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Source: <a href="http://media.maps.com">http://media.maps.com</a>

**Introduction:** This paper will look at the causes, conduct and consequences of the War of 1812. This paper draws heavily upon a number of electronic sources on the War, revised as necessary to eliminate some "partisanship" and to focus on the Canadian content of the



conflict. Several other excellent scholarly references, both hard copy and electronic have been used to provide the balance and content required.

The War of 1812 was a military conflict fought between the forces of the United States of America and those of the British Empire that was concluded by the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814.

Canada emerged from the war with a heightened sense of national feeling and solidarity. Britain regarded the war as a sideshow to the Napoleonic Wars raging in Europe however; it heralded the beginning of an era of peaceful relations and trade with the U.S.

**Causes of the War:** The United States declared war on Britain on 18 June 1812, for a number of reasons:

<u>Trade Tensions:</u> In 1807, Britain had introduced a series of trade restrictions to impede ongoing American trade with France, with which Britain was at war. The U.S. contested these restrictions as illegal under international law and in violation of a neutral nation's right to trade with others as it saw fit.

<u>Impressment</u>: During the Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy had expanded to 175 ships of the line and 600 ships overall, requiring 140,000 sailors. While the Royal Navy could man its ships with volunteers in peacetime, in war it competed with merchant shipping and privateers for a small pool of experienced sailors and turned to impressment when it was unable to man ships with volunteers alone. A sizeable number of sailors (estimated to be as many as 11,000 in 1805) in the United States merchant navy were Royal Navy veterans or deserters who had left for better pay and conditions. The Royal Navy went after them by intercepting and searching U.S. merchant ships for deserters. Americans viewed impressment as an infringement of their national sovereignty and a denial of America's ability to naturalize foreigners.

The United States believed that British deserters had a right to become United States citizens. Britain did not recognize naturalized United States citizenship, so in addition to recovering deserters, it considered United States citizens born in Britain liable for impressment. Exacerbating the situation was the widespread use of forged identity papers by sailors. This made it all the more difficult for the Royal Navy to distinguish Americans from non-Americans and led it to impress some Americans who had never been British.

<u>United States Expansionism</u>: American expansion into the Northwest comprising the modern states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin was being obstructed by indigenous leaders like Tecumseh, who were supplied and encouraged by the British. Americans on the western frontier demanded that interference be stopped. There was, in addition, a strong body of opinion in the United States at the time that wanted to see Britain stripped of all of her North American possessions with control of continental North America shifting to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

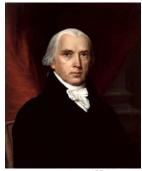
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Stanley, G.F. Canada's Soldiers, The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1960, p.150



**Declaration of War:** On June 1, 1812, President James Madison gave a speech to the U.S.

Congress, recounting American grievances against Great Britain, though not specifically calling for a declaration of war. After Madison's speech, the House of Representatives quickly voted (79 to 49) to declare war, and the Senate by 19 to 13. The conflict formally began on June 18, 1812 when Madison signed the measure into law. This was the first time that the United States had declared war on another nation, and the Congressional vote would prove to be the closest vote to declare war in American history.

MGen Isaac Brock, commander of the British Forces in Upper Canada, heard the news of the war declaration while dining with American officers at Fort George, near Niagara Falls. They finished dinner and then withdrew to make their respective plans for mutual destruction.<sup>2</sup>



**James Madison** 

Apparently, former American President Thomas Jefferson, thought that victory would be a formality, "The acquisition of Canada this year ... will be a mere matter of marching." He might be excused for his optimism. Canada's population was 500,000 compared to the 7 million in the United States.

**Course of the War:** Although the outbreak of the war had been preceded by years of angry diplomatic dispute, neither side was ready for war when it came. Britain was heavily engaged in the Napoleonic Wars, most of the British Army was engaged in the Peninsular War (in Spain), and the Royal Navy was compelled to blockade most of the coast of Europe.

At the outset of the war in Upper Canada, the principal theatre of operations, there was only one British regular regiment immediately available, supported by a few men of the  $10^{th}$  Royal Veteran Battalion and the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and a small detachment of 50 gunners of the Royal Artillery. The total number of troops did not exceed 1,500 and they were responsible for the defence of a frontier nearly 1,000 miles in length. During the ensuing battles, this regular force core was to be reinforced by local Canadian militia units.

There was a stronger regular force available in Lower Canada where five British regular battalions were stationed, with further regular units in the Maritimes. However, it was not feasible to redeploy these forces to Upper Canada since Lower Canada (with Montreal and Quebec City) and the Maritimes remained the strategically most important part of British North America.

Throughout the war, the British Secretary of State for War and the Colonies was the Earl of Bathurst. For the first two years of the war, he could spare few troops to reinforce North America and urged the Governor General, Sir George Prevost to maintain a defensive strategy. The naturally cautious Prevost followed these instructions, concentrating on defending Lower Canada at the expense of Upper Canada (which was more vulnerable to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Gillmor, D. & Turgeon, T, Canada, A People's History, Vol 1., McClelland & Stewart, 2000, p.165

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.165



American attacks) and allowing few offensive actions. In the final year of the war, large numbers of veteran British soldiers became available after the abdication of Napoleon.

The United States was not prepared to prosecute a war, for President Madison assumed that the state militias would easily seize Canada and negotiations would follow. In 1812, the regular army consisted of fewer than 12,000 men. Congress authorized the expansion of the army to 35,000 men, but the service was voluntary and unpopular. It offered poor pay, there were very few trained and experienced officers, and the militias were not amenable to discipline, and performed poorly in the presence of the enemy when outside of their home state. The U.S. had great difficulty financing its war. It had disbanded its national bank, and private bankers in the Northeast were opposed to the war.

#### The War on Land:

<u>1812 Land Campaign</u>: On July 12, 1812, General William Hull led an invading American force of about 1,000 untrained, poorly-equipped militia across the Detroit River and

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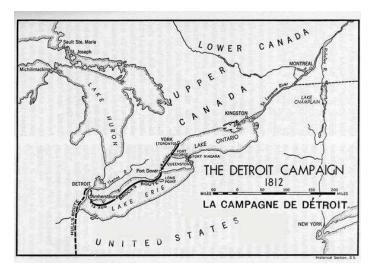
**Isaac Brock** 

occupied the Canadian town of Sandwich (now a neighborhood of Windsor, Ontario).

In response to this incursion, General Isaac Brock, commanding the British forces in Upper Canada issued orders for a series of offensive thrusts into enemy territory with the view to gaining increased support from the native people in the region.

A small force of regulars, fur-traders and Indians attacked and captured Fort Michilimackinac. This action had the effect Brock had hoped for – fearful of further Indian attacks, Hull withdrew to

Detroit on 7 August, 1812.



#### **Detroit Campaign**

(Source: http://www.cmhg.gc.ca)

Aware that enemy morale was poor, Brock immediately attacked Detroit with 300 regular troops, 400 Canadian militiamen and 600 Indians led by Tecumseh. Brock wrote to Hull in a letter that said in part, "... you must be aware that the numerous body of Indians who have attached themselves



to my troops will be beyond my control the moment the contest commences." <sup>4</sup> This was sufficient to cause Hull to surrender his entire force as the assault began, giving up 35 guns and a vast amount of stores. Hull was court-martialled for cowardice and sentenced to death. He was later pardoned, but died in disgrace.

Several months later the U.S. launched a second invasion of Canada, this time at the Niagara peninsula. On October 13, a U.S. force of 6,300 including 3,500 regulars led by General Stephen van Rensselaer were again defeated at the Battle of Queenston Heights by a small British force of 350 regulars and militiamen led by Brock. The joy of victory was tempered by the loss of Brock, who was killed by a bullet to the heart while leading his troops.

There were a number of other smaller exchanges along the frontier during 1812 that had little effect upon the campaign.

1813 Land Campaign: The American failures in 1812 led to a shake-up in the leadership of the army. General John Armstrong, an experienced soldier replaced Dr. Eustis, a dentist, as Secretary of War, and General Harrison, a far more aggressive personality replaced the timid General Hull.

In fighting around the Western end of Lake Erie, the British forces under General Procter initially had some success against the numerically superior American forces, inflicting a significant defeat at Raisin River. He then tried to take Fort Meigs, and although he was able to inflict a stinging defeat on a relieving force, was unable to take the fort. He suffered a similar failure to take Fort Stephenson.

These failures had a significant effect on the relationship between Procter and Tecumseh, with the latter accusing the General of cowardice. This rift came to a head at Moraviantown where the Americans caught up with Procter's force. Procter fled the battlefield and many of his troops surrendered. Only the Indians showed an inclination to fight and Tecumseh was killed. Moraviantown was the first major success by the Americans during the war, although it had little influence on the outcome of the war.

Tecumseh

Of more importance were the events along the Niagara frontier during 1813. After two small raids – one against Brockville by the Americans, and the other against Ogdensburg by the Canadians, the 1813 campaign began in earnest with an American expedition against York.

With a force of 1,700 men, General Pike set out from Sackett's Harbour and landed at York where he was confronted by a force of about 600, including 300 York Militia and about 50 Indians. The defenders retreated toward Kingston, burning and blowing up strategic sites

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.166



along the way. The American commander, Pike, was killed by an exploding British powder magazine. In reprisal, the Americans burned the provincial Parliament Building. They then turned their attention to the Niagara frontier.

The Americans, now under the command of General Jacob Brown, had been reinforced and they now had almost 6,000 men under arms. On the British side of the Niagara River at Fort George, General John Vincent awaited the impending attack with about 1,500 troops of whom roughly 1,000 were Regulars. The fighting that followed on 27 May 1813 was fierce – two out of three British defenders became casualties. Eventually the odds were too great and Vincent began an orderly retreat toward Burlington Heights at the head of Lake Ontario.

The American pursuit was slow, and at Stoney Creek the British counter-attacked at night, inflicting a severe defeat on the American forces, forcing them to retreat back to Fort George from whence they had come.

Stoney Creek marked the turning point of the Niagara campaign. An American attempt to retake a British encampment at Beaver Dam was thwarted by an ambush by Indians led by Joseph Brant.

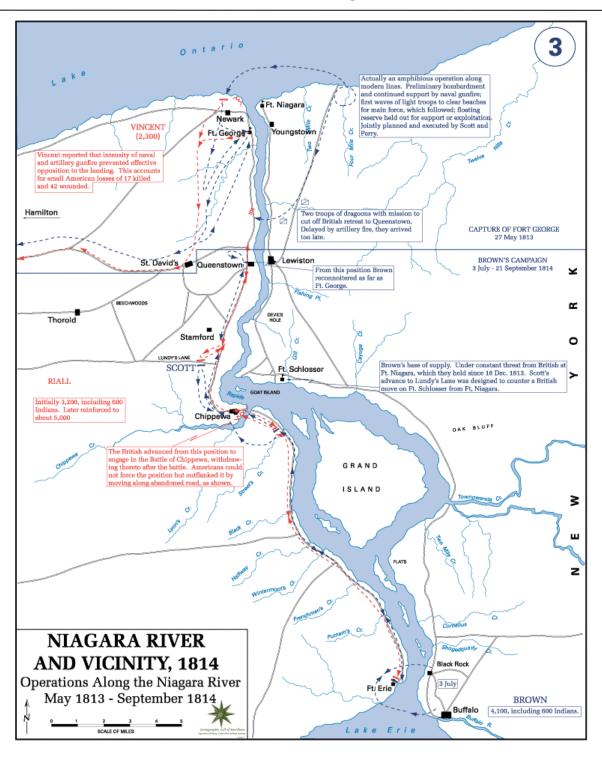
Under threat from reinforced British troops and suffering from a blockade imposed by British ships under Commodore Yeo, the Americans decided to abandon Fort George, but not before putting the torch to the nearby village of Newark. Retribution came swiftly – on December 18 a British force of 500 regulars surprised and captured Fort Niagara, killing or capturing the entire garrison.

Joseph Brant

On the same night, another British force routed the enemy militia at Lewiston before burning the town of Manchester and Fort Schlosser. A few days later, a third British force overcame an American militia force at Buffalo and destroyed the town along with a vast amount of military stores.

From the mouth of the Niagara River to Lake Erie, all resistance had collapsed and the Americans were in a worse state that they had been at the end of 1812.







During October 1813, two large American columns had marched on Montreal with the intention of destroying that important hub in the British lines of communication.

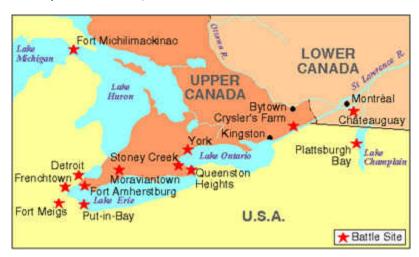


Charles
De Salaberry

One force, led by MGen Wade Hampton, moved from Plattsburg and across Lake Champlain toward Montreal. He ended up in heavily wooded country along the Chateauguay River where he was met by a small force of Voltigeurs led by LCol Charles de Salaberry. Despite the large disparity of numbers in his favour, Hampton withdrew in the face of the effective raids from de Salaberry.

In the meantime, the second American force led by MGen Wilkinson moved down the St. Lawrence where they were harassed by British forces on land and from the water. Finally, they turned to fight at John Chrysler's farm where they were soundly beaten.

Despite the defeat, Wilkinson planned to continue toward Montreal, but on hearing of Hampton's retreat, retired as well.



**Source:** <a href="http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com">http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com</a>

1814 Land Campaign: 1814 saw some of the most intense fighting of the war, with Upper Canada being the principal theatre of operations. Increased British troop strengths were offset by significant improvements in the quality of the American leadership and the training of their soldiers.

On 3 July, a force of 3,500 under Winfield Scott began crossing the Niagara River with the objective of clearing the Niagara Peninsula of British troops before marching on York and Kingston.



**Winfield Scott** 



The Americans easily took Fort Erie and then inflicted a defeat on the British at Chippewa. However, American failure to follow-up quickly on their success at Chippewa, allowed the British to regroup and, on 25 July, under the command of General Phineas Riall, they stopped the American advance in a bloody battle at Lundy's Lane. Both sides claimed victory, but American aspirations in the Niagara Peninsula waned and they retired to Buffalo in October.

The Niagara invasion was the only serious attempt by the Americans to invade Canada in 1814. The British and Canadians however made three forays into the United States – two of them successes and the third, a fiasco.

A Canadian fur trader, William McKay, with a small force of fur traders and voyageurs known as the Michigan Fencibles, and a number of Indians defeated the local American forces and acquired Wisconsin for Britain.

Another force under Sir John Sherbrooke, based in Halifax attacked Maine and annexed all territory north of the Penobscot River to New Brunswick.

Far less successful was an offensive against Plattsburg. Despite a large force of Regulars, the inept leadership of Sir George Prevost wasted the opportunity to take Plattsburg. The timid Prevost withdrew his force following an American naval victory on Lake Champlain.

#### **The Naval War**

<u>The Atlantic Front – 1812</u>: The war at sea was more cheering to the Americans than their limited successes on land. At the outset of the war, the United States Navy had sixteen vessels, but three of them, the 44-gun frigates *Constitution, United States,* and *President* surpassed anything else afloat with their heavy broadsides and excellent sailing qualities.

Despite the disparaging remarks of a London journalist that the American frigates were, "a few fir-built frigates manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws." they succeeded in out-gunning one Royal Navy frigate after another. In one year their frigates won more successes over the British than the French and Spanish had achieved in two decades of warfare. It was not until 1 June, 1813 that the tide of battle at sea turned. On that date HMS Shannon defeated USS Chesapeake after a fifteen minute battle. A succession of British victories followed and command of the ocean passed back into British hands. However, American privateers continued to harry British shipping throughout the war. Despite their depredations, the British blockade was successful and placed a great strain on the United States economy. By 1814, American merchant traffic at sea had been reduced to 11% of that in 1811. In 1812, the United States had exported almost 1,500,000 barrels of flour. In 1814 that figure was reduced drastically to less than 200,000 barrels. By 1813, the British decided to supplement the blockade by victualling the blockading ships by means of a series of punitive raids along the coast.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Churchill, W.S., *History of the English Speaking Peoples, Vol 3*, Dodd, Mead & Co, 1957, p.361

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Potter, E.B. & Nimitz, C.W., Sea Power, Prentice Hall, 1960, p.213



Rear Admiral Cockburn, with four ships of the line and several smaller ships twice penetrated Chesapeake Bay right up to the head of the bay, destroying supplies and armaments on route and even disrupting traffic on the main road between Philadelphia and Baltimore.

It was another such raid that led to the destruction of Washington in 1814. A combined British force of almost 4,000 veterans of Wellington's Peninsula army under the command of Major General Robert Ross swept up the Potomac supported by Royal Navy ships and laid waste to Washington, burning the White House and the Library of Congress. They then moved north to attack Baltimore but were repelled by the city's defenders. This action inspired Francis Scott Key, an American civilian held aboard a British ship, to compose the *Star Spangled Banner*.

A month later, in October 1814, the British fleet, except for the blockading ships, departed for its winter station in the West Indies.

<u>The Great Lakes Campaign</u>: The decisive use of naval power came on the Great Lakes. On Lake Ontario, the rival naval forces were commanded by Sir Lucas Yeo, based at Kingston, and Captain Isaac Chauncey headquartered at Sackett's Harbour, directly opposite Kingston. The two sides concentrated their energies on a ship-building race in which neither side achieved sufficient superiority to launch an all-out attack. Despite occasional skirmishes, the Lake Ontario front degenerated into a battle "of adze, hammer and chisel".<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the construction of *HMS St. Lawrence*, the largest warship yet built on freshwater, the Lake Ontario campaign turned into a stalemate of wasted opportunities and wasted lumber. Without control of the Lake, a military decision on the area proved impossible.

Lake Erie was an entirely different matter. Under the brilliant leadership of Oliver Hazard Perry, the Americans, with a decisive victory at the Battle of Lake Erie on 10 September 1813, won control of the Lake and cut off British and Native American forces in the west from their supply base allowing them to be decisively defeated on their retreat at the Battle of the Thames. Tecumseh, the leader of the tribal confederation, was killed during the battle and his Indian coalition disintegrated. While some Indians continued to fight alongside British troops, they subsequently did so only as individual tribes or groups of warriors, and where they were directly supplied and armed by British agents. Thus, the Americans gained one of their main war goals by breaking the confederation of tribes.



Oliver Hazard Perry

Little of note took place on Lake Huron in 1813, but the American victory on Lake Erie and the recapture of Detroit isolated the British there. During the ensuing winter, a Canadian party under Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDouall established a new supply line from York to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.217



Nottawasaga Bay on Georgian Bay. When he arrived at Fort Mackinac with supplies and reinforcements, he sent an expedition to recapture the trading post of Prairie du Chien in the far west. The Siege of Prairie du Chien ended in a British victory on 20 July 1814.

Earlier in July, the Americans sent a force of five vessels from Detroit to recapture Mackinac. A mixed force of regulars and volunteers from the militia landed on the island on 4 August. They did not attempt to achieve surprise, and at the brief Battle of Mackinac Island, they were ambushed by natives and forced to re-embark. The Americans discovered the new base at Nottawasaga Bay, and on 13 August, they destroyed its fortifications and a schooner that they found there. They then returned to Detroit, leaving two gunboats to blockade Mackinac. On 4 September, these gunboats were captured by enemy boarding parties from canoes and small boats. This engagement on Lake Huron left Mackinac under British control.

The British garrison at Prairie du Chien also fought off another attack by Major Zachary Taylor. In this distant theatre, the British retained the upper hand until the end of the war, through the allegiance of several indigenous tribes that received British gifts and arms.

At the end of the war, Mackinac and other captured territory was returned to the United States.

<u>Lake Champlain</u>: The American navy gained control of Lake Champlain at the Battle of Lake Champlain on 11 September, 1814. The American squadron commanded by Thomas Macdonough consisted of the *Saratoga*, a corvette mounting 18 heavy carronades and eight 24-pounders; the brig *Eagle*; the schooner *Ticonderoga*; the sloop *Preble*; and ten gunboats.

The British squadron under the command of George Downie, included HMS *Confiance*, technically the most powerful man-of-war on Lake Champlain. However, she was brand new and still had workers on board when she entered the fray.

The two squadrons engaged each other while at anchor and after about two and a half hours the American gunnery prevailed and except for a pair of gunboats, the entire British squadron was captured. The engagement cost 300 British and 200 American lives.

This decisive naval victory forced the large invading British army under Prevost to turn back.

Once Britain and its allies had defeated Napoleon in 1814, France and Britain became allies and Britain ended the trade restrictions and the impressment of American sailors, thus removing two more causes of the war.

#### The Battle of New Orleans

By 1814, the United States Army's morale and leadership had greatly improved. The British made one last major invasion, attempting to capture New Orleans, but were decisively



defeated by General Andrew Jackson with very heavy losses at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815, one month after the signing of the Treaty of Ghent.

#### The Treaty of Ghent

By 1814, both sides, weary of a costly war that seemingly offered nothing but stalemate, were ready to grope their way to a settlement and sent delegates to Ghent, Belgium. The negotiations began in early August and dragged on until 24 December, when a final agreement was signed. Both sides had to ratify it before it could take effect. After two years of warfare, the major causes of the war had disappeared. Neither side had a reason to continue nor a chance of gaining a decisive success that would compel their opponents to cede territory or to offer advantageous peace terms. News of the peace treaty took two months to reach the U.S., during which fighting continued.

The terms of the Treaty stated that fighting between the United States and Britain would cease, all conquered territory was to be returned to the prewar claimant, the Americans were to gain fishing rights in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the United States and Britain agreed to recognize the prewar boundary between Canada and the United States.

The Treaty ignored the grievances that had led to the war. American complaints of Indian raids, impressment and blockades had ended when Britain's war with France ended, and were not mentioned in the Treaty. The Treaty proved to be merely an expedient to end the fighting. The war ended with no significant territorial losses for either side.

#### Who Won the War?

Historians have differing interpretations as to who won the war. However, they are in full agreement that the Indians were the war's clear losers, losing land, power and any hope of keeping their semi-autonomous status. Historians also agree that ending the war with neither side gaining or losing territory allowed for the peaceful settlement of boundary disputes and for the opening of a permanent era of good will and friendly relations between the U.S. and Canada.

The view of the majority of historians in recent years has been that the war ended in stalemate, with the Treaty of Ghent closing a war that had become militarily inconclusive. Neither side wanted to continue fighting since the main causes had disappeared and since there were no large lost territories for one side or the other to reclaim by force. Insofar as they see the war's resolution as allowing two centuries of peaceful and mutually beneficial intercourse between the U.S., Britain and Canada, these historians often conclude that all three nations were the "real winners" of the War of 1812. They often add that the war could have been avoided in the first place by better diplomacy.

There remains another school of thought that considers the War of 1812 to have been a British victory. It argues that the British achieved their military objectives in 1812 (by stopping the repeated American invasions of Canada) and that Canada retained her independence from the United States. By contrast, they say, the Americans suffered a defeat when their armies failed to achieve their goal of seizing part or all of Canada.



Additionally, they argue the U.S. lost as it failed to stop impressment, which the British refused to repeal.

#### **Consequences of the War**

Neither side lost territory in the war, nor did the treaty that ended it address the original points of contention—and yet it changed much between the United States of America and Britain.

The Rush–Bagot Treaty between the United States and Britain was enacted in 1817 and provided for the demilitarization of the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain, where many British naval arrangements and forts still remained. This treaty laid the basis for a demilitarized boundary and was indicative of improving relations between the United States and Great Britain in the period following the War of 1812. It remains in effect to this day.

The Treaty of Ghent established the *status quo ante bellum*; that is, there were no territorial losses by either side. The issue of impressment was made moot when the Royal Navy, no longer needing sailors, stopped impressment after the defeat of Napoleon. Except for occasional border disputes and the circumstances of the American Civil War, relations between the U.S. and Britain remained generally peaceful for the rest of the 19th century, and the two countries became close allies in the 20th century.

Border adjustments between the U.S. and British North America were made in the Treaty of 1818. A border dispute along the Maine–New Brunswick border was settled by the 1842 Webster–Ashburton Treaty after the bloodless Aroostook War, and the border in the Oregon Territory was settled by splitting the disputed area in half by the 1846 Oregon Treaty.

In British North America the War of 1812 was seen by Loyalists as a victory, as they had successfully defended their borders from an American takeover. The outcome gave Canadians increased confidence and a new sense of Canadian nationalism.

The Battle of York showed the vulnerability of Upper and Lower Canada. In the 1820s, work began on La Citadelle at Quebec City as a defence against the United States. Additionally, work began on the Halifax Citadel to defend the port against American attacks.

From 1826 to 1832, the Rideau Canal was built to provide a secure waterway from Bytown (now Ottawa) to Kingston via the Rideau River then southwest via the canal to Lake Ontario, avoiding the narrows of the St. Lawrence River, where ships could be vulnerable to American cannon fire. To defend the western end of the canal, the British also built Fort Henry at Kingston, including four Martello Towers, which remained operational until 1891.

One of the lessons drawn from the war, according to F.G. Stanley, was the superiority of the trained soldier over the untrained militiaman. He credits the British victories in the early part of the war, not only to superior leadership but also to superior discipline and training. That said, however, he goes on to say that the Canadian militia system proved to be an



admirable mobilization scheme, able to put men into the field when and where they were needed.<sup>8</sup>

This view is supported in the Canadian Encyclopedia website, "Canadians ... the growing belief that they, the civilian soldiers, and not the Indians and British regulars, had won the war - more mythic than real - helped to germinate the seeds of nationalism in the Canadas."

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8 Stanley, p.178