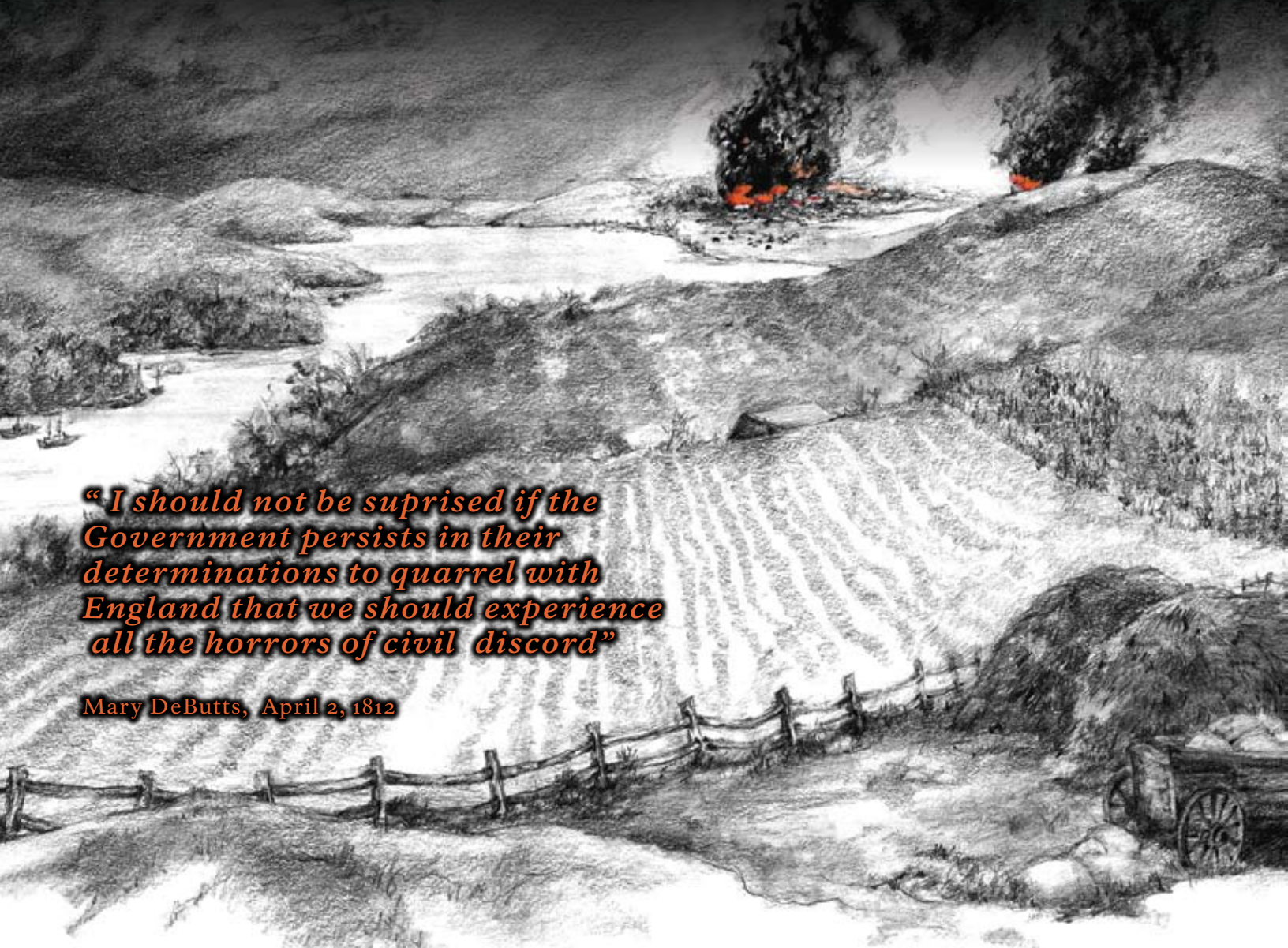




A Question of Loyalties: Mount Welby During the War of 1812



“I should not be surprised if the Government persists in their determinations to quarrel with England that we should experience all the horrors of civil discord”

Mary DeButts, April 2, 1812

Artist's conception of the burning of Washington, seen from Mount Welby, by Billie Rush, 2002.

The Horrors of Civil Discord

Poets and politicians have long lamented the devastating effects of war endured both by soldiers in battle and by the friends, family, and neighbors left behind. Mrs. Mary DeButts, the mistress of Mount Welby, expressed such anguish about the War of 1812 in her letters home to England. In these letters to family and friends, Mary deplored the British invasion of Washington, DC and its impact on the Mount Welby farm. These personal letters provide us with a rare glimpse into this international conflict as experienced from a woman's perspective.

Mary was right to worry about “horrors of civil discord.” The United States declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812. Although no members of the DeButts family were killed in the War of 1812, the war still struck close to home.

Family Hardships

Mount Welby was a thriving wheat plantation and a bumper crop was expected during the summer of 1812. Despite these prospects, the DeButts family had good reason to worry about financial matters. The war at sea raised havoc with shipments of grain and other goods across the Atlantic and south of the Caribbean. On July 4, 1812, Mary writes to her brother, Richard, about their excellent crop and no way to deliver to buyers:

We are now in the midst of our Harvest, & have every prospect of plentiful crops, but if the war continues we shall have no market for our grain, 'tis terrible times for the Farmer but the poor Merchents will be all ruined; money never was so scarce, there is scarce a dollar to be had.

Mary fretted about other inconveniences that the war inflicted on the family. She frets in her letters about the difficulty of drawing on their money in English banks, the stoppage of international travel, and not being able to communicate with her English relatives.

In her letter to Richard, dated July 4, 1812, she pleads for the war to end:

No one can imagine the inconvenience of this horrid war. May it please God to grant a speedy termination to it. The public papers will inform you how very unpopular it is here, so much so that the consequences are to be dreaded.

A Question of Loyalties

Fear and rumor swept across Washington and the surrounding area during the War of 1812. British sailors were accused of sacking river towns, burning houses, killing civilians, and stealing property. Despite the anti-British sentiments, the DeButts family felt the pang of divided loyalties during the war. Mary DeButts was born in England and her husband, Samuel, was born in Ireland. Many of their family and friends still lived in Briton. They still felt compassion for their fellow Englishmen and allegiance to England.

In August 1814, Dr. Samuel and Mary DeButts saw war approaching Mount Welby from two sides. To the northeast, British troops fought a battle with American soldiers and militia near Bladensburg, Maryland, on August 24. From this spot, Mary heard the sound of cannon and rocket fire. The British chased off the American defenders, marched into Washington, DC and set fire to the Capitol, White House, and other government buildings. The glow from those fires lit the walls of the house.

Five days after the fall of Washington, British warships sailed up the Potomac and anchored across the river at Alexandria, VA. The city surrendered, and some time in the next few days the DeButts family passed close by the ships they left Mount Welby to visit their daughter in Virginia. Mary wrote to her sister:

You know how it hurt me to think I was so near my Country men and must look upon them as Enemy, whom I should have rejoiced to show every attention to.

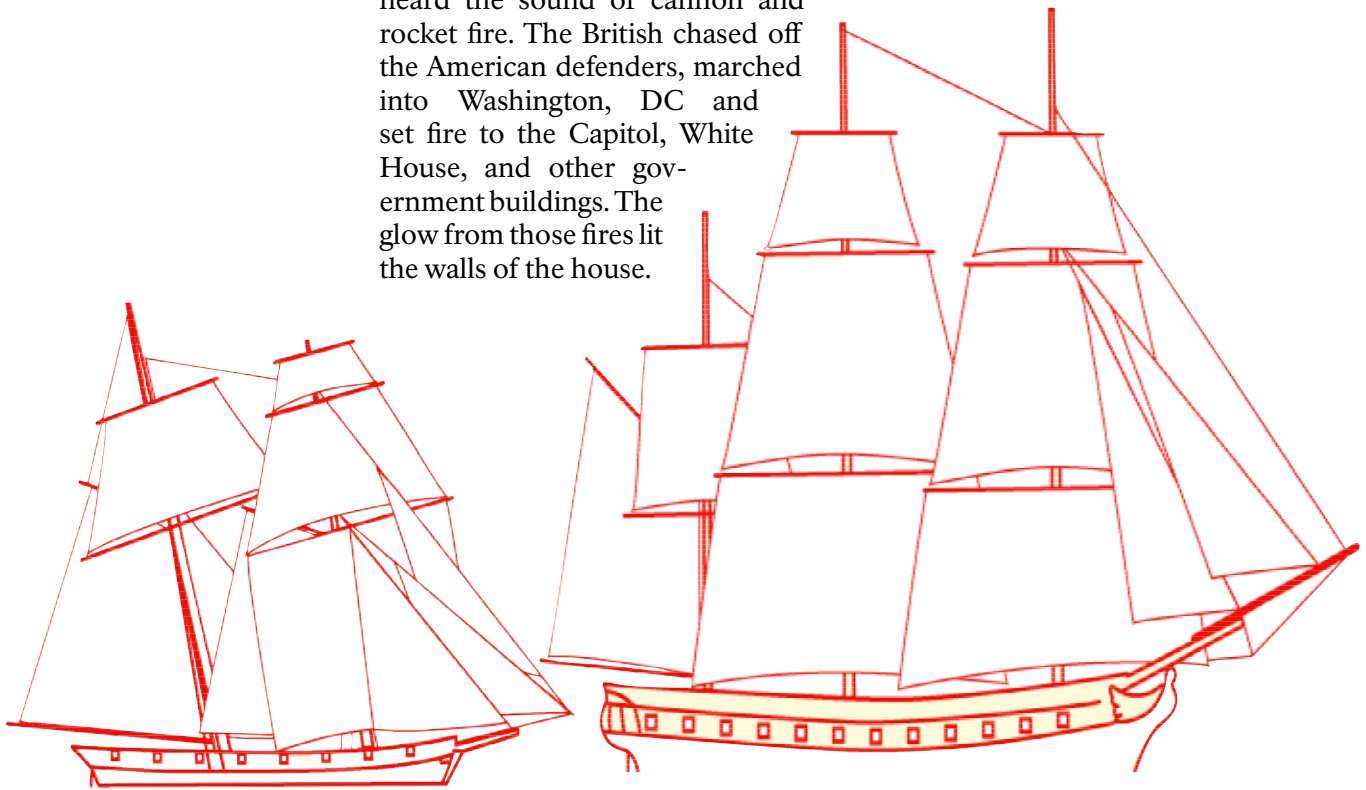


Illustration of a bombship and frigate (left to right) of the British Navy. These are the ships that the DeButts family saw in the Potomac River from their home, Mount Welby in 1814. Illustrations redrawn by John G. Dean from originals by the Calvert Marine Museum.