

The War of 1812

Adapted from the Ontario Archives Website

The causes of the American declaration of war against Great Britain on June 18, 1812 related to events far removed from Upper Canada geographically. Geography, however, determined that Upper Canada would be the primary battleground of the war.

Factors that contributed to the outbreak of hostilities:

- The **expansion of American settlement** in the "Old North-west" (today's Ohio, Michigan, Illinois), frequently in violation of treaties with the First Nations, led to ongoing conflict.
- The United States claimed that the Indian Agents at the British posts in the upper lakes were encouraging **Indigenous Nations to resist American expansion**. The British were also supplying their Indigenous Allies with weapons.
- Many American politicians saw **war with Great Britain as an opportunity to expand** northward through the conquest of Upper Canada.
- The British policy of stopping American vessels and removing any crewmembers believed to be deserters from the Royal Navy (called **Impressment**).

The American declaration of war in June 1812 followed a long period of grievance against Great Britain, but had no one particular cause.

The British North Americans (proto-Canadians)

The resources available to the two sides were unevenly matched. Great Britain had an overwhelming naval superiority but for the first year of the war much of that strength was focused on the blockade of European ports as part of the war against Napoleon.

To garrison and defend the area from Halifax to Fort St. Joseph on Lake Huron, there were only 6000 regular troops, approximately 1500 of them posted in Upper Canada (modern-day Ontario). The population of Upper Canada was approximately 77,000 at the beginning of the war (95,000 by 1814).

The British army officers and enlisted men in Upper and Lower were professional soldiers with some combat experience. This provided them with an advantage in the early months of the war. The militia was potentially large, but poorly trained and ill-equipped.

Major General Isaac Brock had been in command in Upper Canada for nearly 10 years when the war began.

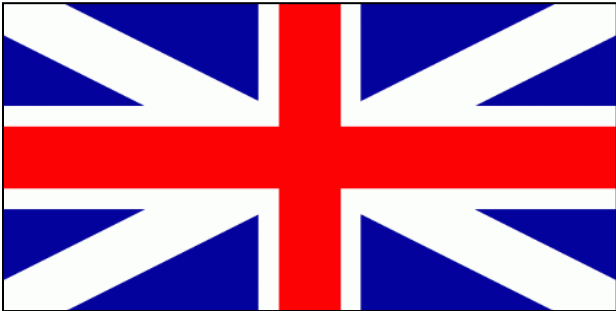
Updated April 2018



The population of Upper Canada consisted of Loyalists, as well as more recent arrivals from the United States with limited loyalty to the British Empire. Some of the political issues that were to erupt into the Rebellion of 1837 were already fostering unrest in the province and distrust of the government. All military stores and equipment had to be imported from Britain.

The economy of Upper Canada was agricultural and had difficulty producing the surpluses required to feed the population and increased military presence.

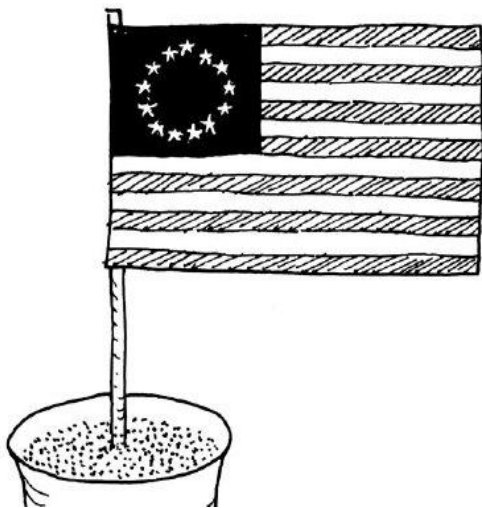
Fun Fact:



In 1801 Ireland was formally added to the United Kingdom. To reflect this union, the St. Patrick's Saltire was incorporated into the "Royal Union Flag" (or "Union Jack").



The United States



The United States had a small regular army and navy, but a population in excess of 4 million and a more developed industrial base. Foundries capable of producing artillery and small arms were located relatively close to the border.

When the war began most of the senior officers in the U.S. army were veterans of the War of Independence 30 years earlier. General Hull and General Dearborn were good examples of this. It took time for younger, more energetic officers to advance to a position of command, and it took several years for American officers and men to achieve the professional level of their British counterparts.

During the conflict, the United States also faced First Nation uprisings stretching from Florida to the Upper Great Lakes. This tied down large numbers of militia and federal troops, dissipating the force that could be brought to bear against Upper Canada.

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Notice that Vermont is an independent republic. It remained independent from the United States from 1777 to 1791.

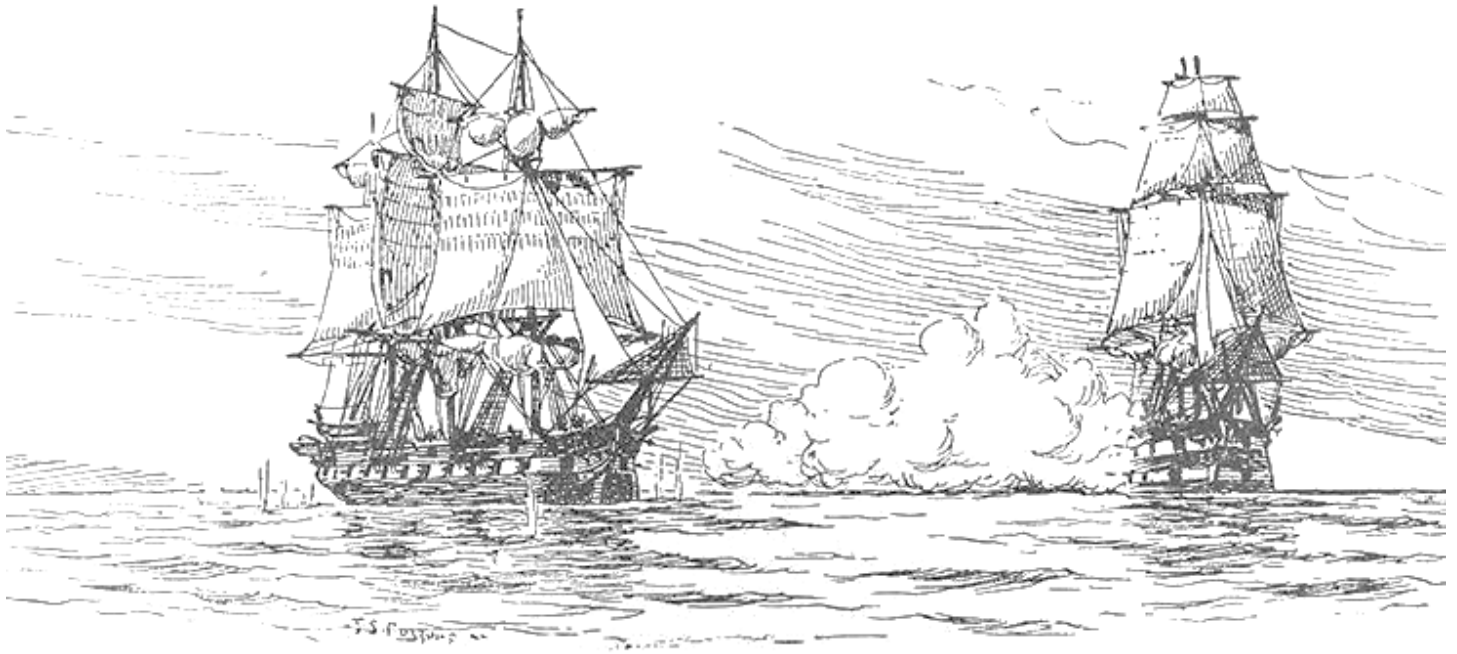
*Not all Indigenous Nations are identified

Indigenous Nations

The map above shows the Indigenous territories (yellow) covered by the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that were abandoned by the British Crown to the American Republic after 1783. However, Indigenous Nations had not surrendered to the Americans, saw themselves as in a state of war, and were winning major battles against the US (with quiet British support). This ended in 1794 when Indigenous Nations suffered a major defeat by the Americans during the Battle of Fallen Timbers (Ohio Valley).

Indigenous leaders were further insulted when the British entered into the 1794 Jay Treaty, vacating the western forts – including Fort Niagara – on what the Crown now recognized as "American territory."

Following the Jay Treaty the British Government moved away from their Treaty obligations (peace with the Americans had meant the Crown no longer needed their Indigenous Allies). Expenditures of the Indian Department for gifts were cut dramatically and Treaty relationships neglected.



Everything changed for the British in 1807 with the "Chesapeake Affair." Upper Canada was now vulnerable, and the British began reinvesting in their Treaty relationships.¹

Chesapeake Affair (1807)

- **British ship *Leopard* demanded America surrender 4 sailors; *Chesapeake* Commander James Barron refused**
 - **British ship *Leopard* fired at American ship *Chesapeake* ,**
 - **Killed 3 and wounded 18**
 - **boarded ship and took 4 American sailors off the coast of Virginia**
- **Jefferson demanded apology for *Chesapeake* incident**
 - **British apologized, but kept right to search and impressment of sailors**



¹ Robert S. Allen, "His Majesty's Indian Allies" in *Readings in Canadian History, 7th Edition*, ed. R. Douglas Francis & Donald B. Smith (Toronto: Thomson Nelson, 2007), 268-281.

WAR OF 1812 - LAKE REGION

