



A tranquil view of the narrow waters of St. Leonard's Creek in Maryland today, but which in June 1814 was aflame with battle and jealous naval maneuvering.

PRESERVING THE NATION'S HONOR: *Capt. Joshua Barney and the Patuxent River Flotilla of 1814.*

Not long after the cannon of the naval War of 1812 fell silent, the fight resumed, and to this day even continues, on paper and in print between British and American partisans. This battle of the scholars could be said to have originated with popular American histories, such as Thomas Clark's well-meaning but rather fast and loose *Naval History of the United States* (1813 and 1814), and, in addition, more credible personal accounts and memoirs, such as Captain David Porter's thrilling *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* (1822)¹ that incited the exasperated ire of former British attorney of William James (1780-1827); who responded with his multi-volume *Naval History of Great Britain from the declaration of war by France in February 1793 to the accession of George IV in January 1820* (1822-24, & 1837). This monumental and impressive, if as many will feel imperfect and sometimes flawed work (volume 6 in particular), was gallantly and coolly answered by James Fenimore Cooper's *The History of the Navy of the United States* (1839);² followed by the even more meticulous *The Navy of the United States from the commencement 1775 to 1853* (1853) by Lieut. George Foster Emmons, USN. Later and even more indignantly James' work received an unapologetically thunderous broadside from Theodore Roosevelt's *The Naval War of 1812* (1882) -- with and in our own time some and more of the same from both sides of the Atlantic (and Canada) -- though in hopefully a better humored and more friendly manner than the earlier historians felt requisite. While most everyone is quick to see errors and misjudgments in these and the writings of their respective opponents, what is unfortunately and too often overlooked is that *all* these writers, whatever their shortcomings in a given instance as historians, have something worth saying and being heard, and a student is very foolish and misguided who turns a completely deaf ear in *wholesale* prejudice and scorn of any of them.³

It was only very recently that I myself had and took the time to go through Cooper's tome; which as survey and overview has much to recommend it. Although far from seamless as a narrative; while occasionally suffering from the author's strained and confusing prose, his history is a must read for purposes of furnishing the broad picture, and I am very sorry I had not already read it many years ago. Moreover, in many portions it makes for some genuinely exciting, touching, and or amusing history-telling; such as (though not exclusively) in these sections:

- * The Barbary States, the Birth of the Federal navy, and the Quasi-War with France (vol. I, chs. 14-16)
- * The War with Tripoli (vol. 1, ch. 18; vol. II, chs. 1-6)
- * Chase of the *Constitution* under Capt. Isaac Hull by a British squadron (vol. ii, ch. 10)
- * Capt. Porter and the *Essex* (vol. II, chs. 13-15)
- * Battle of Lake Borgne 1814 (vol. II, ch. 22)

¹ Perhaps also an inspiration for Melville's *Moby Dick*?

² Cooper put out an abridged version in 1841 which, though some will find more convenient, is inferior as both a chronicle and keepsake compared to the complete edition.

³ As we've noted elsewhere previously, for a nautical primer, including a handy glossary of terms incomprehensible to most laymen and otherwise indispensable for reading such books, see *The Seaman's Friend: A Treatise on Practical Seamanship* (1841) by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. at: <http://www.archive.org/details/seamansfriendcon00danarich>

* Joshua Barney and the defense of Washington, D.C. in 1814

Joshua Barney (1759-1818) is an especially interesting figure because he was one of the few who signally distinguished himself and covered himself with glory in both the Revolution *and* the War of 1812.⁴ If, as is averred, only a minority of valiant and undaunted individuals saved the country from foreign invasion in those two struggles, he would most certainly can be deemed one of those most noble and illustrious few; fighting with a youthful zeal and determination rarely matched even in those heroic times. That he seems to have also lived a relatively prosperous and happy family and domestic life for a military officer adds no little further to his subsequent appeal.

The following then is Cooper's coverage of Barney involvement in the War of 1812. Most notably, Barney's naval service in that conflict saw him leading President Jefferson's ignominious gunboats. As bad a reputation as they have received, it must be observed that those gunboats saw much action in the War of 1812; and a number of them were commanded with remarkable success; so that their true fault lay not some much in their use but in the government's over reliance on them.

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~ from Chapter XXI of Cooper's *History of the Navy of the United States* (1839) Vol. 2, pp. 215-221.

The general peace that, owing to the downfall of Napoleon, so suddenly took place in Europe, afforded England an opportunity of sending large reinforcements in ships and troops to America. Regiments that had entered France from Spain, were embarked in the Loire, with that object; and a land force of more than thirty thousand men was soon collected in the interior, or on the American coast. The ships, also, were much increased in number; and it would seem that there was a moment when some in England were flattered with the belief of being able to dictate such terms to the republic, as would even reduce its territory, if they did not affect its independence. In carrying on the war, two separate plans appear to have been adopted. One aimed at conquest -- the other at harassing the coast, and at inflicting the injuries that characterise [sic] a partisan warfare.

In furtherance of the latter intention, a considerable force in ships and troops assembled in the waters of the Chesapeake early in the summer, when the enemy attempted expeditions of greater importance, and which were more creditable to his arms than many in which he had been previously engaged, against small, exposed, and defenceless [sic] villages. The warfare of 1813 had induced the government to equip a stronger force in the Chesapeake than it had originally possessed, and Captain Joshua Barney, the officer whose name has already been mentioned [See *History of the Navy*, vol. I, ch. 11, pp. 149-153], with distinction, as the captor of the General Monk, was placed at its head.<sup>5</sup> The vessels of the flotilla under the orders of Captain Barney were principally barges, carrying heavy guns, though there were a few galleys, and a schooner or two.

It would exceed the limits of a work of this nature, to enter into a minute relation of all the skirmishes to which the predatory warfare of the English, in the Chesapeake, gave rise; but it is due to the officers and men employed against them to furnish an outline of their services. On various occasions parties from the ships had conflicts with the detached militia, or armed citizens, who were frequently successful. Although it is a little anticipating events, it may be mentioned here, that, in one of these skirmishes, Captain Sir Peter Parker, of the *Menelaus*, was killed, and his party driven off to its ship. In several other instances captures were made of boats and their crews, the people of the country frequently displaying a coolness and gallantry that were worthy of trained soldiers. On the whole, however, the vast superiority of

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<sup>4</sup> He was also unique as a American naval officer for being, like Capt. John Barry and Lieut. Stephen Cassin (which latter fought with distinction at the head of the *Ticonderoga* at the battle of Lake Champlain), a Roman Catholic. A most welcome and extremely useful, if perhaps too hastily penned and edited, modern biography is *Joshua Barney: Hero of the Revolution and 1812* (2000) by Louis Arthur Norton.

<sup>5</sup> As a result of the naval battle that took place in Delaware/New Jersey Bay, 8 April 1782, with Barney flying the flag of the Pennsylvania Navy while escorting a small convoy of American merchantmen out of Philadelphia.

the enemy in numbers, and his ability to choose his time and place of attack, gave the English the advantage, and their success was usually in proportion.

The presence of Captain Barney's flotilla compelled the enemy to be more guarded, and his small vessels became cautious about approaching the shallow waters in calms, or in light winds. On the 1st of June this active and bold officer left the Patuxent [River], with the Scorpion, two gun-boats, and several large barges, in chase of two schooners. He was closing fast, by means of sweeps, when a large ship was discovered to the southward. Just at this moment the wind shifted, bringing the enemy to windward, blowing fresh, and becoming squally. Signal was made for the flotilla to return to the Patuxent, as the weather was particularly unfavourable for that description of force, and the ship proved to be a two-decker. On re-entering the river, the wind came ahead, when the gun-boats began to sweep up under the weather shore. One of the latter being in some danger, Captain Barney anchored with the Scorpion and the other boats, and opened a fire, which immediately drove the enemy schooners out of the river. On this occasion, the English pushed a barge in front, which began to throw Congreve rockets. By this essay it was found that the rockets could be thrown farther than shot, but that they could not be directed with any certainty. The ship of the line anchored at the mouth of the Patuxent; the enemy's barges kept hovering about it, and the American flotilla was anchored about three miles within the river.

Between the 4th and 8th of June, the enemy was joined by a rasée [razee] and a sloop-of-war, when Captain Barney removed his flotilla up the river, to the mouth of St. Leonard's creek. On the morning of the 8th, the British were seen coming up the river, the wind being fair, with a ship, a brig, two schooners, and fifteen barges, which induced Capt. Barney to remove up St. Leonard's about two miles, when he anchored in a line abreast, and prepared to receive an attack. At 8 A. M., the ship, brig, and schooners anchored at the mouth of the creek, and the barges entered it, with the rocket boat in advance.

Captain Barney now left the Scorpion and the two gun-boats at anchor, and got his barges, thirteen in number, under way, when the enemy retreated towards their vessels outside. In the afternoon, the same manoeuvre was repeated, the enemy's barge throwing a few rockets without effect.

On the afternoon of the 9th, the ship of the line having sent up a party of men, the enemy entered the creek again, having twenty barges, but, after a smart skirmish, retired. The object of these demonstrations was probably to induce the Americans to burn their vessels, or to venture out within reach of the guns of the ships, but the latter were commanded by an officer much too experienced and steady to be forced into either measure without sufficient reason. On the 11th, a still more serious attempt was made with twenty-one barges, having the two schooners in tow. Capt. Barney met them again, and, after a sharper encounter than before, drove them down upon their large vessels. On this occasion the pursuit was continued until the rasée, which, by this time, had ascended the Patuxent, and the brig opened a fire on the Americans. In this affair the English are supposed to have suffered materially, especially one of the schooners. A shot also struck the rocket-boat.

Some small works were now thrown up on the shore, to protect the American flotilla, and the blockade continued. In the mean time, Captain Miller of the marine corps joined the flotilla, and a considerable force of militia was collected under Colonel [Decius] Wadsworth, of the ordnance service. The enemy had also brought a frigate, in addition to the rasée, off the mouth of the creek. The largest of these vessels was believed to be the Severn, and the smallest the Narcissus, thirty-two. On the 26th, an attempt was made by the united force of the Americans to raise the blockade. The cannonade was close, for the species of force employed; and it lasted two hours, when the Severn cut, and was run on a sand-bank to prevent her sinking.\*<sup>6</sup> It is said that a raking shot ripped a plank from her bow, and placed her in imminent danger. Shortly after, in company with the Narcissus, she dropped down the river and went into the bay. In this handsome affair the flotilla lost thirteen men in killed and wounded; but it effectually raised the blockade, and induced the enemy to be more cautious.

The portion of the flotilla that was in the Patuxent, remained in that river until the middle of August, when the enemy commenced that series of movements which terminated in his advance upon

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<sup>6</sup> [Cooper's Footnote] By some accounts this ship was the Loire.

Washington. On the 16th, Captain Barney received intelligence that the British were coming up the Patuxent in force, when he sent an express to the navy department for instructions. The answer was, to land the men, and join the army that was hurriedly assembling for the defence of the coast, under General [William H.] Winder, and, if pressed, to burn the flotilla.

On the 21st, the news was received that the enemy had landed a force of four or five thousand men at Benedict [Maryland; some 35 miles southeast of Washington, D.C.], and that he was marching in the direction of the capital. Captain Barney immediately landed four hundred of his party, leaving the vessels in charge of Mr. Frazier, with orders to set fire to them if attacked, and to join the main body with as little delay as possible. The next day this order was executed, a strong detachment of seamen and marines approaching the flotilla to attack it.

On the 22nd, Captain Barney joined the assemblage of armed citizens, that was called an army, at the wood-yard. The next day he marched into Washington, and took up his quarters in the marine barracks. After a good deal of uncertainty concerning the movements of the enemy, it was understood he was marching directly on Washington, and that it was intended to fight him at Bladensburgh. The flotilla-men and marines left the yard on the morning of the 24th, and they arrived at the battle-ground on a trot, and were immediately drawn up about a mile to the west of Bladensburgh, holding the centre of General Winder's position. After a sharp skirmish in front, where the enemy suffered severely in crossing a bridge, the militia fell back, and the British columns appeared, following the line of the public road. The entire force of the flotilla-men and marines was about five hundred men; and they had two eighteens, and three twelve pounders, ship's guns, mounted on travelling carriages. Captain Barney took command of the artillery in person, while Captain Miller had the disposition of the remainder of the two parties, who were armed as infantry. The marines, seventy-eight men in all, formed a line immediately on the right of the guns, while the seamen, three hundred and seventy men, were drawn up a little in their rear, and on the right flank of the marines, on ground that permitted them to fire over the heads of the latter. Although the troops that were falling back did not halt, Captain Barney held his position, and as soon as the enemy began to throw rockets, he opened on him, with a sharp discharge of round and grape. The column was staggered, and it immediately gave ground. A second attempt to advance was repulsed in the same manner, when the enemy, who, as yet, had been able to look down resistance by his discipline, advancing steadily in column, was obliged to make an oblique movement to his left, into some open fields, and to display. Here he threw out a brigade of light troops in open order, and advanced in beautiful style, upon the command of Captain Barney, while the head of a strong column was kept in reserve in a copse in its rear. Captain [Samuel] Miller, with the marines, and that portion of the seamen who acted as infantry, met the charge in the most steady and gallant manner, and, after a sharp conflict, drove the British light troops back upon their supporting column.<sup>7</sup> In this conflict, the English commanding officer, in advance, Colonel [William] Thornton, with his second and third in rank, Lieutenant-Colonel Wood and Major Brown, were all wounded, and left on the field. The marines and seamen manifested the utmost steadiness, though it was afterwards ascertained that the light troops brought up in their front amounted to about six hundred men.

There can be no question that a couple of regular regiments would now have given the Americans the day, but no troops remained in line, except the party under Captain Barney, and two detachments on his right, that were well posted. Having been so roughly handled, the enemy made no attempt to advance directly in front of the seamen and marines, but, after forcing the troops on their right from the field, by a demonstration in that direction, they prepared to turn the rear of Captain Barney, in order to surround him. While these movements were going on in front, a party of light troops had been thrown out on the enemy's right, and the militia having abandoned the ground, they were also beginning to close upon the Americans that stood. By this time Captain Barney, Captain Miller, and several other officers were wounded; and victory being impossible, against odds so great, an order was given to commence a retreat. The defence had been too obstinate to admit of carrying off the guns, which were necessarily abandoned. All the men retired, with the exception of the badly wounded; among the latter, however, were Captain Barney and Captain Miller, who both fell into the enemy's hands. The loss of the latter, in front of the seamen and marines, on this occasion, was near three hundred men, in killed and wounded. Of the marines nearly one-third were among the casualties; and the flotilla-men suffered considerably, though in a smaller proportion.

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<sup>7</sup> [Edit. The sailors and marines when attacking called on their comrades to "board 'em" or words to similar effect.]

The people of the flotilla, under the orders of Captain Barney, and the marines, were justly applauded for their excellent conduct on this occasion. No troops could have stood better, and the fire of both artillery and musketry has been described as to the last degree severe. Captain Barney, himself, and Captain Miller, of the marine corps, in particular, gained much additional reputation, and their conspicuous gallantry caused a deep and general regret, that their efforts could not have been sustained by the rest of the army.

As the enemy took possession of Washington, a perfectly defenceless straggling town of some eight or nine thousand inhabitants, that evening, and a considerable force in ships was ascending the Potomac, it was thought necessary to destroy the public property at the navy yard. At that time a frigate, of the first class, called the Columbia, was on the stocks, and the Argus, 18, and Lynx, 12, had not long been launched. A small quantity of stores and ammunition had been removed, but on the night of the 24th, fire was communicated to the remainder. It is difficult to say why the vessels 'afloat were not scuttled, a measure that would have allowed of their being raised again, as it would have been impossible for the enemy to injure ships in that state, and much less to remove them. Indeed the expediency of setting fire to anything has been questioned, since the enemy could not have done more. It is, however, just to remember that the sudden retreat of the English could not have been foreseen, and that they had a commanding naval force in the Potomac. The loss in vessels was not great; the Columbia, 44, on the stocks, and the Argus, 18, being the only two destroyed that were of any value. The Lynx escaped, and it would seem that the enemy was in too great a hurry to do her any injury. On this occasion the Boston, 28, was burned, though the ship was condemned. The hulk of the New York, 36, escaped, but all the naval stores were consumed.

It is worthy of remark, that this, and the instance in which the Adams was burned in the Penobscot, were the only cases in the war in which the enemy, notwithstanding his numerous descents, was ever able to destroy any public cruiser by means of his troops. In this respect the difference between the war of 1812 and that of 1775 is strikingly apparent. During the former contest, indeed, the enemy: succeeded in no assault on any place of size, although, encouraged by his success at Washington, an attempt was shortly after made on Baltimore....

[In a subsequent footnote, pp. 223n-225n, Cooper states:]

Joshua Barney was born in Baltimore, July 6th, 1759. He went to sea young, and by some accidental circumstances was early thrown into the command of a valuable ship. At the commencement of the war of the Revolution, or in October, 1775, he entered on board the Hornet, 10, which was fitted at Baltimore, as a master's mate, and sailed in the expedition under Com. [Esek] Hopkins, against the Bahamas. The Hornet was separated from the squadron by bad weather, and returned to port alone. He next joined the Sachem, 10, Captain Alexander, as a lieutenant, though his name is not found on the regular list of the service, until July 20th, 1781, when it appears by the side of those of Dale and Murray. From this fact it is to be inferred that the first commissions regularly received from Congress, by either of those distinguished young sailors, were given at that time. But Mr. Barney served even as a first lieutenant of a frigate at a much earlier day. He was in that station on board the Virginia, 28, when taken by the enemy; and he also served in the same rank, on board the Saratoga, 16. Mr. Barney escaped the fate of the Saratoga, in consequence of having been in a prize.

After serving in a very gallant manner on board of different vessels of former command, less than half of his flotilla having been destroyed in the Patuxent, Mr. Barney was appointed to the Hyder Ally. For the manner in which he received this command, and the brilliant action he fought in that ship, the reader is referred to the text. From the year 1782 to that of 1784, Captain Barney served in the General Washington, (late General Monk,) being most of the time employed as a despatch vessel, or on civil duty of moment. It is not easy to say what was the regular rank of Captain Barney at this period. That he was a lieutenant in the public marine is certain, but it does not so clearly appear that he was appointed to be a captain. Of his claim to this distinction there is no question, though it would seem that the peculiar state of the country prevented this act of justice from being performed. When the General Washington was sold, Captain Barney retired to private life, and, like all his brother officers of the marine of the Revolution, was disbanded.

In 1794, Captain Barney was one of the six captains appointed in the new navy, but he declined taking the commission on account of the name of Captain Talbot preceding his own. In 1796 Captain Barney went to France, and not long after he was induced to enter the French navy, with the rank of *chef de division*. On the 28th of May he sailed from Rochfort for St. Domingo, in L'Harmouie, 44, having La Railleuse, 36, in company, and under his orders. After cruising some time with these ships, to which a third was subsequently added, he got the command of La Meduse and L'Insurgente, the latter being the frigate that was eventually lost in the American navy. With these two ships he came to America, and was watched for several months by a superior English squadron. The manner in which Com. Barney got to sea, when he was ready to sail, has always been greatly admired. The French frigates dropped down gradually towards the sea, the enemy moving out before them, until the former had anchored just within the capes, and the latter were watching them in the offing. As soon as it became dark, Com. Barney lifted his anchors and stood up the bay, until far enough to be out of sight, when he again brought up. The next morning, missing him, the English supposed he had got to sea in the night, and made sail in chase. Com. Barney, in the mean while, followed his enemies off the coast, altering his course in time to avoid them.

In 1800, Com. Barney quitted the French service, and returned home, He was engaged in commerce until the war of 1812. The navy by that time had become too regular to allow of his being received into it, and he accepted the command of a privateer. He made only one cruise in this vessel, and in 1813 was put at the head of the flotilla in the Chesapeake, with the rank of a captain in the navy, though not properly in the service. His gallant conduct in that station has been shown. After the war of 1812, he held a civil station under the government, and died in Kentucky, to which state he had removed, December 1st, 1818, in the 59th year of his age. The wound received at Bladensburg is supposed to have caused his death.

Captain Barney, or Com. Barney, as it was usual to call him, in consequence of his rank in the French service, was a bold, enterprising, and highly gallant officer. His combat with the Monk was one of the neatest naval exploits on record; and in all situations he manifested great spirit, and the resources of a man fitted to command. There is little question that he would have been one of the most distinguished officers in the service, had he remained in it; and, as it is, few Americans enjoy a more enviable professional reputation. Captain Barney is said to have been engaged in twenty-six combats, all of which were against the English, and in nearly all of which he was successful.

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Though these by no means are the only online versions available, for the complete text of Cooper's *History of the Navy*, see:

Vol. I

[http://www.archive.org/details/cihm\\_48556](http://www.archive.org/details/cihm_48556)

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