

ALEXANDRIA AND THE WAR OF 1812
A Series of Articles Telling How Alexandrians Were Affected
200 Years Ago by the War of 1812



By
Ted Pulliam



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Foreword

The Alexandria Archaeology Publications consist of papers on different aspects of the history of Alexandria prepared by Archaeology staff, university students, and volunteers. The papers are offered to help tell the story of Alexandria to residents, visitors, and others interested in what happened here in the past.

Alexandria and the War of 1812 relates what Alexandrians did during one of America's least remembered wars. The United States went to war with Great Britain on June 18, 1812, when President James Madison signed the declaration of war passed by Congress. The declaration, however, was not entirely popular. Roughly 40 percent of the Congressmen and Senators who voted opposed it.

Those who favored war pointed to the affront that for years Great Britain had given the United States by seizing its ships and pressing its citizens into involuntary service in the British navy. In addition, citizens in western states and territories suspected that Great Britain had urged Indians to attack their communities. In revenge, and to acquire more territory for the U.S., these citizens and their representatives in Congress argued that British Canada could be overrun easily and urged the nation to attack.

Those opposing the war were mainly New England shipping merchants with close trading ties to Great Britain. To them, occasionally losing a few ships was better than losing their major source of trade and economic stability. Moreover, why go to war with the country that had the strongest navy in the world when the United States lacked money and a navy? Alexandrians also had close trading ties to Great Britain, and many opposed the war.

Not long after the war commenced, Alexandrians began to feel the economic effect of a British blockade of the Chesapeake Bay. Gradually, the town's predicament worsened. Finally, British soldiers marched into Washington, and British warships sailed to Alexandria. Neither place fared well as a result. Alexandrians, however, took revenge on the British navy later in a little-known, strongly-fought confrontation farther south on the Potomac River.

This paper has been researched and written by Ted Pulliam, a member of the Alexandria Archaeology Commission and an Archaeology volunteer. In writing the paper, Ted made extensive use of original sources, including letters, diaries, and memoirs of eyewitnesses and battle participants, contemporary newspaper accounts, and after-action reports from both the Americans and the British. He also examined leading secondary sources.

In telling this part of the story of Alexandria, the paper demonstrates the resilience of Alexandrians of that era and their wise concern for the future of their town. The decisions made by Alexandria leaders in 1814 helped preserve the city that we see around us and enjoy today.

The articles that compose this paper originally appeared in the *Alexandria Gazette Packet* from July 10 to September 25, 2014. The *Gazette Packet* has graciously consented to their being reprinted.

Francine Bromberg
City Archaeologist
2014

The United States Declares War – 1812



NATIONAL MARITIME HISTORICAL SOCIETY

American sailors forced into the British navy.

On June 18, 1812, President James Madison took the nation to war. On that date he signed a bill passed by Congress declaring that the United States was at war with Great Britain.

That war, known as the War of 1812, would have a great effect on the young United States, and particularly on the town of Alexandria, an effect not entirely what was intended. Why, then, did the young United States on a day in June 202 years ago go to war, for the second time, with the most powerful nation on earth? What did Alexandrians think about this war?

The declaration of war received far from unanimous support in Congress. In the House 39 percent of the Congressmen opposed the war. In the Senate, 41 percent of the Senators were opposed, slightly more than in the House.

In Alexandria, Samuel Snowden, the 38-year-old editor of the *Alexandria Daily Gazette, Commercial & Political*, voiced Alexandria's opposition to the war. In a stinging editorial, he wondered whether Congress was "really so mad as to wish to involve us in a partial and disastrous war."

Those who favored war, led by President Madison, pointed to the grievous affront that for years their old enemy Great Britain had given the fledgling United States by seizing its ships (389 had been seized since November 1807) and by pressing U.S. citizens into involuntary service in the British navy. Approximately 9,990 American seamen were so impressed from 1807 to January 1, 1812. As Madison indignantly stated in his message to Congress seeking war: "... thousands of American citizens ... have been torn from their country and from everything dear to them; have been dragged on

board ships of war of a foreign nation. . . . to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes [and] to risk their lives in the battles of their oppressors . . .”

War supporters also pointed to the orders adopted by the royal British government and enforced by a naval blockade that arrogantly required U.S. ships to stop at a British port and pay British custom duties before entering a port on the European continent.

Great Britain took these strong measures because it was in the midst of a deadly war with Napoleonic France and badly needed ships, seamen, and trade. For the U.S., however, that was hardly sufficient justification for actions that grated harshly on its proud sovereignty.

In addition, western states like Ohio and Kentucky suspected that Great Britain had been urging Indians living in Canada and in the Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois Territories to attack their communities. A Lexington, Kentucky, newspaper emotionally editorialized: “The SCALPING KNIFE and TOMAHAWK of *British savages*, [are] now again devastating our frontiers.”

Moreover, representatives from these western states, like young Congressman Henry Clay of Kentucky, looked at British Canada and saw easy pickings. Why should the British control that part of North America, and not the U.S.? Clay asserted that the Kentucky militia by itself could easily capture Montreal and proclaimed, “I prefer the troubled ocean of war . . . to the tranquil, putrescent pool of ignominious peace.”

On the other side, those opposing the war were concentrated mainly in the northeastern states. New England merchants, with their minds on the bottom line, thought: so we lose a few ships and a few sailors every now and then – isn’t that just the cost of doing business? Why go to war with the nation with the most powerful navy on earth? Won’t war mean we lose more ships, and won’t it likely bring about New England’s economic collapse? In addition, New Englanders were bothered very little by the problems of Indians in the western states. They would point out how quiet the Indians were along their own borders.

Virginia’s John Randolph was a leading opponent of the war. On the floor of the House, he asked rhetorically how the country could “go to war without money, without men, without a navy . . . ?” (In 1812, the British navy had some 620 warships. The American navy had fewer than 20.)

Randolph may have been motivated in part by his dislike of Henry Clay. When Clay became Speaker of the House, he had ordered Randolph not to bring his hunting dogs onto the House floor as Randolph was accustomed to doing. Randolph later colorfully expressed his thoughts about Clay, describing him as “being so brilliant yet so corrupt, which like a rotten mackerel by moonlight, he shined and stunk.”

Like Randolph, most Alexandrians opposed the war, following the lead of Samuel Snowden and the *Gazette*. On the day after war was declared, Snowden prophetically

wrote: “While we are . . . beating out the brains of our unoffending neighbors in the north [in Canada], what surety have we that a diversion more horrid will not be meted to us in the south? What pledge have we that a naval force will not be sent to lay our rich maritime cities under *enormous contributions*, or raze them to the ground?”

He and other Alexandrians would learn that there was little surety at all.

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette (During the war, the *Gazette* was known by different names, but in these articles it will be called simply the *Alexandria Gazette*.); *1812: The War that Forged a Nation* by Walter R. Borneman; *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, Volume I*, edited by William S. Dudley; and *The War of 1812: A Forgotten War* by Donald R. Hickey.

Alexandria in 1812

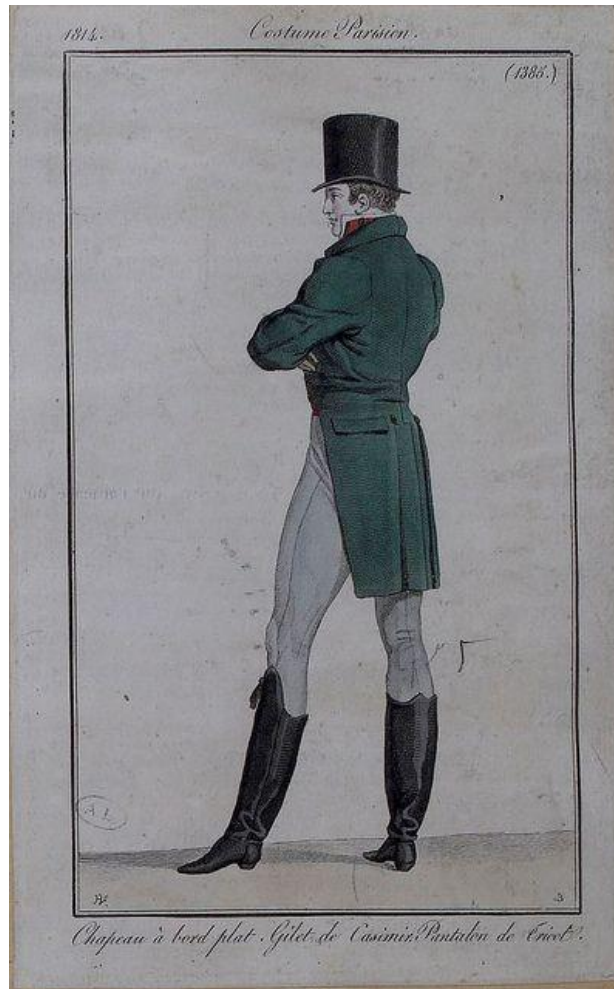
In June 1812, when the United States declared war on Great Britain and the War of 1812 began, what was Alexandria like?

Alexandria then was part of the District of Columbia and had been since 1801. In the 1810 census, its population was only 7,227 (68% white, 12% free black, and 20% enslaved blacks). In comparison, the population of Washington proper was 8,208, only about a thousand more than Alexandria's. (Georgetown was a separate town, population 4,948.)

According to maps developed from 1810 tax lists, the developed area of Alexandria extended no farther north than Pendleton Street and no farther south than Jefferson Street, a twelve block area. From the Potomac River it extended west to West Street on the south side of Cameron Street and only to Fayette Street on the north side of Cameron.

Some Alexandrians lived in brick homes, but most lived in small wooden houses. When they wanted to go somewhere, they rode over dirt or cobblestone streets on horseback or in horse-drawn carriages, coaches, or wagons, or they walked.

An Alexandrian walking along King Street would have heard horses' shod hooves striking cobblestones and the rattle of carriages and wagons. He or she would have smelled chimney smoke from coal and wood fires while walking past buildings whose first floors housed retail stores and top floors enclosed the living quarters of the stores' owners.



FROM "JOURNAL DES DAMES ET DES MODES" PUBLISHED IN PARIS FROM 1797-1839

A well-dressed gentleman's outdoor attire, circa 1812-1814

For example, walking toward the river along the north side of King Street between St. Asaph and Pitt Streets (the area now dominated by the city courthouse), an Alexandrian would have passed two three-story brick buildings built close to the sidewalk.

The first floor of the first building was occupied by John Withers & Company selling “British, French, India, Russia and American GOODS,” as advertised in the *Alexandria Gazette*. The second building was the slightly larger store and home of silversmith Adam Lynn, Jr. Here on the first floor Lynn maintained a combination jewelry and hardware store where he sold such goods as tea trays, swords, nails, watch chains, scissors, saddles, and earrings.



A fashionable lady's walking dress, circa 1812-1814.

up high just under the breasts to suggest a high waist,” according to historian Daniel Pool. From the high waist (in the new Empire fashion) the gown hung straight down following the natural contours of her body to her shoe tops. Walking outdoors, she would have worn a fashionable bonnet tied under her chin.

Walking past these well-dressed men and women, our Alexandrian soon would have reached the corner of Pitt and King Streets. Directly across Pitt Street, he or she would have seen the popular Washington Tavern at the spot now occupied by the Monaco Hotel. High up at the corner of the tavern was affixed a swinging sign with a

FROM “THE LADY’S MAGAZINE” PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN FROM 1770-1837

As our walker proceeded down King Street, he or she might have encountered several well-dressed Alexandria men and women. This was a period of revolution in fashion. In 1812 a well-dressed man no longer wore the artificial powdered wigs, knee britches, stockings, and shoes with bright buckles of George Washington. Instead he dressed in long pants tucked into boots that rose to just below his knees. His coat was double- or single-breasted and solid colored. Its front was cut straight across along the waistline, and in back, it was cut into two tails that hung down to his knees. Under his coat, he wore a waistcoat (vest) that was of a different color or pattern from the outer coat, and his throat was wrapped high in a silk or muslin neckcloth. An elegant top hat completed his fashionable image.

Similarly, a well-dressed woman no longer wore side hoops or bum rolls to make her skirt look fuller. She wore instead a gown or frock made of soft muslin “cinched

likeness of General Washington on horseback painted on each side. On one side Washington rode a bay and on the other a dark gray. The tavern served meals and drinks, rented rooms, and provided a stable and forage for horses. As our Alexandrian crossed Pitt Street, he would have caught the dank smell of the stable mixed with the enticing aroma of coffee and tobacco.

If our walker continued down King Street, he or she would have come to the center of Alexandria's commerce, the harbor. There, commodious warehouses stored tobacco, flour, wheat, ship's bread, and other commodities waiting for shipment to American seacoast towns, the West Indies, and Europe. (One such warehouse, the Fitzgerald Warehouse, still stands at 100-104 South Union Street. It now houses a Starbucks and The Virginia Shop.)

There also were wharves that stretched out into the Potomac River from the town's shore, where ships were made secure with strong ropes. The wharves smelled of stagnant water and emitted the sharp tang of tar from ships' riggings. The week in June when war was declared, the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that 15 ships recently had arrived in port and were tied to the wharves, including the brigs *Rising Sun* from Cuba and *Hunter* from Portugal, plus the schooner *Three Sallys* from New York and the sloop *Montezuma* from Norfolk.

That month in 1812, Alexandria presented a peaceful scene. Our walker and other Alexandrians, however, must have been uneasy about what this new war meant for them. Would ships still be able to enter and depart from their harbor and do business with distant trading partners? Could their town itself be secure from the powerful British army and British navy?

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette; *Virginia Silversmiths* by Catherine B. Hollan; *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* by Daniel Pool; *Fashion in Costume: 1200-2000* by Joan Nunn; *Pen Portraits* by T. Michael Miller; *Sights and Sounds of Alexandria in 1800* by Jim Munson.

Blockade and Raids – 1813



ANNE S.K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Admiral Cockburn burning and plundering Havre de Grace. The date on the image indicates that the attack took place on June 1 which is incorrect. According to reports in the *Gazette* and *National Intelligencer*, it took place in early May.

During the eight months following the United States' declaration of war on Great Britain, the war had little effect on Alexandria.

Then on February 12, 1813, the *Alexandria Gazette* reported from Norfolk that a heavily armed British navy squadron had just entered the Chesapeake Bay, and that its commander had proclaimed "the Chesapeake and all its ports, harbors and waters [are] in a state of strict and rigorous blockade." This was not an idle threat, and for the first time, war would be felt in Alexandria. Moreover, a blockade of shipping would be only part of the mission of the British navy.

The blockading squadron contained at least eight ships: two 74-gun ships of the line, three frigates, a sloop of war, a brig of war, and a small schooner. It was clear to

Alexandrians, particularly Alexandrian shippers and merchants, that its strength was more than adequate to enforce the blockade. The British navy easily outnumbered and outgunned the warships available to the Americans to keep the channel to the sea open. In fact, the only reasonably large ship available to the Americans was the frigate *Constellation*, which carried only about half the guns of one of the 74s alone. The blockaders quickly rendered her useless by chasing her into Norfolk harbor.

A reader predicted in the *Gazette* of February 13 that the blockade would result in a “fall of the price of our flour and grain,” key elements of Alexandria’s trade. The reader continued: “At length the war is brought home to us. *Yeah it is brought home to us!*”

In April, Alexandria gentlemen in top hats, tail coats, and boots eagerly gathered around the *Gazette* office on the west side of the 100 block of South Royal Street to pick up the latest edition of the paper. Possibly some gentlemen or their wives instead sent servants to the office to pick up their copies.

Regardless of how they got their papers, they read the upsetting news that British warships actually were now at the mouth of the Potomac River and had turned back a schooner from Alexandria bound for the West Indies. The schooner’s captain related that the British told him they had captured several privateers from Baltimore and “taken about 3,000 barrels of flour out of small vessels, and burnt the vessels” in their recent voyage in the Chesapeake Bay.

All this information dampened the mood of Alexandrians. The *Gazette* reported observing about town “silent streets, deserted warehouses, dismantled ships, long faces, and various other symptoms of public calamity and private grief.”

Then on May 6, the *Gazette* contained an ominous report headed “Havre-de-Grace Destroyed.” According to the report, the British had bombarded the small Maryland port, located where the Susquehanna River enters the Bay, “with shot, shells and rockets,” and “the destruction was general.” Washington’s *Daily National Intelligencer*, probably brought to Alexandria on the ferry from Washington, contained a more complete, eyewitness description of Havre de Grace’s destruction: “The force of the enemy consisted of six hundred men, four hundred of whom were landed in the town They burnt twenty-four of the best houses in the town, and *plundered* all the rest.”

The *Intelligencer* also reported that the soldiers were led by Rear Admiral George Cockburn (pronounced “Coe-burn”). Later the *Gazette* reported that a British navy deserter who had been at Havre de Grace related that Cockburn “not only led on the forces in person, but took the most active and conspicuous part in the disgraceful scenes which were acted on that occasion.”

This attack deeply impressed Alexandrians, and it and similar later raids would affect profoundly their behavior in the future. The immediate effect, however, was that

the Alexandria militia (then part of the District of Columbia militia) was quickly activated.

Earlier, the U.S. War Department had reorganized the District militia into two brigades. The Second Brigade consisted of an infantry regiment of Alexandria companies, including the privately outfitted Alexandria Blues, and a cavalry regiment composed of units from three jurisdictions: Alexandria (the Alexandria Dragoons), Washington, and Georgetown. President Madison had appointed Alexandria merchant, ship owner, and former council member Robert Young to lead this Second Brigade as a brigadier general.

In addition, Alexandrians over the age of forty-five, some of whom were veterans of the Revolutionary War, were moved by the “wanton destruction of Havre de Grace” to form the Company of Silver Grays to help defend the town.

In the days following the Havre-de-Grace incident, the militia units began to train seriously. Two months later, their training was put to some use when on July 15, General Young learned that the British navy had entered the Potomac and was proceeding upriver. He immediately ordered his brigade under arms and into camp just south of town. The *Gazette* defiantly proclaimed: “Let them [the British navy] come here when they may, they will meet with a reception not very courteous.”

However, after raiding farms and settlements in the lower part of the Potomac, the British ships were stopped from proceeding farther by the Kettle Bottoms, numerous shifting shoals of mud, sand, and oyster shells roughly 90 miles downriver from Alexandria. By July 29, they were reported leaving the Potomac, and by the beginning of September 1813, most of the British ships had left the Chesapeake Bay.

Alexandrians could breathe easier. The British blockade had been relaxed, and the threat of attack on Alexandria had receded. The Alexandria militia, however, had not been tested. That soon would change.

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette; *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, Volume II*, edited by Williams S. Dudley; *Six Frigates* by Ian W. Toll.

Alexandrians vs. British Raiders – June 1814

At five thirty on the evening of Tuesday, June 21, 1814, a number of Alexandria cavalymen were sitting on their horses on a hill overlooking the village of Benedict, Maryland, on the Patuxent River about 40 miles southeast of Washington. Below them, they could see several British barges and ships anchored in the river near the village.

Most of the British navy had departed the Chesapeake Bay in September the year before, leaving only a skeleton blockading squadron. However, in late February 1814, the British returned to the bay in force and resumed the pattern of shore raids it had pursued the previous year. Then Napoleon's defeat freed even more men and ships to fight in the Chesapeake.

Thus, this June evening, part of the British fleet had sailed up the Patuxent River to strike fear into the inhabitants there and to explore the river for possible future operations.

Two days earlier, an express rider had ridden into Washington with the urgent message that the British were in the Patuxent River and had "burnt many dwellings and plundered a number of families" on the river's shores. In response, a force of District of Columbia militia – infantry, artillery and the cavalymen from Alexandria, then part of the District – was assembled quickly in Washington and began marching toward the river.

The cavalry had ridden out ahead of the other units and were the first to reach the hills overlooking Benedict, where they found the British. The cavalymen were citizen soldiers. The Alexandrians were led by Captain William F. Thornton, who normally would have been in Alexandria behind his druggist counter. With him on the hill was Alexander Hunter, 24 years old, whose store on King Street sold groceries, spirits, and



Alexandria (Virginia) Dragoons, 1810--circa 1813

Military Uniforms in America

©1955, 1956 BY THE COMPANY OF MILITARY COLLECTORS & HISTORIANS

Plate No. 110

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gunpowder. Also mounted on his horse on the hill was Francis Wise, the 27-year-old-son of John Wise, the owner of the hostelry today called Gadsby's Tavern. Although they did not know it, one of them was about to become the first Alexandria militiaman killed in the War of 1812.

On the hills above Benedict, they joined a small group of Maryland militia led by General Phillip Stuart, who also had been seeking the British. Two accounts of what happened next have survived. One was printed in Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer*, and the other appeared in the *Alexandria Gazette*.

Looking down from their hill, the cavalrymen saw in the distance the British vessels near the village. Closer, at the foot of their hill, they spotted "a small detachment of the enemy, probably a marauding party." Immediately, the order was given to charge. The troopers obeyed with "much haste and impetuosity."

Dashing down the hill and onto level ground, the cavalrymen quickly overtook three or four British soldiers on foot and took them prisoner. Continuing, the galloping horsemen pursued a group of several soldiers and a sergeant into an adjoining field. There, after a brief fight, they captured two or three of the soldiers and killed another, but the sergeant got away. A few cavalrymen went after him.

The *Gazette* version continues:

"Among the first who overtook him was Mr. Francis Wise of the Alexandria Dragoons who made a bold but unsuccessful assault upon him. Being unable to check his horse, [Wise] passed ten or fifteen paces beyond him. On turning his horse, Wise received the fire of the sergeant and fell dead. At this moment Mr. Alexander Hunter, a young gentleman of this town came up." As the sergeant turned and faced Hunter, Hunter fired at him with his pistol, "which seemed to take effect."

Then: "Mr. Hunter's horse being alarmed at the [pistol's] report ran some distance from the spot. When Mr. H. returned he found Gen. Stuart engaged with this intrepid soldier. He immediately advanced to the general's relief – upon which the sergeant having had his bayonet unshipped [disengaged from his musket], dropped his musket and mounting an adjoining fence, fell upon the other side on his back.

"His escape appearing certain unless pursued., Mr. H. begged the loan of a sword which was presented to him by the general, and with which he alone pursued and soon overtook [the sergeant]. . . . A conflict ensued between them, the brave enemy endeavoring by many and vigorous efforts to get possession of the sword and refusing – though repeatedly urged, – to surrender *except with his life*." Soon his life, in fact, was ended with a stroke of Hunter's sword.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the marauding party had run back to their barges and ships in the river. The British vessels immediately opened up "a very brisk fire of round and grape shot" on the exposed Americans. General Stuart, seeing that the remainder of

the British party had reached safety, ordered the Americans to retreat to the hills. They did so, amazingly without further injury.

The British soldiers taken prisoner told the Americans that the slain sergeant was Sergeant Major Mayeaux or Mayo of the Royal Marines, with 17 years of active service and a man “of great personal prowess.” He, Trooper Wise, and the British soldier slain earlier were buried “with the honors of war, by the Alexandria troop” near where they were killed. Today their burial place is marked at Oldfields Episcopal Church near Hughesville, Maryland.

Two weeks later, the citizens of Georgetown gave the returning soldiers a rousing, celebratory dinner with a suitable number of toasts. The celebration, however, turned out to be premature.

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette; *Daily National Intelligencer*; Will of John Wise, Alexandria Orphans Court Will Book 2; *Artisans and Merchants of Alexandria, 1780-1820*, by T. Michael Miller

The British and the Slaves – July 1814

On July 23, 1814, Alexandrians read in the *Alexandria Gazette* that British ships again were sailing up the Potomac River and further, that they had attacked the county seat of Calvert County, Maryland. The paper also reported news, disturbing to many Alexandrians, that when leaving the county seat, the British “carried off about 300 Slaves.” Three days later, the *Gazette* reported the British also had seized the county seat of Westmoreland County on the Virginia side of the Potomac, and there “Negroes had been stolen.”

This news disturbed Alexandrians because, like their neighbors further down the Potomac, many owned black slaves. In the 1810 census, 20% of the Alexandria population was enslaved. Although the *Gazette* articles suggested only that the British would take away enslaved black Virginians as they would take away any property, Alexandrians knew, too, that slaves were perfectly capable of running away to the British on their own. The *Gazette* also reported that the British navy had been ordered “to receive and protect” escaped slaves.

The idea of the British receiving and protecting enslaved Virginians who had run away actually began during the American Revolution. In 1775, Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia, fled from Williamsburg to a ship in the Chesapeake Bay. As part of his attempt to reassert royal authority, in November 1775 he declared free “all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others . . . that are able and willing to bear Arms” to help crush the Virginia rebellion.

Then 38 years later, in March 1813, a British secretary of state ordered the British in the Chesapeake: “If any Individual Negroes shall in the course of your operations have given you assistance, which may expose them to the vengeance of their Masters after you retreat, you are at liberty, on their earnest desire, to take them away with you . . . but you must distinctly understand that you are in no case to take slaves away as Slaves, but as free persons.”

As a result, as historian Alan Taylor wrote, “The number of escapes surged during the summer and fall [of 1813] as word spread that the British officers welcomed runaways.” Taylor estimated that by the end of 1813 at least 600 slaves had escaped to the British.

The first escapees to reach British ships sailing the Bay were usually young men. Sometimes they would return to land to bring back friends, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles, and aunts, including relatives who had been sold to different owners on different farms along the Chesapeake and its adjoining rivers. At times, whole families – men, women, and children – would come together. They would come to the British ships in stolen boats or canoes or would meet the British when they came ashore looking for water or for slaves to carry away.

The enslaved Virginians were well acquainted with the waters of the Chesapeake and the surrounding land. For years they had been used in the bay as watermen in small boats fishing, catching crabs, tonging oysters, and transporting goods. On land, what little free time they had was mostly at night. While their masters slept, they would roam the woods and fields to hunt for meat, fish for themselves, meet future spouses, steal food, worship, and dance. One Virginian wrote, “The day was their master’s, but the night is their own.”

They became experts in the paths and byways of the land and the inlets of the bay and rivers. This knowledge not only helped them to escape, but also, as the British gradually learned, it helped them lead British raiding parties to farms and villages, and then back to ships before the arrival of American militia.

When the British returned to the Chesapeake in force in early 1814, they understood not only that escaped slaves could help them militarily but also that escaped slaves deprived their owners of what the owners considered valuable property. Thus, in the spring of 1814, the British commander issued a proclamation that even more clearly than before welcomed enslaved Virginians on board British vessels or at British posts “where they will have their choice of either entering into His Majesty’s Sea or Land Forces, or of being sent as FREE Settlers to the British Possessions in North America or the West Indies.”

As this proclamation indicated, the British enlisted black male escapees into a British fighting force called the Colonial Marines. The marines were issued uniforms that included the British red coat and were trained at a fort established on Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay. Once trained, the new marines became a valued part of British raiding parties.



PAINTING BY DON TROIANI, WWW.HISTORICALARTPRINTS.COM

Royal Colonial Marines 1814.

The freed slaves were particularly valuable as soldiers, not only because they were considerably less likely to desert than white British sailors but also because they fed whites' fear of black ex-slaves armed and coming after them.

On August 13, Alexandrians learned that these armed Colonial Marines were on the lower Potomac. That day the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that the British had landed at Monday's Point on the Yeocomico River on Virginia's Northern Neck. The British troops included "5 or 6 black platoons in red, commanded by British officers." They attacked Kinsale, burning houses and carrying away property. Outraged, the *Gazette* added, "Weep, Britain weep, and blush at the destitution and shame, which marks thy countrymen!"

On August 16, the *Gazette* reported that the British had left the Potomac. Alexandrians realized, however, that the British had come to the river in greater strength, with unexpected help, and might do so again.

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette; *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1732* by Alan Taylor; *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, Volume III*, edited by Michael J. Crawford

Alexandria Prepares Its Defense – August 1814

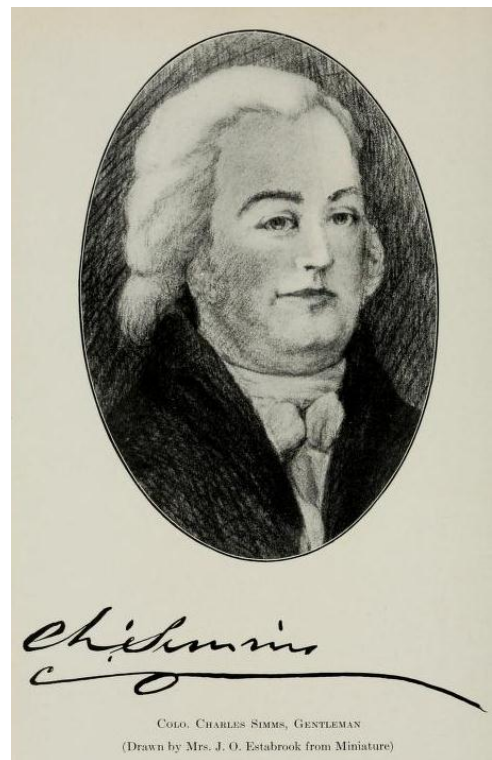
On August 20, 1814, General Robert Young, Alexandria merchant and commander of the 2nd Brigade of the District of Columbia Militia, received orders from his commander in Washington. His brigade, which contained all of Alexandria's infantry units, was to cross the Potomac River to Maryland, and there await further orders.

Disturbing news had reached Washington--the British navy in the Chesapeake Bay had been heavily reinforced. To many in Washington this clearly meant that the British were preparing a major attack, and they were its target. In anticipation, federal government authorities, whose main concern was protecting the capital, not Alexandria, decided that the best place for Young and his brigade was Maryland.

Alexandria's militiamen were under federal control, and they had been sent away from Alexandria. If its own soldiers were not available to protect against a British attack, what other resources did the town have?

That question had concerned Alexandrians for some time. A year and a half earlier, in February 1813, Mayor Charles Simms wrote Secretary of War John Armstrong about the town's inability to defend against "any predatory attempt that may possibly be made against it from the enemy fleet." He continued: "It would be very practicable to land three or four hundred men in the night who might plunder the Banks, Stores, dwelling houses and Shipping without resistance and make good their retreat before effectual steps could be taken to prevent it."

Mayor Simms, then 59, was a veteran of the Revolutionary War. He had served as a colonel under George Washington, who had written of him: "He is a brave intelligent and good Officer." After that war, Simms and his wife had moved to Alexandria where he had become a successful attorney, occasionally representing George Washington. Simms had been elected mayor a year earlier, and he would lead Alexandria throughout the War of 1812. Naturally, he was concerned about the town's safety.



Colonel Charles Simms, Mayor of Alexandria, 1812-1814. Drawing by Mrs. J.O. Estabrook from a miniature, 1912. The drawing comes from a book entitled "Early Chapters in the Development of the Patomac [sic] Route to the West" by Mrs. Corra Bacon-Foster published by the Columbia Historical Society in 1912.

Apparently there was no favorable response to his letter, and the Alexandria Common Council decided to do what it could in its own defense. On May 8, 1813, it appropriated \$1,500 for mounting the town's guns, including two 12-pound cannons at Jones Point, and paying expenses already incurred in mounting "two brass field pieces," both six pounders. (The use of "pound" in connection with cannons refers to the weight of the cannon ball the cannon fired.)

That same day the Council also decided to go to the top with its plea for federal aid. It appointed a committee, headed by Mayor Simms, to meet with President Madison. The meeting took place several days later, and Simms summarized its results: "He [President Madison] observed, that the representation of any respectable body of men was entitled to attention; and that the subject should be taken under consideration, or words to that effect."

The President delivered this brushoff despite Simms having known Madison since 1776 when he and Simms had both been delegates to Virginia's first constitutional convention. Simms had represented the frontier town of Fort Dunmore (later known as Pittsburgh, but in 1776 considered part of Virginia), and Madison had represented Orange County. By 1813, however, Simms and Madison were in opposing political parties, a fact that probably did not help Alexandria's cause.

Also in May 1813 a few days after the meeting with the President, deputations from Alexandria, Washington, and Georgetown met with Secretary of War Armstrong urging him to increase the District's defenses. They urged him particularly to strengthen Fort Washington (also known then as Fort Warburton), the fort located about six miles downriver from Alexandria that was the last line of defense against enemy ships sailing up the Potomac River to Washington or Alexandria.

The fort itself was situated on a level area of less than four acres much lower and nearer the water than the Fort Washington existing today. Major Pierre L'Enfant, military engineer and architect of the capital city, was sent in May 1813 to examine the fort. He reported that it and its weapons were in a dilapidated condition, adding that "the whole original design was bad, and it is therefore impossible to make a perfect work of it by any alterations."

Two months later, a General Wilkinson examined the fort. His July report also criticized its design saying the fort was a "mere water battery" whose cannons could not be swiveled to shoot at ships once they had gotten past them. Also, on the bluff above the fort was a two-story brick blockhouse that "could be knocked down by a twelve-pounder [cannon]." Many British warships then carried 24-pound cannons or larger.

But little or nothing was done to correct these deficiencies. A year later, in July 1814, the overall military commander of the District, General William H. Winder, wrote, "Fort Washington is, in several respects, incomplete in its state of preparation for defense."

Finally some ammunition was sent to the fort along with two men to make repairs, but these measures were sadly inadequate.

On August 18, two days before Alexandria's militia was ordered out of town, the *Alexandria Gazette* announced that banks in Georgetown, Washington, and Alexandria agreed to loan the federal government \$200,000, half to be used for "the erection of permanent fortifications upon the shores of the Potomac." Three banks in Alexandria soon provided \$50,000 toward this goal.

As it turned out, however, there was no time left to spend the money as intended. Mayor Simms and Alexandria were left with no militia, a fort incompletely prepared, and a few small cannons.

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette; *American State Papers, Military Affairs*; *History of the Invasion and Capture of Washington* by John S. Williams.

Battle of Bladensburg – August 1814



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/©GERRY EMBLETON

Secretary of State James Monroe and the Alexandria Dragoons scout British soldiers landing at Benedict, Md., on the Patuxent River.

On August 18, 1814, authorities in Washington learned that British warships were sailing up the Patuxent River in considerable force. Was Washington their target? Taking no chances, the authorities immediately ordered the District of Columbia militiamen, including the Alexandria Brigade under General Robert Young, to report for duty.

Simultaneously, they ordered General Young to dispatch the Alexandria Dragoons to meet Secretary of State James Monroe in Maryland at 4:00 a.m. the next morning. Several days later, the Dragoons would ride with Monroe to the fiasco of the Battle of Bladensburg, the British victory that enabled the British army to seize Washington.

Monroe had volunteered to ride to the Patuxent “to find and reconnoiter the enemy.” No one seemed to think it unusual for a 56-year-old secretary of state to go on a scouting expedition, but Monroe was a veteran of the Revolutionary War with a bullet wound in his shoulder to prove it. Thus, on August 19 at 1:00 p.m., Monroe rode out to seek the British accompanied by 25 or 30 Alexandria Dragoons as his escorts and messengers.

The Dragoons were led, as they had been on their adventurous ride to the Patuxent in June, by Alexandria druggist Captain William H. Thornton. Members of the Dragoons included relatives of several prominent Alexandrians. Young Privates Thomas and William Herbert were sons of Thomas Herbert, president of the Common Council. Cornet Samuel Thompson, 21, was the son of prosperous merchant and wharf owner Jonah Thompson of 209-211 North Fairfax Street, for whom Thompson’s Alley is named. Private Robert Conway, age 22, was the nephew of former Mayor Richard Conway, who in 1789 had loaned money to George Washington so Washington could clear his Virginia debts and go to New York to become President of the United States.

On the morning of the 20th, Monroe and the Alexandria Dragoons arrived on a hill overlooking the Patuxent about three miles from Benedict, Maryland. Monroe quickly sent one of the Dragoons to President Madison with the news that the British were disembarking numerous soldiers at Benedict. Where they were headed – to Washington, Annapolis, or Baltimore – was unclear.

For the next several days, Monroe continued to follow the British army as it marched north generally parallel to the Patuxent River, and he continued to send, by the fast-riding Dragoons, messages about the enemy's movements and strength to General William H. Winder, the American army's commander, President Madison, and even the French Ambassador.

Although General Winder commanded the American army, he had only limited military experience. That experience included blundering into the British lines near Lake Ontario, being captured, and remaining a prisoner for almost a year. While the British army was marching through Maryland, the American army under Winder only monitored the British from afar while repeatedly moving backwards and forwards uncertain as to the enemy's destination. Historian Henry Adams wrote, "Thus for five full days a British army marched in a leisurely manner through a long-settled country, and met no show of resistance."

Finally it was clear that the British were marching toward Washington by way of Bladensburg, a town of about 1,500 inhabitants on the east bank of the Eastern Branch (now the Anacostia River) six miles from Washington. There the road to Washington led over a bridge that crossed the Branch at a spot where it narrowed and could be waded easily.

On the morning of August 24, Winder ordered his army to Bladensburg. There the army was positioned disjointedly by individual unit commanders, by Monroe employing Captain Thornton's Alexandria Dragoons, and by Winder into three parallel lines on the west side of the Branch facing the British in the town on the opposite bank. The lines, however, were too far apart to support each other effectively.

Early in the afternoon, the British charged. After being checked briefly by fire from the Americans, these veterans of battles against Napoleon quickly rallied, crossed the bridge or waded through the Branch, and swept through the American's three lines one at a time, driving most of the largely inexperienced and tired American soldiers off to Washington at a run.

President Madison, Secretary of State Monroe, and other civil leaders were near the first line when the battle started. They soon moved to a place behind the third line, and when all appeared lost, they hastily retreated into Washington and then through it to the Virginia or Maryland countryside.

The Alexandria Dragoons also retreated, but it is unclear what they did next. Some probably accompanied Monroe as he moved about the Maryland countryside, but many of them had been dispersed earlier in various directions while carrying messages. As a captain of another American cavalry unit reported: “The Alexandria troop . . . had so many detached on duties [elsewhere], as left but a few scattering ones on the field [at Bladensburg].”

In the meantime, Alexandria’s infantry under General Young missed the Bladensburg Battle entirely. Initially it had been assigned a position in Maryland three miles behind Fort Washington to guard the fort from attack by land. Then on the morning of the battle, Young was ordered to abandon that position and march to the Eastern Branch bridge into Washington. Before he reached that new position, however, he was ordered to cross the Potomac into Virginia. Then, after some of his men had embarked on boats to take them across the river, he received new orders to occupy a position north of Fort Washington. Finally, as the main army was retreating through Washington, Young again received orders to cross to Virginia, which he wearily did that night. Encamped west of Alexandria, he awaited further orders.

Meanwhile, word reached Washington and Alexandria that seven British warships were sailing up the Potomac River with only the poorly designed Fort Washington blocking their way.

MAIN SOURCES:

Through the Perilous Fight by Steve Vogel; *American State Papers, Military Affairs*.

Alexandria Surrenders – August 1814

On August 24, 1814, the day of the Battle of Bladensburg, Alexandria Mayor Charles Simms called an urgent meeting of Alexandria's Common Council, the town's governing body, to discuss what to do as the British approached Alexandria by land and by water. As they met, worried Alexandrians in homes all around town debated whether to stay or flee.

Council members knew the British army was approaching Washington by way of Bladensburg and the British navy was some 30 miles below Alexandria sailing up the Potomac River. They also surely remembered that in a similar situation the previous year, the British navy destroyed Havre de Grace, Maryland, and that only a month ago, the British were on the lower Potomac burning buildings and welcoming slaves aboard their ships.

They also knew that General William Winder, the commander of the District of Columbia land forces, had ordered the Alexandria militia out of Alexandria, along with all the town's cannons, except for two that lacked ammunition. Earlier that day, the Council had sent a deputation to General Winder to determine how he planned to defend Alexandria. His response was not encouraging.

Without militiamen, with only two useless cannons, and without help from the federal government, the Council realized it had no defense against the British army should it come to Alexandria and the only thing that lay between Alexandria and the British navy was Fort Washington. Thus, the Council passed a resolution: "That, in case the British vessels should pass the fort, or their forces approach the town by land, and there should be no sufficient force on our part to oppose them with any reasonable prospect of success, they [the Council] should appoint a committee to carry a flag [of truce] to the officer commanding the enemy's force about to attack the town, and to procure the best terms for the safety of persons, houses, and property, in their power."

Events moved faster than the Council had anticipated. By the end of the 24th the British army had defeated the Americans at Bladensburg and was in Washington burning buildings. General Winder and the American army had retreated well west of the city. President Madison and his cabinet were scattered throughout the countryside. The Alexandria militia's position was unknown.

The next morning, August 25, a delegation of four Alexandrians appointed by the Council crossed the river and found one of the two commanders of the British forces, Rear Admiral George Cockburn, at his headquarters across from the smoldering Capitol.

The four men were Rev. Dr. James Muir, minister of the congregation known today as the Old Presbyterian Meeting House; Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, a medical doctor who had attended George Washington in his last illness; Jonathan Swift, a prominent merchant; and William Swann, a young lawyer.

Unsure of the army's next move, they asked Admiral Cockburn, who had destroyed Havre de Grace, what treatment their town might expect if the army captured it. His reply: "[A]ll I have to say is that we want provisions . . . , but . . . for every article we take, you shall be allowed a fair price." Considering this response the best they would get, the delegation returned to Alexandria.

Meanwhile, Georgetowners had been trying to surrender to the British for two days. Not finding anyone on the 24th, they located Major General Robert Ross, the British army commander, on the 25th and offered to hand over their town if their houses were spared. Ross said he would think about it.

The following morning, August 26, Alexandrians awoke to find that the British army had left Washington during the night. Its departure apparently nullified Cockburn's pronouncements. Now the town would have to wait for the British navy, steadily advancing upriver, and its confrontation with Fort Washington. Later that day, the Council cautiously appointed a delegation of three, Mayor Simms, Jonathan Swift, and Edmund J. Lee, former Council member and uncle of young Robert E. Lee, to approach the commander of the navy squadron with a surrender flag, if the squadron passed the fort.

They did not have long to wait. The next day, the 27th, the British were opposite Fort Washington. As the Council later wrote: "The citizens [of Alexandria] looked with great anxiety to [the fort] for protection; but, to their great surprise and mortification . . . the fort was abandoned, and the magazine blown up by the United States' garrison on the evening of the 27th, without firing a single gun."

The following morning Alexandrians standing on their waterfront wharves saw smoke rising in the north from the remains of the Capitol burned by the British and to the south, British ships. By 10:00 a.m., according to a report of the Council, part of the British squadron had passed the fort. The Council met again and passed a resolution saying, "... the Common Council has considered itself authorized from extreme necessity . . ." to make an arrangement with the enemy to ensure the town's safety.

The committee appointed earlier took a small boat to meet the British squadron's commander, Captain James Gordon, on his flagship *Seahorse* to learn his surrender terms. Gordon was only 31, but he had served as a captain under British naval hero Lord Nelson and wore a wooden leg to replace one lost to a French cannonball. Gordon said when he arrived at Alexandria, he would let them know.

The next morning, Alexandrians found seven warships with a total of over 100 cannons plus mortars and rockets approaching the town or moored "but a few hundred

yards from the wharves, and the houses so situated that they might have been laid in ashes in a few minutes,” according to the Council’s report.



SHIP MODELER AND PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN PROTHERO-THOMAS

38-gun frigate *H.M.S. Seahorse*, the flagship of Captain James Gordon’s British navy squadron. This image, according to its creator Englishman John Prothero-Thomas, is the photo of a model ship about five inches long made of “balsa wood core planked with individual scale planks of stiff paper.” It is set on a sea of balsa wood covered with wallpaper and swirling model paste to create the look of waves.

That morning, Captain Gordon sent Mayor Simms his terms. He would not destroy the town nor molest its inhabitants if the Alexandrians would not fight and would surrender all naval stores, shipping in the harbor, and merchandise in town intended for export. He gave the town one hour to reply.

The Council, having no other choice, agreed.

The British promptly began removing ships from Alexandria’s wharves and tobacco, cotton, flour, wine, and other commodities from the town’s warehouses.

MAIN SOURCES:

American State Papers, Military Affairs; To Annoy or Destroy the Enemy by Patrick O’Neill.

Alexandria Looted – August and September 1814

On August 29, 1814, Alexandrians had no soldiers to defend them, no prospect of aid from the federal government, and seven warships of the British navy anchored opposite their waterfront with numerous cannons aimed at their town. Having no other choice, they surrendered.

The British commander, Captain James Gordon, agreed not to destroy the town or molest its inhabitants if the town did not fight and surrendered all its naval stores, ships in the harbor, and merchandise in the town intended for export.

That afternoon the British, helped by slaves, began emptying the warehouses lining Alexandria's harbor of flour, tobacco, cotton, rice, wine, and other goods. They placed the goods in ships' boats and rowed them out to the warships or loaded them onto captured American vessels in the harbor to take with them later as prizes. Alexandria merchants stood by "viewing with melancholy countenance the British sailors gutting their warehouses of their contents," a newspaperman reported.

John Lloyd, a successful merchant and future owner of the Lloyd House and Lloyd's Row on Washington Street, probably was one of these merchants. Later he swore under oath that the British "forcibly took from his possession in Alexandria three hundred and fifty two barrels of superfine flour."

Many Alexandrians, however, had left or were sent from town to avoid the British. The frightened parents of seven-year-old Matilda Roberts bundled her into a four-horse wagon, her precious tea set sitting in her lap, to be driven to a location ten miles out of town. Very likely also leaving Alexandria to stay with relatives in the Virginia countryside were seven-year-old Robert E. Lee, his mother, two brothers, and two sisters. A visitor to Alexandria at this time found the town "almost deserted."

Other people also were leaving the Alexandria area, but for a different reason. At midnight on the first night that the British ships were anchored off Alexandria, twenty-four escaped slaves, at least some of them owned by Alexandrians, boarded one of those ships.

The movement of people, however, was not all one way. At least two British sailors deserted from British ships in Alexandria.

The British did keep their agreement not to molest Alexandrians. Mayor Charles Simms, the 59-year-old Revolutionary War veteran, had remained in town. He wrote his wife Nancy, who had left Alexandria with their children, "It is impossible that men could behave better than the British behaved while the town was in their power, not a single inhabitant was insulted or injured by them in their persons or homes."

All did not go entirely smoothly, however, because of the actions of three American navy officers, Captain David Porter, Captain John Creighton, and Lieutenant Charles Platt.

Captain Porter had just returned to the United States from the Pacific Ocean where he had harassed British whaling ships and had fought a valiant battle against a superior British naval force in the harbor of Valparaiso, Chile. When he arrived in Philadelphia in July, he was given a hero's welcome. Just outside the city, Philadelphians even removed the horses from his carriage, substituted themselves, and pulled the carriage and the triumphant Porter into the city. The secretary of the navy then ordered Porter to report to Washington to help defend it against the British. He arrived too late to save the capital, however, and was ordered to Alexandria to help develop a plan to stop the British navy.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/ © GERRY EMBLETON

Near the foot of Prince Street, a mounted American naval officer in civilian clothes grabs British midshipman John Fraser by his neckerchief in an attempt to capture him.

Unlike Porter, Captain Creighton had been in Washington only a week earlier as the British approached the city. Then he had helped burn the Washington Navy Yard to keep it from falling into British hands. Destroyed in the fire was the ship Creighton was to command.

On September 1, both officers plus Lieutenant Platt were on Shuter's Hill in Alexandria.

What appears to have happened that day (accounts differ) is that the three officers donned civilian clothes and rode their horses into Alexandria. They stopped first at the Washington Tavern on King Street with the sign showing George Washington on horseback mounted over the door. Finding no Englishmen there, they rode on down King to Union Street.

Once there they looked to their right and saw British midshipman John Fraser, no older than his early teens, "sauntering leisurely" back to a ship's barge tied to the wharf at the foot of Prince Street. Either Porter or Creighton (again accounts differ) immedi-

ately spurred his horse down Union Street, grabbed the midshipman by a handkerchief tied around his neck and began pulling him onto his horse's back. "The youngster, quite astonished, kicked and squalled most lustily," relates one account. The attempted abduction failed, however, when the midshipman's neckerchief came untied, and the midshipman fell to the ground.

The Americans rode rapidly down Union Street, up Duke, and out of town while the midshipman ran to the barge, whose men rowed him quickly back to their ship.

British Captain Gordon was informed of what had happened. Immediately he ordered the warships' portholes opened and cannons run out. Throughout the town women and children fled "screaming through the streets," Mayor Simms later wrote.

Simms, however, acted quickly. He informed Gordon the town lacked control over the three naval officers, and the crisis was averted.

Earlier that same day, orders had reached Captain Gordon to return to the fleet, and he ordered his warships to begin sailing back downriver with the prizes.

Meanwhile, the Americans had developed a plan that would ensure Gordon's passage downriver would be unpleasant, and for a change, the Alexandria militia finally would fight the British.

MAIN SOURCES:

To Annoy or Destroy the Enemy by Patrick O'Neill; *The Burning of Washington* by Anthony Pitch; *Simms Papers*, Library of Congress.

New Battle Plan -- August and September 1814

On August 31, 1814, atop Shuter's Hill, the site today of the Masonic Memorial, Acting Secretary of War James Monroe, navy Captain David Porter, the hero of the American war in the Pacific Ocean, and others met at the camp of General John Hungerford, a congressman from the Northern Neck who commanded 2,000 militiamen from various Virginia counties. The meeting's purpose was to put into effect a plan to attack the British navy as it sailed back down the Potomac River from Alexandria.

General Hungerford and his militiamen had been shadowing the British ships as they sailed up the Potomac. The British, however, had gotten ahead and arrived at Alexandria before the Americans. Then, as Hungerford and his men approached Alexandria, Alexandrians requested that they not enter the town and disrupt the peace already negotiated with the British. Secretary Monroe agreed and ordered Hungerford to camp outside the town.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE / © GERRY EMBLETON

Navy Captain David Porter points to the British navy as he, Acting Secretary of War James Monroe, and others atop Shuter's Hill (location today of the Masonic Memorial) plan to attack the British as they sail back down the Potomac River.

By August 31, Hungerford and his men had been sitting for two days atop Shuter's Hill watching the British navy below loading captured ships with tobacco, flour, and other goods in preparation for the return voyage. During that time Hungerford had been joined by Captain Porter and approximately 100 seamen and marines.

The plan was for all of them, plus General Robert Young's 450 Alexandrians now in Washington, to march the 12 miles south to Belvoir Neck, the next peninsula below Mount Vernon and the site today of Fort Belvoir. There they would establish a battery of

cannons and attempt to destroy the British as they sailed back down the Potomac. Captain Porter was named overall commander.

At Belvoir Neck, the channel the British ships would use passed close to the Virginia side of the river where they would be easier targets for American cannons. Those cannons would be positioned on top of a 40-foot-high bluff so that the ships would have difficulty elevating their own cannons enough to hit them. On a beach by the river's edge stood the white-painted building that gave the bluffs the name "the White House" or "White House Landing."

On September 1, after Porter had ridden into Alexandria as described last week, the militiamen and seamen on Shuter's Hill began marching toward White House Landing.

With farther to go, General Young's Alexandria brigade had already started across the Potomac and toward Belvoir Neck. The Alexandrians did not fight at Bladensburg, although they were not far away and could have. The American leadership in that battle was so inept that not inserting them into it was one of its many mistakes. After the battle, the Alexandrians marched through Northern Virginia seeking a phantom slave revolt. Then after the British captured Alexandria, they were ordered to Washington to defend it in case the British returned. Now they hoped to see some action.

As General Young recorded, his brigade consisted of "persons from all situations in life." It included Private William Herbert, Jr, grandson of the president of the Bank of Alexandria; Private Samuel Baggett, a 25-year-old laborer; and 52-year-old drummer Domini Barcroff, a free black man who owned a popular tavern on Fairfax Street.

It also included 27-year-old Captain Greenberry Griffith, an Alexandria silver-smith who commanded the Alexandria Artillery. The Artillery had with it all of Alexandria's cannons, including the 12-pounders Young retrieved the night of the 24th as the brigade marched through Alexandria on its way west. At Belvoir Neck, Griffith's artillery would play a leading role in the fight against the British ships.

While marching toward White House Landing, Porter received word from militiamen sent ahead that a British ship was approaching the bluffs. Followed by two 4-pound cannons and their gunners, Porter rode quickly on ahead.

When they arrived at the edge of the bluffs where the militiamen were felling trees to clear a place for the cannons, they saw about half a mile downriver a British brig floating toward them with the tide. "The few sails she had set were flapping as she rolled with the sullen swell, her rigging and yards were hung with shirts and trousers, it being washing day," a militiaman wrote later. "Her deck was covered with men. . . . She stood close in to the shore, not seeming to regard the few men she saw on the banks."

As the ship approached, the militiamen who had been felling trees lay down flat on the ground to hide, and Porter fired a shot from each of his two cannons. One

cannonball skipped across the water in front of the ship's bow, and the other cut down a signal flag, dropping it into the water. The men on deck, however, paid no attention, apparently thinking it was only a small party of neighborhood militia.

As the ship arrived opposite the Americans, however, a third cannon shot struck her hull, and simultaneously the militiamen rose and fired their muskets into the men clearly in view on deck. Immediately, the British sailors vanished behind the ship's sides or below deck.

The ship then fired a broadside, but the cannon balls struck the bank below the Americans. The militiaman continued to fire their muskets "until the shirts and trousers were cut to bits." As the ship moved away, Porter fired a last shot that shattered the glass window at her stern.

The British ship's captain earlier had sent a boat to Captain Gordon in Alexandria with orders that he rejoin the fleet. Now Gordon would learn that his descent of the Potomac would be contested.

That night, the remainder of Hungerford and Porter's men arrived at White House Landing. The next day, September 2, the men of Alexandria's brigade arrived also. They had yet to fire a shot at the British or receive a shot from them. That was about to change.

MAIN SOURCES:

To Annoy or Destroy the Enemy by Patrick O'Neill; *An Account of the Lineage of the Brown Family* by Thomas Brown, Duke University; *American State Papers, Military Affairs*.

Alexandria Fights Back – September 1814

On September 2, 1814, General Robert Young and the infantry part of his brigade of Alexandrians arrived on Belvoir Neck, twelve miles south of Alexandria, at an area called White House Landing. The Alexandria Artillery, which moved slower, would arrive the next day.

There on the edge of a 40-foot high bluff overlooking the river, the Americans under the overall command of navy Captain David Porter had established a battery of cannons protected by infantry, about 2,000 men altogether. Their goal was to destroy the British warships as they sailed back down the Potomac River from Alexandria.

On the other hand, the British were determined to destroy the battery. The British sailed five ships, including two bomb ships and a rocket ship, in position to launch a bombardment. For three days these warships fired their cannon balls, bombshells, and rockets almost continuously day and night.

A bomb ship carried a squat four-ton mortar that fired a shell that flew in a high arc and could be set to explode on the ground or in mid-air. The rocket ship fired Congreve rockets, projectiles about three-and-a-half feet long that soared up into the air like skyrockets “hissing and roaring, trailing flame and smoke . . . and exploded with a thunderous clap, showering shards of metal,” wrote historian Steve Vogel. (Later in Baltimore harbor these same ships sent “bombs bursting in air” and produced “the rocket’s red glare.”)

When Young’s Alexandrians arrived, they were assigned a position behind the American battery Porter had established. Here they were available to protect the battery if the British launched a land attack. They still, however, were within range of the British weapons.

Among them was 24-year-old Private Richard Cranch Norton. Norton, a great nephew of Abigail and John Adams, recently had moved to Alexandria from Massachusetts to practice law. Norton later recorded in his journal that “Until [the battle], I never knew what it was to hear the whistling of cannon balls, shells, etc. At first it was not very agreeable music to a new soldier like myself, but custom soon makes everything familiar to us.”

On September 3, Captain Greenberry Griffith, the 27-year-old Alexandria silversmith, arrived in camp with his Alexandria Artillery and its 6- and 12-pound cannons. Porter immediately ordered him into action with the battery already in place, bringing the number of effective cannons on the bluff to 13.

The next day, September 4, the British rocket ship moved closer to shore. In response, Captain Porter ordered some of his sailors with a 12-pound cannon and Griffith with Alexandria’s two 6-pounders to a point close to the ship.

Porter later reported that the enemy rocket ship “was much cut up” by the American cannons. “Scarcely a shot missed his hull, and for one hour we drew to this point, the fire of all the enemy’s force . . . [T]he intrepidity of Captain Griffith of the Alexandria Artillery, his officers and men, merit the highest eulogiums. [T]hey fought their six-pounders until their ammunition was expended and coolly retired with their guns when ordered to do so under a shower of the enemy’s shot.” The rocket ship soon pulled back to repair damage to sails and rigging and to commit to the depths of the Potomac two of her seamen killed in the action as her wounded captain looked on.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/ © GERRY EMBLETON

Weapons used in the White House Landing Battle: Upper left – a Congreve rocket. Upper right – a naval cannon being loaded, then hauled forward for firing. Middle left – a gun crew loading a small-caliber field gun (the crew is depicted dressed as Maryland militia but the Alexandria Artillery would have worn the same type of uniform, possibly with different colored jackets). Middle right – tools used by gun crew. Lower left – cannon balls, grapeshot, chain shot, and a cannon charge bag. Bottom right – carronade and a cross-section of the tube of a loaded cannon.

Later Captain Charles Napier, captain of the *H.M.S. Euryalus*, complained that the Americans had loaded their cannons with “every sort of devilment” such as “nails, broken pokers, gun barrels—everything that will do mischief.” He grouched, “A 24-lb shot in the stomach is fine – we die heroically; but a brass candlestick for stuffing, with a garnish of rusty two penny nails, makes us die ungentleely.”

That same day the first Alexandrian was killed. He was a small, “very sprightly” boy. The boy’s mother, a widow in Alexandria, had allowed him to accompany an officer “who had greatly befriended her.” The boy was running after a spent cannon ball when another ball flew through the air, struck him, and killed him.

On September 5, all eight of the British warships and the 21 captured merchant vessels loaded with Alexandria goods were assembled for an attempt to pass the battery. Around noon, led by two frigates, *H.M.S. Seahorse* with 38 guns and *H.M. S. Euryalus* with 36, they got under way. The frigates had cut away the upper part of their portholes to elevate their cannons sufficiently to fire effectively on the battery on the high bluff. They anchored close to the shore and began to fire their cannons continuously with round and grapeshot.

The other warships and prizes followed them. Captain Porter later reported that all the British warships were “pouring into the battery and neighboring woods a tremendous fire of every description of missiles.”

General Young had detached some of his men to join a unit from Essex County, Virginia, positioned to the right of the battery. From there the Alexandrians and the other militiamen poured “well-directed fire on the Enemy’s deck,” Porter later wrote.

Alexandrians now were in the middle of the enemy bombardment. Cannonballs from the ships screamed overhead. “The crashing in the woods with which the shore in this place is covered, was prodigious,” Private Norton later recorded. “Large trees were cut down in numerous instances . . . and the limbs and splinters fell in every direction.” Nearby, gunnery officers yelled “Fire,” American cannons crashed, and muskets cracked. Powder smoke drifted among the Alexandria men and into their eyes. Sweat streamed down their faces.

Finally, the British barrage from its eight ships became so destructive that most of the outgunned American cannons were disabled. (A broadside from just one British frigate was 18 cannons. The Americans’ cannons totaled only 13.) Porter ordered a retreat, and the British ships ceased firing. By 2:50 p.m., almost three hours after their bombardment began, all British ships had passed the battery.

The British had seven killed and 35 wounded. The Americans lost eleven killed and 17 or 18 wounded. Two Alexandrians were listed as killed in the battle. One was Private Robert Allison, Jr., who served in the Alexandria Artillery. A Samuel Bowen also was listed, but it is unclear whether he was a soldier or he was the unnamed Alexandria boy killed by the cannonball.

The Alexandrians and all the militiamen had performed well – much better than the militia at Bladensburg. Captain Porter wrote that they “conducted themselves in a manner which reflects on them and their Country the highest honor.”

Although the Americans had not sunk a single British ship, they had delayed the rendezvous of Gordon’s squadron, particularly its bomb and rocket ships, with the rest of the British fleet. Thus the fleet’s attack on Baltimore was delayed, and Baltimore had additional time to strengthen its defenses, defeat the British, and continue to fly the Star-Spangled Banner.

MAIN SOURCES:

To Annoy or Destroy the Enemy by Patrick O’Neill; *Papers of Richard Cranch Norton*, Massachusetts Historical Society; *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, Volume III*, Michael J. Crawford editor; *An Account of the Lineage of the Brown Family* by Thomas Brown, Duke University.

War of 1812 – Who Won?

After the British left Washington and Alexandria, their good luck changed. On September 12-14, 1814, the Americans defeated them at Baltimore and on January 8, 1815, defeated them again at New Orleans.

Even before the Battle of New Orleans, the British had had enough of the war. In Ghent, Belgium, on December 24, 1814, they and American negotiators signed a treaty to end it. The United States Senate ratified the treaty, and President Madison signed it on February 16, 1815. The War of 1812 finally was over.

Yet, who won the war – the British, the Americans – or was it a draw? How did the war affect Alexandria?

The treaty itself did not change the relationship between Britain and America on issues that caused the war. It contained no language preventing the British from seizing American ships or American seamen. It also was silent about British trade restrictions.

The British, however, were no longer in a deadly war with France. They had no need to restrict American trade. They also no longer needed additional ships or additional seamen. Instead, they were mothballing ships and putting seamen on dry land, and they never again subjected Americans to those practices that helped lead to war.

Also, when the war ended the British still controlled Canada. Yet America continued its expansion, not northward but into the vast continent to the west. Westward expansion now was safer because in 1813 an American army defeated the charismatic Shawnee leader Tecumseh. This defeat and the American expansion westward led ultimately to the cessation of Indian attacks, another issue that had led to war.

Perhaps Americans did not win the war in the traditional sense, but at the war's end, the country's pride and prestige had increased considerably. The United States had won the last two major battles against the vaunted British army. During the war the American navy had embarrassed the British navy in ship-to-ship combat. Americans were legitimately proud of these victories, and other nations began to realize the United States' potential to become a great power on both land and sea. The war also gave the United States new, powerful symbols, such as the flag that flew over Baltimore's Fort McHenry and the future national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

To some extent the war was a second War of Independence. Although Britain never seriously challenged America's independence, it had not respected America's sovereignty. After the war that changed. "I must acknowledge that the war has been useful," wrote Albert Gallatin, one of the American peace negotiators. "The character of America stands now as high as ever on the European continent, and higher than ever it did in Great Britain." Never again did the United States and Great Britain go to war against each other.

What was the effect of the war on Alexandria?

Before the British left the Potomac River, the brigade of Alexandrians at White House Landing had helped retrieve some honor for the Americans after the disgraceful Battle of Bladensburg. Many Americans, however, focused not on the Alexandrians' fight against the British as they sailed down the Potomac, but on Alexandria's earlier surrender.

Criticism of the surrender began even before the British left Alexandria. On September 1, Washington's *National Intelligencer* wrote, somewhat inaccurately: "The degrading terms dictated by the Commander of the British squadron below Alexandria . . . connected with the offer of the townsmen *before* the squadron had even reached the fort, to surrender without resistance . . . have everywhere excited *astonishment and indignation*." *The Richmond Enquirer* exulted on August 31, "Thanks be to the Almighty God: that this degraded town no longer forms part of the state of *Virginia*."

Samuel Snowden, editor of the *Alexandria Gazette*, countered by describing Alexandria's numerous, futile efforts to persuade the federal government to help with the town's defense. He then told how the government not only failed to help, but also ordered away the town's soldiers. Snowden proclaimed that under these circumstances to call Alexandrians cowardly was "Matchless impudence! Unparalleled libel upon the character of a virtuous and high-minded people."

Gradually Alexandria's image began to be rehabilitated. A congressional committee appointed to inquire into the invasion of Washington and Alexandria issued its report on November 29, 1814. The report included detailed statements from the Alexandria Common Council and others setting forth the circumstances leading to the surrender. Although the report contained no conclusion, it was clear that Alexandria was defenseless and had no choice but to surrender.



PHOTO BY TED PULLIAM

Homes at 208 and 210 North Fairfax Street today. Both houses were built before 1814, and both might have been destroyed had the British navy opened fire on Alexandria in August 1814.

Unfortunately, after the war Alexandria's economy never fully regained its earlier vitality. By the mid-1820s, Alexandria had been surpassed by both Baltimore and Richmond.

Whatever others might think of the town and whatever the state of its economy, on December 11, 1815, Alexandrians decided to celebrate their contribution to the Battle of White House Landing. On that date, as reported by the *Alexandria Gazette*, the town hosted an "elegant dinner" at what today is Gadsby's Tavern, complete with a band, the firing of cannons, and 30 grand toasts.

Now, although knowledge of Alexandrians' actions during the War of 1812 has largely faded, what has endured are the Alexandria buildings that might have been lost had the British ships aimed their 100-plus cannons at the town and fired. Fitzgerald's Warehouse, Gadsby's Tavern, the Carlyle House, Christ Church, the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary, and other homes and structures remain. They not only help preserve Alexandria's past, they help create its present. To many people they are the essence of Alexandria.

MAIN SOURCES:

Alexandria Gazette; *The Hidden History of Alexandria, D.C.* by Michael Lee Pope; and *The War of 1812* by Donald R. Hickey.

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