

# Another Look at the Battle of St. Michaels

by Norman H.  
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**E**arly on the morning of 10 August 1813, British forces entered the Miles River in eleven small boats. They attacked an American battery on Parrott's Point at the mouth of St. Michaels harbor. After a brief exchange of fire, the British overran the battery, and its defenders retreated to the town. The British returned to their boats, fired on the town for a time,

Admiral George Cockburn, who commanded the British fleet in the Chesapeake Bay during most of the War of 1812, dispatched boats and marines to wipe out the St. Michaels battery.



then moved back down the river to the larger vessels from which they had come.

This engagement, one small incident in the War of 1812, has given rise to two intriguing legends: first, that the defenders of the town hung lanterns at the tops of tall buildings and trees and on the mastheads of ships in the harbor, fooling the British into firing their cannonballs above the town; second, that the British forces suffered as many as twenty-nine killed in the skirmish. How much basis in fact do these legends have?

**T**he British naval and marine forces in the Chesapeake Bay were under the overall command of Vice-Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren (1753-1822) who flew his flag in *San Domingo*, a 74-gun ship of the line. Immediately subordinate to Warren was Rear-Admiral George Cockburn (1772-1853), best known to Americans as the man who burned the nation's capital in 1814. Cockburn's ship, also 74 guns, was *Sceptre*. Warren's fleet contained another 74-gun ship, *Marlborough*, and the brig-sloop *Conflict*, 14 guns, commanded by Henry Loraine Baker. Although the British fleet had many other ships in the bay, these were the only ones connected with the battle at St. Michaels.

The Americans had no naval force to defend the villages along the bay. St. Michaels had to

depend on militia units. The senior commander was Brigadier-General Perry Benson (1757-1827). Lieutenant William Dodson (1786-1833) commanded the four-gun battery at Parrott's Point. Other batteries were located at the base of the harbor in the town itself. Lieutenant John Graham commanded two guns on shipwright Impy Dawson's wharf; Captain Clement Vickers commanded two on Mill Point. A large number of other militia units, both foot and horse and numbering almost 500 men, were in the area but did not directly participate in the fight at Parrott's Point. Detailed descriptions of preparations for defending the town, including the names of most, if not all, the militia units and their members can be found in other histories of the battle.<sup>1</sup>

In the weeks before the battle, Admiral Cockburn had been busy. He took up his command in *Sceptre* on 1 July at Hampton Roads. Later in July, in company with *Conflict*, he directed the capture of two American vessels at Ocracoke, North Carolina: the armed schooner *Atlas* and the privateer brig *Anaconda*. By 20 July Cockburn's ships in company with *San Domingo* were in the Potomac, and on 3 August *Sceptre* was anchored off Poplar Island. The next day boats were sent to take soundings in the channel between Poplar and Kent Islands. On the 5th and 6th the squadron sent two thousand troops ashore and seized the latter.<sup>2</sup>

On 8 August Cockburn received an order from Admiral Warren which began with the familiar phrase, "You are hereby required and directed...." The order stated:

...having received information that an Armed Vessel or Vessels are at present Stationed in St. Michaels River at the Mouth of which a small Battery is erected; You will direct the Commander of His Majesty's Sloop *Conflict* to proceed with the Boats of this ship [*San Domingo*], the *Sceptre* & *Marlborough* to that place in order to Capture and bring them out, or in the event of the impossibility of their being moved from the above River, to destroy them....<sup>3</sup>

Cockburn promptly issued two sets of orders: the first was to Captain Baker of *Conflict* to take under his command a division of boats from *Sceptre*, *Marlborough*, and *San Domingo* and sail up the St. Michaels River, as the Miles was then known, to capture or destroy the enemy's armed vessels "said to be in it" and to destroy the small battery "lately erected on some part of the Banks" of the river. Cockburn's second order was to Lieutenant James Puckinghorne of the *San Domingo*, who had been assigned to command the small boats: "You are hereby required and directed to take under your Orders the Boats named in the Margin...." proceed to *Conflict* and follow Baker's orders.<sup>4</sup> All of these orders are

Eleven British boats, some like this one at the 1814 battle of Fort Oswego, New York, attacked St. Michaels 10 August 1813.

By the Right Hon<sup>ble</sup> Sir John  
Borlase Warren Bart<sup>t</sup> & B. Admiral  
of the Blue Commander in Chief

You are hereby required and  
directed to place the Dockyard Schooner  
Ship in such a situation where any  
Private or Foreign vessels may be stationed  
near this part of Kent Islands, as  
the Commanding Officer of the Troops  
may see proper for the Supply of  
Provisions and protection of the Island.

And having received information  
that an armed Schooner or Frigate is at  
present stationed in St. Michaels  
River, at the Mouth of which a small  
Battery is erected; You will direct  
the Commander of His Majesty's Ship  
Conflict to proceed with the Boats  
of this Ship, the Scipiter & Marlborough  
to that place, in order to capture and bring  
them out, or in the event of the impossibility  
of their being moved from the above River  
to destroy them; And having so done  
You will immediately join me off the  
NW point of the aforesaid Islands;  
leaving the Marlborough here her  
Captain having received my Orders to  
remain at this end of the Island for  
its protection, as near as possible to  
where the Scipiter is now anchored.

Yours  
Commanding Officer of the Islands August 7<sup>th</sup> 1783.  
John Borlase Warren  
Admiral of the Blue

7 August orders  
from the  
British commander,  
Admiral Sir John  
Borlase Warren,  
requiring and  
directing  
Admiral Cockburn  
to capture or destroy  
armed vessels in the  
St. Michaels River.  
They make  
no mention  
of shipyards.

noteworthy for the absence of any reference to the town of St. Michaels or its shipyards.

The boats named in the margin consisted of the *San Domingo's* pinnace; two barges, a launch, a pinnace, and a cutter from *Sceptre*; and from *Marlborough* a barge, a yawl, a launch, and two cutters—eleven small vessels in all. These boats probably ranged from 18 to 34 feet in length. Most could be sailed, and all could be rowed with eight or ten oars each. They were probably armed with lightweight, heavy-caliber carronades which fired 12- or 18-pound shot.<sup>5</sup>

*Sceptre's* log records that "At 1 [PM] sent all Boats with those of the *San Domingo* and *Marlborough* (Armed) up St. Michaels River." The boats met *Conflict* at the southern end of Eastern Bay. On 9 August *Conflict* towed them north and into the river in preparation for the attack. That day *Sceptre's* log records that the weather was cloudy with moderate southerly breezes, and by 6 that evening rain was falling. All day working parties had been ashore on Kent Island digging wells, and three-and-a-half tons of water were brought out to the ship.

By most accounts, including General Benson's,<sup>6</sup> at about 4 in the morning of 10 August when it was still breezy and raining,<sup>7</sup> sailors and marines from the eleven boats under Lieutenant Puckinghorne's command landed near Parrott's Point and attacked the battery. They were met with a shot from one of the battery's cannons. The defenders fled; either the British or the Americans spiked the cannons, and the British withdrew to their boats from which they then fired at the town. The batteries at Dawson's Wharf and Mill Point under Lieutenant Graham and Captain Vickers fired back, possibly inflicting some damage but not sinking any boats. Nor did the British discover or destroy any armed vessels in the harbor.

By mid-morning the boats had returned to *Conflict*. *Sceptre's* log states, "At 1 [PM] Boats returned with those of the *Marlborough* and *San Domingo* having destroyed a Battery of 6 Guns—12 & 6 Pounds—2 Seamen wounded." Puckinghorne exaggerated the size of the American battery just as the Americans later exaggerated the death toll. The log also notes the receipt of a letter from Captain Baker enclosing one from Puckinghorne and the transmittal of both to Admiral Warren. Thus, the battle of St. Michaels

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a number of houses."*

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ended; it was duly reported up the chain of command, and neither *Sceptre's* log nor Cockburn's correspondence mentioned it again.

**W**e look first at the legend of the lanterns. Not one word about them appears in any contemporary account, including that of General Benson. In fact, Benson makes it clear in his official report that British fire did strike the town: "Some of the houses were perforated, but no injury to any human being."<sup>8</sup> All the contemporary newspaper accounts carried a similar refrain: In Baltimore, *Niles' Weekly Register* quoted a letter from St. Michaels:

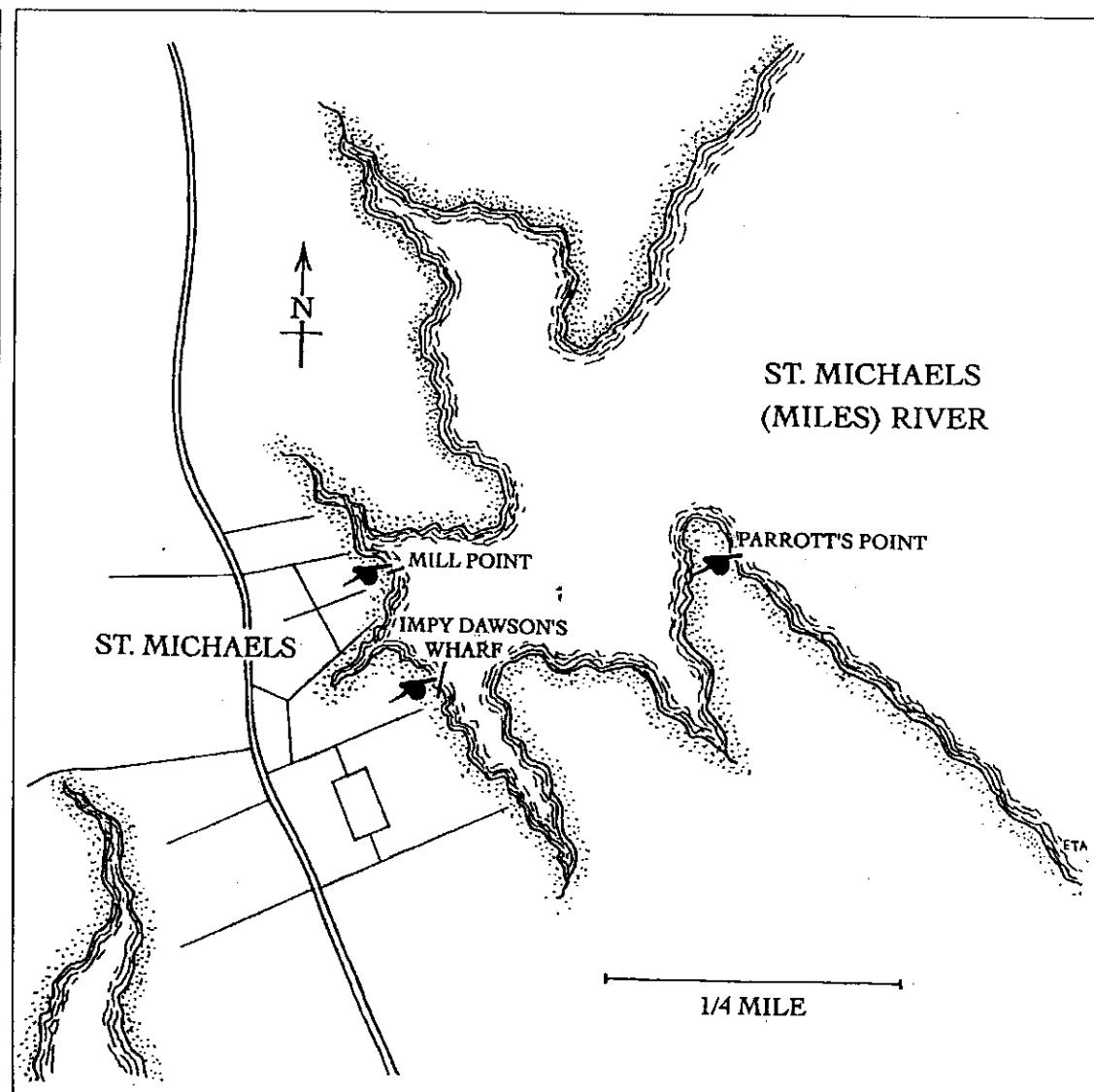
We were fortunate enough not to have a man hurt, although the grapeshot flew like hail in the town, and their balls passed through a number of houses.<sup>9</sup>

The *Maryland Gazette* remarked on the fact that no one was injured even though "several houses and enclosures were perforated in the midst of the [American] force drawn up," and "volleys of musketry sent their balls amongst them."<sup>10</sup> Whether lanterns had been hung in the trees or not, if grapeshot and musket balls were flying around town, the British must have known where it lay.

Other statements in the contemporary reports suggest that the attack on the town was in daylight. Having described the assault on Parrott's Point, the *Gazette* noted that the British then came under heavy fire from the batteries in the town and:

*It being now light, the Enemy abandoned the little Point battery, and the guns of the batteries in town were then directed against the barges alone, which after firing some time, began to retreat....<sup>11</sup>* [Emphasis added.]

Locations of  
the American  
batteries  
during the  
Battle of  
St. Michaels



The sun rose at St. Michaels on 10 August 1813 at 5:09 AM (at what we would now call Eastern Standard Time),<sup>12</sup> and even if it was raining and somewhat misty, by that time any ships in the harbor as well as portions of the town itself could have been seen in the morning twilight. In any case, if the Americans could see the British, the British could see the Americans as well.

Besides the absence of lanterns in the contemporary accounts, no mention is made of them by nineteenth-century historians. In his history of the War of 1812 published in the *Easton Gazette* in 1881, Dr. Samuel A. Harrison gave a detailed description of the battle which drew heavily on the recollection of participants but was silent

with respect to lanterns.<sup>13</sup> Nor were they mentioned in J. Thomas Scharf's 1879 account.<sup>14</sup>

Not until 1913 in anticipation of the centennial of the battle did the lantern story gain prominence. That year a booklet was prepared by St. Michaels historian Thomas H. Sewell who stated, "to deceive the enemy the citizens had placed lights in the tops of the tallest trees and houses...."<sup>15</sup>

The source for the lanterns is based on two accounts attached to Sewell's history that were written by Dr. C. Marion Dodson<sup>16</sup> and repeated in Gilbert Byron's 1971 booklet on the battle.<sup>17</sup> One is an eyewitness account of the battle told to the *Baltimore American* by Thomas Kemp (no

date is given) several years before his death in 1890.<sup>18</sup> Kemp, who was about 13 years old at the time of the battle, stated that "Lights were placed at night upon trees and masts of vessels."

The second account is from a note of Leonidas Dodson (1822-1889), son of Captain William Dodson who was in charge at Parrott's Point. Leonidas' reference to lights was contained in one sentence: "Happily the fire of the enemy went over the heads of the defenders due to the sagacity of Gen. Benson who had ordered lights placed at great elevations." As shown above, the enemy fire in fact "perforated" houses (Benson), and volleys of musketry sent balls among the American forces (*Maryland Gazette*). Leonidas' note has not been found.

Another son of William Dodson, Robert (1808-1883)<sup>19</sup>, also left an account of the battle, which he was old enough to remember, but it does not mention lights or lanterns.<sup>20</sup>

What conclusions can we reach from these accounts? One is simply to discount the lantern stories, which surfaced decades after the event, as the faulty recollections of elderly men. Or we can credit their recollections and assume that the lanterns were hung, but by the time the carronading took place, it was light enough for the British to see the town; therefore General Benson and other contemporary writers did not think them worth mentioning. What is virtually certain is that the citizens of St. Michaels, despite their success in driving them off, did not fool the British with a lantern ruse.

Turning to the next legend, the number of casualties, *Sceptre's* log and Puckinghorne's report both mention only two wounded seamen. Baker's and Cockburn's reports do not mention casualties.<sup>21</sup> The *Marlborough* and *San Domingo* logs say nothing about battle casualties, although one reports that a seaman fell overboard and drowned.<sup>22</sup> In his official report<sup>23</sup> General Benson gave no estimate of British casualties, although he noted, "There was much blood on the grass at the water."

Contemporary newspaper accounts speculated that British losses were considerable: On 17 August the *Easton Republican Star* reported, based on statements by British deserters, that one captain, one marine lieutenant, and twenty-

seven privates had been killed at St. Michaels.<sup>24</sup> The *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) gave the same figures on 26 August but added, "...we cannot expect to receive any information on this subject which can be relied on." Many years later an historian reported that a fugitive slave and witnesses looking through spyglasses had observed dead being carried ashore and buried on Parsons Point<sup>25</sup> (now an island).

The *Republican Star* attributed its information to British deserters from the brig-sloop *Contest*,<sup>26</sup> a sister ship to *Conflict* which was part of Warren's fleet. These deserters, the paper said, had gotten the story secondhand from a midshipman of *Marlborough*. Leaving aside the propensity of deserters to tell those receiving them what they wish to hear, the paper was still dealing with hearsay of questionable reliability.

To conclude that twenty-nine sailors and marines were killed, one must believe that all the official British naval logs and reports concealed that fact, from Puckinghorne's initial report to Cockburn's report to Warren, the overall naval commander. No mention was made in *Sceptre's* log of any loss of life, let alone the deaths of two officers, one a captain. To omit such information was inconsistent with the practice in several of Cockburn's official letters of giving a "Return of Killed and Wounded."<sup>27</sup>

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The corpses which observers thought they saw being buried on Parsons Point may have fallen to an enemy more deadly than American gunfire—the mosquito. *Niles' Weekly Register* reported:

...*Kent Island*...is fertile, but destitute of wholesome water, and peculiarly subject to agues and fevers and the other autumnal complaints, so fatal in all the low countries on the *Chesapeake* bay....The enemy is represented to be very sickly. It is said that 74 bodies have been found on the shores of the *Potomac*. At *Kent Island*...but little chance is afforded to recruit the health of the men.

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*What is certain is  
that the British missed  
the real target at St. Michaels...*

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The "long month of *August*" will slay hundreds of them. Their repose also has an enemy that they cannot "blockade"—that fears neither their great guns nor small arms—in the mosquito; who, in countless multitudes, will fasten upon them, and, assisted by disease, terminate the life of "many a fine, tall fellow" not used [to] them.<sup>28</sup>

With two thousand sickly troops ashore on Kent Island, it seems highly likely that disease, rather than gunfire, caused the deaths of those whose burial witnesses observed through spy-glasses.

Admiral Cockburn's papers throw doubt on another story that has arisen out of the fracas at St. Michaels—that his nephew was killed there. No reference to such an event can be found in the *Sceptre's* log or in Cockburn's correspondence, nor is such a loss mentioned in a recent scholarly biography of the Admiral,<sup>29</sup> nor did contemporary or subsequent accounts give a name to this unfortunate, probably nonexistent, soul.

This episode raises more questions than can be answered. For one, why did Admirals Warren and Cockburn not mention the town of St. Michaels in their orders? Why wasn't Puckinghorne ordered to destroy shipyards and ships on the stocks there? He carried out his orders, but they were quite different from the pattern the British had followed earlier in the year when they attacked Frenchtown, Havre de Grace, and Georgetown, Maryland. Although St. Michaels does not appear on British charts before 1814, surely the admirals knew that the town was an important shipbuilding site. It is likely that at least two vessels were under construction there at the time of the attack—the privateer *Surprise* and the schooner *George Washington*.<sup>30</sup> If the British knew about the battery on Parrott's Point, why did they not know about the shipyards? Perhaps the information given to

Warren was garbled. Were the "armed Vessel or Vessels at present stationed in the St. Michaels River" which Puckinghorne was ordered to take or destroy really vessels still building on the stocks?

We will never know. What is certain is that the British missed the real target at St. Michaels, so perhaps it can be said that the British were fooled after all.

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**Notes**

1. J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Maryland from the Earliest Period to the Present Day*, vol. III (1879; reprint, Hatboro, PA: Tradition Press, 1967), 50-51; Oswald Tilghman, *History of Talbot County, Maryland, 1661-1861*, 2 vols. (Easton, 1915; reprint Baltimore: Regional Pub. Co., 1967) vol. 2, 164-172; Gilbert Byron, *St. Michaels: The Town that Fooled the British*, 2d ed. (Easton, MD: Easton Publishing Co., 1971), 34-46.

2. Log of HMS *Sceptre*, 1 July-31 August 1813, especially 8-10 August 1813. The Papers of George Cockburn (hereafter, Cockburn Papers), microfilm reel 4, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

3. Cockburn Papers, Fleet Orders, 8 April 1812-21 January 1814, microfilm reel 9, 120.

4. Cockburn Papers, Fleet Orders, microfilm reel 10, 244-6.

5. Brian Lavery, *The Arming and Fitting of English Ships of War, 1600-1815*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 207, 219-29.

6. P. Benson, "Attack on St. Michaels," "official" report, *Republican Star or Eastern Shore Advertiser*, 17 August 1813, col. 3, 3. Benson reported the attack began at "about one quarter before 4 o'clock."

7. Log of HMS *Sceptre*, 10 August 1813, 4 AM.

8. Benson, "Attack on St. Michaels," 3.

9. *Niles' Weekly Register*, 21 August 1813, 406.

10. "From the *People's Monitor* of August 14. The Attack on St. Michael's," *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) and *Political Intelligencer*, 26 August 1813, col. 2, 3.

11. *Ibid.*

12. The time of sunrise at St. Michaels was determined from formulas and tables in the 1985 *World Almanac*, 726, 743. Although this calculation was based on 10 August 1985 data, the U.S. Naval Observatory, Washington, DC, advised

the author that the variance for 10 August 1813 would not be greater than plus or minus 2 minutes. Morning twilight would commence about 45 minutes prior to actual sunrise. Neither standard time nor daylight saving time existed in 1813, so there is no way to know what source General Benson used in reporting that the attack occurred at quarter to 4 or how accurate that source was.

13. *Easton Gazette*, 28 May-16 July 1881. The relevant passage appeared in the installment for 25 June: "Owing to the foggy condition of the atmosphere the aim of the enemy was defective. Their balls which were from small six pound pieces flew above the town penetrating the roof of some of the houses or striking some of the higher gables. The injury done was insignificant."

14. Scharf, *History of Maryland*, vol. III, 50-51.

15. Thomas H. Sewell. *The Battle of Saint Michaels 1813-1913*, n.p., 6. A facsimile copy is in the Howard I. Chapelle Library, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, St. Michaels.

16. *Ibid.*, 13-15. Neither Sewell nor Dodson gives the sources of these statements.

17. Byron, *St. Michaels*, 26-7.

18. Thomas Kemp died 16 April 1890 at his home near Fallston, MD, *Baltimore-American*, 17 April 1890, 1. On 22 April 1890, col. 3, 6, the paper printed an appreciation of Kemp, noting that he was "a venerable and highly-esteemed resident of Harford County" who "was a man of sterling integrity and of gentle manners." Though born in Talbot County, he moved to Baltimore when young and worked as a builder with the firm of Dixon and Kemp. Later he moved to Harford County where he lived for forty-eight years.

19. Dates for Captain William Dodson and for Robert Dodson are in the Journals of Leonidas Dodson, Journal for 1856-1863, Box 2, Marylandia Room, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park. The dates for Leonidas are in background material attached to the Journals. These journals do not contain the note cited by Byron regarding lights in the trees during the battle, nor do they contain more than a single passing reference to the battle.

20. Byron, *St. Michaels*, 26.

21. Cockburn Papers: Letters received by Cockburn, 28 August 1812 - 31 January 1815, microfilm reel 9, 115-7; Letters sent by Cockburn,

3 February 1812-6 February 1814, microfilm reel 6, 224-5. Puckinghorne's report is also in *The Naval War of 1812*, William S. Dudley, ed., Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC, 1992, vol. II, 381.

22. The *Marlborough* and *San Domingo* logs were examined at the author's request at the Public Records Office, Kew, England, in January 1995 by distinguished naval historian Christopher McKee.

23. *Republican Star or Eastern Shore Advertiser*, 17 August 1813, col. 3, 3.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Tilghman, *History of Talbot County*, 171-2.

26. In *St. Michaels: The Town that Fooled the British*, 21, Byron stated that the *Republican Star*, in giving the report by deserters, "mistakenly" called *Conflict* the *Contest*. In fact, Byron was mistaken: *Contest*, James Rattray commander, having engaged the American schooners *Scorpion* and *Asp* at the entrance to the Yeocomico River on 11 July 1813, had just come up the bay to join the fleet.

27. Cockburn Papers, microfilm reel 6, Letters Sent by Cockburn, 22 February 1814-22 January 1815. Letters of 21 July and 3 August 1814 reported those killed and wounded during sorties in the Nominy and Yeocomico Rivers.

28. *Niles' Weekly Register*, 14 August 1813, 391-2, (Baltimore: Franklin Press, bound vol. IV, March to September 1813).

29. James Pack, *The Man Who Burned the White House: Admiral Sir George Cockburn 1772-1853*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1987. Pack also provides a wealth of detail about the British campaign in the Chesapeake: that *Sceptre*, a 3rd rate of 74 guns, was Cockburn's flagship, 159; that *San Domingo* was Warren's, 151; and that Polkinghorne [sic] was First Lieutenant of *San Domingo*, 160.

30. The John Earle Ship List, Maryland Historical Society, gives the dates of registry and place of construction.

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