

War on the Chesapeake 12

“... destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as you may find assailable.”

- Orders to Cockburn from Vice Admiral Cochrane

By the spring of 1813, with Napoleon's defeat in sight, Britain was able to focus more attention and resources on the “American war”. Troops fresh from victories in Spain and ships freed from blockade duty in France were redirected to the United States. Strengthening the forces on the Canadian border was a primary objective; and a campaign of raids and tightening of the blockade in the Chesapeake was planned to draw U.S. forces from the northern front.

“Thirteen barges are coming up full of men. We are all under arms here, and expect another attack hourly”

- J. Sewell of Elkton, April 30, 1813



Rear Admiral George Cockburn

Under the command of Rear Admiral George Cockburn, British sailors and marines in tenders and barges ranged the bay, foraging for supplies, destroying stores of arms and gunpowder, seizing tobacco and other valuable spoils and ruthlessly punishing any armed resistance. On April 29, 1813, Cockburn's forces attacked Elkton and Frenchtown at the head of the bay. On May 3, the target was Havre de Grace. On the 6th, Georgetown and Fredericktown on the Eastern Shore were hit. Later in the summer, major raids targeted St. Michael's and Queenstown.

Local militia forces were mostly ineffective against the British, except at Elkton and St. Michael's where they repelled British forces in the second raiding attempts on those towns in August.



Plundering of Havre de Grace

“I have it in mind to give them a complete drubbing before the peace is signed.”

- Cochrane to Lord Melville

Even with peace negotiations underway, when Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane assumed command of the North American Station in April, 1814, the tempo of British activity changed. Napoleon had been defeated and now it was time to “teach the Yankees a lesson”. Cochrane planned to capture and burn Washington in retaliation for the destruction of government buildings in York (present-day Toronto) by U.S. forces; then he would attack Baltimore and destroy its valuable shipyards and troublesome privateers.



Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane

“Thus, we have beat them and their rockets, which they did not spare...”

- Commodore Joshua Barney



Battle of St. Leonard's Creek, June 26, 1814

Before the British could move toward Washington, they had to deal with a more troublesome ex-privateer: Commodore Joshua Barney, commander of the U.S. Chesapeake Flotilla. For seven weeks in June and July, Barney's flotilla of gun barges played cat-and-mouse with a British squadron in the Patuxent River. The British mounted a terror campaign, burning and plundering plantations and towns along the river, hoping to draw the flotilla from its secure position in St. Leonard's Creek. On June 26, Barney broke out, and under orders, moved his forces further up river out of reach. British troops landed at Benedict on July 19, and began the march toward Washington. On July 22, Barney was ordered to scuttle the flotilla, and he and his men raced to join the defenders outside the capital.

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