

# The Burning of Washington, D.C.

*“I cannot express to you the distress it has occasioned at the Battle of Bladensburg. We heard every fire...Our house was shook repeatedly by the firing upon forts and bridges, and illuminated by the fires in our Capital.”*

Mary DeButts, writing to her sister Millicent on March 18, 1815

During the War of 1812, British troops fought a battle with American soldiers and militia near Bladensburg, Maryland. The battleground was about ten miles from here, just east of the current boundaries of Washington, D.C.

The British routed the American defenders and marched into the city on August 24, 1814. By 9 p.m., the U.S. Capitol was ablaze. Two hours later, British soldiers reached the White House and set it afire, along with the Treasury Building next door. Even closer, the Navy Yard in southwest Washington was put to the torch about 8 p.m. to keep ships, ammunition, sails, rope, and other supplies from the British. President James Madison, First Lady Dolley Madison, and many Washingtonians had fled the city only a few hours before.

The DeButts family could see the city in flames from this bluff. You will be looking in the same direction if you can see the top of the Washington Monument through the trees. (The DeButts Family didn't see the monument, because it was not completed until 1884.)



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