

The Causes and Consequences of the War of 1812: A New Look at Old Sources

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This essay began with my dissatisfaction with how the War of 1812 is discussed in a variety of textbooks for a number of courses I teach. It began to take more concrete shape when I developed a presentation setting out my ideas. It grew as I added and amended it in response to questions and comments from the various audiences and also went back and looked at the literature and some of the principal sources. It is not based on new deep primary research or an exhaustive reading of the literature and, therefore, it is highly speculative. There is no new discovery of documents hence the subtitle “a new look at old sources.” This process has reinforced my thinking, however, that we need as historians to step back and rethink how we approach the War of 1812. Earlier historiographical paradigms have led to an incorrect understanding of both the causes and consequences of the war. A large part of that rethinking involves shifting the focus from the eastern seaboard, especially New England, and looking at the events that led up to the war from the perspective of Kentucky and the emerging West of the new nation. Too much of the early history of United States has been written from the perspective of the East Coast. This is an example of where that has led us to misunderstand an important event.

I think historians have misunderstood the War of 1812 for many years and they continue to misunderstand it because they maintain the same focus and use the same lenses to view the war. Seeing the conflict as a Second War for Independence dates back several historiographical generations and seems largely based on our opponent being the same. This approach leads in entirely the wrong direction and directs research to the wrong evidence. It was not the Second War for Independence, I will argue, but was instead the first war of American expansion. The key, as stated above, to understanding that, I think, is to see the war through the lens of Kentucky and the developing West, especially the greater Ohio Valley/lower Great Lakes region, not that of Atlantic coastal society and Washington politics. Old interpretations die hard, it seems, and the idea that the war of 1812 was fought over the impressment of seamen and British violation of United States sovereignty is alive and well in a textbook, and even many monographs, near you.¹ Even when the issue of Western expansion is mentioned, it is almost always listed last after impressment and the other commercial shipping

¹ Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, *The American Pageant*, ninth edition (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1991) is fairly typical.

issues.² Over the years, especially having done research on developing Ohio Valley in the last twenty five years, I've become convinced that impressment is a minor cause, at best, and more likely a political maneuver to enlist idealistic nationalistic support for the war or to provide principled cover. Sovereignty was an issue, but not primarily sovereignty on the high seas, but in the Great Lakes and Ohio River Valley of the emerging West. As long as the British use of native allies to attack and harass American settlers the West would not develop to its full potential. That was a cause for war. This idea is interesting and supportable.

For merchants losing a few sailors was not a big deal stop; it happened on a regular basis. Crew members died during voyages, and sailors deserted in port. They were impressed by the Royal Navy. The British Navy, however, did not impress large numbers of sailors from any single ship, as far as I have been able to determine, though that is a subjective judgment. So, impressment posed no real danger to the completion of the voyage. There was enough crew left to finish and replacements could be had when the destination was reached for the voyage home. Also, I have yet to see impressment listed as a complaint or grievance by any merchant, certainly not by a large body of merchants. In any event, the problem was easily solved ~ add a few crew members.

Crew members were neither expensive nor particularly hard to find. The coffeehouses and taverns in every port town were full of them. The idea of shared risk in limiting potential losses had been implemented years earlier, probably by the 1650s or 1660s in Massachusetts, if not much earlier. All voyages were divided into shares. No one individual risked the whole cost of the ship's cargo alone. Why, then, would you risk the success of the voyage for the cost of the wages of a few sailors when they were so many to hire? It was simply an added cost of doing business in troubled times. A few extra sailors would not be bad for business or particularly expensive. War, on the other hand, especially war with Great Britain, our major trading partner, would be very bad for business.

Merchants had learned many years earlier that war and even serious political unrest were both bad for business. No wonder merchants, both American and especially British, consistently opposed all efforts to tax the colonists. They would gladly pay the few pounds it might cost them each proportionally. But, please, Parliament, do not alienate our best customers. The powerful effect of the non-importation agreements the colonists used in opposition to British efforts to tax them were a brilliant political move which recognized a basic truth about British politics and which were consistently successful until 1773. Even after 1773 and the Boston Tea Party, a group of London merchants offered to pay the government for the

² An example is *American Military History Volume I: The United States Army and the Forging of a Nation*, second edition, Richard W. Stewart, General Editor (Washington: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2009): 131-132. Another example is James W. Hammack, Jr., *Kentucky and the Second American Revolution: The War of 1812* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), which presents a more nuanced view than most, but still prioritizes ocean-going commerce.

destroyed tea at Boston, some £10,000, rather than allow the harbor to be closed and all that business and income lost.³ The government, however, decided a lesson had to be taught. The London and other British merchants knew they would pay, at least a large part of, the tuition for that lesson. This was also augmented later by the powerful effect of the French Alliance. As the merchant community in London and elsewhere in Britain was not reluctant to point out, the colonists were being driven into the commercial arms of France. This was not a desirable outcome.

I could say a lot more about how the interests of the London merchants and their reluctance to support the war against the colonies complicated the British government's efforts to somehow bring the conflict to a close and made it much more feasible for the colonists to prevail against such a great military opponent. The American Revolution was perhaps, well not really perhaps, was, as one of my mentors in graduate school, Thomas C. Barrow pointed out in an article in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, "a colonial war for independence."⁴ The rules for such wars are quite different, if not fully appreciated at the time

Moving ahead, to the early years of independence, one consistent thread through all the political discourse focused on trade and British or French interference with American trade during the Wars of the French Revolution. It was a major political issue, but one thing that is striking when one looks at the literature of the contemporary newspaper articles, the merchant community never asked for war or even much in the way of military protection. They were willing to take the risks involved because they had developed ways to deal with risk through insurance and shares inherent in how they did business.

So, we come to 1812. Trade and neutral rights had been issues by now for at least two decades, throughout the Napoleonic wars, almost from the first days of the new nation. Then, amidst great rhetoric, we finally go to war. We go to war over the impressment of sailors on the high seas according to most historians or at least primarily for that reason. There is little support for the war from any of the places that actually engaged in a high level of oceangoing commerce. Almost no Senator or Congressman from New England or New York voted for the war.⁵ If their interests were being protected by going to war one would think at least a few of

³ Benjamin Woods Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964): chpt.9 for a discussion of how the British response evolved politically. Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 2010).

⁴ Thomas C. Barrow, "The American Revolution Considered as a Colonial War for Independence," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, Vol. 25 (1968): 452-464.

⁵ Leland R. Johnson, "The Suspense was Hell: The Senate Vote for the War of 1812," *Indiana Magazine of History* Vol. 68 (1969): 247-267. Harvey Strum, "New York Federalists and Opposition to the War of 1812," *World Affairs* Vol. 142 (1980): 169-187. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/12-1/h208>. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/mr-madison-s-war.htm>. Tom Kanos, "James Madison, Felix Grundy, and the Devil: A Western War Hawk in Congress," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* Vol. 75 (2001): 433-468.

these representatives would have supported the war, lest they be turned out by their constituents, who were disappointed by this lack of protection for the vital interests. I mean, it's just telling. The United States is going to war to protect the economic interests of a section of the country, but in votes in Congress the representatives of that section largely vote not to go to war. In fact, vote overwhelmingly not to go to war. Also, few people enlisted or volunteered for the military from the states most heavily engaged in oceangoing commerce. They basically agreed to sit it out. While it can be overinflated and overemphasized, and frankly has been, the Hartford Convention brought the northern, more commercial, states together to express their dissatisfaction with war.⁶ It is a telling reminder of how little support there was in New England, the alleged great beneficiary of what came to be known as "Mr. Madison's War." They had also been consistently opposed to Jefferson's Embargo and Madison's prewar efforts to win concessions from Great Britain and France. A corollary to the idea that the war was principally for to defend American sovereignty, violated by impressment above all else, is that the war was unnecessary because all issues had been resolved before the war was formally declared and started. There was a breakdown in communication: word had simply not arrived. Not so fast, my friend. Maritime trade issues may have been largely resolved but not all interests had been taken care of and not all conflicts resolved.

Now we need to go back to the American Revolution, the years of debate with Great Britain over the nature of the Imperial relationship. Years before 1763, let alone 1812, Americans had designs on the Trans-Appalachian region for future settlement. French and Indian activity deterred settlement before 1763, but interest remained strong. We sometimes forget that George Washington first attracted attention, and began his very successful business career, while a young man as a land looker and surveyor essentially exploring the Appalachian region, mostly the nearer Appalachian region rather than the trans-Appalachian region. He did this for wealthy Virginians often taking land in payment for his services. He developed an excellent reputation for the draftsmanship of his maps and his willingness to go into hostile and largely uninhabited (by Europeans) areas and bring back reliable reports. He also played a significant role in the events that triggered the French and Indian (Seven Years) War.

So, the British Proclamation of 1763, which comes at the very beginning of the debate about Empire that ultimately leads to American independence, was strongly opposed by the colonists. Their opposition to the Proclamation is often lost in the discussion of their opposition to the various taxes Parliament sought to impose on them. "No taxation without representation" is a catchy slogan. It synthesizes the opposition to all British efforts to impose control over the colonies and collect revenue to pay for that control, among other things, brilliantly. There is no comparably catchy slogan for the real outrage Americans felt that being

⁶ James M. Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

told they can't go across the mountains. But that grievance was very strong and, when you actually look at the things they complained about, it's invariably on the list.

The Declaration of Independence (in language we would not use today) refers to aspects of this in two places and particularly noted the use of native people to attack frontier settlements.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose of obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners: refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands. . . he has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions...

The British worked very hard to keep the colonists from moving into this new area. Colin Calloway has written, "Henry Hamilton, while lieutenant governor of Canada, developed a reputation with a nickname "the Hair Buyer" because of his cash payment for scalps of the American colonists that could be brought to him at his base of operations in the Detroit - Windsor area."⁷ Hamilton openly operated in American territory against American interests. He also encouraged and rewarded Indian attacks on the frontier well into Kentucky and well into the early years of the Revolutionary War.

Now people had begun filtering into Kentucky by the early 1770s and they lived in these early years in fortified stations. All residences were fortified, enclosed by a wooden palisade, in case of attack. Life of the frontier was hard enough without the ever-present threat of raid and mayhem. In many ways George Rogers Clark's campaign to gain control of the West was at least as much aimed at Hamilton and breaking his ability to incite his Indian allies to attack Kentucky as it was to assert a nominative American sovereignty over the lower Great Lakes region. Again, an East Coast bias. I think Clark had a much more specific goal in mind than asserting a claim to territory. He was determined to break the influence and power that Hamilton had over the native people. Clark used strong tactics to drive home the point that Hamilton could not protect his Indian allies. Infamously, tomahawking a number while they knelt looking at Hamilton for assistance, Clark cold-bloodedly bashed their skulls in as a statement, he can't save you.

Hamilton, when he was captured at Vincennes, was not treated as a prisoner of war but as a war criminal. He was shipped to Williamsburg and kept in neck, leg, and hand chains, and irons under criminal charges by the direction of Governor Thomas Jefferson. Eventually, Washington, as commander-in-chief of the Army, was persuaded that Hamilton's harsh

⁷ Colin G. Calloway, "The End of an Era: British-Indian Relations in the Great Lakes Region after the War of 1812," *Michigan Historical Review* Vol. 12 (1986): 1-20.

treatment might be used against captured Americans and his conditions were relaxed. But that's how serious a threat to westerners Hamilton was seen as. While the Treaty of Paris in 1783 made the area between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River part of the United States, the British were very slow to leave and still did not want the area settled to protect the lucrative fur trade they had taken over from the French. While Hamilton was gone, his successors openly operated in much the same way in the area from the Ohio River to as far north as Sault Ste. Marie.

After independence Kentucky grew rapidly. Settlers came through the Cumberland Gap and down the Ohio River. It was admitted as the fifteenth state on June 1, 1792, shortly after Vermont. Kentucky also played a significant role in Congress and national politics. One of the leaders of the proponents of war with Great Britain was the Speaker of the House – Henry Clay from Lexington. Clay, and most of the Kentucky congressional delegation, supported the war, but interestingly not Kentucky's senators. Clay pretty much demanded war. In fact, I think it might be fairer to call it "Mr. Clay's War" than "Mr. Madison's War." Clay's strong support for War against Britain needs to be seen in the context of Kentucky's future development.

Even during the fighting, as the Revolution had loosened British control, men like Daniel Boone and others began moving into Kentucky through the Cumberland Gap and down the Ohio River. Kentucky had abundant game, rich soil, and numerous rivers for both water and transportation. Kentucky developed very rapidly. Louisville quickly emerged as an important commercial and transshipment point at the Falls of the Ohio. By 1810 its population was 1357; in 1820 it was 4012, a three-fold increase. Lexington, with a population of the 4326 in 1810, emerged as a cultural, as well as a commercial, center in the Blue Grass region. Transylvania University moved to Lexington in 1789 and was at the center of an active cultural community, which led to Lexington being called "the Athens of the West."⁸ The poet Josiah Espy described the city in 1806,

Lexington is the largest in multiple and most wealthy town in Kentucky, or indeed west of the Allegheny Mountains; the main street of Lexington has all the appearances of Market St. in Philadelphia on a busy day... I would suppose it contains about 500 dwelling houses [it was closer to 300], many of them elegant and three stories high. About 30 brick buildings within raising, I have little doubt that that in a few years it will rival, not only in wealth, but in population, the most populous inland towns of the United States... The country around Lexington for many miles in every direction, is

⁸ James Klotter and Daniel Rowland, eds., *Bluegrass Renaissance: The History and Culture of Central Kentucky, 1792-1853* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) contains a number of essays that illustrate and develop this point.

equal in beauty and fertility to anything the imagination can paint is already in a high state of cultivation.⁹

After independence, the new national government did not have sufficient military resources to devote much to protecting the frontier, even if they would have, might have. Settlers were very much left to fend for themselves. What money was spent on defense was spent to build forts to defend coastal cities from attack from Europe. Little, if any, money was spent defending the West. British agents continued to operate openly in American territory and encouraged Indian attacks on settlements. Fewer of the raids were directed at Kentucky than had been before the Revolution, as far as I can tell. The British focused their efforts more on the territories north of the Ohio River. This, however, did not leave Kentuckians feeling safe. News of the raids travelled fast and the collective memory of the earlier raids was strong. Fear and vigilance remained high. Plus, the river was not a real barrier to movement there were reasons for Kentuckian themselves to cross. Land titles, for example, were proving to be perhaps as serious an obstacle to growth in Kentucky as the Indian raids had been, to exaggerate slightly. Kentucky was surveyed under what was known as the Virginia system that often granted land was surveyed after the grant. This could lead to what were called shingled land claims because they often overlapped. Lawyers prospered, people not so much.

North of the river the federal government had set up a system of prior survey using a grid system. Land titles were easier to verify and conflict was minimized. This is one of the great accomplishments of the US government under the Articles of Confederation ~ prior survey of land. As well, we should mention prohibiting slavery in the Northwest Territories as it was opening for settlement. Among the families that crossed the Ohio was that of young Abraham Lincoln. So we know this was something Kentucky families considered as an option. Native activity north of the river was not a distant concern, but a revival of painful collective memories of the violence of the early settlement period in Kentucky. Kentucky had developed rapidly. Lexington was a sophisticated city with a university, theaters, and other cultural institutions.¹⁰ The stakes were much higher in the early 1810s than they had been during the Revolution.

There was also in the west in the early years of the nineteenth century a sense of alienation from a government that did not seem to be doing much to defend or protect people. British agents roamed freely stirring up trouble. The market for their goods was in New Orleans, but sending goods down the Mississippi to New Orleans was fraught with peril, not the least of which was interference at New Madrid by Spanish toll collectors and agents, before the uncertainty of what they might face in New Orleans, where control shifted between France

⁹ "Athens of the West," <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/lexington/athens.htm>.

¹⁰ Klotter and Rowland, *Bluegrass Renaissance*.

and Spain with the flow of events in Europe. The west bank of the Mississippi River was in foreign control. The future growth of the entire region was somewhat up in the air.

At its core, the Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy that emerges in this environment is rooted in this early Western alienation from the federal government seen as indifferent to Western interests. Aaron Burr and James Wilkinson sought to turn that to their advantage, if we are to believe the worst case charged against them. The conspiracy, whatever it was, and the details are murky and shrouded in political rivalries of the period, it really never reaches fruition. The Louisiana Purchase removed its basis for any widespread support and it quickly dissolved. It is an indication of the fragility of the relationship between the rapidly developing west and the federal government.

Initially seeking to secure the regular deposit goods without tariffs in New Orleans as they moved through the port ~ transshipment, Jefferson ended up doubling the size of the country and removing the last obstacles to Western expansion. The US now controlled both banks of the Mississippi as well as the Port of New Orleans. The future of the West would now be clearly linked to that of the United States and controlled entirely by the United States. No toll at New Madrid; no tariffs and fees in New Orleans. One wonders how much the Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy spurred Jefferson, who hated Burr with passion, to try to solve this issue. How did that affect his willingness to purchase Louisiana?

The rivers that facilitated Western trade and commerce now ran safely through United States territory to the sea. The tremendous potential for Kentucky to develop was now unshackled. But could Kentucky grow and reach its full potential while the British maintained their presence in the lower Great Lakes region and the upper Mississippi Valley stirring up the Indians? The rise of Tecumseh's alliance with the British just north of the Ohio River did not escape notice in Kentucky.

In 1811 Kentucky Congressman Henry Clay was elected speaker of the house in his first term as a member of Congress. He was not a newcomer to Washington politics, he had earlier served as a senator. (Career paths in politics were more fluid and less linear than they have become.) He was also a transformative speaker, who made what had been a simple presiding officer position into a powerful government leadership position. Tensions were growing in the West with the rise of Tecumseh. Despite American success at the Battle of Tippecanoe in Indiana on November 1811, the British-Indian alliance remained a real threat to the future of the West. Tecumseh was unwilling to sign a treaty making the situation more ominous.

Clay was determined to resolve this issue and emerged as the leader of a coalition of southern and western lawmakers, determined to have war with Britain to resolve the issue of British interference on the western frontier once and for all. It seems clear to me that he and his allies were more interested in eliminating the Indian obstacles to growth than the impressment of sailors on the high seas. An alliance between the West and the South throughout their interests was certainly possible. Slavery had not yet emerged as the great

divisive issue it would become. Slavery, as many scholars have observed, was a new element in American politics in the early years of the 19th century.¹¹ Sectionalism, the balancing of the varied interests of the North, the South, and the West, was a more important foundation for political alliances. John C Calhoun, a leader of the southern faction, joined Clay's group. He was still in his nationalistic phase and he was crucial to the group's success. His personal dislike for Clay was not yet strong enough to prevent their alliance. The War Hawks, as they came to be known, had their way and war was declared. I would suggest that the war they wanted was one to force the federal government to defend the West from the emerging alliance between Tecumseh and the British, more than any concern for impressment of sailors on the high seas. Kentucky's strong response to the call for volunteers, along with that of other Western states, shows that Kentucky saw a special benefit from the impending conflict. I would suggest that special benefit was not an end to the impressment of sailors, but rather an end to the threat posed by Tecumseh.

Despite an inauspicious start with General Hull's surrender of Detroit and the American defeat at the Battle of the River Raisin – and the massacre after the battle south of the Detroit near Raisinville (now Monroe, Michigan) – the war in the West ended well for the US and for Kentucky. The defeat and slaughter at the River Raisin became a rallying cry for volunteers across the frontier. Kentucky supplied a very large number of troops, close to two-thirds of all who served in United States forces during the war of 1812 were from Kentucky. I haven't done the math, but I'm reasonably confident two-thirds of the people in the United States were not in Kentucky in 1812. Two-thirds of the casualties, unfortunately, were also Kentuckians.

Interestingly, one of the leaders of the Kentucky forces was Col. Richard Johnson, who alternated between a seat in the House of Representatives and recruiting and leading troops in combat during the course of the war. When Congress was in session, he would go to Washington. When Congress would adjourn, he would return home to Kentucky, roundup some troops, head for Canada. It's an interesting approach.

Johnson was not just a politician playing soldier. He suggested to General William Henry Harrison, the victor at Tippecanoe, that the Indians should be attacked in winter not in the summer. He argued they would stand and fight to protect their winter supplies while during the warmer months they could replenish lost food and would disperse. Harrison rejected Johnson's plan as impractical. Interestingly, a very similar policy was later adopted during the Plains Indian Wars after the Civil War and ultimately led to success for US forces. Not only was Detroit retaken, but the British were driven out of Michigan and aggressively pursued into

¹¹ William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State university Press, 1978) remains a good introduction. William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 2 vols. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990, 2007) provides detail.

Canada. At the battle of the Thames, Tecumseh was killed and the Indian military that controlled the Great Lakes region effectively destroyed as a threat. Kentuckians had not simply been interested in driving the British out of the United States. They pursued the British and Tecumseh well into Canada and forced a decisive battle – the Battle at the River Thames.

Johnson, himself, received and took credit for personally killing Tecumseh. Although as in many of these details of history, there is debate over who actually killed Tecumseh. It was, however, a great benefit to Johnson's political career and some years later he was elected vice president under Martin Van Buren. For many reasons, there is not space to get into here, Andrew Jackson, the victor at New Orleans, became the great hero to come out of the War of 1812.¹²

The death of Tecumseh in the decisive American victory at the Thames broke the power of the British – Indian alliance. Twice in successive generations British power failed to protect their native allies. Clark had captured Hamilton and brutally murdered several native captives in Hamilton's sight. Sir Isaac Brock, defender of Canada, and someone Tecumseh respected and trusted – and still to this day great hero in Canada – was killed in the events leading up to the battle and his successor was not up to the challenge. It was Tecumseh, the native leader, who took the lead of the combined force and decided to stand and fight. In that battle, one he saw as potentially decisive, it was Tecumseh, the great charismatic leader of the native people of the West, who died as well. Kentucky and the West had accomplished their purpose in going to war. The British-inspired threat to their development of Kentucky in the West was over. The path was clear and Kentucky quickly grew and prospered becoming one of the wealthiest states in the nation before the Civil War. Among other consequences of the death of Tecumseh was a treaty signed a few years later that opened the area west of the Tennessee River in both Kentucky and Tennessee to settlement.

So I would suggest that if you look at the war of 1812 through the lens of Kentucky and the emerging West, it is, perhaps, not an unnecessary war and may, in fact, have been necessary to allow the full development of Kentucky and the other Western states to continue without British inspired Indian attacks and assaults. It was not about impressing seamen. It was not the Second American Revolution, but rather the first American war for expansion. The most significant battle was not fought at New Orleans after the treaty was signed but was fought on the Thames River in Ontario. That was a battle with real consequences for the future of the United States.

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¹² John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol of An Age* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1955) remains the best study of Jackson's appeal to his generation.