

Portrait of Daniel Dobbins, circa 1840 (Onondaga Historical Association)

Captain Daniel Dobbins
Frontier Mariner, Naval Officer, and Revenue Cutter Master

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Daniel Dobbins is best known for his role in the construction of the U.S. Navy's Great Lakes fleet that, under the command of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, defeated the British in the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812. Following his sometimes-stormy naval career, he joined the Revenue Marine, commanding cutters on the Great Lakes, and briefly on the Atlantic Coast. He served in the Revenue Marine in the days when overt political patronage ruled the officer corps. This led him to a career-long, colorful rivalry with another pioneering Great Lakes cutterman, Captain Gilbert Knapp. This is their story.

Frontier Mariner

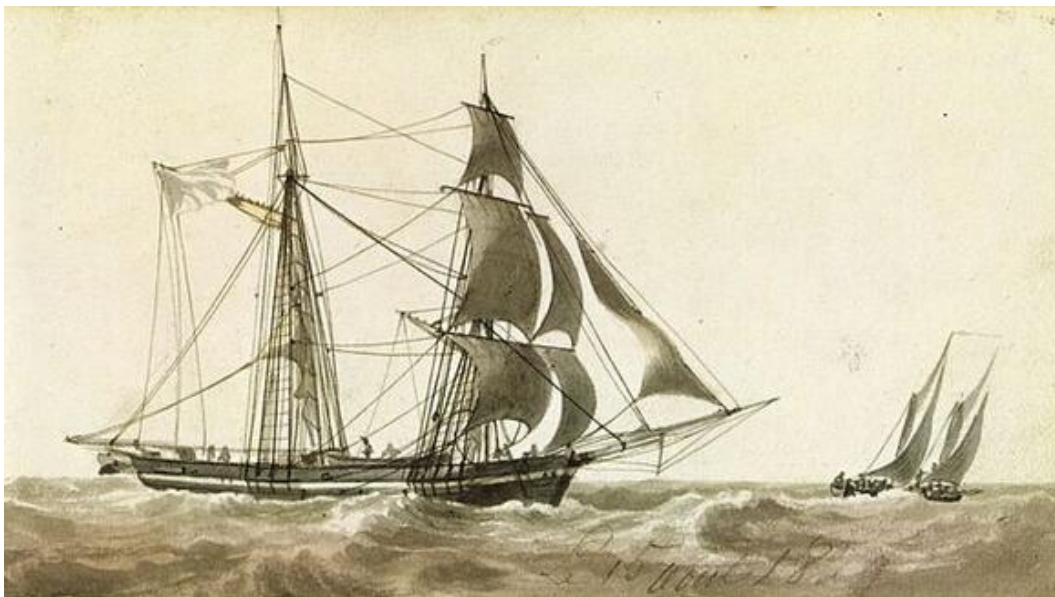
On a cold, wintery December day in 1796, a small group of men gathered at Presque Isle (Erie), PA, for the funeral of General Anthony Wayne, famous Indian fighter and soldier of the Revolutionary War. With the nation's military hero dressed in his uniform, the attendees laid him to final rest. As the general had requested, it was a simple affair. The pine coffin and low-key ceremony in sharp contrast to the exciting life gallant Wayne had led.

Among those in attendance at this somber event was a proud young man of twenty named Daniel Dobbins. The occasion was an impactful reminder that the frontier that General Wayne had helped tame was now open to young men like him to settle and “civilize.” It helped shape Dobbins’ life as a fervent, lifelong patriot and a pioneer set on transforming the Great Lakes region.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Great Lakes area still was very much an untamed wilderness. Essentially, everything and everybody moved by water. Those who became skilled at navigating the massive inland seas were essential and highly valued.

Despite the fact that the Northwest Territory belonged by treaty to the United States, the British continued to exercise greater influence and control. The inhabitants remained strongly tied to a long-established trading economy integrated with British Canada. By the late 1760s, a small number of British vessels and their naval establishment throughout the Great Lakes were structured into what was called the “Provincial Marine.” The U.S victory of independence in 1783 had little impact on the status quo; maritime transport and patrol services remained a British monopoly. Privately owned vessels were not permitted until 1785. However, merchants screamed loudly enough that the government, both British and American, eased the trading restrictions, authorizing commercial firms to build and operate private merchant ships.

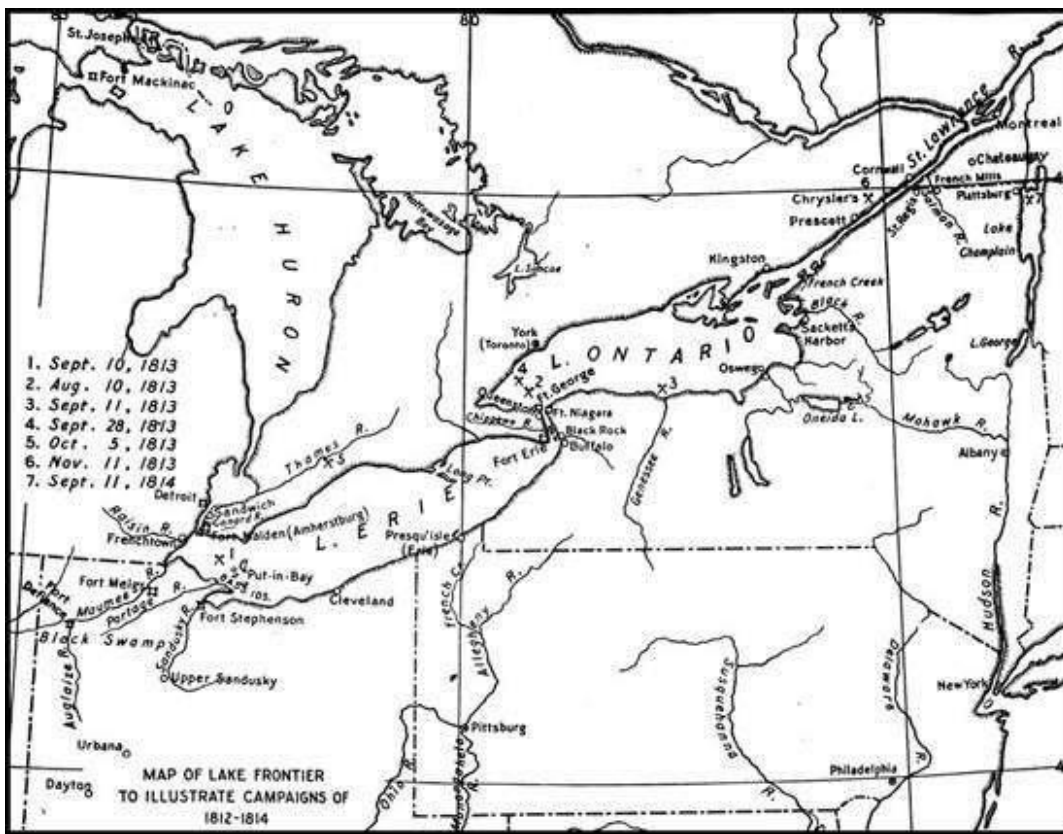
The lure of maritime commerce drew Daniel Dobbins, now a landowner in Erie, to his life’s work. Dobbins got involved in lake navigation at a time when there were very few boatmen and even fewer boats at Presque Isle. Sometime in the spring of 1803, Dobbins had acquired all he felt he needed to know about commanding a vessel. He became master of the thirty-ton sloop *Good Intent* and launched his career as a prosperous merchant mariner. Lake Erie became an increasingly important channel in the westward movement of those hoping to explore and exploit the riches of the West.



Drawing of typical Great Lakes barquentine, circa 1800 (photo by Antoine Roux, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

The War of 1812

Probably the worst place for an American to be in the spring of 1812 was anywhere along the Canadian border—it was like a winding stretch of gunpowder ignited on one end. War with Britain once again loomed on the near horizon. When Dobbins sailed *Salina* into the harbor at Mackinac Island in July 1812, he knew something was wrong. Traders weren't arriving and the entire community was on edge. On 17 July, a British force entered the port, captured Fort Michilimackinac, and seized several merchant ships including the *Salina*. Thus, Dobbins became part of the War of 1812 even before he knew it had been declared. It would become the beginning of a fascinating saga for both him and the nation. Under the terms of capitulation, Dobbins along with other Americans, was paroled—despite his refusal to sign an oath not to take up arms in the future. Dobbins sailed *Salina* from Mackinac as a “cartel,” with orders to report to Fort Malden in Amherstburg, Ontario. The historical details are sketchy, but at some point en route he and his ship joined the U.S. forces defending Detroit. When General Hull surrendered Detroit, Dobbins once again became a prisoner of British forces. He was recognized and charged with being under arms, violating his Mackinac parole—a transgression punishable by death. However, Dobbins, enjoying a friendly relationship with many of the British officers, was allowed to sail to Cleveland aboard a surrendered schooner with other paroled U.S. prisoners. He eventually made his way home to Erie.



Map of lake frontier illustrating campaigns, 1812 to 1814 (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Dobbins's misadventures in these very early days of the war provided him with clear evidence of the vulnerability of the U.S. territories on the Great Lakes. So, after spending a few days relaxing with family and meeting with General David Mead, who commanded the Pennsylvania militia, he departed for Washington to apprise the administration of the alarming situation. Dobbins placed particular emphasis on the naval situation and the horrendous impact of loss of the Great Lakes would have on the American cause. He also forwarded strong recommendations that an expanded U.S. fleet be built in Erie. His plan was subsequently approved, with written instructions from the Secretary of the Navy to return to Erie and there "contract for, on the best terms in your power, all the requisite timbers & other materials for building four Gunboats—agreeably to the dimensions, which you will receive." He also headed home with an appointment as sailing master in the U.S. Navy (a rank akin to present-day warrant officer).

Armed with the official go-ahead, he set out on the monumental task of accumulating the necessary "timbers and other materials," as well as the skilled labor—no easy thing in a remote frontier town. High-quality timber was readily available; all else was essentially nonexistent. To his advantage, Presque Isle had a large natural harbor, protected by a sandbar across its entrance. Skilled local pilots could navigate its twisting, ever-changing channel, but to a mariner unfamiliar, it was impassable. It would serve well as an excellent barrier to enemy warships during construction.

Some in the Navy, including his immediate superior, Lt. Jesse D. Elliot, lacked Dobbins's enthusiasm for the Presque Isle location for construction. Dobbins's disagreements with Elliot revealed his tenacity in pressing an argument, as well as his willingness to use both personal power and political connections to his advantage. It also highlighted his willingness to jump the chain of command if he felt it necessary. These traits did not endear him to his Navy superiors. These same tactics also would come into play later during his career with the Revenue Marine. Fortunately for Dobbins, his efforts concerning the construction of the Navy's Great Lakes fleet proved to be the proper course.

Much as been written about the construction of the fleet at Presque Isle and Oliver Hazard Perry's defeat of the British in the "Battle of Lake Erie." Both construction and battle required equal measures of extraordinary skill and miraculous luck. Numerous books, including one by Teddy Roosevelt, chronicle both creation of the fleet and the dramatic naval battle. This paper will capture very briefly a few essential Dobbins-related highlights. I encourage all to read more about this seminal naval battle.

By January 1813, Dobbins was in the midst of the hustle of bustle of gunboat construction. A visit by the commander of naval forces, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, slightly altered the design of the gunboats and, more importantly, added the construction of two 110-foot, 20-gun brigs, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*. By July 4, after a several more twists and turns, the schooner rigged gunboats *Tigress*, *Porcupine*, *Scorpion*, *Ariel*, along with brigs *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, were completed and launched. The vessels were lightened by stripping guns, ballast and other excess weight and floated over the aforementioned bar that crossed the harbor entrance; large timber camels were also employed to decreased the draft of the brigs.

The converted merchant schooners *Somers*, *Ohio* and sloop *Trippe*, along with brig *Caledonia*, which had been captured from the British, were added to the fleet. Dobbins was placed in command of *Ohio*.

After conducting a shakedown cruise and gunnery practice, the U.S. fleet set sail under the command of Oliver Hazard Perry. It eventually anchored in Put-in-Bay at South Bass Island in western Lake Erie to prepare for the inevitable engagement with the British fleet amassed at Fort Amherstburg. The Battle of Lake Erie, one of the most pivotal naval battles of the War 1812, played out on 10 September 1813. In his post battle dispatch to General William Henry Harrison, Commodore Perry immortalized the U.S. victory with his succinct assessment, “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.”



Painting “Battle of Lake Erie” by Patrick O’Brien (Patrick O’Brien Studio)

What about Dobbins? Unquestionably, the biggest disappointment in the naval career of Daniel Dobbins was not participating in the battle. After having been the managerial strategist and driving force behind the U.S. fleet’s construction, he missed the battle itself. By sad happenstance, Dobbins and *Ohio* were on a resupply mission back to Erie when the British fleet sailed out of the Detroit River and the lines of battle formed. While this is not the role he had hoped for, his unequalled knowledge of the lakes made him indispensable in the gathering of military intelligence and navigating the often-tricky waters of the Great Lakes. He was certainly important to Perry’s victory. Fighting continued for the U.S. naval forces, but Dobbins’s role would be primarily transporting men and supplies.

Peace came with the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814. Despite being the godfather of the U.S. fleet on the lakes, Dobbins was snubbed in much of the post-war accolades recognizing the importance of Perry’s victory on Lake Erie because he had not actually been a combatant. Given the selflessness and dedication he had displayed during the war, he believed he deserved much

better treatment. Undoubtedly, the passage of time has proved his complaints justified; however, his self-righteousness and vanity were not helpful to his cause.

Revenue Marine

The Rush-Bagot Pact of 1817—an agreement between the United States and Great Britain to essentially eliminate their fleets from the Great Lakes, excepting small patrol vessels—dramatically reduced the Navy’s presence on the “North Coast.” The exception for small patrol vessels covered those essential for enforcing each nation’s customs laws, which would prove important to the development of the Revenue Marine on the Great Lakes. The aforementioned perceived slights concerning Dobbins’s service during the War of 1812, combined with the potential opportunity to continue his naval career with the Revenue Marine, caused him to resign his Navy commission in 1826.



Artist rendition of U.S. Revenue Cutter *John B. Floyd* (Robert R. Holon, Lake Superior Tall Ships)

USRC *John B. Floyd* was one of six cutters built for Great Lakes service by Merry and Gay in Milan, Ohio, circa 1856. At approximately 60 feet in length, with a 17-foot beam, and 5-foot draft when the drop centerboard was raised, *John B. Floyd* was typical of early revenue cutters on the Great Lakes.

Prior to his resignation, Dobbins once again deployed his political acumen, asking Congressman Robert Moore for retention of the naval station at Erie for use as a Revenue Marine facility and homeport for a revenue cutter. Dobbins also envisioned that he would be appointed the commanding officer of that cutter. A cutter indeed would be built and commissioned in Erie, but it would be three years before Dobbins joined the Revenue Marine.

With the end of the War of 1812, Dobbins was not the only naval officer seeking transfer to the Revenue Marine. While he did not receive the cutter command he desired, he did apply for and receive an appointment as an inspector of customs for the Cuyahoga District of Ohio—his foot was in the door. Continuing to politic for command afloat in Erie, he would initially lose out to Captain Gilbert Knapp. Knapp too was also a veteran of the War of 1812, having served on the

privateer *Leo*, running the British blockade and delivering dispatches to France. He joined the Revenue Marine in 1819, commanding a cutter out of Detroit. Knapp gained a measure of renown for breaking up an extensive fur-smuggling ring in northern Lake Michigan near Mackinaw Island.

Knapp's selection for the post in Erie was the first chapter in the saga of the Knapp/Dobbins rivalry. Interestingly enough, the rivalry and their future rotating roles with the Revenue Marine had nothing to do with skill and competence. Both were accomplished mariners, respected vessel masters, and successful revenue cutter captains. It simply boiled down to the political practices of the time—the “spoils system.” However, both Dobbins and Knapp sought the use of those idiosyncrasies to maximum personal advantage—creating decades of animosity between the two.



Portrait Photo of Gilbert Knapp (Wisconsin Historical Society)

The 1828 election of Andrew Jackson changed everything. Dobbins, a Democrat, had campaigned for “Old Hickory.” Knapp, on the other hand, had expressed publicly his displeasure with Jackson, allegedly calling him a cutthroat and murderer and his wife a prostitute. This political transgression would lead to Knapp's dismissal. He was removed from command of the thirty-ton revenue cutter *Benjamin Rush* on April 4, 1829. Dobbins was appointed his successor, thereby gaining what he had long sought: command of a revenue cutter in Erie.

Forever interested in improving his hometown of Erie and doing his best for general improvement of his new service, Dobbins used his position with the Revenue Marine to press for harbor improvements and the addition of a second cutter to help stem the prolific smuggling that

plagued Lake Erie. Dobbins did not gain the additional cutter he desired, but in 1833 took command of the recently built sixty-five-ton *Erie*, which was larger and more capable than *Rush*. *Erie* still was the only cutter to cover far too many miles of coastline. Fifteen years after his original appointment with the Revenue Marine, Dobbins still would be pleading for more cutters.

The revolving door that is the saga of Dobbins versus Knapp continued. With the election of William Henry Harrison in 1840, the Whigs wasted no time in removing Dobbins and reinstating Knapp. Four years later, under the Democratic Administration of James K. Polk, the pendulum of political spoils swung back the other way—Dobbins was in, and Knapp was out.

Over the course of his career, when not politicking for some significant cause, Dobbins was dedicated to protecting the revenue and enforcing the maritime laws of the United States. A good deal of Dobbins's time was spent placing channel buoys, transporting supplies to remote lighthouses, rescuing vessels in distress, and visiting revenue collectors. However, his greatest emphasis was stopping smuggling. The relative closeness to Canada and ever-increasing maritime traffic made this an acute problem for all customs officials. Dobbins continued to believe that the solution was simple: more cutters.

Next to tracking down smugglers, the most exciting experience for Dobbins was participation in the so-called Patriot War. In Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) a segment of the population became angered by the oligarchical rule of British officials and by the old, conservative traditions descended from the attitudes of American Loyalists from the Revolutionary War. This group demanded reforms; when rebuffed, they took up arms. Sympathy for the rebels ran high among many Americans. In late December 1837, Canadian loyalists burned and sank the American steamer *Caroline*, which the rebels had hired to ferry supplies. Angry Americans crossed the boarder at Detroit to support the rebel cause, creating a warlike situation in the region.



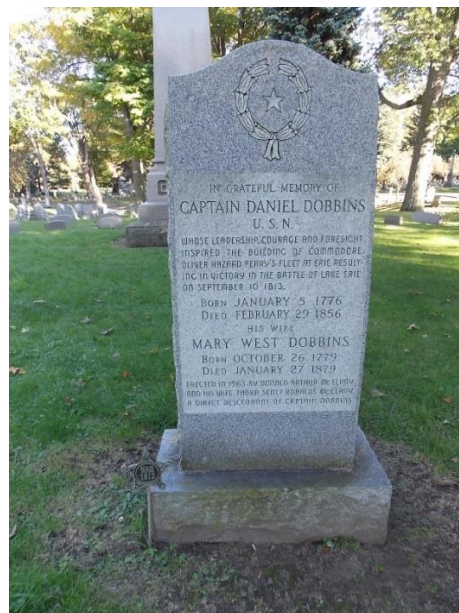
Capture of the *Caroline* (from The Century Edition of Cassell's History of England)

President Martin Van Buren called for strict neutrality and warned Americans not to become involved. He deployed troops and several vessels to the border to prevent support to the rebels. Dobbins and *Erie* were among those ordered to Buffalo and took part in several intense situations, including escorting an American steamer up the Niagara River in January, 1838, with combatants from both sides massed along the river banks. *Erie* later was ordered to Detroit to prevent additional sympathizers from crossing the border.

As discussed earlier, the political spoils system would see Knapp dismissed and Dobbins reinstated in 1845. The latter's joy was dampened by an assignment to command of Cutter *Taney* in Norfolk, VA, rather than his beloved *Erie*. Angered, Dobbins resorted to his old habits: going around his immediate superiors to air his grievances. This time he went to the ultimate top of his chain of command: President Polk. As one can imagine, Secretary of the Treasury Robert J. Walker was incensed, charging Dobbins with insubordination. In 1846, a disgruntled Dobbins, requested a three-month medical leave of absence, supported by a detailed physician's report. Walker had little choice but to grant the leave. Using family and medical reasons, Dobbins managed a temporary assignment back to cutter *Erie* in 1847.

With the 1848 election of Zachary Taylor, a Whig, Dobbins once again was dismissed and his old rival Knapp reinstated. To many, this absurd in-and-out game had become a sad, running joke. Not a man to surrender easily, Dobbins once again took to writing letters and appealing to powerful friends; he had supporters on both sides of the political aisle. Dobbins did not need to defend his record; but neither did Knapp. Everyone knew that both men had been cruelly used as political pawns. This would be the last chapter in the silly game.

Predictably, Dobbins was unsuccessful in his bid for retention in the Revenue Marine. Instead, he became content to live out his life supporting his beloved community of Erie in other ways. He crossed the bar on 29 February 1856. His funeral attracted a huge crowd of mourners.



Daniel Dobbins grave marker, Erie Cemetery, Erie, PA (Find a Grave)

Gilbert Knapp continued to serve honorably in the Revenue Marine; however, it was his pioneering and political accomplishments that form his lasting legacy. During those times when the spoils system saw him replaced by Dobbins, Knapp used his vast knowledge of the waters of the Great Lakes to operate successfully as a merchant mariner. During one of his many cruises in Lake Michigan, he paused to explore the Root River region of what would become the Wisconsin Territory. The 1833 Treaty of Chicago, signed after the Blackhawk War, opened the possibility of settlement on the western shore of Lake Michigan. In one of those periods between stints with the Revenue Marine, Knapp returned to the Root River and settled “Port Gilbert,” one of the first settlements in southeast Wisconsin. The community is now known as Racine, the French word for “root.” He also served in both the Wisconsin Territorial and State Assemblies. His final command in the Revenue Marine was the Cutter Fessenden, one of the service’s early sidewheel steam cutters on the Great Lakes. He retired from the Revenue Marine in 1874, spending the remainder of his life in Racine. He died in 1887.



Gilbert Knapp grave marker, Mound Cemetery, Racine WI (Find a Grave)

The story of Daniel Dobbins and Gilbert Knapp is both sad and fascinating. Fascinating because of the positive impact the two men had on the early history of the Revenue Marine on the Great Lakes, as well as the region as a whole; both shaped the future of their home communities, Erie and Racine. Sad, because of the absurdity of the political spoils system of the early nineteenth century. How much more impact could the two men have had on the history of the Revenue Marine if they had served simultaneously? We will never know.

Primary Sources

Severance, Frank H, "The Dobbins Papers". *Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society*. (Buffalo Historical Society, 1905)—Originally assembled by Daniel Dobbins' son, William W Dobbins these papers reveal tremendous insights into both the career of Daniel Dobbins and the early maritime history of the Great Lakes. The original publication was digitized and copyrighted by the Cornell University Library in 1993—accessed via HathiTrust.org.

Robert D. Ilisevich, *Daniel Dobbins Frontier Mariner* (Erie County Historical Society, 1993).

“Guardians of the Eighth Sea, A History of the U.S. Coast Guard on the Great Lakes” by Photojournalist 1st Class T. Michael O’Brien (1976)—Known by students of Great Lakes Coast Guard history simply as “the red book” (because of its cover color), remains one of the only comprehensive publications specifically highlighting the long history of the Coast Guard, and its predecessor services, on the Great Lakes.

In addition to these primary sources, I credit the Wisconsin Historical Society, Erie Maritime Museum, Buffalo Historical Society, and others for filling in the blanks.