

WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT

The Transformation
of America, 1815–1848

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Introduction

On the twenty-fourth of May 1844, Professor Samuel F. B. Morse, seated amidst a hushed gathering of distinguished national leaders in the chambers of the United States Supreme Court in Washington, tapped out a message on a device of cogs and coiled wires:

WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT

Forty miles away, in Baltimore, Morse's associate Alfred Vail received the electric signals and sent the message back. The invention they had demonstrated was destined to change the world. For thousands of years messages had been limited by the speed with which messengers could travel and the distance at which eyes could see signals such as flags or smoke. Neither Alexander the Great nor Benjamin Franklin (America's first postmaster general) two thousand years later knew anything faster than a galloping horse. Now, instant long-distance communication became a practical reality. The commercial application of Morse's invention followed quickly. American farmers and planters—and most Americans then earned a living through agriculture—increasingly produced food and fiber for distant markets. Their merchants and bankers welcomed the chance to get news of distant prices and credit. The *New York Journal of Commerce*, conceived by Morse himself and published by the famous Christian businessmen and philanthropists Arthur and Lewis Tappan, could put such intelligence carried over the telegraph to good use. The *Journal* has published continuously from 1827 to the present—since 2000 on the Internet as well as in print.

This book is a narrative history of the American republic between 1815 and 1848, that is, from the end of the War of 1812 to the end of the war with Mexico. Along with the traditional subject matter of history—political, diplomatic, and military events—the story includes the social, economic, and cultural developments that have extensively concerned historians in recent years. This reflects my own conviction that both kinds of history are essential to a full understanding of the past.

The invention of electric telegraphy, coming near the close of the period treated here, represented a climactic moment in a widespread revolution of communications. Other features of this revolution included improvements in printing and paper manufacturing; the multiplication

of newspapers, magazines, and books; and the expansion of the postal system (which mostly carried newspapers and commercial business, not personal letters). Closely related to these developments occurred a simultaneous revolution in transportation: the introduction of steamboats, canals, turnpikes, and railroads, shortening travel times and dramatically lowering shipping costs. How these twin revolutions transformed American life will be central to the story told here. Their consequences certainly rivaled, and probably exceeded in importance, those of the revolutionary "information highway" of our own lifetimes.

Morse's telegraph had particular importance for a large country with a population spreading into increasingly remote areas. Thomas Jefferson had declared the United States "an empire for liberty" and by his Louisiana Purchase had put the new nation on course to dominate the North American continent. In 1845, the ambition to occupy still more land would be characterized by John L. O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review* as the fulfillment of America's "manifest destiny"—a term that soon became as important as "empire" to describe American nationhood. Samuel F. B. Morse shared this view, which he reinforced with a religious sense of divine providence. Nation-builders awaited news as eagerly as did people selling crops.

Within a few days of the initial demonstration of his invention, Morse was keeping members of Congress in Washington abreast of developments at the Democratic national convention in Baltimore as they happened. The professor felt disappointment when his favorite candidate, the imperialist Lewis Cass of Michigan, missed out on the presidential nomination but was soon reassured to report that it went to another expansionist, James Knox Polk of Tennessee. Polk won the ensuing election and led the country into a war with Mexico. The conquest of that large republic by the small armed forces of the United States, despite formidable geographical difficulties and in the face of a hostile population, constituted one of the most amazing military achievements of the nineteenth century, and the early telegraph lines helped keep the U.S. president and public abreast of events. When the momentous conflict came to a close, the United States stretched from sea to sea, having acquired Texas, California, and everything in between. The electric telegraph then helped integrate this continental empire.

The text of Morse's demonstration message came from the Bible: "It shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought!" (Numbers 23:23). Credit for applying the verse to this occasion belongs to Nancy Goodrich Ellsworth, who suggested it to her daughter Annie, who in turn provided it to Morse. (The professor was in love with Annie.) The quotation proved the perfect choice, capturing the inventor's own passionate Christian faith and conception of himself as an instrument of providence.

As Morse later commented, the message "baptized the American Telegraph with the name of its author": God.¹ The American public appreciated the significance of the message, for biblical religion then permeated the culture in ways both conventional and sincerely felt. Morse's invocation of the Bible typified that recurrent importance of religion which has long characterized American history.

Morse's synthesis of science and religion represented the predominant American attitude of the time; only a few eccentrics believed there was any conflict between scientific and religious truth. Revelation and reason alike, Americans were confident, led to knowledge of God and His creation. Religious awakening, expansion of education, interest in science, and technological progress all went hand in hand. Evangelists welcomed technological advances along with mass education as helping them spread the good news of Christ. Literature, like education and science, was saturated with religious meanings and motivations. The writers of America's literary renaissance took advantage of the improvements in communications technology to market their art and their moral values to larger and more widespread audiences than writers had ever before enjoyed.

A combination of Protestantism with the Enlightenment shaped American culture and institutions. Morse's telegraph appealed to both these strains in American ideology, for it fostered what contemporaries called the brotherhood of man and could also be viewed as promoting the kingdom of God. Many Americans interpreted their nation's destiny in religious terms, as preparing the world for a millennial age of free institutions, peace, and justice. A Methodist women's magazine explained the role that the electric telegraph would play in this process, revealing both the optimism and the arrogance characteristic of the time:

This noble invention is to be the means of extending civilization, republicanism, and Christianity over the earth. It must and will be extended to nations half-civilized, and thence to those now savage and barbarous. Our government will be the grand center of this mighty influence. . . . The beneficial and harmonious operation of our institutions will be seen, and similar ones adopted. Christianity must speedily follow them, and we shall behold the grand spectacle of a whole world, civilized, republican, and Christian. . . . Wars will cease from the earth. Men "shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks." . . . Then shall come to pass the millennium.²

1. Quoted in Samuel Prime, *The Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York, 1875), 494.
2. "The Magnetic Telegraph," *Ladies' Repository* 10 (1850): 61–62; quoted in James Moorhead, *American Apocalypse* (New Haven, 1978), 6.

The first practical application of Morse's invention—to report a political party convention—was no accident. The formation of mass political parties, their organization on local, state, and national levels, the application of government patronage to knit them together, their espousal of rival political programs, and their ability to command the attention of the public all combined to give this period of American history its distinctive, highly politicized quality. The rise of mass parties has often been traced to the broadening of the franchise (the right to vote) to include virtually all adult white males. However, no such parties with mass followings could have come into existence without the revolution in communication. Many newspapers of the time were the organs of a political party, existing to propagate its point of view; influential policymakers might be former journalists.³ The newspapers quickly enlisted the telegraph in their quest to gather and distribute information; the newspapers of New York City formed the Associated Press wire service "to secure the transmission of news from the South, and particularly from the seat of War in Mexico, in advance of all ordinary channels."⁴

The most common name for the years this book treats is "Jacksonian America." I avoid the term because it suggests that Jacksonianism describes Americans as a whole, whereas in fact Andrew Jackson was a controversial figure and his political movement bitterly divided the American people. Even worse difficulties arise from the familiar expression "Jacksonian Democracy." Our own age finds the limitations on the democracy of that period glaring: the enslavement of African Americans, the abuse of Native Americans, the exclusion of women and most nonwhites from the suffrage and equality before the law. The Jacksonian movement in politics, although it took the name of the Democratic Party, fought so hard in favor of slavery and white supremacy, and opposed the inclusion of nonwhites and women within the American civil polity so resolutely, that it makes the term "Jacksonian Democracy" all the more inappropriate as a characterization of the years between 1815 and 1848. Nor did Andrew Jackson's presidential campaigns constitute a nationwide struggle on behalf of universal white manhood enfranchisement. In most states, white male suffrage evolved naturally and with comparatively little controversy.

3. Jeffrey Pasley has compiled a list, *Printers, Editors, and Publishers of Political Journals Elected to the U.S. Congress, 1789–1861*, found at http://pasleybrothers.com/newspols/images/Editors_in_Congress.pdf (viewed March 2, 2007).
4. Moses Beach in 1853 recalling events in 1846–48, quoted in Menahem Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844–1897* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 50.

The *consequences* of white male democracy, rather than its *achievement*, shaped the political life of this period.⁵

Another term that has sometimes been applied to this period—more by historians than by the general public—is “the market revolution.” I avoid this expression also. Those historians who used it have argued that a drastic change occurred during these years, from farm families raising food for their own use to producing it for distant markets. However, more and more evidence has accumulated in recent years that a market economy already existed in the eighteenth-century American colonies.⁶ To be sure, markets expanded vastly in the years after the end of the War of 1812, but their expansion partook more of the nature of a continuing evolution than a sudden revolution. Furthermore, their expansion did not occur in the face of resistance from any substantial group of people preferring subsistence farming to market participation. Most American family farmers welcomed the chance to buy and sell in larger markets. They did not have to be coerced into seizing the opportunities the market economy presented.

Accordingly, I provide an alternative interpretation of the early nineteenth century as a time of a “communications revolution.” This, rather than the continued growth of the market economy, impressed contemporary Americans as a startling innovation. During the thirty-three years that began in 1815, there would be greater strides in the improvement of communication than had taken place in all previous centuries. This revolution, with its attendant political and economic consequences, would be a driving force in the history of the era.

The America of 1848 had been transformed in many ways: by the growth of cities, by the extension of United States sovereignty across the continent, by increasing ethnic and religious diversity as a result of both immigration and conquest—as well as by expanding overseas and national markets, and by the integration of this vast and varied empire through dramatic and sudden improvements in communications. But while the citizens of the giant republic largely agreed in welcoming the growth of their economy, they were very far from uniting in a bland consensus. The *nature* of the expanding economy constituted one of the

5. My interpretation differs from that presented in Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), which affirms the democratic role conventionally attributed to Andrew Jackson.
6. The older view was powerfully presented in Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York, 1991). For an introduction to the new evidence, see Richard Bushman, “Markets and Composite Farms in Early America,” *WMQ* 55 (1998): 351–74.

most frequently debated issues: Should it remain primarily agricultural, with manufactured products imported, or should economic diversification and development be encouraged along with economic growth?

Not all Americans endorsed their country's imperial destiny of territorial expansion. For some people, the Christian religion provided a fulcrum for criticism of American national aggrandizement rather than an endorsement of it. America's national mission should be one of democratic example rather than conquest, they insisted. The government's massive dispossession of eastern Indian tribes in the 1830s aroused bitter protest. Later, a strong political opposition criticized Polk's war against Mexico. Opponents of slavery deplored territorial expansion as a plan (in the words of the poet James Russell Lowell) "to lug new slave states in." Critics of American culture wondered whether Morse's invention was merely an improved means to an unimproved end. "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas," noted Henry David Thoreau, "but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."⁷

In fact, the various improved means of communication carried very important messages. The early national period witnessed new and controversial ideas being formulated, publicized, and even in many cases implemented. The history of the young American republic is above all a history of battles over public opinion. The political parties debated serious issues, economic and constitutional; political divisions were sharp and party loyalties fierce. Meanwhile, innovators at least as original as Morse explored novel approaches in law, in education, in popular politics, and in corporate organization.⁸ Workers tried to legitimate labor unions in the eyes of public opinion and struck in defiance of the common law. Like technology, politics, and economic development, American religion displayed remarkable originality. Millenarians warned of the imminent Second Coming of Christ. The evangelical movement prompted national soul-searching and argument over the country's goals and the best means to achieve them. Reformers motivated by religion challenged long-held practices relating to the treatment of women, children, and convicts; utopians of every stripe founded communities dedicated to experimenting with new gender roles and family relationships. Manners

7. "The Biglow Papers," *Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell*, ed. Marjorie Kaufman (Boston, 1978), 182; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, intro. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York, 1964), 42.

8. None of the basic science that the electric telegraph applied originated with Morse.

and customs came under as much criticism as institutions: Cockfighting, dueling, and drinking alcohol (among other traditional pursuits) became controversial. All such reforms were created, discussed, and propagated through the enormously expanded media of print and wire. Through these debates, disparate groups competed to define America's national mission. That America, among the nations of the world, had a mission no one doubted. Whatever America stood for, whether an empire for liberty or a light of virtue unto the nations, the Hand of God had wrought it.

More than any other discussion, the debate over the future of human slavery in an empire dedicated to liberty threatened to tear the country apart. The communications revolution gave a new urgency to social criticism and to the slavery controversy in particular. No longer could slaveholders afford to shrug off the commentary of outsiders. Critics of slavery seized upon the new opportunities for disseminating ideas to challenge the institution in the South itself. Alarmed, the defenders of slavery erected barricades against the intrusion of unwelcome expression. Better communication did not necessarily foster harmony.

In the King James Version of the Bible, an exclamation mark follows the words "What hath God wrought." But when Morse transmitted the message, he left off any closing punctuation.⁹ Later, when transcribing the message, Morse added a question mark, and thus it was often printed in accounts of his achievement. This misquotation had its own significance. Morse's question mark unintentionally turned the phrase from an affirmation of the Chosen People's destiny to a questioning of it. What God had wrought in raising up America was indeed contested, in Morse's time no less than it is today. In the title of this book I leave the final punctuation off, as Morse originally did. This allows the title to explore both potential meanings, as the book itself seeks both to affirm and to question the value of what Americans of that period did.

9. The original strip of paper with the dots and dashes of Morse's transmission can be seen at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/athtml/morse2.html> (viewed Feb. 22, 2007). Modern biblical translations render the expression as "See what God has done" (New Revised Standard Version) or "Yea Israel, what God has planned" (Jewish Study Bible).

Prologue: The Defeat of the Past

January 1, 1815, dawned faintly through the dense fog over southern Louisiana. Six miles downstream from New Orleans, two hostile armies hid from each other in the enveloping mists. The invaders consisted of eight thousand British soldiers, some still in ships offshore, commanded by Major General Edward Pakenham. To defend the city, the United States had so far gathered no more than four thousand men under Major General Andrew Jackson. Though small by the standards of Napoleonic Europe, these were large armies for North America. A severe winter all over the Atlantic world slowed communication and made transportation difficult. Neither army knew that across the ocean, representatives of their respective countries had signed a treaty of peace eight days earlier. They did know that heavy rains had fallen on them almost every day since the British landing two weeks before and that the nights were frosty and chill. The British had to operate at the end of a tenuous supply line, without tents and on short rations. Suffering especially were the eleven hundred black colonial troops from the British West Indies. Not acclimated to winter weather and still wearing thin tropical uniforms, some of these men died of hypothermia.¹

Behind the curtain of fog, each army was active. The Americans celebrated New Year's Day with a parade review of their motley army. Jackson's force counted but few regulars. There were Tennessee militia (the component with whom the Tennessee general felt most comfortable), Louisiana militia, mostly French-speaking, and mounted Mississippi dragoons. There was an Irish American regiment called the Louisiana Blues, and two battalions of black men, one made up of African Americans and the other of Haitian immigrants. Some of the black soldiers were slaves on loan from their masters to the army, but most of them were free men. Jackson addressed the blacks as "brave fellow citizens" and had promised them pay and respect the equal of whites'. Up from their hideout at Barataria came the notorious pirate band of Jean and Pierre Laffite—who had cast their lot with the Americans after deciding that a strong presence

1. Robin Reilly, *The British at the Gates* (London, 1974), 258.

by the Royal Navy was not in their best professional interests. Jackson's orders to this heterogeneous army had to be translated not only into French but also into Spanish (for Louisiana had been a Spanish colony as well as a French colony before becoming an American state) and Choctaw, the language of the Native American allies who protected his left flank. The general had assembled these mixed forces behind a parapet of logs and earth constructed along an abandoned watercourse that had once turned a mill wheel. Called the Rodriguez Canal, this served as a defensive moat in front of the breastwork. On Jackson's right flowed the Mississippi River.²

But on New Year's Day the invaders were even more active: They were preparing an assault on the American line. Shortly before 10:00 A.M. the fog lifted a bit and the British artillery opened its preparatory bombardment, catching the Americans by surprise. Jackson's headquarters building was demolished, although he and his officers miraculously escaped unhurt. Gradually at first, then with increasing determination, the American artillery replied. Each army had improvised shelters for its cannoneers from items available at nearby plantations; the Americans used cotton bales, and the British hogsheads of sugar. Neither stood up well to the test of battle. The British infantry waited, bayonets fixed, for the signal to charge. Pakenham wanted to silence some of his enemies' guns and punch a hole in their defensive works before ordering the assault. For three hours the artillery duel went on. Eventually, with his guns' ammunition running low, Pakenham ceased the bombardment and called off the attack. Although the British artillery was slightly superior to the American as measured by "throw weight," the American gunners had inflicted more damage on their enemy than they sustained themselves. That afternoon it rained again.³

Pakenham decided to wait for reinforcements of men and ammunition before planning another attack. By doing so, however, he accorded Jackson the same opportunity to strengthen his army and its position. Neither general had an inclination to stand on the defensive. Both were tough, seasoned soldiers. Thirty-eight years old, Ned Pakenham had been schooled in the Peninsular War by two of the greatest generals of the age: his patron Wellington and his adversary Napoleon. Unhesitatingly courageous, Pakenham had been twice wounded in action. Andrew Jackson

2. Robert Remini, *The Battle of New Orleans* (New York, 1999), 25–60, 107, 124. Jackson's proclamation "to the free coloured inhabitants of Louisiana," Sept. 21, 1814, is in *Correspondence of AJ*, II, 58–59.
3. Robert S. Quimby, *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812* (East Lansing, Mich., 1997), 875–78, 945.

was forty-seven and in poor health but sustained by indomitable willpower. He told how, as a thirteen-year-old boy during the Revolution, a British officer had struck him in the face with his sword. For the rest of his life, Jackson bore the scars and a bitter hatred of the British. Although he had spent time as a frontier lawyer, cotton planter, and congressman, temperamentally Jackson was always a soldier. Earlier in this war, he had distinguished himself in campaigns against the British, the Spanish, and the Creek Indians. Impatient of restraints, as a military leader Jackson relied as much upon his instinct for command as upon formal authority.

The prize for which the two armies contended was well worth fighting over. The city of New Orleans comprised the second greatest port in the United States (after New York), a position it would retain until surpassed by Los Angeles in the twentieth century. Before the Erie Canal and the railroads, New Orleans constituted the gateway to the world for the whole vast area drained by the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio Rivers. The city had much more export than import trade, for until the arrival of the steamboat it was hard to ship goods up the Mississippi against the current. The census of 1810 had enumerated 24,552 people in greater New Orleans, a big city by North American standards. Cosmopolitan in composition as well as metropolitan in size, its population included French and Spanish Creoles (born in the New World of European descent), émigré French planters fleeing the Haitian Revolution, free people of color (*gens de couleur*), and slaves, some of whom had been illegally smuggled in from overseas. There were immigrants from many European countries and Latin America. Along the Gulf Coast lived the Acadians (the name contracted locally into "Cajuns"), French-speaking refugees from the eighteenth-century ethnic cleansing of Nova Scotia. Americans of Anglo descent comprised only 13 percent of the population of New Orleans.⁴ The trade carried on in the great seaport included just about every agricultural and manufactured product known, and the consumer goods available made the quality of life enviable. Famous for their sophistication and attractiveness, the women of New Orleans were almost the only ones in the United States to use makeup.⁵ The British soldiers downstream, cold and hungry, consoled themselves with dreams of "beauty and booty" once they captured the city.

4. Wilbert Brown, *The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana* (University, Ala., 1969), 36. See also Joseph Tregle, *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson* (Baton Rouge, 1999), 23–41.

5. As late as 1834, an Englishwoman commented that "New-Orleans is the only place in the United States where I am aware of having seen a particle of rouge." Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, ed. Daniel Feller (1838; Armonk, N.Y., 2000), 116.

New Orleans had been U.S. territory only since 1803, and Louisiana had been admitted to statehood as recently as 1812. Knowing that the dominant French community of New Orleans merchants and Louisiana planters despised the recently arrived Yankees, the invaders hoped to recruit the *ancienne population* to their cause. In fact, the Creoles were mostly Bonapartists who considered the United States a lesser evil compared to England. But Andrew Jackson did not feel altogether sure of their loyalty, which was why he imposed martial law in New Orleans on December 16. The New Year's artillery duel, in which many of the guns were served by French-speakers, reassured him somewhat, but he remained impatient for the two thousand Kentucky militiamen floating down the Father of Waters and expected daily.⁶

Upon their arrival on January 4, the reinforcements proved a disappointment. Freezing in their tattered clothing, the Kentuckians lacked tents or blankets to shelter them from the elements. Worst of all, only 550 of them were armed. Because the ordnance department had been unwilling to pay enough to have supplies sent by the fastest means, their weapons and ammunition did not reach New Orleans until after the big battle had been fought. Jackson joked in disgust that it was the first time he'd ever seen a Kentuckian "without a gun, a pack of cards, and a jug of whiskey."⁷ He equipped some of the men with miscellaneous weapons from the armory kept by the city of New Orleans against the possibility of a slave uprising. Pakenham, whose two regiments of reinforcements were meanwhile arriving, had suffered even worse from his government's stinginess. Since the admiralty had not provided the shallow-draft vessels requested, the British had to ferry men and supplies long distances from ships to shore by rowboats—exhausting, slow work for the sailors. As a result, their soldiers suffered shortages of everything, including ammunition and food.⁸

Pakenham could not expect his men to endure these conditions indefinitely; he needed to break through to the shelter and supplies of New Orleans. Jackson, reading the situation the same way, resolved that if he could not defend the city, he would put it to the torch rather than let the British occupy it.⁹ Pakenham devised a complicated plan of attack. He would

6. Remini, *Battle of New Orleans*, 31, 58, 132. On the distrust between Jackson and the Creoles, see Joseph Tregle, "Andrew Jackson and the Continuing Battle of New Orleans," *JER* 1 (1981): 373–94.
7. Brown, *Amphibious Campaign*, 133–34; Jackson quoted in Reilly, *British at the Gates*, 287.
8. Quimby, *U.S. Army*, 814–15.
9. Remini, *Battle of New Orleans*, 98.

ferry a substantial force under Colonel William Thornton across the Mississippi to capture the American guns on the right bank and turn them onto Jackson's own lines. At the opposite end of the battlefield, he would send some of his West Indians and other light infantry to infiltrate the swamps and turn the American left flank. Simultaneously he would mount two assaults across the Chalmette plantation against Jackson's main line of defense. To get across the Rodriguez Canal and over the parapet, each assault would be led by troops carrying fascines (bundles of sugarcane to fill up the ditch) and ladders. It was a plausible plan on paper. Coordinating it all in practice was highly problematic.

The attack on the west bank of the Mississippi got under way late because of the difficulty of transporting troops across the river. On the east bank, the most important of the assault forces had trouble locating the fascines and ladders to use. The commander of the unit assigned to place them, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Mullins, felt his men were being sacrificed on a suicidal mission, and in his resentment neglected to follow orders and ascertain where the equipment was kept. Perhaps Mullins's suspicions were justified: Because his troops were Irish, they might have been thought expendable. (The other unit assigned to place fascines and ladders was West Indian.) But his neglect of duty was clearly wrong and cost his cause dearly.¹⁰

At dawn on Sunday, January 8, Pakenham learned of both potential problems with his plan but gave the signal to attack anyway. Having canceled the New Year's Day offensive, he was in no mood to delay further. If he moved out promptly, the morning mist would still provide some cover for the advance. Pakenham had gambled with risky assaults in the Peninsular War, and they had paid off. This time he made the wrong decision.

The main attack, on Jackson's left center, became hopelessly snarled by the failure of Mullins's 44th Regiment to have the fascines and ladders ready. Men arriving at the canal were mowed down by canister and grapeshot while waiting to cross. A few heroes swam the canal and managed to climb the parapet by using their bayonets, only to be captured or killed when they got over. Meanwhile, the attack through the swamps was frustrated by Tennesseans and Choctaws familiar with the terrain. The assault on Jackson's right, where West Indians carried the fascines and ladders, achieved initial success but was left unsupported. In a final mistake, Pakenham shifted the 93rd Highlanders from following up this penetration of the American line into a futile and costly attempt to help the stalled attack on Jackson's left. What he lacked in judgment the British

10. See Quimby, *U.S. Army*, 895–900.

commander tried to make up in bravery. Wounded twice and with his horse shot from under him, Pakenham insisted on being helped to mount another. From his saddle he waved encouragement to the Highlanders; a moment later a round of grapeshot wounded him mortally.¹¹ Two other British generals and eight colonels also died in the attack. The battle had turned into another Agincourt, with Americans playing the role of the English archers and the British themselves cast as the gallant but luckless French knights. Within a few minutes the British lost 251 killed, 1,259 wounded, and 484 missing. Most of the missing were taken prisoner. When the Americans lifted their fire, some of the men on the ground hesitantly rose with their hands up. Other prisoners were wounded men whom the Americans collected after a temporary truce was agreed. Jackson's army lost but 11 killed and 23 wounded.¹²

Ironically, Colonel Thornton's attack on the other side of the Mississippi, despite its delay, overcame the Kentucky militia and captured the artillery there (too late to affect the main battle). The poorly armed Kentuckians had only just reached the position they were expected to defend, and they behaved the way American militia units often behaved in the War of 1812: They ran away. Jackson made plain his fury at them in his official report to Secretary of War James Monroe. "The Kentucky reinforcement, in whom so much reliance had been placed, ingloriously fled."¹³ Thornton's success might have opened up a route to New Orleans if the British had had any stomach for more fighting. But General John Lambert, who succeeded to the British command, declined to exploit the opportunity and chose to evacuate his exhausted and by now dispirited expeditionary force to its ships.

Some of his officers urged Jackson to take the opportunity to counter-attack. But for once Old Hickory declined to take the offensive. He had saved New Orleans and was content to leave well enough alone. Jackson owed his victory in large part to good fortune and British mistakes. He decided not to press his luck. Jackson recognized the limitations of his untrained militia. Under his inspirational leadership, they had performed well alongside artillery and behind a parapet. He would not risk them in the open field against professional soldiers.¹⁴

With the battle over, Jackson ignored his promise to secure equal

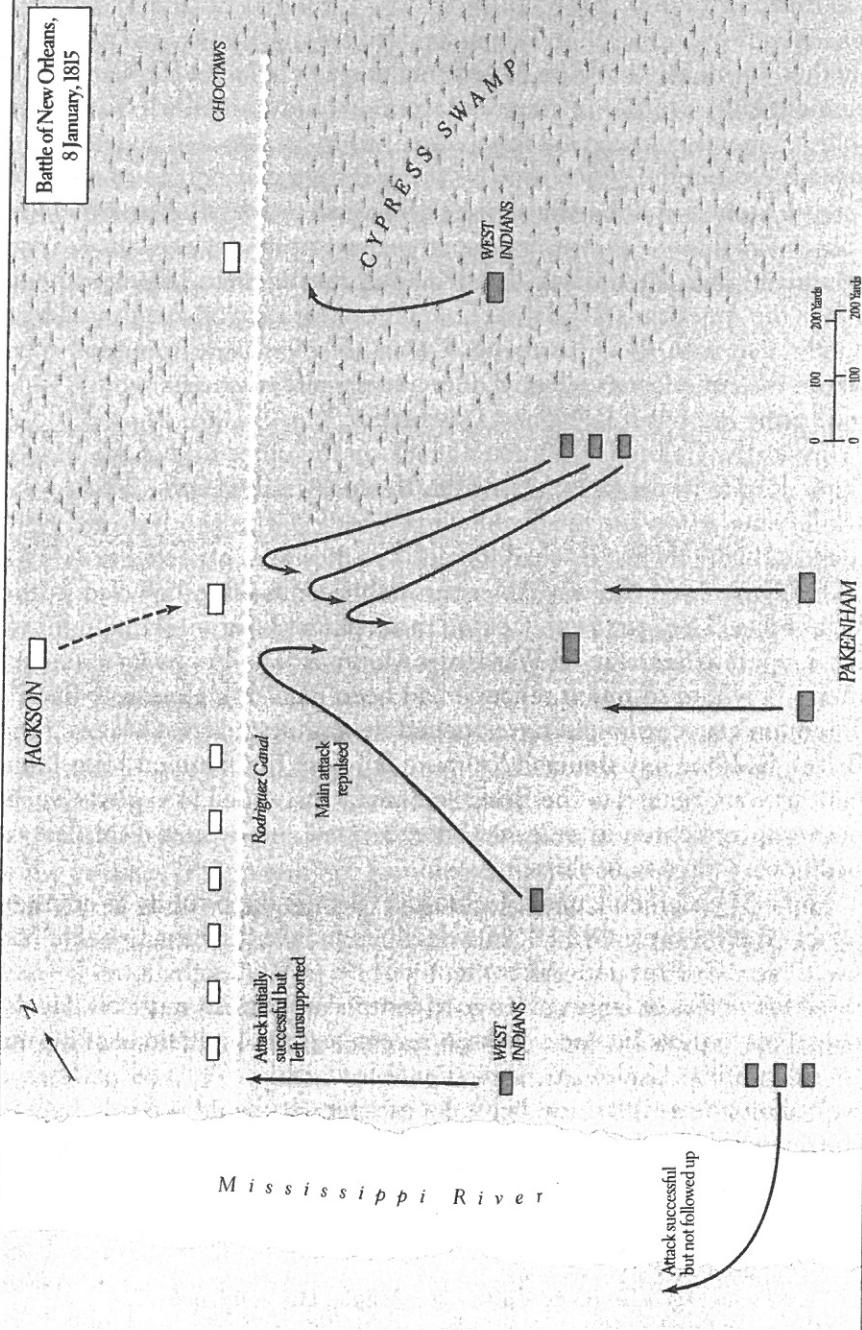
11. Reilly, *British at the Gates*, 300.

12. Some sources give British dead as 291; see Quimby, *U.S. Army*, 906.

13. Quoted in Remini, *Battle of New Orleans*, 162.

14. For a judicious estimate of Jackson's generalship, see J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War* (Princeton, 1985), 498.

Battle of New Orleans,
8 January, 1815



rewards for the black men who had stood with him at the barricade. Besides twenty-four dollars cash, each soldier was supposed to receive 160 acres of public land, but forty years later, the black veterans were still trying to get their land claims honored. The slaves among them had been returned to their owners, who were not bound by any promises made.¹⁵ On the other hand, Jackson showed solicitude for those masters whose slaves had escaped and taken refuge with the enemy. He repeatedly demanded that the departing British army return them. General Lambert, to his credit, refused and took some two hundred self-emancipated people off to lives of poverty but freedom in Bermuda.¹⁶

If history were a novel, this episode would end with the dramatic repulse of the invaders on January 8. In real life the British did not abandon their campaign against New Orleans. The day after the great land battle, their fleet sailed up the Mississippi and bombarded Fort St. Philip at Plaquemine for the next nine days, hoping to force a passage, but to no avail. General Lambert's army, having rejoined its ships and recovered its resolve, sailed off to Mobile Bay and there resumed the offensive. After taking Mobile they would be able to march westward to the Mississippi and cut off New Orleans from the north. On February 11, Fort Bowyer, guarding Mobile Bay, surrendered to the British. The city of Mobile would surely have fallen, but the next day news finally arrived that a peace treaty had been signed on December 24. In the language of boxing, Mobile was saved by the bell.

Six months after the Battle of New Orleans, the Irishmen of the 44th Regiment redeemed their military reputation at Waterloo. But Thomas Mullins was court-martialed and cashiered.¹⁷

II

What did the American victory really mean? The Battle of New Orleans had been fought after the treaty of peace had been signed. Technically, the war ended only with the exchange of treaty ratifications, but in fact the armies ceased hostilities as soon as they learned of the treaty itself. Had

15. See Donald Everett, "Emigres and Militiamen: Free Persons of Color in New Orleans," *Journal of Negro History* 38 (1953): 377–402; James Horton and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty* (New York, 1997), 186; Don Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic* (New York, 2001), 7–8.

16. Reilly, *British at the Gates*, 320–21; *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, ed. Harold Moser et al. (Knoxville, Tenn., 1991), III, 290, 316–17.

17. It is remarkable how many high-ranking officers on both sides in the War of 1812 were court-martialed for incompetence or cowardice: Other British officers included Generals Procter and Prevost; on the American side, Generals Hull and Wilkinson.

news of the treaty arrived soon enough, the battle would not have been fought. The bloodshed at the Battle of New Orleans was a particularly tragic result of the slowness of communication at the start of the nineteenth century. In fact, the slow pace at which news crossed the Atlantic had been responsible for the war in the first place: When Congress declared war on Great Britain, June 18, 1812, its members did not know that two days earlier Foreign Secretary Castlereagh had announced in Parliament that the Orders in Council restricting American commerce would be suspended.¹⁸

In an effort to endow the Battle of New Orleans with strategic significance, Jackson's admirers later claimed that if the British had won the engagement, they might have revoked the Treaty of Ghent by declining to exchange ratifications and seeking a more advantageous settlement.¹⁹ In fact, no such meaning can be derived from the bloodshed of January 8. The prince regent ratified the treaty as soon as he received it and dispatched the ratification to Washington without waiting to hear the outcome of the campaign in the Gulf of Mexico. Far from planning any alteration in ratifying the treaty, Prime Minister Liverpool worried that the other side might "play us some trick in the ratification of it."²⁰ Hence the quick British ratification. A more plausible possibility is that if the British had captured either Mobile or New Orleans, they might have turned the places over to the Spanish. Neither Britain nor Spain recognized the legality of the Louisiana Purchase, since France had violated the Treaty of San Ildefonso (1800) by selling Louisiana to the United States. The American occupation of the city and environs of Mobile rested on nothing more legitimate than a military seizure from the Spanish in 1813, so the British would have been legally justified in returning them to the Spanish governor at Pensacola. Yet there is no direct evidence the British had such an intention, and they did not deliver Fort Bowyer on Mobile Bay to the Spanish at the conclusion of hostilities. Instead, the evidence suggests that the British were principally motivated to capture New Orleans by the prospect of plunder, and that their occupation of the city, if it had been achieved, would have been short.²¹

18. Madison later confirmed that the declaration "would have been stayed" if he had known about the British concession; Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812* (Urbana, Ill., 1989), 42.
19. Some historians have repeated the claim; see Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic, 1801-1815* (New York, 1968), 281.
20. Lord Liverpool to Lord Castlereagh, December 23, 1814, quoted in Irving Brant, *James Madison, Commander in Chief* (New York, 1961), 372.
21. See James A. Carr, "The Battle of New Orleans and the Treaty of Ghent," *Diplomatic History* 3 (1979): 273-82.

Americans at the time did not see their great victory as meaningless. What they chose to make of it is instructive. They did not emphasize the fact that the battle had been fought after peace had been agreed. They seldom rejoiced in the multiracial, multiethnic nature of the winning army. Neither did they celebrate the technological know-how that enabled their artillery to perform so well. Instead the public seized upon the notion that western riflemen, untrained but sharp-eyed, had defeated the arrogant British. In fact, primary responsibility for the American victory lay with the artillery, not with the frontier marksmen of legend. It was the cannons that wrought most of the slaughter on the Chalmette plantation. A single noteworthy discharge from a thirty-two-pound naval gun crammed with musket balls "served to sweep the centre of the attacking force into eternity," in the words of a British officer.²² The infantrymen in the center of Jackson's line were under strict orders to hold their fire. Those in his army who got to use their weapons were typically armed not with rifles but with muskets or hunting pieces firing buckshot. The fog and smoke severely limited opportunities for sharpshooting. In any case, the best marksmen were not necessarily frontiersmen: A target contest between Coffee's Tennessee Volunteers and Beale's Rifle Company, composed of middle-class New Orleans citizenry, was won by the latter.²³

The excellent gunnery that served the American cause so well at New Orleans paralleled the excellent gunnery that stood the U.S. Navy in good stead whenever the outnumbered American ships got the chance to fight the Royal Navy on equal terms. The contrast between the effectiveness of the artillery and the navy with the repeatedly disgraceful performances of the militia in the War of 1812 could scarcely be more glaring. But cannons seemed not altogether satisfactory as a patriotic symbol for the American public. Cannons were products of the industrial revolution and government-sponsored technological development. A predominantly rural people wanted heroes from the countryside. Surely it must be "the *American Husbandman*, fresh from his plough," a congressional orator insisted, who had bested the best Europe had to offer.²⁴

22. The definitive study of the effectiveness of the artillery in the battle is Carson Ritchie, "The Louisiana Campaign," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 44 (1961): 13–103; Major John Cooke is quoted on 74. See also Smelser, *Democratic Republic*, 280.
23. Ritchie, "Louisiana Campaign," 71–77; John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville, Fla., 1972), 369; John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1955), 26.
24. George M. Troup of Georgia in the House of Representatives, quoted *ibid.*, 8; italics in original.

A popular song of the 1820s, "The Hunters of Kentucky," extolled the performance of the Kentucky militia at New Orleans despite the fact that Jackson himself had criticized the Kentuckians harshly and never retracted his condemnation. Exploited for political purposes, the song perpetuated the misperception of what had happened.²⁵ The Battle of New Orleans came to be regarded by Jackson's many admirers as a victory of self-reliant individualists under charismatic leadership. It seemed a triumph of citizen-soldiers over professionals, of the common man over hierarchy, of willpower over rules.

The reluctance to credit the artillery with the victory partly reflected a reluctance to credit the professional servicemen, ethnic-minority city-dwellers, and pirates who manned the guns rather than the all-American frontiersmen. It also manifested a failure to foresee how much the future of the United States would owe to mechanization and government-sponsored enterprises like the federal armories that made cannons. Jackson's admirers liked to believe theirs was a country where untutored vigor could prevail; to point out that technical expertise mattered seemed undemocratic. Their interpretation of the battle was compatible with Jefferson's vision of "an empire for liberty" stretching to the west, a belief that the nation's destiny lay in the multiplication of family farms and the extension of American power across continental space.

Americans agreed in rejecting the traditional class privilege exemplified by the British army and Europe in general. The Battle of New Orleans symbolized America's deliverance from all that. The past had been defeated. But where did America's future lie? With the individualistic, expansionist values exemplified by frontier marksmen? Or with the industrial-technological values exemplified by the artillery? Which would better serve American security and prosperity: the extension of agriculture across the continent or the intensive improvement and diversification of the economy and its infrastructure? To those great questions the rival political parties of the coming decades, Democrats and Whigs, offered sharply divergent answers.

25. See *ibid.*, 13–16. The lyrics were written by Samuel Woodworth, author of another song of rural nostalgia, "The Old Oaken Bucket."