

# A bicentennial look at Blacks in the war of 1812

by Mark Hyman

When writing about Black participation in the War of 1812, or any other large scale conflict, the presentation has to be considerably narrow, selecting carefully those incidents in which Blacks were specifically involved. However, there are two major factors to be considered in the War of 1812. Blacks played a determining role in the two major engagements which decided, once and for all, America's position with Great Britain. Those engagements were the sea battle of Lake Erie and the battle of New Orleans.

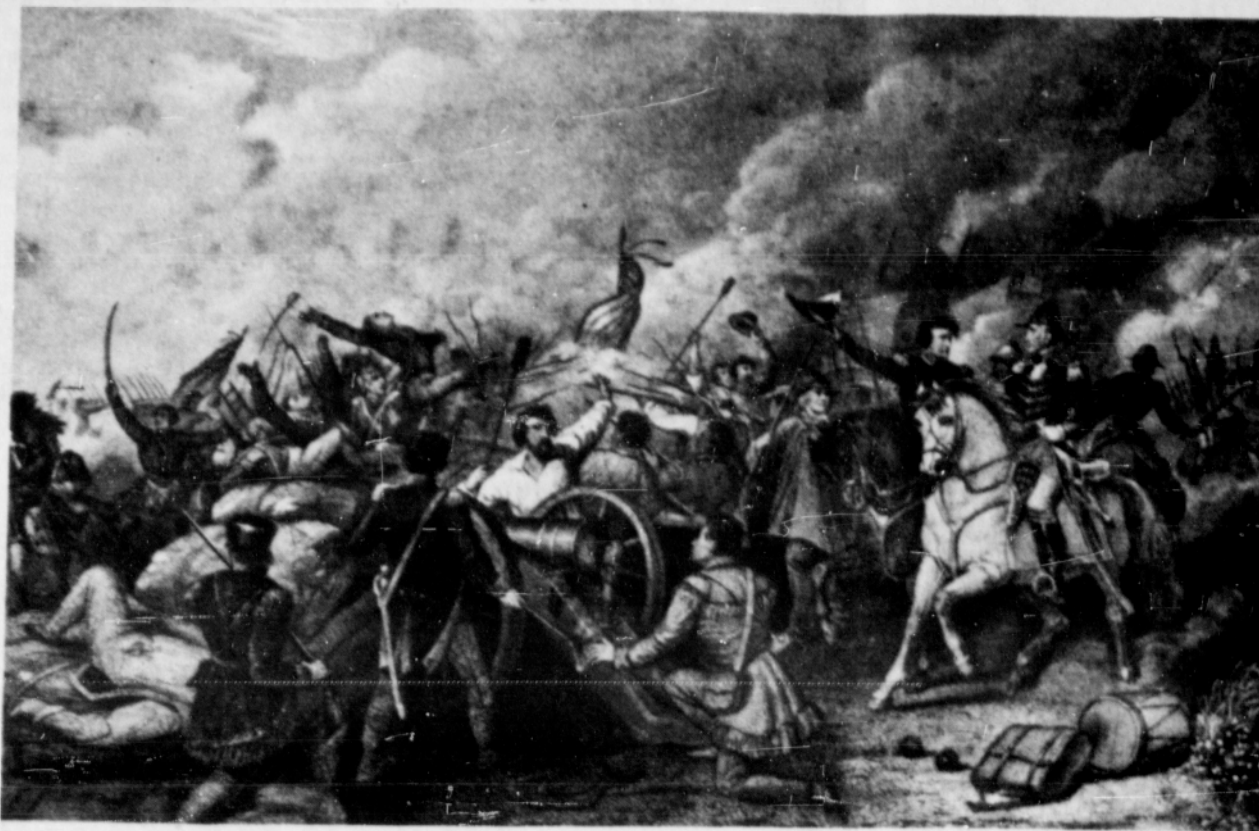
The United States, a short thirty years from the end of the Revolution, was definitely unprepared for war. Most of the generals were old veterans from the Revolution; the newer officers were poorly trained with no experience. The majority of state militiamen were undisciplined and badly prepared. Both the American army and navy were pitifully small and poorly equipped. The Canadian campaign, America's attempt to contain the British, had been a dismal failure. A most damaging tactical and morale blow came when General William Hull surrendered Detroit in 1812. Meanwhile, the British ravaged the Atlantic coast with their superior navy. They captured Washington and seriously attacked Baltimore.

Blacks were involved in one of the major causes of the resulting declaration of war against England for the second time in thirty-one years. In June of 1807, the British man-of-war *Leonard* attacked the U.S. Navy's *Chesapeake* outside Norfolk harbor. Three Americans were killed and eighteen wounded. British officers boarded the *Chesapeake* and placed in irons four alleged deserters from the Royal navy. Three of them were Black—Daniel Martin, William Ware and John Strachan. This had been a common practice of the English, claiming that excellent Black sailors had served England and deserted.

American intelligence had reported that the British planned to attack New Orleans and gain access to the strategic Mississippi River, thereby sealing the fate of the United States. With victory in Canada and the northwest United States, this move would finalize England's conquest.

General Andrew Jackson, after much debate in Washington, and after he had proved himself by defeating the Creek Indians in Spanish East Florida, was made regional commander of the Gulf area. This, of course, included valuable and strategic New Orleans. Jackson wrote to Louisiana Governor Claiborne requesting emergency military assistance. He specifically requested the two well-trained battalions of free Black troops. Although Jackson, at one point, declared New Orleans under martial law—because he feared the anti-American sentiment of the large Creole population—he said to Claiborne:

"They must either be for us or against us. Distrust them and you make them your enemies. Place your confidence in them and you engage them by every dear



the battle of New Orleans

and honorable tie to the interest of the country who extends to them the equal rights and privileges of whites."

Why would Blacks fight the British again, a second time in thirty-one years? To help America? Why should they fight to help the United States maintain her freedom? Why should they fight for a nation which approved of systematic slavery of Black people?

Jackson was eloquent and persuasive. He spoke of equality, of freedom for all men in a growing and changing America. Then, too, Louisiana was now American—not French, not Spanish—but American. Again, the willingness to die for America prevailed. How were these Black soldiers to know that slavery in America would soon get worse with the advent of the cotton gin, when cotton would become the deadly, dehumanizing, merciless king?

Why had they listened when General Jackson sought them out and invited them to fight for America? Simple. The promise of freedom for Black brothers and sisters enslaved in the Delta and the Bayous, in Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia. For the equal money paid white soldiers. For a chance to taste the exhilarating edge of battle again. These were the answers.

## THE BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE

Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry objected when Commodore Isaac Chauncey sent Black seamen to the former for the upcoming, crucial battle of Lake Erie in 1813. Chauncey's reply to Perry was firm and polite:

"I have yet to learn that the color of a man's skin and the cut and trimmings of his coat can affect a man's qualifications and usefulness. I have fifty Blacks on board my ship and many of them are my best men. And these men I am sending to you....have been to sea from two to seventeen years. I presume you will find them as useful as any men aboard your vessel."

Chauncey was right. Not only did Perry learn, but his praises were lofty and gratifying. Perry's victory on Lake Erie was the turning point in the war in the northwest. It blocked all chances of a future invasion by the British from Canada. It set the stage for the recapture of Detroit.

At the outbreak of the war, however, America had no ships at all at Lake Erie. With a crash landing shipbuilding program at Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario and at Black Rock on Lake Erie, the United States had a fighting fleet in short order. There had been built two brigs, six schooners and a sloop. All ready for action.

It was at this point that Commodore

Perry had to be converted from his negative ideas about Black servicemen.

Finally, the stage was set for battle. On September 10, 1813, the British squadron under Captain Robert Barclay approached the American anchorage about noon. Directing his forces from his flagship *Lawrence*, Perry went out to meet it and met heavy fire before he could order his supporting vessels to close in. After receiving damaging blasts from the British, the *Lawrence* was put out of action. Perry transferred to the *Niagara* where he continued to command. After heated exchange of cannon fire, the *Niagara* broke through the British line. The remainder of the American vessels moved in, firing as they went, scoring one damaging hit after another.

The British flotilla under Captain Robert Barclay consisted of two ships, two brigs, one schooner and one sloop. When the smoke had cleared, the British counted forty-one killed and ninety-one wounded. The Americans lost twenty-seven and ninety-three wounded. However, some figures do not agree on the losses. Whether or not the eighty-three Black men who refused to leave the *Lawrence* were all killed has not been supported. Commodore Perry finally said of his Black seamen, "They seem absolutely insensible to danger."

## THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS

Andrew Jackson was a realist and a hardbitten soldier who sought help where he could get it. He was a Southerner, but he defied Southerners when he invited the two Black regiments from New Orleans to help at Mobile Bay. It was Jackson's personal dynamism which made the President and the Federal Government lift the ban on his military leadership in the upcoming battle of New Orleans. Jackson raised such a formidable military force of his own, President Madison relented. Another serious matter to change the President's mind was the Jackson victory over the Creek Indians who had allied with the British in November of 1813 at Talladega and Tallasahatchee.

In no state in the Union were Blacks allowed to join the militia. But in New Orleans, two battle-ready free Black battalions were found. They had been trained by the Spanish long before the United States bought the Louisiana Territory. General Jackson hastily summoned these two units through a letter to Governor Claiborne of Louisiana. It is evident that these two battalions were the key factors in determining the victory for America and the loss for Britain. They were indeed a vital part of the front line defense.

General Sir Edward Parkenham sailed from Jamaica on November 26, 1814 with a British force of 7500 trained and experienced men. Most of them were Peninsular War veterans who had seen action against Napoleon. They landed in the Lake Borgne area three weeks later.

Jackson organized his defensive line along the Rodriguez canal, an abandoned waterway south of the city of New Orleans. His right flank was placed on the Mississippi River so it could not be turned. His left flank was placed on a cypress swamp for the same reason. With Jackson were a small corps of regular soldiers, his favorite units from Tennessee and Kentucky and about 3100 New Orleans militia, which were most likely the free Blacks. He also had 2000 untrained, poorly armed militia in reserve toward the rear.

Before the engagement, through the entire month of December, Blacks along with whites were busily involved strengthening the American defenses. They piled earth and cotton bales along the canal. They laced logs and packed them with mud. When General Parkenham tried to break through on December 28, the defense was easy for the Americans because of the strong fortifications. Artillery and small arms drove the British back.

A British naval attack force attempted to sail up the Mississippi and flank the American position. They were driven back. These were feelers, time consuming tests. However, when all of General Parkenham's troops arrived, his confidence led him to make the all important move on the entrenched Americans.

On January 8, 1814, Parkenham led the first wave of English troops against the American battleworks. His infantry struck with full force. But the trained fire of the American infantry threw them back. The sure shots of the backwoods squirrel shooters picked the British infantrymen off individually.

The British troops regrouped. They charged again. Black men in the breastworks, manning the heavy guns, along with the whites, threw collective power against the invaders. The clash did not rebate immediately. There was a hanging battle and a lingering struggle where bayonet fighting, rifle-butt swinging and short-range rifle and pistol fire came into play. The American artillery lobbed cannon balls at waves of advancing infantry from the British reserve.

Among the 2000 British dead were General Parkenham himself and two of his senior subordinates. Five hundred were captured. One week later, after collecting their wounded and salvaging

This is the second of a monthly series on Black contributions to the defense of our country.



The battle of Lake Erie.

guns, they retreated to their ships in the bay.

It was done. America was free of English threats and entanglements forever. And Black men had died so this could be. The Emancipation Proclamation was still seventy years away. And despite the heroism at Lake Erie and New Orleans, there was still opposition to Blacks fighting in America's wars. The skills, the daring and the dedication of Black fighters were known by all, yet white Americans still had reservations about arming them. In 1814, thousands of Americans were still

alive who remembered the Black performances at Bunker Hill, Trenton, Saratoga, Rhode Island and Valley Forge.

But the Blacks had excelled in battle on land and on sea for America. With reminiscent irony in 1820, six years after New Orleans, a general order came from Washington. It announced that no Black or mulatto would be accepted as a recruit in the United States Army.

General Jackson became the seventh President of the United States in 1836. At no time did he challenge the system of slavery or the inequality of Black servicemen and citizens.

Joe Joseph

Your Community Insurance Man



3933 N.E. Union  
282-3680



We know the election game is a rip off . . .

But its the best we have for now

Representative Wally Priestley

Democrat - District 16

We shall overcome!

Venceremos!

Democrats to Keep Wally Priestley Fighting for the People; Anne Knutson, Secretary.



a bargain in nutrition  
White—100% Whole Wheat—Wheat  
Hillbilly—Roman Meal—Rye

Franz THE good BREAD

## Citizen of the Week



DeWayne Van Sicle is a Senior at Jefferson High School, with a grade point average of 3.97.

DeWayne is active in school, being the editor of the yearbook, a member of the National Honor Society, and a member of the football rally squad. He played freshman basketball, was an advisor at Outdoor School, works at the University of Portland during the summer, and has worked for Willamette Week.

DeWayne received the Lloyd Center Optimist Club 1974-1975 Academic Achievement Award. He won a city wide math test sponsored by the CPA's and was invited to attend the conference in Portland. He won a four year Business Administration scholarship to the University of Portland.

DeWayne is the son of Marlene Whitehead and Dale Van Sickle. He has one sister, Sharon, who is a graduate of Jefferson.

Use all you need  
but save all you can . . .  
The People at Pacific Power.

## FRED'S PLACE

"Kitchen Under  
New  
Management"

Favorite  
Waitress Back

GOOD FOOD

Many Varieties  
Good Southern  
Cooking

Weekdays

Lunch 9 a.m. til 2 p.m.

Dinner 5 p.m. til 8 p.m.

Fri.-Sat. 10 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

2511 N.E. Union