

## **A Breast Work was Thrown Up**

When the archaeologists converged on Historic Elk Landing in May, looking for Fort Hollingsworth, how did they know what they were looking for? How did they know how big the fort was, who manned it, how many guns it had, and how the militia stationed there functioned? Some of their knowledge comes from letters written by Judge Thomas Jefferson Sample to the Cecil Whig as many as 70 years after the War of 1812 battle that made the fort famous. Other information comes from a newspaper article or two out of Baltimore. And still additional information comes from other archaeological work done at other similar War of 1812 sites. But a far greater amount of information comes from a booklet titled "Maryland Militia in the War of 1812; Volume 3: Cecil and Harford Counties" compiled by F. Edward Wright. Wright is associated with Colonial Roots ([www.colonialroots.com](http://www.colonialroots.com)), based in Lewes, Delaware which specializes in researching the origins of families which colonized North America with an emphasis on Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Several years ago, Wright painstakingly reviewed the abstracts of muster, pay, receipt rolls, and Maryland Adjutant General papers for Cecil and Harford counties looking for the testimony of men who fought, or said that they fought, in the War of 1812. Amongst the papers Wright reviewed was documentation of men who not only fought in the war, but were stationed at Fort Hollingsworth when, in April of 1813, the British attempted to burn Elkton. For example, one Samuel Davis of Lee County, Iowa testified in 1860 that "for 18 days was stationed at a small fort erected at what is called Elk Landing, it being the head of boat navigation on the Chesapeake, went over to French Town with some 18 others with the expectation of saving Frenchtown... but it was all in flames when got in sight and the British soldiers were some distance from shore and endeavored to cut off our retreat. We retreated immediately and reached our battery when the British gun boats came in sight. When they came within range our guns we opened a fire which was so well directed that after three or four shots, they put about and went down the Bay."

That short paragraph tells us several things: the general location of Fort Hollingsworth, this particular soldier was stationed at the fort for 18 days, at least some of those men went to Frenchtown to prevent its burning, and when the British approached Fort Hollingsworth, the militia there fired "three or four shots," to drive the British away.

From the testimony of John C. Hull of Union County, Ohio, we learn that the militia members were protecting more than just the county seat. "When the British fleet came into the Chesapeake Bay, about twenty sail of bay craft (sloops and schooners) came up to Elk Landing. A breast work was thrown up, one long nine pound gun and four six pound cannonades were mounted."

Like Davis, Hull also attempted to give assistance to the defenders of Frenchtown as he “volunteered to leave the fortifications at Elk Landing to carry a supply of ammunition to French town but the place was burned before the party could reach the breast work; the party was nearly cut off by the British, escaping capture by their knowledge of the nearest route to the fortifications of Elk Landing. They reached Elk Landing in time to beat off the enemy.” “The British,” Hull continues, “were computed at two hundred strong, in ten barges, armed with swivels in their bows.”

Swivels are small cannons that were easily mounted on boats, barges, or other vehicles, both marine and land based.

The April, 1813 battle that we at Elk Landing celebrate as Defenders Day, was not the only British attempt at burning Elkton. Another militia member, one Jesse Ferguson, testified that a similar incident occurred one year later. It appears that engagement was larger than the previous one.

“The English came up with four barges, and attempted to pass up and burn the town.... As soon as they came in range, (we) opened a fire upon them from 4 or 5 pieces of artillery and after firing about 20 shots and keeping up a general discharge of musketry, the enemy retreated down the river and abandoned the undertaking.”

Ferguson’s report on Fort Hollingsworth’s armaments seem to agree with that of Hull, each claiming “4 or 5” artillery pieces.

The complete volume 3: Maryland Militia in the War of 1812 is posted on the Historic Elk Landing web site at [www.elklanding.org](http://www.elklanding.org), under the Research tab. Our thanks to Mr. Wright for allowing us to post his work.