



Historians: Local unsung hero deserves his due

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Local researcher seeks to define Barney's land

by Tad Wayne Taborn

Old soldiers never die; they just fade away, Gen. Douglas MacArthur said.

Maryland, the federal government and local historians are preparing a series of events to connect present-day citizens with a war some 200 years distant with the intention that the memory of the War of 1812 not simply fade away, but some local historians feel that one soldier who figured prominently in the War of 1812 and the Revolutionary War deserves more careful attention – Dundalk's own Commodore Joshua Barney.



Local historians are looking to find the boundaries of the property once known as Barney's Inheritance, thought to have been located between what is now Bear Creek Park and Wise Avenue. photo by Tad Wayne Taborn

Realizing at age 10 that his teacher had nothing more to explain through books that could not be learned by experience; yearning and begging to go to sea; captaining a ship at age 14 when his brother-in-law succumbed to death while in command; fighting in both of the wars that defined American independence; and, at his end, making the supreme sacrifice in trying to hold off invaders – Barney's life is the stuff of legend, though few outside the circle of hardcore history buffs may have heard of him.

Historians are looking to verify the location of Barney's childhood home in what is now Gray Haven. Robert Reyes points to evidence uncovered by then county planner John McGrain in the early 1980s showing Barney's Inheritance along the shores of Bear Creek. McGrain's findings depict Barney's Inheritance as covering the entirety of the northernmost neck along Bear Creek, from Gray Place to the water – encompassing present-day Bear Creek Park, Bear Creek Elementary School and Patapsco High School and Center for The Arts.

Reyes, president of the Friends of North Point Battlefield, wants to spread the word about Barney and make sure he is included in future generations' historical perspectives.

"I like telling the story that's not being told," Reyes said last week.

Reyes' effort to help preserve history goes back to the early 1990s and his first engagement with political figures. While viewing a diorama at a Defenders Day presentation in September 1992, Reyes noticed something specific about the present-day land use of the historical North Point Battlefield. After asking where the beltway was located, Reyes understood "that not many people realize that the beltway goes through the North Point Battlefield," Reyes said.

Thus began Reyes search to preserve pieces of local history. Reyes was instrumental in having a sign erected that notes the location's importance.

Since then Reyes has been appointed to several committees and participated with many other local history buffs and government officials in a study to determine the sites along a national trail to commemorate the places, people and events associated with the War of 1812.

Terror on the Chesapeake author Christopher T. George emphasizes the importance of Barney's legacy.

"I really think that Commodore Barney should be the most important American and Maryland hero to be learned about by citizens in this upcoming bicentennial of the War of 1812," George said. George points to Barney's early success in taking a toll on British shipping as a privateer in command of the schooner *Rossie*.

In response to British raids around the Chesapeake Bay in 1813, Barney was the one to come up with a plan to defend the Bay, according to George. Barney's proposed strategy led to the formation of the Chesapeake Bay flotilla and Barney's appointment as a commodore in the U.S. Navy.

George cited Barney's exploits on the Patuxent River in the summer of 1814 as giving British Adm. George Cockburn problems in "the two major maritime battles of Maryland history." After the Battle of Bladensburg, the British commented on the tenacity of Barney's sailors and U.S. Marines as putting forth "the best fighting of the day."

There will be an upsurge and awakening to local history and the Battle of North Point as we approach the bicentennial, Dundalk-Patapsco Neck Historical Society volunteer Harry Young said. Young has noticed an increase in researchers in the local archives.

"I don't feel that the whole story of the Battle of North Point as it relates to the War of 1812 has been told yet," Young said.

Barney will emerge as a prominent figure in the battles and local history of the area and Maryland at large alongside Gen. John Stricker, Lt. John Stansbury, privates Daniel Wells and Henry McComas and Baltimore mayor Maj. Gen. Samuel Smith, he said.

To the British, Barney was a notoriously successful privateer. Young said Barney operated his successful privateering from the familiar waters of Bear Creek.

"There is evidence that the British came in and searched the shores of Bear Creek for Barney," Young said, adding that Barney's success is probably responsible for the British "calling us 'a den of pirates' in House of Commons."

George, born in Liverpool, England, was influenced by the war and Barney's exploits to write an article and then a book on events of the 1812 war along the Chesapeake Bay.

"I have an idea: they ought to bring his body back for the bicentennial from Pittsburgh; bring him back to Maryland and bury him properly, perhaps on Federal Hill," George said.

In 2012, state, federal and local governments will begin a two-year celebration of the bicentennial of the War of 1812. A commemorative license plate has already been released, and various sites are being considered for inclusion along the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail.

Solving the mystery of the exact location of Barney's Inheritance and presenting a clear picture of Barney's role in American independence is part of an effort to prevent another old soldier from merely fading away.