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## The Jackson Conference

### Overview.

The *Vicksburg Campaign Preservation Conference* was held in Jackson to facilitate state participation and to simplify travel arrangements for out of town guests. **MDAH** actively participated in identifying key people. Steve Guyton of Representative Mike Parker's office was a strong supporter and active participant. The list of attendees is at Tab 1.

The Conference design and objectives were included in a handout (Tab 2) which was provided to each invitee and attendee prior to the meeting. The conference was designed to facilitate preservation and interpretation of Vicksburg Campaign battle sites by identifying the available historical resources and discussing issues related to the standard operating procedures of the various regulatory and support agencies. Tabs 3-5 were the objectives each work group faced-participation was voluntary.

### Academic Freedom.

The Conference could not have worked had participants been constrained by fear of recrimination. We asked participants to respect a non-attribution policy.

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## Conference Issues

**BGES** analyzed the summaries of the various work groups and synthesized them with background information and personal observation/verification to arrive at items of concern. Each issue will be stated, and discussed with recommended solutions.

### ***Issue #1. The tourist experience does not meet the expectation.***

The state has an active tourist promotion program. While direct advertising of the Civil War is only a portion of that program it is still a considerable investment. The state advertises with enticing, multi-color presentations in major publications.

*"The small plaque stood as a grim reminder of where the last man fell---A warm breeze stirred through the solemn sanctuary and made me quiver. I didn't know you could feel history....For a copy of our Civil War guide...please call 1-800-Warmest."*

This stirring ad has been seen in *Civil War Times Illustrated* and other related publications which reach a combined readership of 500,000 devoted Civil War students. The proffered Civil War guide even presents an enticing seven day itinerary for those people who want to do the trail. The message is also on cable television.

The region is robust with many opportunities to experience the 1863 campaign. However, a tourist visiting the Vicksburg Campaign sites will be lost without the previously mentioned **MDAH** guide. The battlefields are not marked with other than nominal state markers. There are no billboards or directional markers on any of the state or federal highways.

The Old Rodney Road passing through the Port Gibson battlefield is pristine despite open access to motor vehicles. State Route 18 bisects the Raymond battlefield. State Route 467 leads to a point near the Coker House where one can walk or bike along Ratliff Road, the same route used by Confederate forces on their assault at Champion Hill. The Old Jackson Road and other state roads provide vistas where one may follow Generals Sherman, and McPherson's marches along historic road beds to the gates of the Vicksburg defenses. These historic routes include passable county roads. However, none are marked or offered to the tourist who has been lured by the promise of "*feeling history*".

The conference revealed that the charter of the state tourism office is to assist affected communities with matching grants to develop brochures which promote the area itself. The belief is that these counties are the ones most affected and that they must have a desire to do this or the state will be wasting money. One individual commented that counties seem to fear a cooperative relationship with the state which might permit a look into local area business.

Although the limit of strategic planning for tourism is to develop brochures--the Vicksburg Campaign Trail will require a good deal more work than that; however, the rewards may be worth the effort. The Congressionally chartered **Civil War Sites Advisory Commission** in its report to Congress said "Local Civil War parks can stimulate tourism as well as provide educational opportunities and recreational open space. We have been impressed by the heritage corridor potential of Grant's Vicksburg Campaign. (p 48)."

There are plenty of good examples of how the state and counties could rectify this issue. Most have to do with a "tourist friendly" attitude about what strangers to a new region need or might want. The state of Virginia, in preserving and offering Lee's retreat to Appomattox Court House, has an integrated, multi-county, interdepartmental solution in place today. Fueled by Intermodal Surface

Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds, information on "Lee's Retreat," and "Virginia's Retreat" has been jointly developed for the purposes of *"Promoting Economic Development---to enjoy the rich historic and natural resources that this region has to offer."*

This success story is the child of a successful partnership between Virginia's Departments of Transportation, Tourism, Conservation and Recreation, 7 counties, and one predominately African-American city. The hook of course is *"For information on the area's accommodations and other points of interests, please call 1-800-6-retreat."* Furthermore, the state has reissued its *"A Map of Scenic Roads in Virginia"* with a special panel touting the Civil War in Virginia, complete with maps and information.

The implications are straight forward. Tourism will continue to be an essential component of a region's economic package with tremendous growth potential. It is important for the state and counties to get together and present the Campaign in a cogent manner.

**Recommendation #1.** *The MDAH, MDOT, and Mississippi Department of Economic and Community Development (MDECD) should meet with affected county and city officials to develop a plan for upgrading the presentation of historical resources.*

**Recommendation #2.** *The state should revamp its maps and brochures to emphasize the resources.*

**Recommendation #3.** *The state should examine its publications distribution strategy to ensure all visitors centers and points of entry such as airports display these publications.*

## **Issue #2. *Interpretive presentation of the Vicksburg Campaign is inadequate***

The components which make a battlefield useful include interpretive signage, and functional displays such as cannon, unit position markers, and adequate written or oral narratives. The Vicksburg Campaign is dwarfed by the bounteous resources of Vicksburg National Military Park which is complete with position markers, monuments, cassette tours, and so forth. This is the capstone of the campaign experience.

The balance of the campaign need not be presented as lavishly. Still there is plenty of work to do. Except for the Grand Gulf and Port Gibson areas, the remaining battle sites are not adequately presented. Moreover both Grand Gulf and Port Gibson should be reworked.

As tour stop one on the **MDAH's** brochure, visitors to Grand Gulf Military Monument are faced with a number of unrelated signs and a museum which attempts to present too much in a very small space. The majority of the existing structures are not indigenous to the site. While natural sites, such as Fort Cobun, are poorly interpreted and easy to overlook. The addition of modern amenities, such as camper pads, are attractive to recreational campers, but have nothing to do with the presentation of the park as a serious historical stop.

Another factor which detracts from Grand Gulf as a pivot point for historic tourism is its remoteness. There are better entry points for the tourist.

Port Gibson is a strategically located starting point for the campaign student. Visitors from Natchez and the historic Trace can pick up the campaign at this point just as Grant did. The old historic roads exist as do some key structures. US Highway 61 and State Route 18 meet in town, while roads out of town are the same followed by Grant's and Pemberton's forces.

There are three interpretive center opportunities. The first is Bethel Presbyterian, an abandoned but serviceable church, with a partially original 1860's structure. The church is located on a modern road with adequate parking next to the Old Rodney Road. It would lend itself well to interpretation and as an entry to the campaign.

Another option would be for Alcorn State to take over the sponsorship of this site as an African-American interpretive center. Since the original African-American church at Magnolia on the battlefield is gone an important lesson in the region's history could be told here.

A second logical interpretive center is the Shaifer House located along the Old Rodney Road and near the Plantation Road. It was here that the opening shots of the battle of Port Gibson were fired. This impressive structure is the last historically significant building on the battlefield. The house is ripped by bullet holes, one of which penetrated the wall and shattered a picture frame holding a still extant painting of the home's mistress. Among the many attractive features of this home, which is managed by the **Grand Gulf Military Monument Commission**, is the amount of space available for interpretive efforts, the stability of the superstructure, the availability of the original artifacts, and the willingness of the ancestral family to permit responsible interpretation. Drawbacks include: the remoteness of the site which would necessitate a resident caretaker; the need to weatherproof the building to protect the priceless

artifacts; and the need to raise perpetual operating funds. Existing signage should be standardized with the rest of the campaign.

Two other points of interest here: first, the owners may be willing to allow some deforestation to restore the battle areas to its 1863 appearance. This would be a real boost to the interpretive effort. Second, the historic integrity of the Old Rodney Road must be maintained against all efforts to modernize it. A listing or designation as a National Historical Landmark would really help to protect it. This road is one of those locations where you can have a true 19th century experience.

The third option for interpretation is really more of a visitors' center which could be tied to Port Gibson's **Main Street** program. Mississippi invests lavishly in its Welcome Centers. These ante-bellum reproductions present Mississippi the way they wish to present themselves. Counties should look at how they can build on that success using the original structures.

Another element of the interpretive experience is the need for military artifacts. There are sites in this campaign where artillery was prominently employed. Although these items are highly vulnerable to thievery, a serious interpretation shouldn't exclude them. At Vicksburg, a number of artillery pieces have been placed at remote sites which are not visible or seen by the majority of tourists at the park. Perhaps the state and federal government could arrive at an agreement to loan some of the pieces to enrich these sites.

At Raymond, the majority of the grounds are on private property. However, current negotiations may result in easements or outright acquisition of major portions of the battlefield. Since the Raymond field is so open, several stops could easily present the battle. The Federal artillery position sits on a ridge which straddles Highway 18 and is the perfect scene for an artillery park. The field lends itself to easy walking trails and regimental position markers.

After the surrender at Vicksburg, Raymond was the site of Pemberton's paroled soldiers encampment. An interpretive shelter is necessary.

The Battle sites in Jackson have been overgrown by the expansion surrounding the state's capital city. Two sites are listed in the Campaign guide and that is sufficient. The strength of Jackson is in its historically significant structures such as the Old Capitol Museum and the Manship House. An excellent interpretive theme for Jackson would be the concept of "Total War."

The Battle of Champion Hill was the real battle for Vicksburg. It was the fiercest and most decisive of the engagements and should

be presented as such. The presence of the Coker House is historically significant and convenient. Here is the point where the battle began. There is a splendid opportunity to have a **Mississippi Civil War Visitors' Center**. The building, if restored, could clearly serve a number of functions.

The open fields near the Coker House lend themselves to interpretive markers and troop position markers. A hiking and cycling trail could be incorporated along property which has been preserved and which leads to the Champion Hill. Although a portion of the field is not in its authentic 1863 appearance, as a result of some 1930's mining, it is a candidate for restoration. As at other sites, strategic positioning of guns and limbers would really add something to the presentation.

Although Champion Hill is minimally interpreted by informative signage, the existing presentation does not attempt to lead the visitor logically through the experience. The entire battle interpretation should be reworked.

Once Grant had defeated Pemberton and cut off his chance to join General Joseph E. Johnston, the campaign accelerated to its storied conclusion. The relentless movement of Grant's Corps commanders Sherman, McPherson, and McClernand flanked Pemberton out of a final defensive position at Big Black River Bridge and a brief fire-fight cemented the Rebels' fate. As with other sites on the campaign trail, this story is not presented. The battlefield at Big Black River has tremendous interpretive potential as do the federal approach routes to Vicksburg.

Discussion at the conference revealed a common concern that little or no planning has occurred. From Grand Gulf through each of the sites, city planners have shown no interest in either the enduring appeal of these sites to Heritage tourists, or even basic understanding of the role of these sites in the "American Pageant." *If these attitudes are not attacked effectively, all efforts to interpret these sites will result in wasted money.*

There is also a persistent attitude that the "Feds" will recognize the intrinsic value of these sites and ride to the rescue. While it is impossible to say for sure, it does seem certain that the days of expansion of the NPS are over. Given the current funding atmosphere, the role pursued by the NPS is one of benevolent supporter for ambitious partners. Limited planning and interpretive money is available for local leaders and nonprofit groups. Additional Federal funds are being effectively used under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) program. A very specific category of funding supports interpretive efforts along historic

byways. The States of Virginia, Kentucky, and Maryland have all made solid commitments under ISTEA funding.

The issue of interpretation is at the core of public understanding, acceptance, and pride in one's local historical resources. Success in public education will translate into preservation of these sites for future generations.

***Recommendation #4. An active public information campaign should be undertaken to increase local awareness of the Vicksburg Campaign resource and its potential.***

***Recommendation #5. MDAH, MDOT, MDECD, Hinds Community College, Alcorn State, Jackson State University, and Vicksburg NMP should work together to build a comprehensive interpretive plan to include roadside exhibits, walking/hiking/cycling trails, directional signage, and visitor/interpretive centers. This plan would be an excellent candidate for an American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) grant.***

***Recommendation #6. MDAH should commission a noteworthy author to do a self-guided book similar to the US Army War College series on the battles of Antietam, Gettysburg, and Fredericksburg which were written by Dr. Jay Luvaas and Brigadier General Harold Nelson.***

***Recommendation #7. MDAH should liaise with the NPS and the Mississippi National Guard to determine if any surplus battlefield artifacts could be released from obscure, masked portions of the battlefield for a new life at state battle sites on the Vicksburg Campaign Trail.***

***Recommendation #8. All interpretive signage should be standardized to standards at or above those set by the National Park Service. At battlefields with heavy vegetation, the markers should be carefully placed and limited to those areas where they will not disappear into the weeds.***

***Issue #3. Significant historic structures are in need of positive management and immediate conservation.***

The Shaifer House is the last standing battlefield witness to the battle of Port Gibson. The structure is under title from the Shaifer family to the state through the **Grand Gulf Military Monument Commission.** *The house is left open and subject to vandalism.*

Efforts to stabilize the structure appear successful and the site is nearly ready for positive action to make it an interpretive center.

We have concerns about the current management philosophy which appears to be little more than caretaker status. While the grass is cut some actions such as the use of exterior paint inside where no paint was ever used and an inappropriate repair action of a bullet hole leave serious questions about the caretaker's ability to properly conserve the resource. To the best of our knowledge there is no long term plan for the conservation or interpretation of the Shaifer House. As things currently are the prognosis for Shaifer House is that of another ruin awaiting a vandal's torch or the ravages of nature.

Vision is required to plan a future for this and other sites. It is not only possible but is likely that this site could be a very popular part of a visit to the Port Gibson battlefield. Properly interpreted, an admission fee could be collected to defray the cost of maintenance. An on-scene caretaker/ranger can and should be hired with serious consideration given to the construction of a residence masked in a period structure.

**The Coker House at Champion Hill is in immediate danger of ruin and needs positive intervention.** In October 1985, the **Jackson Civil War Roundtable (JCWRT)** was given title to the property. They decided to restore the property. A November 1985 letter from Ed Bearss, Chief Historian of the NPS endorsed the effort commenting, *"The Coker House is specifically singled out as one of the major resources that contributed to the designation of the Champion Hill battlefield as a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of Interior in 1977."*

**JCWRT** discovered the job would take nearly \$600,000 which was far beyond their means or expertise to execute. **MDAH** declined to accept the site because of its repair and recurrent operating costs. A recent stabilization effort appears inadequate to sustain the property much longer. Furthermore, the property is accessible through a chain link fence which has been torn away. Since the Roberts House recently collapsed from neglect, this is the last chance to salvage something of the structures which were standing on Champion Hill battlefield.

Funding for both structures may be available through ISTEA, and state 1502 funds. A Friends group might be an appropriate conduit for private donations which should be solicited nationally. **The National Trust for Historic Preservation** should be solicited for both planning expertise and grant/loan assistance. In any instance, the

previously recommended master interpretive plan could provide a clear vision and make it easier to free appropriations/donations.

*Recommendation #9. The state should take the lead to ensure the Coker House at Champion Hill is restored. This project would provide a centrally located facility which could serve as an administrative office, visitors center, and interpretive site.*

*Recommendation #10. The Grand Gulf Military Monument Commission should take immediate action to develop a coordinated action plan to man, protect, and interpret the Shaifer House.*

**Issue #4. *Manpower and funding is inadequate to support manned, interpretive efforts at historically significant properties.***

The age old problem of government is how to do more with less--less people, and less money. In Mississippi the **government has accepted responsibility for historically significant sites. The simple fact is the government must, at a minimum, conserve the resources.** If it is a state objective to man the sites and make them available to the public it must allocate and fund those operations. In the absence of funding the state must consider offering the resources to the private sector or a reputable non-profit group to maintain them.

Mississippi's and Vicksburg NMP's problems are the same--how can we manage what we have with what we have been given? Clearly, the *Grand Gulf Military Monument staff has neither the manpower or money to do anything with Port Gibson.* **The result are resources which are nominally under title to the state but are in reality abandoned sites.** Given the demands of other groups and other sites around the state it is easy to understand why **MDAH** is reluctant to tackle Coker House or any discussion of visitors centers or maintenance of campaign trails.

As previously mentioned, *the state must decide if a heritage trail is a viable objective of the state.* **If so, then resources of manpower and money must be committed by the state; if not, then private foundations and volunteers should take the entrepreneurial lead.**

No single agency will have the resources to make an entire interpretive/preservation plan happen. Private and corporate funds will be needed. *An organized private group should consider initiating a non-profit, tax exempt corporation or foundation as a vehicle to rally support for the execution of whatever plan is agreed*

upon. A "Friends" group can also serve as the public watchdog for stewardship of the various sites. This is precisely the recommendation of the Congressionally chartered, Civil War Sites Advisory Commission (p 44). Hinds Community College may be in the best position to do this.

The manner in which the state may consider funding whatever portion of the Vicksburg Campaign Master Plan they elect to support is a matter for legislative action. In Missouri operating funds are provided to state owned historic sites from a half cent on the dollar tax. Bond issues are another method of raising capital funds. Finally, direct appropriation from the state legislature over a specified period may be appropriate.

Another area which must be considered is the collection of admission fees. While there is strong sentiment that public treasures should be the property of the American people, it is equally realistic to accept that "Users Fees" are a proper way of defraying the current and future costs of operations and maintenance. There are a number of great examples around the country such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and Shaker Village in Kentucky.

Finally, Federal policies concerning the reuse of admissions fees collected at the National Parks should be revisited. It is our understanding that the fees are, by congressional mandate, sent to the Treasurer of the United States for deposit to the general revenue fund. If Vicksburg collects 80% of its \$4 admission fee its revenues must exceed several million dollars. Those funds could defer existing park budgetary shortfalls and provide an offset for other program costs such as have been proposed in this report.

***Recommendation #11. State funding to support additional staff at Grand Gulf, Coker House, and Port Gibson should be a high priority.***

***Recommendation #12. An active volunteer program such as Friends of the Vicksburg Battlefields should be initiated. Hinds Community College might be a logical educational group to spearhead this effort.***

***Recommendation #13. Admission fees should be established and collected.***

***Recommendation #14. Congressional policies for use of the admissions fees collected in National Parks should be revised to permit fees to be retained in the Park as an offset for operating shortfalls. The revenue should be shared with the state for similar types of park expenses.***