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Sir John Coape
Sherbrooke,
Lieutenant
Governor of Nova
Scotia. *Courtesy of
Archives Canada*

An Uncertain Trumpet: Coastal Mainers, Nova Scotians, and the War of 1812

By Patrick Callaway

The early nineteenth century was an uncertain time in American history. The consensus resulting from the revolutionary experience gradually collapsed, and was replaced with an openly divided political culture. Events in Europe both accelerated this division and created a new geopolitical context for the new republic. The United States was inevitably affected by the war in Europe as American foreign policy interests conflicted with the contradictory demands of Napoleonic Europe and Great Britain. By 1812, the strained relations between the United States and Great Britain devolved into open warfare.

Congress declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812 in a calculated gamble that a quick victory in a war against a distracted foe would render concessions on numerous points of conflict ranging from trade policies to alliances with the First Nations. Although Congress could declare a war between nations, it could not declare a war between peoples, and portions of the country like the coast of Maine had little interest in a war with Great Britain. Longstanding political and economic divisions between primarily Federalist New England and the Democratic-Republicans (or Jeffersonian Republicans) precluded a united front in favor of war. Briefly summarizing a number of important divisions, Federalists emphasized a more paternalistic and deferential view of society that evolved

over time. Economically, Federalists saw their interests reflected in Atlantic commerce. Democratic-Republicans, on the other hand, embraced small, independent landowners and a more autonomous social structure than their Federalist neighbors.¹ This ideology required westward territorial expansion, and conflict between the United States and the First Nations tribes allied with the British was a serious irritant in Anglo-American relations. Political divisions also reflected in foreign policy. The French Revolution and subsequent horrors of the reign of terror in France led most Federalists to support Great Britain. Under the administrations of Presidents Jefferson and Madison, American foreign policy tended to favor France. These serious divisions in economic, social, and foreign policy interests were not resolved. As the trumpets of war sounded in June 1812, they produced a decidedly uncertain tune.

Madison's inability to create a domestic consensus in favor of war or to provide a persuasive justification for the war in 1812 is reflected in the historical analysis of the era. Analysis of the causes that led to the United States' declaration of war against Great Britain offers many different theories. The most forgiving analyses of Madison's foreign policy present the declaration of war as the result of a carefully considered effort to defend American interests against particular abuses by Great Britain relating to the impressment of American sailors, interference with trade, and Britain's relations with native American tribes within the United States.² Other historians present a more cynical appraisal, citing the declaration of war as an act of "desperation" or an effort by the Madison administration to avoid disgrace.³ New England and the Maritime

Provinces were generally ambivalent toward the war. Although privateers on both sides occasionally disrupted the calm, commerce co-existed with the conflict.⁴ The less charitable historian Faye Kert presents a persuasive and pointed critique of the war, noting that it "seems to have been declared by the unprepared and fought by the unwilling for reasons that remain unexplained."⁵ To this we may add the observation that the war was declared against the unprepared and the unwilling who did not fully understand the reasons for the war either.

On Mount Desert Island, an active war would have been disastrous. Writing in 1905, George Street noted, "The island was remote and utterly defenseless, but the inhabitants were ready to bear their full share of the public burdens."⁶ Whether a sacrifice was required and what form it might take depended on a variety of far-distant factors influencing events. The demands of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe left Great Britain with little interest in a war with the United States, and limited military resources for the conflict. British strategy focused on defending the Canadas, maintaining naval supremacy, and attempting to encourage a de facto peace with the New England states. Mount Desert Island benefited from British preoccupation with other issues, and shared local interests in maintaining peace superseded the formal declaration of war.

Local British authorities enthusiastically supported New England's effective neutrality. For Sir John Sherbrooke, the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, the prospect of war with the United States required careful management, as the province was ill-prepared. One means of maintaining the peace was through cultivating trade relations between the Maritime Provinces and the District of Maine. Sherbrooke's proclamation of July 3, 1812 declared his desire that residents "pursue in peace their usual and accustomed trades without molestation."⁷ Further, the proclamation protected

American goods and unarmed vessels in the region provided no hostile acts occurred. In essence, Sherbrooke had called off the war on land, and the war at sea was contingent on external factors.

Imperial authorities in London authorized and encouraged Sherbrooke to cultivate "an amicable and liberal communication with the neighboring states, and of promoting any friendly disposition which may manifest itself in the manner which may appear to you best calculated to ensure its continuance."⁸ Trade under British-issued licenses, which promised safe conduct for merchant shipping, enjoyed the support of Sir John Borlase Warren, the Commander in Chief of the Royal Navy's North American Station.⁹ His consent to the license system provided the security required for continued trade. Although this would change in time over the course of the war, the pertinent British authorities were united in their support for continued peace on shore and seaborne trade.

British consul Andrew Allen in Boston reported on July 23, 1812 that the proclamations preserving peace "has been received here [Boston] with the most marked satisfaction." Popular opinion in the eastern states opposed war with Great Britain; in Boston fears of "the exhaustion of the treasury, the imposition of taxes, the depreciation of real property, and the want of a vent for their produce" combined with fear of the result of a war with Britain dominated public perceptions of the war effort.¹⁰ Public sentiment created an environment

more conducive to peace and trade than the official state of war would suggest.¹¹

For both sides, maintaining the peace in the region made a virtue out of necessity. Continued trade encouraged the flow of American provisions into Nova Scotia and British manufactures into the United States, and an effective blockade of the entire American coastline was unsustainable. According to Lance Davis and Stanley Engerman, "throughout 1812, the British blockade was neither extensive, tight, nor particularly effective." Part of this was by design. Only the coastline between Charleston, South Carolina and Florida was declared blockaded in 1812. It was not until spring 1813 that the blockade was extended north to New York and south to Louisiana. Notably, the ports of New England were not included in these measures.¹² While the war with Napoleon raged in Europe, sufficient forces for a more vigorous conduct of the American war simply were not available. Conversely, the American war effort to conquer the Canadas left inadequate resources to defend New England against a serious attack. The absence of major armies and navies did not mean the complete absence of conflict at sea. A bewildering array of regular naval warships from both navies, privateers from both British North America and the US, merchants protected by licenses, smugglers, and outright pirates made the inshore waters of the Northwest Atlantic a potentially dangerous place for the unwary.

Napoleon's devastating defeat at Leipzig in October 1813 fundamentally changed the nature of the War of 1812.

Great Britain could transfer troops and warships to North America in previously unimaginable numbers. The changing circumstances led to a number of policy changes. The tightening of the blockade ended legal trade between New England and British North America. In July 1814, Sherbrooke reported that due to the implementation of a blockade on all American ports, no further trading licenses would be available.¹³ The expansion of the blockade to include New England for the first time brought the effects of the war home for islanders in a much more invasive way. Island militia repulsed a raid on August 9, 1814 by an armed barge launched from the HMS *Tenedos*. Although the raid was repelled, the Norwood Cove battle provided an ominous portent of a more active war along the Maine coast.

By late summer of 1814, adequate forces arrived in Nova Scotia to allow Sherbrooke to launch a land offensive against the District of Maine. Driven by a desire to secure a land route between the Maritime Provinces and Lower Canada and to provide a buffer against any potential American attack, Sherbrooke attacked with the objective of capturing the port of Castine. Writing to Lord Bathurst in London on August 26, Sherbrooke noted that occupying the mouth of the Penobscot would take "command of the country lying between that river and the Bay of Passamaquoddy."¹⁴ On September 1, the British conducted a successful attack against token resistance by the regular army garrison of Castine. The militia assembled from Castine and the surrounding communities for the port's defense dispersed immediately. The victory at Castine provided Sherbrooke with other opportunities to advance against weak and disorganized American opposition. Chief among his concerns was the destruction of the USS *Adams*, which sought refuge in Hampden. Leaving a small force in Belfast to control the high road from Boston and another force in Buckston [Bucksport], Sherbrooke dispatched an expeditionary



Map of the District of Maine, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia by Jedidiah Morse, 1796. *Courtesy of the Osber Map Library*

force under Lieutenant Colonel Henry John up the Penobscot to destroy the Adams, and to disperse any American militias present.¹⁵ John's force encountered an estimated 1,400 militia bolstered by the crew of the Adams near Hampden. A short but violent battle resulted in the destruction of the Adams, and the occupation of Bangor without further opposition.

The British expedition suffered a total of one man killed and eight wounded.¹⁶

After the victories at Castine, Hampden, and the Passamaquoddy, the only remaining occupied American post in Downeast Maine was Machias. Sherbrooke dispatched a small force to that

port which promptly surrendered. Citing the lack of protection by American forces and with external support unlikely, John Brewer, commander of the Washington County militia surrendered the entire county.¹⁷ With the formal surrender of all of Maine east of the Penobscot, British authorities proceeded to promulgate new regulations for the region that focused on maintaining peace and facilitating trade while diplomacy between the British and American governments negotiated a potentially permanent border adjustment.

The occupation exposed deep divisions in American society. Writing to Lord Bathurst in September 1814, Sherbrooke noted the importance of political divisions between "the Federalists (which comprehends nearly all the people of property and respectability) and the Democrats (who appear to be a lawless set of plunderers)."¹⁸ Sherbrooke's optimistic report to London suggested that a faction of Americans preferred British rule, but were too afraid of their neighbors to announce such sentiments openly. A series of questions and answers exchanged between Sherbrooke and the "respectable inhabitants of Ellsworth and Blue Hill" suggest that this optimism had some basis in fact. The questions posed to Sherbrooke expressed concern over the protection of property, the maintenance of order, and the need for access to weapons to provide personal security illustrate the divisions in American society and how British administrators could potentially gain local support.¹⁹ For some, their neighbors posed more of a threat than the British who offered protection from

"desperadoes made up of our own people" who would inevitably turn the countryside into a "horrible scene of rapine." It was better "to meet death honourably, from a humane enemy, than to receive it from assassins, whose tender mercies are cruel."²⁰

To this end, Sherbrooke allowed some American militiamen to retain their arms to ensure "the protection of persons and property, and for the preservation of the peace and tranquility of the country."²¹ All existing municipal laws all civil magistrates entrusted to enforce the laws in the occupied territory would remain in place and be supported by British authorities until further notice.²² Upon taking an oath of allegiance, mariners from occupied Maine received permits to resume coastal trade between communities, access the British trading port at Castine, and the inshore fisheries.²³ Sherbrooke's concessions reflect two realities. The first is a recognition that the British forces were inadequate to maintain law and order by direct force. Rather, the occupation depended on a shifting combination of dissent between Americans, the recognized inability of the United States or the Massachusetts state government to defend the region militarily, and the British desire to conciliate popular opinion to British rule. Second, with the exception of trade regulations civil government remained in the hands of American officials who cooperated with — or at least acquiesced to — British rule.

Noticeable by its absence in the Sherbrooke correspondence is any direct mention of Mount Desert Island. Officially, the island was under British control and the regulations proclaimed under Sherbrooke's authority. However, there is no record of a physical occupation. The focus for the physical occupation of Maine was Castine, and the administration of the rest of Maine east of the Penobscot was a means to that end. The town served as a hub between the British economy and the United States. In a September proclamation,



Plaque on the campus of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, memorializing the enduring effects of the 1814 campaign. *Courtesy Parks Canada*

Sherbrooke pronounced that the port was open to all British subjects and goods. A customs house was established, and a lucrative trade with American territories west of the river ensued. The volume of trade was so substantial it threatened the stability of the United States' banking system. The *Niles Register* reported at the end of December that "a number of banks to the eastward have recently stopped payment in specie; and if the trade with 'his majesty's' port of Castine, with the usual smuggling is continued, we venture to say without pretending to a spirit of prophecy, that all the rest will soon follow the example."²⁴ In return, the value of British products entering the US also increased. By January 1815, Sherbrooke estimated the value of imports destined for the US stored at Halifax to be worth over £1 million, most of which was destined for Castine.²⁵

The story of Halifax merchant John Young illustrates the success of the conciliatory efforts in eastern Maine. The consistent stream of trade between Castine and Halifax combined with the shortage of inshore escorts in the Royal Navy and the increase of privateers operating out of New England ports made the voyage between the two ports dangerous. Concerned by the increasing dangers of privateers and distressed by increasing insurance costs, the risk-adverse Young decided to transport his wares to Castine by land for safety.²⁶ The curious element in Young's letters is the absence of any hesitation to send his unprotected merchandise though occupied territory where any type of mischief could befall his wares. The most difficult element of the change to land transport was placating the customs collector in Castine, who feared it would open the door to smuggling.²⁷

The War of 1812 in Maine was a brief affair, with the two and one-half years of declared war mitigated by almost two years of unofficial peace. When hostilities did arrive, the success of the British military had the effect of exposing the internal divisions of Downeast Maine, thereby creating a degree stability under British auspices. On the island itself, the one brief encounter with the active war at Norwood Cove is an outlier in a course of events that emphasized local peace in a time of conflict.

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late 1700s and early 1800s. He earned his MA in history from Montana State University in 2008 and his BS in Secondary Education from the University of Montana-Western in 2005. He was a 2018–19 Fulbright exchange student at Dalhousie University, and is currently an adjunct professor of history at the University of Maine and the collections manager at the Mount Desert Island Historical Society.

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 6. George E. Street, *Mount Desert: A History* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin Co., 1905), 211.

7. "A Proclamation, by his Excellency Sir John Coape Sherbrooke," July 3, 1812. *Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia* (hereafter *PANS*), roll 13873. At this time there were two Canadas — Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec). The two provinces were combined into a single Canada under the Act of Union in 1840. The Maritime Provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) each had their own colonial governments, and did not politically join Canada until the British North America Act of 1867 (PEI ratified the agreement in 1873). Newfoundland was not part of Canada until 1949.
8. Sherbrooke to Liverpool, August 7, 1812, *PANS*, roll 13873.
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10. Andrew Allen to Sherbrooke, July 23, 1812, *PANS*, roll 13873.
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14. Sherbrooke to Bathhurst, August 26, 1814, *PANS*, roll 13875.
15. Sherbrooke to Liverpool, September 10, 1814, *PANS*, roll 13875.
16. Lieutenant Colonel Henry John to Sherbrooke, September 3, 1814, *PANS* 13875.
17. Officers of the Washington County Militia to Lieutenant Colonel Pilkington and Captain Hyde Parker, September 10, 1814, *PANS* 13875.
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19. George Herbert to H. [?] Addison [military secretary] (undated, likely late September 1814), *PANS* 13875.
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24. *Niles Weekly Register*, December 31, 1814.
25. Sherbrooke to Bathurst, January 6, 1815, *PANS*, roll 15876.
26. John Young to Nancy Young, December 28, 1814, *PANS*, roll 22714.
27. John Young to Nancy Young, January 2, 1815, *PANS*, roll 22714.