

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: The Last Bastion Small Collections Offer Details of the Siege of Port Hudson

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Feature Essay

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Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: The Last Bastion Small collections offer details of the Siege of Port Hudson.*

New Acquisitions in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries' Special Collections

A Sailor's Life

Strategic Port Hudson was the sole Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River when Vicksburg fell to Union forces in July 1863. Learning of the defeat, Confederate troops at Port Hudson put down their weapons, ending the hard fought 48-day siege. Confederate capitulation—resulting in federal control of the Mississippi River—prompted President Abraham Lincoln to comment: The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.

While Port Hudson held great strategic geographical significance, its socio-political impact should not be underestimated. The battle was one of the first few engagements in which African-American soldiers in blue saw combat. Though their effectiveness in the siege is a matter of debate, the participation of black soldiers in the campaign fueled recruitment efforts in the North. This response marked the dawning of a significant new perception in the North: black men would and could fight as well as white men, and were capable of contributing far more to the war effort than manual labor.

Featured below are excerpts from several recently processed collections which deal, in some way, with the Siege of Port Hudson (*Note: Spelling has been standardized for ease of reading*).

In August 1862, Union forces attacked Baton Rouge in an effort to disrupt supply lines and weaken Confederate control over the Mississippi River. Rebel troops fought back, but were ultimately unable to expel the Federal soldiers. Union General Benjamin Butler turned his focus to New Orleans, withdrawing his men from Baton Rouge.

After failing to hold Baton Rouge, the Confederates moved to fortify Port Hudson, a site high on a bluff roughly twenty-five miles upriver. Soldiers arrived on August 15; under the direction of Brigadier General Daniel Ruggles, preparations began for the acquisition of vital provisions and the placement of artillery in the most strategically advantageous locations.

Confederate topographical report of Port Hudson

August 30, 1862 Mss. 3921MISC:C, LLMVC

Born in France, Leon J. Fremaux was educated in Louisiana. He was a civil engineer and watercolorist. During the Civil War, he served in the Confederate army as captain of the 8th Louisiana Infantry, Company A, and became a chief of engineers in the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana. Fremaux is known for his ink and watercolor maps.

In his report to Confederate Brigadier General Daniel Ruggles, Fremaux outlines his findings regarding placement of light artillery:

In obedience to your order of the 29th instant: I have had an examination made of the right bank of the river from Mr. Robinson's plantation to Trudeau's Store, with a view of placing light artillery and to protect the horses and caissons from the projectiles of the enemy; I therefore respectfully report:

That: From Robinson's to Ware's there are certain sections of the levee affording good shelter and good range. From Ware's to some distance above the point the levee is too far from the water edge, and the view is obstructed by thick light timber.

But facing the Thompson Creek and therefore clearing our batteries in their range, canons can be planted for a distance of 526 yards. The levee gives a good protection and a range of not over 300 yards on any ascending or descending boats.

In the vicinity of Trudeau's Store the place is again good for artillery but between the two points the levee [illegible] through the wood and at too great a distance from the river.

Union forces returned to Baton Rouge in December 1862 to find the town empty and in ruins. It was here that Federals established a base for planning and executing operations against Port Hudson.

Union soldier Parker letter and train ticket

Dec. 18, 1862Mss. 4902MISC:U, LLMVC

Parker (it is unknown as to whether or not this is the first or last name) was a Union soldier whose regiment was assigned to the U. S. Army 19th Corps under General Nathaniel P. Banks.

In a letter written from Baton Rouge during the planning stages of the Union effort against Port Hudson, Parker notes:

We landed here yesterday afternoon, under cover of the famous ironclad gunboat Essex and three small vessels also mounted, not knowing what we had got to contend with. The gun boats commenced shelling the place û it proved that there was only four or five companies of rebels here and they let in a hurry...they left 10 or 15 horses all saddled and bridled, which we took, also [illegible] stragglers, rebels. Two or three rebels were killed by the shells...

We lay on our arms last night, expecting the rebels would be reinforced and give us battle, but they did not see fit to try it...Oh, they say (citizens) that they are 12,000 strong at Port Hudson, about 20 miles up the river, and that the rebels say they will have the place [Baton Rouge] again in less than three weeks...

On December 28, 1862, federal soldiers encamped in the state capitol building (today's Old State Capitol) inadvertently set fire to the building. This tragic mistake marked the beginning of Union occupation of the city, which was to last for the duration of the war and Reconstruction.

Andre Hamille Beauchamp letters

March 6, 1863Mss. 4305, 4403MISC:B, LLMVC

Private Andre H. Beauchamp served in the 1st Alabama Infantry Regiment, Company F, in the infirmary corps. The regiment was organized in Pensacola, Florida, in March 1861.

Beauchamp's letters to his wife describes activity at Port Hudson:

[March 6, 1863] We hear so many false reports we [do not] know when to believe anything. Deserters come in here every day from Baton Rouge two or three at the time...

They can't hurt us much if they do attack us, we have a very large number of light artillery pieces here for the size of the army and manned mostly by companies who had felt the shock of battle before...

One week later on the night of Saturday, March 14, 1863, U. S. naval forces under the command of Admiral David Farragut coordinated actions with General Nathaniel Banks and his army to attack Port Hudson. The goal was to successfully push seven federal gunboats up the river past the fort. The fight was intense and loud as Confederate batteries and Union vessels traded shots throughout the night. The sound was reportedly heard from as far away as New Orleans. Only two of the seven federal gunboats made it past Port Hudson û by contrast, the Confederate batteries emerged unscathed.

[March 22, 1863] How we escaped without some being wounded or killed in the Saturday night fight is indeed wonderful. We (I mean our company) were under cover of fire (and in hottest at that) during the whole of the engagement without any protection in an open field. Just behind one of the batteries that did considerable execution to the enemy's gun boats and you may rest assured that they did their best to silence that battery and our company being just behind it was in complete range of their guns...

Banks ordered a retreat after the explosion of the Union vessel Mississippi; forces marched back to Baton Rouge, confiscating property along the way.

F. A. Belcher letter

[April 1, 1863]Mss. 3196MISC:B, LLMVC

Private Francis A. Belcher served with the 4th Massachusetts Infantry, Company D. Belcher's regiment was organized at Camp Hoe Hooker, in Lakeville, Massachusetts in 1862.

Belcher wrote to his mother and brother:

But Friday morning we were ordered to get ready to start again. We got ready and started out into the road about eleven o'clock and stopped there until half past four in the afternoon, waiting for the army to pass as we were to be the rear guard of the main army. And while we laid there two regular batteries and Nims' battery, three divisions of infantry and cavalry passed by and they were a tired looking lot of boys I tell you. We then started for Baton Rouge and the boys were glad enough to get there all safe and sound for when we started we did all expected [not] to get there without fighting...Port Hudson is now of no use to the rebels as all supplies are cut off from there and the place is as good as ours...

On May 27, 1863, federal navy and army commanders launched a joint attack on Port Hudson. Twelve hours of vicious fighting ensued; at the end of the day, Confederates suffered fewer losses, and maintained control of the fort.

George R. Waite Port Hudson letter

June 10 û 11, 1863Mss. 4904MISC:W, LLMVC

George R. Waite was a mechanic and farmer from New London, Connecticut. He enlisted as a private in the 26th Connecticut Infantry Regiment, Company K.

Writing while stationed near Port Hudson, Waite relays recent action:

And about sun set we came in sight of the Rebel rifle pits which was immediately charged upon by the New York Zouaves and carried without firing a gun, the rebels leaving the last as our troops entered the first...

We made a charge on the enemy's works the 27th of May and had to give way with considerable loss and it is a wonder that our loss was not greater...

We are in musket shot of their fortifications, the enemy, I mean, and they are entirely surrounded. But there will probably be a great loss of life before they surrender...

The next major assault would take place on June 14, 1863, just days after Waite wrote his letter. The Confederates surrendered after having maintained control of the last bastion for an incredible 48 days. Union control of Port Hudson effectively split the Confederacy in two, isolating Arkansas and Texas, and damaging critical lines of supply and communication.

Many more collections within LLMVC feature accounts related to the Siege of Port Hudson, providing details that help flesh out our understanding of this pivotal action. A Civil War subject guide to related collections is available online at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/guides/civwar.html>.

If you are interested in using these or other collections in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, visit LSU Libraries Special Collections online at www.lib.lsu.edu/special for visitor information.

Recommended reading:

The Port Hudson Campaign, 1862-1863 by Edward Cunningham

Port Hudson: Confederate Bastion on the Mississippi by Lawrence Lee Hewitt

About the photographs:

On the cover:

After Surrender, Port Hudson, La., c. 1864. McPherson & Oliver, photographers. Marshall Dunham Photographic Album (Mss. 3241), Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries.

With the column:

Steamship Mississippi: Farragut's fleet, c. 1863. McPherson & Oliver, photographers. G. H. Suydam Collection (Mss. 1394), Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries.

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