General Hull's Campaign along the Detroit: Shots Not Fired on 16 August 1812?

By M. B. Walsh

Introduction

After the surrender of Fort Detroit by Brigadier General William Hull on 16 August 1812, a number of reports circulated that no shots were fired before the surrender and that no effort had been made to defend Detroit. It is true that the post and garrison at Michilimackinac (modern Mackinac Island) were surrendered on 17 July 1812, without a shot being fired by either side on that day. However shots were fired both toward and from Detroit on 16 August and at various places near the Detroit River on prior days.

Other reports were propagated that General Hull refused to allow the artillery and soldiers carrying small arms to fire at the enemy on 16 August, supporting assertions that General Hull was motivated by cowardice or treachery. General Hull was formally charged and exonerated of having refused to allow the artillery to fire by a court martial.

A summary of the campaign through 14 August 1812 will be followed by a more detailed description of pertinent events on 15 and 16 August. Some reports after the capitulation will be mentioned, followed by a discussion of how the charge of refusing fire was handled by a court martial. Finally some analysis of how the erroneous information originated and spread is described. Separate sections discussing historiography, procedures utilized in compiling maps, and developments at historic sites are available through links.

Summary of Campaign through 14 August

William Hull, veteran officer of the Revolutionary War, former Major General of Massachusetts Militia, and Governor of Michigan Territory, was commissioned a Brigadier General in the United States Army on 8 April 1812. At Dayton, Ohio, on 25 May, General Hull took command of three regiments of Ohio militiamen, both volunteers and conscripts, in United States service. A couple weeks later they were joined by about 300 men and officers of the Fourth United States Infantry Regiment at Urbana, Ohio. After a long and difficult march through the wilderness, this force arrived at Spring Wells, Michigan Territory, several miles downriver from the town of Detroit on 5 July (see “A” in map of Detroit Area - 1812).

General Hull had learned early 2 July, upon receipt of a letter from the Secretary of War, that war had been declared against Great Britain and of positive orders to await further orders. On 5 July, before the arrival of Hull and the force marching from Ohio, American artillery pieces at or near Detroit were fired across the river at what was represented to be British artillery batteries on the British side. This American artillery fire was contrary to the orders of the Secretary of War, unauthorized by General Hull, and risked damage to civilians and private property. Hull had camped the previous night near the Huron River, more than twenty miles distant, and was marching toward Detroit during the firing.
The Detroit garrison with less than 100 officers and soldiers present, composed of one small company of artillery and one small company of infantry, were at Fort Detroit ("B") and the Citadel ("C"). On 7 July, the Fourth United States Infantry moved to Detroit. The next day the Ohio militia left Spring Wells and encamped behind the fort and town in the Commons ("D"). Michigan Militia at Detroit, not in United States service, were able to go home and return to their civilian occupations. Late on 9 July, General Hull received discretionary orders permitting the invasion of the British province Upper Canada.

On 12 July, General Hull's invasion force marched up the Detroit River to near the infamous Bloody Bridge, boarded boats ("E"), crossed the river downriver from Hog Island (now called Belle Isle), and landed on the British shore unopposed ("F"). The Canadian militia stationed across the river from Detroit had been evacuated toward the British fort at Amherstburg (Malden) hours earlier. The American invaders marched downriver to opposite Detroit and encamped on the property of Francois Baby ("G"), who although born at Detroit of French-Canadian ancestry, chose to remain a British Subject. The incomplete brick house of Baby was occupied by General Hull as headquarters. During following days the encampment was fortified and a proclamation was distributed.

The Secretary of War had failed to issue a timely requisition for provisions for the large force ordered to Detroit and a number of artillery carriages were found to be in unsatisfactory condition. Hull sent detachments to capture and collect provisions and artificers were put to work trying to repair artillery carriages. As it turned out, new carriages needed to be built, further delaying the movement of siege artillery for the battering of the British fort at Amherstburg (Malden).

Hundreds of Canadian militiamen deserted and returned home to their families and crops. Many went to Hull's encampment to get protection papers. Although the Americans were encouraged by the numbers of Canadians deserting militia duty and seeking protection from the Americans, hundreds more Canadian militiamen remained on duty.

Detachments were sent out for reconnaissance, picket duty, and as a show of force. Some of the detached parties, led by company officers, were conducted without reported problems. Others, led by militia field officers, engaged the enemy and returned with inflated assessments of their successes, including imagined casualties inflicted upon the British or Indian enemy. The British and Indians interpreted these same skirmishes as victories for the British and Indian allies.

General Hull assigned Lieutenant John Anderson, an early graduate of the academy at West Point, to build a new compact picketed fortification across the river from Detroit, designed to hold a garrison of about 300 men for the time when the larger main force would move downriver to attack the British fort at Amherstburg (Malden). Construction was begun on the property of Robert Gouie, a native of Scotland, who operated a trading establishment along the river about 700 to 800 yards downriver from Francois Baby's place, with a wharf, storehouse and other structures ("H").

On 28 July, two Indians from the north arrived with news that the American fort and artillerists at Michilimackinac (Mackinac Island) had been surrendered to an overwhelming force of Indians and British Subjects, led by a British officer. No shots were fired. General Hull, knowing that this event would have great influence on the uncommitted Indians, sent an urgent request to Ohio and Kentucky for large reinforcements, and sent orders to the commanding officer of the American fort near the mouth of the Chicago River to evacuate. The news of the surrender of Fort Michilimackinac, combined with Indian and British successes in skirmishes, provided the British and Indians with considerable encouragement.
On 5 August, Major Thomas B. Van Horne marched a force of Ohio militiamen, augmented by the mail escort composed of Michigan mounted men, into an Indian ambush led by Tecumseh, near Brownstown, about twenty miles downriver from Detroit. After this experience and of a number of earlier engagements with the enemy, General Hull had good reason to doubt the boisterous talk of the militia officers. He had earlier advocated concentrating efforts on protecting lines of communication, but was opposed by a majority of officers in council. Further reports were received of increasing numbers of hostile Indians and of British reinforcements. Hull removed the main force to the Detroit side, left a garrison of about 250 men at the fortification on the Gouie property (“H”), and put together a large force of Army regulars, Ohio militia and Michigan detached militia, led by U. S. Army Lieutenant Colonel James Miller, to march to the River Raisin and escort provisions back to Detroit. This force fought a pitched battle on 9 August, several miles upriver from Brownstown, driving the British and Indians from the field, but suffering substantial casualties. After delivery of more provisions and a reinforcement, and evacuation of the worst wounded, the detachment remained in place without proceeding on the assigned mission. Hull, having received word that the detachment would not resume its forward progress until receiving yet another delivery of provisions, recalled the detachment. He ordered the evacuation of the Gouie fort and proceeded with putting together a third attempt at escorting the provisions, relying upon secrecy and specifying a longer back-route between River Raisin and Detroit.  

On 14 August, General Hull received confirmation that the party at River Raisin with provisions from Ohio would proceed taking the back-route as specified by General Hull. This route, far from the Detroit River, had been traveled several times by messengers without encountering the enemy. Hull dispatched a detachment led by two Ohio colonels, Duncan McArthur and Lewis Cass, to rendezvous with the provisions escort party along the back-route and return to Detroit.

Fort Detroit, called Fort Lernoult by the British, was built by the British during the American Revolutionary War to defend against a prospective American adversary equipped with artillery. It was built on high ground set back from the river and village. The Fort could not interdict vessels moving along the Detroit River. Not only was the fort set back from the river, but buildings in the town blocked artillery fire toward the river. There were no enemy vessels to be considered at that time. In the spring of 1812, two shore batteries were constructed by the Americans to oppose British vessels in the river. The first battery, consisting of 24-pounders mounted on garrison carriages (labeled “I” in the Detroit 1812 maps), was placed at a high spot along the high riverbank, between the river and the Citadel and near the downriver end of the government storehouse, providing good coverage across and downriver, but with the view upriver blocked by buildings. This battery can be referred to as the storehouse battery and was commanded on 15 and 16 August by Captain Samuel Dyson, commander of the artillery company at Detroit.

A second battery of 24-pounders on garrison carriages (“2a”) was placed at lower elevation at waters’ edge near Berthelet’s wharf, providing good view of the river in both directions. A total of five 24-pounders on garrison carriages were deployed at the two batteries. On 14 August, the British were observed constructing artillery batteries atop the river bank on the Canadian side. The second American Battery (“2a”), at a low elevation, was at a disadvantage with respect to the British more highly-elevated batteries under construction across the river. General Hull authorized that the second battery be moved to a nearby location atop the river bank (“2b” in the detail map) within what years before had been the commanding officer’s garden in the old town. Construction was begun on 14 August and completed the afternoon of 15 August. Due to the presence of some old pear trees, this battery is nicknamed as the pear tree battery. It was commanded by Lieutenant James Dalliba, a
graduate of the academy at West Point.

A third American battery (“3”), consisting of the two 24-pounders on traveling carriages, was positioned atop the riverbank at the downriver edge of town. This battery was near the large stone house, built and owned by James May, but that was under contract to be sold to Judge Augustus B. Woodward. This is called the lower battery, because it is at the lower or downriver end of town. This battery was commanded by Lieutenant John Anderson. All three batteries of 24-pounders (“1”, “2b” and “3”) were located on high ground atop the riverbank.

Three iron six-pounders were placed in the blockhouse at the upriver end of town (“4”). Some other pieces were mounted on garrison carriages at Fort Detroit (“B”). Several field pieces were parked in the Citadel (“C”) yard.

Summary of Events on 15 and 16 August

On Saturday morning, 15 August, soldiers on both sides of the river continued work on the artillery batteries. Mid-day two British officers crossed with a flag carrying Major General Isaac Brock’s demand for General Hull to surrender, threatening that if Hull fought, the Indians would be out of control, suggesting a massacre of civilians. Hull had the two British officers held at Henry Jackson Hunt's house, located near the government wharf and storehouse, and wrote a note to Colonel Duncan McArthur recalling his detachment and immediately sent the note by express with a mounted guard. General Hull called a council of officers who agreed with Hull to refuse surrender. Hull drafted a response to Brock and the note was turned over to the British officers for their return across the river. By calling the council, Hull was able to delay the response by a couple hours, leaving more time for preparations and the recall of McArthur's detachment.

The Americans had seven 24-pounders in the three shore batteries capable of firing across the river. The British had five artillery pieces atop the opposite riverbank, one 18-pounder, two 12-pounders, and two 5 1/2 inch mortars. One piece or battery was hidden behind a wooden building which was knocked down prior to firing.

In late afternoon the British commenced firing at the American shore batteries. The Americans returned fire back at the British. The Americans were capable of firing more metal from their guns, but were limited to counter-battery fire. The British had a wide choice of military targets including the three American shore batteries, government storehouse, citadel yard and buildings, and unhardened buildings and personnel within the fort. Also, the batteries were located within the town of Detroit near a number of civilian buildings, increasing the chance of collateral damage, whereas the rural civilian buildings along the British shore were more widely dispersed. Initially, the British fired principally at the American batteries, but this changed later.

The artillery fire continued for about five to seven hours, ending after dark. The American batteries were intact with only a small number of injuries. The American artillery officers thought that one British battery had been hit, due to a long pause in firing. A Canadian militia officer recorded in his journal that one sergeant of the Royal Artillery had been wounded.

During the night a number of Indians, approaching one thousand in number, embarked in canoes downriver from the village of Sandwich ("I") and crossed the river, landing between the downriver end of Spring Wells and River Rouge. The Indians moved around the outside of Detroit about a mile and a half back from the fort and town, and near the edge of the woods in an arc mostly surrounding the
town. British armed vessels had moved upriver to near Spring Wells, several miles downriver from Detroit.

At daybreak on Sunday, 16 August, the British resumed artillery fire from the shore and the Americans returned fire. Boats loaded with soldiers wearing scarlet coats crossed the river landing near the lower end of Spring Wells. Some of these were British Army regulars, but they were augmented by a large number of Canadian volunteer militiamen, dressed to appear like regulars. From the parapet of Fort Detroit, the top of which was elevated close to twelve feet from ground-level, boats were observed crossing the river, but due to intervening orchards, gardens, fences, buildings and other obstructions, the British landing force could not be seen from the fort landing or at any time subsequently. The British landing was covered by the armed vessels, but there was no opposition and no need for fire support from the vessels.

Part of the Fourth Infantry regiment had more than a year earlier been stationed at Fort Independence protecting the approaches to Boston Harbor. Although nominally infantrymen, they learned and practiced firing the artillery pieces at Fort Independence. General Hull had only a limited number of experienced artillerists available. The artillerists captured at Fort Michilimackinac were present at Detroit, but as paroled prisoners of war, were not permitted to engage in combat. Artillerymen available for combat were stationed at the shore batteries and men from the Fourth Infantry were used to augment the artillery at the Fort and elsewhere. Others of the Fourth Infantry manned the ramparts of the fort with pikes.

General Brock also had only a limited number of trained artillerists. He reassigned the Royal Artillery officer commanding the shore batteries and some of his men to the invading force, manning five field pieces, and assigned Captain Hall, commander of the Provincial Marine, to take command of the British shore batteries, probably with some of his gunners from the armed vessels.

Detroit lawyer Elijah Brush, militia colonel and commander of the First Regiment of Michigan Militia, deployed about 150 of his Detroit militia near the upriver end of town (“J” in the detail map). The remainder of his Michigan Militia was evidently dispersed in detachments near their respective homes in the countryside.

The militia in United States service, not on detached duty with Colonels McArthur and Cass, were ordered to man a defensive position downriver from the town. This included Colonel James Findlay's regiment and the remnants of the effectives from the regiments of McArthur and Cass. The position taken was along a fence perpendicular to the river (“K” in the detail map). Near the river this was a picketed fence. Farther from the river was an ordinary farm fence. Farther from the river to right of the Ohio militiamen were placed the Detached Michigan militia of Major James Witherell, Revolutionary War veteran, former congressman, and judge of the Supreme Court of Michigan Territory. Witherell had about 300 Michigan men assigned that had been detached for United States service, of which about 200 had been at Detroit and vicinity. On 16 August, Major Witherell had about seventy to eighty men available for duty along the fence. To the right of Witherell's men, farthest from the river, were the mounted militiamen in the open plain or pasture.

In 1807, after the Royal Navy attack on the United States frigate Chesapeake and a consequent fear of a British-supported attack by Indians, a picketed stockade was built around the town connecting with Fort Detroit, but the pickets were removed prior to the arrival of Hull's army in 1812. A blockhouse built in 1807, remained at the upriver end of town, in which three six-pounders were deployed (“4”).
General Brock collected about 700 to 800 of his invading force and formed into a column for marching upriver along the river road. Ahead of General Brock’s main force, John Norton, a chief of the Grand River Indians from Upper Canada, led his warriors serving as scouts. At Knagg’s Creek, emptying into the Detroit River near the house of Whitmore Knaggs (“L”), Norton found a number of civilian women and children pleading for protection. The civilians were unharmed. Indians were plundering property from Knagg’s house and others. That morning a number of men from Captain Knagg’s militia company, stationed in the area, surrendered to the British. Brock's column crossed the bridge at Knagg’s Creek and continued upriver along the river road. Along the road, especially on the left side were a number of houses, farm buildings, orchards, gardens, fences, and other features that blocked view between the fort and Brock's marching column. Some of the fences were picket fences constructed with substantial cedar pickets.

About two miles from Spring Wells, Brock's force reached what was later called May's Creek, at the tan-yard property of James Henry. May's Creek had been called a number of names over the years including Cabacier's Creek, Campau's River and Claud's Creek, but is best known by the name May's Creek, after a later owner of the tan-yard property and farm. May's Creek was large enough to support a mill. It was deep enough to require a bridge and in sections deep enough to catch sturgeon. Brock wheeled his column to the left away from the Detroit River and deployed his force along the gully or ravine formed by May's Creek (“M”). In this position Brock's force could not be seen by the Americans at Fort Detroit or from the shore batteries, and was protected from a concentrated attack by multiple fence lines, houses, orchards, crops and the creek itself.

Once in this strong defensive position, Brock ate breakfast prepared in a house on the property. Later more men landed and arrived including Canadian militia from the unit commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas B. St. George. The British were in a good defensive position at May's Creek and Americans in a defensive position along a fence line several hundred yards from the lower edge of the town of Detroit. Later a British officer would describe Brock's position as such that it could not have been forced. The British armed vessels could also move up the river to support Brock with gun fire if needed.

Lieutenant John Anderson commanded the lower battery of two 24-pounders on newly-built traveling carriages. These guns were very heavy and could be moved, but were so cumbersome that they would require considerable effort. He left the 24-pounders in place and moved a six-pounder up to a position near the fence line occupied by the American militia (“S”). He later explained that he did not have enough men to move a 24-pounder, an indication that the 24-pounders were not furnished with harnesses and draught animals.

The British position was close to one mile (1760 yards) from Fort Detroit. Brock, in his report of 17 August, specified that “the troops advanced to within one mile of the fort.” The tan-yard by the mouth of May's Creek was about 1,300 yards from the lower battery of 24-pounders, commanded by Lieutenant Anderson. After the surrender, stories were printed that Lieutenant Anderson was close enough with his 24-pounders, loaded with grapeshot, to cause mortal damage to Brock's force if General Hull had only allowed him to fire. The maximum effective range for grapeshot, commonly stated, is only about 600 yards; 800 or 900 yards at most. When Brock turned his column into the gully at May's Creek they were well outside the range of grapeshot from the lower battery of 24-pounders.

Not only was Brock's position at the creek at too great a range for effective use of grapeshot from the 24-pounders, but also the intervening terrain and buildings, fences, orchards and other features
provided physical and visual obstructions.

The American line of militia in United States service was at the closest about 400 yards downriver from the lower battery of 24-pounders. If the lower battery was within sight of Brock's columns when they turned away from the river at the tan-yard, and had the battery fired grapeshot, and had the intervening space been free of obstacles, then the fire would have effected close to zero casualties upon the British and significant casualties upon the friendly Americans at the fence line.

The position where Lieutenant Anderson placed the six-pounder ("5") was about 900 yards from the tan-yard, but this gun was brought down after the British had already turned away from the river and had assumed a protected defensive position.

On 16 August, there were no British or Indians within grapeshot range of Hull's forces at Detroit. There were none within rifle range and none within musket range. What were in range were the British batteries across the river from Detroit, which batteries were within range of solid iron balls (round-shot) fired from 24-pounders in shore batteries. None of the guns within the main fortress were within range of any enemy forces until after the capitulation was signed.

Lieutenant Josiah Bacon, Quartermaster of the Fourth Infantry, monitored the ammunition supplies at the American magazine. He noticed that the ammunition prepared for the 24-pounders was being depleted quickly. He notified General Hull, who had an order communicated to the batteries to watch their firing more carefully. General Hull did not tell them to stop firing. As it turns out, Captain Dyson, commanding the artillery, unbeknownst to Lieutenant Bacon, had left a number of rounds of prepared 24-pounder ammunition in wagons, untouched. After Fort Detroit was surrendered there was ammunition remaining for about 200 shots for the 24-pounders. Before the commencement of firing, there had been 400 or more. About 200 shots were fired by the 24-pounders on 15 and 16 August. Considering the amount of metal thrown, this is equivalent to many tens of thousands of musket or riflefirings and may be compared with the total number of cartridges prepared for the American small arms. The British inventory of captured American munitions listed an estimated 80,000 musket cartridges. The 200 24-pound iron balls fired at the British weighed more than the lead balls in those 80,000 cartridges (using either 17, 18 or 19 musket balls to the pound).

Reports that no shots were fired by the Americans are incorrect. It is true that no muskets or rifles were fired, but the British and Indians did not have the temerity to march openly within rifle or musket range of the Americans at Detroit. General Hull did not order the Americans to abandon their defensive positions and attack the British in their good defensive position or the Indians near the edge of the woods. The Americans had a number of opportunities of firing their weapons during the preceding month and the overall results were not favorable for General Hull. Plenty of opportunity had been given for the men carrying muskets or rifles to show what they had or didn't have. Many in the army had been promiscuous in firing their weapons. Testimony indicates that weapons were fired “frequently for amusement.” Reports reveal a “great desire to play upon them with our cannon” or firing “at long shot.” Robert Lucas recorded in his journal, “We fired at them in this way for amusement till we was tired.” Reports of discipline in firing or of holding fire until seeing the whites of eyes are absent.

Although the British regulars, Canadian militia, and American regulars and militia did not fire their small arms on 16 August, the Indians are reported to have fired at cattle and captured horses grazing in the fields.
During the morning of 16 August, the British artillery changed targeting from counter-battery fire to aiming at other targets like Fort Detroit. The buildings within the fort were soft targets; that is without any hardening against artillery bombardment. Several shots hit inside the fort instantly killing Lieutenant Porter Hanks, another officer and a soldier and mortally wounding a surgeon. Another surgeon was severely wounded. Another two soldiers were killed when the hospital was hit with a ball. Reports of the total, killed by British artillery fire, range from seven to twenty. The results of these shots entering the fort were tremendous. Women and children were screaming and crying and took refuge in a small bomb-proof vault inside the fort. Only a small number of women and children could be protected. The artillery bombardment was furnishing one form of terror, but in a matter of hours the Indians could penetrate the town, set it afire, and capture or kill numerous Michigan civilians. The question of the day was not whether Brock's conventional infantry force would attack the fort, the American defenders or the town; but whether the Indians would be let loose upon Michigan Territory. The Indians could circle around the outside of Detroit and approach the town from upriver, using buildings, orchards and fences as cover to get closer. Buildings in the town blocked effective use of artillery from the fort in this direction. After dark the Indians could approach from any direction. Already detachments of Michigan Militia were surrendering to protect their families. Long term Michigan residents had seen the British take over from the French and the Americans take possession from the British. Hull would follow the Michigan tradition and bend with the reality of the situation. Hull sent out a flag across the river with his intention to treat for terms of capitulation. A white tablecloth was displayed atop a bastion of the fort and orders were sent to the American artillery batteries to stop firing.

Detroit merchant Henry Jackson Hunt, Michigan Militia adjutant to Governor Hull, conveyed orders to Lieutenant John Anderson at the fence line to hold fire. Hunt's namesake nephew, born at Detroit in 1819, later became famous as the United States artillery commander at the Battle of Gettysburg. Lieutenant Hunt was named in honor of Colonel Henry Jackson, a Revolutionary War officer who commanded the only United States regiment that was retained at the close of the Revolutionary War, with William Hull as the only remaining lieutenant colonel. Hunt's father, Thomas Hunt, had served under the command of Hull at the storming of Stony Point.

A British officer, in a letter published in a Montreal newspaper several months later, summarized the situation well saying: “The position occupied by general Brock was such that it could not have been forced, while his batteries must in a few hours have destroyed Detroit, and the whole country was laid open to the Indians.”

General Brock in his report to Governor-General Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost on 17 August stated, “... I resolved on an Assault, whilst the Indians penetrated his Camp.” General Brock was able to sit in good defensive position and resolve, eat breakfast, and resolve more, while the Indians provided terror to the local population. Brock was not prepared to directly assault the fort. He had only field artillery, no ladders were prepared and no other concrete measures had been taken for assaulting a fortification. The Indians, regardless if their number was 600 or 1,000, or any number in between, had plenty of capability to provide terror to both the town and countryside. Brock needed only to await the effects of the Indians.

If Hull concentrated his efforts on defending the fort, this would not protect the town, countryside or population. Hull could have moved some forces to attack the British in their position at the creek, but this would not have protected the town or countryside from the Indians. Major General Henry Dearborn later wrote to the Secretary of War that “it will appear that a humane solicitude for preserving the inhabitants from the tomahawk & scalping knife was the prevailing motive.”
Early Newspaper Reports

General Hull capitulated on Sunday, 16 August. On the next Sunday, 23 August, word of the surrender arrived at Pittsburgh. On Thursday, 27 August, the *Pittsburgh Mercury* reported, “Gen. Hull is said to have fired only a few shots.” On Friday, 28 August, handbills were published reporting the arrival of Colonel Lewis Cass with details of the surrender. Cass was on his way to Washington City, accompanied by Samuel Huntington, former governor of Ohio. Based upon conversations with Cass, the handbills reported: “The guns of the fort were all loaded, the matches lighted, and the men anxiously waiting for the word, when gen. Hull surrendered without suffering a shot to be fired.” In the next regular issue on Thursday, 3 September the *Mercury* reported: “When arrived they formed in a solid column, with flanking components at their wings, and advanced directly in the level of the guns of the fort! A single discharge from the fort at this crisis, would have completely cut off and routed the assailants --- But the order was, to surrender, and our brave army fell an unresisting sacrifice.”

Further along the way in Pennsylvania, Cass told a gentleman that “He was within 3 miles of Detroit when the infamous surrender took place, without firing a gun, to an inferior force, and three months provisions on hand.” Cass also reportedly said that when the British were crossing the river, “Gen. Hull was asked by an officer for a 6 pounder to use against them, which he positively refused.”

Cass and Huntington continued on their way and stopped at Bedford, Pennsylvania. The *Bedford Gazette* Extra of Monday, 31 August, reported: “… there were upwards of 60 fine pieces of cannon mounted in the fortress, not a single shot would Hull suffer the garrison to return. The British landed and marched up to Detroit twelve men deep—and though there were a number of cannon pointed towards them, and loaded with grape shot, Hull would not suffer a single gun to be discharged at them.”

After his arrival at Washington City, Lewis Cass wrote a long letter meant for publication, dated 10 September, attacking General Hull and protecting the Administration and Ohio militia. Secretary of War Dr. William Eustis withheld the letter from publication, awaiting the return of President Madison from his vacation for a decision. The letter was published at Washington on 15 September, and copied in a majority of newspapers in the United States. Cass provided more details than published in the Pittsburgh and Bedford papers. He asserts that two 24-pounders loaded with grapeshot were posted upon a “commanding eminence,” ready to sweep the advancing British column and that the head of the column had arrived five hundred yards from the American position when General Hull ordered the 24-pounders not to open fire.

On Friday, 28 August, the first messenger arrived at the General Post Office in Washington City with news of the surrender of Fort Detroit and a copy of the articles of capitulation. On the next day the Madison Administration's pet paper, the *National Intelligencer*, was silent about the capitulation. The *Alexandria Gazette* reported: “Our informant saw gen. Clark in Washington who informed him he had seen the articles of capitulation, and that general Hull had surrendered with 2,200 men without firing a gun.”

On Monday, 31 August, the *Alexandria Herald* reported that Hull and his army had been captured “without firing a gun!”

On Thursday, 3 September, the *National Intelligencer* referred to “the total surrender of an army of 2,500 men without a battle—probably without firing a gun.” In the next issue on 5 September, it was
said “the post and army were surrendered without an effort to save them.”

Extracts of a letter written by Lieutenant Josiah Bacon of the Fourth Infantry were printed on 11 September, by two Boston papers, the New-England Palladium and The Repertory & General Advertiser. Bacon wrote that on 15 August, “the firing commenced by the enemy but was instantly returned, and continued from both sides until dark.” On 16 August, “At break of day the firing was renewed from the batteries on both sides.” The Columbian Centinel of Boston on 12 September commented: “The most malignant charge against our Countryman—*that of having surrendered an army without firing a gun*—has already been proved to be an atrocious falsehood.

The Federal Republican, printed in Georgetown in the Federal District on 18 September, referring to the published letter of Colonel Cass, in addition to information from Lieutenant Bacon, disputes the “calumnious allegation” that the fort and army were surrendered without firing a gun. Not enough attention has been paid to these comments, because the charge that Hull surrendered without firing has been repeated many times during the last two centuries.

One of the earliest newspaper reports in Upper Canada was in the Bee, printed at Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake), on Saturday, 22 August, reporting the capture of Detroit “without the loss of one drop of British blood.” At Kingston, Upper Canada, a note from Major Allen, commanding at York (now Toronto), was printed saying Detroit was surrendered “without the loss of a man on our part.” Several days later a handbill was printed in Montreal saying, “This glorious event took place without firing a gun, and without the loss of one British soldier.” Another extract from a Montreal handbill spoke of the surrender “without the loss of a man on our side,” but omitted any mention of gunfire. Nothing is said in the newspapers about the wounded British artilleryman. Did he suffer a bloodless injury?

**Court Martial Charge**

Philadelphia lawyer and politician Alexander J. Dallas was hired by the Administration to act as Special Judge Advocate in the planned trial by court martial of Brigadier General William Hull, scheduled to start February, 1813, at Philadelphia. Dallas drafted three charges, each composed of multiple specifications. The trial was postponed, but the same written charges were used by a second court, set up to try Hull commencing in January, 1814, at Albany, New York. Hudson River lawyer and politician Martin Van Buren was hired by the Administration to act as Special Judge Advocate for this second court.

The three charges were (1) Treason; (2) Cowardice; and (3) Neglect of duty and unofficerlike conduct. The first two charges would normally be considered difficult to prove, whereas the last charge is a catch-all that would be more likely to return a conviction. Rather than acquitting Hull of treason, the court in the end refused to give a verdict on the first charge. Interestingly, whereas the court did not find Hull guilty of significant portions of the third charge, the court found Hull guilty of cowardice in all specifications, except one part of the third specification. The relevant part of the verdict on the second charge is: “and also guilty of the third specification under that charge, except that part which charges the said Brigadier Genl William Hull with 'forbidding the American artillery to fire on the enemy on their march towards said Fort Detroit.'”

Judge Advocate Martin Van Buren presented no witness or evidence to support the accusation that General Hull had prevented the American forces from firing at the enemy and Van Buren did not mention this point in his summary of evidence.
John Anderson, the United States Army artillery officer closest to Brock's invading force, answered a question of Van Buren, saying that upon receiving information that Brock's force had arrived at Henry's tan-yard, he ordered his men to quit the 24-pounders and man the six-pounders. One or more six-pounders were moved forward under cover of the line of pickets. Anderson placed one six-pounder and was getting ready to prepare the second, when about the time the white flag was displayed, he was given the order to hold fire. During this time Brock's force of regulars and militia was safely ensconced out of sight near May's Creek. His statement that he received information that Brock's force had arrived at the tan-yard is an indication that Anderson's view of the troops marching up the river road was at least partially obscured. Several Americans, including old veteran Thompson Maxwell, were acting as “spies” or scouts. John Norton's Indian scouts, working for the British, had captured one American soldier and the British captured another. Supporting the observation that the view was at least partially obscured is a later description of a part of the riverbank slope of the farm between the lower 24-pounder battery and the picket fence line that was “covered with a growth of fine large trees.”

The verdict of the Court Martial was published by the Administration and copied by newspapers. The verdict was now public. It would have been reasonable to expect future writers to refrain from claiming that Hull refused to allow the Americans to fire at the enemy, but this did not happen. The story of Lieutenant Anderson being in a position to attack a large part of General Brock's column with two 24-pounders loaded with grape-shot can be definitively declared to be a myth. The British column never marched to within effective range of any of the American artillery or small arms at Detroit before the surrender.

**Origin of the “without firing” phrase and the Grapeshot Myth**

Use of the phrases “without firing a shot” or “without firing a gun” or similar expressions is not unique to the surrender of Fort Detroit. Similar statements have been made many times in military history. On 12 July 1812, the American invasion force landed on the Canadian shore of the Detroit River without firing a shot, although, during preparations for earlier aborted attempt, less than 48 hours before, an American militiaman shot and severely wounded an American field officer. On 17 July 1812, Fort Michilimackinac was surrendered without a shot being fired. On 10 August 1812, a detachment commanded by Colonel Duncan McArthur was fired upon by the enemy and fled without firing a shot, abandoning all their boats, which were captured by the enemy. On 16 August 1812, Brock's invasion force landed without any Americans firing at the landing place. A Michigan Militia company was stationed in the area, but a number of its members independently surrendered. General Hull had the evening before assigned a detachment under the command of Captain Josiah Snelling as a picket at Spring Wells, but Snelling had abandoned his post and withdrew to Detroit in the middle of the night. It should be recognized that the Indians were landing nearby during the night and presumably secured the beachhead prior to the crossing of the British regulars and Canadian militia at daybreak.

Several surrenders during the American Revolutionary War will be mentioned to illustrate important issues. British General John Burgoyne sent notice on 14 October 1777, to begin negotiations for surrender at Saratoga without firing a shot on that day. Two pitched battles had been fought during the previous four weeks and his strategic situation was dismal.

American General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered the town of Charleston, South Carolina, its fortifications and thousands of men in American service on 12 May 1780. The Americans had suffered losses in small engagements outside Charleston, were surrounded, fired artillery at the British without
much success, but had suffered casualties and damage to the town from British artillery. With the exception of one raid on British lines, most of the American soldiers at Charleston had no opportunity to fire their small arms. General Lincoln surrendered rather than endure an unacceptable waste of human life. In days and weeks earlier, the Americans had opportunities to engage the British with small arms, but most of the firing had been by artillery.

General Charles Cornwallis sought terms on 17 October 1781, at Yorktown, after an artillery duel lasting more than a week, a successful French and American infantry assault and capture of two redoubts, and a surprise British infantry raid and spiking along a portion of the American and French lines. Most of the infantry on both sides did not fire their small arms or use their bayonets during this period. An important factor was that several weeks before a French fleet had fought a British fleet off the Virginia Capes, effectively closing off the option of escape by sea transport. The strategic situation of Cornwallis, like that of Burgoyne and Lincoln, was dismal.

Although Generals Burgoyne, Lincoln and Cornwallis were all criticized for their respective surrenders, they had clearly fired shots and engaged the enemy prior to capitulation. In all three cases there had been battles or skirmishes involving small arms in days and weeks before surrender, but not on the actual days of surrender. The overall results of these engagements were not encouraging to the surrendering parties. The surrendering armies were battered by enemy artillery and returned fire, but with less success. The surrendering generals saw their situations deteriorate over a number of days and hoped for outside cooperation, which did not develop soon enough to help. The decisions to surrender were not made impulsively, but were made after days of consideration. In none of these cases mentioned from the American Revolutionary War did the surrendering general face a threatened massacre of a civilian population.

When General Hull displayed a white flag and sought terms on 16 August 1812, he sent orders for the American artillery to cease firing. Ceasing and holding fire is a common practice during negotiations. During the previous 18 hours, Hull's 24-pounders had fired thousands of pounds of iron in the direction of the enemy. General Brock reported that the American artillery fire was “well directed.” During the previous month a number of skirmishes or battles had been fought, including those on 16 July, 19 July, 20 July, 25 July, 5 August, 9 August and 10 August. Many of the men carrying muskets or rifles had opportunities to fire their weapons. The performance of the Americans can be charitably called “spotty.” Field officers disobeyed orders and made stupid decisions. The most senior militia officers joined in a mutiny and unsuccessfully conspired to overthrow the commanding general. Militiamen fired their arms promiscuously and fled from the enemy several times. Those who didn't have an opportunity to fire their small arms on 16 August did not have a good reason for being envious of those with bigger guns that fired theirs on that day.

In this article above, several newspaper reports at Washington City and Alexandria, in late August and early September, have been mentioned. The Federal District was not the only place where the assertion was made that Hull surrendered without firing. A letter was written at Cincinnati on Sunday, 23 August, and initially printed in Philadelphia in early September, saying the British captured “Hull's army in Detroit, without his firing a gun.” The Trump of Fame in Warren, Ohio, on 26 August, printed that “Hull gave up the fort with very little resistance, that there were but seven killed.” The Muskingum Messenger of Zanesville, Ohio of 26 August, exclaimed: “We are constrained to publish the calamitous and degrading fact, that all our noble army have been, without a struggle, surrendered to the British, by the TRAITOR HULL, who beyond the possibility of a doubt, HAS SOLD OUR BRAVE COUNTRYMEN, LIKE SHEEP AND HOGS.”
The *Reporter* at Lexington, Kentucky on 29 August, speaks of Detroit “either weakly or treacherously surrendered to the enemy” and “a scandalous surrender of a fortress, without firing a gun.” The *Kentucky Gazette*, also at Lexington, on 1 September, relates information received from an informant arrived from Chillicothe, Ohio, based upon information from Ohio militiamen who were in Michigan, but not at Detroit on the morning of the surrender, and who had arrived home at Chillicothe. The report says there were 500 British regulars and 1,000 Indians and that Hull surrendered “without firing a gun.”

The *Kentucky Gazette* on 22 September, printed, “interesting particulars relative to the surrender of Detroit:”

> “After the British had landed, they formed, and in an open and level plain *leisurely* marched towards the fort. Still no orders were issued to fire on them with the artillery. After they had got within less than a quarter mile of the fort, they advanced in deep column through a very narrow line. Three pieces of cannon, loaded with grape and cannister shot, were placed in that direction which could be played on them to great advantage, and to their certain destruction. Captain SNELLING, and many other officers, whose names are not recollected, solicited Hull for permission to fire on them---it was refused ---they beseeched--begged--prayed, that he would give the order---with no more success. … *And the fortress was surrendered without a gun being fired from its batteries at the enemy!!*”

Not all of the Ohio and Kentucky papers reported that Hull did not fire. The *Ohio Centinel* of Dayton on 26 August, referring to 15 August, said General Brock: “opened a battery of cannon and mortars from the opposite side of the river, which did considerable damage to the buildings of the town it being situated between our fort and the river, and entirely exposed to the fire of the enemy. A brisk fire was kept up on both sides until day.”

News of the surrender traveled along a number of paths. News in the British provinces moved to Niagara, York (Toronto), Kingston, Montreal and on to Quebec and Halifax. U. S. Army officers and soldiers, as prisoners of war, were taken to Niagara, where some officers, accompanied by families or wives, were paroled and taken across to the American side. A copy of the local Canadian newspaper dated 22 August, including a British account of the capture of Detroit, was also provided to the Americans. News traveled from Lewiston and Buffalo to Albany, New York. The first news accounts from Buffalo, Batavia, Canandaigua, Geneva, and Albany hardly mention anything respecting no guns being fired at Detroit. The closest was in one of the two newspapers at Canandaigua, the *Western Repository*, which reported, “There was little or no fighting.”

What is in common with most of the early reports in the United States, claiming that Hull surrendered without firing, is that they were apparently derived from militia sources. Ohio militia prisoners of war from Detroit were taken by water to the southern shore of Lake Erie, either at Cleveland or to the west of Cleveland, and dropped off on parole. News traveled from the small settlement of Cleveland to the village of Warren, Ohio; to Pittsburgh; and on to Washington City. News also traveled to other towns in Ohio from the paroled militia. The Ohio militia at the River Raisin escorting provisions, were included in the Articles of Capitulation and were duly notified, but rather than lawfully surrendering, they fled back to Ohio without surrendering or firing a shot. They abandoned military equipment and provisions, which were later collected by the British, and stole horses from local inhabitants. News traveled this way in Ohio to Urbana, Chillicothe, Dayton, Cincinnati, and on to Kentucky.

Although Lewis Cass did much to spread the claim that Hull surrendered without firing a shot and propagated the grapeshot myth, it cannot be stated that he originated the grapeshot myth. Cass, while on board a British cartel vessel, evidently borrowed the journal of Ohioan Robert Lucas and copied from it. At Cleveland, Lucas got his journal back and continued home. Cass proceeded on the way
to Washington City, leaving a trail of information, much of it misinformation or disinformation, as he went. Cass was not at Detroit during the morning of 16 August; he was four to seven miles away, but this did not stop him from authoritatively passing off hearsay as eyewitness accounts. In his famous letter of 10 September 1812, Cass expounds the grapeshot myth. Below compare Cass’s statement with the journal entry of Robert Lucas, written three weeks earlier. First, here is the account entered by Robert Lucas into his journal sometime after the surrender on 16 August: “2-24 pounders loaded with grate shot and Musket balls placed on a Commanding eminence, b[elow]low the town, and indeed our whole force was placed in a situation that the enemis flank and front must have been exposed let them make an attack upon what they would ... when the head of their column[n] had ar[r]ived within about 5 hundred yards of our line, when a Single Discharge from the 24 pound[er] must have dispersed them, orders were received from Gnl Hull for all to retreat to the fort and not to fire upon the En[e]my ...”

Following is the Cass account, dated 10 September, and printed in the National Intelligencer on 15 September: “Two twenty four pounders loaded with grape shot were posted upon a commanding eminence ready to sweep the advancing column. When the head of their column arrived within about five hundred yards of our line, orders were received from Gen. Hull for the whole to retreat to the Fort, and the twenty four pounders not to open upon the enemy.”

It is obvious that Cass incorporated the Lucas account into his own.

The newspaper accounts from Pittsburgh and Bedford, Pennsylvania, that claimed that Fort Detroit had 60 artillery pieces, can also be traced to the journal of Robert Lucas. General Brock’s initial report claimed that 25 artillery pieces were taken, a number that earlier had been published in American newspapers. The first British return of captured ordnance provided a total of 33. Afterward, two tubes that had been burst, having been buried vertically as monuments, were included in the count. The final British return provided details about carriages. A gun tube without a carriage is something like an airplane fuselage without wings; it cannot function as intended. The final return reveals 17 guns with garrison carriages and 12 guns with traveling carriages, yielding a grand total of 29 mounted, a number consistent with the 25 reported earlier in the summer, since General Hull had several new carriages built for the siege artillery train. That Lucas records 60 artillery pieces at Detroit is indicative of his detachment from reality, and the passing of this misinformation at Pittsburgh and Bedford by Cass is notable. Lucas and Cass were two of about a half dozen militia generals providing their supposed expertise to General Hull.

The Buffalo Gazette printed an extra on 27 August, announcing the surrender of Detroit and giving details based on an interview with Captain Daniel Baker, one of the paroled officers. In the next regular edition on 1 September, the following was printed without attribution: “On the 16th, Gen. Brock marched up towards Detroit in a solid column, and in some places not more than 12 men could march abreast, and several 24 pounders and other cannon were bearing upon the enemy, and not a gun was fired !”

It is possible that the information passed by Colonel Cass at Pittsburgh had traveled to Buffalo quickly, but it is more likely that it came from one of the U. S. Army officers paroled at Niagara.

On 7 September, the Independent Chronicle of Boston printed an extract of a letter written by prisoner of war Captain Josiah Snelling of the U. S. Army, dated on board the cartel vessel Nancy, 20 August. Although grapeshot is not mentioned, some of the details are familiar: “At the very moment he capitulated, Col. Findley’s regiment was drawn up behind a strong picketed fence within 300 yards of
the enemy, where they might at three vollies have killed at least 200 of them without the least annoyance. The British troops were advancing up the road in column, and lieut. Anderson who commanded the lower battery, had pointed his guns (24 pounders) in such a manner as to rake the whole column, undiscovered by them; which with the aid of Findley’s regt. would absolutely have prevented their penetrating into the town.”

Actually the Americans behind the fence were closer to 900 yards from Brock's force and it is doubtful they could see each other with a number of houses, orchards, fences and other obstacles intervening. Even at 300 yards on an open plain, it is doubtful that muskets or rifles would have easily killed a large number. Snelling had been in the fort most of the morning before the white flag was displayed.

It appears that some common information reached Lucas, who quickly went aboard one of the cartel vessels bound for Cleveland, and also reached Snelling, and possibly others, that went on board cartel vessels bound for Niagara. We do not know who originated the myth, but can speculate about how it originated. Lieutenant Anderson could have told one or more persons that if the British had continued up the river road toward Detroit, he could have attacked them with grapeshot. Many of the Americans were probably not aware that Anderson left the 24-pounders and took six-pounders to the fence line after the British had arrived at their protected position. The British did not emerge from that protected position until after the white flag was displayed and the artillery ceased firing. What may have started out as a few facts, combined with some conjecture, could easily have been embellished in the emotionally-charged atmosphere following the surrender by those who had no direct involvement.

Although Lewis Cass may not have originated the grapeshot myth, he did more to publicize the myth than any other person.

Conclusions

The American forces under Brigadier General William Hull at Detroit did fire weapons on 16 August 1812, prior to the surrender of Fort Detroit and the force in United States service. About 200 rounds of 24-pound shot were fired from seven guns deployed in three American shore batteries on 15 August and 16 August. Although the effectiveness of this fire can be questioned, the firing undoubtedly took place.

During the night of 15 to 16 August, hundreds of Indians, cooperating with the British, landed downriver from the town of Detroit. At daybreak an invasion force of British regulars and Canadian militiamen crossed the river and landed several miles downriver from Detroit and marched upriver along the river road. Although the boats were seen from the fort crossing the river, the landing and marching upriver were not visible from Fort Detroit. Militiamen in United States service were deployed to a fence several hundred yards downriver from town. The British invasion force under Major General Brock turned inland at the tan-yard almost one mile from Fort Detroit and about three-quarters of a mile from the nearest American shore battery. The British took a good defensive position near a creek that was out of sight from the Americans. At the closest point of approach the British invasion force of Brock was three-quarters of a mile from the closest American 24-pounders, not 500 yards as specified in some accounts. Upon learning that the British had turned inland, the commander of the closest battery of 24-pounders, left the 24-pounders in place and moved with his artillerists and six-pounders to a position at the fence line. The British force stayed in the protected position for a significant amount of time and did not emerge from their position until after the white flag was displayed and firing had ceased.
The British invasion force was not within range of small arms fire and no small arms were fired by the British or the Americans. In addition to the distance that separated the forces, there were obstacles between the forces that impeded vision and direct fire between the opposing forces.

Had General Hull sent a force to attack the British invaders, the town would have been left more vulnerable to attack by Indians. The British force and a conventional attack by this force were not the principal threats to the town and countryside. The threat of massacre of civilians by Indians was the deciding factor.

After the surrender, a story was spread that the British had marched to within range of the American 24-pounders, but that General Hull refused to allow the artillery to fire. General Hull was formally charged and was exonerated by a court martial of refusing to allow the Americans to fire. This story, repeated and embellished many times over two centuries, is a myth.

If the reader encounters the statement that the Americans surrendered Detroit “without firing a shot” or that General Hull refused to allow the American artillery to fire at the British, then caution is advised regarding other information from the same source.

Links to Maps and Explanations

- Map of Detroit Area 1812
- Map of Detroit Detail 15–16 August 1812
- Selected Historical Accounts after the War
- Discussion of Compilation Procedures for Maps
- Map of Detroit Area ca. 2012
- Map of Detroit Superimposed Detail 1812 & 2012
- Notes on Later Development at Historic 1812 Military Sites near Detroit

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Orchards, gardens, crops
U. S. artillery prior to 15 August
Indian movements on 16 August