

James Bird:

The Man, the Legend and Ballad

By

Colin Murphy

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The life of James Bird is that of an ordinary man whose path followed that of hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens in the early years of the American Republic. His story, however, is far different. While most of his peers, including those who had become revered for their leadership in great military triumphs, have been swept away by the flowing waters of time, James Bird has been repeatedly recalled and memorialized for nearly two hundred years. It is strange, but not incomprehensible that this man's life, once lamented and pitied, gave rise to a story that propelled James Bird to the status of a legend and has since merged his name into the realm of folklore and song that survives in today's digital age.

The War of 1812 was closing in on the beginning of its second campaigning season and the United States, after failing miserably to wrench Canada from the British Empire the previous year, focused its effort on seizing control of the Great Lakes. On Lake Ontario a massive ship-building race commenced as thousands of sailors, soldiers, marines, laborers and carpenters descended upon its shores from the eastern seaports. Meanwhile Lake Erie, considered less important to the strategic plans of the Americans was left in a much less prepared state. In the early spring of 1813, Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry was on site in Erie, Pennsylvania and commencing the building and manning of a fleet to meet the present British force on the lake. Always playing a secondary role to the efforts on Lake Ontario, Perry found the efforts to man his growing number of ships and gunboats and establish effective defenses frustrating. In early May Perry's frustration was eased when the 147th Regiment of Pennsylvania militia marched into Erie. Among the 147th Regiment was Captain Samuel Thomas' volunteer artillery company from Kingston Township, in whose ranks was James Bird.

James Bird was born December 20, 1785 in New Jersey to John and Rebecca Bird. In his early childhood the family moved to Kingston Township, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania where,

upon reaching adulthood undertook the occupation as a weaver. Yet, like many men throughout history, James Bird's everyday life was interrupted by the onset of war. The precarious nature of the war in the northwest frontier in 1813 led to a mass mobilization of Pennsylvania militia so in late April James Bird and the majority of the other men of military age from Kingston were mustered and began their march west arriving at Erie on May 7.¹ News soon arrived that the men of the 147th Regiment had been federalized and placed under the command of General William Henry Harrison for the remainder of their required four-month tour of duty. For these volunteer, part time soldiers, who once met and drilled in their martial tasks perhaps one Saturday a month, this full time soldiering was a new and unfamiliar facet of their lives. They were placed in and around the shipyard and storehouses of the Erie region as sentries. One evening James Bird found himself in command of one such sentry post with a small guard of men in charge of protecting a storehouse near the shipyard. What exactly occurred is not known, but what is known is that the storehouse was pilfered and Bird was to be held accountable for the transgression and placed under arrest to await his fate decide by a court martial.²

At about the same time of James Bird's arrest, Marine Corps Lieutenant John Brooks was traveling west from Washington D.C. On March 31 Lt. Brooks, "under a dark cloud after being accused of cheating at cards," was ordered to proceed from Washington D.C. to Erie with a small recruiting party of eight men by way of Hagerstown, Maryland and Pittsburg. He hoped to recruit an impressive guard to present to Perry upon his arrival.³ However, due to the paltry pay and bonuses the Marine Corps offered in comparison to the Army coupled with the long five

¹ Gerard T. Altoff. *Deep Water Sailors, Shallow Water Soldiers: Manning the United States Fleet on Lake Erie – 1813* (Put-in-Bay OH: The Perry Group, 1993), 4.

² William W. Dobbins. *History of the Battle of Lake Erie* (Erie PA: Ashby and Vincent, 1876), 149-150.

³ Gerard T. Altoff. *Deep Water Sailors, Shallow Water Soldiers: Manning the United States Fleet on Lake Erie – 1813*, 5-6, 130. Also Lt. Col. Commandant Franklin Wharton to Lt. John Brooks, March 31, 1813, Record Group 127, Office of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, National Archives and Record Administration, Washington D.C.

year enlistment required by the Marines as opposed to the one to three year terms in the army, Brooks was only able to secure the services of seven more men. Perry, desperate for Marines must have felt his heart sink when Lt. Brooks reported to him upon his arrival. Still, opportunity was at hand to secure more Marines. The growing number of militia that continued to stream into the area and those already there, including the 147th Regiment, were prime hunting grounds for an enterprising recruiting officer. Presenting his well trained and disciplined Marines in their elegant scarlet trimmed, yellow laced blue uniforms with gleaming brass buttons, accompanied by his professional drummer and fifer dressed in reverse colors presented a semblance of elite martial pomp to the young country lads. Besides using the snap and flash of his professional Marines Brooks, it seems, “resorted to a measure of inveigling to entice Marine recruits, luring more than one to sign on with eyes less than wide open.”⁴ Lastly, and probably the most effective means of securing recruits for Lt. Brooks was to peruse the various militia camps for men in ominous situations and this method led him to James Bird. Brooks offered Bird a deal he could not refuse. Brooks would work to have the charges against Bird dropped if Bird agreed to enlist in the Marine Corps. On June 8, 1813, the deal was finalized. Bird entered the rolls of the Marine Corps after signing his enlistment papers and passing a surgeon’s exam that certified his health. When he entered the Marine Corps Bird was twenty-seven years old, five feet, eleven inches tall, with blue eyes, sandy hair and a light complexion.⁵ Though off the hook for the charges against him, Bird exchanged a four-month tour of duty in a militia unit full of neighbors, which was probably lax in duties and discipline by comparison for the harsh new rules he would serve under for five long years.

⁴ Altoff, 16.

⁵ “James Bird”. Personnel File, Record Group 127.2.3, Records of the United States Marine Corps, Records of The Adjutant and Inspector's Department 1775-1971. National Archives and Record Administration, Washington, D.C.

Between his arrival at Erie and the end of July, Lt. John Brooks was able to enlist thirty-five men for service in the Marine Corps including James Bird. These men were trained daily and placed on sentry duty at night around the prized brigs of war that were being steadily pieced together. By the third week of July the brigs were ready to take to the lake, but the British squadron coasted ominously on the horizon waiting for an opportunity to pounce. It was well known that the large brigs would not be able to clear the sand bar at the mouth of Presque Isle Bay fully loaded with their guns. So Perry waited for the right moment to clear the guns from the decks, pass over the sand bar and then hope to re-arm the ships before the British could attack. On July 31, that opportunity came and though the entire process took an exhausting four days to complete, Perry's fleet, consisting of two brigs, the flagship *Lawrence* and her sister *Niagara* and seven other gunboats, were on the lake. On board the flagship *Lawrence* with Perry were Brooks, Bird and twenty-eight other Marines along with 129 sailors and landsmen on a westward heading seeking the enemy fleet.

There have been many advanced studies of the Battle of Lake Erie that retell the story of the battle in great detail, but for the purposes of this work a succinct account should suffice. Upon reaching the western end of Lake Erie Perry was able to turn the tactical tide on the British fleet. The British were now cooped up in the small harbor at Amherstburg at the mouth of the Detroit River under the guns of Fort Malden with Perry seeking the best opportunity to strike. Through August and into the early days of September the British failed to venture out of their safe anchorage but Perry's control of the lake was leading to great shortages in supplies and food stuffs. On September 10, Commodore Robert Barclay, commander of the British fleet decided he could sit idle no longer and took to the lake with his fleet of two ships, two brigs, one schooner and one sloop. It was obvious to all that the time of battle was near.

As the fleets closed in on each other, the vessels were readied for action. Everything not needed to fight a battle was stored securely below as not turn into flying debris when struck by enemy fire. Sand was spread upon the wooden decks so men would not slip upon the blood that experienced seamen and Marines knew would soon be under their feet as well. Some sailors went aloft to handle the sails, others went to their guns. Some Marines too went aloft to the tops others formed in ranks upon the main deck from where they could fire volleys of musket fire into the enemy ships, while still others joined sailors in manning the ship's main guns.⁶ In the age of sail power the time between sighting an enemy and the opening of an engagement could take hours of nervous waiting as the ships closed within range. It took from sunrise until 11:45 a.m. before the ships were close enough to engage. The British fleet opened fire first while Perry ordered his men to stand firm. In a daring, or perhaps a brash move Perry took the *Lawrence* directly into the line of British vessels while his other brig and gunboats lagged behind. This allowed the British fleet to concentrate all of their firepower upon Perry's flagship. Within minutes the scene on board the *Lawrence* began to resemble a butcher's shop. Men were hit by flying iron, lead, wood splinters and falling debris. Fairly early in the engagement a British cannonball smashed through the hip of Lt. Brooks throwing him across the deck. He was carried below where he would writhe in pain for two hours until he expired. Bird, who had marched to Presque Isle as an artilleryman was stationed at one of the *Lawrence*'s large guns when he was struck by a spent British canister round in the shoulder, severely wounding him. Legend states that he was ordered below, but he refused and stayed at his post to continue to fight until blood

⁶ The tops are platforms about a third of the way up a mast that served as a staging area for sailors when sent aloft to handle sails. During battles Marines and Sailors armed with muskets, rifles and hand grenades would be station on the tops from where they could rain lead and explosives down upon the enemy.

loss forced him to seek medical attention. Bird went below to the surgeon, was bandaged, and returned to action and remained in the fight until the end.⁷

The course of the remaining part of the action saw the well recounted event of Perry transferring his command and his famous “Don’t Give Up The Ship” flag from the crippled *Lawrence*, via a small row boat amidst a hail of iron and lead, to the sister brig *Niagara* and bringing that undamaged, still fully manned vessel into the fight. Now entirely supported by the other vessels of the squadron the *Niagara* moved in for the kill. The firepower of the American squadron against the heavily mauled men and vessels of the British led to a smashing of the British fleet and by 4:40 in the afternoon Perry was victorious.

The price of this victory was twenty-seven dead and ninety-six wounded, including James Bird. Bird, like many of the severely wounded, was transported back to the main naval base at Erie where he would convalesce in a crudely built and undermanned hospital throughout the winter. Before long, even while Bird recovered from his wounds, the story of his bravery, his refusing to leave his post even though severely wounded and then returning to action after being compelled to seek assistance was being printed in many of the major newspapers in the country. The first to print his story was his hometown paper *The Gleaner*, published in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania by Charles Miner. The column printed by Miner on November 26 recounted the tale described to him by his “old friend Mr. Carkhuff” who had marched off with Bird and the others the previous spring and had recently returned home.⁸ The foundation for the building of a local hero had been laid down for all to read.

⁷ Nearly all accounts written after the battle concerning the story of James Bird transmits this part of the legend, but no impartial primary sources confirm this. Charles Miner’s account from *The Gleaner* (mentioned in the text) is supposed to be a first-hand account, but due consideration must be taken as the story is of a local hero.

⁸ “James Bird,” *The Yankee*, Boston, December 10, 1813, Vol. II, No. 50, American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

While news of his bravery spread and Bird continued his recovery, the war in the Lake Erie theatre was changing. Because of Perry's victory and the resulting successful land campaign on the Canadian side of Lake Erie, culminating with the Battle of the Thames, which included the death of Tecumseh and thus the death crushing of the hopes of an Indian Confederacy, the region sunk even lower on the list of important theatres in the war. The tedium, boredom and deprivation suffered by the men in the region led to an alarming number of desertions from the naval and land services. Yet, for Bird, the arrival of a new Marine officer that winter, Lt. Benjamin Hyde, brought the news of a promotion to corporal for his actions during the battle. With the promotion came better pay, greater responsibilities and what must have been a sense of pride for Bird.

The following spring, with the region clear of large enemy forces, Lakes Erie and Huron became the scene of numerous small campaigns that were, for the most part, punitive strikes against small towns and minor military establishments. On May 13 the American fleet sailed from Erie with seven hundred soldiers on board. Their aim was a small town known as Port Dover on a long peninsula on the Canadian shore known as Long Point. Port Dover was a modest village with numerous lumber and grist mills. By destroying these mills the Americans hoped to cut off those materials from British forces further to the west. On the 14th the soldiers landed accompanied by twenty Marines including James Bird. The area was just recently evacuated and the militia was too scattered to put up any real defense. Only a few shots were fired before the Americans were in complete control of the town. They then set about on their destruction of the mills. This quickly led to looting of the town and the eventual torching of all public and private building within reach. The American officers justified this destructive action because in the previous winter the British burned the towns of Buffalo and Black Rock, New

York. The British justified that action by pointing to the American burning of York the previous April. A “tit-for-tat” war of destruction was well under way.

The American fleet arrived back in Erie on May 19 and began to prepare for the next move. James Bird and all his fellow Marines and sailors resumed the inglorious daily duties of a fleet in port and waited. On June 3, 1814 James Bird took time to write his parents. It is a letter that could have been written by many a young man from any country in any war. He informed his parents of the last raid he took part in, that he was well and his wound, received the previous September, had completely healed, and he was back on duty again. His tone in the letter is upbeat. “My duty is not hard, for I am promoted to officer and I think myself happy in my station.” Yet he recognized the prospects of a new campaign into the upper reaches of Lake Huron and foresaw that if he went his return was not likely until the winter. He implored his parents to write him and that if they needed money they should seek out payments of personal debts owed him from people in and about their town concluding, “I...still remain your most affectionate son until death.”⁹

Promoted, in good health with easy duty and, in his words, “happy” with his situation, Bird seemed every bit a Marine that accepted his role and place in life. This all makes what occurred the very next day more confusing. On June 4 Bird was in charge of two men, Private James Rankin of the Marine Corps and Seaman Henry Davis. They were tasked with guarding a storehouse at the Navy Yard at Erie. Sometime that evening, when the post was inspected, all three were missing and with no other plausible explanation apparent, the men were reported as deserters.

⁹ James Bird to Parents, June 3 1814 in “Letter from Soldier in War of ’12 Found,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 7, 1914, vol. 170, issue 158. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>

News of desertions spread quickly by word of mouth and through advertisements placed in the newspapers offering rewards for assisting in the capture of the wanted parties. Six days later, as a reliable account reports, a young man from Erie, who was heading towards Washington, Pennsylvania to return to his studies met some suspicious men in the town of Butler. It is quite possible that he knew of the recent desertions. Continuing on his journey east the young man came across a party of sailors heading westward towards Erie led by a Sailing Master Cowell. The young man reported what he had seen and Cowell sent a few men forward who, in disguise, seized the three men. When the sailors and three deserters arrived at Erie, Bird and the other two were placed under arrest.¹⁰ For most a speedy trial was never a guarantee during the war but Bird's day in court would have to wait an inordinate amount of time because when he was returned and imprisoned the Erie station was buzzing with activity. The buzz was because the fleet was preparing to sail west to Detroit and then into Lake Huron with a contingent of U.S. Army regulars to destroy, or at least disrupt, the enemy on that upper lakes with the main target being the once American, now British held Fort Michilimackinac. Bird would have certainly been on board with the rest of the fleet's Marines but now he had to sit, confined in a cell and wait until the fleet returned, when there would be enough officers to convene a courts martial. It wasn't until September 1, after a cruise with very mixed results, the fleet sailed back into Erie. With the fleets officers now about the Courts Martial could commence and on September 11, the court convened.

The court consisted of four naval officers and Bird's commanding officer, Lt. Benjamin Hyde. Both Bird and his fellow Marine Corps deserter, James Rankin, were tried simultaneously with their counsel, the Navy purser on the station, Joseph Wilkinson, pleading their case. The

¹⁰ William W. Dobbins, *History of the Battle of Lake Erie*, 150-151.

facts seemed obvious to all and for the defendants the best course for them seemed obvious as well; plead guilty and place themselves at the mercy of the court. To do so was a good gamble. The punishment for being found guilty of desertion during a time of war meant a sentence of death. However, since the start of the war, barring any other extenuating circumstances, it was sometimes possible that deserters sentenced to death would receive reprieves and have their sentences commuted to a period of time in prison at hard labor, some form of corporal punishment and dishonorable discharge. Thus, the seemingly honorable way to approach this scenario, with the best hope of being included in the twenty-five percent of those lucky enough to receive a reprieve, was to assuage the court and plead guilty. It was their best shot to avoid execution and that was just what Bird and Rankin did.¹¹

As anticipated, the court unanimously called for the execution of Bird and, with one nay vote, for Rankin as well. The next step in the process would be for the transcripts of the trial to be sent to Washington for President Madison to examine and confirm or commute the sentence of the court. Bird, Rankin, and Seaman Davis, who was tried in a separate court, which came to the same conclusion, were returned to the jail to await their fate. What that fate was they did not know even though they had, at the least, some reason to hope that they would receive the reprieve. What they could not know was that a battle that occurred less than three weeks earlier and eight hundred miles away would all but spell their doom.

The spring and summer campaign season of 1814 saw the British take to the offensive in the Chesapeake Bay region. Since the previous year the Royal Navy had conducted a reign of terror along the shores of the Chesapeake with numerous amphibious landings that, more often

¹¹ John S. Hare, "Military Punishments of the War of 1812," *The Journal of the American Military Institute*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter, 1940): 239-240.

than not resulted in the local militia falling back to watch their settlements ransacked and destroyed. Determined to “Chastise Jonathan” and inflict greater damage in the region as a strategy to force the United States to draw its forces away from Canada to protect the capital region the reinforced Royal Navy now had a significant land force attached and the 1814 campaign would be much more than raids on small coastal settlements.

On August 19 a large British force under the command of General Robert Ross landed in Benedict, Maryland and commenced a march toward Washington D.C. Five days later they met and routed an American force at the Battle of Bladensburg, five miles from Washington, then continued on to the seat of government and went about seeking retribution, ironically enough, for the American burning of York and Newark upon Lake Ontario and of Port Dover on the shores of Lake Erie where Bird had been present three months earlier.

The destruction and chaos of the British campaign on the Chesapeake led to a panic amongst the administration and the leaders of the military. These times of crisis called for the most concerted efforts to prepare for hazards that lay ahead. The people had to be persuaded that those efforts were underway. Changes in command, calls for militia service and the existing military had to be readied and remain in the highest state of preparedness yet attained. Accordingly, the desertion rate, which had been in a steady climb since the beginning of the war, had to be curtailed. It was believed that the best method to accomplish this was to carry out the death sentences prescribed by law for deserters. Because of the adoption of this stricter policy, the chances of a reprieve declined from one in four in 1813 to one in ten in 1814.¹²

¹² John S. Hare, “Military Punishments of the War of 1812,” *The Journal of the American Military Institute*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter, 1940): 239-240

The trial transcripts traveled to Washington D.C. and arrived at the White House in mid-October. On October 22, the President perused the short document, which merely included the charges against the men and their pleas of guilt. Satisfied with the record he wrote just below the transcription of the courts findings, “the sentences of the court are approved” and then signed the documents and sealed Bird’s fate. Bird and Rankin were to be “forthwith Shot to death upon the deck of the U.S. Brig Niagara with all the solemnity due to the occasion previously announced in a general order throughout the squadron.”¹³ There is some evidence that appeals were made on behalf of Bird to have his sentence reduced to imprisonment because of his bravery in battle. In his book *History of the Battle of Lake Erie*, Captain William W. Dobbins, son of one of the officers of the Lake Erie squadron, related that over the years he had heard his father and the other officers talk about the case of James Bird. However, in response to these appeals for Bird’s life Dobbins stated that President Madison proclaimed that because “he had deserted from his post while in charge of a guard, in a time of war, therefore, must suffer as an example to others.”¹⁴ Bird’s rank as a non-commissioned officer and being, at the time of his desertion, in charge of a guard made his desertion, in the eyes of the President, that much worse. And, perhaps, because of his known bravery and his promotion the President may have seen the execution of Bird as an opportunity to demonstrate the severity of the military’s crackdown on deserters.

In an era where bad extremely roads were the norm, especially those heading westward to the frontier, the return trip of the President’s confirmation of the sentence was seemingly quick. It arrived back at Erie quite near to November 8. This is evidenced by the existence of Bird’s

¹³ Court Martial of Corporal James Bird and James Rankin, Transcripts of proceedings of general courts- martial and courts of inquiry, 1799-1867. Record Group 125.2.2, Volume 5, case 172. National Archives and Record Administration Microfilm Publication M273, Roll #7. National Archives and Record Administration, Washington D.C.

¹⁴ William W. Dobbins, *History of the Battle of Lake Erie*, 151.

solemn and sad farewell letter written to his parents on the following day from the hold of the U.S. Brig *Niagara*. It read:

Dear Parents,

I take my pen in hand to write a few lines to you which will bring bad news, but do not lament, nor make sad moans for the loss of your first beloved and dearest son James.

*Dear Parents, brothers and sisters, relations and friends, I do write you a most sad and dismal letter, such as never before came from any of your beloved children. I have often sat down & wrote a few lines to you with pleasure, but I am sorry at present to let you know my sad and deplorable situation. I am the most miserable and desolate child of the family. Dear Parents, let my brothers and sisters read this letter, for it is the last they can ever receive from my hand, for by the laws of our country I am doomed and sentenced to death for deserting from the marines on Lake Erie, and am now confined on board the United States brig *Niagara*.*

And O ! loving Parents my time is but short here on earth. I have but few moments to make my peace with my Maker. I leave you only for a short time here in this most troublesome world, but I hope that by constant prayer we shall meet in the world above to part no more.

I remain your most affectionate and beloved son until death, so amen.

*This from me
James Bird¹⁵*

Two mornings later, while the American squadron lay at anchor off of Erie, the morning rolls were called bringing all the crewmembers onto the main decks of their vessels. On board the *Niagara*, once all were formed, the sad event commenced. Bird and Rankin were brought up from below and upon reaching the deck were greeted with the sight of all their comrades standing at attention along one rail of the vessel, a line of Marines in the middle facing the opposite rail where there were two wooden coffins. Wearing trousers and shirtsleeves the men

¹⁵ “Wilkes-Barre, (Penn.) May 5. James Bird,” *The Evening Post*, New York, May 12, 1815, No. 4038. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

were led over to the coffins and made to kneel upon them. The charges, conviction and sentence were read aloud. Then the orders were given. “Make ready! Take aim! Fire!”

Their bodies were placed into the coffins, lowered over the rail into a ship’s boat and brought ashore for burial. Because of their crimes, Bird and Rankin would not be buried with their comrades in arms at the cemeteries used for other deaths amongst the sailors, soldiers, and Marines. Instead, they were buried on a spit of land on the shore of the lake without ceremony. An official notice of death was written and sent off to the men’s families. The Bird family received the announcement very soon after receiving the final letter from their son.¹⁶ Amongst the population of Bird’s hometown and surrounding area, as one of them stated, “the report of the execution of this man sent a thrill through [the] valley. Grief pervaded the entire population. He was a great favorite with the people, and the sensation produced by his death was as sincere as it was intense...When the facts of the case became known, it only added fuel to the burning fire of excitement.”¹⁷

That “fire of excitement” was felt by Charles Miner. As the publisher of *The Gleaner*, the local newspaper in Bird’s hometown, Miner knew of the execution but then too heard of James’ last letter home. He called upon the Bird family asking to see the letter. The experience of meeting Bird’s mother led Miner to editorialize and reflect upon of what he termed to be “the sad vicissitudes of fortune, attending a state of war” and that had any had been there to see the pain of the mother they too would question the fortunes of a war that had yet to bring about “great and certain benefits” for the public while it had created “so many causes of private grief.”

¹⁶ “Wilkes-Barre, (Penn.) May 5. James Bird,” *The Evening Post*, New York, May 12, 1815, No. 4038. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>

¹⁷ Hendrick B. Wright, *Historical Sketches of Plymouth, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania*(Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1873), 251.

Miner reflected upon James Bird's gallant service but yet he was not spared, while General William Hull, who had surrendered an entire army and the town of Detroit to a smaller force without firing a shot, received a full pardon. Miner also recalled the case of U.S. Army Sergeant George Brack, who had been convicted of killing Robert Dixon, a resident of Wilkes-Barre after he had enlisted in the army, yet did not receive a death sentence. But Bird, who "had performed more service than either, and his crime much less injurious or malignant, but there was no pardon."¹⁸ Miner followed his discourse with a copy of Bird's final letter. Similar to what happened with his November, 1813 column about Bird's heroism during the Battle of Lake Erie, this column flew through the newspaper circuit and was soon published from one end of the country to the other.

Now the nation knew James Bird as a flawed, repentant, but ever heroic young man who was disproportionately punished and was forced to leave a devastated mother, father, and family behind. Evident in his columns, James Bird's story struck a chord with Miner and over time it weighed on his mind. Eventually Miner, "who was no poet, but an occasional versifier," produced and printed in his paper a twenty-two stanza poem about James Bird; his heroics and tragic fate.¹⁹ Again, as before, Miner's work was reprinted in newspaper after newspaper spreading the tragic tale of James Bird in mournful verse throughout the country endearing Bird and the poem itself to the populace immediately.

During this period, poems by named and anonymous submissions to newspapers were regularly printed within the first few pages of newspapers, and many times on the front page. As

¹⁸ "Wilkes-Barre, (Penn.) May 5. James Bird," *The Evening Post*, New York, May 12, 1815, No. 4038. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

¹⁹ Charles F. Richardson and Elizabeth M. Richardson, *Charles Miner: A Pennsylvania Pioneer* (Wilkes-Barre PA: Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, 1916), 67.

was often the case, these printed poems would catch the eye of some aspiring vocalist and the words were put to tune. It was not long before this was done and the poem became the song *The Ballad of James Bird*.²⁰ In and of themselves, the verses constructed by Miner were pretty straightforward and, though for some minor embellishments for artistic purposes, follows the factual story of James Bird as Miner knew it as a resident and local newspaper editor. However, in the succeeding century and beyond, the story of James Bird, because of Miner's words, led to an ever expanding mythology that would ensure Bird, and the ballad, would remain a part of the fabric of American folklore and folk-life until the present.

According to University of Pennsylvania professors Tristram P. Coffin and Henig Cohen, as presented in their 1978 book *The Parade of Heroes: Legendary Figures in American Lore*, there are a number of qualities that convert an ordinary person into a folk hero. Though not fitting all qualities, the many versions of James Bird's story does encompass several of them. Those qualities that do fit are the exemplary service provided by the hero, an untimely death, trickery, the presence of a villain and occurrences of something supernatural. Coffin and Cohen, after all their studies of American folk heroes determined that "a folk hero, strictly defined, is a figure... about whom legends exist in the oral tradition, owned by no one, transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth."²¹ Undoubtedly the transformation of the life of James Bird into legend and then into American folklore began with Charles Miner's poem turned ballad being widely distributed in print throughout the country. However, more than the ballad, it was peoples' re-telling of his story in conjunction with the singing of the ballad and passing it on from one person, place, and generation to another. Like other folk heroes that began as true

²⁰ For the *Ballad of James Bird* in its entirety see the appendix.

²¹ Tristram P. Coffin, Hennig Cohen, *The Parade of Heroes: Legendary Figures in American Lore* (Garden City NY: Anchor Press, 1978), xxi.

historic figures, like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, there is a continuing effort “to make him more attractive” by adding “touches of color...new traits of character and new adventures.”²²

All this can be said of the legend of James Bird.

Quickly following the completion of the war a number of monographs, were produced concerning the “late war with Great Britain” or those that claimed to provide “*An Authentic History of the Second War for Independence*” as one title suggested. Written by Samuel Brown in 1815, this “authentic history” is one of the earliest books written on the War of 1812 and it covers “details of the military and naval operations from the commencement to the close of the recent war” in two volumes. Being such a hefty task Brown’s work, like most military history, gives a general overview of the conflict and presents battles, commanders, casualties, victories and defeats. Yet within this grand story Brown deemed it necessary to acquaint the reader with the “fate of James Bird.” Brown told the story of Bird’s bravery in battle and that he did indeed desert from his station, was condemned and executed. But Brown saw something amiss. He “fears that the blood of the brave and unfortunate Bird, rests upon the head of a tyrant officer.” Brown continued, “It must have been an energetic cause indeed, that would have induced a man of such undaunted courage...It must have been no ordinary grievance that could have induced a brave man thus situated, to desert the flag he had once so gloriously defended.”²³ Brown, though prescribing a possible answer of the tyrannical officer, is asking the question that must have been in the minds of many. Why did Bird desert his post? For those who saw his actions in the epic Battle of Lake Erie of proof as his “undaunted courage” and patriotism and the fact he was due such large sum of prize money for the victory on Lake Erie there had to be a legitimate

²² Ibid.

²³ Samuel Brown, *Authentic History of the Second War for Independence* (Auburn, NY: J. G. Hathaway, 1815), 153-154.

explanation other than that he was a common deserter.²⁴ Over the long course of the legend of James Bird, this was a continual question that produced numerous speculative answers. The answers often reflected those qualities noted by Coffin and Cohen in their *Parade of Heroes* such as deceit or villainy. Other answers recalled bucolic notions of the country boy that was either naïve, unaware, or distracted by love, or the growing American romance with the ideal frontiersman who had done his duty but had an aversion rigid authority and yearned again for the freedom of his simple pre-heroic life.

The most common reason given for Bird's desertion, which is one of the oldest and longest lasting, was that Bird and the men with whom he was captured were not leaving the service of their country, but, on the contrary, were eager to fight the enemy again. It has been long believed that Bird "learned of the intended attack by the British on New Orleans; that the South were arming for resistance, and he made up his mind to be with them. In company with some of his men, he left without orders."²⁵ Historically, this was impossible. Bird deserted June 4, 1814 while the British decision to attack New Orleans was not made until the fall of that year. Nonetheless this reasoning is found in a local history of Bird's home county, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, published in 1873 and echoes an earlier 1860 publication on the same subject. It probably developed among his family, friends and neighbors and gained traction locally. It appeared in all future publications written of the area's history by local historians through the remainder of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Still, as late as 1978 Coffin and Cohen continued to place the idea of a flight to New Orleans to fight again at the centerpiece of the

²⁴ Prize money is a sum of money paid to members of ship's crews if they were successful in capturing an enemy vessel. The amount received depended upon the value assigned to the captured vessel as ascribed by a government prize court and the rank of the crew member. Though he may not have known the exact amount Bird would have known he was eligible for a significant sum of money because the action resulted in the capturing of an entire British fleet. Being a private at the time of the battle Bird was destined to receive \$417.00. Nearly six years' worth of pay!

²⁵ Hendrick B. Wright, *Historical Sketches of Plymouth, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania*, 251.

historic story of James Bird. Other explanations that place him in a heroic view were posed by those who could not fathom James Bird as a true deserter. One being that Bird was following his beloved commander, Oliver Hazard Perry, who had been transferred back to the Atlantic seaboard so he could sail and fight next to him again.

In the more romantic versions of the story, Bird had left for home because he missed his loved ones, especially his fiancé. One version states that he had a furlough to leave for a period of time and over stayed his furlough because of love while in another he was compelled by love to desert but, in both versions, love induced tardiness or love induced desertion, he intended to return to duty and fight on for his country. Another romantic notion that had less to do with actual romance and more to do with the ever-present romantic notion in American literature and lore of the free spirited, free man of the frontier. Bird has been placed among those who enlisted but “had little knowledge of military law” and “were tenacious of their rights as citizens” and when the battle was over “Bird chose to follow his own view of rights and started for home.”²⁶ In the same vein Bird, “with little knowledge of military law” mistakenly believed his term of service was up. Still others put forth the notion that Bird’s term of enlistment was up or that he believed the war was over. Moreover, most disingenuously, that following the Battle of Lake Erie the war was over and Bird had the right to go home. All are patently false and result from the various authors’ deliberate desires to ignore obvious facts to maintain Bird’s hero status.

The question of the severity of the punishment for Bird has also led to speculation and grand tales that found fault and evil with others. Over the decades many wondered, as Charles Miner had in his newspaper in 1814 or Samuel Brown had in 1815, how a man who was wounded and praised and promoted for gallantry would suffer the ultimate penalty while so many others in like situations, but less courageous did not. For them there had to be something

²⁶ *The Centennial History of Chautauqua County* (Jamestown NY: The Chautauqua History Company, 1904), 91-92.

nefarious at work. That “something” for many was an evil officer who had reason to want Bird dead; for others it was a greedy backstabber and for some it was both. The idea of an officer with an axe to grind led to some of the most outlandish aspects of the legend of James Bird.²⁷ One variation on this theme had some minimal basis in reality. Following the Battle of Lake Erie, there was much speculation about the ineffectiveness of Perry’s second in command, Lt. Jesse Elliot, on board the brig *Niagara*. As Perry charged headlong into the British line with the *Lawrence*, the *Niagara* slowed and gave little assistance. It was not until Perry left the wrecked *Lawrence* to assume command of the *Niagara* that it finally went into action. This led to many people pointing the finger at Elliot for poor leadership, which had nearly cost the hero Perry his victory and his life. In fact, it split the Navy officer corps for years and led to at least one duel. In 1860, *The Annals of Luzerne County* stated that because “Bird had openly expressed his condemnation of the position and management of the *Niagara*...and that his free speech in relation to this subject, operated against him when on trial for his life.”²⁸ Though such talk may have had consequences had it come from a man within the officer corps it is highly unlikely that a corporal’s views were considered by officers if heard at all. A second notion of an evil officer took hold because of an article presented in the January 13, 1814 edition of the *Philadelphia Press*, written by “a correspondent” known only as K. T. B.²⁹ This theory suggested that because of his actions in battle “Bird was honored among soldiers, which excited the jealousy of a young lieutenant” which caused the lieutenant to push for Bird’s quick execution before a pardon could arrive.³⁰ A third version concerning an evil officer stated that the young lieutenant

²⁷ The old adage “an axe to grind” has an odd connection to the story worth noting. In an article for *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly*, historian and state archivist Charles B. Galbreath attributes the invention of the adage to Charles Miner, the author of the *Ballad of James Bird*.

²⁸ Stewart Pearce, *Annals of Luzerne County* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott & Co., 1860), 324.

²⁹ Charles F. Richardson and Elizabeth M. Richardson, *Charles Miner: A Pennsylvania Pioneer*, 76.

³⁰ Samuel R. Smith, *The Story of Wyoming Valley* (Kingston PA: by author, 1906), 59.

who ordered the firing squad was also in love with Bird's fiancé and of course wanted him dead to eliminate competition for her love.³¹ Of course this is a great story of tragedy and evil, but that is all it is for it is implausible that any of the officers sitting on that courts martial even knew of Bird's hometown origins never mind knowing, and having an infatuation with his hometown fiancé.

In a further attempt to place an evil person into the plot in an effort to lessen scrutiny of their hero, writers and story tellers focused on the person who turned Bird in to the authorities. Historically it is quite certain that it was the young man heading off to school that reported Bird and his fellow deserters leading to their arrest, but this fact was apparently too mundane for legends. Apart from the evil officer other stories that took hold invented men who wished to take advantage of Bird and, or his situation. In one tradition, Bird was returning to Erie from home at the end of a granted furlough (which never happened; a furlough or return home), but the bad roads slowed him down. Because he was late in returning a reward was offered. A person aware of the bounty tricked Bird by offering lodging for a night and then offered to take him by river on his boat to where the fleet was. Of course upon arrival the man presented Bird to the officers of the fleet and happily took the reward money.³² A second, similar version related that Bird, when home on furlough, was employed by a man to clear a tract of land, which of course he did quickly and easily like any frontier legend would have. The man, in awe of Bird's abilities did not want to give up his services so he convinced Bird the war was over and he did not have to return to service. When the man heard that a reward was being offered he told Bird that he had prize money waiting for him in Erie. The man would assist Bird and travel with him to Erie. When they arrive he too delivered up Bird and collected the reward.

³¹ Harold Thompson , *Body, Boots and Britches*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 344-345.

³² Thompson, *Body, Boots and Britches*, 344-345.

In all the tales, James Bird performed extraordinary service for others and suffered an untimely death. Some stories included a villain who, through the use of trickery or the abuse of his power, led to the downfall of the hero. Still, according to those who study folk heroes and their stories, notably Coffin and Cohen, something beyond the realm of this world had to take place to solidify Bird as a folk hero. Those who told and re-told the story of Bird did not disappoint and in their efforts to further establish James Bird as a folk hero the story tellers injected that needed dose of something supernatural. One instance has Oliver Hodge, a local historian from Ohio, re-telling the story of James Bird as it had been passed down in his region. Hodge recalled that in his “boyhood there was much talk of the shooting of James Bird,” and that because of the treachery and injustice of the episode “the morning of the execution was clouded in unusual darkness.”³³ A different version of the story, concerning the villainous officer, did not explicitly mention that something supernatural occurred, but led the audience to infer the possibility for themselves. Supposedly, the lieutenant that was responsible for Bird’s unjust trial and death was in such fear of being attacked by Bird’s ghost he had a sentry in his room the night following the execution. The following night, apparently with his fears allayed from the failure of Bird’s ghost to appear the previous night, the lieutenant decided no sentry in his quarters was necessary. The next morning it was discovered that the lieutenant committed suicide.³⁴ This left the audience to contemplate if Bird’s ghost had any part in this. Either way, at least one of the villains, too, met his untimely end. The suicide of the officer also appeared in other versions mainly because it had a hint of factual evidence behind it. Bird’s commanding officer, Lt. Benjamin Hyde, who was a part of the court that convicted him, did indeed commit suicide while in command at Erie in February 1815, three months after the execution of Bird. There is

³³ Oliver J. Hodges, *Reminiscences* (Cleveland: The Imperial Press, 1902), 15-16.

³⁴ Samuel R. Smith, *The Story of Wyoming Valley* (Kingston PA: by author, 1906), 59.

no evidence other than despair and personal debt led to Lt. Hyde's suicide but, after all, the possibility Bird's ghost avenging his death does add significant, supernatural richness to the legend.

Again, in 1882, nearly seventy years after Bird's execution, an event occurred that could be interpreted as natural or supernatural. The *Indianapolis Sentinel* reported that in early April of that year a large storm struck Lake Erie and toppled a large tree that had "grew and flourished" on the shoreline at Erie. Its roots "dragged up two skeletons. The owner of one, James Bird...has been the subject of sentimental poetry all through Pennsylvania for the last seventy years."³⁵ It was only understandable that the tree would flourish as it was nurtured by the blood of a wronged hero.

Another villain in the evolving narrative, the conniving man who turned Bird into the authorities for a monetary reward after using him to clear his land, also had to suffer supernatural punishment. One account concerning this man referred to "one singular circumstance connected with the tragic affair. . . . The land which the unfortunate Bird had assisted in clearing for his treacherous and unfeeling employer, never produced aught of vegetable life, but remains a desert tract of barren soil."³⁶ Similarly, another account transmitted to an author by old "Blind Sam," a fish peddler from western New York, had the grieving mother of Bird placing a curse upon the Judas-like character "who had sold out her boy for thirty pieces of silver." Moreover, Blind Sam insisted that the curse had continued to his own generation.³⁷ Thus, Charles and Elizabeth Richardson, in their work *Charles Miner: A Pennsylvania Pioneer*, concluded that contradictory facts, the mythologizing of the hero, the insertion of jealousy, villainy and the supernatural, none

³⁵ "James Bird, of Perry's Victory," *Indianapolis Sentinel*, April 13, 1882, Vol. XXXI, No. 103. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

³⁶ Theresa Thorndale, *Sketches and Stories of the Lake Erie Islands* (Sandusky OH: I. F. Mack & Brothers, 1898), 42.

³⁷ Harold Thompson, *Body, Boots and Britches*, 344-345.

of which appear within Charles Miner's verses and some having only the most marginal connection to the historical record, have all lead to creation of James Bird the folk legend.³⁸

The search for Bird the legend and use of Bird as a local hero continued into the 1930s. The archives of the United States Marine Corps, now housed at the National Archives in Washington D.C. hold a series of correspondences related to James Bird. The first correspondence in the series was from Congressman C. Murray Turpin, who represented the city and region in Pennsylvania that James Bird had once called home. The letter was addressed to the Marine Corps, asking if any research could be done on his behalf in regards to the record of James Bird. Congressman Turpin recalled hearing the story of James Bird from his father when he was a boy. At present, he wrote, the Wyoming County Historical and Genealogical Society of his home district "is anxious to honor the memory of Bird." They had good reason to be anxious.

Following the exhuming of Bird's skeleton by the storm in 1882, the remains were reburied in the vicinity of Erie. Then, somehow, someone again exhumed the remains of Bird and returned them to his home town. In July of 1935, as Turpin pointed out in his correspondence, the historical society had Bird's "remains standing in the corner of their hall awaiting official records."³⁹ The Marine Corps responded the following day with a detailed, fact filled synopsis of all the records they had regarding the service of James Bird. There was no mention of any of the the legendary aspects of James Bird the hero other than the fact of his promotion for his exemplary service during the Battle of Lake Erie.

³⁸ Charles F. Richardson and Elizabeth M. Richardson, *Charles Miner: A Pennsylvania Pioneer*, 76.

³⁹ Representative C. Murray Turpin to the United States Marine Corps, Washington D.C. July 30, 1935. Record Group 127.2.3, James Bird Personnel File, Records of the United States Marine Corps, Records of The Adjutant and Inspector's Department 1775-1971. National Archives and Record Administration, Washington, D.C.

The third entry in the series was a letter from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania State Archivist Curtis W. Garrison to Captain Dudley Knox, who was the officer in charge of the Office of Naval Records. As a part of the Wyoming County Historical and Genealogical Society's effort to memorialize Bird with "a marker," the Pennsylvania Historical Commission had to sign off on the accuracy of the marker's text. Garrison, who was charged with the task, was seeking confirmation of the belief that Bird's desertion was a patriotically induced attempt to join General Jackson in New Orleans, as the proposed text for the marker stated. Captain Knox referred the matter to the Marines Corps. The response to Mr. Garrison from the Marine Corps was a near exact copy of the response sent to Congressman Turpin with the exception that within this response the Marine Corps responded to the direct question of Bird's desertion. The official stance of the Marine Corps was that no information had been found "in the records to support the statement that the reason for Bird's desertion was – to join General Jackson at New Orleans."⁴⁰

Garrison's report to the Pennsylvania Historical Commission regarding the accuracy of the statement has not been located; however, the end result of the memorializing effort is known. A local hero's legend could not suffer as result of an official letter. Today, in Forty Fort Cemetery in Kingston, Pennsylvania the remains of James Bird lie under an engraved memorial that reads:

James Bird
Son of
John and Rebecca Montanye Bird
BORN DEC. 20, 1785
Served with great distinction in the Battle

⁴⁰ Major Clyde H Metcalf, Officer in Charge, Historical Section, United States Marine Corps to Curtis W. Garrison, archivist, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Public Instruction, October 5, 1935. Record Group 127.2.3, James Bird Personnel File, Records of the United States Marine Corps, Records of The Adjutant and Inspector's Department 1775-1971. National Archives and Record Administration, Washington, D.C.

of Lake Erie. For leaving his command later
to join army at New Orleans was condemned
shot and buried at Erie, NOV. 10, 1814,
but his countrymen in song and story have
honored him as a hero and a martyr.
Reinterred here NOV. 10, 1935 by
Wyoming Historical and
Geological Society and the
Luzerne County Chapter
Daughters of 1812
Erected by Luzerne County⁴¹

Legends, especially popular folk legends, rarely crumble even in the face of historical fact. In many cases, including that of James Bird, it is through the works of local, often non-professional historians and the circulation of local yarns and remembrances the human propensity to imagine and aggrandize is the impetus behind the creation and perpetuity of a legend. Over time, however, it was the song, the *Ballad of James Bird*, which perpetuated James Bird's memory beyond the borders of Luzerne County. The ballad has survived from its first publication until today's digital recordings by American folk singers, because of the fact that it relates "a thrilling subject of deep human interest...and has never gone out of the public mind"⁴² Former State of Ohio Archivist and historian, Charles B. Galbreath, commented how, in the rural areas "corn husking, apple cuttings, log rollings, and even quilting bees of long ago not infrequently closed with the rendition of the quaint, pathetic song."⁴³ Over the nearly two-hundred years of its existence, the song has remained untainted, unlike the historical record of James Bird and exudes power over those who sing and hear it. Examples of the song's continued importance are often found in newspapers. One such example comes from the *Jamestown Journal* printed in Jamestown, New York. In 1874, at a festival held in western New York

⁴¹ Kurt D. Moser, "James Bird," March 6, 2005, Digitized Photograph found at Findagrave.com, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=10568140&PIpi=161221>. (Accessed October 4, 2009).

⁴²Richardson, *Charles Miner*: 67.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 75.

known as Old Settlers Days, one of those “old settlers,” Judge Emory F. Warren brought for display the coat and sword worn by Bird at the Battle of Lake Erie. He also presented the ballad that was once “met with great popular acceptance and much sung in the vicinity.” The *Jamestown Journal* then reprinted the ballad its entirety so “that it may be preserved.”⁴⁴

Between 1889 and 1940 there were several instances where the story or ballad appeared in news print. In 1889, a reader of the Chicago based *The Weekly Inter Ocean* wrote to the paper’s “Curiosity Shop” column, seeking information about the story of the execution of James Bird, “concerning which a mournful ballad was composed.”⁴⁵ In 1914, the discovery of Bird’s farewell letter to his parents in the attic of a relative led to coverage of his story in a number of newspapers. Two years later, in its arts and poetry section, the *Dallas Morning News* printed the entire twenty four verse poem “James Bird.” Again, in 1933 and 1940, there were instances of people seeking information through newspaper submissions about James Bird himself or of the ballad. Both instances occurred in the *New York Times*. In its “Queries and Answers” section, the *New York Times* ran a series of reader generated questions and answers concerning the ballad and life of James Bird, apparently out of a desire to recall and reacquaint themselves with something from earlier in their life.

While James Bird remained an infrequent but persistent interest for a fraction of the public in the written record and the ballad continued to be sung by “the folk” others sought James Bird the man, the legend and ballad for more scholarly and commemorative reasons. In 1922, noted folklorist and University of North Dakota Professor Franz Rickaby was working on a significant manuscript that encased of a collection of folksongs and their lineage. He sought

⁴⁴ “Old Relic,” *Jamestown Journal*, July 3, 1874, Vol. XLIX, no. 9. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

⁴⁵ “James Bird,” *The Weekly Inter Ocean* (Chicago IL.), April 2, 1889, Vol. XVII, No. 2. American Historical Newspapers, NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

out historical documentation relating to James Bird by seeking out his military records. His request for those records, however, was flatly rejected because laws at that time forbade those who were not a legal heir, a military authority or a public official from obtaining personal records. This setback did not deter Professor Rickaby from seeking information elsewhere and he was able to include in his acclaimed book *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-boy* a section on James Bird and the ballad. Rickaby noted that the “ballad clung to the hearts of the American folk for nearly a century; a ballad which in my experience at least, varies less in its countless folk-versions than any other popular song. No detail in it has seemed superfluous, no stanza unnecessary, no sentiment false to the emotional realities of the thousands who heard, leaned, sung and believed it.”⁴⁶

During the 1930s, the Depression years, there was a desire to latch onto the good old days of Americana and capture it as much of what America was seemed to be lost forever. Often it was Government organizations that set out to accomplish this. As some set out to capture the images of American life with cameras others set out to capture the songs of the American past. Between 1937 and 1939 the Library of Congress added recording of the *Ballad of James Bird* sung by people from New Jersey, Ohio, Michigan and California forever securing the ballad as a part of Americana and American history.⁴⁷ Since the publication of Rickaby’s *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-boy* in 1925 through today there have been numerous anthologies produced by learned professionals that contain the *Ballad of James Bird*, often accompanied by a short historical snippet to place the song into context.

Since the recordings done in the 1930s, through eight decades that arguably have seen the greatest change in American music, there still resides the desire of many to recall their past

⁴⁶ Franz Rickaby quoted in Anne Werner, *Traditional American Folk Songs* (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 78.

⁴⁷ Anne Werner, *Traditional American Folk Songs* (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 78.

through music. Today contemporary folk artists still perform and record the “pathetic old song.” As recently as 2006, contemporary folk group “Chicken on a Raft” recorded a shortened version of *The Ballad of James Bird* and released it on their compact disc and made it available for digital download on the world wide web. Thus the legend and ballad of “poor, unfortunate Bird,” has survived two centuries in print, story, memorials, and recordings and now modern digital technology and as long as Americans feel the need to remember their past through song and legend, as they always have, “this ballad is far from extinct.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., *Native American Balladry* (Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1950) 41.

Appendix

The Ballad of James Bird

Sons of Pleasure, listen to me;
And ye daughters too give ear.
You a sad and mournful story
As was ever told shall hear.

Hull, you know, our troops surrendered,
And defenseless left the West;
Then our fleet was quick assembled,
The invader to resist.

'Mong the troops that marched to Erie,
Were the Kingstown volunteers ;
Captain Thomas then commanded,
To protect our West frontiers.
Tender were the scenes of parting;

Mothers wrung their hands and cried;
Maidens wept their loves in secret;
Fathers strove their tears to hide.

But there's one among the number,
Tall and graceful in his mien;
Firm his step, his look undaunted;
Ne'er a nobler youth was seen,

One sweet kiss he snatched from Mary,
Craved his mother's prayers once more,
Pressed his father's hand and left them
For Lake Erie's distant shore.

Mary tried to say "Farewell, James,"
Waved her hand but nothing spoke;
"Farewell, Bird, may Heaven protect you,"
From the rest at parting broke.

Soon he came where noble Perry
Had assembled all his fleet;
There the gallant Bird enlisted,
Hoping soon the foe to meet.

Where is Bird? The battle rages,
Is he in the strife, or no?
Now the cannons roar tremendous,
Dare he boldly meet the foe?

Yes, behold him-see!-with Perry,
In the self-same ship they fight
Though his mess mates fall around him,
Nothing can his soul affright.

But behold a ball has struck him,
See the crimson current flow ;
" Leave the deck," exclaimed brave Perry ;
"No," cried Bird, "I will not go.

Here on deck I'll take my station,
Ne'er will Bird his colors fly,
I'll stand by you, gallant Captain,
Till we conquer, or we die."

And he fought, though faint and bleeding,
Till our stars and stripes arose,
Victory having crowned our efforts,
All triumphant o'er our foes.

But did Bird receive a pension?
Was he to his home restored?
No, nor ever to his bosom
Clasped the maid his heart adored.

But there came most dismal tidings
From Lake Erie's distant shore;
Better, far, poor Bird had perished
'Midst the battle's awful roar.

" Dearest Parents," read the letter,
"This will bring sad news to you,
Do not mourn, my best beloved.
Though this brings my last adieu.

" Brothers, sisters, read this letter,
'Tis the last you'll have from me ;
I must suffer for deserting
From the brig Niagara."

Though he fought so brave at Erie,
Freely bled, and nobly dared
Let his courage plead for mercy,
Let his noble life be spared.

Sad and gloomy was the morning,
Bird was ordered out to die ;
Where's the breast so dead to pity
But for him must heave a sigh?

See him march, and hear his fetters,
Harsh they clank upon the ear;
Yet his step is firm and manly,
For his breast ne'er harbored fear.

See! he kneels upon his coffin
Sure his death can do no good.
Save him !-Hark, O God ! they've shot him !
Now his bosom streams with blood.

Farewell, Bird! farewell, forever;
Friends and home he'll see no more;
For his mangled corpse lies buried
On Lake Erie's distant shore.

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