

That Day and Today, We Were and Are All Americans
1/17/21

More than two hundred years ago this week, a band of unlikely American brothers stood together to protect the freedom and future of our young country. In the early 1800s, New Orleans became part of the United States and was already its most diverse city. In early January, the British turned their attention to the American west with plans to void the Louisiana Purchase and take the Mississippi and the land to its west for Brittain. The move would cripple the young country and profoundly change the history that we now remember. The first move of their plan would be to take the Port of New Orleans.

The war of 1812 was in the process of ending, but word had not yet reached the band of 11,000 British troops that had sailed into the Gulf of Mexico with their sights set on the Port of New Orleans and the riches that awaited victory. The American capital city had already fallen the autumn before, with both the White House and the Capitol building burned in August of 1814. In January of 1815, the best and most experienced of Brittain's troops were leaving their boats for the American bayou.

Standing in their way was an American general and future president. Andrew Jackson was undoubtedly an interesting and polarizing historical figure. Jackson was a Scotch-Irish lawyer and slave owner from Tennessee. As a young teenager, he was captured during the Revolutionary War. During his capture, he refused to polish a British officer's boots and was left with a permanent scar across his hand and forehead for his discretion. He despised the British and lead a small army that stood in the way of the best the British had.

The ethnic hodgepodge that made up the small army held their ground and pushed the British back into the Gulf. The effort was helped along by both the poor planning and hubris on the part of the British. American casualties numbered around 60 while more than 2000 British soldiers fell trying to take the small port. Regardless of your opinion of Andrew Jackson, before the Civil War, among the slavery of the south, he somehow brought together backwater marksmen and militia members from Tennessee and Kentucky with Cajuns and Creoles. Both Black and White, Slaves and Freemen, fought for Jackson that day. Immigrants from Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Scandinavia all came together to protect their new country from invasion. Many had only been Americans for less than a decade. This great coming together saved our legacy as a country.

This week, teachers have struggled to find the words to describe the historical significance of what we witnessed on January 6th, 2021. For the first time since the fall of 1814, the Capitol of the United States was breached. I am not sure I have found the words just yet, but I know that history is full of stories ready to be taught. I do know that months after our capital burned, a diverse group of young soldiers found common ground and stood together in New Orleans.

The greatest battle that day may not have been with the British. We are, at times, our worst enemy. The greatest defeat that day was with the divisive tendencies of the worst part of our nature. Sometimes, we seem to forget that we are countrymen. At the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans, Jackson said, "Natives of different states, acting together, for the first time, in this camp, differing in habits and in language have reaped the fruits of an honorable union." That day and today, we were and are all Americans. That is the lesson that we need to teach our children.