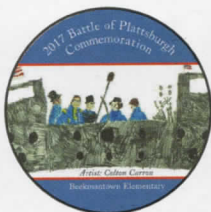




# LOOKING BACK

## A History of the Battle of Plattsburgh Commemoration



*Many of us know the historical facts* behind the British invasion of 1814 because of the work of a small group of history buffs that wanted to bring the memory of this important but largely forgotten American event to life. That first, sparsely attended event in 1998 eventually grew into a major annual event requiring thousands of hours of planning and volunteer time, culminating in the Battle of Plattsburgh Bicentennial Commemoration in 2014. The following year, the City of Plattsburgh and its Promotions & Special Events Coordinator Sandra Geddes assumed responsibility for the organization of future weekend commemorations. This year, Tara Powers has taken over for Sandra Geddes and worked side-by-side with many involved community members to make the 2018 Commemoration happen.

*Perhaps no one has done more* for the Commemoration than Kit Booth, who was one of the initial founders. Kit served as chairman and later co-chairman of the organizing committee with others, including Gary VanCour, leading up to and including the all-important 2014 bicentennial. In 2015, Gary VanCour, Kit and his wife, Sally, an equally important part of the Commemoration, were honored as Grand Marshals of the 2015 BOP parade for their many years of service.

*Here, Kit Booth provides* a brief history of how Plattsburgh's most important historical commemoration came into being.





It all started in the winter of 1997 when a group of interested people gathered to talk about how to prepare to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Plattsburgh. As I recall, there were folks from the City, the Chamber of Commerce, New York state and various history-related groups, including the Kent-Delord House Museum. (Probably others, too, but it was too long ago to remember all of them.) Jim Brigland was on the KDHM Board, and I was also involved because of the KDHM. Jim was about to retire and leave the area and I felt it important to be sure that the KDH played an important role, so I became involved.

Subsequent meetings in the spring of 1998 resulted in a committee formation with Jim and me as co-chairs. At the end of the school year, Jim did retire and move away, and I was left as the chair from then on. That first year, we had a 14-page program booklet covering Sept. 10-13. Highlights were the Caravan Stage Barge and an antique boat show. There was a tactical demonstration and ceremony at the Macdonough monument by reenactors (about 25 as I recall). It was also the year that we showed the 40-minute film created by Col. David Fitz-Enz, *The Final Invasion: The Battle of Plattsburgh*, at Hartman Theater at SUNY Plattsburgh. The whole weekend program was sparsely attended, and very few locals showed up in period dress.





Photo: Don Wickman

As the years passed, we expanded the program, which became progressively more expensive and required us to find new income sources. One was the admission button, which was at first a two-part button into which we inserted the image from the poster. Those first buttons were assembled by Ceil Esposito (then director of the Arts Council) and me, but as we grew, we turned the job over to the ARC sheltered workshop clients for assembly. After a couple of years, we went to a manufactured button as the numbers required eventually rose to 3,500 by 2014.

During those early years, we started the poster contest among the fourth graders of Clinton County. They study local history in that year, so it was appropriate that they did the posters with the winner's poster being used as the subject for the admission button annually.

Around 2004, we started the parade and featured the Band of Her Majesty' Royal Marines from Cobourg, Ontario. They have been coming ever since that year and organized the popular Beat Retreat program in front of City Hall following each parade. I always felt that marching units and lots of band music was the key to a good parade, so the emphasis was always on getting as many bands as possible. Over the years, I recall the U.S. Marine Corps, 10th Mountain Division, Norwich University, the U.S. Navy Band Northeast, Norwood Firemen, Peru School and the Straw Hatters were some of the brass bands accompanying the Royal Marines with additional support of Plattsburgh Police Pipes and Drums, Quigley Highlanders, RCMP Pipes and Drums, the Cobourg Legion pipes and drums, the Sailing Masters of 1812 and the Green Mountain Fife and Drums. By the time the 200th rolled around we had 14 musical units.

Gary VanCour joined us in 2003. For a while, John Tanner was my vice-chairman before Gary became a co-chair. By that time we had grown so much that it was more than I could

handle, and Gary added a lot, especially in the entertainment field. He brought in Keith Lunn, who was a whiz at getting entertainment groups from all over the place.

Suffice to say that for 16 years, the programs got bigger and bigger. Crowds attending were estimated at upwards of 10,000 people. It became an event to witness. Reenactors came by the scores, about 150 by 2014, along with boats, ships and cannons on land and lake. Our little 14-page program for 1998 exploded to 94 pages in 2014, which indicated the growth of the commemoration as well.

Over the years we added many more people to the committee, ending up with about 50. Several became key subcommittee chairs and handled a preponderance of the details that made the Battle of Plattsburgh weekends work so well. It was a group effort and could never have grown to where it did without this incredible team. Also, I can't forget the hundreds of individuals and businesses where the money came from to fund the operation year after year. After the first couple of years, during which we received a token contribution from the City of Plattsburgh, we relied totally on volunteer contributions to run the show. They always willingly contributed their financial support. We couldn't have done it without them.

— Kit Booth