

Events Leading to the War of 1812

The United States fought the Revolutionary War with Great Britain to gain independence and become a new nation. The Revolutionary War started in 1775. Eight years later, in 1783, the thirteen colonies were free from British rule and had formed a new government. The American government was based on democracy where people voted for their representatives while Great Britain was ruled by a king or queen and other royalty. The American government was defined by the United States Constitution.

The thirteen colonies were Virginia, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maryland, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Georgia. Since most of the colonists sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from Great Britain it is easy to understand why these colonies are all close to the Atlantic Ocean. By 1803, Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee had become states as well.

With all the land available in North America, it is no surprise that people began exploring and moving westward. When the United States was first formed, the Spanish had already settled Florida and claimed that land. France owned Louisiana and beyond. In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory of more than 800,000 square miles from France. This purchase, called the Louisiana Purchase, doubled the size of the United States. Louisiana officially became a state in 1812 and the rest of the Louisiana Purchase was divided into other territories.

The United States had grown to be a large country in a short time. In the early 1800s there were no railroads and no means of fast communication across all the land. Anyplace outside of the original colonies was called frontier. Without communication and with only a small army, the frontiers of the United States were hard to control.

Meanwhile, the British continued to control Canada. Canada was never part of the colonies and remained under British rule. In 1783 the United States and Great Britain set boundaries for the border between Canada and the United States but with all the wilderness and open land, the border was not exactly known. Both countries claimed some of the same land, especially around the Great Lakes. The British also tried to claim land further south into Ohio and Kentucky.

Events Leading to the War of 1812 (Cont'd)

The British made allies of the Native Americans living in these areas. The British encouraged the Indian tribes to attack American settlers. The settlers knew that the British were behind the Indian attacks. In spite of this, by 1810 nearly a quarter of a million people had moved into Ohio.

Meanwhile, in 1793 Britain and France were at war. The United States was put in the middle because it traded with both countries. Britain possessed a good navy and prevented ships from entering French ports, including those ships from the United States. American merchants found ways to continue to trade with France. In retaliation, Britain seized more than 250 American ships. Many American sailors were forced to work on British ships. The term for this is they were *impressed* into service. That's about the same as being taken hostage except the sailors were forced to work.

American officials wanted to go to war with Great Britain over the British treatment of sailors and blocking trade with France. President George Washington decided that the country wasn't strong enough to fight Great Britain again. Instead in 1794 he sent the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Jay, to negotiate with the British. John Jay accepted a treaty that said that the British would stop seizing American ships while the United States would stop trade with France. People unhappy with the treaty burned straw dummies with John Jay's name on them. This was known as "burning in effigy" where an effigy is what the straw dummy was called. Even though there was a treaty in place, the British navy continued to harass American ships.

In 1802 Britain and France finally signed a peace treaty. Remember that the following year President Jefferson negotiated the Louisiana Purchase. But Napoleon Bonaparte, the dictator of France, prepared to invade Britain in 1804 and sent French ships towards Britain. Each side wanted to rule the seas and both sides said they would seize ships that traded with the other. American merchants wanted to trade goods with both sides; the United States was neutral in this conflict.

Events Leading to the War of 1812 (Cont'd)

In 1807 Great Britain set into law the Orders in Council. With these laws Britain forbade any neutral nation from trading with any country on the European continent unless the ship had a British license and stopped first at a port on the coast of Great Britain. Many American ships refused to follow these British rules of the sea and the British continued to seize American ships and impress the sailors.

These problems occurred with U.S. merchant ships that were far from home and near Britain and France. In June 1807, though, the problems reached the shores of the United States. The U.S. warship *Chesapeake* had just left Norfolk, Virginia and was stopped by the British warship *Leopard*. The British captain wanted to search the ship for a British sailor and when the American captain refused, the British captain fired his cannon on the *Chesapeake*. The American ship was heavily damaged and the British boarded it, taking the British sailor and three American sailors. Members of the U.S. Congress again wanted to declare war against Great Britain.

By then, Thomas Jefferson was president. In 1807 Congress passed Jefferson's Embargo Act that stated that British ships could not sail in American waters and that the United States would no longer trade with either Great Britain or France. But with no place to send American goods, this second decision hurt American trade so badly that Jefferson allowed trade with Britain and France in 1809 just before his term in office was finished. The next president, James Madison, restored the embargo in 1810.

Meanwhile, also in 1810, Indian attacks on frontier settlers that were backed by the British turned into warfare especially with the Potawatomi and Shawnee tribes. Tecumseh was the Shawnee leader who tried to unite the Indian tribes to fight off the American settlers who were taking over tribal lands. The Battle of Tippecanoe between Tecumseh's Indians and American troops led by William Henry Harrison occurred in the Indiana Territory near what is Lafayette, Indiana today in November 1811. The Indians were defeated which made Tecumseh continue to ally with the British. The British supplied the Indians with firearms in their struggle to keep their land.

Events Leading to the War of 1812 (Cont'd)

After the Battle of Tippecanoe members of Congress again wanted to go to war with Great Britain and also invade Canada to stop the British soldiers from supplying the Indians with firearms and other support. Members of Congress who wanted war were called Hawks and they were outvoted by the rest of Congress. But, in the election of 1811, voters in the southern and western states elected new members of Congress who favored war with Britain. The economy in the southern states had been badly hurt by the embargo and western states were suffering from Indian attacks.

Congress convinced President Madison to demand that Britain cancel the Orders of Council. When they did not get a response from Britain, Madison set the United States on the course of war on June 1, 1812 and Congress approved the measure on June 17. The United States officially declared war on Britain on June 18, 1812. Meanwhile Britain had repealed the Orders of Council on June 16. Unfortunately, in 1812 all messages traveled by ship across the sea and the American Congress didn't know that the embargo against Britain had actually been successful.

Name _____

Date _____

Events Leading to the War of 1812 Questions

Fill in the blanks with the following answers.

Washington
Jefferson
Madison
John Jay

Napoleon
Tecumseh
Harrison

Louisiana Purchase
Orders of Council
Embargo Act

1. In 1793 President _____ kept the U.S. from war with Britain because the British impressed American sailors.
2. Instead, he sent Chief Justice _____ to negotiate with Britain in 1794.
3. The size of the U.S. land area doubled with the _____.
4. In 1804 the dictator of France was _____.
5. The British law that required neutral ships to have licenses was called _____.
6. President _____ decreed that the U.S. would not trade with either Britain or France and then reversed his decision.
7. This decree was called the _____.
8. President _____ also decreed that the U.S. would not trade with Britain and France.
9. _____ was the Shawnee leader who tried to unite the Indian tribes.
10. _____ was the leader of American forces at the Battle of Tippecanoe.

Name _____

Date _____

Events Leading to the War of 1812 Answers

1. Washington
2. John Jay
3. Louisiana Purchase
4. Napoleon
5. Orders of Council
6. Jefferson
7. Embargo Act
8. Madison
9. Tecumseh
10. Harrison