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Baltimore Defenders' Day Fort McHenry's commanding ranger notes role in 1814 battle played by runaway slave

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On his inaugural whistle-stop tour that rolled through Baltimore this year, President Barack Obama made a point of mentioning that a runaway slave was among the troops who beat back the British during the battle in 1814 that inspired "The Star-Spangled Banner."

He didn't name the soldier, but the history buffs of Fort McHenry knew exactly who he was talking about.

"He was referring to Frederick Hall, who escaped from a plantation in Prince George's County and joined the regular U.S. Army under the assumed name of William Williams," said Vincent Vaise, a park ranger at Fort McHenry who commands the historical guard and serves as a font of historical knowledge. "People are intrigued by him and are surprised to hear the role that African-Americans played. It's part of the story that hasn't always been told."

The fact that escaped and freed slaves and African-Americans born free in the United States would defend a country that still condoned their bondage is an often-overlooked part of history that Vaise and others strive to incorporate into their teachings at the fort. That's especially true this weekend when a three-day event known as Defenders' Day commemorates Francis Scott Key penning the national anthem and the decisive defense of Baltimore against the British onslaught in the War of 1812.

Several African-Americans took part in re-enactments of how battles were fought - complete with musket and cannon fire - and the Society for the Preservation of African-American Arts led a singalong. Hundreds of visitors turned out despite intermittent rain showers on Saturday for the event that's been celebrated every year since 1814.

Toy Glover, a re-enactor who became a ranger while studying African-American history at Coppin State University, said he emphasizes to students who visit the fort that African-Americans have played a prominent role in every war since the American Revolution, and succeeded even during times of slavery and discrimination.

"If people back then could make it, then any one of us could make it," Glover said. "There's no excuse for anyone not to accomplish your dreams."

At the time of the war, African-Americans not only helped to build entrenchments and cannon

platforms on the outskirts of the city, but many served in the Navy and maritime trades. An estimated one-fifth of U.S. sailors were black and the crews were not segregated, offering one of the best opportunities for employment for escaped slaves and free African-Americans. Baltimore had the highest population of free blacks in the United States then.

"Just as the war gave us a new standing in the world, it was important for African-Americans to show they could make a contribution," said Christopher T. George, a historian and author of "Terror on the Chesapeake: The War of 1812 on the Bay."

And show their mettle they did. After 25 hours of continuous shelling at Fort McHenry - the only attack it sustained in more than a century of protecting Baltimore - the British abandoned their attempt to capture the city.

As Obama put it: "They were a varied lot, these troops: sailors, militiamen, and even a runaway slave. But on one long and rainy night, they beat back the greatest navy that the world had ever known. And when that night was over, they raised a flag in triumph, inspiring an onlooker to compose a poem that became 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' "

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