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FORT NIAGARA

UNDER THE FRENCH, ENGLISH AND THE UNITED STATES

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by

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north from St. Louis to a point 200 miles from Detroit, and then eastward to the vicinity of Lake Simcoe, Canada. All this territory was governed by Fort Niagara.

Therefore no one spot on the northern end of the continent was so much desired by France and England. It was a check on the unfriendly Iroquois and there was a vast amount of wealth to be had from the fur trade it controlled. "In English hands its importance was great and its expense enormous. Without it the British forts of Detroit and Mackinac could not have existed; yet England's struggle with the rebellious colonies would have been inevitable and it would have ended exactly as it did, had she never possessed a post in the lake region." (Ref. 1) The commercial advantages were one of the prime objects for the creation and maintenance of the fort at Niagara. It was a trading center and supply depot as well as a military post.

For reasons of clarity this thesis is divided into three parts, Fort Niagara as a French, English and American possession. France held that territory eighty years until one July day when Great Britain's wave of continental conquest passed up the Niagara River. The emblem of France vanished from these shores and the Triple Cross of England waved over Niagara until it

(Ref. 1) "Old Trails on the Niagara Frontier"
by, Frank H. Severance. p 130

gave way to the Stars and Stripes. This is the period which we are going to discuss, a period starting with the French and Indian War up to and including the modern Fort Niagara, a period filled with incidents of battle and seige, Indian cruelty, misery and suffering until its ownership was settled and peace reigned.

France from the beginning manifested great military wisdom in the selection of commanding points, and great tact in her Indian policy. Had she given more attention to permanent settlement and encouraged emigration with the wisdom that commanded her military and Indian policy her possession would have been more lasting and perhaps might have been final.

Her military posts were strategically chosen and bravely maintained and aided by her Jesuit missionaries and fur traders she acquired a powerful influence over the Indian tribes. The French system was primarily military and she relied on the mother country for support and when that failed she was lost. We must keep in mind the fact that France preceded England in planting colonies in North America and might, with a better system of colonization, have attained equal or even great success, corresponding with the vast territory so early and widely possessed and so bravely defended.

"As late as 1757, France held all the strategic points on the line of her territorial claims, Quebec, Montreal, Ticonderoga, Crown Point and Niagara and numerous less important posts commanding the communications between the Lakes and the Ohio and Mississippi rivers." (Ref. 2) The English colonies were bounded on the west by the Alleghenies and the lands of the Iroquois. The settlers had become aware of their power and wished to increase their boundaries. The inevitable struggle for mastery could not be long delayed. The war, as we shall see, was to be a bloody and decisive and preparations were made proportioned to the result. France put forth her best efforts for defense and England under the administration of Pitt, for the first time gave powerful assistance to the colonies. The Great Commoner knew it was necessary to overthrow a power hostile to the security of the colonies and their future existence.

The campaign of 1755, showed a lack of foresight on the part of the government headed by Newcastle. It was as poorly composed as it was executed. This campaign comprised three attacks on the line of forts restraining the colonies of which Fort Niagara was to be the ultimate objective. One army under Sir William

(Ref. 2) "Historical Sketch of Niagara" by A.H. Porter

Johnson should attack the forts on Lake George and Lake Champlain. Governor Shirley of Massachusetts should attack Fort Niagara by way of Oswego, and General Braddock was to lead an army from Virginia across the Alleghenies to Fort Duquesne; after capturing this he was to join forces with Shirley for the capture of Niagara if that fort had not as yet surrendered.

Here is where the glaring error was made. Instead of all the armies marching on Niagara, the English tried to reduce the whole line of forts with a blow. "The army under Braddock acting with a detachment of troops from Virginia, was ambushed and was disastrously defeated July 8, 1755." (Ref. 3) His defeat is said to be due largely to his neglect to listen to the advice of Washington. Shirley made an utter failure of his expedition. Reaching Oswego after great hardships, the news of Braddock's defeat demoralized whatever spirit was left in his sickly army and Fort Niagara was not even threatened.

After two years of open hostilities in America, war was again formally declared between England and France. This was their last great struggle for supremacy in the New World. In this campaign the Mohawk Indians were persuaded by Sir William Johnson

(Ref. 3) "An Interpretation of Old Fort Niagara" by E. T. Williams. p 31

to take the part of the English.

The campaign of 1759 was placed in the hands of General John Prideaux who sailed from Oswego to his death at Fort Niagara, on July 1, 1759. His army consisted of 2,200 regulars and provincials and 700 Indians under command of Sir William Johnson.

On July 6, a hunter brought word to Pouchot, French commander of Fort Niagara that the English were approaching the Fort, the army having landed about four miles down the shore of the lake.

Pouchot at once sent a messenger to the forts in the West for aid. Niagara had assisted Fort Duquesne and the Allegheny Forts in their days of siege and now it was their turn to help her.

Prideaux forced the seige by digging a series of trenches toward the fort, each one in advance of the last. Finally, when Prideaux had success in his grasp, he was killed and the command passed to SirWilliam Johnson. The fort was completely surrounded and its surrender was asked.

Johnson showed his skill as a soldier in handling the 1,200 recruits which were coming from the West to aid Fort Niagara. Three of the four messages sent out by Pouchet were intercepted but the fourth went through and accomplished its purpose.

"Johnson redistributed his forces to meet the crisis. He at once detailed a sufficient part to cope with the relieving party and retained sufficient men to prevent a sortie from the rapidly crumbling fort. At an eighth of a mile from the Fort, now within the beautiful village of Youngstown, the clash occurred which settled the fate of Pouchet. The French charged straight into the ambush and one hundred-fifty were captured." (Ref. 4) The important result of this English victory was the removal of French domination over the warlike Seneca nation in this region and the natural possessions that came with Niagara, of which the fur trade was the center.

After the British victory of 1759 and their assuming this territory, the Seneca Indians, motivated by their inherited dislike of the English and also incited probably by the French, began what is known as Pontiac's Rebellion.

The Niagara portage had been taken away from the Senecas upon the introduction of the clumsy carts which were used by the English. Before this, all goods were transported on the backs of Seneca braves. This serious loss of business, coupled with the natural hatred they had for the English, terminated

(Ref. 4) "The Niagara River" by A. B. Hulbert. p 211-222

in the terrible Devil's Hole Massacre of Sept 14 1763. This is a spot located 100 yards from the north city line of Niagara Falls between the highway and the rapids, just south of Niagara University.

"Here a party of 500 Senecas, from Chenussio seventy miles to the eastward of Niagara, led by Farmers Brother waylaid a train of 25 wagons and 100 horses and oxen, guarded in a haphazard manner by a detachment of 24 men." (Ref. 5) Three men escaped that deadly ambush. A relieving party, which came when the news brought by one of the survivors, ran into a second ambush in which all but 8 out of two companies escaped. On the third attempt the commander of the fort hastened to the bloody scene with all the troops at his command except what were needed to defend the fort. The redskins had gone leaving 80 scalped corpses on the ground. The Indians had thrown or driven every team and all the soldiers which they had captured over the brink of the ravine in which lies Devil Hole.

The following is an extract from a letter addressed to the Lords in London, relating to the affairs of the Indians, sent by Johnson.

P.S. "This moment I have received an express informing me, that an officer and 24 men, who were escorting

(Ref. 5) "The Niagara River" by A.B. Hulbert pp 214

several waggons and ox teams over the carrying place at Niagara, had been attacked and entirely defeated, together with two companies of Col. Wilmot's Regiment, who marched to sustain them. Our loss on this occasion consists of Lieuts., Campbell, Fraiser, and Roscoe of the regulars, Capt. Johnson and Lieut., Deayton of the provincials and sixty privates killed with about eight or nine wounded; the enemies are supposed to be Senecas or Chenuses, scalped all the dead, took all their clothes, arms and amunitions and threw several of the bodies down a precipice." (Ref. 6)

In 1764 Sir William Johnson sent a notice to all the Western Indian tribes to attend a council at Fort Niagara in the Spring of that year. This meeting was one of the most memorable convocations ever held on this continent. Most of the tribes were fully represented and a great number estimated at 2,000, beside women and children encamped on the plains around Niagara. At first the Senecas refused to appear, but a threat to destroy their villages brought them to terms. Johnson went about the work of making the treaty not with the whole group at once, but a tribe at a time, making it fit each individual group.

When the great council was over, Sir William Johnson had effected the most remarkable Indian treaty

in history. It took all of his diplomacy and shrewdness to keep order among the savages. On one or two occasions shots were fired at members of the garrison. "The cost of this Indian congress was 25,000 pounds New York currency or about \$10,000 for provisions and 38,000 pounds sterling, or \$190,000 for presents to the Indians." (Ref. 7) The Senecas were compelled to surrender to the English government all right to the tract four miles wide on each side of the Niagara River from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. To this the Senecas agreed but signed the treaty, as it were, with their fingers crossed, never intending to keep it. It is to this date that we trace first the actual white man's ownership of the first foot of land on the Niagara frontier, excluding the enclosure of Fort Niagara. Until this agreement was signed by the chiefs of the various tribes, Johnson refused to deal with the gathered mass of Indians from the West.

Johnson describes this treaty in a dispatch to the Earl of Halifax, dated August 30, 1764. "Your Lordship will observe by the treaty of peace with the Senecas that they have given up all lands from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, of the breadth of four miles, on each side of the strait. The conveying place is comprehended therein, and there at present several

(Ref. 7) "Stories of Old Niagara" by C. H. Hultzen p 25.

little posts erected for its better security. They do not choose that it should become private property, as their hunting grounds are adjacent to it, but it may turn to very great use to all the posts on the communication, which is the most important of any I am acquainted with." (Ref. 8)

Although the activities of the Revolutionary War were quite remote from Fort Niagara, it may be said some of the cruelest outrages of the war started from and returned to this post. Connected with this period we find the names of Colonel John Butler, Molly Brant, Colonel Guy Johnson and Chief Brandt. Under the guiding hand of Haldimand then Governor General of Canada, were planned all these raids on frontier settlements. Records show that various commanders of the fort protested to their home government against the use of uncontrollable Indians against the colonies. These complaints were without effect. The English officers and their wives did much to alleviate the suffering among the prisoners that were brought to the fort. The massacres of Wyoming and Cherry Valley are said to have emanated from the English garrison at Fort Niagara. The Indians were paid for the scalps they took and in many cases were rewarded with their captives as slaves. This was Fort Niagara's only active

(Ref. 8) "Historical Sketch of Niagara" A.H. Porter p 20

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connection with the Revolutionary War.

These massacres had a very demoralizing effect on the frontier settlers and in 1779, Washington sent one of his most capable officers, General John Sullivan, to curb the Indian troubles. General Sullivan marched up through New York State engaging the Indians at numerous places and destroying their villages which were in his path. He finally reached the Genesee River 84 miles from Fort Niagara. In his official report of this expedition, General Sullivan stated that lack of 15 days additional rations kept him from coming on and storming the Fort, which he was confident he could have taken. His work was effective, however, for it stopped in a large measure, the activities of the Indians.

By the treaty of 1763 which ended the Revolution, Great Britain acknowledged the independence of this country. When it was signed the British held the posts of Niagara, Detroit, and Mackinac. She claimed the right to these posts because of the non-fulfillment of certain clauses in the treaty by the American Government. This is called the "Holdover period." Congress was useless, it could only recommend action on the part of the states and these were quarreling with one another. Meanwhile, England was waiting patiently to see the new nation fall because of its own inward troubles.

In 1784 Governor Haldimand, commonly called "Holdover" Haldimand wrote to Brigadier-General St., Leger: "Different attempts having been made by the American states to get possession of the posts in the upper country. I have thought it my duty uniformly to oppose the same until His Majesty's orders for that purpose shall be received, and my conduct upon that occasion having been approved, as you will see by the inclosed extract of a letter from His Majesty's Minister of State. I have only to recommend to you a strict attention to the same, which will be more than ever necessary as uncommon returns of furs from the Upper Country this year have increased the anxiety of the Americans to become masters of it, and have prompted them to make sacrifices to the Indians for that purpose." (Ref. 9)

The Americans made an ineffectual effort to get early possession of the forts. New York State made a proposition for garrisoning Oswego and Niagara but Congress did not conform. Governor Clinton told the New York Senate and Assembly that Haldimand considered the Provisional Articles as a suspension of hostilities only and declined to withdraw his garrison. In the spring Governor Clinton sent a copy of the proclamation announcing the ratification of the treaty to General

(Ref. 9) "Old Trails on Niagara Frontier" by F. H. Severance. . . p 12.

Haldimand. He evaded anything like a direct reply, saying he would obey the instruction of His Majesty's Ministers whom he was meanwhile urging to hold on to the forts. In June, Secretary of War Knox sent Lieut. Colonel Hull to Quebec on the same errand. Again Haldimand exulted over his success in withstanding the Americans.

After the Federal Constitution was adopted the states became more firmly bound together. John Jay was sent by President Washington to Great Britain in 1794 as a special envoy to settle differences growing out of the failure of that country to keep the obligations of the treaty of 1783. It was because of his great state manship that the posts garrisoned by British troops were evacuated in 1796. "Jay's treaty relating to the closing of the war for independence was signed in London November 18, 1794 but not ratified until October 28, 1795 and that treaty provided for evacuation on or before the first of June 1796." "The Actual date of evacuation was August 11, 1796." (Ref. 10)

From the end of the "Holdover Period" up to 1812 nothing of much importance happened at Fort Niagara. The new nation garrisoned the fort and maintained it. On the Niagara Frontier as a whole there was much activity, such as the building of the military road by

(Ref. 10) "An Interpretation of Old Fort Niagara" by E. T. Williams pp55.

General Wilkinson in May, 1801, but these events do not pertain to our discussion.

Fort Niagara played a much more important part in the second war for independence than it did in the first. General Van Rensselaer, commander of the New York militia came to the Fort August 13, 1812. At that time there were 300 light artillery and 1000 U. S. infantry stationed there. General Van Rensselaer asked for more troops because he believed that General Sir Isaac Brock, Commander of the British, contemplated an attack on Fort Niagara and an invasion of the United States. When General Brock returned to Fort George, opposite Fort Niagara, after the capture of Detroit, many of the American prisoners taken there accompanied by women and children were brought to that fort. General Van Rensselaer then planned the capture of Queenston Heights and the attack was made on October 13. General Brock was at Fort George, because he expected the attack to be made from Fort Niagara, and he ordered a bombardment of the fort which lasted several hours. It was due to the unsoldierly conduct of Captain Leonard, Commandant of Fort Niagara, that the British nearly captured the Fort.

On November 21, Fort George again bombarded the Fort with greater fury than before. Five batteries and

the guns at Fort George fired shells at Niagara from sunrise to sunset. Fort Niagara returned the fire but no great damage was done to either side.

On May 8, 1813 General Dearborn and his victorious army from Toronto landed at Four-Mile Creek, the same place that General Prideaux debarked on his campaign against Niagara in 1759, and made his headquarters at Fort Niagara. Plans were then laid for the capture of Fort George. On May 27 the Americans embarked in boats which they had built and under cover of the guns at Fort Niagara proceeded to attack Fort George. After a terrific bombardment the American forces drove back the British and by noon were in possession of the English Fort.

On December 10, word was received that 1500 British regulars and 700 Indians were marching on Fort George with the intention of expelling the Americans from the English soil. The American garrison was not a large one, 60 men, and General McClure was not a man noted for his bravery. In the middle of a very severe winter he abandoned Fort George and reoccupied Fort Niagara.

Before leaving Fort George, McClure set fire to the town of Newark and left a large supply of ammunition and equipment to fall into the hands of the British

forces. His excuse for burning Newark was "that it might not be left as a shelter for the enemy."

(Ref. 11) Once again it seems as though an American officer was guilty of cowardice.

When the British occupied Fort George and viewed the ruins of Newark it was towards Fort Niagara and the destroyer of the town that they turned for revenge. Again the inefficiency of McClure came to the front. Having moved his headquarters to Buffalo he left Captain Leonard in command. When he received word that the British were contemplating landing on the American side of Niagara he sent not one word of warning to the men at Fort Niagara.

So great was the feeling of the British when they saw the ruins left by McClure at Newark that Colonel Murray said to General Drummond, "Let us retaliate by fire and sword." To which General Drummond replied, "Do so quickly and thoroughly." (Ref. 12) On the night of December 12 the British crossed the river carrying axes and other equipment for attack. The American pickets were captured without a struggle and the attack began. The gates were left opened and unguarded. They rushed in and seized the sentinels, who in their fright gave up the countersign and Fort Niagara was in the possession of the British forces, before the garrison was fully awake.

(Ref 11) (Ref. 12) "Interpretations of Old Fort Niagara"....E. T. Williams. ..pp62-63

Little quarter was given and the dead officers were treated with terrible indignity.

There were about 400 men in the garrison and if the fort had been properly commanded a different result might have been had, but Captain Leonard, then commander, without leaving notice with his officers had quietly slipped away to his home the night of the attack.

The capture of Fort Niagara was the beginning of the wholesale burning of the Niagara Frontier, from Lewiston to Buffalo. The British set out for revenge and they obtained it, leaving a country side in ashes, homes destroyed and families scattered. "No true American can take pride in telling of the British victory over Niagara." "There was neither a gallant defense nor a generous enemy. Cowardice on the part of one and retaliation on the part of the other sum up the episode." (Ref. 13)

In 1815 the Treaty of Ghent was signed and the fort was again in the possession of the United States. Since the closing of the war of 1812, Fort Niagara has been used simply to bring back memories of America's past. For nearly a century and a quarter peace has prevailed at this spot and no gun has been fired from the gun loop-holes on the ramparts. The latest repairs to the

(Ref. 13) "Old trails on the Niagara Frontier"
F. H. Severance . . . ppl59

fort were the constructions of the walls toward the river in 1829; the brick walls outside the old breastworks were built in 1861. Slowly the Old Fort was abandoned as military quarters, the troops moving into more modern barracks, which were erected from time to time to the south of the old fort.

This is the modern Fort Niagara which is used for the training of forces and housing peace time units. The only gun mounted in Fort Niagara today is the salute gun for reveille, retreat, and military ceremonies. The modern barracks at Niagara are the military post of the 28th Infantry and it consists of about 2, 000 officers and men. Historians say that it is now of no military value in time of war but in an interview with Colonel William Morrow, present commandant at Niagara, he said that it is the most strategic point in America. It protects the Welland Canal through which much of our products from the west are shipped. The area which Niagara protects is the electro-chemical center of the world and therefore would be of great importance in the next war.

Now let us summarize. We set out to prove the important part Fort Niagara played in the histories of three countries, France, England and the United States. Three hundred years ago the light of modern civilization

had now dawned on the site of Fort Niagara. At that time it was a wilderness, the home of wild animals and the hunting grounds of Indians, hardly less wild, who waged unceasing wars against one another. It had been this way for ages and it would probably still be this way had it not been for the introduction of Christian Civilization.

The French were the first to begin operations here and for one hundred and eighty years afterwards there was in turn peace and war, war and peace. Secret pacts and treaties were made by both rival European nations with the war-like and blood-thirsty Indians, chiefly of whom were the Senecas of Western New York. Ninety years of the entire one hundred and eighty the French were in a struggle with the English for the fort and during these years the fort was the scene of much trading in furs and scalps between the French and Indians. The fur trade was one of the main reasons for the strife in this region and the French offered many gifts to the Indians for English scalps. The English, however, had better success than the French in trading with the Indians because they knew how to handle them. During these years the English planned two major campaigns against the French, the first was unsuccessful but the second under General Prideaux and Sir William

Johnson met with success. Prideaux was killed in this campaign and Johnson with Joseph Brandt, the greatest of all Indian Chiefs, and John Butler, the organizer of Butler's Rangers, occupied the fort the greatest part of the time until the end of the war of 1812.

July 25, 1759 marks the end of the French period in the History of Fort Niagara. The real significance of that period was even less in its military than in its commercial aspect. During the first century and more of our story the possession of the Fort Niagara was coveted for the sake of the fur trade it controlled. The history of this period can best be told by symbolizing Fort Niagara as a Beaver skin held by an Indian, a Frenchman, Englishman and a Dutchman, each trying to pull it away from the others, the Dutchman being early eliminated from the struggle, and each European equally eager to please the Indian with fine words, brandy, or to stick a knife into his white brother's back.

It was during the English occupation of the fort that the cruelest experiences occurred. During the Revolutionary War all those raids originated here that crippled the colonies, struggling for their independence from British rule. The settlers were scalped or taken prisoners on these raids and their homes burned and their horses, cattle and crops confiscated and brought

back to the fort for British use. We all know the outcome of the war and by the treaty of peace Great Britain was to evacuate all parts of the northern border on a specified date. When the American garrison arrived to take over the Fort Niagara it was found that no order for evacuation had been received by the English troops quartered there. As a result the English held the fort for thirteen years after the close of the war.

The exhibition of the American forces and officers who took part in the battles of this fort during the war of 1812 is something a true American does not like to relate or even think about. There were cowardice and inefficiency on the part of the officers and men of the American forces and unsoldierly conduct on the part of the British. By the treaty of Ghent in 1815 the fort was returned to American rule and since that time the Stars and Stripes have flown over it.

During the intervening years since that war peace had reigned and the old fort is just an ancient landmark with a wealth of significant history and the one remaining symbol of pioneer days on the Niagara Frontier. As a military post it has been replaced by modern barracks, which contrary to the opinions of many, is the most strategic point in the United States, in the opinion

of its present Commandant, protecting a great industry and also the Welland Canal.

We have now finished our discussion on Fort Niagara. We have pointed out the events happening during the French, English, and American occupation. It was a coveted prize to all three countries. When England captured the Fort, France's plans for a new world empire collapsed. England wanted it for its commercial value and without it America's westward growth was restrained. We conclude as we began Fort Niagara played an important part in the histories of England, France, and the United States.

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