

Sacket's Harbor during the War of 1812

The site of two military engagements during the War of 1812, Sacket's Harbor served as the site of a decisive action in the battle for the Great Lakes. Located on the eastern end of Lake Ontario in New York State, Sacket's Harbor was a well protected harbor on the lake, only forty miles from Britain's naval base at Kingston. Originally founded and owned by Augustus Sacket, the land was a natural harbor with abundant natural resources and a haven for smugglers after the Embargo Act of 1807. Sacket sold the land for use as a naval base by the United States and by the time war broke out, Sacket's Harbor was the major shipbuilding community on the Great Lakes with an original population of about one hundred growing to 5000 to 12,000 during the war as builders, carpenters, merchants, soldiers and sailors all migrated to the area. Forts and defenses were constructed and by 1812 Sacket's Harbor was New York's third largest population center behind only New York City and Albany. Prominent shipbuilders Henry Eckford and brothers Adam and Noah Brown operated in Sacket's Harbor. British strategy on Lake Ontario included eliminating American shipbuilding capability as a means to controlling the lake and targeted the town at Sacket's Harbor as early as the summer of 1812.

On 19 July 1812 five British naval ships approached Sacket's Harbor, demanded surrender, and fired on the brig USS *Oneida* under the command of Captain Melancthon Woolsey. Local militia responded to alarms and American forces returned canon fire on enemy ships. Shore guns and the *Oneida* canons engaged the British for approximately two hours before *HMS Royal George* was seriously damaged and eight seamen killed. Other British ships also sustained damage before the signal for retreat. The result was a British embarrassment but only eight casualties—American forces suffered no losses. It would be almost another year before the British again attacked Sacket's Harbor.

British forces on Lake Ontario were under the command of Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, Governor General of Canada. Captain James Yeo was in command of the British Navy on the Great Lakes. In mid-May 1813 both were in Kingston, organizing troops and reinforcing naval forces. On 25 May the American naval squadron under the command of Commodore Isaac Chauncey was located off the British's Fort George at the opposite end of the lake. Upon hearing of the American forces hundreds of miles away, Prevost and Yeo determined to attack Sacket's Harbor to establish naval superiority on Lake Ontario. British forces numbered nearly 900 infantry troops, two brigades, three sloops, and a schooner. Prevost assumed command of the ground troops.

American forces under Militia Brigadier General Jacob Brown (a Pennsylvania Quaker with keen organizational and training skills) numbered some 400-500 regulars posted to two forts constructed at Sacket's Harbor—Fort Volunteer and Fort Tompkins. Lieutenant Colonel Electus Backus commanded the regulars. In addition to the two forts, earthworks and several sturdy blockhouses were built to the south side of the town. With the majority of American naval vessels at the western end of Lake Ontario, only two armed schooners were present at the time of the British assault. Lieutenant Woolcott Chauncey, the younger brother of Commodore Chauncey, commanded the naval assets. Under construction at Sacket's Harbor was a sloop, the *General Pike*. Some 250 volunteers made up the rest of American defenses, but the British

presence prompted the call for area militia, and the order of battle included nearly 900 additional troops to support the regular army.

Sailing on 27 May, the British began to row ashore the following morning (May 28) only to return at the sight of American sails. These were American forces sent to reinforce Sacket's Harbor, but the British soon captured all but a handful. The following morning (29 May) Prevost's troops disembarked on Horse Island just offshore from the town. Militia forces fired on the British but withdrew in chaos almost immediately. Brown rallied the American forces and organized fierce resistance by gradually falling back behind fortifications and slowing down British advances. American regulars gave ground grudgingly, retreating behind the blockhouses and using their few field guns to repel every British advance. The British ships, which should have been a huge advantage for the attacking forces, were largely ineffective. Those vessels that could maneuver close enough to fire on American defenses were not equipped with long range guns and the larger brigs could not move into range to bring effective fire. Only one ship, the *HMS Beresford* with sixteen guns, caused any significant damage, firing on Fort Tompkins. Mistakenly concluding the British had taken the fort, Lieutenant John Drury ordered the *General Pike* burned in order to deprive the enemy control of the yet completed ship. The defenders also torched a good number of their stores rather than see the British capture their supplies.

Despite their varied successes, Prevost gave the order to retreat. The British were never able to bring their own field guns to bear, and the American troops under Brown had rallied and brought the British under attack. Sacket's Harbor was Prevost's first occasion to lead troops in battle and it showed. Although Colonel Edward Baynes commanded the British troops, Prevost was the de facto commander assuming command of the British forces in North America in July 1811 and appointed governor general in October. Prevost was generally passive in military affairs and preferred negotiation as a tool of war. His downfall was an unwillingness to take risks or incur heavy casualties. Prevost soon saw little chance of success in the battle at Sacket's Harbor and thus retreated. After the fact, Prevost defended his position and claimed the battle was won—by the British. He also recalled an orderly retreat. But other accounts countered Prevost's account. Several British troops described the retreat to ships as chaotic and in disorder and pointed the finger at other officers and Prevost. For their part the Americans claimed victory and boasted if the British had not retreated when they did the forces would have been decimated. Historians have varied but most agree that if Prevost had continued the attack at risk of heavier troop casualties the battle of Sacket's Harbor would have ended in British victory—noted British army historian Sir John Fortescue agreed. A bold move ended in failure. Prevost's later command in battle had similar results at Plattsburg in September 1814. He was recalled and died in England before a court martial he requested could be held.

The battle toll was not insignificant—British losses were forty-nine killed and two hundred sixteen wounded with a handful (35) taken prisoner. American casualties were heavier—three hundred seven killed (57), wounded (84), or captured/missing (approximately 180). The *General Pike* was salvaged and construction completed, but the loss of stores and construction materials, estimated to be \$500,000, thwarted the American war machine for the duration of hostilities. The American victory also saw Brown commissioned as a brigadier general in the regular American Army. He enjoyed military success for the duration of the war and emerged as a true American hero. Brown was the senior ranking officer in a scaled down

American army following the War of 1812 and became the first commanding General of the Army in 1821. He died in 1828.

History records Sacket's Harbor as a major American victory, and for the duration of 1812 American naval forces controlled Lake Ontario. Yet this control was at a cost as Commodore Chauncey immediately withdrew to the eastern side of the lake fearing further enemy assaults. The attacks on Fort George and at York ceased and American naval aggressiveness on Lake Ontario was arrested. The British Navy under Yeo was freed to relieve and support British moves in other theaters of the war.

One historian concluded that as a result of the engagement at Sacket's Harbor the Americans lost their best opportunity to invade and conquer Canada, ending the dream shared by many prominent American political and military leaders. The American Army diverted more troops to Sacket's Harbor, more than two thousand by October 1813, and a Canadian historian concluded that the events at Sacket's Harbor were crucial to the development of the American army. From the British side, the battle did not end their drive to attack the shipyard at the town but such an attack never happened. The Americans lost their naval advantage as the result of a battle won and an arms race—ship building—was the real legacy of the battle for Sacket's Harbor. Britain did not gain but did not lose control of Lake Ontario, and for the duration of the war the two navies played a game of "cat and mouse" on the lake.

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