

Maneuvers Around Vicksburg and West Virginia Emancipation

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During the last week of March 1863, Union troops continued their seemingly endless efforts to isolate the Confederate garrison at Vicksburg, Mississippi. Citizens, meanwhile, who had taken the oath of allegiance in the proposed new state of West Virginia, voted in favor of the gradual emancipation of the area's slaves as a condition of statehood.

This week saw the end of the ill-fated Steele's Bayou expedition, an attempt to reach Vicksburg from the north via a system of waterways. William T. Sherman commanded the land portion of the movement while Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter led the naval contingent. Nearly impassable terrain and navigation bogged down both of the elements, which were also deterred and ultimately halted by Confederate forces defending Black Bayou. In the words of historian E.B. Long: "the expedition proved little except the impracticability of using the inland waterways to reach Vicksburg. It was the last of a number of unsuccessful efforts to entrance to Vicksburg, the last before the slowly mounting major effort under [Ulysses S.] Grant.

While the Steele's Bayou-Black Bayou expedition floundered, Union naval forces determined on March 25 to test the strength of Vicksburg's main defenses by running two steam-powered rams past the Confederate artillery batteries defending the Mississippi River. The two vessels chosen were the *Lancaster* and the *Switzerland*, which were part of a fleet of ships purchased by the army to assist in operations on the western rivers. Their goal was to pass Vicksburg in order to reinforce a flotilla operating south of the town. The crews soon discovered the accuracy of the rebel gunners. The *Lancaster* was hit by artillery about thirty times before sinking into the muddy waters, while the *Switzerland* suffered numerous hits and heavy damage before passing downriver. Despite the fate of these two vessels, the Union navy would move

two larger fleets past the Vicksburg batteries the following month, allowing them to assist in the crossing of Grant's army to the river's eastern shore, thus marking the beginning of the final phase of the campaign against the southern stronghold.

This same week an important political event took place to the east. In the early months of the war, the counties of western Virginia, where slavery was less prominent and where political and economic differences with the eastern part of the state had led to longstanding tensions, began the process of political separation. Early Union military victories in the region only reinforced this movement toward statehood. Conventions held at Wheeling in 1861 began the dual process of establishing a pro-Union Restored Government of Virginia while at the same time promoting the establishment of the new state of West Virginia.

In November 1861 a convention drafted a constitution for the proposed state. Voters ratified that document the following spring and the U.S. Congress shortly thereafter drafted a bill formalizing the new state's organization. The bill included the provision that West Virginia would gradually abolish slavery, since it was not covered under the terms of the emancipation Proclamation. In December 1862 the statehood bill passed into law, though voters had not yet approved freedom for the region's slaves. In early 1863 the so-called Willey Amendment was drafted for addition to the state constitution. It called for slaves in West Virginia under the age of twenty-one as of July 4, 1863 to be free upon reaching their twenty-first birthday. On March 26, 1863, West Virginians approved the amended constitution with gradual emancipation. With this obstacle removed, West Virginia became the thirty-fifth state two months later.