



Memoranda and Documents

A NOTE ON THE ORIGINS OF “UNCLE SAM,” 1810–1820

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CONVENTIONAL wisdom holds that “Uncle Sam,” the popular personification for the United States government, was inspired during the War of 1812 by Samuel Wilson, who, along with an older brother, Ebenezer, supplied the army with meat from Troy, New York. The Wilsons employed as many as two hundred people, including many relatives who had moved to Troy to work in the diversified family business. The nieces and nephews referred to Sam Wilson as Uncle Sam, and such was his friendly and easy-going nature that the nickname caught on among other employees and townspeople. Due to confusion over the meaning of the abbreviation “U.S.,” which was stamped on army barrels and supply wagons, the nickname supposedly migrated from Wilson to the federal government in 1812.¹

The author has incurred numerous debts in writing this article. Georg Mauerhoff of NewsBank provided indispensable guidance in using the NewsBank databases, especially the Readex newspaper collection. Charissa Loftis of the U.S. Conn Library at Wayne State College tracked down some pertinent information, and (as always) Terri Headley at the Interlibrary Loan Desk proved adept at borrowing works from other libraries. Many years ago Mariam Touba of the New-York Historical Society and Nancy Farron of the Troy Public Library shared typed transcripts of crucial documents. The author owes a special debt to Matthew Brenckle, Research Historian at the USS Constitution Museum, who brought the Isaac Mayo diary to his attention and shared his views on the document. Without Mayo’s diary, this article would not have been written. The author would also like to thank Connie Clark and Matthew Brenckle for reading a draft of this essay.

¹The standard work on Uncle Sam is Alton Ketchum, *Uncle Sam: The Man and the Legend* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959). I could find no other book on the subject other than those written for children, but there is an illuminating article by Albert Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, n.s., 19 (April 1908): 21–65. In June 2013 the USS Constitution Museum published an online description of Isaac Mayo’s diary at <http://www.usconstitutionmuseum.org/proddir/prod/496/42/>. This, in turn, prompted etymologist Barry Popik to explore the origins

The New England Quarterly, vol. LXXXVIII, no. 4 (December 2015). © 2015 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved. doi:10.1162/TNEQ.a.00495.

Samuel Wilson

Samuel Wilson was born in 1766 in Menotomy (now Arlington), Massachusetts, one of thirteen children.² In 1780, the family moved across the state line to Mason, New Hampshire. Nine years later, when he was twenty-three, Sam and his brother Ebenezer moved to Troy, an emerging market town on the Hudson River seven miles north of Albany. Troy lay on an important north-south transportation corridor that stretched nearly four hundred miles from New York City to Montreal; the town also had access to markets in western New York because the Mohawk River drained into the Hudson at Troy.

Although Troy consisted of fewer than 100 people in 1789, it was attracting a steady stream of settlers. The Duke de La Rochefoucauld, who visited Troy in 1795, reported that it was a prosperous village with fifty or sixty shops.³ By then it was the county seat and boasted a weekly newspaper. The village added a subscription library in 1800 and a bank in 1801. Troy's population, which in 1801 stood at 1,800, soared to around 4,000 by 1812, making it the fifth largest city in the state.⁴ Their fortunes rising with the tide, the Wilson brothers opened a brickyard, built houses, ran a distillery, and operated a general store as well as a farm, orchard, and nursery. They also owned a fleet of sloops on the Hudson River.

In 1793 the brothers entered the meatpacking business. By 1805 they owned two slaughter houses and advertised that they had "a large supply of BARRELS and SALT" for sale and were prepared "to kill, cut and pack 150 head of Cattle per day."⁵ The business, already

of the term on his blog site at http://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/uncle_sam_summary/. I examined the origins of "Uncle Sam" in my book, *Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 220–24, but my treatment here differs materially from what I wrote then.

²There is no full-length biography of Wilson. Ketchum, *Uncle Sam*, and Matthews, "Uncle Sam," have collected the known information on him. See also *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Wilson, Samuel."

³Duke de La Rochefoucauld Liancourt, *Travels through the United States of North America, the Country of the Iroquois, and Upper Canada, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (London: T. Gillet for R. Phillips, 1800), 1:370.

⁴For the early history of Troy, see Arthur J. Weise, *History of the City of Troy* (Troy: Edward Green, 1876), chaps. 1–5; *Troy's One Hundred Years, 1789–1889* (Troy: William H. Young, 1891), chaps. 3–5; and Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, *History of Rensselaer Co., New York* (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1880), pp. 167, 175–77.

⁵*Troy Northern Budget* and *Troy Gazette*, quoted in Matthews, "Uncle Sam," p. 54.

prosperous, flourished even more after the U.S. declared war on Great Britain in 1812. That year Elbert Anderson won a government contract to feed troops in New York and New Jersey in 1813, and the Wilson brothers subcontracted to supply the meat. Most of their meat (salted and packed in barrels) went to the large army camp located 15 miles to the south at Greenbush, but the Wilsons also sent meat 150 miles north to troops stationed at Plattsburgh and 175 miles west to Fort Ontario at Oswego and the naval station at Sackets Harbor.

The Traditional View

The accepted story of how Uncle Sam became the nickname for the U.S. government was first laid out in an anonymous piece published in the *New York Gazette* in 1830. Evidently inspired by the recent death of Elbert Anderson, the article claimed that the beef the Wilsons supplied to him was shipped in casks marked “E.A.” (for Elbert Anderson) and “U.S.” (for the United States). When one of the Wilsons’ employees asked what the initials U.S. stood for, another worker reportedly replied—evidently in jest—Uncle Sam, meaning Sam Wilson. The story made the rounds among the Wilsons’ employees, many of whom later enlisted in the U.S. Army, and before the campaign of 1812 was over, people were referring to the government as Uncle Sam.⁶

The explanation, which seems credible enough, appeared to be supported by what was long considered to be the first document alluding to Uncle Sam, a broadside evidently published in eastern New York. The date of issue is usually given as the spring of 1813, although (taking references in the broadside into account) it could be late 1812. Entitled “HIEROGLYPHICS of John Bull’s Overthrow: or A View of the Northern Expedition in Miniature,” the broadside twice refers to Uncle Sam in doggerel that appears under a series of illustrations. The first reference is in a couplet under Napoleon:

If uncle Sam needs, I’d be glad to assist him,
For it makes my heart bleed we live at such a distance.

The other reference, below an image of Commodore John Rodgers, predicts that John Bull and his Indian allies will suffer the same fate

⁶*New York Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, 12 May 1830 (typed transcript supplied by Mariam Touba of the New-York Historical Society). This article has been conveniently reprinted in Ketchum, *Uncle Sam*, pp. 39–41.

as Major General John Burgoyne, who was defeated and forced to surrender at Saratoga in 1777:

He builds on the Indians that now with him join'd,
But if Uncle Sam lives, they will all be Burgoyne'd.⁷

Scholars and writers who mention the genesis of “Uncle Sam” have routinely attributed it to Sam Wilson, a view that has received official support. In 1959 the New York legislature adopted a resolution recognizing Samuel Wilson as the original Uncle Sam, and in 1966 the governor of Massachusetts issued a proclamation adding his endorsement.⁸ In 1961 Congress weighed in on the matter. In a joint resolution adopted on 15 September, Congress saluted “‘Uncle Sam’ Wilson of Troy, New York, as the progenitor of America’s national symbol of ‘Uncle Sam.’”⁹

Although rarely challenged, the story is not without problems. First, the timeline presented in the 1830 *New York Gazette* seems too compressed. Seeking meat suppliers, Elbert Anderson did not solicit sealed bids via the Albany and Troy newspapers until early October 1812, and the winning bids were not scheduled to take effect until 1813. Yet the military campaigns in New York—to the north along the St. Lawrence River and to the west on the Niagara River—were over by the end of November 1812.¹⁰ However, the Wilson brothers were almost surely supplying meat to the army by September 1812, the month in which the town’s two independent uniformed companies were ordered to Plattsburgh.¹¹ Hence, while the story may be true, its chronological framework needs to be enlarged.

Other details are less readily resolved. One might question how likely it is that one of Sam Wilson’s employees was unfamiliar with the abbreviated form for the United States. Although not as common as today, “U.S.” was nonetheless used rather widely. It showed up

⁷Connie D. Clark and I reproduced the broadside in our *The Rockets’ Red Glare: An Illustrated History of the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), pp. 76–77.

⁸Cecile and Jean-Pierre Mouraux, *Who Was “Uncle Sam”: Illustrated Story of the Life of Our National Symbol* (n.p.: Poster Collector, 2006), p. 4.

⁹*Congressional Record*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 15711, 18230–31, 19298–300, 19628–30. The resolution is printed in *United States Statutes at Large*, 75:966.

¹⁰Anderson’s advertisement soliciting bids is reproduced in Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” p. 53. It appeared in an Albany paper on 5 October and a Troy paper on 6 October. U.S. forces withdrew from Lower Canada (modern-day Quebec) on 23 November and ended their campaign on the Niagara front on 30 November.

¹¹See Weise, *Troy’s One Hundred Years*, p. 75.

in a growing number of newspaper stories both as a noun and as an adjective.¹² And it was by no means simply a wartime phenomenon. In his public proclamation issued in the wake of the *Chesapeake* affair in July 1807, President Thomas Jefferson referred to the ill-starred warship as a “frigate of the U.S.” In fact, the heading for the document read: “By Thomas Jefferson President of the U.S. of America.”¹³ Naval officers routinely used the abbreviation to identify their ships, and occasionally it was used for naval yards: thus, “U.S. Frigate *President*,” “U.S.S. *Wasp*,” “US Brig *Enterprize*,” “U S Frigate *Essex*,” and “U.S. Navy Yard New York.”¹⁴ The *Chesapeake* even carried two stars on its quarters, one marked with a “U” and the other with an “S.”¹⁵

In addition, the War and Navy Departments had begun stamping “U.S.” or “USA” on the weapons—including muskets, rifles, and cutlasses—that they purchased or manufactured.¹⁶ By 1812 this practice had become commonplace for a range of government-issued goods, and with the outbreak of war, their numbers soared. The only people in the United States who might have been unfamiliar with the abbreviation were children and recent immigrants, and there is no indication in the prevailing story that the employee who was hoaxed fell into either category.

Still more puzzling is the way in which the *Troy Post* responded to the nickname on 7 September 1813. In a piece it published that day, an anti-war Federalist speaks of the “ill-luck” of the war that “lights upon UNCLE SAM’S shoulders.” A footnote (probably added by the editor) explains the term: “This cant name for our government has got almost as current as ‘John Bull’ (for the British). The letters U.S. on government waggons, etc. are supposed to have given rise to it.”

¹²See the examples assembled by Matthews in “Uncle Sam,” p. 60 n.111.

¹³Proclamation of Thomas Jefferson, [2 July 1807], in *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, ed. William S. Dudley et al., 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1985–), 1:29.

¹⁴*Naval War of 1812*, 1:39, 198, 389, 443, 590, and passim.

¹⁵The star with the “U” was destroyed when the *Chesapeake* was taken by the HMS *Shannon*, but the other star was later mounted above the figurehead of the *Shannon* in Broke Hall, home of the captain of the victorious British ship. See J. G. Brighton, *Admiral of the Fleet Sir Provo W. P. Wallis, G.C.B., Etc.* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892), pp. 148–51.

¹⁶Robert M. Reilly, *United States Martial Flintlocks: A Comprehensive Illustrated History of the Flintlock in America from the Revolution to the Demise of the System* (Lincoln, R.I.: A. Mowbray, 1986), pp. 51–97, 125; William Wilkerson, *Boarders Away*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: Andrew Mowbray, 1991–93), 1:91–100; 2:202–209.

Had there been a connection to a prominent Troy citizen, the paper would undoubtedly have mentioned it.¹⁷

Another consideration casts an even darker shadow on the conventional origin story. Wilson died at eighty-seven years old in 1854. All three Troy newspapers then publishing—the *Daily Budget*, the *Daily Traveller*, and the *Daily Whig*—took note of his death, and two carried obituaries, one brief and one more extensive, but none mentioned Wilson’s connection to the national symbol. Two of the dailies, however, did reprint an obituary carried by an Albany paper that cited the connection.¹⁸

Other Views

Another explanation of the origins of Uncle Sam made its rounds in 1816. Although the first known appearance is in a June issue of the *Brownsville (Pennsylvania) American Telegraph*, the tale had probably already been published elsewhere. “Uncle Sam,” the piece reports, was “a cant phrase” that originated around 1807 when a regiment of light dragoons (that is, cavalry) was raised. The men wore caps (also called helmets) that were painted with the letters “U. S. L. D.” for United States Light Dragoons. “A countryman seeing a regiment of them passing enquired of a bye-stander what they were[.] ‘They are UNCLE SAM’S LAZY DOGS. don’t you see it on their caps!’ This story soon got amongst the soldiers, and they have ever since denominated the United States ‘*Uncle Sam.*’”¹⁹

Congress did authorize raising a regiment of light dragoons in 1808, and their caps were indeed marked with “U.S.L.D.” or “U S D L,” so that part of the story is credible.²⁰ Although the story was picked up by numerous other newspapers—including the semi-official *National*

¹⁷*Troy Post*, 7 September 1813 (typed transcript supplied by Nancy Farron of the Troy Public Library).

¹⁸See Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” pp. 56–57.

¹⁹*Brownsville (Pa.) American Telegraph*, 19 June 1816.

²⁰For the authorization of this regiment, see U.S. Congress, *Annals of Congress: Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, 10th Cong., 1st sess., 2849. For the regiment’s regulation headgear, see J. Duncan Campbell and Edgar M. Howell, *American Military Insignia, 1800–1850* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1963), pp. 10–11; Edgar M. Howell and Donald E. Kloster, *United States Army Headgear to 1854: Catalog of United States Army Uniforms in the Collections of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1969), p. 9; and Joseph M. Thatcher, “U.S. Light Dragoon Belt Plates and Helmets, 1808–1812,” *Military Historian & Collector* 28 (Spring 1975): 16–19.

Intelligencer in Washington—it never won favor as an explanation for the nickname’s genesis.²¹ Today it is all but forgotten.

Yet another account of the matter appeared in 1908, when the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* published a long and learned article by Albert Matthews. Referring to some of the issues mentioned above, Matthews questioned the traditional view. He determined that it was more likely that the nickname “was merely a jocular extension of the letters U.S.”²² That is, some pundit had simply expanded U.S. into Uncle Sam to add some character to the term. But Matthews’s analysis presents a problem. Even though his research in newspapers and other contemporary sources was extensive, he missed the anonymous article of 1830 that made the link to Sam Wilson. Matthews was familiar with the story but only because it had been repeated (although not attributed) by John Frost in *The Book of the Navy*, published in 1842. That date, Matthews, concluded, was too late to make the case credible.²³

New Light

Recently, three earlier references to Uncle Sam have surfaced, and they cast additional doubt on the traditional interpretation. In January 1813 the *Gazette of Geneva*, New York, published a poem entitled “SMYTH’S EXPEDITION.” Reportedly composed by a group of volunteer militia in a Cayuga tavern after they had returned from the recent, unsuccessful campaign on the Niagara frontier, it was supposedly transcribed by a spectator who sent it to the *Gazette*. The poem mocked the militia commander, Brigadier General Alexander Smyth, whose penchant for bombastic proclamations had earned him the nicknames Alexander the Great and Van Bladder. A reference to Uncle Sam was footnoted as follows: “A trite expression, for the U.S. Government.”²⁴ Since the volunteers went home in December, the poem, and its allusions to Uncle Sam, would have been composed at the end of 1812.

In December 1812, the *Bennington (Vermont) News-Letter* carried a letter from a Federalist who had been called up for militia duty. “Now, Mr. Editor,” the conscripted citizen-soldier asked, “pray if you

²¹*Washington (D.C.) National Intelligencer*, 11 September 1817.

²²Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” p. 63.

²³John Frost, *The Book of the Navy* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1842), pp. 297–98; Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” pp. 47–50.

²⁴*Geneva (N.Y.) Gazette*, 13 January 1813.

can inform me, what single solitary good thing will, or can ac[c]rue to (Uncle Sam) the U.S. for all the expence, marching and counter-marching, pain, sickness, death &c. among us?"²⁵ The letter confirms that the epithet was in use by late 1812 and shifts the location of its first known public appearance from New York to Vermont.

More telling is an even earlier reference to Uncle Sam that appeared in the diary of a midshipman on the USS *Wasp* in 1810. Isaac Mayo, who had received his warrant as a midshipman in late 1809, was at the dawn of a long and distinguished naval career. He was promoted to lieutenant at the end of the war, and by 1861 he was one of the senior captains in the service. But Mayo's career ended on a tragic note. A native of Maryland who sided with the South when the Civil War erupted, Mayo submitted his resignation in a letter that rebuked the U.S. government for subverting Southern rights. President Abraham Lincoln chose not to accept Mayo's resignation but instead dismissed him from the service. It is unclear whether Mayo learned of the dismissal because he died shortly thereafter, perhaps by his own hand.²⁶

Mayo reported for duty on the *Wasp* on 1 March 1810 at the New York Navy Yard. He spent the next three weeks helping to prepare the vessel for a cruise. The ship put to sea on 24 March, and Mayo reported that for the first two days he was "most deadly seasick." He added, "oh could I have got on shore in the h[e]ight of it, I swear that uncle Sam, as they call him, would certainly forever have lost the services of at least one sailor."²⁷ The entry, which appears to have been written once Mayo recovered his health, suggests that in the navy the nickname Uncle Sam was in use as early as 1810.²⁸ That finding appears to discredit the role traditionally claimed for Sam Wilson as the original Uncle Sam, although he may still have had something to do with spreading the moniker's use.

²⁵Bennington (Vt.) *News-Letter*, 23 December 1812.

²⁶For details on Mayo's life, see Byron A. Lee, *Naval Warrior: The Life of Commodore Isaac Mayo* (Linthicum, Md.: Ann Arundell County Historical Society, 2002). For his dismissal and death, see pp. 10–17.

²⁷Isaac Mayo, "Private Journal at Sea from 1809 to 1819," Samuel Eliot Morison Library, USS Constitution Museum collection, 1488.1 (typed transcription supplied by Matthew Brenckle).

²⁸Matthew Brenckle says of the diary: "I think there is little doubt that it is contemporary with the date given for the entries—that is he wasn't compiling this later from memory. He uses a mixture of past and present tense, suggesting he wrote it at intervals, when he had a spare moment" (Brenckle to author, 24 July 2013 [e-mail]). I agree with Brenckle's assessment.

Where, then, did the nickname come from? While it is possible that it originated with the Light Dragoons, it seems more likely that Albert Matthews had the right idea more than a century ago when he suggested that it was merely a playful expansion of “U.S.” In the early nineteenth century, as today, public figures were often given colorful—and unflattering—nicknames.²⁹ Calling the federal government Uncle Sam was certainly easier, and livelier, than saying “the U.S. government” or even “the U.S.”

The War of 1812 and After

Although the nickname Uncle Sam apparently predates the War of 1812 by more than two years, there is no denying that the phrase came into broader use during the conflict, at least in the North. After the first references on 23 December 1812 (in the *Bennington News-Letter*) and 13 January 1813 (in the *Geneva Gazette*), eight months passed before the sobriquet showed up again in the fall of 1813; thereafter, it appeared with some regularity. In all, there are no fewer than eighty instances in the American press before war’s end on 17 February 1815. The number of first-time occurrences is much smaller—less than thirty—but, as was commonplace in those days, the press filled space by reprinting material from other newspapers. Indeed, given that a number of newspapers have vanished entirely or are not yet available in any database, the nickname’s total number of appearances during the war is undoubtedly higher.³⁰

The Federalist anti-war press in New England and New York accounts for almost all of the eighty references to Uncle Sam. One article that ran under the headline “Uncle Sam’s Hard Bargains” covered the sad state of U.S. troops.³¹ Another widely reprinted piece entitled “Uncle Sam and John Bull” made the point that the U.S.

²⁹Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” pp. 23–28, provides a number of examples from the War of 1812, and his list is by no means complete. For additional examples, see my *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, bicentennial edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), pp. 80, 88.

³⁰Most of the eighty instances were identified in the course of a search of Readex’s newspaper database. Matthews isolated additional instances when he examined a host of newspapers, most of which were in the extensive collections of the American Antiquarian Society. Other databases—NewsBank’s Early American Imprints and the Library of Congress’s American Memory databases—yielded no additional cases during the War of 1812.

³¹*New York Commercial Advertiser*, 3 February 1814.

government paid its troops in depreciated paper money, while the British paid in gold or silver.³²

Soldiers frequently complained about, and the Federalist press often took note of, the inadequacies of army pay, which was often months in arrears. Militiamen were deserting in droves from Vermont, a letter reprinted in the *Gazette* of Portland, Maine, reported. "They say [the] U.S. or Uncle Sam as they call it, does not pay them punctually."³³ The *Massachusetts Spy* claimed that citizen-soldiers from New York were sent home "without a farthing. . . . *Uncle Sam* has no money to pay his servants."³⁴ Militia units drafted to defend Portsmouth were "on *Uncle Sam's* pay roll; but not a cent of money have any of them received," a New Hampshire newspaper haughtily commented.³⁵ Yet another piece, entitled "Uncle Sam's pay," recounted that militiamen called out in New Hampshire and Massachusetts were offered only "Madison's depreciated paper currency, which is selling at an enormous discount."³⁶ Still another story with the same headline related that New York militiamen called out to defend Plattsburgh were discharged "without (as they inform us) a cent of their pay."³⁷

By the end of the war, the British in Canada were calling American troops "Uncle Sams," and at least one Canadian paper ran a mock advertisement headlined "SLAVES WANTED."³⁸ It continued, "UNCLE SAM, a WORTHY GENTLEMAN Slave-holder WANTS TO PURCHASE, at 124 Dollars a head *Sixty Five Thousand*, (*'more or less'*) Stout, able bodied, full blooded YANKEES."³⁹ Two New England papers reprinted the spoof.⁴⁰ Although the appellation Uncle Sam was not itself strictly pejorative, it was invariably used in this period

³²*New Bedford (Mass.) Mercury*, 16 December 1814.

³³Letter from Burlington, Vt., 1 October [1813], in *Portland (Me.) Gazette*, 11 October 1813.

³⁴(*Worcester*) *Massachusetts Spy*, 4 May 1814.

³⁵(*Keene*) *Newhampshire Sentinel*, 12 November 1814.

³⁶*Portland Gazette*, 21 November 1814.

³⁷(*Providence*) *Rhode-Island American*, 23 December 1814.

³⁸For the British use of the epithet, see the entry of 20 October 1814 in *Merry Hearts Make Light Days: The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot*, ed. Donald E. Graves (Ottawa: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 209.

³⁹The enlistment bounty by the end of the war was \$124 and 320 acres of land. Given that unskilled laborers earned \$10 to \$20 a month, the bounty was equivalent to approximately two years' wages.

⁴⁰*Windsor (Vt.) Washingtonian*, 14 February 1814, and *New Bedford (Mass.) Mercury*, 4 March 1814.

to present the government (particularly its finances) or the army in a bad light. Given such connotations, Republican newspapers either avoided the moniker or dismissed it as slang.

Another thirty-one newspaper references to Uncle Sam have been identified from the conclusion of peace to the end of 1815.⁴¹ Since almost all were in articles critical of the war or the peace terms, they appeared mainly in the northern Federalist press. The term had not yet lost its negative implications, and so Republican papers continued to shun it. When, shortly after the war, the pro-war magazine *Niles' Register*, published in Baltimore, reprinted an article that included the epithet, the editor felt obliged to define it for his audience as “a cant term in the army for the United States.”⁴²

Not until 1816 was the nickname elevated to a book title, *The Adventures of Uncle Sam, in Search after His Lost Honor*. James K. Paulding, under the pen name Frederick Augustus Fidfaddy, was its author.⁴³ The book, which was widely advertised in the northern press, no doubt spread the appellation even further, but because it lampooned Republican leaders and the war, it was spurned in the South and West. From 1816 through 1819, 366 references to “Uncle Sam” emerged in the press, mostly in the North but occasionally in reprints in the South and West.⁴⁴

Uncle Sam finally cast off his negative associations and became acceptable for broader consumption in the 1820s. In that decade, he showed up in the press no less than 681 times.⁴⁵ He had a cameo in the writings of Anne Royall (1826), Davy Crockett (1835), and the British novelist Frederick Marryat (1839).⁴⁶ Although some representations of Uncle Sam had begun to appear in the 1830s, the well-known modern illustration—of an aging, tall, and gaunt man with whiskers who is decked out in striped pants, a coat with tails, and a top hat—dates from Thomas Nast’s cartoons in *Harper’s Weekly* of the 1870s.⁴⁷ James Montgomery Flagg turned Nast’s image into an

⁴¹This figure is based solely on the Readex newspaper database.

⁴²*Niles' Register*, vol. 7, September 1814–March 1815, Supplement, p. 187.

⁴³Frederick Augustus Fidfaddy [James K. Paulding], *The Adventures of Uncle Sam, in Search after His Lost Honor* (Middletown, Conn.: Seth Richards, 1816). See also Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” pp. 40–41.

⁴⁴This figure is based solely on the Readex database.

⁴⁵Again, Readex is the source for the number.

⁴⁶Matthews, “Uncle Sam,” pp. 40–46.

⁴⁷Ketchum, *Uncle Sam*, chaps. 7–10. For more on Nast, see Morton Keller, *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), and Fiona Deans Halloran, *Thomas Nast: The Father of Modern Political Cartoons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

American icon with his “I WANT YOU” army recruiting poster, and this is the picture of Uncle Sam that most people are familiar with today.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In short, the origins and early history of Uncle Sam can be summarized as follows. (1) The term originated more than two years before the War of 1812. (2) It is unlikely that Sam Wilson of Troy, New York, inspired the nickname, although he may have had something to do with spreading it during the war. (3) Initially, the epithet appeared primarily in the anti-war press in New England and New York and invariably showed the government or the army in a bad light. (4) After the war, the term gradually shed its negative connotations, but it was not embraced by the Republican press and the broader public until the 1820s. (5) Although the sobriquet’s origins are unclear, Albert Matthews offered the most persuasive explanation when he suggested that it began as nothing more than a colorful and creative expansion of the abbreviation U.S.

⁴⁸Ketchum, *Uncle Sam*, chap. 11; Susan E. Meyer, *James Montgomery Flagg* (New York: Pitman Publishing, 1974), pp. 37, 80. Flagg used his own image for the Uncle Sam poster.

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