



PHOTO BY CAROLINE KEHNE

# BATTLE OF PLATTSBURGH 101

*By Richard Frost*

One would hope most area residents know the basics about the Battle of Plattsburgh, that critical turning point in the War of 1812. Those who are visiting for the commemoration may not know quite as much. And let's face it, everyone can use an occasional review.

When I first arrived in the area, I confess I knew very little on the topic myself. I vaguely remembered causes of the conflict included trade rights on the open seas and resentment of the British practice of boarding American ships to kidnap sailors whom they claimed were British subjects.

Some of our most cherished traditions arose from this war. During the siege of Fort McHenry near Baltimore, Francis Scott Key composed a poem that later became the lyrics to *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Another legendary icon began with shipments of meat from Troy purveyor Samuel Wilson that were labelled "U.S." and jovially attributed to "Uncle Sam."

Suffice it to say the United States declared war on England in June 1812, generally for the reasons stated above. There may have been other motives, as well. Some in Congress hoped this would lead to annexation of Canada. Concern about British support of Indians in the Ohio River Valley may have influenced some votes. Regardless, fighting began and continued for over two years.

Declaring war and preparing for war are two different things. The U.S. may not have done so well on the latter front. American troops surrendered Detroit almost without firing a shot, and an attack across the Niagara River failed miserably. An incursion on a mill at Lacolle, Quebec, proved similarly unsuccessful, leading to a prompt retreat back to Plattsburgh.

Zebulon Pike, already known for leading one of America's early western expeditions and giving his name to a peak in Colorado, spent the winter of 1812 to 1813 supervising a

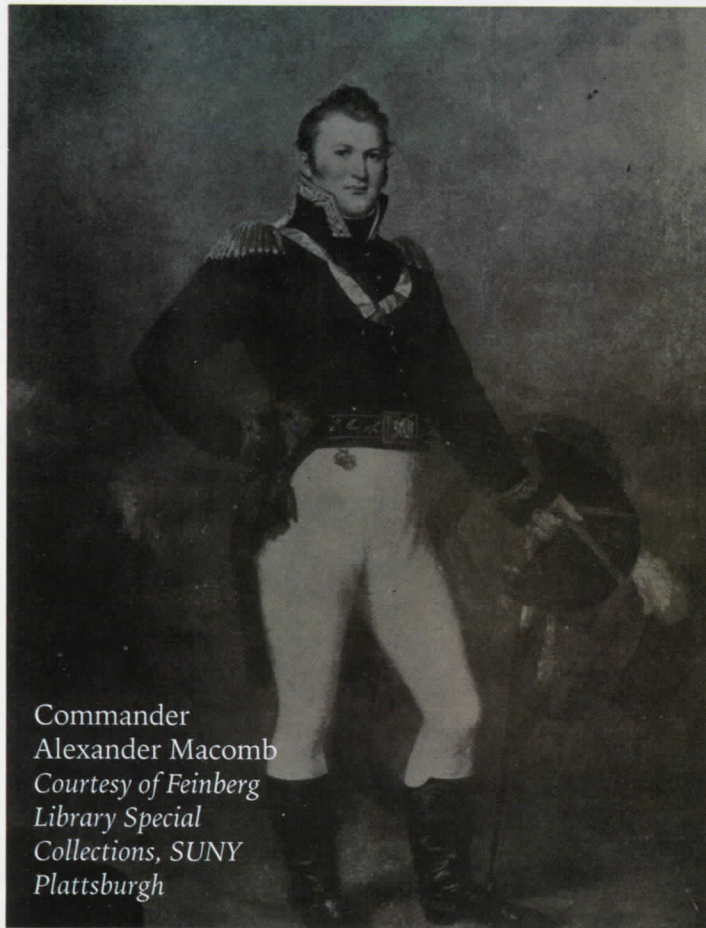
winter camp, or cantonment, on the Saranac River. Come March, he was ordered to move west. His forces provided one victory with a foray against Fort York, on the site of today's Toronto. Unfortunately, he was one casualty when British soldiers blew up the fort's magazine rather than leaving it for the Americans.

Over time, public support for the war threatened to fade. Smuggling was a significant issue. Many states depended on trade with Great Britain and Canada. Here in New York's North Country, goods had been exchanged back and forth to Canada for decades, and no law from a distant Washington D.C. was likely to stop that. Many members of the Federalist Party, opponents of James Madison and his Democratic-Republican Party, called for cessation to hostilities. In fact, a convention was already in the works at which some New England states might call for secession.

In truth, Great Britain was tired of the war, too. That nation had been fighting on other fronts, most notably against French forces led by Napoleon. During a lull there, the king and his prime minister figured it was time to take care of the "pesky American problem" across the Atlantic. Experienced, well-trained troops who had fought under the Duke of Wellington, now available for other duties, would be sent to America.

Textbooks emphasize the significance of the Battle of New Orleans and the siege of Fort McHenry. Indeed, the British sent troops to both places and to other locations along the Atlantic Coast. But it has become clear in recent years that Lake Champlain was not merely an add-on; this was to be the fulcrum of British strategy.

Lord Bathurst wanted his country's forces to move from Canada, down Lake Champlain and then onto the Hudson River — thereby splitting the infant United States democracy in half. It was the same tactic General John Burgoyne had tried



Commander  
Alexander Macomb  
Courtesy of Feinberg  
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Plattsburgh

without success during the American Revolution. All those other troop movements — to Baltimore, to New Orleans and elsewhere — were merely diversions.

The diversion idea worked. Moving troops away from Plattsburgh became almost an American military pastime. Remember that earlier, the secretary of war ordered a surprised General Pike to move all his men from their winter quarters along the Saranac River west to the Niagara peninsula. In 1814, troops in this area were again relocated, this time to Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario. Then, despite intelligence confirming a buildup of British forces north of the border, orders came in late August for General George Izard to move every soldier “able to walk and bear a weapon” from Plattsburgh to Sackets Harbor.

By the end of August 1814, the British — 11,000 men strong — began marching toward Plattsburgh. The new American commander, Alexander Macomb, had barely 3,000 troops, many of them sick or injured, at his disposal. Calls went out for militia units from Vermont and elsewhere in New York. Other volunteers also came forth, most notably a unit of teen-aged riflemen placed under the aegis of a Captain Aikin.

By Sept. 5, the British army arrived in Chazy. There they divided, one group marching along the lakeshore and the other further inland through Beekmantown. Skirmishes at Culver Hill and Halsey’s Corner delayed the enemy advance, as did slow progress on building the British ship *Confiance*.

General Macomb carefully plotted his strategy. Knowing the huge differential in troop numbers, he sought to buy time. American soldiers worked to block roads, remove bridges along likely British routes and mislead the enemy with construction of other trails going away from Plattsburgh. He had his men march every change of shift, day and night, so as to suggest the arrival of new reinforcements around the clock. Meanwhile, work continued on American defenses at Forts Scott, Brown and Moreau.

Macomb ordered his officers to retreat as the British advanced, advance as the enemy retreated. He sought to trap British platoons and then have marksmen concealed in the forests west of the village commence firing. In one aberration from this generally cautious approach, on Sept. 9, Captain McGlassin successfully raided a British battery near Fort Brown, retreating without a single casualty.

Meanwhile 30-year-old Captain Thomas Macdonough, in charge of the American navy on Lake Champlain, developed his own tactics. He studied wind and wave patterns and then had boats set with double anchors, so as to support turning maneuvers. Ships built at Otter Creek, near Vergennes, Vt., were brought into position northwest of Crab Island. His hope was to neutralize British long guns, while maximizing the value of medium-range cannon on American craft.



Captain Thomas Macdonough,  
in charge of the American navy on Lake Champlain

On the fateful morning of Sept. 11, 1814, British sailing vessels, led by the flagship *Confiance*, came around Cumberland Head to confront the Americans. Artillery fired fast and furiously on both sides. Captain George Downey, commander of the British navy, was killed early when cannon fire hit the *Confiance*. One shot must have damaged a cage on Macdonough's own flagship, the *Saratoga*. A rooster escaped and began crowing. Sailors saw this as a positive omen.

Damage proved heavy for both navies. When artillery on one side of the *Saratoga* had been effectively rendered useless, Macdonough called for cutting cables and shifting anchors, thereby allowing the ship to make a 180-degree turn. A new and full complement of cannon began raining down its firepower upon the British, who failed in their own efforts to perform similar maneuvers.

First the *Confiance* and then the *Linnet* pulled down their flags to signal surrender. British officers sought permission to board the *Saratoga*. They formally offered their swords in defeat, a courtesy that Captain Macdonough graciously declined in a show of respect for his opponents. Within a mere two hours, the battle on Lake Champlain had ended in a crucial American victory.

British artillery had begun engaging United States ground forces in Plattsburgh almost at the same moment that fighting began on the lake. Macomb's subterfuge efforts on roads succeeded, confusing the enemy and hampering their advance. Valiant American corps prevented British movement across bridges into the village. Meanwhile, General Benjamin Mooers and his militia managed to entrap British units mistakenly headed toward the Salmon River settlement.

Just before noon, loud cheers were heard from the lake. Investigating, British Commander George Prevost learned about the shocking American victory on the water. Without naval control, he felt his army could not further advance without heavy losses. Fearing that his flanking units were trapped in the woods by a large American force, he ordered a retreat — a decision he spent much of the remainder of his life defending. His four-to-one advantage in troop numbers was never allowed to play out.

The result of fighting at Plattsburgh profoundly influenced peace negotiations already underway in Europe at Ghent. Once expecting significant gains in territory, Great Britain had to settle for maintenance of prior borders with the U.S. America did not add Canada to its realm, but it did establish control over the Ohio River Valley. Among the primary losers were Native Americans and First Nations peoples, who lost traditional homelands and failed to secure the long-term British support they expected.

Macdonough would live only another 11 years, dying of tuberculosis on Nov. 10, 1825. He lies buried in his wife's home town of Middletown, Conn. In 1914, as part of the centennial celebration of the Battle of Plattsburgh, a striking

monument was commissioned to honor his heroic efforts on Lake Champlain. This has become a landmark for the community.

Alexander Macomb's role deserves equal attention. His leadership helped an army persist in the face of almost insurmountable disadvantage. Macomb's career would flourish; at the time of his death on June 24, 1841, he was commander-in-chief of all-American army forces. He was interred with full honors in Congressional Cemetery in Washington D.C.

This incursion into Plattsburgh marked the last time Britain attacked its former colonies, in fact the last attack by anyone on American soil until the tragedies of Sept. 11, 2001. With its stunning victory, our young country reaffirmed its independence and solidity in the eyes of the world. And note well, at least those of you residing in or around Clinton County, these momentous events occurred just around the corner and down the road.

*Two useful references for those interested in learning more are Keith Herkalo's "September 11, 1814: The Battles at Plattsburgh" and "The War of 1812 in the Champlain Valley" by Allan Everest. Both were used in preparing this article. I further acknowledge Herkalo's assistance in ensuring my accuracy. This article originally appeared in the Lake Champlain Weekly and was revised in June 2019. It is reproduced with permission.*



**GENERAL MACOMB.**

A sketch of General Macomb from a 19th-century newspaper. Courtesy of Feinberg Library Special Collections, SUNY Plattsburgh



# KEEPING WITH TRADITIONS

*By Richard Frost*

Organizers of the Battle of Plattsburgh commemoration want everyone to have a good time, and they also hope the weekend will enhance appreciation of our shared heritage. Thus, along with concerts, parades and other special events, they have included a program of history topics related to the battle. This follows in a tradition that has long been part of the celebration, though perhaps less prominently in recent years.

Of course, re-enactments will still be a centerpiece of the festivities. In addition,

the encampment at the Kent-Delord House also provides many learning opportunities. Supplementing these activities on the schedule this year will be short talks covering other related topics. Planned as 20-minute presentations, these should enhance attendees' knowledge of various topics, while not being so long as to preclude going to the other attractions of the weekend.

On Thursday, Sept. 12, speakers will address less well-known aspects of the battle.