

Maine Sunday Telegram/ Sunday, February 28, 2010

# Fascinating, little-known tale stars star-crossed Mainers

By WILLIAM DAVID BARRY

You might imagine that a book about a battle waged on the Niagara peninsula in June 1813 would have little to do with Maine or Mainers.

But then — as Canadian journalist James Elliott proves in his exciting and insightful new book, "Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813" — you'd be wrong.

Stoney Creek is one of those actions, fondly remembered by one side (in this case, Canada) and quickly and deeply buried by the other (the United States). For the former it is remembered as a victory over the invading Yankees when the local militia stood tall with the British as Upper Canadians. For the Americans it was another story, with Maj. Gen. Henry Dearborn (a resident of Maine) explaining weakly: "The enemy was completely routed and driven from the field and would have (been) pursued and

## REVIEW

"STRANGE FATALITY: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813." By James E. Elliott. Robin Brass Studio: Montreal. 312 pages. \$27.95.

destroyed but by some strange fatality — both Brigadier-Generals Chandler and Winder were taken prisoner."

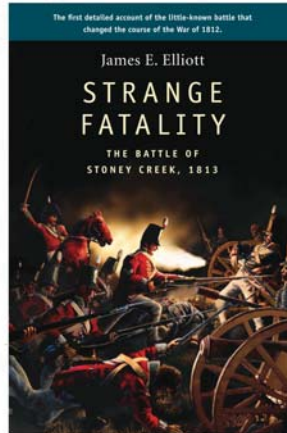
The upshot is that some 3,000 of "the best troops the United States could field" had been sent by Dearborn under Maine's Brigadier Gen. John Chandler to drive British regulars, Canadian militia and a few Indian allies out of Lower Canada (Ontario). Most of the Indian allies stood back and British Brigadier John Vincent's force totaled less than 800, holed up on Burlington Heights.

Detailed battle accounts are notoriously difficult to write. Accurate ones

tend to put general readers to sleep. Popular ones often romanticize or foreshorten complex events, which angers scholars. Elliott is thorough, accurate, evenhanded and vivid.

"Strange Fatality," set as it is in the context of the larger Dearborn campaign on the peninsula, reads like a novel. It is good, gory, realistic stuff, which accurately depicts the most unpopular conflict in United States history before Vietnam. For the Canadians it produced local heroes including Billy Green and Laura Secord.

Indeed much time is spent on the meaning of Stoney Creek, to the emerging nation of Canada and the British Empire in the latter part of the book. There are great maps, good images and some of the best clearing of the fog of battle and political blavioina one will find in recent historical prose. Better yet, it has footnotes, an index and wonderful appendices.



I have always urged Maine historians to read beyond the boundaries of Maine and "Strange Fatality" is a perfect example of what I was trying to get at. Embedded in the story of the distant battle is a shadowy chapter of Maine history that is seldom mentioned. The War of 1812 itself has always been a sore point. In history and social studies, the concentration (at least in my day) was on the great individual naval victories of the USS Constitution and Andrew Jackson's crushing victory at New Orleans. Sometimes the burning of Washington is mentioned, rarely that much of the west and half of Maine was occupied by the Brits.

The war was a disaster, with political generals and militias that would not cross state or national lines or follow orders from officers appointed

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by different party bosses. The incompetence of the military appointments was staggering. Dearborn had been a hero in the Revolutionary War and a fine Secretary of War in the new republic, but now brought out of retirement from his home in Monmouth, Maine, he was too old and ill to lead. The troops called him "Granny," and though he and his army made a spectacular landing and captured Fort George, at the outset of the campaign he dithered. Ultimately he was dismissed and given, of all things, command of New York City.

The role and subsequent career of his protégé, Gen. John Chandler, is even more important to state history. Beginning as an illiterate blacksmith, Chandler had connections with Dearborn and the White House. One of his officers described him as having "neither sense nor discretion, and is without any military knowledge at all." His opponent, Brigadier John Vincent, trembled before Chandler, lost confidence and was nowhere to be seen in the fog of battle (almost captured by the Americans, in fact). The only thing that saved the day is that Vincent turned control over to Lt. Col. John Harvey.

Chandler camped his army in an excellent defensive position, but according to Elliott, posted guards that he knew were tired. Harvey scouted the camp and led a nighttime bayonet attack that almost worked. Though the Americans responded well, the

British captured the artillery and Chandler when he and his second rushed to command the guns. Though the Canadian-British troops were forced to leave the field, they went with the American command in tow. Without leadership the Yankees made a slow, sad retreat. Upper Canada was saved for the Canadians.

Historians give much credit to Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain for his bayonet charge at Gettysburg during the American Civil War. It is seen as a decisive moment that saved the whole battle. In a very real way Gen. John Chandler is the anti-Chamberlain. Poorly trained, uninterested in military tactics, he lost his bearings in battle and hence the whole campaign. Upon his release as a prisoner of war, Chandler was rewarded by being appointed military commander of Maine. Where Chamberlain was rewarded for his competence, Chandler continued to be rewarded for his incompetence becoming "a father of Maine Statehood" and one of the State's first senators. Elliott says that Chandler never escaped "the stigma of Stoney Creek," while noting his Congressional biography limits his war service to state militia. There is virtually no mention of Chandler's role in the loss of Lower Canada in most Maine history books. I would argue that history has all but shielded him from his folly at Stoney Creek. That is, until now.

William David Barry is a local historian who has authored/co-authored five books including "Tate House: Crown of the Maine Mast Trade" and the novel "Pyrrhus Venture." He lives in Portland.