

An 1815 sketch shows in detail the battle of January 8. Col. Rennie storms Jackson's advance redoubt in the foreground, while Gibbs and Pakenham lead the main forces against the Kaintucks near the swamp in the background. Keane leads his troops diagonally across Chalmette to the aid of Gibbs. Clouds of gunsmoke reveal artillery locations.

Reprinted from the American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin 54:2-10  
Additional articles available at <http://americansocietyofarmscollectors.org/resources/articles/>

# New Orleans, 1815: the End and a New Beginning

Lynn Chenault

## ENTREE

Dawn broke in silence over the fog-shrouded plantation fields, but the silent air was heavy with more than fog: it was charged with tension and anticipation. Today was the day. January 8, 1815. The crack British troops quietly formed up their precision columns on the fields separating the Villere and Macarty plantations, nine miles below New Orleans. The Mississippi River was to their left and an impenetrable swamp to their right.

Today was the day that this magnificent fighting machine would crush their foe, as they had so many times, blazing their way across the field with musket fire, swarming over the breastworks for hand-to-hand combat. It was all very familiar to them. The hapless American "dirtyshirts" would be put to the bayonet. The insolent American commander would at last be forced to capitulate to his masters.

The pride of the British Army would again be bathed in glory. Each man would feel that pride, and not the least of which would be their dashing young commander, Major General Sir Edward Michael Packenham. All could be proud to serve with him! Brother-in-law and student of the Duke of Wellington (the "Iron Duke," most popular military figure in Britain), Packenham was apparently designated to be the new Governor of Louisiana after this victory. Already civil servants waited in the wings for the victory celebrations and the establishment of British rule over this trading focus at the mouth of the mighty Mississippi River drainage.

It was a well planned action in the classic style. There could be little doubt that the brilliant young Packenham would carry the day. Three experienced Major Generals were at his side to assist: Gibbs, Keane, and Lambert. Admiral Alexander Cochrane was poised with the British fleet to sweep into New Orleans. Packenham himself would lead the 5,400 advancing infantry. 2,500 troops would bring up the ladders and bridge the puny moat. 1,000 crack green-jacketed riflemen and the 93rd Scottish Highlanders would throw up a fierce fire, while artillery would breach the hasty mud wall, and scatter the defenders.

Yes, at the end of this day, the American ragamuffins would know the feel of British steel. Such must have been the feelings in the minds of the British Army's finest as they took up their positions on the morning of January 8, 1815, tingling with anticipation and shivering in the cold, damp fog. Or so it might seem.



## PROLOGUE

It had been a long, hard pathway to this spot. This war with the Americans was but a sideline contest in the hard-fought Napoleonic Wars for the British. But the war in their former colonies had gone well for them. Even though it was mostly a naval war over naval issues, the British infantry had distinguished themselves on American soil. They'd even captured and burned Washington. Never mind the defeat at Fort McHenry at Baltimore, where Francis Scott Key penned the "Star Spangled Banner." Never mind that. This last major victorious action here in Louisiana, even as the peace negotiations plodded on in Ghent, Belgium, would assure a favorable settlement.

Still, the war had dragged on almost three years since the hostilities had escalated to real warfare in 1812. Even this last grand sweep into the Gulf of Mexico in the autumn of 1814 had seemed to drag on interminably. Mobile had faded as a beachhead as an initial attack was repelled in August. The foothold in Spanish Florida had been given up when Jackson took Pensacola in November. The voyage across the Gulf from Jamaica had been rough. The seas were so high with winter storms that it was impossible to go on deck.

Finally, the naval maneuverings gave way to the tried and true British infantry assault plan. New Orleans was to be the target. An approach up the Mississippi was ill-advised, since it was too well fortified, so Admiral Cochrane brought General John Keane and an advance force of 1800 men through Lake Borgne and up Bayou Bienvenue toward the river. The 60 mile ferry from the anchorage at Ship Island to the staging area at Pea Island

in Lake Borgne had been miserably cold, wet, and cramped. Pea Island itself had been a living hell for a week, awash with frigid water and no shelter.

The day-long pull from Pea Island to the swamps picked for the landing was worse than the earlier ferry, and saw men die of exposure in the sheets of freezing rain and wind. Slogging through the Cypress swamps in the cold, wet Louisiana winter was exhausting. The heavy equipment of war had to be carried in through the mire. Infantrymen had to carry cannonballs in their backpacks. There was little food. The West India Regiment, unused to the rigors of the swamp in winter, were sick. Many had died of exposure. The portage through the swamp, infested with torpid alligators, drained the last of his men's strength and spirits. With the easy conquest of the Villere plantation, Keane decided his men needed a rest. So fires were built, the meager food prepared, and the men were lounging about when darkness fell on December 23rd. Colonel Thornton and Admiral Cochrane wanted to press on toward New Orleans. But Keane knew that his men were exhausted.

Keane hesitated. Americans, captured during the Lake Borgne crossing, were overheard talking about an enemy force in New Orleans ten times the number of Keane's. Perhaps it would be wise to wait for Packenham and the reinforcements. They had captured the Villere plantation without a shot being fired. Surely, the men should rest until December 25, when the superior commander could bring the British force to 15,000, strong enough to assault the unaware Americans.

It was a grave error. The captives had been instructed to plant their false story by Major General Andrew Jackson, U.S. Army. He had anticipated the British move on New Orleans, and had arrived himself on December 1, but he was able to muster no more of a force than Keane had on December 23. Help was on the way, but his force would never reach more than about 4,000. Many were unarmed. It was a magnificent deception.

There was to be no rest that night. Jackson had sworn: "They shall not rest on our soil!" and he was a man of his word. A surprise attack shattered their interlude, with shells raining down from the *Carolina* and a shore battery, and regular and guerilla actions breaking out all about them in the dark. It was chaos in the British camp. Had General David Morgan only attacked their flank from the Jumonville plantation, they might have been destroyed. But finally they rallied, and Jackson fell back in the wee hours of the morning to a position at the Macarty plantation, and started work on a mud fortification just behind a drainage ditch called the Rodrigue canal.

Nor was there to be any rest in the days to come. The *Carolina* kept up her blistering fire until she was

finally sunk on the 27th. Each night raiding parties of backwoodsmen from Tennessee and Choctaw Indians picked off sentries, and generally made life miserable for the hungry, sleepless British. By the time Packenham arrived on Christmas Day, morale was at a low ebb. He realized fighting men need to fight, and threw up an attack, dubiously called a reconnaissance, on the 28th. It was repelled by artillery and a few Indian sharpshooters, but only by a narrow margin. Packenham, with an error in timing, called a retreat just as the green Tennesseans almost fell back before Colonel Robert Rennie's troops. This further depressed spirits rather than strengthening them. The only reward was that the hated *Carolina* had been sunk by hot shot in her magazine. But the *Louisiana* had been saved and continued the bombardment.

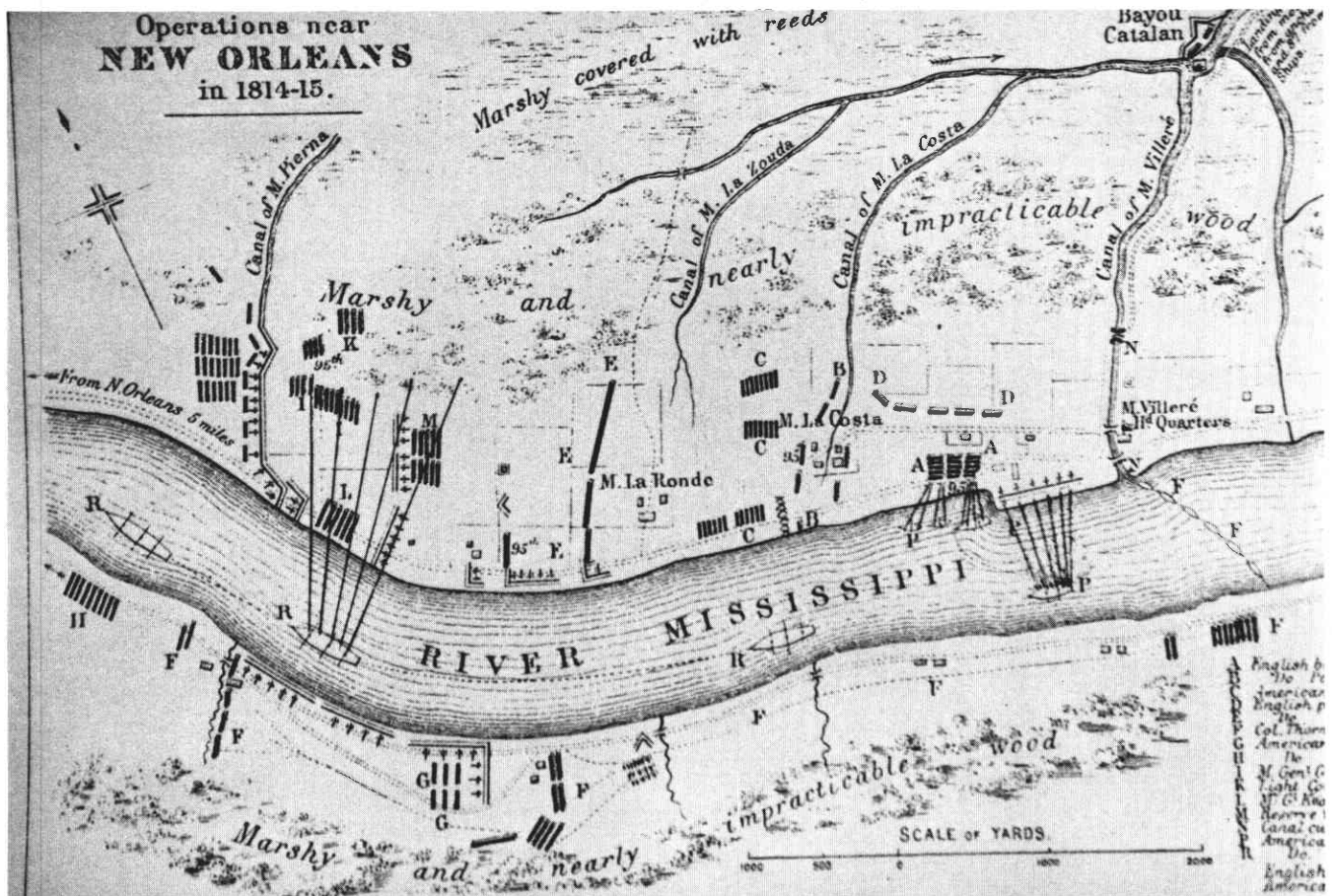
Packenham decided to make it an artillery duel and had naval guns brought up from the fleet for an attack on January 1. Another miserable failure. Lafitte's privateers and the French artillerymen who joined Jackson's regulars made short work of the hasty British gun emplacements, and the British ran out of ammunition.

As Packenham readied a third plan, the nighttime raids by the American "dirtyshirts" continued. Dissension and desertions grew. Food was short. The weather was miserable, the ground a quagmire. Men arose with their clothes frozen to them in the mornings, and faced bitter rainstorms by day. The plan to capture Patterson's artillery on the west bank went bad on the night of January 7, when a hasty engineering job failed.

And so it came to pass that on the morning of January 8, 1815, as Britain's finest lined up in the dark to be slaughtered, they were not entirely filled with fighting spirit.



**Kaintucks, the rugged mountain men of Tennessee and Kentucky, came to Jackson's call for help in defending the Gulf Borderlands. Experienced hunters of game and Indians, and armed with accurate long-range rifles, they were a valuable force.**



A composite map showing actions from December 23 to January 8. The *Carolina* can be seen shelling the British encampment at Villere's plantation, and the *Louisiana* raking the troops on Chalmette's fields.

## THE BATTLE

As the early morning fog lifted on January 8, a signal rocket split the air. Jackson and his ragtag "Army" of "rabbit hunters" were to behold literally thousands of Redcoats marching toward their hasty fortification in waves of red. Precision units marched onward in straight lines. White belts crossed their chests, pinned with a shiny plate in the center. Nine hundred Green Jackets, armed with Baker rifles, bore down upon them. A thousand Scottish Highlanders in full tartans advanced along the river. These tall, fierce fighters knew no fear. The hackles of the backwoodsmen in Jackson's line must have tingled in some awe.

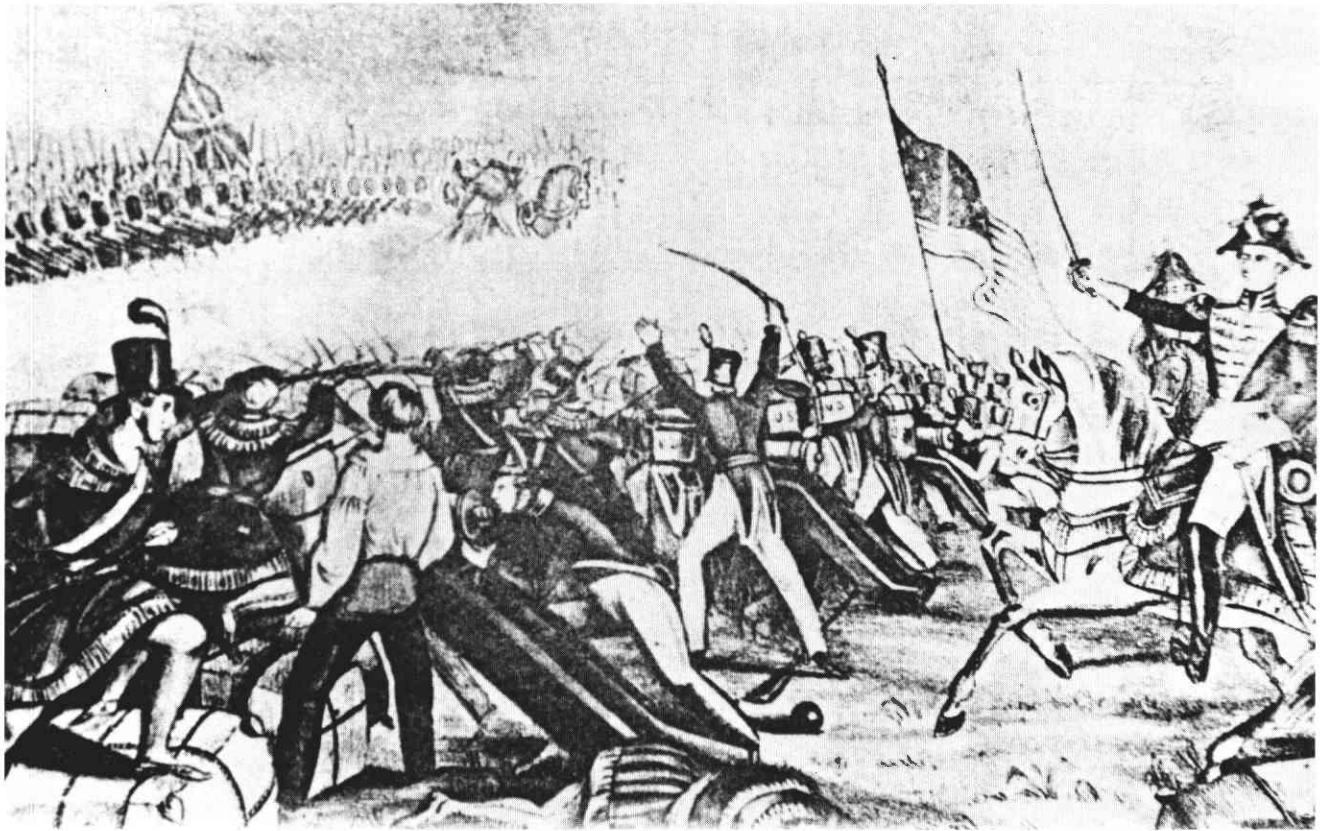
Jackson was calm. He let the Redcoats advance to about 250 yards and begin firing. Finally, he said, "Give it to them, boys, let's finish this business today!" As LaFitte's expert artillerymen raked the field, the riflemen from Kentucky and Tennessee tuned up. General John Adair picked out a British officer on horseback, and told one of his Kentucky riflemen to "snuff his candle." The next instant was his last.

So intense and devastating was the firing from the American line, that the British reported that it appeared like an open furnace, with the sound of rolling thunder never ceasing. The hunters from the Kaintuck country

had been told to aim for the shiny buckles at the crossing of the white belts. For them, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Officers and enlisted men were mowed down. The British broke ranks. Some began to run.

Packenham was appalled. He mounted and rode forward, waving his hat to urge his troops back into battle. He made an attractive target. A bullet shattered his leg, killing his horse. He remounted and continued for about 30 yards before being shot from the saddle. General Samuel Gibbs took command and was picked off by a Tennessee rifleman. The main force was in disarray. Seeing this, General Keane turned his forces to their aid, quartering across the field. He was shot down, along with most of his men. General John Lambert tried to bring up the reinforcements, but they ran into their own comrades in panic. Finally, Lambert had enough, and called a general retreat. The attack had been focussed on Packenham's notion of the weakest link in Jackson's line. General John Coffee's 800 Tennessee riflemen joined General John Carroll's 1,400 Tennesseans at this point, backed by Adair's 520 Kentuckians and Jugeaut's 60 Choctaws. Riflemen stood 4 deep waiting for a chance to shoot at the British.

At the end of about two hours, the fields of Chalmette were a sea of red-clad bodies. 2,036 British



By the time the British lines had advanced from their initial range of 400 yards to about 250 yards in front of Jackson's line, both sides began firing.

casualties littered the field. Many were mortally wounded, and died at the rate of 60 a day for a week and a half. Some were lying with their fallen comrades, hoping to escape being slain. It was said that one could have crossed the battlefield to where Pakenham had fallen without stepping on anything but redcoats. The red waves of dawn were now still.

Historians are still arguing over what the deciding factors in the fight for New Orleans were, and the reasons that things took the turn that they did. Even eye witnesses could not agree. Jackson's superiority was clearly not in numbers, nor in his troops' military precision and training. Nor does he appear to have been Pakenham's superior in battlefield strategy.

Clearly, Jackson's artillery had the British out-gunned, and his defensive position was excellent. His 800 regulars of the 7th and 44th regiments were armed with bayonet-attached Model 1795 and 1806 Springfield type muskets, caliber .69. Probably, man-for-man, they were no real match for the British line that had beaten Napoleon.

I think it was the "irregulars," and to a certain extent their arms, that made the difference. No, it was not just Kentucky rifles against British smoothbore Brown Bess muskets. The 900 British Green Jackets of the 95th Rifle Regiment were well armed with the short, .64 caliber Baker rifles. Bayonets, affixed to the reliable .75 caliber

Brown Bess muskets would have made a big difference if the British could have penetrated the American line in force. But the few who did were shot or captured by the riflemen who fell back out of bayonet range to fire, never having to rely on the long dirks and tomahawks they carried. The British were very well armed (except for artillery), and in fact had given away to Indians, whom they hoped to lure into their service, more guns than Jackson's whole force could muster. Their muskets were in good order, and each man was issued 60 rounds of ammunition.

Jackson, on the other hand, had used up the 500 muskets in the New Orleans armory before he got the militia armed. He had ordered 1,000 muskets from Pittsburgh in August, but the first shipment did not arrive until January 23, when the British were gone. Private homes and merchants of the city were scoured for arms, finally resorting to old Spanish muskets in ill-repair, and fowling pieces.

General Coffee's Tennesseans brought their own arms, some military issue from the Creek wars, some civilian arms from home. When Pakenham's scouts observed their arrival they reported that "Jackson's Army is composed largely of rude backwoodsmen with no shoes, dressed in animal skins, and armed with shoddy, home-made weapons." They had derisively referred to them as "dirtyshirts." They soon found that these



**The British, armed with bayonets fixed on long Brown Bess muskets, would have a decided advantage over Jackson's "dirtyshirts" if only they could breach the Americans' mud fortification. The few who did not die in the ditch were shot or captured as they surmounted the wall.**

hunters were accustomed to shooting squirrels out of the tops of trees and saving the meat. They were terrorized regularly by "hunting parties" whom they began to refer to as "assassins" and "savages." One Tennessean, on a night-time "hunting party," picked off three sentries in a row and brought back their arms to the American lines. Most of these backwoodsmen were armed with American rifles, quite practical in design and style.

On the other extreme, an elderly Virginian named Thomas Beale had organized the volunteer Orleans Rifle Company, composed of 62 merchants and lawyers who were expert marksmen and fond of shooting for sport. They armed themselves, most likely with rather fine "long rifle guns." They distinguished themselves in two ways: almost half of them were captured in the night raid of December 23. The remainder held Jackson's right flank against the river levee attack by Keane on January 8. One of them killed Colonel Robert Rennie as he topped their wall, with a shot precisely between the eyes. One of these sharpshooters, who were clad in blue hunting shirts and black slouch hats, was William Ross, and his fine Virginia-made longrifle is now in the collection of Robert J. Melancon in Louisiana.

Finally, on January 4th, the ailing General John Thomas had arrived from Kentucky with 2,300 volunteers. Jackson was astounded to learn that only 500 had guns. Most thought they would be supplied by Jackson,

but the 1,000 muskets had not arrived from Pittsburgh. Jackson is said to have exclaimed "I don't believe it; I have never in my life seen a Kentuckian without a gun, a pack of cards, and a jug of whiskey!" The town was searched again, and a few more guns turned up, many almost useless. Finally, Jackson disarmed 4 companies of militia and gave the guns to the Kentuckians, bringing their armed force to 900.

Brigadier General John Adair put 520 of his best Kentucky riflemen in the main line to strengthen the juncture of Coffee and Carroll's Tennesseans. The rest with arms went to the west bank to try to help General David Morgan defend Commodore Patterson's artillery (unsuccessfully, as again Morgan's inept leadership almost lost the day for Jackson). The unarmed Kentuckians were put in Jackson's second line to show force, if nothing else.

All-in-all, there were likely no more than 1,000-1,500 "Kentucky" rifles in the battle, along with about 2,500 Springfield-type muskets and an assortment of odd arms on Jackson's line. They faced some 8,000 or so British Brown Bess muskets and 900 Baker rifles. So, it is unlikely that the American longrifle by itself turned the tide of battle as is (and was) popularly believed. But the American fighting men must have been the most important deciding factor.



General Andrew Jackson had taken a British sabre across his face during the Revolution, and he hated the British as much as he loved to fight. He had crushed the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend, and was back at home in Tennessee itching for action when word of the British presence in the Gulf came. He rushed to Mobile, since it was the best approach to New Orleans.

## EPILOGUE

Dawn of January 19, 1815, was silent. Too silent. Jackson sent scouts to find out why. Under the cover of darkness, Lambert had withdrawn, back through the mire of the alligator infested swamps, leaving behind only those too badly injured to travel. Jackson, warily, did not pursue. The British force was still mightier than his own, even in defeat. There was a final skirmish back at Mobile, but in the midst of the action, word came that the Treaty of Ghent had been signed on December 24, 1814, ending the war and wasting the lives of between two and three thousand British soldiers on the fields of Chalmette. The most spectacular land battle of the war of 1812, and the most decisive American victory, had occurred more than two weeks after the war was over!

Was it worth it? Well, it certainly was to America. Jackson had lost seven killed and six wounded in the battle. The victory was sweet to him. He had taken a British sabre across his face in the Revolution, and he hated the British as much as he loved to fight. Word of his victory reached the East, where spirits were at a low ebb. He had been a hero in the West, now he was catapulted to the hero of the nation. The victory at New Orleans was celebrated in song and story. Jackson's popularity soared.

Andrew Jackson had an air of command that had mobilized an apathetic citizenry in New Orleans overnight. Now he was swept in as the 7th President of the



General John Coffee of Tennessee, Jackson's old friend and fighting partner, brought 800 volunteer riflemen. Most, like Coffee, were veterans of Jackson's campaign to crush the Creek Indians. Jackson presented Coffee with a sword, now in the collection of Clarence Runtsch.

United States, the first to have come from the masses rather than the aristocracy. It signalled a new emergence in many ways. This first President OF the people instituted many changes in our way of government. The British grudgingly accepted our existence and eventually became our allies. The style of the warfare began to change.

The style of weapons also changed. Military weapons were slowly in transition from muskets toward the more accurate rifles, but a more dramatic and rapid change came in the style of civilian weapons in this country. The practical nature of the native American longrifle had given way to acceptance of the "Golden Age" of style and decorative arts, as a newly spirited public began to take pride in their country, themselves, and their arms.

During the years between the Revolution and the War of 1812, American gunsmiths fully adapted the husky German Jaeger to the hunting and survival environment of Eastern America. The American longrifle emerged as a graceful and stylish arm, with tasteful and beautiful decoration of a folk-art form. Many found their way west with the pathfinders and settlers of the Kentucky and Tennessee wilderness country.

National pride soared after Jackson's victory, and many wanted "rifle-guns" to be proud of, often including decoration of a patriotic nature, such as federal eagles, etc. At first, this added decoration was executed as tastefully, as had been the simpler style of the earlier



**Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, commanding a British Fleet of more than 50 ships, was the mastermind of the wars in the Gulf borderlands. It was said that he was driven by greed for the rich stores and money in New Orleans.**



**General Packenham died a martyred hero's death on the battlefield at Chalmette rather than return to England with the humiliation of defeat.**

guns. But gradually, decoration, especially in brass, replaced grace, beauty, and style as the key feature of the American longrifle. The gunsmiths of the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania maintained the clean, graceful lines of their style after many of the "schools" of gunsmithing had declined in this respect.

But by the time of the next major conflict in the South, this time in Texas, most of the fine style was gone. The Moll family in Allentown, for example, was engaged in gunsmithing for over a hundred years (since 1764) and observed the complete cycle, emergence and decline of style in the Kentucky rifle.

Today, collectors of Kentucky Rifles prize most highly those guns that were crafted in the period from about 1790 to 1830. Certainly, the arms made earlier are more rare, and those made later are more highly decorated. But most of the earlier rifles do not exhibit the emergence of the true American style. Rather, they are still clearly adaptations of European arms, and are often quite practical in nature. The emergence of the new nation, and its pride, was reflected in the craftsmanship and artistry of its gunsmiths. The Battle of New Orleans was the culmination of that emergence.

And so the historic fight for New Orleans and the Kentucky Rifle are intertwined.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

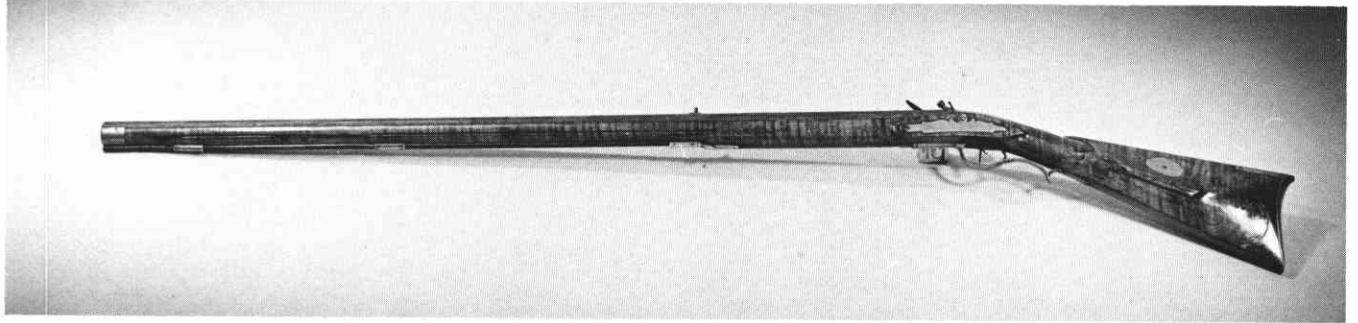
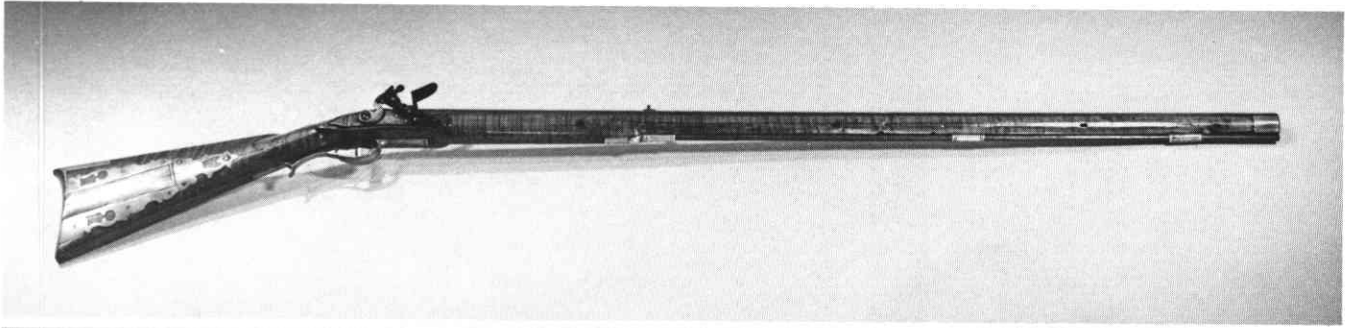
Many thanks to Clarence Runtsch for information of Coffee's

sword, to Ralph Dobbins for the loan of Gleig's book, and especially to Bob Melancon for the materials on the William Ross rifle, shown on the next page.

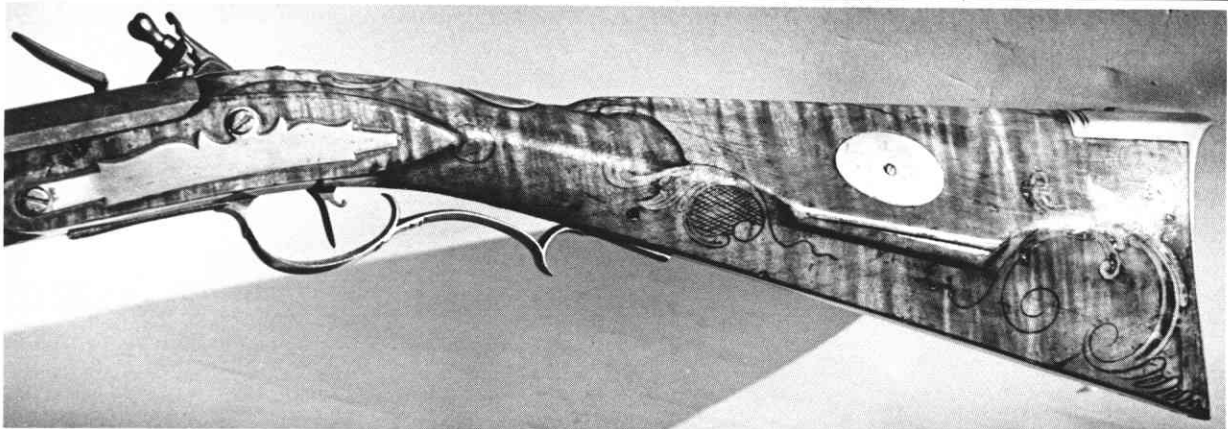
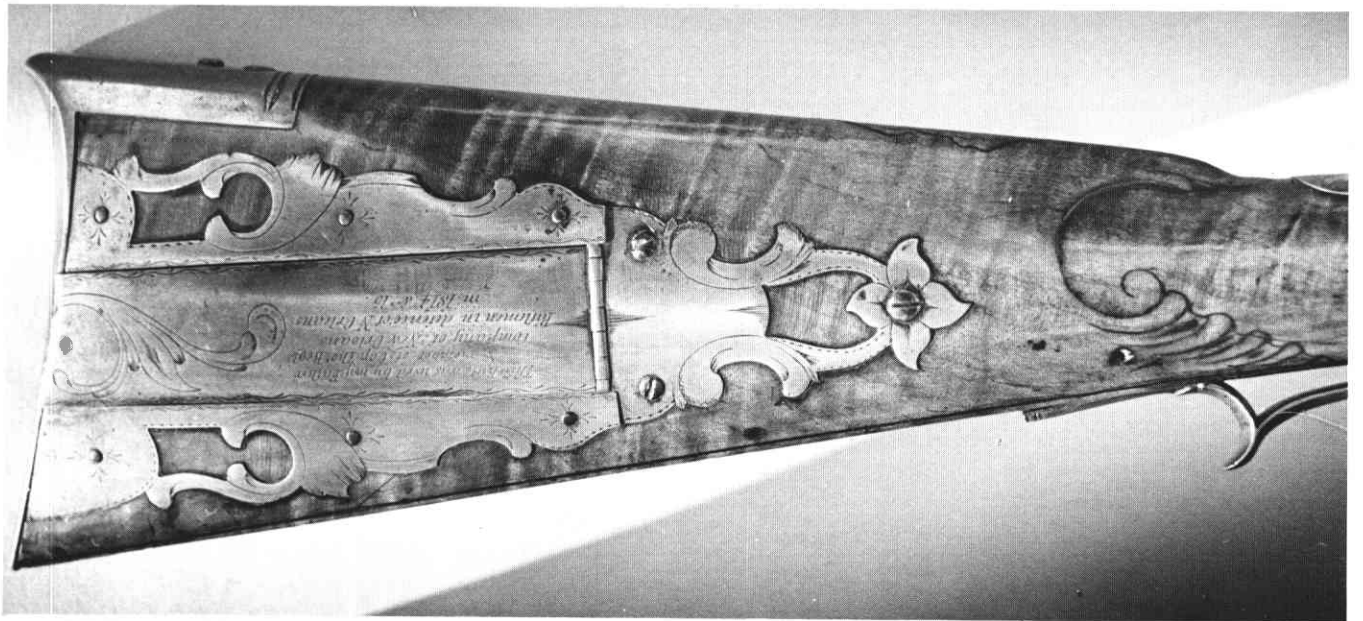
#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carter, Samuel III, *Blaze Of Glory — The Fight For New Orleans 1814-15*, Macmillan 1971
- Casey, Powell A, *Louisiana at the Battle of New Orleans*, The Battle of New Orleans 150th Anniversary Committee of Louisiana, 1965
- Christian, Markus, *Negro Soldiers in the Battle of New Orleans*, The Battle of New Orleans 150th Anniversary Committee of Louisiana, 1965
- DeGrummond, Jane Lucas and Ronald R. Morazan, *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans with Biographical Sketches of the Veterans of the Battalion of Orleans, 1814-1815 Legacy*, 1961
- Forrest, Charles Ramos, *The Battle of New Orleans — A British View* Hauser 1961
- Gleig, George, *A Narrative of the Campaigns of the British Army at Washington and New Orleans*, John Murray 1821
- Huber, Leonard V., *The Battle of New Orleans and its Monument*, Laborde, 1983
- Latour, Arcene Lacarrier, *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana, 1814-15*, Conrad 1816
- Leavitt, Mel, *The Battle That Missed the War*, WDSU-TV
- Marrin, Albert, *1812 — The War Nobody Won — Antheneum* 1985
- McCracken, Joseph H., "Victory at New Orleans 1815," *Bulletin* #41 American Society of Arms Collectors, 1979
- Owsley, Frank L., *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands*, University of Florida 1981
- Reilly, Robin, *The British at the Gates*, Cassell — 1974
- Roush, J. Fred, *Chalmette National Historical Park*, National Park Service 1977
- Warner, Robert, "In Defense of a Queen 1800-1870," *Bulletin* #41 American Society of Arms Collectors, 1979





A fine Virginia longrifle made by John Sheetz, which was carried by militiaman William Ross of Beale's Rifle Company in the defense of New Orleans. (collection of Robert J. Melancon)



Buttstock of the William Ross rifle. The inscription on the patchbox reads: **THIS RIFLE WAS USED BY MY FATHER Wm ROSS MEMBER OF CAP. THOM'S BEAL'S COMPANY OF NEW ORLEANS RIFLEMAN IN DEFENCE OF N. ORLEANS 1814-1815 / JAMES ROSS 1835**