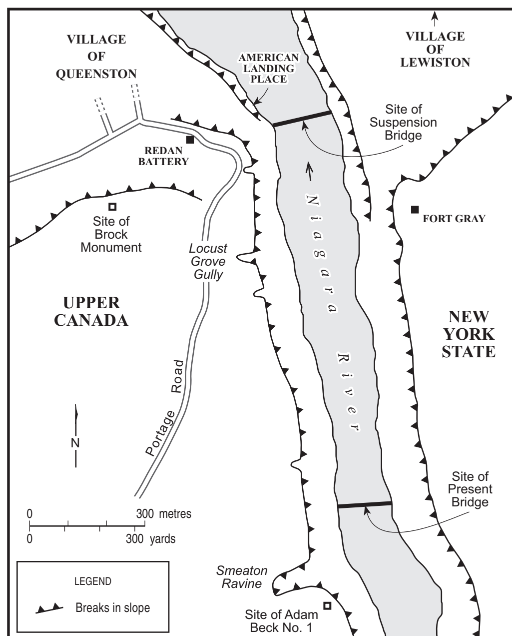
Looking back... with Alun Hughes

THE FISHERMAN'S PATH

In his monograph *Queenston Heights,* first published in 1890, Ernest Cruikshank writes, "Observing that the battery on the heights was now occupied only by a few men working the gun, Lieut. Gansevoort pointed out a narrow fisherman's path leading around a rocky point and winding upwards to the summit, and suggested that a detatchment might gain the rear of the British position unobserved by this route. Although already bleeding from more than one wound, Wool eagerly adopted the proposal which had also been favoured by Van Rensselaer, … and instantly began the ascent … giving strict orders to an officer to shoot any man who attempted to turn back."

So it was that the American invaders captured the redan battery at the Battle of Queenston Heights on October 13, 1812. The battery was located part way up the Niagara Escarpment alongside the Portage Road, and housed an 18-pounder cannon which was within range of the American side of the Niagara River. The capture of the battery was a key part of the American strategy to claim the Heights.

Background



Queenston and the Lower Gorge in 1812

The invasion began early in the morning when it was still dark. It involved 13 boats carrying about 300 soldiers, a combination of regulars and militia led by Solomon Van Rensselaer and John Chrystie, who both held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. The intended landing place was above the village of Queenston at the mouth of the Niagara Gorge, just north of the point where the first Queenston-Lewiston Suspension Bridge was built in 1851. From there a terrace extended downstream toward the dock area in the village. At the landing place itself the terrace was relatively narrow; it was backed by the Escarpment and separated from the river by a very steep bank rising 40 feet.

Chrystie did not make it across — a mechanical problem, the loss of a rowlock, forced him to return to the American shore — and two other boats never crossed either. This left Van Rensselaer in sole command. His counterpart on the British side was Captain James Dennis, whose troops were split between Queenston village and the Heights.

British sentries fired on the boats as they neared the shore, killing one officer and wounding several soldiers. The sentries dashed back to the village to warn Dennis. The Americans disembarked and scaled the bank, with the apparent intention of storming the battery by the Portage Road. But then a fierce firefight erupted, which ended only when the British fell back to the village. Meanwhile the boats returned to Lewiston to bring over more soldiers.

Van Rensselaer was wounded several times in the exchange, ruling him out of further action. But he was still able to give orders. He directed his men to gather at the foot of the bank, and then ordered Captain John Wool to lead a climb up the gorge wall to attack the battery. In a letter to Van Rensselaer dated October 23, 1812, Wool writes, "I have the honor to communicate to you the circumstances attending the storming of Queenstown battery on the 13th inst. …. In pursuance of your order we proceeded round the point and ascended the rocks, which brought us partly in rear of the battery. We took this without much resistance."

Wool's party was guided up the gorge wall by Lieutenant John Gansevoort, who was said to be familiar with the terrain on the Canadian side of the river. The troops apparently followed a fisherman's path, which the British left unguarded because they thought it too difficult for anyone to climb.

History of the Fisherman's Path

Cruikshank was by no means the first to mention the fisherman's path. The earliest reference comes on October 24, 1812, just 11 days after the battle, in an article in *The Bee,* a newspaper published in the Town of Niagara: "It was from under this bank and the ledge of rock up the river that the enemy first attempted to ascend a fisherman's path up the mountain, shaded by small trees and shrubbery from the view of our troops at the battery …." The story is repeated in 1818 by William James in *A Full and Correct Account of the Military Occurrences of the Late War:* "American regulars, headed by captain

Wool … ascended a fisherman's path up the rocks, which had been reported to general Brock as impassable, and therefore was not guarded."

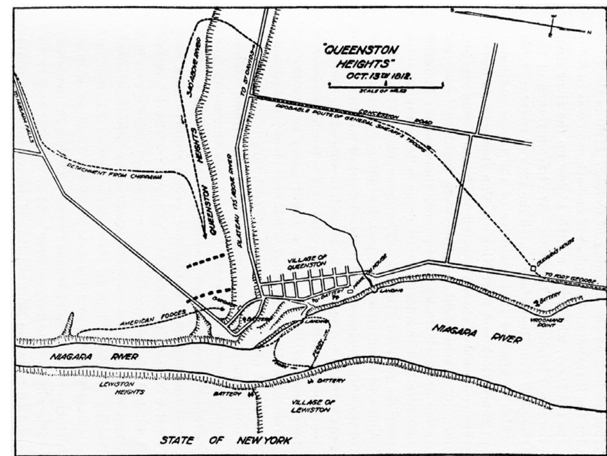
Three years earlier, however, in 1815, Gideon Davison and Samuel Williams in *Sketches of the War between the United States and the British Isles,* describe the assault on the battery, but do not explicitly mention a fisherman's path. Nor does Van Rensselaer himself in *A Narrative of the Affair at Queenstown,* dated 1836. John Armstrong's *Notices of the War of 1812,* also published in 1836, makes no reference to a fisherman's path either. In 1853 Gilbert Auchinleck follows suit, writing about "a path, which had long been considered impracticable, and was, therefore, unguarded …." This appeared in his serialized history of the War of 1812 in the *Anglo-American Magazine,* which came out in book form in 1855.

If we exclude John Richardson's 1842 book, *War of 1812,* where he simply quotes what James wrote in 1818, references to a fisherman's path do not resume until over 40 years later, in John Symons' 1859 book *The Battle of Queenston Heights.* In 1864 William Coffin mentions the fisherman's path in *1812: the War and its Moral,* as does Benson Lossing in *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812,* published in 1868.

As quoted in the introduction, Cruikshank refers to a fisherman's path in 1890, likewise D.B. Read in *Life and Times of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock* in 1894, and J.G. Currie in an address about the battle delivered at the Heights in 1898. There were exceptions, however, among them *History of the War of 1812* by James Hannay in 1905, and *The Canadian War of 1812* by C.P. Lucas in 1906.

Clearly, several early writers specifically mention a fisherman's path, and several do not, though the latter almost always say that the Americans followed an existing path up the gorge wall. Where, then, was this path? The foregoing writers give little clue, and the first precise indication of its location does not appear until 1927, in Louis Babcock's book *The War of 1812 on the Niagara Frontier.* A map in the book, reproduced below, shows the Americans ascending the gorge wall alongside the Smeaton Ravine, which today lies just north of the Adam Beck Power Station No. 1.

(The Smeaton Ravine is shown on the map on the first page of this article. This is the name given it by geologists — the Niagara Parks Commission calls it Smeaton's Cove. The map also shows four gullies cut by streams flowing over high waterfalls into the Niagara River. As will become apparent in the discussion that follows, many historians claim that the enemy climbed the gorge wall by the largest of the four. On the map this is called the Locust Grove Gully. This is not its official name, but since it lies just north of today's Locust Grove Picnic Area the name is considered appropriate.)



Babcock's map

An abridged reprint of the third edition of Cruikshank's monograph, edited by Ernest Green in 1948, contains a crude, hand-drawn map which shows the same line of ascent as Babcock. A map in J. Mackay Hitsman's *The Incredible War of 1812,* dated 1965, depicts the Americans heading up the ravine itself. But another reprint of Cruikshank's monograph, based on the second edition, contains a map showing the Americans ascending by both the ravine and the the Locust Grove Gully (it appears in *The Defended Border,* edited by Morris Zaslow in 1964). A map in George Stanley's 1984 book *The War of 1812* shows the same thing.

This brings us to Robert Malcomson, who wrote the definitive work about the Battle of Queenston Heights in 2003. Entitled *A Most Brilliant Affair,* it contains maps that show the Americans climbing the gorge wall at the Locust Grove Gully only! The same appears in one older book, Pierre Berton's *The Invasion of Canada,* published in 1980, and two more recent ones, *1812 War with America* by Jon Latimer, dated 2007, and Jonathon Riley's 2011 biography of Isaac Brock, *A Matter of Honour.*

Another 2011 biography, Wesley Turner's *The Astonishing General,* does not contain a map and does not address the route issue. Of the nine books which do contain maps, only five mention a fisherman's path — Babcock, Cruikshank (in Green and Zaslow), Berton and Riley. Riley explored the gorge himself, and concluded that the fisherman's path ran only along the base of the gorge at river's edge (indeed, he says it is still there). In his opinion a fisherman's path up the gorge wall made no sense, but this did not stop him from climbing the wall anyway (he does not state exactly where, but presumably it was at the Locust Grove Gully).

Discussion

So, where did the Americans make their way up the gorge wall? At the Smeaton Ravine? At the Locust Grove Gully? At both the ravine and the gully? Or did they follow another route altogether? Also, was the route they took in fact a fisherman's path?

There are a number of issues to consider in answering these questions. The first is whether the Americans climbed the gorge wall in darkness or in daylight, which would obviously make a huge difference when it came to finding the path.

Sunrise at the latitude of Queenston on October 13, 1812 was at about 6:10 a.m., but this was not the first light. Sunrise is preceded by three phases of twilight — astronomical, nautical and civil — which last about 30 minutes each and are determined by the angle of the sun below the horizon. Little can be seen in the first phase, the start of which coincides with dawn, but visibility improves progressively through the next two. It should be stated also that the sun was rising from the south-east, which means that the high gorge wall south of Lewiston would delay daylight at river's edge on the Canadian side.

The invasion itself began about 4 a.m., at least according to American reports; some British officers said the first boats crossed an hour earlier. Regardless, the crossing obviously took place in darkness. Malcomson, who had studied the battle in great detail, divided the conflict into six phases, each illustrated by a map. The American ascent of the gorge wall occurred late in the second phase, between 5:30 and 7:00 a.m. Malcomson's estimate is that the Americans were searching for a path around 6:30, at about the time Isaac Brock arrived in Queenston from Fort George. If he is correct, the enemy could obviously see where they were going (no matter how much daylight might have been delayed). Indeed, Van Rensselaer himself confirmed this, as quoted below.

A second issue is the matter of the distance from the American landing place to the two possible routes up the gorge wall — over three-quarters of a mile to the ravine and about a quarter of a mile to the gully. Did the Americans really march all that distance before ascending the gorge?

Nowadays a ledge carrying a perfectly walkable footpath extends upstream at the base of the gorge, separated from the river by a short steep slope. But it is likely that the ledge is entirely artificial, having been "graded" in 1918 so that a railway could carry materials from Queenston to the Queenston-Chippawa Generating Station (now Adam Beck No. 1), then under constuction. When Adam Beck No. 2 was built in the 1950s the ledge carried a road.

This means that the convenient footpath that exists today (Riley's fisherman's path, incidentally) was not there in 1812. Had the Americans proceeded any distance upstream, who knows what they might have encountered? If old photographs are any guide, it would have been a continuous slope down to river level covered with trees and bushes. This surely would have ruled out the ravine, and has to raise questions about the gully also. After all, the Americans would have wanted to get up the gorge wall as quickly as possible.

This brings us to Lieutenant John Gansevoort, who guided John Wool's party up the gorge wall. He was, to quote Van Rensselaer, "well acquainted with the ground." Some say he knew in advance where the path was. But how did he learn this?

According to Malcomson, Gansevoort had been posted with the First Regiment of Artillery at Fort Niagara "for some time." He no doubt visited Lewiston, and may even have been involved in the establishment of the battery at Fort Gray, situated south of the village overlooking the gorge. It would have provided a fine view of the Canadian side of the river, especially for someone with a telescope. It is quite possible that Gansevoort observed men using a path at the gully. However the ravine, being further upriver, would have been much less visible.

The evidence seems to favour the gully, which leads to a final question: is it possible to climb the gorge wall at that location? The answer is yes, at least on the gully's southern flank, though it would be a very difficult ascent. (Of course, this assumes that today's slopes are reliable indicators of what they were in 1812, which may not be the case.) There remains one problem though: climbing the gorge wall at the gully would have been so difficult as to rule out any chance of a path used by fishermen.

There is, however, another possible route up the gorge wall that has not been mentioned so far, and this is at the site of the former suspension bridge.

Resolving the Issue

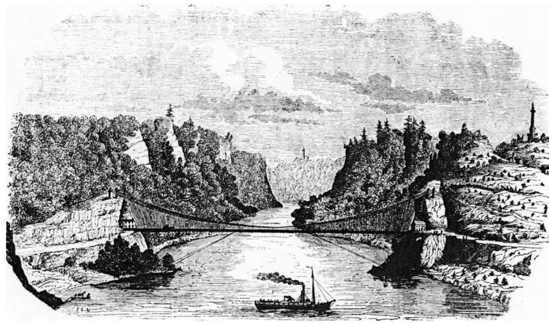
Following the early firefight, Van Rensselaer's troops were clustered at river level at the spot where they had landed. This is what he wrote in 1836 about what happened next: "as it was now broad daylight, any farther [sic] delay was highly hazardous; and I therefore … directed the troops to incline a little to the left, and ascend the heights by the point of the rock, and storm the battery …." In Wool's letter to Van Rensselaer quoted above, he too says that "we proceeded round the point."

The point in question was exactly where the suspension bridge was built. It is actually quite a blunt point, marking where the gorge ends and the river starts widening out. But it features a distinctive triangular rock at river level, which helps explain Van Rensselaer's reference to "the point of the rock." This rock is visible below the bridge on the drawing shown on the next page, though the point itself has been changed by the building of the bridge.

When Van Rensselaer wrote that he "directed the troops to incline a little to the left, and ascend the heights by the point of the rock," he was implying that they did not go far upstream, possibly round the point and no further. A path on the other side of the point would have been quite visible from Fort Gray, yet out of sight of the British troops at the battery. It

could have been climbed quickly, and the Americans would have ended up above the battery, which is what they intended. Ascending by this route makes much more sense than by the ravine or the gully.

There is no sign of a path at the present day. The construction of the two bridges at the site has significantly altered the profile of the point. The first, opened in 1851, did not last long, for it was severely damaged by a gale in 1864. What was left of the bridge was left hanging for 35 years until a second bridge was built in 1899. However, the remains of a path did exist before the second bridge was built. To quote J.G. Currie in his 1898 address on the Heights, "Captain Wool … took some of his men up river and in shore until they came to the fisherman's path, traces of which can still be seen under and near the old ruined bridge."



Frederick C. Lowe's wood engraving, 1853

One question remains, why was the path called a fisherman's path? It is mentioned in the article in *The Bee,* so it had to exist under that name in 1812, and the Niagara River at Queenston has always been a prime fishing location. Indeed, John Smith, an Adjutant with the 41st Regiment, wrote a letter to his superior five days after the battle, in which he says that the Americans landed "at the fishing ground." A shoreline eddy carries the water, fish included, upstream along this stretch of the river, the same eddy that the Americans used when they crossed.

The path presumably connected with the Portage Road somewhere above the battery, but why would anybody use it to go fishing? The closest community was Queenston, and its inhabitants could simply walk upstream to the fishing ground. In the early 1800s not many people lived atop the Escarpment, but the few that did would have sought a shortcut to the fishing ground instead of having to take the long way round, down the Portage Road and back upstream. A fisherman's path at the point makes perfect sense.

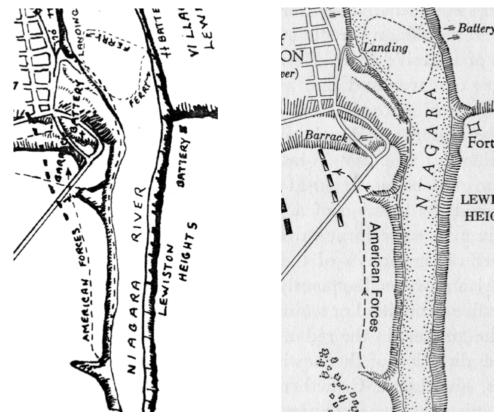
Postscript

It is reasonable to assume that the differing opinions noted above as to where the Americans climbed the gorge wall were the result of variant interpetations of the evidence by different people. But this is only partly so. They were also the result of simple errors in map interpretation.

Babcock's 1927 map, reproduced earlier, shows the Americans ascending at the ravine. It also depicts various other battle-related features, including several batteries, the route by which General Sheaffe climbed the Escarpment in the afternoon, and — oddly perhaps — two ferry routes across the Niagara River, one from Queenston to Lewiston, and the other in the opposite direction.

Green's map of 1948 is an obvious copy of Babcock, with two additions. Green shows elevations above river level: 70 feet for the village, 175 feet for the plateau at the base of the Heights, and 340 feet for the Heights themselves. And he marks the boundary of the military reserve on the Heights. But both the boundary and the direction of troop movements are drawn with the same pecked line, raising the possibility of misinterpretation.

This is exactly what happened when Zaslow drew his map in 1964. In copying Green's map he mistook the southern boundary of the military reserve for a troop movement and as a result showed the Americans climbing the gorge wall at both the ravine and the gully. He also omitted the word "ferry," leaving the impression that the ferry crossings represented the original invasion routes, and, further, that the American landing place was a considerable distance north of its actual location. Stanley's map of 1983 contains the same errors.



Details from the Green and Zaslow maps

At first sight, Hitsman's map of 1965, showing the Americans going up the ravine, does not appear to be a copy of any known source, but the fact that it contains Green's elevations raises suspicions. This leaves Berton, Malcomson, Latimer and Riley, all of whom show the enemy going up the gully. Presumably Latimer's and Riley's choice is based on research by Malcomson, whose book preceded the other two. But Berton chose the gully long before the others, and his source is unknown.

Principal Sources: (in addition to those cited in the text): numerous books about the War and the Battle, published between 1815 and 2012; Spencer, *The Falls of Niagara,* 1906; Way, *Ontario's Niagara Parks,* 1960; *Canadian Engineer,* Aug. 28, 1919; maps, airphotos and fieldwork.

Credits: map and layout (Loris Gasparotto); editing (John Burtniak); field measurements (Terry Ohm).

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