

# THOMAS MACDONOUGH, NAVAL HERO

by Terry A. Bryan

Plattsburgh, New York has a magnificent stone tower monument to Commodore Thomas Macdonough's victory in the War of 1812. To our



**The Plattsburgh, N.Y. Macdonough Battle Monument overlooks Lake Champlain.**

British enemies, this war was a side issue arising out of the war with Napoleon and France. Hostilities at the expanding western frontier, the northern border with Canada and at sea resulted in more American casualties than British. However minor to the British, the War of 1812 resulted in a philosophy of American preparedness and expansion that continued for decades. The events are thought to be an early hint of the United States' progression to a world power.

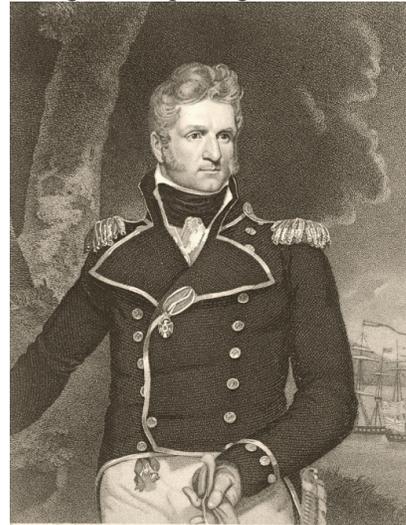
Lake Champlain is a huge watery highway used in Colonial times as a link between the St. Lawrence River and the Hudson River along the New York-Vermont border. Its strategic importance was noted during the Revolution. Ships built on the Lake fought battles and the forts on the banks changed hands as the Americans fought to expel the British from the area.

With a similar strategy in the War of 1812, the British sought to cut off New England from the rest of the United States by invasion from the Canadian end of the Lake by land and by water. Shipbuilding and conversion of the freshwater fleet of merchant vessels created powerful fleets on both sides by September of 1814.

This last attempt by the British to invade the northern states was foiled on land by Brigadier General Alexander Macomb (1782-1841) and defeated at sea by Lt. Thomas Macdonough, Junior (1783-1825).

Thomas Macdonough was the son of a physician who farmed in New Castle County, Delaware. His father was a Revolutionary War officer who had been recognized for bravery by Washington.

His crossroads birthplace was later named "Macdonough" in his honor. It is referred to as "near Middletown" [Delaware], creating confusion in some sources with Middletown, Connecticut, an important location in Macdonough's later life. Young Thomas went to sea as a Midshipman at age 16, following in the example of an older brother, who returned to Delaware maimed from a sea battle. Around 1799 he changed the spelling of his name from *McDonough*.



**Commodore Thomas Macdonough in a mature engraved portrait.**

Thomas evidently showed promise aboard ship. Within two years, he had participated in naval actions against France and was assigned to the Mediterranean cruise of the *USS Constellation* against Tripoli. Intensive education in the fighting navy continued on other ship assignments. His actions in the forefront Stephen Decatur's mission in Tripoli harbor resulted in his promotion to [acting] Lieutenant in 1804.

Further service with Decatur and on other ships brought Macdonough to Middletown, Connecticut. He was in charge of building a fleet of gunboats. These small craft were usually armed with one naval cannon, sailed with sloop rigging on one mast, often augmented by oarsmen. They are sometimes referred to as "galleys" when used on Lake Champlain. His contacts with the shipbuilding industry and familiarity with the necessities of fitting out small ships was vital to his later experiences on Lake Champlain.

By 1808, Macdonough had cruised in command of the *USS Wasp*. This ship figured prominently in the War of 1812, commanded by another Delaware naval hero, Jacob Jones (1768-1850). Jones was born near Smyrna Delaware, 12 miles south of Macdonough. (see PM Vol. LIX, #5).

Macdonough was one of the most experienced junior officers in the Navy when he came back to Connecticut in command of the gunboat fleet. He met his future wife in Middletown [CT]. A two-year leave allowed him to captain in merchant service in 1810 during a downsizing of the Navy.

Return to active duty in 1812 saw Lt. Macdonough and the Chesapeake Bay fleet bottled up by the British wartime blockade. He received more active assignments in coastal New England, finally being put in charge of the fleet at Lake Champlain. The hostilities had mostly gone against the United States during Macdonough's buildup of his freshwater lake fleet. One exception was Jacob Jones' naval battle in 1812, which heartened the American public.

Lake Champlain region military headquarters were located at Burlington, Vermont and Plattsburgh, New York. Up a creek off the main water was Vergennes, Vermont where now Master Commandant Macdonough centered his shipbuilding activities in 1813-1814 counteracting similar industry by the British at the Canadian end of the Lake. Merchant vessels were converted to warships. A large Ship-Sloop of War [French = Corvette in the rather confusing naval designations in different countries] was also built in four months by imported Connecticut shipwrights. Macdonough had to defend his little naval yard against British attacks.

British strategy was to invade by land down the west bank of the Lake. The army troops were to be supported by the fleet on the Lake and later supplied by boat in their march down the Hudson River, cutting through a vital part of the United States. There was no intention of returning captured territory to the U.S. A considerable army advanced toward Plattsburgh in late summer of 1814.

Aware that the British fleet was completing preparations, Macdonough brought his fleet into Plattsburgh Bay on the west side of the Lake. Thorough knowledge of local conditions and seamanship mandated placing the ships at anchor, causing the British to fight contrary winds and sandbars to sail among the Americans. The British brought more firepower and men, but there were disadvantages. The British fleet commander was killed early. The flagship was hastily completed; crews were largely new arrivals and uncoordinated. Naval actions were, and are, terrible. The men on deck working the guns were exposed to appalling danger and horrible carnage. Macdonough was knocked down twice, once briefly unconscious by being struck by a sailor's body parts. He aimed guns when his crew was thinned by enemy fire. By adroit maneuvering at anchor, Macdonough was able to

bring guns to bear on the damaged enemy. The British were at the mercy of the wind for their aim. The superior British fleet's larger ships were captured or destroyed. The numerous gunboat galleys retreated to Canada.



Contemporary rendering of the Battle of Lake Champlain.

Macdonough's sea victory and General Macomb's repulse of attacks on Plattsburgh defenses are credited with preserving our borders. It was the last major invasion of the continental United States by a foreign country during wartime. This last major battle on the northern front in the War of 1812 put the British at a disadvantage in the subsequent treaty negotiations.

Macdonough concluded his illustrious career as Captain in command of several of the United States' largest warships. His final command was the *USS Constitution*; this ended in 1825 when worsening lung disease made him step down. Returning home on a small navy ship, he died of tuberculosis at age 41. He is buried in Middletown, Connecticut. He was the most famous naval hero of his "little" war, perhaps surprisingly, greatly praised in Great Britain.

Referred to by the honorific "Commodore", Captain Macdonough, his officers, and Macomb were voted Congressional Gold Medals for their heroism. Artist Moritz Furst made the Macdonough dies for the Mint in 1818. Silver and bronze medals were struck for several years. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mint sold copies of the medals from new dies. Different Macdonough commemoratives were made by Whitehead-Hoag Company and



U.S. Mint medal obverse of Macdonough: "Defeated the Royal British Fleet on Lake Champlain".



Battle Centennial medal obverse from Macdonough County, Illinois from 1914.

The reverse is an artist's conception of the Battle of Plattsburgh. The town is aflame on the right, the ships centered in clouds of gunsmoke and numbers of oared galleys line up at the edges of the action. The battle was pictured in many media, including British publications and chinaware.



U.S. Mint medal reverse: "Beaten on one side, he fearlessly turns the other".

traded on his famous name by printing or writing it on the payee line of their Obsolete Notes. This is thought to be merely riding on the coattails of prominent men, rather than any direct connection to the celebrities. Perry, Decatur and Porter are also found on the "pay to \_\_\_ or bearer on demand" text on notes of 1814 and 1818. Known "Macdonough" notes are the \$3 Bank of Plattsburgh, N.Y. of 1818 (Haxby NY2240-G22), and \$2 and \$10 of Manufacturers Exchange

others for the battle centennial in 1914. A sesquicentennial medal was done in 1964. A

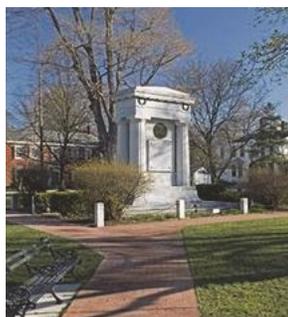
Decatur/Macdonough U.S. Commemorative Stamp was issued in 1937.

The Mint medal shows Macdonough in distinguished profile.



Plattsburgh, New York Battle Sesquicentennial medal from 1964.

Monuments were raised to Macdonough in Plattsburgh, NY, Vergennes, VT and Middletown, CT. Several states awarded him gold, silver and land. Macdonough's family achieved prominence in Delaware and Connecticut. Some banks



Vergennes, Vermont built a classic monument to Macdonough and his little shipyard.

Company of Bristol, Connecticut in 1814 (Haxby CT65-G4, G10).



Bank of Plattsburgh, N.Y. \$3 of 1814, counterfeit. Macdonough is payee. [Newman Numismatic Portal]



Manufacturers Exchange Bank of Bristol, CT, \$2 of 1818, counterfeit. Macdonough written in as payee. [Newman Numismatic Portal]

In the 1850s Danforth, Wright and Company engraved a portrait of Thomas Macdonough for bank



Bank Note Vignette by Danforth, Wright & Company, 1850's.

note use. The portrait is taken from an engraving by John Jarvis originally published in a naval history volume. Known uses for Macdonough's portrait under the DW and ABNCo. imprints are for the Bank of Vergennes, Vermont, \$1 (Haxby VT250-G12) and the Bank of New England at Goodspeed's Landing/East Haddam, Connecticut, \$2 (Haxby CT110-G18 etc.).



Bank of Vergennes, VT, \$1 of 1862 with the Macdonough portrait. [Heritage Auctions]. Bank of New England \$2.



Bank of New England, East Haddam, CT, \$2, 1850's, a common remainder with the famous portrait.

Commodore Thomas Macdonough is remembered as a tall, serious man of strong religious beliefs. He was a product of healthy rural family life,



Macdonough's birthplace "The Trap" in Macdonough, Delaware.

matured in the early United States Navy. His seagoing education and experience were outstanding and recognized by his colleagues. He was a good husband and father and greatly respected by his neighbors in Connecticut and by his extended family and acquaintances in Delaware. The major ships that he served on had their names immortalized on ships of the modern U.S. Navy, and he had four Navy ships named for him. Two towns, a county, many streets and an island have carried the name "Macdonough". Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed him the "greatest figure in our naval history" prior to the Civil War.



Macdonough's Victory plate by Wood. The Commodore was much admired in England.

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 Thanks to Macdonough enthusiast Kenneth Swab for encouragement and advice.