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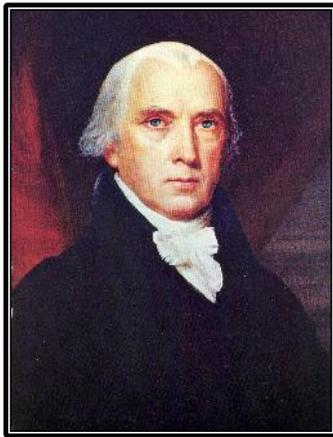
The War of 1812 and Essex County

By Robert Alexander Armour

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

Installment One: The War of 1812 – An Overview

The War of 1812 is America's forgotten war. As President James Madison put it, however, the war allowed the new United States to define its "destiny...to be a great, a flourishing, and a powerful nation." Some events have risen to the level of national legend: the burning of the nation's capital; Dolly Madison rescuing Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington; the flag over Fort McHenry emerging in dawn's early light; Old Ironsides and "Don't give up the ship"; Andrew Jackson and his frontier men defending New Orleans. The details of war itself are generally little remembered, however.



President James Madison
White House Portrait Collection

To the men killed or wounded and to their wives and children, this was no insignificant war.

To the women who saw their homes burned and to the merchants who found their merchandises plundered, this was no trivial hostility. In 1814, the town of Tappahannock was a village in a remote part of Virginia, but to its people who evacuated in face of a British cannonade, seeing their town burned and pillaged, it was personal.

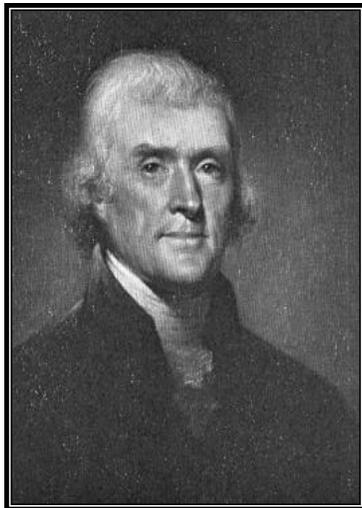
In the years following the end of the American Revolution, tensions between the fledgling nation and its mother country remained heightened. The British stubbornly claimed their right to stop all ships at sea—including American commercial merchantmen and naval vessels—and take any seamen they suspected were British subjects. Conditions aboard British ships of war were terrible. Low pay, harsh officers, long hours, and the always-constant potential for painful death led to frequent desertion. In order to resupply their navy, the British began stopping American ships and "impressing" sailors into British service. American resentment ran high and reached a peak in 1807.

The *USS Chesapeake*, a frigate ordered to the Mediterranean for action against the Barbary

pirates, left Norfolk and sailed through the Virginia Capes into the open sea totally unprepared for war. Hastily loaded supplies for a long voyage were not stowed but stacked on deck. Cannons were not prepared for action, and the crew was untrained in their use. Several of its crew had recently deserted from British ships, and the *HMS Leopard* lay just in international waters with orders to stop the *Chesapeake* and reclaim the seamen. In the ensuing action on June 22, 1807, the *Leopard* fired on the American vessel, which was unable to defend itself due to its lack of preparation. The *Chesapeake* struck its flag after suffering severe damage, as well as the deaths of three crewmembers and wounds to eighteen more. The British boarded the *Chesapeake* and impressed four sailors. The American public was outraged and humiliated, and the war hawks demanded retribution. The citizens of Tidewater Virginia were especially agitated. In Essex County, local leaders met to declare their outrage. Colonial William Waring chaired a meeting which led to the formation of a resolution committee with names that still echo across the county: James Gamett,



Chesapeake and Leopard
Wikipedia



President Thomas Jefferson
White House Portrait Collection.

Taliaferro Hunter, Archibald Ritchie, Newman Brockenbrough, James Hunter, James Webb, Andrew Monroe, Thomas Pitts, James Sale, Sthreshly Rennolds, and Thomas Brockenbrough. Their resolution named the attack on the *Chesapeake* "cowardly" and "murder" and called it "the most outrageous violation of right, that has ever been committed on us." Fully indignant at the affront, the committee

stopped short of requesting a declaration of war, but they did demand a British "atonement," which of course was never forthcoming.

In Richmond the rally was larger and more active. Led by Essex natives Thomas Ritchie, Spenser Roane, and John Brockenbrough, the citizens sent a militia unit hurrying off to Norfolk to engage the enemy, only to find that the British fleet had sailed.

President Jefferson's cabinet prepared to defend the new nation, but more moderate voices prevailed. Jefferson resorted to diplomacy and the troubled waters calmed a bit. Nevertheless, a storm was just over the horizon and the issue of impressment was unresolved.

Relations in the western territory were no better. As Americans looked to grow into the newly purchased Louisiana Purchase territory, the British were apprehensive of American expansionist dreams and encouraged Indians, as their surrogates, to harass frontier settlers. The Indians themselves were fearful and resentful of expansion into their traditional lands, and tribes began to unite under the leadership of famed chief Tecumseh. When William Henry Harrison led his army into Indiana Territory, the Indians attacked, November 7, 1811. The American victory here at the Battle of Tippecanoe drove the surviving Indians firmly into the British camp.

When Madison called for Congress to declare war, he gave three justifications: he charged that the British impressed American seamen, interfered with American trade, and incited Indians to harass the American frontier. America was woefully under prepared for war, with few war ships to take on the greatest fleet in the world, only a few thousand regular army soldiers, and a militia poorly trained and armed. Top officers were too often political appointees, rather than experienced military men. Moreover, Madison was no wartime commander-in-chief. The saving grace was that England was involved in a war with Napoleon and rather saw the American conflict as a flea biting its behind.

The American solution to this sad state of unpreparedness was to invade Canada, an appealing target for American expansionist dreams. The ambition reminds one of a small terrier chasing a large car; what is it going to do with it if it catches it? Nevertheless, the invasion was soon underway. Untrained and under supplied troops marched into Canadian territory and soon met disaster, largely due to incompetent leadership.

The news from the high seas was more encouraging. Victories by the *USS Constitution* and the *USS United States* gave the people on shore something to cheer about. The British navy, unaccustomed to losing ships to an upstart country, would revenge these affronts in a manner that would cause suffering along the Chesapeake Bay and her rivers.

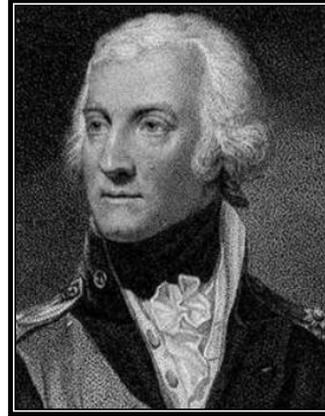
Back on land in 1813, the U. S. army made modest advances. The American attack on York (later renamed Toronto) ultimately affected Essex County. York, the capital of Upper Canada, had no military importance. The Americans overran the light defenses, and, when discipline failed, sacked and burned the city. By the code of military behavior of the day, such treatment of a tactically unimportant town was dishonorable. As a consequence, Admiral Sir John B. Warren, British naval commander of all of North America and the Caribbean, ordered Rear Admiral George Cockburn, his second in command, to the Chesapeake Bay. Cockburn (pronounced "Coburn") arrived on March 3, 1813, and immediately began a series of raids along the Maryland and Virginia shores. Later, when Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane replaced Warren the next January, he renewed Admiral Cockburn's orders "to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as you may find assailable." Eventually, Tappahannock became one of these towns.

Victories at Fort George in New York and on Lake Erie soon lifted American spirits. Master Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry in September 1813 successfully engaged the British fleet trying to resupply the British garrison in Detroit. He sailed on the *USS Lawrence* under a battle flag with the motto "Don't give up the ship," in honor of his friend Captain James Lawrence who had lost his life on the *Chesapeake* only three months earlier.

Other land engagements in 1813 left the Americans with mixed results. The most important event as far as the Chesapeake Bay was concerned happened in the Canadian town of Newark. In a blinding snowstorm and freezing temperatures, the Americans evicted some four

hundred women and children before torching the village. This added to the British conviction of American vulgarity. Cities—and towns—to the south would soon suffer retribution.

In early spring 1814, having defeated Napoleon at Leipzig, Britain committed more troops and ships

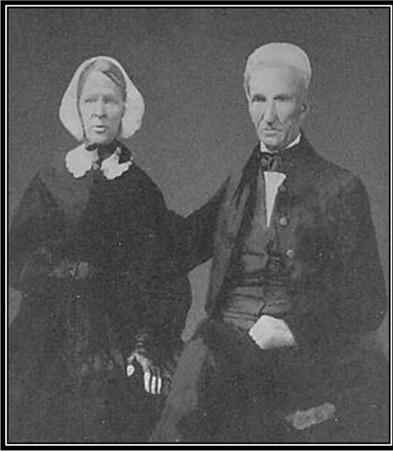


Admiral Sir John B. Warren
Wikipedia

to the pesky war in North America. On assuming command, Vice Admiral Cochrane promised to give the upstarts "a complete dubbing." Canadian Governor-General Sir George Prevost, in retaliation for American raids on his territory, called on Cochrane to punish the Americans to such a degree that they would in the future refrain from such invasions. Cochrane concentrated his forces on the Chesapeake Bay area as it contained both Washington and Baltimore and harbored the Americans' largest privateer fleet. Cockburn was so effective in fulfilling his orders that Americans offered a \$100 reward for his head, but it was never collected.

Cockburn established his fleet's base on Tangier Island where he could lead attacks on the cities and deal with nuisance attacks from the undermanned American naval vessels on the Chesapeake. Major General Robert Ross, one of Lord Wellington's most respected army officers, joined him. Ross's army marched toward Washington, with minimal opposition from the Americans. Little then stood between Ross, Cockburn, and the nations' capital. The British burned the city and claimed that their act was retaliation for American plundering in Canada. The British marched out, boarded their ships, and began planning an invasion of Baltimore.

In September 1814, Cockburn and Ross attacked Baltimore. The defenders of the city famously thwarted the British cannonade, killed



Thomas and Isabella Foushee Ritchie
Essex County Museum & Historical Society
Collection.

Ross, and kept their flag flying high over Fort McHenry. The British retreated down the bay in anger, and Cockburn vowed to vent his frustrations on the towns along the shores of the bay and its rivers.

The main British fleet left the Chesapeake

Bay and sailed to the Gulf of Mexico in preparation for invading the Mississippi River and New Orleans. They left a small flotilla to pursue shipping in the bay and to attack its towns and farms. By November, the British navy found its way into the Rappahannock.

Diplomats, however, were at work in Europe. On December 24, 1814, representatives of both belligerents signed the Treaty of Ghent. It essentially established the status quo; neither side gained or lost much in the negotiations. Native Americans, on the other hand, found that their lands had been opened for further expansion of the United States.

The famous Battle of New Orleans took place after the treaty was signed but before word reached these shores. The victory of Andrew Jackson's volunteers—now celebrated in legend and song—became a source of pride for the emerging nation.

The Ritchies of Tappahannock

Most of the war was fought miles from Essex County, but its impact on the people of the area can be measured through the lives of one of the county's most prominent families. No family better exemplified Virginia's contribution to the War of 1812 than the Ritchies. One Ritchie son made the ultimate sacrifice for his country, another became a nationally respected journalistic voice for

American nationalism, and a third led the county militia. Their father, Archibald Ritchie, Sr. had emigrated early in the 18th century to establish a mercantile business in the village of Tappahannock. He married Mary Roane and fathered four sons and three daughters.

Like many Scottish merchants in colonial Virginia, Archibald depended on trade with Great Britain, and he incurred the animosity of some of Virginia's rabid nationalists—such as Richard Henry Lee—when he was slow to support the call for American independence. But when war was decided upon, he fell in line and became a member of the Essex Committee for Public Safety. At his death in 1784, he left his widow with a large family and substantial wealth.

One son, Captain John Ritchie, commanding an artillery company, died at the battle of Lundy's Lane on July 25, 1814, near Niagara Falls. His



Battle of Lundy's Lane
Wikipedia

commanding officer, Major Jacob Hindman, later wrote of John's heroism: "He behaved nobly and...his gallantry would not permit him to quit the field whilst he could ride. He received a severe wound in the early part of the action, but my earnest solicitations for him to retire, had no effect. In two hours afterwards, "having lost all his men at his piece," his ammunition-wagon blown up, he received his mortal wound, and soon expired." In 1827 Virginia's governor William B. Giles presented a sword to John's family as a token of his gallantry in battle.

Son Thomas became the best known of the brothers. He founded a newspaper in Richmond, the **Enquirer** (later, the **Richmond Enquirer**) and

soon rose to prominence. In 1807, the attack of the *HMS Leopard* on the *USS Chesapeake* turned the young man into a war hawk. When the British bombarded the Americans on the open seas and impressed four seamen, it stirred American nationalism. As biographer Charles Henry Ambler wrote, "Richie deserted his young bride of a few weeks, turned the management of the **Enquirer** over to a friend, and shouldered his musket to fight with the "Republican Blues" in defense of his country...Ritchie [became] an insurgent and in favor of war as the only means of redress for the wrongs and indignities heaped upon us by Great Britain." He saw no action and his military career was short, but he found his role in the coming conflict as a journalist. Ambler said of him, "As editor of the **Enquirer**, Thomas Ritchie's energies were un-

tiring in efforts to arouse the valor of his countrymen, to encourage the soldiers under difficulties and dangers, to nerve and stimulate them to noble achievements and to laud and chronicle their deeds."

A third son, Archibald, Jr., led the Essex militia during the war. As lieutenant colonel, he commanded the 6th Virginia Regiment and played a major role during the invasion of Essex County in 1814. His role in the war will be discussed in the second installment of *The War of 1812 - The Essex Militia*, (ECMHS Bulletin (December 2012).

Given the family's role in the war, it is not surprising that during the raid on Tappahannock the British vandalized the Ritchie family burial vault.

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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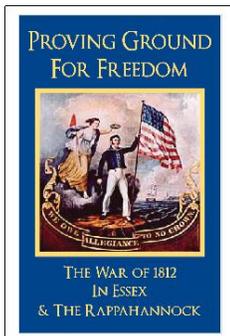
Fall Gala
September 29th

Saunders Wharf at Wheatland

4 pm to 7 pm

Music, great food, choice of beverages, and opportunities to bid on a wide variety of exciting adventures from the auction table

Look for more information on the ECMHS Website/Facebook/Blog or via E-mail blitz



Be sure to visit our War of 1812 Exhibit opening in the Carl D. Silver Gallery at the Essex County Museum and Historical Society on July 27, 2012. Find out facts you never knew about the conflict.

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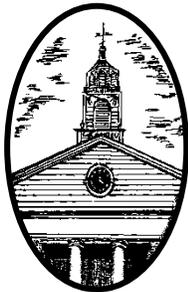
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