



State unveils plans for War of 1812 bicentennial celebration

Festivities kick off with flotilla in June



Crew members of the USS Hurricane (PC3) stand in attention during the Star-Spangled Sailabration announcement. (Kenneth K. Lam, Baltimore Sun)

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With cannon booms, a drum roll and the Navy at the ready, the state unveiled its plans Thursday to celebrate the bicentennial of the War of 1812, a series of events designed to showcase Maryland's role in the conflict.

The Pride of Baltimore II, numerous Navy vessels, the Coast Guard's Eagle and at least 10 other tall ships, many from foreign shores, will berth at the Inner Harbor in June to launch the commemoration. Organizers expect about 1 million people to attend the weeklong event.

There will be fireworks, rowing competitions and living-history displays. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is set to present a new overture.

"So then, we won't have to borrow Napoleon's," Gov. Martin O'Malley told a large crowd gathered near the Visitors Center at the Inner Harbor, referring to Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." "This will be a two-year celebration crescendoing to the defense of Baltimore."

Celebrations similar to the one planned for Baltimore Harbor June 13-19 will take place in New Orleans, Norfolk, Va., New York and Boston.

The scene may remind visitors of 1976's Operation Sail, when tall ships visited Baltimore and many other ports in a salute to America's 200th birthday.

Returning ships will see a much more vibrant harbor, said Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. The promenade, pavilions and Visitors Center have been added since that visit 35 years ago. Those popular amenities sprang from the vision of one of her predecessors, William Donald Schaefer, the late governor, mayor and comptroller, she said, in a nod to his statue, which overlooked the event.

In stark contrast to the Norwegian tall ship anchored in the background were two Navy patrol boats. Men in early 19th-century military uniforms stood beside officers in today's Navy. Women in flowing dresses mingled with their 21st-century sisters in business suits and heels.

The celebratory events will pay homage to Baltimore's place in America's history, the fortitude of city residents and the last U.S. war fought under sail, said Jose Fuentes, executive director of Operation Sail.

"We are facing the same waters where a young lawyer wrote the words that instantly captured pride in our homeland," said Fuentes, referring to Francis Scott Key, who wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner" after being held on a British ship in the harbor during the bombardment.

Before the Battle of Baltimore, the British had sacked Washington. That left Baltimore as a last point of resistance against the enemy forces.

"Many thought all was lost for the new democracy," Fuentes said. "But the city of Baltimore met the attack and saved the nation. This country has an immense debt to the residents of this great city."

The observance will continue with commemorative events planned over the next two years across the state. At Fort McHenry, which, O'Malley reminded the crowd, was built by Baltimore merchants, at North Point, where the American militia demoralized British soldiers, and in towns like Havre de Grace and Perryville, crowds will recall the events of the war and the heroism of their ancestors.

"The reason we carried the day is that we looked out for one another," O'Malley said.

Francis Taylor, chairman of Baltimore County's bicentennial advisory committee, is working to have a North Point trail completed and its weathered battle monuments restored in time for the 2014 anniversary events. After attending the Inner Harbor ceremony Thursday, he felt certain that the festivities are getting off to a good start.

"The harbor is so impressive today with just these few ships," Taylor said. "It is a natural draw anyway, but with the tall ships and the Navy it will be beautiful. This is a great way to kick off the bicentennial events."

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