

Remarks of Beatrice Welters
U.S. Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago
At the
Rededication of the Oliver Hazard Perry Gateway
Tranquility Primary School, Port of Spain
April 4, 2012
10:00 am

Good Morning

Bishop Claude Berkley

Dr. the Hon. Rupert Griffith, Minister of Tourism

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Port of Spain Mayor, the Hon. Louis Lee Sing and Councillors of the Port of Spain City Corporation

Juliana Boodram, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

Embassy Staff

Members of the media

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The national anthem of Trinidad and Tobago promises that “Here every creed and race find an equal place”.

It is a powerful promise and one that continues to bring people to the shores of this twin island nation.

This spirit of welcoming is a valuable treasure in this world and I think is one of the things that brings our nations together.

Today we are here to remember one American who was welcomed by the people of Port of Spain nearly 200 years ago when he was laid to rest at Lapeyrouse Cemetery.

His name was Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry.

It seems almost unimaginable now, but 200 years ago the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada were at war.

There was fighting up and down the Atlantic coast, in the Caribbean, off the coast of Brazil and especially along the U.S.-Canadian border.

It was one of the most terrible wars fought in North America, both the Canadian capital of York – modern Toronto – and the American capital of Washington D.C. were put to the torch.

It was during this war – along that now-peaceful border between the United States and Canada – that Commodore Perry earned the title ‘Hero of Lake Erie’.

When he was just 28 years old, Perry was charged with defending the strategically important lake.

His first task was to raise a squadron of ships to defend it, as the United States had only one warship available there.

Perry built or converted several vessels for military duty in record time.

On September 10, 1813, Perry led his ad-hoc collection of ships against a British squadron.

Perry’s flagship the USS Lawrence was heavily damaged, leading the British to expect his surrender.

But true to his motto, ‘Don’t Give up the Ship’;

he escaped to another vessel and continued to fight, eventually forcing the entire British squadron to surrender, the only time a British squadron ever surrendered to an American.

Perry returned in triumph to the Lawrence and accepted the British surrender on its decks.

His victory was a turning point in the war and his understated after-action report he said —“We have met the enemy and they are ours”— is still remembered today.

He is among the most celebrated American naval heroes and several cities and counties across the

United States are named after Commodore Perry. He also lends his name to the U.S. Navy’s Oliver Perry Class Frigate.

Perry continued to serve in the navy and in 1819, President James Monroe dispatched Commodore Perry on a diplomatic mission to South America where he met with the newly-formed government of Simon Bolivar.

Unfortunately Perry contracted yellow fever, dying en route to Port of Spain on his thirty-fourth birthday.

Although the War of 1812 had ended only a few years before, although some of the British soldiers in Trinidad had been Perry’s prisoners, the British governor of Trinidad, Sir Ralph Woodford, handled Perry’s death with grace and generosity.

A member of Perry’s crew summed up their feelings when he wrote “The troops of the island were turned out & every possible respect was paid to his remains, which were conducted to the grave in a solemn splendid manner. . .”

Years later Perry’s remains were returned to the United States, where he was reburied in his native Rhode Island.

More than 100 years later, in 1925 my predecessor – Consul Henry D Baker – set out to mark this piece of shared history.

Baker had been a newspaper editor and publisher who went on to have a diplomatic career in Russia, Australia, New Zealand and here in Trinidad.

His passion for history would not allow Perry’s resting place to go unmarked. When he could not locate the original burial site he instead worked with City of Port of Spain to mark the place Commodore Perry entered Lapeyrouse Cemetery with the ornamental gateway we will soon rededicate.

He arranged for the gateway to be built in the United States and transported here at his own expense.

He felt it would be a long-standing memorial to the deep bonds of brotherhood between our two nations.

But time and the elements took their toll and by this year, 2012, the gateway was a shadow of itself, pitted with rust and corrosion and bare of any indication of what it was or why it was there.

I myself only learned of the gateway because of the work of Mr. Louis Homer

who had dedicated himself to telling the story of Trinidad and Tobago's heritage. With the help of Mr. Homer and an American historian, Dr. Brad Coleman, we were able to uncover the history of this memorial and then working with the Port of Spain Corporation, the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure and the Ministry of Tourism along with the crew of the USNS Grapple they were able to rebuild and restore the gateway in just a few weeks.

Petty Officer Brian Mouton And Abraham Kritz spent approximately 375 man-hours making repairs and fabricating new parts for the gate.

Members of the USNS Grapple Crew, members of Mobile Diving Salvage Unit Company 2-1, and the Embarked Security team from MSRON-4 worked side-by-side with workers from the Port of Spain Corporation and the Ministry of Works to repair the damage and return the gateway to its original condition which you can see in some of the historical photos on display here.

When Henry Baker spoke in 1925, across the street on Tragarete Road, he said "By this dedication we cannot add to the honor and glory that was already Perry's.

We cannot in any way increase the treasure or take from it, of the illustrious memory already held in the archives of heaven.

But what we can do is to dedicate our own selves to the ideals of Perry – to nobility of mind and purpose, devotion to duty and service to God, country and humanity."

His words are perhaps a bit old-fashioned but the sentiment is the same.

In honoring the past we must also look to the present and to build a better future.

Trinidad has always been an island that welcomes strangers from afar, whether the Merikins – freed American slaves who after the War of 1812 were offered a new home here in 1816 – or the many other races and creeds that make up the gorgeous mosaic of this twin-island nation.

And of course it is ironic that Commodore Perry's final mission was concerned with curbing crime in the Caribbean. In 1819 he was working with countries in the region to combat pirates, just as today countries in the region are working together to combat narcotics and human trafficking. While the times have changed the need for us to cooperate and work together for the safety of our citizens has never changed.

Therefore as a symbol of our deep friendship and long-standing historic ties – just as Consul Baker did in 1925 – I formerly present this restored gateway to the people of Port of Spain.

Thank you.