

OPINION

Our Say: Pieces of a gallant history remain in local waters

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In two years, the Navy and Maryland will kick off a series of events commemorating the bicentennial of the War of 1812. Building public interest may be an uphill struggle. The War of 1812 - even if many Americans of the time regarded it as the "second war of independence" - has tended to be the unloved stepchild among American conflicts.

It had its grand moments for America, including the defense of Baltimore (which gave us our national anthem), the Battle of Lake Erie and the Battle of New Orleans, the last of which was fought after the peace treaty was signed.

But for Americans this doesn't outweigh the fact that our nation's capital was burned, after a largely futile attempt at defense. Or that the war was basically a stalemate between two nations that had no chance of scoring a decisive strategic triumph over each other.

But glorious or not, it remains a key part of our history, and it is fascinating to discover that major pieces of that history repose under the ooze at the bottom of the Patuxent River.

As we reported yesterday, historians and archaeologists think they have found the remains of the Chesapeake Flotilla, the ragtag force of barges and boats organized by Joshua Barney, a Baltimore native who had been a naval hero of the American Revolution.

The force was no match for the British navy, and the best that can be claimed for it is that it harassed the oncoming British during the campaign that culminated in the burning of Washington. The flotilla was ultimately scuttled in the Patuxent; Barney then marched his men into the disastrous Battle of Bladensburg, where they fought with great valor and Barney himself suffered the wound whose complications killed him four years later.

During the past few weeks, teams of divers from the U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command and a contractor hired by the Maryland Historical Trust and the State Highway Administration have been uncovering a wreck they think is that of the *Scorpion*, the 40-foot sloop that was Barney's flagship.

Their smoking gun is a grog cup with the initials C.W. It most likely belonged to the only person in the flotilla known to have those initials: Caesar Wentworth, an African-American cook who was on the flagship.

Work at the site is scheduled to stop for the season on Sunday. Like the archaeologists and divers involved, we hope they can confirm that the wreck is the *Scorpion*, and then get the \$4 million or so they will need to come back in 2012, put a cofferdam in the river and do a full-scale study.

Until then, it might do us all good to contemplate a time when Americans were gutsy underdogs defending their homeland, and scraping together nearly anything that could float to try and go up against the mightiest navy in the world. Perhaps Barney and his men could do more than fight a delaying action - but you have to wonder if any of us would have done as well.