

# Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
www.starspangledtrail.net



HMS *Euryalus* was one of the British ships that sailed up the Potomac to Alexandria.  
Oil by Geoff Hunt Royal Navy Police and Regulating Branch Museum

## A Rematch with Britain

IN 1812 MANY AMERICANS STILL REMEMBERED the exhausting fight to win independence from Great Britain some 30 years before. Tension between the two countries still smoldered. Britain, at war with France for supremacy in Europe since 1803, set policies that interfered with American trade. In need of men for their huge navy, the British boarded American vessels and seized men said to be British deserters, including thousands of Americans. Along the Great Lakes and Northern Frontier, the British joined with American Indians and forcefully blocked American expansion into disputed territory.

Some Americans, including President James Madison, wanted to strike back. They believed the United States stood to gain British and Spanish territory in North America. Others bitterly opposed the idea of war against the much better equipped Britain.

Congress finally declared war on June 18, 1812. Over the next two years, U.S. and British forces clashed at points ranging from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The British occupied the fertile Chesapeake Bay to disrupt trade, bring war to the center of the country, and draw troops from the north. They raided and terrorized waterfront towns.

By summer 1814, President Madison knew the war might escalate. The French emperor Napoleon had fallen and Britain's fight with France ended, freeing up thousands more British troops. President Madison called for militiamen and volunteers to protect the Washington-Maryland area.

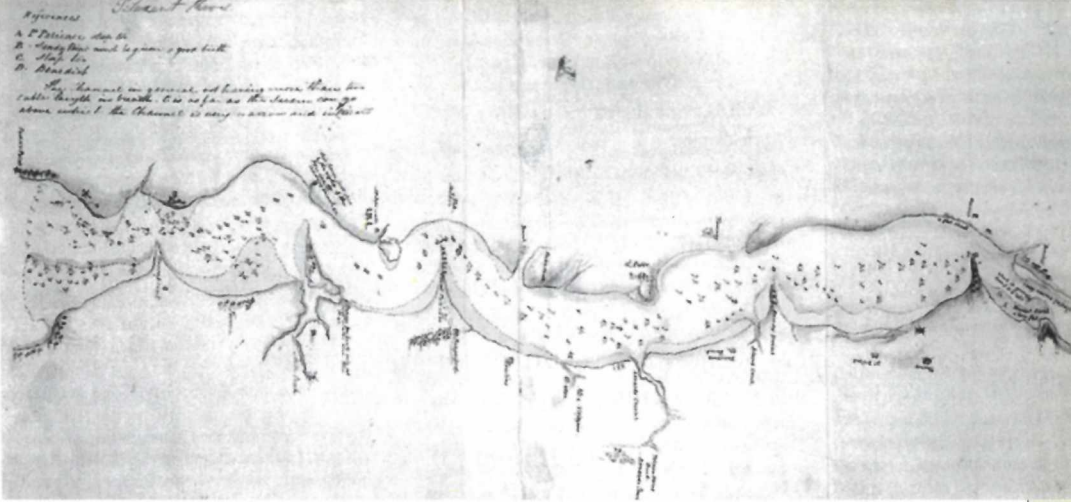
On August 19, 1814, British General Robert Ross brought more than 4,000 troops ashore at Benedict in southern Maryland to begin a land invasion. Meanwhile, his compatriot, Rear Admiral George Cockburn, sailed his flotilla up the Potomac River toward the District of Columbia. Word spread that the British wanted to avenge the Americans' 1813 destruction of British Canada's capital, York (now Toronto). But U.S. Secretary of War John Armstrong insisted the British would strike Baltimore, not Washington. The fledgling U.S. capital was just too inconsequential, he thought.

Nevertheless, panic struck the capital city, and those who could, fled. Wagons, carts, and horses became scarce commodities. Government workers spirited public records to hiding places. The secretary of war was about to be proved wrong.

## A Day of Reckoning

AUGUST 24 WAS SHAPING UP TO be another broiling hot, dusty day. U.S. Brigadier General William Winder, in charge of the Washington-Maryland military district, ordered the destruction of bridges across the Anacostia and Potomac rivers and of the Navy Yard, if the British came. Soon scouts brought word that the British were indeed approaching Bladensburg, a tobacco port just five miles northeast of the Capitol.

The inexperienced General Winder attempted to take command as U.S. troops arrived from as far away as Baltimore. Footsore, exhausted, ill-trained, and poorly armed, they would be no match for the British. In fact many fled as the battle began.



An August 1814 sketch of the Patuxent River by Commodore Joshua Barney shows British ships and some of the American houses raided by the British.  
National Archives and Records Administration



Commodore Joshua Barney, oil by Rembrandt Peale, 1817.  
Maryland Historical Society

The roar of the fighting at Bladensburg carried all the way to the President's House. In mid-afternoon Dolley Madison received orders to leave immediately. She took the time to make sure Gilbert Stuart's life-size portrait of George Washington was saved, then escaped.

The sight of exhausted soldiers straggling into Washington from Bladensburg terrified the citizenry. Hundreds more ran away.

A rare American hero that day was U.S. Commodore Joshua Barney, who had arrived mid-battle, rallied the troops, and fought valiantly. Severely wounded, he was treated by enemy officers and released. General Winder, on the other hand, was widely despised for failing to defend Washington and for his disgraceful performance at Bladensburg.

## Francis Scott Key and the Star-Spangled Banner



National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

As the British sailed toward Baltimore in early September 1814, Georgetown attorney Francis Scott Key and John Skinner, the U.S. agent for the exchange of prisoners, met the British to plead for the release of Key's friend, a physician abducted from Upper Marlboro, Maryland. The three Americans were aboard a truce ship when the British began bombarding Fort McHenry. Thus Key observed the American triumph at Fort McHenry, and the huge star-spangled banner raised after the fort survived the night. Overcome with pride, he recorded his thoughts. The resulting poem eventually became the U.S. national anthem. Today the banner is displayed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

## Paul Jennings, Witness to the Burning of Washington

Paul Jennings, a 15-year-old slave at the White House, later described what happened after Dolley Madison left the Executive Mansion mid-afternoon on August 24:

"... Although the British were expected every minute, they did not arrive for some hours; in the mean time, a rabble, taking advantage of the confusion, ran all over the White House, and stole lots of silver and whatever they could lay their hands on."



Family of Sylvia Jennings

## Washington on Fire

BRITISH TROOPS LED BY Major General Robert Ross and Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn arrived at the edge of Washington City at dusk on August 24. They headed toward Capitol Hill. Suddenly, a sniper's shots shattered the air. Several men fell, and Ross's horse crumpled beneath him. The British searched a nearby stately brick house (today's Sewall-Belmont House), then torched it. Their next target: the U.S. Capitol. There they planted the Union Jack and ignited a fire so intense it melted glass light fixtures.

It was late when the British finally arrived at the President's House. Helping themselves his wine and ale, they mockingly toasted President Madison, disappointed he had eluded capture. Then they set fire to the mansion, which one soldier described as "remarkable for nothing."



A modern painting imagines the scene as the White House is engulfed in flames.  
By Tom Freeman, White House Historical Association

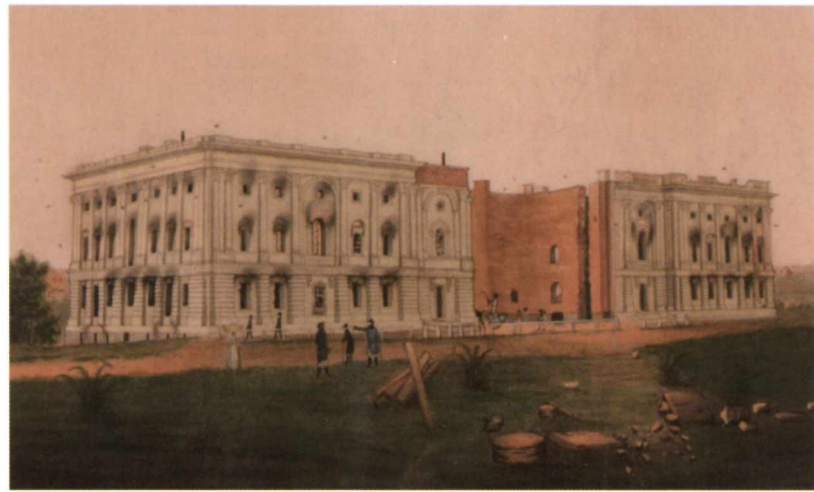
The city in flames brightened the night sky. In the morning, detachments of British continued their mission to burn all public buildings. In addition they vengefully destroyed the offices and presses of the *National Intelligencer* newspaper, which had often attacked Admiral Cockburn. But they spared the Patent Office after its superintendent, William Thornton, pleaded that the hundreds of models inside were private property.

Two shocking events ended the rampage. About 75 British troops were laying waste to the federal arsenal (now Fort McNair), when a sudden explosion gouged a gigantic crater in the earth. About 30 men were blown to bits or smothered in debris. Many others were wounded.

Hours later an unusually violent rainstorm rocked the city. It flattened buildings and toppled trees, chimneys, and people in its path — and also doused some of the fires. That evening the British left so quietly few people realized they were gone.



An artist's imagining of the burning of the Library of Congress.  
North Wind Picture Archives



U.S. Capitol after burning by the British, eyewitness watercolor by George Munger, 1814.  
Library of Congress

Washington began rebuilding. Congress, reconvening in temporary quarters, nearly approved a proposal to move the capital out of Washington.

The Madisons moved into the Octagon, the elegant winter residence of their friend Colonel John Tayloe. It was there on February 17, 1815, that President Madison signed the Treaty of Ghent. The war was officially over.

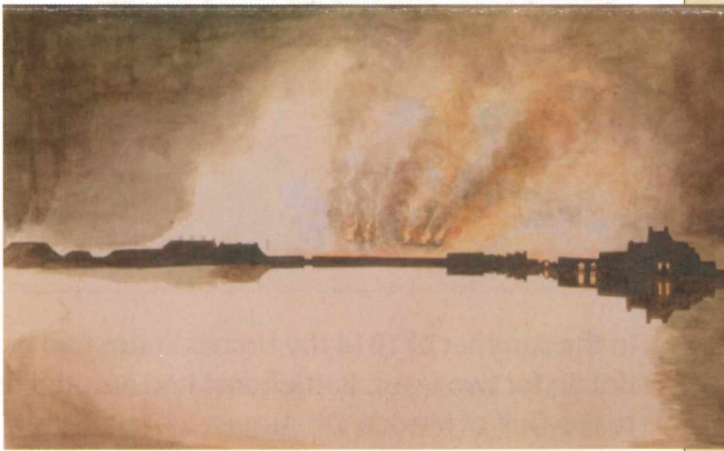
Neither side had won a clear victory, but the war had provided Americans a stronger sense of collective identity and greater commitment to a robust, national military. By defending its rights at sea and expansionist goals at home, the United States confirmed its entry on the international stage.

Two lasting symbols came from the War of 1812: the Star-Spangled Banner and the national anthem that honors it.

## The Aftermath

THE NEXT MORNING WASHINGTON'S LEADERS and citizenry began to filter back. Secretary of War John Armstrong returned just long enough to resign his position.

On August 28, as another British flotilla arrived near Alexandria, a delegation rowed out to negotiate a surrender. The city's Common Council met the enemy's demands that the town relinquish all ships, weapons, equipment, and exportable goods. After plundering Alexandria for six days, the British sailed off with their loot. Less than three weeks later they attacked Baltimore by land and water. This time the Americans put up a valiant fight and sent the British packing.



The Navy Yard burns in this view of the Anacostia River painted by William Thornton.  
Library of Congress

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### Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail

- Trail Markers
- Land Route
- Water Route
- Historic Places of Interest
- Outdoor Recreation
- Museums and Historic Buildings
- Multi-Use Trails
- Chesapeake Bay Gateways & Watertrails Network Sites
- Parkland
- Boat Ramp

### Historic Places of Interest

- 1 Barney Circle, 17th St. and Barney Circle, SE
- 2 Fort McNair, below P St., SW
- 3 1331 F St., NW, site of William and Anna Maria Thornton's home
- 4 Site of Old Patent Office, 700 E St., NW
- 5 Congressional Cemetery, 1801 E St., SE

### Outdoor and Recreational

- 1 Anacostia Park
- 2 Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, 1550 Anacostia Ave., NE
- 3 U.S. National Arboretum, 3501 New York Ave., NE
- 4 Congressional Cemetery, 1801 E St., SE
- 5 Yards Park, 355 Water St., SE
- 6 Canal Park, 200 M St., SE
- 7 National Mall and Memorial Parks
- 8 East Potomac Park
- 9 West Potomac Park
- 10 Francis Scott Key Memorial Park, Georgetown
- 11 Georgetown Waterfront Park, Water St., NW
- 12 Thompson's Boathouse, 2900 Virginia Ave., NW
- 13 Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park
- 14 Capital Crescent Trail
- 15 Rock Creek Park
- 16 Alexandria Waterfront
- 17 Potomac Riverboat Company, 1 Cameron St., Alexandria, VA

### Museums, Historic Buildings, and Visitor Centers

- 1 The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
- 2 The White House Visitor Center, 1450 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
- 3 U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, First St., SE
- 4 Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Constitution Ave. at 14th St., NW
- 5 National Portrait Gallery and Smithsonian American Art Museum, Eighth and F Sts., NW
- 6 National Society United States Daughters of 1812 Museum, 1463 Rhode Island Ave., NW
- 7 National Archives, Constitution Ave., NW between 7th and 9th Sts.
- 8 National Museum of the U.S. Navy, at the Washington Navy Yard
- 9 Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave., SE
- 10 Dumbarton House, 2715 Q St., NW
- 11 Octagon House, 1799 New York Ave., NW
- 12 Sewall-Belmont House, 144 Constitution Ave., NE
- 13 Tudor Place, 1644 31st St., NW
- 14 Decatur House, 748 Jackson Pl., NW
- 15 Dolley Madison House, U.S. Court of Appeals, 700 Madison Pl., NW
- 16 The Lyceum, 201 S. Washington St., Alexandria, VA
- 17 Alexandria Visitors Center, Ramsay House, 221 King St., Alexandria, VA
- 18 George Washington Masonic National Memorial, 101 Callahan Dr., Alexandria, VA

In the summer of 1814 the United States had been at war with great Britain for two years. Battlefronts had erupted from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. On August 24, following their victory over the Americans at the Battle of Bladensburg, Maryland, British troops marched on Washington with devastating results.

The Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail reveals sites of the War of 1812 in Washington, DC, Virginia, and Maryland. Visit [ChesapeakeExplorerApp.com](http://ChesapeakeExplorerApp.com) or download the Chesapeake Explorer app.