



### **African Americans in the Battle of Lake**

As a result, the northern lakes arena witnessed the hardest and bloodiest fighting of the war. If the U.S. Navy could control the waterways comprising much of the border between the United States and British Canada, then American forces would have ready-made avenues for invasion. Conversely, the lakes and rivers could just as easily serve as invasion corridors for the enemy-vulnerable passageways allowing the British to slash through to the soft underbelly of the United States. Whoever wielded control over the lakes possessed a powerful strategic and tactical advantage.

The British, unhindered by the U.S. Navy, used the lakes as transportation routes for troops and supplies during the early months of the war. But the U.S. leadership recognized that warships were needed to form a protective shield along the country's northern and northwestern border, and by late 1812 a furious shipbuilding program had been inaugurated. By the summer of 1813, through new construction and the conversion of purchased merchant vessels, U.S. naval flotillas were cruising Lakes Erie, Ontario, and Champlain and, like their counterparts on the Atlantic, warships on the lakes berthed large numbers of African-American seamen.

Black seamen sailed on American warships throughout the Quasi-War with France during the late 1790's and also in the wars against the Barbary pirates during the first decade of the 19th century. In the early years of the Navy the presence of black seamen on board Navy warships was unofficial to say the least. However, Navy captains during this period were responsible for crewing their own ships and most commanders knew that black seamen were just as well trained and disciplined as white seamen; at sea the color of a man's skin counted for much less than did his skills and abilities. On 3 March 1813 official policy changed when Congress passed a law authorizing the enlistment of "persons of color, natives of the U. States." The United States Navy was integrated by law, and it is estimated that black seamen constituted between ten and fifteen percent of the Navy's crews before, during, and after the War of 1812.

For the most part, general references pertaining to black seamen on the Great Lakes are scarce. Specific citations concerning individuals are even rarer, such as the grim diary entry recorded by Surgeon's Mate Usher Parsons at the Black Rock Naval Station on 7 April 1813: "James Smith a coloured man died today." However, the role of black seamen on the lakes served as the focal point of a bitter controversy that erupted during the summer of 1813 between the overall Great Lakes commander and his subordinate on Lake Erie.

In March of 1813, Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry was assigned by Commodore Isaac Chauncey to finalize construction and take command of the Lake Erie flotilla, based at Erie, Pennsylvania. By mid-July the 11 vessels comprising Perry's squadron were built, fitted out, and ready to sail, save for one major stumbling block. Needing more than 700 men to man his ships, Perry could muster only 120 men fit for duty. Due to limited resources at Erie, Perry was forced to depend upon his superior for reinforcements. The majority of naval resources destined for the lakes were channeled through Sackets Harbor, New York, the Lake Ontario headquarters for the Great Lakes Command, and Chauncey, as the overall commander of Great Lakes naval operations, was obligated to responsibly allocate those resources. On several different occasions the Lake Erie commodore communicated with Chauncey to request reinforcements, but without success. Uncertain as to why Chauncey was unresponsive to his queries and willing to pursue whatever methods necessary to man his ships, Perry bypassed his immediate superior and communicated his concerns directly to the Secretary of the Navy. When Chauncey discovered that Perry went over his head, an acrimonious correspondence was initiated between the principals. Chauncey felt, not without some justification, that Perry wished to rid himself of his superior's authority to gain an independent command.

The Lake Erie commodore's flagrant breach of military etiquette infuriated Chauncey, but his impolitic ploy nevertheless worked.

Pressure from sources in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere ruptured the logjam of seamen, prompting Chauncey to dispatch from Sackets Harbor to Lake Erie two drafts of sailors comprising nearly 150 men. Although desperate for seamen, Perry was still less than delighted with the quality of his reinforcements. Giving little thought to his actions, Perry penned to Chauncey an artless indictment that asserted, "The men that came...are a motley set, blacks, Soldiers, and boys, I cannot think that you saw them after they were selected. I am however, pleased to see anything in the shape of a man."

As might be expected, the Great Lakes commander was "mortified" when he discovered that Perry ignored the chain of command and complained directly to the Navy Department. Already piqued by his subordinate's blunder, the blatant impudence of Perry's latest grievance about the reinforcements caused an incensed Chauncey to retort:

"I regret that you are not pleased with the men sent you... for to my knowledge a part of them are not surpassed by any seamen we have on the fleet, and I have yet to learn that the Colour of the skin, or cut and trimmings of the coat, can effect a man's qualifications or usefulness". I have nearly 50 Blacks on board of this Ship [the General Pike], and many of them are amongst my best men....

Most of Chauncey's statement was undoubtedly true, but Chauncey's seemingly artifice did not divert Perry and he once again communicated directly with Navy Secretary Jones. Referring to the hodgepodge of soldiers and sailors that Chauncey forwarded to Lake Erie, Perry asserted, "...they may sir, be as good as are on the other Lake, but if so, that squadron must be poorly manned indeed."

This unseemly interchange has occasionally been used to accredit Chauncey as a progressive and Perry a bigot. Chauncey truly may have been liberal-minded, but labeling Perry as racially biased based upon this one exchange is rash. Perry's words and actions must be placed in context with his own frustration and anxiety, fostered by the immediacy of the strategic situation on Lake Erie. British incursions into northwest Ohio in late April and again in late July of 1813 generated urgent requests for assistance from General William Henry Harrison's beleaguered army. Harrison's pleas heightened Perry's distress and compelled him to initiate unorthodox measures in order to man his flotilla to assist the harried American ground forces. The circumstances do not excuse Perry's imprudence or impetuosity, but they may help to explain his behavior.

Although he had reason to be nettled, much of Perry's grief was, to a degree, self-induced. Perry was plagued with an impulsive personality and throughout the course of his dispute with Chauncey he seemed self-absorbed and oblivious to the problems of others. During his tenure on Lake Erie, Oliver Hazard Perry displayed more than a modicum of myopia in dealing with his superiors, manifested a disregard for Chauncey's situation on the lower lake, and employed ill-considered vernacular when referring to the men from Lake Ontario as "blacks, Soldiers, and boys."

Some fault for the controversy must also attach itself to Chauncey, either directly or indirectly. The fact that none of the 50 black sailors from the General Pike-seamen who Chauncey described as "amongst my best men"- were sent to Lake Erie is evidence of the Lake Ontario commodore's desire to retain veteran seamen for his own ships. Also, it is safe to assume that the task of selecting men for transfer to Lake Erie was delegated to a subordinate. Even if the individual designated for that chore did not receive specific instructions, a junior officer would not incur the wrath of his superior by arbitrarily consigning the Lake Ontario squadron's most highly trained and disciplined sailors to another command. Instead, human nature motivated the selecting officer to rid Chauncey's flotilla of its undesirable elements: new recruits who were poorly trained, men on the sick list, and those who experienced disciplinary problems.

There can be no doubt that a number of African-American seamen were among the men transferred from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie, but it was not "the Colour of the skin" that so concerned and discouraged Perry. A 13-year veteran of the Navy, Perry could not have been surprised that black sailors were included with the drafts of men sent from Lake Ontario. In fact, a number of black seamen were among the 150 men who not only volunteered, but were welcomed by Perry to accompany him when he transferred to the lakes from his previous command at Newport, Rhode Island.

What the Lake Erie commodore actually deplored about the Lake Ontario levies was their lack of training, poor state of discipline, and the general ill-health of all the sailors, not just the black seamen. Perry was not the only individual at the Lake Erie Naval Station who noted the poor condition of the newly arrived men. Sailing Master William V. Taylor later lamented that many of the crewmen sent from Lake Ontario "were barely able to assist themselves." Purser Samuel Hambleton complained in his diary that, "Our force consisted principally of the refuse of Commodore Chauncey's fleet... Despite the deficiencies of his reinforcements, Perry had no choice but to accept their services, white and black, and their efforts more than sufficed. On 10 September 1813 Perry gained a decisive victory, capturing British Commander Robert Heriot Barclay's entire squadron in a frenzied three-and-a-half hour battle near Put-in-Bay, Ohio. But the victory did not come easily. Two hours of incessant broadsides transformed Perry's stately flagship, the 20-gun brig Lawrence, into a blasted hulk with nearly 80% casualties. Just when defeat seemed inevitable, Perry hauled down his "Don't [sic] Give Up The Ship" battle flag and transferred to the U.S. Brig Niagara, Lawrence's sister ship. With a fresh 20-gun brig under his feet, Perry broke the chaotic British battle line, hurled broadsides from Niagara's larboard and starboard sides, and forced the entire six-ship enemy squadron to capitulate. Perry's victory, in addition to sweeping the British from Lake Erie, conclusively altered the balance of power in the Old Northwest.

Whatever his feelings towards his African-American crewmen, Perry nevertheless praised his victorious black seamen to Chauncey, who in turn wrote:

"Perry speaks highly of the bravery and good conduct of the negroes, who formed a considerable part of his crew." "They seemed to be absolutely insensible to danger. When Captain Barclay came on board the Niagara, and beheld the sickly and partly-colored beings around him, an expression of chagrin escaped him at having been conquered by such men"

Little information has passed into history pertaining to the black sailors who fought with Perry, and few have been identified. Jesse Williams was an ordinary seaman on the flagship Lawrence, where he was wounded in action. Before being sent to Lake Erie, Williams served on the U.S. Frigate Constitution, where, as the 1st sponger (assigned to "sponge" the gun barrel to extinguish sparks before loading) on number 3 long gun. Williams participated in Old Ironsides' victory over HMS Java on 29 December 1812. In 1820, while a resident of Philadelphia, Williams was awarded a silver medal from the State of Pennsylvania for his role in the battle. Also wounded on the Lawrence was Newport Hazard, one of the seagoing Hazard family from Newport, Rhode Island. Hazard served under Perry at the Newport Naval Station and he was one of 150 volunteers from the Newport station to accompany Perry to the lakes. Anthony Williams, a native of Salem, Massachusetts, fought on board the schooner Somers. Williams moved to Meadville, Pennsylvania after the war, where he died in either 1833 or 1834. Cyrus Tiffany may be the best known black seaman from the Lake Erie fleet because of his close personal association with Perry. Tiffany, variously recorded as a seaman and a musician, also served with Perry at Newport. Perry apparently took a personal interest in Tiffany's well being. According to one account, When the engagement approached, the Commodore, in as far as he could to put [Tiffany] out of harm's way, placed him on the berth deck [of the Lawrence] with a musket & bayonet, with orders to charge upon anyone attempting to skulk below. Shortly after the battle began the men fell so thick & fast that the Commodore observed the hatchway crowded with wounded, where passage below seemed to be obstructed. On going there he found them charged upon by 'old Tiffany,' who swore they were a set of skulkers, and should not come below....In the [U.S. Frigate] Java he sometimes took great liberties, which the Commodore bore in the greatest good humor, & was much incensed on one occasion when a Lieutenant had punished him with a ropes end [a thickly knotted rope's end, called a starter, was used by boatswain's mates to galvanize shirkers]. He was a 'hanger on' to the Commodore to the day of his death, who always took the most humane care of him.

In some instances, references relating to individuals on board the Lake Erie flotilla are peripheral or obscure, making it difficult to ascertain their race. On the prize money list can be found the name of Jack Russell, a ship's boy who served on board the U.S. Brig Lawrence. Russell's prize money was paid to "George Mason, his master," but it is uncertain whether Russell was a slave or an indentured or apprenticed white youth. Isaac Hardy was an ordinary seaman killed in action on board the U.S. Brig Niagara. Hardy's wife later applied for a widow's pension from the government. To demonstrate her relationship to Hardy she was required to provide proof of marriage, and the marriage certificate for Isaac and Diane Hardy was signed by John Gloucester, Pastor of the First Presbyterian African Congregation in Philadelphia. Diane Hardy also retained the same lawyer as Jesse Williams when she requested her husband's silver medal from the State of Pennsylvania.

Purser Samuel Hambleton, who served on the Lawrence, contributed a reference in a letter written to his mother three weeks after the engagement. After describing his wound and current condition, Hambleton related, "My faithful Boy, who was exposed to all the dangers of the action, attends me with great care. I am excessively peevish and am constantly abusing him & repenting of it. But he, poor fellow, knows that I mean no harm & takes it all in good part." The implication is that Hambleton, a native of Maryland's eastern shore, brought a slave on board to attend his needs.

Another confusing chapter of the Lake Erie story is that of the African-Americans who claimed to have fought in the Battle of Lake Erie but whose names do not appear on the list of men who served on board the fleet. Muster rolls for the Lake Erie Naval Station during the period in question have not been found, so the most referred to source for determining the names of Battle of Lake Erie participants is Samuel Hambleton's prize list. In 1814 Purser Hambleton was detailed to compile a list of participants in order that prize money appropriated by Congress could be accurately disbursed. Yet Hambleton's list is not complete; some names were omitted and numerous other errors were made.

Years later, a number of survivors and widows claims were filed at the pension office on the basis that their spouses fought at the Battle of Lake Erie. At least three of these claims emanate from African-American families. Mary Brown, wife of Robert Brown [or Bronen] filed a widow's pension application after her husband passed away. From Bedford, Pennsylvania, Brown apparently served in the Army-possibly the militia-supposedly fought on board the fleet, was wounded in action, and was discharged because of his wounds. He died in Bedford on 18 January 1865. Mary Brown's pension application was granted and she received \$12.00 per month until her death in Bedford on 4 December 1895. Elizabeth Brown, wife of James Brown, filed a claim in 1871. She attested that her husband, who was originally from Somerset, Pennsylvania, where they were married in April of 1812, served with Perry in the battle. After the war James and Elizabeth Brown made their home at Erie, Pennsylvania, where James died in August 1857. The claim was rejected because Elizabeth Brown had lost her marriage certificate and could not prove her relationship to James Brown. Margaret Boone filed a similar pension application upon the death of her husband. Brown Boone was a native of Hartford County, North Carolina and he reportedly enlisted in the North Carolina Militia in August of 1812. At that time he was 22 years old, 5'9", and a farmer by occupation. He was sent to Norfolk, Virginia and, according to the pension application, somehow ended up on the Lake Erie fleet. Brown Boone died in Franklin County, Ohio on 9 September 1843. Margaret Boone, who was 78 when she filed her application

in June of 1878, could remember no clarifying details. Her claim was denied because no official corroborating information could be found.

Then there is the case of Hannibal Collins. The Fall, 1994 issue of Newport History, the bulletin of the Newport, Rhode Island Historical Society, proclaims that Collins was a freed slave from Newport, that he fought with Perry on Lake Erie, and that he was among the cutter's crew that rowed Perry from the Lawrence to the Niagara when the commodore transferred his flag at the crucial point of the battle. Yet the name of Hannibal Collins is not found on either Samuel Hambleton's prize list or the list of men who accompanied Perry from Newport to the lakes.

Any or all of these men may have served with the American squadron on Lake Erie, and if they did, it is not known why their names were omitted from Samuel Hambleton's prize list. Since Hambleton also excluded the names of more than fifteen white participants, there seems to have been no contrived effort to discriminate against black seamen. It seems likely that Hambleton simply did not possess detailed muster rolls or other official documentation necessary to compile a comprehensive list.

Since there is no supporting documentation, it can only be estimated that between ten and fifteen percent of the sailors on board the Lake Erie squadron were African-Americans. This estimate does not represent the total fleet complement since roughly forty percent of the men who served on Perry's fleet were not sailors, but soldiers and marines. In other words, of the roughly 550 or so men who served with the flotilla, about 200 should be deducted before the percentage is calculated. Even the ten to fifteen percent figure might be called into question. In 1862, one of the Lake Erie squadron's surgeons, Doctor Usher Parsons, recalled, "In 1814 [approximately one year after the Battle of Lake Erie], our fleet sailed to the upper Lakes to co-operate with Colonel [George] Croghan [in an attempt to recapture Fort] Mackinac. About one in ten or twelve of the crews were blacks." At the time, Parsons was responding to a specific inquiry, and he obviously estimated his figure. It must also be remembered that nearly 50 years had passed to cloud his memory.

Although the exact numbers probably will never be known, it is an indisputable fact that African-American seamen did serve on board the United States flotilla during the Battle of Lake Erie. Lake Erie's black seamen fought with courage, distinction and dignity. Their efforts both served their country and helped secure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the United States of America- rights and freedoms that they themselves were not privileged to enjoy.

The Erie Maritime Museum thanks Author Gerry Althoff for granting us permission to use the above information.