



Hamilton

# War of 1812 Connections

City of Hamilton Culture Division

## **Forcible Possession by His Majesty's Troops *Trade, Transshipment and the Depot on Burlington Heights***

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By the late 18th century Richard Beasley was squatting on the Burlington bay-shore, at the western end of Lake Ontario, using it as a transshipment point for fur and other commodities. By 1791 the Barton survey shows Beasley in possession of 200 acres on top of Burlington Heights. Once established there, Beasley traded locally with the Six Nations on the Grand River, as well as the Mississauga, who used the Heights alongside Beasley for as much as eight months of the year. By 1799 he was a magistrate, a member of the Legislative Assembly, a Justice of the Peace and a militia officer. He had fenced fields, producing orchards, and stands of valuable hardwood. He had acquired full title to most of the property upon which he had been squatting in Barton Township, and he had embarked on his largest land speculation to date as part of a syndicate which purchased 94,000 acres of Block # 2, Six Nations Reserve.

Through the first decade of the 19th century he sold his mill interest and lands in Ancaster. Though his Block # 2 speculation paid off, he had debts most notably with his cousin Richard Cartwright and his partner Robert Hamilton, who wrote pointed letters and took legal action, to encourage repayment. The mishandling of funds almost led to the sale of his newly constructed brick cottage, barn and sheds to make good. The Heights at the head of the lake were a private conduit through which flowed Beasley's goods and influence.

By the War of 1812, he had shaped the Heights landscape into a picturesque country estate, the centre-piece of which was his Georgian style brick cottage. Beasley had all the appearances of a prosperous country gentleman, but these pursuits were soon sharply interrupted by the arrival of the British Army during the War of 1812.

The Heights had not been fortified prior to June 1st 1813. The idea of a post at the Head of the Lake had been considered by the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe (1791-96). In deciding on where to place his military posts, Simcoe emphasized the need for defensible natural harbours for ship building, as well as access to a road running west from the head of the lake to London and Detroit. Simcoe believed that his best option for the defense of Upper Canada lay in the ability to concentrate his meagre military forces at crisis points by the strategic use of shipping.



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At the head of the lake there was available land, access to the Heights by water and trail, as well as mills and farms to provide flour and meat for the troops. While the land was technically available for a post at the Head of the Lake, Beasley had already occupied much of it. A 1793 map detailing the Governor's travels from Niagara to Detroit includes a 100 acre block of land for a post at the western end of Cootes' Paradise at what is today Dundas and it also shows that all around the proposed post the landscape is dominated by Beasley's improvements. Fenced fields on the Heights, a house and store on the bayshore below the Heights, as well as a mill in Ancaster township. The Governor's route as marked on the map extends from the Niagara river passed Beasley's store on the Burlington bay-shore stretching west past Beasley's mill, as well as the village where his important Mohawk clients lived, on its way to Detroit.

The map also shows that in 1793, the ambitious Beasley occupied more than he owned. Although only officially recognized as having title to a mere 400 acres based on the 1791 survey of Barton township, that did not stop Beasley from occupying and developing 400 acres more that did not belong to him. On paper Beasley may have been squatting, but to someone like Simcoe that was less important than turning a wild patchwork of meadow and forest waste-land into an improved, English style landscape. Regardless of whether he held legal title, Beasley was the one whom Simcoe needed to deal with to establish his depot.

It is not clear how negotiations between Beasley and Simcoe proceeded. An opportunistically minded Beasley may have demanded too high a price for his lands, which convinced Simcoe to look elsewhere. In his defensive plan, Simcoe pinpointed the area as a potential depot, part of a fortified post "wish list" drawn up for southern Upper Canada along with York on Lake Ontario, and Long Point on Lake Erie. All were viewed by the Governor as militarily strategic, but all of these sites were not on the established line of shipment and transshipment controlled by the merchant monopoly of Richard Cartwright and Robert Hamilton.

From the 1790's through the first decade of the nineteenth century, most goods from England landing in Halifax travelled from the ocean along the St. Lawrence River to Lake Ontario, to Richard Cartwright's prosperous storehouse facilities at Kingston. The rest of the journey via Lake Erie to Detroit and the west was along the Niagara River climbing the massive Niagara escarpment by way of the Queenston Portage which was controlled by Cartwright's partner, Robert Hamilton. Hamilton, like Cartwright, rented out warehouse space; but unlike his partner, Hamilton received a percentage from all freight moving along the Niagara River in exchange for maintaining the portage road up the escarpment around the falls. Storage and transshipment fees guaranteed success in a business where extracting payment from clients was often difficult. In controlling the carrying trade along the lower Great Lakes, Cartwright and Hamilton ensured



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that the majority of goods flowed through Kingston and Queenston and Fort Erie, largely skirting York, Long Point and Burlington Heights.

The use of the Heights by the military became a practical necessity as the tensions generated by the Napoleonic Wars (1798- 1815) spilled over into North America. Legal trade along the Niagara River was brought to a standstill over the enforcement of the Embargo Act (1809), which officially disallowed trade between the United States and Great Britain. Unofficially, it encouraged a healthy smuggling trade between Upper and Lower Canada and the Border States.

With the loss of Fort George and the other posts along the Niagara River in the spring of 1813 and naval losses on Lake Erie in the fall, the Niagara River/ Lake Erie route was no longer safe for British shipping. In contrast, the Royal Navy on Lake Ontario continued to provide security for shipping to the newly established post on Burlington Heights which thereafter became an important depot of supply, rest and recuperation for the British army until the end of the war.

