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A "Melancholy Experience:" William C. C. Claiborne and the Louisiana Militia, 1811-1815

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A “Melancholy Experience:”
William C. C. Claiborne and the Louisiana Militia, 1811-1815

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History
Public History

by

Michael J. Edwards

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Dedication

To my wife, Kimberly Goin Edwards, for her unwavering love and support.

I could not have done this without you.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere thanks for all of the support I have received from the Department of History at the University of New Orleans and from the College of Liberal Arts. I would like to thank all the members of my committee – Dr. Robert L. Dupont, Dr. Michael Mizell-Nelson, and Dr. Allan R. Millett. Dr. Millett has been my boss, mentor, and military history guru for many years. Thanks to him my wars are no longer confined between 1939-1945. Dr. Dupont has steered me in the right direction since the days of Metro College. Dr. Michael Mizell-Nelson has allowed me to talk endlessly on military history matters and actually encouraged me to do so. For his sage advice I thank Dr. Phillip J. Johnson. And I am indebted to Dr. James Mokhiber for his assistance through Graduate School. And Sherrie Sanders has been a guiding light through the whole process – thanks, Sherrie. Thanks also to my mother, Jo Bolton, and the rest of my family for their support and encouragement.

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Abstract

William C. C. Claiborne found himself a stranger in a strange land. Almost more a colonial governor of a European power rather than an American statesman, Claiborne grappled with maintaining a militia force for the Territory of Orleans, now the present day state of Louisiana. He built upon the volunteer companies he found within the city of New Orleans, but had little success molding the entire militia into an effective, efficient military force. Claiborne, hoping to use the fear generated by the January 1811 slave revolt to spur militia reform, maintained an active correspondence with the state's legislators, the area's military commanders, the members of the Louisiana congressional delegation, and even the President of the United States for assistance with militia matters. Ultimately, Claiborne failed and the British attack on New Orleans in 1814/1815 made the matter of reform academic.

William C. C. Claiborne

Orleans Territory

Militia

Battle of New Orleans

War of 1812

Introduction

In a June 31, 1802 letter to U.S. Secretary of State James Madison, Mississippi Territorial Governor William C. C. Claiborne expressed his wish that the United States gain control of more southern territory, which included East and West Florida as well as the “Island of Orleans.”¹ Claiborne’s dream became reality after the surprising offer by First Consul of the French Republic Napoleon Bonaparte to sell the *entire* Louisiana Territory to the United States. On December 20, 1803, Claiborne, now appointed governor of the Territory of Orleans,² assumed his political duties in Louisiana. His security concerns included the protection of the territory from the neighboring Spanish, possible French intervention, internal discontent, and slave rebellions. Claiborne bore a heavy burden with very few federal troops to enforce the U.S. claim to sovereignty. The lion’s share of protection for the territory fell upon the militia units Claiborne had at his disposal. Guided by his belief in the Jeffersonian ideal of the citizen-soldier, Claiborne tried during his tenure as governor to mold the Louisiana militia into an effective fighting force. After many years in a strange environment that he never felt comfortable or accepted in, Claiborne’s efforts to reform the state militia failed.³

Anglo-American in background and unaccustomed to the casual, personalist Gallic and Iberian culture of New Orleans, Claiborne felt like a stranger in Louisiana. Yet he had to secure this territory and bring it into the American nation. One element of his responsibilities as

¹ Claiborne to Madison, June 13, 1802, in *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson: Mississippi State Archives and History, 1917), 1:140. Hereafter they will be cited as *OLB*.

² Roughly the size of present day Louisiana.

³ The fear of a standing army permeated American political thought. Militia service was viewed as a means to imbue citizens with a sense of duty and obligation. Generally this would not be the case. See Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1994); C. Edward Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 6-9. See also John R. Elting, *Amateurs to Arms! A Military History of the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1991).

territorial governor included command of the militia although he had no military experience. His report in a letter to James Madison on 27 December, 1803, described the necessity for a re-organization of that local force. Claiborne found several officers too young for their rank, others incompetent, and the companies of free men of color unsettling.⁴ His background as a southerner had not prepared him for a group of assertive, educated black men with weapons. His early correspondence reflects little confidence in the militia. Surrounded by an alien – and possibly hostile – population and faced with the fears of slave revolts, the need to suppress smugglers, and entanglements with the Spanish, French, and British, Claiborne attempted to reform the militia into a more effective military force. Through his official correspondence Claiborne revealed his desire for reform, but felt constrained with the realities of a democratic system. Claiborne found his efforts stymied by conflicts with the state legislature, the federal government, and disobedient militia troops. While Claiborne kept Louisiana in the Union – a notable success – he failed to reform the militia. Indeed, it was not Claiborne’s efforts or pleading to the legislature, but Andrew Jackson and the British invasion that forced the militia onto the plains of the Chalmette battlefield.⁵ The period of 1811-1815, starting with the slave revolt and ending with war against Great Britain, proved to be the most tumultuous for the young governor, the state, and the militia. Those four years proved to be the years of decision.

⁴ Claiborne to Madison, December 27, 1803, *OLB*, 1:314.

⁵ Louisiana was not the only state with militia troubles see Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers*, 39. For the Louisiana militia in the early American period, see Joseph F. Stoltz, III, “An Ardent Spirit”: William C.C. Claiborne and the Creation of the Orleans Territorial Militia, 1803-1805 (MA thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009).

Chapter One

Claiborne's territory had been a separate nation for more than a hundred years and unlike any other American state. René Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, claimed the Mississippi River basin for France in 1682. The French maintained control of the region until the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which ended the French colonial empire in North America. France's loss in the Seven Years War pushed it into second class status in the colonial New World. France ceded the area of Louisiana to Spain. This decision was very unpopular with the French residents of the territory, who unsuccessfully rebelled against the first Spanish governor.⁶ But the Spanish returned and reestablished their power until Spain ceded the territory back to France in the "secret" Third Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1800. One provision of this treaty stated that should France wish to leave the region, Spain regained control.⁷ But Spain did not recover control. France sold the territory to the United States and the Americans quickly moved in.

Claiborne, the new governor, operated in a policy vacuum – his situation had no precedent in United States history. The city of New Orleans was almost ninety years old with deep ties to Europe. The population of the city was a mix of European, Creole,⁸ Native American, and African with the latter divided between slaves and free persons of color. In 1809, to add to this racial gumbo, thousands of white, black, and mulatto refugees fled the revolt in St. Domingue and settled in the Orleans Territory. The fear of this new group of slaves grew from the possibility of their having been 'tainted' with a spirit of rebellion.⁹

⁶ Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana* (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1867), 5:213.

⁷ Gayarré, *History*, 5:521; Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness so Immense: The Louisiana Purchase* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 327-328.

⁸ For an in-depth discussion of this term, see Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

⁹ Gayarré, *History*, 3:126. Many of the French originally fled to Cuba, but with war in Europe, the Spanish authorities ejected many of these former colonists who then sought refuge in New Orleans.

Claiborne had approximately 400 regular troops at his disposal in addition to 100 Mississippi militiamen enrolled as a “palace guard” for the move to New Orleans. The latter would go home when their enlistments expired after a three month period. Claiborne needed to find a source of loyal manpower for the local militia. He wrote Secretary Madison with a possible solution. He told Madison that he had enrolled four companies of militia formed from local citizens who displayed a military air, and, more importantly, a “sincere attachment” to the United States.¹⁰ To command this militia, Claiborne appointed Colonel Joseph de Ville Degoutin Bellechase, a veteran of the American Revolution while in Spanish service. The move placated some of the local population by placing a leading citizen of the pre-American era in a position of responsibility. The re-organization of the militia became an ongoing process. On February 2, 1804, Claiborne issued a General Order for the militia: that those who had served in the Corps of Militia and now attached to the Volunteer Companies present within the city to “do their duty accordingly.”¹¹ Claiborne curtailed enlistment until further instructions from Washington.

The political situation within the city was as complex as its population was diverse. Various groups vied for supremacy, and the ongoing clash of cultures kept Claiborne occupied beyond the daily business of government. One common concern, however, was the fear of slave rebellion. Whether French, Spanish, or American, all lived in a constant state of anxiety because of slaves who might seek the most extreme form of resistance and choose armed insurrection.¹² Shortly after Claiborne took power, the long-dreaded slave rebellion became an ugly reality.

¹⁰ Claiborne to Madison, January 17, 1804, *OLB*, 1:339.

¹¹ Claiborne, February 2, 1804, *OLB*, 1:358. The Volunteer Companies were men interested in military matters often composed along ethnic lines (the 69th Infantry in New York State was almost exclusively Irish in composition).

¹² James Dorman, “The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Louisiana,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn 1977): 391.

Edwin Turner, the district commander in Natchitoches, reported the suppression of a slave revolt to Claiborne in October of 1804. Another slave rebellion – again in Pointe Coupee – led Claiborne to direct a “Colonel Butler” to send an officer and approximately twenty-five to thirty troops to defeat the insurrection.¹³ Claiborne directed the Army regulars to carry one hundred muskets (drawn from “public stores”) with which to arm the area militia. Struggles to maintain adequate arms and supplies for the militia troubled Claiborne throughout his time in office.¹⁴

Claiborne wrestled with other matters of state besides slave rebellions. The governor faced issues such as the Aaron Burr conspiracy in 1806, the movements of Spanish troops around and through the territory, the continuing question of the allegiance of Louisianans, and the loyalty of the militia. The dispersal of the federal troops throughout the territory meant that Claiborne faced an almost constant shortage of regulars to protect New Orleans. (Many of the regulars who remained, including U.S. Marines, manned the fortifications around the city.) Claiborne feared he did not have enough regulars to maintain the security of the territory.

In 1809 Claiborne addressed militia reform in his annual address to the Territorial Legislature. He felt distressed over the state of the militia in the territory and complained that the militia remained a fragile institution with the responsibility of the territory’s defense falling on thinly spread regulars. He added that he intended to professionalize the militia, and bring it up to the standards as ordered by the federal government.¹⁵

The latter months of 1810 found Claiborne drawn into the West Florida Revolt. West Florida consisted of the area north of Lake Pontchartrain and along the Mississippi River to the

¹³Dorman, “The Persistent Specter”: 392.

¹⁴ Claiborne to Butler, November 8, 1804, *OLB*, 3:5.

¹⁵ Claiborne to the Territorial Legislature, January 9, 1809, *OLB*, 4:12. The state militias were subject to the Militia Act of 1792, Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers*, 6-7, 8. Also, in 1808 the US Congress voted a yearly appropriation of \$200,000 to arm militia units, but it fell upon state and territorial legislatures to determine what arms they required. The appropriation was based upon militia returns furnished by the state.

present border of the state of Florida. The rebels – predominantly Anglo-Americans – rose against the Spanish government and captured the Iberian garrison at Baton Rouge. In October, 1810, the U.S. annexed most of the Louisiana and Mississippi sections of West Florida. But Fulmar Skipwith, president of the Republic of West Florida, had hoped to negotiate with the United States for better terms and entry into the Union. Claiborne ignored the protestations and moved forward. In early December, 1810, Claiborne traveled to Baton Rouge to take full possession of the Republic of West Florida. He ordered into the field a mix of U.S. Army regulars and militia to provide military muscle for the annexation. Skipwith vowed to fight “to the death” against the United States. Fortunately, for Claiborne, Skipwith and his fellow rebels ceded power peacefully to the United States. In December, 1810, Claiborne dismissed the militia from their temporary term of service and garrisoned Baton Rouge with a small force of infantry and cavalry under the command of Major Homer Milton, U.S. Army.¹⁶ Claiborne weathered this crisis only to face a more serious issue early the next year.

¹⁶ McMichael, Andrew, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 159-171.

Chapter Two

On January 8, 1811, slaves under the direction of Charles Deslondes, a mulatto slave, led a revolt in St. Charles Parish, approximately thirty miles west of New Orleans. Deslondes had been hired out to Colonel Manuel Andry for work on the latter's plantation. Armed with a variety of weapons – mostly farming implements with a few firearms – the slaves attacked Andry and his son. Andry was wounded in the assault and his son killed. But Andry escaped and alerted Claiborne of the revolt. The day before General Wade Hampton, successor to James Wilkinson as commander of the southern military district, arrived in New Orleans to inspect properties that he owned. He had not counted on having to pursue slaves, but he did so under a request from Claiborne. Hampton took command of a detachment that included U.S. Army soldiers, Marines under the command of Maj. Daniel Carmick, and two companies of militia. He then headed north to confront the slave army. Claiborne also sent a letter to Secretary of State Robert Smith and informed him of the situation and his actions with regard to the revolt.¹⁷

Andry gathered a force of about eighty men, a motley mix of militia and planters, and attacked the group of slaves, which he estimated to be between 200 and 500. His attack scattered the slaves into nearby woods. The territorial authorities viewed the slave insurrection with alarm. Claiborne ordered a detachment of mounted infantry and another of light artillery to head south from Baton Rouge to assist in quelling the revolt. There were still rebellious elements unhappy with both the Spanish and the United States in the West Florida area and the weakening of the defensive posture of Baton Rouge attested to the seriousness of the slave revolt.¹⁸

¹⁷ Claiborne to St. Amand, January 9, 1811, *OLB*, 93. A book on the revolt, written by Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Uprising* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), is overly sensationalistic in its approach to the revolt.

¹⁸ McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties*, 166.

Major Milton, commanding the Baton Rouge contingent, rendezvoused with General Hampton at Destrehan Plantation in St. Charles Parish. The rebel army had grown in number with slaves from nearby plantations running away to join the insurrection. The forces met near the present-day small town of Norco. The government forces dispersed the slaves with sixty-six slaves killed either during the battle or immediately afterward. The troops captured sixteen slaves. Militia patrols later found others. A hastily gathered tribunal of citizens found twenty-one of the thirty captured slaves guilty and sentenced them to death. A firing party shot the condemned rebels and then impaled the severed heads on fence posts along the River Road as a warning to others contemplating revolt.¹⁹

Claiborne filed reports to Smith and noted that his belief at present that the territory had no more to fear in regard to slave revolts.²⁰ However, regardless of what he wrote to Smith, Claiborne issued orders to militia officers for aggressive patrolling night and day to reinstate order to the region. The regulars returned to their garrison and assumed their previous duties. Claiborne viewed the disruption caused by the slave revolt as an opportunity to promote militia reform. In a January 14, 1811, letter Claiborne again revealed his desire to reform the system. He wrote that the territory needed a “well organized militia” and stated his intention to keep the Territorial Legislature in session until “they shall have passed a strong Militia Law.”²¹ Wade Hampton, who had no need to be diplomatic in his assessment of the militia, wrote to Secretary of War William Eustis that depicted the militia forces deployed to suppress the slave rebellion were “unorganized,” and that the military response from state forces as confused “beyond

¹⁹ Dorman, “The Persistent Specter”: 397. For reactions to the slave revolt around the country see Thomas Marshall Thompson, “National Newspaper and Legislative Reactions to Louisiana’s Deslondes Slave Revolt of 1811,” *Louisiana History, The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Winter 1992): 5-29.

²⁰ Claiborne to Smith, January 12, 1811, *OLB*, 5:92.

²¹ Claiborne to Andry, January 14, 1811, *OLB*, 5:99.

description.”²² A local newspaper, the *Louisiana Gazette*, in an editorial on January 14, 1811, stated that the region had learned a tough lesson, and, echoing Claiborne’s fears, claimed “the time may not be distant when we shall be called...against a more formidable foe than the banditti lately quelled.”²³ The crisis concerned Claiborne enough that he hoped the legislature might enact laws providing for a more effective, “energetic” militia.²⁴

On January 29, 1811, Claiborne addressed both Houses of the Territorial Legislature. He used the recent slave revolt as a means to prod the lawmakers to support militia reform. He described the state of the militia as “lax and disorganized” due to the standing militia laws. While he advocated change, he also cautioned that any drastic actions may “embarrass and retard the introduction of order and discipline.” Claiborne, sensitive to his position as governor with a complex constituency, requested the Legislature pass laws to make muster attendance more frequent, to fine those who missed muster, to give power to the militia officers to enforce order, and to curb the number of exemptions from militia service.²⁵ Through these reforms, Claiborne hoped to have a more effective state military force at his command.

In response to Claiborne’s address on the question of the militia, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Maglore Guichard, wrote that slaves learned an important lesson and that the territorial calm “depends on the order and discipline of the Militia.”²⁶ Jean Noel Destrehan, president of the Legislative Council, addressed a different reply to the governor. Destrehan agreed that the slave insurrection was a “warning” to the people of the dangers they

²² Hampton to Eustis, *Territorial Papers of the United States, Vol. IX, The Orleans Territory* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940), 917-918.

²³ *Louisiana Gazette*, January 14, 1811, copy in The Historic New Orleans Collection.

²⁴ Claiborne to Ballinger, January 20, 1811, *OLB*, 5:108-109. Rasmussen, *American Uprising*, 195. Rasmussen states that Claiborne sought to “militarize” Louisiana. He did not. He sought to improve security and push the citizens to actually conform to the Militia Law of 1792 – a goal that *every* state in the United States had to work toward.

²⁵ Claiborne to territorial legislature, January 29, 1811, *OLB*, 5:124.

²⁶ Guichard to Claiborne, January 31, 1811, *OLB*, 5:130.

face. Having made that argument, however, Destrehan asked that the tougher militia laws sought by Claiborne instead be changed so that, while improving the readiness of state forces, any new laws would not “harass” the populace.²⁷ The solution, Destrehan suggested, was the permanent stationing of another regiment of federal troops.²⁸ Indeed, another regiment of federal troops would have pleased Claiborne, but there were none available.

In a February 9, 1811 editorial in the *Louisiana Gazette*, a writer identified only as “Zeno” took Claiborne to task over his proposed militia law, which included heavy fines and prison time as punishments for men who failed to appear at militia musters. “Zeno” asked that if the militia laws of previous years had never been enforced, then what would be the purpose of those more stringent laws? “Zeno” stated that since the wealthier classes showed indifference towards the matter of defense, so would the lower classes. Claiborne and the legislature would have to appeal to a mix of self-preservation, patriotism, and defense of liberty and property in order to motivate the citizens to participate in the militia.²⁹

The Legislature took the matter of militia reform seriously – at least for the moment. In a letter to Colonel Henry Hopkins, Adjutant General of the Territorial Militia, on March 28, 1811, Claiborne mentioned his hope that the Legislature might provide an effective militia law. On the same day in a letter to Judge George King – appointed to the position of Judge of Opelousas by the governor – Claiborne argued that the legislature now had a militia law under deliberation that would strengthen the judge’s use of the state military forces to enforce the law.³⁰ In April of 1811, Claiborne addressed the Legislative Council and the House of Representatives and

²⁷ Destrehan to Claiborne, January 31, 1811, *OLB*, 6: 127-128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Joseph T. Hatfield, *William Claiborne: Jeffersonian Centurion in the American Southwest* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1976), 169.

³⁰ Claiborne to King, March 28, 1811, *OLB*, 5:195.

discussed the "An Act Supplementary to An Act regulating and governing the Militia of the Territory of Orleans."³¹ Claiborne thought it necessary for all units to honestly report the state of "arms, ammunition, and accouterments" so as to better gauge their state of readiness.³²

Claiborne wrote to Secretary of War William K. Eustis and enclosed a copy of the Militia Laws of the Territory of Orleans. He told Eustis that the law is "rigorous" and he intended to use "every exertion" to carry out the provisions of the law. The governor suggested, however, that the isolated nature of much of the territory would make it difficult to implement the law.³³ For the next several months, Claiborne sent a copy of the Militia Laws to militia officers, judges, as well as the U.S. Army commanders of distant districts within the territory. One recipient learned that Claiborne wished "to place the Militia on a Respectable footing, but in doing so, I have many difficulties to encounter."³⁴ In August, 1811, he wrote Colonel J. B. Laubat and suggested he continue to press for more effective service from the militiamen in Laubat's command. Claiborne told the colonel that attendance at musters must be enforced by the law. "Five or six months" of regular attendance at musters, according to Claiborne, would make the militia a "sacred duty" to all of appropriate age for military service. Claiborne insisted that those musters – carried out with his guidelines in mind – would guarantee an "armed force" in the region and protect territorial security.³⁵ Claiborne did his best to show his attention to the matter of reform, but was quick to blame difficulties on matters beyond his control.

For all of Claiborne's aggravation over militia reform, the matter was not relegated solely to the Territorial Legislature. As commander-in-chief of the state's forces it was Claiborne's

³¹ Claiborne to Destrehan, House of Rep., April 24, 1811, *OLB*, 5:216.

³² *Ibid*; Such an action was already a tenet of the Militia Act of 1792.

³³ Claiborne to Eustis, May 31, 1811, *OLB*, 5:259-260.

³⁴ Claiborne to Lindsey, August 3, 1811, *OLB*, 5:324.

³⁵ Claiborne to Laubat, August 16, 1811, *OLB*, 5:337.

responsibility to report on the condition of the Louisiana militia to the federal government. On February 20, 1811, James Madison “communicated” the militia returns of all states to Congress, which revealed Claiborne’s deficiency as commander of the state forces. The Orleans Territory returns showed a total of 5,942 men in infantry units, 162 in cavalry units, and no information at all on arms or ammunition. The problem for Claiborne stemmed from the fact that the returns came from 1807, not 1810.³⁶

³⁶ Report on the militia, February 20, 1811, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, Vol. 1:297-301. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsp&fileName=016/llsp016.db&recNum=302> (accessed February 19, 2011).

Chapter Three

In April, 1812, Louisiana gained its statehood. Almost two months later in June of 1812 the United States declared war on Great Britain. On July 30, 1812, Claiborne addressed the Louisiana Senate and House of Representatives. In this speech he mentioned the militia at the beginning of the address and again voiced his disappointment in its defects.³⁷ As in the past, Claiborne discussed the difficulties of maintaining a well-trained militia. He again noted that the isolation of many of the citizens made attending musters difficult. But he exhorted the legislature to continue to press for improvements now that the United States had declared war.

Reforms relating to the Deslondes slave revolt were one matter, but war with Great Britain came as another, even more serious issue. Claiborne wrote to the legislature again in August, 1812, and renewed his request for immediate reform of the militia due to the war. This letter focused on the manner of the appointment of militia officers. Claiborne pointed to vacancies within the militia and “no where a power to supply them,” and described the militia as “disorganized and becoming more so every day.”³⁸ Claiborne finally entreated the legislature to empower him to control the militia in “full or part, as the occasion demands.”³⁹

On August 18, Claiborne revealed his continuing frustrations. Approximately forty-four men had volunteered for militia service due to the war.⁴⁰ Claiborne felt pleased with the enrollments and asked that the regulars loan them the necessary equipment. The governor wrote that he still faced many difficulties and claimed his “enemies” had succeeded in “dividing the Senate and Executive,” with the former appointing candidates to office. As Claiborne saw it, he had no power to issue commissions, but only to commission those chosen by the Senate.

³⁷ Claiborne to state legislature, July 30, 1812, *OLB*, 6:147. Gayarré, *History*, 283.

³⁸ Claiborne to state legislature, August 14, 1812, *OLB*, 6:161.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Powell A. Casey, *Louisiana in the War of 1812* (Baton Rouge: Powell Casey, 1963), 5.

Claiborne understood this constraint when he wrote on August 14, and once more asked for new militia laws that would empower him to make the changes he saw as most crucial.⁴¹ Yet even an official state of war failed to inspire the legislature to take on militia reform. This state of affairs became pressing for Claiborne when the federal government asked for Louisiana militia troops to bolster the regulars because he could not fulfill those requests for troops.

In an August 21, 1812, letter, Claiborne related to General Wilkinson, commander of the Southern Military District, that he felt anxious waiting for a militia law to be passed. Should this law be passed and enforced, he told the general, it would grant him the power to “act with decision & promptitude” in getting more militia in the field.⁴² Claiborne sent Wilkinson’s reply to the members of the legislature, which asked that the state furnish more militia for the war effort.⁴³ Wilkinson’s letter, Claiborne hoped, would add needed emphasis to militia reform.

Claiborne rejected the militia bill – an ironic event in that the legislature had finally acted on the matter – and explained his reason in his “A Message from the Governor, returning a Bill with his objections.” His negative assessment about the measure grew from its confusing and “murky” nature. One example he used was the wish of the legislature to appointment officers, but without any process for their nomination or approval in the bill. Claiborne claimed that passage of the bill would cause more confusion and chaos for the militia. Such confusion, distressful enough under normal circumstances, might very well lead to disaster under wartime conditions.⁴⁴

A constant theme throughout Claiborne’s correspondence is a series of requests for material aid from the federal government to arm the militia. On September 14, 1812, Claiborne

⁴¹ Claiborne to unknown, August 18, 1812, *OLB*, 6:166.

⁴² Claiborne to Wilkinson, August 21, 1812, *OLB*, 6:166-167.

⁴³ Claiborne to the state legislature, August 22, 1812, *OLB*, 6:167.

⁴⁴ Claiborne to state legislature, September 5, 1812, *OLB*, 6:174-175.

sent a letter to Secretary of War Eustis requesting a loan of 4,000 muskets, 4,000 sabers, and as much field artillery as the federal government could loan to the state of Louisiana. The various forts around New Orleans contained a motley assortment of artillery pieces of varying calibers. Fort St. Charles, now the site of the Old U.S. Mint on the corner of Esplanade and North St. Peters Street, and Fort St. Louis, whose former site is now occupied by the Customs House on Canal Street, were two of the most important forts which guarded the city. Fort St. John covered the Lake Pontchartrain approach to the city through Bayou St. John.⁴⁵ Claiborne wanted uniformity in the artillery that guarded the city. But Claiborne never pushed hard enough for improvements in the city's fortifications in order to offset the lack of regulars and some form of trained militia. Compromise may have been achieved, either better forts or more manpower, but Claiborne's political skills proved too weak and local resistance too strong.

Wilkinson hoped to shore up the region's security and again asked the governor for a force of militia to serve as an auxiliary force for the regulars. Claiborne reported that the legislature had mulled over new laws with regard to the use of the militia, but told Wilkinson that he found the act the legislature passed unsatisfactory and had refused to sign it. The legislature adjourned before any resolution of the matter. Claiborne admitted his "embarrassment" over the matter and his lack of power to correct the situation. He asked Wilkinson to please clarify his requests for militia posts on Lake Barataria and Lafourche Bayou, which could serve as picket

⁴⁵ Casey, Powell A., *Encyclopedia of Forts, Posts, Named Camps, and other Military Installations in Louisiana, 1700-1981*. (Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1983), 172-173. See also Wilburt S. Brown, *The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana, 1814-1815* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University Press of Alabama, 1969) for descriptions of area fortifications; Willard B. Robinson, "Maritime Frontier Engineering: The Defense of New Orleans," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 1977): 5-62.

posts in case of invasion. Then, in typical Claiborne style, he concluded his letter with a plea for a loan of arms for any militia posted to these areas.⁴⁶

By the middle of October, 1812, Claiborne reported to Wilkinson that he had a force⁴⁷ ready to protect New Orleans and the state. He then asked Wilkinson for equipment to outfit the unit. He signed off with his hope to “render this Detachment of Militia a respectable Corps.”⁴⁸ In late December, Claiborne sent a message to Wilkinson and asked him to again submit a letter to the legislature on the governor’s behalf, and to impress upon the lawmakers the grave nature of their situation. As his anxiety grew, Claiborne hoped such a letter might also prod the legislature to “vest me with the necessary powers to call to your aid an Auxiliary Militia force.” He requested that Wilkinson provide more precise information about the dangers Louisiana faced. As he closed his letter, Claiborne apologized to Wilkinson for his failure to protect Louisiana.⁴⁹

In 1813, the lackluster performance of the regular forces in the war prompted the federal government to make several changes. First, John Armstrong, Jr., replaced Eustis as Secretary of War. Eustis resigned the office over the intense criticism of the reversals of U.S. fortunes during the early part of the conflict. Armstrong, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, had first served during the war as a brigadier general charged with the port defense of New York.⁵⁰ Also, the War Department transferred Wilkinson to the northern United States for service with the Army. Wilkinson’s successor, Thomas Flournoy, a lawyer and native of Georgia, was appointed brigadier general in June, 1812. He would serve as the commander of the 7th Military District

⁴⁶ Claiborne to Wilkinson, September 22, 1812, *OLB*, 6:180-181.

⁴⁷ No unit complement was given.

⁴⁸ Claiborne to Wilkinson, October 16, 1812, *OLB*, 6:192.

⁴⁹ Claiborne to Wilkinson, December 28, 1812, *OLB*, 6:204-205.

⁵⁰ C. Edward Skeen, “Mr. Madison’s Secretary of War,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 100, Number 3 (July 1976): 336-355.

until April, 1814.⁵¹ For Claiborne, neither change had much of an impact on his anxious situation.

In February, 1813 – with little interference from any direction – Claiborne reorganized the militia from three divisions into two. The first division, commanded by Major General Jacques Villeré, a veteran of the French army, contained nine regiments (1st-9th) each with an average of 300 men. Much of the first division centered around three regiments in New Orleans, the 1st, 2nd, and 4th regiments, with the others in Iberville, Assumption, St. John, Plaquemines, Pointe Coupee, and West Baton Rouge parishes. Major General Philemon Thomas, an Anglo settler in the West Florida area, commanded the second division, which contained eleven regiments. The average unit contained approximately 150-300 men. These militia units found themselves scattered around the rest of the state (the “Upper Country”) as far north as Natchitoches and as far west as Opelousas Parish.⁵² But the dilemma that the states constantly faced had to do with the extent of training undertaken by militia units. Most states still used the same training manual Baron von Steuben had written for the Continental Army in 1779.⁵³

In a March 13, 1813, letter to Andrew Jackson, Claiborne acknowledged the movement of the general’s troops towards Natchez. Jackson had been dispatched towards New Orleans with the idea that an invasion seemed imminent, but this proved false at this time. Jackson then received orders to disband his troops and return north.⁵⁴ Claiborne told Jackson that he had made preparations for “defensive war” in the region were moving along just beautifully – an exaggeration on Claiborne’s part. Claiborne criticized the federal government and believed it

⁵¹ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the War of 1812*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 189. The United States was now divided into nine military districts with Louisiana, the Mississippi Territory, and Tennessee comprising the 7th District.

⁵² Evans J. Casso, *Louisiana Legacy: A History of the State National Guard* (Gretna, La: Pelican Publishing, 1976), 52.

⁵³ Eustis to Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:296.

⁵⁴ William G. Sumner, *American Statesman* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1910), 35.

“reprehensible” that no other forces had yet come to the aid of the state. As commander of the Louisiana militia forces, Claiborne failed to understand that other governors faced serious militia problems.⁵⁵ Claiborne also neglected to recognize that the war had gone badly for the United States, which already had a dearth of regulars.

After he touted the alleged security of the region to Jackson, Claiborne wrote to the Louisiana members of the U.S. Congress and asked them to request more munitions and weapons from President Madison. Wilkinson had secured only 600 muskets due to the war’s national demands, not the 4,000 that Claiborne had requested the previous September. Claiborne warned of that the state militia’s woefully underequipped condition and of the unavailability of private sector purchases to arm the troops. The governor then noted that the shortages had a negative effect on morale and the “military ardor” of the state. With these supplies in hand, Claiborne assured the senators and representatives, he would secure the region and possibly make any further troop movement from the western states to Louisiana unnecessary. Unless, as he suggested, Louisiana and New Orleans faced with a “force greater” than he “had supposed.”

⁵⁶ Far too sanguine in the face of evidence, Claiborne overstated his ability to command the militia and motivate the citizens of Louisiana.

Only a month after his plea to the Louisiana congressional delegation, Claiborne turned to them once again. The letter addressed the withdrawal of the 3rd Infantry Regiment from Louisiana to join the war in the northern theater of operations. Claiborne wished to impress upon the legislators that the loss of a significant portion of the U.S. Army regulars left the state even more vulnerable than ever before. The militia, he wrote, appeared in no condition to render

⁵⁵ Claiborne to Jackson, March 13, 1813, *OLB*, 6:214-215. See also Skeen, Elting for further information on just how troublesome militia units were nationwide.

⁵⁶ Claiborne to Louisiana senators and representatives in the U.S. Congress, May 19, 1813, *OLB*, 6:218-219.

a proper defense of the region from attack – especially a determined effort by the British. Along with the threat of outside invasion, Claiborne told lawmakers, Louisiana face potential slave and local Native American rebellions, incited by the British. Claiborne needed arms in order to prepare the militia for war.⁵⁷ Earlier, however, Claiborne had suggested to the same group of men that he could guarantee the state’s safety. This earlier claim did not go unnoticed by the commander of the 7th Military District Thomas Flournoy.

Several days later in June, Claiborne and General Flournoy exchanged letters. Flournoy chastised Claiborne for the lack of preparation in case of attack. The general pointed out to Claiborne that, despite the governor’s objections, under the current militia law he had the power to call out the militia to oppose invasion, insurrection, or any other danger to “the Public Safety.” Flournoy pressed Claiborne to hurry and prepare defenses for the “public safety” without delay. Flournoy strongly urged Claiborne to undertake these measures to insure the region’s security as well as the ability to fulfill any call for militia from President Madison. With the removal of the U.S. Third Regiment to the north, the security of the 7th Military District became even more precarious. Flournoy added that with the departure of the most of the regulars to the north he had only 1,500 men for the entire district. Any and all aid from the state would be most welcome, he told Claiborne.⁵⁸ Claiborne replied somewhat testily about his awareness of the dangers he and the state faced. He stated that he planned to issue orders for preparation of defensive measures but that the militia had fallen into a “State of Derangement” due to the need elections of officers to positions of command. Claiborne told Flournoy he had no power to call

⁵⁷ Claiborne to Louisiana senators in the U.S. Congress, June 14, 1813, *OLB*, 6:225-226.

⁵⁸ Flournoy to Claiborne, June 14, 1813, *OLB*, 6:225-226.

an auxiliary force into service. He tried to reassure the general that he intended to make every effort to field a militia force as soon as possible.⁵⁹

Early in July, Claiborne wrote a lengthy letter to President Madison in which he praised Flournoy for his work in the region and for his devotion to duty. The letter appears to be an effort to head off any criticism of Claiborne's leadership. He informed Madison that he had given orders for a body of militia to be "held in readiness." When he felt that other militia units in the state were prepared, he would draw off troops from them for the defense of the New Orleans area. In a moment of painful honesty, however, Claiborne admitted that "it has not been, and I fear will not be, for some time in my power to render the Militia of Louisiana efficient." He blamed his difficulties on the "heterogeneous mass" of the Louisiana populace, the different languages spoken in the state, the "dispersed nature of our settlements," and, most especially, a lack of arms and munitions.⁶⁰ Perhaps no other letter written by Claiborne was as open and frank as this one to Madison. Fortunately for Claiborne, he received a letter from the Secretary of War John Armstrong, Jr., which informed him that while his request for the three thousand muskets had been rejected, he would receive at least two thousand muskets. Claiborne thanked Armstrong in his reply, yet still worked in a request for more sabers.⁶¹

While Claiborne waited on the promised weapons, he contacted Senator James Brown of the Louisiana congressional delegation. Claiborne told the senator that he feared Louisiana stood "in far greater danger than the Secretary of War apprehends" and that if the British hoped to delay the conquest of Canada, England would launch a diversionary attack on Louisiana to draw

⁵⁹ Claiborne to Flournoy, June 17, 1813, *OLB*, 6:226-227.

⁶⁰ Claiborne to Madison, July 9, 1813, *OLB*, 6:235-238.

⁶¹ Armstrong to Claiborne, June 22, 1813, *OLB*, 6:242-243; Claiborne to Armstrong, July 22, 1813, *OLB*, 6:243-244. In a July 8, 1813, letter to Congress, Eustis reports that 1,500 "stand of arms" (usually a musket, bayonet, cartridge box and belt) will be allotted to Louisiana for use by the militia. *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, Vol. 1:337-338. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsp&fileName=016/llsp016.db&recNum=343> (accessed March 25, 2011).

off U.S. forces. If that should prove to be the case, the governor would, with his “feeble means,” lend any and all assistance to U.S. regulars.

In a note drawn from bitter personal experience, Claiborne believed that any attack would come after the sickly season. Indeed, Claiborne had lost two wives and one child to yellow fever.⁶² The Louisiana governor then told Brown that he intended to his best to ready the Louisiana militia, but the recent acquisition of Mobile from the Spaniards and the “unfriendly disposition of the Creek Indians” had driven up tension up in the area. As Claiborne saw it, actions would undoubtedly be dictated by the British, and he again mentioned the likelihood that the enemy would incite the slave population into armed rebellion. Moreover, Claiborne feared the situation in Louisiana had become untenable as General Flournoy had deployed most of what few troops he had in the Mississippi Territory due to the Creek War.⁶³

In 1813, the War Department offered Claiborne a manual of “elementary Military discipline” for the state militia. In July, Claiborne expressed his wish to accept the offer, especially since militia forces were expected to conform to U.S. Army standards as outlined in the Militia Act of 1792. Claiborne again exposed his own sense of powerlessness when he noted that the law forced him to first gain the consent of the legislature for purchase of the manual. This episode, which appears trivial on its surface, highlighted the kind of nerve-wracking constraints that hampered Claiborne’s efforts to reform.⁶⁴

Although occupied fully with his duties as governor, Claiborne still harbored fresh and disturbing memories of the 1811 slave revolt. With the possibility of another – and perhaps

⁶² Hodding Carter, ed., *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans 1718-1968* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing, 1998), 101. Also, Charles S. Brooks, *The Siege of New Orleans* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), 17. These two wives, Elizabeth Lewis Claiborne and Clarissa Duralde Claiborne, are buried only yards apart in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 in New Orleans.

⁶³ Claiborne to Brown, July 27, 1813, *OLB*, 6:245-246.

⁶⁴ Andrews to Claiborne, May 13, 1813, *OLB*, 6:247; Claiborne to Andrews, July 28, 1813, *OLB*, 6:247.

more successful – slave revolt uppermost in his mind, Claiborne penned a terse appeal to Flournoy. Claiborne expressed his hope that Louisiana would escape any kind of trouble, but “in case of insurrection, invasion, or eminent danger of invasion,” he promised to call out the militia as well as institute a program of conscription. He focused on the area west of New Orleans, also known as the German Coast named for the large number of Germans who settled that area during the French colonial period, because “on a former occasion of insurrection (1811) there was not as speedy a movement on the part of the militia” and the situation in New Orleans descended into “a Scene of confusion which was very painful to me.” In order to facilitate the reorganization of the militia, Claiborne intended to undertake an inspection tour of the state. He found federal troops in the state “inadequate” in number for a proper defense of Louisiana, and felt that he had to persuade the people for militia service. To better get his point across, he added that trouble might arrive as early as the next winter.⁶⁵

The Louisiana governor contacted Secretary of State James Monroe on August 1, 1813, and informed him that he had issued orders for a draft to fill the ranks of the militia. Because the Creek Indians had “commenced hostilities,” Claiborne feared an attack on Louisiana. General Flournoy and most of the regulars in the 7th Military District, along with some Mississippi volunteers under Claiborne’s brother Ferdinand, moved to intercept the Creeks. The call to arms, Claiborne lamented, had been met with derision within the city limits of New Orleans. But he had more success in the rural, Anglo parishes.⁶⁶ These parishes had no fortifications and a population that was widely scattered. Quickly responding to a threat was simply self-preservation as they had no walls behind which to shelter. The city of New Orleans did.

⁶⁵ Claiborne to Flournoy, July 28, 1813, *OLB*, 6:248-250.

⁶⁶ Claiborne to Monroe, August 1, 1813, *OLB*, 6:251.

On August 7, 1813, the 7th Military District's military situation took a turn for the worst. On the previous day, two slaves at work outside the garrison of Fort Mims in the Mississippi Territory told an officer at the fort that they had noticed large bands of "war painted" Native Americans lurking in the area. After a short search of the area during which no Indians were sighted, the officer had the two slaves whipped for insubordination. The next day, as occupants of the fort lunched with the gates wide open, a war party of Creek Indians attacked and slaughtered over 250 troops, settlers, and friendly Native Americans who had taken refuge there.⁶⁷ With much of the U.S. Army on the Canadian border, the burden for defending against further attacks fell to the state militias of Tennessee, Georgia, and the Mississippi Territory.

News of the fall of at Fort Mims pushed Claiborne to issue a "Circular to Colonels of the Militia" on September 13, 1813. The circular warned militia commanders to be on guard as Creek Indians had slaughtered a large number of white citizens and soldiers "north of Mobile." Claiborne tried to impress upon the commanders the danger they faced, and to begin mounted patrols to help maintain vigilance. While only one faction of Creeks had planned and carried out the raid, Claiborne emphasized new reports that runaway slaves had joined with the Indians.⁶⁸ The fear of escaped – and possibly armed slaves – presented a more fearsome image to Claiborne than an attack by the Creeks.⁶⁹

On September 12, 1813, Claiborne received a report from Flournoy that provided details on the Fort Mims massacre. The Louisiana governor expressed sorrow over the incident, and informed Flournoy of his desire to cooperate with the region's defense. But Claiborne noted that with "an unarmed & undisciplined militia," he could offer only "partial aid." Claiborne

⁶⁷ John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972), 234.

⁶⁸ Claiborne to Colonels of Militia, September 13, 1813, *OLB*, 265.

⁶⁹ Mahon, *The War of 1812*, 235.

assumed that Flournoy knew of his failed efforts to reorganize the militia, and claimed that he realized that “this opposition originated with a few individuals, of whose disaffection to our Country I have long been convinced.” Then Claiborne turned around and wrote to Louisiana Senator Eliguis Fromentin in Washington, D.C. He asked the senator if he might bring his influence to bear in expediting the order of muskets and sabers that Claiborne had submitted months before. In direct contradiction of what he had told Flournoy, Claiborne claimed that the “great body” of Louisiana militia stood ready to defend the state.⁷⁰

Later in September, while on an inspection tour in Lafourche parish in south Louisiana, Claiborne informed Flournoy that the men of the region north of New Orleans felt “disposed to rally, at first call, among the standard of our Country.” Some units had taken the threats seriously, which prompted Claiborne to congratulate the commanding officer of a cavalry unit on his troops’ preparedness. In December, Claiborne again received word from Flournoy that urged the governor to carry out his responsibilities to safeguard Louisiana. He told Claiborne that the militia of New Orleans needed to be ready to move quickly against any invader, and that portions of the “upper Country” militia might also be summoned.⁷¹ But the militia was far from being ready.

By late 1813, Claiborne’s attempts to order out the militia and exact a draft to fill the ranks had incited ferocious opposition. He worried that “unless the people should feel and act in unison & with great firmness the Country will be for the moment lost.” Claiborne’s sense that Flournoy might demand militia forces at any moment only added to his anxiety. Still, he promised Flournoy prompt compliance with any request for troops, but only as it came within his

⁷⁰ Claiborne to Flournoy, September 17, 1813, *OLB*, 6:268-269. For a full account of the Creek War see Frank Lawrence Owsley, Jr., *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University Press of Alabama, 1981).

⁷¹ Flournoy to Claiborne, December 6, 1813, *OLB*, 6:281. See also Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers*, 157-158.

“power” to do so. Indeed, political power sufficient to accomplish militia reform eluded Claiborne throughout his tenure in Louisiana.⁷²

In another instance either of self-delusion or politically calculated dishonesty, Claiborne informed Flournoy of his confidence that the counties (parishes) outside of New Orleans would furnish any necessary troops for the defense of the city. In truth, Claiborne could only hope that the Creole and Anglo citizens outside of New Orleans would heed the governor’s call to duty. Even worse, he believed that with only a clear and present danger could he rally the citizens of New Orleans to their own defense, hardly a solid plan of action.

⁷² Claiborne to Brown, December 11, 1813, *OLB*, 6:281-282. See also Powell A. Casey, *Louisiana at the Battle of New Orleans* (New Orleans: The Battle of New Orleans, 150th Anniversary Committee of Louisiana, 1965), 3.

Chapter Four

Claiborne had an especially difficult time throughout 1814. In his annual address to the state legislature he focused on a possible invasion of Louisiana by British forces. Claiborne acknowledged the damage done to the country's economy by the Embargo and Non-Importation Laws, and the negative effect they had on the state's finances. The slowdown in trade caused many to turn to Jean Lafitte's privateers for goods and services, or others who operated outside the law. To address this problem Claiborne called for the arrest of the Baratarians. The governor then turned more upbeat when he informed lawmakers of the positive response from approximately four hundred members of the Second Division of the militia who answered his call for troops in December 1813. But the hostile activities of Red Stick Creeks, along with the ever-present danger of slave revolts, still posed a threat to New Orleans.⁷³

In late January 1814, Claiborne sent reports to the state legislature from the U.S. Collector that detailed the extralegal business pursuits of the Lafittes. He added that Flournoy had denied his request for troops due to the Creek War and that the general insisted that Louisiana must rely on its state militia for suppression of the Baratarians. Claiborne then boasted that his "present powers are doubtless competent" to order into the field a detachment of militia to strike at the privateers, but pointed to his aversion to strip away any of the thin layer of active militia that stood guard against rebellious slaves, hostile Indians, or a British invasion. Realistically, Claiborne understood the likelihood that the militia might refuse his orders, and revealed as much in a painfully honest message to the legislature. Claiborne surmised that a

⁷³ Gayarré, *History*, 308-310.

negative response from the militia would be a “melancholy experience.” The legislature turned the matter over to a committee it appointed, but nothing came of it.⁷⁴

When Claiborne called for the militia members to muster in for the Creek War in late February, 1814, many Louisianians vilified him. Claiborne noted that editorials referred to him as the “tyrant of the day,” and considered his order illegal and unjust. Militia of the First Division within New Orleans, and a number of units along the Mississippi River openly disobeyed the governor’s order. Many citizens felt concerned about being left defenseless against slave rebellions. Units of the Second Division, however, answered Claiborne’s call and offered to force the units of the First Division into compliance. Indeed, Claiborne faced the very real possibility of civil war between Louisiana militia units.⁷⁵

In order to restore calm, Claiborne released the Second Division militia and thanked them for their prompt service. Also, many of the First Division units promised to take the field if faced with a slave insurrection or invasion by foreign powers, which included volunteer militia units that would serve in the Battle of New Orleans. In correspondence with Flournoy, Claiborne bemoaned the fact that the rivalries and hostilities that greeted him upon his arrival in 1803 still lingered. But Claiborne hardly held a monopoly when it came to disgruntled troops. Gen. Andrew Jackson, at one low point in his fight against the Creek Indians, ordered his West Tennessee militia to stand ready to fix bayonets against mutinous elements of the East Tennessee militia. Jackson restored order and then crushed the Red Stick Creeks at the Battle of Horseshoe

⁷⁴ Ibid, 313. See also Winston Groom, *Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Lafitte at the Battle of New Orleans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

⁷⁵ Brooks, *The Siege of New Orleans*, 21.

Bend on March 27, 1814. Then, the following month, Jackson took command of the entire 7th Military District.⁷⁶

An incident that cut Claiborne to the quick came when the state legislature almost censured the governor's official decree to call the militia to duty. In fact, a committee investigated Claiborne's actions and declared his militia requisition "illegal and unnecessary."⁷⁷ An astonished Claiborne told Flournoy that he had always, at the very least, expected support from the legislature. Claiborne suffered deep disappointment because "the very people for whose benefit it was intended" and for "whose safety I believe it had been necessary," had slapped down his requisition. While Claiborne believed in the sincerity of some who opposed his order on legal grounds, he felt that too many others seemed motivated only by personal intent to inflict harm on the governor. Claiborne had come to believe that his tenure in Louisiana – first as territorial governor and then as state governor – had "attracted the jealousy of some, the envy of others, and the ill-will of many." In addition to the personal injury, Claiborne worried that this widespread conspiracy to injure him politically might undermine the ability of Louisiana to defend itself when the impending crisis finally arrived.⁷⁸

In his own defense, Claiborne sent a sharply worded message to the legislature in regard to his order to muster in the militia. He told state lawmakers that his order conformed to other requests made by governors throughout the United States. For example, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and the Mississippi Territory sent troops to serve with federal forces. Claiborne insisted that he had the same powers and duties as any other governor. He wanted to know why Louisianians should expect federal forces to shoulder the entire burden for the safety

⁷⁶ Ibid, 22, 35.

⁷⁷ Gayarré, *History*, 321. See also Skeen and Elting for legal problems with the militia in other states.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 326.

of the state? Claiborne asked, “When the sentinel gives the alarm, ought not every man to repair to his post?” As before, however, Claiborne’s pleas fell on deaf ears in the legislature.⁷⁹

In the following months numerous domestic and international events made an impact on the mood and morale of Louisianans in general and New Orleanians specifically. For instance, the occupation of Paris by troops of the Sixth Coalition surprised and saddened many residents of New Orleans, as well as citizens in more rural areas of the state. Napoleon’s departure allowed the British a free hand to prosecute their war against the United States.⁸⁰ A short time later a rumor circulated that the British might support a move by Spain to take back Louisiana, news that sent more shockwaves throughout the state. In August, 1814, news that the British had invaded and burned Washington, D.C., however, marked the nadir for the U.S. in the war, and only deepened the gloom in New Orleans society.⁸¹

Louisianans welcomed the news that Gen. Jackson had removed the Red Stick Creek threat with his overwhelming victory at Horseshoe Bend. In September 1814, while British forces occupied Pensacola, Florida, several battles took place along the Gulf Coast.⁸² Most importantly, the Americans defeated an attack by the British on Mobile, and in November, Jackson invested Pensacola and drove the British from that coastal port. Even the troublesome Baratarians refused an overture for their help from the British, and then informed the Americans about the plot. Jean Lafitte even offered the service of his men – always outstanding when it came to artillery skills – to the United States. After a heated council debate, however, came a

⁷⁹ Ibid: 329-330.

⁸⁰ Pickles, Tim. *New Orleans 1815* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1993), 8. Also, Casey, 3; A. Lacarriere Latour, *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana In 1814-1815* (Philadelphia: John Conrad and Sons, 1816. Reprint. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 1-5.

⁸¹ Robin Reilly, *The British at the Gates* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1974), 153-154. This is an excellent book on the Battle of New Orleans.

⁸² Casso, *Louisiana Legacy*, 52-54; David Heidler, David, and Jeanne Heidler, eds., *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812*, 357-358; Also, Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 117.

resolution to drive out the Baratarians rather than accept their offer of aid. Claiborne objected strongly to the measure, skeptical that he could convince any militia units to carry out a punitive expedition against the Lafittes. Indeed, it required a joint American army and naval force to finally disperse the privateers.⁸³

The fact that major battles against the dreaded British that occurred in the Gulf Coast region spurred on more unified action in Louisiana. On October 8, 1814, Claiborne issued a letter to the militia with which he hoped to improve their martial spirits. “The Commander-in-Chief persuades himself that no efforts...to divide us, will prove successful,” Claiborne tells the troops, and that “in defence of our homes and families there surely will be but one option – one sentiment.” Claiborne used such words to encourage and unite the militia, yet on the same day he wrote Governor Isaac Shelby of Kentucky a more private, less uplifting note. “I do not know how far I shall be supported by the militia of my own State,” he wrote Shelby. There is not a “zeal which the crisis demands, and which is so essential to our safety.” Claiborne implored Shelby to send a detachment of his state’s militia around which the citizens of Louisiana can rally.⁸⁴ How low Claiborne’s efforts had fallen is never more apparent than through this appeal for the militia of *another* state to come save his own.

Over the next few months from the summer to the fall, Claiborne kept up a voluminous correspondence with Jackson. Most of the correspondence focused on militia reports. With the enemy at the gates, Claiborne informed Jackson that he had much greater success in filling the

⁸³ Robert C. Vogel, “The Patterson and Ross Raid on Baratavia, September 1814,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 33, No. 2, (Spring 1992): 157-170.

⁸⁴ Gayarré, *History*, 344-345.

quotas for the militia. There were, Claiborne wrote, a “few defaulters” but “with a population differing in language, customs, manners, and sentiments” that not everyone supported him.⁸⁵

In October, 1814, Claiborne wrote Fromentin and told the senator that he made every effort to prepare the citizens to defend Louisiana from “within and without.” Claiborne made note of a new sense of urgency by the citizens of New Orleans, which had convened a Committee of Public Safety drawn from some of the city’s leading citizens to advise the governor, and from within the ranks of the militia.⁸⁶ On the very same day, Claiborne informed Monroe that the requisition for the militia had been filled. He reported that a “very patriotic Spirit pervaded” the state and, unless “attacked by an overwhelming force,” that Louisianans would acquit themselves well. In a third letter on October 24, 1814, Claiborne reported to Jackson that the militia had responded well to his summons.⁸⁷ The militia did respond to muster calls, but not for Claiborne’s orders. The imminent threat of the British invading New Orleans actually energized the Louisiana militia units to heed the summons.

On January 8, 1815, the invading British force met defeat on the battlefield in Chalmette. The American forces consisted of U.S. Army regulars, sailors, Marines, militia from Louisiana (some clad in uniforms reminiscent of the French Imperial Army), Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi, free men of color, American Indians, and pirates. Jackson’s determined stand and unflinching style of command provided the necessary mettle for the Americans to overcome the British forces.

⁸⁵ Gayarré, *History*, 341; Casey, *Louisiana at the Battle of New Orleans*, 9-10.

⁸⁶ Claiborne to Fromentin, October 24, 1814, *OLB*, 6:285-286.

⁸⁷ Claiborne to Monroe, October 24, 1814, *OLB*, 6:286; Claiborne to Jackson, October 24, 1814, *OLB* 6:288-289.

Conclusion

Surrounded by constant threats of upheaval and violence—slave revolts and Indian attacks foremost among them—William C.C. Claiborne attempted for over a decade to mold the militia of Louisiana into a force capable of responding to those threats at a moment’s notice. By any stretch of the imagination, Claiborne failed. Indeed, only the austere and commanding leadership of Andrew Jackson—along with the general’s declaration of martial law—compelled the militia toward success at the Battle of New Orleans. Claiborne, for his part, had the sense to stay out of Jackson’s way. But left to his own devices, Claiborne never mustered the political clout that might have reformed the militia to the standards he desired. His threat assessments made no difference. Moreover, Claiborne failed to cultivate the necessary allies that might have afforded him enough influence to carry out his militia reforms. While blame for the militia’s pitiful condition on the eve of the British invasion can be attributed to all elements of Louisiana’s political system and officials, the governor’s own lack of personal political skill and initiative were a barrier to reform. Unable at any point to trust the militia to act on his orders, Claiborne must have indeed regarded his efforts as a “melancholy experience.”⁸⁸ He was no regional hero like Jackson by late 1814.

⁸⁸ Gayerré, *History*, 313. What also contributed to the success of the Louisiana militia was the fortified wall between the British and themselves on Line Jackson. Jackson, well aware of the deficiencies of the militia, ordered the wall built. One reason the British believed they would capture New Orleans was due in great part to the abysmal performance of American militia in the defense of Washington, D.C. On August 24, 1814, at the Battle of Bladensburg in Maryland, the American militia fled leaving a small federal force, which included U.S. Marines, to defend Washington, D.C. Reilly, *The British at the Gates*, 137-152, Elting, *Amateurs to Arms*, 198-220.

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Vita

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