

OUR OBSCURE NAVAL HERITAGE IS GOOD READING

By Robert J. Williamson

In his well written and timely FLASHBACKS Column in the Spectator, Mark McNeil recently reviewed the August 8, 1813 sinking of two merchant schooners, converted to American gunships for the War of 1812 on Lake Ontario. He raised a very relevant question. How did two 1812 American warships named “Hamilton” and “Scourge”, sunk eleven km off the entrance to the present Welland Canal, somewhat remote from the City of Hamilton, end up on the city’s heritage inventory in Confederation Park? The assumed explanation is that one of the ships is named “Hamilton”. However, that belief couldn’t be further from the truth. It is named in honor of Paul Hamilton 1762-1816, United States Secretary of the Navy during the war.

The correct answer is more obscure and therefore often overlooked in history. As a retired Naval Reserve Commander, having served as the master of ceremonies at several of the “Hamilton and Scourge” Memorial Services, I have always tried to focus on the obscure aspects of the story. In this case, the second converted gunship, named “Scourge”, was originally named “Lord Nelson” in honor of the British Admiral’s glorious and historically concurrent defeat of Napoleon’s French / Spanish fleet prior to the War of 1812 at Trafalgar in 1805. The historic relevance to us is that the merchant schooner was built in Canada at Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) in 1811, and was owned and operated by James and William Crooks, enterprising Head-of-the-Lake merchants and millers in Dundas. Crooks Hollow on Spencer Creek above Webster’s Falls still bears that family’s name. When the “Lord Nelson”, en route to Newark, supposedly encroached on the lake boundary between Canada and New York State on June 5, 1812 just two weeks prior to the outbreak of the war, she was seized by the American Brig “Oneida” built to enforce American Embargo laws against smuggling. The “Lord Nelson” was carrying a legitimate cargo of dry goods including women’s apparel, bedding, linen, fine table cloths, casks of sugar and liquor. The ship and its cargo were never returned.

The establishment of a Hamilton and Scourge Memorial Garden and annual Service of Remembrance in Confederation Park came about through the political influence of Alderman Bill McCulloch who was also an officer in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve. Here again lies another exceptional connection to our city. Over a two day period, August 8-10, 1813, the American squadron lost four vessels. The “Hamilton” and “Scourge” gunships with heavy guns fitted on deck suffered from instability. They capsized and sank during a violent thunder storm and the British squadron captured the USS Growler and Julia as well. Thus the Americans forfeited control of Lake Ontario for the rest of the summer. What appears to have become an oblivious aspect of this event is that one of the ships in the British squadron was the 14 gun, two masted square rigged Brig launched in Kingston in 1813 and expeditiously named His Majesty’s Ship “STAR”, the forerunner of today’s Hamilton Naval Reserve Division.



Finally let me reveal one more bit of disregarded history related to the “Hamilton and Scourge” sinking. The Captain of the Inland Waters Research Ship that was assigned to search for the “Hamilton and Scourge” in 1972 was Lieutenant Commander Archie Hodge, (shown here). He was a retired navy veteran of World War Two from Dundas. He had spent the war years in the North Atlantic searching for enemy submarines that were attacking convoys sailing to Europe. How ironic is it that a naval officer attempting to find enemy submarines was now using his sonar skills to successfully locate the 1813 gunships at the bottom of Lake Ontario?

The plain fact is that much of the naval historical information that has been ignored for 209 years has been brought forward due to the attention focused on the discovery of the “Hamilton and Scourge”. It has helped explain the importance of the naval role in the War of 1812 and specifically the western end of Lake Ontario. Consequently the Memorial in Confederation Park has become a National Historic Site of Canada which is pretty heady stuff, being partnered with our World War Two North Atlantic Memorial, HMCS HAIDA, on our bay front along side HMCS STAR.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society.

NOTE;

Not only did Mark McNeil’s column inspire me to write this story but two other events related to August 8th were too coincidental for me to ignore. In the morning of August 8 while being shuttled home from Johnston Motors, my driver mentioned that his dentist in St. Catharines used to be Dr. Nelson, the amateur archaeologist who initiated the search for the Hamilton and Scourge in 1972. We had quite an interesting conversation since I was scheduled to conduct a Memorial Service for the two ships that same evening at Confederation Park. At the ceremony, as if preordained, a violent thunderstorm blew up just as the service got under way, exactly like the storm that capsized the Hamilton and Scourge 209 years ago. Needless to say, I felt destined to write this story about Obscure Naval History.