

Poetry and Song of the War of 1812: Part I

by Jennifer Janzen

Suggested grade level: Intermediate/Senior

Suggested time: 1 class period

Brief Description of the Task

In this lesson students will research and learn about an event of the War of 1812 from a number of different sources. They will summarize their research in the form of a poem that will express the historical perspective of the individual or event.

Historical Thinking Concepts

- Historical Significance
- Historical Perspective-Taking
- Use of Primary Source Evidence

Learning Goals

Students will participate in an activity that will allow them to:

- Learn about the War of 1812 from a variety of sources
- Express themselves through a poem
- Understand historical perspective-taking and explore the historical significance of the War of 1812

Materials

Photocopies of all Appendices listed in detailed lesson plan.

Prior Knowledge

It would be an asset for students to be aware of:

- the major dates and battles of the War of 1812
- the different groups of peoples that participated in the War of 1812 (British, Canadian, First Nation, American)

Assessment

- Worksheets and individual & group work contributions

- Assignment: "Constructing a Narrative Poem": Another Historical Perspective

Detailed Lesson Plan

Focus Question: How can poetry and song help us to understand the significant events, individuals and perspectives of history?

1. Tell the students that as a class they will be looking at three poems/songs that will aid in discovering **Historical Significance** and **Historical Perspective** about the War of 1812.

2. To begin, ask students if they know of any poetry, ballads or songs that speak of an important or historical event. Write answers on the board.

Some possible answers/suggestions you might show them are:

- Gordon Lightfoot "Canadian Railroad Trilogy"
- U2 "Bloody Sunday"
- Green Day "Wake Me Up When September Ends"
- Sam Roberts Band "Sang Froid"
- Songs from the Arab Spring

(You may have an opportunity to listen/watch some songs on a YouTube video.)

3. Ask students: **"Why would a poet/song writer choose to write these songs?"** During the discussion, students may suggest that the songs were written about something important/significant. Discuss the concept of Historical Significance and its criteria (see www.historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-significance).

4. Also ask students: **"How might the poet/ song writer's point-of-view influence what words/lyrics they use in the song?"** Discuss the

concept of Historical Perspective and its meaning (see www.historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-perspective).

Teaching Tip:

At this point, you may want to go back to one of the suggested songs and analyze both for Historical Significance and Perspective.

5. Tell the students that the first poem they will examine is called, "War in Disguise." Divide students into pairs or groups and provide them with **Appendix 1** (lyrics of the song) as well as a copy of **Appendix 2** (worksheet, "Poetry and Song about the War of 1812"). Have students read the poem and answer the pre-background questions. Discuss the questions as a class.

6. Next provide students with **Appendix 3** (worksheet, "Primary Source Evidence Sheet: 'War in Disguise'"). Discuss the key features of concept of Primary Source Documents, and how they should be analyzed (see <http://historicalthinking.ca/concept/primary-source-evidence>, click on "Tip-Working With Individual Primary Sources" for additional inquiry questions). Then have students read **Appendix 4** (worksheet, "Background Information: 'War in Disguise'") and have students fill in chart questions 1 – 8.

7. Take up the student responses and hold a discussion. Now ask students to read the poem again and ask:

- **"How does knowing the historical context and details of the poem change your understanding of it?"**
- **"What other perspectives of the battle might help you understand this event better?"**

8. Then hand out **Appendix 5**. Explain that Samuel Leech wrote a book about his adventures at sea, one of which was the battle of the *HMS Macedonian vs. The USS United States*. His perspective is one of a

sailor on the British ship the *HMS Macedonian* and the excerpt from the book is also a primary document. (To see the whole excerpt of the battle go to: <http://www.nelsonsnavy.co.uk/engagement.html>)

You may choose to have the students read the first-hand account individually (in class or at home), in groups or as a class and then answer question 9 & 10 on the **Worksheet #2: "Primary Source Evidence Sheet: 'War in Disguise'"**. Discuss these two answers as a class.

9. To conclude the lesson and look again at **Historical Perspective** have the students complete the assignment, "**Constructing a Narrative Poem: Another Historical Perspective**". (For more information about poetry styles and vocabulary see: <http://www.types-of-poetry.org.uk/>)

Appendix 1: "War in Disguise"

One Stephens, a lawyer, and once a reporter,
Of war and of taxes a gallant supporter,
In some way or other to Wilberforce kin,
And a member, like him, of a borough bought in,
Who a Master in Chancery since has been made,
Wrote a pamphlet to show that Jonathan's TRADE
Was a 'War in Disguise;' which, though strange at first sight,
Events have since proved may have been but too right;
For when Carden the ship of the Yankee Decatur
Attacked without doubting to take her or beat her,
A FRIGATE she seemed to his glass and his eyes;
But when taken himself, how great his surprise
To find her a SEVENTY-FOUR IN DISGUISE!
If Jonathan thus has the art of disguising,
That he captures our ships is by no means surprising;
And it can't be disgraceful to strike to an elf
Who is more than a match for the devil himself.

Epigram as it appeared in Corbett's *Political Register*, in 1812,
author: unknown. Downloaded from Galafilm War of 1812 Website,
http://galafilm.com/1812/e/people/songs_british_poems.html, July 2,
2012.

Appendix 2: "A War in Disguise" Questions

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is the "story" of the poem? Write 2 - 3 sentences.

2. The definition of **context** is: the conditions and circumstances that are relevant to an event, fact, etc.

How does knowing the historical context of the poem help you understand its meaning?

Appendix 3 : Primary Source Evidence: *War in Disguise* and *War at Sea*

1. What type of source is it?	2. Who authored/created it?	3. When was it created?
4. What historical events/context were occurring when it was created? What battles of the War of 1812 had already taken place at the time and what were the outcomes? Is this battle significant? Why?		
5. Why was it created? Who was the intended audience?		
6. What point of view/position does the author/creator represent? What is the author's view of Americans?		
7. How does the point of view/position shape the source?		

8. How might the American naval officers and sailors from the battle view this poem?

9. What does reading the first-hand account of Samuel Leech add to your understanding of the poem and the events?

10. If Samuel Leech had written a poem about the battle of the *HMS Macedonian* vs the *USS United States* how might it have differed from a "War in Disguise"?

Appendix 4: Background Information: "War in Disguise"

About the Poem

Author: British, name unknown

Title: Copied from a very popular pamphlet published in 1805 titled, *War in Disguise; or The Frauds of Neutral Flags*, which criticised the profiteering of the Americans through neutral trade

Source: *Corbett's Political Register*, published in London, a compilation of official papers, letters, reports and news from and about different parts of the world edited by William Corbett. Includes summaries of world events by William Corbett. This source is a type of political magazine.

Date: July - December, 1812

Battles Previous to October 25, 1812

- **July 17, 1812:** British capture Fort Mackinac
- **August 16, 1812:** British capture Fort Detroit
- **August 20, 1812:** American ship *USS Constitution* wins a battle
- **October 13, 1812:** British victory at Queenston Heights

The Battle of the *HMS Macedonian* vs the *USS United States*

The battle between the *HMS Macedonian* vs the *USS United States* took place on October 25, 1812, in the Azores (islands off the coast of Spain). The *HMS Macedonia*, sailed by Captain J. S. Carden, was searching for the *USS Essex* but unfortunately found the **USS United States**, sailed by Stephen Decatur, which was a much larger and more powerful ship.

- **HMS Macedonia:** 38 guns, 18 pound cannon balls

- **USS United States:** 44 guns, 24 pound cannon balls, longer range, and larger ship "SEVENTY-FOUR IN DISGUISE"

Not realizing the true identity or strength of the ship, Captain Carden set out to attack the *United States* but quickly found out that the *Macedonian* was no match. After a bloody battle, Captain Carden was forced to surrender his ravaged ship and deal with approximately 36 killed and 68 wounded as opposed to 7 killed and 5 wounded on the *USS United States*. After making the *HMS Macedonian* sea worthy, the American's towed the ship to the New York harbour on December 4th, 1812. This was the first British ship to be captured and brought to a U.S. port.

Vocabulary

Wilberforce: was a well-known British politician who lead the movement to abolish slavery

Frigate: medium-sized sailing war vessel smaller than a destroyer and used primarily for escort

"SEVENTY-FOUR": a large war ship that typically carried 74 cannons

Jonathan: a pseudonym for the United States

Appendix 5: Samuel Leech's Account of a War at Sea

Macedonian vs. USS United States, October 25, 1812

We had scarcely finished breakfast, before the man at the mast-head shouted, "Sail ho!"

The captain rushed upon deck, exclaiming, "Mast-head there!"

"Sir!"

"Where away is the sail?"

The precise answer to this question I do not recollect, but the captain proceeded to ask, "What does she look like?"

"A square-rigged vessel, sir," was the reply of the look-out.

After a few minutes, the captain shouted again, 'Mast-head there!'"

"Sir!"

"What does she look like?"

"A large ship, sir, standing toward us!" ...

As the approaching ship showed American colors, all doubt of her character was at an end. "We must fight her," was the conviction of every breast. Every possible arrangement that could insure success was accordingly made. The guns were shotted; the matches lighted; for, although our guns were all furnished with first-rate locks they were also provided with matches, attached by lanyards, in case the lock should miss fire. A lieutenant then passed through the ship, directing the marines and boarders, who were furnished with pikes, cutlasses, and pistols, how to proceed if it should be necessary to board the enemy. He was followed by the captain, who exhorted the men to fidelity and courage, urging upon their consideration the well-known motto of the brave Nelson, "England expects every man to do his duty." In addition to all these preparations on deck, some men were stationed in the tops with small-arms, whose duty it was to attend to trimming the sails and to use their muskets, provided we came to close action. There were others one of also below, called sail trimmers, to assist in working the ship should it be necessary to shift her position during the battle....

A strange noise, such as I had never heard before, next arrested my attention; it sounded like the tearing of sails, just over our heads. This I soon ascertained to be the wind of the enemy's shot. The firing, after a few minutes' cessation, recommenced. The roaring of cannon could now be heard from all parts of our trembling ship, and, mingling as it did with that of our foes, it made a most hideous noise. By-and-by I heard the shot strike the sides of our ship; the whole scene grew

indescribably confused and horrible; it was like some awfully tremendous thunder-storm, whose deafening roar is attended by incessant streaks of lightning, carrying death in every flash and strewing the ground with the victims of its wrath: only, in our case, the scene was rendered more horrible than that, by the presence of torrents of blood which dyed our decks. Mr. Hope, our first lieutenant, was also slightly wounded by a grummet, or small iron ring, probably torn from a hammock clew by a shot. He went below, shouting to the men to fight on. Having had his wound dressed, he came up again, shouting to us at the top of his voice, and bidding us fight with all our might. There was not a man in the ship but would have rejoiced had he been in the place of our master's mate, the unfortunate Nan Kivell....

Such was the terrible scene, amid which we kept on our shouting and firing. Our men fought like tigers. Some of them pulled off their jackets, others their jackets and vests; while some, still more determined, had taken off their shirts, and, with nothing but a handkerchief tied round the waistbands of their trowsers, fought like heroes. Jack Sadler, whom the reader will recollect, was one of these. I also observed a boy, named Cooper, stationed at a gun some distance from the magazine. He came to and fro on the full run and appeared to be as "merry as a cricket." The third lieutenant cheered him along, occasionally, by saying, "Well done, my boy, you are worth your weight in gold"...

Suddenly, the rattling of the iron hail ceased. We were ordered to cease firing. A profound silence ensued, broken only by the stifled groans of the brave sufferers below. It was soon ascertained that the enemy had shot ahead to repair damages, for she was not so disabled but she could sail without difficulty; while we were so cut up that we lay utterly helpless. Our head braces were shot away; the fore and main top-masts were gone; the mizzen mast hung over the stern, having carried several men over in its fall: we were in the state of a complete wreck...

A council was now held among the officers on the quarter deck. Our condition was perilous in the extreme: victory or escape was alike hopeless. Our ship was disabled; many of our men were killed, and many more wounded. The enemy would without doubt bear down upon us in a few moments, and, as she could now choose her own position, would without doubt rake us fore and aft. Any further resistance was therefore folly. So, in spite of the hot-brained lieutenant, Mr. Hope, who advised them not to strike, but to sink alongside, it was determined to strike our bunting.

This was done by the hands of a brave fellow named Watson, whose saddened brow told how severely it pained his lion heart to do it. To me it was a pleasing sight, for I had seen fighting enough for one Sabbath; more than I wished to see again on a week day. His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Macedonian* was now the prize of the American frigate *United States*.

(Samuel Leech, *Voice From the Main Deck*. C. Tappan, Boston: 1844, downloaded from the website Broadside, <http://www.nelsonsnavy.co.uk/engagement.html>, July 21, 2012.)

Appendix 6: "Constructing a Narrative Poem" – Another Historical Perspective

Purpose: to write a poem from the perspective of a sailor in the battle of the HMS Macedonia vs the USS United States in order to understand a sailor's Historical Perspective on this event.

Format:

1. Imagine that you are Samuel Leech and you have just arrived in New York on December 4, 1812. You are a prisoner.
2. Using **Appendix 5**, read Samuel Leech's first-hand account and underline words and phrases from his writing that help to tell his story of the battle. Choose words and phrases that are descriptive, interesting, and informative of the battle of the HMS Macedonia vs the USS United States.
3. Re-write the words and phrases that you have chosen into a minimum of 10-15 lines to create a poem. You may choose to add words of your own and create 2-3 stanzas.
4. Give the poem a title and add your name to your poem.
5. Underneath your poem or on another page answer the following question: **"Why is more than one historical perspective of an event vital to the understanding of the past?"**

Criteria	Mark
Title and name	2
10 - 15+ lines in poem format	5
Describes the events in a creative way	10
Answered conclusion question	3
	20

Due Date