

The Alexandria Chronicle

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A DEFENSELESS ALEXANDRIA

by

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The War of 1812 has become an insignificant chapter in American history. Most Americans do not realize that following an afternoon battle at Bladensburg, Maryland, on August 24, 1814, America's seat of government was invaded by an enemy force and the Capitol, White House, and other public buildings were set ablaze that evening. The following day British troops continued their burning and withdrew that night, August 25, 1814, without American resistance. Usually this summary of the war ends here, including an often inaccurate account of Dolley Madison's "act of bravery" regarding the full-length portrait of George Washington. The lack of protection for and the subsequent sacking of the neighboring town of Alexandria are seldom discussed. This is unfortunate because the invasion inflicted substantial costs and hardships on Alexandria, located at that time within the District of Columbia.

Background

The British had been involved in the Napoleonic Wars since 1803. In June of 1812 they found themselves also at war with the United States.* Fighting a two-front war proved challenging and expensive, so that the British were unable to put adequate resources into their fight in Northern America. However, things changed on the Continent in April of 1814 when Napoleon was defeated, abdicated, and exiled to the island of Elba, giving the British an opportunity to turn their full attention across the

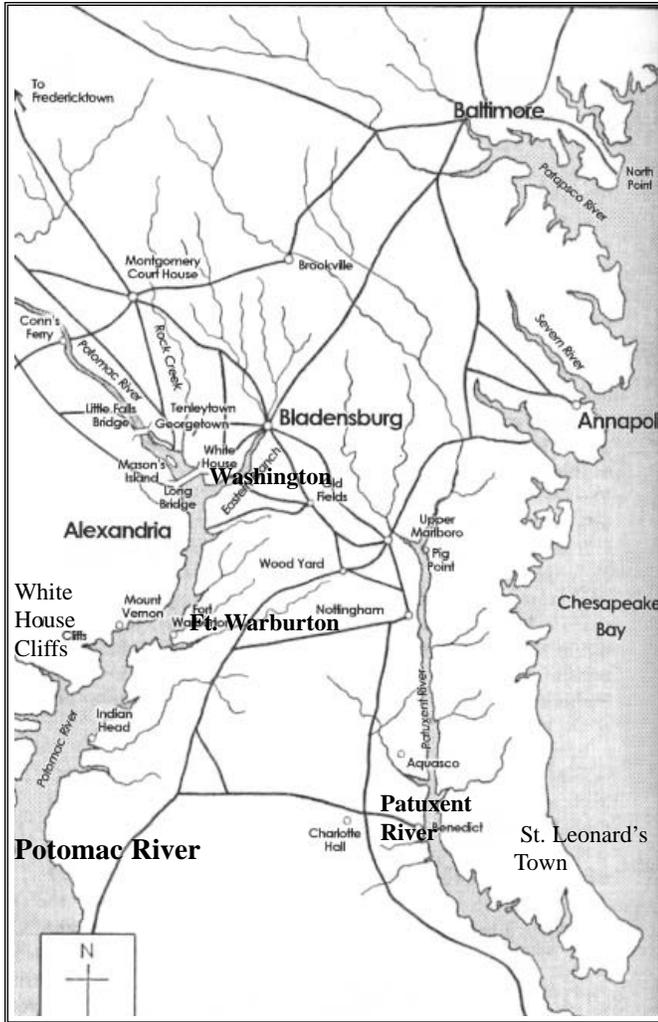
Atlantic with the intent to put an end to the hostilities there.

A Summer's War, 1814

On June 26, 1814 President James Madison received intelligence from Albert Gallatin and James Bayard, two ministers abroad, alerting him that discussions in London contemplated an attack on America's capital, Washington City, located within the territory of the District of Columbia. Madison quickly convened his cabinet on July 1, 1814 to adopt measures to protect Washington.



Brigadier General William Winder



The British first advanced up the Patuxent River, on the right, to Bladensburg and then to Washington. Captain Gordon made his way up the Potomac River, on the left, to Alexandria, passing White House cliffs, Mt. Vernon and Fort Warburton, August 1814.

The following day the 10th Military District was created to protect the nation's capital. This was a large area that included the District of Columbia, the state of Maryland, and Northern Virginia. Its command was given to Brigadier General William Winder, an inexperienced regular officer who had served briefly on the Canadian front before being captured at the Battle of Stoney Creek. Winder was a political appointee rather than a military one and proved to be an unfortunate choice for the president. He was not knowledgeable about military matters; his occupation was that of a Maryland lawyer. Winder spent a great deal of energy and time riding about the countryside inspecting fortifications, terrain, and looking at potential enemy

landing sites. He wrote copious reports. Yet, very little changed regarding the safety of the capital city or the other towns within his command.

Nevertheless, Winder's main obstacle in preparing to defend the 10th Military District was not so much his lack of experience, but his direct superior, Secretary of War John Armstrong, who was stubbornly convinced that the British would not attack the nation's capital. War was costly. Armstrong insisted that it was unnecessary to spend funds to train and equip militia forces for an event that would not happen.

Fears of a possible assault upon the nation's capital were not new. The prior year, 1813, the Royal Navy conducted raids on coastal towns throughout the Chesapeake Bay region. Enemy ships brazenly ascended the Potomac, sounding the river. District residents were nervous, but the British did not come. Life continued as usual and preparations to defend the District of Columbia did not take place. During the winter months the British kept a low profile in the Chesapeake Bay, but in the spring of 1814 they resumed their coastal raids. However, this time they encountered an adversary, in Commodore Joshua Barney, whose fleet of gunboats and barges, known as the Chesapeake Bay Flotilla, engaged British Naval forces at Cedar Point and St. Leonard's Town. The Flotilla escaped up the Patuxent River, but the enemy blockaded the exit, and Barney's fleet was trapped.



**Commodore Joshua Barney
Commander of the Chesapeake Bay Flotilla**

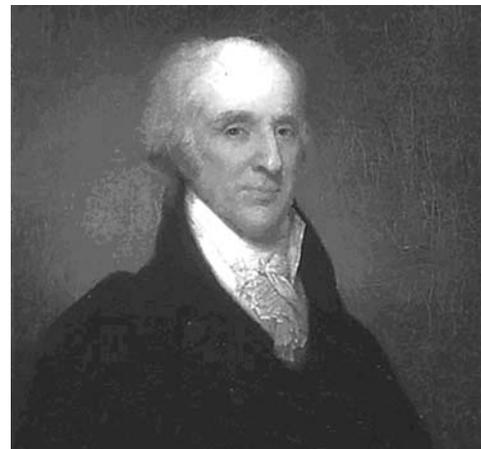
Alexandria, situated on the west bank of the Potomac River, was located in the south-east corner of the District of Columbia. Fears of an assault upon the town were quite real because its main protection was dependent on Fort Warburton, located on the east bank of the Potomac about six miles south of Alexandria. The fort was under the control of the U.S. government and minimally staffed. On May 8, 1813, a citizen group of four, appointed by Alexandria's Common Council, met with President Madison expressing concerns about what they felt were inadequate measures regarding the safety of their city and on the same day, the Common Council appropriated \$1,500 to mount its cannon providing some defense. Three days later the Common Council appointed a committee of vigilantes to work with citizens in Washington and Georgetown about securing protection for the entire District of Columbia. A sub-group met shortly thereafter with Armstrong and Naval Secretary William Jones. An engineer was sent to inspect Fort Warburton. He reported back to Armstrong that "an additional number of heavy guns at Fort Warburton, and an additional fort in the neighborhood, are both to be considered unnecessary."¹ Thus, a year passed before the 10th Military District was formed to defend the nation's capital, ignoring still the defense of Alexandria (and Georgetown). Residents there had reason for concern.

To Winder's credit he did inspect Fort Warburton and twice visited Alexandria going over defensive measures with its citizens. Yet, preparing strategic plans or preparing an adequate defense for the city remained undone. Its residents were concerned that the plans of the new military district focused mainly on the nation's capital city and did not include plans for Alexandria. They pointed out that Fort Warburton was not adequately fortified or garrisoned. To do this required money and men, and Winder had neither! Therefore, the Common Council, being anxious for the safety of its town and the rest of the District of Columbia, secured loans from the Bank of Alexandria (\$10,000) on August 6 and the Potomac Bank (\$25,000) on August 13, and lent the federal government \$35,000 to better fortify the area south of their town.

But it was too late! A British armada under the command of Vice-Admiral Alexander Cochrane was already gathering in the Chesapeake Bay. A three point plan was put in motion on August 17: 1) Captain Peter Parker would lead a small force of two ships to

the upper Chesapeake; 2) seven ships were ordered up the Potomac under the command of Captain James Gordon; and 3) the main part of the force, consisting of about 4500 infantry and 1000 sailors/marines, was sent up the Patuxent. On August 19, British regulars, under the command of General Robert Ross, began marching along the Patuxent's west bank in unison with sailors/marines rowing up the river, under the command of Rear Admiral George Cockburn. Their immediate objective was Barney's 17 gun boat flotilla which remained trapped in the Patuxent.

Clearly the Americans were not caught off guard by the invasion, but they were unprepared. Winder had not yet improved protection for the



Secretary of War John Armstrong

nation's capital or the remainder of the District of Columbia, plus he was having difficulty collecting militia forces. As the enemy moved up the Patuxent closer to Washington, he focused on "battle preparations," rather than implementing plans that would impede or stop their advance. Unfortunately Armstrong arrogantly remained adamant that the British would not attack the nation's capital. As late as Monday, August 22, Stephen Pleasonton, while packing treasured documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, on the orders of Secretary of State James Monroe, encountered Armstrong who "observed to me, that he thought we were under unnecessary alarm, as he did not think the British were serious in their intention of coming to Washington."²

On August 21 and 22, Alexandria's militia, under the command of General Robert Young, was ordered across the Potomac into Maryland and was stationed between the Piscataway River and Fort

Warburton. The town was now empty of its arms and artillery, along with most of its male citizens. This certainly sent a chill throughout Alexandria, but even at this point its situation was not necessarily hopeless. In fact it may have been strengthened. A force was now stationed between the Patuxent and the Potomac Rivers, adding strength to Fort Warburton in case the march of Ross turned west to join Gordon's advancing fleet which was having difficulty navigating the Potomac. Gordon entered into his log book that "each of the ships was not less than twenty different times aground, and each time we were obliged to haul off by main strength, and we were employed warping for five whole successive days, with the exception of a few hours, a distance of more than fifty miles."³

On Monday, August 22, the Redcoats found Barney's gunboats at Pig Point, Maryland. On orders of the Naval Secretary some of Barney's men blew up the American vessels before the British could seize them. The way was now open for a British assault upon the nation's capital. Ross, with the urging of Cockburn, made the decision to strike the American capital after the gunboats were destroyed. "Having advanced to within 16 miles of Washington, and ascertaining the force of the enemy to be such as might authorize an attempt at carrying the capital, I determined to make it."⁴

The morning of Wednesday, August 24, Madison, his cabinet, plus other officials, joined Winder at his headquarters near the Eastern Branch Bridge to strategize for the approaching battle. Calling upon the general in the midst of the crisis was Alexandria's committee of vigilance requesting that Young's troops be sent back across the Potomac to protect their city. Winder granted the request. Alexandrians brought boats across the river to transport the troops back to Virginia, but when they reached the Maryland shore, they learned that Armstrong had ordered Young to retain his position. The empty boats returned to Virginia. Feeling the city's vulnerability, the Common Council adopted a resolution on this same day that it would get the best terms and surrender the town if Gordon's squadron passed the fort or if the town was about to be attacked. It read, "That, in case the British vessels should pass the fort, or their forces approach the town by land, and there should be "no sufficient force," on our part, to oppose them, with any reasonable prospect of success, they should appoint a committee to carry a flag to the officer com-

manding the enemy's force, about to attack the town, and to procure the best terms for the safety of persons, houses, and property, in their power."⁵

American troops were quickly defeated Wednesday afternoon at Bladensburg, although Barney and his seamen continued the fight for some time thereafter. Later that evening at Tenleytown, Winder collected whatever forces he could gather



The White House after being burned by the British

from the scattered troops and without offering a counterattack, began a march to Montgomery Court House. This left the entire District of Columbia completely unprotected! At sunset Ross and Cockburn led a contingent of about 200 redcoats into Washington where they set fire to Robert Sewell's House, Tomlinson's Hotel, the Capitol, the White House, and the Treasury building. Commander Thomas Tingey, on orders of the Naval Secretary, ignited the Navy Yard. With the city ablaze, Winder providing no defense, and the government scattered, terror reigned, but Alexandrians were further chilled when Young's troops were ordered back into Virginia and marched through the city without stopping or offering information regarding their destination. The town's defense was now solely Fort Warburton.

A thunderstorm struck late Wednesday night dousing the flames. Many later claimed that the entire city would have burnt had it not been for this storm. But, the British were not yet finished. The following morning they ignited the fires. Frightened Alexandrians understood the perilous position they were in with Ross and Cockburn destroying the nation's capital and Gordon's ships slowly advancing

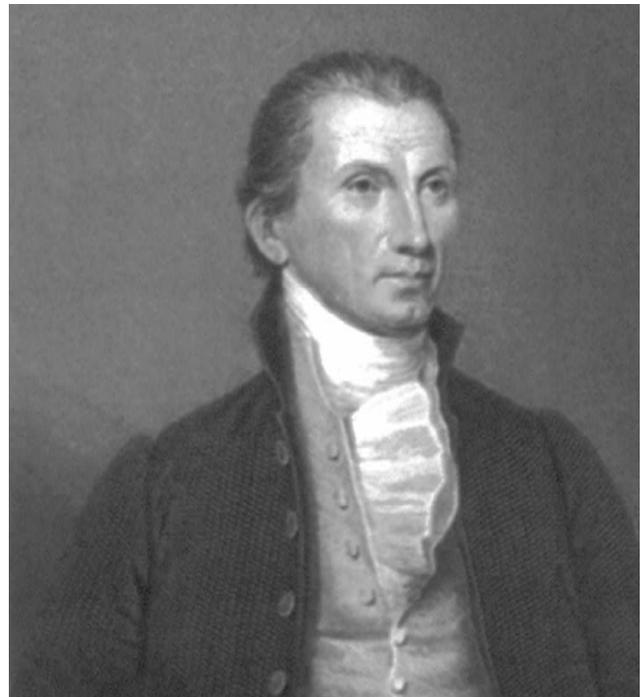
up the Potomac. The Common Council on Thursday, August 25, sent a white flag contingent into Washington inquiring as to the intentions of the British if they should take possession of Alexandria. Cockburn “assured the very respectable gentlemen who bore that flag, that private property, of all descriptions, should be respected, that it was probable that fresh provisions and some flour might be wanted, but that, whatever they did take should be paid for.”⁶

Then, two disastrous incidents struck Thursday afternoon leaving the enemy to reconsider its occupation of Washington. The first event occurred at Greenleaf’s Point where the Redcoats found barrels of powder the Americans had not secured and began dropping them into a well. It turned out to be dry well. The barrels exploded. Numerous soldiers were immediately killed or injured. This event was followed by a horrific storm packing powerful winds that swept across the entire metropolitan region. Then a tornado swept through the city. The roof was blown off Blodget’s Hotel which housed the Patent Office. A building fell on 30 enemy soldiers, killing all of them. British troops had little protection and were clinging to whatever they could grasp so not to be blown away. Ross and Cockburn never intended to occupy Washington, but to destroy it. With their mission accomplished, they set an 8:00 p.m. curfew for residents and left the city Thursday night under cover of a rear guard, retracing their route back to the waiting ships. Their occupation of America’s capital was no more than 25 hours.

Madison, along with Monroe and Rush, returned to the smoldering capital around 5:00 p.m. Saturday, August 27. Unable to return to the White House, the President went to the home of his brother-in-law Richard Cutts on F Street. Around 6:30 p.m. that evening the sound of cannonading rumbled up the Potomac. After ten laborious days spent ascending the Potomac, Gordon’s squadron had reached Fort Warburton. Alexandria was still without protection; its defense relied entirely on the fort. Not realizing that Captain Samuel Dyson and the force under his command had abandoned the fort, the British bombarded it for nearly two hours until the magazine blew up. With that deafening sound, District residents, particularly those in Alexandria, realized that the terror was about to begin anew.

Acting under the authority of the Common Council, Mayor Charles Simms, Edmund Lee, and

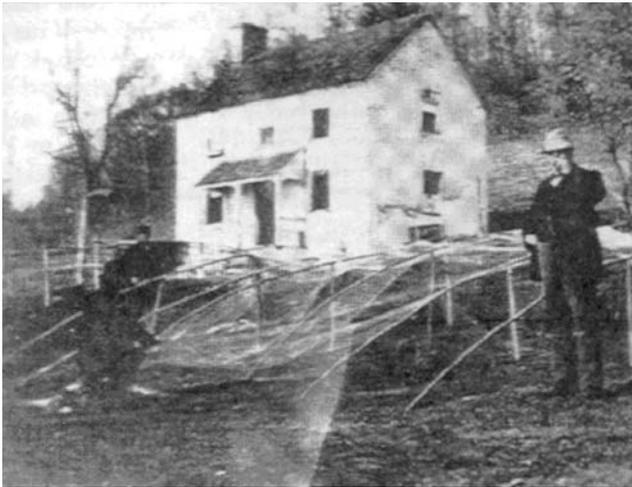
Jonathan Swift rowed down the Potomac Sunday morning bearing a white flag to inquire of Gordon his intentions for Alexandria. Aboard the *Seahorse* Captain Gordon told the deputation that he would announce his terms the following day, but Alexandrians should not expect trouble unless his ships were molested. This meant that residents had to anxiously wait at least 24 hours before learning the fate of their city. The tension throughout the District of Columbia was stifling. Everyone assumed that the enemy was going to make a second assault on the capital city. Since there was no force organized to defend the District of Columbia, many residents in Washington and Georgetown were eager to also capitulate. Winder was leading forces toward Baltimore, and Armstrong was not yet back in the city. Thus, on Sunday, the President, fearing that the government might collapse, appointed Monroe Acting Secretary of War.



**James Monroe, Secretary of State and
Acting Secretary of War**

Monroe, a man of action, immediately established plans for defending the District and impeding or stopping Gordon’s withdrawal down the Potomac. To protect the capital and Georgetown, batteries were mounted at Greenleaf’s Point, Windmill Point, and a location near the badly damaged Long Bridge. To hinder Gordon’s descent, a three-point plan was set in

motion: 1) Captain David Porter, and Generals Young and John Hungerford were to install a defensive position at the White House cliffs (also known as the Heights of Belvoir), 2) Captain Oliver Hazard Perry was to erect a battery at Indian Head, and 3) Commodore John Rodgers was to find vessels at the burnt Navy Yard that could still float, and use them as fire boats to ram enemy ships. Finally, there were plans! Even though there was a lack of ammunition, arms, artillery, and troops, Monroe created a positive spirit. Unlike Winder and Armstrong, Monroe had the support of the troops. He became the galvanizing force that restored public confidence.



The White House at the cliffs, c. 1900, when the building was used as a shad fishery. In 1814 the building was owned by Ferdinando Fairfax, the third son of Bryan, eighth Lord Fairfax, who inherited the property in 1787 at the death of his uncle George William Fairfax.

Gordon's squadron anchored at Alexandria Monday morning. His ships were placed in such a position that their guns threatened all parts of the city. A lieutenant was then sent with a list of terms to Mayor Simms. Gordon's terms contained such things as surrendering the naval and ordnance stores; all goods for exporting, such as flour, tobacco, and cotton; all boats, including those that had been scuttled; and all merchandise that had been removed from the town after August 19. Alexandria had one hour to reply. Simms summoned the committee of vigilance which insisted that merchandise sent out of the town during the last ten days could not be recalled and citizens should not be required to raise the sunken vessels. The waiting officer agreed and the revised conditions were handed to the Common Council which had no choice, but to submit to Gordon's terms and

surrender the city of Alexandria.

The enemy did not proceed further up river, but remained at Alexandria for three days looting the city of such things as flour, tobacco, beef, bacon cotton, rum, wine, rice, and sugar while inhabitants simply watched an event over which they had no control. On Wednesday another enemy ship, the *Fairy*, reached Alexandria, after encountering difficulties passing the White House cliffs where Porter was hastily putting together a battery. Captain Henry Baker delivered orders that Gordon should return to the Bay. Recognizing that his return would be difficult because there would be American resistance, Gordon began a gradual descent Thursday by sending two ships ahead (the *Meteor* and *Fairy*) to bombard Porter's battery in hopes of stopping further construction. Before dawn Friday the remaining six ships and 21 prize vessels (raised sunken ships) sailed loaded with seized merchandise. Before reaching the rubble at Fort Warburton the bomb ship *Devastation* grounded. The rest of the fleet sailed past and dropped anchor above Mount Vernon waiting for it to become free. This offered Rodgers an opportunity to unleash his fire boats. Three unsuccessful attempts were made at ramming the *Devastation* with the flaming boats before the British ship became free on Monday morning and rejoined Gordon's waiting squadron.

Further down river at the White House cliffs, the shelling between the British and Americans had been continuous for four days. It basically was a standoff. The Potomac narrowed at this location with steep cliffs on the Virginia side. Because of the height of the cliffs, the British could not get the necessary angle to eliminate the American battery, and the Americans were unable to destroy the enemy ships because they did not have a good angle or enough of the proper equipment. With the return of the *Devastation*, Gordon's squadron was again complete, so he moved his ships forward until it was time to make a "break for it." Ballast in the ships was shifted to place more weight on one side to get a better angle for firing higher. Around noon on Monday the winds appeared favorable, so Gordon ordered a heavy cannonading upon the battery. About an hour later, he successfully blasted his way past. Porter ordered his men to evacuate their position and assist Hungerford's riflemen in firing at the sailors to keep them from landing. Gordon's squadron, with all of the captured vessels, sailed past the White House cliffs Monday

afternoon with little damage to the ships. The engagement was not without loss of life; 11 Americans were killed, 19 wounded and 7 British died and 35 were wounded.

America's last hope of stopping Gordon's descent was Perry's battery at Indian Head ten miles further down the river. Again, the equipment was inadequate, so the engagement there did not last long; the Americans only had one 18 pound cannon, few arms, and little ammunition. Under the cover of darkness Monday evening, Perry withdrew his men out of firing range, and the eight British ships and 21 captured vessels passed Indian Head Tuesday morning without further opposition to rejoin the main fleet waiting in the Chesapeake on September 9, 1814.

Conclusion

With Gordon's return to the bay, the invasion of America's seat of government was over. What a shameful episode for a young nation. It need not have happened. It was preventable. There was time to prepare. There was no excuse for not throwing together and garrisoning batteries at strategic locations once the enemy made its move on August 17th. It is hard to understand the reasoning of Winder and Armstrong of offering no opposition. They simply watched the advance of Ross and Cockburn, who lacked cavalry and artillery, and permitted Gordon to slowly ascend the Potomac. It's incredible that the British destroyed the nation's capital and simply left 25 hours later, taking four days to march back to their ships, without Winder putting up any sort of counter-attack!

Although, the British vacated the capital Thursday evening, Gordon's squadron still continued advancing up the Potomac, and the only protection left for the District of Columbia, particularly Alexandria, was the minimally garrisoned Fort Warburton. There was a two-day lag period after the British left Washington before Gordon's squadron reached the fort, yet nothing was done to stop his advance. When Fort Warburton blew up Saturday evening the Alexandrians had no choice but to surrender. Monroe's plan to impede Gordon's escape down the river was not new. It had been suggested to both Winder and Armstrong soon after the 10th Military District was created. Monroe simply activated a plan that should have been put in place earlier.

The British set fire to public buildings in Washington and, except for the office of the *National Intelligencer*, left private establishments alone. The troops were unable to haul away booty because they didn't have the means to carry it back to their ships. Gordon spared Alexandria from his guns, but the city was looted of everything that could be loaded onto his ships, leaving a great deal of debris on the wharves to rot. In effect, the people of Alexandria and Washington felt as if their cities were destroyed. Americans would have accepted, no matter how difficult, the quick defeat at Bladensburg and the surrender of Alexandria because of the superiority of the enemy. However, Armstrong's arrogance, Winder's panic-stricken militia troops fleeing the battlefield, and Dyson with his force shamelessly abandoning Fort Warburton will always remain unconscionable acts in the annals of American history.

*The United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812 because of British impressment of American sailors, their seizure of Yankee commercial ships and their continuing support of Indian unrest along the frontier. At the same time, American "War Hawks" saw the British preoccupation with France as an opportunity to press for western expansion with the hope of conquering Canada and annexing it to the Union.

¹*American State Papers*. Military Affairs. 594.

²Pleasanton. *A Sketch of the Events Which Preceded the Capture of Washington by the British on the Twenty-Fourth of August, 1814*. Appendix 10.

³Gordon's Log Book. Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library, Virginia.

⁴Ross. "Official British Account of the Capture of Washington." *London Times*. September 28, 1814.

⁵*American State Papers*. Military Affairs. p. 590.

⁶*Ibid*.

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Carole Herrick received her BA in history from Los Angeles State College. She lives with her husband Philip in McLean where she is a member of several local historical societies. Carole currently chairs McLean & Great Falls Celebrate Virginia 1607-2007 and serves on the board of Fairfax 2007 and on the Fairfax Historical Commission. She has written numerous articles about McLean and northern Virginia and authored three books, two on McLean, and the third *August 24, 1814 - Washington in Flames*, on the War of 1812.

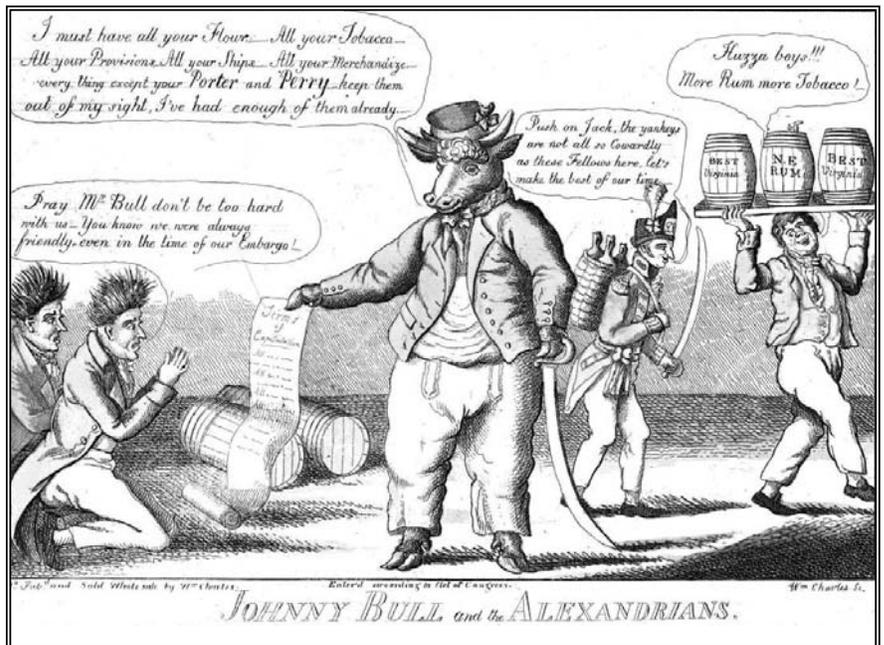
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In this issue of *The Chronicle* read about Alexandria's ignoble treatment by both Johnny Bull and the Federal government in the War of 1812.



Johnny Bull demands all the flour, tobacco, ships, provisions and merchandise of the cowering Alexandrians who plead for mercy, August 1814