



Historical and Cultural Affairs

## **“For the Common Defense,” “Infernals,” and a “Marauding Species of War”: The War of 1812 in Delaware**

*By Chuck Fithian*

One of the most obscure of America’s conflicts is the War of 1812. Wedged between our War for Independence and the Civil War, it is poorly known by many Americans. It was one of the most far flung of any of our nation’s wars. It would rage from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, from Delaware to the coast of the Pacific Northwest, to Valparaiso, Chile and Ghent, Belgium, with the final shots being fired in the Indian Ocean near the island of Java.

While the war was comparatively brief in duration, its consequences would affect the United States long into the nineteenth century. Delawareans would be participants in nearly all aspects of this conflict. They would serve in the federal government, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps; participate in diplomatic efforts; sail on privateering cruises; and provide extensive military service as the front line in the defense of the economically vital Delaware Valley. While Delawareans served in many important capacities outside of the region, this essay is intended to provide an introduction to the history of the War of 1812 within Delaware and the lower Delaware Valley.

The economy of the Delaware Valley in the early nineteenth century was inextricably linked to regional, national, and far-reaching global networks, all of which made the region vital to the economic health of the United States. These networks meant that Delawareans were directly connected to the many events that occurred throughout the Atlantic world. As citizens of a politically Federalist state, Delawareans were mainly opposed to the moves toward war with Great Britain. While many of the complex issues that underlay the coming conflict resonated among the state’s populace, they were keenly aware of the dangers war would bring to the state with its exposed Delaware Bay and River and Atlantic

frontier. Supported by the “War Hawks” who dominated Congress, and over unanimous opposition by Delaware’s congressional delegation, the administration of President James Madison declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812.

Governor Joseph Haslet had begun to prepare Delaware before the declaration of war through the acquisition of additional arms and equipment from the federal government. Some of the earliest efforts to protect the state were the erection and manning of fortifications at Wilmington, New Castle, and Lewes. After the declaration of war, along with the fortifications, sites such as encampments, arsenals, training areas, military administrative facilities, and observation posts, would be established across the state during the course of the war. The governor also drew upon the state’s well established militia. In what for many would be extensive periods of time, his citizen soldiers left their farms and respective trades for military service in manning the fortifications and in the field. Throughout the war, the governor would be assisted by capable military officers such as Colonel Samuel Boyer Davis and Captain Caesar A. Rodney. Revolutionary War veterans, such as Allen McLane and Caleb P. Bennett, would help rally the support of the state’s citizens and provide valuable assistance and advice with defensive measures and other military operations.

The initial actions and campaigns of the war took place along the Canadian border and on the high seas. However, that would change in late 1812. In December, the British government would declare the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays to be in a state of blockade, and by the following February and March, Royal Navy vessels under the command of Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren arrived to impose the directives of the British government. The overall purpose of the naval campaign was the disruption of the maritime economies of the region, and the suppression or elimination of United States Navy vessels. Writing to Admiral Warren, the First Lord of the Admiralty made it clear that “we do not intend this as a mere paper blockade.”

Soon after the arrival of British forces, American shipping was captured or destroyed and maritime communities across the region were attacked. Among these was the town of Lewes just inside the Delaware Capes. Recognizing the town’s maritime importance, Commodore Sir John Poo Beresford

subjected it to a twenty-two-hour bombardment and threatened a landing and attack by sailors and Royal Marines in April of 1813. The American defenders, commanded by Colonel Samuel Boyer Davis, put up a resolute defense and the landing did not take place. Afterwards Colonel Davis wrote to Governor Haslet assuring him that the “honor of the state had not been tarnished.” Throughout the rest of the year, Delawareans were continually on the defense against water-borne raids which proved to be highly destructive to bay and river shipping and commerce.

1813 would also witness a significant naval engagement between United States Navy and Royal Navy forces. Based at New Castle, Delaware, which had become an important base for the United States Navy during the early Federal period, the gunboats of the Delaware Flotilla attacked the sloop of war *Martin* which had come to ground on Crow’s Shoals near the entrance of Delaware Bay. In a two-and-one-half-hour battle American forces nearly succeeded in capturing the *Martin* until being driven off by the superior firepower of HMS *Junon* which arrived to assist the *Martin*.

The naval campaign in the Delaware is characterized by the use of aggressive small-boat tactics and raids ashore, and the use of new technologies in what could be considered the early nineteenth century’s terror weapons. Congreve rockets were used in the Lewes bombardment, which was the first time this weapon was used against the Americans during the war. Later, the Americans would deploy Robert Fulton’s “torpedoes,” known as “infernals,” against British vessels off Lewes. Previously unknown to have been used during the 1813 campaign in the Delaware Bay and River, the deployment of these floating mines was a countermeasure used by the Americans to break the stranglehold of the British blockade of the Atlantic Coast.

The year 1814 saw the inauguration of a new governor—Daniel Rodney of Lewes. Like his predecessor, he continued to oversee and maintain the active defense of the state. Defensive measures continued with Delawareans manning the various fortifications and ongoing militia service. During the year, Delaware ceded Pea Patch Island to the federal government, which fortified it using Martello-type towers, a new type of fortification developed earlier by the British for the defense of southern England. Also at this time, Delawareans would be assisted, for the first time, by the arrival of significant elements

of the United States Regular Army. These regulars were stationed in Lewes and in encampments across northern Delaware. Naval operations by British vessels also continued unabated in the Delaware Bay and River. For example, small boats from the frigate *Neiman* destroyed a group of shallops containing a valuable cargo of shingles in Indian River. However, Delaware would face new threats, this time ones originating in events taking place in the Chesapeake Bay.

British military forces, now under the command of Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane and Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn, launched new and more vigorous attacks against American assets on both sides of the Chesapeake. Both of these highly experienced officers had served in naval campaigns in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and were aggressive practitioners of the concepts of total war. Numerous raids were launched throughout the region, but the 1814 campaign also included larger engagements such as the destruction of the Chesapeake Flotilla in the Patuxent River, the battle of Bladensburg, the burning of government buildings in Washington, the battle of North Point, and the bombardment of Fort McHenry. It is also significant that at this time Admiral Cockburn pressed his commander to consider attacking targets in the Delaware Valley including New Castle, Wilmington, and the DuPont gunpowder works in Delaware; and Chester and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. Admiral Cockburn's interest in enlarging the scale of British operations in the Delaware Valley shows the strategic importance of the region and clearly indicates that the operations on the Delaware should not be considered a backwater of the regional naval campaign.

The events occurring in the Chesapeake were being watched by Delaware authorities, who had begun to prepare the state for attacks from the west. Immediately after the attack at Fort McHenry, British forces again threatened the northern Chesapeake and Delawareans would be a part of the measures to counter that move. Under the command of Thomas Stockton of New Castle, then a major in the 42<sup>nd</sup> United States Infantry, a force of Delaware militiamen, United States Army regulars, and United States Navy sailors from the Delaware Flotilla marched into northern Maryland and occupied positions in the Elkton area. By this time the war was clearly winding down, and British forces withdrew into the lower Chesapeake, and began to depart to other areas. However, for Delaware the war was not over. As late as

November and December, garrisons, such as those at Lewes, were still being manned, Royal Navy vessels, such as HMS *Majestic*, a 74-gun ship-of-the-line, were sighted on station in the Delaware Capes, and fears of landings along the coast were still real.

While the fighting was occurring in America, peace negotiations had been taking place in Russia, and later in Belgium. One of Delaware's senators, James A. Bayard, would be one of the American commissioners who helped negotiate the Treaty of Ghent, which was signed on December 24, 1814 ending the war. Congress ratified the treaty in February 1815, and after news of its ratification spread throughout the country, the citizens of Lewes would illuminate their town in recognition of the "Peace of Christmas Eve."

The War of 1812 in Delaware is an important part of the overall history of this conflict as well as that of the Mid-Atlantic region. For nearly two-and-one-half years, Delawareans experienced and endured a grueling form of naval warfare with seaborne attack potentially coming from any corner at any time. The effective response was constant vigilance. Delaware also became one of the most militarized landscapes along the eastern seaboard with many of its men seeing extensive military service. Actual combat included pitched engagements, raids and skirmishes, the deployment of new technologies by both sides, and required adaptations to what a Delaware militiaman termed a "marauding species of war." The intensity of sustained Royal Navy operations and Admiral Cockburn's interest in attacking Delaware Valley targets indicates this region remained a critical part of British strategy in the Mid-Atlantic naval campaigns of 1813 to 1815.

Long after the fighting ceased, the war continued to resonate well into the nineteenth century and even beyond. The state's economy would take time to recover from the loss of shipping, the disruption of commerce and manufacturing, and price inflation that resulted from the blockade. Unlike the rest of the country, the Federalists remained in power and would shape the state's politics in the years prior to the Civil War. The war's veterans would continue to serve the state with several going on to be elected governor. Many Delawareans had a sense that they had contributed to the larger national success through their sustained defense of the lower Delaware Valley. This sense of service, of having protected vital

interests of the country, was the basis of negotiations between Delaware and the federal government as the state sought reparations for the extensive financial costs it bore during the war. Negotiations over how to settle these would be debated back and forth, but they would finally be resolved and the state reimbursed in 1910.

The War of 1812 has a complex history, and the war in the Delaware Valley comprises an important part of that history. No longer seen as simply a group of isolated events, the actions and operations in the Delaware Bay and River and along its Atlantic coast made Delaware an important theater of the war. As we enter the bicentennial of the war in June 2012, present-day citizens of our state are encouraged to contemplate the service and sacrifice of Delawareans of 1812 to 1815; and to better appreciate the fact that Delaware played a significant role in a war that contributed to shaping the development of the United States.

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