

## The War of 1812

**The War of 1812** was fought between the United States and Great Britain from June 1812 to the spring of 1815, although the peace treaty ending the war was signed in Europe in December 1814. The main land fighting of the war occurred along the Canadian border, in the Chesapeake Bay region, and along the Gulf of Mexico; extensive action also took place at sea.

### Background

From the end of the American Revolution in 1783, the United States had been irritated by the failure of the British to withdraw from American territory along the Great Lakes; their backing of the Indians on America's frontiers; and their unwillingness to sign commercial agreements favorable to the United States.

American resentment grew during the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), in which Britain and France were the main combatants.

In time, France came to dominate much of the continent of Europe, while Britain remained supreme on the seas. The two powers also fought each other commercially: Britain attempted to blockade the continent of Europe, and France tried to prevent the sale of British goods in French possessions. During the 1790's, French and British maritime policies produced several crises with the United States, but after 1803 the difficulties became much more serious. The British Orders in Council of 1807 tried to channel all neutral trade to continental Europe through Great Britain, and France's Berlin and Milan decrees of 1806 and 1807 declared Britain in a state of blockade and condemned neutral shipping that obeyed British regulations. The United States believed its rights on the seas as a neutral were being violated by both nations, but British maritime policies were resented more because Britain dominated the seas. Also, the British claimed the right to take from American merchant ships any British sailors who were serving on them. Frequently, they also took Americans. This practice of impressment became a major grievance.

The United States at first attempted to change the policies of the European powers by economic means. In 1807, after the British ship *Leopard* fired on the American frigate *CHESAPEAKE*, President Thomas Jefferson urged and Congress passed an Embargo Act banning all American ships from foreign trade. The embargo failed to change British and French policies but devastated New England shipping. Later and weaker economic measures were also unsuccessful.

Failing in peaceful efforts and facing an economic depression, some Americans began to argue for a declaration of war to redeem the national honor. The Congress that was elected in 1810 and met in November 1811 included a group

known as the War Hawks who demanded war against Great Britain. These men were all Democratic-Republicans and mostly from the West and South. Among their leaders were John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Henry Clay of Kentucky, and Felix Grundy of Tennessee. They argued that American honor could be saved and British policies changed by an invasion of Canada. The Federalist Party, representing New England shippers who foresaw the ruination of their trade, opposed war.

Napoleon's announcement in 1810 of the revocation of his decrees was followed by British refusals to repeal their orders, and pressures for war increased. On June 18, 1812, President James Madison signed a declaration of war that Congress—with substantial opposition—had passed at his request. Unknown to Americans, Britain had finally, two days earlier, announced that it would revoke its orders.

### **Campaigns of 1812-13**

U.S. forces were not ready for war, and American hopes of conquering Canada collapsed in the campaigns of 1812 and 1813. The initial plan called for a three-pronged offensive: from Lake Champlain to Montreal; across the Niagara frontier; and into Upper Canada from Detroit. The attacks were uncoordinated, however, and all failed. In the West, General William Hull surrendered Detroit to the British in August 1812; on the Niagara front, American troops lost the Battle of Queenston Heights in October; and along Lake Champlain the American forces withdrew in late November without seriously engaging the enemy.

American frigates won a series of single-ship engagements with British frigates, and American privateers continually harried British shipping. The captains and crew of the frigates *CONSTITUTION* and *United States* became renowned throughout America. Meanwhile, the British gradually tightened a blockade around America's coasts, ruining American trade, threatening American finances, and exposing the entire coastline to British attack.

American attempts to invade Canada in 1813 were again mostly unsuccessful. There was a standoff at Niagara, and an elaborate attempt to attack Montreal by a combined operation involving one force advancing along Lake Champlain and another sailing down the Saint Lawrence River from Lake Ontario failed at the end of the year. The only success was in the West. The Americans won control of the Detroit frontier region when Oliver Hazard Perry's ships destroyed the British fleet on Lake Erie (September 10, 1813). This victory forced the British to retreat eastward from the Detroit region, and on October 5, 1813, they were overtaken and defeated at the battle of the Thames (Moraviantown) by an American army under the command of General William Henry Harrison. In this battle the great Shawnee chief Tecumseh, who had harassed the northwestern frontier since 1811, was killed fighting on the British side.

## **Campaigns of 1814**

In 1814 the United States faced complete defeat, because the British, having defeated Napoleon, began to transfer large numbers of ships and experienced troops to America. The British planned to attack the United States in three main areas; In New York, along Lake Champlain and the Hudson River in order to sever New England from the union; at New Orleans to block the Mississippi; and in Chesapeake Bay as a diversionary maneuver. The British then hoped to obtain major territorial concessions in a peace treaty. The situation was particularly serious for the United States because the country was insolvent by the fall of 1814, and in New England opponents of the war were discussing separation from the Union. The Hartford Convention that met in Connecticut in December 1814 and January 1815 stopped short of such an extreme step but suggested a number of constitutional amendments to restrict federal power.

The British appeared near success in the late summer of 1814. American resistance to the diversionary attack in Chesapeake Bay was so weak, that the British, after winning the Battle of Bladensburg (August 24), marched into Washington, D.C., and burned most of the public buildings. President Madison had to flee into the countryside. The British then turned to attack Baltimore but met stiffer resistance and were forced to retire after the American defense of Fort M'Henry, which inspired Francis Scott Key to write the words of the "Star-Spangled Banner."

In the north, about 10,000 British veterans advanced into the United States from Montreal. Only a weak American force stood between them and New York City, but on September 11, 1814, American Capt. Thomas MacDonough won the naval battle of Lake Champlain (Plattsburg Bay), destroying the British fleet. Fearing the possibility of a severed line of communications, the British army retreated into Canada.

## **Peace Treaty and the Battle of New Orleans**

In late 1814 New Orleans was home to a population of French, Spanish, African, Anglo, and Creole peoples dedicated to pursuing economic opportunism and the joys of life. It also occupied a strategic place on the map. Located just 100 miles upstream from the mouth of the Mississippi River, the Crescent City offered a tempting prize to a British military still buoyant over the burning of Washington, D.C. To capture the city, Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane fitted out a naval flotilla of more than 50 ships to transport 10,000 veteran troops from Jamaica. They were led by Sir Edward Pakenham, the 37 year old brother-in-law of the Duke of Wellington and a much decorated general officer.

For protection, the citizens of southern Louisiana looked to Major General Andrew Jackson, known to his men as "Old Hickory." Jackson arrived in New

Orleans in the late fall of 1814 and quickly prepared defenses along the city's many avenues of approach.

Meanwhile, the British armada scattered a makeshift American fleet in Lake Borgne, a shallow arm of the Gulf of Mexico east of New Orleans, and evaluated their options. Two British officers, disguised as Spanish fishermen, discovered an unguarded waterway, Bayou Bienvenue, that provided access to the east bank of the Mississippi River barely nine miles downstream from New Orleans. On December 23 the British vanguard poled its way through a maze of sluggish streams and traversed marshy land to emerge unchallenged an easy day's march from their goal.

Two American officers, whose plantations had been commandeered by the British, informed Jackson that the enemy was at the gate. "Gentlemen, the British are below, we must fight the tonight," the general declared. He quickly launched a nighttime surprise attack that, although tactically a draw, gained valuable time for the outnumbered Americans. Startled by their opponents' boldness, the British decided to defer their advance toward New Orleans until all their troops could be brought in from the fleet.

Old Hickory used this time well. He retreated three miles to the Chalmette Plantation on the banks of the Rodriguez Canal, a wide, dry ditch that marked the narrowest strip of solid land between the British camps and New Orleans. Here Jackson built a fortified mud rampart, 3/5 mile long and anchored on its right by the Mississippi River and on the left by an impassable cypress swamp.

While the Americans dug in, General Pakenham readied his attack plans. On December 28 the British launched a strong advance that Jackson repulsed with the help of the Louisiana, an American ship that blasted the British left flank with broadsides from the river. Four days later Pakenham tried to bombard the Americans into submission with an artillery barrage, but Jackson's gunners stood their ground.

The arrival of fresh troops during the first week of January 1815 gave the British new hope. Pakenham decided to cross the Mississippi downstream with a strong force and overwhelm Jackson's thin line of defenders on the river bank opposite the Rodriguez Canal. Once these redcoats were in position to pour flank fire across the river, heavy columns would assault each flank of the American line, then pursue the insolent defenders six miles into the heart of New Orleans. Units carrying fascines – bundled sticks used to construct fortifications – and ladders to bridge the ditch and scale the ramparts would precede the attack, which would begin at dawn January 8 to take advantage of the early morning fog.

It was a solid plan in conception, but flawed in execution. The force on the west bank was delayed crossing the river and did not reach its goal until well after dawn. Deprived of their misty cover, the main British columns had no choice but

to advance across the open fields toward the Americans, who waited expectantly behind their mud and cotton-bale barricades. To make matter worse, the British forgot their ladders and fascines, so they had no easy means to close with the protected Americans.

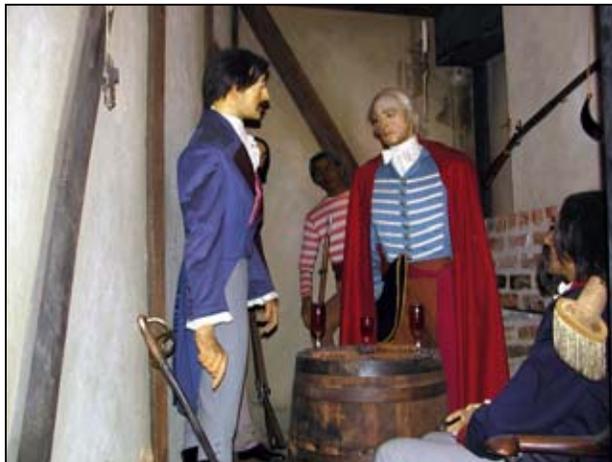
Never has a more polyglot army fought under the Stars and Stripes than did Jackson's force at the Battle of New Orleans. In addition to his regular U.S. Army units, Jackson counted on dandy New Orleans militia, a sizable contingent of black former Haitian slaves fighting as free men of color, Kentucky and Tennessee frontiersmen armed with deadly long rifles and a colorful band of Jean Lafitte's outlaws, whose men Jackson had once disdained as "hellish banditti." This hodgepodge of 4,000 soldiers, crammed behind narrow fortifications, faced more than twice their number.

Pakenham's assault was doomed from the beginning. His men made perfect targets as they marched precisely across a quarter mile of open ground. Hardened veterans of the Peninsular Campaign in Spain fell by the score, including nearly 80 percent of a splendid Scottish Highlander unit that tried to march obliquely across the American front. Both of Pakenham's senior generals were shot early in the battle, and the commander himself suffered two wounds before a shell severed an artery in his leg, killing him in minutes. His successor wisely disobeyed Pakenham's dying instructions to continue the attack and pulled the British survivors off the field. More than 2,000 British had been killed or wounded and several hundred more were captured. The American loss was eight killed and 13 wounded.

Jackson's victory had saved New Orleans, but it came after the war was over. The Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 but resolved none of the issues that started it, had been signed in Europe weeks before the action on the Chalmette Plantation.

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Andrew Jackson planning the Battle of New Orleans – 1814.

*Pictures taken in the Musee Conti Wax Museum – 917 Conti St. in the French Quarters in New Orleans, Louisiana.*



Picture yourself standing behind the mud rampart at Chalmette with Andrew Jackson on the morning of January 8, 1815, with his command of some 4,000 Americans repulsed on onslaught of Pakenham's 5,400 British veterans and won the Battle of New Orleans

Besides the U.S. Army regulars, the buckskinned frontiersmen from Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky, Louisiana plantation owners and New Orleans businessmen, Negroes (both slaves and free men of color) and Lafitte's pirates, played a part in this victory. Seven Americans died and six were wounded.

Besides the U.S. Army regulars, the buckskinned frontiersmen from Mississippi, Tennessee, and

British losses has been estimated at 3,000 dead, wounded and captured. Pakenham himself was a victim of the murderous fire power used by the Americans. Only a few of his forces – the killed 93<sup>rd</sup> Highlanders reached the American lines. This battle was fought fifteen days after the Treaty of Ghent which ended the war of 1812. But this treaty was not a cease fire, and hostilities were to continue until the treaty would be ratified. Had Pakenham and Cochrane won at Chalmette and captured New Orleans and the, Mississippi Valley, would the British Parliament have ratified that treaty? Would the United States have retained possession of the Louisiana it bought from Napoleon? Indeed would the United States remain united? Jackson's victory settled these questions. This battle fought below New Orleans, in 1815 marked the last time the world's two great English speaking nations met in mortal battle.



The red glare of British rockets over Ft. McHenry at Baltimore, Maryland, inspired Francis Scott Key to write the American national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner", printed the day after the bombardment.

Invented by Sir William Congreve in 1803, these incendiary rockets panicked Americans forces when Washington was captured and burned in 1814.

However General Jackson warned his men of the rockets before the Battle of New Orleans, and they were not frightened.

Contrast the Congreve rocket (31– ½ inches long) with Saturn moon rockets now being built at NASA's Michoud plant – just five miles from Chalmette where rockets were launched in 1815.

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