

The War of 1812 and the Town of De Kalb

by Bryan Thompson



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"Our Flag Was Still There"

2012 marks the beginning of the 200th anniversary of the war of 1812. In a previous article in the Gazette I have discussed Brigadier General Thomas B. Benedict of De Kalb, and his role in the war. In this article I will discuss some of the other events of the War of 1812 involving the town of De Kalb and its residents.

Events had been leading up to the outbreak of war for sometime. On April 10, 1812 Congress authorized the raising of 100,000 men from the various state militias in anticipation of the outbreak of war. In response to

this call on May 2, 1812, General Jacob Brown commander of the 4th Brigade of the NYS Militia sent muster orders to Lt. Colonel T B Benedict, of De Kalb, commander of the 123rd regiment of the St Lawrence County Militia.

Benedict was to summon 43 men from the St Lawrence county militia to be ready at a minutes notice under his "immediate inspection." The Benedict ordered the drafting of the local Militia on May 5, 1812. The men were to be stationed at the village of Williamstown (Old De Kalb). They were soon joined by 37 men, of Col. Stone's regiment, under Captain Darius Hawkins from Herkimer County. The men camped and trained for 10 days at the village, probably assembling on the town square, which was adjacent to Col. Benedict's residence.

Because De Kalb was not a military base and the call was rather sudden, there were no supplies there for the militia. Lt. Col. Benedict used his own money to purchase camp kettles, axes, tents, blankets, rations and shoes from William Cleghorn's store at De Kalb.

On May 28, 1812 the troops began marching over terribly muddy roads to Ogdensburgh. Their route followed County Route 17 from old De Kalb to the Old State Road (County Route 10) through the town of De Peyster to present day Heuvelton, then north on present day Route 812 to Ogdensburg. Lieutenant John Polley (of Massena) left first followed within a couple days by Lieutenant Elisha Griffin (of De Kalb). Lt. Col. Benedict sent supplies from the De Kalb encampment on to Ogdensburgh with Whipple (either Esek or Elisha of De Kalb) including: 4 barrels of pork, 4 axes, one barrel of whiskey and one fry pan.

On June 30, 1812 Benedict sent Captain Moses A Bunnell's (of Russell) company to haul 40,000 pounds of guns and ammunition from the Russell Armory to Ogdensburg. They likely traveled through De Kalb on the Russell Road (today it is known as the East De Kalb Rd.), which was laid out in 1810-11 connecting De Kalb Village with Russell. The town Proprietors had encourage the settlers to build the road in hopes of it becoming a new state road connecting Ogdensburg with the Russell Armory. In 1816, when the new state road was built, it largely by-passed the town following the route of the Forest House Rd and avoiding a costly bridge over the Oswegatchie River.

Following the Battle of Ogdensburg, February 22, 1813 the regular army troops of Captain Forsythe retreated on the west bank of the Oswegatchie across the frozen Black Lake to Kellogg's Inn (located at the intersection of county route 11 and county route 10). At the time of the war this Inn was practically on the border between the towns of De Kalb and Oswegatchie. Forsythe's Riflemen were lead by one of their members who knew the local terrain well. George Knight, a resident of De Kalb, whose farm was only a mile from Kellogg's corners.

Following the Battle of Ogdensburg, Gideon Granger, US Postmaster General, sent orders through General Dearborn to Potter Goff, De Kalb Postmaster, not to send or receive any mail from Ogdensburg. De Kalb became Ogdensburg's post office. Residents were required to come to De Kalb to pick up their mail and then only if they were well known to Mr. Goff. The duration of this order is not known but there is some evidence that it continued into 1814.

De Kalb was settled earlier than many of the other towns in western St. Lawrence County. At the time of the war of 1812 it had double the population of Gouverneur and the only post office in the section.

Because the commanding officer, Col. Benedict, was from De Kalb many men from the town were officers and volunteers in the St. Lawrence County militia. An example would be Dr John Seeley, town Doctor, who was appointed surgeon's mate to the regiment. Some of the more notable veterans from the town include: Lt. Elisha Griffin mentioned earlier. He was an officer in the militia from the formation of the first county regiment. Another was the town carpenter, Jehiel Dimmock, who was also a local militia officer. Both of these officers were later assigned to militia companies from other counties. Griffin served in Cape Vincent as well as Ogdensburg. Many De Kalb men served in these units with them.

Jehiel Dimmock was captain of a company of volunteers, which stayed in Ogdensburg when the militia was sent home in December 1812. This company was attached to Major Benj. Forsythe's Regt. and participated in the battle of Ogdensburgh February 22, 1813. Arnold Pratt, son of Solomon Pratt of De Kalb died in the battle. Others from De Kalb who participated in the battle include: Ichabod Arnold, Lemuel Day (Ferrier), Nathaniel Goff, Calvin Grover, James Jackson, George Knight, Joseph Kneeland, Joseph Shaw (deputy tonnage master), Sergeant Elisha Whipple, Sergeant Calvin Day, William Lyttle jr., Joseph Shaw, Timothy Gould, Freeman(Truman?) D. Hurd, Calvin Day, James W. Lyttle and Aaron Osburn. Dimmock died in service Sep 20, 1813 at Sacketts Harbor.

According to Hough's History Joseph Kneeland, who was from Canton but teaching in Richville at the time of the war, also died at the battle of Ogdensburg. However the militia roll shows him in service until March 25, 1813. Perhaps he died of wounds or disease a month later at Sackets's Harbor?

The company of Captain Joshua Sweet of De Kalb was made up entirely of men from De Kalb. Parvis Rounds was sergeant, Abel Cook was corporal, Roswell Burnham was fifer, and Ebenezer Rounds was drummer.

Many De Kalb men also served as officers in Moses Bunnell of Russell's company. Some of these included: Ensign Nathaniel Holt, Sergeants Silas Spencer, Chesley Barker, and Olney Hopkins and Corporal Isaac Tanner junior.

Lt Colonel Benedict was later promoted to Brigadier General and served on the Niagara frontier along with other volunteers from St Lawrence County in 1813-14.

In closing I would like to recount one of the most often published stories of a War of 1812 veteran from De Kalb. In mid summer 1812, in response to one of the many calls for local volunteers, Seth Alexander volunteered as a fresh new recruit. Due to a deficiency in the ranks, Pvt. Alexander was put on sentinel duty the evening of his arrival. He was not trained but read the articles of war that prescribed a sentence of death for the violation of a military order.

A neighbor from De Kalb placed him at his post and ordered him to "Know no man in the dark, and stop all persons passing by land or water". He was not given the countersign for passage.

Pvt. Alexander loaded his gun and stood his post well. When the Sergeant returned with the relieved guard Alexander ordered them to approach one by one and leave their guns in a pile and sit on the ground. Alexander kept them there in total silence.

At 11 PM the Captain of the company noticed the missing sergeant and the corporal of the guard as well. Captain Hawkins, Adjutant Church and two

privates immediately began a search. When Pvt. Alexander challenged them they replied with the countersign "Grand rounds". Not knowing the meaning of the countersign Alexander said, "I'll grand rounds you." And ordered the men to advance and disarm as the others were.

All went well until Church refused to disarm. Alexander fired his musket wounding Church in the leg. Captain Hawkins attacked Alexander, but the 33 year old De Kalb farmer was able to recover his bayonet from Hawkins, wounding him in the arm in the process. The two retreated and ordered a circle of guard placed around the overly diligent soldier until dawn.

Benedict neatly stacked his captured guns and placed swords and hats upon the bayonets. He placed the hat of his captain at the top of the pile and resumed guard duty.

At first two or three companies were called out to forcible remove him from his post but cooler heads prevailed. One young soldier offered to go talk Alexander off his post. He was not seen again until dawn when he was found sitting with Alexander's other prisoners. Some of Alexander's neighbors from De Kalb tried to get him to leave his post but he refused until the very man who had set him on duty called him off. This man had been wounded in the night and had to be carried in a stretcher to the field to give the order.

At first Pvt. Alexander was threatened with court marshal but public opinion faulted the officer, who had threatened him with death for disobedience and then placed him on guard duty without a countersign. Seth Alexander lived to the ripe age of 95 in East De Kalb.

This May when you drive on route 812 through Old De Kalb pause for a moment and imagine the scene 200 years ago, when rows of white canvas tents and

campfires lined the hillside, 83 men marching and sleeping in the mud, preparing to defend their homes from imminent invasion. History happened here too!

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