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THE SOCIETY OF THE WAR OF 1812

IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA



"BACKGROUND AND THE EVENTS

OF THE WAR OF 1812 "

A Talk given on 9 March 1974 before the Pennsylvania Society of the War of 1812 at its Annual Meeting at The Union League, Philadelphia, Penna. by Colonel Paul K. Brown, AUS-Retired, a Certified Genealogist and Genealogist of the Pennsylvania Society.

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GOOD AFTERNOON -

President General, members of the General Society, members of the Pennsylvania Society and guests:

As a relatively new member of the Society, I was disturbed by my own lack of knowledge in this time period. I learned what my qualifying ancestor did, added this to recalled schoolbook stories about the "Star Spangled Banner" and about Lawrence's "Don't give up the Ship" and Perry's "We have met the enemy and they are ours", and decided to go further. I expressed the opinion to the Board of Direction that there were probably others in the Society who would like to hear again, in short form, the broad outlines of the War of 1812.

I will present the material in this sequence:

- 1/ The Situation 1793 to 1812, here and abroad.
- 2/ The Reasons for the Declaration of War.
- 3/ Opposing Forces.
- 4/ Brief Chronological Sequence of Events during the War, including efforts toward a Peace Treaty.
- 5/ In Retrospect - What did we accomplish ?

I. THE SITUATION 1793-1812, HERE AND ABROAD.

One of the most difficult things to do in reviewing early history is to get the situation into proper perspective - what were the facts at the time ? For the War of 1812, we must recall that the 13 Original States had just ratified the Constitution between 1787 and 1790.

In the order of ratification, these were:

Delaware Penna. New Jersey Georgia Connecticut Mass.
 Maryland So. Carolina New Hampshire Virginia New York
 No. Carolina and Rhode Island.

After that, the following had been admitted to statehood:

#14 - Vermont in 1791

#15 - Kentucky 1792

#17 - Ohio in 1802

#16 - Tennessee 1796

#18 - Louisiana 1812.

In 1785, the states in the new Nation gave up their claims to Western land (the Northwest Territory) after Maryland refused to ratify the Articles of Confederation unless this was done. The lands beyond the established boundaries thus created the Public Domain of the United States - the place where the land bounty grants for Veterans of the War of 1812 came from in the 1850s. My Great Grandfather got 160 acres in Indiana and promptly sold it, sight unseen! The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 covered the territory shown on the map, and provided for from 3 to 5 Districts which would pass to Territory status and finally could be admitted to statehood. They were not to be made into permanent provinces, in the European fashion.

In 1793, war started in Europe between Great Britain and France. The American trade trebled, and merchants and ship owners grew wealthy. British seamen were deserting for better pay and living conditions in the American Merchant vessels.

In 1802, Ohio was admitted as the 17th state in the Union, but the Indians were most resentful of the relentless progress of the whites toward the West.

In 1803, Napoleon lost interest in keeping Louisiana as a French Colonial Empire, and sold it to the United States under President Jefferson.

This added a tremendous territory to our country (see map).

In 1805, the Battle of Trafalgar, with the defeat of the French Fleet, established Great Britain as MISTRESS OF THE SEAS for the 19th Century.

Also in 1805, the British Admiralty forbade trade in wartime which was not in effect in peacetime, and asserted its right to seize and confiscate cargo and crews of Americans. This affected our trade with French colonies and France. Each country blockaded the ports of the other, and American trade declined.

The British Navy insisted through this period that her national life depended on impressment, due to desertions from the Navy of 2500 men per year. To fill this gap, it stopped U.S. merchant vessels and took off sailors it claimed were British deserters, without being too careful about proof !

The fighting countries and the neutrals had quite a time announcing various Acts forbidding others to do things, and even the U.S. forbade its citizens to trade, when President Jefferson approved an Embargo Act in 1807 forbidding departure of ships for foreign ports. In 1810, Congress decided to lift restrictions against any country which would lift its own restrictions against the U.S. Britain moved too slowly, and France agreed to drop restrictions. Therefore, the U.S. restrictions were renewed against Great Britain. Unfortunately, in fact, Napóleon continued to seize American ships.

In 1811, in the Western States of Kentucky and Tennessee, there was strong sentiment for territorial expansion. The younger "War Hawks" favored war to get their aims which were directed chiefly against the Indians. TECUMSEH, an Indian Chief, opposed the Americans. He favored an Indian Confederation to stop the whites, and worked for it.

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON, Governor of Indiana Territory made a deal to purchase a lot of land in Ohio and Indiana from some Indian tribes, and he wanted the whites to push west, with a show of strength to help them. Without waiting for a "NO" from President Madison, he gathered troops and marched through the new area. Near TIPPECANOE, the Indians offered to parley and selected a campsite (north of present Lafayette), got the Americans in, surrounded it, and attacked at daybreak on 8 Nov. 1811. Harrison won the Battle of Tippecanoe, but Tecumseh and his Indians allied themselves with the British against the Americans.

SOME CONSIDER THIS THE OPENING BATTLE OF THE WAR OF 1812 !

In Spring 1812, Great Britain was fighting the French in the Peninsular War in Spain and needed American supplies. But the British Council in England was still holding to blockades against the French and anyone helping the French. It finally revoked the blockade orders against the Americans on 23 June 1812 - - - -

BUT U.S. DECLARED WAR ON GREAT BRITAIN ON 18 JUNE !

II. REASONS FOR THE DECLARATION OF WAR

- 1/ British policy of controlling the sea-lanes by force was a threat to American trade and the freedom of the world. Decrees promulgated by warring European nations permitted seizure and enforced their position that Americans had no right to maintain their enemy's lifelines.
- 2/ Blockades by 1811 cut American trade with Europe to 60% of 1806 level, with resultant decrease in profits.
- 3/ Impressment of seamen into the British Navy was a continuous insult to American sovereignty. If the U.S. could not protect its nationals from British press gangs, it was hardly sovereign! This was a real moral issue.

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4/ British policy was to look to the Indians to help retain Canada, even as a Buffer State, between U.S. and Canada. On our side, the Kentucky Militia boasted it could take Canada without any help, and now Canada was ripe for annexation. Britain assumed that Canada could not be conquered while Britain controlled the oceans and while Quebec remained British. So the U.S. decided to go for Canada.

The war seemed to be an issue between US elder statesmen and the impatient young men who talked about "manifest destiny" for Canada and Florida. Empire and War were tied together, with the moral issue of impressment thrown in as a side issue.

NOTE: The KENTUCKY RIFLE, with a rifled bore was so accurate that men could kill a squirrel at 150 yards. The musket used by the enemy had a smooth bore and gave inaccurate fire even at 50 yards. This was a tremendous advantage to the U.S.

III. OPPOSING FORCES

In the United States, President Jefferson had made heavy reductions in the standing Army in 1802, but in 1808, Congress directed that the authorized number be tripled, from 3,000 to 9,300 (actually never got over 6,500). In 1811, Secy of War asked for 10,000 more Regulars, and in Jan. 1812, he asked for 25,000 more. Congress also authorized the President to alert 100,000 militia in addition to 50,000 alerted previously. The call-up term for most militia would be 3-6 months. The US NAVY early in 1812 had 7 of the best frigates in the world, and these were already seeking out British men-of-war, to punish foreign insolence. The Navy sought out enemy ships individually, to beat

them before they joined others. But Congress turned down a request in January 1812 for additional frigates.

THE U.S. WAS UNPREPARED - It plunged into war despite the strong differences of opinion between commercial and agricultural interests.

In Canada and North America, the British North American Naval Squadron was very small. The British Navy had 700 ships, with 79 in the New World and only 25 off North American coasts. Opposing sentiments in US prevented preparation and then aggressive action while enemy forces were small and while the main British efforts were directed elsewhere. The British land forces in North America totalled 8,100 early in 1812, and 2500 of these were Canadian auxiliaries.

IV. BRIEF CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS DURING THE WAR, Including Efforts toward a Peace Treaty.

Aug. 1812 - A triple attack on Canada was planned, but it started piece-meal. (see Map) Kentucky and Tennessee were enthusiastic for the attack through DETROIT under Gen. HULL. Hull never felt he could carry the attack into Canada and spread his troops over a large area. Detroit was a vital center for trade and diplomacy with the Indians, across from the British forts. Due to many errors, the British were successful in attacking DETROIT, and the Americans surrendered 2500 men. General Hull was court-martialled later.

With the fall of MACKINAC at the north end of Lake Huron, American-controlled area was back into Southern Illinois and Indiana. TECUMSEH kept up continuous raids as far south as St. Louis.

Gen. HARRISON was selected to recapture DETROIT, but he never got his

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supplies and troops into position before winter. Public opinion required a winter campaign, BUT NOTHING WAS ACCOMPLISHED. An attack in the Niagara area with 6000 men against 1500 British failed when US Militia refused to fight in Canada.

NOTE: In July 1812, Wellington beat the French who withdrew from Spain and Portugal. This freed Great Britain from that war and permitted the British Navy to shift ships into the Atlantic. NAPOLEON started his invasion of Russia in June 1812. Russians burned Moscow in September 1812 and rejected a truce with the invaders. Napoleon retreated and lost his army.

April 1813 - Americans invaded from Sacketts Harbor (on east end of Lake Ontario) and captured YORK (now Toronto) and burned the public buildings. The British retaliated at Washington DC in Aug. 1814. Veteran regiments released from European Wars were now arriving at Halifax.

May 1813 - A duel between two vessels outside Boston Harbor resulted in wounding of Capt. LAWRENCE, and he died after his last order "Don't Give Up The Ship".

Summer 1813 - British invaded all along the Atlantic coast, particularly in the Chesapeake area. Penna. Militia was called up to protect Philadelphia and the DuPont works.

Sept. 1813 - Action now shifted to Lake Erie. The control of this Lake was essential to the defense of the area. US Navy designated Lt. OLIVER HAZARD PERRY to be in charge as soon as the work of construction under Mr. DOBBINS was completed. With tremendous effort and in the face of great difficulties, the nine vessels were completed and were sailed to the west end of the lake where the British fleet of

six vessels was anchored. The fight started 9 Sept. and soon Perry's flagship "LAWRENCE" was pounded so badly that Perry was rowed over to the "NIAGARA", to change flagship in the midst of battle. Eight minutes after Perry broke through the line, the British fleet surrendered. PERRY reported the victory in the message to General Harrison "We have met the enemy and they are ours ". Control of Lake Erie was now in American hands, and the British abandoned Detroit. Gen. Harrison (US) invaded on the north side of Lake Erie but did not press the advantage. TECUMSEH, the Indian chief, was killed in this battle. The British influence was weakening in this part of Canada.

October 1813 - The US started a campaign against MONTREAL but our troops were defeated and withdrew. There were several invasions and attacks by both sides but no one gained by them. This closed action by both sides on the North front.

Spring 1814 - Gen. Winfield Scott trained an army for the Niagara Theater and he uniformed them with what he could get - short gray jackets, white trousers and tall leather hats. This later became the uniform of West Point Cadets. In action in July, they matched British regulars and captured Ft. Erie. There was no real gain in territory, and the army was withdrawn after blowing up Ft. Erie.

Aug. 1814 - The first British Invasion was ordered for Baltimore and Washington from assembly at Bermuda. The land forces disembarked on the Potomac, and on 23 August, captured Washington which was practically undefended. The British burned all the public buildings and then withdrew to the fleet. Meanwhile, 4000 men attacked Maine and took 100 miles of coast. Citizens there even gave allegiance to King George I

September 1814 - The British started an invasion from MONTREAL through

Plattsburg. Captain MACDONOUGH commanded the US fleet on Lake Champlain which was the same number of ships as the British. In a 2-hour fight, the entire British fleet surrendered. The British land forces with the fleet had 3 to 1 strength advantage, but they retired. The attack failed badly.

The 3rd British invasion was against Baltimore, home port for the US raiders which roamed the seas and cut into British shipping. A British fleet of 50 ships anchored off Baltimore on 11 September with 6000 soldiers. Due to the shallow water by Ft. McHenry, only the "bomb" vessels could get in close, but the fort's guns couldn't reach them and had to remain silent during the bombardment. Our National Anthem was composed by FRANCIS SCOTT KEY on a British ship where he was negotiating the release of a Dr. Beame, taken prisoner at Washington. The fort did not fall, and the British Army and Navy commanders abandoned the attack.

December 1814 - Massachusetts had problems with payment of militia when Secy. of War refused US funds unless troops were placed under the Officers of the Regular Army. Feeling ran high, and the "Hartford Convention" was scheduled to revise the US Constitution. It met from Dec. 14 to Jan. 5, but the war was over before it did much.

24 December 1814 - The Treaty of Ghent was signed, intending to restore peace in America. Word of the signing was slow in reaching the US.

January 1815 - The BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS was fought after the Treaty was signed. In that area, the British War Office had ordered troops from the Baltimore campaign, to go against Louisiana, capture New Orleans, and close the Miss. River to commerce. This would affect all our Western states - Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio, and would divert their

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energies from Canada. Gen. ANDREW JACKSON was the U.S. Commander and he agreed to accept the help of Lafitte's pirates. He captured PENSACOLA, a fine harbor, from the Spanish in November, tho we were not at war with Spain, and then he started New Orlean's defense against the British from Jamaica. They had 8,000 land and 2,000 navy troops. There were 4 separate battles in a 2-week period ending with the stand at New Orleans. In the final battle, when the British pre-dawn attack was delayed and the morning fog lifted, the British troops were in close formation right under Jackson's guns. The British lost their three top generals and 2600 killed, wounded or missing, while the US had under 100 because most of the American troops never were engaged in combat. The US artillery did the job. The British called off a flank attack which was at its objective finally but could not be supported by the main body under heavy artillery fire, and the flankers withdrew.

THIS REALLY ENDED THE FIGHTING OF THE
War of 1812 !

NOTE: Due to running out of time at the meeting, the Section about Efforts toward Peace and the Treaty of Ghent, and the Section titled "In retrospect- What did We Accomplish" were not given. However, in the interest of completeness, the entire talk as prepared, is given here.

EFFORTS TOWARD PEACE AND THE TREATY OF GHENT

In May 1813, US Commissioners Gallatin, Bayard and Adams went to St. Petersburg, Russia at the invitation of Czar Alexander I. Napoleon had started a campaign against Russia, and Russia's only ally was Great Britain. Russia did not want Britain distracted by a war in America where neither side seemed to be able to deliver a mortal blow. Both parties were invited, but Britain declined to attend, and countered by offering to negotiate directly. The US representatives left in Jan. 1814 to return to the US, due to the failure of the efforts at that time. The 3 men then went to Ghent in July 1814, and the British came in August, all ready to dictate the peace terms. Each side gave up points - British dropped the Indian buffer state - US gave up impressment issue since British did not need it after the collapse of Napoleon's empire. The remaining issue was territory, whether each should keep what each now held, or to go back to original lines. The Duke of Wellington demurred about taking command in America, saying his Government had no right to demand territory since it had NOT been able to hang to very much, and more important, it did not have the most important piece, control of the Great Lakes. By December, the Treaty was signed, agreeing to status quo before the war started, and all other points were to be worked out as required

DUE TO SLOW COMMUNICATIONS, WORD OF PEACE DID
NOT REACH THE U.S. UNTIL AFTER THE BATTLE OF
NEW ORLEANS ON 8 JANUARY 1815.

V. IN RETROSPECT - WHAT DID WE ACCOMPLISH ?

This War was entered into with little preparation to insure success. After declaring war, Congress forgot the lessons from the Revolution, and added short-term volunteers and militia to the Regular Forces and did not permit service outside the United States, so that armies just melted away. Many of us found out that Congress learned later, and in WW II, we were called up for "the duration". Congress also refused to create a unified command under a single officer with the result that command was given for political considerations to men inexperienced in combat or even in command of large units. GOOD GOVERNORS DO NOT ALWAYS MAKE GOOD GENERALS ! The only offensive that could have been made, into Canada, failed, because rather than a consolidated coordinated drive on the 5000 British Regulars in Canada in 1812, the US tried piece-meal attacks. This dragged the war out for three years, lost 5,000 soldiers killed or wounded, and in the end, did not gain Canada. Militia made their own decision about fighting outside the limits of the United States. And for failure to build up the Navy, when Britain's superior sea power was brought to bear, the American coasts and commerce were boxed in except for blockade-runners.

The Treaty of Ghent which ended the war, had nothing in it about forbidding Britain from seizing American seamen; capturing and destroying American commerce on the seas; searching American ships; or supporting the Indians in a buffer state between the US and Canada.

BUT THERE WERE SOME ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- 1/ Impressment stopped, but only because Britain didn't need it.
- 2/ American right to be on the seas and to trade freely wherever we wanted was upheld.

3/ The northern boundary of the US was the Great Lakes, and Great Britain gave up all its forts west of the Appalachians in the Northwest Territory, and stopped supplying Indians to harrass settlers. Thus the US could expand toward the West.

4/ The sectional feeling in the Hartford Convention in Dec. 1814 slower down, and New England stayed in the Union. Its strong stand toward secession was taken up by the Southern states 50 years later, a reversal from the position in 1814 !

Not as an accomplishment, but as an observation, the strong sectional feelings favorable to Great Britain at the time of the Revolution and the War of 1812, have continued to this day, and the US has never been able to avoid taking a position on European affairs, supporting Britain. WW I and WW II prove this.

After preparing this talk, my attention was called to a very pertinent observation. It seems that the American Revolution did not end at Yorktown in 1781, but at the Treaty of Ghent in 1814 ! Great Britain had not withdrawn from territory granted in 1781 in the Northwest, and even cities such as New York and Savannah were occupied for some time after 1781. This idea was given in the pamphlet "The War Did Not End at Yorktown" by James Ambler Johnston, in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography", July 1952.

I am willing to discuss matters with anybody later, but I wish to stress that I have not attempted to record specific acts of specific troops in some battle or skirmish. THE SOCIETY has certified to the service of your ancestor ; HISTORY has certified to the value of that service in the development of our Nation. All of us can look back with pride

to our ancestor's part in this War. Few battles had large numbers of fighters - many men just had to be sitting and waiting "just in case...", often close enough to have influenced the outcome of the fight, and often there due to mixed-up orders. But they served their Country, to the chagrin of our foes, to whom, in the words of Li'l Abner, we were no more than "REVOLTIN' COUSINS" !

HARK, HEAREST THOU THE CLARION TONE

A SOUND FROM FAR AWAY ?

ENEMY HORSEMEN, MORTARS OR CANNON FIRE ?

MORE THE SOUND OF POPPING CORKS.. SO I SAY

THANKS FOR LISTENING, AND I HOPE IT WAS INTERESTING TO ALL OF YOU .

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