

Smoke on the Water: The Role of the *USS Louisiana* at the Battle of New Orleans

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Five ships of the U.S. Navy have been named *USS Louisiana* in honor of the 18th state. The first – a merchant sloop¹ built in New Orleans in 1812 at a cost of \$15,500 – played a vital role in the defense of New Orleans during the War of 1812.² From December 23, 1814, to January 8, 1815, the *USS Louisiana* pounded advancing British troops, providing naval gunfire support for Gen. Andrew Jackson’s troops.

Most people are familiar with the ground battle that pitted the best of the English Army against Jackson’s militiamen and volunteers at Chalmette Plantation, but few are aware of the important role played by the *USS Louisiana*, one of only a handful of Navy vessels at New Orleans. The Navy had established a station at New Orleans in 1806, but it was underfunded and undermanned when war began with the British. To make matters worse, the Great Louisiana Hurricane of August 19, 1812, severely damaged the station and devastated several gunboats. On the upside, the storm, one of the worst in early Louisiana history, temporarily scattered the British fleet that was approaching the area.³

In 1814, the *USS Louisiana* was one of only 15 vessels in the squadron stationed at New Orleans. Six of the vessels were President Thomas Jefferson’s gunboats, which were sent there originally to deal with pirates and to do what they could to lift the growing blockade of the city by British ships.

Jefferson-Class Gunboats

The gunboats were often called “Jefferson-class” tug boats because they were built during the presidency of Jefferson, who believed that all America needed was a coastal patrol force, not a blue-water navy. The six “Jefferson-class” gunboats at New Orleans – all in varying stages of decay – did not even have names. They had numbers: No. 5, No. 23, No. 65, No. 156, No. 162, and No. 163.

On December 14, 1814, five of the gunboats were captured by the British in a battle on Lake Borgne, southeast of New Orleans. (No. 65, which was patrolling the Mississippi at the time, escaped capture.) The British attacked with 45 barges and a force of about 1,200. Of the 245 American crew members, 41 were killed or wounded, and the remainder were taken prisoner and transported to Jamaica by the British, who also captured 16 long guns, 14 carronades, 2 howitzers, and 12 swivel guns. The British took the gunboats into Royal Navy service under the names *Ambush* (or *Ambush No. 5*), *Firebrand*, *Destruction*, *Harlequin*, and *Eagle*. Several of these vessels remained in Royal Navy service into June 1815, several months after the treaty of peace was signed. Prize money for the captured vessels was paid in July 1821.⁴

¹ A *sloop* is a single-masted boat with a minimum number of lines and spars.

² The *U.S.S. Louisiana* is not to be confused with the U.S. Coast Guard revenue cutter named *Louisiana*, which was completed at a Baltimore shipyard in December 1804. That vessel was sent to New Orleans that same month to control smuggling and to enforce shipping laws. The cutter *Louisiana* was destroyed in a hurricane that passed west of New Orleans on August 11, 1812. It capsized at the docks of the city with the loss of all hands except Master Angus O. Frazer. –Source: William H. Theisen, *United States Coast Guard, War of 1812*, USCG Historian’s Office, Washington, DC.

³ William S. Dudley, “The Pinchpenny Flotilla,” *Naval History Magazine*, Vol. 29, No. 1, February 2015.

⁴ *The London Gazette*, July 28, 1821, p. 1561.

The loss of the gunboats had an immediate impact. First, it gave the British a landing zone for forces preparing to attack the city. Second, upon learning of the battle, a portion of the local population reacted in sheer panic, prompting Jackson to declare martial law the following day. Third, without the gunboats, Jackson had no means of surveilling the British.

But there were positive, albeit unintended, consequences as well. When questioned, the gunboat crews taken prisoner were able to mislead the British regarding the number and type of troops under Jackson's command. In addition, the sacrificial battle gave General Jackson valuable time to strengthen his defenses and appeal for more reinforcements for New Orleans.

Other Vessels in Fleet

Besides the gunboats, there were nine other vessels in the fleet at New Orleans. The best-known of these is the schooner⁵ *Carolina*, built in 1812 at a cost of \$8,743. The *Carolina* was sent to New Orleans in July 1814 to help deal with the pirates and smugglers in Barataria, 50 miles south of New Orleans, just west of the Mississippi. By December 1814, the vessel was manned to a large extent by Baratarians led by Jean Lafitte, who had volunteered his services. The *Carolina* played a role in the Battle, but was burned and sunk near Chalmette in a skirmish with the British on December 27, 1814.

In addition to the six gunboats and the doomed *Carolina*, the 15-vessel fleet included:

- *USS Alligator*, a sloop purchased in New Orleans in 1812, was used as a tender.⁶ The vessel and its crew of 8 were captured along with the gunboats on Lake Borgne. Its disposition by the British is unknown.
- *USS Sea Horse*, a sloop purchased in New Orleans in 1812, was used as a tender on Lake Borgne. Its crew of 14 burned her on the night of December 13, 1814. to prevent capture by the British.
- *USS Tickler* was a one-gun, 50-ton dispatch sloop purchased in August 1812 and used as a bomb ketch.⁷ It survived the battle on Lake Borgne and was sold in New Orleans in 1818.
- *USS Etna* (or *Aetna*) was a ketch purchased in New Orleans in 1813 to replace a vessel of the same name lost the year before. She was found to be unfit for naval service and could not be used for defense of the city. She was condemned in New Orleans in 1817.
- *USS Bulldog* was a two-gun felucca⁸ purchased in New Orleans in 1814. She survived the Battle and was sold in New Orleans in 1831.
- *USS Eagle* was a 12-gun schooner purchased in 1814, one of four vessels with that name during the War. (Another vessel of that name was captured by the British on Lake Champlain in 1813, but recovered by the Americans in 1814.) The *USS Eagle* at New Orleans was sold in 1820.

⁵ A *schooner* has two or more masts, with fore-and-aft sails on all its lower masts.

⁶ A *tender* is a type of naval vessel used to support other ships, generally by transporting men and supplies.

⁷ A *bomb ketch* was a wooden support ship with two large mortars capable of hurling 200-lb. bombs.

⁸ The *felucca* is a small wooden sailing boat designed by the Arabs for trade in the Mediterranean. In 1814, however, the U.S. Navy captured a 15-ton felucca, *Moon of November*, during a raid of pirates at Barataria. Sources: *Register of the Navy*, 1818; William C. Davis, *The Pirates Laffite: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf*, Harcourt Publishers, 2005, p. 192.

- *USS Tchefonta* was a large shallow-draft vessel being built at the village of Tchefuncte on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain in 1813. Work ceased on the vessel in summer 1814, and she was in dock during the Battle. The vessel was later sold while still in dock.

USS Louisiana

The last but not the least of the 15 vessels in the fleet was the *USS Louisiana*. This vessel, which played such a vital role in the American victory, was unmanned at the start of the campaign, having sat idle since she was built in 1812. She was not even armed until August 1814. By December 23, 1814, when Jackson began attacking the British camp, *Louisiana* had been manned with a crew of 36, under the command of Lt. Charles C.B. Thompson.⁹ The Louisiana legislature had appropriated \$6,000 to use as bounties to recruit able-bodied seaman to man the sloop. The vessel, which measured 99 feet, 6 inches, rated 16 guns, all 24-pounders.

As with other Navy vessels, work on the *USS Louisiana* began at 4 a.m. each day, with the command, "All Hands!" The crew was divided into two watches, starboard and larboard. Breakfast was at 7 a.m., with eight men to a mess. In the absence of a table or other furniture, a piece of canvas was spread on the deck as a table cloth. The men furnished their own plate, pan, and spoon. Afterward, the crew spent the morning doing gun drills and sailing maneuvers. Dinner was at noon, followed at 12:30 p.m. by the daily grog ration. The ration was a half-pint of whiskey diluted with water. From 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., the men engaged in ship duty. Supper was followed by another grog ration.¹⁰

When British troops advanced upriver on December 27, 1814, beyond the range of the *USS Louisiana*'s deadly cannon fire, her crew did not let the lack of wind deter them. Crew members waded ashore with mooring lines and towed their sloop up river against the currents of the Mississippi to re-engage. On December 28, a British reconnaissance force led by Gen. Sir Edward Packenham probed within a half-mile of Jackson's line. *Louisiana*'s guns broadsided the force with heavy and accurate fire, knocked out the levee battery, and stopped the British advance. She fired 800 rounds during the engagement.

On December 29, *Louisiana* landed two 12-pounders and a 24-pounder on the right bank of the Mississippi, and Jackson sent a detachment to build a land battery manned by 106 U.S. Navy seamen. The battery extended a mile along the river. *Louisiana* was moored nearby as a depot for guns, ammunition, and gunpowder.

During the decisive battle on January 8, 1815, *Louisiana* held fire until the British began to retreat. The Historic New Orleans Collection includes a dramatic battle portrait by artist Dennis Malone Carter, depicting British soldiers storming the American line. Jackson and two other mounted officers are shown surveying the defenses. The sails of the *USS Louisiana* can be seen in the background.

In 1821, six years after the victory at New Orleans, the *USS Louisiana* was broken up, its remnants drifting into the mists of history. Its memory is preserved in the name of the USS Louisiana Chapter of the Daughters of 1812, located in Shreveport.

⁹ Charles C.B. Thompson (1786-1832), a native of Virginia, entered the U.S. Navy as a midshipman on December 22, 1802. He was promoted to lieutenant on February 15, 1809. After the War of 1812, he continued to serve, achieving the rank of captain by 1825.

¹⁰ Matthew Brenckle, *Food and Drink in the U.S. Navy, 1794-1820*, USS Constitution Museum, Boston, Mass., 2019. [https:// www.usbcm.org/publications/food-and-drink-in-the-us-navy-1794-to-1820.pdf](https://www.usbcm.org/publications/food-and-drink-in-the-us-navy-1794-to-1820.pdf)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yvonne Lewis Day is a member of the Gen. Robert McCausland Chapter in Baton Rouge. She was formerly Louisiana state registrar and is a former president and former registrar of her chapter. She was the first national recipient of the Spirit of 1812 Award and is recipient of the 1812 History Award. She has written numerous articles on the War of 1812, including one published previously in this *News-Letter*. She is a popular speaker on historical topics and was twice keynote speaker for the Battle of New Orleans commemoration at the Cabildo in Jackson Square. Her presentation, *History Undressed: What Women Wore in the War of 1812*, has received acclaim for its content and originality.

[Click and drag to enlarge photos.]



Painting depicting the naval battle on Lake Borgne between British and U.S. forces on December 14, 1814. Oil on canvas, 25.5" x 37.5", by Thomas L. Hornbrook (active 1836-1844). The original painting is in the U.S. Naval Academy Museum, Annapolis, Maryland.



USS Louisiana sails appear in background of painting *Battle of New Orleans* by Dennis Malone Carter