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## Maybe they're still mad they lost

Canada is pouring millions into the bicentennial of the War of 1812. So why has the U.S. only set aside \$5,000?

by Colby Cosh on Thursday, June 3, 2010 9:40am



Mark Wilson / Getty Images

In the eyes of the world, the War of 1812 may always appear insignificant against its Napoleonic backdrop. But it did decide the destiny of a continent, persuading Empire and Union that it was better to have trade crossing the border than troops.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper was in Niagara Falls, Ont., on May 21, opening a new federally funded expansion to the city's History Museum, which stands on the site of the ferocious July 1814 Battle of Lundy's Lane. The federal and provincial governments are each giving the museum up to \$3.2 million; for the feds, the money is part of a Throne Speech promise to commemorate the bicentennial of the war, "an event that was key to shaping our identity as Canadians and ultimately our existence as a country."

Another \$9 million in 50-50 federal-provincial cash is going to three Niagara Parks Commission sites: Old Fort Erie, McFarland House, and the Laura Secord Homestead. Ottawa has also set aside \$12 million for improvements to 1812-related National Historic Sites along the frontier,

including Gen. Brock's monument at Queenston Heights. And Toronto is putting at least \$5 million into a new visitors' centre at Fort York.

But the only corresponding public funding on the other side of the border, as noted by the *Buffalo News* in April, has been a measly US\$5,000 donation from the Niagara County legislature. Why isn't Uncle Sam pulling his weight?

Mild embarrassment, perhaps. "Many Canadians view the War of 1812 as their own war of independence and, with great justification, they believe they handily won it," says Colorado historian Walter Borneman, author of *1812: The War That Forged a Nation*. "On the American side, the war is overshadowed by our own American Revolution and later wars, in large part because, except for naval victories on the seas and lakes and Jackson's huge victory at New Orleans, there wasn't much to cheer about militarily."

In fiscally comfortable times, New York state spent lavishly on the 250th anniversary of what the Americans call the French and Indian War (1754-63). But the state still hasn't covered all its expenses from that celebration, and last fall Gov. David Paterson vetoed a bill that would have created a state War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission. The story is similar elsewhere: in Alabama, where the war's last major battle took place, the state House and Senate played ping-pong with a bicentennial commission bill this spring until the clock ran out on the legislature's one annual session.

U.S. states, unlike Canadian provinces, face complicated legal restrictions on their ability to run deficits, so budget crises bite deep for governors like Paterson. Arlene White, executive director of the Niagara region's Binational Tourism Alliance, has faith the private sector will pick up some of the slack, noting that "there are a lot more foundations stateside."

Canadians forget easily that the War of 1812 was a cross-country phenomenon in the U.S., ranging from Maine to Ohio to New Orleans. Maryland, where Francis Scott Key witnessed the bombardment of Fort McHenry in 1814 and wrote *The Star-Spangled Banner*, has ambitious plans. The state's budget is tight, but Democrat Gov. Martin O'Malley is a War of 1812 buff. He created a state Bicentennial Commission by executive order, and Congress is considering a U.S. Mint commemorative coin issue that would provide it with up to US\$8.5 million.

Despite the general tight-fistedness, American culture is, on some fronts, stepping up. Florentine Films, the production company co-founded by Ken Burns, is working on a two-hour War of 1812 documentary for PBS. And the U.S. Navy, for which the story of the war constitutes holy scripture, plans to take a fleet of modern vessels and period sailing ships up and down the coast—perhaps even to Toronto.