

The War of 1812

The war of 1812 was fought between the United States and Great Britain from June of 1812 and the spring of 1815, although a peace treaty was signed in Europe in December of 1814.

According to historians, Americas continued to have problems with the British after the American Revolution and were angered and frustrated over four primary issues which eventually led to war. Those issues included:

1. Britain's failure to withdraw from American territory along the Great Lakes
2. Britain's backing of the Indians in issues and battles on America's frontiers
3. Britain's unwillingness to sign commercial agreements favorable to the U.S.
4. Britain's violation of the supposed American rights at sea

During the late 1700s, French and British maritime policies produced several crises with the United States, but after 1803 the difficulties became much more serious. When the British tried to channel all neutral trade to continental Europe through Great Britain in 1807 and the French declared Britain in a state of blockade, condemning neutral shipping that obeyed British regulations, the U.S. believed its rights on the seas to be violated by both nations. However, Americans resented the British more primarily because Britain dominated the seas. In addition, the British claimed the right to take any British sailors serving on American merchant ships off of those ships. (They often took Americans too.)

This practice, called impressment, became a serious problem and created an extraordinary amount of ill-will toward Great Britain.

Initially, the American government tried to deal with the problems using economic means by passing an act banning all American ships from foreign trade. This trade embargo failed to change British and French policies but, devastated New England shipping. Other similar acts were also unsuccessful.

Trade and shipping issues caused America to head toward a financial depression and Americans called for a declaration of war to “redeem the national honor.” Democratic-Republicans including Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun wanted war as they believed an invasion of Canada would change British policies at sea and would save America’s honor. New England shippers, who were primarily of the Federalist party, did not want war as they saw it as a step towards the ruin of their shipping businesses.

On June 18, 1812, President James Madison signed a declaration of war. Although there was considerable opposition, Congress passed the declaration. Unfortunately, Americans did not know that the British had revoked their most detested policies two days before the Declaration of War was passed.

American attempts to invade Canada were unsuccessful. Americans were not financially or militarily prepared for war. The British were so near success in the summer of 1814, that British forces were able to march into Washington D.C. and burn much of the city causing President Madison to flee from the White House and into the countryside.

British forces then turned to attack Baltimore, but met stiffer resistance and were forced back by American defenses at Fort McHenry. (This battle is the one that inspired Frances Scott Key to write the words of the “Star Spangled Banner”.) Next, British soldiers advanced from Montreal toward New York City, but on September 11, 1814, Captain Thomas Macdonough defeated the British in the naval battle of Lake Champlain. After this, the British army retreated into Canada.

In late 1814, the City of New Orleans was a cosmopolitan, integrated city that was home to people from French, Spanish, Creole, African and Anglo backgrounds. The “Crescent City”, just 100 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi, was doing well economically and the British knew that capturing the city would be very advantageous. After finding an unprotected waterway only nine miles from New Orleans, British troops set up only a day’s march from the city limits.

Fortunately for American forces, Andrew Jackson (aka: Old Hickory) was warned of the British whereabouts. Jackson led his troops on a surprise nighttime attack that startled the British and caused them to decide to wait for all of their units to gather before heading into New Orleans. While the British waited, Jackson made good use of the time. He gathered forces from the city which included a group of former Haitian slaves who fought as free men, “dandies” from the city’s militia, frontiersmen, and even some of Jean Lafitte’s bandits/outlaws.

While the British actually had a good plan for invading and taking over New Orleans, the plan was executed very poorly and Jackson's men defeated them soundly and saved New Orleans. More than 2,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded and several hundred were captured. Only eight Americans were killed and 13 were wounded.

Unfortunately, Jackson's victory came after the war was over. The Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war, **but resolved none of the issues** that caused the war, was signed a few weeks earlier in Europe.