

Flee or Stay?: The African American Experience during the War of 1812



During the War of 1812, the enemy came to know this region as a den for pirates and privateers, given the maritime industry's speedy schooner, the Baltimore Clipper, as well as its proximity to the newly formed nation's capital, Washington D.C. In the Spring of 1813, the Chesapeake Bay region was feeling the brunt of what would be known as The United States' 2nd War for Independence against Great Britain. The American ships that came from these waters proved to be a nuisance to the greatest naval force the world had ever seen. The topsail schooner from this region had been in production for a number of years before the outbreak of the war, and was the only resource available to Marylanders that could sail out of the British blockade of the Chesapeake Bay. When the United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, the U.S. accused England of trade restrictions to discourage trade with France, impressment of U.S. citizens by the British Navy, and British instigation and armament of native peoples against American settlers in the West. The U.S. quickly realized that their tiny navy paled in comparison to their enemy's. U.S. naval captains were often reluctant, if not explicitly instructed to avoid British warships encounters since the loss of even one American ship would be a severe blow to her fighting ability. One tactic the American government employed was to issue "letters or marque," contracting the "privateer" ship captains to act on their

government's behalf in this capacity. There was a lot to be earned on the water as a privateer, as the ship's crew usually split the prize money from the hold of the captured vessel. However, the risks were just as great as the potential gains, embarking on such a dangerous and uncertain endeavor as privateering.

For African Americans living in Maryland, whether a freeman working on the wharves of Baltimore City's Fells Point, or an enslaved laborer working on a tobacco plantation in Southern Maryland; the War of 1812 disrupted life as it was known. Those disruptions caused chaos, and in the midst of that chaos is when choices were made. Some saw the open sea as an avenue to a better life, full of purpose and accomplishment. Others viewed the British ships as their vessel for opportunity to escape from their condition here in the Chesapeake and obtain freedom. Some free men even joined the ranks of their local militias to help defend their home and state during these desperate times. This document packet will illustrate the various opportunities that free and enslaved African Americans had during the War of 1812. Whether they chose to be loyal to their owners and stay to protect their home lands, or to run away and join the British Fleet as they sailed in the Chesapeake Bay with hopes to become free men and women. Enslaved African Americans in the Chesapeake were looking to take advantage of the chaotic times and escape their bondage, seeking a better life elsewhere and anywhere, wherever they believed that freedom would reside.

U.S. History Content Standards

Materials compiled in this document can be used by educators for both Grades 5-12 and K-4.

Materials compiled in this document can be used by educators to fulfill the following [United States History Content Standards](#) for Grades 5-12.

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

Standard 2 : *The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society*

Standard 3 : *The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights*

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801-1864)

Standard 1: *United States territorial expansion between 1801-1864, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans*

Standard 3: *The extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800*

Standard 4: *The sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period*

Materials compiled in this document can be used by educators to fulfill the following [United States History Content Standards](#) for Grades K-4.

Topic 2: The History of Students' Own State or Region

Standard 3 : *The people, events, problems, and ideas that created the history of their state.*

Standard 3C: The student understands the various other groups from regions throughout the world who came into the his or her own state or region over the long-ago and recent past.

K-4: Use a variety of visual data, fiction and nonfiction sources, and speakers to identify the groups that have come into the state or region and to generate ideas about why they came. [Obtain historical data]

3-4: Draw upon census data and historical accounts in order to describe patterns and changes in population over a period of time in a particular city or town in the students' state or region. [Draw upon historical data]

Standard 3D: The student understands the interactions among all these groups throughout the history of his or her state.

3-4: Analyze the significance of major events in the state's history, their impact on people then and now, and their relationship to the history of the nation. [Analyze cause-and-effect relationships]

3-4: Identify historical problems or events in the state and analyze the way they were solved and/or the way that they continue to be address. [Identify issues and problems in the past]

3-4: Examine various written accounts in order to identify and describe regional or state examples of major historical events and developments that involved interaction among various groups. [Consider multiple perspectives]

Standard 3E: The student understands the ideas that were significant in the development of the state and that helped to forge its unique identity.

K-4: Draw upon visual and other data to identify symbols, slogans, or mottoes, and research why they represent the state.
[Draw upon visual data]

Topic 3: The History of the United States: Democratic Principles and Values and the Peoples from Many Cultures Who Contributed to Its Cultural, Economic and Political Heritage

Standard 4 : *How democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols*

Standard 4B: Demonstrate understanding of ordinary people who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy

K-4: Identify ordinary people who have believed in the fundamental democratic values such as justice, truth, equality, the rights of the individual, and responsibility for the common good, and explain their significance. [Assess the importance of the individual in history]

K-4: Analyze in their historical context the accomplishments of ordinary people in the local community now and long ago who have done something beyond the ordinary that displays particular courage or a sense of responsibility in helping the common good. [Assess the importance of the individual in history]

Standard 4C: The student understands historic figures who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy.

3-4: Compare historical biographies or fictionalized accounts of historical figures with primary documents in order to analyze inconsistencies and disagreements in these accounts, and assess their reliability. [Compare competing historical narratives]

Standard 4D: The student understands events that celebrate and exemplify fundamental values and principles of American democracy

3-4: Describe the history of events. [Demonstrate and explain the influence of ideas and beliefs]

Standard 4E: The student understands national symbols through which American values and principles are expressed.

K-4: Describe the history of American symbols. [Demonstrate and explain the influence of ideas]

K-4: Explain why important buildings, statues, and monuments are associated with state and national history. [Obtain historical data]

3-4: Analyze the Pledge of Allegiance and patriotic songs, poems, and sayings that were written long ago to demonstrate understanding of their significance. [Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage]

3-4: Analyze songs, symbols, and slogans that demonstrate freedom of expression and the role of protest in a democracy. [Consider multiple perspectives]

Standard 5 : *The causes and nature of various movements of large groups of people into and within the United States, now, and long ago.*

Standard 5A: *Demonstrate understanding of the movements of large groups of people into his or her own and other states in the United States now and long ago.*

3-4: Draw upon data in historical maps, historical narratives, diaries, and other fiction or nonfiction accounts in order to chart various movements (westward, northward, and eastward) in the United States. [Obtain historical data]

3-4: Identify reasons why groups such as freed African Americans families migrated to various parts of the country. [Consider multiple perspectives]

Standard 6 : *Regional folklore and culture contributions that helped to form our national heritage.*

Standard 6A: *The student understands folklore and other cultural contributions from various regions of the United States and how they help to form a national heritage.*

K-4: Describe regional folk heroes, stories, or songs that have contributed to the development of the cultural history of the U.S. [Read historical narratives imaginatively]

K-4: Draw upon a variety of stories, legends, songs, ballads, games, and tall tales in order to describe the environment, lifestyles, beliefs, and struggles of people in various regions of the country. Read historical narratives imaginatively]

Maryland State Content Standards

Materials compiled in this document can be used by educators to fulfill the following Maryland Social Studies Standards for Grades 4 and 8.

Grade 4 - Standard 5.0: Students will examine significant ideas, beliefs, and themes; organize patterns and events; and analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time in Maryland and the United States.

Topic C. Conflict between ideas and institutions

Indicator 2. Explain the political, cultural, economic and social changes in Maryland during the early 1800s.

Objective a. Describe Maryland's role in the War of 1812

Indicator 4. Analyze how the institution of slavery impacted individuals and groups in Maryland

Objective a. Compare the lives of slave families and free blacks

Objective b. Describe the anti-slavery movement in Maryland

Grade 8 - Standard 5.0: Students will examine significant ideas, beliefs, and themes; organize patterns and events; and analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time in Maryland and the United States.

Topic C. Conflict between ideas and institutions

Indicator 2. Analyze the emerging foreign policy of the United States

Objective a. Explain why the United States adopted a policy of neutrality prior to the War of 1812.

Objective b. Explain how the continuing conflict between Great Britain and France influenced the domestic and foreign policy of the United States.

Indicator 4. Analyze the institution of slavery and its influence on societies in the United States

Objective a. Describe pro-slavery and anti-slavery positions and explain how debates over slavery influenced politics and sectionalism

Maryland State Common Core Reading Standards

Materials compiled in this document can be used by educators to fulfill the following Maryland Common Core Reading Standards for Grades 6-8:

CCR Anchor Standard #1 - Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

RH.6-8.1 - Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources

CCR Anchor Standard #2 - Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

RH.6-8.2- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge of opinions

CCR Anchor Standard #4 - Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

RH.6-8.4- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies

CCR Anchor Standard #6 - Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

RH.6-8.6- Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts)

CCR Anchor Standard #7 - Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

RH.6-8.7- Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts

CCR Anchor Standard #8 - Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.




RH.6-8.8- Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text

CCR Anchor Standard #9 - Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.






RH.6-8.9- Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic

Primary Resources

1. TITLE: [Gabriel Hall, March 1892](#)
CREATOR: George H. Craig, photographer
DESCRIPTION: Black Refugee from Calvert County, MD who fled to the British fleet while in the Chesapeake Bay and settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada ([View Gabriel Hall's biography](#))
NOTES: "Gabriel Hall." African Nova Scotians: in the Age of Slavery and Abolition
SOURCE: NSARM accession #1988-387, NSARM negative #N-728
REPOSITORY: Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, Nova Scotia
2. TITLE: [George Roberts, 1861](#)
CREATOR: photographer unknown
DESCRIPTION: George Roberts, free black mariner who join a Baltimore privateer during 1812. Taken captive aboard the privateer *Sarah Ann* and tried for treason in Jamaica. Found not guilty, and is thought to have been a gunner on Captain Thomas Boyle's *Chausser* ([View George Roberts' biography](#))
SOURCE: Portrait of George Roberts, 1861, Image, Z24.2560
REPOSITORY: Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD

3. TITLE: [Obituary for George Roberts, 1861](#)
DESCRIPTION: Old Defender, served with Captain Boyle on the Chausser
SOURCE: Baltimore Sun, January 16, 1861, page 3. MSA SC2852
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD
4. TITLE: no title
CREATOR: Hezekiah Niles and William Ogden Niles
DESCRIPTION: article describes the case of the *Sarah Ann* and George Roberts treason trial in Jamaica, November 1812
SOURCE: [Niles Weekly Register, Volume 3, November 14, 1812, pages 172](#)  and [173](#) 
REPOSITORY: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.
5. TITLE: no title
CREATOR: Jonas Green
DESCRIPTION: article describes the return of the British frigate *Menelaus* into Annapolis and the taking of negroes
SOURCE: [Maryland Gazette and Political Intelligencer, December 22, 1814, page 2. MSA SC3403](#)
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD
6. TITLE: [Claim of Henrietta Ogle](#) 
DESCRIPTION: Notes the actions of the British as they lay off of the shores of Annapolis in the Severn River. Many depositions mention the fact that 20-30 of her negroes fled to the British ship *Menelaus*.
SOURCE: Claim of Henrietta Margaret Ogle, Anne Arundel County, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, 3.5 ft., entry 190, Record Group 76 [View Transcription](#) .
7. TITLE: [Claim of William Harris](#) 
DESCRIPTION: Mentions how his slave, Frisby Harris, escaped to the British in July 1814 and was seen assisting with the rioting and burning of Prince Frederick, Calvert County.
SOURCE: Claim of William Harris, Calvert County, Case 773. Case Files, compiled ca. 1827 - ca. 1828, documenting the period ca. 1814 - ca. 1828. *ARC Identifier 1174160/ MLR Number PI 177 190* ([View Transcription](#) )
REPOSITORY: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD
8. TITLE: [Cochrane Proclamation](#)
CREATOR: Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane
DESCRIPTION: broadside published in April 1814 informing all those who wish to join Her Majesty's fleet could do so and would be received as free settlers
SOURCE: ADM/1/508/ folio 579
REPOSITORY: National Archives, London, England, UK
9. TITLE: ["Rough Plan for the Defenses of the harbor of Annapolis in Maryland"](#)
CREATOR: William Tatham
DESCRIPTION: shows the geography of the land and water around Annapolis, including water depth and distances between locations. Rivers, buildings and forts are noted by name.
SOURCE: Call #G3844.A6R4 1814.T3
REPOSITORY: Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington D.C.
10. TITLE: no title
DESCRIPTION: letters written to Governor Winder from Mr. Robert Travers of Dorchester County asking for permission to retrieve his stolen slaves from the British Fleet in the Chesapeake

NOTES: One letter dated [November 1813](#), and the other [December 26, 1814 \(page 1 & page 2\)](#)
SOURCE: Maryland State Papers, Series A, 1813, MSA S1004-129-23 (November 1813 transcription) & S1004-129-25 (December 26, 1814 transcription)
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD

11. TITLE: ["Narrative Respecting the Conduct of the British"](#)
CREATOR: no author, dedicated to General H.T. Forman
DESCRIPTION: Describes the destruction of property in the Havre de Grace area committed by the British during the War of 1812. Page 13 specifically notes the efforts of Miss Polly McCasky's negro woman to save her home.
SOURCE: MSA SC397 - SCM186
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD
12. TITLE: [Diary - Springfield Farm](#) 
CREATOR: Unknown (likely Joseph Court)
DESCRIPTION: Describes the daily accounts from a planer in Anne Arundel County. Many entries deal with the ongoing war with Britain, and the crop cycles. Page 26 is from August 6, 1814 where the author notes the movement of British ships in the Bay, the burning of tobacco and the carrying off of negroes.
SOURCE: MSA SC210-1-3 ([View Transcription](#) )
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD
13. TITLE: [Forty Dollar Reward](#) 
CREATOR: Benjamin Oden
DESCRIPTION: Runaway ad for Negro Frederick, sometimes calls himself Frederick Hall, ran away from Prince George's County in May 1814
NOTES: Enlists in the 38th U.S. Infantry and defended Fort McHenry until his death on September 13, 2814 during the bombardment of the fort.
SOURCE: American Commercial and Daily Advertiser, May 16, 1814, page 3. MSA SC3392
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD
14. TITLE: [no title](#)
DESCRIPTION: letter written from Governor Winder to British Admiral Sir John B. Warren asking for permission for Mr. John Wathins to retrieve stolen negroes from the British Fleet in the Chesapeake
NOTES: Letter dated August 26, 1813
SOURCE: Governor and Council (Letterbook) 1796-1818, MSA S1075-11. Image from microfilm SCM 392-0148
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD
15. TITLE: [no title](#)
DESCRIPTION: letter written from General Samuel Smith to Committee of Vigilance and Safety of Baltimore City ordering of all negroes "fit to work" to parade on Chinquepin Hill
NOTES: Letter dated August 27, 1814
SOURCE: Baltimore City Archives (War of 1812 Records) 1813-1815, BRG 22-1. Image found on ebook page 684.
REPOSITORY: Baltimore City Archives, Baltimore, MD
16. TITLE: [Subsistence Account of James Biays, 6th Regiment](#) 
DESCRIPTION: Pay for 28 days work for self and "servant" that was not a soldier of the line
NOTES: Invoice dated April 15, 1813
SOURCE: Baltimore City Archives (War of 1812 Records) 1813-1815, BRG 22-1. Image found on ebook page 594-95.
REPOSITORY: Baltimore City Archives, Baltimore, MD
17. TITLE: [Black Recruits](#)
DESCRIPTION: Editorial from a Philadelphia paper about the U.S. Army recruiting negroes to fight the British
SOURCE: Frederick-Town Herald, December 31, 1814, page 3. MSA SC2829
REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD
18. TITLE: [Runaway Negroes](#) 
DESCRIPTION: Article out of Norfolk from October 5, 1813 about runaway slaves joining the

British

SOURCE: The Baltimore Whig, October 12, 1813, page 3. MSA SC3259

REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD

19. TITLE: [Hostile Fleet Off Our Coast](#) 

DESCRIPTION: Reprinted from a May 7, 1814 *Savannah Republican* article about the British Fleet sailing off the Coast of Georgia.

NOTES: Mentions Cochrane's Proclamation, which the published deemed "it inexpedient to publish the proclamation"

SOURCE: Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser, May 18, 1814, page 2. MSA SC3392

REPOSITORY: Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD

20. TITLE: [Proclamation to the Free Inhabitants of Louisiana](#) 

DESCRIPTION: Major General Andrew Jackson's appeal to have freemen of color join the United State's Army against the British

SOURCE: Niles Weekly Register, Volume 7, December 3, 1814, page 13.

REPOSITORY: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

Secondary Resources

Altoff, Gerard T. *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and The War of 1812* (Put-In-Bay, OH: The Perry Group, 1996).

Cassell, Frank A. *Merchant Congressman in the Young Republic: Samuel Smith of Maryland, 1752-1839* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971).

Bolster, W. Jeffrey. *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Cranwell, John Philip and William Bowers Crane. *Men of Marque: A History of Private Armed Vessels out of Baltimore During the War of 1812* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1940).

Eshelman, Ralph. *A Travel Guide to the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake: Eighteen Tours in Maryland, Virginia, & the District of Columbia* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

_____, Burton K. Kummerow. *In Full Glory Reflected: Discovering the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake* (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Historical Society Press, 2012).

Garitee, Jerome R.. *Republic's Private Navy: The American Privateering Business as Practised by Baltimore during the War of 1812* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977).

George, Christopher T. *Terror on the Chesapeake; The War of 1812 on the Bay* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Books, 2000).

Gillmer, Thomas C. *Pride of Baltimore: The Story of the Baltimore Clippers, 1800-1990* (Camden, ME; International Marine, 1992).

Healey, David. *1812: Rediscovering Chesapeake Bay's Forgotten War* (Rock Hill, SC: Bella Rosa Books, 2005).

Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Champaign, IL: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1989).

Marine, William M. *The British Invasion of Maryland, 1812-1815* (Baltimore, MD: Society of the War of 1812 in Maryland, 1913).

McWilliams, Jane. *Annapolis, City on the Severn: A History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

Whitfield, Harvey A. *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006).

Associated Heritage and Preservation Organizations

[National Park Service Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail](#)

[Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine](#)

[National Archives and Records Administration](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum](#)

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