

## War of 1812 bicentennial preparations underway

### County historical sites targeted for cultural tourism, educational initiative

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By Nancy Royden

Prince Georgians don't have to go far from home to see history with national implications, and plans are being made to highlight local architectural and cultural gems for the upcoming Maryland War of 1812 bicentennial.

Gov. Martin O'Malley issued an executive order in 2007 creating the War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission to plan a multi-year cultural tourism and educational initiative to commemorate this segment of Maryland's history, according to information provided by the Maryland Office of Tourism.

On Sept. 12, the governor's office announced Raymond A. "Chip" Mason as chairman of the Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission during a ceremony in Baltimore to commemorate the 195th anniversary of the Battle of Baltimore and the bombardment of Fort McHenry. Mason is founder of Baltimore-based asset management firm Legg Mason Inc.

O'Malley also said the U.S. Navy is planning a series of major events in six U.S. and Canadian port cities in 2012 to commemorate the military branch's role during the war.

Not only are people from outside Prince George's County excited about the educational events being brought to light, but also so are those within the county.

One man who is highly interested in the history of the war is historian Ralph Eshelman, who has published two works regarding it: *Maryland's Largest Naval Engagement: The Battles of St. Leonard Creek, 1814* and *The War of 1812 in the Chesapeake: A Reference Guide to Historic Sites in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia*.

Eshelman said regional meetings are underway to discuss ways to observe the bicentennial, and the counties are working together to accomplish this. Meetings yet to be held are scheduled in Havre de Grace, Baltimore and the Eastern Shore area.

Several agencies supported the Prince George's County Star-Spangled 200 Conference on Sept. 24, one of the meetings set up to plan and highlight bicentennial activities. They included The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, the University of Maryland College Park, the Prince George's County Conference and Visitors



*Courtesy photo by Cassi Hayden, M-NCPPC. 2009 Battle of Bladensburg (War of 1812) reenactment at Riversdale House Museum.*

Bureau, the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area, and Port Towns Community Development Corp.

Eshelman said cooperation is imperative in the planning process and the Prince George's County event was a positive experience.

"We met at 9 o'clock and had over 40 people there. I think everyone enjoyed it," he said.

One local treasure connected with the War of 1812 is the Riversdale House Museum and its visitor center. They are located at 4811 Riverdale Road in Riverdale Park off East-West Highway between Route 1 and Kenilworth Avenue.

Eshelman said this was one of the locales highlighted during the bicentennial-related tour.

"It's a gem. It's kind of hidden. People wouldn't expect it's there," he said.

Eshelman said the history of the War of 1812 is important to share with others.

“Many people don’t realize our National Anthem and our flag all came out of the War of 1812. It’s important to understand the history behind it. It really did happen here in Maryland,” he said.

Riversdale, according to a plaque placed on the gate of the Riversdale House Museum by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, was designated a national historic landmark and it, “possesses national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America.”

According to visitor information from The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, regarding the Riversdale House Museum, Henri Joseph Stier, a Flemish aristocrat who fled from political turmoil in Europe, established it. In 1803, he went back to Europe and gave the house to his daughter, Rosalie. She and husband George Calvert, a member of the state’s founding family, completed the house.

When visitors go to Riversdale, they are treated to a garden recreated in 19th-century style. Tobacco and colorful flowers of all types are on display.

Edward Day is director of the museum and Ann Buermann Wass is history/museum specialist.

Much more planning is underway for the upcoming War of 1812 bicentennial, and collaboration among the state’s stakeholders is essential, according to the Maryland Office of Tourism.

Eshelman discussed the war at the Riversdale House Museum with the Sept. 24 group of people. They also learned from a Fort McHenry National Park Service ranger about the Battle of Bladensburg.

The Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine on East Fort Avenue in Baltimore is the birthplace of the National Anthem.

During the Battle of Baltimore, Sept. 13-14, 1814, the fort was defended by 1,000 Americans and inspired Francis Scott Key to pen “The Star-Spangled Banner,” according to the National Park Service.

They also went to Bostwick in the Town of Bladensburg, a historic house used by a British prisoner-of-war agent during the War of 1812, according to the Maryland Office of Tourism.

Bostwick’s National Register Application, dated 1975, and information posted on the Town of Bladensburg’s Web site, states Bostwick is one of only four pre-Revolutionary War structures still standing in Bladensburg. It was built for Christopher Lowndes, a leading citizen and local merchant.

“His trading company imported spices, building materials, dry goods and slaves. He also owned a shipyard where ocean-going vessels were constructed as well as a ropewalk that manufactured the cordage necessary for shipping lines,” the account states.

The house has been owned by a few different families throughout the years, and was sold by Susanna Yatman in the late 1990s to the Town of Bladensburg, according to the application and town’s Web site.

<http://www.thesentinel.com/pgs/War-of-1812>

The Bladensburg Waterfront Park, situated on Annapolis Road among port towns of Bladensburg, Colman Manor and Cottage City, provided the lunch setting for the Sept. 24 group of War of 1812 history buffs. They also viewed the State Highway Administration’s Bladensburg Archeology Project, according to the Maryland Office of Tourism.

According to the Town of Bladensburg’s Web site, [www.bladensburg.com](http://www.bladensburg.com), written by Bladensburg police captain Charles Owens, in July 1814, a British fleet had been in control of the Chesapeake Bay for more than a year, and a separate military command was created under Brig. Gen. William Winder, for defending Washington, D.C., Maryland and eastern Virginia.

“On Aug. 20, 1814, over 4,500 seasoned British troops landed at the town of Benedict (in Charles County) on the Patuxent River and marched 50 miles over land bent on destroying the Capitol and other federal buildings,” according to the Web site.

The town’s history goes on to recount that British troops gave the Americans the impression they were headed toward Baltimore.

“General Armstrong could not be convinced that Washington would be the target of the invasion and not Baltimore, an important center of commerce. As a precaution, two bridges across the Anacostia River were destroyed to protect the Capital, thus leaving a route through Bladensburg as the logical approach. Gen. Winder sent troops to Marlborough to intercept the British, but they hurried back when they learned the enemy was already entering Bladensburg,” according to the history account on the Web site.

According to an online article submitted by F. Robby to the Historical Marker Database, the Battle of Bladensburg marker in Colmar Manor states Commodore Joshua Barney and his 500 Marines were greatly outnumbered by the British Expeditionary Force of 4,500 trained regulars. For four hours, the battle continued, but the British simply were too much for the Americans, and they burned down the Capitol and White House.

The final stop for the Sept. 24 group was a visit to Mount Calvert, where a detachment of British soldiers landed to join the invading British Army during it soldiers’ march to Bladensburg and Washington, D.C., according to the Maryland Office of Tourism.

There are many ways for Prince Georgians to get involved with history preservation. One of them supports the Riversdale mansion.

For instance, the Riversdale Historical Society is Riversdale’s volunteer supporting organization. Its members raise political and financial support to restore the house and fund interpretation projects.

The group’s members train docents who conduct house tours and operate the museum’s gift shop, which includes books, toys and other items.

For more information about the society, visit: [www.riversdale.org](http://www.riversdale.org).

For more information regarding War of 1812 history and events, a new Web site has been launched. It may be found at: [www.StarSpangled200.org](http://www.StarSpangled200.org).