

## **Vicksburg Stands Defiant**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

By the start of the Civil War, the town of Vicksburg, Mississippi had become a thriving and cosmopolitan port on the Mississippi River. Situated roughly one-third of the way from New Orleans to Memphis by way of the river, the town was wealthy, sophisticated and bustling. By June 1862, it had also become the focus of worldwide attention. As Union naval forces took New Orleans in the spring of 1862 and moved southward toward Memphis, Vicksburg suddenly stood out as a strategic prize.

Part of Lincoln's overall plan was to gain control of the entire Mississippi River and in conjunction with the Atlantic blockade to slowly starve and strangle the Confederacy. Unfortunately for Lincoln and the Union, the Mississippi could not be controlled without taking Vicksburg. Perched on steep hills aside the river, the city was an imposing defensive post.

In addition to being able to prevent free transit of Union shipping up and down the river, Vicksburg served as a critical supply junction for the Confederates. A railroad from Monroe, Louisiana terminated across the river from Vicksburg and brought not only cattle and vegetables from Texas and Arkansas but also weapons from Europe by way of Mexico. In addition, boats could make their way from Texas down the Red River to the Mississippi and then up to Vicksburg. The little town on the bluffs over the Mississippi was serving as a vital lifeline to the rest of the world for the Southern cause.

When Flag Officer David Farragut had captured New Orleans several months earlier, he had also been directed to take Vicksburg. The Confederates began to transfer troops and heavy guns to the town and by mid-May the strength of the defenses was such that Farragut would have

his work cut out for him. When his fleet first approached Vicksburg on May 18, Farragut had an envoy go ashore and demand surrender. The envoy returned with a message that stated that “Mississippians don’t know, and refuse to learn, how to surrender.” Farragut was surprised that his threats had not forced surrender as at weakly defended Baton Rouge farther down the river. He also noticed that his boat’s guns could not rise to the elevation of the town’s defenses, while Vicksburg’s guns could easily pound his ships to pieces. Farragut returned to New Orleans.

This displeased Abraham Lincoln. He demanded that Farragut return to Vicksburg and attempt to run past the city’s defenses, meeting up with his counterpart Flag Officer Charles Davis who was working his way downriver from Memphis. Lincoln thought such a meeting would be a symbolic gesture toward eventual control of the river. Farragut returned better prepared in late June, with more men and more boats, including mortar schooners that could rain shells down on Vicksburg. Farragut managed to get all 11 of his boats by the Vicksburg defenses as both sides fired furiously at each other. His men suffered 45 casualties. In Vicksburg, casualties were lighter but did include Mrs. Alice Gamble. Mrs. Gamble would be the first of many civilians who would die in Vicksburg over the next year.

The Confederates had a surprise for Farragut, as a quickly constructed ironclad called the *Arkansas* came barreling out of the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg and attacked the Union fleet. The *Arkansas* passed through the fleet, hitting every Union ship at least once and causing 59 casualties. She was welcomed joyously by the townspeople, many of whom had seen her exploits, as she made her way down to Vicksburg. Farragut was furious at this humiliation and returned to Vicksburg and tried twice to destroy the *Arkansas*, but her armor and the shore batteries were too much. In the last week of July, Farragut and his boats returned to Baton

Rough to lick their wounds. Vicksburg remained defiantly intact in the middle of the Mississippi.