

**1812: Newspapers and the Name of the War****By Donald R. Hickey**

More than a decade ago, I wrote an article on the name of the War of 1812.<sup>1</sup> It is the only U.S. war known by a date, and I wanted to find out how the name originated and when it came into general use. I thought that I might find the answers in book titles. Relying heavily on the WorldCat data base (a comprehensive worldwide library catalogue) as well as a host of other sources, I developed a list of all books on the War of 1812 published in the nineteenth century. I then pared down the list to those books that actually used the name of the war in their title.

**What Book Titles Revealed**

My list confirmed what many students of the conflict already knew: The first book to feature this phrase in its title was William McCarty's History of the American War, of Eighteen Hundred and Twelve, which was first published in 1816. This work went through several editions, some of which appeared under the title History of the American War of 1812.<sup>2</sup> McCarty's book was popular, and it was followed by other books that used the phrase "War of 1812" in their title. Nevertheless, the name of the war did not become fixed for more than thirty years.

During the War of 1812, Americans usually referred to the conflict as "the war," or "the present war," or "the war with Great Britain." After the contest ended, most people slipped into the habit of calling it "the late war" or "the late war with Great Britain." Based on the list of titles I had compiled, this remained the most common way to refer to the war until the late 1840s, when the Mexican War made it necessary to distinguish between the two wars. By a slim margin, works on the Anglo-American contest published during the Mexican War referred to it as "the War of 1812," and this pattern became more pronounced afterwards. In the 1850s, which saw the publication of more works on the conflict than any other decade, book titles overwhelmingly referred to the struggle as the "War of 1812."

In Canada and Great Britain people were slower to embrace this label. In Canada they continued to refer to the contest as "the late American war," "the late war with the United States," or "the late war between Great Britain and the United States." Not until the 1890s did Canadians adopt the label in common use south of the border. This was largely through the influence of Ernest A.

Cruikshank, a prolific military historian who routinely referred to the conflict as “the War of 1812.” The British, however, held out for another century, opting instead to use a variety of labels, such as “the Second American War,” “the War of 1812-14/15,” or “the Anglo-American War of 1812-15.” Only in the 1990s did they appear to adopt the label that had long been in use across the Atlantic.

### **The War of 1812 in Contemporary Newspapers**

Although book titles offered a pretty good guide to usage, I recently discovered another resource that also sheds light on the matter: newspapers. Newspapers from the period have long been available on microform, mainly through a project launched by Readex in 1950. Once the newspapers were in a machine readable format, they could be readily borrowed through interlibrary loan, but there was no way to efficiently search them. That changed when Readex (which is now owned by NewsBank) put its collection—over 1,000 newspapers—online between 2004 and 2006. The collection has been steadily expanded since then, and it comes with a search engine. Libraries willing to pay a subscription fee can now offer access to their patrons. The subscription fee varies with the size of the library and the level of access. Only well-heeled libraries can afford the highest level.

Recently, however, NewsBank launched an individual subscription. For \$70 US a year anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can secure access to all the available newspapers from 1800 to the present. This price is a bargain, and there is no telling how long it will remain this low.<sup>3</sup>

Using Readex’s newspaper data base, I searched for all references to the “War of 1812” in the nineteenth century. I discovered that the phrase was first used in the New York Statesman on September 8, 1812, less than three months after the declaration of war on June 18. The reference was in an essay entitled “Epitome of the History of the War of 1812.” This phrase appeared only in the title, not in the body of the essay. Signed by “Polybius,” who was probably a Clintonian, the essay may have been designed to promote De Witt Clinton’s candidacy for the presidency. Polybius criticized the administration for going to war without adequate preparation and for pursuing an ill-advised military strategy that focused on Upper Canada instead of Nova Scotia

and Florida. Although the essay was labeled as “Chapter 1” and the author promised to develop his views on military strategy in future numbers, this was the only essay that appeared.<sup>4</sup>

The phrase “War of 1812” showed up another fourteen times in newspapers before the end of the war on February 16, 1815. But ten of those references were to Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, all but one in advertisements for a book entitled “Reflections on the War of 1812” by a Russian staff officer identified as Colonel Tchuykevitch (Petr Andreevich Chuïkevich).<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the essay in the New York Statesman, there were four newspaper allusions to the Anglo-American “war of 1812” (all using the lower case), and these emanated from just two sources. One was a Federalist essay that appeared in the Hartford Connecticut Courant and was reprinted in the Windsor (Vermont) Washingtonian. It ridiculed those Republicans who “greeted the American embargo of 1807 and the war of 1812, with shouts of approval” in the hope that they would help France triumph over Great Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The other was in an essay from the Quebec Gazette that called for significant revisions in the Treaty of Paris of 1783 and the Jay Treaty of 1794 to ensure that Canada and Britain’s Indian allies remained secure. Complaining that the Treaty of 1783 contained “the seeds of the future destruction of the British Empire in America,” the Gazette said those seeds “had already grown to luxuriance” and “the war of 1812 was intended to gather the fruit.” This essay was reprinted from the Boston Gazette in Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser in Philadelphia. It was also reprinted twice over a three-day period in the Philadelphia Democratic Press.<sup>7</sup>

That was it. During the war, only three newspapers—the New York Statesman, the Hartford Connecticut Courant, and the Quebec Gazette—used the phrase “war of 1812,” and they, in turn, were reprinted in just four additional newspapers, one each in Windsor (Vermont) and Boston and two in Philadelphia.

### **Usage after the War (1815-1819)**

Between the end of the war on February 16, 1815, and December 31, 1819—nearly five years—the phrase “War of 1812” (or “War of eighteen-twelve”) showed up another eighty-two times. Two that referred to Napoleon’s Russian campaign can be dismissed, leaving eighty cases.<sup>8</sup> These can be divided into four classes. (1) Twenty of the references are in a report dated May

17, 1815, by Acting Secretary of War Alexander J. Dallas on “The Organization of the Military Peace Establishment.” (2) Thirty-two appear in connection with a book by a Massachusetts surgeon (Benjamin Waterhouse), who was captured while serving on an American privateer and sent to a succession of British prison ships and prisons, landing eventually in Dartmoor. (3) Fourteen were advertisements for McCarty’s book. (4) The remaining fourteen were miscellaneous references to the war in newspaper articles and essays.

The first of these postwar references was in Dallas’s report, which simply explained the administration’s plan to downsize the U.S. Army from its authorized wartime level (62,500) to its new peacetime level (10,000 plus the engineering corps). In this report Dallas wrote: “The American army of the war of 1812, has hitherto successfully emulated the patriotism and valor of the army of the war of 1776.” Perhaps because it contained no new information, this report did not make it into the American State Papers: Military Affairs, a collection that was compiled retrospectively years later.<sup>9</sup> Since Dallas referred to “the war of 1776” as well as “the war of 1812,” his labels may have been simply descriptive. Still, his report is significant because, so far as I know, it was the first time that any U.S. government agency referred to the conflict as “the war of 1812.”<sup>10</sup>

Dallas’s report was followed more than seven months later by the first of thirty-two appearances of a prospectus for Waterhouse’s journal. This proposal appeared in only twelve newspapers. The Baltimore Patriot alone printed the prospectus fifteen times. The reference in the prospectus was to “the war of 1812, to 1815” although sometimes the comma was omitted.<sup>11</sup> The book was actually published in 1816 under the title of “Journal of a Young Man of Massachusetts,” but the ads for the book (as opposed to the prospectus) did not mention the War of 1812 by name.<sup>12</sup>

McCarty’s book appeared about the same time as Waterhouse’s, but the fourteen ads for his book appeared in only three newspapers, with the Wilmington (Delaware) American Watchman accounting for eleven of them. All fourteen ads mentioned the title and thus include the name of the war. In two cases, “War” was capitalized. In all others it appeared in lower case. In all the ads except the first the date appeared in numerals instead of being written out.<sup>13</sup>

What about the fourteen miscellaneous references to the war? These varied considerably. There was a Republican attack on Federalists for opposing the war, a Republican defense of an Irish

emigrant association, and a pair of Republican toasts celebrating the war.<sup>14</sup> There was a Federalist election appeal and a Federalist attack on the war.<sup>15</sup> There was an essay making an appeal for Maine statehood; a prospectus for a Republican newspaper; an essay on the powers of Congress; a piece on the British removal of slaves at the end of the war; two essays defending Andrew Jackson; and, finally, an essay attacking banks.<sup>16</sup> Except for one of the toasts, all the references to the “war of 1812” were in lower case.<sup>17</sup> There was no pattern to the subject matter of the essays. They simply revealed that the phrase was coming into use.

**Usage over Time (1812-1999)**

The accompanying table shows the results for each period that I looked at:

**Newspaper References to “War of 1812”<sup>18</sup>**

1812-1815	5
1815-1819	82
1820s	352
1830s	765
1840s	2,341
1850s	7,499
1860s	6,738
1870s	9,500
1880s	7,173
1900s	6,523
1910s	6,912
1920s	3,976
1930s	3,780

1940s	3,139
1950s	2,743
1960s	3,550
1970s	3,214
1980s	2,979
1990s	738

These figures suggest that the use of the phrase gradually increased until reaching a peak in the 1870s and thereafter declined until dropping off dramatically in the 1920s, probably because of the intervention of World War I. There was a small surge again in the 1960s, most likely because of the expansion of academic scholarship and sesquicentennial commemorations. The drop off in the 1990s probably reflects the smaller number of newspapers in the data base.

There are two anomalies in the data. Although the number of books with the phrase “War of 1812” in the title peaked in the 1850s, the number of newspaper references did not peak until the 1870s. This lag can be partly explained by an increase in the number of newspapers, but that increase was only 12 percent, while the increase in references was nearly 27 percent.<sup>19</sup> Hence, there must be some other factors at work. Spot-checking the first and last 500 references in the 1870s suggests that many fall into one of three categories: (1) obituaries or biographical notices of veterans of the war; (2) ads to buy military land warrants issued to veterans; and (3) reports on legislative initiatives that deal with veterans’ benefits.

The other anomaly is that the norm remained to use the lower case—that is, “war of 1812”—until the 1930s. It was only then that most newspapers began to capitalize the war. This probably reflects a broader trend to treat American wars as proper nouns. The U.S. Government Printing Office had adopted this practice in 1913, and newspapers gradually followed suit.<sup>20</sup>

**Conclusion**

What can we conclude from this examination of the phrase “war of 1812” in newspapers? It does not appear to upset what we learned from book titles, that is, that the name for the war came into general usage in the United States in the 1850s, in Canada in the 1890s, and in Great Britain in the 1990s.

What we did learn is that the phrase was first used in a newspaper in 1812 and in a government report in 1815 and thereafter with ever greater frequency even though it was slow to become the norm. We also learned that initially the phrase was not capitalized and sometimes included a second date, such as “the war of 1812 to 1815.” This suggests that it was more of a descriptive label than a formal title. Only in the 1930s did the phrase assume its modern form: “the War of 1812.” Thus, the name for this war originated earlier than we thought, but there was no agreement on its exact form until much later than we thought.

**About the Author**

Don Hickey is a professor of history at Wayne State College in Nebraska. An award-winning author, he has written six books on the War of 1812, most notably The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, Bicentennial edition (2012), and Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812 (2006). He is also series editor for Johns Hopkins Books on the War of 1812. Don would like to thank Charles Berthold, Connie Clark, and Kathryn Roberts Morrow for reading an earlier draft of this article. He would also like to thank Charissa Loftis, George Barnum, and Mark G. Ames for tracking down information on capitalizing wars in the Style Manuals of the U.S. Government Printing Office.

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<sup>1</sup> See "When Did the War of 1812 Become the War of 1812?" Journal of the War of 1812 6 (Summer 2001): 5-11. This article can be found online at: < <http://journal.thewarof1812.info/archive.asp.htm> >. It was also reprinted in Appendix D of Donald R. Hickey, Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812 (Toronto and Urbana, 2006), 363-68.

<sup>2</sup> [William McCarty], History of the American War, of Eighteen Hundred and Twelve, from the Commencement until the Final Termination Thereof, on the Memorable Eighth of January 1815, at New Orleans (Philadelphia, 1816), and History of the American War of 1812, from the Commencement, until the Final Termination Thereof, on the Memorable Eighth of January, 1815, at New Orleans, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1816).

<sup>3</sup> The site is: < [Newsinhistory.com](http://Newsinhistory.com) >.

<sup>4</sup> See New York [Statesman](#), September 8, 1812.

<sup>5</sup> See Boston [Repertory](#), December 7, 1813; Boston [Patriot](#), January 8, 1814; New York [Commercial Advertiser](#), January 25, 1814; Boston [New-England Palladium](#), January 28, 1814; Boston [Gazette](#), February 17, 1814; New York [Columbian](#), February 25, 1814; Washington [National Intelligencer](#), March 3, 1814; and Georgetown [Federal Republican](#), March 3 and 11, 1814. There was another reference to the "war of 1812 and 1813" that referred to the Russian campaign in the Boston [Repertory](#), December 17, 1814.

<sup>6</sup> See Hartford [Connecticut Courant](#), reprinted in Windsor (VT) [Washingtonian](#), January 10, 1814.

<sup>7</sup> Quebec [Gazette](#), August 18, [1814], reprinted from Boston [Gazette](#) in Philadelphia [Poulson's American Daily Advertiser](#), September 6, 1814; and Quebec [Gazette](#), August 18, [1814], reprinted in Philadelphia [Democratic Press](#), September 17 and 20, 1814. The quotation is from [Poulson's American Daily Advertiser](#).

<sup>8</sup> Providence (RI) [Gazette](#), May 13, 1815; Washington [National Intelligencer](#), March 3, 1819.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Congress, [American State Papers: Military Affairs](#), 7 vols. (Washington, DC, 1832-61).

<sup>10</sup> Dallas's report can be found in the following newspapers: Georgetown [Federal Republican](#), May 25, 31, and June 2, 1815; New York [Courier](#), May 27, 1815; Richmond (VA) [Enquirer](#), May 27, 1815; New Haven [Connecticut Journal](#), May 29, 1815; Albany (NY) [Gazette](#), May 29, 1815; Albany (NY) [Argus](#), May 30, 1815; Easton (MD) [Republican Star](#), May 30, 1815; Richmond [Virginia Patriot](#), May 31, 1815; Middletown [Connecticut Spectator](#), May 31, 1815; Utica (NY) [Patrol](#), June 1 and 5, 1815; Boston [Weekly Messenger](#), June 2, 1815; Middlebury (VT) [Columbian Patriot](#), June 7, 1815; Ballston Spa (NY) [Independent American](#), June 7, 1815; Worcester (MA), [National Aegis](#), June 7, 1815; Brattleboro (VT) [Reporter](#), June 7, 1815; Dover (NH) [Sun](#), June 10 and 20, 1815; and Dayton [Ohio Republican](#), June 12, 1815;

<sup>11</sup> Baltimore [Patriot](#), January 5, 9, 20, 23, 24, 30, February 2, 10, 15, 17, and March 2, 6, 15, 16, 1816; Geneva (NY) [Palladium](#), January 17, and April 17, 1816; Bennington (VT) [Green Mountain Farmer](#), January 22, 1816; Bridgeport (CT) [Republican Farmer](#), January 24 and 31, 1816; Hallowell (ME) [American Advocate](#), January 27, 1816; Washington [National Intelligencer](#), February 2, 1816; Concord [New-Hampshire Patriot](#), February 13, 1816; Wilmington (DE) [American Watchman](#), February 17, and May 8, 18, 1816; Windsor [Vermont Republican](#), February 19, 26, 1816; Newport [Rhode-Island Republican](#), February 21, 1816; Albany (NY) [Register](#), July 9, 1816; and Washington (KY) [Union](#), September 13 and 20, 1816.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Baltimore [American and Commercial Daily Advertiser](#), June 28, 1816; Providence [Rhode-Island American](#), August 6, 1816; and Hallowell (ME) [American Advocate](#), November 16, 1816.

<sup>13</sup> Boston [Daily Advertiser](#), July 23, 1816; Wilmington (DE) [American Watchman](#), November 13, 16, 23, 1816, February 1, 12, March 1, 19, 29, April 12, 16, and July 2, 1817; Washington [National Intelligencer](#), January 3, 1818; and Lancaster (PA) [Intelligencer](#), January 31, 1818.

<sup>14</sup> Hartford (CT) [American Mercury](#), May 10, 1815; Baltimore [Patriot](#), July 10, 1816; New York [Columbian](#), January 5, 1818; Philadelphia [Franklin Gazette](#), July 7, 1818; and Charleston [Carolina Gazette](#), April 17, 1819.

<sup>15</sup> Salem (MA) [Gazette](#), June 28, 1816; Hallowell (ME) [Gazette](#), February 26, 1817.

<sup>16</sup> Portland (ME) Eastern Argus, February 20, 1816; Lancaster (PA) Journal, November 6, 1816; Norfolk (VA) American Beacon, March 31 and October 23, 1818; Springfield (MA) Hampden Patriot, February 4 and March 11, 1819; and Washington (PA) Reporter, July 19, 1819.

<sup>17</sup> The lone exception was in the Charleston Carolina Gazette, April 17, 1819.

<sup>18</sup> The search engine can deliver slightly different results from day to day, both because the optical character scanning technology is not perfect and because the collection is being steadily expanded. I ran my search on November 11, 2012, and I searched for the written out form of the date only for the five years from 1812 through 1819.

<sup>19</sup> The Readex collection has 153 newspapers published in 1855 and 171 in 1875.

<sup>20</sup> George Barnum of the GPO's Office of Congressional Relations reviewed GPO Style Manuals from 1908, 1913, 1924, 1928, and 1933 and laid out his findings in an e-mail to Charissa Loftis dated January 30, 2013. Charissa passed this e-mail on to me.