

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria’s British occupation, 1814

Prominent Alexandrians saw how British forces burned Washington, D.C. on Aug. 24, 1814.

Although the War of 1812 had started two years earlier, the war came home to residents of Alexandria in 1814, when our city was still part of the District of Columbia. Recognizing their dire circumstances, Alexandria’s leaders surrendered the town to British Commander Joseph Gordon’s forces on Aug. 29 on the condition that the British not destroy Alexandria. Gordon’s men were welcome to all naval stores, shipping and merchandise in the city. Alexandria’s surrender without a shot being fired earned scorn, as you can see in the political cartoon by cartoonist William Charles.

However, the actions of Mayor Charles Simms and others saved the town from destruction. The British delay in leaving the Potomac River also

allowed Baltimore more time to prepare its defenses, leading to its successful defense of Fort McHenry, immortalized in our national anthem.

The United States, much like today, was politically polarized, and Alexandria’s surrender and reputation as a Federalist Party stronghold earned scorn from prominent Democratic-Republican politicians, including Thomas Jefferson. The removal of Alexandria’s militia by Democratic-Republican Secretary of War James Monroe to help defend Washington meant that Alexandria could not protect itself.

By all accounts, the British forces abided by the terms of the surrender, confining their looting to the supplies stored in warehouses by the waterfront. A rogue American officer instigated the one incident that threatened to escalate into violence when he grabbed a British midshipman while on his horse.



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The 1814 cartoon 'Johnny Bull and the Alexandrians' by William Charles.

On Sept. 3, the occupiers left in seven British vessels and 14 American merchant ships. Some merchant ships had been sunk by Alexandrians to keep them from the enemy but were raised from the river bottom by the British fleet. American forces harassed the fleet as it sailed out of the Potomac, and the shallow waters delayed British Commander Gordon’s ships from arriving at the Port

of Baltimore as scheduled.

Alexandria’s surrender and occupation by the British for five days illustrated the political polarization of the still-young country. Charles’s political cartoon provides a snapshot into national perceptions of our city, 210 years ago.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.