



Omohundro Institute  
of Early American  
History and Culture

---

High Army Leadership in the Era of the War of 1812: The Making and Remaking of the Officer Corps

Author(s): William B. Skelton

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Apr., 1994), pp. 253-274

Published by: [Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2946862>

Accessed: 29/10/2010 05:49

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=omohundro>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The William and Mary Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# High Army Leadership in the Era of the War of 1812: The Making and Remaking of the Officer Corps

William B. Skelton

IN his memoirs, published at the end of his long and distinguished military career, Winfield Scott described the officers who had entered the army with him in 1808, noting that his generalizations applied equally to officers appointed during the War of 1812:

It may . . . be safely said that many of the appointments were positively bad, and a majority of the remainder indifferent. Party spirit of that day knew no bounds, and, of course, was blind to policy. Federalists were almost entirely excluded from selection, though great numbers were eager for the field, and in New England and some other States, there were but very few educated Republicans. Hence the selections from those communities consisted mainly of coarse and ignorant men. In the other States, where there was no lack of educated men in the dominant party, the appointments consisted, generally, of swaggerers, dependants, decayed gentlemen, and others—"fit for nothing else," which always turned out *utterly unfit for any military purpose whatever*.

Scott attributed this sorry condition to President Thomas Jefferson's "low estimate of, or rather contempt for, the military character, the consequence of the old hostility between him and the principal officers who achieved our independence."<sup>1</sup>

Scott's assessment, frequently cited by historians, is now the standard view of American military leadership in the War of 1812 period.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic

Mr. Skelton is a member of the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He wishes to thank Donald R. Hickey, Don Higginbotham, and J.C.A. Stagg for critical comments. Support for this essay was provided by the University Personnel Development Committee of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

<sup>1</sup> [Winfield Scott], *Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, LL.D.* . . . (New York, 1864), I, 34-35, 36n.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, 9 vols. (New York, 1889-1890), IV, 292-293; Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York, 1967), 107; Theodore J. Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809* (New York, 1987), 172; Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, Ill., 1989), 8.

buildup of the regular army between 1808 and 1814 expanded the authorized strength of the officer corps from 191 during most of Jefferson's administration to 3,495 in 1814. Out of necessity, the Republican administrations commissioned thousands of men directly from civil life, most of whom had little military experience. Political patronage pervaded the selection process, and large numbers of incompetents received appointments. The result was administrative anarchy and military defeat during the first two years of the conflict, reversed only partially in the final stages as a group of younger officers, who had learned their trade by experience, pushed gradually into the higher command levels.

This image of military leadership in the early republic contains more than a grain of truth, but it is largely based on impressionistic and anecdotal evidence. This article subjects the wartime officer corps to empirical analysis. By examining the social backgrounds and career patterns of the men who held general and field rank in the army between 1808 and 1815 it constructs a framework for understanding America's military performance in its first major war as a fully independent nation. It also sheds new light on the origins of the military profession in the early republic.<sup>3</sup>

Congress expanded the army in a complex series of steps.<sup>4</sup> At the start of the period, the regular army consisted of one artillery and two infantry regiments and a small corps of engineers, all commanded by a single brigadier general—an authorized total of only 3,284 officers and men. On April 12, 1808, responding to the humiliating British attack on the frigate *Chesapeake* the previous year, Congress approved five more infantry regiments and one regiment each of riflemen, light artillery, and light dragoons. Acts of January and June 1812 increased this force by twenty-one regiments, and an act of January 1813 added nineteen more. The upper command structure grew to two major generals and eleven brigadier generals in 1812 and to eight major generals and sixteen brigadiers in 1813. A final expansion in March 1814 brought the army's official combat strength to forty-six regiments of infantry, four of riflemen, three each of artillery and light dragoons, and one of light artillery. To support the line branches, Congress also established a collection of general staff departments: adjutant and inspector general, ordnance, quartermaster, purchasing, hospital, and pay. Altogether, the authorized size of the army stood at an impressive 62,674 officers and men during the last year of the war, though actual troop strength fell far short of this number.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This article is a major expansion and refinement of material considered briefly in William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784–1861* (Lawrence, Kan., 1992), which focuses on the peacetime officer corps with only passing attention to the high-ranking officers of the War of 1812, most of whose military service was limited to the war years.

<sup>4</sup> For the military legislation of 1808–1814 see Abner R. Hetzel, comp., *Military Laws of the United States* (Washington, D. C., 1846), 125–179.

<sup>5</sup> For the authorized strength see Francis B. Heitman, comp., *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, From Its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903*, 2 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1903), II, 576–577. According to an army return of Sept. 1814, 29,107 officers and men were present in the 10 military districts into which

In implementing these expansions the Jefferson and Madison administrations mostly followed an approach to raising forces that dated from the Revolution, distributing the new regiments among the states and recruiting men locally. The adjutant and inspector general later claimed that the distribution was based on the states' proportional representation in Congress, but the actual spread of the regiments more closely resembled the distribution of the free population according to the census of 1810 (see Table I).<sup>6</sup> Officers' appointments were linked to this distribution in the apparent belief that the local prestige of the officers would facilitate recruiting.

The government faced a formidable task in selecting officers for this rapidly expanding army. Aside from the tiny peacetime establishment, most of whose senior officers were Federalists, few Americans had significant military experience more recent than the Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Before the war and during its early stages, the administration filled most of the new generals' slots with aging Revolutionary veterans of Republican persuasion, nearly all of whom were former governors, senators, or congressmen. Deluged in 1808 with applications for the lesser grades, Henry Dearborn, Jefferson's secretary of war, largely abdicated the appointment power to Congress. He sent lists of applicants to Republican congressmen from all but one of the states and instructed them to consult with other members as they saw fit and to recommend men from the lists or others from their states whom they considered qualified. In the case of strongly Federalist Connecticut, he wrote separately to an administration supporter, urging him to "pay some attention to the political feelings of the Candidates."<sup>8</sup> Although information is lacking on the criteria used in these selections, the congressmen contacted by Dearborn probably consulted with their delegations. Several delegations are known to have distributed the positions among their members for the purpose of making nominations.<sup>9</sup>

President James Madison and his secretary of war, William Eustis, continued the congressional appointment policy during the expansion of 1812,

---

the country had been divided; Assistant Inspector General John R. Bell, "Abstract of the Returns of the Army of the United States within the several Military Districts," Sept. 25, 1814, file 4560, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General, 1805-1821, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives. A careful study of enlistment records estimates that the actual number of troops was considerably higher; J.C.A. Stagg, "Enlisted Men in the United States Army, 1812-1815: A Preliminary Survey," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLIII (1986), 619-625.

<sup>6</sup> Brig. Gen. Daniel Parker to the secretary of war, Dec. 31, 1814, file P-181(8), Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered Series, 1800-1889, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives.

<sup>7</sup> On officers' political affiliations in the Jeffersonian era see Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 72-76.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Dearborn to Nicholas Gilman et al., Apr. 14, 1808, Dearborn to Alexander Wolcott, Apr. 15, 1808, Miscellaneous Letters Sent by the Secretary of War, 1800-1809, Office of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives. For military appointments generally see Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 26-32.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, files 174, 199, 311, 332, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office.

TABLE I  
GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF NEW REGIMENTS, 1808–1814

	<i>Regiments</i>		<i>Free Population</i> (1810)	<i>House of Representatives</i> (1811–1813)
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
New England	13	23.6	24.4	25.0
Mid-Atlantic (New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey)	13	23.6	33.0	29.3
South Atlantic	13	23.6	27.8	37.9
West	10	18.2	14.9	7.9
Mixed	6*	10.9		
Total	55			

\*Several weighted toward south Atlantic states.

although they did try to broaden support for the war by selecting some Federalists for the officer corps.<sup>10</sup> The administration made a greater effort to control high appointments in the forces raised in 1813 and 1814, in some cases promoting into the new regiments veterans from the older establishments or nominating volunteer and militia officers who had distinguished themselves in the war.<sup>11</sup> On the whole, however, the appointment process reflected the localism of the American social order. It also validated, at least in part, Scott's remark on the importance of political considerations in the original selections.

Altogether, 341 men served as generals or regimental field officers (major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel) between 1808 and the end of the war. This group forms the basis for the present study.<sup>12</sup> About seventy other men, who

<sup>10</sup> The appointment policy of 1812 is explained in Stephen R. Bradley to James Elliott, Feb. 23, 1812, file 1088, *ibid.* See also Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783–1830* (Princeton, N. J., 1983), 164–167.

<sup>11</sup> Based on lists of field officers in the new regiments of 1813–1814 in Heitman, comp., *Historical Register of U. S. Army*, I, 125–138, 142, and officers' service records in the same source. In some cases, the administration allowed the regimental field officers to select the junior officers; Brig. Gen. Thomas H. Cushing to Col. Joseph Goodwyn, Mar. 6, 1813, Cushing to Col. Daniel Dana et al., June 29, 1813, and Cushing to commanders of certain new regiments, Aug. 3, 1813, Letters Sent by the Office of the Adjutant General, 1800–1890, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives.

<sup>12</sup> This list has been compiled from lists of generals and regimental field officers in Heitman, comp., *Historical Register of U. S. Army*, I, 19–24, 50–143. Three men have been included whose field grade appointments were withdrawn or were not approved by the Senate; they served in the higher rank temporarily. In contrast to the study of enlisted men, for whom muster rolls and recruitment records offer abundant and easily accessible data, research on commissioned officers requires painstaking reconstruction of individual lives from scattered and incomplete sources. This problem is compounded by the officers' geographical backgrounds, which by policy were dispersed more-or-less

held field rank in the general staff departments but not in the line or combat branches, have been excluded; their duties were technical and administrative, and many seem to have held their staff rank informally, without Senate confirmation. Of the 341 generals and high line commanders, forty-five (13.2 percent) were holdovers from the old army, having been in service at the start of the military buildup in 1808. Most of these regulars were careerists who had begun their service at the most junior grades; twenty-two still held company rank (ensign, lieutenant, or captain) when war was declared in June 1812. Initially, the War Department kept the old regiments separate from the new forces, thus protecting veterans from discharge in case of a reduction of the army but also obstructing their promotion. Only during the war itself—and then only partially—were the careerists blended with their counterparts of the new establishment.<sup>13</sup>

Of the 296 officers who entered the additional forces, seventeen (5 percent of the total 341) were appointed from civilian life or the militia and volunteer services directly to general's rank, and 151 others (44.3 percent) received direct commissions as field officers when new regiments were formed. The remaining 128 commanders (37.5 percent) served as company officers before achieving promotion, usually by seniority, to field rank.

As might be expected from the appointment process, the geographical distribution both of the commanders as a whole and of those serving in general's rank roughly paralleled the distribution of the free population in 1810 and, to a lesser extent, the distribution of congressional representation in 1811–1813 (see Table II). The western and south Atlantic states were somewhat overrepresented relative to their proportion of the free population; the mid-Atlantic region was underrepresented. This pattern may have reflected the West's generally strong support for the war and the fact that a disproportionately large number of regiments were raised in that section. The comparatively large number of southeasterners in the upper ranks probably stemmed from the South's proportional advantage in the House of Representatives—a product of the three-fifths clause of the Constitution. New England was underrepre-

---

evenly throughout the entire nation. Heitman's *Historical Register of U. S. Army* contains fairly full service records of all commissioned officers, including state or foreign nation of birth (missing or inaccurate in many cases), state of residence at time of appointment, dates of appointment and promotions, date and cause of termination of service, and in some cases date of death. Data throughout this article on officers' ages, occupations, education, political offices, social standing, and former military experience have been gleaned from biographies and biographical dictionaries, genealogies, town and county histories, college alumni registers, city directories, officers' personal papers, and Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office, and other army records at the National Archives. In 145 cases (42.5 percent) complete or nearly complete biographical evidence has been found. Significant partial data are available for 125 cases (36.7 percent), and little or nothing is known of the nonservice lives of the remaining 71 (20.8 percent). The extent of existing data in specific categories is indicated in the tables and notes.

<sup>13</sup> An act of June 26, 1812, combined the pre-1808 army and the additional force of 1808 for purposes of promotion. On Mar. 30, 1814, Congress consolidated the entire army for purposes of promotion; Hetzel, comp., *Military Laws*, 153, 173.

TABLE II  
GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGINS OF GENERAL AND FIELD OFFICERS, 1808-1815

	<i>Place of Appointment (All Officers)</i>		<i>Place of Appointment (Generals)</i>		<i>Free Population (1810)</i>	<i>House of Representatives (1811-1813)</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
New England	73	21.4	8	22.9	24.4	25.0
Mid-Atlantic (New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey)	91	26.7	8	22.9	33.0	29.3
South Atlantic	115	33.7	12	34.3	27.8	37.9
West	62	18.2	7	20.0	14.9	7.9
Totals	341		35			

sented only slightly in the high rungs of the officer corps, despite the opposition of the Federalist state governments of that region to the Madison administration and their lukewarm support of the war.

The high commanders varied greatly in age. The seventeen appointed directly to general's rank ranged from thirty-two to sixty-two years old when they began their regular service; their average age was forty-nine.<sup>14</sup> Those regulars appointed directly to the field grades of new regiments averaged thirty-nine years of age when commissioned, and they ranged even more widely than the generals—from two well-connected majors of twenty-three to a seventy-six-year-old Revolutionary War veteran appointed lieutenant colonel in 1809. The junior appointees to the new forces who rose by promotion to high rank were considerably younger. Their average age at the time of their first regular appointment was twenty-six, and the great majority were in their twenties. These officers benefited from the accelerated promotion rates of the war years: they averaged a shade under thirty when advanced to field rank. By contrast, the old army veterans among the high-ranking wartime officers were somewhat older than their counterparts in the new regiments. At the start of the buildup, the mean age of the field and general officers in the tiny peacetime establishment was forty-eight; that of the company officers destined for field rank was thirty-three.

The social backgrounds of the commanders mirrored fairly well the distribution of social and political status in the early republic. Table III records the preservice occupations of 187 high-ranking officers for whom data have been found. The legal profession was the leading source for the officer corps; lawyers and judges composed about one quarter of the commanders whose

<sup>14</sup> Here and elsewhere in this essay, analysis of age is based on the officers whose ages are known—all those serving as generals and just over half of those serving in field rank only.

TABLE III  
PRESERVICE OCCUPATIONS OF GENERAL AND FIELD OFFICERS, 1808-1815

	<i>Officers Appointed, 1808-1814</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Agriculture	52	27.8
Farmer	28	15.0
Planter	24	12.8
Commercial/Manufacturing	57	30.5
Merchant	36	19.3
Manufacturer	3	1.6
Editor	4	2.1
Clerk/Accountant	4	2.1
Artisan	8	4.3
Other	2	1.1
Professional	54	28.9
Lawyer/Judge	45	24.1
Physician	2	1.1
Teacher	1	.5
Law/Medical Student	6	3.2
Government Service	24	12.8
Federal Officeholder	7	3.7
State/Local Official	7	3.7
Army Officer	6*	3.2
Navy/Marine Officer	4	2.1
Total Known	187	
Too Young for Occupation	19	
Old Army	45	
No Information	90	
Total Officers	341	

\*Men with significant regular army service who were not in the army at the start of the buildup.

occupations are known, and several others had been part-time practitioners, court clerks, or law students. Merchants and storekeepers made up the next largest occupational category—nearly one-fifth of the known officers—and civil and military officeholders were also strongly represented. Farmers and planters were underrepresented; together they constituted slightly over a quarter of the high commanders, though they surely composed two-thirds or more of the free male population. Lawyers and merchants, usually residing at the state capitals, county seats, and commercial centers and holding local and state offices, were more likely than farmers and small planters to have the political contacts to procure a military commission and the local reputations to become successful recruiters. Many of these men may have been hurt by the drastic decline in foreign trade and the subsequent business slump that centered in

New England and the South and thus were motivated to seek alternative temporary employment.<sup>15</sup>

A significant minority of the wartime officers had been exposed to higher education at a time when very few Americans—certainly well under 1 percent of the adult, white, male population—had such experience. Fifty regulars (14.7 percent of the total 341) are certain or very likely to have graduated from college before their military appointments; at least a dozen others are known to have had some college training, and the total of such men was probably much greater.<sup>16</sup> Only three of the commanders were alumni of the United States Military Academy. Founded in 1802, West Point had produced eighty-nine graduates by 1812, but most of those who remained in the army served in the Corps of Engineers or other staff branches or in the artillery, where promotion to field rank was slow.<sup>17</sup>

For a large number of the high commanders, military service was an extension of leadership roles in local, state, and national affairs. Such had been the case during the colonial era, when high commissions in the official militia establishments had most frequently gone to prominent officeholders and community leaders. Of the seventeen men appointed directly to general's rank, seven had served in Congress, four others as state or territorial governors, and one as speaker of his state's senate; two had held high civilian positions in the War Department's bureaucracy.<sup>18</sup> Although the data are incomplete, seven of the 151 men appointed directly to field grades in new regiments had served in Congress and at least thirty-nine others in their state legislatures. The actual total of the latter type of officeholder was surely higher. In the New York, South Carolina, and Virginia contingents, where state legislative registers make a full count possible, nineteen of forty-five direct appointees to field rank (42.2

<sup>15</sup> Hickey, *War of 1812*, 227–231; Curtis P. Nettels, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775–1815* (New York, 1962), 335–340.

<sup>16</sup> Based mainly on a survey of alumni registers for the following colleges: Bowdoin, Brown, College of Charleston, Columbia, Dartmouth, Dickinson, Hampden-Sidney, Harvard, Litchfield Law School, Princeton, Rutgers, St. John's (Annapolis), St. Mary's (Baltimore), Transylvania, Union, United States Military Academy, University of Georgia, University of North Carolina, University of Pennsylvania, University of Vermont, Washington and Lee, William and Mary, Williams, and Yale. The registers vary in thoroughness. Some are incomplete, some list graduates only, and some do not differentiate clearly between graduates and nongraduates. The proportion of high commanders with college education was far below that of college-educated executive officeholders in the Jefferson administration. Sidney H. Aronson, *Status and Kinship in the Higher Civil Service: Standards of Selection in the Administrations of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 124.

<sup>17</sup> George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, N. Y., from Its Establishment, in 1802, to 1890*, 3 vols., 3d ed. (Boston, 1891), I.

<sup>18</sup> The former congressmen and senators were John Armstrong, John Chandler, Dearborn, Benjamin Howard, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Pinckney, and David R. Williams. The former governors were Joseph Bloomfield, William Henry Harrison, William Hull, and Morgan Lewis. James Winchester had been speaker of the Tennessee senate. Peter Gansevoort had been military supply agent for the army's Northern Department; Daniel Parker had been chief clerk of the War Department.

percent) had been state representatives or senators.<sup>19</sup> Many other commanders had held such local offices as mayor, judge, justice of the peace, sheriff, town or county clerk, and district attorney or had served as United States marshals, postmasters, and other federal officials at the local and state levels.

By weighing a variety of factors—occupation, education, offices, wealth, and family prominence—we can determine with reasonable confidence the social positions of 253 high officers. Table IV divides these men into four classes, based loosely on the categories developed by James Kirby Martin for an analysis of political leadership in the Revolutionary era.<sup>20</sup> One quarter of the commanders belonged to the upper elite of the early republic—exceptionally prominent families with traditions of leadership in national affairs or especially strong records of officeholding at the state level. Typical of the top echelon of this group was Henry B. Armstrong. His father was John Armstrong—United States senator, minister to France, and brigadier general and secretary of war during the War of 1812. Young Armstrong's grandfather had been a general in the Revolution and a delegate to Congress; an uncle held a seat in the House of Representatives. Only slightly less prominent were Cary and Robert Carter Nicholas, sons of George Nicholas, a high-ranking Continental Army officer and Virginia state legislator who became the first attorney general of Kentucky. Their Nicholas grandfather was a leader in Revolutionary Virginia, and three uncles served in Congress. George E. Mitchell occupied a place near the lower end of the high elite. A medical graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and the son of a prominent physician, Mitchell had served in the Maryland assembly and held the very prestigious office of president of the state executive council at the time of his appointment as major in 1812.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Edgar A. Werner, *Civil List and Constitutional History of the Colony and State of New York* (Albany, N. Y., 1884); N. Louise Bailey et al., eds., *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1776-1985*, 3 vols. (Columbia, S. C., 1986); Joan Schreiner Reynolds Faunt et al., eds., *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives*, 5 vols. to date (Columbia, S. C., 1974- ); Cynthia Miller Leonard, comp., *The General Assembly of Virginia, July 30, 1619-January 11, 1978: A Bicentennial Register of Members* (Richmond, Va., 1978). Nine of 15 Virginians and 8 of 10 South Carolinians had served in their state legislatures, compared to only 2 of 20 New Yorkers.

<sup>20</sup> James Kirby Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1973), 104-108. In categorizing the officers, I have probably stressed officeholding more heavily than did Martin. Martin's categories are adapted from those of Aronson, *Status and Kinship*, 67-76.

<sup>21</sup> On Armstrong see James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 6 vols. (New York, 1894), I, 92, and U. S. Congress, *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1961* (Washington, D. C., 1961), 487-488. On the Nicholas brothers see file 9143, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office, *Appletons' Cyclopaedia*, IV, 511, and sketches of John Nicholas, Wilson C. Nicholas, and Samuel Smith in *Biographical Directory of Congress, 1387-1388, 1622-1623*. The Robert Carter Nicholas discussed here was appointed to the army in 1808; his first cousin of the same name was commissioned in 1812 and also attained high rank in the wartime army. On Mitchell see Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 21 vols. (New York, 1928-1937), XIII, 46-47, and George

TABLE IV  
SOCIAL STATUS OF GENERAL AND FIELD OFFICERS, 1808–1815

	<i>New England</i>		<i>Mid-Atlantic</i>		<i>South Atlantic</i>		<i>West</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
High Elite	7	12.3	17	27.0	27	31.8	13	27.1	64	25.3
Local/State Elite	31	54.4	27	42.9	51	60.0	28	58.3	137	54.2
Middling Class	19	33.3	19	30.2	7	8.2	6	12.5	51	20.2
Lower Class	0		0		0		1	2.1	1	0.4
Total Known	57		63		85		48		253	
Total Officers	73		91		115		62		341	

The social backgrounds of slightly over half the high wartime commanders fall into the second category: locally prominent families with patterns of leadership in their communities and states and possibly limited or isolated involvement at the national level. Near the top of this group stood Moody Bedel of Haverhill, New Hampshire, a well-to-do farmer, local officeholder, state representative, and brigadier general of militia whose father had been a local leader and a militia general in the Revolutionary War. More in the category's mainstream was Lewis L. Taylor, whose father was a planter and long-time clerk of Lunenburg County, Virginia, and whose older brother was a representative in the Virginia assembly and later a prominent figure in Indiana Territory. Electus Backus exemplifies the lower tier of the local elite; a country storekeeper in upstate New York, he does not appear to have held civilian office, but he was a lieutenant colonel of militia before his appointment as major in the regular army.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly in light of the appointment process, men of elite status constituted a solid majority of the officer corps. They did not, however, monopolize military leadership. About one-fifth of the commanders derived from the broad "middling" range of American society—yeoman farmers, shopkeepers, artisans, clerks, and professional men of local reputation who held no

Johnston, *History of Cecil County, Maryland, and the Early Settlements around the Head of the Chesapeake Bay and on the Delaware River, with Sketches of Some of the Old Families of Cecil County* (Elkton, Md., 1881), 495–507.

<sup>22</sup> On Bedel see Harold K. Davison, *Haverhill's Historic Highlights* (Littleton, N. H., 1963), 41–43, and Daniel Doan, "The Enigmatic Moody Bedel," *Historical New Hampshire*, XXV (Fall 1970), 27–36. On Taylor see Landon C. Bell, *The Old Free State: A Contribution to the History of Lunenburg County and Southside Virginia*, 2 vols. (Richmond, Va., 1927), I, 281, 282, II, 366–368, and sketch of Waller Taylor in *Biographical Directory of Congress*, 1696. On Backus see Daniel D. Tompkins to Dearborn, July 29, 1808, file T-107(4), Letters Received, Secretary of War, Registered Series; Lyman H. Weeks, *Prominent Families of New York, Being an Account in Biographical Form of Individuals and Families Distinguished as Representatives of the Social, Professional and Civic Life of New York City* (New York, 1897), 31; and *People Made It Happen Here: History of the Town of Rensselaerville, ca. 1788–1950* (Rensselaerville, N. Y., 1977), 35, 78.

major offices and had no influential relatives. Some of these commanders regarded their commissions as a means of economic support and social mobility. For example, Turner Crooker had moved from Boston to western Massachusetts before the war because he could not find work in the bricklayer's trade; he had acquired a small farm but sought the additional income of an army commission "*to keep me up with my flock of children.*" Although James Miller regretted leaving his family on his New Hampshire farm, he considered a major's commission in 1808 a better prospect than remaining "in this cluster of stumps in the woods and without property."<sup>23</sup> Most of the known officers of the middling class were appointed from New England or New York. This pattern may support Scott's observation that the exclusion of Federalists barred a large part of the northeastern elite from military service, thus opening the door for aspirants of modest means—"coarse and ignorant men." More likely, it reflected the socially homogeneous yeoman societies of the countryside and New England's relatively democratic tradition of military leadership in wartime, dating from the colonial era.<sup>24</sup> The family of just one officer falls clearly into the lowest social category—that composed of propertyless servants, laborers, and tenant farmers. Yet the very obscurity of the sizable group of regulars for whom significant data are missing suggests that at least a few others may have belonged to this class.

The officers varied greatly in military experience. The old army holdovers were for the most part careerists, and several had served almost continuously since the early stages of the Revolution. According to Scott's recollection, the veterans had, "very generally, sunk into either sloth, ignorance, or habits of intemperate drinking."<sup>25</sup> Certainly, the tiny peacetime army of the early republic, scattered at isolated frontier posts and engaged in constabulary duties, offered poor ground for professional development. Nevertheless, a significant number of experienced and vigorous junior officers eventually reached high rank. Scott himself followed his negative assessment with a long list of exceptions. Though not in service at the time the buildup began and thus not qualifying as old army holdovers, twenty-eight other commanders (8.2 percent of the total) had had some experience as regular army officers. In addition, three officers had held commissions in the marine corps, and one had been a navy midshipman.

Aside from the old army veterans, twenty-five regulars (7.3 percent) had served as officers in the Revolution; this group included nearly all the aging politician-generals appointed before the war or during its early years.<sup>26</sup> A few

<sup>23</sup> Turner Crooker to Daniel Parker, Jan. 6, 1812, Daniel Parker Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; James Miller to Catherine Flint, July 30, 1808, James Miller Papers, U. S. Military Academy Library, West Point, N. Y. Crooker is described as a bricklayer in the Boston city directories of 1803 and 1806.

<sup>24</sup> Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1984), 48–62; Harold E. Selesky, *War and Society in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), 194–215, 231–232.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Memoirs*, I, 31.

<sup>26</sup> For officers' Revolutionary service see Heitman, comp., *Historical Register of*

commanders had other types of military experience that prepared them for regular duty: John P. Boyd, for one, had led native forces as a mercenary in India, and Stephen Ranney, a veteran of the Revolution, had for many years operated a military school in Connecticut.<sup>27</sup> The majority of commanders, however, had seen only militia or volunteer duty, and the extent and quality of this experience varied widely.

Some officers had compiled extensive records in frontier warfare. James Wellborn began his military career at age sixteen as a private in the Georgia state forces raised in the mid-1780s for duty against the Cherokees; during 1788–1794 he had commanded a militia force of 150 men occupying a line of forts on the South Carolina frontier, and he had been a brigadier general of North Carolina militia for fifteen years prior to his regular army appointment in 1808. Samuel Wells had served in a series of Indian campaigns stretching from 1777 to the 1790s, and he had fought as a major of Kentucky volunteers in the battles of Fallen Timbers (1794) and Tippecanoe (1811).<sup>28</sup> Other officers entered the regular service after stints in the active militia or as volunteers during the early stages of the War of 1812. Two of the war's most successful generals, Andrew Jackson and Jacob Jennings Brown, had made their reputations as citizen soldiers, and former volunteers filled many of the upper regimental slots in the forces raised in 1813 and 1814. On the other hand, some appointees admitted to having no military background whatsoever. Although a majority of the commanders had probably held militia commissions of some sort before their regular appointments—and at least twenty-four had been generals—the actual service of most had no doubt been limited to drill at infrequent muster days.

The wartime officer corps contained its share of incompetents—the swaggers, dependents, and decayed gentlemen of Scott's memory. On the whole, however, the group reflected the social and political leadership of the early republic. Far more than individual character faults, conditions in the rapidly expanding army—and in the broader social order—led to the breakdowns and defeats of the early war years. Because of the Republican tradition of restricted government, the administration had not prepared adequately for war. It provided little support or guidance for the efforts of the new officers to recruit and organize their regiments, a situation compounded during the early stages

---

*Officers of the Continental Army During the War of the Revolution, April, 1775, to December, 1783* (Washington, D. C., 1914).

<sup>27</sup> On Boyd see *Dictionary of American Biography*, II, 526–527. On Ranney see Charles C. Adams, *Middletown Upper Houses: A History of the North Society of Middletown, Connecticut, from 1650 to 1800, with Genealogical and Biographical Chapters on Early Families and a Full Genealogy of the Ranney Family* (New York, 1908), 194–196.

<sup>28</sup> Col. James Wellborn to Lt. Col. Alexander Macomb, July 5, 1812, file 2228, Wellborn to Maj. Charles K. Gardner, July 20, 1813, file 4206, and Col. Samuel Wells to Macomb, July 30, 1812, file 2232, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office. In arranging the relative standing of officers appointed to the new regiments of 1812, the War Department requested information on their former military services, and their replies indicate a wide variation in militia and volunteer experience. See generally *ibid.* for 1812.

of the buildup by the decision to keep the relatively experienced old army separate from the additional forces. Not until 1813 did Congress authorize a full general staff to direct logistics and support; even then the primitive state of internal transportation caused chronic shortages of pay, supplies, and equipment. Throughout the struggle, officers of all ranks lacked a comprehensive set of general regulations and even a uniform and clearly established system of infantry tactics. Bitter personal quarrels, most stemming from the inexperience and diverse backgrounds of the new commanders and from the administration's failure to establish clearly officers' relative standing, racked the officer corps. Adding to the confusion was a conflict of authority between regular army and militia commanders, rooted in the constitutional division of powers between the federal government and the states, which the executive branch was slow to resolve.<sup>29</sup>

Pushed into action before they could fully organize their forces or achieve a modicum of proficiency in their duties, the new regulars experienced a series of shocking setbacks. In August 1812, Brigadier General William Hull, a fifty-nine-year-old veteran of the Revolution who served simultaneously as governor of Michigan Territory, surrendered an entire American army at Detroit, resulting in the partial evacuation of the Northwest. During the following fall, the refusal of the militia to cross the Canadian border to attack Queenston on the Niagara frontier led to the capture of a large force of regulars, and problems of logistics and command stymied a second offensive on the Niagara peninsula and another against Montreal. The American performance improved marginally in 1813. American forces burned York, the capital of Upper Canada, and captured Fort George on the Niagara peninsula, but efforts to exploit these successes failed miserably, and by the end of the year the army had withdrawn from the region. The major offensive of 1813, a two-pronged advance on Montreal late in the fall, stalled in a tangle of personal bickering, breakdowns in logistics and communication, and stubborn British and Canadian resistance. Only in the Northwest, where troops commanded by Major General William Henry Harrison reoccupied Detroit and crushed a British-Indian force on the Thames River in Canada, did American arms achieve decisive results, and Harrison's army consisted almost entirely of militia.<sup>30</sup>

The defeats and disappointments of the early war years caused attrition from the officer corps, although the turnover was less extreme than might have been expected. Of the men appointed directly to general or field rank, nearly two-thirds (63.9 percent) were still in uniform at the end of the war.<sup>31</sup> The persistence rates were even higher among the old army holdovers and the

<sup>29</sup> Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, 117–126; Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 155–176; Hickey, *War of 1812*, 75–80; Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 51–59.

<sup>30</sup> Many works treat the army's performance in the War of 1812. See, for example, John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville, Fla., 1972); Adams, *History of the United States*, VI–VIII; Hickey, *War of 1812*; and George F. G. Stanley, *The War of 1812: Land Operations* (n.p., 1983).

<sup>31</sup> The following analysis of officers' service patterns is based on service records in Heitman, comp., *Historical Register of U. S. Army*, I, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office, and other collections of army records in the National Archives.

commanders who began as company officers in the new forces—77.8 percent for the former and 81.9 percent for the latter. The brevity of the conflict partially explains this continuity; officers in the regiments authorized in early 1813 served fewer than two years before peace was concluded. Attrition among the regulars appointed directly to senior rank in the 1808 force was 72 percent by 1815, well over twice the rate of the group as a whole. Moreover, turnover was higher at the generals' grades than among the regimental field officers. Considered as a whole, however, the army's upper ranks demonstrate a high degree of continuity through the war years: 246 of the 341 men serving in field or general rank between 1808 and 1815 (72.1 percent) were still in the army when the fighting ended in January 1815.

The leading cause of the high persistence rate was the lack of means at the government's disposal to rid the army of deadwood. Compelled to appoint citizens directly to high rank, army administrators had little opportunity to judge commanders on the basis of performance. Once in the army, an officer's regular promotion to and in the field grades was theoretically automatic, determined by seniority within his branch of service.<sup>32</sup> The Senate could reject nominees for preferment, and the administration reserved the right to refuse promotion in extraordinary cases, but these powers were rarely exercised. High commanders' political connections discouraged authorities from instituting courts-martial or courts of inquiry, and when such tribunals did convene, they usually acquitted or absolved the officers whose conduct was in question. Moreover, administrative tradition restrained the president from arbitrarily discharging or demoting ineffective officers. During the entire period from 1808 to 1815, only one general—the unfortunate Hull—and seven field officers (2.3 percent of the total group of 341) were dismissed by sentence of court-martial or dropped from the army by executive order for misconduct or incompetence.

Nevertheless, the repeated failures of 1812 and 1813 did lead to efforts to improve the army's leadership. In a few cases, the War Department removed ineffective commanders during reorganizations of the army, a process that allowed them to escape the appearance of censure. Brigadier General Alexander Smyth, a former Virginia legislator who had demonstrated his incompetence in the Niagara offensive of 1812, ended his military career when Congress abolished his office of inspector general in March 1813. Seven field officers left the service as the result of the consolidation of understrength regiments in 1814. Surely some of the forty-seven high officers who resigned before the end of the war did so under pressure, to avoid court-martial or outright dismissal, though this is known to have been the case with only three.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> On promotion see Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 49–51. Promotion up to the rank of captain occurred by seniority in individual regiments.

<sup>33</sup> These men were Maj. George H. Hunter, Lt. Col. Martin Norton, and Maj. Thomas Pitts; files 5863, 6577, 6715, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office. Forced resignations were common at the junior ranks; Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 58.

Although they remained in uniform, a large portion of the older men appointed directly to high rank or held over from the old army saw little active duty in the field. Instead, they served as recruiters or as commanders of quiet districts. Generals Thomas Pinckney and Joseph Bloomfield, for example, spent most of the war comfortably ensconced at Charleston, South Carolina, and Philadelphia respectively, supervising coastal defense in areas that experienced no significant combat.<sup>34</sup> Although his regiment compiled a distinguished combat record, Colonel Simon Larned pulled political strings to remain in stationary command of the army base and hospital at Greenbush, New York, outside Albany; the sixty-year-old Revolutionary veteran admitted that "young & active men are better calculated to go through active campaigns than those more advanced in years." Charged at age fifty-six with the defense of the Connecticut and Rhode Island coastline, Colonel Jacob Kingsbury of the old army resolved to do his duty, as "I dont wish to be disgraced in my old age." He did hope, however, that the British would not attack: "I am so old that the noise of a Cannon with a Shot in it injures my feelings and I had much rather younger men would get acquainted with that Music than hear it myself."<sup>35</sup> Military administrators must have agreed to some such assignments to dispose of commanders too old or infirm for field service but too politically well connected—or, in cases like that of Kingsbury, too proud and patriotic—to discharge or dismiss.

During the middle stages of the war, the administration began to pay greater attention to the military merits of candidates for high rank, especially for generals' appointments, which were not subject to the seniority rule. On February 24, 1813, Congress added six major generals and six brigadier generals, nearly doubling the top command structure. Although Madison and his second secretary of war, John Armstrong, continued to seek sectional balance and consider political implications, they filled most of the resulting openings with men who had at least some recent military experience—either as regular army field officers or as volunteer or militia commanders in the campaigns of 1812 and early 1813. Only two appointees—Governor Benjamin Howard of the Missouri Territory and David Rogerson Williams, formerly chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs—resembled the Republican politician-generals of 1812.<sup>36</sup> Experience and merit figured even more prominently in the

<sup>34</sup> Bloomfield commanded Military District No. 4, embracing eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, and part of New Jersey, in 1813–1814. Pinckney commanded Military District No. 6, including North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, in 1813–1815; Raphael P. Thian, *Notes Illustrating the Military Geography of the United States, 1813–1880* (Washington, D. C., 1881), 32–33; Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office.

<sup>35</sup> Col. Simon Larned to Ezekiel Bacon, Mar. 8, 1814, file 6057, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office; Kingsbury to Joseph Shaylor, Apr. 14, 1813, Kingsbury to Erkuries Beatty, Nov. 9, 1813, Jacob Kingsbury Papers, Burton Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>36</sup> Act of Feb. 24, 1813, Hetzel, comp., *Military Laws*, 161. Besides Howard and Williams, 9 new generals were appointed in 1813. Of these, 7 (Lewis Cass, Leonard Covington, George Izard, Duncan McArthur, Thomas Parker, Zebulon M. Pike, and William H. Winder) were promoted from the regular forces, though Cass and

eight generals' appointments made in 1814, most filling vacancies created by resignations or deaths. Four went to veterans of the old army and two to promising young commanders in the new regular forces; the two appointees from outside the army were Andrew Jackson, volunteer commander in the brutal Creek campaign of 1813–1814, and Daniel Parker, formerly chief clerk of the War Department, who was nominated late in the war to the high staff position of adjutant and inspector general.<sup>37</sup> By the end of 1814, the median age of the army's general officers was forty-two, fifteen years lower than it had been at the end of 1812.

The War Department found other ways to accelerate the advancement of talented—and well-connected—officers. One channel was appointment to such staff positions as adjutant general, assistant adjutant general, inspector general, and assistant inspector general. Introduced in the staff legislation of 1813, these slots carried temporary field rank usually higher than the officer's regimental rank and offered valuable experience in military administration.<sup>38</sup> Captain Henry Atkinson, for instance, rose three grades when appointed to colonel and inspector general in April 1813, and majors Arthur P. Hayne and Ninian Pinkney each advanced two grades when later nominated to the same position. Two of the bright young generals of 1814, Winfield Scott and Edmund P. Gaines, served as adjutants general before their promotions.

The administration tried to circumvent the seniority rule more directly in 1813, when Congress authorized an additional major in most of the regiments, a measure intended to facilitate recruiting. Interpreting these openings as original vacancies to which the seniority rule did not apply, Madison and Armstrong nominated civilians to several of them and promoted captains of junior standing to others. The result was a barrage of officers' petitions supporting seniority and threats of mass resignations.<sup>39</sup> Despite this discord, the administration followed a similar procedure in staffing the regiments formed in 1814, promoting several regulars to field grade slots over the heads of their

---

McArthur had served mainly as volunteers. The others were Brown, a militia general, and Robert Swartwout, a New York merchant appointed as quartermaster general.

<sup>37</sup> Besides Jackson and Parker, the 6 generals appointed in 1814 were Daniel Bissell, Edmund P. Gaines, Alexander Macomb, and Thomas A. Smith of the old army and Eleazar W. Ripley and Scott of the additional forces.

<sup>38</sup> Act of Mar. 3, 1813, Hetzel, comp., *Military Laws*, 164–165.

<sup>39</sup> Act of Jan. 20, 1813, *ibid.*, 156–157; [*Annals of Congress*], *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789–1824* (Washington, D. C., 1834–1856), 12th Cong., 2d sess., 463–464. For examples of officers' protests see files 3510, 3555, 3634, 3969, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office; and files C-110(7), C-136(7), M-103(7), Letters Received, Secretary of War, Registered Series, Record Group 107. The protests were also against the appointment of citizens and junior officers from other regiments to the new rank of third lieutenant. For the administration's defense of these appointments see Armstrong to Macomb, Apr. 28, 1813, Armstrong to Col. Isaac Clark, Apr. 29, 1813, Armstrong to Maj. Gen. Morgan Lewis, May 3, 1813, Letters Sent by the Secretary of War Relating to Military Affairs, 1800–1889, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives. See also Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 334–335.

seniors. In general, the war brought a significant decline of the seniority principle, probably owing more to the executive branch's inconsistency in promoting men from one element of the new army to another than to a systematic policy of advancing men of special talent. The erosion of seniority also reflected the reluctance of some veterans to accept promotion into the newer forces lest they be discharged in a subsequent reduction of the army.<sup>40</sup>

The most important factor in the changing complexion of the officer corps was the gradual rise to high regimental rank, mainly through seniority, of a cadre of seasoned young officers who had learned their trade by practice, in camp and on campaign. At the core of this group were holdovers from the junior grades of the old army and appointees to company rank in the new force of 1808. By the end of 1813, the 1808 veterans had worn the uniform for nearly six years, and the old army officers had served longer still. Also included in this emerging generation of leadership were many younger members of the 1812 contingent whose tenure was far shorter but who had nevertheless fought through two arduous campaigning seasons on the Canadian border. As a group, these commanders had witnessed firsthand the confusion and breakdowns of the early war years, and some had spent time as prisoners of war after the humiliating surrenders at Detroit and Queenston. They had also acquired a good deal of knowledge of small-unit tactics, discipline, and military administration. Indeed, these officers had become "regularized," as had their counterparts of the Continental Army a generation earlier. Moreover, they averaged thirty-one years of age when first promoted to field rank, a decade younger than those men appointed directly to the high grades from civil life.

The last year of the war brought no dramatic strategic breakthroughs, but it did mark a significant improvement in the army's performance. The most notable example was the 1814 campaign on the Niagara frontier. In early July, a small field army commanded by Major General Brown crossed the Niagara River into Upper Canada, intending to recapture York and threaten British communications to the west. The heart of this force was Winfield Scott's brigade—four veteran, though understrength, regiments that had undergone intensive tactical training under his direction at a camp of instruction at Buffalo. Brown's army quickly captured the partially completed British bas-

<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to determine the extent to which the administration violated the seniority rule in filling vacancies caused by deaths, resignations, and dismissals in existing units. Officers thought that infractions of seniority were common and attributed them to political influence. See, for example, Col. Henry Atkinson to Bartlett Yancey, Mar. 10, 1814, Bartlett Yancey Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Capt. William A. Blount to John G. Blount, [Aug. 1814], in John Gray Blount, *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith et al., 4 vols. (Raleigh, N. C., 1952-1982), IV, 243; and Lt. Col. Josiah Snelling to Col. John De Barth Walbach, Mar. 20, 1814, and Snelling to Maj. John R. Bell, Aug. 7, 1814, file 7079, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office. For examples of officers' concerns about promotion into the new forces see Maj. James Bankhead to Madison, Mar. 8, 1813, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress; Lt. Col. James House to Kingsbury, Mar. 17, 1813, Kingsbury Papers; and Capt. William McClellan to Armstrong, Sept. 10, 1814, file 6298, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office.

tion of Fort Erie, and in two bloody engagements—at Chippewa on July 5 and Lundy's Lane on July 25—it fought to a standstill British regular forces of roughly equal size. Extremely heavy losses, including disabling wounds to both Brown and Scott, forced withdrawal into Fort Erie, and the reinforced British began a siege. The defenders repulsed a strong British assault on August 15, however, and on September 17, with Brown back in command, they launched a sortie that broke the siege.<sup>41</sup> Also in the late summer of 1814, regular forces at Plattsburgh, New York, cooperated with the navy's Lake Champlain flotilla to block an offensive from Canada by a vastly superior British army. At Sandy Creek on the Lake Ontario shoreline, Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor, Fort Bowyer in Mobile Bay, New Orleans, and scattered locations elsewhere around the nation's vast periphery during 1814 and early 1815, American commanders demonstrated an increased proficiency in tactics and defensive combat.

Examination of the army's leadership in the Niagara campaign reveals the changing character of the officer corps. Thirty-two of the high commanders have been identified as serving in Brown's army between the initial advance into Canada and the sortie from Fort Erie.<sup>42</sup> Twenty of these men (62.5 percent) had entered the service as company officers in the contingents of 1808 and 1812, and one had risen from junior rank in the old army. The Niagara commanders averaged only thirty-two years of age in July 1814, but their mean length of regular service was just over four years, and thirteen (40.6 percent) had served six years or longer. At thirty-nine, Brown was the oldest of the four generals in the campaign; he had begun the war as a militia general and had completed only a year of regular service by the summer of 1814. However, his brigade commanders were twenty-eight-year-old Scott, who had entered the army as a captain in 1808, and thirty-two-year-old Eleazar W. Ripley, who had launched his military career as a lieutenant colonel in the new force of 1812. Moreover, Brigadier General Edmund P. Gaines, commander of Fort Erie during the assault of August 15, had spent fifteen of his thirty-seven years in the regular army. The absence of many senior field officers left their regiments in the hands of young but combat-tested subordinates. Five of the seven infantry regiments that fought at Chippewa and Lundy's Lane were led by majors during all or part of the campaign. Their ages ranged from twenty-five to thirty-one, and twenty-five-year-old Major Jacob Hindman commanded Brown's contingent of artillery.

Of the 341 commanders who served between 1808 and 1815, ninety-five left the army before the end of the fighting in January 1815. Table V describes the methods by which they terminated their careers. Thirty-two officers died in

<sup>41</sup> On the Niagara campaign see Mahon, *War of 1812*, 266–284; Donald E. Graves, *The Battle of Lundy's Lane: On the Niagara in 1814* (Baltimore, 1993); and Ernest Cruikshank, ed., *The Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier*, 4 vols. (New York, 1971; orig. pub. 1896–1908), IV. For the organization and strength of Brown's army see Adams, *History of the United States*, VIII, 34–38.

<sup>42</sup> The list of officers has been compiled mainly from documents printed in Cruikshank, ed., *Documentary History*, IV. Three of these men were still captains during the campaign and were subsequently promoted to field rank.

TABLE V  
ATTRITION OF GENERAL AND FIELD OFFICERS, 1808–1815

	N	%
Died in Service	32	9.4
Discharged during War	8	2.4
Dismissed/Dropped	8	2.4
Resigned before February 1, 1815	47*	13.8
Resigned February 1–June 15, 1815	4	1.2
Discharged June 15, 1815	180	52.8
Retained in Peacetime Army	62	18.2
Total	341	

\*Omits officers who resigned but reentered the officer corps before the end of the war.

service; ten (2.9 percent of all the commanders) were killed in action or died of combat wounds. Camp diseases or other natural causes accounted for most of the rest. The battle casualties included two brigadier generals—Zebulon M. Pike, killed by the explosion of a powder magazine during the attack on York, and Leonard Covington, mortally wounded at the Battle of Crysler's Farm during the offensive against Montreal in 1813—and four field officers who fell in the bloody Niagara campaign of 1814.<sup>43</sup> As noted earlier, small numbers of commanders were dismissed for misconduct or ineffectiveness or discharged during wartime reorganizations of the army. Some of the forty-seven resignations resulted from the conflicts over rank and precedence within the wartime officer corps.<sup>44</sup> Nearly three quarters of the resignees, however, had been appointed directly from civilian life to field or general rank, and many had experienced little active service. Two months after the declaration of war, Colonel William Dent Beall resigned to avoid an order to join the northern army, as his "circumstances and family situation" required him to remain near his Maryland home. Major Robert McCalla left the service in September 1812 after six months of recruiting duty in Kentucky; he feared that his regiment was destined for the Florida border—"that climate not agreeing with my constitution."<sup>45</sup>

On March 3, 1815, Congress voted to reduce the army from its authorized wartime level of 62,674 officers and men to 12,383.<sup>46</sup> This act cut the commis-

<sup>43</sup> Heitman, comp., *Historical Register of U. S. Army*, II, 13–42.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Col. Joseph Constant to Armstrong, May 9, 1813, file 2711, Lt. Col. Samuel S. Conner to Armstrong, July 7, 1814, file 5007, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office; and Brig. Gen. Wade Hampton to Armstrong, Aug. 22, 1813, Nov. 1, 1813, James Wilkinson Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>45</sup> Col. William D. Beall to Brig. Gen. Thomas H. Cushing, Aug. 14, 1812, file 730, Maj. Robert McCalla to Eustis, Sept. 20, 1812, file 1562, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office.

<sup>46</sup> Hetzel, comp., *Military Laws*, 183–184.

sioned officers from 3,495 to 674 and provided slots for only eight generals and thirty-eight field officers in the line branches. To the dismay of the old army veterans, the Madison administration did not base the reduction on seniority or confine it to the forces raised during the war itself. Furthermore, for the most part, the president selected young, combat-tested commanders to fill the generals' positions. The four Niagara generals of 1814 retained their commissions, as did Alexander Macomb, the thirty-three-year-old commander in the Plattsburgh campaign, and Andrew Jackson, at forty-eight somewhat older than his counterparts, who was a national hero for his victory at New Orleans. In addition, Robert Swartwout (thirty-six) was kept on as quartermaster general and Daniel Parker (thirty-three) continued as adjutant and inspector general. Gone were all the Revolutionary veterans and politician-generals who had dominated the top ranks in the early war years.

In order to choose field and company officers for the peace establishment, the War Department directed regimental and other high commanders to submit confidential reports on the quality of those officers wishing to be retained and appointed a board of generals, headed by Brown, to review these reports and make recommendations. According to Madison's instructions to the board, "those only should be recommended . . . who are at this time competent to engage an enemy in the field of battle." In the case of men equal in merit and moral character, the generals could consider "length of service, a capacity for civil pursuits, and the pecuniary situation of the parties."<sup>47</sup> The result was the first systematic screening of the officer corps by a professional body in the history of the United States Army.

Altogether, sixty-two of the high wartime commanders retained their commissions when the reduction went into effect on June 15, 1815, representing 25.7 percent of those men still in service at the time.<sup>48</sup> Except for two brigadier generals demoted to colonel and twelve majors to captain, the survivors remained in their wartime ranks. Four commanders stayed on by filling field grade slots in the general staff. Geographical balance was not a criterion established by the administration, and the board of generals selected southerners and westerners in proportions somewhat larger than their representation in the officer corps at the end of the war (see Table VI). The generals seem to have

<sup>47</sup> Alexander J. Dallas to Brown, Jackson, Scott, Gaines, Macomb, and Ripley, Apr. 8, 1815, in George Mifflin Dallas, *Life and Writings of Alexander James Dallas* (Philadelphia, 1871), 370-372. Jackson and Gaines did not attend the board but sent recommendations; Gaines to Dallas, Apr. 25, 1815, file G-1815, and Jackson, confidential report on officers of his command, n.d., enclosed with Col. Arthur P. Hayne to Dallas, Apr. 6, 1815, file H-1815, Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Unregistered Series, 1789-1861, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives. For the confidential reports of the regimental and other commanders see *ibid.* for 1815. For the administration's handling of the reduction see generally Dallas, *Life and Writings of Dallas*, 397-446.

<sup>48</sup> The list of retainees has been constructed from officers' service records in Heitman, comp., *Historical Register of U. S. Army*, I. The board's report has not been found, but Madison accepted it as the basis for the reduction and thus its content may be inferred from an analysis of the officers retained. Madison to Dallas, May 10, 1815, Dallas, *Life and Writings of Dallas*, 411-413.

TABLE VI  
GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF GENERAL AND FIELD OFFICERS  
IN REDUCTION OF 1815

	<i>Retained</i>		<i>Discharged</i>		<i>Total Officers, June 1815</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
New England	11	17.7	38	21.1	49	20.3
Mid-Atlantic	14	22.6	61	33.9	75	31.0
South Atlantic	25	40.3	53	29.4	78	32.2
West	12	19.4	28	15.6	40	16.5
Totals	62		180		242	

taken seriously their charge to retain the most active and best qualified commanders. The selectees averaged thirty-three years of age in June 1815 with over seven years in length of regular service. A solid majority had risen from the junior grades of the old army or the additional force raised in 1808; only five had entered the regular army during the last two years of the war, and two of these men were generals Brown and Jackson. Among the officers retained were eighteen veterans of the Niagara offensive of 1814, just under two-thirds of the high commanders who had served in that campaign and survived, as well as five of the seven regimental field officers known to have fought under Jackson at New Orleans. Most of the remaining selectees had compiled solid leadership records in other theaters, either as combat commanders or staff officers. During the fourteen months following the reduction, twenty of the discharged veterans received reappointment to the officer corps; they closely resembled the retainees in age and experience.

The reduction of 1815 introduced a new phase in the evolution of the United States Army. The high-ranking veterans who survived the cutback, together with a far larger group of officers retained in the company grades and general staff, recalled vividly the breakdowns and defeats of 1812 and 1813. They also cherished with exaggerated pride memories of the army's improved performance during the war. In their view, a corps of disciplined regulars had salvaged national honor on the battlefield and rescued the republic from defeat and possible dismemberment. During the postwar years, acting with the support of the Madison and Monroe administrations, this War of 1812 generation of leaders launched a major effort to reform military management and place the peacetime army on a more secure and permanent footing. They rationalized army bureaucracy, introducing systematic staff procedures and comprehensive tactical and administrative regulations. They transformed the tiny military academy at West Point into an effective instrument of professional education and socialization, set in motion a systematic program of sea-coast fortifications for the defense of the vulnerable port cities, and worked to standardize the design of artillery and other types of weapons and matériel. They also developed a coherent vision of their professional role, centering on service as a cadre of experienced leaders to preserve military expertise in peacetime and direct a future war effort against a major European power—thereby

avoiding a repetition of the disasters of the early War of 1812 years. Forcefully presented by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in a report to Congress in 1820 and tacitly approved by the government in the reduction and reorganization of the army in 1821, this conception of the army's mission provided an intellectual stimulus for the professionalization of the army officer corps in antebellum America.<sup>49</sup>

In his assessment of the officer corps, Winfield Scott portrayed accurately the amateurism and partisanship that pervaded the upper rungs of the early wartime army. He erred, however, in attributing military failure to character deficiency, and he did not fully grasp the degree to which the officer corps had changed during the course of the conflict. The men appointed to the rapidly swelling army of 1808–1813 represented a cross-section of America's political and social leadership. This pattern arose from political influence, and it also reflected the widespread and reasonable belief that men of local prominence made effective recruiters. Rather than the result of personal incompetence, the defeats of the early war years stemmed mostly from circumstantial and structural conditions—military inexperience compounded by the haste of the buildup, Republican aversion to concentrated power that impeded planning and coordination, and the decentralization and primitive transportation system of the early republic. By the later stages of the war, the performance of the officer corps was steadily improving, partly through administration efforts to advance talented men but, more important, through the experience that young officers had acquired by years of field service. The board of generals of 1815, on which Scott himself played a leading role, confirmed the wartime gains by carefully screening the officer corps and retaining the best qualified, thereby laying the foundation for the American profession of arms.

<sup>49</sup>On the postwar reform of the army see Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 109–130.