

Rhode Island in the War of 1812

By Maureen A. Taylor

In the early nineteenth century, trade issues caused tension between the United States and Great Britain. Basically, the United States wanted the right to trade with all nations, even during wartime. Specifically, they wanted to continue trade with France during the French Revolutionary Wars, which began in 1792. President Thomas Jefferson hoped to assert our right to trade by passing a series of Embargo Acts stopping foreign trade. These actions adversely affected the livelihood of Rhode Island's shipping industry.

In 1808, Great Britain began forcibly seizing sailors thought to be British deserters from American ships, and claiming them as their own. This practice, known as "impressment," continued until 1811, and more than six thousand sailors in all were taken from American vessels.

As a result of this practice and trade issues, the Jeffersonian Party headed by James Madison declared war on England in June of 1812. However, Rhode Islanders, and the rest of New England, cried foul. They objected to the conflict, calling it "Mr. Madison's War." Providence citizens even declared a day of mourning — shops were closed and state flags were at half-mast.[1]

The Rhode Island General Assembly initially refused to allow the state militia to serve on the national level. Rhode Islanders enlisted in the United States military fought as part of the national armed forces. Naval officer and Rhode Island native Oliver Hazard Perry brought success to the naval campaigns on the Great Lakes. In September 1813 Perry reported, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." By the end of the war in 1815, five hundred Rhode Islanders had served.

Finding evidence of these men requires consulting published and unpublished records available on local, state, and national levels. During the war, East Providence and the eastern part of Pawtucket were still part of Massachusetts so researchers might look for records in that state as well.

Publications

John K. Mahon's definitive military history, *The War of 1812* (DaCapo Press, 1991) provides an overview of the conflict. An *Amazon.com* review states: "Detailed enough for scholars, yet vivid enough for the general reader, this study will remain the standard source for anyone who wishes to gain a complete understanding of the War of 1812." General information on Rhode Island's participation in the war appears in a short article by Robert N. Cool, "Rhode Island in the War of 1812" (*Rhode Island Yearbook* [1968] H102-H107).

United States military records of those who participated in the war are available on CD and abstracted in book form. Muster rolls containing close to 600,000 records appear in the *Military Records Collection* on CD [A1215AP], available from Willow Bend Books.

Men who participated in the war could apply for a pension from the United States government. Virgil White's *Index to United States Military Pension Applications for Remarried Widows 1812-1911* (Waynesboro, TN: National Historical Publishing Co, 1999) and *Index to the War of 1812 Pension Files* (two volumes, Waynesboro, TN: National Historical Publishing Co., 1992) include abstracts from veterans' pension files and applications submitted by widows of veterans.

Manuscripts

Researchers searching for evidence of their ancestor's service in the state militia during the War of 1812 should begin their genealogical inquiries at the Rhode Island State Archives (337 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903). Among their holdings are indexes to four volumes of manuscripts at the State Archives, which were compiled by archivist Ken Carlson. Each volume contains miscellaneous documents such as records of service for Rhode Islanders serving on the state level, supply orders, and receipts. Carlson has over one thousand names in his database including politicians and soldiers.

For record sources on federal troops consult James C. Neagles, *U.S. Military Records: A Guide to Federal and State*

Sources (Ancestry, 1994). His book includes data on pension requirements, land warrants, and a list of related material available on microfilm from the National Archives. You can also search the [National Archives and Records Service website](#) for additional details.

Newspapers

If you have an ancestor who served for Rhode Island in the War of 1812, reading the news is one way to understand the political and social climate of the times. [The Rhode Island Historical Society](#) (121 Hope St., Providence, RI 02908) has the best collection of newspapers in the state. You'll discover local and national news that will fill in the details about life in the state and Rhode Island's participation in the war.

Immigration

Perhaps your ancestor immigrated during the war. In the midst of the strife, Brits continued to migrate to the United States. Two publications list those individuals: Peter J. Coleman and Penelope K. Majeske's "British immigrants in Rhode Island during the War of 1812" (*Rhode Island History* 34 [1975], pp. 66-75) and *British Aliens in the United States During the War of 1812* by Kenneth Scott (Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Co. 1979). More than twelve thousand individuals appear in the Scott book, which is based on the returns of aliens residing in the United States during the War of 1812. Individuals aged fourteen and older are named along with the number of years they lived in the United States, number of people in the family, where they lived, and their occupations.

A Rhode Island Hero--Oliver Hazard Perry

Can you research your ancestor's service record during the War of 1812 and not be interested in the war exploits of Oliver Hazard Perry? In a war that was full of political and military missteps it's difficult not to be curious about Perry. Born in Washington County in 1785, he began his naval career at thirteen as a midshipman under the command of his father, naval officer Christopher Raymond Perry. He served in the West Indies and the Tripolitan War, and was given command of the Great Lakes Fleet in 1812, when he was twenty-seven. He died in 1819 from yellow fever he contracted on a mission to Venezuela. Read Gerard T. Altoff's *Oliver Hazard Perry and the Battle of Lake Erie* (Perry Group, 1999) for more information on this Rhode Island war hero.

Perry's papers are at the Clements Library at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The collection contains material relating to his participation in the War of 1812—order books, notebooks, and letters, as well as personal correspondence sent to family members. The scope and contents of the collection is available [online](#).

While Rhode Island's participation in the War of 1812 was minimal, the above sources will be useful to researchers interested in the Rhode Islanders that were active in military service.