

## WEEKEND READER

## Is the Billy Green story balderdash?

Evidence deconstructs the enduring legend of Battle of Stoney Creek 'hero'

BY JAMES ELLIOTT

On an unseasonably cold day in the late spring of 1889, a group of influential Hamilton citizens, including captains of industry, wealthy merchants, lawyers, politicians and the editor of this newspaper, presided over ceremonies to mark the founding of the Wentworth Pioneer and Historical Society.

At an outdoor picnic across the road from Stoney Creek Cemetery, an estimated 500 people turned out on the 76th anniversary of the Battle of Stoney Creek for an event that included amateur historian Peter Van Wagner among its guests.

Leading a battlefield tour, the 71-year-old phrenologist and former teacher gave a startling explanation of how the British force was able to surprise the American camp early in the morning of June 6, 1813.

Van Wagner said the British had the countersign that enabled them to disarm and capture American sentries. How did they get the countersign? From a young Stoney Creek settler, William Green, who carried it to the British camp at Burlington Heights, now Dundurn Park.

That disclosure is almost certainly the starting point of Stoney Creek's most enduring myth — how Billy Green warned the British army, thereby becoming the hero of the Battle of Stoney Creek.

In the 120 years since Van Wagner's revelation was reported in the Hamilton Evening Times, the 19-year-old militiaman has achieved the status of local legend.

Hailed as a Canadian Paul Revere, Green has been the subject of two books and numerous articles, celebrated in at least three recorded songs (including one by Stan Rogers), cited by historians ranging from George F. Stanley to Pierre Berton and recognized on the floor of Parliament.

The record shows that Green, youngest child of New Jersey Loyalist Adam Green, was born in 1794 in Stoney Creek and died there in 1877. In 1813 he was a private in 5th Lincoln Militia and may have been on active service the night of the battle.

In contrast to the concerted myth-building that began a dozen years after his death, there is no hard evidence that Green ever claimed to be the hero of the Battle of Stoney Creek or even took an active role in it. However, evidence suggests Green's fabled role in the battle was cut from whole cloth in an effort to create a Stoney Creek counterpart to Laura Secord. Additionally, there is evidence that heroics attributed to Green were carried out by his older brother, Freeman Green.

It goes something like this.

In 1820, William applied for a land grant based on his war service. Land petitions were often used by vets to toot their own horn, yet his notes said nothing more distinguished than "William Green did his duty."

Freeman, also a veteran of the 5th Lincoln, filed his own land petition in 1836 in which he said he warned the British, helped capture two generals and "as a private volunteer discharged his duty and



SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

The monument in Stoney Creek cemetery was erected in the 1930s as a tribute to Billy Green, The Scout.

distinguished himself on Secret Services."

In 1851, historian Robert Nisbet interviewed James Gage, an eyewitness on whose farm the battle took place. If Gage mentioned William Green, Nisbet never recorded it.

In 1873, on the 60th anniversary of the battle, journalist E.B. Biggar published an account of the battle based partially on the recollections of five great uncles who served in the 5th Lincoln militia during the war, three of them in the same company as Billy Green.

Biggar also interviewed Green but made no mention of him. He did however relate the escape of a provincial dragoon who spurred his horse up the Mountain on a deer path and made his way to Burlington Heights to report the arrival of the American army in Stoney Creek.

In 1875, when the federal government issued a \$20 payment to all surviving veterans of the war, Green, unlike many of his contemporaries gave no details of his service other than that he was at Stoney Creek and not wounded.

John H. Land, grandson of Billy Green's company commander in the 5th Lincoln, presented a paper

on the battle in 1887, saying that the arrival of the American army at Stoney Creek on June 5, the day before the battle, was reported to the British advance picket at Red Hill Creek by "a scout." If that scout was Green perhaps this was the little story that grew.

In 1893, Biggar wrote an updated account of the battle for the Canadian Magazine in which he scoffed at Van Wagner's countersign explanation. "In the account which this Wm. Green gave the writer years ago," he wrote, "he made no mention of this incident, which one would think he would not have forgotten."

Despite Biggar's skepticism, the legend of Billy Green continued to grow.

The biggest boost came from the release in 1908 of diary entries supposedly dating from 1819 that detail Billy Green's now-familiar role — how he got the American password from his brother-in-law, Isaac Corman, rode a plow horse up the escarpment to escape the Americans, warned the British and then guided the raiding party back to Stoney Creek where he killed at least one sentry in the prelude to the battle.

This account has many holes,

not the least being that the British already knew the Americans were in Stoney Creek as an advance picket had skirmished with them that afternoon before withdrawing to Burlington Heights.

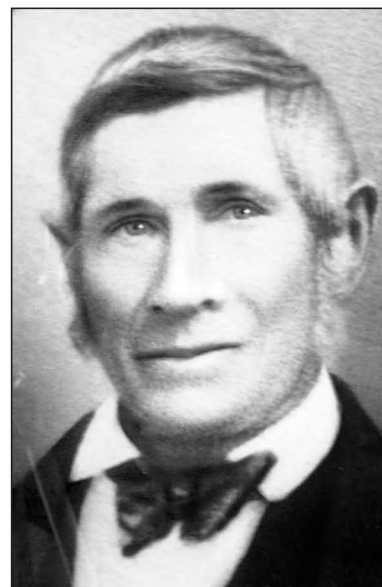
The only documentary evidence for the account is an 18th-century atlas that has handwritten entries on the back of three maps identified as "copied from the diary of S.D. Slater," an Irish schoolteacher. The whereabouts of the diary is unknown.

Thirteen dated entries cover Slater's departure from Ireland on Sept. 3, 1818, and conclude June 5, 1819. They are brief in the extreme — "Dec. 8 Landed in Quebec" — until the last entry in which he apparently recorded Billy Green's 937-word account of his role in the battle.

The atlas, now in Local History & Archives at the Hamilton Public Library, came from the former museum at Dundurn Castle, provenance of the Corman Family in Stoney Creek.

A slightly different, expanded version of Green's statement said to have been dictated by Green, remains in the Green family.

In 1913, when the battlefield monument was opened, Green's



There are strong suggestions that the story of Billy Green's heroic actions is fabricated.

profile was such that his name was chiselled in the limestone facade as one of the stars of the show.

Three years later, Hazel Corman, grandniece of Isaac Corman, published an account of the battle that gave pride of place to Billy Green.

During the 1930s, a publicly-funded monument was erected in Stoney Creek cemetery, where it remains, and in Toronto the Mail and Empire proclaimed him a national hero. "And so Canada remained British ... due to the cool-headed, yet audacious courage of Billy Green, the farm lad who was God's instrument in saving Upper Canada."

Distance fogs and skews memory. Nearly two centuries on, the precise details about what occurred on the Gage farms in Stoney Creek are difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Yet in Billy Green's case, a close reading of the record evokes nothing so strong as a sense of skepticism.

Three quarters of a century ago, Spectator columnist and local historian Charles McCullough caught the scent of something fishy in the Slater diary and suggested "too much telling of the story of the night fight at Stoney Creek had made the resourceful Bill believe in each stage of the tale from the original fact to the finished fiction."

More likely the "finished fiction" is the diary itself.

It stretches credulity that a schoolteacher emigrating from Ireland to the New World in 1818 would find nothing worthy of recording in his diary for 10 months other than the Billy Green narrative. Apart from his name on the diary — two initials only — S.D. Slater left no trace of his time in Upper Canada.

The timeline of the story, its appearance more than a decade after Green's death, the absence of any mention in his land petition, pension application or interview with Biggar and the fact it appears in his brother's land petition, strongly suggests it was fabricated, or appropriated long — perhaps 75 years — after the fact as part of the great patriotic awakening of the 1880s to give Stoney Creek and Hamilton a War of 1812 hero who could stand beside Laura Secord.

James Elliott is a former Spectator reporter and the author of the recently published *Strange Fatality: The Battle Of Stoney Creek*.