

December 30, 1813

by Lynne Belluscio

Two hundred years ago, things were pretty grim for a Happy New Year in Western New York. Warfare on the Niagara Frontier had escalated all summer, and usually, when winter set in, the soldiers and militia, hunkered down and didn't think about doing much. Wars in the 19th century weren't usually fought in the snow and cold. But the Americans were afraid that the British were gearing up for a major event and an invasion from the north.

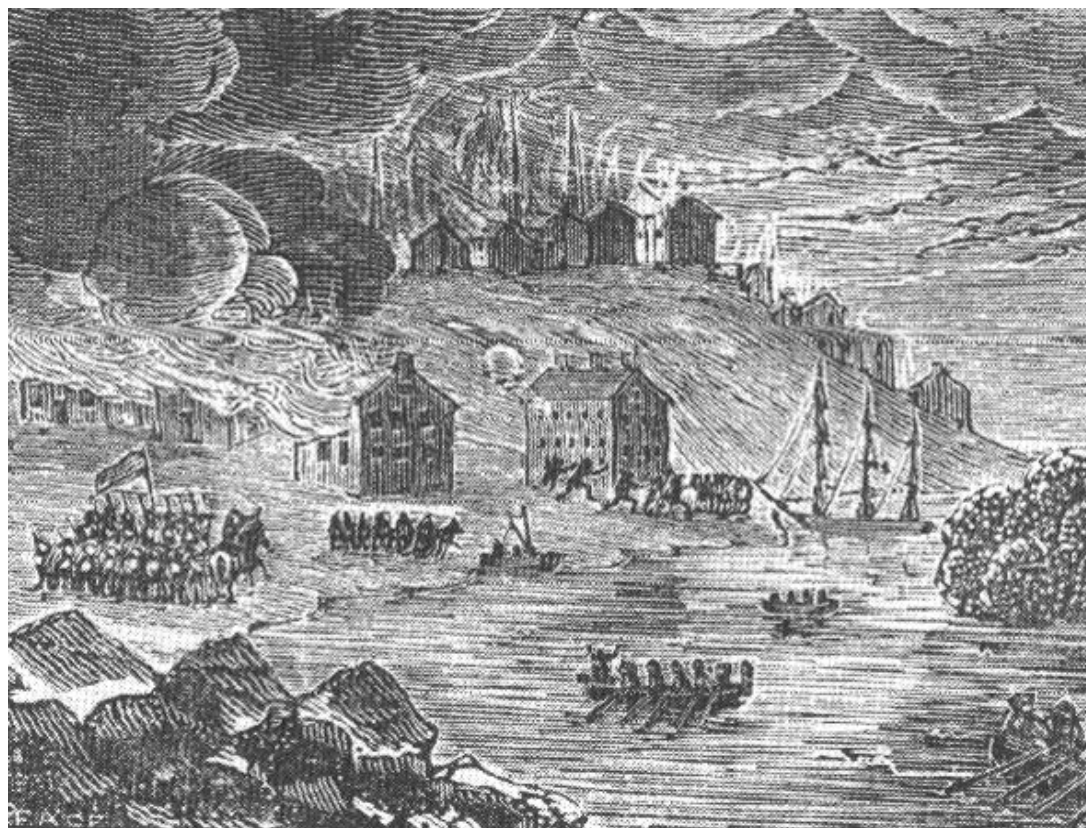
The American's held Fort George near Newark (Niagara on the Lake). In December 1813, when the British threatened to retake the Fort, the Americans sacked and burned the civilian settlement. It was a tragic decision that infuriated the British. They retaliated by capturing Fort Niagara, killing 65 men from the 400-man garrison on November 19.

As the fort fell, another British force attacked and burned Lewiston on the American side of the Niagara River. Indians serving with the British, killed ten civilians at Lewiston and joined the march south to Buffalo and Black Rock, where on December 29 and 30, the British continued their retaliation for the attack on Newark.

The American militia was able to do little to repel the British. It was said that the cannon fire could be heard as far east as Batavia. As people fled the frontier, they abandoned their homesteads and farms and headed to Batavia, LeRoy and further east past the Genesee River to Canandaigua. The refugees had to depend on the generosity of their hosts through the winter of 1814.

On January 2, 1814, Simon Pierson of LeRoy, wrote to his sister Betsey in Killingworth, Connecticut:

"The events of the two weeks past being of such afflicting nature, I shall attempt a brief description of them. Two weeks this morning the British and Indians invaded the Village of Lewiston, burnt the town, entered our Fort, killed many of the sick and made dreadful



havock. Sunday evening of the same day we had the intelligence every man among us was called out, marched to Batavia, were detained there for the want of arms and ammunition, every old musket among us was picked up and sent out. John, Philo and Linus went. Esq Berber took my place. In the meantime the distressed inhabitants of Lewiston and Tuskarora Indians (who suffered greatly by the Canadian Indians) fled through here in a suffering condition having in the space of an hour lost all their living.

On Tuesday last my curiosity led me to go to Buffalo to see how it fared with my bretheren. I arrived there on Wednesday afternoon were I found John very sick with the pleurisy as the doctor called it. Linus and I watched him that night. * About 12 o'clock the thundering cannon sounded the dread alarm and drums beat to arms. Our army consisted of about 3,000 men marched to the north about 1 1/2 miles from Buffalo to prevent the enemy's landing ... at that moment the inhabitants were alarmed and very soon the streets were crowded with men, women and children. So many going for wagons. Children crying for

parents, etc (dreadful scene) ...

I must close by mentioning a few things. Our men suffered such in the battle. Among the killed and missing are Capt. R. MacKay, Doctor Sheldon, Capt. Farnham, Hamilton Wilcox and many other valuable men. Our remains of scattered men came from 11 Mile Creek to Batavia last night, but we are ordered back today. Buffalo is burnt to ashes and is feared Batavia will share the same fate. Scarcely a family remains in Batavia. When the enemy gets to Batavia we shall begin to look out. I trust you will excuse my bad writing when you know we are all confusion. I am sensible that all I have written may not be entertaining to others as to you. May you all be prepared to hear the sollem tidings."

There were few thoughts of a happy new year in 1814. Eventually the war came to an

end, but it would take a toll on Western New York, where the settlers were reluctant to return to their farms, and prospective buyers weren't interested in buying land. And then two years later, the country experienced the year of "18 hundred and freeze to death" when an eruption of a volcano in the Pacific Ocean put so much ash into the atmosphere, that there was a killing frost each month, throughout the summer.

These were times that tested the mettle of the early settlers.

* Simon writes about the difficulty he had trying to move his brother John out of Buffalo and to bring him home. They were stopped all along the way and challenged about why they were leaving the militia. They were able to find a horse and finally John was brought home to his wife, where he died five days later.

Happy New Year