

The Upper Country in the War of 1812: A Chronology

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Background: *Casus Belli*

1803-1812: British warships detain U. S. merchant vessels and impress American men for service on British ships; the British commit other acts—trade embargoes,

firing on the U. S. ship *Chesapeake*—that insult the U. S.

Great Britain is heavily involved in the Napoleonic Wars in Europe.

Some U. S. elements harbor vague notions of annexing

Canada amid more widespread and explicit visions of unfettered Expansion.

Republican “War Hawks” elected to Congress in 1810 press for war.

British fur traders continue to foment disaffection for the U. S. among the Natives.

1807-1812: The British encourage the Native nationalist

Tecumseh and his brother the Shawnee Prophet, or

Tenskwatawa, to form a confederation to oppose U. S. expansion.

June 1812: President Madison sends a message to Congress detailing British offenses and the U. S. House and Senate send a declaration of war back to Madison, who signs it on June 18. Because none of the Federalist opposition party vote for the war declaration, some contemporaries call the war “Mr. Madison's War.” It has also been called the Second War of Independence, after Benjamin Franklin's observation that “The War of Revolution is won, but the War of Independence is yet to be fought.”

The War in Michigan Territory & Upper Canada

(Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) was upstream—i.e. southwest—of Lower Canada (present-day Quebec), on the St. Lawrence River.)

pre-1812: Joseph Varnum, the Factor (government trading agent) at Mackinac Island since Nov. 1809, has been instructed to discourage Native trading with the British at Mackinac, St. Joseph Island, Sault Ste. Marie and elsewhere in Canada.

1807: An Odawa leader named Le Maigouis (The Trout) at L'Arbre Croche in northwest lower Michigan begins to promote the nationalist ideas of Tecumseh and travels

to the Mackinac Straits area to speak against the Americanization of the Natives there.

Early summer 1812: Life continues as usual for the

Great Lakes and Upper Country. People cross the unguarded U. S.-Canada border frequently and freely to

visit and trade. British traders are active at Sault Ste. Marie

and Mackinac.

July-August 1812: Territorial Governor General William Hull loses the American ship *Cuyahoga Packet*,

with strategic papers, to the British. Hull mounts an

ill-conceived and poorly executed invasion of Canada,

retreats, and surrenders Detroit to a smaller British force

under Isaac Brock, Aug. 16. Hull also orders the evacuation of Ft. Dearborn (Chicago) to Fort Wayne in

Indiana Territory, and those retreating are ambushed

and massacred by Natives.

Jan.-Oct. 1813: General William Henry Harrison, replacing

Hull as Commander of the U.S. Army of the North-West,

leads an attempt to re-take Detroit. Some of his troops fall to the British at Frenchtown along the River

Raisin south of Detroit and poorly guarded prisoners

are massacred by Natives.

Oliver Hazard Perry defeats the British on Lake Erie,

Sept. 10; with Lake Erie supply lines cut, the British leave Detroit to American reoccupation later in Sept.

Harrison defeats the British at the Battle of Thames River in Canada, Oct. 5, and Tecumseh is killed, ending the British-Native alliance.

The War in the Upper Country

Summer 1812: General Brock notifies the Scottish fur trader Robert Dickson of the war and advises him to gather Native allies at Fort St. Joseph, on St. Joseph Island in the St. Mary's River. Dickson, a trader in the Upper Country since 1786, assembles a force of 400 Natives from Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin, his vast field of influence.

July 17, 1812: The British force from St. Joseph, commanded by Captain Charles Roberts, moves on Mackinac Island. In addition to the Natives, the force includes a Sgt. and two gunners of the Royal Artillery and 44 men and officers of the 10th Royal Veteran Battalion. They commandeer the trading ship *Caledonia* and on the night of July 16-17 succeed in an undetected landing on the north end of the Island

at a

site still called British Landing. The British force haul

their artillery pieces 2 miles up the rugged slope to the

heights above the American fort—a dominant position.

The small garrison at Fort Mackinac, commanded by

Lt. Porter Hanks, consists only of 61 soldiers, and no

Native allies. When Captain Roberts sends a demand for

surrender, Hanks accedes and papers of capitulation are

signed on “The Heights of Michilimackinac” that day.

The march of folly has shed no blood on Lieutenant Hanks'

watch. Hanks later reports “This, Sir, was the first information I had of the declaration of war.” With communication, as with field generalship, British General

Brock has again out-foxed the far-flung Americans.

Captured, paroled, and returned to Detroit to await

court-martial, Hanks dies when his prison cell is struck by British artillery.

Summer 1812: The British improve an earthen redoubt on

the Mackinac Island Heights with a blockhouse, stockade, and powder house and name it Fort

George.

Summer 1813: The British continue to hold Mackinac and

Sault Ste. Marie but their supply lines falter.

Natives gather at Mackinac to support the British

and quickly exhaust

supplies there. The British establish an intermediate

supply depot on Nottawasaga Bay at the south end of

Lake Huron's Georgian Bay.

January 1814: Lieutenant Robert McDouall, a Scotsman of the

Royal Newfoundland Fencibles, makes his way from

York (Toronto) to Nottawasaga Bay with a regiment,

voyageurs and craftsmen. They build batteaux and

when the ice leaves the waterways they paddle and sail to

Mackinac Island with much-needed supplies.

Summer 1814: From Mackinac McDouall sends a small

expedition to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin to retake the

post there after American forces under General William

Clark had taken it in early June and built Fort Shelby

nearby. The British retake the fort on July 20 after a

brief siege.

July 3, 1814: A military force under George Croghan and

Andrew Hunter Holmes leave Detroit in a small fleet

commanded by Patrick Sinclair, to attack and retake

Fort Mackinac. The 3 brigs and 2 gunboats search for

the British supply base on Georgian Bay. Failing to

find

it, they proceed up the St. Mary's River to Sault Ste. Marie and

burn the abandoned Fort St. Joseph on the way. At the Soo

they raze the North West Co.'s warehouse, trader John

Johnston's warehouses, and a small lock that bypasses the river rapids, on July 21. This attack cripples the

fur trade and ends the old seigneurial society. The force

of 700 includes regulars and Ohio militia.

British Capt. Robert McCargoe hides his schooner

Recovery in an Isle Royale cove still called McCargoe

Cove. He sails to Sault Ste. Marie, arriving a day after the U.S.

attack there, thus avoiding the destruction of his ship.

The *Recovery* goes on to serve British Surveyor Henry Bayfield in his charting of Lake Superior, 1823-

1825. McCargoe goes on to serve the (British) North

West Co. and Hudson's Bay Co., and the (U. S.) American Fur Co.

July 26, 1814: Croghan's force reaches Mackinac and

attempts to bomb the fort with their ships' guns, but the

cannons can't reach the fort up the slope. Fog precludes

further action for a week.

Early Aug. 1814: Croghan returns and lands at British

Landing on the north end of the island. McDouall anticipates this move and leads a force of 140 British regulars and 150 Menominee Indians to a breastworks overlooking a field in the Americans' line of march and ambushes the American force. Thirteen Americans including Major Holmes and two other officers die in the action. The Americans retreat to their ships and sail back to Georgian Bay.

A black slave in the American force hides Holmes' body; it is recovered later and given formal burial. Mid Aug. 1814: The Americans find the British schooner

Nancy. This ship, stationed at Mackinac Island in 1813, had thus avoided destruction by Perry in the Lake Erie battle. Refitted at Sault Ste. Marie in the winter of 1813-14, she returned south and shuttled supplies from York (the capital of Upper Canada) to Nottawasaga Bay. The Americans chance upon the ship, hidden up the Nottawasaga River, and attack. The British set fire to their own ship—and its 300 barrels of supplies—and retreated toward York.

Sept. 3-6, 1814: The British take the two American gunboats, *Scorpion* and *Tigress*, which had been patrolling the Detour Passage on the west end of

Drummond Island to intercept rumored supply canoes

heading from Canada to Mackinac.

With 4 boats and 2 small cannon, Lieutenant Miller Worsley, a

survivor of the *Nancy* engagement at Nottawasaga,

lands on Drummond Island on Sept. 2, sneaks up on the

anchored *Tigress* on Sept. 4, boards her and subdues the

Americans. Two days later, Worsley sails the *Tigress*

under American flag toward the approaching and unsuspecting *Scorpion*. When within gun range, the

British fire a daunting volley, board the *Scorpion* and

take her. A force of 200 Ojibwa natives in 19 canoes is

kept in reserve.

October 1814: The *Scorpion* and *Tigress*, appropriately

renamed by the British *Confiance* and *Surprise*, return to

Nottawasaga, load supplies brought there from York

and sail back to an appreciative British garrison on Mackinac Island.

Dec. 24, 1814: Negotiators sign a peace treaty in Ghent,

Belgium to end the War of 1812.

July 18, 1815: American forces move into Fort Mackinac.

Fort George, on the Heights, is renamed Fort Holmes.

The British withdraw to Fort Drummond—still in U.

S.
territory on Drummond Island.

Aftermath: *Status Quo Ante Bellum*

Dec. 24, 1815: The Treaty of Ghent returns all of the Upper

Peninsula, including military posts, to the U. S. In general, the state of affairs before the war returns.

But:

Although not prohibited *de jure*, impressment of Americans by Britain's Navy is *de facto* over.

1815-1822: Boundary negotiations and surveys continue,

peacefully. Henry Bayfield, a British Royal Topographic Engineer, surveys Lakes Superior, Erie and

Huron, 1817-25, and charts much of the St. Lawrence.

He sails in the *Recovery*, the North West Company ship saved

by British Navy Captain Robert McCargo.

The international border in the St. Marys River puts St.

Joseph Island in British territory, while Drummond, Neebish, Sugar, Lime and 27 smaller islands are in the

U. S. To the southeast, Cockburn Island and the large

Manitoulin Island chain are British.

Although ceded to the U. S. by the 1783 Treaty of Paris

after the American Revolutionary War, Isle Royale now

comes under American, not British, control.

1816: U. S. law prohibits trading in U. S. territory by foreigners. Yet British traders at Soo Canada and

on

Drummond Island continue to attract Natives to trade.

1817-18: The Rush-Bagot Treaty, named for the U. S. and

British negotiators, demilitarizes the Great Lakes (and

Lake Champlain). This begins the longest peaceful

border in the world, the U. S.-Canada border.

Per treaty language, a few warships are permitted in

the Upper Country: On the upper lakes, each country is

allowed 2 vessels of no more than 100 tons burden each

armed with 2 cannon of 18 pounds or less, each.

1818: The Treaty of 1818 establishes fishing rights (for the

U.S. off Newfoundland and Labrador), small territorial

cessions by both sides consequent on setting the 49th

Parallel as the border, and the restoration of slaves.

1820: The British warships on the lakes are dismantled

and housed in the Stone Frigate, an imposing building

at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario.

1828: The British “fort”—military and civilian buildings

intermixed—on Drummond Island is finally removed to

Penetanguishene, on the southeast shore of Georgian

Bay. Fort Drummond, also known as Fort Colyer,

includes buildings salvaged from St. Joseph Island.

THE NATIVES: In 1814 Philadelphia banker Nicholas Biddle, (whose cousin Edward Biddle—his wife Agatha

LaVigne a prominent Odawa—ran a fur trading house

on Mackinac Island) publishes Merriwether Lewis' 1807

Journal...., which includes this prescient prescription by

the great explorer: “....the first principle of governing

the Indians is to govern the whites.” Fur traders in the

U. S. and Canada now have an unimpeded post-war

path across the Upper Country all the way to the West

Coast. Treaties and laws securing land to the Natives

and banning alcohol and sharp dealing with them do

little to prevent their steady decline, despite the healthy

fur trade in the decade after the war.

The Cass Expedition across the U. P. and Lake Superior (1820), then the Erie Canal (1825), plus growing

population, provide the routes and impetus—and later the

regnant notion of Manifest Destiny provides the justification—for Expansion and Land Ownership, with

dire implications for the Natives.

CANADA: Although not a U. K. Dominion until

1867, Canada emerged from the War of 1812 with an enhanced sense of national identity and pride and at

least two figures worthy of lasting memorials: Isaac

Brock and Laura Secord, from Queenston Heights action.

British regular soldiers, local Canadian militia and

First Nation allies quickly gave the lie to U. S. President

Thomas Jefferson's statement that conquering British

Canada would be "merely a matter of marching." They

dominated the Province of Upper Canada (The Upper

Country and southern Ontario) throughout the war. In 2012, Canadians rated Canada's repulse of U.

S. invasions in the War of 1812 as second only to national

health care in the formation of a national identity.