

Battle of New Orleans

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Jean Lafitte National Historical Park
and Preserve
Chalmette Battlefield Unit

Important Educational Concepts

There were four main causes of the War of 1812.

Great Britain's powerful navy enforced restrictive trade rules and forcibly removed American citizens from ships on the high seas, compelling them to serve in the Royal Navy, a practice known as "impressment." "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" were the two causes most often

cited by the war's supporters.

In addition, some believed that the British were encouraging Native uprisings against American settlements in the West, while others hoped to invade Canada and make it a part of the American republic.

The British attacked New Orleans to gain control of the Mississippi River.

In a time before airplanes, cars or even trains existed to transport people and goods, waterways such as the Mississippi River were highways of commerce. Since New Orleans was the port located between the American heartland and the rest of the world, control of New Orleans

meant control of much of American trade.

For the young American nation, losing this battle didn't just mean not being able to trade freely, it threatened the very independence of the country.

The British thought it would be easy to conquer New Orleans...

New Orleans joined the United States in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase; Louisiana became a state in 1812. When the War of 1812 began, many of the Catholic citizens still thought of themselves as French or Spanish, and resented how the new Protestant, English-speaking American government changed the laws and their way of life.

Because of these cultural differences and a general lack of support for the American government, the British assumed that very few New Orleanians would take up arms to defend the city. They also hoped that local American Indians and enslaved Africans would join in and support the British.

... but it wasn't.

The British didn't think about the bad reputation they had with many groups in Louisiana. Throughout the War of 1812, the British had destroyed many towns along the east coast of the United States. Many Acadians (Cajuns) still hated the British for expelling them from their homes in formerly French Canada in the 1700s, forcing them to seek refuge in Louisiana.

Although the citizens of New Orleans did not have much culturally or historically to agree on, the British were seen as a common enemy. This simple fact wasn't much, but it was enough to rally these different groups together, allow them to set aside their differences, and enable them to fight as one.

Many different kinds of people helped defend New Orleans.

American troops included professional soldiers, sailors, and marines as well as volunteers who had fought in the recent wars with some Indian tribes. Volunteer militias came from Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Among the volunteers were free men of color, New Orleans businessmen, Creoles, Irish immigrants, Choctaw Indians, and even pirates from the swamps of Barataria who were considered outlaws.

Many of the people defending the city of New Orleans from the highly trained and well-experienced British “regulars” had never even picked up a weapon before the British invaded Louisiana.

Although many of the American troops had little training, were poorly armed, and were outnumbered, the American’s strong defensive position and knowledge of the land was enough for victory.

Civilian families were involved in the battle.

Although only men fought on the battlefield, women also contributed significantly to the war effort by making uniforms and blankets for the troops and by bringing hot meals to the damp and cold battlefield. Perhaps most importantly, women acted as medics.

Families who lived on what became the battlefield contributed their entire homes. The Americans destroyed the Chalmet family plantation so the British could not use it as a defensive position. Other buildings like the Villeré, Rodriguez and Macarty plantations were taken over as military headquarters.

The New Orleans campaign was fought both on water and on land.

The Battle of New Orleans started at Lake Borgne, about 10 miles east of Chalmette, and progressed to land downriver from Chalmette at the Villeré and Macarty plantations on December 23, 1814.

This minor skirmish on the river escalated, culminating in the major (if short) battle fought on the Chalmette plantation on the morning of January 8, 1815.

The Battle of New Orleans was the last major battle of the War of 1812...

By the time American and British forces were squaring off on the Chalmette field, British and American diplomats were already en route to Washington, D.C. with a peacy treaty.

in fact were prepared to offer the New England states a separate treaty if they seceded and re-joined Britain. However, since the Americans won the Battle of New Orleans, and the British had gained no territory, the Americans were eager to make peace. The Treaty of Ghent was ratified on February 17, 1815, and the war was finally over.

The British were not confident that the Americans would agree to their terms, and

... and changed forever how the world saw the United States, and how Americans saw themselves.

The War of 1812 changed very little about the territory or trading rights of the United States. The peace treaty in fact declared that Britain and the United States would return to the *status quo ante bellum*, or the way things were before the war broke out. But it proved to the world, and especially to Great Britain, that democratic ideas of the United States could really work.

different backgrounds could come together for a common cause.

Even more significantly, winning the Battle of New Orleans helped convince Americans themselves that people from

For the next 50 years, Americans celebrated January 8 with fireworks and parades, just like we celebrate July 4. Some people even call January 8, 1815, the real birthday of the United States. The day of the Battle of New Orleans was the day that all kinds of Americans worked together, the day that the United States won the world’s respect, and the day that the United States became truly united.