

# Battle of Big Sandy and the Carrying of the Great Rope in 1814 (Part 2)

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## An Analysis of the Events Surrounding The Battle of Big Sandy and the Carrying of the Great Rope in 1814 and the Ensuing 185 Years © Blaine Bettinger, Fall 1998 / Spring 1999

### The McKee Hospital

After the battle had ended and the last shot rang through the marsh, the cries of the wounded and dying must have been painfully evident. Since it would not be prudent to move the approximately 39 wounded soldiers very far, a suitable shelter and makeshift hospital would need to be found nearby.

The closest appropriate home was that of Joseph McKee, for whom the stretch of the creek where the battle had occurred had been named McKee's Landing. Joseph's daughter, Harriet McKee Ward, remembered the incident, and helped make the McKee Hospital part of the Battle of Big Sandy legend (Emerson 593). According to legend, Harriet's mother was warned of the danger of staying in the home since British solid shot were approaching them. They retreated to Ellisburgh while the battle raged on. The next day Mrs. McKee and her children, including Harriet, returned to her home to find the children's toys.

"Harriet McKie [sic] Ward gave many interesting stories to her 'listeners.' Many of these have been passed onto me by Anna Jones Bartlett. The McKies moved to the old Fuller place to live while the British were recovering from their wounds. In speaking of the British she said, 'They were the handsomest men I ever saw.'

"One of the officers died after having entrusted a ring to Mrs. McKie to be sent to his wife. Another named a granddaughter of Mrs.

McKie's, 'Sarah Emily Domic' for a relative or sweetheart of his own.

"Mrs. McKie Ward spoke highly of the honesty and good manners of the British, and said that they never took anything that they did not pay for (DeLong 101)."

Another family, the Otis', was also warned of the danger approaching. Mrs Otis took her infant daughter, Emily, on horseback to Ellis village (Ellisburg) to the home of her brother (DeLong 100).

"Mrs. Otis returned the next day to find her house filled with the British dead and wounded. By stepping over the bodies she entered the house to find that all the cloth that was in the house and all the sheets, pillow cases and table linens had been torn into strips and used for bandages (DeLong 100)."

The soldiers were cared for their about two weeks, and Capt Otis presented the government with a bill for \$150 to replace damaged or destroyed property (Lossing 800). Finally, in the mid 1850's, Congress voted to compensate the Otis family. He was paid \$1800, put the lobbyist who put the motion through had made an agreement to take half of the payment, leaving Capt Otis with only \$900 (DeLong 100).

## The Great Cable Carry

**After all the** guns, small cables, and other supplies bound for the *Superior* had been unloaded from the batteaux and carted to Sackets Harbor by oxen, only one great rope remained. It was apparently too big and too heavy for a single cart, so as much as would fit was placed on a cart, and the rest was carried by the militiamen. Although there is no official account of the size of the cable, most accounts describe it as being 600 feet long, 6 inches thick, and weighing 9,600 pounds.

The cable was carried from McKee's Landing on Big Sandy through Ellisburg and Belleville to Robert's corners, where the carriers rested overnight. Then it was taken through Smithville on the way to Sackets Harbor, where it arrived in the afternoon of the second day. This course, rather than one close to the lake, had to be taken as a necessary precaution. British scouting parties, although unlikely, could not be allowed to seize this all-important cable.

There has also been controversy about the final use of the cable on the *Superior*. Some believe that it was a hawser, used as the anchor rope for the enormous vessel. Others believe that the rope was meant to be broken down and used for rigging and other purposes. Once again, there is no official account, and neither possibility can be definitively ruled out.

Lastly, there is no official listing of the men who helped carry the cable. There are, however, many reasonable

educated guesses and the few eyewitness accounts that were documented and are intact. It is these accounts that contribute life and soul to the story of the great cable. These stories are the reason we remember the Carrying of the Cable almost 200 years later.



Chauncey's Dismantled Flag-Ship *Superior*. The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812, Benson Lossing. This image is in the public domain in the United States as the copyright has expired because its first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

## Cable Carry Eyewitness Accounts

**On Monday,** February 9, 1880, almost 66 years after the Battle, an article describing one man's first-hand account of the Cable Carry appeared in the Watertown Daily Times. Eighty-six year old Silas Lyman of Lorraine, who was about 20 years old in 1814, wished to leave his version of the events.

"I have been requested by many to give some account of the cable that was taken up and carried on men's shoulders from the mouth of Sandy Creek to Sackets Harbor, a distance of about twenty miles. The cable weighed nearly five tons, and eighty-four men took it up and carried it from McKee's Landing to Ellis Village, where we got a few recruits and went to Belleville, and thence to a place called Four Corners, finding ourselves then pretty well drilled out. The people at the Corners most liberally furnished us with supper and barn lodging and breakfast, all freely given and thankfully received. Then the rope was taken up and on through Smithville and to the Harbor. Some of our men tired out, but others volunteered in their places. One man left his team with his boys, saying we should not do the job alone. He was a stout fellow, and put his shoulder to the work. As we advanced, men kept falling in, and the people along the route cheered us lustily. And as we advanced

toward the end of our rope job, there was loud cheering the whole length of the cable, which was about thirty-six rods long and the size of a seven-inch stove pipe.

"As we went into the town, there were as many men as could walk under it, and with good music the big cable was landed in the ship yard in care of the soldiers. A stout man stood on the cable and held a flag, and a boy stood on the man's shoulders and played the drum. The boy may be living to tell for himself, but on looking around I can find no man living that took part in carrying the cable – not one.

"The men who first took up the cable were Ellisburg and Lorraine men principally, about 120 lbs to each man.

"This was the last of the property driven into Sandy Creek by the British fleet, consisting of guns and rigging for the old ship now on the stocks.

"Of the old ship I will just say, I was at work on a big oak tree about a mile south of the Harbor, when the word came, "No more ship timber." Peace was declared.

"I resided in Lorraine sixty years, and had quite an extended acquaintance in the south part of Jefferson county with many choice friends and good neighbors who are gone the way of earth. To such as remain, I say

farewell – meet me in Heaven. I am in my eighty-sixth year (Lyman)."

On October 17, 1883 Deacon Silas Lyman died in Lorraine, NY at the age of 89. His obituary appeared in the Pulaski Democrat on October 25. He was born in Hartford, Washington County, NY, on July 24th, 1794, and moved to Lorraine at 12 years of age. When the War of 1812 broke out, Lyman enlisted and saw action at Sackets Harbor, Niles Creek, and Sandy Creek. The obituary gives him full credit for the idea to carry the great cable from the battle site to Sackets Harbor.

He was at the Battle of Sandy Creek "when the British, who had ascended that stream to capture our stores, where themselves captured and held prisoners of war. It was on his [Silas Lyman's] suggestion that the celebrated feat was undertaken of carrying a ship's cable weighing five tons from the mouth of Sandy Creek to Sackets Harbor, a distance of 20 miles, by 84 men. The boats conveying from Oswego the armament and rigging for the ships in process of building at Sackets Harbor, were chased by the British into the mouth of the Sandy Creek. This cable was too large to be put into a wagon. Young Lyman said, 'Let us carry it.' 'Can you do it?' asked the commanding officer. 'We can try,' replied the

sturdy lad. They shouldered it and marched on (Pulaski Democrat).

Another eyewitness account comes from research done by John Benson Lossing. In 1860 he interviewed 80 year old Harmon Ehle for his book, Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812. Lossing states that Ehle provided him with the facts he portrays in his book, and was one of the carriers of the Great Cable.

“The cannon and cables were landed safely from the flotilla, and transported by land sixteen miles to the Harbor. The great cable for the Superior had occupied, in ponderous coils, one of the boats of ten tons burden. The cable was twenty-two inches in circumference, and weighed nine thousand six hundred pounds. No vehicle could be found to convey it over the country to the Harbor; and, after a delay of a week, men belonging to the militia regiment of Colonel Allen Clark [the 55th Regiment of the New York militia], who had hastened to the creek on hearing the din of the battle, volunteered to carry it on their shoulders. About two hundred men were selected for the labor. They left the Big Sandy at noon, and arrived at the Harbor towards the evening of the next day. They carried a mile at a time without resting. Their shoulders were terribly bruised and chafed by the great rope. They were received by loud cheers and marital music. A barrel of whisky was

rolled out and tapped for their refreshment, and each man received two dollars extra pay. (Lossing 801).”

The third eyewitness account is a continuation of the letter quoted previously from N.W. Hibbard to an A. Hunt from Rural Hill, NY, on February 10, 1859.

In 1894, Mr. Hubbard’s son Harvey died in Watertown at the age of 92. He was only 12 at the time of the events, and served as a water boy for the men carrying the rope. The article states, “Apparently he [Harvey] did no carrying himself but rode his father’s horse and got drinking water for the men at the frequent stops (Watertown Daily Times).”

In the history of Jefferson County, NY, published in 1898, author Edgar C. Emerson devotes a great deal of time and space to the Battle of Big Sandy and the following incidents. Regarding the Carrying of the Cable, he gets his information from Mr. Hubbard’s letter, which continues thus:

“Teams and carriages were hired, and commenced moving the property, and in about two weeks it was accomplished, without anything remarkable, except that a cable of 22 inches circumference, and weighing, according to my best recollection, about five tons, could not be transported safely on any carriage that could be procured. The men were clamorous for their discharge, as their spring’s work was far behind the usual time, but this cable must be strictly

guarded, as without it our superiority on the lake could not be acquired. The officers of the regiment held a meeting, and proposed carrying the cable by hand, and in this meeting agreed that no officer should be exempt except the Colonel, and if the men would help carry it to the Harbor, they should be discharged. We took up the cable about noon, and arrived that night at what is now Robert’s Corners; here, during the night, perhaps one-third of our men deserted, leaving a heavy load for the remainder to carry, and every man’s shoulder were bruised till they were black and blue – larger than the palm of a man’s hand; but finding the bottom of an old straw-stack near, we made mattresses from it, and placed them on our shoulders, and thus shouldering the cable, arrived at the Harbor before sundown; perhaps few of the men were able to make use of their arms for a week. When we arrived at the Harbor, we numbered just 100, all told, and received of Commodore Chauncey \$2.00 each. I cannot recollect the names of the men that assisted; no officer failed to fulfill his pledge; Clark Allen was our Colonel; did not carry. Major Arnold Earl, Captains Gad Ackley, Brooks Harrington, Daniel Ellis, Oliver Scott, Lieutenants Charles Hollister and Grout Hossington, I recollect, and I also recollect Captain Jacob Wood, of revolutionary memory, carried through (Hibbard 1859).”



Now that the Superior had all her armament and rigging, she was a formidable force on the lake. Commanded by Lieutenant John R. Elton, the Superior was launched in June, 1814, and sailed to Kingston in July to help Commodore Chauncey's blockade of the city there. In late September she helped with the movement of 3000 troops from Sackets Harbor to Genesee, NY, and temporarily sailed back to Kingston before spending the winter of 1815 back in Sackets Harbor (Keck 1975). Before the arrival of another wartime Spring thaw necessitated the launch of the Superior, peace was declared. She sat in Sackets Harbor until being sold in or before 1825 (Keck 1975, National Archives Naval Records).

As is true of many events of the past, there are many issues surrounding the Battle of Big Sandy told yet today that might only be embellishments amplified by time. Time has the completely innocent ability erode or alter the truth, in part due to fallible human memory. Despite the apparent truth-value of the legends surrounding the Battle of Big Sandy, they are enjoyable and endearing, and perhaps lend a great deal of longevity to the events. Since many of these legends can never be proven, a better label might be 'possibilities'.

One of these possibilities surrounds a black man fighting for the British forces at Big Sandy. The most interesting account of the incident is found in the Pictorial Field-Book

of the War of 1812 by John Benson Lossing in 1868. He states that the black man, "who had been ordered to throw the cannon and small-arms overboard in case of danger, did so when the fight was ended. The Americans called on him to desist or they would shoot him. He paid no attention to them, and, with a sense of duty, had cast overboard one cannon and many muskets, when he fell dead, pierced by twelve bullets (Lossing 800)."

On a later page, Lossing speaks with 75 year old Jehaziel Howard in July 1860. Howard, Lossing asserts, "saw the negro shot on the British gun-boats in the Big Sandy (Lossing 801)."

In an article written by Anna Jones Bartlett in 1926, another brief mention is made of this brave soldier. After all had surrendered:

"a colored man on board one of the enemy's boats attempted to throw over a piece of ordinance and before he accomplished it he was pierced by five musket balls. He did succeed in throwing a small brass cannon overboard, saying as he did so, 'The damned Yankees shall not have that.' The people who were then living, and have since lived in the vicinity, have searched and searched in vain to find the cannon (Bartlett 1926)."

Another example of a possibility is the case of Kit Edmunds. According to a

number of sources, Mr. Edmunds was trapping at the mouth of the Big Sandy as the British began their advance up the Creek (Emerson 592). Despite an attempt to get information from him, Edmunds refused to speak, but was forced to pilot the enemy up the Creek (Hough 510, DeLong 98). In the article written by Anna Jones Bartlett, mention is made of Mr. Edmunds. As Ms. Bartlett explains, Edmunds "was a large powerfully built man. One of the British soldiers asked him if all the Americans were as large as he was and he replied, "Oh yes, I'm only an underling in comparison with some of them (Bartlett 1926)."

A third possibility is described by Dr. J. M. Sturdevant in his letter to the Watertown Daily Times published July 17, 1873. His fairly accurate account of the Battle (if Woolsey's account is considered to be the norm) is followed by the story of a wounded soldier. In the aftermath of the battle, Sturdevant:

"noticed a little incident which I shall never forget: Among the wounded was a huge negro as black as the ace of spades, who was rolling on the ground and groaning at a fearful rate. Being asked if he was wounded, he said, "Yes, I am almost killed." "Where are you wounded?" was the next question. He replied, "I am hurt so bad that I cannot tell where I am hurt the worst." His clothing was stripped off and his body examined. It was a muse; he was not hurt at

all. A few sharp words from an officer, and a few applications of the toe of his boot, brought the negro to his feet, who dressed himself and took his place in the ranks with the prisoners.(Sturdevant 3)”

The last possibility describes the flight of one man to distant Oswego for help. According to legend, Abiah Jenkins, brother-in-law of Battle participant Captain John Otis, was sent on horseback to the soldiers at Oswego to tell them of the British invasion of Sandy Creek, perhaps to requisition aid. Reportedly, Jenkins had been informed not to spare the horses, and when he reached Oswego his horse dropped dead (Bartlett 1926, Sandy Creek Library 744).

## **Monuments**

Thanks to the effort of many different people and organizations across the state, four major monuments and a marker have been erected to honor the events of May and June 1814. There is a monument at the Battlefield and a marker just a short distance away at the McKee Hospital site. There are three more monuments along the trail of the cable carry, one outside of Ellisburg, one in Smithville, and a third in Sackets Harbor.

### **Battlefield Monument**

In August 1926, an article in the Jefferson County Journal mentioned plans for the erection and dedication of the boulder at the site of the Battlefield:

“Plans are being made by the local chapter of the Daughters of the War of 1812, of which Mrs. M.J. Huggins of Pierrepoint Manor is president, to mark the site of the Battle of Sandy Creek with a big boulder, suitably inscribed. There will be special exercises to dedicate this boulder sometime in September. (Jefferson County Journal, August 1926).”

A history of the Northern Frontier Chapter of the United States Daughters of the War of 1812 explains that during a chapter meeting on March 18, 1916, a Mrs. Laird read her paper on the Battle of Big Sandy and carrying of the cable. According to the history, this inspired the Chapter to erect a monument at Big Sandy. On September 16, 1927, the boulder was dedicated.

The Chapter history also relates the rededication of the boulder at the battlefield. On July 27, 1935, the Chapter rededicated the marker because it had been moved from the east side to the west side of the highway because of road work. State Officers were present, and the program was done by Mrs. Frank Williams, Chapter President.

## Cable Route Markers

At a July 8, 1930 meeting of the Daughters of the War of 1812 in Ilion, NY, a committee was formed to decide the route and location of three permanent bronze memorials for the Trail of the Great Rope. Elected were W. Pierrepont White of Utica, Peter Nelson from the state historian's office, and Edward P. Buyck, the designer of the memorials (Watertown Daily Times, July 9, 1930).

Between 1927 and 1928, the Frontier Chapter of the Daughters of 1812 had placed 13 temporary markers along what they believed to be the approximate route (Northern Frontier Chapter History 1998). However, some controversy had arisen regarding the route. For example, a Mrs. M. M. Babcock from Belleville, NY submitted an article to the Watertown Daily Times describing what she felt was the route from Ellis Village (Ellisburg) to Smithville to Sackets Harbor along the "Port Ontario" road. Another subscriber to the Times asked what route the Cable had taken, and much the same answer was given by the newspaper (Watertown Daily Times, June 12, 1930).

On September 11, 1930, the committee announced that the memorial dedication ceremonies would be held October 1st. The Charles A. Winslow Trucking Company of Utica would deliver the six ton markers, measuring 6 feet wide and 7.5 feet high, in mid-September (Watertown Daily Times, September 11, 1930).

Three sites had been donated to the Daughters of 1812 for placement of the markers. The first, in Ellisburg, was donated by H Edmund and Jennie Machold (Liber 427). The second, in Smithville, was donated by Scott and Clara Carpenter (Liber 427). The third, located in Sackets Harbor, was donated by William J. and Margaret M. Fields (Liber 427).

On September 26, 1930, only a few days before the dedication of the memorials, the chairperson of the Memorial Committee,

Harriet B. Fairbanks, reported to a general meeting of the Daughters of 1812:

"This morning," said Mrs. Fairbanks, "I went over the route and the stones have arrived and they are artistic pieces. People all over the country have evinced interest in the Cable trail and I have received letters from people from many sections of the United States.

"One letter from a woman in Washington, D.C. stated that she wished she could attend the services as one of her ancestors was at Sackets Harbor. She regretted the fact that she had not heard about the celebration in time to make arrangements to be here on the date of the unveiling of the three memorial markers (Watertown Daily Times September 27, 1930)."

The dedication service was held in Sackets Harbor on October 2nd, 1930 at two-thirty P.M. (Memorial Dedication Program 1930). The Watertown Daily Times printed a summary of the events of the program on October 1st.

"Miss Harriet Bates Fairbanks will be in charge of the dedication ceremony. The assistant chairman will be Major F.E. Uhl, U.S.A.

"Following invocation by Chaplain Charles C. Merrill, a dedicatory address will be delivered by Alexander C. Flick. The monument will then be unveiled by the children, descendants of the men who carried the cable – William C. Mason, William Grenell Huggins, Jr., Helen McUmbert, Floyd Overton Kenyon, Pauline Steeld, Ralph Otis, Richard Hughs, Norman Jean Otis, Theodore Rice, and Helen Ann Waite (Watertown Daily Times, October 1, 1930)."

Shortly after the memorial dedication, Mrs. Fairbanks published a thank you statement in the Watertown Daily Times.

“The chairman of the cable route wishes to express her appreciation to those who cooperated in making the marking of this historical route possible.

“Thanks are due the state society of the United States Daughters of 1812, and especially the state president, Mrs. Frank D. Callan, together with the state historical society for the money to erect the three markers;

“To William Pierrepont White for contributing his time, knowledge and experience to direct us; to Edward P. Buyck of Albany for his vision and wonderful art to portray the historical event so those who pass will know the whole story;

“To H. Edmund Machold, Scott Carpenter, and William Field who donated the land for placing the tablets; to Arthur Emerson who surveyed the plots; to Attorney William K. Mott, who drew up the deeds and gave his legal services’

“To the Northern New York Utilities, Inc., who did the landscaping and furnished the trees and services; to General William P. Jackson who cooperated in every way to make the event adequate to the historic importance; to Major F. E. Uhl, who presided in such a pleasing way and to whom the success of the occasion is due;

“To Mrs. Gretchen Near Deacon, who sang in such a satisfactory way the national anthem; to the soldiers, naval marine and to the veterans, who added so much to the impressiveness;

“To the speakers who gave all so much inspiration and knowledge; to the Northern Frontier chapter, Daughters of 1812, who have been made custodians of the markers and who will aid in seeing that they are properly looked after; and to everyone who has helped us;

“And to my committee, Mrs. Eli W. Herrick, Mrs. M.J. Huggins of Pierrepont Manor, Mrs. Frank M. Williams, Mrs. Nora W. Cruickshank, Mrs. John N. Carlisle and Mrs. W.E. Murray, who each have done their allotted part perfectly (Watertown Daily Times, October 1930).

Eighteen years later, on September 10, 1948, the Frontier Chapter of the Daughters of 1812 rededicated the monument in Ellisburg. “The marker which will be rededicated has been moved recently by H. Edmund Machold with the consent of the Frontier Chapter, to a new location which is more convenient for Mr. Machold... The old site of the monument was on a knoll and was so far from the road that it could not be clearly seen. At the new site, which is only about 200 feet from the old one, the lettering can be read from an automobile, because the marker is nearer the road. It is on the site of the old Lee district school house, on the road between Ellisburg and Belleville (Watertown Daily Times, September 10, 1948)”