

Confederate Gibraltar

THE VICKSBURG CAMPAIGN FROM THE FALL OF NEW ORLEANS TO THE BATTLES IN THE BAYOU

by Matt Atkinson

EMERGING CIVIL WAR SERIES

Unedited Excerpt

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Savas Beatie
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Chris Mackowski, Leon Reed, and Jim Woodrick for numerous photographs.

Ulysses S. Grant, an inescapable figure of the Vicksburg Campaign. After studying Lee for so long, I



enjoyed having a smoke in Grant's "chair" for a change. He is a lasting American lesson in perseverance.

To all the people who helped me when the chips were down. "Cause when you're shot down and out, you don't get many calls." I'll never forget you.

Finally, to my children, from whose love and inspiration I'm alive today. I told you an Atkinson always gets back up.

Late on March 16, 1863, Rear Admiral David D. Porter's flotilla arrived at Hill's Plantation during the Steele's Bayou expedition. William T. Sherman arrived with 3,000 infantrymen the next day in support of the navy. Today, state historical signs mark the scene. (jw)

Foreword

BY TIMOTHY B. SMITH

Any observer at the time could tell something momentous, even historic, was occurring in that summer of 1863. The huge fight at Gettysburg obviously captivated the nation, then and now, while down in Tennessee, William Rosecrans argued for the validity of his Tullahoma campaign, begging that he should not be overlooked because “it is not written in letters of blood.” But the events that came to be compared to some of the greatest moments in history occurred down along the Mississippi River. In fact, more than a few Napoleonic comparisons emerged as Ulysses S. Grant won control of the city and river, on Independence Day no less. William T. Sherman pronounced it “one of the greatest campaigns in history,” while in Washington, D.C., Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs wrote that the campaign was “a capture as important as that of Ulm.” Perhaps Meigs was influenced by the chief military theorist and Napoleonic historian in America at the time (also in the War Department in Washington), Union commander of the armies Henry W. Halleck. He made the same argument, directly to Grant but in more detail, that “in boldness of plan, rapidity of execution, and brilliancy of results, these operations will compare most favorably with those of Napoleon about Ulm.”

The campaign for Vicksburg would be a story of land and water and an unprecedented cooperation between army and navy. The Yazoo River, which flows southwest to join the Mississippi River at Vicksburg, and its tangled bayous would be one such front of the campaign. (jw)

Grant deserves any and all commendation for his masterful Vicksburg operations, especially given the problems he had to overcome. First and foremost

among them was the geography and terrain; because of the confluence of the huge river with swampy low ground and high hills, few places on earth were more defensible than Vicksburg, Mississippi. That very river also complicated matters as Grant had to have the aid of the United States Navy to succeed; he effectively taught a textbook course on combined operations at Vicksburg. And Grant also proved successful despite one of his three major subordinates being very vocally opposed to the plan, another as a political appointee being labeled as incompetent, whether correct or not, and a third being of less-than-proven experience and proceeded to show it; it could be said that Grant won at Vicksburg *despite* rather than *because* of his corps commanders. Yet Grant still won, and that story, often told in many forms, is always enthralling no matter the level of the telling.

There can never be too many books on Vicksburg, especially when compared with the overflow of Gettysburg volumes. Western Theater titles are, in fact, just now beginning in the last couple of decades to catch up to Eastern studies in terms of battle and army histories, with some western corps-level studies even beginning to appear. And different types of treatments are definitely needed because of varying interest levels of readers. Not everyone will want to slug through three volumes of Ed Bearss or five volumes of Tim Smith, or even some of the large one-volume campaigns histories such as those by Mike Ballard, Warren Grabau, or Terry Winschel. Some readers desire more overview-type treatments, which the Emerging Civil War Series does so well and which Matt Atkinson's volume wonderfully provides.

Matt is well positioned to write this Emerging Civil War volume on Vicksburg. Obviously, he is quite the staple at Gettysburg now, having been on site for many years and working himself into something of a folk hero there. He is legendary among Gettysburg aficionados for his talks, programs, and YouTube presentations. And well he should be, with his folksy, humorous, and entertaining talks complete with an authentic Southern drawl. Case in point: I recently spoke at one of Gettysburg's "Sacred Trust" events and took the younger of my two teenage daughters

with me. Her takeaway was that my talk on Albert Sidney Johnston was boring, but that “your friend [Matt] was funny.” But Gettysburg is not Matt’s only interest. Before he was a staple at Gettysburg, he worked (among other battlefields) for several years at Vicksburg National Military Park, even writing his master’s thesis on Chickasaw Bayou. It is no surprise, then, that he has returned to his former haunts to produce this Vicksburg volume for ECW.

I first met Matt probably 25 years ago. I think our first encounter, despite having lived in our youths in neighboring counties in Mississippi, was when he was an NPS ranger at the beginning of his career at Manassas. I was on a research trip to Washington and one of my fellow graduate students and I went out to the battlefield. I remember the novelty of a Mississippian working for the NPS in Virginia. As his career took him to other sites, most notably Vicksburg and then Gettysburg, I came to know him better and, in fact, although we rarely run into one another these days, it is always with a comfortable familiarity of old friends that the association is immediately renewed. It is obviously a combination of culture, background, education (we are both Ole Miss alums), and interest that fuels the friendship.

Fans of Matt Atkinson can consequently look forward to a quality presentation in this volume. It is well written, comprehensive in outlook, and entertaining to read—all staples of the ECW series. In fact, those who are enamored with Matt’s talks and presentations will actually find these volumes written in his speaking voice. Many good writers are terrible speakers—Thomas Jefferson admitted to as much—while other good speakers cannot write at all. Matt can do both, and while reading over the manuscript to prepare this foreword I often found myself hearing the words in my mind in Matt’s unique voice that so many have come to know so well.

It is therefore with a firm belief in the quality of Matt’s background and presentation that I wholeheartedly recommend this Vicksburg volume to readers. You will not be disappointed.

TIMOTHY B. SMITH, Ph.D., is a veteran of the National Park Service who currently teaches history at the University of Tennessee at Martin. His book *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles for Forts Henry and Donelson won the 2017 ECW Book Award. He is the author of a monumental five-volume study of the Vicksburg Campaign, published by the University Press of Kansas.*



Prologue

NOVEMBER 20, 1862
CAIRO, ILLINOIS

Stewards flitted about while serving a sumptuous meal aboard Captain Richard McAllister's "large, comfortable river boat." The guests of honor being feted by the army quartermaster were the naval officers stationed at Cairo, Illinois. In particular, one stood out among the rest, David Dixon Porter, the acting rear admiral and overall commander of the assembling fleet for the capture of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Porter was an old salt, egotistical, savvy, boisterous but, above all, competent. The furrows lining his face belied a 49-year-old that had seen many days on the deck of a ship. He was born navy. His glory in this war would be the navy's glory. And any glory to be gained he expected to beat the army to it.

In the midst of silver utensils, china dishes, and cut glasses clanking and clinking together, one of the stewards summoned Captain McAllister outside. Soon he returned ushering "in a travel-worn person dressed in civilian's clothes. McAllister was a very tall man and his companion was dwarfed by his superior size," recalled Porter. The captain introduced the man as Ulysses Grant, otherwise known to his close friends as simply Sam.

This man indeed was small in stature. His tailor recorded his measurements as:

Round the Breast under the coat 35
Round the waist under the Coat 31
From Middle Back Seam to Elbow 21

"Fort Pemberton was a hastily constructed fortification consisting of cotton bales and timber logs," says the American Battlefield Trust. The fort is "located on Highway 82 West on the banks of the Yazoo Pass connecting the Yazoo and Tallahatchie Rivers." (jw)



Deer Creek offers a view of the winding, tree-obstructed swamps and bayous that posed such a challenge for the Federals during the Vicksburg Campaign. (jw)

From Elbow to wrist for length of sleeve 12
From Collar seam to hips button 10
Hip buttons to bottom of shirt for length of coat 16
Round the wrist 8
Round the Elbow 12
For pants Round the waist 29
From top of Waistband to bottom outside 49

Captain McAllister placed the two men at a table alone. “Grant, though evidently tired and hungry, commenced business at once. ‘Admiral,’ he inquired, ‘what is all this you have been writing me?’” The always loquacious Porter had much to tell.

Before leaving Washington for his assignment at Cairo, Porter had been informed that his fleet would transport the newly formed infantry command of General John McClernand to Vicksburg. At that very moment, this “army” was being assembled at Memphis. Despite being outranked by Grant, McClernand had obtained an independent command in the same military district. A command given to McClernand after personally lobbying President Lincoln. Not only did he want the glory of capturing Vicksburg, the Illinois politician turned general also wanted Grant’s job. Machiavellianism was indeed underway in the Western Theater.

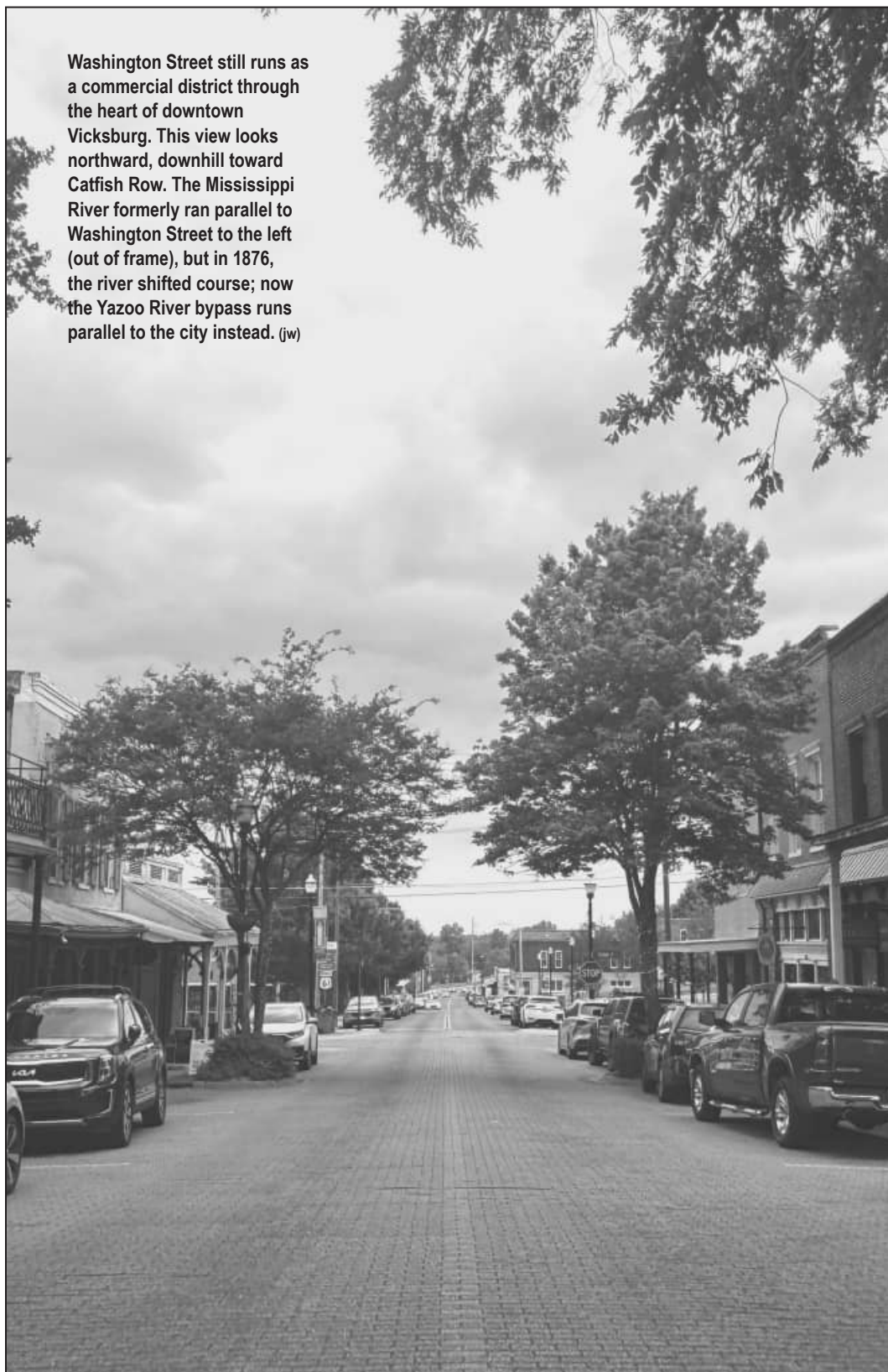
Now it was Grant's turn to speak. While Porter listened attentively, the general proposed advancing overland through Mississippi and approaching Vicksburg from the east. However, if Porter's fleet arrived at Memphis before McClernand, maybe Grant might borrow his army and his boats for a dash downriver. "Here in twenty minutes Grant unfolded his plan of campaign," Porter later wrote, "and, with a good supper staring him in the face, proposed to ride back again over a road he had just traveled without tasting a mouthful, his cigar serving, doubtless, for food and drink." Thus concluded the first meeting between these two titans of the Civil War.

The question now became could this partnership work? After all, the army was not beholden to the navy more than the navy to the army. The success of the expedition depended on the relationship of these two men. The setting aside of egos in the pursuit of a common goal. This is the story of their trials and tribulations. This is the story of the opening campaign against Vicksburg.



The stoic and unflappable Ulysses S. Grant. Victor at Fort Henry and Donelson and Corinth, the commander of the Army of Tennessee now set his sights on the capture of the Confederate Gibraltar. "The fall of Vicksburg now will only result in the opening of the Mississippi River and demoralization of the enemy," he wrote. (npg)

Washington Street still runs as a commercial district through the heart of downtown Vicksburg. This view looks northward, downhill toward Catfish Row. The Mississippi River formerly ran parallel to Washington Street to the left (out of frame), but in 1876, the river shifted course; now the Yazoo River bypass runs parallel to the city instead. (jw)



First Steps

CHAPTER ONE

1809–1861

Vicksburg, Mississippi—the name still resonates from the Civil War. The courthouse dominates the city skyline today, beckoning grandeur from a period long ago. And for a year in the middle of the great North-South struggle, this little city became the most important place in the nation, with the courthouse transformed into a symbol of defiance. This is the story of heroes and villains; of men who, when thrust on the national stage, either rose or fell to the occasion; while in the backdrop civilians, free and slave, vied for mere survival. This is the story of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

The mighty Mississippi River flows for approximately 2,400 miles from northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. This natural highway beckoned for exploration, and then commerce, with war soon following. In 1541, Hernando de Soto became the first European to set eyes on the Mississippi River. In subsequently sailing down the Mississippi, De Soto came across the confluence of the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers. Directly south of this location, the Mississippi River made a sharp turn and began to flow back to the north before making a 180-degree hairpin turn again to the southwest and forming a peninsula along the western side. On the eastern side, bluffs ranging 200–300 feet in height rose from the river. The bluffs were among the few points along the river featuring high and dry ground. The Mississippi

The natural bluffs along the river made an ideal location for the establishment of a riverport town. The 1850 census listed 3,678 residents that grew 25% to 4,591 residents by 1860 with an assessed property value of \$4,820,650. (loc)



provided deep water along the base, making it ideal for a future landing site.

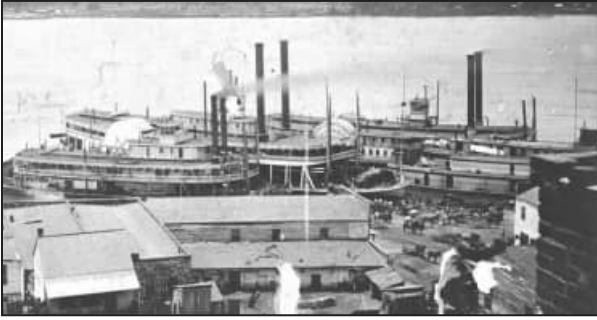
In 1809, the Mississippi Territorial Government created a county in this region, naming it after the Revolutionary hero Joseph Warren. That same year, a Methodist preacher named Newitt Vick moved his family to the area. Vick foresaw the potential of the site and, in 1819, two years after the state's entrance into the Union, began to mark off lots for sale in the newly minted town of Vicksburg. Growth rapidly followed and Vicksburg incorporated in 1825.

Vicksburg's formation corresponded with the advent of steam power. These powerful engines gave boats the ability to navigate the Mississippi River at faster speeds and to make headway against the current. Steam engines also led to the creation of railroad locomotives and, in 1840, a rail line was completed from Vicksburg to Jackson. Now Vicksburg had two major conduits to move freight to and from the Mississippi River, and out to the rest of the world.

Cotton provided the last ingredient that ignited Vicksburg's economy. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made this crop profitable, and production skyrocketed in the early 1800s, especially in the southern United States. The climate of the Deep South, such as Mississippi, coupled with the rich alluvial soil and the labor force of African slavery,

View of Vicksburg, looking from the hilltop toward the Mississippi River. The bustling commerce center on the bluffs would have no respite upon the arrival of United States forces. Confederates soon constructed river battery emplacements and ringed the city with fortifications. (loc)





At the beginning of the war, over 250,000 bales of cotton, along with livestock, flour, corn, grain, timber, sugar, and molasses transited through the port of Vicksburg. Shipyards, warehouses, foundries, businesses, and houses denoted vibrant economic success. (loc)

created a production complex that yielded millions of pounds of the “white gold.” With Vicksburg’s railroad and river port, farmers had the means to get cotton to the textile mills in New England and Europe.

In the first half of the 19th century, Vicksburg not only survived but prospered. The town endured the 1837 financial crisis and a devastating fire in 1846. The 1850s saw even more growth as cotton prices soared. Fine homes were built to counter some of the dilapidated buildings. The business section rapidly expanded. By 1860, the city boasted a brand-new courthouse, five churches, two hospitals, three newspapers, various hotels and banks, and numerous schools, including one run by the local Sisters of Mercy Convent. The 1860 census recorded 193 different occupations among the city’s 4,500 residents. On the eve of war, Vicksburg stood second in population only to the state capital, Jackson. Newitt Vick’s vision had come true.

As Vicksburg flourished, politics and slavery tore the rest of the nation asunder. Mississippians had remained loyal to the Union over the previous decades, siding against South Carolina in the Nullification Crisis of 1832, voting for the Compromise of 1850, and, in 1851, electing a pro-Union governor by a narrow margin. The tide began to turn, though, in 1854 as the conflict over slavery boiled over in Kansas. Mississippians also realized that many Northerners did not intend to honor the terms of the Compromise of 1850, specifically the Fugitive Slave Act. States’ rights proponents gained more leverage by arguing that abolitionists posed a clear and present danger. The 1850s closed with the states’ rights-wing of the Democratic Party winning the governorship and all of Mississippi’s seats in the United States House of Representatives.



John J. Pettus, a lawyer and strong supporter of secession, served two terms as governor of Mississippi. His first term of five days' duration holds the distinction as the shortest term of any governor in state history. His second term, 1859–1863, was marked by Mississippi leaving the Union.
(mdah)

As a new decade dawned, the nation reached a crossroads. In 1860, the anti-slavery Republican Party nominated Abraham Lincoln for president. Northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas while the Southern section countered with John C. Breckinridge. John Bell from Tennessee rounded out the field as representative of the Constitutional Union Party running on the platform of reunification. The fracture of the Democratic Party along sectional lines all but guaranteed a Republican victory. In the November elections, Mississippi voted overwhelmingly for Breckinridge. In Vicksburg, though, the old Whig party, which remained staunchly Unionist, formed the core of a surprising victory. Bell took 816 votes to Breckinridge's 580 while Douglas garnered 83 votes. Lincoln did not receive a single vote of support in Mississippi.

Events moved quickly. Fearing the worst, Governor John J. Pettus called for the election of delegates for a state secession convention. Despite statewide support for independence, Vicksburg remained firm for the Union and elected pro-Union delegates by the wide margin of 561 to 173 votes. Their sentiments were not only emotional for the old Union, but economic as well. The river port carried on much trade and commerce with the mid-western states and war meant an uncertain future but almost certain economic ruin.

On January 9, 1861, Mississippi voted to secede from the Union. While the rest of the state celebrated the new "republic," no events were held in Vicksburg. Nevertheless, the people of the Hill City joined their lot with the rest of the state. Pro-Union *Vicksburg Weekly Whig* editor Marmaduke Shannon wrote, "It is enough for us to know that Mississippi, our state, our government has taken its position. We, too, take our position by its side. We stand ready to defend her rights and to share her fate."

Two days later, the nascent Republic of Mississippi did "defend her rights"—sort of. Unfounded rumors began to circulate that the steamer *Silver Wave* was descending on Vicksburg laden with volunteers to attack Southern ports. Governor Pettus responded by sending the militia to Vicksburg. Four cannon were deployed along the bank to command the river bend. As the artillerymen waited, a steamboat rounded the



Steamboat *A. O. Tyler* after its conversion to the Union gunboat *USS Tyler*. The United States purchased the boat for \$20,666 in June 1861 and remodeled her for service as a gunboat. The bulwarks around the cannon were reinforced with 5 inches of white oak against small arms fire but provided little protection against artillery. The name honors Sir Charles Tyler of the British navy, recognized for his distinguished service and bravery during the Napoleonic Wars, and subsequently bestowed with the Knight Grand Cross. (loc)

bend, and the trigger-happy artillerymen opened fire. Cannon balls flew across the bow and splashed into the water. It was the wrong steamboat, though. Instead of an attack force, the boat turned out to be the *A. O. Tyler*. Through a hail of cannon balls, the perplexed captain, John Collier, brought his vessel to the landing to find out what all the commotion was about. Luckily, no one was hurt in the confrontation. But Mississippi had burned powder three months before the official start of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.

As the tocsin sounded the call for war, Vicksburg responded by raising troops for the cause. The “Vicksburg Sharpshooters” became the first local company to fill their quota and muster into Confederate service. They were followed by the “Vicksburg Artillery” and the “Hill City Cadets.” “The Volunteer Southrons” received a dinner and dance at their sendoff, while the “Jeff Davis Guards” accepted bouquets as decoration for their bayonets. In all, the area would provide 25 companies of infantry, artillery, and cavalry in defense of their homeland—a strong showing for a county that voted against secession.

Already the Hill City looked to shore up their protections against the North. The Vicksburg City Council budgeted \$5,000 to match a local businessman’s pledge for construction of an arsenal. Bond sales to support the war effort were vigorous also. The first purchases were made by Henry Lee and William Newman, two free men of color. All in all, an area that was pro-Union gave wholehearted support to the Confederate cause.

End of Unedited Excerpt