

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.

"N0 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."



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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

