

# The Battle of North Point

A Little-Known Battle from a Scarcely Remembered War

By Ross M. Kimmel

Most people can make a pretty good guess when the War of 1812 started. Some know about the bombardment of Fort McHenry, which inspired Francis Scott Key to write the Star-Spangled Banner. And movie buffs no doubt recall mustachioed Yul Brunner as the pirate chieftain Jean Lafitte coming to the rescue of silver-haired, heavy-browed Charlton Heston as Andrew Jackson in *The Buccaneer*, an account of the Battle of New Orleans.

Not as well known, perhaps, is the pivotal role that Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay played in the war. And even less well known is the Battle of North Point, a fierce engagement on the outskirts of Baltimore that helped turn the Chesapeake campaign against the British.

But the Battle of North Point was a clash that pitted a disciplined, yet untested militia against battle-hardened British veterans. It saved Baltimore and helped boost the self-esteem of a young nation that had just seen its Capitol and many of its national buildings burned to the ground.

Major General Samuel Smith (left) was in overall command of the American defense of Baltimore. Brigadier General John Stricker commanded the American force at the Battle of North Point. Acclaimed American artist Rembrandt Peale painted both these portraits between 1817-1818.



And although military historians would count the battle a draw, it bloodied the nose of the Troops Who Whipped Napoleon, dealing a blow to their morale that they never regained. A day after their advance on Baltimore was stymied at North Point, the British tried unsuccessfully to bomb Fort McHenry into submission, inspiring Francis Scott Key to write the Star-Spangled Banner.

## Remembering Our Forgotten History

The heroes of North Point were once celebrated in Maryland on Defender's Day. Visiting dignitaries made a point of visiting the battlefield and presidents lauded their feats in speeches. But other battles and other heroes eventually pushed North Point, and the war itself, into the background of the national consciousness.

But with its bicentennial approaching, the story of the War of 1812 is reemerging.

Two years ago, Maryland purchased the nine acres that represented the only undeveloped remnant of the September 14, 1814 North Point battlefield for preservation under Program Open Space.

In June, Congress established the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, marking the British campaign on the Chesapeake, including the Battle of North Point and the Battle of Baltimore that followed.

Maryland is planning a statewide commemoration of the war's bicentennial in 2012.

Now at least we have a chance to remember, and learn from, an important era in our nation's history; a point in time that helped shape us as a people, a state, and a country.

## Eyes on British Canada

Rallying the nation with the cry "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights," President James Madison wrung a declaration of war out of Congress on June 18, 1812.

The British were interfering with American merchant shipping and impressing American seamen into service on Her Majesty's ships. Such depredations were affronts to American national sovereignty. In the war's first great irony, the British had decided to stop seizing American merchantmen the day before Congress's declaration, although impressments continued.

Influential Americans had ulterior motives for war: seizure of British Canada, neutralization of Indian tribes resisting American expansion into the Old Northwest, and the possibility of seizing at least some of Spanish Florida. There was a strong anti-war movement, especially in New England. But 1812 was an election year, and President Madison sensed sentiment was running in his favor.

Unfortunately, the country was woefully unprepared to take on one of the world's superpowers.

Most of the fighting occurred on the Canadian-American border, around both sides of the Great Lakes, into Michigan. Neither side could sustain the upper hand, though the American navy established supremacy on the Great Lakes.

## Every Man's Turnip Patch

In 1813, the British sent a squadron of naval vessels into the Chesapeake Bay, hoping to draw American forces from the war in the north. But Madison refused to divert resources from the fighting on the Canadian border and Chesapeake residents were left to fend for themselves.

"It can't be expected that I can defend every man's turnip patch," President Madison said dismissively.

The British raided at will up and down the Chesapeake. They burned towns, settlements and plantations that they deemed offered resistance, including the land that is now Point Lookout State Park. They helped themselves to supplies and offered freedom to enslaved men if they would fight their former mas-

ters. Many enslaved men jumped at the chance.

In the summer of 1814, after the defeat of Napoleon in Europe, the British sent an army of 4,000 men to augment the naval forces in the Chesapeake. Landing at Benedict, on or near DNR lands at Indian Creek, the British force marched past the site of today's Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary, brushed aside a hastily formed force of Americans at the Battle of Bladensburg, marched into a nearly deserted District of Columbia, and burned the Capitol, the White House and other public buildings. Re-embarking at Benedict, the British next set their sights on Baltimore.

### A Nest of Pirates

The British described Baltimore as "a nest of pirates," a disparaging nickname the city earned by outfitting many privateers that preyed on British merchant vessels during the war. The British wanted revenge. But Baltimore was better prepared than Washington. They were led by Gen. Samuel Smith, a veteran officer of the War of Independence, who had been anticipating an attack for more than a year.

In the early hours of September 12, 1814, British forces landed at the tip of North Point and proceeded confidently up the peninsula. Most of the British were battle-tested veterans of the wars against

Napoleon, but fighting far from home. The Marylanders who faced them had special incentive – they were defending hearth and kin.

The British commander, Major General Robert Ross, planned to be in position that evening to assault the defenses of Baltimore which stretched along hills to the east of the city. Unknown to the British, the Baltimore City Brigade under General John Stricker waited at the intersection of North Point and Trappe Roads, predetermined to be the best spot to counter and delay an attack on the town.

Just south of the American line, in a surprise encounter, skirmishers inflicted a mortal wound to Ross. Forcing the skirmishers back, the British met the American main line at the edge of an open field astride North Point Road. The new British commander, Colonel Arthur Brooke unleashed his artillery and rockets to soften up the American line. This fire was returned by the American artillery. After almost two hours of counter battery activity, the British advanced, pushing the Americans back, but not overwhelming them. Stricker held his ground as long as possible then retreated across Bread and Cheese Creek to a reserve position. The exhausted British troops stopped on the field of battle to rest and bind their wounds.

## The Colonial Marines

When the British arrived in the Chesapeake Bay in February 1813, enslaved men and women made their way to His Majesty's ships searching for freedom.

Most were sent to Bermuda or Nova Scotia. Some stayed to serve as guides on the shallow waterways of the Bay. Many men found employment as soldiers to the King.

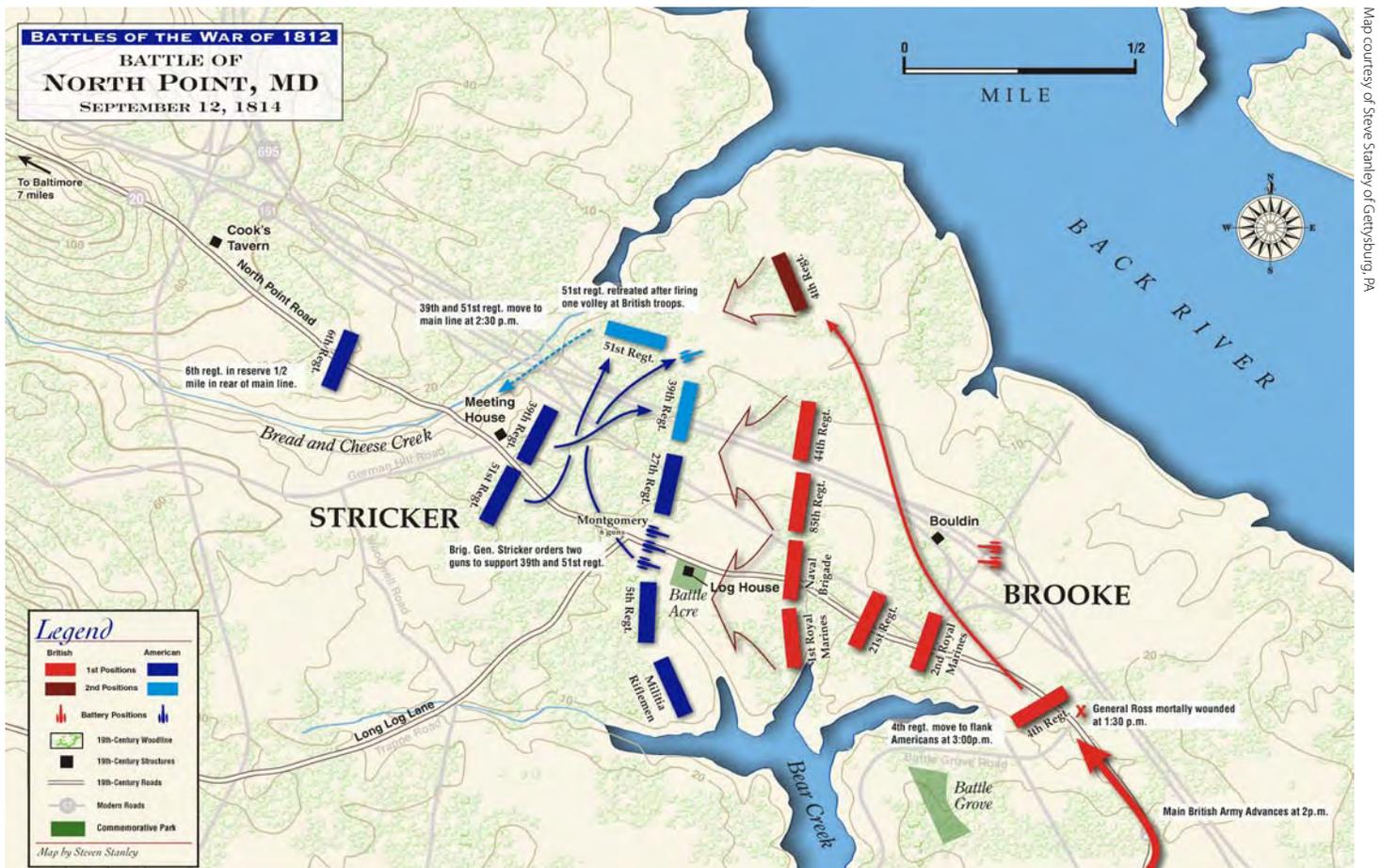
Known as Colonial Marines, they were clothed and accoutered in the same manner as Royal Marines, and trained on Tangier Island where the British had established a base of operations.

Their first action was at Pungoteague on the Eastern Shore on May 28, 1814. A company fought at the Battle of Bladensburg and three companies fought at North Point.

When the British moved south to Georgia in December 1814, the Colonial Marines joined them. Operating from Cumberland Island, the ranks swelled to six companies, their wives and children. After the war, the Colonial Marines served in Bermuda until 1817. They eventually settled in Trinidad where they were given land as free men.



The Battle of North Point by Thomas Ruckle



Map courtesy of Steve Stanley of Gettysburg, PA

That night, Stricker’s brigade retired to another pre-planned position within the American defenses of the city.

Brooke and his army finally made it to the Baltimore defenses, 18 hours later than they had planned. Bruised and battered from the previous day, their momentum dented, the British searched for a way through or around the earthworks. By evening, knowing that the Royal Navy could not provide assistance, Brooke decided not to waste manpower on a fruitless assault.

Brooke marched his army back to North Point, burning Todd’s Inheritance, a historic structure at North Point State Park. Today, this site is leased to a private, non-profit foundation that is working to restore it as a museum. At North Point, Brooke’s army rendezvoused with the navy to sail to the West Indies, from which the British would try again to defeat the Americans at New Orleans.

### Rockets’ Red Glare

As the British navy sailed away from Fort McHenry, Francis Scott Key, a Carroll County native who observed the bombardment from a truce ship recording the “rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air,” was moved at “the dawn’s early light” to see the small storm flag over Fort McHenry come down and the huge garrison flag go up as the British sailed away.

Baltimore citizens and soldiers were jubilant. Key’s poem was set in print, then put to music. The Star-Spangled Banner became immensely popular all over the United States. Congress declared it the national anthem in 1931. Baltimoreans, though, understood

that the repulse of the land phase of the British invasion was strategically the more important event. September 12, the date of the Battle of North Point, was set aside as “Defenders’ Day.” The last of the “Old Defenders,” the soldiers and sailors who had defended the city, died in 1896.

The British and the Americans faced each other for one last epic battle, at New Orleans on January 8, 1815; there the British army assaulted an entrenched foe and were nearly destroyed.

In the war’s other great irony, the Battle of New Orleans was fought *after* British and American peace commissioners agreed to a war-ending treaty in Ghent, Belgium, on Christmas Eve 1814. Word of that had not reached this side of the world.

The Treaty of Ghent ended the war without addressing the issues that caused it. The British already had decided to stop harassing American shipping, and with Napoleon defeated (albeit temporarily), they had no incentive to impress American seamen. A joint-commission was established to mediate border disputes between Canada and the United States. The British agreed to stop inciting the Indians to attack American settlers. The U.S. never again considered conquering Canada.

The decisive victory at New Orleans and the successful defense of Baltimore helped shape the nascent sense of American nationalism, although that would not fully mature until after the Civil War. ■

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