

LAURA SECORD AND THE PRINCE OF WALES

In March of 1861 Laura Secord received a “generous present” of £100 from Albert, Prince of Wales, eldest son of Queen Victoria. Albert had learned about Laura’s epic walk when on a tour of North America the previous year, and his gift is generally interpreted as royal recognition of the heroic role Laura played five decades earlier during the War of 1812. Her obituary in the *Niagara Mail* of October 21, 1868 is typical, describing the Prince’s gesture as a “token of his respect for her patriotism and intrepidity.” But was it really this, or was the Prince motivated by something else altogether?

Laura’s Story

The story of Laura Secord is well known. In late June 1813, at her home in Queenston, she heard of an American plan to attack the DeCew House in Thorold, then in use as a British base with Lieutenant James FitzGibbon in command. FitzGibbon had to be warned. Laura’s husband James was the obvious person to do so, but he had been invalidated at the Battle of Queenston Heights the previous year. Laura had no choice but to go herself, and after a long and arduous full day’s trek, reached the DeCew House at dusk and conveyed the warning to FitzGibbon. Two days later the advancing American troops were ambushed by loyal native warriors in the beechwoods in the northeastern part of Thorold Township, and after a three-hour battle — the Battle of Beaverdams — surrendered.

Though Laura Secord’s walk is familiar today, it was many years before it came to full public notice in the 19th century. Immediately after the War of 1812 it was known only to those directly involved, such as FitzGibbon, and to family and friends. That began to change in 1820, after James Secord submitted a petition to the Lieutenant Governor for a license to operate a quarry on the military reserve at Queenston. In support of his request he included a brief mention of Laura’s walk and enclosed a testimonial written for Laura by FitzGibbon himself.

This was followed over the next two decades by several petitions from James, Laura and their son Charles, for positions, land and pensions. Laura herself sought the job of caretaker of the Brock Monument at Queenston Heights in 1831, the license to run the Queenston ferry in 1839 and a pension after her husband’s death in 1841. Many of the petitions referred to Laura’s exploit, and some were accompanied by other supporting statements written by FitzGibbon in 1827 and 1837. Though James’ 1820 petition was successful, many others (including Laura’s) were not, and significantly none of them elicited any sort of official recognition or even acknowledgement of the role she had played in the War of 1812.

The Prince’s Visit

But this was soon to be rectified when Prince Albert arrived in 1860. He was just 18 when he left Britain in July for a three-month tour of the Canadian colonies and the United States. The itinerary was crammed with official events and travel, but in September the Prince took a weekend break at Niagara Falls, allowing him to relax and play tourist. When the formal tour resumed on the Tuesday, his first stop was at the Brock Monument on Queenston Heights for a ceremony honouring veterans of the War of 1812. He then proceeded down the Escarpment to unveil an obelisk marking the spot where Isaac Brock was mortally wounded, before embarking by boat down the Niagara River.



Laura and Albert

At the Queenston Heights ceremony he was presented with an address of welcome signed by 1193 veterans, all male apart from one female — Laura Secord. About six weeks earlier she had turned up at the office of the Clerk of the Peace in Niagara and demanded that her name be added to the list. An August 8 report in the *Niagara Mail* headed “A Canadian Heroine” says it all: “The Clerk demurred to taking so novel a signature, although the lady insisted upon her right, having done her country more signal service during the war than half the soldiers and militiamen engaged in it. We do not give the venerable lady’s name, as she may not like the notoriety....” Her identity would have been no secret, however, if only because the report goes on to describe her walk, and concludes, “We say that the brave loyal old lady ought not only be allowed to sign the address, but she deserves a special introduction to the Prince of Wales as a worthy example of the fire of 1812, when both men and women in Upper Canada vied alike to defend their country against the invading enemy.”

This newspaper article may have prompted Laura Secord to take a significant further step, and prepare a written memorial to the Prince stating what she had done in 1813 and asking him to take her case to his mother, Queen Victoria. In this she says: “In the war of 1812 being strongly attached to the

British cause I took every opportunity to watch its progress, and living on the Frontier during the whole of the war I had frequent opportunities of knowing the moves of the American forces. I thus was enabled to obtain important information which I deemed proper to communicate to the British Commander ... Lieut. FitzGibbon of the 49th Regt." While there is a touch of exaggeration in what she says, she can perhaps be excused given the lack of official recognition of her achievement.

The memorial continues: "I am now a very old woman — a widow many years. ... I request that your Royal Highness will be pleased to convey to your Royal Parent Her Majesty the Queen the name of one who in the hour of trial and danger ... stood ever ready and willing to defend this Country against every invasion come what might."

The *Niagara Mail* on April 3, 1861 reported that the memorial was delivered to the Governor General, who at first seems to have ignored it. Only through the intercession of one Sir William Fenwick Williams was it presented to the Prince. Laura subsequently met the Prince in person (this is confirmed in her obituary), probably on the Sunday during his stay at the Falls. He was due to attend church in Drummondville, but at the last minute it was switched to Chippawa where Laura was living at the time, and to the very church, Holy Trinity, that she attended. One can't help wondering how the meeting of the elderly Laura and the teenage Albert went, but there are no eye-witness accounts.



Sir William Fenwick Williams of Kars

Lieutenant General Sir William Fenwick Williams of Kars, to give him his full title, clearly played a key role in Laura's later life. He was a hero of the Crimean War (for which he was awarded a baronetcy, hence the "Sir" and the "Kars"), and at the time of the Prince's visit was Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America. According to the *Illustrated London News* for October 13, 1860, the Prince stopped for lunch at his home on Dorval Island in the St. Lawrence, and the two then sailed in a large bark canoe downriver to Lachine. Sir William was born in Nova Scotia, but his paternity is uncertain. He was either the legitimate son of Thomas Williams, Commissary General at the Halifax garrison, or the bastard son of Edward, Duke of Kent, Queen Victoria's father. Interestingly, he made no effort during the Prince's visit to deny the possibility that he was the Queen's half brother.

The Question of Motive

While in North America, the Prince was known to hand out monetary gifts on an *ad hoc* basis — for example, he gave £100 to Blondin, whom he watched crossing the Niagara Gorge on a tightrope. But he didn't give anything to Laura when they met, and her £100 obviously came from the Queen via the Prince. What then was the Queen's motive? Was it recognition of Laura's role in "saving the country," or was it something else?

Queen Victoria is known to have felt great sympathy towards people in distress, but less known was her habit of sending money to women in far-flung parts of the Empire who were enduring financial hardship. This makes an announcement in the *Quebec Morning Chronicle* of March 20, 1861 quite telling. It reads: "The Prince of Wales does not forget Canada. We have pleasure in stating that he has just sent Mrs. Hatt, daughter of Col. de Salaberry, and Mrs. Laura Secord, £100 stg., each, as a mark of sympathy for these ladies in their straitened circumstances." This suggests that the gift was more an act of charity than anything else, especially as Charlotte Hatt is not known to have done anything significant herself.

So, the question remains, was the Queen's gift to Laura Secord an act of charity towards a lady living in poverty, or was it long-overdue recognition of the heroic role she had played in the War of 1812? Or was it perhaps both? The *Morning Chronicle* makes it clear that it was indeed charity, but it is only reasonable to conclude that there was more to it than that. Presumably Victoria did not send out money indiscriminately; something had to justify the gift.

In Charlotte Hatt's case it was a combination of family ties and family heroism. The Queen's father, the Duke of Kent, became acquainted with the de Salaberrys when posted to Quebec as commander of the 7th Regiment of Foot in 1791, and remained a family friend for the rest of his life. And Charlotte's own father, Colonel Charles de Salaberry, was the hero of the Battle of Châteauguay in 1813.

In Laura Secord's case, of course, it was her own heroism that distinguished her — she didn't have to depend on anyone else — and Victoria must have been impressed by her memorial to the Prince. By 1861 Laura was well into her eighties and had been waiting almost 50 years for recognition. When it eventually came it couldn't have come from a more appropriate pair — Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales.

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Note: For full details of the Prince's visit to Niagara in 1860 see my earlier article of September 2009, "The Prince of Wales at Niagara."

Principal Sources: (in addition to those cited in the text and in the article listed in the note above): DCB & DNB entries for Sir William Fenwick Williams; Saunders, "When Nova Scotia Helped to Save the Empire," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 1961; Preston, "General Sir William Fenwick Williams..." *Dalhousie Review*, 1976-77.

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