

Battle of Big Sandy and the Carrying of the Great Rope in 1814 (Part 1)

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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

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In May of 1814, a twenty-minute skirmish involving only a few hundred soldiers helped assert the United States' superiority on Lake Ontario in the latter part of the War of 1812. On a small creek on the lake's eastern shore, a British officer chased American forces into their territory, disobeying a direct order and paying a taxing price. A Great Rope made of hemp and powerful armament, won in this small battle, would end up in the great shipyards in Sackets Harbor, effecting the launch of three new vessels. The story of the Battle of Big Sandy and the Great Cable Carry are tales of pain and triumph, of strength and determination. And today, 185 years later, those tales can still be told and heard.

During the winter of 1813-1814, both the British and the Americans had decided that in order to end the fighting on Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, an enormous shipbuilding enterprise must be initiated. In Kingston and Sackets Harbor new ships with more

armament and a larger crew were being constructed in the hopes of gaining an edge over the enemy.

At the American ship yards in Sackets Harbor, two brigs, the Jefferson and the Jones, and a frigate, the Superior, waited for armament and rigging necessary for their launch. They had been rapidly constructed there by the master ship builder Henry Eckford (who died November 12, 1832 in Constantinople as the chief director of the Turkish Empire's dock yards)(Hough 513). When completed, the Superior would hold 26 forty-two pounders, 30 thirty-two pounders, and 2 twenty-four pounders with a tonnage of 1580 and a complement of 500 officers and men (National Archives Naval Records). The necessary supplies had been transported from the Brooklyn Naval Yards in New York City to Albany, and



Battle of Big Sandy Creek, The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812, Benson Lossing (author). This image is in the public domain in the United States and applies to US works where the copyright has expired often because its first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

from Albany up the Mohawk to Wood Creek and the Oneida Lake, finally arriving at the Oswego River (Slosek 14).

The British recognized that in order to prevent the Americans from becoming a superior force on Lake Ontario, the stores

would have to be captured. On May 4th, 1814, Sir James Yeo left Kingston Harbor with six vessels bound for Oswego.

Some time earlier, Lieutenant Colonel George E. Mitchell had been sent with a battalion of light artillery to defend the fort at Oswego. His forces, however, would prove to be inadequate in the face of the enemy's numbers. At sunrise of May 5th, the enemy was sighted advancing toward the shore. Mitchell, knowing an attack was coming, had ordered all the tents available pitched near the town. Rosemary Nesbitt, author of the young adult novel *The Great Rope*, describes the scene:

“Colonel Mitchell, who was in command at Fort Ontario, was a clever soldier and a determined one. He knew he was going to be greatly outnumbered by the British, but he had made up his mind that he was not going to be outsmarted by them. So he had recruited every man and boy in the village and set them to work building a false military encampment in the meadow beside the Cooper house. Jonathan [the novel's primary character] had helped and he thought it was a great joke on the British.

“They had collected every piece of canvas, every tarpaulin, every old sail, everything that looked the least bit like tent material. Then they had built a city of tents in the meadow. Of course nobody lived in them. But the British didn't know that and Colonel Mitchell hoped they wouldn't get close

enough to find out. He hoped they'd be fooled into thinking he had three times the men who were actually on duty at Fort Ontario (Nesbitt 38-9).”

Mitchell's deception was successful, causing the British to attack the fort instead of the vulnerable village. With a 12-pounder the American forces opened fire on the British vessels, momentarily repulsing the attack (Slosek 15).

On the morning of the 6th the British forces again attacked Oswego, this time opening a terrible fire upon the Americans. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Tischer approximately 1,200 British soldiers landed and successfully pushed back the American forces. The British captured the *Growler* and the small naval stores at the fort, and then burned the barracks. However, since the Superior's armament supplies had cleverly been stored at Oswego Falls, the British were not able to seize those.

Upon retreat, Lieut Col Mitchell destroyed the bridges and filled the roads with timber on his way upriver to Oswego Falls (now Fulton, NY) (Hough 509). The British pursued the men as far as the Black Creek bridge, but since Mitchell had already destroyed it, they turned



Sir James Yeo, Commander, British Naval Forces on Lake Ontario, War of 1812. This image is in the public domain, published before January 1, 1923 in the United States.

back to Oswego. The British, sure that they could intercept any supplies on their way north to Sackets Harbor, withdrew from Oswego and waited at the Galloo Islands (DeLong 98).

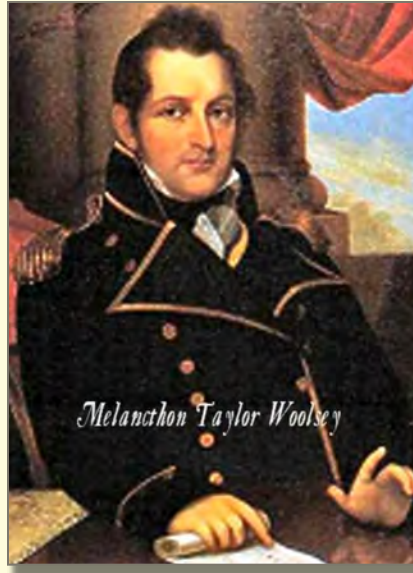
From Sackets Harbor, April 21st 1814, Commodore Isaac Chauncey sent orders to Lieutenant Melancthon T. Woolsey directing him to choose five officers and twenty-five men to proceed in the *Lady of the Lake* to Oswego:

“I request that you will select four or five officers and from twenty to twenty-five men and proceed in the *Lady of the Lake* to Oswego – you will take your officers and men on shore and proceed to the Falls where you will procure the best accommodations possible for the men having in view the public interest – your business to Oswego is to forward the guns and public property new on the way from Schenectady to this place. My object is that you should induce as many of the boats to run the Falls with the guns and stores as will consent and bring the articles to this place.

“As you are in possession of my views on this subject together with the urgency of the occasion I necessarily leave much to your discretion and shall feel every confidence in your exertion, bearing in mind that the guns for the large ship must be got on at all

hazards. You will also recollect that no stores belonging to the Navy Department is to be left below the Falls for more than twenty-four hours.

“As you are well acquainted in that District of Country I shall not attempt to point out to you the particular line of conduct which you are to pursue. I shall trust to your judgment and your known zeal for the Service. I only repeat that the guns must be sent forward to this place. You will keep me informed constantly of all your proceedings (Chauncey Letterbooks).”



Melancthon Taylor Woolsey;
<https://oswegocountytoday.com/the-battle-of-big-sandy/>

It would now be Woolsey's responsibility to deliver the vastly important armament and rigging to the Superior in Sackets Harbor.

To do this, the supplies would have to pass over the Oswego Falls and through Oswego to the lake. In a letter written by Woolsey to Chauncey on June 2, 1814, he describes the events up to and including the battle. This account is undoubtedly the most accurate and detailed description available primarily because they were written almost immediately after the battle by a direct participant. Although it must be considered that Woolsey was indeed detailing his successful actions to

a superior officer, it is doubtful that any gross embellishments or additions were made. I will let Woolsey relate the events in his own words:

“I have already had the honor to inform you of the affair at Sandy Creek on the 30th ultimo, but for want of time at the juncture, I had it not in my power to give you the particulars, and as most of my communication since measures were adopted for a push from Oswego Falls to Sandy Creek, with the naval stores, have been made in great haste, I avail myself of a leisure moment to make a report in detail of my proceedings since that point. On the 17th [of May 1814] I despatched [sic] Mr. Huginan to

Mexico, to hire a number of ox-teams, and to engage a quantity of forage, etc. I also sent orders to Oswego Falls to have an additional number of large wheels made for transporting the guns and cables back across the portage, and caused reports to be circulated in every direction that I had received your orders to send all the naval stores to Oneida Lake, with all possible expedition. On the morning of the 28th, when these reports were well in circulation, and when (as I have since heard from great authority) they had been detailed to

Sir James [Yeo], I had the honour to receive per express your communication of the 27th, vesting in me discretionary powers. I immediately despatched Mr. Dixon in the long gig to reconnoiter the coast. I went with my officers to the falls, to run the boats down over the rapids. At sun-set we arrived at Oswego with the boats (19 in number) loaded in all with

21 long thirty-two pounders,
10 twenty-four pounders,
3 forty-two ditto (carronades),
and 10 cables, besides some light articles, and distributed in the batteaux a guard of about 150 riflemen, under command of Major Appling. Mr. Dixon having returned with a report of the coast being clear, we set off at dark and arrived at Big Salmon river about sun-rise on the 29th, with the loss of one boat having on board 2 twenty-four pounders and one cable. I cannot account for her having separated from us, as every possible exertion was made to keep the brigade as close as possible (Brannan).”

The 19 boats slowly and quietly made their way up the coast of the lake in both darkness and dreary rain. During the night, one of those silent batteaux either became lost or intentionally wavered off course. General E.P. Gaines, Commander at Sackets Harbor, wrote to the Secretary of War John Armstrong on May 31, 1814 that “the enemy has captured one of our boats from Oswego,

having on board two 32-pounders and a 13-inch cable (Slosek 23),” although Woolsey’s audit of the contents (two 24-pounders and one cable) is probably more accurate.

However, on June 4 Chauncey writes to William Jones, Secretary of the Navy, and has a different description of the missing boat dilemma;

“I have the mortification to inform you that the boat that I mentioned to you as being missing with a cable and two 24-pounders had been taken by the Enemy and I have every reason to believe that she was designedly taken to the Enemy’s fleet by Curley, the person who had charge of her – for after separating from the other boats contrary to positive orders – instead of running for Sandy Creek (the place of rendezvous) he steered directly for the enemy’s squadron (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

Captain Stephen Popham, a British officer captured at the Battle of Sandy Creek and writing on June 1 to Sir James Yeo from Sackets Harbor, offers very little to the source of his information; “Having obtained certain information, that the enemy’s boats with their guns and stores, had taken shelter in Sandy Creek, I proceeded to that place” (British Public Record 327).

In a June 8th letter to Bathurst, Sir George Prevost wrote from Headquarters in Montreal about the results of the battle. In the letter Prevost mentions the missing boat.

“A large boat with two long 24-pounders and a 19 ½ inch cable for the enemy’s new ship, having been taken by our squadron then blockading Sacketts Harbor, the information obtained from the prisoners of the sailing from Oswego of fifteen other boats with stores, led to the attempt which has terminated so disastrously (British Public Record 327).”

It is unlikely that the batteaux could have been sighted and captured during the night without being heard. Would a lost boat have immediately headed for shore to avoid detection? Were they captured the next day while trying to find the rendezvous? Or in fact was the pilot of the boat a spy for the British? Unfortunately, those answers remain hidden in history.

Woolsey continues his narrative of the Battle in his June 2nd letter to Commodore Chauncey. The 19th batteaux has come up missing, and the



General Edmund Pendleton Gaines, circa 1830, National Archives. Mathew Brady, photographer. This image is in the public domain in the US and applies to works where the copyright has expired, often because its first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

American forces are preparing for the inevitable British attack:

“At Big Salmon we met the Oneidas, whom I had despatched the day previous, under the command of Lieutenant Hill, of the rifle regiment. As soon as they had taken up their line of march along the shore of Big Sandy Creek, I started with all the boats and arrived at noon at our place of destination about two miles up the creek. In this laborious and hazardous duty, I feel much indebted to Major Appling, his officers, and men, for their exertions, having assisted my officers and seamen in rowing the boats without a moment’s rest, twelve hours, and about half the time enveloped in darkness and rain; also, to some of the principal inhabitants of Oswego, who volunteered their services as pilots (Brannan).”

The number of Indians at the Battle of Big Sandy is not a readily known fact. One very reliable source lists the number as 120 Oneida Indians (Hitsman 185), while Commodore Chauncey lists the number as

130 Indians in his June 2nd letter to the Secretary of the Navy William Jones (Chauncey Letterbooks). Regardless of their number, the Oneidas had been gathered by Lieutenant Hill at Woolsey's bequest in order to confer additional protection to the American forces slinking up the coast (Hitsman 185).

Woolsey continues his recount of the battle.

“At 2 A.M. on the 30th, I received your letter of the 29th, 6 P.M. per express, and agreeably to the order contained therein, sent lieutenant Pierce to look out as far as Stony Point. About 2 o'clock he returned, having been pursued by a gun-boat and three barges. The best possible disposition was made of the riflemen and Indians, about one-half mile below our boats. About 8 A.M. a cannonading at long shot was commenced by the enemy, and believing, as I did, that no attempt would be made to land with their small force, I ordered lieutenant Pierce to proceed in erecting sheers and making preparations to unload the boats; and, as all the teams had retrograded in consequence of the cannonading, I sent in pursuit of them to return. About 9 o'clock [still A.M.] Captain Harris, with a squadron of dragoons, and Captain Melvin, with a company of light artillery and two six-pounders, arrived (Brannan).”

Upon reaching Sandy Creek and realizing a British attack was probable, Woolsey had sent a runner to Sackets Harbor and neighboring

militia regiments to get reinforcements (“Herald,” Rutland, VT). Some sources state that Woolsey sent messengers at dawn of the 30th (Hough 510). At approximately the same time (9 AM), the Adams and Ellisburg militia regiments arrived (Emerson 592).

“Captain Harris, the commanding officer, agreed with me that this reinforcement should halt, as the troops best calculated for a bush fight were already on the ground, where they could act to the greatest advantage, and that the enemy, seeing a large reinforcement arrive would probably retreat. About 10, the enemy having landed and pushed up the creek with three gun-boats, three cutters, and one gig; the riflemen, under that excellent officer, Major Appling, rose from their concealment, and after a smart fire of about ten minutes, succeeded in capturing all the boats and their crews, without one having escaped (Brannan).”

One of the most applauded participants of the Battle of Big Sandy is Captain Appling, commander of the riflemen. Daniel Appling was born August 29, 1787 in Georgia to John and Rebecca (Carter) Appling. In 1805, at the age of 18, he enlisted in the United States army and was commissioned lieutenant. He was a recruiting officer for some time, but was then stationed at Fort Hawkins in Georgia and Point Peter on St. Mary's River

(Northern 54). On April 15, 1814 Appling was promoted to Captain. After the Battle of Big Sandy, Captain Appling was promoted to Major “for gallant conduct in capturing a superior force of the enemy at the battle” (Richardson 1987). Major Appling was then stationed at Plattsburg and successfully led his riflemen against General Provost's attack (Northern 54). For his service there, he was promoted to Brev. Colonel (Richardson 1987).

When the war ended, Appling returned to his home state of Georgia, where he died on or about March 5, 1817. Upon his death a new county in South Georgia was named after him (Northern 55).

Although there were as many as 200 people who directly participated in either the Battle of Big Sandy or the Great Cable Carry, very few recorded their experiences. Eyewitness accounts are essential for an encompassing account of historical events not only because they lend facts, but because they lend humanity and soul as well. History is nothing more than a person or persons' version of events. Since we are human and not recording machines, we interpret and remember events as we see them. In these interpretations, one sees the true humanity of events.

On July 17, 1873, the Watertown Daily Times published a letter written by Dr. J. M. Sturdevant for the Rome Sentinel. It

contained his account of the Battle sixty years earlier.

“On Sunday, June 5th, 1814, an alarm was sent through the town, warning every man and boy to hasten to the landing, for the British were coming. Well, we all turned out, some with guns, some with guns without locks, some with locks without any flints, others with pitchforks, &c. A motley throng – backwoodsmen, hunters, trappers and boys, a sorry looking crowd to fight British regulars.



Commodore Isaac Chauncey, Commander of US Navy forces on Lake Ontario during War of 1812. Artist: Gilbert Stuart, circa 1818. In possession of US Naval Academy Museum Collection. Image is in public domain because the copyright term is author's life plus 100 years of less.

“The British did not appear that day. At evening I went home feeling sad enough; but as I went home I met a troop of cavalry under Captain Harris, of the United States army, a regiment of riflemen under command of Major Appling, a company of artillery with two brass guns, and a company of marines. These were on the way to “the front”, to defend our property. Major Appling stationed

his forces as follows: The artillery at the head of the lane near our boats, so as to sweep the bank of the creek for a quarter of a mile; the cavalry in the open field beside the artillery; the riflemen were secreted behind the brush fence at the lower edge of the woods, and the Indians (the Oneidas) were behind the fence further to the right of the riflemen. The militia men were posted on the bank of the stream in the woods and brushes. Thus arranged with admirable military skill, the American forces lay upon their arms all night awaiting an attack the next morning.

“Monday the 6th was a bright, beautiful morning. The air was balmy, and stillness sat upon the stream, marsh, and woods. About sunrise the British expedition entered the creek. A heavy cannonading shook the forest, and the expedition was soon visible. It consisted of about ten or twelve gunboats, heavily armed and manned by some five hundred picked British regulars commanded by Major Popping [Popham]. A halt was ordered, and an inspection was made with a spy glass of the condition of things at the landing. Not a man however was to be seen. Nothing but the American flag proudly floating in the breeze above the tree tops.

“Said Major Popping, “I will show those Yankees a trick,” and ordered another broadside from his fleet, sending shot and shell among the tree tops, which did some damage to timber, and that was all so far. The

order of advance was spread and all sail set. The bands of music filled the air with lively strains, and slowly they moved up the creek.

“Their gay uniforms – red coats, gilt buttons and white belts – and the bright guns and bayonets gleaming in the morning sun, gave a splendid appearance as they approached the American lines. Another halt and a survey of the situation. The hard ground reached, the troops were landed, a line of battle formed on the level pasture land, and they advanced toward the woods. The boats moving alongside kept up a continuous fire. When they had approached within eight rods of the brush fence, Major Appling gave the order to fire along the whole line and a thousand rifle and musket balls were let loose and tore through the British ranks. The red coats dropped to the ground like apples shaken from a tree in October. The exchange of a few shots served to put them in utter confusion. At this time our Indians poured in a murderous fire, and rushing from behind the brush set up their war whoops and hideous yells in true savage style.

“The British, routed and confounded, threw down their arms and begged for quarter. Many of them, after flinging away their guns, took to their heels and make for the marsh, hoping to reach the lakeshore. They were pursued, however, by the Indians and slain with the tomahawk. Others plunged into the creek, gained the opposite shore, and

ran off into the marsh; these, too, were followed up by the savages and shared the fate of the others. After the fight I saw several soldiers whose heads had been thus cleft by the tomahawk.

“The boats were all captured, and the troops killed or taken prisoner. Not a man escaped to carry the sad tidings to Commander Yeo, on board the British fleet.

“In fifteen minutes the tumult of battle was ended, and the silence was only broken by the groans of the wounded and dying (Sturdevant 3).”

Another account of the Battle came from Captain Israel Adams, an Oswego River and Lake Ontario pilot who traveled with Woolsey from Oswego to Sackets Harbor. As author Anthony Slosek explains in his summary of the battle, Captain Adams had been “hired by the Liverpool, NY, boat builder, J. W. Smith, to take a fleet of boats to Oswego (Slosek 23).” In 1848, Captain Adams published a book called *Life, Travels, and Adventure* in which he included a description of the battle 34 years earlier. The fact that it is an autobiography must be considered when analyzing the factual value of the narrative.

“We here [at Sandy Creek] learned that the enemy were in possession of the coast between this and Sacketts Harbor. We then concluded to ascend the creek as far as

possible, which we accordingly did, showing our boats around a bend of the creek, where there was a small copse (a low growing thicket) which sheltered them in part from the sight of the enemy, a few of our masts only could be seen. We formed a determination to defend our boats as long as possible; and early on Monday morning the enemy made their appearance, coming up the creek and firing at us with 68 pound shot, and some smaller calibre from their gun boats.

“We had a small party of riflemen, thirty in number, commanded by Captain Applin [Appling], to whom we gave the command of the defense. We armed ourselves as well as we could, but could only arm 100 men, including the riflemen.

“About a mile from the mouth of the creek, at a bend in the stream, was a copse of woods below which, on either side of the creek, were meadows.. at the mouth of the creek, on each side, were high banks. Here the enemy landed a part of their forces, but finding they could not proceed by land, they again embarked on board of the boats and proceeded up the creek until they reached the meadows, when a party landed on each side of the creek, and kept along with the boats.

“They commenced firing from the boats immediately on entering the creek, from their largest pieces, which carried a ball weighing 68 pounds. There were seven boats, carrying 14 guns in all, and the number of the enemy was four hundred. well armed.

“Captain Applin drew up his party in the copse of the woods. Behind the woods, in the bend of the creek, lay our boats, the masts of which the enemy had discovered. The enemy were now advancing, keeping up a continual fire, which did no other damage than to cut the limbs of the trees. Each of us were ordered to keep behind the stumps or trees until Capt. Applin fired, which was to be signal for all to fire.. then were to load and fire as fast as we could, and not to waste ammunition.

“When the enemy were marching up the meadows, I told Capt. Applin I would climb a tree and ascertain their number. He told me it would be hazardous, but I might act my pleasure. I then ascended a tree about fifteen feet to a crotch, where I stood counting the enemy, when one of those large balls passed though the top of the tree just above my head, cutting off a large limb. I left my standing place and came down quick, to avoid the limb which fell into the place where I had stood, and stationed myself behind the tree I had left.

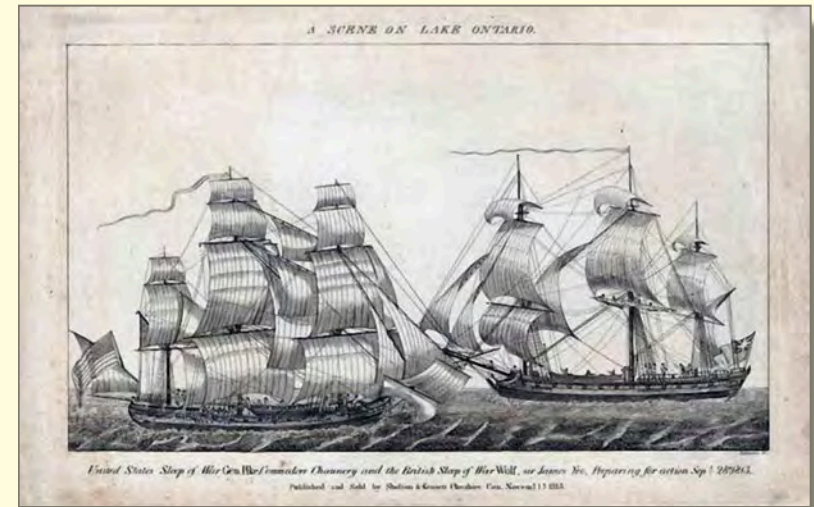
“The enemy were now within six rods of us. They loaded their bug gun with a bag of musketballs, and as the gunner was taking aim at us, Captain Applin fired, and the rest of us at the same instant.. there were seven balls through the gunner’s body. Every man loaded and fired as fast as he could. The battle was general on both sides.. it lasted not more than twenty minutes before the

enemy surrendered prisoners of war, they having 46 killed and 87 wounded. We had none killed, and but one wounded, who died of his wound the third day after the battle (Adams 24-25).”

Another eyewitness account of the battle came from a man named N.W. Hibbard. In 1895 the Jefferson County Historical Society published a pamphlet called “A Participant’s Recollection of the Battle of Big Sandy and Carrying the Cable,” which was a letter from Mr. Hibbard to an A. Hunt from Rural Hill, NY, on February 10, 1859.

“Dear Sir: - Having been informed by my son that you wish me to send you some account of the occurrences that took place in the attack of the British on the American flotilla at Sandy Creek, and of the events which transpired immediately before and after the attack, I will do so, as nearly as I can from recollection. I think it was in the month of June, but am unable to say what day of the month, that the American flotilla entered the mouth of Big Sandy Creek. The brigade consisted, if I recollect right, of eighteen boats, under command of Commodore Woolsey, accompanied by eighty-four riflemen under command of Captain Appling – afterwards Colonel Appling. They left Oswego with nineteen boats, one of which fell off from the brigade in a fog, and was captured by the enemy, who, having command of the lake, has been for some time watching

the coast for the arrival of the American boats having on boards the armament for the frigate Superior, now ready at Sackets Harbor, the superiority of the Americans on the lake would become a fixed fact; hence their anxiety to prevent the arrival of the boats and to capture the armament. The American boats arrived at their moorings on Sunday afternoon. Commodore Woolsey sent Lieut. Ridgely in a small boat to examine the coast as far up as Big Stony Creek, intending to proceed, if possible, with the flotilla to that place. Some time in the night, Lieut. Ridgely fell in with the detachment of the enemy destined for the capture of the American boats. The Lieutenant immediately put about, and about daylight reported the facts to the Commodore. Capt. Appling had, in the meantime, sent Capt. Harrington express to Col. Mitchell, then commanding at Sackets Harbor, who instantly sent Captain Harris’ company of mounted dragoons and a corps of flying artillery, I believe Major McIntosh’s, to reinforce Appling. They arrived at the boats in time, and were immediately drawn up in line, prepared for battle, near the boats, while Appling proceeded down the creek and



A Scene on Lake Ontario, United States sloop of war Gen. Pike, Commodore Chauncey, and the British sloop of war Wolfe., Sir James Yeo, preparing for action, September 28, 1813. Published and sold by Shelton & Kennet, Cheshire, Con. November 1, 1813. This image is in the public domain in the United States as the copyright term is the author’s life plus 100 years of less.

secreted his riflemen behind a brush fence among the alders in the margin of the marsh. The British force, under command of Capt. Popham, R.N., entered the mouth of the creek about sunrise, and consisted of five boats, some forty marines, and something more than 200 sailors; they proceeded cautiously up the crooked channel of the creek, often discharging from a carronade six to eight pound shots, which neither scared nor hurt anybody, as no one was near them, and they only fired at such places as might conceal mischief.

With their eyes fixed on the American troops at the boats, and knowing nothing of Appling, they landed their marines, who, in platoons, marched up the creek by the side of the boats. When near the edge of the marsh, and within a stone's throw of Appling, the signal was given, and Appling's men poured upon them their deadly fire. In ten minutes all was over. I do not know how many were killed; I helped to lay side by side upon the grass thirteen dead of the rank and file; sixty-four were wounded, and two hundred and thirty-four taken prisoners. Of the officers I cannot give much account, as Col. Clark Allen, then commanding the 55th regiment N.Y. militia infantry, with some 300 men, were soon on the ground, and the rank and file of the prisoners were handed over to them, with orders to proceed with them to Sackets Harbor. After a most fatiguing march, we arrived at Sackets Harbor about sundown, where we lay on our arms till sundown [sic sunrise], when we returned to Sandy Creek. There being no means of getting the armament to Sackets Harbor, except by land, and that doubtful, as the force at Sackets Harbor was light, and the enemy having our coast under blockade, and in force sufficient to cut us all up. If they should try, Col. Allen's regiment was stationed at the Creek to guard the boats and property (Hibbard 1859)."

On June 1st, 1814, Captain Stephen Popham, leader of the British forces involved in the Battle of Big Sandy, wrote as a prisoner to Sir James Yeo from Sackets Harbor.

Popham had been ordered to pursue the discovered enemy forces with two gunboats and some smaller vessels, but en route gathered a small force commanded by Captain F. B. Spilsbury, giving a total number of three gunboats, four smaller vessels, and nearly 200 men (Hitsman 186).

In the letter Popham gives a very brief but apt description of the events. It is interesting to note, however, that he does not mention the surprise attack by the hidden American forces. It is also apparent he believes that the loss of a cannon during the battle, a 68-pounder, may have deprived him of the opportunity to win. While reading the letter, one must keep in mind the fact that Popham is writing of his defeat to a superior officer, an exceedingly difficult task.

"Having obtained certain information, that the enemy's boats with their guns and stores, had taken shelter in Sandy Creek, I proceeded to that place (having ordered Captain Spilsbury to accompany me) and reached the entrance of it shortly after daylight yesterday morning. I landed, accompanied by Captain Spilsbury, and some of the officers, and having reconnoitred their position, determined on an immediate attack.

"The masts of their boats (consisting of eighteen) were plainly seen over the marsh and from their situation did not appear to be very near the woods, and their not attempting to interrupt our entry into the Creek, led me to hope they were only protected by militia. This circumstance, added to the very great importance of the lading of their boats, to the equipment of their squadron, was a strong motive for me to risk the attack, not aware that they had brought their Riflemen in their boats, and that a body of Indians had accompanied them along the beach.

"The boats advanced cautiously to within about a quarter of a mile of the enemy's, when Lieut Cox of the Royal Marines was landed with the principal part of his men, on the left bank – and Captain Spilsbury and Lieut Browne with the Cohorn and small Arm party, accompanied by Lieut McVeagh, with a few Marines, were landed on the right bank. Their respective parties advanced on the flanks of the gun-boats (which had from their fire dispersed a body of Indians) to a turning which opened the enemy's boats to our view, when unfortunately the 68-pounder carronade, on which much depended, was disabled, seeing us pulling the boat round to bring the 24-pounder to bear – the enemy

thought we were commencing a retreat, when they advanced with their whole force, consisting of one hundred and fifty Riflemen, near two hundred Indians, and a numerous body of Militia and Cavalry which soon overpowered the few men I had.

Their resistance was such as I could have expected from a brave and well disciplined body, but, opposed to such numbers, unavailing, their officers set them an example honorable to themselves and worthy of a better fate. Captain Spilsbury for a time checked the advance of the enemy, by the fire he kept up with the Cohorn and his party, and I feel much indebted to him for his conduct throughout. Lieutenants Cox and McVeagh who nobly supported the honor of their corps, and I am sorry to say dangerously wounded. Mr. Hoare Masters Mate of the Montreal, whose conduct was conspicuous throughout, is the only officer killed, our loss in killed and wounded (mostly dangerously) is great. I send as correct a return as I can possibly get of them, as well as of the survivors. The winding of the creek which gave the enemy great advantage in advancing to intercept our retreat, rendered any further perseverance unavailing and would have subjected the men to certain death. Lieuts



General Sir Gordon Drummond, GCB; Artist: George Theodore Berthon; This work is in the public domain in Canada and the US as the copyright term is the author's life plus 17 years or less.

Majoribanks and Rowe in the rear, with the small boats, did everything in their power and Lieut Loveday's exertions in the Lais Gun Boat was such as I was much pleased with (British Public Records 331-2)."

On June 2nd, 1814, a British officer by the name of Lieutenant-General Gordon Drummond wrote to Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost from Kingston (Slosek 24). Drummond had come from Kingston to "reconnoitre the Americans' chief naval base and center of operations (Sackets Harbor) (Berton 286)." Prevost then forwarded that same letter to Sir Henry Bathurst, British Secretary of War, from Montreal on June 8th, 1814. It devotes a large percentage of its limited space to Popham's apparent defiance of a command not to chase the enemy inland via a waterway.

"It is but justice to Sir James Yeo to say that this enterprise appears to have been undertaken not only without his authority, but in direct opposition to his reported orders of caution to the officers commanding the boats not to go up the Creek, pointing out to him as a warning against the consequences of such a

measure our disaster of last year in Goose Creek (British Public Record 328)."

Despite the end of the brief but decisive conflict, most of May 30th still remained. The end of the battle left behind an immediate aftermath full of death and pain that had to be dealt with, particularly for the British casualties. In his May 30th report to Brigadier General Edmund P. Gaines, Major Appling wrote from Sandy Creek to list the casualties.

"Sir – presuming that you have already been made acquainted with the results of the affair of this day, I consider it necessary only to furnish you with the return of the killed, wounded and prisoners, on the part of the enemy, which is as follows: 133 prisoners, sailors and marines – wounded 28 ditto – killed 13 ditto, and 1 Midshipman, with two Post-Captains, four Lieutenants of the navy, prisoners; and two Lieutenants of the marines dangerously wounded, and prisoners. The dead will receive all the honors due to unfortunate soldiers – the wounded remain at this place, waiting the arrival of medical aid from the Harbor; the prisoners have been marched into the country, and tomorrow they will proceed for the Harbor. The enemy's boats also fell into my hands, consisting of two gun-boats and five barges, some of which carried Howitzers. Of 120 men, and a few

Indians, my loss does not exceed one man, of the rifle corps, wounded.

“I cannot sufficiently extol the conduct of the officers who served under me – who were Lieutenants McIntosh, Calhoun, Macfarland, Armstrong, and Smith, and Ensign Austin (Fay 191-192)”

General Orders released by Brigadier General Gaines on June 1st, 1814 and published in the Niles Weekly Register June 18th contain a listing of the casualties; “an officer and thirteen men killed, two officers and twenty-eight men wounded (the officer and many of the men dangerously) the residue consisting of ten officers and 133 men taken prisoner (Niles Weekly).” This made a total of 186 British soldiers.

The Register continues with a paragraph of ‘further particulars’;

“Captured in Sandy Creek, in the late affair there, three gun-boats, one carrying a long 24-pounder and a 63-pounder carronade; each of the others one or two heavy guns; two cutters and an elegant gig; two post-captains (Popham and Spelsburg), four sea-lieutenants, two midshipmen, two lieutenants of marines, including the wounded. Captain Woolsey had put into Sandy creek with sixteen boats from Oswego, loaded with guns and naval stores. Major Appling was with him, and mustered 150 riflemen and 123 Indians. The enemy, about 200 strong,

succeeded in capturing one of our boats in the morning, containing two 24-pounders. One midshipman was killed on their part, besides 20 men and two lieutenants of marines mortally wounded, and between 30 and 40 men badly. But one of our men hurt (slightly). Sir James was informed by a flag, on the 1st of June, that the whole of his detachment was wither captured or destroyed; but still he continued the blockade of Sackett’s Harbor on the 2nd, his fleet being moored in a line about eight miles from the harbor (Niles Weekly).”

Woolsey concluded his June 2nd letter to Commodore Chauncey with a brief summary of the post-Battle events.

“About 5 P.M. after having buried with the honours of war, Mr. Hoare, a British midshipman, killed in action, I was relieved by Captain Ridgely, whom you did me the honour to send to Sandy Creek for that purpose. All the prisoners, except the wounded, having been removed, and expecting another attack at night, I remained with Captain Ridgely in that event: but yesterday morning, seeing nothing in the offing, I availed myself of my relief, and returned to this place.(Fay 192).”

Dr. Sturdevant also concluded his letter to the Watertown Daily Times with a brief account of the burial of the British dead and the treatment of the prisoners.

“The dead were tenderly handled, carefully washed and laid out on the green grass. Religious services were then held, and they were buried before sunset. The prisoners were kindly treated, well fed, and marched off to Sackets Harbor, and I observed the huge negro could march as well as the best of them. The casualties on our side were but few: One Indian wounded in the thigh, and a rifleman struck by a ball in the pelvis – this I believe proved fatal. (Sturdevant 3)”

Apparently it was common practice to exchange prisoner’s money from the British currency to American currency upon capture, most likely because merchants and jailors would not accept the foreign money. As evidence of this, a letter written by Chauncey on June 4th to Sir James Yeo describes the trading of currencies:

“Agreeably to your request I do myself the honor to forward by a flag of truce two thousand and seventy five dollars in Canada Notes collected from the seamen and marines late of your squadron and for which I paid Captain Popham the same amount in Bank Notes of this State – this money was not counted by myself but collected counted and sealed by Captain Popham before he left this place. You can at your convenience return me the same

at your convenience return me the same amount.

“I regret that it becomes my painful task to inform you of the death of Lieut Cox of the Royal Marines. He died of his wounds on the evening of the 1st and was buried with the honors of War (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

After the prisoners had been marched by the 55th Regiment of the New York militia to Sackets Harbor (Sandy Creek 739) and eventually to Albany (Niles Weekly 267), the 7 captured vessels and the 18 American batteaux still remained in Sandy Creek. With the British blockade at Sackets, it would be dangerous to move the boats. On June 1st, Chauncey wrote a letter to Captain Ridgely, now in command of the American forces at Sandy Creek, charging him to be alert to an attempt by the British to reclaim the lost boats.

“The enemy may make an effort to recover his boats and take our guns – be therefore on the alert. I understand that the river may be obstructed by falling trees across if so perhaps it would be well to do it and to have the boats ready for sinking. Send the guns on as fast as you can – procure teams to take them- if the enemy does not move from his anchorage tomorrow I will send you a large force to get the guns out. I ordered you a

lieutenant and thirty men today. I send Macpherson [Lieutenant Joseph S. Macpherson] this afternoon to assist you – let me know if you require more officers (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

The enemy vessels lingering around the eastern shore of Lake Ontario soon wavered with the loss suffered at Sandy Creek. As Chauncey explains to Secretary Jones on June 6th, “the enemy left his anchorage yesterday morning...and was joined by the two brigs which had been left to blockade Oswego and... I have no doubt [they] are bound into Kingston for provisions (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

The enemy’s vessels still had to be moved from Sandy Creek to Sackets Harbor. On June 6, 1814, Brigadier General E.P. Gaines wrote to Chauncey relinquishing any claim he might have had on the vessels.

“If there is any doubt as to the propriety of my taking charge of the boats captured from the Enemy on the 30th ulto. At Sandy Creek by the troops under Major Appling and the Seamen and Indians under Captain Woolsey I shall with great cheerfulness relinquish any claim – I have therefore directed Capt. Ridgely to deliver the boats in the state in which he found them to Major Appling or the military officer commanding at Sandy Creek (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

That same day Chauncey wrote to Captain Ridgely in Sandy Creek informing him of Gaines’ decision. Undoubtedly, due to tight military budgets many different groups wanted a share of the goods and capital captured at Sandy Creek, including both the Navy and the Army.

“As there appears to exist a good deal of jealousy and heart burnings lest the Navy should obtain more than they are entitled to altho I have offered to take all the boats captured at Sandy Creek at a valuation yet the Army wish to make reservations. I have thought it best to leave all the captured boats at Sandy Creek. You will therefore deliver every one of the captured boats to Major Appling or the commanding military officer in the same state which you found them. Send all the powder and shot belonging to us to the Harbor by land. Send our two whale boats round to-night if the coast is clear and you can return yourself as soon as the guns are off – the enemy is not in sight and I presume that he has gone to Kingston he was close in with the Ducks at sundown (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

Apparently the ships were turned over to Major Appling, but had already been stripped of their armament. On June 10th, Chauncey again wrote to Brig. Gen. Gaines

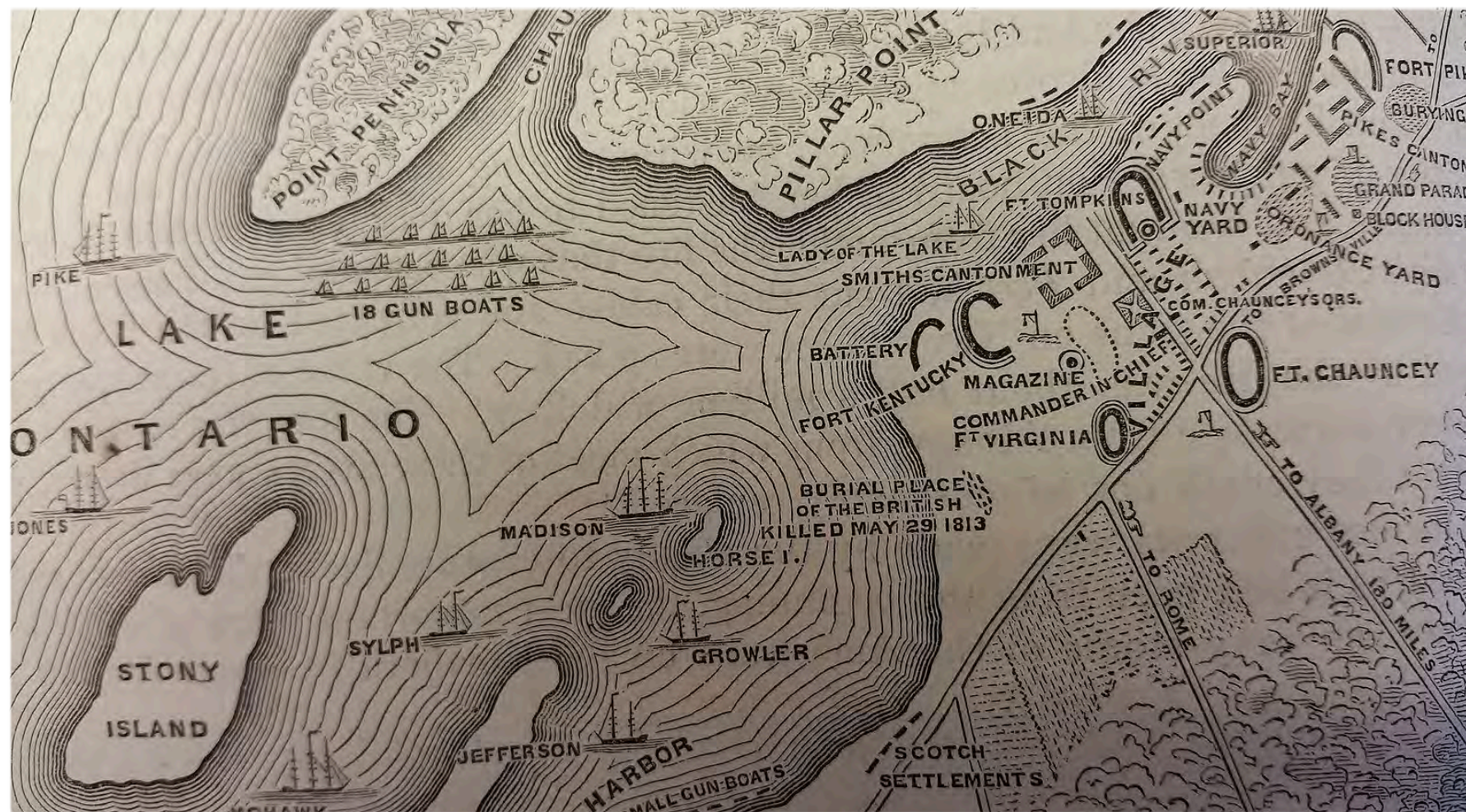
to express his anger over the seizure of the enemy's armament.

“When I offered to take the boats captured by the enemy at Sandy Creek at valuation I did not expect that they would be stripped of their armament but delivered in the same state in which they were taken – for as mere boats they could be of no use to me but as gun boats they might and I am under the impression that I stated at the time that I wished to employ them as gun boats – gun boats without guns would be like an Army without muskets. We are in no immediate want of these boats my principal object in offering to take them was to benefit the brave men who made the capture, but I certainly could not consent to receive them under the present arrangement (stripped as they are of their armament) even if this opinion should clash with the opinions of the Honorable Secretary of War or the Major General commanding. I must therefore adhere to my first determination of not receiving them unless delivered in the state in which they were captured (Chauncey Letterbooks).”

On June 8th, all the armament for the Superior onboard the 18 batteaux had been transported overland and delivered to Sackets Harbor. Chauncey wrote to Navy Secretary Jones about the accomplishment.

“I have much satisfaction in being able to inform you that all my guns (with the

exception of those captured by the enemy) have arrived and the Superior will now have her whole armament on board tomorrow and we shall have sufficient guns for all the other vessels – the whole of our rigging, shot powder, and other stores from North Bay, Utica, and Sandy Creek will be in before tomorrow night – all the prize boats together with the Schenectady boats which brought the guns to Sandy Creek arrived here this morning and the troops, Marines and Seamen, which have been detached for the protection of the property at that place have all returned (Chauncey Letterbooks).”



Battle of Sackets Harbor, The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812, Benson J. Lossing; This image is in the public domain in the United States as the

Thank you to the author, Blaine Bettinger, Ph.D., J.D, who wrote this research article for a class while at SUNY Oswego. He is now a professional genealogist specializing in DNA evidence.

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