

Milliken's Bend and the Gettysburg Campaign Begins

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During the week of June 2-8, 1863, small battles took place throughout the various theaters of the war, including engagements or skirmishes in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Although there were several instances of fighting, this week was primarily significant because of two major events that took place. One of these was the attack on Union forces at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana. This was one of the battles that comprised Union General Ulysses S. Grant's Vicksburg Campaign, and became notable for the Federal's use of black soldiers and the subsequent treatment of those troops by Confederate forces. The other major event was the opening of perhaps the most well-known campaign of the entire war—the Confederate invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania that ended in the battle of Gettysburg.

As Ulysses Grant maneuvered his forces against the Confederate position at Vicksburg, southern troops west of the Mississippi River made efforts to cut off his supply lines and induce a Union retreat. A division of Texans and a brigade of Arkansans moved to attack several Union positions, including the garrison at Milliken's Bend, located on the Mississippi about fifteen miles above Vicksburg. That position was primarily garrisoned by several regiments of newly-organized United States Colored Troops. On June 6, Union Colonel Hermann Lieb, having learned of the enemy advance, moved part of his forces towards Richmond, Louisiana, where he skirmished with Confederate forces before withdrawing to Milliken's Bend. The next day, 1,500 Confederates commanded by Henry McCulloch attacked Milliken's Bend itself. The assault drove the defenders back towards the river, where they were aided by the gunboats *Choctaw* and *Lexington*, which blasted the attackers and forced their withdrawal. During the engagement the Confederates suffered about 185 casualties and the Federals more than 600. The black regiments

had particularly heavy losses, with the one unit suffering the highest casualty rate of any black regiment during the war. One account claims that the Confederates, knowing they faced black soldiers, advanced with a flag of no quarter. Rumors spread after the battle of atrocities inflicted upon black prisoners and the Confederates did adopt a policy of returning captured former slaves to their owners. Nevertheless, in the words of one historian, the battle “establish[ed] [the] credibility of black troops as fighting men in the front lines of Federal armies.”

The momentous event of the week, however, was the beginning of General Robert E. Lee’s second attempt to invade the north, a decision that culminated in the battle of Gettysburg. Following his spectacular victory at Chancellorsville, Lee determined to again move his army northward. As a result of the death of Stonewall Jackson, Lee reorganized his 75,000-man army into three corps for the upcoming campaign, commanded by James Longstreet, Richard Ewell, and A. P. Hill. On June 3 he began moving his army towards Culpepper, from which location he would begin his advance. Lacking the logistical network to maintain his army in the north for an extended period, the movement was essentially a large raid. His objectives were to move his army out of Virginia for a time in order to relieve the strain on the state’s resources, and to disrupt the northern economy and transportation network by foraging liberally off the rich countryside. Other factors included a desire to relieve pressure on the increasingly isolated Confederate position at Vicksburg, and of course the hope that winning a major victory on northern soil might still bring England and France into the war on the Confederate side, though that hope seemed less likely following the adoption of the Emancipation Proclamation. Nevertheless, southern forces moved northward in high spirits, towards a turning point in the war and what many historians have referred to as the High Water Mark of the Confederacy.