

COPYRIGHT / USAGE

Material on this site may be quoted or reproduced for **personal and educational purposes** without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given. Any commercial use of this material is prohibited without prior permission from The Special Collections Department - Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore. Commercial requests for use of the transcript or related documentation must be submitted in writing to the address below.

When crediting the use of portions from this site or materials within that are copyrighted by us please use the citation: *Used with permission of the University of Baltimore.*

If you have any requests or questions regarding the use of the transcript or supporting documents, please contact us:

Langsdale Library
Special Collections Department
1420 Maryland Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21201-5779
<http://archives.ubalt.edu>

Choose the ideal name for the Fort McHenry tunnel

By James M. Merritt

HIS MILITARY DEFENSIVE SKILLS, honed at Long Island, Monmouth, the Brandywine and Fort Mifflin, were legendary. So the U.S. Army officers in the Baltimore of 1814, led by Gen. John Eager Howard, told the Committee of Vigilance and Safety that this man was the one to mastermind the defense of the city against the oncoming British. The committee agreed unanimously.

The man accepted the charge with alacrity, but under one condition. He was a major-general of militia and he did not want some regular army dude coming over from the War Department and giving him a hard time. So he wanted a letter from Governor Levin Winder granting him supreme authority to carry out the mission. It was quickly forthcoming.

And the man went to work. After mobilizing his own command he sent word to Virginia and Pennsylvania that he needed all the help he could get. Units from those states came streaming in. The man put them to drilling and digging.

Figuring that the attack would come from the east, he ordered a pattern of entrenchments anchored on the harbor and extending up over Hampstead Hill (Patterson Park) to a terminus at the Belair Road. Houses and trees in front of the earthworks were removed to afford perfect fields of fire. He was everywhere, cutting corners, throwing Standard Operating Procedure to the winds, but getting things done.

Observing this, the citizens began to take heart. The miasma of defeatism that had settled over the city lifted and soon young and old of high and low degree were at the palisades digging from dawn to dark. When finished, the line was manned by more than 10,000 troops and bristled with 62 guns strategically placed.

How was all this financed? The committee had called on the War Department and the reply was essentially, "Baltimore, you are on your own. We are broke."

Did the man reply with a bush-league remark like "Ask them whose side they are on,

anyhow?" No. He handled the finances himself. He had ponderous clout in the political and financial fields and he soon had finagled loans totalling \$650,000 from local banks.

Now he turned his attention to Fort McHenry, the key to the harbor approach. To help Major George Armistead, he crowded 57 extra guns and 1,000 troops into the fort and stationed a row of barges on the Patapsco and a boom across the Middle Branch. Not entirely satisfied, he talked a group of ship owners into sinking a line of their vessels between Whetstone Point and the Lazaretto, in front of the armed barges.

Just as the man had figured, the British fleet was sighted on September 10, standing in to North Point and beginning to disembark troops. When word reached the city the next day, a Sunday, he wasted no time. He ordered General Stricker with his brigade of 3,200 to proceed down the Patapsco Neck. He suggested a stretch between Bear Creek on the west and an inlet of Back River (Bread and Cheese Creek) on the east, the narrowest part of the peninsula, as a good place to establish a line. The general would find provisions for his troops and hay for the horses already stashed there.

The man wanted to know whether the British commander had landed his first string or if, in view of the easy pickings at Bladensburg, he had put his scrubs ashore to get in a little skirmish time. Stricker was not long in finding out. Contact was made with the enemy at about 2.30 p.m. on the 12th and there ensued a two-hour battle, the final 20 minutes of which were red-hot.

Forced to withdraw, Stricker pulled back to the northern end of the earthworks and reported to the man that night. He had faced Wellington's Invincibles, conquerors of Napoleon. There were about 5,000 of them backed by rocket launchers and light artillery. They had good move and execution. When his casualties reached 165 killed and wounded plus 50 captured, he had broken contact. The British loss was at least 300 and, in addition, Daniel Wells and Harry McComas, two young Baltimore sharpshooters, had picked off Brit-



MYSTERY MAN
A chance to honor him?

ish Gen. Robert Ross. Col. Arthur Brooke was now in command of the land forces and Rear Admiral George Cockburn was with them.

This Cockburn was a rambunctious sort and had conned Ross into burning Washington. The man figured Brooke would be putty for the admiral. He may have been had the colonel not received a letter from Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, the supreme commander out with the fleet, advising that he was unable to perform his part of the planned two-prong at-

tack on Baltimore because he couldn't get Fort McHenry. The line of sunken ships sealed off the most direct water route to the city and every time he sent a force in to blast the fort it received such damaging damage he had to pull back.

Cochrane maintained a sporadic bombardment that night of the 13th and the next morning "the flag was still there". So he sent a downriver to meet the troops.

This withdrawal was a terrific blow to the British. Not only had they wanted to avenged reported American atrocities in Canada, also, Baltimore was the home nest for privateers that had plagued British shipping. The score of 500 ships seized or sunk. The town would have been sacked and torched without doubt.

But the man's defenses prevailed. Has the city revered his memory? Well, hardly. There is an unpretentious statue of him that, after several moves, has found a roost atop Federal Hill. What a spot for an old militiaman! The town is peppered with streets named after 1812 heroes but not even an alley him.

Francis Scott Key would never have been pen to paper if it had not been for this man and Key is remembered by a statue and a waterfront highway, an important harbor bridge. The pen is mightier than the sword, right?

Why has the man been neglected? Maybe because most military historians save their ink for the attack artists rather than the defensive stars; or, maybe, because some of the man's contemporaries considered him a veritable s.o.b. in action.

But means to make memorial amendments close at hand. A new harbor tunnel is under way that will pass right under Fort McHenry, an old impact area. How about it, city fathers? What more appropriate name to give it than the SAM SMITH tunnel?

James M. Merritt is the recording secretary of the Maryland State Society, War 1812.

8/13/81