

Confederate Victory at Sabine Pass

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During the Civil War the week of September 8-14, 1863 was extremely eventful. Fighting occurred throughout much of the South, ranging from Texas to Virginia. The major events were at Sabine Pass, Texas; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Arkansas, and Virginia. The beginning of the week saw a minor, yet dramatic Confederate victory, but the remaining events largely favored the north.

The Sabine River between Texas and Louisiana provided access to Houston and Beaumont, so controlling it would be very helpful to Union efforts to occupy portions of Texas. In early September, some 6,000 Union troops and a fleet of twenty-two gunboats and transports under the command of General William Franklin entered Sabine Pass from the Gulf of Mexico with the objective of moving up the Sabine River and threatening east Texas. Fewer than fifty Confederates from Company F, First Texas Heavy Artillery manned Fort Griffin, a small fortification mounting six cannon which protected the entrance to the pass. Their commander was Major Richard "Dick" Dowling. Severely outnumbered and outgunned, he focused on strategy rather than brute force to stop the Union fleet, erecting aiming stakes in the channel and sharpening his men with regular artillery training. On the morning of September 8 the Federal fleet bombarded the Confederates, and then approached within range of the fort's cannon. Dowling's men concentrated on the two lead ships, exploding the boiler on one and disabling the rudder of the other. Both soon surrendered. The two remaining gunboats withdrew, forcing the transports and their landing force to do likewise. The Confederates suffered no casualties, while the Federals lost 140 killed and wounded and more than 300 taken prisoner in the embarrassing

defeat. This unlikely victory raised Confederate morale and “disproved once and for all the myth about the invincibility of the Union gunboats.”

The Confederate victory at Sabine pass improved southern morale, but the week’s remaining events favored the Union. In Tennessee, William Rosecrans completed the movements of his Army of the Cumberland that would force Confederate forces to evacuate Chattanooga. The mountainous terrain of the area provided great opportunities for concealing his intentions. Confederate forces under Braxton Bragg received contradictory reports of the Union position. Believing that Rosecrans’ force would approach from the north, Bragg positioned his troops for such an attack. Soon he received reports that Union troops had crossed the Tennessee River and stationed themselves to the south of Chattanooga. Fearful of being trapped in the city, Bragg evacuated Chattanooga, which was occupied by Federal troops on September 9. Rosecrans was ecstatic, claiming “Chattanooga is ours without a struggle and East Tennessee is free.” Despite the bloodless victory, the Federal army was still in a dangerous position. In his maneuvers to drive the Confederates out of the city, Rosecrans’ force had become dangerously spread out, and over the next few days Bragg made several attempts to attack isolated elements of the Army of the Cumberland, but these efforts would fail, giving Rosecrans time to consolidate his force along Chickamauga Creek in north Georgia.

In other actions during the week, Confederate forces under Sterling Price evacuated Little Rock, Arkansas, weakening southern control over the Trans-Mississippi region. In Virginia the Union Army of the Potomac under George Meade commenced offensive operations, occupying Culpepper and moving southward towards the Rapidan River. Over the next two months both Union and Confederate forces in the Old Dominion would conduct minor offensives that proved inconclusive. Both armies were weakened as a result of sending reinforcements westward to

participate in the Chickamauga and Chattanooga campaigns. For once operations in the western theater were overshadowing those in the east.