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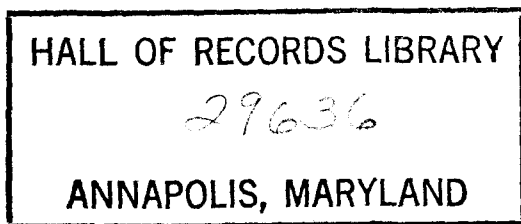
THE

BURNING OF

Washington

THE BRITISH INVASION OF 1814

Anthony S. Pitch



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over forty-five years old and therefore exempt from militia service. But the basement offices in the House of Representatives were almost empty because nearly all of the clerks were young men. Only J. T. Frost, a newcomer over forty-five, remained at his desk.¹⁸ In this moment of unparalleled crisis, a man of scant experience and weak authority was burdened with the need to make rapid decisions of national importance. He was sorely in need of the guiding hand of the clerk of the House of Representatives, Patrick Magruder, a former congressman and custodian of the Library of Congress.¹⁹ But Magruder had been ill for months and had acted on his doctor's advice to leave town and restore his health at mineral springs. No one was around to advise Frost on how and when to protect the volumes of House paperwork from enemy vandals. His colleagues, Samuel Hamilton and Brook Berry, had been plucked from their offices to serve in an artillery company.²⁰

Another clerk, Samuel Burch, had tried hard to reason with his superiors into letting him remain at his post to save the House documents, but he, too, had been marched out of the city to meet the enemy. Not until late on Sunday was he allowed to leave his company of the 2nd Regiment and return to Washington.²¹ This was done through the personal intervention of Col. George Magruder of the 1st Regiment, who was also chief clerk to his brother, Patrick Magruder.

But when Burch arrived back in the disorderly capital on Sunday night, he was hamstrung by Colonel Magruder's specific orders not to begin packing until he knew for a fact that clerks at the War Office had begun to pack their own papers. Burch learned only at noon on Monday that War Office clerks were already moving their documents out. Much later he found out that evacuation work at the War Office had really begun a day earlier.

By the time Burch went looking for wheeled transport, it was too late. The military had grabbed most of them, and the remainder were piled high with the goods of civilians in flight. First he tried to hire the wagons. When he was rebuffed he tried pulling rank, claiming he had a right to impound them. But again he was snubbed, especially when it was obvious he had no force to back him up. In desperation Burch ordered three messengers to scour the countryside, but all they came up with was one cart and four oxen procured from a man living six miles outside of Washing-

ton. It did not arrive in the capital until after dark on Monday night, when it was frantically loaded with the most valuable papers. The oxen were then turned around and driven nine miles away to deposit the documents in a safe and secret location in the countryside. The cart returned to Washington, where harried clerks tried to remove as much as possible of the remaining horde of paper. They toiled until Wednesday morning, then joined the general exodus. Frustrated beyond measure, both Burch and Frost knew that everything could have been saved, even the vast contents of the Library of Congress, if only they had been able to seize more carriages.²²

The archival material of the U.S. Senate was in equal jeopardy because no one with administrative seniority was available to take charge. Samuel Otis, secretary of the Senate since 1789, had died in April, and though senators had mourned his loss by wearing black crepe armbands for a month, no one had appointed his successor during the intervening four months. The principal clerk was out of town, leaving only two younger clerks, John McDonald and Lewis Machen, to decide whether to take matters into their own hands. Machen, twenty-four and married less than two years, should have been called into active service with the District of Columbia militia, in which he commanded a company with the rank of captain.²³ But seven weeks earlier he had bought a farm in Maryland, eight miles outside Washington, which disqualified him from holding a commission in the District militia, though he was allowed to serve there as a rank-and-file volunteer.²⁴ He had not yet been enrolled in the Maryland militia, so he decided instead to make himself available for civilian tasks at the Senate.

Machen waited in vain for an executive order or for someone higher up to tell him what to do with the Senate documents, but neither was forthcoming. By noon on Sunday 21 he could wait no longer. All around him were signs of "doubt, confusion and dismay."²⁵ He gave McDonald, his superior, an ultimatum: help get the documents out of Washington immediately, or he would act alone. Even though McDonald was of the same mind and readily concurred, they now had to find transport. When he had ridden into Washington, Machen had passed a wagon driver and sounded him out about the possibility of hiring the vehicle. But now, when he returned to conclude the deal, the owner was away from his home. The

driver balked at letting the wagon go but relented when Machen threatened to impound it. By the time they got to the Senate, however, McDonald had gone, apparently to make arrangements for the safety of his own family.

According to Machen, he and the driver, assisted by Tobias, the black office messenger, loaded only the most valuable documents. They included confidential papers, "one of which I knew to contain the number and positions of the entire American military force."²⁶ He believed the documents stashed into the wagon constituted the only copy of the Senate's quarter century of executive history.

They loaded the wagon until it could hold no more, then drove off for Machen's farm as the sun was about to set. But they were still within the boundaries of the District of Columbia when a wheel gave way. Fortunately, they were close to a blacksmith's shop and stole a replacement. Then, when only two miles short of the sanctuary in Prince George's County, Maryland, the wagon overturned. It took them several hours during the night to lift it up again and reload the precious cargo. But when McDonald turned up at the farm at ten o'clock the following morning he took the loaded wagon on to Brookville, Maryland, a more secure refuge because Machen's farm lay in the same county crisscrossed by the invaders on their way to and from Washington. The salvaged documents remained at their new location until the following month.

John Gardiner, chief clerk of the General Land Office in the Treasury Department, also packed all his official records on Sunday, August 21, but could not find any wagons to take them out of the city. A day later he found some in the country and loaded them that evening for shipment out of the capital the same night.²⁷

Navy Secretary Jones had the good sense to anticipate a run on transport and allowed his staff to ferry departmental archives in boats up the Potomac River. Three clerks worked feverishly all of Sunday filling boxes and trunks with books, papers, maps, charts, plans, stationery, trophies, instruments, and even prints and paintings. That night the crews of two riverboats were paid to haul the heavy load upriver. The next day two municipal carts carried everything else, leaving behind the heavy desks and other furniture. They quickly covered the short distance to the near-

est Potomac River wharf, and by late afternoon the cargo had been transferred to a boat heading for Georgetown.

Surprisingly, two drivers with large wagons arrived at the Navy Department on Monday morning offering their services. The accountant leaped at the opportunity, and soon the contents of his office had been carted off to the riverbank. A day later the personnel made good their escape, the chief clerk and one of his underlings going by boat up the Potomac, then through the locks and the canal to safety above the falls.²⁸

Late that night a horseman banged on the door of the house of his friend Samuel Harrison Smith, president of the Bank of Washington and commissioner of revenue in the Treasury Department. When it opened, the rider skipped the usual greetings. "The enemy are advancing!" Willie Bradley shouted. "Our own troops are giving way on all sides and are retreating to the city! Go, for God's sake go!"²⁹ Having sounded the alarm, he was gone. Smith's wife, Margaret, calmly supervised the loading of a wagon with some personal keepsakes. It was still inconceivable to her that the enemy would occupy the city, yet they heeded the warning. By 3 A.M. they had bundled their goods into a wagon and set off slowly through the darkness, heading north to Maryland with their daughter and servants. Now and then Mrs. Smith got out of the wagon to walk, and at dawn they stopped for breakfast. Ten hours after leaving Washington they arrived at their destination, the secluded Quaker village of Brookville, set in a small valley with mills by a stream.

Georgetown librarian and bookshop owner Joseph Milligan fled far across Virginia, finding temporary shelter at the Hackwood Park home of Sarah Young, sister-in-law of Joseph Nourse. Milligan was so scared that he had become irrational. "Poor Milligan the Georgetown librarian arrived here yesterday exhausted and insane," Sarah wrote to her sister, Maria Nourse. "He thinks he was pursued by the British, that they guarded the passes of the mountains to watch for the President. He feared he should be taken for him. And finally brooding over his country's woes and his own, his reason was shaken from her throne. How terribly has he overrated his own consequence. He is harmless but knows of treasons and whispers them to all he meets."³⁰

At the State Department a vidette (mounted sentinel) arrived with a

12. Refuge among Pacifists

General Mason's wife, Anna Maria, had fled Washington with her three eldest daughters and two servant maids, finding refuge with "a poor but respectable family" at a farmhouse four miles from the Quaker village of Brookville.¹ She lay ill with a fever and a pounding headache that no amount of forced bleeding could relieve. Though too ill to talk, she welcomed the presence of her good friend Margaret Bayard Smith, who had come from Brookville to nurse her all through Friday and into Saturday morning, 27 August.

But the tranquillity of the humble refuge vanished with the arrival of Dr. Charles Worthington, the patient's wealthy Georgetown physician who was so old-fashioned that he wore his hair in a ponytail and dressed with knee breeches, long stockings, and buckled shoes long after they went out of style. He was outspokenly against the war with Britain and would soon take into his Georgetown home some of the British soldiers wounded at the battle of Bladensburg, an act that later prompted one of the officers to give him a gift of a gold snuffbox engraved in gratitude for the doctor's "extreme kindness and attention."²

Worthington did not care for diplomatic niceties. Instead of showing concern for his patient, he spoke gleefully of the rout of the American army and the fall of the capital. Tearfully, Mrs. Smith begged him, especially at this moment, not to rejoice over losses that should be mourned. Worthington let the matter drop, but Smith was shaken to the core. She could not believe that anyone, even a Federalist, could say such things. In the weeks to come, Worthington's patient was so miserable among tee-

totaling Quakers that she pleaded with her brother, Attorney General Rush, to send her some bottles of Madeira.³

Meanwhile, the president and his horsemen created a stir in the crowded village of Brookville when they arrived on Friday night during Margaret Smith's absence. They had continued on from Montgomery Court House after finding the army had quit the town six hours earlier for Baltimore.⁴ The presidential party put up at the sturdy two-story brick home of the village postmaster, Caleb Bentley, and his wife, Henrietta, a friend of fellow Quaker Dolley Madison. The Quaker hosts and household staff fluttered in and out of the rooms preparing supper and making beds in the wood-beamed parlor. Ever since the village had filled with refugees in their carriages and baggage wagons, the hospitable Quakers had worked tirelessly to house and feed them. Mrs. Smith had "never seen more benevolent people." The tiny community was evidently driven by a common good nature. "It is against our principles to have anything to do with war," Mrs. Bentley explained, "but we receive and relieve all who come to us."⁵

As sentinels circled the house, bands of cavalry and infantry pitched their tents by the stream and beside the wall of a mill, piercing the darkness with myriad campfires and flickering candles. Curious knots of villagers of all ages bunched close to the Bentley home to try and get a glimpse of the president of the United States. With the nation's capital held by the enemy, the nondescript village of gentle pacifists was quickly transformed by Madison's presence into a makeshift center of supreme executive authority.

Madison retained much of his usual composure, and though distressed, he appeared to be far from dispirited.⁶ At 10 P.M. he wrote a brief letter to James Monroe, asking whether he should remain in Brookville or journey to him. "If you decide on coming hither, the sooner the better."⁷

The following morning, Saturday, Monroe got word to the president that the British had evacuated the capital and were en route to Upper Marlborough. Madison acted quickly to summon his cabinet back to Washington. Couriers galloped off to Fredericktown to find Armstrong and Campbell. At 10 A.M. the president scribbled a note to Jones at Wiley's Tavern. Unaware that Dolley had moved to Mrs. Minor's, the president wrote, "I hope you will, with the party attached to your care, have remained at Wiley's and be so much the more quick in your return to the city."⁸

Then he wrote to Dolley. Since the chief executive's mansion had been gutted by fire, Madison told his wife, "I know not where we are in the first instance to hide our heads; but shall look for a place on my arrival. Mr. Rush offers his house in the six buildings and the offer claims attention. Perhaps I may fall in with Mr. Cutts."⁹

At noon the president, now joined by the secretary of state, set out for Washington. Five hours later they rode into the charred city.¹⁰ It was a wrenching sight. The glorious landmarks, designed and crafted with obsessive passion and meticulous detail by Hoban, Thornton, Latrobe, Andrei, and Franzoni, lay open to the skies, their roofs burned off, their singular works of art reduced to rubble or cracked and blistered beyond repair. Scorched walls enclosed piles of ash. At the President's House, charcoal-black stains defaced the surface of chunky stone building blocks. Polished public buildings that once rivaled their weathered counterparts on the old continent of Europe stood hollow and wizened. The ruins were a telling commentary on the scale of the city's degradation.

The ache ran deep. There was a sense of profound personal loss. Richard Rush, a man renowned for his conspicuous good manners and even temperament, grieved when he surveyed "the disgraceful demolition."¹¹ It looked to him like "the most magnificent and melancholy ruin you ever beheld."¹² To former president John Adams he lamented, "How it will agonize your son [John Quincy Adams] in Europe when he hears of it. How it will make all our [peace] commissioners blush when the British commissioners hand them General Ross's dispatch."¹³

Misery would turn to anger. Successive observers decried the "wanton destruction."¹⁴ Others scrawled graffiti on the walls of the Capitol, venting their rage and scorn at both British and American leaders: "James Madison is a rascal, a coward and a fool"; "Armstrong sold the city for 5000 dollars"; "The capital of the Union lost by cowardice." A pencil sketch showed Winder hanging from a tree. Another depicted the president fleeing without his hat or wig. Cockburn was made to look like a common thief robbing henroosts.¹⁵

The president took up temporary lodgings at the F Street home of his brother-in-law, Richard Cutts, only a brief stroll from the gutted executive mansion.¹⁶ He was heavily guarded, at first by eleven horsemen and then by fifty militiamen. The next-door neighbor, Anna Maria Thornton,

14. Jefferson to Caesar Rodney, 24 June 1802, in *Works of Jefferson*, 9:377.
15. Buckner Thruston Diary, 22 Aug. 1814, HSW.
16. Booth to Tingey, 10 Sept. 1814, Reports on the Removal of Powder from the Navy Yard at the Time of the British Invasion of Washington 1814, RG 45/350, NA.
17. Lewis D. Cook Research Collection, 1931, MS 253, HSW.
18. Patrick Magruder to House Speaker, 17 Dec. 1814, *ASP*, Misc. 38, 2:258.
19. *1812 Catalogue*, xv–xvi.
20. Benjamin Burch certificate, 15 Dec. 1814, *ASP*, Misc. 38, 2:259.
21. Harvey Bestor, undated certificate, *ibid.*, 260.
22. Samuel Burch and J. T. Frost to Patrick Magruder, 15 Sept. 1814, *ibid.*, 245.
23. Machen, *Letters*, 10.
24. Lewis Machen to unnamed, 15 Aug. 1814, Machen Papers, LC.
25. Lewis Machen to William Rives, 12 Sept. 1836, Rives Papers, LC.
26. *Ibid.*
27. John Gardiner letter, 5 Nov. 1814, *ASP*, Misc. 38, 2:255.
28. Benjamin Homans letter, 5 Nov. 1814, *ibid.*
29. Margaret Smith to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, [?] Aug. 1814, MBSP.
30. Sarah Young to Maria Nourse, 28 Aug. 1814, NFP.
31. Pleasonton to Winder, 7 Aug. 1848, in Hildt, "Letters Relating to Capture," 65.
32. Estate of Stephen Pleasonton, District of Columbia, Probate Court, Old Series Administration Case Files, 1801–78, no. 3562, RG 21, NA.
33. Mason to Washington Boyd, 20 Aug. 1814, Commissary General of Prisoners, Letter Books, 1814, vol. 1, RG 217, NA.
34. Mason to Deputy Marshal of Maryland, 23 Aug. 1814, *ibid.*
35. Blake letter to Editor, *National Intelligencer*, 10 Sept. 1814.
36. Jones to Dolley Madison, 23 Aug. 1814, in *Memoirs of Dolly Madison*, 105–6.
37. Dolley Madison to Anna Cutts, 23 Aug. 1814, DMP.
38. Dolley Madison to Mary Latrobe, 3 Dec. 1814, quoted in Clark, *Life and Letters*, 166. The author has been unable to locate the original or a handwritten copy of this much-quoted letter.
39. Dolley Madison to Anna Cutts, 23 Aug. 1814, DMP; John Morton report, *ASP*, Mil. 16, 1:587.
40. McCormick, "First Master of Ceremonies," 175–77.
41. Dolley Madison to Anna Cutts, 23 Aug. 1814, DMP.

32. O'Conner testimony, *ibid.*, 44.
33. Dyson testimony, *ibid.*, 116.
34. Winder summation, *ibid.*, 142, 144.
35. Digges to Madison, 30 Aug. 1814, JMP.

CHAPTER 12. REFUGE AMONG PACIFISTS

1. Margaret Smith to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, 27 Aug. 1814, MBSP.
2. *Transactions and Proceedings of the 75th Anniversary of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia, Feb. 16, 1894*, 30–31.
3. Anna Maria Mason to Richard Rush, 5 Sept. 1814, RRP.
4. Madison to Jones, 27 Aug. 1814, UCSC.
5. Margaret Smith to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, 25 Aug. 1814, MBSP.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Madison to Monroe, 26 Aug. 1814, JMP.
8. Madison to Jones, 27 Aug. 1814, UCSC.
9. James Madison to Dolley Madison, 27 Aug. 1814, JMP.
10. "J.M.'s notes respecting the burning city in 1814," *ibid.*
11. Watson, *In Memoriam*, 151.
12. Rush to Jared Ingersoll, 8 Sept. 1814, RRP.
13. Rush to Adams, 5 Sept. 1814, *ibid.*
14. Robert Brown to William Brown, 21 Sept. 1814, Dreer Collection, HSP.
15. Fearon, *Sketches of America*, 284–85.
16. Jennings, *Colored Man's Reminiscences*, 13.
17. Thornton, *Diaries*, 5 Sept. 1814, LC.
18. Thornton letter to Editor, *National Intelligencer*, 7 Sept. 1814.
19. Beall Account Book, 27 Aug. 1814, MDHS.
20. Monroe to Jefferson, 21 Dec. 1814, in *Writings of James Monroe*, 5:304.
21. Thornton letter to Editor, *National Intelligencer*, 7 Sept. 1814.
22. "J.M.'s notes respecting the burning city in 1814," JMP.
23. James Madison to Dolley Madison, n.d., but indisputably 28 Aug. 1814 because of his reference to a letter sent the day before, 27 Aug. 1814. Quoted in Clark, *Life and Letters*, 172.
24. Ingersoll, *Historical Sketch*, 2:208–9.
25. Dolley Madison to Mary Latrobe, 3 Dec. 1814, quoted in Clark, *Life and Letters*, 166.
26. Margaret Smith to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, 30 Aug. 1814, MBSP.