

## Unit 10: Video 5 Transcript

**Q10: Why is Laura Secord important in Canadian history?**

A: Laura Secord, for me, was in some ways not serendipitous but—or working on her, I should rephrase that, was not quite serendipitous. I mean, I was well aware of Laura Secord's walk to Beaver Dams when I was looking— researching my thesis. But she did not show up very much. She did not show up very much in the records. She was really not seen as terribly important by Upper Canadian society. But it's over time, by the time you get to the early 20th century, the historical societies, women's organizations in particular, had decided that the commemorations of the War of 1812—they fully understand those as celebrations of Canadian imperialism and Canadian nationalism intertwined, not separated but intertwined. And they also thought that being part of, in many cases, the early suffrage movement, they thought that you know what those celebrations needed, and what Canadians needed in terms of national identity, was a heroine. And I can understand that. I mean, there had been lots written about the way in which women as symbols of the nation, usually only classical or allegorical figures, they are not real historical women, flesh and blood women, whose histories we can understand. And I think, too, this also comes down to the importance of history as a form of knowledge, as a wider form of anchoring one's self, and creating a past for one's self means creating a subjectivity for one's self. So they, you know, turned Secord into a heroine. In some ways amusing, you know, adding details that we really don't know anything about such as what she was wearing, what she thought. In other ways adding details that I found more troubling such as imagining her relationship with Indigenous people in various ways.

Secord herself when she wrote about her encounter with the Kahnawake Mohawk just before she got to Lieutenant Fitzgibbon said, you know, “I had to convince them that I was not a spy,” which is perfectly logical given the particular context. “I had to convince them I wasn’t a spy, so they took me to him.” She added a few more details later in the 1840s. She talked about being a little bit afraid. But by the time you get to the early 20th century, the historical commemorators including the white female commemorators added all kinds of reactions, emotional dimensions to her encounter. That she was terrified of them. She had heard awful stories about them. That they would scalp her, and so on and so forth. And of course we don’t really know. We really don’t know, and we can speculate as to what she might have made of Indigenous people. On the one hand, she had spent part of her early life—she was born in Massachusetts; she might have been exposed to captivity narratives of the 16th and 17th century that often featured Indigenous peoples as demons. On the other hand, she had worked in her father’s tavern in Upper Canada, so she also might have encountered them. Because we know that Indigenous people did enter taverns in this period. So we just don’t know. But what fascinated me was the way in which these people really needed Secord in so many ways.

And then, of course, she was attacked by William Stewart Wallace at the University of Toronto in 1930, not because Wallace doubted that she had actually made her walk, but that he thought the walk had no significance. That the Mohawk had got there first. And again, what I saw was really quite interesting, was although people, to some extent, started to give up on that part of the story. They would say, “Okay, yes, she committed a brave deed.” But the story persisted and I think also, too, the fact that the candy company came along in 1913, that was one of the reasons why Secord’s story persisted.

And the ways in which the candy company used that story dropped a lot of elements out of it, particularly the presence of Indigenous peoples, but used images of Secord and then created a history of themselves that had to do with purity, a legacy of domesticity, a legacy of artisanal creation. Those were, I think, quite, you know, kind of fun and fascinating parts of the story.

And then, you know, we get to the commemorations of the War of 1812 today, and Secord continued to be part of this. I've actually spent a bit of time working with a group called the Friends of Laura Secord in the Niagara area who have recreated her walk. Actually, parts of it, of course, can't be recreated anymore because there are shopping malls on that trail. But they have, as best as they could, they have recreated the walk. And they're interested, partly, in making sure that the image of a woman that's been part of the commemoration of the war, but also too, seeing that the war could be remembered in different kinds of ways. So when they recreate the path they're interested in incorporating far more Indigenous narratives, putting together GPS walking systems and, you know, iPod versions that will allow people to gain knowledge about plants, for example, in the area. Trying to diversify the narrative in different kinds of ways. And I think in talking to them, in the face of a federal government that has had more to say about Indigenous peoples but had little to say about women in terms of its commemoration and has emphasized only the military and the martial aspects of the war.

**Q** When was the cow added to the story of Laura Secord?

**A:** The cow was added in the 1860s by one of the textbook writers. There's no evidence of that cow at all and highly unlikely that she would have—she would have taken a cow. Well, she took her niece with her for part of the

walk, but she didn't take the cow.

But the cow ends up being added, and I think the cow, of course, ends—helps domesticate Secord in so many ways. She's already domesticated. Unlike someone like Madeleine de Verchères, she doesn't, you know, Secord didn't take up arms. She's not accused of acting in any way that's not congruent with the ideals of 19th century femininity. But the cow, of course, helps reinforce that.

And then the story that I was told by people at the candy company, because unfortunately they have almost no corporation records at all. They have a very rich visual archive of advertising, but no—and I think because they have, they have changed owners so many times, there's nothing left. But they say that Frank O'Connor, the senator who founded the candy company, chose Secord because he associated her name with purity and domesticity. And I think whiteness, too. They don't say that, but I've also found a brochure, one of the few bits of textual information in their archives, that was a hiring guide for women—for managers to hire staff for the stores in the 1920s. And one of the things they were very, you know, “the person should be pleasant, the person should be well turned out, the person should be clean, and if possible blue-eyed and blonde.” So I think when I look at the advertising and the way in which they stress whiteness, which certainly does, of course, have a relationship to selling confectionary. You know, you want to make sure that people are getting something that hasn't been adulterated or tampered with and it's safe, but at the same time I think there's that underlying theme of the whiteness of Secord.