

THE SIEGE OF FORT ERIE:

An Episode of the War of 1812.



CHAPTER I.

A Brief Sketch of Fort Erie up to 1814.

One of the first travelers who describes the vicinity of Buffalo—the first man, in fact, who appreciated the advantages of the site where Buffalo now stands—was Baron La Hontan, lord lieutenant of the French colony in Newfoundland, who, after paying a compliment to Niagara Falls by describing them as seven hundred or eight hundred feet high, says:

"The Lake Erie is justly dignified with the illustrious name of *Conti*, for assuredly 'tis the finest Lake upon Earth. You may judge of the goodness of the climate from the latitudes of the Countries that surround it. Its circumference extends to two hundred and thirty leagues but it affords everywhere such a charming Prospect that its Banks are deck'd with Oak-Trees, Elms, Chestnut-Trees, Walnut-Trees, Apple-Trees, Plum-Trees, and Vines which bear their fine clusters up to the very top of the Trees upon a sort of ground that lies as smooth as one's Hand. Such ornaments as these are sufficient to give rise to the most agreeable idea of Landscape in the World."

He describes the locality as abounding in wild game and fish and filled with warlike Indians. In a map annexed to his journal he locates a prospective fort precisely where the city of Buffalo now stands, which he calls Fort Suppose, and advocates the erection of a post, which was never built.

In 1764, Bradstreet, in the course of an expedition against the Indians, saw the necessity of erecting a fortified trading post near where Fort Erie now stands, and wrote Sir William Johnson suggesting that the acquisition of sufficient land for this purpose was desirable. Before the English Crown succeeded in obtaining title to the ground the trading post was abuilding, and subsequent events soon legalized this trespass upon the hunting grounds of the Senecas.

After the collapse of Pontiac's conspiracy, the Senecas, fearing lest the English would punish them for their participation in his scheme, sent some four hundred warriors to Sir William Johnson to sue for peace. And it was about time, for the terrible massacre at Devil's Hole, perpetrated by this tribe, was fresh in the minds of all. This occurred on September fourteenth, 1763, at Devil's Hole, a few miles from Fort Niagara, when an escort to a train of twenty-five wagons on the trail from Fort Schlosser to Fort Niagara was ambushed and almost annihilated by the wily Senecas, only three men escaping. A small garrison of two companies at Lewiston, hearing the attack, rushed to the rescue and was in turn ambushed. All but eight of these were killed. When the garrison from Fort Niagara reached the scene, the ruins of the train, and some eighty scalped bodies, including those of six officers, alone remained. When the Seneca delegation arrived, Sir William, doubtless bearing this and similar events in mind, insisted upon a substantial grant of land. This the Senecas promised to give. Soon afterward they reluctantly met Sir William Johnson at Fort Niagara and by formal treaty the English acquired a strip of land four miles wide on each side of the Niagara from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. This treaty was concluded on August sixth, 1764.

A clause of the treaty granting this land is here inserted, as it is of considerable local interest. Parkman's graphic description of this gathering of the Indians, in his *Conspiracy of Pontiac*, will well repay a perusal, for the concourse comprised not only the Senecas but upwards of two thousand other Indians. Some,

even, came from west of the Mississippi. The clause of the treaty referred to is as follows:

"ARTICLE FIFTH. In addition to the grant made by the Chenussio Deputys to His Majesty at Johnson Hall in April of the Lands from Fort Niagara to the upper end of the carrying place beyond Fort Schlosser and four miles in breadth on each side of the River the Chenussios now surrender up all the lands from the upper end of the former Grant (and of the same breadth) to the Rapids of Lake Erie to His Majesty for His sole use and that of the garrisons but not as private property it being near some of their hunting grounds so that all that Tract of the breadth before mentioned from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie shall become vested in the Crown in manner as before mentioned excepting the Islands between the Great Falls and the Rapids which the Chenussios bestow upon Sir William Johnson as a proof of their regard *and of their knowledge of the trouble he has had with them from time to time*. All which the Chenussios hope will be acceptable to His Majesty and trust that they may have some token of his favor."

Sir William promptly granted to the Crown all his rights in the land ceded to him. Porter, in his extremely accurate and interesting *History of Old Fort Niagara*, says:

" This was the first tract of land in the limits of the present Western New York to which the Indian title was absolutely extinguished; and this remarkable land deal, so vast in the amount of territory involved, so beneficial to the whites in the power it gave them for trade and the settlement of the country, and of such enormous subsequent value in view of very recent developments along this frontier, was closed * * * within the historic fortifications of Fort Niagara."

The ground having been acquired, the post at Fort Erie was soon pressed to completion. A wharf was constructed just above the rapids, and, no doubt, trade actively commenced with the

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Indians. Marshall, in his article on the Niagara frontier, describes the post as located at some distance below the remains of the fort now standing. The part facing the river was built of stone surrounded by squared pickets, while the balance was stockaded. He says:

"The foundations of the present fort were laid in 1791. It must have been a rude fortification as originally constructed, for the Duke of Liancourt describes it in 1795 as a cluster of buildings surrounded with rough, crazy palisades destitute of ramparts, covered ways, or earthworks. Outside of the fort were a few lbg houses for the shelter of the officers, soldiers, and workmen. There was also a large government warehouse with an overhanging story pierced with loopholes for the use of musketry. The stone portion, the ruins of which still remain, was built in 1806, in the form of a quadrangle, and subsequently enlarged to more formidable dimensions. The Indian name of the locality, Gai-gwdah-Oh, signifies 'The Place of Hats.' Seneca tradition relates as its origin that in olden times soon after the first visit of the white man a battle occurred on the lake between a party of French in batteaux and Indians in canoes. The latter were victorious and the French boats were sunk and the crews drowned. Their hats floated ashore where the fort was subsequently built, and, attracting the attention of the Indians from their novelty, they called the locality 'The Place of Hats.'

Prior to the beginning of this century the route usually traveled from Niagara Falls to Buffalo Creek was up the present Canadian side of the river to the Black Rock ferry, where the river was crossed near where the ferry now plies. The customary route to Detroit was past Fort Erie and along the northern shore of Lake Erie. The old fort was built by Bradstreet for the security of vessels and to provide a safe place for laying them up in winter, as well as for a trading post. Its early history was apparently too prosaic to have left any trace in the writings of travelers beyond a mere occasional allusion or a meager description.

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Christian Schultz, junior, visited Fort Erie in 1807, and describes it as a small post garrisoned by twenty-eight men, who at that time were employed in building new works. He remarks upon the fact that the Americans have no fort or garrison on their side, "although there is a most commanding situation for that purpose." A few days before Schultz visited the post the English had occasion to move one of the guns of the fort. A curious Yankee, after having looked into the bore, went to the breech, and, sighting along the piece, discovered it was pointing directly toward Buffalo. He became enraged, and cursed King George, his officers, and his soldiers with all his ability, and promised to return the next-day with a party of his "choice fellows, and if he found the gun in the same position he would hang every mother's son of them without judge or jury." It is probable either that the gun was moved or that the Yankee failed to keep his promise, for the garrison continued to exist.

The fort's sole claim to importance consisted in its location upon the trail along the northern shore of Lake Erie and in the existence of the harbor and the trading place to which it afforded protection. At no time in its history was its possession of great strategical value either to the English or to the Americans.