

Civil War Treasures: The Siege of Vicksburg From Without and Within

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Feature Essay

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Siege warfare must necessarily produce radically different experiences for those besieging a city and those trapped within its walls. Such distinctly dissimilar impressions from the siege of Vicksburg are recorded in two small diaries contained in the LSU Libraries Special Collections. The Aaron P. Record Diary (Mss. 4869), kept by a private of the 8th Iowa Infantry Regiment, contains accounts of the quick-moving action of the wider Vicksburg campaign in vast strides from the first steamboat landing at Duckport, a trek down the west bank of the Mississippi River to the crossing at Grand Gulf, a mad dash to Jackson, to crisscrossing the road between Jackson and Vicksburg to force their capitulations. The Lewis Guion Diary (Mss. 826) conversely records the static, confined experiences of an officer of the 26th Louisiana Infantry Regiment inside the besieged city with its harassing incoming cannon fire, diminishing rations, and rumors that never cease in both their frequency and absurdity.

Aaron P. Record of Eden Township, Clinton County, Iowa, enlisted as a private in Company A of the 8th Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment on August 12, 1861. Organized at Davenport, Iowa, between August and September 1861, and attached to the Army of the Tennessee, the 8th Iowa took part in the Battle of Shiloh (April 6-7, 1862), where almost the entire regiment was captured. The prisoners were paroled and exchanged in the fall of 1862, and the regiment reorganized in January 1863 at Davenport and St. Louis.

Pvt. Record's journal opens at Benton Barracks in St. Louis on January 1, 1863. Most of its entries pertain to everyday camp life such as the weather, marching, drilling, inspection, discipline, drawing pay, building and striking camp, and serving picket and fatigue duty. The regiment left St. Louis on April 6—one year to the day after they had been captured at Shiloh—and traveled toward Vicksburg by steamboat. Pvt. Record arrived at Duckport Landing, Louisiana, on April 10 just as Grant's engineers began digging their ultimately hapless canal and in time to report Cmdr. David Dixon Porter's running of the Vicksburg blockade on April 16. His regiment marched south beginning on May 2 and crossed the Mississippi at Grand Gulf five

days later, followed by a dash to Jackson for its capture on May 15: “When we were within three miles of the place we met the Enemy but we steadily [*sic*] pushed forward amidst the shot & shell and drove him in his works. And then after a fight of three hours we drove him out and took posesions [*sic*] of Jackson.” After a day spent destroying railroads, the 8th Iowa began marching to Vicksburg. “[I was sick] and did not [go] with the [regment] [*sic*],” Pvt. Record recorded using a simple substitution cipher that he occasionally employed to keep sensitive lines of his diary confidential. He eventually caught up with his comrades and was at Vicksburg for the two failed assaults on May 19 and 22, writing after the latter effort, “I think it is useless to storm their works any more and I guess that they will seige [*sic*] them out.”

Lewis Guion was the son of a sugar planter of Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, who studied law at the University of Virginia and practiced in Thibodaux and New Orleans. On March 12, 1862, Guion enlisted as a lieutenant in Company D of the 26th Louisiana Infantry Regiment. His diary describes his departure from New Orleans (April 24, 1862); his company’s march from Camp Moore to Donaldsonville, Baton Rouge, and Greensburg (May 4, 1862); and military activities around Chickasaw Bayou and Yazoo Lake (December 24-29, 1862).

Lieut. Guion’s diary entries on the siege of Vicksburg began on May 18, 1863. Like his opponent, Guion also acknowledged the two failed Union assaults on May 19 and 22, including noting the names of some Confederates killed in action. Unlike their adversaries, Confederate soldiers at Vicksburg lived in near proximity to civilians with whom they were familiar. On May 20, Lieut. Guion wrote, “Last night went into town to see Mrs. Gibbs, inform her of Felix’s death. She & her daughter were very much affected. His body was brought in town to Capt. Née & he is to be buried today.”¹

Both diaries documented the familiar and repetitive acts of siege warfare for over a month: musket fire and skirmishes, sniping, harassing artillery fire, truces to bury the dead, rare days of strange beauty and stillness, and monotonous waiting. Pvt. Record’s journal always exhibited an unyielding confidence in Union efforts, as when he described sappers’ labors to undermine the city’s defensive lines. “The seige [*sic*] still progresses finely, our men are mining right up to the rebels works and if Mr. Rebel don’t look out some fine morn he will find himself blown sky high with our powder that is under their forts.”

¹ Captain Felix Grundy Winder of the 26th Louisiana Infantry Regiment Company K was killed of a gunshot wound to the chest on May 19, 1863. Captain L. Erasme Née was quartermaster of the regiment.

Conversely, Vicksburg under siege was a city buzzing with vain if hopeful rumors that could not be quashed, even by news gleaned from smuggled-in northern newspapers. Lieut. Guion noted many that he heard in conversation. May 27: “One iron clad attempted to pass the batteries this morning & was sunk ... Com. Porter was reported to have been on the boat we sank this morning.” May 28: “There are rumours in town today that Gen. Lee has badly whipped Harker & now occupies Arlington Heights, that Bragg has whipped Rosecrans.”² May 31: “Yesterday we heard that a courier had arrived the day previous from Johnston & that he was at Jackson with 40000 men awaiting a division of Bragg’s army.” June 3: “This evening there was a rumour that Johnston was within five miles with 55000 men.” June 5: “Again heard rumour that Price had captured Helena taking 82 pieces of artillery.”³ June 7: “Kirby Smith driven Banks into New Orleans & taking Baton Rouge & marching on New Orleans, Kirby Smith at New Carthage, Gen. Gardner at Baton Rouge.”⁴

The truth of the war became clearer on July 3 when the endgame became apparent to Lieut. Guion, “Went into town this morning. About nine o’clock flag of truce sent out by us, towards the middle of the day & early in the evening it began to be whispered that Pemberton was making terms of surrender & by night on account of an order being received that during the night there should be no firing it was confirmed in the minds of all, one hardly began to realize it but I had somewhat the same feeling I had when in New Orleans. I thought it would be taken. I conversed with Yankees twenty feet off. If the surrender on the 4th of July—on a day that would particularly gratify the Yankees—I shall certainly believe Pemberton to be a traitor, for he certainly could have had it later.”

Pvt. Record was stationed well in the rear of Vicksburg on July 4 when news of its capitulation reached his regiment. They wasted no time on their next move, “I started for the reg’mt at 6 o’clock this morning. I got there at noon. The news came that Vicksburg had surrendered [*sic*], just as I got there Vicksburg was surrendered [*sic*] this morning at seven o’clock and the garrison marched out and stacked their arms our forces took posesion [*sic*] at eight. As

² Col. Charles Garrison Harker (1837-1864) had participated in the Battle of Shiloh, the Siege of Corinth, and the Battle of Stones River. He was promoted to brigadier general after distinguished service during the Battle of Chickamauga.

³ Gen. Sterling Price (1809-1867) commanded infantry at the Battle of Helena on July 4, 1863, which failed to take the city from the Union Army.

⁴ Gen. Franklin Gardner (1823-1873) commanded the defense of Port Hudson, Louisiana, which surrendered on July 9, 1863, after a forty-seven day siege. Baton Rouge had been occupied by Union forces since May 1862.

soon as the news came we packed up and was soon redy [*sic*] to march. We started at three o'clock and marched three miles towards Jackson and then camped."

Inside Vicksburg on July 4, after a brief but dignified surrender of arms and colors, order quickly broke down. Yankees stole Lieut. Guion's horse that he had been granted by the terms of the surrender, as well as others' horses and mules. "About 2:30 reached town, in the court house could be seen the U.S. flag the streets were filled with Yankees & before long the sacking of the city began. On Washington street numerous stores were broken open by Yankees with large stones & the contents taken, Yankee officers looking on. Between 5 & 6 in the evening the General & Staff officers (myself among the number) were paroled at Genl. Pemberton's Qrs. There I saw Genl. Pemberton for the first time, he had a careworn, anxious & nervous look."

The city began to calm down the following day and Lieut. Guion began to notice "the demoralized state of the men & in great many officers. They say they will not go into camp but wish to go home, that they have been badly treated by the Confederacy & that the C States is lost. As for myself I am still hopeful & expect to live long enough to be in a fight where the Yankees are whipped." The manner in which the Union soldiers took the city only stoked his ire toward them, as when he noted, "The Yankees are behaving badly about negroes. Thy are searching around today parties of men who go into houses & take from there negroes. The more I see of the Yankees & Yankee character the more I detest them. ... I will be very much mistaken if Grim Death does not have a promising crop in the Yankees here this summer with hot sun & mean water, I have great hopes that many of them may die."

In the meantime, the 8th Iowa strode toward Jackson at a good clip, stopping only to rest. "I had the pleasure of lodging in a Negro cabin on old Jeff's Place," Pvt. Record wrote on July 7, referring to Brierfield, the abandoned plantation of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. They stopped two miles from Jackson on July 10, "when we met an obsticle [*sic*] in the shape of a fort mounting 64 lb. seige [*sic*] guns. We formed in battle line and camped for the night." Five days later, after much shelling and skirmishing, they still sat. "A flag of truce was sent to our lines yesterday by Johnson [i.e., General Joseph E. Johnston]. It is reported that he gave us 24 hours to raise the seige [*sic*] or he would drive us away. I think he will have the privilege to try to drive us but if he does I am badly fooled for I think it will take more men than he has got to make us leave." Two days later, on July 17, Pvt. Record wrote of the fall of the city, "The enemy evacuated Jackson last night and this morn our troops took peaceable posesion [*sic*]. Our forces

have started in pursuit. The rebs set the city on fire before they left.” With Jackson re-captured, any Confederate threat to Union control of Vicksburg vanished and the campaign came to an end. Although both diarists continued their entries for several more months, their complementary accounts of the siege of Vicksburg remain the most fruitful part of these invaluable resources for studying the campaign to capture the famous Confederate citadel on the Mississippi.

Hans Rasmussen received an MA degree in history from Louisiana State University and an MLIS degree in archives and records enterprise from the University of Texas at Austin. He worked as an archivist and catalog librarian at the University of Southern Mississippi until 2006 when he joined the Louisiana State University Libraries. He has served as Head of Special Collections Technical Services in the LSU Libraries since 2013.