

**THE BATTLE OF THE BOUQUET RIVER  
WILLSBORO, NEW YORK**

**MAY 13, 1814**

**BY: DAVID C. GLENN  
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**PA! PA! THE BRITCHES IS COMIN! THE BRITCHES IS COMIN!**

Little Elihu Higby yelled to his father, Levi, as he ran in the door of the Higby's Willsboro distillery on that day in 1814, to report the sighting of British red coats advancing on the village of Willsboro from the Bouquet River.

According to Higby family records found in the Willsboro Heritage Society archives, the story is one of Yankee ingenuity and British folly in the opening salvos of the British invasion coming in 1814 as part of The War of 1812. This is a twice told tale from several sources which do not agree on many of the details. Some of the family recollections may have grown in the retelling over the years and perhaps been embellished to add pride to the family and show the British as incompetent and easily taken in. After all, if you can not make a good story even better on the retelling, what kind of a story teller are you?

Let's go back to the beginning. War had come to the Champlain Valley with troop movements, fleet building, and incursions into Canada by American troops, small skirmishes and fights over control of the lake, all as part of the War of 1812. The years of 1813 and 1814 saw a marked increase of activity. Thousands of American troops had wintered over at Pike's Cantonment just west of Plattsburgh. Both the British and Americans were worried about control of the lake and were starting to assemble fleets. Troop levels were increasing on both sides of the border. Where and when would the British invade?

Tuttle's 1909 *Three Centuries in the Champlain Valley* says that on Friday May 13, 1814

*The British flotilla, consisting of the brig Linnet, with 20 guns, commanded by Captain Daniel Pring, six sloops and schooners and 10 row-galleys passed up the lake from Rouses Point, and in the afternoon appeared off the village of Essex. The soldiers in one row-galley, after giving chase to a small row boat which escaped up the Boquet, landed on the north side of that river and plundered a farm house.*

This was a portion of the fleet which was to meet defeat at the hands of Commodore Macdonough and the American fleet in the Battle of Plattsburgh on September 11<sup>th</sup>, only four months later. The Higby history, however, has the Bouquet incursion occurring after the Battle of Plattsburgh.

Two newspapers of the day reported on the event. *The Columbian* on May 30, 1814 and the *American Watchman* on June 1, 1814 carried the same dispatch from Plattsburgh (*Herald*) date May 20<sup>th</sup> and said that

*On the 14<sup>th</sup> inst. about 2 P.M. the enemy, on their return from the mouth of Otter Creek, sent three of their galleys up a small river, called Boquet or Gilliland's Creek on the west side of Lake Champlain.*

The British had attempted to get at the American fleet construction underway up the Otter Creek in Vermont but had been repulsed by the American batteries at the mouth of the Otter.

Watson, in his *History of Essex County*, written in 1869, has the British entering the Bouquet a year earlier. He says

*The enemy appeared on several occasions in the waters of Essex County, and in the summer of 1813, entered the Boquet with two galleys and two barges for the purpose of seizing a quantity of government flour which had been deposited at Willsboro falls.*

For a historian this is a challenge. We can not come to agreement on the date let alone the year or the spelling of Bouquet. Is the British incursion on the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> of May or later in September? Is it in 1813 or 1814 and how do you spell that rivers name. Is it Boquet or Bouquet or some other variation? Let's agree for the moment that it was on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1814 and we'll use the present spelling of Bouquet. And, to add to the fun let's agree to tell the various versions of the story just as they are and leave it to the reader's imagination as to which one is most correct.

Continuing the news paper's version which is "Just the facts maam".

*Their (British) object was to carry away a quantity of flour and other property from the mills at the falls, which are 2 miles from the mouth of that stream. They had no sooner landed, than they were informed that a body of militia were approaching. This intelligence caused them to re-embark with precipitancy and descend the river. The militia of Essex County, to about the number of 150 had assembled four miles south of that place, and on receiving information that the enemy's boats had gone up the creek, they approached it with an ardor and rapidity of movement that could not be excelled.*

*The galleys had returned to within half a mile of the mouth of the creek, when the advance of the militia opened a fire of musketry upon them at the distance of from four to six rods (Editors Note: A rod is 16.5 feet so they were only 65 to 100 feet away), and running from tree to tree, kept up a brisk fire within that distance, until they arrived at the mouth of the creek, when the main body of the militia also came up. The enemy had other gunboats lying at the mouth of the creek.*

*The militia took a position behind a bank of sand that effectually resisted the fire from the galleys at the mouth of the creek. From these a heavy discharge of canister, grape and round shot were now thrown without effect, the shot passing over or lodging in the bank. The galleys descending the river used in their defense, on this occasion, small arms only. On these a brisk fire was kept up for about fifteen minutes, until they were beyond the reach of musket shot.*

*It has not been ascertained how many of the enemy have been killed in this affair. The cry "man the oars," was on several times heard from the boats, and several were observed to drop from their seats. The rear galley was towed away in consequence, as it is supposed, of the loss of men. Of the militia, none were killed and but one wounded, and he by grape-shot which struck him on the leg.*

*Those of the militia engaged, were at the time very much fatigued and exhausted, having run one mile immediately preceding the engagement, to overtake the enemy.*

*It is related that gen. Wright, of the Essex militia, ingeniously played off a finesse on the marauders, which had the desired effect. The ammunition of his men being nearly expended, and suspecting from a hesitation observed in the movements of the enemy, ordered "the other battalion to advance with the field pieces". The galleys immediately hauled off.*

*Aaron Fairchild, esq. residing at the mouth of the creek, was shamefully plundered of stock, household furniture, and clothing, to the amount of 300 dollars, a British officer being present, and consenting to the transaction.*

This account says the British heard, just as they had landed, that the American militia were coming. They immediately got back in their boats and headed downstream. It seems, however, that it must have taken some time from when the British were first sighted by the Americans for the militia to be gathered. How was that time spent? Higby's records have a different and much more interesting story. I have edited the version for length but left in the salient details.

*One of the principal personages in the village was Mr. Levi Higby, whose extensive forges were at the time busy preparing anchors for American war ships, and his distillery was doing its utmost to supply grog enough for American soldiers and seamen.*

*The British squadron sailed into the mouth of the Bouquet River, dropped anchor and lowered its galleys. These were manned with as many seamen as they could carry, which made quite a formidable fleet. They moved up the river as quietly and as undisturbed as they could, but their bright uniforms and glistening guns betrayed their real mission.*

*Leaving their galleys below the falls, they marched into the little village and took possession of it before the inhabitants were hardly aware that there was a "red coat" on New York soil. One of the first to espy the enemy was the little son of Mr. Higby, who ran into the distillery exclaiming: Pa! Pa! The Britches is comin. The Britches is comin. Levi*

*Higby scanned the road leading from the falls saw the Britches, met their commander as gracefully as circumstances would permit, and offered to show the visitors through his forges, where the anchors for American seamen and their fleets were being made.*

*The commander accepted the invitation with gallant good nature, and many were the jests passed between the seamen and the smiths. Higby secretly sent word to his house to prepare as fine a spread as could be laid on short notice, and to bring out the best liquors that his ample store could provide. From the forges the visitors were conducted through the distillery and were pressed to taste every brand of spirits which the still produced.*

*While the distiller had been feasting the British and muddling their brains with strong liquors, the militia had been secretly summoned from miles up and down the settled valley.*

*Something aroused the suspicion of the commander. The heads and legs of the seamen were capable only of the discretionary part of valor, and made for their galleys amid the whizzing of musket balls. The galleys went down the river much faster than they came up, and consequently out stripped the body of militia, which followed them along the banks as rapidly as possible.*

*By the time the galleys had nearly reached the mouth of the river, they had put sufficient distance between them and their pursuers to allow them to draw ashore long enough to pillage the Fairchild homestead. (Editors note: the plundering of the Fairchild home is also mentioned in the newspaper article and tends to link these apparent two separate incidents as one.)*

*As the galleys drew up to the gun boats, and the seamen were about to board the later, a volley of balls was aimed upon them from the brow of the high and sheltered banks on either side. By the time that such of the British as had not been shot were aboard the gun boats the banks were swarming with militia men.*

*But the sober seamen who had remained in the harbor thought about one broadside from each warship would make the militia scatter like a pack of school boys. As the command was given to train the cannon upon the landlubbers along the top of Bouquet's banks; the mouth of each cannon was elevated to its utmost, and the signal given to fire. The British found their broadsides had been received by the steep sides of the banks, without injury to anyone.*

*The Americans, meantime from their elevation were able to pick off nearly every red coat who showed his head on the gunboats below.*

*When the British became thoroughly convinced that there was no use trying to reach higher than the perpendicular banks with their cannon balls, they moved out into the lake as far as the Four Brothers Islands where they spent the night burying their dead.*

According to a 1943 letter from Frank Morse to John Noble also from the Willsboro archives, a local historic plaque indicates 33 British were killed or wounded in the engagement of May 13, 1814 at the mouth of the Bouquet River and mentions the following incident regarding Job Stafford. Morse is a grandson of Job Stafford who was the only militia man wounded by the British. Morse writes that

*Uncle Wm. took me to the place where Grand-dad stood when the cannon ball took the calf of his leg off. He saw the ball strike the sand ahead of him and jumped to one side to get out of the line and the ball hit a stump and glanced so it hit him. Grandfather was hewing timber with his broad ax when the call came to him that the British were coming up the river to burn the grist mill. He like many others dropped their tools and got their flintlock muskets and ran for the mouth of the river. They shot the British men in their row boats and they drifted out in the lake. The sloop that was firing at our men was anchored outside a piece.*

*Grandfather drew a small pension and lived with his son Wm. till he died at the age of 88. I think he was lame and walked with a cane and had no use for the British after they killed his calf.*

Perhaps the truest story is some of each of these tales and we most likely will never know all the details of what really happened at THE BATTLE OF THE BOUQUET RIVER. We do know that the British were driven off by the heroic actions of the Essex County militia and never again threatened Willsboro. The unsung hero may indeed be Levi Higby who delayed the British, got them drunk, gave the militia time to assemble, and thus prevented the possible looting or burning of the village. It is certain that many of these men went north to Plattsburgh four short months later and took part in that decisive battle of the War of 1812 so that the British would never again threaten Essex County, the rest of northern New York or America by a northern invasion.

The local historic monument commemorating the battle reads as follows:

On May 13, 1814 near this spot  
at the mouth of the Boquet River  
Lieutenant Colonel Commandant

Ransom Noble

and officers and men of the  
37th Regiment New York Militia  
under his command  
repulsed with signal loss to the enemy

the attempt of a British boat party  
to destroy the public stores at  
Willsborough Falls

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American casualties- Private Job Stafford  
severely, and one other slightly wounded

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British casualties- about thirty men  
killed and wounded

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Officers known to have been engaged  
Brigadier General Daniel Wright  
Lieutenant Colonel Commandant Ransom Noble  
Major John Richardson    Major Luman Wadhams  
Adjutant Henry H. Ross    Captain Abraham Aiken  
Captain Jonathan Merriam, Jr.    Captain Ezra Parkhill

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