

Civil War in the Delta

In May 1861, Arkansas secedes from the union and joins the Confederacy. Enthusiasm runs high. Thousands of young men march off to war. All thoughts are of glory and gallantry. Few foresee the suffering and death which is to befall soldier and civilian alike.

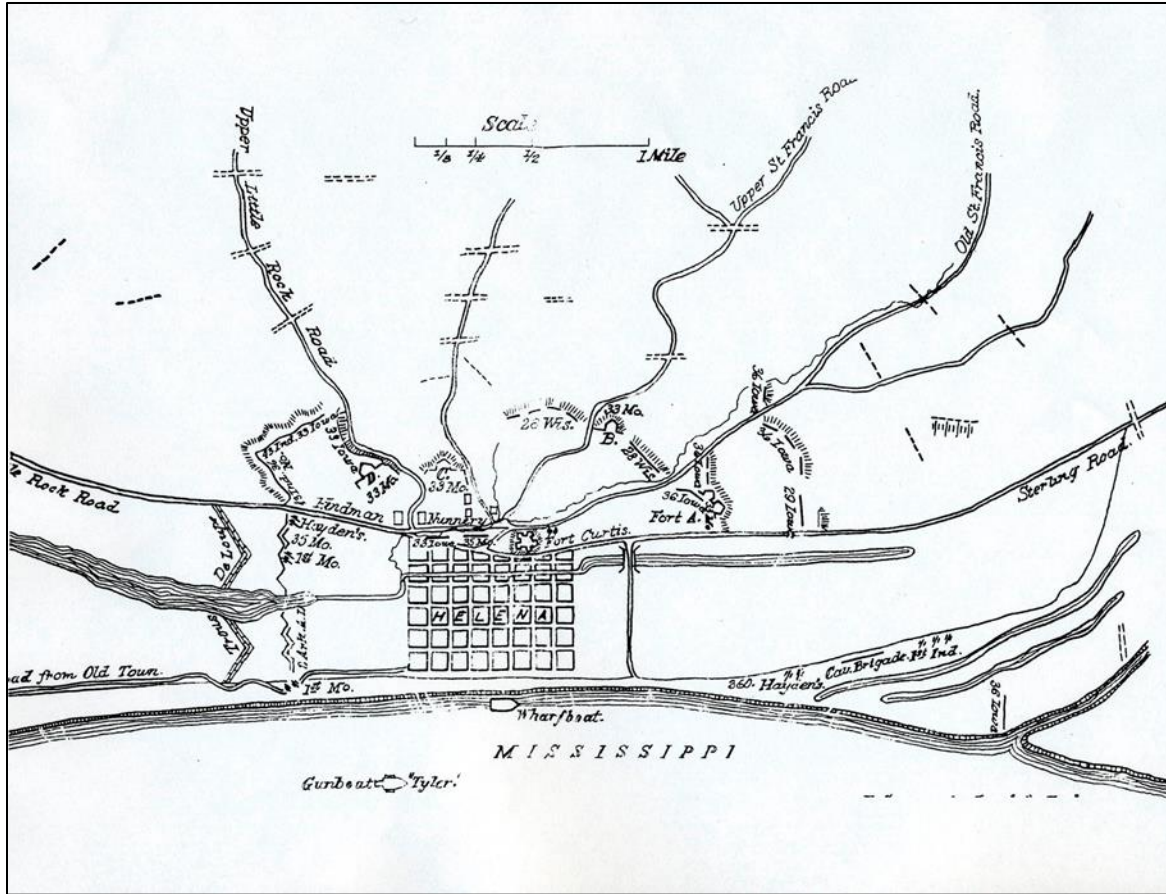
One year later, after their victory at Pea Ridge Civil War battle in northwest Arkansas, Major General Samuel Curtis' Union troops are threatening Little Rock. The resolute leader of the Arkansas Confederates, Delta native Major General Thomas Hindman, takes drastic steps which thwart the Yankee advance. Cut off from their Missouri supply lines and in need of a secure logistical base, the blue-coats change course. They steer away from Little Rock and head instead for the Mississippi River, where they occupy the town of Helena.

Over the next year, war in the Delta is a stalemate. Helena becomes a thorn in the Confederates' side. It serves as a base for Union operations aimed at breaking Confederate control of the Mississippi River and for Union raids of Delta plantations. Confederate forces wage guerrilla war against the occupying forces.

By June 1863, Confederate General Theophilus Holmes, a North Carolinian, has been appointed as commander of the Confederate Army in Arkansas. From his Little Rock headquarters, he develops plans to retake Helena. Driving the invaders from Helena would remove persistent threats to the Arkansas interior while dampening the Union drive to open the Mississippi River.

Unfortunately for the Confederate side, the aging Holmes is ill-suited for his commanding role. Behind his back, troops call him "Granny." Later, historian Shelby Foote would describe him as a "grim-featured man" whose "rigidity of face, indicative of arteriosclerosis, was matched by a rigidity of mind." Holmes is not fully aware of the strength of the Union garrison in Helena, now led by Major General Benjamin Prentiss, a Virginia-born Illinois lawyer.

The Union army's Helena stronghold is Fort Curtis on the western side of Helena. In addition, Prentiss' men had placed four batteries on four hills that formed a rough semicircle around the town. Battery A is located on Rightor Hill, northwest of town (near Adams and Columbia Streets). Battery B is near Liberty Street. Battery C is on the forbiddingly named Graveyard Hill, near the center of the Union perimeter (Clark and York Streets). Battery D is southwest of town on Hindman Hill (on Military Road). Additionally, the U.S.S. Tyler, heavily fortified and armed with a thirty-pound Parrott gun and six eight-inch smoothbore cannon, is anchored off the river.



Marching eastward, nearly 8,000 weary Confederate troops converge on Helena on July 3, 1863.

General Holmes later recalled that "the place was very much more difficult of access and the fortification very much stronger, than I had supposed before undertaking the expedition."

Nevertheless, a three-pronged Confederate attack is launched early the next morning. Forces led by Marmaduke's cavalry (dismounted) are to attack Rightor Hill (Battery A), to be supported on his left by a brigade under L.M. Walker. James Fagan's troops are to move against Hindman Hill (Battery D). The main thrust is to be aimed at Graveyard Hill (Battery C), led by the popular and heroic Major General Sterling Price.

Little goes right for the Confederates. Although they outnumber Union troops nearly two to one, they are assaulting heavily fortified defenses. The approach to the batteries from the West is steep, and the defending troops have felled timber to give themselves a clear line of sight and to obstruct the attackers' route. Union commander Prentiss has his garrison up and armed by 2:30 am that morning, having canceled July 4th celebrations because of warnings of imminent attack.

To make matters worse, the Confederate attack is not effectively coordinated. Fagan's brigade attacks Battery D, but a full hour elapses before Price's two brigades attack on Battery C. Although the Confederates briefly take Battery C, Holmes then orders part of that force to join another attack by Fagan against Battery D. That attack fails, while a Union counterattack on Battery C succeeds. The Confederates are pinned down and repulsed by Federal fire from the Union's hilltop batteries and the Union gunboat Tyler. Terrible carnage results. The battle is all over by 10:30 that morning. Holmes' Confederates retreat. "[J]ust to see the rebels lying in piles where they charged up the hill. It was awful," wrote a Union soldier surveying the scene. "I never want to spend another such a 'Fourth of July.'"

The very same day the Confederate attempt to recapture Helena is rebuffed, Union control of the Mississippi River is assured by the capture of Vicksburg under General Ulysses S. Grant -- a catastrophe for the South, as the Confederacy is now cut in two. Also ominous for the Confederacy is the virtually simultaneous loss at Gettysburg in the North - the so-called "high water mark of the Confederacy." By September 1863, Union forces capture Little Rock.

Confederate losses from Battle of Helena: 1,636 men

Union losses: 229 men