

Small decisions, events can shape history for centuries

Two-hundred-and-fifty years ago this week, a small detachment of British soldiers from Detroit, led by a young ensign, James Gorrell, arrived by canoe on the shores of the Fox River. War between the French and British had gone rather badly for the French, who were now forced to cede control of a vast area from the Great Lakes to the St. Lawrence River valley. Gorrell's assignment was to assume command of the French community of La Baye and set up British authority.

For nearly 100 years La Baye had grown in size and prosperity under French rule, from a small wilderness mission to a lively fur-trading post. However, for the previous few years a scurrilous young Frenchman named Hubert Couterot (nephew of prominent French royalty) was awarded command of the fort. Under Couterot's corrupt rule, the community was mismanaged for his personal gain. And his mistreatment of the local Menominee people caused them to revolt, killing 33 settlers.

So, upon his arrival, Gorrell found a destitute village of neglect and disrepair. Many homes had no roof, the stockade was rotten and ready to fall over, and, with winter right around the corner, supplies of food were desperately low. To make matters worse, the few English fur traders who accompanied the British detachment antagonized the local French traders who viewed this area as their home, their territory, and the British as invaders. Somehow,

young Gorrell managed to rebuild the community and gain the loyalty of its residents. Within a year, infrastructure had been rejuvenated and trading volume had grown considerably for both the French and English. Gorrell also got word of a planned uprising by allied Native American tribes; so when they returned from their winter hunting expeditions he called a general council and negotiated an acceptable peace treaty with them.

Unfortunately, the British outpost at Michillimackinac was not as adept at diplomacy. There, the Chippewas raided the fort, killed the commander and 20 soldiers, and took the rest prisoner. Gorrell was ordered to evacuate his newly rebuilt fort along with all English traders and lend support at Michillimackinac. Upon arriving, Gorrell sought out Charles de Langlade (a French resident of Michillimackinac, married to an Ottawa woman, and longtime friend of local Native Americans) who helped negotiate with the Ottawas to secure the release of the British prisoners. After collecting the prisoners from the Chippewas, Gorrell led the group to safety in Montreal.

With the despicable Couterot gone, and now the departure of the British, French settlers once again

began moving in and developing La Baye. During the next 30 years, Bay Verte, as it was now called, flourished with construction of grist mills, sawmills, farms and even distilleries.

How different might today's life in Green Bay be if Gorrell had been able to remain here and build a strong British community? Would major British settlement and investment have resulted in this area becoming part of the Canadian territory after the war of 1812? Green Bay might be (for better or worse) another Toronto. What if, instead of Gorrell's intervening two-year command, the exploitive Couterot had been allowed to drive the community into oblivion? Ambitious French settlers like Grignon and Porlier might have located elsewhere and perhaps Green Bay wouldn't even exist as a city.

Classroom history tends to focus on names and dates of big events that have shaped our nation or our world. But local history has much to teach us as well. At least one lesson from Ensign James Gorrell's two-year command at La Baye 250 years ago is that inspired local leadership can have an impact that lasts for centuries. The caliber of today's local elected officials is shaping the future our descendants will inherit. We should make sure those we elect are people like James Gorrell, not Hubert Couterot.

Dan Linsen of Green Bay advocates for personal responsibility and thinking outside the box. His book "Who's to Blame?" is available at www.whostoblame.net and other online sources.

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Commentary

