

“A Country Void of Every Resource...” A Royal Engineer’s Perspective on Burlington Heights By Michael McAllister Hamilton Military Museum

Burlington Heights is the height of land on which Dundurn Castle is located today.

In conformity to your Excellency's desire that I should state confidentially my opinion I must candidly acknowledge to you that I consider the situation of this part of the Army so very precarious that I think a retreat from hence [Burlington Heights] will soon become indispensable. Sickness and Fatigue has nearly worn out the Troops; and the inclemency of the Season will soon render them incapable of much exertion.

Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Bruyeres
Commander Royal Engineers
British North America
October 11, 1813

Lieutenant Colonel Bruyeres made this statement in a letter to Governor General and Commander of Forces in British North America, Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost Bt., in order to express concern over defending the new fortified supply depot on Burlington Heights. This letter and one from September of 1813 preserve a rare look into the way a well traveled and experienced British officer viewed Upper Canada and in particular Burlington Heights during the War of 1812.

To Bruyeres, Burlington Heights was important only so long as it could be used to maintain the upper hand against the Americans across a constantly changing strategic frontier. His descriptions of the Heights focus on a lack of supplies, the shortage and uncooperative nature of manpower and the spread of disease amongst the soldiers.

When the British army arrived on the Heights in late May of 1813, they found themselves in a park-like environment with stands of hardwood, orchards, enclosed fields, barns and sheds, and a Georgian Brick cottage on top of the Heights as well as a wharf with storehouses on the bay shore. Major General John Vincent, Commander of the Central Division of the British army, signed an agreement with Richard Beasley for the use of his property, which Beasley later interpreted as an order to remove himself, his family and his one servant from his property without prospects. While it is difficult to imagine someone like Richard Beasley – who was part of the merchant elite – being without prospects, Beasley’s losses during the war were, by his tally, considerable, and it was not unusual for the British army operating in Upper Canada to take what it required of people when it saw fit, so there is probably some truth to Beasley’s claim. This tyrannical beginning characterizes the British army’s approach to landscape acquisition and development, which Bruyeres was no stranger to. The British occupied the Heights using available resources in order to sustain itself.



Hamilton

War of 1812 Connections

City of Hamilton Culture Division

The first task for the army was to set up housing and defenses for the 1628 troops and their families present on the Heights in early June. Given that 1500 of the troops, at minimum, were regulars, at least 96 women accompanied their husbands to Canada and Burlington Heights based on a lottery system wherein six out of every 100 soldiers were allowed to bring their families with them when embarking on foreign service.

The senior officers moved into Richard Beasley's house. A small proportion of the enlisted men sought shelter in Beasley's shed and barn and the rest took what little comfort they could in tents on the cold, hard ground. Out of necessity the troops made use of Beasley's stored cereal grass and straw for bedding. They took his fence posts and cut down his trees for fuel. They used his hay for their horses.

At the time of the arrival of Bruyeres to Burlington Heights in the summer of 1813, housing for stores and men was limited. In his letter to Governor Prevost of September 4th, he laid out his plan to construct "four log buildings to serve as Barracks each to contain 180 men..." to be placed behind the first line of defense. In addition, "Three large storehouses to serve as a depot for provisions and stores are proposed to be erected in the rear of the second line [of defense]." One of the three was near to completion, but the other two had not been started. A temporary gun powder magazine containing 200 barrels located near to the storehouse had also been completed. Two more log barrack buildings were to be constructed near to the storehouses and magazine.

Not much progress has been made to the Buildings or Works carrying on here owing to the total impossibility of procuring workmen or materials to execute them. Every possible exertion has been made by the Officers Commanding here to procure the assistance of the Militia but it has not been practicable to keep them together they have always deserted in such large numbers that they cannot supply the ordinary duties of the place.

The militia could not be depended upon to provide reliable work parties. To Bruyeres, who viewed the deserters with contempt, the civilian population was uncooperative and hostile, unwilling to "supply the ordinary duties of the place." Not only was manpower in short supply but in the original contract, most of the materials had to be provided by the Commissariat Department which was stretched to the limit. Few materials were available locally and so it is no surprise that Bruyeres concluded, "It is a new Country void of every resource."