

The Burning of the White House

SYNOPSIS

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ACT ONE

It's August, 1814 and the War of 1812 is raging between the Americans and the British – as narrated to us by a 50-year-old former slave, Paul Jennings (Old Paul). Back in 1814, James Madison is president and the war is not going well. The British navy waits off the coast of Maryland led by the blustery Admiral Cockburn. At the White House, Congressmen are in a panic about the threat of a British invasion, no matter how well First Lady Dolley Madison tries to quell their fears. In good time, a messenger arrives with news that the British have landed in Maryland and are making for Washington. **(It's The End)** Also in the White House is the young, 15-year-old version of our narrator (Young Paul), who serves as a slave to the Madisons. Smart as a whip and full of sass, Young Paul is less interested in the British invasion than he is getting himself a nice new pair of shoes for serving at the White House – no matter how much Dolley insists that such tinsel of life doesn't much matter. **(The Shoes On Your Feet)** Nevertheless, Young Paul still craves the status that fancy new shoes will bring him. **(Give 'Em A Kick)** Meanwhile, as the British get closer, there is panic and looting in the capital, which the Older Paul remembers sadly. In the madness, Young Paul witnesses an escaped slave on the run from his master and the slave's brutal re-capture, which forces him to think on his own status as a slave. **(Blackbird Song)** Before too long, President Madison determines he must go to the front and fight alongside his troops as the British near the city. Dolley tries to cheer up her husband, despite the dire situation of the American army, and plans a glorious victory feast for him. **(We're Going To Have A Feast)** Victory, alas, seems evermore out of reach, when even the 100-man guard appointed to protect the White House flees in terror on the verge of the big battle. Dolley agrees to arm the White House servants, but not the black servants, as the British have promised freedom to any black slave who joins their cause. Young Paul is aggrieved by this, because he had promised President Madison that he would take care of Dolley in Madison's absence and even questions Dolley about why she won't free him - but Dolley, unable to reconcile her position, cuts the conversation short. Young Paul hopes Dolley knows that, even if free, he would never leave her. **(Here I Is)** The next day, Dolley is preparing the victory feast for her husband when news arrives that the American forces have been defeated and the British are about to take the capital. Dolley and her staff leave the sumptuous feast on the table and flee the White House, but Young Paul, who promised President Madison he would grab some of the President's papers, stays behind – and stays too long. Soon Cockburn and his men arrive and capture Young Paul in the White House. **(Until The City Died)**

ACT TWO

Young Paul has been captured by the British, led by Admiral Cockburn, who ransacks the dinner table prepared by Dolley and pledges to burn down the White House, even against the orders of his superior

officer, General Robert Ross. **(Inferno)** Young Paul manages to escape from the clutches of Cockburn and find refuge up a tree near the White House. As the British soldiers search for him, Young Paul reflects on why he even bothered to stay behind at the White House and risk his life for the very people who have enslaved him. **(Mistuh Tree)** Meanwhile, near the Georgetown River, President Madison is trying to escape into Maryland with a few compatriots and evade capture. By now, Cockburn has started to burn down Washington DC. Madison sees the carnage and feels he is ultimately the cause of the bloodshed. **(I Look Behind Me)** Just then, Young Paul arrives, also trying to flee into Maryland, but Madison's retinue, fearing he could be a British spy, attacks him. Enraged, Young Paul breaks free, turns a gun against his attackers, and runs off, firing indiscriminately, which ends up distracting some nearby British soldiers and allowing Madison and his men to flee. A few hours later, Young Paul finds refuge at the house of a Presbyterian minister named Everett who takes in the young slave and gives him something to eat. It seems Washington DC is doomed to be burnt to ashes, when suddenly it starts to pour the rain, effectively squelching Cockburn's fires. Overjoyed, Young Paul pledges to return to the city to see if the White House – his home – is still standing. **(Let Your Faith Ring Clear)** Back in DC, the British have decided to leave; they have made their point and are now surrounded by hostile American forces in a dank, muddy morass. Before leaving, however, Cockburn's men capture Young Paul. A thrilled Cockburn prepares to hang Young Paul when General Ross stops him. Upon learning from Paul that Cockburn disobeyed his commands regarding the burning of the White House, Ross humiliates Cockburn and orders him escorted to his ship. **(It's Over)** Running to the White House, Young Paul finds it burnt to the ground with just a smoky hull left. Shortly thereafter, seeing the British depart, Madison and Dolley are themselves reunited in the White House with Paul. It is then Madison understands that Paul deliberately saved his life previously by firing the gunshot and distracting the British soldiers near the Georgetown River – and because of that heroism, he promises Young Paul his freedom. Young Paul, Dolley, Madison, and their entourage reflect on the enormous challenge ahead of them for rebuilding the White House and the nation itself. **(It Starts With A Broom)**

In a postscript, the older Paul Jennings tells us he never did get his freedom from the Madisons – and in fact, was even sold by Dolley later in life when she was poor and destitute. Despite this, Old Paul was able to purchase his own freedom. Upon becoming free, he decides to visit the aged, impoverished Dolley and offers her much-needed money and food. As the curtain falls, Old Paul rejoices in the fact that he has finally become a free man. **(Here I Am)**