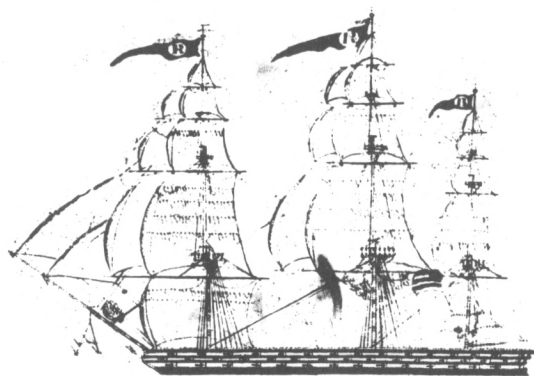


The RECORD

Publication of the Historical Society of Charles County, Inc.

April 1965



Picture Courtesy of the D.A.R. Museum

This frigate was the flagship of Commodore Joshua Barney, U.S.N. His fleet attempted to prevent the British landing at Benedict.

The Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 was ratified in Washington on February 17, 1815. In it was declared "there shall be a firm and lasting peace between the countries."

The year nineteen sixty five marks the one hundred and fiftieth year the United States and Great Britain have abided by this declaration. We believe this monograph is appropriate and should be included in the permanent records of the Historical Society of Charles County.

The editor.

SOUTHERN MARYLAND DURING THE WAR OF 1812

Margaret Brown Klapthor, Associate Curator
Division of Political History
Smithsonian Institution

The story of the War of 1812 in the tidewater areas of Southern Maryland is very similar to the guerilla warfare of modern times. Even the British of 1814 were interested and surprised at the way the war was conducted by the British commanders. An English officer who was serving in the army of General Ross, commander of the British forces, has left us his impression of the campaign:

"Cruising about in every direction they threatened the whole line of coast from the entrance to the very head of the bay and thus kept the Americans in a constant state of alarm. Whenever a favorable opportunity presented itself, parties landed, plundered or destroyed the government stores, laid towns and districts under contribution and brought off all the shipping that could be reached. In a word, the hostilities carried on in the Chesapeake resembled the expeditions of the Ancient Danes against Great Britain, rather than a modern war between civilized nations."

The purpose of this lecture given before the Charles County, Maryland Historical Society in October 1963 was to explore contemporary accounts of the war in Southern Maryland and to see how the people reacted to the pressure and tension brought into their lives by living within the front lines of the fighting.

When the War of 1812 was declared, Great Britain was involved in her struggle with Napoleonic France and at first she gave little attention to the insignificant conflict with her former colony. It was not until seven months later, the end of December 1812, that she declared the coast, ports and harbors of the Chesapeake Bay and Delaware Bay to be in a state of blockade.

By February Admiral Cockburn entered the Virginia Capes with a squadron and then began a harrassment of tidewater Virginia and Maryland which was to last until the end

Commodore Barney's small fleet fought a gallant battle with portions of the British fleet at St. Leonard's Creek and drove off the enemy. After this severe engagement the British made no further effort to destroy the flotilla but turned their attention to pillaging the surrounding countryside. Mr. Niles in the Register estimated that they carried off or destroyed between 3,000 and 4,000 hogsheads of tobacco which they shipped to Europe. "The number of houses destroyed is not ascertained; those that they suffered to remain were wantonly injured; the doors and windows being broken, as was also the furniture; ripping open the feather beds and dispersing the feathers to the winds." The Maryland Gazette of June 30 says: "A retaliatory system of plunder and conflagration, long since predicted, has laid the dwellings of the people bordering the Patuxent in ashes, has driven them from their homes and made them beggars and outcasts." In Charles County the enemy landed in the early part of June and took possession of Benedict. Two days of raiding with the town as a base was brought to a close by an attack from the militia who chased the raiders back to their ships and the enemy sailed from Benedict the following day.

By now it began to dawn on President Madison and his cabinet that Washington might be in danger and some action should be taken for its defense; so General Winder was appointed to organize the defense of the Capital. It was a heartbreaking job, as the Government had inadequate troops to assign to him while the militia and most of the able-bodied men of the area surrounding Washington were already under arms, busy with the protection of their own homes. As if to deliberately heighten the confusion and tension, Cockburn continued his raids without a let-up.

A resident who lived on the shores of the Patuxent wrote an interesting account of the days from July 13 to July 23 describing in detail some of these raids. The following excerpts give further idea of the guerilla warfare being waged: "After ravaging the shores of the Patuxent, burning houses and confiscating tobacco, the ships disappeared from the mouth of the Patuxent and that same night appeared off Breton's Bay. On Tuesday morning they landed near Newton a heavy force which marched to the right of Leonardtown, another marched to the left and a third commanded by Cockburn landed at the warehouse and took possession of Leonardtown. The whole force of this expedition was estimated to be about 1500 men. During their stay in the village which was till about 2 o'clock they behaved with great politeness to the ladies, respected private property wherever the proprietors remained at home, destroyed about 100 barrels of supplies belonging to Col. Carberry's regiment, the whole of Mr. Haislip's store and the furniture, clothing and bedding of Captains Forrest and Millard, all of whom had left town. They got possession of some muskets belonging to the State which they broke to pieces, saying they were only fit to stick frogs. Mrs. Thompson and Miss Eliza Key were instrumental in saving the courthouse, stating that it was sometimes a place for divine worship."

He then goes on to recount details of individual raids and the ruinous losses suffered by citizens of the area, especially in food supplies and tobacco. He ends by saying, "No part of this area is deemed secure; the inhabitants are removing their cattle and negroes into the interior; their crops are abandoned, and the frequent exaggerated statements of the force and movements of the enemy produced such consternation as would melt the soul of every man, except our wicked and callous rulers who have plunged us into hostilities and invited the British shipping into the heart of our country, withhold from us that aid which we have a constitutional right to ask and impose upon us heavy taxes to support a war for foreign conquest while they suffer the enemy to deprive us of our agriculture, the only source from which these taxes can be paid. Bad as these sufferings are, they do not restrain the calumnies of democracy. Toryism and cowardice are charged to those men who repair to the field and do everything their limited means can do; Charles County at this moment has in the service almost every man capable of bearing arms. St. Mary's also has a great many."

"We are told of those thirteen democratic gentlemen who in 1808 by an address to the President urged the National Government to a declaration of war and pledged them their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor in support of any measures which he might adopt. No one of them, save Major Matthews, has ever done one hour's service!! This for Charles." (County.)

Simultaneously with the landing at Benedict from the Patuxent there appeared in the Potomac River such a fleet as had not been seen since Braddock and his army arrived from England. In the enemy fleet in the Potomac under the command of Captain James Alexander Gordon, R.N., were the Sea Horse, the Euryalus, the Devastation, the Aetna, the Meteor, the Erebus, the Fairy and the Anna Maria. Because they did not know the channel and because of stormy weather, it took the fleet ten days to reach Fort Washington, or Fort Warburton as it was then known. General Wilkinson, a native born Charles Countian, was in command of the fort, which he describes as "a mere water battery of 12 or 15 guns bearing on the channel and usable to stop a fleet from ascending the river but useless as soon as a vessel passed." In addition, Gen. Wilkinson says that "the two story garrison was built to withstand musketry only and could be knocked down by a twelve pounder." For this reason, plus inadequate ammunition, Wilkinson destroyed the works and spiked the guns and retreated from Fort Washington without firing a shot. Imagine the surprise of the British fleet, who had already reported that the guns of Fort Warburton constituted a "most respectable defense," to find as they approached that the fort was silent and they could advance on Alexandria and Washington without firing a shot.

After looting Alexandria, the enemy turned south again to sail down the river. Thanks to General Wilkinson, the British fleet -- heavily laden with booty -- passed in front of Fort Washington's spiked guns without any danger. There was considerable action from the shore line with a detachment on the Virginia shore delaying the descent as it passed Belvoir. At Indian Head the British found Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, who later achieved fame in the Battle of Lake Erie, in command of a land battery, but his hastily improvised equipment and wholly inadequate force merely proved a minor embarrassment. In retrospect the entire expedition proved of little tactical value to the British and might be considered as pointless as the burning of Washington in terms of the outcome of the war.

In speaking of Captain Gordon's trip up the Potomac, Grandma Queen describes a typical raid upon the inhabitants in Cobb Neck. "The ships anchored off a farm owned by Mr. Hammersby. When Mr. Hammersby saw the troops coming ashore, he invited them to his house for refreshment. They visited for several hours and on leaving thanked him kindly and promised that his place should not be disturbed. In almost every other house in the same section everything was lugged off that could be moved. Feather beds, pillows, etc., were taken to the windows and doors, ripped open with bayonets and the feathers scattered to the winds. The poultry was shot down, the fruits and vegetables carried away and every outrage that could be perpetrated marked their passage through the neighborhood. Fortunately women, children, servants, horses, etc., had been sent into the interior of the country and silver and other valuables secreted in some places of safety. Coming back down the river they fired several times into Cobb Neck and only a few years since large cannon balls were still lying about in the yards of some of the residences. They were of immense weight and children could roll but not lift them."

Following the burning of the city of Washington, the raids against the people of Southern Maryland began to decrease in number and intensity. The British forces became immediately engaged in the attempt to capture Baltimore and all the ships and troops moved up the bay to take part in the attack on Fort McHenry. This was really the end of the war against the civilian population of Charles County because the coming of cold weather marked the end of the campaign of 1814 and the Treaty of Ghent ending the war was signed before the new year started.

Only then could the people begin to assess what their patriotism had cost them in the terms of loss of farm crops, livestock, household goods and valuables. It must have taken many years to recover from the financial effects of being the front lines of the war. It also cost the country some of its handsome 18th-century homes, which were burned during the enemy raids. Perhaps the most serious loss was the removal from the county of whole family groups and almost whole neighborhoods into the Kentucky-Tennessee area in the years 1812-1815. These are the people whose move to the west was perhaps influenced by a desire to escape the British raids in Southern Maryland in 1813 and 1814.

of the war. With the warships as their base of operations, marauding expeditions were sent out on both shores, plundering and burning houses, carrying off negroes and arming them against their masters, capturing and destroying the light vessels and shipping vessels and fishing boats. The countryside was thinly settled and it was difficult to concentrate defense units at the point of attack when the attack was continually moving. Add to this the fact that no assistance -- troops, ammunition or equipment -- was being furnished to the area by the Federal government. All the defense of the state was left to the local militia. Parties of militia were hastily formed on the spot to repel invasion and disbanded when danger seemed to be passed. Continued appeals were made by the Governor, the Assembly, and the Militia staff to Washington for additional assistance. They called attention to the fact that one of the reasons for establishment of the Union under the Constitution was to "provide for a common defense." Their pleading was in vain. The President, through his Secretary of War, not only refused material aid, he even refused to help defray the expenditures incurred in using the local militia. So the state was left to the ravages of the enemy, who operated almost at will.

During the spring and summer of 1813 these marauding expeditions made frequent inroads among the farmers of Saint Mary's County in the vicinity of Point Lookout. In July they attempted to land in Maddox Creek, only to be gallantly driven off with severe loss by Captain Hungerford's company of light infantry. The British then took possession of Blackistone and St. George's Island and landed a force of 2,000 men near Point Lookout. Here they organized small raiding parties who committed all kinds of depredations along the shores of the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers. Niles' Register reported, "They plundered everything and anything, robbing even the women and children of their clothes and destroying such articles as it did not suit them to carry away." The constant activity kept the men of the region on military duty for the spring and most of the summer. The countryside was in pitiable condition, farms were neglected and pillaged, slaves ran off to the enemy, and unsanitary living conditions brought a wave of illness. It was at this time that a large number of inhabitants of Charles and St. Mary's Counties, unable to bear the burdens of war, abandoned their homes and moved to new settlements then opening in Kentucky and the frontier states.

The whole course of action plotted by Admiral Cockburn for the summer of 1813 had two objectives: First, he wished to gratify his troops with pillage, and secondly, he hoped to make the calamities of war so unbearable to the inhabitants of Maryland that it would drive them into uniting with the Northeastern states to compel the government to make peace. As often happens, his plan backfired, as every act of barbarity so enraged the local people that they supported the war more ardently than before. Curiously enough, though, deliberately left defenseless at home by the national government, the state was at the same time contributing to the main United States Army for the campaign on the Canadian border over one thousand volunteers and recruits, probably many from Charles and St. Mary's Counties.

One small crumb was tossed out to those at home who clamored for defense. Commodore Joshua Barney was appointed by the Navy Department to the command of a flotilla for the defense of the Bay. The small fleet was built in Baltimore during the winter and was ready for service by April 1814.

With the coming of spring 1814, Admiral Cockburn resumed his raids on an even greater scale. The overthrow of Napoleon left Great Britain free to throw a vast force into the war in America and announcement was formally made of their intention "to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts on the coast as might be possible."

Even with this announced intention, the U.S. Government seems to have deliberately closed its eyes to the serious threat to the city of Washington. Evidence of the ruthlessness of the enemy was plainly visible to all who wished to see. Cockburn -- tireless, rapacious, alert -- was continually on the move and it was becoming almost impossible to anticipate and repel his incursions. They were chiefly directed against small villages, isolated farm houses, and other indefensible points which were plundered and burnt not for strategic purposes but by way of punishment. Those who submitted meekly might escape with property loss and insult, but the torch was applied at the least sign of resistance.

The story of the landing of the British forces at Benedict and the march on Washington is too well known to have to be repeated here. What is perhaps not so well known is that the British admiral considered two possible routes for the march on Washington. In his letter to the British Board of Admiralty he says that their lordships will observe that the best approach to Washington is by Port Tobacco upon the Potomac and Benedict upon the Patuxent from both of which are direct and good roads to that city and their distances are nearly alike. It was decided to land at Benedict as the presence of the flotilla of Commodore Barney near the head of the Patuxent afforded a pretext for ascending that river and screened the fact that the ultimate destination of the expedition was the city of Washington.

These ample military records can be illuminated, however, with a few personal incidents which may make the historical facts seem more real: In speaking of the landing at Benedict from the Patuxent River, an English officer said of the expedition, "The banks of the river covered with fields of Indian corn and meadows of the most luxuriant pasture, the neat wooden houses, white and surrounded with orchards and gardens, with backgrounds of boundless forest, differed in every respect from the country in France, the furze, heath and underwood skirting the similar pine forests as if there had not been time to grub and clear the ground. When we landed it was totally deserted by its inhabitants. The furniture however had not been removed, at least not wholly, from any of the houses, and not a few of the dairies were garnished with dishes of exquisite milk and delicate new cheese."

In the fascinating little book written by Sister Mary Xavier Queen of Bushwood, Maryland in 1899, "Grandma's Stories and Anecdotes," she recounts her grandmother's remembrances of the landing at Benedict in 1814. Grandmother says that part of the troops marched to a small village called Bryantown which was about five miles from where she lived. The troops spent a day and a night there and their conduct was not very gentlemanly. She tells that an old lady named McPherson who lived there remembered the Revolution so bitterly that she was not very fond of the Redcoats. When she heard they were coming up the hill to her house, she went out to meet them in her short gown and petticoat, such as old ladies wore in those days. Stopping the general, she asked what the troops wanted. "We're only reconnoitering, madam," he replied. "Have you any sons?"

"Yes, I have one and he is at the cannon's mouth ready to put a ball through you or some of your comrades. You have no business on our land. We have never interfered with you and you should have stayed at home, sir."

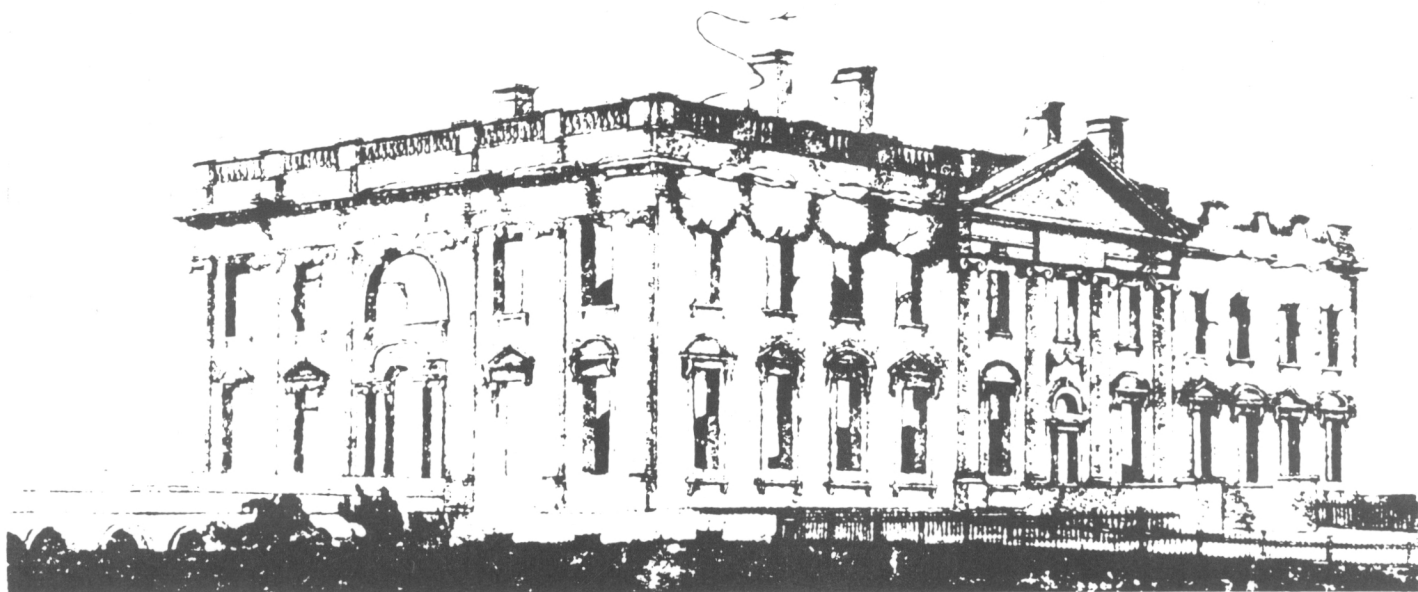
The general then asked her to give them something to eat. She agreed and the soldiers followed her into the house. Spying a gun over the door, the General asked to whom it belonged. "It was my husband's, sir, and he used it well on your people years ago; it was on his shoulder when he saw your Cornwallis give up to Washington at Yorktown." "I would like to have it," said the general. "You'll have to take my life first, sir," said Mrs. McPherson. "I'll defend it to my last breath and whoever dare to touch it will feel the weight of my arm." And she took a poker from beside the fireplace and went to stand beside the door.

"You are very plucky," said the general.

"Yes," she replied, "and all my people are of the same stamp and I can tell you, sir, that many of you who have come in to fight us will never go out: your old carcasses will be left on plucky soil."

Just then Uncle Jim entered with the eatables which he placed on the table. The soldiers then tried to persuade the colored man to come with them but he refused to leave his mistress. Meanwhile, Mrs. McPherson's pet monkey had climbed to the top of a large oak tree in the front yard and refused to come down. One of the officers said, "I'll bring him down," and he shot the poor monkey, who fell dead on the ground. Mrs. McPherson in a fit of anger ordered the soldiers off her land, and they departed, as if ashamed of the display of brutality.

Grandma also reported that the flames of the burning offices and buildings in the city of Washington were distinctly seen at her residence, full forty-five miles below Washington.



THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER IT WAS BURNED BY THE BRITISH DURING THE WAR OF 1812. Picture courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

ADVANCE NOTICE
NEXT MEETING OF THE SOCIETY
DINNER MEETING
DURHAM CHURCH HALL
SATURDAY, MAY 22nd

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CHARLES COUNTY, INC.

Port Tobacco, Maryland