

## **The Battle of York (1813)**

As the War of 1812 entered its second year, the government in Washington was hungry for victory, and that meant the conquest of all, or a significant part, of British Canada. American leaders realized that, if their armed forces could capture either Montreal or Quebec, they would win the conflict. Even with Great Britain deeply involved in the long Napoleonic conflict in Europe, those cities were too well-defended. So, as a kind of lesser reward, President James Madison and his advisors decided on a campaign to take Kingston on the eastern side; then move on to seize York on the western side of Lake Ontario, which is modern day Toronto; and cooperate with an offensive from Buffalo to secure control over the Niagara frontier, thereby cutting off Upper Canada [western Ontario] from the rest of the colony. Fighting in 1812 along the Niagara frontier had ended badly for the Americans. The U.S. government also hoped another offensive would recapture Detroit and make up for its loss in 1812, restoring the balance in Michigan and the West.

The U.S. government appointed Major General Henry Dearborn to lead the invasion. Invading required a degree of decisiveness, of aggression, and Dearborn was timid. The idea was to attack before ice on the St. Lawrence melted, thereby allowing Britain to bring reinforcements upriver. Moving from Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain to the eastern end of Lake Ontario, Dearborn overestimated British defenses at Kingston on the eastern side of Lake Ontario - claiming that General George Prevost had in excess of 6,000 regular troops, going so far as to predict a major British invasion of Sackett's Harbor across the lake. Even when the predicted attack did not take place, and pro-American Canadian civilians reported that Kingston had closer to 600 regular troops and not the 6,000 Dearborn claimed, he still recommended avoiding the attack on Kingston, moving instead to the west side of the lake; take York; threaten the Niagara frontier; and allow Commodore Isaac Chauncey time to continue to construct a fleet to contest for control of Lake Ontario ahead of similar, but slightly behind, British construction efforts. It was a good idea, but Dearborn was the wrong man for such a campaign of combat and quick movement.

At York, British Major General Roger Hale Sheaffe commanded a mixed force of 800 British regulars, Canadian militia, and Native American auxiliaries. This was typical of His Majesty's armies in the New World. Sheaffe feared an enveloping American attack from the east and west, so he positioned his regulars behind earthworks they constructed on the east and west of York, while leaving most of the militia nearer to the city's center to rush up to defend once the American attack began and its axis of advance determined.

The Americans began landing on April 13 on the west under Brigadier General Zebulon Pike, who several years earlier had "discovered" the peak in Colorado bearing his name. He commanded perhaps 1,700 infantry while Dearborn remained aboard one of the American ships anchored off York. Aided by gunfire from Chauncey's fourteen-ship fleet, Pike's men advanced from the west and soon pushed back the defenders-until the Canadian militia lost heart and British regular forces became lost trying to march west to support the militia. When the regulars arrived, Pike's troops drove through them aided by naval gunfire. Sheaffe then decided it better to avoid surrender or catastrophic defeat, and planned to retreat with the regulars eastward. As part of this retreat, he planned to destroy the stores of powder and shell rather than have them fall

into American hands. The resulting explosion - General Pike and the leading American troops were perhaps 200 yards away - killed or wounded over 200 Americans, including Pike [a falling rock knocked him out and he later died aboard ship].

The British retreated toward Kingston as Canadian militia officers negotiated surrender. With Pike's death, the ever-timid Dearborn feared he could not control his troops without Pike's commanding presence and decided not to pursue the British eastwards. Meanwhile, American troops and pro-American residents of York who had borne the slings of Canadian patriotic outrage, and perhaps some opportunistic loyal York residents, combined to sack the city. The Americans remained for several more weeks, and seized supplies that otherwise would have gone to British navy units on Lake Erie, thus indirectly assisting Oliver Perry in his subsequent victory there. After the war, York's residents rebuilt the damaged parts of town, and, as Toronto, it continued as the capital of the Ontario province.

The follow-up battle denied the decisive victory the United States had sought with the campaign. Sheaffe's regulars retreated toward Kingston, and the sack of York had little impact on that theater of conflict. Prevost's attack on Sackett's Harbor failed but caused the Americans to give up ideas of offensive campaigns on the eastern side of Lake Ontario. Meanwhile, American forces commanded by General Winfield Scott had little success forcing a crossing of the Niagara frontier. Ultimately, 1813 ended without a decisive American victory in Canada, helping to bring the conflict to a successful conclusion.

Charles M. Dobbs  
Department of History  
Iowa State University

#### FURTHER READING:

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