



Historical and Cultural Affairs

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

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Delawareans played significant roles in the War of 1812 at both the national and international levels. James Bayard James Gibson, Thomas Macdonough, Jacob Jones, William Bush, and Samuel B. Davis were among those who served in the diplomatic service, Army, Navy and Marine Corps. Probably the one Delawarean that historians at this conference are most familiar was Hezekiah Niles, publisher of the *Niles Weekly Register*. However, events of the War of 1812 that occurred in the State of Delaware have received only passing mention in histories of the war, or in state histories and biographies. Within its historiography, one finds only two studies that examine events of the war itself: Robert M'Culloh's *A Brief Sketch of the Military Operations on the Delaware during the Late War*, published in 1820, and William Marine's 1901 paper *The Bombardment of Lewes by the British*. Due to an early uncritical use of sources, the development of a state mythology surrounding major events, but mainly a lack of serious scholarship, Delaware's War of 1812 history has remained obscured. My intention today is to begin to change that, and to demonstrate that the state was an important, and contributing, component of the war in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Delaware at the beginning of the 19th century was a product of its complex settlement and cultural histories. Its geography was a combination of piedmont uplands, coastal plains, and broad expansive salt marshes interspersed with numerous winding river systems. Occupying this varied landscape was a diverse population of nearly 74,000 Anglo-European, African American, and Native American peoples. Slavery was still a fixture of its social structure, however, Delaware had the largest population of Free Blacks in the Republic. Agricultural production, the maritime trades, and manufacturing were vigorous and expanding. A

lattice-work of road networks and vigorous commercial shipping established the Delaware estuary as an important and powerful economic artery for the nation, connecting the Delaware Valley region to the wider Atlantic world and beyond. Political discourse and diversity were common, however, Delaware was solidly Federalist, and had been so since its lead in the ratification of the Constitution in 1787.

While the many issues behind the war resonated among Delawareans, the June 18th declaration of war was not greeted with great fanfare or an outpouring of patriotic fervor. Delawarean's attitude is best typified by Governor Haslet's address to the Assembly on 20 January 1812. In his address, he outlines the attempts by the United States to negotiate with Britain and France and that "our rulers have left no honorable effort unemployed to arrive at a friendly and sincere adjustment of every existing difference" and that through these attempts "the powers have...receded from the ground of compromise, increased the difficulties and turned negotiation into an object of "derision and contempt...Under this aspect of our public affairs, it behooves us to be prepared for such a crisis as may ultimately occur." Delawareans responded and rallied in the defense of their state, and ultimately the Delaware Valley.

Correspondence between the governor and Secretary of War Eustis in April of 1812 suggests defensive preparations had begun prior to the declaration of war. Surprisingly, no fortifications had been constructed in the Delaware Bay or along the state's exposed Atlantic frontier, a situation that left the region open to blockade and attack. Governor Haslet's single largest military asset was his state's militia. Surviving records from the late 18th and early 19th centuries indicate an active organization that numbered between 7000 and 9000 men. Some of these men would be in garrisons, such as one at Lewes, established prior to year's end.

Throughout most 1812, the war had been remote- possibly leading to the criticisms leveled at Delawareans as having a "dormant" military spirit. That would change in December 1812 with British government's declaration that the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays were to be in a state of rigid blockade. Originally part of the fleet that arrived in the Chesapeake Capes under Admirals Warren and Cockburn, a group of vessels commanded by Commodore Sir John Poo Beresford was detached to the Delaware, and by 3 March had taken up stations in the lower Bay. Beresford's squadron was composed of the ship-of-the-line

Poictiers, frigate *Belvidera*, and the schooner *Paz*. Specific among his instructions were the recruiting of black mariners as guides, and to be vigilant against attack from American gunboats, fireships, and "Fulton's Machines."

The squadron's arrival led to a rapid mobilization throughout Delaware. Extra appropriations were made by the Assembly, the militia was augmented, and the state's financial assets were removed. Citizens were aided by the state's Revolutionary War veterans in many of the defensive measures- a prominent role they would play throughout the war.

It was only after the arrival of the squadron that any fortification construction commenced. Fort Union guarded the approaches of the Christina River to the city of Wilmington, Fort Casimir protected New Castle and its vital naval facilities, and two fortifications were constructed for the defense of the maritime/piloting community of Lewes. The construction of these fortifications and the establishment of their garrisons marked the beginning of the process of militarization of the Delaware coast that would last throughout the conflict.

Diaries, reports, and correspondence indicate Beresford's squadron commenced naval operations immediately and initiated a period of over two years of waterborne siege throughout the Bay region. A major attack at Lewes, the first action in which Congreve rockets were used in the American war, occurred on 6-7 April. Hidden by propaganda that the action resulted in only "one chicken killed, one pig wounded," renewed research has found that this twenty-two hour bombardment was more consequential and caused more damage than has previously been realized. Another engagement, this time between gunboats of the Delaware Flotilla and the *Martin*, *Junon*, and British small boats, occurred at Crows Shoals on 29 July. This one and one-half to two hour action was the only principal resistance offered by the U.S. Navy in the bay during the course of the war. Numerous amphibious landings and raids, skirmishes, and the capture and destruction of vital American shipping occurred along the bay and coast. The single largest raid on Delaware shipping occurred in late May when British small boats swept up the Delaware Bay and took or destroyed twenty American vessels in two days. Humphrey Senhouse's raids demonstrate the tactical control of Royal

Navy forces, and their successful projection of naval power up both sides of Delaware Bay northward to Reedy Island, a distance estimated at the time to be sixty miles inland and upriver from the Delaware Capes.

A previously undocumented naval action occurred on the Delaware in late spring and early summer. Under the command of a Lt. Swarthout, two of Robert Fulton's torpedo boats had been secreted into Lewes. The "Infernals" received their crews, and on 30 June they attempted a sortie against the frigate *Statira*. The results are uncertain, but apparently caused alarm among the ships on station. Other correspondence indicates a wider use of torpedoes was contemplated for the Delaware.

The continued fortification of the region can be seen when Pea Patch Island was ceded by the state to the Federal government. Assistance would arrive when Pennsylvania sent some of its militia to Delaware's aid. A detachment occupied a camp of observation strategically situated because of its close proximity to both the Chesapeake and Delaware estuaries. In central Delaware, two companies of detached Delaware militia were responsible for defending over twenty-eight miles of irregular Delaware Bay coastline.

As the two sides engaged, Delaware's African Americans made choices about their participation in the war. The important role of African Americans in the region's maritime economy was recognized by the British through instructions for the recruitment of black pilots. Some, such as "2 negro men," chose to escape to a British warship. Other blacks aided the American cause. One black mariner was noted assisting in the capture of a Royal Navy landing party near Little Creek Landing, and others served in Delaware militia companies.

The elections of 1813 brought in a new governor, Lewes merchant Daniel Rodney. This Federalist governor continued to maintain the state's defenses. Efforts to fortify the Delaware continued with an ambitious plan to erect Martello towers on Pea Patch Island and on the Delaware shore.

The arrival of a larger and more powerful British force in the Chesapeake in August, and no nonsense commanders intensified the 1814 campaign season. At the same time Royal Navy ships continued operations in the Delaware. Expectations were that British forces were going to land at the head of Chesapeake Bay and attack targets in the Delaware Valley. Those concerns were not unfounded. The correspondence of Admirals Cochrane and Cockburn stressed to Admiralty officials the desirability of

campaigning in the northeastern Chesapeake, Delaware, and southeastern Pennsylvania where the aim would be the destruction of the DuPont gunpowder yards, attacking Newcastle, Wilmington, and Philadelphia as well as assets in the lower counties of the Delmarva Peninsula. Clearly, these aggressive commanders did not view the Delaware Valley as a backwater of the Mid-Atlantic campaign. Instead they recognized an area where naval and land operations would produce significant military and strategic results.

Countermeasures to ongoing and anticipated British operations were the dispatch of additional Pennsylvania militia units to northern Delaware. These included the Advance Light Brigade from Philadelphia, many of which had served the preceding year, as well as the First City Troop cavalry to a position of observation, part of a cavalry vidette line that extended across the state, linking communications between the Chesapeake and Delaware regions and Philadelphia.

The events that occurred in the Chesapeake were closely watched. Delaware militia units were among the various commands that were positioned in the northern Chesapeake to respond to the next move of British forces after the attack at Baltimore. Joining these troops would finally be elements of the U.S. Army. Individual regular officers had served since the spring of 1813, but no body of regular troops had been dispatched to Delaware- a situation that had become increasingly annoying to Governor Rodney. They would be joined by sailors detached from the Delaware Flotilla and U.S. Navy vessels, and again by Pennsylvania troops, who occupied camps across northern Delaware. Strategically located, these troops would be able to respond to threats in either the Chesapeake or the Delaware, and were massed and positioned in anticipation of active campaigning in the Delaware Valley.

With the withdrawal of the British fleet later in September, activities in the Upper Chesapeake diminished. Nevertheless, the different commands remained in a state of readiness as British naval vessels continued to operate in the lower Delaware Bay and off the Capes. On the 19 September, Delaware's AG Cornelius Comegys reminded his officers of the governor's order regarding keeping their companies ready to march on the shortest notice. Barges "well stocked with men" were seen well into October. At this late phase of the war, militia and regular troops remained stationed across Delaware, including Lewes, in anticipation

of active campaigning in the Delaware Bay, river, and Atlantic coast, where any landing, would as an confident American officer stated, receive a “warm reception.”

This fear was not without basis. James Bayard, of the American Peace Commissioners at Ghent, anticipated a continuation of hostilities. In a 28 October letter to Captain C. A. Rodney, he stated that "you ought to count upon & to be prepared for another campaign, and a campaign in which the Government will exert its whole power against us." As we now know, this campaign would not materialize, operations shifted to other regions of the United States, and finally formal hostilities were ended on Christmas Eve, 1814. Winfield Scott, who had assumed command of the 4th Military District in late December, discharged serving militiamen. Others, such as William Marshall's Volunteer Company of Pilots, remained in service at Lewes until the middle of March of 1815.

A number of observations can be made on the events of 1812-1815 in Delaware. Obscured by the lack of scholarship and a mythology of wounded farm animals and later of women marching with shouldered cornstalks, these events were not simply part of a backwater region of the war. British forces mounted naval operations that effectively sealed the Delaware, disrupted maritime activities, and harassed coastal areas on a scale and duration similar to that which took place in the Chesapeake. British military objectives were maritime disruption and the destruction of the economic vitality of the Delaware Valley. Shifting objectives prevented the initiation of a land campaign. References to a stymied commerce, numerous vessel losses, and scarce commodities with inflated prices reveal a variety of economic hardships that bear testimony to British success. The war in Delaware Valley should be seen not simply as a series of nuisance raids, but instead as a concerted part of the overall British Mid-Atlantic campaign. The strategic significance of the Delaware Valley and its assets can be seen in Admiralty's early instructions to Admiral Warren, and later in the recommendations of Admirals Cochrane and Cockburn. The Chesapeake and Delaware estuaries were always interlinked, forming two components of a larger regional operational theater.

The costs of the blockade and operations to the bay region are just beginning to be understood. Losses resulting from the destruction of shipping had to have been extensive. In addition to the physical

damages resulting from the bombardment at Lewes, the economic costs when framed within purchasing power, labor, and place within the economy would have been as high as millions of dollars in modern US dollars. Post-war references to inflated commodities prices are indicators of lingering shortages. Some of the most poignant statements about the costs of war came from one of Delaware's elite. Writing in the early fall of 1814, a Supreme Court justice states his family has gone without food because of a lack of money, a condition he ascribes as "one of the effects of that most distressing war we are now engaged in with Great Britain."

The Delaware maritime campaign witnessed the deployment of state of the art military technologies in the form of mine warfare, rockets, and Martello towers. The Delaware estuary's complex ecology also shaped the conduct of naval operations. The Bay's shallow water, complex and dangerous shoals, and defined shipping channels permitted the Royal Navy to successfully impose the blockade by stationing small numbers of vessels at critical positions, and thus dominate maritime activities. The same physiographic features shaped tactics that made small boats prominent in rapidly deployed amphibious operations. For example, the *Statira's* commander, Captain Hassard Stackpoole, received strict orders to use "rowing boats" in the attack, and not to allow his vessels to be drawn in among the shoals where they could not close with the enemy. American responses can be seen in the modification of some Delaware militia units to effectively respond to this irregular warfare, or "that marauding species of war which we have of late."

Direct federal assistance was largely restricted to providing munitions and supplies. Naval forces were adequate, but except for Crows Shoal, seemed to avoid action. The Senhouse raids of May 1813 were conducted unopposed by U.S. Navy vessels. Regular troops, though a valuable addition to aiding in the state's defense, arrived as an effective force only in the fall of 1814. Delaware was essentially on its own, with its principal defense resting on its militia. Delaware commands, with many in federalized service, performed well during periods of service in and out of the state. Many of these men became soldiers for two or more years, a circumstance that impacted the manufacturing areas, maritime trades, and agricultural cycle. In spite of their success, developments during the war foreshadowed the beginning of the end for the enrolled militia system and helped usher in a new system in the early 1840s.

Politically, Delaware Federalists emerged from the war unscathed and free of the criticisms leveled at the party in other parts of the nation. They had successfully defended the state and region, and would continue to control state politics until the 1830s.

A strong sense of being on one's own led to Delaware's persistence in seeking reimbursement for its expenses in the defense of the Delaware region. Beginning in 1815 and lasting throughout the remainder of the 19th century, the state sought restitution from the Federal government for the considerable expense in money, resources, and manpower. The last act of the War of 1812 in Delaware occurred in 1910, ninety-eight years later, when Delaware received reparations in the form of funds for the first restoration of the Statehouse on Dover's Green. Their prickly persistence for nearly a century is a testament to Delawarean's insistence that their service and sacrifice in the national defense be recognized.

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