

ON THE BOOKSHELF

February is American History Month AND Black History Month!

"Warring for America: Cultural Contests in the Era of 1812"

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UNC Press

The early years of the 19th century were fraught with changes and challenges in the new American republic. Wars with Barbary pirates, the birth of the American navy, the vast expanse of the Louisiana Purchase that doubled the territory of the USA while bringing in many Native American tribes as protagonists, the growing anti-slavery movement in Great Britain and America, the military challenge of Napoleon in Europe, while Central and South American were filled with revolts against their Spanish colonizers.

Indeed, "the history of the early Republic is one of struggle to define the physical and cultural parameters of the nation. Americans of all stripes disagreed on who and what constituted the United States." The War of 1812 has long been considered by many historians as a "second war for independence" with England, but it wasn't the only armed struggle. Free blacks were "using what liberties they had found, to pry wide debates about the nature and limits of American liberty", particularly for men of color. The blackface minstrel show was born during the war, an attempt by whites to lampoon blacks became events that pointed out the efforts of sons of Africa to participate in nation-building.

The war also badly damaged the influence of the old Federalist political party, and the fighting in the southwest territories of Alabama and later Florida saw extensive warfare against Native American tribes. It wasn't limited to the south: shifting borders between the Canadian territories and the American northwest/Ohio Valley meant more conflict with Indian tribes.

Napoleonic aspirations in Europe inspired whites in America to envision a land from ocean to ocean, and the idea of re-colonizing freed slaves into a new nation in Africa began to attract serious attention. In a very real sense, America was not just the nation for which some fought in the War of 1812, but also "the place they fought OVER from the post-Revolutionary decades through the 1830s. The very definition of the nation was crucial battleground."

The fact that there were more people within our borders who could not vote, than there were people who COULD vote, was part of the irony and the issue.

The period of 1810-1816 saw a rash of domestic slave revolts and rumors of slave uprisings across the US, and a relatively successful one in Haiti. (The loss of that battle caused Napoleon to lose heart that France could hold onto any of its North American territories and resulted in his offering to sell us the enormous Louisiana territory. He needed the money for wars he still thought he could win.) The Jeffersonian-Madisonian Republic would begat a very different nation than the Continental Congress had envisioned a generation earlier.