

Fort McHenry



The repulse of a British naval attack against this fort in 1814 prevented the capture of Baltimore and inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star Spangled Banner"

From 1793 to 1815 England and France were engaged in a world war. Intent on crushing each other, both countries confiscated American merchant ships and cargoes in an attempt to prevent supplies from reaching the enemy, acts considered by many Americans as violations of their neutral rights.

The situation was made hotter by British impressment of American seamen and the demands of the "war hawks," a group of southern and western congressmen who wanted the United States to expand into British Canada and Spanish Florida. The declaration of war on June 18, 1812, in order to preserve "Free Trade and Sailors Rights," was carried by the war hawks.

For two years the Americans were merely an annoyance to the British, who could not devote much effort against the United States until Napoleon was defeated. In April 1814 Napoleon capitulated, and in August a British expeditionary force arrived in Bermuda. The ships' crews had been augmented with experienced sailors from the Mediterranean fleet and the army, under Gen. Robert Ross, with seasoned veterans from the Spanish campaigns. The British commander, Adm. Alexander Cochrane, had full authority to use his ships and soldiers as he saw fit, and he decided to attack Washington. Negotiations for peace between England and the United States were about to begin at Ghent, Belgium. Cochrane wanted to give the Americans "a complete drubbing" before peace was made to strengthen the British bargaining position.

In mid-August the expeditionary force entered the Patuxent River with 20 warships and 3,400 troops. The British landed at Benedict, Md., and at the battle of Bladensburg on the 24th routed the American militia defending the capital. That evening the British entered Washington. The well-disciplined British army succeeded in destroying government buildings and property, but it also greatly inflamed American bitterness against the British.

Because the Bay was considered unhealthy in the late summer, Admiral Cochrane had planned to attack Washington, leave the Chesapeake, and attack Rhode Island. He would then move southward attacking vulnerable points along the coast, including Baltimore, until he reached New Orleans. General Ross concurred with this plan, but Admiral Cockburn urged Cochrane to launch an immediate attack on Baltimore. The British force reembarked on their ships at Benedict and set sail down the Bay. For some reason Cochrane changed his mind and decided to attack Baltimore. But to do so from the Chesapeake it was first necessary to seize Fort McHenry. On the morning of September 12 British troops landed at North Point and began their march toward the city. En route the British discovered an uncompleted defensive trench across their line of march. Ross realized the Americans were closer than he had expected. At the Gorsuch farm Ross interrogated some American prisoners, who reported the strength of Gen. Samuel Smith's army, but said nothing about the 3d Brigade under Gen. John Stricker at nearby Bear Creek.

Stricker, however, knew Ross was coming and sent a detachment toward the Gorsuch house with orders to stop the British force. In the skirmish, the Americans were forced back, but Ross was mortally wounded. Col. Arthur Brooke then assumed command and moved his troops forward. Later that afternoon, in the battle of North Point, he forced Stricker to retire. The Americans retreated to a position near Baltimore and the British camped for the night.

the Battle of Baltimore

Rain fell almost continuously the next day and throughout the night, as British forces prepared to resume operations against Baltimore. The bomb vessels *Terror*, *Meteor*, *Aetna*, *Devastation*, and *Volcano*, firing a heavy explosive shell from a mortar, and the rocket ship *Erebus*, employing the new Congreve rocket, took position about two miles from Fort McHenry. The remaining ships formed an arc, out of the range of the fort's guns. At first light an intensive bombardment of Fort McHenry began. The British hoped the American defenders would panic, evacuate the fort, and leave Baltimore defenseless.

On the shore a British army of 3,300 men faced 15,000 Americans. Brooke, realizing that a frontal attack could not be made on Baltimore, tried to move his troops under cover of the heavy rain to the north of the city. The attempt was discovered, and the Americans kept between the British and the city. By evening the British were before Rogers Bastion, the strong defensive position east of the city.

In the early evening Brooke decided upon a night attack on the bastion. Because of the need for diversionary and protective fire, this enterprise required the cooperation of the fleet. Brooke arranged with Admiral Cochrane for a feint by the navy toward Ridgely's Cove, just off Ferry Branch. Boats carrying 1,200 men were to be utilized for the feint, while the vessels of the fleet were to reduce Rogers Bastion. With the bastion destroyed Baltimore could be attacked.

Shortly before midnight all was ready. The rain made everyone miserable. Special care had to be taken to keep the powder from getting wet and making the guns useless. Sailors and marines from the fleet rowed toward Ridgely's Cove, and made their way through the hulks sunk across the river by the Americans to prevent such a foray. Meanwhile, the British soldiers facing Rogers Bastion had to contend with the mud as well as the rain and darkness.

On the other hand, the Americans were frustrated by the inability of their cannon to reach the British. The defenders hung on, taking cover from the bombs and rockets and retaliating with an occasional gun fired at the British ships. Still, they had to be prepared to hold the fort against the attack they felt was certain to come.

At midnight the attack began. The fleet intensified the cannonade of Fort McHenry, and 20 boats headed for Ferry Branch. But somehow, in the rain and dark, 11 boats became separated and headed toward Northwest Branch. The Americans believed this was a move to capture the Lazaretto Battery and began to fire upon them. Realizing the error and the danger confronting them, the boats retired to the fleet. In the meantime the other boats moving into Ferry Branch were detected by the batteries west of Whetstone Point: *"and the heavens were lighted with flame, and all was continued explosion for about half an hour. Having got this taste of what was prepared for them (and it was a mere taste) the enemy precipitately retired with his remaining force, battered and crippled, to his respectful distance. . . ."*

By 2 a.m. the attack was over. The British had failed to reduce the bastion, neutralize the fort, or capture the city. For five more hours the ships continued to provide fire to cover the retreat of the army to North Point. In 25 hours of cannonade the British expended between 1,500 and 1,800 rounds at Fort McHenry, causing but four deaths and 24 wounded.



The Bombardment of Fort McHenry
by Alfred Jacob Miller

Courtesy The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.



The tour of the fort and grounds begins at the visitor center, where exhibits and a film depict the history of the fort and the writing of "The Star Spangled Banner." Numbers on the map indicate other exhibits along the route. Audio stations around the fort are marked by stars ★

Opposite the visitor center is a statue of Maj. George Armistead, the commander of Fort McHenry during the 1814 bombardment. (1) You can also see the outlines of several original service buildings. Along the trail to the fort, markers (2) identify the site of an old tavern and the 1814 road to Baltimore.

Fort McHenry itself, star-shaped with five bastions, follows a century-old French design. On your right as you approach the fort, the raised mound (3) is the remains of the dry moat that originally encircled the fort and protected many of its defenders during the bombardment. At that time the moat was a little larger than it is today. The V-shaped outwork (4) opposite the fort entrance is a ravelin, which protected the entrance from direct attack. The underground magazine was added after the battle.

The archway over the sally port (5), through which you enter, was also constructed later. The underground rooms on either side were originally bombproofs, but during the Civil War, Confederate prisoners were held there. On the parade ground (6) is a cannon believed to have been used in the defense of Baltimore. It bears the monogram of King George III of England. At the front of the parade ground and just beyond the sally port is the flag pole (7) from which the 42- by 30-foot battle flag flew during the bombardment, inspiring Francis Scott Key to write "The Star Spangled Banner."

a Tour of Fort McHenry

The guardhouses (8) on both sides of the entrance date from 1835, and the cells, where Civil War prisoners were held, from 1857. From one of the five bastions (9) you have a view of the Patapsco River, where the British fleet lay at anchor in 1814. A taped message here describes the fort's strategic importance.

In a semi-circle around the parade ground are the several buildings that served as living quarters for the soldiers of the forts. The regular 60-man garrison was housed in the soldiers' barracks (10 and 11). These buildings, like the other quarters at the time of the bombardment, were 1½ stories high, with gabled roofs, dormer windows, and no porches. They appear today much as they did over a century ago. Each contains exhibits which help to explain the significance of the fort. The first floor of the adjoining building (12) was junior officers' quarters.

During the bombardment, the powder magazine (13) was struck by a 186-pound British bomb which failed to explode. Later it was rebuilt and enlarged to its present size. The restored quarters of the commanding officer (14) were used by Major Armistead as his headquarters. At that time the end room was a separate building that served as a guardhouse.

Several places on the outer grounds are of interest. The Civil War batteries (15) replaced the earlier battery near the waterfront. The Civil War powder magazine is near the entrance to the grounds. The statue of Orpheus, a mythological Greek hero of music and poetry, was erected in 1922 to honor the memory of Key and the soldiers and sailors who participated in the defense of Baltimore.

Francis Scott Key In 1814 the author of "The Star Spangled Banner" was an influential young lawyer. Opposed to war on religious grounds, Key nevertheless served briefly with the Georgetown Field Artillery and was at the Battle of Bladensburg. After the British captured Washington, Key and Col. John S. Skinner, U. S. Commissioner General of Prisoners, were asked to obtain the release of William Beanes, a Maryland doctor held by the British.

Sailing from Baltimore, Key and Skinner met the British fleet in Chesapeake Bay. Admiral Cockburn promised to free Beanes after the planned attack on Baltimore. Confined on board a small vessel beyond the action, Key watched the 25-hour bombardment of Fort McHenry. On the morning of the 14th, Key at last saw the flag still flying about the fort and knew the Americans were victorious. The poem he wrote on the occasion was published the next day and was soon being sung to the tune "To Anacreon in Heaven." The song was made the National Anthem of the United States in 1931.

About Your Visit Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine is 3 miles from the center of Baltimore, and is readily accessible over East Fort Avenue, which intersects Md. 2.

The fort is open 7 days a week, except Christmas and New Year's Day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. From May 30 through October 15, the visiting hours are from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

You can make your visit safe and enjoyable by observing common sense rules of safety. Climbing on the cannons, monuments, and trees, venturing too close to the edge of the fort walls, and walking on the seawall are not allowed.

Administration Fort McHenry is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Baltimore, MD 21230, is in immediate charge.

National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

Rivardi's Star Fort McHenry, located on Whetstone Point, guards the approaches to Baltimore from the Patapsco River and Chesapeake Bay. Fort Whetstone occupied the site during the Revolutionary War, but was soon abandoned. In 1794 Congress began a system of fortifications to protect major coastal cities. John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi was commissioned to draft plans for a new fort on the point, and Samuel Dodge was appointed to supervise construction. Star Fort, the main portion of the present structure, was completed by the late 1790s and became known as Fort McHenry, honoring a native Marylander who had been an aide to General Washington and was then Secretary of War in Washington's cabinet.

Many improvements were made in the fort over the years, but after the War of 1812 it saw no further fighting. Fort McHenry served as a prison for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War, it was used for a time by the Immigration Service, and it was an Army hospital in World War I. In 1925 the fort was made a national park.