

Vessels of Victory

By Benjamin Pomerance

IN A PRIZE-WINNING DRAMA, most people forget the folks who built the props. Without them, of course, there would be no drama, no story at all. Yet they usually remain invisible, footnotes inside their own creations.

Perhaps this explains why history has neglected Noah and Adam Brown. Today, from the high-stakes human drama that played out on Lake Champlain in 1814, we still honor and laud those with the starring roles. Two hundred years after those last shots died away, we're still cheering Thomas Macdonough, Stephen Cassin and so many more heroes who performed nobly in that struggle.

Behind that applause, though, two brothers stand together, largely forgotten. Without the Brown's, there would have been no triumph on Lake Champlain, no monuments etched in stone for the commanders. Like all great purveyors of stagecraft, they set up their drama's leading players for immortality. When the curtain fell, they retreated to the shadows.

Yet no shadow should dampen their legacy. In a secluded dockyard on Vermont's Otter Creek, Noah and Adam administered an astonishing feat. During the early months of 1814, the Americans and the British toiled to assemble the most powerful naval force on Lake Champlain. President James Madison and his Cabinet followed this contest with the same level of tension that political leaders 150 years later would reserve for Cold War nuclear proliferation.

Ultimately, Noah and Adam made the Americans the unexpected champions of this arms race. Under their guidance, an armada of workers raised a powerful fleet in record time. Without this unprecedented achievement, Macdonough would have lacked the naval firepower to compete with the mighty British Royal Navy. With this impact in mind, one can honestly conclude that the Battle of Plattsburgh's first heroes really were these shipbuilding siblings.

For two centuries, though, the contributions of Noah and Adam have evaded their rightful acclaim. Finally, thanks largely to the efforts of James G. Brown, a descendant of the shipbuilders currently writing a biography of the two men, many of these details are at last beginning to obtain their place in the sun. And as the North Country honors the bicentennial of that pivotal battle in Plattsburgh, it seems fitting to recognize these too-often-overlooked lives of the brothers who made that victory possible.

The Early Years

The trail of Noah and Adam begins in Stamford, Conn. There, David Brown and Rebecca Slauson gave birth to Adam in 1769 and Noah in 1770. Approximately three years later, the family moved to Salem, N.Y.

About two years after that, David and Rebecca relocated again, this time settling their family in New Stamford, a rural area in New York's Delaware County. While they were living there, the Revolutionary War erupted. James G. Brown's research shows that two of Noah and Adam's older brothers joined the Continental Army. One of them, Nathan Brown, died in combat in 1777.

Another encounter with the brutality of war came in 1780. Spring came late that year, according to Noah's own autobiographical statement, and snow still covered the ground on April 6. That night, a mob of Native Americans and British sympathizers attacked New Stamford. They raided the Brown household, taking David Brown and three of his teenage sons — Doctor, Solomon, and John — as prisoners.

Adam and Noah were not captured. Yet they never again saw their father. Two of the Native Americans separated him from the three sons whom they had kidnapped. "I will see you no more," 66-year-old David purportedly told the three adolescents, "for they plan to kill me." They did so, reportedly returning with his scalp and taunting the prisoners with it.

The raiders then took the three brothers down the St. Lawrence River, hiding them on an island. One boy, John, escaped in 1782. The other two were released a year later, after the ending of the Revolutionary War.

Throughout all of this, Adam and Noah had returned to Connecticut with their mother and three more young siblings. Rebecca raised the family on her own, carrying on in the wake of her husband's cruel death. As they grew older, the children learned trades. Adam and Noah focused their energies on carpentry. According to James' findings, they began specializing in shipbuilding as early as 1797.

Sometime around 1808, Adam and Noah took a tremendous leap of faith by opening a shipyard of their own in New York City. With plenty of competition around them, such a venture easily could have failed. However, records studied by Kevin Crisman, whose book, *The Brig Eagle*, describes the shipbuilding effort on Lake Champlain, prove that the siblings found fast success.

Most of their early commissions were for merchant vessels. However, the fledgling United States Navy occasionally asked them to construct gunboats, too. Within just a few years, this seemingly narrow market for warships would become their path to commercial success, and their greatest contribution to America's freedom.

Ships of War

“The declaration of war in 1812,” wrote Crisman in *The Brig Eagle*, “brought the Browns into their element.” During the first year of combat, the brothers immediately left their mark on the naval scene, designing several schooner-rigged privateers. All of these ships, particularly one called the *Prince de Neufchatel*, were highly prized by the Americans.

Their first great impact, though, came in the winter of 1813. That season, the Brown’s received a mammoth commission: creating Oliver Hazard Perry’s squadron on Lake Erie. Noah, taking the lead on the project, arrived to find conditions that were anything but pleasant. Wood in the area was mediocre, basic building supplies were non-existent, and there wasn’t enough food on hand for the 200 shipwrights assigned to the site.

Still, they completed the job and with stellar results. Despite multiple “near-mutinies by his half-starved men,” Noah oversaw the completion of two 20-gun brigs, three gunboats and a dispatch schooner by June of 1813. Just three months later, Perry used that fleet to capture the entire British squadron on Lake Erie.

Perry’s words after that battle are among the most famous in American history: “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.” Without Noah’s rapid work, though, the triumph would have been improbable at best, as the British held the superior vessels until Noah built Perry’s ships.

Later that summer, Noah and Adam developed the sloop of war *Peacock*. Several experts considered her the finest ship in her class ever constructed in the U.S. Starting with the British brig *Epervier*, the *Peacock* would go on to capture a total of 20 British vessels during the War of 1812.

Between Perry’s fleet and the *Peacock*, the Brown brothers were the talk of the Navy as the year 1814 dawned. Thus, it was no surprise that when Macdonough, anchored below the small Vermont town of Vergennes, desperately needed a fleet upgrade, Secretary of the Navy William Jones assigned Noah and Adam to come to Macdonough’s aid.

An Arms Race

In late February 1814, Noah Brown arrived at Vergennes. His orders from Jones seemed impossible. Among other smaller assignments, Noah was required to construct and launch a 24-gun warship on Lake Champlain in just 60 days.

Yet two months was all that the Navy could wait. Already, ships in Macdonough’s fleet were cumbersome and outdated. Now, the commander had just received word that the British, moored for the winter at nearby Île-aux-Noix located on the Richelieu River just north of the border, were constructing a ship that was larger and better-armed than any currently existing in their squadron. Without new American vessels, Macdonough knew that the fight would be over before it began.

The location of Macdonough’s dockyard helped the American cause. Thanks to power generated by the waterfalls at Otter Creek, Vergennes contained several industrial centers — eight forges, several mills, a blast furnace and more. High quality timber in the forests around the community was plentiful. Even more importantly, the location was nicely sheltered, preventing the British from ambushing the Americans while construction was in progress.

Those conditions helped Noah not only meet, but exceed, Jones’ expectations. Instead of a 24-gun warship in 60 days, Noah and his builders launched the 26-gun sloop of war *Saratoga* in just 40 days. In addition, Noah led construction of six American gunboats. He also oversaw the conversion of a partially completed steamship hull into a 17-gun schooner, christened the *Ticonderoga*.

All in all, it was a stunning body of work for one winter. When Noah and his crew returned to New York City in late spring, he left behind a stalwart fleet of ships with which Macdonough could control Lake Champlain. On May 29, 1814, Macdonough proudly told Jones that his new squadron was ready.

Macdonough’s confidence, however, was short lived. In early June, intelligence reports revealed that the British were building a new ship, one that was larger than even the *Saratoga*. This latest trump card, the 37-gun *Confiance*, would be the most powerful ship Lake Champlain had ever seen.

Right away, Macdonough wrote to Jones. This time, though, there was a problem. Believing that he had sunk enough money into Lake Champlain, Jones refused to pay another cent to augment Macdonough’s fleet. It took a special order directly from President Madison — the first and only time he overruled Jones during the War of 1812 — to free up the funding.

When the money became available, though, Macdonough immediately summoned the Brown’s. This time, it was Adam who came to Vergennes, with Noah remaining in New York to run the shipyard. In one night, the Brown’s recruited 200 skilled workers to build the new American ship.

As with the *Saratoga*, the builders worked long hours to make up for lost time. And just as his brother had done before him, Adam and his crew finished ahead of schedule. In fact, they launched their new brig, *the Eagle*, after a mere 19 days of construction. Once again, one of the Brown’s had matched the British in the quest for naval power on Lake Champlain.

And on Sept. 11, when conflict exploded on that lake, it was Macdonough who carried the day. The commodore’s cunning battle tactics were the primary force in that unanticipated victory. Yet the roots of that crucial

feat unquestionably came from the Brown brothers, the individuals who gave Macdonough the fine ships necessary to seize the moment.

The Aftermath

The War of 1812 proved profitable for Adam and Noah. By the time the Treaty of Ghent ended the conflict on Dec. 31, 1814, the brothers had solidly secured their reputation as expert shipbuilders. Commissions flowed to their shipyard in droves. Noah became an Assistant Alderman on the New York City Common Council, and for a few years, both men were among the city's wealthier citizens.

Yet their fortune did not last long. Just three years after the war's end, Adam passed away at the age of 48, most likely from heart problems. Noah remained in New York, attempting to run the shipyard alone.

However, without any guidance from Adam, the enterprise suffered. Evidently, Noah was a poor manager of his personal savings, too. He lent a significant portion of his assets to friends and family, money which was never repaid to him. Then, in the summer of 1826, several Wall Street firms in which Noah invested abruptly collapsed, tearing through more of his fortune. James' research indicates that Noah likely was the victim of fraud, too. He passed away on Sept. 6, 1845, with his finances in shambles.

Both men seemed to face an ignominious end, a downslide that only continued posthumously. Today, they are largely forgotten, overlooked even by many War of 1812 scholars. Their proficiency provided the means for the Americans to prevail in two decisive victories, achievements that arguably paved the way for the modern U.S. Navy, and yet few people even know their names.

This brings us to today. Two hundred years after that struggle on Lake Champlain, rectifying that wrong of historical anonymity seems appropriate. During this year's commemoration weekend, revelers should spare a few thoughts for the Brown's, remembering the work they did extraordinarily well under extremely tight deadlines. It is time to bring the makers of these vessels of victory out from backstage, giving them the spotlight that their service deserves. This weekend is their celebration, too.

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