



News from the Stow Historical Society

*A newsletter for all friends of Stow history.
Please feel free to pass it along to others who might be interested!*

February 2012

This month, the SHS newsletter does something different – It discusses a topic not about Stow history but about American history in general. There are three reasons: 1) I (inadvertently) did a lot of research on it (I read a book, plus a New York Times article); 2) Once I thought about it, it seemed both interesting and illuminating; 3) I didn't actually have anything else to write about this month. So here it is, sort of a book report. – Ralph Fuller

“War of 1812 Bicentennial” Edition

You very likely didn't realize that this year is the bicentennial of the War of 1812. Well...it *is* 2012. I didn't realize it, and I just read a book about the war. If George Daughan, the author of *1812 – The Navy's War*, realized it, any mention he made escaped my notice.

The folks in Maryland realize it. They're spending \$25 million to celebrate. Of course, they have Fort McHenry. Folks in New York realize it also – but two governors in a row have vetoed bills to spend money on a celebration. Gov. David Patterson said the war was important but funds were too tight. Gov. Andrew Cuomo just said that money was too tight.

And then there's the fact that the War of 1812 just hasn't been one of our nation's favorite wars, particularly in New England. It was the “minor” war sandwiched in between the American Revolution and the Civil War that apparently accomplished little. Relatively little of its action took place in New England and it was generally unpopular in the region because of its devastating effect on trade.

And yet...think about the phrases, images and anecdotes that are part of our collective memory even today: **Words:** “We have met the enemy and they are ours,” “O! say can you see...”; **Images and icons:** Cannonballs bouncing off Old Ironsides, which we can still tour in the Charlestown Navy Yard; **Heroism:** Dolly Madison escaping with George Washington's portrait just before the British arrive to burn the White House, Gen. Andrew Jackson's outnumbered forces whuppin' the British at New Orleans – in a battle fought after the peace treaty was signed.

In *1812 – The Navy's War*, Maine-based George Daughan provides a thorough account of the conflict. That the tiny U.S. Navy played such a major role in the war is ironic, since President James Madison and his fellow statesmen discounted the importance of the navy and failed to give it much support. As the war started, the Madison people wanted to keep the Navy's warships in port as sort of floating artillery defenses against British raids.



Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry changes ships during his victory on Lake Erie. (Illustration: Wikimedia Commons).



The battle of Fort M'Henry at Baltimore. (Illustration: Wikimedia Commons).

Fortunately, prominent naval officers persuaded them that the warships could be much more effective operating independently, raiding British merchantmen and distracting the far-larger British navy from attacking American shipping and ports. What followed early on was a string of one-on-one confrontations with British warships that the Americans impressively won.

Madison's vision lay with land forces that would invade Canada, creating leverage over the British government or even adding to American territory. Madison was also counting on the ongoing Napoleonic wars bogging down the British. That worked until Napoleon's army was destroyed in Russia. And, Madison was hampered by appointing incompetent Secretaries of War, who

tended to appoint incompetent generals, and the Canadian invasion never seriously materialized. His Secretaries of the Navy were better men. What leverage the U.S. did achieve on its northern border was due to American naval victories that denied the British use of Lake Erie.

Major issues leading to the war were onerous British trade policies and the British habit of stopping American ships and impressing, or seizing, sailors they claimed were British subjects. Eventually, the trade policies were offered up – but the British government was adamant that impressment was essential to British security. That's because sailors in the British navy were treated so abominably that they tended to desert at the first opportunity. American rank and file fared much and U.S. ships were characterized by good morale and training.

The curmudgeonous historian James Loewen, in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, says that's all wrong – the real cause of the war was the American desire to expand into (British-supported) Indian-occupied western lands. And, as Daughan notes, it's true that the western territories were an issue for both sides – American ambitions for growth, British desire to render the U. S. a weak nation confined to its eastern states. But the fact that once peace talks began the Brits yielded on trade issues very quickly but both sides refused to budge on impressment suggests that impressment *was* a big deal.

By 1814, many U.S warships were bottled up in ports and the land war was going so badly that Madison and company were anxious for peace. But by that time, British leaders were determined to punish the upstart Americans, recapture American territory and eliminate the United States as a threat to British dominance in world affairs. But their plans also went awry. As part of their campaign of raiding cities and ports along the Chesapeake Bay, the Brits easily marched on Washington and burned it because of U. S. incompetence – Secretary of War John Armstrong did little to protect it. But Baltimore Mayor Edward Johnson and militia and naval leaders strove mightily to create a defense – and the result was the British failure at Fort M'Henry.

Similarly, the 1814 Battle of Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain was an important American victory – Who knew there were American and British warships, some manned by as many as 200 sailors, fighting it out on Lake Champlain? After the victory of American naval forces under Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough at Plattsburgh, British plans to invade the U.S. were done. By this time, both sides wanted to end the war. Since the diplomats negotiating in the Netherlands were unable to come to terms, they basically agreed to return to the pre-war borders. The issue of impressment wasn't even mentioned. With the Napoleonic wars winding down, it was tacitly assumed that the practice would cease to be an issue. And British support for the Indians in western lands did cease.

So, was the War of 1812 worth it? Daughan says it was. In many ways, by its end it created a unified United States that hadn't existed before. It established the U.S. Navy as a worthy factor in international affairs. American leaders learned to appreciate the value of a naval force and sought to expand it. Even the Battle of New Orleans, although indeed fought after the treaty had been signed, reinforced the American nation's new stature.