

**Billy Green the Scout and the Battle of Stoney Creek (June 5-6, 1813)**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the story of Billy Green the Scout and his role in the battle of Stoney Creek during the War of 1812. It sets out the evidence that he obtained the American countersign, led the British troops to the American encampment, used the countersign while approaching American sentries, dispatched at least one sentry, and was present at the battle itself. It weighs the evidence using a similar standard of evidence to that used to accept the story of Laura Secord as historical fact. It concludes that there is strong and plausible evidence that Billy Green the Scout played an important contribution to the British victory.

**Introduction**

On May 27, 1813 the invading US army captured Fort George from the British, near the present-day town of Niagara on the Lake, Ontario. The British withdrew, led by Brigadier-General John Vincent, and set up camp about 70 km away at Burlington Heights, in the present location of the Hamilton Cemetery and the grounds of Dundurn Castle. Two American brigades set off in pursuit, and established a camp at Stoney Creek, where they contemplated plans to attack the British. On the evening of June 5, the two armies were about 12km apart. The American force greatly outnumbered the British.

The Battle of Stoney Creek took place on June 6, 1813, in the early hours of the morning. The story of William Green in this action, as reconstructed from the evidence presented herein, is described below. He is normally referred to as Billy Green the Scout.

Billy Green was a 19-year old farm boy living in Stoney Creek, Ontario, where he was born. He was the son of Adam Green, a United Empire Loyalist who had fled the United

States in about 1792. On June 5th Billy's brother-in-law Isaac Corman, a farmer, was captured by the Americans and held near the beach on Lake Ontario. He convinced some American officers that he was a cousin of William Henry Harrison, an American politician (and later president) who was major-general of US troops in the north-west. The officers released Isaac, who then requested the counter-sign so that he could get past the American sentries and go home. They gave it to him—it was Wil-Hen-Har, after the major general, and released him. Billy was searching for Isaac, whose wife—Billy's sister—had reported him captured. When he found him Isaac gave him the countersign. The Americans promptly caught up to Corman and recaptured him.

Billy took his brother Levi's horse "Tip" and rode to Burlington Heights to warn the British. The British took him for a spy and held him. Lieutenant-Colonel John Harvey questioned him and decided he was not a spy. He realized that the password and Billy's intimate knowledge of the countryside would help Harvey's planned attack on the American camp at night and allow it to be taken by surprise. He gave Billy a sword and asked him to guide the troops. They left just before midnight, with Harvey in charge.

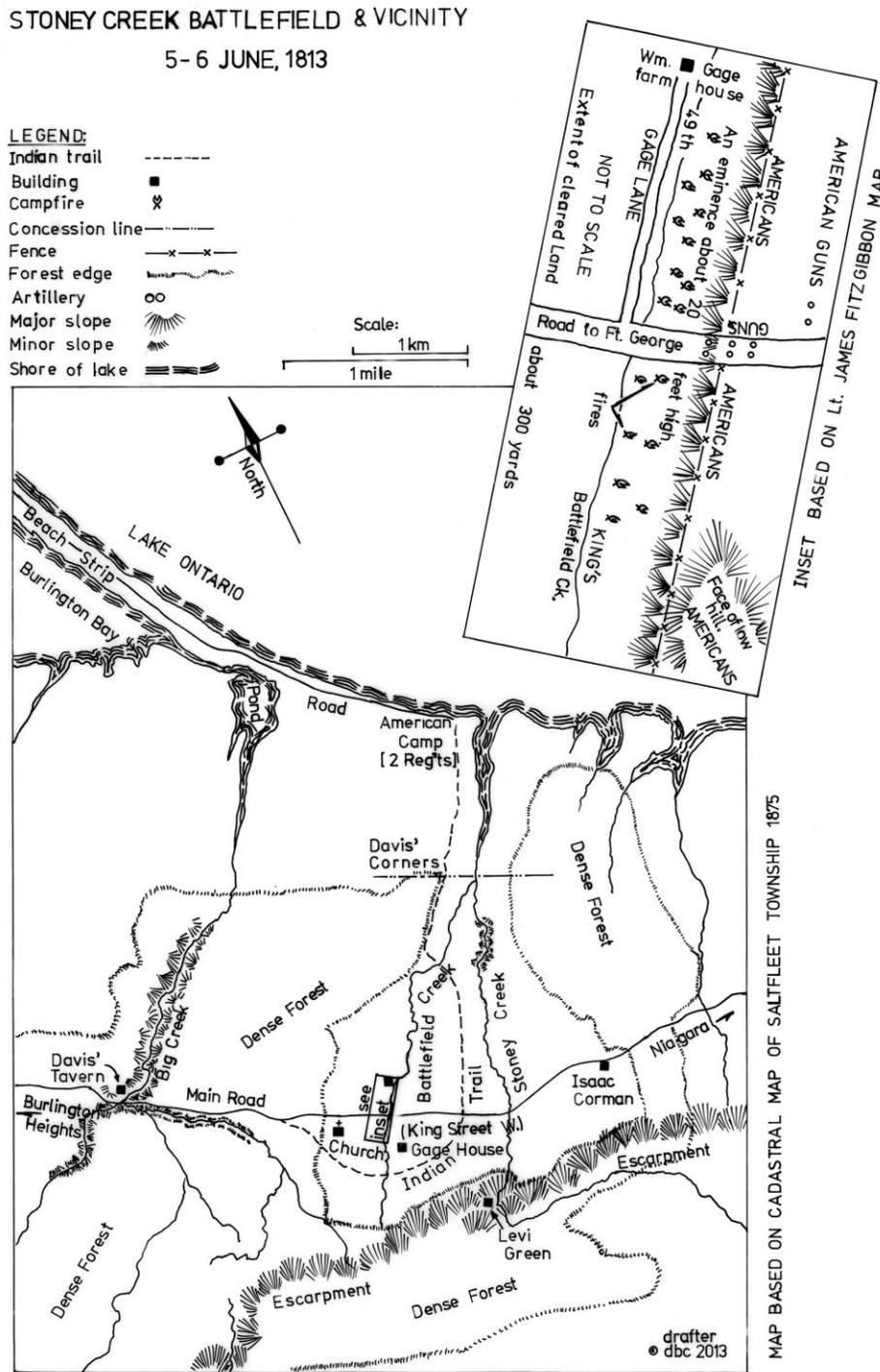
They first encountered American sentries at Davis' tavern at Big Creek, who fired their muskets and dispersed. They encountered more sentries along the way, in the woods and near a church. Billy dispatched one of the sentries with his sword, while giving him the countersign. As they snuck up to the American camp they saw fires set by the American troops, on the other side of a lane. He was present at the battle and was not injured. During the fighting the British captured some American artillery pieces and the American commanding officers. The Americans fled. Billy's contribution was pivotal to the British victory.

Various accounts have greatly embellished this version of events. For example one account called Green the "Paul Revere of Canada," and claimed that he "sighted the American army massing below the mountain at Stoney Creek" and "felt it his duty to inform the English troops of their nearness."<sup>1</sup> This is a fabrication, as the British knew exactly where the Americans were, and knew they were being pursued by them. Such

easily demonstrable inventions have fuelled commentary that the whole story is a legend.<sup>2</sup> The reports by British and American officers after the battle make no mention of either Billy or Isaac Corman, bolstering the case of those who discredit the story.

**Goal**

This article examines the evidence of favour of the following hypotheses: that William Green (a) obtained the American countersign from Isaac Corman prior to the Battle of Stoney Creek and delivered it to LTC John Harvey and (b) that he was at the front of the British force with Harvey, guided them to the American encampment, dispatched at least one sentry, and then fought in the battle.



Map produced by David Clark, UE. Sources for the map are: FitzGibbon's map of the battlefield;<sup>3</sup> Cadastral map of Saltfleet Township 1875; Lossing's picture of battlefield area;<sup>4</sup> Map by W. Ford;<sup>5</sup> Land Information Warehouse, Government of Ontario. (David Clark)

## **The Evidence**

The evidence examined is of three types: primary source documentation, secondary sources in the years following the battle, and material culture.

Part of examining evidence is to weigh it according to some standard. Does it provide strong, weak or no support of the hypothesis? In a Court of Law different standards of evidence are required to reach different verdicts. In a murder trial one needs evidence that puts the guilt of an accused beyond a reasonable doubt. Only a balance of probabilities is needed for a civil action or to prove a regulatory offence. Scientists try to quantify their doubts. In research in the physical sciences, such as nuclear physics, the “doubt” must be less than one chance in a million. Researchers in the biological sciences are often willing to accept a doubt of one in twenty—a much lower standard.

Both Laura Secord and Billy Green played role in military victories against the invading American army. These events took place 18 days apart, 50 kilometres away and involved many of the same players.

Secord’s exploit is widely accepted as factual in Canadian history. The standard of evidence used to support her story is thus sufficient to judge the two hypotheses regarding Billy Green in this paper. The evidence for the Laura Secord story is briefly outlined below.

## **Laura Secord and the Battle of Beaver Dams**

The Battle of Beaver Dams took place on June 24, 1813. Indian Chief Dominique Ducharme led the native forces in an attack on the Americans. Lieutenant James FitzGibbon, commander of the 49th Regiment, arrived near the end of the battle and bluffed the American commander into surrendering.

Laura Secord overheard American officers at Queenston say they were about to attack FitzGibbon's smaller force. She then walked about twenty miles through a circuitous route from her house, to warn FitzGibbon. Ducharme's party of Indians surrounded the Americans. Ducharme, who spoke little English, asked Fitzgibbon to accept their surrender.

The primary sources of evidence used to establish the story of Laura Secord are the personal accounts of Laura Secord herself. She wrote one in 1853, forty years after the battle, and another in 1861.<sup>6</sup> Her son Charles wrote a letter to the editor in 1845 in support of a grant from the House of Assembly for FitzGibbon, in recognition of his role in the battle. In the letter he describes the roles played by his mother and FitzGibbon. He and his mother say essentially the same thing. Both accounts lack details that can be compared with military accounts. For example, they refer to her mother walking "in the month of June" but do not state the date or time or the number or disposition of troops.

There is no record of her contribution in the official accounts of the battle. In Lieutenant FitzGibbon's account,<sup>7</sup> in which he wrote that at 7am on the day of the battle, he says he received information "that about 1,000 of the enemy, with two field guns, were advancing towards me from St. David," but does not say from whom. He continued "I soon after heard a firing of canon and musketry." He immediately sent out a detachment "to close upon the enemy and reconnoitre."

Lieutenant FitzGibbon wrote a certificate on February 23, 1837, 24 years later, in which he said that Laura Secord did "acquaint" him with the Americans' intentions.<sup>8</sup> He does not say whether this acquaintance played a decisive, or indeed any role, in his command, nor does he say when he received it, other than "in the month of June".

Mohawk Chief John Norton wrote in his diary<sup>9</sup> that "a loyal Inhabitant brought information that the Enemy intended to attack us that night with six hundred men," but does not name the inhabitant. He says the Indians then "dressed an Ambuscade... but this precaution proved to be premature, he had not yet sufficiently prepared to assail us."

Captain Dominique Ducharme, leader of the Caughnawaga Indians who played the decisive role in stopping the Americans, makes no mention of Secord or of receiving information from her or FitzGibbon. He says his scouts returned at 8 am on the 24th warning that they were “attacked by the enemy.” They then “ran forward towards the enemy ...and took up our position.”<sup>10</sup> The only role he gives to FitzGibbon is to “conclude the capitulation.”

In 1860, the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) visited Canada. Secord, by then 75, had described for the prince her contributions during the war. When he returned to England, he sent Mrs Secord a reward of £100.<sup>11</sup> After this her fame grew.

The strongest part of the evidence is FitzGibbon’s certificate as it establishes that she conveyed potentially useful information to him, and that she took her famous walk. Several points about the body of evidence in favour of Laura Secord’s story should be noted, as they have a bearing on the evidence in the case of Billy Green and the Battle of Stoney Creek. There is no specific record of her contribution in the military accounts of the battle; the accounts as they pertain to her are vague on specifics of date and time; Secord gives no information about the numbers and position of troops and artillery before and during the battle but does describe its outcome; the accounts do not make it clear that her information was useful or used; Laura Secord was literate and campaigned for recognition of her contribution many years after the war.

### **Evidence from the Battle of Stoney Creek**

There are several accounts by British and American officers of the Battle of Stoney Creek and the events preceding it. As with Secord, none of them mention Billy Green. Nor is there a certificate describing his role in the action. There are no accounts written by Billy Green himself; he was an illiterate.

There are two indirect accounts by Billy Green. One is a diary entry copied from S.D. Slater’s diary into a school book, dated June 5, 1819, describing what Slater heard from

Billy Green after an encounter with him.<sup>12</sup> Inside the cover is written, amongst several other names, the name “Isaac Corman, born 1778.”<sup>13</sup> The other is an account transcribed and kept by Billy’s grandson John Green, who wrote the story as he heard it from his grandfather.<sup>14</sup> In it John said he was in possession of the sword Harvey gave Billy before the battle. John Green’s account was first published in 1938.<sup>15</sup> The original version of John’s account has been lost. A letter has recently been found, however, from Sara Calder to John Green, dated July 8, 1913, thanking John for “the copy of the Battle of Stoney Creek as told by your Grandfather.”<sup>16</sup> Calder was the founder of the Stoney Creek Battlefield House Museum—perhaps John donated it to the museum on the centenary of the battle.

There is a diary by Peter Van Wagner, a farmer and Justice of the Peace<sup>17</sup>, who lived in Stoney Creek between 1850 and 1906. It contains entries related to Billy Green. There is an account by Hazel Corman, granddaughter of Isaac Corman, about the counter-sign, how Isaac obtained it and how he passed it on to Billy. There is a document signed by John Green’s granddaughter Barbara Green stating that she was in possession of the sword Harvey gave Billy and that had been passed down from her grandfather John.<sup>18</sup> There is useful contextual information from John Norton’s diary,<sup>19</sup> from a letter from Billy’s brothers Samuel, Levi and John when they were jailed on a murder charge in York jail in 1815.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike Laura Secord, Billy could not write about his exploits, and had reasons, or occasion, not to promote his cause to princes or others.<sup>21</sup> Diarist and local Justice of the Peace Peter Van Wagner made an entry in his diary on the day of Green’s burial (18 March 1877) about a comment made to him by Dr Thomas Picton Brown, Green’s physician. Brown related that Green had confessed to him that he felt remorse about killing a sentry who had just fired his musket and was thus unarmed.<sup>22</sup> Billy may have had another reason to keep quiet. His brothers Samuel, Levi and John had been accused of murdering Indians by Mohawk Chief John Norton in 1814, and spent a year in York jail under a murder charge, with reward of £100 offered by Lieutenant-General Sir Gordon Drummond, administrator and commander of Upper Canada, for information on

the guilty<sup>23</sup>. The brothers complained that they had been “Despoiled of Every Thing by the Indians – in the presence of Capt Norton.” (They were released before trial). The same entry in Van Wagner’s diary also noted that “Green stories used to be told of how [Billy Green] on the sly killed Indians and papooses during the War of 1812 where the wild Indians were troublesome to the early settlers stealing stock & everything else they could get at.” In the circumstances, and feeling guilty about killing an unarmed sentry, Billy Green may have been reluctant to say anything that might re-enforce a perception that the Green brothers were killers.

### **Analysis of the evidence: Primary Source Accounts**

I compared the accounts by and about Billy Green with the military accounts of the Battle of Stoney Creek (details are shown in the appendix). The military accounts differ from one another in the details, as one would expect. They also differ from the two Billy Green accounts in the details. But they all agree on the main points. Some consistency between military accounts and Billy Green accounts gives credibility to the Billy Green accounts. Perfect consistency would raise suspicion about lifting from one account to another. As an illiterate, there is no way Billy Green could have read the military accounts. In any event, most of the accounts cited herein were only published in 1902 by Cruikshank.

The differences in the details and in the consistency of the main points support the two hypotheses.

The key points of the comparison of the military accounts and the Billy Green accounts are outlined below.

- a) The accounts agree that the Americans were imprisoning civilians and that some US soldiers were camped on the lakeshore near Stoney Creek, where Isaac Corman was held.

- b) They agree that it was Lieutenant-Colonel Harvey that suggested a night attack on the enemy.
- c) The military accounts say the march started around 11 or 11:30 at night. In the Slater account Billy says “It was about twelve o’clock and they commenced to hustle. We got started about one o’clock”. In the John Green account he says “We got started about 11:30pm.” The difference in the military accounts is within a range one might expect without the benefit of standardized time if the officers had not synchronized watches. The discrepancy between the John Green and Slater accounts is harder to explain—perhaps there was some updating of the story over the years.
- d) The accounts agree that the first sentries were encountered were at Davis’ tavern at Big Creek
- e) There is some disagreement about where the first sentry fired his musket. Some of this is explained by the position of the people making the reports. Billy was at the front of the column and says sentries fired at Davis.’ Merritt was at the rear and says “at our arrival at Davis’s we heard the report of a gun.” By ‘our’ does he mean the British or only his own company?
- f) There is agreement that there were sentries at the church.
- g) There is ambiguity about whether the sentries at the church fired. Billy says a sentry fired. John Norton says the same. Merritt does not mention the church, but says “upon opening the clearing we were fired on by the second picket.” The second picket Billy describes is at the church. One would expect a church to be in a clearing, not in the woods. An American account based on information from an injured British Major Munday says that the sentries at the church were asleep, but that the next sentry, wherever he was, discharged his piece.

- h) Billy says the sentry at the church demanded the countersign. He “commenced to give it to him” and then “I put my sword to him.” It is not clear what he means by “commence.” To give it to him he would have to have it. To “commence to give it to him” he could say the first syllable of the counter sign that he knew, or he could dissemble because he did not know it. Perhaps Billy Green was just being awkward with his use of language. In the Slater account Billy says he forgot the countersign. He does not say whether he remembered it again, or whether he forgot all of it. Perhaps he remembered “Will” and not “Hen-Har” and only said “Will.” The American account about Major Munday says that “from him [the sentry at the church] the major unquestionably obtained the countersign.” This supports the existence of a countersign, and some transaction with respect to the countersign at the church.
- i) Billy says he stabbed the sentry at the church. An American account says that some officers and men “hailed, amused and stabbed some of our sentinels, pretending to give them the countersign.” It is not clear what he means by “pretending.” Is he alluding to Billy’s “commence”? Peter Van Wagner, a Justice of the Peace, recounts in his diary on the day of Billy Green’s funeral that Green’s doctor had related to him that Billy felt “very sorry” about killing a sentry “who he had seen discharge his piece”.<sup>24</sup> These accounts connect the stabbing and the countersign, as in Billy’s account.
- j) Billy saw a sentry “leaning against a tree” after the church. FitzGibbon and Merritt both refer to sentries in the wood. Merritt says they were captured without giving the alarm. FitzGibbon says two were captured and one bayoneted. Billy Green says Harvey said to ‘run him through.’
- k) There is general agreement about where the fires were seen and their proximity to the lane. Billy Green says they could see the fires after the incident with the sentry at the tree. He says they “cut across and got in the lane when the order was given to ‘fix flints—fire’” FitzGibbon’s map of the battlefield diagram shows the fires on the

US side of the lane. John Norton says “we then could discern the Encampment of the Enemy by the fires on both sides of the road.” Merritt says “The fires of the 500 on our left was the first that was discovered.”

- l) There is agreement between Billy’s account and military accounts about the intensity of enemy fire after they crossed the lane, on the British left.
  
- m) There is agreement on the capture of the guns. In the Slater account Billy says “the centre flank captured their two guns.” The John Green account says “Major Plenderleath, with thirty men of the 49th, and Major Ogilvie, with the 8th or King’s regiment, charged and captured four field pieces in very gallant style.” The John Green account is very close to Harvey’s account “The King’s Regiment and part of the 49th charged and carried the four field pieces in very gallant style...” The expression “very gallant style” was frequently used by military officers.

### **Secondary Source Accounts**

There are two nineteenth century secondary accounts of the battle with similarities to Billy Green’s accounts. Benson Lossing wrote the “Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812,”<sup>25</sup> which he published in 1868—while Billy Green was still alive. The preface notes that “the author has traveled more than ten thousand miles in this country and in the Canadas, with notebook and pencil in hand, visiting places of interest connected with the War of 1812.” He had access to Merritt’s military papers,<sup>26</sup> and spent time with Merritt’s son. He interviewed residents of Stoney Creek, including a Mrs Hannah Aikman<sup>27</sup>, then 91. In his account of the Battle of Stoney Creek he says, referring to the departure of the British at around midnight, “Harvey’s scout joined him.”<sup>28</sup> He refers to the countersign: “By one of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who had treacherously joined the Americans and deserted, Vincent had obtained the countersign for that night, and through it he was able to secure the sentinels without giving the alarm.”<sup>29</sup> This is consistent with Isaac Corman being captured, becoming friendly with the Americans, obtaining the countersign and then betraying them by giving it to Billy Green.

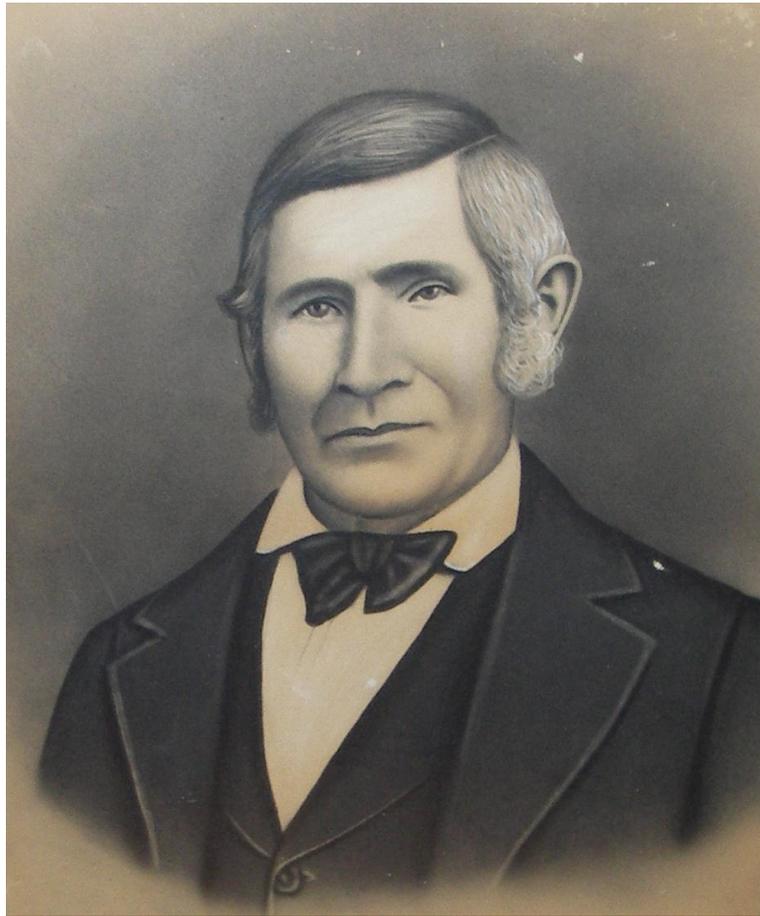
Biggar's account, published in 1873, says "Col. Harvey (sic) ... was in front of the light companies with another man of the 49th, and observed the sentry reclining against a tree which leaned partially over the road about a hundred yards west of the church."<sup>30</sup> This is consistent with Billy Green's sighting of the sentry. Biggar has the first musket shot at Davis', but no sentries are captured, consistent with Billy Green. The man with Harvey could have been Billy Green. Harvey was close enough to Billy in Billy's accounts that he could hear Harvey say "run him through."

Cruikshank, who assembled and published much of the primary source evidence from the war, published an article in 1909 that summarized the battle.<sup>31</sup> He said that Harvey was "joined by a deserter from whom he obtained some important information."

The Hamilton Evening Times<sup>32</sup> and the Daily Spectator<sup>33</sup> reported an award ceremony in the Council Chambers of Hamilton for veterans on October 4, 1875. The Times said "The First Applicant was William Green, aged 82, of Saltfleet ... he was present at the Battle of Stoney Creek, but was not wounded." The Daily Spectator reported that Billy Green was the second veteran called. It said he "fought at the Battle of Stoney Creek; was not wounded." It does not identify him as William Green of Saltfleet. At 82 years of age he would have been born around 1793, which corresponds to Billy Green's birth year.

### **Material Culture—the Sword**

The sword that Harvey gave Billy Green before the battle has been passed down through the generations of Greens.<sup>34</sup> John Green makes mention of it in his account of his grandfather and his grand daughter has signed a document stating that she is also in possession of it, and that she was told by her father that this is the sword her grandfather referred to<sup>35</sup>. It appears to be an 1803 pattern British Light Infantry Sword.<sup>36</sup> The existence of this sword through generations of Greens, and the oral history accompanying it, is not proof that Harvey gave a sword to Billy Green, or that this is that sword. It is, however, one more piece of evidence lending credibility to the story.



**William Green. Photograph taken by the author of a painting in the house William Green built, and occupied by his great, great granddaughter Barbara Green.**

### **Discussion**

That there are inconsistencies about the times of events is easy to explain. Standard time was not invented until 1883. Each town had its own time. In 1861, for example, clocks in London, Hamilton, Toronto Kingston and Ottawa, Ontario were set at different times, spread over 25 minutes.<sup>37</sup> Some people may have been reading from time pieces and others not—whether because they did not have one or because they could not be read in the dark. In the excitement of the battle some may have forgotten the time.

There are inconsistencies in the accounts about which sentries (or pickets) fired muskets. There is tremendous variation in how far a musket can be heard. Richard Feltoe, an experienced re-enactor of the War of 1812, has stated that he has been in situations where “the sound of a shot from a musket is virtually unheard only 50 yards away when the wind and humidity conditions were right” and has also heard them “over a mile when alternate conditions applied.”<sup>38</sup> Davis Inn was at Big Creek, which is in a small valley. It had rained at the start of the British march from Burlington Heights, the humidity would have dampened the sound, and the river may have been making considerable noise on account of the rain.<sup>39</sup>

On June 6, 1813 the moon set at 1:14am in Stoney Creek.<sup>40</sup> In combination with the rain, and thus cloudy weather, it would have been a very dark night. Some military accounts state this. FitzGibbon wrote about the “extreme darkness.”<sup>41</sup> U.S. Army Brigadier-General John Chandler, the American commander at Stoney Creek, also noted the “extreme darkness.”<sup>42</sup> In such conditions some disagreement about who fired a musket, how many sentries there were, and what they were doing is to be expected.

Within the context of these disagreements over details, there is a general correspondence between Billy Green and Hazel Corman’s accounts and the military accounts about the main points. They agree that the Americans were holding civilians captive near the lake. They agree that it was Harvey that suggested the night attack to Vincent, who gave Harvey “conduct and direction” of the troops.<sup>43</sup> They agree that there were sentries at Davis’, at the church, and in the wood or at a tree. They agree that there was a countersign and that the British got it. They agree that there was something that happened regarding a sentry, a member of the British force, the countersign and the church. They agree on the position of the fires in the American camp, on the intensity of enemy fire, and on the capture of the guns.

Why would a British officer need a local farm-boy scout to lead his army to its objective? Harvey already knew the way. But he had only been there a day or so, and would not have detailed local knowledge, especially for a night march. FitzGibbon said it is “so

difficult is it to navigate these forests.”<sup>44</sup> It was dark. It is thus very plausible that Harvey would ask Billy if he knew the way, as he does in the Slater account. Billy answered “Yes; every inch of it.”

Elliott, in his book on the battle, argues that the story of Billy Green is “cut from whole, or nearly whole, cloth to create a Stoney Creek hero.”<sup>45</sup> The main points of his argument are as follows. Green did not get the countersign because it is “difficult to imagine what sort of officer would reveal the countersign to a civilian who had just been arrested because of security concerns.” Both the Hazel Corman and Green accounts explain why the officer gave the countersign to Corman. Elliott dismisses the story that Corman had a relationship to William Henry Harrison because genealogists had not proven the relationship. Isaac Corman was the son of George Corman and Sarah Harrison, who were married in German Reformed Church, Frederick, Maryland in 1763. There were many Harrisons in Frederick at that time, including a William Harrison, and a Major William Harrison from Frederick who resided in Kentucky<sup>46</sup>. Corman’s kinship to the famous Harrison does not have to be true for him to have used the ruse, and his connection to the Harrison family would have helped him devise it if it were not. He may also have been using the word “cousin” to mean someone of common ancestry, rather than a first cousin.

Elliott cites an alternative account by Snider that describes how Harvey obtained the countersign from a sentry.<sup>47</sup> Snider’s undated account makes several obvious errors, such as “the British General St. Vincent was found some days after wandering about in the woods nearly dead of hunger.” His name was Vincent and he did not wander about the woods for days. Snider says two American brigadier-generals—Winder and Chandler—slept in the church, from whence they were made prisoners. This contradicts the primary source evidence. The discrepancies between Snider’s account and primary source accounts are so large as to make it an unreliable source regarding the countersign.

Elliott says that the British could have determined that Green was not a spy because he was a member of the 5th Lincoln County militia. Green was not on the payroll of the 1812 Muster Rolls until September 17, 1813.<sup>48</sup> The British were justified in taking

precautions against spying, having themselves just spied on the American camp. Elliott says that if Green's statement that "three sentries fired at us" at Davis' were true, "the entire American camp would have been roused." Merritt also heard a gun at Davis', and the American camp was not roused. Davis' was near Big Creek (now Red Hill Creek) which is in a valley 20 metres deep. Probably the Americans did not hear the shots because muskets shots cannot be heard over two kilometres on a humid night from a valley bottom. A discrepancy of one or three shots with everything that went on that night is not enough to toss out the story. In any event, all we know for sure about what Green meant was that there were three sentries and there was at least one shot. He was awkward with language, using phrases such as "them simples did run."

Elliott claims that Van Wagner "revealed" the story in 1889 "to create a Stoney Creek hero who could stand beside Laura Secord." An article by Van Wagner in 1884 describes how Isaac Corman obtained the countersign and gave it to Billy Green, who rushed off to General Vincent's headquarters and was at the "front rank" of the first charge at the battle.<sup>49</sup> Dr Brown died in 1859. His recounting of Billy's remorse to Van Wagner, therefore, took place before then, as did Van Wagner's diary entry. Perhaps Van Wagner did "reveal," in the lay—not theological—sense, the story, but he did not create it. Elliott allows that "examination of his two statements does however suggest a possible peripheral involvement." The evidence presented herein of Green's statements and their correspondence with official accounts suggests far more than a peripheral involvement.

## **Conclusion**

The stories of Billy Green the Scout and Laura Secord must stand or fall together. If the story of Laura Secord is accepted as historical fact, so must the story of Billy Green.

The evidence shown in this paper supports the hypothesis that Billy obtained the American countersign, that he led the British column on a very dark night along the road to Stoney Creek, and that he participated in the battle. It is not as clear that he delivered

the countersign, in whole or in part, to Harvey, but it is likely, and likely that it proved useful in approaching the American sentries.

As Shakespeare said in Twelfth Night, Billy Green had “greatness thrust upon” him. The greatness should be recognized. He was a young civilian who took initiative, took risks, and fought in battle to contribute in his own way to repelling the invading army. It is time that historians, history textbooks, the department of Canadian Heritage and the Canadian public celebrate his role, especially during the 200th anniversary commemoration of the War of 1812. Isaac Corman should also be recognized for his contribution.

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Appendix 1 Detailed Comparison of Primary Source Military Records and Accounts about Billy Green

| Quote from military or other account  | Who said                 | Source                      | Billy Green accounts  | Source                  |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| “The Americans had already given them [the militia] a sample of their policy by countenancing traitors and making prisoners of the most respectable inhabitants.”   | Merritt                  | DHCNF p. 46.                | “For his [Isaac Corman’s] impudence, the officer ordered his arrest and he was taken to camp.”  | Hazel Corman, p. 26.    |
| “They [Americans] had also a party of 1500 on the Lake Shore.”  | Merritt                  | Journal Capt. Merritt p.30. | “Instead of going right to the Gage homestead, some of the American army turned north on what is now Lake Avenue, and followed the lake shore ... here they camped on the beach. While camped on the beach, Corman ...” | Hazel Corman, p. 26-27. |
|   |                          |                             | “I asked her where Isaac was, and she said the enemy had taken him prisoner and taken the trail to the beach.”  | John Green              |
|   |                          |                             | “I whistled and out came Dezi. I asked where Isaac was and she said “they have taken him prisoner and taken the trail to the Beach. I wanted to know how she knew. She said Alph had followed him to the swamp.”        | Slater                  |
| “Having intelligence from a deserter of their [US] intention to attack us [British] early the next morning with their whole force, General Vincent called together his officers, when it was determined to be beforehand with them and attack their front division that | Capt. Alexander Hamilton | DHCNF p. 179.               | There are several different versions of how the British came to decide upon a night attack.<br><br>“When I got there they took me for a spy, and I had to tell them all I knew before they                              | John Green              |

|   |                 |                                     |   |  |
|---|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| <p>night.”</p>  |                 |                                     | <p>would believe me. It was about 11 o'clock pm. I explained to Colonel Harvey where and how the American Army were encamped near Stoney Creek. He suggested a night attack on the enemy.” Billy’s description of the Americans may have confirmed that he was telling the truth and was not a spy.</p> |  |
| <p>“I strongly urged General Vincent to make a forward movement for the purpose of beating up this encampment.” “I therefore recommended to the General to move the 5 Cos. Of the Kings (say 280) &amp; the 49th Reg<sup>t</sup>, (say 424) total 700 men—which was accordingly done at half past 11 oClock...”</p> | <p>Harvey</p>   | <p>Wood, Vol II, p. 140.</p>        |   |  |
| <p>“Lieut.-Col. Harvey, D.A.G., immediately went forward with the light companies of the King’s and 49th Regiment, and having advanced close to and accurately ascertained the enemy’s position, sent back to propose to me a night attack on his camp.”</p>  | <p>Vincent.</p> | <p>DHCNF p. 8</p>                   |   |  |
| <p>“Mr George, an Ensign in the militia, suggested an attack on them [US] in the camp. Ensign McKinney suggested the same and claims the priority. Col. Harvey approved of the plan, and on his return from reconnoitering, proposed it to Gen. Vincent.”</p>   | <p>Merrit</p>   | <p>Journal Capt. Merritt p. 30.</p> |   |  |

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| “..to propose to me a night attack on his [American] Camp. The motives which induced Lt. Col. Harvey to make and me to agree to this proposal were these...”                               | Vincent    | Wood, Vol. II, p. 142.        |   |            |
| “Harvey gallantly led on the attack”   | Vincent    | DHCNF p. 9.                   | Billy puts Harvey at the front—assuming he means Harvey when he says “the officer.” Harvey was the only officer he had referred to.   | Slater     |
| “About half past 11 I moved forward”   | Vincent    | DHCNF p. 9.                   | “After Colonel Harvey had a short interview with General Vincent, it was decided to start at once... We got started about 1130pm  | John Green |
| “...which was accordingly done at half past 11 oClock..”   | Harvey     | Wood, Vol. II, p.140.         | “It was about twelve o’clock and they commenced to hustle. We got started about one o’clock”.   | Slater     |
| “About 11 at night”  | FitzGibbon | DHCNF p.12.                   |   |            |
| “we had to march 6 miles before we came upon their pickets.”   | Meritt     | DHCNF, p. 45.                 | Google maps says there are 9.7 km (6 miles) between Dundurn Castle and Red Hill Bowl, approximately where William Davis’ house was, and where Billy says the first sentries were found. |            |
| “they had no post in advance—only 3 sentries about 200 yards on the road through the wood leading to their position”   | Fitzgibbon | DHCNF, p. 13.                 | “near William Davis’, when three sentries fired at us and ran over to the south side of the creek.”   | John Green |
| “On our arrival at Davis’s (sic) we heard the report of a gun from their picket.” (Merritt was in the rear, so when he heard the ‘report’ he may have been hearing the one at the Church.) | Merritt    | Journal Capt. Merritt, p. 30. |   |            |
| “...their pickets nearly half a mile in advance [of the American lines], in the  | Merritt    | DHCNF, p. 45.                 | “I espied a sentry leaning against a tree...Harvey said ‘run him through.’”   | John Green |

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| wood. Those we made prisoners without giving the alarm.”  |  |               |   |            |
| “They had no post in advance—only 3 sentries about 200 yards on the road through the wood leading towards our position. The 2 first were surprised and secured in succession by the Lt. Company of the 49th , which led—the third resisted and was umbred.”   | FitzGibbon   | DHCNF, p. 13. |   |            |
| “On our opening the clearing we were fired on by the second picket, which was more alert.”  | Merritt  | DHCNF, p. 45. | “the next sentry was at the church. He discharged his gun and demanded a pass. I grabbed his gun with one hand and put my sword to him with the other.” | John Green |
| “... they must have been asleep in the church near where they were posted, and that the first centinel with whom he [Major Munday, British] fell in near the church was totally ignorant of his duty, and was taken without noise. From him the Major [Munday] unquestionably obtained the countersign, as he stated that no difficulty was experienced in capturing the other centinels except the one who was posted next in line, who did his duty faithfully and by discharging his piece.” | Niles register, probably inspired by Chandler (US) | DHCNF, p. 37. |   |            |
| ?   | Niles register, probably inspired by Chandler (US) | DHCNF, p. 38. |   |            |

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|  |  |                                  | away.”   |        |
| “In conformity with the directions I had given, the sentries at the outskirts of the enemy’s camp were umbred in the quietest manner.”   | Harvey                                   | DHCNF, p. 7.                     |  |        |
| “In a charge on a picquet he run a man through who had an empty gun without a bayonet. This was related to me by Dr Brown as he attended Green in dangerous illness where he told the doctor he was very sorry for what he had done, for he knew the U S soldier was defenceless for he had seen him discharge his piece.” | Van Wagner                               | Van Wagner diary, March 18, 1877 |  |        |
| “we came to a Methodist Meeting house in which the Piquet of the Enemy was stationed. They gave the first alarm--we then could discern the Encampment of the Enemy by the fires on both sides of the road.”  | John Norton                              | Journal of John Norton, p. 328.  |  |        |
| “Some officers and men advanced at some distance ahead of them, who hailed, amused and stabbed some of our sentinels, pretending to give them the countersign.”  | Letter to editors of Baltimore Whig (US) | DHCNF, p. 47.                    |  |        |
| “an advance picket from half to three-quarters of a mile in front...”. This puts sentries half way between the Red Hill Creek (Davis) and the battle field.  | Chandler (US)                            | DHCNF, p. 26.                    | Consistent with Billy’s description of sentries at Davis, at tree and at Church. | Slater |
| “...their pickets nearly half a mile in advance, in the wood. Those we made prisoners without giving the alarm.”   | Merritt                                  | DHCNF, p. 45.                    |  |        |

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| <p>“the crosses which I have marked thus upon the accompanying slip [i.e. a drawing] you may suppose the fires which guided the enemy much in their firing upon us, as we had to form amongst them, the fires.” The diagram shows the fires on the US side of the lane, the 49th on the British left, and the American guns behind the American troops. Who were on an ‘eminence about 20 feet high.’</p> | <p>Fitzgibbon</p>    | <p>DHCNF, p. 13.</p>                   | <p>“Then we could see the camp fires. We cut across and got in the lane when the order was given to ‘fix flints—fire’ and we fired three rounds...” Slater. “In the flat just across the ____ near Lewis lane about 500 American soldiers were encamped in advance of their artillery, which was situated on a hill directly in front of the road our troops must pass.”</p> | <p>John Green</p> |
| <p>“They gave the first alarm, --we then could discern the Encampment of the Enemy by the fires on both sides of the road. The 49<sup>th</sup> entered the field on the left,--the King’s advanced in the Road;--after passing a Lane, which led to the Encampment of the Enemy on the left, they opened fire on us”</p>  | <p>John Norton</p>   | <p>Journal of John Norton, p. 328.</p> | <p>“Then we could see the camp fires. We cut across and got in the lane...”</p>  | <p>John Green</p> |
| <p>“The enemy were encamped in Gage’s fields in a very advantageous position, 2000 on the hill on the right of the road [i.e. King Street], 500 in a lane on the left... The fires of the 500 on our left was the first that was discovered.” There is only a lane on the British left, according to Fitzgibbon’s drawing,</p>  | <p>Merritt</p>       | <p>DHCNF, p. 45.</p>                   |  |                   |
| <p>“..the fires of the 25th, which were in front, and by my orders had been abandoned, enabled us to see a small part of the enemy.” [the 25th was on the US right, thus the British left.] “an attack was made on our right”</p>   | <p>Chandler (US)</p> | <p>DHCNF, p. 26.</p>                   |  |                   |

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| <p>“[the General] therefore ordered the 25th infantry and the light troops in advance to form a line and kindle their fires at about 150 yards in advance of the high ground in rear of the meadow....”</p> <p>“The fires of the 500 on our left was the first that was discovered.”</p>  | <p>Niles Register (US)</p> <p>Merritt</p> | <p>DHCNF, p. 38.</p> <p>DHCNF, p. 45.</p> |   |                    |
| <p>“an attack was made on our right. A well directed fire was opened on them from the 25th...”</p> <p>“...the enemy opened a most tremendous fire on us from the hill, likewise opened their guns.”</p>   | <p>Chandler (US)</p> <p>Merritt</p>       | <p>DHCNF, p. 26.</p> <p>DHCNF, p. 46.</p> | <p>“There’s where we lost most of our men. We got bunched right down there under them.”</p>   | <p>Slater</p>      |
| <p>“It was the British 49th, who had pushed forward to the head of their column and gained the rear of the artillery.”</p>  | <p>Chandler (US)</p>                      | <p>DHCNF, p. 27.</p>                      | <p>“The centre flank captured their two guns.”</p>  | <p>Slater.</p>     |
| <p>“The King’s Regiment and part of the 49th charged and carried the four filed pieces in very gallant style...”</p> <p>“A party of the 49th Regt, with Major Plenderleath at their head, gallantly charged some of the enemy’s field pieces and brought off two six-pounders. Major Ogilvie led on the most gallant manner the five companies of the King’s Regt...”</p> | <p>Harvey</p> <p>Vincent</p>              | <p>DHCNF, p. 7.</p> <p>DHCNF, p. 9</p>    | <p>“Major Plenderleath, with thirty men of the 49th, and Major Ogilvie, with the 8th or King’s regiment, charged and captured four field pieces in very gallant style.”</p> | <p>John Green.</p> |

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| <p>“Major Plenderleath came immediately after to that portion of the line which I had quitted, and with the men I had left in charge of a sergeant and a few others he rushed forward against the guns and took 4 of them—2 and a umbrel were brought away.”</p> | <p>Fitzgibbon</p>      | <p>DHCNF, p. 13.</p> |  |  |
| <p>“...they succeeded in carrying off a six-pounder, a howitzer and a caisson, to the great mortification of our brave artillery.”</p>   | <p>James Burn (US)</p> | <p>DHCNF, p. 25.</p> |  |  |
| <p>“...had not Major Plenderleath charged and captured their guns we would have been completed defeated.”</p>  | <p>Merritt</p>         | <p>DHCNF, p. 46.</p> |  |  |

**Table 1 Comparison of 19th Century secondary source accounts and accounts about Billy Green**

| Quote from secondary source   | Who said         | Source                     | Billy Green accounts  | Source   |
|---|------------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| <p>“By one of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who had treacherously joined the Americans and deserted, Vincent had obtained the countersign for that night, and through it he was able to secure the sentinels without giving the alarm.”</p> | <p>Lossing</p>   | <p>Lossing. Chapter 27</p> | <p>“I got it [countersign] and away I went”<br/>                     “Isaac gave the countersign to me.”<br/><br/>                     “In the meantime [Isaac] Corman had given the countersign to [Billy] Green.”</p> | <p>Slater<br/>John Green<br/><br/>Hazel Corman</p> |
| <p>“Col. Harvey ... observed the sentry reclining against a tree which leaned partially over the road about a hundred yards west of the church.”</p>  | <p>Kernighan</p> | <p>Historical Atlas</p>    | <p>“I espied a sentry leaning against a tree.”</p>  | <p>John Green</p>                                  |

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DHCNF refers to Cruikshank, E.A., ed. Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Nigara Frontier in 1812-1814”, Welland, Ontario. Tribune Press. 1896-1908.

LAC refers to Library and Archives Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Anon. “Descendants of Billy the Scout Recall his Deeds”, Hamilton Spectator, March 12, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Rose, Gordon. “Billy Green: fun-loving youth or con man but not genuine hero, says reader.” Hamilton Spectator, April 6, 1973. Beynon, Colwyn. “Dusty Corners: Troubled Story of Billy Green,” Hamilton Community News, May 30, 2012. James E. Elliot. Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813. Montreal. Robin Brass Studio, 2009, Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> FitzGibbon to Somerville. 7 June 1813. In DHCNF Part VI. P. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Lossing, page 603 “Battleground of Stony Creek” (sic).

<sup>5</sup> Hannay, James. “How Canada Was Held For The Empire: The Story Of The War Of 1812. Morang & Co, Toronto. 1905. Page 16, map by William B. Ford, Ontario Land Surveyor. Secord, Laura. “Mrs Laura Secord’s Narrative.” DHCNF, Part VI., June-August 1813, pages 127-128.

<sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lieut. James FitzGibbon, 49th Regiment, to Major DeHaren. DHCNF part VI, June-August 1813, page 111.

<sup>8</sup> Certificate by James Fitzgibbon, DHCNF part VI, June-August 1813, page 130.

<sup>9</sup> Klinck, Carl and Talman, James eds. The Journal of Major John Norton. Toronto, Champlain Society, 1970, p. 330-331.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Capt. D. Ducharme, 5 June 1826. DHCNF, part VI, June-August 1813, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> MacKenzie, Ruth. “Ingersoll, Laura (Secord).” Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online. [www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id\\_nbr=4507](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id_nbr=4507). Accessed October 17, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Slater, D. “An old diary.” Journal and Transactions. Wentworth Historical Society. Vol. 5. 1908. Griffin and Richmond Co. Ltd. Hamilton, p. 31-33. The diary is copied into: Guthrie, William. A New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar. The Thirteenth Edition, Corrected and Improved. Dublin: John Exshaw, 1794. (An enclosed note reads: A very old leather-covered Grammar published about 1794. Written on the backs of Maps in this book is a copy S.D. Slater's diary including the story told by Billy Green of his experience at the battle of Stony (sic) Creek. Donated by W. E. Corman (came to us from the Hamilton Scientific Assoc. 1938). Diary is opposite pp. 117, 149, 571. Archives File Slater, S.D., Hamilton Public Library, Hamilton, Ontario.

<sup>13</sup> The names range from “George Corman born 1713, died 1804, came to Canada in 1792”. There is a heading “Children,” apparently children of Isaac Corman and Deaise Green (born April 2 1783), that lists 11 children from rebecca (Oct 2 1802) to “James, born July 4 1827.”

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<sup>14</sup> Anon. "Descendants of Billy the Scout Recall his Deeds", Hamilton Spectator, March 12, 1938.

<sup>15</sup> The journalist (un-named) who wrote it up in the Hamilton Spectator said he visited John Green and "was shown one of the great treasures of the family, a statement made by Billy the Scout to his grandson John... The complete story ensues." We have not been able to trace the original account in the Billy Green's house, where John Green's granddaughter Barbara Green lives at the time of writing.

<sup>16</sup> Calder, Sarah. Letter from Sarah Calder to John Green, 8 July 1913. Stoney Creek Historical Society, accession number 012-015-014. (Found in Barbara Green's house December 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Van Wagner was sworn in as a Justice of the Peace on 21 December 1853 according to his diary entry of that day. His obituary of December 31906 refers to him as a Justice of the Peace sworn in 1842. (Anon. "An Old Landmark Gone." Hamilton Spectator. December 3, 1906.

<sup>18</sup> Green, Barbara. Letter dated 15 October 2012. Stoney Creek Historical Society. Accession number 012-017-004

<sup>19</sup> Klinck, Carl and Talman, James eds. The Journal of Major John Norton. Toronto, Champlain Society, 1970.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel, Levi and John Green to Gordon Drummond, June 17, 185 ("Dispoiled"), RG 5, A 1, 23:10086, reel C-4545, LAC; Klinck, Carl and Talman, James eds. The Journal of Major John Norton. Toronto, Champlain Society, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> William Green Petition. S.U.E. Grant-August 1820-1837. L.A.C. RG1, L3, Vol. 213, "G" Bindle 20, Petition 80, Signed with an 'X' by William Green. Indenture, November 3, 1873. Signed with an 'X' by William and Elizabeth Green; witnessed by John Wiley Miller (signed) and Rhoda Jones (with an 'X'). Signed by Freeman Green, William's brother.

<sup>22</sup> Van Wagner, Peter. Diary of Peter Van Wagner. Archives of Ontario. MS 568 Reel 3. Peter Van Wagner Diaries Vol 14 to 18. 1875-1884. March 18, 1877.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel, Levi and John Green to Gordon Drummond, June 17, 1815 ("Dispoiled"), RG 5, A 1, 23:10086, reel C-4545, Library and Archives Canada; Klinck, and Talman, The Journal of Major John Norton.

<sup>24</sup> Van Wagner, op.cit., March 18, 1877

<sup>25</sup> Lossing, Benson, J. Pictorial Field-Book Of The War Of 1812. Harper & Brothers, Publishers. New York. 1868.

<sup>26</sup> Lossing, p. 623

<sup>27</sup> Lossing, p. 625

<sup>28</sup> Lossing, p. 602

<sup>29</sup> Lossing, p. 602-603

<sup>30</sup> Biggar, E.B. "The Story of the Battle of Stony (sic) Creek." Hamilton Spectator, 6 June 1873

<sup>31</sup> Cruikshank, Brigadier General E.A. "A history of the battle of Stoney Creek". Hamilton Evening Times. June 5, 1909.

<sup>32</sup> Anon. "The Veterans of 1812-15." Hamilton Evening Times. October 4, 1875.

<sup>33</sup> Anon. "The veterans of 1812-15." Daily Spectator. October 4, 1875.

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<sup>34</sup> The sword is held by the Stoney Creek Historical Society, Accession number 012-017-003.

<sup>35</sup> Green, Barbara. Letter dated 15 October 2012. Stoney Creek Historical Society. Accession number 012-017-004

<sup>36</sup> Major John R. Grodzinski, Assistant Professor, Department of History, The Royal Military College of Canada. (2012). Personal communication (email) to P. Green. October 3, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Hodgins, George. "Lovell's General Geography for the Use of Schools." R&A Miller, Toronto. 1861.

<sup>38</sup> Feltoe, Richard Email to Philip Green dated 15 October 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Lieut. James FitzGibbon to Rev. James Somerville. 7 June 1813. In DHCNF part VI, page 12.

<sup>40</sup> United States Naval Observatory. "Complete Sun and Moon Data for One Day". [http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/RS\\_OneDay.php](http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/RS_OneDay.php) Accessed Oct 12, 2012. Used longitude W79.8, latitude N43.2.

<sup>41</sup> FitzGibbon to LtC's widow Plenderleath's widow, January 1 1854. In DHCNF Part VI, p16.

<sup>42</sup> Chandler to Dearborn, June 18, 1813. In DHCNF Part VI, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Lt. Colonel Harvey to Colonel Baynes, 6 June 1813, in DHCNF Part VI, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> FitzGibbon to Somerville, 7 June 1813. DHCNF Part VI, p.15.

<sup>45</sup> Elliott, James E. Strange Fatality. Montreal. Robin Brass Studio, 2009, Appendix A..

<sup>46</sup> The Harrison DNA Project, John A. Harrison.

<http://www.worldfamilies.net/surnames/Harrison> Accessed December 15, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton Public Library, Thompson Papers, "Snider's Account of the Battle of Stoney Creek."

<sup>48</sup> L.A.C. RG9, I-B-7, volumes 24 to 26, microfilm reels T-10386 and T-10387 and volume 16, microfilm reel T-10383.

<sup>49</sup> Van Wagner, Hans. "A scrap of history. How the British got the American Countersign, and won the battle of Stoney Creek." Hamilton Evening Times. September 30, 1884.