

# MARITIME MUSEUM AND BRIG NIAGARA TOUR



**COMMODORE OLIVER HAZARD PERRY ON HIS WAY TO HISTORY AND THE FLAGSHIP NIAGARA**



Kathie Walter has been very active in trying to provide the association with opportunities for a memorable weekend.

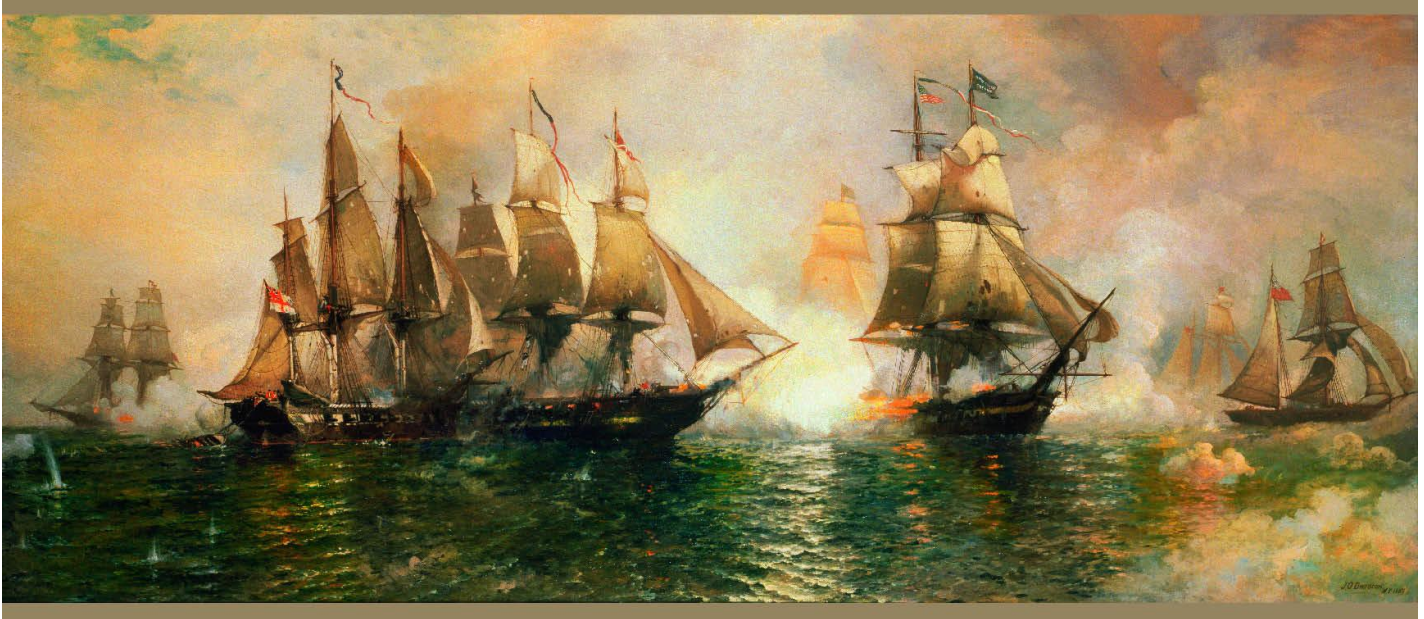
She is a member of the Flagship Niagara League so she was able to get us discounted fees to visit the Erie Maritime Museum. This is her latest offer for those interested in seeing the museum and Brig NIAGARA on the same visit:

On Friday, June 1st, Alpha Association is being offered a guided tour that will include the Erie Maritime Museum and the Flagship Niagara. It will take place at noontime and last about two hours. The cost per person will be \$7.00 per person, a bargain for those interested.

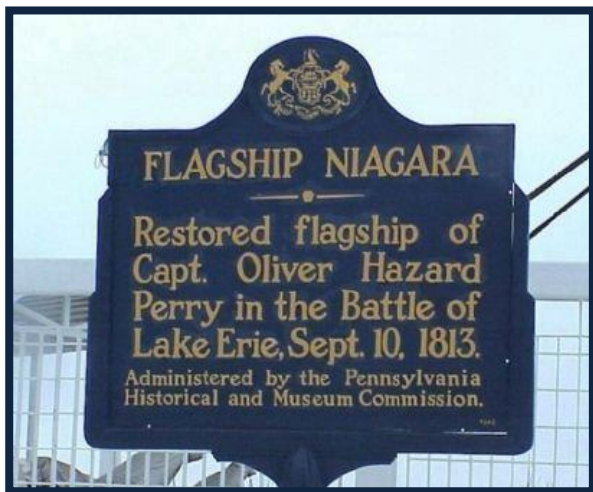
We were very fortunate that the Flagship Niagara will be at the museum during the weekend of the reunion. Much of the time, it is out touring the Great Lakes serving as an ambassador of Pennsylvania.



# THE HISTORY OF THE USS NIAGARA



**FLAGSHIP NIAGARA 'CROSSING THE T' MANEUVER**



Everyone recalls from their grade school text books that Commodore Perry became famous for defeating the British during the Battle of Lake Erie coining the phrase, "We have met the enemy, and they are ours."

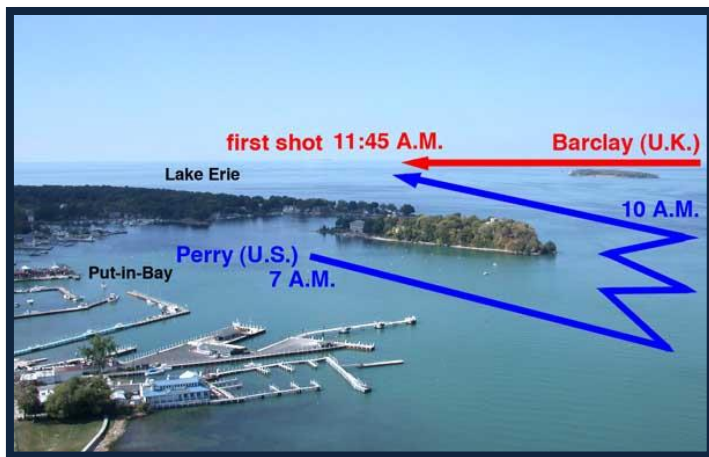
Perry commanded a group of nine American warships who engaged a fleet of six British frigates off the coast of Ohio.

Perry's fleet was led by the ships USS LAWRENCE, (named after Captain James Lawrence, who had his own famous iconic plea as he was dying, 'DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP'), and the USS NIAGARA.

Perry commanded the fleet from the deck of the LAWRENCE flying this flag in deference to his good friend James Lawrence.

The British ships were observed by the fleet while it was in dock at Put-In-Bay Island off Ohio.

*DONT GIVE UP  
THE SHIP*



It took a while for the American force to catch up to the British fleet, but when they did, a chaotic engagement ensued. Perry placed all his ships in line and slugged it out with the British. Somehow, the NIAGARA trailed behind the fleet and was undamaged in during the main attack. The LAWRENCE, with Perry commanding was doing serious damage, but suffering heavy losses. Two and a half

hours after the battle began, she was completely disabled. All her guns were put out of action and eighty-four of its crew of one hundred and three were either killed or wounded.

Undeterred, Perry lowered the flag ordering the ship's sailors to not give up the ship and boarded a rowboat to transfer his command to the NIAGARA (see opening image). Once in command, he heavily engaged the British ships, preventing the boarding of the LAWRENCE and her being lost to British Marines. When the opportunity arose, he executed what was called a 'Crossing the T' maneuver where he split the British force in half, and was able to deliver devastating broadsides to the British force. During this exercise, the enemy attempting to thwart the attack, had two of their ships become entangled and effectively put out of play. It was not long after that the British fleet surrendered.

The British lost 41 killed and 94 wounded. The surviving crews, including the wounded, numbered 306. Captain Barclay, the British Commander, had previously lost his right arm in 1809, lost a leg and part of his thigh in the action while his remaining arm was rendered "permanently motionless" during this battle. The Americans lost 27 killed and 96 wounded, of whom 2 later died

Following the victory Perry sent the famous message to General William Henry Harrison, Commander of the American Military Force of the West, "We have met the enemy, and they are ours."

This victory ensured American control of the lake for the rest of the war, which in turn allowed the Americans to recover Detroit and win the Battle of the Thames to break the Indian confederation of Tecumseh. It was one of the biggest naval battles of the War of 1812.

Perry was rewarded handsomely upon his return to Washington and awarded a Gold Medal for the heroic deeds on that day.

In 1819, after a successful expedition to Venezuela's Orinoco River to consult with Simon Bolivar about piracy in the Caribbean, Perry contracted yellow fever from mosquitoes while aboard the USS *Nonsuch*. Despite the crew's efforts to reach Trinidad for medical assistance, the Commodore died as the ship was nearing Port of Spain. He was 34 years old.

## **SO WHAT HAPPENED THE LAWRENCE AND NIAGARA?**

After the Treaty of Ghent was signed, ending the war, the majority of the surviving ships that participated in the Battle of Lake Erie were disposed of in 1815. The *Queen Charlotte*, the *Detroit*, and *Lawrence* were sunk for preservation in Misery Bay on Presque Isle, whereas the *Niagara* was kept afloat and operated as a receiving ship. It was sunk in 1820 when the naval station at Presque Isle was closed. Benjamin H. Brown of Rochester, New York bought all four ships in 1825, but sold them in 1836 to George Miles of Erie. Miles raised the ships, planning to use them as merchant vessels. The *Lawrence* and the *Niagara*, not having a large enough hold and being in poor condition, were allowed to sink again.

As part of celebrations for the centennial of the Battle of Lake Erie, the *Niagara* was raised from Misery Bay in April 1913. Its keel was found to be in good enough condition for the brig to be rebuilt. Efforts to rebuild the *Niagara* were hampered by the lack of original plans.

The restored *Niagara* was launched on June 7, complete with a new bowsprit, rigging and reproduction cannons supplied by the Boston Navy Yard.

From mid-July to mid-September, the *Niagara* was towed to various ports on the Great Lakes – including Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo and Cleveland – by the USS *Wolverine*, the Navy's first iron-hulled warship. Ownership of the *Niagara* was transferred to the City of Erie in 1917, where it remained docked deteriorating.

The City of Erie transferred ownership of the *Niagara* to the newly formed "USS Niagara Foundation" in 1929, which was tasked with "acquiring and restoring the ship and making it the centerpiece of a museum." The onset of the

Great Depression forced the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to take ownership, through the Flagship Niagara Commission, two years later. \$50,000 was made available for another restoration in 1931, but by 1938 the state stopped its funding, leaving the restoration unfinished. The *Niagara* was transferred to the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, predecessor of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and became a project for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Historical Commission contracted Howard I. Chapelle to draw up plans for another restoration of the *Niagara*, based on other period ships that were built by Noah Brown, like the *Saratoga*. According to Chapelle, very little of the original *Niagara* remained, as parts of it had been sold as souvenirs, and the 1913 reconstruction was not accurate to the period. The hull of the *Niagara* was launched in October 1943 without any masts, spars, or rigging. It was placed in a concrete cradle in 1951. Discovery of dry rot throughout every part of the *Niagara* made it clear that a complete reconstruction would eventually be needed. Funds were appropriated by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission to make the *Niagara* "presentable" for the sesquicentennial of the Battle of Lake Erie in 1963 with the addition of rigging and cannons. The *Niagara* was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 11, 1973.

It is now moored at the Erie Maritime Museum in Erie, the port where it was originally constructed. <sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the USS LAWRENCE was not so fortunate. In mid-1815, following the end of hostilities, Lawrence was sunk in Misery Bay on Presque Isle, PA in order to preserve her hull. Her submerged hulk was sold in 1825 and, except for a brief examination in 1836, remained underwater for five more decades.

In September 1875, her remains were raised, cut into sections, and transported by rail to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she was exhibited during The U.S. Centennial International Exhibition of 1876. Her remains were destroyed by a fire during that exhibition.

The *Niagara* is one of only two remaining vessels that served in the War of 1812, the second being the USS *Constitution* now moored in Boston. It recently was used in the PBS American Experience two-hour special, "*INTO THE DEEP, WHALING IN AMERICA*," portraying the whaling ship 'Essex'. That ship's disastrous loss at sea after it was rammed repeatedly by a giant whale served as the inspiration for Herman Melville's classic '*MOBY DICK*'. You can view that entire two hour program online by clicking here:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/whaling/player/>

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To sign up for the Maritime Museum and Niagara Tour contact Kathie Walter either by phone or by email:

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<sup>1</sup> Source, Wikipedia online encyclopedia