

# On American Soil: The 1814 British Invasion of the Chesapeake

Within six months of the outbreak of hostilities between the United States and Great Britain on June 18, 1812, a contest that history would later address simply as the War of 1812, the Chesapeake Bay had become virtually a British lake. The waterfront towns and plantations of the Tidewater succumbed with startling regularity to Royal Navy depredations. Plantation establishments on the islands of the Bay and its many tributaries (such as Sharps, Tilghmans, Poplar, Blackstone, St. Clements, and St. Catharine's) were regularly attacked and plundered. Frenchtown, Maryland was burned to the ground, and Havre de Grace fell with little resistance. Hampton, Virginia was captured, pillaged, and many of its residents cruelly brutalized. From their fortified base on Tangier Island, the British maintained a wooden wall of ships that throttled maritime commerce in the Tidewater. Their base became a beacon of freedom for thousands of escaped slaves, many of which were formed into a special military unit called the Black Colonial Corps of Marines. The British awaited only a large infusion of land troops from England to carry out a major attack on urban centers such as Norfolk, Baltimore, Annapolis, and Washington. With most American troops engaged on the Canadian frontier, the Chesapeake Tidewater was almost defenseless on land. With only a few frigates available for the defense of the bay – and these already blockaded in – Secretary of the Navy William Jones appeared entirely incapable of coping with the crisis. Jones needed men, money, and ships, all in critically short supply. But most of all, he needed a comprehensive plan of action that stood at least a modest chance of success and a man capable and determined enough to institute it.

On July 4, 1813, Joshua Barney, a native Marylander, revolutionary War hero, and privateersman of great renown, penned for Jones an unsolicited plan for the defense of the Chesapeake. Barney recognized that the enemy awaited only the arrival of land forces before an attack could be made on the major cities of the Tidewater. "I am therefore of [the] opinion that the only defense we have in our power, is a kind of barge or row-galley, so constructed, as to draw a small draft of water, to carry oars, light sails, and one heavy gun . . . Let as many of these barges be built as can be manned, form them into a flying squadron, let them be continually watching and annoying the enemy in our waters, where we have the advantage of shoal water and flats in abundance throughout the Chesapeake Bay." One barge would cost less than \$3,000. Fifty such vessels would cost less than half the price of a conventional frigate, provide the same firepower, and go where a frigate would not dare to go.

The bold plan was accepted by a grateful Secretary of the Navy on August 20, 1813, and by early September Barney was in Baltimore attending to the birth of his little squadron. By the spring of 1814, Commodore Barney's construction program was far behind schedule and recruitment was going slowly. Nevertheless, enemy depredations having again resumed, Barney sailed forth with 18 small vessels to attack the main enemy base on Tangier Island. His force included the Scorpion, Vigilant, No. 137, No. 138, six 50-foot-class barges, seven 75-foot barges, a lookout boats, and a small flotilla of merchantmen bent on running the blockade.

On June 1, 1814, the Chesapeake Flotilla encountered superior British forces led by H.M.S. Dragon (74 guns) and St. Lawrence (18) off St. Jerome's Creek, St. Mary's County. After a brief skirmish of Cedar Point, the flotilla was obliged to retreat into the Patuxent River. With the arrival of a strong reinforcement of frigates, the British imposed a blockade of the river and prepared to attack the flotilla. Barney, outgunned nearly seven to one, retired into the shallows of St. Leonard's Creek, a narrow tributary a few miles up the river, which was shouldered on both sides by steep highlands. The British immediately pursued. On June 8, 9, and 10, a nearly continuous series of naval battles, the first major fleet engagements ever fought in Maryland waters, was carried out on the creek's waters as the British sent wave after wave of their own barge flotilla in against the Americans. Unable to enter the creek with their large warships, the British were met by a stout resistance and routed after every encounter.

Convinced that Barney could not be defeated in his lair, the British commander, Captain Robert Barrie, sought to lure the flotilla into the open by forcing it to come to the defense of the towns and plantations of the Patuxent. The British soon instituted a campaign of terror, laying waste to town and tenant farm alike in an effort to force Barney's hand. Calverton,

Huntingtown, Prince Frederick, Benedict, and Lower Marlboro were among the towns either burned to the ground or totally plundered.

On June 26, with reinforcements from the U.S. Army under Colonel Decius Wadsworth, and U.S. Marines under Captain Samuel Miller, Barney resolved on a breakout. A stunningly successful pre-dawn combined land-sea attack on the blockading frigates at the mouth of St. Leonard's Creek sent the British reeling and permitted the flotilla's escape upriver to Benedict. To avenge their defeat, a strong British force ascended the abandoned creek, captured and burned the ancient (1706) town of St. Leonard's at its head. The Royal Navy, however, was not inclined to re-engage Barney.

In mid-August, with a British invasion force of nearly 4,000 hardened veterans of the Napoleonic Wars onboard under the command of General Robert Ross, the largest armada of warships ever to visit Maryland waters came to anchor off the Patuxent.

Under the overall command of Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, this force had nothing less than the capture and destruction of Washington, D.C. as its objective. However, instead of the obvious route of advance - up the Potomac River - Admiral Sir George Cockburn, senior naval commander on the Chesapeake, suggested an ascent up the Patuxent and a landing at Benedict. From there, the army, under the command of General Robert Ross, and a strong barge force, three times as large as Barney's, might ascend in tandem, using the Chesapeake Flotilla as a pretext for the advance. The flotilla, which had retired above Pig Point (modern-day Bristol), could then be destroyed. Once the army had gained Upper Marlboro, it might then swing west and, after a forced march, capture Washington by surprise.

Realizing the possibility of the flotilla's falling into enemy hands, Secretary of the Navy Jones ordered Barney to take the flotilla as high up as possible, even to the old port of Queen Anne's and destroy the entire American squadron. On August 21, Barney, having come to anchor above Pig Point, left the squadron with the majority of his men to join an American army under General William Henry Winder, which had been gathering at the Woodyard, Maryland. A skeleton crew commanded by Captain Solomon Frazier was left behind to destroy the flotilla as necessary.

The British landing at Benedict by 4,000 invading troops on August 18-19 was unopposed and the march on Washington began immediately, via Upper Marlboro, however with the capture or destruction of the flotilla as its first objective. Shortly before 11:00 a.m. on August 22, 1814, as a British flotilla rounded a bend of the river at Pig Point, and a land force approached along the shore, the United States Chesapeake Flotilla was blown up and settled on the bottom of the Patuxent.

An American stand to protect the U.S. Capital was to be made at the little riverport town of Bladensburg by a small scratch force of the U.S. Army, U.S. Marines, Maryland militia, and Chesapeake Flotillamen, under the command of General Winder, but personally attended by President James Madison. The center of the American line was held by Barney and his flotillamen. On the sweltering hot day of August 24, 1814, the British launched their attack across the Anacostia River onto a large field of potatoes owned by Charles Calvert, a direct descendent of the founder of Maryland in 1634. Within a very short time most of the American forces had been routed in what was derisively called "The Bladensburg races." The center, however, commanded by Barney repelled attack after attack until the commodore fell with a wound that would later prove mortal. By evening, the U.S. Capitol Building, the U.S. Navy Yard, and the President's Palace (later dubbed the White House) in Washington, D.C. were in flames. Soon afterwards the city of Alexandria would surrender to a British fleet ascending the Potomac.

British attentions were then turned north to carry out the destruction of the City of Baltimore, but with far less good fortune. At the Battle of North Point, General Ross would be met and killed, with his troops turned back by a determined resistance. The Royal Navy's attempt to attack the city by sea was also turned back by the stout defense of Fort MCHenry, where the battery of guns was manned by Barney's flotillamen, and the great American flag, would inspire a Maryland lawyer named Francis Scott Key to write a poem that would galvanize a nation.

Upon the British withdrawal from the Patuxent, the flotilla remains became the target of considerable scavenging. Finally, John Weems of Anne Arundel County began to attend to the salvage of the wrecks. From a base of operations at Mount Pleasant Landing, Weems proceeded to recover artillery, tons of munitions, most of the squadron's anchors, and a large amount of miscellaneous arms and materials lost with the fleet. Several vessels were raised. Though the Scorpion and a large, privately owned merchant vessel belonging to Georgetown, D.C., which had been hired to carry ordnance, received considerable attention, it seemed that their resurrection would prove impossible.

Gradually, the hulls that had once been the "much vaunted flotilla," that had once defeated the mighty Royal Navy, now resting in the upper Patuxent River, were forgotten, little more than a curiosity whose presence was noted in a few local histories of a war most Americans knew nothing about. As late as 1907, a number of wrecks were still visible and received mention in official reports of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Local elderly residents of the Bristol area noted that at least two of the sites were visible as late as the 1930s. On March 3, 1931 Key's poem, which had early on been set to music, became the official National Anthem of the United States of America. Nearly half a century later, Barney's nearly intact flagship Scorpion was rediscovered and archaeologically excavated in June 1980.

Today her bones are once again quietly sleeping where they have lain for the last 210 years.

-- Don Shomette

#### **SUGGESTED READING**

Gilbert Auchinleck. *A History of the War Between Great Britain and the United States of America During the Year 1812, 1813 & 1814*. (Toronto London, and Redwood City, Calif.: Arms and Armor Press and Pendragon House, 1972.)

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Ralph Eshelman and Burton K. Kummerow. *In Full Glory Reflected: Discovering the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake*. (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society Press/Maryland Historical Trust Press, 2012).

Hulbert Footer. *Sailor of Fortune: The Life and Adventures of Commodore Barney, U.S.N.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940, reprint 2014).

Christopher T. George. *Terror on the Chesapeake: The War of 1812 on the Bay*. (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Books, 2000).  
Walter Lord. *The Dawn's Early Light*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1972).

William M. Marine. *The British Invasion of Maryland, 1812-1815*. (1913; reprint, Hatboro Pa.: Tradition Press, 1965).

Scott S. Sheads. *The Rockets' Red Glare: The Maritime Defense of Baltimore in 1814*. (Centerville, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1986).

Donald G. Shomette. *Flotilla: The Patent Naval Campaign in the War of 1812*. (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Donald G. Shomette. *Tidewater Time Capsule: History Beneath the Patuxent*. (Centerville, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1995).







Donald G. Shomette and Fred W. Hopkins, Jr. *War on the Patuxent, 1814: A Catalog of Artifacts*. (Solomons, Md.: Nautical Archaeological Associates and Calvert Marine Museum Press, 1981).

Steve Vogel. *Through the Perilous Fight: Six Weeks That Saved the Nation*. (New York: Random House, 2013).

# Chesapeake Engagements, 1814



## Map legend

-  American vessel
-  British vessel
-  Battle or skirmish
-  Raid
-  Town surrender
-  Extended encampments

0 10 miles

U.S. frigate *Constellation*  
(blockaded in Elizabeth River)

Fort Norfolk

Cape Henry

British Fleet Blockade

Hampton

Norfolk

Cape Charles

Cape Charles

Cape Charles

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Chesapeake Bay

Maryland Virginia

Princess Ann

Snow Hill

Salisbury

Vienna

Federalsburg

Lewes

St. Michaels

Queen Anne

Rock Hall

Georgetown

Fredericktown

Frenchtown

Elkton

Wilmington

Pennsylvania Maryland

Maryland Virginia

Washington Alexandria

Bladensburg

Georgetown

Baltimore

Patapsco River

Bombardment of Fort McHenry

Packet sloop Messenger

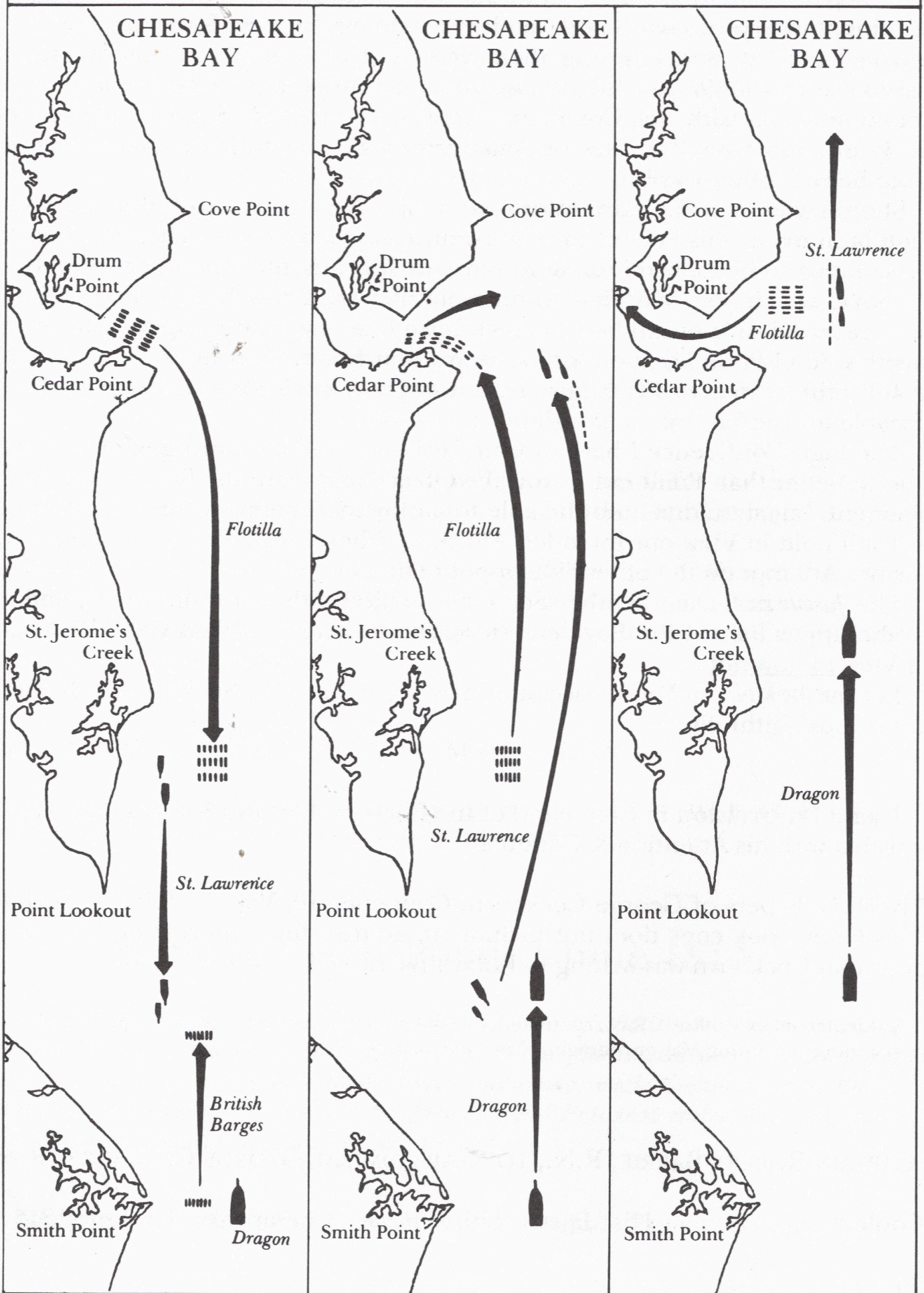
Susquehanna River

Chesapeake Bay

Chesapeake Bay

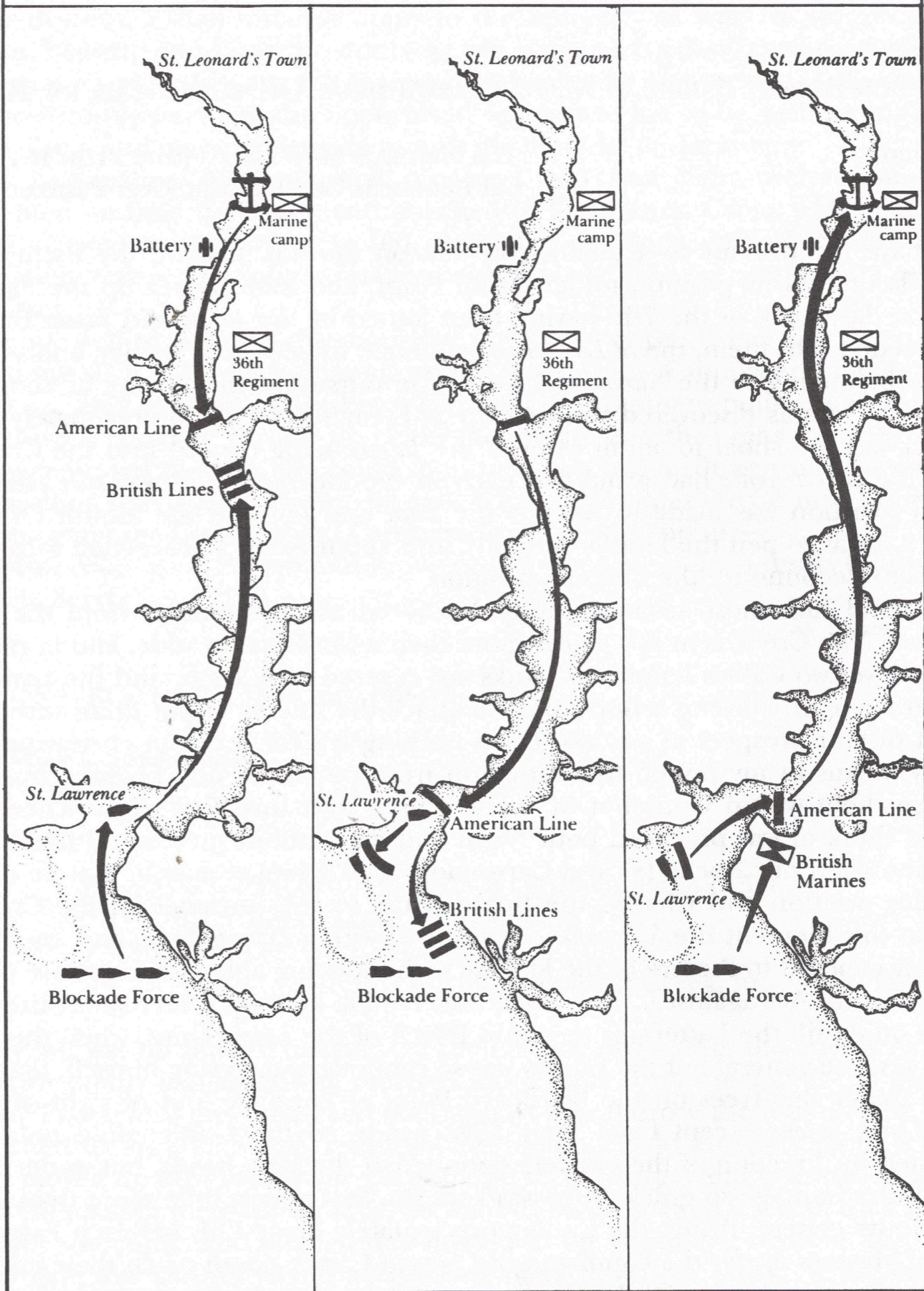
Chesapeake Bay

# THE BATTLE OF CEDAR POINT JUNE 1, 1814

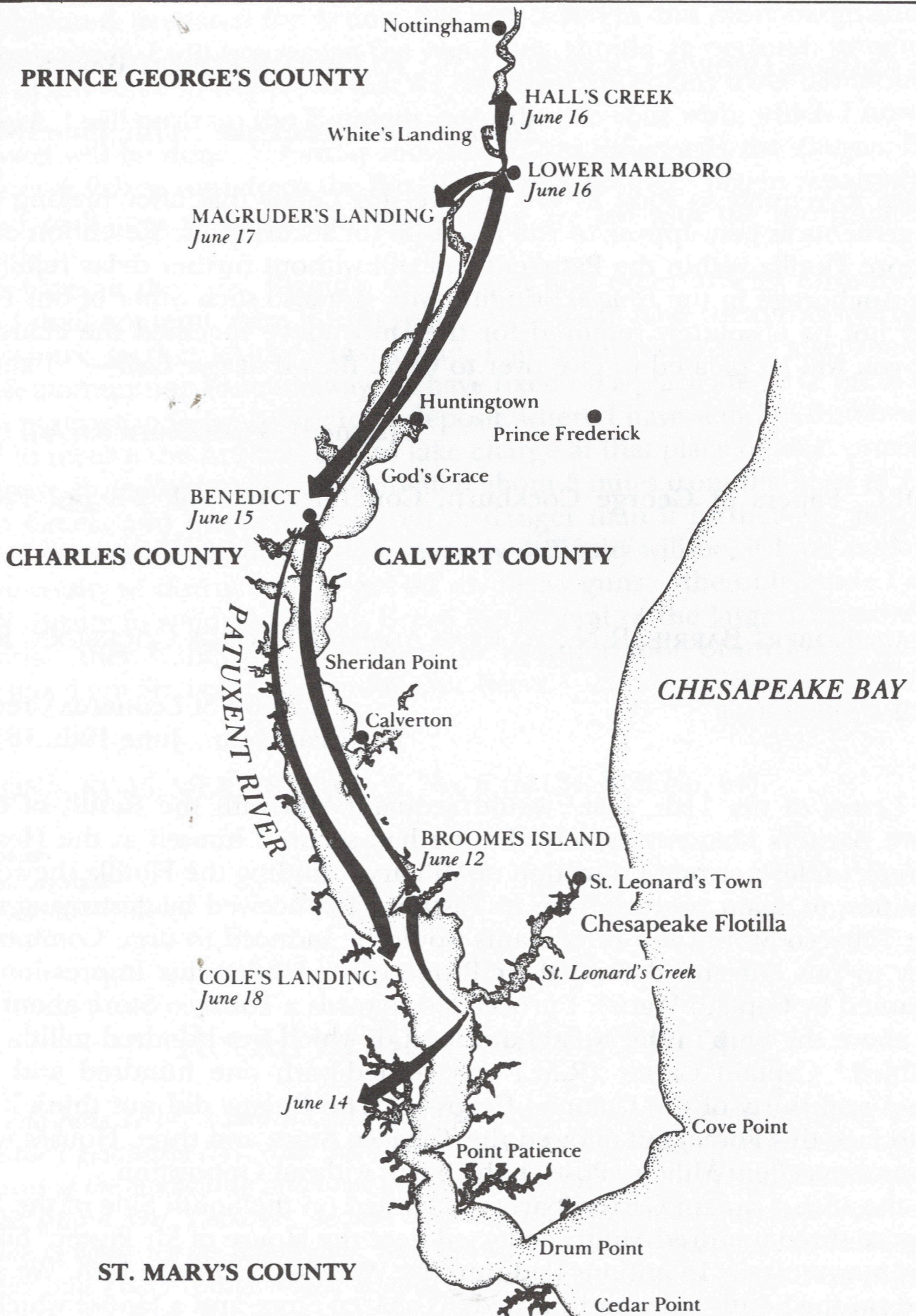


# THE BATTLE OF ST. LEONARD'S CREEK

## JUNE 10, 1814

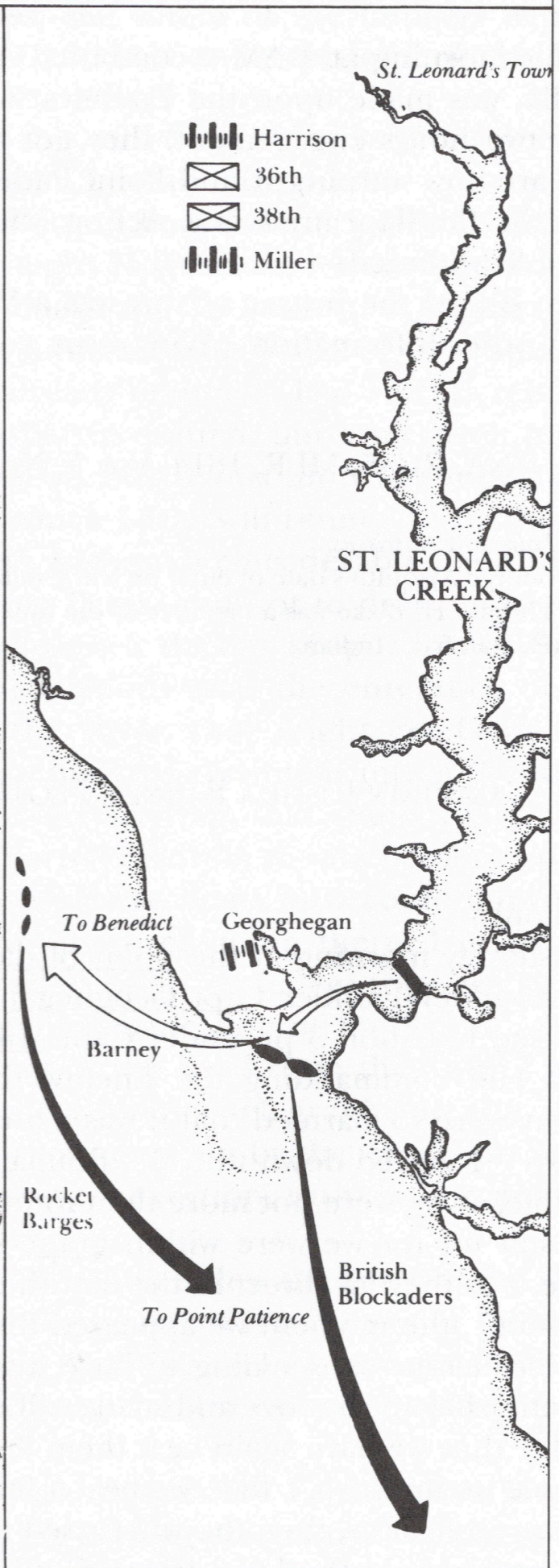
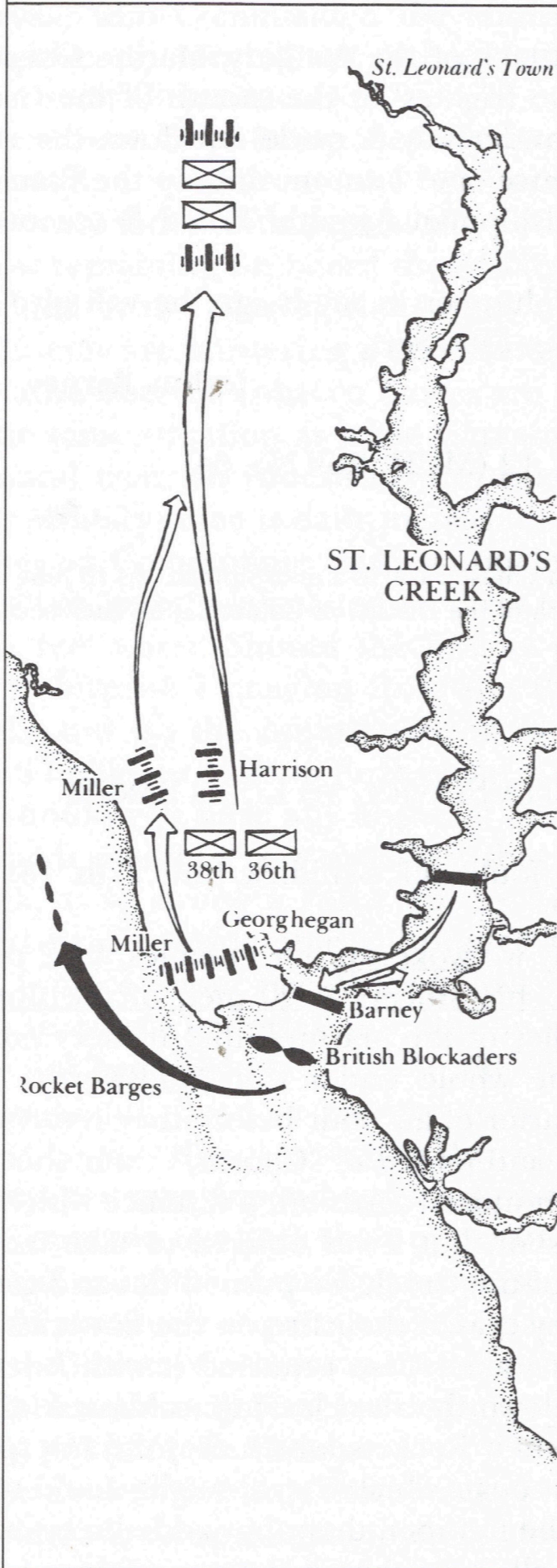


# BARRIE'S RAIDS ON THE PATUXENT



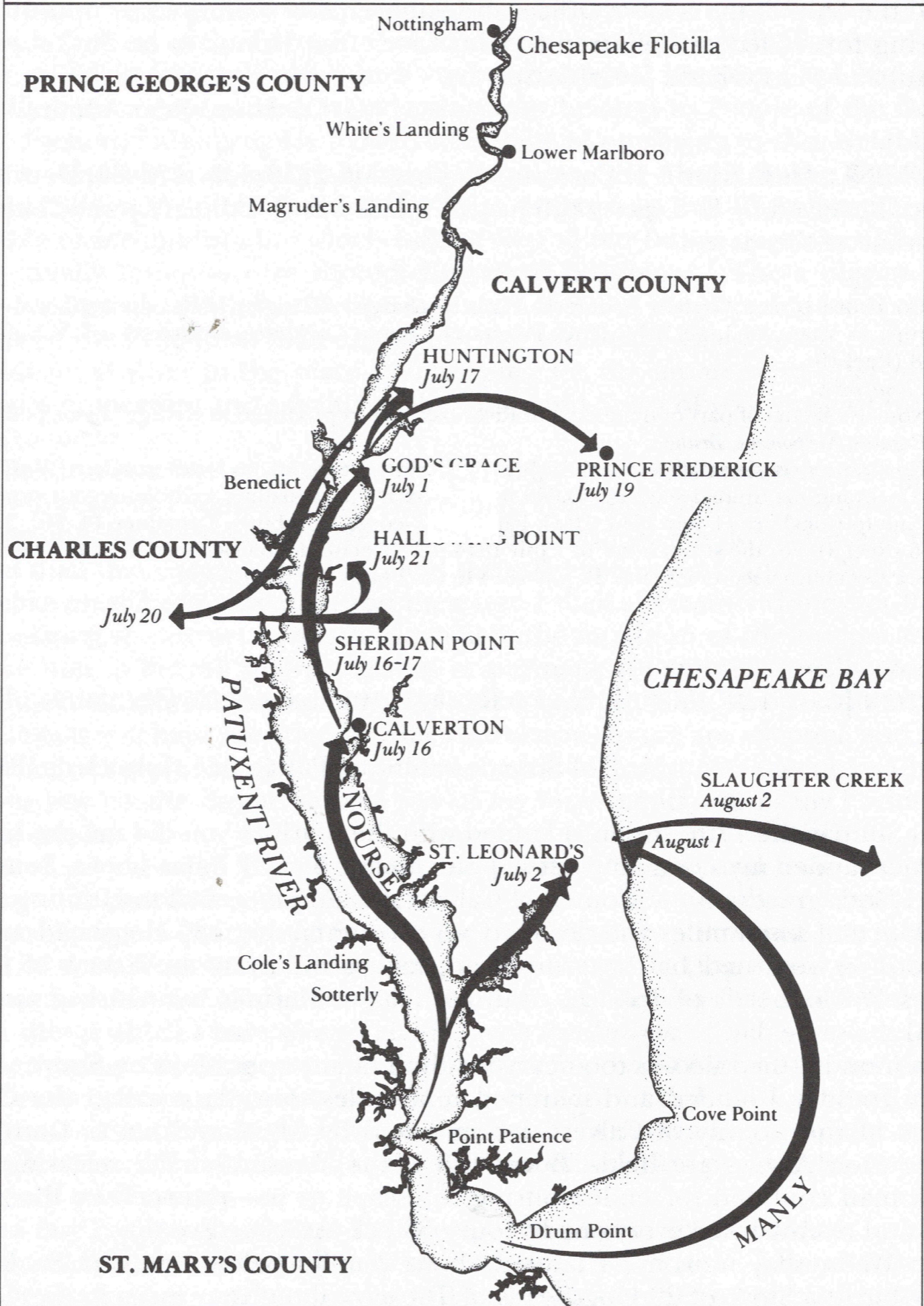
# THE BATTLE OF ST. LEONARD'S CREEK

## JUNE 26, 1814











# NOURSE'S RAIDS ON THE PATUXENT



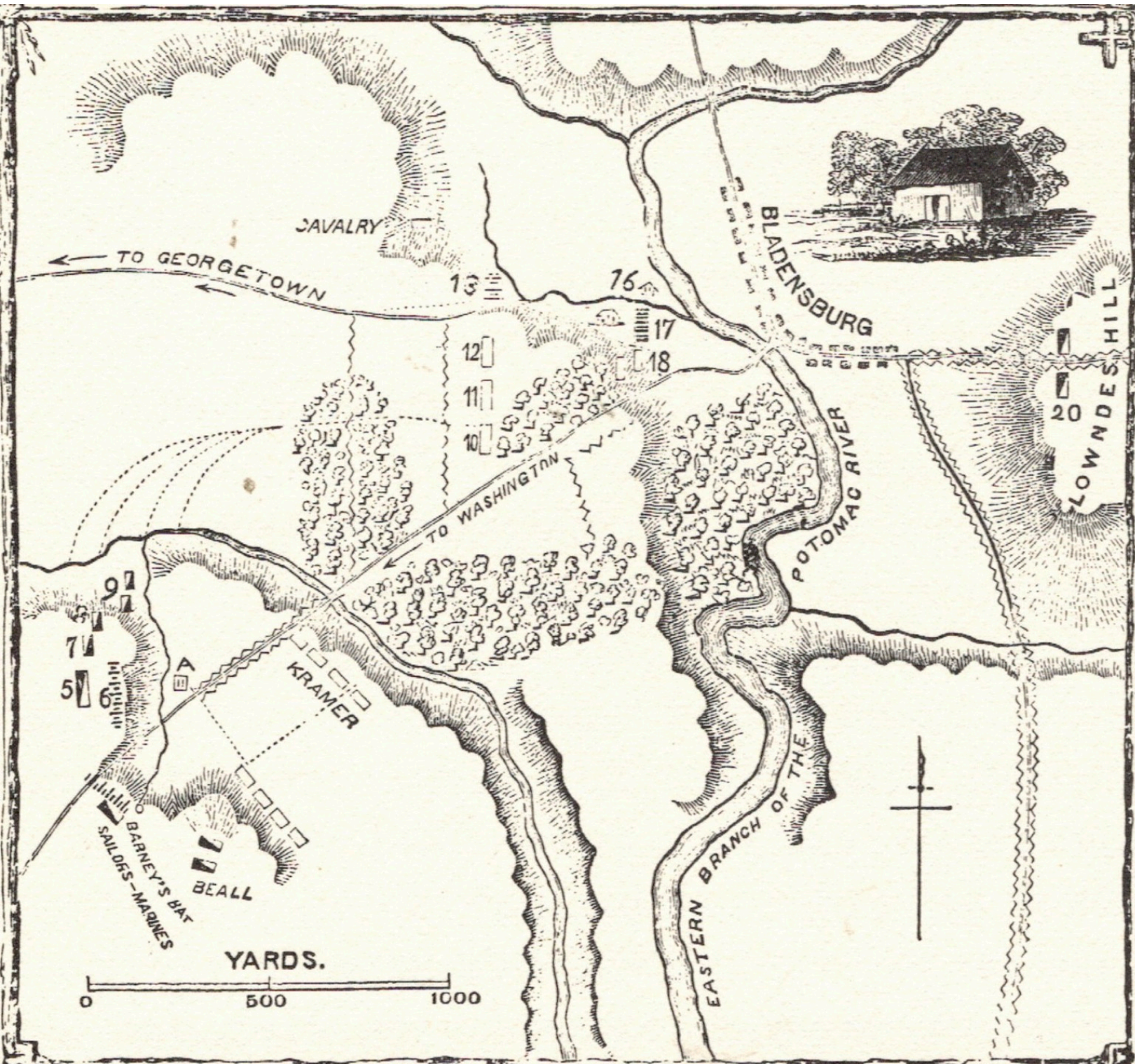


**Map legend**

-  War of 1812 site
-  Limited or no access
-  Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail
-  (approximate water route)
-  Other attraction
-  Visitor center

0 5 miles





PLAN OF THE  
**BATTLE GROUND AT BLADENSBURG**

**Map legend**

- War of 1812 site
- Limited or no access
- Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail
- (approximate water route)
- Other attraction
- Visitor center

0 2 miles

Leesburg 0 miles  
Maryland Virginia  
Claude Moore Park/  
Old Vestal's Gap Road  
Riverbend Park/  
Conn's Ferry Site

Herndon  
Reston

Centerville

George Washington Museum/  
George Washington  
Masonic National Memorial/  
Shuter's Hill  
King Street  
Carlyle House  
Historic Park  
Gadsby's Tavern Museum  
**The Lyceum: Alexandria Visitor Center**  
**Ramsay House Visitor Center**  
Historic Alexandria History Center and  
Museum Store/ Torpedo Factory Arcade  
Cameron Run  
0 1/2 mile

Woodbridge

Brookeville Academy  
Caleb Bentley House/Madison House  
Brookeville

Tudor Place  
Dumbarton House  
National Society United States  
Daughters of 1812 Museum  
Decatur House/  
National Center  
for White House History  
White House  
Sewall-Belmont  
House and  
Museum  
Theodore Roosevelt  
Island  
Octagon House  
Constitution Ave.  
National Mall  
Independence Ave. U.S. Capitol  
National Museum of  
American History  
National Archives  
Arlington National  
Cemetery  
U.S. Marine Corp  
Barrack  
Washington Navy Yard/  
National Museum  
of the U.S. Navy  
Fort McNair  
Greenleaf Point  
Federal Arsenal  
George Washington Parkway  
Potomac River  
Anacostia River  
0 1/2 mile

Bethesda  
Silver Spring

Hyattsville  
Bladensburg  
Congressional  
Cemetery

Arlington National  
Cemetery  
District of Columbia  
Maryland  
Alexandria  
Mount Welby  
Oxon Hill  
National Harbor

Mount Vernon  
Fort Washington  
Park  
Piscataway R