

One hundred and forty - six years ago this past week Laura Secord made her famous walk from Queenston to the Beaverdams to warn Colonel Fitzgibbons of the proposed enemy attack. In spite of the adverse criticism of some modern historians the glory of this famous feat by the Heroine of Upper Canada has not dimmed with the passing of time.

At the time this event took place Laura was a young married woman with a family of small children and an invalid husband who had been badly wounded in the battle of Queenston Heights the previous autumn. In that month of June in 1813 all the able-bodied men on the Niagara frontier were fighting for their country, most of them in the ranks of the Lincoln Militia. About two hundred of the older men from the frontier communities, many of whom were not fit to bear arms, had been taken prisoners and sent long distances from their homes.

The whole of the Niagara frontier, including Fort George at Niagara, was in the hands of the Americans. At a council of war held at Niagara on June 18, 1813, Colonel Boerstler, of Maryland, distinguished for his gallant services in the campaign up to that time, had been selected to deal a vigorous blow against Colonel James Fitzgibbons, who was entrenched in the large stone house known as Decew's.

At that time some of the American officers were billeted at the home of James and Laura Secord at Queenston. On the 23rd of July Colonel Boerstler joined them for dinner at the Secord home, during which time they talked freely of their plans to attack the British. They were to commence the proposed operations by capturing Colonel Fitzgibbons. "That position captured," said Colonel Boerstler, "Upper Canada is ours."

Naturally Laura and her husband were very much alarmed at what they had overheard and agreed that Fitzgibbons should be warned. James could not go because of his war wounds so Laura promptly decided that it was up to her to make the journey. This account was written by a niece, Mrs. Gregory: "On that ever to be remembered morning, Aunt left her home at Queenston before daylight (the cow and the milk pail are a myth) and came to St. David's. On June 24th the sun rose at 4.36 a.m. and was just coming up when Aunt reached the home of her mother-in-law (Mrs. Stephen Secord) at St. David's. There she rested for a few moments, then left, accompanied by her niece, Elizabeth Secord, as far as Shipman's Corners (Now St. Catharines), who became weary and turned back."

Mrs. Gregory goes on to relate, how, in later years, she would sit in childish terror as she listened to her Aunt Laura and Grandma Secord talking over the affair. Her aunt would relate the fears she had entertained of being taken prisoner by the Americans before she could reach the British lines. However, she did not seem to think she had done anything more than her sacred duty in making the hazardous trip.

Laura Secord was never properly rewarded by the government for her brave deed. Some time after the end of the war she applied for the privilege of operating the ferry at Queenston but this was not granted. In 1827, according to government records, James Secord made application for a position which Sir Peregrine Maitland, the Lieutenant-Governor, did not see fit to give him, but he did promise, when Brock's monument was completed, that Mr. and Mrs. Secord might be given the chance to look after it. This, however, Mrs. Secord seems to have declined,

perhaps because Mrs. Nichol, widow of Colonel Robert Nichol, had also been mentioned for the position, as she was in very straightened circumstances following her husband's death.

In 1827 Colonel Fitzgibbons made an affidavit covering the story of Laura's famous feat. (We have in our possession a photostatic copy of this, the original of which is in the Public Archives at Ottawa.) Mrs. Secord's own narrative of the event was published in the Anglo-American Magazine, Toronto, November, 1853. She closed her story with this statement: "I returned home the next day exhausted and fatigued. I am now advanced in years and when I look back I wonder how I could have gone through so much fatigue with the fortitude to accomplish it."

As late as 1845 there was a debate in the House of Assembly concerning a reward for Colonel Fitzgibbons. Some thought he should have a grant of land while others proposed a grant of £1,000. There was a lengthy debate as to whether Colonel Fitzgibbons really deserved the credit of winning the Battle of the Beaverdams or whether it belonged to Major Delormier. Laura's share in the battle honours was also evidently outlined for her only son, Charles, wrote a letter in defense of his mother's brave deed, stating that: "Without waiting for further information, my mother, a lone woman, at once left her house to apprise the British troops at the Beaverdams, of what she had heard, and travelled on foot the whole way, passing the American guards and many of the Indian scouts who were placed along the road, until she arrived at the Beaver Dams, and enquiring for the officer in command was introduced to Colonel Fitzgibbons (then Lieutenant Fitzgibbons). She then told him what she had come for and what she had heard." This letter was published in "The Church" at Cobourg, April 1845.

Laura Secord and her husband moved to Chippawa some time before 1837 when the latter was appointed collector of customs at that port. After the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, visited here in 1860 and heard her story, Laura was sent a special gift of £100. Two monuments commemorate Laura's fame, — one in Drummond Hill Cemetery, Niagara Falls, and another on Queenston Heights.