

RNSHS VIRTUAL PLAQUE SERIES: THE WAR OF 1812 IN NOVA SCOTIA

News of yet another war arrived in Nova Scotia on 27 June 1812, when the *Belvidera*, a frigate of the Royal Navy sailed into Halifax harbour having escaped a mauling inflicted by a squadron of the United States navy. Some assumed the incident had been an accident spawned by trigger-happy American sailors, but news soon in from Boston confirmed that nine days earlier, the United States had declared war on the British empire. Relations between the two powers had been deteriorating for some five years, particularly over British impressment of sailors on American merchantmen, combined with London's orders-in-council that restricted neutral trade with Britain's mortal enemy, Napoleonic France. Those orders had just been suspended, however, prompting the imperial government to assume that America would refrain from going to war. Indeed, efforts at negotiating a cease-fire mean persisted into mid-October 1812 and only then did Britain issue its own declaration of war.

Meanwhile, Nova Scotia faced what locals feared could become a major crisis. An enemy navy was already in nearby waters and was certain to be joined soon by a fleet of hostile privateers. Reports coming out of Washington suggested that a raid on Halifax might well feature in American war strategy. The colony's coastal defences were either non-existent or, as at Halifax, in a decrepit state. Few professional soldiers could be mustered and the Royal Navy's presence had been reduced to a handful of undermanned and often poorly conditioned vessels. Prospects for reinforcement were negligible, since Britain needed every sailor and soldier it could muster for the all-important campaign against the French empire in Europe. Equally serious was Nova Scotia's economic underdevelopment, which made it persistently dependent on imports of provisions from neighbouring New England. If war severed that trade connection, supply shortages could translate into starvation, not just locally but also in the British West Indies and among Wellington's troops fighting in Portugal and Spain, all of whom relied on imports of American flour, peas and salted meat.

With considerable initial pessimism, Lieutenant-Governor Sherbrooke and Vice-Admiral Sawyer struggled to mount a defence of Nova Scotia. Fortunately, the small size of the United States navy inhibited its commanders from mounting a direct strike against Halifax. But they remained a potent threat, highlighted through 1812 when, in a series of one-on-one encounters with Royal Navy frigates, the Americans came out triumphant. Meanwhile, by the summer of 1812 American privateers were seizing a host of British and colonial vessels along the Atlantic coast, resulting in a significant loss of cargo and manpower. Memories of shore raids by privateers during the Revolutionary war prompted anxiety in many Nova Scotian outports, so much so that on occasion the sight of an unknown sail made residents to flee their homes. Counter-measures featured the commissioning of colonial privateers (the most famous of which was the *Liverpool Packet*) and insisting that all merchantmen sail to and from Nova Scotia in convoy. As well, agents were despatched to distribute presents to the colony's Mi'kmaw community, lest somehow they might be seduced into becoming allies of the Americans.

All this might have been to little avail had not assistance been provided by New England. While that region resented Britain's Orders-in-Council and impressment policies, it was even more

vehemently opposed to the commercial embargos Washington imposed, starting in 1807, on its own citizens in an effort to extract concessions from London. As a result, Yankee merchants engaged in large-scale and sustained smuggling into neighbouring parts of British North America, including Nova Scotia. Once war had been declared, Congress imposed draconian penalties on anyone persisting in trade with what had become the enemy, but New Englanders largely ignored this legislation because they viewed the war as unwinnable and also **because of** the large profits that could be earned from continued dealings with the neighbouring colonies. In Nova Scotia's case local and imperial officials enticed continued smuggling by **issuing** licences which exempted Yankee vessels from seizure by either the Royal Navy or colonial privateers. Accordingly, by the end of 1812 Halifax had become a bustling entrepot, welcoming an incoming flood of American provisions, to be exchanged for an exodus of British manufactures and Caribbean rum, sugar and molasses. High profits and full employment rapidly became the dominant facts of economic life across Nova Scotia.

At the same time, the fortunes of war were undergoing fundamental change in Europe. At the end of 1812 French forces were driven out of Russia and its Grand Army virtually disappeared. Meanwhile Wellington's forces advanced across Spain and by 1813 were fighting inside France. Napoleon's military and political fortunes rapidly spiralled downward until he was forced to abdicate in April 1814. Ever more confident of victory, Britain began shifting military assets to the North American theatre, allowing local commanders to go on the offensive. The most important imperial initiative was to launch a blockade of America's Atlantic coast, beginning in mid 1813 and **completed** a year later. Symbolic of the shifting balance of power was the victory of Halifax-based HMS *Shannon* over the USS *Chesapeake* in June 1813.

Simultaneously, an inconclusive war was being waged in to continental interior. In 1812 imperial and First Nations' forces, along with colonial militiamen, had repelled American invasions into Upper Canada. Then in 1813 renewed enemy aggression, on land and water, gave Americans control of Lake Erie, followed by the capture and burning of Upper Canada's capital, York (the future Toronto). They failed, however, in an all-importance assault on Montreal. Subsequently, as reinforcements arrived from overseas, the Americans were placed on the defensive, with New York State becoming a scene for imperial invasion. Neither this nor the equally abortive British assault on New Orleans would be of great strategic significance, since the outcome of the war was being decided elsewhere.

Nova Scotia did not exactly "win" the War of 1812 but it did assist significantly with defence of the Canadas, helping to guard the sea access to the St. Lawrence, forwarding men, munitions and supplies into the interior and receiving American prisoners of war, to be housed at Halifax's Melville Island prison. Most dramatically, in 1814 Halifax and its satellite naval base at Bermuda became launching points for naval assaults on the American coast, action which led to protracted occupation of Maine's north-eastern territory, along with raids within Chesapeake Bay that culminated in the seizure and burning of Washington. Britain's goal was not so much territorial conquest as the inflicting of economic loss (including loss of slaves, thousands of whom relocated to the Maritimes to become a vital part of the region's Black population).

By late 1814 the United States was in crisis, its national government facing looming bankruptcy, as well as threats of secession from New England. President Madison's will and capacity to wage

war had deteriorated to the point where his administration was eager for peace. Similarly, the government in London, burdened with massive war debts generated by the long struggle against Napoleon (who lurked ominously in Italian exile), was willing to settle, especially since the Americans no longer sought concessions on naval impressment and neutral rights in wartime (issues rendered largely irrelevant by the coming of peace). Accordingly the War of 1812 ended with an Anglo-American treaty signed at Ghent (modern Belgium), 24 December 1814.

The settlement is often described as a return to pre-war conditions, and indeed that was true in terms of territorial boundaries. But otherwise this episode of war and peace brought a new era to British America. The timber preferences launched in 1807 in response to Napoleonic trade threats would continue for another quarter century, stimulating the colonial economy from Pictou to the Ottawa valley. Construction of military fortifications such as Halifax's Citadel and Kingston's Fort Henry, along with spending by imperial garrisons further stimulated British American growth. At the same time, public works projects, most notably the Rideau Canal, built specifically to guard against another American invasion, brought capital and jobs to the backwoods. And perhaps most significantly, in the three decades after the coming of peace, a flood of immigrants, many of them people dislocated by the transition from war to peace, poured across the North Atlantic from the British Isles to take up residence on frontiers ranging from Cape Breton to the shores of Lake Huron.

Overall then, it's probably fair to see the War of 1812 as a watershed event in Canadian history, an event in which Nova Scotia played a far from negligible part.