

Vicksburg

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"Vicksburg is the key.... The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket." A. Lincoln

On July 4, 1863, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant put the key in President Lincoln's pocket. Vicksburg fell, and 5 days later Port Hudson surrendered, giving Union forces control of the Mississippi. This victory came because of the type of war Grant chose to fight in the West, as opposed to warfare back East where thousands of soldiers moved back and forth between Washington and Richmond, striking no decisive blows.

Grant's western campaign was more aggressive, more intense, and broader in scope than any in the war up to that time. Massive movements took Federal armies deep into the Southern heartland, opening the Mississippi and cutting the Confederacy in two. Northern forces rolled southward in 1862 and captured Forts Henry and Donelson. After the savage fighting at Shiloh in April, they closed in on Memphis and Corinth. Huge amphibious operations moved Union forces up the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers and down the Mississippi. The Union aim of dividing the Confederacy along the "Father of Waters" appeared to be moving rapidly toward success.

Union seagoing vessels gave the North control of the lower Mississippi, as New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Natchez fell in April and May 1862. Although the Federals controlled most of the river, the Confederates occupied strong defenses on the banks, attempting to deny the river to the Federal warships that could interrupt Confederate communications. Vicksburg was the strongest and most important of these. Situated on a high bluff overlooking the mighty Mississippi, Confederate big guns above and below the city controlled the river.

The Union Navy's oceangoing vessels and river ironclads failed to take Vicksburg in the summer of 1862. During the winter, Grant conducted a series of land and amphibious movements



to reduce Vicksburg, but once again Union attempts met with failure.

By the spring of 1863 three courses of action were open to Grant. With Memphis as a base, he could advance southward into Mississippi, using the railroads to supply his army and invest Vicksburg from the east. Secondly, he could attack Vicksburg from directly across the river. Or, he could march down the west bank, cross well below Vicksburg, and then swing into position to attack from the south. He had to choose the method that would buy victory at the lowest cost in Northern lives. Direct attack against Vicksburg would probably bring military disaster, and withdrawal toward Memphis would look like a Northern retreat. Grant chose to strike the city from the south after the march downriver.

It was an important and difficult choice for Grant. It meant exposing his army to possible destruction if the Confederates checked his advance out of the bridgehead. But, Grant recalled, the move was "eminently successful."

The Federals marched down the west bank of the river until they were opposite Bruinsburg, well below Vicksburg. Here, Grant's men crossed the river on April 30, establishing a bridgehead on the Mississippi side, but encountering stout resistance from elements of Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton's Confederate forces near Port Gibson. By May 7, Grant was ready to push inland.

His aims were simple. He wanted to capture Vicksburg and destroy the army garrisoning the city's defenses. Grant changed his plan. Instead of marching north he would drive northeast to cut the railroad between Jackson and Vicksburg. Then he would pivot and strike the town from the east.

Stiff resistance at Raymond on May 12 convinced Grant that a strong Confederate force had concentrated at Jackson, the State capital. He now changed his immediate objective and decided to destroy this Southern force before attacking Vicksburg.

On May 14, the Federals took Jackson, scattering the defenders. Grant then turned his army west. Pemberton, meanwhile, brought his field army east from Vicksburg. On May 16, the two forces clashed at Champion Hill. After this hotly contested battle, and one on the following day at Big Black Bridge, Pemberton's army fell back to Vicksburg's defensive works. On May 18, leading elements of Grant's army were approaching the bristling Confederate defense line.

Believing that Southern morale had deteriorated, Grant immediately assaulted the city. The first attack, on May 19, failed, as did the second assault 3 days later on the sector between the 26th Louisiana Redoubt and Fort Garrott.

Realizing it was useless to expend further lives in attempts to take the city by frontal assault, Grant decided to capture the stronghold by siege. Union engineers drove 13 approach trenches toward their adversaries' works, seeking to mine and blow up key points of the Confederate line. Heavy columns of Union infantry waited to storm through the gaps.

The Federals exploded only two mines, both under the 3d Louisiana Redan. The only attack—after the first explosion—failed.

Still, time was running out for the beleaguered defenders. Supplies were short. No assistance came from other Confederate forces. On July 3, Grant demanded unconditional surrender; Pemberton refused. Grant then proposed more liberal terms, and on July 4, the Confederates surrendered.

ADMINISTRATION

Vicksburg National Military Park and Cemetery are administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

A superintendent, whose address is Box 349, Vicksburg, Miss. 39180, is in immediate charge of both park and cemetery.

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