



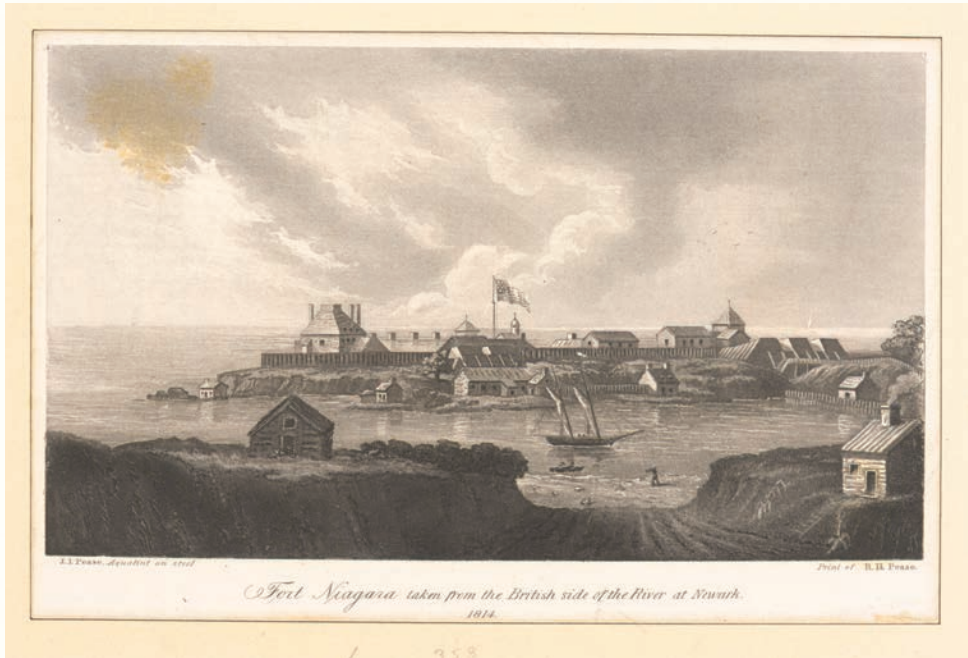
MONUMENTAL THANKS

BY LEE SIMONSON

Citizens of Lewiston
are forever grateful
to Tuscarora heroes.

On December 19, 2013, thousands of people gathered in Lewiston, New York, to dedicate a new bronze monument that commemorates a "forgotten moment in a forgotten war."

The bronze monument of thanksgiving stands in tribute to the courage and sacrifice of the local Tuscarora Nation for saving the lives of dozens of Lewistonians during the War of 1812 British attack that had occurred exactly 200 years earlier. Created by Western New York sculptor Susan Geissler, the larger-than-life Tuscarora Heroes Monument shows a Lewiston woman and her baby being led to safety by two Tuscarora men.



In late 1813, the small frontier village of Fort Niagara on the Niagara River at the border between the US and British Canada suddenly found itself on the front line in the War of 1812.

In December of 1813, suspecting the British would make a move against the United States, local Tuscarora men remained vigilant atop the Niagara Escarpment, a rock promontory that afforded a good view of the town of Lewiston. And in the early morning hours of December 19, their suspicions proved true. The small frontier village on the Niagara River, at the border between the United States and British Canada, suddenly found itself on the front line in the War of 1812. Hours earlier, in the middle of the night, British-Canadian troops and their native allies had launched an invasion and successfully captured the American Fort Niagara without firing a shot. And now they were about to unleash an assault on Lewiston. It would be the first wave of destruction that would eventually see

western New York scorched, residents killed, and families torn apart.

Seeking Revenge

The British, along with their native allies, ran down River Road toward Lewiston, armed with torches, guns and tomahawks. They sought revenge for the Americans burning Niagara on the Lake (then Newark), Ontario, nine days earlier.

Their history with the British was a primary reason the Tuscaroras sided with the Americans in both the Revolution and the War of 1812. The Tuscaroras had migrated north to New York State in the 1700s after being driven out of the Carolinas. The Iroquois admitted the Tuscaroras as the sixth nation of the Confederacy in 1722, and the tribe eventually settled in Lewiston decades later,

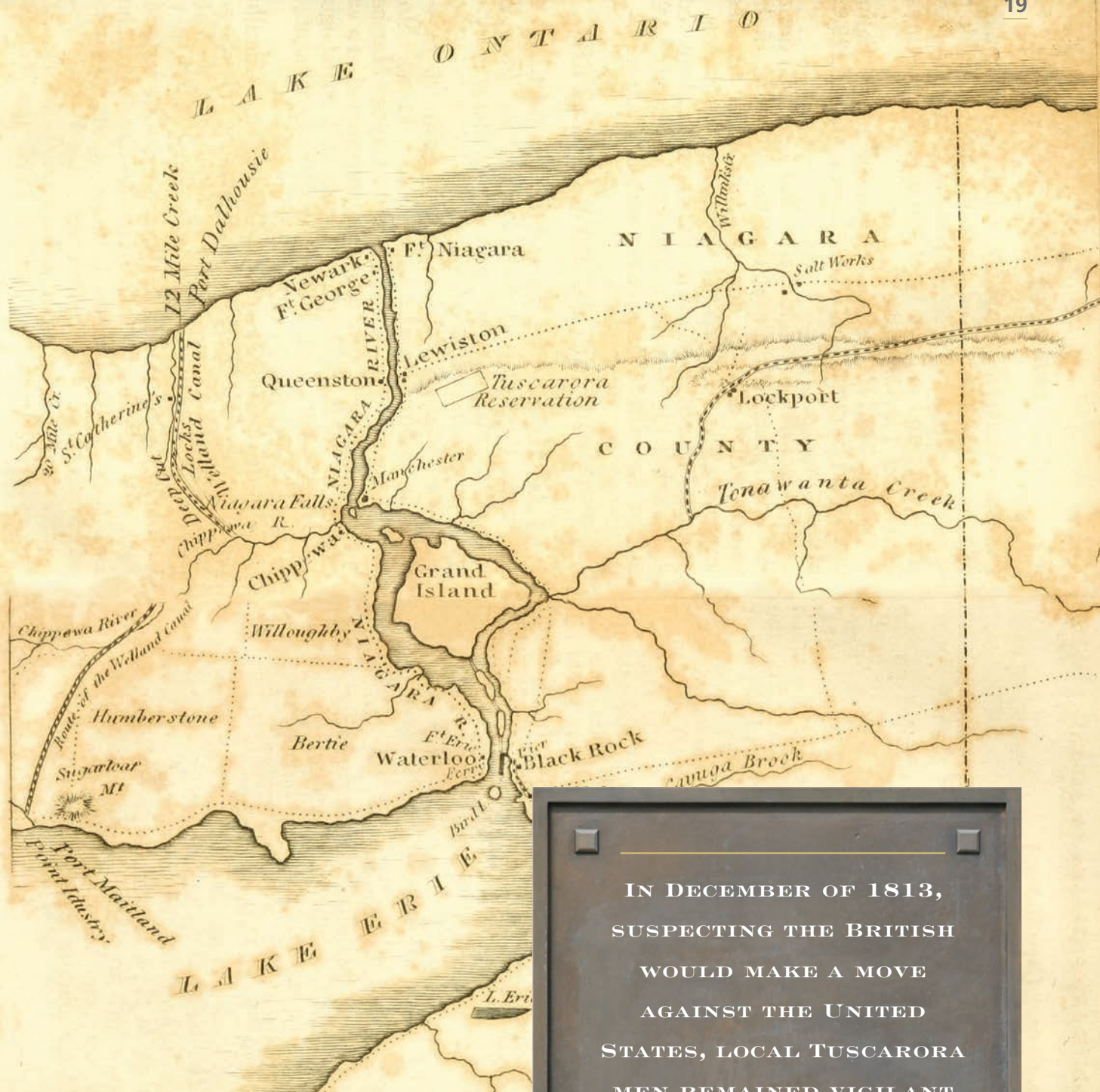
being gifted a tract of land by the Senecas, the Holland Land Company, and the US. Meanwhile, the Tuscaroras who settled in Lewiston developed cordial relations with their white neighbors, conducting business and forming valued friendships.

Watching Over

It was during the pre-dawn hours when Tuscarora scouts first saw faint lights cross the river—lanterns from the British boats transporting the soldiers and native allies. The scouts reported that a massive British invasion was underway, including hundreds of British allied Indians, composed mostly of Wyandot and other natives from Ohio, Michigan, and Western Ontario. The Tuscaroras scrambled to get the warning out to the Lewistonians, while mustering the men in their own village above the escarpment to quickly evacuate their women and children and take up arms to fend off the attack.

But some families did not get the word in time. The approaching enemy force was a juggernaut—close to 1,000 strong. Poorly defended, Lewiston citizens were on their own. They could only run for their lives through the snow and mud in hopes of escaping.

It would not be surprising if the British wanted to burn Lewiston to the ground—it would be retaliation for the burning of Niagara on the Lake. But what happened

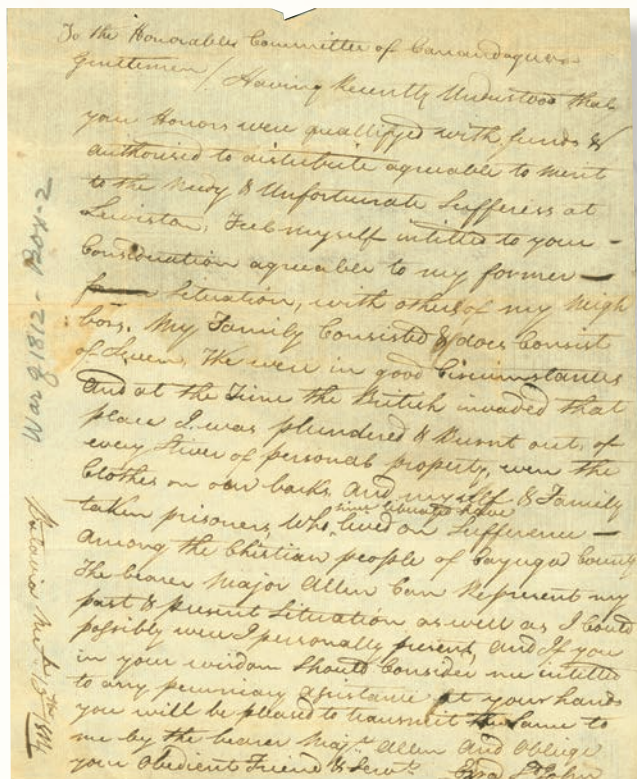


The Tuscarora Reservation was situated on a rock promontory overlooking the town of Lewiston.

turned into much more. While the citizens of Niagara were forced from their homes, the citizens of Lewiston, including women and children, were brutally murdered in the rampage and

the exodus. During the desperate escape, minutes seemed like hours. With whatever clothes they had on their backs, the local settlers ran for their lives, some in bare feet.

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The British and their native allies left a wake of destruction in Lewiston. This letter from Ezra St. John, written a few months after the burning of the town, requests funds from the Committee of Canandaigua in relief of his family's suffering in the attack.

BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

Outnumbered and Outgunned

Lewiston's defense was composed of a small militia outpost. Reports indicated that seven or eight men were killed defending Lewiston, including the sons of Captain Horatio Jones, the famous native interpreter. But the soldiers knew they were outnumbered and outgunned and the small outfit saw many desert and run as soon as they "heard the yells of the Indians." There was little resistance. The British general admonished his native allies before the attack to "refrain from their usual savage practices." However, despite the general's plea, the destruction escalated quickly.

Just as the situation had become dire, the local Tuscarora men swung into action. The Tuscaroras knew they were outnumbered 30 to 1. They were not thinking about a counterattack. Their rescue mission was purely a defensive operation and the objective was to mitigate the catastrophe and facilitate the rapid evacuation of the town. That meant a series of diversionary tactics would have to be employed. The object would be to bluff the enemy and create an illusion of strength without getting anyone killed in the process. No one knew the escarpment and geography of the area better than the Tuscaroras and they used that knowledge to leverage their plan to save as many lives as they could.

The Tuscaroras executed a courageous and brilliant strategy within minutes. The Tuscarora plan was based primarily on bluster and was tremendously risky. Facing the enemy was proof of the fearlessness and tenacity of the Tuscaroras at that critical moment.

Tuscarora Chief Solomon Longboard directed the operation and sent some men to the top of the escarpment, just above the British allied Indians below. The men started blowing horns from several locations along the edge of the escarpment cliff, giving the impression that there was a large unseen force of American allied natives ready to launch a counterattack from the heights. At the same time,

another group of Tuscarora men "rushed down the mountain with their war whoops as if a legion were coming down." The sight and sound of the Tuscarora advances spooked the British allies who were still chasing the column of Lewiston citizens trying to escape.

Fleeing Citizens

Unsure of what they were facing, and not wanting to run into a trap, the British allies stopped in their tracks and retreated about a mile and a half back to Lewiston where the main British force was stationed. When the last British ally was seen running back to Lewiston, enough time was gained to enable the safe eastward passage of the fleeing citizens on Ridge Road who were lucky enough to escape the onslaught. The swift strategy and courage of the Tuscaroras bought precious minutes by creating a wedge, or buffer zone, between the attackers and the citizens and saved dozens of American lives.

But the British allied natives were furious with the Tuscaroras for helping the Lewiston residents, and there would be payback. Knowing there would be consequences for their actions, and willing to make the sacrifice, the Tuscaroras had quickly vacated their village. With most of the Tuscaroras defending the rear of the train of escapees on Ridge Road, the Tuscarora village was defenseless and the British allies began indiscriminately burning the Tuscaroras' homes and winter

food supplies.

Realizing they had destroyed both Lewiston and the Tuscarora villages, the British allies gained a second wind and wanted to chase down the fleeing residents. Ridge Road was the main road into and out of Lewiston. It was a dirt road and conditions were terrible. Lewiston citizens did their best to navigate the ruts, the mud, and the snow, as they traveled east as fast as they could. No one could predict when or if the invading force would strike again. When they had gone about nine miles, some of the Lewiston men in the procession had arrived at a large log house which was used as an armory. As they were breaking open the powder kegs to set the house on fire in an effort to prevent the British from capturing any of the supplies, Tuscarora leader Solomon Longboard arrived on the scene. With the help of an interpreter, Chief Longboard persuaded the Lewiston men to save the building and the powder and to keep advancing east, out of harm's way. The Tuscaroras remained at the armory. By the time the exhausted British allies arrived at the scene they were simply too tired to engage the Tuscaroras and turned back, still not sure about the actual size of the Tuscarora force. The residents of Lewiston continued to migrate out of Niagara County, in many instances on foot, to rebuild their shattered lives.

Estimates of the number of Lewiston civilians killed in

the attack range from "some" to forty-six, with most in the dozen range. True figures will never be known because records were destroyed, some families didn't move back to the area, and an undeterminable number of people perished within the burning homes and buildings. But what is certain is that the casualties would have been more severe had it not been for the courage and friendship of the Tuscaroras. Lewiston's history of friendship with its Tuscarora neighbors manifested itself in an impressive display of bravery and sacrifice on that winter morning in 1813.

In 2010, Lewiston residents and local organizations worked together to create what eventually became the largest War of 1812 Bicentennial monument project in the United States. Thousands turned out on December 19, 2013, the 200th anniversary of the Tuscarora Heroes, to let the world know that our small community will forever honor the courage and sacrifice of the Tuscarora Nation. Tuscarora Chief Leo Henry and Tuscarora Council member Neil Patterson Sr. spoke on behalf of the Nation, thanking Lewiston for the honor. Highlighting the event was a reenactment of "Flames Through Lewiston," which portrayed dozens of Lewiston residents reenacting the burning of Lewiston and flight out of town. Large fires were placed down the middle of the main street, recreating a vivid scene. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The Historical Association of Lewiston holds a copy of a handwritten letter from Isaac Cooke, one of the survivors who chronicled the events of the day. His nephew, Joshua Cooke, also wrote about his family's plight in *Souvenir History of Niagara County, Reminiscences of Lewiston* (1902). The New York State Archives holds military pension records of Tuscaroras who served in the War of 1812.

The Historical Association of Lewiston also maintains a collection of hard-to-find books and newspaper articles related to the War of 1812 in Western New York. Important material involving the Tuscarora includes *Pioneer History of the Holland Land Purchase of Western New York* by Orasmus Turner (1850); *Drummond's Winter Campaign, 1813* by Lt. Col. E. Cruikshank; *The War of 1812 on the Niagara Frontier* by Louis Babcock (1927); the Buffalo Historical Society's *Recalling Pioneer Days* (1922); *The History of the Tuscarora* by Elias Johnson (1881); *Dark Days on the Frontier of Western New York* by Chipman P. Turner (1879); William Pool's edited *History of Lewiston, New York* (1897); and *Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* by Benson Lossing (1869).

The Historical Association of Lewiston has compiled a list of the Tuscaroras who served, along with a list of Lewiston citizens who were killed in the attack.

In 2010, the Historical Association of Lewiston published *Tuscarora Heroes*, which contains relevant and unedited excerpts from primary sources.

