

Where's the Action? Challenges of Constructing a Comprehensive Inventory of War of 1812 Engagements

By Ralph E. Eshelman

In his article "The Many Wars of 1812," historian Donald Graves states, "[R]egional beliefs for the War of 1812 [are] regarded differently in different areas of North America. Each area or region has its own established view on the origins of the war, how it was fought, who was victorious and what it accomplished. That these views may or may not be sound is not really the question -- they exist and must be acknowledged."¹

Despite these regional differences, most scholars assume the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River regions saw the most actions during the War of 1812; after all, weren't more battles fought there than anywhere else? Fully two-thirds of all US regular troops who served in the war were deployed along the Canadian-American border.² Donald Graves states that "northern and western New York...witnessed some of the heaviest fighting and suffered some of the worst destruction in the war," and "Ontario suffered ... much destruction."³ Graves also claims that the US invasion of Upper Canada by crossing the Niagara River in July 1814 resulted in "the longest and bloodiest military campaign of the War of 1812."⁴ (It may have been the bloodiest but Rear Admiral George Cockburn's 1814 campaign in the Chesapeake was longer.)

Historian Donald Hickey notes that no matter how spectacular an operation elsewhere might have been, "contemporaries understood that they were subordinate to the campaigns in the North."⁵ In an article reviewing new scholarly contributions, Hickey affirms, "This conflict [the War of 1812] could only be won or lost on the Canadian-American border."⁶

The significant role that the Chesapeake region played in the war was suggested in a 2008 National Park Service report to Congress on the historic preservation of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 sites in the United States.⁷ In a distribution map depicting War of 1812 sites by state, Maryland is shown as having the highest number (not all necessarily engagements), followed by New York. Based in part on this report and also on their own research, Eshelman,

Sheads and Hickey state in 2010 that, "Maryland was the site of more battles, skirmishes, and raids than any other state in the Union."⁸

Where are the statistics to support such a conclusion? Neither the National Park Service report nor the Eshelman et al. book includes a comprehensive listing of North American engagements during the war. In a search for a definitive answer it was determined that there was no comprehensive inventory that would allow statistical comparison of states, provinces and theatres of war, and therefore the compiling of a comprehensive inventory was undertaken. To better understand the severity of actions and sufferings by region, the current compilation includes not only battles, skirmishes and raids, but also massacres, invasions, and occupations. This working database is presented at the end of this article. The statistical results of this effort will be presented at the "From Enemies to Allies: An International Conference on the War and its Aftermath," to be held at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, in June 2013.

Following is a discussion on the methodology, difficulties, limitations of the study, and future possible steps to augment and improve this database. The inventory of actions is not intended to be a comprehensive chronology of the War of 1812 but rather a comprehensive listing of known battles, raids, skirmishes, massacres, invasions and occupations during the war in North America. Therefore, events such as embargoes, negotiations, exchange of prisoners, etc., are not included.

Methodology

Several sources were utilized to compile the database. Among the most comprehensive chronologies are Alastair Sweeny, [Fire Along the Frontier: Great Battles of the War of 1812](http://alastairsweeny.com/1812/index.php?War_of_1812.Timeline) (http://alastairsweeny.com/1812/index.php?War_of_1812.Timeline), Bud Hannings, [The War of 1812: A Complete Chronology](#) (McFarland & Company, 2012), and Donald R. Hickey, [Don't Give Up The Ship!: Myths of the War of 1812](#) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), Chronology. The Sweeny website is updated as necessary, and Hickey has updated his chronology in an unpublished document simply entitled "Chronology" dated January 16, 2012.

Wherever possible, Hickey used primary documentation, such as Clarence Edward Carter's Territorial Papers of the United States (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1934).

Additional sources included The Encyclopedia of the War of 1812 (ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, CA, 2012) edited by Spencer C. Tucker; Report to Congress on the Historic Preservation of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Sites in the United States (American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service, 2007); Patrick Richard Carstens and Timothy L. Sanford, Searching For The Forgotten War - 1812, Volume 1 Canada and Volume 2 United States (Xlibris Corporation: Bloomington, IN, 2012 [Appendix A: The Chronology of the History of the War of 1812]); Gilbert Collins, Guidebook to the Historic Sites of the War of 1812 (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006 [Appendix A: Chronology of the War of 1812]); David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, editors, Encyclopedia of the War of 1812, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1997 [Chronology]); http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_War_of_1812_Battles; and The Official War of 1812 Website, <http://www.visit1812.com/history> [Historic Timeline of the War of 1812].

Also used were more regionalized sources such as Ralph E. Eshelman, Scott S. Sheads, and Donald R. Hickey, The War of 1812 in the Chesapeake: A Reference Guide to Historic Sites in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) [updated and corrected ms file]; Myron (Mike) E. Lyman, Sr. and William W. Hankins, Encounters with the British in Virginia during the War of 1812 (Society of the War of 1812 in the Commonwealth of Virginia, revised December 2010); Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, Frustrated Patriots: North Carolina and the War of 1812 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973); North Carolina And The War of 1812 (Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1984); "Illinois War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission Timeline," <http://illinoiswarof1812bicentennial.org/timeline.html>; Gillum Ferguson, Illinois In The War of 1812 (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012); and "Forts and Battle Sites Alabama," <http://alabamatrailswar1812.com/forts.htm>.

Other sources apparently overlooked in previous studies added to the completeness of the database. A case in point is Daphne Smith, "Burlington Connections To The War of 1812" (Museums of Burlington April 2008, updated May 2011,

http://www.museumsofburlington.com/system/documents/53/original/War_of_1812_PDF-_Revised_and_Final_Document_May_2011.pdf/1305821951). Three new actions were added because of this source.

While extracting data from these sources, some errors and conflicts in dates were found. How many such errors were not caught and thus were inadvertently introduced into this database is unclear. When differences in entries could not be reconciled, the variables in the dates were placed in brackets at the end of each individual listing identified by source. Variable spellings and multiple names for the same action are shown after the most common name for each entry.

Difficulties of Using These Sources

Some sources contained vague entries such as "September 27 [1812], Florida" or "April 15 [1813], West Florida (Alabama/Louisiana, US)" making them unclear as to which specific event is meant. There are also errors such as "August 10 [1813], USS *Julia* and USS *Prowler* captured (Lake Ontario) " when the actual name of the latter schooner was *Growler*. Battle of Châteauguay is given as October 1, 1813 (apparently taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battles_of_the_War_of_1812) although the battle actually took place on October 26, 1813. In one instance Odelltown is listed as being in Ontario although it is actually in the Province of Quebec, and the Battle of Rock Island is mistakenly located in Illinois but actually took place across the river in Iowa.

In books with multiple contributors, such as The Encyclopedia of the War of 1812, caution must be used as errors and inconsistencies in dates were found among the different contributors. For example, the Burlington Races is presented as having occurred on September 18, 1813, which is probably a typographical error of September 28, the correct date used elsewhere in the text. Other examples of errors include the date for the capture of US sloop *Levant* as March 20, 1815 in the heading while the text states March 11. The text for St. David's, Upper Canada, mistakenly states it is located near Queenstown, New York when Queenston, Upper Canada is meant. The chronology also mistakenly refers to Ogdensburg as Orangeburg.

In many cases different spellings are used for the same incident. Examples include Calabee versus Callabee, Beekmantown versus Beakmantown, Hoople's Creek versus Uphold's Creek, and Prophetstown versus Prophet's Town. Examples of multiple names for the same incident include Battle of Thames versus Battle of Moraviantown; Battle of Longwood versus Battle of Long Woods versus Battle Hill; Battle of Lundy's Lane versus Battle of Bridgewater versus Battle of Niagara Falls versus Battle of Niagara versus Battle of the Falls versus Battle of the Cataract; and a personal favorite, Battle of Horseshoe Bend versus Battle of Tohopeka versus Battle of Cholocco versus Litabixbee versus The Horseshoe. Another writer does not refer to this battle by any of these names but by the name of the river along which the battle was fought, the Tallapoosa. Some engagements have been mistakenly combined into one engagement. One example is the Battle of (more correctly, the battle for) Baltimore which consisted of two distinct battles and two skirmishes-the bombardment of Fort Henry (with a naval night attack on nearby forts protecting Fort McHenry's flank) and a land battle at Patapsco Neck (better known as North Point despite being eight miles from that location) preceded by a skirmish. Other examples include the skirmish on the day prior to the attack at Cook's Mills combined with the battle the next day.

The terms battle and skirmish are often used interchangeably and minor engagements are frequently called battles. Finally, where does one draw the line on every minor Indian raid or British burning of a canoe or rowboat?

Limitations of Study

Unfortunately, not all states, provinces and theaters of war have received equal study. In compiling this database it became clear some states and regions are woefully under-represented because they have not received the same level of study as others. At the upper level of study, several works on the Chesapeake region have been published or are under study. While it could be argued that further research is warranted for most, or even all, states and provinces, specific need is noted for Georgia, New Jersey, Nova Scotia, Rhode Island and South Carolina. Lemmon, in her book on the War of 1812 in North Carolina, wrote in 1973, "Should histories of other southern states in the War of 1812 be undertaken, not only will ample data be found, but, I am

convinced, a reevaluation of the war effort on the southern seaboard will eventually result."⁹
Unfortunately, her call has thus far gone unanswered.

The publication of one well-researched book on a state, province or region not previously comprehensively studied can make a significant difference in the database. Only 13 actions were listed for Illinois but largely with the 2012 publication of Gillum Ferguson's Illinois In The War of 1812, this number jumped to 50. Ferguson's book also added additional actions for neighboring states; Indiana jumped from 17 to 27 and Missouri from 10 to 16. Similar future studies will no doubt add to the database.

In some instances it is somewhat arbitrary as to where an action should be listed. For example, is Ball's Battle, located twenty miles south of Lake Erie, part of the Great Lakes Theater or the Northwest Theater? Because it was an Indian skirmish, it was placed in the Northwest Theater. When the British captured a vessel in the Potomac River, would one list it under Virginia or Maryland? While many political boundaries are divided down the middle of rivers, the Potomac is regarded as Maryland waters all the way to the Virginia shore so all such occurrences in the river are listed under Maryland although some took place closer to the Virginia shoreline. When a cannonade on one side of a river border in Upper Canada fired on a fort on the United States side of the river and vice versa, these are listed as actions from both sides of the river.

Finally, further research will continue to uncover new information about poorly known or unknown actions necessitating continual updating of the inventory database. Important resources such as William S. Dudley, Michael J. Crawford, et al. eds., The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1985–) have not been thoroughly explored (volume four covering 1815 has not yet been published).

Several new books are scheduled to be published that will add to the completeness and accuracy of this inventory. Regional works are also underway, including a book on the Potomac River, one on Delaware, and yet another two on the Chesapeake Bay. There are sure to be many more.

Future Work

The purpose of this article is to notify the War of 1812 community of the presence of this project. A database of this sort will constantly need updating as new information is discovered and more thorough research is undertaken. The publication here of the current comprehensive engagement list allows the community to review the database and suggest corrections and additions after which the database will be updated as necessary. Presently the database is listed alphabetically by state and province. In early 2014, after the community has had sufficient time to comment on the inventory, the author plans to update the database and in addition construct both a chronological dataset and a single alphabetical dataset (not by state or province and including all the variant names for the same action) to facilitate future users. To this end, the author welcomes updates, corrections and additions. The author can be contacted at ree47@comcast.net.

¹ Donald E. Graves, "The Many Wars of 1812", *The Journal of the War of 1812*, 2004 8(2):1.

² Donald E. Graves, "Introduction: 'Mac' Hitsman, Sir George Prevost and the Incredible War of 1812", J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, updated ed., 1999), xxi.

³ Graves, "The Many Wars of 1812", 1-2.

⁴ Graves, "Why The White House Was Burned: An Investigation into the British Destruction of Public Buildings at Washington in August 1814," *The Journal of Military History* 76 (October 2012): 1095-1111.

⁵ *Ibid*, 300.

⁶ Donald R. Hickey, "The Challenge of Writing Naval History", *The War of 1812 Magazine*, no. 17, January 2012.

⁷ Report to Congress on the Historic Preservation of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Sites in the United States (American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service, 2007).

⁸ Ralph E. Eshelman, Scott S. Sheads, and Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812 in the Chesapeake: A Reference Guide to Historic Sites in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), vii, end note no. 1.

⁹ Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, *Frustrated Patriots: North Carolina and the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), vii.