

The Laura Secord Story

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Editor Emeritus, Saturday Night.

Early in the morning of a very hot day in June, 1813, a scant year after the outbreak of the War of 1812, a woman "of slight and delicate frame," then in her 38th year, set out from Queenston, on the Canadian side of the Niagara River just below the escarpment on which Brock's Monument now stands, and began a long day's journey on foot through the enemy lines, which was destined to write her name for all time on the pages of Canadian history.

She was Laura Secord, wife of James Secord, a respected citizen of Queenston. She was born an Ingersoll of Great Barrington, Mass., daughter of Major Thomas Ingersoll, who fought on the Continental side in the Revolutionary War but later removed with his family to Canada. The day of their arrival in Canada is not exactly known, but was probably around 1795.

At the time of Laura Secord's journey the Canadian side of the river, for several miles inland, was in the possession of the American invaders. James Secord had been dangerously wounded in an earlier battle around Queenston, and his wife was allowed to tend him within the enemy lines. Here, on June 23, she learned of the American plan to surprise a British detachment at Beaver Dams, some distance further west, under command of Lieutenant James FitzGibbon. She determined that if possible she would convey a warning to the isolated troops.

Starting before daylight of one of the longest days of the year, and prevented by the large number of American sentries from taking the direct route, she walked all day and well into the evening before coming to the encampment of the party of Indians who formed part of FitzGibbon's forces. Exhausted by the journey and alarmed by their signs of hostility and suspicion—she came from the American lines and they took her for a spy—she had the utmost difficulty in persuading the Indians to take her to FitzGibbon's quarters. According to one account it was

well on into the next morning before she had her meeting with him and communicated her news. At any rate it was in time to allow FitzGibbon to dispose his troops in the best manner to meet the situation, and when the Americans came up about ten in the morning of June 24 expecting to surprise their foes they were themselves completely taken by surprise and the whole force, consisting of upwards of five hundred men with a field-piece and fifty dragoons, was captured. This was one of the turning-points of the war, and but for Laura Secord's exploit the whole history of North America since that time might well have been different. As it was, the American invasion of Canada, while not entirely repulsed, was prevented from spreading during 1813, and in 1814 the British in Europe were relieved of a large part of their difficulties by the defeat and capture of Napoleon, and were thus able to increase their forces in North America. The Americans thereupon gave up their ambitions for conquest, and the war came to an end with no changes in the territory of either side. Since 1814 the boundary between the two nations of North America has never been violated by the troops of either country.

Two monuments have been erected in memory of Laura Secord's achievement, one at Queenston by the Canadian government, and one at Lundy's Lane by the Ontario Historical Society, but she did not live to see either of them. For forty years her exploit went almost unrecognized. A magazine article of 1853 was the first printed mention of it. In 1860 the then Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, visiting Canada to lay the foundation stone of the Ottawa Parliament Buildings, spent some days at Niagara Falls, and learning of Laura's story sent her a cheque for one hundred pounds. She died October 17, 1868, and is buried with her husband at Drummond Hill. Her name has become for Canadians a synonym for courage, devotion and loyalty.