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No. 7

**Alfred Jacob Miller
(1810-1874)
&**

“The Bombardment of Fort McHenry, September 13-14, 1814.”

By Scott S. Sheads



The Bombardment of Fort McHenry, September 13-14, 1814

Alfred J. Miller, c. 1829, oil on canvas.
(Maryland Center for History & Culture)

Within the War of 1812 galleries of the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore is artist Alfred Jacob Miller’s famous panorama on canvas painting entitled “The Bombardment of Fort McHenry, Sept. 13-14, 1814.”¹ It remains the quintessential War of 1812 image of the perilous fight, complete with “the bombs bursting in air” and the Star-Spangled Banner.²

In the Fall 2002 issue of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Gretchen M. Cooke’s article “On the Trail of Alfred Jacob Miller” provided an analysis of Miller’s artistic works and travels to Europe, New Orleans and to the American West. This article focuses on Miller’s painting the *Bombardment of Fort*

McHenry, September 12-14, 1814 with a brief introduction to re-acquaint the reader with one of the artistic post war chroniclers of the Battle for Baltimore. ³

On March 15, 1816 the Baltimore City Council passed a resolution to have an artist execute “two superb paintings”: *The Battle of North Point* and *The Bombardment of Fort McHenry*, each to measure fifteen feet long by ten feet in height. The artist the committee had desired to produce these paintings was none other than Colonel John Trumbull (1756-1843) of Connecticut. ⁴

Trumbull visited the Patapsco Neck battlegrounds and Fort McHenry in company with Mayor George Stiles (1760-1819), Brig. Gen. John Stricker (1758-1825), and Judge-Captain Joseph H. Nicholson, 17770-1817) a veteran militia officer s present at the bombardment of Fort McHenry. Soon thereafter, the Baltimore City Council failed to commission Trumbull for the paintings, likely due to the high commission that Trumbull placed on his works.⁵



Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874)

Alfred J. Miller 1827

Miller was described as having blue eyes, brown hair, complexion rather dark and five feet, four and a half inches high .

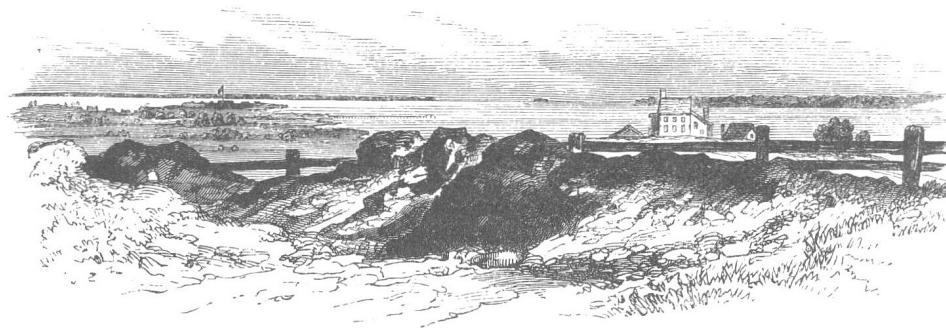
**Gift of Mr. William Pinkney Carton and Mrs. Eugenia C. Dixon
(MCH&C)**

In Baltimore the Council discovered a promising eighteen year old artist whose local artistic talents were well known and established. Alfred Jacob Miller, the oldest of nine children, was born on January 2, 1810 to grocer George

Washington and Harriet Jacobs Miller.⁶ During the bombardment of Fort McHenry, George Miller served as a private in Captain John Berry's *Washington Artillerist*, 1st Maryland Regiment of Artillery. His experiences and observations later provided his son with details of the battle.

George Miller became a prosperous sugar merchant, tailor and a grocery-tavern keeper on Baltimore's Market Square, providing his son with a variety of local color for his early satirical portraits of ordinary urban life.⁷ George Miller's success enabled him to establish a 662 acre agricultural market farm estate, *United Friendship*, of cultivated fruit trees, garden vegetables and woodlands on Anne Arundel County's Hawkins Point on the Patapsco River four miles below Fort McHenry.⁸

With an agreeable commission to the committee, eighteen year old Alfred began his studies and sketches in the spring of 1827. He opened his sketch book with a promising view upon a South Baltimore promontory known as Camp Look-Out (today Riverside Park), a circular 180-ft. earthen redoubt that had taken an active role in the city's defense.



Remains of Camp Look-Out (today Riverside Park), as viewed by artist-author Benson J. Lossing during his 1860 visit to Baltimore gathering narratives and sketches for his *Field Book of The War of 1812*. In the left distance may be seen Fort McHenry. During the bombardment this battery was commanded by Lt. George Budd of the U.S. Sloop of War *Ontario*.⁹

Later at his studio and residence, Miller completed the painting.¹⁰ That autumn the *Baltimore Gazette* gave notice of Alfred's composition:

“Among the decorations of the Saloon at Mr. [William G.] Lyford's [Fountain] Inn...[is] a large painting representing the bombardment of Fort McHenry. It is the production of a young gentleman of Baltimore, who, we are assured, has never received any of the instruction usually considered indispensable, as well to the formation of a correct taste, as to the acquisition of mechanical skill in painting. Indeed it would have been scarcely possible for him to have enjoyed many advantages in this respect, as his age does not exceed sixteen years. His painting is marked by a beautiful richness of colouring, and a graphic faithfulness in the delineation of the shores of the bay, the British fleet, the smoke of the cannon, and the bombs “bursting in air” over the Fort. With attention instruction commensurate with his genius, he will most assuredly attain a high rank as an historical painter.”¹¹

In 1832, an English lawyer Godfrey Thomas Vigne, one of many English travelers who had visited Baltimore, recalled;

“ I visited the studies of two very promising young artists...Mr. Miller, who is an American, quite a boy [at 23 years]; and whom, I think, at least an equal genius. He has had little or no instruction. If sent to Europe, as he certainly ought to be, I will venture to predict, that at some future period, he will be an ornament to his native city...”¹²

In the following years having served under the professional tutorage of Philadelphia artist Thomas Sully, Jacob traveled to Europe for studies under the

patronage of his father and Baltimore's affluent art patrons Robert Gilmore, Jr. and Johns Hopkins.¹³

Baltimore's *Niles' Weekly Register* noted in the January 1835 issue:

"...many persons have been publicly named as distinguished or promising American painters. We beg leave to add that of our young friend, Mr. Miller, who has lately returned to his native city from a long and close study of the arts of Paris, Rome, Florence. His collection is yet a small one but contains some very fine displays of talent, taste and skill."¹⁴

**A. J. MILLER, Portrait Painter—Rooms
No. 69 BALTIMORE, opposite Holliday st. J1: 3m**

The Sun, June 26, 1838

On February 23, 1836, his father George Miller died, followed by his mother Harriet Miller, a year later in 1837 leaving Jacob executor of an estate remaining in probate with accumulated debts for several years¹⁵ Jacob began to sell his father's varied properties to settle the accounts. Ms. Cooke in her article stated that the economic Panic of 1837 may have played a part in Alfred's decision to leave Baltimore for New Orleans.¹⁶

In September 1837 Alfred accompanied Scottish adventurer Captain William Drummond Stewart to the plains and Rocky Mountains of the American west. During this venture that Miller produced his famous watercolors and oils of Native Americans, trappers and landscapes he is known for today.¹⁷ Many of his earlier and western works were exhibited in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York between 1858-1874, with a series of 200 watercolors illustrating his western

tour to wealthy Baltimore merchant, investor patron of the arts William T. Walters (1820-1894) .

On June 26, 1874, Jacob died at the age seventy-four of unknown origins with his brief obituary mentioned nothing of his artistic career.

MILLER. - On yesterday, June 26, ALFRED J. MILLER, of this city. His friends and those of his family are invited to attend his funeral and his late residence. No. 264 West Fayette street, on to-morrow (Sunday) afternoon, at four o'clock, without further notice. ¹⁸

While his parents were buried at Pastor [John] Glendy Graveyard (est. 1807) of the Second Presbyterian Church at Gay and Broadway, a once prominent burial ground for merchants and 1812 veterans, Alfred was buried at Loudon Park Cemetery (Est. 1852) in west Baltimore on Frederick Road.



**Alfred Jacob Miller's grave
Loudon Park Cemetery**

Alfred's estate, compiled by his brother and executor, Decatur H. Miller, Jr. recorded the amazing breadth of his portfolio: 28 large paintings, 50 small paintings and 16 engravings in addition to his personal estate chattels and vast investments in bank stocks brought his property appraisement to \$118, 301.24.¹⁹

In the years following his death, Miller's life and his works went virtually unnoticed until the early twentieth century. Many were kept by his brother and later exhibited in 1905 at his estate of *Woodrift* in the Green Spring Valley of Baltimore.²⁰

With a growing interest in the American west, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore was one of the first art institutions to dedicate an entire gallery to Miller's works when in 1935 a large collection of 100 watercolor sketches of



Strategic Post NPS Wayside Exhibit on site at Riverside Park, formerly known as Battery Square. (Star-Spangled Banner NHT, NPS)

Miller's were discovered in the old Rembrandt Peale Museum in Baltimore.²¹ In 1950, an exhibit entitled *The Paintings of Alfred Jacob Miller, An Exhibition at the Peale Museum* was displayed from January 8 to February 12, 1950.

Today, no study and account of the Battle for Baltimore and bombardment of Fort McHenry is complete without viewing Alfred Jacob Miller's pre-eminent painting of the naval bombardment of Fort McHenry.



1901.23 Bombardment of Fort McHenry

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DETAILS OF THE PAINTING

(CENTER)

The Star-Spangled Banner - The primary focal point is the star-spangled banner, whose flagstaff rises above the brick-earthen ramparts amidst the smoke, rain, lighting and bombardment. Due to the stormy weather the flag flying is the 17' x 25' storm flag. The garrison flag would not be raised until 9 a.m. September 14th. two hours after the attack ended

Fort McHenry Boundary Wall - To the left center, what appears to be the fort is actually a ten foot high brick-masonry wall built in 1817, stretching across the width of the peninsula. The wall was built by Lt. Colonel George Armistead's brother, Lt. Colonel Walker Keith Armistead, U.S. Corps of Engineers. In 1837, with additional land acquired, the wall was relocated to its present site marking

the federal north boundary of the present day Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine.



The primary focal point is the star-spangled banner whose flagstaff rises above the brick-earthen ramparts amidst the smoke, rain and bombardment.

Schwartzauer's Tavern - Below the flag to the left is a two-story brick tavern owned by a Mrs. Maria Schwartzauer (appearing incorrectly as a three-story structure) located outside the military boundary with a wooden boarding house, all private property. The tavern was removed in December 1837 when the U.S. army purchased additional lands outside the fort in order to secure the land approaches to the fort.

Lombardy Poplar Trees - The trees within and without the fort are Lombardy Poplars part of the initial ca. 1800 landscape design, that are utilized to soak up ground water, an important component for masonry construction. Many of the trees still survived when Miller painted the scene.

Military Tents - In the foreground is the camp 36th and 38th U.S. Infantry (600 men), who were stationed in the dry moat or outer ditch that surrounded the fort to provide a line of defense against British marine landings.

(LEFT)

Lazaretto Battery - Barely visible, is one of the several merchant vessels deliberately sunk to block the northwest branch of the Patapsco River. The drifting billowing smoke along Fort McHenry's shore batteries are the result of the French 18- and 36-Pdr. naval cannon that provided the mainstay of Baltimore harbor's defense.

(RIGHT)

Battery Babcock - In the center foreground of the painting is the "Six Gun Battery" a semi-circular 180 foot earthen redoubt with a central earthen mound powder magazine and a flagstaff mounted on top. In May of 1813, the City of Baltimore had raised construction funds and named it for U.S. Corps of Engineers, Captain Samuel Babcock. During the bombardment it was commanded by a Harford County Maryland native, Sailing Master John Adams Webster (1786-1877), U.S. Chesapeake Flotilla. Today the site no longer survives. In 1914, a granite block mounted with an 1812 iron cannon inscribed "Battery Babcock" was dedicated during the Star-Spangled Banner National Centennial Celebration to marks its approximate location. The memorial was removed in the fall of 2020 during new waterfront construction. ²²

Fort Covington - To the far right edge of the painting is seen the partially obscured Fort Covington, named for Marylander Brigadier General Leonard Covington (1768-1813), who was mortally wounded on November 11, 1813 at the Battle of Chrysler's Field, Upper Canada. Beneath the flag one may see the gated entrance.

In early 1814, soon after its completion using federal funds, Fort Covington was described thus:

“One and a half miles west of Fort McHenry is a new work calculated to receive ten or twelve guns; this work is demi-riveted; the height from the ditch to the crest of the parapet [is] 16 feet, calculated for a battery *en-barbette*; with quarters sufficient for a company and a magazine 30 x 12 feet, it is enclosed in the rear by a [180 foot, 10’high] brick wall.”²³

During the bombardment the fort was commanded by Lt. Henry Newcomb and eighty sailors from the U.S. frigate *Guerriere*. Encamped outside the brick walls were Brigadier General Griffin Taylor’s 56th Virginia Regiment from Leesburg, Va. On January 6, 1869, the U.S. Government sold the 2 ¾ acre site as the property had become commercially valuable as a manufacturing site with an extended deep waterfront.²⁴ Today, nothing remains of Fort Covington (present day site of Under Armour Wye Whiskey Distillery).

(DISTANCE)

British Bombardment Squadron - Clearly visible beyond Fort McHenry on the Patapsco River is the British squadron of twenty vessels, among of which were HM bomb ships *Volcano*, *Devastation*, *Etna*, *Meteor* and *Terror* that hurled “the bombs bursting air” over the embattled ramparts and HMS Erebus’s “rocket’s red glare.” The remainder of the fleet lay anchored off North Point, ten miles distant. Amidst the stormy wind-rain swept event, several cast-iron 190 pound, thirteen inch cast-iron British mortar shells are seen hurtling towards the fort from a distance of 2 miles - then “bursting in air” over the ramparts.

American Truce Vessel, Sloop-Packet, *President* - To the right on the distant horizon may be seen the small two-masted sloop (highlighted with a burst of the dawn's early light) the *President*, one of Captain John Ferguson's mail-passenger packets, known to have carried American dispatches to the British command. From this position, it is clear that attorney Francis Scott Key and Colonel John S. Skinner had a clear view of the bombs and rockets, providing "proof that the flag was still there."

END



1901.23 Bombardment of Fort McHenry

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ENDNOTES

¹ A replica of the painting is also on view in the Visitor Center at Fort McHenry, the site of the epic bombardment.

² Most of his sketches and watercolors were entirely forgotten for nearly a century until they were rediscovered in a storeroom of the Peale Museum, Baltimore in November 1933. The Maryland Historical Society acquired the painting in March 7, 1944. *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* by Marvin C. Ross (University of Oklahoma Press, 1951).

³ Another artist chronicle of the Battle for Baltimore was Battle of North Point veteran Thomas Ruckle (1776-1853) a house painter whose own paintings *The Battle of North Point, Near Baltimore* and *The Defense of Baltimore, Assembling of the Troops, September 12, 1814* also are in the gallery of the Maryland Historical Society.

⁴ John Trumbull (1756-1843). In January 1817, Congress approved to commission Trumbull for four large murals for the U.S. Capitol rotunda depicting scenes from the American Revolution at a cost of \$8,000 per painting.

⁵ Judge Joseph Hopper Nicholson (1760-1817), U.S. Congressman (1799-1806); *The Sun*, September 8, 1912; "Defense of Baltimore," *Niles' Weekly Register*, March 30, 1816; *Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters of John Trumbull from 1756 to 1841* (New York and London: Wiley and Putnam, 1841), 260-261; "Liberality of Congress," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 31, 1817; .

⁶ Cooke, Gretchen M. "On the Trail of Alfred Jacob Miller." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (Fall 2002). George W. Miller was a Proprietor of a Liquor Store (1810), Inn-keeper and Distiller of Cordials (1812), Dry Goods Merchant and Grover (1822). The Miller residence in 1810 was located on the corner of the Fish Market and Marsh Market. "Intelligencer Office," *The Baltimore Whig*, July 3, 1810; "Died," [George W. Miller] *Baltimore Gazette & aily Advertiser*, February 24, 1836; "Intelligence Office," *Federal Republican*, September 24, 1810; George Washington Miller (1777-1836) and Harriet Jacobs Miller (1784-1834).

⁷ His early sketches are in the galleries of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

⁸ "Public Sales," *Baltimore Gazette*, August 5, 1836; "Chancery Sale," *Baltimore Patriot*, April 25, 1833; and "Hawkins Point for Sale," *Baltimore Gazette*, January 2, 1826.

⁹ In November of 1813, Fort Look-Out, also known as the “Circular Battery” was thereafter referred to as Fort Wood named after a native Marylander Lt. Colonel Eleazer Derby Wood (1783-1814), U.S. Corps of Engineers who was killed leading a charge at a sortie of Fort Erie, Upper Canada on September 17, 1814. The site was commemorated in 1914 by the installation of six 6-pounder cast iron field guns.

¹⁰ “How a Baltimorean Saved the West” by J. Wynn Rousuck (*Sun Magazine*, May 11, 1975). His studio-residence was located at Frederick and Baltimore streets, one of several such residences of Alfred in Baltimore during his lifetime.

¹¹ *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, September 17, 1829.

¹² Vigne, Esq., Godfrey Thomas, (1801-1863) *Six Months in America*, (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co., 1832), vol. 1, 141.

¹³ Thomas Sully (1783-1872), English born, is best known for his portraits. One of his works is that of *Lady with A Harp* (1818) of Eliza Ridgely of Hampton Mansion (Hampton National Historic Site). Robert Gilmor (1774-1848) to Benjamin C. Howard (1791-1872), U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, March 15, 1833. Benjamin Chew Howard Collection, Box 17, folder 1820-1865, MS469, MHS. Howard served as captain of the Baltimore Mechanical Volunteers, 5th Maryland Regiment at the Battle of North Point.

¹⁴ *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 3, 1835.

¹⁵ “Died,” *The Sun*, December 27, 1837. No gravestone traces of George Miller nor that of his son Alfred who was likely buried at the Glendy Burial Grounds survives, nor for that matter any of Baltimore’s most notable merchants and veterans of the war.

¹⁶ “On the Trail of Alfred Jacob Miller,” Gretchen M. Cooke, *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Fall, 2002, 330.

¹⁷ William Drummond Stewart (1796-1871) had served as a lieutenant in the 15th King’s Hussars at Waterloo.

¹⁸ *Baltimore American*, July 27, 1874.

¹⁹ Baltimore City Register of Wills (Inventories) 100, pp. 288-297. Alfred J. Miller, 11 August 1874. (Maryland State Archives, T603-34; 2/29/11/11.

²⁰ *Baltimore American*, July 23, 1905.

²¹ Upon Walter's death in 1894 his personal fortune was valued at \$4.5 million dollars. "William T. Walter's Estate," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1895; *Fortune Magazine*, January 1944.

²² Captain George Stiles (1760-1819); Sailing Master John Adams Webster (1785-1876). The site of Battery Babcock lies underneath the elevated Interstate 95 southern approach to the Fort McHenry Tunnel. The original site is marked by the monument that is erected in front of the 1905 Baltimore Gas & Electric Gould Street Station. The structure was torn down in 2020 for new waterfront development. The cannon memorial was removed for storage until a more suitable site can be selected on the Under Armour property.

²³ Samuel Babcock to Secretary of War John Armstrong, December 1, 1813. "Letters Received," Office, Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives.

²⁴ "Additional Sales at Fort Covington," *The Sun*, June 24, 1831.