

The Chesapeake Campaign (1814)

After five American offensives against Canada, the British and Canadians feared they might no longer be able to resist. But, by summer 1814, the strategic situation of 1812-1813 had changed. The Russian campaign and the Peninsula campaign had humbled Napoleon; the Battle of Leipzig in October 1813 had forced him to retreat back into France; and the battles for France in spring 1814 resulted in his abdication and exile. Thus, Great Britain no longer needed to devote the majority of its resources to containing the great French leader. Instead, the Allies exiled Napoleon to Elba in the Mediterranean and presumably the fighting in Europe was over. This in turn allowed the British to dispatch large naval and ground forces to invade the United States and thus relieve pressure on their Canadian colony.

Britain transferred more warships to its North American squadrons, and it took the offensive. Royal Navy ships raided various American ports; they captured American merchant ships; and they organized convoys to protect British merchant ships. As the size of the Royal Navy in the Americas increased, it was largely able to force American warships off the high seas. Now it was time to take advantage of this overwhelming force preponderance. Britain intended to invade down Lake Champlain to threaten the New England colonies, raid along the Gulf Coast and perhaps shut off the Mississippi River, and finally to attack in the Chesapeake Bay area threatening the nation's capital.

British Rear Admiral George Cockburn commanded the fleet that reached Chesapeake Bay on August 15, 1814 and landed troops under the command of Major General Robert Ross two days later at Benedict, Maryland. The so-called Chesapeake Bay Flotilla, a squadron of twenty barges, retreated into the Patuxent River, leaving the Chesapeake to the larger, more powerful British invading force. The intense summer heat made for difficult conditions for the 4,000 British officers and men. They approached Washington, DC by a somewhat circuitous route through the town of Bladensburg - causing in part U.S. Secretary of War John Armstrong to predict the British would attack Baltimore first - where several rounds of Congreve rockets caused the American militia to flee (the rockets were not particularly accurate but scared the untested soldiers).

The British soon reached the capital, and proceeded to avenge the burning of York (modern Toronto and capital of Upper Canada) the previous year by the Americans. They tried to burn the capitol, but the two chambers were built mostly of stone. They then turned to the Treasury Building and the presidential home - it was not yet the White House - where the British discovered a dinner setting for 40 people apparently to celebrate an American victory over the very British troops who occupied the mansion! President James Madison fled to Virginia to avoid capture while his wife, Dolly, saved valuables, including the famous Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. The British set fire to the mansion, although some accounts accuse local residents of causing more damage and looting than the invading British - similar to but the reverse of - the situation in York a year earlier.

The British decided to follow up their success in sacking Washington, DC, capital of the United States, with an attack in early September on nearby Baltimore, Maryland. The port city was an attractive target given its size, commercial prominence, and role in sheltering privateers.

British troops marched to the city but could not trick the Americans to leave their prepared defenses.

There was a brief and intense firefight, which the British won, but which did not affect the combination of American prepared defenses and forts. So, Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane moved up the bay with his fleet, bringing 16 frigates, rocket ships and bomb brigs to attack Fort McHenry and thereby to try to force an American surrender. US Major General George Armistead and about 1,000 defenders waited in the star-shaped fort.

The British bombardment of Fort McHenry began at 5:00 am on September 13, 1814. For two days and nights the bombardment continued. Amazingly, the fort held even though it was being pounded by 200 pound shells fired from several miles away. The British, fearing possible onset of poor autumnal weather, retreated to the Chesapeake and Baltimore was saved the fate of Washington, DC.

An American, Francis Scott Key, was aboard a British during the bombardment. He watched the several day shelling and was so inspired at the sight of the flag still flying over the fort that he composed a poem, "The Star Spangled Banner," which more than 100 years later (and, after being set to music,) became the US National Anthem.

Failing to compel the fort's surrender, the British fleet returned to its main North American naval base at Halifax, Nova Scotia two days later. To hide the burn damage, the Americans subsequently whitewashed the presidential mansion and ninety years later under President Theodore Roosevelt it gained the name, "The White House."

The failure of the British offensive along Lake Champlain and the Chesapeake and the thus-far inconclusive results of the offensive along the American Gulf coast caused British negotiators to relax demands for territory and helped result in the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812, under conditions of *status quo antebellum*, or the situation before the fighting began, in other words, a draw.

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