

A warrior he wasn't

Simcoe County history

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Not everyone who heads off to war is a warrior.

James Sampson was sent to Canada in 1811 with the 85th Foot Regiment and arrived just in time for a war. He was an army surgeon and was in great demand.

In early 1812, he was moved from the 85th to the Royal Newfoundland Fencible Infantry. It was with this unit he would make a name for himself, one that is still remembered in Simcoe County.

Sampson was involved in three of the War of 1812's big marine actions. The first was the Battle of Sacket's Harbour in the spring of 1813, when a large British force attacked a well-defended American harbour. It was considered a failure, but with an asterisk — the American forces suffered significant losses of personnel as well as a large chunk of their supplies on the lower Great Lakes. In addition, a number of ships in the harbour for repair or under construction were destroyed or damaged, including one that had been seized during the burning of Toronto (York).

Sampson was also involved in the only battle that took place in Simcoe County during that war. Sampson was with Lt. Miller Worsley and the relief force that managed to sneak around American ships at the mouth of the Nottawasaga River, where Wasaga Beach is today.

In that August 1814 encounter, Sampson was at the blockhouse, with the unit guarding the schooner Nancy, about where the River Road West bridge crosses the river, when the American forces attacked. The shelling took off tops of trees all along the area between the river and the water. The attacking force was firing guns from its ships, the Niagara, Tigress and Scorpion, out in Nottawasaga Bay as well as from the beach.

More than 50 men, including British regulars, militia, Ojibway warriors and French-Canadian voyageurs, held off the attack as

long as they could under Worsley and Lt. Ramsay Livingston. The attacking force — about 10 times their size — was in danger of overrunning the defences and seizing supplies and the Nancy, and taking the defenders prisoner, if not killing them.

As Worsley and his men prepared to blow up the Nancy to prevent the Americans from taking it, a lucky shot hit the blockhouse. The explosion set the ship on fire and it sank downstream. Eventually, Nancy Island developed around the wreck.

Meanwhile, the British fled upriver and into the woods.

The Scorpion and the Tigress remained guarding the mouth of the river, shutting down the supply route to Fort Michilimackinac and the British forces there.

Sampson had lost his surgical kit when the Nancy sank, but he accompanied the defenders as they took to canoes and quietly made their way around the two American ships and up the eastern shore of Georgian Bay, passing Christian Island and the future sites of Penetanguishene and Midland, possibly resting in the Fesserton/Coldwater area before heading north, past Beausoleil Island across the north shore between Manitoulin Island and the mainland — paddling and rowing about 540 kilometres of open water in laden canoes and batteaux hauling men and supplies.

The Americans dropped trees and other barricades across the mouth of the Nottawasaga and left after finding no sign of the defenders. They made their way up to Fort Michilimackinac by the more direct western route and took up positions nearby.

Sampson was with the force Worsley led to capture the Tigress, which was anchored in Detour Passage, not far from the fort. In four canoes, the small force of 98, augmented with troops from the fort, made its way to the Tigress at midnight and quickly and quietly captured it Sept. 3. They followed this up Sept. 6, continuing to fly the ship's American flag, and capturing the Scorpion.

The following year, when his unit was disbanded after the war, Sampson moved to the 104th Foot



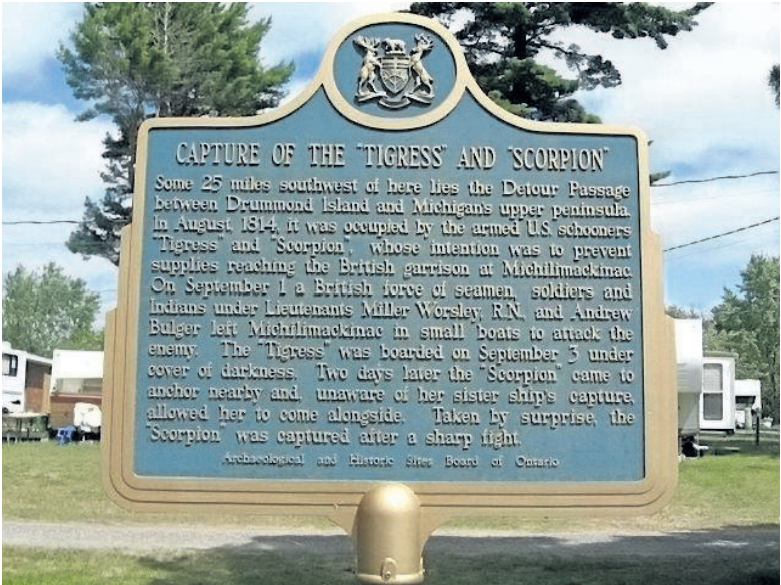
James Sampson was more than just a warrior; he was a man concerned about the marginalized people of the new province of Ontario.

and garrison duty in Quebec and Montreal. He later settled down in Ontario, opening a medical office in Queenston and Kingston.

He moved among the influential families of the province in its early days, but he was less interested in politics and power than he was in the cause of caring for the sick and the needy. He was involved in the construction of a hospital for the poor in Kingston, which, interestingly, became the parliament building for the Province of Canada at one point. He was also increasingly interested in the need for housing for the newly arrived settlers.

Sampson later served as the surgeon at the penitentiary in Kingston and was a leader in corrections reform, fighting the use of prisoners as a form of entertainment. (At the time, members of the public were permitted to view prisoners for a fee.) He also fought jailing the mentally ill and was a proponent of an asylum for them.

As well as his interest in health, he dabbled in agriculture, offering prize-winning wheat seed for free and raising prize-winning sheep for breeding. He was eventually drawn into politics, serving as mayor of Kingston. During the



A plaque in Algoma commemorating the War of 1812 action James Sampson took part in that saw the capture of two American warships that had been involved in the sinking of the Nancy at Wasaga Beach.

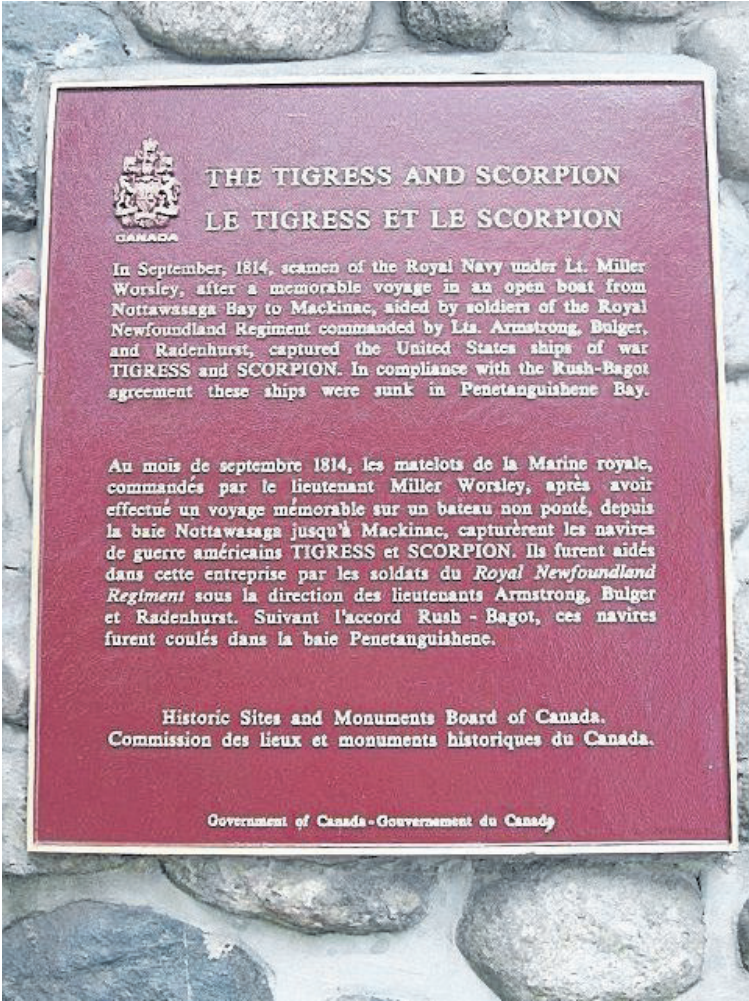
1837 rebellion, Sampson led the town guard in Kingston.

Margret Angus, who has researched and written on Sampson extensively, said about him: "He had unlimited patience with the sick and mentally ill, and no patience with humbug or dishonesty."

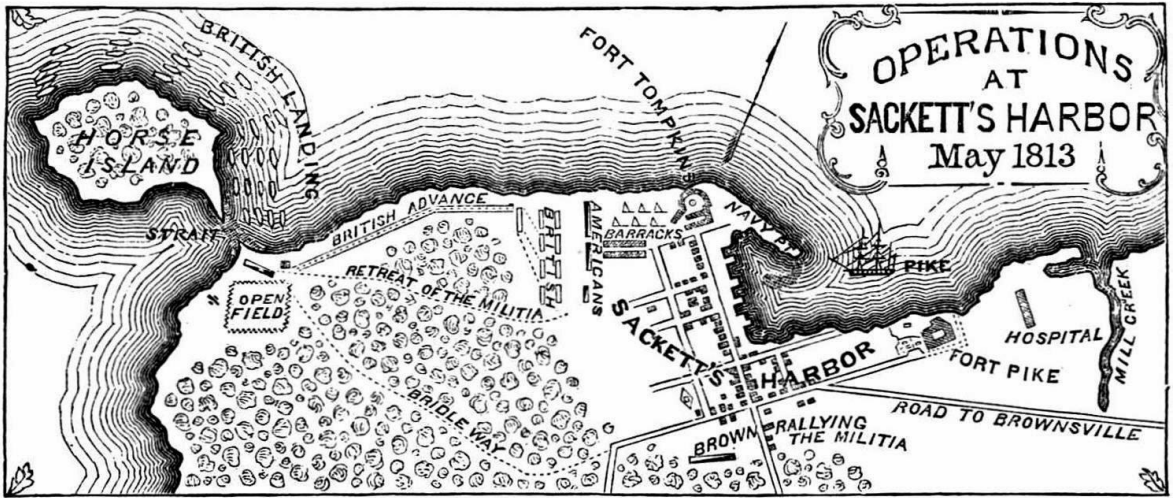
Sampson died in 1861 but is

remembered in Simcoe County with a street named in his honour in Barrie.

Tom Villemaire is the co-author of two books with Randy Richmond: *Colossal Canadian Failures* and *Colossal Canadian Failures 2* — both about things that seemed like a good idea at the time — and writes about local history.



Detail of the Penetanguishene plaque.



An illustration of the British raid on Sacket's Harbour during the War of 1812. James Sampson took part in this action.



The remains of the hull of the Nancy after it was burned to the waterline during the Battle of Nottawasaga Bay in the War of 1812.



Depiction of the War of 1812 Battle of Michilimackinac.