

The Battle of New Orleans Description

Major General Andrew Jackson received orders to defend the city of New Orleans from the British. After an initial battle on December 23 where the British camped south of the city, Jackson's troops retreated and dug in at the Rodriguez Canal, a usually dry, wide ditch. Jackson had his men build a wide mud barricade beside the canal running more than a half mile between the Mississippi River and an impassable swamp. He added artillery behind the barricade and on the opposite side (western) of the river. If the British wanted to attack New Orleans on foot, they would have to overrun the American position.

The British, led by General Edward Pakenham, tested the barricade on December 28, but were driven back by artillery. After receiving more troops, Pakenham decided on a new plan of attack. He had his men build 40 shallow boats and start knocking down a levee so they could send troops by boat to attack Jackson's artillery on the west bank of the river. When captured, the cannon there could then be used against the Americans across the river behind Rodriguez Canal. Afterwards Pakenham planned on British troops, who outnumbered the Americans 8,000 to 4,000, attacking the barricade head on and overpowering the Americans.

Jackson, who heard rumors of a British attack on the west bank, moves more men there to protect the artillery. Suffering from an illness, Jackson worried that his troops, many of them poorly trained volunteers, wouldn't be able to hold the British back. The British attacked at dawn, hoping the early morning fog will hide their whereabouts from the Americans.

Pakenham's troops that were sent to silence the west bank artillery had trouble getting their boats out the levee, and then were swept down river past the American positions.

In a fatal mistake, Pakenham decided to proceed with the east bank attack even though he hadn't captured Jackson's artillery on the west bank yet.

As the British attack began, the fog lifted, which left the Americans with a clear view of the enemy advancing across the field in front of them. American soldiers behind the barricades and artillery on both the east and west banks of the river began shooting. The American defenders were three and four deep behind the barricade. One would fire his gun, step back, and allow another to shoot as he reloaded. The fire from the Americans was overwhelming.

The British, using European fighting techniques, advanced in straight lines, and were mowed down by the Americans. Most British soldiers who reach the canal were unable to penetrate the American line even though they had ladders to climb the barricade. Only a few soldiers made it to the top of the barricades, but they were pushed back. Although American warships have been used against the British earlier, on the day of the battle, neither the American nor British ships were involved in the fighting. Pakenham tried to lead a charge when his horse was shot out from under him. He attempts to mount another horse but he was shot and died. The new British commander ordered his troops to retreat. Meanwhile the British soldiers sent to capture the American guns on the west of the river finally succeeded, but it was too late. There was an incredible sight on the battlefield as nearly 300 British soldiers lay dead along with more than 1,200 wounded. One American said "I could have walked on the dead bodies of the British one-quarter of a mile without stepping on the ground."

Jackson's troops only had 13 killed and 39 wounded. Outnumbered two to one, the Americans won a tremendous victory.