

The Pirate Bill Johnson Burns Boat at Newcastle

Local historian Isaac M. Wellington would tell the story of the most notorious event to take place in this area during the War of 1812.

"During this time (War of 1812) Grandfather Gibson spent the greater part of his time working and building a schooner for one of his sons on the shore in front of his dwelling (should kind Providence spare his boys to return from the War). He had the schooner nearly completed when a report was made to the American Government by spies that were continually coasting along the Canadian frontier that vessels were being built by the Government for war purposes. Consequently, Bill Johnson (the notorious land pirate as he was called) was sent by the American government to burn the boat. He came from Sackett's Harbour in what was called a revenue cutter boat, and with oars muffled, the crew came noiselessly up the shore at night, threw some inflammable substance on the vessel, ignited it and the boat was soon wrapped in flames from stem to stern, burning to ashes while standing on the stocks. While the boat was burning, the cutter was seen with 6 or 8 oars on either side dipping together into the water taking her departure."¹

William Johnson had been born in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, in 1782² and was a merchant, farmer, and freighter of goods on the St. Lawrence River. Eventually, became one of the most effective smugglers across the St. Lawrence river between Upper Canada and New York State. In 1812, he was arrested by the British and imprisoned, supposedly for the duration of the war. However, Johnson managed one of his many escapes from custody, and made his way to Sacket's Harbour, New York. Now, he was angry at the British for treating him so badly, and so went over to the American side. He made himself useful as a spy and raider during the war.

The burning of the ship at Newcastle was a minor event for Johnson, but was unfortunate for George Gibson because the boat he was building was privately owned, meant for commercial purposes. Of course, there was a war going on so both sides destroyed any shipping they thought might benefit the other side. While this one event did not influence the course of the war, it certainly set George Gibson back a few dollars, and we can only hope he was able to pry some compensation out of the government.

The label of pirate would be firmly applied to William Johnson after an event in May of 1838, during the Mackenzie Rebellion. "On 30 May 1838, near Wellesley Island, Johnston and his men captured the steamer Sir Robert Peel, which was carrying the payroll for British troops in Upper Canada. They put the passengers and crew ashore and then carried off more than \$175,000 in cash, jewellery and silver plate before burning the ship. Lord Durham, the Governor General of Canada, put a reward of \$5,000 on Johnston's head. Johnston issued a proclamation justifying the capture of the ship as a legitimate act of war."³ (The name is spelled Johnston in this account although his memorial shows Johnson.⁴)

Notes

1. Wellington, Isaac M., *The Tobey Book*, Chapter III, 1811-1820, page 56, a digitized copy produced from the original in the Brighton Public Library.
2. Butts, Edward, William Johnston, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Published Online January 22, 2008, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/william-johnston>.
3. Ibid.
4. William Johnson, Findagrave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/92233763>.