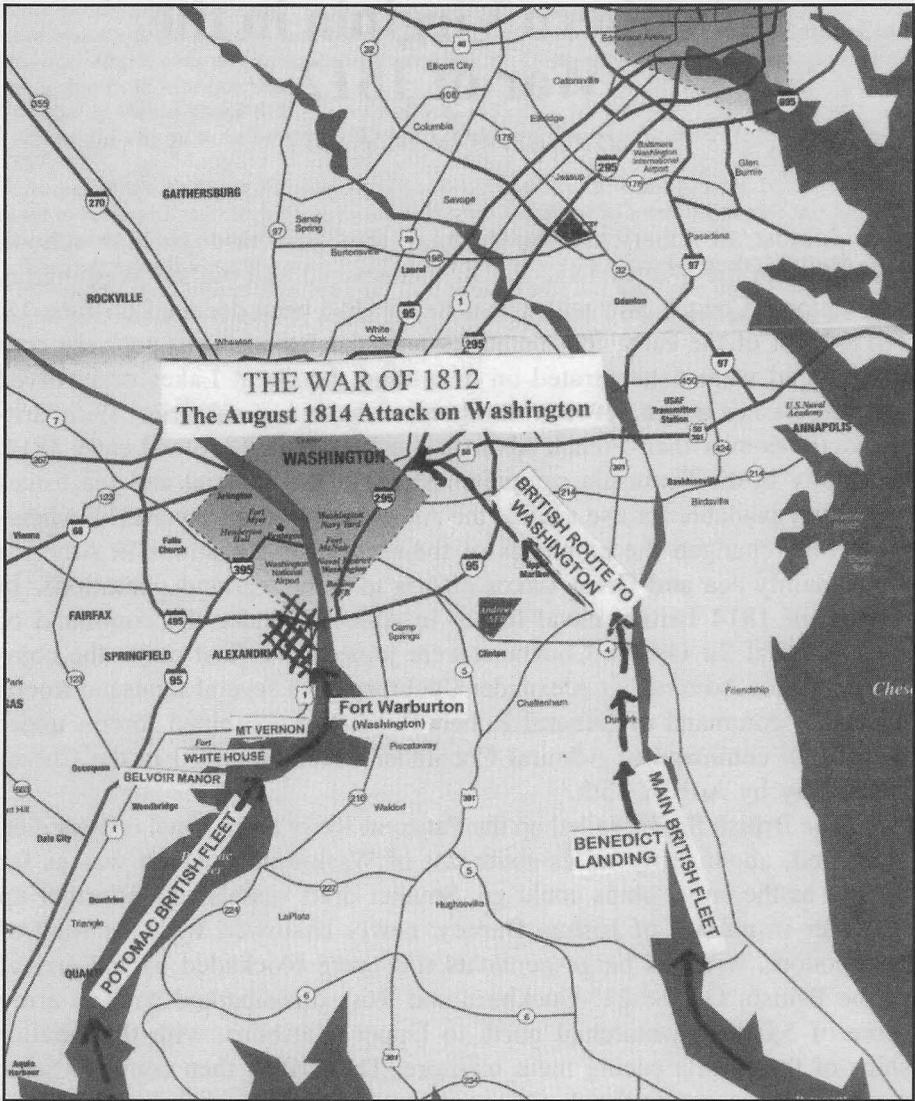


Northern Virginia in the War of 1812

BY *SHERMAN W. PRATT*

Almost all Americans, by the time they pass through high school, know that in the War of 1812 the British entered and burned Washington, the National Capital. War with Great Britain had been declared on June 18, 1812. Most of the early confrontations with the British were not very conclusive and were concentrated on or around the Great Lakes or involved isolated clashes at sea between naval ships of the two countries. With British victories over their French adversary in Europe in 1813 and early 1814, especially in the Peninsula campaign, sizeable British land and sea forces were then available for use against the Americans in the New World, whereupon they changed the emphasis of their military operations in America from mainly sea and Great Lakes efforts to joint sea/land operations. In August of 1814 British naval forces in America under the command of Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn were joined by a fleet under the command of Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane with several thousand troops under the command of General Robert Ross. The combined forces, under the overall command of Admiral Cochrane, were assembled in the Chesapeake Bay by August 15th.¹

The British flotilla sailed up the Patuxent River to the town of Benedict, Maryland, about thirty miles southeast of Washington, which was as far upriver as the larger ships could go. Smaller draft vessels sailed further up the river in pursuit of Joshua Barney, newly bestowed with the rank of commodore, with his barge-gunboats that were blockaded by the arrival of the British. On the 21st Cockburn and Ross disembarked with an army force of 5,000 and marched north to Upper Marlboro, with the smaller ships of the flotilla pacing them offshore. The British then continued, not north to Baltimore as the American commander General William Winder insisted they would do, but rather, they turned west and General Ross's force set off for Bladensburg and Washington. In the early afternoon of the 24th at Bladensburg the British met and quickly overpowered a hastily assembled force of local militia. They then entered the capital city and set fire to whatever government buildings they could find, to include the Capitol, the White House and the War and Treasury Department buildings. They intended also to burn the Washington Navy Yard but found it already in flames set by its commander, 63-year-old Thomas Tingey, so that it could



Courtesy of Fort Belvoir Historical Office as modified by Sherman W. Pratt

not be used by the invaders. Later that day and the next, in a severe and blinding summer storm, the British withdrew and returned to Benedict where they re-embarked on the 30th.²

Mostly unknown by all but the most advanced scholars of those times is the fact that Arlington County, then known as the Alexandria County part of the District of Columbia, that included the town of Alexandria, was

also significantly affected and impacted by this British ravaging invasion and assault in a most detrimental and disruptive way. As the British approached and entered the capital outskirts the citizenry took to the streets in panic and fright with whatever possessions they could muster to find transport to flee to Georgetown or beyond and across the Potomac River. The few primitive dirt roads or turnpikes on the Virginia side were located where modern day Columbia Pike, Arlington Boulevard, Lee Highway and Jeff-Davis Highway now traverse the county. Those routes were quickly choked and flooded with long lines of carriages, livestock and walking people. There was massive disruption to the local people probably not unlike the situation that would exist many years later on Northern Virginia roads and neighborhoods in September 2001 when masses of panicky Washington residents and workers fled into Virginia from in or near the District of Columbia in the wake of the terrorist attack on the Pentagon building. The masses of fleeing Washington residents in 1814 included even the first lady Dolley Madison who escaped with a hastily commandeered wagon packed with as many items from the presidential mansion as she could hastily collect. Included was Stewart's now famous and treasured painting of George Washington.

President Madison instructed his cabinet to go and leave the fighting to the military and he arranged for key staff members to join him in Frederick, Maryland. Instead of proceeding directly to Frederick, however, he stopped at the house of Caleb Bentley, the local postmaster, in the Brookville community near present day Olney in Montgomery County, Maryland.³ From there he set out for Falls Church in Virginia, which surely would have taken him through or near present day Arlington County. He probably traveled along primitive roads or turnpikes in the vicinity of modern day Chain Bridge Road. On August 25, his and Dolley's routes intersected at Wiley's Inn on Difficult Run near Little Falls, whence they continued their flight together.⁴ For them, the mission of reuniting had proven to be a daunting challenge. They had floundered around the Virginia countryside for most of the day looking for each other. The President had ridden from Salona, a Presbyterian boarding school on or near present-day Chain Bridge Road and Georgetown Pike, back toward Falls Church hoping to find his wife at Wren's Tavern. He returned to Salona, but learned he had just missed her. She had stayed not at Salona but at Rokeby, the house of her friend Mathilda Lee Love. Madison then resumed his search for Dolley but was delayed by the fierce Virginia storm that was also dogging the British in their operations and movements. The President finally reached the First Lady at Wiley's toward the end of the day.⁵

In their near panic and desperation to flee the Capital and escape the British, many refugees simply abandoned their possessions and luggage, trudged to the Potomac and rushed across the Long or other bridges to Virginia. In doing so they found themselves constantly dodging horses and crowds of people and military columns of wagons loaded with wounded or army supplies.⁶ The confusion and disruption to Arlington County residents must have been mind-boggling. In the process of the people's flight from the Capital, and in effect ending the flight for some at the Potomac River,⁷ was the burning of the ends of the Long Bridge. The British invaders set the bridge afire at the Washington end as a defensive measure to frustrate any attacks from the south, and it was set on fire on the Virginia side to prevent pursuit by the British. The fires were extinguished, however, before they reached the center.⁸

As the British main naval force navigated up the Patuxent River, a smaller companion flotilla of seven vessels (two frigates, two rocket ships, two bomb ships, and one schooner) entered the mouth of the Potomac at Point Lookout. It worked its way up the river with the objective of arriving in the Washington area simultaneously with the arrival of General Ross's force from the Upper Marlboro and Bladensburg areas. The Potomac flotilla, under the Command of Captain James Gordon, found that negotiating the shallow and treacherous Potomac was a task far more daunting than expected. The ships constantly ran aground. Even to this day the broad Potomac is mostly only inches deep except for the narrow channel of twenty-two or more feet kept dredged by the Army Engineers. Over the whole course and almost to their destination they had to be warped, a procedure consisting of taking an anchor or line ahead in a small boat, securing it to a tree or other fixed object, or a dropped anchor, and then having the crew physically pull the ship to the warp. The procedure would be repeated as often as necessary until the ship again floated free.⁹

Following the tedious and time consuming warping, the ships of Captain Gordon approached Fort Warburton, later renamed Fort Washington, on the Maryland side of the river and made ready to do battle there. The fort was under the command of Captain Samuel T. Dyson with a garrison of sixty men and it promptly was bombarded by the frigate *Euryalus* for two hours. Dyson was authorized to abandon the fort by blowing it up and retiring only if attacked by land. Upon the arrival of the British flotilla, however, Dyson, with no land assault on the fort, nevertheless blew it up and fled, to the bewilderment of the British who heard but did not understand the explosion as they observed Dyson's men fleeing. In a later court-martial Dyson testified, not very convincingly it seems, to the court mem-

bers that he heard rumors of enemy troop reinforcements landing on the Patuxent and he did not want his force trapped in between.¹⁰

As a consequence of Dyson's lack of resolution, or confusion as to his instructions, the formidable Fort Warburton fired no guns and played no meaningful part in deterring the British flotilla in its advance up the Potomac. Whether he alone should be held accountable and the degree of his fault is a debatable matter. There is evidence of a lack of reliable intelligence of British intentions and whereabouts and that Dyson believed the British had in fact landed and were approaching by land, and that under those circumstances he did indeed have authority to blow up and abandon the fort. In a conference with his staff a vote was taken and most supported withdrawing. Additionally, Dyson lacked confidence in the effectiveness of the fort's guns and equipment and in the proficiency of his own manpower.¹¹

Once past abandoned Fort Warburton, the British flotilla arrived just below Alexandria on the 27th, three days after the burning of Washington by the main British force from Benedict. The flotilla anchored about two miles south of the town at about where the Belle Haven Marina is now located and the frigate *Seahorse* moved on to a point about a mile below the city, about where the Woodrow Wilson Bridge of Interstate 495/95 is now located.

Around 10 A.M. on the 28th, as the ships prepared to shell the town, frightened members of the Committee of Vigilance formed by Mayor Charles Simms rowed out with a flag of truce. They desperately pleaded that their town be spared. After some tense negotiating, Captain Gordon agreed not to shell and destroy Alexandria if the town would submit to pillage and looting as ransom or the spoils of war.

The committee of town leaders agreed and the British began loading almost everything loose and moveable. Included in the items confiscated were naval stores, ordnance and ships, 16,000 barrels of flour, 1,000 hogsheads of tobacco, 150 bales of cotton, \$5,000 worth of wines, and numerous other items. During the next three days the British flotilla loaded 21 prize ships and burned what stores they were unable to carry away.¹² Gordon also demanded that a dozen or so vessels sunk by the townspeople be refloated for his use but he relented when they claimed they had no means to do so. Dolley Madison was particularly disgusted with the acquiescence of the Alexandrians and later told her friends that the people should have let their town be burned rather than to submit to such humiliating terms.¹³

During the British presence at Alexandria the town was subjected to a different danger perceived by civic leaders to be far more ominous than the invaders. Word was received that a rescue force of 1,400 Virginia militia under the command of Brigadier General John P. Hungerford was near-

ing the town from the southwest. The leaders, however, did not want to be rescued at a cost of the destruction of the town. It was felt that the intervention of such a force could easily cause Gordon to begin shooting and destroying the town. The town leaders quickly prepared a resolution urging Hungerford to stay away and explaining that the town had no military force and that it intended to surrender. The resolution was delivered to Hungerford by a staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel R.E. Parker, who was shocked by the town's lack of fortitude and courage. He lamented, "My Heart is broken."¹⁴ Hungerford complied with the town's request to abort all rescue plans but he permitted a small observation force to occupy Shuter's Hill, now the location of the George Washington Masonic Memorial. From there they watched the British operations with telescopes.

As Hungerford waited and restrained his troops at Alexandria, he made plans to construct fortifications and to station troops on both sides of the Potomac down the river to harass or prevent the coming withdrawal of the British when they finished ransacking Alexandria.

As often happens, however, with best laid plans, those of the Committee of Vigilance were nearly aborted at one point when a couple of Hungerford's officers, in violation of instructions, donned civilian clothing, left their vantage point and walked to the docks for a better view. The officers spotted a lone young British seaman, John Went Fraser, and grabbed him in an apparent attempted abduction. The seaman wrestled free, the alarm was given and the British ships made ready for action. Calm was restored and an all clear sounded when committee members hastily assured Captain Gordon that the two officers were acting alone and without permission and that they were not the advanced guard of a general attack by Hungerford's forces.¹⁵

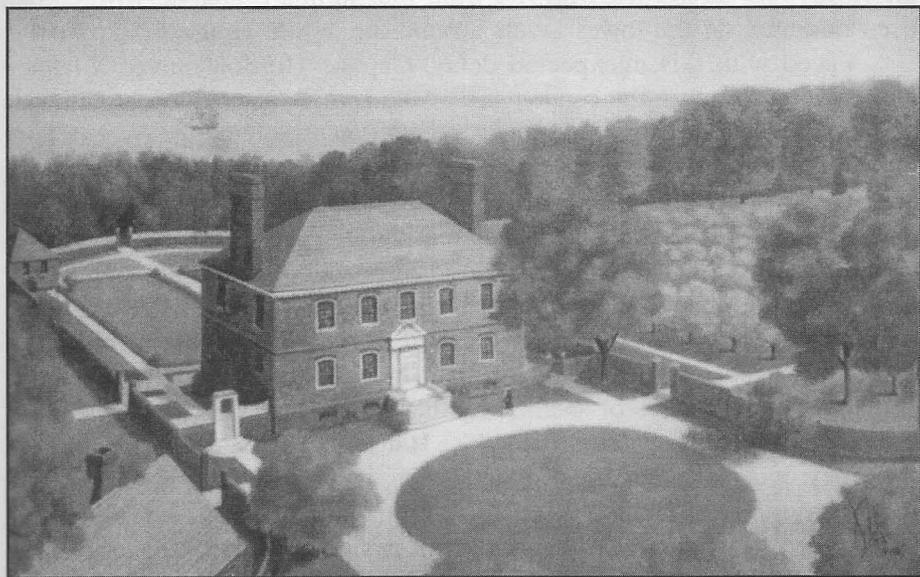
By the first day of September, the loading of British ships was completed and the flotilla set sail the following morning for its return voyage down the Potomac with Captain Gordon's flagship *Seahorse* leading the flotilla. The President and Secretary of War had sent Commodore John Rodgers and Captains David Porter and Oliver Perry to aid in harassing the British on their move down the river. All had proven track records in naval engagements on the Great Lakes, West Coast, or elsewhere.

On the 3rd, Commodore Rodgers "saddled up his horses" consisting of a small fleet of cutters and fire vessels and took after the withdrawing British. He caught up with Gordon's grounded bomb ship *Devastation* that seemed to be an easy target for a fire barge. But the wind changed and this attack was broken up by the *Devastation's* own cutters. One of Rodgers' fire boats was towed ashore by an enterprising midshipman from the

Seahorse and others were diverted. Rodgers set fire to another of his vessels to prevent its capture and its crew had to jump overboard to avoid being burned alive. He then ordered all craft to abandon the chase and turn tail and return to Alexandria.¹⁶

Up front, other British ships were in more serious trouble. Upon reaching a point about ten miles from Alexandria marked by a residence on the western shore known as the White House, and now a part of the Fort Belvoir military reservation, the flotilla arrived at the fortifications of the Virginia militia. The White House had been built by Ferdinando Fairfax, the grandson of William Fairfax who had built and occupied the manor Belvoir,¹⁷ about a half mile away and higher on the bluffs, for his cousin Thomas, 6th Lord of Fairfax.¹⁸

At the White House the British flotilla came under fire from fortifications hastily constructed by the Virginia militia. Captain Porter placed a battery of fifteen cannons on the cliffs above the White House with protection by some of the Virginia militia.¹⁹ The British found that the deepest water with the least likelihood of their ships grounding was near the western river shore and almost directly under Porter's guns. Thus the ships were easy targets since they were required to pass within easy musket range of the militiamen.²⁰ As the ships neared this area, their seamen were



Fort Belvoir Collection

Belvoir Manor (ca 1800), as envisioned by an anonymous artist.



Sherman W. Pratt

The cliffs of Fort Belvoir on the banks of the Potomac River (in background) where the Battle of the White House took place in September 1814.

nearbeginning to be picked off with devastating accuracy. Additionally, the ships were threatened with fire from four militia 8-pounders which had been mounted on the lower levels around the White House.²¹

Faced with this unexpected delay, Captain Gordon moved a frigate into position to return the cannon fire of the fort. For several days, showers of shells, 14-inch bombs, and rockets rained down. Some burst over or near the militia batteries, but many dropped harmlessly off target. Gordon found, however, that his gun barrels could not be elevated enough to aim at the more ominous fortifications higher on the bluffs above the shoreline. Whereupon he moved most of the ship's cargo to one side so that the ship would list to the port, or left, and thus raise the starboard gun barrels on the shore side of the vessels. These measures proved to be effective in a mismatch of a naval broadside of 63 cannons versus the militia total of only 13 effective guns. After several days of shelling by the ships, the militia, which included volunteer Ferdinando Fairfax, the White House owner, could no longer hold out. They eventually ran out of ammunition, and when the British landed a shore party up river and advanced on the fortifications from land, the militia were forced to withdraw. The engagement would go down in history as the Battle of the White House. In it the Virginia militia suffered 11 killed and 18 wounded and the British 7 killed and 35 wounded.²² The British force then

resumed its voyage down the river and away from the Washington area and out into Chesapeake Bay.²³ The attack on Baltimore and Fort McHenry would soon follow in mid-September.

With the departure of Captain Gordon's British forces from the Potomac River following the burning of Washington, the direct involvement in the War of 1812 of that part of Virginia that is now Arlington and Fairfax Counties and the City of Alexandria came to an end. The experience was costly, painful and disruptive to the citizens of the area, and every bit as traumatic and damaging to them as was the burning of Washington to its residents. To the everlasting irony of the Virginians the events in Virginia have received scant attention in text books and are all but entirely unknown to modern day youthful scholars and even many older citizens.

Sherman Pratt is a past president of the Arlington Historical Society and a regular contributor to the *Arlington Historical Magazine*. He is the author of *ARLINGTON COUNTY VIRGINIA: A Modern History* and books on World War II and the Korean War.

Endnotes

- ¹ J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1999), pp. 237-48.
- ² John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), pp. 294-302.
- ³ Walter Lord, *The Dawn's Early Light* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 192.
- ⁴ Mahon, *War of 1812*, p. 302.
- ⁵ Lord, *Dawn's Early Light*, p. 191.
- ⁶ Lord, *Dawn's Early Light*, p. 155.
- ⁷ Located in the area where the "Twin Bridges," also known as the 14th Street Bridges, now exist.
- ⁸ Nan Netherton, et al., *Fairfax County, Virginia: A History* (Fairfax County, VA: Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, 1991), p. 201.
- ⁹ Mahon, *War of 1812*, p. 303.
- ¹⁰ Mahon, *War of 1812*, p. 303.
- ¹¹ Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998), pp. 153-8.
- ¹² Mahon, *War of 1812*, p. 303.
- ¹³ Pitch, *The Burning of Washington*, p. 179.
- ¹⁴ Lord, *Dawn's Early Light*, pp. 197-9.
- ¹⁵ Pitch, *The Burning of Washington*, pp. 173-4.
- ¹⁶ Pitch, *The Burning of Washington*, p. 176.
- ¹⁷ Fort Belvoir gets its name from the early Fairfax family manor Belvoir which is not extant. The site of Belvoir is preserved and outlined within a small park on the military reservation cliffs. On the park trail there is a sign with a drawing of the Belvoir manor.
- ¹⁸ As described on trail signs in the Fort Belvoir park, the White House and Belvoir manor were heavily damaged by the guns of the British flotilla during the withdrawal from Alexandria. The White House was rebuilt and may have been occupied by Ferdinando until his death in 1820. It eventually became

unoccupied as a residence and was used as a fishery in later years before it was burned after 1920. Today there is a two-story brick military family quarters, assigned to the Post Chaplain, on the site.

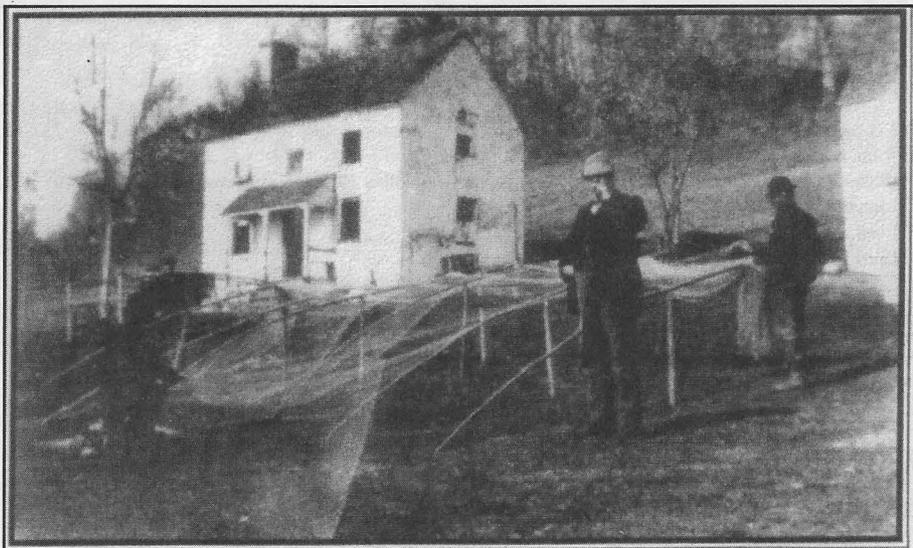
¹⁹ Pitch, *The Burning of Washington*, pp. 176-8; Lord, *Dawn's Early Light*, pp. 207-9. There is inconsistency among the cited writers as to the number of militia guns. Lord on page 209 mentions "13 effective guns"; Pitch on page 174 lists "two 12-pounders, and three long 18-pounders" and "two small 4-pounders on the edge of the bank"; and Mahon writes on page 303 "Porter set up a battery of 13 cannon at White House."

²⁰ Mahon, *War of 1812*, pp. 303-4.

²¹ Pitch, *The Burning of Washington*, p. 175.

²² Mahon, *War of 1812*, pp. 303-4.

²³ Lord, *Dawn's Early Light*, p. 209.



Post History Office, Fort Belvoir

The White House as a shad fishery (ca 1900).