

CHAPTER HEADING

SUMMER 1814: SECESSION THREAT IN NEW ENGLAND

Narration: That Autumn of 1814, James Madison sent two regiments of troops to an unusual destination: Hartford, Connecticut. [Stagg, p. 477] Where there were, in theory, no enemies. But force might be needed -- to quash a rebellion against the United States itself. For a group of New England leaders had announced a convention to be held in Hartford in the fall. And the New Englanders were bitter about the war. Many were openly defiant.

Hickey: Madison, like most republicans, feared that the Hartford Convention was part of a larger secessionist plot.

Narration: "Let the Union be severed," wrote one Massachusetts leader. [Winik 18-19] The United States seemed to be on the eve of destruction from within and without.

Lambert: America is badly beaten, their capital city has been torched. The British have won the war. And it's just a question of what terms they'll they're prepared to accept.

Narration: At the negotiations in Ghent, Belgium, [RCAH 1130] the British were prepared to accept large areas of American territory for themselves, including parts of what would become Maine and Minnesota; and they demanded that a massive Indian state be created around the Great Lakes. [Hickey 290]. In other words, they were determined to end American expansion into the west [Langguth 348]. And there was muscle behind these demands: in September of 1814, the Governor-General of Canada, George Prevost, led a British army into northern New York state. It was the largest force ever to invade the continental United States.

Lambert: This is going to be a killing stroke. If it's carried out effectively against relatively small American garrison the English can win a decisive battle here and force the Americans to concede terms.

Narration: Prevost planned to attack and occupy the American forts at Plattsburgh. To keep his troops supplied there he needed to control Lake Champlain as well. What stood in his way was a small American squadron on the lake, commanded by a young officer named Thomas Macdonough.

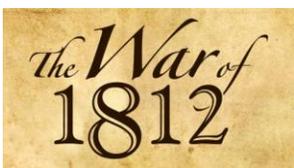
Borneman+: MacDonough chooses to anchor the American flagship Saratoga, and fight from an anchorage in Plattsburgh Bay.

Suthren: He was going to simply turn his ships into floating gun platforms. The idea was, since there was overwhelming force coming by land, and possibly equal size force to Macdonough's fleet coming by sea, he was going to back himself into a corner and fight like a badger and not come out until he won.

Narration: On Sept. 11th, the British fleet sailed up to engage Macdonough's ships. [Latimer 354]

Borneman: The British have to sail up the lake against the wind. [Latimer 354] They struggle into the Bay, begin to exchange some fire.

Lambert: These ships are relatively lightly built. They carry heavy guns; in any kind of fire fight they



will be knocked to pieces and the guns on one side will be taken out of battle. MacDonough is ready for this. When his ships are so badly battered they can't fight he simply hauls on the cable, turns the ship around, and presents a fresh broadside to an enemy who was already badly beaten up. The English commander cannot do this. He's only anchored one way [Latimer 356, Borneman 212]. He can't turn his ships around so he's gonna lose. 04.08.42.29

Narration: After almost three hours of fighting, the British struck their colors. Any chance for their control of the lake was gone. With a single naval battle, the largest invasion of the continental United States had been brought to an abrupt halt.

Grodzinski: Prevost calls off the attack and orders the division to move back to Canada, to destroy the excess stores and off they go. And everybody from the soldiers, the NCOs, the junior officers, senior officers, could not understand why he did that.

Sir Christopher Prevost: He had had to operate a defensive campaign up to that time. And when the Navy was defeated on Lake Champlain in his opinion it was no point in risking British lives by taking Plattsburgh, which he could well have done. So he withdrew the Army, for the protection of Canada in the future.

Don Graves: Prevost is a tragic figure, a sad figure. The man is told to hold the line, hold the line, and he does that. He followed orders. That finished his military career. [Hickey 141]

Grodzinski: When he got back to Montreal, a cabal of disgruntled officers began a letter-writing campaign back to London basically criticizing Prevost for his command, his conduct on the Plattsburgh campaign. And that leads to his being sent back to England in disgrace [Hickey 141].

Narration: Prevost's retreat meant the end of Britain's killing stroke invasion into New York State. But just two days after MacDonough's victory, British forces launched another bold attack, this time against Baltimore.

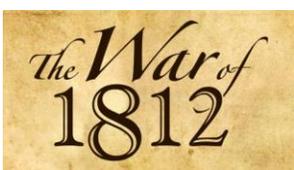
Leggett: The British went through Bladensburg. They ransacked Washington D.C. But the big prize was Baltimore. It was an international community. It was a deep port. It was the center of commerce.

Lambert: And it's the home of a lot of the privateers that are causing them problems [Hickey 83]. Baltimore, big ship building town. So it would be really nice to get into downtown Baltimore and burn their shipyards, destroy their privateers.

Narration: The star-shaped fort called McHenry at the top of the bay was the linchpin -- destroy the fort, and the city would fall. On the morning of September 13th, the British navy attacked the Fort [Borneman 245]; the bombs began bursting in air.

Sheds: The British hurled fourteen hundred cast iron exploding shells at the fort within a forty-eight hour period. And that's a total of about a hundred and thirty-three tons of exploding metal over Baltimore Harbor that could be heard, by the way, a hundred miles away in downtown Philadelphia.

Narration: For all the explosions, what Americans would remember from that was the work of a lawyer.



He was named Francis Scott Key, and he watched the bombardment from a ship just eight miles away [Hickey 88].

Pitch: Key had seen over Fort McHenry this gigantic flag flying before sunset. And throughout the night he paced the deck of his ship in the darkness hoping the explosions would continue because if there was silence it might mean the Fort had capitulated.

Sheds: As the morning mist clears, as he says in his hymn, he saw the American flag. [Hickey 87-8]

Pitch: And he had never looked with such reverence upon the symbol of his country. He took a letter out of his pocket, and on the back of it jotted down thoughts, words, phrases, anything that tumbled through his mind while the intensity of the moment lasted. The poem was crafted and polished and it was set to an old English drinking song called Anacreon in Heaven [Hickey 91, Borneman 248].

Sheds: Within a week after the battle for Baltimore the song is published. It is four stanzas [Hickey 90] long. Within a month every newspaper in the United States has published it.

Narration: “The Star-Spangled Banner” didn't become America's national anthem for 116 years. But the battle of Fort McHenry had an immediate effect. The Fort did not fall, and the British withdrew.

Narration: The results from Plattsburgh and Baltimore changed the emotional and political climate – even in New England. The Hartford Convention did meet, in three weeks of secret sessions. Its report denounced the war, but the word “secession” was not used. [RCAH 491] The two American victories also changed the tone at another meeting – the peace negotiations in Belgium. Britain's demand for an Indian state no longer had the force of victory behind it.

Miller: England tried to demand that America leave an Indian buffer zone between American settlements and Canada. The United States rejected this vigorously. They said this is a property right we possess.

Rick Hill: The treaties that resolve both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 in many ways ignored us as primary participants. We're, we're not nations in the final resolution of the peace. But they are still talking about us. They're the ones deciding our rights. And then when the war is over they divide up our land.

Narration: No one at the Ghent talks cared about impressment anymore [Latimer 362]. With Napoleon in exile, the British no longer needed to impress sailors. The key question now was: where should the borders be drawn? Negotiations dragged on into December – while a massive British fleet headed for New Orleans.

