

## **The Battle of New Orleans (January 8, 1815)**

The Battle of New Orleans occurred on January 8, 1815, which, interestingly, was after American and British negotiators signed the Treaty of Ghent (Belgium) but before word of the treaty's signing reached North America. Given the American victory, most Americans concluded the British agreed to the treaty *because* of the battle's outcome and hence most Americans believed the United States had won the war, which was not the case.

Great Britain had long considered an attack on the American gulf coast. Early efforts had failed. By the time British forces first arrived along Florida's Gulf Coast, then still part of the Spanish empire, Major General Andrew Jackson had defeated hostile Creek Indians near Horseshoe Bend and forced Creek leaders to sign the Treaty of Fort Jackson, ending British hopes of Native American help in the forthcoming campaign. Still, in August 1814 British forces landed at Pensacola in Spanish Florida to use it as a staging base for attacks on Mobile, Alabama, or New Orleans and the Mississippi River. Jackson's subsequent attack on Pensacola, and the British destruction of the town's fortifications before retreating, left the base useless to the British and the Americans.

In fall 1814, it seemed Britain's two-decade long war with France had ended with the exile of Napoleon Bonaparte to the island of Elba off the northeast coast of Italy. The British were able to transfer more warships and battle-tested troops to expand their control of the American coastline and to invade New Orleans, an important port for goods and agricultural bounty coming down the Mississippi River and full of valuable cotton and sugar. An earlier, September 1814, attack on Mobile Bay had failed. Similarly, two earlier campaigns in 1814, one on Lake Champlain to threaten upper New York state and Vermont and another into the Chesapeake, had not forced an American surrender. Perhaps bottling up the Mississippi, threatening the livelihood of Americans in the trans-Appalachian area, would add to the severe economic dislocations in the United States and force Washington to concede a favorable treaty settlement.

British Admiral Alexander Cochrane sent a powerful fleet of more than 50 ships to transport more than 10,000 troops from Jamaica. The brother-in-law of the Duke of Wellington (eventually the victor over Napoleon at Waterloo in June 1815), Lt. General Edward Pakenham commanded this army; he replaced the original choice, Robert Ross, who died in the Baltimore campaign the previous fall. Many of the troops had fought in the Peninsula Campaign, and they generally had little respect for their American opponents. They assumed an easy victory.

The campaign to seize control of the mouth of the Mississippi was part of a larger plan. The British Admiralty wanted to control the American coastline, challenge for control of inland waterways, safeguard British commerce from American privateering, pillage key American ports, and threaten American commerce, all to make the war more expensive than the United States could afford to prosecute. The two earlier campaigns did not achieve their goals; the Americans had defended well on Lake Champlain around Plattsburgh, and rather famously after sacking Washington, DC, the British saw a Congreve rocket attack fail to damage Fort McHenry, as the national anthem noted, "the rockets' red glare." The final attack was a campaign using Pensacola and Spanish Florida and perhaps Native American tribes to threaten the American gulf

coast. The initial effort at Mobile failed, so Cochrane concentrated forces for an attack on New Orleans.

The American commander, Major General Andrew Jackson, known affectionately as "Old Hickory" by his men, had marched down the Natchez Trace from Tennessee with his volunteers (hence Tennessee's nickname as the "Volunteer State"), local militia, freed Haitian slaves, and even the pirate Jean Lafitte and his men (who provided badly needed ammunition and intelligence about British movements and intentions). Jackson had correctly guessed that the city of New Orleans was the British objective. His motley group of 4,000 had to defend the many approaches--perhaps as many as seven reasonable avenues of attack for the British--to the city against this seemingly overwhelming expression of British force.

The British achieved a degree of surprise by soon landing some nine miles downstream from New Orleans on Bayou Bienvenue and by December 23 were within a day's march of the city's outer defenses. The Mississippi River itself, Lake Pontchartrain, and other waterways offered too many attractive avenues of attack for the British. Jackson had the Louisiana militia tail the British, naval gunboats guard the Lake Pontchartrain approaches, and established several lines of defense depending on the axis of the British advance.

Jackson surprised the British with a night attack that, while not successful, caused them to wait for further reinforcements from troops on the ships in the river. After a sortie the night of the British landing, Jackson decided to defend the city on a line about four miles south of New Orleans. The Americans fortified a bank along the Rodriguez Canal with the Mississippi River to their right (and west) and a supposedly impassable swamp to the left (and east). Pakenham awaited the arrival of additional troops, giving Jackson valuable time to construct his defenses of earth, wood, and cotton bales and to anticipate the British plan of attack. Still, the British lacked shallow-draft landing craft, and that lack helped determine the subsequent British plan of attack, easing Jackson's defensive burdens.

After much preparation, General Pakenham attacked the Americans. He followed the advice of his staff who believed the British could force their way against the so-called Line Jackson rather than using Lake Pontchartrain to outflank Jackson and threaten New Orleans by a rapid overland march. Pakenham intended to follow an artillery duel by attacking the flanks and caving in the American position and pursuing them back into the city. He had hoped to seize American artillery on the west bank of the Mississippi and turn it on the main American defenses on the east side.

The plan may have made sense in theory but exposed the British to an advance across an open field in daylight against the Americans who were behind mud and cotton bale defenses. Moreover, the British left, who were supposed to attack and seize American artillery on the west bank of the Mississippi and then turn those guns on Jackson's position, was delayed, landed further downstream than planned (and thus farther from the American artillery), and so did not achieve its goal before the main body moved forward to test American defenses. Moreover, the remaining US Navy gunboat, the *Louisiana*, augmented the west bank artillery slowing the British advance to seize the guns and turn them on Jackson's main line of defense. A fog that

Pakenham hoped would cover his attack caused some of his units to become disoriented and not be in position on time.

Pakenham nonetheless decided to go forward. The fog cleared and the defenders rained shot and shell onto the British moving across a largely open field, although a small column that Colonel Robert Rennie commanded managed to seize a redoubt. British troops advancing on the right side of the line lacked equipment to bridge the many ravines, and so they bogged down. Many British men and officers were wounded, including Pakenham and several senior commanders, and many killed. After thirty minutes, the British wisely retreated. The British suffered more than 2,000 casualties to around 100 for the Americans.

In the aftermath of the battle, Royal Navy units sailed to Mobile Bay, seized a defending fort, and began planning for an attack on Mobile itself. By that point, they along with most of North America learned of the treaty ending the war. Indeed, the battle of New Orleans is famous because it was fought after the two sides signed the Treaty of Ghent in Belgium on December 24, 1814, before news of the treaty reached New Orleans; in fact, news of Jackson's victory and news of the treaty reached Washington, DC, at the same time, convincing many Americans incorrectly that the victory meant the U.S. had won the war; it made Jackson a national hero (and later President).

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#### FURTHER READING:

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