Secessionville, Cumberland Gap, and Vicksburg

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During the third week of June 1863, fighting erupted at several locations throughout the Confederacy, as Union forces advanced to occupy more rebel-held territory. In South Carolina, as they continued their operations against Charleston, the Federals reeled from their defeat at the June 16 battle of Secessionville. General Henry Benham commanded the 9,000 Yankees who had occupied a portion of James Island near Charleston, opposed by a smaller Confederate force under General Nathan "Shanks" Evans. Benham soon determined to attack the enemy position at Secessionville, despite the fact that his main subordinates evidently opposed the plan as too dangerous.

General Evans learned of the Union threat on the morning of June 16, and sent reinforcements to assist the small garrison of the fort located there. Despite being outnumbered the southerners had the advantage of strong defensive works supported by artillery. The Confederates repulsed three Federal assaults, inflicting nearly 700 casualties. In the aftermath of the defeat an ugly dispute took place among the Union high command, with General David Hunter, commander of the Union Army's Department of the South, accusing Benham of grossly exceeding his authority in ordering the attack. Three days after the battle Benham was arrested and ordered to stand trial before a court martial. Despite having the support of several powerful politicians, Benham's commission was revoked, though he eventually was reinstated. Union operations would continue against Charleston with little success, with the city not falling until 1865.

While the reverberations of the Secessionville defeat still echoed, Union operations proved more successful against Cumberland Gap far to the northwest. This important passage

through the Cumberland Mountains near the borders of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia had been occupied by Confederate troops under command of Brigadier General Carter L. Stevenson earlier in the war. On June 18, 1862 Union General George W. Morgan moved against the Confederates defending the Gap. Because of a Union threat against Chattanooga, Stevenson was ordered to withdraw his forces to support that location so little more than skirmishing took place in the vicinity of Cumberland Gap. After occupying the position Morgan reported to his superior General Don Carlos Buell that he had taken control of the "American Gibraltar." Cumberland Gap would be reoccupied by the Confederates in September 1862 before being taken again by the Federals in September of the following year.

In Vicksburg, Mississippi, meanwhile, Confederates prepared fortifications to resist the Union attack that they knew was forthcoming. To the south, Union Admiral David Farragut prepared a fleet of ships to move north past the Confederate batteries at Vicksburg, while another Union force under General Thomas Williams moved northward towards the town from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Williams' objective was to establish a position near Vicksburg to assist Farragut, and to construct a canal across a bend in the Mississippi to allow Union vessels to bypass the town's defenses. A final important military event took place on June 23 in Richmond, where a conference was held in which General Robert E. Lee discussed plans to strike the Union forces threatening the capital in what would become known as the Seven Days Battles.

A significant political event occurred this week when the U.S. Congress passed and President Lincoln quickly signed an act prohibiting slavery in the territories. This act seemed to run counter to the Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scot case of 1857, which stated congress had no power to regulate slavery in the territories. Though the war had begun as an attempt by

northerners to preserve the Union, the weakening and ultimate destruction of slavery was obviously becoming a by-product of the conflict.