History records contributions of many peoples

BY PAUL PUGH

IN APPROACHING the bicentennial of the War of 1812, which confirmed Canada's borders and independence from the United States, we reflect on Thunder Bay ancestors who participated in that long-ago conflict.

England had been at war with France almost continuously since 1796. French armies dominated most of Europe, cutting off British trade with Europe, and England retaliated with a naval blockade. This led to mounting tensions between the United States and England, as British fleets prevented U.S. ships from trading with Europe. On June 18, 1812, the United States declared war on England.

U.S. leaders were confident of seizing the British colonies that are Canada today: "We can take the Canadas without soldiers, we have only to send officers into the province and the people . . . will rally round our standard," declared Secretary of War William Eustis. U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Henry Clay said, "We have the Canadas as much under our command as Great Britain has the seas."

The balance of forces favoured U.S. optimism: there were about 4,500 British troops and half again as many Canadian militia, compared to 35,000 U.S. soldiers with several times that number U.S. militia. Aboriginal

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peoples, although distrustful of the British, generally fought as allies against the more brutal U.S. regime.

By July 11, 1812, a U.S. force of 2,500, led by General Hull had crossed the Detroit River and on July 12 captured Sandwich (now Windsor). British commander Major-General Brock determined on offensive actions against the numerically superior U.S. forces.

The first of these occurred when North West Company agent William McKay arrived from Montreal at British Fort St. Joseph (on the St. Mary's River entrance to Lake Huron), with orders for its commander, Lt. Roberts, to capture nearby U.S. Fort Michilimackinac. Roberts supplemented his small garrison with North West traders, voyageurs and Aboriginal warriors, including Chief Shingwawkonce, an ally of Shawnee Chief Tecumseh.

In a surprise attack, Roberts' force captured Fort Michilimackinac without having to fire a shot on July 17. On hearing of this, U.S. General Hull retreated back to Detroit. William McKay travelled on to Fort William, and a force of "traders, voyageurs and Indians" was sent to reinforce those at Fort St. Joseph.

Meanwhile, Gen. Brock moved 300 York militia to Malden, across the river from Gen. Hull in Detroit. Brock was joined by 600 warriors led by Chief Tecumseh. Brock and Tecumseh's forces crossed the river, and after a brief engagement, U.S. Gen. Hull surrendered his 2,000 troops and 30 cannon to Gen. Brock, terrified by reports of "Indians (from Michilimackinac) . . . swarming down in every direction." Gen. Brock and Chief Tecumseh lost their lives in subsequent battles. English-Canadian,

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North West Company agent William McKay travelled to Fort William to marshal a force of "traders, voyageurs and Indians" in the War of 1812.

French-Canadian and First Nations all made important contributions in turning back the U.S. invasion forces.

The war ended with the December 24,1814 Treaty of Ghent, ending U.S. territorial aims by confirming pre-war borders.

We can be proud of the role played by "traders, voyageurs and Indians" from Fort William. One of William McKay's descendants, Bob McKay, is a leader of Thunder Bay's Metis community.

Our history records the contributions made by people of diverse ethnicity, language and colour.

As we move ahead, we would do well to embrace our city's RESPECT campaign, so that everyone living in Thunder Bay can feel welcome and contribute to further enriching our home.

Paul Pugh is a Thunder Bay city councillor and member of the city's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee which produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

29/05/12