



## *The Siege of Vicksburg: Climax of the Campaign to Open the Mississippi River, May 23–July 4, 1863* by Timothy B. Smith.

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Timothy Smith is a prolific author of works on the US Civil War Era, with an emphasis on key battles and battlefield preservation.<sup>1</sup> His most recent study is part of his multi-volume history of the Vicksburg Campaign<sup>2</sup> a work meant to make good a deficit in the scholarship:

while historians have argued over that siege and the larger campaign and its importance in the Civil War, amazingly, the siege has not received its share of attention from historians.... [It] is often portrayed as a whimper at the end of the exciting land campaign leading to Vicksburg.... While the siege would not have been possible without the earlier efforts of the campaign, so the earlier gains in the campaign would not have netted much of anything without the final blow brought about by the siege. Often tacked on as a predestined or foreordained conclusion, the siege operations in and of themselves have a lot to offer to our understanding of the campaign and the war itself in terms of the extent of the operations, the complexity of the strategy and tactics, the grueling nature of the day-by-day participation, and the effect on all involved. (xv)

The first three chapters set the context by informing readers about the city of Vicksburg itself, the campaign, and the Union assaults of 19–22 May 1863. Vicksburg was a tough nut to crack.

[It] lay inside a cocoon of safety, shielded by the Mississippi River to the west, the Delta to the North, and the Big Black River to the east and south, One or more of these major water features would have to be breached, tamed, or conquered for the Union forces to even approach Vicksburg, and that did not even factor in the actual capture of the city, which was itself ringed with fortifications along the half-circle to the north, east, and south, especially on each major thoroughfare's entrance into the city. In actuality, just reaching Vicksburg was problematic enough, but then taking it would prove just as difficult. (4)

General Ulysses Grant's various approaches included a particularly inventive and arduous idea involving constructing a canal across De Soto Peninsula in an attempt to re-route the Mississippi River. Grant, assisted by Adm. David Porter's fleet, eventually crossed the river below Vicksburg and fought a daring campaign that brought him to the very gates of the city. Smith reviews the campaign as well as the failed assaults on 19 and 22 May 1863. The failure of the assaults made it clear that a siege would be necessary and made both armies think "that nothing was likely to

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1. Viz., *This Great Battlefield of Shiloh: History, Memory, and the Establishment of a Civil War National Military Park* (Knoxville: U Tennessee Pr, 2004); *The Golden Age of Battlefield Preservation: The Decade of the 1890s and the Establishment of America's First Five Military Parks* (id., 2008); *Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2012); *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (id., 2014); and *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles for Forts Henry and Donelson* (id., 2016).

2. Viz., *The Union Assaults at Vicksburg: Grant Attacks Pemberton, May 17–22, 1863* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2020), and *Early Struggles for Vicksburg: The Mississippi Central Campaign and Chickasaw Bayou, October 25–December 31, 1862* (id., 2022).

change for the foreseeable future” (48).

Smith’s subsequent chapters analyze, in vivid and exhaustive detail, how the siege unfolded. Grant, perturbed that Vicksburg did not fall to his assaults, realized he would need to take the city by siege. As soldiers started digging, he called in reinforcements and fretted over what Confederate Gen. Joseph Johnston, summoned to relieve Vicksburg, was doing. But “Johnson exhibited from the start a lethargic attitude” (73) and, Smith argues, missed the moment to strike Grant in early June, when his 31,000 soldiers together with Gen. John Pemberton’s 29,000 outnumbered Grant’s 56,000 men (before reinforcements arrived). But the two spent most of the siege talking past each other; Smith concludes that “Johnston was probably not the right man for the job of relieving Vicksburg. It would take a bold leader willing to take a gamble for it to work—and Johnston was not that bold leader” (77). Nevertheless, Grant fretted on.

“If the first couple of days after the May 22 assault consumed both sides in getting their bearings and setting up more lengthy siege operations,” Smith comments, “the last week in May saw those operations come in full force.” As May turned into June, “almost all elements of the full-fledged siege became present” (89). Life assumed a monotonous rhythm for many soldiers. This did not mean that siege life was safe—“there was ... constant danger in the midst of the work on the front lines; the soldiers always being within range of the Confederates and drawing closer every day” (139). Sharpshooting and artillery fire played an important role during the siege. Furthermore, Smith asserts, “one of the truly important but often overlooked aspects of the Vicksburg Campaign, including the siege in large part, was the Union naval contribution” (91).

By late June, US engineering efforts had reached what Smith calls a more professional stage. He discusses the effect of mines under the rebel lines. Vicksburg surrendered on the Fourth of July, triggering great hatred, humiliation, and resentment among the rebels, quite apart from charges that Pemberton was a traitor. After the surrender, however, “many Confederates were just glad to finally be out from the ordeal—win or lose” (509). The consequences of Grant’s victory were profound: “the fall of Vicksburg severely damaged Confederate morale and military power in the Mississippi Valley, especially with a full army and all its weaponry and equipment lost” (533). That said, Vicksburg itself became a “backwater position” (535) as people turned their attention elsewhere. Smith’s account of what happened in Vicksburg after the soldiers left is june. One misses comments about post-siege life in the city and how it has been remembered, misremembered, and commemorated.

The great strength of the book is the remarkable array of voices the author weaves into his narrative. His bibliography features hundreds of manuscript collections, government documents, memoirs, and newspapers. Smith discusses the usual suspects, of course—Grant, Sherman, and McPherson; Pemberton and Johnston talking past each other; and McClernand feeling slighted. But he also includes numerous observations by soldiers and civilians, known and unknown. Some Union soldiers sympathized with the civilians in Vicksburg; others did not. Samuel Irwin, for example, observed that rebel “citizens are coming to grief—tired of their evil deeds now since it has overtaken them” (116). Smith includes examples of mordant humor. For example, US soldiers commented that rats fled from Vicksburg to avoid being eaten and that “if their rats are coming, the Rebels must also be soon tamed” (201). Grant himself joked about Pemberton being superseded in command by General Starvation. Rebels made sarcastic comments about “mule liver hashed, à la explosion” and “mule tongue, cold à la bray” (202).

In his engrossing new study of the Siege of Vicksburg, Timothy Smith offers a fascinating overview of how U.S. Grant, his generals, and his soldiers, captured the Gibraltar of the Confederacy.