

THE BATTLE
OF
JACKSON,
MISSISSIPPI

MAY 14, 1863

ALSO BY CHRIS MACKOWSKI

Decisions at Fredericksburg: The Fourteen Critical Decisions that Defined the Battle

Grant's Last Battle: The Story Behind the Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant

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BATTLES & LEADERS SERIES

THE BATTLE
OF
JACKSON,
MISSISSIPPI

MAY 14, 1863

Chris Mackowski

SB

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Savas Beatie Battles & Leaders Series

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For Jackson

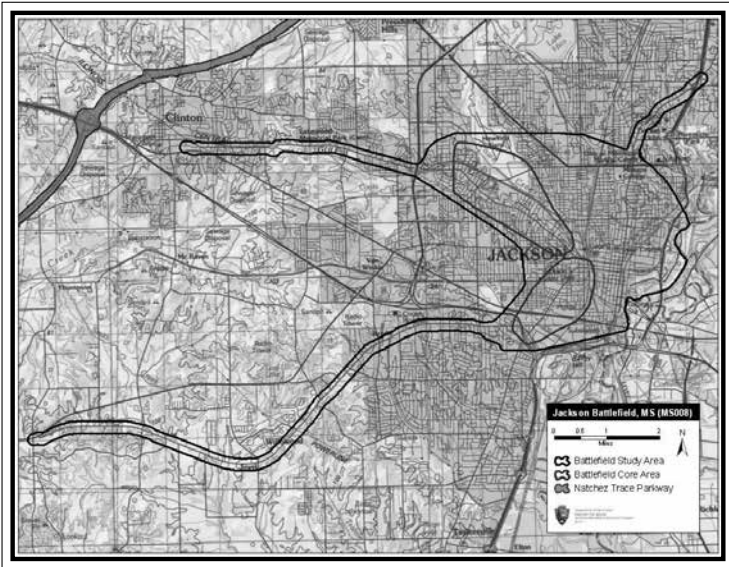
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JACKSON BATTLEFIELD, MS

The National Park Service assessment of Jackson’s core battlefield areas overlays atop a busy state capital, with virtually no preserved space. The battlefield study area includes the approach routes of the Federal army as well as part of the evacuation route of the Confederates.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FIRST, MY thanks to Kris White and the American Battlefield Trust (ABT) for sparking my interest in the Vicksburg Campaign in general and the battle of Jackson specifically. Thanks, too, to Conner Townsend for her excellent work on our expedition.

Dave Powell and Timothy B. Smith looked over early drafts of this manuscript and were gracious with their constructive feedback. I am lucky to count Dave a colleague at Emerging Civil War (ECW) and even luckier to count both Dave and Tim as friends. Dave also helped me track down a few western sources lacking from my eastern-centric library, as did Jon-Erik Gilot and Gary Milligan. Thanks, too, to Pat McCormick for his review of the manuscript.

Matt Atkinson was kind enough to raid the research library at Vicksburg National Military Park for me in search of Jackson-related sources, of which there turned out to be few (not to Matt's surprise). My thanks to Vicksburg National Military Park for giving Matt access for me, though. It's a wonderful park with wonderful resources.

I'm also lucky that when I have a Vicksburg-related question, I can get a quick answer from park historian (and occasional ECW contributor) Andrew Miller or my old friend, historian Emma Murphy Novak. They have been patient with my inquiries, and I appreciate their readiness to always help.

Jim Woodrick was gracious enough to not only offer his expertise but also show me around the lost battlefield of Jackson with the knowing eye of a native and the patience of a sage. I intentionally steered away from the July 1863 actions around the city in my own retelling of Jackson's story because Jim wrote an excellent book on the topic, *The Civil War Siege of Jackson, Mississippi* (History Press, 2016).

Edward Alexander made several great maps that, as usual, enhance the overall work tremendously. At first, I just asked for two . . . then a couple more . . . and finally settled on six. Let's just say that Edward's cartography skills are matched only by his patience.

Publisher extraordinaire Theodore P. Savas continues to give me tremendous latitude with the projects I do. As a creative type, I could not be luckier, really.

At the eleventh hour, Ted surprised me with the news that Terry Winschel, the now-retired historian from Vicksburg National Military Park, was interested in writing a Foreword for me. I sent Terry the manuscript and began to sweat bullets. He is one of the people in the field I most respect and admire, and I was scared to death to disappoint him. Fortunately, he offered a few small edits and some very kind words. I am grateful for his read of the manuscript and for his gracious willingness to write such a great Foreword.

My thanks to my wife, Jenny Ann, who tolerated a lot of late nights of work on my part as this strange project took shape and grew. At some point, it seemed like the Project That Would Not Die, which maybe might have made a great drive-in movie in the 1950s but wasn't so hot on endless replay night after night.

Finally, a shout-out to my kids: to my daughter, Stephanie, her husband, Thomas, and their wonderful little daughter, Sophie Marie (my first grandchild, "The Pip!"); to my youngest son, Maxwell James; and to my oldest son, Jackson, who inspired this whole adventure and to whom this book is dedicated.

FOREWORD

by Terrence J. Winschel

"VICKSBURG IS the key," declared President Abraham Lincoln and asserted that "the war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket." This powerful statement was no exaggeration as Confederate cannon mounted on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River at Vicksburg denied that important avenue of commerce to Northern shipping. It was imperative for the administration in Washington to open the river to enable the rich agricultural bounty of the land, especially that of the "Old Northwest," to reach world markets. Pocketing that key would give the North unfettered control of the Mississippi River. It would also divide the South in two, sever major Confederate supply and communications lines, achieve a major objective of the Anaconda Plan, and effectively seal the doom of Richmond. Thus, Vicksburg was a city of unparalleled significance, and the "Gibraltar of the Confederacy" would prove a tough nut to crack.

Throughout 1862 and into 1863 Union land and naval forces made several attempts to capture the city to no avail. Finally, after months of frustration and failure, in the spring of 1863 combined land and naval forces led by Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and R. Adm. David Dixon Porter launched a campaign that resulted in the fall of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863. Although Grant would later

admit that he could not have taken Vicksburg without the navy's assistance, his land operations have been termed "The most brilliant campaign ever waged on American soil." As such, it warrants detailed examination by professional soldiers and students of military history.

Many excellent histories have been written about the campaign at large and even specific aspects of Grant's operations. The battle of Jackson, fought on May 14, 1863, was a key action during the Vicksburg campaign as it resulted in the capture of Mississippi's capital city. More importantly, Union victory scattered Confederate forces under Gen. Joseph E. Johnston to the winds, which provided Grant's force security as he wheeled his Army of the Tennessee west toward its ultimate objective, Vicksburg. It also firmly established Grant's army as a wedge between Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton's army in Vicksburg and those forces of Johnston that would reoccupy Jackson and pose a threat to Grant's rear throughout the long 47-day siege of the fortress city on the Mississippi River. Grant's position prevented effective communications between the two Confederate generals, keeping them from acting in concert with one another to raise the siege and rescue the beleaguered garrison.

In light of these results, it is hard to understand why most works on the Vicksburg campaign devote but few pages to the battle of Jackson. The lengthiest and most detailed work to date is *The Battle of Jackson May 14, 1863/The Siege of Jackson July 10-17, 1863* (158 pages) by Edwin C. Bearss and Warren Grabau, released by Gateway Press in 1981. This volume is now hard to find and treasured by those who have it. Ed Bearss also included a chapter on the battle of Jackson in Volume II of his trilogy *The Vicksburg Campaign*, recently reprinted by Savas Beatie.

Chris Mackowski, the editor of the *Emerging Civil War* blog, and book series by the same name published by

Savas Beatie, corrects that oversight and fills a significant void in the literature on the campaign with this volume. Mackowski, author or co-author of more than 15 books, focuses his talented pen and marvelous storytelling ability to detail the battle for control of Mississippi's capital city. He combines enough detail to satisfy the serious student of the war and color to appeal to the novice that makes for a smooth-flowing and easy-to-read narrative that is a welcomed addition to the fast-growing field of literature on the Vicksburg campaign.

Terrence J. Winschel

Historian (ret.) Vicksburg National Military Park

Author of the two-volume *Triumph & Defeat:*

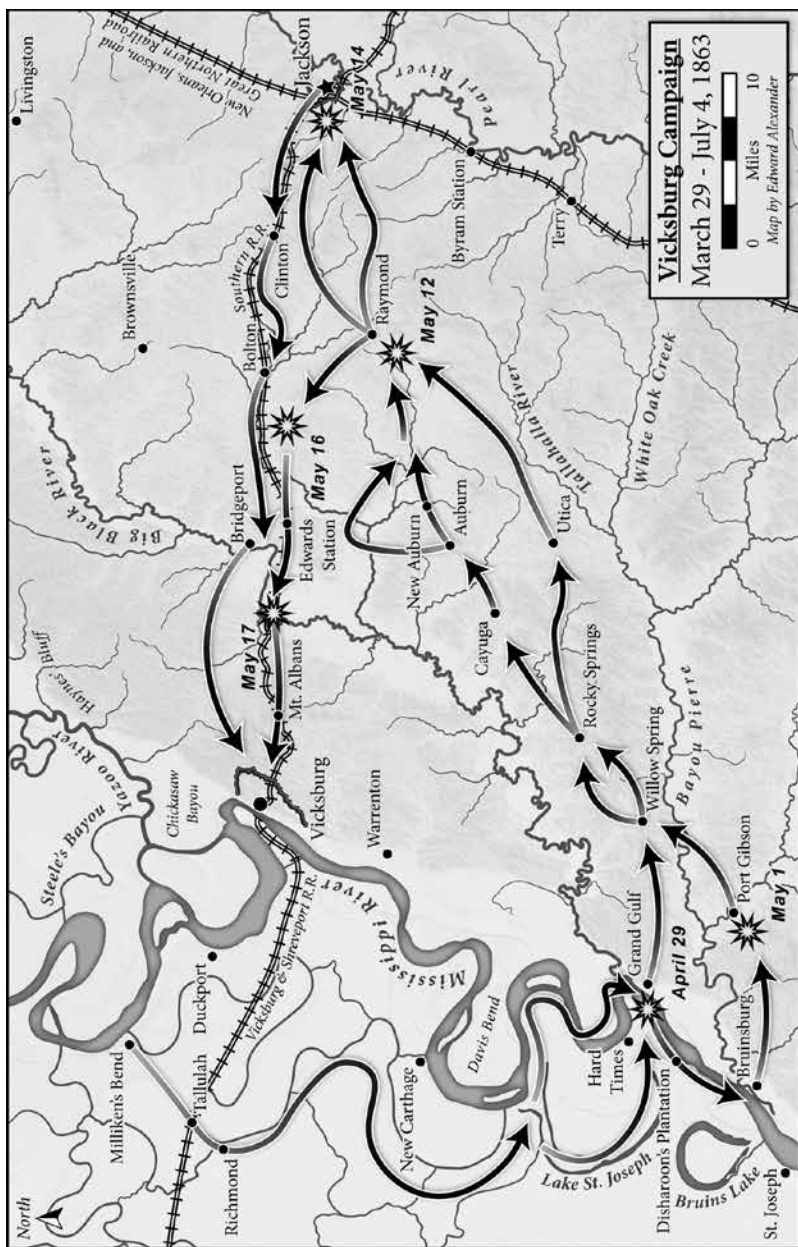
The Vicksburg Campaign

INTRODUCTION

IN MAY 2018, the American Battlefield Trust (ABT) invited me to visit Mississippi as co-host of a series of Facebook Live videos to commemorate the 155th anniversary of Grant's Vicksburg campaign. I would be traveling with my partner in crime and frequent collaborator, Kris White, the Trust's senior education manager, and Conner Townsend, the Trust's social media manager. Along the way, we'd be joined by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Parker Hills, Timothy B. Smith, Terry Winschel, and historians from the National Park Service as special guests to help share the stories of one of Grant's most impressive feats of the war.

I'm an Eastern Theater guy by background, experience, and proximity, so I had to do some studying up in order to hold my own among such a constellation of western talent. Winschel, retired chief historian of Vicksburg National Military Park, is a legend, and Tim Smith is among the Civil War historians whose work I most admire. I was unfamiliar with Gen. Hills but soon came to appreciate his incredible encyclopedic memory and passion for the story (and I'm lucky that we've since become friends).

I knew in advance I had to pick my battles, so to speak. The Vicksburg campaign was vast, stretching from the city's July 4, 1863, surrender all the way back into the early summer of '62. For our ABT trip, we were focusing



VICKSBURG CAMPAIGN

Some historians have called Grant's overland campaign through Mississippi "the Blitzkrieg of the Civil War." Grant's May 14 capture of Jackson—on the heels of an unimpeded river crossing and successes at Port Gibson, Grand Gulf, and Raymond—set the stage for his pivot west to finally invest Vicksburg by land. Victories at Champion Hill and the Big Black River would bolster Federal confidence prior to assaults on May 19 and 22 and, finally, a 47-day siege. It would also give Grant important insights he would put into play during his 1864 Overland Campaign in Virginia.

Edward Alexander

on only the overland actions leading to the gates of the city, as well as the siege itself. If we mark time beginning with the river crossing on April 30, that still manages to encompass 67 days of action, including battles on May 1, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, and 22, with lots of smaller actions and anecdotes sprinkled in until the surrender of the city on July 4, now famously known as "the most glorious fourth."

For context, let me remind you that I'm a "Stonewall" Jackson fanboy, so the vast majority of my knowledge of events on May 2, 1863, and the eight days that follow are focused on the battle of Chancellorsville, Jackson's accidental wounding by his own men that day, the conclusion of Robert E. Lee's so-called "greatest victory," and Jackson's death on May 10. In that regard, Grant's crossing of the Mississippi could not have been better timed. Like me, most of Richmond's attention was focused on, and absorbed by, events along the Rappahannock, not along the Mississippi. While Jefferson Davis was himself a Mississippian—a resident of Warren County, of which Vicksburg is the county seat—poor health had him laid low by late April, so he struggled to find the energy to deal with the faraway events in his home state when closer events loomed with so much more pressing immediacy.

I set about familiarizing myself as much as possible with the events of those 67 days, padding what I learned

with as much additional context as I could. Aside from this breadth, I also wanted to pick something I could go deep on. Aside from their general expertise, I knew Parker would have Raymond covered because he'd personally done so much to preserve that battlefield; I knew Tim would have Champion Hill covered because he wrote "the" book on the battle (and was working on his five-volume magnum opus on the campaign, which has been fantastic); I knew Terry and the NPS folks would have Vicksburg itself covered because of the national military park.

In this context, I chose to become the "instant expert" on the battle of Jackson, although not because of any process of elimination. I chose the battle because my oldest son is named Jackson, christened by his older sister after Stonewall. But even Stonewall Jackson didn't play into my decision, despite my appreciation of him. I did it simply because the battle and my oldest son shared a name.

As I researched the battle of Jackson, news of the fall of the city was almost always preceded, surrounded, and drowned out by news of the fall of the general. This was true in newspapers, diary accounts, and even postwar memoirs. A Google search of "Jackson" in May 1863 (if we can imagine such a thing!) would have certainly returned hundreds if not thousands of lamentations about Stonewall compared to perhaps dozens of mentions of the Mississippi capital. (For kicks, try it yourself: "Jackson + May 1863"). Earl Van Dorn's death at the hands of a jealous husband might make a cameo appearance in the search, too, because he was the one-time commander of the Vicksburg garrison—"Mississippi" might have tripped an algorithm somewhere.

The ABT trip to Mississippi became one of the real highlights of my Civil War career, and my meager attempt to be the crew's expert on the battle of Jackson went smoothly. Kris chuckled at me because, of the two of us,

he's usually the one who descends to the microtactical level and I'm usually the big-picture "story" guy, so it amused him to see me go into the weeds.

After the trip, I thought, *I should really do something with all this Jackson research I've done.* I didn't know what, exactly, but I figured I'd get around to writing something at some point. The sheaf of notes, scribbled across pages and pages of yellow ruled paper, sat on a pile on the catch-all top of a filing cabinet next to my desk.

For years.

In 2021, as Emerging Civil War prepared to celebrate its tenth anniversary with a short commemorative series of books, we honed in on Vicksburg as the topic of one of the volumes. *Ah ha!* I thought. *Now's the chance to dust off that research on the battle of Jackson and use it to write an original piece for the Vicksburg volume.* I hadn't revisited the material since the trip, although it didn't take too long to freshen up.

The body of work on the battle of Jackson isn't expansive. Aside from an impossible-to-find short hardcover by Ed Bearss and Warren Grabau written in 1981, no stand-alone work on the battle seemed to exist. (Jim Woodrick, former Civil War historian for the state of Mississippi, has a great little book on the July 1863 siege of Jackson.) Where the battle of Jackson is covered in campaign histories, it typically gets no more than three pages, if that. Even Ed's book covers the battle in a volume that also includes the July siege and three other post-Vicksburg actions.

Here was another chance to go deep.

As my notes took shape in narrative form, that narrative grew and grew. I thought I'd write something hefty in the six-thousand-word range. Then eight thousand. Then suddenly a dozen. And by then, I knew I'd outgrown the ECW Vicksburg volume—and I wasn't even done yet.

What was I going to do with this thing?

During one of my regular conversations with Ted Savas, I mentioned this quandary to him. “Heyyyyy!” he replied. Ted has a way of drawing out the last “y” when he gets a flash of inspiration. “I have an idea. What if we do this. . . .”

And here *this* is.

It will likely take you longer to read about the battle of Jackson than it took the men to fight it. However, I wanted to provide the most comprehensive account to date of the action there. The May 14, 1863, battle does not rank as the most important of Grant’s Mississippi campaign, but it does probably rank as the most overlooked. Port Gibson was the first; the fall of Grand Gulf might be the most strategically important; Raymond has had extensive preservation efforts bolstering its story; Champion Hill was easily the most consequential. Perhaps only the flash-in-the-pan fight at the Big Black gets less love than Jackson.

Here, then, is the story of the May 14, 1863, battle of Jackson, Mississippi—with thanks to Kris White and the American Battlefield Trust and inspired, at its very core, by my own son, Jackson.

I assure you, that’s a lot of love.

“down through the starlight came the echo of that fainting cry under the wheels of the guns: ‘Murder! Murder, boys! Oh, Murder!’”

— *Pvt. Robert Burdette*

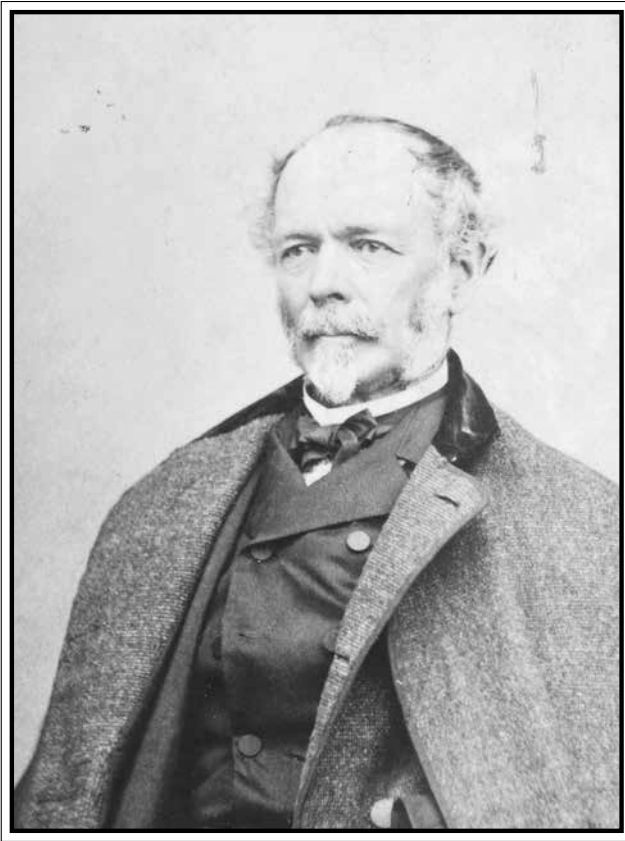
OLD JOE

JOSEPH E. Johnston was unfit for service and flat-out said so to his boss: “I shall go immediately, although unfit for field service.”¹

But go the general did, departing on May 10, 1863, from Tullahoma, Tennessee, for Jackson, Mississippi, on the peremptory orders of the Confederate Secretary of War, James Seddon. A Union army had made landfall on the east bank of the Mississippi River and was now operating somewhere in the state’s interior. Control of the river was at stake. The populace—the white populace, anyway—was panicked. Confederate President Jefferson Davis expressed concern about his home state. Johnston had to go sort things out.

Johnston did not want to make the trip, though—had, in fact, resisted going to Mississippi for months. He had insisted that the Confederate army in middle Tennessee, also under his command, needed his direct supervision more than the army in Mississippi did. He had worried that the commander in Tennessee, Gen. Braxton Bragg, was distracted by the failing health of his dying wife. For good measure, Johnston had also complained that old

1 Johnston to Seddon, 9 May 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), Series 1. Vol. 23, Pt. 3, 826, hereafter abbreviated as “O.R.”



GEN. JOSEPH E. JOHNSTON

One soldier of the Army of Tennessee described Joe Johnston thus: "Fancy, if you please, a man about fifty years old, rather small of stature but firmly built, an open countenance, and a keen, restless eye that seemed to read your inmost thoughts. In his dress he was a perfect dandy. He ever wore the finest clothes that could be obtained, carrying out in dress and the paraphernalia of the soldier the plan adopted by the War Department at Richmond, never omitting anything, even to the trappings of his horse, bridle and saddle. His head was decorated with a star and feather, his coat with every star and embellishment, and he wore a bright new sash, big gauntlets, and silver spurs. He was the very picture of a general."

war injuries still ailed him, thus making him too unwell to serve in the field.

The thing Johnston worried about most, though, was his reputation. His litany of complaints served primarily as a smokescreen to defend it.

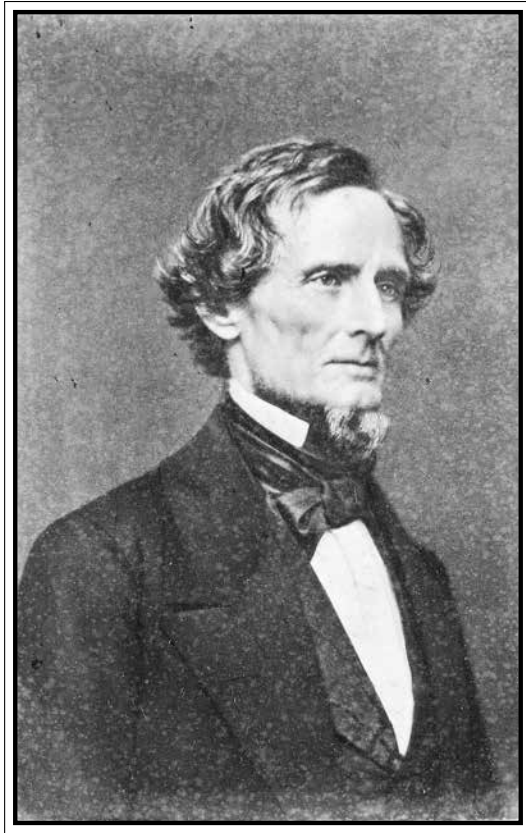
“[O]ld Joe was a yerker,” said Pvt. Sam Watkins of the Army of Tennessee admiringly. “He took all the tricks. He was a commander.”² Arthur Fremantle, a British colonel observing the American war in the spring and summer of 1863, was impressed by the “commander’s” bearing:

In appearance, General Joseph E. Johnston, commonly called Joe Johnston, is rather below the middle height, spare, soldierlike, and well set up; his features are good, and he has lately taken to wear a grayish beard. He is a Virginian by birth, and appears to be about fifty-[six] years old. He talks in a calm, deliberate, and confident manner; to me he was extremely affable, but he certainly possesses the power of keeping people at a distance when he chooses and his officers evidently stand in great awe of him.³

As a career officer, Johnston had an impressive resume that he’d begun building during the war with Mexico decades earlier. After, he served with distinction in the antebellum army and, when civil war broke out, became the highest-ranking officer to defect to the Confederacy. A disagreement over how to count that pre-war service when it came time to issue ranks in the Confederate army led to a dispute between Johnston and President Davis: Johnston fell behind Samuel Cooper, Albert Sidney Johnston, and Robert E. Lee on the list of seniority but

2 Sam Watkins, *Co. Aytch: A Side Show of the Big Show*, 2nd ed. (Chattanooga, TN: Times Printing Company, 1900), 106.

3 Arthur Fremantle, *Three Months in the Southern States* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1863), 116.



CONFEDERATE PRESIDENT
JEFFERSON DAVIS

A native of Mississippi, Jefferson Davis owned a plantation on the outskirts of Vicksburg—as did his brother, Joseph—so the military situation along the river was not only of vital national importance to him but also of keen personal interest.

Library of Congress

thought he should rank higher. His placement in the number-four slot “seeks to tarnish my fair fame as a soldier and a man, earned by more than thirty years of

laborious and perilous service,” he complained.⁴ Slighted, the too-proud Johnston held a grudge against Davis that ever thereafter poisoned their relationship. “His hatred of Jeff Davis amounts to a religion,” diarist Mary Chesnut would write of the embittered Virginian. “With him it colors all things.”⁵ Indeed, says scholar Stephen Cushman with the benefit of a century and a half of hindsight, “The two men did not trust, cooperate with, or forgive each other as long as they lived.”⁶

Nonetheless Johnston was one of the Confederacy’s true war heroes after earning victory at First Manassas in July 1861 (though, in fact, he had little to do with it). He remained in command of Confederate forces in his native Virginia through May 31, 1862, when a shell fragment knocked him out of action at the battle of Seven Pines. This was the war wound he would thereafter milk whenever called on to perform a task he didn’t want to do.

Davis had disapproved of Johnston’s strategy during the spring campaign on the Virginia Peninsula and, in fact, Johnston’s wounding must’ve seemed at least a partial relief to the Confederate commander in chief. Robert E. Lee’s subsequent success as Johnston’s replacement made the switch permanent. As much as Johnston wanted his old army back, Davis had no intention of replacing Lee, even after Johnston had recuperated. Rechristened the Army of Northern Virginia, it was Lee’s army in spirit as well as in fact, and “Old Joe” would ever after be on the outs.

4 Johnston to Davis, 12 September 1861, O.R., series IV, Vol. I, 607.

5 Mary Boykin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, Isabella Martin and Myrta Lockett Avery, eds. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 248-49.

6 Stephen Cushman, “Joseph E. Johnston,” *Essential Civil War Curriculum*, <https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/joseph-e.-johnston.html> (accessed 10 January 2021).

To solve the problem, Davis promoted Johnston to command of the Western Theater—from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. A position of high stakes required a skilled commander, and like many others, Davis respected Johnston’s reputation even if he did not like the man or approve of his spring performance on the Peninsula. Of the tools available, Johnston seemed best equipped to handle the vast responsibility in the West. “Whatever man can do will be done by him,” Davis would tell Mississippi lawmakers, expressing “perfect confidence.”⁷

Johnston, for his part—with bruises to his ego to nurse—believed Davis promoted him as an elaborate ruse to set him up for failure. “[T]he forces . . . under my command are greatly inferior in number to those of the enemy opposed to them,” he wrote, sounding much like his old nemesis, Union Maj. Gen. George McClellan, who habitually overestimated enemy strength.⁸ Worse, in Johnston’s opinion, the geographic expanse under his charge was too vast to cover with the troops available to him. He sought on several occasions to consolidate the two main armies in the theater, Bragg’s Army of Tennessee and Lt. Gen. John Pemberton’s Army of Vicksburg. Davis refused, instead ordering Johnston to establish a headquarters that “in his judgment will best secure facilities for ready communication with the troops within the limits of his

7 Jefferson Davis, speech to Mississippi legislature, 26 December 1862. From Rice University’s online Papers of Jefferson Davis. <https://jeffersondavis.rice.edu/archives/documents/jefferson-davis-speech-jackson-miss-0> (accessed 3 March 2021). Text from *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, Volume 8, 565-84, transcribed from the 29 December 1862 edition of the Memphis *Appeal*, which, according to *The Papers*, was being published in Jackson at that time.

8 Joseph E. Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations, Directed, During the Late War Between the States, by Joseph E. Johnston* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 149.

command. . . .” Wherever headquarters turned out to be, Johnston’s orders explicitly stated that he should not feel tethered to the spot but rather “repair in person to any part of said command whenever his presence may for the time be necessary or desirable.”⁹

From Davis’s perspective, Richmond was too far from both Tennessee and Mississippi, and “he thought it necessary to have an officer nearer, with authority to transfer troops from one army to another in an emergency,” as Johnston later explained. “If such an officer was needed,” he continued, “I certainly was not the proper selection; for I had already expressed the opinion that such transfers were impracticable, because each of the two armies was greatly inferior to its antagonist; and they were too far from each other for such mutual dependence.”¹⁰

Johnston thus set up shop in central Tennessee and thereafter did his best to pretend the Vicksburg army wasn’t really his concern. “The only effect . . . of my taking direction of affairs,” he wrote a political ally, “would be my being responsible for Pemberton’s generalship, instead of himself. If he entitled himself to praise, robbing him of it. If he deserves blame, bearing it for him.”¹¹

Whenever Richmond pressed him, Johnston responded with his smokescreen of concerns, complaints, and ailments. By early April, when Bragg’s wife’s health recovered and Johnston no longer had that distraction as an excuse, he “afterward became sick” himself and, as he reported to Jefferson Davis on April 10, “am not

9 Special Orders 275, 24 November 1862, O.R. XVII, 758.

10 Johnston, *Narrative*, 154-55.

11 Joseph Johnston to Louis Wigfall, 8 March 1863, quoted in John R. Lundberg, “I Am Too Late,” *The Vicksburg Campaign, March 29-May 18, 1863*, Steven E. Woodworth and Charles D. Gear, eds. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 119.

now able to serve in the field.”¹² Sympathetic biographer Craig L. Symonds describes Johnston as “suffering from incompletely healed wounds, exacerbated now by his frequent travels,” adding apologetically that Johnston exercised only “nominal command.”¹³ Historian John Lundberg counters that “Johnston used his discomfort as a cover for not pursuing his command in Mississippi more proactively.”¹⁴

But on May 10, 1863, with a Federal army under Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant driving boldly through Mississippi’s interior, Johnston had no choice but to go west.

12 Johnston to Davis, 10 April 1863, O.R. XXII, Pt. 2, 745.

13 Craig L. Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston: A Civil War Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 201.

14 Lundberg, 120.