



**SIEGE OF  
PORT HUDSON, LA.**

EXPLANATION			
ATTERY 1	1 30 <sup>th</sup> Parrott	BATTERY 6	2 3 <sup>rd</sup> Rifled, NORRIS
"	2 2 1/2 <sup>nd</sup> Howitzers, PHILPS	"	9 2 1/2 <sup>nd</sup> " COX
"	8 4 Siege Mortars, TAYLOR	"	10 Naval Batt 9 <sup>th</sup> Dahlgren, TERRY
		"	11 6 20 <sup>th</sup> Parrotts, MACK
		BATTERY 16	7 3 <sup>rd</sup> Rifled, BAINS
		"	6 12 <sup>th</sup> Napoleon, RAWLES
		"	17 4 8 <sup>th</sup> Siege Howitzers, ROSE
		"	18 4 Siege Mortars
		BATTERY 21	2 20 <sup>th</sup> Parrotts, WALKER
		"	3 24 <sup>th</sup> Gauss, WALKER
		"	2 9 <sup>th</sup> Dahlgren, LITTLE

Plate 1. The 7-mile Confederate battleline surrounding Port Hudson, Louisiana, May to July, 1863. Credit: *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, The Century Company, 1888.

# Port Hudson: For Louisiana, A Battle Lost, A Battlefield Won

By J. Larry Crain

My roots are deep in the soil of Washington Parish, Louisiana, where I was born. Until a few years ago I never knew just how deep were those roots, nor did I really care. An opportunity to wander over the long forgotten Civil War battlefield at Port Hudson, Louisiana, around 1972 made a deep and lasting impression on me. I ambled down long, winding Confederate trenches, some almost completely reclaimed by nature, and others almost intact. Suddenly I came upon the great, silent earthenworks which had earned the ominous name of Fort Desperate. Its walls and cannon embrasures still stood impressively over an open, water-filled moat. Only a random footpath and an overgrown vehicular or wagon road winding through the woods indicated that there had been human contact with this place of desolation since that fatal summer of 1863. Looking around, I realized that here, in these quiet Louisiana woods with their trenches, forts, rifle pits and redans, was the largest remaining untouched or abandoned battlefield of the Civil War. I was to learn later that this was the scene of the longest siege operation of that entire terrible conflict.

An undeveloped Civil War battlefield of this size and significance is a rare treasure, indeed. I wasn't long in finding out that three of my direct ancestors has fought in those woods. That knowledge suddenly made these woods and this battlefield seem especially important, and personal, to me. As my appetite for more information about my ancestors was being gradually whetted, my craving for more information about Port Hudson grew in proportion.

About those ancestors, I must explain that before long I had learned some interesting facts. So far, I have discovered only one deserter, and one thrown out of his church, but none hanged. That's really a pretty clean slate for a family which was part of frontier America for over 200 years. I am proud of all my ancestors. Because of my interest in them, through Port Hudson, I feel that a significant contribution to the restoration and interpretation of Louisiana's, and the nation's, history has been made.



My ancestors, who dutifully played a role at that historic battlefield well over a century ago, are still serving — through sparking my interest in an important restoration project. The success of this development will allow countless thousands a better opportunity to share and gain knowledge about an important event in our nation's history.

Let us take a look at the Port Hudson of the mid-Nineteenth Century. The little town was an important Mississippi River commerce feeder for many years before the tragedy that occurred there in May, June, and July of 1863. Twelve miles to the south of the town lay Louisiana's capitol, Baton Rouge. From the east came one of America's first railroads, the Clinton and Port Hudson, built in 1833. Over this strap iron railroad, cotton bales and forest supplies by the tons had been hauled from central Mississippi and eastern Louisiana for three decades prior to the confrontation that exploded there in the spring of 1863. A few miles above that important rail bed, Port Hudson sat high upon a bluff in a bend of the Mississippi River. On the opposite shore, the strategic Red River joined the Mississippi. From Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas vast supplies of cotton, sugar, salt, beef hides, and many other valuables of this southwest river came by shallow draft stern wheelers. These supplies were frequently destined for the huge and important battlefields of Virginia, Georgia, and Tennessee. This traffic attracted an assortment of frontiersmen, ranchers, mountainmen and high plainsmen. All

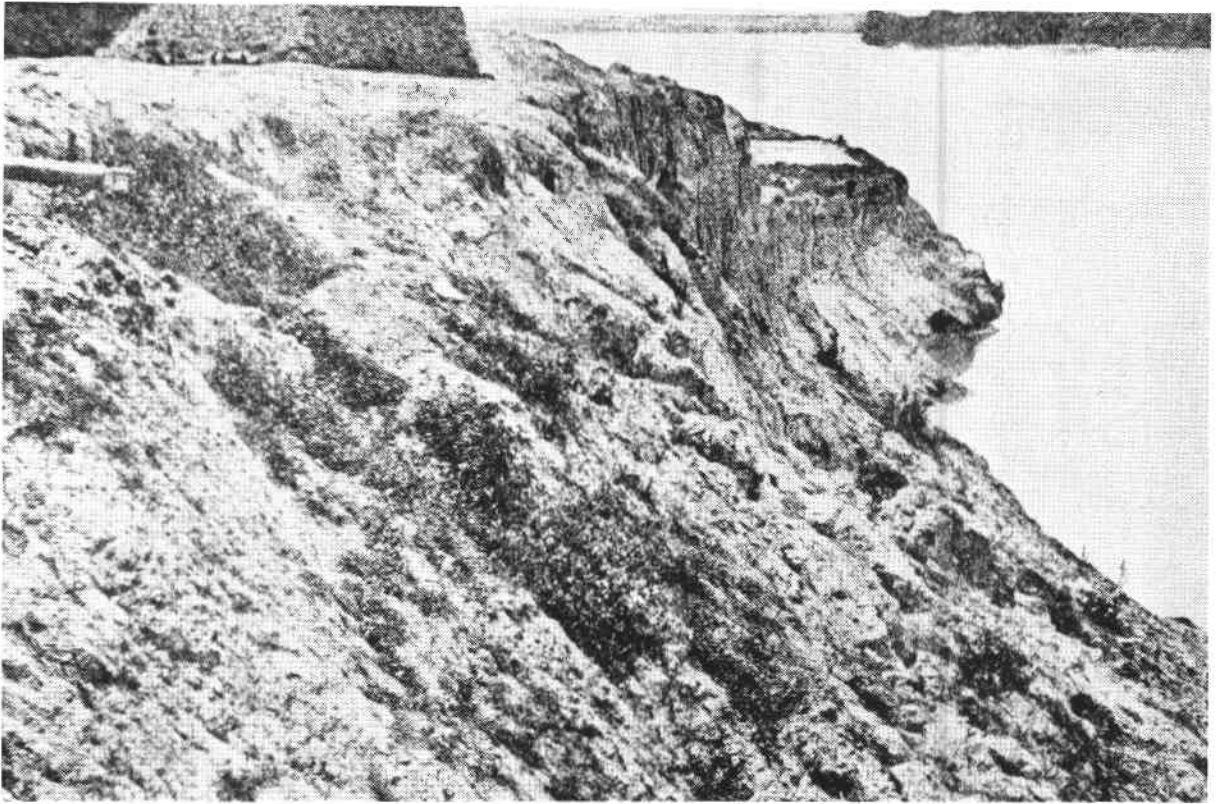


Plate 2. A defiant Citadel of logs and sandbags, upper left, high above the river helped block Farragut's fleet from passing until the fall of Vicksburg and surrender of the Confederate line July 8, 1863. Credit: Library of Congress.



Plate 3. One of the heavy Confederate guns overlooking the Mississippi River. Credit: Library of Congress.



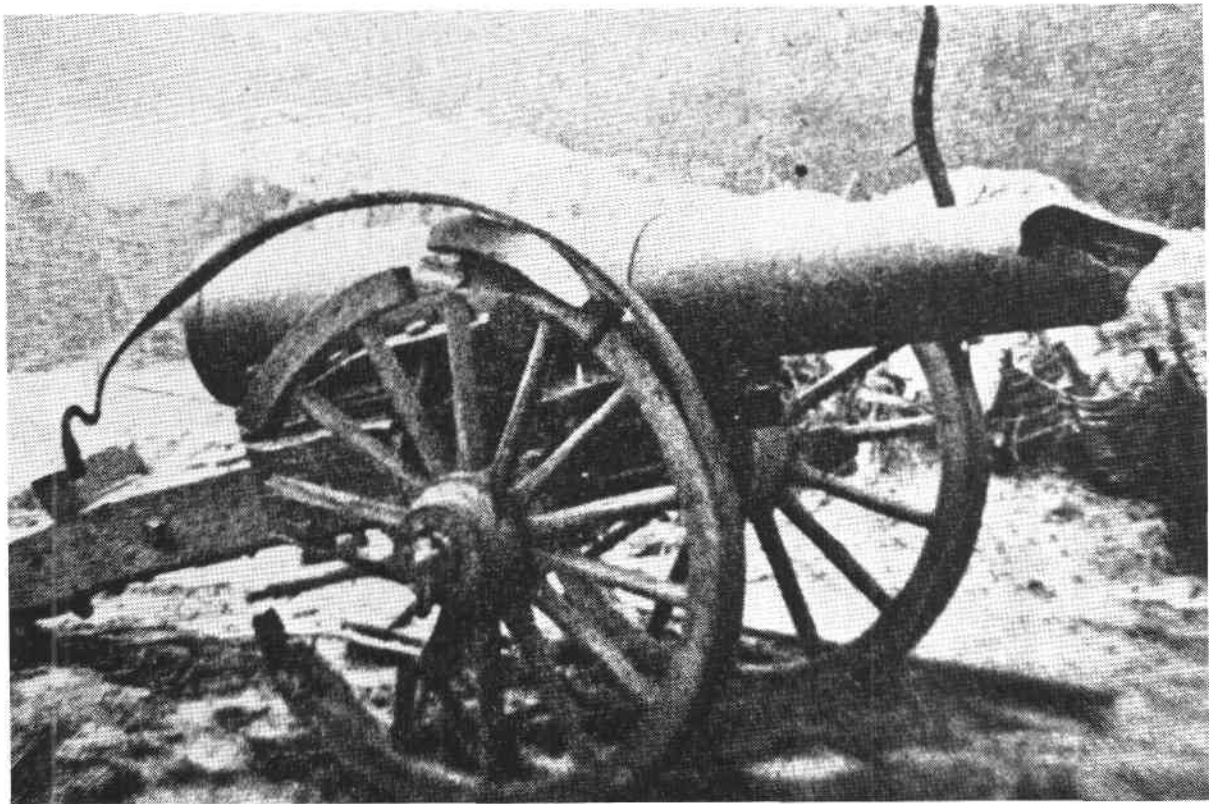


Plate 4. One of the shattered Confederate fieldpieces caught in the overwhelming barrage of Union artillery fire.  
Credit: Library of Congress.

could shoot and fight, even if they were short on respect and discipline when it came to accepting military orders.

The strategic importance of Port Hudson was not lost to the Confederates, especially President Jefferson Davis. Soon after the loss of Baton Rouge in the spring of 1862, the Southerners began digging the first trenches at Port Hudson using slave labor from nearby plantations to build the vast defensive complex. Artillery was shipped from the east, and the troops were gathered from all points. In the spring of 1863 Union officials, well aware of the fact that they controlled the entire length of the vital Mississippi River except for that stretch of water between Vicksburg and Port Hudson, resolved to correct this situation by reducing Port Hudson. Steps were taken by Union commanders, General Nathaniel Banks and Admiral David Farragut, to remove the Port Hudson threat, open the river, and flank Vicksburg from the south. This ambitious plan was to be accomplished simultaneously.

By the time of the first Union land assault in May of 1863, the fortifications had just been completed. Miles of trenches, redans, and rifle pits connecting a countless series of ravines, clumps of

dense undergrowth and narrow creeks with high banks, made Port Hudson a perfect hell for an attacking force. So dense and overgrown were some parts of the Confederate lines that Union troops sometimes became hopelessly lost in that wilderness. Frequently, they never knew in which direction the enemy line lay. One Union officer described the battle of Port Hudson as "one gigantic bushwhack."

This treacherous line formed a seven-mile semicircle around the port's eastern front (Plate 1). The northern end of the line rested on the Mississippi at a point near a small water course known as Sandy Creek. At the southern end, the fortifications were anchored on the river at the mouth of a geographic feature known as the "great ravine." Up on a high hill sat "the Citadel," an earthenwork and sandbag fortress with guns heavy enough to keep Farragut's fleet just out of range at a spot in the river called Profit's Island (Plate 2). Confederate water defenses consisted of about 20 heavy guns on the bluffs overlooking the river (Plate 3). This was not quite equal to a single broadside from Farragut's ships, the *Hartford*, *Richmond*, or *Mississippi* waiting down river. Thirty-one fieldpieces were placed on the great semicircle to

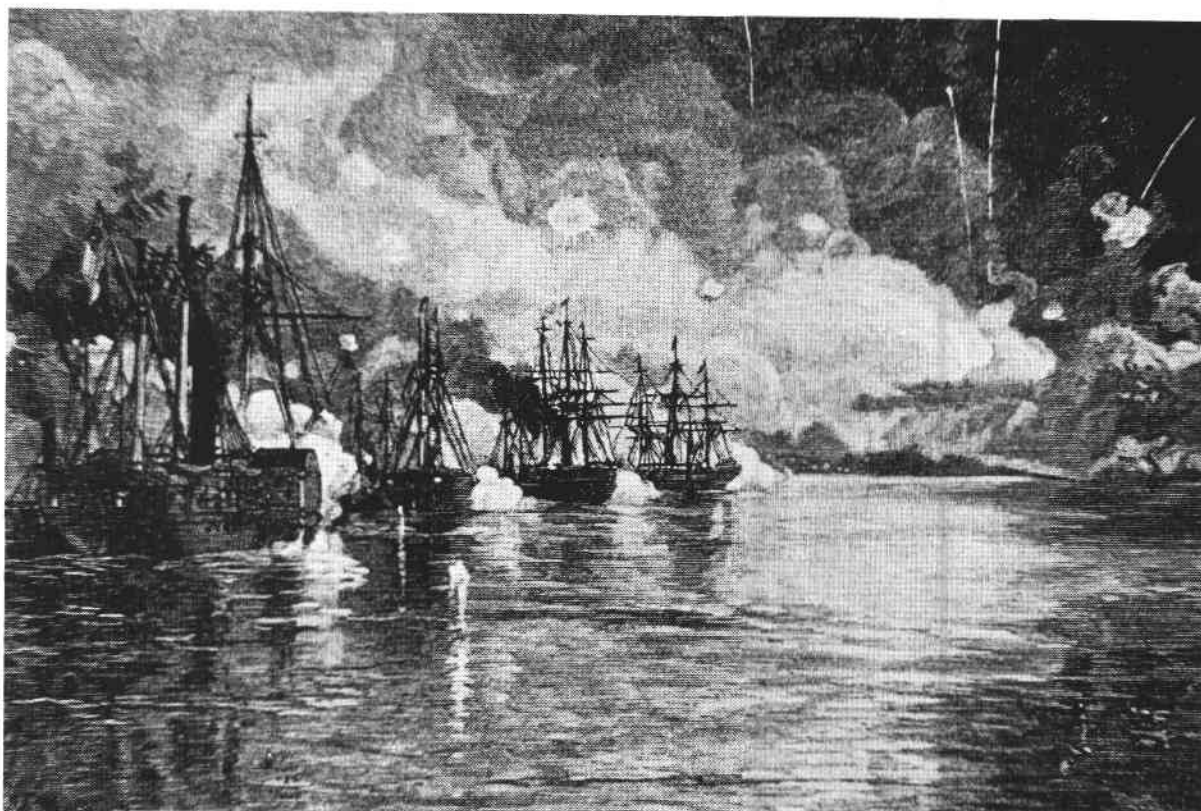


Plate 5. The Union fleet under Farragut attempted to run the gauntlet of Rebel guns on the bluff March 14, 1863. Only Farragut's *Hartford* and one other ship got through. Credit: *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, The Century Company, 1888.

ward off the land attacks of Union General Nathaniel P. Banks' 35,000 troops (Plate 4).

Manning the Port Hudson stronghold, when the first attacks came, were about 7,000 Confederate troops under the command of a West Point trained New Yorker, General Frank Gardner. Gardner's task was a formidable one, indeed, since his 7,000 were defending fortifications designed with a force of 20,000 in mind.

The stalwart defenders were soon to be tested. On that night of March 14, Admiral Farragut made an attempt to run the gauntlet from Profit's Island on the south past the fort's river guns on the high right bank of the river. He was seeking the comparative safety of the waters north of Port Hudson (Plate 5). Only the flagship *Hartford* and one gunboat made it past Gardner's river batteries. The *U.S. Mississippi* was destroyed and her young executive officer, Lt. George Dewey, barely escaped with his life.

At the time time Port Hudson's troubles were beginning, General Ulysses S. Grant was preoccupied with the siege of Vicksburg and was meeting with little apparent success. He would offer no help to General Banks in the latter's plans for the capture of Port Hudson. Grant wanted Banks' army

with him in Vicksburg and not in the bayous of Louisiana. Strangely, other than the Union navy under Farragut, only two men in high places had strong feelings about Port Hudson in the beginning. These were President Jefferson Davis, who reasoned that Port Hudson must be saved at all costs; and Confederate General Joe Johnson, commander of the western theater who thought just as strongly that neither Port Hudson nor even the mighty Vicksburg fortress were worth the men and materials that it would take to defend them.

Jefferson Davis' will prevailed and Port Hudson became the bloody, frantic struggle that, strange to say, contemporary historians had almost forgotten until some very recent events took place which will be outlined later.

On May 21, Federal troops sealed off Port Hudson from any outside help during a skirmish at Plain's Store several miles east of the town. Union forces pushed back an outriding contingent of Rebel Troops into the fortifications on the river. The siege was to last from that date until the surrender of Port Hudson on July 8, 1863, making this the longest encirclement and siege operation of the whole war (Plate 6).



Plate 6. Union troops of General Banks on the Bayou Sarah Road marching south to seal off the gray troops at Port Hudson. Credit: *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, The Century Company, 1888.



Plate 7. Nine-inch Dahlgren guns and sailors from the U.S.S. *Richmond* were placed in the line to the east of Port Hudson and helped reduce what was left of that small town. Credit: Library of Congress.

From beginning to end there was an almost continuous Union shelling of Confederate lines, both from the fleet in the river and from the heavy guns surrounding the fort on the east (Plate 7). There were only two pitched battles with all of the troops on both sides engaged. These were on May 27, and on June 14. For the first battle, General Banks planned a general assault along the entire Rebel line scheduled to begin at dawn.

It should be noted that even though the Confederate troops were thinly scattered across their whole front, each soldier was issued three guns; two rifles and a double-barreled shotgun. The Rebel soldier could lie deep in his fox hole, or burrow, dug into the walls of the line and patiently sit out the continuous Union bombardment (Plate 8). When silence finally reigned, every Southern soldier scrambled out of his burrow, for he knew that the troops in blue were quietly rushing toward his walls. At a given signal, each man would suddenly stand up and together issue a wall of flame from a thousand double-barreled shotguns ranged along the clay walls. At the same time, Confederate cannons with double-shotted canister and explosive shells, with fuses cut for one second, swept the approaches to the walls with grape and shrapnel. After the first volley, every second soldier in the line was assigned to simply reload weapons and keep a charged rifle in the number one man's hands. The effect was devastating.

At dawn on the 27th, a sudden rush of Union troops set out to capture the Citadel on the river to the south of Port Hudson. The trenches to the left and center of Slaughter's Field were the object of this attack. To the northeast, where Fort Desperate jutted out leaving two exposed sides, an assault on both these sides was designed to eliminate this important obstacle. Finally, black troops from the Union right facing the northern end of the line on the river were to assault this position. The use of these troops was significant since this was the first time that black troops, organized in military ranks, had ever participated in pitched battle on the North American continent. If all of these plans were carried out, Banks hoped, Port Hudson would be in Union hands at day's end. The First and Third Louisiana Native Guards, the black troops in Union uniform, moved out as ordered. Their path lay through a swamp and a deep creek, all ending in an inaccessibly steep 25-foot high ridge with a trench at top crowded with determined Confederate defenders from all sections of the battlefield who

were not under attack crowded down into that northern corner. A wall of indignant Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama fire crashed into that mass of struggling and, by now, leaderless troops. Within 15 minutes the terrible battle was all over for the raw northern troops.

Fort Desperate, defender of perhaps three-fourths-of-a-mile of trench, was held by 292 Arkansas troops. Attacking from two sides came courageous men from Maine, Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts. They scrambled into the moat and then clawed their way up almost perpendicular dirt walls in the face of point blank shotgun and musket fire. Hopes of assistance for these attackers were dashed as their reserves were swept away by the usual canister and solid shot. After two hours, these brave men could do no more. They had broken into the fort time and time again only to be thrown out in vicious hand-to-hand fighting. The gaps in the walls were closed, the Blue jacketed troops receded, and Fort Desperate, until now a nameless clay, log and dirt structure, was forever etched into the annals of military history.

During the morning all was silent from the central and southern ends of the Union line. Not a soldier had advanced, for General Thomas W. Sherman had given no orders. Sherman finally entered Banks' uncoordinated and piecemeal attack shortly after 2 p.m. His action started with the unlikely orders for 300 unarmed black pioneer troops, each carrying a pole or plank, to charge across Slaughter's Field. They were to be followed by an armed assault wave. According to Sherman's plans, the poles and planks were to be dropped over supposedly deep ditches in front of the Rebel works thus creating an artificial bridge for the regular, white troops to charge across. The plan went awry. The black pioneers were swept away, and with them the tide of advancing troops also receded. Defenders of the Citadel, though bombarded from the river and assaulted from land, resisted every attempt at capture by General Sherman who, by now, had retired from the field nursing a wound which had been inflicted by a well-placed Confederate bullet.

At the end of this long day, the dead and dying lay between the lines — the dead collecting flies and the wounded crying for human help and water, none of which was available. For all of this General Banks had accomplished little except, perhaps, to warn the Confederates that more of the same was to come until the fort could stand no more. Over 2,000 Union



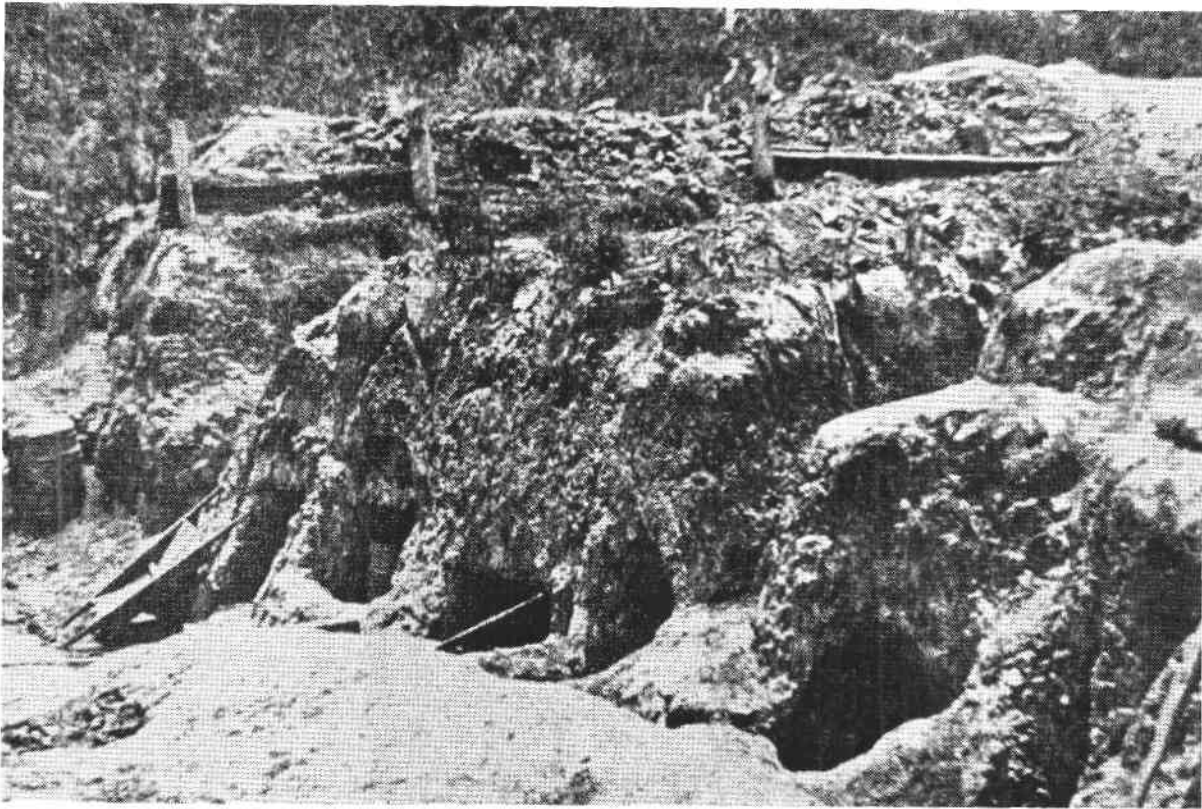


Plate 8. Confederate fox holes or burrows that protected the individual defenders until attack was eminent. Credit: Library of Congress.

troops were killed or wounded. The Rebels lost 350 men.

On June 13, Banks decided on a second grand assault. The Citadel was to be captured, he determined, and an attack across Slaughter's Field was to be made in great force. Major thrust of the offensive, however, was to fall upon the rear of Fort Desperate against a series of zig-zag Rebel lines that received the name of "Priest Cap" from their appearance as the capital letter "M" on topographical maps — a letter which resembled the decorative crowns or berets worn by priests. Banks, of course, planned a new thrust directly at Fort Desperate. Finally, the black troops were to be allowed to attack the Confederate left, only at a more advantageous position than in the previous battle. Before daybreak on June 14, the assault against the Citadel was started. This was beaten back by the Gray defenders. Later a massive Union charge down the great ravine leading to the Citadel was attempted. This, too, was slowed to a halt and by 8 a.m. action on this sector of the field was all over.

The action at Slaughter's Field fit the name of the location perfectly since it turned out to be just that — a slaughter. Thousands of incredibly brave Federal troops marched out in perfect formation, brigade upon brigade, as though they were on a drill field. As the Confederate artillery opened wide gaps in that fantastic, beautiful, senseless order of men, the lines merely closed ranks with a short step to the right to fill the gaps, and then pressed onward. After half-an-hour of such a display of perfect discipline and courage in the ranks, and stupidity at headquarters, the dead and dying mounded on Slaughter's Field began to resemble a long low breastwork to the Southerners in their trenches and redans. The attack was finally called off. Thousands of troops took part in the attack on the Priest's Cap in the greatest struggle of the day. All was to no avail. Hand grenades were hurled by the Union troops into the Southern trenches. Many were caught in blankets by the Rebels and tossed back at those who had thrown them. Another attempt was made to storm Fort Desperate. On came the Union forces, regiment after regiment, only to meet with





Plate 9. Cox's 12 pound battery, protected by cotton bales and sandbags, pushed to within 300 yards of the Confederate works. This was as close as any Union battery got. Credit: Library of Congress.

failure. These men were frustrated in desperate hand-to-hand fighting at the walls. Finally, the black troops moved into position. General Gardner shifted 1,500 men of Colonel Miles' legion to meet that attack. At 100 yards, over 1,500 guns fired "with almost a single sound." After a second volley, the black troops broke and fled the field leaving over 1,000 dead and wounded. Banks left the dead, dying, and wounded where they fell before the Southern trenches for three days before he would ask for a truce to bring them off the battleground.

This second great assault was finally called to a halt on all fronts after the North had lost over 4,000 troops, either killed, wounded, or missing. The Union general decided that his forces were not strong enough to take Port Hudson by storm. Instead, he recommended that the bombardment be continued while his sappers and miners inched the Union trenches ever closer to the Confederate lines (Plate 9). Long underground galleries were dug under the Citadel and the Priest Cap in preparation for blowing them out of existence on the Fourth of July. After the blasts, a volunteer storming party of a little over 1,000 men were prepared to assault these works.

Events elsewhere, however, forced a conclusion to the undecided issue at Port Hudson. With the surrender of Vicksburg to General U.S. Grant on July 4, 1863, defense of Port Hudson was useless and futile. The Port Hudson garrison formally surrendered as 5,500 troops put down their arms on July 8 ending this siege of 48 days. Now the Confederacy was cut assunder and the entire length of the great Mississippi River from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico was once more under the control of the United States of America. Thus ended the dramatic tale of Port Hudson at the height of the Civil War.

Returning to far more recent times, I was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism as a member of the Cabinet of Governor Edwin Edwards in 1976. Now, I could personally do something about a significant portion of American Civil War history which, up to that time, had been completely neglected by the State. Other than the purchase of 640 acres of the northern portion of the battlefield in the mid 1960s, and some preliminary planning, nothing of consequence had been accomplished in preserving this historic battlefield.



Plate 10. The first spade of earth is turned that began the restoration of the Port Hudson Battlefield. Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.

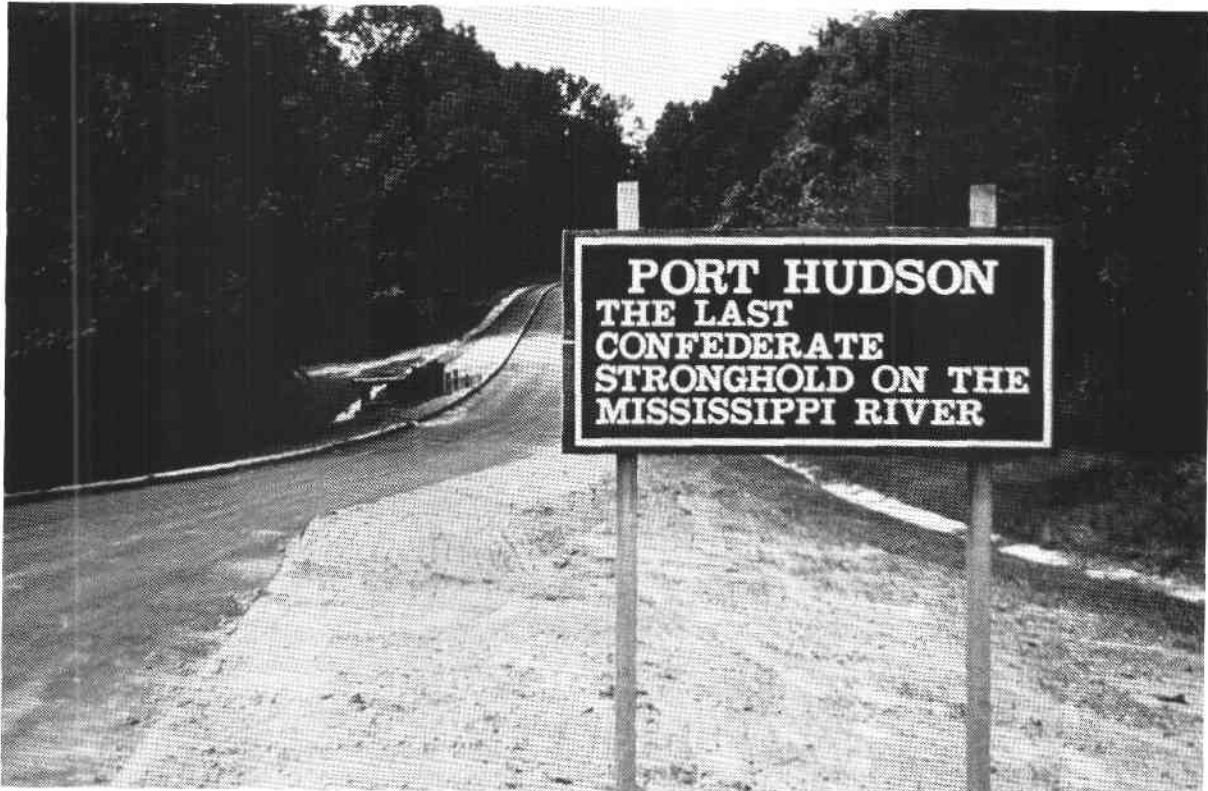


Plate 11. The development of the Port Hudson State Commemorative Area was begun in 1976 under the direction of the author. The gates leading to this sign at the entrance to the park were finally opened to the general public six years later on March 15, 1982, a long awaited dream come true. Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.

# HISTORIC TRAIL

## Port Hudson State Commemorative Area

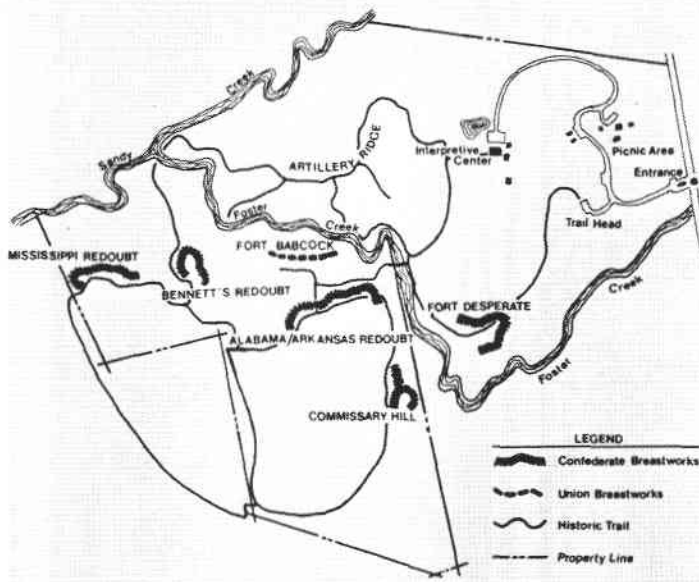


Plate 12. Phase I as begun under the supervision of the author.  
Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.

To make matters worse, the portion of land that had been purchased was ruled off limits to the public, thus making it practically inaccessible and unknown to Louisianians, or anyone else, for that matter. Occasional relic hunters were the only ones to disturb the peace. I started the pot boiling under the proposal to restore and preserve the battlefield by getting good people like Bill Moore involved. Organizing public, professional and political support for the "let's do it now" restoration of the battlefield ensued. A year later, I was appointed by Governor Edwards to the position of Secretary of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. I was then able to obtain funding for preservation and restoration from various sources and set into motion a three-phase program (Plate 10).

Here is a brief sketch of what has been accomplished and what will be realized if all goes according to plan.

Phase I was the preservation and interpretation of that part of the battlefield owned by the State. The facilities and programs now in existence, or with immediate plans for completion, are (Plates 11, 12, and 13):

1. Over six miles of walking trails enabling visitors to view the battlefield in a natural setting. Breastworks and fortifications of various design, both Union and Confederate, are located along these trails (Plates 14 and 15).
2. A paved walkway leading to the main attraction of the facility, Fort Desperate, as well as an elevated boardwalk, allowing for easy access and viewing of this area. A viewing tower is also located at this site. (Plates 16 and 17).
3. Other facilities including scenic viewing towers, a picnic area and restrooms have also been provided (Plates 18 and 19).

Phase II, it is hoped, will see the establishment of a museum and further interpretive facilities as well as an enlargement of the recreational area.

Phase III will establish a period railroad system around the area which would be tied into other historical attractions such as the Audubon Trail and other sites of local historical interest and significance.

My story is told! I can only hope that Phases II and III will be brought into realization. Louisiana, and in fact the whole nation, deserves it. Those brave soldiers, our forgotten kin from both north and south, made a tremendous sacrifice here. Their sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, and all their descendents from throughout the nation should know about their heroic deeds here. Descendents of these men should have a chance to experience first-hand the horrors and privations that their ancestors endured in defense of the principles that they believed in so fervently and devotedly. Those living today can profit well by learning of the bravery and devotion to duty that their forefathers expressed so vividly here. The perfect place to learn these valuable lessons is in the classroom where they actually happened — right there on the exact battlefield where the story unfolded. Port Hudson is worthy of preserving for our generation and for all of those yet to come.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The following individuals have rendered invaluable technical assistance of one sort or another, and to each I



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For proofing and typing, I owe a special note of appreciation to my secretaries, Mrs. Diane Correjolles and Mrs. Judy Couvillon, and for the final reading of the manuscript, Mr. Vic Couvillion.

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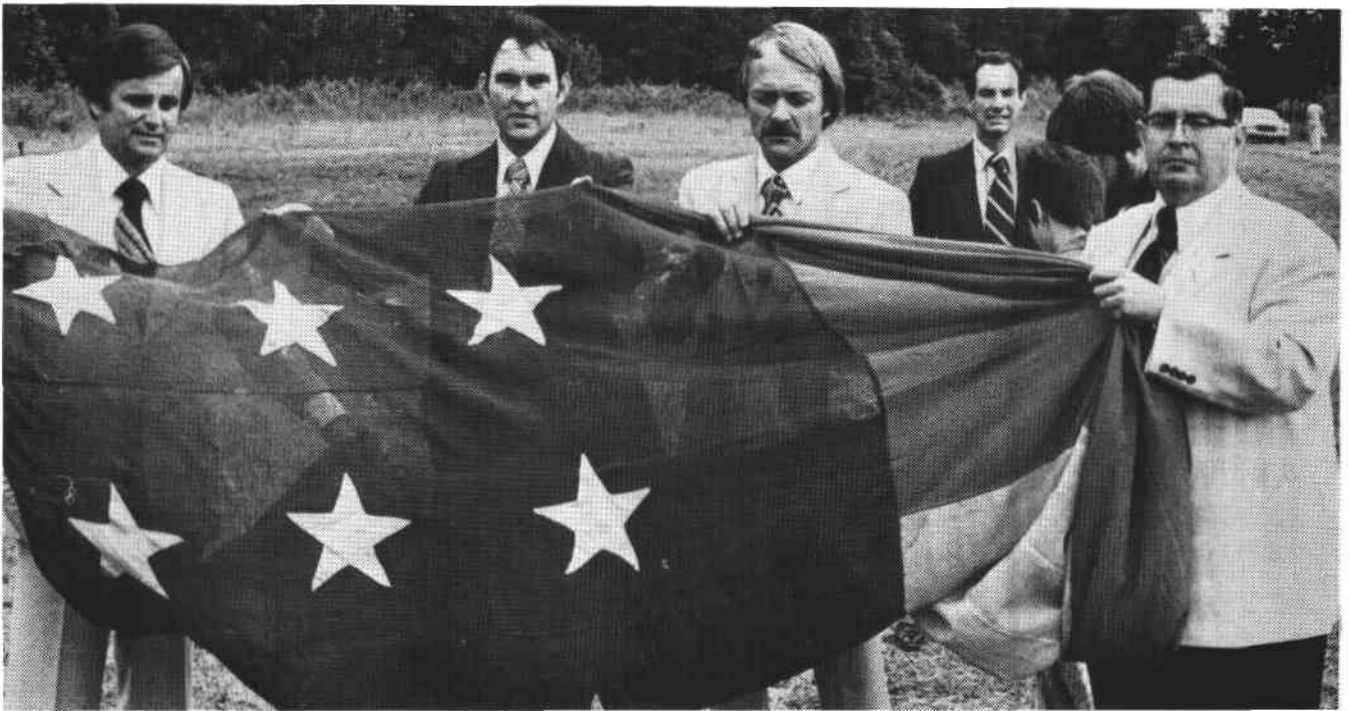
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Plate 13. The battlefield was such a tangle of gulleys, hills and streams that one Union officer referred to Port Hudson as "one giant bushwack." This bridge is across a meandering stream which has banks and bed loaded with shell fragments, rifle and musket bullets, and buck and ball. Above, Plate 14. A gentle rolling path over six miles long winds besides deep trenches and shallow rifle pits much in the same natural state as was seen by both defenders and attackers 120 years ago. Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.



**Plate 15.** Ed Boagni, M.D. (Baton Rouge), a Louisiana preservationist and historian, stands to the right holding the stripes of the original Confederate Garrison flag. Dr. Boagni located it in California, purchased and donated it to the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks, for future display in the projected museum. This huge flag was made of the very thinnest material to enable it to float aloft in a gentle breeze. Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.



**Plate 16.** This paved road allows the elderly, ill, and otherwise incapacitated accessibility to and appreciation of Fort Desperate in its original untouched condition—cannon positions, steep walls, moat and all. Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.



**Plate 17.** One of the outer trenches of Fort Desperate, left in its original condition, and preserved for future generations of Americans. Credit: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of State Parks.