

# **Preventing the “Eggs of Insurrection” from Hatching: The U.S. Navy and Control of the Mississippi River, 1806-1815**

**Gene Allen Smith**

*La station de la marine américaine à la Nouvelle-Orléans a joué un rôle clef en affirmant le contrôle américain du territoire de la Louisiane alors nouvellement acheté au début du 19ème siècle. Bien que la force disponible ait inclus principalement de petites canonnières, elle a répondu effectivement à la menace d'insurrection parmi la population multinationale, la contrebande effrénée, et la présence voisine de forces espagnoles. Cette expérience a permis aux forces de la station de contribuer sur une échelle bien plus grande que n'ait été précédemment appréciée à la défaite de l'assaut britannique sur la Nouvelle-Orléans à la fin de la guerre de 1812.*

During the summer of 1806 Captain Thomas Truxtun, who had become privy to one of Aaron Burr's plans for a western revolution, eagerly suggested to President Thomas Jefferson that the naval force stationed on the Mississippi River should be used to keep the “eggs of insurrection” from hatching. Louisiana had only recently been purchased by the United States and there was still great uncertainty about the loyalty of the region's multi-ethnic inhabitants; this fear had increased considerably after Burr's 1805 tour of the west. According to Truxtun, the government needed to be prepared for Burr and this could be accomplished only by using the ships of the New Orleans Naval Station to blockade the city, control commerce on the Mississippi River, and prevent the arrival of foreign aid, all of which would be necessary for Burr's success.

Truxtun's recommendations for the naval station to control the Mississippi River does not completely correspond with the general impressions of naval duties for warships during the Age of Sail. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the location of the United States provided natural defense and unparalleled national security. As such, President Thomas Jefferson used the country's geographic situation and his own republican predisposition as a justification for turning away from large ships-of-the-line and frigates, traditionally used for protecting trade and projecting offensive power on the open seas. Instead, Jefferson's administration (1801-1809) embraced smaller, shallow-draft vessels that stressed coastal defense and internal security. The United States was a country preoccupied with protecting its own territorial integrity from the uncertainties of a world at war, and Jefferson's naval policy represented a natural political-defensive response

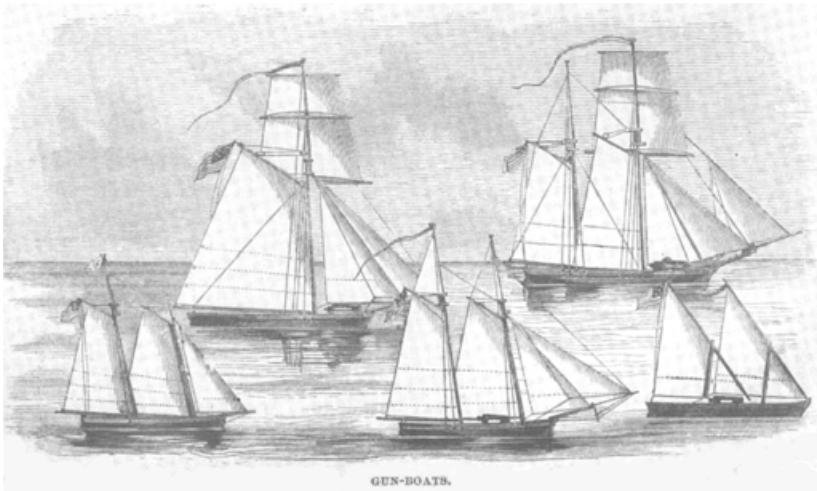


Fig. 1: Jefferson intended gunboats, such as these depicted in Benson J. Lossing's *Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1869), to be a primary component of the country's defense system.

aimed at preserving security and the American identity. And while there are valid reasons to condemn Jefferson's naval policy as it developed, it ultimately forced the Navy to redefine its roles within the national government and within the nation's defense scheme. The New Orleans Naval Station's efforts to control the Mississippi River during the early nineteenth century vividly illustrates the nontraditional activities that the Navy undertook as well as an often-overlooked benefit of the Jeffersonian naval program—that the Navy was an important instrument supporting American territorial expansion and was essential for projecting power into areas little touched by federal authority.<sup>1</sup>

The New Orleans Naval Station, founded in 1806 as the government's most isolated establishment, was far removed from Washington, D.C. or the East Coast, and hardly visited by capital vessels. In fact, the station had no ships-of-the-line or frigates and its complement of craft consisted entirely of gunboats and similar shallow-draft vessels. The type of duty generally associated with the station—maintaining law and order while curtailing the slave trade, smuggling, privateering, and piracy—was onerous and despised by most naval officers because it did not provide them with many chances

<sup>1</sup> Joel Barlow to Thomas Jefferson, 11 February 1804, Jefferson to James Bowdoin, 10 August 1806, both in Jefferson MSS, LC; Mary P. Adams, "Jefferson's Military Policy with Special Reference to the Frontier: 1805-1809" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1958), iii-vi; Julia H. Macleod, "Jefferson and the Navy: A Defense," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 3 (1944-45): 176; Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 60; Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 156-57; Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America* (1891; reprint New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 1036; Gene A. Smith, *"For the Purposes of Defense": The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 94-113.

for professional military recognition. Yet the station did offer constant excitement, a variety and number of enemies, and opportunities for independent command. Another problem facing the station was its proximity to foreign territory (Spanish West Florida) and numerous shallow waterways, which meant in real terms that the station existed as a lonely bastion of governmental authority along the lawless multi-national Gulf frontier. Moreover, without any other noticeable U.S. presence along the Mississippi River or Gulf Coast, the New Orleans Naval Station became the agent most responsible for upholding federal law and preventing the region from succumbing to revolution or foreign influence.<sup>2</sup>

By the time Thomas Truxtun warned Jefferson of Burr’s activities, Master-Commandant John Shaw, commander of the New Orleans station, knew full well the uncertainties of the region. He had to contend with the threat of Burr’s revolution, as well as with an increased Spanish presence in the region—additional troops from Havana had arrived in Pensacola, Florida, in response to Burr’s activities. With the likelihood of armed conflict looming, on 9 October 1806 Shaw instructed his men “to act entirely on



Fig. 2: Map of the Gulf Coast 1806-1815

the defensive” but not to allow any indignity to the American flag. He realized that his tiny flotilla—which at this time consisted of only four gunboats and the bomb-ketches *Vesuvius* and *Aetna* (a total of sixteen guns and 134 seamen)—faced a Spanish force that numbered at least 900 men and was supported by two small cruisers. Feeling greatly outnumbered, Shaw anticipated that “one action was to decide” the fate of the entire

<sup>2</sup> Gene A. Smith, “U.S. Navy Gunboats and the Slave Trade in Louisiana Waters, 1808-1811,” *Military History of the West* 23 (Fall 1993): 135-147; Gene A. Smith, *Thomas ap Catesby Jones: Commodore of Manifest Destiny* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 13-32.

country. Should the Spanish be victorious, he predicted, “there was nothing preventing their marching to New Orleans” and the Mississippi River where they would find “numerous . . . followers of a victorious flag.” Yet such was not the case as General James Wilkinson and Colonel Simon de Herrera quickly and peacefully resolved problems in the west; they agreed that Spanish troops would withdraw west of the Sabine River, Americans would remain east of the Arroyo Hondo, and the land between the two rivers would be neutral territory until a boundary commission settled the matter diplomatically.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the fall of 1806 Burr had continued with his plans, yet no one could confirm what the former vice-president had in mind. Apparently, Burr had approached the Spanish and British ministers in Washington, as well as influential friends in the east and west proposing a plan for a western empire. Although no one could corroborate his plans, most believed that Burr planned to raise a force of associates/adventurers either to seize lands from Spain or to initiate a revolution, making himself “Emperor of the west.” The latter scheme gained much publicity, as rumors swirled that the British would readily join his volunteers at the mouth of the Mississippi River. One story even claimed that the “United States Navy stood ready to join” Burr’s forces on the Mississippi, and it gained further credibility when Shaw reported that Lieutenant Robert P. Spence, who had delivered dispatches to Burr in late October 1806, also played a role in the plot.<sup>4</sup>

The future of Louisiana and the west was at stake during the fall of 1806 and early winter of 1807, prompting Shaw to warn that the “country [was] on the Eve of destruction.” He prepared the New Orleans station for that possibility by ordering two gunboats to ascend the Mississippi to oppose any unauthorized body of men, while two others descended the river to prevent an attack from the south. But events on the Mississippi River did not play out as Shaw or others anticipated. In mid-February 1807 U.S. naval forces discovered not the “numerous followers” or the “eggs of insurrection” that they expected but only a handful of ill-provisioned men and women. Burr, under indictment and running from the law, would be apprehended on 19 February 1807, near Fort Stoddert in the Mississippi territory and a jury would soon determine his intentions as well as his innocence or guilt.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John Shaw to the Men of his Squadron, 9 October 1806; John Shaw to Commanders Read and Patterson, 24 October 1806; John Shaw to the Secretary of the Navy, 22 August, 10, 31 October, 29 November 1806, all in Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commanders, 1804-1886. National Archives Microfilm, RG45, M147. (Hereafter cited as Commanders’ Letters); James Ripley Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior: Major-General James Wilkinson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), 230-231.

<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 229-230; Adams, *History of the United States*, 815; John Smith (of Ohio) to N. Evans, 25 January 1808, John Smith MSS., LC; John Shaw to the Secretary of the Navy, 24 December 1806, Commanders Letters; Secretary of the Navy to Andrew Gregg, Chairman, Committee on the Naval Peace Establishment, 16 December 1805, William Dudley, *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1985), 1:4.

<sup>5</sup> John Shaw to the Secretary of the Navy, 22 August, 9, 15 December 1806, 12 January 1807, and W.C.C. Claiborne to Shaw, 1 December 1806, all in Commanders Letters; W.C.C.

Though Burr’s conspiracy did not succeed, the events surrounding its failure and the government’s preparation for it provide a window through which we can view naval activities on the Mississippi River and the government’s policy of expanding authority during the first decade of the nineteenth century. During the affair the small station had gained limited control over the river, had helped diffuse a diplomatic problem with Spain and, in doing so, had helped squelch Burr’s attempt at territorial expansion—a challenge that many believed could have resulted in the U.S. losing control of all lands west of the Mississippi River. The presence of naval vessels had also helped bolster confidence in the government’s determination to maintain stability in a turbulent region. Additionally, those federal armed vessels physically demonstrated the government’s ability to maintain civil obedience along the river by military force. During the next turbulent decade the station would confront several other foes determined to undermine U.S. control in the region, including slave traders, privateers, smugglers, pirates, as well as a British invasion force.

Events occurring along the Atlantic Coast during the early nineteenth century, not surprisingly, influenced greatly the course of action along the Mississippi River. During the summer of 1807 the British frigate HMS *Leopard* fired on the USS *Chesapeake*, leaving the federal warship and the American psyche injured. Jefferson, knowing the country was not prepared for war, called a special session of Congress. Rather than declaring war on Britain, the legislature passed a slave trade act, prohibiting the importation of slaves from Africa, and the Embargo Act, forbidding American vessels to trade with foreign ports. Both pieces of legislation greatly tested the Navy’s ability to assert control over the Mississippi River.

The “Act for Prohibiting the Slave Trade,” which went into effect on 1 January 1808, proved especially troubling for the New Orleans Station. The geography of New Orleans and Louisiana, dominated by the voluminous flow of the Mississippi River, created several shallow estuaries that flow into the Gulf of Mexico. To the east and west of the river delta laid numerous shallow bays and inlets that provided safe havens for those trying to evade the law. In addition to the geographical hardships, Master-Commandant David Porter—who took command of the station in June 1808—found what he also believed to be a conspiracy to undermine the slave trade act. Foreign merchantmen, slavers, and disloyal elements in New Orleans reportedly tried to subvert the importation laws. His fears seemed confirmed when he later learned that the French privateer *L’Epine* had anchored off the Mississippi River with a load of slaves, and a Spanish ship also believed to be carrying human cargo also anchored nearby. Before the end of the year the New Orleans Station had apprehended three slave brigs (*Adherbal*, *Baltimore*, *Louisiana Packet*) all carrying illegal human contraband, yet others

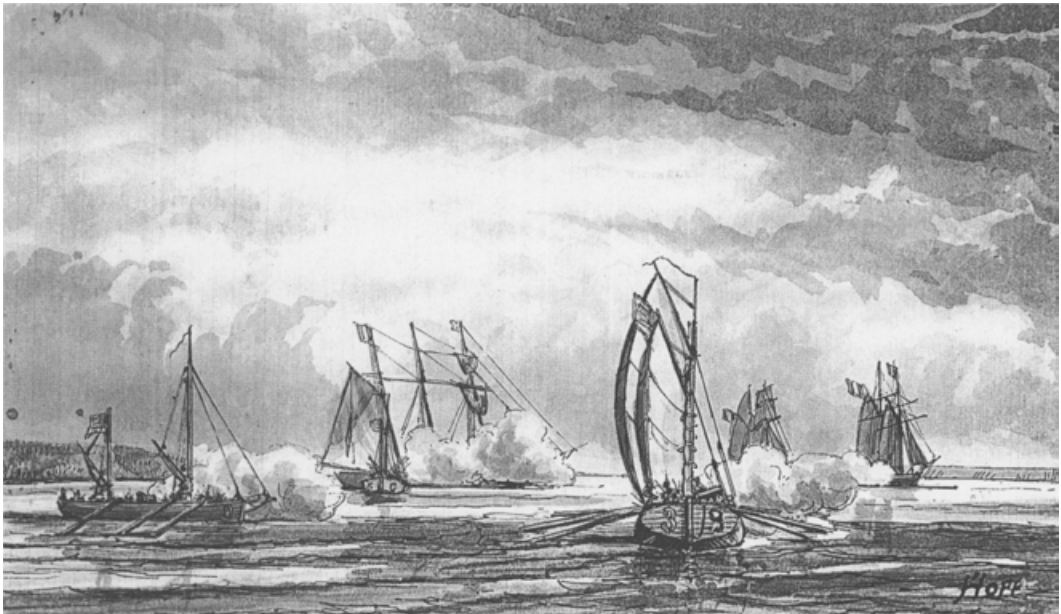
---

Claiborne to James Wilkinson, 19 January 1807, Dunbar Rowland, *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816* (Jackson, Mississippi: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 4:100-101; Milton Lomask, *Aaron Burr: The Conspiracy and Years of Exile, 1805-1836* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 212, 222-223; “Biography of John Shaw,” No author, no date, 8, John Shaw Papers, NHF-LC; “Newspaper Clipping,” in Morse Family Papers, LC.

undoubtedly made their way up the river uncontested.<sup>6</sup>

The New Orleans Naval Station always found itself short of vessels and men, which meant that Porter could not maintain continuous control over the River. In 1809 the shortage of seamen prompted him to propose recruiting Creoles to supplement his crews; using locals would bring into the service men that could act as interpreters, who were accustomed to the climate, and who had knowledge of the region. Moreover, Porter thought it would bind the people of Louisiana closer to the United States and provide them with an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty. Although Porter's plan was never implemented, it offered a realistic counter to Truxtun's fears and would have provided him with pilots and sailors who were familiar with the geography of the region.<sup>7</sup>

Porter's task, difficult in any case, became more arduous after further reductions in his force. These setbacks contributed greatly to the station's lack of success in



*Fig. 3: Gunboats capturing French privateers on the Mississippi River in 1808. Drawing by Capt. William Bainbridge Hoff. Courtesy Naval Historical Center*

<sup>6</sup> James Stirling to Lord Viscount Melville, 17 March 1813, Stirling Memorandum, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA; Robert C. Vogel, "Jean Lafitte, the Baratarians, and the Historical Geography of Piracy," *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 5 (1990): 63-64; David F. Long, *Nothing Too Daring: A Biography of Commodore David Porter, 1780-1843* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 1970), 40, 43, 52; David Porter to the Secretary of the Navy, 26 June 1808, Commanders Letters; David Porter to John Henley, 2 July 1810, John Henley Papers, Nimitz Library, United States Naval Academy.

<sup>7</sup> Porter to Secretary of the Navy, 1 September, 26 December 1808, 5 April 1809; Lieutenants on Station to Porter, 23 February 1809, all in Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy: Miscellaneous Letters, 1801-1884, National Archives Microfilm, RG45, M124; Secretary of the Navy to Porter, 26 December 1808, John Henley Papers, Nimitz Library.

apprehending slavers in 1809; the station detained several foreign vessels, but they did not capture any ship involved in the slave trade. Porter attributed his lack of success to several factors, including the nearby location of Spanish territory and the abundance of water routes that could not be adequately patrolled with his few craft. In fact, he became convinced that any attempt to enforce the country's trade laws would "be ineffectual as long as the *disputed Territory* [surrounding Louisiana remained] in the hands of Spain."<sup>8</sup>

Another problem for Porter was the extremely low risk-to-profit ratio for those involved in the Louisiana slave trade, which provided an additional incentive for the illegal activity. In the first half of 1810 Porter's gunboats captured the British brig *Alexandrina* from Jamaica with 127 slaves, and a Portuguese vessel with 104 slaves; a number of others reportedly landed their cargo near New Orleans. Before departing the station in July 1810, Porter expressed fears that the profitability of the slave trade would prompt increased violations. Captain Shaw, who returned to replace Porter as commander, found the increased activity his predecessor had predicted, noting that the Portuguese brig *Moreveto*, the French privateer *Le Guillamne*, and the Spanish ship *Alerto*, carrying 170 slaves, had all violated the law and smuggled the illegal cargo into Baratavia (the area west of New Orleans to Bayou Lafourche and south to the Gulf of Mexico). During the fall Shaw's gunboats captured an unnamed British brig, the brig *Adherbal*, and the brig *Neptune*, all carrying slaves. All either Porter or Shaw could hope to do was station their vessels in such a manner as to frustrate much of the illegal activity.<sup>9</sup>

Although the vessels of New Orleans Naval Station did not eliminate the slave trade, they did hinder such illegal ventures. Their presence often forced traders to unload their cargo in Spanish-held lands and then move slaves overland to avoid patrols. But as with any illicit activity, it became more dangerous and profitable for those involved after it became illegal. Furthermore, the station's activities contributed to a general shortage of slaves throughout the territory, also resulting in higher prices for labor needed in Louisiana's plantation economy. Baratavian pirate Jean Laffite's most fruitful business was the slave trade, and the naval force along the Mississippi River, he admitted, frustrated his designs. True, the ships of the station did not eradicate the African slave trade, but their efforts at curtailing the illegal activity established a foundation for the U.S. government to station an American naval squadron in the Caribbean and some years

---

<sup>8</sup> David Porter to the Secretary of the Navy, 15 February 1809, 19 February 1809, Commanders Letters; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 43-44.

<sup>9</sup> Porter to Secretary of Navy, 1 January, 4 May 1810, Commanders Letters; Porter to John Henley, 2 July 1810, Henley Papers, Nimitz Library; Michael B. Carroll to John Henley, 20 June 1810, Michael B. Carroll to Secretary of the Navy, 5, 28 July 1810, John Shaw Papers, NHF-LC; Henry Demis to the District Court of Orleans, 9 October 1810, Brugman Privateer Papers, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA, (Hereinafter cited as HNO); Jane Lucas de Grummond, *Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 12-15; Udolpho Theodore Bradley, "The Contentious Commodore: Thomas ap Catesby Jones of the Old Navy, 1788-1858," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1933), 25-26.

later along the coast of Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The country's anti slave trade manifesto remained troubling for the New Orleans station, but the changing and ill-defined navigation laws proved almost impossible to enforce, as naval officers found themselves charged with discerning the minute differences between privateers, smugglers, and pirates. In August 1808, under Porter's watch, a gunboat captured the British schooner *Union* from Jamaica loaded with military stores. Less than a month later two other naval vessels apprehended a schooner with 400 barrels of flour and window glass, plus a barge with twenty-eight additional barrels of flour. Before Porter discontinued enforcing the Embargo on 1 April 1809, his forces had also detained the Spanish schooner *Catalina* and seized 56 barrels of flour.<sup>11</sup>

Porter quickly learned the truth about enforcing the Embargo law, especially after his February 1809 capture of the Spanish schooner *Precious Ridicule*. The ship, sailing down the Mississippi River from Spanish Baton Rouge and bound for Pensacola, had been loaded with seventy-five barrels of flour, clothing for troops, wine, oil, and cheese. After detaining the ship, he faced the problem of determining what portion of the cargo was Spanish and what part was American contraband, thus liable to seizure. After careful consideration, he surmised that the flour was obviously produced from American grain and impounded it. The other items, however, could possibly have been foreign, so his only recourse was to release them.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1809 and the beginning of hostilities in 1812, the New Orleans station remained as the only continually active gunboat squadron in operation; the Navy decommissioned gunboats from the other stations with the last being laid up in New York in September 1811. While President James Madison chose to emphasize a different naval policy, the gunboats of the New Orleans station continued seizing Spanish, British, and French violators. But of the three nations, French vessels proved the most troublesome; three French privateers in particular, *Le Duc de Montebello*, *L'Intrepide*, and *La Petite Chance*, for months had sailed the waters off the Mississippi River plundering every Spanish or American vessel they met. By March 1810, Porter received information that the three ships had anchored in the river delta. Assembling his gunboats for action, Porter confronted the heavily armed vessels and forced them to surrender. While he had been successful in capturing the violators, Porter then had to fight them again in the corrupt legal system of New Orleans. And not surprisingly, the pro-French juries of

---

<sup>10</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Lafitte the Pirate* (New Orleans, Robert L. Crager and Company, 1950), 25-26; Richard Wheeler, *In Pirate Waters* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), 52-53; Paul Hamilton to John Shaw, 14 February 1811, Letters Sent to Officers; Smith, "U.S. Navy Gunboats and the Slave Trade in Louisiana Waters," 135-147.

<sup>11</sup> Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 43-45; Louis Martin Shears, *Jefferson and the Embargo* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 90-91; David Porter to John Henley, 8 July 1808, John Henley Papers, Nimitz Library; David Porter to the Secretary of the Navy, 26 June, 26 August, 24 September 1808, 16 March, 25 March, 1 April 1809; Benjamin Reed to David Porter, 19 February 1808, all in Commanders Letters.

<sup>12</sup> David Porter to the Secretary of the Navy, 15, 19 February 1809, Commanders Letters; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 43-44.



Louisiana almost always acquitted privateer captains whose ships attempted to transport to the Louisiana market what most considered to be legitimate consumer goods.<sup>13</sup>

John Shaw had returned to New Orleans by 1811 and spent his second tour of duty trying to enforce the government's ill-defined commercial legislation. He also found increased tension with the Spanish concerning West Florida, and news of worsening Anglo-American relations. When Shaw finally learned, on 9 July 1812, that the United States had declared war, it surprised him that the declaration had been issued against Great Britain, and not Spain. Even so, Shaw knew that the station was in precarious shape, as his squadron consisted of only two brigs and eleven gunboats; he immediately sent five of his gunboats to the mouth of the Mississippi River to defend the most obvious invasion route against New Orleans.<sup>14</sup>

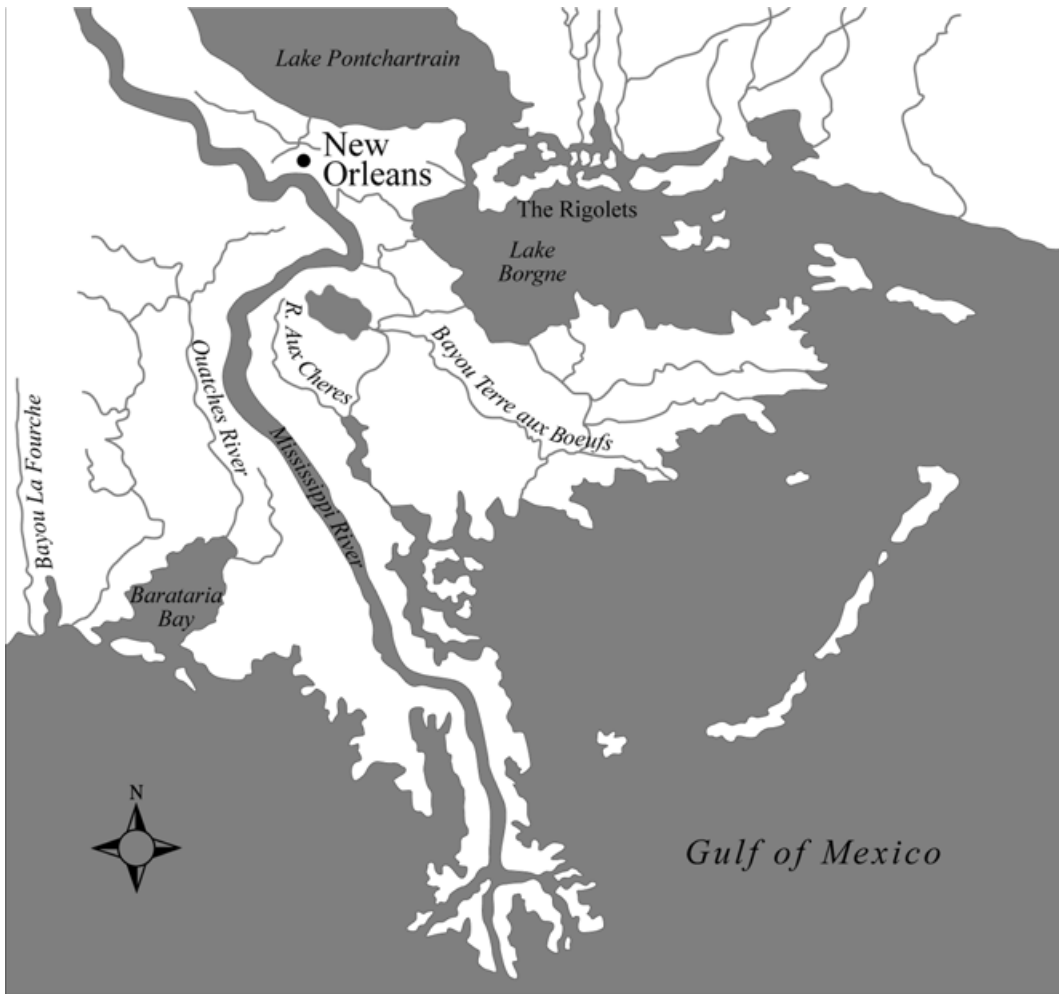
When Daniel Todd Patterson arrived at New Orleans as commander in October 1813, he found the station virtually undefended. “The approaches to this city . . . by water are so numerous,” he exclaimed, “that they require many vessels and vigilant officers to guard them effectively.” Yet he had neither as the station was always short of both vessels and personnel. This lack of resources forced Patterson to use all the means at his disposal to prevent the invasion, which he believed to be inevitable. Working in cooperation with Fort St. Philip some thirty-miles from the river's mouth and Fort St. Leon seventy miles upstream, Patterson intended to use the converted merchant sloop *Louisiana* and schooner *Carolina* in the Mississippi to cover land attacks along the river. Some of his gunboats would support Fort St. Philip, and he would use fireships to disperse an enemy assault via the river. Most of the flotilla's gunboats, however, would be stationed on the bays and estuaries east of New Orleans to prevent an attack along those avenues.<sup>15</sup>

Once the war with the United States actually began, British policy-makers and military officers quickly focused on New Orleans and the Mississippi River as a key to victory. In November 1812, Sir John Borlase Warren, British commander of the North America Squadron, unsuccessfully proposed an operation to close the Mississippi River. A year later Warren again called for his country to make “a vigorous attack to the southward in taking possession of New Orleans and bringing forward the Indians and Spaniards . . . and a division of black troops to cut off the resources of the Mississippi.”

<sup>13</sup> Porter to Louis Alexis, 8, 9 July 1809; Porter to the Secretary of the Navy, 25 August 1809, Commanders Letters; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 52-55.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Dexter to John Shaw, 24 January 1812, Daniel Dexter Letterbook, National Archives, RG45:395, Entry 8; Shaw to Secretary of the Navy, 10 July 1812, John Shaw Papers, NHF-LC.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Patterson to Secretary of the Navy, 27 December 1814, Commanders' Letters, RG45, M147; E.M. Eller, W.J. Morgan, and R. M. Basoco, *Sea Power and the Battle of New Orleans* (New Orleans: The Battle of New Orleans, 150th Anniversary Committee of Louisiana, 1965), 17-19; Edwin N. McClellan, “The Navy at the Battle of New Orleans,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 50 (December 1924): 2045; Daniel Patterson to the Secretary of the Navy, 20 January 1815, *Niles' Weekly Register*, 18 February 1815, Vol. 7, 389; James D. Little, Jr., “The Navy at the Battle of New Orleans,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 54 (Spring 1971): 23.



*Fig. 4: Approches to New Orleans, 1815.*

Naval Captain James Stirling, also forwarded to the Admiralty Office in 1813 a detailed memorandum on the geography of Louisiana, concluding that the region was “very open to attack.” He posited that army forces approaching from north of the city and ships forcing “their way up the River sufficiently far to cooperate with the Army” could easily take New Orleans. Likewise Admiral Henry Hotham, the commanding officer at Bermuda, also suggested to the government that “the place where Americans [were] most vulnerable is New Orleans and . . . [its capture] will be the severest blow America can meet with.” “Whoever has possession of the mouths of the [Mississippi and Ohio] rivers,” he declared, “must have the inhabitants more or less under control.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> John Borlase Warren to Lord Melville, 18 November 1812, 16 November 1813, Warren Papers, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England; James Stirling to Viscount Melville, 17 March 1813, James Stirling Memorandum, H.N.O.C.; Henry Hotham Book of Remarks, 1813, Hotham Collection, DDHO 7/99, Brynmor Jones Library, University of

Vice-Admiral Alexander Forrester Inglis Cochrane finally convinced the Lords of the Admiralty in early August 1814 that a campaign against New Orleans would weaken American efforts against Canada and bring a quick and successful end to the war. Yet as he prepared his assault, Cochrane learned that the approaches to the city were limited; New Orleans was located some 150 miles north from the mouth of the river and surrounded by swamps, marshes, shallow lakes, and bayous. Thus, access to New Orleans was impractical except by several water routes, including Bayou La Fourche, Barataria Bay, River Aux Chenes and Bayou Terre Aux Boeufs, the Mississippi River itself, and three routes via Lake Borgne (the British ultimately chose one of the Lake Borgne routes for their invasion).<sup>17</sup>

Bayou La Fourche, a deep narrow stream running from the Mississippi River north of New Orleans to the Gulf, could not serve as a British route of attack because of its length, narrowness, and ease of obstruction. Barataria Bay, seventy miles west of the mouth of the Mississippi with numerous channels running north to the river across from New Orleans, was also unfeasible unless the British procured experienced pilots familiar with the narrow, shallow, treacherous passages. River Aux Chenes and Bayou Terre Aux Boeufs, small streams running almost from the lower Mississippi River and emptying into the Gulf of Mexico just east of the river's mouth, were also winding, narrow, and easily defended.<sup>18</sup>

The main channel of the Mississippi River provided a possible alternative and given hindsight, was probably the best route the British could have taken. The river was the only option where deep-draught vessels could be used, but even so its shallow mouth denied access to large ships-of-the-line. A strong current also forced vessels to make a long beat upstream, leaving them exposed to fire from the river's banks. Since this was the most viable British route of attack, the Americans had constructed Fort St. Philip and Fort St. Leon for additional defense. Moreover, Fort St. Leon commanded English Turn, an S-shaped turn on the river where sailing vessels had to wait for a change in wind before proceeding upstream. While it was possible to sail upriver, the time spent tacking and waiting for favorable winds would have left Cochrane's flotilla exposed to the possibility of constant barrage.<sup>19</sup>

---

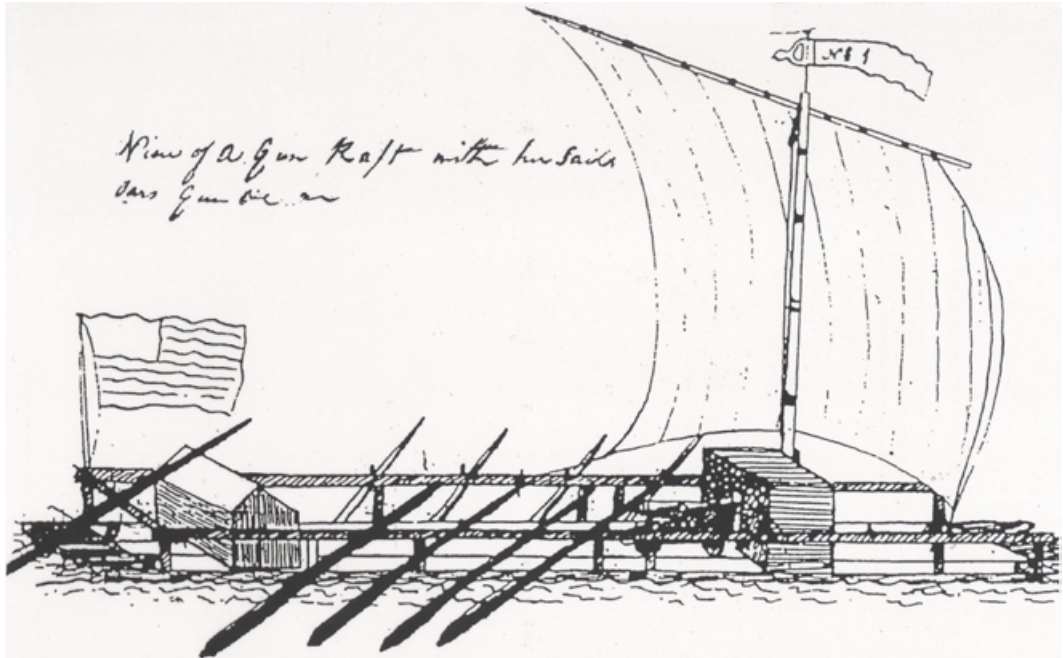
Hull, Hull, England; Lord Bathurst to Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, 25 March 1813, British Public Records Office, Admiralty Office Papers, 1/4223, Kew, England; Viscount Melville to Admiral Hope, 13 November 1812, Robert Saunders-Dundas Papers, NMM.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander F. I. Cochrane's Observations to Lord Melville Relative to America, 1814, War of 1812 MSS, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana; John Wilson Croker to Alexander Cochrane, 10 August 1814, PRO, War Office 1/141, 15-24.

<sup>18</sup> John Shaw to Daniel Patterson, 21 December 1813, Captain's Letters, RG45, M125; Frank Lawrence Owsley, Jr., *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands; The Creek War and the Battle of New Orleans, 1812-1815* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1981), 126-127; Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 164.

<sup>19</sup> John Shaw to Daniel Patterson, 21 December 1813, Captain's Letters; Owsley, *Struggle for the Gulf*, 126-127; Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* 164.

Daniel Todd Patterson, as well as the commanders before him, had understood the military importance of the river and had made plans for such an attack. When David Porter commanded the station (1808-1810), he designed gun rafts to be outfitted with both oars and sails. Each was to be armed with one heavy gun, and supplement gunboats on the river. These vessels, acting in conjunction with gunboats, shore batteries, and permanent fortifications would discomfort an enemy and make the Mississippi River virtually impassible. But those craft were never constructed.<sup>20</sup>



*Fig. 5: Gunraft: Drawing by David Porter, enclosed in letter to the Secretary of the Navy, 28 November 1810. Reproduced from Letters received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commanders 1804-1886. National Archives Microfilm RG45, M147, Roll 2.*

A more ambitious project was started during John Shaw's second tenure as commander (1811-1813). Shaw began construction of a blockship or barge (148 feet in length, 42 feet in beam) that would have drawn only six and one-half feet of water. This vessel's size would have permitted the craft to navigate the river as well as the other shallow waterways within the region. Since the block-ship was designed to carry twenty-six 32-pound cannon or as many guns as a small frigate, it would have been the most heavily armed craft within the region. Shaw argued that it was "better calculated to defend our waters than all the forts and batterys erected for the defense of the country." Even Governor William C. C. Claiborne agreed, claiming "two large Block Ships . . . on the Mississippi, . . . would give greater security" than any other defense that could be erected. Secretary of the Navy William Jones, however, viewed the project as a waste of money and discontinued the vessel's construction in early 1814. Even so, rumors of the

<sup>20</sup> David Porter to the Secretary of the Navy, 28 November 1808, Commanders' Letters.

ship’s existence greatly influence British plans for their assault against New Orleans.<sup>21</sup>

Patterson’s plans for the Mississippi worked reasonably well as British operations against Louisiana could not proceed upriver against New Orleans; they were forced to approach the city via Lake Borgne and the Bayou Bienvenue. Moreover, his use of the sloop *Louisiana* and schooner *Carolina* on the Mississippi River to rake British forces as they prepared in December 1814 to move against Jackson’s army at Chalmette kept the redcoats demoralized and forced them to remain cautious. On 8 January 1815, Patterson used the guns of the *Louisiana* to supplement Jackson’s artillery, and this contributed to Jackson’s success—one of the greatest military victories in American history. Even when the British later evacuated their forces, they had to do so along the same slow circuitous route from which they had advanced because Patterson’s small squadron still controlled the river.<sup>22</sup>

By 1815, the decade-long struggle to maintain control over the river had finally paid great dividends, preserving Louisiana and the west for the United States. In the years following the Battle of New Orleans, American naval forces on the Mississippi River found far fewer enemies than they had previously encountered. Privateering, smuggling, and piracy subsided greatly as the United States returned to peace. It still remained a problem in the Caribbean as Spain’s Latin American colonies began fighting for their independence. Maritime depredations, combined with the slave trade, ultimately influenced the U.S. decision to station a squadron in West Indian waters to curtail illicit activities. The slave trade continued, but the absence of foreign (Spanish) territory near New Orleans greatly reduced the opportunities for that illegal activity to succeed. Even the fears of a western revolution such as Burr’s conspiracy—which might have brought about disunion or have caused the “eggs of insurrection” to hatch—eased as Louisiana became more politically, culturally, and economically incorporated into the United States. The New Orleans Naval Station had spent almost a decade fighting, sometimes successfully and other times unsuccessfully, against foreign encroachments, the possibility of internal revolts, slave trade violators, as well as privateers, smugglers, and pirates. In doing so, the Navy had helped expand governmental presence and authority along a lawless Mississippi River frontier, as well as had helped to incorporate Louisiana into the American union.

---

<sup>21</sup> John Shaw to Secretary of the Navy, 11 September 1813, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy; William C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, 9 July 1813, *Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne*, 6:238; Secretary of the Navy to Daniel Patterson, 25 January 1814, Miscellaneous Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy, 1798-1886, National Archives Microfilm, RG45, M209.

<sup>22</sup> Eller, Morgan, and Basoco, *Sea Power and the Battle of New Orleans* 39-47.

