

Laura Secord, nee Ingersoll, Loyalist and mythologized Canadian figure (1775-1868)



Laura Secord was born as Laura Ingersoll in 1775, and her father Thomas Ingersoll was an American who sided with the “Patriots” who were loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolution that took place from 1775-1783. Thomas moved his family to the now-Canadian side of the Niagara Peninsula region in 1795 because he was a Loyalist and wished to live among fellow devotees to the British Crown and Empire. He ran a tavern in Queenston, Ontario and the site of his farm is today the town of Ingersoll, Ontario.

Laura Secord is best known for her role in the War of 1812. During this war, Laura Secord walked 30km from Queenston, Ontario (5km north of Niagara Falls) to Beaver Dams to inform British Loyalist soldier James FitzGibbon that American forces were planning an attack on his outpost. The story of her 30km journey has become something of a Canadian legend, and she has become a

mythical figure in Canadian history. In 1797, when she was 22, Laura Ingersoll married James Secord, who was a merchant in Queenston.

Her husband James was wounded at the Battle of Queenston Heights, early in the War of 1812, when American forces occupied Queenston where Laura and James called home. Laura Secord rescued her wounded husband from the battlefield and took him home to nurse him back to good health. In June 1813 James Secord was still recuperating when occupying American forces forced them to billet some American officers at their home. During their stay, Laura Secord overheard the officers planning an attack on British forces at Beaver Dams.

With her husband incapacitated, Laura Secord set off on her own to warn the British outpost at Beaver Dams, taking a divergent route through treacherous terrain to avoid American sentries. She received assistance by a group of First Nations men she encountered along the way who were sympathetic to her plight and guided her to her destination. She reached British Loyalist and soldier James FitzGibbons on either the 22nd or 23rd of June.

On June 24th, after having been alerted to the American assault plans by Laura Secord, 300 Caughnawaga, 100 Mohawk warriors—both aligned with the British—and 50 British soldiers led by FitzGibbons ambushed the American troops and prevented their surprise assault of Beaver Dams. No mention of Laura Secord was made in the official British reports of the victory.

While details of Laura Secord’s 30km journey are uncertain, her story has become part of the Canadian national identity, and has been mythologized in Canadian popular culture. Revered Historian Pierre Berton stated that Secord’s story has been “used to underline the growing myth that the War of 1812 was won by true-blue Canadians.”

Laura Secord herself never revealed how exactly she became aware of the American plan, and while she did absolutely make the 30km trek to deliver a message to James FitzGibbon in Beaver Dams, it is unknown if she got there before Aboriginal scouts arrived with the same message. FitzGibbon later testified in support of Laura Secord’s petition to the government for a pension that she did indeed warn him of a planned American attack and positioned the Aboriginal forces supporting Beaver Dams accordingly.

Her petition for a military pension refused, Secord only gained recognition later in life when in 1860, the future Edward VII, then the Prince of Wales read a letter she wrote to him of her efforts that was packaged among other letters from War of 1812 veterans. Upon returning to England, he personally sent her an award of 100 pounds. She died in 1868 at 93 years of age. The chocolate company was named after her in 1913 because she was “an icon of courage, devotion, and loyalty.”