

Battles at Plattsburgh Lesson Plan Narrative

On the 31st of March in 1814 British forces occupied Paris in France and forced ***Napoleon Bonaparte*** to ***abdicate***. France surrendered to Britain on 11 April 1814 ending several years of war between the two countries. Britain then had a large number of army and navy forces which could be sent across the Atlantic Ocean to fight the war with the United States.

In March 1814, ***Bathurst, the Secretary of War and the Colonies*** issued a set of orders to the British army and navy instructing that the navy was to transport Major General Ross and 4,500 British troops to create a ***diversion*** by attacking the United States along the eastern coast. Bathurst thought that the United States would concentrate on defending its coast and might not reinforce the U.S. Army along the Canadian border. General Ross directed that coastal towns be annoyed and began to raid the Chesapeake Bay region of Maryland. In August he attacked at Bladensburg, Baltimore (***Fort McHenry***), and Washington, where the British Army burned the President's home (later white-washed to hide the burned appearance – resulting in its being referred to as the “White House”).

With the United States distracted by the British actions along the coast and in the Chesapeake, Bathurst issued another order in June 1814 instructing that 15,000 British troops be sent to Canada to **augment** the army in Canada under the command of **General George Prevost**. He directed that Prevost “commence offensive operations on the Enemy’s Frontier before the close of this Campaign”, destroy **Sacket’s Harbor**, and to capture and occupy an advanced position on **Lake Champlain**, “always however taking care not to expose His Majesty’s Forces to being cut off by too extended a line of advance.”

Prevost moved 4,000 of the new troops to **Kingston, Ontario** from where they were to attack Sacket’s Harbor, attracting the United States War Department’s attention to what could be viewed as an invasion of the country. In response to the threat at Sacket’s Harbor, **General John Armstrong** of the War Department directed that all available troops under the command of **General George Izard** at Plattsburgh move west to defend Sacket’s Harbor. The diversion worked! Plattsburgh, the largest supply point for the Northern Army of the United States, was left virtually defenseless as 4,500 U.S. troops marched west.

General Alexander Macomb was left in command at Plattsburgh with three unfinished forts, all of the sick and injured, prisoners, and small companies of riflemen, engineers, and artillery; the four-ship navy at Plattsburgh was under the command of **Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough**. General Macomb began moving the 700 sick and injured soldiers to the military hospital at **Burlington, Vermont** and created a hospital on Crab Island in **Cumberland Bay**, just off the shores of **Plattsburgh, New York**. He directed that the remaining men concentrate on completing the fortifications. Macomb also ordered that **General Benjamin Mooers** of the NY militia call for all available **militia** troops of Clinton, Essex, and Franklin counties to report for duty; approximately 700 farmers, shop keepers, doctors, lawyers, mill workers, and newspaper employees responded. Seeing the need for more troops, Macomb then requested help from the militia of the State of Vermont; almost 2,500 arrived before September 11th.

A group of twenty school boys from the **Plattsburgh Academy**, many with their family's weapons, reported to General Macomb to volunteer. Macomb, needing every fighter he could get, agreed to let them fight as a rifle company if they could get military sponsors. Captain Martin Aikin of the Essex County, NY militia and

Lieutenant Azariah Flagg of the Clinton County, NY militia (and editor of the Plattsburgh Republican newspaper) volunteered as sponsors. The boys were **cited** by General Macomb after the battle for their bravery and usefulness.

With the diversions of the Chesapeake region and Sacket's Harbor an apparent success, General Prevost ordered the British Army to advance toward Plattsburgh starting on 3 September 1814. He left supplies and about 650 men where they camped at Champlain on the 5th of September.

The 10,000 man British Army moved into Plattsburgh on the 6th of September 1814 from two directions: the **artillery** and some of the troops by the roadway along the shore of Lake Champlain and the major **infantry** forces from the west through the village of Beekmantown. General Macomb ordered 250 soldiers and some of the militia to meet the 7,000-man British column at Beekmantown. After firing for a short period of time at the long line of advancing red-coated troops, the Americans returned hastily to Plattsburgh, crossing to the south side of the Saranac River. Macdonough moved his ships to deeper water within the bay and out of range of the British artillery range. The British troops

encamped on the northern side of the Saranac and began building artillery and ***rocket batteries***.

Prevost's plan called for a combined naval and land attack. The British were building a new flagship, the *Confiance*, larger than any of Macdonough's vessels, at ***Isle Au Noix*** to the north of Lake Champlain. ***Captain George Downie*** arrived to take command of the *Confiance* and the British fleet at the beginning of September. Downie was new, and short of experienced sailors and cannon crew; some spoke only French! Prevost's plan was to wait for the *Confiance* to join the British Fleet before the final assault at Plattsburgh.

Knowing that Prevost might attempt to attack the forts from the rear by moving west and south, Macomb ordered all roadways leading from the west toward the village to be disguised by the militia. The work was to be done at night, without torches or lanterns. They would leave the roadway to the south, three miles west of the village, leading to the ***Salmon River Settlement*** where General Mooers maintained his headquarters. ***Lieutenant Sumpter*** with two artillery crews and two cannon were to remain at Salmon River Settlement and await the British.

In the evenings and during the days from the 6th to the 10th of September, Macomb continually marched some of the militia out of the woods from one direction and into the woods at a different location, back and forth, changing locations and directions, to give the appearance of large numbers of reinforcements arriving. Macdonough anchored his vessels with lines set to aid in “**winding**” his ships, turning them around to bring fresh guns against the British. His flagship, Saratoga, was a match for the Confiance at close range; Macdonough had **caronades**: short, fat cannons with limited range. Downie’s ship had **long guns**: long-range cannons.

On the morning of the 11th of September, Downie’s fleet entered Cumberland Bay adjacent to the Village of Plattsburgh. Had Downie remained in the deeper water of the lake, he could have fired upon Macdonough without risking any return fire; Macdonough’s guns would not have been able to achieve the range. Because of the insistence of General Prevost that the British navy support the advance of the army, and due, in part, to the unseasoned **bravado** of Captain Downie, who boasted that the Confiance, alone, could defeat the American navy, Downie entered into Macdonough’s trap. The crews of Macdonough’s vessels knew the lake, each other, and had practiced gunning frequently; Downie’s

crews were “green” and had trouble communicating with each other.

Downie died within the first fifteen minutes of the naval battle. Macdonough’s crews inflicted considerably more damage upon the British fleet than the Americans suffered. Miraculously, none of the ships from either side sank. When all of the initial guns on Macdonough’s vessel were disabled he gave the order to “wind ship”. With the lines previously placed to make it happen, the Saratoga turned a fresh broadside of guns upon the listing British *Confiance*. The new gunfire was more than the broken British fleet could stand: at 11:00 AM, they struck their colors after two and one half hours of non-stop battering. The naval battle resulted in an American victory.

On land, when the naval battle started at 8:30 AM, General Prevost called his officers to his tent for a meeting. He was told that the army was eating breakfast and he ordered that they be able to finish. His battle plan called for ***General Sir Thomas Brisbane*** to take 1,500 troops to create a diversion inside the village at the Saranac River while all the remaining infantry were to go west and then south, crossing the **Saranac River** several miles from the village to attack the American forts as

General Macomb had anticipated. General Brisbane's force was to engage the American forces at 9:30 while **General Frederick Philipse Robinson** led a column of troops west to meet with **General Sir Manley Power's** troops outside the village, turning south to enter the woods and eventually cross the Saranac to attack the American forts from the south. The 7,000-man column entered the woods only to get lost among logging roads and eventually found the river crossing at 10:30.

General Macomb had ordered the New York militia into the western woods along the roadway leading to the Salmon River Settlement telling them to retreat as the enemy advanced. He ordered the Vermont militia into the eastern woods along the same roadway, telling them not to fire upon the British until they heard the cannon of Lieutenant Sumpter at Salmon River Settlement.

The large British column crossed the Saranac River and assembled in a mile and a half column on the roadway to the Settlement, taking fire from the New York militia on their right flank. At 11:00, as the naval engagement ended and silence fell upon the lake, the British column reached the Salmon River Settlement – Lieutenant Sumpter's cannon blocked their approach and sounded the start of an engagement with the British

column receiving fire from the woods on both sides of the roadway.

General Prevost, after watching as the British fleet surrendered, now was aware that General Robinson's column was not attacking the American forts from the south but was itself under attack by cannon and a force of unknown quantity some two and a half miles from where they should have been. Perhaps remembering that American militia seemed to be arriving day and night for days and recalling the words of Bathurst's orders, "always however taking care not to expose His Majesty's Forces to being cut off by too extended a line of advance", General Prevost issued an order to retreat. The finest, most experienced army in the world, turned in the face of an unknown defender and retreated. The Americans won the Battles at Plattsburgh.

Theodore Roosevelt and **Winston Churchill** referred to Plattsburgh as the most important engagement of the War of 1812. It was the largest invasion on United States soil during the War and forced the British to rethink their position in peace talks at **Ghent** in the Netherlands. A treaty was signed on December 24th, 1814 effectively ending the War. The Battle of New Orleans, at which

4,500 British troops participated in a disastrous ending, happened in 1815 after the treaty was signed.