

THE ROYAL NAVY

RAVING RAMPANT

Seeking to strike terror into the citizens of Chesapeake Bay, Admiral Cockburn's forces cruelly raided several bayside townships in the War of 1812

PART TWO-CONCLUSION BY BLAINE TAYLOR

SYNOPSIS OF PART ONE

Early in May 1813, a brutal offensive that ultimately set the stage for the burning of Washington began when British Adm. Cockburn's squadron sailed from its secluded anchorage near Spotsylvania Island to commence terror raids throughout the Chesapeake Bay against a number of small, poorly defended bayside villages. The first site attacked was the sleepy riverside hamlet of Havre de Grace (Harbor of Mercy), with its 60 quaint wood or brick homes and popular ferry terminal. Located near the entrance of the Susquehanna River,

Havre de Grace's over confident townsfolk defiantly hoisted their colors, and began firing at the British, further evoking the enemy's scorn. Having initially had every intention of bypassing the village, Cockburn became incensed with the Americans' audacity, cynnily reasoned that if the town was worth defending, it had to be worth attacking.

Assembled in the dark of night alongside the frigate HMS *Fantome*, under Lt. Westphal's guidance the British' troop-filled long boats, plus the fire snorting Congreve rocket boats, led the van. Capt. Lawrence brought up the rear with a detachment of Royal Marines. The landing



The British raid at Havre de Grace on Monday, 3 May 1813.



George Cockburn

boats were discovered before dawn on 3 May, and a heavy fire opened upon them. So ably was this returned by the launches and rocket boats that the largely untrained American militiamen were driven from their guns. Before Capt. Lawrence could arrive with the Marines, the town and several prisoners were taken, leaving him only to secure the conquest...

THE SPOILS OF WAR

The attack — virtually without loss — did have its lighter moments. Lieutenant Scott recounts, "Havre stands on the high road between Baltimore and Philadelphia. The enemy had fled into the woods and it appears, gave no clue to their traveling countrymen of the state of affairs at besieged Havre. As a consequence, the startled passengers with all their goods innocently fell into the hands of the waiting British.

Meanwhile, in the town itself, the guns of the captured battery were turned upon the town, and added to the destruction. A greater portion of the enemy, almost 400 in

Sir George Cockburn in his retiring years. He became vice admiral on 23 August 1819, but had no employment until December 1832, when he was appointed commander-in-chief of the North American and West Indian Stations, the post his old boss — Adm. Cochrane — held in 1814. His return from that command in February 1836 was the end of his service afloat. He became admiral on 10 January 1837, and admiral of the fleet on 1 July 1845. In 1848, he became a Member of Parliament for Portsmouth. Briefly a baron, Cockburn died on 19 August 1853.



The Principio iron works, a major foundry during both the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, was a prime target of Sir George Cockburn during his raids on the Upper Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries during the spring of 1813.

number, went up to the site of the present railway ferry landing, and departed there. They rushed up to the open common, separated into squads, and commenced plundering and systematically destroying; officers and men entering into the business with equal alacrity.

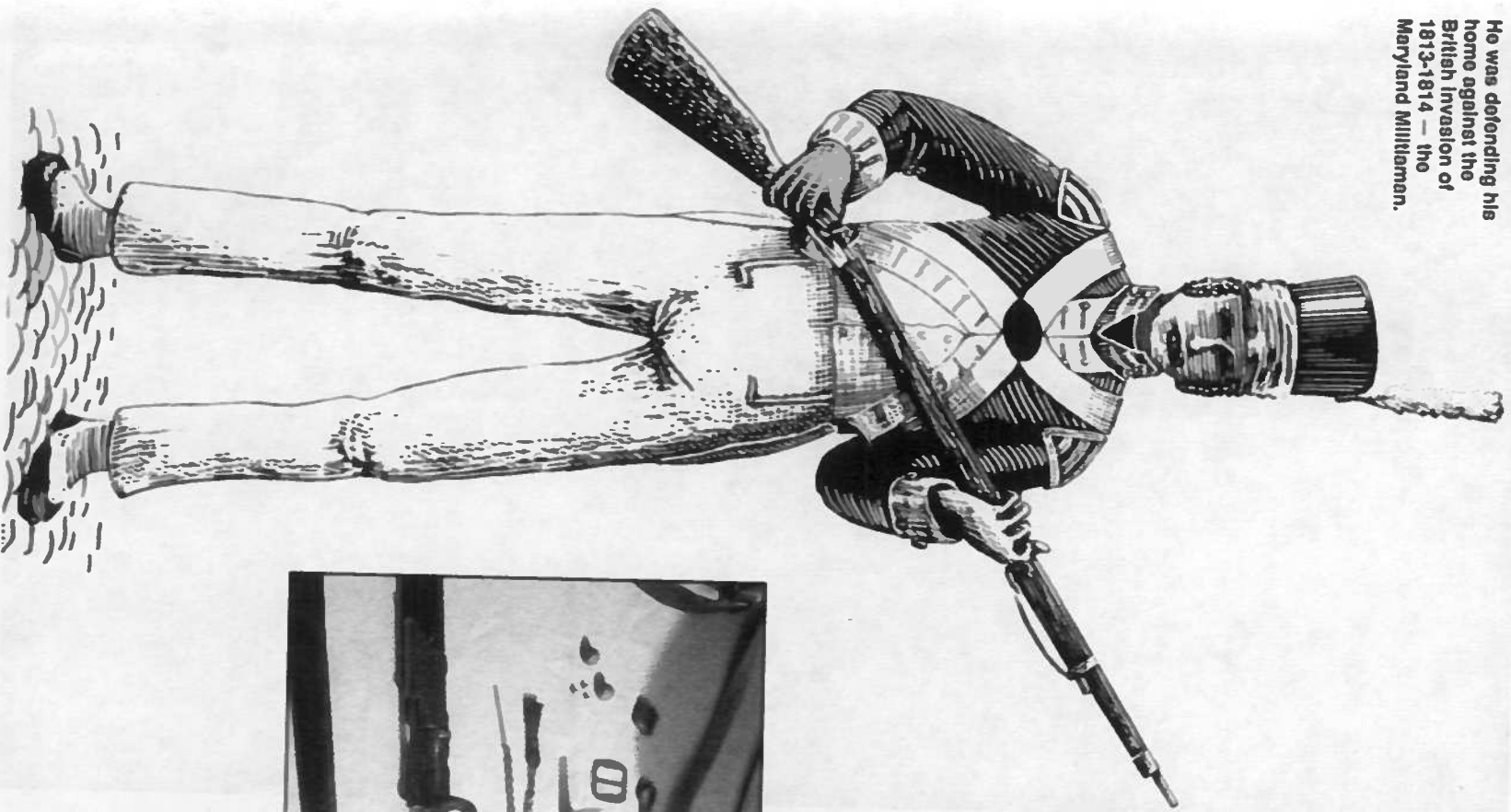
"Finally — when at last one-half of the village had been destroyed Cockburn — instigator of the crime — went ashore and was met by several ladies who had taken refuge in an elegant brick house some distance from the village, known as the Pringle Mansion. They entreated him to spare the remainder of the village, and especially the roof that sheltered them. With great reluctance Cockburn yielded, and at length gave an order for a stay of the plundering."

IRON WORKS RAIDED

Meanwhile, a large detachment of the enemy marched up the Susquehanna about 6-mi to the head of the tidewater, and there destroyed the extensive iron works and cannon foundry belonging to Col. Hughes. A number of vessels that had escaped from the bay and were anchored there were saved from the flames by being sunk in shallow water that would later make them readily re-floating.

Finally, when all possible mischief had been achieved along the riverbank — farms plundered and burned a long distance on the Baltimore road — and when, after 40 of the 60 houses in the village had been destroyed and nearly all the remainder of the edifices, except the Episcopal Church, more or less damaged — the murderers assembled in their

He was defending his home against the British invasion of 1813-1814 — the Maryland Militiaman.

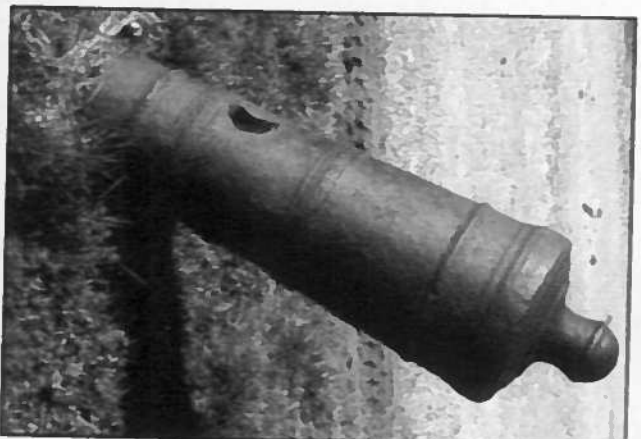


EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE RAID ON HAVRE DE GRACE, 2-3 MAY 1813

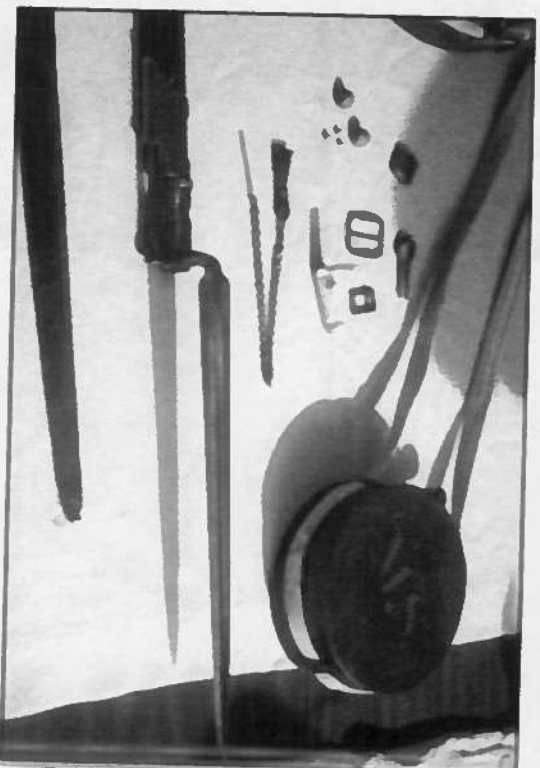
There were many eyewitness accounts, including this one: "On the

vessels and at sunset sailed out into the bay to pay a similar visit to the villagers on the Susquehanna River."

report of guns, the villagers immediately jumped out of their beds, and from the top of the house, could plainly see the chaos and hear the cries of the inhabitants. Running down the road, they soon began to meet distressed people, women and children half-naked; children inquiring for their parents, parents for their



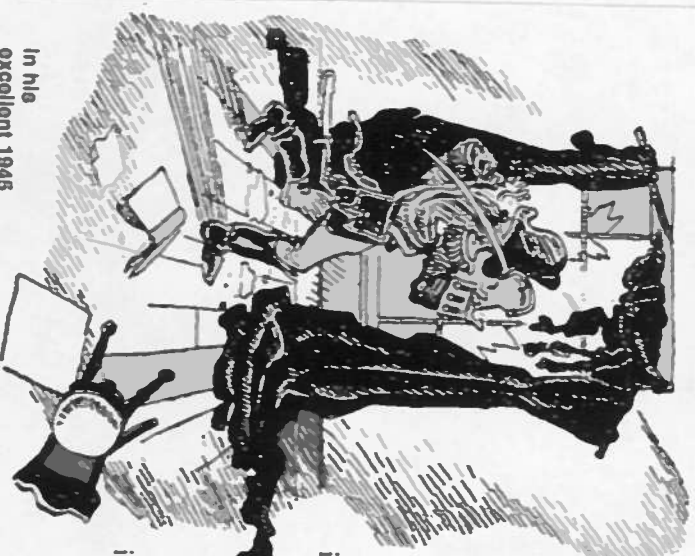
A cannon — believed to be one unit blown in half — placed in front of Brantwood, a residence on Williams Road, east of US Route 213 in Cecil County, Maryland, in 1968. Probably a relic of the British 1813 raid on Frenchtown.



Equipment used by Maryland Militia during the War of 1812: (Top) typical wooden water canteen; ball, cartridge, and gear for loading the muskets of the day; the fearsome bayonet (middle) and its scabbard — feared by those who encountered it more than being shot! (Blaine Taylor)

children, and wives for their husbands. It appeared to us as if the whole village is afire — a frightening, blazing holocaust. I think this act — omitted without any previous warning — has totally degraded the integrity of the British flag."

The enemy robbed every house of everything valuable that could be carried away. The admiral (Cockburn) himself was present at this atrocious act of destruction, and gave orders for it to his officers.



In his excellent 1845 study, the late Ball Moran newspaperman and author Neil H. Swanson wrote, "An officer put his sword through an elegant looking glass, attached the windows, and cut out several sashes." (John G. Stoen.)

There were repulsive stories from that night. One officer slashed pigs down their backs to cruelly watch them squeal. Then there was the nursing mother who wouldn't leave her home, so raiders "despoiled her and her children and her clothes," while "One villain actually tore away the handkerchief that discreetly covered her bosom."

Even other British officers were so disgusted by the behavior that the rear admiral condoned that years later Adm. Sir Charles Napier — writing his memoirs — asserted that Cockburn, "Could not be too much detested. He was a blackguard and a robber who disgraced himself in America. Much as I dislike sneaking and burning of towns, it is also a bad employment for British troops." Napier vowed, "I would — with my own hand — kill any perpetrator of brutality under my command."

HOW MANY HOUSES BURNED? THE CONTINUING CONTROVERSY

The controversy as to exactly how many houses were damaged or burned continues unabated to this very day.

Few Havre de Grace buildings survived... but possibly five brick structures and — more surprisingly — possibly four frame houses did. All but one survive to this day. Two

include the Joshua Green House and The Ordinary.

THE LT. WESTPHAL WOUNDING CONTROVERSY

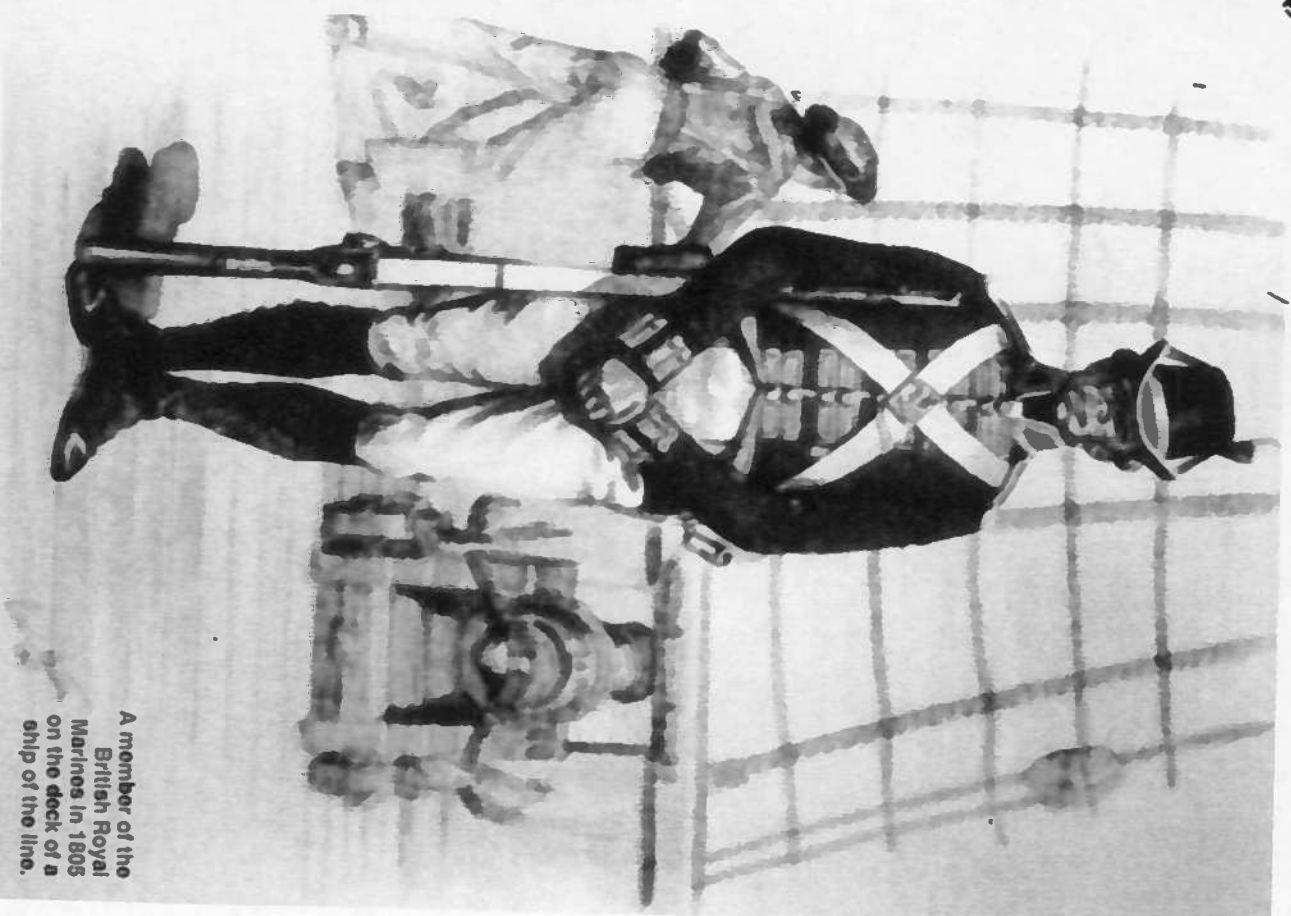
This incident, too, remains controversial to this day. Was a British officer carrying a flag of truce before the pillaging began, shot in the hand? Indeed, Lt. Westphal was shot in this manner. After this wounding, who could wonder why the British seamen and Marines demolished everything in their way?

We shall, perhaps, never know the full truth of this incident, but the famous lieutenant appears again in the legend concerning the fate of

John O'Neill, whom we left languishing in the forecaste of the British frigate HMS *Maldstone* in Part One. Some authorities believe his release was engineered by Christopher Levy, but popular legend more plausibly decreed otherwise — and what a tale it is!

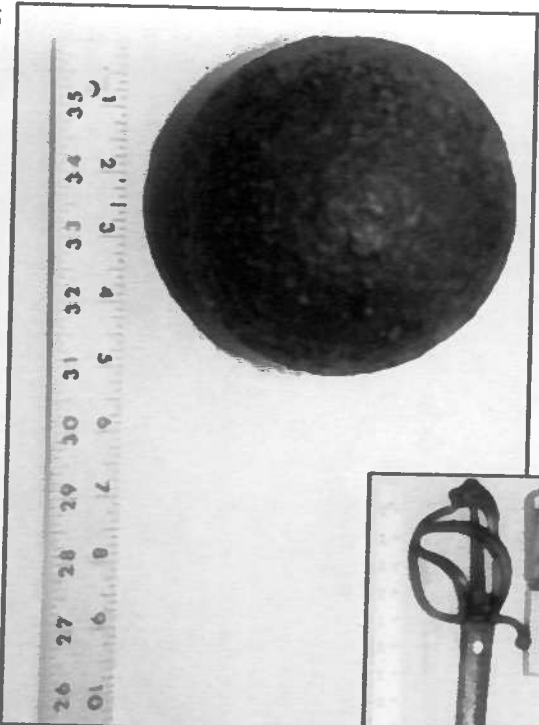
THE LEGEND OF MATILDA O'NEILL VERSUS ADM. COCKBURN

Here is that popular version, handed down from generation to generation: They were sentenced to be hanged, his daughter was told. Lt. O'Neill's family — including his 15-year-old daughter Matilda, who was deeply devoted to her father — took shelter in the nearby woods along with most of the population of the town when it

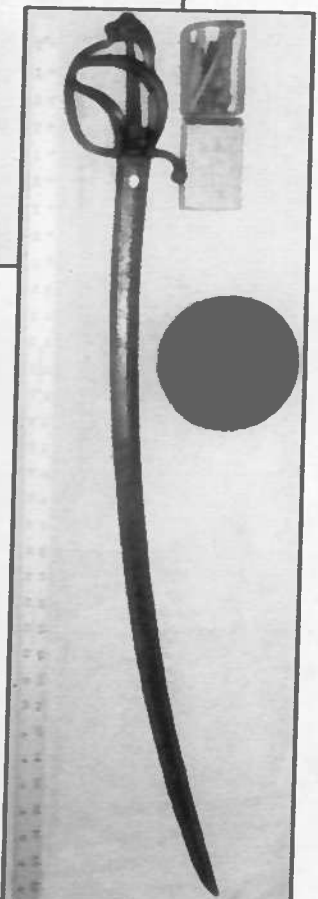


A member of the British Royal Marines in 1805 on the deck of a ship of the line.

Cavalry sabre, dug up in a field opposite the Kitty Knight House in Georgetown, south of the Susquehanna River on US Route 213, as well as an 18-pounder cannonball.



18-pounder cannonball, dug up on Bow St. at Elkton, Maryland, during a 1988 urban renewal project. This was found at the location of the 1812 earth-and-log works used to defend the town against the marauding British.



became apparent that the British, in an ugly frame of mind, would land.

There Matilda learned from Mr. Barnes of the nail factory, who had seen her father firing on the British, that militiaman O'Neill had been captured, taken aboard a British vessel, and was in danger of his life. Matilda ran from the shelter and rushed to the pier on the water's edge. Finding Lt. Westphal of the warship HMS *Marborough* directing the loading of the last contingent of troops, she boldly grasped his arm. "Oh, sir!" she cried. "Your soldiers have taken my father out to one of your ships. Please, please, I must see him!"

"What is your father's name?" asked the startled young officer. "He is Lt. John O'Neill. Tell me — was he wounded?" "I don't think so," replied Westphal. "Those fellows didn't show much fight after our first round, but we're in a hurry, my lady. I don't think the admiral will want to wait for you to see your father."

"I'll row out myself and ask the admiral. What ship is my father on, lieutenant? What is the admiral's name?" she asked in a single breath. Informed that Adm. Cockburn was on the *Mainstone*, she rowed out to the anchored man-of-war and was politely greeted and helped aboard. "I'm Matilda O'Neill," she announced. "It's urgent. I must speak to Adm. Cockburn. It's about my father. He's a

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prisoner in this ship."

"I am Adm. Cockburn, Miss," replied a tall, distinguished looking man standing near the gangway. "What favor can you expect of us after your people so wantonly fired on our vessels?"

"Sir, my father," replied Matilda with spirit, "was only doing his duty."

"His duty!" exclaimed the admiral. "Since when has it become the duty of civilians to take up arms? If your father had not been taken with a musket in his hands, he would not now be a prisoner! As it is, he must pay the penalty prescribed by the rules of war. I am sorry, young lady, there is nothing to be done for him."

"Admiral Cockburn," Matilda pleaded, "my father is a citizen of the State of Maryland, and the government of the state has appointed him an officer in the militia. He is not a civilian — he is a soldier!"

"But," protested Cockburn, "he was not wearing a uniform! When taken, he was clad in dress very much like that of the other citizens of Maryland whom we have today had a chance to observe."

"Sir, the State of Maryland does not provide uniforms for its militia," replied Matilda, "but the state does provide its officers with commissions. If I produce his commission, will he be cleared of the charge against him?" "Yes," replied the admiral, softened somewhat, perhaps, by her obvious



Marker at the Kitty Knight House, Georgetown.

devotion to her father. "If you produce his commission, he will be freed. I'll wait one-hour — not a minute longer!"

The brave girl was given permission to return to her home which — although badly damaged — had not been burned, and within the hour was back on the admiral's flagship with her father's commission as an officer in the militia of the State of Maryland. As might be expected, the reunion of father and daughter was a joyous affair.



JOHN O'NEILL'S SWORD. He was then too late.

John O'Neill's sword, presented to him in 1813 by the citizens of Philadelphia and preserved today in the Maryland Historical Society Collection in Baltimore. This drawing was made on 22 November 1861 by Benson J. Lossing from the actual weapon, then in the possession of John O'Neill, Jr., the son of the great defender of Havre de Grace. Ironically, after O'Neill himself was set free, American authorities inadvertently informed the British that their former prisoner was a native born Irishman, and hence a subject of His Britannic Majesty, King George III. Had they known this, the British almost certainly would've hanged him as a traitor, and regretted setting him free, but it was then too late.

Admiral Cockburn — true to his promise — released Lt. O'Neill and the other citizens who had been captured after it was proven that they had not borne arms against the British. As Lt. O'Neill and Matilda soaked themselves in their little skiff for their return to the shore, the admiral called over the side, "Wait a minute, young miss! I wish to present you with a token to show my admiration of such gallant conduct in one so young!" Tossing a small, shining object into the boat, he said, "Keep this for remembrance of Adm. George Cockburn, who admires you loyally and bravely in his onomias



The John O'Neill memorial cannon marker at Concord Point, Havre de Grace, Maryland. (Harford Historical Bulletin)

just as he rewards those same virtues in his men."

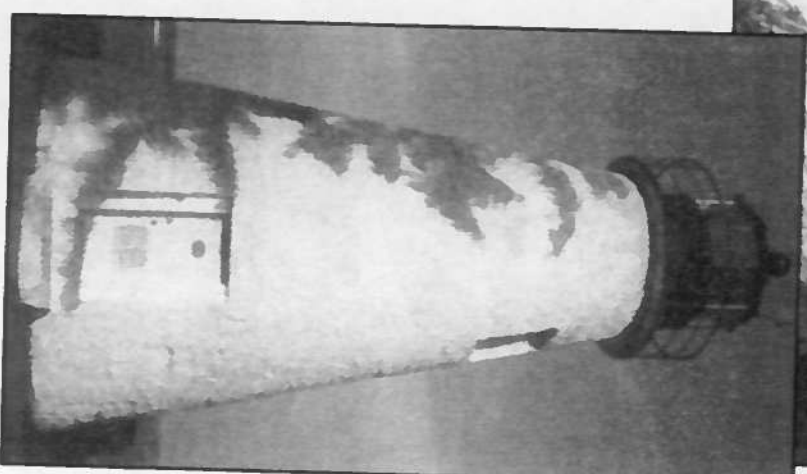
The object tossed to Matilda was his personal, gold-mounted, tortoise shell snuff box. Today, that snuff box is still proudly owned by Matilda's descendant. The design of this snuff box is engraved on that portion of the silver plate contributed by Harford County for the battleship USS *Maryland*.

NEWS OF THE RAID ENRAGES THE AMERICANS

When news of the Havre de Grace raid got out, there was a great outcry in Maryland and across the nation.



Type of short sword and scabbard used by the Maryland Militia in 1814 with (top to left to right), cuff of jacket, book, strap and boot spur.



The Concord Point lighthouse at Havre de Grace, built in 1827 at the foot of Lafayette Street, marks the spot of the gallant "Potato Battery" defense of Lt. John O'Neill against 400 British Royal Marines and sailors who burned the town on 3 May 1813. (Blaine Taylor)

The *Baltimore American* published a letter from a citizen of Havre de Grace dated 4 May. "On Monday morning, about sunrise, the enemy took possession of Havre de Grace, and immediately opened a scene of destruction that would've disgraced

Britain's allies. A general plunder and burning followed. In less than two hours, they had looted and torched almost every house including both ferry houses."

"The *Baltimore Patriot* and *Mills Register* — for several weeks thereafter — published editorials bitterly reflecting on the disasterly British actions at Havre de Grace: "The savage burning of Havre de Grace led the people to calculate what they might expect from the tender mercy of the enemy."

"Some of the friends of the water Warmabages are apologizing for the conflagration of Havre de Grace by stating that a flag of truce sent by Adm. Cockburn was fired upon. It is sufficient to observe that no flag was ever sent, and, consequently, that the excuse is only an instance of the ingratitude of those well inclined to the British interest."

Cockburn's exploits at Havre de Grace undoubtedly led to his becoming the most hated British officer of the war in America, and also to the production of James Kirke Paulding's satirical *Levee of the Scottish Fiddle* that parodied Cockburn, his oafish officers, and their burning and plunder of Havre de Grace, Frederick, and Georgetown.

ON TO CHARLESTOWN, PRINCIPPIO FURNACE, FREDERICKTOWN, AND GEORGETOWN

With Havre de Grace well despoiled, the British sailed up the western side of the Susquehanna River with the aim of next pillaging Fort Deposit, but changed their minds when a captive informed them that it was defended by a stout fort, armed by a company of expert riflemen. They went south instead, razing both Charlestown and destroying Principio Furnace, then an important American cannon factory, along with a mill and the bridge crossing Principio Creek. Landing there, he destroyed 51 large caliber guns and 130 smaller arms, as well as seizing five vessels on the Susquehanna and a large cache of flour. "This accomplished, the next day Cockburn dispatched a 500-man expedition to take Fredericktown and Georgetown on the river.

ACTION AT FREDERICKTOWN

Ready for them at Fredericktown with loaded muskets was Col. T.W. Venable and his militiamen, who received Cockburn's emissaries at 6



British infantry officer with shako hat and overcoat in foreground. (Drawing by C. Hamilton Smith, London, 1815.)

any, stating that the British would destroy only the storehouses and vessels if there was no resistance. In reply, the Americans hoisted a concerted volley, and the fighting began, lasting a half-hour, until the Americans' ammunition ran out, and they were routed.

The town was plundered and burned, and the British repeated the exercise at Georgetown, thus completing their Cecil County operations before they sailed for southern bay waters. True, they had looted Havre de Grace, Georgetown, Fredericktown, and Fredericktown, but the successful defense of both Elkton and Port Deposit showed that they were not invincible, and could be stopped—and, yes, even turned back.

THE TALE OF KITTY KNIGHT

While the British ships stayed out

in the Susquehanna River to bombard the towns, the soldiers and Marines landed in their barges. They stormed up the hill and overran the fort, while the women and children were evacuated. As the militia withdrew, only Miss Catherine Knight — a local beauty — and an older woman were left behind to ensure that their own houses wouldn't be burned.

Miss Knight, then 38, threw away the firebrand that had been placed to burn her home, and when confronted by a British officer about this, she asserted — eyes flashing — "If you burn this house, you'll burn me with it!" The Englishman backed off, and her home and that of her friend were saved as she proceeded to put the fire out with her broom. She died on 22 November 1857, aged 79, and is buried close to the south wall of St. Francis Xavier Church.

BRITISH BASE AT POOLE'S ISLAND

For the next year, the British used Poole's Island — opposite the Kent County shoreline — as a Naval base, interchanging trans-bay traffic between the eastern and western shores of Maryland. Aid received by the British from the local "blue lights" in guiding them on their raids was invaluable, as always.

Ominously for Baltimore, Cockburn had been heard to say at Fredericktown that he would "Not rest until he had burned every house in it," reported the *Weekly Register*; but, as yet, he still had no

THE STATE OF MARYLAND REACTS

Marylanders were horrified and outraged — as well as incredulous — that such destruction could have been accomplished within a two-week time span. Governor Levin called a rare special session of the legislature at Annapolis on 17 May 1813, eleven days following the British departure from the upper bay.

The Governor's proclamation read, in part, "...Since the rejourning of the ... legislature, a large enemy Naval force within the waters of the Chesapeake has wrought wanton destruction of our houses and other

property. We have furnished all the means within our power to repel the invasion of the enemy, and — as our resources are too limited to afford complete protection — it is for the wisdom of the legislature to make such further provision as the exigencies of the state, in their opinion, may require."

The special session lasted from 17-30 May. A large part of the time was consumed in the discussion of resolutions which could not be passed owing to the firm difference of opinion between the Senate and House. Of the 23 acts ultimately passed, only three had anything to do with the matter for which the legislature had been convened.

On the 28th, State Delegate Louis Duvall offered a resolution in the House of Delegates both condemning Adm. Cockburn and thanking Brig. Gen. Miller for rescuing the citizens of Havre de Grace. The House, largely Federalist by party, submitted an amendment to Duvall's resolution that stated, in part, "Whereas, the national government has perverted the national revenue to foreign conquest; i.e., Canada; be it resolved — in the opinion of this General Assembly — that the conduct of the national government... has been guilty of an improvident departure from the genius of our Constitution in how blow to President James Madison, who had helped France etc... That our Senators and Representatives in the Congress of the United States be instructed and required to use every Constitutional means to bring to an immediate and honorable peace the present oppressive actions."

The amendment passed the House by a vote of 43-15. The Mayor and City Council of Baltimore were petitioned for aid for Havre de Grace, the City however, had no charter mechanism to enable it to tender the aid required. In the end, it was the citizens of Baltimore — in their individual capacity — who subscribed liberally and raised a large sum for the relief of the stricken town. And with these resolutions passed, Cockburn's infamous raids slowly slipped into history as he went on to bigger and better infantry in a war that in itself today is largely forgotten. **SC**

Townson, Maryland, writer Blaine Taylor is a member of the International Napoleonic Society and the Dumfries-Paterson Neck Historical Society, Maryland.



British Marines in their perch upon a platform in the tops of a Royal Navy warship at sea. Note also the sailors securing the sails.

real army at his disposal, so this remained an empty threat in the spring of 1813.

1813 RAIDING WINDS DOWN

Thus ended Cockburn's 12-day reign of terror on the Chesapeake for that year, but he had successfully venerated to everyone how vulnerable were American defenses, and how easily they could be overcome with a minimum number of troops and hardware. As Cockburn and his minions retired back down the bay, the *Weekly Register* in Baltimore reported that, "A certain James O'Boyle — a naturalized fishman living at Pugh's Town, Virginia — offers a reward of \$1000 for the notorious and infamous scoundrel, violator of all laws, the British Adm. Cockburn, or \$500 for each of his ears, on delivery."



Local Havre de Grace historian Elsworth Shank as I saw him in April 1999 at the site of the restored Rodgers' Tavern at Perryville, Maryland, on the C&D County Lower Susquehanna River ferry, on the shore opposite where Adm. Cockburn landed at Havre de Grace. (Blaine Taylor)

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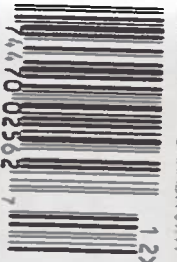
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