

Presqu'île at War

by Andy Seguire

Okay well, maybe not exactly. While those living at Presqu'île in the first quarter of the 19th century probably never smelled the smoke of the flint-lock muskets nor heard the firing of 18-pounder guns, our humble little peninsula did play a few important roles in a war that would eventually shape the country of Canada; the War of 1812.

Being a major stop on a vital supply route, many soldiers and prisoners would have, at one point or another, walked the very ground visitors camp on today. Presqu'île was not only a place of rest, but also of work and productivity during the war.

Schooners supplied to the British were built on this very soil, and although no battles were fought, Presqu'île was the focal point of some trouble during the later years of the war. However, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

True North Strong

This part of Ontario was mainly settled by refugees from the American War of Independence (1774-1783). These United Empire Loyalists, including Brighton's 1st settler, Obadiah Simpson, moved north into British held territory to remain loyal to the British crown.

It was this high population of American-born settlers in Upper Canada that had the Americans convinced that Canada would be an easy take-over when hostilities broke out between America and Britain in 1812. However, this assumption was a vital mistake.



Most of the Ontario battles during the war (1812-1814) were fought in SW Ontario. Presqu'île was a vital link in the supply line to British Troops there.

Photo: Garnet McPherson

The United Empire Loyalist still remained loyal to the throne and fought on the British side. These settlers fought as militia in order to protect their farmland and livelihood. With the majority of British troops tied up in Europe in the Napoleonic Wars, the militias had a greater role to play than might have been the case.

Some say that it was this factor that created a great deal of Canadian nationalism among those who defended the Canadian borders, laying the groundwork for an independent nation many years later.

Presqu'île and the War of 1812

The major theatre of operations in this war occurred in south-western

Ontario and the Niagara frontier where American troops repeatedly invaded. That part of Ontario had very little infrastructure developed and had to rely on outside supplies to keep an army in the field.

Those supplies came from Britain, Lower Canada (Quebec) and Kingston, down the St Lawrence and through Lake Ontario. It was this supply route that put Presqu'île on the map.

Presqu'île found itself in quite an interesting location. To the west we have York (now Toronto) and the Niagara frontier. To the east we find Kingston, the gateway into Upper Canada from points east.

With roads nearly non-existent, most supplies had to come by water and there was Presqu'île,



Supply routes to Montreal and the Atlantic via the St. Lawrence

Presqu'île's good harbour, halfway between Kingston and York, made it a regular stop on the supply route during the war.

with the Newcastle (Presqu'île) Harbour, right in the middle.

There was also a more secure 'inland' water route here that went through the Bay of Quinte. This route connected to Newcastle Harbour by a short portage route through what was, and is still known as, the Carrying Place.

This natural harbour could not be ignored by those moving supplies west and prisoners east, and Presqu'île was used as a secure rest spot along the supply route when needed. While sparse, there

are some records of military presence at Presqu'île throughout the war.

Not only were supplies brought through Presqu'île, but Presqu'île was also producing the largest of supplies, the ships themselves.

In the first part of the 19th century Presqu'île had a dockyard, owned by George Gibson who had settled on the north side of the peninsula near Salt Point. There is record of at least two schooners built on the peninsula, only one of which was ever used, purchased by Captain Richards in 1813. What happened

to the other one? See the article *Daring Raid* to learn its fate.

The war lasted two years in North America and while in the end no borders were redrawn, the war had a lasting impact on Canada, keeping her British and awakening a sense of Canadian national pride.

Both sides also realized that peaceful co-existence was a much happier and productive relationship than military action and we have had peace with our southern neighbours and friends for almost 200 years.