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A Note on Western Logistics in the War of 1812

IN the embryonic stages of industrialization during the early years of the nineteenth century, financial and transportative techniques lagged seriously behind those of production. The financial problem may have been less serious than the transportation one, but it is a truism of the time that the railway age arrived before the railway! Napoleon's successes were due primarily to his leadership, speed, and tactical expertise, his greatest defeat to his failure to provide his armies with adequate logistical support. In his Russian campaign, "the forces were too great, the spaces across which they operated too vast for the existing methods of communication and supply."¹

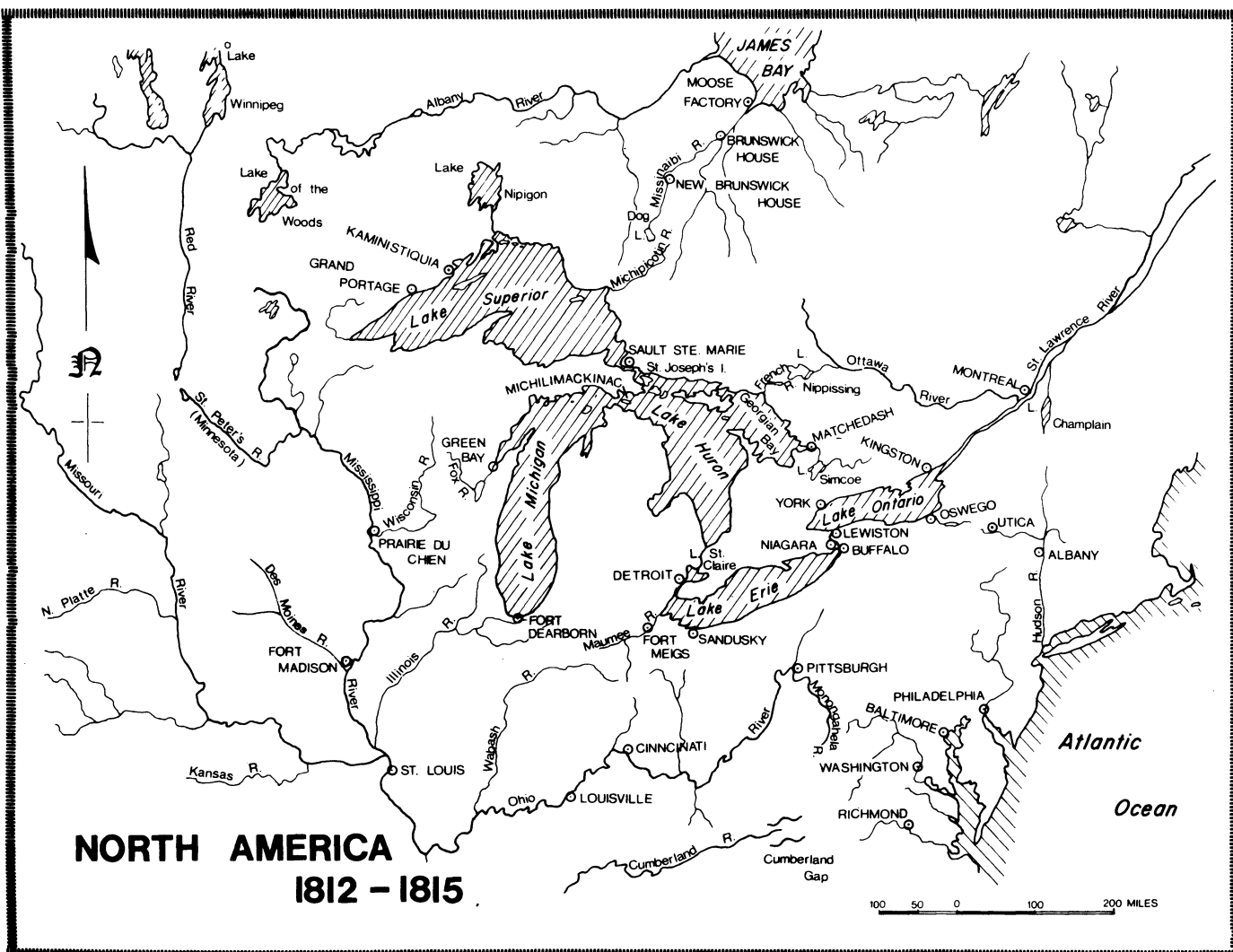
The North American campaigns in the War of 1812 were fought with far fewer men than those of the European

theater, but the distances involved were generally greater and the climate more extreme, while the terrain was almost always substantially more difficult.² Moreover, the economies of the continent were not as well developed, so that financial arrangements were commonly less sophisticated than in Europe, where, for example, the Bank of England had been developing control of British finance since 1694, and France had obtained a centralized banking system in 1774.

Comparatively little attention has been paid by students of the war to the details of western logistics, and when the question has been considered, the tendency has been to emphasize geographic and climatic embarrassments and to neglect financial and policy weaknesses. In supplying forces in the field about the Upper

Lakes and the upper Mississippi valley, geography and the administrative qualities of their personnel appear to have given the United States definite advantage in overall logistics. And as the area of conflict spread more to the west the Americans obtained an even greater advantage in ease of concentration and supply and in safety of movement along the lines of communication, an advantage which was further increased by the superior education and experience of their commissaries.

At the outbreak of war the British were spread along the whole length of their battle front, from Montreal to Michilimackinac. Their first and simplest line of communication lay right along that front through the Great Lakes; and, with one possible exception, all the available alternatives also touched that line at one or more points, so that their hold on the western country was at times tenuous in the extreme. The Canadian Shield, which had been a primary factor in creating the Anglo-Indian alliance in the North West, also made it exceedingly difficult for the British to support that alliance adequately.



Water was still, as it always had been, the key to transportation in North America, but even if the British had held and retained command of all the major Lakes there was no guarantee that the entire Great Lakes route to the upper country could be used. Aside from the dangers posed by the possibilities of naval action on any of the Lakes themselves, the route was peculiarly vulnerable along the narrow waterways which connected the various lakes, especially in the regions of the Niagara peninsula and Detroit. Guns at Detroit or Sandwich, for example, could easily control the channel linking Lake St. Clair with Lake Erie, since the channel was only 800 to 900 yards wide at those points.

A second route for the British to the Upper Lakes, one which avoided the dangers of Niagara and Detroit, was by way of the St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario to York, thence over a 30-mile portage to the Holland River and Lake Simcoe, and along the Severn to Georgian Bay. This route had been known to the old French fur traders and redeveloped by John Graves Simcoe during his tenure as lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, and it was actually used to supply the western forces for most of the war. It had a second advantage over the Lake Erie route in that an express message or shipment from York, the seat of government, might reach Georgian Bay in 24 hours, and from there be carried to St. Joseph's in four or five days, while the route along the Lakes took over two weeks from York to St. Joseph's.³ The particular disadvantage of this land-and-water route lay in the necessity to transship stores from ship or batteau to wagon at York, from wagon to canoe at the Holland River, and from canoe to batteau at Matchedash.

In either case it was necessary to get supplies to York, and naval control of Lake Ontario was never decisively established by either protagonist after 1812. It was often necessary to use the execrable road that ran from Kingston to York along the shore of the lake.⁴

Except in winter, when snow provided passable conditions for sleds, this road—and, indeed, all the roads of Upper Canada—was almost impassable to heavy vehicles and equipment, and during the spring thaw and fall rains it often became completely closed to anything except men on foot, who could only struggle through with the greatest difficulty. Before the war the mail from Montreal to Kingston, a distance of just under 200 miles, sometimes took a month in transit; and even in October 1814, after more than two years of war,

General Drummond was uncertain how long it was going to take a detachment of troops "to struggle through the dreadful roads from Kingston to York," some 240 miles.⁵

Sir George Prevost, two months earlier, had reported that "the command of the lakes enables the enemy to perform in two or three days what it takes the troops from Kingston sixteen to twenty days of severe marching. Their men arrive fresh; ours fatigued and with exhausted equipment."⁶

Two alternative approaches to the Upper Lakes and western country provided water transportation virtually all the way and offered the additional advantage of military security. First was the old fur route along the Ottawa and Mattawa Rivers to Lake Nipissing and down the French River into Lake Huron. This well-established waterway was much more direct and faster than the Great Lakes route, despite the many rapids and falls—between 22 and 36 portages and 12 and 36 decharges—which limited its use to canoes.⁷ For some reason comparatively little use was made of the canoe brigades of the North West Company to take supplies west along this route. Perhaps the need to maintain the fur trade at all costs was the limiting factor. Both the North West and the South West Companies had offered, in January 1812, "to enter with zeal into any measure of Defence, or even offence, that may be proposed to them" by the government;⁸ and they did so in a very literal way at the taking of Michilimackinac in 1812 and the subsequent occupation of Prairie du Chien, the fur trading base which commanded the upper Mississippi, in 1814. Yet both were tasks that could have been done as well, and probably better, by a company of regular troops, and we are left to wonder why the voyageurs were not used more widely for transport instead of garrison duties.

They were used on the Ottawa once. In the summer of 1813 Prevost wrote to Bathurst: "The occupation of our frontier Territory on the Niagara River having interrupted our usual mode of communicating with Lake Erie, I have had great difficulty in supplying the Forts at Amherstburg and Michilimackinac. . . . Those difficulties have, however, by great exertions been in some measure surmounted and I have, although at considerable expense, been able to transport . . . by the Grand [Ottawa] River."⁹

Nevertheless, by October of that same year the stores at Michilimackinac held only 68 pounds of salt meat, one month's supply of flour, and "but

very few cattle . . . to supply our immediate wants," and the garrison waited vainly for supplies to arrive via Matchedash while a brigade of 40 canoes lay on Lake Superior much of that summer waiting to convey men and arms to Montreal, if necessary.¹⁰ Michilimackinac survived the ensuing winter only through rigorous rationing and by scouring the adjacent settlements at Green Bay, the Sault, and St. Joseph's for anything edible.

Despite the hardships of the Michilimackinac garrison, the second alternative to the Lake Ontario route seems to have occurred to nobody except Ninian Edwards, the American governor of the Illinois Territory. "From Hudson's Bay to the Heads of the Mississippi goods can be brought more conveniently with less expense than they are now carried from Montreal to several parts of the North West," he wrote in January 1814, and he was quite right.¹¹ The Hudson's Bay Company had known this for years, normally supplying their posts along the Red River by this route. More of their trade went south from Moose Factory via Brunswick House, which had been established in 1783, to the headwaters of the Missinaiba River, thence over a portage of a quarter of a mile across the Height of Land into Dog Lake, the Michipicoten River, and Lake Superior. Although Michipicoten was a North West Company post, and it was not until the amalgamation of the two great fur empires in 1821 that this route began to be used regularly for communications between James Bay and the Sault, it was always there, and the distance from Moose Factory to Michilimackinac was several hundred miles less than from Montreal to Michilimackinac.¹² Perhaps the Hudson's Bay Company was less cooperative than their southern rivals who were more intimately involved in the war?

From an analysis of the transportation difficulties occasioned in supplying food, arms, and clothing to the few hundred men who were based at Michilimackinac, and bearing in mind that there were some local resources of food, it begins to appear that perhaps those difficulties were not entirely geographical in nature, as has so often been suggested. Certainly in the years between the Revolutionary War and 1812, when the fur trade was spreading into the Athabasca region and the Mackenzie basin, the great fur companies had managed to overcome their problems by dint of careful organization and still make some sort of

profit, despite the fact that it cost them \$160 per canoe load to transport goods from Montreal to Michilimackinac alone.¹³ The expenses were great but it could be done, and the supplies required by the Athabaskan and Mackenzie brigades every year were surely no less than those required by the garrisons of the far western posts between 1812 and 1815.

The fur trade transportation system had been built up gradually over many years, however, while the military system had to be created almost instantaneously; the fur trade commissaries had grown into their jobs over half a lifetime, while the military commissaries had not: administrative as much as the physical difficulties were at the root of wartime problems. Prevost's commissary-general blamed his troubles upon the poor caliber of clerks and storekeepers. He pointed out that there were few men available in the frontier society of British North America who had the necessary education and training in administration to work effectively in his department, and asked for such men to be brought out from England.¹⁴

The other problem was money with which to purchase supplies. General Proctor, commanding the British western flank, complained of the absence of supplies themselves rather than of transport difficulties, although his army presented the biggest transportation problem of all, taking into account its size and location. This lack of supplies was due not only to limited local production but also to a "want of Specie for payment of Articles obtained. A Paper currency has as yet proved an indifferent substitute for bullion," wrote Prevost, going on to compliment Robinson for his work as commissary.¹⁵

This currency question posed a difficulty that the United States suffered from as well, although their geographical and personnel problems were noticeably less. Three roughly parallel lines of communication ran westward from the great industrial centers of the U.S. central seaboard. One followed the military front for much of its length, running from Albany, on the Hudson, through Utica to Buffalo, along the south shore of Lake Erie to Sandusky, and eventually to Detroit; but some of this road was as poor as its Canadian counterpart along the north shore of Lake Ontario. The 17 miles of "mud road" from Lewiston to Buffalo, for instance, once took one and a half days to traverse in 1808.¹⁶ It may have

been substantially improved under the pressures of wartime necessity, but it remained poor in comparison with the other American roads.

In any case this was really little more than a tactical supply road. The more important routes of communication with the western armies lay deep in the hinterland—from Philadelphia and Baltimore down the Monongahela to Pittsburgh, then down the Ohio to Cincinnati or the falls at Louisville; or along the Wilderness Road from Richmond through the Cumberland Gap to Nashville. These were the settlement and trade routes which had helped the western states to develop with such fantastic strides in the years immediately before the war, and by 1812 they were well enough developed and organized to carry with comparative ease all kinds of military stores except the very heaviest cannon. The same masses of population that had brought about the opening of these routes supplied the personnel to handle the logistical problems of the war, once the Americans had survived the initial shock.

Much of the myth that has grown up concerning the physical difficulties of supplying the American West during the war appears to have been based upon Balthasar Meyer's monumental and apparently scholarly 1917 work on transportation in the United States before 1860.¹⁷ Meyer made his case largely upon the alleged costs of transport of various essentials of war, stating, for example, that a \$400 cannon cost \$1,500-\$2,000 to deliver from Washington to Lake Erie, that pork for the western garrisons cost \$127 per barrel even after the war was technically over, and that "at Fort Meigs, during the northwestern campaign, flour cost the Government \$100 per barrel and oats \$160 per bushel, taking into account the cost of forage for the horses used in transportation and the horses that were lost."¹⁸ Since flour *per se* was plentiful in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, the implication is that many horses died under the conditions imposed by the geographical difficulties of bringing up supplies to Fort Meigs, the American outpost on the Maumee River.

The heaviest cannon—24-pounders and the like—may have cost such sums as Meyer claims, to transport to Lake Erie; his figures for the cost of oats seem a little unreasonable upon consideration; but those for flour and pork are demonstrably in disagreement with contemporary authority. Meyer's source, quoted in a footnote, appears to have been making a case for more and better canals in the postwar United States and thus can

scarcely be considered unbiased, but in any case the whole matter is put into proper perspective by *Niles' Weekly Register* of 13 November 1813, in which a letter from John H. Platt, the head of General Harrison's purchasing department from the beginning of the war, denies a rumor that flour furnished to the northwestern army ever cost from \$50 to \$70 per barrel. Platt states categorically that "at Fort Meigs [sic] on the Miami, the most remote post, the highest price at which flour has been supplied, including all incidental expenses, has not exceeded 15 dolls. per barrel, . . . the average cost of beef and pork has been 5 dolls. per hundred."

Five dollars per hundred means \$6 per 125-lb. barrel of pork, and the term "all incidental expenses" used in respect to flour prices would certainly include the costs of men, boats, horses, carts, and forage used in transporting the flour. Fifteen dollars a barrel at Fort Meigs, "the most remote post" in a technically logistical rather than a geographic sense, also makes more sense in view of a report that at Green Bay in January 1814 "flour was at Six dollars when Duncan (Graham) arrived and he (Joseph Follette) raised it to Ten. . . . Mr. Barthe says flour will be worth fifteen Dollars in the Spring. . ."¹⁹

The American logistical difficulties seem, in fact, to have been caused not primarily by transportation or even personnel problems, but by an erratically inefficient supply policy and by the same technicality that beset Sir George Prevost on the British side—a serious shortage of specie and a disinclination on the part of primary producers to accept paper currency.²⁰ "There is no longer a possibility of getting money for drafts in this country. . . . I have been obliged to agree with the bank here that the United States shall be at the expense and risk of sending on the specie for the drafts that are now given," reported William Henry Harrison, although "there is an abundance of beef, flour and whisky to be procured here."²¹ Harrison's trouble lay in the need to pay hard cash, for the essential fact was that the easterners, and particularly the New Englanders, had acquired most of the nation's specie and were not letting go. From June 1811 to June 1814 the Massachusetts banks alone increased their holdings of hard money from \$1,709,000 to \$7,326,000.²²

Both British and Americans clearly had the same problems, although the Americans were usually a long way

from starving, whereas by February 1814 Bullock had been forced to reduce the ration of beef at Michilimackinac to half a pound per man issued only four days a week. But in both cases it may be argued that

distance and terrain were not by any means the only elements of logistical difficulty. Shortage of ready cash and rather inefficient supply policies were hazards faced by British and American commanders alike, and the

greater physical problems of supply which faced the British appear to have been exaggerated by their financial and policy weaknesses, as well as failure to examine properly all the alternative supply routes open to them.

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time consumed in ascending the streams."

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The United States Navy and Texas Independence: A Study in Jacksonian Integrity

THE degree of official American support for the Texans during their war for independence is an issue that has long divided American historians. Most have acknowledged that Andrew Jackson at least went through the motions of maintaining neutrality by issuing the proclamations required by international usage and the Neutrality Act of 1818. Whether his efforts actually went further or whether his acknowledged pro-Texan sympathies controlled his subsequent actions has become the center of a lively controversy.¹

The orthodox, pro-Jackson position was best stated by the President him-

self when he declared, "My administration . . . had no agency directly, or indirectly, in the steps resorted to by the people of Texas to establish for themselves an independent Government."² The anti-Jackson historians stress his failure to enforce strictly the 1818 Neutrality Law. The President's statements, they argue, were mere pretenses since he scarcely tried to halt the movement of men and supplies across the United States border into Texas.

Yet the law forced the President to rely on the local federal officials for enforcement. In the border areas this meant federal district attorneys who

were often the leading local Texas supporters. Even in areas, like New Orleans, where the district attorney might have been willing to enforce the law, local sentiment would have prevented him. Where then must we look for clues to Jackson's real position? The one arm of the Federal government not subject to significant local political control under the conditions of 1835-36 was the Navy. Moreover, the Navy's role was crucial in another respect. Most of the material exported from New Orleans to Texas moved by water and, more importantly, the Mexican army along the Rio Grande and in Texas drew its supplies almost *en toto* from New Orleans.

The importance of this waterborne traffic appears in the earliest maritime incident of the Texas Revolution, an action which antedates the land fighting. One of the precipitating events of the Texas revolt was the expulsion of the Mexican garrison from Anahuac by local hotheads led by William B. Travis in July 1835. In an attempt to stanch the resulting inflow of smuggled goods General Martín Perfecto de Cos, the Mexican military commander in Texas, sent the