

The War of 1812: Two Perspectives

On the page that follows this one, Dave Kent, in his “New Issue of the Week” using a stamp from Belarus presents the larger perspective on the War of 1812 as “merely a side show in a much larger and long war called the Napoleonic Wars.”

Closer to home, the United States and Canada both have issued stamps commemorating that event. Needless to say, the two commemoratives differ. The U.S. Postal Service focuses on the *USS Constitution*, aptly described as “the most famous ship of the war.” The stamp design is based on a painting by Michele Felice Corné, circa 1803. The 150th anniversary of the launching of the *Constitution* was commemorated on a 1947 U.S. stamp (Sc. 951).

On August 18 in Boston, Mass., the USPS issued its War of 1812: USS Constitution Forever stamp in one design in a pressure-sensitive adhesive “souvenir sheet” of 20. It will be the first in what is described as “a series commemorating the bicentennial of the War of 1812, a two-and-a-half year conflict with Great Britain that many Americans viewed as the nation’s ‘Second War of Independence.’” The Canada issue consists of two stamps that focus on that aspect of the war that involved the U.S. invasion of Canada in the belief that Britain was too involved with its fight with France to resist the Americans and that many Canadians also would not resist.

The United States’ “War of 1812” was fought in three arenas:

- At sea, warships and privateers of both sides attacked each other’s ships. Indeed, it was the impressment of American sailors by the British that led to the declaration of war by the United States.
- Land and naval battles along the Great Lakes and Saint Lawrence River on the American–Canadian border.
- The American South and Gulf Coast, the highlight for the U.S. being the victorious Battle of New Orleans. The 150th anniversary of this event was commemorated by the U.S. in 1965 (Sc. 1261).

Canada’s War of 1812

The Canadian War of 1812 issue features War Chief Tecumseh and British Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, who are described by Canada Post as “two of the most important leaders in the War of 1812.” On the June 15 Canada issue, they meet again, this time facing one another with mutual respect on the se-tenant pair of commemoratives. As with the USPS, Canada Post plans a multi-stamp series.

The background across the two stamps initially appears to be a continuous landscape, but closer examination reveals markedly different cultural backdrops. Behind Brock we can see a European settlement, as it would have looked circa 1812. Chief Tecumseh is shown with encampments scattered around him, indicating that more than one tribe has taken to arms under his command.



“The events of this war were critical in shaping what would later become the Dominion of Canada,” said Steven Fletcher, Minister of State (Transport). “Together, Tecumseh and Brock won a decisive victory at Detroit. This bloodless battle highlighted a key alliance in the war. Today, both leaders are beautifully depicted on the new commemorative stamps-.”

Major-General Brock was born in Guernsey in the Channel Islands, and as a result, these stamps also marked Canada Post’s first joint issue with Guernsey Post. Brock began his military career at the age of 15, becoming the Lieutenant Colonel in command of the 49th Regiment of Foot at the age of 28.

He was posted to Canada in 1802, and when war was declared in 1812, he was ready to take action. From Canada’s perspective, “Shawnee War Chief Tecumseh united men from several First Nations to resist American encroachment on Native territory. When war broke out, he sought an alliance with the British in order to protect their lands and cultures. Despite vastly different backgrounds, Brock and Tecumseh worked together to take Michigan from the enemy.”

(“The other side” of the Michigan story is that the U.S. was able to end the prospect of an Indian confederacy and an independent Indian state in the Midwest under British sponsorship.)

Finally, quoting from Wikipedia:

“In the United States, victories at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 and in the Battle of Baltimore of 1814 (which inspired the lyrics of the United States national anthem, ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’) produced a sense of euphoria over a ‘second war of independence’ against Britain. Peace brought an ‘Era of Good Feelings’ in which partisan animosity nearly vanished.

“Canada also emerged from the war with a heightened sense of national feeling and solidarity, having repelled multiple American invasions. Battles such as the Battle of Queenston Heights and the Battle of Crysler’s Farm became iconic for English-speaking Canadians. In Canada, especially Ontario, memory of the war retains national significance, as the invasions were largely perceived by Canadians as an annexation attempt by America seeking to expand U.S. territory. In Canada, numerous ceremonies are scheduled in 2012 to commemorate a Canadian victory, despite the defeat of the First Nations.

“The war is scarcely remembered in Britain today; it is relegated to a sideshow to the much more important victory in the war against Napoleon. The peace opened an era of peaceful relations and trade.”

And that is where things stand today between the U.S., Canada and Great Britain.

New Issue of the Week:

The Patriotic War of 1812

by David A. Kent

A new stamp from Belarus celebrates the bicentennial of the great victory at the Battles of Polotsk during the Patriotic War of 1812. Artist Artiom Rybchinski's design pictures soldiers of both sides struggling with their rifles and swords.

Those who know their American history are scratching their heads. For one thing, they have never heard of the War of 1812 being titled "patriotic," but more importantly they wonder how fighting in a city in what was then called West Russia could have been part of the War of 1812. You need a much broader view of world history to understand it.

Our "War of 1812" was merely a side show in a much larger and long war called the Napoleonic Wars, which were waged by the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte between the late 1790s and 1815 in an effort to conquer all of Europe. We got involved in a small part of the wars, against only one of the nations involved, Great Britain, because the Royal Navy ran out of sailors to man its ships and started kidnapping American sailors on the high seas to help out.

As the years passed, Napoleon was quite successful in his military campaigns, taking over Spain, Italy and areas of what are now Germany, Austria and Poland. He made his biggest blunder, however, in 1812 when he decided to invade Russia (a mistake Adolph Hitler was



to repeat more than a century later). The route to Moscow led directly through the area that is now Belarus, and as he drove into Russia he left fortifications at the city of Polotsk to protect his flank, and to guard a major supply depot at Vitebsk. The French loss at Polotsk was a key to Napoleon's eventual defeat and withdrawal from Russia.

There is debate today in Belarus over the use of the title "patriotic" for the struggles against Napoleon. Although the people of Belarus have their own distinct culture and customs, the area has long been dominated by its neighbors, being over the centuries a part of Lithuania and Poland. In 1795 it became a province of Russia, and the Russians forbid the use of the area's original language, alphabet and religion. When Napoleon invaded, many Belarusians sided with the French in the hopes that they would drive the Russians out and restore their native culture. In fact, it would not be until 1991, and the collapse of the Soviet Empire, that Belarus would become a truly independent country.

The Napoleonic Wars were historically very important, causing hundreds of thousands of casualties and major disruptions to life among Europeans. However, this appears to be the first stamp to take any note of the bicentennial of the wars. Perhaps at least Belgium will commemorate Napoleon's final defeat at its city of Waterloo in 1815.