

# War of 1812: The 200th Anniversary

**A military event that may have been a small blip in U.S. history held rather significant repercussions for Mobile and Baldwin counties.**

Text by Michael Thomason



Most of us know only that the War of 1812 occurred in 1812, and that it wasn't all that important. The fact is, it was very important to Mobile and Baldwin counties. It began with a Creek Indian rebellion, which broke out late in 1812, and the larger war did not end until February 1815. There is much more to that war than most of us imagine – not the least being that this article is written and being read, in English, not Spanish.

When pressed, many of us recall Fort Mims and Andrew Jackson, but we need to know more. The War of 1812 was fought between Great Britain and the United States. We had various reasons to fight the English: they were impressing (stealing) our merchant sailors and otherwise suppressing the freedom of the seas.

Some Americans wanted to add British Canada to our nation, and we in the South were facing serious problems with the Creeks, whom the British were supplying with guns and ammunition to use against the country's western frontiersmen. (In the early 19th century, that frontier meant the Mississippi Territory, whose eastern half was what became Alabama after the war.) Here are some places and people to know as we commemorate this war.

## **The Massacre at Fort Mims**

In 1812, the Mississippi Territorial government sent militia troops, commanded by General Ferdinand Claiborne, to Fort Stoddard on the river at Mt. Vernon. He assigned Major Daniel Beasley, a Mississippi lawyer with no military experience and given to drink, to command 170 men at Fort Mims, in the Tensaw District, the land bordering the headwaters of Mobile Bay. Even though unrest among the Native Americans was widely reported, Beasley refused to see any danger posed toward his position, even when evidence was repeatedly given him to the contrary. He did not maintain a military guard and even left the main gate propped open by sand.

Despite Beasley's illusions, the woods were filled with some 750 Creek "Red Sticks" (the term for any group of Creeks that was making war). At noon on Aug. 30, 1813, the Red Sticks attacked. After the death of the ill-prepared Maj. Beasley in the early minutes of the assault, his place as commander was taken by Dixon Bailey, elected captain of the fort's volunteers. Bailey, who died in the last moments of the battle, was himself of mixed race. So were the leaders of the Red Sticks, William Weatherford ("Red Eagle") and Paddy Welsh, who was a prophet and tactical commander. As the battle wore on, Weatherford was said to be sickened by the slaughter that he could not stop and left. The massacre was total – 250 men, women and children – and quite savage, and made more so by the fact that the dead were not buried for three weeks. During the interval, wild animals and the unrelenting August heat added to the horror the Americans eventually found.

Few of the Red Sticks survived after the subsequent Battle of Horseshoe Bend. William Weatherford did, though, and after the war returned to his land in Monroe County where he died in 1824. He is buried with his mother, Sehoy III, a Creek Princess of the Wind Clan and sister of Alexander McGillivray. Their grave is a short distance north of the site of Fort Mims.

## **Courage at Fort Pierce**

All afternoon, settlers in the stockade near Fort Mims, named Fort Pierce, could hear the sounds of the massacre, but with only 40 troops, they were too few in number to leave their stockade to try to help. After the sounds of battle died down, Andrew Montgomery took 40 militiamen to Fort Mims, where the evidence of the slaughter was all too clear. He then gallantly led his troops, along with the 150 settlers from Fort Pierce, on a trek through the forests until they arrived in Mobile, 35 miles away, on September 4.

## **Lesser-Known Fort Stoddard**

### **Timeline of the War**

- *April 1813*

The Spanish surrender Mobile to American forces.

- *June 1813*

Fort Bowyer established at Mobile Point; rebuilt 1814.

- *August 30, 1813*

Fort Mims attacked; defenders massacred.

- *August 31, 1813*

Fort Pierce militia and settlers begin escape to Mobile.

- *September 14, 1814*

Fort Bowyer attacked; British repulsed.

- *December 24, 1814*

Treaty of Ghent signed. War is officially over.

- *January 8, 1815*

American victory at the Battle of New Orleans

- *February 12, 1815*

British take Fort Bowyer, but war is already over.

Established on the Mobile River near Mt. Vernon, Fort Stoddard was the western terminus of the Federal Road in July 1799. It was, at that time, also the southern port of entry into the Mississippi Territory. By the outbreak of the War of 1812, it was used as the headquarters of the Mississippi Militia under command of Gen. Ferdinand Claiborne. From this fort, he sent men to defend the various stockades established to offer shelter from the Red Sticks. (The best remembered, and least successful, was Fort Mims). Fort Stoddard was

the staging point for the post-massacre Battle of the Holy Ground, where General Claiborne defeated the Red Sticks on Dec. 23, 1813. All the Indian forces were not destroyed then, but they would be by Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend on March 27, 1814.

## **Empty Victory at Fort Bowyer**

Because Great Britain was the world's greatest naval power, Col. John Bowyer rebuilt an earthen fort at Mobile Point (near where Fort Morgan is today) in April 1813. Two months later it was abandoned. Andrew Jackson, warned of a nearby British fleet intending to attack Mobile, quickly reopened the fort a year later with 160 men commanded by Maj. William Lawrence. A month later, the British fleet appeared off the

coast of Alabama, intent on invading this area and linking up with rebellious Red Sticks. Due to faulty intelligence, they were too late for the latter; Fort Bowyer prevented the former. The Americans hit the HMS Hermes, the lead English ship, running it aground and blowing it up.

Chagrined, the English withdrew and decided to attack New Orleans. Andrew Jackson stopped them again on Jan. 8, 1815, at the Battle of New Orleans. Smarting from this defeat, the English, under the command of Captain Ricketts of the HMS Vengeur, successfully attacked Fort Bowyer in February 1815. (Fort Bowyer was designed to repel an assault from the sea; Royal Marines attacked it from the land.) A day or two after the battle, the English received word the war was over and had been since Christmas Eve 1814, when the Treaty of Ghent was signed. Nevertheless, Ricketts kept the sword of the American commander at Fort Bowyer who had surrendered. His family in England still has it.

## **Unusual Victor**

In April 1813, American troops, under the command of Gen. James Wilkinson, marched into Mobile, demanding and securing the surrender of the Spanish garrison. Modern Mobile and Baldwin counties were thus added to the United States. Wilkinson, however, became known as one of the leading scoundrels in the history of the United States Army: he never won a battle or lost a court martial. He had been an agent of the Spanish and in league with Aaron Burr in his treasonous efforts to establish an independent state in the west. After he took Mobile, he was sent to the St. Lawrence Valley where he lost two major battles trying to conquer Canada. Mobile laid out its modern downtown street plan in the 1820s, naming an important street for him. When his treasonous behavior became obvious, Wilkinson Ave. was renamed Washington Ave.

## **Aftermath of the War of 1812**

The only territory the United States acquired during the years of contention was Mobile and Baldwin counties – not Canada. The Native Americans in Alabama lost everything, and settlers poured in. Alabama soon became a separate territory from Mississippi, and in 1819, a state in the Union. Wilkinson dodged another court martial, and Andrew Jackson became our nation's greatest hero since George Washington. Mobile boomed, thanks to cotton production in the interior counties coming down the rivers to the port. By 1860, the tiny village the Americans took in 1813 was a city of 30,000 inhabitants.