

# THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

001964324

FRIDAY, JUNE 3, 2011 ♦ THESPEC.COM ♦ THE VOICE OF OUR COMMUNITIES SINCE 1846

## The battle over Billy

### Kin defend legend of Stoney Creek war hero

BY MARK MCNEIL

Call it the second Battle of Stoney Creek or maybe the Battle over the Battle of Stoney Creek.

Whatever you call it, the community hasn't seen these kinds of fireworks since the Americans ran off in a hail of musket and cannon fire nearly two centuries ago.

At issue are the reported heroics of local hero Billy Green, who was said to be instrumental in the 1813 British victory by leading the royal troops to the American encampment. He allegedly learned of the enemy password and passed it on to the Brits, who were able to get past sentries and surprise the Americans under a cloak of darkness.

According to this view of history, Green was crucial in the crushing British victory. And if not for Billy's heroics, people in this part of the world would be celebrating Thanksgiving in November and singing a national anthem about a flag with stars and stripes.

That's the story written in standard history books, the reason a local school is named after Billy Green, and that's the version of events that Stoney Creek battle buffs and descendents of Green like to hear.

But the problem, according to local author James Elliott, is that it's balderdash.

Elliott came out with his contro-

versial revisionist view in an appendix of his book *Strange Fatality* last year. He says he looked hard at all the evidence and believes the Billy Green story is a tall tale passed on through time to create a local hero in the spirit of Laura Secord or Paul Revere.

But now there's a volley from the other side, just in time for the Battle of Stoney Creek re-enactment this weekend and 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 2013. Three descendents of Green have gone on the offensive as authors of a 30-page booklet that tries to restore the Billy Green legend.

A foreword from the board of directors of the Stoney Creek Historical Society says the booklet is an effort to "clarify the facts surrounding the exploits of Billy Green and what has traditionally been believed concerning his contribution to the British triumph at the Battle of Stoney Creek... and to respond appropriately to recent attempts to downgrade his importance."

Ironically, while *Strange Fatality* is being rebuked by the Green family in the booklet that will be on sale at the re-enactment, on Saturday in North York the Elliott book is set to receive one of the country's premier history honours: the 2010 Ontario Historical Society J.J. Talman Award.

Continued on A4

## Award-winning battle book has some up in arms

Continued from A1

The award is given to the year's "best book on Ontario's social, economic, political and cultural history."

A release from the society says the win by Elliott, a former *Spectator* reporter, "marks a departure of sorts for the award which, to date, has been typically awarded to academics."

Elliott says he has not seen the rebuttal book called *Billy Green and Balderdash* and stands by his view of Billy Green in *Strange Fatality*.

"The idea of the British army needing a local scout to find Stoney Creek is a complete nonstarter. The British had been there the afternoon before and knew exactly where Stoney Creek was. The whole idea that he led them back holds no water at all."

As for the password, that doesn't make sense either, he says. Ac-

cording to the monument to Billy Green in the Stoney Creek cemetery, the password was passed on to Green from an Isaac Corman, who had been detained by the Americans for a short time. Elliott says that "no army would be so amateurish and inept that it would hand out a password to a civilian in the middle of enemy territory. Again, it is just absurd."

He also argues that Green, who lived from 1794 to 1877, had opportunities to speak about his exploits — when applying for a loyalist land grant, and giving a notable interview to a journalist in the 1870s — and apparently chose not to. It was only late in life that he apparently passed on his story to family members.

But authors David B. Clark, Douglas A. Green and Mary Lubell say Green's apparent silence through most of his life proves nothing and argue that Elliott's case is built on innuendo.



RON ALBERTSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

**War memorial featuring Billy Green in Stoney Creek Cemetery.**

"We kind of think (Green), like a lot of vets, had some form of post traumatic stress disorder. He just didn't want to talk about it... he couldn't write it down himself because he was illiterate. He eventually did tell his grandson. He didn't

blow his own horn," says Clark.

The account told to grandson John Green was published verbatim in *The Spectator* in March 1938 and can be read at the Battlefield House Museum website.

Elliott says the Billy Green story appears to have its genesis with amateur historian, teacher and phrenologist Peter Van Wagner, who told a group of prominent people at an anniversary ceremony in 1889 the incredible tale of a 19-year-old who helped the British with the surprise attack. That was 76 years after the battle and more than a decade after Green's death.

But the booklet argues there were earlier references to Green's exploits, most notably Van Wagner's diaries in the 1870s.

"I think if a story has perpetuated for 200 years, there's got to be some validity to it," says Kathy Wakeman of the Stoney Creek Historical Society. "I think the original United Empire Loyalist families

in Stoney Creek, the Cormans and the Greens and the Van Wagners from the beach... they have diaries. Someone would not write something in a diary to start a story. You write something in a diary because it is about your life."

Douglas Green, one of the booklet's authors, says "When we speak of Elliott, we speak of Benedict Arnold because he published a book in 1994 on Billy Green, telling the traditional story. The Stoney Creek Historical Society gave him money to write (the) Battle of Stoney Creek book but... they had no idea he would be trashing Billy Green."

For his part, Elliott says, writing the appendix on Green "was the hardest thing I had to do in that book. I essentially had to repudiate everything I said earlier in the Billy Green book. It was not something that I relished."

mmcneil@thespec.com  
905-526-4687