

## **Crucial Victory on Lake Champlain – “9/11” 1814 America’s Second War for Independence (1812 – 1815)**

**The War of 1812, also known as America’s Second War for Independence, was a contest to see if a free, republican form of government could survive.** The Irish in America again rallied to the colors – the rapid fortification, by the Irish, of the Battery in New York City being but one example. Thomas Addis Emmet raised the Irish Republican Greens, which participated with the US Army for the duration of the war, including in the 1813 invasion of Canada. [See: Washington’s Irish by Derek Warfield.]

England does not recognize expatriation, i.e., that someone born in the United Kingdom could ever renounce being a “British subject” and acquire American (or any other) citizenship. This resulted in the **impressment of American merchant seamen** into the Royal Navy, one of the causes of the war. During the course of the war it also gave rise to an English threat to hang any captured Irish-born members of the American forces. American General Winfield Scott countered by promising to hang two English prisoners of war for every Irishman hanged. No one was hanged.

In essence, **England’s war aims** in North America during 1812-1815, were similar to those of 1775-1783, but with a strategy based on lessons learned from the former conflict. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, the **Duke of Wellington** sent sixteen of his best veteran infantry regiments, plus cavalry and artillery, to North America to attempt the **partitioning of the United States** by driving down the Champlain and Hudson Valleys, as intended by “Gentleman Johnny” Burgoyne in 1777, to cut off New England from the rest of the country.

[Ironically, the same route followed by the airliner hijacked over Vermont, and then flown right down the Champlain and Hudson valleys to the World Trade Center in New York City on “9/11”, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.]

Wellington, however, recognized that any invasion force could be properly supported only with control of the waterways, beginning with **Lake Champlain**; otherwise, an army marching inland without such support was in great danger of being itself cutoff, defeated and captured, as happened at Saratoga during America’s first War for Independence.

The land forces, which were committed to this invasion, were more than twice the size of the invasion force, which would later meet “Old Hickory,” Andrew Jackson, at the Battle of New Orleans, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1815. In order to control the waterways for the great invasion, the “Crown” forces in Canada were building a fleet of vessels armed with 24-pounder guns (which could fire over a mile) at the north end of Lake Champlain. Less than a hundred miles to the south, on the **Otter Creek**, downstream from Middlebury - near Vergennes, Vermont (a little north of Crown Point), the Americans were building their own squadron of vessels (armed mostly with carronades with a range of only some 500 yards, but firing heavier shot) to defend the Lake from invasion.

The Americans determined to maintain control of the Lake through construction of the ship SARATOGA, the brig EAGLE, the schooner TICONDEROGA, the sloop PREBLE and ten galleys. In command of this activity was an officer described by The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1995) as an “aggressive, thorough and dedicated naval commander,” **Thomas Macdonough**.

*“The Almighty has been pleased to grant us a signal Victory...”*  
*- Thomas Macdonough*



**Commodore Thomas Macdonough**  
Victor on Lake Champlain, 11 September 1814

Macdonough was born in New Castle County, Delaware, 31<sup>st</sup> December 1783. His father was a physician, who had served as a major in Washington’s Continental Army. His grandfather, James MacDonough, emigrated from Kildare to Delaware about 1730; he was the father of Thomas, an officer in the Delaware Regiment during the first American War for Independence [this regiment was commanded by Colonel John Haslet from Derry (grand uncle of John Mitchel)]. Major Thomas McDonough very effectively led his battalion in the Battle of Brooklyn (aka “Long Island”), 27<sup>th</sup> August 1776, where he was so severely wounded that he was forced to leave the service; he was later named a Colonel of Delaware militia, 1781-2. One of his sons, also named Thomas, would be the **Commodore of the United States naval squadron on Lake Champlain in 1813/1814.**

In 1798, after the death, on active naval service, of his older brother, Thomas Macdonough also joined the United States Navy of Commodore John Barry. He would see action in the Quasi-War with France (1798-1800) and in the Tripolitan War (1801-1805). One of the bones of contention between the United States and the British Empire during the great conflict between England and France was the impressment of American seamen into the Royal Navy; England never recognized that anyone born a British subject could become an American citizen, immune from English law, nor could England tolerate the American doctrine of Freedom of the Seas. A young Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough had distinguished himself by recovering a seized neutral American merchant seaman from under the guns of a Royal Navy frigate in Gibraltar.



**The “Star Spangled Banner”**

1795 – 1818 -- 15 Stars and 15 Stripes

Both as a strategic diversion, and as part of an attempt to control the Chesapeake, British forces attacked and burned Washington, and, on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1814, were moving on Baltimore, where Francis Scott Key would write of seeing “*The Star Spangled Banner*” (30’ x 42’, each stripe 2’, and each star 2’ diameter) through the dawn’s early light after Fort McHenry survived a major bombardment and rocket attack. See: Charles Neimeyer, War in the Chesapeake: The British Campaigns to Control the Bay, 1813-1814 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015). Similar operations were underway in the west near Lakes Erie and Ontario, and in raids along the Atlantic seaboard. But the main attack was focused on up-state New York and the Champlain Valley. Colonel David Fitz-Enz points out that there were no other regular US Army troops between the garrison at Plattsburg (which had been depleted to send troops to face the threat in the west) and Baltimore.

A major event both in the history of the United States of America, and in the European wars of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was the simultaneous battles of **Plattsburg and Lake Champlain**. On the **11<sup>th</sup> of September 1814**, outnumbered and outgunned American land and naval forces fought the invaders to a standstill. At the crucial point of the battle, the Commodore of the American naval forces on Lake Champlain, Thomas Macdonough, carried out a brilliant manoeuvre, rotating his ships using kedge anchors and spring lines to expose the enemy to fire from fresh batteries. This sudden fire superiority devastated the Royal Navy ships (winds, unanticipated by the English commander, but known to Macdonough, had placed them within range of the American carronades), resulting in their complete defeat. **Macdonough's conduct of the battle was a model of tactical preparation and execution**. Having lost the naval component of their joint invasion plan, the British land forces withdrew to Canada, ending the threat to the Hudson and Champlain valleys, and the threat to partition the United States.

The Duke of Wellington, involved in the planning, had determined that the English invasion force would not repeat “Gentleman Johnny” Burgoyne’s error of marching south without waterborne communications and logistical support. That expedition had come to a disastrous end, with the English defeat and surrender at Saratoga, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1777 – which convinced the French to enter the American War for Independence, as an ally, recognizing the United States as a sovereign country. This northern invasion of the United States was by a force of veterans, fresh from victory in Europe, approximately twice the size of the force which would be so decisively defeated and turned back by General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1815 (after the Treaty of Ghent, ending the war, had been signed, but before it had been ratified). David Curtis Skaggs (Naval History, Oct 2013) cites Samuel Eliot Morison as concurring with Alfred Thayer Mahan, **Macdonough’s victory** “merits the epithet ‘**decisive**’.”

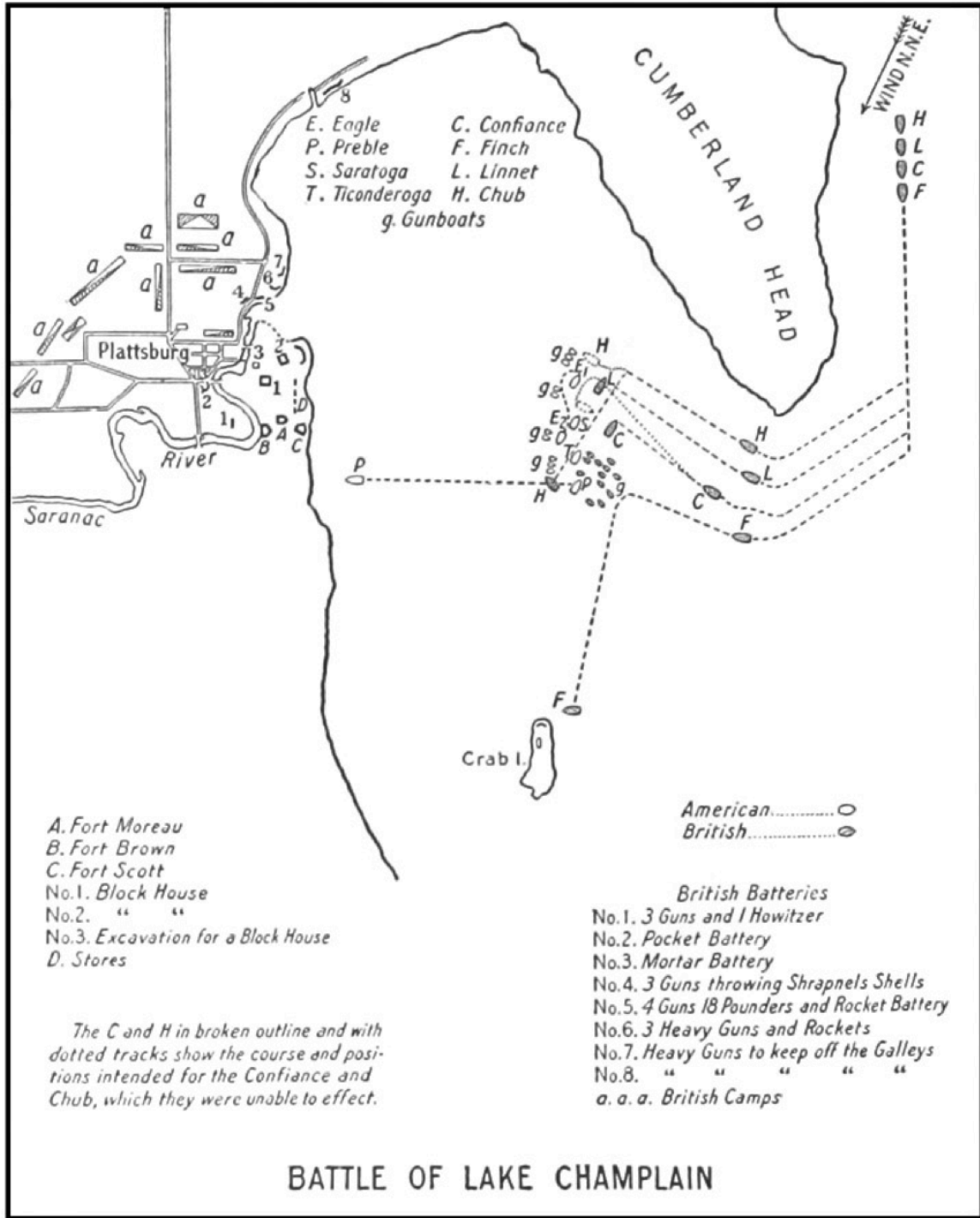


Chart provided by Dr. David F. Winkler, Ph.D.  
**Naval Historical Foundation**

**Macdonough's victory, though dearly gained after a hard fight, was brilliant and complete.** Having been denied control of the waterways, the English could not continue their invasion.

Historian David Fitz-Enz, "*11 September 1814*" (Military Illustrated, No. 172), points out that because of the American victory at Plattsburg/Lake Champlain, and the failure of the strategic diversionary at Baltimore, the English negotiators were unable to acquire any land south of the existing Canadian border, or to gain control of the Great Lakes, and so sued for the *status quo ante* of 1812. Thus the Peace of Ghent was signed on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1814. See: David Curtis Skaggs, Thomas McDonough: Master of Command in the Early U.S. Navy (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003); Rear Admiral Joseph F. Callo, "*1812 Victory at Sea*," Military History, March 2011, and "*How the Battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain Influenced the American Narrative*," The Hudson Valley Review, Autumn 2012; George C. Daughan, 1812: The Navy's War (New York: Basic Books, 2011); David Curtis Skaggs, "*More Important Than Perry's Victory*," Naval History, October 2013; Captain Walter Rybka, "*Naval Battle of Plattsburg Bay, 11 September 1814*," Sea History 148, Autumn 2014; Captain Kenneth J. Hagan, The People's Navy: The Making of American Seapower (New York: Touchstone, 1992); John Lehman, On Seas of Glory: Heroic Men, Great Ships, and Epic Battles of the American Navy (New York: Touchstone, 2002); E.B Potter and Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, ed., Sea Power: A Naval History (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1960); Rodney Macdonough, Life of Commodore Thomas Macdonough (Boston, 1909); Charles Geoffrey Muller, Hero of Two Seas: The Story of Midshipman Thomas Macdonough (McKay, 1968); Michael J. O'Brien A Hidden Phase of American History: "Ireland's Part in America's Struggle for Liberty". (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920).

**Thomas Macdonough (1783 – 1825)** was rewarded with promotion to full captain, and with the command of the USS OHIO, a ship-of-the-line. Always the sailor, Captain Thomas Macdonough later insisted on returning to a more active sea duty; his last command was "*Old Ironsides*," the USS CONSTITUTION, on Mediterranean patrol. Thomas Macdonough died passing Gibraltar on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1825. After a state funeral in New York, he was buried in his late wife's family plot in the Riverside Cemetery in Middletown, Connecticut.





MACDONOUGH'S VICTORY ON  
LAKE CHAMPLAIN

E. TURNELL.

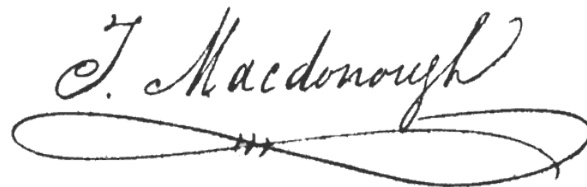


While the significance of this battle on **Lake Champlain** is often eclipsed by the spectacular defense of Fort McHenry and Baltimore, enhanced in the popular memory by the poetry of Francis Scott Key, which would later become the national anthem, the fact is that **the enemy's major effort was committed to the Champlain Valley campaign.**

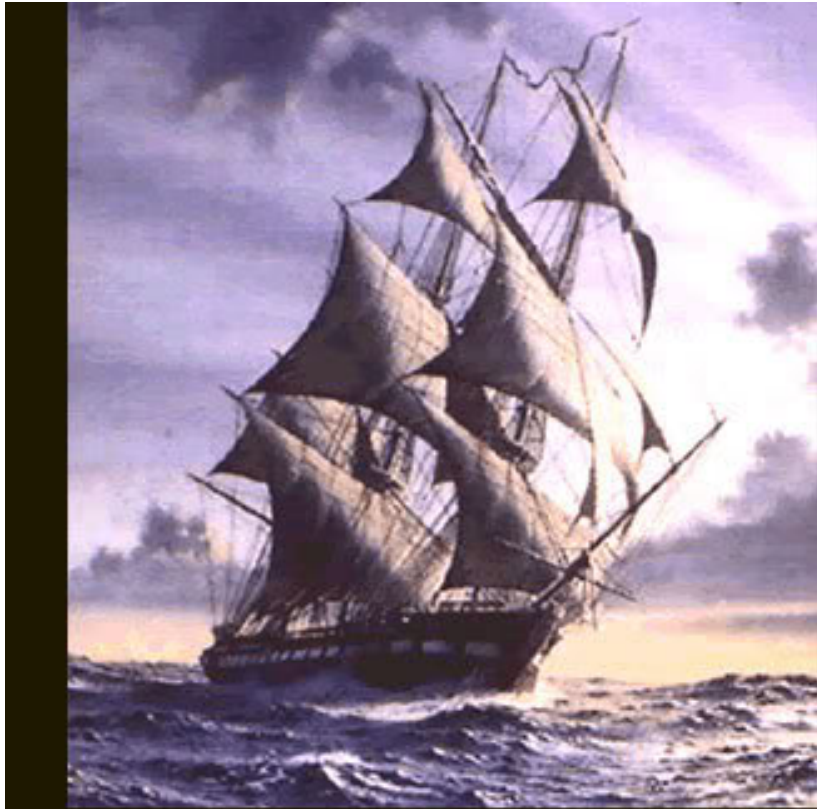
**The deciding battle of the war was on Lake Champlain on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1814 (“9/11”).** This was the judgment of **Winston Churchill** in his **A History of the English Speaking Peoples**, who stated that the defeat at Plattsburg crippled the British advance and was the most decisive engagement of the war [cited by Colonel David G. Fitz-Enz, US Army (Ret.). The Final Invasion: Plattsburg, The War of 1812's Most Decisive Battle (Lanham, MD: Cooper Square Press, 2001)].

**The victor was Master Commandant, Commodore Thomas Macdonough** of the US Navy, one of the more notable of “Preble’s Boys” from the war with the Barbary Pirates, grandson of James MacDonough, an Irish immigrant from Kildare (in Ireland’s eastern Province of Leinster – the finest of horse country), and son of one of Washington’s officers (Major Thomas McDonough of the Delaware Regiment). [The spelling of the name actually changed with each of the first three generations of this particular branch of the *Mac Donnachadha* in North America.] The flagship of the American squadron was, appropriately, named SARATOGA. †

*“The Almighty has been pleased  
to grant us a signal victory...”*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J. Macdonough". The signature is written in dark ink and features a large, decorative flourish at the bottom that loops back under the name.

(Commodore Thomas Macdonough, U.S. SHIP SARATOGA, *off Plattsburg*,  
Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, 1814, to Secretary of the Navy William Jones)



USS Constitution, "Old Ironsides"



A Carronade on the main deck  
of the USS CONSTITUTION  
*"Old Ironsides"*

*“Macdonough in this battle [Lake Champlain] won a higher fame than any other [naval] commander of the war, British or American. He had a decidedly superior force to contend against, the officers and men of the two sides being about on a par in every respect; and it was solely owing to his foresight and resource that we won the victory. He forced the British to engage at a disadvantage by his excellent choice of position; and he prepared beforehand for every possible contingency. His personal prowess had already been shown at the cost of the rovers of Tripoli, and in this action he helped fight the guns as ably as the best sailor. His skill, seamanship, quick eye, readiness of resource, and indomitable pluck, are beyond all praise.”*—**Theodore Roosevelt**, 1882, in his first book,

**The Naval War of 1812** (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889).

Four US Navy warships have been named **USS MACDONOUGH** for Commodore Thomas Macdonough, plus one World War II Liberty Ship:

- USS *Macdonough* (DD-9), an early destroyer, launched in 1900 (World War I) 1919
- USS *Macdonough* (DD-331), a *Clemson*-class destroyer, 1920 - 1930
- USS *Macdonough* (DD-351), a *Farragut*-class destroyer, 1934 (World War II) 1945
- USS *Macdonough* (DLG-8 / DDG-39), was a *Farragut*-class guided missile frigate (destroyer leader), launched in 1959 and served until 1992

SS *Thomas Macdonough*, a World War II Liberty ship

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*by Derek Warfield,  
with Captain Liam Murphy (SUNY Maritime College, Fort Schuyler)  
and Colonel David Fitz-Enz*