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## Helping to preserve an important but mostly forgotten piece of U.S. history

### Grant will allow officials to save remainder of Bladensburg battlefield

by Elahe Izadi | Staff Writer

If local history buff Dick Charlton wants to retrace the steps of American Marines who shot at invading British forces in the Battle of Bladensburg during the War of 1812, he has to drive up a busy road surrounded by tire shops and fast food restaurants.

"Most are not aware of it all," Charlton, 77, of Beltsville, said of the battlefield.

"It's almost a forgotten war, and it's one that we won," he added. "It was a foreign country on our territory. It was in the early years of independence as a nation and Great Britain was trying to recapture a lost territory."

The site on which thousands of British troops faced the last American resistance before entering Washington, D.C., where they would eventually burn the White House and Capitol, has long since been covered by busy roads, a park, a cemetery and commercial businesses.

A few plaques telling passersby what once transpired are dotted throughout Bladensburg Waterfront Park and Fort Lincoln Cemetery.

Researchers and archeologists will embark upon a project to preserve the battlefield this year after the National Park Service awarded a \$60,000 research grant to the Maryland State Highway Administration in June as part of a battlefield protection program.

"Basically, we want to find out how much is intact out there," said Richard Ervin, an SHA senior archaeologist. "The area has been very cut up by development in the early 20th century."

The research will lay the groundwork for projects done by other groups to commemorate the battle, such as a visitor's center, small museum or plaques, Ervin said.

"To my knowledge, nobody has done intensive archeological research out there," Ervin said.

Researchers and archeologists will be looking to find out exactly how the battle was fought and whether popular depictions of the battle are accurate.

The battlefield preservation will tie into SHA's Bladensburg Archeology Project, which already has begun with a series of archeological digs throughout the town. The findings will be presented as part of the bicentennial celebration of the War of 1812.

About \$40,000 has been spent thus far on projects such as archaeological digs and public outreach related to the War of 1812 bicentennial in the Bladensburg area, SHA spokesman Chuck Gischlar said.

Charlton, who is treasurer of the Aman Memorial Trust, a group charged with preserving historic sites in and around Bladensburg, said popular culture doesn't recognize the War of 1812 as it does other wars, such as the Civil War.

British troops entered Bladensburg on a hot August day in 1814 and crossed the Anacostia River on a bridge the Americans should probably have destroyed ahead of time, Charlton said. The bridge is approximately where a later bridge stands today along Bladensburg Road. The War of 1812 was fought until 1815.

Most of the Americans retreated, and the British dubbed the battle "The Bladensburg Races," Charlton said. But a group of 500 Marines stood their ground under the command of Joshua Barney and fought from an area where Fort Lincoln Cemetery stands today.

Although the Americans eventually lost the battle, and the British went on to burn much of Washington, D.C. to the ground, Charlton said the battle should be remembered.

"I don't see it as anything to hide under the rug. I don't buy that at all," he said. "All the more to learn from."

Aside from Barney's force, the American troops were disorganized and lacked good leadership, which lead to the defeat, Charlton said.

Charlton also said the battle was one part of a larger story that eventually led to

the penning of the "Star Spangled Banner" by Francis Scott Key during the battle at Fort McHenry in Baltimore. After the Battle of Bladensburg, the British captured a Marylander and Key went to plead for his release. It was the reason he was on the British flagship when Fort McHenry was being bombarded, the image of which inspired him to write the song.

The Battle of Bladensburg battlefield likely will never be turned into something like Gettysburg, Ervin said, because of all the commercial development. But that doesn't stop people like Charlton from feeling a connection to the history.

"Everything in today's world is so different than back then," he said. "But you can visualize it, what it looked like. You got to keep your eyes open and your imagination."

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Elahe Izadi/The Gazette  
History buff Dick Charlton of Beltsville stands at the site of the Battle of Bladensburg, which took place during the War of 1812. A \$60,000 grant from the National Park Service will be used to help preserve of the battlefield, where British troops broke through American defenses on their way to burn Washington, D.C.