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Episode 340: Nicholas Guyatt, Prisoners of War and the War of 1812

- Announcer:** [00:00:00](#) You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.
- Liz Covart:** [00:00:04](#) *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
- Liz Covart:** [00:00:19](#) Hello, and welcome to episode 340 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart. The War of 1812 is really an underknown conflict in United States history. It's not a war like the American Revolution or the American Civil War that many Americans think about or dwell upon. In fact, it's also not a war where Americans can claim that they won; if anything, the war of 1812 ended in this stalemate. Nicholas Guyatt, a Professor of North American History at the University of Cambridge, joins us to investigate the War of 1812 and the experiences of American prisoners of war. Specifically, Nick will use details from his book, *The Hated Cage: An American Tragedy in Britain's Most Terrifying Prison*, to take us inside Great Britain's Dartmoor Prison and the experiences of the American sailors who were held there.
- Liz Covart:** [00:01:15](#) Now, during our exploration of Dartmoor Prison, Nick reveals a brief history of the War of 1812 and its causes, the history of Dartmoor Prison and why it was thought to be an ideal place to house Great Britain's prisoners of war, and details about how American POWs experienced life inside Dartmoor Prison until the prison was evacuated in July, 1815. But first, did you know that you can support this podcast and receive a bonus episode each month? It's true! *Ben Franklin's World* has a subscription program, where for \$5.99 per month, or \$60 per year, you can help support this podcast and receive ad-free versions of each new episode and a monthly bonus episode. A subscription to *Ben Franklin's World* also makes a great gift for all the history lovers in your life. So, for more information about the *Ben Franklin's World* Subscription program and how to become a subscriber, visit benfranklinworld.com/subscribe. That's benfranklinworld.com/subscribe. Alright, are you ready to explore the War of 1812, and the experiences of American prisoners of war? Allow me to introduce you to our guest historian. Joining us is a professor of North American History at



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the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Jesus College. He's the author of numerous articles and books, including *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Segregation*, which we explored in episode 96, and most recently *The Hated Cage: An American Tragedy in Britain's Most Terrifying Prison*. Welcome back to Ben Franklin's World, Nicholas Guyatt!

Nick Guyatt: [00:03:03](#)

Hi Liz, so great to be with you again!

Liz Covart: [00:03:06](#)

So, Nicholas's book, *The Hated Cage*, tells a relatively unknown story of American prisoners of war who were captured during the War of 1812 and held at Dartmoor Prison, which is a prison located in a really remote region of southwestern England. Nick, I know we're keen to get into the story of American POWs at Dartmoor Prison, but I wonder if we could actually start with the War of 1812. Would you help jog our memories and remind us of what this war was about, when it took place, and who were the participants in this war?

Nick Guyatt: [00:03:35](#)

The war of 1812, such a fascinating, honestly still relatively unknown or like underknown conflict in American history, and I think one of the reasons that we know relatively little about it, or it doesn't have that same traction as the Revolutionary War or the Civil War is, it's more of a stalemate for the United States and there are some aspects of it which are kind of quite embarrassing for the young republic, and there are other elements of it which, to us today, perhaps we wouldn't look back on with the same kind of pride that people did in the moment. So, the easiest way for me to describe it would be, there are sort of three parts of it. There's the territorial part of it, and that in particular involves the efforts of Americans in the West—especially in what was the Northwest territory, the Indiana territory, so what's now the Midwest—to try to overcome Indigenous resistance to US expansion. And that process ended up being far more of 1812 because Britain was helping various Indian Nations.

Nick Guyatt: [00:04:32](#)

So there was that kind of like rumbling, ongoing conflict up there in the Northwest, which is the territorial core in that bit of North America. Then it was also an effort to try and take Canada. So, a lot of fighting in Canada around the Great Lakes. That was on the part of the US, to see if the Canadians could be persuaded to realize the US was the way to go, not the first or the last time



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in American history the US imagined that Canada might have wanted to come into the United States. And then, the other phase of the war, and perhaps the one that really gets the war started—although interestingly, the one that goes missing in the eventual treaty that ends the war—is the war at sea with Britain. And, to cut a long story short, at the end of the American Revolution, the British continued the practice that they’d used throughout the eighteenth century, which is when they found a ship containing English speaking white people, they would effectively take some of those white sailors onto their own vessels and put them in the Royal Navy. Now, before 1776, that was fine—or it wasn’t “fine,” you know, that was legal because North American colonies were part of Britain. After 1783, it was definitely not the way to go, but it kept happening. So, in effect, the Royal Navy’s determination to try and undermine American neutrality and the rights of American sailors at sea, formed a kind of third motive, or the third terrain of the War of 1812. So, in effect, when people describe a “second War of American Independence,” there is some truth to that, but it was also a war to consolidate and expand American territorial control against Indigenous people, and that was a really very important war, and that was probably the bit the US ended up doing best on. Which, again, is a reason, perhaps, we look back on the war now with different feelings than people had at the time about that process.

Liz Covart: [00:06:20](#)

You mentioned that there are really two things going on with this war with Great Britain at sea. That (one) the United States was trying to be neutral and (two) that the British Navy was impressing American sailors into the British Navy. So, Nick, what is the wider context for this? What was going on with the British Navy that they needed American sailors in its ranks, and why did the Americans seek neutrality? What was going on in the world that the United States really just didn’t want to be a part of?

Nick Guyatt: [00:06:48](#)

Well, let me take those questions in reverse. I think neutrality is such an interesting subject. Because you know, if you look, Washington’s Farewell Address in 1796, Washington’s like, “no entangling alliances.” Sometimes when we hear about that Farewell Address, we kind of think it’s a blueprint for isolationism, by, you know, “the US isn’t going to bother with Europe, it could just do its own thing in North America,” well



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actually what Washington was saying, what most of the founding generation believed, is that America should be deeply engaged in Europe commercially but not politically. And in a strange kind of way, all the wars in Europe that followed the French Revolution—so, Europe is basically at war from 1793-94 all the way through until 1815—that twenty-year period of war in Europe is really good news for the United States. Now, that may sound weird, but let me explain: it's good news because all of the agriculture in Europe is getting disrupted, huge numbers of people that might be growing food or catching fish are actually fighting each other.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:07:49](#)

So the fish and the crops that come from North America are incredibly useful and valuable to people in Europe. So, from America's commercial perspective, being neutral does not mean being isolated from Europe. But think about the bad guys—well, depending on whether you're Jefferson or Hamilton, maybe the bad guys are Britain or France, it's hard to determine—let's look at our protagonists, the British and the French, they all don't like the idea that Americans might trade freely with both sides. So, to cut a long story short, there's a variety of ways in which the British try and prevent the Americans from trading with the French, and the French try and prevent the Americans from trading with the British. So, that's one of the tensions surrounding this idea of independence at sea for the United States; the US has this vision of neutrality that's commercial, but actually in many ways it's really advantageous to the US, and it's rooted in European war. The European powers don't want the other side to get any advantage from trading with the US. Now, on the subject of impressment, think about the Royal Navy as this gigantic, 150,000-man-strong fighting force, that just strides the oceans of the world, but it needs more people, particularly at a time of war, and not just anyone – I don't know about your sailing skills, Liz, but I can tell you I'd be a pretty crappy sailor, they wouldn't want me. So, if I were hanging out at a pub in Boston or whatever, I wouldn't be getting clocked; they'd be like, "he doesn't know what he's doing." The place to impress people isn't in the tavern, usually; it's at sea. Because when you stop a ship at sea you can be pretty sure the men who are on it are going to know how to sail a ship. So, the Royal Navy is constantly, constantly looking for new men. Now to be fair to the British—and you can probably tell I am British, so I am pretty



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biased here—there were actually a ton of Brits on American ships. So, Brits and Irishman, who were effectively chosen to sail on American merchant ships, and nationality and sailors is kind of a tricky subject anyway, like figuring out whether a sailor was British or American was not always very easy. So, the Royal Navy basically didn't spend much time checking the paperwork, they would just grab the men that they needed. Because they could, because they had the power—the US had a really puny navy, Britain had a massive navy, so, in effect, power on the British side is what made impressment possible. But politically, all of this resentment and pressure is building back at home in the United States, to do something about the outrage of impressment, so that's why it becomes one of the banner causes of the war, when it breaks out in June of 1812.

Liz Covart:

[00:10:21](#)

The story of neutrality, where the United States tried to stay clear of committing to either England or France during the Napoleonic wars, that's something we talk about if and when we ever talk about the War 1812. British impressment of American sailors is also something we talk about here in the United States when we discuss the War of 1812. But Nick, you also mentioned a third cause: you mentioned that the War of 1812 was also about the American dispossession of Native Americans from their homelands, all in an attempt to assert more American control over sovereign Native nations and to clear the pathway for American expansion West. And that's a story, Nick, that we don't tend to talk about when we talk about the War of 1812. Although, it is a story that we're increasingly starting to see in the new history books that are coming out about the War of 1812 in this period of early American expansion.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:11:11](#)

It's an absolutely critical part of the war, but as you said, it's one that until fairly recently, has been less noticed by historians. Although, Liz, I should say, at the time it was very visible to white Americans, who were actually delighted by what was going on. In essence, during the period after 1789, so when the federal government gets going, there is a low-level war for the American Northwest. So, by “the American Northwest,” now, I mean pretty much everything north and west of the Ohio River, so if you think about all of those states in what's now the Midwest, that whole region, will it become part of the United States? Well, it's in the Northwest Ordinance, the Northwest



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Territory, but it still belongs to Indigenous people. So, from 1789 onwards, there's a concerted effort by the federal government, by settlers, by state governments, by territorial governments, to try to grab more and more and more of that land. Clearly, Indigenous people are upset about this, so this low-level war sometimes becomes a very high-level, hot war. Happens at the beginning of the 1790s, but it's beginning again in the late 1800s, under the leadership of two Shawnee Indians, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa. Their plan is to try and unite Indigenous people in a giant crescent all the way from the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast and to get a single Indigenous movement to try to roll back the United States. And Britain comes into the picture in a really interesting way because a big design of the British after the American Revolution is to see if they can force the United States into creating a kind of buffer zone between Canada and the US.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:12:51](#)

And again here, that territory to the northwest of the Ohio River is critical. In the British kind of strategic vision, the plan will be to support Indian sovereignty in that region, so you can have this buffer between British settlers, British settlements, and the United States. So again, it's one of the great what-ifs of American history to me: what if those Indians had been successful with their British allies, and they had been able to craft a durable Indigenous national state, comprising lots of different Indian nations within that region of North America? I mean, now it sounds ridiculous, right? "Oh, that could never have happened," but that's what American policymakers feared, and that's what the British were looking for. So, the kind of tawdry part of this is that for Britain they weren't interested in Indian rights, right? I mean Britain was just interested in the geostrategic bit, like, "how can we get these Indians to do work for us?" But, for indigenous people, that line of the Ohio River was so critical to imagining independence and autonomy for their nations and ways of life, and the war is the moment where for that region, that possibility really begins to close.

Liz Covart:

[00:14:02](#)

So, if we take another step back from these three causes of the War of 1812, what we can see is a war that really had two fronts. One front was on land and on the Great Lakes in North America and the other front was really on the Atlantic Ocean. And combined, these two fronts would've led to all sorts of opportunities for the capture of prisoners of war. So, Nick, would



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you talk to us about how prisoners were captured and what it would've been like to be a prisoner of war during the War of 1812?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:14:32](#)

Yeah, I'm not sure there was ever a good time to be a prisoner of war. Although, let me back up. So, our sponsor, Benjamin Franklin, when he was talking about the American Revolution, he mentioned that once upon a time, when you captured people in a war, you would put them to death. So, we're talking now about the Medieval period and before. And then, in in the Early Modern period you might capture people and enslave them; wasn't it awesome, Franklin said, that we were moving towards a place where when you captured prisoners of war, you'd treat them humanely? And that in a sense is very much the kind of late-seventeenth and eighteenth century story, that amongst quote, unquote "civilized" nations—and again really want to emphasize that this is an emerging humanitarian understanding of POWS that applies to quote, unquote "civilized" countries, so European, later you have the United States—the new kind of rhythm of this is that you will treat prisoners humanely, and you will look to exchange them when you can. So, the theory behind capturing prisoners of war has changed fundamentally from a moment in history when you either kill or enslave them. The theory is, once you've captured them, they're actually not really guilty of anything, they're not criminals. But obviously you want to find ways to prevent them from being helpful to the enemy, you also want to ensure that if the enemy has any of your prisoners of war, you can find ways to exchange the prisoners you have with the ones in enemy custody. So that's kind of like the ground rules for this by the end of the 18th century.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:16:03](#)

But, of course, like every great plan, once it meets reality, it begins to fall to pieces, and during the Revolutionary War, there were some particularly notorious episodes of prison ships, for example, in New York City, which were incredibly squalid, where there were insanely high death rates for incarcerated Americans—these are British prison ships. In British-occupied New York during the revolution, they had like 40% mortality rates. So, that was true, too, with some of the prison hulks off the south coast of Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. So again, there was this sense that there's a rhetoric of humanity and a way you should treat prisoners of war humanely, but then there were



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practices of incarceration which were actually totally undermining the rhetoric. So, I think for Britain and the United States going into the War of 1812, the challenge is to try and find a way of making the rhetoric and the kind of facilities, the logistics, the realities of incarceration line up. And that was a big challenge.

Liz Covart:

[00:17:04](#)

Yeah, it sounds like a big challenge. And speaking of this challenge, we've also spoken with historian Ken Miller, who's a historian who's studied British POWs in American camps during the American Revolution. And during our conversation in episode 48, we of course talked a little bit about the prison ships and the Hudson River and how Americans had prison ships too. But we also talked about how Americans would set up these POW camps to move German and British prisoners of war so that they would be as far inland as possible—they did not want them near the water, so they settled them in places like Lancaster, Pennsylvania and in the interior of Virginia to keep those prisoners not only out of the way but also away from British naval raids. And during their stay in the interior of what is now the United States, these prisoners of war, they were sort of rented out or lent out to local farmers and families who needed their help running their farms and local businesses. Was this hiring out of prisoners and moving them away from battlefields something that still went on during the War of 1812?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:18:09](#)

So, originally at least, the rhetoric begins, you shouldn't be kind of hiring people out, or kind of exploiting their labor, whenever. So, the rhetoric surrounding this is you should keep prisoners safe, you should put them in facilities where they'll be healthy and they'll be well looked after, and you play the waiting game. Now ideally, the way that war is supposed to work, you would hope or expect that because people are being captured on both sides, no one would actually be a prisoner of war for all that long, right? So, the problem really begins to set in where you get situations in which one is taking far more prisoners than the other. And here we come back to the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy was incredibly good at taking prisoners of war, just because the royal was so big and bad that it went around pretty much capturing everyone and everything. So, what that meant was that with France, and also with the United States when the war began in 1812, Britain quickly ended up with a surplus of



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US prisoners. So, in the British prison facilities, you tended to have far more Americans than you had British prisoners in the American facilities. So, in effect, this problem of what to do with prisoners of war, you do see it in the North American space, and those people at the very edge—in Alan Taylor’s book *The Civil War of 1812*, he goes into a lot of detail on the War of 1812 within the US, but the real action for me is happening in Britain because that’s where you’ve got literally tens of thousands of prisoners building up. And these guys can’t easily be exchanged because the Americans or the French just don’t have enough prisoners to exchange them, so, then you start getting into this very unnerving problem of having indefinite prisoners of war who may not end up being freed until war ends.

- Nick Guyatt:** [00:19:56](#) But if you’re captured by the British and you’re French in 1804 and you’re still in captivity in 1814, I mean that really sucks and some of those guys end up in the prison I write about, in Dartmoor.
- Liz Covart:** [00:20:07](#) That’s a good transition Nick, as we should start discussing the details of Dartmoor Prison and the experiences of POWs who lived in Dartmoor prison. So, Nick, what is the history of Dartmoor prison? When was it planned and when was it built?
- Nick Guyatt:** [00:20:23](#) Yeah, the first thing I should do, Liz, is tell you it’s still there. Actually, I didn’t tell you this, I went this summer. So, I got a tour of the prison, which is prison, incredibly. And it is a story I get into a bit in the book, but it was a real kind of thrill or weird or something, actually to be inside the working prison when I was there, back in July this year, in 2022. I didn’t have a chance to visit it, because of Covid, before I published the book, but now I’ve seen it, I really have a sense of how impressive it is kind of up close, and how kind of terrifying it would be to be a prisoner there. And for any of your listeners who have been to the south of England, Dartmoor is about fifteen miles north of Plymouth, so it’s both in the middle of nowhere, but it’s also, like, really close to Plymouth. I mean, it’s only 15 miles, a day’s march from Plymouth. So, it’s kind of the perfect place to put a prison, because it was close to the major Royal Navy station at Plymouth, but, honestly, it was also in this incredibly blasted, sort of, like, empty, treeless terrain. Kind of on a big plane, it’s about a thousand meters, I’d guess, above sea level, so for



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Britain that's pretty high. Very, very bad weather, extremely exposed. And if you imagine for a second you were a prisoner there, wearing, like, a yellow jumpsuit with sort of diagonal arrows on it, if you got out of Dartmoor, you'd definitely have to go like another ten miles to find anywhere, you know, where there's another human being, and you'd be really conspicuous because there are no trees. So, in that sense it was the perfect place to put a prison. In pretty much every other sense, it was the worst place to put a prison, because it was like really dire out there, just really depressing. These guys weren't supposed to have done anything wrong, so why would you want to put them in such a gothic hellscape?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:22:07](#)

Also, the weather stuff is really, really important because, back then—so, when I'm talking about, the prison begins taking people in 1805—the theory of prisons is that basically you need air to circulate. So, what you want to do is, not have any windows, you want basically big gaps in the walls high up to let air come in, but what that meant was all prisons in Britain were insanely cold. Dartmoor though was spectacularly cold and there was so much rain and snow that enough can come through these windows to make it feel like it's raining indoors. So, for that reason, it was a terrible place to build a prison, but the reason it came into being was partly because Britain really needed what they called a land prison, because they had so many prisoners coming from the French wars in 1805, so they couldn't put all of them on prison hulks anymore. The hulks are all decommissioned naval ships basically used as prison ships and they were overflowing, they were unsanitary, so there was a kind of a need for a land prison. But the other reason Dartmoor happened is because the guy who came up with the idea, a guy called Thomas Tyrwhitt, was a big friend of the Prince of Wales, so the guy who was about to be Prince Regent, the future King George IV, and I get into it in the book how crazy the story is of the relationship between this Tyrwhitt guy, kind of courtier of the future King George IV, and George IV himself. George basically owned all this land in Cornwall—the Prince of Whales still owns that land; it's called the Duchy of Cornwall. So, partly to give his friend Tyrwhitt something to do, he allowed him to have a peppercorn lease on this massive patch of land that the prison could get built upon. So, it was partly a kind of location thing, partly the kind of strategic need in the world at that point, given



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the way the war was going, and also partly a bit of old-fashioned graft and corruption, which meant Dartmoor ended up being built where it was. He started in 1805, and it welcomed its first person through its doors in May of 1809.

Liz Covart:

[00:23:56](#)

While you were describing Dartmoor, my mind was busy creating images of what you were describing. So, I have this image in my mind of a big stone monstrosity that was cold, very cold at times, damp and dank, I'm not sure what the flooring was made of, but I have to imagine that it was wood or dirt flooring. And I'm also not sure whether Dartmoor is the type of place where prisoners had space to socialize, or whether it was built on a model kind of like Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, which was a place that prided itself on prisoner isolation. So, pretty much everyone had their own solitary cell. So, I'm curious how much my mind painted me an accurate of Dartmoor, or what corrections need to be made so that we can have an accurate picture of Dartmoor.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:24:42](#)

The big difference between Dartmoor and a modern prison, first it's circular. So, in some respects the image you have in your mind is that famous Jeremy Bentham idea of prison, the panopticon, a big kind of circular prison. I don't want to leave that in your mind for too long because in some ways it's not like a panopticon, but it is round. So, there's a gigantic, mile-circumference stone wall surrounding the prison. Then it's kind of divided into two halves of the semicircle. The bottom half is all the various admin buildings, there's big yards have markets in, and in the top part of the semicircle, there are seven prison blocks going in a kind of sun shape, in a kind of radius of sun beams spreading out from the center. Just like you said, Liz, if you were going to Eastern State Penitentiary or Auburn or one of those kind of facilities that's built during this moment, what you think about the penitentiary is all about the cell. So, the penitentiary is about putting an individual in an enclosed space. That's not happening at Dartmoor. In fact, each one of these seven prison buildings has three open floors. The floors are only broken up by stanchions and the stanchions are there for you to sling your hammock in-between. And then when you're finished sleeping in the morning, take down the hammock and basically you have this big open space except there are these poles everywhere. So, that's the three floors of each one of these seven



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buildings. So, what that meant was you could get anywhere between a thousand and fifteen hundred men in each of these prison blocks. And get this: during the day, for the most part, particularly toward the second to last American captivity at Dartmoor, those prisons are open during the day. So, essentially, you can move around and walk from one prison block to the other. So again, our idea of a modern prison, they're all about the individual effect of being locked in a cell, isn't happening here, not just because we've not reached that moment in prison history, but because critically, again these guys are not supposed to be criminals. So, the idea is that this is supposed to be a kind of humane space. And for me, as I'm writing the book one of the fascinating things about it is figuring out all the ways in which the people running the prison come to realize, whenever you coop people up, like in their thousands, they're not your friends. And you are not their friend. And that's going to make it very, very hard to run a kind of benevolent prison of war. So, all those things about the architecture of Dartmoor mean in some ways it's a lot more open plan within the prison than a modern prison would be. But you're totally right about the bleakness, and the granite, and the kind of leakiness. From the outside it looks terrifying, and if you do manage to get over the wall or under the wall, your chances of making it off the moor are pretty small.

Liz Covart:

[00:27:25](#)

Okay, now that we know about the prison and its layout, let's talk about the prisoners. Nick, how did American prisoners of war find themselves in England? Because if we think about the British Empire in the early nineteenth century, it has military bases in other places where it could have held these American prisoners. I'm thinking of places like Canada, Jamaica, Barbados, places much closer to the North American continent. So, why did the British bring American prisoners to England instead of taking them to Canada or one of its Caribbean colonies?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:27:59](#)

Well, Liz, I would never want you to undersell Britain, especially global Britain. Clearly, I'd be very unpatriotic if I let you do that. So, what you need to know is that there's an entire network stretching around the world of British prisons. There are British prisons in Capetown, there are British prisons in Nova Scotia, there are war prisons in Bermuda, in Barbados, in Calcutta, they are all over the place—in Sierra Leone – they're everywhere. So, what happens during the war is that lots of American prisoners



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who get captured, say, just off the coast of North America, they'll get taken to Canada, or maybe Bermuda, or Barbados. Then as the war goes on, especially into 1814, some American ships are captured much closer to Britain, and they'd be taken straight to Britain just because it's closer. So, this global prison complex, Britain's got all these prisons all over the world, second half of 1814, the French war is over, all of the French prisoners are removed from Dartmoor and sent back to France, that creates space for at least another five thousand prisoners and British officials make the decision that it'll be better to concentrate all the American prisoners from around the world in Dartmoor. Partly because it's cheaper for them to maintain a prison in Britain than it is for them to have lots and lots of provisioning and supplying going on of prisons in South Asia and South Africa, wherever else, so for our poor American prisoners, that may have been captured off the coast of Boston, say, and then taken off to Nova Scotia, they find themselves in the summer of 1814 transported across the Atlantic to Dartmoor, terrified they might die on the way, not at all certain that they'll survive how much longer the war is going to go on in a British prison, it's a horrendous ordeal. And again, I think the big difference between being a prisoner of war rather than being a kind of criminal prisoner, convict, is a convict knows how long they're in for; that's not true for a prisoner of war, and that uncertainty about the length of the sentence is what I think really, really begins to drive our Americans to despair in Dartmoor prison.

Liz Covart:

[00:30:04](#)

Okay, well let's take this example you've just given us a little deeper. So, we're an American prisoner of war, and thus far we've spent our entire captivity in prison in Nova Scotia. And now, all of the sudden we find ourselves placed on a ship headed to the southwest coast of England where we're going to be housed in Dartmoor prison. So, Nick, what was our journey to Dartmoor like, and what kind of experiences would we have had once we were inside Dartmoor?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:30:31](#)

So listen, I actually have a character in the book, a guy called Frank Palmer who actually expresses all of this beautifully. He basically gets captured as a young man, so he's basically a teenager, ends up going off to sign up for privateering, so he's not in the US Navy, he's on a private ship that's agreed to go off



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and try and prey on British shipping, he doesn't even make it into the Atlantic, gets captured by the Royal Navy on his first day as a privateersman, and then ends up being taken to the Caribbean, then ends up being evaced to Nova Scotia, to the British prison there in the spring of 1814. And then in the summer of 1814 he finds himself being taken to Dartmoor. And we know a lot about Frank Palmer because he left behind a diary. And the sources for this project are really interesting because lots of people wrote about their experience of Dartmoor many years later. Just a handful of prisoners wrote about their experience *in* the prison; they had ink, they had some kind of pen, and they had paper. And this guy, Frank Palmer, is one of them, and he actually is a really great guide to that sense of astonishment, bewilderment, and despair that accompanied the news that he was going to be moved back to Britain. He said, "look, I'm in North America, like that's where I'm from. I'm in a British prison, why on earth would you want to move me to Britain?" When he gets to Dartmoor, that sense of hope: constantly being crushed, so almost like hope is a drug which you don't want to take too much of, because coming down from it is so terrible. He writes about all that stuff very plainly, but also very, very powerfully. So, he became one of the kind of main sailors I wrote about in the book, because you've got such an immediate access to what a nightmarish time he had, this experience is very clear in what he's written.

- Liz Covart:** [00:32:21](#) So what else did Palmer have to say about his time in Dartmoor, other than it was both horrific and hopeless? Did he talk about anything else when he was writing about his experiences?
- Nick Guyatt:** [00:32:32](#) The prisoners who wrote about their experiences in journals at the time tended to dwell upon the privations, the boredom, the uncertainty, and again that sort of difficult cocktail of hope and hopelessness, that sort of shuffling between believing the war might be about to end, and being crushed by the fact that it wasn't ending. And I should say that although newspapers were banned in Dartmoor, for a variety of reasons they got smuggled in. Partly because people who were brought to the prison, new prisoners would very often either have them, or would just have read a newspaper before they came in. And there was an incredible shift in the prison population after the French are released in May of 1814. The next six months, basically five



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thousand Americans, close to five and a half thousand, come to the prison. So, you go from having a thousand Americans in the prison register, to having nearly six and a half thousand by the start of 1815. So, there are lots of new arrivals bringing lots of information about what's going on outside Dartmoor. And many of these rumors are about war. It's like, "well, look, Baltimore didn't fall," or "Washington didn't fall" or oh dear, they burned Washington." So, all of these things are being passed around like a game of telephone in prison, and again, despair or hope are kind of zigzagging their ways through the different prison blocks. So that sense of boredom, that sense of hopelessness, and I would say fear about what might happen to you is very much there in the accounts of the men who wrote journals contemporaneously. What's interesting, I think, is that those people that wrote memoirs much later, ten, twenty, or thirty years after what happened, tended to be a bit more romanticized. So, they tended to focus on all the amazing stuff going on at Dartmoor. And again, we can get into this if you like. You know, the fact that there was a library there, or the fact that you could get dance lessons, or the fact that there was a baseball team—okay, don't tell me, but I think it was a baseball team, I know this is the most controversial thing you could ever talk about in the history of baseball—or the fact that there were theatrical performances, right? So, these were the kinds of things that tended to make it into the memoirs published later. Now, my view is that both of those are true. It was an incredibly boring, desperate, depressing, hopeless place, and there was also quite a lot to do. But it's interesting as a historian to think about how the sources emphasize those two elements of being there so differently based on the proximity of the historical account. So, if you were in the moment, you didn't tend to talk about the great Shakespeare play you went to see last night. I mean, people mention it, they just didn't seem too jazzed by it. Whereas twenty years later they're like, "whoa! That performance of Othello was amazing!"

Liz Covart:

[00:35:17](#)

That's a really great insight. You know, when you're a historian, you really try to get information from all sides of a story or an event. And it sounds like, Nick, that you found that you had these memories from the prison that were written in these memoirs twenty or thirty years after the war, and you also have these in the moment accounts of what was going on during a



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prisoner's stay in Dartmoor. Did you happen to find any records from the British perspective? Did any guards keep journals or write memoirs? Did the prison keep any sort of records that are still available about the prisoners so that you could determine if and what these other prisoners were saying in their day-to-day journals or their nostalgic memoirs were accurate?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:35:54](#)

Yeah, well you know us Brits, we love bureaucracy, bureaucracy is, like, in our mothers' milk. So, fortunately, a lot of that material has survived. There is a slightly maddening aspect about the archival record on the British side, in that the letters that were actually written by the prison governor—who was a Royal Navy captain that everyone called “the Agent” rather than the Governor, but that's basically what he was, the prison governor—those letters, they haven't survived. So, we don't know what happened to them. But what we have is a very brief account of what was in those letters in a big, kind of a handbook in London. And we also have the responses of the group within the Admiralty, just called the Transport Board, so it was a part of the British government that dealt with the prison system. So, you can actually kind of piece together lots of what went on in the prison from the replies coming from London. So, for example, let's say there was a prison seamstress who ended up getting into trouble because she brought a gun to prison; we don't have the letter from the prison governor saying, “hey, Mary the seamstress brought a gun into the prison and all these bad things happened,” what we have is the letter back from London, which says, “you should dismiss Mary, the seamstress, bringing guns into prisons is banned.” So, in a way, as a historian what you're trying to do is tell that story from both sides, when actually you only, kind of, have half of it. But the really key document, and the one I get into a lot of detail on in the book, is the prison register. So it's basically this gigantic, six-and-a-half-thousand-line register of every prisoner who came into Dartmoor on the American side, and it tells you so much about each prisoner, not just where they came from, how old they were, but also what they looked like, including what their skin color was—which, again enables you to do all kinds of things you can't do from many records like this at the time. It tells you what ship they were on, it tells you what happened to them in the prison—whether they died in the prison, when they were released—all of that. So, when I was beginning the project, I thought to myself “Well, let me just make my own searchable version of the database; no one has ever digitized it



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before, so I'll just type it out." I did all this myself, because I'm nerdy, don't have any money, so I just spent like a year and a half typing all this stuff into my computer.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:38:08](#)

But here's the cool thing: when I had the prison register, all six and a half thousand lines of it, I could do something the British could never do, which is I could search the Dartmoor prison population—and again, without wishing to geek out on this too much, imagine like a version of Excel, or your favorite spreadsheet provider, and you can't search it. So, you've just got this gigantic Excel spreadsheet, but it's not searchable. I mean that wouldn't work for any of us, right? But that's what the British had. So, they had like a vision, a desire to manage this prisoner population, but they actually didn't have the technology to search. So, for me, being able to search was awesome because I could look for all the people who wrote accounts of Dartmoor and figure out “okay were they actually at the prison?” And I could find out whether the stuff they said about themselves is true. And there's all kinds of, sort of, verification, in addition to looking at the prisoners that haven't left accounts and thinking about their lives. And that was particularly helpful for thinking about the Black prisoners at Dartmoor, who became kind of a big part of my story.

Liz Covart:

[00:39:11](#)

So, your database really allowed you to see a lot of different information about the prison population at Dartmoor. And you mentioned earlier that by the end of 1814 there are about 6,500 American prisoners of war detained in Dartmoor. So, I have to imagine that when you're looking at this register, you see prisoners who served in the army, more likely the navy, and even most likely they were men like Frank Palmer who served as sailors on privateer vessels. But that you also saw within these different populations that you had officers and enlisted men. So, Nick, when you're looking at your database, did you see how rank and a man's branch of service impacted his life at Dartmoor? Did officers really have better living conditions than those of enlisted men?

Nick Guyatt:

[00:39:59](#)

The short answer is yes, but actually there aren't that many officers from the US Navy, and there are virtually no officers from the US Army or militias at Dartmoor. So, it's predominantly a prison for sailors. And the decision was made



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by James Madison, in close conjunction with his friend and predecessor, Thomas Jefferson, that the United States would not ramp up its navy to fight the War of 1812, and this matters in a really, really important way, which I'll explain in a moment. But, just to kind of explain why they made that decision, there's a big fight amongst the founders that has Hamilton and Adams on one side in the 1790s, and Jefferson and Madison, as so often, on the other side. Hamilton and Adams are like, "look, we need a navy. We don't have to have a navy as big as Britain's navy, but it'd be great to have, you know, like, twenty big ships, you know, like one hundred tons each, you know, that kind of navy. Now Britain has a navy with hundreds of ships like that. But if we had twenty or twenty-five, that might be enough for us to have some kind of presence." Now, Madison and Jefferson are replying like, "are you crazy? Like, if we have that sort of navy it will cost a ton, it will be basically a permanent military, and we're not supposed to like permanent militaries because they undermine the republic, and, you know, we don't want that kind of permanent standing army or navy. And, also, it's going to get its clock cleaned by Britain anyway, I mean the Royal Navy's not going to care if you've got twenty-five, or fifty, or five ships, it's just going to get rid of them. You're going to need way more ships than we can afford to compete with the Royal Navy." So, the decision gets made instead to use privateers. The privateering proposition, which goes back to the seventeenth century and even earlier, is very simple: when states don't want to sustain a big navy, they get the commercial fleet, or the kind of merchant marine, to agree to accept commissions from the government to go off and hunt ships from the power you're at war with. So, even a nation like France will have privateers, which are licensed by the French government to go off and attack the British. Now, in Britain and France's case, they've got big navies, so privateering is a fairly small part of what they do. For the US, privateering was virtually the only game in town. So, the vast majority of guys that end up in Dartmoor prison are actually from privateers. Now the problem with that is they don't have the same protections as uniformed personnel.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:42:17](#)

So, if you're a uniformed US Navy officer, or even if you are a US Navy, like, you know, ordinary sailor, you are first in line for release, you are given all the creditation that you would give someone who was uniformed, kind of, military personnel, you



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get all that stuff you would get. If you're an officer, any kind of officer, however kind of lowly your rank as an officer, you don't even go to Dartmoor. They put you in these special towns called parole towns on the outskirts of Dartmoor, so, a few miles away from the prison, and you're under house arrest. And trust me, Liz, those were much nicer places to be in. I mean, you're not allowed to leave the town, but you can do stuff within the town and have a perfectly nice time. Now, on the privateers, only the captain, and sometimes not even the captain, would get to go to that kind of cushy parole town option. Everyone else is logged into the prison. So, actually, in a very real way, the US dependence on privateers exposed more of its fighting men to this kind of worse kind of imprisonment than if the United States decided to have a big navy. So, you know, in the book I understand why Jefferson and Madison went the way they did, but it was really bad news for the guys who were in harm's way, because they didn't have the kind of basic protections you might expect to have if you were fighting a war for your country.

Liz Covart: [00:43:38](#)

So, what were the other kinds of protections that you would get as an officer or enlisted man in the US Navy and you were captured as a POW, but your captured privateer companions would not have had access to?

Nick Guyatt: [00:43:51](#)

Here's one of the problems, right? So, let's say for a second you're an officer on a privateering vessel. You're used to, as an officer, keeping order at sea in a very strict way. So, I mean, sailing ships are not democracies, they are fierce autocracies, although there is often a lot of camaraderie between the ordinary sailors. The problem is, when all those guys get put in a prison, there is an acceptance that prison government will be democratic. So, this is just the practice you see in French, in British, and American prisons, that prisoners will elect their own prisoners' committees, they'll form their own ways of running the prison space, which are inclusive and democratic. Well, this creates big problems if you've been the guy on the privateer who's been beating people with sticks to tell them to work harder, and then you don't get elected to be on the prisoners' committee. So, in fact, a lot of the tensions at Dartmoor were not just along racial lines, but were along these lines of authority, which meant that the men who at sea had been in charge of privateering, in charge of their fellow sailors, now lost their



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command, in effect. And this created real tensions amongst Americans, which in some respects transcended the general hostilities of the Americans to the British. So, this, again, is what's so interesting, I think, about going into the prison space: you might expect that the daily reminders everywhere that you're at war with Britain, and you're all Americans, would bind everyone together very, very tightly. In fact, the American community frayed and fractured in all kinds of really fascinating ways to get you into this kind of deeper sense of what it meant to be an American. Well, what was most important to the identities of these guys is that they were from the US, is that they were ordinary sailors rather than officers, you know, all those kinds of questions come into this in the prison space, because the privateering system means the officers don't get to go somewhere else. Pretty much everyone is stuck in the same prison.

Liz Covart:

[00:45:52](#)

Tensions between white and Black sailors is something you've mentioned twice now, and one of the really interesting points you write about in your book, *The Hated Cage*, is that there were a lot of Black American POWs who were housed at Dartmoor prison. And, specifically, they were housed in a segregated prison called Prison Block Number Four, which was actually away from the white POWs. So, Nick, why did the British segregate Black and white POWs? And I ask this because we don't typically think of the early nineteenth century as a period where segregation had fully taken hold in the United States, let alone elsewhere.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:46:30](#)

In defense of the British, they did not choose to segregate the Black people from white people at Dartmoor. The American sailors, or rather the white American sailors, requested that they segregate Black people from white. And in the book, I try and get into this because in some respects this is one of the most fascinating parts of the Dartmoor story, and part I think has got real relevance thinking about race and coexistence back in the United States. If you think for a second about the decade we're in, the 1810s, this is kind of a pivotal decade in the history of American race relations. Coming to the end of that long revolutionary arc, where there are lots of antislavery, kind of, activists, Black and white, who are wondering not only if Black people can be free from slavery, but if freed Black people will be



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able to live alongside white people in freedom. So, for me one of the most fascinating things about Dartmoor was, “well, can Black people and white people live alongside each other in captivity in this British prison?” And that became kind of a big hook for me. Now, instantly when I started to do the, kind of, reality, so I ran into a couple problems. The first is that of the thousand or so Black people I was able to identify from the prison register, there is not a single one, *not a single one*, who left behind memoir, or a really significant piece of, kind of, remembering, whether it's a letter, or an essay, or something later in life. There are a few people we know of, just about, because they made their way into newspapers later on, and a very, very few who did say something about Dartmoor. But in essence this is a place where the archive lets us down because we have a lot of information about white people, by white people, we have a lot of claims about Black people, all by white people, and we have very little information from Black people of what they said about their own experience. So, partly I've tried to use all of the other sources to kind of cast a number of different lights on Black experience to try and reconstruct what may have actually happened, and it begins with this question of segregation.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:48:29](#)

Because to my mind one of the major reasons that the request went out from white prisoners to the prison governor, in October of 1813, so about six months into the American experience at Dartmoor, one of the reasons the white American prisoners asked to be separate from the Black prisoners is that they hoped it could get them out of the prison block they were in. So effectively, they were in the worst prison block alongside some of the most miscreant of the French prisoners, and my surmise is that these white American prisoners tried to use race as a means to vault their way out of this prison building. Now, in fact, they failed horribly, because what happened was the British just put the Black prisoners on a different floor. So that was part of the problem. I think the other thing going on here, and again, to go back to what you said before about, you know, how this might impact on what we think about with race back in the United States, the one thing that isn't happening in the United States in a major way in the 1810s is political power sharing between Black and white people. We still have some Black people voting, although in relatively small numbers, in northern states.



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Nick Guyatt: [00:49:37](#)

What we don't have is a kind of mixed race politics. Now, remember, I said before that when prisoners arrive, they elect a prisoners' committee, which is supposed to represent the prisoner population. Well, it's not hard to imagine that the eighty or so Black prisoners, amongst around seven hundred total prisoners in October 1813 on the American side, those seventy, seventy-five, eighty Black prisoners, may actually have wanted representation. So, they may have wanted a seat on that prisoners' committee. And we note from other prisoners' committees that there were issues surrounding racial representation and the decisions reached by prisoners' committees when it came to different outcomes for people from different races, there in other prisons around the world, other British prisons. So, we know that this problem of political power sharing across the color line existed. So, again, I can't tell you this, because there's no evidence for the reason why the decision was made. You can't find any evidence for that in the archives. Nobody talks about it in their memoir, except for one guy who says, "well the Black people were stealing, and we had to keep doing something about the fact that they were stealing." Well, that really reinforces my sense that this was about politics, because when someone steals, the prisoners' committee deals with it. What happens when those Black people want a seat on that prisoner's committee? That to me is the other reason these white prisoners almost certainly asked for the Black people to be moved elsewhere. So, they're separated, the Black prisoners are on the top floor of Prison Four, and most of the prisoners are surrounded by the most kind of outrageous and miscreant French prisoners. After the French are released in May of 1814, all of Prison Block Four becomes a Black prison. And so, from that moment for an entire year, basically all the way through the rest of 1814 and the first half of 1815, Prison Four is a self-governing Black space, with anywhere between seven hundred and a thousand Black people running their own operation but allowing white people to come and visit. So, it's a unique space, I think, in the, kind of, Atlantic world, and one that I'm just incredibly delighted and thrilled to write about, because things are possible there which never really happen anywhere else, I think, in American history.

Liz Covart: [00:51:51](#)

It does sound like Black prisoners would've had a lot of freedom, having their own prison block and their own prison committees,



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and it also sounds like they would've had more freedom in Prison Block Number Four than they would've had if they had not been captured, and had remained in the United States.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:52:08](#)

Well, the key thing about it is that Black people were in charge. The white people knew Black people were in charge. So, let's just imagine what it would be like to go through the doors, if you want to buy a beer, you'll buy it from a Black person. If you're a white prisoner and you want to learn how to box, you're going to get taught by a Black person. If you want to go off and learn French, your teacher's going to be Black. If you've got an issue or a problem with somebody, you can expect there to be a kind of majority Black crowd while you try to work out what the issue was. If you want to go worship, there was a chapel in the cockloft, the top floor of Prison Number Four. You had a Black minister. So, for me what's fascinating about Prison Four is it became a place to which the white prisoners from all the other prison blocks kept being drawn to. It was a place that, they said, had more entertainment and amusement than all of the other prisons put together. And obviously there's a kind of cliché in here, right, which is kind of the old, sort of, racist line that there's, you know, some kind of cornering of the market on entertainment among Black people. So, actually, that that's what's going on in some of the memoirs; where they're like, "oh yeah we went to Prison Four but just to kind of laugh at the Black people who were there." If you look at the diaries and journals written in the moment, I think they demonstrate a very sincere way that many of the white prisoners came to Prison Four to enter a space that was Black, sincerely, and on the grounds that they were in effect the junior partner. So, this doesn't happen anywhere else, right? I mean, we can't really point to a space where that kind of racial stepping over the line was going on, it was happening in Prison Four. And again, it's why it's a really unique place in a unique moment, and in some ways it was a moment that could only exist because it was all male. And I just want to end by stressing that, that it's just not a place where there were women. And I think that that absence of women, with all of the kind of patriarchal concerns and anxieties that white men brought to that question of Black people and white women, the fact that there were no women, in some respects, is what made this space possible.



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- Liz Covart:** [00:54:05](#) England's war with France had largely ended by 1814 and by May of 1814, the French prisoners had largely been released from Dartmoor. Meanwhile, the war of 1812 would continue until the end of December 1814. And yet, a lot of American POWs would remain in Dartmoor well into the spring and summer of 1815. Nick, we need to take a moment to talk about our episode sponsor, and when we're done with our moment of gratitude, let's talk about the POWs of Dartmoor and when they learned about the end of the war of 1812, and when they'd be released.
- Hannah Farber:** [00:54:40](#) Hi, I'm Hannah Farber. I'm an Assistant Professor of History at Columbia University, and my new book, *Underwriters of the United States: How Insurance Shaped the American Founding*, published by the Omohundro Institute, is out now. Insurance is a quirky and strange business that leaves a very light paper trail in formal politics, but insurance has a vast influence on America's commercial affairs. And because of that, insurance has a vast influence on American politics. *Underwriters of the United States* talks about the financial machinations that go around a world of warfare, and it's about the kinds of things that national figures are doing in their private lives. National figures like Alexander Hamilton, Robert Morris, Daniel Webster. We're not just looking at what they say in political affairs, we're looking at the whole commercial world that surrounds them, and that makes them money. *Underwriters of the United States* tells that story. Get your copy of *Underwriters of the United States* wherever you buy your books.
- Liz Covart:** [00:55:49](#) Nick, did the American POWs in Dartmoor know that the War of 1812 had ended in late 1814? And did you ever find out why the British continued to hold so many American POWs so long after the war had ended?
- Nick Guyatt:** [00:56:04](#) This is like a trick question. Did the war end in late 1814? Well, look, the Treaty of Ghent was signed on Christmas Eve of 1814, and that was a big deal. But when you sign a treaty, the treaty has got to be ratified. So that meant the Treaty of Ghent came to London, and in January of 1815, it was approved in London. So, it got the sign off from the British government. But then, horrifyingly for the Dartmoor prisoners, you had to go on a ship and travel to America. And worse, then it has to come all the



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way back. So actually, I would say if you're an American you could say that the War of 1812 ended in February of 1815, when Congress ratified the Treaty of Ghent. Maybe if you're a Brit, you can't really say the War of 1812 ended until the middle of March 1815, which is when that news came back. Now, there were still Americans in Dartmoor in July of 1815, so the first of your questions is totally correct. Like, there was a massive period of time after which everyone knew officially the war was over, and Americans were left in prison. And the main reason for that is the logistics of getting five thousand or so remaining American prisoners out of Dartmoor, and back to North America, were incredibly complicated. Both Britain and especially the United States thought they should be leading the process. They ended up agreeing, the American diplomatic representatives and the British, that this is something they would handle rather than just allowing people to find their own way. So, unless you have a ton of money, if you're an American prisoner in Dartmoor at the end of 1815, you couldn't go to the gate and walk out. You were kept a prisoner of war when the war was over. And that was still true for hundreds of prisoners, even as late as July of 1815. And it still got so much worse, because there was a lot of disease in the prison that winter, so when everyone knew the war was ending and everyone was waiting for the paperwork to be signed, everyone was also dying. I mean, you have, like, hundreds of people who were dying of, you know, prison fever or one of the other respiratory diseases that carried off people in jails at that time. So, you had a lot of unrest, you had a lot of despair, and you had a lot of resentment and anger directed not only at the British but also at the United States. So, people feeling their own country had betrayed them.

Liz Covart: [00:58:15](#)

There was a lot of unrest in Dartmoor prison in 1815, and I'm really glad you brought it up because it allows us to talk about the peak of this unrest, which happened on April 6th, 1815, when we have the massacre of Dartmoor prison. Nick, would you tell us more about this unrest that you have mentioned and about this massacre that happens in April 1815?

Nick Guyatt: [00:58:38](#)

I sort of got into this whole project partly because I didn't know about the Dartmoor Massacre, and as someone who's British, who has taught in the US, and has studied in the US, and also teaches now in Britain, it just seemed kind of, like, very bad



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form that I had no idea about this massacre of Americans that took place in Britain. Now, fortunately when I talked to a bunch of people in the US, my friends and colleagues there, they didn't know about it either. So, it didn't just feel like it was, kind of, British memory-holing, I felt like it was everyone's memory-holing. And in some respects, this goes back to the very first question you asked about the War of 1812; I think it's totally the case that American historians have not necessarily found an easy way to make sense of the War of 1812, so some of its most iconic stories, and episodes, and tragedies are not really part of our popular memory, because we can't do much with them. So, to me it raises lots of interesting questions about what history is, what we remember, what we don't. Sixth of April 1815, effectively you're now looking at three weeks since the prisoners in Dartmoor found out the war is over. It's a fairly warm day, for Britain in particular, it's a very warm day for April. Perhaps for the first time in the winter, everyone goes out of the prison blocks into the yards, they start playing baseball. They've another game that involves kind of going off to a grassy part of the prison yard and tearing up the turf and throwing it at each other; they don't have a name for it, so I call it "turf throwing," hasn't taken off professionally, not yet.

Nick Guyatt:

[00:59:52](#)

Anyway, so, they're doing all this crazy stuff, the one amusement that gets them in trouble is that a bunch of younger prisoners find that there is a loose stone in one of the internal walls of the prison. And they start prying away at it with their fingers, eventually they push it out completely. And then someone goes and pulls a crowbar from one of the high windows from one of the prisons, grabs that and starts pulling away more and more of the wall. It turns out the internal wall, the other side of it is the barracks where the prison guards are housed. Once the prison guards see what's going on, they assume the Americans are trying to escape. Now, that's clearly not happening. There's still another two walls to jump over, and even then, you're in the middle of Dartmoor, and, like, it's not an easy place to escape from. But essentially, one thing leads to another, and the troops have a standoff with the prisoners. The prisoners are furious and desperate anyway about their experience, and in the central yard of the prison, there are hundreds of prisoners challenging this sort of long line of prison guards with muskets. One of the guards fires, and then all hell breaks loose. And for the next hour



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or so, you have, in effect, the prisoners becoming sitting ducks, people that the prison guards feel they can shoot at at will. Nine prisoners are killed, either immediately or as a result of the injuries they had received, and something like three or four dozen are pretty seriously wounded. I mean, they're losing limbs, and one of our prisoners goes into the prison block and down in his diary, "this is the day that'll be remembered forever." He says it's as bad as the massacre in Boston in 1770, and Americans will always think about it in the same way. And instead, of course, the war is over, neither side really wants to remember or do much about it, so both the Americans and the British government decide they're just going to sweep it under the carpet. And to the amazement of the prisoners, almost nothing is done. There is no justice. Nobody goes to prison. You know, nobody is found guilty for the massacre. The troops who fired on the Americans, none of them are disciplined the slightest, and the whole thing vanishes into history. Not even to history, in fact, it vanishes into obscurity.

- Liz Covart:** [01:01:59](#) I can only imagine that whatever hopeful morale existed in Dartmoor prison must have ended with this massacre and having been shot at for over an hour, it sounds like, and having nine friends killed and many more injured.
- Nick Guyatt:** [01:02:15](#) Well, it was a chaotic process of evacuation going on. I mean, again, I get into it in the book, but one of the crazy things going on at this moment is Napoleon has managed to break out from his temporary prison on Elba and he's come back to Paris. So actually, there's a new ramping up in the war with France. So, one of the reasons it's so hard to evacuate the Americans back to North America is you can't get any ships because all of the ships you might otherwise hire to do the transport are actually transporting materiel and men over to France to go and fight Napoleon. So, there's a series of terrible bits of luck that made the massacre happen. But after April 6, there are a number of inquiries that go on, they're happening while Americans are being evacuated back to North America. So, I think a lot of what's happening is happening in an age where if you leave, and you're on the move, you don't know what's going anywhere, it's really hard to keep anyone accountable because, you know, it's really hard to know what's going on in an Atlantic world where news takes weeks to pass from place to place. And there's one other



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way in which our sailors are a particularly easy group to screw over. When they all come back to North America that summer, they're not going to form, like, a victims' group, and like petition the government—they've got to go and work! So, these guys are all getting back on ships, and sailing to other places again within sometimes days, at most weeks of their return. So, they're the kind of population that's not settled.

- Nick Guyatt:** [01:03:38](#) They're itinerant, and that means they don't have the kind of grounding and traction to run the movement for justice you would require. I mean they're the very worst population to be able to pull off what was required, which is something that could really have mobilized people consistently to march for justice. So, they never get it. And again, the event is effectively memory-holed, and not just for like a year or two years, it's kind of memory-holed for good. The only time Americans become very aware of it again is in the 1840s, when a bunch of memoirs are published to coincide with the fact that tensions between Britain and the United States are rising again over Oregon and Texas. So, when it becomes politically useful for the nation, as it were, to have something like British bad guys, there is this brief moment where Dartmoor comes back. Before that moment, nothing. After that moment, very little. So, I often tell people when I talk about the book, these are the last Americans to be killed in a war with Britain. In fact, they're the last people on either side to be killed in a war with Britain. You think about how important the process of Brits and Americans killing each other is, so the sort of history you and I do, in this moment, American history in particular, like it's such a terrible but crucial story. These guys are the last, and because they're the last, they're kind of marooned by history. Nobody wants to know about them. But they don't know that, so they think they're going to be just as popular for historians as those guys in the Boston Massacre. And they were wrong. And, again, I think this poses really interesting questions about what we remember and what we don't.
- Liz Covart:** [01:05:00](#) So, when did the last American POW leave Dartmoor prison?
- Nick Guyatt:** [01:05:16](#) The very beginning of August, 1815. Pretty much the final guys to get out were almost all Black and this is partly because Black sailors are extremely worried about being on one of these evac vessels, not knowing its destination. So, what they fear is that the



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American diplomat in London who's organizing the evacuation may send them to the South, and if they end up in Charleston or in Norfolk, say, then when they get off the ship, if they've got no money, which of course they haven't, they've got no way of traveling, they could be arrested by the city authorities as a pauper and sold into slavery. And, in fact, this happens to one of the Americans, who ends up being sold into slavery in Georgia, and I talk about his story in the book. So, that's one reason the Black people are the last to leave. Also, because they're desperate for money, they sell their release lots. So, effectively, they pair off with white Americans who were captured after them, and they agree that those white Americans are going to claim to be them. And this, again, is what I found hilarious, right? Like, it clearly says in the prison register if a particular is Black, but actually, they could still sell their name to another white American prisoner, who would claim to be them on the way out. Because when you're leaving the prison, the British didn't care if you were white or Black. So, in a sense, the British allowed this traffic in release slots to go on, which meant the Black people were almost the last to leave. So, that Black community in Dartmoor was there all along, but it was the most enduring of the American communities there because Black people were overrepresented in that last crop leaving in August.

- Liz Covart:** [01:06:45](#) Nick, you wrote *The Hated Cage* in part to bring the experiences of American POWs during the War of 1812 to light, to help us re-remember their contributions. So, what is the one aspect of this POW experience that you'd really like for us to walk away and remember?
- Nick Guyatt:** [01:07:02](#) Well, I think I'm really keen to get people to think about sailors and about sailors', kind of, loyalties. And in some respects, sailors are, especially in a time of war, they're like the ultimate representatives of your nation, right? They are fighting a war for Britain, fighting a war for the United States. And in some ways being a sailor was all about, like, not being tied to a particular nation, like being a sailor came with the possibility that you could move between nations, particularly if you were Black. I think this is the thing about the experience of sailors I'm really, really keen to emphasize because, in lots of ways, sailors didn't do very well out of the War of 1812, and they weren't treated very well by either government. So, in some respects I think they



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found the sea as a bit of a place of refuge or a space where there were more possibilities for them than there were on land. But the consequence of the war was to strip all that away from them. And it was to make them American, or British, but not in a good way, I mean in a way that meant that they were really screwed over by their respective governments. So, I do think there's a story here about nation or national identity, and I think there's a story about the power of the state. You know, Britain's a very powerful state but still does an incredibly crappy job of running a prison system. And the US is an emerging powerful state but does a very, very crappy job of looking after the people it's sending into harm's way. So, I mean, as someone who is writing in our current moment where the state is huge, patriotism is enormous, whatever else, it was interesting, to me, to look back at a time when neither of those things was really necessarily the case.

Liz Covart:

[01:08:31](#)

Now we should jump into the "Time Warp." This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently, or if someone had acted differently. In your opinion, Nick, if Dartmoor prison had never been built, what might have happened to the 6,500 American POWs who'd been imprisoned there? How might their POW experience have been different if there had been no Dartmoor prison?

Nick Guyatt:

[01:09:17](#)

I definitely think they would probably have had a better time. I mean, I think what would have happened, almost certainly, is if they had been left in their prisons around the world and not brought back to Britain, or they might have been put into prison hulks, and then they'd have had to build some more of those, and in a sense that sounds kind of horrible, right? Like, "well, hey, you could have been in a prison hulk!" But it says something about how grim the Dartmoor experience was, that being in a prison hulk might have been preferable. So, I definitely think there would've been no Dartmoor Massacre, and I think probably the outcomes for those prisoners would've been a bit better. So, there's real irony in this, right, which is that the whole purpose of Dartmoor prison was to provide a space where prisoners could be treated more humanely, but in almost every respect, the prison created the conditions for the massacre to happen. So, it became the very thing that it was supposed to prevent.



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- Liz Covart:** [01:10:06](#) So, Nick, I'm curious where you're going next with your research because you've moved from the origins of segregation in the United States to the segregation and trials of the War of 1812 prisoners. So, what's up for you?
- Nick Guyatt:** [01:10:18](#) Well, I have a couple of things on the go I want to tell you about really quickly. One is, I'm editing the big new *Oxford Illustrated History of the United States* with, I'm imagining, a few benefactors, sort of alums, along for the ride. So, it's basically a big book, sixteen chapters, all of American history, we each write a chapter. So, we have people you might remember or know like Joyce Chaplin and Honor Sachs, Ari Kelman, all writing different chapters of this, and we're nearly done with that, and it should come out next year. And, in addition to that, I'm writing a new book for Harvard with a friend of mine, Christa Dierksheide of the University of Virginia, which is called *Jefferson's Wolf*, which is going to be the first book about Jefferson and slavery since the 1970s.
- Liz Covart:** [01:10:58](#) Wow, it's really hard to believe that no one has written a book about Jefferson's views on slavery since the 1970s.
- Nick Guyatt:** [01:11:05](#) Yeah, it's incredible. John Chester Miller wrote in a very, very different time, very much a denialist when it came to things like Sally Hemings, and actually had a line of the book, which I can't wait to write about, which was, he said, "if what's been claimed about Jefferson and Sally Hemings is true, then everything Jefferson stands for would become worthless." Now, that's clearly not true, but it was very interesting that in the 1970s, we had someone who seemed to be, kind of, prophesizing a kind of "cancel culture" vision of Jefferson and slavery, and Jefferson and Hemmings. So, one of the things we want to do is think, "okay, well why did we all end up having so much investment in the idea that it was impossible that Jefferson could have been having a sexual relationship with an enslaved person?" So, in addition to thinking about the big politics side of stuff, we're also getting into the kind of personal life of Jefferson as well. And yeah, I'm really excited about the project.
- Liz Covart:** [01:11:54](#) There are so many stories in *The Hated Cage* that we just didn't get a chance to discuss today. Nick, do you have a preferred



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email or social media handle where we can reach out to you and ask questions?

- Nick Guyatt:** [01:12:05](#) You could always email me, just Google my name, there aren't many Nicholas Guyatts around, you'll find my Cambridge email address. You can look for me on Twitter, where I sometimes tweet about history or about the general state of the world. Those are the two best ways to get a hold of me. I would encourage you to get in touch if you want to ask anything, I would love to hear from you.
- Liz Covart:** [01:12:22](#) Nicholas Guyatt, thank you for taking us through the War of 1812, and for helping us better see and understand the experiences American sailors had during this war and their treatment as POWs.
- Nick Guyatt:** [01:12:32](#) An absolute pleasure, thank you so much Liz, and thank you for all you do.
- Liz Covart:** [01:12:36](#) The War 1812 had three causes: first, it was a war of expansion. The United States used the war to dispossess Native American peoples from their lands in the Old Northwest Territory, to clear the way for national westward expansion. Second, along these national expansion lines, the United States also used the War of 1812 as an opportunity to annex British Canada to the new nation. And third, the War of 1812 was a war at sea. Americans sought a neutral trade with both Great Britain and France during the Napoleonic Wars. As such, the United States sent hundreds of merchant vessels to Europe laden with American farm produce and fish. Now, the British government did not like this double trade, so it ordered its navy to stop and raid many of these vessels. Using the Napoleonic war as a pretext, the British Royal Navy seized American ships, produce, and sailors. Now, these three goals, or causes, prompted the United States to declare war on Great Britain and on the indigenous peoples of the Old Northwest Territory.
- Liz Covart:** [01:13:36](#) Once at war, American men were killed, wounded, and captured. For its part, Great Britain captured far more American soldiers and sailors than the United States captured British soldiers and sailors. So, what was Great Britain to do with all the American soldiers and sailors that it captured? One solution was to place



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them in Dartmoor Prison, a prison built in southwestern England with the idea that it would be a place to humanely house and care for prisoners that Britain took during the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. Of course, as Nick related, Dartmoor was far from a humane place. Although intentions were good, the British built a cold, dank fortress that was prone to bad weather, disease, and squabbling among the prisoners. As Nick also mentioned, it was never a good time to be a prisoner of war, and this is something that we can clearly see through the eyes of men like Frank Palmer and the others who Nick describes and writes about in his book, *The Hated Cage*.

Liz Covart:

[01:14:31](#)

Plus, we can also see through Nick's research how governments can make it really hard for prisoners of war. The United States' decision to rely on a privately owned merchant-turned-privateer fleet, rather than to build a proper navy, meant that a majority of the 6,500 American sailors imprisoned at Dartmoor would remain imprisoned until the end of the war, because as privateers, they would always be ineligible for prisoner exchanges. Likewise, we can also see how the British mismanaged the prison and its policies when it came to prisoners of war. British mismanagement played a role in the death of prisoners from disease, the tensions between the prisoners themselves, and the sense of hopelessness among the men who were held in Dartmoor. By taking the time to investigate the histories of Dartmoor Prison and the War of 1812, we remember the men who fought for the United States during its second war for independence.

Liz Covart:

[01:15:21](#)

Men who we often forget about when we remember and think through the history of the United States. You'll find more information about Nick, his book, *The Hated Cage*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page: benfranklinworld.com/340. Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts, so if you enjoyed this episode of *Ben Franklin's World*, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from The Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Nyree Dowdy, and Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit



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airwavemedia.com. Finally, what else would you like to know about the War of 1812? This is a war we really should cover more in this podcast. So let me know how you'd like to investigate it. Liz@benfranklinsworld.com. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.