

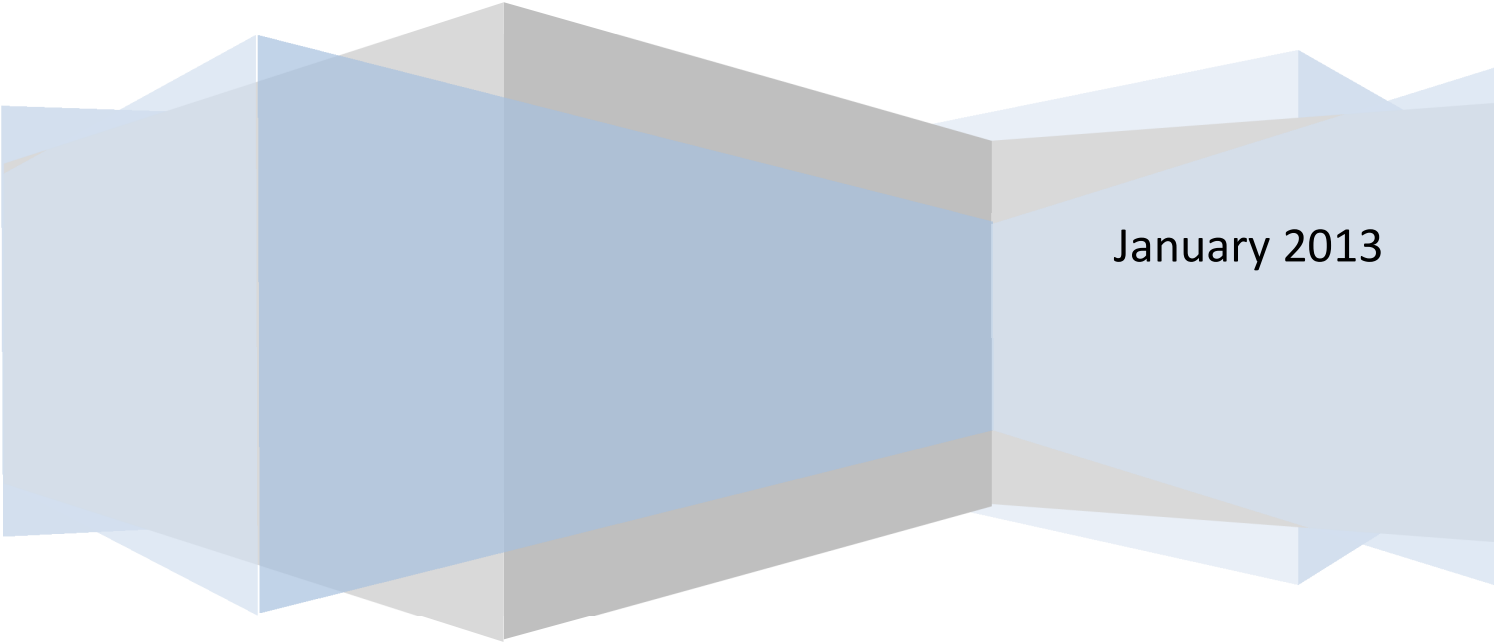
Prepared for the Heritage Museums of Havre de Grace

An Interpretative Plan -- Telling the Havre de Grace War of 1812 Story for the Popular Audience

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January 2013

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Historiography of Havre de Grace

Introduction

Havre de Grace, a thriving historic community at the northern top of the Chesapeake Bay, is the subject of a public history project that is chronicling the community's history in the first third of the 19th century. The purpose of this broad initiative is for the City and its six heritage museums, with support from the National Park Service's Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority, and other partners, to share the heritage of the City with residents and visitors during the Bicentennial of the War of 1812.

The town that grew up at the spot where the Susquehanna River flows into the Chesapeake suffered from a devastating attack by the British in May 1813, and a large portion of its buildings and structures were destroyed when the enemy stormed onto Harford County soil.

To aid a cluster of stakeholders in delivery of public programs and interpretations of this unique narrative for the broader general audience during the Bicentennial, the report has a number of goals. Those include:

- The presentation of a basic background briefing on the broader conflict;
- A summary of the historiography related to the first third of the 19th century in the community;
- development of a basic interpretive narrative sketching out the storyline, which can be used to aid institutions in developing partner-specific popular understanding for museum docents sharing the history with the non-specialist;
- A bibliography to guide additional development of partner-specific interpretations, and study. It may also provide a framework for future research.

The concept is that this document will serve as a primer or source of base reference materials to help the six heritage museums of Havre de Grace better communicate their institutional and local storylines to the public during the Bicentennial and thereafter. It is not the final piece of research on this subject, but serves as an emerging body of documentation and scholarship centered on the attack on the fishing village, the characteristics of the community, and the period of recovery. As each stakeholder has specific organizational goals and narratives to be shared, the document should be used to assist in developing and

implementing the organization’s site-specific unique interpretive plan, so project colleagues should use the primer as a base reference to be built upon for training their docents and museum guides in presenting the unique narratives of the community that withstood a weathering attack at the hands of an enemy.

Interpretation, according to the National Park service, “is communication that is specifically designed to reveal underlying meanings to the visitors through first-hand involvement with an object, a landscape, a natural feature, or a site. Interpretation helps people connect intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually with the ideas, beliefs, and values embodied in the world. [It] is based on facts, but reveals what an object, place, feature or event means and why it matters – why it is relevant.”¹

¹ National Park Service, *Planning for Success: Interpretive Planning Tools for Historic Trails and Gateways*, p.2., U.S. Department of Labor: Chesapeake Bay Office

Background

The War of 1812

On June 1, 1812, President James Madison sent a list of four grievances against Great Britain to Congress, and after some deliberation the House and the Senate declared war the same month. The major goal of the declaration was to force the British to respect American maritime rights as the Royal Navy was impressing seamen on American flagged vessels and committing other seafaring injustices. American seamen were taken off American ships and pressed into service on Great Britain's ships. They also harassed American ships in neutral waters and while leaving ports. The United States was ill prepared for the conflict, it possessing only a small regular army containing fewer than 10,000 men and a navy of fewer than twenty frigates and sloops. The regular army was scattered around the frontier in small garrisons and state militias were in various conditions of readiness.²

The War was fought in four principal theatres. At sea, warships and privateers attacked each other's merchant ships, while the British blockaded the Atlantic Coast of the United States. With the British forces tied down in Europe fighting the Napoleonic Wars at first, the U.S. American military operations initially focused on the western Great Lakes and Canadian fronts. Once Britain defeated Napoleon in 1814 they took the offensive as their victory over Napoleon released thousands of well-trained British troops for service in America. British strategist planned to increase pressure on three separate American fronts: the Canadian frontier, the Chesapeake, and New Orleans.³

Unlike the Revolutionary War, which almost left Maryland directly untouched by military action, the War of 1812 threatened the State directly. In December 1812, the British government issued an order declaring the Chesapeake and Delaware bays blocked. The following February Rear Admiral George Cockburn and his warships carried the war into these parts. Harassing the Chesapeake coast, Admiral Cockburn's forces made shore incursions in the upper Bay at Frenchtown (near Elkton), Havre de Grace, Georgetown and Fredericktown, St. Michaels, St. Mary's County, Kent Island, and other places.

² Morris & Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History*: 7th Edition, Revised & Updated, Declaration of War on Great Britain. P 159-160

³ Dictionary of American History, Revised Edition, 1976, War of 1812, Julius W. Pratt & Doane Robinson, pp 232 - 235

To enforce their blockade and harass the bay, the British Admiralty maintained eight ships-of-the-line, twelve frigates, and many smaller vessels. To their surprise, the British found the region largely undefended. This concentration of power in the Chesapeake caused the Governor of Maryland to ask the Madison administration for federal assistance. Maryland was told that it must rely upon its own militia.

On April 27, 1813, a British brig and three schooners anchored in the waters of off Havre de Grace. (Old men recalled they were in the same place used by the British in 1777 as they readied themselves for the Philadelphia campaign.) Once these vessels were joined by another brig and schooner, Cockburn's raiders started their work on the Upper Chesapeake.

In the early morning of April 29, with Lt. Westphal of the HMS Marlborough in command of about 150 marines and five artillerymen, Frenchtown was attacked. The fortification consisted of a small redoubt upon which were mounted a few small cannon, which had seen service during the Revolution. The garrison consisted of some stage drivers, wagoners, and a few militia from Elkton, made a stand, firing on the invaders as they came in range. British shipboard artillery returned fire and soon, with the British marines coming ashore, the defenders were forced to retreat before the overwhelming numbers. The wharf, fishery, warehouses, goods, and at least two vessels lying at anchor were plundered and burned.

Sailing further up the Elk River, the British attacked Fort Defiance, which was held by one hundred and fifteen men. The assault failed and the enemy tried to approach the town by land, but blundered into Fort Hollingsworth at Elk Landing. They were again driven back and this ended their attempt to take Elkton. Abandoning their efforts on the Upper Elk River, the British sailed away and again rounded Turkey Point.

On May 3, they took Havre de Grace, then a settlement of about fifty to sixty houses. (Note: See the storyline section of this report for details on the attack on Havre de Grace.) After burning a large part of the town, they burned the warehouses and other buildings at Lapidum, a Harford county village on the Susquehanna.

Next the British sailed into Charlestown, but, by now, the fate of resisting communities was clear. Charlestown sent a peace party to greet Cockburn as his fleet lay in

the bay, “To assure the reader admiral that this place was considered at his mercy.” After landing unopposed, the British destroyed the cannon factory at Principio.

Sailing from the mouth of the Susquehanna to the Sassafras, the British approached the settlements on the Bohemia River. At Fredericktown, the invaders encountered fire from a local militia company, but these protectors were soon overcome by far superior forces. When the invaders occupied the town, they burned it. Following the destruction of Fredericktown, the enemy crossed the Sassafras and destroyed Georgetown in Kent County, except for two houses, which were spare due to the pleading of Catherine Knight.

With six of the settlements at the Head of the Chesapeake Bay (Frenchtown, Havre de Grace, Lapiudum, Principio Furnance, Fredericktown and Georgetown) in smoldering ruins and perhaps satisfied that Cecil and Harford counties were sufficiently subdued for the moment, Admiral Cockburn and his fleet sailed southward.

On August 24, 1814, in retaliation for the American destruction of the capital of Upper Canada (York, Ontario), a small force of British marines routed militia at Bladensburg and with American resistance fading, the British marched into Washington, D.C., setting the city ablaze. Encouraged by this success, the British launched a full scale attack on Baltimore (Sept. 14), the nation’s third largest city and an important commercial center. The fort guarding the harbor, Fort McHenry, held out against a heavy naval bombardment and the British gave up the operation. The survival of Fort McHenry inspired Francis Scott Key to write “The Star Spangled Banner.”^{4,5}

By 1814, both sides were weary of a costly war that offered little clear overall strategic progress for either nation. So peace talks opened and on December 24, 1814, diplomats signed the Treaty of Ghent. The treaty was ratified by the British three days later and arrived in Washington on February 17, where it was quickly ratified, bringing the war to an end. The terms called for all occupied territory to be returned, the prewar boundaries between Canada and the United States to be restored. The treaty did not mention the

⁴ George, Christopher T. *Terror on the Chesapeake: The War of 1812 on the Bay*, White Main Books, 2000, Chapter 4, Cockburn’s Terror

⁵ Johnston, George, *History of Cecil County*, Published by the Author: Elkton, MD. Chapter 24, the War of 1812,

grievances that led to the war. But American was satisfied that their honor as an independent nation had been upheld.

The Community

Havre de Grace began as a river settlement in the 17th century and was known as Susquehanna Lower Ferry. This settlement grew until there were 200 residents when the county was formed in 1773-74. The land was divided into lots before 1785, but laid out again on a grander scale in the 1790s. The earlier plan was done by Robert Young Stokes and the later by C. P. Hauducoeur. A pamphlet of 1795 describes Hauducoeur's work: "eight hundred and fifty acres . . . laid out in square in imitation of Philadelphia. These squares are now divided into lots, amounting in the whole to forty-five hundred. . . . The same pamphlet stated that the town at that time had fifty 'good dwelling houses.'"^{6,7}

"Hauducoeur provided many sites for public buildings and open spaces," John W. Reps wrote. According to the legend on the plan these included no fewer than ten locations for churches, two of them fronting on a public walk and garden called Washington Square. In addition, sites were reserved for a college, a bettering house, a hospital, an alms-house, Columbia Square and Theatre, a public market, a cemetery, and a courthouse and jail. "While the citizens of Havre de Grace put in a determined bid in 1787 to become a county seat of Harford County, Bel Air won the election held for this purpose and Havre de Grace failed to achieve the stature of a major city. In 1798 it contained about 40 houses and some 250 inhabitants; today it numbers slightly more than 8,000".⁸

The early 19th century commercial fishing village was attacked on May 3, 1813, by British forces during the War of 1812 and was almost

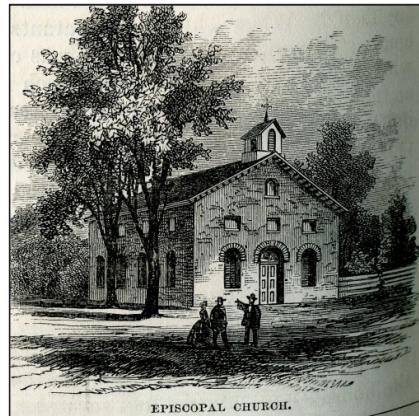


Figure 1. From the Pictorial History of the War of 1812, a sketch from Havre de Grace

⁶ Harford County Dept. of Planning, National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form (Bel Air: 1980) p.

⁷ Preston, Walter W. A.M., *History of Harford County Maryland*, Baltimore: Press of Sun Book Office, 1901, p. 250

⁸ Reps, John W., *Tidewater Towns: City Planning in Colonial Virginia and Maryland*: Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 236-237

completely destroyed. Few American communities have had to recover from such devastation at the hands of invading foreign forces. Yet the citizens of Havre de Grace rebuilt and saw the development of commercial prosperity by middle third of the 19th century as the transportation revolution changed the community.⁹

Geographical Gazetteers

Geographical Gazetteers, published throughout the late 18th & 19th century, are an important references for descriptive and statistical information about towns and villages. These publications typically contain information concerning the geography of a place, as well as social statistics and information on physical features.

1805 -- Havre-de-Grace a post town of Maryland, situated in Harford County, on the w. side of the Susquehanna River, at its confluence with the Chesapeake. It contains upward of 40 houses and 250 inhabitants and is 37 miles N.E. of Baltimore, 65 W.S.W of Philadelphia, and 80 from Washington city.¹⁰ – *A Geographical Dictionary of the United States of North American by Joseph Scott, 1805, Philadelphia*

1821 -- Havre de Grace, p-t [post town]., and port of entry. Harford Co., MD. On the W. side of the Susquehanna as its confluence with Chesapeake Bay . . . Contains 40 or 50 houses. Amount of shipping in 1816, 1,636 tons¹¹. *3rd Edition, Revised and Corrected. A New Universal Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary; by Jedidiah Morse, D.D. A.A.S.S.H.S. and Richard Morse, A.M. Published by Sherman Converse of New Haven, 1821*

1828 -- Havre-de-Grace, a considerable seaport in Harford County situated at the head of the Chesapeake Bay, It is a principal centre of the lumber and grain brought down the Susquehanna River. It has a post office.¹² *Darby's Edition of Brookes' Universal Gazetteer or a New Geographical Dictionary; 3rd American Edition by William Darby Philadelphia, 1828*

⁹ Nield, II., Wayne L. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Register Nomination of Historic Places Inventory. Harford County Planning Department: Bel Air, 1992

¹⁰ Scott, Joseph. *A Geographical Dictionary of the United States of North American*. Philadelphia: 1805

¹¹ Morse, Jedidiah & Morse, Richard: *A New Universal Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary; 3rd Edition, Revised and enlarged*: Sherman Converse: New Haven, 1821

¹² Darby, William. *Darby's Edition of Brookes' Universal Gazeetter or a New Geographical Dictionary; 3rd American Edition*, Philadelphia: 1828

1843 -- Havre de Grace, p-v, [postal village] seaport. It contains 1 Episcopal Church, several stores, a printing office and 1,200 inhabitants.¹³ *A Complete Descriptive and Statistical Gazetteer of the United of America. By Daniel Haskel, A.M. and J. Calvin Smith, New York, Published by Sherman and Smith, 1843*

1850 -- Havre de Grace, a thriving post-village of Harford County, Maryland . . . It is an old town, considerable enlarged and improved since the construction of the Tidewater Canal. It contains 1 or 2 churches, 1 newspaper office, and a number of stores. Population in 1850, 1336, in 1854 about 1800.¹⁴ -- *New and Complete Gazetteer of the United States by Thomas Baldwin and J. Thomas, M.D. 1854 Lippincott, Philadelphia*

1852 -- Havre de Grace – Seaport, Harford Co. The town itself is small, but well-built and contains several stores and warehouses and in 1850, it had a population of 1,336 – 1,049 white person, 203 free colored persons and 84 slaves. The various mechanic arts and commerce form the chief industrial pursuits; and in the proper season the shad and herring fishes of the river and bay give employ to many. The Harford Madisoian is published here, weekly ciruclation about 400 copies. *Gazetteer of the State of Maryland by R. S. Fisher, M.D., Publishing by J.H. Colton and James S. Waters, Baltimore, 1852*

Newspapers

New York Gazette & General Advertiser reports in May 1813 that “Havre de Grace is a flourishing little village on the Susquehanna, and contains about 100 houses, though in a scattering direction. The ferry is at the upper end of the town, and from this the mistake may have arose respecting its size, as we have heard many assert there were not more than a dozen houses in the whole village.”¹⁵

¹³ Fisher, R. S.: *Gazetteer of the State of Maryland*, J.H. Colton and James S. Waters: Baltimore. 1852

¹⁴ Baldwin, Thomas & Thomas, J: *New and Complete Gazetteer of the United States*, Lippincott: Philadelphia, 1854

¹⁵ *New York Gazette & General Advertiser*, New York: New York, May 8, 1813, p. 2

The following list of the houses injured and burnt at Havre-de-Grace by the British, May 3d, was received at the Coffee House in this city.

Foster's House, struck with a ball and damaged; Stoke's house, stable and stages burnt; Wareham's do. do.; A. Hall's do.; Mrs. Sear's house and stables do.; Mansfield's do. do.; Millouff and Barnes' do.; J. & Mrs. Phillips' do.; S. Bartlett's do.; Mr. Tucker's do.; Mr. Christie's do.; Company House, now Mr. Pringles, do.; Mrs. Sarah Hall's do.; S. Jay's (small) do.; Mrs. Rodgers' (not her dwelling) do.; James Kenny's do.; John Gillich's do.; Capt. Barnes' do.; Mr. Pringles' do.

At Smith's Ferry—Mr. Stump's warehouse and contents, with several bay craft, &c. were burnt.

One young man of that place was killed by the explosion of a bomb, in the course of the attack. Commodore Rodgers' house was preserved by a lady, who informed Admiral Cockburn, as his party were going to fire it, to whom it belonged, when he immediately ordered his men to desist. A beautiful new coach, valued at a thousand dollars, belonging to a gentleman of the town, was put on board one of the barges. (Taken off probably for the purpose of enabling the admiral to take an army on some of the islands which he has in the Chesapeake. [Delaware Statesman.]

Figure 2. Boston Gazette, May 17, 1813

The Boston Gazette of May 17, 1813, copying the information from the Delaware Statesman, published a "list of the houses injured and burnt at Havre de Grace by the British May 3^d": "Foster's House, struck with a ball and damaged; Stoke's house, stable and stages burnt;

Wareham's do, do; A. Hall's do; Mrs. Scar's house and stables, do.'; Mansfield's do, do; Milhooff and Barnes' do; J. & Mrs. Philips' do; S. Bartlett's do; Mr. Tucker's do Mr. Christie's do; Company House, now Mr. Pringles, do; Mrs. Sarah Hall's do; S. Jay's (small) do; Mrs. Rodgers' (not her dwelling) do; James Kenney's do; John Griffith's do; Capt. Barnes' do; Mr. Pringle's do.

At Smith's Ferry – Mr. Stump's warehouse and contents, with several by craft &c were burnt. One young man of that place was killed by the explosion of a bomb, in the course of the attack. Commodore Rodger's house was preserved by a lady, who informed Admiral Cockburn as his party were going to fire it, to whom it belonged, when he immediately ordered his men to desist.

Travel Directories

Traveling in 1795, Isaac Weld wrote: "The river here is about a mile and a quarter-wide, and deep enough for any vessels. The banks are high and thickly wooded and the scenery is grand and picturesque. A small town called Havre de Grace, which contains about forty houses, stands on this river at the ferry. A petition was presented to congress the last year to have it made a port of entry, but there is very little trade carried on there. A few ships are annually built in the neighbourhood. From thence to Baltimore, the country is extremely poor; the soil is of a yellow gravel mixed with clay. . . ."16

Traveling in 1806 and 1807, Josh Melish wrote in *Travels through the United States of America*, "On the 3rd of June out from Baltimore by the Pilot stage at 3 o'clock in the morning. The country was thinly settled and the road very rough all the way to Havre-de-Grace, at the mouth of the Susquehanna, where we crossed by a ferry, upwards of a mile wide. Havre-de-grace is built on a beautiful plain; but it is subject to fever and ague, and is not thriving. The banks of the river to the northward are romantic and beautiful. The country improves toward Philadelphia . . ."17

In 1856, a travel guide for the railroad said: The traveller who enters Havre de Grace for the first time cannot but admire the picturesque beauty of its location. Situated on the western bank of the Susquehanna, it raises on a gentle slope, as it retires from the water.

¹⁶ Weld, Isaac, *Travels Through the States of North American and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada*, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797, (London: 1799) p 49-50, Vol. 1 of 2

¹⁷ Melish, John, *Travels Through the United States of America in the Years of 1806 and 1808*, Philadelphia: printed for the author, May 1, 1818 p 290-291

Back of it, and around it, undulating and fertile country give us glimpses of hill and dale – of forest and field. . . .

Rear Admiral Cockburn, whose name had been rendered infamous by the plunder and wanton destruction of farm houses, villages and unprotected villages, along the coast of the Chesapeake Bay, after the sacking and burning of Frenchtown, made a descent upon Havre de Grace, then a village of thirty or forty houses and destroyed it on the 3rd day of May 1813; . . .

Havre de Grace, though possessing many advantages, has not increased as rapidly as these might induce one to believe. It now contains about four hundred houses and has a population of two thousand. Among its public improvements are several neat churches and halls, and substantial and commodious wharves. The only newspaper published in this place is the Harford Madisonian, edited by George Keating, esq.¹⁸

Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad Guide: by Charles P. Dare, Philadelphia: Fitzgibbon & Van Ness. 1856 pg 51 – 60

Maps

Cartographic representations provide an additional source for insights to understand the development pattern of the emerging community at the top of the Chesapeake, early in the 19th century. One of the strongest visual representations is that of C. P. Hauducoer in 1799. The engineer for the Susquehanna Canal drew a high detailed, prospective map of the developing settlement. His work contained eight hundred and fifty acres laid out in square in imitation of Philadelphia. These squares were divided into lots. It also contained space for public institutions of the type a major city would have. All of this, course, was a plan to market and develop the place and is not representative of what was extant at that time.

¹⁸ Dare, Charles P. Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad Guide: Philadelphia: Fitzgibbon & Van Ness. 1856 pg 51 – 60

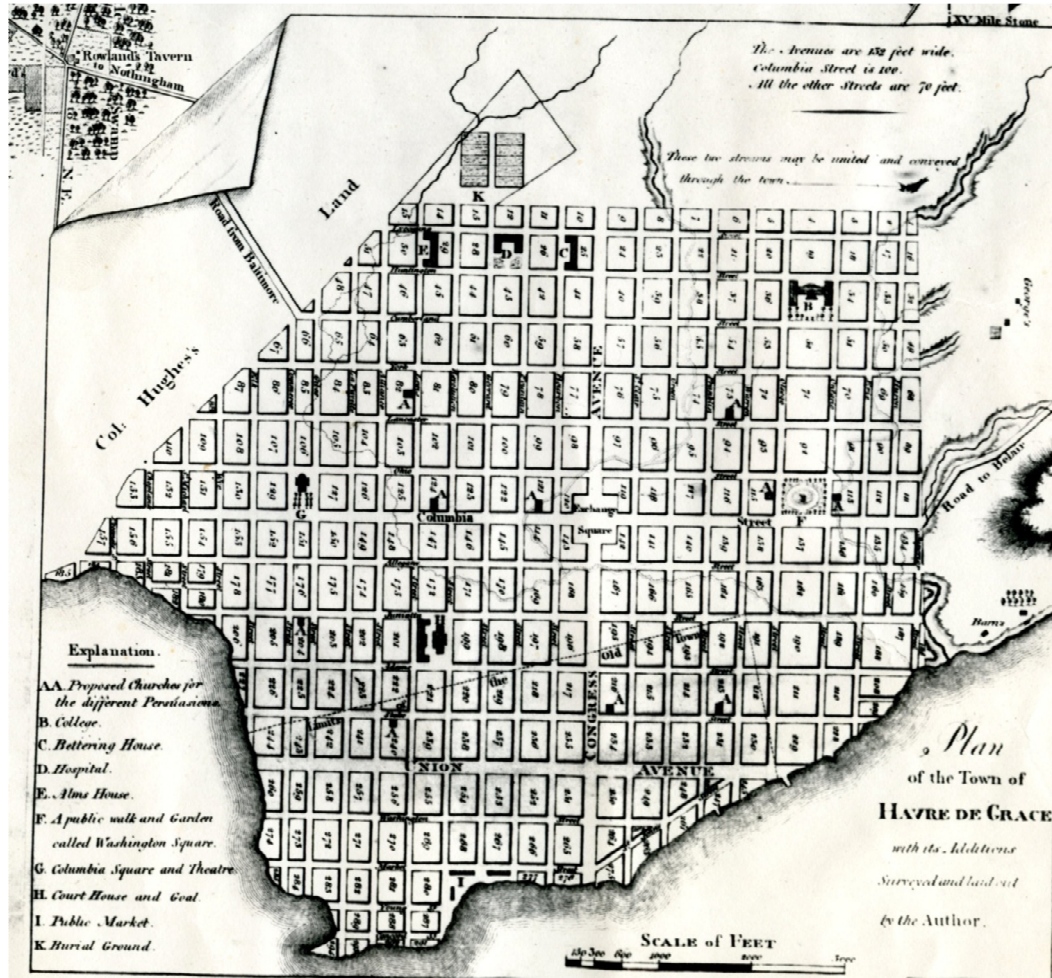


Figure 3. C. P. Hauducouer, 1799

Two other early products provide views from other sources. In 1802, while examining the roads between Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Mathew Carey sketched in the village. In 1836, the U.S. Congress printed a survey showing the head of the Bay, including the village. That drawing appears to rely on Hauducouer's sketching of the village. A later 1858 commercial map (see illustrations on following pages) gives another visual representation of how that mapmaker decided to show the built environment at that point.

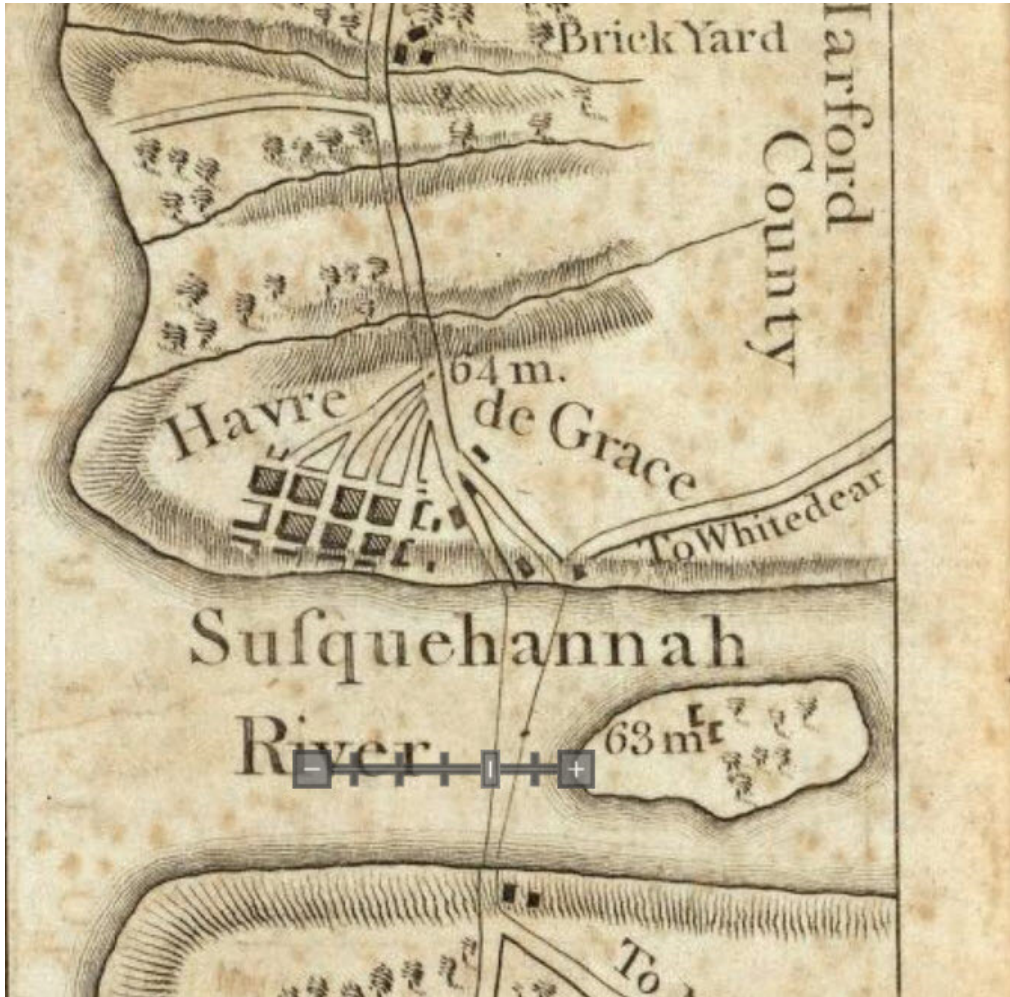


Figure 4. Mathew Carey, Road from Philadelphia to Washington, 1802

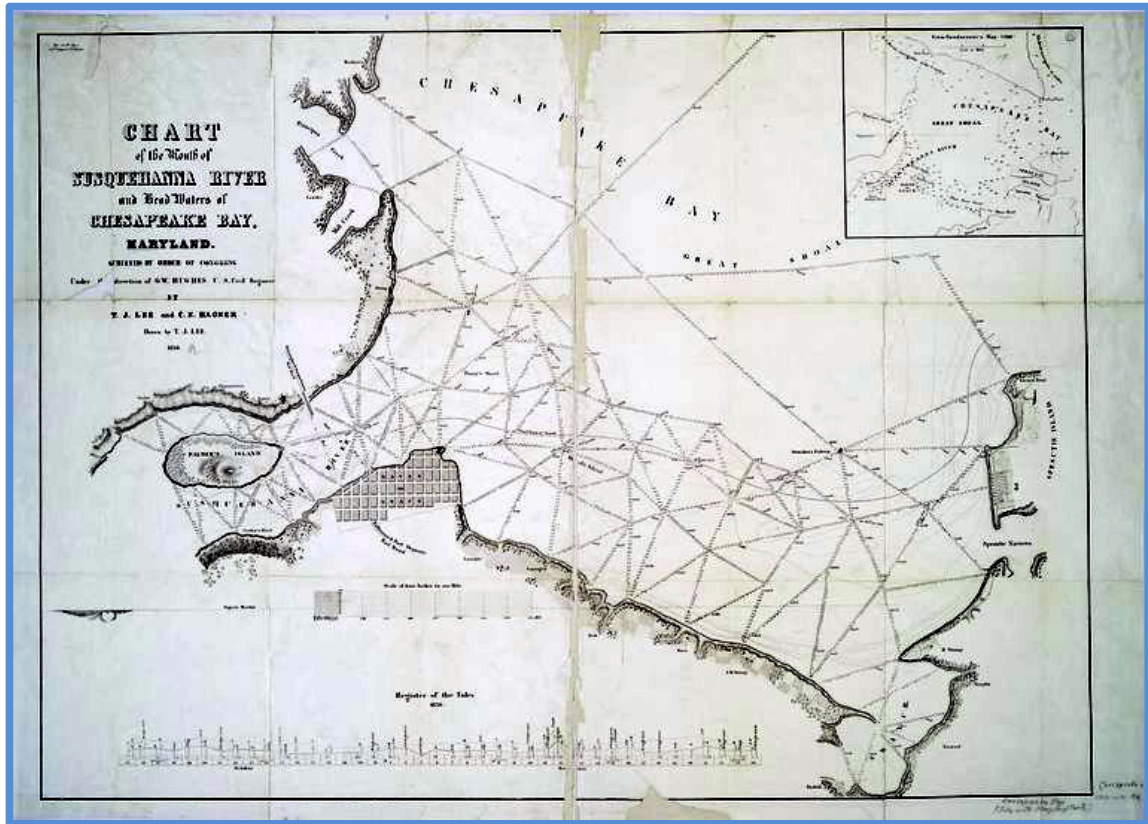


Figure 5, 1836 U.S. House of Representatives, Doc. 134, 24th Congress, 2nd Session

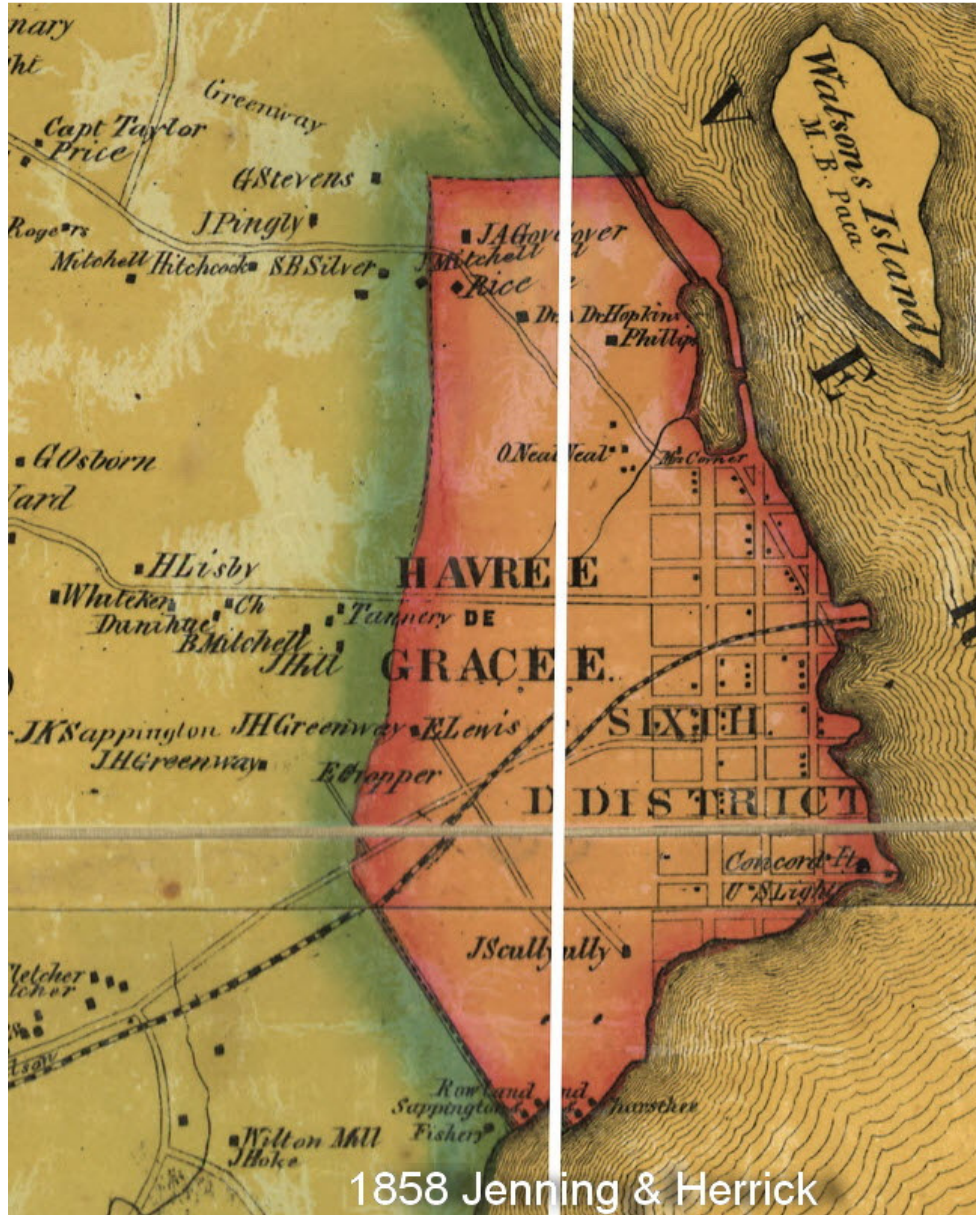
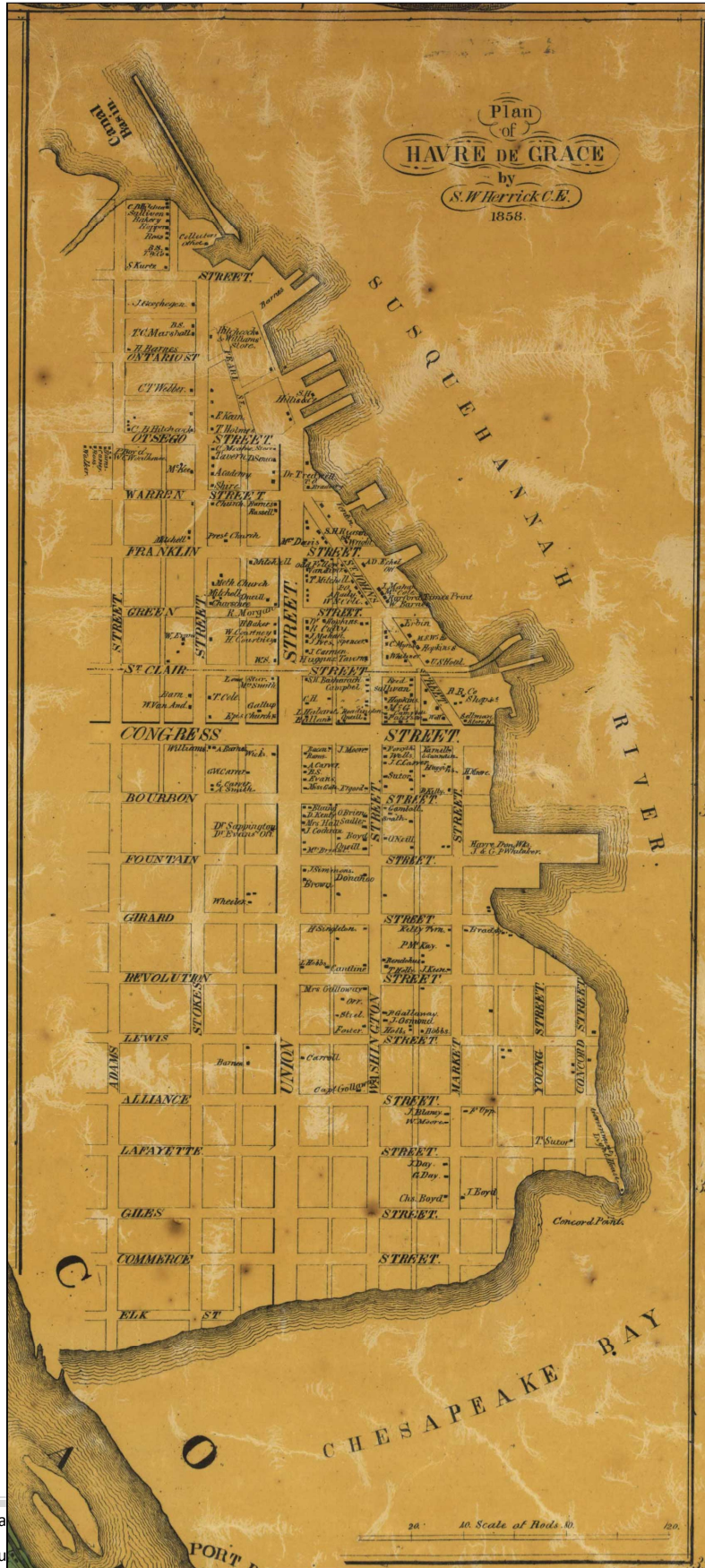
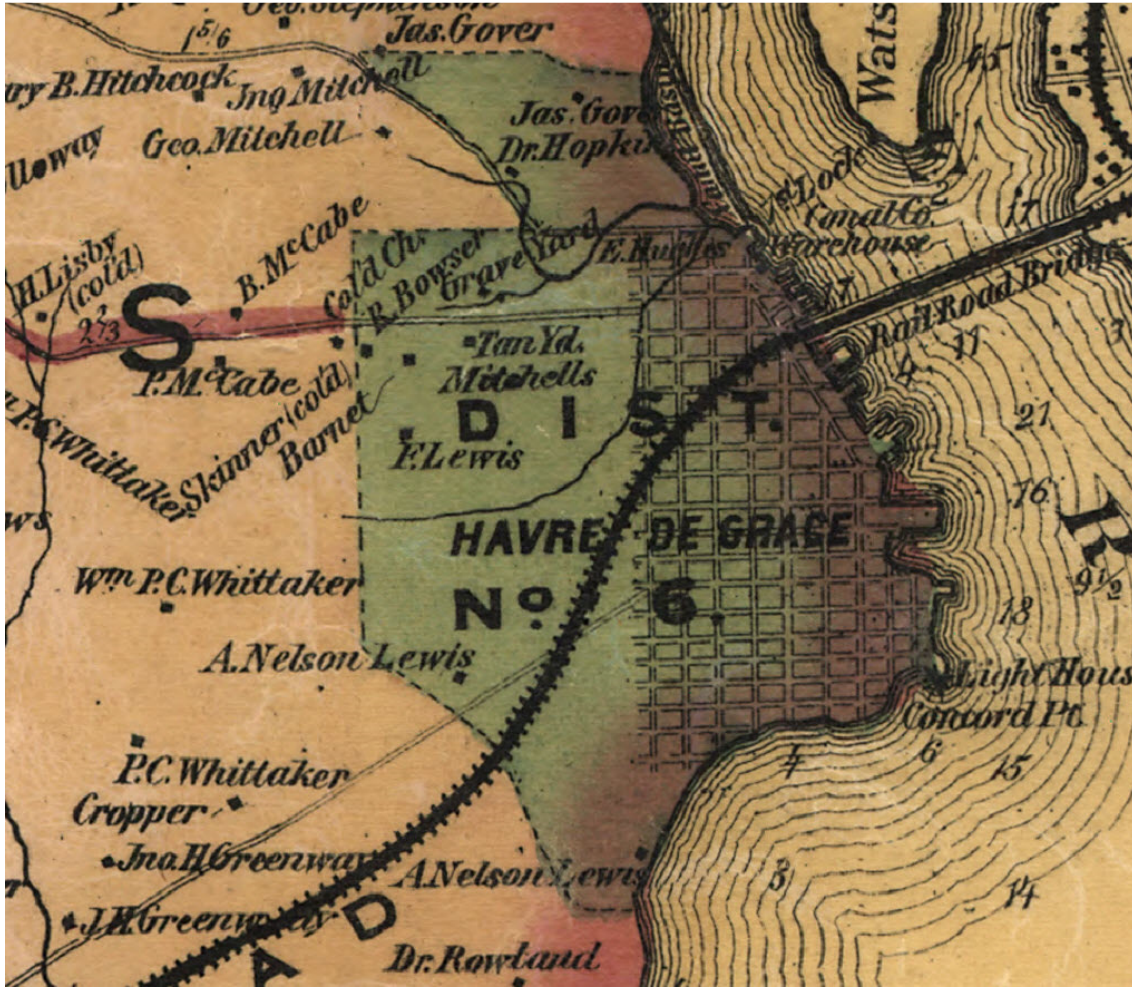


Figure 6. 1858 Map of Havre de Grace, L. W. Herrick





Magazines & Other Publications

Four years after the incursion, an article in the *North American Review* said: “. . . It has been said in a very respectable history of the time, that one house only escaped the flames; but this is a mistake. Havre de Grace consisted of about sixty houses, and of these not more than forty were burnt. Many others were plundered and much injured, and scarcely one remained which was not perforated with balls or defaced by the explosions of shells.¹⁹ This essay was written by Jared Sparks, LL.D. an eyewitness to the incursion. A Unitarian Minister and historian, he served as the 17th president of Harvard University.

¹⁹ Conflagration of Havre de Grace, *The North American Review and Miscellaneous Journal*, Vol. 4 No., 14 (July 1817) pp 157-163, Published by University of Northern Iowa; Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25121304>

Another observer, James J. Wilmer, wrote in the *Narrative, Respecting the Conduct of the British from their first landing on Spesuita Island, till their progress to Havre de Grace* that “the amount of dwelling houses burnt in Havre-de-Grace, is upon calculation found to be twenty. Also one warehouse and twenty out-houses, including stables.”²⁰

Havre de Grace, near the mouth of the Susquehanna River, was the marauding knight’s next object for visitation. It was a small town, two miles from the head of the Chesapeake Bay, and contained about sixty houses, built mostly of wood.²¹

Secondary Sources

Nathan Woodhouse wrote a series of columns for the *Democratic Ledger*, a Havre de Grace Newspaper in the 1890s. While generations have passed, he provides some comments about what he says he heard from older people in the community, noting “the historical accounts I have heard differ very materially from accounts I have heard from people who were living in the village at the time.” Specifically concerning community development he offers the following.

I have heard Mrs Matilda Woods also tell about the burning and looting of Havre de Grace, but I have no recollections of any wholesale burning of houses as told about in history. In fact there were not many there at that time to burn. It was a fishing village of a couple of hundred people and they scattered over a great deal of ground. . . . As to Commodore Roger’s house in Havre de Grace being burned by the British, if old John Chew’s tale is true, they did not burn it then and it is standing there now. Mr Chew once lived in the house occupied by Mr Otho Green and he said that the house was a part of the commodore’s estate and was his town residence, but some other old people say the commodore lived in the country, and if he did, they may have burned his house, but if he lived where Col. Robt S. did later, that does not look like a repaired building. There are a number of old brick houses still standing in Havre de Grace that may antedate the 1812 war – The Bartol, Thomas, Geo Wareham, the little brick opposite the Otho Green House and probably some others.

²⁰ Wilmer, James Jones *Narrative, Respecting the Conduct of the British From Their First Landing on Spesuita Island, Till Their Progress to Havre de Grace* (Baltimore: 1813)

²¹ Lossing, Benson John, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1866 pp. 670

The Storyline – Havre de Grace Under Fire

Havre de Grace, an active, thriving city of 13,000 people at the very top of the Chesapeake, has a rich and varied history. It draws its compelling stories from the water and as a timeless, shifting tide has ebbed and flowed, the comings and goings of time have generated many adventurous stories. Tales of Indians, pirates, mystery, and war have all risen out of the annals of the past at this unique, attractively placed spot where the Susquehanna River meets the Chesapeake.

But for all the arresting folklore and history connected with this tourist destination, there is none more thrilling than the high drama that took place there during a spring 200 years ago as a British raiding party attacked the lightly defended village. On that day in May 1813 the British stormed into the fishing village, almost completely destroying it. Buildings still smoldered as shocked residents prepared to clean-up the devastated village while the news spread throughout the stunned nation.

With word spreading throughout the apprehensive region, newspaper all across the new nation screamed about the outrageous warfare that came to one small community of about 50 homes on the Chesapeake Bay. It was “unquestionably one of the most wanton and unjustifiable outrages every practiced in modern warfare, The National Advocate said while dutifully reporting that the British had “laid in ashes the beautiful village of Havre de Grace.”

It was a small place with about 250 residents when the British stormed into the fishing village on the morning of May 3, 1813, the enemy almost completely destroying it. After taking possession of the shore and plundering the stores of all worth taking they set fire to many of the structures and the craft docked at the shoreline.

“Contrary to the usages of civilized war and feelings of humanity, the British have laid in ashes the beautiful village of Havre-de Grace! The war has now come to our own doors . . . in a manner that would have disgraced a band of pirates,” the Carolina Gazette screamed.²² Despite the rampage and the devastation from the flames, it recovered. Fortunately, few American communities have had to rebuild from such devastation at the hands of an invading foreign force, according to the National Register Nomination.

²² Carolina Gazette, May 15, 1813, War Has Now Come to Our Doors

Attack at Dawn

At dawn the sleeping town was aroused by the heavy fire of shells and rockets coming from some 19 British row barges and a rocket boat. Joined by a few local militia, Lt. John O'Neill hastened to a little battery that had been hurriedly put up. The defenders got off a few shot, but the bursting bombs and grapeshot directed at them proved too much, especially after a militiaman was hit on the head by a rocket and killed. All but Lieutenant O'Neill fell back. Standing alone in the face of an advancing enemy, he continued the defense until a recoiling cannon ran over his leg and he was taken prisoner. After occupying the territory, the Royal Marines plundered the stores of all worth taking and set fire to many of the structures and crafts docked at the shoreline.²³

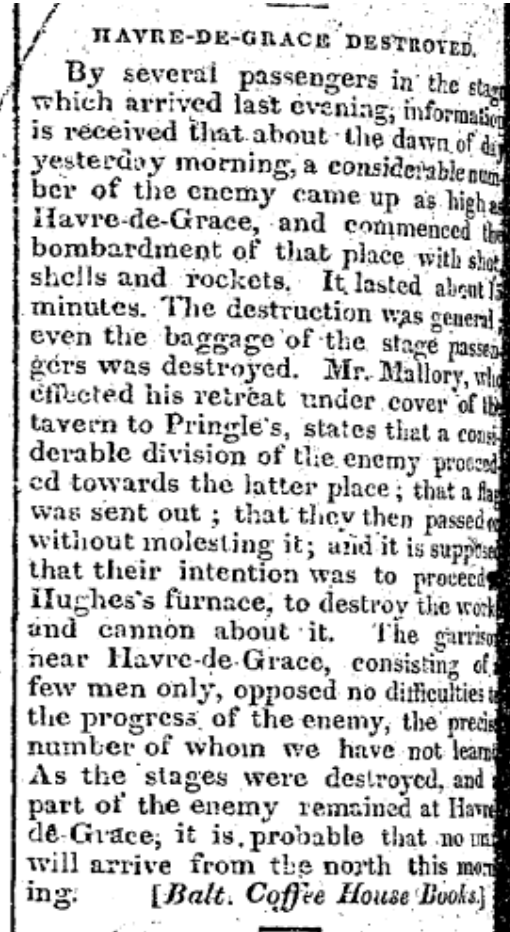


Figure 7. Maryland Gazette, May 6, 1813

Christopher George, writing in the Harford Historical Bulletin, provides some first-hand accounts of that frightening morning. Daniel Mallory, a traveller staying at the tavern of Mrs. Sears was one:

Just as the day dawned I was awakened by the report of heaving artillery. It neared with fearful rapidity. I had scarcely time to realize what it was and our critical situation, when we were startled with a loud report in our room, accompanied with pieces of the wall flying in all directions. This was followed quickly with continuous showers of grape shot. . . . in this deplorable condition, we made our exit by the back door and I believe were the last that made their escape from this ill-fated house. The air seemed alive with Congreve rockets, squirming and hissing about like so many fiery serpents. The hills were covered with flying, frightened, and half-dressed people. . . . Here were women crying for their children and children crying for their lost

²³ George, Christopher T., Harford Historical Bulletin, Number 76, Spring 1998, Harford County in the War of 1812, p 26 - 29

parents! Behind us the flames and smoke of the burning village . . . forming dark thick clouds . . .²⁴

Buildings still smouldered and shocked residents prepared to clean up the devastation as the alarming news spread throughout the stunned nation. Papers—carrying the headline-grabbing news far and wide—screamed about the outrageous warfare that had come to the community.

It was “unquestionably one of the most wanton and unjustifiable outrages ever practiced in modern warfare,” The National Advocate insisted, while dutifully reporting to alarmed readers that the British had “laid in ashes the beautiful village of Havre de Grace.” The settlement, with strong colonial roots, had about 250 residents and 50 buildings when the British savagely stormed ashore, putting it to the torch.

“The war has now come to our own doors . . . in a manner that would have disgraced a band of pirates,” another publication added. Fortunately, “Very few communities [in the United States] can say they were attacked by a foreign country, were nearly destroyed, survived it, and moved into the future.”

From there, the raiding parties went to present-day Lapidum. While that detachment was doing its work, another unit went to nearby Principio Furnace, an important military target as it was a cannon factory. There the Royal Marines destroyed 46-cannon.

After completing a 12 day reign of terror on the Upper Chesapeake, for 1813, Admiral Cockburn’s fleet sailed away, having demonstrated, as he indicated in reports to his superiors across the Atlantic Ocean, how easily the Americans could be overcome with a minimum number of British Troops. These were lessons that the English military learned from the events of 1813, and the following spring they led directly to Cockburn’s assault on the capital of the United States, the only time it has fallen to enemy troops. Of course, Fort McHenry and Baltimore would be a different story.

²⁴ George, quoting Historian Jared Sparks, Conflagration of Havre de Grace, North American Review, July 1817.

John O'Neill

The hero of Havre de Grace, John O'Neill was born in Ireland in 1768 and immigrated to America at the age of 18. He settled in Havre de Grace, where he worked as a gunsmith and was involved with the nail factory. On the morning of the attack, Lt. John O'Neill, manned a battery north of the lighthouse, before being taken prisoner by the enemy. "No doubt by now you have heard of my defeat," he says in writing a letter to a local newspaper:

"When the alarm was given I ran to the battery and found but one man there, and two or three came after-wards. After firing a few shots, they retreated leaving me alone. . . I loaded the gun myself without any one to serve the event, which you know is very dangerous . . . [and fired] when she recoiled and ran over my thigh. An English officer rode up and took me with two muskets in my hand. I was carried on board the Maidstone frigate, where I remained until released, three days hence."²⁵

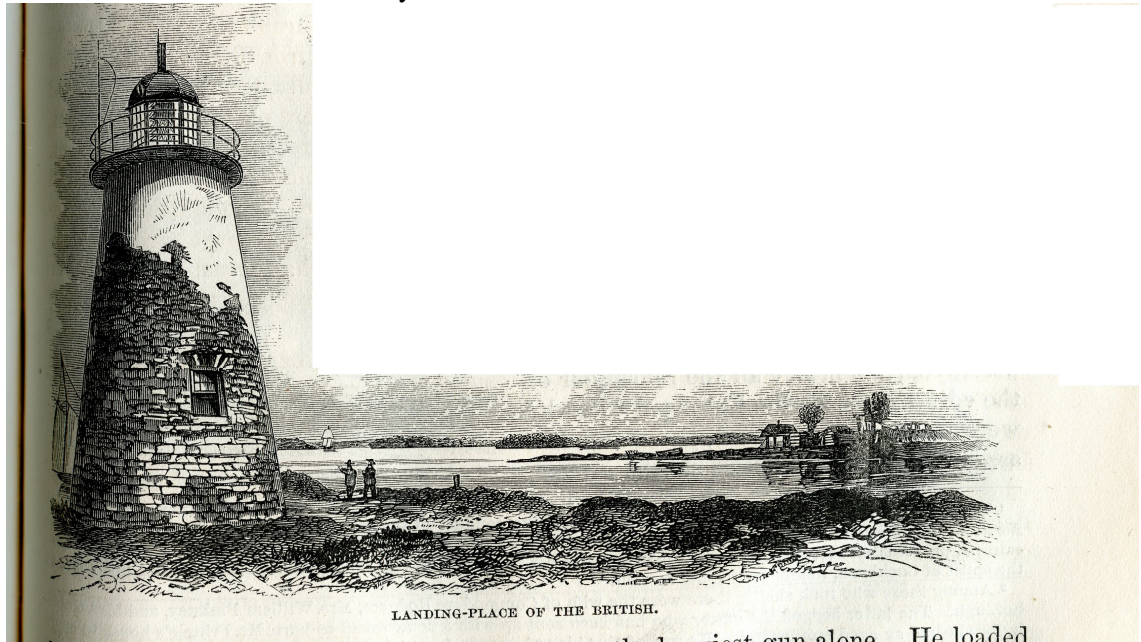


Figure 8. Pictorial History of the War of 1812. The lighthouse was built after the War.

²⁵ H. Niles, Ed., Niles Weekly Register, Vol. 14. Baltimore: Franklin Press, 1813.

JOHN O'NEILL.

Extract of a letter from Mr. John O'Neill, who was taken at Havre de Grace, bravely fighting alone in the cause of his adopted country, to a gentleman in this city, dated

"Havre-de-Grace, May 10.

"No doubt before this, you have heard of my defeat. On the 3d instant we were attacked by 15 English barges at break of day. They were not discovered by the sentry until they were close to the town. We had a small breast work erected, with two 6 and one 9 pounder in it; and I was stationed at one of the guns. When the alarm was given I run to the battery, and found but one man there, and two or three came afterwards. After firing a few shots they retreated, and left me alone in the battery. The grape shot flew very thick about me. I loaded the gun myself, without any one to serve the vent, which you know was very dangerous, and fired her, when she recoiled and ran over my thigh.

"I retreated down town, and joined Mr. BARNES at the nail manufactory, with a musket, and fired on the barges while we had ammunition, and then retreated to the commons, where I kept waving my hat to the militia, who had run away, to come to our assistance: they, however, proved cowardly, and would not come back. At the same time, an English officer on horseback, followed by the marines, rode up, and took me with two muskets in my hand. I was carried on board the Maidstone frigate, where I remained until released, three days since."—*ib.*

Admiral Cockburn refused to concede military status to O'Neill and there was a real possibility that he might be hanged as a traitor, since he was from Ireland. American Brig. General Henry Miller wrote from Baltimore, threatening to execute two British subjects if Cockburn hanged the Irishman. His daughter, Matilda, 15, came to his aid, too. Learning

that her father was a captive and in danger of his life she rang to the shore and arranged to be rowed out to the flagship. She went on the board the ship where he was being held to plead for his release. Her pleas softened the battle hardened Admiral and O'Neill was released.

The defender of Havre de Grace returned to town as a hero. He was honored by the City of Philadelphia, which presented him with an elegant sword, which is found in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society. O'Neil helped rebuild the town. He was a long-time member of the St. John's Episcopal Church and when the Concord Point Lighthouse was built in 1827 grateful citizens had the aging John O'Neill made its first keeper. O'Neill kept the post until his death and after that descendants held the post continuously, filling the job that had been given to the elder family member as a thank you for the heroic defense of Havre de Grace. That succession continues until automation in 1920 eliminated the need for a lighthouse keeper.²⁶

²⁶ John O'Neill, Daily National Intelligencer, Letter to the Editor, July 13, 1813

THE HERO OF HAVRE-DE-GRACE.

FROM THE AURORA.

Several gentlemen of this city, duly appreciating the example of intrepidity shewn by Mr. JOHN O'NEILL, of Havre de-Grace, in the attack made upon that place by the British, determined to present him with a sword, as a testimony of their esteem.

The following letter accompanied the presentation of the sword :

Philadelphia, July 4, 1813.

SIR—Impressed with a high sense of your brave and patriotic exertions, in defence of your fellow-citizens of Havre-de-Grace; and desirous of evincing our esteem for your magnanimous conduct—we request your acceptance of the sword which accompanies this communication; and that it may remain in your family as a testimony of the regard and esteem in which your character and conduct is held by,

Sir, in behalf of a few of your fellow-citizens of Philadelphia.

Yours, most respectfully,

HENRY RICHMOND.

Mr. JOHN O'NEILL,
Havre-de-Grace, Maryland.

To which Mr. O'Neill returned the following reply :

Havre-de-Grace, July 6.

SIR—Your communication of the 4th inst. I duly received, together with your inestimable present, for which I return my most grateful thanks to my fellow-citizens of Philadelphia. If any other motive besides patriotic zeal should stimulate me to use it, there certainly could be none more effective than receiving it from the patriotic citizens of Philadelphia. If fortune favors me with an opportunity of using it in defence of my adopted country, it will be made use of to the utmost of my power; and after my exit from this earthly globe, according to your request, it shall remain in my family, with that one of my four sons whom I shall think most worthy of wearing it, with an injunction never to draw it but in defence of his country. At present I am on parole of honor, and anxiously waiting for information of being exchanged, which gen. Miller of Balt. has promised to have done as soon as possible. It is a heart rending reflection for me to think, if the instruments of that maniac (King George) should make an attempt any where within my ability of attending, that I could not assist in repelling them. If the merciless blood-hounds attempt Baltimore, as they say they will, I am fearful that I cannot try the metal of the sword, on account of not being exchanged; but Providence may be so propitious as to grant me the opportunity.

Receive for yourself and your fellow-citizens of Philadelphia, the thanks of your faithful adopted citizen.

JOHN O'NEILL.

Mr. Henry Richmond.

Earlier Celebrations

The City has observed this important piece of unforgettable heritage before. In 1963, on the 150th anniversary of the attack, The *Havre de Grace Record* issued a special newspaper supplement, “The Burning of Our Town in the War of 1812.” On the 150th anniversary of the attack, Havre de Grace’s city council, too, remembered the bravery of townspeople facing enemy invaders head-on. “In some ways, the deeds of that infamous day fanned the feeble sparks of patriotism and drew people of Maryland together in a more united stand against the foe,” the councilmen wrote in a statement. “Out of this determination came the defeat of the British at Fort McHenry amid the rockets’ red glare, bombs bursting the air.”

About the time of the 100th anniversary, ceremonies involved the unveiling of a monument on Concord Point in memory of brave defender and hometown hero John O’Neill.

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