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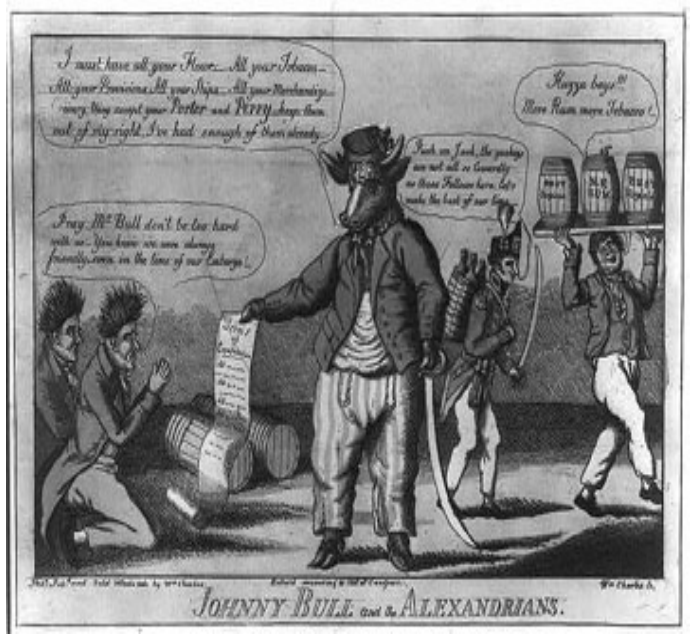
The Better Part of Valor: Alexandria Surrenders

by Jim Bartlinski

The seaport of Alexandria had felt the effects of war from its establishment. Alexandria had been overrun by a belligerent military force on three occasions: twice by the forces of Great Britain and once by those of the United States during America's Civil War. The first time Alexandria gave itself over to a martial force was at the start of the French and Indian War. It was during the spring of 1755 when the relatively new town was inundated by British troops under the command of Major General Edward Braddock, Commander-in-Chief of His Royal Majesty's Forces in North America. Braddock had been sent to the Colonies to stop French encroachments into British America's western frontier. Though initially welcomed as an army of fellow Englishmen sent to protect their American brethren from the French and their Indian allies, the Alexandria citizenry soon viewed the presence of His Majesty's troops as an invading army.

Alexandria merchant and trustee John Carlyle expressed the towns feeling best when he wrote that Braddock's army "*came In so prejudiced against us, our Country* […] *that they used us Like an Enemy Country*" and "*took everything they wanted & paid Nothing* […] *they Curst the Country, & Inhabitants, Calling us the Spawn of Convicts, the Sweepings of the Gaols* […] *which made their Company very disagreeable*." Almost sixty years later, in 1814 Carlyle's daughter Sarah and his son-in-law William Herbert would experience a similar, though more menacing, occupation by a British force.

Even more "*disagreeable*" than General Braddock's stay in Alexandria—and undoubtedly the most controversial incursion of the town by a martial force—occurred during America's second war with Great Britain. It was the summer of 1814 when Alexandria again played host to a British military force, though this time they came as the Union troops did in 1861—as true invaders. The circumstances that lead to Alexandria's occupation by His Royal Majesty's forces for a second time in a generation are as obscure and as convoluted as the war that prompted the town's capitulation—the War of 1812. The events surrounding the War of 1812



Johnny Bull and the Alexandrians, *Harper's Weekly*, 1814. Courtesy of HarpWeek Online Database.http://loc.harpweek.com/lcpoliticalcartoons/

inspired the creation of such American icons as "Uncle Sam" and the *Star-Spangled Banner*, the hastily-written poem that became our national anthem and helped transform the American flag into a national symbol. While the immortal words "*Don't Give up the Ship*" uttered by Captain James Lawrence, commander of the USS *Chesapeake* and the patriotic slogan "*Free Trade and Sailors Rights*" have become a part of America's national lexicon, the war itself is relatively unknown to most Americans and the surrender of Alexandria during

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the conflict is even more obscure. Despite its historical anonymity, complicated causes, and inconclusive outcome, the War of 1812 helped establish the credibility of the burgeoning American Republic among the established foreign powers and gave its citizens a lasting national identity.

Less than thirty years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in September 1783, which ended the Revolution, Great Britain and her former American Colonies were again at war. Along with American expansionist visions of annexing Canada, the public outcry over Britain's interference with American international trade, as well as the impressing of American sailors into the Royal Navy, led Congress to declare war on the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on June 18, 1812.

Early in the war, the American navy scored major victories in the Atlantic and on Lake Erie while Great Britain concentrated its military efforts on its ongoing war with France. But with the defeat of Napoleon's armies in April 1814, Britain turned its full military might against an unprepared United States. On August 19, 1814, Major General Robert Ross, fresh from victory over Napoleon's army on the Iberian Peninsula, was sent to America with orders to "*effect a diversion on the coast of the United States of America in favor of the army employed in the defense of Upper and Lower Canada*." The General and his battle-hardened troops landed about 60 miles from Washington, D.C. at the town of Benedicts, Maryland situated on the Patuxent River and advanced towards the capital.

On August 24, as General Ross's force of approximately 5000 British Regulars neared the Federal City, they were temporarily delayed at Bladensburg, Maryland by an unorganized and poorly-led American army twice their size. During the battle Ross ordered the use of Congreve Rockets. Though extremely inaccurate, the rockets caused panic amongst the Americans as they whistled over their heads. After only three hours of fighting the US forces were routed, leaving the British 3rd Brigade (with General Ross and Rear Admiral Cockburn at its head) an unobstructed path to Washington. The embarrassing rout of the Americans at Bladensburg was satirized by contemporaries as "*The Bladensburg Races*." Incidentally Colonel John Carlyle's thirty-six year old grandson, namesake, and heir, John Carlyle Herbert took part in the Battle of Bladensburg.

Captain James Alexander Gordon

Like his uncle George William Carlyle, John Herbert was in the cavalry, serving as captain of the Bladensburg Troop of Horse. It was the result of his uncle's untimely death at the Battle of Eutaw Springs in 1781 that Herbert inherited his grandfather's Alexandria estate. More research is merited to uncover the details of John Carlyle Herbert's brief military service, but he was surely involved in the pandemonium that ensued during the army's disorderly withdrawal from Bladensburg. It is known that John Carlyle Herbert was a Federalist, serving first in the Virginia House of Delegates and then as a member of Maryland's House of Delegates. After the War of 1812, Herbert was elected by the people of Maryland to the House of Representative, serving in both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Congresses. John Herbert died in 1846 and is buried in Baltimore's Greenmount Cemetery.

Within hours of His Majesty's troops' swift victory at Bladensburg, they entered Washington and set fire to the Capitol, the President's Mansion, and other public buildings. It was a night of terror for the capital's population with fire dominating everything. The fires' glow could be seen over forty miles away in Baltimore. The horrified citizens of Alexandria, just about three miles south, undoubtedly watched the destruction of the Federal City from their open windows and rooftops. William and Sarah Herbert must have viewed the sacking of the capital from their North Fairfax Street home and, like the rest of the town, dreaded what awaited them as Mayor Simms and the town's Committee of Vigilance contemplated their next move.

To compound the Herberts' fears, word of the debacle at Bladensburg had assuredly reached Alexandria and the concerned parents were likely waiting to hear word of their son, Captain John Carlyle Herbert of the Bladensburg Troop of Horse. It must have crossed Sarah Carlyle Herbert's mind that her son may have met the same fate as his uncle George William did during the first war with Great Britain.

On the evening of August 25, while the capital was still in flames, a storm of hurricane force hit the region. The fierce storm uprooted trees, ripped off roofs, and snapped the masts of ships for miles around. Through this tempest appeared a rain-soaked delegation of four men from Alexandria. The town's Common Council and Committee of Vigilance are reported to have sent Reverend James Muir and three other Alexandria clergymen to Washington to surrender to the British. Other accounts suggest that the delegation consisted of a "*pair of physicians and two other respected notables*." It is not known if William Herbert, a member of the Common Council and Committee of Vigilance, was among the "*notables*" of the group. Regardless of who made up the Alexandria contingent, the four men met with Rear Admiral George Cockburn, the subordinate to

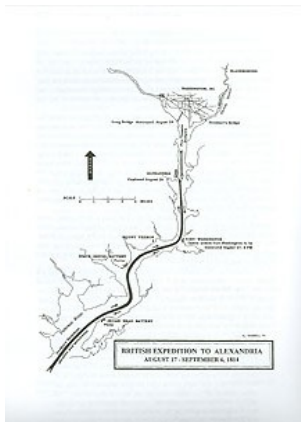
The fall of Washington—or, Maddy in Full Flight/, Published by S.W. Fores, 1814. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, and related to the Admiral that the town was defenseless and was prepared to accept the enemy's terms of surrender. The Admiral first asked if Captain James Alexander Gordon of the H.M.S. *Seahorse* and the Royal Naval squadron under his command were in sight of Alexandria. The four men reported that Gordon had not yet reached Alexandria. Cockburn told the Alexandrians that if the town's residents showed no resistance, then private property would be respected and the Royal Navy would pay a "fair" price for provisions needed for the troops. With that, the delegation made its way back to Alexandria through the storm to await Gordon's arrival.

Meanwhile, as General Ross's triumphant army was completing their sacking of the capital and making preparations to move on to Baltimore and clean out "*that nest of pirates*," Captain Gordon and his squadron worked its way up the Potomac River towards the undefended port of Alexandria. Gordon's intimidating armada included his flagship the *Seahorse*, a frigate of 36-guns; the 36-gun frigate *Euralus* and her tender; the rocket ship *Erebus*; the dispatch boat *Anna Maria*; and the imposing bomb vessels *Ætna*, *Devastation*, and *Meteor*. Captain Gordon had been sent to the Potomac by Vice Admiral Cochrane to distract the Americans to the Admiral's plan to destroy Commodore Joshua Barney's US Chesapeake Flotilla which had been a hindrance to his fleet in the Patuxent River, to divert attention away from General Ross's assault on Washington, and to secure an escape route for the General's troops if cutoff from their transports on the Patuxent. To achieve the final part of his orders, Gordon had to subdue the defenses along the Potomac, which meant that as the closest important city to the capital, Alexandria needed to be subjugated. The fact that Alexandria was a rich port just ripe for the picking by the Royal Navy was likely a motivating factor as well.

The maritime mercantile city of Alexandria was a Federalist stronghold and for the most part its citizenry opposed the war with the Kingdom of Great Britain. The citizens of Alexandria, like those of the mercantile ports of New England, were against the war with Great Britain, primarily because it interfered with commerce. Additionally, Alexandria's Federalist majority viewed the conflict as a "party war" designed to further the interests of Republicans. They also feared that war with Britain would throw the nation into an alliance with France, with whom the United States had previously been engaged in an undeclared naval war known as the Quasi-War (1798-1800). At least twenty commercial vessels out of Alexandria were captured by the French during this conflict, for which many merchants of the port likely still held a grudge. Even after the danger of a French alliance had faded with the defeat of Napoleon in April 1814, Federalists continued to oppose the war. Although willing to support a war to protect American commerce or to defend the Nation's frontiers, Federalists refused to endorse an "offensive" war aimed at the conquest of Canada. Amidst this political intrigue, Alexandria looked to President Madison's Republican administration for support against the onslaught of the British juggernaut making its way up the Potomac.

In consequence of reports that the British were contemplating an "*attack upon the City of Washington*" Alexandria Mayor Charles Simms related that, "*the municipal authority* [Common Council] *of Alexandria thought it advisable to appoint a Committee of Vigilance*" in July 1814, "*for the purpose of procuring information of the approaches of the enemy, and of obtaining assistance and advice*" from the Federal government "*as to the measures which it might be proper to pursue for protection and defence*." Members of the city's Committee of Vigilance included Mayor Simms who also chaired the committee, Joseph Dean, Matthew Robinson, Jonah Thomson, Edmund J. Lee, the committee's secretary Thomas Vowell, and the Herbert brothers William and Thomas, who served as president of the committee.



The British Expedition to Alexandria, August 27-September 4, 1814.

Originally from Muckross, Ireland, William Herbert quickly established himself as a successful merchant and pillar of Alexandria's community. Herbert served as Mayor of Alexandria in 1782, and again from 1809 to the eve of the War of 1812.

About 1775, Herbert married Sarah, the daughter of John Carlyle. The couple soon gave birth to John Carlyle Herbert, the future captain of the Bladensburg Troop of Horse. Like his father-in-law, William Herbert held the post of justice of the peace from 1786 to 1787. From 1796 to his death in 1819, Herbert was president of the Bank of Alexandria. He was also instrumental in the construction of the building at the corner of North Fairfax and Cameron Streets to house the bank. Herbert erected the bank on the same site where his late father-in-law's mercantile office and a warehouse once stood. The building was completed in 1807 and stands today as the second oldest structure in America specifically built for banking. William Herbert was a member of Alexandria's Committee of Vigilance along with his brother Thomas, who served concurrently as president of Alexandria's Common Council and the town's Committee of Vigilance. As members of the port's Committee of Vigilance, the Herbert brothers soon learned that the political tempest raging between the town's Federalist "municipal authority" and President Madison's Republican administration would add to Alexandria's vulnerability to attack.

Back in May 1813, four members of Alexandria's Common Council met with the Madison administration concerning the inadequate measures taken to protect the town. The Common Council's concerns derived from attacks on towns up and down the Chesapeake Bay by the Royal Navy. That July, Secretary of War John Armstrong and Secretary of the Navy William Jones sent Major Pierre L'Enfant to evaluate Fort Warburton, and he reported back to them that "*the whole original design was bad and it is impossible to make a perfect work of it by any alterations*." Secretary of the Navy Jones ordered an additional water battery of nine guns to be built. Originally completed in 1809, Fort Warburton—better known as Fort Washington—was the only major fortification constructed by the Federal Government to protect Washington. A year later Alexandria's Committee of Vigilance again approached the Madison administration for more assistance.

In July 1814, Mayor Charles Simms and the Committee of Vigilance again related to Secretary Armstrong that Alexandria is "*totally destitute of fortifications of any kind, and its protection against invasion by water, depended entirely upon a fort about six miles below the town*." Secretary Armstrong did not see Alexandria as having any military value to Washington. He believed that the British movement toward the capital was a ploy and insisted that the British had their sights on Baltimore, but he did make a small effort to strengthen Fort Warburton's defenses. Armstrong's lack of action would prove disastrous for Alexandria and the Federal City.

Next, Alexandria's Committee of Vigilance approached Brigadier General William Winder, commander of the newly-created Tenth Military District, for help. Although he inspected Fort Warburton and suggested defensive measures for the town to take for its protection, he did nothing to shore up Fort Warburton or to erect any additional fortifications. Still concerned over their town's safety in early August, the Common Council secured loans from the Potomac Bank for $25,000 and $10,000 from the Bank of Alexandria. The monies were lent to the federal government to improve and erect fortifications down river from Alexandria. Given that William Herbert was the president of the Bank of Alexandria and a member of the Committee of Vigilance, it is not surprising that his bank contributed to Alexandria's defense. But it proved to be too late.

The Tenth Military District encompassed the District of Columbia (including Alexandria) and parts of Maryland and Virginia. Winder, a Federalist from Maryland, was the nephew of Levin Winder, that state's outspoken Federalist governor. Though he was a veteran of the Canadian campaign, General Winder was inexperienced at coordinating the defense of a military district. To intensify the problem, Winder had been appointed to his post by President James Madison. The Republican Madison selected General Winder to command the Tenth Military District in the hope that the General's uncle, Governor Winder, would commit Maryland troops to the defense of Washington. Secretary Armstrong had little input in the decision to appoint Winder to command the Tenth District. Feeling bitter over the slight, Armstrong refused to give Winder the support he needed to perform his duty. Armstrong went so far as to not provide General Winder with a staff. Winder ended up acting as his own quartermaster and adjutant. All of these factors contributed to the beleaguered William Winder's ineffectual command of the Tenth Military District.

To make matters worse, on August 21 and 22, 1814, Alexandria militia was ordered by Winder to Fort Warburton across the Potomac with most of the town's small arms, leaving two twelve-pound cannons without ammunition and only about "*one hundred effective armed men*," most of which were too old, young, or feeble to defend the town. On the morning of August 24th Mayor Simms recounted that General Winder "*informed the Committee of Vigilance, who waited on him, that he could send no part of the forces with him to Alexandria; but that he had ordered Gen. Young to cross over to Alexandria, if practicable, if not to fall down river. The*

Committee of Vigilance, on receiving this information, sent boats over to the Maryland shore sufficient in number to bring over the whole of Gen. Young's force at once; but when the boats reached him, he had received orders from the Secretary of War to retain his position."

On August 27th the Royal Navy squadron approached Fort Warburton. Captain Gordon's report states that "*A little before sunset the squadron anchored just out of gunshot; the bomb vessels at once took up their position to cover the frigates in the projected attack at daylight next morning and began throwing shells until about 7:00pm. The garrison, to our great surprise, retreated from the fort; and a short time afterward Fort Washington* [Warburton] *was blown up*" by its own garrison. The next morning Gordon reported that "*the fleet paused in front of the fort completed the destruction, then sailed to Alexandria*."

It was Monday, August 29, 1814 that Captain Gordon and his squadron dropped anchor off Alexandria and trained its artillery on the exposed port. Gordon had already been in surrender negotiations with Alexandria over the past few days and delivered his terms to Mayor Simms. Having already secured terms first from Rear Admiral Cockburn while Washington was still ablaze and now again from Captain Gordon, Alexandria's Mayor and Common Council agreed with Shakespeare's Falstaff, when he said "*the better part of valour is discretion*" and quickly and willingly gave their town over to the might of the Royal Navy squadron before them. The British seized twenty-one merchant vessels and confiscated 757 hogsheads of tobacco, 13,786 barrels of flour, tons of cotton, beef, rum, wine, sugar, tar, and sundry other items on the docks and in Alexandria's warehouses as tribute.

There was only one moment during the occupation when Alexandrians feared for their town. The incident occurred on September 1, the day before Gordon's squadron was to weigh anchor. The celebrated Commodore David Porter, Captain John O. Creighton, and Lieutenant Charles T. Platt of the US Navy were in the vicinity of Alexandria and heard that some British officers were dining at Tripplet's Hotel and decided to make an attempt at capturing them. To their dismay, the British officers had been alerted to the American Navy officers' plan and escaped. Porter, Creighton, and Platt rode undeterred to Alexandria's waterfront like "*Saracens and seized on a poor unarmed Midshipman* [John West Fraser] *a mere strapling and would have carried him off or killed him had not his 'neck handkerchief broke*." The fourteen year-old Midshipman Fraser was supervising a work detail loading one of the captured prizes with plunder when "*those Gallant Naval Officers*" attempted to capture him. When word of the attempted abduction reached Captain Gordon, the *Seahorse* hoisted the signal to prepare for action without delay. With Gordon's squadron poised to reduce the town to nothing, Mayor Simms immediately prepared a message to Captain Gordon "*explaining the manner and circumstances of the insult and sent it on board by Mr.* [Thomas] *Swann and Edmd. J. Lee*." Equipped with Simms note of explanation and apology, Swann, an Alexandria lawyer and Edmund J. Lee, a now-former member of the Common Council, met with Gordon. After reading Simms' note and being reassured by Lee and Swann that the residents of Alexandria had nothing to do with this "*rash act*," Gordon ordered his gun crews to stand down. According to Simms, Alexandria "*was providentially preserved from destruction, by the accidental circumstance of the midshipman's neck handkerchief giving way for had he been killed or carried off, I do not believe the Town could have been saved from destruction*." On September 2 Gordon's squadron slipped their moorings and headed for Baltimore**.** Thus ended the surrender and occupation of Alexandria. It would be forty-seven years before another invader would subjugate the town.

The capitulation and brief occupation of Alexandria after the burning of the nation's capital, gave Baltimore precious time to shore up its defenses, allowing that city to ward off His Royal Majesty's forces at Fort McHenry and Hampstead Hill. The successful defense of Baltimore marked a turning point in the War of 1812. Three months later on December 24, 1814, the Treaty of Ghent was signed formally ending the war. Soon after the British left Alexandria, its inhabitants were branded as cowards and traitors by Republican propaganda. Disgraced, the people of Alexandria slowly allowed this sad event in their history to fade into the murky waters of history. But if not for the surrender of the town, many of Alexandria's now historic buildings, including John Carlyle's grand Aquia sandstone mansion overlooking the Potomac, may have been destroyed.

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