The War of 1812

After Independence was won in 1783, the Continental Congress dismissed America's small Navy.

As the country's maritime commerce grew, so did its merchant fleet. Without naval protection, America's vessels were subject to capture by vessels from Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli.

In 1794 the Congress ordered the construction and outfitting of 6 frigates. Only 3 would be launched in 1797, since in the meantime a peace treaty was signed with Algiers.

Among these 3 ships was the 44-gun frigate *Constitution*, still in commission in the US Navy.

But there was still an open conflict with England.

In 1799, after Napoleon Bonaparte became dictator of France, war broke out again between France and England. The United States declared themselves neutral, but both England and France encouraged their privateers to prey on American vessels to force the US to take sides. As a result, new effort was put into the construction of warships.

However, by 1800, after Thomas Jefferson’s election, a peace treaty was signed with France, and the Congress disinvested again from building a strong Navy.

Jefferson believed in the construction of small gunboats, rather than warships, and kept his policy of building these vessels even after war broke out with Algiers again in 1802. When the war ended in 1805, Jefferson ordered again the construction of small gunboats carrying 1 or 2 guns, saving much money, but doing little to protect the American merchant fleet on the high seas.

In the meantime, England’s navy was over 1,000 vessels strong, of which 236 were ships-of-the-line. The British navy had over 5,000 officers and 145,000 men.

After the humiliation of the war of 1776-1783, England resumed a leading role in commercial and colonial activities. With more 1st to 3rd rates than Spain, France, and the Netherlands together, England stretched its naval power from the North Atlantic to the Mediterranean, from the West Indies to the Indian Ocean.
To supply the huge needs of its navy, England’s press gangs would run around the country impressing all the able men they could find into service. Many American vessels were boarded by the British navy and American citizens were impressed, since England did not recognize the existence of America as an independent nation.

Meanwhile, relations between the United States and Great Britain were deteriorating. Then, on June 22, 1807, the British frigate Leopard accosted the ship Chesapeake off Hampton Roads, VA, demanding to "stop and inspect" the American frigate for "deserters".

When the Chesapeake's captain, Commodore Samuel Barron, refused to let the British party climb onboard his vessel, the Leopard fired a broadside inflicting 23 casualties. Barron struck his colors, and, without even acknowledging the surrender, the Leopard's captain boarded the Chesapeake and interned four of her crew.

Four American citizens, William Wane, Daniel Martin, John Strachen and Jenkin Ratford, all who had been illegally impressed, were taken by the English Navy. Jenkin Ratford, accused of mutiny, was immediately hanged from a yard of the frigate HMS Halifax to set an example; William Wane, wounded during the fight, was left to die on the deck; the remaining two men were condemned to 500 lashes each, a penalty that meant a certain but awfully brutal death. President Jefferson intervened, and managed to get the English to commute these sentences and have the men released.

Impressing was a plague for the new American merchant marine. By the Fall of 1811, there were over 6,000 registered kidnappings of American citizens, and England even acknowledged 3,300, claiming that "once a British man, always a British man," and that all impressed young boys had been born before the independence of the United States.

Then, on 18 June 1812, after a confused engagement off the coast of Virginia in which the US 44-gun frigate President battered the 18-gun English sloop Little Belt, President James Madison declared war.

The first single-ship actions were quite embarrassing for the most powerful navy in the world. In August, the USS Constitution defeated the English frigate Guerriere. In October, the USS United States captured the Macedonian. In December, the USS Constitution defeated the Java.

Although this war was fought mainly at sea, it was in the interior that, once again, the outcome of the conflict would be resolved. The Great Lakes were again a major theater in this war.
Lake Champlain

1812  Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough was entrusted with the Lake Champlain forces, which consisted of two gunboats built in 1808. He commandeered and armed three small merchant vessels and tried to maintain US supremacy on the lake during the entire year of 1812.

1813  Macdonough commandeered more merchant sloops, but could not stop a strong English attack (2 sloops, 3 gunboats, 47 bateaux, and 1,000 men) on Plattsburg and the bombardment of Burlington.

1814  Macdonough got Noah Brown to build a series of vessels in Vergennes, Vermont. In 40 days Brown built and launched:
   - a 26-gun ship Saratoga;
   - 6 gunboats (22.9 m long, with 2 guns).

   Then Noah Brown went on working on the hull of a steamboat that was being built at that site. Macdonough commandeered the steamboat, but it was not possible to have the machinery in place within the timeframe of this war, and Noah Brown transformed it in the 17-gun schooner Ticonderoga.

   Finally, in July, after learning that the English were building a large ship on the Richelieu River, Adam Brown was sent to Vergennes with 200 shipwrights, and in 19 days built the hull of the 20-gun brig Eagle. Lack of time and sailors caused this vessel's crew of 150 to be completed with musicians from a military band and 40 convicts from a chain gang.

   During the winter of 1813-14, the British had a series of vessels built as well:
   - the 16-gun brig Linnet;
   - the sloop Chubb;
   - the sloop Finch;
   - a flotilla of gunboats.

   In 1814, they built:
   - the 37-gun Confiance, carrying twenty-seven 24-pounder long guns,
     four 32-pound carronades,
     and six 24-pound carronades.

   On 1 September, the British army (10,000 men) began the invasion of America on the western shore of Lake Champlain.

   The United States naval forces included:
   - 26-gun frigate Saratoga - Comm. T. Macdonough; 28k/29w;
   - 17-gun schooner Ticonderoga - Lt. Stephan Cassin; 6k/6w;
   - 20-gun brig Eagle - Lt. Robert Henley; 13k/20w;
   - 7-gun sloop Preble - Lt. Charles Budd; 2k/0w
   - 10 row galleys.
The British had:
39-gun frigate *Confiance* - Capt. G. Downey; 41k/40w;
16-gun brig *Linnet* - Capt. Daniel Pring; 10k/14w;
11-gun sloop *Chubb* - Capt. James McGhie; 6k/16w;
11-gun sloop *Finch* - Capt. William Hicks; 0k/2w;
12 row galleys.

Macdonough positioned his fleet at Plattsburgh Bay and waited for George Downey and his fleet (39-gun frigate *Confiance*, 16-gun brig *Linnet*, sloops *Chubb* and *Finch*, and many gunboats).

On September 11 the fleets engaged: after 15 minutes Downey was dead, and after two hours the *Saratoga* and the *Confiance* were useless wrecks. The *Confiance* and the *Linnet* soon struck their flags and the battle was over. The British naval support was annihilated and the invasion was called off.

Shortly after the beginning of the engagement Captain Downey was killed aboard the *Confiance*. A shot from the *Saratoga* hit one of the long guns of the *Confiance*. Thrown off of its carriage, it struck Downey and killed him instantly.

Aboard the *Saratoga*, Macdonough worked as a sailor, pointing and handling a favorite gun. Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough was himself hit in the face by the flying head of the captain of the gun crew, and he was thrown across the deck.

After the end of the war, these vessels were abandoned at Whitehall, New York. In 1825, they were sold for scrap and stripped of most metal fittings.

The *Ticonderoga* was raised in 1958 and displayed behind the Skenesborough Museum in Whitehall, New York.

The *Eagle* was found in 1981 by Kevin Crisman and Arthur Cohn, together with the *Linnet* and a galley, probably the *Allen*.

Lake Erie

1812 The lake fell into English hands, since the Canadian Provincial Marine managed to arm 4 small schooners, 1 brig, and 1 ship with 16 carronades. The Americans had only a 6-gun brig, the *Adams*, which was eventually burned by American troops to prevent it falling into British hands.

1813 In 1813 Lieutenant Oliver Hazard Perry was entrusted with its defense.

Perry hired two New York shipwrights, Adam and Noah Brown. In February, they started the construction of 2 brigs, the *Lawrence* and the *Niagara*, a small
schooner, 2 gunboats, and 14 small boats, as well as a series of houses and barracks.

All this was finished by springtime. On September 10, Perry met and defeated his British opponent, Robert Barclay, destroyed or seized all his ships, and maintained control of the lake until the end of the war.

All of the ships were abandoned at the end of the war. The Lawrence was raised in the 1870s and cut down into small pieces, which were sold as souvenirs.

The Niagara was raised in 1913 and reconstructed. It is still on display today, in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Lake Ontario

1812 There was only one American brig, the Oneida, on Lake Ontario by 1812, when hostilities began. With the Oneida and a few schooners, Captain Isaac Chauncey had to face a much stronger English force.

Under the command of James Yeo, the English had a 22-gun ship on the lake, the Royal George, and some 4 or 5 smaller schooners.

1813 Chauncey had hired in 1812 another New York shipwright, Henry Eckford, who built for him:

- a sloop of war, the Madison,
- a fast dispatch schooner, the Lady of the Lake,
- a 24-gun ship, General Pike,
- a 16-gun schooner, Sylph.

These ships joined the Oneida, and they took Fort George in May.

On the other side of the lake, James Yeo also engaged in a shipbuilding race, building a series of ocean standard warships.

Fearing both defeat and the loss of their fleets, Chauncey and Yeo spent the next years of war maneuvering and avoiding each other.

Chauncey was to learn how dangerous his armed merchant schooners were …

On 8 August 1813, the Hamilton and the Scourge were cruising Lake Ontario in the dark, early morning hours when a sudden squall provoked a dangerous heel and sank both vessels before anybody could do anything about it.

The Hamilton and the Scourge were found in waters 91 m deep in 1973, during a survey organized by the Royal Ontario Museum.
James Fenimore Cooper wrote a book (*A Life Before the Mast*, 1843) about the life of Ned Meyers, a crewman that survived the sinking of the *Scourge*. This sinking is also mentioned in Cooper’s *History of the Navy of the United States of America*, 1856, and in C.H.J. Snider’s *In the Wake of the Eighteen-Twelvers*, 1913.

**1814** Chauncey and Yeo kept building vessels and avoiding battle. Eckford built two 20-gun brigs (the *Jones* and the *Jefferson*) and one 56-gun ship (the *Superior*) in four months. This armament race went on until February 1815, when the war effectively ended.

Chauncey's vessels were stationed in Sackets Harbor and eventually rotted and sank. Two were salvaged in 1825. The brig *Jefferson* was found in the 1960s by a sport diver, and surveyed in 1985 by Dr. Kevin Crisman and Arthur Cohn.

Yeo's vessels also rotted in Kingston Harbor:
- the 112-gun *St Lawrence*,
- the 60-gun frigate *Prince Regent*,
- the 44-gun frigates *Princess Charlotte* and *Psyche*,
- the ships *Montreal*, and *Niagara*,
- the brigs *Charwell*, *Star*, and *Netley*,

Together with two new three-deckers under construction, the *Wolfe* and the *Canada*.

**Privateers: the *General Armstrong*, 1814**

By late 1814, while negotiating peace, the British were preparing an attack on New Orleans to secure the control of the Mississippi and provide the basis of a British-dominated region to the west of the Appalachian Mountains.

On September 14, however, three British warships on the way to the New World spotted an American privateer lying at anchor in the neutral Portuguese harbor of Faial on the Island of Pico in the Azorean Archipelago.

It was the brig *General Armstrong*, commanded by Captain Samuel Reid, and armed with 14 guns.

Captain Lloyd, the commander of the British fleet, had many reasons to leave Captain Reid alone. His three ships – the *Plantagenet* (74 guns), the *Rota* (38 guns), and the *Carnation* (18 guns) – were supposed to rendezvous at Faial with the frigates *Thais* and *Calypso*, and then proceed directly to the Louisiana coast. Moreover, Faial was a neutral port, and the law demanded that the *General Armstrong* should be left alone.

But Captain Lloyd hated privateers.

Just in case of an attack, Captain Reid moved the *General Armstrong* closer to the shore, where the larger vessels could not get to him.
By night, Lloyd sent four boats from the *Carnation* to try to take the *General Armstrong* by surprise. But they were spotted and decimated by the *General Armstrong*’s guns, one of them aimed by Captain Reid himself.

Angered, Captain Lloyd ordered twelve barges from the *Rota* and the *Plantagenet*, armed with guns, to take the privateer. They, too, were decimated by the *General Armstrong*’s guns. Too numerous to be driven away by the *General*’s guns, the British managed to board the ship, but in spite of their number, they were driven off the ship and suffered many casualties.

Captain Lloyd then sent the *Carnation* to sink the privateer. However, on the *General Armstrong* nobody was even thinking of surrender, and the *Carnation* left combat three hours later with her bowsprit shattered, the main topmast down, 15 dead, and many wounded.

Now, Captain Reid decided to act in anticipation of the next attack. He scuttled his ship and took a strong position in one of the Islands convents.

It was too much for the British. Having lost perhaps more than 200 men, failing to convince the Portuguese authorities to give him the “pirates,” and drastically delayed on his schedule, Lloyd sent the *Thais* and the *Calypso* to British bases together with the wounded.

The attack of New Orleans was postponed one month, giving General Andrew Jackson time to reach the city, organize its defenses, and be ready for the British.

**The end of the war**

By late 1814, England had finally managed to impose a blockade on America's East coast. The abdication of Napoleon freed troops and ships, and England began raiding coastal towns, particularly in the Chesapeake Bay area.

In May 1814, Admiral George Cockburn looted and torched Havre de Grace in Maryland.


But the British were repelled in Baltimore suffering critical losses. Soon after they moved to attack New Orleans, where they were soundly defeated by Andrew Jackson on January 8, 1815.

On September 13, 1814, General Samuel Smith defeated Admiral Cochrane at Baltimore.

The war was lost for England and the Treaty of Ghent was signed by the British on Christmas Eve, 1814, and by President Madison on February 12, 1815, bringing a formal end to hostilities between America and Britain.
This time the armistice held. The victory, although a great triumph for American sailing ingenuity and audacity, signaled the end of the era dominated by Baltimore Clippers.

On April 6, 1815, at the British prison of Dartmoor, guards opened fire on 6,000 American POWs killing 7 and wounding 54.