

The Battle for New Orleans

In 1814 the war between the United States and Great Britain that had begun in 1812 was still being waged. At this point in the war the British planned to attack the United States on three fronts. Part one of the British plan was to attack the major coastal cities along the Atlantic Ocean. These cities were: Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia. On August, 1814 the British attack on Washington, D.C. was overwhelmingly successful and major buildings of the U.S. government including the Capitol Building, the White House and the Library of Congress went up in flames from fires set by British soldiers. Part of the reason that this attack was so successful is that the American military leaders had expected the British to attack Baltimore so Washington was not well defended.

In September, 1814 the British forces went confidently forward to repeat their victory at Baltimore but the American troops that weren't in Washington to defend the capital were waiting at Baltimore, some sixteen thousand strong. American forces were able to successfully defend that city and the British fleet left Chesapeake Bay in defeat and did not continue with their plan to attack the other cities.

Part two of the British plan was to penetrate into New York State from Canada by coming across Lake Champlain. The British reasoned that if they controlled New York State they could isolate the New England states from the rest of the country. Once isolated, these original British colonies would be willing to return to being British subjects in the face of superior military might. This plan failed as well. The American forces were successful in driving the British forces back to Canada on August 31, 1814.

The third part of the plan was to conquer the port city of New Orleans, Louisiana. If the British could control the port of New Orleans, they could stop commerce in the southern states and the territories west of the Mississippi River. Controlling New Orleans would also give the British naval fleet access to the Mississippi River and all the land along its banks. By December, 1814 the British fleet was ready to advance on New Orleans.

The Battle for New Orleans (Cont'd)

The war was taking its toll on the United States and President James Madison. The U.S. treasury was nearly bankrupt but the President needed additional troops to continue fighting the war but men were not enlisting in the military. Drafting men, that is requiring men by law to serve in the military if they were selected, was not an option because the New England states threatened to secede from the United States if there was a draft. President Madison wanted an army of sixty thousand but he could only muster thirty thousand. The feeling in the country is that an attack on New Orleans would result in a defeat for the United States.

New Orleans is a thousand miles from Washington, D.C. and any messages between the federal government and military leaders in New Orleans took ten days to arrive by messengers traveling on horseback. In late 1814 the British had fifty large warships, over ten thousand soldiers and about one thousand cannons on wheels ready to attack New Orleans.

On December 1, 1814 American General Andrew Jackson, whose nickname was Old Hickory, arrived in New Orleans and set about strengthening defenses and identifying strategic locations that needed to be defended. To bolster his formal army of soldiers, General Jackson recruited the Louisiana militia, local frontiersmen of both French and Spanish heritage, local Choctaw Indians, African Americans and Creoles. Creoles were Louisiana natives with a mixed American, Spanish and French background. General Jackson even accepted the assistance of pirates who were under the command of Jean Laffite. On December 23, twenty-five hundred volunteers from Tennessee arrived. The British called this oddball army "dirty shirts."

The British fleet arrived and faced the huge task of getting their men and supplies to shore in the swampy area around New Orleans. The British had to row everything to shore. British General John Keane assembled two thousand men and supplies on shore and camped just seven miles from the city of New Orleans.

Jackson ordered his men to attack the camp during the night gaining a psychological victory over the British by a surprise attack. On Christmas Day, 1814 both armies moved into place for battle. The first attack occurred on January 1, 1815 when the British fired their cannons on the American defenses and American cannon returned fire. After a three-hour battle the British retreated.

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The Battle for New Orleans (Cont'd)

On January 8 more British troops had arrived at the battleground and the commanding general attacked the American defenses. But British General Pakenham used the traditional method of fighting that had successfully defeated Napoleon in France just a short while before. The British troops marched toward their enemy in straight column ranks, firing muskets when they approached the enemy. Jackson's army of sharpshooters were perched high on defended walls and were able to easily shoot the advancing British soldiers who were marching across open terrain. This was a complete victory for the American troops.

On February 4, 1815 a messenger arrived by ship from Europe with the news that American and British negotiators had signed a peace treaty in Ghent, Belgium on December 24, 1814. The War of 1812 was over.

Name _____

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The Battle for New Orleans Questions

Circle True or False after analyzing each of the following statements.

1. True False In 1814 the British attempt at conquering New York State was successful.
2. True False If the British could control New Orleans they could prevent commerce in the southern United States.
3. True False The Mississippi River was too shallow to allow the British navy to sail on the river.
4. True False In 1814 President Madison was able to raise all the troops he needed to fight the war with the British.
5. True False The New England states were in favor of drafting citizen into the army to fight in the War of 1812.
6. True False The British troops and supplies brought in to attack New Orleans were much larger than the American troops and supplies available for defending the city.
7. True False General Jackson's army was called the "dirty shirts" by the British.
8. True False General Jackson gained a psychological advantage over the British with a surprise attack at night.
9. True False The British used the same military technique at the Battle of New Orleans that defeated Napoleon in France and defeated the Americans at the Battle of New Orleans.
10. True False If communications had been faster in 1814, the Battle of New Orleans would have not occurred.

Name _____

Date _____

The Battle for New Orleans Answers

1. False
2. True
3. False
4. False
5. False
6. True
7. True
8. True
9. False
10. True