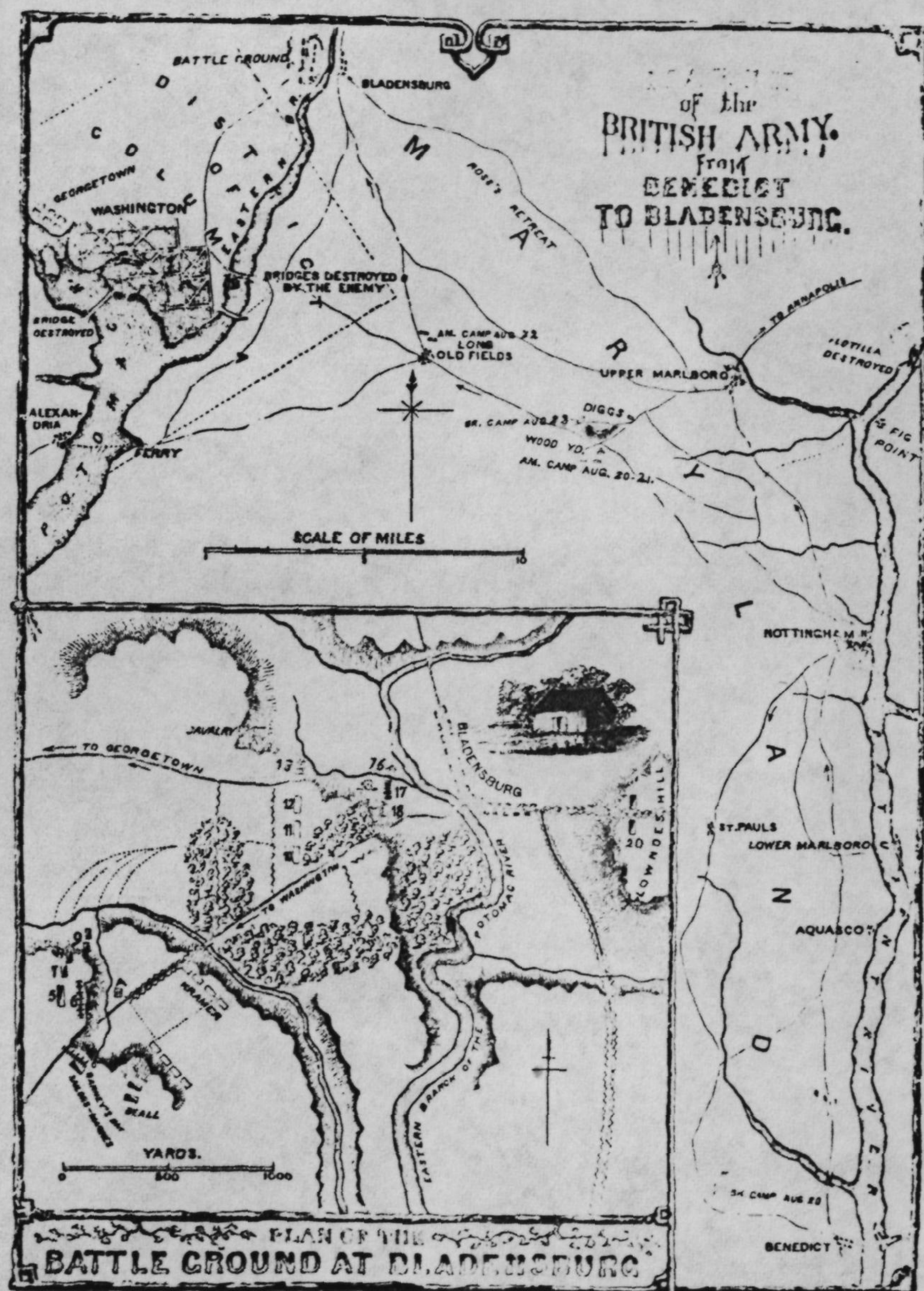




Lossing, Field Book

Citizens outside the militia organization bestirred themselves. In one small Virginia town a prominent lawyer mounted a wagon and called on his neighbors to follow him against the enemy. A company formed behind him, scraped up some equipment, and began the march. In Washington militia exempts hastily organized and joined the movement. At Bladensburg the people volunteered to dig earthworks, and Winder, who had neglected to have it done before, sent a trained engineer to supervise them. The newspapers urged all free people of color to go to Bladensburg to help dig, and about 500 of them answered this call.¹⁶

Everyone neglected the simplest and most obvious tactics of all: to fell trees across the roads, tear up bridges, and harass the enemy column as it passed through the heavy forest. (Armstrong later claimed that he advised Winder to do the harassment.) For 40 miles the invaders traversed the thick woods and scarcely caught sight of an American.¹⁷

By 23 August citizen soldiers began swarming into District Number Ten. Winder had about 2,000 of them with him at the Woodyard, 10 miles southeast of Washington. The enemy were vulnerable while in column, with their flank to him, but he made no attempt to strike them. His camp, only a few miles from the British position, was very noisy, and a spy could have picked up the countersign 50 yards from any outpost.¹⁸

On 23 August the militia called en masse by General Winder began to reach the Washington area. For a while on Tuesday two regiments of drafted militia from the vicinity of Baltimore, commanded by Brigadier General Tobias Stansbury, occupied a strong position east of Bladensburg. Winder sent orders to Stansbury to stay where he was and fight the enemy if he came that way. Disgruntled because he thought Winder was recklessly hazarding the Maryland troops, Stansbury called a council of his officers. He and they decided to disobey the order and to cross the eastern branch and take position on the slope beyond it. At that point the eastern branch was 40 yards wide, but only 3 feet deep, with a firm bottom and gently sloping banks. The road crossed the branch on a wooden bridge. General Stansbury claimed that he ordered it destroyed, but the bridge remained intact.¹⁹

In its new position Stansbury's brigade was joined about five in the afternoon of 23 August by 1,000 men commanded by Colonel Joseph Sterrett. The core of this reinforcement was the Fifth Maryland Volunteer Infantry, recruited from the best society in Baltimore. It had left the city in full dress: blue jackets faced with red, white pantaloons,