



## War of 1812: No historical revisionism, please

11:53 a.m. EDT, July 14, 2010

As a student of Baltimore history and a working tour guide for the Historic Ships in Baltimore museum, I was shocked and appalled at the totally wrong historical interpretation presented in the July 12 article, "A grand, two-year salute to War of 1812."

While I look forward to the proper commemoration of the events of this war, I must write to set the record straight.

The most egregious mistake is to refer to the war as America defeating the British. Both countries negotiated an end to the war that left things almost the same as when it began. The British had no interest in conquering the U.S. They tried to avoid the war by ending most of our objections to their restraint of overseas trade, and the attacks along the Chesapeake were only raids, not a true invasion.

Yes, we did have some land and naval battles that instilled pride and allowed us to continue expanding into what became our Midwest, but our invasion of Canada failed and our capital was burned. The defeat outside Washington, DC, which the British referred to as the "Bladensburg Races," due to the speed that the Maryland and D.C. militia ran from the British, had as much an effect on the war's outcome as did our repulse of the British at Baltimore. It is only local pride, well deserved as it may be, that makes us think the British defeat here had a strategic effect on the war.

Second, Francis Scott Key was not a prisoner on a British ship in the harbor during the attack, though this mistake has been bandied about for years. Key came to Baltimore aboard an American ship and he stayed on that ship during the bombardment. He was not allowed to leave the harbor before or during that attack, but was free to leave after it was over. Key, a lawyer, referred to being detained. It was the local papers, to dramatize the event, that called him a prisoner.

Third, the Battle of North Point did not see the Maryland Militia defeat or repulse the British army. It was a better-fought battle than at Bladensburg, Maryland, but the outnumbered Maryland troops, when outflanked by the British, retreated from the field. They fell back to Hampstead Heights, better known today as [Patterson Park](#), to newly built earthworks and took cover. Sorry, Ms. Hare, when you retreat and leave the field to the enemy, who keep on advancing, you are not "repulsing" them.

The entire British plan was to advance their army to the outskirts of the city, and wait there for the British fleet to break through into the harbor and use their ships' guns to provide artillery support for their troops' assault on the land fortifications. Once in the city they were going to burn our shipyards, and probably public buildings, and then retire, just as they had as Washington a month before.

I could go on but I will instead say to those who want a true history, I heartily recommend the book "Terror on the Chesapeake," by local author Christopher George.

As an aside, I spent about ten minutes this morning talking to and laughing with a ranger from [Ft. McHenry](#) about the claims of the article. It was a great piece of local boosterism and a classic case of the saying "when legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Paul J. O'Neil