Edenton and the War Of 1812

The United States declared war on Great Britain in June of 1812.

Not everyone was happy about the decision. Although Pres. James Madison’s Democratic Republican Party supported it, many members of the Federalist Party opposed it. The tension between the two parties appeared in Edenton during the election of 1812, when Federalists accused soldiers under the command of Capt. Jesse Copeland of intimidating voters at the Chowan County Courthouse.

A sailor, who had enlisted in the company, having courage enough to vote for the federal ticket, was advancing to do so, when he was seized by the gang of soldiers, headed by one of their officers, in the court-house, in the very presence of the Sheriff, and by violence withheld from the polls.

- Edenton Gazette, October 13, 1812

Although Democratic-Republicans denied that the events described took place, tensions remained, and Captain Copeland continued to come under fire from Federalists for several months afterwards.

By the summer of 1813, rumors of a British naval fleet approaching the North Carolina coast caused alarm in many coastal towns. Edenton, as a port town, was also anxious, and some residents left town seeking a safer haven from the feared attack.

The James Iredell family fled to the Hermitage Plantation in Martin County, owned by James Iredell Jr.’s uncle Samuel Johnston. Meanwhile, Edenton made plans to defend itself. In a letter dated June 18, 1813, Annie, James’s eldest sister, reported seeing local troops in Edenton.

I have not yet seen the fortifications that have been erected; but it is thought they will defend the town from any force it is probable the English will send against it though indeed, there seems to be no inducement for them to send a force here at all. Militia to the amount of seven hundred had been assembled here before intelligence was of the departure of the enemy. One or two companies have arrived since, two or three corps of volunteers offered their services. It is proposed, I believe to retain a small body of troops here for some time. And a very strict guard is kept up every night.

President Madison declared the war over in February of 1815. Although British troops invaded Ocracoke and Portsmouth Islands, they never appeared in Edenton.
Declaration of War!!

EDENTON, N. C.,—The "Edenton Gazette"出版了这份全文抄本
of the Declaration of War against England.

EDENTON GAZETTE April 1782.

DECLARATION OF WAR.

To the Governor and People of the...
James Iredell, Jr. (November 2, 1788- April 13, 1853) was the son of James Iredell (October 5, 1751 - October 20, 1799), an early North Carolina Attorney General and an Associate Justice on the first United States Supreme Court, as appointed in 1791 by George Washington. James Jr.'s mother, Hannah Johnston Iredell, was the sister of Samuel Johnston, a North Carolina governor and United States senator.

James Iredell Jr. attended Edenton Academy, the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), and was admitted to the North Carolina Bar in 1809.

By 1812 James Iredell Jr. was a 24-year-old attorney when he was commissioned as a captain in the Chowan County Militia, but he never saw active duty in the Chowan Regiment.

In August of 1814, after the British burned Washington, D.C., Pres. James Madison ordered fifteen hundred militia troops from North Carolina to defend Norfolk, Virginia.
Capt. Iredell commanded the “Bertie Detachment,” assigned to North Carolina’s First Regiment. He wrote his mother, October 5, 1814, informing her he was “to march for Norfolk, Virginia, and expected to arrive Sunday next.” Hannah Iredell, upset by James’s choice to march off to war, responded on October 15, 1814.

I feel unceasing uneasiness & pain in thinking of you my Dear James and of your imprudence in placing yourself in a situation so little consistent with your duty & in which you can acquire nothing by any means to the sacrifices you have made, to your own profession, you had fair prospect of gaining a reputation, your independence. Let me ask you what you expect as Capt. of a militia company or what great service you can render to your country or yourself that justify you, in having quitted the business of your clients, which they have trusted to your care and of throwing it away for six months in scenes where you can acquire very little useful information. You may contract habits that may be injurious to you for the rest of your life. Business of clients, which they had trusted to your care, of throwing away another to reflect on your indiscretion, to prevail on you to return to your other duties the first moment you can with honor... 

By November 3, Captain Iredell had arrived in Norfolk and wrote of his daily routine to his sister, Annie.

In my return from a seven hour tedious attendance on a General Court Martial which is sitting in Norfolk and for which I act as Judge Advocate .... You need not be afraid that the amusements of Norfolk will distract my mind, for if there are any in the place we have little opportunity of partaking in them. I seldom go there except on business.... Indeed the duties of my station confine me closely to the Camp. We are roused between daylight and sunrise by the Reveille.... From nine until eleven the officers drill their companies and from then till sunset the Regiment is exercised—this together with making our reports and returns, forms the ordinary routine of our duty. Every other day one of the captains is selected as officer of the Guard, at the outpost, which is three miles from this place. I have fortunately escaped this disagreeable service, thus far, having been engaged for this last fortnight having Court Martial duty.

Iredell’s troops never saw battle. Measles invaded the camp of the First Regiment, and two hundred men died from the disease. Captain Iredell returned from the War of 1812 as a brigadier-general of the North Carolina Militia and was discharged in 1815. He resumed his law practice and his political career, eventually becoming a North Carolina legislator, governor, and United States senator.

Iredell married his cousin Frances Tredwell in 1815. Together they had eleven children, with three sons serving with the Confederates during the Civil War. Maj. James J. Iredell was killed in 1864 near Spotsylvania, Virginia; Campbell T. Iredell died in 1863 from wounds received in the Battle of Gettysburg; and Capt. Cadwallader J. Iredell was wounded twice and recovered.
The Summer Uniforms of the North Carolina Militia, 1813

Left to right: Infantry Colonel, Artillery Major, Cavalry Major, Major General, and Aide-de-Camp.

During the War of 1812 the State of NC published guidelines for uniforms in local papers, and militia officers purchased their own uniforms made to those specifications. At the time of his discharge in 1815, Iredell’s Brigadier General uniform would have been similar to the Major General’s uniform pictured second from right.
Accompanying James Iredell Jr. in his military service was Geoffrey G. Blair (sometimes referred to as Geoffrey Iredell). He had been the property of Hannah Iredell’s nephew, William Blair. Blair inherited Geff from his mother, Jean Johnston Blair, who died in 1789. Geoffrey was sold at auction in June of 1812, with Iredell as the highest bidder at $600.00. The same month, Iredell prepared a petition to the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions for the freedom of Geoffrey G. Blair. The petition stated:

That the desire arises solely from an intimate knowledge of the integrity of the said Geoffrey, of his long and faithful services, of the affection & attachment he has always displayed towards his late master & of his unremitting attention to him, while laboring as he has been for a few years past under almost continual bodily indisposition.

The entire petition follows on page 8.

In a November 3, 1814 letter to his eldest sister Annie, Iredell described the importance of Geff to his own well-being and comfort.

We live quite comfortably in our but which is just large enough to contain us and which constitutes at once our bed-room, dining room and drawing room. We have obtained a kitchen just back of our but and have hired a cook for whom Geff is an excellent provider. We are even so extravagant as to indulge occasionally in the luxury of a pudding... I am writing on a table, which Geff purchased for a quarter of a dollar. We have four chairs and a bench. Two bedsteads and my cot hanging from the joists, occupy two sides of the room. On the third are hanging our surtouts (frockcoats), cloaks and swords. On the fourth side are hanged on a shelf, a coffee pot, teapot, baker pot, plates, etc... Under these are the basket and barrel, which Geff use. Deposited beyond these, half a side of bacon, ham, a quarter of mutton, a string of onions and another of sausages. Next... our side board which is simply a plank nailed to the log on which we have our pitcher, two tumblers and a junk bottle instead of a decanter. Under these items again are a jug of Brandy...

Geff continued working for James Iredell Jr. after the war and is mentioned in family letters as he performed errands for the Iredell family.

Fort Norfolk, built in 1794, played an important role in the defense of the Virginia coast. Iredell and his militia troops were encamped nearby in Norfolk, Virginia.
A copy of the original petition for Geoffrey's freedom included 35 signatures from Edenton men who supported Iredell's request.