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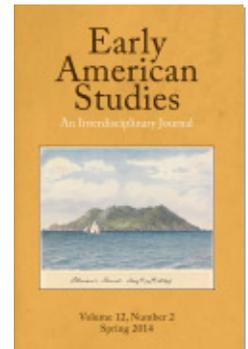
Reflections on a Bicentennial: The War of 1812 in American  
Public Memory

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Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 12, Number  
2, Spring 2014, pp. 269-300 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2014.0007>



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# Reflections on a Bicentennial

## The War of 1812 in American Public Memory

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**ABSTRACT** The public memory of the War of 1812 functioned initially to exaggerate the United States' triumph and overstate its martial and global power. In turn, it encouraged an American militarism that was imperial, costly, and devastating. Ironically, the purposeful memory of the war and its heroes, particularly when absorbed into the political myths of the American Revolution, obscured confounding divisions among Americans, allowing them to construct and embrace alternative models of Americanism without fully confronting growing sectional, social, or political rifts. The public memory of the War of 1812 thus contributed to the cultural work of American politics, relieving (obscuring rather than resolving) the tensions between republicanism and imperialism, nationalism and sectionalism, opportunity and oppression, and later patriotism and capitalism. Late in the nineteenth century, as the last veterans died and the war's history and memory were eclipsed by the Civil War, the War of 1812 seemed to descend into complete irrelevance. And yet Americans found new ways to tap its latent value as they embraced a new American century and as boosters cultivated local identity and profit by invoking—and sometimes lampooning—the war's memory.

The War of 1812 is the only conflict in American history designated simply by the year of its commencement, and for nearly a hundred years after it ended in 1815 its name hardly even qualified as a proper noun. Even as its centennial approached in 1915, it often appeared in print in merely descriptive terms, typically with a lower-case “w”—“the war of 1812”—lacking some other, grander, or more definitive label. The claim forwarded by some—that the war was America's Second War of Independence—never

*Early American Studies* (Spring 2014)

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really caught on. As a recent historian of the war, Alan Taylor, has written, “The War of 1812 looms small in American memory.”<sup>1</sup>

The name of the war matters less than the problems the War of 1812 might illuminate about how Americans remember, memorialize, commemorate, or deploy their past. *Should* it loom larger in the history or memory of the United States? How might or should it be remembered, and what sort of cultural and political work has or might the commemoration do? This essay does not offer prescriptions, let alone hand-wringing admonitions about American forgetting, nor does it aspire to offer an exhaustive account of the public memory of the War of 1812, despite the essay’s broad chronological sweep. Instead, it surveys the limited and sometimes odd ways that Americans have remembered the war and used that memory for a range of purposes. My goal is less to assess the history and significance of the war itself—a task performed adroitly and perceptively by a number of recent historians—than to examine the course of the war’s public memory on the occasion of its two-hundredth anniversary. If the commemoration has presented scholarly opportunities to historians, others—journalists, popular writers, politicians, enthusiasts, promoters, and boosters—have seen their own opportunities in the bicentenary, and they have taken them. Indeed, public awareness of the events of 1812–15 during the years 2012–15 is more likely to be provoked by nonscholars—with different interests and agendas. Making these efforts more transparent by placing them in the context of the history of American public memory might help scholars act more effectively as public historians and to enrich civic discourse about the American past, in this and other anniversary moments.

In the realm of public memory, it’s worth asking what is remembered and what is forgotten and, more important, how remembering actually entails and promotes that forgetting. Why wasn’t the War of 1812 better

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1. See, for example, Helen W. Pierson, *History of the United States in Words of One Syllable* (New York: George Routledge & Sons, 1884), 106; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 10. See Donald R. Hickey, “When Did the War of 1812 Become the War of 1812?” *Journal of the War of 1812* 6 (Summer 2001): 5–11. The naming of the war is discussed in provocative fashion in the recent, wide-ranging “Interchange: The War of 1812,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 2 (September 2012): 520–55, esp. 548–52. Though the name began to appear regularly in the immediate aftermath of the war, Paul Gilje, in “Interchange: The War of 1812,” notes that “‘the war of 1812’ (at least as a small-w war) achieved more general acceptance in the late 1830s and the 1840s” (552).

remembered, its events often inaccurately recounted and then soon obscured by newer, more enduring, or more useful military memories?<sup>2</sup> The war was in fact less significant than the major ones that preceded and followed it (the Revolution and Civil War), though its history is nonetheless worth recalling and evaluating. Yet the war's history and its public memory quickly diverged, and they've remained largely estranged for two centuries. A brief and episodic history of that memory is limited in what it might tell us about the War of 1812 itself, but it can be revealing about the workings of American public memory and political culture in the United States, which the war helped mold. The story of this memory is at times peculiar and even amusing, which makes it more rather than less significant for understanding American political culture, given the way that irony and humor can function to disguise, naturalize, and perpetuate national myths.

The public memory of the War of 1812, as we will see, functioned initially to exaggerate the United States' triumph and overstate its martial and global power. In turn, it encouraged an American militarism that was imperial, costly, and devastating. It helped frame and fortify new versions of American nationalism, which were more local and regional and less uniform than the term *nationalism* might suggest. The country had been divided on the merits of the war, the theaters of conflict had been limited, and the combat had been inconclusive, yet retroactively the war quickly became an emblem and trophy of national feeling, unity, strength, and expansion. Ironically, the preferred memory of the war and its heroes, particularly when absorbed into the political myths of the American Revolution, obscured confounding divisions among Americans, allowing them to construct and embrace alternative models of Americanism without fully confronting growing sectional, social, or political rifts. The war helped reshape the pantheon of American heroes—its new champions were popular as well as elite, seafaring as well as terrestrial, men of the Eastern Seaboard as well as the expanding West. The public memory of the War of 1812 thus contributed to the cultural work of American politics, relieving (obscuring rather than resolving) the tensions between republicanism and imperialism, nationalism and sectionalism, opportunity

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2. The term *military memory* is adapted from the work of Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); she argues that it was rendered less stable during the War of 1812.

and oppression, and later patriotism and capitalism. Late in the nineteenth century, as the last veterans of the conflict died and the war's history and memory were eclipsed by the Civil War, the War of 1812 seemed to descend into complete irrelevance. And yet Americans found new ways to tap its latent value as they embraced a new American century and sought to cultivate local identity and profit by invoking—and sometimes lampooning—the war's memory. The War of 1812 is a case study in how the American past can function like a commodity, at times literally. Paradoxically, a poorly defined “historic” event or set of idols, such as those associated with the War of 1812, can be as valuable as those with more detailed, settled reputations (e.g., the Revolution or George Washington). A hazy past permitted considerable flexibility among those who sought to use it to promote their own agendas in subsequent American presents in the nineteenth century and beyond.



What should we make of the war's low profile in American public memory? The direct accomplishments of the War of 1812 were meager, and general historical knowledge of it is thin compared to the transformational struggles that bookended it—the American Revolution and the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> Historically, we can argue the case for its significance, on terms that avoid the mythologizing of yesteryear. We might instructively acknowledge the political miscalculations of American leaders, and their military ineptitude and failures as well as their occasional successes. And we might note the critical

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3. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teachers Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Press, 2008), 244–45, on the other hand, argues that the place of the War of 1812 is actually inflated in American high school history textbooks. He notes, for example, that the War of 1812 and Vietnam are treated, on average, in the same number of pages, despite their disparity in casualties, domestic repercussions, and global significance. He suggests an implicit political agenda embedded in the mythmaking characteristic of many of these books: that the War of 1812, in its heroic representation, is a more suitable subject, despite its insignificance, than the much longer and more controversial conflict in Vietnam. Many recent historians seem poised to legitimate and even expand this coverage, ironically by stressing among other themes those that Loewen implicitly associates with the Vietnam War—postcolonialism and imperialism. See, for example, Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*; Carl Benn, *The War of 1812* (New York: Routledge, 2003); or David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Old Hickory's War: Andrew Jackson and the Quest for Empire* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

role of the war in establishing U.S. sovereignty and citizenship, especially relative to Great Britain, in setting the nation's northern boundary (after its failed effort to conquer Canada), and in advancing westward and southern expansion along with Native dispossession.<sup>4</sup> But memory is not history. And the war's legacy in popular memory and imagination, in any event, is thinner still—not well informed historically, more mythic, and strikingly ephemeral.<sup>5</sup>

History and memory are often at odds. In classical Greek, *history* referred to a man who settled legal disputes—someone who examined facts and determined accuracy or truth through inquiry. *Historie* meant “a search for the rational explanation and understanding of phenomena,” and thus history is meant to be evidence-based, critical, and revisable. Memory is different, though also concerned with the past. When we speak of memory here, we are referring not to individual recollection but, rather, to collective mentality or popular historical consciousness—the past that ordinary people carry around with them in their heads, the big stories we share that explain our world and organize the shorter stories that we tell about our communities. As one historian has written, memory “draws the past into the present but

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4. On the history of the War of 1812, in addition to Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, and Benn, *The War of 1812*, see Walter R. Borneman, *1812: The War That Forged a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Donald R. Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), and Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History*, updated by Donald E. Graves (1965; repr., Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1999); Hugh Howard, *Mr. and Mrs. Madison's War: America's First Couple and the Second War of Independence* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); A. J. Langguth, *Union 1812: The Americans Who Fought the Second War of Independence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); C. Edward Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); John C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783–1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Wesley Turner, *The War of 1812: The War That Both Sides Won* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1990). And see Donald R. Hickey's review essay “Small War, Big Consequences: Why 1812 Still Matters,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (November–December 2012): 150–55.

5. See esp. “Interchange: The War of 1812” for a lively and informative discussion of the state of the field.

colors it with particular hues and reflections.” Collective memory, then, is not really a group’s history; in fact, it’s often ahistorical, or even anti-historical. As the historian Peter Novick has written, “To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists’ motives and behaviors.” Collective memory, on the other hand, simplifies. It “sees events from a single, committed perspective, is impatient with ambiguities of any kind, [and] reduces events to mythic archetypes.” Memory downplays the “pastness” of the past, emphasizing instead the usable past’s purposeful presence.<sup>6</sup>

The public memory of the War of 1812 fits this bill well—that is, to the extent that it’s present at all in the popular consciousness of the United States. So, we might ask: How has the war been remembered? How has it affected American legend and lore? And, more intriguingly: Why has it been so readily or so often forgotten?<sup>7</sup>

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6. Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993), xvi; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 3–4. On “the history that common people carry around in their heads,” and popular historical consciousness generally, see Carl Becker’s classic essay, “What Are Historical Facts,” delivered to the American Historical Association annual meeting in 1926 and ultimately published in the *Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (September 1955): 327–40. An exemplary recent reflection on the disparity of history and memory—in its political costs and implications—is Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

7. This essay makes no attempt to chart the public memory of the war in Canada or Great Britain, though the history of the war is best told in transnational fashion. But see “Interchange: The War of 1812,” an informative dialogue that includes the perceptive commentary of a number of Canadian historians and early American historians teaching in Canada, including Rachel Hope Cleves, Cecilia Morgan, and Jason M. Opal; see esp. 522–25, 540–42. Canadian public memory, and the surge of nationalist (and even militarist) promotion advanced by the government of the current prime minister, Stephen Harper, in conjunction with the bicentenary, is its own separate and fascinating story. Canadians generally remember the War of 1812 substantially better, more fully, and more accurately than do citizens of the United States. Recently, the war has been retroactively transformed by some into a Canadian war of independence. Thomas H. B. Symons, chairman of the Ontario Heritage Trust, writes, for example: “Had there been a different outcome [in the War of 1812], as desired by the [U.S.] invaders, there would be no Canada today. The successful defence of this province was the cornerstone in the struggle for a yet-unborn nation to survive”; see Thomas H. B. Symons, “A Message from the Chairman,” in “Perspectives on the War of 1812,” a special issue of *Heritage Matters*, a publication of the Ontario Heritage Trust, February 2012. And see the official

## POLITICAL SPIN

If the War of 1812 was largely a series of disasters for the United States, the Treaty of Ghent that ended it was a windfall and godsend. It was signed in Belgium on Christmas Eve in 1814, and copies arrived in Washington on February 14, 1815. The Senate ratified the pact two days later. Though the treaty did not actually address the primary issues that propelled the country to war (impressment of American seamen and freedom of the seas), by 1815 Americans were generally happy to accept a stalemate with the British and delighted by the treaty's generous terms. The political objectives of President James Madison and the Democratic-Republicans determined how the war would be characterized publicly in its immediate aftermath—as a glorious victory, a heroic defense of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Before the deliverance of peace, Madison had been preparing a white paper designed to defend and justify the war, which had not been going well. Retooled to reflect the new circumstances, consolidate Democratic-Republican power, and burnish Madison's legacy, the paper was published in 1815 as *An Exposition of the Causes and Character of the Late War with Great Britain*. It stressed the morality of the struggle and equated it with the Revolution (while echoing the terms of the Declaration of Independence). With this treatise the administration commenced its semiofficial effort to shape memory of the war, and the *National Intelligencer* and other party newspapers amplified the feel-good Democratic-Republican spin.<sup>9</sup>

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Canadian War of 1812 website: <http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1305654894724/1305655293741>.

8. I do not mean to imply that the war itself was uncontroversial or that Democratic-Republican efforts to prosecute it and characterize their efforts were untested. Historians have long noted the opposition in particular of the Federalist party and the region of New England. Purcell, *Sealed in Blood*, 136–37, convincingly emphasizes how the war “accustomed the American public to political disagreement” and how, she argues, it destabilized military memory generally, even memories of the American Revolution, by exposing the constructedness of public memory (161). I would argue that the public memory of the Revolution itself was somewhat more stable, particularly as it functioned as a critical referent against which all parties measured and promoted themselves and judged and disparaged their opponents. If Americans confronted the constructed nature of political discourse during these years, such public discourse was construed less as *memory* per se than as *politics*, which was evaluated in light of military and other forms of public memory.

9. [Alexander Dallas], *An Exposition of the Causes and Character of the Late War with Great Britain* (Philadelphia, 1815). Madison collaborated with Dallas, the U.S. Treasury secretary, the ostensible author of the paper, but the paper was largely Madison's work. See Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg, *Madison and Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 2010), 552–54. Paul A. Gilje, “‘Free Trade and Sailors’

General Andrew Jackson's victory in the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815, though tardy, proved particularly useful. It was real enough and recent enough that it could help obscure the memory of the military debacles that began with General William Hull's disgraceful defeat and surrender at Detroit in August 1812. Similarly, American maritime triumphs and the war's genuine naval heroes were immediately marketable, and Americans' sense of their marine grandeur grew further when Commodore Stephen Decatur, dispatched to the Mediterranean in 1815, subdued the Barbary pirates once and for all, won the release of their American captives, and produced a respectable peace with Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, which seemed to vindicate the international standing and might of the United States. The returning hero Decatur struck a popular chord of nationalist bravado when he toasted, "Our Country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong." These victories, and the overestimation of U.S. power they seemed to encourage, allowed white Americans to imagine that their country possessed greater military might than in fact it did; the historian Lawrence Peskin recently concluded that "1815 marks the point at which the United States begins to see itself (and to act) as a world power." If in retrospect that notion strikes us as delusional, public memory of the war sustained the idea during the nineteenth century and influenced Americans' willingness to adopt military solutions to their perceived problems—particularly as they sought to expand in North America—masking their colonial aggression as defensive and legitimate. Troubling details such as the ill-famed Dartmoor incident in 1815 could contradict the popular party line, but the American public—as much as Madison—seemed relatively uninterested in less auspicious facts.<sup>10</sup>

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Rights': The Rhetoric of the War of 1812," *Journal of the Early Republic* 30 (Spring 2010): 1–23, shows how common people deployed symbols and mottos from the war for their own political empowerment in the nineteenth century. Madison and his party were assisted in their memorializing effort to define the war by the fortunate confluence of extraordinary events at the very end of the conflict—quickly following the Treaty of Ghent came the victory in the Battle of New Orleans and news of the Hartford Convention, which strengthened the hand of war hawks and undermined their antisouthern, antiexpansionist, antiwar opponents, a point made by Rachel Hope Cleves in "Interchange: The War of 1812," 535–36.

10. *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 3:189 (quotation). See especially Dan Hicks, "Broadships on Land and Sea: A Cultural Reading of the Naval Engagements of the War of 1812," in Paul A. Gilje and William Pencak, eds., *Pirates, Jack Tar, and Memory: New Directions in American Maritime History* (Mystic, Conn.:

When the release of American prisoners held at Dartmoor in England was delayed in the spring of 1815, some detainees grew restless. On April 6 guards overreacted to their agitation and shot into a crowd, killing seven and wounding thirty-two. American accounts quickly represented the tragedy as “the Dartmoor Massacre,” threatening the new peace and dampening the buoyant tone of the American postwar narrative. The British and U.S. governments moved promptly to defuse the situation, appointing a joint committee to investigate. Its report judged the incident to be an unfortunate accident, and Britain provided financial compensation for those killed. The Madison administration thus calmed tensions and helped undermine a story line that Americans sought to avoid—one that cast them as victims rather than heroes. Survivors would later publish their own potentially inflammatory accounts in the United States, but these, along with pension petitions that offered nonheroic personal tales of loss and pain, could not compete with the celebratory patriotic narrative that dominated the public sphere.<sup>11</sup>

This post-War of 1812 inclination—to emphasize triumph and self-possession, despite the actual record—contrasts with a later emphasis on victimhood in American public memory, in which persistent colonial or imperial aggression was justified as legitimate retribution by means of narratives of victimization—ironically as the United States actually grew in power. By the 1880s, for example, national and international performances

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Mystic Seaport Museum, 2007), 180–84; Lawrence Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public, 1785–1816* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 187–210; Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), 179–202; and Frederick C. Leiner, *The End of Barbary Terror: America's 1815 War against the Pirates of North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See comments of Matthew Rainbow Hale and Lawrence Peskin in “Interchange: The War of 1812,” 531–33, quotation at 533.

11. On the Dartmoor incident, see Taylor, *Civil War of 1812*, 423–24; [Charles Andrews,] *The Prisoners' Memoirs, or Dartmoor Prison; Containing a Complete and Impartial History of the Entire Captivity of the Americans in England, . . . Also, a Particular Detail of All Occurrences Relative to the Horrid Massacre at Dartmoor, . . . the Whole Carefully Compiled by a Prisoner in England, Who Was a Captive during the Whole War* (New York: Printed for the Author, 1852). See John Resch, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). The University of Scranton historian David Dzurec and Queen's University Ph.D. candidate Maria Moncur recently developed these themes in a session titled “Repercussions of the War of 1812: Memory and Identity in the Early Republic and Beyond,” held at the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic annual meeting in Philadelphia, July 2011.

of Buffalo Bill's Wild West conventionally opened with dramatic reenactments of victimhood on the overland trails, as actors posing as vulnerable travelers—men, women, and children—circled the wagons as they suffered supposedly unprovoked attacks by Indians. Such performances helped obscure and justify westward expansion and colonial dispossession in the West. And a similar inversion of the roles of victim and aggressor would become more common and continue into the twentieth century and beyond. The War of 1812, however, would offer a preview of this inversion, during the conflict and in its selective public memory—in the infamous River Raisin disaster.<sup>12</sup>

#### “REMEMBER THE RAISIN”

If American public memory rejected victimhood in the wake of the Dartmoor Massacre, it seemed to tentatively embrace it, conditionally and purposefully, particularly when it looked west. The River Raisin Massacre of January 1813 provides an example. General James Winchester had moved his small army of Kentucky volunteers imprudently north from the Maumee Valley in Ohio toward Frenchtown, along the River Raisin south of British-held Detroit, to rescue its inhabitants. Momentarily successful, the Americans rashly advanced too close to the enemy and too far from any possible support. A few days later, Winchester's men were overpowered by a superior force of British regulars, militia, and Indians; what began as a credible defense degenerated into panic, defeat, deaths, and surrender. On January 23 Indian allies of the British slaughtered some thirty to sixty wounded American prisoners left behind in Frenchtown. The incident shocked and embarrassed the British. It inflamed the Americans. The cry “Remember the Raisin” was seared into American public consciousness. Plundering, scalping, and atrocities besmirched the records of both sides in the conflict, but the horrific events at the River Raisin enabled an American propaganda war that charged the British with treachery, advanced the Democratic-Republicans' war agenda, and diverted attention from the ineptitude of its military efforts. Celebration of these victims aided recruitment; more important, it renewed familiar charges of Native savagery and sparked new

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12. See, for example, Richard White's essay in James Grossman, ed., *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library: Essays by Richard White and Patricia Limerick* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and see Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 61–62.

eruptions of Indian hating, even though Native people served on both sides in the war. William Henry Harrison, later (briefly) president of the United States, staked his claim to American heroism in part on his actions in response to the debacle, and after he died within thirty-two days of his 1841 inauguration, his tomb bore the inscription “Avenger of the Massacre of the River Raisin.” George Armstrong Custer grew up along the River Raisin in Monroe, Michigan, and in 1871 he had himself photographed with War of 1812 veterans at a monument commemorating the incident. Five years later, in 1876, Custer and his cavalry would fall “victim” to Cheyenne and Lakota forces at Little Bighorn in Montana. “Custer’s Last Stand” became an iconic event that classically transformed aggressor into victim, “victim” into hero, and battle into “massacre.”<sup>13</sup>

If Americans ultimately failed in their effort to conquer Canada, the war significantly advanced their conquest of the West against Native peoples struggling to preserve their homelands. At the Battle of the Thames in 1813, U.S. forces prevailed and killed Tecumseh, a Native leader critical to pantribal resistance. Along the country’s southwestern frontiers, General Andrew Jackson defeated the divided Creeks, which would effectively open up millions of acres for the westward expansion of the Cotton South. The Treaty of Ghent ending the war stipulated that the United States guarantee to western Indians the same status and territory as they possessed in 1811. But that status quo was not really restored. U.S. negotiators signed fourteen treaties between July and October 1815 but returned no land. Though the British government showed some concern for their Native allies—allies who had contributed significantly to their defense of Canada—they ultimately abandoned them to their unpromising fate, as they faced new waves of expansion by the American republic. White Americans soon forgot how tenuous their “victory” in the West had been, and few beyond the Old Northwest continued to remember the Raisin, though the tropes of savagery and white victimhood remained current. Postwar myth obscured history

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13. See Taylor, *Civil War of 1812*, 203–33, esp. 210–14; Reginald Horsman, “United States Indian Policies, 1776–1815,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 4, *Indian-White Relations*, ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), 38–39; John K. Mahon, “Indian-United States Military Situation, 1775–1848,” *Handbook of North American Indians*, 4:153–56; Tony Horwitz and Brian Wolly, “The Ten Things You Didn’t Know About the War of 1812,” at Smithsonian.com, May 22, 2012 (the above tidbits are obscure fact no. 6), [www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/The-10-Things-You-Didnt-Know-About-the-War-of-1812.html](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/The-10-Things-You-Didnt-Know-About-the-War-of-1812.html).

and helped naturalize and advance U.S. conquest of the North American continent.<sup>14</sup>

#### NEW NATIONAL FEELING

“Victory” unleashed a wave of American patriotism after 1815, which ironically emphasized the triumph of the American Revolution more than the split decision of the “late war.” The glories of the latter struggle—such as they were—were rendered indistinct as the war was subsumed by Revolutionary memory. As Albert Gallatin, a former Treasury secretary and a key negotiator at Ghent, observed, “The war has renewed and reinstated the national feelings and characters which the Revolution had given. The people . . . are more American; they feel and act more as a nation.” The years 1812–15 seemed to ratify the popular memory of 1776 and 1783, igniting a new nationalism (or rather nationalisms), expressed in politics, festive commemorations, architecture, arts, and literature.<sup>15</sup>

Infamously, the British had sacked Washington, D.C., in August 1814 and destroyed nearly all its public buildings, including the Capitol and president’s mansion. Famously, Dolley Madison had managed to save Gilbert Stuart’s full-length portrait of George Washington, which seems fitting, as Washington would remain the nation’s greatest hero. Though the ruined interior would require major renovation, the smoked-stained exterior of the president’s house soon received a bright new coat of paint and re-earned its long-term name, the White House. The Capitol, too, was restored and plans laid for a new Rotunda. In 1817 the renowned American history painter John Trumbull won a commission for four life-size pictures to adorn it: two military scenes (the surrender of British armies at Saratoga and Yorktown) and two civil scenes (*The Declaration of Independence* and *The Resignation of General Washington*). These paintings, focusing on the Revolution

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14. R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); Colin G. Calloway, *The Shawnees and the War for America* (New York: Viking, 2007); Mahon, “Indian–United States Military Situation,” 155; Horsman, “United States Indian Policies,” 37, 39.

15. Gallatin is quoted in Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71. On the emergence and growth of a locally and regionally (and sectionally) determined nationalism, see Peter Onuf, “Federalism, Republicanism, and the Origins of American Sectionalism,” in Edward L. Ayers et al., eds., *All over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11–37; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 246–93; Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, 40–42.

rather than the recent war, were completed between 1817 and 1824, and appreciative audiences for them grew as Trumbull took them on tour and had them engraved before ultimately installing them in the Capitol in 1826, the nation's jubilee.<sup>16</sup>

The American public soon learned that, like other great nations of the world, the United States had a suitable epic poet, supposedly the lyric equivalent of a Trumbull, at least according to a promotional piece published in *The Ariel: A Semimonthly Literary and Miscellaneous Gazette* in June 1828. He was Dr. Richard Emmons, the recent author of *The Fredoniad; or, Independence Preserved, an Epic Poem on the Late War of 1812*, available only at select bookshops. The literary notice trumpeted the work's mammoth length—"1200 pages of epic poetry!" in four volumes that the reviewer had not actually read. Emphasizing quantity over quality, he did list the titles of the poem's forty cantos, from "Description of Hell" to "Battle of New Orleans." And somewhat defensively (or tongue in cheek) he remarked, "Should this magnificent production arouse the sneers of envious critics, let the author console himself with the reflection that even Arioso was once accosted with the question 'where the devil did you pick up all this nonsense?'"<sup>17</sup>

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16. Jules David Prown, "John Trumbull as History Painter," in Helen A. Cooper, ed., *John Trumbull: The Hand and Spirit of a Painter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 39–40. Trumbull's most celebrated paintings were *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec* and *The Death of General Warren in the Battle of Bunker's Hill*, both depicting martyrdom and defeat. In keeping with the buoyant feelings of the time, he did not include them in an exhibition in the hall of the House of Representatives in January 1817, a lobbying effort that proved successful. Though perceived as an unprovoked attack, the burning of the White House was retribution for the sacking of York (later Toronto), the capital of Upper Canada, and the burning of the Parliament. The "president's house" had been white previously, but only as a result of whitewashing. For an early reference to "the white house," see "Tammany to President James Madison," in the *Alexandria Gazette*, May 10, 1810, reprinted from the *Baltimore Whig*, April 25, 1810. Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship*, 81, notes that the former British minister to the United States, Francis James Jackson, used the term the White House (without quotation marks, and capitalized as a proper noun) in a letter to Timothy Pickering, April 24, 1811.

17. "Epic Poems," *Ariel: A Semimonthly Literary and Miscellaneous Gazette*, June 14, 1828, 2, 4. See also Samuel Woodworth, *The Heroes of the Lake: A Poem, in Two Books* (New York: S. Woodworth and Co., 1813), an epic poem celebrating the Battle of Lake Erie and the Battle of the Thames, reproduced and insightfully analyzed by Matthew Allen, "The Heroes of the Lake: Samuel Woodworth's Epic poem on the Battle of Lake Erie," [www.xavier.edu/history/heroesofthelake/](http://www.xavier.edu/history/heroesofthelake/). In an

The War of 1812 fared better when annexed to remembrances of the Revolutionary War. Given the unimpressive facts and divisiveness of the conflict, which Federalist newspapers were happy to point out, it made sense to wrap the late war in the sacred, unifying public memory of the Revolution.<sup>18</sup> As the historian Sarah J. Purcell shows, the controversy and missteps of the War of 1812, the subject of widespread debate in the nation's newspapers, "accustomed the American public to political disagreement" and threatened to destabilize "military memory" more generally. The research of the historian Rachel Hope Cleves has uncovered a surprising and substantial antiwar rhetoric during the conflict that pilloried not merely politicians but American soldiers as well. Purcell argues that such turmoil endangered even the mythic standing of the American Revolution and its heroes. In the late war's aftermath, the ineffective, much criticized, and embittered War of 1812 General Henry Dearborn, for example, proved willing to attack a champion of the Battle of Bunker Hill, Israel Putnam. Such sniping, in a Fourth of July address and subsequently in print, caused a sensation. Purcell writes, "The controversy belied the notion of voluntary public unity and threatened to expose heroism as a mere cultural construction." Dearborn's rants were exceptional, and the public memory of the Revolution and its champions could withstand them. Indeed, the strength of that public memory would only increase, enduring as the touchstone for evaluating subsequent generations of Americans, as a commodity valuable

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1858 celebration of Oliver Hazard Perry's 1814 victory on Lake Erie, D. Bethune Duffield reportedly enthralled a large audience at Detroit and brought tears to veterans' eyes with the recitation of his epic poem about the event. A *New York Times* reporter noted that following the performance, no energy remained among the throngs to listen to the last remaining speech, to be delivered in mere prose, by the Hon. H. D. Mason of Toledo; instead, "betaking themselves to their respective boats, [the crowd] soon were speeding their way over the Lake homeward." "Perry's Victory on Lake Erie: Grand Celebration of the Anniversary at Put-in-Bay," *New York Times*, September 16, 1858.

18. The Federalist *Alexandria Gazette* (May 3, 1815) published a mock conversation between Madison and Monroe: "Says Jemmy Madison to James Monroe, /I've flogged the British rascals Jim, by Jo, /Have you so, says he? And after all what's gain'd? /What by your war, good sir, have you obtain'd?" Quoted in Burstein and Isenberg, *Madison and Jefferson*, 554. A New York newspaper in 1814 prophesied that in the next century a poet writing the epic debacle of the sacking of Washington might fittingly conclude with this verse: "Fly, Monroe, fly! /Run, Armstrong, run! /Were the last words of Madison." Quoted in "Washington, D.C., Captured and Burned 100 Years Ago," *New York Times*, August 23, 1914.

to all parties seeking to promote themselves and to disparage their political opponents.<sup>19</sup>

In a Fourth of July oration at the College of William and Mary's commencement in 1818, for example, John Mason Jr. conventionally began with words of gratitude "to the heroes of the revolution, whose bravery preserved our Country thro[ugh] the dread tempest of War." He ultimately came around to the War of 1812, expressing a certain Anglophobia and presenting that war as another test of America's Revolutionary spirit and its Constitution: "When Britain, proud, rapacious Britain by repeated depredations on the commerce of America, compelled her [the United States] once more to unsheathe the sword, under the guidance of this Constitution her armies marched from Victory to Victory, on land, while the red Cross of St.-George bowed to the star-spangled banner on the ocean." In the same year, Andrew Griswold Whitney's Fourth of July oration, delivered to civic notables and lyceum members in Detroit, suggested that Americans had passed a cosmic test. "The events of the late war have demonstrated to the world that 40 years of peace and commercial prosperity have not enervated the American Character: have not enfeebled the arms nor corrupted the hearts of our soldiers nor seamen. It has shown us repeatedly victors over the best troops of the Old World." He addressed veterans in the audience directly: "Gentlemen of the Army, the events of the late war in which you were engaged has shown that you have not studied the deeds of your fathers in vain. You have proved that their blood has not degenerated in your veins. . . . You have repeatedly vanquished the veterans of Europe, the conquerors of the Peninsula. You have raised the National Character, for valor, to the

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19. Purcell, *Sealed in Blood*, 136–37, 161–70; Rachel Hope Cleves, in "Interchange: The War of 1812," 531, expresses surprise at the willingness to criticize soldiers participating in the war—in stark contrast to public practice that celebrates U.S. soldiers today, regardless of the popular standing of the conflict. At Bunker Hill in Charlestown, Mass., in 1817, President James Monroe used his Fourth of July address more conventionally, and effectively, to appeal to shared patriotic recollections, based in the experience of the Revolution, to cement national union in the region most estranged during the War of 1812. The Battle of Bunker Hill martyr Joseph Warren proved to be a more plausible and useful hero than the much-rejected local nonhero General Henry Dearborn. Dearborn had been an ineffective commander of American forces on the Canadian frontier from 1812 to 1813; in 1815 his nomination to become secretary of War was defeated by the U.S. Senate, and he was beaten in 1817 as the Democratic-Republican candidate for governor of Massachusetts.

high ground on which it stood at the close of the Revolution. You could not hope to do more.”<sup>20</sup>

American public memory was transformed in these years. Not only was it militarized, in puffed-up fashion as Whitney’s oration suggests, but it was diversified geographically, and it was broadened and democratized. The Tennessean Andrew Jackson’s victories helped integrate western heroes into the American nationalist saga and opened the way for a new generation of backcountry politicians, most notably Jackson himself but also the likes of William Henry Harrison and James K. Polk.

Military memory began to acknowledge common soldiers and sailors and to emphasize heroic maritime achievements largely absent during the Revolution (except for the exploits of the self-promoting John Paul Jones). Necessity was the mother of invention here, as naval heroes were abundant in the 1812–15 conflict—Isaac Hull, Stephen Decatur, William Bainbridge, James Lawrence, Thomas Macdonough, Oliver Hazard Perry—while military champions (Jackson excepted) were not. The army’s limited successes were attributed to the heroic endurance of regular soldiers and volunteers, occurring despite, not because, of their military leaders.<sup>21</sup>

#### VENERABLE VETERANS

Informal gatherings of veterans, organized locally, took place throughout the nineteenth century and kept memories alive. In New York City a group

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20. Orations reprinted in Henry A. Hawken, ed., *Trumpets of Glory: Fourth of July Orations, 1786–1861* (Granby, Conn.: Salmon Brook Historical Society, 1976), 300, 305, 347–48. Matthew Rainbow Hale, in “Interchange: The War of 1812,” emphasizes the role of the War of 1812 in the emergence of a “new culture of war” in this country (531). He writes, “If a popular desire for war—or perhaps, more specifically, an eagerness to prove the military capacity of the United States against Britain—was at the heart of the march toward and willingness to engage in war, then many Americans’ positive, self-centered, and prideful evaluation of events between 1812 and 1815 appears much more understandable—or at the very least, a bit less ridiculous” (532).

21. On the rise of backcountry folk and politicians, see Matthew Rainbow Hale and Nicole Eustace in “Interchange: The War of 1812,” 527, 534. On the emergence of naval heroes, see Hicks, “Broadships on Land and Sea.” On the democratization of military memory following the War of 1812, see esp. Purcell, *Sealed in Blood*. For a slightly earlier episode in the democratization of public memory, see Matthew Dennis, “Patriotic Remains: Nationalism and Bones of Contention in the Early Republic,” in Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, eds., *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 136–48.

of ex-officers and soldiers of the Revolutionary War had formed in 1790, and they volunteered as a body for active service in June 1812. This mixed Revolutionary War and War of 1812 veterans' society continued to meet after the peace of 1815, and as time passed it was increasingly dominated by participants in the latter conflict. The conflation of veterans of these two wars extended the reach of Revolutionary War memory and served to democratize it. The enhanced longevity of the glorious struggle in American memory, personified in veterans of the First *and* Second War of Independence, helped support the illusion of national unity as that unity was increasingly challenged in the nineteenth century. In 1826 the group established itself as the Military Society of 1812, and in 1848 it merged with a similar organization, the Veterans Corps of Artillery. The ranks of living 1812 veterans thinned substantially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in 1890 the organization transformed its regulations to allow admission of hereditary members.<sup>22</sup>

In Baltimore memories were more fully cultivated. Here and in other places similarly visited and indelibly marked by the war (for example, Plattsburgh, Cleveland, and New Orleans), public memory endured, or at least faded less dramatically. As the military crisis passed after 1815, particularly in towns, cities, and regions removed from the war's theater, the War of 1812 was barely remembered, except by those who had actually served. But not in Baltimore. The militia companies and regular troops that successfully repelled the British attack on the city in 1814 became known as the Baltimore Defenders. They gathered on the first anniversary of the defense on September 12, 1815, to celebrate the occasion and lay the cornerstone for the city's Battle Monument. Thereafter the commemoration became an annual event. In 1841 the Defenders established a more formal organization, and in 1842 they received a Maryland state charter and attended a national encampment with veterans from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. On January 8, 1854, the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans, a meeting of veterans at Independence Hall in Philadelphia took the first steps in establishing a national umbrella organization, and subsequent gatherings eventually consolidated the various state groups into the General Society of the War of 1812, which persists and currently includes some thirty state associations.<sup>23</sup>

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22. "Name Rights of Societies: Contention of Society of the War of 1812 for Exclusive Use of Its Title Affirmed," *New York Times*, January 13, 1900.

23. The General Society of the War of 1812 is at [www.societyofthewarof1812.org/](http://www.societyofthewarof1812.org/); the Society of the War of 1812 in Maryland is at <http://maryland.society.thewarof1812.info>.

In the postbellum United States, War of 1812 veterans acquired relic status, not so much because of the particular importance of the war itself, but simply because they were the oldest living American veterans. Late nineteenth-century newspapers reported their passing, particularly as fewer and fewer remained. The ancient veterans connected Americans with a remote past, nearly to the days of the American Revolution, a time untainted by the bitterness and devastation of the more proximate Civil War. Their celebration could even help rehabilitate the reputations of northern Democrats, such as those in New York City, stained by their limited support of the Civil War. Their memory thus aided purposeful forgetting. The hoary veterans of 1812 offered the safety of nostalgia and symbolized a generalized American patriotism in these years, and they could be treated with a superficial reverence or even light humor.

In August 1879, for example, the *New York Times* offered this headline: “The Veterans at a Picnic; Survivors of the Second War; The Old Campaigners of 1812 Enjoying Themselves among the Trees and Bugs and Beer and Joining in the Mazy Dance.” The outing was under the management of the Continental Washington Guard, which again suggests the dominance and authority of Revolutionary War memory, “and there were so many Continental uniforms about” that it reminded the imaginative reporter “of the days when we were fighting the Britishers, when the residents of Boston were making cold tea in their harbor.” The uniforms, “adorned with the mystic figures, ’76, should, of course, fill every American’s heart with patriotism and make his blood boil with pride and things,” he wrote. “But somehow, it doesn’t,” which the reporter took as a good thing, given the temperatures of the midsummer day. The veterans, “of whom there are less than a score left in the city,” were described as “jolly and as spry and fond of spinning yarns . . . as any old warriors could reasonably be expected to be.” “It may also be added, parenthetically,” he wrote, “that the veteran is fond of his beer.” The group had chartered two barges to take them up the Hudson, but only one was needed, given the modest turnout. “It was expected that everybody who is at present enjoying any of the advantages derived from the war of 1812 [unspecified and apparently few] would take interest enough in the occasion to go along. But the crowds who talk of the spirit of ’76, and sing the ‘Sword of Bunker Hill,’ did not go bravely to the rescue.” The veterans’ destination, Spring Grove, was described unappealingly as “one of the places where five-cent cigars vie with stale beer in attracting custom.” While members of the group were “enjoying themselves sitting on the green grass, picking black ants out of all parts of their dress, the rain began to fall, and there was a rapid retreat.” The

veterans made “an early start for home on account of the rain, and 1812 took a rest for another year.” Thus, the party and the memory of the war (or remembrance of its dominant partner, the Revolution) slipped back into oblivion, having offered readers a preciously quaint and diverting recollection easier for Americans to assimilate than the more troubling memory of the latest “late war.”<sup>24</sup>

The oldest living veteran, Hiram Cronk, finally succumbed at age 105 in May 1905 at his home in Ava, in upstate New York. In his last days, Cronk was subjected to a wave of impressive delegations, including one led by the president of the New Jersey Society of the War of 1812 in April, just before he died. Cronk had played a minor role in the war, serving twice at Sackets Harbor, on the second occasion as a substitute. His daughter explained, “Of course, it wasn’t any Port Arthur at Sackets Harbor. There were a few skirmishes, but I guess the fighting wasn’t what they would call severe. Still he was there as a soldier, and he stayed there till the war was over.” Cronk’s primary accomplishment—perhaps like the United States’ in the war itself—was simple survival. Yet despite his humble part, Cronk’s longevity and the country’s patriotic desires earned him a grand funeral, with full military honors. He lay in state in New York’s City Hall, and then an elaborate procession conveyed his body across the Brooklyn Bridge to its place of interment on Victory Hill, in Cypress Hills Cemetery. One hundred and fifty policemen were required to manage the large crowds at City Hall, and according to one newspaper report, “during the noon hour [when Cronk was already in Brooklyn] it was estimated that 10,000 persons visited the building under the impression that the body was still there.”<sup>25</sup>

The impressive public memorializing of Private Hiram Cronk exemplifies the democratization of American public memory, which had begun early in the nineteenth century and grew in the aftermath of the Civil War, as the United States struggled to assimilate its unprecedented losses. If Cronk was emblematic of an American Everyman, however, the hereditary organizations that emerged in the 1890s, some of which elevated descendants of the War of 1812 in particular, were elitist, not plebian. The United

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24. *New York Times*, August 5, 1879.

25. “Cronk, 105 Years Old, and Does Not Know It; Sole Survivor of War of 1812 Visited on His Birthday,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1905; “Soldiers Escort Body of Last 1812 Veteran,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1905. Port Arthur, on the coast of China, had been in the news during the winter of 1904–5, when Japanese forces laid siege to the Russian-held port in the course of the Russo-Japanese War. Casualties associated with the siege (killed, wounded, and missing) were estimated at an astonishing 57,000 for the Japanese and 31,000 for the Russians.

States Daughters of 1812 and the General Society of the War of 1812 took their place alongside the more famous Mayflower Society, the Sons and the Daughters of the American Revolution, and others, which admitted members based on blood descent and thus excluded most Americans—pointedly, recent immigrants from southern and central Europe.<sup>26</sup>

Actually, a diverse array of Americans could claim the honor of service to their country in the War of 1812. Irish Americans were prominent in their participation, for example, even before the great waves of immigration following the Irish Potato Famine, and American Indians served distinctively and proudly as well, among them the famed Seneca orator Red Jacket and the prominent Pequot activist and author William Apess. Occasionally, the public confronted the fact that not all the war's veterans were white, as in January 1896 when a *New York Times* headline reported the death of Peter Peterson, an African American: "A Negro Centenarian Dead; Peterson Left His Master to Fight in the War of 1812." Peter Peterson had been born a slave in 1795 and lived in bondage in Florida and Alabama before becoming a drummer boy in the War of 1812 and later a soldier in the Mexican War. Slavery endured in the United States until the Civil War, but for Peter Peterson, unlike most African Americans, it came to an end in the War of 1812. In the antebellum and postbellum United States, remembrance of black military service, which had begun in the Revolution and continued in subsequent wars, played a critical role in African American claims to equality and full citizenship, though even the extraordinary military sacrifice of black soldiers in the Civil War was often underrepresented in American public memory.<sup>27</sup>

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26. See especially Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans' and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

27. "A Negro Centenarian Dead; Peterson Left His Master to Fight in the War of 1812," *New York Times*, January 6, 1896; Peter Peterson had been born in 1795 and died in Fenhurst on Long Island. The service of African Americans in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812 had long been emphasized by African American activists and abolitionists, and in 1851 the black Boston reformer William C. Nell first published *Services of Colored Americans, in the Wars of 1776 and 1812* (Boston: Prentiss & Sawyer, 1851). The Abolitionist Wendell Phillips provided an introduction to the second edition (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1852), and in his preface Nell quotes John Greenleaf Whittier: "When we see a whole nation doing honor to the memories of one class of its defenders, to the total neglect of another class, who had the misfortune to be of darker complexion, we cannot forego the satisfaction of inviting notice to certain historical facts, which, for the last half century, have been quietly elbowed aside, as no more deserving of a place in patriotic recollection, than the descendants of men, to whom the facts in question relate,

The popular author Mrs. Roger A. Pryor wrote on the occasion of Decoration Day in 1898, “We live in an age of patriotic societies, nearly all of which commemorate the victorious conflicts of our country. . . . As many as seventeen of these societies already exist, all, except one, of recent birth.” But what were the implications? Pryor quoted “an irreverent writer,” who characterized such exclusive associations “as Badges, Buttons, and Banquets, their object being ostensibly to put up a monument, to erect a historical building, but really to belong to something exclusive to one’s self, and then to keep other people out.” Pryor noted: “In order to enter these societies, the blood of the dead hero must flow in the veins of the applicant. It has, therefore, been urged against them that their vaunted ‘patriotism’ is only an extended selfishness.” Real patriotism, she suggested, “springs ultimately from the habit men acquire of regarding their nation as a great organic whole.” The United States was more divided than organically whole, of course, and some Americans continue to lament and contest the differential possession of equality and civil rights, but the public celebration and memory of military service remained among the best tools for asserting male claims to full American citizenship.<sup>28</sup>

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have to a place in a Fourth of July procession, [in the nation’s estimation.]” Whittier’s own 1847 oration had thus lamented, “Of the services and suffering of the Colored Soldiers of the Revolution, no attempt has, to our knowledge, been made to preserve a record. They have had no historian.” Nell became this historian, not merely of those who served in the Revolution but of those who fought in the War of 1812 as well. Such service was critical to the campaign to achieve equality for African Americans in antebellum Massachusetts and the North generally, as well as the movement to contest and resist southern slavery. Of course, after the Civil War, in which some 200,000 African Americans served, black veterans prominently contested the premature abandonment of Reconstruction and the amnesia that accompanied postwar reconciliation of North and South. Though the Civil War completely eclipsed the memory of the War of 1812 (what was left of it), notice of the death of a black veteran of America’s earlier wars, in 1812–15 and 1846–48, struck the public as a novelty and enhanced African American postbellum claims to citizenship and equal rights that were based in part on military service and sacrifice.

28. Sarah Agnes (Rice) Pryor was a popular author—*The Mother of Washington and Her Times* (1903), *Reminiscences of Peace and War* (1904), *The Birth of the Nation: Jamestown, 1607* (1907), and *My Day: Reminiscences of a Long Life* (1909)—and the wife of former Confederate Brigadier General Roger Atkinson Pryor. Pryor had moved his family to New York City after the war, where he underwent a “conversion,” becoming first a law partner with the former Union general, prominent Republican party congressman, and Massachusetts governor Benjamin F. Butler, then a judge and Democratic party politician. Mrs. Roger A. Pryor, “The Genesis of Decoration Day,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1898.

## NAVAL POWER

By the dawn of the twentieth century, whether populist or elitist, the memory of the War of 1812 had found new utility, expressed clearly at the annual meeting and banquet of the United States Daughters of 1812 at Delmonico's in New York on January 8, 1900. The orator of the day began with the requisite gesture to the American Revolution: "I believe I shall not exaggerate when I say that a very large portion of the people of the United States are not aware of the fact that the war of 1812 constituted the coping stone of the edifice of American independence." But then he referred to more recent developments: "Those of us who have lately been thrilled with pride at the annihilation of the Spanish fleet on the morning of May 1, 1898, in Manila Bay, and by the destruction of the ships of Cervera off Santiago on July 3 of the same year should bear in mind the fact that the supremacy of the American Navy was created by the war of 1812."<sup>29</sup>

In an age of rising global imperialism, the U.S. Navy would play a critical role, and the War of 1812 offered a retroactive pedigree, a set of heroes, and valued lessons. The public memory of the war constructed in the early nineteenth century had exaggerated American international reach and martial power. In the early twentieth century American might (or its potential military strength) was more credible, and commentators doubled down on older historical claims. When the influential historian and naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan added two new volumes to his series *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* in 1905, addressing *Sea Power in Relation to the War of 1812*, one reviewer asserted, "The war of 1812 was, as everyone knows, preeminently a naval war." Helping make such a claim "common knowledge" was Theodore Roosevelt, himself the author of *The Naval War of 1812* (1882); by 1883 that work had gone through three editions, and by 1886 it was, by regulation, required equipment on all U.S. Navy vessels. While assistant secretary of the Navy in the spring of 1897, Roosevelt completed a volume commissioned by the English newspaper correspondent

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29. "The Daughters of 1812: Flag Presentation at the General Society's Meeting—President Guggenheimer on America's Second War," *New York Times*, January 9, 1900. In 1896 the Massachusetts Historical Society acquired an important relic of the war, which celebrated naval power dating to the 1812 conflict—a commemorative cane fashioned from the live oak timbers of the U.S.S. *Constitution*, commonly known as Old Ironsides, presented by Isaac Hull to John Quincy Adams in 1836. The society already had in its collection a powder horn taken from the *Guerrière*, a British ship that Old Ironsides had famously defeated in 1812, donated in 1833; see *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d ser., 3 (Cambridge: E. W. Metcalf, 1833), 407.

and historian Sir William Laird Clowes, editor of the official history of the British navy. Roosevelt's *The War with the United States, 1812–1815* ultimately appeared in 1901 in England as volume 6 of *The Royal Navy: A History* (1897–1903) and was reprinted in the United States as *The Naval Operations of the War between Great Britain and the United States, 1812–1815*. These works argued strenuously for the creation and maintenance of a powerful navy; the United States had won on the sea in 1812, and its navy would be critical to the country's power in the coming century, Roosevelt asserted. The public memory of the War of 1812 thus possessed a sort of commodity value; when shaped correctly, it could be resurrected and retailed to great effect during the centenary celebrations of 1912–15, as the Great War erupted in Europe, and as the Anglo-American alliance seemed vital.<sup>30</sup>

#### CENTURY OF PEACE

Feelings of Anglophobia had accompanied the post-1815 rise of American nationalism. Americans recalled British brutality in its first two wars, the Dartmoor Massacre echoing the horrific confinement of Americans in prison ships during the Revolution, and the burning of Washington constituting the ultimate insult, supposedly a vindictive act of vandalism by the embittered British, losers of the American War for Independence. Americans sought to assert their autonomy and sovereignty politically and diplomatically, economically and culturally. In 1833, for example, the lawyer and poet Alexander Beaufort Meek delivered a Fourth of July oration at the State House in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which declared: "It is a shame and a disgrace upon our People, that we look up to England for every thing great and sublime in Literature and Art. We look to her for criticism, praise, and even for the very success of our own works. We have genius here; we have philosophers, historians, critics, poets, novelists, equal to any that have ever written or sung. Why then do we bow to others? Can we not have a standard of our own? We want an American Mind!"<sup>31</sup>

30. "Capt. Mahan; The Distinguished Naval Authority's Two New Volumes on the War of 1812," *New York Times*, November 18, 1905; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (1882; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1999), xii–xiii; Roosevelt, *The Naval Operations of the War between Great Britain and the United States, 1812–1815* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901). And see Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1979), 58.

31. Alexander Beaufort Meeks, "Oration at Tuscaloosa, Alabama, July 4, 1833," reprinted in Hawken, *Trumpets of Glory*, 317. Ralph Waldo Emerson more famously and prominently made such points, without Anglophobic intentions, in his "American Scholar" address, sometimes referred to as America's "Intellectual Declaration

But anti-English prejudice faded in the United States; it was largely absent by the second half of the nineteenth century, replaced by a growing Anglophilia. As the hundredth anniversary of the War of 1812 approached, Americans resurrected the history of Anglo-American war but focused particular attention to the postwar peace. “Since the close of the war the two great English-speaking nations have been at peace,” a richly illustrated *New York Times* foldout proclaimed on June 12, 1912. “The centenary of the opening of hostilities for the last time between these countries will also attract attention to the hundred years of peace that have intervened since the proclamation of hostilities.” Another article describing upcoming centenary celebrations in 1914 similarly emphasized not war but Anglo-American peace: “The end of the battle of Plattsburg [1814] marks the beginning of the century of peace.” On an earlier visit to the battle site, it was reported, the English ambassador had been impressed by “this unusual circumstance of victors and vanquished being buried together.” Townspeople in Plattsburgh had tended the graves of both sets of dead. This rite of Anglo-American reconciliation—between the Blue and the Red—seems to have paralleled the North-South memorial rites of reunion between the Blue and the Gray that had begun in the 1870s. These acts of reconciliation, small and large, required the cultivation of some memories at the expense of others. In both cases, the animosities and causes of “civil war,” which pitted Britons against former British subjects, Anglo-North Americans, and then citizens of the United States, were obscured, while commonalities, common histories, and common destinies were recalled. Changing circumstances and current demands—particularly the challenges of a world war—seemed to encourage former combatants to forgive and forget.<sup>32</sup>

#### FORGETTING

“The war to end all wars” was followed by another world war, and then by yet another major conflict in Korea. The War of 1812 further slipped

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of Independence.” It was subsequently published in his collection *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* in 1849; see Emerson, “The American Scholar: An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, August 31, 1837,” in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 51–71. On Anglophobia, see Lawrence A. Peskin, “Conspiratorial Anglophobia and the War of 1812,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (December 2011): 647–69; Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

32. “Our Last War with England One Hundred Years Ago: Famous Events, on Land and Sea, of the Struggle That Started in 1812, Since Which We Have Lived through a Century of Peace with Our Opponent,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1912;

Americans' minds. By the sesquicentennial year of 1962, the War of 1812 had been more thoroughly forgotten; it was a mere footnote. That there was anything at all to commemorate was itself news in the 1960s. A *New York Times* writer, Brooks Atkinson, commented: "Although the War of 1812 gave us our National Anthem, the celebrations of the current sesquicentennial lack exuberance. There's a good reason. In the grumpy language of World War II, it was a colossal snafu." Atkinson acknowledged, "After a century and a half, we can feel humorous about its many follies. But many Americans hated it at the time." Perhaps in a more ironic age, the ineptitude and calamities that characterized the war were more easily acknowledged and the actual carnage devalued. The commemoration engaged history buffs and was a boon to boosterism in those places, such as Plattsburg or Baltimore, lucky enough to have once been sites of the war's devastation. In 1964 Plattsburg hailed the 150th anniversary of its battle with a pageant and a week of festivities, commencing on July 4, even though the historic event being remembered occurred on September 11, 1814. The earlier, more illustrious date was determined by promoters to be better suited to tourism. In such slippage we can see the literal commodity value of the past—a means of cashing in on selective public memory, represented as "history," deployed as a tool for the distinctive marketing of localities.<sup>33</sup>

If the Plattsburg commemoration was transformed by its Chamber of Commerce into a (chronologically) movable feast, in other places the War of 1812 was simply forgotten or, worse, obliterated. The most poignant example might be Cleveland in the late nineteenth century, where public memories of the event did not merely lapse but were, rather, consciously demolished—a development as controversial at the time as the later decamping of the city's infamous twenty-first-century former hero, LeBron James. Unlike James, the War of 1812 champion Oliver Hazard Perry did not go willingly. To celebrate his naval victory in the Battle of Lake Erie in

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"To Celebrate Centenary of Battle of Plattsburg," *New York Times*, September 6, 1914.

33. Brooks Atkinson, "Sesquicentennial of War of 1812 Is Said to Be Lacking in Exuberance," *New York Times*, October 5, 1962; "A July Fete in Plattsburg; Event to Commemorate Role Area Played in War of 1812," *New York Times*, June 7, 1964, Travel Section, 7. The War of 1812 failed to meet the standards of the Second World War—the so-called Good War—against which other conflicts have been judged since the second half of the twentieth century. Ironically, as a few commentators have pointed out, in at least one aspect, the two are similar—they represent the first war and the last war in United States history to be formally declared by Congress.

1814, Clevelanders erected a memorial to Perry in centrally located Monument Park in 1860. A mere thirty years later the city razed it to build a new one, to commemorate the more recent, more significant Civil War. The monument commission did so over substantial opposition and only after the intervention of the Ohio Supreme Court. Coincidentally, the Perry monument's ultimate defeat came on the anniversary of the hero's great victory—it was destroyed on September 12, 1892. On July 4, 1894, Cleveland dedicated a new memorial in the place of honor once occupied by Perry in Monument Park; it honored the soldiers and sailors who had fought in the Civil War, among them some ten thousand men of Cuyahoga County, nearly three thousand of whom had been killed or disabled.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the ultimate expressions of the War of 1812's trivial status, conveyed with dollops of local whimsy, occur today in coastal Connecticut, in festivals commemorating the losses at two towns, Stonington and Essex, invaded by the British in 1814. For nearly a hundred years, townspeople have celebrated the Battle of Stonington, in which a British naval squadron pounded the village with more than fifty tons of shells, rockets, missiles, and cannonballs. Miraculously, the bombardment caused little damage or bloodshed, and as the British withdrew on August 10, the townspeople declared victory and inaugurated their annual holiday on August 11, which has lagged at times but persists to this day. The April 8, 1814, invasion of Essex was more costly; it resulted in the short occupation of the town and the destruction of some twenty-eight ships. On the second Saturday of each May since 1964—the war's sesquicentennial—Essex commemorates the “Burning of the Ships” with its Loser's Day Parade down Main Street and other festive events. Such creative, quirky, and harmless remembrances

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34. Other monuments continue to honor Perry, including a massive, 353-foot Doric column at Put-in-Bay, constructed during the centenary, 1912–15. See “Perry's Victory on Lake Erie: Grand Celebration at Put-in Bay,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1858, and a report in *New York Times*, September 14, 1860, on the Perry monument's dedication; on the destruction and replacement of the memorial, see John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 94, and Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, 234. On the recent sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War in Cleveland (likely again to dwarf remembrance of the War of 1812), see Brian Albrecht, “Ohio and Cleveland's Role in the Civil War Recognized on 150th Anniversary Year,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 10, 2011, [http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/04/ohio\\_and\\_clevelands\\_role\\_in\\_th.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/04/ohio_and_clevelands_role_in_th.html). Not surprisingly (or inappropriately), the Civil War's sesquicentennial has largely obscured national commemorations of the War of 1812.

might not be hostile to history, but they deploy the past for a different purpose—to build community, to brand a place and increase its marketability, and to have some fun. Forgetting the remote terror and destruction of a distant age is a privilege of the present, and perhaps a source of profit.<sup>35</sup>

#### STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

The past—even the obscure past—is an invaluable resource for American boosters, as we have seen above, and Troy, New York, in its postindustrial predicament, must feel fortunate to have its own historical artifact to claim and promote—a relic of the War of 1812. No battle was fought at this latter-day Troy, but the city is now reckoned as the birthplace of “Uncle Sam.” Antiquarians tell us that the folkloric personification of the U.S. federal government, Uncle Sam, dates from the War of 1812. During the conflict, one Sam Wilson of Troy, New York, supplied provisions to American troops in the northern theater, often shipping this material in barrels marked with the initials “U.S.” Legend has it that a soldier asked what the “U.S. stands for” and received this reply: “Why, Uncle Sam Wilson. It is he who is feeding the army.” The attribution apparently caught on, so much so that a *Troy Post* article on September 7, 1813, reported, “This cant name for our government has got almost as common as John Bull.” The rest, as they say, is history.<sup>36</sup>

In the end, the most lasting contribution of the War of 1812 to American public memory has been Francis Scott Key’s “Star-Spangled Banner,” which still proudly waves as the country’s national anthem. After Baltimore’s successful defense in September 1814, Key composed a poem, “The Defense of Fort M’Henry.” He later set its words to the tune of a popular English drinking song, “To Anacreon in Heaven,” and its name was changed to “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Anacreon was an ancient Greek poet noted for his songs praising love and wine, and “To Anacreon in Heaven” probably originated with the Anacreontic Club of London, a male group dedicated to wine, women, and song. Key’s adaptation transformed a popular

35. James Boylan, “The Glorious Tenth: Stonington’s Own Holiday,” *Historical Footnotes* (August 1999), Stonington Historical Society, [www.stoningtonhistory.org/index.php?id=56](http://www.stoningtonhistory.org/index.php?id=56); more heroic is Philip Freneau’s 1815 poem, “The Battle of Stonington, on the Seaboard of Connecticut”; “A Quaint and Sleepy Town; Why the Battle of Stonington Is Not to Be Celebrated with a Sham Fight,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1883. By tradition, the Essex annual commemoration is unpublicized, but see, for example, Jeni Gray-Roberts, “Essex, Connecticut: Loser’s Day Parade,” April 11, 2007, [www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/15191](http://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/15191).

36. See David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America’s Founding Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 229.

drinking song (an English one at that) into something more serious, more stirring, more American.<sup>37</sup>

The heroic air employs numerous stanzas to proclaim national survival, symbolized by the flag that continued to wave over a besieged Baltimore fort. Who can fail to recall those immortal words from the third verse celebrating the American destruction of its British foes?

Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.

Of course nearly everyone has forgotten these embarrassingly blood-soaked phrases, from a time when slavery still existed in the United States (but not in Britain), along with the lyrics in every verse beyond the first. Even the anthem's first verse has not fared well: "Oh, say can you see, by the danzerly light?" is a question many a schoolchild has asked, ingeniously crafting a new adjective for early morning. Adults can butcher the words and tune as well, displaying their ineptitude not infrequently when performing before sporting events, for example. Such entertainers, even when they remember the lyrics, often translate the sacred song into their favorite idiom, inflecting it with rock, country, or other musical styles, speeding it up or slowing it down to a dirge. And appreciative fans often punctuate the anthem's last, drawn-out line with indecorous cheers and whoops. Such performances, from Igor Stravinsky's modernist version of 1944 through Jimi Hendrix's electric guitar star-spangled Woodstock fandango of 1969, have even inspired a "Star-Mangled Banner" website.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" was not immediately embraced or always treated with reverence. Nineteenth-century temperance advocates parodied it, for example: "Oh! Who has not seen by the dawn's early light, / Some bloated drunkard to home weakly reeling?" Foreign-language versions have been common. German and Latvian translations date to the 1860s, for example, and later, Yiddish, French, and other renditions have appeared, including a Spanish-language anthem that caused controversy amid the

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37. The story is narrated heroically in Margaret Scedeen, *Star-Spangled Banner: Our Nation and Its Flag* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1993); for more critical assessment, see Cecelia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), and Matthew Dennis, "The Star-Spanglish Banner: It's Truly All American," *Eugene (Ore.) Register-Guard*, May 5, 2006.

immigration debates of 2007. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Education had printed the anthem in Spanish in 1919 to cultivate among immigrants a love of their new country. Meanwhile, the song was played at baseball games during the World Series in 1918, and on special occasion thereafter, but not routinely during the regular season. Some owners objected to its overuse, fearing that it trivialized the song and showed disrespect. By the Second World War, however, the anthem's performance became conventional for virtually all American sporting events. Americans have largely forgotten the War of 1812, but its "Star-Spangled Banner" lives on as more than a relic, oddly embodying America as a place of adaptation, creativity, and transformation.

STARSPANGLED200.COM

"The legacy of the War of 1812 is alive in Maryland with a 32-month commemoration, Star-Spangled 200, led by the Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission," its executive director, William J. Pencek Jr., announced recently through an e-mail listserve hosted by the indefatigable War of 1812 historian Donald Hickey. Pencek heads up perhaps the most active and ambitious 1812 commemorative and promotional effort in the United States today, but many other history buffs, boosters, and government officials are intent on making Americans remember the forgotten conflict, at least as much to promote tourism and generate revenue and profits as to cultivate historical knowledge. In virtually every conceivable historical site that might be associated with the war, initiatives have emerged to put local places on the map, lure tourists, revitalize local economies, and make money. History, mediated through commercialized memory, is a valuable resource, and Americans are mining it, as they have done repeatedly, at least since the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

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38. E-mail communication on War of 1812 listserve, from Bill Pencek, September 3, 2012. William J. Pencek Jr. is Deputy Assistant Secretary, Maryland Division of Tourism, Film, and the Arts; Maryland Department of Business & Economic Development; and Executive Director, Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission. The Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission's official website is at [www.starspangled200.org](http://www.starspangled200.org). Star-Spangled 200, a public-private partnership, is at [www.starspangled200.com](http://www.starspangled200.com). Various logos attached to these efforts, as well as links to sponsors, clearly reflect the corporate involvement (e.g., "Star Spangled 200 presented by AT&T"). *Key Notes* is the official e-newsletter of the Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission; see, for example, [www.emarketingmd.org/Tourism/Key\\_Notes/September\\_12/Index.html#](http://www.emarketingmd.org/Tourism/Key_Notes/September_12/Index.html#). For the beginning of historic tourism in the early nineteenth century, see Thomas A. Chambers, *Memories of War: Visiting*

Most dramatically, Maryland's bicentennial campaign kicked off in June 2012 with the "Star-Spangled Sailabration," an international parade of tall ships and navy vessels, an airshow that featured the Blue Angels, the world premier of a new symphonic work, and seven days of free public entertainment in Baltimore. According to a post-Sailabration economic-impact report and press release, the fete attracted 1.54 million visitors and generated more than \$166.1 million for the city, state, and region. With public expenditures tallying \$4.8 million, the investment yielded \$35 for every dollar spent—a historic success. Commissions in other states, regional consortiums, individual towns and communities, private and public institutions, and corporate America have boarded the bicentennial bandwagon. New memorials have been dedicated. One in suburban Washington, D.C., at Blandenburg Balloon Park, for example, commemorates the disastrous Battle of Blandenburg in 1814 and aspires to be the centerpiece of larger renewal efforts. "But," as a *Washington Post* feature report acknowledged, "the task of creating a modern-day tourist attraction is somewhat daunting for the area. . . . With its strip malls, manufacturing companies and mid-rises, it is more Anytown, U.S.A., than Colonial Williamsburg." An economic development aide lamented, "You have very historic sites lost in the commercial clutter of 21st-century America. . . . There are sacred battlefields where people died and changed the course of history next to used-car lots and liquor stores." And Blandenburg's main street is a congested commuter route carrying more than 50,000 vehicles a day—a risky and unenticing place for tourists.<sup>39</sup>

In other locales, often with more scenic potential, pageantry and promotion by local chambers of commerce have been designed to attract tourist dollars, and timely art exhibitions, festivals, museum displays, and spruced-up historical sites mark the commemoration during its regrettably brief duration (through February 2015—the legacy of a time when the U.S. fought short wars). All these efforts might nonetheless remain obscure for most Americans, unless they live near the theaters of the 1812–15 conflict, particularly the Chesapeake, the Great Lakes, coastal New England, and New Orleans. The war is perhaps more likely to come to the homes of

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*Battlefields and Bonefields in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

39. "Star-Spangled Sailabration: The National Launch of the Bicentennial of the Star-Spangled Banner and the War of 1812," Economic Impact and Audience Research Report Prepared by Forward Analytics, October 18, 2012. Miranda S. Spivack, "The New Battle for Blandenburg," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2012.

widely dispersed middle-class Americans through public television specials, the occasional feature article in newspapers and magazines, and the latest series of books and the doll depicting one Caroline Abbott of Sackets Harbor, New York, a new fictional character in the American Girl series beloved by so many elementary school girls. In November 2012 Caroline was “launched” at the American Girl banner store on Fifth Avenue in New York City, attended by reenactors representing Sackets Harbor, Ogdensburg, and the Thousand Islands International Tourism Council, there to help sell dolls and promote their historic towns and tourist delights.<sup>40</sup>



Surely, the dim spotlight shining on the War of 1812 on the occasion of its bicentenary will marginally increase historical awareness, knowledge, and understanding. Professional historians deserve credit for their dogged work to enrich Americans’ sense of the War of 1812, its consequences and implications, even if they are unlikely to make a major dent in American public memory. Though the temptation is powerful to adopt a declensionist narrative about the state of the Americans’ historical knowledge and understanding, many historians have instead pursued a more realistic and opportunistic path, like the one recommended by the historian Alan Taylor. Conceding the public’s desire to feel good about its nation, Taylor writes, “My strategy is to acknowledge openly the (limited) value of the nationalistic narrative. Then we have a chance to identify elements left out of traditional narratives—and to identify alternative stories that can also be told.”<sup>41</sup> What has been left out in expressions of American public memory is in part a function

40. “American Girl Caroline Wows Them in NYC,” *Watertown (N.Y.) Daily Times*, November 23, 2012; “New York Area Girls Celebrate Caroline® at American Girl Place® Event,” I♥NY The Beat, November 9, 2012, <http://thebeat.iloveny.com/new-york-area-girls-celebrate-caroline%AE-at-american-girl-place%AE-event-5842.html>. Among the examples of official state bicentennials, see the website of the Michigan Commission on the Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the War at [www.michigan.gov/war1812](http://www.michigan.gov/war1812); and Virginia’s Bicentennial of the American War of 1812 Commission website at <http://va1812bicentennial.dls.virginia.gov/>; the latter site announces that, like Maryland, Virginia now has 1812 bicentennial license plates available for automobile owners registering in the state. In the Washington, D.C., area, the National Park Service and a consortium of other historical sites has sponsored the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, and the individual sites within the National Park system have organized or will organize their own commemorative events, such as the Natchez Trace Parkway’s “Partnership to Bring the War of 1812 to Life,” for example; see [www.nps.gov/history/1812/](http://www.nps.gov/history/1812/).

41. Alan Taylor in “Interchange: The War of 1812,” 529.

of what has been included, because “remembering” often entails willful acts of amnesia—the exclusion or occlusion of facts and ideas that contradict favored narratives. And the selective stories Americans have told themselves have served particular interests and have had political and material consequences. What are some of these consequences? We should not overstate the significance of the War of 1812 in American public memory, but it did play a role in promoting the dominance of the Democratic-Republican party and its standard-bearers, who increasingly represented new regional (particularly western) expansionist interests, new political styles, and new versions of American nationalism. This nationalism was less firm or uniform than it might appear, and different localized visions of Americanism coexisted, but the good feeling that followed the war helped obscure such division and sectionalism, which smoldered and later erupted in the Civil War. Meanwhile, the American public drew lessons from the War of 1812, encapsulated in their memory of the supposed triumph, which helped set the country on a particular course—encouraging a self-righteous, hubristic, and militarist expansionism, sometimes justified by an inflated sense of victimhood. The transformation of the war into a Second War of Independence through the medium of public memory, particularly by conflating it with the American Revolution, blurred divisions (regional, economic, ideological), overstated American unity of identity and purpose, and helped relieve Americans of the necessity of confronting the contradictions at their core—particularly the growth of slavery and the pursuit of imperial expansion that some might regard as antithetical to a republic. As even an event such as the War of 1812 shows, the past has a certain commodity value—one that might actually increase as it’s unmoored from the constraints of history—which can be used to bolster nationalism and patriotism (or particular versions thereof), to advance particular political agendas, and even to promote commerce, tourism, and local economic development. Nonetheless, the recent attention garnered by the long-forgotten War of 1812—at least in some parts of the country—presents historians with an opportunity to help Americans “remember” their past better, as history rather than as myth, heritage, local lore, or commercial consumption alone. The stakes are relatively low—if the early memory of the war was subsumed by the Revolution, the Civil War sesquicentennial has placed this anniversary at least in partial eclipse. Still, Americans’ limited knowledge of the War of 1812 suggests there are fewer misconceptions to correct and perhaps greater gains to be made in the historical understanding of that late, late war.