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## The British Burn Washington, 1814

**A**ugust of 1814 was one of the hottest in the memory of the approximately 8,000 residents of America's new capital. The sweltering, humid heat turned the stagnate marshes surrounding the city into thriving hatcheries for disease-carrying mosquitoes. To make matters worse, the city found itself the target of an invading British army slowly making its way from the Chesapeake Bay.

America had been at war with the British Empire since 1812, but the action so far had consisted of a series of indeterminate skirmishes along the Great Lakes region. With the defeat of Napoleon, the Empire turned its full attention to its former colony sending its battle-hardened troops to squash the up-start Americans. Washington had little strategic value - the thriving port of Baltimore was much more important. However, as capital of the nation, the British hoped that its burning would have a psychological impact on the will of the Americans to continue the conflict.

As the British army of approximately 4,000 approached, the majority of Washington residents fled the city. On August 24th American defenders, with President James Madison in attendance, were quickly routed by the invaders in a battle at Bladensburg a few miles from the city. A messenger was dispatched to the White House to warn First Lady Dolley Madison of the impending arrival of the British. She and her staff fled by carriage across the Potomac - taking with her the full-length portrait of George Washington that had been torn from a White House wall.

The British boasted that, if captured, they would parade Dolley Madison through the streets of London as a prisoner of war.

That evening, the vanguard of the British army reached Capitol Hill and began its systematic destruction of all public buildings in the city.

**"All thoughts of accommodation were instantly set aside"**

*George Gleig was part of the British force that attacked and burned Washington. Too small in size to effectively occupy the city - their intent was to cause as much damage as they could. We join Gleig's story as the British send a truce party to negotiate with the Americans:*

"Such being the intention of General Ross, he did not march the troops immediately into the city, but halted them upon a plain in its

immediate vicinity, whilst a flag of truce was sent in with terms. But whatever his proposal might have been, it was not so much as heard, for scarcely had the party bearing the flag entered the street, than they were fired upon from the windows of one of the houses, and the horse of the General himself, who accompanied them, killed. You will easily believe that conduct so unjustifiable, so direct a breach of the law of nations, roused the indignation of every individual, from the General himself down to the private soldier.

General Robert Ross, British commander of the force that sacked Washington, was killed a few days later in the battle for Baltimore.

All thoughts of accommodation were instantly laid aside; the troops advanced forthwith into the town, and having first put to the sword all who were found in the house from which the shots were fired, and reduced it to ashes, they proceeded, without 'a moment's delay, to burn and destroy everything in the most distant degree connected with government. In this general devastation were included the Senate House, the President's palace, an extensive dockyard and arsenal, barracks for two or three thousand men, several large storehouses filled with naval and military stores, some hundreds of cannon of different descriptions, and nearly twenty thousand stand of small arms. There were also two or three public rope works which shared the same fate, a fine frigate pierced for sixty guns and just ready to be launched, several gun brigs and armed schooners, with a variety of gunboats and small craft. The powder magazines were, of course, set on fire, and exploded with a tremendous crash, throwing down many houses in their vicinity, partly by pieces of the wall striking them, and partly by the concussion of the air whilst quantities of shot, shell, and hand grenades, which could not otherwise be rendered useless, were thrown into the river."

The battle at Baltimore's Fort McHenry in September inspired Francis Scott Key to write the *Star Spangled Banner*

### **"The sky was brilliantly illuminated"**

*While Gleig's regiment was sacking the city, the remainder of the British force marched into the American capital as night approached:*

"... the blazing of houses, ships, and stores, the report of exploding magazines, and the crash of falling roofs informed them, as they proceeded, of what was going forward. You can conceive nothing finer than the sight which met them as they drew near to the town. The sky was brilliantly illuminated by the different conflagrations, and a dark red light was thrown upon the road, sufficient to permit each man to view distinctly his comrade's face.

...When the detachment sent out to destroy Mr. Madison's house entered his dining parlor, they found a dinner table spread and covers laid for forty guests. Several kinds of wine, in handsome cut glass decanters, were cooling on the sideboard; plate holders stood

by the fireplace, filled with dishes and plates; knives, forks, and spoons were arranged for immediate use; in short, everything was ready for the entertainment of a ceremonious party. Such were the arrangements in the dining room, whilst in the kitchen were others answerable to them in every respect. Spits, loaded with joints of various sorts, turned before the fire; pots, saucepans, and other culinary utensils stood upon the grate; and all the other requisites for an elegant and substantial repast were exactly in a state which indicated that they had been lately and precipitately abandoned.

You will readily imagine that these preparations were beheld by a party of hungry soldiers with no indifferent eye. An elegant dinner, even though considerably overdressed, was a luxury to which few of them, at least for some time back, had been accustomed, and which, after the dangers and fatigues of the day, appeared peculiarly inviting. They sat down to it, therefore, not indeed in the most orderly manner, but with countenances which would not have disgraced a party of aldermen at a civic feast, and, having satisfied their appetites with fewer complaints than would have probably escaped their rival gourmands, and partaken pretty freely of the wines, they finished by setting fire to the house which had so liberally entertained them.

...Of the Senate house, the President's palace, the barracks, the dockyard, etc., nothing could be seen except heaps of smoking ruins."

**References:**

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