

The British Attack on the Capital

While the War of 1812 began in that year, it was still unresolved and in full battle in 1814. The leaders of young country of the United States perhaps were unwise in their decision to fight with Britain again so soon after the Revolutionary War. There were also missed opportunities to avoid the war altogether since Britain was willing to repeal the Orders of Council that prompted the United States to declare war in the first place. With the delays in communication inherent in that era, the letter declaring war from the United States toward Britain and the letter indicating Britain's willingness to repeal the Orders of Council were sent within days of each other, only to face long sea voyages before arriving. Even after the letter from Britain arrived, Congressional leaders voted to continue the war.

No matter what the circumstances surrounding the outset of the war were, nonetheless the war started in 1812. At that time Britain was also at war with Napoleon, the dictator of France. The leaders of the United States had a second opportunity to end the war early in 1813. At that time, the British leaders seemed willing to negotiate with representatives from the U.S. but American leaders were unwilling to compromise on some issues and the war continued.

Early in 1814, British troops prevailed over Napoleon's forces and Britain could focus its entire military might against the United States. The victory in France boosted British morale and the war had lasted long enough to raise the desire for revenge. Britain wanted the United States to return to colonial status instead of being an independent country.

At this point in the war the British planned a three-pronged attack on the United States. The first part of the plan was to attack the major cities along the Atlantic coast, including Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia. The second part of the plan was an attack on New York State. The British planned to come in from Canada and cross Lake Champlain. Taking control of New York would cut off the New England states from the rest of the country. The British hoped that these original colonies would then be willing to return to colonial status with the threat of British military might.

The third part of the plan was to attack New Orleans, Louisiana, the major shipping port of the southern states. Control of New Orleans would stop the flow of goods to and from the southern states and the western territories. Since New Orleans is located at the mouth of the Mississippi River, the British could also move their navy vessels onto the river and control the middle of the United States as well.

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The first step in the plan was to attack cities on the Atlantic coast of the United States. In August, 1814 the British Admiral, Alexander Cochrane, sailed his fleet into Chesapeake Bay. Chesapeake Bay is a part of the Atlantic Ocean that separates Virginia and Maryland. The target city of Baltimore is toward the northern reaches of the bay while Washington, D.C. is accessible from the bay through the Potomac River or the Patuxent River off the western inlet of the bay. Cochrane had four large ships, twenty frigates, and twenty troop transport ships with over four thousands soldiers.

Chesapeake Bay was defended by only fifteen American gunboats which were pursued by Cochrane's forces. The American commander sailed up the Patuxent River and destroyed the gunboats rather than surrender. This meant that British troops were close to Washington, D.C. and the city was without military troops. American troops had been sent to Baltimore since military leaders assumed it would be attacked first.

On August 23, 1814 British troops started marching the fifteen miles from the shores of the Patuxent River to the city of Washington. Citizens fled and First Lady Dolly Madison quickly removed valuables from the White House before she fled. President Madison was away gathering more troops to defend the city.

The hastily assembled American troops faced the British and defended the city until the British began firing Congreve rockets. While the purpose of these rockets was to start fires, the unfamiliar weapons frightened American soldiers and they retreated.

On the evening of August 24 British troops entered the empty city of Washington. They set fire to the Capitol Building, the White House, the navy yard, the Library of Congress, and the city's largest newspaper. With such an easy victory, the British were poised to take Baltimore.

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However, Baltimore had already been fortified and civilians volunteered to build more barricades. They even sank boats in the harbor to block the British warships from entering. The British attacked Baltimore on September 13, 1814. They fired eighteen hundred cannonballs at Fort McHenry that defended Baltimore. Francis Scott Key witnessed the battle and saw the red glare of the Congreve rockets. He later wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner", now the national anthem of the United States, after experiencing this battle. The British forces were unsuccessful at capturing Baltimore and left Chesapeake Bay.

On August 31, 1814 British troops began phase two of their plan, the attack on New York through Lake Champlain. They were quickly defeated and retreated back to Canada. United States forces had won on two out of the three fronts.

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The British Attack on the Capital Questions

Circle True or False after analyzing each of the following statements.

1. True False The United States had more than one opportunity to end the War of 1812 through diplomacy and negotiation.
2. True False Britain's war with France and Napoleon in the early 1800s did not influence the War of 1812 with the United States.
3. True False During the War of 1812 the British hoped to defeat the Americans and return the United States to a British colony.
4. True False In 1814 the British planned to attack the frontier forts along the Mississippi River.
5. True False In 1814 the British planned to attack American cities, especially New York City.
6. True False In 1814 the British planned to attack American cities, especially New Orleans, Louisiana.
7. True False On August 24, 1814 the British captured the city of Washington, D.C. and set fire to important government buildings.
8. True False The battle at Washington, D.C. was inspiration for the song "The Star-Spangled Banner", the national anthem.
9. True False After burning Washington, D.C. the British moved on to attack Baltimore but were defeated.

True False In 1814 the British plan included an attack on New York State which was successful.

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The British Attack on the Capital Answers

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. True
7. True
8. False
9. True
10. False