

Carole L. Herrick. *August 24, 1814: Washington in Flames*. Falls Church: Higher Education Publishing, 2005. vi + 250 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-914927-50-1.

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## A Terrific Day in Washington History

The invasion and partial incineration of Washington, D.C., in August 1814 has always been a sort of footnote to the history of the War of 1812, perhaps with good reason. This was, after all, one war the United States could put in the win column, so why focus on the negative? In *August 24, 1814*, Carole L. Herrick reminds us that despite America's eventual victory, events along the Potomac River during the last summer of the war left the bitter taste of ashes in the mouths of many Americans. In the acknowledgments, Herrick describes the book, commissioned as a legacy project by the McLean/Great Falls Celebrate Virginia 1607-2007 community pilot program, as an effort "to give the reader a more accurate account of the terror and tragic events surrounding Washington, August 24, 1814" (no page number). Two themes dominate this quest for precision: understanding the causes of the disaster and assessing the veracity of anecdotes about the day's events which began circulating in the aftermath of the invasion. Herrick makes a significant contribution toward achieving both goals.

Citizens and government officials occupied themselves with assigning blame for the capture of Washington even before the scope of the disaster had become clear. President James Madison, Secretary of War John Armstrong, and General William Winder, commander of U.S. forces in the capital region, were obvious and immediate targets of criticism. Herrick demonstrates that responsibility for the defeat should be shared, because no single incident of inaction or miscalculation can fully explain the ineffectiveness of Washington's protectors. Winder's poor coordination of defensive forces, Arm-

strong's refusal to believe that British invaders would find the national capital a tempting target, and the unwillingness of militia forces to confront British regulars in any meaningful way all contributed to the American rout at the Battle of Bladensburg, Maryland, and the subsequent brief and destructive British occupation of the federal city.

*August 24, 1814* effectively illustrates the ineptitude and inefficiency of the federal government's defense preparations, but does not explore the important lesson that can be learned about the situation of the national capital in light of the history of the early United States. American aversion to standing armies is mentioned only in passing, but much is made of James Monroe's volunteering to scout the location and movements of the invading army. Herrick observes that "none thought it strange that a Cabinet official, the Secretary of State, led a scouting party" (p. 20). It should surprise no one that a republic with few fiscal and military resources had a shallow bench of personnel to draw on for unforeseen military operations. In addition, Herrick seems to exonerate Madison from bearing too much responsibility for the disaster, explaining that it is unreasonable to expect the president to have taken a more active role in the city's defense. Herrick's own evidence suggests that many of Madison's contemporaries disagreed, and certainly many Washingtonians during the Civil War were thankful that Abraham Lincoln did not share Madison's views on security for the District of Columbia.

Herrick revises or clarifies much of the mythology

surrounding the events of August 24, 1814. Especially illuminating is her description of Dolley Madison's flight from the executive mansion and discussion of the motivations behind the burning of Washington. The tale of the First Lady's escape from the city with Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington rolled up and tucked away among her personal baggage is convincingly refuted without diminishing the important role she played in saving the painting and other valuable items from the president's house. The presumption that British commanders decided to burn the city's public buildings as an act of retribution for similar conduct by U.S. forces at York, the capital of Upper Canada, is also effectively challenged. Instead, a calculated plan to quickly deprive the United States of its administrative infrastructure is presented. Supposed retaliation for the burning of York emerges in the aftermath of the invasion as justification for British actions, not as a motivating factor behind occupation of the city.

Heavy reliance on documentary sources characterizes the entire book, and large block quotations appear on nearly every page. There are benefits and drawbacks to this approach. The accessibility of the evidence conveys to the reader a clear sense of the course of events surrounding the invasion. Unfortunately, the effect is repetitious; material presented in quotations is frequently restated in the author's text. Alternatively, in those instances when differing contemporary accounts are left open to reader interpretation, lack of context, and an oc-

casional weak transcription, obscures the clarity these testimonials can provide.

In addition, poor annotation limits the volume's usefulness as a resource for historians. Although authors of the included eyewitness accounts are usually identified, annotation of these sections is irregular. No numbers appear in the body of the text that correspond to the notes listed in the back of the book. This deficiency can be misleading in those instances when contemporary accounts blend promiscuously with testimony, interviews, or newspaper articles produced years or decades after the summer of 1814. These chronological shifts couple with sudden changes in evidentiary sources to obscure rather than to clarify events. Compounding this problem is the virtual absence of source attribution for Herrick's own writing. This is particularly awkward when facts not mentioned in the printed quotations are discussed in the text. The account of the surrender of Alexandria City covered in chapters 19 and 21 suffers noticeably from this oversight.

All things considered, these are minor problems. Herrick provides a detailed account of the burning of the capital that will be uncomfortable for the patriotic American reader to digest and distasteful for the dedicated Washingtonian to swallow. The book serves as a pointed reminder that the War of 1812 was not so much a struggle the United States won as it was a conflict the nation avoided losing.

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