

## What happened during the War of 1812?

January 6, 2021 is now a pivotal day in United States history and is an unprecedented event. Yet as the day unfolded and afterward, leaders and journalists referred back to a moment in history near the end of the War of 1812 to offer a comparison. Why are we even talking about the War of 1812 and what happened two hundred years ago?



### What is this object?

This is a cannonball that the British fired into Port Chester Harbor during a war that historically has not gotten a lot of attention. Now, because of January 6th, people are talking about it. At the Rye Historical Society, we use this object to teach students about life long ago, both in wartime and in peace. It has been less than 250 years since our nation was formed, and during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, battles were fought not far from our town. On days like January 6th, that distant past feels not so distant.

### How did the Rye Historical Society come to own it?

Rye Historical Society has a collection of objects that are passed down from local families who want to help us preserve history within our community. This cannon ball came from a woman named Rhoda Jenkins. The Jenkins family is related to the Fremds and has lived in Rye for many generations.

## **What happened in the War of 1812?**

James Madison, our fourth president of the United States of America, was the first president to declare war with another country, Great Britain, on June 18, 1812. War was considered the only option after a series of trade disagreements and failed diplomacy. Americans were unprepared for a war, lacking experienced leaders and a strong naval presence. Another war had been raging on the European continent since the 1790's, when the French Revolution led to conflicts between France and other countries, including Britain.

America declared its first victory when USS Constitution defeated HMS Guerriere on August 19, 1812. Then, in January 1813, Great Britain officially declares war on the United States of America. Following early American victories, US leaders looked to seize British-held land in Canada. In April 1813, troops entered the Canadian capitol of York, now known as Toronto. During the Battle of York, also known as the Sacking of York, American troops set fire to the Parliament and other public buildings in Canada.

In retaliation for this victory at York, Great Britain had a plan, but they waited more than a year to enact it. During that time, the war brought conflict to Sound Shore communities from Pelham up to Greenwich, with a particularly intense British occupation in the waters off Port Chester on September 7th and 8th, 1813. Perhaps that is when this cannonball became a local artifact.

After many more battles on American soil, on the evening of August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1814, British forces under the command of General Robert Ross marched into Washington D.C. They were celebrating a British victory in nearby Maryland and now their goal was to destroy the heart of the US government. Throughout the evening, British troops burned the Capitol, the Presidential Mansion, Library of Congress, the navy yard and several warships. British forces were not met with any American military presence or officials and easily made their way into government buildings. President Madison and his wife, Dolley, knew ahead of time about the attack and had fled to safety in Maryland. The next day, a major thunderstorm and a tornado waged further destruction on the government buildings, which was one of the reasons British forces moved on. Later, Congress approved the purchase of Thomas Jefferson's library to replace the one lost in the fire. The Capitol building, which had been under construction prior to the attack, was repaired and construction continued.

This invasion happened at the same time Great Britain invited Americans to start peace talks. With this, President James Madison made the following proclamation, stating the attacks were, "a deliberate disregard of the principles of humanity and the rules of civilized warfare, and which must give to the existing war a character of extended devastation and barbarism."

**Why do we hear so many people referencing that war when talking about the events at the Capitol on January 6th?**

August 24th, 1814, a day near the end of the War of 1812, stands out as a historical moment. British forces, at that time the enemy of the United States, left their footprint in Washington. The British seized government property, ate and drank within the landmarks and eventually burned government buildings. Until last week, this was the only time in our nation's history when the Capitol Building was invaded. The circumstances were very different, yet many Americans looked to it for clarity and to better understand the significance of the scenes unfolding before them on January 6th.

So, why even compare the War of 1812 to January 6, 2021? The United States of America has grown to be a resilient nation and will continue to learn lessons from events of the past. January 6th, 2021 will now be one of those historic days. Moments like this, and what our country learns from them, shape the future.

Follow-up questions for students:

Why do you think the War of 1812 is not talked about as much in history as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War or more recent wars?

Compare and contrast the circumstances of the War of 1812 to the time we are living through now. What are the similarities, and what are the differences?

What lessons do you think we can learn from January 6th, 2021, and how might those shape the United States going forward?

Bibliography:

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[www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

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<https://constitutioncenter.org/>

For More on Rye/Westchester in the War of 1812:

<https://ryerecord.com/the-war-of-1812-and-sound-shore-communities/>