



# Delmarva Peninsula, its people had key roles in War of 1812

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America's least-known war had a greater direct effect on our area than any other of this country's conflicts.

The British wreaked destruction in the War of 1812 on upper Chesapeake Bay [communities](#) and tried to do the same to Lewes.

So as we near the bicentennial, let's set the local stage.

President James Madison took the country to war because Britain was impressing American seamen, blockading ports and otherwise violating our neutrality. Congress formally declared war in June 1812, with Delaware Sen. James A. Bayard opposing the decision.

The war may have been between Britain and the United States, but it also involved many Native American tribes and Canada. It was fought on the seas, bays and lakes as much as it was on land. Its end in December 1814 was largely the result of a Delawarean's [naval](#) victory.

Delaware's most famous entanglement with the British was the bombardment of Lewes. The British fleet had blockaded the Chesapeake and Delaware bays in early 1813, and British Commodore John P. Beresford demanded Lewes "sell" him bullocks, hay and [vegetables](#), or else he would destroy the town.

When Lewes refused, the town was bombarded for 22 hours on April 6-7 by 800 cannon shells and rockets, but they failed to do much damage. Delaware militia on the [beach](#) repulsed a landing effort by a few British sailors. No American was hurt.

<http://www.delawareonline.com/article/20111219/OPINION09/112190315/Delmarva-Peninsula-its-people-had-key-roles-War-1812?odyssey=mod%7Cnewswell%7Ctext%7COpinion%7Cp>

Lewes' story will be detailed at the Public Archives in Dover in a 10:30 a.m. talk Jan. 7 by Michael DiPaolo, executive director of the Lewes Historical Society.

The British landed occasional foraging parties in Delaware, including at Indian River and Little Creek, and destroyed some ships.

Both the upper eastern and western Chesapeake shores of Maryland suffered the most under an English onslaught in 1813.

The British wanted to burn down Elkton, but a local militia fought off landing parties at Elk Landing, where the Big and Little Elk River meet, a skirmish that will be re-enacted next year on April 28, the anniversary of Defenders Day.

On April 29, 1813, the British attacked Frenchtown on the Elk River, burning down the entire port so that no such community exists today. Frenchtown was where [cargo](#) was loaded and unloaded for the Delmarva Peninsula since there was no canal then.

On May 5, Adm. George Cockburn sailed up the Sassafras River to Georgetown in Kent County and Fredericktown in Cecil County. The British burned down all the shops, granaries, private homes, farmhouses, taverns and ships.

Legend has it that Kitty (Catherine) Knight waved the American flag at the British and chased their [marines](#) from her home with a broom. It may only be a legend, but her house remains a restaurant and inn today.

Havre de Grace suffered a similar fiery fate on May 4. This time, the British attacked from the Susquehanna River and fought off a ragtag group of older militia.

Delaware's principal War of 1812 connection comes with its Medal of Honor hero, Captain or Commodore Thomas Macdonough, born at the village that bears his family's name, about four miles northeast of Middletown.

His prominent [Navy](#) career climaxed with his clever defeat of the British fleet at Plattsburgh, N.Y., in the Battle of Lake Champlain on Sept. 11, 1814. When word of his victory arrived at peace negotiations a month later, it resulted in the Treaty

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of Ghent (in today's Belgium) on Dec. 24, 1814, where James Bayard was a delegate in the negotiations.

Most people remember the War of 1812 for the British burning of Washington in August 1814, where Dolley Madison saved the Stuart portrait of George Washington, and the siege the next month of Baltimore, successfully defended by Fort McHenry and immortalized by Francis Scott Key.

Delaware has the close connection to that latter event because "The Star-Spangled Banner" that flew that day and night has been restored for the National Museum of American History under the direction of Suzanne Thomassen-Kraus, a graduate of the [University](#) of Delaware/ Winterthur art conservation program. She will return to Delaware on June 6 to speak at 10:30 a.m. at the Public Archives in Dover about that project.

Harry Themal has been writing a News Journal column since 1989.