

## Battle readied for spot on War of 1812 trail

By Meghan Hoyer  
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Only a few decades after America gained its independence, the fledgling nation found itself at war again with the mighty British Empire.

The War of 1812 involved battles waged from New Orleans to New England. The defense of Baltimore's Fort McHenry in 1814 famously inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner."

At Portsmouth's Craney Island, 700 American militiamen repulsed 3,700 British Redcoats in Virginia's only land battle of the war. The victory was significant because it protected South Hampton Roads' cities, the crucial Gosport Shipyard, and one of the new nation's few warships, the USS *Constellation*. But it hasn't been recognized much in the history books, overshadowed by the later burning of Washington and the battle that inspired Key's famous song. Now, locals worry that it has been forgotten again.

The Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, designed by the National Park Service to mark important sites of the War of 1812, focuses mostly on Maryland's legacy.

Local historic groups asked several years ago for Hampton Roads to be included in the National Parks trail, to no avail. Now, they're trying again – this time, with the power of the state behind them.

A statewide commission established to help Virginia commemorate the bicentennial of the War of 1812 is working with Norfolk and Portsmouth to ask congressional leaders to extend the trail into Hampton Roads.

At stake are tourism dollars, publicity and a greater sense of the region's historical legacy.

"To have something about the Star-Spangled Banner and the War of 1812 that is totally concentrated in



*Louis L. Guy, Jr. poses for a portrait on Monday, Dec. 28, 2009 in front of Fort Norfolk. Guy, 71, is the past president of the Norfolk Historical Society. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)*



*A photograph of Fort Norfolk on Monday, Dec. 28, 2009. Norfolk and Portsmouth historians are making a case to be included in the new Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, which traces important sites such as this in the War of 1812. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)*

### Prospects for stops on trail

Local historians have suggested these sites:

- Fort Norfolk, a fort built in 1809 near Norfolk's downtown waterfront.
- Hoffer Creek Wildlife Reserve, where British troops landed in Portsmouth in 1813.
- Craney Island is listed as a stop that could be viewed by boat tour from the water.

Maryland is embarrassing,” said Louis Guy, of the Norfolk Historical Society. “... We’ve got a case, it’s just bringing enough attention to correct the record.”

Proponents say it’s going to be an uphill battle. The trail emphasizes events of the 1814 campaign, not the earlier engagements here.

To change it would literally require an act of Congress. Federal legislators alone have the authority to widen the range of national trails.

Members of the state commission believe federal legislators may not be aware of Virginia’s role in the war, said Brenda Edwards, a senior research associate in the state’s Division of Legislative Services.

“It probably was an oversight,” she said. “We’ve already begun to provide historical information to representatives so that they are made aware about different sites and battles, and Virginia’s contributions.”

In recent weeks, Portsmouth officials have sent letters to congressmen and Hampton city leaders, urging them to join in the campaign. British troops burned Hampton after being rebuffed in Portsmouth in 1813.

Local historians have suggested sites ranging from Fort Norfolk, a largely intact fort built in 1809 near Norfolk’s downtown waterfront, to the Hoffler Creek Wildlife Reserve, where British troops landed in Portsmouth in 1813, as possible stops on the national trail. Craney Island, now owned by the Army Corps of Engineers and used to deposit dredging material, is listed as a stop that could be viewed by boat tour from the water.

“It’s a tourism issue; it’s a history issue,” said Nancy Perry, Portsmouth’s director of museums, who is working on the city’s lobbying effort. “The hope is that it would bring more recognition to Portsmouth. We do have places that are War of 1812 sites, or that interpret the War of 1812 – they were important.”

National trails have been changed in the past. In 2009, the Trail of Tears – a series of routes across the South and Southwest that traced the removal of the Cherokee from their land in the 1800s – added several new spurs, said Steve Elkinton, program director of the trail system for the National Park Service.

But the process of being added to a national trail is long and tedious, and Elkinton advised Hampton Roads leaders instead to concentrate on showing off the region’s historic hot spots.

“If they want to just show off the great stuff they have over time – there’s some alternatives,” Elkinton said. “Don’t fool around with the trail. The best way to do it is to say, ‘Here’s the role we played in the War of 1812.’”

The state commission is doing that, too, Edwards said. It has planned events – from participation in Norfolk’s 2012 OpSail to historic tours, book-signings and remembrances – to mark the War of 1812’s bicentennial.

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