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BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS

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I

Few events in the history of our nation have left the imprint of greatness upon participating individuals and groups as did the memorable Battle of New Orleans, January 8, 1815, the culmination of the War of 1812. Out of the great victory, there emerged on the national scene, in the person of Andrew Jackson, a leader destined for future greatness. At the same time, those dissident Federalist voices which regarded disunion as the solution to the ills facing the young republic were quieted. With the battle over, the abortive Hartford Convention of December, 1814, stood in mute contrast to the patriotic devotion to country rendered by unlearned frontiersmen.¹ The question

¹ O. P. Chitwood, F. L. Owsley, and H. C. Nixon. *The United States from Colony to World Power*, (New York, 1954), 218. Delegates from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, and New Hampshire met at Hartford, Connecticut, December 15, 1814, to declare their opposition to the war. Declaring that a state could interpose its authority against unconstitutional acts of the Federal Government, the Convention also proposed seven constitutional amendments and appointed a committee to go to Washington to negotiate with the Government. Shortly after the committee's arrival,

of the possession of legal title to western lands acquired from France by the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 was quickly settled. Not the least result was the breaking of alliances which had existed between the Creek Indians and their British and Spanish allies.

It is impressive that so much could be accomplished for young America from a military engagement which lasted little more than two hours. The Battle of New Orleans, which occurred after the signing of the peace treaty at Ghent in December, has been referred to as a useless expenditure of life and time. One must remember, however, that the issues leading to the battle evolved over a long period of time, many of them dating back to the Revolution. A climax to the friction existing between America and Great Britain was inevitable. In this conflict, Tennessee played a prominent role, not only as a participant in the final action of the war, but in the developments preceding it. Indeed, it is important to note that Tennessee was influential in putting into motion the machinery which brought about the dramatic event, from which national attention was focused upon the Volunteer State and her courageous sons.

however, word came of the overwhelming American victory at New Orleans, so that the representatives retired without revealing the purpose of their trip.

II

Felix Grundy, Nashville's vocal and eloquent attorney, was elected in 1811 to the United States Congress on a platform demanding war with Great Britain. Grundy, a native Virginian who had also lived in Pennsylvania and Kentucky, resented the policy of Spain and Great Britain which was to incite the southern Indians against frontiersmen who were inexorably pushing further to the west. Tennessee, then in its early commercial development, was particularly concerned over this issue because the trade routes to New Orleans and Mobile were under almost constant attack by well-armed red men.

Once seated in Congress, Grundy wasted no time in pressing his attack. He aligned himself with Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, William Lowndes, and others who earned for themselves the title "War Hawks" by their insistence upon war. To them, the time was ripe for such a step since the Napoleonic War with England was in progress, and it offered an opportunity for America to profit from the turmoil in Europe. Unrelentingly the "War Hawks" pressed their cause until public opinion forced a reluctant Congress and President James Madison to declare war against England on June 16, 1812.²

² The northern states were more concerned with the infamous "Orders of Council" passed by the British Government permitting that nation's navy to search any United States ship on the pretense of looking for English deserters, and forbidding

Tennesseans had watched with dismay the significant success which British troops enjoyed along the Canadian boundary, and across the northeastern tier of states. Their concern was intensified with the burning of Washington on August 24, 1814. Many westerners regarded Federalist inertia toward the war with Britain as largely responsible for the ineffective resistance being offered. Some Northern governors had refused to answer the War Department's call for militia, while others would not assume their proportionate share of the financial obligation.

After the sack of Washington, the British vessels and troops disappeared and left Americans wondering where the next blow would come. James Monroe, the tough-fisted new Secretary of State, concluded that the abrupt thrust against Washington and Baltimore was only a feint, designed to confuse the government while the enemy concentrated his forces elsewhere for a major invasion. With winter approaching, it seemed reasonable to assume that the strike, if made, would be in the South—probably at some point in the Gulf region where the defenses left much to be desired. As Monroe contemplated the portentous days ahead, he was relieved to know that the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Seventh Military District, comprising the states of Tennessee, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Territory, was

any intercourse between France and America. The firing on the American frigate *Chesapeake* in the summer of 1807 by the British warship *Leopard* for the former vessel's refusal to be searched, brought the two countries dangerously close to war, and Federalist apathy was almost swept away by an aroused public opinion.

Major General Andrew Jackson of Tennessee.³

Jackson had recently received national attention by the overwhelming victory which he and his Tennessee militiamen, led by Generals John Coffee and William Carroll, won over the Creek Indians at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend on March 27, 1814. There the westerners struck a mortal blow at the repugnant British-Indian alliance, which many believed was responsible for the infamous massacre of men, women, and children at Fort Mims.

³ Charles B. Brooks, *The Siege of New Orleans*. (Seattle, 1961), 12. Jackson assumed command of the Military District on May 28.

III

On his return from Horseshoe Bend, Jackson was acclaimed throughout Middle Tennessee for his victory, and was given spectacular public receptions in Gallatin and Nashville. But his stay in Tennessee was brief and he moved south again, this time to Mobile, where he established headquarters in late August, 1814.⁴ Jackson's use of Mobile as his base of operations was fortunate, for two weeks later British vessels appeared at the entrance to Mobile Bay and made a concerted attack on Fort Bowyer (now Fort Morgan). However, the tiny garrison of 130 men stood fast and when one of the British frigates ran aground, exploded, and burned, the fleet withdrew to an unknown area. Jackson speculated over Britain's future intentions.

The thrust against Mobile convinced Jackson that an invasion of major proportions somewhere along the coast was imminent. A likely site, he thought, would be Pensacola, which was still under Spanish control. Spain, it will be recalled, was England's ally against France but was neutral toward America. Spain's neutrality, Jackson believed, was only a veneer for her selfish

⁴ Enroute to Mobile, Jackson on August 10 concluded a peace treaty with the Creeks, requiring that tribe to reside on lands bordered by the Coosa River to the west, the Chattahoochee in the east, and to the south, by a line running east and west. It was thought that the Creeks and Seminoles would thus be separated, and contact broken with British agents. John H. DeWitt, "General James Winchester, 1752-1826," in *Tennessee Historical Magazine* I (1915), 183.

interests which she would direct against the United States the moment a suitable opportunity arose. Then, too, there were the Creeks. Jackson had broken their power at Horseshoe Bend, but they remained in the vicinity, possibly ready to resume hostilities if supported by a strong belligerent. Before leaving Nashville, Jackson had conferred with Governor Willie Blount about sending a brigade of mounted Tennessee militiamen under Brigadier General John Coffee to join him in Mobile. Now he sent urgent word for the militiamen to come without delay!

The fraternal feeling existing between John Coffee and Andrew Jackson ran deep. Each man, completely devoted to the other, was willing to undergo the most rigid personal sacrifice should the other command it. Coffee, “tall, broad-shouldered, gentle in manner, but brave and intelligent,” had executed the key move that bottled up the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend.⁵ With his usual alacrity, he once again answered his country’s call to duty and ordered his troops to rendezvous in Fayetteville on October

⁵ Coffee was born in Prince Edward County, Virginia, June 2, 1772, and died at his home “Hickory Hill” near Florence, Alabama, July 7, 1833. Migrating to Tennessee in 1798 with his widowed mother, Coffee became a successful merchant and surveyor. In 1809 he married Mary Donelson. Their farm on Stone’s River in Rutherford County was 10 miles from the Hermitage. “Letters of General John Coffee to His Wife, 1813-1815,” in *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, II, (1916), 264-65. Coffee’s granddaughter, Eliza Croom Coffee, described him as possessing a commanding appearance with brilliant black eyes and a dark skin. “His expression,” she wrote, “was quiet and serious, but not sad, and showed deep thought. His manners were courteous and gentle.” Eliza Croom Coffee, “Sketch of the Life of General John Coffee,” Florence, Alabama, 1897 (Script in Manuscript Collection, Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library and Archives.)

3. Patriotic feeling swept across Tennessee as Coffee's veterans, with the fire of battle still flashing in their eyes, emerged from the hills, valleys, and hamlets to make the long trek southward for the second time within a year. Most of them were simple countrymen, armed only with their long rifles and knives and attired in the clothing of the frontier. Their pantaloons pockets were filled with bullets. In this manner they responded to the appeal to "come forward ... as there (could not) be a moment's delay."⁶

Jackson's recall of the Tennessee militia, already schooled in the kind of wilderness warfare which appeared forthcoming, was a wise decision. Against the Creeks these men had subsisted for months in the Alabama back country with only scanty supplies. Their mobility, loyalty, and capacity to move upon their objective with a minimum loss of time made Jackson confident that here was a fighting force well prepared to meet any test.

At Fayetteville, Coffee mustered 2,000 men into service, and organized two divisions under Colonels Robert H. Dyer and Thomas Williamson. At dawn on October 5, the high-spirited troops began their long march southward over the familiar trails which they had traveled the previous year. During the march, their ranks were swelled by the addition of 800 more men, including four East Tennessee companies. Coffee's men reached Camp Gaines, 70 miles north of Mobile, on October 22, after

⁶ Nashville *Whig*, September 21, 1814, p. 3.

having traveled 470 miles in 18 days.⁷ That autumn trip had been accomplished with a minimum of sickness and no deaths, and the men were inspired with the feeling that Nature's blessing was upon them, however arduous the campaign might be.

With the arrival of General Coffee, Jackson was ready to move against the Spaniards at Pensacola. He did so with an awesome display of force on November 7, and within a few hours declared the town in the possession of the United States. With this blow, although it accomplished little in the way of military success, Jackson confirmed his "reputation as a man who could act boldly, assume vast responsibilities, and move rapidly."⁸ Having quieted the aggressive intentions of the Spaniards and Creeks, Jackson quickly returned to Mobile where he expected a British attack at any moment. Coffee, in the meantime, was instructed to proceed at once to the mouth of Sandy Creek, about 20 miles north of Baton Rouge.

At this point of the campaign, Jackson had no idea that New Orleans would be the focal point of a British invasion. He was convinced that the landing would come somewhere to the east, and considered that logically the invaders would align themselves with the hostile Creeks and push through the back country to the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge. There Coffee would be in a position to repulse whatever force was thrown against him.

⁷ John Coffee to Mary Donelson Coffee, Camp Gaines, October 22, 1814, in *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, II (1916), 285-86.

⁸ C. S. Forester, "Victory of New Orleans," in *American Heritage* VIII, (1957), 8.

Unknown to Old Hickory, however, the British had no immediate designs upon Baton Rouge. At that moment, a great invasion fleet of some fifty armed vessels and over ten thousand veterans of the Napoleonic wars were being organized at Negril Bay in Jamaica: its objective being New Orleans.⁹

However uncertain Jackson's initial operations along the coast may have seemed to the uneasy citizens of New Orleans, it was soon evident that he did not intend to allow the city to go completely undefended. To further bolster his army and make his coastal defenses adequate, Jackson now called upon the trusted William Carroll. Carroll was only 26 years of age at this time but his courage and intelligence had already elevated him to the rank of Major General of the Second Tennessee Division.¹⁰ A veteran of the Creek campaign, Carroll made no effort to conceal his destination in his strongly worded appeal for volunteers:

Should any foreign power obtain a permanent possession of the City of New Orleans and the mouth of the Mississippi we may bid farwell (sic) to all our prosperity and anticipated greatness. Let our enemy ... place one foot in Louisiana

⁹ N. Floyd McGowin, "Some Aspects of Waning British Influence in the Middle Gulf Region," in *The Alabama Review*, IX (1956), 166-67.

¹⁰ Born near Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, March 3, 1788, Carroll came to Nashville in 1810 to open a mercantile store. His fondness for studying military tactics endeared him to Andrew Jackson, then Major General of the Second Tennessee Division encompassing West (now Middle) Tennessee. When Jackson resigned in 1813 to command the United States Army in defense of the Southern frontier, Carroll received the appointment. Later, as Governor of Tennessee, Carroll distinguished himself for his frugality and business acumen.

and we are at once bestrode by a colossus who has too long rested the other in Canada; in fine let him command the Mississippi River, and we become the most dependent, degraded, and miserable people on earth.... You may add the immortal glory of conquering the boasted troops of a Lord Wellington.¹¹

The 3,000 militiamen who met with Carroll in Nashville on November 13 were similar in appearance to those of Coffee. One eyewitness remarked that they were “as fine looking men as any we ever saw, and a considerable part of them (were) well armed, with muskets and rifles.”¹² Another observer noted that they “have come forward with that promptitude which has heretofore characterized the state.... They are generally provided with arms, etc. at their own expense.”¹³

Six days after they gathered in Nashville, the troops embarked on boats for New Orleans. The main diversion offered the Tennesseans during the slow, tedious trip down the Cumberland, Ohio and Mississippi rivers was the daily drilling which Carroll and his two subordinates, Brigadier Generals Thomas Coulter and Bird Smith, gave the recruits. There had been no time for training prior to their hasty departure.

Enroute the militiamen were cheered when they overtook a New Orleans-bound keelboat laden with muskets. Thomas L.

¹¹ *Nashville Clarion*, November 1, 1814, p. 3.

¹² *The Clarion and Tennessee State Gazette*, November 22, 1814, p. 3.

¹³ *Nashville Whig*, November 16, 1814, p. 3.

Servoss, a prominent Natchez businessman, was responsible for this fortunate occurrence. While visiting New York during the summer of 1814, he was informed by a government official that New Orleans was considered the likely site for a British invasion. Concerned for his family's welfare, Servoss had left for home immediately. At Pittsburg he boarded one of two keelboats headed for New Orleans with large quantities of arms and ammunition. Experienced in navigation himself and familiar with the route, Servoss prevailed upon the captain to depart earlier than was scheduled. By doing so, Servoss unintentionally insured that Carroll's troops were fully armed before their trip was completed.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Nashville Daily Gazette*, November 10, 1858, p. 2. As the story goes, all of the Tennessee troops, including those of Coffee, were fully armed by December 21. The second keelboat, however, did not arrive until some time after the battle of January 8, leaving the Kentuckians, who arrived January 4, only partially armed.

IV

While William Carroll and his men were plying their way down the Mississippi, John Coffee and his mounted militiamen were making their way toward Sandy Creek. The 16-day march was worse than any Coffee had ever experienced, because the area was interlaced with streams and covered with heavy undergrowth.¹⁵ Drenching rain fell for 20 successive days. At Sandy Creek, where quantities of corn had arrived from Tennessee, the men ate their first adequate meal since leaving Pensacola and the horses were foraged. Here they impatiently awaited further word from Jackson.

By now the British plan was becoming clear to Jackson, who hastened from Mobile to New Orleans. There, on December 2, he found the local situation one of general turmoil and confusion. The citizens appeared in a fighting mood and, on the whole, received him enthusiastically.

Jackson's problems, however, increased immediately. There were only about 700 regular United States troops in the city—hardly enough to pose a threat to an invading veteran army—and the situation was made more difficult when the New Orleans militia refused to serve under United States officers.

¹⁵ John Coffee to Mary Donelson Coffee, Sandy Creek, December 15, 1814, in *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, II (1916), 289. The line of march was almost parallel to the sea coast, about 40 or 50 miles from the Gulf.

The offer of service by the Baratarian pirates made through the local Committee of Defense was refused by Jackson because the pirates were at that time being prosecuted in a Federal court. Since the pirates possessed artillery in considerable quantities and were proficient in its use, the Committee next turned to Federal Judge Dominick Hall. He advised them to have the Louisiana legislature, then meeting in New Orleans, adopt a resolution requesting that all charges against the pirates be dropped for four months. The resolution was then presented to Judge Hall, who, in turn, ordered the District Attorney to suspend his prosecution for the designated period. This action made possible the valuable contribution of the Baratarians in the defense of New Orleans.

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