



Jackson's battle jacket and portrait in jacket circa 1820



Battle of New Orleans

Honoring the bicentennial

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JAN. 8, 1815: A HEAVY FOG greeted British Gen. Sir Edward Pakenham when he awoke after midnight in the commandeered plantation home of future Gov. Jacques Villere, downriver from the battle line of U.S. Gen. Andrew Jackson. Sir Edward's day would get much worse.

For the 2-year-old state of Louisiana and the United States, however, the Battle of

New Orleans would be a day of glory, remembered for the deeds of a patchwork army that saved the central third of the nation – a story whose bicentennial year is being celebrated by thousands who'll visit the battlefield, attend celebrations and witness the re-enactments and special exhibits.

The factors that had led Pakenham to the "Plain of

Chalmette" were irreconcilable differences on an international scale: trade restrictions and impressment of U.S. seamen, which had prompted the declaration of war against Great Britain in 1812 and attacks on British strongholds in Canada. That got the Brits thinking about invading New Orleans and the Mississippi Valley with the dual purpose of diverting

U.S. forces from Canada and (yikes!) nullifying the Louisiana Purchase. The Duke of Wellington's February 1814 victory in Napoleon's Peninsular War freed England to turn its full attention to the little war in the United States, and by that August the U.S. Capitol and White House were in flames, and the invasion force was well on its way to Louisiana.

By Sept. 3 British Capt. Nicholas Lockyer was visiting Barataria to buy the assistance of "Buccaneer" Jean Laffite, who instead would offer his allegiance to Gen. Jackson.

After defeating Britain's longtime Indian allies in the 1813-14 Creek Indian War, then detouring to Mobile Bay to prepare it for attack, Jackson arrived in New Orleans on Dec. 1 to begin blocking potential land and water routes to the city. As Eisenhower credited the landing crafts of New Orleans Andrew Jackson Higgins with winning World War II, Jackson would owe his gratitude to a steamboat for completing his long list of battle preparations before the British attack.

On Dec. 14 Capt. Henry Miller Shreve steamed down with a load of cannons and munitions aboard the *Enterprise*, boasting powerful boilers and shallow hull of his own design (more practical than Fulton's on shallow rivers), and Jackson immediately gave Shreve the duty of transporting necessities to downriver positions (including a 60-mile run past enemy batteries to Ft. St. Philip). Next came the delivery of artillery and supplies to Chalmette itself, after which Shreve would request a place on the battle line and perform artillery service on a 24-pounder near the river.

The British fleet arrived Dec. 12 and disgorged its troops on Pea Island near Pearl River, then launched 45 troop-laden longboats (armed with powerful "carronades") to Lake Borgne, adjacent to Lake Pontchartrain. On Dec. 14 after 36 hours of rowing,



Jackson's line today

those vessels were met by the five small gunboats of U.S. Lt. Thomas Jones – a hopeless defense but one that would scuttle three British vessels and delay the landing for two hours before the tiny U.S. flotilla was captured.

With Lake Borgne secure the longboats began delivering troops in waves of 2,000, and on Dec. 23 an advance party of 1,800 followed the narrow Bayou Bienvenu and Villere Canal to the Villere plantation, where 30 officers including Villere's son Gabriel were captured. Young Major Villere escaped and alerted Jackson, whose immediate attack prevented a British advance on the city, after which the Americans regrouped at the Rodriguez Canal (stretching from the river across the "plain" to a dense swamp, destined to be Jackson's ultimate line of defense).

While Pakenham waited 13 days for his artillery to be boated up Bayou Bienvenu, Jackson was assembling U.S.

regulars, Tennessee and Kentucky militiamen, New Orleans volunteers, Choctaws, free men of color and Laffite's Baratarians into a sort of army as the frenzied labors of widening and fortifying the canal continued night and day.

Laffite fully expected to join his brother Pierre, half-brother Renato Beluche on the battle line, but on Jackson's orders went to the west bank to help establish artillery positions. Days earlier Pierre had fought in the night battle of Dec. 23 before being assigned as an assistant to Gen. John Coffee, whose Kentuckians would man the battle line near the swamp.

When the battle began on Jan. 8 a British force was to cross to the west bank, capture U.S. artillery and turn those guns on Jackson, while Pakenham's four-prong attack advanced toward the Rodriguez Canal. Despite a major delay with the river crossing, Pakenham launched his attack at 3 a.m., moving

forward as the West Bank guns blasted gaps in his columns. Equipment for crossing the canal and mounting Jackson's fortification had been misdirected, so the main thrust led by Gen. Samuel Gibbs (alongside the swamp) faltered at Jackson's line while being shot to pieces. Pakenham sent the 93rd Highlanders across the field to assist Gibbs, but Gibbs was dead, 825 of the 950 Highlanders fell while crossing the field, and Pakenham himself died while taking personal command in front of Coffee's guns. The left-flank prong on the river side found no kinder fate, and Gen. John Lambert at mid-field, now the ranking officer, wisely ordered an overall withdrawal.

British warships continued to swap artillery fire with downriver Ft. St. Philip until Jan. 19, then withdrew to join the fleet which departed that day bearing all survivors to friendlier climes.

Jackson remained at Chalmette until his triumphant



return to New Orleans on Jan. 23, with all the predictable speechmaking and celebrations, and attended a thanksgiving service at St. Louis Cathedral. Remaining in the city until he received confirmation that the war had ended with the ratification of the Treaty of Ghent by Congress and Parliament, he departed for Nashville on April 6 with members of his Tennessee and Kentucky units. While passing through then undivided Feliciana Parish (source of many volunteers), the entourage camped along Thompson Creek near the site of the brand new parish seat, to be named Jackson. A few miles

west, above St. Francisville, the general was welcomed as guest of Judge Thomas Butler in the 1795 plantation home called the Cottage, now a B&B, (225) 635-3674. The Battle of New Orleans Bicentennial Commission, hosted by the Office of Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne, has forged a grand calendar of events utilizing the facilities and personnel of the National Park Service, Parish of St. Bernard, City of New Orleans and Louisiana State Museum. Re-enactors “recruited” by the Louisiana Living History Foundation and U.S. 7th Infantry Living History Association will re-create the battle and other

scenes Jan. 7-10, with all events listed at nps.gov/jela/chalmette-battlefield.htm. At the battlefield stands the 100-foot-tall and 100-year-old Chalmette National Monument, begging to be climbed, and the new (post-Katrina) Interpretive Center offers a dramatic film plus relics and replicas enhanced by creative audio and lighting techniques. Other landmarks related to the battle include the ruins of the De La Ronde mansion in the median of St. Bernard Hwy. – used as British headquarters, where Pakenham’s body was taken after the battle – the Gator Country (souvenir shop) building at 106 Royal St., used as Jackson’s headquarters in the Vieux Carré, and the famed Clark Mills equestrian statue of the general unveiled in Jackson Square in 1856. The 1753 Old Ursuline Convent at 106 Royal St., setting of a prayer vigil on the eve of battle, is presenting a “Praying for a Miracle” exhibit that includes an original bust posed for by Gen. Jackson, and this year as always the nuns will host a special Mass in gratitude for the victory, 4 p.m. on Jan. 8 at Ursuline Academy, 2635 State St.

The State Museum is offering “From Dirty Shirts to Buccaneers: The Battle of New Orleans in American Culture,” a Cabildo exhibit featuring uniforms, portraits, weaponry, sweeping battle-field paintings and Baratarian treasures like a ship’s compass and octant for navigation. The centerpiece, however, is the combined impact of Jackson’s battle jacket (from the Smithsonian, its first visit to New Orleans since 1815) and a circa-1820 portrait of Jackson wearing that jacket!

Visit the Historic New Orleans Collection, 533 Royal St., to see “Andrew Jackson, Hero of New Orleans,” a stunning display illustrating Jackson’s life from the Creek Indian War and Battle of New Orleans to his 25th-anniversary return to New Orleans in 1840: personal items like eyeglasses and beaver hat, plus items reflecting his impact on the nation, from images on medallions and ceramics to condemnations and scathing caricatures printed by his detractors. In Baton Rouge, the Capitol Park Museum’s “Revolution: the Atlantic World Reborn” views the “single global narrative” of the American, French and Haitian revolutions, all significant to the story of the War of 1812. If the Bicentennial of the Battle of New Orleans has a single theme it is that striving for a common goal can meld a mélange of mankind like Andy’s army into a unified citizenry, even transforming regions with diverse issues and agendas into a unified nation. Well worth celebrating! ■

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