

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Port Hudson, Louisiana

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"We eat all the meat and bread in the fort...eat all the beef--all the mules--all the Dogs--and all the Rats around us." Civil War soldiers often ate poor food and lived under miserable circumstances, but few could make the boast of hardship to match a Confederate soldier who endured the siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana. To many Americans, the battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg were turning points in the Civil War. A lesser-known, but equally important campaign was waged that same summer of 1863 at Port Hudson.

For forty-eight days Confederate troops defended the fortifications dominating the meandering Mississippi River from its 80-foot-high bluff. For forty-eight days Union attackers stormed the earthen walls of the fortifications or pummeled the defenders with cannon shot and rifle fire. Soldiers who fought there would never forget their harrowing experiences, whether in attacking the earthworks, enduring the deprivations of the siege, or seeking freedom for themselves and their families. That long, hot Louisiana summer became indelibly etched in their minds.

The siege of Port Hudson was a part of the great struggle for control of the Mississippi River. The river was important to both sides. Union forces wanted to conquer the river and divide the Confederacy. The Confederates wanted to maintain control and ensure the flow of men and supplies back and forth across the river. When New Orleans and Memphis fell to the Federals in the spring of 1862, Confederate command of the Mississippi was in jeopardy. By that autumn, they had fortified the river bluffs at Vicksburg and Port Hudson. The 150-mile stretch of territory along the Mississippi between these two points was all that remained in Confederate hands. The Red River, which empties into the Mississippi about half-way between the two strongholds, was the primary route for the shipment of vital supplies from west of the river to the east. Salt, cattle, and horses moved eastward through this corridor, and arms, munitions, and currency moved westward.

Confederate troops occupied Port Hudson in mid-August 1862. This was one of the objectives of the Confederate attempt to recapture Baton Rouge earlier that month. General Pierre G. T. Beauregard claimed to have recommended the fortification of Port Hudson to Major General Mansfield Lovell in March 1862. While Lovell may have had

some earthworks constructed for a battery in April, the fall of New Orleans and resulting confusion prevented the placement of cannons or troops there at that time.

Port Hudson was chosen because it was a strong natural defensive position. From atop the steep 80-foot bluffs, Confederate artillerymen could launch a potentially devastating plunging fire against Union ships. Conversely, the elevated position of the guns would make them difficult for enemy cannoners to hit. A severe bend in the river near the little town would force enemy vessels to slow down to negotiate it, especially going upriver. The terrain in the rear, or east, of the town was criss-crossed with canyon-like ravines, some 40-60 feet deep. To the north along Big and Little Sandy Creeks were dense woods. Another point in Port Hudson's favor was the little railroad that ran to nearby Clinton. This railroad could be used in the shipment of men and material in and out of Port Hudson.

The Confederates began erecting artillery batteries on the bluffs as soon as they occupied the town and soon brought in cannons to mount in them. By late October, the Confederates had mounted thirteen heavy guns along the bluffs. To protect the river batteries from a land attack, the Confederates began construction of a series of detached lunettes, but this line was soon abandoned in favor of a shorter, continuous line of trenches. This line began at a point on the Mississippi River about two miles south of Port Hudson. Eventually it would stretch nearly 4 1/2 miles, running to the northeast before turning due west and returning to the river above the town.

In mid-December 1862, the Federals reoccupied Baton Rouge. The troops were an advance element of a new army brought to Louisiana by Major General Nathaniel P. Banks. He had been governor of Massachusetts and Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives before the war. He was one of the political generals appointed by President Abraham Lincoln and had been defeated twice by "Stonewall" Jackson in Virginia. Banks had orders to conduct a campaign up the Mississippi River in conjunction with a campaign against Vicksburg led by Major General Ulysses S. Grant. At first, Banks planned to advance immediately toward Port Hudson. Rumors and information from spies convinced him that the Confederate garrison had 15-17,000 men in it, when in fact there were less than 5,000 troops there. Banks decided to delay his attack while he trained his men and handled some non-military problems. If he had acted promptly, Banks could have taken Port Hudson in a few days.

In response to this threat to Port Hudson, the Confederate government assigned a new commander for the garrison, Major General Franklin Gardner. He was born in New York City and had graduated from West Point. He had married a daughter of former Louisiana governor Alexander Mouton, so he joined the South when the war started. Gardner's brother fought for the North, and his father held a position in the U.S. Treasury Department. Under Gardner, the Confederates rebuilt and strengthened their river batteries and pushed completion of the land works. Of equal importance, he had his men build roads connecting the breastworks so that men and supplies could be moved easily from point to point.

Finally, in March 1863, the Federals planned a combined naval and land attack on Port Hudson. Rear Admiral David G. Farragut's naval squadron was to run past the river batteries and knock them out. Once past Port Hudson, the gunboats would be in a position to close off the Red River and stop the flow of supplies to Port Hudson. Simultaneously, Banks' army would march up from Baton Rouge and threaten to attack the land defenses. It was hoped that his diversion would draw men and cannons away from the river batteries, thereby easing the passage of Farragut's vessels up the river. If Farragut succeeded, then Banks' men would cut off Port Hudson from the east, forcing the evacuation or surrender of the garrison.

Banks' army of 17,000 marched out of Baton Rouge on the morning of March 13. The advance continued the next day, and the troops were in position that afternoon. Assured that the infantry would make their demonstration when needed, Farragut scheduled his attack for just before dawn on March 15. He would make his movement with seven vessels. Three steam sloops would advance with a smaller gunboat lashed to their port (left) sides. If the larger vessel were disabled or ran aground, the smaller ship could pull it to safety. The gunboats as they were paired up were the *Hartford* and *Albatross*, *Richmond* and *Genesee*, and *Monongahela* and *Kineo*. One vessel would have no consort--side-wheeler *Mississippi*--because of her large, side-wheel paddle boxes.

Late on the fourteenth, Farragut revised his timetable, thinking it better to risk navigating the bend in the river in darkness rather than Confederate gunners in daylight. Banks claimed he could not make a supporting diversionary attack at that time, but the irritated admiral decided to proceed anyway. The squadron began its run about 11:20 P.M., and the Confederate batteries opened fire almost immediately. Confederate soldiers on the west bank of the river lighted bonfires to outline the enemy vessels for their gunners. The earth shook for miles with the exchange of fire and the concussions of exploding shells.

Fairly early in the battle one of those strange Civil War incidents occurred. Lieutenant Colonel Marshall J. Smith of New Orleans was the commander of the Confederate heavy artillery. He had served under Farragut in the navy before the war. During the fighting, he stationed himself at one of the batteries and intended to give the Federals a warm reception. Farragut's flagship, the *Hartford*, came in close to the bluffs near this battery. Smith wrote that the vessel "came so near to our battery that a pistol shot would have taken effect on her deck." To pay his respects to his old commander, Smith had the two columbiads in the battery double shotted. He then personally aimed one of them at the *Hartford*. "When he gave the order to fire, both friction primers failed. Replacing them, again Smith gave the order to fire. Once more, both primers misfired." The *Hartford* passed the battery unharmed.

Only the *Hartford* and her consort, the *Albatross*, got past the river batteries. Both the *Richmond* and *Monongahela* ran aground on the west bank and were severely damaged by the Confederate cannon fire before getting free. The two sloops, with their consorts, had to turn around and seek safety below. The *Mississippi* also ran aground and

was set on fire by hot shot. She was evacuated by her crew and eventually slid off the shore back into the river. The current carried her almost half way to Baton Rouge before the fires exploded her magazines, destroying her.

Farragut's attempted passage of the Port Hudson batteries was a failure. The Confederate gunners had won a strategic and tactical victory. Farragut's two vessels that did get past the garrison could not effectively blockade the river from Port Hudson to Vicksburg. Only when anchored at the mouth of Red River could the gunboats stop the flow of supplies via that stream. Consequently, the Confederates continued to move weapons and foodstuffs across the Mississippi.

With Farragut's failure, Banks ordered his army back to Baton Rouge without a fight. The failure of the March 14 attack caused Banks to initiate a new campaign. He moved most of his army west of the river to drive Confederate troops out of south Louisiana. After accomplishing this by early May, Banks decided to move again against Port Hudson. More than half of the Port Hudson garrison had been ordered away to Jackson, Mississippi. President Jefferson Davis had sent orders to Gardner to evacuate Port Hudson and join the army being gathered in the Mississippi capital by General Joseph E. Johnston. Gardner began moving his men northward until he learned that the Union army was approaching from the Red River. Then he returned with some of his men to meet Banks' threat.

Banks hoped to accomplish a swift capture of Port Hudson and then join Grant's campaign against Vicksburg. His troops left Alexandria on May 14 and reached Bayou Sara (near St. Francisville, north of Port Hudson) on the twenty-second. The three divisions he had would be joined by one from Baton Rouge and another from New Orleans. The converging Union divisions would have the Confederates surrounded.

Skirmishing began on May 21, and by the evening of the twenty-second all of Banks' divisions had linked up and the siege of Port Hudson commenced. Gardner had about 7,400 men under his command, but nearly 1,000 of them were ill. Since no one had expected the enemy to advance from the north, the Confederates had not constructed any works between Little Sandy Creek and the Mississippi. Consequently, while one group of soldiers skirmished with the Federals, another group began throwing up crude trenches. In about thirty-six hours, the Confederates succeeded in erecting one-half mile of earthworks.

On the night of May 26, Banks and his generals held a council of war. They decided to assault the Confederate lines the next morning. Banks felt his men would overrun the trenches quickly and enable him to proceed to assist Grant at Vicksburg. He had reason to be confident of success. The Union army numbered 30,000 men and had more and better artillery. Yet the delay had given the Confederates time to strengthen their works. Also, the Federals failed to conduct any reconnaissance of the Confederate positions. While the assault was to be simultaneous all along the lines, Banks did not specify a time for the attack.

The Union assault began on their right about 6 A.M. The rough terrain and stubborn Confederate resistance broke up the Union attacks. In very few places did the Federal soldiers succeed in getting any closer to the trenches than 150-200 yards. Gardner was able to shift some of his men from his center and right to reinforce his left wing. At one point, the attackers did get into the ditch, or moat, of one Confederate earthwork. Several attempts to charge over the walls were beaten back. The fighting here was so fierce that the Confederates nicknamed their position Fort Desperate.

To create a diversion, the Federals then ordered forward two regiments of black troops stationed on their extreme right. This charge was made by the 1st and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards. Organized in late 1862 in New Orleans, they were among the first all-black units mustered into the United States army. Most of the company officers of both regiments were black. The men of the 1st Native Guards were mostly free men of color, while those of the 3rd Native Guards were runaway slaves. They never had a chance for success. The men had to cross 600 yards of open ground against a strongly defended portion of the Confederate line. In fifteen minutes, about half of the 1,000 blacks were killed or wounded. The Confederates defending that portion of the earthworks suffered no casualties. By 11 A.M., the fighting on the Union right had ended in stalemate.

The Federals on the left did not attack at all on the morning of May 27. After much prodding by Banks, one division commander, Brigadier General Thomas W. Sherman, finally led his men forward against the Confederate center at about 2 P.M. Since the Confederate troops had left this sector to reinforce the left, men from the extreme right had to rush in to defend the area.

One dramatic incident in this fighting was the charge of the 165th New York Infantry. These troops were wearing colorful Zouave uniforms. Their bright red pants and white cross belts made perfect targets for the Confederate defenders. The regiment lost 186 of the 350 men who made the attack. A Confederate recalled: "...[A] New York regiment of Zouaves came dashing out of the swamp on the extreme right of the field, making, with their red breeches and caps, a magnificent spectacle....[They] came dashing on, deploying from column into line, with the precision of veterans, as they neared our works, we mowing them down by scores, when they were ordered by their colonel to lie down, who, himself walked back and forward with as much apparent coolness, as if he were giving orders on parade. In a moment more he fell, and his men broke and fled for the woods, leaving a great many killed and wounded behind them."

One of the Zouaves left this description: "...[T]he Colonel ordered the charge; when about 150 yards from the works the enemy gave us grape and canister at short range; I never saw anything like it; our men were mowed down; the firing was terrific;...our Colonel, Major and line officers [were] wounded, the men by natural instinct deployed as skirmishers taking to whatever protection they could;...Such a sight; the dead and wounded lay thick; the wounded groaning and calling for water...and calling upon us not to desert them;..."

Later the Federals on Sherman's right under Major General Christopher C. Augur moved to the attack, advancing along the Plains Store Road. They also met a withering Confederate fire and were stopped. Like the men on their left and right, many of these Federals sought cover wherever they could and remained pinned down until after dark. A Massachusetts soldier remembered: "It was impossible to keep in line. The spaces between the trees were filled with twigs and branches, in many places knee-high. Foolishness to talk about cheering or the 'double-quick.' We had no strength for the former, aye, and no heart either. We had gone but a few rods ere our Yankee common sense assured us we must fail. You could not go faster than a slow walk. Get your feet into the brush and it was impossible to force them through, you had to stop and pull them back and start again. As best we could we pressed on; shells shrieked past or bursted in our midst, tearing ground and human bodies alike; grape and canister mowed down the branches, tore the leaves, or lodged in trees and living men. Solid shot sinking into the stumps with a thumping sound or thinning our ranks, minie balls 'zipping' past us or into us, made our progress slow indeed."

Finally the fighting ended. The casualties in Banks' army were high. His official count was 293 men killed; 1,545 wounded; and 157 missing. Confederate casualties are hard to determine but probably numbered about 250 men killed and wounded.

After this repulse, Banks sought to strengthen his force. He brought up nine additional regiments. These men more than offset the losses suffered on May 27. The Union army grew in numbers to about 40,000 men. Banks also brought up more artillery. Eventually, he would have about 130 cannons and mortars on his lines, and these did not include the cannons and mortars of the Union fleet above and below Port Hudson.

Banks also began making plans for a second assault. On the morning of June 13, the Union artillery opened an hour-long bombardment of the Confederate lines. When the shelling ended, Banks demanded that Gardner surrender to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Gardner responded: "My duty requires me to defend this position, and therefore I decline to surrender." After this, the Federals resumed their bombardment. The firing continued into the night.

The Union army attacked again at 4 A.M. on June 14. The Confederates had greatly strengthened their fortifications. Many Confederates had increased their firepower. Men had gathered up weapons dropped by the Federals on May 27 and now had two guns--a rifle for long range and a musket loaded with buck and ball for close work.

The major Union effort was against the Confederate center. They concentrated on a portion of the earthworks known as the Priest Cap. The first assault hit the right face of the work. Some Federals got up to the Confederate trenches, and there was fierce hand-to-hand fighting. Repeated assaults failed to overrun the position. This first Union attack had ended by 8 o'clock. Soon a second assault hit the left flank of the Priest Cap. Again there was hard fighting, but the Federals could not break through.

One of the Union casualties in the attack against the Priest Cap was Brigadier General Halbert E. Paine, who commanded one of the divisions making the assault. During the pre-dawn hours, he moved among his skirmishers and told them that he was going to lead them in. He told them, "Men, I want you to follow me right into those works." Many of the troops of his division sought shelter once they came under heavy fire. Paine rushed forward, with his sword in his hand, and called as loudly as possible upon these men to continue the advance. Soon he went down, rifle fire having shattered his thigh in two places. He found shelter behind a fallen tree but had "to wait for fourteen hours in the blistering sun, exposed to a continual fire from the works, and enduring torment from thirst, heat and swarms of insects" before his men could drag him to safety.

By 10 o'clock, the Union attacks on the Priest Cap had failed. To distract the Confederates, Banks ordered an attack on the Confederate right flank. Union troops tried to break through at a position called the Citadel and the works just northeast of it. Here also the Confederates stopped the attackers. By 11 o'clock, all Union attacks had ceased. Union losses on June 14 were greater than those on May 27. The Federals had 1,800 men killed, wounded, or captured. There are no figures for Confederate casualties, but were probably about the same as on May 27.

Banks contented himself with regular siege operations after the failure of the June 14 assaults. The Federals kept up an almost constant artillery bombardment on the Confederate lines. To protect themselves, the defenders dug holes up under the sides of their trenches and in nearby ravines. One Arkansan wrote in his diary that when the bombardments began, "The word then was 'rats to your holes'."

Union sharpshooters kept the Confederate soldiers pinned down during daylight hours. That same Arkansan recorded, "We are situated in a ditch, where we are compelled to sit or lie down; and when we move we crawl." Most Confederate casualties fell with head wounds when they tried to peer over the parapets. The Southern sharpshooters became very proficient as well. One gully occupied by Union soldiers gained the nickname Dead Man's Corner. A Connecticut officer recalled an incident there:

"...Early on my first day in the gully, just as I had risen, smirched and damp, from my bed on the brick-colored earth, a still breathing corpse was brought down from this spot of sacrifice. A brave, handsome boy of our Company D, gay and smiling with the excitement of fighting, disdainful to cover himself, was reloading his rifle when a ball traversed his head, leaving two ghastly orifices through which the blood and brains exuded, mingling with his auburn curls. He uttered strong, loud gaspings; it seemed possible, listening to them, that he might yet live; but his eyes were fast closed and his ruddy cheek paling; in a few minutes he was dead."

In anticipation of a third assault, Union engineers dug tunnels under several key points on the Confederate lines. They planned to place explosive charges under the works and blow them up. The Confederates dug countermines and destroyed one enemy tunnel. At another point, Union troops constructed a sharpshooter's tower of sugar hogsheads.

From this height, men could both fire down into the Confederate trenches and observe movements behind the lines.

Both sides suffered from the heat and disease. To again quote the Arkansas lieutenant: "The mosquitoes give us the devil of nights, & though apparently insignificant, they do what the roar of the enemy's cannon has not been able to do—(i e) keep us from the embrace of tired nature's sweet restorer balmy sleep."

By late June, the Confederates had begun to run out of food. Union artillery fire destroyed their grist mill. The Confederates improvised by using a locomotive. Placing it on blocks, they attached a belt around a rear wheel. Starting the engine, they were able to get a mill going. Union attempts to knock out the engine with artillery fire failed. When Union shells destroyed a warehouse, the Confederates moved their supply of peas to the little Methodist church in town. The peas filled the structure to the tops of the pews. Exploding shells shattered the church's windows. Afterwards, the Confederates had to be extremely careful when eating their peas.

Beef supplies were gone by late June. The Confederates began to look for substitutes. A member of the garrison wrote shortly after the surrender: "The last quarter ration of beef had been given out to the troops on the 29th of June. On the 1st of July, at the request of many officers, a wounded mule was killed and cut up for experimental eating. All those who partook of it spoke highly of the dish. The flesh of mules is of a darker color than beef, of a finer grain, quite tender and juicy, and has a flavor something between that of beef and venison. There was an immediate demand for this kind of food, and the number of mules killed by the commissariat daily increased. Some horses were also slaughtered, and their flesh was found to be very good eating, but not equal to mule. Rats, of which there were plenty about the deserted camps, were also caught by many officers and men, and were found to be quite a luxury—superior, in the opinion of those who eat them, to spring chicken; and if a philosopher of the Celestial Empire could have visited Port Hudson at the time, he would have marveled at the progress of the barbarians there toward the refinements of his own people."

Historian Bell I. Wiley wrote that the deprivation experienced by the Confederates at Port Hudson was worse than by the men at Vicksburg. Gardner and his officers sought means to keep up morale. One Confederate recalled: "The sugar and molasses was put to good use by the troops in making a weak description of beer, which was constantly kept at the lines by the barrel-full, and drank by the soldiers in preference to the miserable water with which they were generally supplied. This was a very pleasant and healthful beverage, and went far to recompense the men for the lack of almost every other comfort or luxury."

The conditions became too much for many Confederates, and hundreds deserted as the siege progressed. One Arkansas soldier wrote: "I am beginning to think we are in a pretty tight place, I am fond of romance--but this continual slap-bang is becoming monotonous--& I would be willing to try something else by way of variety."



A captain at another part of the lines remembered the long days of the siege more soberly: "[It] was one succession of charges and repulses[,] was one prometheus dying yet never dead--we lived on fire and excitement. We lay in the ditches in the mud and water[,] in the sunshine--in the blood of fallen comrades--...It was here that I was bespattered with the blood and brains of my comrades--stepped across their bodies to give orders--lay on the very boards at night on which they had fallen and tinged them 'gorey red'...."

Morale became low in the Union army as well. In particular, twenty of Banks' regiments had enlisted for nine months, and their terms of service ended in mid- to late-June. Many of these soldiers felt they had been sacrificed in the assaults of May 27 and June 14. They openly expressed their discontent on several occasions. Relations between the nine-month men and the three-year troops became strained. One regiment [4th Massachusetts] mutinied and was disarmed. Other regiments came close to mutiny, and Banks placed a number of officers and enlisted men under arrest. Discontent with Banks' leadership was not limited to the nine-month units. One soldier wrote, "We are poorly led and uselessly slaughtered. All of the brains are within and not before Port Hudson."

On July 7, word reached Banks of the surrender of Vicksburg three days before. The Union troops began to celebrate this welcome news. Copies of official documents telling of the fall of Vicksburg were sent into Confederate lines. Gardner called a council of war that night that decided to ask Banks for surrender terms. The Federals would soon receive reinforcements from Grant. With his men starving, Gardner had no alternative but capitulation. A truce was arranged just after midnight. Terms were agreed upon the next morning, but the official surrender was delayed until July 9. The ceremony occurred about 9:30 that morning. Dozens of Confederates took advantage of the delay to sneak out and escape. Banks paroled the Confederate enlisted men, but the Confederate officers were all sent to Northern prison camps.

The parting between the officers and enlisted men who had shared so many travails was a very emotional affair. One member of the garrison recalled the scene: "The men who had withstood this storm of battle[,] this lingering siege of a month and a half--who had lived on...excitement for weeks at a time--these men cried like children when they went to part from their officers, and the officers cried as hard as the men did."

During the siege, the Union army suffered severe casualties. More than 5,000 men were killed, wounded, or missing. Heat or disease hospitalized another 4,000 Federals. These losses totaled more men than were in the entire Confederate garrison. Confederate losses were relatively light. Only about 500 men were battle casualties. About 200 died from disease. One historian concluded, "In no other campaign during the Civil War was there a more disproportionate ratio of [combat] casualties between the two sides."

Why was the siege of Port Hudson important? Port Hudson's surrender was the final blow in a week of catastrophe for the Confederacy. On July 3, 1863, General Robert E. Lee's second invasion of the North was turned back at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The following day Vicksburg surrendered, and a Confederate drive through Arkansas was

halted at Helena. Five days later came the surrender of Port Hudson. It was a week of crushing defeats, one from which the Confederacy would never recover. The surrender of Port Hudson's Confederate garrison gave the North undisputed control of the Mississippi River. Port Hudson was also the longest "genuine" siege in American military history--48 days. Finally, at Port Hudson, black soldiers in the regular United States army first participated in a major assault and demonstrated that they would and could fight with discipline and valor for their freedom from slavery. Their example was used as propaganda to recruit more blacks into the Union army. At the time, this episode was more celebrated than the attack of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry against Fort Wagner near Charleston. Eventually nearly 180,000 blacks served.

Despite its significance, the Port Hudson campaign largely has been neglected by historians of the war. They generally have relegated it to a paragraph at the end of a discussion of Vicksburg or put it in a footnote. The first modern study of the operations was not even written until 1963. The site of the greatest suffering by soldiers in the field on both sides should not be forgotten.

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