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Capital Weather Gang

The inside scoop on DC, Maryland and Virginia weather

The thunderstorm that saved Washington

By Kevin Ambrose | July 15, 2010; 10:30 AM ET

Of all the weather-related stories of Washington, this ranks as one of the more interesting. Washington weather historians will have to dig deep to find information on this storm event.

But, before I begin, you may wonder how any storm could possibly save a city? Here's a hint: If an invading army sets fire to a city's buildings, a drenching East Coast thunderstorm is extremely helpful in putting out the flames.



Lightning flashes across the sky of Washington. Source: *The book "Washington Weather"*

This is what happened to Washington in the summer of 1814. The invading army was the British, our city was burning, and a severe thunderstorm helped to extinguish the fires. The storm also produced serious wind damage in Washington, but that was far less destructive than the fires that burnt down the Capitol and White House.

Keep reading for a wild story of severe weather and war that took place right here in Washington...

During the summer of 1814, British warships sailed into the Chesapeake Bay and headed towards Washington. The warships continued sailing up the Patuxent River and anchored at Benedict, Maryland on August 19, 1814. Over 4,500 British soldiers landed and marched towards Washington. The British mission was to capture Washington and seek revenge for the burning of their British Capitol in Canada, for which they held the United States responsible.



A force of 7,000 Americans was hastily assembled near the Potomac River to defend Washington. During the

afternoon of August 24, in 100°F heat, the two armies clashed. The British Army quickly routed the less disciplined American volunteers, mostly due to a series of American blunders and a new British rocket that did little damage, but unnerved the raw American troops with a very loud, shrill noise. President Madison and Secretary of State Monroe, who had led a group of officials to watch the battle, were almost captured in the confusion. It was noted that the 100°F temperatures made the fighting more difficult.

The British army invaded Washington and set fire to the city on August 24, 1814. A day later, a severe thunderstorm spawned a tornado in Washington that killed several British soldiers and helped extinguish the fires that burned throughout the city. *Source: The book "Washington Weather"*

After the battle, the British Army marched quickly into Washington while American soldiers, United States government officials, and Washington residents fled the city. There were no officials left in Washington from whom the British could seek terms of surrender. The British admiral ate dinner in the White House, then gave the order to set fire to Washington. Within hours, the White House, the Capitol, and many other public buildings and homes were burning.

On the morning of August 25, Washington was still burning. Smoke was reported to be visible in Baltimore. Throughout the morning, the British soldiers continued to set more fires in the city and destroy ammunition supplies. As the soldiers spread fire and destruction, the sky began to darken and lightning and thunder signaled the approach of a thunderstorm. As the storm neared the city, the winds began to increase dramatically and then built into a "frightening roar." A severe thunderstorm was bearing down on Washington.

The center of the storm with a small tornado tore through Washington and directly into the British occupation. Several buildings were lifted off of their foundations and destroyed. Other buildings were blown down or lost their roofs. Feather beds were blown out of homes and scattered about. Trees were uprooted, fences were knocked down, and the heavy chain bridge across the Potomac River was buckled and rendered useless. It was noted that cannons were tossed into the air. The flying debris killed several British soldiers. Many of the soldiers did not have time to take cover from the winds and they laid face

down in the streets. One account describes how a British officer on horseback did not dismount and the winds slammed both horse and rider violently to the ground.

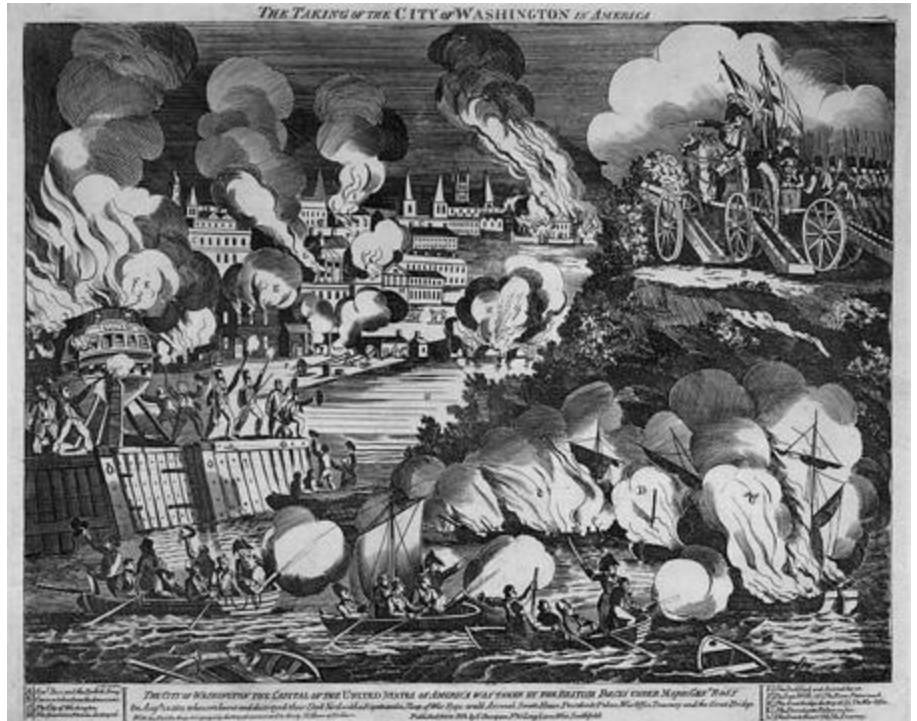
The winds subsided quickly, but the rain fell in torrents for two hours. (There may have been a second thunderstorm that followed quickly after the first thunderstorm.) Fortunately, the heavy rains quenched the flames and prevented Washington from continuing to burn.

After the storm, the British Army regrouped on Capitol Hill, still a bit shaken by the harsh weather. They decided to leave the city that evening. As the British troops were preparing to leave, a conversation was noted between the British

Admiral and a Washington lady regarding the storm: The admiral exclaimed, "Great God, Madam! Is this the kind of storm to which you are accustomed in this infernal country?" The lady answered, "No, Sir, this is a special interposition of Providence to drive our enemies from our city." The admiral replied, "Not so Madam. It is rather to aid your enemies in the destruction of your city."

Hours later, the British forces left Washington and returned to their ships on the Patuxent River. The journey back was made difficult by numerous downed trees that lay across the roads. The war ships that lay waiting for the British force had also encountered the fierce storm. Wind and waves had lashed at the ships and many had damaged riggings. Two vessels had broken free from their moorings and were blown ashore.

The occupation of Washington lasted 26 hours. President Madison and other government officials returned to Washington and began the difficult process of setting up government in a city damaged by fire and wind.



The City of Washington burns at the hands of the British, August 24-25, 1814. Source: *The Library of Congress*