



Painting by Thomas Birch

*USS Constitution captures HMS Guerriere, August 19, 1812*

## **THE WAR OF 1812** **and '13, '14, and a little bit of '15**

-by Ed Reilly

The War of 1812 is often called “America’s Second War of Independence,” but I prefer an extended title, that of Hugh Howard’s book, *Mr. and Mrs. Madison’s War—America’s First Couple and the Second War of Independence* (Bloomsbury Press, NY, January, 2012). Howard lives down the road a piece, fifty miles to the southeast in East Chatham, NY. “Mrs. Madison” was, of course, the incomparable Dolley Madison, wife of our 4<sup>th</sup> President, James Madison. Howard, in turn, is an historian and author.

The War of 1812 began on June 18, 1812, when President Madison signed a declaration of war which began: “*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that war be and hereby is declared to exist between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the dependencies thereof, and the United States of America and their territories.*”

The causes of the War are quite clear. England had been brazenly “impressing” seamen from American ships and weren’t always careful that those they reclaimed were British rather than American citizens. The pragmatic reason was that the seamen were desperately needed to man the steadily increasing number of ships needed to maintain British control of the seas during the Napoleonic wars that raged from 1803 through early 1815. There had been a steady defection of English sailors to American ships because the pay was better. And Napoleon had assembled a *Grande Armée* of 600,000 troops, poised in western France and threatening a cross-channel invasion of England. By 1812, Great Britain had abducted over 6,000 men.



*First Lady Dolley Payne Todd Madison*

Just nine years before the time in question, 1803, President Madison's friend, mentor, and predecessor Thomas Jefferson had doubled the size of the country through the Louisiana Purchase at the rock bottom price of 15 million dollars, funds that helped Napoleon and thus angered the British. The land purchased, 828,000 square miles at a cost of 3 cents per acre (about 42 cents per acre in 2012 dollars) lay in a swath that ran down the center of the country from the Canadian border to New Orleans. And the British weren't happy about that because they wanted the port of New Orleans for themselves. The issue was still festering in 1812.

Our country had war aims too. Many Americans, and to some extent even President Madison and Dolley believed that our "Manifest Destiny" was to encompass all of North America. Thus the early fighting began along the Canadian border and on the Great Lakes, Lake Champlain, and the St. Lawrence River. American ships won their share of engagements, but seven forays into Canada intended to gain control of forts and land areas were all repulsed. One of these briefly held York, Ontario—the later Toronto—and did some damage but couldn't hold it. Brigadier General Zebulon Pike was killed in the raid and is buried in Sackets Harbor.

America had been ill-prepared for such warfare, whether on land or sea. At the onset, military strength was just 7,000 men, all paid volunteers. Great Britain was not much better off because the bulk of British forces were then heavily engaged in Spain and in the Mediterranean. The total of British Regulars stationed in Canada was 6,034 men and in the Maritimes (including Bermuda), there were 3,743 British Regulars. As to a navy, we started the war with 17 fighting ships arrayed against over 500 British vessels. But by early 1815 when fighting ceased, U.S. forces had risen to almost 36,000 deployed against only slightly greater British forces.

Hugh Howard covers the War's naval battles quite well, but the classic work in that regard, a free E-book easily found on the Web, has the prodigious title *The Naval War of 1812 Or The History of the United States Navy during the Last War with Great Britain to Which Is Appended an Account of the Battle of New Orleans*, one of the 40 publications of Theodore Roosevelt, our 26<sup>th</sup> President. The prose in this book, written when the author was only 23 but already an Assemblyman, is nothing short of astonishing.

The *USS Constitution's* victory over the *HMS Guerriere* of August 19, 1812, was a great morale booster for America. Called "Old Ironsides" because cannonballs bounced off of its oak hull, the ship, noted for an unbroken string of victories, was almost scrapped in 1930. But protests from students versed in the famous poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. resulted in its becoming a floating museum in Boston Harbor and remains the oldest fully commissioned ship in the world.

During the War the Mohawk River was largely used for transporting military ordnance supplies, with Schenectady as the embarkation point while the soldiers marched westward over the Mohawk Turnpike (essentially, the current State Route 5). A campground in nearby Scotia became the base of General Winfield Scott, aka "Old Fuss and Feathers."

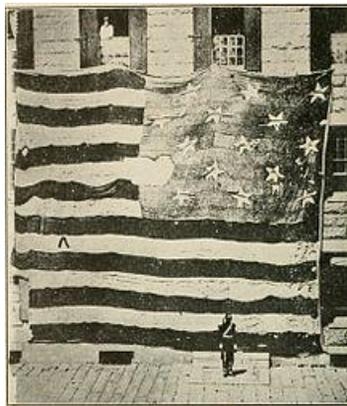
After 28-year old U.S. Navy Captain Oliver Hazard Perry defeated the British navy at the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, he sat down to compose a message to his commanding officer, U.S. Army General William Henry Harrison. Eschewing "Mission Accomplished," he became famous for choosing "We have met the enemy and they are ours." Then, early in 1814, he journeyed eastward, his progress marked by a series of triumphant ovations. At Utica, Perry embarked on a Mohawk packet and sailed down the River past the Mabee Farm to Schenectady where he was greeted by a patriotic committee of city burghers, one of whom welcomed him in Dutch.

U.S. volunteers recruited for action anywhere in New York State began their training at a "Military Cantonment" in Greenbush ("Greene Bosch" in Dutch), about 24 miles to the southeast of Schenectady. The Cantonment was the headquarters and assembly point for the Northern Army of the United States. In the *Daily Gazette* of October 1, 2000, Schenectady High School history teacher Neil B. Yetwin wrote: "On September 16, 1812, 4,000 officers and men under General Henry Dearborn moved out of the Greenbush Military Cantonment, ferried across the Hudson to Albany, and commenced marching down the Military Turnpike (Albany Street) toward Schenectady. From there they would begin a 300-mile trek to the Niagara Frontier to engage the British in what came to be known as the War of 1812."

General Dearborn was a Revolutionary War hero for whom, much later of course, both Dearborn, Michigan and Dearborn, Missouri were named. Further along in his essay, Yetwin continues: “Like most New Yorkers, Schenectadians were deeply divided about the war’s effect on trade with Canada.....Hundreds lined the streets on the late afternoon of September 18 and watched nervously as the troops came rumbling down State Street hill. Among the soldiers were Lt. Winfield Scott, Lt. John Keyes Paige (later Schenectady County’s first District Attorney), and Captain Mordecai Myers, who was getting his first look at the city he would serve as mayor 40 years later.”

A portrait of Mordecai Myers appears on the cover of the Schenectady County Historical Society’s March-April 2011 Newsletter to illustrate the featured Yetwin story titled “Albon Man, the Physician Who Saved the Life of Schenectady Mayor Mordecai Myers” [during the War of 1812 when he was Captain Myers].

By serendipity, it just so happened that my friend Frank Wicks, a professor of EE at Union College, handed me a copy of *his* article on the War of 1812, one that appeared in the *St. Lawrence Plain Dealer* in Canton, NY on June 19. He is a native of Canton, which was close to much of the action in the War. In it, he mentions that the Union College campus was designed during the War, in 1813, by the French architect Joseph Jacques Ramée, who also designed the David Parish House in Ogdensburg, now the site of the Frederic Remington Art Museum.



*The enormous size of the 15-star, 15-stripe Fort McHenry flag can be grasped by comparing its height to that of the soldier on the ground. The flag, of much reduced width, is on display at the Smithsonian.*

The signature events of the War were the British burning of our White House and Capitol on August 24, 1814; the composition of our national anthem by Francis Scott Key during the bombardment of Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor on September 13-14, 1814, and General and future President Andrew Jackson’s victory at the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815, two weeks *after* the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in Belgium on December 24, 1814, the formal end of the War. Sailing ships needed at least two weeks to cross the Atlantic, and ponies can run only so fast.

The Treaty, not ratified until February 15, largely restored relations between the warring nations to the *status quo ante bellum*, with not a single acre of land changing hands. It did not specify the mandatory end of impressments, but it stopped abruptly because no longer needed. In response to a threat from the east in 1812, Napoleon had pulled his 600,000-man *Grande Armée* from his western front and marched them toward Moscow in the winter. Fewer than 30,000 returned, a disaster that ultimately led to Waterloo on 18 June, 1815.

The official U.S. military history of the War of 1812 states: “The United States entered the war with confused objectives and divided loyalties and made peace without settling any of the issues that had induced the nation to go to war.”

A less harsh assessment was given by Edward Rothstein in his June 26, 2012 *New York Times* story “A Legacy Far Beyond the National Anthem.” He claims that, directly or indirectly, the War gave us the Erie Canal ; Uncle Sam; four Presidents; The Star Spangled Banner; the westward expansion of the United States; and the growth of New England manufacturing.” Not bad for government work.