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The War of 1812 and Essex County

By Robert Alexander Armour

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Author's Note: In recognition of the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 and its impact on our county, the ECMHS Bulletin is devoting several issues to covering the war. This is the second of four installments on the War as it affected Essex County. Subsequent articles will cover the invasion of Essex County, and the use of former slaves during the invasion.

The new constitution, approved in 1788, gave shape to the government of the United States. Among its stipulations was one that established an armed militia to complement the standing federal army and navy. Previous experience with the standing army of Great Britain led the colonists to hold such force injurious to liberty. As a result, the new government limited the size and power of a standing army in favor of decentralized militias under control of the individual states. These militias were made of citizen soldiers who could be called up “to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress insurrections, and repel Invasions.” The president, with constitutional authority, could call the militias to service of the nation, but the power to appoint officers and train the men was reserved to the states.

Surviving records do not spell out the condition of the Essex militia at the time of the War of 1812, but it would have operated under the authority and requirements of the federal Militia Acts of 1792.¹ In that year the United States Congress passed two sets of laws that augmented the expectations for militias set forth in the constitution. These acts required that every “free able-bodied white male” between the ages of 18 and 45 enroll in the militia in the county where he resides. He must provide himself with the necessary equipment for battle: “a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints, and a knapsack, a pouch, with a box therein, to contain not less than twenty four car-

tridges, suited to the bore of his musket or firelock, each cartridge to contain a proper quantity of powder and ball; or with a good rifle, knapsack, shot-pouch, and powder-horn, twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter of a pound of powder.”²

Officers should be “armed with a sword or hanger, and espartoon.” A hanger was a short sword, and an espartoon was a long pole (6 or 7 feet) topped with a long blade accompanied by two shorter ones in the shape of a trident. Loading a musket required the soldier to focus his attention on his gun, so officers instead used swords and espartoons which allowed them to keep their eyes on the battle.

The United States’ small standing army was chiefly deployed far to the north in Canada and the Great Lakes leaving state militias to defend the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. These troops were civilian soldiers – farmers, merchants, watermen, and their friends and neighbors. They were called up for short terms, often just a few days, to face an immediate threat to their homes and surrounding farms and villages. Unfortunately, they were poorly armed and poorly trained, but they were defending their homeland. They knew the lay of the land and the rivers with all their tributaries. The records of the war show that often they scattered quick-

² A musket was notoriously inaccurate. It had no rifling in the barrel and therefore had a range of only 100 yards or so. A well-trained soldier could load and fire this weapon once every 15 to 20 seconds. In contrast, a few of the Americans at the Battle of New Orleans were armed with “Kentucky” rifles, which had a range in excess of 300 yards and which would become standard in a few decades.

¹ These acts were amended in 1795.

ly when confronted by well-armed regular British soldiers in superior numbers, but oftentimes they stood their ground and drove off the invaders.

The operation of the militia in Essex County during the War of 1812 becomes a case study of the deployment of a state's militia in defense of the country.

The Essex Militia

Essex men were engaged with the war even before it was a war. Three from prominent Essex families had gone to Richmond to follow their careers, and they became leaders there of the anti-British sentiment. Thomas Ritchie, Spencer Roane, and John Brockenbrough³ led the protest at Capital Square against the British for the attack on the USS *Chesapeake* by HMS *Leopard* in 1807. They encouraged the large demonstration and secured the crowd's agreement to a resolution condemning the attack on the American ship, which thought it was at peace with the British. Ritchie then joined the Republican Blues – a local militia – in a five-day march to the Peninsula. The enemy, however, did not land troops, and after a few days, the Blues marched back to Richmond.⁴



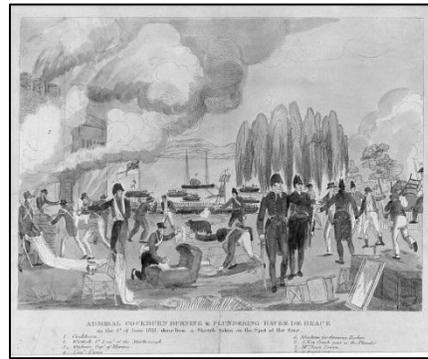
British Rear Admiral
Sir George Cockburn
(Royal Museums Greenwich)

In early March 1813, British Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn, on the 74-gun *Marlborough*, arrived in the Chesapeake Bay to join the fleet commanded by Admiral John Borlase Warren, on the *San Domingo*. Cockburn had been ordered – first by Admiral Warren and then by his successor Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane – to lay waste to the towns and villages along the shores of the bay in retaliation for American raids on strategically unimportant sites in Canada.

Cockburn was efficient and ruthless; as a result, he became public enemy number one to the people of the Chesapeake region. His raids on towns such as Havre de Grace, Maryland, and Kinsale, Virginia, earned him the contemptuous epithet, the “Great Bandit.”

³ Ritchie was founding editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, Roane a jurist, planter, and politician (James Slaughter calls his “perhaps the greatest mind in Essex history”), and Brockenbrough a medical doctor.

⁴ Ritchie's outspoken opposition to the British is suggested as one reason the Ritchie tomb in Tappahannock was desecrated during the British raid in December, 1814.



Cockburn's Raid on Havre de Grace, MD
(www.mdhs.org/digitalimage)

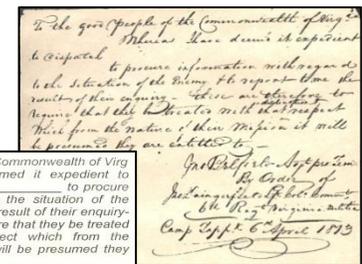
The British first order of business was to bottle the USS *Constellation* in the Elizabeth River between Norfolk and Portsmouth, thus effectively eliminating any maritime resistance to the superior

British navy on the bay. They then proceeded up the bay and anchored at the mouth of the Rappahannock River.

On April 2 the British spied four large American schooners just off Windmill Point. The British chased them for fifteen miles up the Rappahannock and caught up with them the next morning. The four ships, with some 219 men and 31 guns, were soon captured by a much smaller troop. The British followed this action by putting troops ashore on both sides of the river. On the 4th they raided Carter's Creek and then on the 6th they crossed the river and landed just up-river from Urbana. Observers reported that the invaders came in considerable numbers and caused extensive damage. By the next day, the British had left the river, moved up the bay, and soon established a base at Tangier Island. This excursion up the Rappahannock River did not reach Essex County, but its far-reaching consequences did.

When told of fighting downriver near Urbana, Essex Lieutenant Colonel John Dangerfield began to assemble his militia. He received a brief note from Lieutenant Colonel Elliott Muse from Middlesex: “The

County of Middlesex being invaded by the enemy, I hereby call on you for such aid as you can furnish.”



Dangerfield Transcript
(Essex County Museum and Historical Society)

Not knowing that the British had gone up the bay, Dangerfield immediately wrote to Virginia Governor James Barbour informing him of the invasion and of his action calling up the militia. He tells the governor that his first action was to dispatch an “Express” to Middlesex. He does not say so, but most likely the “Express” was the Essex cavalry, under the command of Lieutenant James Allen, Jr. There may have been another company of

cavalry since Dangerfield says he is sending a troop of 50 men, and the surviving muster rolls show Allen's troop only has 22 men. Most of these men served for three to five days, and then apparently were dismissed.

This troop returned from Middlesex the next day with a further request from Muse. He told Dangerfield that the enemy had "landed in considerable numbers and were committing many outrages." In response, Dangerfield ordered the Essex Light Infantry attached to his regiment to report for duty. This created the potential for an uneven confrontation between the American militia and well-armed and well-trained British regulars – David facing Goliath without his slingshot.

Dangerfield was concerned about the legality of what he had done. He wrote the governor that the law seemed to make "an actual invasion of the County a prerequisite" before the militia is called up. Since Essex County had not actually been invaded, he asked the governor to support his decision regardless of the law and to authorize the continuance of the men in service. The colonel proceeded to order up the county militia, but he told the governor that they were poorly armed. When the threat of further intrusion on the Middle Peninsula faded, the Essex troops stood down.

During this period, the Essex militia was led first by Lieutenant Colonel Dangerfield and then, in March of 1814, he was joined by Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Ritchie, Jr. They were assisted by two majors: George Banks and Samuel Muse. This command was supported by 15 companies, each led by either a captain or a lieutenant. These companies served at different times and at different strengths. During the call-up in April 1813 Dangerfield had ten companies under his command.

Some examples serve to illustrate the movement of the militia. Muster rolls tell us that Captain Joseph Tarney's company was called to serve from April 5 to 8. It consisted of the captain, two sergeants, and 54 privates. Most likely, they returned to their homes and families when the British left Urbanna and sailed up the bay. A second company had a slightly different call. Captain Thomas D. Pitts' company served two days in April, the 6th and 7th, but returned to service in July 1813 and September 1814. The records show that some of these men served for two or three days, but others for much more.

The Essex Order Book demonstrates that throughout this period local officials were responsible for the leadership of the companies of county militia. County records show the appointment of the officer ranks during the war. There is evidence of movement; in the Muster Roll of April 5, 1813, Carter M. Braxton was a private in Lieutenant Allen's cavalry. By May 1814, he had risen in rank to captain and given his own company,

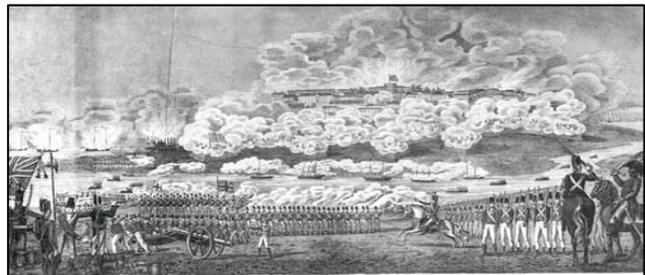
but the Muster Rolls have him assigned to a company under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Richard Parker from Westmorland County. Perhaps most significantly, in March 1814, Archibald Ritchie, Jr. received his appointment as lieutenant colonel. He will be the leader during the December invasion.

The hubbub created by the British excursion into the lower Rappahannock had little direct impact on Essex County other than the disruption of the lives of the men called up briefly. County officials, however, were suitably alarmed. About six weeks after the action, they authorized the county clerk, John Pitt Lee, to move official papers from his office to some safe location if the county colonel notifies him of approaching enemy.

The next year the Essex militia became more directly engaged in action. The first occurred in August and September 1814, in Northern Virginia. Captain Joseph Janney's company was temporarily assigned to the 111 Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Richard Parker. They assembled at Layton's Landing near Champlain, presumably crossed the river here, and then marched to Westmorland Court House and on to Northern Virginia.

The Battle of White House

The story of the British assault on Washington and the burning of The White House is often told. British General Robert Ross disembarked his brigade of 3,400 men on August 19, 1814, at Benedict on the upper Patuxent River in Maryland. He was joined by Admiral Cockburn on land with 900 marines. They marched toward Washington. Passing through Bladensburg they encountered badly-led and badly-trained American militia who soon withdrew in considerable haste.

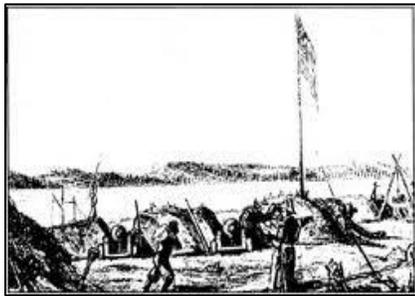


Bladensburg, MD
The British assault on Washington.
(National Park Service)

The British marched on, overcame spirited, but eventually ineffective, defense of the Washington Navy Yard, and soon dined at The White House and burned major buildings in the nation's capital. By August 24 the British army was marching toward Baltimore.

What is not so often remembered is the Battle of White House (a Virginia site, not to be confused with the large white building in the nation's capital city). This White House was named for a large white fishing

house on the Virginia banks of the Potomac some four miles below Mount Vernon. The building had long been used as a navigational guide to ships plowing the river, and George Washington had suggested that a gun emplacement be located there because the river narrows at



Battery at White House
The battle at White House Landing.
(Naval Historical Center)

this point and there are high bluffs perfect for a cannon battery.⁵ In September 1814, the Americans quickly brought cannons here to impede the British fleet's withdrawal from the District of Co-

lumbia, and elements of Essex militia were engaged in the action.

In August British naval Captain James Alexander Gordon had sailed a small flotilla of two frigates and five smaller ships up the Potomac to support the British troops advancing toward Washington. His charge was to destroy any American fortifications along the river and ensure an escape route for the army were it to be blocked on land. He arrived too late to be of any use in the sacking of the nation's capital, so he turned his attention to the ripe plunder in the city of Alexandria just across the river. Town officials immediately gave up the town in exchange for Gordon's promise the British would not sack it. He destroyed the military installations, captured 21 small ships, and took the supplies he needed. He then sailed down the river with his ship holds brimming with plundered flour, cotton, tobacco, tar, beef, and sugar.

In the meantime, the Americans made plans to delay and annoy the British on their sail down the Potomac. On August 31 Secretary of the Navy William Jones ordered naval Captain David Porter⁶ to White House: You will proceed with the detachment of Seamen and Marines which arrived here under your command last evening, to the White House on the west Bank of the Po-



Captain David Porter
(www.nps.gov/pha/USN/Navy)

tomac, where you will find a train of five or six 18 pounders [cannons] ordered there by the War Department in concert with this department, which you will take command of and place in Battery in the most favorable position or positions and endeavour to effect the destruction of the Enemy's Squadron on its passage down the Potomac." Two days later Secretary of State James Monroe wrote to Commodore John Rogers,⁷ placing him as second in command of this action: "the battery erected at the white house under command of Com. Porter promises to embarrass, if not impede the progress of the enemy down the bay."

The commander of the Virginia militia assigned to help defend the river was Brigadier General John P. Hungerford of Westmorland County.⁸ The men of Essex County reported to Lieutenant Colonel Parker. Janney's company, and perhaps one more unidentified Essex company, joined in the action. They felled trees, sited cannons, defended the flanks of the battery, and when the British were within range, fired their muskets. Given the limited effective musket range and the width of the river at this point, it is doubtful that musket fire had much consequence.

From September 2nd through the 5th the British and Americans exchanged unnumbered artillery and musket shots to little effect. This was one of the major exchanges of cannon fire toward the end of the war, but few Americans were killed or wounded and eventually the British caught a favorable wind, sailed out of the range of the shore weapons, and proceeded down the river.

Captain Porter wrote a lengthy and detailed account of the battle in the after-action report he sent to the Secretary of the Navy.⁹ In it, he commended the Essex militia, even if he did misspell the commander's name. He wrote that militia from other areas of the Commonwealth had distinguished themselves, "as did a company of militia under the command of Captain Gena [sic.] who was posted by me on the right . . . It affords me much pleasure to observe that the militia who came under my immediate notice and were attached to my command voluntarily or otherwise conducted themselves in a manner which reflects on them

⁵ Today this site is on the grounds of Fort Belvoir.

⁶ After a highly successful naval career, Porter had captained the *Essex* until it was destroyed in a storm and subsequent battle. On his return to Washington, he was given this assignment at White House.

⁷ Commander John Rogers also had an outstanding career on behalf of the U.S. Navy. He had sailed down the Potomac and was ordered to take his cannons and men to supplement the battery at White House.

⁸ General Hungerford was a veteran of the Revolutionary War, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate, and member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

⁹ To see this report please consult *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, vol. III, pages 251-55. It is electronically published.

and their Country the highest honor. . . .” He did report that this company had lost two men in action, but no other record of deaths of Essex men has survived.

As noted earlier, in many encounters between British regulars and American militia, the militia did not stand up to superior force; but in this case, the Americans withstood heavy shelling without flinching. Captain Porter thought it important to make a point of praising militia courage: “. . . there was no instance where one [soldier] offered to retire until I gave the order to retreat and it was not necessary to repeat the order to rally.” General Hungerford echoed that praise: “. . . not a man under my command offered to move, until orders to that effect was [sic.] given.”

Janney’s company remained active until September 25, and it seems likely that they followed the British down the river. The fear that the British might come ashore anywhere in the Northern Neck kept the Virginia militia operational in the area. Other Essex companies also were mobilized during the month and possibly joined these maneuvers.

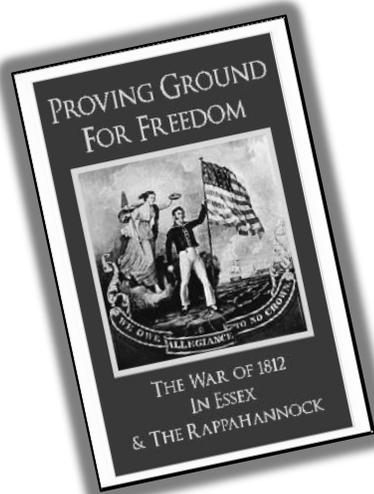
The Essex militia was finally engaged in action during the invasion of its own county in December of the same year. That story will be told in a later edition of the Bulletin.

About the Author

Bob Armour is a valued contributor to the ECMHS Bulletin, having previously written on John Smith’s coming to Essex County for an earlier issue. He is Professor Emeritus of English from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, and has been a Fulbright professor in Egypt and visiting professor at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. Currently he is Adjunct Professor of English in the Honors Program at Tennessee Tech University. He is author of three books and editor of three more, and is currently completing his study on the scholarly life of C.S. Lewis. He and his wife Leandra have summered near Dunnsville since 1969.

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Local Decoy Collector and Specialist
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10 am to 4 pm

Refreshments will be served

*Larry will identify and appraise old decoys
in return for a donation to the*

*Essex County Museum and Historical Society
(A minimum of \$10.00 suggested)*

*Well-known carver John D. Krom, of Laneview,
will also share stories of his early carving days,
and an extensive collection of his carvings will be
on display.*

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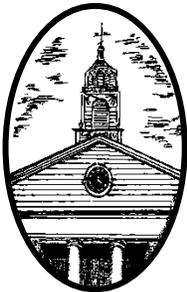
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