Chapter 12

THE 1815 BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS
A Physical Geographical Analysis

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Abstract: The closing battle of the War of 1812 occurred on the floodplain of the Mississippi River 7 mi south of New Orleans. Strategically, control of New Orleans determined control of the Mississippi River and, by extension, most of the western territory. Tactically there were six approaches to the city. All had some geographic disadvantage, mostly relating to the disparity between the draft of the vessels available to the British and the water depths in the various lakes, channels, and bayous. The eventual choice of approach via Lake Borgne and Bayou Bienvenue placed the invading army in logistical peril as all supplies had to be ferried over long distances in small, open boats. The battleground itself was beset with a number of obstacles of a physical geographic nature such as a shallow depth to water table, inadequate cover, poor soils, and unseasonable weather.

Key words: New Orleans, Mississippi River, weather, floodplain geomorphology, bayous

1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The American Congress passed a declaration of war against Great Britain on 18 June 1812 in response to perceived British interference in American free trade. At the time the British were embroiled in a protracted war with France that had started in 1793. The Americans had attempted to remain neutral as that war spread to involve most of the major European powers. In the end, the Americans found themselves caught between the competing strategies of England and France. Combined with an increasing American nationalism and a British disdain for its ex-Colony, the Americans were led into a war they were not prepared to fight (Caffrey, 1977; Hickey, 1989). For two years, the British and Americans clashed in a series of inconclusive battles, but British attention was clearly focused on Europe and the French.

Following the defeat and exile of Napoleon to Elba in April 1814, the British turned full attention to the Americans, and planned a three-pronged attack to fracture the country and lead to American concessions as a condition of peace. The British were not successful in prosecuting this strategy as two disastrous defeats befell them in September 1814. An attempt to isolate the New England region by an attack down the Hudson River valley to seize New York City was thwarted by the destruction of the British naval force at the Battle of Lake Champlain. In the mid-Atlantic, Washington, DC was seized and burned by the British sending the American government into disarray. But British plans in this theater were dealt a mortal blow with their defeat at Baltimore and the death of Major General Robert Ross. Ross was eventually replaced by Lieutenant General Sir Edward Pakenham for the third prong of the attack, an assault against New Orleans. New Orleans was the key to the American western frontier. Control of New Orleans assured control of the Mississippi River and large sections of the interior. Tactically, there were six approaches to the city. All had some geographic disadvantage mostly relating to the disparity between the draft of the vessels available to the British and the water depths in the various lakes, channels, and bayous needing to be traversed to attack the city.

The Battle of New Orleans began on 23 December 1814 with the arrival of a British invasion force at the Villere Plantation located on the east bank of the Mississippi River at Chalmette about 7 mi downriver from New Orleans. The Americans, under the command of Major General Andrew Jackson, established a defensive position upriver along the Rodriguez Canal between the Chalmette and Macarty Plantations. There followed, over the next 16 days, a series of engagements culminating with the final unsuccessful assault by the British on 8 January 1815. Many aspects of this engagement, from the selection of the site to the conduct of the actual battle, were influenced by the physical geography of the area. Geographic factors such as relative location, landforms, soils, vegetation, weather, and hydrography impacted the decisions made by the commanders in the field. This paper highlights three physical geographic factors that played crucial roles in the outcome of the battle - hydrography, landforms, and weather.

2. HYDROGRAPHY

Fig. 1 details the six possible approaches to the city (Brooks, 1961); the Mississippi River, Lake Borgne, Lake Pontchartrain, or one of three winding routes through bayous and swamps from the Bay of Barataria, Bayou L...