The War of 1812

As you read, look for:
• Louisiana’s participation in the War of 1812,
• the Battle of New Orleans, and
• vocabulary terms *impressment* and *blockade*.

The War of 1812 is sometimes called the “second war for independence.” The young United States was looking for the respect of other nations, including Great Britain. The British did not treat the United States as an equal and continued to talk of regaining their former colony. Thirty years after the American Revolution, the British continued to occupy American territory along the Great Lakes. British agents encouraged the Native American tribes in their struggles with the Americans. Trade issues also created conflict.

But the British angered the Americans most by the practice of *impressment*. American ships were stopped by the British, and American sailors were accused of being British deserters. These sailors were seized and forced to serve in the British navy. The United States finally declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812.

Protecting New Orleans

During the early years of the War of 1812, the British were also fighting France in Europe. Even while fighting this other war, they were able to turn back American attacks on British Canada and Florida. The few American victories involved battles at sea. In 1814, the British defeated Napoleon and could then direct their full attention and strength to the war with the United States.

Governor Claiborne prepared for an attack on New Orleans. If the British captured the city, they could reach the entire Mississippi Valley. The United States tried to strengthen the forts near the mouth of the Mississippi River and protect this vital port.

Claiborne expected the state militia to defend the city. In a letter to the captain of the militia in Pointe Coupe, Claiborne ordered him to assemble his troops for exercise twice a week and to “be in readiness for actual service at a moment’s notice.” But he was not sure these French-speaking Creoles would consider themselves American and fight the British.

In the fall of 1814, British warships entered the Gulf of Mexico and *blocked* New Orleans. That is, the British positioned their ships to isolate the city.
and prevent any ships from entering or leaving the port. The United States sent Major General Andrew Jackson to defend the city. Jackson had recently defeated the Creek Indians in the Mississippi Territory.

Jackson gathered his forces and prepared the city’s defenses. His troops included the regular U.S. Army, Kentucky sharpshooters who had served with him in the Creek War, the local militia, and the Choctaw. Jackson too doubted the loyalty of the French in New Orleans. But after a huge public meeting, they swore their support. A U.S. Army major described Jackson’s ability to motivate his New Orleans troops by noting “he electrified all hearts.” A French Creole described their feelings, “Nationalities no longer count. We are all Americans.”

Even Jean Lafitte and his Baratarians offered to fight with the Americans after refusing a British request for their help. In return for Lafitte’s agreement, some of his men were released from jail and some of his property was returned. He and his men then fought with skill and bravery under Jackson’s command.

The Art of Politics

This political cartoon by William Charles satirizes the fact that American soldiers during the War of 1812 sometimes marched to the front encumbered by their wives, babies, and household furnishings.
The Battle of New Orleans

The Battle of New Orleans was actually the last in a series of battles that began in December 1814. The British fleet approached the city through Lake Borgne, where the first battle occurred. The British warships were too large to enter the lake, but the small British sloops defeated the six American gunboats. Although the British won this battle, their progress toward New Orleans was slowed.

The British army then landed some of its troops across the lake and started for New Orleans. Jackson surprised the British with a night attack, which again slowed their approach. British General Edward Pakenham led two more attacks, but Jackson’s troops held their ground.

The two armies met on January 8, 1815, “on the plains of Chalmette,” just south of the city. On that foggy morning, the battle lasted less than an hour. Jackson and his five thousand assorted troops soundly defeated eight thousand professional British soldiers. More than two thousand British soldiers were killed, while only eight of Jackson’s men died in battle that day.

 Ironically, the two generals did not know that the war was already over. On December 24, 1814, a treaty ending the war had been signed. But news of the Treaty of Ghent did not arrive in the United States until weeks later. The battle could have been avoided.

But the victory was not meaningless. The British had been forcefully shown that the Americans were willing to take on the world’s mightiest nation. If the
Above: In this painting of the Battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson can be seen on the right, mounted on a white horse.

Americans had been defeated, the British might have stopped the peace process.

Fourth of July celebrations in New Orleans had new meaning. The Battle of New Orleans brought all of Louisiana’s citizens together to fight for the American cause. After the battle, New Orleans honored Jackson and the United States in a patriotic ceremony. The hero of the Battle of New Orleans is still honored today. A statue of Andrew Jackson guards the city from the center of the Place d’Armes, now called Jackson Square. The statue, cast from a cannon used in the battle, was completed in 1856. Jackson himself laid the cornerstone in 1840.

Lagniappe

British General Pakenham was killed at the Battle of New Orleans (below). His body was shipped home to England in a hogshead (barrel) of rum. He was buried on his English estate.
After the War

The War of 1812 settled the major conflicts between the United States and Great Britain. But the boundary between Louisiana and Spanish Texas was still unsettled. The Spanish claimed all of the land as far east as the former Spanish fort of Los Adaes. They considered the Arroyo Hondo ("dry gulch") in Natchitoches Parish their boundary indicator. The United States believed that the Sabine River—or even the Rio Grande River—should be the boundary.

The issue was not settled until February 1819, when the Adams-Onis Treaty set the boundary at the Sabine River. In that treaty, Spain also ceded (gave) East Florida to the United States. The United States gave up its claims to Texas, at least for the time being.

A U.S. military post, Fort Jesup, was built in 1822 at the boundary line between the United States and Spanish Texas. Later, this outpost served as the headquarters for the Western division of the U.S. Army, which covered the territory from Florida to Lake Superior. Fort Jesup has been reconstructed at its site in DeSoto Parish. The nearby town of Many (MAN e) was named for the commander of the fort, Colonel John Many. The main street of Many follows the old San Antonio Trace (now Highway 6), a Spanish trail that ran from Natchitoches to San Antonio, Texas.