

The War of 1812

Many generations have come and gone since the time when the most friendly and peaceable international border in the world was a place of embittered conflict and brutal battles.

The War of 1812—fought nearly two centuries ago—is a war worth remembering. The outcome shaped the identity and geography of North America and helped define our national cultures and heritage. WNED is proud to lead the way on Bicentennial activities through the presentation of a comprehensive film history for PBS, a stunning companion book, a comprehensive website, and a robust bi-national educational initiative.



To fully understand this multi-faceted conflict and truly appreciate the deep significance it bears, one must look carefully through the prisms of its four divergent points of view. The British, American, Canadian and Native perspectives all reveal important truths—and myths—about this historic event and the timeless lessons that come with it.

The essays that follow have been written by four of several leading scholars featured in the “War of 1812” documentary. We hope that their respective insights provide meaningful context to guide your journey through a brief yet critically important period in our nations’ shared history.

Donald K. Boswell
President and CEO, WNED-TV



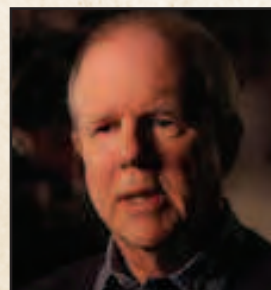
Donald Fixico



Donald Hickey



Andrew Lambert



Victor Suthren

In June of 1812, the infant United States, a still-loose confederation of 18 states, saw fit to declare war on Great Britain, probably the most powerful country in the world. Hostilities lasted until early 1815. In that war, most Native American tribes were Britain’s allies; the inhabitants of Britain’s Canadian provinces also became (unwillingly) involved when the United States invaded.... as it did, time and time again, with a notable lack of success. The four combatants in the conflict, the United States, Great Britain, the Canadian Provinces, and the Native Nations of North America, all had different perspectives on the reasons for the war, the success and failure of the battles, and most important, who gained and who lost after the peace treaty was signed.

For Canada, this was the war that saved a future nation and began to mold a national character. As the war began, Canada seemed doomed. Virtually everyone in the U.S. believed that conquering Canada would be “a mere matter of marching,” as Thomas Jefferson suggested. But as the war went on, American invasions kept failing, and the war became more and more brutal. People in Canada joined together, united in spirit, partly because the Americans, in this war of spiraling revenge, had become a hated Enemy. It’s not only historians, but average Canadians, who often see the War of 1812 as a critical event in Canadian history.



Cinematographer Stephen McCarthy and Director Larry Hott with reenactors.

“For the British,” as historian Andrew Lambert says in the film, “1812 is when Napoleon marched on Moscow. They have no idea there was a war going on the other side of the world.” Britain had been locked in a death struggle with Napoleon for over a decade. The view from London was simple: America stabbed Britain in the back when it declared war on the crown. Great Britain, although the strongest military power on earth, could not afford to devote all its men and ships to the war; at the same time they could not afford to lose the rich resources of their Canadian territories. Their goal was to blockade American

trade, expend as little money on the war with America as possible, and hold on to Canada. To that end they formed alliances with the Native Nations along the Canadian-US border, promising to protect their lands from American appropriation.

For Native Americans, this was probably their last serious chance to stave off the rapacious advance of the whites. Tecumseh, a brave and brilliant Shawnee chief, worked unceasingly to gather tribes together into one great alliance to fight their common enemy. But his confederation dissolved when Tecumseh himself was killed by William Henry Harrison’s troops in late 1813. Even so, had the British won the war, the western destiny of America might never have become manifest. During the initial months of peace talks in 1814, the British proposed a large “buffer state” of 250,000 square miles to belong to Native Americans. If the idea sounds unlikely today, that’s only because it didn’t happen: the past seems irrevocable, but history is often balanced on a knife’s edge. Two unlikely American victories, in Baltimore and on Lake Champlain, halted British invasions in September, 1814; these victories transformed the negotiations. The British dropped their demands for a permanent Native nation in the midst of what is now the U.S.: the War of 1812 ruined Native American hopes forever. Native warriors played a crucial part in many victories, but in the end they were the ones who truly lost this war.

The war was a surprisingly crucial event for the United States as well. In 1814 we were invaded by a force that could well have beaten us. After the fall of Napoleon in April, 1814, Great Britain could turn its vast military strength against the U.S. Most of the seaboard was under British blockade. Then three armies invaded us – including the largest invading army ever to set foot in this country – from all directions. The nation was crumbling financially; the government defaulted on the national debt, and the economy was shattered. Politically, the war divided the country in an almost ruinous fashion. Just months before the end of the war, New England states sent representatives to a meeting in Hartford that might well have meant secession (by the North, not the South). The meeting was serious enough for President Madison to send troops to quell the possible outbreak of a New England Rebellion.

A war that had begun with American assumptions of conquest in Canada almost ended in catastrophe and self-destruction at home. It was both a war we nearly lost, and a war in which we came close to disintegration. Now, in a United States that is certainly the strongest country in the world, it is worth remembering a period when the democratic republic was still an uncertain experiment – when no one knew whether democracy would, in time, vanish from the earth.

Lawrence Hott, Producer
“The War of 1812” on PBS