

## **Winfield Scott (1786-1866) during the War of 1812**

Winfield Scott was born in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, on June 13, 1786. As a youth, Scott exhibited an active mind and, at first, devoted himself to the study of philosophy before eventually settling on the law. Entering the College of William and Mary at age nineteen he pursued legal studies both there and at a private practice in Petersburg, Virginia. By 1807 Scott changed his focus a second time and sought a military career as tensions between the United States and Great Britain increased. After a personal interview with President Thomas Jefferson and with the approval of Congress to increase the size of the United States Army in 1808, Scott was commissioned a Captain of Light Artillery. His outspoken nature landed him a misconduct conviction in 1810 by court-martial for his ill-conceived public criticisms of Brigadier General James Wilkinson, but he served only three months of his year-long suspension before being reinstated.

By the time the United States declared war on Great Britain on July 18, 1812, Winfield Scott had been promoted two grades to Lieutenant Colonel and assigned with the Second Artillery to the Canadian frontier. The buildup of US forces in northern New York presaged an autumn offensive by a mixed army of regular and militia units aimed at conquering Canadian territory. When the US offensive into Canada began, it was a disorganized advance and senior American leadership was often at odds over rank. Initially Scott was ordered by Major General Stephen van Rensselaer, commanding the US invasion force, to remain on the American side of the Niagara River and provide artillery support for the coming battle as his presence on the field would outrank several militia officers including the general's second cousin, Lieutenant Colonel Solomon Van Rensselaer. The American invasion was met by a combined army of British regulars and Mohawk Indians at Queenston Heights, Ontario, above the Niagara River, on October 13, 1812. Once the battle began and American officers were killed and wounded, General van Rensselaer finally sent for Scott, who was fuming over his inactivity, and appointed him to command those regulars that had made it to the field after a difficult early morning river crossing in the teeth of British resistance. Scott's men were first assailed by the Mohawks, an action that seriously demoralized his troops, and then were driven back to the river by a British charge led by Major General Roger Sheaffe after the British commander, Major General Isaac Brock, was killed. Scott retreated to the river banks but was forced in the absence of evacuation boats to surrender himself with his survivors. Winfield Scott spent the remaining months of 1812 as a British prisoner of war. While held by the British, Scott witnessed the execution of Irish-American prisoners by their captors, the British, who considered them former subjects and, therefore, guilty of treason.

Lieutenant Colonel Scott was released in January of 1813 during a prisoner exchange and immediately set about petitioning the United States Senate to approve retaliatory executions of British prisoners of war. President James Madison refused to countenance the idea and Scott resumed his duties with the army on the northern frontier. With another expansion of the army to meet the disasters of the previous campaigning year, Scott received promotion to Colonel and full command of the Second Artillery in March. In a second attempt at a Canadian offensive, the US Army under command of Major General Henry Dearborn won a victory at the Battle of York on April 27, 1813, and sought to follow that success with the capture of Fort George. In addition to serving as the commander of the Second Artillery, Scott was appointed as General Dearborn's

chief of staff and, further, was selected to lead the first wave in the assault on Fort George. The attack began on May 25, 1813, with a series of bombardments from fixed American artillery positions and from naval vessels in the Niagara River. Scott landed on the on the Canadian side of the river on May 27 and beat back a British charge on the beach. His advance elicited a second British effort to throw his line back; the effort failed as Scott was reinforced heavily by the next American wave. British Brigadier General John Vincent ordered the evacuation of Fort George and set charges to blow up two of the powder stores within the fort. Scott pursued the retreating British so closely that he was thrown from his horse, breaking his collar bone, when one of the charges exploded. Due in large part to Scott's planning and tactical leadership, the Battle of Fort George was a second, and sorely needed, American victory.

Colonel Scott spent most of the rest of 1813 in garrison duty at Fort George before finally abandoning the post to participate in another offensive led by General Wilkinson. During the American defeat at the Battle of Chrysler's Farm on November 7, 1813, Scott was in the advance of the army and skirmished with a small British force at Hoople's Creek forcing it to retreat or be destroyed. With the failure of the American advance, Scott was called to Washington to testify on the state of the army while his men went into winter quarters at French Mills, New York.

By 1814, the leadership of the US Army was changed through promotions and retirements to a younger and battle-experienced officer corps. Winfield Scott was one of those promoted, in March, to brevet Brigadier General and assigned to the First Brigade consisting of the Ninth, Eleventh, Twenty-Second, and Twenty-Fifth US Infantry. Scott, earning the nickname "old fuss and feathers" for his insistence on military protocol and dress, drilled his men relentlessly using French manuals at the Buffalo, New York, Camp of Instruction before joining the Left Division of the Army of the North, under Major General Jacob Brown for another offensive into Canada.

This offensive, called the Niagara Campaign, led on July 5, 1814, to a meeting engagement with British regulars on Chippewa Creek. Forming his men into a defensive line, Scott's men withstood British artillery fire before coming into a short range exchange of punishing volley fire with the British line. Once the British retreated, the American army continued their advance and maneuvered in preparation for a larger engagement. That engagement was the Battle of Lundy's Lane on July 25, 1814, during which Scott led the first attack on the British position and gained early success. Under the pressure of a British counter-attack the Americans lost momentum and Scott, advancing without orders into the center of the British position, was severely wounded in the left shoulder and the American army retreated back to its base at Fort Erie. While this wound removed Scott for the remainder of the war, his gallantry and service were recognized by congress both by brevet promotion to Major General and, on November 3, by a vote to award him a congressional gold medal.

With the conclusion of the War of 1812 by the Treaty of Ghent, Brigadier General Winfield Scott, his rank now made official, travelled to Europe to study tactics which eventually led to his publication of *General Regulations for the Army* in 1821. His career saw him stationed in South Carolina during the Nullification Crisis (1832), planning offensive campaigns in the Second Seminole War (1836), overseeing the Cherokee removal from Georgia (1838), and by 1841 promoted to full Major General and named Commander in Chief of the US Army. Holding

that position for the next two decades, Scott led US forces in the US-Mexican War (1846-1848) by executing the first full amphibious invasion in US military history at Vera Cruz and marching overland to take Mexico City (1847) while winning significant victories at Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Churubusco, Molino del Rey, and Chapultepec along the same route followed by Hernan Cortez three centuries before. Despite these successes, Scott would lose two bids for president. In 1848 he lost the Whig party nomination to Major General Zachary Taylor and, in 1852, lost the general election to his Mexican War subordinate Franklin Pierce. His service in the war was recognized by the brevet promotion to Lieutenant General making him the first American since George Washington to hold that rank.

Maintaining his leadership of the US Army, Scott developed what came to be known as the “Anaconda Plan” for defeating the Confederate states during the opening months of the US Civil War (1861-1865) and remained in office until his resignation in 1861 and replacement by Major General George B. McClellan. Scott, who had held the top position of command in the US Army for a period longer than any other American, devoted his retirement years to writing his autobiography, *Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, L.L.D.* (two volumes) published in 1864, and consulting with President Abraham Lincoln in support of the Union war effort. Winfield Scott, infirm and suffering from obesity and gout, died on May 29, 1866, at the age of seventy-nine and is buried at the US Military Academy, West Point, New York.

Russell S. Perkins

**See Also:**

Chippewa, battle of; Chrysler’s Farm, battle of; Erie, fort; Ghent, treaty of; Jefferson, Thomas; Lundy’s Lane, battle of; Madison, James; Niagara, campaign of; Queenston, battle of; Taylor, Zachary; York, battle of.

**FURTHER READING:**

Eisenhower, John S. D. *Agent of Destiny: The Life and Times of General Winfield Scott*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.

Peskin, Allan. *Winfield Scott and the Profession of Arms*. Kent, OH: Kent State Press, 2003.