"Wednesday Morning, twelve o'clock. -- Since sunrise I have been turning my spy-glass in every
direction, and watching with unwarried anxiety, hoping to discover the approach of my dear hus-
band and his friends; but, alas! I can descry only groups of military, wandering in all directions, as if
there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own fireside." - Dolly Madison

The excerpt was taken from a letter written by First Lady, Dolly Madison to her sister, started on Au-
gust 23, 1814. In this letter, she describes what was occurring in the city and her own efforts to save
what items she could from the “White House.” The most famous item saved was the portrait of
George Washington painted by Gilbert Stuart.

It had been 29 years since the United States of America and Great Britain had faced each other as
foes when President James Madison asked that Congress declare war in June of 1812. The reason
given for this declaration was British obstruction of American maritime trade and the impressment of
American sailors into the Royal Navy. Other American political leaders hoped that by going to war
the United States would be able to address the unfinished business of the Revolution by adding Brit-
ish North America (Canada) as new territory. This hope was never realized and American leaders
quickly discovered the nation was woefully unprepared to do battle with Great Britain.

One of the most notable events that occurred during the War of 1812 was the burning of Washington
D.C. by British forces on August 24, 1814. The reason for this act depends on what history one
reads. Some historians believe the action was taken in retaliation for American forces burning of the
provincial capital in York (now Toronto). Others maintain the burning of Washington was done in re-
sponse to all the destruction American forces performed while operating in British North America.

The British forces were led by Rear Admiral George Cockburn and Major General Robert Ross, a
veteran of the Iberian Peninsula campaigns in the war against Napoleon. Ross was a seasoned
campaigner and superb troop commander.

British forces began landing at Benedict, Maryland at 2:00AM, August 19, 1814, with
a combined force of 4,500 Sailors, Marines
and Soldiers. From this point Ross marched
his force to Nottingham, MD (Aug 21), Up-
per Marlborough, MD (Aug 22) and Bland-
denburg, MD (Aug 23).

At Blandensburg, Ross’ force came into
contact with American forces under the
command of Brigadier General William H.
Winder. Ross ordered his First Brigade to
attack with support from his rocket artillery.
American forces consisted of a few hundred
Army Regulars, Marines, and Sailors with the

U.S. Capitol after burning by the British, George Munger, 1814
bulk of the force consisting of Maryland militia units. Once the British operation commenced, the militia units began to fall back under the weight of multiple attacks causing them to break and retreat in disorder. Because of this, the engagement battle would come to be known as “The Blandensburg Races.”

General Ross entered the City of Washington on the evening of August 24, 1814, despite shots fired at him from a private home that killed his horse while he was in the saddle. Admiral Cockburn and Ross decided to “destroy and lay waste” to all public buildings in the city, including the torching of the Capital building and the President’s House. The burning of Washington was a great shock to all Americans. It demonstrated that America was not prepared for war and provided a sense of urgency on the part of the government to take threats to the homeland more seriously.

The history of the United States is unfortunately filled with examples where our military was unprepared for war. The Civil War exacted a heavy toll as Soldiers learned in combat, followed by the Spanish American War which caused the Army to create a War College to address deficiencies, Kasserine Pass in 1943, Task Force Smith in the Korean War, and so on. The lesson is simple — national security demands a well-trained, well-equipped, and ready force to protect the Nation.

The US Army Heritage and Education Center, part of the US Army War College in Carlisle, PA is dedicated to “Telling the Army Story, One Soldier at a Time, preserving the professional story of the United States Army in our archival holdings. We have several historical artifacts that date back to the period of the War of 1812, including the original Congressional report on the invasion of Washington. For more information about the USAHEC and its resources, visit: www.usahec.org