

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Paducah-Gateway to the Confederacy

By John P. Cashon

When one watches the Civil War movies like *Gettysburg* and *Glory*, most think of the battles that occurred in the east. The battles in the east were very important for keeping the opposing forces from taking Washington D.C. and Richmond, Virginia. However, it can be argued that it was events in the western theatre of operations, where General Ulysses S. Grant's victories occurred at Fort Henry, Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Corinth and finally Vicksburg, Mississippi, that had the most dramatic effect on the war.

Similarly, when one studies Confederate General Robert E. Lee's successes at the Second Battle of Bull Run and also at Fredericksburg, the impression is that the war was going just as the Confederates wanted, but even though these battles in the east were very important for keeping the Union forces from taking the southern capital at Richmond, Virginia, as well as many later battles in which Lee commanded, it can be argued that it was events in the western theatre of operations, where General Ulysses S. Grant's victories occurred at Fort Henry, Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Corinth and finally Vicksburg, Mississippi, that had the most dramatic effect on the war. By gaining control of the Tennessee River at Paducah, Kentucky and control of the Cumberland River at Smithland, Kentucky, Grant was able to gain access to river highways that allowed his forces to strike deep into the Confederacy. Because Grant was able to strike and take Fort Henry on the Tennessee, and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland, these successes allowed him to flank the Confederates at Columbus, Kentucky and also at Bowling Green, Kentucky, forcing the Confederate armies to retreat out of Tennessee.¹

On September 6, 1861, when Grant took Paducah, Kentucky, after Confederate Major General Leonidas Polk took Hickman and Columbus, Kentucky on September 3-4, 1861, his quick action countered the earlier Confederate move that took control of the Mississippi River at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Capturing Paducah gave Grant access deep into the south through Tennessee and northern Mississippi all the way to Chattanooga, Tennessee via the Tennessee River. It also gave him access to the Cumberland River at Smithland, Kentucky that provided a route

¹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee 1861-1865*, (New York and Toronto, Canada: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 2005), 35-39.

straight to Nashville. The later victories that Grant accomplished can be directly tied to his control of Paducah.

At the beginning of the war, both sides thought that the bluffs at Columbus, Kentucky, on the Mississippi River below the confluence with the Ohio River which formed a part of the region called the Jackson Purchase, was the most important place in western Kentucky. After Fort Sumter fell to the Confederacy, the State of Kentucky tried to remain neutral. Not wishing to risk pushing the state into the arms of their enemies during this time, both Union and Confederate armies tried to place their forces on the most strategically advantageous points on Kentucky's borders, especially in the west, next to the Mississippi River. The Union army set up its headquarters at Cairo, Illinois, and Bird's Point, Missouri, at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and the Confederate army set up at Union City, Tennessee, and New Madrid, Missouri, just across the border from southwest Kentucky. Columbus, due to its high bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, created a natural defensive position that would control any river vessels attempting to pass up or down the Mississippi. By putting artillery batteries on these bluffs, the side that controlled this area could effectively control the Mississippi River Valley and the adjacent portions of Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee.

The problem that the Union army had early in the war when they were setting up Fort Defiance at Cairo, Illinois was that the people in the Jackson Purchase were largely Confederate sympathizers. In 1818, almost ten years before Paducah became a town, the Jackson Purchase treaty with the Chickasaw Indians was completed, and because most of the early settlers into the region came from the southern states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia and Tennessee, they had a strong affinity for southerner Andrew “Old Hickory” Jackson, who lived in Nashville, Tennessee. Also, because the Jackson Purchase was geographically isolated from the rest of Kentucky due to its being located west of the Tennessee River, the culture remained southern and strongly Democratic. In fact, the region was so Democratic that it was known as the “Democratic Gibraltar” of the state.²

On September 2, 1861, General Polk ordered Brigadier General Gideon Johnson Pillow to move into Kentucky, and the next day, they entered Hickman unopposed. Pillow moved his forces by the Mississippi River from New Madrid to Hickman, and on the fourth, the main army marched overland and took control of the heights at Columbus. The main reason cited by Polk's move was that Union forces were seen across the river at Belmont, Missouri. The forces they saw were sent by the Union

² J. H. Battle, William Henry Perrin and G. C. Kniffin, *Histories and Biographies of Ballard, Calloway, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, McCracken and Marshall Counties, Kentucky* (Louisville, KY/Chicago, IL: F. A. Battey Publishing Co., 1885), 28-34; Patricia Ann Hoskins, “‘The Old First is with the South’: The Civil War, Reconstruction, and Memory in the Jackson Purchase Region of Kentucky” (Dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Auburn University, 2008, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009. 3365543, 32-33. See: <http://search.proquest.com/openview/5a8a1f762ba4a70bf29379ecc78ecdbf/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>, accessed August 27, 2018 ; Berry F. Craig, “Kentucky’s South Carolina: The Jackson Purchase in the Secession Crisis of 1860-1861.” in *Journal of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society* 3 (1975): 28-34; Hoskins, “Old First”, 4-5.

Western commanding general Major General John C. Frémont from Cairo, Illinois, and when they saw the Confederate forces entering Columbus, the Union forces in Belmont left on the same day. In a letter to President Davis on September 4, General Polk stated:³

The enemy having descended the Mississippi River some three or four days since, and seated himself with cannon and intrenched [sic] lines opposite the town of Columbus, Ky., making such demonstrations as left no doubt upon the minds of any of their intention to seize and forcibly possess said town, I thought proper, under the plenary power delegated to me, to direct a sufficient portion of my command, both by river way and by land, to concentrated at Columbus, as well to [afford] to its citizens that protection they unite to a man in accepting, as also to prevent in time the occupation by the enemy of a point so necessary to the security of Western Tennessee. This demonstration on my part has had the desired effect. The enemy had withdrawn his force even before I had fortified my position.⁴

On the same day that the main Confederate force entered Columbus, Commander John Rodgers on the U.S. Gunboat *Tyler* sent a message to Major General Frémont, in St. Louis, telling him about the events after the Union forces under Colonel Gustave Waagner, at Belmont, made a reconnaissance down the river as far as Hickman. In the letter, he stated, “When we arrived in sight of Hickman we discovered a rebel gunboat, with the Confederate flag flying, off that town. The boat fired a shot at us, to which we replied; a number of tents extending for half a mile were upon the shore fronting the river. When three or four shots had been exchanged a battery on shore fired several guns, then another battery opened upon us.” Commander Rodgers, after firing approximately twenty shots, decided to move away from Hickman back toward Cairo, and when they were passing Columbus, he stated, “Upon passing Columbus and the Chalk-Banks, we were fired upon by rebels with muskets. This was returned with muskets principally—but also by two great guns.” Commander Rodgers concluded by noting that “the army at Hickman is considerable.”⁵

³ Lewis Collins and Richard H. Collins *History of Kentucky*, 2 vols. (Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Historical Society, 1874), 1:93; John Y. Simon, ed. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 31 vols. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2009), 2:178 (Waagner wrote to USG. "Your Genl order No 2 dated Cape Girardeau Mo Sept 1st and your special order dated Cairo Ills Sept 3d 1861 I received at 4. o'clock this evening. I shall leave at 3. o'clock tomorrow morning with my command for Charleston leaving the two Gun Boats to watch Columbus and Belmont in fulfillment of my order from the Commander in Chief dated St Louis August 25th, 1861). Ibid., 2:178; United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 3, p. 148 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 3, 148), (Grant tells Fremont that he ordered troops to leave Belmont).

⁴ *O.R.*, I, 4, 181.

⁵ Simon, *Papers*, 2:187.

General Grant arrived at Cairo on September 4, and on the fifth, one of General Frémont's paid scouts, Charles A. de Arnaud, a Russian who had just arrived after traveling from Memphis and Union City, reported that Hickman and Columbus were occupied and that Confederate troops were sent out to take Paducah. In Arnaud's report to Frémont, he wrote, "Just arrived from Memphis and Union City, Tenn. The enemy is marching in large force to take Paducah, on the Ohio River, to invade Southern Illinois. Our occupation of Paducah will frustrate the enemy's plans and secure for us the Tennessee River. Have communicated this to General Grant. He will move at once. No time to lose."⁶

By September 5, General Grant had sent multiple messages explaining his military designs to General Frémont in St. Louis, and because he had received no responses, he went ahead with his move to Paducah. Afterward, Grant sent a message explaining his action to Frémont about setting out from Cairo: "I left Cairo at 10:30 o'clock last night, taking two gunboats and three steamboats, with the Ninth Illinois, under Gen. E.A. Paine; the Twelfth Illinois, under Col. J. McArthur, and Smith's battery, four pieces light artillery, under Lieutenant Willard. I met with some detention at Mound city, owing to an accident to one of the steamers, creating a necessity for a transfer of troops. During the detention I was joined by Captain Foote, U.S. Navy, who accompanied the expedition."⁷

General Grant's fleet arrived at Paducah at 8:30 a.m. on September 6, and encountered numerous secession flags flying over the city, making it apparent that the citizens were anticipating the approach of the rebel army. Grant wrote that as he approached the city, Confederate Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman and his staff left by the railroad, taking with them all the rolling stock. Grant was able to land his troops and take possession of the city without firing a gun.⁸

Colonel John McArthur's 12th Illinois regiment landed at the Marine Hospital, which was in the lower part of the city, and Brigadier General Eleazer A. Paine's 9th Illinois regiment landed at the foot of Broadway. The 12th Illinois took control of the hospital, and the 9th Illinois marched up Broadway toward the Ohio and New Orleans railroad depot. In his report to Frémont, Grant noticed that before the soldiers

⁶ Simon, *Papers*, 2:193; Charles A. De Arnaud, *The Union, and Its Ally, Russia: An Historical Narrative of the Most Critical and Exciting Period of Our Late War. Reminiscences of Col. Charles A. de Arnaud* (Washington, D.C.: Gibson Bros. Printers and Bookbinders, 1890.), 10-11.

⁷ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1885-1886), 1:80; *O.R.*, I, 3, 150; *O.R.*, I, 4, 197.

⁸ Simon, *Papers*, 2:196.

disembarked, all of the secession flags had disappeared, and after landing, Grant had U.S. flags raised in their place.⁹

After taking control of the railroad depot, Grant stated that many complete rations and almost two tons of leather were found, which he said was marked for the Confederate army. Also, the Union forces seized the telegraph office and a number of letters and dispatches. The September 11 St. Louis Democrat newspaper, recorded that Commander John Rogers “immediately took possession of the telegraph office. He was refused admittance, but the prompt application of the butts of muskets in the hands of his marines, gave quick entrance. It was found that the battery of the office had been carried off. The wires were immediately cut. The Post-office was next searched, and a large number of the most violent secession letters to rebels in the South were found.”¹⁰

After Paducah was occupied by the Union army, the city became a staging area for green Union volunteer forces under Brigadier General Charles Ferguson Smith. Because he was formerly the Commandant of Cadets at West Point, which had trained the likes of Brigadier Generals Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman in their younger days, he was considered the best person to take control at Paducah. He spent much of his time getting his soldiers in shape and ready for battle.¹¹

Paducah was very fortunate to have escaped a deadly and destructive outcome while the city was on the front lines of the war. As the troops and gunboats went south to capture Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, the Confederate armies in Hickman, Columbus and Bowling Green were forced to move south to keep from getting flanked and surrounded by Grant’s army. Paducah was now behind the Union lines, and the secessionists in the city and in the Jackson Purchase were horrified when they learned that the Southern armies, including many of their sons, were moving away and leaving them in the hands of the Federal army.

In time, the importance of Paducah became apparent. Situated at the confluence of the Tennessee and Ohio rivers, it defended crucial supply lines that supported the Union advances up the rivers to Nashville and Louisville.

After the Battle of Shiloh on April 6, 1862, Paducah became an important area for many hospitals to help the vast numbers of sick and wounded being shipped down the Tennessee River, away from the front lines in the south. Makeshift hospitals in Paducah

⁹ Frank Moore, *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, with Documents, Narratives, Illustrative Incidents, Poetry, Etc.*, 12 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam/Henry Holt, 1864-1868), 3:67; *O.R.*, I, 4, 197.

¹⁰ *O.R.*, I, 4, 197; Moore, *Rebellion Record*, 3:67.

¹¹ Simon, *Papers*, 2:205-16; Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (Boston, MA: Brown and Company, 1960), 50; James N. Granger, *Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Minnesota Commandery: Companion Warren Granger, Lieutenant-Colonel 100th N.Y. Infantry and Brevet Colonel U.S. Volunteers*. Vol. 5 (Hartford, CT: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard, 1895), 8.

include the Baptist, Christian, Episcopal, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, along with the Female Seminary, the courthouse and other public and private buildings.¹²

Arguably without Paducah, Grant might not have been able to mount his successful campaigns along the Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Paducah remained a major Union supply depot and center for care of the sick and wounded throughout the war. Without Grant's capture of Paducah, the war in the west might have turned out very differently. Paducah's capture was one of Grant's early and important successes as Paducah became the gateway to the Confederacy.

¹² Nurse Jennie Fyfe to (her sister) Nell Fyfe, March 20, 1864, University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library Correspondence of Jennie Fyfe, 1864-1866 from Fyfe Family Papers 1864-1954, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/idx/b/bhlcivilwar/2011348.0001.001?view=toc> , accessed August 27, 2018.