Raise the White Flag

In the early 1800s Alexandria was part of the District of Columbia and an important port with its own militia. In summer 1814, though, Alexandria’s militia had been sent to defend Maryland from the British invasion. So on August 28, four days after the British burned Washington’s most important federal buildings, defenseless Alexandrians saw enemy warships approaching up the Potomac River. To prevent similar destruction, Alexandria Mayor Charles Simms and members of his “vigilance committee” rowed out with a white flag of surrender.

“[As] there be no sufficient force, on our part, to oppose [the British], with any reasonable prospect of success, [you] should appoint a committee to carry a flag to the . . . enemy . . . and procure the best terms for the safety of persons, houses, and property.”

Alexandria vigilance committee’s recommendation to the city’s Common Council