



United States – East Coast MARYLAND BALTIMORE HARBOR

Baltimore, the U.S. Navy, and the War of 1812

Baltimore contributed to America's fight against the seaborne enemy during the War of 1812 by engaging in privateering, confronting British forces on the Chesapeake Bay, and defending Baltimore itself.

Privateering

With peacetime commerce at an end, a substantial portion of Baltimore's 50,000 inhabitants who depended on overseas commerce for their income relied on privateering instead. Patriotism mingled with profit, as Baltimore stood behind the Madison administration's decision for war. Privateer owners and privateersmen wanted to take revenge for years of British seizures of ships and goods, and their impressment of sailors.

Baltimoreans dispatched 122 privateers and letter-of-marque traders, privately owned armed vessels authorized to capture the enemy's commerce on the high seas.

Commissioned vessels – many of them Baltimore schooners remarkable for their speed – took more than 500 British merchant ships, captured 1,600 prisoners, and cost British merchants millions of dollars. Privateers forced the British to deploy naval vessels for the protection of merchant convoys, devote naval assets to blockade the Chesapeake, and assign warships to defend ports and islands.



Joshua Barney, commander of the United States Chesapeake Bay Flotilla during the War of 1812. (Navy Art Collection, Naval History & Heritage Command)

Confronting the British on the Bay

In 1813, the British blockaded the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. They led expeditions along the bay shores, pillaging towns, plantations, and warehouses. They burned what they could not carry away. The British met only weak opposition, for, with the bulk of the U.S. Army fighting on the border with Canada, militia units and the U.S. Navy's undermanned gunboat flotillas were inadequate for local defense.

In July 1813, Baltimore's Joshua Barney proposed a new waterborne force to counter the British raiders. As a successful sea captain and privateersman, and former officer in the Continental Navy and the navy of Republican France, Barney persuaded the U.S. Secretary of the Navy to appoint him as commander of a flotilla of barges and row galleys. Of shallow draft and armed with a

heavy cannon, these small vessels would

operate inshore where the great ships with their deep drafts could not follow, intercepting boats sent by British warships and breaking up their raids.

In May 1814, Barney set out from Baltimore with a fleet of 18 vessels but, on June 1, a superior enemy fleet chased them into the Patuxent River. The American flotilla held the enemy at bay until August 21 when, facing overwhelming odds, Barney was forced to retreat. He landed his men at Pig Point, near Upper Marlboro, and then marched to assist in defending Washington against the approaching British invasion force. He left a small contingent to burn the ships to prevent their capture.

The Defense of Baltimore

After the British burned Washington on August 24 and 25, the invasion force moved against Baltimore. In the predawn hours of September 12, 1814, a British army contingent disembarked at North Point, Maryland. Royal Navy warships began bombarding Fort McHenry the next morning. U.S. merchant vessels that were scuttled at the entrance of Baltimore Harbor near Fort McHenry denied the British easy access to the city.

The British army planned to assault the city from the east, while the navy would secure the harbor. The U.S. Army and Navy worked together, and Commodore John Rodgers deployed his naval contingent under orders from Major General Samuel Smith. When Fort McHenry did not capitulate quickly to the bombardment, the British admiral realized his squadron would suffer too many casualties from solid American defenses. He decided that the Royal Navy could not support the army in a two-pronged attack on Baltimore, and ended the expedition.

Baltimore's gallant defense inspired young Francis Scott Key to compose the ode to the Star Spangled Banner that became the United States national anthem.



An aerial view of Fort McHenry. (Maryland Governor's Office)

Our Flag Was Still There



Francis Scott Key depicted in "By Dawn's Early Light." (Library of Congress)



A view of the bombardment of Fort McHenry, near Baltimore, by the British fleet taken from the Observatory under the command of Admirals Cochrane & Cockburn. (The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA)

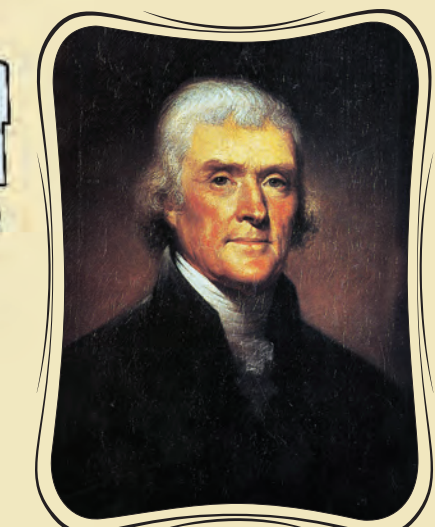


First Battle of St. Leonard Creek, June 10, 1814. (Private Collection)

United States Coast Survey

President Thomas Jefferson signed legislation establishing the U.S. Coast Survey in 1807, tasking it with creating charts of the nation's coastal waters so America's young shipping industry could thrive. Today, America's

coastal waters remain as central to the nation's prosperity as they were 200 years ago, and mariners continue to trust the accuracy and precision of the nation's navigational charts, still provided by NOAA's Office of Coast Survey.



President Thomas Jefferson. (Library of Congress)