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## Interview

### RE-EXAMINING THE RED RIVER: INTERVIEW WITH GARY DILLARD JOINER

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*An instructor of history and director of the Red River Regional Studies Center at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, Gary Dillard Joiner is also the founder of Precision Cartographics. He serves as a member of the U. S. Civil War Center's On-Site Advisory Board. He is the President of the Friends of the Mansfield Battlefield, a preservation organization dedicated to saving the battlefields of the Red River Campaign. Joiner is past president of the North Louisiana Civil War Roundtable. In addition to being a Louisiana and Civil War historian, he is a professional cartographer. Among other projects, Joiner creates geographic information systems for the Civil War Preservation Trust in Washington, D.C. Gary Joiner's latest book is One Damn Blunder From Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864 (Scholarly Resources). Re-examining the Red River*

Interviewed by Leah Wood Jewett

***Civil War Book Review (CWBR): How did the Red River campaign initially capture your interest?***

**Gary Dillard Joiner (GDJ):** I have been interested in the Civil War since childhood. My scholarly pursuits led me to Civil War navies and also to the Trans-Mississippi region. The two were combined in the Red River Campaign of 1864. In 1994 the late Dr. Eddie Vetter, a professor at Centenary College in Shreveport, and I wrote an article on the Union navy in the Red River Campaign for the journal *Civil War Regiments*. This article became the kernel of both my dissertation and *One Damn Blunder From Beginning to End*.

***CWBR: How has your expertise in the fields of history, archeology, geography, and cartography affected your approach to this topic?***

**GDJ:** The Red River valley in Louisiana is a difficult place to examine a Civil War campaign. The river has moved constantly from the first European settlement to the creation of the J. Bennett Johnston Waterway navigation system in the 1980s and 1990s. Documents from the Civil War often describe geographic landmarks which little resemble features today or describe places no longer on the Red River. The key to ground truthing the campaign is the use of maps from Union and Confederate cartographers, modern topographic maps, examination of archeological site forms from the State of Louisiana, and, of course, reading through volumes of reports and messages in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*. I use all of these tools to examine the campaign. I have had great success using this technique in other places, particularly at Vicksburg while mapping the Vicksburg National Military Park and surrounding areas for the National Park Service. Whether working on relatively obscure campaigns or well-documented battles, an inter-disciplinary approach is best.

***CWBR: Current critics of the war against Iraq argue that oil is the underlying reason for the conflict. What role did economics in general and cotton in particular play in the federal decision to execute the Red River campaign?***

**GDJ:** The Red River Campaign was driven almost entirely by economics and politics. The military objectives, although touted early in the war by President Lincoln, General George McClellan, General Henry Halleck, and others, were secondary. Many of New England's textile (cotton) mills were idled due to lack of the fiber and over 28,000 workers were out of work. The Red River Valley was called the Upper Cotton Kingdom. It was among the most fertile cotton growing areas in the world. This alone made it a high priority economic target. Also to be considered was the upcoming presidential race in the fall of 1864. President Lincoln had a strong potential contender in Nathaniel P. Banks. Banks, who led the campaign, was very popular in New England. A native son of Massachusetts, Banks was a former three-term governor and former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. He understood cotton, textile mills, and the needs of his wealthy benefactors. Added to this mix of priorities was the misunderstanding by President Lincoln that the German immigrant hill farmers in Texas would revolt against the Confederate government and mount a counterrevolution if they received Federal assistance.

***CWBR: What role did engineering play?***

**GDJ:** The role of both Union and Confederate engineers was vital in the conduct of the campaign. The Confederates prepared massive fortifications and traps at several points along the river culminating in layered defenses in and near Shreveport. The most ingenious system was located just south of Shreveport at a place called Tone's Bayou. The Confederates diverted 75% of the water from the Red River into Bayou Pierre and almost trapped the Union fleet. Admiral David D. Porter, commanding the Union naval effort, was at a loss for an explanation of the river's behavior. The fleet was not saved by naval efforts, but by a Wisconsin lumberman, Colonel Joseph Bailey. Bailey's Dam, actually a series of structures, raised the water level enough for the vessels to float and pass into the safe portions of the channel below Alexandria. Col. Bailey was awarded the Medal of Honor for his efforts. At the end of the campaign, Bailey again saved the army by creating a bridge of steamboats lashed side by side to allow the cavalry, artillery, and finally the infantry to cross the Atchafalaya River into the safety of Union held territory.

**CWBR:** *What did the outcome of the campaign mean for Northern war strategy? Southern morale?*

**GDJ:** The campaign had a definite effect on Northern plans in that 10,000 troops detached from General Sherman were not able to join him in the Atlanta Campaign or the March to the Sea. They were sent to Tennessee where they were pivotal in the final battles in that state. The XIX Corps was sent to Washington to bolster the defenses and arrived in time to fend off Confederate raids and then to participate in General Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley Campaign. The Red River Campaign briefly revived Southern morale. General Richard Taylor, the true Confederate hero of the campaign was given the official thanks of the Confederate Congress. Taylor captured enough supplies from the retreating Union column to equip his small army for the remainder of the war.

**CWBR:** *How valuable is Richard Taylor's Destruction and Reconstruction to understanding the campaign?*

**GDJ:** Taylor's *Destruction and Reconstruction* ranks as one of the best autobiographies penned from either side in the war. He is certainly colorful at times and blunt in his opinions, but he is generally fair. Always eloquent, he describes the Department of the Trans-Mississippi as he saw it. His utter dislike of his department commander, Lt. General E. Kirby Smith, is plainly evident,

and at one point he calls him that hydrocephalus in Shreveport. Taylor also displays his contempt for Banks, having fought him both in Virginia and in Louisiana. Taylor's account adds a tremendous amount of information to that found in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*.

**CWBR:** *You mention in your introduction that the Union's failure here led to the neglect of this chapter of Civil War history. To what else do you attribute the lack of literature on the subject?*

**GDJ:** The winners always write the history, at least the most widely disseminated versions. The campaign was such an embarrassment to the Union effort in 1864 that most leaders chose not to write of their achievements. Indeed, there were few. Admiral Porter wrote two lengthy accounts of the campaign following the war. Beginning with his official reports and then the two books, each version was more embellished. Individual soldiers published diaries and books or gave speeches to veterans' organizations, but that was the extent on the northern side. Other than Taylor's book, few works came from the campaign on the Southern side. Little was published for the general public until 1958. The simple fact was that the campaign was a sideshow rather than a primary conflict designed to end the war quickly. That alone makes the campaign more difficult to research and understand, but it also makes it intriguing.

**CWBR:** *What is the legacy of the Red River campaign? Why is it important that we give it a second look?*

**GDJ:** The campaign's legacy rests more in what it did not do. Nathaniel Banks did not achieve his battlefield glory and was humiliated. Therefore, his bid for the Republican candidacy in 1864 fizzled. Before the campaign, he was arguably more popular than Lincoln, particularly in New England. Sherman's 10,000 did not join him in Georgia or the Carolinas. This may have lengthened the war by weeks. Taylor and his Confederates stopped the grand invasion of Texas and the capture of Shreveport, but they failed to capture or destroy the bulk of the inland or brown water navy. This may have tipped the balance of power along the Mississippi for an extended period of time and drawn forces from the east to re-conquer the great river. A particularly long-lasting result was the fact that northern Louisiana, almost all of Texas, and southwestern Arkansas did not receive the ravages of fighting. With the infrastructure intact, Reconstruction was particularly harsh in these areas and the ex-Confederates became the hard-core conservatives that led the Jim Crow movement. The

Colfax Riot and the Coushatta Massacre were direct responses to post-Confederate attitudes over harsh Reconstruction.