

## WEEKEND READER

## A Victorian dynamo

Sara Calder led gender-divided fight for Battlefield Park monument

BY JAMES ELLIOTT

Few visitors to the greystone gothic monument that towers over Battlefield Park in Stoney Creek are aware that it actually commemorates two battles.

The first, most obviously, is the 1813 Battle of Stoney Creek in which an invading American army was repulsed during the War of 1812. It lasted less than an hour. The second, more obscure Battle of Stoney Creek, occurred 80 years later with lines drawn, not between nationalities, but between sexes and was fought over the location of a memorial. It lasted 15 years.

Cut into the limestone facade of the 10-storey monument are names of the main players including Plenderleath, Harvey, Vincent and FitzGibbon. Conspicuous in its absence however is Calder, as in Sara Calder, without whom the monument, and its surrounding grounds, would not exist.

The story has its beginnings in the great patriotic revival of the 1880s with War of 1812 heroine Laura Secord as the poster girl. Historical societies sprouted like mushrooms all over the province. One of the earliest was the Wentworth Pioneer and Historical Society in Hamilton whose founding resolution was the attainment of federal funding for a monument on the Stoney Creek battlefield.

An enthusiastic, early supporter of the resolution was a middle-aged socialite and amateur painter with a pedigree that few of the society worthies could claim. Sara Galbraith Calder, wife of prominent Hamilton clothier John Calder, was the granddaughter of James and Mary Gage, over whose farm the battle had raged.

Obsessed with the idea of honouring history, the 43-year-old Calder would become a local version of Joan of Arc, striding into battle under the old flag and smiting her enemies with the sword of righteousness. Described by one historian as a “hard-driven Victorian dynamo,” Calder was energetic, creative and, most of all, single-minded. Her compulsive credo was: “It can be done, it must be done, and it will be done.”

Presenting the society with an elaborate cream silk and velvet banner commemorating the Battle of Stoney Creek in 1893, she declared her pride at being “able to claim descent from United Empire Loyalists as my great grandfather, Captain James Gage was killed while fighting under the old flag.”

Ironically, Calder’s claim was anything but solid. The flag her great grandfather died fighting under was not the King’s colour but the Stars and Stripes. Calder however, never suffered a moment’s doubt about her Loyalist lineage and the banner was a mark of her faith.

In 1894 the society authorized formation of a ladies’ auxiliary. Few in the hierarchy of the society could have foreseen how that tiny sliver of autonomy could grow into a giant wedge that would split the society along gender lines.

That same year two potential monument sites became available: the former James Gage homestead with four acres of land, and Smith’s Knoll, site of the American artillery battery during the battle.

The choice for Calder was obvious. The Gage parcel included an option on a commanding hilltop lot behind the house, and Calder, with the eye of an accomplished amateur painter, had visions of Brock’s soaring monument on Queenston Heights in mind.

Calder actively promoted the Gage package, but the WHS committee of five men had a different view, and its recommendation of Smith’s Knoll was accepted.

Although rebuffed, she was not discouraged. The first sign of rift in the society ranks became evident after the ladies’ committee refused to hand over the proceeds from a Calder-organized fundraiser in 1895. The issue, of course, was the site for a



PHOTO COURTESY BATTLEFIELD HOUSE MUSEUM

Sara Calder was the driving force behind the monument marking the Battle of Stoney Creek.



PHOTO COURTESY BATTLEFIELD HOUSE MUSEUM

When Governor General Earl Grey visited Hamilton in the spring of 1909, Sara Calder, left, arranged a visit to Battlefield House where the Countess of Grey, right, turned the sod for the monument.

Stoney Creek monument.

By 1899 the WHS had spent a decade fruitlessly petitioning Ottawa for money with nothing to show for it. The ladies’ committee, with Calder in the chair, decided to form its own society – the Women’s Wentworth Historical Society.

Calder announced that the first order of business would be the purchase of the Gage property for \$1,900. The \$900 down pay-



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Queen Mary pressed a button in Buckingham Palace on June 6, 1913, symbolically unveiling the Battlefield Park monument.

public park. Calder’s doughty band became the first historical society in Canada to purchase and donate to the public an historically significant property.

The question of site selection was still in question and the WHS missed its last, best chance to win the monument sweepstakes. A query from the minister asking if the WHS was prepared to contribute anything to supplement a government grant was essentially ignored. A similar question to Calder’s group elicited an immediate promise to “cheerfully assume the responsibility of ... securing a sum of money.”

Endgame. Calder understood how Ottawa worked, how initiative and a willingness to roll up your sleeves and get to it, could trump an essentially passive academic interest.

But Ottawa, distracted by the Boer War, shifted the monument issue to the back burner again. In 1901 Calder’s chief adversary, George Mills, died. Four months later, her husband, John Calder, would follow. Calder, who had more than her share of personal tragedy in her life – seven of her nine offspring died in childhood – soldiered on.

Duty beckoned, and she was instrumental in raising \$10,000 to honour the 64-year reign of Queen Victoria with the imposing bronze statue in Gore Park.

On Jan. 6, 1909, an agreement was reached. Two monuments would be built, a modest stone marker on Smith’s Knoll and a soaring tower on the hill behind the Gage House with the tower receiving the entire government grant.

Construction was completed at the end of May 1913, just days before its official inauguration on the 100th anniversary of the battle. A crowd of 15,000 jammed Battlefield Park for the ceremonies.

The unveiling of the monument by Queen Mary, via a trans-Atlantic cable, provided a storybook culmination of the personal vision that had driven Calder for nearly two decades.

Seven months later, Calder petitioned the militia minister for funds for landscaping. It would be the last time the militia department would hear from Sara Calder. Now 67, the Victorian dynamo’s 14-year struggle with diabetes was coming to an end. On March 16, 1914, she died in her Aberdeen Avenue home. Her gift to Stoney Creek however, endures. A permanent testimonial to our early colonial history and as much a tribute to her perseverance as it is to the battle that inspired it.

James Elliott is the author of *Strange Fataality: The Battle Of Stoney Creek*, published earlier this year by Robin Brass Studio.