

The 1812 Streets of Cambridgeport

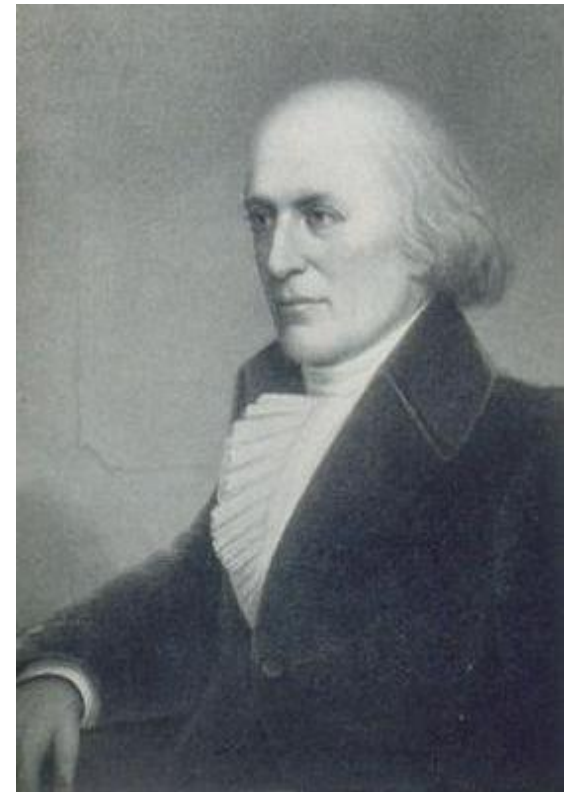
The Last Battle of the Revolution

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 profits.

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 to pass first 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.)

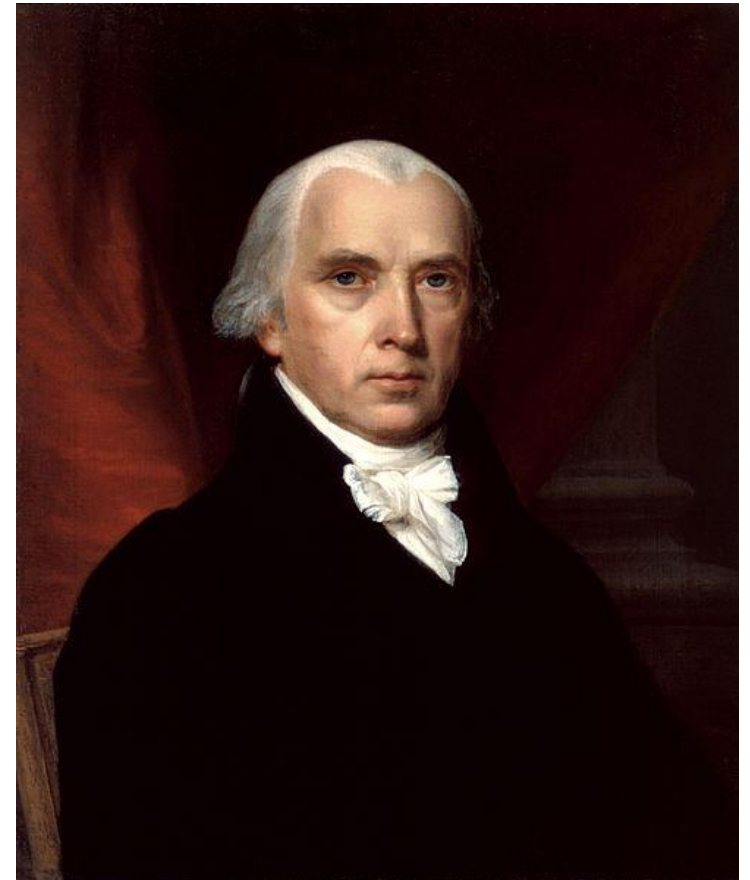
James Madison became president in 1808 and repealed the Embargo Act in early 1809. International trade resumed, except with Great Britain and France, and prosperity began to return. However, Cambridgeport never achieved its earlier aspirations.

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.

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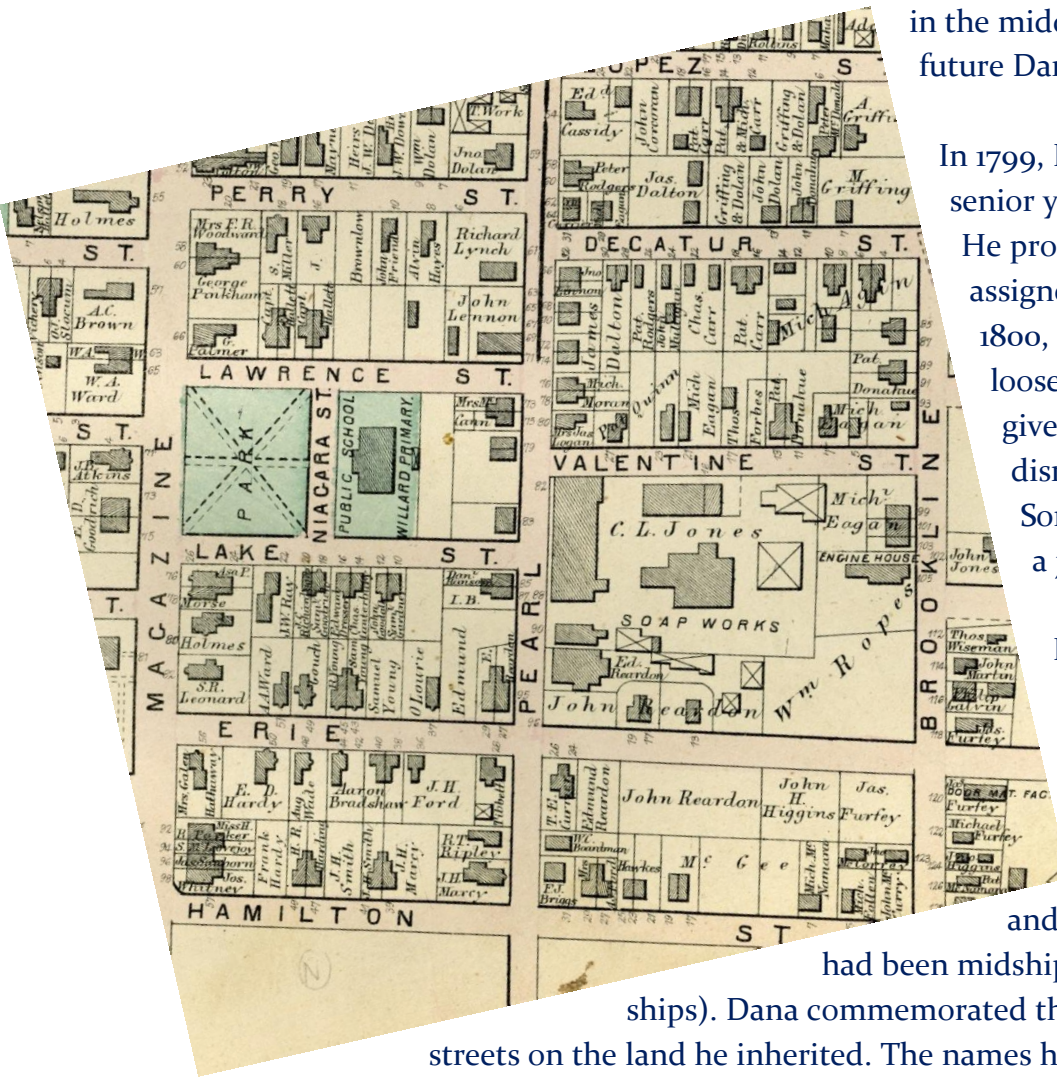
Judge Francis Dana died on April 25, 1811. The family had lost heavily through speculation in docks and wharves in Cambridgeport, and much of the Dana property had to be sold off. The remaining property was divided among the children of Dana and his wife, Elizabeth (Ellery). Edmund Trowbridge Dana (1779-1859),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



Perry Street

Named for Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry

Victor at the Battle of Lake Erie

Oliver Hazard Perry was born in Rhode Island in 1785 and, like his father, three brothers, and son (Oliver Jr.), was a career naval officer.



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 and 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. {1}

The Hero of Lake Erie, Oliver Hazard Perry
(1839)

After John Wesley Jarvis
U.S. Naval Academy Museum Collection

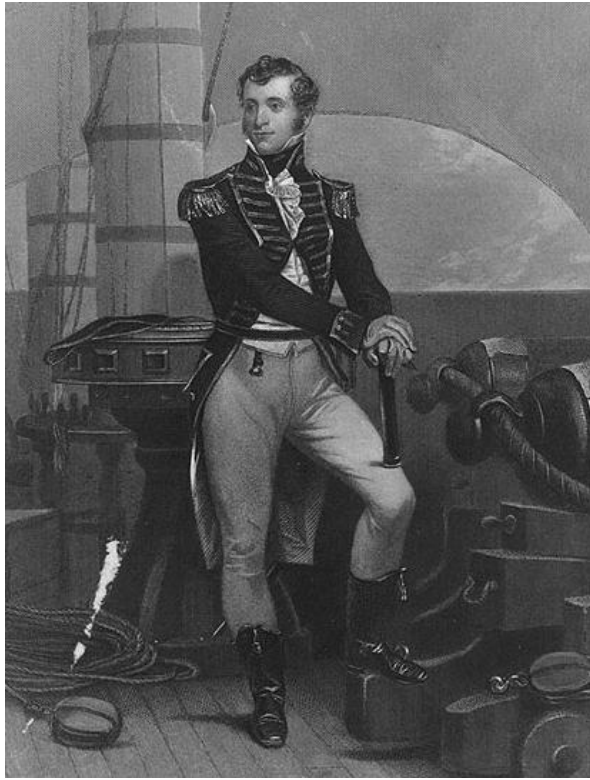


Decatur Street

Named for Commodore Stephen Decatur

Intelligent, bold & brave

Stephen Decatur was born in 1799 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.



Stephen Decatur

Engraving by G. R. Hall (pub. 1858),
after a painting by Alonzo Chappel
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

By the time war came in 1812, Decatur already had 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 he 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. For the rest of the war, Decatur was trapped there by the British blockade. In January 1815—unaware that a peace treaty had been signed—he tried to run the blockade in the frigate *President* but was trapped off Sandy Hook by a British squadron and forced to surrender. Decatur was killed in a duel in 1820.

Decatur was not one of 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.

Brooks Street

Named for Lieutenant John Brooks

Handsome, mannerly, elegant

Brooks Street—the original name of Lawrence Street—was named for Lieutenant John Brooks, born in 1783, the son of Massachusetts governor (and former Revolutionary War general) John Brooks. “After graduating from Harvard, Brooks studied medicine before receiving a lieutenant's commission in the Marine Corps on October 1, 1807. His early career was everything that could be asked for, including a stint with the Marine guard at Boston and command of the detail on USS *Wasp*.” [8] He was described by a 19th-century historian as “probably unsurpassed by no other officer in the Navy for manly beauty, polished manners, and elegant appearance.” [9]

Then “Brooks' fortunes and career potential took a sudden downturn. A fellow officer's accusation resulted in Brooks' arrest for cheating at cards, and in December 1812 he appeared before a court-martial board. A guilty verdict was handed down, but higher authority overturned the sentence and a confusing situation ensued. Brooks found himself in limbo [and] out of favor with his superiors . . .” [10]

The solution came in the spring of 1813 when Brooks was dispatched from Washington, D. C., to recruit a Marine guard detachment for Oliver Hazard Perry's flagship, *Lawrence*. Brooks trawled for men through Maryland and Pennsylvania without much success. He joined the commander at Erie, Pennsylvania, where Perry's small fleet was being built, and enlisted a few more men from the Pennsylvania Militia guarding the camp. Neither Brooks' Marine contingent, nor Perry's ships were sufficiently staffed; it was not until August that both men had enough volunteers to sail the lake with assurance. John Brooks was mortally wounded during the action in September 1813.

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

Lawrence Street

First flagship of Oliver Hazard Perry during the Battle of Lake Erie

Perry named his flagship for Captain James Lawrence, who had been killed in a single-ship duel off Boston in early 1813; Perry's battle flag carried Lawrence's dying words, "Don't Give Up the Ship."

Niagara Street

Perry's second flagship during the Battle of Lake Erie

After *Lawrence* was badly damaged, Perry transferred his command to *Niagara*.

Niagara Street was discontinued in 1924 to allow for the enlargement of Dana Park. In Dana's original 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.

Hamilton Street

Named for Paul Hamilton

Secretary of the Navy, May 15, 1809-December 31, 1812



Paul Hamilton, portrait by G. B. Matthews
Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
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 Gerard T. Altoff. "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>
- 9 Usher Parsons. *Brief Sketches of the Officers Who Were in the Battle of Lake Erie*. 1862.
- 10 Altoff

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