

The Battle of Pensacola (1814)

The 1814 Battle of Pensacola was not much of a military engagement, more skirmish than full-fledged battle, but the strategic implications make it one of the more important later battles in the latter stages of the War of 1812. Pensacola was the second oldest city in Spanish Florida, although with a population of 1000 it was little more than a settlement. Located on the north end of Pensacola Bay, the community was protected by a fort (Fort San Miguel) within the city and another on Santa Rosa Island, Fort San Carlos de Barrancas (which fronted the Gulf), providing a most strategic location for control and protection of the upper Gulf. After General Andrew Jackson's route of the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend in Alabama, Pensacola became home to nearly a thousand sick and starving Red Stick Indians. As Jackson targeted Pensacola the British established a presence in the area in late August 1814 under Major Edward Nicolls and two hundred Royal Marines. They occupied Pensacola without full cooperation and endorsement of Spanish governor Don Mateo Gonzalez Manrique. Clearly the British hoped to maintain strategic control of the Gulf region from Pensacola and from their arrival bullied the Spanish with threats of destruction if they aided the Americans in any form. The British and Nicolls unsuccessfully raided Mobile in September after which Spanish authorities ceased any cooperation with the occupying force. Against this setting Jackson and an army of some 4000 men initiated an attack on November 7.

After Horseshoe Bend (March 27), Jackson aimed to remove British presence in north Florida and sought approval of his plan to take Pensacola. Secretary of War James Monroe sent orders for the General to stay away, as Washington feared drawing Spain into the war, but these orders arrived too late to thwart the aggressive Jackson who commanded a regular army of four infantry battalions. After the arrival of volunteers under General John Coffee the Americans moved towards Pensacola. After two aborted attempts at reaching a peace accord with the Spanish, Jackson sent 500 troops in a feinting move on the western side of Pensacola but moved the majority of his army to attack Fort San Miguel from the east. The Spanish force of 500 men was quickly overwhelmed and Governor Manrique quickly surrendered, hoping to spare the city. The battle toll was light—7 Americans killed and 11 wounded against 15 Spanish casualties. Hearing of the approach of the American army and getting no cooperation from the Spanish, the British had simply abandoned Fort San Carlos on Santa Rosa Island on November 7-8 and sailed away on six British warships anchored off the coast.

With one swift and relatively uneventful maneuver Jackson had achieved great success, stymied British activity and intrigue in Florida, eliminated any hope of British-Spanish cooperation in the region, and effectively removed any Spanish threat against the American army. From Pensacola Jackson's army would advance to New Orleans by year's end where the war ended in January 1815. Of no consequence militarily, the Battle of Pensacola was an overwhelming strategic success for Jackson and the American nation.

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FURTHER READING:

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