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Secretary of State James Monroe was sent to spy on the British troops. He reported them “in full march.” President Madison ordered two bridges across the Eastern Branch of the Potomac (Anacostia River) destroyed to protect the Capitol, leaving a bridge at Bladensburg as the only crossing. American troops were sent toward Upper Marlborough to meet the British, but quickly retreated upon seeing the superior size of the British forces.

The British Attack

August 23, 1814 - Overnight in Bladensburg. General Winder assembled the American troops. He first positioned troops on the high ground above Bladensburg. During the night, however, the troops began retreating toward Washington, ending up on the low field just south of town.

The next morning, Winder discovered troops in new positions and weary from moving overnight. Leader arriving for the battle second guessed Winder’s positions. General Samuel Smith of Baltimore and his aide, Francis Scott Key, organized troops a half mile away from the bridge. During this chaos, President Madison arrived to survey the troops, heading for the previous position — the high ground the troops had abandoned. Passing the American forces, he nearly rode into British hands before an aide could stop him. Members of his cabinet began to arrive to watch the “defeat of the British.”

Barney’s Stand

Commodore Joshua Barney’s group of hired private soldiers, known as “flotilliamen,” led the final fight against the British. Barney had been left with orders to burn the “mosquito fleet” he commanded in the Patuxent River and his troops were to guard the lower Anacostia River bridge. Contradicting orders, they were directed by Barney to go to Bladensburg.

Flotilliamen arrived just as the British fired their first shots at the bridge. They formed a line on the Maryland/Washington, D.C. border on a small hill overlooking the battle. African American flotillaman Charles Ball watched as the militia below scattered and retreated.

Combining soldiers who were falling back from the battle, Barney’s Flotilliamen fired their cannons down the hill leading to significant British casualties.

However, the better trained British troops encircled Barney’s position, overtaking his left and ending the battle. Commodore Barney lay in the middle of the road with a shot to the leg, surrounded by his loyal flotillaman. He had ordered the soldiers to retreat three times before most retreated toward Washington, D.C.

British leaders General Ross and Admiral Cochrane met with Barney and offered him a pardon for giving their soldiers a fight. Barney accepted and watched as British forces marched toward the Capitol. They were led by a group of formerly enslaved men freed by the British and called the “Colonial Marines.” Barney would die from this wound two years later.

The bullet was removed from his leg and is preserved today by the Daughters of American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C.

By four o’clock the battle was over and American forces were defeated. The British moved on to Washington D.C. By the end of the day, the Capitol, the President’s Mansion (White House), and many other public buildings were in flames.

After the Battle...

Around noon on August 25, a hurricane-force storm extinguished the flames in the city. With no sign of support from British forces on the Patomac River and the mission accomplished, leaders called for retreat — back to the Patuxent River. At dusk, troops quietly withdrew to Bladensburg to gather their dead and wounded. Soldiers were miserable in sweating August temperatures. They were tired, ill, and wounded. Troops were so exhausted that many died on the four-day march back.

Along the way, a few British stragglers were arrested by a group of citizens in Upper Marlboro and taken to a nearby jail. When word reached the British commanders, they immediately called for the arrest of Dr. William Beanes, a well respected doctor and town elder for exchange. Georgetown lawyer, Francis Scott Key, and U.S. Agent for Prisoner Exchange, John S. Skinner, were sent to arrange for Beanes’ release.

They brought with them letters from British troops who testified as to the compassion that was received in Bladensburg. Key and Skinner rode out to the British fleet, now located in Baltimore Harbor.

Onboard the British vessel, Key and Skinner were detained until the Battle of Baltimore — the Defense of Fort McHenry — was finished. From this vantage point, Key would watch the “bombs bursting in air” and found the next morning that “the flag was still there.” His recent experience with “rockets red glare” in Bladensburg and this battle would inspire his writing of the poem that would become the United States of America’s national anthem, The Star Spangled Banner.

...the militia ran like sheep chased by dogs.

– Flotillaman Charles Ball, 1837

On the fourth day, a hurricane-force storm extinguished the flames in the city. With no sign of support from British forces on the Patomac River and the mission accomplished, leaders called for retreat — back to the Patuxent River. At dusk, troops quietly withdrew to Bladensburg to gather their dead and wounded. Soldiers were miserable in sweating August temperatures. They were tired, ill, and wounded. Troops were so exhausted that many died on the four-day march back.

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Explore the Remains of a Battlefield

The Battle of Bladensburg was fought in August 1814 on a large, open field and orchard, just south of the town of Bladensburg. Today, that field has become the communities of Cottage City and Colmar Manor. The primary fighting was on the Washington to Baltimore Turnpike, now Bladensburg Road or Alternate US Route 1. The only remaining witness to the history are the historic homes in the Town of Bladensburg. No battlefield has been preserved and only highly altered views remain.

To experience the remaining battlefield and views, start at Bladensburg Waterfront Park (4601 Annapolis Road, Bladensburg, MD) where the Third Line stood under Barney's command at the top of the hill. The historic mausoleum and Little Chapel are approximately where charging British forces overwhelmed the line. The view from this point gives a wide sweep over the former battlefield.

Finish at the Undaunted Monument (Upshur Street at Baltimore Avenue, Bladensburg MD — next to Peace Cross), dedicated in 2014 to those who fought in the Battle of Bladensburg. The historic homes (George Washington House, Magruder House, and Bostwick House) in Bladensburg are private and only open for special events. All may be viewed from the exterior.

Battles of the War of 1812

BATTLE OF BLADENBURG, MD
AUGUST 24, 1814

12:00 PM: After several attempts to cross the Eastern Branch bridge, Col. Thornton's 1st Brigade finally breaches the bridge twice by smaller force fords the river and drives the First American Line from the field.

12:45 PM: Thornton's 1st Brigade attacks and routs the Second American Line. His brigade then moves into position to assault the right flank of the Third American Line.

2:00 PM: Thornton's 1st Brigade now under the command of Gen. Ross, attacks Commodore Barney's position twice before shifting to attack the American right flank with success driving the Americans back to Washington.

3:30 PM: Thornton's 1st Brigade crosses Tunnell's Bridge to attack Kramer.

5:30 PM: After several attempts to cross the Eastern Branch bridge, Col. Thornton's 1st Brigade finally breaches the bridge twice by smaller force fords the river and drives the First American Line from the field.

3:00 PM: On the way to the battlefield, Gen. Ross receives intelligence that the British forces under Maj. Gen. Robert Ross arrived in Bladensburg from Upper Marlboro.

2:30 PM: After the Second American Line retreats from the field, Bowies's 2nd Brigade moves along the Georgetown Pike to engage the left flank of the Third American Line.

1:30 PM: Gen. Winder orders the Third American Line to retreat. Gen. Winder's left flank under Smith and Scott receive the order and fall back to Washington.

1:00 PM: After the Second American retreats from the field, Bowies's 2nd Brigade moves along the Georgetown Pike to engage the left flank of the Third American Line.

MILESTONE MILESTONES HERITAGE CENTER

418 Gallatin Street, Hyattsville, MD

One block from the Rhode Island Avenue Trolley Trail and located in the Pyramid Atlantic Arts Center

Start your exploration of the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area at the Maryland Milestones Heritage Center! With brochures, exhibits, and a rotating event schedule, the Heritage Center is a great starting place in historic Hyattsville. Our partners work to preserve and promote the history, art, culture, and natural resources of northern Prince George’s County, Maryland, located just outside Washington, D.C. With a wide variety of historic sites, art centers, trails and rivers, and nineteen participating local governments, the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area is a unique experience for visitors and residents. Our participating communities in Maryland are:

- Beltsville
- Berwyn Heights
- Bladensburg
- Bowie
- Brentwood
- Cheverly
- College Park
- Colmar Manor
- Cottage City
- Edmonston
- Glenn Dale
- Greenbelt
- Hansville
- Laurel
- Mount Rainier
- North Brentwood
- Riverdale Park
- University Park
- Prince George’s County