

Monday marks the 200th anniversary of the start of the War of 1812. Even though it's a conflict that inspired our national anthem and in which the British burned down the White House, the war remains a forgotten chapter in U.S. history. But not so in Canada. Robert Siegel talks with two history teachers — one from the U.S., the other from Canada — about teaching the War of 1812 in their classrooms.

*Copyright © 2012 NPR. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.*

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block hosting this week from NPR West in California.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

I'm Robert Siegel in Washington. And, Melissa, here's a quiz for you. Ready?

BLOCK: OK.

SIEGEL: Do you know who Laura Secord was?

BLOCK: I have no idea who Laura Secord was, Robert.

SIEGEL: OK. It's 0 for one. And now the second question. Did the U.S. win the War of 1812?

BLOCK: I think I can do better on this one because, based on a conversation I had on the program on Friday, I would say that neither side can claim a victory in the War of 1812. How about that?

SIEGEL: Well, let's see. I'll get to Mrs. Secord in a couple of minutes, but of course the reason I asked you about the War of 1812 is that this season marks the kickoff of the War of 1812 bicentennial.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SIEGEL: There's a festival underway in Baltimore this week. That, of course, is where Francis Scott Key's poetic rendering of "The Battle of Fort McHenry" gave us lyrics for a national anthem.

But, as commemorated events go, the War of 1812 isn't in a league with the revolution or the civil war. It's that strange episode in between when the young United States reaffirmed its independence, even if the White House did get torched in the process.

From what we hear, it is even less of an occasion in Britain, but if you want to hear the War of 1812 taught as the very fulcrum of national history, try Canada. We're going to hear from two public school teachers, one American and one Canadian, in this part of the program and we'll hear about how they teach the War of 1812.

TIM BAILEY: My name is Tim Bailey. I teach eighth grade U.S. History at Northwest Middle School.

SIEGEL: In Salt Lake City. For Tim Bailey's students, like so many American school children, the War of 1812 is a pretty small unit in American history.

BAILEY: I usually give it just a couple of days with the amount of curriculum that we need to cover in a year.

SIEGEL: Here's what the war was about in a nutshell: The U.S. was trading with both Britain and Britain's enemy, the French. The Brits tried to ban U.S. trade with France, so they boarded American ships and impressed American merchant seamen into the Royal Navy, impugning our independence.

What's more, the Americans thought the Brits were supporting Indian tribes in their resistance to America's westward expansion. And there was another thing: British lands just across the northern U.S. border looked to Americans like low-hanging fruit.

BAILEY: I think the United States just saw it as an opportunity to take advantage of the situation since England was embroiled with Napoleon over in France and decided that it was - you know, this just looked like a nice chance to grab some land and some world prestige.

SIEGEL: How does Tim Bailey make this little war interesting to his eighth graders in Salt Lake City? Well, he says things happened in the war that engage the kids. For example, Francis Scott Key's writing about the flag that was so gallantly streaming.

BAILEY: One thing that I do with my students is I'll show them a Super Bowl version of the "Star Spangled Banner." I mean, they've all heard it many times, but they don't realize that it basically tells the story of the Battle of Baltimore.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "STAR-SPANGLED BANNER")

WHITNEY HOUSTON: (Singing) And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air...

BAILEY: So it really helps them connect, you know, what's happened in the past has a very strong influence on their present.

SIEGEL: And Mr. Bailey gets another musical assist when it comes to the famous battle that Andrew Jackson fought in New Orleans, not knowing that the war was actually over and a peace treaty signed.

BAILEY: Johnny Horton and I - we get those kids up and we get some stomping going on in the classroom, much to the chagrin of my neighboring teachers, but in 1814, we took a little trip. Oh, yeah, yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS")

JOHNNY HORTON: (Singing) In 1814, we took a little trip along with Colonial Jackson down the mighty Mississip. We took...

SIEGEL: For eighth graders, I bet it's a good short unit in that you can always remember when the war began.

BAILEY: Yeah, yeah. And I think that they take from this. I think what they take from this is that America was not wanting to be just that colony that got lucky in beating, that America wanted to take its place on the world stage and be a factor in world affairs and world politics.

SIEGEL: As for who won the war, Tim Bailey teaches it as a kind of a tie between the U.S. and Britain, but it wasn't a tie to our northern neighbors.

BRYCE HONSINGER: My name is Bryce Honsinger. I'm a grade five-six teacher at Applewood Public School in St. Catharines, Ontario.

SIEGEL: And, for Bryce Honsinger's fifth and sixth graders, the War of 1812 is no two day quickie.

HONSINGER: I would say that the units usually stretch between three to four weeks. In Ontario, it's certainly a major component of one of our curriculum strands and it's certainly something that our children relate to because of the heroes that come from the war and people that we look to as role models.

SIEGEL: In his class, the War of 1812 is taught as a crucial event in the development of a Canadian national identity. Honsinger says he uses the stories and records of his own forbearers. They were loyalists who had

been on the losing side of the American Revolution, lost their lands and sought refuge and new lives north of the border.

When the U.S. tried to annex their new homeland, they stood their ground alongside British troops and loyal Indians.

HONSINGER: Many Canadians would consider that we won that war because we are not American. We maintain those boundaries. We were fighting one of the great powers to be in the world and we were able to beat them back.

SIEGEL: And those role models for young Canadians today? Well, while American politicians made huge careers in the 19th century as Indian fighters, the great Indian warrior, Tecumseh, is a hero up there.

HONSINGER: He was actually remembered in a lot of local newspapers at the time and 50 year celebrations of battles and things. He's remembered very, very favorably.

SIEGEL: And the bombs bursting over Baltimore Harbor, the burning of the White House, they teach that in Canada.

HONSINGER: Absolutely. They're definitely things that we touch upon because the Americans burned York, which is now Toronto, in 1813 and so the destruction of and the burning of Washington was seen as kind of a retaliation.

SIEGEL: If this is starting to sound like American history through the looking glass, consider the story of the woman I asked Melissa about a few minutes ago, Laura Secord. In Canada, there's a famous brand of chocolates named for her.

Laura Secord was Massachusetts-born, but her loyalist family had moved north. In 1813, invading American soldiers were quartered in her home, her husband had been injured in battle, and she overheard those Americans discussing a plan to attack a British camp under the command of an officer named James Fitzgibbon. The camp was a perilous 20 mile walk away, but as this 1990 song tells it, Laura Secord walked and warned the British so that Canada could remain free, free from us.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SECORD'S WARNING")

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Singing) There's American guns and 500 men, so the warning must be given and Laura Ingersoll Secord was the stalwart heart who braved the heat and the flies and the swamp to warn Colonel Fitzgibbon.

SIEGEL: The British troops Laura Secord warned, far from being surprised by the Americans, in fact, surprised them.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SECORD'S WARNING")

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Singing) ...and keep us free from Yankee domination. There's American guns and 500 men, so the warning must be given.

SIEGEL: By the way, the Canadians were probably the biggest winners of the War of 1812, but the biggest losers were neither the Americans nor the British. The Indians had hoped to gain a state of their own with British support. In the end, they were forced off their lands instead.

This is NPR News.