

**John C. Fredriksen,
The War of 1812 U.S. War Department
Correspondence, 1812-1815**

8,5 x 11 inches, 481 pp. index. McFarland and
Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2016.
US\$95.00

Before his untimely death in 2014 (see my obituary in Issue 24 of the "Online Magazine of the War of 1812"), John C. Fredriksen had established a sterling reputation as a bibliographer of the War of 1812. Over a period spanning more than three decades, John published a series of bibliographies of the war and the early republic, transcribed and published many participants' letters, diaries and correspondence. His last project and certainly his major work is this reference volume, which is properly a descriptive register of the letters received by the secretary of war, from approximately the spring of 1812 to the beginning of 1815, as found in Record Group 107, War Department Correspondence, of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

In all, Fredriksen indexed, described and analyzed 11,322 documents found in the main or registered series (Micro 221) and the unregistered series (Micro 222). For each document he provides the name of the author, the author's institution, military unit or position; the author's location; date and number of pages of the document and its exact position in the microfilm holdings of the NARA by reel and frame number. Finally, he provides a descriptive annotation concerning the document, usually containing a direct quote to illustrate its context.

To demonstrate the thoroughness of Fredriksen's work, I chose at random the following two items:

Clark, Isaac (Colonel, 11th US Infantry)

1924. Apr 15, 1813, Burlington, VT) 5 pages; M[icrofilm] 221/[Reel] 51: [frames] 5619-5621.

Clark contacts Secretary Armstrong and reports that he allowed Captain Holley -- a West Point graduate -- to resign because of his unhappiness with new appointments in the regiment with greater seniority. "Most of the officers, who have received commissions in the army of 1812 have, I believe, stepped forward from the purest motives of patriotism & not from mercenary views, not as mercenary adventurers or needy profligates to whom a bare subsistence is a blessing & whose friends rejoice in their absence." Excellent for military matters. Fredriksen also describes 11 other letters by Clark to the secretary.

Randall, John (Inventor)

8434. Jul 28, 1814; Philadelphia, PA; 3 pages, M224/65, 8665-8667.

Randall informs Secretary Armstrong that he has invented a novel way of destroying enemy shipping, but he dares not mention it by mail where the British may catch wind of it. He therefore seeks funds from Washington to facilitate a visit and "My wish is for this to become an universal scene of destruction before they think proper to leave our waters or before they can form an idea of such unusual horror." Fredriksen notes that Secretary of War Armstrong did not reply to this letter nor the two follow-ups that Randall dispatched.

Both the volume and variety of the correspondence is quite amazing but it has to be remembered that in this period, the secretary was not only trying to conduct the republic's first major war, he was also responsible for Indian affairs, military lands and military pensions. Fredriksen adds value to his work by providing a detailed appendix that breaks down the correspondents by name, occupation or military unit (both federal and militia and if the latter, by state). Finally, he a fairly comprehensive index, organized by document number, that includes not only the names of the correspondents but also geographical locations, subjects (e.g. ordnance manufacture and military discipline), unit or tribe, ship name, etc. In its own right, this index is a very valuable work.

Professor John Stagg of the University of Virginia, who provided the foreword for this very fine work of scholarship, notes that, lacking such a guide when researching his thesis, he was forced to go through numerous reels of microfilm containing the entire wartime correspondence of the secretary. Stagg was not the only historian to do so -- to research my thesis in the late 70s I had to undergo the same laborious travail to peruse both the incoming and outgoing correspondence of the War Department from 1811 to 1816. In all, as I recall, this amounted to 66 reels of microfilm, which it took me about six months to read. I did make copious notes, which have proved very valuable over the years, but I would not like to have to repeat the process. If I had possessed a research tool such as this register, I could have completed my work in RG 107 in about three weeks.

Thanks to an incredible amount of dedicated labour on the part of John Fredriksen, future historians of the war will not have to overcome such obstacles. In a way, this volume is a fitting memorial to a man whose often unsung labour has advanced both our knowledge of the war and the level of scholarship concerning it.

Most simply put, this register is so indispensable that it belongs on the bookshelves of any serious student of the War of 1812 and in all major reference libraries.