

A Place Called Bowles's In Search of a Historic Site from the War of 1812

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

General Henry Procter's ignominious retreat at the Battle of Moraviantown in 1813 ruined his reputation. At his court martial, a number of pioneer place names were identified as milestones in his retreat, including a homestead called Bowles's an important depot for the British where two schooners were scuttled to prevent the Americans from advancing up the Thames River by boat. This article uses evidence from a variety of original sources to determine the most likely location of Bowles's homestead and, perhaps, two historic shipwrecks from the War of 1812.

A PLACE CALLED BOWLES'S

In Search of a Historic Site from the War of 1812*

by Guy St-Denis

Early in the autumn of 1813, American forces under the command of Major General William Henry Harrison set out from Amherstburg in pursuit of a British and Native army as it retreated through the Upper Canadian wilderness. The chase continued until 5 October 1813, when Major General Henry Procter and the Shawnee warrior chief Tecumseh took up defensive positions and awaited the onslaught. After a brief and futile resistance, the Battle of Moraviantown ended in a spectacular defeat for the defenders.¹ Tecumseh closed with the enemy and died a hero's death, while Procter took flight and ruined his reputation. In a later bid to redeem his good name, Procter agitated for the court martial he believed would exonerate him

of any wrongdoing. Instead, his behaviour was found to have been less than exemplary.² It was a bitter pill for a career soldier like Procter, but there was at least one positive outcome. All of the testimony given at his trial was written down and now forms an invaluable record of the disastrous affair he tried to disown.

The minutes of Procter's court martial proceedings have long been a source of fascination—especially where they discuss the homesteads of early settlers. Apart from their obvious relevance to local history, these pioneer place names also serve as milestones in Procter's retreat. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to visualize them within the modern landscape. After experiencing a fair share of frustration in this regard, the author

*The author wishes to acknowledge Glenn Stott and Carol Hall for their joint effort in producing *Taken and Destroyed: The War of 1812 Losses Claims, London and Western Districts, Upper Canada*, an invaluable reference and one that was used extensively in the writing of this article.

¹ Also known as the Battle of the Thames, this action was fought alongside the Canadian Thames River within a short distance of the Moravian mission at Fairfield and not far from modern Thamesville, Ontario.

² Procter was found guilty of not taking proper measures for conducting the retreat; not providing security for the ammunition, stores, and provisions; not having occupied a defensible position at Fairfield, or Moraviantown; and not making the military preparations necessary to resist an enemy attack. See: National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK), War Office, Records of the Judge Advocate General, Courts Martial Proceedings and Board of General Officers' Minutes (WO 71/243), Major General Henry Procter, 21 Dec. 1814–28 Jan. 1815 (hereafter Procter Court Martial Proceedings), pp. 323–26. Disgraced, Procter retired to the Isle of Wight. He died in 1822, during a sojourn to Bath, England.

Abstract

General Henry Procter's ignominious retreat at the Battle of Moraviantown in 1813 ruined his reputation. At his court martial, a number of pioneer place names were identified as milestones in his retreat, including a homestead called Bowles's an important depot for the British where two schooners were scuttled to prevent the Americans from advancing up the Thames River by boat. This article uses evidence from a variety of original sources to determine the most likely location of Bowles's homestead and, perhaps, two historic shipwrecks from the War of 1812.

Résumé: *Le général Henry Procter a détruit sa renommée en 1813 lorsqu'il avait décidé de battre en retraite à la bataille de Moraviantown. Devant la cour martiale, plusieurs noms de lieux pionniers ont été identifiés en tant qu'étapes importantes lors de sa retraite, parmi lesquels une propriété au nom de Bowles – un dépôt important pour les forces britanniques où deux goélettes furent sabordées afin d'empêcher les forces Américaines d'avancer sur la rivière Thames en bateaux. Nous exploiterons de nombreuses sources originales afin de retrouver l'emplacement probable de la propriété Bowles et peut-être aussi des deux épaves de la Guerre de 1812.*

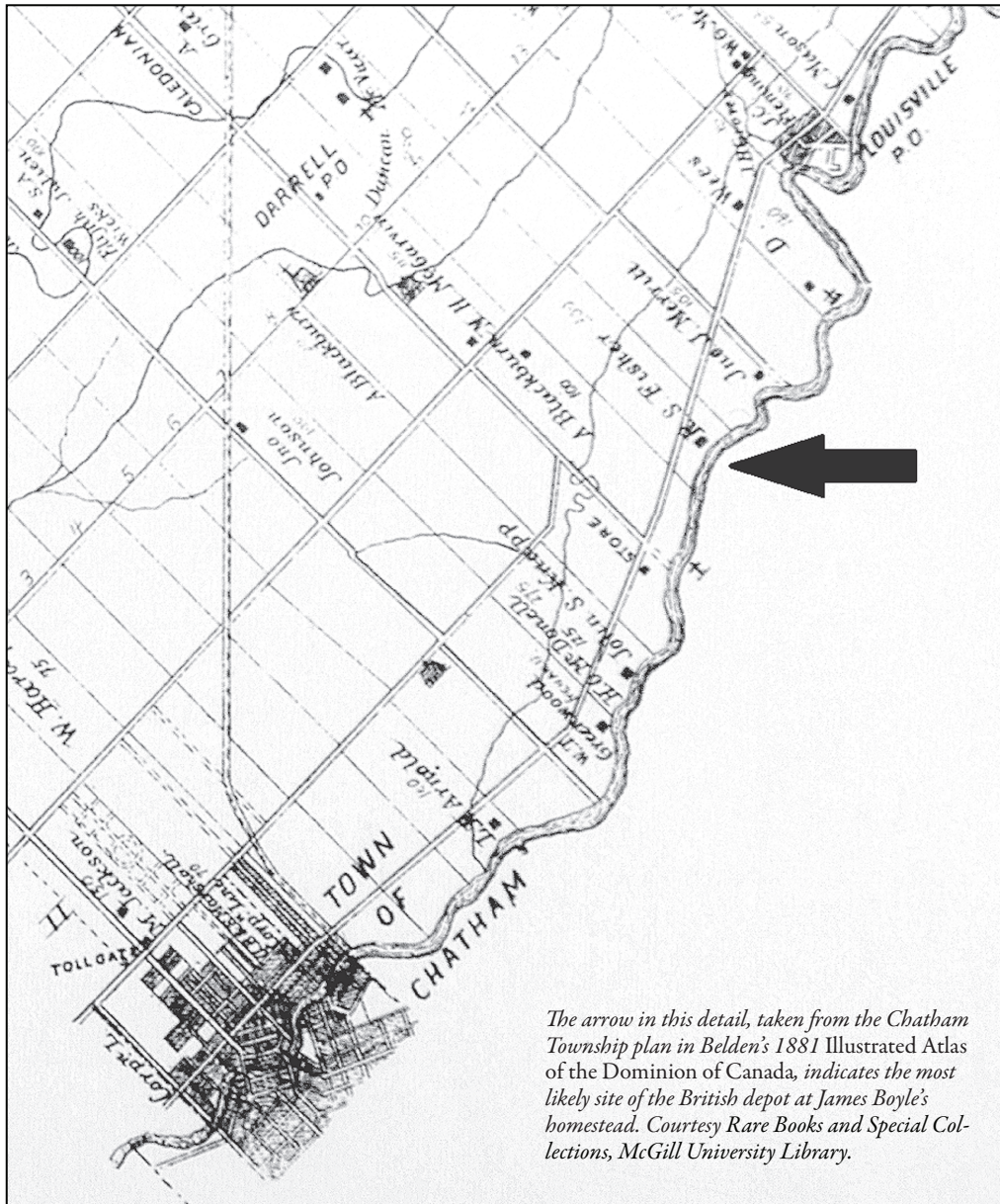
resolved to investigate each of the homesteads mentioned during Procter's court martial. Some proved relatively easy to situate in the context of southwestern Ontario's Thames River Valley, and the easiest by far was Ward's. At the time of the battle, it was the only habitation on the road through the extensive forest known as the Longwoods tract. Subsequently, George Ward's grant of land was subdivided into what is still known as the village of Wardsville. Other homesteads

were rather more difficult to locate, and the most challenging of all was a place called Bowles's.

Given the large quantities of ammunition and ordnance stored there, the Bowles homestead was an important depot for the British.³ It was also at Bowles's where two small schooners were scuttled in the Thames River to impede any attempt by the Americans to advance by water. But even with these impressive historical associations, it was soon realized that determining the whereabouts of Bowles's would be a major challenge. While an extensive literature search produced numerous references to this mystery spot, none of them were very precise. Some other means of tracking it down was needed, specifically a rigorous analysis of the relevant primary sources, which meant going to the early land records of western Upper Canada.

The quest began by consulting the patent plans for Chatham Township, as the northeastern extent of that township was also the head of navigation on the Thames River for small lake schooners like those scuttled at Bowles's. The patent plans, so called for the original patentees, record the names of all those settlers who received grants of land from the Crown (or Upper Canadian government). The names written over each lot in the broken front along the river were checked in the hope of finding someone with the last name of Bowles. When this

³ *Ibid.*, 86.



search proved fruitless, plans were examined for other townships on the same, or north, bank of the Thames and as far

upstream as the Gore of Zone Township (where the Battle of Moraviantown was fought).⁴ Once again, the search came up

⁴ Early land surveyors linked the site of the battlefield to lot 4 in the Gore of Zone Township, Kent County. See: Guy St-Denis, *Tecumseh's Bones* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press,

empty-handed. The results were the same for the south side of the river.

Although a patentee named Bowles did not appear, there was a William Boyle with two grants of land in Howard Township—one of which (lot 13) fronted on the river.⁵ Could it be that Bowles's was really meant to be Boyle's? It seemed plausible, given the phonetic spelling of many of the names in the minutes of Procter's court martial proceedings.⁶ But there was just one problem. William Boyle's lot in Howard Township was some 33 kilometres upriver from the "forks of the Thames" at McGregor's Creek (in what is now downtown Chatham, Ontario). Yet, the testimony of several witnesses at Procter's court martial seemed to suggest that Bowles's was farther downstream and much closer to the forks.⁷

Given this disparity, it became imperative to ascertain if it was really William Boyle's homestead which was

described as Bowles's in Procter's court martial proceedings. Perhaps the War of 1812 Losses Claims might provide the answer. Disappointingly no record of a William Boyle was found. But there was a James Boyle, and this particular Boyle happened to own land on the Thames River in Chatham Township. It consisted of lot 11 in the first concession, only eight kilometres above the forks.⁸ Interestingly enough, James Boyle purchased this property from his father—who was none other than William Boyle.⁹

Although the river at lot 11 in Chatham Township appeared to be too wide and deep for a successful scuttling, there soon came a change of heart. It was prompted by William Shaw, a local justice of the peace. In an affidavit he prepared in support of James Boyle's claim for the loss of a horse during Procter's retreat, Shaw wrote the claimant's name as "Boles." In noticing his mistake, however, he changed the spelling to "Boyles."¹⁰ Ob-

2005), 176, n. 23.

⁵ William Boyle was also granted lot 12 in the first concession of Howard Township. This lot, however, was not on the Thames River.

⁶ For example, Procter's own name frequently appears as Proctor.

⁷ NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, pp. 11, 107, 196.

⁸ Glenn Stott and Carol Hall, *Taken and Destroyed: The War of 1812 Losses Claims, London and Western Districts, Upper Canada* (Milton, Ontario: Global Heritage Press, 2011), 14, 46, 73, 112. According to a record in the Township Papers, lot 11 in Chatham Township was originally located (or assigned) to Frederick Harboth, but then transferred to Mathew Dolsen and finally William Boyle. See: Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), Crown Lands Records, Township Papers (RG 1, C-IV), Chatham Township, land board minute, 20 Sep. 1793, p. 47.

⁹ This purchase took place in 1810. See: AO, Kent County Land Registry Office, Abstract Index Books (RG 61-24), Chatham Township, vol. A, con. I, lot 11, bargain and sale, William Boyle to James Boyle, 8 Jan. 1810, inst. 141. The relationship between James and William Boyle was recorded in the estate file of the latter individual, who died 10 March 1813. See: AO, Essex County Surrogate Court, Estate Files (RG 22-311), William Boyle, 1816, no. 127.

¹⁰ Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Department of Finance, Upper Canada, War of 1812 Losses Claims (RG 19, E5a), vol. 3749, file 2, claim of James Boyle, no. 733, affidavit of Daniel Crow, 5 Oct. 1815.

viously, Boyle's was pronounced Bowles, which explains how it came to be recorded as such during Procter's court martial. While this explanation in favour of James Boyle seemed to hold great merit, it still lacked the hard evidence necessary to definitely establish the location of the Bowles's homestead as lot 11 in Chatham Township. Initially, lot 13 in Howard Township seemed to be a more viable place to obstruct the Thames with scuttled lake schooners—but the river's navigational limitations above the townsite of modern Chatham put this in doubt. It was unlikely that there was a sufficient depth of water for the schooners to proceed so far upstream.

Another mark against lot 13 was the place where the British crossed from the south to north side of the river, which was below the townsite of Chatham and approximately 38 kilometres downstream from William Boyle's lot in Howard Township.¹¹ The place of crossing provided a tantalizing clue that Bowles's was on the north side of the river, as the depot would have been on the British line of march. There were other clues pointing to a location in Chatham Township, including that left by an American cavalry officer who participated in the expedition against Procter

and Tecumseh. In a sketch map drawn by Captain Robert B. McAfee, the position of "two boats on fire" is plotted a short distance up from the forks and appears to correspond with Procter's orders to scuttle the two schooners at Bowles's.¹² The location of these vessels also appears to be in keeping with lot 11, Chatham Township. Additional evidence was found in Procter's court martial proceedings, which placed Bowles's below Arnold's Mills.¹³ These mills were about 22 kilometres above the forks, and it was reassuring to know that this span of the river encompassed lot 11 in Chatham Township. This recognition also tended to rule out lot 13 in Howard Township, as it was ten kilometres higher up the river from Arnold's.

The argument for lot 11 in Chatham Township was further strengthened by James Boyle's wife, Rebecca. In 1811, she petitioned for a grant of Crown land.¹⁴ In doing so, she listed herself as being of Chatham Township. There was also a nice find in a miscellaneous series of land records known as the Township Papers, which reinforced the impression that the Boyle family had made their home in Chatham Township from an early date. In January of 1794, land surveyor Patrick McNiff prepared a list of settlers

¹¹ The British troops crossed to the north side of the Thames River at Dolsen's on lot 19, Dover West Township. The crossing was accomplished using a "flat" or flat-bottomed boat. See: NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, p. 206.

¹² "The McAfee Papers," *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* 26:77 (May 1928), opp. 123; NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, p. 196.

¹³ NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, p. 206.

¹⁴ LAC, Upper Canada Land Petitions (RG1, L3), vol. 37, B10 (1804-1823), pt. 1, petition of Rebecca Boyle, 26 Oct. 1811, no. 46. No similar record could be found for James Boyle.

in the Third (or Howard) Township and the improvements they made to their properties. William Boyle was found to have done nothing to lot 13. Furthermore, it was noted that he lived in the Second (or Chatham) Township.¹⁵ Such circumstantial evidence was compelling, but it was the land records which finally settled the question against Howard Township.

According to the abstract index, a calendar of registered land transactions, William Boyle sold his grant of lot 13 in Howard Township early in 1811—well before Procter's retreat in October of 1813.¹⁶ This "bargain and sale" thus eliminated any possibility that Bowles's was in Howard Township, which meant that it was likely to have been James Boyle's homestead on lot 11 in Chatham Township. A verification might be possible based on the two schooners scuttled at Bowles's. After all, it was there that Procter decided to block the river

with the burned-out hulls of the *Mary* and *Ellen*.¹⁷ According to Captain Webb Crowther of the 41st Regiment, he proceeded to "Bowles's" on 4 October 1812, and there

found that the Deputy Ass[istan]t Quarter Master General was destroying the stores that had been landed. I then went onboard the two Vessels, and with the assistance of the Naval Officers, we moored the Vessels across the River. I took the entrenching tools and Carpenters tools and sent them off in a boat. I commenced immediately destroying the naval and Ordnance stores that were onboard those two Vessels, breaking them and cutting them and throwing into the River such as would sink. I then gave directions to the master Carpenter to scuttle the two Vessels, which was done and on their settling in the water I set fire to the upper works.¹⁸

The destruction of the *Mary* and *Ellen* was nothing, if not thorough. Yet, remnants of both ships might very well survive to this day, buried deep in the mud of the Thames River—and some-

¹⁵ AO, Crown Lands Records, Township Papers (RG 1, C-IV), Howard Township, "State of the Improvements on the different Lots in the Third Township..." by Patrick McNiff, 16 Sep. 1794, pp. 357b-c.

¹⁶ William Boyle sold lot 13, Howard Township, to John Julien. See: AO, Kent County Land Registry Office, Abstract Index Books (RG 61-24), Howard Township, vol. A, con. I, lot 13, bargain and sale, William Boyle to John Julien, 10 Jan. 1811, inst. 172.

¹⁷ Although Captain Webb Crowther identified these schooners as the *Mary* and *Ellenor*, the latter vessel is referred to several times as *Ellen* in the owner's claim for war losses. See: NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, p. 196; LAC, Department of Finance, Upper Canada, War of 1812 Losses Claims (RG 19, E5a), vol. 3744, file 1, claim of Richard Pattinson, no. 263.

¹⁸ NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, p. 196. See also: LAC, Department of Finance, Upper Canada, War of 1812 Losses Claims (RG 19, E5a), vol. 3749, file 2, claim of James Boyle, no. 733, affidavit of Daniel Crow, 5 Oct. 1815. Another account of the scuttling of *Mary* and *Ellen* was given in testimony by Captain John Hall of the Canadian Regiment: "I Received Orders from Genl Procter at Bowles's to direct Captain [George B.] Hall of the Provincial Marines to warp down two vessels to a proper situation in the River, to Lash them together across it, scuttle them, sink them, and Burn them to the Water's edge. On Returning to Bowles's, I found that his Orders had not been Obeyed, and reported to the General Accordingly. I proposed performing that Duty and requested the assistance of Captain Crowther, which the Genl acceded to. We had accomplished the sinking and Burning of these Vessels about half after three in the afternoon." See: NAUK, Procter Court Martial Proceedings, p. 250.

where along the frontage of lot 11, Chatham Township.¹⁹ If so, their eventual discovery will confirm the site of a place called Bowles's.

¹⁹ James Boyle sold this land in 1815. See: AO, Kent County Land Registry Office, Abstract Index Books (RG 61-24), Chatham Township, vol. B, con. I, lot 11, bargain and sale, James Boyle to Charles Fortier, 29 Aug. 1815, inst. 16. It should also be noted that James Boyle died 25 January 1842. His tombstone can still be seen in the Desmond/Farslow/Traxler Cemetery on the Croton Line in Camden Township near Dresden, Ontario, some 16 kilometres north of his former homestead on lot 11, Chatham Township.