

## The Pacific in the War of 1812: Pelts, Ploys and Plunder

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The outcome of the War of 1812 had its greatest effect on the eastern United States and its border with Canada. Most of the war's conflicts occurred on the Atlantic Ocean, the Great Lakes, along the Canadian border and westward into Michigan. Little has been written about the few occurrences in the Pacific. The Pacific Northwest was sparsely populated with a small band of mostly American and British fur trappers and fishermen. Neither country had an official presence there at the time, yet due to an enterprising German-American immigrant and a British/American naval battle, the outcome of the War of 1812 profoundly affected the political and economic development of the region closely related to pelts, cunning naval ploys and plunder.

The War of 1812 was a conflict fought on many levels. Certainly the United States fought impressment of its seaman on the high sea by the British, yet made an opportunistic “territorial grab” to annex Canada while the British were at war with Napoleon. A speech by Virginia Congressman John Randolph gives evidence of the fervor of the times: “Agrarian cupidity, not maritime right, urges the war. Ever since the report of the Committee on Foreign Relations [recommending war preparations] came to the House, we have heard but one word — like the whip-poor-will, but one eternal monotonous tone — Canada! Canada! Canada!”<sup>i</sup>

At another level the conflict renewed the hostility between expatriate Tories who left for Canada during the Revolutionary War and their former countrymen still residing in the United States. It became a quasi-civil war between the recent Irish immigrants who had fled from the harsh treatment under British rule of Ireland and joined the American military and their fellow conscripted Irishmen in British regiments. It pitted diverse Native American tribes that were coerced to make alliances with either the British or Americans. When the conflict began, many indigenous Americans fought for the side that appeared to represent their best long-term interest, mostly with the British and Canadians against the Americans. It was both a political war fought in Congress led by Federalists such as Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts and the Republican “War Hawks” like Henry Clay of Kentucky.<sup>ii</sup> The war also pitted the economic objectives of merchant traders of the north and the southern agrarians of the south and the fur trading posts of the Pacific Northwest.<sup>iii</sup> On a positive note, it united American economic interests to contest against those of the British.<sup>iv</sup>

When the United States declared war against Great Britain on 18 June 1812, the United States felt confident that its wartime goals could be accomplished despite the fact that it was waging a war on the country with the largest navy and one of the best-trained armies in the world. The British Army had been engaged against Napoleon's forces beginning in 1803 and was to continue until 1814, thus they consisted of seasoned

veterans. Local militias provided the defense of the Canadian colonies, and were supplemented and supported by a contingent of British troops commanded by experienced officers. The British Navy had over six hundred warships of varying sizes, while the American navy had but sixteen naval combat vessels. Much of the British fleet was engaged in blockade duty off of Napoleon's European port, but the British did manage to blockade most of the American major ports in 1812 in an attempt to seal the Atlantic coast and prevent as many enemy ships as it could from entering the ocean.

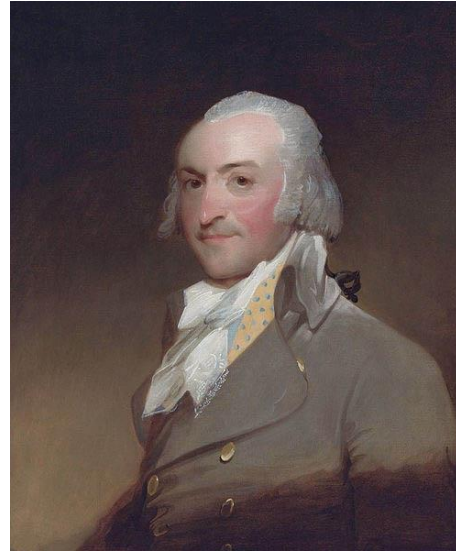
The United States was not prepared for war. The nascent nation did not wish to staff or fund a standing army. They considered such militarization as part of the reason for the near constant state of warfare in Europe. Individual state militias defended the nation. Rudimentarily trained and ill equipped, the militias were more like a collection of local social clubs than a real fighting force. Although the United States Military Academy at West Point was founded in 1802, it produced few officers by 1812. Most of the high-ranking officers in the militias, therefore, were aging veterans of the Revolutionary War having been recalled or re-volunteered for duty, but few could provide effective leadership. Many of the new, more junior officers were political appointees who had a poor understanding of the soldiering profession and war. The United States did have a relatively experienced navy, having recently engaged the Barbary Pirates, but it was small, consisting of a few frigates, plus row-galleys and gunboats that were assigned to protect America's vast shallow-water coastal enclaves. The declaration of war made American merchant ships at sea vulnerable to boarding and capture. The blockade and the formidable British Navy, even though concentrated in the Atlantic, still presented problems for American interests in the Pacific.

The chief economic resource on the shores of the Pacific northwest was the lucrative fur trade, a trade that involved the exchange of iron tools, blankets and beads for pelts harvested from the forests of North America. The British government granted monopolistic trade rights for certain parts of the world to individual companies. Two companies dominated that business in North America: The Hudson's Bay Company, founded in 1670, had exclusive rights to control all land whose waters emptied into Hudson's Bay. The North West Company, whose employees are commonly called "Nor'westers" was a Canadian company based in Montreal, but primarily worked in land around the Great Lakes and terrain to the south and west of the lakes. The North West Company lacked a royal charter and the exclusive trading rights in their area. Entrepreneurs were free to form competing companies; therefore the North West Company aggressively exploited western lands across North America for its furs.

The North West Company tried to control the vast region bounded by the Pacific Ocean, the Rocky Mountains on the east, the current southern border of Oregon and by what is now British Columbia known as the Oregon Country. There were many obstacles for the North West Company to establish the fur trade in this region. It was difficult to supply trading posts west of the Rockies via overland routes. The natural market was in China but this necessitated a very long and dangerous trading route. Also, the British East India Company had exclusive British trading rights to China and jealously guarded access to the China markets. Finally, the Nor'westers lacked a charter granting them control of

the Oregon country, thus competition could endanger their entire operation.

This economic competition appeared in the person of John Jacob Astor. Astor was a leading and powerful early nineteenth-century American businessman who dreamt of forming a vast economic empire. Born in 1763 and immigrating to the United States from what is now Germany, he began working in the fur trade in upstate New York by 1784. Astor knew that western lands contained substantial populations of beaver and other valuable fur-bearing animals. If Astor could establish a trading post at the mouth of the Columbia River he would control commerce in this vast region. Furs collected from this area would funnel into this post, be loaded onto Astor's ships and carried to China. Once there the furs would be sold and Chinese goods could be bought cheaply. In addition, Astor's ships could establish a trade relationship with the Russian settlements and trading posts in Alaska. The potential profits from both trades were substantial, especially if they could be maintained as monopolies. A clever and industrious entrepreneur, Astor hoped to parlay the



**Figure 1 John Jacob Astor. Detail from Gilbert Stuart Painting in the Brook Club, New York . Source: Wikimedia Commons.**

fur trade business into a fortune that included overseas commerce and land speculation, an opportunity that might make him one of the richest men in the world.<sup>v</sup>

In 1807 the New York Legislature and the federal government permitted Astor to incorporate his American Fur Company. It would control the fur trade south of the British Canadian border and the Great Lakes region. With the resources and contacts from this parent company, Astor then formed a subsidiary named the Pacific Fur Company, essentially Astor's Pacific commercial empire. The Russians had substantial claims to the northwest that complicated his plan, but Astor reached a deal with Alexander Baranov's Russian American Company to establish a post at the mouth of the Columbia River.<sup>vi</sup> To set up this trading post, Astor organized two expeditions, one by land and one by sea to lay claim and settle this land.

After leaving New York on 10 September 1810, Astor's small (ninety-four foot, 269 ton) expedition ship *Tonquin* finally encountered the churning waters of the mouth of the Columbia River on 22 March 1811. With angry seas and breakers crashing all around them, the *Tonquin*'s captain Jonathan Thorn had to cajole his men to cross the bar into the river. A whaleboat was ordered lowered to test the waters, but the first mate protested. Thorn said, "if you are afraid of Water, you should have remained in Boston . . . I command here . . . do not be a coward. Put off!"<sup>vii</sup> The men had good reason to fear these treacherous waters. Less than a hundred yards from the ship, the men and their boat disappeared into the maelstrom never to be seen again. The ship then proceeded boldly without reconnoitering and dropped anchor in Oregon on 25 March 1811. As they off loaded men and material, Gabriel Franchère a clerk in the expedition wrote, "We had left

New York, for the most part strangers to one another; but arrived at the river Columbia we were all friends, and regard each other as brothers. . . . The preceding days had been days of apprehension and uneasiness; this was one of sorrow and mourning.<sup>viii</sup>

The first task of the men was to find a suitable location for a trading post that had reasonable access to the river, but could also be defended in case of attack. The place that they selected was Point George (currently Smith's Point) on the southern shore of the Columbia River just off Young's Bay. In about three weeks they cleared the ground and built the structures. On 12 April 1811 they christened Fort Astoria in honor of Astor, the headquarters of the Pacific Fur Company in the Oregon Country and the first permanent United States settlement on the Pacific coast. The Chinook and Clatsop Indians were not hostile and made frequent visits to trade food and furs with the colonists.

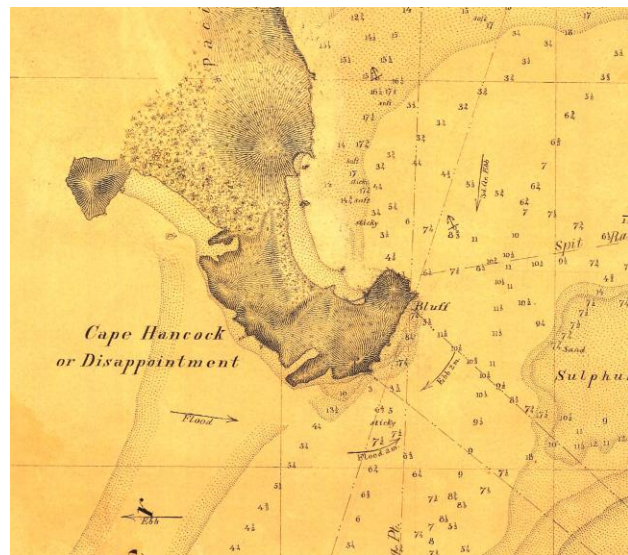
Ten months after the *Tonquin* landed its crew and cargo, Astor's overland expedition arrived at Fort Astoria. Having suffered many hardships during their journey, the exhausted men staggered into the post part of which would become the town of Astoria. They turned the fort into a real settlement constructing a warehouse, separate dwellings and a high fence to enclose a space of 90 by 120 feet. They also built a protective palisade at the front and rear and placed a small cannon, likely a 3-pounder, at each corner.<sup>ix</sup> The influx of new workers also made it possible for the Pacific Fur Company to expand into the surrounding territory, establishing trading posts deep into the interior of the Oregon Country. Some of these posts were close to Nor'westers posts, particularly one in the Spokane settlement. From here they trapped, traded with natives and competed with Nor'wester traders in a relatively peaceful relationship.

Following the declaration of war in 1812, Fort Astoria remained peaceful until late December 1812. A Nor'westers' overland party from the company's depot on Lake Superior learned of the declaration of war and that the British were dispatching a warship to capture Fort Astoria. This critical information found its way to a Pacific Fur Company trader, via Nor'wester John George McTavis. In early October 1813 a party consisting of ten canoes carrying McTavish and seventy-four men landed at Fort Astoria. McTavish informed the men at Fort Astoria about the impending seaborne threat saying that the British navy had orders to destroy the American post. The news caused great distress in the fort but it also created a bargain for McTavish. He bought the entire supply of stockpiled American furs and trade goods for a fraction of their worth, an example of opportunistic plunder.<sup>x</sup> The Americans realized that Fort Astoria was a garrison in name only and extremely vulnerable to capture by the British Navy. The Royal Navy's policy was that the value of all goods captured from an enemy in war would be paid to the crews as prize money, a great conquest incentive for a warship. If the British Navy captured Fort Astoria, Astor's plans would be an economic lost cause. Some Americans decided to leave and some stayed on. The number of each is not known.

Astor wrote to Secretary of State James Monroe in February 1813 to tell him about the situation. He requested that the United States government send "forty or fifty men" to Fort Astoria, who "with the aid of the men already there, [to] repel any force." To add to the importance of his request Astor implied that if in time America wanted to

lay claim to this Northwest wilderness, the nation would be well served to save this “infant establishment” from being lost to the British.<sup>xi</sup> Monroe ignored Astor’s request. Astor subsequently learned of the North West Company’s request for sending armed British ships to capture Fort Astoria. Thus newly alarmed, Astor sent another request to Monroe warning of the impending loss of the American fur-trading outpost. President Madison ordered Master Commandant William M. Crane on a special mission to come to Fort Astoria’s aid. Because this was to be a secret mission, Crane received his orders orally in Washington assigned to his first command, the frigate *Adams* (28 guns). The warship was docked in New York but was to sail to protect Astoria.<sup>xii</sup> Meanwhile Astor, after being informed that his request had been granted, saw this as an opportunity. He outfitted an unidentified merchant ship to sail as a consort with the *Adams* and resupply the fort. Unfortunately, just before the *Adams* and Astor’s merchant vessel were readied to sail, much of the crew of the *Adams* was reassigned to naval duty on Lake Ontario. This meant that the *Adams* was undermanned and the mission was postponed indefinitely.<sup>xiii</sup>

Meanwhile the Nor’westers developed two schemes that hopefully would destroy the Astorian operations. They were not about to lose to that upstart Astor. The first plan was to send the armed merchant vessel named the *Isaac Todd* to the Pacific coast to capture Fort Astoria. The *Isaac Todd* was to carry a letter of marque and supplies for the company's trade operations.<sup>xiv</sup> The letter of marque, issued to the armed civilian merchant ship made the vessel a privateer and as a privateer the *Isaac Todd* could legally seize Fort Astoria by force for the North West Company. The second plan involved getting the British Government to help or support the North West Company in light of the recent declaration of war.<sup>xv,xvi</sup> The North West Company requested a naval escort to protect the *Isaac Todd* from the American Navy and privateers that roamed the Atlantic. Obviously the navy ship could help in the capture of the Astorian fort. The admiralty complied and assigned the frigate HMS *Phoebe* (46 guns) to escort the *Isaac Todd* to the mouth of the Columbia River.<sup>xvii</sup>



**Figure 2 Detail from an 1851 U.S. Coast Survey chart of the Mouth of the Columbia River. Cape Disappointment is an easily recognized landmark to the entrance.**

On 11 April 1813 Nor'westers McTavish (a return visit), Joseph Larocque and Michel Bourdon together with fifteen men to support them arrived at Fort Astoria. This time they had traveled overland.<sup>xviii</sup> They suggested that arrival of the *Isaac Todd* was imminent, but since they could not know the vessel’s exact location on the vast Pacific, they likely had no notion about when it really would arrive. The Nor'westers were well

aware that when a British ship arrived, hopefully in a few weeks, the fort would likely be theirs. The Astorians who had remained at the fort/trading post had been expecting the arrival of the Canadians, but when they actually appeared, it came as something of a shock. They saw no point in defending the post, so they prudently decided to treat the Nor'westers as guests rather than enemies. The following day, 12 April, was the third anniversary of when they considered the founding of settlement. McTavish and his men were graciously invited to join the Americans in what was likely to be their last "birthday" party. The food and liquor made for a festive occasion and for the Pacific Fur Company people it was easy to forget that the days of the American settlement were numbered.<sup>xix</sup>

The Nor'westers enjoyed the American hospitality, but it also became obvious that the Canadians lacked sufficient provisions and especially foodstuffs to survive a winter if the British ship(s) did not arrive. Therefore a deal was struck. The Pacific Fur Company agreed to provide food to the Nor'westers in exchange for trade goods they had brought with them. In addition the two companies agreed to suspend their competition with each other for the year to conserve the supplies on hand. This bought time for both companies. The Nor'westers could await the arrival of the ships, and the Astorians had time to prepare for an orderly evacuation. This situation continued all throughout the summer and into the fall.<sup>xx</sup>

Indeed, help was on the way for the North West Company. After some delay the *Phoebe* and the *Isaac Todd* sailed from England, stopping at Rio de Janeiro for supplies and orders. Once there, Rear Admiral Manley Dixon, Commander of the British Brazilian station assigned two small sloops of war, *Racoon* (18 guns) and *Cherub* 26 (guns), to assist *Phoebe* in her protection duties. Dixon had just received word of an American naval ship sailing in the Pacific that had success in capturing British whaling ships. "I considerate it a duty incumbent upon me to place under your [Hillyar's] immediate Orders the *Cherub* and *Racoon*, which ships were about to sail to the Southern Pacific, for the protection of the Whale fishery. . ."<sup>xxi</sup> The source of the problem was the United States frigate *Essex* (46 guns) under the command of David Porter. *Essex* and Porter were a potential threat to the British plans to capture and hold Fort Astoria.

Porter had risen rapidly through the ranks in the fledgling American Navy from a midshipman in 1798 to captain by 1811 through several acts of heroism and courage under fire, particularly during the Quasi War with France and the Barbary Pirate War. Porter's mission at the onset of the War of 1812 was to disrupt the British whaling fleet. His ship, the *Essex*, was rated at 32-guns, but by 1812 she carried forty 32-pound carronades and six 12-pound long guns. Porter was disappointed being assigned to *Essex* and expressed his consternation to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton when he wrote, "I beg that the department will indulge me in the exchange on my return from the next cruize [sic] as my insuperable dislike to Carronades and the bad sailing of the *Essex*, render her in my opinion the worst frigate in the service."<sup>xxii</sup>

Captain David Porter's *Essex* was assigned to Commodore William Bainbridge's squadron that was to patrol the South Atlantic off Brazil. Porter had been unable to make

a prearranged rendezvous with Bainbridge and while on his mission received intelligence that the British naval force had been greatly reinforced along the Brazilian coast. Therefore he concluded that he was alone and operating against the most powerful navy in the world. Porter believed that “there was no port on this coast where we could procure a supply, without the certainty of capture . . . to attempt to return to the United States at this season of the year when our coast would be swarming with enemy’s cruisers, would be running too much risk. I therefore determine to pursue that course which seems to me best calculated to injure the enemy, and would enable me to prolong my cruize: this could only be done by going into friendly a port . . . on the coast of Chili [sic].”<sup>xxiii</sup>

In February 1813, Porter noted that a significant portion of the British whaling fleet was located in the Pacific. No other American warship was assigned to patrol that vast ocean, so Porter boldly sailed around the horn —without orders. His success came from surprise tactics , and the maintenance of his vessel while at sea for extended periods by taking stores from seized British whale ships and captured fauna on the Galápagos Islands. His biggest problems were the scarcity of fresh water and having few officers and men to crew his captured prizes. Porter’s cruise was costly for the British and, without doubt, had a major effect on British commerce in the Pacific.<sup>xxiv</sup>

By the fall of 1813, the *Essex*’ eleven months at sea and multiple battles produced severe hull damage, deterioration of the ship’s sails and rigging and an infestation of vermin that threatened the vessel’s stores. Their number became so great that they threatened to “eat their way through every part of the ship.”<sup>xxv</sup> Therefore, on 3 October he set sail for the Marquesas Islands for a badly needed overhaul.<sup>xxvi</sup> While engaged in doing his repair work, Porter perhaps hatched some of his cunning ploys. The first was the use of the false British flag when approaching a vessel, then running up the stars and stripes and seizing the surprised ship with either little or no resistance on their part. In a more imaginative scheme, Porter ordered the recently captured British whaler *Seringapatam* “painted exactly like the *Essex*, so that it would have been very difficult to have known them apart at a short distance. I then changed entirely the appearance of the *Essex* and gave to the *Greenwich* [another captured whaler that was turned into a store-ship] the appearance of a sloop of war, hoping at some period to derive some advantage over the enemy by deceptions.”<sup>xxvii</sup> In another gambit Porter took advantage of the fact that the Galápagos Islands were a favorite stopping place for Pacific whalers. He left a note on a bottle on the Galapagos’ Santiago Island that spoke of the death of many of his crewmen. The note also said, “ The *Essex* leaves this in a leaky state, her foremast very rotten . . . and her main mast sprung . . . Should any American vessel, or indeed a vessel of any nation, put in here, and meet with this note, they would be doing an act of great humanity to transmit a copy of it to America.”<sup>xxviii</sup> In fact *Essex* was in excellent repair with a healthy crew awaiting new prey — British whalers deceived into thinking they were safe.<sup>xxix</sup> Porter also made additional use of some the vessels that he captured. He would send them out about seven miles from form his flagship but in opposite directions to form radii. Each in turn could reconnoiter the sea about seven or more miles beyond them. By using prearranged signals Porter, at the hub of this great circle, could monitor sail traffic over hundreds of square miles of ocean around him.<sup>xxx</sup> These strategies and

ruses were employed to find and lure potential captives and, if needed, confuse any British naval force that might have entered the area.

While rounding Cape Horn the *Isaac Todd* became separated from her British consorts. Later, Hillyar received incorrect information that *Essex* had captured the *Isaac Todd*. He quickly decided to depart from his orders and sent the *Racoon* to complete the mission to the mouth of the Columbia and capture Fort Astoria. The *Racoon*, being a smaller ship, had a better chance of navigating over the treacherous and shifting sand bars at the entrance to the Columbia River.<sup>xxxix</sup> *Phoebe* and *Cherub* would hunt for *Essex*; combined they would likely be able to easily defeat the American warship.<sup>xxxii</sup>

On 3 February 1814 Captain Porter's *Essex* arrived at Valparaiso, Chile accompanied by the former British 8-gun, 351-ton letter of marque whaler *Atlantic*. Porter had captured the vessel near the Galapagos in early April 1813, re-armed her with twenty guns (ten 18-pound carronades and ten short six-pounder guns) and crewed her with a complement of sixty officers and men. Porter re-named the former *Atlantic* the *Essex Junior*. Porter occasionally used her as his flagship, but she served mostly as an escort, scout or supply ship. Porter was aware that the British squadron was almost certain to find him there. Porter ordered the *Essex Junior* to patrol outside the harbor to watch for the British squadron. "A rendezvous was appointed for the *Essex Junior*, and every arrangement made for sailing; and I intended to let them chase me off, to give the *Essex Junior* an opportunity of escaping."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

On 8 February *Phoebe* sailed into the neutral harbor with *Cherub* close behind. Hillyar and Porter had established a respectful professional relationship when, during friendlier times, they served their respective nations in the Mediterranean. Now they met again, this time duty-bound to destroy each other. Hillyar sailed the *Phoebe* into the neutral harbor and immediately came alongside the *Essex*, their yards almost fouling. At that point, both vessels cleared for action. Hillyar hailed the *Essex* and seemed to set a somewhat convivial tone. In the ritual of gentlemanly naval officers, they had a polite exchange over speaking trumpets. The *Phoebe* anchored well away from the *Essex* but within sight in the politically neutral Chilean harbor.

Porter concluded that the *Essex* was no match for the more powerfully-armed *Phoebe*. Nevertheless, he challenged Hillyar to a two-ship duel, *Essex* versus *Phoebe*, perhaps reasoning that his crew's experience and recent fighting skill might prevail. He also believed that both *Essex* and *Essex Junior* had superior sailing speed. Hillyar however declined. *Essex* and *Essex Junior* sailed out of port on three occasions followed by Hillyar's ships. On one of these excursions *Essex* fired at *Phoebe*, but Hillyar did not respond, once again refusing to rise to the challenge. Instead Hillyar took careful measure of the sailing quality of the American vessels. He wanted to ascertain where his advantage would be in the inevitable fight that would occur in the near future. Hillyar was well aware that when he chose to close for action *Phoebe*'s long guns would likely wreck *Essex* before its shorter-range carronades could effectively respond. The *Essex Junior* was relatively weakly armed and appeared undermanned and should be little threat.



Porter made the prudent choice to flee the safety of Valparaiso's harbor at the right moment. On 28 March 1814, the *Essex* and the *Essex Junior* took advantage of a fresh southerly breeze and abruptly set sail to escape the anchored British naval ships. Upon rounding the outer-point of the vast Chilean bay, a sudden strong wind gust carried away the main-top-mast of *Essex*. Meanwhile the *Phoebe* and *Cherub* quickly sailed to meet the now crippled *Essex*. As they approached, Porter ordered a shot to be fired at his pursuers and his gunners successfully hit *Phoebe's* mainsail, cut the main-stay and damaged the jib-boom.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Hillyar had had enough. The frigate *Essex*, no longer a graceful sailor, was a cripple at the mercy of both the weather and the British. Hillyar would not let the opportunity pass to finally take on the Americans.

The battle between the three warships began at 5:35 in the late afternoon. The *Phoebe* took position to rake the *Essex's* stern, while the *Cherub* was off the starboard bow. The *Essex* was virtually helpless, but Porter fought back. The *Cherub* was forced to join the *Phoebe* off the *Essex's* stern. A spring line was placed on the anchor cable allowing *Essex* to swung about and bring her guns to bear on the enemy. (A spring line is used to control a vessel from moving too far forward or further aft. It can be used to maneuver a ship while still at anchor or tied to the shore.) This was repeated three times,

but the enemy ships successfully shot away the spring before it could be effectively used. A few guns were shifted to the stern gun-ports to allow the Americans to return fire, but this was a fraction of the firepower that was directed at them. The carronades

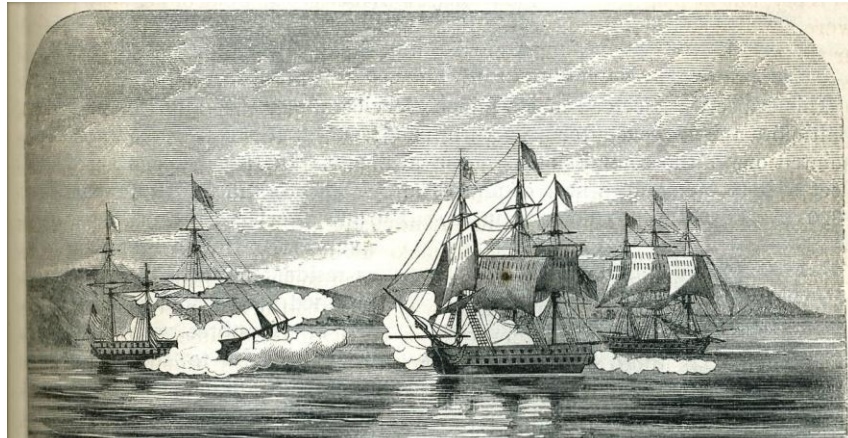


Figure 3 The ESSEX, the PHOEBE and the CHERUB. From Lossing, Benjamin J. *The pictorial field-book of the War of 1812*. New York: Harper, 1869.

did however force both British warships to back off and repair damage, but the *Essex* had sustained heavy damage to her rigging and took many casualties.

The *Phoebe* and *Cherub* resumed their attack position far off the port bow, so as to be out of both carronade range and the stern guns' fields of fire. Porter ordered the flying jib set, the American frigate's last remaining unscathed sail. Porter began to close for battle, passing close enough to *Cherub* to drive her off with carronade fire. *Phoebe*, however, remained out of *Essex's* carronade range. The British frigate continued to pound the American vessel with her long guns.

Porter decided his only chance for victory lay in grappling and boarding the *Phoebe*, but Porter's attempt to board the British warship was unsuccessful. Shortly thereafter fires broke out in several places on the *Essex*, forcing her crewmen to abandon

their guns to battle the flames. In panic, several men deserted in the only intact boat. Only one of Porter's officers was unscathed. The conditions aboard *Essex* now became desperate. Her deck was strewn with bodies and below the cries and groans of wounded were disheartening. Porter ordered his helmsman to turn his battered vessel toward shore to beach and destroy her thus preventing *Essex* from falling to the enemy. A few men leapt overboard to avoid either capture or the possibility of burning to death. Two and a half hours after the first shots were fired, Porter struck his colors. The *Essex* was no longer a threat.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Of the two hundred fifty-five men onboard the *Essex* at the start of the battle, fifty-eight were killed, approximately sixty-six lay wounded, thirty-one were missing and presumed drowned while twenty-four managed to reach the safety of shore.<sup>1</sup> Most of those not listed as wounded were bruised and battered. By contrast, the *Phoebe* had four killed and seven wounded and *Cherub*, one killed and three wounded. Prisoners of war, Porter and his surviving crewmen were sent back to the United States on *Essex Junior* that had also been captured in the battle, but with the provision that they would be on parole. Upon arriving off New York on 6 July 1814, *Essex Junior* was stopped by the British 56-gun razeed *Saturn*. At first the Royal Naval officer examined the ship's papers and let them proceed. A few hours later *Saturn* intercepted *Essex Junior* once again and detained Porter. Porter managed to escape in a small boat to the nearby shore. Once back on American soil he declared that the second detention was a violation of his and his crewmen's parole agreement and they were "accordingly declared discharged from their paroles."<sup>xxxvi</sup> In February 1815, British Admiral Thomas Cochrane admitted that the captain of the *Saturn* had in fact not respected the parole agreement and "the American Government had a perfect right to release Captain Porter and Crew."<sup>xxxvii</sup>



Figure 4 Capt. David Porter. Portrait in the U.S. Naval Academy Museum. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In his 3 July 1814 summary report of the battle to the secretary of the navy, Porter both praised and criticized Hillyar's conduct. "Commodore Hillyar . . . has, since our capture, shewn [sic] the greatest humanity to my wounded, whom he permitted me to land, on condition that the United States should bear their expenses; has endeavored, as much in his power, to alleviate the distresses of war, by the most generous and delicate deportment towards myself and, my officers, and crew." Yet he went on to say "Commodore Hillyar, who, in violation of every principle of honor and generosity, and regardless of the rights of nations, attacked the *Essex* in her crippled state within pistol shot of a neutral shore, when for six weeks I had daily offered him fair and honorable combat, on terms to his advantage."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Yet in a letter dated 30 March 1814 Hillyar

commented, “The defense of the *Essex*, taking into consideration our superiority of force, the very discouraging circumstances of her having lost her main-top-mast, and being twice on fire, did honor to her brave defenders, and most fully evinced the courage of Captain Porter, and those in his command. Her colours were not struck, until the loss in killed and wounded was so awfully great, and her shattered conditions so seriously bad, as to render further resistance unavailing.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Later on 4 April Hillyar apologized to Porter for not returning the sword of vanquished captain, the symbol of surrender. He wrote, “. . . my mind being much engrossed in attending to professional duties, to offer its [the sword’s] restoration, the hand that received it will be most gladly extended to put it in possession of him, who wore it so honorably in defending his country’s cause.”<sup>xl</sup> The aftermath of at least this early nineteenth century naval battle quickly switched from decimation to decency and on to decorousness.

Many thousands of miles north and above the equator an overland party of Northwest company men arrived at Fort Astoria on 7 October 1813. They were British fur traders expecting to see that the Astorians had either surrendered their fort or deserted, but the promised British ships had yet to appear. The Astorians were warned that they were coming, but were not inclined to capitulate. The winter rains were about to return and the probability of having to live in a primitive crowded shelter together with a food shortage caused the Nor’westers to worry. After intense and protected negotiations the Nor’wester’s leader decided to buy the Pacific Fur Company's furs and trade goods plus all of their holdings and assets in the Oregon Country.<sup>xli</sup> Hidden in this simple business deal were political and policy implications. If an American warship or privateer arrived, the fort could be captured and returned to American control. On the other hand, if a British warship arrived, there could be hard feelings among its officers and crew because the fort was now legally in the hands of a British company. Any claim for prize money was now moot and they would have come a very long way for nothing.

When HMS *Racoon* finally arrived at the mouth of the Columbia, it precipitated the latter scenario. Captain William Black of the *Racoon* discovered that the fort was already in British hands and found that the Nor’westers had given aid and comfort to the enemy of the crown by purchasing the fort and its operations. In what appeared a futile symbolic gesture, Black came ashore, raised a British flag over the fort and declared Astoria and the country all around British by the right of a wartime conquest — another example of opportunistic plunder. He wrote the following to the Admiralty: “Agrebel [sic] to order of Captn. Hillyar, I succeeded entering Columbia River, in Majestys Sloop *Racoon*. Novr. 30<sup>th</sup> 1813 Found party of Northwest Company here, who made arrangements with the American party before my arrival. Country and Fort I have taken possession of in name of British Majesty later I have named Fort George and left in possession of and charge of Northwest Company. Enemy quite broke up, they have no settlement whatever on this River or Coast.”<sup>xlii</sup> Black’s action clouded British claims to the Oregon country and subsequently became the subject of controversy.

In February 1814, one of Astor's ships, the brig *Pedlar*, arrived at the recently renamed Fort George.<sup>xliii</sup> The British allowed the vessel to evacuate those Americans who wished to leave. *Isaac Todd* finally reached her Columbia River destination on 23 April

1814, too late to affect any outcome of the many events that had transpired. The Nor'westers now operated Fort George as its headquarters in the Oregon Country without competition. Because of supply difficulties, and high operating costs, the Nor'westers failed to make it profitable.

The Treaty of Ghent that ended the War of 1812 declared "status quo ante bellum."<sup>xliv</sup> Therefore Astor felt that he had a strong case for the return of the property. The captain of the *Racoon* had declared the fort his conquest, therefore a prize of war. Astor argued that Fort Astoria had been his before the war and, taken as a prize, it should be returned to him. The Nor'westers however presented signed purchase documents.<sup>xlv</sup> They had irrefutable evidence that they had bought the outpost in good faith; it was not conquered. Unfortunately for John Jacob Astor, the United States government was too weak after the war to send forces in a timely manner to recover the post and gain a foothold in the territory. The defunct Pacific Fur Company was formally dissolved on 12 November 1814. Around that time Astor wrote to a friend, "Was there ever an undertaking of more merit, of more honor and enterprising, attended with a greater variety of misfortune."<sup>xlvi</sup>

The fur trade remained under British control for the next thirty years.<sup>xlvii</sup> At one point it briefly looked as if Astor might regain custody of Fort Astoria after-all. President Monroe sent the USS *Ontario* to the Mouth of the Columbia "to assert the claim of the United States to the sovereignty of the adjacent country, in a friendly and peaceable manner, and without the employment of force."<sup>xlviii</sup> By this time, even if the government did manage to assert its claim on the territory, Astor was not returning. Astor felt that American troops should be deployed rather than having what he considered a mere naval presence to keep Canadian traders from overwhelming a hopefully reestablished settlement.

The northwestern border between Canada and the United States would be in dispute for about thirty years. A primary treaty of 1818 set the boundary between the two nations along the 49th parallel from Minnesota to the "Stony Mountains" (Rockies). The territory west of the Rockies was to be called Oregon Territory and the Columbia District of the Hudson's Bay Company with its lucrative fur district administered under joint control. Soon thereafter the British government issued new regulations governing the fur trade in British North America and the Hudson's Bay Company bought out the North West Company in July 1821. It continued to carry on with the fur trade in the Oregon country.

Unfortunately, shared jurisdiction led to confrontations during the American expansionist policies of the James Polk administration when there was a military move to annex the entire region up to parallel 54°40' north, the southern limit to the North American Russian Empire and push out the British from western Canada. The imminent outbreak of the Mexican War diverted American resources and having a third war against a formidable Britain made little sense. Finally then Secretary of State James Buchanan negotiated the Oregon Treaty between the United Kingdom and the United States signed in Washington, DC on 15 June 1846.

The Oregon Treaty ultimately led to the so-called “Pig War,” a strange almost comic opera-like footnote event in American/British history. The treaty stated that the 49th parallel would be the boundary between the United States and Canada until it reached an undefined middle or main channel that separated the continent from Vancouver's Island which would remain as British territory. The British believed the main channel referred to Haro Strait, east of San Juan Island, the Americans understood it to be Rosario Strait, on the west. Thus San Juan Island was left in limbo.

The Hudson's Bay Company had made claim to the island in 1845. In 1850 the company built first a salmon curing station, followed by a sheep ranch in 1853. In 1853 Washington Territory was created and San Juan Island was incorporated as part of Washington's Whatcom County.<sup>xlix</sup> By 1859 about twenty-nine Americans had formed a settlement on San Juan Island on land claimed by the British and this led to consternation.

On 15 June 1859 Lyman Cutlar, an American settler, killed a pig that was rooting for potatoes in his garden. It belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company farm, managed by Charles Griffin. Cutlar informed Griffin what he had done and offered to replace the animal, but the situation tuned into confrontation when Griffin insisted the animal was worth \$100 and Cutlar angrily countered that it was not even worth \$10. Cutlar refused to pay for the pig, so Griffin demanded his arrest. Cutlar's fellow Americans on San Juan petitioned Brigadier General William S. Harney, the commander of the Department of Oregon, to come to the aid their neighbor and countryman. Harney, in turn, ordered troops from the Ninth Infantry under the command of George Pickett to San Juan Island. Pickett arrived on the island on 27 July.<sup>1</sup>

In response, James Douglas, Governor of the Crown Colony of British Columbia, dispatched a naval force to protect British interests but it was to avoid armed conflict if possible. It seemed untenable that two countries might go to war over a pig. Throughout the summer of 1859 both countries continued to move forces into the area. By 31 August some four hundred sixty-one Americans, supported by fourteen cannon, had dug into earthen redoubts in anticipation of fighting against five British ships carrying one hundred sixty-seven cannon and approximately two thousand forty troops. President James Buchanan sent General Winfield Scott to defuse the situation.<sup>ii</sup> Scott and Douglas agreed to withdraw most of their forces and, in mid-September, London and Washington agreed that they would jointly occupy San Juan Island with token military forces.<sup>lii</sup> They could not reach an equitable settlement, so for the next twelve years both nations kept garrisons at opposite ends of the island.

Finally in 1871 the United States and Great Britain decided to submit the matter to the Kaiser of Germany for arbitration. A German three-man commission ruled in favor of the Americans on 21 October 1872. The British troops withdrew from the San Juan Island by the end of November. The last American troops left in 1874.<sup>liii</sup> A dispute over a pig almost changed the history of the Pacific Northwest after the War of 1812 — but it was a war that never was.

## Conclusion

The Pacific front of the War of 1812 involved pelts, ploys and plunder and had a multitude of effects that changed the history of the Pacific Northwest. The United States Government, with only *Essex* and her converted whaler escort ships operating in the Pacific, was forced to cede this vast ocean to the British Navy. It marked a humiliating defeat of David Porter, one of the United States Navy's early storied officers. John Jacob Astor was unable to protect his fur trade operations at Fort Astoria. This cost Astor his dream. Rather than becoming the richest man in the world, Astor had to settle for only being the richest man in the United States. The end of the War of 1812 in the Pacific led to a population expansion of the northwest for the British, Canadians and the Americans. Fur trappers and fishermen made way for farmers, ranchers and merchants to produce the vibrant transnational area we know today.

Notes:

<sup>i</sup> John Randolph, 16 December 1811, in Congress, Annals of Congress: Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789-1824, 42 vols. Washington, D.C., 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, 533.

<sup>ii</sup> Dudley, William S. ed. The Naval War of 1812: a Documental History. Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, vol. 1, 1985, 68-69, 1985; vol. 2, 1992, 34; Daughan, George C. 1812: The Navy's War. Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2011, 15-16.

<sup>iii</sup> Op. cite. Daughan, George C. 1812: The Navy's War, 14-16.

<sup>iv</sup> Labaree, Benjamin w. et. al. America and the Sea : A Maritime History. Mystic ,CT: Mystic Seaport, Inc. 1998. 211-212; Latimer, Jon, 1812: War with America. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007. 2, 4-5.

<sup>v</sup> Oglesby, Richard E. "John Jacob Astor---a better businessman than the best of them." *Journal of the West* 25 (1986): 8-14.

<sup>vi</sup> Ronda, James P. Astoria and Empire. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1990, 37-41.

<sup>vii</sup> Ross, Alexander. Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River: Being a Narrative of the Expedition Fitted Out by John Jacob Astor to Establish the "Pacific Fur Company." London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1849, 55.

<sup>viii</sup> Franchère, Gabriel, Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America, 1810, 1811, 1812, 1813, and 1814. (Translated by J.V. Huntington) New York: Redfield 1854, 34-37. [Originally Franchère, Gabriel, *Relation d'un voyage à la côte du Nord-ouest de l'Amérique Septentrionale, dans les années 1810, 11, 12, 13, et 14. Par G. Franchère, fils*. Montréal : Impr. de C.B. Pasteur, 1820.

<sup>ix</sup> Dolin, Eric Jay, Fur Fortune, and Empire: The epic History of the Fur Trade in America. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010, 204.

<sup>x</sup> Irving, Washington, Astoria; or, Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains. Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1836, 313.

<sup>xi</sup> John Jacob Astor to James Monroe (February 1813) in Message from the President of the United States, Communicating the Letter of Mr. Provost, and other Documents, Relating to the Establishment Made at the Mouth of the Columbia River, January 1823, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)14-15.

<sup>xii</sup> Secretary of the Navy Jones to Master Commandant William M. Crane, 16 April 1813. In op. cite. Dudley, William S. ed., vol. 2, 1992, 103. Also note at top of page 103, *Secret Mission of John Adams*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Eric Jay Dolin, Fur etc. 213-214.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ronda, James P. Astoria and Empire. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1990, 255-256.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. 256.

<sup>xvi</sup> Gough, Barry M. Distant Dominion: Britain and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1810-1914: A Study of British Maritime Ascendancy. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971, 11-13.

<sup>xvii</sup> Op. cite. Gough, Barry M. Distant Dominion.13.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jones, Robert F. ed. Annals of Astoria: The Headquarters Log of the Pacific Fur Company on the Columbia River, 1811-1813. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1999. xxi.

<sup>xix</sup> Op. cite. Ronda, J. P. Astoria and Empire. 276-277.

<sup>xx</sup> Op. cite. Ronda, James P. Astoria and Empire. 37-41.

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<sup>xxi</sup> Rear Admiral Manley Dixon, RN., to Captain James Hillyar, RN., 1 July 1813. Letter Signed, Public Records Office, London, Admiralty. 1/21. Pp. 330-31. Also Dudley, William S. ed. The Naval War of 1812: a Documental History. vol. 2, 1992, 713.

<sup>xxii</sup> Captain David Porter to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, 14 October 1812. National Archives and Record Service, Washington, D.C. Records Group 45, Captains Letters to Sec. of the Navy, 1812. vol. 3, no. 68. In a touch of irony, Porter continues in his letter, asking to be assigned to command the frigate *Adams*, the vessel that was first to sail to defend Fort Astoria, but had much of her crew reassigned to the Great Lakes fleet.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Porter to Bainbridge, 23 March 1813, Letters received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., M125, Reel 29/139; also Porter, David. Journal of a Cruise, New York: NY, Wiley and Halsted, 1822, vol.1, 72-73.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid. vol. 2, 292-4.

<sup>xxv</sup> Op. cite. Porter, D. Journal of a Cruise, 251.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Op. cite. Dudley, William, The Naval History of 1812. vol. 2, 702-3.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Op. cite. Porter, Journal of a Cruise, 243.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Op. cite. Porter, Journal of a Cruise, “Note left by Porter,” 253-254.

<sup>xxix</sup> During his Pacific cruise Porter captured twelve British whalers and burned three others.

<sup>xxx</sup> McCranie, Kevin D. Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812, Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute Press, 2011, 180.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Op. cite. Gough, Barry M. Distant Dominion. 13-17.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Op. cite. Dudley, William S. ed. The Naval War of 1812, vol. 2, 710-11.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Captain Porter to the American secretary of the navy, 3 July 1814. In James, William, Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812: A Full and Correct Account of the Naval War Between Great Britain and the United States of America, 1812-1815. London, UK: T. Egerton, Whitehall, 1817. Reprinted Conway Maritime Press of Chrysalis Book Group, plc. London, 2004, appendix #73, 337.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Op. cite. James, William. Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812, 153-154.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Ibid., 336-341; Guttridge, Leonard F. and Smith, Jay D. The Commodores. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1969, 242-245.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> John Mason to Jones 10 August 1814, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers, Reel 11/401.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Cochrane to Mason, February 1815, National Library of Scotland, Edinburg, UK, Cochrane Papers, Manuscript 2349/258. (Porter also objected to the legality of his capture and loss of ship because the battle occurred in neutral waters. There was little Porter could do about it as he sailed back to the United States. With his parole declared invalid, Porter joined in the defense of Baltimore in September 1814.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Op. cite. Captain Porter to the American secretary of the navy, 3 July 1814, in James, William, Naval Occurrences, appendix #73, 341.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Ibid. From Captain Hillyar to Mr. Crocker, 30 March 1814, appendix #71, 331.

<sup>xl</sup> Ibid. From Captain Hillyar to Captain Porter. 4 April 1814, appendix #72, 333.

<sup>xli</sup> Op. cite. Ronda, James P. Astoria and Empire. 287-91.



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<sup>xlii</sup> Commander William Black, R.N., to First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, 15 December 1813. Copy, Admiralty 1/21. P 464. Also Op. cite. Dudley William, The Naval War of 1812, vol. 2, 714.

<sup>xliii</sup> Op. cite. Dolin, Eric Jay, Fur Fortune, and Empire: 216.

<sup>xliv</sup> Coles, Harry L. The War of 1812. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 237.

<sup>xlv</sup> When the Pacific Fur Company sold Fort Astoria to the North West Company in 1813, fur trader Donald Mackenzie carried the American copies back east in 1814. The current location of the American documents is unknown. McKenzie later helped develop the rich trade of Southern Idaho. In 1824 he was made Governor of Red River Colony, the highest post of the Country, next to the Governor-in-Chief. According to an archivist at Archives of Manitoba (130-200 Vaughan Street, Winnipeg, MB) a Canadian copy is in their Hudson's Bay Company Collection: Location code F 4/61 microfilm # 5M13.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Op. cite. Ronda, James, Astoria & Empire, 301.

<sup>xlvii</sup> The Northwest Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 and developed the Oregon Country over the next three decades. Ironically, the Hudson's Bay Company supplied the thousands of Americans who travel the Oregon Trail, a route discovered and used by one of Astor's men, to settle the Oregon Country. In 1846 the British and Americans signed the Oregon Treaty ceding all rights to the mainland south of the forty-ninth parallel to the United States.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Greenhow, The History of Oregon and California, New York, NY: d. Appleton and Company, 1845, 307.

<sup>xlix</sup> Dawson, Will, The War That Was Never Fought, Philadelphia, PA: Auerbach Publishers, 1971, 28

<sup>l</sup> Ibid. 63

<sup>li</sup> Ibid. 83.

<sup>lii</sup> Murray, Keith, The Pig War, Tacoma, WA: Washington Historical Society, 1968, 72.

<sup>liii</sup> Ibid. 74.

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