* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1913), and Milo Milton Quaipe, *The Yankees Capture York* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1955).

<sup>2</sup>Consult Margaret Coleman, *The American Capture of Fort George, Ontario* (Toronto: Dept. of Northern and Indian Affairs, 1977), and Ernest Alexander Cruikshank, *The Battle of Fort George* (Welland, Ont.: Welland Tribune, 1904).

<sup>3</sup>Accounts by eyewitnesses are in two articles by John C. Fredriksen, "Memoirs of Ephraim Shaler: A Connecticut Yankee in the War of 1812," *New England Quarterly* 57 (1984), pp. 411-420, and "Lawyer, Soldier, Judge: Incidents in the Life of Joseph Lee Smith," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 51 (1986), pp. 103-121.



**Col. James Burn, from a portrait by John Wesley Jarvis in The Brooklyn Museum Collection**

24.<sup>4</sup> Stunned by these these twin reverses, the Americans thereafter restricted their activities to a static defense of Fort George and environs. This impasse lasted nearly six months, until they abandoned their hard-won gains to an imaginary British assault. In the annals of American military history, few operations began with such promise, or ended so disastrously, as the 1813 Niagara campaign.

Present throughout these proceedings was one of the few South Carolina officers of regimental grade, Colonel James Burn. Born at Charleston in 1768, Burn first experienced military service as a cornet in the volunteer state cavalry. When international tensions rose during the quasi-war with France, he obtained a regular army commission on March 5, 1799. Burn mustered out the following year, but did briefly serve as aide-de-camp to the notorious Major General James Wilkinson, to whom he was greatly attached. He disappears at this point, only to emerge on August 15, 1812, as colonel of the newly created 2nd U.S. Light Dragoons.

Burn served capably throughout the War of 1812, but is best remembered for his controversial role at the Stoney Creek debacle. Following the capture of the American generals, Burn was the next senior officer in the chain of command. Though earnestly exhorted by younger subordinates to pursue the defeated enemy, Burn, being a cavalry officer unacquainted with infantry tactics, refused to advance. He defended his decision to the secretary of war: "I found the command of the army had devolved on me and being at a loss of what steps to pursue in the unpleasant dilemma occasioned by the capture of our generals, finding the ammunition of many of the troops nearly expended, I had recourse to a council of field officers present, of whom a majority coincided with me that we ought to retire to our former position at the Forty Mile Creek, where we could be supplied with ammunitions and provisions, and either advance or remain until further orders."<sup>5</sup> His decision was resented by many, but it apparently satisfied the government for no court of inquiry was ever appointed. Burn's remaining tour of duty was uneventful and he resigned his commission on June 15, 1815. He returned to his former obscurity and died at Frankfort, Pennsylvania, on February 28, 1831.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the scarcity of War of 1812 documentation, the eight letters of James Burn reproduced below are of particular significance to military historians. First, they form the only collection extant which touches upon

<sup>4</sup>See Ernest A. Cruikshank, *The Fight in the Beechwoods: A Study in Canadian History* (Welland, Ont.: W.T. Sawle, 1889), and Frank H. Keefer, *Beaverdams* (Thorold, Ont.: Thorold Post Printers, 1914).

<sup>5</sup>*American State Papers: Military Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: Gales, Seaton, 1832) vol. 1, p. 447.

<sup>6</sup>Details on the life of James Burn were provided by the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, which is in possession of his portrait.

the career and activities of the 2nd U.S. Light Dragoons, an elite but apparently forgotten formation from this war.<sup>7</sup> Next, Burn's correspondence addresses in detail not simply combat narratives, but the equally important, more mundane aspects of everyday military life. He paints a bleak portrait of garrison duty within the ramparts of Fort George: supply and transportation shortages abound, officers bicker among themselves over trivial matters, and commanding generals are dismissed with alarming regularity. Burn's anxiety over the American fleet on Lake Ontario also illustrates in bold relief the degree to which army operations were contingent upon naval support. But most revealing of all is the growing sense of frustration over Burn's inability to garner any distinction for himself or his troopers. Throughout his tenure at Fort George, his principal liability lies with his being a cavalry commander in a theater dominated by other arms.

In addition to their historical merit, these letters allow us to address another consideration: What kind of man was the enigmatic James Burn? History is silent on the subject, but some intriguing information has survived in fragments. Burn's portrait, by the noted artist John Wesley Jarvis, bespeaks a robust individual, endowed with martial prowess, and looking every inch a hard-charging colonel of dragoons. However, contemporaries who knew him, while acknowledging his commanding presence, ascribe to the man an aura of unfulfilled expectations.<sup>8</sup> But from his writings Burn emerges as a frank, unassuming individual, perceptive in military circles and unawed by either rank or pedigree. As a military man, he speaks sparingly about his actions at Stoney Creek. Perhaps his reluctance to pursue the defeated British spared his battered survivors from further mishap at the hands of a veteran and dangerous enemy. Burn's explanation is laconic but conveys the confidence of one imbued with a sense of ultimate vindication. If any shortcomings can be detected in Burn's military background, it is his curious partiality for the rogue James Wilkinson who, it must be confessed, fooled a great many people respecting matters of

<sup>7</sup>A good history of this unit is Donald E. Graves, "The 2nd Regiment of U.S. Light Dragoons, 1812-1814," *Military Collector and Historian* 34 (1982), pp. 101-108.

<sup>8</sup>One observer wrote, "I have been much with the brave and modest Burn, but he is in far better hands for his military objects in Genl. Wilkinson's. His prospects, I think, seem good. As you say he walks well, rides well, and as soon as he puts on that most captivating of dresses, the American uniform, will as I would counter-vouch you, fight well, conquer humanely, die gallantly. But again, *how dare* you compare him to Izard?... He would make an elegant figure, would glitter in all parts of the field as an aide — would charge, too, like a soldier at the head of his battalion where ever ordered.... No my dear inchiquin, you and General Wilkinson must enjoy your judgements together, if you are bent on making a *great* man of Burn. Why attempt more than nature has done?" Richard Rush to Charles J. Ingersoll, April 12, 1812. Ingersoll Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

honesty and military ability. Through it all, James Burn proved himself to be a reliable soldier, uncomplaining and willing to serve his country. Perhaps, then, it is only fair to rank him with Arthur P. Hayne, John R. Fenwick, and the handful of other South Carolina officers who acquitted themselves well in the War of 1812.<sup>9</sup>

The letters of James Burn are located in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and are reproduced, exactly as written, with that institution's permission. They are all addressed to Charles Jared Ingersoll, a leading Republican politician and early historian of the War of 1812.

Utica [New York] 7th April, 1813

My Dear Sir,

I had the pleasure of receiving your letter of the 27th inst. from the Post Office here. I frequently took my pen to write to you from Sackett's Harbor, but was prevented by various interruptions — that village being so much crowded by the military that there was scarcely room to turn around. The cause of our rapid march to that point you are already well acquainted with, and our timely arrival, I believe, prevented Prevost from executing his plans.<sup>10</sup> I was in the hopes he would have made the attempt as the ice afforded a glorious opportunity for the cooperation of cavalry, and having with me one squadron of picked men, well mounted and eager to come to blows, I flattered myself that the 2nd Regt. would have gained some credit. Our force was too small to have ventured an attack on Kingston, the defenses of which are said to be formidable. Both Generals being disappointed in their plans have returned to their respective headquarters. Forage becoming scarce is the reason of my being marched to this place, where, I presume, I shall remain until the plan of the ensuing campaign is about to be put into execution. In the confidential letters of General Washington he complained of many abuses no doubt, and I am sorry to say that at the present day there is equal cause. The Q. Master's department has been unavoidably (I believe) in a miserable state of confusion, however as a new organization of all the branches of the E'tat Major has taken place, I trust that much

<sup>9</sup>Arthur P. Hayne (1790-1867), received no less than four brevet promotions during the war, a distinction shared only with Nathan Towson of Maryland. See *A Brief Sketch of the Life and Military Service of Arthur P. Hayne of Charleston, South Carolina* (Philadelphia: T.K. & P.G. Collins, 1837). John R. Fenwick (1780-1842) was wounded at Queenston Heights in 1812, and following the war helped compile the first uniform system of military drill for the United States Army. His diary is in the Toner Collection, Manuscript Department, Library of Congress.

<sup>10</sup>George Prevost (1767-1816), governor general of Canada. The best analysis of his military abilities is J. McKay Hitsman, "Sir George Prevost's Conduct of the Canadian War of 1812," *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1962), pp. 34-43.



good to the service will be the result.<sup>11</sup> Many general officers, I observe, have been lately appointed, which will no doubt impress the world with a belief that our armies are numerous, which probably will have a good effect, but to one who is on the spot and knows the actual force, it appears farcical — I much fear that, including all the recruits that will join this spring, the force will not exceed in a great degree that of last fall. The Army has been much weakened by death & at Sackett's Harbor, six, eight, & even ten are buried daily, the men generally are sickly. All armies calculate on losing a certain portion of the new recruits, and supposing that loss to equal what it was last year, the actual number of rank and file fit to take to the field the ensuing summer will fall short of the calculation of the sanguine.

I am of the opinion that the mediation of Russia will bring about peace — Great Britain knows so well the nature of our government that she will concede any point at present even if she disputed it hereafter, as she did at the Treaty of Amiens respecting Malta.<sup>12</sup> She well knows that the [ ] & preparation is already incur expense [sic] & if a peace is patched up, our government will relax as it did during the administration of Mr. Adams, and if a future armament becomes necessary would have a repetition of the same difficulties which are now in part overcome.<sup>13</sup> It will give me much pleasure to hear frequently from you, I beg you will present my best compliments to Mrs. Ingersoll, your brother, and all friends, and believe me to remain, my dear Sir, with sincere regard your friend &c.

James Burn

<sup>11</sup>For insight into the often horrendous logistical difficulties of this war, consult James Huston, *The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1953* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953), and Erna Risch, *Quartermaster Support for the Army: A History of the Corps, 1775-1939* (Washington, D.C.: Quartermaster Historian's Office, 1962).

<sup>12</sup>In 1813 Czar Alexander I attempted to resolve the dispute between Britain and America, but failed owing the former's intransigence. See Frank A. Golder, "The Russian Offer of Mediation in the War of 1812," *Political Science Quarterly* 31 (1916), pp. 380-391. Burn's mention of the 1802 Treaty of Amiens, which ended the Second Coalition against Napoleon, is a reference to Britain's refusal to abandon Malta after previously agreeing to do so. See George Lefebvre, *Napoleon from 18 Brumaire to Tilsit, 1799-1807* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 110-115.

<sup>13</sup>Burn here refers to the presidency of John Adams and his difficulties during the 1798-1800 quasi-war with France. See Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797-1801* (New York: Scribner, 1966).

Fort George, Upper Canada  
1st July, 1813

My Dear Sir,

I have often felt the greatest inclination to write to you but in taking my pen I found my subject would be an addition to the catalog of [ ] misfortunes and postponed it from time to time in hopes of a more favorable opportunity. I yesterday received yours of the 24th June and am happy to hear that the Secretary of War had formed so correct an opinion of my situation after the capture of generals Chandler<sup>14</sup> and Winder<sup>15</sup> at Stoney Creek. I was so much at a loss on that occasion as you would be if you were to be made the President of the U.S. without any previous notice. I commanded the advance and I did not even know the regiments that composed the Army. We had a sharp skirmish on the afternoon of the 5th with the advance of the enemy which led us to pursue them farther than was intended by the Generals, and induced them to (I believe) to encamp more advanced than they originally intended. The enemy, finding they would be attacked the next day, determined to give the first blow and came upon us in the dark with their Indians and regulars, who are entitled to credit for the masterly manner in which it was executed. Our army defended themselves with bravery but were unable to move from the position they held, while the enemy, from their local knowledge, moved under the cover of night — when they pleased. They pushed forward a column which took part of our artillery, and I believe at the same moment our generals, who were heard about that time encouraging the men to rally — it was so dark it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe and Chandler at that time had ordered the artillery to cease firing, fearing they were annoying our

<sup>14</sup>John Chandler (1762-1841). For his role at Stoney Creek, see Harry H. Cochrane, *History of Monmouth and Wales, Maine*, 2 vols. (East Winthrop, ME: Banner Co., 1894), vol. 1, pp. 167-168. He is described by one contemporary as “A man of very ordinary abilities, and totally unfit for the command of an army.” John C. Fredriksen, ed., “Plough-joggers for Generals: The Experience of a New York Ensign in the War of 1812,” *Indiana Military History Journal* 11 (1986), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>William H. Winder (1775-1824). See his *Statement by Colonel William H. Winder, of Occurrences on the Niagara Frontier in 1813* (Washington, D.C.: D. Green, 1829). Winder subsequently commanded American forces at the disastrous battle of Bladensburg, after which the British burned the White House. In contrast to Burn’s assessment, another contemporary felt Winder, “before he was appointed knew no more of military matters than his horse, and I am satisfied he could not put a company in motion now after two year’s experience.” Worthington C. Ford, ed., “The Letters of William Duane,” *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 20 (1906-1907), p. 363.



own men — unfortunate order for it was the British who were at the mouth of his cannon.<sup>16</sup> That part of the field of battle was covered with their killed and wounded.

When the day appeared I found myself in command and not knowing what had become either of the generals or a great portion of the army who inter nos had skulked into the woods, and finding the ammunition of those who had gallantly defended themselves in many instances nearly expended, I called a council of the field officers who were of the opinion we ought to retire to our former position at the 40 Mile Creek than to join our boats and get supplies.<sup>17</sup> We were joined by Generals Lewis<sup>18</sup> & Boyd<sup>19</sup> next day & with them came the British fleet who destroyed our boats, with tents, ammunitions, provisions & c. and the army returned by forced marches to this place for its protection.

The British have pressed and destroyed all the waggons in the country, they have at present [total control?] of the lake and the army must remain where it is until Chauncey<sup>20</sup> and Sir James Yeo<sup>21</sup> decide who shall have the command. In the meantime we are entrenched and the enemy push the Indians every night as far as our picquets, which keeps

<sup>16</sup>According to one officer, "The morning was extremely dark, so much so, that we could not distinguish a red coat from a blue one at the distance of three paces." Major John Johnson to Gen. Henry Dearborn, June 7, 1813. Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>17</sup>Several years later, Charles Jared Ingersoll characterized his erstwhile friend Burn as "operating under the influence of an evil star, which then seemed to predominate against us. . . [he] lacked what perhaps less courageous men would have shown in his exigency, fearlessness of responsibility: and fell back when a bold advance would probably gained him a brigade, with the applause of his country and his own confidence." Charles J. Ingersoll, *Historical Sketch of the Second War Between the United States and Great Britain, Declared by Act of Congress, the 18th of June, 1812, and Concluded by Peace, the 15th of February, 1815* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845), vol. 1, pp. 286-287.

<sup>18</sup>Morgan Lewis (1754-1844), formerly governor of New York. See Julia Delafield, *Biographies of Francis Lewis and Morgan Lewis* (New York: A.D.F. Randolph & Co., 1877).

<sup>19</sup>John P. Boyd (1764-1830), who at one time served as a mercenary in the Indian army. A defense of his military career is *Documents and Facts Relative to Military Events in the Late War* (N.p.: 1816).

<sup>20</sup>Isaac Chauncey (1772-1840). Insight into Chauncey's failure to wrest control of Lake Ontario from the British is in Ernest A. Cruikshank, "The Contest for the Command of Lake Ontario in 1812 and 1813," *Royal Society of Upper Canada Transactions* 10 (1916), pp. 161-223.

<sup>21</sup>Sir James Lucas Yeo (1782-1818). A biography of this noted naval figure is John W. Spurr, "Sir James Lucas Yeo: A Hero of the Lakes," *Historic Kingston* No. 30 (1981), pp. 30-45.

the army constantly on the qui vive. We have had many quarrels among our officers of the most childish nature but I believe most have been arranged, I have kept clear as yet & hope to continue to do so. I have been playing Capt. of Dragoons and being generally in the advance I have troubled myself very little with the tittle tattle of the camp, which in that respect equals any tea party in our cities. I will write to you often in field and let you know what is passing here. When you have leisure I shall be glad to hear from you. Deserters come in daily who report that the enemy are reinforcing and intend soon to pay us a visit; if they come in the day time we will beat them most assuredly, our fellows fire so much better than theirs do. A dieu.

Yours, &c. James Burn

Fort George, Upper Canada  
16th July, 1813

My Dear Sir,

I did myself the pleasure of writing you some time ago, since then the army has remained entrenched and inactive. The enemy is reinforcing daily and visits our picquets frequently accompanied by his Indians, in hopes of inducing us to send him every advantage by employing the Indians, who would be of little service were he to storm our lines. The army cannot proceed for the want of transportation, having no waggons, and the enemy commanding the lake renders our boats useless. We are anxiously waiting the result of the operations about to commence with the fleet under Chauncey on the success of which all our future movements depend. We were much surprized yesterday to hear the recall of Dearborn from the command of this army.<sup>22</sup> We all regret it as he is a persevering good officer and had recovered his health sufficiently to do his duty. I believe it was a very unexpected event to him and he appeared to be much mortified at the manner in which it was communicated to him — I really felt for the old buck. The command devolved on Boyd, who is no doubt a brave man, but I should suppose not capable of so important a command. I really wish you would send us somebody that can be depended upon and who has been tried. Wilkinson would be the man, but he is still in the South.<sup>23</sup> Williams is talked of as one of the brigadiers who no doubt will exert himself & do all he can, but a general of experience would serve us better at present. General Lewis has gone to Sackett's Harbor, he is a pleasant gentleman, but as an officer

<sup>22</sup>Henry Dearborn (1751-1829). A distinguished Revolutionary veteran, Dearborn was sacked for incompetence. See Richard A. Erney, *The Public Career of Henry Dearborn* (New York: Arno Press, 1979).

<sup>23</sup>James Wilkinson (1751-1825). A glorified account of his military career is his *Memoirs of My Own Times*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Abraham Small, 1816).

he was laughed at by all, he left us in the nick of time and I do not believe anyone regretted his departure. Winder was the best of the bunch and the army certainly experienced a loss in his capture — he was violent and gave offense often, but he had ardor and talent. I have not yet heard the news of the camp relative to the command of the troops, but I dare say there will be much bickering among some of the officers. There are many who are calling for rank and command, who are never at the trouble of consulting themselves whether or not they are qualified — self conceit appears to predominate. I intend in a few days to write to the Secretary of War relative to the recruiting of my regiment which I will forward to you and get you to deliver to him, when an opportunity offers. Do you think there is any probability of peace soon taking place? On that question depends all my future plans respecting the Regt. I hope you enjoy good health and pass the time pleasantly. I guess however you must be tired of Washington before now.

Yours sincerely, James Burn

Fort George, Upper Canada

31st July, 1813

My Dear Sir,

I had the pleasure of receiving yours of the 18th and as you there mention the probability of Congress adjourning so soon I have directed this to Philadelphia, where I presume you will direct your course immediately. The British, tho' foiled on their attempt on Hampton & Norfolk, appear to be carrying on a most successful war against our finances, the assembling [of] the militia in so many quarters must be attended with much inconvenience at this season, besides the expense of moving them.<sup>24</sup> The foreign troops they have chosen to carry on their operations against us appear to be a strange group, they are, I fancy, a part of the Regt. de Watteville formerly composed of French emigrants, but now recruited with all the miscreants that could be collected.<sup>25</sup> A little secret service money might be well applied among them. General Williams arrived two days ago & Chauncey's fleet of 17 vessels made its appearance about the same time. A strong detachment under the command of Scott embarked on the night of the 29th and has gone up the lake and we

<sup>24</sup>Here Burn is referring to the British repulse at Craney Island, June 22, 1813. The most recent account is John M. Hallahan, *The Battle of Craney Island: A Matter of Credit* (Portsmouth, Va.: St. Michael's Press, 1986).

<sup>25</sup>Originally a Swiss formation, the DeWatteville Regiment recruited large numbers of French, Polish, and Spanish prisoners into its ranks. It was a highly unreliable formation. See John D. Martin, "The Regiment DeWatteville: Its Service and Settlement in Upper Canada," *Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records* 62 (1960), pp. 17-30.

are in hourly expectation of hearing the result. The destruction of some mills and public stores at Burlington bay are the ostensible objects but I presume they will do every thing to distress the enemy in their power. Boyd is commanding general, and Williams has taken command of his brigade. Everything must be new to him and as he told me I was the only officer in camp he was acquainted with I have of course done everything for him in my power and will consider it my duty to give him all the information I possess on any subject he may be pleased to inquire.<sup>26</sup> I mentioned in my last my intention of troubling the Secretary of War with a few lines relative to the cavalry and of requesting you to deliver them, but believing you would leave Washington before my letter could reach you, I concluded on sending it by mail to the Department, which I have done & where it may take its chance. The mail leaves this day, but I will not close this letter until the last moment in the hope of being able to give you the news from the fleet. Williams has appointed your townsman Capt. Biddle his major of brigade, he could not have selected a more deserving young officer.<sup>27</sup> We have nothing from the fleet and the mail about to close, I must therefore conclude by offering my best compl. to Mrs. Ingersoll and my wishes for the health of your youngsters. To your brother, Mr. Waln, Wilcox, Davis and our friends at the corner near the Coffee House I beg to be remembered when you pass that way and in the meantime I remain with sincere regards &c. &c &c.

James Burn

Fort George 3d August, 1813

My Dear Sir,

I wrote to you a few days ago by the mail to Philadelphia — Col Scott has this moment landed from the fleet.<sup>28</sup> They went to the head of

<sup>26</sup>David R. Williams (1776-1830). Williams was formerly an influential "War Hawk" Congressman from South Carolina, known better as "Thunder and Lightning Williams" owing to the nature of his speech. Williams left the Niagara frontier apparently disillusioned by the static nature of warfare around Fort George. By his own admission, Williams claimed "I love, like Murat in his best days, to lead the charge. I am a miserable poor hand at defense." Harvey Toliver Cook, *The Life and Legacy of David Roggerson Williams* (New York: Country Life Press, 1916), p. 185.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Biddle (1790-1831), son of an influential Philadelphia family. Two other brothers, John and James, were also distinguished in this war. See Nicholas B. Wainwright, "The Life and Death of Major Thomas Biddle," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 104 (1980), pp. 326-344.

<sup>28</sup>Winfield Scott (1786-1866), the most noted soldier to emerge from this war. See Charles Winslow Elliott, *Winfield Scott, the Soldier and the Man* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937).

the lake but found the British so strongly entrenched and numerous that they did not think it proper to attack them. A reinforcement of four hundred regulars in boats passed up in sight of the fleet which could not get near them, it being a calm. They landed at York, burnt the barracks, took some stores and flour, and made prisoners of some wounded men in the hospital, who they paroled. The weather has been very warm and so calm that the ships could not sail until evening when a gentle breeze sprang up. The enemy attack our picquets every night, which I suppose is meant to give employment to their Indians who must be doing something. I shall have the pleasure of writing you again ere long and I remain My Dear Sir,

Yours Sincerely,  
James Burn

Fort George, Upper Canada  
8th August 1813

My Dear Sir,

We have had a most interesting spectacle for the last two days, having both the British and our own squadron in sight. The former came boldly up to attack ours, who as boldly went to meet them, the British had the weather gage and declined the combat. Chauncey fired three guns at Yeo as a challenge, which was not accepted. The British fleet went to the head of the lake, ours followed, the weather became very squally and both returned yesterday — two of our small vessels are missing and rumor says they foundered in the night in a squall.<sup>29</sup> Chauncey has this morning received a reinforcement of soldiers to act as marines as it is supposed Yeo means to board from the number of Marines in his fleet. Both fleets in sight, the Commodore is said to be in good spirits and confident of a favorable result. The British have the wind in their favor. 10th August. It is certain that the two schooners foundered and all on board except 14 perished — last night the wind blew fresh, our fleet is higher up the lake than this place, and the British are opposite the mouth of the river. Yesterday Chauncey did all in his power to get near the enemy, but could not succeed. The British appear to manouvre in hopes of cutting off some of our small vessels, when I presume they would not risk an action. The wind has been always in their favor, which has enabled them to sail in any direction they chose. I shall leave this letter open till the mail is about to close, which will be about seven o'clock: if anything occurs I will mention it, if not you will

<sup>29</sup>These two vessels were recently uncovered by underwater archaeology and are considered a historic discovery. An illustrated account is David A. Neilson, "Hamilton and Scourge: Ghost Ships of the War of 1812," *National Geographic* 161 (1983), pp. 288-313.

believe me to remain  
Yours Sincerely,  
James Burn

Fort George, Thursday  
12th August

My Dear Sir,

I wrote by the last mail stating the situation of our fleet and the enemy. On Tuesday night about 11 o'clock a cannonading was heard on the lake, and yesterday two of our schooners came into the river with the disagreeable tidings of the capture of two of our schooners. The wind favored Chauncey for a few hours and he determined to attack and made a signal for the leading schooner to commence the action. This signal had scarcely been given before the wind changed, the British commander made sail and cut off the two schooners before the rest of the squadron could come to their relief. Such is the history of the battle as given by the officers who have arrived. Chauncey with the remainder of his ships has gone down the lake, I presume to get provisions at Sackett's Harbor. It is not known whether the enemy sustained any damage or not, they have not been in sight of this place since. When Chauncey arrived off here he had thirteen vessels, two were lost in a squall and two being taken leaves him nine and the enemy with the addition of the two they have captured, will have eight. This in my opinion will make them so superior to us, their vessels being large, that the question of the lake navigation is nearly decided. Of what will next be done I can form no idea, the army has no means of transporting its provisions & ammunition and without those necessaries it would cut a sorry figure in the field. I am so busily employed as President of a Court Martial (and I am sorry to say we have so many officers to try) that I have little time to myself. You will therefore excuse this short epistle and with best compliments to Mrs. Ingersoll and all friends believe me to remain My Dear Sir

Yours most truly,  
James Burn

Geneva, New York  
12th Sept. 1813

My Dear Sir,

I received yours of the 9th inst. at Fort George and I assure you no one regrets more sincerely the death of our friend Poundfit than I do. I always respected his virtues and his foibles, poor fellow, were only hurtful to himself. I regret also my not having named him in any letter among those friends when I begged to be remembered, it was an omission that I cannot account for in any other way than that I frequently intended to have written him, but knowing his sanguine views as an



American I waited for an opportunity of giving him some pleasing military detail which I am sorry to say has not yet been in my power. You will be surprised at the date of this letter, I am here in pursuance of orders received from Genl. Wilkinson when at the harbor. The troop horses were so worn out by fatigue and the want of food which could not be procured at Fort George that many must have died of starvation had we not been removed, besides in the woody country which must be the theater of war, if war is to be carried beyond that post, our corps could not render much service.<sup>30</sup> As the general and the fleet are at Niagara, something will be undertaken soon, he will either endeavor to beat the enemy where he is posted, which will in my opinion be difficult business, or he will withdraw the troops for another destination. Should he succeed in dislodging the enemy, he will retreat to the 20 and 40 mile creeks, from thence to Burlington heights where, with fifteen hundred men, he may keep off five thousand. The General is a man of good understanding and I hope he will judge for himself and not be humbugged by Councils of War and all other military modes of gaining information. A portion of the militia of this state are under orders for the Niagara frontier which induces me to think they are intended to replace the regulars. The Q. Master General, I am told, has bought all the boats on the small lakes and is sending them into Ontario as fast as possible. Not being in the secret, I know nothing of the plans or the topics, but it appears to me the season is too advanced to make any change unless it can be effected immediately.<sup>31</sup> The lake becomes stormy next month and the [ ] which answers in to [ ] for transportation will be useless to all in a late season of the year. I shall be happy to hear from you, direct to Utica where I have given directions to the Post Master to forward my letters until I know my destination. I beg to present my compl. to Mrs. Ingersoll and family, and to remain My Dear Sir with great regard yours &c.

James Burn

<sup>30</sup>Burn is not exaggerating. During the height of Stoney Creek his "squadron of dragoons remained formed and ready at their post, but could not act on account of the darkness and thickness of the adjacent woods." *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, vol. 1, p. 447. There seems to be a long-standing misconception as to the role of Burn's cavalry in this battle. A recent publication states, "Just as their comrades' line broke, a squadron of the 2nd U.S. Light Dragoons charged, riding through an extremely surprized 49th Foot." The notion of a cavalry charge at night, in the dark, with friendly troops in front is patently absurd. They were apt, under these conditions, to do more damage to themselves and friendly forces than to the enemy. Quote is from Gregory J. Urwin, *The United States Cavalry: An Illustrated History* (Dorset, UK.: Blandford Press, 1985), p. 48.

<sup>31</sup>Wilkinson's subsequent campaign was defeated on November 11, 1813, at Chryslers Farm, Ontario. See Charles W. Elliott, "The Indispensible Conquest," *Infantry Journal* 44 (1938), pp. 334-342.