

= Battle of Lake Pontchartrain =

The Battle of Lake Pontchartrain was a single @-@ ship action on September 10 , 1779 , part of the Anglo @-@ Spanish War . It was fought between the British sloop @-@ of @-@ war HMS West Florida and the Continental Navy schooner USS Morris in the waters of Lake Pontchartrain , then in the British province of West Florida .

The West Florida was patrolling on Lake Pontchartrain when it encountered the Morris , which had set out from New Orleans with a Spanish and American crew headed by Continental Navy Captain William Pickles . The larger crew of the Morris successfully boarded the West Florida , inflicting a mortal wound on its captain , Lieutenant John Payne . The capture of the West Florida eliminated the major British naval presence on the lake , weakening already tenuous British control over the western reaches of West Florida .

= = Background = =

Significant military activities of the American Revolutionary War did not occur on the Gulf Coast until 1779 , when Spain entered the war . Before then , New Orleans , then the capital of Spanish Louisiana , served as a semi @-@ secret source of money and matériel for the Patriot cause . The cause was quietly supported by the Spanish governors before 1779 , and often mediated by Oliver Pollock , a prominent New Orleans businessman . Pollock effectively acted as an agent of the Continental Congress , negotiating with the Spanish governor , and taking other actions , including spending some of his own fortune , on Patriot activities along the lower Mississippi River .

In 1778 James Willing led a raiding expedition directed against targets in British West Florida . One prize that he captured on the Mississippi River was a British ship , the Rebecca , which he brought into New Orleans . She was brought into the Continental Navy and rechristened the USS Morris in honor of Philadelphia financier Robert Morris .

The British province of West Florida extended from the Mississippi River in the west to the Apalachicola River in the east . The HMS West Florida had been cruising Lake Pontchartrain since 1776 under the command of George Burdon , stopping and searching all manner of shipping , including Spanish merchants destined for New Orleans , to the annoyance of the Spanish . Burdon was unsuccessful in tracking down Willing during his 1778 raid , and returned to Pensacola , West Florida 's capital , for refit and repair late in 1778 . In January 1779 Burdon was replaced at her helm by Lieutenant John Payne , who had been engaged in survey duty along the West Florida coast and knew the area well . The West Florida was a sloop @-@ of @-@ war armed , according to its captors , with several four- and six @-@ pound cannons and carrying a crew complement of about 30 . (British accounts place the crew size at 15 .)

= = Prelude = =

Payne cruised West Florida 's waters uneventfully until August 1779 . On August 27 he sent a boat with a few men to make contact with a detachment of Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Dickson 's men at Manchac . The boat never returned . On that day Bernardo de Gálvez , the governor of Spanish Louisiana , launched an expedition to gain control of British military posts on the Mississippi , and the boat was captured by his men . Gálvez successfully took the Manchac garrison on September 7 , and negotiated the surrender of Dickson and the remaining British forces on the Mississippi after the Battle of Baton Rouge on September 21 . Payne however was unaware of these activities .

Pollock used commissioning authority granted him by Congress to give command of the Morris to Continental Navy Captain William Pickles . However , she was destroyed in a hurricane (which also delayed the departure of Gálvez ' expedition) , and Gálvez provided another ship for Pickles ' use , variously called Morris or " Morris 's tender " . According to the report of Lieutenant Peter George Rousseau , Pickles ' second @-@ in @-@ command , this ship was a schooner armed with five small (2 @-@ 5 pound or less) cannons and ten swivel guns , and that it lacked barricades to protect the men on deck from gunfire . Furthermore , the crew was not otherwise well prepared for

close action , lacking axes , lances , and other tools useful for a boarding action . Pollock instructed Pickles to harass British military shipping on the lake , which had recently increased in activity .

= = Battle = =

Pickles sailed from New Orleans with a crew of 57 Americans and Spaniards (Rousseau , his second in command , was a Frenchman commissioned into the Continental Navy) . To hide his intentions , Pickles flew a British ensign as a false flag . Spotted on September 10 , the two ships closed , and Payne hailed the Morris to discover her intentions . He was told she was a merchant bound for Pensacola shortly before Pickles had the false colors hauled down and replaced with an American flag . The Americans and Spaniards then threw grappling hooks to bring the ships together and opened fire with their swivel guns while Lieutenant Rousseau prepared a boarding party . It is unlikely that either ship fired its larger guns .

Payne 's small crew put up spirited resistance , twice repulsing the boarders . The third boarding attempt succeeded , and Payne himself went down with a mortal wound in fighting described as " very violent " . The boarders successfully overwhelmed the British , wounding two men in addition to Payne , while suffering 6 to 8 killed and several wounded .

= = Aftermath = =

Captain Pickles took the prize back to New Orleans , where Pollock had her fitted out . Pickles cruised with her in West Florida 's waters during Governor Gálvez 's march up the Mississippi . Pickles then assisted Gálvez in the Battle of Fort Charlotte , which resulted in the capture of Mobile , before sailing her to Philadelphia for sale .

The battle is commemorated by a historic marker in Mandeville , Louisiana . The marker credits William Pickles with ending the Revolutionary War in Louisiana , since some British individuals on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain evidently surrendered to Captain Pickles in mid @-@ October of 1779 (three weeks after the Battle of Baton Rouge) . In this context , " Louisiana " means the future state of Louisiana and not the larger area of Spanish Louisiana . The Battle of St. Louis , also within Spanish Louisiana , took place in 1780 .