THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS
JANUARY 8, 1815

Major-General Andrew Jackson (1767-1845), hero of the Battle of New Orleans, from a painting by John Vanderlyn executed in 1819.

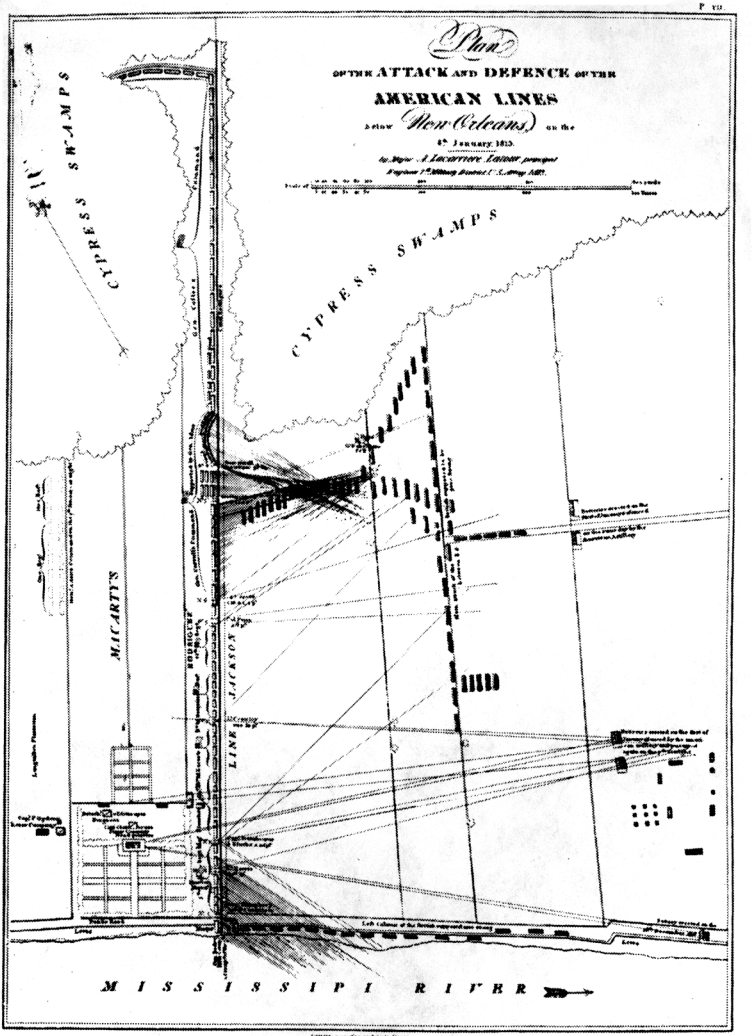
Courtesy City Hall, New York, N.Y.

Battle of New Orleans: January 8,1815

The Battle of New Orleans was the last major battle of the War of 1812. This war, which had been going on for nearly a year and a half without any decisive military action, suddenly became alive when the British, after defeating Napoleon in April, 1814, were able to turn their mighty war machine toward the United States. An expenditionary force under Admiral Alexander Cochrane raided Washington and burned the White House and attacked Fort McHenry at Baltimore. Joining a fleet of troopships from England in Jamaica in the West Indies, Cochrane and General John Keane sailed for the Louisiana coast and arrived with fifty ships carrying one thousand guns on December 9, 1814.

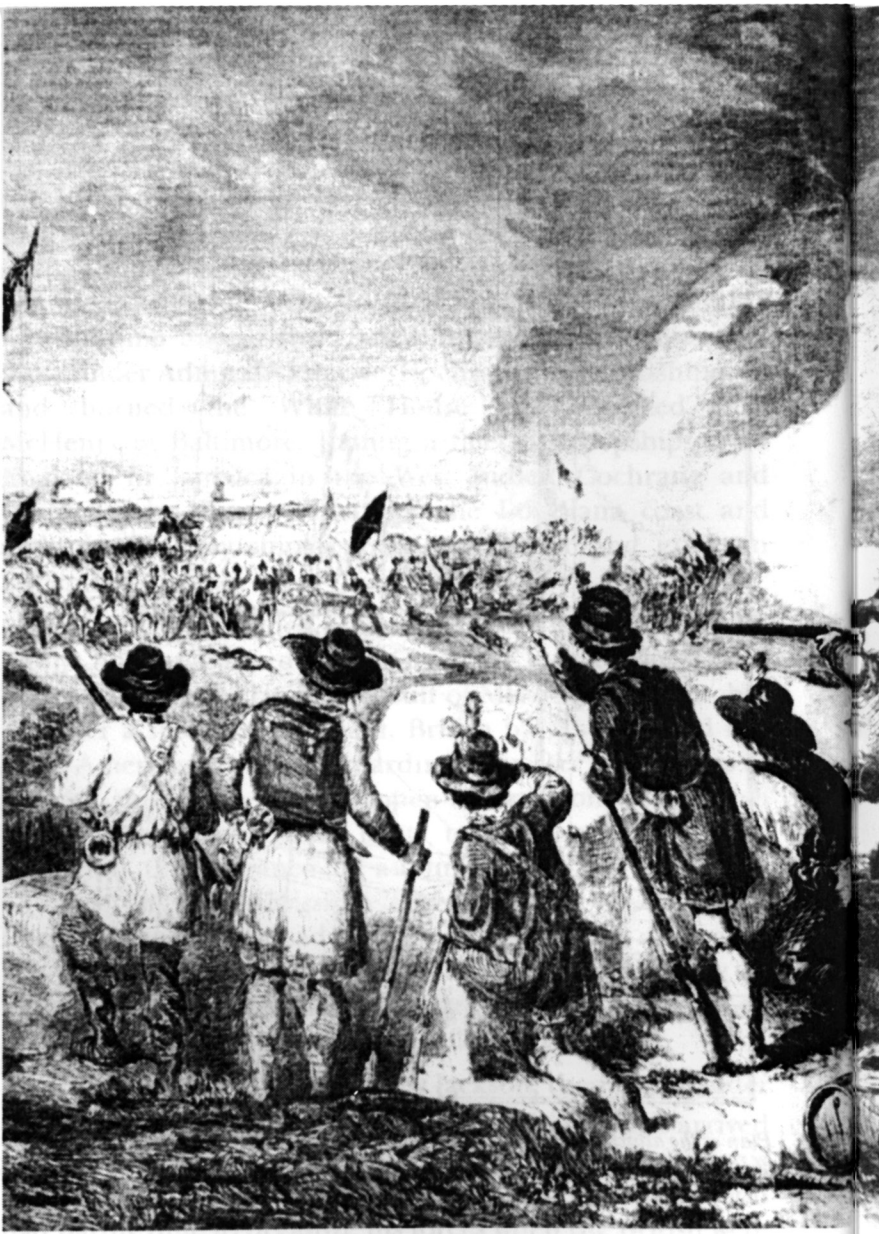
The British decided not to sail up the river past Fort St. Philip, but approached the city from the rear, through Lake Borgne, a shallow arm of the Gulf of Mexico. On December 14, after a sharp engagement, British barges captured five small American gunboats guarding the water approaches to the city, thus laying the way open for invasion. The British made their way in small boats to the mouth of Bayou Bienvenu, the entrance to an unguarded route to New Orleans on the Mississippi River. During the night of December 22-23, they had advanced to a point just nine miles below New Orleans. Pushing upriver during the day of December 23, they spread over the Villeré, Lacoste, and de La Ronde plantations and made camp for the night.

Meanwhile, General Andrew Jackson, then commander of the military district that included Louisiana, had arrived in New Orleans on December 2, bringing with him his regulars and elements from the Tennessee militia. Jackson had hardly time to organize his forces when the British were on American soil; when he received news of the British



Plan of the attack and defense of the American lines below New Orleans on the 8th of January, 1815.

By Major A. Lacarriere Latour, Principal Engineer.
7th Military District, 1815.



The Battle of New Orleans, engraving by John Andrews.

From *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* (1850s).

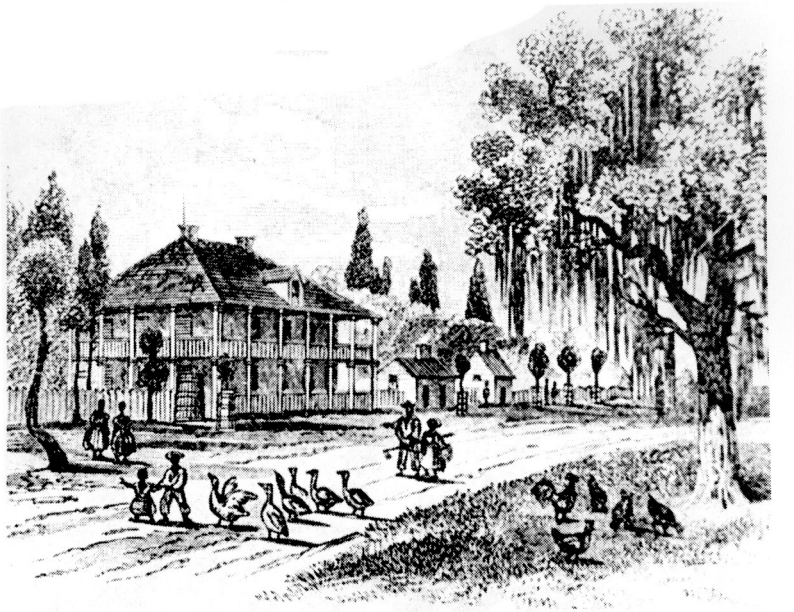
approach he decided upon a very bold night of December 23, in their camp. Catching them off guard, he gave the leaders the impression that they were being met by a very formidable move. He struck the enemy on the force. Jackson withdrew his men to the Rodriguez Canal, a ditch about fifteen feet wide that separated the Chalmette and Macarty plantations. Along this ditch his men threw up a mile-long shoulder-high rampart, using mud, rails, fence posts, wooden kegs, and anything they could get their hands on. This rampart occupied a most fortunate position between the Mississippi River on one side and an almost impassable swamp on the other.

On Christmas Day, 1814, General Sir Edward M. Pakenham, brother-in-law of the Duke of Wellington, arrived to take command of the British forces. Pakenham ordered an attack on the Americans on December 28. His men began advancing in two columns, one near the river and the other near the swamp, through the stubble of the plantation cane fields.

The American sloop *Louisiana* came downriver and began firing into the nearest British column, and artillery fire from the American lines forced the column by the river to withdraw. The commander of the British column near the swamp, seeing that he had no support on his left, called off his attack.

On January 1, 1815, Pakenham ordered his artillery to try to silence the American guns and break through the rampart. The British had brought up heavy artillery from the fleet with incredible labor, and a battery was erected about seven hundred yards from the American line. Pakenham's forces began a terrific fire, accompanied by a shower of rockets that were designed to frighten the defenders. The American guns answered, and so great was their accuracy that by noon the British guns were completely silenced.

Fearing that further delay would demoralize his army, Pakenham made preparations for a head-on assault against



MACARTE'S, JACKSON'S HEAD-QUARTERS.[1]

At the time of Lossing's visit in 1861, the Major-General Andrew Jackson's headquarters in the Battle of New Orleans was still in existence. The plantation house of Edmond Macarty, it survived until 1896, when it burned.

From a sketch made in April, 1861 by Benson J. Lossing, from *Lossing's The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812.* New York. 1868.

the Americans, even though some of his junior officers thought that such an attack would fail.

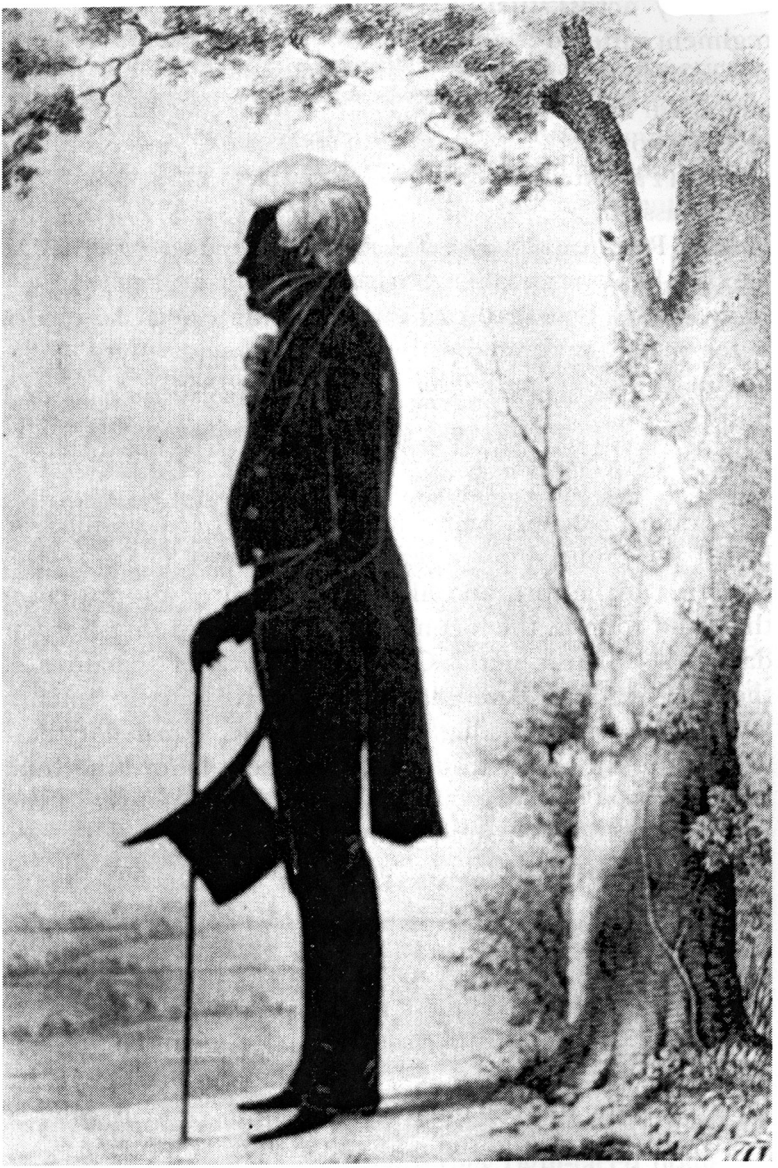
In the half light of the early morning of January 8, Pakenham sent his forces in a frontal attack on the Americans. He had hoped to take advantage of the darkness to get his troops within a few yards of the American line without being seen, but a delay caused by one of his junior officers in forgetting to bring ladders and bundles of sticks to throw in the ditches to help scale the ramparts cost him the advantage. Pakenham, nevertheless, determined to proceed with the attack. General Samuel Gibbs attacked the American left and center with a brigade of three thousand men. As the

A hero's welcome was given to General Jackson by the people of New Orleans.

From a woodcut in the Author's Collection.

British advanced across the open fields, the artillery. fire from the American batteries quickly tore huge gaps in their ranks. The redcoated British troop quickly filled in where their comrades had fallen and continued their advance in measured time until they came within musket range. Then the crack shots from Tennessee and Kentucky, who made up this part of the line, opened up on them with their long rifles. This checked their advance and killed many, including their commander, General Gibbs.

On the British left along the river, General Keene divided his brigade. One force under Colonel Robert Rennie was sent against the extreme right of the American



General Andrew Jackson, in old age, drawn from life, silhouette by William H. Brown, lithograph by E. B. and E. C. Kellog, 1844.

Author's Collection.

line. Keene then took a regiment of Scottish Highlanders obliquely across the field to help General Gibbs. The regiment suffered frightful casualties from the galling fire of the batteries. Keene rallied the remainder of Gibbs's men, and again assaulted the American center. This time he was severely wounded, and as his attack on the right was failing, General Pakenham himself rode forward to rally his men for a third assault. In this action, Pakenham was shot and killed. Colonel Rennie's attack on the right was repulsed after fierce hand-to-hand combat. A British force across the river, successful at first, had to be recalled, and because of the bitter defeat suffered by their main force, General John Lambert, now commander in chief, ordered an end to hostilities. The casualties in this dreadful battle were 2,057 British, 71 Americans. Rarely had professional veteran soldiers been defeated in so one-sided a battle.

Some days later, far down the river at Fort St. Philip, the British sent four ships of war in an attempt to silence the batteries of the fort, and although they fired more than a thousand rounds, the fort never failed to respond. After ten days the British left. On the plains of Chalmette, the Americans discovered on January 19 that the enemy, leaving campfires burning, had stolen away, returned to their ships, and sailed off. Ironically, two weeks before the final Battle of New Orleans, on January 8, representatives of the United States and Great Britain had signed a treaty of peace at Ghent, Belgium, a fact not known by any of the participants in the battle.

The Battle of New Orleans and the American victory had a profound effect upon our history. It not only saved New Orleans from conquest by the British, and made the Mississippi an American river, but it opened the way for westward expansion. It increased our nation's prestige in the world, gave the young United States confidence in its military powers, and increased the national feeling of unity. It made a popular hero of Andrew Jackson, and did much to stamp the effects of frontier democracy on the American social and political order.