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A Fort York employee leads a group of elementary school students through a tour of the historic site on January 31, 2009.

Photo by Peter Power/The Globe and Mail

COMMEMORATION

## Tories gear up for War of 1812 bicentennial

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While 9/11 highlighted the bonds between Canada and the United States, another major anniversary will mark just how the two countries decided to become friendly in the first place.

The Conservative government is getting ready to announce its bicentennial plans for the War of 1812, a major undertaking that will have Canadians reaching into their high-school memory vaults and

municipalities vying for cash to spruce up their historical landmarks.

“It has led to 200 years of peace between Canada and the United States,” Heritage Minister James Moore said in an interview.

“We’re two countries with two very different identities and we obviously disagree from time to time, but we have the longest border and the most successful neighbouring relationship of probably any two countries in the world ... and all of that started with the end of the War of 1812 and it’s something to be recognized.”

The conflict, which lasted until 1815, pitted the growing United States against British forces mostly in Upper and Lower Canada. The United States had grown weary of British naval blockades hampering their trade abroad, and of first nations armed by the British Empire stunting their expansion into the northwest of the continent.

The new Canadians fought alongside British troops and first nations allies in battles at Queenston Heights, York, and Crysler’s Farm, among the many. They helped to crush any ideas of annexation by the Americans and ultimately to lay down the foundation for a lasting peace with the United States once the conflict was over.

Historians point to the war as one of the first defining moments for a Canadian nation that was just starting to come together. Names from the war such as Secord, Brock, Barrie and Tecumseh have become part of the Canadian ethos and even its maps.

“Without the War of 1812, you don’t have the expression of a clear, full Canadian identity; without the War of 1812, aboriginal Canadians would have probably seen the same future as American Indians saw; without the War of 1812, the French fact would not have been protected in North America,” Mr. Moore said.

One of the biggest 1812 history geeks in cabinet happens to be Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

“He’s been personally very involved in this because he’s very energetic and enthusiastic about the importance of taking these moments that we have in the pre-Confederation history of Canada, finding these moments and making sure Canadians understand them,” Mr. Moore said.

There are no details yet on how much the government will spend on the celebrations, but \$1.6-million in TV vignettes about the war have already been approved. Municipalities across southern and eastern Ontario have begun gearing up for next year and applying for funding.

Mr. Moore said the government would like to help with the restoration and upkeep of cenotaphs and plaques and other historic locations, but particularly with educational initiatives.

The bicentennial is seen as the start of a five-year ramp-up to Canada’s 150th birthday in 2017. The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, the 60th anniversary of her reign, will also be celebrated in 2012.

The Conservative government has placed emphasis on Canadian heritage symbols, including the monarchy, the North and the military.

Canadian embassies were recently ordered to put up portraits of the Queen, and the maritime and air commands were rechristened the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force this summer.

“We think that certainly these are very important institutions to the stability and foundation and creation of Canada and this is certainly something to recognize, and certainly Queen Elizabeth next year in her Diamond Jubilee year is an important moment and we’re going to seize it,” Mr. Moore said.

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## **SIR ISAAC BROCK**

Administrator of Upper Canada when war broke out between the United States and Britain. Brock led British forces to a decisive victory at Fort Detroit, but died months later at the Battle of Queenston Heights.

**Legacy:** Brockville and Brock, Ont.; Brock University

## **ROBERT BARRIE**

As captain of HMS Dragon, Barrie was a leading force in the British naval war, and helped lead the blockade of Chesapeake Bay.

**Legacy:** Barrie, Ont.; Barrie Point and Barrie Reach, B.C.; Barrie Island

## **TECUMSEH**

A Shawnee spiritual leader who rallied natives against U.S. encroachment on their land, Tecumseh was a crucial British ally in the war - eventually, at the cost of his own life at the battle of Moraviantown.

**Legacy:** Tecumseh and New Tecumseth, Ont.; Tecumseth Street, Toronto

## **LAURA SECORD**

Born Laura Ingersoll, Secord overheard news of a planned American surprise attack on the Beaver Dams outpost in June, 1813, and travelled 20 miles through the woods on foot to warn the officer in charge.

**Legacy:** Laura Secord chocolate company; Secord's homestead in Queenston, Ont., is now a museum