

THE WAR OF 1812

Between 1793 and 1814, the two great European powers of England and France were at war while the young United States tried to maintain its neutrality. Neither France nor Great Britain honored America's right to trade as a neutral, and both belligerents frequently interfered with American ships on the high seas. Particularly objectionable was the British practice of impressing sailors on U.S. vessels into service with the English Navy on the often dubious premise that the men were actually British deserters.

More than American honor and maritime rights were at stake, however, as the sentiment for war with Great Britain grew in this country. Settlers on our western and southern frontiers blamed British influence with the Indians for the regular assaults on white settlements. Southerners eyed Spanish Florida and saw an opportunity to expand American territory at the expense of a weak British ally. Large and virtually unprotected, Canada's annexation possibly offered the greatest motivation to declare war on England. A vocal group of Congressmen called War Hawks, led by Henry Clay of Kentucky and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, agitated in Washington for a military resolution to our problems with the London government.

Opposed to this faction were the united voices of New England and the eastern seaboard. Despite occasional interruptions in shipping, the eastern economy still prospered from overseas trade. War with England, or France for that matter, would mean a virtual halt to the American maritime industry and economic disaster for the Northeast. Also, any military action by Great Britain would likely center on the east coast, not the far reaches of the frontier. For Easterners, war was unthinkable and they argued against it in Congress and to President James Madison, a Virginian.

The debate continued but on June 18, 1812, Congress declared war on England. Ironically, two days before the fateful declaration, Parliament suspended its Orders in Council thus relieving many of its restrictions on American trading rights. Parliament's actions were, of course, not communicated across the Atlantic until well after preparations for war were under way in the United States. The War Hawks and their followers looked forward to restoration of American rights on the seas and more importantly, the addition of Florida and Canada to the United States.

American military efforts in 1812 and 1813 were extremely ineffective on land. Only on the Great Lakes was the United States victorious. The tone of the slow-moving conflict changed considerably, however, in 1814 when England defeated Napoleon and the temporary peace freed some 20,000 troops for service in America. Now, the British took the offensive.

Britain planned three campaigns. The first started in Canada but was turned back by Americans under Commodore Thomas MacDonough at Lake Champlain. The second offensive centered on Chesapeake Bay and succeeded in capturing Washington and burning the White House. This British advance was stopped at Fort McHenry near Baltimore in a battle which inspired the writing of the Star Spangled Banner. The third campaign focused on the Gulf Coast and resulted in the Battle of New Orleans.

The Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 was signed in Belgium on Christmas Eve 1814. It was neither known about nor ratified at the time of the fighting at Chalmette, but following the disastrous British defeat both sides were happy to formally end the hostilities. In a practical sense, the War of 1812 resulted in no change to the territorial status quo. But, the conflict marked the arrival of the United States into the family of first-rate nations of the world, both in the minds of Europeans and Americans. The legality of the Louisiana Purchase was no longer challenged, the country united as it had at no other time in its history, and Americans had a new hero to toast--Old Hickory, General Andrew Jackson.