



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Remembering the British Invasion of Alexandria

*Alexandria Times, August 28, 2014*

*Image: The Carronade, at the Lyceum: Alexandria's History Museum. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.*

Despite spending two years planning for the defense of Alexandria during the War of 1812, the city's surrender to British forces on the morning of August 28, 1814 turned out to be an inevitability. Even before war was declared in June 1812, representatives of Alexandria had met with federal officials to relay their worries about the inadequate ramparts along the Potomac River, and their concern that their city and the national capital nearby were at risk of an attack from the Chesapeake Bay.

Even multiple offers of money and loans from Alexandria banks did not persuade the federal government to move quickly, particularly as Secretary of War John Armstrong thought an attack on the mid-Atlantic region was implausible. On August 22, 1814, just two days before the attack on Washington from Maryland, Armstrong still believed the likelihood of such an event was remote.

Alexandrians prepared the best they could for a potential attack, training the local militia, gathering arms and moving important stockpiles to locations outside the city. On August 21 and 22, Gen. Robert Young ordered the town's militia to cross the Potomac and move south towards Fort Warburton — now Fort Washington — to help provide a line of defense for the city. However, in doing so most men of fighting age and all the town's weapons were removed from Alexandria. The carronade pictured here, now in the collection at the Lyceum, is believed to have been scuttled by those troops at the mouth of Hunting Creek, just as British forces descended on the city in the days that followed.

By August 24, as an attack on Washington appeared imminent, the Alexandria committee on vigilance asked Gen. William Winder that Gen. Young's troops return to Alexandria to defend the city. Winder agreed, and boats were immediately sent to transport the force back across the Potomac, but they returned empty after Armstrong insisted the troops remain in Maryland. Alexandria's Mayor Charles Simms reconciled himself to the inevitable and prepared the city's citizens for a complete surrender.

Days later, the Common Council authorized the Mayor, Edmund Lee and Jonathan Swift to row south to meet the British fleet and negotiate terms of surrender with Capt. James Gordon. The following day, the British anchored off Alexandria with their guns trained on the homes, warehouses and infrastructure of the city. Their terms required that all merchandise and stores of flour, tobacco and other





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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supplies, including those previously removed from the city, be turned over to them, as well as naval ordnance and ships. The Alexandrians quickly agreed, sparing them from the destruction that had been expected.

This weekend, you can relive that fateful week in August 1814 with a variety of special War of 1812 Bicentennial commemorative events, including a concert of the United States Navy Band on Saturday, August 30 at Market Square, and a daylong festival on Sunday, August 31 at Waterfront Park. For more information on all the activities, times and their locations, please visit [www.historicalexandria.org](http://www.historicalexandria.org).

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*