

Today, Lake Champlain is a scenic highlight of Vermont, New York State and part of the peaceful border between the United States and Canada. During America's early history, however, Lake Champlain was often a war zone.

Before the Europeans came, the lake and the land surrounding it were fought over by the Hurons and the Iroquois. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Lake Champlain separated French and English colonies. During the Seven Years' War (1756-63), British armies fought bloody battles for control of Fort Carillon near the southern tip of the lake. After failing in 1758, the British succeeded with overwhelming force one year later, renaming their prize Fort Ticonderoga.

Early in the American Revolution, Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys seized Fort Ticonderoga, followed by Crown Point the next day. British forces still had dominance on Lake Champlain but it was short-lived. During the war, the lake became a focus of naval competition. It was the easiest route for shipping British troops into the heart of New York, and an ideal staging point for an American invasion of British-ruled Canada. Both sides built fleets on the lake, and America fought its first naval battle

off Valcour Island in October 1776.

While the Americans lost the battle, they delayed a British invasion until winter made it impossible.

The British controlled Lake Champlain after seizing Fort Ticonderoga in July 1777, but defeat at the Battle

of Saratoga prevented them from exploiting their advantage. The fort was destroyed by British troops after their defeat at Saratoga in 1777.\* When Britain recognized American independence in 1783, the Americans regained control of the southern tip of the lake and most of the eastern and western shore, while the British retained a presence at the Canadian end.

So things stood until the United States declared war on Britain in June 1812. Americans were outraged when British ships forced American merchant sailors into the British navy and forbade Americans from trading with France. For ambitious Americans, this was an opportunity to conquer and annex Canada. Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain was one of three staging areas for an American invasion, but the attack stalled when local militia refused to cross the Canadian border.

In 1813, an American attempt to drive British forces off the lake backfired badly. The British capture of two American ships, the *Eagle* and *Growler*, at Isle-aux-Noix gave Britain naval supremacy on Lake Champlain, but U.S. forces still controlled Plattsburgh Bay. Both sides raced to build bigger navies for an eventual showdown.

Throughout the war, Americans and Canadians traded with each other, despite U.S. attempts to prevent traffic with the enemy. The lake made Quebecois, New Yorkers and Vermonters natural trading partners, while widespread opposition to the war made many Champlain Valley people willing to sell food to a foreign army. To conceal their part in the illicit trade, some American merchants hired privateer vessels to "capture" Canadian cargoes the merchants had already paid for.

By 1814, peace talks were under way. During the negotiations, the British planned to maximize their bargaining position by establishing military supremacy on Lake Champlain. That meant seizing Plattsburgh and destroying the rebuilt American fleet.

On September 1 the British began their offensive. Troops advanced

along the western shore while a fleet led by the warship *Confiance*, including the two captured American ships, prepared to sail for Plattsburgh Bay. The army reached Plattsburgh on September 6, but was pinned down by fire from American ships before it could cross the Saranac River and fully control the town.

British land forces waited five brutal days before their fleet was ready to confront the Americans.

The Battle of Plattsburgh was fought on September 11. The British had more guns, while the Americans had more men. The British *Confiance* was more

powerful than any other ship

in the lake, but at a crucial moment, the American commander on board the *U.S.S. Saratoga*, Lt. Thomas McDonough, won the battle with superior seamanship.

*Confiance* badly damaged *Saratoga's* starboard battery in the early exchanges, and the British believed the American flagship crippled.

McDonough had planned ahead, however. He had put out *Saratoga's* anchors before the battle, so he could wind the ship around and blast *Confiance* from an undamaged leeward battery. When *Confiance* tried the same maneuver, its anchor lines became tangled, leaving the battered ship crippled.

The American victory at Plattsburgh ended the British threat to New York. It was the last battle fought on Lake Champlain. Soon after the war ended, work began on a canal linking the lake to the Erie Canal project. Completed in 1823, the Champlain Canal strengthened the natural commercial ties between Canada and New York, while naval combat on Lake Champlain became a distant memory.



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## Fort Ticonderoga and The Battle of Plattsburgh

This is one of a 10-part educational series created by the NYNPA NIE Program © 2008



### Newspaper Tie-ins to Today:

Did you notice cause-effect relationships in this story? For example, McDonough dropped anchor (cause) and the immediate effect was to allow the ship to wind around *Confiance*. The ultimate effect was to cripple *Confiance*. Find cause-effect relationships in news stories. Look for immediate and long-term effects.

McDonough showed superior seamanship and was victorious when he and his crew were the underdogs in the fight. Look through recent editions of the newspaper (in-print or online) for examples of unexpected victories. Did they win due to great leadership or teamwork? How might the modern story be similar to the fight of the U.S.S. *Saratoga*?

\*The grounds were acquired by the Pell family in 1820 and a replica Fort Ticonderoga was built in the early 20th century.

Image: Lithograph of McDonough's Victory, Library of Congress, reproduction number LC-USZC2-2831. For more information on the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadrcentennial go to [www.exploreny400.com](http://www.exploreny400.com).