

Vicksburg

NATIONAL MILITARY PARK • MISSISSIPPI



Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, commander of Union forces in the Vicksburg Campaign.

"Vicksburg is the key," said President Abraham Lincoln about the strategic importance of the Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River. "The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket." On July 4, 1863, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant put the key in President Lincoln's pocket. Vicksburg fell, and 5 days later, with the surrender of Port Hudson, La., Union forces gained control of the Mississippi.

Between Cairo, Ill., and the Gulf of Mexico the Mississippi meanders over a course a thousand miles long, dividing the Confederacy into almost equal parts. Control of this stretch of the river was of vital importance to the Union from the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Command of that waterway would allow uninterrupted passage for Federal troops and supplies moving into the South. It would also have the desired effect of isolating the States of Texas, Arkansas, and most of Louisiana, comprising nearly half the land area of the Confederacy and a region upon which the South depended heavily for supplies.

In an effort to deter the advancing Union army and navy from their objective, the Confederates erected fortifications at strategic points along the river. But fighting their way southward from Illinois and northward from the Gulf of Mexico, Federal forces captured post after post, city after city, until by late summer of 1862 Vicksburg and Port Hudson posed the only major obstacles to Union domination of the Mississippi.

Of the two posts, Vicksburg was the strongest and most important. It sat on a high bluff overlooking a bend in the river, protected by heavy artillery batteries along the riverfront and by a maze of swamps and bayous to the north and south. So far the city had defied large-scale river expeditions designed to force it into submission.

In October 1862 Ulysses S. Grant was appointed commander of the Department of the Tennessee and charged with clearing the Mississippi of Confederate resistance. That same month, Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton, a West Point graduate and a Pennsylvanian by birth, assumed command of the roughly 50,000 widely scattered Confederate troops defending the Mississippi. His orders were to keep the river open. Vicksburg became the focus of military operations for both men.

During the winter of 1862-3 Grant conducted a series of amphibious operations (often referred to as the Bayou Expeditions) aimed at reducing Vicksburg. All of them failed, and Grant's military career plunged to its lowest point. To many Northerners he was foundering in the swamps with nothing to show for it but a steadily mounting death list. But Lincoln, replying to the critics, decided to "try him a little longer."

By the spring of 1863 three courses of action were open to Grant: first, with Memphis, Tenn., as his 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 (Louisiana) bank, cross well below the city, and then swing into position to attack from the south. Because of the criticism he had sustained during his winter operations, Grant knew he had to choose the method that would buy victory at the lowest cost in Northern lives. Direct attack against Vicksburg would probably be disastrous, and withdrawal toward Memphis would look like a retreat. Grant chose to march downriver and strike the city from the south. 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.

On March 29, having divided his field army of approximately 45,000 men into three corps under Gens. William T. Sherman, John A. McClernand, and James B. McPherson, Grant moved south from his encampment at Milliken's Bend, 20 miles northwest of Vicksburg, through the fertile delta lands of Louisiana. Opposed by only a handful of Confederate troops, he easily established his army on the Mississippi River above Grand Gulf, 25 miles south of Vicksburg.

For the river crossing he needed the cooperation of the Union navy. On the nights of April 16 and 22, Adm. David D. Porter managed to run eight gunboats and seven transports past the Vicksburg batteries, losing only two vessels. Now Grant not only had troops south of the city, but he also had the means for ferrying them across the river.

On April 29, to prepare the way for the crossing, Porter's ironclad gunboats bombarded the Confederate forts at Grand Gulf. The attack was repulsed. Undaunted, Grant marched his troops a little further south and stormed ashore unopposed at Bruinsburg. Striking rapidly eastward to secure the bridgehead, the Northerners met elements of Pemberton's Confederate forces near Port Gibson. The Southerners fought a gallant holding action, but they were overwhelmed and fell back toward Vicksburg.

By May 7 Grant was ready to push inland. His aims were simple. Unlike many 19th-century soldiers, he was thinking of total victory. Since his goal was not merely to capture Vicksburg but also to destroy Pemberton's defending army, Grant drove northeastward to break the Southern Railroad of Mississippi upon which the Confederates depended for supplies. Then he planned to pivot to the west and drive on Vicksburg. But after

meeting and defeating a small Confederate force at Raymond, Grant changed his plan. Learning that Confederate troops were converging on Jackson from the south and east and that Gen. Joseph E. Johnston was en route from Middle Tennessee to reinforce Pemberton, the Federal commander decided to wheel to the east and capture the rail center of Jackson, thus placing himself squarely between two strong enemy forces. It was a gamble but it paid off. On May 14, almost unopposed, the Union army took Jackson, scattering Johnston's forces to the winds.

Grant then turned his army westward and moved against Vicksburg, defeating the Confederates in a crucial battle at Champion Hill and again at Big Black Bridge. Unable to hold their positions, Pemberton's disorganized troops fell back into the city and occupied strong fortifications. Advance units of the Union army, pressing hard on the Confederates' heels, were in front of Vicksburg by May 18.

Federal officers were convinced that the battles of Champion Hill and Big Black Bridge had broken Confederate morale and they immediately scheduled an attack on Vicksburg. Though only part of his army was in position to strike, Grant ordered an assault on the afternoon of May 19. Rushing into the heavy abatis in front of the Southern positions, the Union troops were thrown into confusion. Some reached the ditch in front of Stockade Redan, but most were pinned down short of their goal.

Many Federal soldiers fired all the ammunition in their cartridge-boxes as the opposing troops blazed away at each other throughout the long, hot afternoon. After dark, the Northerners fell back.

Three days later, on May 22, at 10 a.m., Grant launched a second assault on Vicksburg. Union officers synchronized their watches to ensure a simultaneous movement. Careful timing, however, did not prevent the Confederates from repulsing the initial thrust. Renewed attacks during the afternoon also failed. At nightfall, the Union troops fell back, having lost 3,100 men in their second vain attempt to storm Vicksburg.

Grant's failure to capture the city by assault compelled him reluctantly to start siege operations. Advance breaching batteries were established to

hammer the Confederate fortifications, and while Admiral Porter's gunboats cut off communications and blasted the city from the river, the Union army began to squeeze Vicksburg from the land side. Weeks went by. Fewer messages went in and out of the beleaguered stronghold. Food, ammunition, and supplies of all kinds began to run short.

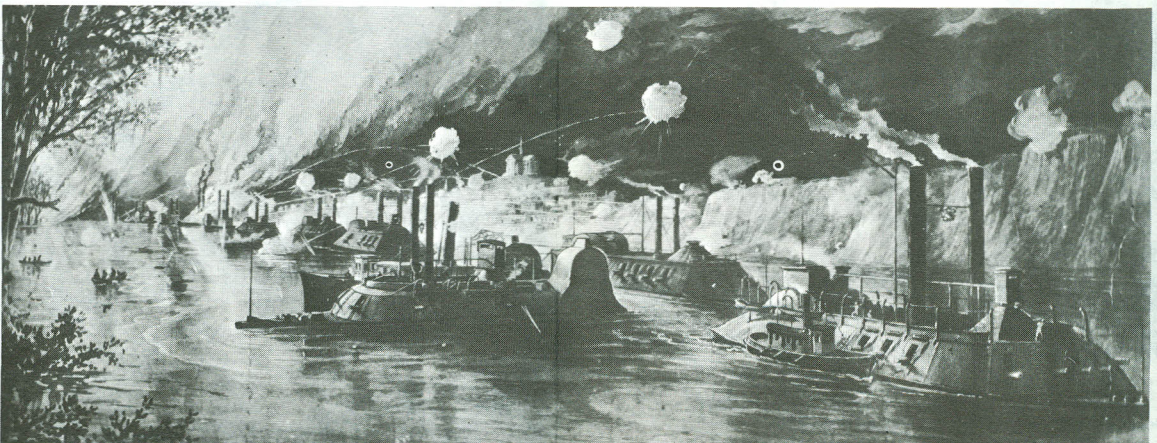
Union engineers dug 13 approach trenches toward key Confederate strongpoints and started to dig tunnels under them. "Every man in the investing line became an army engineer day and night," a Federal infantryman later recalled. "Every day the regiments foot by foot, yard by yard, approached nearer the strongly armed rebel works. The soldiers got so they bored like gophers and beavers, with a spade in one hand and a gun in the other." In a vain effort to stop their attackers, the Confederates dug countermines and rolled powder-charged barrels down at the Federals.

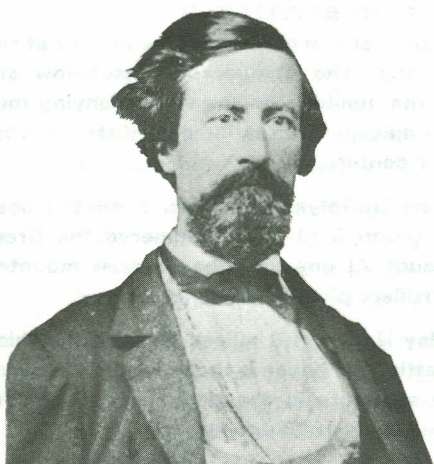
On June 25 Union engineers exploded a mine under the 3d Louisiana Redan, blowing a breach in the Confederate line. After occupying the crater and battling for 24 hours to hold it, Grant pulled his men back, realizing the attempted breakthrough had failed. Five days later, the Northerners detonated a second mine at the same point, but did not follow it with an assault.

For the beleaguered defenders, time was running out. Soldiers were eating mule meat instead of the usual salt pork. Ground peas had replaced cornmeal. Their only hope for relief was that General Johnston might break through the Union siege lines or that reinforcements from Louisiana could gain possession of DeSoto Peninsula across the river. As the weeks passed and no help came, hope died.

By the end of June, Pemberton could see only two possible alternatives: he could either evacuate the city and cut his way through the Federal lines or "capitulate upon the best attainable terms." The choice was reduced to one when his division commanders reported that the physical condition of the Confederate soldiers was so poor that an attempt to cut through the encircling army would be disastrous. On the afternoon of July 3 Pemberton met with Grant to discuss terms for the surrender of Vicksburg. Grant demanded unconditional surrender; Pemberton refused. The meeting broke

Admiral Porter's gunboats running the Vicksburg batteries on the night of April 16, 1863.





Gen. John C. Pemberton, commander of Confederate forces in the Vicksburg Campaign.

up. Grant, however, agreed to submit new terms in writing.

During the afternoon, the Union commander agreed to let the Confederates sign paroles not to fight again until exchanged. Officers could retain side-arms and a mount. Pemberton accepted these liberal terms, and at 10 a.m. on July 4, 1863, the Confederates marched out and stacked their arms. The Union troops marched in.

When Port Hudson surrendered 5 days later, the great Northern objective of the war in the West—the opening of the Mississippi River and the severing of the Confederacy—was at last realized. For the first time since the war began, there were no longer any Confederate troops or fortifications along the Mississippi. As President Lincoln wrote, “The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.”

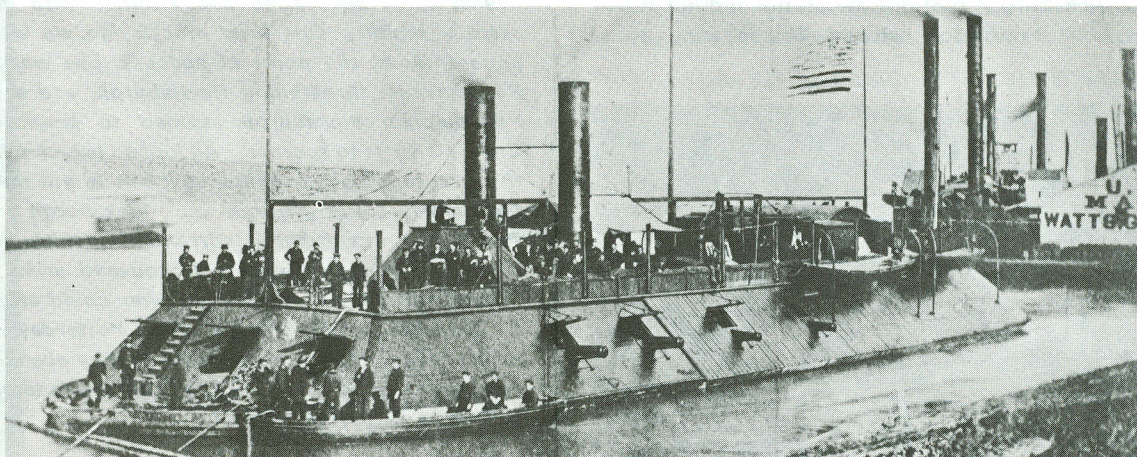
The loss of Vicksburg, coupled with Gen. Robert E. Lee’s defeat the day before at Gettysburg, marked the beginning of the end for the Southern Confederacy. Her chances for independence now lay in the hope that Northerners would tire of the war and force the Federal Government to terminate hostilities. But the steady advance of the Union’s western armies made this a vain hope. Gen. Josiah Gorgas, Confederate Chief of Ordnance, saw the outcome clearly, as the following entry from his diary indicates:

Events have succeeded one another with disastrous rapidity. One brief month ago we were apparently at the point of success. Lee was in Pennsylvania threatening Harrisburgh, and even Philadelphia. Vicksburgh seemed to laugh all Grant’s efforts to scorn. . . . All looked bright. Now the picture is just as somber as it was bright then. Lee failed at Gettysburgh. . . . Vicksburgh and Port Hudson capitulated, surrendering thirty-five thousand men and forty-five thousand arms. It seems incredible that human power could effect such a change in so brief a space. Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success—today absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction.

A TOUR OF THE BATTLEFIELD

We suggest that you begin the 16-mile tour at the visitor center. The numbered stops below are keyed to the numbers on the accompanying tour map. The mileage figures indicate distance from the visitor center.

- 1. Battery DeGolyer (1.4 miles).** From this position Union field guns hammered the Great Redoubt. At one time the Federals mounted 22 artillery pieces here.
- 2. Shirley House (1.8 miles).** Once in the thick of battle, this house is the only surviving war-time structure in the park. It has been restored to its 1863 appearance.
- 3. Third Louisiana Redan (1.9 miles).** Here was one of the major Confederate earthworks guarding the Jackson Road approach to Vicksburg. Two mines were exploded beneath the redan in hopes of breaking the Confederate line.
- 4. Ransom's Gun Path (2.9 miles).** Dismantling two 12-pounder guns, men of the 2d Illinois Artillery, aided by Ransom's infantry, dragged the cannon over rough terrain to an earthen parapet only 100 yards from the Confederates.
- 5. Stockade Redan Attack (3.7 miles).** From this and nearby points, Union soldiers on May 19 swept toward the Confederate fortifications surrounding the Stockade Redan, but were repulsed with heavy losses. Three days later the "Forlorn Hope," an advance force of 110 volunteer Federals, attacked from near here. Few returned.
- 6. Thayer's Approach (6.4 miles).** During the afternoon of May 22, Union soldiers stormed up the hill toward their adversaries, then were stopped by geography and Confederate fire. Later, Gen. John M. Thayer pushed his approach trench toward the Confederate line. His soldiers used the tunnel beneath the road to avoid crossing the ridge where they would be exposed to enemy fire.
- 7. Battery Selfridge (7.5 miles).** One of the artillery batteries manned by naval gunners. A plaque at the monument tells the story of the navy's role in the siege of Vicksburg.
- 8. National Cemetery (7.8 miles).** The final resting place for almost 17,000 Union soldiers, of whom about 13,000 are unknown. Many Confederates who died during the siege lie in Vicksburg city cemetery.
- 9. Fort Hill (9.2 miles),** the anchor of the left flank of the Confederate lines. Confederate gunners posted here assisted the river batteries in sinking the Union gunboat *Cincinnati*.
- 10. Stockade Redan (10.8 miles).** Here on May 19 Confederates threw back the first assault on the Vicksburg lines. Three days later the Federals again attacked and again were repulsed.
- 11. Great Redoubt (11.9 miles).** On May 22 Union forces launched an unsuccessful attack against this massive earthwork guarding the Jackson Road.
- 12. Second Texas Lunette (12.8 miles)** was the scene of furious fighting on May 22 as Confederates beat back Union efforts to storm this work and follow the Baldwin's Ferry Road into Vicksburg. Union soldiers during the siege dug approach trenches to within 15 feet of the lunette.
- 13. Railroad Redoubt (13.5 miles).** This redoubt protected the Southern Railroad of Mississippi. On the morning of May 22, Northern troops assailed this strongpoint and forced out the defenders. A detachment of Waul's Texas Legion counterattacked and in a savage fight with bayonets, clubbed muskets, and artillery shells used as grenades drove out the Federals.
- 14. Fort Garrott (14.2 miles).** Here, on June 17, Confederate soldiers suffered from the highly accurate fire of Union sharpshooters. Confederate Col. Isham W. Garrott picked up a rifle-musket to return the fire. A Federal rifle ball pierced his heart. He died before he could learn he had been promoted to brigadier general.
- 15. Hovey's Approach (14.6 miles).** This restoration gives an indication of the construction of Federal approach trenches.

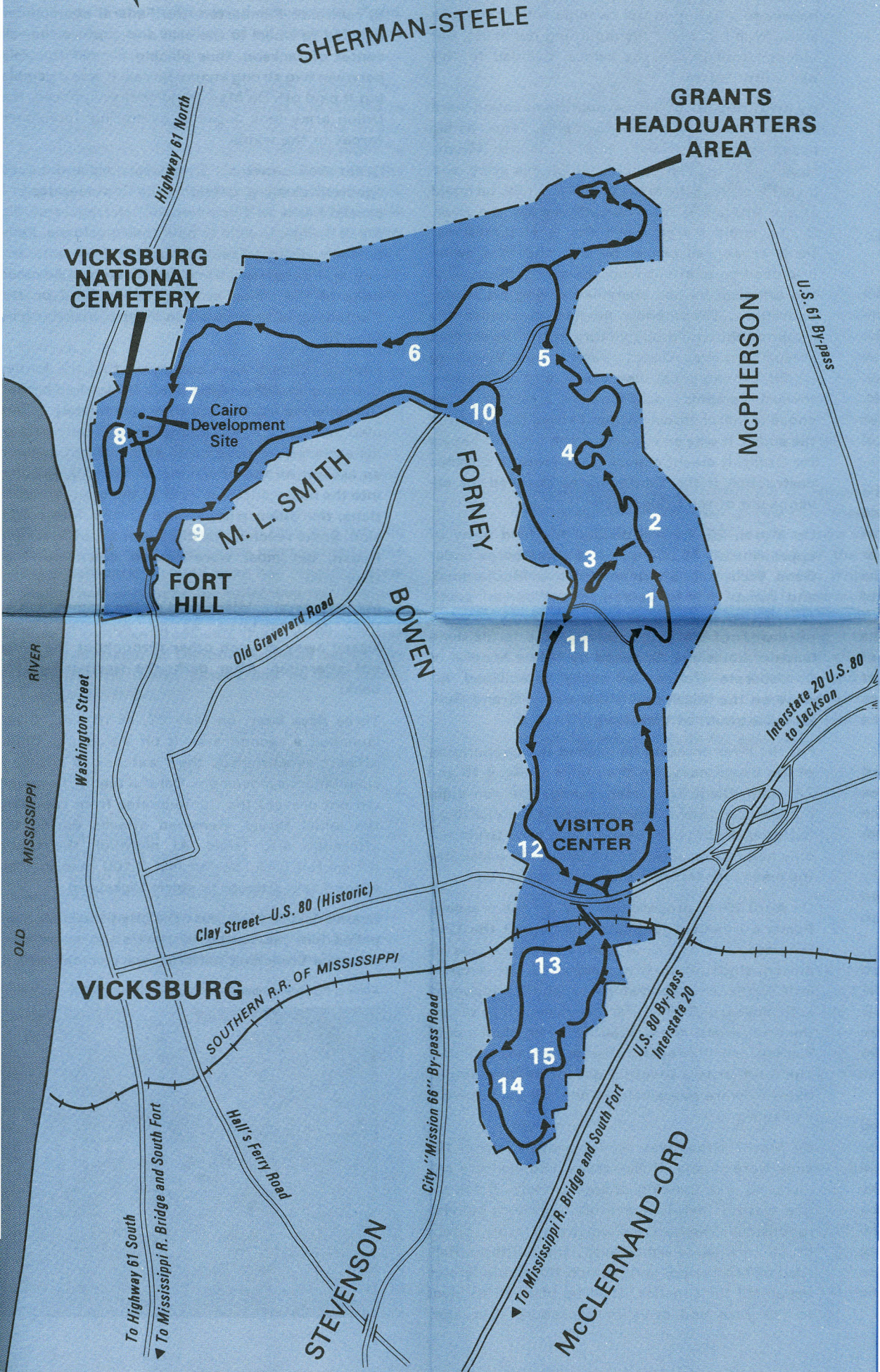


The U.S.S. *Cairo* (shown here in a wartime photo) was one of a series of ironclad gunboats constructed by James Eads and designed to win control of the Mississippi River and its tributaries for the Union. In December 1862 the *Cairo* was ordered up the Yazoo River to destroy Confederate mines. Instead, two of them blew up under the *Cairo*, making her the first warship in history to be sunk by an electrically detonated mine. The gunboat, raised from her watery grave after more than a century, is now undergoing extensive restoration at the Cairo Development Site (see map).

VICKSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK



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SCALE IN FEET



For your safety. Do not allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. Efforts have been made to provide for your safety, but there are still hazards which require your alertness and vigilance. Exercise common sense and caution.

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, MS 39180, is in immediate charge of both park and cemetery.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

National Park Service

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