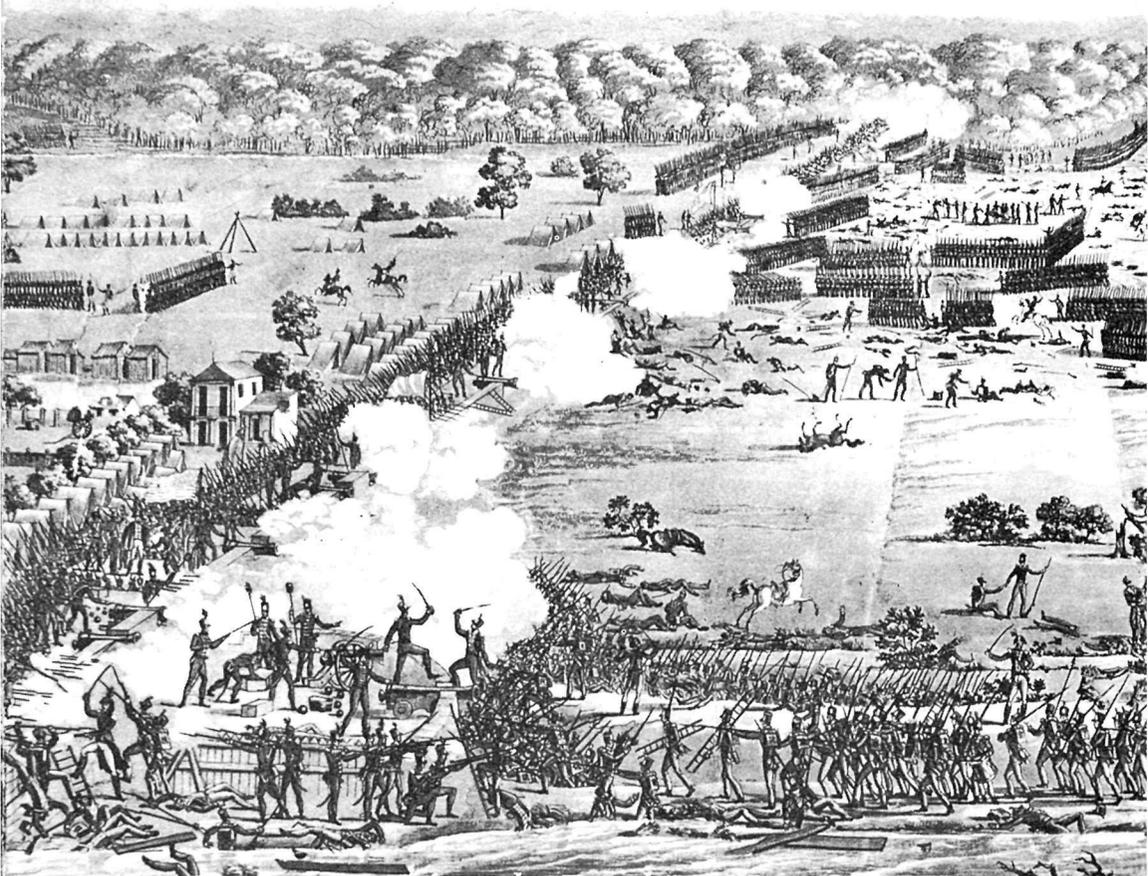
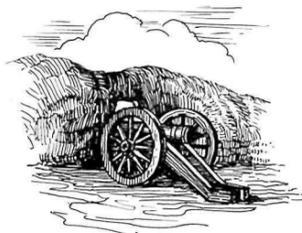


Chalmette

NATIONAL HISTORICAL
PARK ☆ ☆ LOUISIANA



Commemorating the Battle of New Orleans



Chalmette

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Scene of the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 where Gen. Andrew Jackson won from the British the greatest American land victory of the War of 1812

At dawn on January 8, 1815, the last major battle of the War of 1812 was fought on the fields of Chalmette plantation. Here, 5,400 British and 4,000 American troops struggled for possession of the nearby city of New Orleans. This rich commercial port was so situated geographically that the force which held it would also control the mouth of the Mississippi River.

This mighty river in 1815 was the major route into the back parts of the American west of that day. Control of the river by a foreign power would have seriously threatened the economic well-being of the whole Mississippi Valley and would have made westward expansion of the new Nation difficult, if not impossible.

Pitted against the crack troops of the British army was a motley group of Tennesseans, Kentuckians, Mississippians, Creoles, Indians, Negroes, sailors, pirates, and a handful of regular soldiers. Seldom, if ever, has a British force of recognized valor, proven ability, and numerical superiority met such an overwhelming defeat at the hands of a force of irregulars.

The victory at New Orleans had profound effects upon American history. It saved New Orleans from conquest and made the Missis-

sippi an American river, thus opening the way for westward expansion. It increased the new Nation's prestige in world affairs. It gave Americans confidence in their military prowess and encouraged the growth of national feeling and unity in the United States. It made a popular hero of Andrew Jackson and did much to stamp the effects of frontier democracy upon the American social and political order.

An important sidelight to the battle is that it was fought *after* the peace treaty was signed at Ghent on December 24, 1814—a fact not known in the United States at the time of the battle, nor for some weeks after. Because the peace treaty was already signed, it might appear that the battle had little immediate significance. But this was not so. It was fought *before* hostilities were officially ended by ratification of the treaty in February 1815. Because the battle was a decisive victory for the United States, it hastened ratification of the treaty and assured that the Mississippi Valley was saved for the United States.

Since the War of 1812, Britain and the United States have been at peace with one another and their joint presence on fields of combat has been as comrades in arms.

Moving Toward War

The War of 1812 grew out of discontent with English maritime policies stretching back a decade or more. President Thomas Jefferson had barely avoided war during his two terms from 1801 to 1809. His successor, James Madison, was pushed toward war by a group of young Westerners in Congress called "War Hawks." They were eager to put an end to Britain's search and seizure of American ships and her impressment of American seamen. They believed that war with Britain would profit the West and make it possible for the United States to conquer and annex Canada.

Pressure for war increased when, after many protests, Britain continued to interfere with American commerce. Diplomacy apparently had failed and war was the only alternative for the proud young Nation. Unaware of a last-minute concession by Britain, the United States declared war on June 18, 1812.

The New Orleans Campaign

No conclusive military actions occurred during the first year and a half of the war. The United States made several attempts to conquer Canada, but was repulsed each time. Britain could not bring her full force to bear because she was committed in a life-and-death struggle with Napoleon in Europe. However, when Napoleon was defeated in April 1814, Great Britain was able to turn her mighty war machine toward the United States.

One of the most important parts of Britain's new war plan was the proposal to capture New Orleans and gain control of the Mississippi Valley. This would have effectively hemmed in the youthful Nation and prevented its further expansion.

The British Advance

Jamaica in the West Indies was selected as the rendezvous for the New Orleans cam-



Andrew Jackson. Painted from life in 1817 by Samuel Lovett Waldo. Courtesy, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

paign. There a fleet of troopships from England was joined by the expeditionary force which had recently taken Washington and attacked Fort McHenry at Baltimore. The combined force sailed from Jamaica under command of Adm. Alexander Cochrane and Gen. John Keane. By December 9, 1814, they had arrived off the Louisiana coast.

The British approach to New Orleans was made by way of Lake Borgne, a shallow arm of the Gulf of Mexico. On December 14, after a brief but sharp engagement, British barges captured five small American gunboats which were guarding the water approaches to the city.

With Lake Borgne cleared of resistance, the British troops began transporting themselves across its waters in small boats to the mouth of Bayou Bienvenue, the entrance to an unguarded route to the Mississippi River and New Orleans. During the night of December 22–23, British advance forces penetrated Bayous Bienvenue and Mazant to a point on the Mississippi River, 9 miles below New Orleans. They pushed upriver toward the city during the daylight hours of the 23d.

Then, spreading over the Villeré, Lacoste, and the De La Ronde plantations, they set up camp for the night. If they had advanced immediately upon the city, very probably they would have taken it, because New Orleans at that time possessed no organized line of defense against an attack from this direction.

Jackson's Night Attack of December 23

Meanwhile, General Jackson, commanding the military district which included Louisiana, had arrived in New Orleans on December 2, 1814. He immediately called upon the diverse elements that then made up the population of New Orleans to support his regulars and Tennessee militia. There had scarcely been time for this when early in the afternoon of December 23, Jackson learned that the enemy was encamped at the Villeré plantation, virtually on the outskirts of the city. Arriving unexpectedly along a poorly guarded route, the British had caught the Americans completely by surprise.

Upon receiving news of the British approach, Jackson decided on a bold move. In a fierce night attack he struck the British in camp on the very date of their arrival. He sent Gen. John Coffee's brigade far to the left in a flanking movement. To keep his main army between the enemy and the city, Jackson moved it parallel with the river to attack the British.

The British were caught completely off guard. For several hours they were unable to restore order. Darkness and fog closed in, making it hard for the troops to identify one another. Shouts in the night from the two English-speaking armies made it even more difficult to distinguish friend from foe. About midnight Jackson began meeting increased resistance from the British, who had managed by this time to restore some order to their units. Jackson then ordered his



Gen. Edward M. Pakenham. From a lithograph after an original portrait in England.

men to withdraw, fearing that his force and General Coffee's brigade would mistake each other for the enemy should they meet in the darkness.

Later Jackson wrote that if the British had arrived a few days sooner, or if the Americans had failed to strike at once, quite probably the invaders would have taken New Orleans.

First British Attack: December 28

Jackson withdrew his forces to the Rodriguez Canal, an abandoned millrace some 15 feet wide. It separated the Chalmette and Macarty plantations. Along this ditch he ordered his men to throw up a rampart strong enough to withstand the British fire. Using whatever materials were available—fence rails, posts, wooden kegs, and mud—the men erected a defensive rampart, irregular in thickness and height, but shoulder high along most of the line. The rampart, about a mile long, occupied a most fortunate position—a neck of dry land between the Mississippi River and an impassable swamp. (Some 800 feet of this American line is no longer visible, having been washed away by the river.)

On Christmas Day, 1814, Gen. Sir Edward M. Pakenham, distinguished soldier and brother-in-law of the Duke of Wellington, arrived to take command of the British army. Knowing that delay could favor only the Americans, he ordered an attack on December 28. He divided his forces into two columns, one near the river and the other near the swamp, and set them in motion toward the American line.

The British approached the American line across the flat, open canefields of the Chalmette plantation. At any other season the cane would have afforded some cover for the advancing troops. But it was winter and the cane had been cut, leaving only short stubble. Thus not only were the attackers deprived of protection, but their footing was made difficult by the sharp stubble.

The American sloop *Louisiana* eased downriver and began firing into the nearest British column. However, the British continued

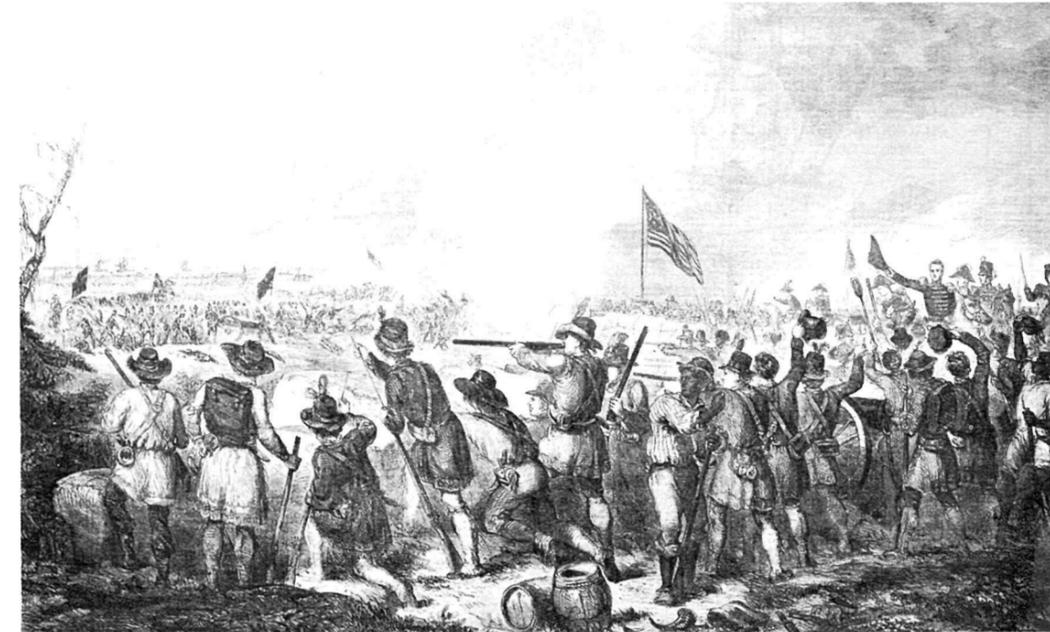
their advance until fire from batteries of artillery behind the American line, combined with that of the *Louisiana*, forced the column near the river to withdraw. When the commander of the British column near the swamp saw that he had no support on his left, he too called off his attack.

Second British Attack: January 1

Pakenham decided that he must silence the American artillery if he was ever to get his troops into combat with the Americans without heavy losses. Moreover, the British troops faced a formidable rampart before they could close with the Americans in hand-to-hand fighting. To silence the American guns and to break through this rampart, Pakenham brought up heavy artillery from the fleet and ordered a battery erected about 700 yards from the American line.

On the morning of New Year's Day, 1815, the British began a terrific fire accompanied

The Battle of New Orleans, January 8, 1815. Reproduction of a woodcut by John Andrew (1815–75). Though inaccurate in many respects, this illustration captures the spirit of the battle and shows the mixed nature of Jackson's army.



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