

Poetic Myths: American Nationalism and the War of 1812

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Abstract

“The Star Spangled Banner” is one of the best known patriotic songs in the United States; however, most people do not know it originated as a poem during a much understudied, but highly influential time. “The Star Spangled Banner” is one of several poems that helped build unity in America during and after the War of 1812. This project analyzes early 19th century American poetry and the influence it had on building foundational ideologies of American nationalism. It focuses on the role poetry played in creating nationalistic myths by using primary texts to explore and analyze the different themes, words, and styles used to convey poetry to the populace between 1812 and 1829. It also shows ideas, beliefs, and social and political ideologies prevalent among those with the influence to get their voices heard. The ideas that are most prevalent in the American nationalistic myth are those of valor, gallantry, pride, perseverance, godly endeavor, liberty, duty, roughness, and steadfastness. This study helps provide a general understanding of how national unity is built in fledgling countries.

Introduction

“Oh say can you see by the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming? Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight, O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming!” There are very few people in the United States today that would not recognize these lines as the beginning of the country’s national anthem. Yet, based on a recent poll asking which war was associated with this song, only 30% answered correctly. The majority of those polled believe the anthem originated in the Revolutionary War; a few even answered that they believe it emerged during the Civil War. The correct answer, however, is the War of 1812.¹

On September 13, 1814, Francis Scott Key penned “The Star Spangled Banner” as he was forced to watch the bombing of Fort McHenry from a British frigate, which he had boarded in an attempt to negotiate a prisoner exchange. All night Key watched as the fort was brutally assaulted. When the dawn rose and the carnage could finally be seen, Key was astonished to find that the flag still waved. Overcome by emotion, he quickly wrote down his feelings of pride, patriotism, and awe in the poem “The Bombardment of Fort McHenry.” The poem quickly became popular, and, as many poems were during the time, it was set to a familiar tune, “To Anacreon in Heaven,” and renamed, “The Star Spangled Banner.” It wasn’t until 1931, one hundred and seventeen years later, that it would be officially declared the national anthem.

“The Star Spangled Banner” ranks the United States among many other nations whose anthems took shape during a time of war. The anthems of France, Great Britain, Belgium, Cuba, Greece, and Venezuela, just to name a few, were also written in response to wartime events such as a coming battle, a current battle, or in the aftermath of a battle.² The purpose of writing and consequently spreading these anthems was to inspire patriotism in an effort to

¹ This poll was conducted anonymously online at <http://www.misterpoll.com/polls/603773>. The poll was initiated on June 3, 2015, and concluded on June 11, 2015. At that time 78 voters had responded to the question: What war is associated with the American National Anthem (Star Spangled Banner)? Of those 78 people: 42 (53%) said Revolutionary War, 24 (30%) said War of 1812, 11 (14%) said Civil War, and 1 (1%) said World War I.

² The information regarding these anthems was gleaned from an essay written by Mathew Perry entitled, “National Anthems: A Call to Arms” found at: http://users.dickinson.edu/~history/product/perry/national_anthem.html and also from the website of the National Anthems of the World Organization found at: <http://www.national-anthems.org/history.php>. Please see these sites for more information on these and other national anthems.

unify the country's populace. This unity is what scholars refer to as nationalism. The term "nationalism," however, can be ambiguous and deceiving.

In 1828, Noah Webster compiled the first dictionary of American English. The term nationalism does not appear as an entry in that volume.³ A few of Webster's other definitions shed light on the origins of the word. For instance, his definition of "nation" reads: "a body of people inhabiting the same country, or united under the same sovereign or government." He defined the word "national" as: "public; general; common to a nation."⁴ This means that, according to Webster, the root of the term "nationalism" should encompass the entirety of anyone governed by the United States. By these definitions, one could assume anything deemed "national" by nature would need to be a general understanding and common to each member of the nation. Therefore, any ideas, beliefs, language, religion, and politics would need to be the common understanding and practice of the governed body. There is a piece missing though. Webster posited that a nation encompasses "a body of people inhabiting the same country," but he did not indicate that it is the *entire* body of people.

The common term for this body of people governed by a central government is "citizen." Webster defined that word as: "an inhabitant who enjoys the freedoms and privileges of the city [or country] in which he resides."⁵ Although this may sound fairly straightforward, Webster included an accompanying definition. "In the United States, [a citizen is] a person, native or naturalized, who has the privilege of exercising the elective franchise, or the qualifications which enable him to vote for rulers, and to purchase and hold real estate."⁶ Webster's definitions, readily suggest that only free white men made up the citizenry of the U.S., because only they could afford to own land and had the power to vote. This citizenry determined what would be considered "national." Only these citizens were deemed relevant to the government and important enough to inspire thought and action in the country. In contrast, according to the definition, women and black men, whether free or slave, could not be considered citizens because they could not vote. Furthermore, only a white, male immigrant who had been naturalized and prospered enough to own land could be considered a citizen. By Webster's definitions, only a limited number of the population residing in the United States in 1828 were actually citizens who determined what the earliest face of nationalism would look like.

When nationalism is considered in this vein of reasoning, it raises the question of whether nationalism is ever truly real. The fact is, no nation is ever going to have 100 percent popular support. It is very rare that a group of people will ever agree unanimously upon what is best for a nation, because its ideas, beliefs, and social and political objectives will never be totally unified. Anthony D. Smith, a historical sociologist, in his attempt to define and explain the theoretical concept of nationalism, claims that no matter the definition one chooses to incorporate, the underlying theme common to all is that the "nation is at the centre (sic) of its concerns and seeks to promote its well-being."⁷ Due to this ambiguity and lack of cohesiveness, nationalism, as a whole, is more myth than reality.

Hugh Seton-Watson, a historian and political scientist, suggests that "no scientific definition of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists."⁸ History textbooks teach that countries and nations are built on certain ideas and principles, and anyone who does not hold true to those ideas and principles is not exhibiting nationalism. There are some historians and social scientists that will say that when nationalism breaks down, so does the country. While this may be true in some instances, it is definitely not the norm. Because nationalism is based on abstract ideas that originate with only a small percentage of the populace, the idea that someone not agreeing with those ideas will destroy a nation is absurd. There may be contention among the populace on differing opinions in regards to the ideals nationalism is based on. There may even be uprisings and rebellions of people who do not agree with those ideas. The fact that ideas of nationalism are created by people who are both powerful and influential makes them stronger than most rebellions and uprisings. This is why, even though nationalism cannot be defined, it still exists. It just exists as a myth rather than a concrete ideology.

The notion of nationalism as a myth is more easily identifiable. As with most myths, the ideas of nationalism have a basis in truth, but are greatly exaggerated or overplayed to incite a particular action from a group. Just as origin myths from various cultures around the world teach of the sacrifice, love, and power of those who created life, so too does the myth of American nationalism. Our myth lies in the history of our county and on the

³ The term nationalism does not appear until the fourth edition of the *American Dictionary of English* printed in 1842.

⁴ Webster, *American Dictionary*, Vol. 2.

⁵ Webster, *American Dictionary*, Vol 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, 9.

⁸ Seton-Watson, *Nations and States*, 5.

shoulders of our “founding fathers.” American nationalism, even from the earliest of times, was based on the actions and characteristics of those who led the people through the Revolutionary War and created the United States. However, these characteristics are based on idolized conceptions of who those men were and what they did. Furthermore, not everyone viewed these “heroes” in the same light or agreed with their actions. But that does not matter in the realm of nationalism. The ideas, beliefs, and the social and political objectives of a nation, need only be of a majority opinion *of those in power*, rather than a unanimous opinion of the entire populace, to become a basis for growth and unification. It is actually the concept of patriotism that allows nationalism to flourish within a country.

“Patriotism,” as defined by Webster, construes a “love of one's country; the passion which aims to serve one's country, either in defending it from invasion, or protecting its rights and maintaining its laws and institutions in vigor and purity. Patriotism is the characteristic of a good citizen, the noblest passion that animates a man in the character of a citizen.”⁹ According to this 1828 definition, if a man is patriotic, he loves his country and will uphold the ideas on which it is founded. Although many people may confuse nationalism and patriotism, patriotism is simply a way for the populace to support the ideas of nationalism their leaders have established.

Due to the ambiguity surrounding definitions of nationalism as a whole, this study is not an attempt to solidify a categorization of nationalism. Rather, this study is an attempt to show one aspect of how the myth of nationalism is historically built. Most historians have focused on the mediums of word of mouth, newspapers, and political propaganda when studying the spread of American nationalism in the early 19th century. They have devoted little to no attention to the role of poetry in the first era of American nationalism. This project, then, will fill this niche and produce data that, when combined with evidence from other historians, may help answer the question of what traits and doctrine unified our country in the past and how that task was accomplished.

In 1825, William Cullen Bryant claimed that poetry was a “suggestive art” that had the power to influence three areas of human thought: the imagination, the passions, and the reason.¹⁰ He challenged the people to “consider the influence of poetry on the welfare and happiness of our race...as it addresses itself to the imagination, to the passions, and to the intelligence.”¹¹ Similarly, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in 1832 that, “the true glory of a nation consists [of]... the extent of its mental power, -the majesty of its intellect, -the height and depth and purity of its moral nature.”¹² During the time of these two great authors, there was a literary revolution that called for the production of a national literature—an American literature—rather than continuing to follow in the footsteps of Britain’s great authors. However, there was little support for this shift, both from the populace and the government. As such, it fell to the authors themselves to try to build a niche for themselves in American culture. They focused their works on things the general populace valued. Poets wrote about the world around them to project the majesty of the American nation. They wrote about patriotism to project a sense of unity and loyalty among the citizens. They wrote about specific events both in the present and from a historical perspective to showcase important events that had brought America to its current glory. In short, these poets wrote in an attempt to create an American literature by building an audience through American nationalism.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of poems written during the War of 1812 revolved around the various battles fought or on the war itself. There were a few written about icons who died, monuments to the past, and even some based on nature. While not all of the poetry was the same, and not all of the poems produced during the War of 1812 were written with an idea of building a national unity, the majority contained a common thread in the virtues, characteristics, ideals, and symbols they presented. The earliest form of American nationalism was born from these threads.

Using the time period from 1812 to 1828, which encompasses the years of the War of 1812 and the period of national unification that immediately followed it, this study will show how poetry influenced certain areas of nationalism. Each of the sections is dedicated to a different theme found within the verses of the poems. Not only does each section show the ideas popular among those who had the opportunity to publish their poems, but how those poems relate to the ideas of nationalism instituted by the citizens of the United States at the time. It is as

⁹ Webster, *American Dictionary*, Vol 2.

¹⁰ Link, *American Nationalism and the Defense of Poetry*, 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51.

important to keep in mind the previously identified definition of citizen as it is important to realize the scope of the poetry being presented here.¹³

Historiography

The topic of nationalism, has greatly interested historians for many decades. Past studies in nationalism, mostly focused on European, Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries, but had not ventured into the realm of American nationalism. Recently, Jasper M. Trautsch, a nationalism scholar at the German Historical Institute in Paris, France, published an article answering the question of why so few scholars have seemingly ignored nationalism in the United States. “Nationalism,” he explains, “implied a doctrine or a specific form of consciousness conveying superiority or prestige and had often engendered exclusion, wars, displacements, and genocide, which, as such, had never come to pass in America.”¹⁴ He furthers his claim that it has only been since the September 11, 2001 attacks that American nationalism become a topic of serious consideration for historians, due to the intense display of it during this time of national tragedy.¹⁵ Nationalism scholars finally conceded that American’s did in fact have a sense of nationalism, though it was very different from their previous studies in other countries.

American nationalism is different in that there were not multiple centuries worth of antagonistic ideas threatening it, as can be seen throughout all the other nations of the world. As the study of American nationalism has grown in popularity, many debates have gained attention within the historical community. The biggest of these has concerned the precise formation of American nationalism. In his article, Trautsch considers when nationalism emerged for the first time in American history. Ultimately, he concludes that it was the “period between the American Revolution and the Civil War that an American nationality emerged,” and that it “continues to be an ongoing process.”¹⁶ His findings, however, are by no means new to authors who have studied it for longer than it has been popular.

Most historians who study the War of 1812 and the Era of Good Feelings concur that this period, as Donald Hickey proclaims, “promoted national self-confidence and encouraged the heady expansionism that lay at the heart of American foreign policy for the rest of the century...The war gave the fledgling republic a host of sayings, symbols, and songs that helped Americans define who they were and where the young republic was headed.”¹⁷ Ernest Gellner counters this definition of emerging nationalism. “Nationalism,” he asserts, “is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”¹⁸ Despite semantics, both claim nationalism first occurred in America during the War of 1812 and the years immediately following it. The fledgling country that had been torn apart by party politics since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution was finally drawn

¹³ This scope becomes very apparent when one considers that it was white, male authors who wrote the published poetry of the time period. Every effort was made to locate poetry written by women, black men, whether free or slave, and immigrants. After searching through several volumes of poetry anthologies, literature anthologies, archival sources, and newspapers, there were simply no poems to be found that were written and published by women, black men, or immigrants during this time period. It is possible, however, that they were submitting their work as anonymous authors, as a great many poems discovered did not have authors listed.

¹⁴ Trautsch, “The Origins and Nature of American Nationalism,” 1. For similar discussions on the nature of nationalism throughout the world and how American nationalism differs see Smith, *Nationalism*; Dangerfield, *The Awakening of American Nationalism*; Schwartz, “The Origins of Jeffersonian Nationalism;” Seton-Watson, *Nations and States*; and Trautsch, “Mr. Madison’s War.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 2. For further discussion on the growth of nationalism post-September 11, 2001, see Bratta, *Flag Display Post 9/11: A Discourse on American Nationalism*.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3. For more discussion on when American nationalism emerged see Bukovansky, “American Identity and Neutral Rights;” Caruthers, “Influence of Maritime Trade;” Dangerfield, *The Awakening of American Nationalism*; Dudley, *Antebellum America*; Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*; Furstenburg, *In the Name of the Father*; Hickey, *The War of 1812*; Lind, “The Case for American Nationalism;” Nash, “Contested Identities;” Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*; and Waldstreicher, “Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent.”

¹⁷ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 3. For more information on the emergence of nationalism during the War of 1812 see also, Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*; Pessen, *American Nationalism and American Historians*; Hicks, Mowry, and Burke, *A History of American Democracy*; and Hockett, *Political and social growth of the American People, 1492-1865*.

¹⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 3, quoted by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

together in a fight for economic survival. Benedict Anderson, the author of *Imagined Communities*, embraces the concept of nationalism as myth and is quick to point out that, “it is doubtful whether either social change or transformed consciousness, in themselves, do much to explain the attachment that peoples feel for the inventions of their [nation] or... why people are ready to die for these [nations].”¹⁹ Although the general population may come together for a common purpose, it is the concept of patriotism that really cements nationalism within nation-states.

During the War of 1812, patriotism, founded in the seemingly impossible naval victories, unified the country. The war with Great Britain, which had the world’s most powerful and prominent Navy, brought a lot of internal criticism of the U.S. government. When the American Navy achieved victories in the Great Lakes and Atlantic campaigns, both political parties rejoiced and celebrations were heard throughout the countryside. In these victories, the populace found a common ground.²⁰ “What the celebration of naval victory shows,” states political historian, Jennifer Clark, “is that the War of 1812 played a much larger role as a catalyst for nationalism than implied by [all of the other political movements of the time combined].”²¹ Despite the reasons behind the war, the American public believed it necessary to support the men who honored the call to arms. No longer were they men from individual states fighting in “Mr. Madison’s War.” They were *American* sailors and soldiers fighting an *American* war, and they needed to be supported by their fellow Americans. In no time, the individual states ceased to exist and America the nation-state emerged with a sense of nationalism.

Although there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that the events during and after the War of 1812 sparked a sense of nationalism, exactly when nationalistic sentiment spread to an expanding America remains problematic. One of the first and most basic ways was through public political festivities and patriotic celebrations. David Waldstreicher, Simon Newman, and Christopher Looby each discuss this concept from different angles.²² Newman shows how patriotic and political celebrations, like electoral candidate speeches, the Fourth of July, and George Washington’s birthday, brought urban communities together for parties and parades. From the time of the Revolution, these festivities reminded the populace of the sacrifices made in the cause of freedom. They featured guest speakers that would entreat the gathering with political ideas of unity, oneness, patriotism, and American exceptionalism. Each occasion was another chance for leaders to build a sense of nationalism. The problem was that most of these commemorative events did not reach the large number of rural communities or individual farmers who found few reasons to venture into larger metropolitan areas.

These political speeches became a highly useful way of circulating ideas among the people who were in a position to affect change, despite their inability to expand into many of the rural communities. The leading political party, and preferred guest speakers, at the end of the War of 1812, was the Democratic-Republicans.²³ They posted numerous propaganda posters and pamphlets declaring their platform and encouraging the people to stand together in unity.²⁴ One of their greatest weapons was President Washington’s Farewell Address, though he had officially backed the Federalists. His legendary treatise was reprinted in newspapers and political pamphlets for years after his resignation and death. In his speech, Washington urges the people to embrace one another as a nation and to not give in to the differences that would naturally separate them.²⁵

It was not just Washington’s great address that was being printed in the papers. Waldstreicher makes the claim that it is the newspapers spreading the news of these celebrations that really helped to spread nationalism. “For answers,” he asserts, “to the great questions left by the American Revolution – who the people were, what their character was, what they believed – people looked to the festivals and the printed commentary that sought to persuade everyone how to act.”²⁶ Although Waldstreicher refers more to the Revolutionary time period, the concept pertains to other time periods as well. After the War of 1812, the people turned to the newspapers to show them how to proceed. The nation was still new and no one understood just how to progress out of state loyalties to that of a

¹⁹ Anderson, 141. See also, Citrin et al., *Is American Nationalism Changing? Implications for Foreign Policy*.

²⁰ Clark, “The Celebration of American Naval Victory: Popular Nationalism in the War of 1812.” 56-65.

²¹ Ibid. 74.

²² Burgett, *American Nationalism - R.I.P*

²³ Ferling, *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Rivalry that Forged a Nation*. Intro.

²⁴ Schwarz, “The Origins of Jeffersonian Nationalism,” 569-592.

²⁵ Furstenburg, *In the Name of the Father*, 41-43.

²⁶ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 225. For more information on the power and position of the presses during this time period see also, Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting*; Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism*; Nord, “Newspapers and American Nationhood, 1776-1826;” and Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*.

national loyalty. Newspapers, which were generally supportive of a particular political party, used their articles to form a unique American image and character. However, newspaper reports about the War of 1812 itself really brought American nationalism to the forefront of these stories and propelled the political ideals into the hearts of the populace.

Although the celebrations and newspapers played an important role in the spreading of national ideas, Looby argues it was a literary and philosophical language that truly solidified a sense of nationalism in American culture. Drawing on the works of Benjamin Franklin, Charles Brockden Brown, and Henry Hugh Brackenridge, Looby shows how the ideas presented in these post-revolutionary texts not only impacted their readers, but also how philosophers and theologians in later years interpreted those ideas and then expounded on them.²⁷ These expanded ideas were disseminated during the post-War of 1812 years via word of mouth, political speeches, or newspapers.

Some critics are quick to point out that this sense of nationalism, born from the War of 1812, centered only on the white male populace, as only they held any power within the government. Recently conducted research focuses on racism within American nationalism, and there has always been a level of division among the people based on race, ethnicity, religion, and culture.²⁸ Due to the complexity of sorting the size and influence each of these factors might contribute to understanding the whole scope of the issue, this project will center on general perceptions of nationalism regardless of the religious, racial, or ethnic identity of the contributor. Focus will, instead, be on the common virtues, ideals, characteristics, and symbols found within the poems themselves.

Common Virtues in American Nationalistic Poetry

During a time of war and strife, one may assume that virtues attributed to the belligerents would be positive with regards to one's own country and negative towards the enemy. This was not the case in the majority of the poems analyzed from the War of 1812. These poems tell a story about a particular time and place, and usually both opposing sides of the conflict appear in a positive light. This could have been because of a lingering sense of connection to Great Britain, among American authors, or simply an attempt to show the strength of the enemy so that a victory would be more impressive and a defeat more palatable. Since Great Britain had one of the most powerful naval and land forces in the world, poets chose to use the same virtues found among the British forces to describe their own. These virtues developed into the cornerstones of American nationalism. Supporting the war effort meant a man possessed these virtues, whereas not supporting the war effort meant he lacked those same virtues. When a virtue was exhibited as positive, whether British or American, it became desirable to not only possess the virtue but to identify with others who possessed it as well. This desire to identify and unite marked the beginning of the myth of American nationalism.

These virtues are a nationalistic myth because they are undefinable and unmeasurable. One person's idea of honor or cunning may differ from another's. There is no way to measure how brave someone is or is not. This is what made these virtues desirable. All one had to do to possess them was to claim them and associate with other people who claimed them. Most of these virtues had long since been associated with great leaders and movements throughout world history. Among the most popular virtues in the poetry from the War of 1812 are valor, gallantry, pride, and perseverance.

Valor

Valor, courage, bravery, and daring are often presented as synonyms in the thesaurus. All of these words are used repeatedly throughout the poems written during the War of 1812. The poets show these virtues mostly through the eagerness and actions of the common soldiers and seamen. "Come, Ye Lads, Who Wish to Shine," an anonymous poem written in 1812 near the beginning of the war, choruses: "Beat the drum, the trumpet sound/
Manly and united,/ Danger face, maintain your ground,/ And see your country righted."²⁹ This poem was to be sung

²⁷ Burgett, "American Nationalism, R.I.P.," 323-324.

²⁸ For examples of recently conducted research that contributed to this essay see: Madriaga, *Why American nationalism should never be considered postnationalist*; Gerstle, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism*; Cheng, *American Historical Writers and the Loyalists, 1788-1856: Dissent, Consensus, and American Nationality*; and Johnson and Frombgen, *Racial Contestation and the Emergence of Populist Nationalism in the United States*.

²⁹ Stevenson, *Poems of American History*, 287, lines 5-8.

to the tune of *Yankee Doodle*. As such, it was a fairly common tune and included in one of the first anthologies following the War of 1812.³⁰ This poem is only one among many that implied a man with courage and bravery would answer the call to arms and join one of the state militias.³¹ This was especially important during the War of 1812, as the regular army only had 11,744 officers and enlisted men.³² The fighting force behind the War of 1812 relied on militia volunteers. Inspiring men to unite and fight was crucial. However, it was not easy as the British had superior numbers and veteran soldiers in almost every battle.

Building on the ideas of courage, bravery, valor, and daring was important to the efforts of the War of 1812. The key lay in using these virtues to connect ordinary men with enough national identity to not only unite them together as a fighting force, but to keep them fighting even when the opposing forces seemed overwhelming and impossible to beat. Another common theme among the poems analyzed is that of overcoming horrible odds. One such poem is “The Battle of Stonington on the Seaboard of Connecticut,” written by Philip Freneau in 1814. During this battle, the HMS *Ramillies*, *Pactolus*, and *Despatch* bombarded the small town of Stonington, Connecticut. The three ships had a total of 113 canons against the two possessed by the people of Stonington. For four days, the British assaulted the town with a nearly nonstop barrage of gunfire, while the townsfolk fired their two canons as often as they could. At the end of four days, the British ships finally gave up and sailed away after unsuccessfully displacing the town folks and taking their supplies. Freneau writes: “The shells were thrown, the rockets flew,/ But not a shell, of all they threw,/ Though every house was full in view,/ Could burn a house at Stonington.”³³ He expatiates on the battle showing how the people used their two canons to annihilate the *Pactolus* and *Despatch* so much that the *Ramillies* gave up the fight for fear it would suffer the same fate. For weeks, Stonington was in the news both locally and nationally. Americans found the story exciting and bolstering, but still only a story in a newspaper. Through his poem, Freneau gave the battle life in the eyes of readers who lived nowhere near the area. This poem allowed people to experience the battle for themselves, and feel the same sense of courage, bravery, valor, and daring the people of Stonington did as they faced the British. Though it cannot be seen or measured, Freneau’s poem helped to unite people in a way that simply stating the facts of battle was never able to.

Gallantry

Gallantry is similar to valor and courage, but is usually associated with something more. Gallantry is not only defined as a “spirited and conspicuous bravery” but also as “an act of marked courtesy.”³⁴ To be gallant in war was not only to fight bravely, but to do so in a manner that showed respect and dignity towards the enemy. In “Firstfruits in 1812,” Pierpont describes the battle between the HMS *Guerriere* and the USS *Constitution*. After the British surrendered the battle, the American captain, Isaac Hull, could have had the British prisoners killed, beaten, set out to sea in long boats to die a slow death from dehydration, or any other number of atrocities. However, he chose to be gallant instead. When the British captain offered up his sword to Hull as a declaration of defeat, he refused it. Pierpont states: “Dacres, injured, o’er our side/ Slowly bears his sword of pride,/ Holds it out, as Hull stands there in his renown:/ ‘No, no!’ says th’ American,/ ‘Never, from so brave a man,/ But I see you’re wounded, let me help you down.”³⁵ Pierpont does not end his show of gallantry with just the captain, but extends it to the whole crew as well. He writes, “All that night we work in vain/ Keeping her upon the main,/ But we’d hulled her far too often, and at last/ In a blaze of fire there/ Dies the pretty *Guerriere*.”³⁶ The men of the *Constitution* could have easily destroyed and sank the *Guerriere*, but instead they chose to try their hardest to save the enemy ship.

“Firstfruits of 1812” does not just tell a story of brave Americans who gained victory over a better equipped enemy. Instead, Pierpont sets out to show that Americans need not be monsters in war, but must instead show gallantry. During a time when the British forced American sailors into service, and often treated them

³⁰ Included in 1842 compilation by William McCarty, *The American Song Book*.
<http://www.bartleby.com/338/69.html>

³¹ For more examples see also from Stevenson’s *Poems of American History, Reparation or War* (286), *Terrapin War* (286), and *The United States and Macedonia* (293). Examples of valor also appear throughout many other poems of the time, however, these poems have valor as one of the main topics.

³² Center of Military History, *American Military History*, 132-134.

³³ Stevenson, *Poems of American History*, Freneau, *Battle of Stonington on the Seaboard of Connecticut*, 309, lines 37-40.

³⁴ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, “gallantry”.

³⁵ Stevenson, *Poems of American History*, Pierpont, *Firstfruits in 1812*, 291, lines 55-60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 61-65.

inhumanely if they defied their captivity, the desire to be cruel and vengeful towards the enemy ran high. Pierpont, however, understood that uniting a nation on the precipice of vengeance and retaliation would not carry the nation forward into the future. Only under positive virtues that would garner compassion and understanding, could the people be united and compelled to foster the same attitude towards one another. After all, if one could find common ground and be courteous to one's enemy in war, it was expected that they could do the same for their neighbors.

Pride

Pride can be a double edged sword with both positive and negative connotations. When positive, it is a "feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired."³⁷ In its negative form, pride often leads to over confidence and ego and usually ends in a downfall of some sort. Poets from the War of 1812 display both types of pride in their poetry. Perhaps not surprisingly, the negative connotation was not applied to the American forces, but only to the British. Pride, at its worst, was blamed for the downfall of the British troops in the battles that they lost.

"The Constitution and the Guerriere" illustrates how pride emerged as Great Britain's downfall. After a three-week chase, the HMS *Guerriere*, one of the most active and prestigious ships of the British Royal Navy, and the USS *Constitution* finally came into contact on August 19, 1812. The British captain, James Richard Dacres believed the *Constitution* and her American naval men would easily be defeated due to their vast inferiority. In the poem, Dacres declared, "Make that Yankee ship your prize,/ You can in thirty minutes, neat and handy, oh!/ Or, twenty-five I'm sure,/ You'll do it in a score,/ I will give you a double share of good brandy, oh!"³⁸ Dacres was full of pride, and for good reason, considering the power of the Royal Navy. The fight commenced and the *Constitution* caused much more damage to the *Guerriere* than they caused the American ship. In the poem, Dacres showed his error in overestimating his own forces while underestimating the force of his enemy when he professed, "Lord, I didn't think those Yankees were so handy!"³⁹ After a second barrage of cannon fire, Dacres surrendered. "The Constitution and the Guerriere" was written in the aftermath, amid the rejoicing of the populace. The victory of the *Constitution* and destruction of the *Guerriere* increased morale and unity among not only the American forces, but the general population as well. Not only did this poem bring the story of the battle to light in a fun and humorous manner, it also showed how pride would be the downfall of the British. This poem, and others like it, were written to build confidence and unity of purpose among the people. With the political parties and people strongly divided on the prudence and wisdom of the war, the author of this poem used the unexpected and surprising victory to begin bridging the division by showing how the pride and arrogance of the British led to their defeat because they underestimated the cunning and determination of the Americans.⁴⁰

In contrast, poets tended to give pride a positive connotation when it was applied to the American forces. One of the most compelling poems that appealed to the pride of the outclassed American forces is "Farewell, Peace." This poem was written by an anonymous author at the beginning of the War of 1812 to defend the declaration of war and inspire the people to have pride in themselves, their fledgling country, and their fighting forces. Building on the past was a common tactic among authors, politicians, and poets during this time and "Farewell, Peace" is no different. The author refers back to the Revolutionary war and patriot soldiers who had already won freedom from the British once stating, "Sons of Freedom! Brave descendants/ From a race of heroes tried,/ To preserve our independence/ Let all Europe be defied./ Let not all the world, united,/ Rob us of one sacred right:/ Every patriot heart's delighted/ In his country's cause to fight./ Come then, war! With hearts elated/ To thy standard we will fly:/ Every bosom animated/ Either to live free or die."⁴¹ The author appeals to the citizens of the American nation to exhibit the same qualities as the patriots of the Revolution, and to fight the British in this new battle for basic rights. Using the pride that most citizens still felt for the patriots who freed America from British rule, this tactic was meant to unite the people under a common past. By reminding the citizens of the same fight that had been fought on the very same soil a short thirty-five years before by the fathers and grandfathers of the current

³⁷ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, "pride".

³⁸ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, The Constitution and the Guerriere*, 288, lines 20-24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, line 39.

⁴⁰ Other poems from Stevenson's *Poems of American History* that show a similar underestimation of the American forces and British pride include *On the Capture of the Guerriere* (290), *The Wasp's Frolic* (293), *The United States and Macedonia* (294), and *The General Armstrong* (296).

⁴¹ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, Farewell, Peace*, 287, lines 17-28.

generation, was a strategic effort in the face of building of national unity that put the reader in the position to either be proud of their heritage and support the war or to disrespect their own family name by refusing to fight.

Perseverance

Despite the growing sense of nationalism, as the War of 1812 dragged on, with neither country remotely close to claiming victory and devastating defeats for both sides, it became necessary to once again boost morale in order to maintain a semblance of unity. A new trend formed within the poetry of the era—perseverance. One of William Cullen Bryant's earliest poems, "After a Tempest," does not deal directly with battles and war. Bryant was a poet who often embraced nature, and the message of perseverance in his work is strong. He begins his poem writing about a horrible storm that he thought would never end, but one day it broke and the sun began to shine once more. He then talked about how new, beautiful, and fresh the world looked after the storm had passed. Near the end of the poem he switched topics slightly and addressed the ravages of the war. He stated: "I looked, and thought the quiet scene/ An emblem of the peace that yet shall be,/ When o'er earth's continents, and isles between,/ The noise of war shall cease from sea to sea,/ And married nations dwell in harmony."⁴² He then examines the damage the war has done to the earth, and compares it to the damage from the fierce tempest at the beginning of the poem. He ends by stating, "Like the glorious light of summer, cast/ O'er the wide landscape from the embracing sky,/ On all the peaceful world the smile of heaven shall lie."⁴³

"The Battle of Bridgewater" provides another example of poetic perseverance. In July of 1814, the British and American forces fought, once again, for the right to control the Fort at Niagara Falls. The battle was one of the bloodiest battles of the War of 1812 as each side knew the fort was a strategic location for both the land and water forces. Although the Americans withdrew, the devastation endured by both sides, left the claim for victory indecisive. Neither side could boast that it had won, as both forces were decimated and nearly destroyed. Regardless of the outcome, the poet of "The Battle of Bridgewater" used his influence to spread the idea of persevering through the trial of war. The author wrote: "Haste, haste thee, Scott, to meet the foe,/ And let the scornful Briton know,/ Well strung the arm and firm the blow/ Of him who strikes for liberty/.../Charge, Miller, charge the foe once more,/ And louder than Niagara's roar/ Along the line is heard encore,/ On, on to death or victory."⁴⁴ After the news came that the American forces retreated from the battle, there was disharmony among the citizens as to whether the battle should have been fought in the first place. "The Battle of Bridgewater" showed the people that if the soldiers who were fighting and dying were capable of persevering to the very end and fighting a battle they could not win, then citizens should do the same. These lines urge the people to stay united and persevere through the trials of the war—even if they did not see a way to win, staying united together in a common cause was more important.

Common Ideals in American Nationalistic Poetry

When attempting to build nationalism among a divided nation it is important to unite the people behind common ideals. During the War of 1812, there was a great deal of anger among the people due to the trade restrictions being forced on them by both the British and the French. American ships were constantly coming up against blockades and American sailors were being pressed into service on British ships. Though there are differing theories on the reasons behind James Madison and Congress declaring war on Great Britain, the main reason that they gave was to stop the impressment of American sailors and to ensure the right to free trade with whomever the United States chose to trade with. It was from this premise that the War of 1812 poets wrote about the ideals of liberty, duty, and Godly endeavor.

Liberty

In today's world, it is common to see liberty and freedom used synonymously. However, similar though they may be, they are not the same. The basic difference between the two is that freedom is being free *from* something or someone, while liberty is being free *to do* something.⁴⁵ The American Revolutionaries fought for

⁴² Hollander, *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, 149, lines 37-41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, lines 52-54.

⁴⁴ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, The Battle of Bridgewater*, 308, lines 21-24 & 33-36.

⁴⁵ Eyer Robert Coates, Sr., *The Jeffersonian Perspective*, Freedom, Liberty, Rights and Their Limitations.

freedom from the tyrannous rule of Great Britain. The War of 1812 was a fight for liberty—the right to trade with whomever a merchant wanted, whenever they wanted to. The political leaders of the time wanted support for the war and they used the idea of liberty to get it. Citing the egregious behavior of both the French and British trade blockades, the leaders declared war. The poets of the time, used this same ideal throughout their poems to call the men to fight for liberty in the United States.

One such poem appeared after the British burned the capital in 1814. “Ye Parliament of England” was written as a letter to the English Parliament. At the beginning of the poem, the author reminded Parliament why war was declared in the first place, asserting, “You first confined our commerce,/ And said our ships shan’t trade,/ You next impressed our seamen,/ And used them as your slaves.”⁴⁶ After then describing several instances when Great Britain thought they had the upper hand but the American forces reigned supreme, the author ended his letter declaring, “Go tell your king and parliament,/ By all the world ‘t is known,/ That British force, by sea and land,/ By Yankees is o’er thrown./ Use every endeavor,/ And strive to make a peace,/ For Yankee ships are building fast,/ Their navy to increase;/ They will enforce their commerce,/ The laws by heaven are made,/ That Yankee ships in time of peace/ To any port may trade.”⁴⁷ The author makes it very clear to the reader that the cause and the end result of the war is the right to free trade. This right to trade without restriction was the embodiment of liberty during the War of 1812.

Although not everyone was a sea-merchant or transatlantic tradesman, a myth of nationalism was still built around this embodiment of liberty because it impacted the entire nation. The economy of the United States relied on imports and exports to remain fluid.⁴⁸ The right to trade was, therefore, tied to every citizen whether directly or indirectly. The call to arms in the name of liberty was a way of unifying the nation behind a common ideal as well as a common goal to restore trade as swiftly as possible.

Duty

With the ideal of liberty, the country had a purpose for which to fight, if it could just get the citizens to answer the petition. At the beginning of the war, the people were still divided in their opinion of the war itself. The response to the call to fight was fairly slow. There were some who believed that the war was a risk as it was a miracle they had beat Great Britain the first time. There were also those who believed the real reason for the war was to invade Canada, and they did not agree with that plan. The poets took it upon themselves to attempt to unify the populace by uniting them under the ideal of duty.

One of the first poems written during the War of 1812 addresses the issue of fighting for the nation due to a sense of duty. Anonymously authored, “The Times” began: “Ye brave sons of Freedom, come join in the chorus,/ At the dangers of war do not let us repine,/ But sing and rejoice at the prospect before us,/ And drink it success in a bumper of wine./ At the call of the nation, Let each to his station, And resist depredation, Which our country degrades.”⁴⁹ The author encouraged the reader to join the fight by speaking of liberty, valor, pride, and patriotism that were won during the Revolutionary War. The author implied that these virtues and ideals would not exist in America had the patriots not voluntarily answered the call of duty and fought for them. At its close, the poet issued the challenge for the reader to forget “local attachments” and instead embrace the Union in unity forever.⁵⁰

Godly endeavor

Of all the ideals that are spoken of throughout the poems from the War of 1812, the most common is that God granted his favor to America. Since the founding of the colonies in the seventeenth century by varying religious sects, God has been a prevalent topic in American literature. Divine providence was a subject addressed by George Washington in many of his speeches, including his Farewell Address. Although the people were divided about the various religious teachings of the Christian sects, most would agree that there was a God and that he favored his chosen people. It was this ideal that the poets built upon. They did not mention specific religions in their poems. Instead, they focused on how divine providence and God’s good graces helped to win battles. In one poem, “Sea and

⁴⁶ Stevenson, *Poems of American History*, *Ye Parliament of England*, 318, lines 9-12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 61-72.

⁴⁸ For information on the financial status of the United States during the War of 1812 please see the doctoral dissertation of Lisa Morales, *The Financial History of the War of 1812*.

⁴⁹ Stevenson, *Poems of American History*, *The Times*, 285, lines 1-8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, line 49.

Land Victories,” the author told of many of the impossible victories attained by the American forces and attributed them all to a higher power, stating, “Should grief and madness rise,/ Remember God, the avenger, reigns.”⁵¹ Using the idea that God is no respecter of persons, the author reminded the people that though they may not agree on how to worship, they were unified through a similar God who protected His people and avenged them against their enemies.

Common Manliness Characteristics in American Nationalistic Poetry

In addition to common virtues and common ideals, the poets of the War of 1812 strove to unify the citizens of the United States under common physical characteristics as well. This proved to be much harder. Unlike virtues and ideals that cannot be seen or measured, characteristics can. The color of one’s skin, the style of one’s clothes, or the cadence of one’s speech could all be used to implicate the social status of any man, woman, or child. Despite this obvious obstacle, many of the poets writing during this time chose to draw on the characteristics they deemed important for those actually doing the fighting. Because soldiers were men, these characteristics focused on the manly attributes of common men, being loud and rough, and finding the strength to remain steadfast.

Common men

It was important for the poets writing during the War of 1812 to portray the soldiers in their poems as common men, rather than professional soldiers or even men of influence. The majority of America’s fighting force relied on volunteers. Those volunteers were mostly farmers, carpenters, fisherman, sailors, and other skilled laborers. They spent little time actually training to fight, unlike the British Army and Navy whose soldiers were constantly drilled on maneuver and tactics. Being common meant the Americans fought for more than money and obligation. They were united in a mutual goal to protect their homes and families—the very backbone of the common man.⁵² This concept was important to the security and well-being of the common men throughout the history of the colonies. Before a standing army was organized during the Revolutionary War, colonies, and later states, were mostly protected by their militias. Each man was required to serve in the militia for a predetermined amount of time. The majority were made up of common, rural farmers and laborers. However, without these militias, America never would have gained its independence. In order to inspire more men to be like the militia men and join the fight willingly, poets played on the strength of commonality by reminding the citizens that it was up to them to protect their homes and very livelihoods.

One such poem, “The Lost War-Sloop,” was written in 1814 about the third USS *Wasp*, which after defeating the HMS *Atlanta*, was caught in a storm and never seen again. The author spent a great deal of time detailing the ship and its crew in comparison to those of the British. The author wrote, “Well her daring crew knew shoal and wind and tide;/ They had come from Portsmouth river,/ Sea-grit Marblehead and Salem,/ Bays and islands where the fisher-folk abide;/ Come for love of home and country,/ Come with wrongs that cried for vengeance,/ Every man among them brave and true and tried. ‘Hearts of oat’ are British seamen?/ Hearts of fire were these, their kindred,/ Flaming till the haughty foe should be descried!”⁵³ The men on board the USS *Wasp* were nothing more than local fisherman and sailors. Their advantage lay in the fact that they knew the rivers and bays more intimately than anyone else because they lived there and spent every day on those waters. The very strength on the volunteer militias was that they were comprised of common men who knew the countryside and waters and understood the cost of losing. It was this knowledge that united them.

Loud and rough

In addition to being common, one of the most collective themes of manliness that poets focused on was that American fighters were loud and rough. A common comparison throughout many of the poems likened the British to lightning and swords, while the Americans were compared to thunder and cannons. In many of the poems, the British were described as flashy, with their tailored uniforms and polished brass buttons, always fighting with

⁵¹ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, Sea and Land Victories*, 328, lines 45-46.

⁵² For a more in depth look at how political leaders also used home and family to inspire the common man to volunteer in the War of 1812 read Nicole Eustace’s book, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*.

⁵³ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, The Lost War-Sloop*, 311, lines 15-24.

decorum as they had been trained and drilled to do. Like lightening and swords, they could be deadly and precise, but still limited in their destructive abilities. By contrast the Americans were poor volunteers. They did not have uniforms but fought in their own homespun clothes. They knew how to follow orders but they were not as methodical as the British in their maneuvers and tactics. Like thunder they tended to last longer than lightening and overshadow the brightness with the noise. Like a cannon, the American forces were adapt at causing destruction and chaos for the British who were used to fighting Napoleon Bonaparte's well trained and highly disciplined Grande Armée.⁵⁴

The poem that most clearly showcases these comparisons was actually written after the Treaty of Ghent had been signed. Neither the British troops in Louisiana nor the American troops under General Andrew Jackson, realized that a peace treaty had been signed to end the war. On January 8, 1815, the British attacked New Orleans with a force of 5,900 men against Jackson's 3,500.⁵⁵ At the end of the battle nearly 2,600 British soldiers were either dead or wounded. By a miraculous contrast, only 8 Americans died in the fight and 14 were wounded.⁵⁶ Poems were quickly written about Jackson and his troops and the Battle of New Orleans quickly became a heroic folktale. "Jackson at New Orleans" described the battle in detail. However, at the very beginning, when describing the belligerents is when the comparison between lightning and thunder is made. In relating the arrival of the British troops at New Orleans, the author stated, "Batteries roll on, halt, and flashing lightnings/ Search out our earthworks, silent and portentous."⁵⁷ The British troops were met by the American forces which were described as attacking with the "Roar of our thunders till the grape and shrapnel/ Shriek through their columns."⁵⁸ The poet used this graphic wording to show the readers that though the British look good and have finesse in their movements, they were overshadowed by the loud and rough actions of ordinary American men. This illustration was a way to unite the populace in their commonness and encouraged them to be proud of their base heritage.

Steadfast/strong

The War of 1812 was a hard fought war for both the British and the Americans. Neither side expected that it would end in a *status quo antebellum*. The British were forced to divide their forces between America and France. The United States "entered the war with confused objectives and divided loyalties."⁵⁹ The British knew the Americans were unprepared to fight. Both sides underestimated the other resulting in a lack of victory for either. However, there were plenty of single battle victories for each side during the conflict. As one would expect, the triumphs brought the nation closer together under a banner of mutual success. Defeats were harder to swallow. While no one particularly wanted to acknowledge a loss, they could not simply be ignored. Poets tried to find a way to present the lost battles in a positive light. One way they did this was by encouraging their audience to remain strong and steadfast. In this way the people were unified in defeat as well as victory.

One particularly devastating American defeat became a rallying cry throughout the remainder of the war. In June of 1813, the USS *Chesapeake* met the HMS *Shannon* near the Boston Harbor. In the course battle the commander of the *Chesapeake*, James Lawrence, was fatally wounded. The poem "Defeat and Victory" described the scene that would become a rallying cry during other battles as well. Lawrence was taken below deck but continued to inspire his men to fight, though defeat was almost certain. The poet wrote, "Gallant Lawrence, wounded, dying,/ Speaks with still unconquered lip/ Ere the bitter draught he drinks:/ 'Keep the Flag flying!/ Fight her till she strikes or sinks!/ Don't give up the ship!'"⁶⁰ Though the *Chesapeake* was lost, the legacy of the commander and crew to remain steadfast despite all odds, survived. Commodore Oliver Perry, in his fight for the control of Lake Erie, named his flagship *Lawrence*, and hung from the mast a flag with the slogan, "Don't give up

⁵⁴ For information on Napoleon's Army see Hughes' book, *Forging Napoleon's Grande Armée: Motivation, Military Culture, and Masculinity in the French Army, 1800-1808*. This book also gives great information on the idea of manliness as a characteristic of a soldier.

⁵⁵ Center for Military History, *American Military History*, 153.

⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Poems of American History*, 323.

⁵⁷ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, Jackson at New Orleans*, 325, lines 4-5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 10-11.

⁵⁹ Center for Military History, *American Military History*, 131.

⁶⁰ Stevenson, *Poems of American History, Defeat and Victory*, 302, lines 5-10.

the ship,” a slogan still used in the United States Navy today.⁶¹ Other poems written about battles lost carry the same message to remind the people to remain steadfast and look forward to a brighter future for America.⁶²

Conclusion

The War of 1812, though an often neglected conflict in studies of American history, provided the cornerstones of American nationalism. Poets had the power to begin building an idea of what it meant to be an American. They promoted virtues of valor, gallantry, and pride, ideals of liberty, duty, and godly endeavors, and characteristics of commonness, loudness, and steadfastness to depict a nation of strong and rugged men; men that matched the landscape of the rugged countryside and everlasting seas. They encouraged men to not only accept these attributes, but to embrace them in brotherhood and rally behind them in battle. Though these attributes did not, and were not meant to, apply to the entire populace, they nevertheless became the first foundation of American nationalism.

Nationalism, however, is not a concrete idea. It is made up of different ideas presented by people who have the power to be heard and accepted by those with the power to affect change. During the War of 1812, poets who were able to publish their works wielded this power. Though their attitudes towards virtue, ideals, and the characteristics of manliness were their own opinions, because they were built on the stories of astonishing battles and incredible men, they were not only merely accepted, but were embraced by the populace as well. Ordinary men suddenly felt extraordinary because they were implementing the same attributes their heroes had. The problem with this is that not all the stories from the past were based on fact.

The stories from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, which inspired many of the poems, quite frequently, became exaggerated the farther they were spread and the longer they were told. However, men continued to believe in them and aspire to them, because they had an unquenchable desire to be more and do more in life. Believing in something that may or may not have happened, in an effort to improve one’s self and one’s country is the real conceptualization of nationalism. In the end, it doesn’t really matter whether the stories, feelings, ideals, virtues, or anything is real. All that matters is that the people believe it and embrace it. That is the myth of nationalism.

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⁶¹ Hickey, *Don’t Give Up the Ship: Myths of the War of 1812*, 117-135.

⁶² Other poems in Stevenson’s *Poems of American History* that show the characteristic of steadfastness include *The Battle of Queenstown* (292), *The Shannon and the Chesapeake* (300), *Chesapeake and Shannon* (301), *The Battle of Valparaiso* (307), *The Battle of Bridgewater* (308), and *The Battle of Baltimore* (315).

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