

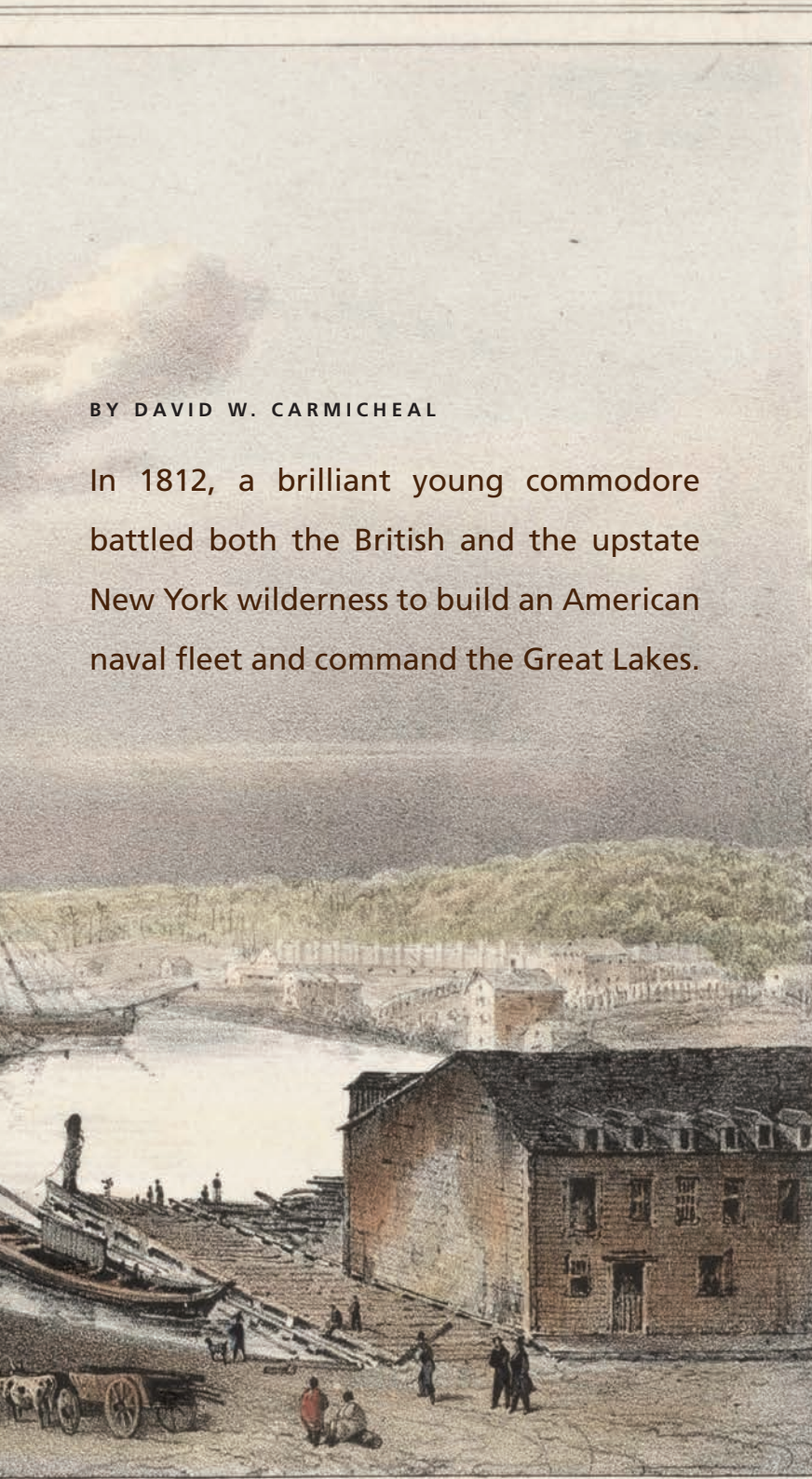
# Battle of the BROADAXES





BY DAVID W. CARMICHEAL

In 1812, a brilliant young commodore battled both the British and the upstate New York wilderness to build an American naval fleet and command the Great Lakes.



*Sackets Harbor, on Lake Ontario, was selected as the site of a naval base from which the U.S. could seize and control the Great Lakes.*

Lake Ontario would not have been anyone's first choice for staging a naval arms race. But warriors rarely choose their battlegrounds.

In 1812, the Americans dreamed of invading Canada and adding its vast territories to their expanding nation. They assumed, on the weight of very little evidence, that the Canadians would welcome them with open arms and unite to overthrow the yoke of British oppression. The Great Lakes were the linchpin of British and American military strategies, and Lake Ontario was key. It not only provided an efficient invasion route into the heart of Canada but also served as a highway between two other possible invasion routes: one to the west of the lake, along the Niagara Peninsula, and the other to the east, via the Champlain Valley.

More than the Americans, the British depended on the Great Lakes for defensive purposes; they intended to use those same routes for their own attacks. Early in the war, John Armstrong, who would later become U.S. Secretary of War, recognized how important the Great Lakes were to Canada's defense: "Resting, as the line of Canadian defence does...on navigable lakes and rivers, no time should be lost in getting a naval ascendancy on both for...the belligerent who is the first to obtain this advantage will (miracles excepted) win the game."

But by 1812 the Americans possessed just one warship on all the Great Lakes, the 16-gun *Oneida*. So the U.S. Navy posted Commodore Isaac Chauncey to Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario—just thirty-five miles across the water from Kingston, where the British intended to build their own fleet—with orders to build a naval base from which to



COURTESY OF U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY MUSEUM

Isaac Chauncey,  
ca. 1818.

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seize and control the lakes. Sackets Harbor was selected for the depth of its harbor, though it had little else to recommend it. Even with the surrounding areas included, its population was less than 1,000. It had little industry, no facilities for building warships, and no skilled workers to craft them. Yet from this inauspicious place, Isaac Chauncey meant to fend off the most formidable military power in the world.

#### A Practical Seaman

If an American fleet was to be built on the Great Lakes, there was probably no man in the Navy better qualified to build it than Chauncey. When the Navy was organized in 1798, Chauncey, who was just nineteen years old and already captaining ships for John Jacob Astor, was tapped to be one of its fifty-nine charter officers. His first assignment was a harbinger of things to come: he was ordered to build a frigate. Subsequent assignments took the young officer

to sea, where he proved his mettle. On April 10, 1803, he was in the Mediterranean battling the Barbary Pirates when an explosion rocked the fleet's flagship. Smoke filled the decks and panic spread among the crew when the fleet's commodore ordered the boats lowered. Chauncey, though only an acting captain, ignored the commodore's orders and shouted for men to follow him down into the smoking hold, since (as he said) they might just as well be blown up through one deck as through three. There they smothered the flames with wet blankets and saved the ship.

Chauncey went on to captain at least two more ships, but his superiors realized that his greatest skill was organizing ship construction. By 1812 he was both a commodore (the rank of admiral did not yet exist in the U.S. Navy) and commandant of the New York Navy Yard, "and it was generally admitted by all conversant with his professional character, that a better selection [for Sackets Harbor] could not have been made. Of tried firmness and spirit, Chauncey was one of the best practical seamen of the age..."

Yet just getting to Sackets Harbor proved challenging. It took Chauncey ten days to travel the nearly 400 circuitous miles from New York City to Sackets Harbor, even though the first leg of his journey was by steamboat. He described his trip in a letter to Navy Secretary Paul Hamilton: "I

arrived here on the 6th instant [6 October 1812] in company with His Excellency The Governor, through the worst roads I ever saw..." He was so dismayed by the condition of the roads that he sent word back to his clerk to send all shipbuilding supplies to Oswego, so they could be transported from there to Sackets Harbor by water. He was not optimistic, though, that the new route would prove much better: "I am... apprehensive that owing to the badness of the roads and the lowness of the water in the Mohawk [River] that the guns and stores will not arrive in time for us to do anything decisive against the enemy this fall."

If anything, he was understating the difficulties. Lake Ontario was girdled by nearly impenetrable forests, and the muddy roads were impassable for much of the year and ill-suited to heavily loaded supply carts even at the best of times. River transport offered an alternative to the overland route, but that journey was hardly better. Cargo had to be shipped from New York City up the Hudson River to Albany, a trip that could take several days. North of Albany, all articles had to be laboriously transferred to wagons that trundled to Schenectady, where they were manhandled onto boats once more. From there, the Mohawk River afforded passage as far as Rome, after which the route became complicated: through a canal to Wood Creek, then





to Lake Oneida, which gave access to the Oswego River—which, except for a series of challenging rapids called “the waterfalls,” ran uninterrupted to the town of Oswego if the water was high enough. From Oswego, naval stores could travel along the edge of Lake Ontario in small open boats to Sacketts Harbor, a distance of over forty miles through treacherous waters. The British patrolled Lake Ontario intent on snatching the guts of America’s ships before they could be offloaded. And the

lake itself, known for its “boisterousness,” could prove as intimidating as the enemy. One diarist reported leaving Oswego with a group of open boats and arriving at Sacketts Harbor five hours and twenty-five minutes later: “Ours the only boat that kept the lake, many were driven on shore and lost.”

**Building in the Wilderness**

To this nearly inaccessible outpost Chauncey was expected to haul “all the necessary Officers, Seamen, Marines,

cannon, ball, powder, small arms of every description, provisions, Slops, warm clothing, watch coats, surgical instruments, medicine, hospital stores, cordage, canvas, &c.” that might be required to construct and outfit ships. And that wasn’t all. His orders went on to mention “ship carpenters, caulkers, riggers, Sailmakers, &c.”—and, as Chauncey knew from his years of commanding a naval yard, “etcetera” included joiners, sawyers, blacksmiths, block and pump makers, boat

*Just eleven weeks after being ordered to Sacketts Harbor, Chauncey had built a naval fleet and secured control of Lake Ontario.*





COURTESY OF H. LEE WHITE MARITIME MUSEUM, OSWEGO, NEW YORK

*Building a naval fleet was a formidable task in an area with little industry, no facilities for building warships, and no skilled workers to craft them.*

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builders, spar makers, gun carriage makers, and armorers, along with grape and canister shot, trucks, spindles, rammers and sponges, ladles and worms, medicines, beef, pork, flour, cheese, whiskey, beans, and the thousands of other items required to house and sustain men, store supplies, erect workspaces, and build ships of war. And he was to accomplish it with "all the expedition" possible.

Chauncey was ordered to Sackets Harbor on August 31, but nearly a month passed before he boarded a steamboat for Albany. The commodore hastened to assure Secretary Hamilton that he had not been idle. On the contrary, his orders had not reached him until September 3, and in the previous twenty-two days he had "sent from this place [New York] 140 Carpenters, about 700 Sailors and Marines (every man of which I am proud to say are

volunteers) and more than 100 pieces of Cannon the greater part of which are of a large Calibre, with muskets, Shot, carriages &c &c compleat,..." Chauncey had also written Lieutenant Melancthon Woolsey, who had been ordered to Oswego in 1808 to enforce the Embargo Act, President Jefferson's attempt to stop Great Britain and France from waylaying U.S. ships by closing all U.S. ports to export shipping. Chauncey asked Woolsey for a summary of conditions on Lake Ontario and ordered him to purchase whatever additional commercial vessels he thought suitable for converting to military use.

Perhaps most importantly, Chauncey had dispatched Henry Eckford to oversee the ship carpenters. It was a prescient decision, for if any man could wrest ships from the wilderness, it was Eckford, a Scottish-Canadian immigrant and perhaps the most

celebrated master shipbuilder of his day. "As to his talents...", Chauncey wrote Secretary Hamilton, "I am bold to say, that there is not his equal in the U. States, or perhaps in the World."

By the time Chauncey and Eckford arrived at Sackets Harbor, Woolsey had patched together a fleet—vessels he had seized from smugglers or purchased from merchants and converted to military use—which boasted about forty-four guns on eight ships, though the British, with just three ships, boasted larger guns and far outweighed the Americans in the metal they could hurl in a fight. Chauncey was undeterred.

### **"We Have Now the Command..."**

On November 8, barely two months after receiving his orders, Chauncey led his motley fleet of repurposed vessels onto Lake Ontario. He pro-

ceeded to chase the *Royal George*—with twenty-two guns, the largest ship on the lake—into Kingston harbor and lob shot into her rigging, drive the *Governor Simcoe* into the same harbor and onto a reef of rocks, and effectively clear the lake of British ships. By November 13, just eleven weeks after receiving his appointment, Chauncey wrote to Secretary Hamilton, “I think I can say with great propriety that we have now the command of the lake and that we can transport Troops and Stores to any part of it without any risk of an attack from the Enemy.” He had not only intimidated the British; he had also succeeded in preventing much-needed military stores and winter clothing from reaching the British army at Fort George. In his few short weeks at Sackets Harbor, Chauncey had proven the value of controlling Lake Ontario.

It was a shot across the bow in what would become a shipyard battle, in which the object was to deter the enemy by building ever-larger ships. For two years, Chauncey and Eckford managed to keep pace with the enemy’s shipbuilding, even though the British transported naval supplies from the docks of England to the docks of Canada entirely by water, by far the most efficient method of transportation in North America—so efficient, in fact, that a U.S. Senate committee calculated that the cost of moving one ton of supplies from England to North America was equal

to the cost of moving that same ton just thirty miles over the roads of the United States. Chauncey recognized that he could not defy the British unless he first conquered the wilds of upstate New York, and in speaking of this second foe, he boasted that “I will challenge the world to produce a parallel instance—in which the same number of vessels of such dimensions have been built and fitted in the same time by the same number of workmen,” despite the fact that “this fleet has been built & fitted in the Wilderness, where there are no agents, and Chandlers shops and foundries &c &c to supply our wants but every thing is to be created.”

Eventually the naval arms race outweighed all other naval efforts by both the U.S. and Britain. By late 1814, the fleets on, or under construction at, Lake Ontario totaled over 1,100 guns, with a combined weight of metal of nearly 37,000 pounds—an increase in guns and metal since 1812 of 2000% and 2600% respectively. There were also 3,250 American officers and men on the Great Lakes, compared to just 450 on the Atlantic.

Unfortunately for Chauncey, a dogged arms race could never produce the fireworks of the Atlantic commanders, and his success, as James Fenimore Cooper wrote, “was not...of the brilliant and attractive nature that is the most apt to extort popular

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The most vivid accounts of the War of 1812 were produced by the active participants. *Letters received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains, USNA*, preserved in the National Archives, provide many details about the conduct of the war and life on the front lines. Captains wrote to recount battles, brag about victories and explain away defeats, request supplies, gossip about other captains, complain about civilians, and question the conduct of the war. The government collected other documents related to the war and published them later as *Official Accounts, in detail, of all the battles fought by sea and land, between the navy and army of the United States, and the navy and army of Great Britain during the years 1812, 13,*

*14, and 15*. Similar documentary collections were published by the Canadians and the British.

Newspapers are also important primary sources related to the war, particularly *The Weekly Register* (also known as the *Niles Weekly Register*), a Baltimore-based newspaper that circulated nationally and was widely read.

The *Transactions of the Jefferson County New York Historical Society* are especially valuable sources of reminiscences of the war related to Sackets Harbor. Though these must be taken with a grain of salt, they often provide telling and vivid details that supplement more academic accounts of historical events.

All of the quotations in this article come from these sources.

admiration.” But Chauncey’s herculean efforts hamstrung a major component of the enemy’s offensive strategy while consuming British men, matériel, and money that might have been applied elsewhere with fatal results to the United States. Against all odds, Isaac Chauncey created an American fleet, and in the New York wilderness he won a crucial battle, not of broadsides but of broadaxes. ■