

THE STORY BEHIND THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

by NEIL H. SWANSON


THE PRESIDENT of the United States was a fugitive, wandering the country roads on horseback. Behind him, Washington was burning. Fire was licking through the windows of the presidential palace. The halls of Congress were in flames. The north end of the Potomac River bridge was burning. The new warships in the Navy Yard were burning. The Treasury, the War Department and the arsenal were burning.

Through the summer night — hot, stifling, black with thunderheads—the American Army also wandered the back roads. That afternoon—the afternoon of August 24, 1814—it had met an invading British enemy, inferior in numbers, near the little town of Bladensburg in Maryland. There the American Army had been beaten. Now it was nothing but fragments.

In Baltimore, 40 miles away, people stood in the streets or climbed to the rooftops to watch the glare that pulsed in the Southern sky. Baltimore liked fires. It liked the noise and commotion that went with them, the jostling, hollering excitement. For Baltimore was a lusty, rambunctious upstart of a town.





But Baltimore was not noisy, that night of August 24, 1814. 

The people in the streets talked, but in low tones of apprehension. Even the householders trading their opinions from one dormer window to another kept their voices as calm as anxiety would let them. The town was not excited. Its emotions had passed beyond excitement.

All that the town knew, for certain, that night was that Maryland had been invaded—that the overwhelming hostile fleet in Chesapeake Bay had been powerfully reinforced, that it had entered the Patuxent River, that it had put ashore an army somewhere near the town of Benedict.

Nobody knew how big that army was. Five thousand, one story had it. But another made it 20,000. Rumors ran wild. The invading troops were marching northward; they had passed Nottingham; they were going to plunder Baltimore and burn it, wipe it out completely.

That night, nobody doubted that the town was doomed. The only way to save the city seemed surrender. But “citizens in town meeting” wasted no time in reaching a decision. Their decision: fight! But who was to lead the fight? Why Sam Smith, of course. So supreme command was offered to a 62-year-old militiaman.

Sam Smith*Sam Smith*

Sam Smith was a good oak beam of a man. But he was more than a man: he was part of a gallant legend. He was part of that thunderous roll call of battles—Long Island, Harlem, White Plains, Fort Mifflin, the Brandywine, Monmouth. He

was part of the old despair, the defeats, the long retreat through the Jerseys; of Morristown, Valley Forge; of the old heartaches, the starving, the freezing, the feet wrapped in rags, the bloody tracks in the snow. He was one of the first Maryland regulars to go in the Revolution.

Sam Smith had a house of his own. He had a wife. He had a son. He had ships at sea. He had helped to found a bank. He was honored, respected, elected to Congress. And time had touched Sam Smith only a little. He was still a military figure, solid and strong; he was dignified, ample and gracious.

Now Sam Smith knew that Baltimore was at stake. There were many who believed the life of the nation itself was in danger; that this war was only a continuation of the War for Independence; that if it should be lost, independence would be lost. The danger seemed real, the future dark.

Sam Smith had few illusions. He hadn't been chosen for this new task only because he had been a soldier. The town needed someone it could trust, someone it knew. If Baltimore thought Sam Smith was that man . . . well, he would do what he could.

But he couldn't think only in terms of guns and troops, of so many pounds of rations and so

Sam Smith

many pounds of powder and shot. He had to consider the town: what kind of town it was and what it could do in a pinch.

NO ONE KNEW WHEN the blow would come, or where, or from what direction. Sam Smith had neither time nor means to prepare against every possible combination of assaults. If attack was coming, it was likely to come quickly. To fortify the whole perimeter of Baltimore would take months. He could hope to defend one point, or two, or three; he could not defend all. But which points? *Which?*

The British might try a land attack, but Sam Smith doubted it. Their fleet was too good: their minds were tied to ships. There was something else, too — Fort McHenry. To a military mind, there's something fascinating about forts. They're like a snake's eyes to a bird. That was half the value of a fort: to draw the enemy on to attack you at your strongest point. Maybe the British would feel honor-bound to attack Fort McHenry.

There was still another reason for thinking the British would come by water; they'd been there before. But they hadn't attacked. Why? What did they have now that they hadn't had before? An army!

They'd come both by land and by water; they'd use both their troops and their fleet. They could use the fleet for two things — to cover the troops and to try to knock out Fort McHenry. The only place they could do both those things at once was North Point.

North Point wasn't the best place for a land attack. It was too narrow. There wasn't room to maneuver. So long as the fort held out, the British

Sam Smith

couldn't land men within range of its guns; so long as the Americans held out on land, the enemy could not get around the fort and attack from the rear. But if Sam Smith picked a position where he could cover the fort from a land attack and the fort could protect his flanks from a boat attack, the other flank would be out in the open. Well, he couldn't have everything. . . .

He thought it out, half-soldier and half-businessman. He thought of the coming campaign as a business deal: one way to settle a deal was to make the other man sick of the haggling.

Now Sam Smith believed in his men. Given time, they'd make soldiers as tough and steady as any. But he couldn't give them that. He would have to use them as they were. Well then, Baltimore would play fox. *The town was going to dig.*

Sam Smith gave Baltimore no high-sounding sentiments; he did not dress up the job as a "call to arms." He issued a call for picks and shovels and asked the town to provide them. Top-hatted gentlemen began to dig. Bankers and stevedores, merchants and hostlers, lawyers and slaves and free Negroes and harness-makers and coopers and wheelwrights and soft-handed shop clerks began to dig.

What Sam Smith needed desperately was more mobile artillery . . . field batteries . . . horse artillery that could be sent at a gallop to any threatened point. Surely the War Department, if it could do nothing else, could find him a few more field guns. But the War Department had a better idea. It decided to take away some of the guns he had. Checking its records, it discovered that Baltimore was

Sam Smith

preparing to defend itself with 19 field guns that were the property of the Federal Government. The War Department ordered Maj. Gen. Smith to return them at once.

Sam Smith did not refuse to surrender the guns. He explained that the *barrels* of the guns were, indeed, the property of the Federal Government, but that the *carriages* were the property of the city of Baltimore. There would be some difficulty about moving the guns without their wheels. For the time being, therefore, he would be obliged to keep them.

In three weeks Sam Smith had concentrated some 12,000 troops and somehow sheltered them and fed them. He had found muskets, blankets, mess kits for militia levies who came empty-handed. He had found shoes for men who came barefooted. He had somehow filled their cartridge boxes — or their pockets—with 36 rounds. He had turned them into something that at least resembled a “grand army” and the low hills into “heights” which looked “naturally strong” and had been “rendered doubly so” by his entrenchments.

In the American lines, some of Sam Smith’s brigade commanders were urging him to make a night attack, to annihilate the enemy. He heard them out. “Yes,” he said, “it would be a fine thing.” Then he added earnestly: “But when you fight our citizens against British regulars, you’re staking dollars against cents.”

That was the philosophy on which his whole plan of defense was based. His mission was to keep the enemy from getting Baltimore. He had undertaken to fulfill the mission by convincing the invaders that the price would be too high to pay.

Sam Smith

When he sent the City Brigade out to meet superior numbers, he was risking some lives to save many. To the British, it seemed reckless and unnecessary. To Sam Smith, it seemed the best way to give them “an earnest” of what they might expect to pay if they attacked his field works. But he would not spend one life to buy a few cents’ worth of glory by attacking when he did not have to attack.

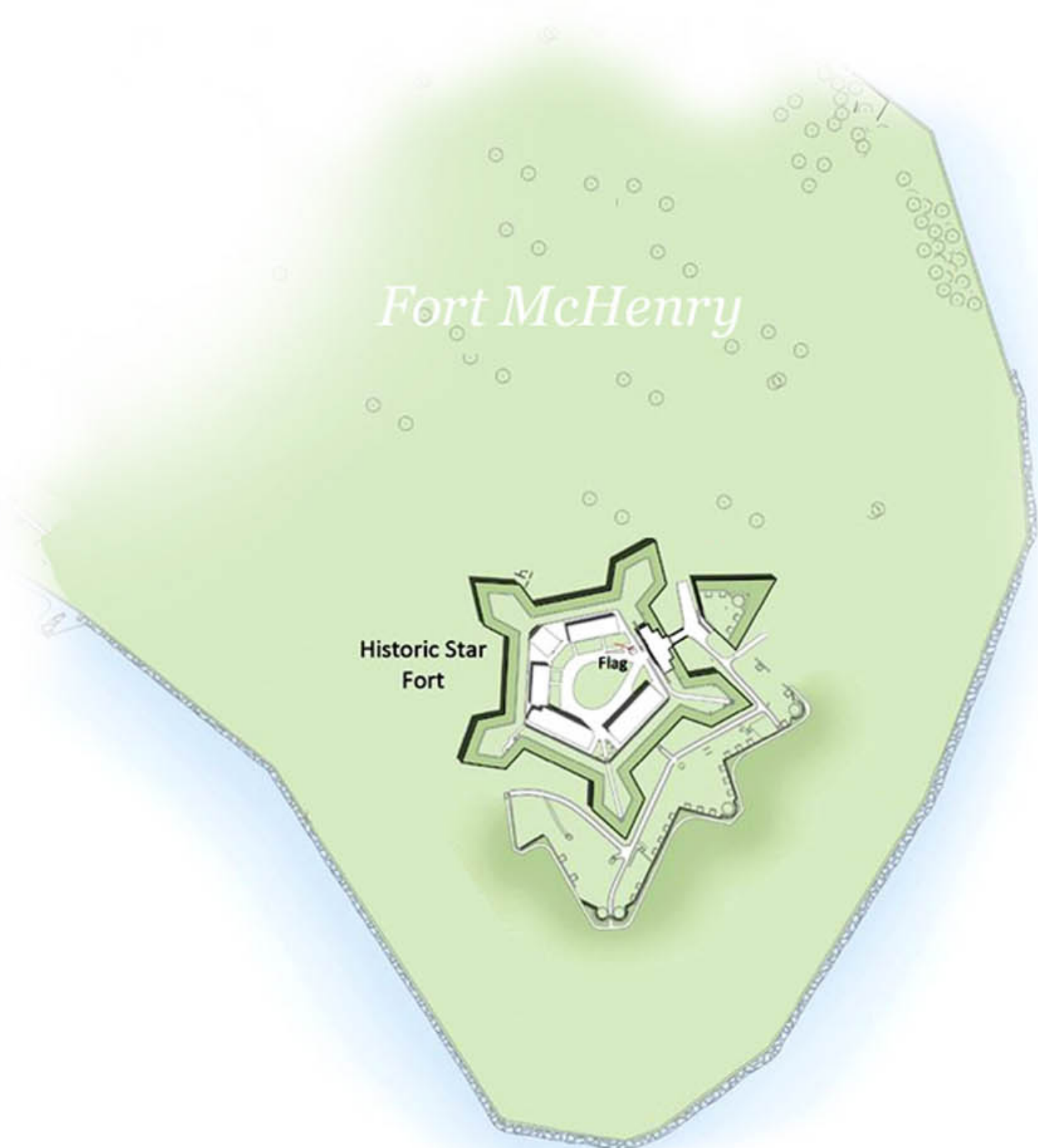
In the end, the British were defeated because Sam Smith had read their minds and outguessed them. They had failed to see the weakness of Baltimore, the south and southwest sides unfortified and lacking natural defenses. They had committed themselves to a landing on North Point for an offensive that could be supported by their fleet at the strongest, not the weakest, places. When weeks of naval bombardment failed to shatter the city’s defenses, failed to bring Baltimore to its knees, the enemy withdrew, exactly as Sam Smith had intended they should.

Actually, the British army was not beaten. It was driven from the field by one man. It was defeated by the habit of thought on which Sam Smith had based his whole defense—the British habit of believing in the fleet.

The significant, dignified books can’t be bothered with Sam Smith. Some of them find room for a grudging line about Francis Scott Key and the verses he wrote during the bombardment of Fort McHenry. Others can’t be bothered even with the National Anthem: it has no social significance. As for Sam Smith . . . *Smith?* Who is he? They know all about Andrew Jackson: he saved New Orleans, an important city. But they never heard of Sam Smith.

Sam Smith

It doesn't occur to historians that these men marching in Baltimore may have had something to do with the course of a nation's life or with the song of a people, *The Star-Spangled Banner*. They never find out that the flag quite probably would not have been there for Key to write his verses about if Sam Smith, merchant, had not read the enemy's plan of battle—and read it correctly—three weeks before the plan was prepared.



Coronet

June, 1948: p. 98

Neil H. Swanson, executive editor of the *Sun* papers in Baltimore, is the author of several books based on neglected aspects of American history. Among them are *The Judas Tree*, *The Flag is Still There* and *The Silent Drum*. This article is taken from one of his newest books, *The Perilous Fight*, published at \$3.50 by Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., New York City.