

John C. Babcock: Civil War Spy: A Heritage Frederick Activity



Heritage Frederick is a nonprofit organization that preserves and shares Frederick County history through exhibits, programs for all ages, and research services. Established in 1892 as the Historical Society of Frederick County, Heritage Frederick has a Museum of Frederick County History with about 6,000 objects and a Frederick County Archives and Research Center with 28,000 collections of documents, images and books that are available for research. These two institutions are located at 24 E. Church Street in downtown Frederick, Maryland.



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Our “Civil War Spy” activity is one of many we are developing to give families learning opportunities about their community. This activity can be done at home or while taking a simple stroll in downtown Frederick.



The booklet is available online or may be picked up at Heritage Frederick’s entrance at 24 E. Church Street. Parking is available on the street and across the street at

John C. Babcock: What led him to become a Union spy

Nearly 100 years before the FBI was formed, John Babcock was a spy for the U.S.



In the early 1800s, the U.S. was changing rapidly. The North was building factories. They created new jobs that attracted people from other countries who sought improved living conditions and were willing to work for low wages. The South's more temperate weather was conducive to large-scale farming. Slave labor was relied upon to grow crops.

The northern and southern states disagreed over slavery, states' rights and westward expansion. Many slave-owning states seceded (withdrew) from the U.S. and in 1861 formed the Confederate States of America. The Civil War, also called "The War Between the States," began in 1861.

Maryland was caught in the middle. It was located south of the Mason-Dixon Line that divided the North from the South, and was near Washington, D.C., the nation's capital. It was a slave-owning state but did not secede. Some Marylanders sided with the Union. Others were loyal to the



Confederacy. Three major battles were fought in Maryland. The Civil War ended when the South surrendered in 1865.

Meet John Babcock

When the Civil War started, John Babcock, a successful architect in Chicago, enlisted as a Private. In 1862, he worked for Allan Pinkerton, Chief of Intelligence for General George McClellan. One of his jobs was to supply information for the Union during the Battle of Antietam. In 1863 he was made third in command of the U.S. Bureau of Military Information, a group of official U.S. spies. That year, he was ordered to Frederick. ***This exercise is about what happened in Frederick.***



John Babcock was highly valued as an exceptional map maker. Maps of enemy lines were used by the North and the South to plan ways to win battles. To create maps for the Union, he rode his horse Gimlet into Confederate fortifications and sketched what he saw. His work was extremely dangerous, and he literally dodged bullets. If caught by the Confederates, he would have been executed. As the war continued, Babcock was hired as a civilian contractor and replaced Pinkerton as Chief of Intelligence. After the war, he eventually moved to New York City and resumed his work as an architect. He died in 1908.