

# Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail



*O! say can you see by the dawn's early light . . .*

## Test of a New Nation

In 1812, the United States of America was less than 30 years old, and only one generation had been raised to adulthood under the American flag. Many people still personally remembered the daring and exhausting fight to win independence from Britain, pitting 13 allied colonies against the largest military force in the world.



Maryland militia at the Battle of North Point.

The conflict had launched a new nation, but in 1812 much was still taking shape. Americans were wary of a strong central government and grappled with questions about trade, slavery, and expansion. Washington City was a fledgling capital. National defense was hotly debated and poorly funded. Then, war came again.

Britain, at war with France, 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. In the process, they forced thousands of American sailors into service. Along the Great Lakes and Northern Frontier, they united with Native Americans to obstruct American expansion into disputed territory. The tension between Britain and America, still smoldering from the revolution, grew into flames. Some Americans wanted to strike back. Others cautioned against the human and financial costs of war. Britain had over 500 warships; America had 17. The nation was deeply and bitterly divided.

On June 18, 1812, Congress finally declared war, but Americans continued to argue over the course of the nation. In Baltimore, a pro-war mob destroyed the offices of an anti-war newspaper, igniting riots that left dead and wounded in their wake.



Riots erupted in Baltimore in response to an anti-war newspaper.



Maryland Center for History and Culture

Over the next two years, British and American conflicts erupted from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. By the time the fighting ended, the war had propelled America into greater maturity as a nation. Having been tested against a world superpower, the states were now more truly "united." Americans felt a stronger sense of collective identity and greater commitment to a robust, national military. By defending rights at sea and expansionist goals at home, America confirmed its entry on the international stage.

The war also inspired two lasting symbols of pride—the Star-Spangled Banner that flew in defiance of British attack and the national anthem that honors it.

## War on the Chesapeake

The British occupied the Chesapeake Bay during the War of 1812 to disrupt trade, bring war to the center of the country and draw troops from the north. After declaring a blockade on the Bay in 1812, they established a base on Tangier Island and raided waterfront towns at will, burning homes, warehouses, ships, and farms. Towns in Southern Maryland and along the upper Bay were among the targets. In Virginia, the British sacked towns and raided plantations along the James, Rappahannock, and other rivers.



Gerry Emberton



Richard Schlicht

People lived in fear. When attacked, they faced a difficult choice: flee, cooperate, or stage civilian resistance to a far superior force. In Havre de Grace, the defense soon dwindled to one man, John O'Neill, who continued to fight until captured. In Georgetown, Kitty Knight confronted the British admiral herself and successfully spared both her home and that of her neighbor.

Enslaved people made bold decisions, too. The British promised freedom to those who joined their ranks. At least 3,000 men, women, and children sought their freedom. Some were taken to Tangier Island, where they trained to fight their former enslavers as Colonial Marines.



Gerry Emberton



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**The "Mosquito Fleet"**  
In a daring plan to defend the Chesapeake, the United States Navy approved plans to organize a flotilla of nimble gun boats to bedevil the British on the Bay's shallow waters.

In August 1814, the British trapped the "mosquito fleet" in the Patuxent River, where they battled on St. Leonard Creek. Then, trapped further upstream, they received orders to destroy the flotilla. As the barges exploded and sank, the flotillamen rushed on foot to help defend Washington.

## Washington in Peril

In 1814, when more than 4,000 British troops came ashore at Benedict in Southern Maryland, Americans were still guessing at the enemy's plans. A British squadron was also sailing up the Potomac River toward the port of Alexandria, while another was sailing up the Chesapeake. Washington was an obvious target, but so were Annapolis and Baltimore.

Americans soon realized that the troops in Southern Maryland were marching straight to Washington. On August 24, thousands of militiamen and soldiers confronted the British at Bladensburg, a few miles east of the capital. But the Americans were inexperienced and poorly led. The effort quickly failed.

By evening, Washington was in flames. The British burned many government buildings, including the Capitol and the White House. President James Madison and his wife Dolley, along with hundreds of frightened citizens, fled the city. The Declaration of Independence and other important documents were rushed to safety in the surrounding countryside.



Tom Freeman/White House Historical Association

## Battle for Baltimore

A few weeks after withdrawing from Washington, the British set their sights on Baltimore—but Baltimore had long been preparing for a fight, and the Americans would be ready.

The British attacked by land and by water. Landing at North Point on September 12, 1814, they met their first resistance when American sharpshooters killed British Major General Robert Ross, and a bloody battle followed. The next day, the British marched toward Baltimore, but met an overwhelming number of men and artillery. They considered a nighttime attack but awaited the outcome at Fort MCHenry.



Richard Schlicht

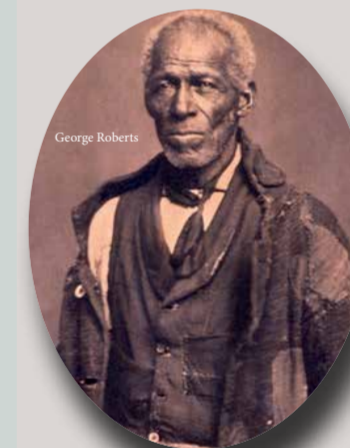
Fort MCHenry guarded the city and its harbor. Its commander, Major George Armistead had prepared his men for the trying task of endurance: British ships in the Patapsco River were largely beyond the range of the fort's guns. Through a day and night of stormy weather, the British pounded the fort with rockets, bombs, and mortars.

The British expected quick surrender, but it didn't come. In the morning, they gave up the fight. Americans raised a large flag over the fort. The British fleet withdrew, and their troops abandoned North Point.

Coupled with an American victory on Lake Champlain, the end of the war was in sight. The United States and Britain agreed upon the Treaty of Ghent in December. However, they did not ratify the treaty until shortly after the Battle of New Orleans, officially ending the war on February 17, 1815.



During the War of 1812, painted hat plates were sometimes attached to soldiers' hats to designate military units. The canteen and mug shown above were both used by American soldiers during the Battle for Baltimore.  
All objects Maryland Center for History and Culture



George Roberts

**Chesapeake Privateers**  
To compensate for the maritime deficit, the U.S. issued "Letters of Marque" to private ships that allowed them to capture and seize British merchant vessels as privateers. One such privateering vessel was *Chasseur*, a schooner that was built in and operated out of Baltimore. George Roberts was a gunner on *Chasseur* during its most prolific periods and is one of many Black men who, in a time of extreme inequality on land, was valued for his merit at sea. A replica of the ship called the *Pride of Baltimore II* still operates today as Maryland's goodwill ambassador to the world.



Gerry Emberton

**The Major and the Flagmaker**  
When Major George Armistead sought a large national flag for Fort MCHenry, he turned to Mary Young Pickersgill, an experienced flagmaker for the ships at Fells Point. Mary and her daughter, Caroline, nieces, Eliza and Margaret, and mother, Rebecca Young, worked on the project for seven weeks alongside Black indentured servant, Grace Wisher. Thirty-foot high by Forty Two-foot wide, the flag was so large that they completed the work in the loft of a nearby brewery.



The Battle of Fort MCHenry by Francis Gay, Maryland Center for History and Culture

## Francis Scott Key and The Star-Spangled Banner

American lawyer Francis Scott Key watched the bombardment of Fort MCHenry from a ship in the Patapsco River. Key was helping to negotiate the freedom of an American doctor, held captive on a British ship. The British prevented the Americans from leaving until after the attack, and Key spent an anxious night watching it take place. The experience inspired him to write patriotic lyrics for a popular, existing melody. The resulting words and tune became America's national anthem in 1931.



Francis Scott Key  
Library of Congress



Assembly of troops on Hampstead Hill by Thomas C. Buckle, Sr., Maryland Center for History and Culture