International Municipal Lawyers Association
2014 Annual Conference
Baltimore, Maryland

Work Session War of 1812

Maryland and the War of 1812

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Work Session War of 1812, Friday 8:30-9:30 am

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Most scholars assume the Canadian border of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River saw the most military engagements during the War of 1812, but research over the last decade has resulted in some startling results. Maryland suffered more battles, skirmishes and raids than any other state in the union. Furthermore, the Chesapeake theater (consisting of Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia) had more actions than any other theater of war excluding naval actions in the Atlantic Ocean.

Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren, the Royal Navy's commander on the North American Station, suggested that the British conduct predatory raids on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts to draw American forces away from Canada. On December 26, 1812, the Admiralty ordered the Royal Navy to blockade the Chesapeake Bay. Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn arrived on March 3, 1813, and over the next 18 months led a series of predatory raids that had a dramatic impact on people living here. Coupled with the British blockade, these raids brought the war home to Americans living in the Chesapeake region.

British raiding parties had nearly a free hand because there were few professional soldiers available here to resist them, and the poorly trained and equipped militia was usually slow to respond and quick to flee. Cockburn's raids seemed to be little more than robbery and arson. Many exposed towns were left in ruins, and much of the tidewater countryside was devastated, and many people were left destitute. The scars that the raids left on the landscape and its people did not soon heal.

Although much of southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore supported the anti-war Federalist party, the state nonetheless contributed to the war effort. Maryland subscriptions to the government war loans exceeded those of the northeastern states and even those of Virginia, which had a much larger population in 1810. Baltimore merchants in 1813 subscribed for more than $3 million in government war loans. Baltimore raised an additional $600,000 for its own defense. Early in the war Maryland manufactured twice the amount of gunpowder than the better known du Pont mill in Delaware.

Maryland militia units were frequently called out and by and large did not distinguish themselves, although they successfully defeated British attacks at Elkton (twice), St. Michaels (twice), and Caulks Field. They also fought well at Baltimore and played a crucial role in preparing the defenses of the city. The U.S. Chesapeake Flotilla was manned by Marylanders, including African-American freemen. This unit fought bravely in all the battles that it engaged in, including the Battle of Bladensburg. The British lost two of their most popular officers on Maryland soil, Major General Robert Ross and Captain Peter Parker.

The legacy of the War of 1812 in Maryland is significant. Many people here experienced first-hand the horrors of war. The British blockade disrupted trade, and British raids sometimes resulted in looting and arson. Many buildings in towns such as Havre de Grace, Huntingtown and Fredericktown, had been burned, and other communities had experienced the indignity of enemy occupation and minor abuses of looting. Some people who lost their businesses were unable to rebound. After the British burned the Principio Iron Furnace in Cecil County, the owner was forced to mortgage his wood, coal, and iron resources to reopen but ultimately had to sell off his mansion to pay his debts.

There were at least 135 military actions in Maryland. While other areas, most notably the Niagara region, had been the scene of significant campaigning and extensive property losses, no region in the United States suffered such immense losses as did Maryland. These losses ran in the millions of dollars, and at the time when there was virtually no property insurance or government assistance programs (although the state of Maryland did give funds to the needy in Fredericktown and Havre de Grace). People in Maryland did not soon forget these depredations. Rear Admiral Cockburn and his men were long remembered as bandits, or barbarians.

But if the war caused heart-rending losses in Maryland, it also left a legacy of pride. The success of the privateers was long remembered, and today a replica of the original *Chasseur* has been built to keep that memory alive. Known as *The Pride of Baltimore II*, it was launched in 1988 and serves an educational purpose and sails the seas as a goodwill ambassador on behalf of Baltimore and Maryland.

On September 12, 1816, the second anniversary of the Battle for Baltimore, the city council passed a resolution calling for the annual commemoration of the engagement, a commemoration that is now known as Defender's Day. By state legislation, this date in 1907 became a Maryland holiday. Although the paid holiday was dropped in 1996, Defender's Day is still commemorated with re-enactments at North Point and a wreath laying at the Battle Monument in Baltimore.

People in Maryland, as well as the nation, may have suffered, but they also considered the war a success, an important step in forging a nation. The war produced many great national symbols such as Uncle Sam and Old Ironsides. But two of them have Maryland origins. The bombardment of Fort McHenry gave special meaning to the garrison flag known as the "Star-Spangled Banner," which is now on display at the Smithsonian Institution. In addition, the bombardment produced Francis Scott Key's lyrics, which eventually became our national anthem in 1931. The flag and the song have been irrevocably bound together in the public memory ever since that fateful day that Fort McHenry survived the British attack.

[much of this article is extracted from Ralph E. Eshelman, Scott S. Sheads and Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812 in the Chesapeake: A Reference Guide to Historic Sites In Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)]