

The War of 1812

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FOR YEARS, THE British Empire had thrown its weight around against the young republic of the United States, impressing American sailors into the Royal Navy, supporting Indian tribes in their resistance to western expansion and blockading the US from trade with Napoleonic Europe.

Hoping to defeat the British while they were distracted by Napoleon, on 18 June 1812, President James Madison signed a declaration of war against Great Britain. American troops set out to invade Canada, but suffered early reversals after the Potawatomi Indians massacred the garrison and civilians at Fort Dearborn (modern-day Chicago), the British captured General William Hull's battle plans and took Fort Detroit, and combined British and Canadian forces repulsed an American invasion at the Battle of Queenston Heights, at which British commander Sir Isaac Brock was killed. In November and December, the British managed to extend their blockade along most of the eastern coast of the US. At the end of 1812, the USS *Constitution's* defeat of HMS *Guerriere* was the only major victory with which demoralized American troops could console themselves as they retreated to winter quarters in New York state.

When the conflict resumed in earnest in the spring of 1813, the



To declare war, US ships sailed out to meet the British blockade not far off the eastern coast.

US enjoyed a string of victories. American troops managed to capture and burn York (modern-day Toronto), the British seat of government in Upper Canada, on 27 April, and defeated and killed British ally Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames. At sea, American warships managed to drive the British out of both Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, while the USS *Argus* managed to capture more than 27 ships in the English Channel before being taken by the British.

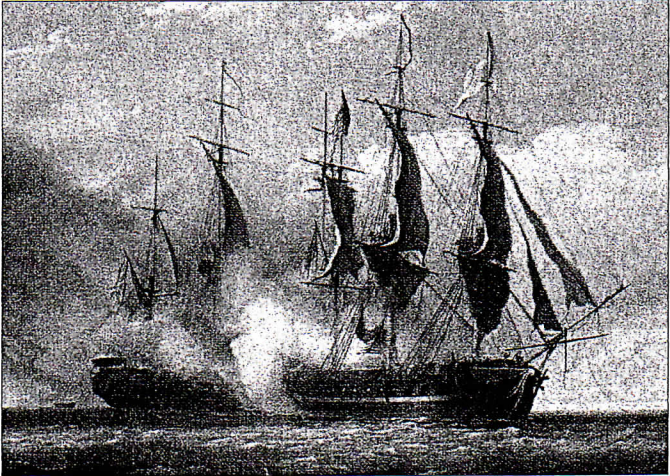
By 1814, the tide had turned again, and on 24 August British troops entered Washington, DC, burning the Capitol and the White House before leaving two days later. Although Francis Scott Key was inspired by the British failure to take Fort McHenry at the Battle of Baltimore, it was a near thing, and Americans were somewhat intimidated by the British bombs

bursting in air. By December, both Americans and British diplomats recognized that the time had come to end the conflict. Representatives of the two nations met in Belgium on 24 December to sign the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war, returned territory the British had captured and restored the recognized boundaries between the US and British North America. Unaware that a treaty had been signed, Andrew Jackson lead US forces to triumph over the British at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815, but this accidental conflict failed to reignite the war.

While many European historians regard the War of 1812 as a minor sideline to the Napoleonic Wars, the conflict was truly one of the key events in North American history. Though no clear victor emerged and no territory was permanently transferred, the brief conflict did much to define the national characters of both Canada and the US. In Canada, the war and its memory united French and English subjects under the British crown in common opposition to the US, and made heroes of Tecumseh, Sir Isaac Brock and Laura Secord. In the US, the conflict helped establish the ideology of Manifest Destiny, made Andrew Jackson a hero and gave birth to the *Star-Spangled Banner* and Uncle Sam.



After crossing the Niagara River in warboats, an invading US force was decisively defeated at the Battle of Queenston Heights.



During the famous battle between USS *Chesapeake* and HMS *Shannon*, the American captain is said to have exclaimed "Don't give up the ship" before succumbing to injuries.