

Fighting Along the Mississippi

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The week of March 10-16, 1863 saw military action primarily in the western theater of the war, as along the Mississippi River and its surrounding tributaries Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant continued their operations against Vicksburg while farther to the south part of Admiral David Farragut's fleet forced its way past the Confederate defenses at Port Hudson, Louisiana.

During the week Federal gunboats and transports carried troops through the Yazoo Pass towards Vicksburg. Grant's goal was to follow a series of waterways to reach high ground north of the town. To block their passage, Confederate General John Pemberton had ordered the construction of Fort Pemberton at Greenwood, along the banks of the Tallahatchie River. The position was hastily constructed of earth and cotton bales on flooded ground by troops commanded by Major General William W. Loring. The Confederates had also sunk a vessel in the river's channel to block the Federal's passage. During the week two Union gunboats bombarded the fort several times but were unable to reduce it. Federal infantry was also landed, but high water kept them from reaching the fort. By March 20 they withdrew, leaving the defenders in command of the approaches to Vicksburg.

Having been blocked by a combination of Confederate forces and geography at Fort Pemberton, Grant soon launched another joint army-navy effort against Vicksburg by way of Steele's Bayou. He hoped to move against the city by following a series of long twisting waterways to reach the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg. Grant hoped the route would allow him to capture the town by surprise, but the Confederates had anticipated such a movement and had

obstructed the route, making progress painstakingly slow. This movement was also abandoned by late March, and as the month ended the prize of Vicksburg appeared still to be out of reach of the Union commander. He would next change his strategy by moving his army south of the city rather than focusing on its northern approaches.

Meanwhile, far to the south the passage of Port Hudson, Louisiana occurred on the evening of March 14, as Union Admiral David Farragut led his flotilla past the Confederate batteries located there. Farragut was operating in conjunction with a land force under General Nathaniel Banks that was approaching Port Hudson from Union-occupied Baton Rouge. The Union's objective was a series of strong positions constructed along a bend in the Mississippi which represented at this time the most significant Confederate position on the river south of Vicksburg.

As Farragut's seven vessels attempted to make their way past the Confederate artillery positions, southern gunners poured into them a deadly accurate fire. They also lit driftwood and logs on fire and set them afloat downstream to better illuminate the Union ships. The U.S.S. *Mississippi* was damaged and then ran around, making it an easy target. Abandoned by its crew, it soon caught fire and exploded in the river. Rebel fire also damaged the *Richmond* and the *Monongahela*, forcing them and two other ships to withdraw downstream. Two of Farragut's ships, however, the *Hartford* and the *Albatross*, were able to successfully make their way upriver past the Confederate defenses. Farragut's failure to reduce the Port Hudson defenses forced General Banks to withdraw his land forces, giving the Confederates time to strengthen their positions. Banks would return in two months and lay siege to Port Hudson, but for now the stretch of water between that location and Vicksburg remained in rebel hands.