



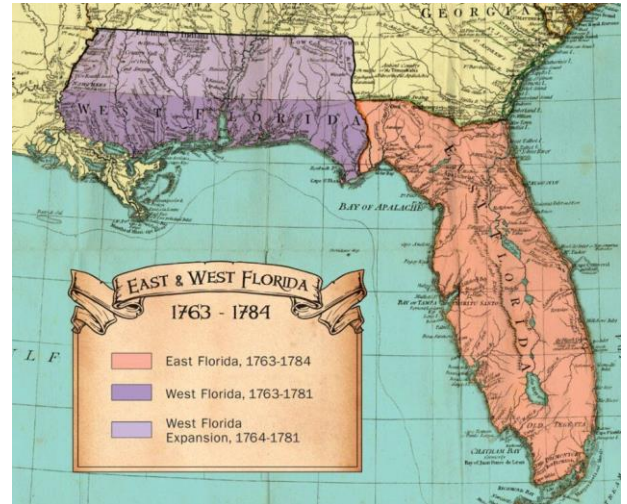
Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime History Briefs

Battle of Lake Pontchartrain

September 10, 1779, saw a battle between the British sloop-of-war *HMS West Florida* and the Continental Navy schooner *USS Morris*.

The battle, termed the

Battle of Lake Pontchartrain, was reported to have taken place off the south shore of the Lake near the entrance to Bayou St John. At that time, the waters of Lake Pontchartrain were a part of the British province of West Florida whereas New Orleans was under Spanish rule.



The *HMS West Florida* had been patrolling the waters of the Mississippi Sound and Lake Pontchartrain since January 1776 and was the only armed naval vessel in these waters. Her patrols protected the communications and supply lines between the British forces at Pensacola and the British forts at Mobile and on the Mississippi River -Bute at Bayou Manchac, New Richmond near the current site of Baton Rouge, and Panmure at Natchez. It was reported that the *HMS West Florida* captured three vessels out of the north shore in April 1777 based on the accusation of smuggling tar to New Orleans. Galvez claimed that the captured vessels were Spanish not American and retaliated by seizing all vessels of British registry on the river south of Fort Bute. One of those vessels was reported to be under the command on William Pickles who would play a pivotal role in the Battle of Lake Pontchartrain. Unfortunately, little is known about Pickles' background.

It was not until late 1779 that the dominance of the *West Florida* in the waters of the Mississippi Sound and Lake Pontchartrain was challenged in what has been termed the Battle of Lake Pontchartrain. The battle was initiated when patrolling the Lake, the British Royal Navy sloop-of-war *West Florida* encountered the *USS Morris* of the Continental Navy which had set out earlier from New Orleans with a mixed American and Spanish crew of 57 men. The *Morris* was under the command of Continental Navy Captain William Pickles while the *West Florida* was under the command of British Navy Lieutenant John Payne. In contrast to the large crew onboard the *Morris*, the *West Florida* was reported to be carrying a very modest crew of 15 men. Captain Pickles had been commissioned on October 10, 1776 and saw active duty on the Gulf Coast.

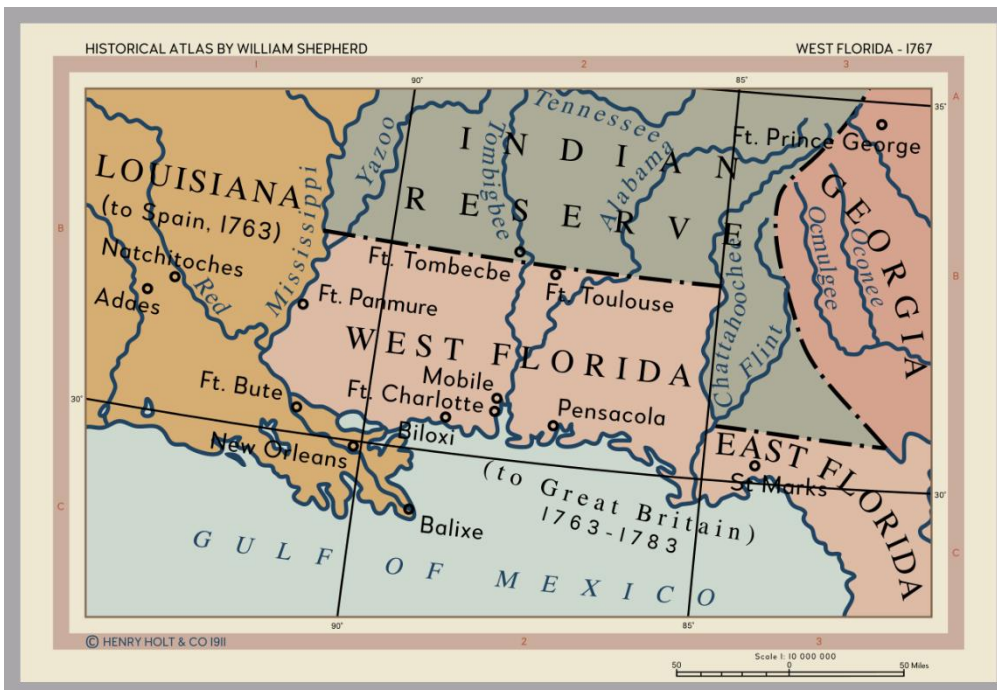
The origin of the *Morris* is somewhat complicated. The “original” *Morris* was actually the British vessel, *HMS Rebecca*, captured in 1778 at Fort Bute by twenty-nine men of the 13th Virginia Regiment under the command of James Willing that had departed from Fort Pitt at Pittsburgh and traveled down the Mississippi River on the gunboat *USS Rattletrap*. The captured vessel was then sailed to New Orleans where she was made a part of the Continental Navy and renamed the *Morris* after Robert Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Oliver Pollock, a prominent New Orleans businessman, used the authority granted him as the Commercial Agent of New Orleans by the Continental Congress in 1778 to place the *Morris* under the command of Pickles who directed conversion of the vessel to a man-o-war. The vessel only saw limited action before being destroyed by a severe hurricane on August 8, 1778, causing the loss of 11 of her crew. It has been reported that the sitting Governor of Spanish New Orleans, Bernardo de Galvez, provided another ship to Pickles that was also named the *Morris*. Second in command was Pierre George Rosseau, a French national and a lieutenant in the Continental Navy. This vessel was reported to be a schooner of indefinite length armed with five small (2.5 pound or less) cannons, and ten swivel guns. It lacked barricades to protect the crew from gunfire.

A Royal Navy sloop-of-war was a warship with a single deck that carried up to eighteen guns. It could be rigged as a “ship sloop”, “brig sloop” or “Bermuda sloop”. Records indicated that the *West Florida* was rigged as a “brig sloop” (see adjacent diagram).



Fort Bute was one of three British colonial forts located on the far western border of West Florida. It was located at the confluence of Bayou Manchac (aka Riverie d’Iberville) and the Mississippi River. The two

other forts, Fort Panmure and Fort New Richmond, were located at Natchez and Baton Rouge, respectively. Fort Bute was captured by the Spanish under the leadership of Bernado de Galvez on September 7, 1779. After



capturing Fort Bute, Galvez proceeded upstream to Baton Rouge and, on September 21, 1779, attacked the British garrison at Fort New Richmond with artillery causing its commander, Colonel Alexander Dickson, to surrender after three hours of shelling. On the same occasion, Dickson surrendered on behalf of Fort Panmure as well. The victory at Baton Rouge effectively ended British control of the Mississippi River and placed it firmly in the hands of the Spanish. Now in Spanish hands and control, Fort New Richmond was renamed Fort San Carlos.



Returning our attention to the Battle of Lake Pontchartrain, the *Morris* was reported to have been sailing under a “false flag”; i.e., in this instance, a British ensign. Hailed by the *West Florida* to determine the intentions of the *Morris*, the captain of the *Morris*, Pickles, directed the British ensign to be hauled down and replaced with an American flag. The two ships being in close proximity, the crew of the *Morris* were ordered to throw grappling hooks to draw the ships together. The ships exchanged gunfire and the much larger crew of the *Morris* attempted to board the *West Florida*. After being repulsed twice, the crew of the *West Florida* was ultimately overcome and boarded by the crew of the *Morris*. Rosseau, second in command, is reported to have personally led the *Morris* boarding parties. During the boarding, John Payne, the captain of the *West Florida* was mortally wounded. Six to eight *Morris* crew members were reported to have been killed along with an indeterminate number of wounded.



(Note: The Wikipedia Encyclopedia article on the Battle of Lake Pontchartrain lists John Payne as the captain of the *HMS West Florida* and provides a link to more detailed information concerning a John Willet Payne that is not the same John Payne that captained the *West Florida*. Further, while the fundamental accounts of the battle from the various sources are reasonably consistent, some of the specific details differ. This brief attempts to summarize the accounts that are generally consistent across most of the sources.)

Captain Pickles returned to New Orleans with the captured British vessel that was refitted at the direction of Oliver Pollock for service in the Continental Navy and renamed the *USS Galvestown*. Under Pickles’ command, she along with the *Morris* cruised West Florida waters during Galvez’s march up the Mississippi River. In January of 1780, *Galvestown* under the command of Pickles joined Galvez’s invasion force attacking Fort Charlotte at Mobile. It was not until February 25th, that Galvez actually landed his forces, enhanced by reinforcements

from Havana, on Dog River some 10 miles from Fort Charlotte. Around March 2nd, Galvez began his bombardment of Fort Charlotte finally breaching the wall of the fort on March 13th. The British Commander of the Fort, Captain Elias Durnford capitulated the following day. The exact role that Pickles and the *Galveztown* played in the siege could not be determined.

Prior to the engagement at Mobile, Pickles continued to patrol the Lake and the Mississippi Sound and on one occasion captured a vessel said to have slaves onboard. On September 21, 1779, Pickles landed on the north shore near what is now the city of Mandeville and at the time was a part of West Florida, a British territory, to demand the surrender of British citizens living there. A total of nineteen residents of the area, including one woman- Mary Smith, signed the documents pledging their allegiance to the United States. Years later, the Treaty of Paris of 1783 signaled to end of the Revolutionary War including the wars between the British, French, and Spanish. A provision of that Treaty ceded the British province of West Florida to Spain.

Subsequent to Pickles' part in supporting Galvez's attack of the British fort at Mobile, he sailed *Galveztown* to Philadelphia at which point the ship was sold. Still active in naval service, he was given command of the *Mercury* and given orders to transport Henry Laurens on a diplomatic mission to the Dutch Republic in late 1779 or early 1780. Unfortunately, the ship was captured off the coast of Newfoundland and both Pickles and Laurens imprisoned in Plymouth and London, respectively. Pickles escaped in May of 1781 and eventually made his way back to Philadelphia only to be assaulted and killed by a gang of Italian sailors in 1783. Laurens received an unconditional release from custody on April 27, 1782, based on a prisoner exchange authorized by the President of the Continental Congress. Laurens had the dubious distinction of having been the only American ever to be held in the Tower of London.

At some point in my research, I discovered a [blog](#) by Donald J. Sharp describing the Battle of Lake Pontchartrain. While both my brief and Sharp's blog are essentially in agreement on the fundamentals of the Battle, some of the details differ.

Sources

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