

The Civil War Comes to Yazoo  
Civil War History in Yazoo County, Mississippi  
1862-1864

For Yazooans, the War Between the States at first seemed far away. For its first full year, though scores of Yazoo boys had already enlisted and many were fighting in distant Virginia, life at home went on quietly. And in those early, heady days of the conflict, most Yazooans expected things to remain that way.

Then in the spring of 1862, in rapid succession, came stunning, sobering Confederate losses nearer home in the Western Theater. Union victories at Pea Ridge in Arkansas and Shiloh in Tennessee brought the war to Mississippi's doorstep. The U.S. Navy entered the Mississippi River in force from both north and south, quickly capturing New Orleans and Baton Rouge, then Memphis. With Vicksburg as President Lincoln's personally ordered next target, in early June a formidable fleet commanded by David Farragut, soon to be commissioned the first rear admiral in American naval history, was steaming toward it. Thus Yazoo City and Yazoo County, in the space of a few weeks, found themselves almost in the center of the storm.

Successive Union efforts to take Vicksburg would continue until it finally fell on July 4, 1863, and Farragut's first attempt to capture it in 1862 by a purely naval action was fruitless. But in the months before that first siege was abandoned, Yazoo City was spurred into action. A string of earthwork fortifications manned with cannon were built on the bluffs above the town and the Yazoo River. A barricade of submerged rafts, old boats and chains was placed across the river at Liverpool Landing some 15 miles downstream. Hurriedly the Confederate Navy Department, with the help of local artisans and plantation owners, created a rudimentary navy yard a half-mile south of town on the eastern bank of the Yazoo River.

Yazoo City soon became a key naval base almost by accident, and its one great contribution to naval warfare was probably the most incredible vessel ever to engage an enemy fleet.

The ironclad ram *CSS Arkansas* was a child of misfortune from the beginning. She was one of several ships being built at Memphis when Union forces threatened that city. Of all the vessels in the yards, only the *CSS Arkansas* was saved. Her unfinished hull was towed down the Mississippi and up the Yazoo to near Greenwood where work on her stopped.

On the morning of May 28, 1862, Lieutenant Isaac N. Brown, a native of Grenada and a 27-year veteran of the United States Navy, who had commanded the Confederate navy yards at Memphis and Nashville, received a telegram from Stephen Mallory, Secretary of the Confederate Navy, instructing him to "finish and equip that vessel (the *CSS Arkansas*) without regard to expenditure of men or money."

At Greenwood, where the vessel was supposed to be, Lt. Brown was told the *Arkansas* was up river "nigh to four miles from dry land, but we will try to row you to her." **Upon reaching the hulk**, Brown found that she had no engines, no armor and no deck house. She was loaded down with ten enormous guns, but there were no carriages on which to mount them. Her armor plate lay on the river bottom in a sunken barge.

With the help of soldiers from a nearby army camp, the barge was raised, the armor retrieved, and two old mismatched engines were salvaged from wrecks.

Greenwood offered comparative safety for completing the vessel, but there was no skilled help and no necessary materials available. In Yazoo City both men and materials were in readiness, but the whole Union fleet was practically on top of Vicksburg – less than 50 miles away. Because of the plight of Vicksburg, Lieutenant Brown had the river steamer *Capitol* tow the hull downstream to the shipyard at Yazoo City.

There was excitement among the worker as the big gray shape was berthed. The *Arkansas*, even at this stage, was an imposing sight. She stretched 110 feet long and at her bow was a massive ramming beak. Her sides, soon to be covered with four inches of iron, sloped inward 45 degrees to help deflect cannon balls and there were gun ports all around. When fully armored, she would draw 14 feet of water. Her pilot house which stuck up 12 inches from the armored gun housing would be only six feet above the water line.

Soon 200 men were working around the clock to get the ship ready. Crews of workmen systematically scavenged the countryside for metal and parts. Any likely item, and some not so likely, wound up in the makeup of the ship that – after her destruction – the enemy dubbed “a floating junkyard.”

After five weeks the stern and some portions of the ship were still unprotected by armor, but the Yazoo River was falling. Pilots warned that if the *Arkansas* did not get into the deeper Mississippi River soon, the great ironclad would be land-bound for the summer.

So, on July 2, 1862, the *Arkansas* steamed away on her first self-powered voyage. Never a more unlikely vessel headed for combat. Her armor was skimpy in spots and boiler plate had been “tacked” over the unprotected stern to hide its weakness. Her mismatched engines were totally inadequate for a ship of her size and would push her along at only eight knots – far too slow for any ramming. Her crew of two hundred men was composed principally of landsmen with no experience in either operating or fighting a ship. One notable exception was young Confederate Navy Lieutenant Charles “Savez” Read, a native of Yazoo County born in Sartonia. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and a U.S. Naval officer up until the war, he manned the stern guns of the *Arkansas*. Serving on the ram as long as she stayed afloat, Read went on later to a swashbuckling and heroic career, first in Confederate raiders on the high seas, then to exploits on the James and Red Rivers.

Lieutenant Brown of the *CSS Arkansas*, recognizing his vessel's weaknesses, explained to the crew that they would have to meet the enemy head on. Said he, “No ram, no run, just fight.”

And fight they did, but not before one more piece of bad luck plagued the ship. Some 25 miles below Yazoo City a steam pipe broke and soaked all the gunpowder. Luckily it was a hot, dry day and the powder soon dried on tarpaulins spread over warm beds of sawdust at a sawmill where the broken steam pipe was repaired.

On July 13, the *CSS Arkansas* rounded a bend about a mile and a half upstream from the Mississippi River. Ahead were the Union gunboats *O.S. Tyler*, *Carondelet*, and *Queen of the West*. Although this was a formidable fleet, the *Arkansas* – which had already been affectionately named “the ramming bucket of bolts” by its crew – must have looked to the enemy like the world's best fighting ship in

perfect shape. The Union fleet reversed engines and tried to back away into the broader Mississippi.

The Confederate ironclad continued to forge straight for the enemy. There were two reasons for this: (1) because despite her weaknesses she was a first class fighting ship and (2) because she couldn't expose her weakly armored stern to Federal fire. Each of the enemy let the *Arkansas* have a broadside, but most of the shot bounces off the armor like hailstones. In her turn, the *Arkansas* gave the Union ships a severe mauling.

When the battle ended the *Carondelet* was badly damaged and had run ashore, the *Tyler* limped off in bad shape, and the *Queen of the West* decided to retire and fight another day.

The *CSS Arkansas* had taken the fire of all three ships. Lieutenant Brown had been wounded and a part of the wheel had been blown away. The base of the smokestack had been hit and heat and smoke filled the engine room, making frequent changes of the crew necessary. But the pride of Yazoo city had survived her first battle and there was no place to except straight ahead – or straight down.

Straight ahead could only mean to Vicksburg where the entire Union armada lay in wait. As the *Arkansas* stormed toward the beleaguered city, there was consternation in the Federal fleet. The guns were manned, but the fires had been banked to preserve precious coal. The *Arkansas* drove at the middle of the fleet and took broadsides from the *Hartford* and *Richmond* without serious damage. Anywhere the Confederate ironclad might fire, it was almost certain to hit a Union ship. But the Union fleet did more damage to itself than the *Arkansas* could ever have inflicted. Many of the shots fired at the *Arkansas* passed over her low gun house and landed on a Union target.

The *Arkansas* docked at Vicksburg under protection of the shore batteries. The Union battle ship *Essex* charged in for a ramming attempt and both vessels loosed a short-range broadside. The *Essex* missed the ramming and dug its bow into the river bank where shore batteries gave it a tough time until it could back off and steam away at full speed. Next the *Queen of the West*, which had followed the *Arkansas* down river, tried to ram, but a well-placed broadside from the *Arkansas* disabled her and she was towed away after drifting out of range.

Presence of the *CSS Arkansas* at Vicksburg made the Union position precarious. It was always necessary for the Federal fleet to keep up stream for fear of a surprise attack, and coal was scarce. Commodore Farragut's deep-water vessels were in danger of being stranded as the low-water season approached, so he ordered his fleet back to New Orleans. The "bucket of bolts" had almost single-handedly lifted the siege of Vicksburg.

The Federals did not know the damage they had inflicted on the brave vessel. One point-blank shell from the *Essex* had penetrated *Arkansas'* armor, killing eight men. Many of the crew had to be transferred to the hospital, including the able engineer who seemed the only man capable of keeping the ancient engines operating. Lieutenant Brown had been ordered home to Grenada to recuperate from his wounds and Executive Officer Stevens, a fine officer, was in command.

Although the *Arkansas* had been in heavy battle and was not in shape to go without extensive repairs, General Earl Van Dorn ordered her to support him on a drive he planned against Union forces at Baton Rouge. Lieutenant Stevens told Van Dorn that Lieutenant Brown had left orders for the ship to stay at Vicksburg. General Van Dorn appealed all the way to Richmond to have these orders overruled.

*CSS Arkansas* had steamed only a short distance before her creaking engines played out. After being patched up, she headed for Baton Rouge, but on the way met the *Essex*. Charging full steam ahead and bow guns firing, the *Arkansas* headed straight for her old enemy, but just before the expected collision the *Arkansas'* port engine quit. With each engine connected separately to a propeller, this pulled the ship square-around into a terrific broadside from the *Essex*.

As the *CSS Arkansas* drifted helplessly toward shore, her weak stern a perfect target for enemy fire, Lieutenant Stevens ordered the crew to destroy the ship and try to reach Confederate lines. Men of the *Arkansas* put powder on deck, set her afire, and scurried for the woods. Then an unpredictable current swung the *Arkansas* into the river where, face to face with the *Essex*, she blew up.

Thus, in just 24 full days, the *CSS Arkansas* dealt the Union severe blows and then died honorably.

The *CSS Arkansas* was not the only surprising weapon unleashed on the harried Union navy on the Yazoo River. The first warship to be sunk by an electrically detonated mine was the *USS Cairo*, sent to the bottom in the autumn of 1862 near the mouth of the Yazoo River.

Eight months after the sinking of the *Cairo*, the *USS Baron DeKalb* was sunk by torpedoes at Yazoo city. But descendants of the men who touched off those torpedoes are still living in Yazoo city, and they say that this ship was sunk by jugs filled with explosives and pulled against the ships by strong cord.

When General U.S. Grant's final great siege of Vicksburg by both the Union Army and Navy began in May 1863, a Confederate fortification at Snyder's Bluff on the Yazoo River blocked passage to Yazoo City where the navy yard was still building ironclad vessels. Union Rear Admiral David D. Porter sent five ironclads to try to bypass the Snyder's Bluff defenses and destroy the yard. And he almost succeeded in becoming one of the first admirals to have his naval fleet captured by land forces.

The vessels ascended Steele's Bayou, passed through Black Bayou and entered Deer Creek. If the Yankee warships gained Rolling Fork, they would have clear sailing down the Big Sunflower and up to Yazoo City. Confederate Colonel Samuel W. Ferguson moved his combat team to Rolling Fork. While snipers lined the creek banks and peppered the ships with small arms, other soldiers cut trees to fall across the stream ahead of and behind the vessels. With the fleet blocked in by trees, the crews unable to come into the open, and Confederate forces ready to drive in and take the ships, General Grant had to send a land force to rescue Admiral Porter's fleet.

By May 17, the Confederate forces had abandoned Snyder's Bluff and two days later units from the Union arms and navy occupied the fortifications without firing a shot. The first frontal attack upon Yazoo city itself came on May 21, 1863, and was a naval thrust. Admiral Porter ordered a task force consisting of the ironclads *Baron DeKalb* and *Choctaw*, supported by the tinclads *Forest Rose*, *Linden* and *Petrel*, to proceed against the Yazoo city Naval works as soon as demolition teams could destroy the chain placed across the Yazoo River by Confederates.

With Lieutenant Commander John g. Walker in charge, the fleet met only token resistance on the river. But Captain Isaac Brown, recovered from the wounds he had received on the *Arkansas* and in command at Yazoo City, ordered the navy yard burned.

A landing party from the Union ships found that Confederate demolition squads had destroyed everything of military value in the town. Three warships at the naval station were smoldering ruins, nothing more than charred hulks. They were the *Mobile*, the *Republic*, and an unnamed ironclad monster 310 feet long and with a beam of 70 feet. The latter vessel was scheduled to be plated with 1/5 inch iron and was to have had six engines, four side wheels, and two propellers.

All that remained of the navy yard, which had contained five saw and planing mills, extensive machinery, carpenter and blacksmith shops, were fire-blackened ruins. Shore parties reported that except for a large sawmill and lumberyard north of town, Confederate forces had also either removed or burned all the public property in Yazoo City of potential value to the enemy. By the morning of May 23, the sawmill and lumberyard had been put to the torch by the Federals. After patrolling the 115 military patients in the city hospital, the Union squadron was ready to return to the fleet anchorage at the mouth of the Yazoo.

After the destruction of the shipbuilding facilities at Yazoo city the river had little naval value to the Confederacy, but Union ships continued to use the waterway.

Immediately after General Grant failed to crack the Vicksburg defenses by a massive assault on May 22, 1863, he received word of a Confederate build-up at Yazoo City and Commander Walker's squadron again steamed upriver. There was no build-up of Southern forces and the expedition met little resistance. Lieutenant Brown had planted torpedoes in the Yazoo River, but the Federal fleet inadvertently avoided them when the ships cut through Tchula Lake – an old channel of the Yazoo – instead of staying on the main stream.

After passing Yazoo City uneventfully, the Union fleet was stopped below Greenwood by a barrier of vessels which Lieutenant Brown had ordered sunk across the channel. While sailors tried to remove the scuttled steamboats, Confederate Captain John H. Morgan's Arkansas sharpshooters peppered them with rifle fire. The Union fleet sprayed the area with canister and shell, then cut the cables and withdrew downstream.

The expedition stopped again at Yazoo City where a landing party gathered a number of iron bars missed on the first raid of the navy yard. In the eight-day raid up the Yazoo, the Union fleet destroyed seven Confederate steamboats.

At the time he ordered Commander Walker's fleet up the Yazoo (May 22, 1863), General Grant received word that Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston was massing a large force to move in relief of Vicksburg. He feared that his army would move toward him down the “Mechanicsburg Corridor,” the ridge in Yazoo County that separated the watersheds of the Big Black and Yazoo rivers. Accordingly he detailed Colonel Amory J. Johnson to take 1,000 men and reconnoiter that area. Secondary objectives were destruction of the Mississippi Central Railroad bridge across the Big Black at Way's Bluff, near Vaughan in Yazoo County, and destruction of all forage and corn stored in the region between the Big Black and Yazoo rivers.

On May 24, Colonel Johnson and his blue coats rode out of Snyder's Bluff and the next day they rode right back in again. They had encountered Confederate Colonel W. Wirt Adams' Mississippi Cavalry and after a brief skirmish had withdrawn.

Upon his return to his base, Colonel Johnson made the wildly exaggerated report that General Joe Johnston, with a force of between 6,000 and 10,000 men, was camped near the Yazoo County village of Mechanicsburg. Actually, at this time the only Rebel force operating between the Big Black and Yazoo were scattered units belonging to Brigadier General John Adams' mounted command.

General Grant dispatched 12,000 of the troops which he has assembled at Vicksburg to meet the threat of General Joe Johnston's overestimated forces. General Grant places these troops under command of aggressive Major General Francis P. Blair, who in turn split them into two divisions under Brigadier Generals Joseph A. Mower and John McArthur.

General Blair planned a two-pronged thrust toward Mechanicsburg with General Mower's division marching up the Ridge Road and General McArthur's division moving up the Benton road to a rendezvous at Sulphur Springs. Colonel Johnson's cavalry was to screen the advance of the "Expeditionary Corps."

The force moved out of Vicksburg on May 27 and even Colonel Johnson's far-ranging cavalry failed to flush any Confederates that day. On May 28 the two forces came together at Sulphur Springs, but Colonel Johnson brought General Blair a disturbing report. The cavalymen had talked to a farmer, Richard A. Barkley, who told him that Lieutenant General Ambrose P. Hill had just reached Jackson with heavy reinforcements from the battle-hardened Army of North Virginia. Between them, General Johnston and General Hill were reported to have 45,000 men in Central Mississippi.

General Blair, nevertheless, decided to push on. It was about 1p.m. When the Federal horsemen rode by the dozen or so houses that constituted Mechanicsburg and they turned into the road leading to Kibbey's Ferry. Two miles beyond the village, an Iowa Regiment sighted a number of greyclads. These were the same hell-for-leather troopers that had turned back Colonel Johnson's blueclad cavalry four days before.

As soon as General John Adams saw the bluecoats he sent his cavalymen charging at the enemy. The startled Federal troops fell back toward Mechanicsburg, fighting a bitter delaying action. General McArthur sent his advance brigade to the rescue and the thin line of greyclads, vastly outnumbered, fell back toward the Big Black River.

Two miles southeast of Mechanicsburg the Confederates made one more effort to hold the Federal advance. Guns of the Brookhaven Artillery charged up and started firing on General Blair's men. This threat was quickly met by arrival of additional Union artillery, armed with 12-inch howitzers. After a brief duel, the outgunned Mississippians broke off the engagement.

What Confederate forces had failed to do, General Grant did for them. Troubled by reports of General Joe Johnston's huge army and fearing that General Blair might be moving into a trap, he ordered the northern army back to Snyder's Bluff.

The Union forces made their return trip down the fertile Yazoo Valley. Here General Blair estimated there was sufficient subsistence and forage to supply General Joe Johnston's army for at least a month.

The soldiers destroyed an immense quantity of bacon, approximately 500,000 bushels of corn and

seized about 1,000 head of cattle and 200 horses and mules.

Meanwhile, Confederate communications being very slow, General Johnston did not receive word at his Jackson headquarters that a force of Federals was advancing up the "Mechanicsburg Corridor" until May 30, the same day General Blair was evacuating Mechanicsburg to fall back toward Snyder's Bluff.

To effect a concentration against General Blair, General Johnston sent Major General Samuel G. Maxey's brigade to Canton by rail. At the same time he ordered Major General William H.T. Walker's "Right Wing" to march from Canton to Yazoo City. Colonel Samuel W. Ferguson's hard-hitting combat team joined General Walker and by June 1 the "Army of Relief" was in Yazoo City.

Immediately after the surrender of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, Admiral Porter prepared to follow up this Confederate disaster with a series of raids into the surrounding countryside.

General Johnston, occupied with defending the capital, Jackson, against Major General William T. Sherman's forces, had called the "Army of Relief" and all the troops he could take from other Central Mississippi locations.

At Yazoo City, Commander Isaac Brown was in charge of a naval unit, while Colonel William B. Creasman commanded the soldiers. They were desperately trying to throw up fortifications against an inevitable Union attack.

On July 12, Admiral Porter sent seven transports carrying Major General Francis J. Herron's division to Yazoo City. The transports were convoyed by the ironclad *Baron DeKalb* and the tinclads *Signal* and *New Republic*. The 5,000 men of General Herron's army disembarked below the city and the ships moved upstream where there was a short duel between Confederate artillery in the bluffs above the town and the vessels on the river. The troops, during the artillery engagement, outflanked the town and made the Confederate position untenable.

Both Commander Brown and Colonel Creasman withdrew. Commander Brown moved on to the Confederate Arsenal at Selma, Alabama, and his sailors joined ships at Mobile. Colonel Creasman's small force made contact with General Johnston's Rebels at Morton, Mississippi.

The only bright spot in all of this from the Southern viewpoint was the sinking of the *DeKalb* by two planters, Mr. J.J.B. White and Dr. Washburn, who had devised the mine-like device described earlier that they could discharge under the vessel.

From September 1863 to December 1864, northern gunboats ranged the Yazoo River at will, and Yazoo City was raided and/or temporarily occupied four more times without significant resistance from the small number of Confederate units operating in the interior of Mississippi. The main objective of these raids was to commandeer cotton and food supplies, livestock, horses and mules for the Yankee stronghold in Vicksburg.

In September 1863 the Federals landed two regiments of troops from river vessels which went on a rampage in the city. In October, another Federal force, this time under General McArthur, occupied the town and were particularly ruthless.

Only once did the Confederates strike back, on March 5, 1864, during the third temporary occupation. And this time bloody fighting in the streets of downtown Yazoo City left 31 northerners dead, 121 wounded, 31 missing, and brought a hasty return to Vicksburg by the rest. The southerners lost only 6 with another 51 wounded.

That Union operation was part of a master plan by General William T. Sherman, then commanding from Vicksburg all Yankee troops in the area to tear up completely the railroad from Vicksburg to Meridian. There his forces would destroy the Confederate rail center and supply depot, thus paralyzing all rail transportation left within Mississippi. He would then try to drive all remaining Confederate forces from the state, and destroy as much public and private property as possible.

As a bluff, and to keep the Confederates guessing about his next moves, he planned other diversions. One was to send an amphibious force of about 1,600 men to occupy Yazoo City, and from there to raid on up the Yazoo River as far as possible, seizing cotton, mules and food to be brought down to warehouses in Yazoo City for further shipment to his Vicksburg stronghold. Two tinclad gunboats would protect the warehouses.

The raiding in Central Mississippi would keep Rebel troops there too busy to hinder his Meridian expedition.

To stop the raiding, and to retrieve as much of the loot as possible, a strong contingent of 1,300 Tennessee and Texas cavalry was assembled at Benton, just east of Yazoo City. With some artillery support they were led by Generals R.V. Richardson of Tennessee and Sul Ross of Texas. Early in the day they first surrounded and silenced with cannon-fire the main Union redoubt on the Benton Toad protecting the occupying force. Then the southerners swept from the bluffs into the north of town and on down toward the river landing. Fiercely resisting house by house, the Federals were pushed during the day toward the protection of their tinclads which were also lobbing shells into the fray. At one point a howitzer was landed from one of the boats to the foot of Main Street and surrounded by cotton bales to make a small fort. Firing up Main Street, it was soon taken by the southerners, but then was recaptured by the Yankees.

By mid-afternoon the southerners had found and burned much of the looted cotton and had retake most of the miles and supplies not inside the warehouses. Considering their objectives largely gained they began an orderly withdrawal. Rushing out of the warehouses to fire and the departing enemy, the Yankees were quick to claim a Southern rout that is, until their true losses were realized the next day. \*  
\*See additional articles included in this booklet for more details on this bloodiest day of the way in Yazoo County.

The following month, on April 22, 1864, another surprising and most uncommon event occurred on the Yazoo River two miles upstream from Yazoo City. A Federal gunboat, the tinclad USS Petrel, tied up to the river bank near the mouth of the Tokeba Bayou, was attacked and captured by a combat patrol from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Arkansas Consolidated Mounted Infantry. Accurate fire from the opposite bank by two 10-pound Parrot rifles partially disabled the vessel, causing part of its crew to flee. Then Arkansas boys swimming across the swift-flowing muddy waters took their prize.\*

\* See additional articles included in this booklet for a more detailed account of the USS Petrel's capture.



On May 19, 1864, Federal troops for the last time came into Yazoo City and got out of hand. Despite the efforts of the provost guards, they burned the courthouse, the lawyer's offices, and several swellings.

By the last few month of the war, Yazoo County had been so overrun by the frequent raids of the enemy that there was little of value left and the county had practically no strategic value.

In addition to serving as a battleground, Yazoo City and County contributed mightily of men to the Confederate cause. The Hamer Rifles was the first unit to be organized and mustered into service at Yazoo City on April 8, 1861. This unit was assigned to the Army of Virginia and served there as Company D of the 18<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Regiment.

By the end of the war all companies made up from Yazoo County had suffered extreme losses through death, wounds, prison confinement and disease. Only a small remnant of those who enlisted returned.

It was these survivors who, when they returned to their denuded homeland, were faces wit the heartbreaking task of rebuilding under the rigors of Reconstruction days. It was several years before the county began to take on a health economic complexion and the battle against great odds was turned in favor of the residents.

Yazoo City and County have an active historical society.

The following pages contain reprints of several articles from The Yazoo Herald which were published in the past for the Society about interesting events in our town and the surrounding area during the War Between the States.

**“A Little Girl's Poem and a Kind Northern Officer”  
originally published Wednesday, December 24, 1997, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President**

During the War Between the States in 1864, Honora O'Keefe was just a little girl.

She lived in Yazoo City in her family home right on the corner of Jefferson and Washington streets. A low fence separated her yard from the empty lots next door on Jefferson, which then extended all the way up to Monroe.

During and after the Vicksburg campaign when that city became the Federal stronghold to try to control all of Central Mississippi, Northern forces came up to occupy Yazoo City temporarily on several occasions. The big house made an ideal campground for some of the troops.

When they arrived one of those times and began putting up their tents, Honora climbed up on her fence to watch. A very surprised Yankee soldier close by was suddenly startled to hear the little girl recite a poem to him:

Jeff Davis rides a snow-white horse,  
Abe Lincoln rides a mule.  
Jeff Davis is a gentleman,  
Abe Lincoln is a fool.

Amused and delighted at the little Rebel's audacity, he called some of his companions over and told Honora he'd give her “two bits” in U.S. Money to say her little piece again. But Miss O'Keefe haughtily refused.

“My mama has plenty of money,” she said.

A young Union officer, seeing the gathering by the fence, came to investigate. He told the little girl she has better go into her house. Then he came over and knocked on the door. Mrs. O'Keefe courteously invited him in. He entered and told Honora's mother, most politely, that this unit would not be there long, that he has some pretty tough types in his ranks, and that he'd appreciate her keeping her daughter indoors for her safety.

While talking with Mrs. O'Keefe, the young officer noticed another little girl lying in bed in an adjacent room. Smiling, he told Mrs. O'Keefe that he too had two little daughters of just about the same ages. He was obviously pained to learn that the other child was very ill with malaria and that it was impossible to find any quinine. At the time, quinine powder was the only medication for that sickness.

Soon after this Northern gentleman – for that he certainly was – left, an orderly sent over by him knocked on Honora's door. He had a small parcel for her mother. In it were five doses of quinine. Her older sister was soon much better.

A grateful little Honora continued to live in Yazoo City for the rest of her life. In her adult years she was Mrs. Owen Brown, and she never forgot her verse nor the happy consequences it brought for her family.

Some of Mrs. Brown's great-grandchildren are still prominent Yazooans.

**“A Wounded Confederate Soldier's Gratitude to the Citizens of Yazoo City”  
originally published on Wednesday, December 31, 1997, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President**

When the Civil War began in early 1861, an aspiring young American artist was studying and sketching in Rome, Italy. But within little more than a year, his destiny would make him a wounded and convalescing Confederate soldier, drawing scenes in pencil of Yazoo City.

Conrad Wise Chapman was of a Virginia family but born in Washington, D.C., in 1842. He was the son of an already prominent painter who took his family to live in Italy when Conrad was only 6. When the war in America threatened, the young man, by then 19, was determined to return home and fight for the South. Sailing from England to New York, then down the Ohio River by steamboat, he enlisted as a private in the first Confederate Army unit he encountered – the Kentucky Third Infantry Regiment.

By then it was September and Conrad soon “got the measles” and was hospitalized for two months. He rejoined his unit in early 1862, just in time for the Battle of Shiloh in western Tennessee, where he received a serious head wound. After another hospital stay of a month in Memphis, he rejoined his regiment once more near Corinth, Mississippi. But shortly, he was very ill again along with hundreds of his fellow Kentuckians. They were struck by dysentery contracted from water drunk from shallow and contaminated wells.

This time there was no more hospital space, the badly wounded from Shiloh still overflowing all local facilities. The only solution was to load the disables on trains and send them in all directions to any towns along the railways that would take them in.

That's how Conrad got to Yazoo City, where there was an established military hospital. But let him tell his own story of coming here, as relates to his family in a portion of a letter of May 18, 1862:

*“There were fifty more of our regiment in the same way as myself, and we were started off from Corinth on the card, the Drs or any one else not caring a damn where we were sent to or what became of us, so they got us off their hands. A box car was all we had for fifty men and such a night we spent of it no one can describe legs and arms groaning all night.*

*The next day we arrived at Vaughan's Station about 5 P.M. Here Dr. Blackburn our old Ky Friend,*

*started us all who were able to undertake the journey in a wagon, just as the sun was sitting behind some dark clouds which threatened us with rain before we could get far with our wagon over such ruff roads as led from the station to Yazoo City which place was our destination. The rain soon began to come down in earnest and our backs which were by no means unused to the like, got as wet as water could make them. We slept however through most of it so tired and broke down were we and reached Yazoo City a little after day brake-*

*That little town, if I should live a hundred years would always be remembered by me, for the kindness of its citizens, especially of the ladies. Never was I treated with more kindness in my life and this too by strangers. As soon as we arrived the citizens crowded around our wagons to see what they could do for us. Our names were taken and each citizen volunteered to provide for two. Wilson and I fell to the lot of Mr Harrison and Nick Ransdel also all Paducah boys. Charley Ewell and the Fontleroy's were taken at once into the country by an old judge and his pretty daughters much to our envy.*

*Holt found a relation close by, and all were provided for and but few remained in the temporary hospital after the first day.*

*Yazoo City presented a strange look at the time we reached it. A great portion of it was flooded by the recent overflow of the river and islands appeared on all sides, trees under water – etc -*

*I had not been there but one day and night before a gentleman living about a mile and a half from town came and got Wilson and myself from the Hospital and took us to his country house. Mr. Richard Powell's kindness will always be remembered with gratitude by me, that is all that a soldier can do. I remained at his house for over a month, at first my health was every day improving but one day I was out sketching too long in the sun and in the night has a congestive chill, as they called it, and it was some time before I got over it. I was sick up to the first of June. Wilson was always by my side indefatigable, often setting up all night with me.*

*The names of Harrison, Powell, Link, Holt and Fewques will never be forgotten by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ky at Yazoo City.”*

**“Letters Give War Glimpse of Yazoo”  
originally published on Wednesday, January 7, 1998, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President**

Our last article told the story of Conrad Wise Chapman, an artist and a private in the Third Kentucky Infantry Regiment of the Confederate States Army who was brought to Yazoo City in May 1862 to convalesce from a Shiloh battle wound and dysentery.

Of a Virginia family and studying in Rome, Italy, at the outbreak of the Civil War, he came back home at age 19 to fight for the South.

Several of Conrad's letters to his family survive and excerpts from one, which was quoted in the previous article, recounted how he came to Yazoo City and told of his kind reception here. Parts of later letters give us some most interesting glimpses of Yazoo City in the summer of 1862.

*“Friday night the 30<sup>th</sup> of May- a grand concert was given for the benefit of the sick Kentucky soldiers. All at the hospital and in the country were invited, and those who were well enough and could borrow or beg a clean shirt went. The Performance commenced with tableaux and such things as they were would have astonished the world elsewhere. Some of the singing was good. Nick Ransdel was behind the scenes and whistled for the mockingbird in the song “Listen to the Mockingbird” and was called out several times by the audience.”*

Another letter makes great fun of the local militia – He spells it “Malitia” - composed mostly of youngsters and men who had not yet volunteered, charged with protecting the homefront.

*“A great commotion took place at Yazoo City – the Yankees were threatening to come up the river in their gunboats and a party of Malitia started to build a raft across the entrance of the river – around which point the gunboats were hovering – We started in grand style with the Malitia on the steamboat “The Dew Drop” on the 3d of June – These amateur soldiers had a great quantity of little nicknacks for the necessities and luxuries of camp life. Musketoe bars, cooking utensils of all sizes and shapes, hams, pickles, preserves of all sorts enough to stock a whole brigade of Volunteer aids and with all this they had but a dozen guns for the party of thirty. It was fun to hear them boast of what they would do if the Yanks only showed themselves, and we smiled in our sleeves, and we four of the third as lookers on enjoyed in the extreme.*

*When we got to Liverpool – the entrance of the Yazoo we found these fireside rangers were inclined to do nothing but fish hunt; and eat and drink and wanted us to watch out for the Yanks. We stood the duty for them for a couple of nights and got tired of the fun and left them the glory of their conceit in imagining that they were soldering, and prepared at once to return to our more serious duties as soldiers in the regiment.*

By mid-June 1862, the young Kentuckians had been nursed back to good health by their Yazoo friends. Conrad wrote of their departure:

*On the 15<sup>th</sup> we left Yazoo City, all the citizens who had been so kind to us were anxious for us to remain longer, but we had already overstaid our time, for we were able to do duty again. A Farewell diner at Mrs. Harrisons and a shake of the hand with our many friends and peached on wagons no longer the sick drooping lean invalids, we arrived there but a month before but well and harty and ready for a good long spell of hard service again.*

**“March 5, 1864: the day the war came into Yazoo City”  
originally published on Wednesday, November 26, 1997, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President**

Few Yazooans have been aware that one of the engagements between large numbers of Confederate and Federal troops in Central Mississippi took place right in the heart of our then small town on March 5, 1864. A good description of that short but very bloody encounter can be gleaned from the written reports made afterward by both the Northern and Southern officers leading their respective units. Some today call it “The Battle of Benton Road,” but this is purely local and the term is not mentioned in history books or in the “Official Records of the War of the Rebellion.”

First, some background.

Why in Yazoo City? During and after the Siege of Vicksburg in May and June 1863, Union warships regularly patrolled the Yazoo River and on several occasions landed troops here. They were not opposed and stayed only temporarily.

In February 1864, however, a much larger force was sent to occupy Yazoo City for several weeks as part of a strategic move by General William T. Sherman, then in command at Vicksburg which the Federals had made one of its main southern strongholds. It was later in 1864 that Sherman became notorious for his capture of Atlanta and his destructive “March to the Sea” through northern Georgia.

By January 1864 he had devised a master plan to totally tear up the railroad from Vicksburg to Meridian, destroy the Confederate rail center and supply depot there, and thus paralyze all rail transportation in Mississippi. He would then try to drive all remaining Confederate forces from the state and destroy as much public and private property as he could – clearly foreshadowing his later actions in Georgia.

As a feint to keep the Confederates guessing, he planned other diversions. One was to send an amphibious force far up the Yazoo River, raiding for cotton and supplies for Vicksburg, which would keep all rebel forces in Central Mississippi too busy to hinder his Meridian expedition.

In early 1864, the Federals learned that Col. Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross and his Sixth Texas Cavalry Brigade was using Yazoo City as a base to run several thousand muskets, in wagons up through the swampy country, to near Greenville. From there, by night, to avoid Yankee gunboats that after Vicksburg's fall controlled the entire Mississippi River, the weapons were being ferried across to Confederate units in Arkansas and Texas.

The northerners, in occupying Yazoo City, could stop “Sul” Ross as well.

More about “Sul” Ross will be told in another article. Suffice it to note here that within a month, he became the ninth youngest brigadier-general in the Confederate Army, served brilliantly throughout the Civil War, went home to become a United States senator, governor of Texas and president of Texas A&M College, where his statue on campus is still revered by the Aggies of today.

The first Union convoy of gunboats and troops transports headed for Yazoo City in early February 1864. But it was so harried by gunfire from “Sul” Ross's cavalry and artillery on the bluffs at Liverpool, 16 miles south of Yazoo City, and approaching Yazoo City itself, that it turned back. The Texans were then ordered to join up with a larger force near Pickens, however, so on Feb. 9 a second convoy brought Col. James H. Coates and some 1,600 officers and men to Yazoo City without incident. The men were mainly of Coates's Eleventh Illinois Infantry. But he also led several companies of black soldiers from the Eighth Louisiana Infantry, newly freed former slaves with white officers, and a detachment of First Mississippi Cavalry, also black.

Leaving only a part of his force in Yazoo City – about 250 men – Coates and the convoy continued upriver to Greenwood, plundering along the way for 19 days and as far afield as Grenada. On Feb. 29, he returned here with much booty, as well as many slaves seeking their freedom.

Coates set up headquarters in the defunct Michie's Bank building on lower Main Street. It had white pillars at the entrance and was near the corner of Commercial Street. With two gunboats he needed no protection at his rear. But to further strengthen the Confederate-built fortifications to the south and east, which he now manned, he built a strong redoubt, or large earthen fortress surrounded by trenches, at the top of Broadway, where the two large water tanks now stand. It dominated Benton Road, then covered with wooden planks, and inside was placed a stationary cannon, or howitzer, borrowed from one of the gunboats.

At that point the Confederates decided to put a stop to the Yankee raiding and to try to recover the plunder now warehoused in Yazoo City by retaking the town.

Ross, just promoted to brigadier-general, was given the assignment with about 800 cavalry men and some artillery men drawn from several Texas brigades. Moving toward Yazoo City from Pickens, he was joined at Benton on March 4, 1864, by Brig. Gen. R.V. Richardson with 550 cavalry and another artillery detachment, all from Tennessee. The attacking Confederates now numbered about 1,300 to the 1,600 Yankees holding Yazoo City.

The strategy decided by the two Southern generals was first to assault and take the Benton Road redoubt. Batteries of canon were set up at three locations and trained upon the fortress. They were just above the burial vaults now at the highest part of Glenwood Cemetery, on the ridge now occupied by Yazoo Tire Service, and on Highland Drive, probably just above the Frederick Clark home. Between these three key points, all the Texans and some of the Tennesseans took their positions.

If one looks today from the top of the cemetery toward the large American flag flying by the water tanks across to the Mississippi 16 over the recently cleared ground, the plan for the attack becomes immediately clear.

The action began at about 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday as the Confederates began firing at the Union cavalry and infantry – called pickets – forming a first line of defense outside the redoubt. The batteries soon afterward added their very accurate firepower from three directions, driving all the pickets into the redoubt. At about 10 o'clock, after several deadly shells had fallen inside the fortress, putting the howitzer out of commission, the Texans formed battle lines. They raced simultaneously down into the intervening ravines on three sides and only 150 feet under the redoubt. The Broadway side still being open, Major McKee of Illinois, commanding inside of the redoubt, decided to send a small detachment of infantry down into town to headquarters to report his situation and to request another howitzer.

But at the same time, Brig. Gen. Richardson and most of his Tennesseans poured down Brickyard Hill, across the completely open fields of Lintonia Plantation north of the canal, and toward the town. At that time the old Pugh home, still standing at the end of Yazoo Street on Powell Street, practically marked the northeast limits of Yazoo City. Toward that substantial house, which still has a cannon ball imbedded in one wall, one detachment with an artillery piece rushed south to reach Broadway.

The main force, with six pieces of artillery, headed on along the canal to just beyond the present Gilbert Lumber and Home Center where the Union's First Mississippi Cavalry had its camp, no doubt for the convenience of watering their horses in the canal.

Surprised and outnumbered, the cavalry men hastily retreated down Mound and Main streets, where a

company of Louisiana infantry men, rushing up to support them, were also turned around near our present library. Pressed by the Confederates all the way back to Union headquarters, they took up positions in houses and stored on Lower Main, Washington and Mound streets, where they fired on the Southerners from windows and doorways. One report states that Coates stood outside his commandeered bank building while its white pillars became speckled with bullet holes but he only received one in his coat.

Meanwhile, the Tennesseans heading for Broadway arrived there just in time to meet the unfortunate squad of Northerners coming down from the redoubt. They took 10 of them prisoner, the others escaping on into the intense fighting and now reaching downtown. These Tennesseans quickly moved on up Broadway to complete the encirclement of the redoubt.

At noon, Ross first demanded the surrender of the redoubt, pointing out to McKee his position was hopeless and wishing to avoid more useless bloodshed. The major refused, not knowing what was happening downtown and doubtless still hoping for relief. Ross continued the artillery and gunfire relentlessly.

But Coates's men were being pushed more and more toward the riverside warehouse and the protection of the gunboats, which now began shelling. The Southerners nevertheless found and set fire to the plundered cotton. They retrieved many of the horses and mules taken during the upriver raids and some clothing and ammunition but most of the food stuffs were in the protected warehouses.

In the early afternoon, one almost comic episode took place at the end of Main Street near the river landing. Coates requested one of the gunboat captains to land a howitzer there behind an impromptu barricade of cotton bales. This an Ensign and several sailors did, but when the first Southerners fired on them, the young naval officer and his boys fled shamelessly back to their boat, where the indignant captain refused to let them on board. Meanwhile, the Tennesseans took the Howitzer for a short time before a Yankee counterattack got it back. Coates then had the big gun moved to one of the street intersections further up Main and manned it with a braver crew.

By 3 o'clock, Gen. Richardson felt he had achieved as much of his objective as he could. His ammunition was running low, and two boatloads of Federal reinforcements were believed to be arriving. He ordered his men to withdraw toward Brickyard Hill. Seeing them pull back from downtown, the Union soldiers taking refuge in the warehouses came out and followed them firing. This allowed Coates to boast in his official report that "my force made a desperate charge through the streets, completely routing the enemy and pursuing them through the town."

By then, Ross had requested McKee two more times to surrender the redoubt. But they had squabbled over terms and were at a stalemate. Because of Richardson's success in the town, the two generals agreed that the loss of Confederate lives in finally taking the redoubt by storm would not be justified. So Ross's Texans, too, retired back toward Benton.

Both the redoubt and Yazoo City were still in Union hands. But though not yet apparent, the day had been clearly won by the Confederates. When casualties on both sides were counted, the Southerners had lost only six men and only 51 wounded. The Federal dead totaled 31 with 121 wounded, and another 31 missing. When Vicksburg headquarters learned this they ordered, the very next day, that the redoubt be abandoned, that the Illinois troops return immediately, and that the rest of their forces fall



back to Liverpool.

Gen. Ross and Richardson and their men stated encamped at Benton for several weeks, treated as true heroes by citizens of Yazoo City and Yazoo County.

March 5, 1864, was truly a day in Yazoo City like no other.

**“Sul” Ross wrote fondly of Yazoo”**  
**originally published on Wednesday, December 10, 1997, as submitted to**  
**The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President**

Late last year, two ladies from Texas came to the Triangle Cultural Center. One of them, Mrs. Jean Eldridge Nix of Waco, was a descendant of Brig. Gen. Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross of the Confederate States Army, one of the two generals leading the Southerners in the bloody engagement of March 5, 1864, in Yazoo City. A recent article in The Yazoo Herald described that battle.

Mrs. Nix had wanted to see Yazoo City because the general, in two letters to his wife in 1864, had spoken of the town and its people almost with affection. A total of 81 of the general's letters, mostly from the Civil War period, are in the Baylor University Library. And, in 1994, they were published in a slim volume bound in cloth, limited to 500 copies and entitled “Personal Civil War Letters of General Lawrence Ross With Other Letters.” Before leaving, Mrs. Nix graciously presented a copy of the book to the Yazoo Historical Society.

“Sul” Ross was one of the outstanding public figures of 19<sup>th</sup> century Texas. Only 22 in 1860, he was persuaded by Gen. Sam Houston to raise a volunteer force of Texas Rangers and deliver a decisive blow to the marauding Comanches. A year later, when Texas seceded, he joined the Sixth Texas Cavalry Regiment, was elected its regimental major, and was off to Arkansas and the War Between the States. Serving afterward during the entire conflict in Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, he learned he has been named a brigadier-general, the ninth youngest in the Confederacy, while camping at Benton in January 1864.

After the war, he went on to become a U.S. Senator, governor of Texas, and president of Texas A&M College, which he set on the path to becoming the great school it is today.

Before his part in the battle in Yazoo City on March 5, 1864, “Sul” Ross and his Sixth Texas Regiment had already come here on an assignment to deliver several thousand muskets through the undrained swamps then mostly separating our town from the Mississippi River, to a point below Greenville. From there they had to be slipped across the Arkansas shore by night to avoid Yankee gunboats, by then in full control of the river.

Partly because of this, Federal headquarters in Vicksburg decided to occupy Yazoo City in early February. A convoy of gunboats and troopships bringing Col. James Coates of Illinois with some 1,600 men headed up the Yazoo. But at Liverpool, about 16 miles below town, on Feb. 3, “Sul” Ross gave them big trouble.

This is how he told the story to his wife, Lizzie, in the first of his letters from our area.

*Pickens Station Miss*

*Febry 9<sup>th</sup> 1864*

*My dear wife,*

*I have just gained a great victory over the Enemy. They have advanced again and taken Jackson and are moving it is supposed on to Mobile. My Brigade was posted on the Yazoo River below Yazoo City, and the Enemy's Fleet comprising three Gun Boats & nine Transports loaded with Infantry started up the Yazoo River to Garrison the City. I took position at Liverpool 16 miles below the City, & when the Fleet came up my Artillery (2 little 6 pound Rifle pieces) opened upon them, and Kept them back.... They then landed their Infantry, and attempted to drive me from the heights, but I whipped them back to the Boats and forced them to reembark. I left our Regt on the River and moved the other three back several miles to forage the Horses and rest the men. While gone, the Boats ran by this Regt under heavy Musketry fire – but I beat them to Yazoo City and took position with my men out of sight, and the Gun Boats came boldly along, careless of danger, until the front one was just opposite, & within 250 yards of my Artillery when, much to their surprise, several large holes was suddenly made through it. With much difficulty, it was drawn off down the stream, and then the whole concern commenced shelling me with their 24 pound Guns, trying to drive me from the hills, but after many hours trial they gave it up, and moved down the River and Again put off their Infantry I then posted my men in the fortifications around the City to give them Battle, but they had been to badly whipped at Liverpool to try that Experiment the second time. So they got on board put back down towards Vicksburg. I followed them back to Liverpool. They left their dead & wounded in our possession, amounting to 180 – my loss 20 – The people of Yazoo City, Mayor and worthies gave me & the Brigade vote of thanks, and Genls Lee & Jackson paid high compliments. The Whole country is vocal with praise of the Cavalry from Texas, that whipped a whole Fleet, & Defeated twice their number of Infantry on land. I was ordered to join Genl Jackson yesterday and am no En route. I learn this Evening that the Fleet came to the City, after I left and landed 7000 troops.*

*Our Infantry gave up Jackson without a fight. The Enemy have 30,000 our force not more than 15,000. Genl Lee had three Brigades, Cavly, & mine will make four, some 8000 men. No one Killed that you know – I am still in the notion of coming Home soon & tried to get off, about a week ago, but failed. They would not let me go.*

*Yours truly,  
Sul Ross*

A few clarifications:

The Generals Lee and Jackson referred to are not Robert E. and “Stonewall,” but his cavalry superior, Maj.-Gen. Stephen D. Lee, and Brig.-Gen. W.H. Jackson. “Sul's” information was wrong about the number of occupying troops in Yazoo City. There were only 1,600 – not 7,000.

**“Damaged “Sul” Ross Letter Reconstructed”  
originally published on Wednesday, December 17, 1997, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President**

## Yazoo Historical Society

A previous article told how last year two ladies from Texas visited the Triangle Cultural Center.

One of them was Jean Eldridge Nix of Waco, who is a descendant of Brig.-Gen. Lawrence Sullivan "Sul" Ross of the Confederate States Army. Ross, a Texan, was one of the two generals commanding the Southern forces which fought a bloody engagement with Federal forces on the outskirts and in the streets of Yazoo City on March 5, 1864.

Mrs. Nix most graciously presented to the Yazoo Historical Society a small volume of Ross' Civil War letters written to his wife. Two of these letters concerned the military actions of his Texas Cavalry brigade in and near Yazoo City, and one was printed in full in that previous article. It described an attack by his men on a Federal convoy of gunboats and troopships steaming up the Yazoo River to occupy our town in early February 1864. It has been written just afterward from Pickens on Feb. 9, 1864.

The second letter, written from Benton on March 19, 1864, two weeks after the battle at Yazoo City, was most unfortunately damaged badly in latter years. Much became illegible, and entire words and phrases were lost

Still, however, if one guesses at the missing words, enough of what remains about the fighting in Yazoo City is quite clear and graphic. And his comments about his reception by the Yazooans after the battle and other observations about local matters are of keen interest.

Here are portions of some of his paragraphs that have been partially reconstructed and edited:

*Benton, Miss  
March 19, 1864*

*My Dear Wife,*

*We have fought and won a very hard engagement against an enemy greatly superior numerically... again at Yazoo City. The Division Headquarters has commended us and has allowed "Yazoo City" to be added to the banners of each regiment serving in my brigade.*

*The local press proclaim our valiant Texans can travel anywhere they want without paying a cent whilst others are charged heavily. Our name has become a terror to the Yankees. When I rode down into Yazoo City the Negro troops ran wildly through the streets shouting "Old Ross, Old Ross is coming..."*

*The people of Yazoo City have been bestowing many compliments and giving us banquets, cakes, etc. Some come from distant portions of the county to make calls. Flattering invitations are numerous.*

*...Some young ladies thought it no sin to kiss and be kissed by a general even if he was married. But you know I didn't engage in any thing of that sort.*

...

*...The generals over me will not let me be gone long enough to go to see you. Even so if I have to stay on this side much longer I will try to send and have you run the blockade across the Mississippi River. I am dearly dead to see you. It's hard to be parted from wife and loved ones. I am going to make another effort to get off very soon. I have sent a copy of an official report to Mother. You will find it and accompanying letter interesting.*

*I have just been told we now have a namesake. Mr. Spires, a wealthy gentleman living in Yazoo City has a daughter born two weeks ago and he christened her "Texanna." The men of my command are calling her "Texas Brigade."*

*They are trying to cultivate the deserted plantations all along the Yazoo River and have adopted a system called "Armed Occupancy and Colonization of Occupied Country." But notwithstanding their*

*plans, in these next weeks six or seven scouts will go to raid those places and drive off all the horses and miles and destroy the supplies. ... A report from scouts came to me today telling me of the captive of a good many mules, and they are to be brought here tomorrow. ... They will soon abandon the Colony System. ...*

*Just sold my war horse for five thousand dollars to General Jackson.*

*Very resply L. S. Ross*

That final line shows how inflated the Confederate currency was becoming. Gen. W.H. Jackson was a friend in command of the area around Canton.

**“Concord Church Skirmish Revisited”  
originally published on Wednesday, May 20, 1998, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President  
Yazoo Historical Society**

About three months ago, our society had a telephone call from a gentleman in Indianapolis who wanted to know the exact location of Concord Church in Yazoo County.

He was coming through here especially to visit the spot where one of his ancestors, a Confederate soldier from Arkansas during the Civil War, had helped to defeat the Yankees in a sharp skirmish in December 1, 1864.

About three weeks ago, our society had a telephone call from a gentleman in Denver who wanted to know the exact location of Concord Church in Yazoo County. He was collecting family history for his little daughter whose great-great-great-grandfather was a young Union cavalry officer from Wisconsin during the Civil War, taken prison there by the Confederates in a strong skirmish on Dec. 1, 1864.

We were happy to help them both. And it would probably be helpful to most Yazooans as well to tell again why that sharp military engagement took place in such an unlikely place in our country so long ago.

Concord Church is a Baptist church founded in 1843. When driving to Jackson, if you look to the right at the last crossroad on U.S. 49 about a mile before getting to Little Yazoo, you will see a sign announcing it. The present and relatively new church, replacing the old wooden one there in 1864, is about a half-mile up the wide road.

Now partially abandoned, this road during the early years of our history was the principal connection between Yazoo City and Pritchett's Crossroads, the former name for Bentonia.

The chain of events leading up to the skirmish began far away in the fall of 1864. After Gen. Sherman's victory at Atlanta on Sept. 1, the defeated Gen. Hood shifted his Confederate Army of Tennessee. It was vital to the South to keep control of two of the principal railroads supplying him: the Mobile and Ohio in eastern Mississippi and the Mississippi Central, still mostly intact from Jackson, Miss., to Jackson, Tenn.

Realizing their importance, the Union high command determined to cut both lines. One expedition from the Federal bastion in Baton Rouge would set out across Southern Mississippi to strike the M&O. Another would leave from its stronghold in Vicksburg to destroy the Mississippi Central above and below Vaughan's Station in Yazoo County. It would also burn the railroad bridge over the Big Black River at Way's Bluff just south of Vaughan.

The Northern force (2,200 strong and including the Second Wisconsin Cavalry), trailed by a large wagon train, rode from Vicksburg at daybreak on Nov. 23 for Mechanicsburg and Benton. Two tin

clad warships and a transport vessel steamed toward Yazoo City at the same time in case of need.

The Confederates, caught by surprise, thought at first that Jackson was their target and gathered Arkansas and Mississippi cavalry units at Clinton to meet them. Because of the primitive communications of the times, the Yankees were almost at Benton three days later before the alerted Confederates at Clinton realizes the truth and began the race toward Way's Bluff bridge.

Leaving Benton via the Deasonville Road early on Nov. 27, the Northerners hit Vaughan's Station without opposition by noon and began tearing up the tracks northward toward Pickens. One detachment went south to attack the few guards at the Big Black bridge and to cut and gather wood and brush to pile on both the bridge and trestle leading to it. This has just been set on fire when the first Southerners rode up in the nick of time. The Yankees fled, and the still small blazes were easily put out.

The next day, however, before the rest of the Confederates could arrive and stop them, the Yankees were more successful. At Pickens, they burned the depot, a trestle, 1,200 bales of cotton and a large store of corn. Then on to Goodman to burn or destroy not only tracks and railway buildings, two engines and four cars but also another 1,300 bales of cotton and more grain.

Skittish now about being so deep into hostile territory, the Union commander bivouacked that night at Goodman. But when his scouts reported a sizable Southern force now just behind him, he hastily broke camp at 2 a.m. On Nov. 29 and rode rapidly via Ebenezer into Benton, then on to Yazoo City and the protection of the gun boats by 1 p.m.

The Confederates, in hot pursuit, to bottle the Yankees up in Yazoo City and to cut off supplies, set up roadblocks on all roads leading into our town – from Vicksburg, Benton, Lexington and Pritchett's Crossroads. The last was near Concord Church. Then they made camp not far away at Pritchett's Crossroads to await developments.

After two days, to test the strength of the roadblocks, the Union commander sent out several patrols. The 280 men of the Second Wisconsin Cavalry were dispatched down the road toward Pritchard's Cross-Roads. As fate would have it, just as they neared the roadblock at Concord Church, the Southern commander had decided to ride up to the same spot with most of his Arkansas and Mississippi Cavalry.

The two force met head-on.

Except for some firing at the Way's Bluff bridge, this heavy engagement of more than an hour at Concord Church was the only fighting between bluecoats and greyclads during the entire operation we have described. Finally the outnumbered Yankees retreated in some disarray back across Short Creek and into Yazoo City. They had lost five killed, nine wounded, and 25 missing. The Confederates had two killed and four wounded.

The Northern missing were mostly a young lieutenant and 23 boys of Company E, Second Wisconsin Cavalry, who were surrounded in a ravine while fighting dismounted and captured.

The lieutenant was the forbear of the daughter of our caller from Denver. He told us the boys were then sent to the notorious Confederate prison at Andersonville, Ga., but the lieutenant fortunately was exchanged four months later.

After his setback at Concord Church, the Yankee commander opted to cross to the west bank of the river and go well below Yazoo City to await transports from Vicksburg to take his men safely back to base by boat. They arrived there on Jan. 4, 1865.

**“The *USS Petrel* Captured by Arkansas Infantrymen Near Yazoo City”  
originally published on Wednesday, May 2008, as submitted to  
The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President  
Yazoo Historical Society**

The saga of the *Petrel* begins in early April 1864 with a decision by the North's commanding general and staff at their stronghold of Vicksburg to mount yet another temporary occupation of Yazoo City. This had already been done more than once before.

The official reason given for this expedition was to cut off the base of Confederate sharpshooters who were operating out of the Yazoo City area and targeting Yankee gunboats and commercial shipping on the Mississippi river.

Civil War historian, Edwin C. Bearss, suspects, however, that the real reason for the expedition may have been to locate and confiscate hidden stores of rare cotton. It could be sold at immense personal profit for the high ranking Yankee officers. This shabby practice among Union occupiers of the Deep South was widespread.

Indeed there were considerable Southern cavalry and infantry units at the time in the Yazoo-Canton area, under command of Brigadier General Wirt Adams. Their mission was to make trouble for, and frustrate if possible, any excursions by the Northerners out of Vicksburg to raid the interior of Central Mississippi.

Prominent among General Adams' units were both the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Consolidated Arkansas Infantry (Mounted), led by Col. John Griffith, and Captain James Owens' Arkansas Battery which employed powerful 10-pounder Parrot guns, called rifles by some but large enough to be mounted on carriers like small cannon.

The Yankee force, consisting of three infantry regiments, one cavalry regiment, and one section of artillery marched out of Vicksburg toward Mechanicsburg and Satartia on April 19, with Col. Hiram Scofield in command.

At the Army's request, the U.S. Navy assigned two tin clad gunboats as additional support to proceed up the Yazoo River near the Army's line of march. They were the *U.S.S. Petrel*, flagship, under the command of Acting Master Thomas McElroy, and the *U.S.S. Prairie Bird*. The messenger boat Firestone was also in the small fleet.

The Confederates began sniping attacks and provoking skirmishes at Mechanicsburg, continuing the harassment past Satartia. There the bluffs, called Liverpool Heights, began to almost border the road up to Liverpool, and the Confederates could intensify their attacks from them in bloody fighting that inflicted numerous casualties on the enemy all the way to Thompson's Creek. There General Wirt Adams threw in his entire brigade, including Col. Griffith's Arkansans, and Col. Scofield halted his march.

Wary of approaching farther, Col. Scofield requested Capt. McElroy to go on alone with his tin clads and reconnoiter the defenses of Yazoo City.

When the tin clads reached the site of the Navy yard just below town, Capt. McElroy was therefore surprised by the hail of cannon fire. *Petrel* returned the fire while attempting hastily to turn back. But Capt. McElroy was told by his pilot that that would be impossible in the narrow channel. His only recourse was to steam on upstream out of the cannon's range.

Since, oddly, *Petrel* had not taken a single hit from the Rebel bombardment, Capt. McElroy's first decision was to turn back and risk running the gauntlet at Yazoo City again. However, he changed his mind and decided to remain upriver until the following night before moonrise to slip past the Confederate guns.

Meanwhile, after attacking *Petrel*, the Arkansans had moved their guns down to the bluffs above the Navy yard and turned their 10-pounder Parrots on *Prairie Bird*. She was hit three times; a cylinder was badly damaged, and she retired two miles downstream.

During *Petrel*'s period of waiting upriver, however, two new developments would take place of which Capt. McElroy was, of course, unaware.

First, without consideration for his Navy supporters, Col. Scofield would decide to stop the army expedition, and would make no effort to inform the ships' officers.

Worse, Col. Griffith of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Consolidated Arkansas Infantry (Mounted), after failing to persuade General Adams to go after the *Petrel* with his entire brigade, did get his reluctant permission to take a detachment of his own men, two of Capt. Owens' Arkansas 10-pounder, and several Yazoo County boys of Companies A and K of Wood's Mississippi regiment, who knew the local terrain, to at least attack the tin clad.

Soon after noon on April 22, Col. Griffith and about 130 men moved out of their encampment in the hills and down to the Andrews Ferry Road, which began at the foot of Madison Street in Yazoo City, out of sight from the river whose banks were thickly lined with trees and bushes.

At 1 p.m., as the Confederates were approaching undetected, Capt. McElroy moved the *Petrel* two and one-half miles above Yazoo City to where Tokeba Bayou emptied into the Yazoo. He tied up to the west bank, sent a party ashore to gather wooden rails for fuel (as their smoke would be less noticeable than coal smoke) and went to lunch.

By 2 p.m. The Confederates had left the road, moved stealthily across the fields, dragging the Parrot guns to avoid the noise of mules, and had positioned themselves on the east bank of the river, about 400 yards south of *Petrel*, with its crew still unaware of their presence.

As Capt. McElroy came on deck from his lunch, the first two Rebel projectiles came screaming at his tin clad. Rushing to battle stations, his crew attempted to fire back from the right side of their still moored ship. But they could neither see their attackers nor get them into range of their cannons.

The captain ordered cast off and full steam ahead. But the pilot could not steer far enough into the stream, and after 200 yards ran aground.

All the while *Petrel* was under merciless fire from the Southern sharpshooters and guns. One shell severed a steam pipe shutting down the engine; another tore into the magazine and cut off both legs of the gunners mate; rifle fire killed or wounded around 10 others. Some of the crew panicked, jumped ashore and fled across the swampy land toward *Prairie Bird*.

When a Parrot shell finally exploded the *Petrel's* boilers, scalding steam forced most of the officers and remaining crew to abandon ship and take flight after the others. Only Capt. McElroy, the pilot, and the quartermaster stayed to get the wounded ashore, and with the dead still aboard, to attempt to set fire to the gunboat by spreading hot coals along her deck.

Seeing this, some of the good swimmers among the attackers plunged into the swift current, swam across the river, and took the captain and his remaining men prisoner.

Scattering the hot coals which had not done much damage, the swimmers were soon joined by Col. Griffith and the rest of his combat team who notified General Adams of their success. Soon work parties and wagons from Yazoo City were removing the *Petrel's* eight 24-pounder howitzer cannons as well as all the ammunition, food and stores they could carry. After taking everything of value, the *U.S.S. Petrel* was set ablaze to burn to the water's surface.

The eight howitzers were taken to Canton, then sent on to the defenses around Mobile. Capt. McElroy was sent as a prisoner to Richmond.

The heroic quartermaster of the *Petrel*, John H. Nibbe, a native German, was awarded the U.S. Navy's Medal of Honor, a new decoration that soon was adopted by the other service branches and finally became the Congressional Medal of Honor.

**“Twelve Medals of Honor for U.S. Navy Men Serving at or Near  
Yazoo City During the Civil War”  
originally published on Saturday, August 12, 2000, as submitted to**

## **The Yazoo Herald by Sam Olden, President Yazoo Historical Society**

Dr. and Mrs. David Arnold have recently made an intriguing discovery about the U.S. Navy's activity on the Yazoo River during the Civil War, at or near Yazoo City, which appears never to have been locally known or recorded before. We are grateful to them for presenting this to the Yazoo Historical Society.

For heroic acts on Northern warships fighting in our area in 1862 and 1864, no less than 12 Medals of Honor were later presented to Union petty officers and enlisted men. Three of these were for a landing action from the *U.S.S. Marmora* at the foot of Main Street.

Of additional interest, the World War II destroyer *U.S.S. Laffey*, (DD-724), that survived the onslaught of Japanese kamikaze attacks and became known as "The Ship That Wouldn't Die" was named for Bartlett Laffey, one of three medalists who took part in the Main Street fighting.

The *U.S.S. Laffey* is now moored alongside the famous aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Yorktown* in the harbor of Charleston, SC, together with other historic WWII warships.

The US Congress, at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 first created the Medal of Honor. It was proposed by the Secretary of the Navy for award "upon such petty officers, seamen, landsmen, and Marines as shall distinguish themselves by the gallantry in action and other seaman-like qualities during the present war." Eligibility for the honor was soon extended to the Army, and in later years to other branches of the service.

Today it is the highest award for valor in action against an enemy force which can be bestowed upon an individual by our country.

The first four medals of the 12 won here went to young men aboard the *U.S.S. Baron DeKalb* before it was sunk later by a homemade torpedo, or mine, just below Yazoo City. Her hulk can still be seen near the lumber mill when the water is low.

Their citations read in part: "Served on board the *U.S.S. Baron DeKalb* in the Yazoo River Expedition, 23 to 27 December 1862. Proceeding under orders up the Yazoo River, the *Baron DeKalb*, with the object of capturing or destroying the enemy's transports, came upon the steamers *John Walsh*, *R.J. Locklan*, *Golden Age*, and *Scotland*, sunk on a bar where they were ordered to be burned. Continuing up the river, the *Baron DeKalb* was fired upon but, upon returning the fire, caused the enemy's retreat.

Returning down the Yazoo, she destroyed and captured large quantities of enemy equipment and several prisoners. Serving bravely throughout, he distinguished himself in the various actions."

A citation of special interest to us is that of medal winner Coxswain John G. Morrison of the *U.S.S. Carondelet*, one of the first Union warships to be attacked near Vicksburg by the Confederate ram *C.S.S. Arkansas* soon after she was launched from the Yazoo City Naval Yard.

It reads in part: "Morrison was commended for meritorious conduct in general and especially for his heroic conduct and inspiring example to the crew in the engagement with the rebel ram *Arkansas*, Yazoo River, 15 July 1862.

When the *Carondelet* was badly cut up, several of her crew were killed, many wounded and others almost suffocated from the effects of escaped steam. Morrison was the leader when boarders were called on deck and the first to return to the guns and give the ram a broadside as she passed. His presence of mind in the heat of battle or trial is reported to be always conspicuous and encouraging."

The citation for medalist Bartlett Laffey and his two companies for their heroism at the foot of Main Street is as follows: "Off Yazoo City, Miss., 5 March 1864, embarking from the *U.S.S. Marmora* with a 12-pound Horwitzer mounted on a field carriage, Laffey landed with the gun and crew in the midst of heated battle and, bravely standing by his gun carriage and rammer, contributed to the turning



back of the enemy during the fierce engagement.”

This engagement was during the one-day, so-called by some, “Battle of Benton Road,” when Texas and Tennessee cavalry and artillery attacked Federal forces from Vicksburg temporarily occupying Yazoo City. There was indeed heavy fighting throughout our street from the top of Broadway to the river. The Yankees and their gunboats evacuated the town the next day.

Medalist John H. Nibbe, age 22, born in Germany, was aboard the *U.S.S. Petrel*. It was a Union tin clad tied up to the river bank two miles upstream from Yazoo City when it was surprised, captured, and burned by Arkansas troops stationed in our vicinity.

His citation is the most moving of all: “Served as quartermaster on board the U.S.S. Petrel during its capture in Yazoo River, 22 April 1864. Standing his ground when a shot came back through the stern, raking the gundeck and entering the boilers when all the others had deserted the flag, Nibbe assisted in getting the wounded off, the guard off and proceeded to get ready to fire the ship despite the escaping steam from the boilers at which time he was surrounded on all sides by the Rebels and forced to surrender.”

Fuller details on all 12 of these Medal of Honor winners are now in the Yazoo Historical Society files for anyone interested.