

The 1812 Streets of Cambridgeport

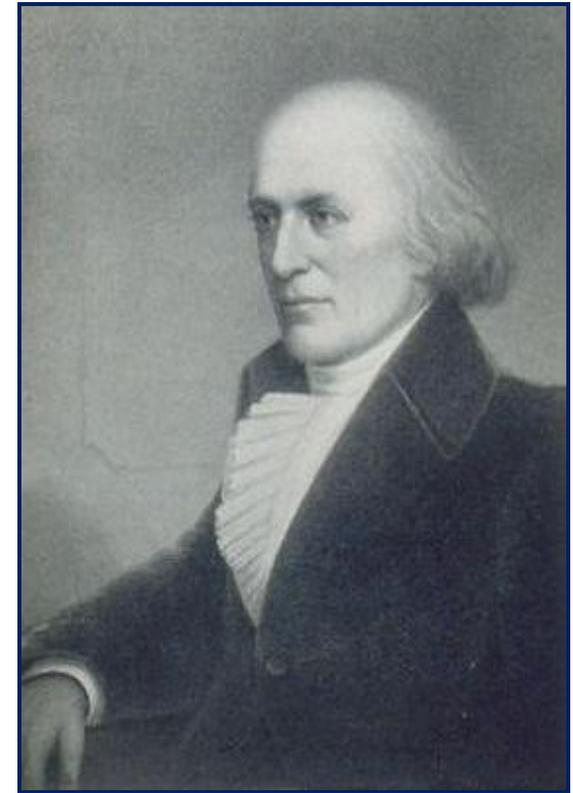
The Last Battle of the Revolution

Less than a quarter of a century after the close of the American Revolution, Great Britain and the United States were again in conflict.

Britain and her allies were engaged in a long war with Napoleonic France. The shipping-related industries of the neutral United States benefited hugely, conducting trade with both sides. Hundreds of ships, built in yards on America's Atlantic coast and manned by American sailors, carried goods, including foodstuffs and raw materials, to Europe and the West Indies. Merchants and farmers alike reaped the benefits.

In Cambridge, men made plans to profit from this brisk trade. "[T]he soaring hopes of expansionist-minded promoters and speculators in Cambridge were based solidly on the assumption that the economic future of Cambridge rested on its potential as a shipping center." The very name, Cambridgeport, reflected "the expectation that several miles of waterfront could be developed into a port with an intricate system of canals." In January 1805, Congress designated Cambridge as a "port of delivery" and "canal dredging began [and] prices of dock lots soared." [1]

*Judge Francis Dana, a lawyer, diplomat,
and Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court,
was one of the primary investors in the development of Cambridgeport.
He and his large family lived in a handsome mansion on what is now Dana Hill.
Dana lost heavily when Jefferson declared an embargo in 1807.*



Britain and France objected to America's commercial relationship with their respective enemies and took steps to curtail trade with the United States. Napoleon excluded from trade any and all goods cleared through British ports. Great Britain responded by ordering all neutral shipping intended for France first to pass through a British port. American merchant ships thus became subject to capture by both nations.

On the high seas, British warships, desperately in need of men, impressed sailors from American merchant ships into the Royal Navy. English commanders claimed to seek only deserters, but seized both native-born and naturalized Americans.

Outraged, the United States insisted that all such measures violated U.S. sovereignty and international neutrality laws.

In 1807, President Thomas Jefferson responded to these offenses with economic sanctions meant to impose hardships on the warring nations of Europe and to garner respect for American neutrality. The Embargo Act prohibited American ships from all foreign trade and closed American ports to British ships; the president believed Europe would feel the effects within the year.



Political cartoon, 1807

However, the embargo—“ograbme” to its many opponents—was difficult to enforce and economically devastating for the United States. Ships rotted at the docks in Boston and other ports; in agricultural areas farmers and planters suffered, unable to sell their goods on the international market. The impact on Cambridgeport—an official “port of delivery”—was devastating.

Meanwhile, in the Northwest Territory, Britain armed and supported the Native American tribes fighting to maintain a buffer against the expanding new nation. (The land, which had been ceded by Britain at the end of the Revolution, now comprises the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin.)

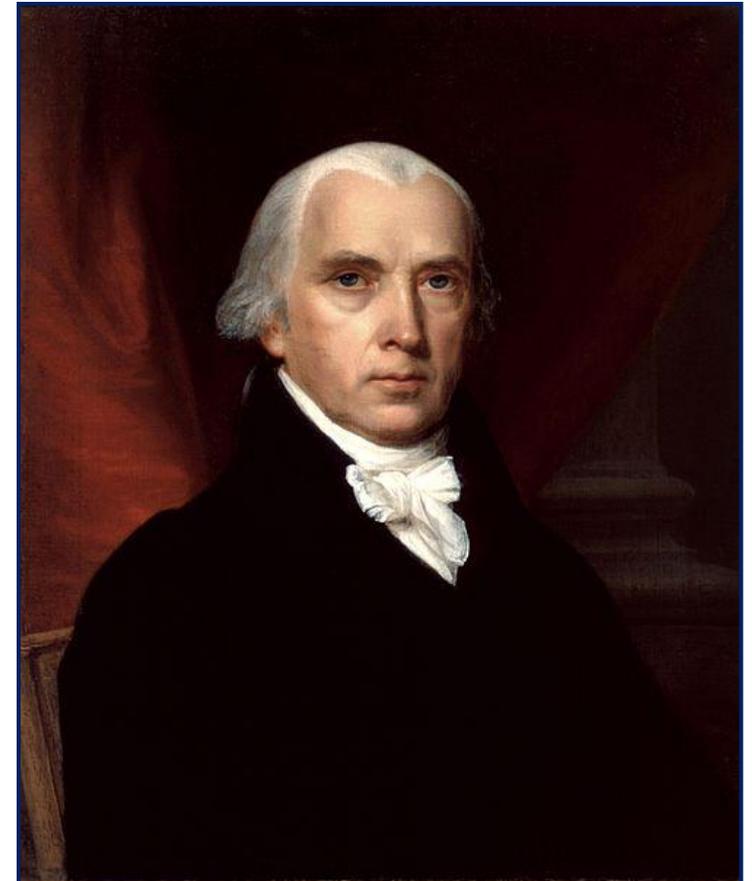
James Madison became president in 1808 and repealed the Embargo Act in early 1809. International trade resumed, except with Great Britain and France, and prosperity began to return. However, Cambridgeport never achieved its earlier aspirations.

For the next three years, the Madison administration vainly pursued diplomatic solutions while hoping for an end to the war in Europe. British affronts continued, however, and, finally, Madison bowed to the war hawks in Congress. In his war message to legislature on June 1, 1812, the President stated that British policy was "a series of hostile acts to the US as an independent and neutral nation" and included "incursions into American territorial waters, impressment of American seamen, confiscations of American ships and property, paper blockades, . . . and alleged incitements of Indians in the Northwest Territories." [2] War was declared on June 18.

Madison later admitted that America had been unprepared for war: the country had a small army and navy, both ill-equipped, and its coastline and Western border were unguarded.

Nine months into the war, he wrote "it was certain that effective preparations would not take place, whilst the question of war was undecided." [3]

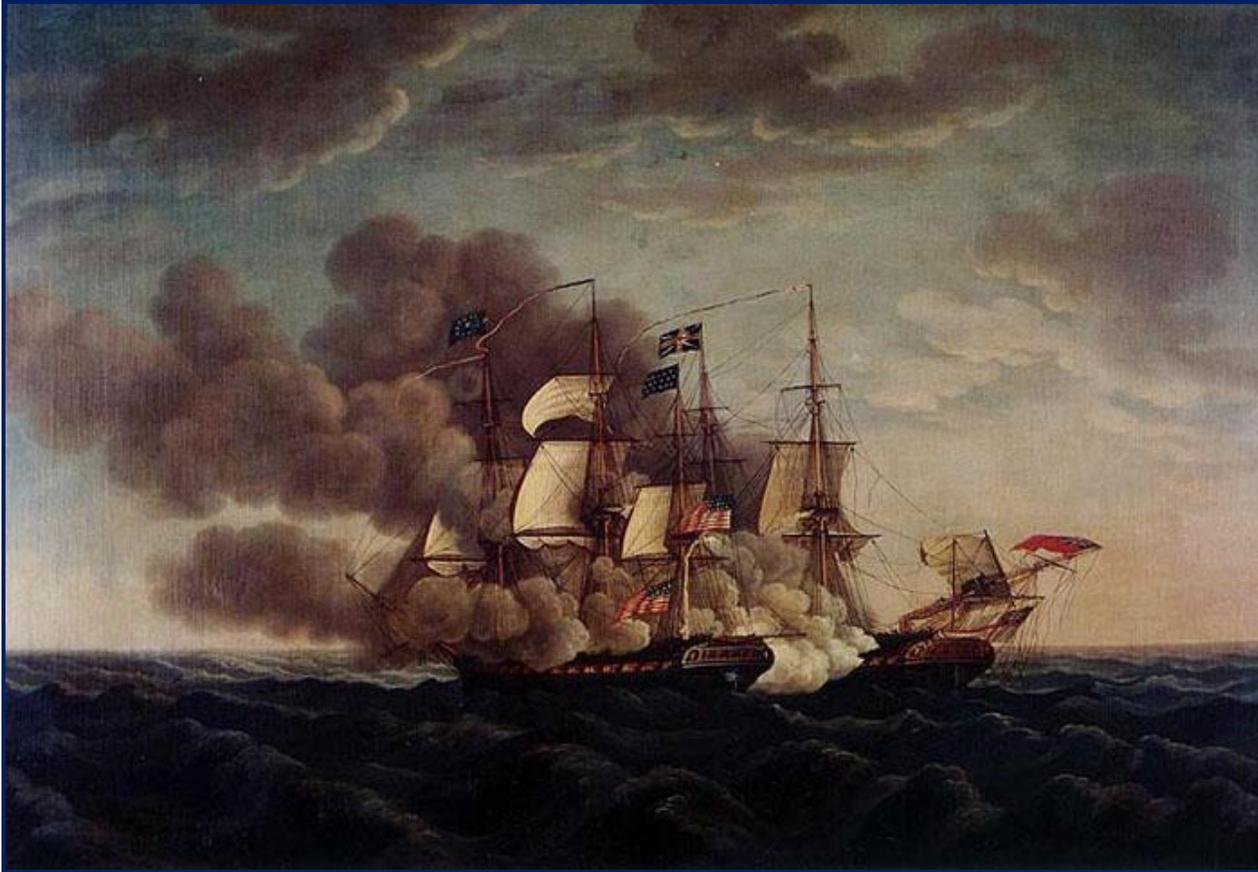
*James Madison (1816) by John Vanderlyn
White House Historical Association*



The War of 1812, with its resulting blockades, was economically disastrous for Cambridge and politically unpopular in the Federalist strongholds of New England. The governor of Massachusetts, Caleb Strong, evoked an old New England tradition when he declared a public fast to atone for a war "against the nation from which we are descended, and which for many generations has been the bulwark of the religion we profess." [4] In its 1814 commencement, Harvard conferred honorary degrees on four men who had expressed strong opinions against the war, including Judge Isaac Parker, who had advised Governor Strong to withhold the state's militia from service.

The war was fought on three fronts, involving both naval and land forces: at sea and along the Atlantic coast, in the Northwest Territory and on the Great Lakes, and on the southern coast.

In the Atlantic, American and British warships engaged in fierce battle, often single-ship duels. On August 19, 1812, the USS *Constitution* defeated the HMS *Guerriere* south of Halifax, Nova Scotia, winning the nickname, "Old Ironsides."



*USS Constitution vs.
HMS Guerriere
by Michel Felice Corne (1752-1845).
National Archives*

Built in Boston and launched in 1797, Constitution was one of the original six frigates authorized in 1794, and was a heavy 44-gun ship. At the time of the engagement, Constitution was commanded by Captain Isaac Hull; his ship "pounded [Guerriere] to a wreck in an action that electrified the Nation and demonstrated that the small U.S. Navy was a worthy and dangerous opponent for Britain's otherwise overwhelming maritime might."
[5]



*Captain Isaac Hull. Stipple engraving by D. Edwin after Gilbert Stuart portrait, for the "Analectic Magazine."
U. S. Naval Historical Center Photograph*

Squadrons of British warships kept most American frigates bottled up in northern harbors, but American privateers easily evaded the blockade and wreaked havoc on British shipping all across the Atlantic. British soldiers raided towns and ports up and down the coast; in August 1814, they attacked Washington, D.C., and burned the White House, the Capitol (including the fledgling Library of Congress housed there), and other public buildings.

In the Northwest Territory, Americans battled the united, British-allied Indian tribes, ultimately defeating them. Along the border with Canada, Britain and the United States fought numerous inconclusive battles, including reciprocal border invasions. Finally, in September 1813, Captain Oliver Hazard Perry won a decisive victory at the Battle of Lake Erie, ensuring American control of the lake for the rest of the war and allowing the Americans to reoccupy Detroit.

Late in the war, fighting broke out along the Gulf Coast. At the end of 1814, Andrew Jackson responded to reports that the British were preparing for a large-scale invasion and fortified New Orleans. There, in early January 1815, Jackson and his motley force of soldiers, militiamen, and pirates roundly defeated eight thousand British regulars—before news reached the United States that the treaty ending the war had been signed.

In one sense, “Mr. Madison’s war” had been inconclusive: all occupied territory was returned, and the boundary between Canada and the United States before the war was restored. The provocations that had led to war—the impressment of sailors and British trade impediments—had largely ceased and were not, by mutual agreement, mentioned in the treaty.

But in other ways the War of 1812 was the final stage in America’s struggle for independence and created important and lasting change. Funding and support increased for a standing army and for improved coastal defenses. Security improved on the western frontier as it moved ever westward. The power of the Indian nations in the Northwest Territory was “decisively broken, opening the way for white settlement across a broad front.” [6] The British blockade of the Atlantic coast had created a shortage of cotton cloth in the United States—which led to the development of the American cotton industry.

Perhaps most important, the war forced European countries, particularly Great Britain and France, to acknowledge and affirm America as an independent sovereign nation. In turn, Americans discovered their own sense of pride and patriotism and pride.

The story of Cambridgeport and its 1812 streets is a part of this history.

The 1812 Streets of Cambridgeport

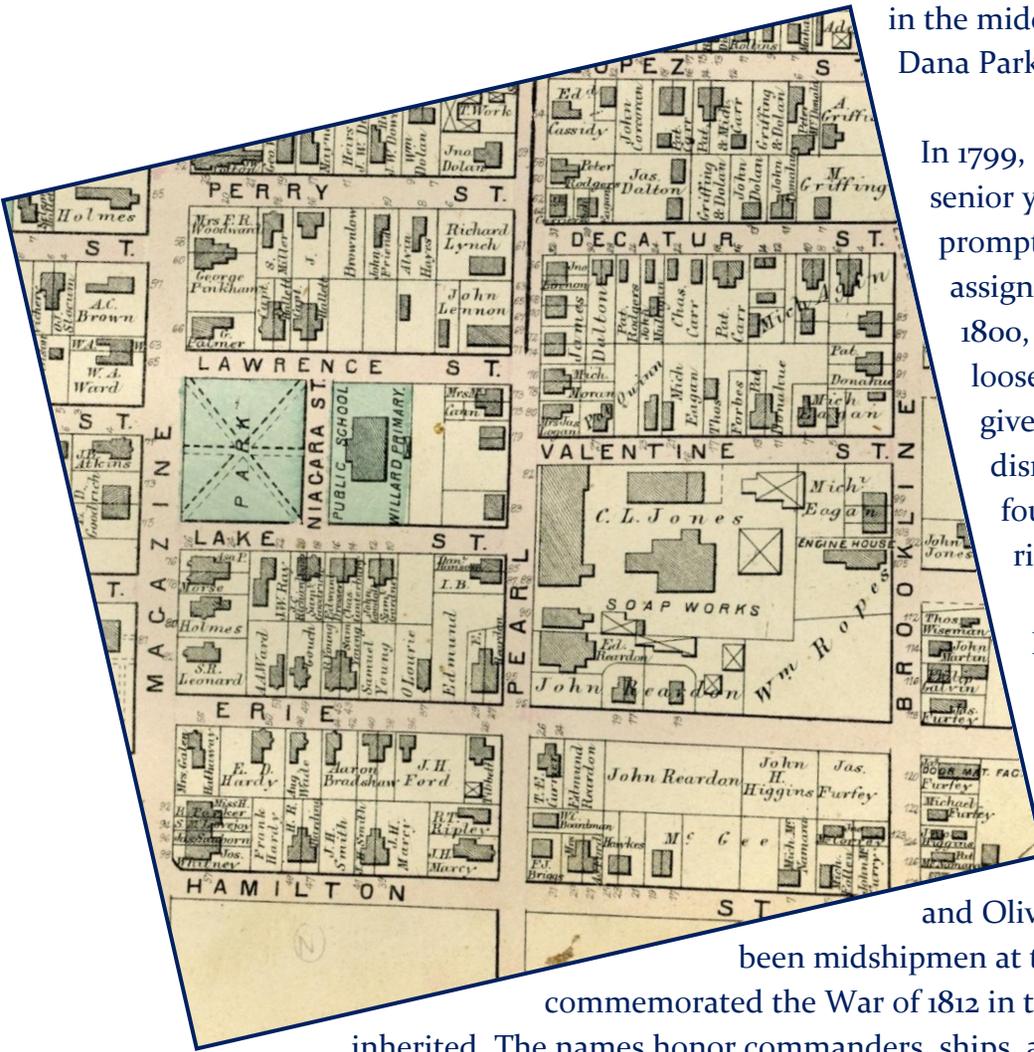
Judge Francis Dana died on April 25, 1811. The family had lost heavily through speculation in docks and wharves in Cambridgeport, and much of the Dana property had to be sold off. The remaining property was divided among the children of Dana and his wife, Elizabeth (Ellery). Edmund Trowbridge Dana (1779-1859), the eldest of the Dana boys, inherited land in the middle of the Cambridgeport neighborhood (including the future Dana Park).

In 1799, Edmund was dismissed from Harvard at midwinter of his senior year (for “absence from prayers,” among other offenses [7]). He promptly joined the Navy, was appointed a midshipman, and assigned to the frigate *Congress*. On her maiden voyage in January 1800, *Congress* ran into a heavy gale. The rigging may have loosened during warmer weather, and the main topmast began to give way. Before long, the three-masted ship was completely dismasted, leaving the frigate wallowing in the heavy seas. Some four weeks later, she limped into Chesapeake Bay under a jury rig.

Before *Congress* was ready for sea again, Dana had resigned from the Navy, recalling later he had been seasick every day.

In spite of such an unhappy voyage, Dana appears to have cherished the memory of his brief military career and harbored a fondness for the Navy. He never forgot that he and Oliver Hazard Perry, the victor at the Battle of Lake Erie, had been midshipmen at the same time (although they served on different ships). Dana commemorated the War of 1812 in the names he gave to the ladder of cross streets on the land he inherited. The names honor commanders, ships, and a decisive naval battle.

G. M. Hopkins, 1873 Atlas of the City of Cambridge (detail)
Cambridge Historical Commission



Hamilton Street

Named for Paul Hamilton, Secretary of the Navy

Unlike the other 1812 streets, whose sources are certain, there are several contenders for the origin of Hamilton Street.



The most likely honoree is Paul Hamilton of South Carolina, who served in numerous state offices (he was governor there from 1804-1807) before becoming President Madison's Secretary of the Navy in 1809. "He was constantly frustrated by the lack of funds from Washington for the construction of new battleships and the repair of old ones. Even as the war approached, his petitions for new warships were denied in Congress." [8] Hamilton pursued innovative tactics: he "funded Robert Fulton's experiments with torpedoes and tried to improve harbor defenses by building blockships [ships deliberately sunk to prevent a waterway from being used] and floating batteries. . . . [Early in the war] he divided his small fleet into three divisions and sent them to sea to capture and destroy British shipping, forcing the British to concentrate their fleet and allow American merchant ships at sea to escape capture." [9]

Despite scathing attacks in Congress, the secretary's policies were instrumental in the success of the navy during the early years of the war, including victories on Lakes Erie and Ontario. However, Hamilton resigned his post in December 1812 and returned home to South Carolina, where he died in 1816.

Another, but less probable contender, is Hamilton's son, Archibald. Young Hamilton was serving under Stephen Decatur on *United States* when she took *Macedonian* and was chosen to deliver the captured flag to the White House. He was killed in action on Decatur's *President* during the battle off Sandy Hook.

Paul Hamilton

By G. B. Matthews

Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

Perry Street

Named for Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry

Oliver Hazard Perry was born in Rhode Island in August 1785 and, like his father, three brothers, and son (Oliver Jr.), was a career naval officer. Perry was warranted a midshipman on April 7, 1799, and served during the Quasi-War with France (an undeclared naval war involving U.S. trade with Great Britain) and in the wars against the Barbary pirates.

Perry reported to Lake Erie in March 1813, with orders to build a fleet to gain control of the lake. The decisive action came on September 10, 1813. Perry named his flagship

Lawrence in honor of Captain James Lawrence, who had been killed in a single-ship duel off Boston just three months before. Perry's battle flag carried Lawrence's dying words: "Don't give up the ship." After *Lawrence* was badly damaged, Perry transferred his flag to *Niagara* and gained the decisive victory. He reported: "We have met the enemy, and he is ours."

In 1819 Perry led a diplomatic mission to the new government of Venezuela. He was stricken with yellow fever at the mouth of the Orinoco River and died on August 23, 1819.



The Hero of Lake Erie, Oliver Hazard Perry
After John Wesley Jarvis
U.S. Naval Academy Museum Collection

Lawrence Street

Named for Oliver Hazard Perry's first flagship during the Battle of Lake Erie



James Lawrence was the 31-year-old captain of the USS *Chesapeake*. At 5:30 PM on June 1, 1813, Lawrence engaged the HMS *Shannon* under Captain Philip Broke in a fierce sea battle off Boston. The fight lasted a mere 15 minutes. Lawrence was shot while on deck directing the action. Carried below, the dying commander urged his men to “fire faster and to fight the ship ‘til she sinks, never strike, let the colors wave while I live.” The victory went to the Royal Navy, which, “to this day . . . considers the action the finest duel of the war.”

The two ships appeared to be evenly matched in crew size and number of guns. However, Shannon's crew “was experienced with its ship and the officers and understood both.” Lawrence had been in command of Chesapeake less than two weeks, had had difficulty filling his crew, and his officers were “ordinary members of the service” temporarily elevated in rank. Chesapeake sailed into battle flying three American flags and “a large white banner declaring FREE TRADE AND SAILORS RIGHTS.” [10]

Captain James Lawrence

J. Herring, after Gilbert Stuart

U.S. Naval Academy Museum Collection, Gift of Mrs. Albert Gleaves, 1938

Niagara Street

Named for Perry's second flagship

After *Lawrence* was badly damaged, Perry transferred his command to the *Niagara*. Both 20-gun brigs, *Lawrence* and *Niagara* had been built in Erie, Pennsylvania, under Perry's supervision specifically for wartime service on the Great Lakes.

Niagara Street was discontinued in 1924 to allow for the enlargement of Dana Park.



A replica of Niagara fires her cannon on

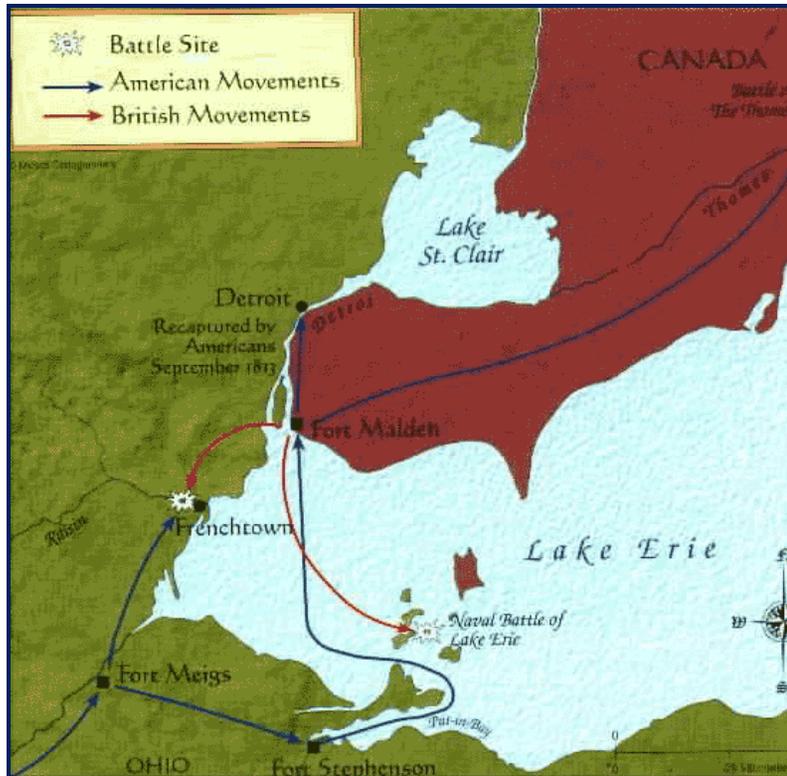
Put-in-Bay, Lake Erie, June 2009

Photo by Lance Woodworth

Brooks Street

Named for Lieutenant John Brooks

Brooks Street—the original name of Lawrence Street—was named for John Brooks, born in 1783, the son of Massachusetts governor (and former Revolutionary War general) John Brooks. Young Brooks had brilliant prospects. He graduated from Harvard, studied medicine, and received a lieutenant's commission in the Marine Corps. “His early career . . . [included] a



stint with the Marine guard at Boston and command of the detail on USS *Wasp*.” [11] A 19th-century historian described him as “probably unsurpassed by no other officer in the Navy for manly beauty, polished manners, and elegant appearance.” [12]

Then a “fellow officer’s accusation resulted in Brooks’ arrest for cheating at cards, and in December 1812 he appeared before a court-martial board,” which found him guilty. When that sentence was overturned by a higher authority, Brooks was left “in a confusing situation . . . and out of favor with his superiors.” [13]

The difficulty was resolved in the spring of 1813 when Brooks was dispatched from Washington, D.C., to recruit a Marine detachment for Oliver Hazard Perry’s flagship, *Lawrence*. Brooks trawled for men through Maryland and Pennsylvania without much success and joined the commander at Erie, Pennsylvania, where Perry’s small fleet was being built. He enlisted more men from the Pennsylvania Militia guarding the camp. Still, Brooks’s Marine contingent was not at full strength, and

Perry’s crews were undermanned. Not until August did both men have enough volunteers to allow the Americans to sail the lake with assurance.

Map courtesy <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2824.html>

Brooks Street

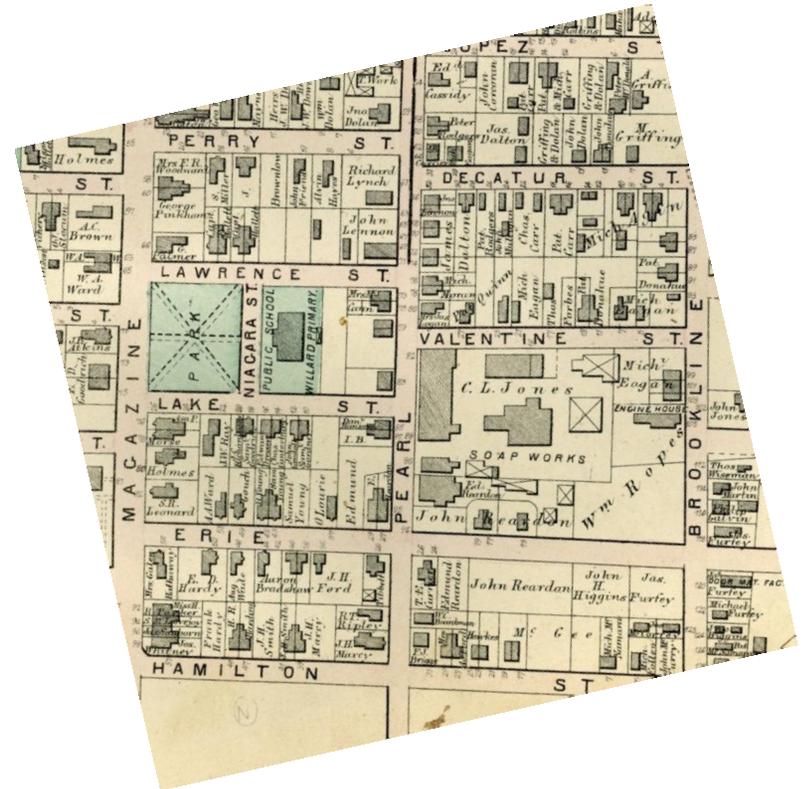
The decisive battle for control of Lake Erie came on September 10, 1813. An hour into the fight *Lawrence* became isolated from the rest of the fleet and was attacked by three British ships. In the bloody melee, Marine Lt. Brooks was felled by a solid shot that shattered his hip and pelvis; he was carried below and died an hour later.

Curiously the street name was changed in 1873, apparently to accommodate Luke Brooks (probably *not* a descendant of Lt. Brooks's family). Mr. Brooks owned property off Main Street, on what was called Holly Street. On the same day that Holly Street became Brooks Street, the original Brooks Street became Lawrence Street. (Mr. Brooks's Brooks Street was closed in 1937 when Newtowne Court was built.)

Lake Street and Erie Street

In the original naming plan, Lake and Erie streets were laid out as parallel streets, one block apart, in a clear reference to the 1813 battle.

That connection was lost after World War II, when Lake Street was renamed for Marine Corporal William McTernan, who was killed in action during the invasion of Peleliu Island in the Pacific in September 1944.



G. M. Hopkins, 1873 Atlas of the City of Cambridge (detail)
Cambridge Historical Commission

Decatur Street

Named for Captain Stephen Decatur

Stephen Decatur was born in 1779 on the eastern shore of Maryland. During the Revolution, his father, a merchant captain, served in the fledgling U.S. Navy. In 1798, Stephen, then 19, joined the Navy as a midshipman. In 1804, at only 25, he was made captain, the youngest man ever promoted to the rank.



By the time war came in 1812, Decatur had already won a reputation for boldness. In October 1803, during the first Barbary War, the USS *Philadelphia*, commanded by William Bainbridge, ran aground on an uncharted reef near Tripoli. Unable to refloat the ship, Bainbridge surrendered to the attacking corsairs, and his entire crew was captured and imprisoned. The pirates managed to free *Philadelphia* and sailed her into Tripoli Harbor, intending to use her on their own raids.

On the evening of February 16, 1804, Stephen Decatur and a crew of eighty volunteers sailed *Intrepid* (disguised to look like a local merchant ship) into the harbor and, with a combination of guile and boldness, maneuvered close enough to *Philadelphia* to board. The Americans killed many of the Tripolitan defenders and forced the rest to flee. Decatur and his men placed charges around the ship, set her ablaze, and made their escape. None of Decatur's men were lost.

In 1810 Decatur was given command of the 54-gun frigate *United States*. In October 1812 he defeated the British frigate *Macedonian* and made a triumphant entry into New York Harbor, escorting his prize. Unfortunately, *United States* was confined to the harbor for the rest of the war by the British blockade.

Burning of the Frigate *Philadelphia* in the Harbor of Tripoli, February 16, 1804

By Edward Moran, 1897

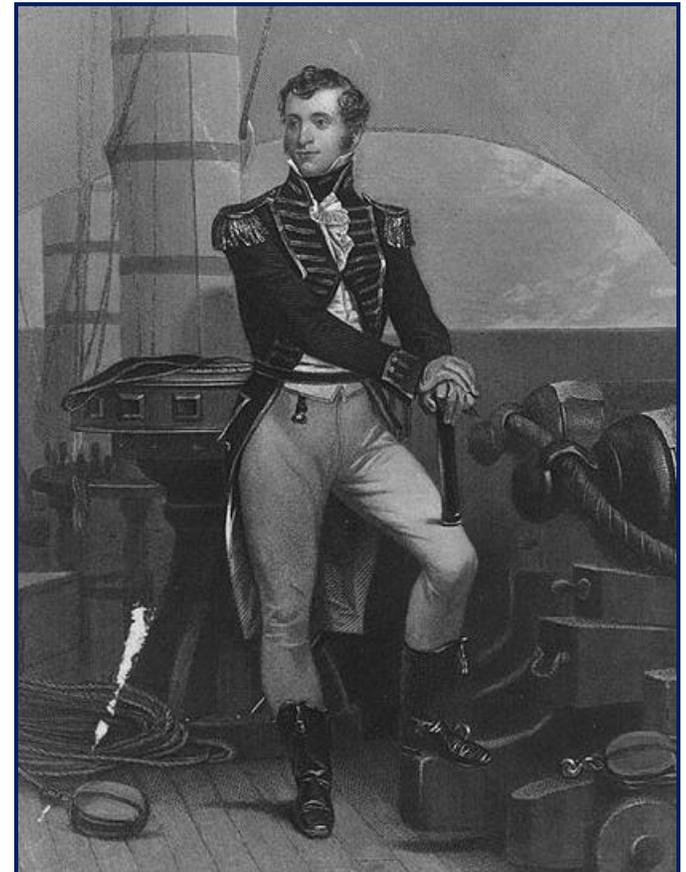
U.S. Naval Academy Museum Collection

Decatur Street

In January 1815—unaware that a peace treaty had been signed—the young captain tried to run the blockade in *President* but was engaged off Sandy Hook by a British squadron. After a fierce engagement during which *President* lost a quarter of her crew and was hemmed in by three enemy frigates, Decatur surrendered and was made a prisoner. Taken to Bermuda, he was eventually paroled to New London, Connecticut.

In 1820 Decatur was killed in a duel with an old nemesis. In 1807 Decatur had served on the court martial board that found Commodore James Barron guilty of “unpreparedness” in the loss of his ship and barred him from command for five years. Barron spent the next years abroad; not until around 1818 did he seek reinstatement in the navy. The request was met with much criticism from fellow officers, and Decatur was one of the most outspoken. Barron accused him of maligning him and of deliberately damaging his career. The men faced off on March 20, 1820, in Bladensburg, Maryland. Both were shot. Decatur died of his wounds. Barron recovered and lived until 1851.

Decatur was not one of Edmund Trowbridge Dana’s original street names. The street began as a continuation of Perry Street, known as East Perry Street. After its alignment was slightly changed in 1873, it became Decatur Street.



Stephen Decatur
Engraved by G. R. Hall (pub. 1858)
After a painting by Alonzo Chappel
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

Endnotes

- 1 Garrett, Wendell D. "The Topographical Development of Cambridge, 1793-1896." Cambridge Historical Society, *Proceedings*, vol. 39 (110-111)
- 2 Toll, 331.
- 3 Toll, 329. Walter Borneman quotes from Henry Adams in Adams's history of the early United States: "Many nations have gone to war in pure gayety of spirit, but perhaps the United States were first to force themselves into a war they dreaded, in the hope that the war itself might create the spirit they lacked." (480)
- 4 Quoted in *Cambridgeport and Its 1812 Streets* (7)
- 5 Naval History & Heritage Command. <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/events/war1812/atsea/con-guer.htm>
- 6 National Park Service, "The Unfinished Revolution. The War of 1812: American Independence Confirmed." http://www.nps.gov/revwar/unfinished_revolution/war_of_1812.html
- 7 Quoted in *Cambridgeport and Its 1812 Streets* (12)
- 8 *The War of 1812, People and Stories: Paul Hamilton*. <http://www.galafilm.com/1812/e/people/hamilton.html>
- 9 *GlobalSecurity.org: Paul Hamilton*. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/navy/ddg-60.htm>
- 10 Ellis, 122-125.
- 11 Altoff, Gerard T. "War of 1812: Leathernecks on Lake Erie." Originally published November 1988 in *Leatherneck, Magazine of the Marines*. <http://www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/war-1812-leathernecks-lake-erie>

12 Parsons, Usher. *Brief Sketches of the Officers Who Were in the Battle of Lake Erie*. 1862.

13 Altoff.

Bibliography

Borneman, Walter. *1812: The War that Forged a Nation*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

Budiansky, Stephen. *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815*. New York: Knopf, 2010

Ellis, James. *A Ruinous and Unhappy War: New England and the War of 1812*. New York: Algora Publishing, 2009.

Cambridge Historical Society & Cambridge Historical Commission. *Cambridgeport & Its 1812 Street*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Historical Society, 2012.

Latimer, Jon. *1812: War with America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 2009.

Stagg, J. C. A. *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Taylor, Alan. *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels & Indian Allies*. New York: Knopf, 2010.

Toll, Ian M. *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U. S. Navy*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.