

Future, Present, and Past: Perry's Victory on Lake Erie

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a painting and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance
- Analyze and explain the significance of Oliver Hazard Perry's victory over the British on Lake Erie during the War of 1812.

Painting

Perry's Victory on Lake Erie by Thomas Birch

Oil on canvas, c. 1814

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; gift of Mrs. Charles H. A. Esling

Additional Artworks

For more artworks and portraits, visit the “1812: A Nation Emerges” online exhibition at <http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/1812/>

Background Information for Teachers

Information about Naval Battles in the War of 1812

During the War of 1812, Americans were justifiably proud of their frigates' victories over British warships on the high seas. In these one-on-one contests, the newly designed American ships proved faster, more maneuverable, and more resistant to enemy fire than the British frigates. American officers showed excellent seamanship, and their crews were well trained, usually exceeding their British counterparts in the accuracy of their gunnery. The celebrations of those flamboyant victories, however, distract us from perhaps the more basic and critical realities of the naval aspects of the War of 1812. First, the British possessed a vastly larger navy. In 1812 the Royal Navy had more than 500 ships in service, including 115 ships-of-the-line and 126 frigates. The entire American navy consisted of 17 vessels. With such numbers, the British were able to maintain a largely successful blockade of American ports throughout the war. Second, perhaps the greatest American naval victories of the war were not the dramatic contests of the frigates on the high seas but the clashes of naval squadrons on the inland waters of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain. The victory of Oliver Hazard Perry secured the Northwest, while that of Thomas Macdonough prevented a British occupation of upper New York. These victories shaped the course of peace negotiations and convinced the Duke of Wellington—who many in the British government wanted to send to America after he defeated Napoleon—that the war in America could not easily be won.

Information about the Battle of Lake Erie

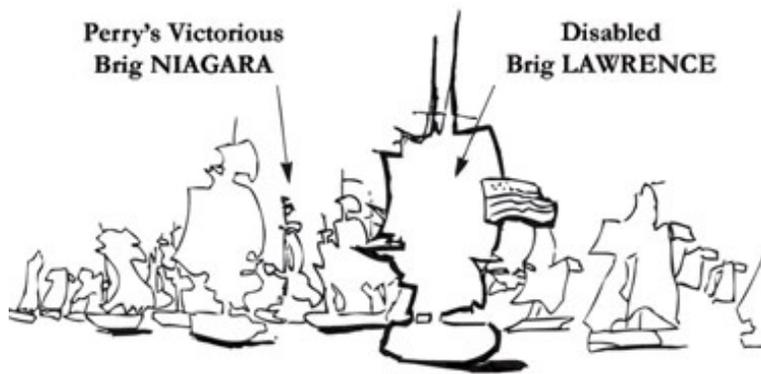
In February 1813, Oliver Hazard Perry was given command of the naval force on Lake Erie. Previous American defeats on land made control of the lake crucial for securing the Northwest Territory. On August 2, Perry succeeded in moving his brigs across a sandbar into deep water, with the British fleet in sight but unaware of his vulnerability. On September 10, Perry unfurled his “Don’t give up the ship” pendant on the *Lawrence* and led his ships into battle. For two hours, the *Lawrence* took most of the British fire. When it became disabled, Perry transferred his flag to the *Niagara*. After the British surrendered, Perry sent Major General William Henry Harrison the most famous after-action report in American history: “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” Perry’s victory led to American successes on land and control of the Northwest Territory.

Information about the painting by Thomas Birch from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (<http://www.pafa.org/Museum/The-Collection-Greenfield-American-Art-Resource/Tour-the-Collection/Category/Collection-Detail/985/mkey--42/>)

Dramatically depicting a key battle during the War of 1812, Thomas Birch painted the British and American naval fleets in full, easily tracked by their individual flags. Birch emphasizes the drama of the battle between Great Britain, his native home, and his adopted country, the United States, by showing the vast array of ships blanketed in a haze of cannon fire and the embattled ship *Lawrence* adrift with bullet-riddled sails. The ship credited with winning the long battle against the British navy, the *Niagara*, appears with its three large sails in the distant center of Birch’s scene, keeping the viewer at a safe distance from the actual fighting and presenting a patriotic vision of American victory that gives credit to the entire fleet rather than one officer or ship.

Information about the painting from Battle of Lake Erie Art (<http://www.battleoflakeerieart.com/birch.php>)

At the very apex of his pyramidal composition, Birch has placed the largest ship in the painting, a battered but buoyant brig, enhanced by an oversized American flag in perfect array. We assume this ship to be the heroic *Niagara*, but in this case, size does not correlate with importance. This is actually the *Lawrence*, Perry’s abandoned, disabled, unengaged brig. Trying to find the *Niagara* among the 14 to 16 other vessels is a challenge because the composition obscures its role in the battle. Looking more closely, we finally see the *Niagara* almost a half mile away, so small and insignificant that Perry and his brave men are completely lost to viewers who lack extensive knowledge of the battle (see illustration below identifying the fleet).



Lesson Procedures

Art Analysis

Have students analyze and discuss the painting *Perry's Victory on Lake Erie* by Thomas Birch (available on the “[1812: A Nation Emerges](#)” online exhibition), using the following questions as the basis for discussion:

- Describe what you see in the painting. What is the setting? What action is occurring? What is in the foreground and what is in the background?
- In what ways (if any) does the artist make it clear that the United States has won this battle?
- The Battle of Lake Erie took place in the afternoon, but artist Thomas Birch sets this painting in the morning, with a rising sun displacing the darker clouds in the top half of the canvas. Why might Birch have chosen to move the time of the battle in this way? What message might he be trying to convey with this choice?
- The large ship highlighted in the foreground of the painting is the *Lawrence*, which was disabled by British fire a few hours into the fighting. The *Niagara*, from which Perry ultimately won the battle, appears seemingly insignificant in the background. Why might Birch have composed the painting in this way?

Writing Activity: Future, Present, and Past

Perry's victory on Lake Erie was an unexpected but very important development in the course of the War of 1812. Research the background, events, and effects of the battle, and then explore its significance by writing paragraphs that explain the battle from each of the following three perspectives:

- Future (predicting what will happen in the battle, based on what was known in advance)
- Present (describing the actual course of the battle)
- Past (assessing the long-term significance of the battle)

National Standards of Learning

Standards in History for Grades 5–12

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–61)

- Understands United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.
- Understands the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800