

## Admiral George Cockburn: Destroyer of Washington D.C/ Emancipator of Slaves



Admiral Cockburn is pictured with The United States Capital City Washington, D.C. burning in the background. Cockburn wanted to punish The United States for declaring war on Great Britain while it was at war with Emperor Napoleon in Europe and because American forces had plundered towns in British Canada in 1812. Cockburn had a long distinguished career. He considered the burning of Washington to be his greatest accomplishment.<sup>1</sup>

Rear Admiral George Cockburn was a combination of Captain Jack Aubrey and Attila the Hun. Captain Jack Aubrey is the heroic captain of Patrick O'Brien's popular Master and Commander historical fiction novels. Attila the Hun was the renowned central Asian conqueror whose westward sacking and pillaging of Roman Territories hastened the decline of The Roman Empire. The British and American slaves who escaped to British lines must have seen Cockburn as a hero. Americans living in the region of The Chesapeake Bay would have seen Cockburn as Attila the Hun.

During the War of 1812, The British Navy occupied The Chesapeake Bay from 1813-1814, creating a theater of war in coastal Maryland and Virginia. The British force lacked manpower because they were fighting Napoleon's armies in Europe. For this reason the British Government ordered Admiral Cockburn and his officers to encourage slaves living in the Chesapeake Bay area to escape so they could be recruited into the British Army as Colonial Marines. The fledgling United States Government had committed its troops to its northern territories of Ohio and the Great Lakes Region in order to attack Canada. Virginia and Maryland had only local militias comprised of farmers and merchants to defend themselves against the highly trained and well armed British Marines and Navy. These local militias, poorly armed and not well trained, had no chance against the professional military of Great Britain. Cockburn's ships and British Marines attacked ships and the farms and towns of the Chesapeake Bay region with impunity throughout the Spring, Summer and Fall. When Cockburn took the bulk of

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Robert, The Internal Enemy, p. 275.

his forces to Bermuda for the winter, a smaller force of British Naval Vessels blockaded the Chesapeake Bay and continued to raid farms and towns.<sup>2</sup>

Admiral Cockburn and his naval superiors based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, hoped to undermine The Republican leadership of President James Madison in order to obtain a peace settlement with Federalists who controlled the State Governments of New England. Polarization over which direction the young United States Nation should take caused intense distrust between The Federalists and The Republicans, the two major political parties in The United States at that time. The Republicans, led by President James Madison and the retired Thomas Jefferson had declared war on Great Britain in 1812 for impressing American sailors on British Naval Ships and encouraging Indians on America's western frontier to attack American settlers. The British Empire refused to acknowledge the right of any British citizen to become a citizen of The United States. The inability of The United States Government to protect its citizens from being impressed-kidnapped and forced to work on British naval vessels was a threat to its legitimacy.

The two major political parties in The United States were The Federalists and The Democratic-Republicans (known as Republicans by the early 1800's). Federalists opposed the war and maintained trade with The British. They accused Republicans of supporting the French dictator Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. With exception of a 3 year truce, The British and The French had been at war with each other since The French Revolution in 1793.

The United States suffered because the war between France and Great Britain stifled trade and both nations sought to entangle the Americans on their side. In Virginia and Maryland's lands surrounding the Chesapeake Bay, citizens often had no choice but to cooperate with the occupying British. If they refused their farms were burned and their crops and livestock plundered (at Chapico cooperation still resulted in the destruction of the town). Other citizens willingly cooperated with The British occupiers, who paid market rates for the food and supplies their military force required so long as the Americans offered no armed resistance to them.<sup>3</sup> If Americans did try to resist the British forces, their homes were burned and they risked being thrown into prison on a British prison ship.

Rear Admiral George Cockburn was second in command. The British Admirals commanded their North American Fleets from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Cockburn's ship HMS Albion was stationed in The Chesapeake Bay. During 1813, The Napoleonic Wars were still raging in Europe. So Admiral Cockburn had to make due with a threadbare force of sailors and marines. In 1813 Admiral John Borlase Warren commanded North American Operations for the British. The British resolved to perform hit and run raids on riverside towns along the rivers that fed into The Chesapeake Bay. Admiral George Cockburn was an excellent choice to lead the British forces. He was 40 years old. Throughout his career he had displayed discipline, resourcefulness bravery and a willingness to put himself in the thick of battle.<sup>4</sup>

The British forces in The Chesapeake Bay depended on American cooperation for food and water. Some Americans cooperated only when faced with the destruction of their farms while others cooperated secretly because the British proved to be excellent customers who

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, .197

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, 189-192, 291-292

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, 178-179

were willing to pay market rates for their provisions. A strange irony quickly developed with the British military presence on The Chesapeake, white British servicemen often found that desertion for American shores provided the opportunity for a better life. Military pay was low, floggings were common and life on British naval vessels was very hard. Many men were little better than slaves, for the British had impressed them. Impressment was the common practice of kidnapping able bodied men and forcing them to serve on British Ships. The British justified impressment by stating that England was at war for its very existence against a barbaric enemy who represented an end to free civilization. By 1812 Napoleon Bonaparte's French Empire ruled or had forced alliances with all of the nations of Europe. He relentlessly waged war with Great Britain. The British only prevented conquest by Bonaparte thanks to their resourceful Navy, the strongest sea force the world had ever known.

Admiral George Cockburn was representative of the effective, resourceful British Naval Command. He had been given his first command when he was in his early twenties. He impressed the great naval hero Horatio Nelson with his effectiveness as a commander who always took the battle to the enemy. Admiral Cockburn relished action and military service. Although he was a strict disciplinarian, men found serving with him worthwhile because the British Navy paid its servicemen through conquest. Captured enemy ships and provisions taken from the enemy and its supporters were considered prizes. The money gained from them was distributed between officers and their men. Men who worked with Admiral Cockburn received the benefits of many prizes throughout his service with The British Navy.<sup>5</sup>

Almost immediately after The British began operations in the Chesapeake Bay they realized that slaves in the area were anxious to provide support. Slaves began escaping from Virginia and Maryland farms and plantations as soon as British Ships appeared near the mouths of the Patuxent and Potomac Rivers. The escaped slaves offered their services as guides and laborers. At first Admiral Cockburn disdained the presence of "blacky." He assumed they were childish and ignorant as slavemasters in America and The British West Indies claimed them to be. During 1813 Cockburn was forced to undergo a reappraisal of the black people who were flocking to The Union Jack in an effort to escape slavery. The British Government decided that promising slaves who escaped to British lines to have their freedom accomplished two important goals, it greatly undermined the Americans ability to fight the war and it undermined American claims that the United States was a land of liberty.<sup>6</sup>

During 1813, Admiral Cockburn had waged war with a limited force of British sailors and Marines. As the year wore on the newly appointed Commander of Great Britain's North Atlantic Fleet Sir Alexander Cochrane decided that Cockburn should actively recruit and train willing black men who had escaped to his ships. Men willing to join the British forces were given meat along with their food rations. They were issued Red Coats, black top hats and rifles with bayonets. Once trained, the Colonial Marines proved to be an effective fighting force. Many of the men sought to free family members who were still enslaved. Others sought revenge against their former masters. The men knew the terrain and could provide The British forces with useful intelligence for their raids. In 1814, Admiral Cochrane ordered Admiral Cockburn to distribute

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<sup>5</sup> Peck, The Man Who Burned Washington.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor 208-209

handbills throughout The Chesapeake Bay Area proclaiming that any slaves who escaped their American Masters and joined the British would be granted freedom in The British Empire.<sup>7</sup>

Cockburn and his officers went further than the British Government had initially intended. The British wanted to undermine American slaveholders without angering their own slave holders (Slavery was legal in The British Empire until 1832). Although the British Navy sought to prevent The Atlantic Slave Trade they still pursued free trade and valued property rights. When British ships stationed in The Bahamas captured slave ships, they often assigned the freed male slaves to serve in their West Indian Colonial Regiment, where one of their duties was to enforce the rights of slave owners in Caribbean. The British Government was adamant that Admiral Cockburn not incite a full scale slave insurrection in The United States. The French Colony of St.Domingue had recently experienced such an insurrection and had become the independent black nation of Haiti. The years of bloodshed involved in Haiti's founding was something all white men sought to avoid. For two years, Admiral Cockburn and his men were able to raid the American coastal areas of Maryland and Virginia with almost no serious opposition. This led Cockburn to develop his most controversial military plan- attacking the United States Capital in Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup>

Cockburn's only serious military opposition came from American Commodore Joshua Barney, who led a flotilla of shallow armed barges in his ship *Scorpien*. Barney's small fleet was manned by a diverse group of sailors, many of whom were free blacks. Although black slaves ran to the British Lines in great numbers most free blacks remained loyal to The United States. For slaves and free blacks family concerns played a role in their decisions about who to side with during the war.<sup>9</sup> Escaped black slaves also served in The United States army. Historian Alan Taylor has suggested that one way to view the period from 1765-1816 is as a protracted civil war between the English speaking people of Great Britain and The Americas. Just as white people had to choose sides between the United States and Great Britain, blacks and Indians had to choose sides as well. They often did so based on their opinion of which side would benefit their interests the most.

During the early 19th century, Virginia was transitioning from a farming economy based on slave labor to a slave trading economy. Slave owners were dependent on their slaves as sources of wealth. Healthy slaves were worth anywhere from \$250 to \$850 each. Virginia's planters wanted to move slaves out of Virginia to keep the black population from getting too big. Virginians blamed The British for the fact of slavery in Virginia because they had allowed slavery to develop there during colonial times and they had forbidden The Americans to end the Transatlantic Slave Trade during the mid 18th century.

During the early 19th century, slave labor was in demand in newly conquered American territories south and west of Virginia. Virginians were beginning to break up families of slaves by selling certain slaves to plantation owners in newly acquired lands in The Louisiana Purchase Territory. Being sold to these new lands meant a slave would be separated forever from his or her family. Virginia slave owners used the threat of breaking up a family as a stricter form of punishment than whipping, which damaged property and caused greater

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, 99-101

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, 299

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 113

disenchantment among groups of slaves. When slaves realized they could obtain freedom for themselves and their loved ones, who Admiral Cockburn proved willing to use British Troops to rescue, more and more slaves chose to run away to the British lines.<sup>10</sup>

American Slaveowners were shocked that their slaves chose to runaway to the British. They complained to the British Admirals in Halifax who allowed the owners to come to the British lines under a flag of truce and talk to their slaves personally to see if they could convince them to return. The slaveowners were generally shocked to find that their former property had no interest in returning. They warned their former slaves that the British would eventually sell them off for a harsh life on plantations in the West Indies. But the slaves often retorted that even if that happened, their was just as likely a chance that their former owners would have sold them south. In fact the British did honor their promise to runaway slaves. Any runaway person who did not wish to serve in the Colonial Marines was transported to Bermuda or Halifax.<sup>11</sup>

Admiral George Cockburn came to realize that his new Colonial Marines were hardworking, brave soldiers. A great deal of respect developed between the admiral, his officers and the Colonial Marines. Cockburn had a large miitary band that he ordered to play throughout the day and evening aboard his ship The Albion. The sound of the band helped escaped slaves find their way to Tangiers Island where Cockburn had employed 250 Marines in building Fort Albion. The island became a military training ground and refugee center for the runaways. The Americans could do nothing about this enemy fort that was situated on The Chesapeake Bay near the mouth of The Potomac River. When American slaveholders came to try to talk their runaways into returning, the gracious admiral Cockburn entertained him aboard his ship with courtesy and fine wine.<sup>12</sup>

Admiral Cockburn resented the way local newspapers in the region depicted him as a devilish savage. Cockburn especially hated President James Madison's official newspaper The National Intelligencer which was published by the Irish American Joseph Gales. Gales editorials compared Cockburn to Satan. Cockburn hated "Josey" as he referred to Gales because he considered the Irishman a traitor to his homeland. Cokburn referred to President James Madison as "Jemy."<sup>13</sup> He longed to march on Washington so that he could punish Josey and Jemy.

On August 19th, 1814 Admiral Cockburn began his assault on the nation's captial. He led a flotilla of ships up the Patuxent River landing General Robert Ross and his force of Royal and Colonial Marines at the town of Benedict, Maryland. On August 20th The Colonial Marines and a force of armed sailors led by Admiral Cockburn marched inland towards Washignton D.C. along the Bladensburg Road as a flotilla of ships carrying Royal Marines led by Cockburn's superior Admiral Cochrane sailed up the river towards the same destination. The heat was intense and the mosquitos seemed to be favoring the Americans. For some of the white troops these proved to be the worst conditions they had ever had to fight in. Men suffered heat stroke as the massive force bore down on Washington, which was at the time, a small town with a few

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<sup>10</sup>Taylor, 48

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 175-176

<sup>12</sup> Taylor,265-266

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, 303

newly constructed government buildings including the White House where President Madison and his wife Dolly resided.

On August 24th The Americans were waiting for The marching British force of 4,500 troops at Bladensburg, Maryland with a force of 7,000 men. President James Madison and Commodore Joshua Barney joined the American forces. Madison became the last president ever to direct a military force in battle. Although the Americans had greater numbers the British Royal Marines were experienced from years of fighting in Spain. They routed the Americans whose embarrassing retreat is remembered as "The Bladensburg Races". One reason that the American militia men were quick to leave the battle was that they had heard of the possibility of a massive slave revolt. These men were anxious to get home in case their slaves decided to attack their families while they were away. As Historian Robert Taylor observes "slavery had contributed to the American defeat."

The government abandoned Washington after people there heard about the defeat at Bladensburg. President Madison rode off to join his wife Dolly, who had left the capital with a wagonload of the Madison's possessions. The Americans set fire to the Navy Yard and its ships before fleeing the city. The British Troops marched into the city at dusk with the only opposition coming from a few random snipers. Americans who had remained began to loot government buildings. Admiral Cockburn's troops dispersed the looters at The White House and were delighted to find a meal with fine wine left behind by The Madisons. Admiral Cockburn made a toast to "Jemy", the name he mockingly used to refer to President James Madison. After he and his officers enjoyed their meal they raided the closets of the white house for clean clothing. Then British soldiers broke the White Houses windows with long poles and hurled incendiary devices inside, causing the building to erupt in fire. The British burned buildings they considered to be of political and military import. They left civillian houses standing unless people in the houses shot at them. <sup>14</sup>

Admiral Cockburn directed himself and his sailors to the offices of Joseph Wales Natonal Intelligencer. When some ladies who lived next door to the newspaper's offices begged Cockburn not to burn it becuase it would inevitably cause their own homes to burn, Cockburn obliged them. He ordered his men to pull down The walls of The Natonal Intelligencer with ropes and to remove all of the type of letters from his name from Wales presses. This to prevent Wales from ever writing anything bad about him again. Cockburn flattered the ladies, bragging that he was protecting them better than "Jemmy" and "Josey" ever could. Cockburn justified his sacking of Washington, D.C. by stating that it was payback for The Americans burning of towns and British offices in Canada a year earlier. Throughout the War of 1812, The British officers sought to punish the Americans for the way they had waged war and for declaring war in the first place.

A tremendous storm hit Washington the next day . Strong winds and rain buffeted the city, dousing The British fires and tearing down some buildings. On the night of August 25, 1814 the British marched back to their ships. Cockburn's bold plan had come off without much difficulty. One month later The British Fleet bombarded Baltimore. Major General George Armistead, The American Officer in charge of Baltimore's Ft.McHenry had commissioned a

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<sup>14</sup>Smith, 117

gigantic American Flag to fly over the fort. Armistead knew his small force could not adequately defend Baltimore against the massive British Armada that would attack it, but he reasoned that the tremendous Star Spangled Banner flying over the fort would keep flying in spite of the British Assault.

A lawyer from Washington D.C. named Francis Scott Key had traveled to Baltimore to obtain the release of one of his friends from the British. While watching the assault on Baltimore on a ship in Baltimore's harbour, Key penned a poem, the first few lines of which, The Star Spangled Banner, would become The National Anthem of The United States. The poem was inspired by the gigantic flag Major-General Armistead flew over Ft. McHenry. One line that is not part of the song we sing at professional sporting events reads:

No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.  
And the star-spangled banner-O! Long may it wave,  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.<sup>15</sup>

Key had reason to hate the British and resent the way Admiral Cockburn and his officers had encouraged slaves to runaway. He himself was a slaveowner. The Key family gravesite had been damaged during a British raid on Chaptico, Maryland.<sup>16</sup> For the rest of his life, Francis Scott Key would be an advocate of slavery and strict policies towards free black people living in slave states.

Admiral Cochrane led The British Fleet south for the winter. The British planned to capture the newly acquired American City of New Orleans. Although that plan would be foiled by a resourceful American General named Andrew Jackson, Admiral Cockburn had greater success on the coast of Carolina and Georgia, where he established a sea base at Cumberland Island. From Cumberland Island, Cockburn's forces practiced the same strategy that had worked so well in The Chesapeake Bay area, they raided Georgia Plantations near the states' coastal waterways, freeing any slaves who chose to join them. Ultimately 1300 slaves were freed as a result of Cockburn's three month occupation of Cumberland Island.<sup>17</sup>

During the early 19th century news traveled slowly. The tyranny of space and distance would be conquered throughout the later 1800's thanks to steam power and the telegraph but during the second decade of the 1800's these innovations had yet to come to fruition. Although the Treaty of Ghent was agreed to on December 24th 1814 it would take months for it to be ratified by The United States Government and weeks for the forces fighting in The United States to learn that peace had been declared. Cockburn and the rest of The British Navy continued to welcome runaway slaves until its ships departed American coastal waters on April 14th, 1815. Although the Americans demanded the return of runaways who had fled to The British during the first three months of the year, The British ended up leaving only 83 persons who had been

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor, . 310.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, p.309.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, 142-143

on Cumberland Island as of February 15th, 1815 behind. These unfortunates were placed back into slavery, even though they had been wearing the colors of the Colonial Marines.<sup>18</sup>

Cockburn and his fellow officers insisted that all of the slaves who had come to them between 1813-1815 be given their freedom in British Territory. The runaways became refugees. Those who went to Nova Scotia were provided with food and clothing for two years and then granted land to use for farming. The runaways who relocated to Bermuda lived on land at Ireland Island which was used as a station for British ships. Most of the runaways who relocated to Bermuda found work at the ship yards on Ireland Island. The American Colonial Marines refused to be merged with The West Indian Colonial Marines. These men insisted that they keep their families with them and that they not have to live anywhere slavery was prevalent. The American Colonial Marines were relocated to Trinidad where they were allocated land far from the island's capital where they could live in peace with their families. The Colonial Marines of Trinidad agreed to serve Trinidad's Colonial Governor when called upon to do so. In exchange the Colonial Marines and their families received food rations and tools for a period of two years after their relocation there.<sup>19</sup>

The British recruitment of runaway slaves and their families resulted in the greatest emancipation of slaves from American shores during the four score and seven years of the nation's existence. Over 2,000 people of African descent escaped slavery in America. In order for these people to experience liberty they had to escape the United States and find a home in the western territories of The British Empire: Bermuda, Nova Scotia and Trinidad. The emancipated slaves faced racism in their new environments but very few ever returned to The United States. Some of them wrote letters to their former masters, explaining that although they missed members of their families they left behind, they much preferred a life of freedom.<sup>20</sup>

One American Military leader who emulated Admiral Cockburn's promise of freedom to slaves who joined his forces was Andrew Jackson, the hero of The Battle of New Orleans. Jackson was forced to offer slaves in New Orleans their freedom and an allocation of land if they would join his small force of free blacks, native Americans, white soldiers and pirates in defense of the city. However after Jackson won the battle, he returned those slaves who had volunteered to their masters explaining that he could not take peoples' property away from them.<sup>21</sup>

Although it took place after The Treaty of Ghent had ended the War of 1812, Jackson's defeat of the British forces at New Orleans in January, 1815 made him a hero and gave Americans renewed confidence in their ability to persevere as a nation. Jackson and the Star Spangled Banner became emblematic of The United States and the powerful nation it was to become.

Admiral George Cockburn's last official naval post was as Commander of the West Indies Station in 1833. This was a critical time in Great Britain's history because it was the year after The British Empire emancipated its slaves. Cockburn supported the Jamaica Plantation Owners advocacy of a six year Apprenticeship, before slaves received full emancipation. This meant that the slaves would have to serve their masters for 12 years, working full time for no pay.

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, 143-144

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, 377-379

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 381-387

<sup>21</sup> Smith, 154

Cockburn agreed with the slaveowners that this was the fairest thing for all concerned. Ultimately the British Government used 40% of its budget to pay the slave owners for the loss of their property an amount that would total billions of dollars today.<sup>22</sup>

Those who had been enslaved in Great Britain received their freedom by the late 1840's but no economic compensation. Although Admiral George Cockburn had developed a positive attitude towards the American slaves he had helped to free and the men who had fought for him after being freed, ultimately he was a servant of the British Empire, much more of a pragmatist than an abolitionist or liberator. However, there are descendants of people Cockburn and the British freed living today in Nova Scotia, Bermuda and Trinidad and their ancestors were able to experience freedom two generations earlier than the rest of the slaves serving in bondage in the United States during the early 1800's.

### **Postscript: The Creole Affair of 1841**

A generation after Admiral Cockburn and The British Fleet had left American waters, The Creole, a ship transporting American slaves from Virginia to New Orleans was over taken by its human cargo. The slaves were led by an assistant steward on the ship named Madison Washington. Washington wanted to take the ship to Africa but the ship's mate they were relying on to lead them there steered them to the port of Nassau, the capital of The Bahamas Islands. Although the ship's captain had been murdered during the mutiny aboard The Creole, Nassau's Governor Francis Cockburn, George Cockburn's nephew, granted the slaves aboard the ship their freedom and allowed them leave freely. Madison Washington was imprisoned until a trial could be held, but he was found innocent of murder because he and his followers were fighting for their freedom, which the court in Nassau reasoned any person was entitled to. Slavery had been ended throughout the British Empire 9 years earlier.<sup>23</sup>

Americans were furious that the British had allowed the mutineers their freedom. Since 1820, Congress had a gag order that forbids members to discuss slavery's abolition because the issue was so contentious. Despite the Gag Order, Ohio Congressman Joshua Giddings spoke out in support of the Creole mutineers and the necessity of resisting slavery. Giddings was censured and then banished from the House of Representatives but his constituents re-elected him and he served in Congress for many years.<sup>24</sup>

There is no record of The British Naval Cockburns being strongly involved with Abolition in Great Britain. Regardless of where their societal interests lay, the circumstance of British naval superiority and the enmity that existed between the United States and Great Britain

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<sup>22</sup> Hochschild, Adam Bury the Chains,

<sup>23</sup> Downey, Arthur T. "The Creole Affair: The Slave Rebellion That Led the U.S. and Great Britain to the Brink of War, p.65

<sup>24</sup> Downey, p. 99-101

between the American Revolution and The War of 1812 led them to act as a force against American slavery whenever they had a chance to do so.

### **A Cockburn Connection?**

As someone who has thoroughly researched the life of Joshua Cockburn, a native of The Bahamas who became the only British Ship Master of African Descent to earn notices in British Newspapers for his naval exploits during World War I. I have often wondered if he has a connection with the British Naval Cockburns. Admiral George Cockburn had one daughter who married but had no children. No one has ever written of him having liaisons with women of African descent. Is it possible that slaves from Virginia, Maryland or Georgia may have taken the last name Cockburn to honor the man who was most responsible for the success of the runaway slave/ military operations on American coastal waters between 1813-1815? Could one of the Creoles emancipated slaves have decided to honor Francis Cockburn by using his surname? There are many instances of American slaves having the last names of great American leaders. Madison Washington for instance.

The strongest historical connection between The Bahamas and The War of 1812 is revealed by The Arbuthnot and Armbrister incident of 1818 which occurred during General Andrew Jackson's conquest of Florida which is remembered in U.S. History as The First Seminole War. Alexander George Arbuthnot was a 70 year old Scottish merchant who had lived in the Bahamas for many years. Beginning in 1803 he began spending a lot of time with the Seminole Indians in Florida. The Seminoles were comprised of Africans who had escaped slavery and members of Native American tribes who had been driven off their lands by Europeans. Arbuthnot learned the Semionles language and acted as a diplomat for them. He wore Indian clothing.

Robert C. Armbrister was the son of a loyalist Carolina planter who had relocated to the Bahamas after the American Revolution. Robert Armbrister had served as a midshipman on several British ships during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1815 he was living back in the Nassau when British Major Nichols arrived on the HMS Hermes to recruit men for a military expedition to Florida. The British hoped to train the Indians of Florida and escaped slaves to fight in Colonial Marines Units against The Americans in Georgia and Louisiana. Robert C. Armbrister was made a Lieutenant. He journeyed to the Apalachicola River in Spanish Florida where Nichols oversaw the construction of a fort where the new colonial marines troops were to be trained.

After the British were defeated at New Orleans Armbrister returned to the Bahamas for two years. He chose to return to Florida in April, 1818, presumably to help the Seminole Indians preserve their lands from the land hungry Americans. Armbrister was arrested by General Andrew Jackson's forces after they had sacked the Indian town of Bowlegs in Eastern Florida. Alexander George Arbuthnot had been arrested a week earlier at The Spanish Fort of St.Marks after General Jackson had occupied it. Jackson had both men executed after a hasty military trial during which both men had been found guilty of conspiring to help the Indians attack Americans. It is interesting that Robert C. Armbrister, the son of a slaveowner, became such an advocate of the rights of fugitive slaves and native Americans that he became a martyr for their cause. There is no mention of African fugitive slaves or Indians traveling back and forth to the

Bahamas with Lieutenant Armbrister. There is some evidence that Alexander George Arbuthnot transported black Seminoles to and from the Bahamas. After the destruction of Bowlegs Town, several Black Semionles eventually relocated to Andros Island in the Bahamas. They traveled there in dugout canoes that they equipped with sails. Joshua Cockburn was once referred to as “a somewhat mischievious Androsian” in a history of The Bahamas. But his birth record indicates that he was born in Nassau and his father was named Richard Cockburn. Could Richard Cockburn or his mother or father have come to the Bahamas from Florida?

Although Joshua Cockburn never referenced the 19th century naval Cockburns, he did sail out of New York on a ship bound for Australia as an American. Why would he claim to be American when he was a British subject? Marcus Garvey was aware of this fact and tried to question Cockburn about it during his trial for mail fraud, but the judge would not allow it becuae Garvey was on trial for mail fraud and Cockburn was a witness.

Most remarkable for me is the similarity between Admiral Cockburn’s attack on Washington D.C., which relied on a flotilla of ships and barges that traveled up The Patuxent River in 1814 and Ship Master Joshua Cockburn’s participation in The British flotilla that succesfully attacked an conquered on The German Port of Dwolla in The Cameroons, West Africa. Joshua Cockburn was Ship Master of the S.S. Trojan at that time. Both George and Joshua Cockburn were pragmatic individuals. Both were ship’s captains. Was there a connection between the two that had been forged during the early 1800’s somewhere on The Atlantic between The United States and The British West Indies?



In the picture. This ship's anchor belonged to The S.S. Yarmouth (also known as The Frederic Douglass). Captain Joshua Cockburn removed it in anger after Marcus Garvey fired him in June, 1920. Cockburn later won the right to keep the anchor in British Admiralty Court. The Yarmouth was a British Ship, anchored in New York City.

### Bibliography

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Admiral George Cockburn's actions and involvement in the region during the War of 1812, which actually took place from 1813-1815.