

Curator's Choice

Havre de Grace Cannon

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This cast iron cannon (Figure 1), currently at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, was likely used against the British Navy in the spring of 1813. Coastal Maryland, like much of the Eastern Seaboard during the War of 1812, was routinely harassed by the British naval fleet.



Figure 1 - Havre de Grace Cannon conserved at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory.

The Chesapeake area had an especially large British naval presence, as the Royal Navy sought to blockade the Bay and prevent the shipbuilding and privateering operations taking place in Baltimore and the surrounding towns (Byron 1964: 13-14). Many communities were raided, including Havre de Grace in the early morning of May 3, 1813.

Having heard that the British were nearby, the residents of Havre de Grace were ready to defend their town (Whitehorne 1997: 48). The local militia kept watch at the "Potato Battery" on Concord Point, which consisted of one nine-pounder and two six-pounder cannon. When the attack came, the only militiaman to hold his ground was John O'Neill, who single-handedly manned the battery until he was captured. He was imprisoned by Admiral Cockburn aboard the Maidstone for three days. Although the town was burned and ransacked (Figure 2), O'Neill became a local hero. When the lighthouse was built at Concord Point in 1827, he was given the position of lighthouse keeper in appreciation of his brave actions. Successive generations of his family followed as keepers of the lighthouse until it was automated in 1920 (Vojtech 1996: 10).



Figure 2 - Admiral Cockburn Burning & Plundering Havre de Grace. Illustration: a hand colored etching attributed to William Charles from 1813 - Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.

In 1914, Havre de Grace held a centennial commemoration of the war, and O'Neill's descendants unveiled a memorial (Figure 3) to "John O'Neill, The Gallant Defender of Havre de Grace Against the British Attack in 1813" (Unknown 1914: program cover). The

memorial consists of an iron cannon placed on a marble base and a plaque detailing O'Neill's story. Fittingly, it is located on the site of the "Potato Battery" next to the Concord Point lighthouse. The cannon used in the memorial is dated circa 1812 and was found in the Chesapeake Bay near Havre de Grace. Although this style of cannon was widely used by the Americans during the War of 1812 (Manucy 1985: 12), it is possible that this cannon is one of the original "Potato Battery" cannon used by John O'Neill in his defense of the town.



Figure 3 - Installation of O'Neill memorial, 1914 - Courtesy of Friends of Concord Point Lighthouse.

The memorial has been moved within Havre de Grace several times, but it was returned to its original location at Concord Point in the early 1980s (Figure 4). Decades of exposure to the natural elements has caused the deterioration of the cannon, and most of its original surface has corroded away. If left unchecked, its condition would have continued to decline; however, it was recently removed from its base and transported to the MAC Lab, where it will undergo conservation treatment. The methods used to stabilize and protect the cannon will allow it to be returned to Concord Point, where it can continue to commemorate O'Neill's distinctive place in Maryland history.



Figure 4 - John O'Neill memorial at the Concord Point Lighthouse prior to conservation.

References

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