

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA MILITIA MUSKET

The Pennsylvania Militia's role in events leading up to the Battle of Lake Erie.

by David H. Hanes

"If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten."

- Rudyard Kipling

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of E. Philip Schreier, fellow member of the American Society of Arms Collectors (ASAC) and the Company of Military Historians, comrade in arms of military history and raconteur extraordinaire. Wherever Phil was present, no matter the event or venue, a day could not end without a protracted cigar-sacrificing ritual that often continued well into the *next day*. With our resident bard holding court and the air wafting blue haze, he would captivate his listeners with engaging anecdotes ranging from Theodore Roosevelt to film noir.

Because of his terminal illness, Phil couldn't attend our ASAC meeting last fall. It was during one of those early-morning cigar-burning sessions at his home in late November that he asked me to retell the lecture he missed in Pittsburgh. I had the presentation on my laptop, and after an hour of delivering what must have been cruel and unusual punishment to my only audience, I received polite applause. Always the gentleman, amid the smoke-filled room, Phil enthusiastically encouraged me to publish this account.

Over my years of collecting U.S. martial weapons, I have learned that a military arm is more than a mere assemblage of wood and iron – it's a storyteller of history if one is willing to listen. The artifact described here called out to tell its tale, but until now, its pleas went unheard. This sole surviving musket, likely a witness to pivotal events more than two centuries ago, reveals the little-known backstory of an American naval legend: an impending hero who called upon unsung farmer-heroes to protect his weapons of war as they were being built at a remote shipyard, thus enabling his passage into history.

Abstract

The American victory at the Battle of Lake Erie is important because it allowed the U.S. to take control of the lake, which led to the recapture of Detroit and the defeat of the British and their Indian allies. This victory helped establish U.S. dominance over the Old Northwest. The Battle of Lake Erie was a key turning point in the war and a major moral boost, especially since the overall conflict hadn't been going well for the U.S., with few reasons to celebrate before this win.

History and legend often recount Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry's victory over the British Royal Navy on 10 September 1813. However, little has been written about how Perry's ships were built in the wilderness at a remote outpost on Lake Erie, and even less about how, without militia presence, the crucial lake battle might never have taken place. The provisional shipyard at

Presque Isle Bay, Erie, Pennsylvania, was vulnerable to attack and destruction by the British, from land or lake, before the ships even set sail. Perry feared the worst and asked General David Mead, commander of Pennsylvania's 16th Division of Pennsylvania Militia, to provide security during construction.

But a generation before the War of 1812, post-Revolutionary War America was transitioning from a fragile dependence on foreign military weapons to a federal armory system to supply its armed forces. This is an account of a rare artifact from that period, surviving to tell of the events leading up to this historic battle. It reveals that the local militia was not only tasked with providing security for Perry's fleet during its construction, but also with floating the brigs over the shallow sandbar guarding the mouth of the bay and supplementing the undermanned crews of his ships as they sailed into battle.



Figure 1. John Trumbull, *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777*.

Background

In the John Trumbull painting *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777* (Figure 1)¹, observe that the rebel faction is not bearing firearms, yet several "Brown Bess" muskets are visible. The outgunned Continental Army is depicted fighting with swords alone and will likely seize the fallen British soldiers' muskets as General George Washington charges in to save the day. In this romanticized depiction, why does Trumbull subtly show American soldiers without firearms? Perhaps Trumbull thought it was important to memorialize the arms disparity during the war, or maybe he wanted to remind Americans that the U.S. infantry was still poorly equipped and still relied on foreign nations for military arms. Regardless, Trumbull portrays the clas-

sical Greek heroic tradition, where, but for the intervention of our American Perseus, all would have been lost – with Washington, like Perseus, greatly outmatched and armed only with a sword.

Unlike our opponents, the firearms used during the American War of Independence (1775-1783) were far from uniform. A long-established armory system provided the ubiquitous British Army with a standard firearm, the .75-caliber Brown Bess family of muskets. Colonial fighters, on the other hand, brought whatever weapons they could find to the fray. Unlike the British, there was no national armory to produce standardized military-grade weapons. At the start of the American Revolutionary War, muskets used by citizen-soldiers came from many arbitrary sources: personal firearms, raids on British arsenals, confiscations from Tories, commissioned muskets and battlefield captures.²

This unreliable and unsustainable supply situation changed dramatically when the French began supplying firearms, first secretly, and then openly in 1777. During the war, the French shipped many thousands of these arms to the fledgling Continental Army.³ This firearm, with its .69 caliber barrel, was the French Model 1763 and its lighter variant, the Model 1766. Colloquially called the “Charleville” to describe muskets of this type, it remains a term widely used by historians and arms collectors today, even though Charleville was just one of three French arsenals producing this musket.⁴ The widespread use of this firearm not only influenced the outcome of the war but also established the Charleville pattern as the archetype for American-made military muskets for years to come.

Martial Gun Manufacturing Begins in the U.S.

In 1793, Secretary of War Henry Knox evaluated the U.S. arms situation and found it unsustainable. Most muskets were over twenty years old and could not withstand the rigor of further military action. Moreover, the inventory included a confusing mix of American and European weapons. An army requires a reliable supply chain of dependable firearms with a uniform design and standard caliber, which is not possible with unstable overseas suppliers

and a hodgepodge of aging arms in inventory. Furthermore, the 1790s marked the beginning of the American two-party system. The pro-British Hamiltonian Federalists opposed the French-leaning Jeffersonian Republicans. The debate in American politics raised a key question about sourcing firearms: if we relied on a European supplier, which country would we procure them from, given the volatility of international politics? The question answered itself. The only practicable choice was domestic production, and in 1794 Congress authorized the construction of two federal armories.⁵ The chosen locations were Springfield, Massachusetts, at the site of the existing arsenal, and Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

The decision proved portentous, as the British government refused to allow Ketland, a major firearms manufacturer, to fulfill the 1797 contract for 10,000 stands of arms with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In addition, rather than continuing our strong alliance, the U.S. nearly went to war with France during the so-called Quasi-War (1798-1800) – as if the French Revolution itself were not enough reason to begin domestic production.

Because our national defense still relied heavily on state militias and the nascent federal armory system was not yet fully operational, alternative arms procurement measures were underway. For example, the Commonwealths of Virginia and Pennsylvania, along with the federal government, procured arms in large quantities from various sources. In the 1794 and 1798 contracts, the U.S. government solicited nearly thirty private gunmakers to manufacture approximately 47,000 arms.⁶ The Commonwealth of Virginia’s 1797 legislative act, which also authorized the construction of a state armory in Richmond,⁷ and Pennsylvania’s 1797 Arms Procurement Act,⁸ both mandated the purchase of arms from private contractors. Private contractors also supplied arms to other states and for individual sales. Most military contract muskets from this period, despite variations among manufacturers, generally follow the period-specific “Charleville Pattern” or “Charleville Musket” design.

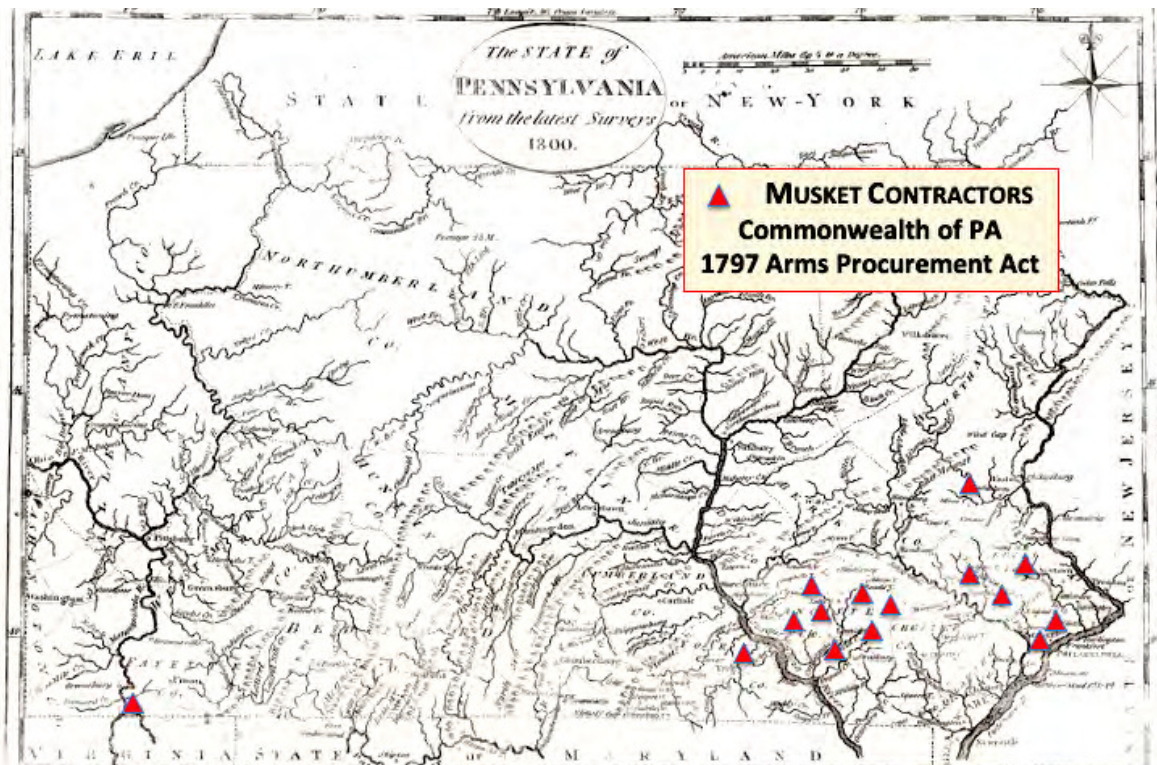


Figure 2. J. Low, *The State of Pennsylvania from the Latest Surveys 1800*. Annotations by the author.

Pennsylvania Militia Muskets

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Arms Procurement Act of 1797 authorized the purchase of 20,000 muskets, with 19,900 eventually contracted to fifteen gunmakers, all located in Pennsylvania. An initial order for 10,000 muskets was awarded to the British maker Ketland, and as noted previously, the British government believed that no good could come from supplying arms to the U.S., so it intervened to cancel the deal.⁹ The British order was then redistributed among other Pennsylvania gun manufacturers. The list of Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (CP) contractors appears in Table 1. The First Group lists the original contractors, while the Second Group shows the replacement suppliers after the canceled British order.¹⁰

To the discerning eye, Table 1 reveals two anomalies involving one contractor and one manufacturing region, both on the same line item. First, Albert Gallatin was the only non-gunmaker to secure an arms deal, while the others were well-established Pennsylvania gunmakers. Second, the county where Gallatin's muskets were to be produced, Fayette County, south of Pittsburgh near the Virginia (now West Virginia) border, is the only site west of the Alleghenies chosen for arms production. The other suppliers are all clustered around the traditional gun-making region of South-eastern Pennsylvania (Figure 2).¹¹ What can we attribute these incongruities to, where a non-gunmaker secures a contract to manufacture 2,000 muskets in the non-manufacturing wilderness of Western Pennsylvania?¹² To explain these inconsistencies, we need to examine Albert Gallatin and his role in securing an arms deal in Western Pennsylvania.

Albert Gallatin

Travelers arriving at Three Forks, in Gallatin County, Montana, might wonder about the name Gallatin, whose name unexpectedly appears when tracing the Corps of Discovery's journey up the Missouri River. In the summer of 1805, to their profound disappointment, Lewis and Clark discovered that the Missouri River had reached its navigable limit. The river abruptly divided into three forks, all roughly the same size, none large enough to provide a Northwest Passage to the Pacific as Jefferson had hoped. Declaring the Missouri River begins at the confluence of these rivers, they named the three forks: Jefferson, after the President and promoter of their expedition; Madison, the Secretary of State; and Gallatin. Who was this Gallatin, and why was recognition given to him on the level of founding father luminaries Jefferson and Madison?

Today, Abraham Alfonse Albert Gallatin (1761-1849), born in Geneva, (present day) Switzerland is perhaps one of the lesser-known architects of our growing nation, but he had a diverse and productive career in both public and private service. His major accomplishments include serving as a U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania (1793-94), though he was summarily removed over a citizenship issue in a partisan dispute; in the U.S. House of Representatives (1795-1801); Secretary of the Treasury (1801-1814); Ambassador to France (1816-1823) and Great Britain (1826-27); co-founder of New York University; and president of the National Bank in New York City. Additionally, his lifelong study of Native American language and culture led him to found the American Ethnological Society, earning him the moniker "the Father of American Ethnology." During his tenure in the Treasury Department, Gallatin earned the memorial bestowed by Lewis and Clark, and he remains the longest-serving Secretary of the Treasury in our nation's history.¹³

But it was in 1797, while serving as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Pennsylvania's 12th District, that Gallatin received a contract from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to manufacture CP muskets. Although Gallatin lacked the skill or even the interest in gun-making, he was eager to build a community for expatriated French citizens fleeing the devastation of the French Revolution. Gallatin had founded the town of New Geneva in Fayette County and actively promoted business growth in the sparsely populated trans-Allegheny wilderness of Western Pennsylvania. New Geneva and Gallatin's Friendship Hill estate, now a National Historic Site, are located just north of the confluence of the Monongahela and Cheat Rivers near the present West Virginia border, about twenty-five miles west of Fort Necessity, the site of George Washington's first battlefield encounter. Whether Gallatin intended to personally profit from this arms contract is unknown, as a Venn diagram of his interests might well resemble a single circle, with his political, business and altruistic pursuits all overlapping.¹⁴

The Melchor Baker musket

Little is known about Melchor Baker, aside from his work as the subcontractor for Gallatin's 2,000 CP musket arms contract and his work in the newly established community of New Geneva. Baker produced at least 1,200 guns to fulfill that order. An educated estimate among CP musket collectors is that fewer than ten of these Melchor Baker muskets exist. It is believed that these firearms

PENNSYLVANIA MUSKET CONTRACTORS 1797 Arms Procurement Act

First Group Contracts (1797-99)			Second Group Contracts (1801)		
T. Ketland	Great Britain	10,000	C. Welshance	Lancaster	1,000
O. Evans	Montgomery	1,200	J. Dickert	Lancaster	1,000
W. Henry	Northampton	2,000	J. Haeffler	Lancaster	500
J. Lether	York	1,200	H. Dehuff	Lancaster	500
A. Henry	Lancaster	2,000	P. Brong	Lancaster	500
J. Miles	Philadelphia	2,000	J. Miles	Philadelphia	2,000
J. Fondersmith	Lancaster	500	J. Fondersmith	Lancaster	500
A. Gallatin	Fayette	2,000	J. Kerlin	Berks	1,000
	Adjusted Total	10,900	E. Evans	Montgomery	1,000
	Total from Second Group	9,000	R. McCormick	Philadelphia	1,000
	Total Contracted	19,900	Total	9,000	

spent their useful life in Western Pennsylvania and were poorly stored and maintained, which explains their low survival rate.¹⁵ The musket described herein is one of the few survivors of the original 1,200 (or possibly 2,000 if it can be proven that the entire order was filled).



Figure 3. M:Baker maker's mark and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (CP) contract identifier (top); "Liberty cap" barrel proof and CP contract identifier (second from top); the Joseph Torrence "T" inspection stamp on the left stock flat (second from bottom) and Militia unit designator: 133rd PA Volunteer Regiment, 16th Division, Pennsylvania Militia (bottom).

The author's musket bears the stamp "M:Baker" on the lock plate (Figure 3, top). All authentic surviving muskets observed not only carry this mark but, under close optical inspection, appear to be struck from the same stamp.¹⁶ Like most CP muskets, the M:Baker firearms closely follow the Charleville pattern adopted by the U.S. The barrel proof mark 'P' on this musket is positioned directly beneath a Liberty Cap (Figure 3, second from top), also known as a Phrygian Cap, which symbolizes freedom dating back to antiquity. This proof mark is characteristic of those made in the First Group, as shown in Table 1. Aesthetic features, such as finial decorations found on lock parts, are also indicators of this earlier vintage. Later CP musket makers followed the U.S. example by

using an eagle-head proof mark and eliminating some stylistic features. The "CP" logo appears on both the lock plate and barrel per Pennsylvania contract specifications (Figures 3).¹⁷

While common on U.S. muskets from this period, inspector acceptance stamps are rare on CP muskets. On this M:Baker musket, however, a "T" inspection stamp is deeply struck on the left side of the stock flat (Figure 3, third from top). Joseph Torrence most likely inspected this musket sometime before 27 January 1802, as he is known to have inspected 1,200 muskets by that date. No additional records of his inspection activities have been found, so it's possible that only 1,200 of the original 2,000-unit order were delivered to the Commonwealth.¹⁸

An essential feature of this musket renders it both unique and historically significant to this narrative. The stock has a prominent "133" on the right side, indicating the 133rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment of the 16th Pennsylvania Militia Division (Figure 3, bottom). Many CP muskets bear regimental markings, but among all existing CP muskets, this is the only known arm identifiable to a militia regiment native to the backwoods of Northwest Pennsylvania. It is also the only CP musket directly linked to a Pennsylvania militia unit assigned to defend Perry's fleet, the fleet that was destined to defeat the British Royal Navy in the Battle of Lake Erie.

Forming the Pennsylvania Militia Regiments

In 1807, the Pennsylvania Militia Act, *An Act for the Regulation of the Militia of the Commonwealth*, consolidated the 131 existing and somewhat independent militia regiments, added a few new ones and reorganized them into sixteen divisions under a single command. The 16th Division, comprising eight militia regiments, was formed from seven embryonic counties in Northwestern Pennsylvania: Beaver, Butler, Crawford, Erie, Mercer, Venango and Warren.¹⁹ (Figure 4)²⁰

This seven-county region covers 5,263 square miles and had a population of 41,614 in 1810. However, Beaver, the county closest to Pittsburgh (Allegheny County), accounted for nearly one-third of that number, with a population density of 28.0 people per square mile. In contrast, Erie County's population density was only about one-sixth of that (4.7), with a population of just 3,758. The town of Erie recorded 394 residents in 1810, a significant increase from 1800, when it had only eighty-one residents.²¹

The eight militia regiments of the 16th Division, covering these seven counties, were numbered 132 through 139, with the 133rd comprising residents of Crawford County.²² This force stood at the ready, though no notable militia events occurred in this area for the first several years after the 16th Division was formed. Although much of this remote area of Pennsylvania was still considered wilderness, white settlers had displaced or neutralized the resident Native American population, who by then posed little threat. However, the proximate presence and mobility of the British military, along with their Indian allies, remained a troubling concern.

Strategic Lake Erie

In 1535, Jacques Cartier became the first European to sail up the St. Lawrence River, opening a new route for exploring North America's vast interior. The next 200 years would see French explorers and fur traders reconnoitering the chain of Great Lakes and venturing deeper into North America's interior. The French primarily aimed not to settle, but to establish a fur trade conduit and to find a Northwest Passage to Asia.

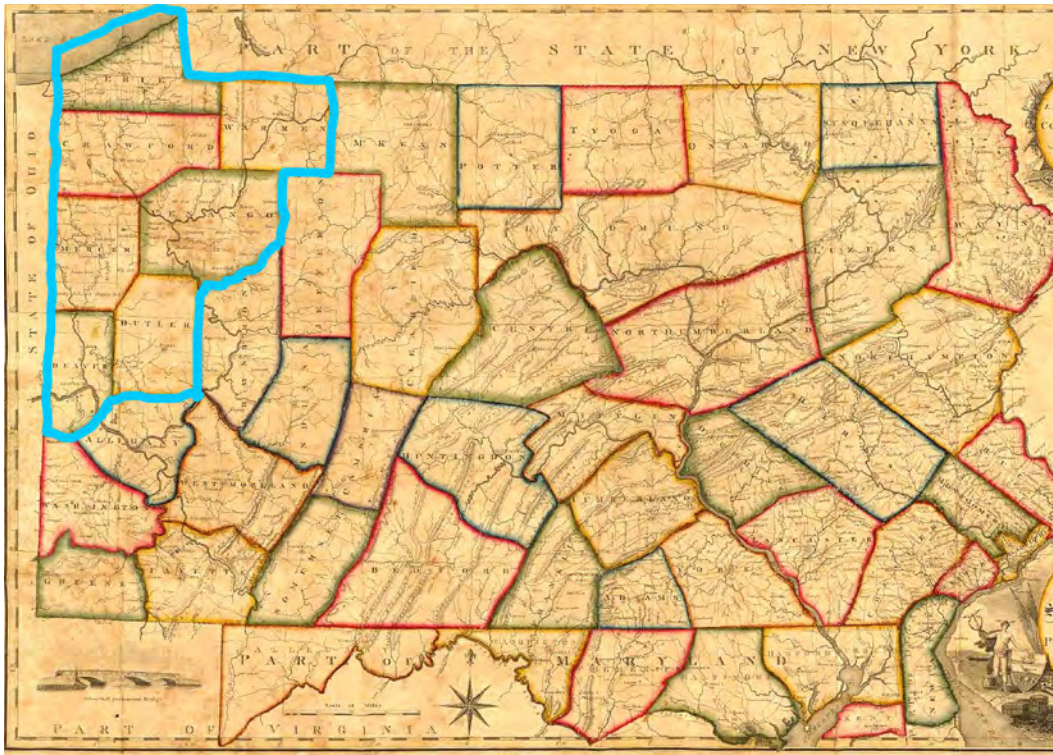


Figure 4. Reading Howell, *A Map of The State of Pennsylvania*, 1811. PA 16th Division seven-county area highlighted. Annotation by the Author.



Figure 5. John Cary, *A New Map of Part of the United States of North America*, 1805.

The British would displace the French from the Old Northwest under the terms of the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years' War, known in North America as the French and Indian War. These lands would become contested again after the American

Revolution, as the burgeoning United States sought to expand and dislodge the British from the Old Northwest and Canada (Figure 5)²³ Control of Lakes Erie and Ontario would provide separate arenas for the drama that eventually culminated in the War of 1812.²⁴

Figure 6. William Charles, *John Bull making a new Batch of Ships to send to the Lakes*, ca. 1814. Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2002708986/. The caption to the right reads, "I tell you what Master Bull. You had better keep both your ships and guns at home. If you send all you've got to the lakes, it will only make fun for the 'Yankeys' to take them."



Lake Erie receives water from the south-flowing Detroit River at its western end, which drains the upper Great Lakes. On its eastern end, Lake Erie feeds the north-flowing Niagara River into Lake Ontario. Early French maps describe the Niagara River as a "chute" or "cascade," which are interesting terms that obscure the magnitude of Niagara Falls. The 300-foot overall elevation difference between the two lakes meant that warships sailing on Lake Erie had to be built on Lake Erie.

Although Ohio achieved statehood in 1803, dominance over what remained of the Old Northwest – including the northwest-

ern portion of Ohio – remained in dispute. The British were well positioned in Upper Canada and, with little American presence on Lake Erie, they could resupply Detroit with impunity. Clearly, controlling Lake Erie was vital for opening the western territory to American settlement. In contrast, Americans did not enjoy a secure or direct supply line to Detroit or the western regions. Instead, they relied on arduous overland passages north from points along the Ohio River. The supply route to Detroit was slow and fraught with difficulties, including portage, swamps, and the threat of Indian ambushes or British confrontation along the way.

Figure 7. William Charles, *A Scene on the Frontiers as Practiced by the HUMANE BRITISH and their WORTHY ALLIES*, 1812. Library of Congress.



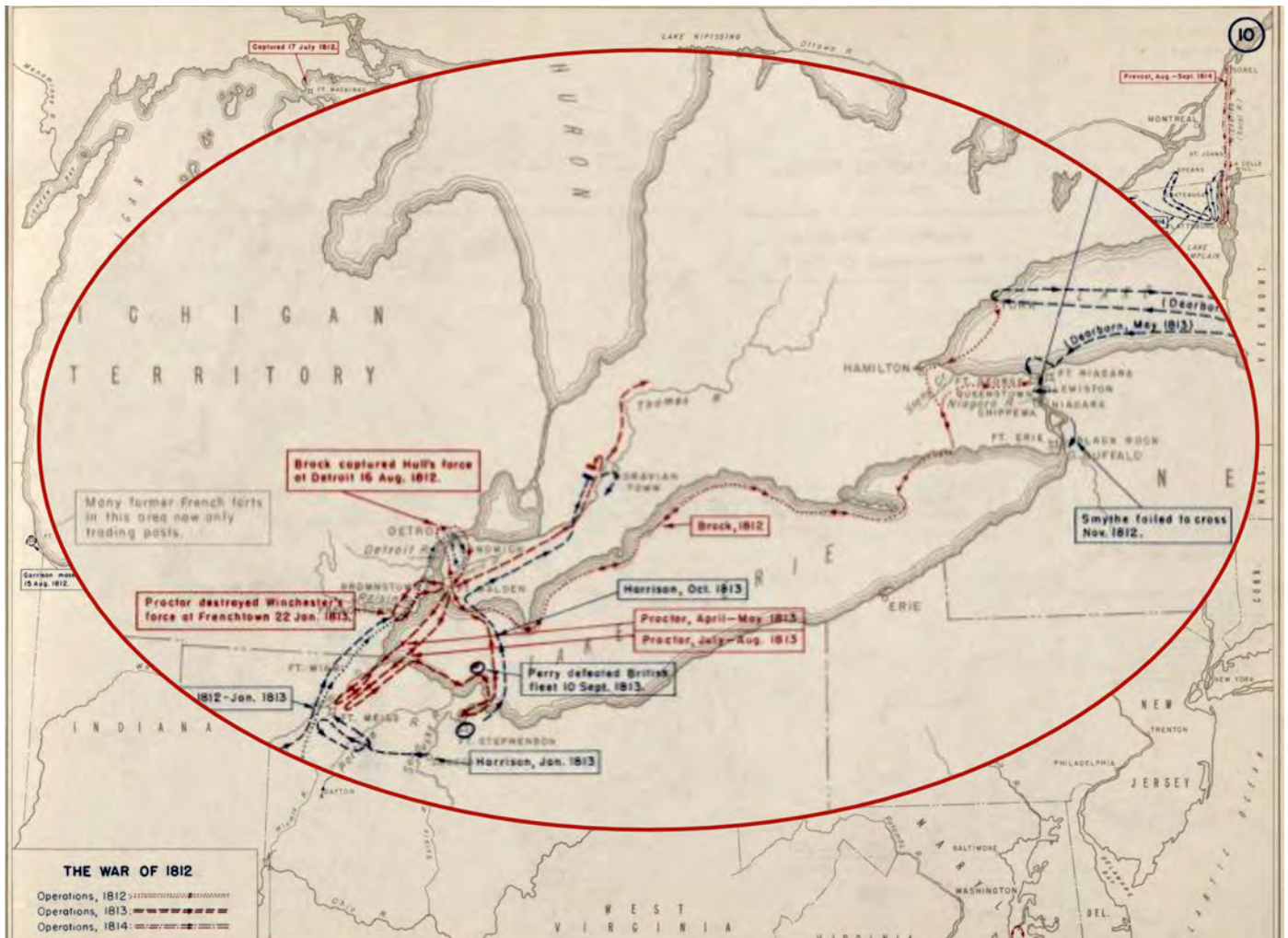


Figure 8. Vincent J. Esposito and Matthew Forney Steele, *Atlas to Accompany Steele's American Campaigns*, 1956. Theater of War, Lake Erie, 1812-1814.

War with Great Britain

For the third time in fifty years, Great Britain would once again be involved in a war in North America. In addition to other factors, the U.S. claimed Great Britain had violated American sovereignty by preventing American expansion into the Old Northwest, which by 1812 had been somewhat reduced with Ohio's admission as a state. However, statehood did not guarantee supremacy, and control of this region was a key reason the United States declared war in 1812. To maintain a grasp on their claims in the disputed territory, the British supplied arms and goods to Native American defenders who welcomed the support, as they fought off American invaders in a desperate struggle to retain their homeland and preserve their way of life. No doubt intended to incite public support for the war, one propaganda example from 1812 reproaches the British for collaborating with Indians and encouraging them to commit atrocities against Americans (Figure 6 and 7).²⁵

Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, the first two of the Great Lakes upstream from the St. Lawrence River, would require separate attention and allocation of military resources. Because Niagara Falls prevented inter-lake navigation, the two lakes would effectively operate as independent theatres. Domination over Lake Ontario was necessary to control the upper St. Lawrence River region, to provide a staging point for American incursions directly north into Canada and to protect the Lake Champlain region from British

expeditions south. Control of Lake Erie was essential for access to Detroit and the Western Territory (Figure 8).²⁶

The Niagara River, a thirty-six-mile-long northward-flowing strait connecting the two lakes, forms the border between Canada and the U.S. The British built two forts on the west side of the river: Fort George at the northern end near Lake Ontario and Fort Erie at the southern end near the mouth of Lake Erie. On the American side, Fort Niagara stood opposite Fort George. Black Rock, a small shipyard, was located downstream (north) a few miles from Fort Erie on the American side.

General Mead's Letter to President Madison

In 1788, at the confluence of Cussewago Creek and French Creek, David Mead founded the town of Meadville, the first permanent settlement in northwestern Pennsylvania. After its formation in 1807, David Mead became the commander of the 16th Division of Pennsylvania Militia.²⁷ In this position, Mead figures prominently in the events leading up to the Battle of Lake Erie. Mead understood the threat to the frontier he was tasked to defend. After learning of Hull's surrender of Detroit and observing the British naval actions on Lake Erie firsthand, he wrote a lengthy letter to President James Madison.²⁸ From Erie, on 29 August, 1812, he begins:

Sir,

On the evening of 16th Inst. I was apprized at Meadville of the Surrender of Detroit with the whole of the army under Brigr. Gen'l Hull, and a number of British vessels were hovering on our coast in sight of this place, in consequence of the Alarming Station of the frontier of Pennsylvania bordering upon Lake Erie, in circumstances so extraordinary, I proceeded immediately with a number of volunteers and arrived here on the 17th.

The bearer of this dispatch was Daniel Dobbins, whom Mead introduces in his message with both tributes, “a man of intelligence and good character” and credentials, “present and made prisoner at the capture of both Michilimacinae [sic] and Detroit, is able to communicate all the material details.” Daniel Dobbins was an Erie resident who had plied the waters of Lake Erie in commercial ventures and was uniquely qualified to advise the President and his staff on where to build a battle-ready fleet capable of engaging the British Navy. Based on Dobbins’ firsthand account, Mead’s blunt critique of Hull’s surrender at Detroit clearly indicates that Mead believed Hull’s inaction resulted from incompetence and cowardice, possibly even treason:

“An inferior force on the part of the enemy was permitted without resistance... the Surrender being virtually unconditional, containing as appears not a single reservation, of which the usages of war authorised the Surrender in any case.”

Mead suggested that Madison query Dobbins, who was captured and released at Detroit, should he require “further particulars.”

In the second section of Mead’s letter to Madison, Mead informs the Commander-in-Chief about Erie’s vulnerability, which had recently been under direct threat from the British Navy. Erie held enough strategic importance that Mead believed Madison should be informed. Mead states, after observing the British Navy off the coast of Erie in August 1812, “that about eight hundred men recently ordered by the Governor are now under arms and expected today. On Yesterday an attack from an Armed brig was hourly expected from about one o’clock to Six pm.”

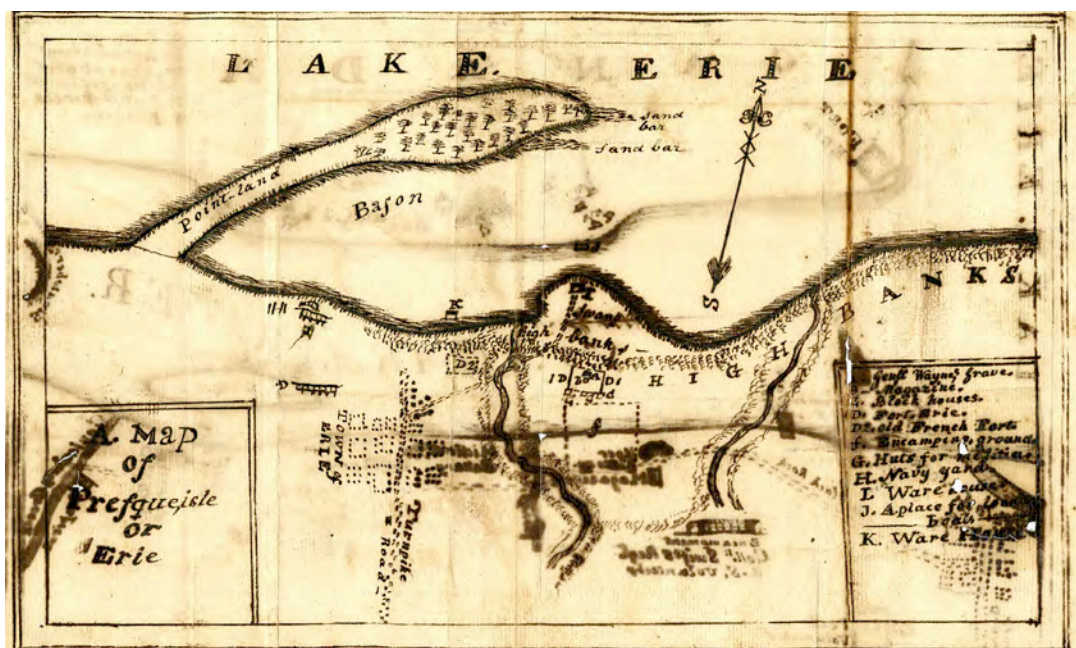
It seemed an armistice to ease tensions had been announced, but Mead was suspicious for several reasons, as detailed in his letter. Instead of embracing this so-called armistice, Mead suggests “it appears now necessary to the Safety of this place, at which the whole of Gen'l Brocks army might assemble with little more difficulty than at Detroit.” Major General Brock was the commander of Upper Canada, and Mead was concerned that Brock could easily move on Erie, which lacked a fort or permanent military presence. Mead then ends the letter by recommending Dobbins to serve in “some active Capacity” for government employment, “as a man capable trust worthy and highly patriotic.”

In his letter, Mead condemned Hull’s failure as inexcusable but felt that Madison must hear the story firsthand from Dobbins to boost its impact. Using the Detroit disaster to parallel the situation in Erie, Mead urged the President and the Navy Secretary to focus immediately on Erie’s strategic importance, lest the same fate recur. Mead’s message induced three essential pronouncements, made while Dobbins was still in Washington. First, Dobbins was appointed sailing master in the United States Navy. Second, a fleet of warships would be built to defend and secure control of Lake Erie. Third, taking the advice of Dobbins, perhaps the most knowledgeable seaman on Lake Erie, Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton and his staff agreed that the warships would be built in Erie’s Presque Isle Bay rather than Black Rock or some other less secure location. The site was approved, and on 15 September 1812, just a few days shy of one year before the Battle of Lake Erie (10 September 1813), Dobbins was authorized to acquire the materials needed to build four gunboats. A few months later, a directive was issued to build two brigs in addition to the four gunboats.²⁹

A Controversial Shipbuilding Site

Captain Issac Chauncey was appointed the overall Great Lakes commander and tasked with building the fleet and securing control of Lake Erie. However, he did not immediately accept the Erie site decision. Already commander of Lake Ontario and based at Sackett’s Harbor, an unambiguous directive from Secretary Hamilton to Chauncey emphasized the strategic importance of Lake Erie: “Of the two lakes, if either is to be considered as the greatest object, it

Figure 9. John Widney, a map of Presque, isle or Erie, 1813. Drawn by Pennsylvania volunteer John Widney and enclosed in his letter of May 13th, 1813, to his cousin, Samuel Williams. The letter, with another of October 3, 1812, is filed with the map. Although “sand bar” is labeled at the mouth of the bay, this map does not clearly show how the tip of the peninsula nearly encloses the bay.



is Lake Erie.”³⁰ Chauncey directed Lieutenant Jesse Elliot, both of whom favored Black Rock, to locate a suitable shipbuilding site. Black Rock, situated on the Niagara River near Buffalo, just a few miles downriver from the mouth of Lake Erie, was a small, established boatyard that offered two advantages for Chauncey. Black Rock provided better logistical support and superior command and control over both lakes.³¹ But Black Rock presented two major drawbacks. The Niagara River’s swift current required favorable northerly winds and significant manpower to tow the completed ships upriver to Lake Erie. Additionally, Black Rock was a poor tactical choice, as the slow upstream movement would make the vessels vulnerable to British cannon fire as they neared Fort Erie.³²

Erie’s strategic location was first recognized by the French, who built Fort Presque Isle in 1753 at the outset of the French and Indian War, only to burn it in 1756 when British capture was imminent. The occupying British reestablished a post, which was subsequently captured and burned during Pontiac’s Rebellion in 1763.³³ Erie later became Pennsylvania’s only lake port in 1792, made possible by the purchase of a forty-mile-long wedge-shaped section of land from New York, known as the Erie Triangle.

Erie is the shallowest of the Great Lakes, easily provoked by capricious westerly winds. Dobbins knew that the finest natural protective harbor on the American side – the windward side – of Lake Erie was the Presque Isle peninsula, affording full protection from the tempestuous waters. He also knew those same winds conspired to close the east end of the peninsula, offering another layer of protection, this time against a man-made threat. The constant wave action created a shallow sand bar across the bay’s narrow mouth, and Dobbins asserted this barrier would prevent annoying enemy warships from entering the bay and pestering the provisional ship-making enterprise (Figure 9).³⁴ Additionally, Erie’s geographic location offered some level of protection against an overland approach due to its relative isolation. Situated roughly one-third of the east-west distance between the vulnerable towns of Buffalo and Detroit, Erie served as a significant buffer from British infantry. The likely route of invasion, therefore, would be courtesy of the British Royal Navy.

Chauncey remained skeptical of the Erie site, perhaps influenced by Elliot, and unaware of the decision already made in Washington to build in Erie. A feud between Elliot and Dobbins raged over site selection until Dobbins persuaded Chauncey to conduct a site visit to Erie, which settled the matter on 1 January 1813. By that time, Dobbins was already actively involved in building the gunboats, and authorization to construct the first brig was granted.³⁵

A Commander is Chosen

Once the decision was made to build a fleet of warships, a commander for Lake Erie had to be chosen. As the overall commander of the Great Lakes, Chauncey selected Lieutenant Elliot, but then transferred him to Lake Ontario to command the newly commissioned USS *Madison*. Elliot’s replacement, Lieutenant Samuel Angus, feuded with Chauncey to the extent that Angus was soon relieved and transferred out. Commodore Chauncey once again was left without a commander for the Lake Erie fleet.³⁶ In a fortunate turn of events, Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry was seeking an upgrade from his gunboat flotilla command, having recently been promoted. He had gained substantial experience at sea, beginning in 1799 as a midshipman aboard the USS *General Greene*, a frigate once commanded by his father. Perry served in the Barbary Wars (1801-1806) and was promoted to lieutenant in 1802. In his hometown of Newport, Rhode Island, he oversaw the construction of gunboats and later commanded a fleet of gunboats along with the twelve-gun schooner USS *Revenge*. Perry was described as taciturn in manner and well respected by his peers and those under his command. His experience in boat construction would prove useful in his next assignment.³⁷

Perry was campaigning for a new position, eager for an ocean frigate, when he learned of the Lake Erie opportunity. From November 1812 through March 1813,³⁸ correspondence among Perry, Chauncey, Secretaries of the Navy Hamilton and Hamilton’s replacement, William Jones, culminated in Perry’s appointment on 15 March 1813. Even though a sense of urgency existed among all parties, little could be accomplished on the frozen bay during the winter months. It was only after the spring thaw that major ship construction and enemy lake activity could continue. Chauncey

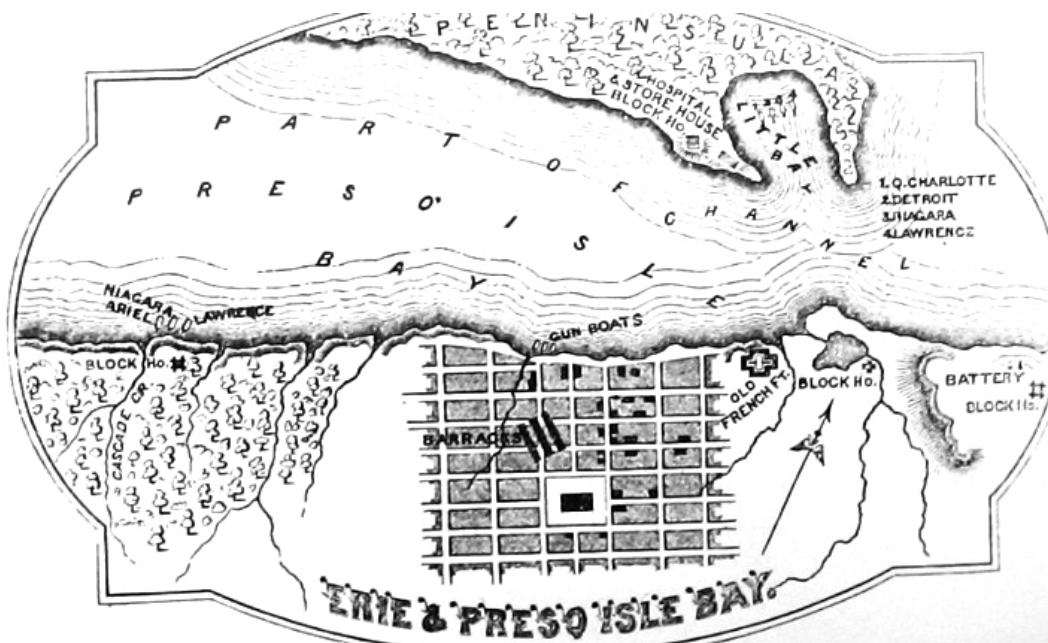


Figure 10. Erie & PRESQUE ISLE BAY. 1813. Map of Erie and Presque Isle Bay. The shipyard is at the foot of Cascade Creek, and the completed gunboats are anchored just north of the barracks. Little Bay (now Misery Bay) was the assembly point, as indicated by the number key. The “bar” connects the two points of land on opposite sides of the channel.

instructed Perry to have the squadron built and readied for battle by 1 June 1813. He anticipated defeating the British on Lake Ontario by then and planned to be in Erie to command the Lake Erie squadron, arriving "with the greatest part of my officers and men."³⁹ Chauncey expected Perry to oversee the build, but he would assume command of the fleet once it was operational.

Supervising and Supplying the Build

The coastal frontier village of Erie had very little manufacturing capability and few skilled laborers in 1813, limited only to those activities necessary to support the budding local farming communities. And despite an abundant supply of timber, the burgeoning lake towns that would someday form the heart of the manufacturing belt were far from capable of producing finished goods for shipbuilding at this time.⁴⁰

The first seven months of 1813 in Erie exemplify American determination and resourcefulness. From 1 January 1813, when authorization to build the first brig was given, to 6 June, when Perry's ships were all "in their element," six ships were built and afloat in the bay: four gunboats and two brigs. Outfitting, from sail to anchor, continued after launch, and the fleet was ready to sail on 23 July.⁴¹ What makes this accomplishment extraordinary is the shipyard's extreme remoteness. Building a fleet of ships in this isolated location would not only require a master ship builder to design and oversee construction, but also a logistics chain to convey the wide range of matériel – almost everything except timber – over primitive routes from great distances. A skilled labor force would also have to be brought in, led by a taskmaster capable of directing the workforce to maximum efficiency to meet the aggressive schedule (Figure 10).⁴²

Gratz Collection Case 5 Box 33 Perry, O.H.

no 2

Erie (Pen^a), April 16th 1813

Sir

I am this moment informed that power is vested in you to call out the militia for the defence of this place, - you doubtless are acquainted that there is a number of vessels of war building here, and that there is no force to protect them. - The Navigation is now nearly open between this and Malden, and from the importance to the Enemy to destroy those vessels, we may confidently expect they will attempt it. - Should they succeed it will be an everlasting disgrace to the Country, as well as an irreparable loss. - If you feel yourself at liberty to order on one hundred men, it would in my opinion add much to our security -

Very Respectfully
I am Sir

Major General David Mead. Stone Store Detroit

O. H. Perry
Comdr. U.S. Navy Forces

Figure 11. Perry's 16 April 1813 letter to Mead requesting militia support in Erie.

Major players in this amazing effort included Issac Chauncey, Daniel Dobbins, Noah Brown and, of course, Oliver Hazard Perry. Captain Issac Chauncey made only that one trip to Erie on 1 January 1813, but from there he traveled to New York to contract with shipbuilder Noah Brown to build the two brigs. In numerous follow-up letters with Brown, he pressed him to meet a June completion deadline. Once Dobbins convinced Chauncey of the advantages of the Erie location, Chauncey leveraged his captain's rank to become an effective logistics manager. From his Lake Ontario headquarters in Sackett's Harbor, Chauncey authorized and directed the flow of materials and labor from New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh.⁴³ He exerted little influence over fleet construction, leaving that to the experts, as he had the good sense to stay out of the way of the Erie team.

Erie resident and sailing master Daniel Dobbins was probably the most important figure in the events leading to the victory at the Battle of Lake Erie. From personally delivering Mead's letter to President Madison and convincing him to build a fleet *on* Lake Erie and *in* Erie, to piloting the supply schooner *Ohio* in support of Perry's fleet,⁴⁴ Dobbins was omnipresent. During the build, he served as designer, supply officer, advisor, and project coordinator. Through his sustained efforts, Dobbins rightly deserves much credit for the project's ultimate success.

Shipbuilder Noah Brown arrived in Erie from Brooklyn around 3 March to assume shipbuilding superintendent duties and partnered well with Dobbins, who wrote to Chauncey, "(Brown) *appears to be the man that we want at this Place in order to drive the business.*"⁴⁵ Brown proved to be an effective construction manager, completing the fleet nearly on schedule, delayed only by logistical issues beyond anyone in Erie's control. Additionally, Brown was also tasked with constructing the "camels," which, as will be seen, were instrumental in floating the brigs over the bar.

Perry would serve as the project's chief director, overseeing construction and bearing overall responsibility for its timely completion. Finding Dobbins and Brown to be solid leaders, Perry was free to focus on the arduous task of ensuring they had the workers and materials needed to keep the project on schedule. He would busy himself with logistics "*to expedite the business of equipping all the vessels.*"⁴⁶ The ultimate success of the shipbuilding endeavor is attributable to Perry's leadership and the cooperation among him, Dobbins and Brown.

Aside from timber, most shipbuilding materials had to be transported over long distances. The overland supply route relied on crude wagon trails, whose suitability for freight travel was heavily affected by weather conditions. The treacherous lake-water route from Buffalo was only accessible after ice breakup, around mid-April, and the wagon trace paralleling the lakeshore was primitive. Iron materials, like nails, spikes, rods, and flat bars, could be produced in the emerging steel town 120 miles to the south, Pittsburgh, as well as shot and rope. But even the largest city west of the Alleghenies could not produce critical materials such as sails, powder and cannon.⁴⁷ For these, the builders had to look much further, across the Alleghenies, to established manufacturing centers in Eastern Pennsylvania and beyond. Powder, cannon, rigging, and sail were brought from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and other eastern cities, all of which would have to be hefted over the Alleghenies along this grueling route.⁴⁸

The route from the eastern population centers followed the wagon path first blazed by the British from Carlisle to Fort Pitt over fif-

ty years earlier, which had since been improved by the thousands of emigrants seeking the Gateway to the West. But from Pittsburgh, the northern leg of the supply line was much more difficult. It would trace the same Allegheny River to French Creek water route that a twenty-one-year-old Major George Washington of the Virginia Militia braved sixty years earlier (see note 33). Although this water route experienced seasonal water level fluctuations, was unusable during frozen months and involved a fifteen-mile overland portage from Waterford to Erie, it remained the preferred route. Alternatively, a more direct overland route would go straight north to Meadville, then to Erie. This route was sometimes considered worthless, as it was less developed, swamplier and its travelability greatly depended on weather conditions.⁴⁹

The availability of skilled labor also challenged the fleet builders, exacerbated by Chauncey's reluctance to release workers from Sackett's Harbor. Aside from woodcutters, who were indigenous to the frontier environment, most labor came from distant sources – many from the shipyards of Philadelphia and New York. Block makers, ship joiners, caulkers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and other trades were in high demand. These workers endured the same travel difficulties that hindered the supply trains along those primitive routes, but as with material matters, Perry's team overcame these labor challenges to meet their demanding schedule.⁵⁰

An Appeal to the Militia

Perry had two major concerns that grew as production problems eased. First, Perry knew that the British could destroy his fleet while it was in drydock or helpless at its moorings before it ever put to sea. A marine-force landing from offshore or an overland infantry campaign from either Detroit or Niagara was possible, perhaps imminent.

Second, the sandbar was indiscriminate. British Commander Robert H. Barclay could not directly challenge Perry during the construction of his fleet because the sandbar blocked access to the bay, but that worked both ways. Perry's brigs would be trapped in the bay when he was ready to sail. The bar's nominal depth was about six feet below the channel entrance, while the brigs drew about nine feet. Once the fleet was completed, outfitted and battle-ready, the Lawrence and Niagara would have to be floated over the bar. Noah Brown developed a specialized technique to accomplish this, but it would render the entire fleet vulnerable to attack while crossing the bar and while clustered at the bay's mouth assembling for maneuver. To confront the first threat, when the ice on Lake Erie broke up in mid-April, Perry petitioned General Mead for protection (Figure 11):⁵¹

Erie (Penn) April 16, 1813.

Sir:

I am this moment informed that power is vested in you to call out the militia for the defense of this place. You doubtless are acquainted that there is a number of vessels of war building here, and that there is no force to protect them. The Navigation is now nearly open between this and Malden and from the importance to the enemy to destroy those vessels, we may confidently expect they will attempt it. Should they succeed it will be an everlasting disgrace to the country as well as an irremediable loss. If you feel yourself at liberty to order on one hundred men, it would in my opinion add much to our security.

Very Respectfully

I am Sir,
Com. Of U.S. Naval Forces
O.H. Perry
on Lake Erie
Major General David Mead

This request from Perry would hardly have surprised Mead. Based on his observations of British activity off Erie's coast the previous August and detailed in his letter to Madison, Mead was well aware of the British naval threat long before Perry's shipbuilding enterprise began. (see Mead's letter to Madison²⁸). Three months after his initial appeal to Mead, the British fleet was sighted, prompting Perry to once again alert Mead of the impending threat. Mead summoned his militia with this notice in Meadville's newspaper, the *Crawford Messenger*:⁵²

Citizens to Arms!

Your state is invaded. The enemy has arrived at Erie threatening to destroy our navy and the town. His course, hitherto marked with rapine and fire wherever he touched our shore, must be arrested. The cries of infants and women, of the aged and infirm, the devoted victims of the enemy and his savage allies, call on you for defense and protection. Your honor, your property, your all require you to march immediately to the scene of action. Arms and ammunition will be furnished to those who have none, at the place of rendezvous near to Erie and every exertion will be made for your subsistence and accommodation.

Your services to be useful must be rendered immediately. The delay of an hour may be fatal to your country in securing the enemy in his plunder and favoring his escape.

DAVID MEAD

Maj. General 16th D.P.M.

July 20, 1813

On one hand, Mead's call for volunteers exemplifies powerful propaganda. It would be difficult to find a more extreme example of inspirational grandiloquence, projecting well beyond the usual embellishments expected in a motivational appeal. On the other hand, although Erie was never invaded, from Perry and Mead's perspective, they must have sensed a threat so dire that by the time the militia responded, Mead's entreaty would no longer be just puffery, but a stark reality. Mead's 20 July petition coincides with Perry's plan to put to sea and engage Barclay. Mead's 16th militia appeared in Erie after the fleet was seaworthy but still vulnerable to infantry attack in Presque Isle Bay. In Perry's 7 August 1813 letter to Mead, which follows later in its entirety, Perry stated, "*I shall always recollect with pleasure, the alacrity with which you repaired with your division to the defense of the public property at this place, on the prospect of an invasion.*"

A Contrary Letter

An unsigned letter from Erie, written during Perry's fleet construction, has recently been discovered and is included here. The author and recipient are unknown, but they clearly possess knowledge of shipbuilding and naval tactics (Figure 12). The full transcription reads:⁵³

Erie 19 July 1813

Dear Brother

Yours of the 22d March was duly rec'd after a long passage. I had almost a conclusion similar to yours - that I should now see or hear from you again - It appears that you have made a journey to the eastward & lately returned. It would be agreeable to hear the news more in detail than you gave it. As it is very uncertain when I shall visit your part of the country as I must continue here for the present. We apprehend no danger here from invasion although the military force stationed here for our defense is a little more than a show consisting of about 800 militia guarding Liberty & equality now under no deception and little better than a mob - I am always apprehended more danger from them than our chosen enemy. Our whole dependence is upon the sailors though there are but few here now. More expected in a few days - The naval force I expect will give us command of these lakes in a short time after they get out. I have reason to believe it is superior in every respect - Commanded by Com. Perry a tough Rhode Islander - The naval force consists of two brigs carrying each 20-32 cannon, a pilot boat built schooner 2 heavy long guns 1 large gunboat 2 heavy guns 2 smaller carrying 1 gun each. These were all built here since last winter. In addition to these is a Brig Caledonia taken from the British last fall 2 large guns and 4 smaller vessels 60 to 80 tons carrying 1 large gun each. The whole fleet will all be ready to sail immediately on the arrival of the seamen. The greatest danger apprehend is in getting over the bar at the mouth of the harbor. The 5 old vessels wintered at Black Rock and narrowly escaped the British on the passage here.

(End of letter, unsigned)

The level of tactical information in this letter about Erie defenses, the expected arrival of sailors, the force capability of Perry's fleet, the sandbar obstacle and the absence of familiar chat strongly suggests that Noah Brown wrote it to his brother and shipbuilding partner, Adam. In one letter, regardless of authorship, the trifecta of militia involvement in Erie is captured:

- 1) The militia was present in Erie in significant strength. This number would have included other militia units not under Mead's command, all mobilized for an anticipated invasion. That the invasion never occurred explains the militia's deterioration into a "mob," as described in the author's letter, but it also confirms the prevailing urgency that led to the deployment of forces to Erie in the first place.
- 2) The fleet is ready to sail, but there are "few" sailors present. The tenor of this letter suggests the arrival of seamen is imminent. With ships ready and the expected sailors retained by Chauncey in Lake Ontario,⁵⁴ Perry would be forced to seek help elsewhere - the militia - in his eagerness to commit the Lake Erie fleet to battle.
- 3) With the threat of invasion now past, the letter's author anticipates the "greatest danger" now is in "getting over the bar." Before enlisting them in the ships' companies, Perry would look to the "mob" to negotiate this formidable obstacle.

Mr a Brother

Yours of the 22^d March was Recdly Recd
after a Long passage. I had almost a conviction some-
times to you - that I should never see or hear from you
again - It appears, that you have made a Journey to
the Postward & lately returned it would be agreeable
to hear the news more in details than you
give it, as it is very uncertain when I shall visit
your part of the Country as I must continue
here for the present. We apprehend no danger here
from invasion although the ^{Military} forces stationed here
for our defence is little more - as a show

Figure 12. Excerpt from the unsigned "Brothers" letter.

Over the Bar

Despite the threat of attack, whether real or perceived, close or distant, six ships were built and completed by mid-July 1813. These included the two largest ships, approximately 260 tons, the brigs USS *Niagara* and USS *Lawrence*. Other ships built in Erie included the fifty to sixty-ton gunboats USS *Ariel*, USS *Scorpion*, USS *Porcupine*, and USS *Tigress*. The captured USS *Caledonia* and gunboats brought up from Black Rock, the USS *Somers* and USS *Trippe*, completed the squadron. Dobbins' supply ship, USS *Ohio*, was also brought up from Black Rock.⁵⁵

What Perry needed next was assistance in getting the USS *Niagara* and USS *Lawrence* over the sandbar. The natural feature that made Presque Isle Bay the most protected site on enemy-held Lake Erie now became a major tactical obstacle. Barclay could have his

way with Perry as Perry struggled to get the two brigs over the bar, or immediately afterward, as Perry was refitting and forming up.

The shallow sandbar at the channel entrance was normally six feet below the surface, but the summer lake level lowered the depth to four or five feet. Ships that drew more water required the use of "camels," ingenious flotation devices invented by the Dutch. Camels were essentially large, hollow wooden boxes that were first flooded, then lashed to both sides of a ship's hull. A ship could be lifted by pumping water from the camels' hollows, raising the ship enough to clear the bar.⁵⁶ Noah Brown had planned for this and built four camels, but deploying them required significant manpower. Much of this manpower would come courtesy of Mead's militia (Figure 13).⁵⁷

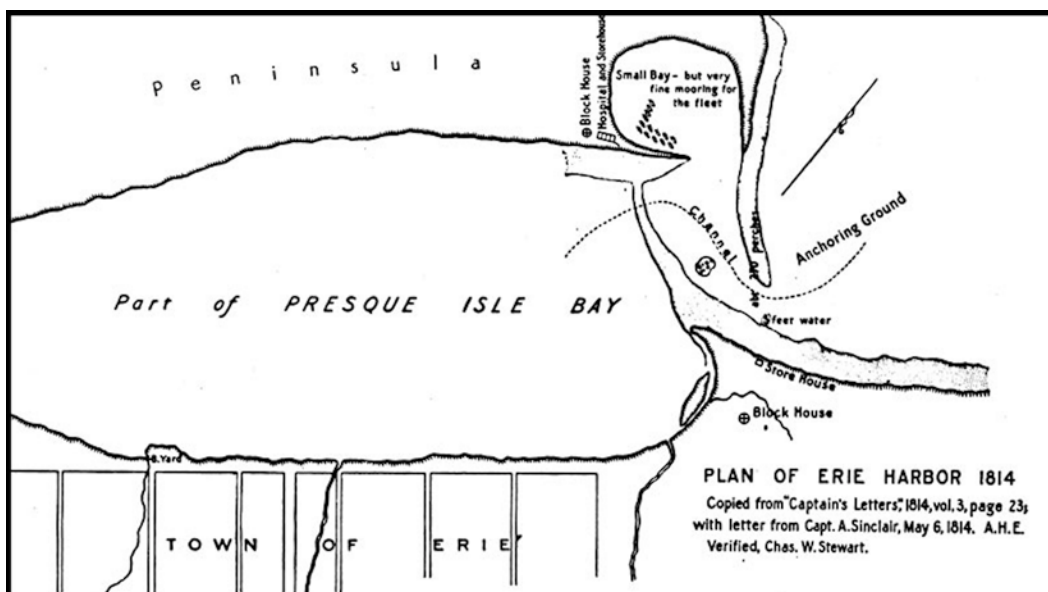


Figure 13. Plan of Erie Harbor 1814. From *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* (vol. II, p. 73) by A.T. Mahan. Note that Small Bay (now Misery Bay) is the assembly area for the fleet before crossing the sandbar. The finger of land extending south from the peninsula disappears underwater and connects to the mainland near the "Store House." Its depth is shown on the map as "5 feet."

192 EXPENDITURES OF PENNSYLVANIA.

RECEIPT ROLL FOR THE FIRST COMPANY 133 REGIMENT, 1 BRIGADE, 16 DIVISION PENNSYLVANIA MILITIA COMMANDED BY COL. SAMUEL GOWDY FOR PERFORMING A 23 DAYS TOUR OF DUTY AT ERIE UNDER THE ORDER OF MAJOR GENERAL DAVID MEAD.

Commencement of Service 23 July 1813.
Expiration of Service 14 Augt.

Name.	Rank.	No. days.	Pay per mo.	Amt. Pay.	
				doll.	cts.
John Colton	Capt.	13	40	16	31
Thomas Karse	Lieut.	23	30	16	21
John Chamberlin	Serjt.	23	20	11	09
James Baker	Serjt.	23	20	11	09
Robert Edwin	Serjt.	23	20	11	09
John Brown	Capt.	11	11	8	43
Bliss Meeker	Capt.	11	11	8	43
Benjamin Wilson	Capt.	11	11	8	43
William Barclay	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Jacob Kelly	Privt.	23	20	11	09
James Adams	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Samuel Lofgren	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Dominick McBride	Privt.	23	20	11	09
John McBride	Privt.	23	20	11	09
George Keeler	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Calb Meeker	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Jacob McBride	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Heath Sweney	Privt.	23	20	11	09
James McBride	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Neal McBride	Privt.	23	20	11	09
William McMollin	Privt.	23	20	11	09
Gideon Dann	Privt.	23	20	11	09

Certified by Col. Gowdy.

Figure 14. Example of one company's Receipt Roll from the 16th Division, 133rd Regiment service in Erie during July-August 1813. PA Archives, Sixth Series, Vol. X.

Historians have long speculated why Barclay, who had imposed a blockade to contain Perry, suddenly sailed away on 31 July.⁵⁸ Perry, suspecting a ruse, waited until the next day to risk floating the bar. To successfully employ the camels, much of the ballast, ordnance, stores, mast, and yards had to be removed incrementally until the camels began to work. This added to the delay and made the ships especially vulnerable during the refit.⁵⁹ Barclay was not present while Perry was exposed, allowing Perry to clear the bar and rearm. By midnight on 3 August, Perry was ready to begin an aggressive pursuit of Barclay, except that he was still short of sailors and marines.

In addition to thanking Mead for his earlier assistance in defending Erie, Commander Perry expressed his gratitude for Mead's division's help in floating the squadron over the sandbar. Perry wrote another letter to Mead:⁶⁰

*U. States Sloop of war Lawrence,
off Erie, August 7, 1813.*

Sir – I beg leave to express to you the great obligations I consider myself under for the ready, prompt and efficient service rendered by the militia under your command, in assisting us in getting the squadron over the bar at the mouth of the harbor; and request that you will accept, sir, the assurance that I shall always recollect with pleasure, the alacrity with which you repaired with your division to the defence of the public property at this place, on the prospect of an invasion.

With great respect

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

O. H. Perry.

*Major General David Mead
Pennsylvania Militia, Erie.*

Militia Participation in the Battle of Lake Erie

Brown, Dobbins, and Perry overcame countless difficulties while building the fleet, navigating political, material, manpower, weather, and transportation obstacles, all while facing the threat of enemy attack. Still, the aggressive production schedule was very nearly met, hampered only by supply chain issues beyond their control. But just when the fleet was ready to sail, Perry was dealt the ultimate affront. The promised ships' companies had not arrived, and he did not have enough sailors and marines on hand in Erie to man his squadron.⁶¹ This problem was solved when Perry turned to the simple expedient of asking for and getting militia assistance to fill the manpower shortages. Militia volunteers, not a redundant term, found themselves engaged in the most important and bloodiest sea battle of the war. Altoff's valued work, *Deep Water Sailors and Shallow Water Soldiers*, is principally a book of appendices, lists, short biographies, and primary sources that identify all soldiers, sailors, marines and militia known to have served in Perry's squadron just before and during that historic battle.⁶²

The Pennsylvania Archives provides useful primary sources for identifying Pennsylvania militia units and listing their officers and men who received payment for service in Erie (Figure 14). From these archives, it is evident that Mead's 16th Division, including 230 officers and men of the 133rd Regiment under LTC Samuel Gowdy – all eight companies – was in Erie from 23 July through 14 August 1813.⁶³

This timeframe would encompass the 16th Division's defense of Erie during Barclay's late July blockade and the division's assistance in floating the ships over the bar in early August. At least one member of the 133rd Regiment volunteered to serve on board the U.S. fleet for a forty-eight-hour cruise in August, but unidentified militia also served.⁶⁴



Figure 15. The Government of Pennsylvania issued silver medals to Pennsylvania Commonwealth militia members who served on Perry's squadron during the Battle of Lake Erie. The originals were solid silver and engraved with the soldier's name on the reverse. About 39 medals were struck, with only a few known to exist, two of which are on display at the Erie Maritime Museum (middle and bottom). William C. Brady and Samuel McKenny (whose medal is incorrectly inscribed: Saml. M. Kenney) were both recruited from the 147th Pennsylvania Militia Regiment, thereby becoming volunteers twice over. Perry's profile appears on the obverse as exemplified by this silver-plated restrrike (top, Author's collection).

Captain Chauncey never traveled to Erie to take command of the Lake Erie squadron as originally planned, nor did he provide Perry with the full manpower needed to operate the fleet as promised. Chauncey was criticized for his parsimonious release of Lake Ontario-based labor and able seamen needed in Erie, despite Secretary of the Navy Hamilton's mandate to prioritize Lake Erie over Ontario.⁶⁵ Chauncey had expected to complete his Lake Ontario campaign by late spring, but those plans were frustrated by the British counteroffensive. Perry was compelled to find other means to fulfill his manpower requirements. He then assumed fleet command, and, on 12 August 1813, "*Perry's little fleet raised anchor at Presque Isle Bay and sailed off for immortality.*"⁶⁶

The crucial victory over the British navy at the Battle of Lake Erie enabled the United States to regain control of Detroit and secure unrestricted access to the Northwest frontier. Perry's victory message to General Harrison was a simple and direct nine-word dispatch: "*We have met the enemy, and they are ours.*"⁶⁷ While the details of this decisive battle are beyond the scope of this work, it is enough to say that the formidable British Royal Navy was defeated, and Perry emerged a celebrated naval hero. The battle's impact on the nation's morale was as significant as its strategic importance, since there were still sixteen more months of war to come.

That no shots were fired in anger during the militia's service in Erie does not diminish the value of the home guard, for Perry remained unmolested while building and launching his fleet. Perry's expressions of gratitude in his 7 August and 22 October letters to Mead stand as an acknowledgement of the militia's importance in preventing a land invasion, floating the brigs over the sandbar and supplementing the squadron's complement. Perry's final letter to Mead was written six weeks after the Battle of Lake Erie and two weeks after the Battle of Thames, where Harrison defeated British General Henry Proctor and Tecumseh's Indian Confederacy. Without their naval support, British military presence in the Detroit region would be unsustainable:⁶⁸

Erie, October 22, 1813

Dear sir – It may be some satisfaction to you and your deserving corps, to be informed that you did not leave your harvest fields in August last, for the defence of this place, without cause.

Since the capture of gen. Proctor's baggage, by gen. Harrison, it is ascertained beyond doubt, that an attack was, at the time, mediated on Erie; and the design was frustrated only by the failure, in gen. Vincent, to furnish the number of troops promised and deemed necessary.

I have the honor to be,

Dear Sir;

Your obedient servant,

O. H. Perry.

Major General David Mead, Meadville

After the battle, various versions of "Perry Medals" were produced, most notably the U.S. Mint medal designed by Moritz Furst, awarded to U.S. service members who participated in the battle. Furst also designed a Pennsylvania government-commissioned Perry medal honoring volunteer members of the Pennsylvania mi-

litia who fought with the fleet. The originals were solid silver and engraved with the soldier's name. About thirty-nine medals were struck, with only a few known to exist, two of which are on display at the Erie Maritime Museum (figure 15). William C. Brady and Samuel McKenny (whose medal is incorrectly inscribed: Saml. M. Kenny) were both recruited from the 147th Pennsylvania Militia Regiment, thereby becoming volunteers twice over. With Perry's profile on the obverse, the medals display this tribute on the reverse:

TO

(Name of soldier, engraved.)

IN TESTIMONY OF HIS
PATRIOTISM AND BRAVERY
IN THE NAVAL ACTION ON
LAKE ERIE
SEPTEMBER 10, 1813

Summary

To tie this narrative together, the subject firearm, identified as belonging to the 133rd Regiment of the 16th Division of Pennsylvania Militia, was likely present during the events in Erie from June to September 1813, since the entire 133rd Regiment was there. As noted earlier, this is the only known firearm linked to any unit serving in Erie during that historic summer of 1813.

The British missed two key opportunities. First, they failed to destroy Perry's fleet while it was under construction in Presque Isle Bay. Was the British command discouraged by the militia forces waiting for them in Erie? If not, why did they allow their opponent to complete their squadron? Second, they failed to intercept the squadron as it left the bay, when it was most vulnerable. Barclay was court-martialed for his defeat at Put-in-Bay, but not for his inaction at Presque Isle Bay, on which the court made no inquiry.⁶⁹

One crucial fact is clear, and one outcome is certain: as his petitions to Mead show, Perry was deeply concerned about a British attack, and without a fleet, the Battle of Lake Erie would not have occurred when it did. It follows that the British would have maintained control of Lake Erie for some time and would have been able to reinforce Proctor while denying Harrison critical support. To what extent prolonged British control of Lake Erie would have altered the outcome of the war and their dominance in the disputed region is, of course, academic.

A musket is but a tool, the skillfully engineered merging of iron and wood, and like any tool, useless if not applied to its intended purpose. However, the utility of this tool was demonstrated by its presence alone, rather than by its violent deployment. Years later, a new purpose emerged – far from its original design – unforeseen and profound. It was repurposed for modern use by sparking this author's curiosity. Because when an ultra-rare artifact surfaces, crafted at the turn of the nineteenth century in the wilderness of western Pennsylvania and contracted to an unknown gunmaker by a U.S. Congressman, bearing regimental Pennsylvania Militia markings, there must be a story.

Credits

All artifacts shown are from the author's collection and photographs are by the author.

Author's notes

1. The subject musket, with a number-matching bayonet, is currently on display at the Hagan History Center in Erie, Pennsylvania. The musket and bayonet each have a "44" stamp, indicating the bayonet was hand-fitted to the musket and that both were match-marked to indicate this. The bayonet is too recent to be original to the gun (c. 1799) and may not have been paired with it in 1813 either, as it appears to be a modified Model 1816 bayonet. However, noted bayonet authority Fred Gaede suggests that the bayonet displays characteristics of earlier models and could have been fitted to the gun before 1813. Although interesting, the author chose not to discuss the bayonet in the text but included photos here.



2. The term "marine" as used in this text is generic and includes those men who were brought to Erie or volunteered in Erie to perform that role. The source material is somewhat vague about the term, and unless a specific U. S. Marine Corps regiment is specified, the lowercase designation is used.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Trumbull, John. *The Death of General Mercer at The Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777*, ca. 1789-1831, oil on canvas, 21 × 30 3/4 in., Trumbull Collection, Yale University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ.
- ² The American Revolution Institute of The Society of The Cincinnati displayed an eclectic collection of period armament in their exhibit *A Revolution in Arms: Weapons in the War for Independence* exhibit (2018-2019). A summary of that study is available here: <https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/exhibition/a-revolution-in-arms/>
- ³ Moller, George. *American Military Shoulder Arms, Vol. I: Colonial and Revolutionary War Arms*. University Press of Colorado, 1993, P. 195. The number of firearms introduced from France during this period is far from precise, in part due to the surreptitious nature in which many were acquired. Moller estimates the number to be over 100,000 and may well exceed 200,000.
- ⁴ The Model 1763/66 was manufactured at Saint-Étienne, Maubeuge, and Charleville and are so marked on each lockplate.
- ⁵ *Library of Congress*. <http://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.2200050g> (accessed September 10, 2025).
- ⁶ Moller, George. *American Military Shoulder Arms, Vol. II: From the 1790s to the End of the Flintlock Period*. University Press of Colorado, 1993. Pp. 122-123,138-139.
- ⁷ Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Virginia Manufactory of Arms records, 1798-1864. Accession APA 175, State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=lva/vi00205.xml> (accessed September 20, 2025).
- ⁸ Stewart, David A. and Reid, William M. "Pennsylvania Contract Muskets—1797 Arms Procurement Act" *American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin* 91:10-40. 2005.

- ⁹ Ibid. P. 14.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., Pp. 14-15.
- ¹¹ Low, J. *The State of Pennsylvania from the Latest Surveys 1800*. Map. New York: J. Low, ca.1798-1800. This map is from John Payne's *A New and Complete System of Universal Geography*, published c1798-1800 per Lister. It can be dated 1789-95 by counties shown. From *A New and Complete System of Universal Geography*. "1800's Pennsylvania Maps." Annotations by the author. <https://www.mapsofpa.com/antiquemaps30.htm> (accessed September 3, 2025).
- ¹² U.S. Census data reveals that, Western Pennsylvania's Fayette County, where Melchor Baker plied his trade, had a population density of less than 20 people per square mile in 1800, At the same time, the aggregate population density of the six listed Eastern Pennsylvania gun-making counties was approximately 62 per square mile. The entire Western PA region outside the developing population centers in the Pittsburgh area (described by the Monongahela/ Allegheny/ Ohio River valleys), was still considered wilderness. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1870/population/1870a-10.pdf>. (accessed September 14, 2025).
- ¹³ *Wikipedia Foundation*. 2025. "Albert Gallatin," Last edited 26 December, at 11:39 (UTC). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Gallatin (accessed January 3, 2026).
- ¹⁴ Albert Gallatin is one of the more colorful characters of his era and his storied career is worthy of further study. The above *Wikipedia* reference summarizes his life well for the purposes of this essay, but for further reading, the author suggests referencing several published sources, beginning with Henry Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin*, first published in 1879 and still in print.
- ¹⁵ The author recalls once seeing a letter from inspector Joseph Torrence (q.v.) to Pennsylvania Governor Snyder (1808-1817) lamenting the poor state of arms stored in the West. It is known that Torrence inspected the M:Baker arms, and though not specifically stated in this letter, a reasonable assumption is that the M:Baker muskets were among those subject to the poor conditions noted by Torrence.
- ¹⁶ Baker's maker's mark appears as "M:Baker" on the lockplate. Other variations should be closely examined as spurious examples are known to exist. A survey of knowledgeable members of the American Society of Arms Collectors, including authors Stewart and Reid (q.v.), estimate that only about ten of the original M:Baker muskets survive, and none with regimental markings save the one under discussion in this narrative.
- ¹⁷ Stewart and Reid, Op. cit. P. 15. Unlike the CP logo, an identifiable maker's mark was not a contract requirement and authentic CP muskets are often found without them.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., Pp. 18, 21, 34.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., Pp.39-40.
- ²⁰ Howell, Reading. *A Map of the State of Pennsylvania*, engraved by J. Vallance (Philadelphia: Kimber, Conrad, Johnson & Warner, 1811), hand-colored engraved pocket map on linen, scale 1:650,000, David Rumsey Map Collection, List no. 5217.001, <https://www.davidrumsey.com> (accessed January 30, 2026). Annotation by the author.
- ²¹ Population densities calculated by the author from US Census data. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1870/population/1870a-10.pdf>.
- ²² Altoff, Gerald T. *Deep Water Sailors, Shallow Water Soldiers*. The Perry Group, 1993. P. 112.
- ²³ Cary, John. *A New Map of Part of the United States of North America, Exhibiting the Western Territory, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia &c., Also the Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Ontario & Erie; with Upper and Lower Canada &c*. From the Latest Authorities. London: J. Cary, 1805, engraved hand colored map, David Rumsey Map Collection, List no. 1657.058.
- The modern-day provinces of Quebec and Ontario are what was then called Lower Canada and Upper Canada, respectively. The Old Northwest Territory included the lands north of the Ohio River, bordered by the western boundary of Pennsylvania on the east and the Mississippi River on the west. The chain of Great Lakes from Lake Erie to Lake Superior would define the northern boundary of the Old Northwest and, by adding Lake Ontario, the southern boundary of Upper Canada.
- ²⁴ A more thorough understanding of Lake Erie's strategic role in the War of 1812 requires a detailed study of the events in and around Detroit, of Tecumseh and his pan-Indian confederation's last-ditch fight for freedom, of the British exploitation of those tribes in fulfillment of the King's objective, and of America's unmitigated resolve toward boundless expansion in North America. These are well beyond the scope of this narrative. A good summary is given in *A Signal Victory* by Skaggs and Altoff.
- ²⁵ Charles, William. A scene on the frontiers as practiced by the humane British and their worthy allies! 1812, watercolor etching, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002708980/>(accessed January 30, 2026).
- ²⁶ Vincent J Esposito and Matthew Forney Steele, *Atlas to accompany Steele's American campaigns*. Map. United States Military Academy, Department of Military Art and Engineering, West Point, N.Y., 1956. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/map60000397/> (accessed January 30, 2026).
- ²⁷ Gertrude MacKinney, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives, Ninth Series*, vol. III (Harrisburg, 1931), 2381.
- ²⁸ "David Mead to James Madison, 29 August 1812," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/03-05-02-0166> (accessed January 30, 2026).

- ²⁹ Rosenberg, Max. *The Building of Perry's Fleet on Lake Erie, 1812-1813*. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1997. Pp. 9, 47-48.
- ³⁰ Secretary Hamilton quoted in Skaggs, D.C. and Altoff, G.C. *A signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812-1813*. Bluejacket Books, 1997. P. 39.
- ³¹ Ibid., P. 69.
- ³² Rosenberg, M., Op. cit., P. 31.
- ³³ Four French forts were established along the Venango Path, an old American Indian trail which traced a water route from Fort Duquesne, at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers (modern-day Pittsburgh, PA) to Fort Presque Isle. Two other forts built to protect the route and control access to the Ohio Territory were Fort Machault at the confluence of French Creek and the Allegheny River (modern-day Franklin, PA) and Fort LeBoeuf (modern-day Waterford, PA). The water route ended at Ft. LeBoeuf, requiring a 15-mile portage to Fort Presque Isle (Erie, PA). In 1753 the land was claimed by the British but occupied by the French. Major George Washington of the Virginia Militia delivered a letter from Virginia's Governor Dinwiddie to the French commandant at Ft. LeBoeuf, instructing the French to leave the Ohio Country. This route would figure prominently a half-century later in Perry's shipbuilding efforts.
- ³⁴ Widney, John. *A map of Presque, isle or Erie*. Map. 1813. William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?id=S-WCL1IC-X-949%](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?id=S-WCL1IC-X-949%20) (accessed August 21, 2025).
- ³⁵ Skaggs and Altoff, Op. cit., Pp. 69-70.
- ³⁶ Ibid., P. 45.
- ³⁷ Ibid., Pp. 45-46.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid., P. 48.
- ⁴⁰ Erie, situated solidly in the center of the future Manufacturing Belt and positioned midway between the future industrial centers of Cleveland and Buffalo, in 1810, had no industry and a population of 394, compared to Buffalo, with 1508, and Cleveland so small no US Census data is available. Meadville, forty miles to the south, had a population of 457.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Erie,_Pennsylvania#:~:text=Erie%20has%20long%20been%20declining,-claim%20the%20third%20largest%20spot (accessed September 15, 2026).
- ⁴¹ Rosenberg, Op. cit P. 49. See also Skaggs and Altoff, Op. cit., P. 63.
- ⁴² *Erie & Presq Isle Bay*. 1813. History Link 101. https://historylink101.com/bw/1812/slides/IMG_8559_e3b.html (accessed January 30, 2026).
- ⁴³ Skaggs and Altoff, Op. cit., P. 70.
- ⁴⁴ Dobbins commanded the *Ohio*, the fleet's merchant schooner, shuttling between the Erie supply base and Perry's fleet. He was not present at the Battle of Lake Erie, returning to the fleet three days after the battle.
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in Rosenberg, Op. cit., P. 25.
- ⁴⁶ Skaggs and Altoff, , Op. cit., P. 73.
- ⁴⁷ Pittsburgh, the "Gateway to the West," was the largest city west of the Alleghenies with an 1810 population of 4768, up from 1565 in 1800.
- https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2016/comm/cb16-tps80_graphic_pittsburgh.pdf
- ⁴⁸ Rosenberg, Op. cit., Pp. 37-43.
- ⁴⁹ Rosenberg, Op. cit., Pp. 17-18. Highway US-19 was developed from this route.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., Pp. 31-36.
- ⁵¹ Letter from Oliver H. Perry to General David Mead, 16 April 1813, Case 5, Box 33, *Simon Gratz Autograph Collection*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- ⁵² Crawford Weekly Messenger, July 21, 1813.
- ⁵³ This letter is in a private collection and was shared with this author by local historian, Linda Bolla, curator of the Erie Maritime Museum, in 2016. For more on Adam and Noah Brown, see: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2022/february/brothers-brown>
- ⁵⁴ Altoff, Op. cit., Pp. 11-13.
- ⁵⁵ Rosenberg, Op. cit., Pp. 49-50. Note that reported tonnages differ significantly from source-to-source.

- ⁵⁶ Rosenberg, *Ibid.*, Pp. 50-52. See also Skaggs and Altoff, *Op. cit.*, Pp. 84-86.
- ⁵⁷ *Plan Of Erie Harbor 1814*. From *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (Vol. II, p. 73) by A.T. Mahan. Map. Boston: Little, Brown, 1905. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/battle-of-lake-erie-building-the-fleet-in-the-wilderness.html> (accessed January 26, 2026).
- ⁵⁸ Altoff, *Op. cit.*, P. 21. Altoff lists several theories advanced by historians to explain Barclay's sudden absence, later resulting in his court-martial testimony, where he was exonerated. Some reasons given: he was low on provisions, he had to undergo necessary repairs, he was blown off station, he left to attend a testimonial dinner in his honor, and he left to visit with a "mysterious female." The author would like to suggest one more possibility, somewhat tongue-in-cheek: in the shadow of Admiral Nelson (Battle of Trafalgar, 1805), to emulate Nelson, Barclay would need to let Perry out unmolested so he could engage in an honorable sea battle. If this was Barclay's reasoning, he was correct about the hero potential — except the emergent hero was not Barclay.
- ⁵⁹ Skaggs and Altoff, , *Op. cit.*, Pp. 84-85.
- ⁶⁰ *Crawford Weekly Messenger*, August 7, 1813.
- ⁶¹ Rosenberg, *Op. cit.*, P. 49.
- ⁶² Altoff, , *Op. cit.* Appendix C contains a comprehensive list, by unit, of all persons known to have served on Perry's fleet during the Battle of Lake Erie. Several militia units are identified, including regiments of Mead's 16th Division, as well as soldiers from unidentified units.
- ⁶³ Thomas Lynch Montgomery, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives, Sixth Series*, vol. X, (Harrisburg: Harrisburg Publishing Co., 1907), 192-193, 196-200, 203, 207. These include the roles of each of the 8, line companies, and the staff company, of the 133rd Regiment. An example of one company's Receipt Roll from the 16th Division, 133rd Regiment service in Erie during July-August 1813 is shown in figure 14.
- ⁶⁴ Altoff, *Op. cit.*, Pp. 21, 112.
- ⁶⁵ Skaggs and Altoff, *Op. cit.*, Pp. 37-42; 76-77. See also Altoff, *Op. cit.*, Pp. 22-25.
- ⁶⁶ Skaggs and Altoff, *Op. cit.*, P. 101.
- ⁶⁷ Daughan, George C. *1812: The Navy's War*. Basic Books, 2011. P. 216.
- ⁶⁸ *Crawford Weekly Messenger*, October 22, 1813.
- ⁶⁹ Skaggs and Altoff, *Op. cit.*, P. 178. Barclay was honorably acquitted, and in his judgement, Rear Admiral Foote stated, "(Barclay's actions) entitled him to the highest praise."

