

Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail

Chesapeake Bay Region
Maryland, Virginia, and
Washington, DC

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



O! say can you see by the dawn’s early light . . .

Test of a New Nation

In 1812, the United States of America was less than 30 years old, and only one generation had been raised to adulthood under the American flag. Many people still personally remembered the daring and exhausting fight to win independence from Britain, pitting 13 allied colonies against the largest military force in the world.



Maryland militia at the Battle of North Point.

The conflict had launched a new nation, but in 1812 much was still taking shape. Americans were wary of a strong central government and grappled with questions about trade, slavery, and expansion. Washington City was a fledgling capital. National defense was hotly debated and poorly funded. Then, war came again.

Britain, at war with France, set policies that interfered with American trade. In need of men for their huge navy, the British boarded American vessels and seized men said to be British deserters. In the process, they forced thousands of American sailors into service. Along the Great Lakes and Northern Frontier, they united with American Indians to obstruct American expansion into disputed territory. The tension between Britain and America, still smoldering from the revolution, grew into flames. Some Americans wanted to strike back. Others cautioned against the human and financial costs of war. Britain had over 500 warships; America had 17. The nation was deeply and bitterly divided.

On June 18, 1812, Congress finally declared war, but Americans continued to argue over the course of the nation. In Baltimore, a pro-war mob destroyed the offices of an anti-war newspaper, igniting riots that left dead and wounded in their wake.



Riots erupted in Baltimore in response to an anti-war newspaper.

Over the next two years, British and American conflicts erupted from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. By the time the fighting ended, the war had propelled America into greater maturity as a nation. Having been tested against a world superpower, the states were now more truly “united.” Americans felt a stronger sense of collective identity and greater commitment to a robust, national military. And, by defending rights at sea and expansionist goals at home, America confirmed its entry on the international stage.

The war also inspired two lasting symbols of pride—the Star-Spangled Banner that flew in defiance of British attack and the national anthem that honors it.



Maryland Historical Society

Armed Forces History, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution

The bombardment of Fort McHenry inspired new lyrics to a popular tune. The tune was then re-named The Star-Spangled Banner and became the United States of America’s national anthem in 1931.

War on the Chesapeake

The British occupied the Chesapeake Bay during the War of 1812 to disrupt trade, bring war to the center of the country, and draw troops from the north. After declaring a blockade on the bay in 1812, they established a base on Tangier Island and raided waterfront towns at will, burning homes, taverns, ships, and farms. Towns in Southern Maryland and along the upper bay were among the targets. In Virginia, the British sacked towns and raided plantations along the James, Rappahannock, and other rivers.



Gerry Embleton Richard Schlect



People lived in fear. When attacked, they faced a difficult choice: flee, cooperate, or stage civilian resistance to a far superior force. In Havre de Grace, the defense soon dwindled to one man, John O’Neill, who continued to fight until captured. In Georgetown, Kitty Knight confronted the British admiral herself and successfully spared both her home and that of her neighbor.

Enslaved people made bold decisions, too. The British promised freedom to those who fled slavery and joined British forces. At least seven hundred men, women, and children escaped. Most were taken to Tangier Island, where some of the men trained to fight their former masters.



Gerry Embleton



Maryland Historical Society

Gerry Embleton

Joshua Barney and the “Mosquito Fleet”

In a daring plan to defend the Chesapeake, Commodore Joshua Barney organized a flotilla of nimble gun boats to bedevil the British on the bay’s shallow waters.

In August 1814, the British trapped Barney’s “mosquito fleet” in the Patuxent River, where they battled on St. Leonard Creek. Then, trapped further upstream, Barney received orders to destroy the flotilla. As the barges exploded and sank, he and his men rushed on foot to help defend Washington.

Washington in Peril

In 1814, when more than 4,000 British troops came ashore at Benedict in Southern Maryland, Americans were still guessing at their plans. A British squadron was also sailing up the Potomac River toward the port of Alexandria, while another was sailing up the Chesapeake. Washington was an obvious target, but so were Annapolis and Baltimore.

Americans soon realized that the troops in Southern Maryland were marching straight to Washington. On August 24, thousands of militiamen and soldiers confronted the British at Bladensburg, a few miles east of the capital. But the Americans were inexperienced and poorly led. The effort quickly failed.

By evening, Washington was in flames. The British burned many government buildings, including the Capitol and the White House. President James Madison and his wife Dolley, along with hundreds of frightened citizens, fled the city. The Declaration of Independence and other important documents were rushed to safety in the surrounding countryside.



Tom Freeman/White House Historical Association

Battle for Baltimore

A few weeks after withdrawing from Washington, the British set their sights on Baltimore. But Baltimore had long been preparing for a fight, and the Americans would be ready.

The British attacked by land and by water. Landing at North Point on September 12, 1814, they met their first resistance when American sharpshooters killed British Major General Robert Ross, and a bloody battle followed. The next day, the British marched toward Baltimore, but met an overwhelming number of men, artillery, and cavalry. They considered a nighttime attack, but awaited the outcome at Fort McHenry.



Richard Schlect

Fort McHenry guarded the city and its harbor. Its commander, Major George Armistead, had prepared his men for the trying task of endurance: British ships in the Patapsco River were largely beyond the range of the fort’s guns. Through a day and night of stormy weather, the British pounded the fort with rockets, mortars, and cannons.

The British expected quick surrender, but it didn’t come. In the morning, they gave up the fight. Americans raised an especially large flag over the fort. The British fleet withdrew, and their troops abandoned North Point.

Coupled with an American victory on Lake Champlain, the end of the war was in sight. The United States and Britain agreed upon the Treaty of Ghent in December. However, they did not ratify the treaty until shortly after the Battle of New Orleans, officially ending the war on February 17, 1815.



During the War of 1812, painted hat plates were sometimes attached to soldiers’ hats to designate military units. The canteen and mug shown above were both used by American soldiers during the Battle for Baltimore.
All objects Maryland Historical Society



Dolley Madison and the Rescue of Washington’s Portrait

Modern visitors who ponder the portrait of George Washington in the White House can thank First Lady Dolley Madison for her determination. As British troops closed on Washington in 1814, Madison insisted the portrait be saved. The frame of the portrait, firmly attached to the wall, was destroyed to remove the canvas and spirit it away for safekeeping.



White House Historical Association/ White House Collection



Gerry Embleton



Maryland Historical Society

The Major and the Flagmaker

When Major George Armistead sought a large national flag for Fort McHenry, he turned to Mary Pickersgill, an experienced flagmaker for the ships at Fells Point. She and her daughter, mother, nieces, and servants worked on the project for seven weeks. Thirty-feet high by 42-feet wide, the flag was so large that they completed the work in the loft of a nearby brewery.



Maryland Historical Society

Francis Scott Key and the Star-Spangled Banner

American lawyer Francis Scott Key watched the bombardment of Fort McHenry from a ship in the Patapsco River. Key was helping to negotiate the freedom of an American doctor, held captive on a British ship. The British prevented the Americans from leaving until after the attack, and Key spent an anxious night watching it take place. The experience inspired him to write patriotic lyrics for a popular, existing melody. The resulting words and tune became America’s national anthem in 1931.



Maryland Historical Society

Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail

Begin Your Adventure

Discover the War of 1812 on the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail—a path tracing troop movements through historic places, inspiring landscapes, charming waterfront towns, and waterways of the Chesapeake Bay region.

The trail offers many ways to experience the drama of the war and the stories of its people. Follow the march on Washington with a driving tour of Southern Maryland, or paddle the wetlands where Barney scuttled his fleet. Imagine British attacks from the waterfront of Havre de Grace or St. Michaels. Hoist the flag at Fort McHenry, and visit the original Star-Spangled Banner at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History.

Combine your history quest with outdoor fun for the whole family. Take time to picnic, explore trails, or cast a fishing line. Stop at a farmers market, or browse for antiques. You can also try your hand at geocaching, a treasure hunt using GPS technology, on the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail.

Make your journey by car or by boat, on bike or on foot. However you travel, the trail is a great way to discover the War of 1812 and a host of outdoor adventures along the way.

Be sure to extend your adventures on Virginia's War of 1812 Heritage Trail. Start with <http://va1812bicentennial.dls.virginia.gov/places.html>.

Get Ready, Go!

Dig in: Read *In Full Glory Reflected: Discovering the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake*, a book by Ralph E. Eshelman and Burton K. Kummerow, including a travel section for the region (2012).

Go on-line: Check for the latest happenings at the web addresses above. Most festivals, re-enactments, and other special programs take place from June through September. For special events in Maryland during the War of 1812 Bicentennial, visit www.starspangled200.org.

Grab your phone: Download a free app for your iPhone or Android from the iTunes Store, Google Play, or the trail web site.

Drop by: Visitor contact stations, noted on the map, can also identify local events and attractions.



Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, Baltimore MD
Dietrich Ruehlmann



Fells Point, Baltimore, MD
Middleton Evans



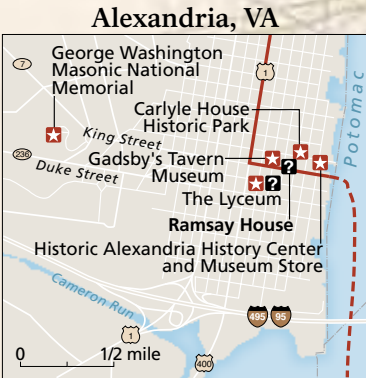
Flagmaking at Flag House and Star-Spangled Banner Museum, Baltimore, MD
Visit Baltimore



The White House, Washington, DC
NPS



Belle Haven Park and Marina
Alexandria, VA
NPS



Alexandria, VA



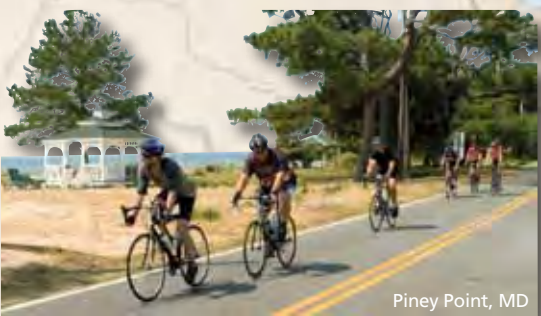
Darnall's Chance, Upper Marlboro, MD
Ralph Eshelman



Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum
Calvert County, MD
Ralph Eshelman



Sotterley Plantation, St. Mary's County, MD
Sarah Rogers



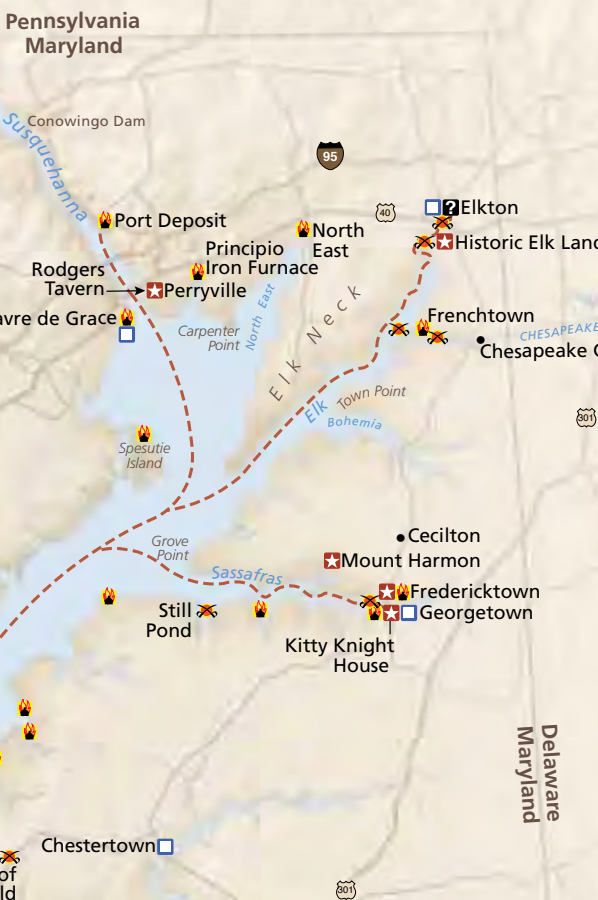
Piney Point, MD
St. Mary's County Tourism



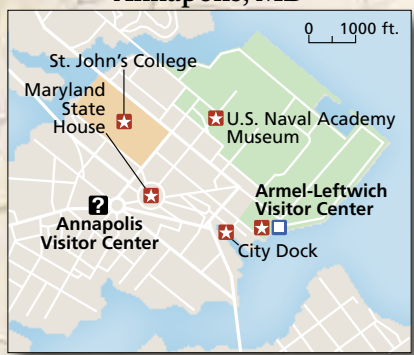
Baltimore, MD



Havre de Grace, MD



Annapolis, MD



Annapolis, MD



St. Michaels, MD



Promenade, Havre de Grace, MD
Ralph Eshelman



Kitty Knight House
Georgetown, MD
Kathi AshMD Office of Tourism Development



Elk Landing Historical Park
Elkton, MD
Ralph Eshelman



Chesapeake City, MD
Ralph Eshelman



Fishing at Kent Narrows, MD
Ralph Eshelman



Sailing on the Chesapeake Bay
NPS



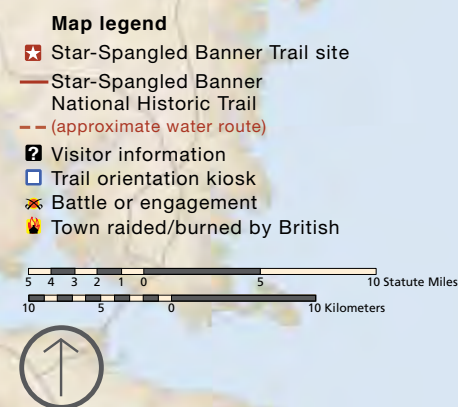
Drum Point Lighthouse, Solomons, MD
Calvert Marine Museum



Smith Island, MD
MD Office of Tourism Development



Tangier Island Ferry, VA
Starke Jett



About the Trail
The Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail is administered by the National Park Service in coordination with the Maryland Office of Tourism Development and State Highway Administration. The trail is managed through partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies; War of 1812 Bicentennial commissions and committees; and private organizations in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.