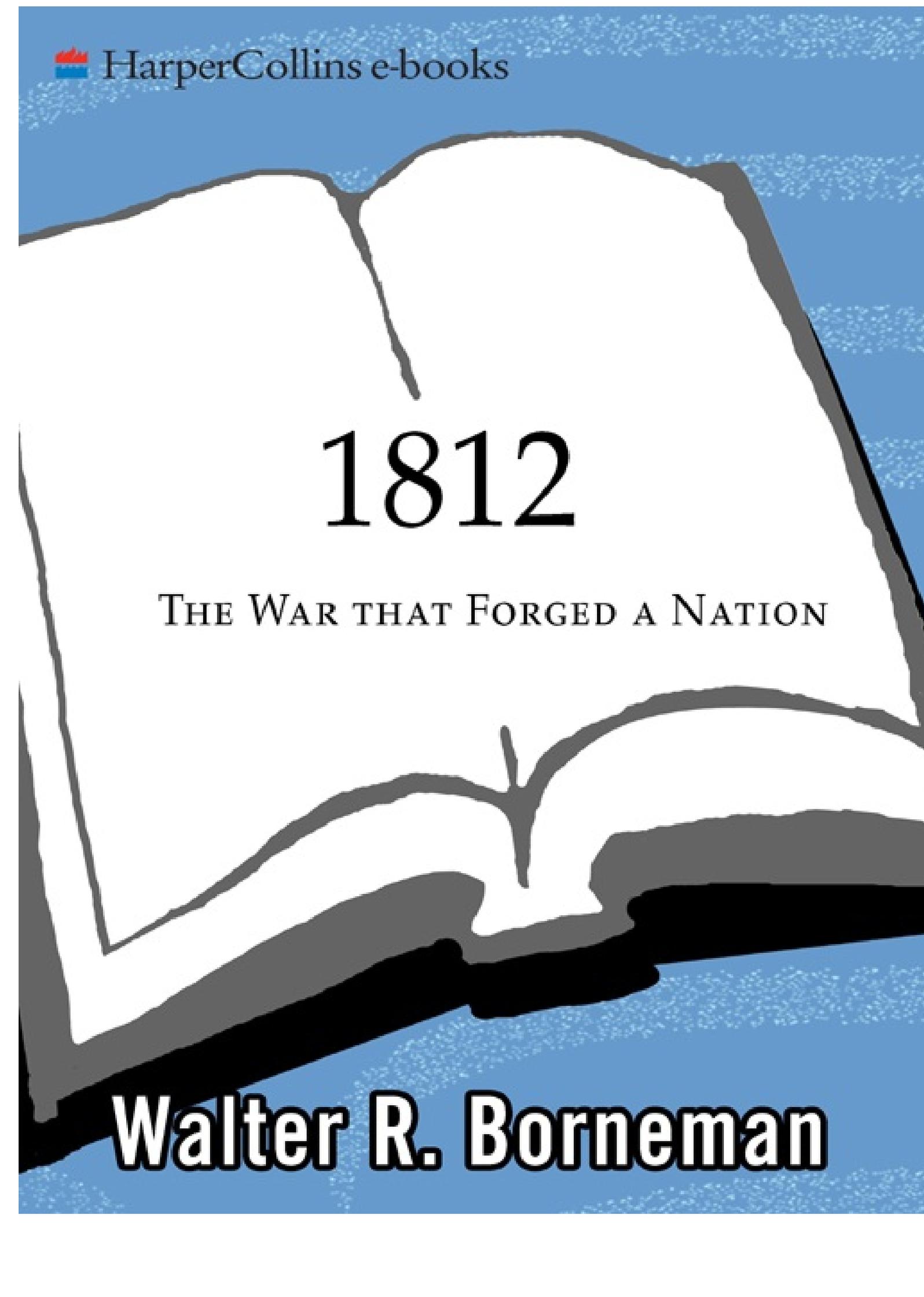




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1812

THE WAR THAT FORGED A NATION

**Walter R. Borneman**

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For my mother

Barbara Lucille Parker Borneman  
(1927–1956)



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**At first glance**, a history of the War of 1812 may seem to be far afield from my previous writings on western history. In truth, as a youngster growing up in Ohio, I cut my teeth on tales of the American Revolution, the later battles along the Great Lakes, and the settlement of the Northwest Territory. When childhood fascination turned to academic study, I quickly came to realize that whatever happened west of the Mississippi had its roots in the eastern rivers and forests that had first captured my imagination.

My chief goals here are to present a readable history of the War of 1812, place it in the context of America's development as a nation, and emphasize its importance as a foundation of America's subsequent westward expansion. Though frequently overlooked between the Revolution and the Civil War, the War of 1812 did indeed span half a continent—from Mackinac Island to New Orleans and Lake Champlain to Horseshoe Bend—and it set the stage for the conquest of the continent's other half.

For those who wonder how I could write a history of the War of 1812 based in Colorado, I must thank the Denver Public Library, the Penrose Library of the University of Denver, and the Arthur Lakes Library of the Colorado School of Mines. I am also grateful to the research assistance of Fadra Whyte at the University of Pittsburgh and Christopher Fleitas at Yale University, and the cartographic skills of Eric Janota at National Geographic Maps.

In addition to newspapers and the Annals of Congress, many primary sources from this period are increasingly available in published form. These include the personal papers of such key figures as John Quincy Adams, Burr, Clay, Gallatin, Hamilton, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Wilkinson. John C. Fredriksen's *War of 1812 Eyewitness Accounts* is the key to finding primary sources from lesser-known participants on both sides. Recent publication of *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* has also placed a host of primary sources at one's fingertips. There have been many scholarly histories of the war or its phases over the years, but one of the most recent and clearly the best is Donald R. Hickey's *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. Professor Hickey's insight and voluminous footnotes are a treasure trove and form bedrock for any serious study of the period. Other essential secondary sources include J. Mackay Hitsman's *The Incredible War of 1812 from the British and Canadian perspective*; Robert Remini's biographies of Jackson and Clay; and Arsene Latour's *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana* and Robert McAfee's *History of the War in the Western Country*—both published shortly after the conflict. Theodore Roosevelt's *The Naval War of 1812* and Alfred Thayer Mahan's *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* remain steady stalwarts.

As always, my favorite part of the research was being in the field. My beloved grandparents, Walter and Hazel Borneman, may have started it all by taking me to Brock's Monument at Queenston Heights at the age of four. In ensuing years, I walked the decks of "Old Ironsides," looked out across Put-in Bay, visited Presque Isle, and crossed the straits of Mackinac. More recently, my wife,

Marlene, and I toured Fort McHenry, Chesapeake Bay, and Lake Champlain. Jim Gehres and Jean McGuey joined us on a whirlwind return to Queenston Heights, Lundy's Lane, and Chippawa, and Jim and Gail Fleitas extended us cordial southern hospitality for a reenactment of the Battle of New Orleans. This book makes number two with two of the best, my editor, Hugh Van Dusen, and my agent, Alexander Hoyt. I'm very glad to be a part of the team!



## THE WAR THAT FORGED A NATION

**In some respects**, it was a silly little war—fought between creaking sailing ships and inexperienced armies often led by bumbling generals. It featured a tit-for-tat, “You burned our capital, so we’ll burn yours,” and a legendary battle unknowingly fought after the signing of a peace treaty. In the retrospect of two centuries of American history, however, the War of 1812 stands out as the coming of age of a nation.

In June 1812 a still infant nation of eighteen loosely joined states had the audacity to declare war on the British Empire. Such indignation was fired by resentment over years of British high-handedness on the high seas and envious yearnings by Americans west of the Appalachians for more territory. But a good part of the country, mostly the New England states, thought there was far more to lose by pulling the lion’s tail than a handful of ships and impressed sailors. New Englanders did not take kindly to or go out of their way to support what they called “Mr. Madison’s war.”

Indeed, Great Britain might have easily crushed the upstarts if it had brought its full weight to bear on the matter, but the British were preoccupied with Napoleon’s maneuvers in Europe, and the American war in North America remained a sideshow for its first two years. During that time the American navy proved its mettle and found an icon as the USS Constitution, “Old Ironsides,” sent two first-rate British frigates to the bottom. On land, despite Henry Clay’s boast that the militia of Kentucky alone was capable of conquering Canada, two years of invasion attempts on three fronts failed. When the tide appeared to turn in America’s favor, it was because a twenty-seven-year-old lieutenant named Oliver Hazard Perry ran a flag boasting “Don’t Give Up the Ship” up his flagship’s mast and with a motley collection of hastily built ships chased the British navy from Lake Erie.

Within two months of Perry’s victory, however, Napoleon met his first Waterloo at Leipzig, and victorious Great Britain was free to swing a battle-hardened hand at its American cousins. Suddenly the young American nation was no longer fighting for free trade, sailors’ rights, and as much of Canada as it could grab, but for its very existence as a nation. In 1814 Great Britain threatened assaults against all corners of the United States: from Canada via Niagara Falls and Lake Champlain, into the heartland of the mid-Atlantic states from Chesapeake Bay, and against that door to half a continent, New Orleans. For a time it looked as if the British Empire might regain its former colonies.

With Washington in flames, only a valiant defense at Fort Mchenry saved Baltimore from a similar fate. The greatest American victory in 1814, however, may have come not on the battlefield or the high seas, but at the negotiating table. Somehow, with British armies arrayed along its borders and a British blockade locking up its ports, the United States managed to sign a peace treaty on Christmas Eve, 1814, that preserved its preexisting boundaries, even if it made no reference to one of the war’s

most egregious causes.

The news of the Treaty of Ghent reached Washington only after Andrew Jackson had assembled a tattered force of army regulars, backwoods militia, and bayou pirates and bested the pride of British regulars. Strategically, the Battle of New Orleans was of no military significance to the war, but politically it came to fill a huge void in the American psyche—not only propelling Andrew Jackson to the presidency, but also affirming a strong, new sense of national identity.

During the War of 1812, the United States would cast aside its cloak of colonial adolescence and—*with more than a few bumbles along the way*—stumble forth onto the world stage. After the War of 1812, there was no longer any doubt that the United States of America was a national force to be reckoned with. But in the beginning, all of this was very much in doubt.



[The United States, 1812](#)

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BOOK ONE

*Drumbeats*  
*(1807–1812)*

Many nations have gone to war in pure gayety of heart, but perhaps the United States were first to force themselves into a war they dreaded, in the hope that the war itself might create the spirit they lacked.

—*Henry Adams, History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, 1889*



**In the early twilight**, the swollen waters of the Ohio River swept a wooden flatboat up to a landing on a small, tree-covered island. On the river's east bank lay the western reaches of the state of Virginia; on the west, the shores of the state of Ohio, now, in the spring of 1805, barely two years old. The flatboat was much grander than the normal river craft that floated by or landed here. Indeed, its owner had commissioned its recent construction in Pittsburgh, and he himself described it as a "floating house, sixty feet by fourteen, containing dining room, kitchen with fireplace, and two bedrooms, roofed from stem to stern...."<sup>1</sup>

The flatboat belonged to Aaron Burr. With jet-black eyes, a silken tongue, and the refined dress to match the accoutrements of his vessel, Burr cast a larger shadow than his diminutive height suggested. For four years, he had been the proverbial heartbeat away from the presidency, but once he had also been just one particular heartbeat away. Why the recent vice president of the United States came to make this journey down the Ohio River evidences just how tenuous the American union still was in 1805, and that the very last thing it should have come to contemplate was another war with Great Britain.

**In the presidential election** of 1800, there were as yet no strictly organized political tickets. Prior to the Twelfth Amendment, the Constitution merely ordained that the person receiving the highest number of electoral votes be declared president and the second highest, vice president. Party electors were supposed to withhold a vote or two from the agreed-upon vice presidential candidate, thus assuring the election of their presidential favorite.

Such informality didn't work very well. In fact, so many Federalist electors withheld votes from John Adams's running mate in 1796 that Republican Thomas Jefferson ended up with the second highest number of votes and the vice presidency. (Jefferson's Republicans were the liberal predecessors of the Jefferson-Jackson Democrats and not the "Grand Old Party" of Abraham Lincoln.) To avoid such a result in 1800, Republican vice presidential candidate Aaron Burr obtained Jefferson's assurance that no southern elector would drop a vote for Burr, but that Burr would arrange for a Republican elector from Rhode Island—supposedly a solid Jefferson state—to withhold one vote for Burr. That strategy backfired when the Federalists proceeded to win Rhode Island, and the remaining Republican electors cast the identical number of votes for president and vice president.

Thus in only the nation's fourth presidential election, Thomas Jefferson handily defeated incumbent John Adams, but imagine Jefferson's surprise when his vice presidential running mate received the same number of electoral votes as he, and the election was declared a tie. With Jefferson and Burr each receiving seventy-three votes, the election went to the House of Representatives, where the contest was suddenly not between Federalist and Republican, but between Republican and

Republican.

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Vice presidential candidate Burr professed allegiance to Jefferson, but made no outright disclaimer of the higher office. Indeed, there were plenty of whispers in Burr's ear to suggest that the higher office was his for the taking. New England Federalists, who were rarely as unified in anything as they were in their opposition to Thomas Jefferson, actively courted Burr, vastly preferring the New York lawyer—Republican though he might be—to the Virginia planter.<sup>2</sup>

Not all Federalists felt that way, of course. Alexander Hamilton for one was appalled at the possibility of Burr becoming president. Four years before he would die by Burr's dueling pistol, Hamilton wrote: "There is no doubt but that upon every virtuous and prudent calculation Jefferson is to be preferred. He is by far not so dangerous a man and he has pretensions to character."<sup>3</sup> Among other things, Hamilton probably feared that Burr might come to take over the Federalist Party that Hamilton clearly viewed as his own exclusive route to the presidency.

In the House of Representatives, the Federalists controlled six states, the Republicans eight. Two states were undecided. A simple majority of nine was needed to elect either Jefferson or Burr president. For a turbulent six weeks, the electoral balloting and the intra-party intrigue continued. Certain Federalists and Republicans friendly to Burr clung to the hope that they might be able to swing three states into the Federalist column and make Burr president. Finally, after some backroom concessions obtained from Jefferson through Alexander Hamilton, James A. Bayard of Delaware—the undecided state's lone vote in the House of Representatives—voted for Jefferson to give him the required nine states. Aaron Burr would spend four years being a heartbeat away from the presidency, but he lost it by the single heartbeat of James Bayard.

Both Jefferson and Burr were quick to say that each bore no hard feelings toward the other, but more than a few Republicans noted how far Burr had been tempted to stray to the Federalists, and, likewise, the Federalists knew how close they had come to getting him. The result was that both sides came to view Burr as something of a leaf willing to be blown by whatever political winds offered the promise of greater glory. For Jefferson's part, he would soon prove that he hadn't meant that line about "no hard feelings" after all.<sup>4</sup>

So Aaron Burr became vice president of the United States in March 1801. By most accounts he served a distinguished term, taking seriously his charge to preside over the United States Senate and tarnishing his reputation only through his duel with Alexander Hamilton. Even by the standards of 1804, it is difficult to grasp that a sitting vice president of the United States should fight a duel, let alone kill his opponent, but in truth Thomas Jefferson had been determined to rid himself of Burr long before the public uproar over the duel.

On February 25, 1804, before the days of political conventions, congressional Republicans met to nominate Jefferson for a second term. New York Governor George Clinton received the lion's share of vice presidential votes ahead of Kentuckian John Breckinridge and a handful of favorite sons. The incumbent vice president, Aaron Burr, received none. Four years before, Burr had been a single heartbeat away from the presidency; now he could not muster the support of a single heart that thought him worthy of the vice presidency. It was a humiliating repudiation.<sup>5</sup>

Burr's first thought was to redeem himself by winning the governorship of New York. When he

failed miserably in that attempt, there was little to do but finish out his term as vice president and head west. His direction was chosen with a great deal of forethought.

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**At the time**, the ink was scarcely dry upon the Louisiana Purchase treaty. Louisiana was a vast chunk of territory—roughly the western drainage of the Mississippi River—that France had ceded to Spain in 1763 as part of its North American concessions following the Seven Years' War. Four decades later, Napoleon managed to bully Spain into returning it, but Spanish administrators in Louisiana retaliated by revoking the “right of deposit” enjoyed by the fledgling United States. Negotiated by the Washington administration in 1795, the right of deposit permitted Americans to export farm products and other goods through New Orleans. When the right of deposit was revoked, it was tantamount to choking the commerce of all of the United States west of the Appalachians.

By 1803 Jefferson wanted Louisiana in part to resolve the right of deposit issue. Napoleon desperately needed American cash to fund his European conquests. Even if Napoleon sold Louisiana, a steady stream of clandestine reports seemed to suggest that he might be able to have his cake and eat it, too. The very acquisition of Louisiana by the United States might, wishful thinking suggested, prompt the split of the still tenuous American union between the New England and mid-Atlantic states more interested in European commerce, and the western states more in tune with Napoleon's swaggering militarism. Then Louisiana and all of the Mississippi Valley might be persuaded to become a French ally. With fifteen million American dollars in his vaults, Napoleon might still be able to retain effective control of Louisiana. Now there was a touch of Napoleonic optimism of the sort that would find him at the gates of Moscow a decade hence!<sup>6</sup>

In this early period of American history, the idea of states seceding from the Union was not nearly as cataclysmic as it would be deemed two generations later. Indeed, people in all parts of the country maintained an intense, first-line loyalty to their respective home states. As early as 1792, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson warned President George Washington that southern states might secede in opposition to Alexander Hamilton's national banking system. And even as the Senate debated the ratification of the Louisiana Purchase, Senator John Breckinridge of Kentucky threatened that if the treaty was rejected, “the western states would immediately secede and form a separate country.”<sup>7</sup>

While some hailed Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana a diplomatic masterpiece, others argued that the United States should simply have seized the territory over the right of deposit issue. There were others who were convinced that no matter the present transaction, should Napoleon be victorious in Europe, the United States would be called upon to defend the new acquisition from his rapacious territorial appetite. But when Jefferson dispatched 450 troops under the command of Brigadier General James Wilkinson to occupy New Orleans in the wake of the purchase, it was not out of fear of the French, but rather that the Spanish who still controlled the city might resist. Nonetheless, Wilkinson and newly appointed Governor William Claiborne took possession of the Crescent City without incident on December 20, 1803.<sup>8</sup>

James Wilkinson was either the most despicable scoundrel in American history or the victim of the worst press ever. Most accounts support the former. Wilkinson had known Aaron Burr for more than a quarter of a century, ever since their paths crossed as young officers serving under Benedict

Arnold during his ill-fated 1775 attack on Quebec during the opening round of the American Revolution. Two years later as a deputy adjutant general, Wilkinson helped to draft the terms of surrender for Burgoyne's British army at Saratoga—a fact that Wilkinson was always quick to relate

Despite his long tenure in the United States Army, however, Wilkinson took an oath of allegiance to Spain as early as 1787. To the Spanish, he was known as “Agent 13.” Such duplicity aside, by 1792 Wilkinson was a brigadier general, and the following year commanded a wing of General “Mad” Anthony Wayne's army at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. When Wayne died in 1796, James Wilkinson was left as the ranking general in the U.S. Army, a position he would occupy for the next fifteen years.

But Wilkinson was seldom happy. In May 1802 Wilkinson wrote Aaron Burr of his disillusionment and bitterness over lack of congressional support for the military in general and machinations with his rank and salary in particular. Small wonder Wilkinson was disposed to line his pockets with Spanish gold. Burr may not have known of that, but he certainly knew Wilkinson to be disgruntled by the actions of eastern politicians while envisioning himself as the guardian of the young nation's frontier.<sup>9</sup>

Another to whom Wilkinson complained was Alexander Hamilton. Wilkinson assured Hamilton that he had explored “with military eyes...every critical pass, every direct route, & every devious way between the Mexican Gulph [sic] & the Tennessee River.” Wilkinson intimated that he was tired of President Jefferson's pacifism and that to wear his sword “without active service is becoming disreputable.”<sup>10</sup> Despite such criticisms, Wilkinson somehow managed to remain Jefferson's favorite soldier. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he wrote Jefferson lengthy letters filled with descriptions of flora and fauna.

Over the objections of Secretary of War James McHenry, who would soon have a fort near Baltimore named after him, Hamilton had previously recommended Wilkinson's promotion to major general. In doing so, Hamilton urged McHenry that “we ought certainly to look to the possession of the Floridas and Louisiana—and we ought to squint at South America.”<sup>11</sup>

Wilkinson had scarcely settled into New Orleans when he had a series of late-night conversations with Vincente Folch, the governor of Spanish West Florida. Agent 13 gave the Spaniard helpful suggestions about how to keep the Americans out of the Floridas and lessen American influence in newly acquired Louisiana. Shortly afterward, Wilkinson—with his most recent Spanish retainer payment jingling in his pockets—set out on a trip back east.<sup>12</sup>

On May 23, 1804, in the wake of his repudiation as vice president and would-be governor of New York, Aaron Burr received a late night caller, who made a point that no one should know of his visit. Never mind the fact that Burr and his secretive guest were old friends. With Burr's political power apparently destroyed, what could he and James Wilkinson possibly have to talk about?

No record remains of their conversation. Subsequent events, however, suggest that the man who had just told the Spanish how to keep American influence at bay in the Louisiana Territory was now on Aaron Burr's doorstep suggesting to the disgruntled politico a way to steal an empire away from both American and Spanish influences. Louisiana also meant Mexico and the entire Southwest, and Wilkinson had with him maps of Texas and the Spanish Southwest.<sup>13</sup>

Because he was a man determined to be on the winning side at all costs of honor, Wilkinson had also written to Alexander Hamilton a few weeks before his clandestine meeting with Burr. The “destinies of Spain” in the entire Southwest, Wilkinson assured Hamilton, were in “the hands of the U.S.”<sup>14</sup> Several months later, Hamilton was dead, the consequence of a bullet fired by Aaron Burr in the culmination of a quarter of a century of political rivalry. Hamilton’s friends demanded a criminal indictment. Burr kept a low profile, but he was not without a plan.

On August 6, 1804, the British ambassador to the United States, Anthony Merry, sent a report of an astonishing communication to the British foreign secretary. “I have just received an offer from Mr. Burr the actual vice president of the United States (which Situation he is about to resign),” wrote Merry, “to lend his assistance to His Majesty’s Government in any Manner in which they may think fit to employ him, particularly in endeavouring to effect a Separation of the Western Part of the United States from that which lies between the Atlantick [sic] and the Mountains, in it’s [sic] whole Extent.”<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the rightful owner of that territory appointed General James Wilkinson—who had suggested to anyone who would listen or grease his palm with gold that all of Louisiana was ripe for the picking—governor of Upper Louisiana. Significantly, as he moved upriver to St. Louis and assumed his gubernatorial duties, Wilkinson continued to hold his military rank. Despite criticisms in Congress that civil and military authority should not repose in the same person, the general/governor would be waiting for Aaron Burr to pay a return visit.

**Such was the background** to the journey that found Aaron Burr touching shore at the landing on Blennerhassett Island in the spring of 1805. If Burr was a particularly distinguished visitor to the island, his host and hostess were themselves rather extraordinary. Harman Blennerhassett traced his roots to English nobility. His ancestors immigrated to Ireland during the fourteenth century, and Harman was born there on October 8, 1764, or perhaps 1765, the youngest of three sons and six daughters. “My father and mother,” Harman later wrote, “were never agreed as to which year I was born.”<sup>16</sup> As the third son, he chose law as his profession, but the death of his father and two older brothers soon made him heir to a considerable fortune.

In 1796, while visiting Captain Robert Agnew, the lieutenant governor of the Isle of Man, Blennerhassett was dispatched aboard to escort Agnew’s daughter home from school. He was thirty-one, tall, learned, but somewhat awkward. Margaret Agnew was a captivatingly beautiful eighteen. She, too, was tall. With blue eyes and auburn hair, she was a skilled horsewoman and spoke and wrote both French and Italian. Enough said. Blennerhassett cast aside all notion of his fiduciary role and persuaded her to marry him on the spot. There was only one problem: she was also his niece. Upon their return to the Isle of Man, the reception was less than cordial, and Blennerhassett promptly sold his estate in Ireland for a reported \$160,000—then a considerable sum—and sailed for New York with his elegant bride, arriving there on August 1, 1796.<sup>17</sup>

The newlyweds spent some time first in New York and then in Philadelphia, but soon headed west across the Alleghenies. They found their way via keelboat down the Ohio to Marietta, then the gateway to much of the Northwest Territory. From the heights above Marietta, Blennerhassett discovered an island in the Ohio River that at once boasted both the lushness of Ireland and a regal

setting from which to command an empire. In March 1797 he purchased two hundred acres on the island and was soon ensconced there with Margaret, who quickly bore him three children. By the time of Burr's arrival, the centerpiece of Blennerhassett Island was a fifty-four by thirty-eight-foot mansion with two thirteen-foot-wide and thirty-seven-foot-long porticos that connected to symmetrical wings. Perhaps Burr mused that not even Thomas Jefferson's executive mansion in Washington City had such fine appendages as yet.<sup>18</sup>

On this spring evening, Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett greeted their guest warmly. While Burr was an anathema to many easterners who still mourned the loss of Alexander Hamilton, here in the West men viewed such matters as dueling quite differently. Burr was treated as the celebrity he certainly was. Once again, there is no complete record of the conversations that took place that evening, but subsequent events suggest that Burr appealed to Blennerhassett's ego as well as his pocketbook.

Burr soon continued down the Ohio bound for New Orleans, but he called again at Blennerhassett Island on his return upriver. Afterward Blennerhassett wrote Burr looking for money in exchange for sale or lease of his island. "In either way, if I could sell or lease the place, I would move forward with a firmer confidence in any undertaking which your sagacity might open to profit and fame," suggested Blennerhassett. "Having thus advised you of my desire and motives to pursue a change of life, to engage in any thing which may suit my circumstances, I hope, sir, you will not regard it indelicate in me to observe to you how highly I should be honored in being associated with you in any contemplated enterprise you would permit me to participate in."<sup>19</sup>

That desired association almost left Blennerhassett high indeed—swinging high from the end of a rope. Blennerhassett would later testify that he had no clear understanding of what venture Burr had in mind, but he nonetheless agreed to assist Burr in the construction of certain boats and to permit a company of men to gather on Blennerhassett Island.

Another stop Burr made in May 1805 and again in August upon his return from New Orleans was with Andrew and Rachel Jackson in Nashville. The Jacksons welcomed Burr as a man of the West. Jackson himself had fought his share of duels, and he could well relate with talk of driving the Spaniards from not only the Floridas but also Texas. Jackson viewed such talk as just good American boosterism—the sort of thing that would come to be called "manifest destiny." If Jackson saw Burr's dark side and suspected his true motives, he gave no inkling of it until November 10, 1806, an uncomfortable week or so after Jackson, too, had accepted money from Burr for the construction of two boats.

On that date Captain John A. Fort arrived in Nashville from New Orleans and stayed with the Jacksons. Over the course of the evening—apparently thinking Jackson more of the insider than he was—Fort went on at some length about Burr's plans to seize New Orleans and make it the gateway to a great southwestern empire. Suddenly disturbed, Jackson sent a series of letters, including one to President Jefferson, suggesting that something was amiss along the Mississippi. Jefferson at first was confused by Jackson's missive. Was the belligerent frontiersman merely suggesting a war with Spain or was there in fact something treasonable behind Burr's actions?<sup>20</sup>

Initially Burr was arrested and arraigned before a grand jury in Frankfort, Kentucky, on charges of raising troops for illegal purposes. Burr's lawyer was a young up-and-comer named Henry Clay. Finding that "no violent disturbance of the Public Tranquility or breach of the laws" had occurred, the

grand jury dismissed the charges. Nonetheless, Jackson wrote Burr of his suspicions, and Burr hastened to Nashville to reassure Jackson. Whatever he said, it must have mollified Jackson, because on December 22, 1806, Burr left Nashville with the two boats he had purchased from Jackson and floated down the Cumberland, planning to rendezvous with the boats and men coming from Blennerhassett Island.<sup>21</sup>

Scarcely had Burr disappeared downstream, however, than a presidential proclamation reached Nashville announcing that President Jefferson believed a vast military conspiracy was under way in the West and calling for the arrest of all those involved, principally his former vice president. Jefferson was at least partly correct, of course, but the man who had urged him to take such action and the man to whom Jefferson now turned to save the Union was none other than James Wilkinson.

Much has been written about Wilkinson's true motives. His detractors far outnumber his supporters. Why he chose to double-cross Burr, when Wilkinson himself had first sung the siren's song of empire in Burr's willing ear, is debatable, but in no small measure it was motivated by Wilkinson's desire always to be on the winning side. Perhaps he saw the futility of a handful of men flatboats stealing an empire. Undoubtedly he bemoaned the potential loss of his regular Spanish retainer. Going to great pains to cover his own conspiratorial tracks, Wilkinson wrote a subordinate: "By letters found here, I perceive the plot thickens; yet all but those concerned sleep profoundly. My God! What a situation has our country reached."<sup>22</sup>

The upshot was that Aaron Burr was arrested again and taken to Richmond, Virginia, to stand trial for treason. He was acquitted only because Chief Justice John Marshall chose to preside over the trial himself and narrowly define treason under the Constitution as requiring an overt act of war. Marshall had political debts to Burr, and it was not his most shining moment as a jurist. General Wilkinson was a star witness for the government and played the self-righteous defender of America's frontier. Agent 13's reputation emerged from the trial as muddled as ever.<sup>23</sup>

While Burr was on trial, Harman Blennerhassett spent fifty-three days in a Richmond jail awaiting his own fate and ruing the day that he and Margaret had welcomed such a wily guest to Blennerhassett Island. With Burr's acquittal, all charges were dropped against Blennerhassett, but his beloved mansion overlooking the Ohio River had been overrun and damaged by local militia in the wake of his arrest.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, Andrew Jackson, who had himself come uncomfortably close to Burr's web, wrote a friend: "I am more convinced than ever that treason never was intended by Burr, but if ever it was you know my wishes that he may be hung."<sup>25</sup>

**So Louisiana** and the Mississippi Valley still belonged to the United States. The fledgling American union remained intact, but the plotting of a disgruntled politician and an unscrupulous general had shown how tenuous it was. Within a short time, growing pains along its entire border from British Canada to Spanish Florida, as well as on the high seas, would push the country into war. When that war came, Aaron Burr had faded into the shadows, but many of the others who had played a role in the machinations of what came to be called the "Burr Conspiracy" would be center stage, including Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and the nefarious General Wilkinson.



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