

Lesson Forty-Six

Andrew Jackson

LESSON IDEA

To describe how superior leadership won the final battle of the War of 1812 against the most powerful and professional army England could assemble.

PREPARATION

Make a copy the map on page three for each family member, and also have available a copy of the "time line" listed in the "During The Week" section.

"NO PERSONS will be permitted to leave the city No vessels, boats or other craft will be permitted to leave Street lamps shall be extinguished at the hour of nine at night, after which time persons of every description found in the streets, or not in their respective homes ... shall be apprehended as spies." Such were the orders issued to citizens of New Orleans in December 1814 as General Andrew Jackson prepared to defend the city against British invasion.

Between 9,000 and 10,000 English troops were sailing toward New Orleans at that moment. Many had fought against Napoleon. They were ready for battle and confident of victory. Their commanders had already drawn up plans for governing the rich seaport at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Appointments had been made at every level of government, from customs collector to governor. A victory celebration had been planned, and many officers' wives — adorned in satin gowns, jewels, and plumed hats — accompanied the invading fleet in anticipation of the festive social life that awaited in New Orleans.

Two of England's top generals — John Keane and Sir Edward Pakenham (brother-in-law of the famous Wellington who defeated Napoleon) were to lead the invasion army. Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane commanded the 50-ship fleet and its 2,000 sailors. Do you remember Admiral Cochrane from our lesson about Baltimore and Washington? [Remind family members of Cochrane's hatred for Americans, his command of the forces that burned and sacked our nation's capital in August 1814, and his bombardment of Fort McHenry.] England was sending one of the most powerful and elite forces ever assembled to capture New Orleans and punish the American "savages."



Andrew Jackson

As commanding general of the U.S. southern forces, General Jackson was assigned to defend the resource rich and strategically crucial seaport. His patchwork army was comprised of backwoodsmen from Kentucky and Tennessee; clerks, merchants, and bookkeepers from New Orleans; a battalion of freed slaves; a small unit of Choctaw Indians; and some veterans from Napoleon's armies. One of the many problems he faced was where to position his men. There were more approaches to the city than they could guard. The surrounding area was laced with winding, sluggish waterways called bayous. Any pro-British native familiar with the back country could guide the enemy from the Gulf of Mexico to New

Orleans by any number of secret routes.

To preclude this possibility, Jackson ordered that every bayou deep enough to float a barge be barricaded with trees. And to keep British ships

from sailing up the Mississippi River, he reinforced Fort St. Philip and positioned a flotilla of five gunboats as lookouts on Lake Borgne east of New Orleans. [Distribute copies of the map on page three and ask family members to locate the various sites.]

On December 9, 1814 the British fleet arrived at the Gulf of Mexico. The plan entailed taking control of Lake Borgne and establishing an invasion headquarters on one of its small northern islands.

LIEUTENANT THOMAS JONES, commander of the American gunboats guarding Lake Borgne, sent Jackson a warning message, then attempted to slip away unnoticed. But the British gave chase and forced a fight. Even though the American flotilla was hopelessly outmanned and out-gunned, Jones fought valiantly. When his five boats were finally surrounded, boarded, and captured, the Americans counted six dead and 35 wounded, while the British tallied over 300 casualties. In the wake of the fierce battle and heavy casualties, British commanders became more cautious, buying valuable time for Jackson to prepare his defenses. [Ask family members to keep this key point in mind, and consider the effect that immediate surrender by Jones might have had on the ultimate outcome of the battle for New Orleans.]

Jackson now knew where the British were, and that their most likely route of attack would be Chef Menteur Road east of the city. He did not know, however, that contrary to his orders the Bayou Bienvenu south of New Orleans had been left undefended. Despite the precautions taken to prevent information from leaving the city, that important intelligence soon reached the British.

Confident that a lightning attack on New Orleans from the Bayou Bienvenu would catch Jackson off guard and force an immediate surrender, General Keane and about 1,800 troops set out for the undefended waterway. The plantation of Major General Jacques de Villere, head of the Louisiana militia, was captured with little resistance, but the general's son escaped by leaping over a low fence while bullets whistled by his head. He then hurried to New Orleans with the electrifying news, which confirmed a report that Jackson had just received from another intelli-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Detailed accounts of Jackson's New Orleans victory may be found in *Andrew Jackson, The Border Captain* by Marquis James, and *The War Of 1812* by Francis F. Beirne. Both books are out-of-print, but should be available at most public libraries.

gence source.

A cautious general might have waited until morning, since his troops were spread over a wide area and it was impossible to muster them and reach the Villere plantation before nightfall. A less decisive commander might have waited to see if the small English force on the bayou was merely a clever ruse to draw his troops away from the main assault likely to come from the Chef Menteur Road. But Jackson was neither cautious nor indecisive. His instincts told him to meet the enemy at the bayou.

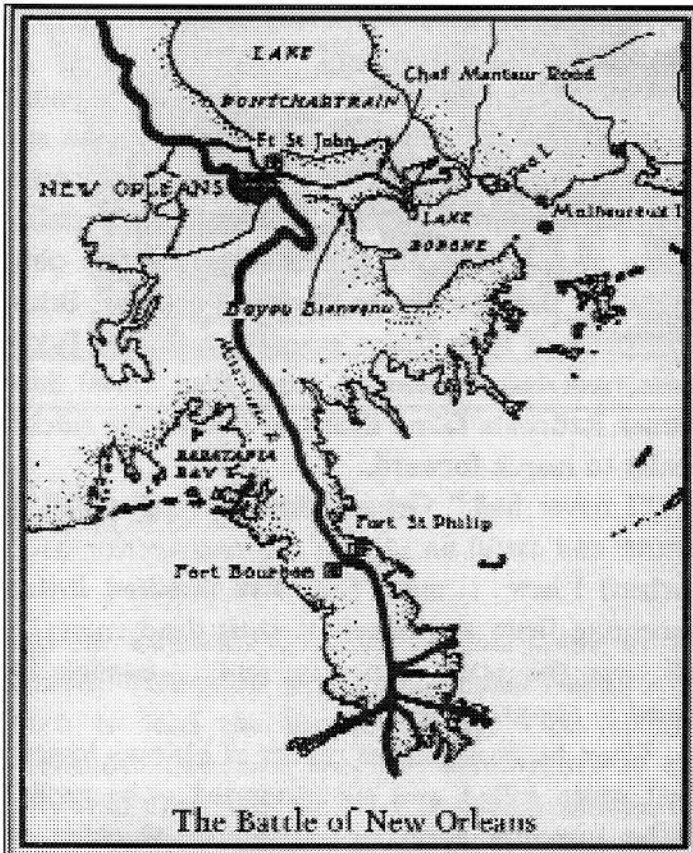
"Gentlemen," he calmly told his officers, "the British are below; we must fight them tonight."

WITHIN TWO HOURS Jackson was in the saddle, leading a force of over 2,000 men down the river road to the Villere plantation. On the Mississippi, to the army's right, the schooner *Carolina* drifted with the current toward the same destination.

At their plantation headquarters, the British talked of entering New Orleans the next day as conquerors. The possibility of attack by the American was never considered. Officers who recalled the rout of U.S. forces at Bladensburg, during the British march on Washington, advised their superiors that the Americans were only capable of speedy retreat when fired upon.

As Jackson's troops silently encircled the unsuspecting Redcoats, cannon fire from the *Carolina* began descending on the camp, sending the British veterans scurrying for their weapons. Jackson waited quietly for about 30 minutes, to entice the British into believing that only the schooner posed a threat. Then, with enemy fire concentrated on the *Carolina*, the order to attack was given. Bewildered British troops were caught so completely by surprise that they were nearly routed by the Americans.

After two hours of bloody hand-to-hand combat in darkness and fog, Jackson called off his men. He suspected that British reinforcements would



sharpshooters fired into their camp. Fearing that every outburst of gunfire was a prelude to another all-out attack, the Redcoats spent most of the night jumping from bed to battle columns. The following morning their plight worsened, as the American gunners were uncannily accurate. Jackson patrolled the line, shouting words of encouragement, turning back panic-stricken militiamen who broke ranks, and ordering reinforcements to cover weak positions. He seemed to have superhuman strength, yet was actually in poor health. He suffered from dysentery, and periodic chest pains so agonizing that he sometimes had to bend over with his chest pressed against something solid until the attack passed. He had eaten little more than boiled rice for months, and was at times so weak that he could neither stand nor even sit. Yet his immense will kept him going and seemed to infuse his troops with energy. How many men do you know who would serve their country under such physical strain? What does this tell us about Jackson's character? [Encourage discussion.]

soon arrive, and knew that little more could be accomplished. It was time to withdraw and set up the line of defense for New Orleans.

The supposedly invincible English, dazed and disheartened, suffered further serious casualties, losing 277 men in the battle (46 killed, 167 wounded, and 64 taken prisoner). One of the prisoners was Major Mitchell, who had applied the torch to the Capitol building in Washington. Instead of a lightning attack on New Orleans, the Redcoats were forced to revise their plans, opting instead to move more slowly and bring up their cannon. They would have to knock out the *Carolina* if they hoped to advance further.

Jackson dropped back two miles and dug in at the Rodriguez Canal, a narrow strip of land bounded by the Mississippi River on the west and swampland on the east. If the British tried to move toward New Orleans, they would first have to breach this fortification.

BY DECEMBER 27TH the English had blown up the *Carolina*, advanced to within a few hundred yards of the American line, and positioned their cannon for an early morning attack. Throughout the night, however, American

The British, now commanded by the popular and able General Pakenham, nearly broke through the left side of the American line on December 28th. But at the critical moment, the schooner *Louisiana* opened fire from its position on the Mississippi, ripping the Redcoat infantry to shreds. Pakenham ordered a general retreat.

Four days later (January 1, 1815), the English attempted a frontal assault with heavy siege guns. Again they took a beating from Jackson's own gunners.

Pakenham decided that a new tactic was needed. Having attacked the American left and center without success, he planned an assault on the right. Troops were to be sent across the Mississippi to seize the American batteries upstream. The batteries were then to be turned against Jackson's own troops, from behind the lines, as the British infantry began its frontal assault. As one phase of the strategy, Colonel Thornton was ordered to dig a canal connecting the Bayou Bienvenu with the Mississippi. Construction took six days, but when it was finished Thornton realized that he had only half the boats that were needed. To compound the problem, walls of the new channel caved in, miring boats in the mud. Once freed, they were caught by

the swift current and carried several miles below the designated landing point.

Unaware of Thornton's problems, Pakenham assumed that all was going according to plan and, without waiting for the confirming signal, marched his troops straight toward the American fortifications. Jackson's gunners and sharpshooters methodically cut them to shreds. In record time, the British lost three of their major generals (including Pakenham) and left more than 2,000 dead on the battlefield. Some Redcoats faked death to escape the suicidal order to march forward.

General Jackson later recalled, "I never had so grand and awful an idea of the resurrection as (when) I saw ... more than five hundred Britons emerging from the heaps of their dead comrades, all over the plain rising up, and ... coming forward ... as prisoners." When he received the report that his own losses were limited to seven killed and six wounded, he asserted, "The unerring hand of providence shielded my men."

The war was over, in New Orleans and elsewhere. Unknown to Jackson, a peace treaty had been signed on Christmas Eve, 1814. And the haughty nation that had threatened to "not only chastise the savages [meaning Americans] into present peace, but make a lasting impression on their fears," was humbled to see one of its most distinguished generals, John Keane, begging Jackson for the return of the sword he had lost in battle. Jackson returned the sword with this letter:

The General Commanding the American forces, having learned that Major General Kean [sic] ... has expressed a wish for . . . his sword.... feels great satisfaction in having it ordered returned to him The undersigned, feeling for the misfortunes of the brave, begs that Genl Kean [sic] will be assured of his wishes for his speedy restoration.

Concluding Thought

The Battle of New Orleans proved an important point to Americans, and to the European nations who were closely watching the events of 1812-1815. The fledgling nation had produced leaders who could defeat Europe's finest professional soldiers despite heavy, unfavorable odds. The United

States was no longer an unknown quantity. It had shown itself to be a potential powerhouse.

DURING THE WEEK

Review major events of the War of 1812 and urge family members to memorize the following "time line":

- 1812** War declared (June) Forts at Detroit, Dearborn, and Michillimackinac surrender (July, August)
Four American naval victories (August-December)
- 1813** Perry defeats British on Lake Erie (September)
- 1814** Capital sacked and burned (August) British defeated at Baltimore (September)
Peace treaty signed (December)
- 1815** British defeated at New Orleans (January)