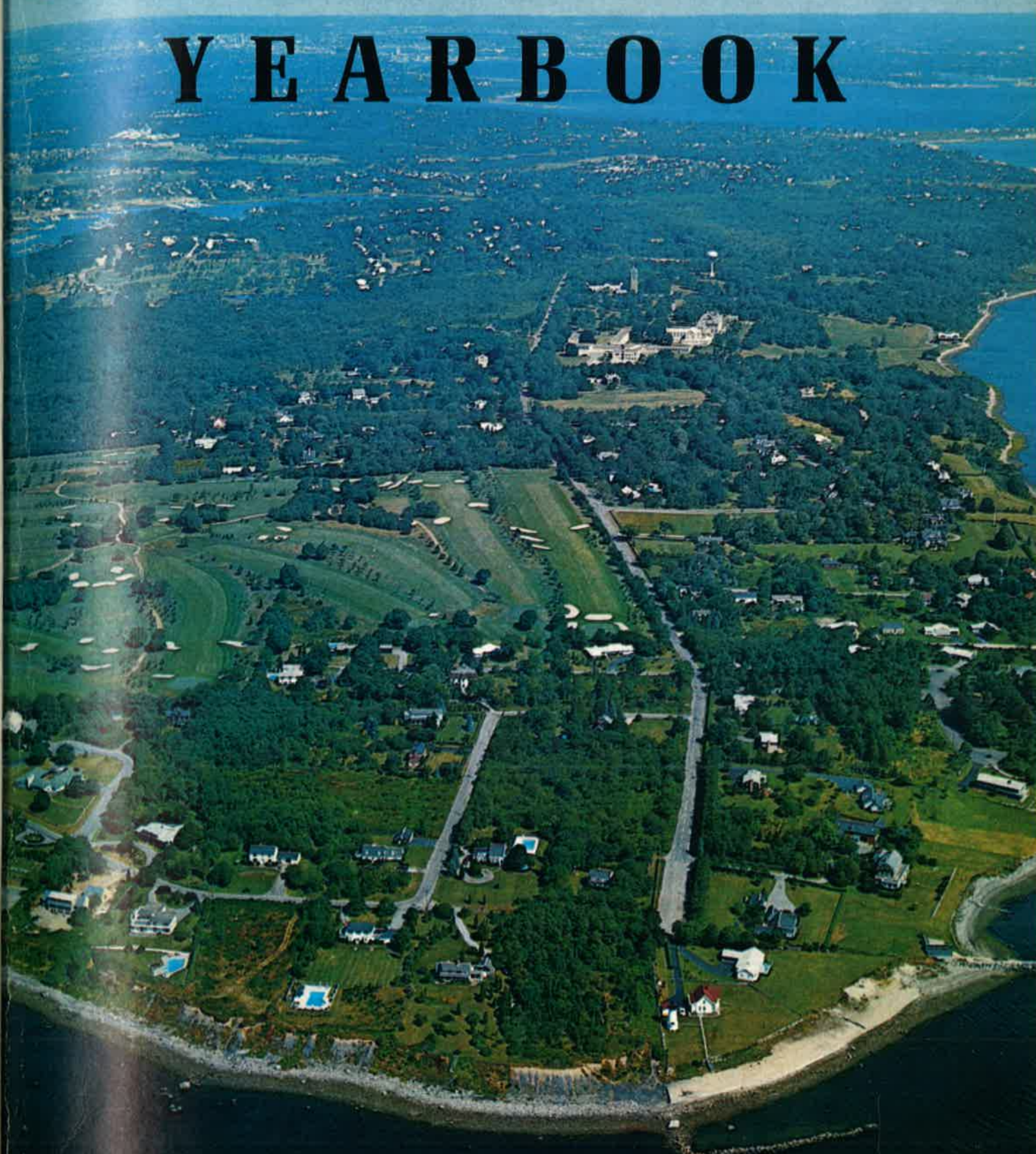


RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



The Warwick Story . . . Whatever Happened to Miss Rhode Island? . . .
The Glorious Fourth By George Howe . . . Rhode Island Exodus . . .
Distinguished Doorways . . . History Section The 19th Century Part II

Rhode Island and the War of 1812

BY ROBERT N. COOL

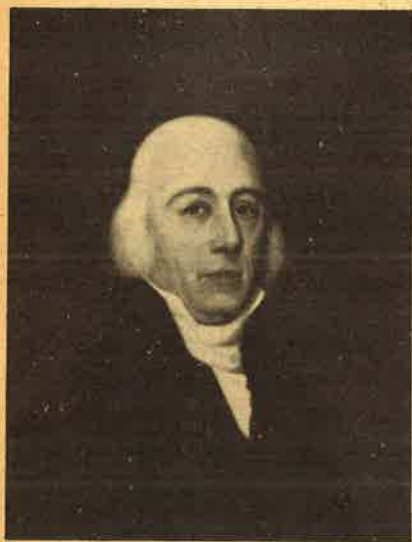
ON the night of January 8, 1811, the United States armed schooner *Revenge* sailed out of Newport harbor bound for New London. Crossing Narragansett Bay she ran into heavy fog, and the next morning pounded herself to pieces on a reef near Point Judith. The pilot was held officially responsible, but the loss of his ship fell heavily on the hopes of 25-year-old Lieutenant Oliver Hazard Perry. He requested a furlough, and on the fifth of May was married to Elizabeth Champlin Mason, the spritely daughter of a Newport physician.

A Rhode Islander by ancestry, birth and choice, Perry had gone to sea as a boy midshipman in the Warren-built frigate *General Greene*. He had grown up in South Kingstown, the family later moving to Newport and Westerly. After cruising in the West Indies and the Mediterranean, Perry had sought assignment to the Newport station, where he supervised the building of a fleet of gunboats which he commanded in the enforcement of President Jefferson's Embargo as far south as New York Bay during the years 1807 to 1809. Then as commander of the *Revenge* he had distinguished himself for firmness against British pretensions on at least one occasion in the Caribbean before his ship was lost on a routine overnight run in home waters.

During 1811 the United States and Britain drifted steadily toward a war in which Oliver Hazard Perry was to wrest an all-important victory from apparent defeat. Because of his background and personal following of Rhode Island companions, he would help win for his native state a somewhat illustrious place among the victors — if that word may be used — of the many-faceted War of 1812. It was a conflict in which most of New England wanted no part.

Election day on November 4, 1811, brought young "War Hawk" Congressmen like Henry Clay sweeping into the national capital, determined to do something about the national honor, which had been flouted by British warships, and also perhaps about an economic depression which had disheartened the South and West at the same time they were being harassed by Indians on the frontier. War with England for the seizure of Canada was an obvious solution, and if Spanish Florida should also come as the fruit of military prowess so much the better. But in Rhode Island the election returns told a different story. Here William Jones, a pro-British Providence merchant was elected governor by the Federalists. He was to keep the post until 1817. A Newport native, Jones had been a sailor during the American Revolution, but now he believed we should be fighting radical Napoleonic France instead of her enemy Great Britain. Under his administration Rhode Island, like Massachusetts and Connecticut, maintained a defiant, uncooperative attitude toward the government at Washington. The wartime messages Jones exchanged with Governor Caleb Strong of Massachusetts sounded as if they were two sovereign powers making treaties of mutual aid. New England governors complained that Washington left them defenseless after President Madison declared war on June 18, 1812. Though the cause of the conflict was said to be Britain's impressment of American seamen, as well as Orders-in-Council which allowed seizure of American shipping, the representatives of northeastern maritime states had voted solidly against hostilities. They were outweighed by the South and West.

Disenchantment with "Mr. Madison's War" became particularly noticeable when the President called upon the people to go without food on Sunday, August 30, and repair to their temples where the clergy were requested to pray for the success of American arms. Characteristic were the strong scruples of the Rev. Otis Thompson, pastor of the Congregational Church at Rehoboth, who saw the war (which had already started disastrously) only as "a judgment of Heaven upon a guilty land." He



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could not pray for American victory, he told his people, but only for Peace. "The golden age of our Republic has passed away," he mourned in a Fast Day sermon typical of scores in the leading churches of Federalist New England.

In response to the President's call to arms, Rhode Island raised its quota of five hundred soldiers for the regular army, but it would not allow the militia to leave the state. In a war that was open to much criticism, this retention of state militia commanders often proved decisive in the field. New York and Vermont militia refused to cross into Canada; but thousands of Kentuckians swarmed north, while Tennessee militia followed their local hero Andrew Jackson in an unauthorized occupation of Spanish territory.

For home defense, Rhode Island raised funds to be given to the Providence Marine Corps and stockpiled muskets and cannon at strategic centers. When, in time, it seemed that the state might be attacked, citizens and college students rushed to construct earthworks. Guards were posted near towns along the bay.

Privateering had a natural appeal to those who like the combination of adventure, jingoism and profit. Many of them sailed from Narragansett Bay. Two weeks after war was declared James DeWolf of Bristol offered his 160-ton brig *Yankee* to the federal government. In six cruises its 120-man crew captured or destroyed three million dollars worth of British property.

Oliver Hazard Perry found himself suddenly invaluable to his government and was promptly set to work organizing the naval defense of Narragansett Bay. Based in Newport, he commanded twelve gunboats manned by 350 enlisted men. But he had hardly deployed his force when he received orders to discharge all but eight of each 24-man crew. The Secretary of the Navy suggested that "volunteers" could be drummed up to man the gunboats when an emergency arose.

Perry's reply, in a letter dated at Newport, July 27, 1812, was emphatic.

"From the peculiar situation of this town," he explained, "a ship may, from the time she is discovered in the offing, be at anchor in the harbor in less than an hour and a half. The water up the bay is sufficient for vessels of the heaviest draft, and the towns of Providence, Bristol, Warren, Wickford and Greenwich are without fortifications of any kind. There are very few seamen in this place at present, most of the ships belonging to it being absent. It will, therefore, be impossible to expect any assistance. But, sir, if volunteers could be procured, the enemy would give us so little time - for no doubt they would take a favorable wind to come in - it would be impossible to beat up for them, get them on board and station them before probably the occasion for their services would be entirely over."

The British did not attack Narragansett Bay, perhaps because they hoped to lure New England from the Union. In 1814, however, they extended their blockade north of New London and shelled Stonington, Conn.

The initial collapse of American efforts to invade Canada, resulting in the loss of Detroit, brought recognition to the fact that naval supremacy would have to be won on the Great Lakes to protect the Mississippi Valley. Early in 1813 Lieutenant Oliver H. Perry received a letter from Captain Isaac Chauncey, the Navy officer in charge of creating an American fleet on Lakes Ontario and Erie, which the British controlled. "Perry was," Chauncey said, "the very person that I want for a particular service in which you may gain reputation for yourself, and honor for your country."

Elevated to the rank of Master Commandant, Perry was ordered to take 150 of his men to Presque Isle on the southern shore of Lake Erie where a start had been made at building a United States flotilla. Placed in charge of this operation, he was given command of the squadron that would be built. By the middle of February he had dispatched three detachments of volunteers by way of Providence and Albany. He soon followed, taking with him his twelve-year-old brother, James Alexander Perry, and leaving behind a wife and infant son.

The fact that many of his friends went with the young officer from Newport led



A Rhode Island Privateer.



During the Battle of Lake Erie, Commander Perry transfers his battle flag from the crippled LAWRENCE to the NIAGARA. His twelve year old brother is with him.

Tristram Burgess, a famous statesman of the 1830s, to stress the state's share in Lake Erie operations. "Every Yankee is an axe man," he exulted, "and all the companions of Perry were of the full blood, the Rhode Island stock . . . They built from the stump six vessels, the *Lawrence* of twenty guns — two long twelves and eighteen 24 pound carronades; the *Niagara*, of two long twelves and eighteen 24 pound carronades; the *Ariel* of four guns . . . the *Porcupine* . . . the *Tigress* . . ."

A more recent historian notes that "the men in charge had made slow progress until, at the end of March 1813, Captain Oliver Hazard Perry, then only 28, arrived and took command."

Commanding British naval forces on Lake Erie was a one-armed veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar, Captain Robert Heriot Barclay. While his subordinates hastily worked to complete a new brig at the British base near the western end of Lake Erie, they kept a watch on the shallow bay of Presque Isle where Perry's men worked behind a long shallow sand bar which kept the British ships at a distance but which the new American vessels would also find impossible to cross. Perry's first big achievement was hoisting his two new brigs across the bar, with the aid of tank-floats lashed to their sides, and rearming them before the British blockaders reappeared after a careless absence.

The morning of September 10, 1813, dawned upon the first confrontation of the two small fleets. The British had sailed out of the Detroit River the previous night. Perry was waiting for them in Put-in Bay, off what is now Sandusky, Ohio. On sighting the enemy he gave the signal and crowded on sail. At 11:30 a.m. they were close enough so the Americans heard "Rule Britannia" floating across the clear waters with their wooded, distant shores. As the last note faded on the blast of a bugle, a British cannon boomed. Its projectile threw up a geyser short of the *Lawrence*, still a mile and a half away. Five minutes later a second shot crashed into the bulwarks, killing a sailor. With the breeze now favoring him, Perry moved ahead.

His battle motto, the had named Usher P of two sup on the *Law* we could v breechings gun could fighting fla *Niagara*, a which hith British squ board side minutes be Dr. Par returned to a diploma his widow death in 1 The Bar so handso Becoming General V and decis Harrison naval batt schooner, The fol power aga of Wellin soldier tum me to be naval sup This su men on L old Capt. The Du ended on territory London t Wellington It was that Lor offering t son imme Bayard, later, this British en Jonath tion, had July 4, 1 it attract Madison

His battle flag of white muslin climbed to the main royal masthead, flaunting its motto, the last words of Capt. James Lawrence, a recent naval hero for whom Perry had named his flagship.

Usher Parsons, who had all the medical work on his hands because of the illness of two superior surgeons, wrote the next day: "They opened a most destructive fire on the *Lawrence* from their whole squadron. At half past one, so entirely disabled we could work the brig no longer. At two p.m. most of the guns were dismantled, breechings gone or carriages knocked to pieces. At half past two, when not another gun could be worked or fired from the *Lawrence*, Captain Perry hauled down the fighting flag which bore this motto, 'Don't give up the ship,' repaired on board the *Niagara*, and there raised it again . . . Captain Perry made all sail with the *Niagara*, which hitherto had kept out of the action, and in fifteen minutes passed in among the British squadron, having the *Detroit*, *Queen Charlotte* and *Lady Prevost* on the starboard side, and the *Hunter* on the larboard side, and silenced them all, and ten minutes before three they hauled down their colors."

Dr. Parsons moved to Providence and long outlived Oliver Hazard Perry who returned to a hero's reception in his native state but died in 1819, aged 34, while on a diplomatic mission to Venezuela. His body was later returned to Newport, where his widow lived on the south side of Washington Square off Thames Street until her death in 1858.

The Battle of Lake Erie proved a total triumph. Perry treated the defeated British so handsomely that he won their grateful respect, as well as that of the Indians. Becoming thoroughly involved in the problem of the West, Perry accompanied General William Henry Harrison and his Kentuckians as they recaptured Detroit and decisively defeated the fleeing Redcoats at the Battle of the Thames. To General Harrison had been sent Perry's famous message written on an envelope after the naval battle: "We have met the enemy and they are ours: two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop."

The following year Napoleon was beaten and Britain could transfer tremendous power against the Americans. In October, 1814, the British Cabinet asked the Duke of Wellington to take charge of American operations. But the empire's greatest soldier turned aside the proposal for a significant reason: "That which appears to me to be wanting in America is not a general, or a general officer and troops, but a naval superiority on the lakes."

This superiority had been wrested from the British by Oliver Hazard Perry and his men on Lake Erie; it was sustained a year later on Lake Champlain where 30-year-old Capt. Thomas MacDonough destroyed a British invasion flotilla.

The Duke of Wellington also suggested to the Cabinet that the American war be ended on the best terms possible, pointing out that Britain should expect to gain no territory because it did not control the lakes. Despite demands by the *Times* of London to "chastise the savages, for that is what they are!" the Cabinet followed Wellington's advice.

It was soon after word of Perry's victory reached London, on November 4, 1813, that Lord Castlereagh, British foreign secretary, had sent a letter to Washington offering to start direct negotiations toward a settlement of the war. President Madison immediately nominated four peace commissioners: John Quincy Adams, J. A. Bayard, Henry Clay and Jonathan Russell. With Albert Gallatin, who was added later, this strong team went to Ghent, Belgium for peace talks with three inferior British envoys.

Jonathan Russell, perhaps the least well-known member of the American delegation, had been born in Providence in 1771 and educated at Brown University. On July 4, 1800, he gave such a stirring address in the First Baptist Meeting House that it attracted nation-wide attention and was reprinted in twenty editions. President Madison made Russell chargé d'affaires first in Paris and then in London. He was



Governor James Fenner.



Henry Clay.

U. S. minister to Sweden when summoned to negotiate at Ghent.

With much going on behind the scenes, the summer of 1814 was made terrible by British Congreve rockets — primitive buzz bombs which were all fire and smoke — first launched with Royal Navy rockets in a British assault on Baltimore's harbor forts. This failed, but British amphibious troops fresh from France previously had successfully raided Washington, D. C. With the coming of autumn eight thousand veterans and a powerful battle fleet ranged southward into the Gulf of Mexico — the expedition that Wellington had not wished to lead.

In December Rhode Island sent four delegates to the Hartford Convention where Massachusetts and Connecticut aristocrats solemnly considered plans to revise the United States Constitution. "Second Pillar of a New Federal Edifice Reared; Third Pillar Raised!" The Federalist *Columbian Centinel* of Boston crowed when the Rhode Islanders joined the movement, which Jeffersonians thought had secession for its goal. After three weeks of secret talk, the Hartford stock dropped early in the new year when rumors filtered up from Orleans that instead of being overwhelmed by General Pakenham's red-coated veterans, American forces led by General Jackson had repelled the invaders with artillery and massive gunfire. But it was too soon to tell yet.

Then, on February 11, 1815, came an indubitable bombshell that silenced for all time the Hartford dissidents.

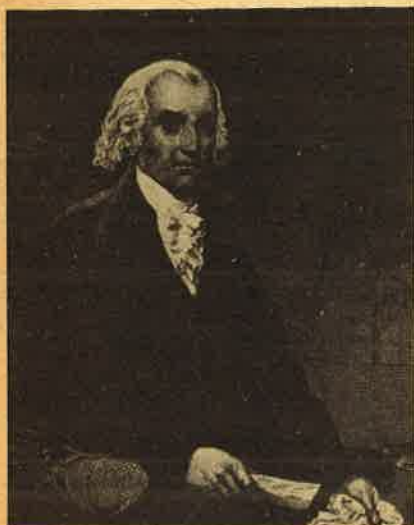
Francis Wayland, later to become president of Brown University, was a young man studying medicine in New York City during that winter which was "shrouded in gloom" because, after years of war, "no one could predict when the contest would terminate, or discover the means by which it could much longer be protracted."

Late one Sunday afternoon "a ship was discovered in the offing, which was supposed to be a cartel bringing home our commissioners from Ghent from their unsuccessful mission. The sun had set gloomily before any intelligence from the vessel had reached the city. Expectation became painfully intense, as the hours of darkness drew on. At length a boat reached the wharf, announcing the fact that a treaty of peace had been signed, and was waiting for nothing but the action of our government to become law. The men on whose ears these words fell rushed with breathless haste into the city to repeat them to their friends, shouting as they ran through the streets, 'Peace! Peace! PEACE!' Every one who heard the sound repeated it. From house to house, from street to street, the news spread with electric rapidity. The whole city was in commotion. Men bearing lighted torches were flying to and fro, shouting like madmen 'Peace! Peace!' When the rapture had partially subsided, one idea occupied every mind. But few men slept that night. In groups they were gathered in the streets, and by firesides, beguiling the hours of midnight by reminding each other that the agony of war was over, and that a worn-out and distracted country was about to enter again upon its wonted career of prosperity."

Flying horsemen rushed the treaty that had arrived so unexpectedly in H.M.S. *Favourite*, a small sloop, to the national capital where it was unanimously ratified and hurried back to England. On February 17, Madison proclaimed that the war had ended.

Although no single issue was settled by the treaty, it brought a peace that proved enduring for the United States and Great Britain. In the true spirit of Perry's victory, the Great Lakes were never re-armed, and somehow the war created a nation. "In 1815," wrote Henry Adams, "for the first time Americans ceased to doubt the path they were to follow. Not only was the unity of their nation established, but its probable divergence from older societies was also well defined."

During hostilities, which seemed so crippling, Rhode Islanders had pioneered toward a new prosperity — a phenomenon that came to light in 1814 when Representative Elisha Potter opposed repeal of the once-hated Non-Importation Acts because new Rhode Island manufacturing interests were thriving under them. Soon



President James Madison.

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After the war, the *Columbian Centinel* noted that now "the cotton manufacturers of Providence" were petitioning for tariff protection. "They state," editor Benjamin Russell reported, "that in a circle thirty miles from Providence there are no less than 140 manufactories, containing 130,000 spindles . . . which produce 27,840,000 yards of cloth, the weaving of which costs 2,227,000 dollars, which in value exceeds six millions of dollars."

The Great Gale which inundated downtown Providence in the fall of 1815 did more maritime damage there and in New Bedford than had been occasioned by the recent war. But soon the Federalist editor noted in the *Centinel* that "Since the storm in September, the season has been unusually mild and fair." This seemed symbolic, for earlier in the year he had coined a phrase to describe his postwar times: "the era of good feelings."



Rhode Island's 28 year old hero of Lake Erie, Oliver Hazard Perry.