



Fort Michilimackinac Michigan, USA. formerly Upper Canada (Ontario)

## Fort Mackinac – Gibraltar of the North

Mackinac Island was a highly strategic location during the history of early North America. Overlooking the straits between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron it controlled the fur trade of the Great Lakes. Before the American Revolutionary War, the French had located Fort Michilimackinac on the mainland but in 1779–81 British Commandant Patrick Sinclair constructed a new fort on the 46 meter limestone bluffs of Mackinac Island—finding it to be a more strategic position. The fort had a 3 meter high stockade of cedar pickets topped with iron prongs. The construction crew reassembled buildings from Fort Michilimackinac inside the stockade and constructed interior buildings with up to three meter thick stone walls. The many cisterns were set up to enable the self-contained fort to resist a long siege. Even after the Revolutionary War ended and *Jay's Treaty*, awarded the Americans the island, the British didn't give up their great fort until 1796. Giving up such a strong location to the Americans was hard. Then, thanks to the cross-border fur trading interests of John Jacob Astor, the British/Canadian side knew about the start of the War of 1812 before the Americans at Mackinac. The surprise attack\*, the first land battle of the war, led to Fort Mackinac being back in British hands until the end of the war. Unfortunately, the *Treaty of Ghent* awarded it to the U.S. Like the Rock of Gibraltar, as a strategic

location Mackinac was highly desirable. However, before that final hand-over to the U.S. in 1815, with the British back in control in 1812, they garrisoned the fort, built a new defensive fortification on the highest point of the island and successfully fended off another American attack in 1814—thanks in no small part to the recruiting efforts of locals such as Mrs. Elizabeth Mitchell. The British garrison during the 1814 defence included 136 Royal Newfoundland Fencibles, a dozen men from the British 10th Royal Veteran Battalion, 13 artillerists, 37 Michigan Fencibles\*\*, 100 militia from St Joseph’s Island and 360 First Nations allies. Although Newfoundland was not yet a part of Canada, if you count them in, over 700 of the soldiers securing the victory on Mackinac Island were Canadians. Had Canadians not taken Fort Mackinac in 1812 and held it in 1814, who knows what Canada might look like today?

---

*\*The British attack was led by Captain Charles Roberts who had 45 British Regulars (10th Royal Veterans) and help from the North West Company which provided 180 Canadian and Métis employees, and the schooner Caledonia. Additionally he had First Nations recruits: 300 Ojibwa and Odawa (Ottawa) and 110 Sioux, Menominee and Winnebago*

---

*\*\*A small unit of men raised at Fort Mackinac in 1813*