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The Rise and Fall of George Ulmer: Political Entrepreneurship in the Age of Jefferson and Jackson

by ALAN TAYLOR

In his powerful analysis of early nineteenth-century American society the visiting Alexis de Tocqueville described a volatile society where fortunes and positions were rapidly made and lost: a turbulent economic democracy akin to America's equally turbulent political democracy. Subsequent scholars have qualified Tocqueville's model by pointing out that rarely if ever did individuals from the very top and from the very bottom of society exchange their positions; the John Jacob Astors routinely grew yet richer while other Americans by the thousand lived out existences of poverty and drudgery. Nonetheless, Tocqueville's point remains relevant to the swollen American middle class, the milieu of entrepreneurs and opportunities, where conditions were indeed volatile. Men of sufficient initial capital to seize a "main chance" could achieve dramatic advances only to suffer equally dramatic setbacks if they failed to anticipate the next sudden twist in the American economy. Ever-promising and yet ever-threatening, the booming but unstable capitalism of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian America fostered that peculiarly paradoxical American bent of mind detected by Marvin Meyers: exuberant boosterism married to dark forebodings over the future of the Republic.¹

This paper examines the attempt of one man of middling wealth, first, to capitalize on the heady flux of the post-revolutionary American society and economy to stake out a position of at least local dominance and, second, to secure that dominance from the very volatility which had rendered its achievement possible. Therein lay the dilemma of America's "self-made men": how to construct for themselves an unchallengeable social and economic position. I will argue that the most successful and persistently successful American entrepreneurs were those able to rest their domains on two foundations: on the ownership of a profitable and ever-expanding stock of private capital and on the possession of a strategic position within a successful political party. Given the capriciousness of both the American marketplace and the American polling place, men who could secure strongholds in both could find temporary refuge in one when threatened in the other. But such men needed to use their

¹ I would like to thank Professor Marvin Meyers of Brandeis University and Professor Harold B. Raymond of Colby College for their criticism of this work at various stages of its evolution.

still sound position to rapidly repair the weakened one for the time would probably come when they would need to lean on it instead. Only in the short run could politician-entrepreneurs preserve their local dominance in one realm without strength in the other.

This argument certainly does not apply to the John Jacob Astors, to the owners of extensive empires of capital, men able to weather any economic downturn and able to turn their backs on direct participation in the theatre of American politics. Instead I mean to explicate the possibilities and dangers facing the "self-made men," the holders of recently acquired positions of local economic and political power. To this end this essay examines the life of George Ulmer.

George Ulmer enjoys no entry in the Dictionary of American Biography, for his wealth and political prowess never exceeded the bounds of his own county: Hancock County, the District of Maine, Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Maine separated to become a state in its own right in 1820). In the first decade of the nineteenth-century he briefly became that frontier county's most powerful politician. Tall, broad-shouldered, and slightly corpulent, he was just the sort of physically impressive man who would be looked to for leadership in a still rough-and-tumble frontier district. In addition, he was renowned as a forceful, if not always precise or grammatical, speaker, for like many another ponderous early nineteenth-century politician his logic often lagged far behind his own confident assurance of his grandiloquence. Usually known as "General Ulmer" for his command of the county militia, he also collected the important and potentially lucrative appointive posts of county sheriff and justice of the peace. He secured these three appointive patronage plums because of his own vote-winning abilities both for himself—he regularly won election to the Massachusetts House or to the State Senate—and for his fellow Democratic-Republicans running for national or statewide office.²

Moreover, George Ulmer was not far from being the county's richest man. In his home town of Lincolnville he was certainly the wealthiest entrepreneur. The 1798 Federal Direct Tax Return for that community reveals that in Lincolnville alone he owned 1900 acres of land valued at nearly $4400 and a mansion-house valued at $1200. On all three counts, acreage, land value, and house value, George Ulmer was Lincolnville's wealthiest taxpayer. Only his brother and business partner, Philip Ulmer, with 1024 acres valued at nearly $2800 and an $800 house, came close. The drop-off after the Ulmer brothers was dramatic; the next most valuable house in town was assessed at $350 and the next most valuable land holding was worth $936. George Ulmer knew all of this well; he was also the area's federal tax assessor and collector. If anything, then, the tax return may undervalue the economic dominance of the Ulmers in their community.³

². Joseph Miller, "Historical Sketch of the Town of Lincolnville" (1879), typescript copy in the New England Historic Genealogical Society [NEHGS hereafter], 3; "General George Ulmer," Hancock Gazette, January 11, 1826.
³. Prior to its incorporation on June 23, 1802, as a town, Lincolnville was known as Ducktrap Plantation. Ducktrap Return, Massachusetts and Maine 1798 Federal Direct Tax Returns, Volume I, NEHGS.
A French traveler, the Duc de La Rochefoucauld Liancourt, visited the region in 1794 and noted the contrast between the position of the Ulmers and that of their settler neighbors:

They are universally poor, or at least live as if they were so in an extreme degree. The habitations are every where poor, low huts. Every where, you find a dirty, dark-coloured rye-meal, and that not in sufficient quantity . . . In short, of all America, the province of Maine is the place that afforded me the worst accomodations of many other places; what I have now said of Maine must be regarded as an affirmation that the condition of human life in that place is exceedingly wretched.

In the course of his entire tour of Penobscot Bay only the Ulmers’ enterprises impressed the Duc: “Save the brothers Almas [sic], we found none who could be said to be even moderately intelligent.”

But even the then merely “Captain” George Ulmer’s lifestyle disappointed the Duc who partook of “a poor supper, and an indifferent night’s lodging with Captain Alma, who, however opulent, continues to live in a miserable log-house without suitable supplies of bread, rum, sugar, or even flesh.” Had the Duc returned two years later he would have been more pleasantly entertained in the newly erected mansion-house of the newly appointed justice. Visiting preacher Paul Coffin recorded the dramatic improvement in Ulmer’s circumstances: “The Squire and his very comely wife, treated me with liberal hospitality. We had bloated eels, pigeons, fresh mackerel, cucumbers, wine, &c.”

The brothers derived their wealth from land, the trees that grew upon that land, and their ability to obtain credit from Boston merchants, credit that enabled the brothers to cut the timber to build coasters and ships, cordwood to be hauled to meet Boston’s growing demand for fuel, and pine lumber to be shipped to the West Indies. They owned every step of the process, contracting with settlers to procure the wood, operating sawmills to turn logs into plank and boards, running a shipyard to produce the vessels to carry all to market, and managing a store to market the West India and English goods that their vessels returned with. So long as the winds, the seas, and foreign navies did not destructively interfere, the Ulmers’ enterprises promised steady, even spectacular, gains, the sort of which mansion-houses were built. The leading men of every Penobscot Bay and River town derived their fortunes and power by controlling and managing the critical transformation of Maine’s then virgin timber into capital for reinvestment and for consumer goods.

Like other leading men, the Ulmers supplemented their income with every conceivable resource at hand. They built a toll bridge across the Ducktrap River and alienated their poorer townsman by fencing off access to the adjoining ford, obliging all who meant to pass to use their toll bridge. In addition, the brothers and three other investors engaged in salvage operations to bring

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5. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels*, I, 431; Anonymous to Henry Knox, December 1, 1785, Henry Knox Papers, Box 1, Maine Historical Society (MeHS hereafter).
up the cannon and other valuable hardware aboard the sunken vessels in Penobscot River and Bay, vessels that had belonged to the ill-fated American expedition to recapture eastern Maine from the British during the Revolution. Philip supervised the brothers' shipping operations while George acted as land agent for the region's original title holder, General Henry Knox. George's sales to settlers for Knox netted the brothers commissions in the form of special price breaks by which they were able to cheaply obtain their large landed holdings. George even turned his limp into a resource; although he conceded that it was not the result of any battle, he convinced the Massachusetts General Court that the limp was a product of his Revolutionary War service and so obtained a pension. 6

How did George Ulmer find himself in such a fortunate position, one which none of his townsmen and few in the valley could match? His nineteenth-century eulogizer stressed the American mythic elements in the General's rise. He spoke of his "extraordinary vigor of intellect which under all the discouragements of early poverty and ignorance could enable him to arrive at a point of so much distinction." He noted that George Ulmer was born in Waldoborough, a newly settled town of German immigrants on the Maine coast on February 25, 1756. While engaged in a fishing voyage at age twenty George was captured by a British frigate and carried to Boston. The young man escaped to the American lines, enlisted in the Continental army, met and married a Rhode Island girl, learned to read and write, and saw action at Quebec, Ticonderoga, Saratoga, Rhode Island, Brandywine, and Monmouth. By 1779 he was back on the Maine frontier serving out the duration of the war in state service as a captain commanding the small American outpost at Camden. 7

It would be more accurate to say that, like most American "self-made men," George began modestly but not humbly. His father, Captain John Ulmer, was considered "a man of property and energy." A schoolmaster in Germany, he gave up the profession as a non-paying proposition once he arrived on the American frontier. He quickly caught on to the fact that in his new environment the significant money was made by those who first grabbed, and then successfully developed, the most potentially lucrative pieces of wilderness land. No parcels were more prized than the waterfalls or rapids where dams could be erected to provide the motive power for operating sawmills, for sawmills were the key mechanism in the conversion of Maine's forests into marketable planks and boards. Ignoring the proprietary Waldo family's pretensions to reserve all of the region's mill seats to themselves, Captain John Ulmer simply occupied a Waldoborough mill seat and erected, and ultimately

6. Resolves of the General Court of Massachusetts for the Year 1802 (Boston, 1803, Shaw-Shoemaker, no. 2617), Chapter XXXV (June 24, 1802), 42-43; Resolves of the General Court of Massachusetts for the Year 1797 (Boston, 1798, Evans, no. 32449), Resolve LXIX (March 10, 1797), 75-76; Acts of the General Court of Massachusetts for the Year 1811 (Boston, 1812, Shaw-Shoemaker, no. 23309), Chapter XCIX (February 27, 1811), 348; Jacqueline June Watts (editor), Lincolnville Early Days (Camden, Me., 1976), I, 19-23; Related Papers filed by General Court Resolve 114 (March 15, 1786), Massachusetts State Archives [MSA hereafter].

sold at a handsome profit, a successful sawmill on the site. Nor did George Ulmer enter adulthood as an illiterate; his schoolmaster father passed on his mastery of penmanship. But George’s most important legacy from his father was an example of aggressive confidence in seizing opportunities and weathering risks.8

At the close of the Revolutionary War in 1783 George and Philip Ulmer looked about for their own main chance, their own strategic combination of timber, waterpower, and access to the sea. Obtaining and developing such a combination meant rapid emergence as a leading man, a man of property and standing who in time could expect appointment as a squire and perhaps even become a sheriff or militia general. The alternative lot, endured by most frontier inhabitants, was long years spent in “poor, low huts” eating “a dirty dark-coloured rye-meal” before gradually obtaining a modest “competence.” The brothers found such a spot just north of Camden on Penobscot Bay at Ducktrap; there they found a small but snug harbor perfect for wood sloops and lumber schooners and several promising mill seats along the stream emptying into the harbor and stretching back into the richly timbered interior. Several squatters had already taken up occupation beside the harbor and back into the watershed but they lacked the capital necessary to develop the site; for modest sums the Ulmers bought them out. The brothers then ran their own survey lines around the land embracing the entire basin. By 1785 the stream had four operating saw mills with “lumber round them to supply for 20 years.” All of that lumber would have to be cut at the Ulmers’ mills and shipped from the wharves in their compact harbor.9

Contemporary travelers to the Maine frontier were fascinated by the process of social genesis. Talleyrand visited the area in 1794 and observed that the strategically-placed squatter “draws to himself all the lumber business of the vicinity and his mills are the nucleus of a small settlement.” The English traveler Edward Augustus Kendall reported that “the owner of the saw mill becomes a rich man; builds a large wooden house, opens a shop, denominated a store, erects a still and exchanges rum, molasses [sic], flour and pork for logs.” The spot attracts a blacksmith, shoemaker, tailor and other artisans to compose a growing business center. Before long half the inhabitants “are in debt at the store . . . and the other half are in debt all around.” This ensured the mill owner a steady supply of logs and labor from his settler-debtors. In short, by monopolizing an economically strategic spot the successful opportunist not only secured the local timber, he captured the labor of the growing settler population. But to maintain this required unceasing vigilance for debtors frequently sought to leave their debts behind by fleeing to a new locale. This was all a part of what Talleyrand called “a struggle of finesse” where “in the intention of the merchant selling is only a means of getting the

9. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, Travels, I, 431; Anonymous to Henry Knox, December 1, 1785, Henry Knox Papers, MeHS.
customer in debt” while the debtor explored every avenue of escaping payment.10

In the late 1780s the Ulmers’ monopoly over the Ducktrap basin received a potential challenge from the revived claim to the entire western half of the Penobscot Bay watershed by its absentee proprietor. According to a 1631 Royal Charter, legal title to Ducktrap and all of the surrounding lands as far north as Bangor and as far south as Waldoborough belonged to the heirs of Brigadier General Samuel Waldo. During the period of the American Revolution General Henry Knox married General Waldo’s granddaughter and bought out the other heirs to the “Waldo Patent.” But during the war proprietary control over the lands within the Patent lapsed and some six hundred squatter families, including the Ulmer brothers, took up the best lands along the coast. Some of them talked of violently resisting any post-war proprietary return.

Through their father the Ulmer brothers possessed a family heritage of resentment and resistance toward the Waldo heirs. And George Ulmer’s first meeting with Knox did not go well. Ulmer offered his services as an experienced land surveyor. Knox responded: “You are the very man I have been wanting to see this long time! I’ve a hundred acres of land which I want to divide into house lots of ten acres each—how many will it make?” Discouraged by the suddenness of the question and supposing it of hidden complexity Ulmer turned it over and over again in his mind until the impatient proprietor interrupted, “it is no matter about an answer at present, any other time will do as well.” Moreover, an anonymous informant sent by Knox to scout out the Ducktrap area in 1785 recommended against allowing the brothers to retain their monopoly over the entire basin. But Knox recognized the brothers’ potential usefulness in bringing along their poorer neighbors, many of whom owed at the Ulmers’ store, and who subsisted by cutting, hauling, and sawing lumber and timber for the brothers.11

Ever alert to capitalize on every available resource, the Ulmers turned potential settler resistance into an opportunity to secure, and even extend their holdings; they parlayed their capacity to deflate local settler opposition into proprietary recognition of their local predominance. Largely through the Ulmers’ efforts most of the settlers in Ducktrap and the adjoining settlement of Canaan accepted Knox’s compromise offer in 1788. While all the other settlers were restricted to buying a 200 acre maximum and most received just half of that, the brothers were allowed to buy up their entire existing holdings and


much more, mostly at the modest price of four to five shillings per acre, about one third to one half of their market value. George’s share alone amounted to 2942 acres. And, for the moment, the only payment demanded was a series of promissory notes secured by two mortgages, one from each brother. Knox also named George Ulmer his land agent responsible for retailing his lands to new settlers in the Ducktrap area. And the General secured for Ulmer a coveted and prestigious appointment as a justice of the peace; “Captain” Ulmer became “Squire” Ulmer.12

The brothers had gambled in making such an extensive purchase. If the General remained patient about collecting on their notes and if Mother Nature continued to smile on their voyages, the brothers Ulmer stood to dramatically enhance their wealth. Ulmer’s new hilltop mansion bespoke his confidence: his log cabin days were over.13

But nature soon ceased to cooperate. During 1797 the brothers suffered the loss of two vessels including cargos, making for a net loss in excess of £1600. A year later, in November, a carpenter at work within George Ulmer’s mansion-house carelessly left a fire unattended; the fire spread to his shavings and within an hour consumed the entire structure. All of George Ulmer’s books, accounts, promissory notes from his debtors, winter stock of provisions, furniture and clothing were “burnt to ashes leaving us with nothing except what we had on....” Then in late 1801 Knox rebuked George Ulmer for several decisions involving land sales; humiliated, the Squire resigned, thereby losing not only his commissions as land agent but also the benefit of Knox’s political patronage.14

The brothers struggled to recoup their deteriorating fortunes. George rebuilt his mansion and with several other investors the brothers constructed a toll bridge across Ducktrap Stream and sought a land grant from the Commonwealth to pay for its upkeep. But Philip could no longer bear the mounting costs of overextension; he dissolved the partnership and sold out his half to a wealthy and newly arrived merchant named Samuel Austin Whitney. Himself in worsening financial straits, Knox sold the two mortgages on the Ducktrap enclave to the Bank of the United States and to Wiscasset merchant Abiel Wood. In 1805 both foreclosed on Ulmer and Whitney obliging them to take out a new mortgage. In June of 1806 Philip Ulmer was convicted and fined for presenting a loaded gun to the chest of a deputy sheriff who had come to seize


14. George Ulmer to Henry Knox, Ducktrap, November 14, 1797 (Volume XLI, item 27), and Ulmer to Knox, Ducktrap, December 9, 1798 (Volume LV, item 53), both in Henry Knox Papers, MHS; Knox to Ulmer, Boston, December 7, 1797, and Ulmer to Knox, Ducktrap, November 13, 1801, both in Henry Knox Papers, Box 4, MeHS.
some of his remaining property to meet his unpaid debts. In the spring of 1807 George Ulmer and Whitney suffered $6000 in damages when a spring freshet carried away their bridge, mills, and lumber. They rebuilt in time to suffer $5000 more in damages in December 1807 when a second flash flood destroyed their complex. Whitney weathered the crisis but Ulmer was obliged to sell out to his son-in-law, the recently arrived English merchant John Wilson.  

The mighty had fallen, losing control of Ducktrap basin, the mill sites on the stream emptying into it, and most of the timber lands of its watershed. The two newcomers, Wilson and Whitney, who replaced them, also took over their places atop Lincolnville’s economic hierarchy. The 1815 Federal Direct Tax list for Hancock County reveals Whitney to have been that town’s wealthiest man with holdings worth $6264. Wilson ranked third at $4502. Philip Ulmer had slipped back to fifty-third with a modest $783. George Ulmer no longer possessed any assessable property in Lincolnville and only small parcels worth $306 and $63 in two adjoining towns.  

Tocqueville pointed out that in eighteenth-century America wealth, social status, and political power had been one. Men with wealth and with education superior to their neighbors expected and were expected to lead. So long as they behaved with reasonable decorum the George Ulmers could expect appointment as squires and routine election to their town and county offices. But, Tocqueville noted, the democratic logic of the American Revolution favored the development of a new sort of politician who would blatantly flatter the populace and develop their inchoate suspicions of the social elite as would-be aristocrats to whom political power could not be safely entrusted. For the moment politics and great wealth diverged. The securely wealthy did not lose their economic power but they became more politically and socially reclusive, withdrawing into the privacy of their mansions out of distaste for the increasing turbulence of electoral politics. Their political replacements, as depicted by Tocqueville, were the most aggressive of American entrepreneurs, the most self-made of American men, capitalizing on politics to make their fortunes, cultivating a new distrust of the old elite in order to advance themselves into a new elite. The transition converted political office from being primarily a badge of economic and social standing into a waystation on the road to such standing, into a new more-rapid means of achieving such standing.

George Ulmer’s experience exemplifies a variant of this new political man. With his economic standing rapidly decaying Ulmer increasingly turned to


16. Hancock County Tax Roll, 1815 Federal Direct Tax, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, CXXXII, 214–22, MeHS.

populist politics in an attempt to salvage his position. Both his own worsening financial position and the ongoing political evolution of American society dictated that George Ulmer could no longer count on the automatic allegiance of his neighbors. So he adopted the new emerging political language effusively celebrating popular sovereignty and direly warning of social aristocrats intent on subverting American democracy. This new mastery of an increasingly popular political rhetoric ensured Ulmer election and reelection, first as Lincolnville’s representative to the Massachusetts House and then to the State Senate. By uniting with like-minded politicians throughout the Commonwealth into a political network of mutual support—in short into a new political party, although these men did not like the term—Ulmer preserved his access to state patronage. With his economic base in shambles Ulmer looked to that patronage for an alternative source of income and influence. Good entrepreneur that he was, when he lost his Ducktrap enterprises he turned to the most promising new field for making a name and a fortune: politics. 18

The gentlemen-politicians of the old school bore the label “Federalists” while the new breed of politician adopted the title of “Democratic-Republicans” and looked to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison for their national leadership. Maine’s leading Federalist was, naturally, its wealthiest and most socially prominent man, General Henry Knox, who had settled in Thomaston. The break with Knox made it easier for Ulmer to renounce his own early Federalism and to shrewdly, albeit inconsistently, begin to champion the cause of Maine’s settlers against their proprietors. 19

With the same sense of timing which had netted him and his brother the Ducktrap watershed, George Ulmer staked out the politically strategic position as Hancock County’s earliest important Republican. In the short run this risky venture left him isolated in the county’s political community composed largely of more-cautious leading men reliant on patronage from the deeply entrenched Federalist state government. But when the political tide turned, as it soon did, Ulmer was the first in line to reap Hancock County’s share of the spoils. When the Democratic-Republicans elected their first governor, Maine-born James Sullivan, in 1807, he tossed Hancock County’s richest patronage plums—the command of the county militia and the position of county sheriff—to Ulmer, for the very good reason that Ulmer had been instrumental in obtaining a majority of the county’s votes for Sullivan. Whether we label it timing or luck, George Ulmer’s switch to the Jeffersonian style and to the Jeffersonian political network not only preserved his former political position but greatly extended it, to provide a substitute for his foundering sawmill and shipping business. 20

18. “General George Ulmer,” Hancock Gazette, January 11, 1826.
20. Thomas C. Amory, Life of James Sullivan with Selections from His Writings (Boston, Mass., 1829), II, 275; Eastern Argus (Portland, Me.), April 6, 1808.
But just as an unexpected shift in the market or world politics could wreck a shipping business, a sudden shift in voting patterns could just as suddenly undercut a political entrepreneur. The most successful operators were those able to differentiate, resting their position on an eclectic mix of government contracts, fees, and salaries, and on private mercantile returns. Ulmer's inability to revive his mercantile empire despite a blatant use of his sheriff's position to dodge executions for debt, left him increasingly reliant on his strategic political position. Should either he falter in his ability to coordinate and muster Hancock County's Jeffersonian votes, or should his counterparts elsewhere in the Commonwealth fail in enough other counties to allow a statewide Federalist resurgence, then Ulmer's position was doomed. A Federalist return to either county or state power would undercut Ulmer's political career as rapidly as a flash flood had carried away his sawmills.  

Indeed, George Ulmer's local political hegemony proved fleeting. The problem lay in the troubled integration of New England's Democratic-Republicans into a national network dominated by the politicians of the Jeffersonian heartland: the Old South and the New West. Voters there were eager to avenge British insults to American pride and commerce by either punitively cutting back on trade with Great Britain or by resorting to war. Either course threatened to destroy New England's shipping-based economy. When in December of 1807 Congress passed and President Jefferson signed an Embargo Act, confining all American shipping to port, New England's Republicans were placed in the uncomfortable position of defending a measure which undermined their region's economy, and therefore their own mercantile and political futures. The Embargo wrought a depression along the Maine coast, a depression which doomed Ulmer's hopes of reconstructing his recently flood-destroyed Ducktrap complex, increasing Ulmer's reliance on his political career at the very time that the depression revitalized local Federalists. To other Jeffersonians, George Ulmer increasingly seemed a beaten man unable even to stem the Federalist resurgence in his home town of Lincolnville, a resurgence led by his former business partner and Lincolnville's richest man, Samuel Austin Whitney.  

The American declaration of war on Great Britain in June of 1812 administered the coup de grace to Ulmer's political career by adding the threat of armed invasion to the economic woes already afflicting the Maine coast. For Ulmer the possibility of receiving a commission as a brigadier general in the expanding American army was the war's lone silver lining. Patronage from the Democratic-Republican national government in the form of a military commission was Ulmer's only possible refuge from the looming collapse of his political career.

21. "General George Ulmer," Hancock Gazette, January 11, 1826; for Ulmer's evasion of debt suits, see Elisha and William Penniman, February 23, 1809, to the Council, and Dory Little, April 18, 1809, to the same, in Box 17, Council Files, MSA; see also Council Committee reports on George Ulmer dated August 30, 1810, and February 16, 1812, in Boxes 19 and 20, respectively, Council Files, MSA.  

political enterprise. Anticipating war, in April of 1812 Massachusetts’ voters returned the Federalists to state power. To forestall the imminent embarrassment of discharge and perhaps of an investigation into his misuse of the sheriff’s office, in October Ulmer resigned his posts as sheriff and militia major general. “I am now really under the necessity of going into the army or navy to keep out of prison [for debt] or some thing worse,” Ulmer wrote plaintively to General William King, a fellow Maine Democratic-Republican with close ties to the national administration.23

Ulmer deluded himself in anticipating a general’s command in some important theatre of the war. President Madison’s administration did its best to proffer national military patronage to displaced New England Republicans. But the number of available commissions was limited while the pool of interested politicians was large. Compared to others in that pool, Ulmer’s claim was weak. His economic position had vanished and, for the foreseeable future, his political career was finished. He was no more than a former county sheriff and a former militia commander unable any longer even to successfully produce a Republican majority in his own small county. He could no longer even count on the support of his fellow Hancock County Democratic-Republican leaders. Frustrated by defeat, many blamed and resented George Ulmer. Premature rumors of a command over local volunteers led one Bangor Jeffersonian to write, “Some who felt warmly interested in this quarter . . . feel their ardour a little abated on account of the brigade being entrusted to Ulmer—who, though he has influence with the soldiery, is better known by those better informed.” Ulmer’s claim to a commission rested solely on the weak basis of a reward for past service and a consolation prize for his present plight, the result of continued loyalty to a locally unpopular war. In short, it would have been unseemly to allow Ulmer nothing, but politically impractical to offer him something coveted by more influential figures. As a result Madison appointed Ulmer a Colonel of volunteers and entrusted him with the command of the least desirable post in the entire war: Eastport, Maine.24

There was no glory to be won at Eastport; the American command planned no offensive operations on the eastern frontier for the very good reason that British naval supremacy in the Bay of Fundy rendered them hopeless. But some sort of token military force was necessary at Eastport to try to put a damper on the swelling flow of illegal commerce back and forth across the border, a commerce of great benefit to the provision-short British army. Unable to trade legally and directly with Great Britain and her colonies, many American merchants shipped their flour and wheat to Eastport while their British counterparts forwarded their textiles and hardware to adjoining St. An-

23. William Eustis to George Ulmer, May 6, 1812, on reel 5 of “Letters Sent by the Secretary of War” [“Letters Sent” hereafter], National Archives [NA hereafter]; Ulmer to William King, July 28 and October 16, 1812, WKP, MeHS; King to Eustis, on reel 46 of “Letters Received by the Secretary of War” [“Letters Received” hereafter], NA.

24. James Carr to Joseph F. Wingate, September 24, 1812, and George Ulmer to King, October 16, November 9, and November 12, 1812, and King to William Eustis, December 6, 1812, all in WKP, MeHS. The quote comes from Carr’s letter.
Almost every night a local flotilla of boats rowed both ways across the passage to exchange cargos. While Embargo and then war meant mercantile depression elsewhere in coastal America, it introduced a wildcat boom at Eastport. Perhaps this explains Eastport's continued and overwhelming Jeffersonian electoral majorities; after all, Democratic-Republican commercial policies provided successful violators with artificial and lucrative opportunities. Obliged to live in the community, Eastport's customs officers quickly learned the advantages of personal safety and extra income that accrued to those who winked at the lucrative business. This enabled the customs collector, Lemuel Trescott, to die at a ripe old age revered as a local pillar of society with Eastport's municipal hall and an adjacent town both named for him. In sum, Eastport became the most notorious smuggling port in a nation notorious for smuggling. The locals were not likely to suffer lightly a restraining military force led by an inexperienced commander.

British naval superiority in the Bay of Fundy put it in their power to seize Eastport, a lightly fortified and isolated island town, virtually at will. As a result, the American command was willing to invest in Eastport's defense only those men and resources which it was prepared to sacrifice. Hence, when Ulmer arrived in December of 1812, he found a military nightmare. The barracks were two tenements "scarcely fit to shelter cattle" that had to be rented at an exorbitant rate from a local landlord; unsure of how long it would be staying in Eastport the American command declined building its own barracks. Ulmer described many of his soldiers as "children that ought to have nurses come with them to take care of them and cannot with prudence be suffered to be out in the night." An Eastporter characterized the troops as old men and boys who "can do government but little service for one year except eat the government provisions and stay by the fire."

What provisions did arrive were characterized by Ulmer as "refuse." The local commissary was a smuggler named Bartlett and, as such, a participant in the thinly-veiled local campaign to drive Ulmer mad. He provoked the troops to near mutiny by insisting "that government don't allow them good provisions—and will not pay for any but bad." Sometimes no provisions got through. One transshipper figured out that he could make double profits by accepting United States government pay to transport provisions to Eastport but instead carry them directly to New Brunswick for sale to the British. Ulmer exploded, "Thus the troops must suffer, while the enemy are furnished with their provisions by traitors!" There is more than a little tragic irony in a situation where malnourished American forces futilely tried to garrison a smug-


26. Kilby, Eastport, pp. 164–65; Captain Oliver Leonard to John Blake, September 14, 1812, in Bangor Historical Magazine, VI. 164; Joseph B. Varnum to James Monroe, December 29, 1812, on reel 58 of "Letters Received," NA; George Ulmer to William King, December 1, 10, and 24, 1812, January 15 and February 12, 1813, B. Vance to King, February 16, 1813, all in WKP, MeHS.
gling port overflowing with provisions bound from their profit-minded countrymen across the lines to the British enemy. 27

Nor was any clothing forthcoming for Ulmer's ragged men. Infuriated, Ulmer threatened to resign: "I cannot consent to tarry to see the sufferings and distress of men who are sent here, as defenders of their country . . . ." But George Ulmer had no other income, and nowhere else to go, so he did what he had done so often and so badly before: he overextended himself to salvage his position. He obtained firewood, hospital stores, bedding straw, camp kettles, coats, and blankets on his own credit. 28

Irregular pay for his men was the crowning blow in Ulmer's eyes. He asked, "If troops on the frontier, exposed to all the severities of weather, naked, and fed on the meanest foods, must be kept out of their hard-earned pay, how are we to expect success?" Ulmer was obliged to disband and send home one company because the pay for the men and the commissions for its officers were over three months overdue. Bitter over neglect from the military commissary and high command, Ulmer came to sense that his command was regarded as merely a makeshift guard that sooner or later would fall into British hands. He ruefully (and no doubt unnecessarily) assured one superior not to worry about providing regimental flags for his command: "If we don't have them, we shall not lose them." 29

The locals proved adept at frustrating Ulmer's every attempt to suppress their smuggling. In early March when Ulmer's men seized the schooner Polly laden with a cargo worth $40,000, collector Trescott and the commissary Bartlett interceded to claim the vessel for the custom house and so prevent the volunteers from receiving any prize money. In April the local smugglers fabricated a number of trumped-up debt executions against Ulmer allowing the local sheriff to pack the Colonel off to jail in Machias. "I hate to fight Americans, and we have not other real enemies on this frontier," Ulmer wrote from behind bars. Released a month later, he found that Eastport was once again "filled with speculators, spies, and smugglers." They operated without annoyance from the leaderless volunteers whose discipline had vanished in their commander's absence. 30

Nor could Ulmer count on support for his efforts from his superiors. The Secretary of War, John Armstrong, rescinded Ulmer's order forbidding all communications with the British side except under a flag of truce authorized by the Colonel. Although his superiors sent George Ulmer to Eastport with exhortations to suppress smuggling, they could not bring themselves to permit him the authority necessary to do so. As an alternative commercial system

27. George Ulmer to William King, December 24 and 27, 1812, and February 7, 1813, WKP, MeHS; Ulmer to John Armstrong, April 16, 1813, on reel 58 of "Letters Received," NA.
28. George Ulmer to John Armstrong, April 16, 1813, on reel 58 of "Letters Received," NA; Ulmer to William King, January 15, 1812, WKP, MeHS.
29. George Ulmer to William King, December 27, 1812, February 12, and March 26, 1813, all in WKP, MeHS.
30. Kilby, Eastport, p. 161; George Ulmer to William King, February 12 and March 19, 1813, WKP, MeHS; William Loney to Thomas G. Thornton, April 10, 1813, Thornton-Cutts Papers, MeHS; Ulmer to John Armstrong, March 29, 1813, on reel 58 of "Letters Received," NA.
utilized by merchants as far south as Philadelphia to trade with Great Britain, the Eastport trade possessed a powerful constituency opposed to any tampering. For instance, Ulmer’s political patron and Maine’s leading Democratic-Republican, General William King of Bath, was himself secretly but heavily involved in illegal commerce with the British. Second, the opposition Federalist press made the most of every news item suggesting the onset of martial law. Third, as America’s political keystone state, Pennsylvania’s allegiance was critical to the continued political viability of the Madison administration and Pennsylvania’s economy hinged upon a continued British market for its flour exports. Finally, the Democratic-Republicans were slow to risk their political position by voting the taxes necessary to finance the war. This left the administration reliant upon customs revenue. Hence, commerce, however illegal, had to continue to enter and pay duties if the nation was to avoid bankruptcy. For all of these reasons Ulmer was placed in the absurd position of having to simultaneously suppress and permit the illicit commerce so beneficial to the national economy.31

It is small wonder then that, after his arrest, the accumulated humiliations and setbacks broke the Colonel’s spirit. His wife joined him, but her growing infirmities and near-blindness only added to his mounting depression. He began to drink heavily and act erratically. His accounting practices grew ever more careless and slipshod leaving Ulmer vulnerable to charges of embezzlement. Worst of all he lost control of his men, who ceased to fear or respect their commander. Disregarding Ulmer’s direct orders, on the Fourth of July the men began to wildly fire their muskets into the air in celebration. Enraged, the Colonel stormed onto the parade ground and ordered his shocked officers to level a fieldpiece charged with deadly grape-shot at the celebrants. As all fell silent, Ulmer renewed his order and threatened to discharge the piece if another shot was fired. Calling the Colonel’s bluff the men resumed their firing. Furious at his impotence Ulmer stormed off the parade ground.32

Ulmer’s mood was not improved by the Secretary of War’s thinly disguised scheme to let the Volunteers wither away. Armstrong commissioned three of Ulmer’s officers into a new regular regiment and instructed them to commence recruiting among Ulmer’s men. Their promises of bonuses and immediate furloughs steadily siphoned off Ulmer’s volunteers. Again George Ulmer over-reacted, arresting Captain Simmons, one of the three officers, as an example to the other two to cease and desist in their recruiting. Intent upon Ulmer’s removal and led by Captain Sherman Leland, his officers secretly drew up a list of complaints which they forwarded to the district commander, Brigadier General Thomas H. Cushing, in Boston. They asserted of their Colonel: “He drinks so hard and there is such wildness and inconsistency in his

32. Col. Joseph D. Learned to John Armstrong, May 18, 1813, on reel 54 of “Letters Received,” NA; “Results of the George Ulmer Court of Enquiry, July 3, 1814,” Isaac Lane Papers, MeHS.
orders and conduct that he has become perfectly contemptible in the sight of his troops, and the consequence is insubordination and all the train of evils which naturally follow." Cushing dispatched an aide to Eastport who after a hasty investigation exercised his authority to relieve Colonel Ulmer of his command and place him under house arrest. Recalling the heroic death of General Zebulon Pike at York, Canada, that spring, Ulmer gloomily lamented, "... would to God I had been a companion to General Pike and have shared his fate. I am it seems about to receive the rewards of my patriotism and satisfaction for my exertions while on the lines."

Denied a copy of the charges against him, George Ulmer was held under house arrest until he was summarily discharged from the service on December 17, 1813. Thereafter he became obsessed with clearing his name and obtaining his back pay and compensation for his personal debts incurred to provide for his men. First he called on General Cushing in Boston, but he refused Ulmer any satisfaction. Proceeding on to Washington Ulmer called on the Secretary of War. After twelve days of delay Armstrong gave up his hope that the old man would simply go away and leave him alone; Armstrong grudgingly consented to receive him. Upon hearing Ulmer's threat to carry his embarrassing case to Congress, Armstrong decided that it might be a good idea after all to hold a court of inquiry to allow Ulmer the chance to clear his name. He so directed General Cushing. Held at Portland, Maine, on May 30, 1814, the court cleared Ulmer on the six counts of embezzling pay, rations, and weapons. They found him "literally guilty" of arresting Captain Simmons and of mishandling the Fourth of July incident, but concluded that "the circumstances attending the acts" were such "that no criminality can be attached to them from their commission." George Ulmer then had to make another trip to Washington before the War Department would release his back-pay and refund his expenses.

George Ulmer's military and political careers were over. His attempt to obtain legal damages from Sherman Leland for malicious libel ultimately failed in the courts. Before dying on December 23, 1826, Ulmer temporarily regained a modest economic position by developing a new sawmill and store complex in the still heavily timbered recesses of Lincolnville's Ducktrap Stream watershed. Nonetheless, it was a shadow of his former empire, and when his estate went through probate it proved insolvent.

Tocqueville described the novel American notion of that day that by pursuing his own individual self-interest every man promoted the national well-
being, and that so long as self-interest was "rightly understood" there would be no conflict between aggressive individualism and the pursuit of the collective public interest. As an entrepreneur both private and political, George Ulmer avidly promoted that notion. In taking up Ducktrap, in striking a deal with Henry Knox that isolated settler militants, and in crafting a political career, Ulmer got ahead in a volatile milieu by exploiting individual opportunities and then convincing settlers, neighbors, and constituents that in so doing he promoted the common good. But, as his unpopular fencing-off of the Ducktrap Stream ford demonstrates, contrary to Tocqueville's optimism, George Ulmer did not "rightfully understand" his self-interest in a way that would avoid violation of the common good.

Ulmer's tragedy lies in the fact that he was placed in a situation which made a mockery of that peculiarly American conceit. At Eastport he collapsed under the pressures incurred while vainly attempting to stem the untrammeled pursuit of self-interest by his fellow countrymen, in whose name he had donned his military uniform. He was overwhelmed by the same acquisitive culture within which he had once made a name and a fortune. His decline and fall illuminates in an unusually stark way the humiliations and lack of options facing a leading man whose political and economic domains have both eroded. In clutching at the command of Eastport's troubled garrison as a last chance to recoup his power and prestige, Ulmer only assured their complete dissolution. 36

Not every American entrepreneur shared George Ulmer's fate. Some did. His Lincolnville neighbor and salvage operation partner, Adam Rogers, made his own fortune only to lose it all in the financial panic of 1837 and end his days in a poorhouse. But most entrepreneurs ended life at least as comfortably as they had begun. Nevertheless, there were enough George Ulmers and Adam Rogers to sustain a steady undercurrent of doubt and pessimism within the American culture of confidence.

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