

Chandler esteemed 'as a citizen and a neighbour'

Ignoble military career haunted 19th-century Mainer until death in 1841

Halfway down the snowy slope of Mount Vernon Cemetery that falls to the Kennebec River in Augusta, a weathered stone marks the final resting place of John Chandler.

Cemetery records note the essential dates and public offices held. The Honorable John Chandler, when he was buried here in 1841, was remembered for his pioneering work in support of Maine's statehood and his long public service as congressman, senator and sheriff of Kennebec County.

His military service during the War of 1812? Not so much. In fact, his three-year career in the Army was mostly a misadventure. He is notable, more than anything, for squandering a golden opportunity to drive out the British from what is now the Canadian province of Ontario.

At the outbreak of war in June 1812, the brusque, gray-haired New Englander, who had scrabbled his way from obscure poverty to become the most influential politician in his home territory of Maine, was a remarkable success story. During the Revolution, he'd served under a young field officer, Henry Dearborn, who would become his patron when they settled in Monmouth after the war.

Self-educated and ambitious, Chandler worked as a blacksmith, cleared land, took census and kept a tavern. Under Dearborn's tutelage, he assumed an increasingly public role, first as postmaster, town clerk and county sheriff and then state senator and federal congressman. In 1812, with the army rapidly expanding to a war footing, political influence secured him a brigadier general's commission.

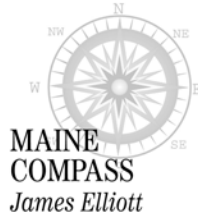
In November 1812, he had been with his mentor Dearborn, now the ranking officer in the U.S. Army, at Plattsburgh for the farcical third invasion of Canada, which contemporary historian Charles Ingersoll called "the climax of our military degradation for that year."

One of the officers on that expedition declared Chandler "has neither sense nor discretion, and is without any military knowledge at all."

Questions about his military competence combined with his blacksmith background gave an increasingly restive press a theme they could expand on. Chandler, one of the Washington papers sneered, "can form a half moon or a horse shoe, a hollow square or a plough share with equal skill and ability."

The following spring, while stationed at Sackett's Harbour on Lake Ontario, Chandler, who had been appointed brigadier general without having spent so much as a single day in the regular army as an officer, had complained to the secretary of war about the number of civilians being awarded military commissions.

In May of 1813, he was present at



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the capture of Fort George at the mouth of the Niagara River but saw no combat. Ten days later near the tiny hamlet of Stoney Creek at the western end of Lake Ontario, Chandler, at the head of an army of 3,500 was on the verge of mopping up the remnants of the British garrison that had fled Fort George.

The capture or destruction of that force would have left most of Upper Canada, as Ontario was then known, completely defenseless.

Early in the morning of June 6, however, while most of his army, including the advanced picket, was asleep, a British raiding party of about 800 troops attacked his camp.

In the ensuing confusion of a moonless night, Chandler stumbled into the British force that had just overrun his artillery. He was promptly captured, as was his second-in-command, William Henry Winder, a few minutes later.

Both general officers were spirited off, as the British withdrew before anyone in the American line knew what had happened.

At first light, the leaderless American army also withdrew, the first phase of a retreat that took it back to the Niagara River, abandoning the entire Niagara Peninsula and the United States' best chance of conquering Upper Canada.

Chandler spent nearly a year in confinement before being exchanged, while the press had a field day ridiculing his ineptitude.

"Our administration appear to have supposed that they could make a good



Photo courtesy of Maine Historical Society

'GOOD BLACKSMITH': Brig. Gen. John Chandler is buried on a hillside in Mount Vernon.

general out of a hairbrained partisan," railed the Connecticut Mirror.

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In the public's eye he came to symbolize the folly of placing political appointees in the army's high command.

Although he enjoyed a lengthy career as a public servant and was instrumental in winning statehood for Maine, Chandler never escaped the stigma of Stoney Creek and bore it like a curse until he died. He sought a court of inquiry into his conduct but was denied. He also ghosted a long newspaper account of battle defending his actions but its publication did little to retrieve his military standing.

Chandler ended his public life at the age of 75 as collector of customs for Portland and Falmouth and retired to Augusta, where he died in relative obscurity in 1841.

His passing was given only perfunctory notice in the New England press. The Kennebec Journal made no mention of his war record but conceded "as a citizen and a neighbour he was always esteemed."

James Elliott is a writer and journalist living in Hamilton, Ontario. His most recent book, "Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek 1813" traces the wartime career of John Chandler.