

The Battles Begin

1 Although United States and British commissioners met in Ghent, Belgium, on December 24 to sign a peace treaty to end the War of 1812, the battle raged on around New Orleans. A major American victory came on New Year's Day, with British casualties outnumbering those on the United States side by more than two to one.

2 Finally, on January 8, the day commemorated today as the victory day in the Battle of New Orleans, two British generals, including Major General Pakenham, were killed in battle, with a third severely wounded. Soldiers described battlefield action as confused and haphazard in the dark hours of that foggy morning. Britain suffered over 2,000 casualties in that decisive battle, whereas General Jackson lost only 71 men. The British forces withdrew through Lake Borgne and into the Gulf, firing on Fort St. Philip for over a week before sailing out to sea for good.

Jackson's Forces

3 The First and Second Battalions of Free Men of Color, comprising over six hundred men, played an important role in the Louisiana campaign, just as free black men had during the colonial period in the service of France and Spain. Louisiana was the first state in the Union to commission a military officer of African descent, and an act passed by the Louisiana legislature in 1812 was the first in the nation to authorize a black volunteer militia with its black line officers.

4 Louisianians at home contributed to the American victory in many ways. Behind the front lines white and free black men forty-five years and older formed home guards to protect private property and maintain order in New Orleans and surrounding towns and posts. Slaves and citizens helped widen canals and build defenses along them. Slaves also fortified military positions and fought in several battles of the Louisiana campaign. Women at home made clothing for the troops and flags and bandages for the militia regiments, while nuns and free women of color nursed the wounded at hospitals and convents.

5 Fighting with Jackson's forces in Louisiana was a group of Choctaws, longtime enemies of the pro-British Creek nation. They were under the command of Major Pierre Jugeant, a part-Choctaw scout who had grown up among Native Americans and spoke various dialects.

6 The legendary Baratarians pirates also lent assistance to Jackson and the Americans, primarily in the form of military supplies and artillery power. The Baratarians had been approached by British officials to act as allies and waterway guides. Acting as leader of the "Frenchmen of Barataria," Jean Laffite went to American authorities while considering the British offer, ultimately securing from Jackson promises of amnesty for past offenses in return for siding with the United States and committing his men to battle.

<http://www.crt.state.la.us/louisiana-state-museum/online-exhibits/the-cabildo/the-battle-of-new-orleans/>

