

Abner **Williams** in the War of 1812
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2012

It was a frightening time in the little community of Canadaway when the War of 1812 broke out. Rumors of enemy action and Indian raids added to anxiety about all the other unknowns. However, a strong surge of patriotism soon began to balance out the fears. Young men —and old — joined the local militia unit, and there are many accounts of individuals rushing to repel incursions at the mouth of Canadaway Creek or marching to defend Buffalo from advancing troops.

There was one exception to this pattern: Abner **Williams**. Somehow, Abner found himself not in the militia down by the Creek or marching east to Buffalo, but in Presqu' Isle, today's Erie PA, assigned as a Marine private to Oliver H. **Perry's** flagship *Lawrence*. To understand how this came about and its consequences, we must first look into the history of the postal service — of all things — to glean some answers.

When the earliest permanent settlers came to what is now Fredonia in 1805, mail delivery was not economically feasible considering the sparse population. At first, we were served by the Buffalo post office to which someone had to travel to pick up or send off any mail. However, by 1807 a route between Buffalo and Erie was established with the 90 mile trip being made once a week. The contract was awarded to John **Metcalf** who hired the first carrier, John **Edward**.

It was not until the War of 1812 brought an increased sense of urgency that the Federal Government directed the Postmaster at Buffalo to establish an express mail route to Cleveland to run twice a week. It was that route for which Richard **Williams** became a subcontractor. **Williams** was one of our early settlers. He and Hezekiah **Barker** built the first grist and saw mills and, when **Barker** built his log home/inn by today's Barker Common [*1 Park Place*] in 1808, **Williams** soon followed with a comparable home/inn at today's *189 West Main Street*. When he took on subcontracting the mail delivery in 1812, he did not himself make the run. Rather, he hired others to do that. One was his oldest son, Abner **Williams**, the other was Nathan **Cleland** who had come to Fredonia in 1811. "In the winter of 1812-13 **Cleland** carried the mail from this village [Canadaway/Fredonia] to Erie on alternate days, part of the time on horseback, except when there was snow on the ground, when he rode in a 'jumper' or 'pung.' This vehicle was made by taking two saplings, the small ends for thills, and to the large end attaching a rude box with pins [dowels] in the saplings, and cutting away the wood just forward of the box, so that they would bend, in the form of runners.

"In February he carried Commodore **Perry** to Erie in his 'jumper' when that distinguished officer proceeded to construct his fleet at that place, with which he won the memorable victory on the 10th of September following. The Commodore was brought from Buffalo to this place in connection with Mr. **Cleland** from this place to Erie." In other words, what *The Fredonia Censor* of 1 June 1870 was saying in paraphrasing a **Cleland** interview was that Richard **Williams** hired his eldest son Abner to carry the mail between Buffalo and Canadaway and Nathan **Cleland** to handle the Canadaway to Erie segment. Both boys were 17.

If the *Censor* editor was quoting accurately, **Cleland**, then 75 years old, should have put the trip in which they carried Oliver Hazard **Perry** as taking place in March rather than February 1813. It is very clear from various contemporary records that **Perry** left Buffalo on the 25th or 26th of March and arrived at the Pennsylvania port on the 27th. However, the precise date of the journey is not so significant as the fact that it was Abner **Williams** who carried him on the first leg. We may well imagine the patriotic young man listening avidly to whatever the older one —

Perry was all of 27 — had to tell him of his already substantial naval career and of the battles yet to come. It surely was an important factor in Abner’s decision as to where he would enlist soon after.

There is only one other contemporary account of how Abner **Williams** became involved in the War, that by his younger sister Sophia **Williams** (later Mrs. William **Harris**). In a reminiscence published in *The Fredonia Censor* (25 June 1873) for an Old Settlers Reunion, Mrs. **Harris** wrote, “My oldest brother used to carry it [the mail] on horseback. He enlisted in Buffalo as a recruiting officer and a number of young men went to the war with him.” Either the newspaper mangled her original text or Mrs. **Harris** was relaying some family accounts that were misunderstood. Certainly Abner **Williams** was in Buffalo picking up or delivering mail often enough, but he did not enlist there. He enlisted at Erie, and he surely didn’t “enlist as a recruiting officer.” No service would take an 18-year old raw recruit and set *him* to recruiting others. The task would fall to some seasoned veteran who could glamorize the service and bully or cajole young men into signing up.

Just such a man was Lieutenant John **Brooks** of the U. S. Marine Corps. **Brooks** and seven enlisted men were sent as a recruiting party from Washington DC early in April 1813. Gerard T. **Altoff**’s meticulously researched *Oliver Hazard Perry and the Battle of Lake Erie* describes how the team recruited at Frederick and Hagerstown MD and then in Pittsburgh and Waterford PA as they made their way to Erie. Unfortunately, all their efforts yielded but seven new recruits. However, as **Altoff** explains, (p.15), “Over the next eleven weeks [from 17 May 1813] **Brooks** canvassed nearby towns seeking volunteers. . . . By the time the squadron was ready to sail in August, the resourceful **Brooks** had managed to enlist at least 35 more men for his Marine detachment.” Among the 35 was Abner M. **Williams** of Canadaway, Chautauqua County, New York. His service record shows that he enlisted at Erie on 24 July 1813 “to serve five years in the Marine Corps of the UNITED STATES. . . .” (Someone had been very persuasive.) He signed in three places in the document and, on the reverse, endorsed the entry “Rec’d Erie 24 July 1813 of Lt. John **Brooks** Twenty Dollars as Bounty for the within Enlistment.”

It would seem that between 17 May, when **Brooks** first arrived at Erie, and 24 July, Abner **Williams** responded to some call from within or without, presenting himself to take up — not the limited militia term — but the serious five year commitment the Marine Corps demanded. Perhaps the twenty dollar bounty, something like \$200 in today’s dollars, made the difference, although it didn’t seem to work for his compatriots at home. “A number of young men went to the war with him,” Mrs. **Harris** stated, but none is evident in the muster rolls or the record of prize moneys awarded participants or their families after the battle. In *Deep Water Sailors: Shallow Water Soldiers*, **Altoff** has attempted to trace every person who manned — or was intended to man — the Lake Erie fleet in 1813, with particular attention to those who were soldiers, not sailors. With one, perhaps two, exceptions no other New Yorkers were involved.

John P. **Downs**’ *History of Chautauqua County*, Vol. I, p.451, has an interesting although unfortunately unsourced account. “Chautauqua county furnished men for **Perry**’s fleet, just how many cannot now be told. Portland furnished one, Samuel **Perry**, a cousin of the Commodore, and as daring as the commodore himself. He was desperately wounded near the close of the battle. The next day, with four others, hopeless cases like himself, he was landed at the mouth of Chautauqua creek at the now village of Barcelona. He lingered until 1814, cared for by friends and a generous public, and died, and his remains are now resting somewhere near the lake with those of three of his companions, one only recovering, who wandered away to his home in some

section of Western Pennsylvania. Pomfret furnished one, Abner **Williams**, eldest son of Richard **Williams**, an early settler; he was killed on the Lawrence early in the battle, and his body, with others, thrown in to the lake. Charlotte furnished one, a young man by the name of **Gooderich**, then in the employ of Major **Sinclear**. It is said that he greatly distinguished himself in the engagement and in due time returned.”

In personal correspondence, G. T. **Altoff** suggested that **Gooderich** might be Josiah **Goodrich** who was issued a silver medal from the State of Pennsylvania. He later moved to and eventually died in Madison Township, Geauga County, Ohio. “The family history has him being born in Connecticut and enlisting at Erie.” However, “we have no record whatsoever of a Samuel **Perry** serving on board the American squadron. He shows up on neither the prize list nor the casualty list. . . . Still this does not mean that a Samuel **Perry** did not fight in the battle. Many names were omitted from Samuel **Hambleton’s** prize list. . . .”

Thus we have one likely and one possible western New Yorker to add to the record. Were they recruited by Abner **Williams** as Mrs. **Harris** described it? The more likely one geographically is Samuel **Perry** of Portland NY. Dr. H. C. **Taylor** in his *Historical Sketches of the Town of Portland, New York* (p.317) refers to a Samuel **Perry**, in passing, as having married Fanny **Barnes** and fathering an “Oliver H. **Perry**” (named for his heroic relative?). Samuel **Perry** died in Portland in 1815, which does seem to fit with **Downs’** account, although it seems odd that **Taylor**, who devotes some pages to the land battles, does not mention Samuel **Perry** or the Battle of Lake Erie.

The other candidate, more geographically distant, is Josiah **Goodrich**. The early local historian Obed **Edson** gave an outline history of the Town of Charlotte printed in *Celebration of the One Hundreth Anniversary of American Independence at Sinclairville, N.Y., July 4, 1876* in the collection of Donald L. **Jordan**, Historian for the Town of Charlotte and Village of Sinclairville. In this historical sketch, **Edson** states that “**Goodrich**, a young man in the employ of Maj. **Sinclair**, read at night the proclamation of Commodore **Perry** asking for assistance, and the next morning started from Sinclairville to join him; he enlisted, participated in the naval battle on Lake Erie, of the 10th of September, 1813, was distinguished for his gallant conduct, and was rewarded therefor. He returned afterwards to Sinclairville, with his hearing much impaired from his participation in the battle.”

In the 1855 Census of Charlotte, Joseph **Goodrich**, 46, is recorded as having been born in Chenango County and having been resident in Chautauqua County 20 years. His wife, Nancy, was 53, born in Otsego county and resident 25 years. Their children were the twins Lephy P. and Tilphy, both 18. Unfortunately, the biographical details about Josiah **Goodrich** — born Rocky Hill CT in 1785, married Harriet **Moor** 21 December 1814, had seven children in Ohio — seem to bear no relationship to our Joseph **Goodrich**. We must assume, then, that he too is among those missed from the record. However, since the early historical sketch describes him as reading “the proclamation of Commodore **Perry** asking for assistance,” and responding the next morning, we may accept that Mrs. **Harris** — or the editor — was in error about *his* being one of those recruited by Abner **Williams**.

Later in her reminiscence, Mrs. **Harris** returned to the Battle of Lake Erie remembering “the day my brother [Elijah] brought the news of **Perry’s** battle and victory. We knew there had been a battle for we heard the report of the cannon, although so far away, and every man and woman was all anxiety to know the result.” It seems a little doubtful that the cannonade taking place some 250 miles away could have been heard over that great distance, although they obviously knew there had been a battle of some kind. “Mother had been busy all day with her

work, she seemed to be in such a hurry. My aunt [Asenath **Woodcock**] said to her. ‘What makes you hurry so? You don’t stop for a moment.’ She answered, ‘I want to get through before the mail comes, for it may be I can’t work then.’ She seemed to have a presentiment of my brother’s death. Towards evening most of the neighboring men had collected on father’s platform [porch?] to be in time for the news. Soon my brother [Elijah] was seen coming and the news was spread. ‘The mail is coming’ was enough. Mother ran to the door as he rode up and said ‘Elijah, is Abner killed or wounded?’ He is not wounded, mother,’ was the reply, and he handed her a letter from Commodore **Perry** telling of his [Abner’s] bravery, his fighting after he was wounded, till finally he was cut in two by a cannon ball.”

The general impression made by this sad account is that the battle noises had been heard that day, or perhaps the previous one, and neighbors gathered to learn the news. That would have been the late afternoon of September 10th or 11th, 1813. Again, a question arises. The Battle of Lake Erie concluded with the British surrendering in mid-afternoon of the 10th. Because of the need to immediately inform the army of the change in the balance of power on the lakes, as **Altoff’s Oliver Hazard Perry**, p.54, tells us “**Perry** hastily scribbled a note to William Henry **Harrison**.” That was the famous “We have met the enemy and they are ours” document. “A short time later **Perry** scribed a more eloquent, though less dramatic letter to Secretary of the Navy William **Jones** headed U.S. Brig *Niagara* off the Western Sister [island] Head of Lake Erie, Sept. 10th 1813 4 p.m.”

After an exhausting ten hours, it is not likely that **Perry** was able, or had the casualty reports sufficiently in hand to begin writing a letter such as Mrs. **Harris** described: telling of Abner’s bravery, his continuing to fight, and how he died. Not if **Perry** was to write one for each of the 27 Americans killed in the engagement, much less for the 96 wounded. Let us say that it took another day or two, at a minimum, to gather together all the reports and then dictate, or write, a personal letter referring to the heroic actions of each individual. That would mean letters may have been ready to go out by the end of the day on the 12th (although, unfortunately, there is no record in **Perry’s** collected correspondence nor in government archives of any such letters being sent). The standard time of delivery for the post between Buffalo and Erie was from Buffalo, Saturday noon, arriving at Erie on Monday at 6 p.m. From Erie it left on Tuesday at 6 a.m., arriving at Buffalo on Thursday at 12 noon. If a dispatch boat reached Erie in time and the mail left at 6 a.m. on the 13th, it should have arrived in Buffalo on Thursday 15 September where Elijah could have picked it up and raced for home that evening. (If the mail took its usual route, being brought to **William’s** “platform” from Erie, which would have been early in the day, then taken by Elijah to Buffalo, why wasn’t the letter just handed over in Fredonia? If it was the express mail, simply changing riders and transferring a sealed pouch might explain that.) Of course, this is all total speculation.

We have no idea when, exactly, the written news reached the anxious group gathered outside *189 West Main Street* or whether Mrs. **Harris** has conflated the simple news bulletin with a later formal letter of condolence. But one thing we do know with certainty. Despite any doubts that might be raised about some of the details in Mrs. **Harris’** narrative so far, there can be no doubt about the authentic tone of the events she goes on to depict. “The scene that followed [Elijah’s news] I cannot attempt to describe. It was a house of mourning and rejoicing. My father and mother, hand in hand, walked through the house out the back door, through the garden into his peach orchard and sat down on a log. There they gave vent to their pent up grief. I followed them and stood by mother, and such a prayer as she prayed to her God that He would give them strength to bear up under that crushing blow I never heard before.”

Although, as a notation in Abner's enlistment document indicates, the \$20.00 bounty was "Transferred to his father Richard **Williams**," and in July 1814 Abner's prize money of \$214.89 was paid to his father, nothing could compensate for the death of their firstborn son. "My poor brother's death broke his spirit and crushed his life's prospects. He never recovered the shock of the irreparable loss; he lived on but an altered man." On 20 September 1822 "death released him from his life's labors and his lifeless clay was laid to rest in Fredonia's burying ground," Pioneer Cemetery, in a grave next to a simple family marker: Abner M. **Williams** Died Sept. 10, 1813 Aged 18 Yrs. —His life he gave to his Country, his body to the deep.