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**The Winter of 1863:**  
Grant's Louisiana Canal Expeditions

A Scholarly Monograph by  
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## About the Illustrations

The reader will notice the generous use of woodcut illustrations in this work. While the War between the States was the first photo documentary war, the use of woodcuts provides a contemporary and useful view of the progress of this military effort.

You should correlate the dating of many of the cuts to articles and editorial commentary about Grant's progress. The point is Grant was under a microscope during the entire period of the operations. Regardless, he was certain of his vision and willing to risk his career to ensure the achievement of his objective. The engravings are a significant, if silent, story behind the story.

## INTRODUCTION

President Abraham Lincoln once remarked:

*See what a lot of land these fellows hold, of which Vicksburg is the key. Here is the Red River, which will supply the Confederacy with cattle and corn to feed their armies. There are the Arkansas and White Rivers which can supply cattle and hogs by the thousand. From Vicksburg these supplies can be distributed by rail all over the Confederacy. Then there is that great depot of supplies on the Yazoo. Let us get Vicksburg and all that country is ours. The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pockets. I am acquainted with that region and know what I am talking about, and valuable as New Orleans will be to us, Vicksburg will be more so. We may take all northern ports of the Confederacy, and they can still defy us from Vicksburg. It means hog and hominy without limit, fresh troops from all the states of the far South and a cotton country where they can raise the staple without interference.'*

The War between the States began on April 12, 1861, at Charleston, South Carolina. By May 1862 the mighty Mississippi River had become the scene of major action between the Confederate and Union armies. Fifty-seven navigable bodies of water flowed into the Mississippi, and it bordered ten states.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the importance of the river, Lincoln urged the Union military leaders to control the navigation as soon as possible. New Orleans, Natchez, Baton Rouge, and other river ports fell in the spring of 1862. Thus, seizing the Mississippi River became a major goal of the North's war strategy known as the **Anaconda Plan**.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 David Dixon Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1885), 95-96. To avoid the excessive use of [sic], all quotes in this paper retain their original spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
  - 2 Adam Badeau, A Military History of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1885), 123.
  - 3 Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War, 96.

The rebel leaders also recognized the important strategic position of the "Hill City."<sup>4</sup> The railhead at Vicksburg meant they could continue to receive and distribute supplies from Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana to the eastern Confederacy. Materials traded through Gulf of Mexico ports moved up and down the Atchafalaya and Red Rivers.<sup>5</sup> If the South failed to maintain some control of the lower Mississippi River the Confederacy would be divided. After early Union successes the segment from Vicksburg to Port Hudson was the last point of free navigation and communication with the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy!

Several Union attempts were made to capture Vicksburg before Major General Ulysses S. Grant finally succeeded in July 1863. The first was made by Admiral David G. Farragut and Brigadier General Thoma Williams in June 1862. Williams began digging a canal across the DeSoto Peninsula, a long flat, narrow strip of land on the Louisiana side of the river formed by a looping bend in the Mississippi River.<sup>6</sup> If they had succeeded the Union fleet could have bypassed Vicksburg rendering it insignificant. Port Hudson would then have easily fallen (as it did once Vicksburg fell in July 1863). Although Williams failed to complete the canal, the idea remained popular with some Federal officers and Lincoln.

In December 1862 Grant launched a two-prong assault on Vicksburg. While he marched through central Mississippi towards the city, Major General William T. Sherman attacked it from the river. Confederate cavalry turned back Grant's column by destroying his supply base at Holly Springs, while Sherman suffered a devastating defeat at Chickasaw Bluffs.<sup>7</sup>

By January 1863 Grant began assembling his **Army of the Tennessee** along the Mississippi River from Lake Providence to Young's Point, but his attempts to capture Vicksburg were hampered by the geography and strong rebel defenses which capitalized on the navigable but challenging loops and bends of central Mississippi. The approaches to the city were protected from both the north and south for almost twelve miles, along a line running from Haines Bluff to Warrenton. Flood water

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<sup>4</sup> Harper's Weekly, August 2, 1862, p. 482.

<sup>5</sup> Richard S. West, Jr., The Second Admiral: A Life of David Dixon Porter, 1813-1891 (New York: Coward, McCann, Inc., 1937), 168.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Catton, This Hallowed Ground: The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956), 213.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Sherman Thorndike, ed., The Sherman Letters (New York: DaCapo Press, 1969), 180.

plains made it impossible to land troops north of Vicksburg and try to march around these defenses. There were twenty-eight guns of heavy caliber mounted on the river front bluffs well above the maximum elevation of the guns of the Union fleet. It seemed suicidal to try and run ships past the bluffs to land troops below the city. Even if a landing was achieved near the bluffs, rebel rifle pits defended the land between the river and the high ground. An approach via the Yazoo River, north of Vicksburg, was blocked with rafts, chains, and torpedoes stretched across its mouth. Even if the city could be bypassed, an approach from the rear was difficult because of rugged hills, steep ravines, thick forests, and numerous swamps and bayous. It was a disheartening problem for Federal planners.<sup>8</sup>

Grant refused to try a direct assault because Vicksburg's defenses were considered "impregnable from above and from the front."<sup>9</sup> Even staging his forces for such an attack was risky. The New York Times reported, "The struggle will be no small one--the determination of the rebels to defend this, their last hold upon the Valley of the Mississippi, is only equaled by the determination to wrest it from their possession."<sup>10</sup>

However, failure to take Vicksburg was not an option. So Grant resolved to move his soldiers south of Vicksburg down the Louisiana side of the river, cross the Mississippi, and attack Vicksburg from the south. Although this meant the Union fleet would have to force a passage of Vicksburg's Mississippi River batteries to get in position below the city to ferry the army across the river, it seemed to be Grant's best option.<sup>11</sup>

Grant was not insensitive to the possible destruction of his supporting fleet and in an effort to minimize the risk he decided to reopen the old canal begun by General Williams in June 1862.<sup>12</sup> By beginning the work in the winter months, Grant hoped to complete the canal before the river began falling and before the onset of the hot malarial summer.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Badeau, Military History of Ulysses S. Grant, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 18, 1863.

<sup>10</sup> New York Times, February 9, 1863.

<sup>11</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, vol. 1 (New York: The Century Co., 1917), 371.

<sup>12</sup> William T. Sherman, Memoirs of William T. Sherman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 305.

<sup>13</sup> Gary B. Mills, Of Men and Rivers: The Story of the Vicksburg District (Vicksburg: Vicksburg Corps of Engineers, 1978), 29.

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Unfortunately once he decided upon this effort, the inclement weather convinced Grant that he would not be able to move his army south over the flooded Louisiana delta before March. Still, he also would not let it remain idle and have morale suffer.<sup>14</sup> *Work on the canal across the DeSoto Peninsula, as well as other canal experiments at Lake Providence and Walnut Bayou, would help to distract the rebels in the vicinity, pacify the public, and keep his men occupied.* Grant did not expect much from these projects, but if they worked, he would take advantage of them.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> New York Times, February 9, 1863.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.



## **GRANT'S CANAL ON the DESOTO PENINSULA**

In January 1863 General Order Number 13 was issued, placing Grant in charge of the **Department of Tennessee** and the Mississippi River expedition against Vicksburg.<sup>16</sup> He was warned by General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck not to expect much help from Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, who was planning operations against Port Hudson, Louisiana.<sup>17</sup> If Banks had been able to reduce Port Hudson, the struggle for control of the Mississippi River would have been much easier.

On January 1, 1863, General Grant advised Flag Officer David Dixon Porter that he had sent an engineer, Colonel Josiah Bissell, to Youngs Point. Bissell was to survey the area and determine the feasibility of opening the old Williams's canal on the DeSoto Peninsula.<sup>18</sup> Before departing Memphis, Grant wrote to General Halleck concerning the Peninsula canal:

I propose running a canal through starting far enough above the old one, commenced last summer, to receive the stream where it impinges against the shore with the greatest velocity. The old canal left the river in an eddy and in a line perpendicular to the stream and also to the crest of the hills opposite, with a battery and directed against the outlet. This new canal will debauch below the bluffs on the opposite side of the river, and give our gunboats a fair chance against any fortifications that may be placed to oppose them.<sup>19</sup>

On January 20 General Grant ordered Major Generals John A. McClernand and William T. Sherman to move with their commands to

<sup>16</sup>

U. S. War Department. The War of the Rebellion: A n the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol pt. 1, p. 11. Hereinafter referred to as the O.R. Unless otherwise indicated references are to series 1

<sup>17</sup>

Ibid.. 9.

<sup>18</sup>

Ibid., vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 551.

<sup>19</sup>

Ibid., vol. 24, pt. I, p. 8; John Y. Simon, ed., The Papers of UIysses S. Grant. December 9. 1862 - March 31, 1863. vol. 7 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 233-34.

Young's Point, where they were to begin work reopening Williams's Canal. Grant later recalled:

The real work of the campaign and siege of Vicksburg now began. The problem was to secure a footing on dry ground on the east side to the river from which the troops could operate against Vicksburg.<sup>20</sup>

The excessive rain in the southern area along the Mississippi made the living and working conditions for the Thirteenth and **Fifteenth Corps** very uncomfortable. They were forced to camp on the levees and the land behind them. The Union forces stretched for miles along the Mississippi's west bank from the DeSoto Peninsula to Milliken's Bend.<sup>21</sup>

Grant wrote to McClernand on January 22 advising him that he was sending ammunition and milling tools. He also suggested that gunny sacks be saved for future use as sandbags.<sup>22</sup> In a January 22 report to Grant, McClernand wrote:

Before nightfall I reconnoitered the country within three-quarters of a mile of the canal, and by nine o'clock this morning quite to and beyond it. The water of the Mississippi River, which is rising rapidly, is in the upper end of the canal and must run through in a few hours, if the rise continues. . . The line of the canal is now occupied by forces deemed sufficient to hold it. . . I will immediately commence enlarging the present, or cutting a new canal. . . . Additional implements, however, will be required..<sup>23</sup>

In order to protect his troops while they worked on the canal, McClernand set up a battery of twenty-pound Parrots on the bank of the river. He also requested as many steamboats as possible to evacuate his troops, if necessary, from the rapidly rising waters.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Grant, Personal Memoirs, vol. 1, p. 370.

<sup>21</sup> New York Times, February 9, 1863.

<sup>22</sup> O.R., vol. 24, Pt. 3, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Simon, ed., The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 7, p.240; O.R., vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 7.

Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 21, 1863.

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In his report on January 24, McClernand wrote, "The waters of the Mississippi are now running through the canal a foot deep."<sup>25</sup> Two days later he reported:

I have only to add . . . the Mississippi River is still rising . . . three crevasses occur within twenty miles of the lower end of the canal. . . . The water flows three feet deep in the canal, but gives no evidence of diverting the channel of the river. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Sherman too was active. A working party of 1,000 men was to begin cutting a new channel 300-500 yards further upstream from the original canal in an effort to intercept the main current of the river. If he was successful the river would do the rest, cutting a new path far from the menacing bluffs of Vicksburg.

Unfortunately, the work was risky and Sherman was admonished to "put and keep the roads in good repair" in case rising water forced him to move the troops and artillery back aboard the transports.<sup>27</sup> When Sherman and his staff rode over to look at the canal, he was not impressed and remarked, "*It's no bigger than a plantation ditch.*"<sup>28</sup> This "ditch," however, kept his corps occupied throughout January and February.

Sherman's work was designed to accomplish three goals. First, he would widen the canal nine feet to increase the volume and power of the current. Second, he would use the earth as a parapet, which would enable a small number of men to guard it. Third, batteries would be erected to control the river below Vicksburg.<sup>29</sup> In a January 24 letter to General McClernand he noted his progress:

I have just ridden my line. General David Stuart's division occupies the line of the canal, and is at work widening the canal 9 feet and throwing up the earth on this side, to make a parapet and to prevent an overflow. About 2 feet of water is in the canal now, and moving at a current about the same as the main river. With our tools, we cannot attempt much more. . . .<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> O.R., vol. 24, pi. 3, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 9; New York Times, February 9, 1863.

<sup>28</sup> Edwin C. Bearss, The Campaign for Vicksburg: Vicksburg is the Key, vol. 1 (Dayton: Morningside Press, 1985), p. 437.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> O.R., vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 9.

The rising water of the Mississippi caused Sherman much concern. The water seemed to be everywhere. He exclaimed, "Rain, rain--water above, below and all around. I have been soused under water by my horse falling in a hole and got a good ducking yesterday where a horse could not go. No doubt they are chuckling over our helpless situation in Vicksburg."<sup>31</sup> In the above letter to McClernand he stated, "If the river rises 8 feet, as I feel assured it will very soon, water will overflow this plain, and we will all be in the levee."<sup>32</sup> The only safe refuge his troops had was either on the levee or aboard the steamboats anchored nearby. As a precaution, Sherman issued General Order Number 8 on January 26, assigning certain sections of the levee to a part of his command, while sending the rest to the steamboats.<sup>33</sup> McClernand was also threatened and his troops were eventually moved to Milliken's Bend.

During this episode, Sherman's headquarters were at a Mrs. Grove's house, which was surrounded by water and could only be reached by a plank walk built on posts extending from the levee to the house.<sup>34</sup> Neither Mrs. Groves nor Sherman were satisfied with this situation. Sherman strongly suggested that either she or the Union army was going to have to move. He wrote. "Cannot we prevail on her to move? *She has no substantial cause for complaint other than the burning of rails, the noise, tumult, and confusion of the mass of men.* . . .(emphasis added)"<sup>35</sup>

Surprisingly, the Confederates had made no attempt to fill in the canal on the DeSoto Peninsula after it was abandoned by General Williams. Officials apparently did not feel it could be of any help to the Union army. Even had the canal been filled, the Union forces simply would have dug another one. As one reporter wrote:

Labor is nothing with our enemies, as every one can test who has seen that portion of the Yazoo swamp occupied by them for a few days some weeks since. If they had continued there one week longer, the whole swamp would have been intersected with corduroy roads. The building of bridges, the digging of canals

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<sup>31</sup> Terry L. Jones, "Grant's Canals in Northeast Louisiana," North Louisiana Historical Association Journal 9 (Winter 1979): 11.

<sup>32</sup> O.R., vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Sherman. Memoirs of William T. Sherman, 305.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> O.R., vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 10.

and the construction of roads, are but matters of recreation with the abolitionists.<sup>36</sup>

By the time the Union troops began work in January 1863, the canal varied in depth from seven to eight feet and in width from nine to twelve feet.<sup>37</sup> One soldier from the Fifty-fifth Illinois got a close-up look at the canal when his regiment camped nearby. He sarcastically wrote on January 22:

This noted canal, from which wonderful results were anticipated and confidently foretold by those who, hundreds of miles distant, managed the war upon maps, greatly disappointed the soldiers encamped in the swamp beside it. In appearance it was little more conspicuous than a farm ditch, being generally not over ten feet broad and six feet deep where completed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>

Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 7, 1863.

<sup>37</sup>

David F. Bastion, "Hydraulic Analysis of Grant's Canal," The Military Engineer (July-August 1974): 229, in Vicksburg National Military Park Archives.

<sup>38</sup>

Capt. Lucian B. Crooker and others, The Story of the Fifty-fifth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry<sup>y</sup> in the Civil War, 1861-1865 (Clinton, Illinois: W. J. Coulter, 1887), 211.

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The **Fifteenth Corps** was provided with spades and began to widen the canal to fifty or sixty feet. The engineers divided the canal into 160-foot sections with one regiment in charge of digging each section. Many of the laboring soldiers must have realized that the eddy at the canal entrance would prevent success. Others may have noticed that the rebel batteries at Vicksburg appeared to be in range of the canal's southern outlet, a fact which could make passage difficult even if the canal was completed. Perhaps those who seriously considered the situation realized that they were merely killing time, waiting for better weather.

R. W. Grose, whose insight proved better than his writing, probably voiced the popular opinion of many of the troops when he wrote:

We are encamp about four miles from Vicksburg on the Louisiana side the entention was to dig a cannal across a bend in the Mississippi River but I think that it will be a failure for they have dug it only about twenty five feet wide and left the trees a standing in it thinking that God Almity would send great floods of water through and tare trees and stumps right out but he failed in doing it so they let the water in it just like some little boys would to see the water run in it Now the cannal is of no account and it takes our men all the time to throw up a levy on this side to keep the water from over flooring us yesterday we had a small brake in it we did not know what minute we would have to move out of this place and the is no dry spot handy here either I woulden care if it would over flow the hole Southern Confederacy and drive us back in Ohio for we might as well be there as here for all we will make by being here I have come to conclusion that this Rebellion will never be put down by fighting the south can fight us as long as what we can fight them until the first of April our Army will be as small by sickness and deaths and desertions as what it was before the Draft then they will either have to make another big draft or give up the strugel the Soldier are getting very tired of fighting and would be very glad to hear of peace being made between North and South. . .39

The living conditions of the soldiers on the peninsula were awful. A member of the **Fifty-fifth Illinois**, graphically described the horrid conditions:

The period of its stay at Young's Point was on many accounts one of the gloomiest in the career of the regiment. At the time of its arrival the river was rapidly rising, and the turbid waters gradually crept up the slope of the high levee several feet above the level of the encampments. It was a winter of excessive rains and unusual floods. The swamps became lakes, and camps and roads were sloughs of black mire. If one put his foot squarely down anywhere, it was questionable when he raised it again, if the shoe would not stay behind; and if it yielded reluctant allegiance where it belonged, it brought with it a pound or two of unctuous earth. The nights were so damp and chill that, when attainable, log fires were kept before the tents, while the days were sometimes oppressively sultry. The men, although now hardened campaigners, working day after day midleg deep in mud and water, in a malarious climate, under various discouragements, grumbled audibly, and began to fail in health.<sup>40</sup>

The bogs, lakes, and bayous were the home of alligators and other reptiles, and mosquitoes filled the air with their monotonous buzzing. One soldier referred to the mosquito as "the vilest of earth's tormentors." A reporter from the New York Tribune was even more descriptive. In an article, he wrote:

Mosquitoes out here are much larger than our Eastern species, and their bills are of corresponding length; but they have not much good voices for music. They descend upon you like a hawk on a June bug, without warning of any kind, except you feel the wind from their broad wings, as if some bird of prey were swooping down.<sup>42</sup>

Thoughts of desertion were encouraged by discouraging articles printed in some of the Northern newspapers. One reporter claimed,

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<sup>40</sup> Crooker, The Story of the Fifty-fifth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry, 212.

<sup>41</sup> Otto F. Bond ed., Under the Flag of the Nation: Diaries and Letters of a Yankee Volunteer in the Civil War (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1961), 50.

<sup>42</sup> New York Times, April 16, 1863. The



"There is worse demoralization in Gen. Grant's command than has been exhibited anywhere else in the army since the beginning of the war."<sup>43</sup> Still another wrote:

The army is as stagnant and inactive as the swamps and back water around us. This inaction is not that of easy and sluggish repose. It is a long suspense --a painful expectation. The army is anxious and weary of nothing to do. . . .<sup>44</sup>

One of Grant's harshest critics was Murat Halstead, editor of the Cincinnati Gazette. An article taken from the Cincinnati Gazette was even published in the Vicksburg Daily Whig. The article's author criticized Grant for not having a point of operations on land and for apparently not having any plans to establish one. He also stated that the strategies Grant had been using so far had only led to the destruction of his own vessels.<sup>45</sup> Some of Halstead's criticisms were sent directly to government officials. In a letter to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase on February 19, 1863, Halstead wrote:

I write you this morning to send you a copy of a private letter I have from our army in front of Vicksburg. It is from a close observer who endeavors to tell the truth: "There never was a more thoroughly disgusted, disheartened, demoralized army than this is, and all because it is under such men as Grant and Sherman . . . while hundreds of poor fellows are dying of smallpox and every other conceivable malady, the medical department is afflicted with delirium tremens. . . . How is it that Grant, who was behind at Fort Henry, drunk at Donelson, surprised and whipped at Shiloh, and driven back from Oxford Miss., is still in command?<sup>46</sup>

Other critics declared that Grant was "simply wandering around. baffled and outwitted, wasting men, time and patience."<sup>47</sup> Still others criticized Grant for choosing Sherman as second in command. After

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<sup>43</sup>

Vicksburg Daily Whig, March 28, 1863.

New York Times, March 1, 1863.

<sup>45</sup>

Vicksburg Daily Whig, April 15, 1863.

<sup>46</sup>

W. E. Woodward, Meet General Grant (New York: Liveright

Publishing Corp., 1928). 292.

<sup>47</sup>

Earl Schenck Miers, The General Who Marched to Hell! William Tecumseh Sherman and March to Fame and Infamy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 26.

Shiloh, it was widely rumored that Sherman had gone insane. Critics stated that this proved "that 'crazy' birds of a feather flocked together."<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps the most frequent complaint against Grant concerned his drinking. Halstead, in addition to his other criticisms of Grant, claimed, "He is a poor drunken imbecile ... a poor stick sober, and he is most of the time more than half-drunk, and much of the time idiotically drunk. . . ."<sup>49</sup>

Lincoln received so many complaints about Grant that Charles Dana was sent to visit the army in early 1863 and investigate them. Dana's report, however, was very positive. He became one of Grant's strongest supporters, and described him as being modest, honest, even-tempered, sincere, thoughtful, and courageous.<sup>50</sup> Reassured, Lincoln thereafter supported Grant against his critics. As Lincoln pointed out, the Union could not survive without Grant because Grant at least would fight.

Frequent twelve hour shifts of duty made leisure time scarce for those working in the canal, but the men usually found ways to entertain themselves. They read letters from family and books they had stolen from Southern homes while marching across the countryside. Food and gifts sent from home also helped to brighten otherwise dreary days. Another form of amusement for the soldiers was fishing. One soldier wrote:

This morning the employees of the hospital are having fine times over a fish of a new kind they caught last night in the shape of an alligator. A number of them went out last night with guns and a dog for bait to the lake a couple of hundred yards from our quarters. They say it is full of alligators. Coming to the lake they tied the dog to a sapling and then gave it a whipping, making the poor dog howl at a great rate. After a while a noise was heard near the bay when an alligator, seven feet long, wishing for a dainty morsel, approached the dog. Those lying in wait fired away with success, for his alligatorship lies on the bank this morning.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Leckie, None Died in Vain (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 547.

<sup>50</sup> Charles A. Dana, Recollections of the Civil War (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 61.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Ross McGregor, Dearest Susie: A Civil War Infantryman's Letters to His Sweetheart (New York: Exposition Press, 1971), 50.

According to a reporter for one Northern newspaper, fraternizing with the enemy was also a form of entertainment. The river was only five hundred yards wide at one point, and the men could carry on conversations with the rebels across the way. One conversation between members of the **Eighth Missouri** and the rebels went like this:

*"When are you going to surrender Vicksburg?"*

*"Never! by G-d!"*

After exchanging insults the rebels became inquisitive:

*"What's your regiment:"*

*"The 8th Missouri."*

*"What's your opinion of the canal?"*

*"Go to h-ll"* replied the Federal and sullenly retired.<sup>52</sup>

Simply watching each other's activities seemed to provide entertainment for both sides. One newspaper in Vicksburg provided this story for its readers' pleasure:

On Tuesday we (rebel soldiers) saw six Yankees chasing hogs about the ruins of the depot of the Vicksburg, Shreveport and Texas railroad. Yesterday morning we noticed seven . . . men with guns and one with a sword, perambulating about the ferry landing. In the afternoon two killed a hog just below Seales' on the bank of the river. One stood picket and the other commenced cutting up "porkie." Before he got through the job a shell from our lower batteries compelled them to seek safety behind the levee. They were persevering however, and determined to have the pork. As soon as the shell fell they returned to their work, but another shot compelled them to retire. They came back again and this time each succeeded in getting away a portion of the hog.<sup>53</sup>

Such incidents quickly taught the Yankees the proper rules of behavior when it came to exposing themselves to the enemy. One or two soldiers were generally safe, but if a dozen or more gathered in the open, the rebels would usually remind them of their presence by throwing shells among them. The Federal engineers, particularly, were targeted, but the rebel aim was not accurate enough to make the engineers stop their work.

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<sup>52</sup> Chicago Tribune, March 21, 1863.

<sup>53</sup> Vicksburg Daily Whip, January 1, 1863.

The fortifications along the Vicksburg bluffs were clearly visible to the Union soldiers who visited the point of land opposite the city. One reporter accompanied a group of men who walked down to the river to gawk at the rebels. The Vicksburg newspaper republished the reporter's account of the visit:

Immediately below the city they have a fort mounting several of their heaviest guns, and casemated. Men can be seen at work strengthening their fortifications everywhere. Guns are planted half way up the hill, in the middle of every street leading from the landing, and most of the streets appear to be barricaded. All the lower part of the city (by which I mean the portion next to the river) is deserted by families. Soldiers are quartered in many of the buildings, but many more are tenantless. The few dozens of Federal soldiers who straggled through our pickets and reached the river bank on the point lay there for hours, watching all that was going on. At one time a woman came out of a house, got into a buggy and drove away, which so excited every emotion of gallantry, that three rousing cheers were given for the lady and three groans for the broken down mule she drove. The cheering was too uproarious, and the rebels admonished them to be less noisy by pitching a shell directly over their heads, which exploded but a few yards in the rear.<sup>54</sup>

The rising water continued to threaten camp and kept the men very busy. On January 30 Captain Frederick Prime, an engineering officer, expressed concern over the rising river and the numerous crevasses in the levee. He noted that if the water continued to rise there would be flooding from the backwater in the swamps.

To keep the rising water out of the camps, the soil from the new entrance to the canal had to be used to build a protective levee. Levees also ran for miles along the river's edge and were the only area where the land was dry enough for graves. At times the water was so high it washed away the soil and exposed the coffins and corpses wrapped in blankets. These often had to be moved and reburied in a higher, hopefully drier, place. As Adam Badeau wrote, "The troops were thus hemmed in by the burial-places of their comrades."<sup>55</sup> One reporter was shocked at the flooded graves. He wrote:

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<sup>54</sup>

Vicksburg Daily Whip, February 24, 1863.

<sup>55</sup>

Badeau, Military History of Ulysses S. Grant, 161.

The present state of water in the Mississippi has.. . partially overflowed the Louisiana peninsula opposite Vicksburg; has encroached upon the encampments of our troops. . . . One of the many rude burial-places down here, where the defenders of the republic who fell in battle last December, and who have since perished of disease, are now lying in eternal silence, but with glorious suggestiveness, has been inundated by the flood, and the graves are but partially visible above the surfaces of the broad-expanding waters.<sup>56</sup>

**The United States Sanitary Commission**, in response to constant complaints about the living conditions of the **Army of the Tennessee**, sent a representative to the flooding camps. He concluded. "[the soldiers] were forced to lead a life for several months in a condition exceedingly unfavorable to the preservation of their health and vigor."<sup>57</sup>

The men did what they could to remain comfortable and dry. This included building a corduroy (paved) road across the swampy land to the canal work site. At night the men had to sleep on straw on the cold ground unless they were fortunate enough to find a board to use as a bed.

The winter of 1862-63 had been extraordinarily cold and wet, and once a contagious disease was contracted by one soldier, it quickly spread to others in the cramped quarters. Typhoid, smallpox, measles, dysentery, diphtheria, and mumps became common ailments. From January-April 1863, the average number of deaths from disease per month in the **Army of the Tennessee**, was 534 or approximately nineteen deaths per day. This was the highest death rate of any Union army at that time.<sup>58</sup>

Still work was more healthful than idle camp life and each day nearly four thousand troops worked on the canal along with whatever black men could be gathered from the surrounding area.<sup>59</sup> Grant, however, still needed more men [a curiosity if he was sure the effort was not going to succeed--editor's note]. On January 30, he wrote to Brigadier General Willis A. Gorman at Helena, "If you have them send here one hundred able bodied contrabands to be employed on the canal at this

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<sup>56</sup> Harper's Weekly, April 11, 1863, p. 235.

<sup>57</sup> Thienel, Seven Story Mountain, 50-51.

<sup>58</sup> Phillip M. Thienel, Seven Story Mountain: The Union Campaign at Vicksburg (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1955), 76-77.

<sup>59</sup> Chicago Tribune, February 25, 1863.

place." Another telegram to Colonel George W. Deitzler at Lake Providence on February 2, ordered him to "Collect as many able bodied Negro men as you can conveniently carry on your transports, and send them here to be employed on the canal." Deitzler replied on February 3:

I send by same boat 100 able-bodied negroes--all that can be secured at present--will send out tomorrow and collect as many as possible and forward them. The planters have sent most of their Negroes and cotton back into the country on Bayou Macon some 12 or 15 miles from here, and we shall, therefore, probably not be able to send you many hands to work on the canal.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Simon, ed., The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 7, p.279.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 282.

Not surprisingly, tensions existed between the midwestern soldiers and the black men working beside them, with the soldiers openly showing their prejudice. Charles C. Enslow, of the **Seventy-seventh Illinois Volunteers**, was concerned about the hardships the soldiers faced and looked upon the blacks as a safe alternative. He wrote, "At canal trying to stop water by damming it. 560 contrabands working there about. I hope they increase it a thousand fold and save our boys." 63

Major General Frank P. Blair, a politically connected division commander serving in Sherman's corps, was critical of the amount of work the troops were having to perform on the canal. He believed the army was "wearing itself out" and wrote, "This business of working our men to death when there are hundreds of thousands of Negroes who could be had to do the work in the mud and water is disgusting beyond all measure."

Work on the canal continued despite all of the other problems. General Grant was in constant contact with Halleck, keeping him informed of the progress being made on the canal. These reports seemed to indicate Grant's growing disillusionment with the DeSoto Peninsula effort. On January 27 Grant informed Halleck that the water in the canal was rising rapidly and that Parrot guns were being set up to defend it. Two days later Halleck learned there was five feet of water in the canal, and the water was still rising, but that Grant had no hope of the water enlarging the canal. On January 31 Grant told Halleck he was seeking other means for bypassing Vicksburg because he had little faith in the ultimate success of the canal<sup>65</sup>

In one of his messages to Assistant Adjutant General J. C. Kelton. Grant wrote:

On examining the route of the present canal, I lost all faith in its ever leading to any practical results. The canal is at right angles with the thread of the current at both ends, and both ends are in an eddy, the lower coming out under bluffs completely commanding it. Warrenton, a few miles below, is capable of as strong defenses as Vicksburg, and the enemy, seeing us at work here, have had the

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<sup>63</sup> Thienel, Seven Story Mountain, 45.

<sup>64</sup> Bruce Canon, Never Call Retreat (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), 87.

<sup>65</sup> O.R., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 10.

effect of making the enemy divide his forces and spread their big guns over a great deal of territory.<sup>66</sup>

The continuous rise in the river kept the soldiers busy trying to keep the water out of the camps. This meant fewer hours were spent actually working on the canal. Captain Frederick Prime, in a letter to Grant on February 9, reported:

The water is still rising at the rate of 2 1/2 inches per twenty-four hours for past two days. A dam has been erected at each point where the canal crosses the levee. The water in the intermediate space will be let out into the swamps and low grounds as soon as the camps south of the railroad and west of the canal have been entirely removed, which, I trust, will be tomorrow. This will render it practicable to remove the stumps and trees now in the canal, and to widen and deepen the canal to the necessary dimensions. A frame is being sunk in the excavation for the new entrance. It has reached a depth of 6 feet below the surface, and stiff clay is the material now encountered. The water seeps in so that at present the excavation in the new entrance cannot be pushed deeper than about 4 feet. . . [Few] soldiers are at present employed, on account of shifting camps, building roads, &c., and the delays which have prevented the canal from being emptied. . . With fair weather and strong working parties, there is a fair prospect of obtaining satisfactory results.<sup>67</sup>

Colonel Bissell's engineer regiment was to be used in removing stumps from the canal and in cutting another channel should the batteries across the river prove to be a threat. On February 13 Halleck suggested to Grant that dredges might be used to hurry things along. On March 1 a steam dredge arrived .

In the frenzy to complete the canal, one-half of every regiment worked on the canal around the clock. Prime noted that the work was progressing very well until the upper dam gave way on March 7. Harper's Weekly reported:

When the fracture occurred, a number of soldiers were on the levee, and were thrown into the torrent. Some swam and scrambled out; but several of them would have been drowned but

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 14,

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 119.



for the heroic exertions of John C. Keller, one of the officers of the transport, Swallow, who succeeded at great personal risk in placing them once more upon terra firma, much wetter if not wiser men.<sup>68</sup>

Describing the situation. Prime wrote:

The opening in the canal levee which had been used to drain the water was still open, and there was ... a heavy rush of water ... which it was found impossible to stop. This opening is now about 150 feet wide, double its original width. . . . Between upper main levee and railroad, mostly dug out to required width, and about six to eight stumps in the canal; the canal levee is above water of river 18 inches. . . . Between railroad and lower main levee all of the canal to full width; four to six trees and from twelve to fifteen stumps in canal; levee for about half its length is good order . . . balance below grade, and levee not strong enough. Two dredges are at work in new entrance, making channel 11 feet deep.<sup>69</sup>

Dredges and barges filled with dirt were used to try to stop the flow of water over the upper levee. A pile driver to drive piles across the break in the levee was to arrive from Memphis ,and a machine that could cut trees under the waterline was also expected.<sup>70</sup> It was hoped that these measures, and the use of grain bags or sandbags, would stop the rising water. On March 9, however, Prime reported that they had been unsuccessful in closing a gap in the levee with an earthen filled barge.<sup>71</sup>

War correspondents covering the canal work found the newly arrived dredges to be interesting. Of the Sampson, Harper's Weekly reported:

The "mud machine" Sampson is seen hard at work digging into the dam on the upper side. Its huge iron scoop is ever in motion scooping away the earth, and demolishing the barrier which now keeps the Mississippi waters out of the bed in the canal. . .

Both Northern and Southern newspapers carried stories about the dredges. The Vicksburg Daily Whig published an article from the

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68 Harrier's Weekly, April 4, 1863, p. 215.

69 O.R., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 122.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 123.

72 Harper's Weekly, April 4, 1863, p. 215.

Memphis Bulletin on February 25, announcing, "Large dredges from Louisville were soon expected there [the canal at Vicksburg] to assist in digging."<sup>73</sup> The Daily Whig contained a paragraph or two almost every day once the dredges arrived at DeSoto. On March 21, 1863, it reported, "A ten-inch mortar was engaged on Tuesday night in sending messengers over to the Yankee dredge-boat, which was working on the canal. The effect was not known."<sup>74</sup>

The dredges were working well but soon came within range of the rebel guns. When the Confederates realized that the dredges increased the likelihood of Yankee success, they erected special batteries on the bluffs across the river from the canal in order to rake the dredges with artillery fire. Captain William Capers was ordered to move his guns to a position on the Vicksburg bluff to prevent any boats from running through the canal. In a letter on April 7, 1863, he wrote:

I came, and found that two dredge boats had well-nigh succeeded in cutting through. I commenced, and kept up, both day and night

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<sup>73</sup> Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 25, 1863.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., March 21, 1863.

at irregular intervals, a telling fire and finally drove the dredge boats and batteries away, and put a quietus to all work on the "canal." Being just two miles off- -the nearest point a battery could be erected--you may judge with what precision I have to fire to make my shots effective. One of their letter writers, in speaking of my firing, says, "the rebel battery threw shot and shell with wonderful precision, and terrible effect, making it almost impossible to work on the boats." . . . My general officers are highly pleased with my success and say they would rather see me keep the dredge boats out of the canal, than to sink a dozen gunboats. If I keep them out of the "canal," they will be forced to pass the batteries at Vicksburg.<sup>75</sup>

This increased enemy shelling put an end to the dredges' work. By March 24 it had already been decided to move the dredges from the peninsula canal to a new site. Originally called Pride's Canal, this new project would later be known as the Duckport Canal.<sup>76</sup>

Prior to March, Grant's messages to Halleck had usually been positive concerning the canal, although he did, at times, express doubts. By March 17, however, he began to couch his opinions about utility of further work on the peninsula:

Since the giving way of the dam at the upper end of the canal, work with the dredges has progressed favorable, but all attempts to stop the rush of water into the canal have proved abortive. If required, however, the canal can be made to pass boats of ordinary size in a few days. . . .<sup>77</sup>

On March 27 Grant informed Halleck that all work on the canal, except for those repairing the canal levee, had been stopped for a few days because the enemy fire had driven the dredges out of the area. Grant, at this time, thought that the canal might be "used to pass boats through at night," but nothing more.<sup>78</sup>

Soon the Confederate defenders at Vicksburg sensed victory. They noticed that most of the steamboats that had been tied up at Young's

<sup>75</sup>

William G. Capers to Starr, April 7, 1863, Capers Collection, Old Courthouse Museum Archives, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

<sup>76</sup>

Simon, ed., The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 8, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup>

O.R., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 20.

<sup>78</sup>

Ibid., 23.

Point were gone, and the troops camping on the levee were no longer visible. Although the dredges had succeeded in opening the canal about one-fifth of its length, by March 24 they had been towed out of the channel. The rebels correctly assumed that work on the canal had been suspended.<sup>79</sup>

After months of back breaking labor, Grant finally accepted the inevitable and gave up. The aborted, unpopular canal project became the source of much ridicule. Daniel D. Emmett was one who saw little merit in the grand project. He wrote:

*Grant marched his men, worn out and jaded  
To Vicksburg where he was blockaded,- He  
dug a canal (none dare dispute him) The  
river would not rise to suit him.*<sup>80</sup>

However. Grant was not defeated and he had already begun to concentrate on a second site. Work had already begun at Lake Providence, Louisiana, sixty miles above Vicksburg.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Mills, Of Men and Rivers, 30.

## **LAKE PROVIDENCE CANAL**

Grant was not a single focused automaton to the exclusion of other possibilities. So while work on the canal across the DeSoto Peninsula continued, sixty or seventy miles above Vicksburg other soldiers were attempting to create another passageway at Lake Providence on the Louisiana side of the river.<sup>81</sup>

Grant had learned first hand that the charts of the Mississippi River were not very reliable. The mighty river often changed its course, leaving behind an island here or a lake there. In fact this was how the lake at Providence, Louisiana, had been formed.

Lake Providence, as it was called, had once been a channel of the Mississippi River, but the river had changed its course, moving a mile to the east. Grant reasoned that the oxbow lake, crescent-shaped and six miles long, might again be coaxed into being a main channel of the mighty Mississippi--at least until he could achieve his objectives. If the navy could gain entrance into the lake, it could follow Bayous Baxter and Macon to the Tensas and Ouachita Rivers and then pass through the Black and Red Rivers into the Mississippi. It would allow Grant's forces to bypass the Confederate fortresses at Warrenton and Grand Gulf and reenter the Mississippi River 400 river miles below Vicksburg.<sup>82</sup>

Emerging just above Port Hudson, Louisiana, Grant could then join General Nathaniel P. Banks's forces to take that Confederate stronghold. After its fall, the enlarged Union army could--if necessary--attack Vicksburg from the south. As Charles B. Allaire, a Union soldier, wrote, "It is a long way around 'Robin Hood's Barn'," but if the Lake Providence route succeeded, it would make the campaign easier.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Vicksburg Daily Whip, February 28, 1863; Chicago Tribune, February 27, 1863.

<sup>82</sup> Michael B. Ballard, Pemberton: A Biography (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 132; Stephen E. Ambrose, ed., A Wisconsin Boy in Dixie: The Selected Letters of James K. Newton (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 55.

<sup>83</sup> Charles B. Allaire Letter, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (a photocopy of this letter is located in the Allaire Collection in the East Carroll The Papers of the BGES 30

On January 30 Grant wrote Admiral Porter requesting a light-draught gunboat to accompany an expedition through the Lake Providence route. He also wrote to General McClelland:

Upon inquiry . . . I find that Lake Providence ... which connects with Red River, through Tensas Bayou, Washita and Black Rivers, is a wide and navigable way... . With this open, a vast foraging district would be opened, and our gunboats of light draught would be enabled to cut off the enemy's commerce with the west bank of the river.. . .<sup>84</sup>

Grant ordered General McPherson to begin work opening the Lake Providence route. In his orders Grant wrote:

Move one division of your command to this place with as little delay as practicable, and come with it yourself. . . . This bids fair to be the most practicable route for turning Vicksburg.<sup>85</sup>

Grant's engineers hoped to cut the levee between Lake Providence and the Mississippi River to gain access to the lake. This cut, about one hundred feet wide and five feet deep, would allow the river to flow into the lake, which was almost eight feet lower in elevation. In a February 3 note to Lieutenant Colonel John A. Rawlins (Grant's Chief of Staff), Colonel George W. Deitzler reported the levee should be cut within six days. He added:

I do not think that we will have any considerable difficulty in finding a passage for gunboats and small stern-wheel boats through Baxter Bayou and Bayou Macon, a distance of from 10 to 15 miles.

When the water in Lake Providence rises to the level of the water in the Mississippi, Baxter Bayou will furnish a passage for large boats; it will only be necessary to cut a few trees, so as not to

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Parish Library, Lake Providence, Louisiana); Samuel Carter III, The Final Fortress: The Campaign for Vicksburg, 1862-1863 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 118; Ballard, Pemberton, 132; Canon, This Hallowed Ground, 213.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 18; Simon, ed., Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 7, p. 257.

<sup>85</sup> OR., vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 33.



McPherson and his engineering officers at Lake Providence.  
(*Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*; p. 465.)

interfere with chimneys. Once in Bayou Macon, we shall have a clear coast to Red River. . . .<sup>86</sup>

Deitzler, who had reconnoitered the area added that the gunboats should be able to pass through to Bayou Macon within three weeks. Two possible routes from the lake into the bayous were available. Both would involve destroying the town of Providence, which was practically deserted. Lieutenant Colonel W. L. Duff wrote, "Neither Deitzler nor myself thought this a matter of sufficient importance to interfere with the accomplishment of the object in view."<sup>87</sup>

This point of view was obviously shared by numerous enlisted men as well. James K. Newton, camped at Lake Providence, wrote to his parents, "There is a awful waste of property attends our army wherever it goes but we don't think so much of it as we would if it was our own property that we were wasting."<sup>88</sup>

Not surprisingly, the residents of the area apparently did not agree with the Union soldiers. The Memphis Bulletin reported an interview with a Lake Providence gentleman who felt the canal would probably be a success. The paper noted:

<sup>86</sup>

OR., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 15.

<sup>87</sup>

Ibid., 16.

<sup>88</sup>

Ambrose, ed., A Wisconsin Boy in Dixie, 56.

The residents along the lake, and the bayous and streams communicating with the lake, are in the utmost consternation, in expectation of a ruinous overflow when the water is let into the canal from the Mississippi through the lake. It is said they have offered one million and a half if Vicksburg will surrender, and save them from apprehended destruction and overflow.<sup>89</sup>

The Vicksburg Daily Whig, copying an article from the Chicago Times, gave an accurate description of the village of Lake Providence:

The village of Lake Providence lies directly between the river and lake, and contains about two hundred houses of all kinds; and may have had a white population of one thousand persons before the war. It boasts a few fine residences; several dry goods, hardware, grocery and drug stores; a church or two; a printing office and a Masonic lodge. Nearly all the families have deserted the place. Those of wealth were so heartily committed to the rebel cause that they betook themselves to the interior on the approach of our troops, leaving their homes and many things of value behind them. A few poorer families remained to take the chances of war.<sup>90</sup>

The article also gave some information concerning the residence of a member of the Confederate Congress. The author used such terms as "uncommonly fine," "palatial in proportions," and "princely in its surroundings" to describe the plantation house. He added:

It seems to be the old family mansion, but is fast losing its charms by the ravages of our soldiers. The dwellings are in the center of a brigade. The lawn in front, the gardens in the rear, and the peach orchard above are dotted with tents; and all the fences and outhouses are disappearing before the demands for firewood and flooring for tents."

Impressed with the beautiful plantation houses, the fine residential homes along the lake, and the rich soil, the author further stated that this area could well have been the "garden spot of the world."<sup>92</sup> In referring to

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<sup>89</sup> Vicksburg Daily Whig, March 18, 1863.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., March 10, 1863.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



the callous treatment of these fine homes, he lamented, "All is waste--destruction!"<sup>93</sup>

Bayou Baxter was easily accessible from the lake and the water's depth was adequate, but it was crooked and a large number of trees had to be removed before it could be used for navigation into Bayou Macon. This would take several weeks. The canal connecting the river with Lake Providence involved less work, being shorter and straight. It was to be five feet deep and could be completed in a week.<sup>94</sup>

Once passage into Lake Providence was gained, the next task was to decide whether to use Bayous Baxter and Macon or the Tensas River for passage into the Ouachita River. Reconnaissance parties were sent out to determine the suitability of both routes. Private Elisha Stockwell, Jr., wrote:

We went on one march to guard the engineers who were sent to look over a contemplated canal from the lake to Bayou Macon. It was swamp all the way--about fifteen miles. There was quite a stream of water ran through the swamp so the engineers went with a canoe, and we waded through the jungle. In places, where the water was too deep to wade, we had to fell trees to get across. We were two days on this trip. When I got back, my pants were gone up to my crotch, but I had a good pair of cotton flannel drawers on, or the hide would have been torn from my legs by the briars and canebrake.<sup>95</sup>

Navigation of the Tensas, Ouachita and Red Rivers posed no problem for the Union forces, but the clearing of Bayou Baxter did. Located between Lake Providence and Bayou Macon, this six mile stream passed through a cypress swamp.<sup>96</sup> With only two to three feet of water in the swamp, it was necessary to clear a channel through the thick timber. The greatest challenge for McPherson was how to cut the trees beneath the waterline.<sup>97</sup> Colonel Josiah Bissell's men solved the problem by mounting a large circular saw on a floating platform that could be

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> OR\_, vol. 24, pt. I, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Byron R. Abernethy, ed., Private Elisha Stockwell, Jr., Sees the Civil War (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 61.

<sup>96</sup> Francis Vinton Greene, The Mississippi (New York: Scribner's, 1882),

<sup>97</sup> Grant, Personal Memoirs, vol. 7, p. 374.

adjusted to cut at different depths. The machine worked well, but progress was slow.<sup>98</sup>

Union soldiers were easy prey for Confederate guerrillas, and the bayou could be quickly blocked by felling trees.<sup>99</sup> On February 7 Grant was reminded of this vulnerability when some local men tried to cut the levee at Bunch's Bend. Fortunately, Deitzler's "mule cavalry" discovered the mischief before any real damage was done. The saboteurs were forced to repair the levee and were warned that if they tried anything like it again, every building in East Carroll Parish would be burned. 100

By February 9 the canal from the Mississippi River to Lake Providence was almost finished. As was done at the DeSoto Peninsula, local slaves were impressed to work on the canal and help relieve the exhausted Federal troops. The final levee cut would not be made until the passage through Bayou Baxter to Bayou Macon was completely opened. McPherson, however, impatient to find a secure route to the Ouachita, began to seek another way to enter Bayou Macon. He explored the area at Ashton, Louisiana, just below the Arkansas state line, where Bayou Macon came within three miles of the Mississippi River.<sup>101</sup> McPherson's plan was to cut the levee near Ashton and float the boats across a field into Bayou Macon. On March 2 he wrote Grant:

There is now a difference of eight feet between the surface of the water in the river, and the general level of the country behind the levee, and there is an open route across the fields and following a road to the bayou. . . . [T]he only question is, whether the country between the river and the bayou will fill up with water after the levee is cut, deep enough to float Steam Boats. . . . The point where the levee will be cut is a very short distance below the Arkansas line.<sup>102</sup>

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Carter, The Final Fortress, 120; David Martin, The Vicksburg Campaign: April, 1862-July, 1863 (New York: Gallery Books, 1990), 68.

<sup>99</sup> Grant, Personal Memoirs, vol. 7, p. 374.

<sup>100</sup> Bearss, The Campaign for Vicksburg, vol. p. 471.

<sup>101</sup> Jones, "Grant's Canals in Northeast Louisiana," 13.

<sup>102</sup>

Simon, ed., The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 7, p.390 .



On March 5 McPherson informed Grant, "Col. Bissell is at work cutting the Levee near the Arkansas Line & I will know in two or three days whether we can get boats through to Bayou Macon at that point. . . ."<sup>103</sup>

The soldiers at Ashton had difficulty breaking the levee by hand, so they first exploded a mine in it and then used spades to loosen the dirt. Bissell soon reported to McPherson that water flowing through the levee had flooded the land sufficiently to allow boats to pass through to Bayou Macon. But McPherson found Bissell's report premature. The water had not reached an adequate depth for boats; it did, however, have an unfortunate impact on other areas. The soldiers working in Bayou Baxter had to suspend their work for a few days when water from the Ashton cut flowed into the bayou and Lake Providence.<sup>104</sup>

With the aid of horses, the men at Lake Providence pulled a small thirty-ton steamer, the J. A. Rawlins, overland from the Mississippi into the lake. It was to be used for reconnaissance, but after serving its initial purpose, the steamer was used by McPherson as an excursion boat for his staff and guests. As the passengers enjoyed their ride, the regimental band accompanying them would play both Dixie and Yankee Doodle.<sup>105</sup>

The soldiers seemed to enjoy the days and nights spent at Lake Providence. Life was relatively simple, and they had plenty of free hours in which to chat, play cards, write letters, carve finger rings out of coal or pipes from sugar cane, construct jewelry out of shells, or sleep.<sup>106</sup> When the weather warmed, some men also swam, but quickly discovered the danger it entailed. One wrote:

It is very warm, and the boys will go swimming in the River which is not good for them. Strict orders have been given to stop it, yet they will go. Yesterday a lot were in and one started to swim across the River. Just as he got out in the deep water he threw up his hands, gave a yell and went under and did not come

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>104</sup> Bearss, The Campaign for Vicksburg, vol. 1, pp.473-74; Georgia Payne Durham Pinkston, A Place to Remember: East Carroll Parish, La. 1832-1976 (Baton Rouge: Claitor Publishing Division, 1976), 53; Jones, "Grant's Canals in Northeast Louisiana," 13.

<sup>105</sup> Carter, The Final Fortress, 120.

<sup>106</sup> Jim Huffstodt, Hard Dying Men: The Story of General W. H. L. Wallace. General T. E. G. Ransom, and Their "Old Eleventh" Illinois Infantry in the American Civil War (1861-1865) (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1991), 29.

up. The Darkys say a gar got him. Just what a gar is we do not know but the boys don't go swimming any more.<sup>107</sup>

Charles B. Allaire penned the following description of the area in a letter to his professor:

Providence is a small town of only a few hundred inhabitants on the Louisiana shore of the Mississippi about 300 miles below Memphis. . . . I think this country comes as near to my idea of Paradise as is possible . . . this fills my expectations of the "Sunny South."

Our camp is pitched on the western bank of Lake Providence here flowers are already in bloom. Peach trees have been in bloom 3 or 4 weeks. . . . The road . . . is bordered on either side with the Palmetto, China trees filled with little white balls about the size of the end of your little fingers and there is trees filled with moss hanging down like a goat's beard.<sup>108</sup>

A member of the **Eleventh Illinois Infantry** agreed with Allaire's assessment of Lake Providence:

Our camp is on the banks of one of the most beautiful little lakes that I have ever seen. It is ten miles long in the shape of a crescent and about a quarter of a mile wide. My tent is pitched in the door yard of the finest house that I have seen in the southern confederacy.<sup>109</sup>

McPherson's men also appreciated the sweet aroma of the roses and honeysuckle in bloom. Strawberries and figs were tasty new treats and a new game called baseball was played whenever they could find dry ground. They also found sport in shooting alligators.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Oscar Osburn Whither, ed., The Civil War Letters, Diaries & Reminiscences of Theodore F. Upson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 60.

<sup>108</sup> Chas. B. Allaire letter, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University

<sup>109</sup> Huffstodt, Hard Dying Men, 128.

<sup>110</sup> Lloyd Lewis, Sherman: Fightin<sup>g</sup> Prophet (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958), 268.

The presence of McPherson's men had a dramatic impact on residents of the area. One soldier reported:

Most of the white inhabitants belonging to this section of the country have fled to other parts. The few that remain have too many interests here to attend to, to go away, or they would go too for they are bitter Secesh... . But they are beginning to feel the horror of a war in all shapes. . . . The man who owns the plantation . . . is a very wealthy man, worth several hundred thousand dollars ... but most of it is in this section of the country. Yet, not withstanding all his wealth, he cannot get the necessaries of life to put on his table. There is not a soldier in our army, but what has better meals every day than he does.<sup>111</sup>

A major reason for the civilians' privations were the Yankees themselves. Foraging expeditions into the countryside stripped the area of all the staples and luxuries the residents had on hand. Charles Allaire told about the materials foraged by men in his company. On one trip they brought in two wagon loads of sweet potatoes, two wagons of pork, and three barrels of molasses. Chickens, geese, and ducks were also taken. They even confiscated a milk cow and a two week old calf for the hospital's use.<sup>112</sup>

Sometimes these excursions were little more than an excuse to plunder. Brigadier General T. E. G. Ransom, commanding the Second Brigade at Lake Providence, issued the following ineffective reprimand for looting on February 12:

The outrageous conduct of a few lawless members and followers of this Command has brought an imputation of disgrace upon us all. Houses have been entered and pillaged. Old men and defenseless women has been abused and insulted. . . . These things have been done under the pretext of subsisting on the enemy, and have been too lightly regarded by many of the officers. <sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>

Huffstodt, Hard Dying Men, 128.

<sup>112</sup>

Allaire to Professor, March 4, 1863, Allaire Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection.

<sup>113</sup>

Windier, ed., The Civil War Letters, Diaries, & Reminiscences of Theodore F. Upson, 130.



By the middle of March, McPherson would report that small boats could reconnoiter the area around Lake Providence, Ashton, and Bayou Macon. McPherson instructed his subordinates to relocate their camps to higher ground, and then he ordered the levee cut. One member of the **Twentieth Illinois Volunteers** recorded the momentous occasion on March 17:

The troops break camp. The stores put on steamers, the steamers which were lying along the levee, then all the troops were taken on board, and all was in readiness, when a small channel was cut through the bank and the water began to pour through down into the lake. The little stream soon increased to a mighty torrent as the banks gave way.

Some sailors from one of the Gun Boats got out their life boat and jumping in went down over the cataract holding their oars high in the air. To add to the grandeur of the scene, some soldiers set fire to the buildings of the town, and for a time it was a grand panorama of fire and water doing their destructive work. The country around was soon flooded and the inhabitants, what were left, had to flee with their earthly effects for their lives to higher ground for safety.<sup>114</sup>

It is possible the success at Lake Providence surprised Grant. He certainly was unprepared to move via that route. In any event, Grant had committed to make one more attempt to reach Vicksburg from the north on the Mississippi side of the river.

The Yazoo River had been scouted by a Union patrol that had been sent to destroy the Confederate gunboats being built on that river. They reported that direct passage to the Yazoo could be gained by going through Yazoo Pass into Moon Lake and along the Coldwater and Tallahatchie Rivers.<sup>115</sup>

When this route proved unsuccessful, Grant began another expedition which ran from Cypress Bayou, into Steele's Bayou, Little Black Fork, and the Big Sunflower River, before turning at Rolling Fork to move southward into Deer Creek and into the Yazoo River above Haine's Bluff. Grant later explained that the failure of this expedition was

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<sup>114</sup>

Ira Blanchard, Civil War Memoirs of the 20th Illinois Volunteer Infantry (San Francisco: J. D. Huff and Company, 1992), 81.

<sup>115</sup> n.a., "The War on the Mississippi." Harrier's Pictorial History of the Civil War, Old Courthouse Museum Archives, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 453.



probably due to a lack of knowledge of the amount of work that would be required to open up the route.<sup>116</sup> The effort also showed his propensity to take direct action if he believed it could material shorten his campaign.

Grant's lack of confidence in the Lake Providence project combined with the skepticism bred by the Desoto Peninsula fiasco, and his failure to find a northern route to Vicksburg through Mississippi, led to the abandonment of these plans by the middle of April 1863. Grant would now pursue another route that had been explored in February. This last attempt, at Duckport, would also fail.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 455.

## ***THE DUCKPORT CANAL***

General Grant's half-hearted attempts to move his troops below Vicksburg had failed. The canal across the DeSoto Peninsula, the cutting of the Ashton levee, and the Lake Providence canal (also known as Grant's Folly) accomplished little, but the work had kept his men occupied during the winter months. Grant had never put much faith in these experiments and began to plan another strategy as early as January 1863.

His new plan involved both naval and land forces. Grant planned to march his troops below Vicksburg on the Louisiana side of the river and have Porter run his fleet past the Confederate batteries on the Vicksburg bluffs. With the completion of one more canal, Grant could ferry supplies through the Louisiana bayous and then have Porter transport the army across the Mississippi River.

This last scheme would be his final chance. If Admiral Porter ran the Vicksburg batteries with his gunboats successfully, he would not be able to return upriver. The strong current would slow his gunboats and transports making them easy targets for the rebel batteries. Once Grant put the operation in motion, he would either succeed or be disgraced.

Grant's previous movements had kept the Confederates alert. Not knowing where Grant might attack, the rebels were constantly being moved from place to place. Union efforts to reach Vicksburg through the Yazoo Pass and Steele Bayou corresponded with their canal attempts in Louisiana.

The Yazoo River and Steele Bayou expeditions confused both General John C. Pemberton and Jefferson Davis. It seemed the Yankees were everywhere and Pemberton wrote, "[The] Enemy is constantly in motion in all directions."<sup>117</sup>

The Federal troops, however, benefited from the physically strenuous days spent along the shores of the Mississippi. The terrain was now familiar, and they were acclimated to the weather and living conditions. In short, the men were in prime condition, it was time for Grant to put his plan into action.

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<sup>117</sup>

John C. Pemberton. Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg<sup>®</sup> (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 91.

Moving his headquarters to Milliken's Bend, Grant moved his forces into position. He felt his plan would work because it was not as dependent on the water level of the Mississippi River or the rivers and bayous as the previous canal projects had been.<sup>118</sup> Grant first had to select a commander for the expedition. His first choice, McPherson, was unavailable because he was still at Lake Providence; therefore, McClelland was chosen for this position. <sup>119</sup>

The soldiers encamped at Milliken's Bend were aware that they would soon be on the move; they just did not know where they would be going. To some, the prospect was not an unpleasant one, for they were tired of the swamps of the Mississippi Delta. Lieutenant S. C. Jones of

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<sup>118</sup>

William Roscoe Livermore. The Story of the Civil War (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 233.

<sup>119</sup> Dana, Recollections of the Civil War, 32-33.

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the **Twenty-second Iowa Volunteers**, who arrived at Milliken's Bend on March 30, was not impressed. He wrote:

We landed at Milliken's Bend, 20 miles by water or 7 by land above Vicksburg. There had been a town here but rebel guerrillas had so infested it that it was burned down by shells from our gunboats. At this time there is no sign that there ever was a house here. 120

Corporal Owen Johnston Hopkins, of the **Forty-second Ohio Volunteers**, was another who had grown tired of Louisiana:

The country around was low and marshy and often flooded for leagues in the swellings of the stream, expanding often into an almost illimitable ocean, spreading through somber forests and over gloomy morasses through a region of hundreds of square miles, where Nature, by the slow deposit of ages, is preparing soil for future tillers, [but] now presents bogs and lakes and sluggish bayous. the congenial home of alligators and all unclean reptiles.... Majestic trees, draped in funeral moss, overhang these gloomy waters, while the rankest undergrowth of every creeping, climbing, intertwining shrub renders the boundless thicket almost impregnable. Where the land is sufficiently raised above the water to be cultivated, it is protected from the spring and autumnal freshets by dykes, or levees--artificial mounds of earth about ten feet high and fifteen wide, constructed at immense expense along the river.121

Despite these maudlin descriptions, some men found the area very much to their liking. One soldier, Sgt. Levi L. Hoag of the **Twenty-fourth Iowa Infantry**, seemed pleased with his time spent at Milliken's Bend. In his diary he wrote:

We went on shore and went in camp about a quarter of a mile. The prettiest place I have seen in the south, a large beautiful house surrounded by beautiful hedges of sweet brier and a grove of beautiful trees, upon the whole it is a very nice place to camp in.122

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120 Lieutenant S. C. Jones, Reminiscences of the Twenty-second Iowa Volunteer Infantry (Iowa City: Camp Pope Bookshop, 1907), 25.

121 Bond, Under the Flag of the Nation, 50.

122 Edwin C. Bearss, ed., "The Civil War Diary of Sgt. Levi L. Hoag," **The**

He knew, however, that Vicksburg had to be taken, and the sooner it was in Federal possession the sooner he could go home.

From Milliken's Bend, a series of bayous extended past Richmond, the parish seat of Madison Parish, to New Carthage, where Grant planned to combine all of his forces for the final push against Vicksburg. This was the first dry point below Vicksburg that could be reached by land.<sup>123</sup> The bayous leading there supposedly were open enough to allow small steamers and barges to pass through.

A few miles above Young's Point, at Duckport, the Mississippi River came to within three miles of Walnut Bayou.<sup>124</sup> By cutting a canal across the narrow strip of land, Grant's artillery and supplies could be shipped by barge to New Carthage through Walnut Bayou and Roundaway Bayou, a distance of about thirty-seven miles. The troops, Grant hoped, could march along the bank of the bayous to New Carthage.<sup>125</sup> Grant once remarked that his first attempts to take Vicksburg had failed because "God wanted him to use the road."<sup>126</sup> Now with the ground drying out, Grant had an opportunity to do so and ordered McClernand to survey a road to New Carthage.<sup>127</sup>

An advance unit of McClernand's **Thirteenth Corps** under the command of Brigadier General P. Joseph Osterhaus was sent to reconnoiter the route from Milliken's Bend to New Carthage on March 29. Osterhaus was to pass by Richmond and march down the western side of Roundaway Bayou to New Carthage, approximately 27 miles below. McPherson and Sherman would follow as soon as supplies and ammunition became available.<sup>128</sup> Osterhaus's men occupied Richmond on March 31 and reached New Carthage on April 6.<sup>129</sup>

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Annals of Iowa 39 (Winter 1968): 175.

n.a., "The War on the Mississippi," Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War. 455, Old Courthouse Museum, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Edwin C. Bearss, ed., "Diary of Captain John N. Bell of Co. E, 25th Iowa Infantry, at Vicksburg," Iowa Journal of History 59 (April 1961): 193; O.R., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 123.

Carter, The Final Fortress, 152; Dana, Recollections of the Civil War,

31.

<sup>126</sup>

O.R., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 67.

<sup>127</sup>

Badeau, Military History of Ulysses S. Grant, 186.

<sup>128</sup>

[*ibid.*]

<sup>129</sup>

Greene, The Mississippi, 110.

At the same time work had begun on the Duckport Canal under the direction of Colonel Prime, Grant's engineer. On April 1 Grant sent orders for McClernand to send 2,000 men with shovels and spades to help.

Grant explained his final plan to Admiral Porter on April 2. The troops sent to New Carthage would be used to secure the area into which the other troops were marching and to build and maintain the wagon road. Their presence at New Carthage would help make certain that the barges and tugs had no trouble making the trip from Milliken's Bend. Planning to move 20,000 men at one time, Grant requested that all available barges be sent to Milliken's Bend, along with at least 6 tugboats to pull them.<sup>130</sup> If the canal at Duckport was completed and Walnut and Roundaway Bayous remained navigable, then these boats would be used to move the supplies and possibly the men.

On April 11 Prime wrote Grant concerning the new canal and the possible passageway for the transports. Walnut Bayou, called Brushy Bayou on its lower end, contained some large trees and numerous bushes. The scattered trees could be removed fairly easily, this would widen the channel to thirty-five or forty feet. Prime also saw no difficulty with Roundaway Bayou from Richmond to New Carthage. Near New Carthage the water was shallow because of a break in the levee, but the vessels could avoid the shallow area by going down Harper's Bayou, which had a depth of over seven feet.<sup>131</sup>

Prime's report reflected the feverish pace of the work:

The channel has been dug by the troops as far as practicable; a depth of 7 feet has been reached between the main level and the backwater by the aid of the steam pump. The balance of the work to the bayou will have to be done by the dredges. The levee could be cut this day, but is delayed in order to raise portions of the road from Milliken's Bend to Richmond. . . . Three companies of Bissell's engineer regiment and three pioneer companies are employed clearing the bayou.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>

Carter, The Final Fortress, 152.

<sup>131</sup>

alt., vol. 24, pt. pp. 122-23.

<sup>132</sup>

Ibid.

Charles Dana, looking over the canal with Colonel G. G. Pride, noted that there was "a force equal to five regiments at the digging, while a large number of pioneers were engaged in clearing the bayou beyond."<sup>133</sup>

The troops working on the canal at Duckport were in very good spirits. Private Isaac Jackson wrote from Walnut Bayou:

We have a fine time while out here. We don't have to work very hard ... 6 or 8 hours a day. And we have a very pleasant place to come while out here, alongside the bayou on the gently sloping bank which is nice and *grassy*. We have plenty of rafts which we ride on and, then, the bayou is one of the prettiest places to swim in the world. It is also an excellent place to fish.<sup>134</sup>

Water was let into the canal near Duckport on April 13, but there was still much work to be done. Over the next several days, the dredges were put to work dredging out the bottom, and the banks were trimmed of brush.<sup>135</sup>

The rise in the water level did not take place as rapidly as Prime had expected. It was hoped the situation would improve as soon as the channel was deepened all the way to the bayou. To accomplish this, trees and other obstacles had to be removed. Captain Prime reported to Grant on April 18 that Colonel Pride was taking a small steamboat through to Richmond:

Two, and if possible three, barges, of from 100 to 120 [feet] in length, will be passed into the bayou at the same time, with pioneers on them, provided with saws to cut 6 feet under water, and other tools necessary. They will clear out any obstacles they may encounter. I am afraid that it will take them from three to five days to reach Richmond.<sup>136</sup>

Once the bayous were cleared, Grant's supply line to New Carthage would be open unless the water level continued to fall. By April 25 the dredges were rushing to finish work before the river fell further. Private

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<sup>133</sup> Dana, Recollections of the Civil War, 35.

<sup>134</sup> Carter, The Final Fortress, 153.

<sup>135</sup> Edwin C. Bearss, ed., "Private Charles E. Affeld's Account of the Activities of Battery B, First Illinois Light Artillery, at Vicksburg," Louisiana Studies 6 (Fall 1967), 215.

<sup>136</sup> OR., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 124.

Charles E. Affeld passed by the canal and witnessed the frenzied activity. In his diary he noted. "Started at about 11 A. M. on the Diligence. Noticed the new canal a few miles above the upper landing. One dredge is about one-half mile down the canal and another at its head, and a number of barges with railings all around, the barges are lying nearby."137

General Sherman took a personal look at the canal on April 25. What he saw reinforced his pessimism. In a brutally honest report he informed Grant:

I sounded it in its whole length; it is nearly 3 miles long. The first mile is comparatively good; the middle mile is bad; has not an average depth of 1 foot; and the last mile has 3 feet, 2 feet, and nothing; 200 yards at Willow Bayou is dry. I made a rude estimate, and allowing for four dredges . . . will take near fifty days' work to make a canal 8 feet deep. Your tugs draw 7 1/2 feet. 138

McClermand disagreed with Sherman and believed that the canal was progressing well. His main concern was water from the Mississippi River running into Walnut and Roundaway Bayous might endanger his troops near New Carthage. The extra water could very well cover the road being used to supply his men. Grant, aware of McClermand's concern, ordered him to leave his heavy artillery behind until it was known if the water would affect the road.<sup>139</sup> Grant believed it would be difficult to take the guns back over the road if flooding did occur. A more threatening problem was whether or not Grant could supply McClermand with ammunition if the road flooded. It was becoming imperative to open the waterway for transportation.<sup>140</sup>

In a letter to Grant on May 4, Prime reported that the water had fallen so much that most of the work on the canal had ceased. He added that two dredges at the entrance of the canal had been moved out, but the other two were stuck. The twenty or more barges already in the bayou were also trapped. In order to maintain what little water was still in the bayou, the Yankees dammed up Roundaway Bayou below Richmond.<sup>141</sup>

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137 Bearss, ed., "Private Charles E. Affeld's Account," 214-15.

138 O.R., vol. 24, pt. 3, pp. 234-35.

139 Simon, ed., Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 8, p.48 .

140 Ibid., 57.

141 O.R., vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 125.





William Sherman, Grant's confidant and second in command. (*Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*; p. 325.)

Lieutenant Colonel Judson D. Bingham reported to Grant that the barges in the canal had been delayed by the "falling of the water and the agents in charge of the work at first not acting with sufficient energy."<sup>142</sup> Three barges were grounded and could not be moved, and if the water continued to fall, the barges would not be able to get into Walnut Bayou. Grant wanted the barges moved to a position which would shorten the distance goods had to be hauled. The bayous contained enough water that barges could still use them even if the water level fell several feet. If the water remained stable, the barges could be moved back to the mouth of the canal and loaded.<sup>143</sup>

General Ulysses S. Grant's advance down the Louisiana bank of the Mississippi River was underway by April 20. McPherson's **Seventeenth Corps** from Lake Providence and Sherman's **Fifteenth Corps** from Duckport and Young's Point were on the march. McClermand's **Thirteenth Corps** was already at New Carthage awaiting the arrival of the other forces.

Due to a fifteen foot drop in the Mississippi River, the Duckport Canal had proven unsuccessful. All supplies, artillery, and men had to be moved overland once the water had subsided enough to make the roads

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<sup>142</sup> Simon. ed., The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol. 8, p.121.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 107.

passable. In those areas where the water was still high or bridges had been destroyed, the troops had to build corduroy roads and new bridges. Corporal Hopkins recounted the difficult march:

The road was all but impassable. It lay through a vast bog, intersected by numerous bayous half flooded with water. The heavy artillery wheels cut through the slime and the mud, making the path a perfect mortar bed through which we waded knee deep, and where the hubs of the wheels often disappeared out of sight. The advance of the army was found to be utterly impracticable, except by the building of corduroy roads, cutting outlets for the egress of the water, and bridging the bayous. The army had to build for itself, under the most difficult circumstances, a military road as it advanced. Twenty miles of levee had to be most carefully guarded, lest it should be cut by the enemy and the whole country flooded. . . . [A]fter having constructed seventy miles of road and about 2000 feet of bridging, we reached our final destination.<sup>144</sup>

The people living in the areas through which the Union soldiers marched did not fair well either. Kate Stone told of having her favorite horse stolen by two Federals. When she tried to open the corral gate to let the horse escape, one of the Yankees held a gun to her head while the other one caught the horse.<sup>145</sup> Along the route of march, livestock was confiscated as well, and the cotton that had not been burned was taken by Union forces and sold for a profit. Homes were plundered, and many Negroes armed by the Union officers posed a threat to the few remaining people living in the area. Levees along the Mississippi River also had been cut in numerous places by both the Yankees and the Confederates, flooding much of the land in eastern Louisiana.<sup>146</sup> As Kate Stone wrote, "The country seems possessed by demons, black and white."<sup>147</sup> The Stones decided to leave their home and flee to Texas where many others from the area had gone. They did not return for many years.

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<sup>144</sup> Bond, Under the Flag of the Nation, 51.

<sup>145</sup> John Q. Anderson, ed., Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 182.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 184. *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> The Papers of the BGES

## CONCLUSION

Upon his arrival at New Carthage, Grant had to change his plan of attack. Originally, he had intended for New Carthage to become his base for getting his army across the Mississippi River, but he found the town too low and waterlogged to be of any use.<sup>148</sup> It was practically an island. He also learned that a frontal attack on Grand Gulf would be futile.<sup>149</sup> Well fortified, the fort was unapproachable from the front. As a result, Grant moved his forces fifteen miles down the river to Hard Times.<sup>150</sup>

The task of getting Grant's forces across the Mississippi fell to Admiral Porter. On the night of April 16 three transports, towing barges loaded with supplies, and seven naval vessels ran past the Vicksburg batteries.<sup>151</sup>

James Newton, a member of the **Fourteenth Wisconsin Volunteers** at Lake Providence, recorded the event:

Night before last, the camp was aroused by some of the heaviest firing that we have yet heard. It seemed to shake the ground here, and we are full thirty miles in a strait line from Vicksburg. We did not know what was up at the time but we found out last night. It seems that the troops below Vicksburg are in need of transports, (though I don't know what use they are going to put them to) and night before last Gen. Grant sent some down to them. Three Gunboats and eight transports started together to run down stream past Vicksburg. The boats were protected by barges loaded with cotton, and although it retarded their speed considerable, yet none of them were willing to go without such protection. The gunboats and six transports went by unhurt; one transport was set on fire by a shell and burnt and one other was disabled; on the whole I think they came out first rate.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>

Martin, The Vicksburg Campaign, 100.

<sup>149</sup>

Grant, Personal Memoirs, vol. 1, pp. 402-403.

<sup>150</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>151</sup>

Fred Grant, "Reunion of the Army of the Tennessee," M. J. Mulvihill Collection, OW Courthouse Museum, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

<sup>152</sup>

Ambrose, ed., A Wisconsin Boy in Dixie, 63.

The soldiers crossed the Mississippi at Hard Times on April 29 and landed on the east bank at Bruinsburg, ten miles below Grand Gulf.<sup>153</sup> Their goal, according to Newton, "was *Old Slaughterhouse*, the name Vicksburg went by."<sup>154</sup>

The successful crossing strengthened Grant's confidence. Fighting its way north to Jackson, through Port Gibson, Raymond, Champion Hill, and Big Black River the Union army gained the initiative over the rebels.<sup>155</sup> The Union attack on Vicksburg began on May 22 and ended on July 4. Port Hudson, the remaining Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River, fell on July 8.<sup>156</sup> President Lincoln triumphantly announced, "*The Father of Waters goes again unvexed to the sea.*"<sup>157</sup>

Grant's struggle to find the best position from which to attack Vicksburg had begun in December 1862. His **Army of the Tennessee** totaled almost 62,000 men, not including Major General Stephen A. Hurlbut's **Sixteenth Corps**.<sup>158</sup> The editor of Harper's Weekly wrote:

No monarch in Europe ever gathered together so many men, so many vessels of war, so many guns for any single purpose. . . Should the war be finally settled by a pitched battle in the heart of Mississippi, as Jeff Davis predicts, the forces engaged will probably be twice as numerous as those that fought at Waterloo, and our army ought to exceed that of the rebels by a large percentage.<sup>159</sup>

During the campaign, the Northern people and their newspaper publishers were often critical of Grant's efforts. One New York Times reporter stated:

At one time we are promised a brilliant triumph of engineering skill, by the opening of the Lake Providence Canal. But as soon as the water begins to rush through, and the work is pronounced "a success," all further attempts are abandoned, the workmen and

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<sup>153</sup> Grant, Personal Memoirs, vol. 1, pp. 401-402.

<sup>154</sup> Ambrose, ed., A Wisconsin Boy in Dixie, 64.

<sup>155</sup> Lewis, Sherman: Fighting Prophet, 272.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 292-93.

<sup>158</sup> Carter, The Final Fortress, 109.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

troops are withdrawn, and another grand scheme is projected in another quarter<sup>160</sup>

These critics seemed to forget that Grant's success depended on the whims of the mighty Mississippi River. Newspaper reporter, Franc B. Wilkie, compared the river to Russia's Catherine the Great. He noted:

[The Mississippi had] all her savage passions, her treachery, and her capriciousness. Its embrace means death. Its course is strewn with the lifeless victims of its passions. It was not to be expected that a wanton of this kind would yield allegiance to the Federal wooer. The stronger the effort to alienate it from Vicksburg. the closer it clung to that romantic city. It was full of promises; it appeared incessantly on the eve of yielding to Federal blandishments, and yet ever avoided compliance. "To-morrow" was the burden of the song to Grant, but to-morrow never came.<sup>161</sup>

The river was a mighty foe, but some of Grant's misfortunes were due to poor planning. The DeSoto Peninsula Canal would have worked had it been in the correct place and at the right angle. This was proven in 1876 when the Mississippi River finally washed out part of the old canal, leaving Vicksburg isolated from the river by over a mile. Today there is a marker designating the location of the canal near the town of Delta, south of U.S. Highway 80.

The Lake Providence Canal also could have succeeded had the Yankees been able to cut their way through the cypress swamps before the Mississippi fell. The levee was mended after the war and the canal became a mosquito infested ditch. In 1953, after much pressure from local residents. Senator Russell Long introduced a bill to have the government fill up the ditch. He said, "*Since the Federal Government dug it, it is only fitting that the Federal Government should fill it up.*"<sup>162</sup> The only reminder of the canal today extends from Lake Providence to Holland Delta Road. The filled-in ditch became an alley appropriately called Grant Street.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> New York Times, April 16, 1863.

<sup>161</sup> Franc B. Wilkie, Pen and Powder (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888), 282.

<sup>162</sup> Pinkston, A Place to Remember, 39.

<sup>163</sup> Vicksburg Evening Post, August 17, 1975.

The failure actually to dig a canal from the Mississippi River to Bayou Macon near Ashton caused that project to fail as well. Instead of making a channel to direct the water, McPherson let the water from the river flood the fields. As a result, the water was too shallow to be of any use to the Federal forces. As for the Duckport Canal, the sudden drop in the Mississippi made the canal unusable. A marker today designates where the canal was located. A rumor persists that Grant even performed dredging and digging operations in the Tensas Basin. His intention was to go through Tensas Bayou to Tensas River and then into the Red River, bypassing Vicksburg. If true, this project also was abandoned.<sup>164</sup>

Admiral Porter best summed up the man and his expeditions. He wrote:

No ordinary general could have taken Vicksburg at all; it required a man full of military ability and knowledge, and one who knew whom to select from all the able men of the army - those who were best qualified to undertake the many vexatious problems that would arise during so important and difficult a siege. Some men would have given it up and said that it was not worth the loss of time and the waste of human life which would ensue; some would have demanded half the resources of the Union; but Grant never wavered in his determination, or in his hopes of success. <sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup>

Jack Hilburn, Park Ranper at Lake Bruin State Park, St. Joseph, Louisiana. Interview by author, March 13, 1995.

<sup>165</sup>

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