
Essex County Museum and Historical Society Bulletin



VOLUME 61

TAPPAHANNOCK, VIRGINIA

JANUARY 2014

The British Raid Essex County

December 2-4, 1814

By Robert Alexander Armour

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Author's Note: This is the fourth and final essay on the impact of the War of 1812 on the people of Essex County. Earlier essays have explored the significance of the Richie family of Tappahannock, the role of the county militia, and the British use of former slaves during the raid on Essex County. This final essay describes the British military excursion into the county just as the war was coming to a close. We are fortunate to have accounts of the raid from both American and British documents, which when pieced together, give a detailed picture of the action along the shores of the Rappahannock that December.

The author wishes to express gratitude to Carolyn Harris, the bulletin editor; to David Jett, curator of ECMHS; and to the board of the ECMHS for their support and assistance in this effort to commemorate this event in this history of our county.

On the 29th of November, 1814, a small flotilla of British ships under the command of Captain Robert Barrie of the Royal Navy entered the Rappahannock River and proceeded upriver toward Tappahannock. By the morning of December 2, the ships arrived offshore of the town and proceeded to shell it and later send troops ashore to plunder, vandalize, and burn the town. By the 4th they had done their worst and left to sail down toward the Chesapeake Bay. They stopped at Bowlers long enough to go ashore and burn property belonging to Captain Joseph Janney¹, a militia officer under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald Ritchie. The British harassed Essex County for three days, two longer than they infamously spent burning the nation's capital the previous August.

Causes of British Anger

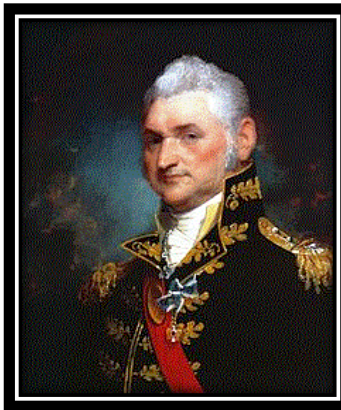
War is not a time for the "niceties" of civilization, but what happened in Tappahannock in 1814 was triggered by acts of American cruelty committed a year earlier. The so-called "rules of war" hold that there are military actions that fall outside the civilized code of behavior – deploying poisonous gas, torturing captives in uniform, or planting land mines in civilian areas, for examples. In 1813 American violations of the generally understood rules of the day so outraged the British that they exacted brutal revenge.

There was at the time of this war an un-codified code of behavior that was widely understood, if not legalized by treaty. Brutality against civilians is generally accepted as a viola-

tion of the rules of war. Killing, torture, rape are easily identified as brutal, but sometime the violence is more insidious. Pillaging, for example, may cause no overt violence against civilians but can take from them their means of survival. If an army confiscates a farmer's livestock and burns his crops, he and his family may starve. Military leaders may justify brutality as wartime necessity, but even if true, that does not make such behavior palatable. Prior to the outbreak of the War of 1812, British troops had themselves committed atrocities which earned them a reputation for brutality. The ill treatment of both combatants and civilians during the Irish Rebellion of 1798, the actions of Colonel Banastre Tarleton ("Bloody Ban") during the American War for Independence,

and the rampage of British soldiers following the Battle of Badajoz in Spain (1812) were especially egregious. British brutality during the War of 1812, however, was first ignited by American actions.

In late April 1813, American forces, under the command of General Henry Dearborn, invaded the Canadian town of York (later named Toronto). York held no military importance even though it was the capi-



General Henry Dearborn
by Gilbert Stuart

tal of Upper Canada, and there was no strategic reason for attacking it.

¹ Various spelled Janney and Janey in records of the day.

Nevertheless, Dearborn, eager for some sort of victory on Canadian soil, attacked. A badly outnumbered British contingent defended the town. After the Americans drove the British off with significant loss of life on both sides, American troops were then unopposed, unled, and undisciplined.

Dearborn lost control of his men who began to rampage through the town, pillaging private homes, a church, the library, and some government buildings.

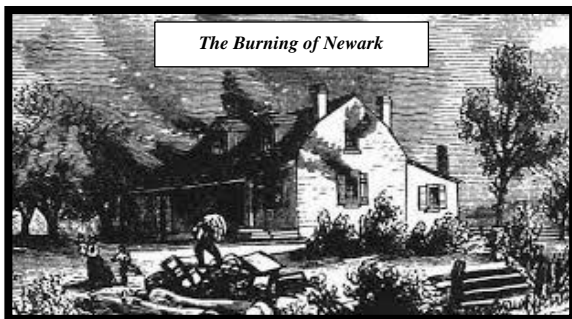


*Death of General Pike
Battle of York, April 1813.*

Dearborn ordered government and military buildings burned, as well as the private home of the British commander. When the Americans left, Dearborn took with him the parliament's mace and personal property of the British general. He was reprimanded by his superiors in Washington but the damage had been done.

It got worse. In December of the same year, American troops invaded the village of Newark just inside the Canadian border where the Niagara River spilled into Lake Ontario. The Americans attacked the undefended village in a blinding snowstorm. They forced the town's residents, including widows and small children, out into the freezing cold and burned the houses. One ill woman was carried out of her home on her bed and thrown into the snow where she watched her house burn along with her husband's valuable library. Ninety-eight buildings were burned and four hundred citizens fled the atrocity. The British would remember the events all the way to Washington and Tappahannock the following year.

The British Governor-General of Canada, Sir George Prevost, became distraught with anger over the treatment of his civilians and ordered Admiral Alexander Cochrane – now Commander-in-Chief of the North American station of the British military to exact retribution. Cochrane, in turn,



on 18 July 1814 issued a proclamation ordering his subordinates to punish America for its transgressions:

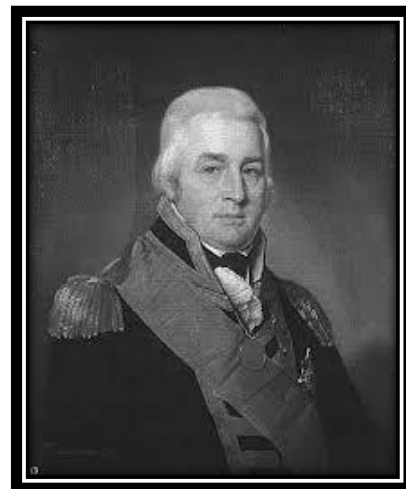
...It appears that the American troops in Upper Canada have committed the most wanton and unjustifiable outrages on the undefending inhabitants, by burning their mills and houses, and by a general Devastation of private property. And whereas, his Excellency [Prevost] has requested that in order to deter the enemy from the

repetition of similar outrages I would assist in inflicting measures of retaliation.

You [British navel commanders] are hereby required and directed to destroy, and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as you may find assailable. You will hold strictly in view the conduct of the American army, towards his majesty's unoffending subjects, (and you will spare merely the lives of the unarmed inhabitants of the United States). For only by carrying this retributory justice into the country of our enemy can we hope to make him sensible of the impolicy, as well as the inhumanity of the system he has adopted.

You will take every opportunity of explaining to the people, how much I lament the necessity of following the rigorous example of the commanders of the American forces.

Cochrane's commanders in the Chesapeake Bay were quick to follow his orders. They had already caused much destruction but with this proclamation, they intensified their efforts. Leaving their headquarters on Tangier Island, they worked their way up the bay, eventually burning the nation's capital. Then, retreating from the failed attempt to sack Baltimore, they sailed down the bay, raiding the villages along the Potomac



Admiral Alexander Cochrane

and finally finding their way to the Rappahannock. By one count, the British had 63 encounters with the Americans between the time of Cochrane's proclamation and the raid on Tappahannock in early December.

We should not overly simplify the causes of the British brutality on the towns of the Chesapeake Bay, for there were other reasons for it. The British remained horrified by the American practice of slavery and sought ways to express their outrage. General Sir Charles James Napier defended the British practice of brutality because people holding slaves should expect no less.

And finally, we should acknowledge the character of the British soldiers. They were recruited from the lower classes and accustomed to rough living. Many were criminals who avoided jail by enlisting, and nearly all were drunks. The Duke of Wellington famously wrote of them, "We have in the service the scum of the earth as common soldiers." Elsewhere he wrote about the British men under his command on the Continent, "I really believe that more plunder and outrages have been committed by this army than by any other that ever was in the field." General Napier described the "shameless rapacity, brutal intemperance, savage lusts, cruelty and murder..." that characterized the British troops during the Battle of Badajoz.

The British Come to Essex County

This raid is well documented by those who were there.² The American description is mainly told in official reports by Archibald Ritchie and Brigadier General John Hartwell Cocke and in congressional testimony by Joseph Janney and others. The British point of view comes from a lengthy after-action report by Captain Barrie to his commander, Rear Admiral George Cockburn. The bulk of the British fleet under Cochrane had left the Chesapeake on the way to blockade New Orleans, but left Cockburn in the bay to harass the citizens of the bay area. The London Times had spelled out the British attitude: "The southern states..., as they have most cordially embraced the mischievous policies of the President [Madison], ought to receive their richly merited reward." It fell to Barrie to deliver the "reward" to the Northern Neck and the Middle Peninsula. As he explained his mission, "my chief object in the Expedition, was, to annoy the Enemy by obliging him to reassemble his Militia, and by landing in different parts of the River, keep his Troops constantly on the alert."

Captain Barrie sailed his flotilla up the river with light winds until December 2. Several of his ships ran aground owing to the British lack of knowledge of the river bottom and were slow to come up to the town, but his raid progressed nevertheless. He reported to Cockburn:

...We observed a considerable body of Troops drawn out With their Field Pieces; as the Schooners could not make any progress against the Tide, I anchored them and proceeded with the Boats abreast of the Town, and when within Grape Shot commenced our Fire, which the Enemy did not return and observing them abandoning the Town, I directed Lieutenant Colonel Malcolm to land with the Dragon, Menelaus, and Havannah's Marines; before this was effected, the Inhabitants with the exception of two had entirely deserted the Town, and removed all their effects, except about forty Hogsheads of Tobacco and some Flour.

The Enemy in his haste to abandon the Town left behind him a Stand of Colours, several Muskets, Bayonets, and a quantity of Ammunition and Camp Equipage.

Once the full complement of British ships arrived, Barrie sent more men ashore, including Royal Marines – the former slaves trained by the British on Tangier Island and inserted into their army:³

...About one hundred and fifty of the Royal Marines were landed in consequence of the Enemy, being insight drawn up on a Hill, about a Mile and a half above the Town, his Force appeared to consist of nine Companies of Foot, a few horse, and three Field Pieces. Lieutenant Moore of the Royal Marine Artillery was advanced with the Rockets and two of them being thrown with great judgment; [we] fell among the Enemy who soon retreated into the Wood behind the Hill. Wishing to entice him to attack us in the Town, I caused to be set on fire the Custom House and a Jail, but as he evinced no disposition to quit his fastness, I embarked the Troops at Sunset⁴, and at daylight on the 3rd. I again landed and completed

Shipping the Flour and Tobacco; in the course of the day, a second Jail and the Court House was consumed without molestation from the Enemy though he frequently shewed himself with increased Force.

"Having sufficiently alarmed this part of the State," Barrie sailed downriver on the 4th but not before mounting a small raid on Bowlers.

But why Tappahannock? This like York and Newark is a town with no special military significance, but the British inflicted severe damage anyway. The reasons are never exactly stated, but there is some evidence of the motivations. Tappahannock was the only town of any size between Urbana (which the British had already raided) and Fredericksburg (which was too far up river). It had an important wharf holding valuable hogsheads of tobacco. The local militia, thinking that the British had retired for the winter, themselves retired to their homes; the British wanted to harass them and force them out into the cold. Moreover, perhaps most speculatively, the British may have wanted to exert a measure of revenge on the Ritchie family. One Ritchie brother, John, died a hero's death at the Battle of Lundy's Lane, a second was the commander of the Essex militia, and a third, Thomas, was a well-known newspaperman who was fervent in his support of the American cause in the war.⁵ Thomas was relentless in his opposition to the British. Whatever the reason, the British caused the family great anguish during their stay in town.

The American version of the story begins with Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Ritchie, in command of the Essex militia. In a report dated December 1⁶, he wrote an after-action report for Governor Wilson Cary Nicholas, who by chance had just taken office that day. Ritchie says that he had risen from his sick bed on hearing that the British were coming up river in strength. He issued a call for the militia to assemble; but fearing they were outnumbered, he ordered the artillery pieces and ammunition removed from the town. The first difficulty was finding horses to pull the equipment. Then when he tried to return one of the pieces to shell the enemy, he could not find enough men to do the job. He found that only eight artillerymen had arrived and only thirty infantry and sixteen cavalrymen had responded to the call to assemble.

He explained to the governor his next action and began to describe the destruction of Tappahannock:

With this force I deemed it too prodigal of the lives of my valuable officers and men to contend with the Enemy then advancing upon us. The Troops remained in Town until the Enemy had fired many cannon, one of which struck the easternmost part of Dr. Brokenbrough's large House; some struck in the Lots, and some passed over. We then retired, carrying with us the Field-piece to the range of hills one and a-half miles from Town, on the Fredericksburg road. Here I left them just before sunset, with orders to retire about 3 miles to procure barracks and refreshments.

As soon as the Americans evacuated, the British took possession of the town. Americans who got close enough to see what was going on estimated that the enemy brought some five hundred men ashore. Ritchie appealed to the commanders

² These texts are slightly edited to assist in modern reading.

³ Please see the essay in the summer, 2013, issue of this *Bulletin* for a full examination of the role of the Royal Marines in the war.

⁴ Barrie withdrew his troops from the town and boarded them on his ships for the night. They returned to Tappahannock the next morning.

⁵ Please see the first of these essays in the winter of 2012 for a history of the roles of the Ritchie family during the war.

⁶ Internal evidence suggests that he began his report on this date but did not immediately finish it.

of the militia units in King and Queen and Caroline counties for aid, but help was slow to come. Ritchie assured the governor that his men were eager to take up the fight once their numbers would justify it.

Ritchie, whose family had long resided in Tappahannock, personally felt deeply the violation of the town and the damage done to personal property:

I am truly sorry to state the Inhabitants of the Town have lost much, owing to the weather favoring the Enemy so much and operating so unfavorably on them together with the short time given to remove. All have brought out some things, but Col. Banks will suffer particularly, having removed but few of a great many. With his store and most of his property, Mr. Blake merchant remained in Town. How he will fare time will develop. To what few officers and men were in Town last night I am much indebted for the preservation of all the artillery and ammunition. Had it been permitted to remain until the morning, all would have been lost, as draught horses could not be procured.

He adds that a local tannery just outside town was blown up and that he was informed that part – or perhaps all – of the



*The Burning of the Courthouse
in Tappahannock*

town had been set to fire that night. In addition, as we have seen, the British burned two jails, the custom house, and the court house (later Beale Memorial Baptist Church and now a county building).

Brigadier General Cocke, commander of Virginia's

Fourth Militia Brigade, picks up the story. On hearing of the raid on Tappahannock, he set out with a detachment of his brigade to confront the British, only to discover that they had set sail. He informed the governor on December 4 of his frustration of trying to encounter the enemy who were sailing toward the bay with a good wind: "This rapid and unlooked for movement has baffled all my schemes." He too estimated the number of invading troops at about five hundred, but he believed that Barrie had others on his ships that did not come ashore. He commented that the British included one hundred and fifty African-American troops trained on Tangier Island.

General Cocke also described the destruction in the town:

The plundering of the enemy has been confined to the river shores, of inconsiderable amount, and on a few plantations. Indeed his whole course has been marked with the most circumspect caution and evident alarm. He has never trusted himself on land a single night. An officer remarked here, that their object was to harass the militia. --- That they should beat about the rivers for a week of two longer, and then go into winter-quarters. There has been much ton destruction of private property here, in breaking windows, and furniture --- and one deed of damnation has been performed which outdoes all their former atrocities. The Family-Vault of the Ritchies was broken open and coffins searched. I have seen the shocking spectacle.

Thomas Ritchie printed Cocke's report in *The Enquirer* and there he expressed the family's anguish over the desecration of the vault: "The editor of this paper was the youngest

son of the venerable pair, whose ashes there reposed amidst those of their children. May curses light upon the Barbarians who have disturbed those ashes."

Cocke chased Barrie's flotilla down river but was unable to catch up. The British landed on the opposite shore and made a short raid into the Northern Neck, engaging the American militia at Farnham Church⁷, and then sailed toward the bay. On the way, Barrie left a barge to harass the settlement at Bowlers.

The British Stop at Bowlers

Bowlers Wharf – just called Bowlers in 19th century records – lies some ten miles or so down river from Tappahannock at the eastern end of Essex County. At the time of the War of 1812 it was the home of Captain Joseph Janney. Janney served under Lieutenant Colonel Ritchie and was assigned to lead a company of militia to defend Bowlers. He owned a home there, as well as two granaries, a store house, and various other properties. The story of his encounter with the British is told in U.S. Congressional Records collected when he filed for restitution for damages to his property during this raid.

Janney's orders instructed him to watch the enemy's movements on the river, to protect the local farms from pillaging, and to prevent slaves from escaping to the British. He led his company to the settlement, where they barracked in his buildings. The men slept in the dwelling house, store buildings and cabins, where they stockpiled their weapons, ammunition, and personal belongings. On Sunday, December 4 they encountered the British. That afternoon, realizing that the enemy held superior force, the company abandoned the farm and watched the enemy burn the house and buildings.

One Richard Barnes, presumably of Essex County, reported to Congress that while traveling in the Northern Neck, he encountered a Lieutenant Anson of the British Navy. Anson strongly advocated the British use of brutality in pursuit of the militia. He argued that the outrages and burnings of villages committed by his compatriots were justified by American outrages on the Canadian frontier. In particular reference to Janney's property, he said that the place was burned because it had been used as a barrack for troops.

The men who filed depositions before Congress made a strong argument that Janney had lost property while in the service of his country, but his claim was denied. No explanation was given, but the report stated that the petitioner was found to have no claim against the United States. Janney was not in the regular U.S. army, and it seems that his claim was not granted because he served in the Essex militia, not the federal forces.

The War Ends

On his way out of the Rappahannock, Barrie made his raid on Farnham Church and another at Jones Point. Within a week, the British navy had left Tangier Island. On December

⁷ Stuart L. Butler has given an excellent account of the British harassment of the Northern Neck in "Captain Barrie's Last Raid," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, December 2004, pages 6441-6452.

24 diplomats in Europe signed the Treaty of Ghent, but of course it took a while for the news to reach America. In the meantime, the navy made some nuisance raids in the Chesapeake and both armies lined up against each other at New Orleans. This makes the raids on Tappahannock and Farnham the last significant engagements prior to the official ending of the war.

Why the War of 1812 Mattered

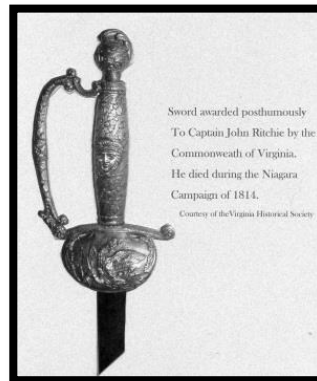
Called the “forgotten war,” the War of 1812 is not much studied in schools. As these things go, it was a small war sandwiched between the two great confrontations that shaped American character for generations, but it did play a part in developing the American sense of nationhood. Many Americans most likely would have trouble remembering which war spawned “The Star Spangled Banner,” or could name the president during this war. It cost lives and displaced homeowners but had few memorable battles. When the peace treaty was signed, it hardly resolved any of the issues that precipitated the war. Diplomatically nothing changed. So, why does this war matter?

To answer this question, it is fitting to conclude this series of essays with thoughts on the significance of the war. In so far as possible, we should answer this question through the prism of the raid on Essex County.

- Some have called the War of 1812 America’s second war of independence. The Revolutionary War had established American independence from Great Britain, but the creation of a new nation was still a work in progress well into the 19th century. The War of 1812 tested America’s constitutional strength and its resolve to take its place alongside the powers of Europe. Even though the war was at times badly managed and poorly fought, the American forces on land and sea held off the greatest army and navy in the world. From Niagara in New York State to White House (the battle site in Virginia) and to Tappahannock and Bowlers, the men of Essex County answered the call to defend their land. Additionally, victories at Baltimore and New Orleans especially did much for American pride.
- This war exposed the advantages and disadvantages of a citizen army – the militia. Many of the leaders at the time of the creation of the constitutional government feared the power of a standing army. A regular army evoked reminders of past abuse, and so the founders of the American government established the militia. It was an army of non-professional soldiers – citizens who served only when called to defend their homes and property. They were under the command of their states – not the U.S. government – and their officers appointed locally. When protecting their own villages and farms, the militia often fought well; but by in large, they were poorly trained, badly equipped, and wretchedly led. They were

often outnumbered by professional British soldiers, who were better trained and supplied. The raid on Tappahannock serves as an example. Though there was no indication of a lack of leadership, the Essex militia was no match for the invaders. The militia bravely stayed in town until the last minute, when a superior force caused them to retreat to the nearby countryside. They had no power to stop the looting and firing of the town. The same story ensued at Bowlers. The weaknesses of this plan for defense became evident, but they were not fully corrected until the *Militia Act of 1903* when the National Guard was created.

- The war became a bump in the road leading to the elimination of slavery. From the writing of the Constitution until the Civil War, numerous episodes exposed festering wounds that slavery brought to this new country. The British engaged in the War of 1812 in part because of their revulsion over slavery. British General Sir Charles James Napier expressed the attitude: “. . . but from a people holding millions of their fellow-beings in the most horrible slavers, while they prate and vaunt of liberty until all men turn in loathing from the sickening folly, what can be expected?” He goes on to describe the Americans of 1812 as cursed by “black slavery which clings to them, adding the most horrible ferocity to the peculiar baseness of their mercantile spirit, and rendering their republican vanity ridiculous.” As we have seen, the British endeavored to free slaves in Virginia wherever they raided, and were successful in releasing hundreds from their masters. Many of these were trained and equipped for army service, and some 150 freed slaves participated in the raid on Tappahannock. This episode was a minor event in the story of slavery, but it does illustrate that the march toward emancipation was inexorable and inevitable.



Sword awarded posthumously
To Captain John Ritchie by the
Commonwealth of Virginia.
He died during the Niagara
Campaign of 1814.
Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society

However much we reflect on these broad analyses of the war, the true significances of the war lie in its impact on the people of Essex County. The men who fought throughout the Northern Neck and Essex County paid a personal price. Their families and farms suffered in their absences. The people whose homes and businesses were raided and burned knew that the war had cost them dearly. And Captain

John Ritchie, killed at the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, knew the ultimate meaning of war.

About the Author

Bob Armour is a valued contributor to the ECMHS Bulletin. 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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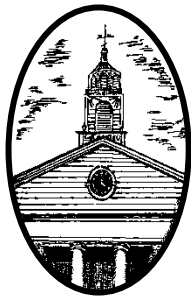
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