

Uncle Sam

The backdrop of the following story is the War of 1812.

Britain had been at war with France for several years, and America was glad to have washed its hands of its former sovereign. The new country wanted nothing to do with the arguments and battles of the Old World. But Britain began capturing American ships at sea and forcing American sailors into the British navy, ignoring all protest from the new United States government. At last, the old muskets were brought out of the closets and the cannons rolled out of storage, and the United States declared war on Britain.

Part of running a successful war was making sure all the soldiers and sailors were supplied and fed. The government gave contracts for all sorts of provisioners—uniform makers and gun foundries, boot factories and grease renderers, biscuit bakers and ship builders. And meat packers.

Up in Troy, New York, Sam Wilson's slaughterhouse won a contract for packing cured beef into barrels to ship off to the army. Each barrel intended for the government was stamped "U.S." for United States. But since Wilson was known locally as Uncle Sam, people began saying "U.S." stood for Uncle Sam Wilson.

"That's Uncle Sam's beef," the workmen joked as the barrels were loaded onto wagons for shipment.

And as the barrels rolled their way down from New York, the term rolled along with them. "That's Uncle Sam's," people pointed out whenever they saw the country's initials. Eventually the entire nation adopted Uncle Sam as the nickname for the federal government. In 1961, Congress declared: "Resolved by the Senate that the Congress salutes Uncle Sam Wilson of Troy, New York, as the progenitor of American's National Symbol of 'Uncle Sam.'"