

The Battle of Lake Erie

(September 10, 1813)

“We have met the enemy and they are ours—two ships, two brigs, one schooner and a sloop.” With this simple victory message to General William Henry Harrison, commander of the U.S. forces in the Northwest Territory, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry announced his defeat of the British fleet at the Battle of Lake Erie. This battle, one of the most unusual in American naval history, ensured American control of the Great Lakes during the War of 1812 and secured the country’s tenuous hold on the Northwest.

Commodore Perry’s victory was quickly enshrined as one of the heroic military events of the early American Republic. The famous engagement on September 10, 1813, was initiated by Perry’s flagship *Lawrence*, named after James Lawrence, the commander of the recently captured *Chesapeake*. Lawrence’s dying words, “Don’t give up the ship,” inspired the nation and Perry. Those words were stitched onto Perry’s battle flag, which flew over the *Lawrence*. As the battle began, Perry placed the *Lawrence* at the head of his fleet. The *Caledonia* and the *Niagara*, as well as six other ships of various sizes, fell in behind. For reasons that have never been determined, the faster *Niagara* remained behind the slower *Caledonia*, and the *Lawrence* sailed into the battle virtually unsupported. Perry was then forced to fight the entire British fleet with only the *Lawrence*.

After an intense bombardment of two and a half hours, the *Lawrence* fought the British fleet to a standstill, though the ship itself was severely damaged and four-fifths of its crew were killed or wounded. In a daring move, Commodore Perry abandoned his shattered ship and climbed into a rowboat with four crewmen. He took with him his battle flag, which he draped over his shoulders. The boat set out for the brig *Niagara*, braving heavy gunfire. Perry boarded the ship, took command, and turned the *Niagara* directly toward the British ships. The encounter was confusing and bloody, but brief. The damaged British flagship *Detroit* attempted to swing around,

William Henry Powell, an Ohio artist who had studied with Henry Inman in New York City, received a coveted commission in 1847: the last of the historical paintings for the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. His subject, *Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto A.D. 1541*, was completed in 1853. As Henry Tuckerman wrote in his 1867 *Book of the Artists*, it was “a commission bestowed upon him rather in deference to his Western origin than because of priority of claim in point of rank or age.”¹ That is, the new political clout of the Northwest Territory had made itself felt. This national success led his home state to commission Powell in 1857 to paint *Perry’s Victory on Lake Erie* for the rotunda of the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus. The work was completed in his New York City studio. The artist let it be known that he had used as models men from the Brooklyn Navy Yard and had sought authenticity in all the nautical details of the picture, an effort for which he was praised. The picture was installed in Columbus in 1865, whereupon the Joint Committee on the Library commissioned Powell, on March 2, 1865, for a painting “illustrative of some naval victory,” to be placed at the head of the east stairway in the Senate wing of the Capitol.² It seems certain that he was expected to repeat his Ohio Statehouse subject on a larger scale. He did so, painting it in a temporary studio inside the U.S. Capitol and completing it in 1873. For this version, it appears that Powell used as models workers then employed at the Capitol.

Powell chose as his subject the moment when Perry made his way from his severely damaged flagship, the *Lawrence*, in a rowboat through enemy fire to the *Niagara*. Powell enlarged the crew of the boat, showing six oarsmen, a helmsman, Perry, and Perry’s 13-year-old brother, Alexander, who served as Perry’s midshipman. Sources do not agree on whether Alexander in fact accompanied his brother in the rowboat, but it must have seemed an irresistible addition. In the painting, Alexander grasps his brother’s coat as if to pull him to sit, as the helmsman also urges with a gesture. Perry does not carry his battle flag; the artist chose instead to fly the Stars and Stripes from the boat’s bow. This is stirring, if inaccurate, as the “colors” were not taken from the *Lawrence*. One of the oarsmen is an African American. Although Tuckerman identifies him as “Perry’s black servant, Hannibal,” who responds to a near-hit in “evident consternation,” his inclusion is more likely dictated by the date

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William Henry Powell (1823–1879)

Oil on canvas, 1873

201 1/8 x 319 1/2 inches (510.9 x 811.5 cm)

Signed and dated (lower left corner): W.H. Powell. / 1873

Inscribed (centered at top of frame, on central crest): We have met the enemy and they are ours / Oliver H. Perry

Inscribed (centered at bottom of frame, on cartouche): BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE / September 10th / 1813 / painted / by / W.H. Powell

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1865

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1873

Cat. no. 33.00008



of the painting—immediately post-Civil War and emancipation—than by the reality of 1813.³

In addition to the heroic figures in the rowboat, Powell shows three figures on the abandoned *Lawrence*, along with a dead sailor in the flotsam between brig and boat and a doomed figure in the water at the right side. To judge from the flags, three British ships are clustered from the left to the center in the background, and five American ships are grouped from the center to the right. Many sailors are seen in those ships. Powell's most expressive work is found in the indistinct background, seen through gunsmoke and haze; in the water; and in the corpse atop the tangled flotsam. Powell sacrifices spatial unity, however, by ignoring the middle ground. Thus, the diagonal that is meant to lead

and its rigging became entangled with that of the *Queen Charlotte*, rendering both ships helpless against the onslaught from the *Niagara*. In short order, the smaller British ships also succumbed, and a mere 15 minutes after boarding, Perry had achieved an extraordinary victory. With it the British supply line to the Western frontier was severed, and within the month the British and their Indian allies were decisively defeated.

The Battle of Lake Erie—*continued*

the eye from the *Lawrence* through the rowboat to the distant *Niagara* fails to do so, despite Perry's rhetorical pointing gesture.

Although the commodore's heedless action of standing in the boat had exposed him as he headed for the *Niagara*, "Perry's luck" became legendary. The heroic stance, as presented by Powell, may seem overdone to the modern viewer, but it was not out of step with dramatic

conventions of the period. For example, Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* portrays George Washington similarly.

The Leutze canvas was exhibited in New York in 1851 and again in 1853, and it was all but universally praised for showing the hero's determined purpose. Likewise, in describing Perry's action in the earlier version of Powell's *Perry's Victory on Lake Erie* in the Ohio Statehouse, Tuckerman revels, "[Perry]—the central figure, the soul of the picture—is standing with outstretched arm, and resolute and confident look, unconscious of his handsome little

brother, who tugs at his dress, or of the deprecating gesture of the helmsman to make him sit down and avoid the terrible exposure, of which, in the excitement of the moment, he is unaware."⁴

William Powell's 1865 painting, *Perry's Victory on Lake Erie*, hangs in the rotunda of the statehouse in Columbus, Ohio.
(Ohio Historical Society)



Detail: top of frame.



Detail: bottom of frame.

Right:

The *Battle of Lake Erie* dominates the east grand stairway of the Senate wing. Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry's message to General William Henry Harrison announcing the defeat of the British is inscribed on the walnut frame.
(1999 photograph)

