

# The War of 1812 – Battles at Plattsburgh

## September 11, 1814

Lesson Plan in accordance with NY State Educational Standards

- Plattsburgh's location on Lake Champlain in New York and its relationship to the locations of other places and people meant that Plattsburgh would play a key role in the War of 1812.
- Lake Champlain played a vital role in Britain's plan to capture the newly-formed United States.
- The British hadn't gotten over their loss of the colonies during the Revolutionary War and sought revenge.
- The United States did not want to go to war against the British again. Their government was young, they did not have the finances, and there was an insignificant army and naval force.
- The British antagonized the United States by impressing sailors, blocking international trade, and firing upon U.S. ships.
- British troops were well established in Canada, marking Plattsburgh as an obvious target.
- The battles at Plattsburgh on September 11, 1814 are often referred to as the most important engagements of the War of 1812.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

History of the United States and New York

Needs and Wants  
Human Rights

Brainstorm with students and develop a list of freedoms that are important to them. Ask them what their reactions would be should those freedoms be taken away. Define *impressment*. Then have them write a persuasive essay or speech defending their point of view.

Civics, Citizenship, Government

Change  
Conflict  
Civic Values

Ask students to take a stance on the War of 1812 and support it.

- What viewpoints might they have?
- Why did the British incite the war?
- Why was the United States reluctant to enter into a war?
- In the end, why was war declared and by whom?
- What was the result of the war?

Decision Making

Have students make a poster encouraging men to join the army, navy, or militia.

Geography

On a map, have students locate and label Canada, Plattsburgh, Lake Champlain, and the Saranac River. Have them relate the geography to strategy.

History of New York State

Power, Science, and Technology

Have students write biographical sketches of Commodore Thomas Macdonough, Captain George Downie, General Alexander Macomb, or General George Prevost.

Discuss the differences of ship size, firepower, and naval strategies. Discuss the numbers and capabilities of the land forces. Have the students predict the outcome of the battles. What were the results and consequences of the battles?

Have students write an essay about the battles at Plattsburgh.

Have students assume the persona of Commodore Macdonough or General Macomb and write a journal entry of the events and results of the battles.

*Teacher Note:*

The Battle of Plattsburgh Association has an up-to-date website with educational resources at [www.battleofplattsburgh.org](http://www.battleofplattsburgh.org)

# Interdisciplinary Connections

## English Language Arts

Students will write persuasive paragraphs, essays, and speeches.

## Art

Students will draw and illustrate posters and maps.

## Physical Education

Students will play period games – Graces, hoops, jump rope, stilts, and duck-duck-goose.

## Mathematics

Students will calculate the differences in ship size, guns, and crew.

## Science

Students will calculate the trajectory of cannon fire at different ranges (an important skill that Macdonough used in moving his ships out of the range of British gun batteries).

## Suggested Documents and Other Resources Selected by New York State Teachers:

- Portraits of Commodore Thomas Macdonough, Captain Downie, General Maccomb, and General Prevost
- Paintings of the naval and land battles by Julian Davidson, Dean Mosher, and John Purdy
- Maps of the land and naval forces on September 11, 1814
- *The Battles at Plattsburgh: September 11, 1814* by Keith A. Herkalo
- *The War of 1812 in the Champlain Valley* by Allan S. Everest
- *The Journal of Henry K. Averill, Sr.* edited by Keith A. Herkalo
- *Nine Days a Soldier* by Joy A. Demarse

## Trade Books

*Mr. Teach Goes to War*, by Frank A. Cooper

*The Battle of Plattsburgh 200 years* (historical coloring book, activities, and text), by Ricky Laurin

### Using the Internet

<http://www.battleofplattsburgh.org>

### Field Trips

War of 1812 Museum  
31 Washington Road  
Plattsburgh, NY 12903  
(518) 566-1814

Clinton County Historical Association  
98 Ohio Avenue  
Plattsburgh, NY 12903  
(518) 561-0340

Kent-Delord House Museum  
17 Cumberland Avenue  
Plattsburgh, NY 12901  
(518) 561-1035

Plattsburgh City Hall  
41 City Hall Place  
Plattsburgh, NY 12901  
(518) 563-7701

### **Battles at Plattsburgh Lesson Plan Narrative:**

On the 31st of March in 1814 British forces occupied Paris in France and forced **Napoleon Bonaparte** to **abdicate**. France surrendered to Britain on 11 April 1814 ending several years of war between the two countries. Britain then had a large number of army and navy forces which could be sent across the Atlantic Ocean to fight the war with the United States.

In March 1814, **Bathurst**, the Secretary of War issued a set of orders to the British army and navy instructing that the navy was to transport Major General Ross and 4,500 British troops to create a **diversion** by attacking the United States along the eastern coast. Bathurst thought that the United States would concentrate on defending its coast and might not reinforce the U.S. Army along the

Canadian border. General Ross directed that coastal towns be annoyed and began to raid the Chesapeake Bay region of Maryland. In August he attacked at Bladensburg, Baltimore (**Fort McHenry**), and after being directed not to go inland, marched into Washington where the British Army burned the President's home. It was later rebuilt and white-washed to hide the burned appearance – resulting in its being referred to from the early 1900's as the "White House".

With the United States distracted by the British actions in the Chesapeake and along the coast, Bathurst issued another order in June 1814 instructing that 10,000 British troops be sent to Canada to **augment** the army in Canada under the command of **General George Prevost**. He directed that Prevost "commence offensive operations on the Enemy's Frontier before the close of this Campaign", destroy **Sacket's Harbor**, and to capture and occupy an advanced position on **Lake Champlain**, "always however taking care not to expose His Majesty's Forces to being cut off by too extended a line of advance."

Prevost moved 4,000 of the new troops to **Kingston, Ontario** from where they were to attack Sacket's Harbor, attracting the United States War Department's attention to what could be viewed as an invasion of the country. In response to the threat at Sacket's Harbor, **General John Armstrong** of the War Department directed that all available troops under the command of **General George Izard** at Plattsburgh move west to defend Sacket's Harbor. The diversion worked! Plattsburgh, the largest supply point for the Northern Army of the United States, was left virtually defenseless as 4,500 U.S. troops marched west.

**General Alexander Macomb** was left in command at Plattsburgh with a **pioneer corps** attempting to complete three unfinished forts, all of the sick and injured, prisoners, and small companies of riflemen, engineers, and artillery. The four-ship navy at Plattsburgh was under the command of **Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough**. General Macomb began moving almost 800 sick and injured soldiers to the military hospital at **Burlington, Vermont** and a hospital established on Crab Island in **Cumberland Bay**, just off the shores of **Plattsburgh, New York**. He directed that the remaining men concentrate on completing the fortifications. Macomb also ordered that **General Benjamin Mooers** of the NY militia call for all available militia troops of Clinton, Essex, and Franklin counties to report for duty; approximately 700 farmers, shop keepers, doctors, lawyers, mill workers, and newspaper employees responded. Seeing the need for more troops, Macomb then requested help from the militia of the State of Vermont; almost 2,500 arrived before September 11th.

A group of twenty school boys from the **Plattsburgh Academy**, many with their family's weapons, reported to General Macomb to volunteer. Macomb, needing every fighter he could get, agreed to let them fight as a rifle company if they could get military sponsors. Captain Martin Aikin of the Essex County, NY militia and Lieutenant Azariah Flagg of the Clinton County, NY militia (and editor of the Plattsburgh Republican newspaper) volunteered as sponsors. The boys were **cited** by General Macomb after the battle for their bravery and usefulness.

With the diversions of the Chesapeake region and Sacket's Harbor an apparent success, General Prevost ordered the British Army to advance toward Plattsburgh starting on 3 September 1814. He left supplies and about 650 men where they camped at Champlain on the 5th of September.

The 10,000 man British Army moved into Plattsburgh on the 6th of September 1814 from two directions: the **artillery**, supplies, and other wagon-borne items by the roadway along the shore of Lake Champlain and the major **infantry** forces from the west through the village of Beekmantown. General Macomb ordered 250 soldiers and some of the militia to meet the 7,000-man British column at Beekmantown. After firing for a short period of time at the long line of advancing red-coated troops, the Americans returned hastily to Plattsburgh, crossing to the south side of the Saranac River. The British troops encamped on the northern side of the Saranac and began building artillery and rocket **batteries**. Macdonough moved his ships to deeper water within the bay and out of range of the British artillery range.

Prevost's plan called for a combined naval and land attack. The British were building a new flagship, the *Confiance*, larger than any of Macdonough's vessels, at **Isle Au Noix** to the north of Lake Champlain. **Captain George Downie** arrived to take command of the *Confiance* and the British fleet at the beginning of September. Downie was new, and short of experienced sailors and cannon crew; some spoke only French! Prevost's plan was to wait for the *Confiance* to join the British Fleet before the final assault at Plattsburgh.

Knowing that Prevost might attempt to attack the forts from the rear by moving west and south, Macomb ordered the militia to disguise the roadway south of the Saranac River leading from the west toward the village. The work was to be done at night, without torches or lanterns. They would leave the roadway to the south, three miles west of the village, leading to the **Salmon River Settlement** where General Mooers maintained his headquarters. **Lieutenant Sumpter** with two artillery crews and two cannon were to remain at Salmon River Settlement and await the British.

In the evenings and during the days from the 7th to the 10th of September, Macomb continually marched his troops out of the woods from one direction and into the woods at a different location, back and forth, changing locations and directions, to give the appearance of large numbers of reinforcements arriving. Macdonough anchored his vessels with lines set to aid in "winding" his ships, turning them around to bring fresh guns against the British. His flagship, *Saratoga*, was a match for the *Confiance* at close range: Macdonough had **carronades** - short, fat cannons with limited range; Downie's ship had **long guns** - long-range cannons.

On the morning of the 11th of September, Downie's fleet entered Cumberland Bay adjacent to the Village of Plattsburgh. Had Downie remained in the deeper water of the lake, he could have fired upon Macdonough without risking any return fire; Macdonough's guns would not have been able to achieve the range. Because of the insistence of General Prevost that the British navy support the advance of the army, and due, in part, to the unseasoned **bravado** of Captain Downie (who boasted that the *Confiance*, alone, could defeat the American navy), Downie entered into Macdonough's trap. The crews of Macdonough's vessels knew the lake, each other, and had practiced gunning frequently; Downie's crews were "green" and had trouble communicating with each other.

Downie died within the first fifteen minutes of the naval battle. Macdonough's crews inflicted considerably more damage upon the British fleet than the Americans suffered. Miraculously, none of the ships from either side sank. When all of the initial guns on Macdonough's vessel were disabled he gave the order to "**wind ship**". With the lines previously placed to make it happen, the *Saratoga* turned a fresh broadside of guns upon the **listing** British *Confiance*. The new gunfire was

more than the broken British fleet could stand: at 10:54 AM, they struck their colors after nearly two and one half hours of non-stop battering. The naval battle resulted in an American victory – the British fleet surrendered.

On land, when the naval battle started at 8:30 AM, General Prevost called his officers to his headquarters for a meeting. He was told that the army was eating breakfast and he ordered that they be able to finish. His battle plan called for **General Sir Thomas Brisbane** to take 1,500 troops to create a diversion inside the village at the Saranac River while all the remaining infantry were to go west and then south, crossing the **Saranac River** several miles from the village to attack the American forts as General Macomb had anticipated. General Brisbane's force was to engage the American forces at 9:30 while **General Frederick Philipse Robinson** led a column of troops west to meet with **General Sir Manley Power's** troops outside the village, turning south to enter the woods and eventually cross the Saranac to attack the American forts from the south. The 7,000-man column entered the woods only to get lost among logging roads and eventually found the river crossing at 10:30.

General Macomb had ordered the New York militia into the western woods along the roadway leading to the Salmon River Settlement telling them to retreat as the enemy advanced. He ordered the Vermont militia into the eastern woods along the same roadway, telling them not to fire upon the British until they heard the cannon of Lieutenant Sumpter at Salmon River Settlement.

The large British column crossed the Saranac River and advanced for a mile and a half on the roadway toward the Settlement, taking fire from the New York militia on their right flank. At 11:00, as the naval engagement ended and silence fell upon the lake, the British column reached the Salmon River Settlement – Lieutenant Sumpter's cannon blocked their approach and sounded the start of an engagement with the British column receiving fire from the woods on both sides of the roadway and the artillery in front of them.

General Prevost, after watching as the British fleet surrendered, now was aware that General Robinson's column was not attacking the American forts from the south but was itself under attack by cannon and a force of unknown quantity some two and a half miles from where they should have been. Perhaps remembering that American militia seemed to be arriving day and night for days and recalling the words of Bathurst's orders, "always however taking care not to expose His Majesty's Forces to being cut off by too extended a line of advance", General Prevost issued an order to retreat. The finest, most experienced army in the world, turned in the face of an unknown defender and retreated. The Americans won the Battles at Plattsburgh.

**Theodore Roosevelt** and **Winston Churchill** referred to Plattsburgh as the most important engagement of the War of 1812. It was the largest invasion on United States soil during the War and forced the British to rethink their position in peace talks at **Ghent** in the Netherlands. A treaty was signed on December 24th, 1814 effectively ending the War. The Battle of New Orleans, at which 4,500 British troops participated in a disastrous ending, happened in 1815 after the treaty was signed.

**Battles at Plattsburgh Lesson Plan Vocabulary:**

**Napoleon Bonaparte** - military and political leader of France in the early 19th century

**Abdicate** - to give up power

**Bathurst**, the Secretary of War - Henry Bathurst, prince of England and 3rd Earl of Bathurst who was in charge of King George's military forces during the War of 1812

**Diversion** - an action that draws attention away from something else

**Fort McHenry** - the star-shaped fort at the entrance to Baltimore harbor

**Augment** - to make greater in size or quantity

**General Sir George Prevost** - British soldier and governor in chief of Canada from 1811 to 1815

**Sacket's Harbor** - a New York village on Lake Ontario at the entrance to Black River Bay

**Lake Champlain** - the 7th largest lake in the United States; a natural, fresh-water lake extending 110 miles north-to-south from New York's border with Canada

**Kingston, Ontario** - Canadian city located in the eastern portion of Southern Ontario where Lake Ontario enters into the St. Lawrence River

**General John Armstrong** - American general appointed in 1813 by President Madison as Secretary of War

**General George Izard** - American general in charge of the northern division of the American army in 1814

**General Alexander Macomb** - American general left in command of the military forces at Plattsburgh in the summer of 1814

**Pioneer Corps** – regular army personnel assigned to labor tasks.

**Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough** - American naval officer in charge of the American fleet on Lake Champlain in 1814

**Burlington, Vermont** - a city on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain

**Cumberland Bay** - bay adjacent to Plattsburgh, New York where the Saranac River enters into Lake Champlain

**Plattsburgh, New York** - now a city; a village during the War of 1812 at the mouth of the Saranac River

**General Benjamin Mooers** - American general who commanded the New York militia during the Battles at Plattsburgh

**Militia** - civilians acting as soldiers but not part of the regular army

**Plattsburgh Academy** - a school in Plattsburgh, New York which existed from 1811 to 1871

**Cited** - mentioned

**Artillery** - an army unit which features large guns (cannons)

**Infantry** - an army unit of foot soldiers

**Batteries** - units of rockets or cannons gathered together for better concentration of control and force

**Captain George Downie** - British naval officer appointed to command the British fleet on Lake Champlain in 1814

**Isle Au Noix** - an island in the Richelieu River south of Montreal and just north of Lake Champlain

**Lieutenant Sumpter** - American Light Artillery officer; light artillery being smaller horse-drawn cannon

**Carronade** - a naval gun with a short barrel and large bore; a short-range, but very effective cannon

**Long gun** - a cannon with a longer barrel; a long-range cannon

**Bravado** - an exaggerated display of self- confidence or courage

**“Wind Ship”** - command given to turn a ship around, end-for-end by pulling on the anchors

**Listing** – for a ship, leaning over to the side.

**Salmon River Settlement** - a small area of homes and shops which existed southwest of Plattsburgh in 1814; American Militia General Mooers maintained his headquarters here

**General Sir Thomas Brisbane** - British army officer who commanded a brigade at Plattsburgh

**Saranac River** - A rapid but navigable river in northern New York that empties into Lake Champlain at Plattsburgh

**General Frederick Philipse Robinson** - British army officer who commanded a brigade at Plattsburgh

**General Sir Manley Power** - British army officer who commanded a brigade at Plattsburgh

**Theodore Roosevelt** - 26th President of the United States; author and historian

**Winston Churchill** - former Prime Minister of England; author and historian

**Ghent, Netherlands (now Belgium)** - European city in which representatives of Britain and the United States met to conduct peace talks in 1814