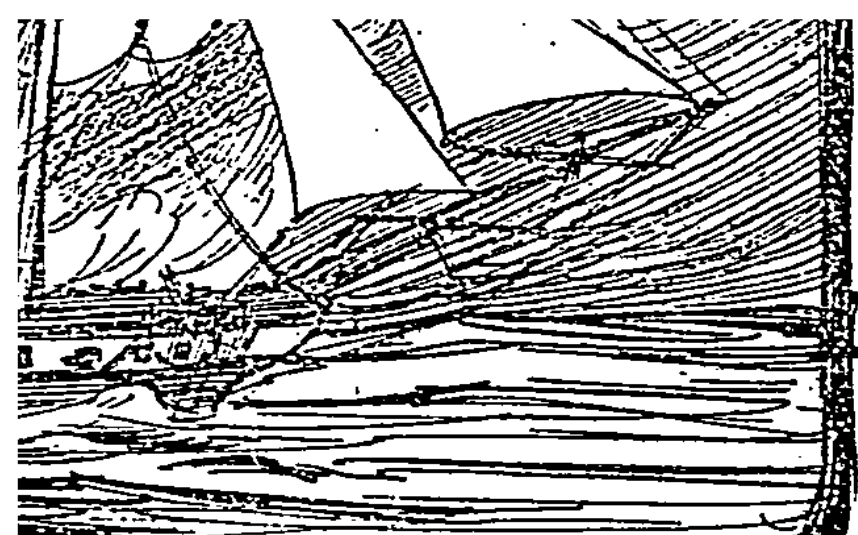
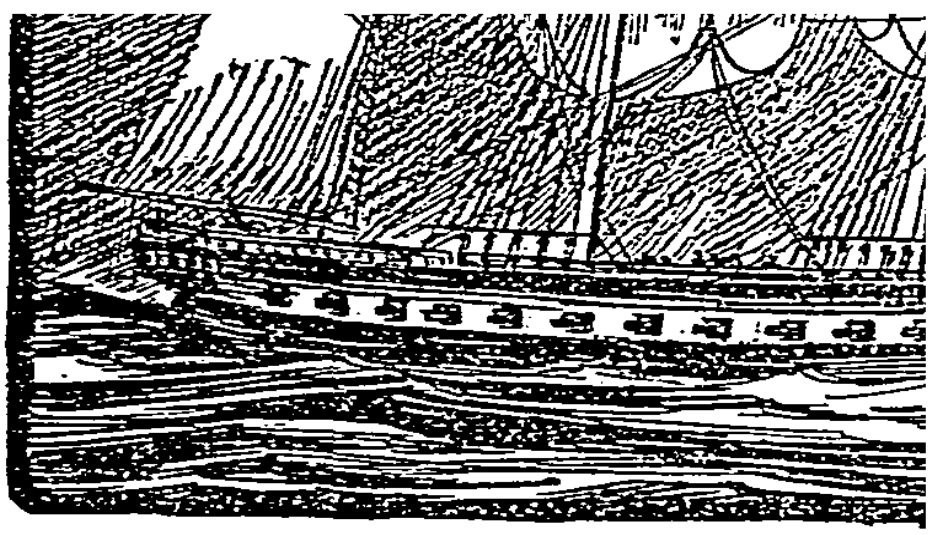
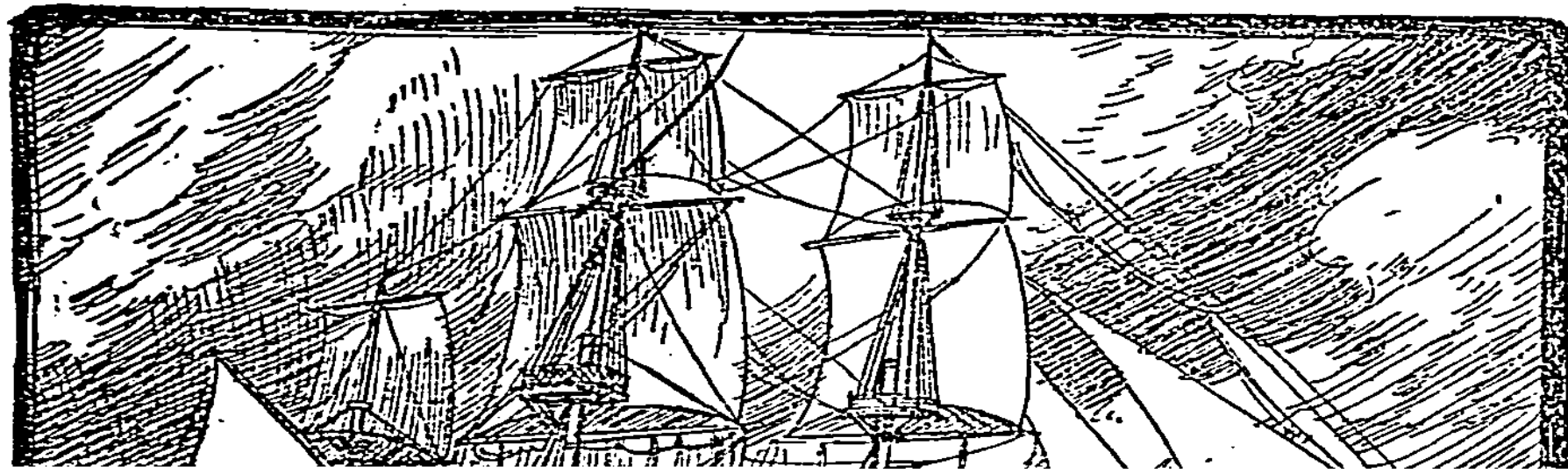


# 100 YEARS AGO TUESDAY--FIRST SHOT OF 1812 WAR

## A Year Before War Was Formally Declared Commodore Rodgers Defeated the Little Bell in a Hot Fight Off the South Atlantic Coast.



The First Shot in the War of 1812.



Commodore Rodgers.

The President—Commodore Rodgers' Ship.

By Prof. B. J. Cigrand,  
of the University of Chicago.

ON May 18, 1811, 100 years ago next Tuesday, the first shot was fired in the second war with England. Thus the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of "the War of 1812" is not in 1912, but falls on May 18, 1811. It was the beginning of a naval engagement off the coast of Virginia, and the thunder of the opening gun has been referred to as "the second shot which was heard around the world." Indeed, the battle might well be known as "the Lexington of the War of 1812."

The War of the Revolution ended in 1783. England withdrew her troops from New York City and reluctantly admitted the independence of the United States, but in spirit refused to accord the young republic a respected place in the household of governments.

She constantly sought opportunities to humiliate her conqueror, and assumed an especially aggravating attitude in insisting upon the right to take from our vessels, merchant or naval, any sailors who were supposed to have been born under the British flag. Men made captive thus were forced to enter and serve upon British ships of war. This was a very practical illustration of the edict promulgated by the English Cabinet: "Once an Englishman always an Englishman."

A most distressing situation for America grew out of the British kidnapping policy, and such of the impressed men as endeavored to escape, or manifested discontent with their seizure, were severely punished according to the naval standards of the day, which were not remarkable for gentleness.

For a score of years the young republic endured these high-handed outrages on the persons of its citizens. Our statesmen, among whom were Adams and Jefferson, seemed unable to handle the problem, and their endeavors to enlist European sympathy against Great Britain's drastic proceedings were in vain.

But what a whole nation seemed powerless to accomplish was at length achieved by a single person equipped with the necessary amount of nerve and a fine disregard of consequences. It was a plain case of "the right man in the right place at the right time."

On May 18, 1811, this unusual combination of qualities and circumstances was harmonized to cope successfully with a national emergency. Our histories lay little stress on this really important event, and a close investigation of the nation's unpublished archives reveals certain salient facts concerning it which are now set forth fully in print for the first time.

The British frigate *Guerriere* stopped an American vessel, the *Spittire*, about fifteen miles from New York. English officers went aboard her and arrested for impress a young sailor who they declared was an Englishman by birth. The American Captain protested in vain.

"I have known this lad personally from childhood," he asserted, "and know him to have been born in the State of Maine." "All that may be so," responded the British Captain, "but what can you do about it—he has no protection?"

Under the circumstances the argument was unanswerable, and the lad was carried off in the *Guerriere*. The Washington authorities were duly notified of the occurrence, but apparently they had become so accustomed to such happenings that little or nothing was done in the matter, and the documents relating to the inquiry rested in dusty pigeonholes of departmental desks.

Finally a genuine sea captain chanced to assume the duty of the hour, and the War Department, acting under some pressure the details of which are not made clear in the official records open to the public, gave orders for the frigate *President* to cruise on the Atlantic off Chesapeake Bay.

On the evening of May 16 Commodore

Rodgers, in command of *The President*, sighted a sail on the eastern horizon, and concluded that the strange vessel was none other than the *Guerriere*, which had forced the boy from Maine into British service. Rodgers at once gave orders to sail in pursuit and to ascertain what flag the stranger flew.

Several hours passed ere the vessels came within close range of each other. The sun had set and darkness was falling when Rodgers sprang into the rigging and tried to decipher with the aid of his glass the ensign borne by the object of the chase. But the shadows of night had rendered the colors undistinguishable, and Rodgers, seizing his speaking trumpet, shouted with the full strength of his powerful lungs, "What ship is that?"

There was no reply, and again Rodgers repeated his hail. Then a response came from the stranger in the shape of a sheet of flame and a round-shot which hurtled along the upper deck of *The President* and buried itself in the main mast.

Before Rodgers could give the command to "return fire" one of his eager gunners anticipated his leader's instructions, and the first shot fired by an American vessel in the War of 1812 thundered forth defiance to the foe. The Commodore then gave the order to engage, and the broadsides of both craft crashed in unison.

A pall of blackness had now descended on the deep, and the battle raged fiercely on by the dim rays of the deck lanterns and red flashes from the cannons' mouths. Suddenly the enemy ceased firing, and Rodgers gave orders to follow suit, believing that she had surrendered. But the momentary lull was broken by

another broadside from the stranger, and the powder-begrimed, cheering Americans replied in kind.

Through the darkness of the night they fought on steadily, until again their adversary's fire was silenced. For the third time Rodgers's stentorian voice roared across the waters:

"What ship is that?"  
The response came back faintly:  
"We are his majesty's ship."

The wind was blowing strongly and away from *The President*, and prevented the conqueror from hearing the name of the defeated craft. The rigging of the enemy was badly cut up and shattered and her decks were crimson shambles. At daylight Commodore Rodgers ascertained the name of the battered hull his guns had hammered so mercilessly through the night to be the *Little Bell*, a consort of the *Guerriere*.

When *The President* reached home and the news of her exploit and victory was made known, the heroes of the battle were everywhere received with tremendous enthusiasm. For a short while Commodore Rodgers was praised and lionized on all sides, but suddenly negotiations were opened between the Washington and British Cabinets, and a change of scene took place.

The American diplomats saw fit to keep the heroes of the combat from public view, and the people were naturally bewildered by their actions. A court of inquiry was appointed by our Government as a result of a claim put forward by A. B. Bingham, the British Commodore, in which he stated that *The President* had fired the first shot and commenced a sud-

den and unwarranted attack upon his ship. The unwinding of a vast quantity of diplomatic red tape followed, and both governments were seemingly desirous of hushing up the whole business. But the American people at large believed in Rodgers and his gallant crew, and made their protests heard in no gentle tones. A real and not visionary war cloud lowered on the international horizon, and Rodgers himself, disregarding what were practically orders of silence from the War Department, made the following bold declaration:

"I may be censured, but I was determined not to be the aggressor, nor would I suffer the flag of my country to be insulted with impunity. And that is why I gave a general order to fire, and we have taught England a lesson."

To the foregoing spirited announcement the American public—contrary to the wishes of President Madison and his peace-loving policy—gave hearty and unstinted applause. It transpired that the British vessel was fearfully damaged during the engagement, besides sustaining a loss of thirty-one men killed and wounded, while *The President* escaped almost unscathed, and had but one injured, a boy slightly wounded in the hand.

To Rodgers belongs the glory of having been bigger than his Government. In that he would not allow the flag of his country and ensign of his command to be flouted. That Rodgers assumed the entire responsibility is further shown by a diary kept by one of his officers, which reads, in part, as follows:

"Yesterday, May 18, while beating down the bay, we spoke to a brig com-

ing up who informed us that he saw the British frigate the day before off the very place where we now are, but she is not in sight. We have made the most complete preparations for battle. Every one wishes it.

"She is of exactly our force. Should we see her I have not the least doubt of our engagement. The Commodore (Rodgers) will demand the person impressed, the demand will doubtless be refused, and the battle will instantly commence. The Commodore has called in the boatswain, gunner, and carpenter, and informed them of all the circumstances and asked if they were ready for action. 'Ready' was the reply of each."

Just why historians treat this essential beginning of our second war with England so lightly, and accord it so little space, practically passing it over as unimportant, is hard to comprehend. The victory won by Rodgers is accorded less than a page in the elaborate twenty-volume history of the United States by Guy Carleton Lee; in the twenty volumes by E. J. Lossing it receives half a page; and in Bryant's four huge volumes a single sentence of two lines is all that is allotted this naval exploit.

More than one writer has fallen into the error of declaring Commodore John Rodgers to have been of foreign birth. As a matter of fact he was born in the State of Maryland, July 11, 1771. His favorite vessel was *The President* and with her he accomplished wonders of naval warfare.

When the war with England opened he was sent out on a cruise, and in 148 days captured eleven British merchant ships

officers donned the uniform of a British Lieutenant and went aboard the *Highflyer*, where he informed the commander that part of the *Highflyer*'s signal code was lost, and asked that he be allowed to make good the deficiency.

The permission was graciously granted and taken advantage of, after which the British officer accompanied his new acquaintance aboard the American vessel. Rodgers greeted him courteously, and then asked:

"Do you know what ship you are aboard of?"

"Why, yes," responded the British officer, "it is his Majesty's ship *Seahorse*."

"Did you ever hear of a vessel called *The President*?" inquired Rodgers.

"Indeed I have," replied the unsuspecting Englishman. "That is the craft we are supposed to take."

"Well, *The President* has taken you," smiled Rodgers.

The full truth of the ruse by which he had been betrayed flashed at once upon the chagrined Briton, but he saw that he was helpless. The crew of *The President* were at quarters ready for instant action, and the *Highflyer* lay at their mercy under the frowning muzzles of the American guns.

There was nothing for it but to submit as gracefully as possible. Rodgers ordered the British colors struck, and soon the Stars and Stripes floated in the breeze over both vessels.

The sword worn by Hutchinson, the English commander, was the personal property of Rodgers, taken amid other plunder at the burning of *Havre de Grace*, but destined to be returned to the owner in token of the surrender of one of his Majesty's crack sea-fighters. The *High-*

and the English armed schooner the *Highflyer*. The crew of the latter vessel had burned and plundered *Havre de Grace*, Md., the home of Rodgers, so that the Commodore may be said to have had private as well as patriotic reasons for wishing to lay *The President* alongside of her.

Before he sailed from Boston Rodgers had obtained from some unknown source a partial knowledge of the secret signal code of the British navy, and caused certain flags to be constructed accordingly. When he came in sight of the *Highflyer* he flew the British ensign, which was immediately hailed. A signal was then displayed on the English vessel, and Rodgers succeeded in answering it correctly.

He then signaled that he was the British ship *Seahorse*, and the two vessels ranged alongside each other. One of Rodgers's

flyer was taken captive to the American shore, and the country once again rang with the praises of the dashing and ingenious Rodgers.

To Rodgers and *The President* also belong the peculiar distinction of having fought for eighty hours in absolute daylight. This is explained by the fact that the engagement in question took place in the Norway latitudes, where perpetual daylight exists at a certain season of the year.

It was Rodgers who broke up the blockade of the port of New York, and who became known to friends and foes alike by the fitting title of "the Swamp Fox of the Seas." He was acting Secretary of the Navy in 1823, and on August 1, 1828, he died at Philadelphia in his fifty-eighth year.

(Copyright, 1911, by W. G. Chapman.)