



"The Battle of Lake Erie"

The United States Brig *Niagara* in Erie, Pennsylvania is a replica of an early 19th century warship of the United States Navy. On September 10, 1813, nine small ships defeated a British squadron of six vessels in the Battle of Lake Erie. This pivotal event in the War of 1812 secured the Northwest Territory, opened supply lines and lifted the nation's morale.

Six vessels in Perry's Fleet, including *Niagara* were constructed in Erie. Building the American squadron was a remarkable feat, given Erie's mere five hundred inhabitants and remote location. Shipwrights, block makers, blacksmiths, caulkers, boat builders, and laborers were recruited from Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. Materials to construct the vessels were imported from other regions of Pennsylvania including iron from Meadville and Pittsburgh; canvas for sails from Philadelphia; rigging, cannon shot and anchors crafted in Pittsburgh. The cannon were brought from Washington, D.C. and Sackets Harbor N.Y. Because there were no sawmills, the lumber had to be cut, hewed, and squared by hand.

Daniel Dobbins, a Great Lakes shipmaster living in Erie, was assigned by the Navy to direct construction until experienced builders arrived. In February 1813, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, Great Lakes Naval Commander, hired Noah Brown, a New York shipbuilder to complete the six vessels. Brown also designed two of the four schooners and the two brigs, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*.

In March 1813, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry took command. By late July, Perry completed the vessels and raised volunteers to augment his sailors.

A significant number of the skilled sailors were free blacks, many landsmen and soldiers were also enlisted due to a shortage of men.

On August 1, the British squadron withdrew its blockade and the American ships emerged from Erie harbor. For the next month Perry trained his crews and watched the British squadron at Fort Malden, Ontario (Amherstburg, near the mouth of the Detroit River).

On September 10, the British under Commodore Robert Heriot Barclay and the Americans under Perry met in battle near Put-in-Bay, Ohio. Perry's flagship *Lawrence* engaged her counterpart, while *Niagara*, for unknown reasons, did not close the enemy. Nevertheless, the *Lawrence* held fast and continued a heavy bombardment. After she was completely disabled, with most of her crew wounded or killed, Perry transferred by boat to the undamaged *Niagara*, sailed her into close action, broke the British battle line, and forced Barclay to surrender. In the aftermath, Commodore Perry wrote his famous report to General William Henry Harrison: " We have met the enemy and they are ours: two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop."

After the war, *Niagara* served as a station ship in Erie until 1820, and was then scuttled there in Misery Bay. To celebrate the centennial of the battle in 1913, Erie citizens raised the hulk and rebuilt her, using many of the old timbers. *Niagara*, towed by the *USS Wolverine*, visited Great Lakes ports and participated in ceremonies at Put-in-Bay on September 10, 1913.

Following the commemoration, *Niagara* returned to Erie. In 1938, the Works Progress Administration began a major restoration on *Niagara* that was delayed by the Great Depression. Her hull was completed in 1943; masts and rigging were finally installed in 1963.

By the early 1980s *Niagara* was again severely decayed. International Historic Watercraft Society was contracted to design and build a reconstruction of the *Niagara*. The present ship is a new vessel, incorporating both known and conjectural design features. Some original timber is installed in non-structural places.

On September 10, 1988, *Niagara* was launched in Erie ceremonies marking the 175th Anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie and celebrating the ensuing peace between the United Kingdom and the United States.