

The War of 1812

America's "Second War for Independence" (1812-1815)

On **June 18, 1812**, the United States declares war on Great Britain after long-standing disputes with the British. For nearly 10 years British ship captains had been impressing American sailors to serve on British ships. Also, Americans are killed and wounded when the British ship *Leopard* fires on the *USS Chesapeake* in 1807 after the Americans refuse to be boarded. In the Northwest Territories Great Britain continues its disputes with the United States at the border with Canada. President Jefferson's attempt to reduce the controversy with the British by introducing the Embargo Act creates an economic disaster for merchants.

In **1808** James Madison is elected President and is re-elected in **1812**. He is pressured by the "War Hawks" in Congress to declare war on Great Britain. The war is labeled "Mr. Madison's War" by the Federalists who oppose it.

By the end of **1812** the British successfully capture Detroit, blockade South Carolina and Georgia, and blockade the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays. By the end of **1813** the British blockade extends to all southern and mid-Atlantic states. By spring of **1814**, the British blockade extends to New England.

Campaigns are waged in the South, the East and the North, with the British undertaking a threepart invasion of the United States at Chesapeake Bay, Lake Champlain, and the mouth of the Mississippi River.

At the Battle of Baltimore, **September 13-14, 1814**, Francis Scott Key writes "*The Star Spangled Banner*."



Fort McHenry

On **February 17, 1815**, the war ends when the Treaty of Ghent is accepted by both the United States and Britain.

The Maine Connection to the War of 1812

At the time of the War of 1812, the District of Maine was still a part of Massachusetts. There are no comprehensive records to indicate how many Maine natives served in the conflict, but undoubtedly many seamen from the District were impressed by the Royal Navy before and after the start of the War. A few individuals, like Joseph Treat of Bangor, served with the regular U. S. Army. He was a captain in the 21st Infantry and participated in heavy fighting in upper New York State and around the Great Lakes. The majority of men were called up by their local militia units, but remained in Maine and saw very little, if any, action.

The Embargo and other trade restrictions profoundly affected Mainers, dependent as they were upon the sea for most manufactured goods coming into the District as well as the export of their principal products, lumber and fish. All sorts of goods became scarce and inflation rose to unprecedented levels. Many merchants had been opposed to Jefferson's Embargo and had initially opposed the War, but by 1813 were resigned to its prosecution. Accordingly, there was a brief surge of joy and hope when, on September 5, 1813, residents along the coast witnessed (or at least heard the gunfire from) a tremendous fight between the British brig *Boxer* and the American brig *Enterprise*. This classic naval battle raged back and forth between Monhegan Island and the mainland and resulted in an American victory.

The seizure by the British of the entire coast east of Penobscot Bay further deepened the economic hardships of the residents of Maine. The Massachusetts Legislature refused to take any action to relieve or defend Maine and instead improved their own fortifications. President Madison then nationalized the Maine militia, placing it under the command of William King, a local militia Major General. But the Federal Government had no funds to support, arm, or equip the locals, who had to continue to endure the British occupation. There were countless unpleasant incidents, some crops and stores were burned or destroyed, but fortunately, the British seldom carried out such threats as that issued by a Captain Barry to the citizens of Hampden: "My business is to burn, sink and destroy. Your town is taken by storm, and by the rules of war, we ought both to lay your village in ashes, and put its inhabitants to the sword. But I will spare your lives, though I mean to burn your houses." It should be noted, however, that one reason the British were reluctant to harm the inhabitants of the occupied area was that they claimed the entire region as part of Canada and did not want to inflame residents who, according to them, were by rights British subjects. The actual boundary between Maine and Canada was not settled until 1842.

The most important result of the War of 1812 upon the citizens of Maine was that it fanned the movement for independence from Massachusetts. This had been a growing issue before the war, but the utter failure of Massachusetts to assist the District of Maine in any way brought the matter to a head. William King, who had been in charge of the Maine Militia, became the principal leader of the drive for statehood. Joseph Treat, who had served in the Western theater of the War, was a member of several conventions leading up to the signing of the Constitution of Maine, and upon achieving statehood in 1820, William King was elected the first governor of the State of Maine.

Material taken from William D. Williamson, *The History of Maine from Its First Discovery, A. D. 1602 to The Separation, A. D. 1820, Inclusive*.Hallowell, 1832, and selected records in Maine State Archives