

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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## John Eager Howard

**War Hero, South Baltimore Land Owner, Governor, Senator, Slave Owner**

by David Safier

In 1781 a 29 year old Revolutionary Army captain from Baltimore headed a battalion, including members of the famous “Maryland Line” regiment, during the Battle of Cowpens in South Carolina. He led his troops, bayonets at the ready, into battle with the British infantry. The British troops fled, and seven officers were taken prisoner.

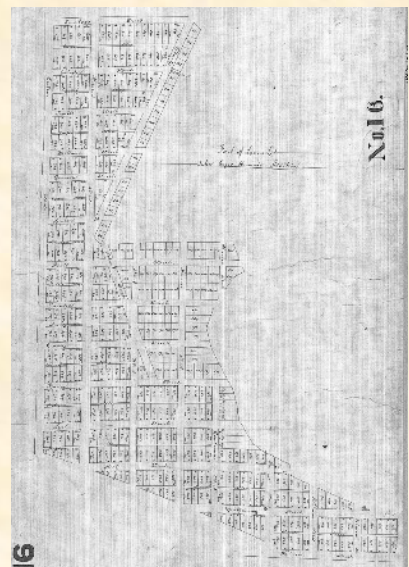
The problem was, the captain led the charge without waiting for orders from his superiors.

After the battle, Lieutenant Thomas Morgan said to the captain, “You have done well, for you are successful; had you failed, I would have shot you.”

That young man, who was heralded as a war hero for his many acts of valor during the Revolutionary War, was John Eager Howard, the son of a wealthy Baltimore land owner. Four years earlier he inherited a large parcel of land from his father, which is what makes him an important part of Otterbein history. The land, which he named Howard’s Addition, spanned from Saratoga Street in the North to Warren Street in the south, including what is now the Otterbein neighborhood. Howard divided the land into lots and began leasing and selling them to developers and land speculators in 1783, beginning the settlement of South Baltimore.



**John Eager Howard**



**Howard's Addition**

## War Hero, Governor, Senator

Is the tale of Howard’s exploits in the Battle of Cowpen just another war story, or is it accurate? I don’t know for sure, but I can say I got the information from a good source: *The Chronicles of Baltimore* written by J. Thomas Scharf in 1874, considered to be the first comprehensive history of the city. Here is Scharf’s stirring account of the battle.

No American officer during those seven years was more frequently engaged in desperate conflicts with the enemy [than John Eager Howard], and by none were performed more numerous acts of heroic daring. The distant cannonade was not the kind of warfare pleasing to his ardent temperament; he delighted to meet the foe in the close encounter of crossed bayonets. . . . At Cowpens, cheering on his men, he rushed like a thunderbolt upon the British infantry while advancing as if to certain victory. The shock was terrible—the foe were unable to stand before it. Tarleton's best troops recoiled—fled—and Howard stood master of the field. He had charged without orders; and as he stood with the swords of seven British officers in his hands, whom he had just taken

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prisoners, [Lieutenant Thomas] Morgan rode up to him and said: "You have done well, for you are successful; had you failed, I would have shot you."

However, this wonderful tale is contradicted by the description of the battle on the website, George Washington's Mount Vernon, which says Morgan ordered Howard to charge:

Morgan ordered Howard's men, retreating but still in rank, to turn and fire a volley in unison. The British had broken rank and were in the midst of an unorganized charge when the American volley halted their advance. Morgan then ordered a bayonet charge by Howard's men just as patriot cavalry, led by Lieutenant Colonel William Washington, flanked Tarleton's force from one side and Pickens' reorganized militia attacked from the opposite flank. This "double envelope," orchestrated masterfully by Morgan led nearly half the redcoats to lay down arms and cease fighting.

Whichever description is closer to the truth, Howard's bravery at Cowpens earned him a Congressional medal. Translated from Latin, the inscription reads, "By rushing suddenly on the wavering lines of the enemy [Howard] gave a brilliant example of martial courage at the battle of the Cowpens, January 17, 1781."



**Howard's Congressional Medal**

Scharf's narration of Howard's life continues on a factual note when he described Howard's continuing public career.

After the close of the Revolution, the State of Maryland testified her appreciation of Col. Howard's gallant services by thrice electing him her Governor, and afterwards twice sending him to represent her in the Senate of the United States. General Washington invited him to a seat in his Cabinet as Secretary of War, which high honor he magnanimously declined.

## Howard's Later Years

Scharf described some incidents from the last decade of Howard's life. A memorable moment was during the war of 1812, when Baltimore expected and feared an attack by British troops. Howard, then 60 years old, once again showed the kind of patriotism and courage which he displayed as a soldier years earlier.

When the British army, flushed with their easy victory at Bladensburg, were threatening an attack upon Baltimore, some of the more timid of its inhabitants proposed to purchase the safety of their property from impending destruction by an inglorious capitulation. Howard answered the proposition indignantly, with a response worthy of his own character and of lasting remembrance: "I have," said he, "as much property at stake as most persons, and I have four sons in the field; but sooner would I see my sons weltering in their blood, and my property reduced to ashes, than so far disgrace the country."

Howard died at age 74. His funeral indicated that his acclaim had not faded over the years.

Honor, wealth, and the ardent love of friends were his lot in life, and few men ever went down to the grave more truly lamented than John Eager Howard. His remains were committed to the tomb, attended by an immense civil and military procession; and the general gloom that pervaded the city testified the



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great respect and esteem for his worth and services. Hon. John Quincy Adams, the President of the United States, being in the city, attended the funeral.

## **John Eager Howard, Slave Owner**

Whether or not Scharf's descriptions are entirely accurate, John Eager Howard's bravery, stature and importance in the development of the city of Baltimore and the state of Maryland cannot be questioned. However, one aspect of his life which was left out of Scharf's narrative is worthy of critical scrutiny. Howard was a slave owner.

The only listing of members of Howard's household I was able to find is in the 1820 census. At the time of the census, Howard's 29 member household included 5 enslaved people.

In southern states it was common for people of Howard's station to be slave owners; it was even considered a status symbol at the time. However, that does not make his choice defensible. It deserves to be condemned, not excused. In the early decades of the 1800s the subjects of slavery and abolition were widely discussed in Baltimore, and Howard being a former governor and U.S. senator would have been well aware of the discussions. Because Baltimore had the largest free Black population of any city in the country, Howard would have found it easy to have as many free Black people working for him as he needed. In fact, the 1820 census lists 7 free Black people as part of Howard's household. He could have chosen to hire a few more.