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Civil War in the Delta: Environment, Race, and the 1863 Helena Campaign

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Civil War in the Delta: Environment, Race, and the 1863 Helena Campaign

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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August 2017
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Abstract

“Civil War in the Delta” describes how the American Civil War came to Helena, Arkansas, and its Phillips County environs, and how its people—black and white, male and female, rich and poor, free and enslaved, soldier and civilian—lived that conflict from the spring of 1861 to the summer of 1863, when Union soldiers repelled a Confederate assault on the town. Scholars have been writing Civil War community studies since the 1960s, but few have investigated communities west of the Mississippi River. Historians also have written widely about Arkansas during the war, but there are no comprehensive studies of a single community in the state. “Civil War in the Delta” fills these voids by detailing the wartime experiences of soldiers and civilians in Helena and its surrounding countryside.

“Civil War in the Delta” also describes the 1863 Helena campaign, one of the most significant engagements of the war west of the Mississippi. On July 4, 1863, approximately 7,600 rebels attacked and were repulsed by 4,100 Federals at Helena. The attack was launched to relieve pressure on the besieged Confederate garrison at Vicksburg and secure an important rebel position on the Mississippi River. In the end, it was too little and too late to save Vicksburg, which capitulated on the same morning. However, over 1,800 men were killed, wounded, or captured in the engagement, and its outcome ensured Union control of the Mississippi. The campaign also illustrates the natural environment’s pivotal role in the Civil War. The Confederates believed if they moved against Helena with “celerity and secrecy,” they would easily capture the post. However, the natural environment of the Arkansas Delta—and the Federals’ strategic use of that environment—prevented the Confederates from achieving those ends. Harsh environmental conditions during the rebel approach to Helena in tandem with

the Federals' adaptation of the landscape as a key ally led to Confederate defeat and, by extension, solidified Union control of the Mississippi River and Arkansas.

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Like all historians, I am indebted to a number of librarians, archivists, and fellow historians who unearthed valuable materials for me and patiently steered me in the right direction. In Helena, Otis Howe, Alice Gatewood, and Shane Williams at the Helena Museum of Phillips County pointed me toward Phillips County's superb historical quarterly. At the University of Arkansas, Jeannie Whyne and Elliott West introduced me to environmental history, while Mullins Library's Special Collections Division and fine Interlibrary Loan Department provided vital materials and advice. I extend particular thanks to Geoffery Stark, Joshua Youngblood, Kasey Kelm, and Robin Roggio for patiently obliging my incessant requests for books, articles, and manuscript materials. I am also grateful to the staffs of all of the institutions listed in my bibliography, but I express particular gratitude to the following: Brian Robertson and his team at the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies in Little Rock; Mary Daniel at the Hawks Inn Historical Society in Delafield, Wisconsin; Russ Horton and Lindsey Hillgartner

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Antebellum Phillips Country	13
Chapter 2: The Secession Crisis	47
Chapter 3: And The War Came	90
Chapter 4: Occupation	140
Chapter 5: The Helena Campaign	192
Conclusion	244
Figures	259
Bibliography	266

Introduction

In the spring of 1860, journalist John P. Pryor recounted his tour of eastern Arkansas for a Memphis newspaper. Arkansas, which Pryor called “the rising ‘Crystal State’ of the Union,” had become a state only twenty-four years earlier, and Pryor hoped to satisfy his readers’ curiosity about their neighbors to the west. A resident of the Memphis area, Pryor could have crossed the Mississippi River at his home. Instead, he galloped his horse some seventy miles south into Mississippi, rode a steamboat across the river, and entered Arkansas at Helena, “a far more populous, prosperous, and growing place” than he had anticipated. “Helena presents all the appearances of a rapidly growing place,” he reported. “Elegant business houses are going up by the score in the trading part of town, and many comfortable and even palatial mansions are beginning to cluster upon and crown the picturesque hights [sic] which, from the West, so handsomely overlook the ‘future commercial metropolis of Arkansas.’”

The area surrounding Helena, especially its natural features, also impressed the colorful columnist. Traveling west from the town along the St. Francis Road—“one of the finest dirt roads” he had ever seen—Pryor mounted Crowley’s Ridge, an upland “broken into thousands of ‘spurs’ and well-wooded crags, and covered by timber of the largest and richest growth.” On the ridge’s western slopes, only a few miles outside Helena, he discovered “the finest upland farming country” he had ever seen. For twenty or more miles, he observed “almost one unbroken column of fair-lying plantations, all in a high state of cultivation,” and in his view, the region’s soil was “second only to the Mississippi bottom” in its ability to produce both cotton and corn. In fact, Pryor deemed Helena’s “back country superior in extent, and far exceeding in

quality, that of any other town on the western bank of the Mississippi river, between St. Louis and New Orleans.”¹

Less than three years after Pryor wrote his celebratory account, another correspondent described Helena in the same Memphis newspaper. In late February 1863, the Mississippi River was rising, and the reporter predicted the town would soon be inundated. “If Helena—the accent of the first syllable is eminently proper—is overflowed,” he declared, “I do hope it will be cleansed of a few of its impurities; for a more corrupt, intolerable place than it now is, cannot well be imagine[d]. The atmosphere is such that men who were once honest become tainted in principle and depraved in conduct.” Since July 1862, tens of thousands of Union troops had bivouacked at Helena, and the author lamented that “soldiers and officers alike” became demoralized in the town. “The latter drink, and the former die,” he bemoaned. “It is a noisome graveyard. There is no health, moral or physical, in it; no energy in its outgivings, no benefit in its influences. Helena is ethically, as well as philologically, hell, with additions.”

The correspondent estimated that 4,000 soldiers had perished in Helena’s hospitals since the Federals arrived in the summer of 1862, and he predicted that more would expire in coming months if “some great reform” was not made. “The hospitals are fearful to behold, and horrible to imagine,” he proclaimed. “They are grossly mismanaged, and nine out of every ten who enter them are certain to die. . . . Many of our soldiers, brought from transports have died here, like dogs, in the street, while our officers have occupied the best houses in the town as their quarters. Disease is in the atmosphere,” he concluded, “and the presence of death is attested by thousands

¹ “A Trip to Arkansas,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 11, 1860; General Thomas Jordan and J. P. Pryor, *General Nathan Bedford Forrest and of Forrest’s Cavalry*, ed. Albert Castel (Boston: Da Capo, 1996), iv-v.

of graves, filled by brave men murdered by neglect, lost to the republic through the stupidity and carelessness of unworthy and heartless officials.”²

In 1860, Helena was a prosperous port of 1,500 people (some 500 of whom were enslaved), abundant amenities, environmental advantages, and a promising future. By February 1863, however, the town had become a disease-ridden, mud-caked garrison of 16,000 federal soldiers, more than 3,000 black refugees, thousands of horses and mules, hordes of traders, a handful of aid workers, and hundreds of disgruntled white civilians whose homes, businesses, and farms had been confiscated and plundered. What prompted these profound changes? As Abraham Lincoln so poignantly put it in his second inaugural address, “[T]he war came.”³

The pages that follow describe how the Civil War came to Helena, and how its people—black and white, male and female, rich and poor, free and enslaved, soldier and civilian—lived that conflict from the spring of 1861 to the summer of 1863, when federal soldiers repulsed a Confederate attack on the town. Scholars have been writing Civil War community studies since the 1960s, and consequently, we know a great deal about a number of southern towns, especially those that were attacked or occupied by Union armies.⁴ Few, however, have investigated

² “Helena and Memphis,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, February 28, 1863; “Dreadful Condition of Helena, Arkansas – Yankee Soldiers Dying off like Sheep,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 3, 1863.

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, Compiled, from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census, (June 1, 1870) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 87; U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 74 (hereafter cited as *OR* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted); The Emancipation League, *Facts Concerning the Freedmen. Their Capacity and Their Destiny* (Boston: Press of Commercial Printing House, 1863), 7-9; Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 8, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 332.

⁴ For a list of the most important Civil War community studies published up to 1990, see Daniel E. Sutherland, “Getting the ‘Real War’ Into the Books,” *Virginia Magazine of History*

communities west of the Mississippi River.⁵ Historians also have written widely about Arkansas during the Civil War, but there are no comprehensive studies of a single community in the state.⁶

and Biography 98 (April 1990): 203n16-17, 206n18. Since 1990, the most important community studies include Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr., *Confederate Mobile* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); Sutherland, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861-1865* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Chester G. Hearn, *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); William Blair, *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); William Marvell, *A Place Called Appomattox* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); A. Wilson Greene, *Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Robert Tracy McKenzie, *Lincolntonites and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Richard R. Duncan, *Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); and Nicole Etcheson, *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

⁵ See, for example, Louis S. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), and Adam Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011). Historians of the Civil War traditionally have regarded the territory west of the Mississippi River as something of a backwater, but in recent years, that has begun to change. For a passionate defense of the Trans-Mississippi's importance, see William L. Shea, "The War We Have Lost," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 70 (Summer 2011): 100-108. For the latest synthesis on the war west of the Mississippi, see Thomas W. Cutrer, *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁶ Important articles about how the Civil War affected an Arkansas community include Nate Coulter, "The Impact of the Civil War upon Pulaski County, Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1982): 67-82; Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19 (June 1981/September 1981): 18-36; Moneyhon, "The Impact of the Civil War in Arkansas: The Mississippi River Plantation Counties," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51 (Summer 1992): 105-118; and Moneyhon, "The Civil War's Impact in Arkansas: Phillips County as a Case Study," *Locus* 5 (Fall 1992): 19-32. The best narrative history of Arkansas in the Civil War is Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003). The best analytical history of how the war affected the state socially, politically, and economically is Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994). Other important works on Civil War Arkansas include Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976); Mark K. Christ, ed., *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of

“Civil War in the Delta” fills these voids by detailing the wartime experiences of soldiers and civilians in Helena and its Phillips County environs.

In 1990, Daniel E. Sutherland called for scholars to heed Walt Whitman’s call to “get the ‘real war’ into the books” by producing “stories of individual communities and their inhabitants” in order to “come to grips with the diversity and reality of the war.” More specifically, he urged scholars to write county-level studies of the war years. “Civil War in the Delta” represents an attempt to heed Sutherland’s call. The best way to understand the Civil War is to study its causes, conduct, and consequences at the local level, and, as Sutherland noted, viewing the war from the vantage of a single community is a realistic way of telling its story because “most people [in the 1860s], even the soldiers to a large extent, were spectators of the war, much like us” today. Phillips County is an ideal place to study the war because its residents and visitors experienced the conflict’s social, economic, military, political, and environmental effects from 1861 to 1865 and beyond.⁷

Before the Civil War, Phillips County was planter-dominated slave society whose white residents exploited their Delta environment (and African American labor) to grow cotton and corn for export to outside markets. Thanks to rivers, roads, telegraphs, steamboats, railroads, and newspapers, they were linked to a larger antebellum world defined by Protestant Christianity, passionate politics, a slave-based economy, and a devotion to a Union that most white residents

Arkansas Press, 1994); Anne J. Bailey and Daniel E. Sutherland, eds., *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000); Mark K. Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863: The Battle for a State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010); and Mark Christ and Patrick G. Williams, eds., *I Do Wish This Cruel War Was Over: First-Person Accounts of Civil War Arkansas from the Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014).

⁷ Sutherland, “Getting the ‘Real War’ Into the Books,” 201; Sutherland, *Seasons of War*, vi.

believed was mankind's best hope for democratic government. A number of prominent secessionists hailed from Phillips County, but as late as December 1860, they represented a minority of the county's citizens.

When Abraham Lincoln—a Republican devoted to halting the expansion of slavery—was elected U.S. president in November 1860, unionism waned in Phillips County, but it was by no means extinguished. Three weeks after Lincoln's election, the county's residents adopted a resolution urging the Arkansas legislature to call a convention of the southern states to demand southerners' constitutional rights in the Union. Most Phillips County citizens, though concerned about their future in the United States, remained hopeful they could continue to be a part of it. When South Carolina seceded from the Union in late December, support for separation grew in both Phillips County and Arkansas at large. On January 15, 1861, the state Senate scheduled a February election in which voters would decide whether to hold a secession convention and choose delegates to that hypothetical convention. Three weeks before that election, rumors that U.S. troops were reinforcing Little Rock's federal arsenal swept the state. Although the rumors were false, an estimated eight hundred to one thousand militiamen—including five hundred from Phillips County—descended upon the capital and seized the arsenal, thus exacerbating sectional tensions in the state.

Ten days after the arsenal's capture, Arkansans overwhelmingly voted to hold a secession convention, and the citizens of Phillips County—like most of their fellow southern and eastern Arkansans—sent pro-separation delegates to the meeting. Most of the counties in northern and western Arkansas, on the other hand, chose unionists, so when the convention adjourned on March 21, Arkansas remained in the United States. By that time, however, most Arkansas unionists were *conditional* unionists. Sometimes called “cooperationists,” they shared the

secessionists' conviction that slavery had to be protected, but because they believed this could best be accomplished in the United States, they strove to prevent Arkansas's separation. If, however, the U.S. government proved unwilling to protect slavery and southern rights, the cooperationists were willing to secede. Most also opposed any federal attempts to force the states that had already seceded to rejoin the Union.

In April 1861, the U.S. government attempted to do just that. After Confederate troops captured Fort Sumter, South Carolina, President Lincoln requested that states still in the Union supply a total of 75,000 troops, including 780 from Arkansas, to put down the Confederate rebellion. Arkansas's governor refused, and in the ensuing days, cooperation in the state collapsed. By late April, support for secession in eastern Arkansas was almost unanimous. In Phillips County, anti-northern vigilante activity escalated, Helena's newspapers endorsed separation, and the militia drilled in anticipation of secession and war. Militiamen in Helena seized northern-owned steamboats that passed on the Mississippi River. By the time a reconvened convention announced Arkansas's secession on May 6, some 500 militiamen from five counties, including Phillips, had already mobilized to fight for the Confederacy.

In the spring and summer of 1861, mobilization in Phillips County was both rapid and widespread. In the war's opening months, approximately 400 of the county's 2,000 adult white males volunteered to fight, and over the next four years, at least seven infantry regiments came from the Arkansas Delta. Women frequently spearheaded the region's mobilization festivities, pressured males to enlist, and founded aid societies to support the troops. Enslaved Arkansans—who constituted some one-third of the state's population and a majority of Phillips County's—quietly took advantage of the tumult to rebel against their owners.

By early June 1861, all of the companies raised in Helena had departed to fight elsewhere, but residents continued to feel the effects of the conflict. In the war's opening year, slaves, civilians, and rebel soldiers moved in and out of Phillips County, while white residents suffered from crippling inflation, cash and manpower shortages, the collapse of credit, and eventually, draconian Confederate impressment and conscription. Nature also wreaked havoc on the county's citizens.⁸ A hog cholera epizootic reduced its swine population, a drought diminished its corn crop, and the "great [Mississippi] flood of 1862" inundated its buildings and fields. All of these trials paled in comparison to those spurred by the Union invasion of the county on July 12, 1862.

On that day, the van of General Samuel R. Curtis's Army of the Southwest trotted into Helena, and over next three days, some 20,000 federal troops overwhelmed Phillips County. The soldiers appropriated buildings, confiscated crops and livestock, ransacked homes, and emancipated more than 2,000 slaves, most of whom ran to Union lines to secure their freedom. Many of these refugees, labeled "contrabands" by the soldiers, tragically found that freedom did not live up to its promise. They lived in dilapidated camps on the outskirts of town, worked various jobs for wages that most never received, and died in droves due to hunger and disease.

⁸ Scholars are divided on the definition of "nature," especially humans' place within it. Some argue that humans are a part of nature and thus cannot be separated from it, while others assert that because humans have altered the natural environment so significantly throughout history, there is little that is "natural" in nature anyway, so it is futile to try to remove humans from the equation. While these arguments have merit, for the sake of clarity, my definition of "nature" does not include humans. Rather, like Lisa M. Brady, I define nature as "the nonhuman physical environment in its constituent parts or as a larger whole." Moreover, I use "natural environment" and "environment" as synonyms for "nature." Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes During the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 12-13.

The arrival of Curtis's army marked the beginning of an uninterrupted federal occupation of Helena that spanned the remainder of the war. The town served as a permanent Union enclave, supply depot, cotton-trading hub, coaling station, and staging ground for federal operations in the Mississippi valley, particularly those aimed at the Confederate bastion at Vicksburg. Union occupation posed a continual threat to the Confederacy's control of the Mississippi River and the Arkansas interior, and throughout 1862 and 1863, the rebels contemplated removing that threat. At one time or another, recommendations for attacking Helena were made by such high-ranking Confederates as General Samuel Cooper, Secretary of War George W. Randolph, General Joseph E. Johnston, Secretary of War James A. Seddon, General Robert E. Lee, and President Jefferson Davis. Ultimately, however, responsibility for capturing the town fell to General Theophilus H. Holmes, whose 7,600 rebels attacked and were repulsed by the 4,100-man Union garrison on July 4, 1863.

On that day, federal armies scored key victories in three different locations. One of those was at Gettysburg, where on July 1-3 Union forces defeated Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which retreated on July 4. On that same day, federal forces under Ulysses S. Grant forced the surrender of Vicksburg, the most important rebel stronghold on the Mississippi River. By far the smallest military engagement of the day occurred at Helena, but while overshadowed and mostly forgotten, Helena was by no means insignificant. The rebel attack on the Union post was conceived at the highest level of the Confederate command. It was intended as an important strategic move to relieve pressure on the collapsing Confederate garrison at Vicksburg and secure a crucial rebel position on the Mississippi River in the case of Vicksburg's surrender. The Union occupation of Helena menaced the Confederacy's control of the Mississippi River and Arkansas, and the Helena campaign was initiated to eliminate that menace. In the end, the July 4

attack was too little and too late to save Vicksburg, which capitulated on the same morning. Still, the battle of Helena proved to be among the most significant engagements of the Civil War west of the Mississippi. Over 1,800 men were killed, wounded, or captured in the campaign (15% of those involved), and its outcome ensured federal control of the Mississippi River. It also preserved the Union foothold in eastern Arkansas, which, in turn, allowed the Federals to capture Little Rock only two months later.

The Helena campaign deserves consideration for all of these reasons.⁹ It also merits attention because it lucidly illustrates a number of ways in which the natural environment shaped the course and conduct of the Civil War. In recent years, scholars have shown that nature played an important, sometimes crucial, role in the conflict.¹⁰ The Helena campaign offers yet another

⁹ There are no books on the Helena campaign. Scholarly works that consider it in detail include Edwin C. Bearss, "The Battle of Helena, July 4, 1863," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (Autumn 1961): 256-297; Albert Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), chap. 8; Warren E. Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days: A Geographer's View of the Vicksburg Campaign* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), chap. 40; Gregory J. W. Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas," *North & South* 6 (December 2002): 26-39; G. David Schieffler, "Too Little, Too Late to Save Vicksburg: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas, July 4, 1863" (M.A. Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2005); Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, chap. 4; Mark Christ, "The Battle of Helena," *Blue & Gray* 32, no. 4 (2016): 6-23, 42-47; and Thomas W. Cutrer, *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), chap. 12.

¹⁰ Environmental Civil War history is a rapidly growing field. The best succinct survey of the field is Brian Allen Drake, "New Fields of Battle: Nature, Environmental History, and the Civil War," in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*, ed. Brian Allen Drake (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 1-15. For a longer historiographical review, see Lisa Brady, "From Battlefield to Fertile Ground: The Development of Civil War Environmental History," *Civil War History* 58, no. 3 (Sept. 2012): 305-321. Important works that have appeared since the publication of Brady's essay include Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Brian Allen Drake, ed., *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green*; Matthew M. Stith, *Extreme Civil War: Guerrilla Warfare, Environment, and Race on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016); and Adam H. Petty, "Wilderness, Weather, and Waging War in the Mine Run Campaign," *Civil War History* 63 (March 2017): 7-35. See also Judkin Browning

example of that impact. Previous historians have acknowledged the importance of the campaign's environmental factors, but they have not analyzed their impact from an environmental perspective.¹¹ In other words, they have not treated nature as a decisive actor or explicitly investigated the ways in which the natural environment influenced human thoughts and actions.¹² In the summer of 1863, the Confederates believed if they moved against Helena with "celerity and secrecy," they would easily capture the post.¹³ However, the natural environment of east Arkansas—and the Union army's strategic use of that environment—prevented the Confederates from achieving those ends. Harsh environmental conditions during the rebel approach to Helena in tandem with the federal garrison's ability to adapt the landscape as a key ally during the battle led to Confederate defeat and, by extension, solidified Union control of the Mississippi River and Arkansas.

and Timothy Silver's forthcoming *The Civil War: An Environmental History*, Kenneth W. Noe's forthcoming book on weather and the Civil War, and Megan Kate Nelson's forthcoming *Path of the Dead Man: How the West was Won—and Lost—during the American Civil War*.

¹¹ Brady, "From Battlefield to Fertile Ground," 319-320. Geographer Warren Grabau's *Ninety-Eight Days*, which highlights the importance of geography and terrain in the Vicksburg campaign, comes closest to analyzing the Helena campaign from an environmental perspective. See Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days*, chap. 40.

¹² Scholars are divided on the question of whether nature has "agency." I am persuaded by Linda Nash, who contends we should be careful about assigning agency to nature because unlike humans, nature does not act with intention. A honeybee, for instance, can build a hive, but it cannot envision how its hive will look before completion. The bee simply builds. A human architect, on the other hand, can imagine the particulars of her house before constructing it. Nevertheless, Nash stresses that nature is not simply an object to be acted upon. Similarly, human ideas and actions do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, human agency emerges out of and exists in specific environments. Nash contends that when we look at history's human and environmental components, "what we often uncover is not merely the way that nature influences and constrains human *actions*, but also the way that particular environments shape human *intentions*." In the end, she suggests, we should strive to write history that presents humans not as the "motor of history but as partners in a conversation with a larger world, both animate and inanimate, about the possibilities of existence." Linda Nash, "The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?" *Environmental History* 10 (January 2005): 67-69.

¹³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 863.

Daniel Sutherland has hypothesized that historians may ultimately discover that “there was no single real [Civil] war, but rather several, perhaps many, wars, depending on geography.”¹⁴ If anything, the variety of Civil War community studies produced suggests that he was on to something. Was there a typical Civil War experience? What was the real war, and can we ever get a sense of it? Scholars have not yet answered these questions satisfactorily, but community studies offer one way of doing so. If the Civil War was in fact many wars, the people of Phillips County certainly experienced one of them. Typical or not, their story represents an important piece of the larger record.

¹⁴ Sutherland, “Getting the ‘Real War’ Into the Books,” 202.

Chapter 1: Antebellum Phillips County

Nature drew the first people to Helena, Arkansas. According to legend, those original pioneers were Native Americans who, sometime in the early sixteenth century, traveled down the Mississippi River in search of a mysterious white stag, which prophecy foretold would appear at the precise location they should halt their journey and build a great city. Floating down the mighty “Father of Waters,” the itinerant Indians eventually came to a place marked by scenic, tree-topped hills that towered over a grassy floodplain blanketed with wildflowers. Naturally, they decided to disembark, encamping on a lush meadow watered by a spring and protected by a “sharp sugar-loaf shaped hill, standing like a sentinel to guard it.” When they awoke the following morning, much to their amazement the elusive white stag appeared. The eager Indians chased the animal to the top of an earthen mound, where it rested momentarily before bounding out of sight. Convinced that the Great Spirit had finally revealed their destination, the natives began building permanent homes at the site. They called their new village “Pacaha,” meaning “downstream.”¹

The natural environment also attracted Helena’s earliest documented settlers. Archaeological remains, including the burial mounds at the modern-day Helena Crossing Site, suggest that the area was a crossroads and gathering place for various tribes of the Hopewell culture that predated the natives of Pacaha by some 1,500 years.² Europeans arrived much later. The Spanish and French explorers who surveyed the Mississippi valley in the sixteenth and

¹ Fred W. Allsopp, *Folklore of Romantic Arkansas*, vol. 1 (Grolier Society, 1931), 114-116.

² Billy Steven Clift, s.v. “Phillips County,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=797> (accessed February 3, 2017).

seventeenth centuries likely glimpsed the land that would become Helena and perhaps even stepped on its shores. Indeed, the Pacaha legend holds that Hernando de Soto, the famous Spanish conquistador whose soldiers were probably the first Europeans to set foot in Arkansas in the 1540s, visited Pacaha and planted a silver cross on the same mound where the white stag had stood.³ No proof of this story exists, however, and if any early European explorers visited the Helena site, they made no record of it. That would fall to the first Anglo-Americans to put down roots in the area. In the late 1790s—when Arkansas was still “native ground,” notwithstanding European maps that claimed it for Spain—Kentuckian Sylvanus Phillips and a handful of pioneers from the nascent United States ventured west to settle.⁴ In 1820, Phillips and his cohorts platted the village of Helena (named for Phillips’s daughter), which became the seat of Phillips County in 1830 and was incorporated as a town in the Arkansas Territory in 1833. Interestingly, nature propelled some of the first pioneers to Helena. When the New Madrid

³ Allsopp, *Folklore of Romantic Arkansas*, 119. For a different version of the Pacaha story that places the village at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Francis Rivers, see Clarence Taylor, “Offers New Version of How DeSoto Landed on What Now is Site of City of Helena,” *Arkansas Democrat*, June 23, 1935, in “Helena” Vertical File, Mullins Library, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Modern scholars place Pacaha well to the north of Helena, in modern-day Mississippi County, Arkansas. Jeannie M. Whyne, Thomas A. DeBlack, George Sabo III, and Morris S. Arnold, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 2nd ed. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2013), 39-42 [see also plate 11 following p. 126].

⁴ Kathleen DuVal persuasively argues that the Arkansas valley was a “native ground” where various Indian groups, including the Quapaw, Osage, and Cherokee, effectively called the shots from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). On Sylvanus Phillips et al.’s arrival in Arkansas, see Ted R. Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1954): 1-2. Worley says Phillips came from North Carolina, but at least two sources say he was born in Virginia and then relocated to Kentucky before moving west of the Mississippi River. See Tom W. Campbell, “The Naming of Phillips County,” *Arkansas Gazette*, December 10, 1944, in “Phillips County” Vertical File, Mullins Library; and *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1890), 744.

earthquakes of 1811-1812 destroyed their homes in northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri, the survivors used government-issued New Madrid certificates to resettle at Helena. Others came from Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina.⁵

By the time Phillips and his companions founded Helena, the Indians who inhabited the area had migrated elsewhere (or perhaps had been decimated by disease), but the site's natural features remained. Located approximately 240 miles north of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and 70 miles below Memphis, Tennessee, Helena lay in the heart of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain—a vast swath of territory in the North American interior comprising the floodplain of the Mississippi River and its major tributaries, including the Ohio, St. Francis, White, Arkansas, Yazoo, and Red rivers (Figure 1). Often referred to simply as “the Delta,” the region extends from the mouth of the Ohio to the Gulf of Mexico, a distance of 600 miles. At its widest point, it stretches some 150 miles across, from Little Rock, Arkansas, to the land east of Memphis. For thousands of years, the Delta has been shaped by the ebb and flow of its rivers, which have eroded and deposited hundreds of feet of fertile topsoil on its landscape. In the words of one scholar, the region is “a land of rivers, built by the rivers, and defined by the rivers.”⁶

⁵ Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” 1-2; Dale P. Kirkman, “Old Helena,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19 (December 1980/March 1981): 73-75; Howell Purdue and Elizabeth Purdue, *Pat Cleburne: Confederate General* (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Jr. College Press, 1973), 27. Kirkman notes that some of Helena's early settlers also claimed land using certificates of purchase from the U.S. government and military land warrants issued for their service in the War of 1812. Kirkman, “Old Helena,” 75. Arkansas's territorial legislature created Phillips County in May 1820, and the Helena site was platted approximately seven months later. Steven Teske, s.v. “Helena-West Helena (Phillips County),” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=950> (accessed February 3, 2017).

⁶ Thomas Foti, “The River's Gifts and Curses,” in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, ed. Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 30.

Modern geographers divide Arkansas's portion of the Delta into five subregions. Helena, a geographical and topographical border town, was built at the intersection of three of them—the St. Francis Basin, Crowley's Ridge, and the White River Lowlands (Figure 2). The town sits on the western bank of the Mississippi, approximately seven miles south of its confluence with the St. Francis, on the southern edge of the St. Francis Basin. One authority calls this subregion the "archetypal" Delta because it is "flat, flat, flat, and almost featureless."⁷ Just west of the basin, however, the land rises. Crowley's Ridge, an upland reaching heights up to 250 feet above the surrounding Delta, originates north and west of Helena and extends north for 150 miles to southern Missouri. Scientists believe this loess-capped ridge is the product of geological processes that began some fifty million years ago, when much of the southern United States lay at the bottom of a shallow bay of the Gulf of Mexico that extended as far north as southern Missouri. As the Gulf gradually receded to its present position, it deposited sand, gravel, and clay from its beaches and floor.⁸

Meanwhile, the Mississippi and Ohio rivers flowed into the abandoned bay, slowly scouring and removing most of its ocean deposits in the process. The two rivers did not always follow their current courses. In fact, within the last twenty thousand years, scientists believe the Mississippi flowed down the west side of Crowley's Ridge, not the east side as it does today. As both rivers waxed, waned, and meandered across the Delta, they gradually carved an island between them—the backbone of Crowley's Ridge. Since then, dust storms have added up to fifty feet of loess—windblown, glacier-ground rock—to the ridge, thus increasing its stature.

⁷ Foti, "The River's Gifts and Curses," in *The Arkansas Delta*, 41-42.

⁸ Hubert B. Stroud, s.v. "Crowley's Ridge," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=12> (accessed February 8, 2017); Foti, "The River's Gifts and Curses," in *The Arkansas Delta*, 32.

Some also think fault lines beneath the ridge augmented its height. “Whether it had a boost from fault lines or is strictly the result of erosional forces,” one author contends, “the tertiary deposits of Crowley’s Ridge remained high ground towering above the Mississippi Alluvial Plain.” A cavalryman who patrolled east Arkansas during the Civil War called the ridge “one of those freaks of nature,” while a reporter who visited Helena in 1862 described it as “a series of picturesque bluffs that will do no discredit to the wildest scenery of the Rocky Mountains.”⁹ Though certainly an exaggeration, the reporter’s observation nevertheless underscores the ridge’s prominence in an otherwise flat region (Figure 3). As the only high ground on the Mississippi’s western bank between Missouri and the Gulf of Mexico, the ridge caught the eye of all who visited the area.¹⁰

West of Crowley’s Ridge and south of Helena lie the White River Lowlands, the third Delta region to border Helena and “the wildest” of them all. Even today, much of the Lowlands remains undeveloped because it is so prone to flooding. The White, Black, Cache, and L’Anguille rivers, as well as Bayou DeView, regularly inundate this region, which is also susceptible to backwater flooding from the Mississippi. The Lowlands’ chief waterway, the White River, originates in the Ozark Plateau of Northwest Arkansas, where the water runs clear. Clearer streams scour deeper channels, and thus, by the time the White reaches the Delta, it runs

⁹ Foti, “The River’s Gifts and Curses,” in *The Arkansas Delta*, 32-33, 43; Jodi Morris, “On High Ground: A Natural History of Crowley’s Ridge,” *Craighead County Historical Quarterly* 44 (October 2006): 28; Donald J. Stanton, Goodwin F. Berquist, and Paul C. Bowers, eds., *The Civil War Reminiscences of General M. Jeff Thompson* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1988), 187; Galway, “The Mississippi Expedition,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1862.

¹⁰ William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 28; Edwin C. Bearss, *Decision in Mississippi: Mississippi’s Important Role in the War Between the States* (Jackson: Mississippi Commission on the War Between the States, 1962), 146; “The Old Route,” *New York Herald*, October 2, 1863.

lower than most of the region's other rivers, including the Mississippi. Consequently, Mississippi floods have been known to extend as far as forty miles up the White, saturating its lowlands and transforming them into a sizeable swamp. Helena's earliest homesteaders avoided settling the White River Lowlands, much of which was not drained and developed until the twentieth century.¹¹

In spite of its vulnerability to flooding, the Helena site abounded with natural advantages. The town's Anglo-American founders were drawn to these features, including the high ground on nearby Crowley's Ridge, the springs that flowed from the ridge's base, the canebrakes on the floodplains for grazing livestock, the fertile alluvial soil for farming, and, most importantly, the proximity to the Mississippi River, which gave settlers ready access to water and an extensive trade network. Helena's founders intended the town to become a prominent port. One of them reportedly built a rudimentary shed on the riverbank to serve as a warehouse for shipping as early as 1800 or 1802, well before the town's official incorporation. Thirty-five years later, one of the first ordinances passed by Helena's aldermen designated separate docking areas for steamboats, stockboats, keelboats, and flatboats along the town's riverfront. Interestingly, the ordinance used nature to demarcate its three zones, designating them according to elm, cottonwood, and willow trees that grew along the bank. Moreover, some of the town's original streets and alleys—Cherry, Walnut, Pecan, Beech, Poplar, Elm, Mulberry, Hickory, and Persimmon—were named for native trees.¹²

¹¹ Foti, "The River's Gifts and Curses," in *The Arkansas Delta*, 43-44; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 745.

¹² Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 1-2; Kirkman, "Old Helena," 86; Campbell, "The Naming of Phillips County"; "Dedication of Old Helena," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1962): 7.

To keep those streets dry and passable, Helena's early settlers took precautions against the Mississippi's periodic overflows. In language reminiscent of a modern eminent domain statute, the town's 1820 dedication asserted its citizens' "full and absolute right to raise, erect, and build a levee" in the part of the town near the riverbank. Early townspeople eventually acted on this right, mining loess from nearby Crowley's Ridge to build a small earthen levee on the river's edge. This primitive embankment—probably little more than an extension of the natural levee of silt deposited by Mississippi floods—was hardly adequate, however, and the town experienced almost annual inundations throughout its first century. As the river rose steadily in the spring of 1859, the rector of Helena's Episcopal parish expressed a sentiment felt by many in Phillips County when he wrote that "both town and country are now suffering severely from the effects of last year's overflow, and at this present writing we are greatly threatened with another. It is only our levee that keeps the Mississippi out of town and from some of the richest plantations in the country now, and, as the river is still rising, whether this artificial barrier will continue to protect us, is, with many, a question of absorbing interest."¹³

An 1836 ordinance outlawing the "riding, driving, or leading of horsebrutes or cattle upon the levee" accentuates the importance residents attached to their embankment's structural integrity, for they knew that whenever it was breached or overtopped, the Mississippi's floodwaters could seep into their wells and cisterns, contaminating them with cholera, a common

¹³ "Dedication of Old Helena," 16; Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 3; Otis Hackett, "Excerpts from the Diaries and Letters of Reverend Otis Hackett from the Files of St. John's Episcopal Church, Helena, Arkansas," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1962): 29-30. On the Mississippi's formation of a natural levee along its bank, see Foti, "The River's Gifts and Curses," in *The Arkansas Delta*, 37. It appears that Helenians intended to build a new levee on the eve of the Civil War. In April 1861, a Memphis newspaper reported that the Helena city council had "determined to have a levee thrown up to protect the city from the rising waters." "Levee at Helena," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 23, 1861.

killer in early Helena. Concerned residents read regular river reports in local newspapers, and during the summer months, those who could afford it sought refuge from Helena's insalubrious environment on the high ground of Crowley's Ridge, which became a symbol of social prestige. The ridge's foothills also served as a convenient place to bury the dead. The town's main cemetery was located on one of those hills, appropriately named Graveyard Hill.¹⁴

Helena's citizens quickly learned, however, that as the river takes, it also gives.¹⁵ Those annual overflows so hazardous to the townspeople's health also created some of the richest farmland in the world. Sylvanus Phillips and Helena's original proprietors were traders, cattlemen, and land speculators, not farmers, but farmers eventually flocked to Phillips County, eager to take advantage of the region's fertile alluvial soil. Farming became the most important occupation in antebellum Phillips County, and plantation agriculture—the large-scale production of crops for sale mainly to outside markets—dominated the county's economy in the years leading up to the war. An 1859 editorial in a Helena newspaper boasted of an “Extraordinary Yield” in a six-acre field south of town that “has, this season, produced over twenty thousand pounds of seed cotton.” “In truth,” the author claimed, “there are hundreds of thousands of acres of this description of land in the counties of Phillips” and others in east Arkansas, “and all that is needed to insure heavy crops is proper cultivation, and good seasons.” Whether this particular report was true or not, cotton cultivation in the county was extensive. In 1860, Phillips County

¹⁴ Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” 2-3; “River News,” *Helena Southern Shield*, February 4, 1860; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 747.

¹⁵ In the words of ecologist Thomas Foti, “As the river gives, it takes. Always the river gives and takes.” Foti, “The River's Gifts and Curses,” in *The Arkansas Delta*, 31.

farmers grew 26,993 bales, the third largest crop in Arkansas. They also ranked second and third in orchard products and corn production, respectively.¹⁶

In that same year, Helena was home to 1,024 whites and 527 blacks, making it slightly less than half the size of Little Rock, Arkansas's state capital. The Mississippi port was by far the largest town in Phillips County, which had 14,876 residents in 1860. Of those, 8,941 (sixty percent) were enslaved, the most of any county in the state. Moreover, those slaves tended to be concentrated on large farms. In 1860, over twenty-five percent of Phillips County slaveholders owned twenty or more slaves, the typical benchmark of "planter" status in antebellum America. Based upon the average number of acres per slaves in the county in 1860, one scholar believes that a 600-acre farm would have been considered a large plantation. In 1860, 21.4 percent of the county's farms were at least that size, and they constituted 63.1 percent of all the county's landholdings during that year.¹⁷ Phillips County was not a plantation society, per se. In other words, its planters did not have the same stranglehold on their community's wealth and power that their counterparts in older, more established areas east of the Mississippi River did. Nevertheless, as one scholar put it, the county's "aspiring gentry aped the ways of more-

¹⁶ Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 1-2, 10; Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Impact of the Civil War in Arkansas: The Mississippi River Plantation Counties," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51 (Summer 1992): 106-107; "Extraordinary Yield," *Helena Southern Shield*, in Ron Kelley, *Diary of a State 1860: Prelude to the Civil War in Arkansas* (Helena: Arkansas Toothpick Publishing, 2014), 3; Orville W. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1958), 98.

¹⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, Compiled, from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census, (June 1, 1870) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 87; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 13-15; Moneyhon, "The Impact of the Civil War in Arkansas," 107-108; Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 2.

established planters in eastern slaveholding states and shared many of their values.”¹⁸ Moreover, compared to Arkansas as a whole—where only twelve percent of slaveholders had achieved “planter” status in 1860—Phillips County was a planter-dominated slave society.¹⁹ Most of the county’s wealth was concentrated in land and slaves, and some of that wealth was owned by absentee planters. The most prominent of these was Gideon J. Pillow, a Mexican War veteran, Tennessee planter, and eventual Confederate general who maintained five large plantations in the vicinity of Helena.²⁰

Profitable planting, however, did not preclude Helena’s citizens from doing other jobs. In fact, some of the town’s wealthiest landowners also worked as merchants, businessmen, doctors, and attorneys. Like many frontier communities, Helena teemed with lawyers eager to cash in on the plethora of cases involving land speculation and titles. Before the Civil War, many of Helena’s leading citizens were attorneys, a number of whom ultimately occupied

¹⁸ Bobby Roberts, “‘Desolation Itself’: The Impact of the Civil War,” in *The Arkansas Delta*, 71. Roberts was referring to the entire Arkansas Delta, but his description applies to Phillips County in particular. Carl Moneyhon contends that in 1860, Phillips County was still a developing plantation society that looked more like 1850 Mississippi than it did the rest of the Old South in 1860. Put another way, in 1860 the proportion of wealth controlled by Phillips County’s “upper economic strata” was greater than that in the “free states of the northwest, but not as great as in the rest of the cotton South.” Carl H. Moneyhon, “Economic Democracy in Antebellum Arkansas, Phillips County, 1850-1860,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Summer 1981): 154-172 [quotation on p. 172].

¹⁹ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 2. Ira Berlin, a leading scholar of American slavery, defines “slave societies” as those where slavery, as the dominant form of labor, shaped all other social relationships in that society. “Societies with slaves,” on the other hand, were societies where slavery existed but was not the dominant form of labor. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 1-14.

²⁰ Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” 14; Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Roy P. Stonesifer, Jr., *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 141-143. Leonidas L. Johnson, Esq., of Louisiana was another absentee planter with landholdings in Phillips County. Johnson, a former resident of Phillips County, reportedly visited his plantation at Old Town, approximately twenty miles south of Helena, in early 1860. *Helena Southern Shield*, February 4, 1860.

prominent positions in local, state, and national government. They included James C. Tappan, a state representative who later rose to the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate army; Thomas B. Hanly, an Arkansas Supreme Court justice, state representative, delegate to Arkansas's 1861 secession convention, and Confederate congressman; William K. Sebastian, U.S. Senator from 1848-1861; and Sebastian's law partner Charles W. Adams, a secession convention delegate and Confederate brigadier (and activist Helen Keller's grandfather).²¹

Perhaps most prominent, at least in due course, was Thomas C. Hindman, a Mexican War lieutenant, fire-eating U.S. congressman from 1859-1861, and commander of the Confederacy's Trans-Mississippi District in 1862, and Patrick R. Cleburne, ultimately regarded as one of the top divisional commanders in the rebel army. Cleburne, an ambitious Irish immigrant, moved to Helena in 1850 to work as a pharmacist in a drugstore owned by two local doctors, Hector Grant and Charles Nash. The hardworking Cleburne quickly earned enough money to purchase Dr. Grant's share in the store, only to sell it in 1854 to focus his efforts on studying for the bar—in Judge Thomas Hanly's law library, no less. That same year, Thomas Hindman, a hotheaded partisan and attorney from Ripley, Mississippi, relocated to Helena. Hindman and Cleburne ultimately became close friends, political allies, and law partners. Both men, like most of Helena's aspiring young professionals, understood that the law was a gateway to social prominence in the community.²²

²¹ Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 8-10; "Seven Confederate Generals of Phillips County Arkansas," in "Phillips County" Vertical File, Mullins Library; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 741-742.

²² On the life of Thomas Hindman, see Bobby Roberts, "Thomas C. Hindman, Jr.: Secessionist and Confederate General" (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1972); and Diane Neal and Thomas W. Kremm, *Lion of the South: General Thomas C. Hindman* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993). On Patrick Cleburne's pre-Civil War years in Helena, see Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 26-44; and Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 23-62. L. H. Mangum,

Most of Phillips County's residents, however, were not socially prominent. In 1860, only 35.3 percent of the county's free adult males owned any improved farmland, and only 16.9 percent owned slaves. Moreover, of the approximately four-hundred farmers who tended improved acreage in the county in that year, only 73.1 percent owned land. In other words, over a quarter of Phillips County's free farmers were tenants, renters, or farm laborers. Frequently lumped together as "poor whites," these people constituted one of the largest classes in Phillips County on the eve of the war. In spite of their numbers, they remained economically and politically subordinate to the county's wealthy landowners and businessmen.²³

Many of those businessmen, including Patrick Cleburne, had offices in Helena's vibrant downtown district centered on Front and Ohio Streets.²⁴ On the eve of the Civil War, that district included a busy waterfront, a small, two-story frame courthouse, a two-story brick jail, a pair of merchant tailors, a hotel, a milliner, a watchmaker and jeweler, a tin shop, a Swamp Land Office, at least five mercantile stores, and a cabinet and carpenter shop. Helena's carpenters, like its farmers, depended on the bounty of the surrounding Delta land. They used lumber cut from

who moved from North Carolina to eastern Arkansas in the late 1850s and ultimately became Cleburne's law partner in Helena, also studied in Hanly's law library. L. H. Mangum to Martha P. Mangum, 23 January 1859, in Henry Thomas Shanks, ed., *The Papers of Willie Person Mangum*, vol. 5 (Raleigh, N.C.: State Department of Archives and History, 1956), 358.

²³ Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19 (June 1981/September 1981): 22; Moneyhon, "Economic Democracy in Antebellum Arkansas," 161-167.

²⁴ Dale P. Kirkman notes that today, most of what was once Front Street, sometimes called Water Street, is either in the Mississippi River or under the levee that was built in the twentieth century. Kirkman, "Old Helena," 76-79. Before the Civil War, Patrick Cleburne practiced law with several different partners. In 1859, he began working with Barry Scaife and L. H. Mangum, a partnership that "lasted up to the breaking out of the war in 1860." Charles Edward Nash, *Biographical Sketches of Gen. Pat Cleburne and Gen. T. C. Hindman* (Little Rock: Tunnah & Pittard, 1898), 85. In February 1862, Cleburne, Scaife & Mangum still advertised their practice in Helena's local newspaper even though by that time, all three partners were away serving in the army. Helena *Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 786.

farms and fields, cypress from the lowlands, and oak, hickory, American beech, sugar maple, yellow poplar, and other hardwoods that grew atop Crowley's Ridge.²⁵ Some of the logs—hewed at the steam-powered sawmill near the river—were used by locals. Others were loaded onto steamboats at the nearby wharf and shipped upriver to Memphis, Cairo, St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati, or downriver to New Orleans—the North American interior's gateway to the larger Atlantic world.²⁶

Contrary to popular myth, frontier communities like Helena were not isolated. Several roads linked Helena to the Arkansas interior; the main ones, including the Little Rock Road, were strategically built atop the hills west of town. An early newspaper editor noted that Helena was one of the only places on the Mississippi River that could be reached from the Arkansas interior via high and dry roads.²⁷ By the late 1850s, passengers could travel by coach from Helena to Little Rock for eleven dollars. Stagecoaches—which also carried the mail—departed Helena every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday at midnight and arrived in the state capital thirty-

²⁵ *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 739-740; Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 7; Helena *Southern Shield*, January 28, 1860, and February 4, 1860; Hubert B. Stroud and Gerald T. Hanson, *Arkansas Geography: The Physical Landscape and the Historical-Cultural Setting* (Little Rock: Rose Publishing Company, 1981), 19, 29; Hubert B. Stroud, s.v. "Crowley's Ridge."

²⁶ George Porter built Arkansas's first steam-powered sawmill at Helena in 1826. Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 12, and Kirkman, "Old Helena," 85-86. On the South's connections to the larger Atlantic World, see Brian E. Ward, Martyn Bone, and William A. Link, eds., *The American South and the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). On the Atlantic World as an "analytic construct" and "category of historical analysis," see Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Kirkman, "Old Helena," 78-79. On July 5, 1863, a soldier stationed in Helena wrote, "It is impossible to give in a letter any idea of the formation of the country in the rear of Helena. It is a succession of ridges and ravines winding in different directions. The road runs along the summits of these ridges." John A. Savage, "An Interesting Letter," in *Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Reunion of the Society of the 28th Regt. Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, Held at Waukesha, July 9, 1913, in Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Helena, Arkansas, July 4, 1863* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Houtkamp Printing Company, 1913), 96-97.

four hours later. Postmasters supervised the dispatch and delivery of mail at Helena within a year of the town's founding, while local newspapers printed "prices current" columns so residents could stay informed of market conditions and maximize their selling and purchasing power.²⁸

By October 1860, Helena's newspaper editors could acquire that information via a telegraph line that linked their town to Memphis, and thus, to the nation at large. In fact, the first dispatch ever sent over a wire in Arkansas reportedly was transmitted out of Helena, across a "submarine cable" to Panola, Mississippi, and up to Memphis. A local newspaperman understood the implications of his town's new line. When it was completed, he announced, "Helena is in telegraphic communication with the whole telegraphic world. Let that fact be known." By early 1861, a second telegraph line connected Helena to Madison, Arkansas, a terminal point on the Memphis and Little Rock Railroad (M&LR), Arkansas's only antebellum railway. On the eve of the Civil War, a telegraph line spanned the entire 133 miles from Memphis to Little Rock, but the tracks of the M&LR did not. By late January 1862, the railroad's eastern and western thirds had been completed, but its middle section—which traversed the swampy White River Lowlands—had not. The environmental obstacles of the lowlands, in conjunction with money shortages and the chaos of the Civil War, delayed the completion of the M&LR until 1871. Even then, wartime travelers used a combination of rail, stagecoach, and steamboat to make the journey from Memphis to Little Rock in twenty-seven to thirty-six hours—a full twenty-four hours shorter than traveling by steamboat alone.²⁹

²⁸ "Improved Facilities for Travel in Arkansas!" *Arkansas State Gazette*, August 1, 1857; "Postal Service in Phillips County," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 9 (Dec. 1970): 1-10; Helena *Southern Shield*, February 4, 1860.

²⁹ "Electrical Communication with Helena," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, October 27, 1860; "The Telegraph in Arkansas," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 8, 1860; "Telegraphic

More than any other factor, rivers kept Phillips County connected to the outside world. Steamboats regularly carried residents up and down the Mississippi, St. Francis, and L'Anguille rivers, and they brought goods from Memphis and New Orleans, whose businesses advertised in Helena newspapers. One local restaurant served fresh oysters that were delivered daily from New Orleans packed in ice. The county's farmers and businessmen regularly exported cotton, lumber, and other products via the Delta's numerous waterways, while merchants imported a variety of finished items for sale to local citizens. H. P. Coolidge, one of Helena's earliest merchants, set up shop in town less than a decade after its incorporation. On the eve of the Civil War, he and his son owned a mattress factory and a prosperous dry goods store that sold items from around the Mississippi valley. A former slave in Phillips County recalled that Coolidge's store was the "biggest" in town and sold "everything most," including "boots, shoes, tobacco, medicine en so on." Coolidge used his connections in New Orleans, Philadelphia, and New York to open a private bank, and, like most of Helena's top businessmen, he also dabbled in land sales.³⁰

Communication Between Memphis and Helena," *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, November 2, 1860; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 41; "The Telegraph to Helena," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, June 19, 1860; "Helena Brags," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, November 8, 1860; Margaret Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years, 1819-1866. A History* (Little Rock: Arkansas Gazette Foundation, 1969), 352, 366-367; William R. Plum, *The Military Telegraph during the Civil War in the United States*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, & Company, 1882), 121-122; Van Zbinden, s.v. "Memphis and Little Rock Railroad (M&LR)," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2304> (accessed February 21, 2017); Leo E. Huff, "The Memphis and Little Rock Railroad during the Civil War," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 1964): 260-265.

³⁰ Helena *Southern Shield*, January 28, 1860, February 4, 1860, and February 8, 1862; William B. Worthen and Charles H. Brough, "Private Banks in Arkansas," in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, vol. 1, ed. John Hugh Reynolds (Little Rock: Democrat Printing and Lithographing Company, 1906), 406; George E. Lankford, ed., *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery Narratives from the 1930s WPA Collections* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 273; "Valuable Tract of Land for Sale," *Helena Southern*

Before the Civil War, Phillips County was home to a number of other businesses, including baking, butchering, shoemaking, blacksmithing, tanning, harness manufacturing, and grist-milling. Nash and Cleburne's Drug Store, located in Helena's downtown district, continued to operate under the same name for two years after its owners sold it, while the Helena Home Insurance Company was incorporated in late 1860.³¹ In the town's early years, the State Bank and local branch of the Real Estate Bank of Arkansas were particularly important businesses in a planter-dominated community whose prosperity rested on the land.³² Charles Adams, a member of the famed family from Massachusetts, worked as a cashier at the Real Estate Bank before joining the bar. Reflecting on Helena's commercial success on the eve of the war, one citizen bragged, "[T]he amount of dry goods, clothing, drugs, stationery, etc., will compare favorably with that of any other city of or above the same size." Moreover, he asserted, "The cotton shipped from this port during the year is of a quantity by no means small—not including those quantities sent away by cotton brokers and speculators." These "facts," he concluded, were "not to be denied" and were "evidence of advancing prosperity."³³

Shield, February 8, 1862. For more on Coolidge, see *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 766; and Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 44.

³¹ Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 13; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 34; "Legislative Proceedings," *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 17, 1860.

³² Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 11; Kirkman, "Old Helena," 81-82. On the State Bank, see Ted R. Worley, "The Arkansas State Bank: Ante-Bellum Period," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23 (Spring 1964): 65-73. On the Real Estate Bank, see Worley, "The Control of the Real Estate Bank of the State of Arkansas, 1836-1855," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 37 (December 1950): 403-426; and Charles H. Brough, "The Industrial History of Arkansas," in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, 209-211.

³³ John Hallum, *Biographical and Pictorial History of Arkansas*, vol. 1 (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1887), 307; Price Tappan, "History of the City of Helena," 6, Arkansas History Commission and State Archives, Little Rock.

Inevitably, much of that prosperity was built on the backs of Phillips County's enslaved people. Although most of these people's voices sadly have been lost to history, the surviving evidence shows that they did not docilely accept their servile status. Some of them fled their homes to protest poor treatment or "steal away" their bodies to freedom, while others violently resisted their owners' and overseers' demands. In August 1859, for example, an enslaved person who lived near Helena reportedly crushed his overseer's skull with an axe. Less than a week later, he was captured and hanged (without a trial) near the scene of the crime, his body left dangling to warn other slaves against committing such acts. Such extreme forms of resistance, however, were both difficult and hazardous—they required individuals to abandon their families and surmount near-impossible odds, and they sometimes resulted in death. Accordingly, most enslaved Arkansans preferred subtler methods of resistance, so-called "weapons of the weak," to challenge their owners and carve out spaces for themselves within the brutal institution of slavery. For example, some stole extra food for themselves and their families, feigned sickness, broke tools, or sang songs to slow down their work, which could buy them a brief respite. Likewise, some communicated via the grapevine telegraph, practiced covert religions, and built strong networks of family and friends, which buoyed them in trying times.³⁴ Oftentimes, their

³⁴ Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 108. On slave resistance in Arkansas, see Kelly Houston Jones, "'A Rough, Saucy Set of Hands to Manage': Slave Resistance in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 71 (Spring 2012): 1-21; and Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Slave Family in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Spring 1999): 24-44. On oppressed people's use of "weapons of the weak" to fight a power imbalance, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). For more on slave resistance, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), part I. Two pillars of the literature on slave resistance that remain relevant are John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

networks extended beyond their immediate household. A former slave in the Helena area, for example, recalled traveling to a plantation south of town to visit his family members two or three times per week. Apparently, the slaves on this plantation were allowed to host barbecues attended by enslaved people from two other area plantations.³⁵

Phillips County's enslaved people, like their free counterparts, frequently utilized the Delta landscape to their advantage. The dense forests, wetlands, and streams of eastern Arkansas served as excellent hiding places, and, occasionally, avenues to freedom. Dock Wilborn, a former slave in Phillips County, remembered that his father sometimes responded to his master's whippings by "escap[ing] to the dense forests that surrounded the plantation where he would remain for days" or until he was recaptured. Similarly, Peter Brown, another ex-slave, recalled that when his master tried to force his pregnant mother to work, his father "stole her out" and escorted her to a canebrake to sleep over night. Like Wilborn's father, it does not appear that Brown's parents intended to flee their home permanently; rather, they temporarily ran away to protest their owner's treatment. Remarkably, a panther attacked the couple while they lay in the canebrake, and the man fended it off with a Bowie knife. The woman also gave birth to her baby that night, and upon returning home the next day, the owner promised that if the man "would stay out of the woods they wouldn't make her work no more." Instead, she could devote her time to child rearing. It was a small victory—precipitated by the couple's daring resistance and use of the land—but it was a victory nevertheless.³⁶

³⁵ Kelly Houston Jones, "Chattels, Pioneers, and Pilgrims for Freedom: Arkansas's Bonded Travelers," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 75 (Winter 2016): 322.

³⁶ Jones, "Chattels, Pioneers, and Pilgrims for Freedom," 335; Lankford, ed., *Bearing Witness*, 296, 262.

Thanks in part to slave labor, Phillips County's free population (which included four African Americans) was able to enjoy a variety of cultural and recreational activities before the Civil War.³⁷ For example, residents hiked on Crowley's Ridge, hunted and rode horses in the countryside, and fished and sailed on the Mississippi—a potentially dangerous activity given the steady steamboat traffic along the river. Additionally, they perused art and science exhibits at the Helena Athenaeum and listened to public lectures at the county courthouse. They also read books housed in the town's three private libraries, which reportedly contained a combined 5,000 volumes. Patrick Cleburne was as involved in Helena's civic life as anyone. In the 1850s, the determined Irishman was a member of the community literary club, debating society, and chess club.³⁸

Some of the county's most privileged children attended one of its six private schools, which, like most schools of the era, were segregated according to race and sex. The schools convened for terms of twenty-one weeks at a cost of fifteen to forty-five dollars per term. A typical curriculum for males included courses in English, reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, chemistry, mensuration (geometric measuring), engineering, navigation, and

³⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the United States in 1860*, 15. In February 1859, the Arkansas legislature passed a law requiring all free blacks to leave the state by January 1, 1860, or face enslavement for one year (during which time the slave would work to pay for his or her transportation out of Arkansas). Although most of Arkansas's estimated 700 free African Americans subsequently left the state, some 144 remained. Also, there is no evidence that the expulsion law was ever enforced, so this may explain why four free African Americans reportedly still lived in Phillips County in 1860. Billy D. Higgins, s.v. "Act 151 of 1859," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4430> (accessed March 1, 2017).

³⁸ L. H. Mangum to Martha P. Mangum, 15 January 1858, in Shanks, ed., *The Papers of Willie Person Mangum*, vol. 5, 344; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 32, 45, 50-51, 54, and 68; Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 6-7; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 31. In spring 1856, Cleburne was involved in a boating accident in which three people drowned. Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 44-47.

bookkeeping on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, and Latin, French, Greek, belles lettres (literature), algebra, geometry, and rhetoric on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Female students also studied English, Latin, and French, if not mathematics and science, and, in accordance with the era's prevailing gender norms, they learned embroidery, bead work, and music, both vocal and instrumental (piano or guitar).³⁹ In 1858, select young ladies began boarding at the St. Catherine Convent and Academy, where four Catholic nuns from Ireland administered their education. There was no college in Helena before the Civil War, though in 1859 it was rumored that a local man had donated the funds to build one in his will. One reporter gleefully predicted that "with ordinary management and proper investment," the new college's endowment would "equal that of Harvard University."⁴⁰

Phillips County's most distinguished adult males belonged to Helena's Masonic lodge, "the handsomest building in the city" according to one resident. The Freemasons, an international fraternal order whose past members included Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, had been in Arkansas since its earliest territorial days. Contrary to popular belief, Freemasonry was a fraternity, not a religion, though its members were required to exhibit morality and virtue and believe in the existence of a supreme being. "Nearly all the respectable male members of the town, and many from the country" were members of Helena's lodge, one

³⁹ Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 5-6. Worley notes that six schools were reported in Phillips County in 1850, and all were privately funded. Ten years later, however, "all the schools in Phillips County received a part of their support from public funds though all were still dependent primarily on private income." On the curricula and cost for male and female academies in Helena, see the advertisements for the "Helena Male School on Rightor St., under the Superintendence of Nelson & Montgomery" and the "Select School for Young Ladies," both in the *Helena Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862.

⁴⁰ Phillips County Historical Society, *Historic Helena-West Helena Arkansas* (Helena: Phillips County Chamber of Commerce, 1973), 12; "Arkansas Items," *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, April 6, 1859.

member recalled. They included Judge Hanly, James Tappan, H. P. Coolidge, Charles Adams, Hector Grant, Charles Nash, and Patrick Cleburne, who was elected lodge master in 1853. That same year, Little Rock attorney Albert Pike, Arkansas's most distinguished Freemason, conferred upon Grant, Nash, and Cleburne "the sublime degree of Royal Arch Mason." As lodge leaders, the three men helped spearhead an annual Masonic convention in Helena that commemorated the nativity of St. John the Baptist. The event even attracted Freemasons from nearby Friars Point and Austin, Mississippi.⁴¹

Those Mississippi Masons, like their counterparts in Helena, did not view the river as a significant boundary. Rather, they saw it as an avenue that joined, rather than divided, the communities of the Mississippi valley. Unlike modern Americans, who travel chiefly by automobile, most Americans of the mid-nineteenth century—especially those on the Trans-Mississippi frontier—were "boat people." As historian William Shea writes, they "lived in a world of waterways and watercraft. They viewed navigable bodies of water as highways, not obstacles; as connectors, not dividers." Antebellum Helenians embodied this mentality. Roads in the region were unreliable, and before the Civil War, there was no bridge linking Helena to the Mississippi shoreline. However, steamboats regularly carted passengers from one side of the river to the other. One local ferry service advertised that the trip took only ten minutes, though on the eve of the Civil War, complaints against the ferry's management were reportedly "very general." Even then, a number of Helena's attorneys used the ferry to conduct business in

⁴¹ Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 28-35; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 31-32; Dick E. Browning, s.v. "Freemasons," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=4122> (accessed February 17, 2017). While Cleburne served as Helena's lodge master, the lodge was suspended by the Grand Lodge in Little Rock for refusing to contribute money to St. John's College in Little Rock. The Helena lodge's charter remained suspended until the Civil War, when its building allegedly was destroyed by Union troops. Nash, 29-31.

Mississippi counties, while planters on both sides of the river regularly crossed to and fro. For example, Charles Nash's drugstore and medical practice were located in Helena, but he owned a plantation in Mississippi that he eventually made his home. At the same time, Mississippi planter James L. Alcorn, a former Whig and Mason from Friars Point (and future governor of Mississippi), regularly traversed the Mississippi to conduct business and buy supplies in Helena.⁴²

Unfortunately, disease was not bounded by the waters of the Mississippi, either. In the fall of 1855, a steamboat from New Orleans arrived in Helena carrying several passengers infected with yellow fever. A deadly epidemic subsequently erupted in the town, and most of the citizens who could afford to do so fled to the surrounding countryside. Three doctors remained to care for the sick, but when they asked for volunteers to stay and assist them, only three stepped forward: a local preacher, Thomas Hindman, and Patrick Cleburne. While the physicians cared for their suffering patients, the three "young philanthropists" delivered bread, soup, and tea to the sick and buried the dead. After two taxing months, the epidemic finally subsided. Looking back on the event forty years later, one of the doctors recalled that the "part that Cleburne and Hindman took as nurses made them confidential friends, though they differed

⁴² William L. Shea, "The War We Have Lost," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 70 (Summer 2011): 108; "Steam Ferry Boat at Helena," *Helena Southern Shield*, October 25, 1856; "A Trip to Arkansas," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 11, 1860. James C. Tappan & John Hornor, attorneys at law, advertised that they would go to court in the first Arkansas judicial district and in Tunica and Coahoma counties in Mississippi. *Helena Southern Shield*, February 4, 1860. Similarly, attorneys Patrick Cleburne and Mark Alexander, whose law office was located in Helena, announced that they would "attend all the courts in the first circuit of this State, and the various courts in the western counties of Mississippi." Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 40. Dr. Charles Nash retired his medical practice and relocated to his plantation in Tunica County, Mississippi, before the Civil War. Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 85. James L. Alcorn's connections to Helena are well documented. See, for example, James Lusk Alcorn to My Dear Wife [Amelia Alcorn], 16 March 1863, in P. L. Rainwater, ed., "Letters of James Lusk Alcorn," *Journal of Southern History* 3 (May 1937): 204.

at that time in politics.” He also remembered that his three assistants represented three of Helena’s churches. The preacher was a Methodist, Hindman a Presbyterian, and Cleburne an Episcopalian.⁴³

Cleburne was a vestryman at St. John’s Episcopal Church, one of twenty-nine churches in Phillips County on the eve of the war. St. John’s had been organized as a parish in 1853, but its members did not erect a church building until the winter of 1860-1861. Thus, for seven years, its religious services—which included the baptisms of both free and enslaved congregants—were held in either the Helena courthouse, a storehouse, or in various members’ homes. The parish’s reluctance to build a sanctuary frustrated its rector, who resigned his post in the spring of 1859 because the church’s members were “scattered, most of them living in the country.” More than that, he complained, “the planters look askance upon the town, feel no pride in its growth, and take no interest in building it up. It is little, therefore, and in some instances nothing that they will give toward the building of a church in Helena.” Perhaps the rector’s departure motivated those allegedly apathetic planters, for the parish decided to break ground on a church building the very next year. In the fall of 1860, James Tappan purchased a plot “east of the cypress swamp” in downtown Helena and donated it to his parish as a site for its new church. Nature mandated the church be constructed of cypress, not brick, which members feared would sink into the town’s waterlogged land. The building was finished the following spring, and inaugural services held on Easter Eve, 1861. St. John’s parishioners could not have known it at the time,

⁴³ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 39; Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 52-57; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 33.

but only two weeks later, Confederate gunners at Charleston, South Carolina, fired on Fort Sumter, thus inaugurating the Civil War.⁴⁴

Like Cleburne and Tappan, a number of Phillips County's most prominent citizens were Episcopalians, yet most of its residents attended other churches. As in most antebellum southern communities, Protestant Christianity dominated. On the eve of the Civil War, Phillips County was home to ten Methodist churches, eight Baptist, seven Presbyterian, two Christian, and one Roman Catholic Church, in addition to the aforementioned St. John's. The county also experienced the aftershocks of the Second Great Awakening—a swell of evangelical Christian revivalism that swept the United States from the late eighteenth century through the 1830s. Generally speaking, revivalist preachers—who often ascended the pulpit (or the stump) at rural camp meetings—told listeners that their souls could be saved through righteous action, and that they should work to perfect themselves and the world in preparation for Christ's imminent return. In the summer of 1853, an especially energetic revival erupted in Helena and ensnared many of its citizens, including the Episcopalian Cleburne. Meetings were held in the woods outside town, and Cleburne, in particular, was attracted to the simplicity and purity of the religious services, which involved “worship[ing] God beneath his own ethereal roof.” The Irishman was so moved by the experience that he temporarily converted to evangelical Presbyterianism, though he eventually returned to worship at St. John's.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 31; Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” 7; Hackett, “Excerpts from the Diaries and Letters of Reverend Otis Hackett,” 28-29. On the history of St. John's Episcopal Church, see Dale Kirkman, *A History of St. John's Episcopal Church, Helena, Arkansas* (Helena: St. John's Episcopal Church, 1968); and St. John's Episcopal Church Register, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock.

⁴⁵ Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” 7; Michael Fellman, Lesley J. Gordon, and Daniel E. Sutherland, *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 20, 43; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 33-34; P. R. Cleburne to Dear Mamma, 26 October 1853, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers, Mullins Library; Nash, *Biographical*

In some parts of the United States, the Second Great Awakening's emphasis on "perfectionism" inspired fervent reform movements in which Americans strove to rid their nation of activities and institutions they deemed sinful. These reformers, many of whom hailed from the evangelical ranks, championed a variety of causes, including the abolition of slavery, school and prison reform, and abstinence from alcoholic drink, or temperance. Temperance reformers had plenty of potential targets. In 1830, the average per capita consumption of absolute alcohol for Americans of drinking age (15+) was roughly seven gallons per year; in twenty-first century terms, that was roughly the equivalent of eighty-eight fifths of eighty-proof alcohol per year.⁴⁶ Statistics on drinking in antebellum Helena are unavailable, but, like other frontier river towns, Helena acquired a reputation as a lawless den of drunken gamblers. When Traveler G. W. Featherstonhaugh visited Arkansas in the late 1830s, a native of the state warned him that Helena was a place "where all sorts of 'negur runners,' counterfeiters,' 'horse-stealers,' 'murderers, and sich like,' took shelter 'agin the law.'" Some fifteen years later, the town was home to at least one saloon—across the street from Nash and Cleburne's drugstore—where "Irish levee men" reportedly "were in the habit of coming across the Mississippi River and getting on sprees."⁴⁷

Sketches, 36-38. On religion in antebellum America, including the Second Great Awakening, see Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); and Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁶ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 20-21, 55-56; W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 233. On temperance and other reform movements in antebellum America, see also Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860*, revised ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); and Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979).

⁴⁷ Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 4; G. W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion Through the Slave States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 87; Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 18.

Beginning in the 1840s, a number of temperance societies formed to combat Helena's unsavory reputation. Patrick Cleburne, who joined a local chapter of the international Sons of Temperance, told his stepmother that when he arrived in Helena in 1850, the town had only one church and four "drinking & gambling houses." Nearly four years later, however, there were a total of three churches, and the drinking houses were "not making any thing." Cleburne credited the Sons of Temperance with "work[ing] wonders for the morality of Helena," and apparently, a majority of its citizens agreed. In 1854, Phillips County voters went to the polls and directed their representatives in Little Rock "to obtain the passage of a special act, prohibiting the sale of vinous and spirituous liquors in less quantity than one quart." For his part, Cleburne was proud to have helped clean up what was once considered "the haunt of the most reckless desperate characters in the Mississippi Valley"—a place where "pistol & Bowie Knife decided every quarrel." One wonders how Cleburne's stepmother might have responded to her son's optimistic description of his adopted town's progress had she known that only two and a half years later, he would nearly be killed in a downtown gunfight.⁴⁸

Cleburne's 1856 gunfight—in which the Irishman served as an accomplice to his rash companion Thomas Hindman—was the result of a political dispute gone awry, and when viewed within the context of antebellum America, his predicament was not unique. Politics in Helena, like politics across the United States in this period, was a passionate pastime that inspired intense partisanship and occasional violence. Helena was founded at the beginning of what scholars call the "party period," an era spanning the 1830s through the 1890s characterized by high voter turnout in elections, intense party loyalty, extensive patronage, the proliferation of partisan

⁴⁸ Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," 5; P. R. Cleburne to Dear Mamma, 26 October 1853, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 43.

newspapers, detailed party organization, close competition in elections, and widespread participation in political rallies, torchlight parades, and barbecues.⁴⁹ The causes of this political upsurge are complex, but the growing number of eligible American voters certainly contributed to the fury. In 1789, Vermont was the only state that had no property or tax requirements for voting. Over the next thirty years, however, westward expansion, a growing egalitarianism spurred by the American and Market Revolutions, party competition, and other factors prompted most states either to abolish or reduce their property-holding or tax-paying suffrage requirements. Consequently, by 1840, over ninety percent of adult white males enjoyed the right to vote, and for the next fifty years, most exercised that right, as average turnout in presidential elections soared to some eighty percent of eligible voters.⁵⁰

The most famous observer of the American people in this period, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, did not visit Phillips County when he toured the United States in the 1830s, but he did detect the political frenzy of the party period, noting that it was “difficult to say what place the cares of politics occupy in the life of a man in the United States. To meddle in the

⁴⁹ Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3-41. McGerr is primarily interested in explaining why the party period ended in the 1890s, but he also describes the characteristics of the period.

⁵⁰ For a survey of the era’s politics, including the political culture and the expansion of white male suffrage, see Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 42-43; Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990); and Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). On the growing egalitarianism of the era spurred by the American Revolution, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). On the Market Revolution and its connections to the era’s politics, see Watson, *Liberty and Power*; and Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Daniel Walker Howe rejects the term “Market Revolution” to describe what transpired in the period and instead argues that a communications revolution, along with its “political and economic consequences,” was the “driving force in the history of the era.” Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

government of society and to speak about it is the greatest business and, so to speak, the only pleasure that an American knows.” Tocqueville’s observation was astute. The practice of politics in antebellum American was not restricted to the ballot box; rather, it involved regular participation in a complex political culture that espoused democracy, liberty, and equality (though the definitions assigned to each could vary widely). Women, denied formal voting rights, nevertheless found ways to act politically by organizing and attending rallies, circulating petitions, mentoring children, writing articles, and participating in the era’s reform movements. A group of Phillips County women, for example, hosted a barbecue for Thomas Hindman before the congressman left for Washington in late 1859. After the event, one of the organizers wrote a detailed letter to her brother articulating her views on Hindman’s political talents, the Democratic Party, race, slavery, sectionalism, northern wage labor, and the state of the union. Unable to vote or run for office, the woman staked her position on the foremost political topics of the day via other means. She was not extraordinary. Simply put, few free Americans of the period would have described themselves as apolitical. Even in a little frontier town like Helena, politics was the thing to do.⁵¹

When Cleburne and Hindman dueled with their political rivals in the spring of 1856, the most prominent parties in Phillips County were the Democrats and the Know-Nothings. The Democratic Party, officially called the “American Democracy,” had emerged in the 1820s as the

⁵¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 232; Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 42-44; Harriet Sandford Everett to My Dear Brother [Burnum D. Sandford], 15 January 1860, Sandford-Everett Family Correspondence, Arkansas Small Manuscripts Collection, 1823-1986, UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock. On white women’s participation in antebellum politics, see Lisa Tendrich Frank, “Domesticity Goes Public: Southern Women and the Secession Crisis,” in *The Die is Cast: Arkansas Goes to War, 1861*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2010), 31-51.

party of white male egalitarianism, limited government (especially at the national level), and opposition to “special interests” like the Second Bank of the United States, which President Andrew Jackson, the party’s founder, had effectively painted as the enemy of the common man. Some twenty years later, the Know-Nothing, or American, Party arose when a host of semisecret nativist organizations—whose members allegedly responded to questions about their clandestine rituals by claiming they “knew nothing”—coalesced to oppose infiltration of the United States by immigrants, especially Irish and German Catholics. Among other things, the Know-Nothings wanted to lengthen immigrants’ waiting period for naturalized citizenship and bar Catholics and immigrants from public office. Although the Know-Nothing movement originated in the late 1840s, Arkansas’s American Party was not born until 1854. Many of its members, though ostensibly committed to nativism, were former Whigs looking for a new political home after their party had begun to unravel two years earlier.⁵²

Cleburne was one of those former Whigs in search of a new party, and, as relative newcomer from Ireland, he understandably detested the Know-Nothings. Thus, in 1855 he

⁵² Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 42-43, 55-56; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 37-38. On the collapse of the Whig Party, including its connection to the passage of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, see David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), chap. 7. Thomas DeBlack argues that the Whigs ceased to be a major factor in Arkansas politics as early as 1852. Moreover, he contends the Know-Nothings in Arkansas mainly “served as a vehicle” for all those who opposed the so-called Family, a Democratic dynasty led by the Johnson-Conway families that controlled Arkansas politics from its territorial days until 1860. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 7-8. According to one resident of antebellum Helena, the political transformations rocking the nation in 1854 were also apparent in his hometown, where, in that year, “the democratic party had gained a signal victory over the whig party in Phillips county. For many years,” he continued, “the strength of the two parties was about equal, the whigs always sending Walter Preston to the lower house of the legislature, while the democrats never failed to put in their Davis Thompson, Dr. Jeffries and Jas. C. Tappan. The senate was always democratic. At this election Dorsey Rice and Robt. Macon, both democrats, were elected. At this session the know nothing rage ran high, and some of our best democrats were leaving the old party and joining the new.” Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 61.

joined forces with his friend and colleague Hindman, a staunch Democrat, in an impassioned effort to discredit them. Political excoriation was an activity at which Thomas Hindman excelled. A friend in Helena described him as an “ambitious politician, rather overbearing in expression . . . uncompromising in every thing,” while a congressional colleague called him an “an irreconcilable man. No one could eat more fire in a given time in connection with Southern questions in [the 36th] Congress” the congressman wrote. “While [Hindman] was on the floor of the House it seemed as if he was perpetually anxious to have a duel.” In May 1855, the irascible Hindman organized the Phillips County Democratic Association to promote the party’s activities in the county, and two months later, his lieutenant Cleburne lambasted the Know-Nothings at a local Democratic rally hosted by some of the county’s women. Though he had not garnered a reputation as a rousing orator, Cleburne decried the Know-Nothings’ nativism and anti-Catholicism and effectively linked them to abolitionism—always good politics in planter-dominated Phillips County.⁵³

Shortly thereafter, Cleburne was elected secretary of the county’s Democratic Association, and in November, he and Hindman sponsored a Democratic festival at “Camp Jefferson” on the outskirts of Helena, complete with food and drink, banners, artillery, a brass band from Memphis, and, of course, fervid speeches condemning the Know-Nothings. Speakers included William Sebastian, Gideon Pillow, and a former Mississippi congressman who admonished Arkansas Know-Nothings to remember that their “most vital interests were now imperiled by a fanatical majority at the North.” Thousands reportedly attended the two-day meeting, which unanimously adopted a resolution specifying Congressional actions that would

⁵³ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 38-39; Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 74; Samuel S. Cox, *Union—Disunion—Reunion. Three Decades of Federal Legislation. 1855 to 1885* (Tecumseh, Mich.: A. W. Mills, 1885), 96.

precipitate a “dissolution of the Union.” Though no one knew it at the time, the resolution portended events to come.⁵⁴

The following spring, Hindman and Cleburne, now firm Democratic allies, purchased a local newspaper and tellingly rechristened it the *States Rights Democrat*. On the eve of the Civil War, it was one of three newspapers printed in Helena, though by 1860 it was under different ownership. Helena’s antebellum newspapers, like most in nineteenth-century America, were overtly partisan publications, but that did not stop one citizen from boasting in 1860 that the “the news and topics of the day” were “published in Helena very liberally indeed.” He believed the town’s three weeklies were evidence that freedom of the press, “that great constitutional right and privilege of democratic government and country, which reflects the opinions, the thoughts, the deeds and actions of men,” was championed in Helena. A visitor to the town in April 1860 agreed. “Three well conducted newspapers in a small town, well supported, too,” was “not common,” he wrote. In his view, the papers were “gratifying evidence of the intelligence and liberality” of Helena’s populace.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 39-40; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 30-31; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 48.

⁵⁵ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 40; Worley, “Helena on the Mississippi,” 7-8; Price Tappan, “History of the City of Helena,” 7; “Rambling Correspondence,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 24, 1860. Worley lists the *Shield*, the *Weekly Notebook*, and the *Weekly Bulletin* as Helena’s three newspapers in 1860, while Price Tappan lists the *Shield*, the *States-Right Democrat*, and the *Note-Book*. The Library of Congress’s “Chronicling America” newspaper database agrees with Tappan’s list. Craig Symonds contends that the *States Rights Democrat* ceased publication in the wake of the Democrats’ nationwide success in the 1856 elections (and Cleburne’s subsequent withdrawal from active involvement in politics), whereas “Chronicling America” says it was published from 1856-1865. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 42; and <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87062069/> (accessed February 15, 2017). Dale P. Kirkman agrees with “Chronicling America,” citing one source that says the *States Rights Democrat* continued until 1865 “with General Hindman maintaining his connection with it.” Dale P. Kirkman, “Early Helena Newspapers,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 4 (March 1966): 15. The *Arkansas State Gazette* announced that the *States Rights Democrat* had been

By the spring of 1856, Hindman and Cleburne were esteemed citizens, leading Democrats, and newspaper owners. And thus, the stage was set for the most famous duel in Helena's history. Two months after the first issue of the *States Rights Democrat* rolled off the press, the hot-tempered Hindman chastised a state legislator from Phillips County, Dorsey Rice, for deserting his fellow Democrats for the Know-Nothings, publicly labeling him "the mulatto would-be Senator." This was out of bounds. Dorsey may have been a political turncoat, but in nineteenth-century America—especially on the southern frontier—using racial language to publicly disparage an opponent was, by most counts, off limits. One contemporary said Hindman had "stripped every vestage of political clothing from Rice and left nothing but his naked deformity." Predictably, Rice wanted vengeance, and word reached Hindman that he was plotting it. No stranger to political confrontations, the cautious Hindman assumed that he might need backup, so after arming himself, he visited Cleburne and asked his friend to dine with him at a local hotel. Cleburne obliged, grabbing two derringer pistols on his way out the door.⁵⁶

At just past one o'clock in the afternoon on May 24, 1856, the two men met Rice, flanked by two of his relatives, on Front Street in downtown Helena. Rice demanded that Hindman apologize, and predictably, the short-tempered Democrat refused, instead replying with a sling of insults. Shots were fired, and when the smoke cleared, three men lay wounded on the ground.

purchased by a new owner in the fall of 1859. "The States-Rights Democrat," *Arkansas State Gazette*, October 8, 1859.

⁵⁶ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 40; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 50; Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 63-64. Historian Bobby Roberts contends that Hindman "used the term Know-Nothing to designate any group in Arkansas that opposed his views." Therefore, "the term is not necessarily associated with the national party known by that name." Roberts, "Thomas C. Hindman, Jr.: Secessionist and Confederate General," 7. Regardless of Hindman's intended meaning, this was not the first time that he had called Rice a "Know Nothing." In fact, the two had been engaged in a public feud dating at least as far back as January 1855. Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 36-38.

One of Rice's accomplices, who Cleburne's former drugstore co-owner said was "as brave a man as ever breathed the atmosphere of free people," died within a few days. A ball struck Hindman in the chest, but a surgeon removed it, and the hard-nosed Democrat convalesced rather quickly. The same could not be said for Cleburne. Shot just below the waist, a ball lodged dangerously close to his spine. Immediately after the melee, friends carried him to a nearby bed, where he languished near death for ten days while Dr. Nash, his old friend and business partner, sat beside him. Eventually, a surgeon was able to remove the ball and Cleburne recovered, though the effects of his injury plagued him for the rest of his life.⁵⁷

In the aftermath of the gunfight, Hindman and Cleburne grew even closer. According to Nash, the "political friendship which existed between [the two men] now became a warm personal and lasting friendship." The two eventually recuperated, were exonerated for their role in the shootout, and swiftly returned to the campaign trail. Their efforts paid immediate dividends, as Democrats captured the presidency, the Arkansas governorship, both of the state's Congressional seats, twelve of the thirteen state Senate seats, and three-fourths of the various county races in the elections of 1856, though the Know-Nothing contender for governor won Phillips and four other counties. In the wake of these victories, Cleburne scaled back his political activism and instead focused his attention on his legal practice and land speculation. His partner, however, was just warming up. In 1858, Hindman was elected to the U.S. Congress,

⁵⁷ The details of the duel, including the relationship between Rice and his accomplices, vary widely. See Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 63-73 [quotation on p. 65]; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 40-41; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 37-38; and Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 50-52. Some four and a half years after the duel, Cleburne told his brother, "[M]y lungs have never been well since I was wounded. I catch cold on the smallest provocation and an hours excited debate in the Court House will sometimes fill my mouth with blood[.] when I first came here I thought nothing of wading all day through ponds and bayous after ducks[.] now a broken boot will give me a bad cold." P. R. Cleburne to Dear Robert [Cleburne], n.d. (probably January 1861), Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers.

where, over the next two years, his fire-eating extremism grew even hotter. He would eventually help lead Arkansas out of the Union.⁵⁸

And yet, the secession of Arkansas and ten other slaveholding states—and the civil war their separation triggered—was still months away. In early 1860, Phillips County’s free residents, like many in the United States at large, had plenty of reasons to be optimistic about their future. From 1850 to 1860, the cash value of Phillips County’s farms had increased by 691 percent, making it the richest county in Arkansas on the eve of the war. Although most of that wealth was owned by large farmers who lived outside Helena, the town itself saw a 48.3 percent increase in revenue from 1859 to 1860. This growth, in conjunction with the community’s existing amenities, natural advantages, and proud past, made one local lawyer eternally optimistic about his town’s prospects. “It would seem to almost every one,” he wrote in 1860, “that a bright future must certainly be in anticipation; that [Helena] will surely occupy a place among the more prominent cities of the globe.” The former rector of St. John’s Church agreed. A vocal critic of purported planter indifference toward Helena’s success, he nevertheless remained confident in the town’s future: “But notwithstanding all drawbacks, Helena grows; and I am still of opinion that it is destined to be an important town.” Neither the priest nor the lawyer could foresee what destructive events lay ahead.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 73; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 41-42; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 38-39; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 52; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 9-10.

⁵⁹ Moneyhon, “Economic Democracy in Antebellum Arkansas,” 160; Moneyhon, “The Impact of the Civil War in Arkansas,” 180; Price Tappan, “History of the City of Helena,” 6-7; Hackett, “Excerpts from the Diaries and Letters of Reverend Otis Hackett,” 30.

Chapter 2: The Secession Crisis

On January 28, 1861, the telegraph office at Helena, Arkansas, was abuzz. A dispatch—sent from Little Rock to Memphis along the newly completed telegraph line and then relayed down to Helena—had just arrived reporting that a transport loaded with U.S. troops was steaming down the Arkansas River toward Little Rock. The soldiers on board, recently stationed at Fort Gibson in the Indian Territory, were supposedly en route to the Arkansas capital to reinforce the city's federal arsenal. The news spread rapidly in Phillips County, and a number of residents panicked. For months, they had heard rumors that the federal government, lately controlled by a cabal of northern radicals, was determined to abolish slavery and coerce the South into submission. Fears of such reports had only intensified since November, when Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected president despite winning no electoral votes in the South. Since Lincoln's election, six slaveholding states had seceded from the Union, and although Arkansans had been contemplating secession, they had not yet decided on the matter.¹

In the minds of many in Phillips County, however, the latest dispatch from Little Rock was proof that the dominoes were falling. A public meeting was called in Helena, and residents passed resolutions declaring it the duty of Arkansas Governor Henry M. Rector to seize the Little Rock arsenal and expel the troops who garrisoned it. The following morning, Helenians wired their governor both a report of their resolutions and an offer to send five hundred militia to assist in their proposed operation. The recently-inaugurated Rector was an erratic politician and a

¹ Margaret Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years, 1819-1866. A History* (Little Rock: Arkansas Gazette Foundation, 1969), 352; Howell Purdue and Elizabeth Purdue, *Pat Cleburne: Confederate General* (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Jr. College Press, 1973), 70-71. On January 28, 1861, Texas was the lone lower South state that had not seceded. It would vote to do so on February 1.

strong proponent of states' rights, but even he knew that to accept such a proposal would be reckless. In effect, it would mean ordering a preemptive strike on a U.S. arsenal, an act that could precipitate war. Therefore, his adjutant-general replied to Helena's citizens that the governor had no authority to "take possession of a Federal post, whether threatened to be reinforced or not." But his message included an interesting caveat: "Should the people assemble in their defense, the governor will interpose his official position in their behalf." If Helena's leaders recognized the ambiguity of this response, they did not report it. Instead, they ordered four militia companies to move to Little Rock at once.²

One of those companies, the Yell Rifles, had been organized in Helena some six months earlier. Named for Archibald Yell, a former Arkansas governor killed in the Mexican-American War, the company consisted of 115 volunteers, most of whom hailed from Phillips County's upper crust. Patrick Cleburne, who eventually was elected company captain, described his unit as a "splendid company of Riflemen," the majority of them "young planters of the county." One of those planters was Lucius E. Polk, a close friend of Cleburne, nephew of Episcopal Bishop Leonidas Polk, and a future Confederate general. Throughout the fall of 1860, Cleburne led Polk and his comrades in regular afternoon drilling. Contemporaries said the Irishman, a veteran of the British army, possessed both the skills and demeanor required to whip his men into shape.

² Governor Henry Rector's Message to Arkansas's secession convention delegates, March 2, 1861, in James J. Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas: A Documentary History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 158-159; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 70-71; Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 46; Michael B. Dougan, "'An eternal chitter chatter kept up in the galleries': The Arkansas Secession Convention in Action, March-June, 1861," in *The Die is Cast: Arkansas Goes to War, 1861*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2010), 17-18; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 352-353; L. H. Mangum to Martha P. Mangum, 19 February 1861, in Henry Thomas Shanks, ed., *The Papers of Willie Person Mangum*, vol. 5 (Raleigh, N.C.: State Department of Archives and History, 1956), 385.

Years later, a former soldier recalled that he “never before nor since saw as fine a body of men, or as well drilled, as was the Yell rifles.” Their abilities notwithstanding, the Rifles were no aberration. Throughout the tense summer and fall of 1860, similar militia and “Minute Men” units formed across the South, including Phillips County’s own Phillips Guards. Both the Guards and the Rifles were part of a short but distinguished military tradition in Phillips County. Only fourteen years earlier, the county had sent a company with the First Arkansas Volunteer Cavalry to fight in Mexico.³

Helena’s increasingly martial atmosphere in the summer and fall of 1860 was a boon to resident secessionists. Scholars have portrayed Phillips County as one of the state’s earliest and staunchest separatist strongholds, and there is plenty of evidence to support this contention. For example, two of antebellum Arkansas’s leading fire-eaters, Senator William K. Sebastian and Congressman Thomas C. Hindman, hailed from Helena, while Phillips County sent two pro-separation delegates to the state’s 1861 secession convention. Moreover, the county famously contributed seven generals to the Confederate cause, including Hindman, the top rebel officer in Arkansas in 1862, and Cleburne, who rose to the rank of major general in the Army of Tennessee. However, in the fall of 1860, Arkansas’s secession—and the Civil War—lay several

³ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 45-46; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 63-64; P. R. Cleburne to Robert S. Cleburne, 7 May 1861, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers, Mullins Library, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; Dale P. Kirkman, “Whatever Happened to the Seven Generals? Brigadier General Lucius E. Polk,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 22 (June/Sept. 1984): 69-70; Judge T. J. Oliphint to C. E. Nash, 16 August 1898, in Charles Edward Nash, *Biographical Sketches of Gen. Pat Cleburne and Gen. T. C. Hindman* (Little Rock: Tunnah & Pittard, 1898), 168; “Confederate Soldiers from Phillips County,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 2 (Sept. 1963): 29-31; Michael Fellman, Lesley J. Gordon, and Daniel E. Sutherland, *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 68; “Co. K, First Arkansas Volunteer Cavalry,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 4 (Dec. 1965): 28.

months in the future, and Sebastian and Hindman, though certainly not alone in their sentiments, seem to have represented a minority of Phillips County citizens.⁴

For most of 1860, unionism remained strong in both Phillips County and Arkansas at large. During the previous decade, most white Arkansans, including those in the Delta, felt pride in the Union of states they had joined only twenty-four years earlier. In their minds, the United States was still mankind's best hope for democratic government—a beacon for the rest of the world to see—especially in the wake of the failed European revolutions of the 1840s. In a January 1860 address before the U.S. House of Representatives, Arkansas Congressman Albert Rust proudly told his colleagues, “The people whom I represent, and whose sentiments . . . I believe I faithfully reflect, are eminently a national conservative, Union-loving people. Their love is not a romantic, sentimental, unreasoning passion.”⁵

Harriet Everett of LaGrange (approximately twenty miles northwest of Helena) was one of those Arkansans to whom Rust referred.⁶ Though denied formal suffrage rights, Everett

⁴ Thomas A. DeBlack “‘A Remarkably Strong Union Sentiment’: Unionism in Arkansas in 1861,” in *The Die is Cast*, 77; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 5; Brian G. Walton, “Politics during the Compromise Crisis, 1848-1852,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1977): 319; Bobby Roberts, “‘Desolation Itself’: The Impact of the Civil War,” in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, ed. Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 73. The other Confederate generals from Phillips County were Lucius E. Polk, James C. Tappan, Daniel C. Govan, Charles W. Adams, and Archibald S. Dobbins. Jno. P. Morrow, Jr., “Confederate Generals from Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 21 (Autumn 1962): 231-246. On Daniel Govan's life and military career, see Daniel E. Sutherland, “No Better Officer in the Confederacy: The Wartime Career of Daniel C. Govan,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (Autumn 1995): 269-303; and Dale P. Kirkman, “General Govan,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 23 (Dec. 1984/March 1985): 94-100.

⁵ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 5-7; *Arkansas True Democrat*, January 25, 1860, quoted in Jack B. Scroggs, “Arkansas in the Secession Crisis,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 12 (Autumn 1953): 180. On the importance of the Union to Americans in the Civil War era, see Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁶ Today, LaGrange is in Lee County, Arkansas, but during the Civil War, it was part of Phillips County. In 1873, Lee County was created from parts of Phillips, Monroe, St. Francis,

embodied many of the characteristics of a typical fire-eating southerner. She was a devoted Democrat (and Hindman admirer) and avowed white supremacist who accused northern politicians and New England ministers of inciting slave rebellions, stoking sectionalism, and “spreading . . . deadly hatred to the south.” Like many white southerners, she also declared the South’s slaves happier, healthier, and more prosperous than the North’s factory workers, whom she called “slaves to capital.” Her radicalism notwithstanding, Everett still hoped the Union could be preserved. “Why dont the north, the Democrats I mean, arise as a band of Brothers, and save this union[?]” she asked her brother in January 1860. “Of what use will be their union meetings when they continue to send men to Washington, that openly advocate Treason, and Rebellion, and would rejoice to see the South overwhelmed with desolation, and her soil deluged with the blood of her Sons, and daughters, her dwellings in flames[,] her fields laid waste[?]” Everett obviously felt little fondness for northerners, and ultimately, the extreme sectionalism (and penchant for finger-pointing) displayed by her and others like her would propel the nation to disunion and war. However, she is proof that in early 1860, it was still possible to be both a firebrand and a unionist, even in Phillips County.⁷

Arkansans like Everett knew that membership in the Union was about more than lofty ideals. It also came with tangible benefits, including the protection of the U.S. army (especially significant in a frontier state), federal aid, and, perhaps most importantly for residents of the

and Crittenden counties. Blake Wintory, s.v. “Lee County,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=783> (accessed March 3, 2017).

⁷ Harriet Sandford Everett to My Dear Brother [Burnum D. Sandford], 15 January 1860, Sandford-Everett Family Correspondence, Arkansas Small Manuscripts Collection, 1823-1986, UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock. On white women’s political participation during the secession crisis, see Lisa Tendrich Frank, “Domesticity Goes Public: Southern Women and the Secession Crisis,” in *The Die is Cast*, 31-51.

Delta, a swamplands reclamation project launched in 1850. Arkansas planters, in particular, were thriving in the Union. “The planters in Alabama, North Carolina, and many other of the old States, when they rise from their beds in the morning, give their first thoughts . . . to the rich lands of Arkansas,” boasted a Little Rock newspaper in 1857. “If cotton will only hold present prices for five years, Arkansas planters will be as rich as cream a foot thick.” Three years later, Phillips County farmers expected their best corn crop in over a decade. It is no coincidence that the Whigs—a party devoted to active federal involvement in the economy, including the funding of internal improvements like roads, canals, and railroads—enjoyed substantial support in Phillips County, especially among its planters, prior to the party’s collapse in the 1850s. Though the Democrats dominated Arkansas as a whole before the Civil War, and they ultimately rose to the fore in Phillips County, one resident recalled that “for many years the strength of the two parties was about equal” in the county.⁸

By 1860, however, the Whigs were effectively dead, and four other parties nominated candidates for that year’s presidential election. The Democrats, unable to agree on a federal policy regarding slavery’s expansion, split into northern and southern wings. Northern Democrats nominated Senator Stephen A. Douglas, author of the controversial 1854 Kansas-

⁸ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 7; “Our City,” *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, May 16, 1857; “The Crops in Phillips County,” *Helena Southern Shield*, July 21, 1860, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, July 28, 1860; Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 61. In March 1859, the *Southern Shield*, Helena’s Whig newspaper, championed a number of traditional Whig proposals to transform Helena into a prosperous place. The author blamed the Democratic Party, which he called an “incubus,” for stunting Helena’s (and Arkansas’s) growth. “There Is No Reason Why Not,” *Helena Southern Shield*, n.d., in *Arkansas State Gazette*, March 26, 1859. On swamplands reclamation in antebellum Arkansas, see Robert W. Harrison and Walter M. Kollmorgen, “Land Reclamation in Arkansas under the Swamp Land Grant of 1850,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 6 (Winter 1947): 369-418. On the Whig Party, see Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

Nebraska Act and a proponent of popular sovereignty, or the idea that the residents of a territory should decide the fate of slavery for themselves. Southern Democrats, including most of Arkansas's party delegates, walked out of the party's nominating conventions and chose Vice President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky as their candidate. Tellingly, they also advocated a federal law that would guarantee slavery in the western territories. Most Arkansas Democrats, including those in the Delta, preferred Breckenridge over Douglas. In March 1860—three months before the national party split—Phillips County Democrats adopted resolutions denouncing “squatter sovereignty, and other heresies which a faction at the North . . . [had] attempted to engraft” on the party platform. In keeping with the position of most of his constituents, Congressman Hindman was one of the delegates who exited the June 1860 convention that nominated Douglas.⁹

Meanwhile, the Republican Party, born only six years earlier, met in Chicago and nominated former Illinois congressman Abraham Lincoln. During the campaign, Lincoln repeatedly declared that he had “no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery” in states where it existed. Moreover, he believed he had “no lawful right to do so” and “no inclination to do so.” Most white southerners did not buy it. Lincoln's party had devoted itself to halting the expansion of slavery into the territories, and in the eyes of many in the South, this was at best a tacit condemnation of the southern way of life and at worst a step

⁹ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 66-67; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 11-12; Diane Neal and Thomas W. Kremm, *Lion of the South: General Thomas C. Hindman* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993), 77; Bobby Roberts, “Thomas C. Hindman, Jr.: Secessionist and Confederate General” (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1972), 26-30.

toward general emancipation. In most southern states, including Arkansas, citizens could not vote for Lincoln because there were no party tickets that bore his name.¹⁰

The Constitutional Union Party, a new coalition of former Whigs, Know-Nothings, and moderate Democrats, also entered the contest. In April 1860, a group of former Arkansas Whigs who styled themselves the “Opposition Party” met in Helena and elected delegates to the upcoming Constitutional Union convention in Baltimore. One of those delegates was Q. K. Underwood, editor of the *Southern Shield*, Helena’s Whig newspaper. The following month, he and his colleagues nominated John Bell, a planter and former Whig from Tennessee, to run for president. Bell and his associates denounced extremists in both the North and the South, avoided the issue of slavery’s expansion, and endorsed “The Constitution of the Country, The Union of the States, and The Enforcement of the Laws,” including those that protected slavery. Going forward, a number of prominent Helenians stumped for Bell, including attorney Charles W. Adams, an alternate delegate to the Baltimore convention, and Roland James Cook, secretary of the Helena convention and a future Confederate sergeant.¹¹

¹⁰ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 67; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 12-13; Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 4, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 263. On the Arkansas delegates’ participation in the 1860 Democratic conventions, see Scroggs, “Arkansas in the Secession Crisis,” 184-187.

¹¹ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 67; James M. Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment: Arkansas's Road to Secession* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 81, 138; “Opposition State Convention,” *Van Buren Press* (Van Buren, Ark.), May 25, 1860; “Proceedings of the Opposition State Convention” and “The Union Constitutional Convention,” both in *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 12, 1860; Adios to Dear H., 11 May 1860, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 19, 1860; “The Baltimore Convention,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 2, 1860; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 341; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 13-14; John Hallum, *Biographical and Pictorial History of Arkansas*, vol. 1 (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1887), 309; Betty M. Faust, ed., “Civil War Letters of Roland James Cook and Ranson C. Fowlkes,” *Phillips County Historical Review* 36 (Spring 1998): 3.

The 1860 presidential election was the most consequential one in American history, yet most Arkansans remained rather detached from the contest for most of the campaign. Instead, they continued to focus on local events, including their own August gubernatorial race, in which “Independent Democrat” Henry Rector, backed by Congressman Hindman, upset the candidate endorsed by the state’s longstanding Democratic dynasty. “Politics! yes great political excitement in Arkansas! I have heard of nothing, thought of nothing, but politics for the last two months,” exclaimed a Helena lawyer following Rector’s victory. “[T]he old Lion Democracy has come out of Our State elections triumphant – with the gallant Hindman at their head. . . . There is but little excitement [sic] felt here respecting the Presidential election [as] Arkansas is *certain* to go for Breckinridge.”¹²

Voters in Arkansas’s first congressional district also reelected Hindman in 1860, but before his victory had been certified, the *Southern Shield* anticipated its hometown candidate’s defeat. Early returns suggested that Jesse Cypert, “the Union candidate” from Searcy, had captured Phillips County, and the author believed Cypert’s election had national implications. “This is a glorious victory for the cause of the Union and the Constitution,” he wrote. If the district that had “hitherto given overwhelming Democratic majorities” voted for Cypert, the author predicted it would “insure the State for Bell” in November. Moreover, it would “serve to arouse a feeling, a confidence—inspire the Union men of all the States, from Maine to Louisiana, with a will and determination to do their duty, their whole duty to their country, by making one long, vigorous, hearty effort to succeed in the great national contest.” The author must have been crushed to learn that Hindman trounced Cypert by more than a two to one margin, winning

¹² DeBlack ““A Remarkably Strong Union Sentiment,”” in *The Die is Cast*, 80; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 14-16; L. H. Mangum to Martha P. Mangum, 15 September 1860, in Shanks, ed., *The Papers of Willie Person Mangum*, vol. 5, 375-376.

twenty-three of the district's twenty-seven counties. Still, his editorial shows that in the fall of 1860, unionism remained alive and well in Phillips County.¹³

Their state elections completed, Arkansans gradually turned their attention to the presidential contest. Judge John W. Brown of Camden called Election Day “the most important day to these United States, and perhaps to Mankind since the Fourth of July 1776,” but the evidence suggests that many in the state disagreed. Although eighty percent of Arkansas voters cast ballots—the highest percentage in a presidential election in state history—they cast over seven thousand fewer votes for president than they did for governor two months earlier.¹⁴

Still, the results of Arkansas's election were conclusive. Breckinridge won the state with 28,783 votes (53 percent), while Bell and Douglas garnered 20,094 (37 percent) and 5,227 (9 percent), respectively. One might infer that Breckinridge won Arkansas because he was the candidate most closely associated with the preservation of slavery and southern rights, but most scholars disagree with this conclusion. Bell, as it turned out, found his greatest success in eastern Arkansas, a traditional Whig stronghold of cotton-growing slaveholders. The Constitutional Union candidate won a plurality of votes in five Delta counties, and a majority in one. In Phillips County, Breckinridge bested Bell by a razor thin margin of thirteen votes, but the Tennessean appears to have won a majority in Helena. Thanks to commercially-minded former Whigs, Bell also carried some of the state's other entrepôts, including Little Rock and

¹³ Helena *Southern Shield*, n.d., in “An Arkansas Paper Jubilant,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1860; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 63; Dallas T. Herndon, ed., *Centennial History of Arkansas*, vol. 1 (Chicago—Little Rock: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 273.

¹⁴ DeBlack ““A Remarkably Strong Union Sentiment,”” in *The Die is Cast*, 80-82; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 16-17; John W. Brown Diary (Transcript), 6 November 1860, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 33-34.

Van Buren. Breckinridge, for his part, dominated the cotton-producing areas of southern and southwestern Arkansas. He also captured established Democratic counties in northern and western Arkansas, where slavery was less significant than in other parts of the state. Given that many of these counties would be unionist strongholds in the years ahead, it appears that party loyalty, not Breckinridge's platform, explains the Southern Democrat's success.¹⁵

Breckinridge's victory in Arkansas and ten other slaveholding states was not enough to propel the Kentuckian to victory. Over eighty percent of American voters cast ballots in the election, and though Lincoln garnered less than forty percent of their votes, his victories in the free states gave him a resounding sixty percent of the Electoral College. Five days after the election, Judge Brown wrote, "The news of Lincoln's election is confirmed. . . . I am so much concerned about the fate of the Government and the prospect of individual ruin that I do not sleep more than half my usual and necessary time."¹⁶

Brown's fears proved prescient. Although Lincoln's inauguration was nearly four months away, his election convinced a number of white southerners that they had lost their voice in the federal government. As during the campaign, many believed that the president-elect and his "Black Republicans" threatened the South's economy and lifestyle, both of which rested on the institution of slavery. Lincoln had made it abundantly clear that he was not an abolitionist.

¹⁵ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 17-18; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 33-34; DeBlack "A Remarkably Strong Union Sentiment," in *The Die is Cast*, 81-82; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 110-112, 189; "Official Vote of Arkansas for President, 1860," *Arkansas State Gazette*, December 8, 1860. Bell won six counties in the Arkansas Delta, including two that bordered Phillips (St. Francis and Crittenden). In seven other Delta counties, including Phillips, the combined number of Bell and Douglas voters surpassed those of Breckinridge. Woods, 189. In November 1860, the *Arkansas State Gazette* reported the results in Helena "as far as received" were 276 votes for Bell, 160 for Breckinridge, and 113 for Douglas. *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 10, 1860.

¹⁶ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 69-70; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 18; John W. Brown Diary (Transcript), 11 November 1860.

Moreover, his Republican Party, though certainly the preferred party of the small cadre of northern abolitionists, was not an abolitionist party. However, most white southerners perceived them in just that way.¹⁷

Upon hearing the news of Lincoln's election, Harriet Everett lamented, "Now abolitionists have triumphed, and have ruined both north, and south." Her response was typical. Numerous white southerners presumed the Lincoln government would eradicate slavery, curb the South's power, amalgamate the races, elevate black people, and, worst of all, unleash black violence and lechery on a degraded white population. An Irish immigrant in western Alabama responded to Lincoln's victory by exclaiming, "[S]ubmit to be governed by a sectional party whose grand aim is . . . to sink the southern white men to an equality with the negro! Submit to have our wives and daughters choose between death and satisfying the hellish lust of the negro! Submit to have our children murdered, our dwellings burnt and our country desolated!! Far better ten thousand deaths than submission to Black Republicanism."¹⁸ A week after the election, a Phillips County woman expressed similar sentiments:

Oh! Brother what are we coming too [sic]? When we lay down at night in fear before morning we may be roused by there [sic] blood hounds. . . . I feel now if I was ever to see a real abolitionist again that I should dread them as I would the worst of murderers! The vilest class of people in these United States when I say real I mean those that are willing to see the negroe set loose upon defenseless mothers & children. . . . Do you think Lincoln will do any out ragious [sic] act when he takes the chair? . . . If there should be war what should we all do? There has been great excitement here in this little place[.]¹⁹

¹⁷ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 68-70, 75-76.

¹⁸ Harriet Sandford Everett to My Dear Brother [Burnum D. Sandford], 28 November 1860, Sandford-Everett Family Correspondence; Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 75.

¹⁹ Sister Lucy to My Dear Brother [Burnum D. Sandford], 14 November 1860, Sandford-Everett Family Correspondence.

In the weeks following Lincoln's election, secessionist voices in Arkansas grew louder. Several Arkansas counties, including three in the Delta, demanded a state convention to discuss separation. Phillips was not one of them, but resident fire-eaters like Thomas Hindman continued to agitate for the South's withdrawal. On November 23 and 24, Hindman and Edward Gantt, Arkansas's other U.S. congressman-elect, "openly declared for secession" in speeches before the legislature. According to one reporter, their speeches "were of the most ultra and inflammatory character." Three weeks later, a Little Rock newspaper owned by Hindman, the *Old-Line Democrat*, declared, "Lincoln has been deliberately flung in our teeth; there is nothing left for Arkansas to do but to follow the lead of the lower South, in secession or not." "Our destiny is irrevocably linked with that of the other cotton-growing States," the author continued, and "we should not falter for one moment to seek that destiny or pause to deliberate the consequences that may follow."²⁰

Most Arkansans, however, did not share Hindman's views. Though concerned about the election's results, most remained loyal to the Union, urged caution, and adopted a wait-and-see approach toward the new administration. Most state legislators, for example, rebuffed Hindman and Gantt's pro-secession appeals. According to one author, the congressmen-elect's November 23-24 speeches "produced a powerful reaction, and the Union sentiment in the legislature was greatly strengthened." A week earlier, a conservative Little Rock editorialist had announced, "Lincoln is elected in the manner prescribed by law, and by the majority required by the Constitution." "Let him be inaugurated," the author implored his readers, "and let no steps be

²⁰ "Speaking to the Legislature," *Arkansas State Gazette*, December 1, 1860; Scroggs, "Arkansas in the Secession Crisis," 194-195; *Old-Line Democrat*, December 13, 1860, quoted in Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 116. For an example of a county petition calling for a state secession convention, see the Resolutions from Desha and Jefferson Counties, December 15, 1860, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 67-69.

taken against his administration until he has committed an overt act which can not be remedied by legal and Constitutional means.” Another Little Rock newspaper, which served as a mouthpiece for the state’s Democratic dynasty, similarly announced it was “opposed to premature agitation or hasty legislation.” Albert Rust’s stance was even more conservative. In a speech before the state legislature, the outgoing congressman denied the right of a state to secede and proclaimed, “[I]f the opinion and wishes of nine-tenths of the people of Arkansas are reflected by her Representatives at Little Rock, and in Washington, her course in the present political crisis will be temperate and conservative.”²¹

In Phillips County, unionism waned after Lincoln’s victory, but it was by no means extinguished. A week later, a dedicated Democrat in LaGrange reported that some of her neighbors “wished they could see the Democrats tarred & burned to the stake.” Because, by that time, most white residents of eastern Arkansas deemed the Democrats the party of secession, it is reasonable to assume those angry neighbors were unionists, perhaps perturbed by the escalating talk of separation. At the very least, they must have been upset that their state had gone for Breckinridge in the election.²²

Two weeks later, Phillips County residents assembled at a mass meeting to discuss the implications of Lincoln’s election. At the meeting’s conclusion, they adopted a resolution urging the Arkansas legislature to call a convention of the southern states to discuss the condition of the

²¹ Scroggs, “Arkansas in the Secession Crisis,” 190; DeBlack ““A Remarkably Strong Union Sentiment,”” in *The Die is Cast*, 83; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 114-115; “Speaking to the Legislature,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, December 1, 1860; “The Condition of the Country and the Duty of Patriots,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 17, 1860; *Arkansas True Democrat*, November 24, 1860, quoted in DeBlack, 83; “Col. Rust’s Letter,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 24, 1860.

²² Sister Lucy to My Dear Brother [Burnum D. Sandford], 14 November 1860, Sandford-Everett Family Correspondence.

Union. “Entertaining the hope that our rights in the Union may yet be maintained,” the people proclaimed, “and believing that . . . the time is now upon us when . . . united action among all the southern states can and ought to be brought about . . . the legislature of Arkansas . . . ought to take prompt action toward bringing about the proposed southern convention.” The people of Phillips County knew that South Carolinians were contemplating secession, and they wanted their representatives to “take some official action to induce South Carolina, and the more hasty of our southeastern sister states” to participate in the convention. There, they hoped representatives from the South would “demand for each and every southern state, all her constitutional rights in the Union.” If this failed, the convention could consider forming an “independent Southern Confederacy,” but this should be only a contingency plan. Many white Phillips County residents, though deeply concerned about their future in the United States, remained hopeful they could continue to be a part of it.²³

A doctor in LaGrange shared his neighbors’ guarded optimism. On November 28, he observed, “Our country is healthy and but for the political excitement I should say we were prosperous & happy.” Though the current political situation was “dire enough to make one pause & reflect,” he insisted, “[T]here is everything to lose & nothing to gain in the disruption of this beautiful fabric of our fathers.” Military companies were forming all over the South, but he reasoned they were for defense, not aggression. Moreover, he hoped white southerners were “unnecessarily alarmed & that good fellow ship may be restored speedily.” Like other white residents of Phillips County, he was also encouraged by the county’s recent economic progress, including that built by slave labor: “We have a telegraph running from Helena to Madison

²³ “Resolutions of Meetings of Citizens of Phillips and Chicot County,” November 27, 1860, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 42.

passing by our door so we can get news if we are willing to pay for it[.] Our country is improving faster than any country I ever knew. There are plantations on every side of us of from fifty to a hundred negroes & land is selling from 25 to 50 dollars an acre.”²⁴

Like a typical politician, Governor Rector struck a more ambiguous tone regarding how Arkansans should respond to Lincoln’s election. In his November 15 inaugural address, the governor advised that “a most unprovoked and diabolical warfare” was “being waged by the people of the non-slaveholding states, against the peace, dignity and independence of all those recognizing that institution.” He declined to “counsel precipitate or hasty action” concerning Arkansas’s secession, but if any other southern states were to secede, Rector thought Arkansas “ought not to withhold her sympathies and active support, if coercive measures be adopted by the general government.” And, in such a case, the governor believed it would be his duty to “convene the General Assembly, that the matter might be referred to the people for their primary action and advice.”²⁵

Less than a month later, however, Rector hardened his tone. “I am convinced that the Union of these states in this moment is practicably severed and gone forever,” he told the Arkansas Assembly on December 11. The “union of the states may no longer be regarded as an existing fact, making it imperatively necessary that Arkansas should girdle her loins for the conflict, and put her house in order.” To justify his outlook, the governor listed a number of

²⁴ Jesse Everett to Dear Brother [Burnum D. Sandford], 28 November 1860, Sandford-Everett Family Correspondence.

²⁵ Governor Rector’s Inaugural Address, November 15, 1860, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 30-32.

ominous events transpiring around the country. One of those events was South Carolina's imminent secession convention.²⁶

Nine days after Rector's address, South Carolina seceded from the United States. Over the next six weeks, the other states of the Deep South—Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—followed. South Carolina's withdrawal, in particular, was a turning point for many white Arkansans, including those in Phillips County. For decades, secession had been only a threat employed by hotheaded partisans (in both the North and the South) who opposed federal actions that clashed with their interests. Now it was a reality. In the weeks ahead, numerous large farmers in eastern and southern Arkansas—many of them former Whigs who had backed Bell for president—found common cause with secessionist Democrats. Many saw themselves as inextricably linked to the other slaveholding states. When some of those states seceded, they wished to follow. At the same time, the small farmers in the upland counties of northern and western Arkansas gradually united to oppose secession, which many viewed as a planter-led conspiracy. Few of these uplanders were abolitionists. To the contrary, many were slaveholders, and most of those who were not aspired to own slaves. However, they owned fewer slaves than their counterparts in the Delta, and they were unwilling to leave their beloved Union to protect slavery. At the very least, they wanted to consult with the other slaveholding states of the Upper South (especially neighboring Tennessee) before acting. Going forward, this gulf between Arkansas's upland farmers and lowland planters widened, and the state's politics, long dominated by personal alliances and party labels, largely realigned along geographic lines.

²⁶ Henry Rector, Speech to the House of Representatives, December 11, 1860, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 62-67.

Accordingly, support for secession in Arkansas became, in most cases, directly related to the percentage of a county's enslaved population.²⁷

In the winter of 1860-1861, at least eleven Arkansas counties, including several in the uplands, sent anti-secession resolutions to the state legislature, but they failed to quell the separatists' cries. In fact, South Carolina's withdrawal on December 20 inspired two of the state's fiercest rivals, Congressman Hindman and Senator Robert W. Johnson, to resolve their differences in the name of secession. On December 21, the two urged the Arkansas Assembly to pass "an act calling together a convention, to enable the people of Arkansas to join in the common councils of the South, for her protection and future safety." The following day, the Assembly obliged. Its act, which the state Senate endorsed on January 15, called for a statewide election to be held on February 18. In that election, Arkansas voters would decide whether to hold a secession convention. At the same time, they would choose delegates to represent them at that hypothetical convention. This arrangement gave the secessionists a clear advantage. As one historian put it, Arkansas unionists had the undesirable "double task" of opposing a secession convention while simultaneously stumping for their own election to it.²⁸

Some Arkansans opposed secession because they knew it would lead to the withdrawal of federal troops from the state, thus leaving it vulnerable to attack. "The main dangers," a conservative Little Rock editorialist warned in January 1861, "will be on the Western and the Eastern sides of the state." By his calculation, U.S. troops would be removed from Arkansas's

²⁷ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 76; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 20; DeBlack "A Remarkably Strong Union Sentiment," in *The Die is Cast*, 84; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 120-125; Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, xix-xx.

²⁸ Scroggs, "Arkansas in the Secession Crisis," 195-196; Telegraph from US Senator Robert Ward Johnson and Congressman Thomas C. Hindman, 22 December 1860, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 74-76; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 20-21; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 122.

western border, thereby exposing it to violent assaults by Indians incited by abolitionists and robbers. At the same time, eastern Arkansas would be ravaged by Mississippi River-based “pirates” who would destroy telegraph stations and other valuable property and “escape before any steps could be taken” against them. “Almost the whole country on the river,” the author warned, “is not only exposed, but, at present, without any means of defense.” A number of Phillips County residents no doubt shared his concerns.²⁹

If Patrick Cleburne feared the destructive repercussions of Arkansas’s secession, he did not record it. However, the “gloomy state of Affairs” facing the nation in the winter of 1860-1861 hung heavily on his mind. “I never spent a more gloomy christmas,” he wrote to his brother in early 1861. “I have been invited to twenty parties this christmas and have not attended one.” Despite his pessimism, Cleburne still hoped the Union could be preserved, but only if the federal government granted to the South what he called “the full measure of her constitutional rights.” Cleburne, like many of his compatriots, wanted assurances that white southerners would be able to manage their own affairs, including those associated with slavery. “I never owned a Negro and care nothing for them,” he wrote in May 1861. “[B]ut these people [whites in Arkansas] have been my friends and have stood up to me on all occasions.” If Cleburne opposed slavery, he never said so explicitly. Like virtually all white southerners of the era, he probably accepted it as a part of life.³⁰

²⁹ “What Will Be the Expense of Governing Arkansas in the Event of Separate Secession?” *Arkansas State Gazette*, January 12, 1861; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 126-127.

³⁰ P. R. Cleburne to Dear Robert [Cleburne], n.d. (probably January 1861), and P. R. Cleburne to Robert S. Cleburne, 7 May 1861, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 33, 44.

What Cleburne did not accept, however, was the prospect of a Republican-controlled government denying white Arkansans the right “to live under laws of their own making.” For most of the United States’ eighty-five year history, southerners had dominated the federal government. Thanks to a divisive but fair presidential election in 1860, that period of dominance was over, and Cleburne and a number of other white southerners feared they would be reduced to second-class citizens. The Irishman, like most of his companions, also seems to have believed that slaveholders held a constitutional right to take their slaves into the western territories, and, accordingly, that Republican opposition to this right was despotic. In 1864 he extended this argument further, declaring that the North’s opposition to slavery was “merely the pretense to establish sectional superiority and a more centralized form of government, and to deprive us of our rights and liberties.”³¹

That winter’s predicament left Cleburne despondent. Support for secession was growing in both Phillips County and Arkansas at large, and by January 1861, the Irishman could gaze out his office window in downtown Helena to “see a foreign nation on the other side of the river.” “I hardly know what to say to you about politicks,” Cleburne wrote to his brother. “[T]his State has called a convention for [February] 18th . . . or rather ordered an election for that day for delegates to a convention. I cannot say what course they will adopt but the fever of revolution is very contagious and if blood is spilled and passion excited the reckless riflemen who inhabit our

³¹ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 181-183; P. R. Cleburne to Robert S. Cleburne, 7 May 1861, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers [1st quotation]; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 65-67; U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, vol. 52, pt. 2, p. 592 [2nd quotation] (hereafter cited as *OR* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted).

woods will inevitably take a hand.” Even if Arkansas decided not to secede, Cleburne predicted it would be “impossible to prevent armed volunteers from rushing to the scene of action.”³²

The Irishman’s observation was perceptive, for this is exactly how militiamen from several Arkansas counties responded to reports that federal troops were reinforcing the Little Rock arsenal in late January 1861. When the citizens of Helena sensed Governor Rector’s desire to seize the arsenal, the Yell Rifles, the Phillips Guards, and two other militia companies proceeded to the capital without delay. With Cleburne leading them on horseback, some five hundred volunteers marched to Helena’s wharf and boarded a steamboat. From there, they traveled down the Mississippi River and up the Arkansas, arriving in the state capital on February 5. To their surprise, only one local citizen greeted them at the riverbank. After loading their weapons, the militiamen marched to the governor’s mansion to obtain orders. Rector was surprised to see them. Apparently unaware of the ambiguous message sent by his adjutant, the governor told the volunteers that he opposed any movement against the arsenal unless the situation deteriorated. The zealous militiamen were surprised and disappointed. In their minds, the army’s decision to reinforce the arsenal was proof that the situation had already worsened. As it turned out, that decision had never been made. The telegraph report was false.³³

Phillips County residents were not the only ones fooled by a fictitious report. Rector also had heard the rumor. On January 28, he asked Capt. James Totten, commander of the sixty-five troops who garrisoned the arsenal, to guarantee that he would neither remove nor destroy the munitions inside the installation, and that no reinforcements were en route. “Any assurances that

³² P. R. Cleburne to Dear Robert [Cleburne], n.d. (probably January 1861), Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers.

³³ Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 71; L. H. Mangum to Martha P. Mangum, 19 February 1861, in Shanks, ed., *The Papers of Willie Person Mangum*, vol. 5, 385; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 352-353.

you may be able to give touching the observance of these . . . two conditions will greatly tend to quiet the public mind, and prevent a collision between the sovereign people of Arkansas and the Government troops now stationed at this point,” the governor informed Totten. The captain was aghast. As a native of Little Rock (and the son of a local doctor), Totten wished to avoid any confrontation that might lead to bloodshed and destruction in the city. He reminded Rector that he and his troops had been sent to Little Rock the previous November at the request of several Arkansas citizens and congressmen. Additionally, although he could give no guarantees about the army’s plans for the arsenal, he did not know of any orders regarding reinforcements or munitions. Totten politely reminded Rector that he took instructions from the U.S. government, not the state of Arkansas, but he promised to forward the governor’s concerns to the secretary of war and the president.³⁴

Totten communicated his dilemma to his superiors in Washington and asked them for instructions, but unfortunately, none came. Meanwhile, the rumor that U.S. troops were bound for Little Rock continued to sweep the state. Word eventually came from Pine Bluff, a cotton hub on the Arkansas River, that a boat carrying three to four-hundred federal soldiers was destined for the capital. Rector responded to the news by ordering cannons to be placed on the wharf “to intercept the landing of the troops.” He also sent out messengers to investigate the report’s veracity. When the governor learned that the rumor was false, he ordered the cannons removed and the gunners disbanded.³⁵

³⁴ Governor Henry Rector’s Message to Arkansas’s secession convention delegates, March 2, 1861, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 158-159; *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 638-639; David Sesser, s.v. “Seizure of the Little Rock Arsenal,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=6854> (accessed March 5, 2017).

³⁵ *OR*, vol. 1, p. 638; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 353; “Passing Events,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, February 9, 1861; Governor Henry Rector’s Message to Arkansas’s

Nevertheless, by February 5, an estimated eight hundred to one thousand militiamen from at least nine Arkansas counties, including five from the Delta, had descended upon the capital. Rumors spread that as many as four thousand more volunteers were on the way. “The excitement became intense,” Rector recalled, and two local companies were called out to stabilize the situation. The volunteers mistakenly believed that the governor and the citizens of Little Rock supported their cause. In response to the looming crisis, the Little Rock city council passed resolutions declaring it “the duty of the governor to assume the responsibility of this movement or to interpose his authority and influence to prevent it.” If the governor believed that taking the arsenal was “the only way to prevent the effusion of blood,” the council recommended he request its surrender.³⁶

With the council’s backing, Rector demanded that Totten surrender the arsenal on February 6. A “considerable number” of citizens had come to Little Rock to seize the facility, the governor told the captain, and reports indicated that a “large force of citizens” was on its way “for the same purpose.” Though he had not authorized the gathering of these volunteers, Rector felt duty-bound to “prevent a collision” between his constituents and the U.S. troops.³⁷

Totten mulled the governor’s request for twenty-four hours. For over a week, he had awaited his superiors’ orders, but none had arrived. This was a serious situation, one that could provoke civil war, something Totten desperately wanted to avoid. Any fight in the city likely would lead to the destruction of private property and the death of innocent civilians. Moreover,

secession convention delegates, March 2, 1861, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 159.

³⁶ “Passing Events”; Sesser, s.v. “Seizure of the Little Rock Arsenal”; *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 641-642; Governor Henry Rector’s Message to Arkansas’s secession convention delegates, March 2, 1861, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 160; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 21-22; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 353.

³⁷ *OR*, vol. 1, p. 640.

Totten was severely outnumbered. So, on February 8, “in the presence of a greatly superior armed force,” he ordered his troops to evacuate the arsenal. As they marched toward the bank of the Arkansas River, throngs of people jeered. The Capitol Guards, a Little Rock militia company whose ranks included many of the city’s finest men, swung in line to protect them. When they reached the riverbank, Totten and his men set up camp; four days later, they boarded a steamboat for St. Louis. Prior to their departure, a group of Little Rock ladies visited the camp and presented Totten with a ceremonial sword for his “gallant and meritorious” behavior. The sword was inscribed with the following legend: “When woman suffers chivalry forbears, The soldier dreads all dangers but his own.” In his report on the arsenal crisis, Totten noted that the majority of Little Rock citizens had opposed their governor’s actions. The women’s gesture certainly bore that out.³⁸

When Cleburne heard what the ladies had done, he reportedly expressed shock. Nevertheless, he was pleased that the arsenal was now safely in Arkansans’ hands. With the governor’s permission, he secured a supply of minié balls from the facility’s stockpile and led his Yell Rifles back to Helena. The Phillips Guards, however, remained in Little Rock to garrison the arsenal for a few more days. When they returned home, the “Young Ladies of Helena” formally presented them with a sky blue-colored silk flag with a golden fringed border and the words “Onward and Upward” inscribed above the Arkansas coat of arms. Apparently, the ladies expressed some consternation about presenting such a flag while Arkansas remained in the

³⁸ *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 644-646; “Passing Events”; Calvin L. Collier, *First In – Last Out: The Capitol Guards, Ark. Brigade* (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1961), 4-7; “Presentation of a Sword to Capt. Totten,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, February 16, 1861.

Union. Nevertheless, in the words of one historian, they had “literally stitched their way into the political sphere.”³⁹

Unlike the women of Helena, a number of Arkansans disapproved of the arsenal’s seizure. A planter in the Delta spoke for many of the state’s unionists when he declared, “We deem the whole affair to be one gotten up for political effect, in order to hurry the State into a rash and excited secession attitude, because there exist some fears that the moving of Arkansas out of the Union might not be done precipitately enough.” At the height of the arsenal crisis, several of the state’s leading politicians, including Albert Rust, William Sebastian, Albert Pike, Robert Johnson, and even Thomas Hindman, implored the governor to withhold any attack “for God’s sake.” To be sure, Johnson and Hindman were more concerned about the possible disgrace of a failed assault than they were its implications for disunion. Accordingly, when Johnson received word that Rector had captured the installation, he wired his brother in Little Rock, “Thank God! Hold it.”⁴⁰

While the arsenal crisis ensued in Little Rock, Johnson was in Washington penning his *Address to the People of Arkansas*, which he hoped would convince his constituents to vote for a secession convention. He forcefully argued that Arkansas should withdraw from the Union, join its “sister” Deep South states who already had seceded, and, if necessary, defend itself in war. “Worse calamities may befall a people than war,” the senator argued. “[O]f these are submission and Negro equality, and the subversion of our social system which makes of the humblest and

³⁹ Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 72; Dale P. Kirkman, ed., “The Big Flag,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 20 (Dec. 1981/March 1982): 57-58; Frank, “Domesticity Goes Public,” in *The Die is Cast*, 45.

⁴⁰ “Excitement in Little Rock,” *The Constitutional Union* (Des Arc, Ark.), February 8, 1861; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 129; *OR*, vol. 53, p. 617, vol. 1, pp. 681-683.

poorest white man, a proud man, and the peer and the equal of the wealthiest and greatest in the land.”⁴¹

Six days after Totten’s troops departed Little Rock, Arkansas voters decided to hold a secession convention by overwhelming numbers (27,412 to 15,826). Yet most of the delegates they elected opposed immediate separation. As one scholar observed, “while many Arkansans were willing to consider the possibility of secession, most were in no hurry to secede.” Moreover, the election confirmed the recent geographic division in the state’s politics. Most of the counties in southern and eastern Arkansas—including Phillips County—elected pro-secession delegates, while most in the northern and western sections chose unionists. Meanwhile, as Arkansans cast their ballots on February 18, Jefferson Davis was inaugurated president of the Confederate States of America in Montgomery, Alabama.⁴²

Affairs in Arkansas again coincided with important national events on March 4. On that day, Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office as the sixteenth president of the United States, and Arkansas’s secession convention opened in Little Rock. Hindman was not a delegate to the convention, but when Congress adjourned in early March, he rushed home to urge separation. In the ensuing two weeks, a number of other pro-secession visitors addressed the convention, including Rector, Johnson, a spokesman for Jefferson Davis, and representatives from South Carolina and Georgia—both now part of the Confederacy. Their efforts proved futile. Of the

⁴¹ Robert Ward Johnson, *Address to the People of Arkansas*, February 7, 1861, in Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 119.

⁴² DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 24; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 130. According to the *Arkansas State Gazette*, Arkansans cast 23,626 votes for unionist delegates and 17,927 votes for secessionist ones. “Vote in the Recent Election,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, March 9, 1861. A majority of voters in Helena reportedly voted for a secession convention. “The Arkansas Election,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1861.

seventy-seven delegates who attended the convention, anti-secessionists consistently held a five-person majority, and they swiftly rejected most of the separatists' proposals.⁴³

This did not stop the two delegates from Phillips County, Charles Adams and Judge Thomas Hanly, from doing everything in their power to expedite Arkansas's secession. The county was capably represented by the duo, a unionist delegate later recalled. Adams, a former Whig and Bell supporter, was "an able man, and noted for the frequency of his orations" at the convention. He relished debating unionists and was a "scholarly man, of fine appearance, [who] wore his hair long and was sometimes called [Albert] Pike, the Second." Likewise, Hanly was "one of the ablest advocates of secession," another unionist remembered. "He was a powerful debater, and was very effective as such by reason of a constant flow of wit and sarcasm." Hanly also had the honor of being the first delegate to move that Arkansas voters decide their state's fate. During the roll call vote on this motion, Adams proudly told his fellow delegates, "I have the honor of representing on this floor a county that has always been true to the South. They imposed no instructions upon me, except to aid in taking the State of Arkansas out of the Union as soon as possible, and I feel it an honor to record my vote aye." Though the motion was defeated, the convention ultimately passed it in modified form.⁴⁴

⁴³ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 24-25; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 84; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, chap. 9; Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, xx-xxi. William S. Oldham of Texas represented Jefferson Davis at Arkansas's secession convention. Woods, 144.

⁴⁴ Alfred Holt Carrigan, "Reminiscences of the Secession Convention, Part I," in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, vol. 1, ed. John Hugh Reynolds (Little Rock: Democrat Printing and Lithographing Company, 1906), 308; Jesse N. Cypert, "Secession Convention, Part II," in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, 321; "Arkansas State Convention," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 23, 1861; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 144-146.

In the convention's final days, some of the delegates who opposed secession feared that Rector might sidestep the convention and take the issue to the state legislature, or worse, that southern and eastern Arkansas might secede from the rest of the state in protest. Therefore, they begrudgingly agreed to a referendum, to be held on August 5, in which Arkansans would vote either "for secession" or "for cooperation." Two weeks after the referendum, the convention would reconvene to ratify the people's decision. In the meantime, David Walker, a steadfast unionist from northwest Arkansas who chaired the convention, also had the power to reassemble the delegates.⁴⁵

When the convention adjourned on March 21, Arkansas remained in the United States. The unionists were victorious, but with an important qualification. By the spring of 1861, most Arkansas unionists, including those who attended the convention, were *conditional* unionists. Sometimes called "cooperationists," they shared the secessionists' conviction that slavery had to be protected, but they believed this could best be accomplished in the Union. Thus, they sought every possible means of compromise to prevent Arkansas's separation. If, however, the federal government proved unwilling to protect slavery or guarantee the rights of the slave states, they were willing to secede. Most cooperationists also opposed any effort by the federal government to force the states that had already seceded to rejoin the United States. A unionist at Arkansas's secession convention, for example, said that he and his colleagues agreed that "any attempt on the part of the Federal Government to coerce the other Southern States would be, or should be, resisted by the state of Arkansas, however anxious the people were to remain in the Union." After the convention, he and the other thirty-eight delegates who had opposed secession explained their position in a "Unionist Manifesto," published in a Little Rock newspaper on

⁴⁵ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 25; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 145-146.

April 6. Among other things, they declared, “[W]hile Arkansas is not committed to the doctrine of secession, she condemns coercion by the Federal Government, and recommends the removal of causes that might lead to a collision.”⁴⁶

One of the “causes” those unionists wished to remove was Fort Sumter, a federal fortress that guarded the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina. When Lincoln became president on March 4, the United States controlled only four forts in the seceded states. The Confederates eventually seized all except Sumter, which they had besieged since January. On March 5, Lincoln learned that the eighty U.S. soldiers inside the fort would run out of supplies within six weeks. This left the president with a difficult decision. If he attempted to resupply the garrison, U.S. ships might have to shoot their way past the rebel gunners that ringed Charleston harbor, thus triggering a war. If, on the other hand, he ordered the troops to evacuate the fort peacefully, many Americans would interpret it as a de facto recognition of the Confederacy, something Lincoln wanted to avoid. Further complicating matters, a number of conservatives and Upper South unionists were urging the president to relinquish Sumter as a gesture of amity to bolster southern unionism. Lincoln pondered the idea, and many unionists, including those in Arkansas, believed he would do it. “The Federal troops have been, or very soon will be, withdrawn from Fort Sumter,” the “Unionist Manifesto” promised Arkansans, “and thereby the danger of a collision avoided.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 148-152, 155; Gigantino, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, xx; Cypert, “Secession Convention, Part II,” in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, 317; “To the People of Arkansas,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 6, 1861.

⁴⁷ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 79-80; James M. McPherson, *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18; “To the People of Arkansas,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 6, 1861.

Collision, as it turns out, is exactly what happened, though that was not what Lincoln intended. On April 6, the president notified the governor of South Carolina that he would resupply Fort Sumter with provisions only. “[I]f such attempt be not resisted,” he continued, “no effort to throw in men, arms, or amunition [sic], will be made, without further notice, or in case of an attack upon the Fort.” It was a shrewd plan, one that placed the burden of decision for peace or war on Jefferson Davis. Davis chose the latter. He demanded that federal troops evacuate Fort Sumter, and at 4:30 a.m. on April 12, rebel forces fired on the fort. After a thirty-four hour bombardment, the U.S. garrison surrendered.⁴⁸

Three months earlier, Patrick Cleburne had written to his brother, “My own opinion is that the first blood shed on Southern soil in a collision between the Federal troops and the state authorities of any southern state will be the signal for a civil war.” Once more, the Irishman proved prophetic. No one was killed in the bombardment of Sumter, but the following day, an accidental explosion during the garrison’s farewell salute killed one U.S. soldier and mortally wounded another. The low casualties did not temper Lincoln’s response. On April 15, he requested that states still in the Union supply a total of 75,000 volunteers, including 780 from Arkansas, to put down the Confederate rebellion. The volunteers would serve for ninety days “to favor, facilitate, and aid this effort to maintain the honor, the integrity, and the existence” of the Union and the “perpetuity of popular government.” More specifically, these volunteers would “repossess the forts, places, and property” that had been seized by the Confederacy. At the heart

⁴⁸ Abraham Lincoln to Robert S. Chew, 6 April 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 4, 323; McPherson, *This Mighty Scourge*, 18-19; Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 79-80; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press), 264-275. On the historical controversy surrounding Fort Sumter, see Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

of Lincoln's proclamation was his belief that the South—especially the Upper South states of Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia—was filled with unconditional unionists who would rally around the American flag, or, at worst, sit out the coming conflict. He was wrong. In reality, most southern unionists resembled those in Arkansas. In other words, they were conditional unionists, or cooperationists, who championed southern rights, opposed federal coercion, and were willing to secede if things did not go their way. Like Cleburne, they hoped for the best and prepared for the worst, and in the eyes of many, the worst had arrived.⁴⁹

After Lincoln's call for troops, cooperation in Arkansas collapsed. Judge John Brown, a unionist, believed Lincoln had played right into the secessionists' hands. "This is enough. The secession leaders have accomplished their fatal plan at last," the judge wrote on April 20. "The new administration has been weak enough, or wicked enough to afford them the pretext to precipitate not only the 'Cotton' states but to involve the whole South in a war. Nothing like coercion could or would be borne by the south." On the same day, a Little Rock newspaper announced that because the president had commenced "The Work of Coercion," the time had come for Arkansas to resist him. The author, a cooperationist, believed secession was unconstitutional, yet he implored Arkansans to exercise their "right to rebel against an oppressive government" that had declared war on the seceded states. In the same newspaper, one hundred and thirty-seven self-proclaimed unionists signed a statement to declare, "The recent action of the weak and perfidious Administration of Mr. Lincoln has made the Southern People, a united people. Its abrupt adoption of a war policy in the midst of protestations of pacific and conciliatory purposes has convinced it of a duplicity and treachery towards the conservative

⁴⁹ P. R. Cleburne to Dear Robert [Cleburne], n.d. (probably January 1861), Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers; Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 80-81; *OR*, Ser. 3, vol. 1, pp. 67-69.

portion of the Southern people, only equaled in degree by the incapacity and stupidity which dictated it.” More specifically, the authors lamented the federal government’s attempt to use military power to “compel” the seceded states “to submit to its jurisdiction,” and they called on David Walker to recall Arkansas’s secession convention “at the earliest practicably moment” so that Arkansans could “take such action as duty” required.⁵⁰

Inevitably, secessionists also wished to reconvene the convention as soon as possible. Thanks to Lincoln’s call for volunteers, most people viewed the state’s withdrawal as a fait accompli. On April 17, Judge Hanly reminded Walker that as chairman, he had the power to recall the convention if any “exigency” arose before the state’s August referendum. In Hanly’s view, Lincoln’s request for troops certainly qualified as such. To justify his position, the judge informed Walker that in the eastern Arkansas counties of Phillips, Monroe, St. Francis, Poinsett, Craighead, Greene, Crittenden, and Mississippi, the sentiment for secession was nearly unanimous. “Since the recent events,” he added, “I doubt much whether one can be found to oppose secession in these counties.”⁵¹

Hanly knew his home county well. That same month, a Little Rock newspaper observed that all three of Helena’s papers were now “of the secession school.”⁵² Meanwhile, pro-southern

⁵⁰ John W. Brown Diary (Transcript), 20 April 1860; “The Work of Coercion Commenced—Let the People of Arkansas Resist It As One Man” and “To the People of Arkansas,” 18 April 1861, both in *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 20, 1861.

⁵¹ Thomas Hanley to David Walker, 17 April 1861, David Walker Letters, Mullins Library.

⁵² “Papers at Helena,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 6, 1861. The author noted that the Helena *Southern Shield* was back up and running “after its late destruction by fire.” The *Shield*’s office had burned on January 24, 1861, and some at the time believed the conflagration was “the work of an incendiary.” In the aftermath of the fire, the editor had to “employ an officer day and night to watch his premises.” Because the Whig paper had championed unionism in the fall of 1860, it is plausible that secessionists started the fire. On the burning of the *Shield*’s office, see “Burning of the Helena Shield,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, January 30, 1861, and the *Newark Advocate* (Newark, Ohio), February 22, 1861.

mobs in the countryside targeted residents from the North whom they believed to be abolitionists. On April 17, William Stevenson, a New Yorker who had moved to Phillips County the previous month, was awakened in the middle of the night by three men on horseback. The posse, which included a “good friend” and two acquaintances, ordered the New Yorker to accompany them to Jeffersonville, a small town on the St. Francis River approximately fifteen miles northwest of Helena. There, Stevenson was tried by the Phillips County Vigilance Committee for being “an Abolitionist whose business . . . was to incite an insurrection among the slaves.” Stevenson was no abolitionist. Like most northerners, he believed that “where [slavery] existed it should be left to the control of those who were connected with it.” Still, as a northerner, he aroused the locals’ suspicions. During his midnight “trial” at Jeffersonville, the vigilance committee, essentially a lynch mob of fifty to sixty drunken zealots, hissed, groaned, and shouted, “Hang him! Burn him!” Stevenson coolly refuted all of their charges, at which point they produced a letter—which the New Yorker had penned and mailed the previous day—that described Phillips County as a “hard place” in which to live. At this, the mob, now bearing a noose, surrounded him. Stevenson and his friends reached for their firearms, prepared to shoot their way out of the room if necessary. Upon seeing this, however, the committee voted to acquit him in order to avoid a gunfight.⁵³

After his narrow escape, Stevenson decided to flee Phillips County. Two nights earlier, members of the same vigilance committee had murdered a New York native who had lived in Arkansas for sixteen years and “against whom no charge could justly be brought.” A few days before that, they had whipped to death a man whose “only crime was that he was a Northern

⁵³ William G. Stevenson, *Thirteen Months in the Rebel Army: Being a Narrative of Personal Adventures in the Infantry, Ordnance, Cavalry, Courier, and Hospital Services* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Burr, 1862), 15-28 [quotations on pp. 19, 22, 17, 21, and 24].

man.” Stevenson interpreted these tragic events as an omen. “No Northern man’s life was safe for an hour in that section of Arkansas,” he later wrote. So, under the cover of darkness, he rode to Helena, where he boarded a steamboat bound for Memphis. Upon entering the ship’s cabin, he heard “excited crowds” discussing rumors of his escape the previous night. As it turned out, Stevenson’s boat had come down from Jeffersonville earlier that morning. The *New Yorker* wisely kept a low profile during his trip up the Mississippi, but when he disembarked at Memphis on April 19, a military policeman halted him. The officer marched him directly to Memphis’s Committee of Public Safety, whose members thoroughly interrogated him. To Stevenson’s amazement, one of his cross-examiners had been present at the Jeffersonville trial thirty hours earlier. Apparently, the man had followed him to Helena, caught an earlier boat to Memphis, and alerted the authorities to the *New Yorker*’s impending arrival. Even with this witness, the committee could not convict Stevenson of any wrongdoing. However, it intimidated him into “volunteering” for service in the “Jeff. Davis Invincibles,” a Memphis militia. Ironically, Stevenson spent the next thirteen months serving in the Confederate army.⁵⁴

As Stevenson began his military service, the Phillips County militia, including the Yell Rifles and Phillips Guards, was drilling more frequently, and new companies were forming in anticipation of secession and war. Hindman, who returned to Helena after the secession convention adjourned, must have reveled in his town’s increasingly bellicose environment. In April, he asked the Confederate war department if Arkansas soldiers could enlist in their cause even though the state had not yet seceded. The Confederate secretary of war politely declined

⁵⁴ Stevenson, *Thirteen Months in the Rebel Army*, 29-40 [quotations on pp. 29, 30, 31, and 34].

Hindman's offer, but he left open the possibility that an Arkansas brigade might be organized following the outbreak of war.⁵⁵

Governor Rector also pondered the role of Arkansas troops in the impending conflict. On April 22, he formally declined Lincoln's request for 780 volunteers. "In answer to your requisition for troops from Arkansas to subjugate the Southern States," the governor declared, "I have to say that none will be furnished. The demand is only adding insult to injury." Perhaps oblivious to the irony of his position, Rector also asserted, "The people of this commonwealth are freemen, not slaves, and will defend to the last extremity their honor, lives, and property against Northern mendacity and usurpation."⁵⁶

When the Confederate secretary of war got wind of Rector's "patriotic" refusal of the U.S., he asked the governor to furnish a regiment of Arkansas troops for the Confederacy instead. In the time since the secretary had declined Hindman's offer of troops, Virginia had seceded, and soldiers were needed for immediate service there. Rector no doubt wished he could oblige the request, but he regretfully informed the secretary that he had "no power" to do so, given that Arkansas remained in the Union. However, the governor forwarded the entreaty to four of the state's militia officers, who immediately took up the task. He also assured the secretary that Arkansas's separation was imminent. Due to unremitting pressure from secessionists, David Walker reluctantly had ordered the state's secession convention to reassemble on May 6.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 47; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 84; *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 684-685.

⁵⁶ *OR*, vol. 1, p. 687.

⁵⁷ *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 687-688; "Volunteers for the Southern Cause!" *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 27, 1861; "To Volunteers," *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 4, 1861; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 157-158. On April 17, Virginia's secession convention, which already had been in session, voted for separation. Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 81.

Some Arkansans, including many in Phillips County, were unwilling to wait. They assumed that war was coming, and they wanted to ensure that their local militias were equipped for the pending fight. Therefore, in the spring of 1861, a number of communities in Arkansas and across the South began purchasing guns and ammunition, including some from arms dealers in the North. Alarmed by this development, some northerners moved to stop it. In April, for example, local police and Home Guard units in Cincinnati, Ohio, began halting munitions ships destined for Arkansas, including some that were passing through the city from Virginia. When Arkansans learned about this, they sought vengeance. In Napoleon, a port at the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers, firebrands mounted two cannons on the Mississippi riverbank and forced steamboats to land for inspection. In April 1861, they seized the *Ohio Belle*, a steamboat bound for Cincinnati, and confiscated its cargo. A few days later, the captain of another ship refused to surrender his freight, and local militiamen fired on the vessel, killing one passenger and injuring another.⁵⁸

Phillips County residents also retaliated against the people of Cincinnati. In April 1861, Helena's city council ordered the town's mayor "to have all unmounted cannon mounted and to purchase two barrels of cannon powder for the defense of the city." The council also authorized residents to seize all Cincinnati-owned ships that passed on the Mississippi. Apparently,

⁵⁸ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 47; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 355; "Seizure of Arkansas Arms" and "Seizure of Munitions of War Going South," *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 27, 1861; Message of Governor Henry Rector to the Arkansas secession convention, May 6, 1861, in *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas, Which Were Begun and Held in the Capitol, in the City Little Rock* (Little Rock: Johnson & Yerkes, State Printers, 1861), 151-152; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 58; "Steamer Ohio Belle Seized at Napoleon, Arkansas," *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, May 1, 1861; A. C. Denson, *Westmoreland; or, Secession Ferocity at the Breaking Out of the Rebellion* (St. Louis: P. M. Pinckard, 1865), 8-16; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 26; "Last Night's Report," *Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 30, 1861.

numerous townspeople complied. In late April, a Memphis newspaper reported that Helenians had erected a battery near the river, and guards were “on duty night and day to prevent the boats of unfriendly States from carrying out any objectionable designs.” Likewise, a correspondent who ascended the Mississippi that spring did not see a single U.S. flag between New Orleans and Cairo, while that of the Confederate States greeted him “at every turn and on all occasions.” As his boat neared Helena, the reporter saw “a huge crowd assembled and a cannon pointing to the river.” When he asked the people what they were doing, they declared their intention “to intercept Cincinnati boats, as an offset to the detention of firearms at Cincinnati by the authorities there.”⁵⁹

On April 24, the citizens of Helena accomplished their objective. On that day, the Cincinnati-owned *Mars*, which had left New Orleans three days earlier, steamed into view. Upon sighting the ship, local militia fired a cannon ball across her bow, forcing the captain to bring his vessel to shore. At Hindman’s behest, militiamen then boarded the *Mars* and confiscated large quantities of molasses, sugar, resin, turpentine, oil, beer, and wine “as a reprisal for the arms seized by the Cincinnati authorities that were destined for the state of Arkansas.” The militia allowed the boat’s crew to remain on board, but several companies “stood regular watches alternately night and day.” For three days, the crew negotiated for their ship’s release, but to no avail. The belligerent Helenians reportedly announced that the people of Cincinnati could have the boat when they took her, “and not until then.” Eventually, the frustrated crewmembers abandoned their vessel and caught a ride upriver on a boat bound for Louisville. Their cargo, however, remained at Helena. When he learned about the *Mars*’s seizure, Governor

⁵⁹ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 47-48; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 73; “Helena,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 30, 1861; “Appearance of the Mississippi,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 11, 1861.

Rector ordered James Yell, major general of the state militia, to “take charge” of it and the *Ohio Belle* until the people of Cincinnati made “restitution” for the property they had captured.⁶⁰

With the *Mars* secured at Helena’s wharf, another vessel, the *Queen of the West*, steamed into sight. Again, local militiamen, including Patrick Cleburne, fired a volley in its direction and forced the ship to bay. The soldiers quickly discovered that in addition to the stores of coffee, sugar, and molasses on board, the *Queen of the West* was also “full of people.” Nevertheless, angry Helenians demanded that the captain disclose the name of his boat’s owner. When he told them it belonged to Rogers & Sherlock, a Cincinnati company, Cleburne must have shuddered. As fate would have it, the Irishman’s sister was married to Thomas Sherlock’s younger brother.⁶¹

This improbable situation put Cleburne in a quandary. Three months earlier, he had told his brother that in the impending crisis, he would be “with Arkansas in weal or in woe.” The *Queen of the West* incident put that pledge to the test. Sherlock was, for all intents and purposes, family, and moreover, Cleburne knew him to be “a good Southern man.” Therefore, he begged his fellow townspeople to release the ship as a personal favor to him. By his own admission, the Irishman “cried on the public street like a woman” while making his plea. Helena’s citizens

⁶⁰ “Steamer Mars and Queen of the West Detained at Helena, Arkansas,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, April 26, 1861; “Our Special River Correspondence,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, May 1, 1861; “Last Night’s Report”; “News of the Day,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1861; “Mars Seized at Helena,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 27, 1861; “The Seized Boat Mars,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 30, 1861; Message of Governor Henry Rector to the Arkansas secession convention, May 6, 1861, in *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas*, 152. None of the contemporary accounts of the *Mars*’s seizure mention Hindman, but six weeks later, the Congressman claimed he seized sugar from Cincinnati steamboats and turned it over to “civil authorities.” T. C. Hindman to the Military Board, 6 June 1861, Helena *Southern Shield*, n.d., in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 15, 1861.

⁶¹ Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 47-48; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 73; “Steamer Mars and Queen of the West Detained at Helena, Arkansas”; “Gleanings from Our Exchanges,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, April 29, 1861; “Boat Sacked,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 26, 1861.

must have been moved by this open display of emotion, for they eventually agreed to release the boat, but not before they seized “every pound of freight consigned to Cincinnati.” A report from Memphis claimed that “the citizens of Helena, with their accustomed politeness,” treated the *Queen*’s passengers “with all possible respect.” If true, it was a testament to their respect for Cleburne.⁶²

Three days later, another boat moored at Helena’s wharf, but this one was not from Cincinnati. Rather, it was a transport whose captain had come to carry some of Helena’s soldiers to war. Arkansas still had not seceded, but some of Helena’s most distinguished militiamen were eager to enter the fray. On April 27, Cleburne assembled the Yell Rifles in front of the Helena courthouse. From there, they marched one block to the Methodist church, which was so crowded with well-wishers that they spilled outside the sanctuary. Inside the church, a minister conducted a short service, at the conclusion of which he blessed the troops and presented them with a Bible. Touched by the gesture, Cleburne reportedly thanked the congregation in a hushed tone. He then led his men to the town’s waterfront, where hundreds of friends and supporters gathered to see them off. Hindman, who recently had resigned his seat in Congress to raise troops for the Confederacy, addressed the crowd at the landing. The festivities concluded, the Rifles boarded a steamboat and plied upriver. Their destination was Camp Rector, a gathering place for aspiring

⁶² Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 48; P. R. Cleburne to Dear Robert [Cleburne], n.d. (probably January 1861), and P. R. Cleburne to Robert S. Cleburne, 7 May 1861, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers; “River and Steamboat News,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, April 27, 1861; “River and Steamboat News,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, May 1, 1861; Report from *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, in “Gleanings from Our Exchanges.”

Arkansas Confederates on the west bank of the Mississippi River near modern-day West Memphis.⁶³

The Yell Rifles and other Arkansas volunteers gathered at Camp Rector at the behest of the governor. Since declining Lincoln's call for Arkansas troops on April 22, he had been "acting as though the state had already seceded." For example, Rector ordered the Arkansas militia to seize the federal post at Fort Smith, which they accomplished on April 23. He also authorized four of the state's militia officers to raise a regiment for Confederate service in Virginia. Finally, he ordered James Yell and Dandridge McRae, a militia captain from Searcy, to "concentrate troops" at Camp Rector to thwart a rumored federal advance down the Mississippi. By May 4, some five hundred militiamen from five Arkansas counties had congregated at the camp to organize and drill. Along with the Yell Rifles, they included the Harris Guards of Monroe County, the Rector Guards of Prairie County, the Jefferson Guards and Pine Bluff Artillery of Jefferson County, and the Border Rangers of White County. White County also supplied the Hindman Guards, who, though not personally connected to the fire-eating congressman, hoped that their "friend, Hon. T. C. Hindman, [would] fully appreciate the honor bestowed upon him." Most of the companies were mustered as the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry (later renamed the Fifteenth Arkansas), and they elected Cleburne as their colonel.⁶⁴

⁶³ Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 73-74; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 48; Alan Thompson, ed., "'Frank and out spoken in my disposition': The Wartime Letters of Confederate General Dandridge McRae," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2013): 334.

⁶⁴ *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 650, 688; Carl Moneyhon, "1861: 'The Die is Cast,'" in *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 7; "Volunteers for the Southern Cause!" *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 27, 1861; "To Volunteers," *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 4, 1861; Message of Governor Henry Rector to the Arkansas secession convention, May 6, 1861, in *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas*, 152-153; Dandridge McRae to Angie McRae, 25 April 1861, in

All of the militias that convened at Camp Rector hailed from eastern Arkansas, a fact that likely came as no surprise to contemporaries. In fact, as delegates to the secession convention made their way to Little Rock, passions in the Delta intensified. On May 4, a mob of angry secessionists at Taylor's Creek—some fifty miles north of Helena in St. Francis County—murdered a man whom they believed was “secretly opposed to the interests of the South.” Apparently, the man had been trying to raise a militia company “with the avowed purpose of sustaining law and order and putting down vigilance committees,” but local hotheads believed he was colluding with the Federals. To prove his southern credentials, the man had promised to join a local company “gotten up for resistance to Federal usurpation,” but when he failed to report for duty, a mob attacked his home and killed him.⁶⁵

Two days after the “Bloody Affray in St. Francis,” Arkansas's secession convention resumed. Chairman Walker called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Minutes later, Charles Adams of Phillips County moved that a committee prepare an ordinance of secession, and by 3:00 p.m., it was ready. One delegate recalled that, unlike the “many turbulent scenes” that had occurred over the course of the convention, “very little excitement” ensued during the secession vote, which the delegates knew was a foregone conclusion. When the votes were tallied, sixty-five approved, and only five objected. Clearly, Arkansas's unionist-cooperationist majority had collapsed in the wake of Lincoln's call for troops. With secession now inevitable, Walker pleaded for unanimity among the delegates: “[L]et us all go together; let the wires carry the news, to all the world that Arkansas stands as a unit against coercion.” At that, four men

Thompson, ed., “Frank and out spoken in my disposition,” 334; “Letter from Camp Rector,” 4 May 1861, in *Des Arc Semi-Weekly Citizen*, May 10, 1861; “Arkansas Troops,” *Arkansas True Democrat*, May 23, 1861; “New Military Company at West Point, White County,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 27, 1861; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 49.

⁶⁵ “Bloody Affray in St. Francis,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 1, 1861.

switched their “nay” votes to “yea.” Only Isaac Murphy of upland Madison County held true. He arose and told his colleagues, “I have cast my vote after mature reflection, and have duly considered the consequences, and I can not conscientiously change it. I therefore vote ‘no.’” A Little Rock woman, who observed the proceedings from the gallery, responded to Murphy’s bold act by tossing a bouquet of flowers in his direction. Hindman also watched from the gallery on May 6. Later that evening, he wired Jefferson Davis that Arkansas’s convention had “passed [an] ordinance of secession at 4 p. m. by a unanimous vote.” After nearly a decade of fire-eating, Helena’s most prominent secessionist was so excited about his state’s decision that he chose to ignore Murphy’s dissent.⁶⁶

Upon hearing the news of Arkansas’s separation, Hindman’s old friend Cleburne responded defiantly. “I am with the South in life or in death, in victory or defeat,” he wrote from Camp Rector on May 7. “I believe the North is about to wage a brutal and unholy war on a people who have done them no wrong[,] in violation of the constitution and the fundamental principles of the government.” Going still further, he opined, “[T]hey no longer acknowledge that all Government derives its validity from the consent of the Governed[,] they are about to invade our peaceful homes[,] destroy our property[,] and inaugurate a servile insurrection[,] murder our men and dishonor our women.” Cleburne’s pro-southern zealotry aside, his forecast for the costs of war was astute. In September, the Irishman would cross the Mississippi to defend other parts of the Confederacy. Meanwhile, his adopted home of Helena, like so many

⁶⁶ Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 158-160; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 27-28; *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas*, 114-115; Cypert, “Secession Convention, Part II,” in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, 318-319; Frank, “Domesticity Goes Public,” in *The Die is Cast*, 31-32; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 85; *OR*, vol. 1, p. 690.

other communities across the South, would be transformed to a degree that few at the time foresaw.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ P. R. Cleburne to Robert Cleburne, 7 May 1861, Patrick Ronayne Cleburne Papers; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 58.

Chapter 3: And The War Came

On the morning of May 15, 1861, Camp Rector hummed with activity. For more than a week, militiamen from Arkansas had been congregating to defend the Confederacy, and additional volunteers were arriving daily. On this day, a delegation of women from Jefferson County joined the hubbub, and they were eager to see their family and friends who had departed Pine Bluff two weeks earlier with the Jefferson Guards and the Pine Bluff Artillery. Since then, Arkansas had seceded from the Union, and the people of the state were busy preparing for war. To demonstrate their support for their male protectors, the “patriotic ladies” of Pine Bluff had sewn flags for the troops, and they selected Etta Bocage and Lillian Rozelle to present them.

As the camp prepared for the women’s presentations, excitement filled the air. “Large crowds” of ladies and gentlemen gathered for the occasion, including many from Memphis who crossed the Mississippi in a ferryboat. Bocage, the daughter of a Pine Bluff judge, launched the event at 11:00 a.m. She unveiled a “fine blue silk” banner bearing the Latin motto, “Fiat justitia ruat coelum [sic],” meaning, “Let justice be done though the heavens fall.” As she presented her flag to the Jefferson Guards, an attendee observed that “the patriotic emotions of the heart . . . fell from her lips.” The captain graciously accepted her gift on behalf of his company, and the crowd erupted in “hearty cheers.”

The following day, Rozelle bequeathed a second banner to the Jefferson Guards, but this one was for the company’s regiment. More than six-hundred soldiers of the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry, including those from Pine Bluff, assembled before the speaker’s platform “in all the pomp and circumstance of glorious war,” as Rozelle rose to address them. “Our hands have made [this flag]; your hearts must defend it,” she charged. “You go, brave ones, to struggle in the dearest cause an American heart has at stake—the rights of this hallowed land of the

South!” She continued, “It was liberty, not Union, for which our forefathers fought,” implying that southerners were “not the aggressors, but the *wronged*.” Thus, she maintained, “an all-wise and just God” had blessed the South’s cause. At the conclusion of her speech, as the audience cheered “with an enthusiasm and stentorian voice,” Rozelle handed her flag to the captain of the Guards, who passed it to his newly-elected colonel, Patrick Cleburne. The beloved Irishman received the banner with “an able and eloquent speech of some length, in which he promised that it should never be dishonored.”¹

At the beginning of the Civil War, such scenes were common across the North and South. In that stirring spring and summer of 1861, communities in both sections gathered for galas, parades, and ceremonies to urge their men to enlist and join the war. One veteran remembered “the excitement, the bonfires, the speeches stirring the young hearts to action” in White County. “The sentiment of war was so strong and ran so high,” he recalled, “it was death to anyone who should utter a word in opposition, especially to manifest sympathy for the north.” In a rally at Searcy, a speaker climbed atop a hogshead to deliver Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty, Or Give Me Death” speech, after which residents congregated in the Methodist church to present a Confederate flag to a militia captain. “I boiled over” at the sight, the veteran recalled, “and I proceeded to join” the Hindman Guards. When, a few days later, his company boarded a boat for Camp Rector, the veteran observed “the parting scene of mother, father, sisters, brothers and

¹ “Presentation of Banners to the Jefferson Guards,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 1, 1861; “Letter from Camp Rector,” *Des Arc Semi-Weekly Citizen*, May 24, 1861; “Arkansas Troops—Gen. Dandridge McRae,” *Arkansas True Democrat*, May 23, 1861; “Presentation of Flag in May, 1861,” *Confederate Veteran* 1 (May 1893): 139; Bobby Roberts, ““Desolation Itself”: The Impact of the Civil War,” in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, ed. Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 72-73; Howell Purdue and Elizabeth Purdue, *Pat Cleburne: Confederate General* (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Jr. College Press, 1973), 79-80; Glenn Dedmond, *The Flags of Civil War Arkansas* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Company, 2009), 76.

sweethearts. No man or boy who enlisted had the power to resist a tear,” he remembered, “and hard hearted indeed was any one who witnessed the departure who did not also weep.

Handkerchiefs fluttered from those on board and those ashore, until the boat hove around the bend and out of sight.”²

Women frequently spearheaded these mobilization festivities. They organized parades and church services, founded aid societies, and established clubs to make clothing, flags, and other items for the soldiers. The ladies of Helena, for example, founded a sewing society when the war began. Between April and October 1861, they knitted 579 pairs of pants, 378 shirts, 295 coats, 120 pairs of drawers, 72 haversacks, 60 sheets, 30 mosquito bars, and 20 pillowcases for local troops. The society also proudly reported that a large number of garments were made by Phillips County women who did not belong to the club. Not to be outdone, the ladies of Little Rock sewed 3,000 uniforms, 1,500 haversacks, and 5,000 shirts during the first six weeks of the war. A local newspaper boasted that the “arduous services” that the Little Rock women had “so cheerfully and so faithfully rendered their country” did not diminish the “patriotic ardor which urged them to these duties.” The women were so dedicated, the paper declared, that they were “willing to labor on and to the end with a high and holy purpose.” Like the ladies of Pine Bluff, some women proclaimed their political views on the flags they stitched. In Searcy, for example, local ladies presented a company with a banner inscribed, “No Backing Out.”³

² Michael Fellman, Lesley J. Gordon, and Daniel E. Sutherland, *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 82-83; Judge T. J. Oliphint to C. E. Nash, 16 August 1898, in Charles Edward Nash, *Biographical Sketches of Gen. Pat Cleburne and Gen. T. C. Hindman* (Little Rock: Tunnah & Pittard, 1898), 165, 167-168.

³ Lisa Tendrich Frank, “Domesticity Goes Public: Southern Women and the Secession Crisis,” in *The Die is Cast: Arkansas Goes to War, 1861*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2010), 44-45; “Arkansas Items,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, October 9, 1861; *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 15, 1861; Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate*

Women also pressured their male counterparts to enlist in the army. Henry Morton Stanley, a soldier in eastern Arkansas who later gained fame for exploring Africa, recalled that following Arkansas's secession, "inflamed as the men and youths were, the warlike fire that burned within their breasts was as nothing to the intense heat that glowed within the bosoms of the women. No suggestion of compromise was possible in their presence," Stanley observed. "If every man did not hasten to the battle, they vowed they would themselves rush out and meet the Yankee vandals." Moreover, because women were "worshipped by the men," such language made the men "war-mad." When Stanley hesitated to enlist, he received a "chemise and petticoat, such as a negro lady's-maid might wear," from an unknown address, "written in a feminine hand." The unidentified woman's gesture compelled Stanley to join the Dixie Grays, which later mustered as the Sixth Arkansas Infantry at Little Rock. The ladies of Little Rock sewed all of the Grays' uniforms and made them a flag, and when the company marched to war, crowds lined the streets of the capital to cheer. Stanley observed that the "emotional girls," in particular, "waved their handkerchiefs and wept."⁴

Stanley recalled that his comrades joined the army for a variety of reasons. Some were motivated by patriotism and a sense of duty, while others enlisted because they had "an appetite for glory, the desire of applause, a fondness for military excitement, or because they were infected with the general craze, or to avoid tedious toil, or from the wildness of youth." Modern

Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 72.

⁴ Roberts, "Desolation Itself," in *The Arkansas Delta*, 72; Henry M. Stanley, *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley*, ed. Dorothy Stanley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 165-166, 172; "A Card," *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 22, 1861; "Henry M. Stanley in Arkansas and the Dixie Grays," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (September 1942): 245. On the Little Rock women's presentation of a flag to the Grays, see the *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 22, 1861.

scholars agree with his assessment. Some Civil War soldiers volunteered for ideological reasons—nationalism, honor, or opposition to tyranny—while others had more practical motives, including money, peer pressure, defense of home and hearth, and the pursuit of adventure and glory.⁵

Yet others, like Stanley, enlisted to prove their manhood. At the start of the war, many Americans believed that southern men were more aggressive and martial than their northern counterparts. Because most southerners lived in sparsely settled, rural regions, a number of Americans assumed that southern males, free from the corrupting effects of urbanization and industrialization, learned to defend their homes and honor at an early age. “We were taught to believe that one southern man could whip at least five yankees; they were no marksmen, but that we of the south who had from childhood been used to the gun were far superior to them,” a soldier from White County recalled. Most Americans quickly learned, however, that such perceptions were exaggerated, if not false. In the mid-nineteenth century, most northerners also lived in rural communities, and they possessed just as much grit as their opponents. “We learned however before the war closed that we were made of about the same ‘stuff,’” the soldier

⁵ Stanley, *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley*, 168. Historians disagree about what prompted Civil War soldiers to enlist. James M. McPherson contends they were motivated primarily by ideology, including patriotism and a sense of duty and honor. See McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Others, including Carl H. Moneyhon, have criticized McPherson for failing to account for the performance aspect of soldiers’ letters, which, because they were written for other people’s consumption, should not be taken at face value. Moneyhon contends that few Arkansans went to war “holding any deep political or cultural attitudes about the conflict itself but rather they went to pursue excitement and individual glory. Their leaders, both military and political, quickly gave them ample reasons that allowed them to justify their behavior in patriotic terms.” Moneyhon, “Why They Fought: Arkansans Go to War, 1861,” in *The Die is Cast*, 74. For an excellent summary of the myriad reasons why soldiers enlisted, as well as what motivated them to stay and fight in the heat of battle, see Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 85-89.

continued, “and many of us saw the time when one-half a yankee would be as much as we wanted to contend with.”⁶

In the war’s opening months, the men of eastern Arkansas enlisted in droves. Approximately 400 of the 2,000 adult white males in Phillips County volunteered to fight, and over the ensuing four years, at least seven infantry regiments came from the Arkansas Delta. In addition to the Yell Rifles and the Phillips Guards, the men of Phillips County joined the L’Anquille Rebels, the Trenton Guards, the Pat Cleburne Guards, John Clendenning’s Company, and the LaGrange Guards, who were captained by Daniel C. Govan, later a Confederate brigadier. Another future rebel general, James C. Tappan, led the Tappan Guards, who were sometimes called the Helena Guards. The Phillips County Cavalry Company protected county residents before the Civil War, and in the war’s later years, local horsemen joined companies commanded by William Weatherly and John Swan. Area gunners, for their part, enlisted in the Helena Artillery, which eventually was led by Thomas Jefferson Key, publisher of the *Helena Weekly Note-Book*, one of the town’s three newspapers at the outbreak of the war. By May 7, 1861, both the Phillips Guards and the Helena Artillery had joined the Yell Rifles at Camp Rector.⁷

⁶ Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 82; Judge T. J. Oliphint to C. E. Nash, 16 August 1898, in Nash, *Biographical Sketches*, 166.

⁷ Carl H. Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19 (June 1981/September 1981): 23; Roberts, “Desolation Itself,” in *The Arkansas Delta*, 73; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 64; “Confederate Soldiers from Phillips County,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 2 (Sept. 1963): 29-32; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1890), 745; Robert C. Moore, “To the Members of the Seven Generals Chapter of the U.D.C.,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 9 (June 1971): 21-28; “Attention, Cavalry!”, *Helena Southern Shield*, January 28, 1860; Dale P. Kirkman, ed., “The Diary of a Soldier,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 20 (December 1981 & March 1982): 26-27; “Helena Artillery (Key’s Battery),” *Tri-County Genealogical Society* 20, No. 1 (Spring 2005): 24-34; Telegraph from Camp Rector to the Members of the Arkansas State Convention, 7 May 1861, in *Journal of Both*

White men from all ranks and classes enlisted in Phillips County's companies. Aristocrats dominated the Yell Rifles, but their captain, Cleburne—though a member of the Irish gentry—was largely a self-made man in the United States. Daniel Govan, the LaGrange Guards' leader, was a prosperous cotton planter who owned twenty-five slaves, but John Clendenning, commander of the company that bore his name, owned no property. Similarly, John Swan held only 170 acres of land, while William Weatherly owned virtually no property. In contrast to the Yell Rifles, the L'Anguille Rebels were mostly men of modest means. A local newspaper described them as "hardy, industrious men, inured to toil and privation of frontier life,—the best material out of which to make the effective, reliable soldier, if properly armed, drilled and disciplined."⁸

Like most early enlistees across North and South, those in Phillips County tended to be young. Cleburne was barely thirty-three years old when the war began, while Govan and Clendenning were thirty-four. Swan, for his part, was only twenty-three years of age. Many of the initial volunteers were also bachelors. For example, eighty-eight members of the Yell Rifles enlisted in Confederate service in the summer of 1861. Of the forty-three men for whom census

Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas, Which Were Begun and Held in the Capitol, in the City Little Rock (Little Rock: Johnson & Yerkes, State Printers, 1861), 136. Clendenning's Company eventually mustered as Company B, Twenty-Third Arkansas Volunteers, while Daniel Govan's company became Company F, Second Arkansas Infantry. "Confederate Soldiers from Phillips County," 31-32. On Thomas J. Key's life and military career, see Wirt Armistead Cate, ed., *Two Soldiers: The Campaign Diaries of Thomas J. Key, C. S. A., December 7, 1863-May 17, 1865, and Robert J. Campbell, U. S. A., January 1, 1864-July 21, 1864* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938).

⁸ Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 9-45; Daniel E. Sutherland, "No Better Officer in the Confederacy: The Wartime Career of Daniel C. Govan," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (Autumn 1995): 271-272; Moneyhon, "The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas," 23; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 64; "The 'L' Anguille Rebels," Helena *Southern Shield*, n.d., in the *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 1, 1861.

data exists, their average age was twenty-six years, and only three were married. Untethered to wives and children, they willingly risked their lives to “see the elephant,” prove their mettle, and make a name for themselves.⁹

As white Arkansans enthusiastically prepared for war, African Americans—who constituted some one-third of the state’s population and a majority of Phillips County’s—proved they had little interest in supporting the Confederacy, a slaveholders’ republic. In the war’s first year, U.S. forces fought to save the Union, not end slavery, but the evidence suggests that enslaved people always believed the fight had something to do with the latter.¹⁰ In the spring of 1861, rumors of slave insurrections spread across Arkansas, and though it is impossible to know if the revolts were planned by slaves or simply imagined by fearful whites, the consequences of the rumors were palpable.¹¹ In Camden, Judge John Brown noted that the slaves were “very

⁹ Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas,” 23; Moneyhon, “Why They Fought,” in *The Die is Cast*, 66-74; “Confederate Soldiers from Phillips County,” 30-31; manuscript census returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, population schedules, Phillips County, Arkansas, www.ancestry.com (accessed April 3, 2017).

¹⁰ Carl Moneyhon, “1861: ‘The Die is Cast,’” in *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 17-18; Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 122. On the Federals’ fight to save the Union, see Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011). On enslaved people’s thoughts about the meaning of the war, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), chap. 2; Ira Berlin et al., “The Destruction of Slavery, 1861-1865,” in *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-76; and Carl H. Moneyhon, “White Society and African-American Soldiers,” in *“All Cut to Pieces and Gone to Hell”: The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Little Rock: August House, 2003), 31-57.

¹¹ Moneyhon, “1861: ‘The Die is Cast,’” in *Rugged and Sublime*, 18; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 74. The 1822 Denmark Vesey rebellion in Charleston, South Carolina, is the most famous antebellum slave conspiracy that appears to have been concocted by whites. After reviewing three modern books on the subject and analyzing the manuscript trial records, historian Michael Johnson concluded that the Vesey insurrection never occurred. More specifically, he argues that the Charleston Court of Magistrates and Freeholders conspired with

quiet,” but whites were nevertheless “taking measures to strengthen [their] watch in the city.” In eastern Arkansas, enslaved people were anything but silent, as at least two insurrections were reported. In early May, African Americans in the vicinity of Des Arc, a port on the White River, allegedly planned to kill every white person they met on their way to Searcy, where a white Methodist minister would then lead them to Memphis. White vigilantes foiled their purported plot, and five of the supposed conspirators, including the minister, were hanged. In the immediate aftermath, whites who resided near Des Arc organized vigilance committees to “ferret out those engaged” in the “nefarious plot.” The following month, authorities arrested several African Americans in Monroe County, approximately thirty miles west of Helena, “on a charge of attempted insurrection.” Three of the accused were hanged, including a blacksmith who had lived at Big Creek, a small community in Phillips County.¹²

While white Arkansans violently crushed suspected slave revolts, their representatives in Little Rock were busy advancing the state’s rebellion against the United States. In the words of one delegate, the secession convention was “placing the State on a war footing, and organizing the government of the same as a party of the Confederacy.” Despite Governor Rector’s protests, the convention remained in session until June 3—nearly a month after it approved a secession ordinance—to act as the state’s interim government. Among other things, the delegates rewrote

several frightened witnesses to create a story of an imminent slave insurrection. Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (Oct. 2001): 915-976. Johnson’s controversial article inspired a spirited forum in which several scholars responded to his claims. See “The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, Part 2,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (Jan. 2002): 135-202.

¹² John W. Brown Diary (Transcript), 5 May 1861, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; “Attempted Negro Insurrection,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 11, 1861; Alan Thompson, ed., “‘Frank and out spoken in my disposition’: The Wartime Letters of Confederate General Dandridge McRae,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2013): 335n7; “Attempted Insurrection,” *Fayetteville Observer* (Fayetteville, Tenn.), June 27, 1861.

Arkansas's constitution to outlaw the emancipation of slaves, legalize banking, and move the state elections from August to October. Elections were scheduled for October 1862, thus reducing the embattled Rector's term from four years to two. Thomas Hanley of Phillips County chaired the judiciary committee that drafted Arkansas's new constitution. He and his colleagues also joined the Confederacy, approved the Confederate constitution, and selected five delegates to represent the state in the provisional Confederate Congress.¹³

Thomas Hindman was not one of the delegates chosen for the Congress, nor was he present at the Little Rock convention. However, he reportedly helped write an ordinance—approved by the convention on May 15—that empowered a three-man military board to “call out the militia and volunteer forces of the state,” manage its forts and munitions, and “put on foot such military expeditions as in their opinion circumstances and necessity may require . . . for the safety and protection of Arkansas, until such time as the authority of the Confederate States of America shall be extended over it.” The final qualification would, in due course, prove to be a point of contention between Rector, who chaired the military board, and other state leaders. Initially, however, all agreed that the Confederacy should assume primary responsibility for defending Arkansas as soon as possible.¹⁴

¹³ Cypert, “Secession Convention, Part II,” in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, vol. 1, ed. John Hugh Reynolds (Little Rock: Democrat Printing and Lithographing Company, 1906), 320; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 63-67; James M. Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment: Arkansas's Road to Secession* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 160-161; Alfred Holt Carrigan, “Reminiscences of the Secession Convention, Part I,” in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, 308; Moneyhon, “1861: ‘The Die is Cast,’” in *Rugged and Sublime*, 8; U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 4, vol. 1, pp. 309-310, 335, Ser. 1, vol. 3, p. 582 (hereafter cited as *OR* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted).

¹⁴ Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 65; Diane Neal and Thomas W. Kremm, *Lion of the South: General Thomas C. Hindman* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993), 88; *Ordinances of the State Convention, Which Convened in Little Rock, May 6, 1861* (Little Rock:

As the delegates in Little Rock debated his ordinance, Hindman was busy raising troops for the Confederacy. Spurned by the convention, he would seek glory in war, not government. After Arkansas seceded, Hindman journeyed to Montgomery, where he was commissioned a colonel in the provisional Confederate army. Accordingly, on May 17, Confederate Secretary of War LeRoy Walker approved Hindman's longstanding offer to raise a regiment for rebel service, but he informed the colonel that Arkansas, not the Confederacy, must supply the regiment's arms. Undeterred, Hindman pressed forward. He returned to Helena and on May 23 asked the delegates in Little Rock to provide muskets, clothing, and ten days rations for his troops. "Helena is the rendezvous—two large companies in camp, others coming," he told them. "I intreat you to afford the aid requested. Give us a chance to fight for our country."¹⁵

The military board failed to supply the requested items, so Hindman turned to the citizens of Arkansas. On May 25, he invited the public, through the *Arkansas State Gazette*, to send shirts, pants, hats, socks, shoes, blankets, and food to his troops at Helena. He explicitly appealed to people who resided "some distance from Helena," for the residents of his hometown already had shown "the utmost liberality towards the soldiers of the South," and Hindman believed it was "unjust to ask more aid from them" until after others had contributed. That same month, a local newspaper also praised Helenians for their unparalleled support of the war effort. In contrast, "certain wealthy individuals" in the countryside had been "extremely parsimonious and selfish . . . in refusing to aid in a cause of such vital importance as the equipment of troops to

Johnson & Yerkes, State Printers, 1861), 20-22; Carl H. Moneyhon, "Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy: States' Rights versus Military Contingencies," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 73 (Winter 2014): 357-359.

¹⁵ *OR*, vol. 3, p. 578; "Our Montgomery Correspondence," *Charleston Mercury*, May 21, 1861; "From Montgomery," *New York Times*, June 9, 1861; T. C. Hindman to the President and Members of Arkansas Convention, 23 May 1861, in *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas*, 325.

defend the country.” The paper chastised the unnamed people and juxtaposed their selfishness with the largesse of two men who lived outside Phillips County—a businessman in Mississippi who donated a mill “towards the equipment of Southern troops,” and a captain in Monroe County who outfitted sixty soldiers “out of his private purse.”¹⁶

Hindman was also funding his troops’ subsistence out of pocket, and the expense was “ruinous” to him. Accordingly, he wanted either Arkansas or the Confederacy to outfit his men as soon as possible. On May 25, Secretary Walker told Arkansas’s Confederate congressmen that the war department would be happy to receive Hindman’s troops (and others) “into the Confederate service and assign them to duty on the Indian frontier” in western Arkansas. Walker also notified Hindman of his plan but assumed that the state had armed the troops. It had not, apparently, having reserved its weapons for the militia, and Hindman’s men suffered for it.

Nevertheless, Hindman continued to recruit. By June 1, he had assembled ten companies—six at Helena and four at Pine Bluff—but they still lacked accoutrements as well as transportation to the west. Consequently, he became willing to serve outside Arkansas. If the Confederacy would supply his men with adequate provisions, the colonel “preferred” to go to Virginia. Unfortunately, half of his regiment disagreed. Rumors circulated that federal forces in southern Missouri were threatening Arkansas, and Hindman’s troops, like many in the Civil War, wanted to stay near home to protect their families. On June 3, Hindman warned Walker that he would “certainly lose five companies” if ordered outside the state. He wished to be sent to western Arkansas first. After that, the secretary could send his troops wherever he pleased.¹⁷

¹⁶ T. C. Hindman, “To the Public,” 25 May 1861, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 1, 1861; “Donations” and “A Generous Action,” both in *Helena Southern Shield*, n.d., in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 1, 1861.

¹⁷ *OR*, vol. 53, p. 694, vol. 3, pp. 584-585, 587-588, 590; T. C. Hindman to the President and Members of Arkansas Convention, 27 May 1861, in *Journal of Both Sessions of the*

The Confederate war department ignored Hindman's appeal and ordered his regiment to Virginia. The colonel complied, but not before excoriating the state military board for its failure to supply his troops with such basic amenities as shoes and blankets. The board had invited his men to "become a part of the State militia for twelve months." Hindman replied that as "soldiers of the Confederate states," not Arkansas, he and his regiment could not "honorably consider, much less accept" such a proposition. Had the board provided arms as requested, he believed his troops would have defended the Arkansas frontier "without one dollar from the State treasury." However, the board had refused them, and so they would abandon their home state. Two days later, Hindman and six companies departed Helena for the Eastern Theater.¹⁸

As the troops boarded transports at Helena's wharf, J. M. Potts, a civilian from Kansas who had lived in Helena for nearly a year, took advantage of the "general confusion" at the landing and secured passage on one of the boats "without being detected." The Kansan fled Helena out of fear that he, "like many other Union men, would be pressed into the rebel army," and he departed in secret because northern men had been "closely watched," which made it "almost impossible for them to escape from the State." Potts disembarked at Memphis with Hindman's troops, who subsequently left for Virginia. The Kansan, however, made his way north to Cairo, Illinois, where he was briefly detained by Union General Benjamin M. Prentiss. Neither the general nor Potts could have known it, but Prentiss would later command the federal garrison at Helena and defend it against a major Confederate attack.¹⁹

Convention of the State of Arkansas, 358; "Col. Hindman's Regiment," *Helena Southern Shield*, n.d., in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 15, 1861.

¹⁸ *OR*, vol. 53, p. 694; *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 15, 1861; T. C. Hindman to the Military Board, 6 June 1861, *Helena Southern Shield*, n.d., in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 15, 1861.

¹⁹ *The Conservative* (Leavenworth, Kan.), June 27, 1861, in "Affairs in Arkansas," *New York Times*, July 8, 1861.

The drama surrounding the enlistment, provisioning, and departure of Hindman's regiment from Helena was indicative of the confusion that plagued Arkansas in the war's opening months. Most of the state's leaders wanted (and expected) the Confederate war department to take charge of Arkansas's defense because it would rid the state of the fiscal burden of supplying its troops. But the war department, which apparently had no plan for protecting the state, waited for Arkansas to tender its troops to the Confederacy. State officials, meanwhile, expected the war department to ask for those troops. This breakdown in communication caused chaos. In early June, David Hubbard, commissioner of the Confederate Bureau of Indian Affairs, told the secretary of war that "with about 25,000 able-bodied brave men Arkansas [had] less the appearance of a military organization than any people" he had ever known. The people were "nearly all under arms," Hubbard wrote, "and daily rumors of invasions calling them from home." Even then, the commissioner had never seen "people who appeared to know so little about commanders, or who seemed so utterly devoid of confidence in any one faction or leader of a faction in the State." To solve this problem, Hubbard wanted the Confederacy to send a military leader from outside the state to assume command of Arkansas's disorganized, but "brave and hardy hunters."²⁰

On June 25, Confederate leaders did just that, appointing William J. Hardee, author of the era's top tactical manual, to take charge of most of northern Arkansas. Once there, Hardee would assume command of Hindman's regiment—whose orders to move to Virginia had been rescinded—and 3,000 other troops, including Cleburne's First Arkansas. Hardee's dallying,

²⁰ Moneyhon, "Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy," 358-361; *OR*, vol. 3, pp. 589-590.

combined with continued confusion among state and Confederate leaders, delayed the general's arrival in northern Arkansas for a month.²¹

Hindman was already in east Tennessee when he learned that the war department had rerouted him to northern Arkansas, so he backtracked to Memphis, where his soldiers mustered into service. While in Tennessee, the colonel continued to recruit, eventually raising a total of eighteen companies. "Hindman's Legion," as contemporaries dubbed his unit, remained in Memphis until the evening of July 10, when it boarded transports to relocate to Pitman's Ferry, an encampment in northern Arkansas. As was often the case during the Civil War, nature dictated the legion's itinerary. Because of an abnormally wet summer and the marshy Delta terrain, the troops traveled by boat instead of marching overland. Their route led them down the Mississippi to the mouth of the White River, up the White to the Black River, up the Black to the Current River, and up the Current to Pitman's Ferry. Along the way, they stopped at a familiar place: Helena.²²

²¹ *OR*, vol. 3, pp. 598, 612; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 90; Helena *Southern Shield*, June 29, 1861, in *Des Arc Semi-Weekly Citizen*, July 10, 1861; Moneyhon, "Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy," 362. On the importance of Hardee's *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*, see Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

²² Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 89-90; "Col. Hindman's Regiment to Return," *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, n.d., in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 22, 1861; *OR*, vol. 3, pp. 590, 592; Bobby Roberts, "Thomas C. Hindman, Jr.: Secessionist and Confederate General" (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1972), 40-42; Edward Bourne, "The 'Young Guard,'" in *The Military Annals of Tennessee. Confederate. First Series*, ed. John Berrien Lindsley (Nashville: J. M. Lindsley and Co., 1886), 600; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 82-83. Hindman's regiment departed Helena for Virginia on June 8. Three days later, the Confederate war department sent a message to Helena ordering the colonel to proceed to northeast Arkansas "for the defense of that section of country." Moreover, Hindman was instructed to acquire subsistence from Confederates in Memphis and arms and munitions from Governor Rector (a curious order given that Hindman was bound for Virginia because Rector and the military board had refused to supply him with arms). It is unclear whether the colonel received this message or was alerted to the change of plans in another dispatch. *OR*, vol. 3, p. 590.

At 6:00 a.m. on July 11, Hindman's Legion docked at Helena's wharf. They were "complimented by quite an interesting ovation," one soldier recalled. Townspeople must have known they were coming, as Cleburne's regiment—also en route to Pitman's Ferry—had passed through the previous week. However, because Hindman's troops arrived at such an early hour, "a great many from the country failed to get in in time to see" them. One soldier—who hailed from Mississippi County but had attended school in Helena a few years earlier—was "gratified by meeting many familiar faces" in the town, all of whom cheered him "with a warm and hearty greeting." Apparently, his former acquaintances were surprised to see that the young man had become captain of his company.²³

From Helena, Hindman's troops proceeded down the Mississippi to the mouth of the White River, where they temporarily parted ways with their commander. Upon reaching the White, most of the boats turned toward Pitman's Ferry, but Hindman continued down the Mississippi to Napoleon. A month earlier, the Confederate war department had requested that Governor Rector relinquish "the provisions captured at Helena and Napoleon" to Hindman, and the colonel intended to act on that authority. Upon reaching the town, he commandeered thirty-five muskets and then made his way back upriver. The colonel caught up to his legion at Des Arc, where he seized two steamers, the *Mars* and the *Ohio Belle*, "in the name of the Southern Confederacy" and ordered them to Memphis. A local reporter was perplexed by Hindman's "novel and strange" act, for he knew that the boats belonged to the state of Arkansas, not the Confederacy. What the reporter likely did not know, however, was that Hindman had a history

²³ Elliott Fletcher, Jr. to My Dear Father, 19 July 1861, in J. H. Atkinson, ed., "A Civil War Letter of Captain Elliott Fletcher, Jr.," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1963): 51; "Military Moving," *Des Arc Semi-Weekly Citizen*, July 17, 1861; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 83, 102n14; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 90.

with the *Mars*, whose supplies he had helped seize at Helena three months earlier. Moreover, because the boats had been captured at Helena and Napoleon, the colonel probably believed he was authorized to sequester them. Regardless, Hindman had made it abundantly clear that he and his troops were “for the war,” not Arkansas, and as the colonel ultimately proved, he was eager to do whatever he deemed necessary to defend the Confederacy.²⁴

By late July 1861, Hindman, Cleburne, and the rest of Hardee’s command were encamped on the Current River. From there, they spent the greater part of August trying (and failing) to drive the Federals from Missouri, while Hindman traversed northern Arkansas to recruit more men to the Confederate ranks. In September, Hardee’s troops crossed to the east bank of the Mississippi, where most of them remained for the duration of the war.²⁵

Meanwhile, their companions back in Arkansas were adjusting to life in the new Confederacy. When Arkansans rushed off to war in the spring and summer of 1861, they vacated a number of state and local offices, leaving behind what Governor Rector called a “mere skeleton of a government.” In August, the governor decried the impossible task of running such a government, as many counties had “neither Sheriffs, Judges, Coroners nor Justices of the Peace, to administer the laws or enforce justice.” Frustrated, Rector beseeched Arkansas officeholders who had departed for the war to return to their posts immediately or resign so that suitable replacements could be selected. That same month, he also instructed the Phillips County

²⁴ Elliott Fletcher, Jr., to My Dear Father, 19 July 1861, in Atkinson, ed., “A Civil War Letter of Captain Elliott Fletcher, Jr.,” 51-52; *OR*, vol. 3, p. 592, vol. 53, p. 694; “Military Moving”; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 90. Because the Confederate war department had requested that Hindman be allowed to commandeer provisions at both Helena and Napoleon, he probably did so at the former on July 11.

²⁵ Elliott Fletcher, Jr., to My Dear Father, 19 July 1861, in Atkinson, ed., “A Civil War Letter of Captain Elliott Fletcher, Jr.,” 52-53; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 53-58; Purdue and Purdue, *Pat Cleburne*, 83-88; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 91-93; Moneyhon, “Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy,” 364.

sheriff to hold two elections: one to fill the county's three vacant seats in the state legislature, and the other for "the general election in October in pursuance of law." In compliance with the governor's proclamation, Arkansas voters went to the polls in the fall of 1861 and endorsed Jefferson Davis for a six-year term as Confederate president. Davis had served as provisional president since February, so his election was a mere formality. In fact, Arkansas leaders ensured that neither he nor Vice President Alexander H. Stephens faced any opposition. At the same time, Arkansas voters chose four representatives to the Confederate Congress, including Thomas Hanly of Phillips County. Judge Hanly, whom one scholar calls "probably the most industrious member of the Arkansas delegation" in Richmond, served on at least six congressional committees and easily won reelection two years later.²⁶

Two days before the general election, Arkansas legislators convened to select the state's Confederate senators. They called Robert W. Johnson out of retirement to fill one of those seats, while Charles B. Mitchel, a medical doctor from Hempstead County, was elected to the other. Mitchel had been chosen to succeed Johnson in the U.S. Senate in December 1860, but, like the rest of his colleagues, he had departed Washington following Abraham Lincoln's inauguration in March 1861.²⁷ Upon leaving the capital, Mitchell and nineteen other U.S. senators from the

²⁶ Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 43; *Arkansas State Gazette*, August 24, 1861; "Letter to B. W. Green, Esq., Phillips County Sheriff, Aug. 1861," *Phillips County Historical Review* 29 (Fall 1991): 5-7; Margaret Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years, 1819-1866. A History* (Little Rock: Arkansas Gazette Foundation, 1969), 360-361; James M. Woods, "Devotees and Dissenters: Arkansans in the Confederate Congress, 1861-1865," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Autumn 1979): 236.

²⁷ Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 361; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 82-83; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 119-120, 142-143; Woods, "Devotees and Dissenters," 237. Mitchel was the only member of Arkansas's Congressional delegation who did not leave Washington in early March. He stayed to work on a compromise to save the Union, and when that failed, he departed the capital at the end of the month. Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 143.

Confederate states had resigned their posts, but Helena attorney William K. Sebastian, Arkansas's other U.S. Senator, had not. He and Andrew Johnson (the future U.S. president from Tennessee) refused to tender their resignations in hopes that the Union might yet be preserved. When that did not happen, they and their southern colleagues were formally expelled from the Senate in July 1861. After departing Washington, Sebastian returned to Helena to resume his law practice. For a short time, he also reportedly captained a military company that drilled in the town.²⁸

By the summer of 1861, most of the military companies that had assembled in Phillips County had departed to fight elsewhere. When J. M. Potts fled Helena (with Hindman's troops) in early June, he observed that the only soldiers remaining were a "Home Guard of about 100 men," who were armed with two cannons "stolen from the arsenal at Little Rock" and an additional thirty-two pounder. In spite of this paltry military presence, Potts reported that no one in Helena called himself a "Union man" for fear of reprisal. "[C]ouldn't if he owned a hundred niggers," the Kansan observed. Inevitably, the political violence that had plagued Phillips County before secession spilled into the early months of the war, as two men lately had been

²⁸ Steven Teske, s.v. "William King Sebastian," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4652> (accessed April 26, 2017); John Hallum, *Biographical and Pictorial History of Arkansas*, vol. 1 (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1887), 269-273; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 29, 1861. Sometime after federal forces captured Helena in July 1862, Sebastian moved to Memphis, and, in July 1863, he expressed interest in reclaiming his seat in the U.S. Senate. Abraham Lincoln embraced the idea, but with two conditions. First, the Senate had the final say on whether to admit Sebastian. Secondly, although the Emancipation Proclamation had already freed enslaved Arkansas—and Lincoln did not intend to rescind the proclamation in the state—the president was willing to consider any plan proposed by Sebastian to gradually emancipate those slaves who had not yet "tasted actual freedom." Sebastian apparently refused to cooperate, and the plan to readmit him died. Abraham Lincoln to Gen. Stephen A. Hurlbut, 31 July 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 6, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 358, 359n2; William C. Harris, *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 85-86.

hanged in Phillips County “for their political opinions.” Despite the excitement, Potts noted that business in Helena was “extremely dull.” Salt pork sold for twenty-five cents per pound, and “very little” of that was available.²⁹

The pork shortage that Potts witnessed in June 1861 was no aberration, as Phillips County—and Arkansas at large—experienced an economic crunch in the war’s first year. Local communities spent the bulk of their cash arming and equipping the companies they sent to war, while the troops’ departures drained local economies of crucial manpower. Additionally, county courts levied special taxes to raise money for the war effort, which further squeezed cash-strapped civilians. Consequently, by the summer of 1861, currency shortages existed throughout the state. John Brown recognized the crippling costs of mobilization. “A great number of companies forming,” the judge wrote in early June, and the “greatest trouble is to get the means of starting them out.” Brown expressed alarm that “every dollar” that could be raised seemed to be given to the troops or loaned to their friends. “More money has already been furnished than I thought was in the Country,” the judge observed. “The expenses of the War are becoming almost incalculable.”³⁰

In many Arkansas communities, currency shortages triggered a collapse of the credit system, which further paralyzed local economies. Debtors lacked the cash to pay their bills, which hampered the ability of creditors to buy supplies, especially from merchants outside the state. Without these supplies, farmers struggled to plant their crops, and a vicious cycle ensued. In May, the secession convention attempted to alleviate Arkansas’s looming debt crisis by

²⁹ *The Conservative* (Leavenworth, Kan.), June 27, 1861, in “Affairs in Arkansas,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1861.

³⁰ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 103; John W. Brown Diary (Transcript), 11 June 1861.

passing an ordinance forbidding creditors from seizing property owned by men who fought for Arkansas or the Confederacy. This stay law was a boon to debtors, but it made life even more difficult for creditors, who struggled to pay their taxes and fulfill their obligations to creditors elsewhere. In June 1861, Judge John S. Hornor of Helena complained that a local debtor was so “absorbed in the Military movements” that he seemed “to have lost sight of his personal liabilities and promises, resting perfectly easy, no doubt, in consequence of the disposition on the part of our Civil Authorities not to press the collection of any debt.”³¹

In the opening months of the war, merchants and tax collectors scrambled to muster the money owed them, but most were unsuccessful—in some cases because public officials impeded their efforts. For example, the secession convention temporarily suspended “all sales by sheriffs or constables, for the collection of debts.” Within ten months, however, Phillips County law enforcement had resumed this practice. In February 1862, the Helena *Southern Shield* publicized the names of 104 individuals and businesses in Phillips County whose property the sheriff would sell “to pay the taxes, penalty and costs due thereon for the year 1861, and other years therein mentioned.” That A. G. Underwood, a local judge, appeared on the sheriff’s list suggests that by early 1862, the costs of war had fallen upon some of Phillips County’s most prominent citizens.³²

Unable to collect their debts, a number of merchants stopped extending credit to their customers. In February 1862, two Phillips County businesses, the Helena Flouring Mill and

³¹ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 103-104; *Ordinances of the State Convention*, 35-37; Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas,” 28-29; John S. Hornor to W. E. Woodruff, 15 June 1861, quoted in Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 73.

³² Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 104; *Ordinances of the State Convention*, 24; “Sale of Land for Taxes, in Phillips County, Arkansas,” *Helena Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 740.

Cage & Rankin’s Drugstore, announced that, henceforth, they would only accept cash as payment for their goods and services. The former implored its patrons to settle their debts as soon as possible—with payments in corn or wood, if necessary. Merchants across the state made similar pronouncements in the war’s first year. As early as April 1861, a Little Rock business declared it would only take cash for its corn meal because credit was “*played out*” in the capital city. The following month, another Little Rock entrepreneur instructed his customers to refrain from asking for credit because he would “not do a credit business with any one.” He also directed his debtors to “come forward and settle” immediately.³³

The Confederacy also taxed the people of Phillips County in the war’s first year. In August 1861, the Confederate Congress imposed a modest tax of one-half of one percent on all personal property and charged the states with collecting it. Six months later, the Phillips County sheriff announced that he had received Richmond’s assessment for the county, which taxpayers had twenty-one days to dispute. Apparently, South Carolina was the only state that collected the tax. Texas confiscated northern-owned property to pay its share, while the nine other Confederate states, including Arkansas, paid their levies either by borrowing money or by printing paper currency.³⁴

The latter practice, together with wartime shortages of goods and widespread speculation, caused runaway inflation. Before the war, a sack of salt, necessary for curing meats before

³³ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 104; Helena *Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862; Burgevin & Field advertisement, April 6, 1861, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 18, 1861; R. E. Beebe, “Notice to My Customers,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 25, 1861.

³⁴ Gary W. Gallagher and Joan Waugh, *The American War: A History of the Civil War Era* (State College, Pa.: Spielvogel Books, 2015), 55; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 437-442; “Notice to Confederate Taxpayers of Phillips County,” *Helena Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862.

refrigeration, cost only two dollars in Little Rock. By November 1861, that price had risen to twenty dollars in eastern Arkansas. Over the same period, a pound of coffee increased from fourteen cents to forty cents, and by February 1862, it retailed for a dollar in Helena. To counter inflation, in November 1861, Confederate authorities in Arkansas briefly outlawed the speculation, monopolization, and exportation of “subsistence supplies, constituting the necessaries of life,” and six months later, they capped the prices of various items, including salt, coffee, flour, bacon, and sugar. Speculation continued, however, and prices continued to rise. In late 1861, the editor of the *Arkansas State Gazette* complained that from the war’s beginning, “unprincipled, soulless speculators” had “traversed almost every settlement” and preyed upon ignorant civilians. Posing as government agents, they made “appeals to the patriotism of the people,” bought essential goods they claimed were for the war effort, and then turned around and sold them at exorbitant prices. Meanwhile, some farmers and merchants simply refused to abide by price controls, while others sold their products on the black market. Consequently, by March 1863, coffee had risen to seven dollars per pound, while salt soared to one hundred dollars per sack.³⁵

Inevitably, inflation fell hardest on the poor, whose loyalty to the Confederacy waned with each successive hardship. In 1862, prices in the Confederacy rose some three hundred percent, while wages for skilled and unskilled workers increased only fifty-five percent. Farm families fared little better. The exodus of adult white males to fight in the war sapped their

³⁵ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 107-108, 120-121; *Washington Telegraph* (Washington, Ark.), February 19, 1862; Solon Borland, “General Order,” November 29, 1861, and “Col. Borland’s Orders,” both in *Arkansas State Gazette*, December 14, 1861; Moneyhon, “Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy,” 367-368; *OR*, vol. 15, p. 782; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 85; “Whom Will Ye Serve?” *The Shield* (Helena, Ark.), September 6, 1862.

farms' productivity, while salt shortages hampered their ability to tan leather and preserve beef, pork, and butter from bacteria. The dearth of salt also made their horses and mules more susceptible to hoof and mouth disease.³⁶

Nature conspired against Arkansas farmers in other ways, too. In the war's opening year, hog cholera decimated the South's swine population. This outbreak was particularly devastating because pork was a staple of southern diets, both free and enslaved. In fact, one authority contends that, "[w]ith the exception of yellow fever, no disease hurt the Confederacy more than hog cholera." In the fall of 1861, Thomas Jefferson Key claimed to have witnessed "the hogs in Arkansas dying at the rate of thirty or forty per day." However, he was happy to report that farmers in Phillips County had discovered that by adding trace amounts of arsenic to their pigs' feed, they could mitigate the disease. Key was so encouraged by this remedy that he shared it with the editor of a newspaper in middle Tennessee, although, oddly enough, the farmers who lived just across the Mississippi from Helena knew nothing of the remedy. In June 1862, a resident of Friars Point, Mississippi, observed that cholera had "destroyed nearly all the hogs" in his county, while cutworms had ruined many of their cornfields. The following summer, hog cholera erupted into a full-blown epizootic in Arkansas. "A disease has pervaded the whole country which has killed most of the hogs," Judge Brown observed in July 1863. "Meat is very scarce and the country is likely to be almost without next winter." Brown's fears proved prescient, though the disease spread even more rapidly than he predicted. Only three months

³⁶ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 107-108; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 440; Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 207. Glanders, a bacterial disease that infects horses and mules, also plagued farmers during the Civil War. See Terry G. Sharrer, "The Great Glanders Epizootic, 1861-1866: A Civil War Legacy," *Agricultural History* 69 (Winter 1995): 79-97.

later, he lamented that cholera had “killed out the hogs to such an extent that there cannot be meat for bacon.”³⁷

Drought also diminished Arkansas’s hog population. In the summer of 1861, insufficient rainfall reduced the state’s corn crop, which was crucial for feeding livestock. Consequently, a number of farmers were forced to slaughter their cattle and pigs before they were fully fattened, as well as find other sources of protein. Some attempted to solve their dilemma by reducing the amount of pork they allotted to their slaves, while others took to the woods to hunt wild game. Enslaved Arkansans—who always had supplemented their diets with wild deer, rabbits, and raccoons—also hunted nearby forests and fields to feed their families. In doing so, they sometimes ran into white farmers, who accused them of killing hogs they had released into the woods to forage. This ongoing struggle to consume enough calories to survive, while “bereft of the glory and theatricality” of conventional battles, was nevertheless central to how Americans—North and South, soldier and civilian, free and enslaved, male and female, young and old—experienced the Civil War. It also shaped the conflict’s outcome. Generally speaking, northern soldiers and civilians ate better than their southern counterparts. A number of factors explain this food disparity, including northern mechanization, the Union naval blockade, southern labor shortages, the armies’ logistics, and the location of the fighting. The natural environment, however, was also key. Droughts, floods, extreme temperatures, crop blights, and animal

³⁷ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 106; Paul W. Gates, *Agriculture and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 89-93 [quotation on p. 90]; R. Douglas Hurt, *Agriculture and the Confederacy: Policy, Productivity, and Power in the Civil War South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 35-36, 113; Thomas J. Key, “Hog Cholera,” *Fayetteville Observer* (Fayetteville, Tenn.), October 10, 1861; “Letter from Friar’s Point, Mississippi,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, June 27, 1862; John W. Brown Diary (Transcript), 9 July 1863 and 20 October 1863.

diseases ravaged Confederate foodstuffs, and this gave the Union a crucial advantage in the fight.³⁸

The decision-making of Arkansas farmers also contributed to the state's food shortages. State and Confederate authorities encouraged planters to grow cereal crops to feed soldiers and civilians; however, most people found that cultivating cotton better paid the bills. In late 1861, the *Southern Shield* reported that a farmer who lived twenty-five miles above Helena had netted \$1,500 by shipping forty hogs to New Orleans. The paper enthusiastically suggested that "the cost and trouble of raising that lot of hogs did not exceed what it would to plant, gather, gin, and send to market three bales of cotton!" Although some farmers undoubtedly agreed with his assessment, many also believed that cotton's market value made it worth the trouble. Most planters were debtors, and cotton was the one crop that consistently brought in cash, even after the war obstructed its sale. As a result, Arkansas farmers kept growing cotton, especially in fertile Phillips County. In February 1862, at least two cotton factors, including one in New Orleans, still advertised in Helena's newspapers, while a local feed store declared it would stow "any amount of cotton" in its depot on Front Street, with no extra charge for "shipping, drayage, or wharfage." The store's owner also announced he would accept cotton as payment for the sugar he was peddling. Cotton was so valuable in Phillips County that students at a local girl's academy could use it to pay their tuition and board in kind.³⁹

³⁸ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 106; Gates, *Agriculture and the Civil War*, 119-120; Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89-98 [quotation on p. 98]. Steinberg, who calls the Civil War "the great food fight," was one of the first historians to argue that the natural environment had a hand in shaping its outcome.

³⁹ Helena *Southern Shield* report, n.d., in "Arkansas Intelligence," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 4, 1861; Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 106-107, 121; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 86-87; Helena *Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862.

Nevertheless, by early 1862, numerous newspapers and public officials were exhorting Arkansas farmers to grow less cotton and more food. In February, the editor of the *Southern Shield* reprinted (and endorsed) a letter penned by “a very intelligent citizen” that entreated farmers to “make *no cotton at all*, and produce so much grain that *poor men* who are in the army can support their families on \$15 per month.” If southern planters did this, the author believed the Confederates would become “complete masters” over both the North and the English, who, desperate for cotton to feed their textile mills, would recognize the Confederacy. If, on the other hand, southern farmers failed to recognize their duty to “provide *cheap food* for the families of the absent laboring men,” the author predicted that by spring 1863, the nation would be left with a “*disbanded army and a ruined cause.*” Arkansas legislators apparently agreed with this sentiment, for in March 1862 they passed an ordinance forbidding the state’s farmers from growing more than two acres of cotton per hand. Farmers who violated the law faced a penalty of \$500 to \$5,000, but many ignored it anyway. In early May, a newspaper editor in Little Rock chastised those planters who seemed “determined, notwithstanding the prohibition of the Legislature, to plant large crops of cotton. We cannot believe it. There must be some mistake,” he opined. “Cotton planted now is planted for the enemy.” Like his colleague at the *Southern Shield*, the editor also implored Arkansas farmers to “plant grain—so as to support the families of absent soldiers, and feed the soldiers themselves as they fight our battles.” Additionally, he argued, “great attention should be given to raising hogs, cattle, sheep, and everything of which meat can be made.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 106-107; “The Short Cotton Crop Policy,” *Helena Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 86-87; Gates, *Agriculture and the Civil War*, 18; “Cotton Planting,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 3, 1862.

Planters were not the only people in Phillips County eager to conduct business as usual. A local shoe factory—that regularly advertised for employees in a Memphis newspaper in the fall of 1861—reportedly secured a contract to make shoes for Confederate soldiers at \$3.50 per pair. In early 1862, most of Helena’s businesses still advertised in local newspapers, just as they had before the war. Private schools continued to educate the community’s children for five-month terms, while H. P. Coolidge and his son still sold a cornucopia of items at their dry goods store. In February 1862, many of those goods continued to be imported from merchants in Memphis and New Orleans, as most of the Mississippi River remained open for trade. It also remained open for travel. As late as May 31, 1862—nearly a month after the Union navy captured New Orleans and infiltrated the Mississippi—steamboats regularly carried passengers from Memphis to Helena, Napoleon, Vicksburg, and places in between. Meanwhile, many of Helena’s attorneys continued to conduct business on both sides of the Mississippi, though by 1862, all three partners at the law office of Cleburne, Scaife, and Mangum were off serving in the war.⁴¹

Yet, no matter how hard they tried, the people of Phillips County—like those employed at Cleburne’s law firm—could not escape the war. Even after many of the county’s men marched off to fight, local women continued to support the war effort. In the fall of 1861, for example, they donated a box of clothing to the Southern Mothers’ Association, a charitable organization that ran a soldiers’ hospital in Memphis. African Americans had no interest in supporting the Confederacy philanthropically, but they were caught up in the conflict, too. For

⁴¹ “Shoemakers Wanted Immediately,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 3, 1861; *Daily Missouri Democrat* (St. Louis), June 4, 1862, in “Arkansas Items,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1862; *Helena Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 31, 1862; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, 786; Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 65. L. H. Mangum served as a volunteer aide to Cleburne. Symonds, 55.

example, a slave named Toney took advantage of the wartime chaos and ran away from his owner in Coahoma County, Mississippi. In January 1862, the Phillips County sheriff apprehended the young man and published a runaway notice in the Helena *Southern Shield*.⁴²

That same month, the *Southern Shield* announced that a “faithful servant” named Major had escaped a federal prison in Cairo and miraculously returned to his plantation in Phillips County, where, among his “real friends” once more, he was “a happy, contented, honest darkey.” According to the report, Major had accompanied his Confederate owner to Belmont, Missouri, where, in November 1861, U.S. forces overran the rebels and detained him. From there, he was transported to nearby Cairo, where an Illinois captain promised him twelve dollars per month to serve as his personal cook. When, a month later, he had not yet received payment, Major decided to flee. Under the cover of darkness, he crawled through federal lines, stole an “old leaky skiff,” and drifted down the Mississippi to Columbus, Kentucky, where he was improbably reunited with his owner. The *Shield* printed Major’s story to show that southern slaves were loyal to their masters, and thus, that “Lincoln and his myrmidons” had no hope of converting them into rebellious “incendiaries and executioners” to sabotage the Confederate cause.⁴³

While it is impossible to determine the truth of Major’s story, his alleged odyssey nevertheless illustrates what one scholar calls the “experience of movement” that defined the Civil War for so many of its participants. Like Major, some slaves accompanied their rebel owners to war, while others, like Toney, ran away from them. From 1861 to 1865, at least 500,000 slaves fled their farms and plantations to seek refuge behind Union lines, while untold

⁴² *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 21, 1861; “Runaway Notice,” Helena *Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862.

⁴³ “An Escaped Prisoner from Cairo—A Faithful Servant,” Helena *Southern Shield*, n.d., in *Memphis Daily Appeal*, January 22, 1862.

numbers were captured trying to do so. Others, meanwhile, were forcibly relocated to distant frontiers by their owners, who sought to hide their prized property from federal forces. In the fall of 1863, for example, Judge John Hornor moved his slaves from Phillips County to northeastern Texas, where they remained until after the war. “The slaves had become restless” in Helena, his son later recalled, and both Union and Confederate soldiers “took from him freely.” “[C]aught between two fires” and “threatened with eventual despoliation,” Hornor and his family packed their belongings and took to the road. Over the course of the war, hundreds of thousands joined them—as refugees, runaways, stragglers, deserters, and aid workers. All the while, an estimated three million soldiers and sailors moved from their homes to military camps, from camps to battlefields (where they marched, rode, steamed, and sailed against their opponents), and from battlefields to hospitals, prison camps, or the next site of combat. This movement of people was, in the words of one scholar, a “pivotal aspect” of how the Civil War actually was lived.⁴⁴

Confederate soldiers moved in and out of Phillips County during the war’s first year. In September 1861, the so-called “Preachers’ Regiment” of Arkansas troops passed through Helena “*en route* for the seat of war.” The *Southern Shield* wryly reported that the regiment’s colonel, a

⁴⁴ Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1-11 [quotations on pp. 11, 4]; Berlin et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 77-80; Robert Connell, Sr., *Arkansas* (New York: Paebar Company, 1947), 26; Joseph Mosby Hornor, “Some Recollections of Reminiscences by My Father,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 10 (December 1971): 11-16 [quotations on p. 11]. On enslaved Arkansans’ movements before and during the war, see Kelly Houston Jones, “Chattels, Pioneers, and Pilgrims for Freedom: Arkansas’s Bonded Travelers,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 75 (Winter 2016): 319-335. On slaveholders and other white refugees in Arkansas who left their homes during the war, see Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 133-134.

Methodist minister from Pine Bluff, commanded at least eight other preachers, including one over seventy years old. Four months later, the honorable Charles W. Adams began raising yet another Confederate regiment at Helena. Unlike those led by Hindman and Cleburne, this one would remain west of the Mississippi River, where it could better protect the Arkansas homeland. Once raised, it would remove to the Indian Territory, where Albert Pike—now a Confederate brigadier—was assembling an army. In January 1862, Adams reported that eastern Arkansans thus far had responded “nobly” to Pike’s call for troops, and he hoped the men of southwest Arkansas would do so, too.⁴⁵

Pike was still recruiting soldiers to his ranks in early March, and in that month, Helenians experienced an unanticipated consequence of mobilization. Adams’ enlistees, by then designated the “Adams Guards,” were still encamped at Helena, when, in the early morning hours, they accidentally started a fire that quickly engulfed much of the town’s riverfront district. “The flames spread with great rapidity,” a local newspaper reported, “and in a short space of time two blocks of business houses were wrapped in liquid fire, and their long tongues mounted high in the air, spreading devastation before them, and illuminating the entire city.” Firefighters “did all in their power” to stay the blaze, but with only one engine at their disposal, their success was limited. Panicked residents spread wet blankets on the rooftops of downtown buildings, and

⁴⁵ “The Preachers’ Regiment,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 4, 1861; Charles W. Adams to Col. Eakin, January 1862, in the *Washington Telegraph* (Washington, Ark.), January 29, 1862; Albert Pike, “Troops Wanted,” January 8, 1862, in the *Washington Telegraph*, January 29, 1862. On the Confederates who joined the army after the feverish spring and summer of 1861, see Kenneth W. Noe, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Noe contends that contrary to popular belief, these “late enlistees” did not lack the commitment and patriotism of those who signed up at the outbreak of the war; rather, like their predecessors, they were driven by a spirited desire to protect home and hearth.

ultimately, the fire was confined to two city blocks. Still, when the smoke cleared, Helenians had suffered an estimated eighty-five to ninety thousand dollars in damages.⁴⁶

The *Helena Weekly Note-Book* office caught fire, but, unlike many other buildings on the block, it survived the conflagration. Both the *Note-Book* and the *Southern Shield* remained in print in early 1862, but by that time, paper shortages were limiting the length of issues. The same was true for numerous other Arkansas (and Confederate) newspapers, including the flagship *Arkansas State Gazette*, which temporarily suspended publication in May 1862 when it ran out of paper. When the *Gazette* reopened the following month, only eight newspapers remained in Arkansas (not counting regimental newspapers published by soldiers), as compared to the thirty or forty printed in the state before the war. Helena's newspapers also ceased publication in 1862, but not before their editors made a favorable impression on M. Jeff Thompson, the so-called "Swamp Fox of the Confederacy," whose soldiers occupied Helena that spring. "We were treated with great kindness and respect by the citizens of Helena," Thompson recalled, "and the good conduct of my men was much complimented by everybody especially the newspaper editors."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Albert Pike, "To Volunteers," *Washington Telegraph*, March 12, 1862; "Destructive Fire in Helena—Two Blocks in Ashes," *Helena Weekly Note-Book*, n.d., in the *Arkansas State Gazette*, March 8, 1862.

⁴⁷ "Destructive Fire in Helena—Two Blocks in Ashes"; Ross, *Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years*, 365-366, 369-371; *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 816-818; Doris Land Mueller, *M. Jeff Thompson: Missouri's Swamp Fox of the Confederacy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 56-57; Donald J. Stanton, Goodwin F. Berquist, and Paul C. Bowers, eds., *The Civil War Reminiscences of General M. Jeff Thompson* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1988), 149-152 [quotation on p. 152]. The February 8, 1862, issue of the *Helena Southern Shield*, which had only two pages (as opposed to the usual four), is the last surviving wartime issue of the newspaper. The paper continued to be published until at least April, however, because in that month, the *Arkansas State Gazette* printed one of its river reports. Shortly thereafter, the *Southern Shield* appears to have been discontinued, probably because of the Union occupation of Helena in the summer of 1862. On August 30, 1862, the newspaper was resurrected by U.S. military authorities, who understandably endorsed a unionist perspective and accordingly

As Thompson and his men mobilized in Helena, the natural environment again wreaked havoc on the county's war-weary citizenry. In March, the waters of the Mississippi started to rise—as they often did at that time of year—and by the end of the month, they had breached the levee below Friars Point. The river continued to surge in early April, eventually rupturing the earthworks on both sides of the Mississippi below Helena. An estimated \$800,000 had been spent on one those levees, but the forces of nature proved undeterred by that price tag. Interestingly, Helenians benefited from these downriver breaks, which lowered the waters at their wharf by several inches. Thus, on April 5, they remained optimistic about their prospects for staying dry. “Thanks to the Mayor and levee committee, our city is yet free from overflow,” a local newspaper reported. “We think the river will not rise any more at present, as the breaks will take off most if not all the water to come out of the St. Francis.” The author pled ignorance about the condition of the Mississippi upriver of Helena, however, because the “war times” had prevented him from acquiring any “reliable information from above.”⁴⁸

The author's war-induced ignorance did not produce bliss, for the following month, the Mississippi swelled to historic levels and inundated Phillips County. By late May, floodwaters “stood three feet deep on many of the first floors of the stores and dwellings in Helena,” and “the water was all over the country for many miles, all the plantations being thoroughly drowned out, with the June rise still to come.” The overflow washed away a Baptist preacher's rental house in

renamed it *The Shield*. After the war, longtime editor Q. K. Underwood restarted the paper under its former name. See “River News,” *Helena Southern Shield*, April 5, 1862, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 12, 1862; *The Shield*, August 30 and September 6, 1862; “Our Helena Correspondence,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 20, 1865; and *Helena Southern Shield*, June 11, 1870.

⁴⁸ *Helena Southern Shield* river report, March 29, 1862, in *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 6, 1862; “River News,” *Helena Southern Shield*, April 5, 1862, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 12, 1862.

Helena and “so undermined another” that he could no longer lease it “without considerable expense.” Floodwaters also ruined most of the buildings in Old Town, a plantation community about twenty miles southwest of Helena. In August 1862, a Union soldier noted that “before the last freshet there was a large warehouse, two fine stores, a tavern and a shoeshop besides several dwelling houses” in Old Town. “’Twas a place of considerable trade,” he added, but thanks to the deluge, only a “little old log house” remained. Later Helenians remembered this “great flood of 1862,” during which the Mississippi rose to its highest level since 1815 and swamped some of the world’s most productive farmland. An 1865 newspaper described it as “the highest water ever known” in Helena.⁴⁹

Further compounding the townspeople’s suffering that spring, the rebel soldiers who occupied Helena were acting with impunity. According to one report, they confiscated all of the community’s beef cattle, burned all its cotton, and “rigidly” enforced conscription. In theory, their actions were legal because in March 1862 the Confederate Congress had sanctioned the destruction of cotton and other property in danger of falling into Union hands; the following month, it authorized the first national military draft in American history. The Confederate conscription act of April 1862 made all white males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five liable for three years of military service; it also extended by two years the commitment of men already serving who had, in good faith, volunteered for one year. In hindsight, the act was probably necessary for the Confederacy to survive beyond the summer of 1862, but many

⁴⁹ *Daily Missouri Democrat* (St. Louis), June 4, 1862, in “Arkansas Items,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1862; William Barksdale Journal, 10 May 1862, in “The Reverend William Henry Barksdale,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 15 (December 1976): 40; Charles E. Wilcox Diary, 18 August 1862, in Edgar L. Erickson, ed., “Hunting for Cotton in Dixie: From the Civil War Diary of Captain Charles E. Wilcox,” *Journal of Southern History* 4 (Nov. 1938): 502; “River News,” *Western Clarion* (Helena, Ark.), April 1, 1865; Gates, *Agriculture and the Civil War*, 120.

citizens viewed it as a violation of their civil liberties by a dangerous, distant government. Two shoemakers who fled Helena in the spring of 1862 reported that in consequence of conscription, flooding, and Confederate confiscation, the people of eastern Arkansas were suffering greatly and soon would starve if U.S. authorities did not send them food. Accordingly, they believed the region's residents "were looking for the approach of the Union troops with hardly concealed joy."⁵⁰

Unbeknownst to the people of Phillips County, U.S. troops were on the way, although ultimately, their presence provided little relief to local citizens. The Union brass found much to like in Helena's riverside location at the tip of Crowley's Ridge. As the only high ground on the Mississippi's western bank between the Gulf of Mexico and Missouri, the loess-capped ridge represented a strategic military position for anyone trying to control traffic on the river. The Confederates had tried to capitalize on Helena's natural advantages. At the outbreak of the war, rebel strategists assumed Union gunboats would use the Mississippi to invade the South, and although the Confederates could counter with iron- and timber-clad vessels of their own, they knew that northern industries would outproduce them. Therefore, to defend their heartland, the rebels relied primarily on fixed fortifications at key points along the Mississippi. Helena was one of those points. On April 17, 1861, almost three weeks before Arkansas seceded, the Confederate war department asked Governor Rector for permission to construct a defensive

⁵⁰ *Daily Missouri Democrat* (St. Louis), June 4, 1862, in "Arkansas Items," *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1862; *OR*, Ser. 4, vol. 3, p. 1066; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 118; Gallagher and Waugh, *The American War*, 54-55. U.S. naval commander J. A. Winslow also observed in June 1862 that the people around Helena were suffering because of conscription, the flood, and wartime restrictions on trade. U.S. Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. and index (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Ser. 1, vol. 23, pp. 244-245 (hereafter cited as *ORN* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted).

battery “at or near Helena” to obstruct a possible federal invasion. Rector gave his consent on April 29, even though a week later, he told Arkansas’s secession convention that the topography of eastern Arkansas was “inauspicious for defence [sic].”⁵¹

Helenians worried about their vulnerability to attack from the outset of war. In May 1861, they held a public meeting to petition Jefferson Davis to build a “strong and safe fort” upon “one of the eminences west of the city.” A week later, Confederate engineers arrived to superintend the construction of a battery near the town. A local newspaper lauded the engineers’ appearance and demanded that every planter in the region “send five, ten or twenty negroes” to “aid in this essential measure,” but apparently, the fort was never built. In February 1862, Senator Robert W. Johnson recommended to President Davis that fortifications be constructed at both Helena and the mouth of the Arkansas and White rivers. Such defenses, Johnson argued, would prevent the isolation of Confederates west of the Mississippi in case Memphis was captured. That same month, a rebel colonel also worried about the fate of the lower Mississippi if Memphis fell. Accordingly, he wanted the Confederates to erect “fortifications of a suitable character” at Helena and other strategic sites in the lower Mississippi valley. Interestingly, his plan depended on what the local ecosystem furnished. He called for enslaved men—freed from the onus of cultivating cotton thanks to the Confederacy’s wartime shift to corn and grain—to

⁵¹ Warren E. Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days: A Geographer’s View of the Vicksburg Campaign* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 477; Edwin C. Bearss, *Decision in Mississippi: Mississippi’s Important Role in the War Between the States* (Jackson, Miss.: Mississippi Commission on the War Between the States, 1962), 146; William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 28; James M. McPherson, *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 73; *OR*, vol. 1, pp. 685-686, 689; Message of Governor Henry Rector to the Arkansas secession convention, May 6, 1861, in *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas*, 153.

build casements using the region's ample timber supply and then cover them with earth and Bermuda sod, which would make them "impervious to shot or shell." Apparently, his plan was ignored. As late as June 1862, Confederate officers continued to reconnoiter the hills around Helena to select a site for defense batteries.⁵²

Without fortifications, Helena became easy prey for U.S. forces. Federal attempts to occupy the river town were delayed until the spring of 1862, when Union land and naval forces began their invasion of the South. In accordance with Union strategy, this invasion hinged on gaining control of the Mississippi River, "the backbone of the Rebellion and the key to the situation," according to President Lincoln. Between March and June, the Federals captured several Confederate bastions on the Mississippi above Helena, including New Madrid, Missouri, Island No. 10, Fort Pillow, and Memphis (Figure 1). In April, Union Admiral David Farragut's West Gulf Blockading Squadron entered the southernmost portion of the Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico, passed Forts Jackson and St. Phillip, and captured the most important city in the Confederacy outside of Richmond, New Orleans. By late May, Farragut's fleet had seized Baton Rouge and Natchez, Mississippi, and on May 18, it reached Vicksburg, where it began a siege of the Mississippi port.⁵³

In March 1862, Union Major General Henry W. Halleck, then commander of the Department of the Missouri, did his part to try to secure the Mississippi River by land. He

⁵² *Helena Weekly Note-Book*, May 30, 1861, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 8, 1861; *OR*, vol. 53, pp. 785-786, vol. 8, pp. 812-813, vol. 13, pp. 814-815; *ORN*, vol. 22, pp. 829-830; T. C. Hindman to Gen. Daniel Ruggles, 4 June 1862, in Copybook of Telegraphic Dispatches from Thomas Hindman's command, 2 June – 9 Oct., 1862, p. 7, Peter Wellington Alexander Papers, Box 9, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, online at the Springfield-Greene County Library (Springfield, Mo.), "Community & Conflict: The Impact of the Civil War in the Ozarks" Collection, <http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/> (accessed May 2, 2017).

⁵³ Shea and Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key*, 1, 8-16; David Dixon Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1885), 172.

instructed Brigadier General Frederick Steele, who was operating in southeast Missouri, to invade Arkansas, destroy enemy stores, and proceed to Helena. Once there, Steele was to fortify the town and cut off all Confederate steamboat communication with Memphis. Halleck believed Steele's expedition, "if successful, [would] be one of the most important of the whole campaign."⁵⁴

Steele's column did not occupy Helena in March 1862. Instead, it would eventually converge upon the port town later that summer, and it would not make the journey alone. Shortly after its victory at the battle of Pea Ridge in northwest Arkansas on March 6-7, 1862, Major General Samuel R. Curtis's Army of the Southwest began marching east along the Missouri-Arkansas border (Figure 4). Curtis initiated the movement on April 5, after learning that his adversary at Pea Ridge—Confederate Major General Earl Van Dorn, who was encamped in Van Buren, Arkansas—had begun moving his defeated army east. Curtis worried that the Confederates, fresh off their failed attempt to invade Missouri from northwestern Arkansas, were threatening to try again from the northeastern part of the state. In actuality, Van Dorn had no such plan. He had orders to move his army across the Mississippi River at Memphis and join forces with General Albert Sidney Johnston's army at Corinth, Mississippi. Together, Van Dorn and Johnston hoped to annihilate General Ulysses S. Grant's army at Pittsburg Landing, on the Tennessee River, and shift the balance of power in the Western Theater in the Confederacy's favor.⁵⁵

When he learned of Van Dorn's movement, Curtis wasted little time shifting his army to protect Missouri's southern border. After receiving Halleck's approval, he led his men across

⁵⁴ *OR*, vol. 8, pp. 578-580.

⁵⁵ William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess, *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 284-291.

the rugged Ozark Plateau of southern Missouri. Proceeding eastward from Cassville to West Plains, Missouri, the Army of the Southwest endured great hardships as it navigated the Ozark Plateau's rocky peaks and flooded valleys. During the course of their journey, Halleck learned about the intended terminus of Van Dorn's movement. Relieved that Missouri was no longer threatened, he instructed Curtis to take the offensive and invade northeastern Arkansas. On May 2, Curtis occupied Batesville, Arkansas, on the White River, and two days later, he joined forces with Steele, whose column had moved out of southeastern Missouri and captured Jacksonport, twenty-five miles southeast of Batesville. After incorporating Steele's troops with his army, Curtis was to march to Memphis, where he would combine forces with a Union flotilla on the Mississippi and converge upon the Tennessee port in a combined army-naval operation. However, when flooded fields made the region between Jacksonport and Memphis impassable, Halleck altered his plans and instructed Curtis to march on Little Rock instead. Once he controlled Arkansas's capital, Curtis was to take over the state government and declare martial law.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, heavy spring rains slowed Van Dorn's movement across Arkansas to a snail's pace. By the time his army reached Corinth in mid-April 1862, the battle of Shiloh was over, General Johnston was dead, and the Confederates had suffered a devastating defeat.

⁵⁶ Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 291-296; William L. Shea, "1862: 'A Continual Thunder,'" in *Rugged and Sublime*, 41; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 53. On Curtis's remarkable post-Pea Ridge march across Arkansas, see Robert G. Schultz, *The March to the River: From the Battle of Pea Ridge to Helena, Spring 1862* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Publishing, 2014); and William L. Shea, "A Semi-Savage State: The Image of Arkansas in the Civil War," in *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders*, ed. Anne J. Bailey and Daniel E. Sutherland (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 85-100. Shea contends that many of the negative stereotypes about Arkansas were reinforced by the writings of Curtis's Midwestern soldiers, who, in the spring of 1862, marched through a foreign (and seemingly backward) land and shared their observations with friends, family, and newspapers back home.

Perhaps more significant than Van Dorn's tardiness, however, was the void his movement left in the Trans-Mississippi Theater. In addition to moving some 15,000 troops out of Arkansas, Van Dorn had transferred nearly all of the Confederate weapons, stores, and ammunition out of the department for use east of the Mississippi. Consequently, Confederate Arkansas stood unable to defend itself against Union invasion. The ranking rebel in Arkansas summed up the state's predicament in a letter to his superior: "No troops—no arms—no powder—no material of war—people everywhere eager to rise, complaints bitter." Outraged at the abandonment, Governor Rector complained to Jefferson Davis and even threatened Arkansan secession from the Confederacy. To quell dissatisfaction and stabilize the situation west of the Mississippi, the Confederates called on a soldier familiar to all Arkansans: Thomas Hindman.⁵⁷

Since leaving Arkansas in the fall of 1861, Hindman, Cleburne, and their Confederate compatriots had clashed with Union armies in both Kentucky and Tennessee. At the battle of Shiloh, Hindman—whose superiors unanimously praised his performance in the engagement—severely injured his leg when his horse was shot from under him. He received a leave of absence to recuperate in Helena, and, in late April 1862, was temporarily reunited with his wife and children, including an infant son who had been born during his absence. While convalescing at home, he also learned of his promotion to major general, thus capping a meteoric rise from the

⁵⁷ Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 296-297; Shea, "1862," in *Rugged and Sublime*, 38-39; Bobby L. Roberts, "General T. C. Hindman and the Trans-Mississippi District," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1973): 298-302; John S. Roane to P. G. T. Beauregard, 10 May 1862, quoted in Shea, "1862," 38. Carl Moneyhon argues that Rector's threat to secede from the Confederacy stemmed from Richmond's longstanding failure to protect Arkansas dating back to the beginning of the war. Moneyhon contends that Van Dorn's departure, though unquestionably "the most immediate catalyst" for Rector's threat, was the final affront in a "longer and more nuanced story" about the Confederacy's inability to defend its borders and disagreements over "the rights of the state versus those of the central government in time of war." See Moneyhon, "Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy," 357-380 [quotation on p. 358].

rank of colonel in only a year. Sufficiently recovered by early May, Hindman rejoined the Army of the Mississippi at Corinth on May 10, just as Curtis's army was threatening Little Rock. The general had barely settled into his old command when he received orders to return to his home state to command the Confederacy's Trans-Mississippi District.⁵⁸

Hindman wasted little time in assuming his new command. From Corinth, he traveled to Memphis, where he confiscated weapons, shoes, blankets, and other "camp equipage" for the army he planned to build. He also purchased medicines, and, with his superior's apparent permission, impressed \$1 million in Confederate currency. From Memphis, he proceeded down the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Arkansas. Along the way, he "caused large quantities of cotton to be burned, pursuant to the order of the War Department on that subject, to prevent it from falling into the hands of the enemy." He also made a quick stop at Helena, where, in typical fashion, he "seized all the ammunition, shoes, blankets, and most valuable medicines held for sale." While there, he also arranged for his wife and children to join him in Little Rock, which the general reached on May 30. "I found here almost nothing," he complained to the Confederate war department. "Nearly everything of value was taken away by General Van Dorn." Nevertheless, the following day, Hindman announced, with his usual flair, that he had come "to drive out the invader or to perish in the attempt." With Curtis's army threatening and precious little time to organize an army, Hindman vigorously enforced conscription, declared martial law, and called for the formation of militia groups and guerrilla bands to attack the invading Federals and lay waste to the landscape on which they subsisted.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 93-117; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 55; Roberts, "Thomas C. Hindman, Jr.," 72-76; *OR*, vol. 52, pt. 2, p. 303, vol. 10, pt. 2, p. 510, vol. 13, pp. 28, 829.

⁵⁹ *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 28-29, 833, 830; Neal and Kremm, *Lion of the South*, 117-118; Roberts, "General T. C. Hindman and the Trans-Mississippi District," 302-311; Daniel E.

Hindman's draconian measures ultimately proved unpopular in Arkansas, but victory remained paramount in the general's mind. During his sixty days in command of the Trans-Mississippi, he tolerated no compromise, not even in his hometown. When, in early June, Hindman learned that federal gunboats were plying toward Helena, he ordered the provost marshal there to "[b]urn, immediately, every bale of cotton in Phillips County," arrest those who had hidden their crop, and send them to Little Rock, where they would be "delt [sic] with as traitors." At the same time, he instructed the provost to confiscate all powder, lead, percussion caps, cartridge paper, and quinine in the town and send them to Little Rock.⁶⁰ Ten days later, when Hindman learned that Union troops might capture Helena, he ordered a colonel in Phillips County to attack the Federals "at all times, by day and night," even if it caused civilian casualties. "Allow no threats of shelling or burning Helena, or doing any other injury, to prevent you from striking the enemy, whenever you can," the general instructed. "Use all rigor and report often." Union forces did not capture Helena in mid-June, but less than a week later, Hindman learned that some of the town's citizens were refusing to accept Confederate currency. In response, he told the Confederate commander in Phillips County to notify Helenians that if they allowed "such conduct to prevail in the future," their town would be "burned to ashes." Union sailors who patrolled the Mississippi at Helena reported seeing men hiding near the

Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 66-70.

⁶⁰ Roberts, "General T. C. Hindman and the Trans-Mississippi District," 302; T. C. Hindman to Col. A. C. Robertson, 6 June 1862, in Copybook of Telegraphic Dispatches from Thomas Hindman's command, 2 June – 9 Oct., 1862, p. 15, Peter Wellington Alexander Papers, "Community & Conflict," <http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/> (accessed May 4, 2017).

riverbank and “flying from the conscription act,” a predictable response to Hindman’s severe policies.⁶¹

Meantime, Curtis’s advance had stalled. As his army moved closer to Little Rock, its supply line—which originated three hundred miles to the north in Rolla, Missouri—stretched to its breaking point. Furthermore, Confederate resolve was strengthening under Hindman’s command, as rebel guerrilla and militia bands constantly harassed the overextended Army of the Southwest. After coming within forty miles of the capital, Curtis was forced to halt. He backtracked to Batesville, where he hoped to be resupplied by a federal flotilla from Memphis that was moving up the White River. Unfortunately for the Federals, the fleet never made it to Batesville. On June 17, it encountered stiff rebel resistance at St. Charles. During the fight, Confederate shots struck the steam drum on the Union ironclad *Mound City*, killing or severely wounding most of its 175-man crew. Although the rest of the flotilla managed to escape, it was eventually halted by low water near Clarendon, well downstream from Batesville. Nature, it seemed, was colluding with Hindman and the Confederates.⁶²

⁶¹ R. C. Newton to Col. Albert Johnson, 16 June 1862 and 21 June 1862, Copybook of Orders and Letters from Thomas Hindman's Command, 11 June – 30 Dec. 1862, pp. 29, 51, Peter Wellington Alexander Papers, “Community & Conflict,” <http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/> (accessed May 4, 2017); *ORN*, vol. 23, p. 241.

⁶² Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 297-300; Shea, “1862,” in *Rugged and Sublime*, 41-42; Shea and Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key*, 21; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 57. On the failed Union mission to resupply Curtis on the White River, see Edwin C. Bearss, “The White River Expedition, June 10 – July 15, 1862,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 21 (Winter 1962): 305-362. Carl Moneyhon contends that low water on the White River “may bear greater credit” for stopping Curtis’s advance on Little Rock than Hindman’s actions. See Moneyhon, “Governor Henry Rector and the Confederacy,” 378-379. Anna Pfeifler notes that the White River usually drops to its lowest levels between June and September, and thus, the Union supply flotilla plied toward Curtis just as the White was beginning to fall. She contends that falling water and Hindman’s guerrillas thwarted Curtis’s march. Anna Ruth Pfeifler, “River of Conflict: The White River during the Civil War” (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 2010), 25, 37.

Desperate for provisions, Curtis decided to cut his Rolla supply line and march his army along the White River to meet the grounded convoy. For the next two weeks, his troops foraged and pillaged everything in sight, devastating the eastern Arkansas countryside and waging war on its economy. According to the *Arkansas State Gazette*, “No country ever was, or ever can be, worse devastated and laid waste than that which has been occupied, and marched over, by the Federal army. Every thing which could be eaten by hungry horses or men has been devoured, and not content with foraging upon the country, almost every thing which could not be eaten was destroyed.” All the while, Curtis’s troops struggled mightily to survive the region’s harsh summer temperatures and wet, low-lying terrain. One Illinois cavalryman described the Delta sun as being so hot that the troops knew “how it [was] in haydes.” Another soldier called eastern Arkansas a “wooded wilderness of fever nests and mosquito pests,” while an Illinois officer labeled the region between Batesville and Helena “the most backward in civilization and cultivation of any we saw in the South.” The Army of the Southwest was the first Union army to operate without a base of supplies during the Civil War. Such a daring feat would not be repeated for almost a year, when Grant’s army undertook similar actions during the Vicksburg campaign.⁶³

As Curtis’s army trudged across the Arkansas Delta, it attracted a number of unexpected followers. Several hundred “loyal residents of Arkansas” joined the column at Batesville; they “demanded that arms be given them” to form a Union regiment, and Curtis complied, eventually

⁶³ Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 300-301; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 57-58; Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 128-129; *Arkansas State Gazette*, July 19, 1862; Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” in *Civil War Arkansas*, 93-94; Samuel Black, *A Soldier’s Recollections of the Civil War* (Minco, Okla.: Minco Minstrel, 1911–1912), 16; James M. Miller et al., *History of the Sixteenth Battery of Ohio Volunteer Light Artillery, U.S.A.* (1906), 18-19.

forming the Arkansas Six Months Infantry Volunteers.⁶⁴ More significantly, an estimated 2,000 slaves fled to Union lines during the march. “We have been marching through vast plantations of cotton and corn where the negroes swarm by thousands,” Curtis informed his wife. “They are all delighted to see us, and all want to go with us. They are entirely indifferent, or delighted, to see the masters suffer either as prisoners or as contributors.” A Little Rock newspaper accused Curtis of stealing these men, women, and children from Arkansas planters, but in many cases, the enslaved people—drawn by the presence of soldiers in blue—stole their own bodies from their so-called masters.⁶⁵ “On our march the negroes had fairly swarmed around us, coming from every mansion, log cabin, and habitable place in the whole region,” an Illinois cavalryman remembered. “So excited a body of humanity never was seen before; here was the realization of the hopes of liberty which they had kept alive for years.” Abraham Lincoln would not issue his final Emancipation Proclamation for another six months, but black Arkansans believed the Army of the Southwest had come to liberate them. “The slaves seem to understand the matter very clearly and are on the alert to make escape by any opportunity,” an Illinois soldier reported. Many of the Midwesterners in Curtis’s column witnessed slavery on a large scale for the first

⁶⁴ “The Federal Army in Arkansas,” *Louisville Daily Journal*, n.d., in *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 2, 1862; “News of the Day; The Rebellion,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1862; Schultz, *The March to the River*, 306-309.

⁶⁵ *Arkansas State Gazette*, July 19, 1862; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 60-61; Samuel Curtis to My Dear Wife, 14 July 1862, Samuel R. Curtis Papers, Box 10, Vol. VII, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. Renowned abolitionist (and former slave) Frederick Douglass famously described an enslaved person’s act of running away as stealing away one’s body. See, for example, Frederick Douglass, “The Horrors of Slavery and England’s Duty to Free the Bondsman: An Address Delivered in Taunton, England, on September 1, 1846,” *Somerset County Gazette*, September 5, 1846, in John W. Blassingame et al., eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 1: 1841-46* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 372-373. Some sources claim that as many as six thousand runaways joined Curtis’s march. See, for example, “From Curtis’ Column,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1862; and Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” in *Civil War Arkansas*, 95.

time. “It was a country of large plantations with armies of strange looking negroes who streamed into our camps and attached themselves to our columns,” recalled one officer. “They were the most wretched lot of human beings that we boys had ever seen. We were short of supplies ourselves, but we had to share what we had with these strange camp followers.” In some cases, the slaves returned the favor, clearing rebel barricades and sharing valuable intelligence and food with the famished soldiers. On the outskirts of Helena, slaves reportedly lined the road and handed boiled ears of corn to passing troops.⁶⁶

Curtis did not encourage enslaved Arkansans to join his march, but he did not discourage them from doing so, either. As a former Republican Congressman from Iowa with antislavery sentiments, he certainly sympathized with their plight. However, he had thousands of tired and hungry soldiers to provide for, and they remained his primary responsibility. Still, Curtis had encountered numerous man-made obstacles during his march across Arkansas, and upon further investigation, he learned that many of those obstructions had been built by the very people who sought his assistance. According to the First Confiscation Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in August 1861, all slaves “employed in or upon any fort, navy yard, dock, armory, ship, entrenchment, or in any military or naval service” to the Confederacy were “subject of prize and capture wherever found.” Although the act did not explicitly free slaves employed by Confederates, it nullified their owners’ claims to their labor, so Curtis believed it authorized him to act.⁶⁷ An accomplished attorney, Curtis also reasoned that slaves were, by definition,

⁶⁶ Edward A. Davenport, *History of the Ninth Regiment Illinois Cavalry Volunteers* (Chicago: Donahue & Henneberry, 1888), 49; Edward Ingraham to Wife, 12 May 1862, quoted in Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” in *Civil War Arkansas*, 95; Othman A. Abbott, *Recollections of a Pioneer Lawyer* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1929), 40; “From Curtis’ Column”; Black, *A Soldier’s Recollections of the Civil War*, 17.

⁶⁷ Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” in *Civil War Arkansas*, 95; Berlin et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*

captives. Thus, when he seized them in warfare, they “became captured captives and therefore subject to [his] disposal instead of a former captor or assignee.” Using this logic, he issued freedom certificates to all slaves who proved they had been “engaged in the rebel service.” His so-called “free papers” declared these slaves to be “contraband of war” and, as such, he “forever emancipated” them.⁶⁸ Word of Curtis’s actions spread quickly along the slaves’ grapevine telegraph, and in the months ahead, thousands more flocked to Union lines to secure their freedom and have it validated.⁶⁹

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 25, 16, 259; “Important from Arkansas,” *New York Herald*, July 20, 1862; Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 141-142; *OR*, vol. 13, p. 525; Samuel Prentis Curtis, “The Army of the South-West, and the First Campaign in Arkansas, Chapter Twelfth & Thirteenth,” *Annals of Iowa* 1868, no. 4 (1868): 256-257; Samuel Prentis Curtis, “The Army of the South-West, and the First Campaign in Arkansas, Chapter Fifteenth (pt. 2) & Chapter Sixteenth—Appendix,” *Annals of Iowa* 1869, no. 3 (1869): 209, 217; Black, *A Soldier’s Recollections of the Civil War*, 16; A. W. Sanford, “Eighth Indiana Correspondence,” 25 July 1862, in *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, August 23, 1862.

⁶⁸ Samuel Ryan Curtis, “Journal,” 21 May 1862, folder 3, Samuel Ryan Curtis Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill. For an example of a “free paper” issued by Curtis, see Berlin et al., *Freedom*, series 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, 292; and *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 876-877. Berlin et al. contend that Curtis issued freedom certificates on the basis of the First Confiscation Act, and the language of the certificates suggests this was the case. See Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, 25, 292. However, Curtis’s private journal—and his foremost biographers—suggest otherwise. Terry Beckenbaugh argues that Curtis used the “captured captive” argument to justify his actions, while William Shea contends that the general “struck at slavery in Arkansas on his own authority or, more accurately, without any legal authority at all.” See Terry Lee Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics: Samuel Ryan Curtis, Race and the Political/Military Establishment” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2001), 30-31, 38-39, 53-54, 121-123; and Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” in *Civil War Arkansas*, 255n28. In a later work, Shea noted Curtis’s “captured captive” rationale. Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 384n48. Beckenbaugh also argues that Curtis’s “liberal racial beliefs” were the main reason why he attracted a number of enemies (in both the military and the U.S. government), some of whom accused him of profiting from an illegal cotton trade while in command at Helena in the summer of 1862.

⁶⁹ The historiographical debate over who freed American slaves is a contentious one. For succinct summaries of the debate, see Gallagher, *The Union War*, 147-150; and James McPherson, “How Did Freedom Come?” in McPherson, *The War that Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97-107. Some historians argue that enslaved people self-emancipated. See, for example, Barbara J. Fields, “Who Freed the Slaves?” in Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New

Curtis's distribution of free papers infuriated Hindman and the Confederates, who tried frantically to halt the Union advance and end the destruction of their homeland. On June 24, Hindman called for all Arkansans residing near the White River to resist the Yankees in a guerrilla war:

Attack him day and night, kill his scouts and pickets, kill his pilots and his troops on transports, cut off his wagon trains, lay in ambush and surprise his detachments, shoot his mounted officers, destroy every pound of meat and flour, every ear of corn and stack of fodder, oats and wheat that can fall into his hands; fell trees, as thickly as in rafts, in all the road before him, burn every bridge and block up the fords. Hang upon his front, flanks and rear, and make the ring of your rifles and shot-guns the accompaniment of every foot of his retreat.⁷⁰

Many civilians ignored Hindman's request for what must have sounded to them like economic suicide, for the general later lamented, "My instructions for devastating the country were not executed." However, Hindman's troops complied. He ordered them to "resist the enemy to the last extremity blockading roads, burning bridges, destroying all supplies, growing crops

York: Knopf, 1990). Others credit Abraham Lincoln and Union policymakers for ending slavery. See, for example, James McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" in McPherson, *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 192-207. Still others point to the Union army as the primary "agent of liberation." See Gallagher, *The Union War*, 108, 147-150 [quotation on p. 108]; and Berlin et al., "The Black Military Experience, 1861-1867," in *Slaves No More*, 189. Most historians now agree that emancipation was a complex process that hinged on the actions of numerous individuals, including U.S. officials, abolitionists, the Union army, and enslaved people. See, for example, Berlin et al., "The Destruction of Slavery, 1861-1865," in *Slaves No More*, 5-6; and Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans & the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7. Brasher also argues that "the issue of slaves fleeing to Union lines was less important in the debate over emancipation than was the military contribution of African Americans to both the North and the South." More specifically, slaves' contributions to the Confederate war effort as trench diggers, fortification builders, and soldiers during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign convinced many northerners to support emancipation as a military necessity. See Brasher, 1-7 [quotation on p. 7]. Curtis's experiences on his march through eastern Arkansas support Brasher's contention.

⁷⁰ T. C. Hindman, "To the Citizens of Arkansas," June 24, 1862, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 28, 1862; "From Arkansas," *North American and United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), July 18, 1862.

included, and polluting the water by killing cattle, ripping the carcasses, and throwing them in.”⁷¹ The Union soldiers subjected to these scorched-earth tactics suffered immensely. One recalled that during the march, he and his comrades “suffered mor [sic] for water than anything else. On every plantation there [were] generely [sic] two or three wells which might have afforded us tolerably cool water,” he continued, “but our enemies would break the buckets and fill up the wells with logs and dirt on our approach leaving only the muddy swamps and Bayous along the road[.] this water was perfectly hot and almost putrid for the secesh would drive hogs and cattle into these places and then shoot them and leave them to season the water for us to drink.” To survive the ordeal, the soldier sipped water that, prior to joining the army, he “would have been ashamed to offer to a hog.”⁷²

Still, Curtis’s column pressed forward. On July 7, a collection of Texas and Arkansas regiments failed to prevent the Yankees from crossing the Cache River, and by July 9, the Army of the Southwest had reached Clarendon. To their dismay, the Union soldiers found that the supply flotilla had already left Clarendon and moved downstream. Without provisions, Curtis knew that an attack on Little Rock would be impossible. Reasoning that the safety of his army was more important than the occupation of Little Rock, he decided that the Arkansas capital

⁷¹ Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas,” 25; “Military Movements in Arkansas,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, July 12, 1862; *OR*, vol. 13, p. 37; Daniel E. Sutherland argues that Hindman’s use of “independent companies”—though ostensibly legal thanks to the Confederate Congress’s Partisan Ranger Act of April 1862—sanctioned a guerrilla war in Arkansas that ultimately ravaged the state. See Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict*, 66-70; and Sutherland, “Guerrillas: The Real War in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Autumn 1993): 257-285.

⁷² John W. Burke to My Dear Sister, 22 July 1862 and 15 July 1862, John W. Burke Letters, January 23, 1862 – November 22, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Many of the men who marched to Helena noted the water problem. See, for example, Black, *A Soldier’s Recollections of the Civil War*, 16-17; “From Gen. Curtis’ Army,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 5, 1862; and “The War in Arkansas,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1862.

could be taken another day. On July 9, his army began a three-day, forty-five-mile march to Helena, where it would establish a new supply line on the Mississippi River. After three months and five hundred miles of marching, the Army of Southwest reached and occupied an undefended Helena on July 12, 1862.⁷³

Six months earlier, Q. K. Underwood, the longtime editor of the Helena *Southern Shield*, commemorated his newspaper's twenty-second anniversary by bemoaning the "diabolical war" that consumed his country. Like many white southerners, he blamed Lincoln and the northern abolitionists for attempting to subjugate "to their unhallowed will a large number of their former fellow citizens, joint inheritors with them of the great legacy left them by the father's [sic] of the Republic, because they had the temerity to differ from them in their construction of the Constitution." A former Whig, Underwood also longed for the leadership of William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun, "that renowned host of intellectual giants" who, if alive, would have recoiled at what had befallen the United States. He beseeched his readers to look to those "illustrious sages" for guidance and to defend their liberties against the North's "yoke of hateful oppression." "Rather than submit to such a fate," he harangued, "it were better that every field were whitened with the bones of our people, every ear of corn and blade of grass consumed, leaving our beautiful country one vast desolation, 'A seething cauldron and a burning Hell.'" Tragically, Underwood would get much of what he wished for in the months ahead, as his and the devotion of fellow Helenians to the Confederate cause would be put to the ultimate test.⁷⁴

⁷³ Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 302-303; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 58-59. On the July 1862 battle at the Cache River, see William L. Shea, "The Confederate Defeat at Cache River," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Summer 1993): 129-155.

⁷⁴ "The 22d Anniversary of the Establishment of the Southern Shield," *Helena Southern Shield*, February 8, 1862.

Chapter 4: Occupation

On July 11, 1862, at 2:00 a.m., a bugler blasted reveille. The signal startled the 2,500 Union cavalymen encamped at Clarendon, Arkansas, who slipped out of their bedrolls and packed their gear. After a paltry breakfast of “three crackers to each man,” the weary soldiers mounted their horses and hit the Little Rock Road. For weeks, they had been riding “through the enemy’s country,” where “on all sides there was hostility to the Union soldiers” courtesy of Confederate regulars, rebel guerrillas, antagonistic civilians, and the eastern Arkansas environment. The Federals and their horses had been living off the land, and nature had been unkind to them. Food and potable water were scarce, and the “country literally steamed with heat.” Moreover, many of the horses suffered from “Grease Heel,” a disease that attacks the horse’s feet “between the hoof and fetlock, separating and cracking open the skin.” One soldier observed that the animal’s feet heal quickly when they are properly cleaned and given dry ground to stand on, but there was little of that in the Delta.¹

At last, however, the cavalymen neared the end of their journey. Only sixty-five miles to their southeast lay Helena, a bustling port on the Mississippi River where they hoped to establish a new waterborne supply line. Led by former congressman (and future Wisconsin governor) Cadwallader C. Washburn, the horsemen were the van of General Samuel R. Curtis’s Army of the Southwest, which had been marching for more than three months. They were parched, hungry, and fatigued, but they rode all day and all night, stopping only once to feed and

¹ Rhonda M. Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War: The Fifth Illinois Cavalry, 1861-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 54; C. C. Washburn to Elihu B. Washburn, 15 July 1862, in Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Israel, Elihu and Cadwallader Washburn: A Chapter in American Biography* (New York: MacMillan, 1925), 336; Othman A. Abbott, *Recollections of a Pioneer Lawyer* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1929), 40.

water their horses. Consequently, some of the men “dropped from their horses” along the way, while “others laid quietly down by the roadside—quite a number to rise no more.”²

Twenty-eight hours after leaving Clarendon, the cavalry emerged from the “wilderness” and trotted into the streets of Helena, where they glimpsed the Mississippi River “with a delight almost equal to that of Hernando de Soto when he first gazed upon its turbid current.” No Confederate troops were present in the town, but many of the locals were surprised to see the Yankees. “Nobody was aware of our coming,” reported a newspaperman who accompanied the Union column. Still, some Helenians must have had a hunch. More than a month earlier, Thomas Hindman had ordered the town’s “publick stores and impressed property” moved in anticipation of the Federals’ arrival, and on June 24, he ordered the citizens of eastern Arkansas to wage a guerrilla war against Curtis’s army. Additionally, a number of Union boats had churned past Helena’s waterfront in recent weeks, including those that had attempted to resupply Curtis on the White River. Nothing, however, could have prepared Helenians for the full-blown invasion that commenced on July 12.³

² “Important from Arkansas,” *New York Herald*, July 20, 1862; Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War*, 54; Edward A. Davenport, *History of the Ninth Regiment Illinois Cavalry Volunteers* (Chicago: Donahue & Henneberry, 1888), 51.

³ “The War in Arkansas,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1862; “Important from Arkansas”; Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War*, 54; Frederick Winslow to Samuel Curtis, 12 July 1862, Samuel R. Curtis Papers, Box 10, Vol. VII, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines (hereafter cited as Curtis Papers, SHSI); T. C. Hindman to A. C. Robertson, 6 June 1862, in Copybook of Telegraphic Dispatches from Thomas Hindman’s command, 2 June – 9 Oct., 1862, p. 18, Peter Wellington Alexander Papers, Box 9, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, online at the Springfield-Greene County Library (Springfield, Mo.), “Community & Conflict: The Impact of the Civil War in the Ozarks” Collection, <http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/> (accessed May 9, 2017); T. C. Hindman, “To the Citizens of Arkansas,” June 24, 1862, in *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 28, 1862. On the Union boats that passed by (and moored near) Helena prior to the Army of the Southwest’s arrival, see, for example, U.S. Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. and index (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Ser. 1, vol. 23, pp. 241, 244-245 (hereafter cited as *ORN* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted); and

As the Yankee cavalry charged into town, they spotted a boat steaming away from the riverbank. Its passengers, who included a “few negroes and citizens,” may have been attempting a last-minute escape. To stop this, the soldiers hauled a brass howitzer onto the levee and fired several four-pound shots over the ship’s bow. When the ferryman on the Mississippi shore saw the excitement, he refused to let the steamboat dock, so its unnerved captain waved a white flag and returned to Helena’s wharf, where Union troops detained the passengers and examined their belongings. Meanwhile, in accordance with his orders, Washburn established a supply line. He “hailed the first Boat and sent to Memphis for supplies,” and he dispatched a second ship to find the “lost fleet” on the White River. After attending to the welfare of his exhausted troops—some of whom literally fell from their saddles upon reaching camp—Washburn took up his headquarters at “the splendid residence of Genl. Hindman,” a profoundly symbolic act given all that the rebel general had done to thwart his advance. Hindman’s home, one of the finest in Helena, was a two-story brick structure “built on ground so high as to be always above the highest overflow of the river.” It was surrounded by a white picket fence that enclosed a lawn sheltered by “some shady beach trees with sweeping limbs and thick shade.” The proud Yankees hoisted a U.S. flag above the roof of the house, thus capping their conquest of Confederate Arkansas’s most prominent Mississippi port. “The Stars and stripes float to the wind on the Mississippi at Helena,” boasted the army’s quartermaster.⁴

Symmes E. Brown to My own very, very dear Love, 14 June 1862, in John D. Milligan ed., *From the Fresh-Water Navy: 1861-1864: The Letters of Acting Master’s Mate Henry R. Browne and Acting Ensign Symmes E. Browne* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1970), 90-92.

⁴ “The War in Arkansas”; Charles Edward Nash, *Biographical Sketches of Gen. Pat Cleburne and Gen. T. C. Hindman* (Little Rock: Tunnah & Pittard, 1898), 178; “Important from Arkansas”; William Fayel report, *Daily Missouri Democrat*, July 17, 1862, in Robert G. Schultz, *The March to the River: From the Battle of Pea Ridge to Helena, Spring 1862* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Publishing, 2014), 304-305; C. C. Washburn to Elihu B. Washburn, 15 July 1862, in

Over the next three days, the remainder of the Army of the Southwest, including its commander Curtis, trickled into town. The infantry's march to Helena was just as grueling as the cavalry's had been. "We had no blankets for the night, no food for the day, no decent water to drink," an Illinois soldier recalled. "During the entire day the only water we could get was from one swamp we passed. In that, the thick green scum, from an eighth to a quarter of an inch thick had to be pushed away before we could get to the filthy, poisonous water beneath. We were tired and worn out, foot-sore, sick and hungry. That was soldiering in earnest." Inevitably, some of the troops did not make it to Helena, and many who did arrived in wagons and ambulances. "Back for miles the sides of the road were strewn with our sick and exhausted soldiers," the Illinoisan continued. "Full three fourths, if not more, of the entire command were thus lying upon the road side. . . . It took two or three days after we arrived to bring in our worn-out and sick soldiers. The first thing being, of course, to send back food to distribute to them along the road."⁵

That food came from federal steamboats on the Mississippi River, the army's new lifeline. It was a godsend to the famished troops, who rushed to the riverbank to receive their rations. "Never was a vessel more thankfully received than this one bringing relief to us in our destitute and starving condition," one soldier recalled. Shortly after the Federals arrived in

Hunt, ed., *Israel, Elihu and Cadwallader Washburn*, 336-337; Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War*, 54; James B. Loughney to Very Dear Brother Matthew, 15 April 1863, James B. Lockney [Loughney] Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; "Gen. Curtis' Army; Progress of the War in Arkansas," *New York Times*, August 22, 1862; Frederick Winslow to Samuel Curtis, 12 July 1862, Curtis Papers, Box 10, Vol. VII, SHSI.

⁵ Samuel R. Curtis account of military history prepared for Col. E. D. Townsend, February 28, 1865, pp. 58-59, Box 4, Folder 1, Curtis Papers, SHSI; Albert O. Marshall, *Army Life. From a Soldier's Journal. Incidents, Sketches and Record of a Union Soldier's Army Life, in Camp and Field, 1861-64*, ed. Robert G. Schultz (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 94-95; "From Curtis' Column," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1862.

Helena, an Indiana cavalryman reported that “20,000 persons assembled on the bank to behold the sight” of a steamboat. “The brass band was there a few National airs then the shouts of the soldiers wrent the air, as the white handkerchiefs waved in return.” Another Yankee remembered a more chaotic scene, as hungry soldiers stampeded the riverbank to fill their bellies: “On the levee there had been several boxes of hard bread opened, and about five or six bushels were broken up very fine and trodden into the dirt and mud. Our poor boys saw them, and broke ranks in the wildest confusion, and such devouring of dirty food would have melted a heart of stone. Our general witnessed the sight and wept like a child.”⁶

The hard bread that the troops gorged was a standard army ration called hardtack, a three-inch square cracker made of flour, water, and salt that was, as the name suggests, rather rigid. In fact, soldiers sometimes soaked it in water or coffee to avoid breaking their teeth. Hardtack arrived at Helena’s wharf in boxes labeled “B. C.,” meaning “Brigade Commissary,” but one soldier assumed it meant “‘baked before Christ,’ which seemed applicable as [the crackers] were infested with worms.” The army’s rations were “not good,” he recalled, but after weeks of foraging in the wilderness, they were certainly “better than starvation.”⁷

Starvation was exactly what faced the estimated 2,000 runaway slaves who accompanied Curtis’s column to Helena. Most fled to Union lines voluntarily, but some had been dispatched

⁶ Samuel Prentis Curtis, “The Army of the South-West, and the First Campaign in Arkansas, Chapter Fifteenth (pt. 2) & Chapter Sixteenth—Appendix,” *Annals of Iowa* 1869, no. 3 (1869): 217; Marshall, *Army Life*, 95; Floyd Thurman to Dear Brother [Marion Thurman], 15 July 1862, Thurman Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis; “From Gen. Curtis’ Army,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 5, 1862

⁷ Thomas E. Rodgers, “Billy Yank,” *Essential Civil War Curriculum*, <http://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/billy-yank.html> (accessed May 19, 2017); Samuel Black, *A Soldier’s Recollections of the Civil War* (Minco, Okla.: Minco Minstrel, 1911–1912), 19. For a Union soldier’s description of hardtack and other army rations, see John D. Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee, or the Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Boston: George M. Smith & Co., 1888), chap. 7.

by their owners, who, on account of the war, found themselves unable to feed their slaves. The Federals gave the African Americans what rations they could; they also employed them as cooks, teamsters, construction workers, laundresses, grave-diggers, guides, wood-choppers, hospital aids, and personal servants, though, in the months ahead, much of their work went uncompensated. Still, slaves continued to flock to federal lines, and Curtis kept freeing all who could prove they had been employed by the Confederates (the burden of proof required by the general was allegedly rather low). On July 15, for example, Curtis “forever emancipated” “David Bostwick and Family, colored persons formerly slaves,” who, “by direction of their owner,” had been “engaged in the rebel service.” The general declared them to be “contraband of war” and granted them permission to pass through Union pickets and go north. Two weeks later, Curtis noted that on account of his policy, slaves were “throwing down their axes” and rushing into Helena to acquire free papers. “It is creating a general stampede in this region of cotton and contempt for Yankees,” the general reported. “The slaves are mutinous, but do not abuse their masters. Society is terribly mutilated, and masters and slaves are afraid of famine.” Meanwhile, in Little Rock, Thomas Hindman heard rumors of slave insurrections in Monroe and Phillips counties. Exasperated, he ordered a subordinate in Pine Bluff to “Send a squadron under a discreet and reliable officer, to follow up track of the enemy, get as near Helena as possible. . . and preserve order among [the] slave population.”⁸

⁸ Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War*, 56; “The Federal Army in Arkansas,” *Louisville Daily Journal*, n.d., in *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 2, 1862; Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 137-140; C. C. Washburn to Maj. Gen. Curtis, 22 August 1862, in Berlin et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 660; “Curtis’ Free Papers,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 23, 1862; H. Z. Curtis, Special Order no. 30, 15 July 1862, Curtis Papers, Box 5, Vol. I, SHSI; U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and*

Unbeknownst to Hindman, the time for white Arkansans to control African Americans in the Delta was over. Only three days after Curtis reached Helena, the U.S. government's Second Confiscation Act proclaimed all slaves owned by rebel masters "forever free of their servitude" and declared that they be "not again held as slaves." Whereas the First Confiscation Act of August 1861 touched only those slaves employed in the Confederate service, the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862 effectually freed all who entered Union lines and claimed that their owners were disloyal. In the months ahead, the number of enslaved Arkansans (and Mississippians) who declared this at Helena swelled into the thousands.⁹

The white residents of Phillips County could not control their Union invaders, either. As Curtis's soldiers poured into Helena, they seized private residences, businesses, lumber, and anything else they needed to establish their barracks. Washburn politely relinquished the Hindman house to his commanding officer, and the rest of troops took much of what they wanted from the locals. "The arrival of Curtis' army was a complete surprise to the people of Helena," one newspaper reported, "and when the immense body filed into the town, and occupied every road and lane leading to and from it, great was the terror of the inhabitants." William Barksdale, a Baptist preacher in Helena, decried the Federals' demolition of his rental houses, which he believed the soldiers "devoured . . . for the purpose of making their fires at camp." Two months earlier, Mississippi floodwaters had damaged his houses, and the troops came in and finished the

Confederate Armies, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, vol. 13, pp. 525, 684 (hereafter cited as *OR* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted); T. C. Hindman to R. G. Shaver, 15 July 1862, in Copybook of Telegraphic Dispatches from Thomas Hindman's command, 2 June – 9 Oct., 1862, p. 233, Peter Wellington Alexander Papers, "Community & Conflict," <http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/> (accessed May 20, 2017).

⁹ Ira Berlin et al., "The Destruction of Slavery, 1861-1865," in *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 40-41.

job by stripping them of their weather-boarding, which they then hauled off and burned. On July 15, another fire erupted in Helena, and a portion of the town was destroyed. “Every where [the Yankees] are devouring and laying waste the labor of man’s hands,” Barksdale complained. “Our wives are not free from their insults—but they walk in armed with pistols and sabres, and thus compell [sic] with arms, our wives to cook for them!” An Indiana infantryman agreed that Helena had seen better days. On July 26, he reported, “Helenas about as miserable a looking place as I ever saw. What has been the best part of town is completely destroyed, whether by the rebels or through a[n] accident I dont know. The remaining houses are all deserted by their owners and are now occupied by Soldiers for different purposes.”¹⁰

Three months later, Union troops continued to requisition local buildings. “We are now in our winter quarters and it is a sight to look at, we have quite a town and most conceivable kind of house that one could imagine,” reported a soldier in late October 1862. “[B]ut in building up our houses we had to pull down the ancient city of Helena so that not a stone, brick or fence now be found within the former limits, even good houses have been sacrificed for the comfort of the 1st Brigade.”¹¹

¹⁰ Bobby Roberts, “‘Desolation Itself’: The Impact of the Civil War,” in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, ed. Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 76; C. C. Washburn to Elihu B. Washburn, 15 July 1862, in Hunt, ed., *Israel, Elihu and Cadwallader Washburn*, 336-337; *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 683-684; “The Federal Army in Arkansas”; Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 130; William Barksdale Journal, 19 July 1862, in “The Reverend William Henry Barksdale,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 15 (December 1976): 40; Civil War Diary of James H. Hougland, 15 July 1862, in “Indiana Troops: Part I,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 16 (March 1978): 21; Strew Emmons Letter, 9 August 1862, in Stewart Bennett and Barbara Tillery, eds., *The Struggle for the Life of the Republic: A Civil War Narrative by Brevet Major Charles Dana Miller, 76th Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004), 253n9; Sylvester C. Bishop to Dear Mother, 26 July 1862, in “Indiana Troops at Helena: Part III,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 17 (March 1979): 11.

¹¹ Henry G. Ankeny to My Dear [Fostina Ankeny], 27 October 1862, in Florence Marie Ankeny Cox, ed., *Kiss Josey for Me!* (Santa Anna, Calif.: Friis-Pioneer Press, 1974), 98-99. On

Federal soldiers also appropriated whatever they needed from the region surrounding Helena, laying waste to large swaths of the countryside while doing so. They confiscated crops and livestock from nearby farms, and they cut down trees and razed fences and cotton gins to obtain lumber for their quarters. “[I]t looks hard the way the farmers are served here,” empathized an Illinois cavalryman. “[T]he soldiers take the fence and turn the crop out and when they go for forage they find a cornfield drive in get what they want leave the fence down and go back[.] there is but few whites and the darkeys will suffer this winter[.]” The troops also looted valuables. In August 1862, a soldier stationed fifteen miles below Helena reported that local whites had abandoned their plantations and “left a lot of fine furniture” in their houses. “We tear everything upside down,” he confessed. “We don’t care for nothing. . . . [E]verything we want we take and ask nobody.” In consequence of such scavenging, William Barksdale observed that the country surrounding Helena was, “for miles around, swept by foraging parties. Farmers have both negroes and all kinds of stock stolen from them. Some of my dear brethren, are striped [sic] of nearly everything by these ruthless invaders. . . . It seems that Curtis’ army is bent upon starving out this county.”¹²

Barksdale believed that Union officers disapproved of the plundering, and he noted that “every family in town [was] compelled to keep a special guard” of troops to prevent pillaging.

Union soldiers’ destruction of southern houses, including their targeting of Confederate leaders’ homes, see Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), chap. 2.

¹² “Letter from the Eleventh Regiment,” 17 October 1862, *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, October 31, 1862; T. G. Larkin to Dearest Wife, 9 October 1862, Thomas George Larkin Letters, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Thaddeus Rice to My Dear Sister [Mary E. Rice], 11 August 1862, in Wilson Powell, ed., “Jacksonport’s ‘Arkansas Traveler’ and the Civil War Letters of Thaddeus Rice,” *Independence County Chronicle* 13 (July 1972): 11; Barksdale Journal, 19 July 1862, in “The Reverend William Henry Barksdale,” 40-41. On soldiers’ consumption of forests and transformation of southern landscapes, see Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, chap. 3.

Indeed, federal soldiers were stationed with a number of local families “to protect them and their property from molestation,” but they often neglected to do their duty. One man recalled that he and his comrades were ordered to guard a plantation about five miles from Helena, but they “did not protect it much.” As a case in point, they “did not prevent the soldiers from helping themselves to rebel chickens and garden stuff,” and they always “looked out for number one, you bet.” On August 15, the U.S. war department reminded troops about the rules for confiscating civilian property, including “the penalty of death for pillage or plundering,” but many ignored the warning.¹³

The story of the Pillow plantations illustrates what happened to many farms in Phillips County following the Army of the Southwest’s arrival, albeit on a large scale. Before the Civil War, Gideon J. Pillow, a Mexican War veteran and Tennessee planter, was one of the leading landowners in Arkansas. Pillow resided on his plantation near Columbia, Tennessee, but he also owned “a small empire” in eastern Arkansas, including five plantations in Phillips County. In 1860, those plantations, which constituted over six thousand acres, were home to more than two hundred slaves who grew cotton and corn in abundance. An absentee landowner, Pillow was still the sixth largest slaveholder in Arkansas on the eve of the war.¹⁴

In May 1861, Pillow was given command of the Provisional Army of Tennessee, and, when the Confederacy assumed control of that army two months later, he was commissioned a

¹³ Barksdale Journal, 19 July 1862, in “The Reverend William Henry Barksdale,” 41; George E. Flanders to Dear Brother, 2 August 1862, in Alice L. Fry, ed., *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry* (Independence, Mo.: Two Trails Publishing, 1998), 156; “General Orders,” War Department, Adj. Gen’s Office, 15 August 1862, in *The Shield* (Helena, Ark.), September 6, 1862.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Roy P. Stonesifer, Jr., *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 141-143 [quotation on p. 142]. Remarkably, Pillow was also the “wealthiest persisting individual” in Phillips County after the war. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 185.

rebel brigadier. In February 1862, his troops surrendered Fort Donelson, the most formidable Confederate bastion on the Cumberland River (near the Tennessee-Kentucky border), to Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant—but not before Pillow and his superior, General John B. Floyd, controversially fled the fort.¹⁵ In the wake of the Donelson disaster, Pillow was relieved of his command, and in April 1862, the disgraced general made his way to Helena. Concerned about his inability to manage his Arkansas plantations, and fearing they might eventually fall into federal hands, Pillow sold them—along with the slaves who tended them—to H. P. Coolidge, Helena’s most prominent merchant, for \$575,000. It was a mock sale, for the two friends then effected a second, secret agreement that showed “in point of fact no sale of this property was intended, but the real object of the pretended sale was to create in Coolidge an agency for the management of Pillow’s estate and to supply the wants of Pillow’s large slave population.” Coolidge was purportedly a Unionist, so Pillow probably believed the agreement would increase his chances of preserving his property if Helena was captured.¹⁶

Helena fell to Curtis’s army only three months later, and Pillow’s plantations became spoils of the war. On July 20, Pillow told his brother Jerome—also a Tennessee planter with significant holdings in Phillips County—that as soon as General Curtis “gets out of the way,” he

¹⁵ Hughes and Stonesifer, *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow*, 162, 172-173, 237-239; Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 36-39. On the Fort Donelson campaign, see Hughes and Stonesifer, chap. 12; and Benjamin F. Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 122-263.

¹⁶ Hughes and Stonesifer, *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow*, 242-244 [quotation on p. 244]; Terry Lee Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics: Samuel Ryan Curtis, Race and the Political/Military Establishment” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2001), 55; Bobby Roberts and Carl Moneyhon, *Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Arkansas in the Civil War* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 87; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1890), 766.

intended to move his slaves in eastern Arkansas elsewhere. Unfortunately for Pillow, Curtis did not get out of the way. In fact, his advance cavalry under C. C. Washburn “sent out large foraging parties that fell upon the Pillow farms” shortly after arriving in Helena on July 12. In Curtis’s mind, this was justified because all members of the Pillow family “except the slaves were in the rebel lines.” When Curtis reached Helena two days later, he “found the Pillow negroes, three or four hundred, and thousands more claiming freedom and protection. Thus neglected,” the general reported, “the Pillow plantations were visited in a spirit of wantonness [sic] by soldiers, camp followers, and the negroes, which could not be restrained.”¹⁷

Curtis did not restrain his troops in the ensuing weeks, either. An Illinois cavalryman remembered that his comrades made “frequent excursions” to one of the Pillow plantations, where the troops carried off “what they desired,” while an Indiana soldier assured his family that he had “plenty to eat” because Pillow and Hindman had “plenty of hogs and roasting ears near and we help ourselves whenever we wish.” The following day, another Hoosier reported that one of Pillow’s plantations had “heretofore furnished the boys with roasting ears and poultry,” but, on account of the troops’ continuous foraging, the farm was now “played out.” The *Arkansas True Democrat*, a pro-Confederate newspaper in Little Rock, agreed. On July 30, it reported that the Pillow farms were “utterly ruined; not a fence rail, rafter, or vestige of a home left.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Gideon J. Pillow to Jerome B. Pillow, 20 July 1862, quoted in Hughes and Stonesifer, *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow*, 244; Samuel R. Curtis to E. D. Townsend, 15 December 1862, Curtis Papers, Box 6, Vol. II, SHSI.

¹⁸ Davenport, *History of the Ninth Regiment Illinois Cavalry Volunteers*, 56; Civil War Letter from Unidentified Indiana Soldier, 25 July 1862, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock; Kizer, “Letter from Arkansas,” 26 July 1862, *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, August 13, 1862; “Federal Excesses in Arkansas,” *Arkansas True Democrat*, July 30, 1862.

The pillaging of the Pillow plantations caused great suffering among their African American inhabitants. Union soldiers stole much of their sustenance, and, on occasion, persecuted the black residents. On the night of July 21, for example, eight drunken Illinois cavalymen “abused and maltreated” the female slaves on a Pillow farm. The rapists declared that they hated abolitionists and feared that Abraham Lincoln would “adopt the policy of ‘nigger equality.’” In subsequent months, sexual liaisons (voluntary or otherwise) between federal troops and African American women were common in Phillips County. In late July, a Union quartermaster in Helena reported that white teamsters and soldiers were “indulging in intimacy” with black women, which, in his view, could “only be accounted for by the doctrine of total depravity” that existed among the freedpeople. Two months later, a newspaper correspondent lamented that black females at Helena were “in too many instances made to serve as prostitutes.”¹⁹

Curtis observed that of all the farms in eastern Arkansas that his soldiers visited, the Pillows’ were “especially devastated, [and] the negroes were most destitute.” To alleviate the African Americans’ anguish, the general freed all who could prove they had labored for the Confederates (a relatively easy task given that most belonged to a rebel general). He also allowed them to sell whatever cotton remained on the premises. The Confederates had burned much of the region’s cotton to prevent it from falling into Union hands, but the slaves—sometimes at the behest of their owners—had utilized the Delta terrain to conceal a number of bales, hiding them in the swamps, woods, and canebreaks. Curtis reasoned that because the

¹⁹ Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War*, 58; B. O. Carr to Capt. F. S. Winslow, 24 July 1862, in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 659; “The War on the Mississippi” (correspondence from September 23, 1862), *New York Times*, October 3, 1862. See also Samuel Sawyer et al. to Maj. Gen. Curtis, 29 December 1862, in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, p. 675.

slaves had performed most of the labor required to grow, harvest, and preserve the crop, they were entitled to the fruits of their labor. Plus, he argued, the Pillow plantations were “stripped by our Soldiers and the Negroes must have perished, If I had not [resorted] to some such means to save them from starvation.”

And so, African Americans brought their bales to Helena and sold them to make ends meet. Curtis allowed them to “make their own bargains” with buyers, but unscrupulous speculators and soldiers frequently took advantage of them, so the general stepped in to supervise their exchanges. He typically did so on an ad hoc basis, safeguarding the freedpeople’s earnings and then doling them out piecemeal whenever they needed money. He also maintained sloppy records of transactions and steered the freedpeople toward merchants he personally trusted (some of whom were his acquaintances), practices his enemies later cited as evidence of his corruption. Still, the general’s policy was a boon to the African Americans of Phillips County. Some four hundred freedpeople from the Pillow plantations, for example, used the money they earned from cotton sales to travel north “in rather comfortable circumstances.” Moreover, Curtis furnished them free passage to Cairo, Illinois, on a government steamboat, another act for which he was later criticized.²⁰

²⁰ Samuel R. Curtis to E. D. Townsend, 15 December 1862, Curtis Papers, Box 6, Vol. II, SHSI; *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 783-784; “Testimony by the Former Commander of the Army of the Southwest before a Military Court of Inquiry, and Testimony by Two Former Arkansas Slaves before the Court,” March 20, 1863, and June 27, 1863, in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 660-664; “From the 11th Wisconsin—Up and Down the River,” in *Quiner Scrapbooks: Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers, 1861-1865*, Vol. 4, p. 308, Wisconsin Historical Society; Testimony of Eugene C. Avery, 8 December 1863, Curtis Papers, Box 5, Vol. 1, SHSI; “From Cairo and Below,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 5, 1862; Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” 55-60; Earl J. Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort: The Army of the Southwest at Helena,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1985): 62-64.

When Pillow learned about the devastation of his Phillips County properties, he protested to President Jefferson Davis and asked, “Can no retaliatory measures be adopted?” He also wrote to Samuel P. Walker, his friend in Union-occupied Memphis, to complain about the “wholesale robbery” of his plantations. Rumor had it that four hundred of his slaves had been “taken off” by federal soldiers, who also “destroyed everything else” on his farms. Many of those slaves reportedly had made their way to Memphis, where they were “wandering about” and “suffering for food.” Pillow asked Walker to investigate these rumors and forward his concerns to either U. S. Grant or William T. Sherman, the Union commander in Memphis, to “ascertain if these proceedings [had] been ordered by them.” He also reminded his friend that he had “protected the property of Union men” in Missouri and Kentucky, including that of General Thomas L. Crittenden, and now he hoped federal officers would return the favor. Moreover, the Second Confiscation Act accorded rebels sixty day days to affirm their loyalty to the United States and keep their property. That act had barely been on the books for two weeks, so in Pillow’s estimation, his slaves “were in no legal sense liable to seizure.”²¹

Walker forwarded Pillow’s letter to Sherman, who promptly replied even though he believed it was “not proper in war” to do so. It just so happened that Curtis had visited Memphis recently, and Sherman had asked him to respond to Pillow’s allegations. Not surprisingly, the Iowan defended his actions. Curtis denied that “armed men” had taken slaves from Pillow’s plantations or any others, unless, of course, the general “had proof that such slaves had been used in war against him.” Moreover, the alleged damage to Pillow’s plantations was, in Curtis’s

²¹ *OR*, vol. 52, pt. 2, p. 332, vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 171; Berlin et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 285-287 [the particulars of the Second Confiscation Act are on p. 287n1]; Hughes and Stonesifer, *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow*, 245-246.

appraisal, “only such as will attend the armies, such as marked the progress of your . . . columns a year ago in Kentucky.” Sherman acknowledged that Curtis had freed slaves “used as property to carry on war,” and though he personally disagreed with this policy, Curtis was his superior, so he had “no control over” him. Sherman also dispelled the rumor that Pillow’s slaves were roaming around Memphis “in want and destitution,” and he glibly reported Curtis’s “great surprise” at Pillow’s “solicitude” for his slaves in Phillips County, especially since Pillow had “sold them all or had transferred them by some instrument of writing for a record to a gentleman near the plantation, who is a loyal citizen of the United States.” Apparently, H. P. Coolidge had divulged the nature of his secret agreement with Pillow, and Curtis had declared the sale null and void.²²

Curtis’s snide dismissal of Pillow’s concerns did not end the drama surrounding (or the destruction of) the rebel general’s Phillips County holdings. In the months ahead, Union soldiers continued to camp and forage on the plantations, thus depriving their African American occupants of what little rations remained.²³ An Indiana infantryman marveled at the desolation in October 1862:

Among the many rich plantations that the ravages of war have been let loose upon, are three of the finest in all Arkansas, close to [Helena], belonging to one certain Gideon J. Pillow. When he beheld them with his eyes, perhaps for the last time, they were in a superb condition, with fields of hundreds of acres teeming with bountiful crops, while the mellow [voice] of his corr [sic] [of] colored gentry might be heard from morn till night,

²² *OR*, vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 172; Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” 55-56, 146n27.

²³ William S. Burns, *Recollections of the 4th Missouri Cavalry*, ed. Frank Allen Dennis (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1988), 48; Sylvester C. Bishop to Dear Mother, 9 September 1862, in “Indiana Troops at Helena: Part III,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 17 (March 1979): 16-17; Henry D. Barnes to Dear Parents, 8 January 1863, in *The Civil War letters of Henry D. Barnes, 28th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, Company I, 1862-1865*, trans. and ed., William J. K. Beaudot (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Library, 1998). A northern newspaper correspondent who visited Helena in September 1863 reported that General Pillow’s “loss by this war is estimated at from six to seven hundred thousand dollars. All the buildings upon the plantation have been destroyed by our troops.” “The Old Route,” *New York Herald*, October 2, 1863.

as he performed his daily task. Wealth and riches were being counted by the legion, and he justly prided himself among the “upper ten” of the chivalrous South. . . . Could he return now to view these plantations, how changed would be the scene! In lieu of wealth and riches are poverty and distress; in lieu of the fields of cotton, which now would have been whitening for the spinners, having the appearance of a field of snow, is the broad, barren, fenceless commons, and instead of cotton is a crop of weeds such as Arkansas alone can produce; in lieu of a beautiful yard and a magnificent mansion that once decorated the spot, the briars and the thistle now flourish, and an old wreck of the once beautiful mansion, with weather-boards torn off, and windows broken to atoms, is taken for the purposes of some enterprising soldier—and in their stead the spider has woven his complicated web—marks the spot where once stood the monument of wealth; in lieu of the clump of negro huts, that once gave to their chosen location the appearance of a well laid out village, is now a heap of ruins; and in lieu of the Southern gods who once occupied these buildings is now utter loneliness [sic] and desolation! And thus it is how this cruel war is blasting and blackening the sunny South.²⁴

By January 1863, the circumstances on one Pillow farm had become so dire that Jerome Pillow, a self-proclaimed loyalist, reportedly led 183 of his slaves to Helena to consign them to the Federals. “I cannot use them,” Pillow allegedly told the post commander. “I had bacon to keep them on, but it has been stolen. I had corn, but it has been gobbled. Now, I have nothing for them to eat, and, as Lincoln has turned this army into a nigger boarding house, you will please seat these people at your table. . . . You will not see them starve, I hope.” Tragically, the commander—whose camp was already inundated with indigent freedpeople—rejected the newcomers because he had “no food for them” and “nothing for them to do.”²⁵

²⁴ “Letter from the Eleventh Regiment,” 17 October 1862, *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, October 31, 1862.

²⁵ “‘Free Americans of African Descent’ in Arkansas. An Interesting and Instructive Incident” [correspondence of the *Chicago Times*, January 18, 1863], *Memphis Daily Appeal*, February 12, 1863. Jerome Pillow’s loyalty is difficult to surmise. He claimed loyalty to the United States, but Curtis was skeptical. See, for example, Samuel R. Curtis to E. D. Townsend, 15 December 1862, Curtis Papers, Box 6, Vol. II, SHSI. It appears, however, that when distributing free papers and supervising cotton sales, Curtis tried to determine which African Americans lived on farms owned by Gideon Pillow (an avowed rebel), and which ones resided on Jerome’s. See, for example, David Haywood’s testimony in the court of inquiry, June 27, 1863, in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 661-663. Additionally, Union troops were assigned to guard Jerome Pillow’s cotton, a luxury typically

The following month, the U.S. war department commissioned a court of inquiry to investigate whether Union officers had been “engaged, or directly or indirectly participated in traffic in Cotton or other produce on the Mississippi River or its tributaries, . . . granted licenses or permits for trade, . . . [or] used or permitted the use of Government transportation, or other public property for private purposes.” The court examined trade and profiteering throughout the Mississippi valley, but it focused primarily on Curtis’s actions at Helena, including those related to the Pillow plantations.²⁶

In late August 1862, Curtis had left Helena to attend a Pacific Railroad convention in Chicago. While he was away, General Frederick Steele took over the Army of the Southwest, and Curtis was promoted to command the Department of the Missouri (which included Arkansas), headquartered at St. Louis. Steele, who hailed from “the old hard-shell Democratic party” that had “no sympathy with anti-slavery,” opposed his predecessor’s liberal treatment of African Americans. In the name of military necessity, he forbade freedpeople from selling cotton, withheld the wages they earned as cooks, teamsters, and fortification builders (until their owners’ loyalty could be determined by the courts), ejected those unable to work from the army’s lines, and even returned some to their former masters (technically a violation of the Second Confiscation Act). Additionally, Steele and his primary ally, John S. Phelps—a Missouri slaveholder and Democratic congressman whom Lincoln had appointed military governor of Arkansas—cited Curtis’s handling of the Pillow plantations as evidence of the Iowan’s

reserved for loyalists. Nevertheless, some of his crop allegedly was hauled away by federal troops. “The Cotton Court of Inquiry,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1863.

²⁶ Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 664n; Kenneth W. Munden and Henry Putney Beers, *The Union: A Guide to Federal Archives Relating to the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1986), 331. The best analysis of the court of inquiry’s investigation of Curtis is Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” chap. 3.

corruption. In May 1863, Steele testified that Jerome Pillow's cotton, supposedly under the Union army's protection, was nevertheless "hauled away by what was called the Staff team of Gen. Curtis." The implication, of course, was that Curtis had profited from this illegal seizure and sale. Phelps did not testify in the court, but he repeatedly relayed rumors of Curtis's cotton speculation to the war department. Other members of the Steele clique, for their part, accused Curtis of embezzling some of the Pillow slaves' earnings.²⁷

The court of inquiry lasted nearly four months, and in the end, it found Curtis guilty of no crimes. It did, however, declare that the general should not have paid the Pillow slaves for the cotton they brought to Helena. While the court conceded that the slaves might have had a lawful claim to the portion of the crop they had grown on their own, it determined that most of the cotton actually had belonged to their Confederate owners. Therefore, as contraband of war, it "should have been turned over to some officer of one of the administrative branches of the Staff and regularly accounted for." The slaves, meanwhile, should have been provided for "in a regular systematic manner by the proper staff Officers On proper returns made by some officer having knowledge of the number, and condition of these negroes." Ironically, prior to leaving

²⁷ Curtis, "The Army of the South-West, and the First Campaign in Arkansas, Chapter Fifteenth (pt. 2) & Chapter Sixteenth—Appendix," 220; *OR*, Ser. 1, vol. 13, pp. 605, 653, 577, 683-684, 751-753, Ser. 3, vol. 2, p. 233; J. Young Scammon, "Gen. Steele," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 19, 1863; "The Contrabands a[t] Helena, Ark., An Appeal for Aid," *New York Times*, November 8, 1862; "The War on the Mississippi," *New York Times*, October 3, 1862; "News from Washington; Military Governor of Arkansas," *New York Times*, July 21, 1862; Hess, "Confiscation and the Northern War Effort," 64-67, 74; "The Cotton Court of Inquiry," *New York Times*, May 24, 1863; Beckenbaugh, "The War of Politics," 57-58, 76-77. For partial transcripts of court testimonies by Curtis and two freedpeople, see Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 660-664. For a portion of Steele's testimony on May 4, 1863, see "The Cotton Court of Inquiry." On military governor John S. Phelps's mission to restore loyal civil government in Arkansas, see Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 156-157; and William C. Harris, *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 83-84.

Helena, Curtis had attempted to do just that. He instructed C. C. Washburn to organize, employ, and care for the freedpeople, many of whom “were in a most deplorable condition suffering for both food & covering.” Steele, however, had reversed many of his predecessor’s policies, explicitly forbidding the feeding of unemployed freedwomen and children.²⁸

The government never acted on the court of inquiry’s findings, but accusations of cotton speculation plagued Curtis for the rest of his life. The Iowan’s actions notwithstanding, Steele and Phelps’s allegations gained traction because Helena was, in fact, a hub for cotton trading (both legal and illicit) during the Civil War. Before the war, cotton was the United States’ most valuable product. Cotton cultivated in southern fields fed textile mills in the North and in Europe, thus creating what one scholar calls an “economic symbiosis” between the regions. When hostilities erupted in 1861, both the U.S. and Confederate governments banned trade with the enemy, yet almost immediately, northern merchants, politicians, investors, and manufacturers began pressuring Lincoln to restore trade with the South. The president initially resisted, but smuggling between the lines was common. Cut off by the Union blockade, southerners needed salt, pork, medicines, clothing, and other essentials, while enterprising Yankees willingly exchanged these items for cotton, for which desperate northern manufacturers paid premium prices. “Few things are so troublesome to the government as the fierceness with which the profits of trading in cotten [sic] are sought,” lamented Lincoln in 1863. “The temptation is so great that nearly every body wishes to be in it; and when in, the question of profit controls all,

²⁸ Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” 74; Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 664n-665. On September 6, 1862, C. C. Washburn reported the freedpeople’s dire situation to the war department and asked if he should continue to feed the women and children in spite of Steele’s orders to the contrary. On September 30, the war department instructed him to continue to feed and clothe them and to “give employment to such of them as are able to work.” P. H. Watson to C. C. Washburn, 30 September 1862, in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, p. 665n.

regardless of whether the cotten [sic] seller is loyal or rebel, or whether he is paid in corn-meal or gun-powder.”²⁹

Despite some reservations, Lincoln eventually decided to “let commerce follow the flag.” That is, he allowed loyal citizens to trade in those parts of the South occupied by Union forces, which, by the summer of 1862, included most of the Mississippi valley. By reinstating some trade between the sections, Lincoln hoped to satisfy the desire of northern (and European) manufacturers for cotton and commence the commercial “reconstruction” of the South. Accordingly, in the summer of 1862, the Department of the Treasury began issuing trade permits to planters and merchants who pledged their allegiance to the United States. Federal forces were ordered not to interfere with their commerce “except to prevent trade in Articles which are contraband,” and soldiers were forbidden from seizing southern cotton unless it was “exposed to be destroyed by the enemy.” In that case, the cotton was to be “receipted for” and “immediately turned over to the quartermaster’s department,” which would ship it to market for sale. If the cotton belonged to a rebel or someone “rendering assistance to the enemy,” the U.S. government kept the proceeds; if it was owned by a loyal citizen, the government gave him the money minus any expenses incurred for transport.³⁰

²⁹ Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” 74-77; Hess, *The Civil War in the West*, 70-71; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 620; Thomas H. O’Connor, “Lincoln and the Cotton Trade,” *Civil War History* 7 (March 1961): 20-27; Abraham Lincoln to Hon. Wm. Kellogg, 29 June 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 6, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 307. On the legal and illicit cotton trade in the Mississippi valley, see Ludwell H. Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958); O’Connor, “Lincoln and the Cotton Trade”; Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” chap. 3; and Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort” [especially pp. 68-75].

³⁰ O’Connor, “Lincoln and the Cotton Trade,” 27-28; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 620-621; Henry W. Halleck to Ulysses S. Grant, 5 July 1862, in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, vol. 5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 196n; J. C.

Union soldiers quickly found that preventing trade in contraband goods was easier said than done. To the army's dismay, a number of northern merchants proved willing to trade almost anything for cotton, including salt, flour, clothing, lead, and even ammunition and percussion caps—which, if undetected by federal guards, frequently found their way to Confederate lines. In December 1862, for example, a Union expedition from Helena to the vicinity of Grenada, Mississippi, found boots, shoes, clothing, and other illegal items that “open and avowed rebels” had purchased from northern merchants. “The Yankees are deluging the country with contraband goods,” griped a Union officer. “[A]nd letters intercepted from the army show from whence they are receiving their supplies. War and commerce with same people!” he sarcastically exclaimed. “What a Utopian dream!” The officer also believed that perfidious northern merchants had spied on him. “Every secret of our camps is carried, by the same men that formerly sold their God for thirty pieces of silver, to our worst enemies for a few pounds of cotton,” he continued. “I have made three expeditions into the enemy's country beyond Helena, and everywhere I find the blighting effects of their cupidity. No expedition has ever been dreamed of at Helena that these bloodhounds of commerce have not scented out and carried to our enemies days in advance.”³¹

When the Army of the Southwest arrived at Helena, the rules regulating the seizure, purchase, and sale of cotton were still being formulated. From July to December 1862, the system for gathering the South's crop was, in the words of one historian, “haphazard at best.” As a result, local commanders—especially those who, like Curtis, served far from Washington—had

Kelton, General Orders, No. 31, 6 June 1862, in *The Shield* (Helena, Ark.), September 6, 1862; *OR*, vol. 10, pt. 2, p. 632; Hess, *The Civil War in the West*, 70-72; Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort,” 68-69.

³¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 620-621; Hess, *The Civil War in the West*, 70-71; *OR*, vol. 17, pt. 1, p. 532.

a great deal of latitude for dealing with the trade. Curtis confessed that initially, he “let everybody [at Helena] trade in cotton,” but he soon found his camp “infested with Jews, secessionists, and spies, and had to issue an order confining the business to a few.” That order came on August 25, 1862, when the general restricted trade to those with a license that bore his signature. To obtain such a license, a trader had to prove he was “unquestionably a loyal citizen,” and Curtis estimated that he issued permits “to hundreds” of men who met that criteria. Predictably, those who were denied licenses lashed out at the general, and, in Curtis’s mind, they spearheaded the cabal that accused him of corruption. Curtis was not authorized to issue trade licenses—that responsibility fell to the treasury department—but the exigencies of war compelled him to intervene. He was aware of the war department’s orders governing the cotton trade, but he deemed them unsuitable “in a country where cotton [was] the only available means of subsistence.” A number of destitute families, including many black ones, owned a few bales, and Curtis believed they should be allowed to sell them “to buy the necessaries of life.” He asked General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck to modify his orders to account for “such emergencies,” but when Halleck neglected to do so, Curtis took matters into his own hands.³²

In late July, Curtis sent a subordinate, Colonel Charles E. Hovey, to establish a cotton depot at Old Town, an abandoned landing on the Mississippi River about twenty miles below Helena. One soldier remembered that “[v]ile and unhealthy swamps lay all around” the

³² Marshall, *Army Life*, Appendix D [quotation on p. 283]; Beckenbaugh, “The War of Politics,” 39-43; Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort,” 69-70; *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 553, 783-784; H. Z. Curtis, Gen. Orders, No. 40, 25 August 1862, in *The Shield* (Helena, Ark.), September 6, 1862; Samuel R. Curtis account of military history prepared for Col. E. D. Townsend, February 28, 1865, pp. 61-62. James McPherson contends that although most traders were not actually Jewish, federal officers used the word “Jew” as a “shorthand way of describing anyone they considered shrewd, acquisitive, aggressive, and possibly dishonest.” McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 622n61.

frequently-flooded town, while another called Old Town “the most pestilential camp we ever occupied, and where the men of the regiment sickened and died by the score. There was no reason that we should be sent to that deadly place,” he continued, “except that we would be somewhat nearer the cotton area.”³³

From Old Town and Helena, Union forces made regular forays into the Arkansas and Mississippi countryside to confiscate rebel cotton and slaves and protect merchants who bought (and stole) the crop for shipment north. African Americans sometimes alerted the Yankees to cotton stockpiles; they also loaded bales onto wagons and boats and frequently accompanied the soldiers back to camp. Some left their plantations voluntarily, while others were seized as contraband of war. In August 1862, for example, a Union scout from Helena to Mississippi confiscated more than eight hundred bales of cotton, some fifty mules, and approximately four hundred slaves who ran to the Union column. “It was the greatest sight I ever saw,” exclaimed one soldier, “but there will no doubt be many of the same kind. Several slaves were killed by the overseers to intimidate the others. They drive them into the canebreaks [sic] and hills as we advanced, but when left they came by the hundreds singing, crying and dancing for joy. They think their day of liberty is dawning and I hope it may be so.”³⁴

³³ Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort,” 69; Marshall, *Army Life*, 96; Isaac H. Elliott, *History of the Thirty-Third Regiment Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War* (Gibson City, Ill.: Regimental Association, 1902), 30.

³⁴ Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort,” 69-74; Marshall, *Army Life*, 95-100; Elliott, *History of the Thirty-Third Regiment*, 30-31; Charles D. Field, *Three Years in the Saddle from 1861-1865* (s.l.: s.n., 1898), 21; Edgar L. Erickson, ed., “Hunting for Cotton in Dixie: From the Civil War Diary of Captain Charles E. Wilcox,” *Journal of Southern History* 4 (Nov. 1938): 493-513; “Federal Reports from Arkansas,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 5, 1862; Henry G. Ankeny to My Dear Tina [Fostina Ankeny], 17 August 1862, in Cox, ed., *Kiss Josey for Me!* 78.

With Curtis's permission, steamboats under government contract ferried privately owned cotton for three to five dollars per bale, usually at night, when the army did not need them for transport. Occasionally, the navy deployed gunboats to protect the shipments. Additionally, many of the steamers that carried supplies to Helena were emptied and then loaded with cotton for their return trip north. Oftentimes, Confederate guerrillas tried to burn the bales before the Yankees could confiscate them; they also frequently attacked the cotton-gatherers. Despite these dangers, traders continuously risked their lives to procure the white gold. "Men boldly dare the shot-gun of the bushwacker, the perils of water, arrest, imprisonment; the recesses of swamp, morass and bayou" to obtain King Cotton, quipped a newspaper correspondent at Helena. "[I]n short, they dare everything and fear nothing in search of altars upon which they can offer their devotion to this saint of saints, this king of kings."³⁵

Most Union troops did not share the merchants' devotion to the "white-headed monarch." They welcomed the opportunity to plunder rebel planters, undermine the Confederate rebellion, and make money for the U.S. government, but they resented being used as guards for greedy speculators, especially when cotton-gathering missions put them in harm's way. Some men also suspected that their officers personally profited from the trade, a notion that demoralized many of the rank and file. "We are lying still and doing nothing except guarding cotton that is bought and sold by the officers for speculation & to line their pockets with," grumbled a Wisconsin soldier encamped across the Mississippi from Helena in December 1862. "The only thing that (in my opinion) is the prolongation of this war but soon that will be played in this part for I should think they had got about all the cotton there was to be got within reach of here." Years

³⁵ Hess, "Confiscation and the Northern War Effort," 69-74; *ORN*, vol. 23, p. 481; Hess, *The Civil War in the West*, 73; "Cotton in Arkansas," *New York Times*, December 25, 1862.

later, an Illinois infantryman expressed similar disillusionment about his regiment's stint at Old Town: "How much of [our] 'cotton collecting' was done for the government, and how much for private interests, I do not know, but from the fact that serious trouble on account of it came to a number of officers in high command, justifies the opinion that we were not doing very much at that time toward saving the county in this hard and dangerous service, and I know that I but reflect the feeling of every comrade when I say that every life that was lost in those expeditions was a useless and wanton sacrifice." Another soldier believed the army's obsession with cotton prolonged the war. In September 1862, he told wife, "Had we used half the force and industry to put the rebels down in Arkansas as we have to steal cotton it would have been better for the nation and the Army." Even U. S. Grant, who, in the fall of 1862 commanded east of the Mississippi, detected his men's disdain for the trade. He later wrote, "Men who had enlisted to fight the battles of their country did not like to be engaged in protecting a traffic which went to the support of an enemy they had to fight, and the profits of which went to men who shared none of their dangers."³⁶

Cotton was not the only thing that moved in and out of Helena during the federal occupation of the town. From 1862 to 1865, Helena served as a permanent Union enclave,

³⁶ "Cotton in Arkansas"; Rescum Sterns to My Dear Wife [Lavinia Sterns], 14 December 1862, in Robert A. McCown, "Thomas Rescum Sterns at the Battle for Vicksburg," *Books at Iowa* 39 (November 1983): 42; Elliott, *History of the Thirty-Third Regiment*, 30; Henry G. Ankeny to My Dear Wife [Fostina Ankeny], 12 September 1862, and Ankeny to My Dear Tina, 17 August 1862, both in Cox, ed., *Kiss Josey for Me!* 86-87, 78; Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, eds. Mary Drake McFeely and William S. McFeely (New York: Viking, 1990), 267. For a sample of soldiers' thoughts about the cotton trade near Helena and their own participation in cotton-gathering expeditions, see Hess, "Confiscation and the Northern War Effort," 72-74; "Letter from the 11th Regiment," 24 September 1862, in *Quiner Scrapbooks*, Vol. 4, pp. 312-313; Floyd Thurman to Dear Brother [Wayne Thurman], 9 October 1862, Thurman Family Papers; and "Disgraceful Cotton Speculations of Army Officers in Arkansas," *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, Calif.), November 6, 1862.

supply depot, coaling station, and staging ground for federal operations in the Mississippi valley, particularly those aimed at the Confederate bastion at Vicksburg. Although the troops stationed there enjoyed the benefits of a river-based supply line, few found comfort in the low-lying, oft-inundated river town. In July 1862, an Iowa private said Helena would be “a nice place if the river did not over flow so mutch. the high watter mark in town in the houses is about as high as my head.” Another Iowan who arrived in January 1863 said that “mud and misery were . . . the order of the day, with rain, snow, cold and discomfort. . . . We wondered if it always stormed at Helena.” Accordingly, he and his companions nicknamed the place “Hell-in-Arkansas.” Charles Musser of the 29th Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment proclaimed his disdain for the town’s conditions: “i would not live here if i owned the whole state of Arkansas. We have read of Helena [that] it is one of the dirtiest holes on the river. mud is knee deep there all the time.”³⁷

The wet, swampy conditions in Helena were a breeding ground for disease, discomfort, and death for Union soldiers and civilians. Between July 1862 and January 1863, Helena surgeons recorded 1,002 cases of intestinal problems (mostly diarrhea and dysentery) among soldiers in the town, 163 cases of typhoid (and typho-malaria) and 573 instances of malarial fever. According to one historian, one in six cases of intestinal disease in Helena was fatal, compared to only one in fifty-nine in the Department of the Tennessee (of which Helena became a part in January 1863). One in three soldiers at Helena who suffered from typhoid died, while one in 7.5 malaria cases was fatal. For the department, those ratios were only one in six and one

³⁷ John B. Scotton to Dear Brothers, 21 July 1862, John B. Scotton Letter, Mullins Library, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; A. F. Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment, 1863-6*, ed. Gregory J. W. Urwin and Kathy Kunzinger Urwin (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 14; Charles Musser to Dear Father, 3 February 1863, in Barry Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy: The Civil War Letters of Charles O. Musser, 29th Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 24.

in 131, respectively. As indicated by these figures, soldiers in Helena were much more likely to die of disease than were their counterparts in other areas in the department. When one considers the inadequacy of Civil War medical records, as well as the tendency of nineteenth-century doctors to misdiagnose illnesses, disease in Helena was likely even more severe than the numbers indicate. On account of these factors, thousands more cases of intestinal disease, typhoid, and malaria likely went unrecorded in Helena.³⁸

Contemporary sources also indicate that disease in the town was rampant. In January 1863, Helena was so sickly that a journalist warned his readers to stay away. “This is a dreary little town,” the correspondent wrote. “If you have never been at Helena, take a friend’s advice and never go if you can help it. It is low, marshy and unhealthy. The soldier[s] call the fever they have there ‘the Helen-fever,’ and their rows of huts and tents loomed out of the fog, as if the miasma had fairly wrapped them in its folds. . . . One thinks, as he looks at this country, of that expression—God-forsaken! There is something utterly desolate and dreary in the whole landscape as far as eye can see.” That same month, Benjamin Palmer of the 29th Iowa complained that “the Balance” of his comrades was “on the Sick list and greater A number of them in the Hospital. . . . [T]heir [sic] are a Great many Diseases among the men here, it is hard to tell what is the matter with them all.” Two weeks later, he reported that he and his comrades had “Buried as high as Five in A Day [in Helena] this is loosing men very fast for so short a time.”³⁹

³⁸ Rhonda M. Kohl, “‘This Godforsaken Town’: Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862-63,” *Civil War History* 50 (June 2004): 123-124, 128-129, 137-138.

³⁹ “Down the Mississippi,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1863; Benjamin Palmer to Dear Wife [Kezia Palmer], 30 January 1863, and 15 February 1863, Benjamin Palmer Collection, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies.

Palmer indicated that his regiment was camped on the muddy banks of the Mississippi, which certainly did not facilitate the troops' health. Soldiers frequently drank from the river, which they mistakenly supposed was healthier than the water that flowed from nearby springs. They also were bitten by swarms of mosquitoes, which, like enemy combatants, decimated the Federals by spreading malaria—a disease the troops believed emanated from miasmatic swamps near their camps. By February 1863, Charles Musser estimated that forty Helena men died every day of disease, and on February 17, alone, he witnessed five disease-induced funerals. Eighteen months later, the health of Helena's soldiers apparently had not improved, as a Union inspector declared that the town "appear[ed] to be the most deadly place on the river."⁴⁰

Sickness at Helena was exacerbated by the thousands of horses and mules marshalled at the post. The animals routinely died of disease, exhaustion, and in combat, and the soldiers frequently left their corpses in the mud. The carcasses attracted rodents, which carried fleas infected with bacteria that caused murine typhus in humans. In February 1863, an aid worker observed that the streets of Helena were "almost impassable except for heavy mule teams,"

⁴⁰ August M. Bondi Diary (Transcript), 10 August 1862, August M. Bondi Papers, Kansas Historical Society; Thad L. Smith, "The Twenty-Fourth Iowa Volunteers," *Annals of Iowa* 1 (1893): 19; Edson S. Bastin Diary, 9 January 1863, Edson Sewell Bastin Diaries, Wisconsin Historical Society; Henry G. Ankeny to Dear Tina [Fostina Ankeny], 22 August 1862, in Cox, ed., *Kiss Josey for Me!* 81; Charles Musser to Dear Father, 3 February 1863, and Musser to Dear Father and Mother, 17 February 1863, both in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 22, 27; *OR*, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 714. On disease in the Civil War, see Margaret Humphreys, *Marrow of Tragedy: The Health Crisis of the American Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Humphreys, *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Andrew McIlwaine Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). On early Americans' beliefs about miasmas, see Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basic Books, 2002) [especially chap. 4]. The mosquitoes-as-soldiers analogy comes from Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers*.

which “flounder in the ponds, fall in the holes in . . . the mire, [and] often lie there & die they are so exhausted & abused.” The following month, a Kansas cavalryman expressed similar concern about the dead livestock in the town. “I dread spending another summer here,” he remarked. “If the army remains at this place through the coming summer, it’s ranks will be thinned out by diseases, to an alarming extent, unless prompt measures are instituted to remove the thousands of dead horses and mules which cover the ground for acres and acres in the vicinity of the camps, which added to the filth which of necessity, accumulates in an army of thirty thousand makes a stench sufficient to turn the stomach of a sick horse.”⁴¹

If Helena’s insalubrious environment contributed to widespread disease, the town’s severe overpopulation during Union occupation also did not help its inhabitants’ health. When Curtis’s Army of the Southwest entered Helena in July 1862, some 20,000 to 24,000 soldiers overwhelmed the town’s 1,500 inhabitants. Between Curtis’s arrival and July 1863, the military population of the town fluctuated between approximately 1,600 and 25,000 troops. In February 1863, Charles Musser believed that thirty thousand soldiers were camped in and around the town, and the following month, C. C. Washburn described the scene for his daughter in Wisconsin:

You, my dear, who are living so pleasantly and quietly at home have little idea of the misery and unhappiness that war brings. Just imagine ten or twenty thousand rude men coming into La Crosse [Wisconsin] some morning and taking possession of the town, going into houses of the people and helping themselves to whatever they want, burning houses, killing cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens, and almost everything they see, destroying furniture,—and you will have a pretty good idea of the march of an army through a

⁴¹ Jack Temple Kirby, “The American Civil War: An Environmental View,” National Humanities Center, July 2001, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuseland/essays/amcwar.htm> (accessed June 29, 2017); Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War*, 94; Maria R. Mann to Dear Elisa, 10 February 1863, Mary Tyler Peabody Mann Papers, Library of Congress, National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as LOC); George E. Flanders to My Dear Brother, 4 March 1863, in Fry, ed., *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry*, 165.

country. The people [in Helena] are paying dearly for their wickedness in trying to destroy our government.⁴²

Adding to the overcrowded conditions, scores of runaway slaves continued to flock there on a daily basis to seek refuge behind Union lines. Most of these refugees, labeled “contrabands” by the soldiers, lived in shanties, “condemned and cast-off tents of the army, and in caves and shelters of brush” built just inside Union picket lines. Others crammed inside the “poorer houses” of Helena or in dilapidated huts deserted by the troops, who sometimes returned from their expeditions elsewhere and expelled the homeless refugees.⁴³ In early 1863, Charles Musser complained that Helena was “nearly overrun with contrabands, and they are still coming in by dozens every day.” An Indiana soldier also grumbled that his camp was “over-run with ‘contrabands’ of every shade of color and character, who flocked in from Mississippi and

⁴² Kohl, “This Godforsaken Town,” 115-116; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 38-39; Gregory J. W. Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas,” *North & South* 6 (December 2002): 27; Charles Musser to Dear Father, 3 February 1863, in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 22; C. C. Washburn to Jeannette (Nettie) Washburn, 8 March 1863, in Hunt, ed., *Israel, Elihu and Cadwallader Washburn*, 341.

⁴³ J. G. Forman, *The Western Sanitary Commission; A Sketch of its Origin, History, Labors for the Sick and Wounded of the Western Armies, and Aid Given to Freedmen and Union Refugees, with Incidents of Hospital Life* (St. Louis: R. P. Studley & Co., 1864), 111; Samuel Sawyer to Major Gen. Curtis, 26 January 1863, in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 674-675. In 1861, Union General Benjamin F. Butler declared the slaves who flocked to his lines at Fort Monroe, Virginia, to be “contraband of war.” As such, he refused to return them to their rebel owners and employed them as laborers in his camp. Henceforth, most Union soldiers referred to refugee slaves as “contrabands.” “The Slave Question; Letter from Major-Gen. Butler on the Treatment of Fugitive Slaves,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1861; Michael Fellman, Lesley J. Gordon, and Daniel E. Sutherland, *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 141. Recently, some historians have argued that the term “contraband”—which Union soldiers also used to denote the inanimate property and livestock they seized from rebels—obscures the enslaved people’s humanity. Thus, some scholars now use “refugee,” “refugee from slavery,” or “freedperson” to identify the people who fled slavery and made their way to Union lines. See Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 24-25; and Kate Masur, “‘A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation’: The Word ‘Contraband’ and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States,” *Journal of American History* 93 (March 2007): 1050-1084.

Arkansas plantations, anxious to do anything for the soldiers that would place them under the protection of the stars and stripes.” By January 1863, an estimated three to four thousand freedpeople lived in and around Helena, thus making the post one of the largest contraband centers in the South.⁴⁴

Tragically, most of the refugees found that freedom did not live up to its promise.⁴⁵ Freedwomen cooked, cleaned, and prostituted themselves to make ends meet, while able-bodied men built fortifications, dug trenches, shoveled coal, drove mules, chopped wood, and “wade[d] through the deepest mud along the river bank in loading & unloading government stores,” all for government wages that most were never paid. Meanwhile, the young, elderly, and infirmed died in droves from hunger, exposure, and such diseases as smallpox, which white doctors ignorantly interpreted as evidence of the black race’s pending extinction. Although a number of the soldiers welcomed the contrabands’ contributions—many bragged about their black cooks, for example—others robbed, raped, and murdered the impoverished refugees. “Freedom in the abstract is a fine thing,” remarked a newspaper correspondent at Helena. “[B]ut when Freedom

⁴⁴ Charles Musser letter, n.d. [probably 3 February 1863], in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 26; William E. McLean, *The Forty-Third Regiment of Indiana Volunteers: An Historic Sketch of its Career and Services* (Terre Haute, Ind.: C. W. Brown, 1903), 97; The Emancipation League, *Facts Concerning the Freedmen. Their Capacity and Their Destiny* (Boston: Press of Commercial Printing House, 1863), 7-9.

⁴⁵ Historians of emancipation in the United States traditionally have told a celebratory story of African-American autonomy and perseverance. See, for example, Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). More recently, however, scholars have shown that emancipation was a disordered, disorienting process that had both triumphant and tragic results, including the deaths of thousands of freedpeople due to disease. For a historiographical essay on recent efforts to revise the so-called “freedom narrative,” see Carole Emberton, “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Southern History* 82 (May 2016): 377-394. See also Downs, *Sick from Freedom*. For a list of works that highlight the violence and suffering of emancipation, see Manning, *Troubled Refuge*, 303n14.

amounts to no more than what the negroes obtain at Helena, it is a different affair. There it means simply freedom to starve, rot, die, and the sooner the better. Since I reached that place, the average daily mortality among the contrabands has been from ten to twenty. Nobody takes any further interest in them than to kick them out of the way whenever they get in it, and to curse them upon all occasions as a source of the most serious demoralization to the army. Their condition is not a single remove above that of brutes—a more degraded, helpless class of people exists no where on the Continent. If our philanthropy is to end in taking them away from their masters, we had better, in mercy to them, decree that as fast as emancipated they shall be shot.” Given such conditions, it is no wonder that some of the freedpeople said they “wish[ed] they were back with their masters,” while scores of others reportedly acted on that wish.⁴⁶

There were, however, some people in Helena who were eager to help the black refugees. In November 1862, the chaplains of the District of Eastern Arkansas—led by Samuel Sawyer of the 47th Indiana and J. G. Forman of the 3rd Missouri—wrote to the *New York Times* to alert its readers to the freedpeople’s privations (and Steele’s draconian treatment of them) and to appeal for aid. The following month, they wrote a similar letter to General Curtis in St. Louis and begged, “For the sake of humanity, for the sake of christianity, for the good name of our army,

⁴⁶ Samuel Sawyer to Major Gen. Curtis, 26 January 1863, and Sawyer et al. to Curtis, 29 December 1862, both in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 674-676; Margaret Breckinridge, *Memorial of Margaret E. Breckinridge* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1865), 56-57; Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 116-119; “The Contrabands a[t] Helena, Ark., An Appeal for Aid,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1862; “The Army of the Southwest,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1862; Harry Beard to My Dear Mother, 13 December 1862, Daniel Carter Beard Papers, LOC; William F. Vermilion to My Darling [Mary Vermilion], 18 June 1863, in Donald C. Elder III, ed., *Love amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 138-140; “The War in Mississippi; Details of the Expedition Under Gen Hovey,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1862; Nathan H. Kimble to Family, 31 December 1862, Nathan H. Kimble Civil War Letter, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies.

for the honor of our country, cannot something be done to prevent this oppression & to stop its demoralizing influences upon the Soldiers themselves?” The chaplains wanted the government to appoint someone to oversee the freedpeople’s welfare, and in January 1863, Sawyer was named Superintendent of Contrabands at Helena.⁴⁷

In that same month, the Western Sanitary Commission—a philanthropic organization in St. Louis whose agents had aided the Army of the Southwest since the battle of Pea Ridge—sent Maria R. Mann, a New England humanitarian (and the niece of educator Horace Mann), to Helena to “fit up a better hospital” for the contrabands and “minister generally to their wants.”⁴⁸ When Mann arrived, she found the “personal condition” of the patients in the contraband hospital to be “so deplorable that any idea of change for the better seems utterly impossible. Many of them seem to come there to die,” she observed, “& they do die very rapidly.” Mann complimented the efforts of Sawyer and Forman, but otherwise, she believed the black refugees had few friends among the officials at Helena, a “sickly, pestilential, crowded post,” which, though certainly unfavorable for the freepeople’s “colonising,” was nevertheless the only place below Memphis where there was “nominally an army to protect & furnish food & employment.” Over the next eight months, Mann established a new contraband hospital at Helena, taught freedwomen how to make their own garments, and distributed food, medicine, and clothing to

⁴⁷ “The Contrabands a[t] Helena, Ark., An Appeal for Aid”; Samuel Sawyer to Major Gen. Curtis, 26 January 1863, and Sawyer et al. to Curtis, 29 December 1862, both in Berlin et al., *Freedom*, ser. 1, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 674-676n.

⁴⁸ Western Sanitary Commission, *Report of the Western Sanitary Commission for the Year Ending June 1st, 1863* (St. Louis: Western Sanitary Commission Rooms, 1863), 24-26; Forman, *The Western Sanitary Commission*, 55-56, 112. On the Western Sanitary Commission, see William E. Parrish, “The Western Sanitary Commission,” *Civil War History* 36 (March 1990): 17-35; and Robert Patrick Bender, “Old Boss Devil: Sectionalism, Charity and the Rivalry Between the Western Sanitary Commission and the United States Sanitary Commission During the Civil War,” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2001).

the refugees. She and the chaplains also gathered the freedpeople in churches and taught them the alphabet “from charts hung in front of the pulpits.” “It was interesting to watch them,” declared one aid worker, “to see their eagerness to learn.”⁴⁹

From July 1862 until July 1863, Helena stood as the southernmost permanent federal outpost on the Mississippi River above Vicksburg. Over the same time period, it remained the only significant Union stronghold in eastern Arkansas. Because it was located in Arkansas, Helena officially stood within the geographical boundaries of the Confederacy’s Trans-Mississippi Department, which consisted of all the territory west of the Mississippi River. The Federals, however, did not designate the area west of the Mississippi as a separate arena of conflict. In fact, over the course of the war, troops from Helena were deployed on the river’s east bank almost as often as they were on its west bank. The town’s proximity to Little Rock made it an ideal staging ground for an assault on the Arkansas capital, but its location on the Mississippi made it equally capable of playing a role in the campaign against Vicksburg. Consequently, Helena’s position created a great deal of confusion amongst the Union high command, which remained ambivalent about the strategic role it envisioned for the garrison throughout the fall of 1862.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Forman, *The Western Sanitary Commission*, 112-113; Maria R. Mann to Dear Elisa, 10 February 1863, Mary Tyler Peabody Mann Papers, LOC; Levin Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Western Tract Society, 1876), 641; L. P. Brockett and Mary C. Vaughn, *Woman’s Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience* (Philadelphia: Zeigler, McCurdy & Co.; Boston: R. H. Curran, 1867), 697-702. St. John’s Episcopal Church was one of the churches used as school for black children. Dale Kirkman, *A History of St. John’s Episcopal Church, Helena, Arkansas* (Helena: St. John’s Episcopal Church, 1968), 9; “Our Helena Correspondence,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 20, 1865; Henry C. Lay to My Dearest Wife, 31 December 1865, Henry C. Lay Collection, UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture, Arkansas Studies Institute.

⁵⁰ William L. Shea, “The War We Have Lost,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 70 (Summer 2011): 107-108.

During the first few months of Union occupation, Helena was deemed most important for its ability to serve as the base of operations for a federal campaign against Little Rock. In July 1862, Brigadier General John M. Schofield, who commanded all of the Union militia in Missouri, feared that the Confederates were planning an attack on southern Missouri. Therefore, he asked Curtis to move his Helena force against Little Rock to divert the rebels away from the border. Halleck, then serving as commander of the Department of the Missouri, concurred with Schofield's plan. Curtis, however, did not believe the Confederates posed a serious threat to Missouri, and since the rebels controlled the mouths of most of eastern Arkansas's primary rivers, he did not deem an attack on Little Rock to be possible. Furthermore, he believed that operations in Arkansas should remain subordinate to those on the Mississippi: "The hopes of the West float on the Mississippi, and all my hope of reducing Arkansas and supporting Missouri depend on this river."⁵¹

In the late summer and fall of 1862, Halleck was promoted to general-in-chief of all Union armies, Curtis succeeded Halleck as commander of the Department of the Missouri, Steele took over the Army of the Southwest at Helena, and Schofield took command of the Army of the Frontier. Even after the personnel changes, Halleck and Schofield continued to press for the Helena troops to make a move, either into the Arkansas interior as a diversion or toward the Missouri border to assist Schofield directly. Curtis and Steele disagreed. Curtis continued to doubt the presence of any danger to Missouri, and he feared that if Helena's troops were removed, the Confederates might strike its weakened garrison. However, in late September and early October, Curtis became convinced that Missouri was indeed threatened by Confederate

⁵¹ *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 508, 519, 541; Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 426.

forces. He capitulated to Schofield's request, ordering forces from Helena to march toward Missouri.⁵²

Adding to the confusion, Halleck also changed his mind about the role of the Helena garrison in October 1862. In an administrative about-face, he told Curtis that he had always advised against the weakening of Helena, which was "too important a place to risk." Rumors of an impending Confederate attack against the eastern Arkansas port only served to reinforce Halleck's position, but by that time, the detachment from Helena was already on the move. A confused Curtis reminded Halleck of his orders. Nevertheless, he assured Halleck that future operations would be fully focused on carrying out the general-in-chief's main objective "to open and hold the Mississippi." However, by this time, Halleck's plans for the Helena garrison did not involve the Mississippi River. He openly disapproved of Curtis's decision to move troops to Missouri and reminded the general that "the main object in taking Helena was to make it the base of operations against Arkansas." In the fall of 1862, it seemed that no federal officer could make up his mind about what role the Helena garrison should play in overall Union military strategy.⁵³

In November and December of 1862, the strategic focus of the Helena garrison shifted almost entirely to operations on and across the Mississippi River. For the next nine months, until the Union capture of Vicksburg in July 1863, Helena served as an important staging ground and supply depot for troops and materiel participating in the federal expedition against Vicksburg. During that time, Halleck continued to send conflicting signals. On the one hand, he asserted that Helena's primary role was to serve as a staging ground for the eventual capture of Little Rock. On the other hand, he almost always consented when troops were requested for operations

⁵² *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 629, 22-28, 656, 661-662, 667-668, 673, 695; Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 426.

⁵³ *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 702-703, 729-730, 746, 759, 761-762, 773, 812-813.

against Vicksburg. Halleck stressed that Helena's forces should not be weakened so much as to "endanger any necessary operation in Arkansas," but he made it very clear that both he and President Lincoln wanted Helena troops to be employed in the Vicksburg campaign. "The security of . . . Helena," Halleck proclaimed, "is of vital importance to our future operations on the Mississippi."⁵⁴

By November, Curtis was convinced that he should do everything possible to assist in the operations against Vicksburg. In accordance with Grant's request, he directed a Helena force under General Alan P. Hovey to destroy a portion of the Mississippi Central Railroad near Friar's Point, Mississippi. One month later, when Halleck asked how many troops he could spare for Grant's operations on the Mississippi, Curtis offered to send 20,000 troops downriver: "In this I propose to give all my available force to the primary object of opening the Mississippi, leaving at Helena only enough to hold that point, deferring any and all interior movements until main downriver forces can be returned. . . . I feel that the downriver movement is of the first importance, not only to your entire command in the West, but to this department especially."⁵⁵

Halleck responded to Curtis's enthusiastic support for the Vicksburg campaign by continuing to be unclear about the purpose of Helena troops. He reprimanded the general for sending men to Grenada, again stressing that "the first object of sending troops to Saint Helena

⁵⁴ *OR*, vol. 17, pt. 2, pp. 401, 424, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 840, vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 303. Halleck's indecisiveness and inability to make difficult military decisions are well documented in John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004). For a brief discussion of Halleck's ambiguous communications with Curtis over the importance of Mississippi River operations, see Marszalek, 161.

⁵⁵ William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel. *Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 38; Donald E. Reynolds, "Union Strategy in Arkansas During the Vicksburg Campaign," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 29 (Spring 1970): 23-24; *OR*, vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 383.

was stated to be the capture of Little Rock, which has been continuously urged on me for the last six months.” Perplexed by Halleck’s ambiguity, Curtis reduced the number of troops to be allocated down the Mississippi to 12,000, thereby leaving 13,000 in Helena to operate against Little Rock. He then ordered a force from Helena to advance on Little Rock as soon as possible. Halleck approved of the plan, telling Curtis to “use the forces at Helena as you propose.” Unfortunately for Curtis, that advance never occurred.⁵⁶

In late December 1862, a Union expedition under the command of William T. Sherman arrived in Helena. In accordance with Grant’s plan, Sherman was to pick up several thousand troops and proceed to Vicksburg, where his expedition would serve as part of a two-pronged attack against the Confederate Mississippi bastion. To Curtis’s dismay, Sherman unexpectedly took 13,000 troops instead of 12,000, leaving Helena’s garrison, which had also been weakened by sickness, with only 4,000 effective infantry and 3,000 effective cavalry—too few to move on Little Rock *and* defend Helena. According to Brigadier General Willis A. Gorman (who commanded at Helena from December 1862 to February 1863), without reinforcements, Helena troops could do nothing “more than lay here in this wonderfully muddy hole.”⁵⁷

The Helena soldiers transported downriver with Sherman in December 1862 were placed under the temporary command of General Grant. According to the battle plan, Grant’s army would move down the Mississippi Central Railroad and attack Vicksburg by land. At the same time, Sherman’s flotilla would proceed down the Mississippi and up the Yazoo River to assault an area north of the city called Chickasaw Bayou. If all went according to plan, Grant believed

⁵⁶ Reynolds, “Union Strategy in Arkansas,” 23-25; *OR*, vol. 17, pt. 2, pp. 401, 433, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 855.

⁵⁷ Shea and Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key*, 42-43; Reynolds, “Union Strategy in Arkansas,” 24-26; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 858-859.

the Confederates would be unable to repel the two-pronged offensive. Unfortunately for the Union, nothing worked according to plan. Grant was forced to abandon his overland campaign when rebel cavalry forces cut his northern supply line. Grant's retreat then allowed the Confederates in Vicksburg, who were alerted to Sherman's move downriver, to fortify the bluffs north of town. When Sherman's troops launched their final assault on December 29, the Confederates were well entrenched. Sherman's amphibious assault at Chickasaw Bayou ended in bloody defeat, and the Federals were forced to rethink their strategy for taking Vicksburg.⁵⁸

Despite Grant's failures in 1862, Curtis remained willing to supply him with Helena troops in 1863. On January 12, he forwarded Grant a copy of his telegram to Gorman in which he instructed Gorman to "continue to regard the Vicksburg move of primary importance. Let all other moves delay, if deemed necessary. Send boats and men for that object, but do not weaken Helena so as to endanger the position." Curtis's willingness to cooperate must have been a relief to Grant, who had become so accustomed to drawing on Helena for his Vicksburg operations that he even wondered if Helena was in his department. By the end of the month, Grant's wishes had come true, as he assumed command of "all troops in Arkansas" which were "in reach of his orders." The Helena garrison was most certainly within Grant's reach.⁵⁹

Between January and July 1863, troops at Helena continued to play a significant role in Union operations on the Mississippi River. On January 10, they participated in a federal expedition against Arkansas Post, a Confederate fort positioned fifty miles above the mouth of the Arkansas River. Major General John A. McClernand believed the rebel garrison at Arkansas

⁵⁸ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 855; Reynolds, "Union Strategy in Arkansas," 27; Shea and Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key*, 43-55.

⁵⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 34, vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 543, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 68; Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 179.

Post posed a threat to the Union's line of communication on the Mississippi, and on January 11, his force of 32,000 men, six gunboats, and three ironclads forced the fort to surrender. The following month, troops from Helena participated in the Yazoo Pass Expedition, yet another federal attempt to take Vicksburg from the north. On February 3, 1863, a Union party stationed on the east bank of the Mississippi River about six miles below Helena destroyed an earthen levee along an old channel of the Mississippi called the Yazoo Pass. General Gorman sent five hundred soldiers from Helena to assist in the breaching. The Federals hoped the levee's destruction would flood the Mississippi bottomlands and fill a winding maze of small streams, thus opening a navigable backdoor waterway to the Yazoo River and to Vicksburg. The project succeeded, and on February 24 a Union flotilla began motoring toward Vicksburg. When the Confederates learned of the approaching boats, they felled trees in the channel to obstruct the Union advance. The Federals struggled for weeks to remove the obstructions, cut overhanging trees, and navigate the swampy streams. To further hinder the federal procession, the rebels erected an earthen fort—which they named Fort Pemberton—at the head of the Yazoo River. On March 11, 13, and 16, Smith's flotilla engaged the fort. The strong Confederate fortifications combined with reinforcements from Grenada repelled the federal attack, and the flotilla was eventually forced to return to the Mississippi River.⁶⁰

The federal troops from Helena who participated in the Yazoo Pass Expedition experienced the hardships of overcrowded river transports, poor sanitation, limited food, and widespread sickness. Benjamin Palmer left Helena in early 1863 to take part in the expedition.

⁶⁰ Reynolds, "Union Strategy in Arkansas," 28-29; Shea and Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key*, 68-71; Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 253n3. For an environmental interpretation of the Yazoo Pass expedition and other Union operations during the Vicksburg campaign, see Lisa M. Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), chaps. 1 and 2.

After toiling in the bottomlands for over a month, Palmer was elated to return to Helena in early April:

We had a very hard time while we were Gon[e]. We were on Picket Every other Day while we were Stationed their [sic]. . . . We Landed here [in Helena] from the yazoo Pass Expedition on the 8th of this month and have Been very Busy Ever Since A Leavling [sic] and Ditching our camp Ground. . . . But I would Rather Be In camp and Drill half of the time than to Be cramped up on A Steamboat two or three weeks at A time and Get no Exercise at all and Live on Food half cook[ed]. . . . I Am Sick of Steam Boating I hope I will not Be Put on Board of another one as long as I am In the Survise [sic].⁶¹

A. F. Sperry, a musician in the 33rd Iowa who left Helena for the Yazoo Pass in February, also cited the journey's danger and adversity. According to Sperry, the expedition was "in some respects . . . the hardest of our soldiering. . . . Diarrhea was universal, almost unanimous. Few of us remained in as good health as usual, and many contracted diseases to whose sad end the lonely grave-yard on the bare Helena hills, within the new few months bore witness."⁶²

Helena's significance as a federal river outpost was not limited to its role as a base of operations. The town also served as a convenient supply and reinforcement depot for Union flotillas heading to various locations on the Mississippi. The number of federal troops who actually camped in Helena paled in comparison to the number of men who passed by the town on transports on their way to Vicksburg, Memphis, and other points along the river. The diaries and letters of soldiers who were stationed at Helena between July 1862 and July 1863 are filled with observations of Union fleets that either bypassed the town or stopped for reinforcements and supplies. "The many vessels that lay at the landing and the countless numbers of teams that

⁶¹ Benjamin Palmer to Dear Father [Samuel Kirkland], 18 April 1863, and Palmer to Dear Wife [Kezia Palmer], 21 April 1863, Benjamin Palmer Collection, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies.

⁶² Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 26.

crowded the streets together with the great number of encampments, give the place the appearance of a great military depot,” observed a Wisconsin soldier in January 1863.⁶³

The previous month, Joshua W. Underhill, a Indiana surgeon, witnessed Sherman’s flotilla docking at Helena on its way to Chickasaw Bayou: “This morning a large number of transports arrived loaded with troops—been coming all day—72 [transports] are said to be here and on the route. . . . This will swell the number of troops [on the expedition] to at least sixty thousand. Vicksburg is thought to be the point of attack.” According to Underhill, Sherman’s fleet did not linger in Helena for long; it picked up Helena soldiers for the Chickasaw expedition and began heading downriver before dark the following day. On January 21, 1863, Iowan Minos Miller observed 10,000 troops landing at Helena on their way to Vicksburg. In early June, Miller estimated that “between 15 and 20 thousand troops passed here within the last week for Vicksburgh and just now 10,000 thousand more are passing down.” A. F. Sperry noted his cohorts’ excitement when they witnessed Union transports headed for Vicksburg in late January 1863: “While we were here, General Grant passed down the river to Vicksburg, with a portion of his army. The sight of the fleet loaded with troops, with colors flying, bands playing, and men shouting and cheering, was a new and grand one to us. . . . [T]he regiment all broke camp and scattered up and down the levee, to get a better view.” Five months later, an Iowa infantryman estimated that in one week, some 45,000 federal troops passed through Helena on their way to Vicksburg. Although some of the soldiers’ figures were likely exaggerated, the large numbers of troops and transports they observed confirm Helena’s prominent role as a steamboat landing and

⁶³ Bastin Diary, 7 January 1863, Edson Sewell Bastin Diaries, Wisconsin Historical Society.

supply depot for federal operations on the Mississippi River, particularly those aimed at Vicksburg.⁶⁴

Over the course of the Vicksburg campaign, Curtis and his successor Schofield sent over 30,000 troops from the Trans-Mississippi Department across the Mississippi River to Grant. According to one historian, this number accounted for approximately one-half of the army that successfully captured Vicksburg. Many of these troops either came from Helena or were stationed there at one time, and an even greater number temporarily stopped at Helena on their way to Vicksburg and other points along the Mississippi. The sustained Union presence in Helena from July 1862 to July 1863 posed a serious threat to Confederate control of the Arkansas interior, including Little Rock. Even more, it endangered the rebel presence on the Mississippi River, particularly at Vicksburg. It is little wonder then that throughout 1862 and 1863, the Confederate high command viewed the retaking of Helena as a strategic military necessity.⁶⁵

Less than a week after Curtis's Army of the Southwest had occupied Helena, the Confederates contemplated an attack on the Union post. From the very beginning, the Confederate desire to retake Helena was dictated by the town's relation to Vicksburg. Confederate officials believed that occupying Helena was an important step in protecting not only Vicksburg but also Confederate interests in other parts of the Mississippi valley. Moreover,

⁶⁴ Joshua Underhill Diary, 21 December 1862, in Christopher Morss, ed., *A Civil War Odyssey: The Personal Diary of Joshua Whittington Underhill, Surgeon, 46th Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry, 23 October 1862-21 July 1863* (Lincoln Center, Mass.: Heritage House, 2000), 24; Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 21 January 1863, and 12 June 1863, Minos Miller Letters, Mullins Library; Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 16; Milton P. Chambers to Dear Brother [Armory K. Chambers], 14 June 1863, Milton P. Chambers Letters, Mullins Library.

⁶⁵ Reynolds, "Union Strategy in Arkansas," 36-37.

if Vicksburg fell, the Confederate high command believed that possession of Helena would “secure a great future advantage to the Confederacy.”⁶⁶

On July 15, 1862, only three days after Curtis reached Helena, Confederate General Samuel Cooper in Richmond ordered Thomas Hindman in Little Rock to assault and retake the town. Lacking the force he believed he needed to do so, Hindman respectfully declined Cooper’s request. Two months later, another call for an attack on Helena came from the Confederate war department. On October 20, Secretary of War George W. Randolph urged Theophilus H. Holmes, an ineffective veteran of the Eastern Theater (and West Point classmate of Jefferson Davis) who had assumed command of the Trans-Mississippi Department on July 30, to advance upon Helena for the sake of protecting the Confederacy’s position on the Mississippi: “After providing for the defense of Arkansas and the Indian Territory, neither of which I presume will be seriously menaced from Missouri, your next object should be speedy and effective co-operation with General [John C.] Pemberton for the protection of the Mississippi Valley. . . . [A]n advance upon Helena would seem to be the first step necessary.” President Davis agreed with Randolph’s assessment. “It was rather hoped that [Holmes] would be able to retake Helena,” he told the secretary in November 1862, “which would greatly contribute to the security of the country below, both in and out of Arkansas.”⁶⁷

No Confederate attempt to retake Helena took place in 1862. However, rebel cavalry and guerrilla bands continually harassed the garrison’s outer pickets in an effort to keep the Federals confined to their enclave. One such attack occurred in September 1862, when fifty rebel

⁶⁶ *OR*, vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 219.

⁶⁷ *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 874, 889-890, 914-915; Bobby L. Roberts, “General T. C. Hindman and the Trans-Mississippi District,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1973): 309; James M. McPherson, *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 108.

skirmishers charged upon a Union picket on the outskirts of town, killing one federal soldier and capturing two others. The Union colonel who reported the incident requested the help of additional cavalry units to protect the town's borders from "[rebel] parties hovering around us on all sides." The following month, Joshua Underhill of the 46th Indiana reported that "a party of 200 guirrellas attacked and captured a number of [Union] teams that were out foraging." On December 27, he claimed that Helena's pickets were fired upon by guerrillas almost every night. Federal attempts to secure the Helena garrison were further hindered by Confederate sympathizers (living in and around town) who assisted the rebels in any way they could. The same colonel who reported the assault on his pickets also claimed to have arrested a number of civilians who were caught delivering important information about Union positions to the Confederates stationed nearby.⁶⁸

In the absence of an assault on Helena, the Confederates focused their attention on the protection of Vicksburg and the Mississippi valley. Throughout November and December 1862, the war department asked Holmes to send 10,000 reinforcements across the river to Vicksburg, which was being threatened by Grant's army. Holmes stubbornly refused, arguing that it would take his men no less than two weeks to get to Vicksburg, and by then, Union forces would have moved out of Helena and captured Little Rock. However, Holmes continued to contemplate an attack on Helena. In November, he asked Hindman, whose army was stationed in northwest Arkansas, if he had enough troops to protect the Indian Territory and northwest Arkansas and still attack Helena, "the object being to hold and fortify it for the purpose of securing the navigation of the Mississippi." Hindman replied that conditions in northwest Arkansas forbid

⁶⁸ *OR*, vol. 13, pt. 1, pp. 272-273; Underhill Diary, 23 October 1862, and 27 December 1862, in Morss, ed., *A Civil War Odyssey*, 5, 26.

any such campaign. In early December, Union forces defeated his army at the battle of Prairie Grove. To make matters worse for Holmes and the Confederates, Union troops under General McClelland captured the Confederate fort at Arkansas Post only one month later.⁶⁹

Following these defeats, Holmes lost the confidence of his military cohorts both inside and outside of Arkansas. A new Confederate secretary of war, James A. Seddon, noted that Holmes, “while esteemed for his virtues, [seemed] to have lost the confidence and attachment of all.” Common soldiers referred to their partially deaf, elderly general as “granny Holmes,” while newspapers called him “old foggy.” Army doctors diagnosed him with “softening of the brain,” and one of his subordinates later wrote, “Mental suffering, old age, and a life of great exposure had told heavily upon [Holmes’s] physical development and correspondingly upon his intellectual faculties.” Even Holmes’s spiritual leader, Episcopal Bishop Henry C. Lay, characterized his parishioner as “a very old man” with “memory, will, [and] judgment all debilitated to a degree which incapacitates him for any efficient administration.” In January 1863, a Texas cavalryman observed that Holmes “looks to be about seventy years old, though he is said to be only fifty-seven. He is getting frail,” the soldier continued, “and looks more like an old farmer who had lived about long enough than the General of the Trans-Mississippi District.” Perhaps the Texan had a premonition, for the following month, President Davis replaced his old friend and classmate with General Edmund Kirby Smith, and Holmes was subordinated to command the District of Arkansas.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Albert Castel, “Theophilus Holmes: Pallbearer of the Confederacy,” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 16 (July 1977): 14; McPherson, *Embattled Rebel*, 108-110; *OR*, vol. 17, pt. 2, pp. 753-757, vol. 13, p. 917.

⁷⁰ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 802; Albert Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 141-142; John N. Edwards, *Shelby and His Men: Or, The War in the West* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing Company, 1867), 105; Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a*

Throughout the spring and summer of 1863, the Confederate war department continually urged Smith to do everything in his power to assist in operations across the Mississippi, either by sending troops across the river or by making a diversion on the river's west side to take pressure off of Vicksburg. In early May, President Davis asked him to strike Union bases in southern and western Louisiana. A month later, Seddon asked him to establish artillery detachments at various points along the Mississippi above Vicksburg "to endanger and destroy the vessels and frail transports of the enemy passing up or down, frequently laden with troops." However, Smith took no significant action. According to one scholar, the Trans-Mississippi commander had neither the manpower nor the materiel to make any effective moves on behalf of Vicksburg. Davis understood Smith's predicament. If his general made no diversionary move, the president assured him he knew "it was because [Smith] had not the means."⁷¹

Meanwhile, the Union's attempts to converge on Vicksburg from the swamps and bayous of the Mississippi delta had failed. In March 1863, Grant mobilized 24,000 troops camped on the west side of the Mississippi River at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, and marched them overland approximately twenty-five miles below Vicksburg. With the help of Admiral David D. Porter's fleet, he transported his force across the Mississippi to the river's east bank. Next, instead of marching on Vicksburg (which seemed like his obvious next step), Grant moved his army inland. On May 14, he captured the Mississippi capital of Jackson, thirty-five miles east of Vicksburg. General Pemberton, commander of the Confederate forces at Vicksburg, was thoroughly

Frontier State in Wartime (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 93; H. G. Orr to Dear Father, 21 January 1863, in John Q. Anderson, ed., *Campaigning with Parsons' Texas Cavalry Brigade, CSA: The War Journals and Letters of the Four Orr Brothers, 12 Texas Cavalry Regiment* (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1967), 90.

⁷¹ Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 141-142; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 834-835, 852-853.

confused by Grant's movements. On May 12, he moved a portion of his garrison between Vicksburg and Jackson with the hope of stopping Grant before he could move on Vicksburg. On May 16, Grant attacked Pemberton at Champion's Hill, about eighteen miles east Vicksburg. By the end of the day, the Confederates were fleeing back to the defenses of their port city. During the next week, Grant tried twice to assault and capture Vicksburg. When his efforts proved futile, he ordered his army to lay siege to the rebel town. Outnumbered nearly two to one by their Union counterparts, Pemberton and the Confederates were forced to hold on and wait for help.⁷²

News of Pemberton's retreat and entrapment quickly spread to the Confederate war department. At this urgent stage in the war, the rebel high command was committed (verbally, at least) to doing everything possible to save Vicksburg and preserve the diminishing Confederate presence on the Mississippi River. On May 23, Secretary of War Seddon sent an important message to Joseph E. Johnston, the general in command of the rebel forces responsible for relieving Vicksburg from the east. Seddon suggested that forces in the Trans-Mississippi Department should, if possible, attack Helena in order to divert Union attention away from Vicksburg. Also, if Vicksburg were to capitulate, the secretary thought Helena would serve "a great future advantage" in the Confederacy's efforts to control the Mississippi. Seddon believed Helena's garrison had been weakened by Grant's acquisition of troops for the Vicksburg campaign. It might, therefore, might be more easily captured. In closing, he stressed to Johnston, "Had I command of communication, this suggestion would be directly addressed and

⁷² Fellman et al., *This Terrible War*, 218-223.

pressed by the [War] Department. Its policy is so apparent that it is hoped it will be voluntarily embraced and executed.”⁷³

Johnston agreed with Seddon that “the time [was] favorable for attacking Helena,” and he forwarded the secretary’s proposal to Smith on June 3. Smith, who was stationed across the Mississippi in Shreveport, Louisiana, did not receive the message for several days. When he read Seddon’s suggestion, he believed he was too far away from Helena to ascertain the strength of the Union garrison there or give any orders for an attack. Therefore, on June 13, he forwarded Seddon’s message to General Holmes in Arkansas and instructed him to “act as circumstances may justify.” Even General Robert E. Lee, operating hundreds of miles east of Helena with the Army of Northern Virginia, believed an assault on Helena should be made at this time. On June 2 he told Jefferson Davis that “General Kirby Smith ought, if possible, to collect a sufficient force and occupy Helena or some better point on the west bank of the river.”⁷⁴

The Confederate generals in the Trans-Mississippi Department had considered the prospects of attacking the Union outpost at Helena even before Smith had received Seddon’s dispatch. On June 4, the Trans-Mississippi commander wrote to Thomas C. Reynolds, the Confederate governor of Missouri: “Helena is the point looked to; it is the strategic point in that section, and, if a favorable opportunity offers for securing its possession, it should be improved. I hope, however, no attempt will be made by General [Holmes] without first obtaining accurate information of the works, the strength, garrison, &c.” Four days later, on his own initiative,

⁷³ *OR*, vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 219; Edwin C. Bearss, “The Battle of Helena, July 4, 1863,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (Autumn 1961): 256.

⁷⁴ *OR*, vol. 24, pt. 1, p. 225, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 914, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 407, vol. 18, p. 1089; Bearss, “The Battle of Helena,” 257. Bearss suggests that Johnston forwarded Seddon’s suggestion for an attack on Helena to Smith on May 31, but this is contradicted by Johnston to Smith, 3 June 1863, in *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 914.

Holmes departed Little Rock for Jacksonport, Arkansas, the headquarters of Major General Sterling Price. Holmes wanted to ask Price, his top subordinate, if he believed the Confederate forces in Arkansas “could with propriety attack Helena.” Holmes’s ambulance broke down before he reached Jacksonport, so he sent a messenger ahead to deliver his query to Price. Price responded enthusiastically to his commander’s suggestion, saying that his troops were “fully rested and in excellent spirits.” Furthermore, he notified Holmes of a scouting report obtained by Brigadier General John S. Marmaduke that placed the Helena garrison at “not more than from 4,000 to 5,000” strong. If an attack was “conducted with celerity and secrecy,” Price had no doubt that they could “crush the foe” at Helena.⁷⁵

Marmaduke’s scouting report made Holmes reconsider the proposed attack on Helena. An assault on 4,000 or 5,000 fortified Union soldiers “would cost too much,” he told Price on June 13. Alternatively, Holmes believed that better service would be rendered by establishing a battery on the Mississippi River below Memphis. From there, Confederate troops could attack federal transports passing along the river and disrupt the flow of Union supplies and reinforcements to Vicksburg.⁷⁶

Over the next two days, Holmes received two dispatches that caused him to recover his enthusiasm for an assault on Helena. First, he obtained information indicating that the number of Union troops in Helena was less than he had previously thought. According to Marmaduke, “all Federals troops that [could] be spared [were] being sent to re-enforce Grant,” leaving Helena “very weak.” Second, he finally received the secretary of war’s recommendation for an attack on Helena. On June 15, Holmes instructed Price to make no move until further notice. “I will

⁷⁵ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 856, 863; Bearss, “The Battle of Helena,” 258.

⁷⁶ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 866.

probably be with you on Wednesday night,” he added. That same day, he wired his commanding officer, Smith, in Shreveport: “I believe we can take Helena. Please let me attack it.” On June 16, Smith sent the encouraging reply Holmes had hoped for: “Most certainly do it.”⁷⁷

One hundred miles east of Little Rock, Charles Musser sat at Helena with the 29th Iowa Infantry Regiment. Unaware of the decisions being made by the Confederate high command, he wrote to his father on June 12: “There is nothing going on around here, only the fortyfying of the place. it would take a large number of troops to take this place.” Like Musser, rebel infantryman Fontaine Richard Earle knew nothing of Holmes’s plans. On June 11, while camped on the outskirts of Little Rock, Earle wrote to his sweetheart: “We have good health, a pleasant camp, good water (wells), plenty to eat (beef & cornbread), light drill and upon the whole are fairing [sic] well. No prospect of our moving. . . . If however the war can move on as well without our moving as with it I am willing to be easy. But if there is need for us in the field I will gladly go.” Although he did not know it at the time, the Confederate army would call on Earle and his cohorts in the coming days.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 867-868, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 407.

⁷⁸ Charles Musser to Dear Father, 12 June 1863, in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 55; F. R. Earle to Amanda Buchanan, 11 June 1863, in Robert E. Waterman and Thomas Rothrock, eds., “The Earle-Buchanan Letters of 1861-1876,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1974): 136.

Chapter 5: The Helena Campaign

As the Confederate generals in Arkansas eagerly planned their assault on Helena, federal soldiers at Helena's garrison continued their daily routines. Regular drilling, fortifying, and picketing occupied the life of every soldier in the camp, especially after rumors of an impending rebel attack began to circulate amongst the soldiers. "About the 1st of June, there began to come rumors of an approaching attack by the rebels," chronicled A. F. Sperry of the 33rd Iowa. "Occasionally we would have to stand 'at arms' from an early reveille till after sun-rise. One effect of all this was, that at last we grew to believe there would never be any attack on the place, and that all the long days of work on the fortifications, and the false alarms and every thing of the kind, were but the means adopted by our commanding officers, to keep us from rusting in rest." Captain Edward S. Redington of the 28th Wisconsin also complained about the incessant drill and discipline in the Union camp: "We have had about our usual number of false alarms. The night before last everyone was up and our Company sent into the rifle pits until morning, but it all ended in smoke as usual. I . . . spent nearly the entire night riding through the woods and hills to visit the pickets and outposts to see that all were on the alert[.]"¹

Although habitual training bored some federal soldiers and made many complacent about the looming Confederate threat, it equipped them for the day when an attack might come. The commanders at Helena wanted to prepare their garrison as much as possible, and most of the troops understood this, regardless of whether they enjoyed the drilling. "The progress of the

¹ A. F. Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment, 1863-6*, ed. Gregory J. W. Urwin and Kathy Kunzinger Urwin (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 32; Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 24 June 1863, in Dale P. Kirkman, ed., "The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VI," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 14 (December 1975): 14.

rebels . . . seemed to have been well known to our commanders,” observed Sperry, “and our force at Helena was therefore kept well in readiness.”²

The commanding officer in Helena in the spring of 1863 was Major General Benjamin M. Prentiss, a Mexican War veteran who took charge of the District of Eastern Arkansas in February 1863. Before arriving in Helena, Prentiss had served as an officer in Ulysses S. Grant’s Army of the Tennessee, where he made a name for himself at the battle of Shiloh. On April 6, 1862, 44,000 Confederates attacked and routed 40,000 Federals who were camped near Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee. With disaster looming, Prentiss helped rally a defensive line to slow the rebel assault. The fighting that ensued was so intense that the position occupied by the Union army came to be known as the “Hornet’s Nest.” The Confederates eventually overran the Union lines, taking Prentiss prisoner in the process. However, by that time, the general and his companions had held off the rebels for six hours, just long enough to allow Grant to arrive with 25,000 reinforcements and save the day for the Federals.³

² Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 35.

³ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 110, vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 39 (hereafter cited as *OR* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted); Ezra Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 386; Gregory J. W. Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas,” *North & South* 6 (December 2002): 27; Michael Fellman, Lesley J. Gordon, and Daniel E. Sutherland, *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 119-120. In recent years, Prentiss’s reputation as the “Hero of Shiloh” has been questioned. Timothy B. Smith argues that W. H. L. Wallace’s division, not Prentiss’s, was the key defender of the Hornet’s Nest. Mortally wounded during the battle, Wallace was unable to tell his side of the story, while Prentiss, though a prisoner for six months, conducted something of a public relations campaign to promote his own role in the battle. See Smith’s many works on Shiloh, including *The Untold Story of Shiloh: The Battle and the Battlefield* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 22-25; *This Great Battlefield of Shiloh: History, Memory, and the Establishment of a Civil War National Military Park* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), chap. 5; and *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), chap. 11. For a defense of Prentiss, including his actions at Shiloh and his efforts at self-promotion, see Toby

When Prentiss was released six months later in a prisoner exchange, he returned to the Union army a man permanently marked by his experiences at Shiloh. On March 15, 1863, he gave a speech to his troops at Helena, and Joshua Underhill of the 46th Indiana was in the audience: “[Prentiss’s] remarks were to the point and made some good hits. Spoke of his capture at Shiloh and the treatment he suffered. Altogether he made a favorable impression—about one thousand persons present.” Apparently, Prentiss was rather fond of recounting his reputed heroics at Shiloh, for he delivered a similar speech in mid-June. A soldier who stopped at Helena en route to Vicksburg recalled that “Gen Prentiss made us a Short Speech and told us to remember at Vicksburg the sufferings of himself and troops while prisoners there.”⁴

While in command at Helena, Prentiss would do everything in his power to ensure that his Shiloh experiences would not be repeated. In March, he closed the lines around town and allowed only those citizens who had sworn an oath of allegiance to the United States to enter. Males over the age of eighteen who refused to take the oath before a provost marshal were put outside the lines. Additionally, trade with the surrounding countryside was banned, and those who wished to pass through the lines were required to carry official passes. On May 14, a Kansas cavalryman reported that two groups of Confederates bearing flags of truce recently had come to Helena, “but they don’t find out so much as they used to. Gen. Prentice [sic] don’t honey fuggle round them as much as the other commanders of the past used too [sic],” he

Bates, ““General Prentiss Proved Himself No Better Than a Vulgar Braggart!”: General Benjamin Mayberry Prentiss and a Failure of Civil War Historiography,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 73 (Fall 2011): 193-224.

⁴ Smith, *The Untold Story of Shiloh*, 25; Joshua Underhill Diary, 15 March 1863, in Christopher Morss, ed., *A Civil War Odyssey: The Personal Diary of Joshua Whittington Underhill, Surgeon, 46th Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry, 23 October 1862-21 July 1863* (Lincoln Center, Mass.: Heritage House Publishers, 2000), 58; Nannie M. Tilley, ed., *Federals on the Frontier: The Diary of Benjamin F. McIntyre, 1862-1864* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 162.

explained. “He don’t supply them in clothes, salt, etc. He was a prisoner among them too long, and suffered too much from their hands, to love them any. He was taken prisoner at Shiloh.”⁵

Prentiss also buttressed his garrison with regiments of black troops, though interestingly, he was not the first person in Phillips County to suggest that African Americans be armed. On July 17, 1861—only two and a half months after Arkansas seceded—W. S. Turner, a Helena planter, asked the Confederate secretary of war for permission to raise black regiments for rebel service. “Our negroes are too good to fight Lincoln hirelings,” he declared, “but as [the Yankees] pretend to love negroes so much we want to show them how much the true Southern cotton-patch negro loves them in return.” A spokesman for the Confederate war department politely declined Turner’s offer, explaining two weeks later that although “this Department is not prepared to accept the Negro regiment tendered by you, . . . it is not doubted that almost every slave would cheerfully aid his master in the work of hurling back the fanatical invader. . . . But now there is a superabundance of our own color tendering their services to the Government in its day of peril and ruthless invasion.” Both Turner and the spokesman must have been horrified by the way black Arkansans welcomed Samuel R. Curtis’s army the following summer.⁶

⁵ Rhonda M. Kohl, *The Prairie Boys Go to War: The Fifth Illinois Cavalry, 1861-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 99; T. G. Larkin to Dear Wife, 5 March 1863, Thomas George Larkin Papers, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Richard J. Fulfer, *A History of the Trials and Hardships of the Twenty-Fourth Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Printing Co., 1913), 50; John B. Howard to Dear Sister, 17 March 1863, John B. Howard Civil War letters, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock; George E. Flanders to Dear Brother, 14 May 1863, in Alice L. Fry, ed., *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry* (Independence, Mo.: Two Trails Publishing, 1998), 177.

⁶ *OR*, Ser. 4, vol. 1, pp. 482, 529. Turner was not the last Helenian to suggest that slaves be armed to fight for the Confederacy. Major General Patrick R. Cleburne, who made such a proposal in the winter of 1863-1864, was one of the first high-ranking Confederates to do so. See Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), chap. 10; *OR*, vol. 52, pt. 2, pp. 586-592; and Thomas J. Key Diary, 28 December 1863, 31 January 1864, and 3 February 1864, in Wirt Armistead Cate, ed., *Two Soldiers: The Campaign Diaries of Thomas J. Key, C.S.A., December 7, 1863–May 17,*

The Confederacy did not officially consider arming black troops until the waning months of the war, but the U.S. government took steps to do so in the spring of 1862. The Second Confiscation Act of July 17, 1862, authorized the president to employ “persons of African descent” to suppress the rebellion, while the Militia Act, passed on the same day, sanctioned the employment of African Americans in “any military or naval service for which they may be found competent.” Six months later, President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation expanded the parameters of black service. In addition to freeing all slaves who lived in the states still in rebellion, the president declared on January 1, 1863, that African Americans “of suitable condition” would be “received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.” Although Lincoln did not specify combat roles for black men, African Americans and their abolitionist allies seized upon the proclamation to urge black enlistment. Their appeals, together with mounting federal casualties and the corresponding need for manpower, convinced increasing numbers of white northerners that African Americans should share the burden of the fight.⁷

In the spring of 1863, Lorenzo Thomas, the adjutant general of the U.S. Army, toured the Mississippi valley to enlist black soldiers. On April 6, Thomas visited Helena, where he launched a recruitment drive with a rousing speech to an estimated 5,000-7,000 troops. “I briefly defined my general plan,” Thomas later reported, “and told the soldiers . . . that their commanding officer [Prentiss] thought he could raise a colored regiment at once, and I had

1865, and Robert J. Campbell, *U.S.A., January 1, 1864–July 21, 1864* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 16-18, 32, 33.

⁷ Ira Berlin et al., “The Destruction of Slavery, 1861-1865,” in *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 41-51; Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 6, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 28-30 [quotation on p. 30].

authorized him to do so.” In his speech, Thomas also introduced a program to put the region’s freedpeople to work and, in the parlance of the times, help them become “free laborers.” Under his plan, the army would seize farms abandoned by (and confiscated from) local rebels and lease them to loyal men—many of them discharged Yankee officers—who, in turn, would hire freedpeople to work. Despite its admirable goals, this plantation-leasing system, as it came to be called, in some cases resembled the system of tenancy and sharecropping that dominated the postwar South. Lessees duped workers into signing unfair contracts, and conditions on most of the plantations were harsh. In 1865, some twenty-three federal plantations were leased around Helena, and they became regular targets for rebel guerrillas. African American troops often guarded the plantations, which further enticed vengeful Confederates to attack them. In the spring of 1863, however, plantation-leasing lay several months in the future. On April 6, Thomas’s primary goal was to recruit black soldiers.⁸

At the conclusion of Thomas’s speech, Prentiss joined him on the speaker’s platform and “indorsed in a forcible and eloquent speech the policy announced by Adj’t Gen. Thomas.” In typical fashion, Prentiss also recounted his experiences at Shiloh, telling his audience that “from the time he was a prisoner, and a negro sentinel with firm step, beat in front of his sell [sic] . . . he prayed God for the day of revenge, and he now thanked God that it had come.” He then reportedly turned to Thomas and said, “[T]ell the President for me. I will receive [black troops] in the lines—I will beg them to come in—I will make them come in! and if any officer in my

⁸ Mark K. Christ, “‘They Will Be Armed’: Lorenzo Thomas Recruits Black Troops in Helena, April 6, 1863,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2013): 366-383; “Conversations with Gen. Thomas; The Negro Regiments in the Mississippi Valley,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1863. On the federal plantation-leasing system in Arkansas, see Carl H. Moneyhon, “From Slave to Free Labor: The Federal Plantation Experiment in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53 (Summer 1994): 137-160; and Dale P. Kirkman, “The Leased Plantations Below Helena,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 4 (September 1966): 8-15.

command, high or low, neglects to ‘receive them friendly and treat them kindly,’ I will put him outside the lines.” The troops reportedly responded to their commander’s bombast with “Tremendous applause,” and the following day, recruitment began for the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry, African Descent (A.D.). In May, the newly-formed regiment was ordered to Louisiana, but the Second Arkansas, A.D.—also authorized before Thomas left Helena—remained in Phillips County through the summer. In the days following the adjutant general’s speech, Minos Miller of the 36th Iowa applied for an officer’s commission in the Second Arkansas, A.D.⁹

Recruiting black regiments was not the only way that Prentiss sought to bolster his position at Helena; he also set out to use the surrounding landscape to his defensive advantage. Previous Yankee garrisons had already established suitable defenses prior to Prentiss’s arrival, but the general supervised their improvement. Just west of town stood four prominent hills—the foothills of Crowley’s Ridge—which, according to one soldier, were “divided by numerous deep and narrow gorges, where in many places a man could only walk with difficulty.” These gorges, the product of years of erosion of the ridge’s loess cap, shielded the town’s western

⁹ “Arming the Negroes—What the Soldiers Say About It,” *Douglass’ Monthly* (Rochester, N.Y.), June 1, 1863; Ronnie A. Nichols, s.v. “First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent) (US),” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=5904> (accessed June 18, 2017); Christ, “They Will Be Armed,” 370; Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), 116; Fred A. Kaufman, “The Fifty-Fourth U.S. Colored Infantry: The Forgotten Regiment,” *Ozark Historical Review* 16 (Spring 1987): 1-8; “Conversations with Gen. Thomas”; Lorenzo Thomas to E. M. Stanton, 18 May 1863, in “The Negro in the Military Service of the United States,” vol. 3, pt. 1, Records of the Colored Troops Division, 1863-94, Records of the AGO, 1780s-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as NA); Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 18 April 1863, Minos Miller Letters, Mullins Library, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

approaches.¹⁰ Prentiss, however, had no intentions of relying solely on Helena's natural defenses. Under his supervision, Union troops and former slaves adapted the terrain to their advantage by building batteries on the peaks of the hills, each armed with two guns and protected by earthen walls, sandbags, and a series of connecting rifle pits. The Federals labeled the batteries, from north to south, A, B, C, and D (Figure 6). Cavalry, rifle pits, and additional batteries protected the flanks of this western line of defense.¹¹

To fortify their garrison further, the defensive-minded Yankees felled trees in the ravines and roads leading into town. The trees, which included oak, hickory, American beech, sugar maple, yellow poplar, and other hardwoods that grew atop Crowley's Ridge, obstructed the avenues through which enemy artillery might be brought to bear on the post. Confederate assailants later identified these trees as *abatis*—defensive barriers formed by cutting limbs, lining them up (with sharpened branches turned toward the enemy), and securing their butts in the ground. Whether the Federals built actual *abatis* or simply slashed the trees and let them lie where they fell, the result was the same—solid fronts of jagged, intertwining branches that would thwart, or at least slow down, any rebel assault by land.¹²

¹⁰ Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 37; Hubert B. Stroud, s.v. "Crowley's Ridge," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=12> (accessed June 16, 2017); Hubert B. Stroud and Gerald T. Hanson, *Arkansas Geography: The Physical Landscape and the Historical-Cultural Setting* (Little Rock: Rose Publishing Company, 1981), 29; Jodi Morris, "On High Ground: A Natural History of Crowley's Ridge," *Craighead County Historical Quarterly* 44 (October 2006): 28.

¹¹ Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 27; Lurton Dunham Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion: A History of the Troops Furnished by the State of Iowa to the Volunteer Armies of the Union, Which Conquered the Great Southern Rebellion of 1861-5*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1867), 616; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 387-388.

¹² Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion*, 616; Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 27; Earl J. Hess, *Field Armies & Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 334. Confederate General James F. Fagan called the obstructions *abatis* in his post-battle report. *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 425. Such

Helena's troops loathed the hard work required to secure their post, but they continuously bragged about its natural and man-made defenses. One soldier insisted, "This is a very well fortified place and . . . the country in the rear of town is a continuation of hills which are the most natural fortifications I have ever seen. On many of them, we have Batteries planted and rifle pits dug so it seems as though every avenue into the town is so commanded as to make it impossible for a rebel army to get in here." Another boasted that "fifty thousand men could not take this town by attacking it. in the rear, the batteries command the whole country around. the country is very rough and hilly in the rear of the town, and no artillery can be brought against it." A month later, he added, "[W]e have a line of batteries and rifle pits all round town, and all the roads are blocked up by the falling of heavy timber." Minos Miller also observed efforts to strengthen the garrison's defenses: "The troops here are still fortifying and digging rifle pits," he wrote in early June. There is some talk of [General John S.] Marmaduke attacking this place but no fears of it."¹³

In the summer and fall of 1862, the Federals had constructed their most formidable defense mechanism, an earthen redoubt on the western edge of town called Fort Curtis.

According to local lore, the fort—named for the erstwhile federal commander at Helena—sat on

obstacles were called *abatis* because they were made of *arbres abattus*, French for felled trees. Fred Anderson also contends they were named as such because they were supposed to become the attackers' *abattoir*, or slaughterhouse. Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 242. On the hardwood trees of Crowley's Ridge, see Stroud and Hanson, *Arkansas Geography*, 19, 29, and Stroud, s.v. "Crowley's Ridge."

¹³ Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 27; William F. Vermilion to My Darling [Mary Vermilion], 4 June 1863, in Donald C. Elder III, ed., *Love amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 123; Charles Musser to My Dear Parents, 8 May 1863, and Musser to Dear Father, 12 June 1863, both in Barry Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy: The Civil War Letters of Charles O. Musser, 29th Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 51, 55; Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 12 June 1863, Minos Miller Letters.

the same mound where the white stag of Pacaha had stood; where Hernando de Soto had planted his silver cross in the 1540s; and where Helena's founding proprietor, Sylvanus Phillips, had made his home. In the summer of 1862, the site was owned by Phillips's only surviving child, Caroline Phillips Hanly, the wife of the esteemed Judge Thomas Hanly. Because Hanly was a Confederate congressman, and his wife a rebel sympathizer, federal forces confiscated the property without compensating the couple. The Yankees broke ground on the fort in August 1862, and on October 30, they celebrated its completion with a formal dedication. Most of the work of building the fort was performed by freedmen, who swung pickaxes, shoveled dirt, and hauled guns while white soldiers "lay in the shade an[d] drill[ed]."¹⁴

Fort Curtis was not, as the name implies, a military administration center (Figure 7). Rather, it was a mostly subsurface structure containing two powder magazines and a well. On the surface, it was equipped with several large siege guns, the exact locations and specifics of which have been disputed. Archaeological research conducted in the late 1960s revealed that the fort was equipped to hold four 24-pound Barbette guns, one in each corner, with three additional guns mounted somewhere along the fort's outer walls. Joshua Underhill, who visited Fort Curtis in November 1863, said it was "a pretty substantial fortification" occupying "one city square" and armed with "large guns," the largest being a 42-pounder. The exact size of Fort Curtis, be it one city block or smaller, has also been disputed. However, one thing is certain—its defenses were substantial, and the Federals believed it would provide them with ample protection in the

¹⁴ Dale P. Kirkman, "Old Helena," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19 (December 1980/March 1981): 73, 84; "Gen. Curtis' Army; Progress of the War in Arkansas," *New York Times*, August 22, 1862; "Fort Helena," *The Shield* (Helena, Ark.), September 6, 1862; Samuel Sawyer, "Letter from Helena," 30 October 1862, in *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, November 11, 1862; Gilbert H. Denny to Dear Father [Morris T. Denny], 24 August 1862, in "Indiana Troops at Helena: Part II," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 16 (September 1978): 4.

event of an attack. A week after the fort's dedication, one soldier boasted, "Helena is so situated that it could be defended by a small force against vastly superior numbers, merely with the help of its natural advantages, and with the aid of Fort Curtis—which is just finished—we consider it nearly impregnable." Two months later, the garrison remained eminently confident. "I do not think [the rebels] will ever attack this place," predicted Minos Miller, "for about fifty yards east of us is one of the best Foarts in the U.S. it has nine thirty two pound cannons which would mow them down as fast as they could come up I think the only thing they will try to do is to harrass our pickets or if they can catch a small squad of our me[n] [and] take them prisnors."¹⁵

Miller's contention that the Confederates would never try to seize Helena ultimately proved untrue, but his prediction that they would harass Union pickets was prophetic. Throughout the spring of 1863, small bands of rebel guerrillas and regular cavalrymen continued to attack the Union pickets around Helena and federal foraging parties that ventured out of the garrison. The diaries and letters of Union soldiers stationed at Helena are filled with references to guerrilla attacks and minor skirmishes on the outskirts of town. In February 1863, Miller himself reported a small clash between Union picket guards and Confederate skirmishers. According to Miller, a Kansas cavalry unit was dispatched to the scene, and four federal soldiers were wounded in the fight. In April, another Iowa soldier wrote to his friend at home: "Well

¹⁵ Burney McClurkan, "Archeological Investigation at Fort Curtis, Helena, Arkansas," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 6, (June 1968): 3-7; Underhill Diary, 23 November 1862, in Morss, ed., *A Civil War Odyssey*, 16; "From the Fourth (Iowa) Regiment," 8 November 1862, in *Quiner Scrapbooks: Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers, 1861-1865*, Vol. 3, p. 144, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 18 January 1863, Minos Miller Letters. Both General Frederick Steele and Military Governor John S. Phelps opposed the construction of Fort Curtis, which neither believed would adequately defend Helena. Steele called the fort "a humbug," while Phelps snidely suggested its construction had been "commenced in order to give employment to the slaves." *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 653, 684.

Han, Since I last Wrote to you I Have Heard Rebel Bullets Sing But we Have Had no General Fight we was Fired on Several times By Gurillas Fired on us & Slightly Wounded 2 of our Co.” In May 1863, Benjamin Palmer of the 29th Iowa reported that a Union foraging party from Helena was attacked near Clarendon, Arkansas, by “quite a large force” of rebels. When the troops in Helena received word of the skirmish, they “were cauled out and formed In line of Battle. Stacked their arms and Prepared themselves with thirty Rounds of cartage [sic], expecting every moment to Be marched away.” Although such minor skirmishes did not seriously threaten the Union post, they did keep the soldiers alert to the possibility of more substantial Confederate attacks. They also prevented the Federals from controlling any part of Phillips County beyond Helena and those areas adjacent to Union encampments.¹⁶

White civilians who found themselves in the paths of the two armies sometimes suffered immensely. Most supported the Confederate cavalryman (and bushwhackers) who roamed the eastern Arkansas countryside, ambushed Union patrols, and sniped at the Helena garrison, and they sometimes provided the rebels with food, shelter, and intelligence. The Federals, of course, knew the loyalties of most white locals, and they occasionally retaliated against enemy civilians by burning their houses, destroying their farms, and stealing their crops and livestock. Such harsh tactics, in conjunction with sanctioned Union foraging, devastated large swaths of the Arkansas Delta. In May 1863, Edward Redington described the country outside Helena as “desolation itself.” A scouting expedition in which Redington participated departed Helena on

¹⁶ Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 2 February 1863, Minos Miller Letters; Newton Robert Scott to Dear Miss Han. M. Cone [Hannah Cone], 9 April 1863, in Bill Proudfoot, ed., “Letters from an Iowa Soldier in the Civil War,” <http://www.civilwarletters.com/index.html> (accessed June 15, 2017); Benjamin Palmer to Dear Wife [Kezia Palmer], 13 May 1863, Benjamin Palmer Collection, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies; Carl H. Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County, Arkansas,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19 (June 1981/September 1981): 26.

the Little Rock Road, which “ran through one continued series of plantations of the best land in the world, all deserted, not an acre under cultivation. The houses were almost all empty,” Redington recalled, “and when anyone was to be seen, it was the wife and children of some poor white trash (as they call them here) who wither voluntarily or involuntarily were in the Rebel army, and were obliged to stay from sheer necessity. The poor things looked frightened to death, and well they might be, for many of the troops, especially the Kansas [regiment] was composed of men who had their homes spoiled by the raids of the Rebels and have about as much feeling for a Secesh as a wolf has for a lamb.”¹⁷

The Union brass anticipated a Confederate attack against Helena as early as the fall of 1862. The Federals understood the strategic importance of their eastern Arkansas outpost, and they knew that the rebels would eventually try to reclaim it. In September 1862, General Curtis reported that Theophilus H. Holmes and the Confederates were on the move, “probably to invest Helena.” The following month, General Eugene A. Carr, in command at Helena before Prentiss, told Curtis that he also thought the garrison would be attacked. Curtis responded by asking Admiral David D. Porter to send gunboats there to provide additional protection. In December, Grant also believed Holmes was moving against Helena, but he thought the federal force there was strong enough to protect the town.¹⁸

¹⁷ Bobby Roberts, “‘Desolation Itself’: The Impact of the Civil War,” in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, ed. Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 78-79; Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 133-134; Mark K. Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863: The Battle for a State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 107, 109; Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 14 May 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: IV,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 13 (March 1975): 23.

¹⁸ *OR*, vol. 13, pp. 667, 741, 746-747, vol. 17, pt. 2, p. 511.

Rumors of an impending rebel attack continued to circulate throughout the spring of 1863. “We have rumors this morning, that [Confederate generals Sterling] Price and [John S.] Marmaduke have joined their forces and are marching on this place,” reported Edward Redington on May 16, “but I guess it is all bosh. But let them come if they want to, I think they will be glad to get away again.” Two and a half weeks later, one of Redington’s comrades described the garrison’s heightened state of awareness to his friend: “A man from the country just brot [sic] in, states to Gen. Prentis [sic] that Marmaduke is but 7 miles from here with 7000 men, and Price is 18 miles farther behind, an attack is expected by morning. I mention this to let you know how we are kept in a state of anxiety I might say fear for these reports are frequent and often we have to march into the country a few miles to meet the enemy, but as yet the Infantry has seen no force at all, not even one Reb.” Two days later, the soldier happily reported, “The anticipated fight is over and we still hold Helena. The fact is, the fight amounted to only a scare, as I expected at first.”¹⁹

In April and May, Curtis worried that Confederate forces in Arkansas were being massed for a renewed assault against Missouri, and he recommended that Helena forces attack them before it was too late. However, Prentiss, who had taken command at Helena by this time, believed Confederate threats to Missouri were only a feint for their plan to move on Helena, and he expressed concern that his garrison was too small to withstand an attack. On June 12, General Stephen A. Hurlbut reported from Memphis that Price had left Little Rock with a force of about 4,800 men and was moving toward Helena. Porter heard similar reports later that month, and as a precautionary measure, he sent a force of gunboats to Helena, including the U.S.S. *Bragg*,

¹⁹ Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 16 May 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: IV,” 29; Ammi Hawks to Dear Friend Allie, 4-6 June 1863, Ammi Doubleday Hawks Letters, Hawks Inn Historical Society, Delafield, Wisconsin.

Tyler, and *Hastings*. The Federals had already exploited Helena's topographical advantages; now they sought to utilize the town's riverside location.²⁰

While reports of an impending Confederate assault against Helena circulated amongst the Union command, the rebels began putting their plan into motion. On June 16, two days after asking General Edmund Kirby Smith for permission to attack Helena, Holmes traveled to Jacksonport, Arkansas, to meet with Price and Marmaduke to discuss the plan of battle. Holmes must have been confident that his attack would be approved, for he made his trip before receiving Smith's reply. Even then, Holmes remained noncommittal. According to an acquaintance, the general "vacillated as to [the attack's] propriety and did not finally decide on it until he came to Jacksonport, and held a consultation with Generals Price and [John Sappington] Marmaduke, who both advised it."

According to the plan devised at the meeting, Confederate forces totaling approximately 7,600 men would converge on Helena. Price's 3,095-man infantry division, which consisted of Brigadier General Dandridge McRae's Arkansas brigade and Brigadier General M. Monroe Parsons's Missouri brigade, would leave Jacksonport and rendezvous at Cotton Plant, Arkansas, about sixty miles northwest of Helena, on June 26 (Figure 5). Marmaduke's 1,750-man cavalry division, which consisted of Colonels Colton Greene's and Joseph Shelby's Missouri brigades, would join them there. An additional infantry brigade, Brigadier General James F. Fagan's 1,339 Arkansans, would leave its base in Little Rock and move to Clarendon, about fifty miles

²⁰ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 203, 270, 317; Benjamin M. Prentiss to U. S. Grant, 25 April 1863, and David D. Porter to U. S. Grant, 18 June 1863, both in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, vol. 8 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 106, 390; U.S. Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. and index (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Ser. 1, vol. 25, p. 227 (hereafter cited as *ORN* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted).

west of Helena. The two separate columns would then converge on Helena for the attack. In the meantime, Brigadier General Lucius M. Walker's 1,462-man cavalry division, which was already operating in the vicinity of Helena, was responsible for helping the Confederates achieve an element of surprise. Holmes instructed Walker to picket all the approaches to Helena and prevent anyone from entering or exiting the town.²¹

With the plans finalized, Holmes reportedly turned to Price and said, "I determine on this expedition with some fear of an unsuccessful result; you have great weight and popularity, and if the expedition fails, I rely on you to sustain the action taken in ordering it." Price allegedly assured his commander he would do so. At that, Holmes returned to his headquarters in Little Rock, where he received Smith's authorization for the attack. On June 21, Holmes wired Price that the attack had been approved. He also ordered Price to move his division to a place called Switzer's (or Oakland Post-Office) instead of Cotton Plant. Two days later, Holmes issued a spirited order to his troops. "Comrades!" he exclaimed. "Your time has come to strike a blow in the good cause. You are ready. Your discipline and manhood are confidently relied on. . . . The invaders who seek to subjugate you have been driven from Arkansas save at one point, Helena! We go to retake it!" On June 26, Holmes traveled to Clarendon to assume personal command of the operation.²²

²¹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 877; Thomas C. Reynolds, *General Sterling Price and the Confederacy*, ed. Robert G. Schultz (St. Louis: Missouri History Museum, 2009), 85; Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 29. For a personal account of one of Walker's cavalymen who picketed the approaches to Helena, see Thomas J. Barb Diary, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries of Notre Dame, http://www.rarebooks.nd.edu/digital/civil_war/diaries_journals/barb/ (accessed June 15, 2017).

²² Reynolds, *General Sterling Price and the Confederacy*, 85; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 878, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409. Holmes's June 23 order appears in several sources with minor variations. See "The Battle at Helena," *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1863; "From the 28th Regiment," in *Quiner Scrapbooks*, Vol. 10, p. 342; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 389; and Mark Christ, "The Battle of Helena," *Blue & Gray* 32, no. 4 (2016): 9-10.

Price had assured Holmes that if the Confederates moved against Helena with “celerity and secrecy” the Federals undoubtedly would be crushed. Unfortunately for the rebels, the natural environment of eastern Arkansas prevented the Confederates from achieving either of those ends. In fact, what happened next became a small-scale version of General Ambrose Burnside’s notorious “Mud March” in Virginia earlier that year.²³

On June 22, Price and Marmaduke began their marches toward Switzer’s, and two days later, heavy rains started falling, transforming the roads on their route to mud and the creeks in their path to torrents. The rain fell incessantly for four days, and three different streams—now all overflowing their banks—mired the Confederate advance. “The heavy rains had swollen all the streams and still it rained until the time of Old Noah seemed coming again,” recalled a Confederate colonel. The rebel rendezvous was supposed to occur on June 26, but on that day, most of Price’s infantrymen were stopped several miles from Switzer’s, unable to cross the swollen Cache River. Jacob H. Rockwell, a cavalryman in Shelby’s brigade, said the Cache was “always on a rampage at that season of the year and when we reached it[,] it was at its old game of swamping the country, and it surely is a swamp too.” General McRae summed up the rebels’ predicament on the banks of the river: “It is utterly impossible to get my train across Cache. . . . The mud is so deep . . . that mules cannot stand up.” William McPheeters, a surgeon in Price’s division, was forced to abandon his carriage, which was “too weak to stand the horrible roads of the Cache [River] bottom, famous for its almost impassibility.” By June 26, only Marmaduke’s

²³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 863. The best analysis of Burnside’s “Mud March” is A. Wilson Greene, “Morale, Maneuver, and Mud: The Army of the Potomac, December 16, 1862-January 26, 1863,” in *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Decision on the Rappahannock*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 171-227. The best environmental interpretation is Harold A. Winters, “The Battle That Was Never Fought: Weather and the Union Mud March of January 1863,” *Southeastern Geographer* 31 (May 1991): 31-38.

cavalry had reached Switzer's. When Price's infantrymen finally crossed the Cache, two more flooded streams, Bayou DeView and Caney Creek, stood in their way. Price sent his engineers ahead to construct bridges across the creeks, but floods swept away the bridges before the infantry could cross them.

It was June 29, three days after they were supposed to arrive, when Price's infantrymen were across Caney Creek and camped near Switzer's. "None of the soldiers who participated in that march can forget its hardships," remembered a Confederate captain. "The crossing of the Cache River, Bayou de View, Candy and Big Creeks, with their attendant six days' wading through mud and water, from ankle to waist high, whether in timber or prairie, it was 'splash' after 'splash' from one to four feet deep, and creeks two miles wide. Some of the nights following these weary days were spent without rations or shelter, for the wagons could not reach camp. Yet, through all this disheartening hardships the troops bore themselves with heroic fortitude." Likewise, a Missouri historian called the march "one of the most extraordinary . . . in the history of the war." And, with a bit of hyperbole, he added, "Napoleon's passage of the Alps was hardly more arduous than the march of this army from Jacksonport to Helena."²⁴

Predictably, Fagan's brigade faced similar difficulties on its journey east from Little Rock. "[W]e crossed the [Arkansas] river at Little Rock on the 18th June, the main army having

²⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 886-889, 891, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 413; L. C. Gause to My Dear Col. [Asa S. Morgan], 30 July 1863, Asa S. Morgan Collection, Arkansas History Commission and State Archives, Little Rock; Jacob H. Rockwell Memoir, p. 16, Vertical File, Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, Prairie Grove, Arkansas; William McPheeters Diary, 24 June 1863, in Cynthia DeHaven Pitcock and Bill J. Gurley, eds., *I Acted from Principle': The Civil War Diary of Dr. William M. McPheeters, Confederate Surgeon in the Trans-Mississippi* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 35; Capt. James H. McNamara speech before the Southern Historical Society, December 5, 1885, in Michael E. Banasik, ed., *Confederate "Tales of the War" in the Trans-Mississippi, Part Three: 1863* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Bookshop, 2012), 77; W. L. Webb, *Battles and Biographies of Missourians, or the Civil War Period of Our State* (Kansas City, Mo.: Hudson-Kimberly, 1900), 189.

crossed the day before,” reported one soldier. “We then marched through nearly an incessant rain from then until after we crossed White river at Clarendon. Which made it very hard traveling, to say nothing of uncomfortableness of being wet.” Another soldier later wrote, “It is useless to tell . . . anything of the hardships of our marches through the . . . swamps, no one but an actual participant, can picture anything like the reality. It was mud & water all the time from ‘knee’ deep up to the arm pits. It would not be surprising if the number of sick from exposure on this trip will equal that of the killed and wounded in the fight.”²⁵

Unbeknownst to them, the exasperated Confederates were slogging their way through an area modern geographers call the Grand Prairie, a subregion of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain that is covered with a fertile topsoil (Figure 2). Beneath that topsoil, however, lay a deep layer of dense, silty clay that drains poorly. This makes the Grand Prairie ideal for rice cultivation but not for marching, especially after heavy rains.²⁶ After traversing the Grand Prairie, the soldiers

²⁵ William H. H. and J. S. Shibley to Beloved Parents, 23 July 1863, in Ruie Ann Smith Park, ed., *The Civil War Letters of the Shibley Brothers, William H. H. and John S., to Their Dear Parents in Van Buren, Arkansas* (Fayetteville: Washington County Historical Society, 1963), Letter No. 42; David W. Moore to Dear Mother, 28 July 1863, in Mark K. Christ, ed., “‘We Were Badly Whipped’: A Confederate Account of the Battle of Helena, July 4, 1863,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 (Spring 2010): 49-50. Both Mark Christ and Edwin C. Bearss contend that Fagan’s infantry traveled by train from Little Rock to DeValls Bluff. This is a logical assumption, but the primary sources do not mention the railroad, and they suggest that many, if not most, of the troops marched overland. See Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 110-112; and Bearss, “The Battle of Helena, July 4, 1863,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (Autumn 1961): 260. Interestingly, the source that Bearss cites on the subject, Col. John M. Harrell, says the Confederates marched from Little Rock “across the Grand prairie, a treeless level, whose heavy, wet flats are easily cut into miry roads. At the season of this march, millions of prairie-flies and black gnats swarmed everywhere, distressing the mules and horses.” John M. Harrell, *Confederate Military History of Arkansas* (Atlanta, Ga.: Confederate Pub. Co., 1899), 176.

²⁶ On the characteristics of the Grand Prairie and its soil, see Stroud and Hanson, *Arkansas Geography*, 19; Guy Lancaster, s.v. “Grand Prairie,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2996> (accessed May 6, 2017); United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, “‘Stuttgart’ the Arkansas State Soil,” http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ar/programs/?cid=nrcs142p2_035042 (accessed

had to march through the White River Lowlands, a region regularly inundated by the White, Black, Cache, L'Anguille, and Mississippi rivers, as well as Bayou DeView. When German sportsman Friedrich Gerstäcker hunted the Lowlands in the late 1830s, he found "the ground was covered with water, in many places knee deep." It was a land of "almost impenetrable swamps," he wrote, where a "few dry strips of land ran across the country from north to south, the intermediate spaces being about a foot or a foot and a half under water, with here and there channels three or four feet deep." A quarter of a century later, the Lowlands had changed little. As one Confederate cavalryman recalled of the summer of 1863, "The entire country between Jacksonport and the Mississippi river became one vast lagoon streaked innumerable by now swimming streams and bottomless bayous."²⁷

In spite of the obstacles, Holmes (and Fagan's brigade) reached Clarendon on June 26 and began moving toward Trenton, Arkansas, the next day. At Clarendon, Holmes issued further orders for the attack: Price's division, shielded by Marmaduke's cavalry, was to march from Switzer's to Helena. Fagan's column, shielded by a portion of Walker's cavalry, would march from Clarendon toward Helena via the lower Little Rock Road. On June 28, Holmes and Fagan reached Trenton, approximately fifteen miles west of Helena. By this time, William and John Shibley, brothers in Fagan's brigade, had learned why their unit was advancing toward Helena. In a letter home, they informed their parents of their expedition: "It is thought to be our intention to try and divert the attention of the Federals from Vicksburg." J. W. Paup, Fagan's acting

May 6, 2017); and Paul B. Francis, s.v. "Soils," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=5141> (accessed May 6, 2017).

²⁷ Foti, "The River's Gifts and Curses," in *The Arkansas Delta*, 43-44; Friedrich Gerstäcker, *Wild Sports in the Far West* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Co., 1861), 185, 191; John N. Edwards, *Shelby and His Men: Or, The War in the West* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing Company, 1867), 164.

inspector-general, expressed a more sinister motive for attacking Helena. On June 29, he reported that the Yankees there had established “two Etheopean [sic] schools in which they have some 5 or 6 hundred negroes in each. Teaching them how to read and write, and instilling into them their hellish doctrin [sic] of insurrection. God grant that we may be able to murder the last one of them,” he told his wife. “I would be willing any day to sacrifice my own life to accomplish their destruction.”²⁸

Price’s progress, meanwhile, continued to be hampered by bad weather and impassable streams. Marmaduke, whose cavalry had been moving ahead of Price’s column during the preceding week, was forced to halt on June 30 and wait for the infantry to move forward. Price’s continual tardiness caused Holmes a great deal of angst, as he feared the holdup would allow the Federals to learn about the attack. On July 1, a frustrated Holmes informed Price from Trenton: “I deeply regret the difficulties that cause the delay in your march. I have used every precaution to prevent a knowledge of our approach reaching the enemy, and have what I believe to be certain information that I had succeeded up to the night before last. I fear these terrible delays will thwart all my efforts.”²⁹

As it turned out, Holmes’s fears were justified—nature had blown the Confederates’ cover. On June 24, Hurlbut wired Prentiss to alert him to Price’s location in Jacksonport. Three days later, Prentiss responded by saying that he had heard Price was there, but that the latest intelligence had him moving toward the Red River, not Helena. However, Prentiss acknowledged that his scouts had been unable to obtain much information on Price’s movements

²⁸ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 409, 427, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 886-887, 890; William H. H. and J. S. Shibley to Dear Parents, 28 June 1863, in Park, ed., *The Civil War Letters of the Shibley Brothers*, Letter No. 40; J. W. Paup to My Dear Wife, 29 June 1863, author’s collection.

²⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 886-887, 890, 898-899.

because Confederate cavalry had been blocking his communication with the Arkansas interior. Additionally, the rebels were preventing people living outside of Helena from entering the town (apparently, Walker's cavalry was doing its job). This, Prentiss later admitted, made him suspicious of an attack. Therefore, for an entire week before the battle, he issued orders that the "entire garrison should be up and under arms at 2.30 o'clock each morning." On July 1, Prentiss learned that the Confederates had congregated about fifteen miles from Helena, and he became convinced that an attack was imminent. His suspicions were confirmed the following day, when Hurlbut reported that "a man who has escaped from Price's army informs me that Price is moving south, and will make an attempt on Helena." To his soldiers' dismay, Prentiss cancelled the garrison's scheduled Fourth of July celebration as a precautionary measure. Minos Miller, recently promoted to the rank of lieutenant in the Second Arkansas, A.D., heard rumors of the Confederate approach: "[W]e recd news on the 2^d that there was a large rebble force fifteen miles from here and that they intended to celebrate the 4th in here so all the troops here was ordered to be in line a half hour before day each morning."³⁰

On July 3, the Confederate forces finally converged on the outskirts of Helena. After nearly two weeks of trudging through the mud and fording swollen streams, the tired and dispirited rebels had at least reached their objective. The natural environment, though, had prevented them from doing so according to schedule. One rebel soldier later recognized the cost of the delays: "There had been heavy rains which made the roads impassable and corduroy roads had to be constructed the entire way; this with the building of bridges across all swollen streams

³⁰ *OR*, vol. 24, pt. 3, p. 445, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 387-388, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 352; John S. Morgan, "Diary of John S. Morgan, Company G, Thirty-Third Iowa Infantry," *Annals of Iowa* 13 (Winter 1923): 492; Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 6 June 1863, Minos Miller Letters. Miller's June 6 letter describes the battle of Helena. Since the battle did not occur until July 4, he probably intended to date the letter July 6.

delayed the movement so much that the enemy learned of our coming and had ample time to prepare for our reception.” General Holmes concurred. “Price was unavoidably four days behind time in consequence of high water and bad roads,” he lamented, “which gave the enemy ample time to prepare for me.”³¹

Nevertheless, the Confederates moved forward with their plans. On July 3, Holmes met his subordinate generals at the Allen Polk house, five miles west of Helena, to discuss the order of battle. He also briefed them on Helena’s defenses, which were stouter than he had originally believed them to be. “[T]he place was very much more difficult of access,” he declared, “and the fortifications very much stronger, than I had supposed before undertaking the expedition, the features of the country being peculiarly adapted to defense, and all that the art of engineering could do having been brought to bear to strengthen it.” General McRae agreed. “From what I can learn [the Federals’ position] is one of the strongest positions imaginable,” he wrote to his wife on July 3. “May the Lord deliver me from a[n] imbecile old man like Genl H[olmes]. If I am killed in this fight charge it to Jeff Davis through his clerk Holmes for if we could be sacrificed he would or will do it.”³²

Faulty intelligence, poor reconnaissance, and the Federals’ strategic use of the environment had placed the rebels in a precarious position before the first shots were fired. Still,

³¹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409; Reminiscence and Diary of William Jeffery Bull, in Michael E. Banasik, ed., *Missouri Brothers in Gray: The Reminiscences and Letters of William J. Bull and John P. Bull* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Bookshop, 1998), 54; Theophilus H. Holmes to Jefferson Davis, 14 July 1863, in Correspondence of Gen. T. H. Holmes, 1861-1864, Records of Confederate Military Organizations, 1861-65, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109, NA.

³² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409; Dandridge McRae to Dear Wife [Angie McRae], 3 July 1863, in Alan Thompson, ed., “‘Frank and out spoken in my disposition’: The Wartime Letters of Confederate General Dandridge McRae,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2013): 361.

Holmes stayed committed to the attack. To achieve coordination, he ordered his subordinates to attack on July 4 at “daylight,” a vague time designation that had disastrous consequences the following morning. According to the plan, the rebels would strike the federal garrison simultaneously from three different positions (Figure 6). Price’s division was ordered to assault Graveyard Hill due west of town, where the Federals’ battery C was located. Marmaduke’s cavalry would take Rightor Hill on the north side of town, which was protected by battery A. Fagan would capture battery D on Hindman Hill on the town’s south side. Finally, Walker’s cavalry unit was ordered to proceed to the Sterling Road north of Helena (and left of Marmaduke), where it would “resist any [federal] troops that may approach Righter Hill.” When Rightor Hill was captured, he should “enter the town and act against the enemy as circumstances may justify.” According to Holmes, all of the officers agreed with the plan.³³

While the rebels mobilized for their Independence Day assault, the Federals cautiously anticipated an attack. As late as June 28, they were still adapting the land to their advantage by digging “ditches” and “big holes so that [rebel] cavalry cannot cross.” Like many of his cohorts, James B. Loughney of the 28th Wisconsin loathed the hard work required to strengthen Helena’s fortifications. However, when he took his position on July 3, he was glad those defenses were in place: “Our Officers here . . . very wisely had the place strongly fortified at every assailable point, as batteries & breastworks commanding all the roads. This imposed heavy duty on the boys, who in their ignorance of the true state of affairs often cursed the projectors of these works as they did not believe that their heavy labors would be of any avail & were not needed.” Writing home to his wife the night before the battle, Loughney’s comrade, Edward Redington, knew that

³³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 409-410, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 903.

a fight was coming: “Tonight since eight o’clock news has come in that Price is within a few miles . . . and will surely make an attack on us tomorrow or next day.”³⁴

Just offshore of Helena, on the Mississippi River, the crew aboard the U.S.S. *Tyler* also prepared for a rebel attack. The *Bragg* and the *Hastings* had since left for operations elsewhere, so that on July 3, the *Tyler* was the only naval vessel anchored at Helena. Under the command of Lieutenant Commander James M. Pritchett, the Union ironclad, 180 feet long and 42 feet wide, was armed with a deadly thirty-pounder Parrot on its stern and six eight-inch guns. Pritchett had been alerted to the approaching rebel force, and he was prepared to assist Prentiss in any way he could.³⁵

As the Federals prepared for the coming fight, Major Robert Henry Smith, a quartermaster in Marmaduke’s division, sat in the Allen Polk house the night before the battle. Before eating his supper, he wrote home to his wife: “I cannot refrain from writing you a line or two before going into this fight. It may, My Darling, be the last thought transcribed to paper in this encounter from your loving Husband. . . . If I fall do not think harshly of me, for I think that I have your approbation to fight for liberty rather than live as a slave, to drag my family down, down to the lowest depths of slavery and misery by such an enemy.” Smith’s premonition about

³⁴ Edmund Holt Diary, 28 June 1863, in “Wisconsin Troops at Helena: X,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 15 (December 1976): 8-9; James B. Loughney to Dear Father, 7 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: II,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 12 (June 1974): 21-22; Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 3 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VII,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 14 (March 1976): 30.

³⁵ *ORN*, vol. 25, pp. 227-229; Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat,” 33; Thomas A. DeBlack, “1863: ‘We Must Stand or Fall Alone,’” in *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 79; Steven W. Jones, ed., “The Logs of the U.S.S. *Tyler*,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 15 (March 1977): 23-24.

dying in the fight turned out to be true. The following morning, while manning a canon near Rightor Hill, Smith was struck and killed by federal fire.³⁶

Shortly before midnight on July 3, the Confederates began moving into their respective positions for the coming battle. Price's division was led by Parsons's brigade, itself spearheaded by two units of sharpshooters: Major Lebbeus A. Pindall's Ninth Missouri Sharpshooters, and Captain Cameron N. Biscoe's company of Helena-area Arkansans. A brother-in-law of Thomas Hindman, Biscoe was sent to the front because he was familiar with the country. As it approached the town from the west, Biscoe and his comrades encountered deep ravines, steep hills, and felled timber. The rough terrain and darkness made it virtually impossible for Price's column to transport its artillery, so the general ordered his guns to be left behind. Furthermore, he instructed the soldiers who operated the artillery to arm themselves and prepare to capture and man the federal guns on Graveyard Hill. William J. Bull, an artilleryman in Captain Charles B. Tilden's Missouri battery (of Parsons's brigade), was one of the volunteers called "to go in with the infantry and serve any guns that might be captured." John D. Waller, also an artilleryman in the brigade, observed that "the Feds are prety well fortified[.] the artillery canot get in[.] 32 of our canoners are going to take muskets and goin with the Infantry."³⁷

³⁶ Robert Henry Smith to Wife, 3 July 1863, Smith-Mendenhall Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University, Bozeman; Kim Allen Scott, "A Diminished Landscape: The Life and Death of Major Robert Henry Smith," *Missouri Historical Review* 91 (July 1997): 368-369.

³⁷ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 413, 417; Josiah H. Shinn, *Pioneers and Makers of Arkansas* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), 268-269; Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 126; R. E. Young, *Pioneers of High, Water and Main: Reflections of Jefferson City* (Jefferson City, Mo.: Twelfth State, 1997), 114; Reminiscence and Diary of William Jeffery Bull, in Banasik, ed., *Missouri Brothers in Gray*, 55; John D. Waller Diary, 3 July 1863, p. 27, Vertical File, Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, Prairie Grove, Arkansas.

After marching for much of the night, Price halted his column a little over a mile from Helena. Apparently, Price had interpreted Holmes' instructions to attack at "daylight" to mean "sunrise," so he stopped his men for fear of arriving on the battlefield prematurely. According to William Bull, Parsons's brigade reached the outskirts of Helena "several hours before the time for the assault." The soldiers spent this idle time visiting, joking, and speculating about the coming battle. Others wrote home to their families and loved ones or mulled over their chances of surviving the upcoming fight. Bull, who was exhausted from a combination of illness and the long week of marching through wetlands, lay down on the ground and slept. Anticipating that it would be difficult to transmit orders once fighting ensued, Parsons utilized the down time to brief his subordinates on the plan of attack. According to Price, Holmes joined his column during this idle time and remained with it until dawn, when the troops resumed their march toward Helena.³⁸

At daylight, Price's division started moving again, following the lead of several local guides. The rebel advance toward battery C, as well as their advances elsewhere, was aided by the cover of a dense morning fog. "A heavy fog settled over the scene, giving a weird and strange look to the lines of the two contending armies as they loomed up in the rising mist," recalled a Yankee adjutant. Additionally, a series of "heavily wooded" hills stood between Price's column and Graveyard Hill. According to William Bull, these hills were not as steep as those on which the federal batteries were located. However, they "had been covered with heavy timber" whose "limbs [were] allowed to lie where they fell. This made a most excellent abatis." The obstructions significantly slowed Price's advance and created a great deal of confusion in

³⁸ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 413, 421; Reminiscence and Diary of William Jeffery Bull, in Banasik, ed., *Missouri Brothers in Gray*, 55.

the rebel ranks. “[T]he steep ridges and deep ravines . . . rendered the movement very slow and fatiguing,” Parsons recalled.³⁹

Inside the Helena garrison, 4,129 federal soldiers were roused out of bed on July 4 at around 2:00 a.m. After only a few minutes, they assumed their respective positions and stood at arms. Because they had been drilling in this manner for months (and had been arising at this hour for almost a week), many soldiers still doubted the presence of a Confederate threat. A. F. Sperry suspected that “some thing [was] up,” but even he wondered if the rebels would attack. Although he had heard that Price was coming, Edward Redington still doubted that a fight would come on that day: “[T]he drums beat the assembly, and we were quickly under arms. Still, almost every one thought it all nonsense, and we were sitting around, talking of everything but a fight.” When the alarm gun fired at Fort Curtis, signaling the coming attack, some soldiers remained skeptical. A “few minutes after four . . . the alarm gun on Fort Curtis [brought] every one all standing,” Redington recalled. “Still, hardly any one believed then there would be a

³⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 392, 413, 398, 421; Maj. John F. Lacy, “A Battle Scene at Helena, Ark., July 4, 1863,” in *The War of the 'Sixties*, comp. E. R. Hutchins (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1912), 194; Reminiscence and Diary of William Jeffery Bull, in Banasik, ed., *Missouri Brothers in Gray*, 57. Numerous sources mention the fog that covered the field in the battle’s opening moments. See, for example, Charles Musser to Dear Father, 6 July 1863, in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 64; Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 38; Frederick Salomon, “The Battle of Helena,” Eleventh Annual Meeting of The Society of the 28th Wisconsin Vol. Infantry Held at Mukwonago, Wisconsin, June 21st and 22nd, 1893, at “Twenty-Eighth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry,” <http://www.28thwisconsin.com/service/battle.html> (accessed June 19, 2017); Henry S. Carroll to Dear Mother, 5 July 1863, at “Twenty-Eighth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry,” <http://www.28thwisconsin.com/service/helena2.html> (accessed June 19, 2017); Ebenezer S. Peake to My Dear Augusta, 4-5 July 1863, Ebenezer S. Peake Civil War Collection, Series II, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies; and “The Battle of Helena,” *National Tribune*, April 11, 1907.

fight, and after a few minutes settled down again, thinking perhaps it was only meant for a salute at sunrise, in honor of our natal day.”⁴⁰

However, when the Federals heard continuous shots fired around their pickets, virtually everyone became convinced that a fight was imminent. By this time, the soldiers guarding the Union pickets needed no convincing of the Confederate approach. Iowan Charles Musser, assigned picket duty for the night of July 3, had been “told to Keep a watchfull eye, for the enemy was within a Short distance of town.” At around 2:00 a.m., Musser “heard a few Shots fired on [his] picket line, and in about an hour it was increased considerable all along the line.” The soldiers in Helena’s garrison were part of Brigadier General Frederick Salomon’s Thirteenth Division of the Thirteenth Army Corps. Although Prentiss retained overall command as head of the District of Eastern Arkansas, the Prussian-born Salomon held operational control of the garrison, and thus, made most of the pivotal decisions during the battle. Colonel William E. McLean was in charge of Salomon’s left wing, and Colonel Samuel A Rice, a former Iowa attorney general, commanded his right. Colonel Powell Clayton of the 5th Kansas Cavalry commanded the Union’s extreme right flank.⁴¹

A half-mile from town, Price’s lead skirmishers engaged the federal pickets, and firing commenced at around 5:00 a.m. Price’s division then formed two columns to prepare for the assault. Parsons’s Missourians, occupying the right side of the formation, led the Confederate advance. McRae’s Arkansans lingered behind on the left. At the officers’ signals, the troops rushed over the hills toward town, ducking bullets and firing on the federal pickets as they

⁴⁰ Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 35; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 389; Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 7 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VII,” 32.

⁴¹ Charles Musser to Dear Father, 6 July 1863, in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 64; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 392-393; Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 122; Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 417.

advanced. Upon reaching the far side of each hill, they halted to rest and reform the lines. “[S]hots of the enemy . . . poured upon us from small arms and artillery from the time we appeared on the top of the hill until we were under the protection of the next hill,” Bull remembered. As the fighting escalated, Price’s guides became frightened and fled the battlefield. Without guides, “confusion and consequent delay ensued.” When a new guide was found, the column marched on, finally reaching the position at the base of Graveyard Hill from which the rebels would make their assault. In accordance with the battle plan, Parsons halted his column (about 300 yards from the Union rifle pits) and waited for McRae’s troops to move into position on his left. This delay gave the weary rebel troops a much-needed break from the action. It also gave the Federals in battery C an opportunity to focus their artillery on another target. Fagan’s column would be the unfortunate recipient.⁴²

South of town, Fagan’s brigade approached Helena from the lower Little Rock Road. At dusk on July 3, Fagan sent Colonel W. H. Brooks’s 34th Arkansas Infantry, a battery of light artillery, and three cavalry companies ahead of his column to a position within three miles of town. At 11:00 p.m., the rest of the brigade, spearheaded by Colonel Alexander T. Hawthorne’s Arkansas Infantry, left its encampment and marched toward Helena. Fagan caught up with Brooks at the junction of the upper Little Rock Road (which Fagan called the “old hill road”) and lower Little Rock Road at 1:30 a.m. There, he ordered the colonel to proceed toward Helena via the lower Little Rock Road, where he would protect Fagan’s flank and make a feint against the federal positions south of town.⁴³

⁴² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 413-414, 417, 420-421; Reminiscence and Diary of William Jeffery Bull, in Banasik, ed., *Missouri Brothers in Gray*, 57-58.

⁴³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 423-424, 427, 430, 410.

At daybreak, Brooks's skirmishers made contact with federal pickets. After a short clash, the Federals fell back, and the Confederates advanced upon a contraband camp on the outskirts of Helena. In his official report, Brooks—a Michigan native who had practiced law in Fayetteville before the war—claimed the camp was “abandoned, the occupants having fled to the town at the first alarm.” Still, he reported, “Eight negroes were taken and sent to the rear.” An infantryman in Brooks's unit also declared that the regiment “had a little fight with the pickets about a mile and a half from town and killed 2 or 3 wounded several and took 8 of them prisoners together with 7 or 8 negroes.” One of the infantryman's comrades, however, said the rebels drove the Yankee pickets from their camp and “the negroes from their quarters, killing two or three, wounding some, and capturing nine and [an] ambulance.” A Union picket guard similarly recalled that the Confederates “fired on us as they came, but their attention was taken for a short time with a camp of negroes who had camped just inside our picket line. How many of them were killed I never heard,” he confessed, “but their screams were terrible and the shooting by the enemy at close range soon ended the scene.” Brooks later admitted that during the Confederate retreat around noon, his men “applied the torch to the negro quarters, which were consumed.” Whether the camp was burned at the beginning of the battle or at its end, the results were tragic. “The cabins were burned, and many of the aged and sick [black refugees] perished in them,” lamented a humanitarian worker who had left Helena a week before the battle. “The contrabands at that point were now left without shelter, and suffered greatly.” Brooks's comrade J. W. Paup—who, five days earlier, had expressed his desire to murder African Americans in Helena—must have been proud of his brigade's actions.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 430; Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 136; W. C. Braly to My Dear Ma [Amanda Braly], 21 July 1863, Amanda Malvina Fitzallen McClellan Braly Papers, Mullins Library; F. R. Earle to Amanda Buchanan, 4 August 1863, in Robert E. Waterman and Thomas

Continuing toward town, Brooks's rebels assumed a position near a hill south of Helena. Almost immediately, federal soldiers in Battery K, 1st Missouri Light Artillery and the guns aboard the U.S.S. *Tyler* opened fire on them. The Missouri battery's shots had little effect on Brooks's men, but the *Tyler*'s shells were destructive. An eight-inch shell from the gunboat struck a rebel cavalry company, killing three horses and injuring three men. Fontaine Richard Earle of the 34th Arkansas Infantry, who thought he was being attacked by two gunboats, was nonetheless impervious to the shots being fired at him: "These boats and . . . batteries did a great deal of shooting at us, but we dodging behind trees were perfectly safe."⁴⁵

Brooks responded to the *Tyler*'s fire by ordering rebel guns to be positioned on the nearby hill. All the while, the federal gunboat and battery continued to shell the Confederates,

Rothrock, eds., "The Earle-Buchanan Letters of 1861-1876," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1974): 139; Albert G. Foster, "On Picket Duty Before the Battle of Helena," at "Twenty-Eighth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry," <http://www.28thwisconsin.com/service/picket.html> (accessed June 20, 2017); Levin Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Western Tract Society, 1876), 646. The *New-York Daily Tribune* reported that during the Confederates' retreat, "they burned the contraband camp at Beach Grove. Much labor had been spent in rearing houses sufficient to accommodate about five hundred colored people. At daylight in the morning, as the pickets were driven in or captured, the men, women, and children fled from their encampment at Beach Grove, leaving everything behind them. All they had in the world except the clothes on their backs was consumed in the flames. They are truly objects of charity, and make a strong appeal to the benevolent friends of the colored race. The Major-General commanding, under the circumstances, proposes to send a load of freedmen to contraband headquarters at St. Louis, from which place they may voluntarily choose their homes in the Free States, where they will be able to support themselves." "Fourth of July at Helena," *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1863. The *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph* reported that the "only property destroyed during the fight was the negro quarters below the town," while John Eaton, Jr., the Superintendent of Freedmen in the Department of Tennessee, later wrote that the freedmen camps in Helena "had been broken up and destroyed by the advance and retreat of the rebel army." "The Battle of Helena," *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, Tex.), August 12, 1863; John Eaton, *Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, Department of the Tennessee and State of Arkansas for 1864* (Memphis, Tenn.: s.n., 1865), 12.

⁴⁵ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 430-431, 405-406; F. R. Earle to Amanda Buchanan, 25 July 1863, in Waterman and Rothrock, eds., "The Earle-Buchanan Letters of 1861-1876," 137.

limiting the rebel attack to only twenty-one rounds and eventually forcing them to withdraw their guns from the hill. “The force in front and on the right was fully three times as large as mine,” Brooks later claimed. Believing that a direct assault against the Union rifle pits would devastate his small unit, the colonel decided to keep his men behind cover and do his best to hold the Federals in check. His troops spent the remainder of the morning using their six-pounder gun to divert the fire of the Missouri battery and the *Tyler* away from Fagan’s column as much as possible. “In this,” Brooks later claimed, “I was entirely successful.”⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Fagan’s column continued its advance toward Hindman Hill along the upper Little Rock Road. One mile from the Federals’ outer defenses, his lead units unexpectedly found the road into town obstructed with felled trees. Fagan rode to the front and observed that his path was “completely filled with felled timber, the largest forest growth intermingling and overlapping its whole length, while on either side precipitous and impassable ravines were found running up even to the very intrenchments of the enemy.” Like Price, Fagan decided it was impossible to move his artillery through the obstructions, especially if he wished to follow Holmes’s orders to assault Hindman Hill at daylight. Furthermore, he believed his officers had no chance of navigating the dense brush on horseback. Thus, he ordered his officers to dismount and his guns to be left behind. Crawling through the “closely jutting limbs and boughs” for a mile, Fagan’s column reached the pickets below Hindman Hill and discovered that the Federals were “on the alert, and evidently expecting and awaiting an attack.”⁴⁷

As daylight arrived, Fagan’s regiments emerged one by one from the brush and attacked the entrenched bluecoats. “[A]mid the leaden rain and iron hail,” they climbed up the side of

⁴⁶ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 430-431.

⁴⁷ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 423-424, 430.

Hindman Hill, which “was so steep the men had to pull themselves up by the bushes.” One Confederate soldier recalled that “the hills and hollows running parallel to [the federal] works . . . compelled us to charge over the hills exposed to a deliberate and murderous fire. Then to make the matter worse the timber had been felled in such a manner as to make it next to impossible to pass over this ground at all.” Reaching the first of five Union rifle pits protecting the hill, the rebels attacked and drove back the Federals. At this point in the morning, Fagan’s brigade was the only Confederate force attacking the Helena garrison. Price’s delay in front of Graveyard Hill freed the Union guns in battery C to aim elsewhere, and Fagan’s column bore the brunt of their fire. Despite attracting the attention of batteries C and D, as well as the Union breastworks, Fagan’s men captured the first four rifle pits, sustaining heavy casualties in the process.⁴⁸

North of Helena, Marmaduke’s cavalry division vacated its camp at 10:00 p.m. on July 3 and proceeded toward Helena along the Old St. Francis Road. Like Price, Marmaduke followed local guides. Three miles outside of town, the general ordered all but one company of his cavalymen to dismount and continue on foot. After only one mile of marching, they “found the road and country thoroughly obstructed, the enemy having chopped down the trees and rendered almost impassable that approach to the fort and town.” The guides also lost their way in the woods, thus delaying the troops by about a half hour and preventing them from commencing their attack at the first light of day.⁴⁹

Three-fourths of a mile from battery A, Marmaduke’s advance unit, Shelby’s brigade, came upon a force of federal skirmishers and drove them back in the direction of the fort. When Shelby’s force came within 200 yards of the federal battery, the rebel troops deployed on the

⁴⁸ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 423-429, 431-432; William H. H. and J. S. Shibley to Beloved Parents, 23 July 1863, in Park, ed., *The Civil War Letters of the Shibley Brothers*, Letter No. 42.

⁴⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 436.

high ground opposite Rightor Hill. Unlike Price and Fagan, Marmaduke was able to move his artillery through the federal *abatis* and set up a battery, albeit with great difficulty. However, even with their guns, the rebel cavalymen were in a precarious position. The 29th Iowa, protected by rifle pits and artillery, sat entrenched in their front, while Colonel Powell Clayton's 5th Kansas Cavalry, alongside Colonel Thomas Pace's 1st Indiana Cavalry, attacked their left flank. Ensnared behind the levee, the federal cavalymen harassed Marmaduke with a constant enfilading fire.⁵⁰

West of Graveyard Hill, Price's delay was causing Holmes a great deal of anxiety. The lieutenant general rode up to Price and asked why the attack against battery C had not been initiated. Price, who had just ordered McRae's column forward, agreed that his troops should have been advancing. Therefore, he sent a courier to Parsons to inquire about the holdup. Parsons replied that he was waiting for McRae's column to get into position on his left. Although he was not aware of it, by that time, McRae's brigade was already moving forward. A "high ridge" separated the two rebel columns, and Parsons had been unable to see that McRae was in position to attack. Yet again, the natural environment seemed to conspire against the Confederates. Price sent a messenger to Parsons informing him of McRae's position and instructing him to charge. When he received the message, Parsons immediately "ordered [his column] 'forward' at double-quick." Shortly thereafter, Price observed, "Both brigades moved forward on the instant . . . under a storm of Minie balls, grape, and canister, which were poured upon them not only from Graveyard Hill in their front but from the fortified hills upon the right and the left."⁵¹

⁵⁰ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 436-438, 395-396, 402-403.

⁵¹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 413-414, 421.

The rebel brigades under Parsons and McRae stormed the rifle pits protecting battery C and climbed up the rugged slope of Graveyard Hill. General Salomon, seeing that most of the rebel forces were massed in front of batteries C and D, immediately reinforced those areas with reserve troops. Edward Redington, who was stationed near battery B with the 28th Wisconsin, looked to his left and saw the rebels climbing Graveyard Hill: “Oh, what terrible feelings came over us as they slowly made their way up the hill. . . . On, on they went, yelling like demons, up to the breastworks.” His fellow marksman, J. D. Cummings, remained confident thanks to his natural defenses. “We had the prettiest chance you could imagine,” Cummings remembered. “We just picked them [the rebels] off like sheep as they marched up the hill. We lay behind stumps and logs, and could see them fall eight or nine at a time.”

At this point in the morning, the Federals had, for the most part, pinned down Fagan on Hindman Hill and checked Marmaduke’s assault on Rightor Hill. Observing that battery C was in the greatest danger of being captured, Prentiss ordered the guns in batteries B and D, Fort Curtis, and those aboard the *Tyler* to concentrate their fire on Graveyard Hill. The *Tyler*, after pinning down Brooks’s rebels south of town, steamed upstream a half mile and began dropping its shells on Price’s column. The boat’s executive officer later estimated that the barrage was responsible for six hundred rebel casualties at Graveyard Hill.⁵²

The Confederate assault on Graveyard Hill was a horrifying spectacle for onlookers. Minos Miller, who sat on the far left of the Union line, witnessed the Confederates storming

⁵² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 392, 388; Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 7 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VII,” 33; J. D. Cummings to Father, n.d., in “Civil War Letter of J. D. Cummings,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 25 (June/September 1987): 20. Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat,” 35; *ORN*, vol. 25, p. 229. The federal guns in batteries A, B, C, and D and Fort Curtis were operated during the battle of Helena by members of the 33rd Missouri Infantry. *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 390.

battery C, as well as the devastation being wrought on them by Union guns: “[W]e could see column after column pouring over the hills towards battery C[.] as soon as they come in sight Ft Curtis the gunboat and evry battery that could get range of them let into them with a vengeance[.] the air was full of shells and we could see the rebbels lines open and see them falling in all directions[.] directly they began to give back.” Another Union soldier, Lieutenant C. H. Glines, witnessed the Confederate advance on Graveyard Hill: “[O]ver the Breast works came the Enemy and in five minutes the hole hills ware covered . . . and there was six Batries besides the fort [Curtis] and the gunBoat Tylor playing on them at the same time and still they kept coming.”⁵³

Despite suffering enormous casualties during their advance, the rebels still managed to reach the fort atop Graveyard Hill. “[S]creaming and yelling at the top of their voices,” the “Rebel horde” attacked the fort twice and was repulsed. On the third try, the Confederates succeeded in capturing the battery. In Prentiss’s view, the rebel assailants who took Graveyard Hill exhibited “a courage and desperation rarely equaled.” Edward Walden of the 28th Wisconsin, watching from his position near battery B, “saw the Rebels march up to the fort [battery C] and without scarce making a halt marched inside of the works, our men leaving as fast as their legs would carry them.” The federal force driven from battery C consisted of members of the 33rd Missouri and 33rd Iowa infantry regiments. As Walden observed, those who managed to escape fled toward the protection of Fort Curtis. However, on their way out of the fort, the Federals swiped all of the “friction primers and priming wires, thus rendering the pieces [in battery C] useless” to the rebels. When he learned that his plan to use the Federals’ own

⁵³ Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 6 June 1863, Minos Miller Letters; C. H. Glines to Albert Glines, 8 July 1863, in *Graveyard Hill: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas, July 4th, 1863*, ed. William F. Koss (Iowa City: Gwensfrewi Press, 1966), 22-23.

artillery against them had failed, Price immediately ordered Confederate field pieces brought forward to the fort. However, as a result of the rapidly deteriorating situation on the battlefield, as well as the rough terrain leading up to the hill, the guns did not make it there in time.⁵⁴

At 7:00 a.m., Fagan's column had been attacking south of Helena for approximately three hours. At that time, only the fifth rifle pit and battery D stood between them and the capture of Hindman Hill. While reforming their lines in the security of the fourth rifle pit, they discovered that battery C's guns had turned away from them and were focused on Price's assault on Graveyard Hill. It was the perfect time to continue the assault, but the rebel troops were exhausted, wearied by the summer heat and the Federals' continuous fire. "Numbers had fainted from excessive heat and fatigue," recalled Colonel Hawthorne. "Many had been killed and wounded, and a large majority in each of our three regiments were utterly unable to fight any longer." Nonetheless, Fagan knew he had to take advantage of the distraction at Graveyard Hill. He ordered a charge against the fifth and final rifle pit protecting battery D. Intense fighting ensued, and the Federals fled their breastwork for the safety of their armed battery above. With only one obstacle remaining, Fagan then ordered a charge against the fort. However, by this time, the rebel ranks had been thinned substantially, and the troops who remained were plagued by fatigue. Fagan's final assault failed, leaving the brigade pinned in the innermost rifle pit at the mercy of battery D's guns. Here they remained for the balance of the morning, hoping to be relieved by rebel reinforcements. Those reinforcements never came.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Edward N. Walden Diary, 4 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., "The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 12 (March 1974): 13-14; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 388-390, 398, 414, 417-418, 421, 400.

⁵⁵ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 423-429, 431-432.

In the meantime, the situation atop Graveyard Hill had become chaotic. In the words of Holmes, “Everything was in confusion, [and] regiments and brigades mixed up indiscriminately” as the rebels struggled to secure their captured battery, advance against the Federals, and shield themselves from the constant Union bombardment. Adding to the chaos, Holmes entered the captured battery, and, at the most inopportune time, ordered one of Parsons’s colonels to assault Fort Curtis. Holmes must have been distracted by the intensity of the fighting, for in giving the order, he violated a fundamental military concept, the chain of command. Nonetheless, the colonel followed the general’s orders, leading his men down Graveyard Hill toward the fort without delay. When the other officers saw the colonel’s advance, they assumed that Parsons’s entire brigade had been ordered forward. Thus, they immediately directed their men to join the assault. The Confederate troops stormed down the rear slope of Graveyard Hill, exposing themselves “to a fatal cross-fire from the [Federals’] artillery and musketry.”⁵⁶

Edward Redington observed the rebels’ reckless dash: “As they charged down the hill (and a braver charge was never made) how grand they looked, and how for a moment, our hearts almost ceased to beat as those ranks of daring desperate men came over the hill, and we thought all was lost.” When they reached the foot of Graveyard hill, the Confederates met an overwhelming volley of shots from Salomon’s reserves. All the while, Fort Curtis’s guns pounded the bewildered rebels. Redington continued to watch from nearby battery B: “[T]hey were met by a storm of shot and shell . . . but still on they came, and some of them nearly reached the fort, but fiends themselves could not stand such a fire, and they broke in all directions.” Realizing that they had run into a deathtrap, many of the Confederates turned back

⁵⁶ OR, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 410-411 [1st quotation on p. 411], 421-422 [2nd quotation on p. 422].

and ran toward battery C. Others took cover in ditches, buildings, or behind stumps. William Bull of Parsons's brigade was one of the soldiers pinned down in front of Fort Curtis: "To prevent a charge upon our position we kept up a steady fire. A few of us battery boys got together and would follow one after the other in firing over the top of a stump which stood on the brow of the hill." Iowan Minos Miller observed the pitiful sight from his post near Hindman Hill: "[A]fter they got possession of battery C they charged down a hollow towards Ft Curtis but our batteries poured the grape and canister to them so fast they tried to shelter in a large brick house[.] about a hundred of them got into it and some of them under it when our Cavalry charged on them and took about 150 of them prisoner[.] the [Infantry] surrounded the rest of them and took them in." The reckless advance on Fort Curtis devastated the Confederate ranks and essentially nullified the advantage they had gained in capturing Graveyard Hill. "It was here," Parsons later lamented, "that my loss was the heaviest. Not more than half of those that went in that direction [toward Fort Curtis] returned."⁵⁷

Apparently unaware of the damage he had done, Holmes continued to issue dubious orders from his post atop Graveyard Hill. By this time, Holmes knew that Fagan was pinned down on Hindman Hill. In an effort to relieve him, he ordered Parsons to lead his column

⁵⁷ Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 7 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., "The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VII," 33; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 410-411, 421-422; Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 36; Reminiscence and Diary of William Jeffery Bull, in Banasik, ed., *Missouri Brothers in Gray*, 59; Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 6 June 1863, Minos Miller Letters. After the battle, Holmes allegedly told Missouri Governor Thomas C. Reynolds that Price's tardiness in attacking battery C was the main reason why his army failed to capture Helena. Holmes also privately complained that Price had been slow to enter the battery after his troops captured it (Holmes entered the battery before Price did). Price later defended himself, telling Reynolds that as soon as he learned that his men had captured the battery, he rode toward it but then saw Holmes enter it. Upon seeing this, one of Price's staff members suggested that Price "should, from delicacy, allow Gen. Holmes to have the *éclat* of being the first general officer to enter the captured works." Price agreed, so he held back. Reynolds, *General Sterling Price and the Confederacy*, 88-90.

toward battery D and attack it from the rear. Holmes then relayed that order to Price (who apparently had issued similar instructions to Parsons) and left Graveyard Hill for his headquarters. Two or three hundred yards behind the hill, Holmes spotted General McRae. According to his own report, Holmes then instructed McRae to join his brigade in battery C. However, McRae later claimed that Holmes ordered him to aid Fagan. If McRae's account is true, the looming prospects of rebel defeat must have been clouding Holmes's mind at this critical moment; if the commanding general's orders had been followed, all the rebel troops occupying battery C would have abandoned the hill they had fought so desperately to capture. Nevertheless, Holmes's potential blunder did not alter the battle. Parsons and McRae convened and decided that McRae's column would assist Fagan, while Parsons's brigade, the stronger of the two, would continue to hold battery C.⁵⁸

With a force of only two hundred men, McRae set out to attack battery D. Arriving at the foot of Hindman Hill, he found the fort thoroughly fortified with rifle pits and protected by a deadly enfilading fire. McRae decided that an attempt to scale the hill would be suicidal, so he ordered his men to shoot at the rifle pits in hopes of making a diversion for Fagan. In the end, McRae's attempt to relieve Fagan failed. When he learned of this outcome, Holmes decided that the battle was lost. At 10:30 a.m., he ordered a general retreat.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 411, 414-415, 418, 421-422; Albert Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 149. Holmes later charged McRae with "misbehavior before the enemy" for his alleged shirking below battery C, but a court of inquiry later cleared McRae of the charge. Historian Alan Thompson agrees with the court's decision to exonerate McRae. Interestingly, it appears that Price originated the charge but later withdrew it. See Thompson, ed., "Frank and out spoken in my disposition," 360-361.

⁵⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 418, 411.

North of town, the Federals continued to attack Marmaduke's left flank, thereby preventing him from capturing Rightor Hill. Marmaduke twice sent couriers to ask Walker for help in removing the threat along the levee. To Marmaduke's dismay, no help came. On the evening of July 3, Walker's cavalry—which included Helenian Archibald S. Dobbins's Arkansans—had left its encampment on the lower Little Rock Road, four miles west of Helena, and galloped fifteen miles to the Sterling Road, north of town. There, the cavalymen waited until 2:00 a.m., when they began their advance. A mile short of Helena, they predictably came upon a timber roadblock. Walker dismounted approximately three hundred troops as skirmishers and sent them forward while holding the majority of his brigade north of the blockade. For the balance of the morning, Walker's skirmishers engaged Clayton's bluecoats, although most of the fighting consisted only of skirmishing and long-range sniping. According to Walker and his subordinates, additional rebel companies were sent forward throughout the morning, repelling the federal forces along the levee on several occasions. However, Walker's brigade was unable to dislodge those Federals, and therefore, it was impossible for Marmaduke to capture Rightor Hill. At 11:00 a.m., Marmaduke received orders from Holmes to withdraw. Furious, he left the field without notifying Walker, who did not retreat until 2:00 p.m. William W. Garner, a cavalryman in Walker's brigade, summed up the day for the rebels fighting north of town: "They [the Federals] . . . let on to know nothing of our approach and we thought that we would take the place easy, and perhaps without a fight; but we were disappointed."⁶⁰

After the battle, Walker claimed to have fulfilled his obligation to prevent the Federals from reinforcing Rightor Hill and to have assisted Marmaduke as much as possible. Marmaduke

⁶⁰ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 433-437; Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 34; William W. Garner to Henrietta Garner, 7 July 1863, in D. D. McBrien, ed., "Letters of an Arkansas Confederate Soldier," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 2 (June 1943): 174.

thought otherwise. He blamed Walker for his failure to capture battery A, claiming that if the Federals on his left and rear had been removed, his troops “would have carried it.” Marmaduke maintained that the force opposing Walker consisted of no more than five hundred troops, making Walker’s actions even more inexcusable. According to Holmes, Walker gave “no satisfactory reason” for why he failed to protect Marmaduke’s flank. The animosity between Marmaduke and Walker did not end at Helena. In early September, while Union forces under General Frederick Steele threatened Little Rock, Marmaduke publicly accused Walker of cowardice. Walker responded by challenging him to a duel, and on September 6, Walker was mortally wounded in the gunfight.⁶¹

By the time Holmes’s issued his orders for a retreat, his rebel army had deteriorated into a collection of dispersed, diluted units. The Federals took advantage of the isolated, bewildered Confederates by capturing as many prisoners as possible before they fled the field. Under the direction of Colonel Cyrus H. Mackey, the Federals captured “several hundred prisoners and two stands of colors” near Hindman Hill. In front of Graveyard Hill, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas N. Pace witnessed the surrender of about one hundred rebels, and then joined in the recapture of battery C. All the while, the Confederates hastily fled the field, leaving many of their dead and wounded behind. With their rear guard skirmishing to cover their withdrawal until the early part of the afternoon, the battered rebels retreated toward the Polk house.⁶²

⁶¹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 433, 437, 410; DeBlack, “1863,” in *Rugged and Sublime*, 92-93. On the Marmaduke-Walker duel, see Leo E. Huff, “The Last Duel in Arkansas: The Marmaduke-Walker Duel,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23 (Spring 1964): 36–49; Mark Christ, “The Marmaduke-Walker Duel,” *Blue & Gray* 32, no. 4 (2016): 47-48; and Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 173-174.

⁶² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 398-399, 402-403; DeBlack, “1863,” in *Rugged and Sublime*, 82.

Throughout the morning, nurses and surgeons on both sides had worked continuously to care for the wounded soldiers. Surgeon William McPheeters accompanied Price on the battlefield during the early part of the fight. “[R]emembering that Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston probably lost his life [at Shiloh] by not having a surgeon with him,” McPheeters was determined to be with his general in the case of his fall. However, as the number of wounded troops began to accumulate, McPheeters moved behind the lines to assist his fellow surgeons. When the Confederates started their retreat, the surgeons were ordered to move all the wounded men off the field and transport them to the Polk house, which became a rebel hospital. In his personal memoir, Confederate cavalryman Jacob Rockwell devoted almost half of his reflection on the battle to a description of “the grand exhibition [sic] of the glorious heroism of the heaven-inspired women of our dear old Southland in our field hospital.” Forever grateful for the tender care the nurses had provided for his cohorts, Rockwell described a scene in which the nurses used their “linen under garments” as dressings because the field hospital had run out of bandages. After the battle, Helena’s Catholic nuns turned the St. Catherine Convent and Academy into a morgue and a hospital. Moreover, the Little Rock Road was reportedly “lined with citizens who come to see if any of their friends had been hurt, and to assist in taking care of the unfortunate wounded.”⁶³

The white women of eastern Arkansas did more than nurse wounded soldiers; they also cheered for their rebel liberators. According to the accounts of both Union and Confederate

⁶³ McPheeters Diary, 4 July 1863, in Pitcock and Gurley, eds., *I Acted from Principle*, 38-39; Rockwell Memoir, p. 18; United Confederate Veterans of Arkansas, *Confederate Women of Arkansas in the Civil War, 1861-'65: Memorial Reminiscences* (Little Rock: H. G. Pugh Ptg. Co., 1907), 139-140; Phillips County Historical Society, *Historic Helena-West Helena Arkansas* (Helena: Phillips County Chamber of Commerce, 1973), 12; Griffin Frost, *Camp and Prison Journal* (Quincy, Ill.: Quincy Herald Book and Job Office, 1867), 52.

soldiers, the white citizens of eastern Arkansas almost universally supported the rebels during the engagement. Given the region's antebellum sympathies, as well as the hardships that many civilians suffered during the federal occupation of Phillips County (and Curtis's march toward Helena), this is not surprising. As Price's troops passed through Augusta en route to Helena, they saw "a great many ladies who expressed themselves glad to see us and shouted us on as they thought and we hoped to victory." Before the battle, civilians in the countryside briefed Confederate cavalymen on the size of the Helena garrison—at least until Prentiss forbid them from coming near federal lines. When that happened, a Union trooper observed that the civilians "already on the inside were quiet, reserved, and extremely reticent." Apparently, the citizens of Helena knew, or at least sensed, that an attack was coming.⁶⁴

On the day of the battle, many Helenians—especially the pro-Confederate women—openly displayed their allegiances. "Some of the ladies of Helena wore the Confederate colors publicly in the streets," observed Iowan Charles Musser. "Some of the boys told General Prentiss about it, and in less than no time 14 of them were going up to Memphis." Confident of victory, a group of women reportedly prepared meals for the Confederates, waved white handkerchiefs, and were "very saucy" as "the rebs were cuming over the hights." A soldier from Wisconsin remembered this "display of ladies on the bluffs, who waved their handkerchiefs and hurrahd for Jeff Davis." He also recalled that a number of citizens came to Helena "from miles around with a train of 40 wagons drawn by oxen, mules and horses, loaded with good things for

⁶⁴ James T. Wallace Diary, 1862-1865, 25 June 1863, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; William W. Garner to Henrietta Garner, 23 June 1863, in McBrien, ed., "Letters of an Arkansas Confederate Soldier," 172; W. A. Jenkins, "A Leaf From Army Life" [Read December 8, 1887], in *Military Essays and Recollections, Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Illinois*, Vol. III, *Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*, Vol. 12 (1899; Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot, 1992), 438.

the occasion.” Black Helenians, for their part, did more than simply encourage the Federals. A Union gunner in Fort Curtis marveled at “a negro worker that left his spot and come up in the fort and got a gun and went over on the hill where the rebs was and took a prisoner and marched him over to the fort.” In the same letter, the gunner declared that he had “never com in to the service to fight for the freedom of the niger,” but “if it had not ben for the negros, the troops at this place last spring would have had a hard time.”⁶⁵

African American troops fought in the battle, but because they were positioned on a part of the field that saw little action, they did not significantly alter its outcome. The Second Arkansas, A.D., was not officially mustered into service when the Confederates attacked on July 4, so it is likely that some of its soldiers lacked proper training. This, in conjunction with the novelty of black combat troops in the summer of 1863, probably explains why the Second Arkansas was assigned to guard the Federals’ extreme left flank—a position unlikely to face a direct assault. Still, the regiment faced sporadic enemy fire during the engagement, and at least two black soldiers sustained injuries. Late in the battle—after the Confederates had captured battery C—some forty to fifty “infirm and aged contrabands” reportedly joined the Second Arkansas in the rifle pits. Recruited and armed by Chaplain Samuel Sawyer, the Superintendent of Contrabands at Helena, the African American refugees “willingly lent a helping hand in this hour of need.” A newspaper sympathetic to their plight proudly reported that the contrabands

⁶⁵ Charles Musser to Dear Father, Mother and Sisters, 9 July 1863, in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 67; Floyd Thurman to Marion, Brother & Friend, 7-8 July 1863, O. V. Brown Papers, Indiana State Library, Manuscripts and Rare Books Division, Indianapolis; “Helena,” *National Tribune*, August 18, 1887; David T. Massey to Dear Father [Nathan Massey], 8 July 1863, Letters of David T. Massey, Missouri History Museum, St. Louis.

“stood their ground nobly and won golden opinions from all quarters. They felt more like men that they had an opportunity to defend their wives and children and country.”⁶⁶

As expected, the Second Arkansas’s white officers praised their regiment’s performance. “[T]he 2nd. Arks was on the Extreme left Supporting a Battery,” explained the regiment’s orderly sergeant. “[O]ur Battery Done great Execution[.] We was not in Gun Shot of them But Could See them Fighting all the time & there Balls whistled all arround us & Amongst us[.] one Ball wounded 2 Darkies in the Arm not Dangerous.” Lieutenant Minos Miller similarly bragged, “[O]ur black boys behaved well[.] they was placed in a position wher [sic] they could be fired on and no chance to return the fire and if there is anything that will discourage man it is that[.] but they took it calm and cool yesterday when the alarm was given[.] men that stood off and looked on say they never seen a regt form as quick as ours did in their lives.”⁶⁷

Newspapers that supported the use of black troops in combat picked up on such praise, and, in some cases, exaggerated the Second Arkansas’s role in the battle. The pro-Union *Memphis Bulletin* was one of the first papers to report on the battle of Helena, and it accurately declared that the “negro regiments fought well, fully demonstrating their usefulness as soldiers.” Eight days later, however, the *New York Times* reprinted the *Bulletin*’s account under a different (and misleading) headline: “The Battle of Helena; The Rebels in a Tight Place—Gallantry of Negro Regiments.” On July 19, the *Times* ran a second account of the battle whose embellished contents better reflected the first report’s title. “The negro troops stripped off everything but pants, and fought with the most persistent courage,” the correspondent declared. “It is said that

⁶⁶ Kaufman, “The Fifty-Fourth U.S. Colored Infantry,” 2; “Fourth of July at Helena,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1863.

⁶⁷ Newton Robert Scott to Dear Parents, 6 July 1863, in Proudfoot, ed., “Letters from an Iowa Soldier in the Civil War,” <http://www.civilwarletters.com/index.html> (accessed June 15, 2017); Minos Miller to Dear Mother [Martha Hornaday], 6 June 1863, Minos Miller Letters.

they could with difficulty be restrained from breaking out of the intrenchments and pursuing the enemy in the open field.” The author also erroneously claimed that black soldiers constituted one-half of Helena’s victorious garrison.⁶⁸

Some Union soldiers doubted the black troops’ contributions, and they resented reporters’ aggrandizement of the Second Arkansas’s role. Edward Walden of the 28th Wisconsin sarcastically recorded that the African Americans “fought so desperately, without firing a gun. Bully boys are they! They get a good deal of praise for what they did not do.” Walden’s compatriot Edward Redington also rebuffed the papers’ adulation for the Second Arkansas, but he admitted that the African Americans’ position on the battlefield had prevented them from proving their mettle. “I do not think but that they would have fought if they had had a chance,” Redington declared, “but they were placed on the extreme left between the Levee and river bank close to their camp, and stayed there all day and were not molested and of course could not fight.” Iowan A. F. Sperry concurred: “In the newspaper reports of the action, much credit was given to a colored regiment which held the left of the works, extending from the bluffs to the river; but the truth was that they were not attacked at all. If they had been, they would doubtless have done their duty bravely, but they deserve no especial credit as it was.” A number of Federals also begrudged the newspapers’ excessive praise of the gunboat *Tyler* and General Prentiss. Wisconsinites, in particular, believed their home-state hero, Frederick Salomon, deserved most of the credit for the Union victory.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ “Latest from Helena,” *Memphis Bulletin*, July 7, 1863; “The Battle of Helena; The Rebels in a Tight Place—Gallantry of Negro Regiments,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1863; “The Surrender of Vicksburgh; An Account from Another of Our Special Correspondents. Barricades. Holes in the Ground. Still Another Fourth of July Victory [V]alor of the Negro Troops in Arkansas,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1863.

⁶⁹ Walden Diary, 4 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena,” 13; Edward S. Redington to Dear Mary, 7 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th

Their interpretive quibbles aside, the victorious bluecoats were jubilant following their crushing Independence Day victory. “I have Spent Several fourths of July but never celebrated it with so much fire works before,” exclaimed Charles Musser. “I would not have missed that day for Six months wages.” When they saw the dead and wounded sprawled out on the battlefield, other Federals were more somber. “It was a revolting & sickening sight to see the pile of deceased . . . thrown here & there,” lamented John Savage of the 28th Wisconsin. “[A]ll semblance of humanity knocked out of some of them by the explosion of the shells, heads dissevered, arms & legs torn off, some of them completely disemboweled. There they lay in all shapes, postures & positions, under this blazing sun with the flies creeping in & out of their wounds. What a work for the anniversary of American Independence, American against American.” Fellow Wisconsinite Edward Walden was also repulsed by the battlefield scene. The sight of the rotting bodies even made him feel sorry for his rebel counterparts. “The battlefield is no pleasant place to visit, covered with men wounded in all ways—some with brains exposed, others shot through the body with a grape shot,” Walden wrote. “But if there is anything that calls on the sympathy of a man it is to look upon a wounded man, with deathlike and pale face, groaning and wreathing with the greatest possible pain.”⁷⁰

Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VII,” 37, 39; Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa*, 41; Thomas N. Stevens to Carrie Stevens, 6 July 1863, in George M. Blackburn, ed., “*Dear Carrie. . .*”: *The Civil War Letters of Thomas N. Stevens* (Mount Pleasant, Mich.: Clarke Historical Library, 1984), 128-129; John A. Savage to My Wifie Darling [Louise Kingsley Savage], 10 July 1863, John A. Savage Letters to Louise Kingsley Savage, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens; William F. Vermilion to My Darling [Mary Vermilion], 12 July 1863, in Elder, ed., *Love amid the Turmoil*, 160; Savage to Hon. T. O. Howe, 20 August 1863, Frederick C. Salomon Papers, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center, Madison.

⁷⁰ Charles Musser to Dear Father, 6 July 1863, in Popchock, ed., *Soldier Boy*, 65; John A. Savage to Wifie [Louise Kingsley Savage], 5 July 1863, John A. Savage Letters to Louise Kingsley Savage; Walden Diary, 4 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena,” 15-16.

The bodies left lying on the slopes of Helena's hills were a telling sign of the battle's outcome, as the engagement had been a disaster for the Confederates. Of the 7,646 rebels involved, Holmes estimated that his army had suffered 173 killed, 687 wounded, and 776 missing and captured for a total of 1,636 casualties, over twenty-one percent of his command. As with most defeated generals, Holmes probably underestimated his casualties (On July 6, Prentiss claimed to have captured over 1,100 prisoners and buried almost 300 rebel dead.). Prentiss and Salomon, on the other hand, had engineered a defensive masterpiece. Of the 4,129 Union soldiers in action, there were 57 killed, 127 wounded, and 36 missing for a total of 239 casualties. Newspapers that reported on the battle were predictably biased toward the sides they supported. "The casualties on our [Confederate] side were about 400 killed and wounded," reported the editor of the *Arkansas True Democrat* on July 8. "[T]he number taken prisoners is variously estimated, but it is not large. . . . Our army is yet around Helena, but the enemy will not venture out of their defences and give us an open battle." The *New York Times*, though in support of the Union, was not as erroneous in its assessment: "Further particulars of the late battle show that the repulse was very decided and disastrous to the enemy [rebels]."⁷¹

While the bulk of Holmes's army withdrew from Helena, Prentiss made no attempt to follow up the retreat. On July 6, he wired General Grant and informed him of his "regret that the number and condition of [his] small force [would] not warrant a pursuit." However, Prentiss did believe the Confederates would eventually renew their attack against Helena, so he made the precautions necessary to ensure the garrison's defense. Around mid-afternoon on July 4, Prentiss wired Hurlbut in Memphis with news of his victory and asked the general for

⁷¹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 411, 387, 389; DeBlack, "1863," in *Rugged and Sublime*, 84; "The Battle at Helena," *Arkansas True Democrat*, July 8, 1863; "The Fight at Helena, Ark.," *New York Times*, July 12, 1863.

reinforcements and an additional gunboat. He also made sure that his garrison remained on constant guard for several days following the engagement. “It was expected that the Rebels might make an attack in the night,” Edward Walden wrote on July 5, “and our forces slept behind the earth-works with their tools by their side ready to receive them and give them the same warm greeting that they did the morning previous.” Thomas Stevens of the 28th Wisconsin also noted the garrison’s post-battle vigilance: “We laid in the trenches all the time (except 4 or 5 hours Sunday afternoon) (5th) from 4 A.M. on the 4th till 6 ½ A.M. on the 6th as it was apprehended that they would return & renew the conflict.”⁷²

Prentiss waited two days before sending a cavalry patrol outside Helena to investigate the Confederate retreat. The patrol, led by Colonel Clayton, ventured out from the garrison on July 6 and came upon the rebel hospital at the Polk house. Unaware of the yellow hospital flag flying outside the building, the Federals fired on the building when they arrived. Surgeon McPheeters, caring for the wounded inside, “ordered a large white flag to be raised fearing that we might be injured by the shell falling thick around us.” When Clayton noticed the flag, he ordered a ceasefire and went inside to investigate. There, he met McPheeters, who informed him that the building was only a hospital. When they saw suffering, wounded men, the Federals offered to take some of them back to Helena, “where they could have ice and other comforts.” Although he declined their offer, McPheeters later explained that he “had nothing to complain of in [the Federals’] treatment.”⁷³

⁷² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 384-387; Walden Diary, 4 July 1863, in Kirkman, ed., “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena,” 16; Thomas N. Stevens to Carrie Stevens, 6 July 1863, in Blackburn, ed., “*Dear Carrie*,” 128.

⁷³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 387, 440; McPheeters Diary, 6 July 1863, in Pitcock and Gurley, eds., *I Acted from Principle*, 40-41.

Before leaving the Polk house, the Federals gave McPheeters one last bit of information. “They informed me that Vicksburg had surrendered to Gen. Grant on the 4th with 20,000 prisoners,” the surgeon explained. “This was sad news to me and although I did not fully credit it—the Federals being such enormous liars—it nevertheless disturbed me a little.” McPheeters would have been even more distressed had he known that the Federals were telling the truth. On the same morning that the rebels were repulsed at Helena, three hundred miles to the south, white flags appeared on the defenses at Vicksburg, the most important Confederate bastion on the Mississippi River. As the days progressed, other rebel soldiers who had fought at Helena heard the news of Vicksburg’s fall. “Our own defeat could have been more cheerfully borne had it not been so closely followed by the news that Vicksburg had fallen,” complained Fontaine Richard Earle of the 34th Arkansas. “This Department is now fully cut off from the Eastern portion of the government, and we must stand or fall alone.” When the federal victories at Helena and Vicksburg were coupled with news of Lee’s retreat from Gettysburg, July 4, 1863, was indeed a gloomy day for the Confederacy and a glorious one for the Union.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 400; McPheeters Diary, 6 July 1863, in Pitcock and Gurley, eds., *I Acted from Principle*, 40-41; Shea and Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key*, 178; F. R. Earle to Amanda Buchanan, 25 July 1863, in Waterman and Rothrock, eds., “The Earle-Buchanan Letters of 1861-1876,” 138.

Conclusion

Years after the battle of Helena, Confederate cavalryman Jacob Rockwell discussed the engagement in his memoir. The “object” of the campaign, he said, was “to relieve Gen. Pemberton, then besieged by Grant’s army at Vicksburg, Mississippi [sic]. But if we had won at Helena, it would have been too late. For on that same day Pemberton was forced to capitulate.” Rockwell may not have known it when he wrote his account, but his analysis of the Helena campaign would stand the test of time.¹

The rebel assault on the Union garrison at Helena was intended as a key strategic operation to relieve pressure on the collapsing Confederate garrison at Vicksburg and secure a strategic rebel position on the Mississippi River. The Federals secured control of Helena in July 1862, and for the next year, they used it as an important supply depot and staging ground for military operations on the Mississippi River, especially those aimed at Vicksburg. The Union presence in Helena was a constant threat to the Confederacy’s control of the Mississippi River and the Arkansas interior. The rebels expected the Helena campaign to eliminate that threat. In the end, the attack was too little and too late to save Vicksburg, which surrendered on the same morning. However, over 1,800 casualties were incurred in the fight (15% of those involved), and the outcome ensured Union control of the Mississippi River. It also preserved the federal toehold in eastern Arkansas, which served as the staging ground for General Frederick Steele’s capture of Little Rock in September 1863.

The Union commanders at Helena, Benjamin M. Prentiss and Frederick Salomon, did a masterful job preparing their garrison for the fight. Prentiss had been surprised and routed at

¹ Jacob H. Rockwell Memoir, pp. 17-18, Vertical File, Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, Prairie Grove, Arkansas.

Shiloh in April 1862, and he came to Helena determined not to be caught off guard again. He and Salomon adapted the hilly, wooded landscape to their defensive advantage by erecting artillery batteries on the hills commanding the western approaches to town. They supervised the digging of rifle pits in front of the batteries, as well as the felling of trees in the roads leading into Helena (and on the slopes leading up to the batteries), creating *abatis* to obstruct the rebel advance. Additionally, they took full advantage of their intelligence. When Prentiss learned that the Confederates were advancing toward Helena, he ordered his entire garrison to be up and under arms at 2:30 a.m. for an entire week before the battle. He required a consistent regimen of drilling and picketing for every soldier under his command. Prentiss's troops loathed the hard work required to strengthen Helena's defenses, but they respected their commander's vigilance. When he learned that the rebels were massing within fifteen miles of Helena, Prentiss cancelled the garrison's Independence Day festivities to ensure that his soldiers would be ready for an attack.

On the day of the battle, Salomon made most of the crucial tactical decisions. He performed brilliantly, promptly reinforcing the areas on the battlefield that needed it most. When the Confederates captured battery C, the Prussian-born general did not panic. Anticipating that the rebels would next attack Fort Curtis, he rapidly reinforced the ground in front of the fort with artillery and infantry, devastating the rebel advance. After the battle, Prentiss emphasized his subordinate's noteworthy performance, as did many of the Union rank and file.²

² U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 390 (hereafter cited as *OR* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted).

Prentiss's role during the fight was also noteworthy. When he saw that the rebels had massed their forces against battery C, he ordered the guns at battery B and D, Fort Curtis, and those aboard the *Tyler* to concentrate their fire on Graveyard Hill. According to the generals' published reports, as well as the letters and diaries of common soldiers, this concentration of fire had a devastating effect on the attacking rebels. Late in the morning, when the Confederates had been repulsed, Prentiss did not let his soldiers become complacent. Anticipating that the rebels would renew their attack, he wired General Stephen A. Hurlbut in Memphis and requested that reinforcements and an additional gunboat be sent to Helena. Furthermore, he kept his men on constant guard for several days after July 4.³

Prentiss's only mistake was that he failed to follow up on his victory with a pursuit of the retreating rebels. It was July 6, two days after the battle, before he dispatched a reconnaissance force to inspect the Confederate retreat. However, Prentiss's mistake was a common one for Civil War generals. Furthermore, he believed his force was not sufficient to pursue the fleeing rebels. He told General Ulysses S. Grant on July 6, "I much regret that the number and condition of my small force will not warrant a pursuit." In the end, Prentiss fended off a rebel force of 7,600 with only 4,100 men, sustaining a relatively minor 239 casualties in the process. His own assessment of his garrison's performance adequately underscores the Union accomplishment: "[M]y whole command not only succeeded in repulsing the enemy's attack, and thus holding Helena, which, if I mistake not, is all that was expected of it, but, in addition, administered to the enemy as severe punishment as he ever received west of the Mississippi, and this, too, with a loss to itself so small as to seem almost miraculous."⁴

³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 388, 384-386.

⁴ Edwin C. Bearss, "The Battle of Helena, July 4, 1863," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (Autumn 1961): 293; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 387, 389.

The Union victory at Helena was undoubtedly aided by the presence of the U.S.S. *Tyler*, whose powerful guns fired upon the rebels throughout the engagement. The gunboat's executive officer later claimed to have fired 413 rounds during the battle, killing or wounding about 600 men. Prentiss was so impressed by the *Tyler*'s impact that he recommended its commander, James M. Pritchett, for a promotion following the battle. Contemporary newspapers stressed the *Tyler*'s contributions, while most of the previous scholarship on the Helena campaign has highlighted the crucial, if not decisive role that the gunboat played in the Union victory. Edwin C. Bearss, for example, cited the *Tyler* as one of the seven principal reasons why the Federals triumphed.⁵

While the *Tyler* certainly helped the Union cause, the evidence suggests that its contributions may have been exaggerated. Edward S. Redington of the 28th Wisconsin questioned the gunboat's influence on the battle. "The gunboat *Tyler* lay in front of the town and threw shells away over our heads, not knowing where they were going any more than a boy knows where a stone will fall that he has thrown into the air," he declared. "All the damage we can hear of being done by them was by a shell that went full a mile beyond us and happened to fall in the woods where a Rebel surgeon was dressing their wounded and killed twenty already more than half dead." Iowan Lurton Ingersoll also believed the gunboat's impact had been embellished. "The gun-boat *Tyler* . . . rendered most valuable assistance during the entire engagement," he wrote, "but not enough to justify the dispatch . . . that it had 'saved the day.'"

⁵ U.S. Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. and index (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Ser. 1, vol. 25, p. 229 (hereafter cited as *ORN* with all references to Series 1 unless otherwise noted); *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 391-392; "Latest from Helena," *Memphis Bulletin*, July 7, 1863; "The Battle at Helena," *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1863; "The Battle at Helena," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 28, 1863; Bearss, "The Battle of Helena," 293.

A Confederate who was positioned near the river during the fight similarly recalled that the *Tyler* “shelled us nearly all day but with out any damage.”⁶

A number of Union soldiers believed the *Tyler*'s shells were more psychologically overwhelming to the rebels than they were physically devastating. “The gunboat *Tyler*, steaming up and down the river and keeping up an incessant fire from her sixty-pounders, gave great assistance by the excellent ‘moral effect’ if not by actual execution,” recalled Iowan A. F. Sperry. “The rebels believed there were several gunboats operating against them.” Adjutant John A. Savage, frustrated that the press had overlooked the performance of his fellow Wisconsinite, General Salomon, disparaged the *Tyler*'s performance: “You can judge then of our surprise when we saw the Northern papers giving entire credit of the battle to Gen Prentiss & the Gunboats! (There was but one gunboat there – the *Tyler* – a wooden steamer which shelled the woods, exercising a moral effect, perhaps accidentally killing & wounding some of the enemy out in the woods).” In his later examination of the *Tyler*'s role, author Steven Jones similarly argued that the gunboat's contribution was mostly psychological. In the end, the evidence suggests that the *Tyler*, while certainly an important factor in the battle, did not “save the day” for the Federals.⁷

⁶ Edward S. Redington to Mary Redington, 7 July 1863, in Dale P. Kirkman, ed. “The 28th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment at Helena: VII,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 14 (March 1976): 39; Lurton Dunham Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion: A History of the Troops Furnished by the State of Iowa to the Volunteer Armies of the Union, Which Conquered the Great Southern Rebellion of 1861-5*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1867), 616; W. C. Braly to My Dear Ma [Amanda Braly], 21 July 1863, Amanda Malvina Fitzallen McClellan Braly Papers, Mullins Library, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

⁷ A. F. Sperry, *History of the 33d Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment, 1863-6*, ed. Gregory J. W. Urwin and Kathy Kunzinger Urwin (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 38; John A. Savage, Jr., to Hon. T. O. Howe, 20 August 1863, Frederick C. Salomon Papers, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center, Madison; Steven W. Jones, ed., “The Logs of the U.S.S. *Tyler*,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 15 (March 1977): 23-38.

The commanding Confederate at the battle of Helena, Theophilus H. Holmes, deserves much of the blame for Confederate defeat. He was an unproven general who came to Arkansas in the summer of 1862 after several failed efforts in the East. A friend of Jefferson Davis, Holmes was appointed commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department despite his protests against it. He claimed that he was neither qualified for nor desired the position, but Davis selected him anyway. Holmes's troops called him "Granny," and at least one doctor diagnosed him with "softening of the brain." By the summer of 1863, Holmes had been subordinated to commander of the District of Arkansas, and it was from this post that he coordinated the attack against Helena.⁸

Holmes approved the attack after receiving information from his subordinate, General John S. Marmaduke, which indicated that "all [federal] troops that [could] be spared [were] being sent to re-enforce Grant." Marmaduke believed this movement had left Helena "very weak." His report, coupled with a recommendation for an attack from Secretary of War James A. Seddon, convinced Holmes that the time was right to reclaim Helena for the Confederacy.⁹

General Sterling Price, Holmes's second in command, believed that Helena could be taken if the rebels moved with "celerity and secrecy." However, the natural environment of the Arkansas Delta—and the Union army's strategic use of that environment—prevented the Confederates from achieving those ends. When the rebels converged outside Helena on July 3, Holmes learned that he had severely underestimated the garrison's defenses. "[T]he place was very much more difficult of access," he wrote, "and the fortifications very much stronger, than I had supposed before undertaking the expedition, the features of the country being peculiarly

⁸ William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 461-463.

⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, pp. 867-868.

adapted to defense, and all that the art of engineering could do having been brought to bear to strengthen it.”¹⁰

Faulty intelligence, poor reconnaissance, and the Federals’ strategic use of their environment placed the rebels in a precarious position before the fight had even begun. Nonetheless, Holmes stayed committed to the attack. He called for a three-pronged assault against heavily fortified, entrenched federal positions on high ground, a plan that arguably had little chance of succeeding from the beginning. In order to achieve coordination, Holmes ordered the attack to begin at “daylight,” a vague time designation that had disastrous effects the following morning.¹¹

When the Confederates moved toward their positions the night before the battle, they unexpectedly found their paths blocked with felled timber. These *abatis* forced them to leave their artillery behind and severely hindered their advance toward the town. Because of poor reconnaissance and a lack of knowledge about the approaches to Helena, the Confederates were forced to use local civilian guides to lead them to their positions. When the fighting began, many of the guides fled the battlefield, further delaying the rebel advance. By the time they reached their attack positions, most men were exhausted from the long night’s march through thick timber and deep ravines. They also lacked artillery support.

On the day of the battle, Price misinterpreted Holmes’s orders to attack at “daylight” to mean “sunrise,” and he halted his men until then. Once the rebels resumed their march, a lack of communication between Generals Parsons and McRae further hindered the attack against battery C. While Price’s men dallied below Graveyard Hill, Generals James Fagan and Marmaduke

¹⁰ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 863, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409.

¹¹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, p. 409.

launched their assaults, thus ending any possibility of a synchronized attack. The Confederates' poor coordination allowed the Federals to concentrate their fire on whichever point the rebels threatened, a luxury that had devastating effects on the rebel assailants. After the battle, Holmes reported that "Price did not make his attack till after sunrise, and more than an hour after the time named in the order." However, Price claimed that Holmes actually accompanied his column during the idle time and "remained with the division until the dawn of day, when the line of march was resumed." If this was the case, Holmes could have easily prompted Price to advance his column. Regardless, the situation could have been prevented had Holmes chosen a more specific time at which to begin the assault.¹²

Holmes's blunders did not end with his vague battle plan. After the Confederates captured battery C, he rode into the fort and ordered one of Price's battalion commanders to attack Fort Curtis. His order, which violated the chain of command, had disastrous consequences. The other Confederate commanders on Graveyard Hill saw the advance on Fort Curtis and, believing that a general attack had been ordered, instructed their men to charge the fort. The dashing rebels, who immediately became the target of Fort Curtis, the batteries, the *Tyler's* guns, and a hail of enfilading rifle fire, were either captured or massacred. It is important to note that it was Parsons, not Holmes, who described this incident in his battle report. However, Holmes did admit that most of his loss in prisoners "resulted from not restraining the men after the capture of Graveyard Hill from advancing into the town, where they were taken mainly without resistance."¹³

¹² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 410, 413.

¹³ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 421-422, 411.

North of town, the absence of cooperation between Marmaduke and General Lucius M. Walker doomed the attack on Rightor Hill from the very beginning. Marmaduke's advance was continuously thwarted by a federal force ensconced behind the levee on his left. Marmaduke believed it was Walker's job to remove that threat, and he twice asked him to do so. In his report, Walker claimed to have engaged those Federals throughout the morning, pushing them back on several occasions, and in the end, succeeding in protecting Marmaduke's left flank. He also maintained that he had fulfilled his duty to prevent the Federals from reinforcing Rightor Hill. However, the reports also indicate that throughout the fight, Walker held a sizeable portion of his force north of Helena, presumably preparing to invade the town as soon as battery A was captured. For whatever reason, Walker did not dislodge the Federals behind the levee, and thus, Marmaduke was unable capture Rightor Hill.

Holmes blamed the rebel defeat in large part on Price's delay in attacking Graveyard Hill and the failure of Price and others to direct the men after the capture of battery C. Furthermore, he publicly accused McRae of "misbehavior before the enemy," presumably for his alleged shirking below battery C. However, Price praised McRae's performance in his report, and a court of inquiry later acquitted McRae of the charge. While the Confederate defeat at the battle of Helena was certainly a combined effort, the evidence indicates that Holmes's mistakes were the most crippling of the lot. A month after the battle, Fontaine Richard Earle, an infantryman in the 34th Arkansas, made no attempt to hide his opinion of who should shoulder the blame for rebel defeat: "Poor old soul . . . the whirring 64 pound bombs was to[o] much for him [Holmes]. He is . . . verr[y] sick, in which condition I leave him and hope he will stay so."¹⁴

¹⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 411, 438, 416; F. R. Earle to Amanda Buchanan, 4 August 1863, in Robert E. Waterman and Thomas Rothrock, eds., "The Earle-Buchanan Letters of 1861-1876," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1974): 139. Historian Alan Thompson

The Helena campaign was a disaster for the Confederates, due in no small part to their commander's blunders. And yet, Holmes should not shoulder all of the blame. The unpredictable forces of nature, as well the Federals' strategic use of the natural environment, were decisive in the campaign's outcome. Those involved in the battle understood this fact. Reflecting on the battle the following month, one Union soldier believed "it was not alone the bravery of our men that saved Helena. It was the defences & the manner in which the troops were disposed in readiness for any emergency & the untiring vigilance which prevented the enemy from gaining a foothold." Tellingly, a defeated Confederate offered similar analysis: "The facts can be summed up in very few words. We were badly whiped—not from any want of bravery on the part of men or officers, but the natural position together with the 'fortifications' around the place would have defied almost twice our numbers."¹⁵

The Helena campaign cannot be understood without some consideration of the ways in which soldiers manipulated, and were shaped by, their natural environment. Historians have proven that nature played an important, sometimes paramount, part in the Civil War, and the Helena campaign offers a vivid illustration of that fact. And yet, the natural environment alone did not determine the outcome at Helena. Other variables, including the decision-making of such individuals as Theophilus Holmes and Benjamin Prentiss, were also consequential. Nature was

agrees with the court's decision to exonerate McRae. Interestingly, it appears that Price originated the charge but then withdrew it. See Thompson, ed., "'Frank and out spoken in my disposition': The Wartime Letters of Confederate General Dandridge McRae," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2013): 360-361.

¹⁵ John A. Savage, Jr., to Hon. T. O. Howe, 20 August 1863, Frederick C. Salomon Papers; David W. Moore to Dear Mother, 28 July 1863, in Mark K. Christ, ed., "'We Were Badly Whiped': A Confederate Account of the Battle of Helena, July 4, 1863," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 (Spring 2010): 50.

but one actor in the Helena story, albeit a crucial one.¹⁶ Still, an environmental interpretation of the Helena campaign is instructive because it demonstrates that “battlefield tactics and outcomes are not merely the products of military minds and soldierly actions but also of the dynamics of weather, terrain, soil type, disease, and other nonhuman entities and forces.” This, ultimately, is environmental history’s most important contribution to our understanding of the Civil War and the past generally. In the words of one scholar, environmental history “might not have the potential to transform Civil War studies in the way that social histories have,” but it “*can* tell us many things we didn’t know before and can also allow us to reassess some things we *thought* we knew.”¹⁷

The Helena campaign was a failed Confederate attempt to relieve pressure on the collapsing rebel bastion at Vicksburg. The fortified, entrenched Federals at Helena repulsed the poorly coordinated Confederate attack, inflicting severe rebel casualties in the process. Reminiscing about the battle three years later, Horace Greeley sarcastically wrote that “Holmes—who had been grossly deceived both as to the strength of our [the federal] works and the number of their defenders—had never a reasonable chance of success. His only ground of rational hope was that he might be confronted by a coward, a traitor, or an idiot; and that did not happen to be the case.” Greeley’s Unionist leanings aside, his analysis was only slightly

¹⁶ I am persuaded by military historian Harold Winters’s contention that “one makes a mistake by becoming deterministic regarding geography and the outcome of battles and wars. But when considered along with all the other variables and human decisions involved, there are occasions when physical or cultural environmental factors are paramount in the success or failure of soldiers, armies, and their commanders.” Harold A. Winters, “The Battle That Was Never Fought: Weather and the Union Mud March of January 1863,” *Southeastern Geographer* 31 (May 1991): 37.

¹⁷ Paul S. Sutter, “Waving the Muddy Shirt,” in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*, ed. Brian Allen Drake (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 227; Brian Allen Drake, “New Fields of Battle: Nature, Environmental History, and the Civil War,” in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green*, 3.

exaggerated, although ultimately, the reason for Confederate failure did not matter. On that same morning, General John C. Pemberton surrendered to Grant at Vicksburg. In the end, the battle of Helena was too little and too late to save Vicksburg, but for those who fought and died there, the campaign was of no less consequence than those that transpired elsewhere.¹⁸

The same goes for the soldiers and civilians who survived the fight—and for those who endured the ordeals of secession and war in Phillips County. Today, most students of the Civil War remember Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg, not Helena, but while overshadowed and mostly forgotten, Helena was by no means unimportant. Rather, it is an ideal vantage from which to study the “real war” because its people experienced the conflict’s political, social, economic, military, and environmental effects from 1861 to 1865 and beyond.

Before the war, Phillips County was planter-dominated slave society whose white residents exploited their Delta environment and slave labor to grow cotton and corn for regional, national, and international markets. Accordingly, they were linked to a wider antebellum world defined by partisan politics, Protestantism, a slave-based economy, and a devotion to a Union that most believed was a democratic beacon for the rest of the world to see. As late as December 1860, most of the county’s citizens wanted to remain a part of that Union.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected U.S. president, unionism decreased in Phillips County, but it did not disappear. Tellingly, the county’s citizens responded to the Republican’s election by adopting a resolution urging the Arkansas legislature to call a meeting of the southern states to demand southerners’ rights *in* the Union. When South Carolina seceded in December 1860, support for separation grew in both Phillips County and Arkansas at large, and in early

¹⁸ Horace J. Greeley, *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860-'65*, Vol. 2 (Hartford, Conn.: O. D. Chase & Company, 1866), 320.

1861, a statewide election was called so that voters could decide whether to hold a secession convention and choose delegates to that convention. Ten days before that election, Phillips County militiamen helped seize the federal arsenal in Little Rock, thus exacerbating sectional tensions in the state.

On February 18, Arkansans overwhelmingly voted to hold a secession convention, and Phillips County, like most counties in southern and eastern Arkansas, sent pro-separation delegates to that meeting. However, most counties in northern and western Arkansas chose unionists, so when the convention adjourned in late March, Arkansas remained in the United States. By that time, most of the state's unionists were cooperationists, meaning they were willing to secede if the U.S. government failed to protect slavery or tried to force the states that had already seceded to rejoin the Union.

In April 1861, the U.S. government tried to do just that. After Confederate troops captured Fort Sumter, Lincoln requested that states still in the Union supply troops to crush the Confederate rebellion, and in the ensuing days, cooperation in Arkansas collapsed. By late April 1861, support for secession among whites in eastern Arkansas was almost unanimous. In Phillips County, the militia drilled in anticipation of secession and war, Helena's three newspapers endorsed separation, anti-northern vigilante activity increased, and Helenians seized northern-owned boats that passed on the Mississippi. By the time a reconvened convention announced Arkansas's secession on May 6, some 500 militiamen from five counties, including Phillips, were already mobilized to fight for the Confederacy.

In the war's opening months, some 400 of Phillips County's 2,000 adult white males volunteered to fight, and over the next four years, at least seven infantry regiments came from the Arkansas Delta. White women often led the region's mobilization events, and enslaved

Arkansans—who constituted a majority of Phillips County’s population—quietly took advantage of the turmoil to revolt.

By June 1861, all of the companies raised in Helena had departed, but the residents of Phillips County continued to experience the consequences of the war. In the war’s first year, slaves, civilians, and Confederate troops moved in and out of the county, while white residents suffered from cash and manpower shortages, a credit crunch, inflation, and ultimately, Confederate conscription and impressment. Floods, droughts, and hog cholera also wreaked havoc on the county’s residents.

In July 1862, approximately 20,000 Union soldiers under General Samuel R. Curtis invaded Phillips County. They seized buildings, confiscated crops and livestock, and freed more than 2,000 slaves, most of whom ran to federal lines to secure their freedom. Tragically, many of these refugees moved into decrepit camps, worked for wages that most never received, and died due to hunger and disease.

The arrival of Curtis’s army marked the beginning of a continuous Union occupation of Helena that spanned the remainder of the war. The town served as a permanent federal enclave, supply depot, coaling station, cotton-trading hub, and staging ground for Union operations in the Mississippi valley, particularly those aimed at Vicksburg. The federal occupation of Helena threatened the Confederacy’s control of the Mississippi River and the Arkansas interior, and throughout 1862 and 1863, the rebels considered removing that threat. They finally attempted to do so in July 1863, but harsh environmental conditions during the Confederate approach to Helena in tandem with the Federals’ ability to adapt the landscape as a key ally led to Confederate defeat.

Years after the war, a Wisconsin soldier who fought in the battle of Helena recalled that the town was “situated on the right bank of the Mississippi river, and on the only high ground on that side, between Memphis and Vicksburg. The occupation of it,” he continued “completely blockaded the Mississippi as that of either Memphis or Vicksburg. This fact gave its occupation by our forces, and hence the battle of Helena, an importance which it has never received in history.” The white civilians, black refugees, Yankee merchants, northern aid workers, and federal troops who joined him in Helena undoubtedly would have agreed.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Fifth Annual Meeting of the Society of the 28th Wisconsin Vol. Infantry Held at Whitewater, Wisconsin, September 7th and 8th, 1887* (Milwaukee: Burdick & Armitage, 1887), 40.

Figures

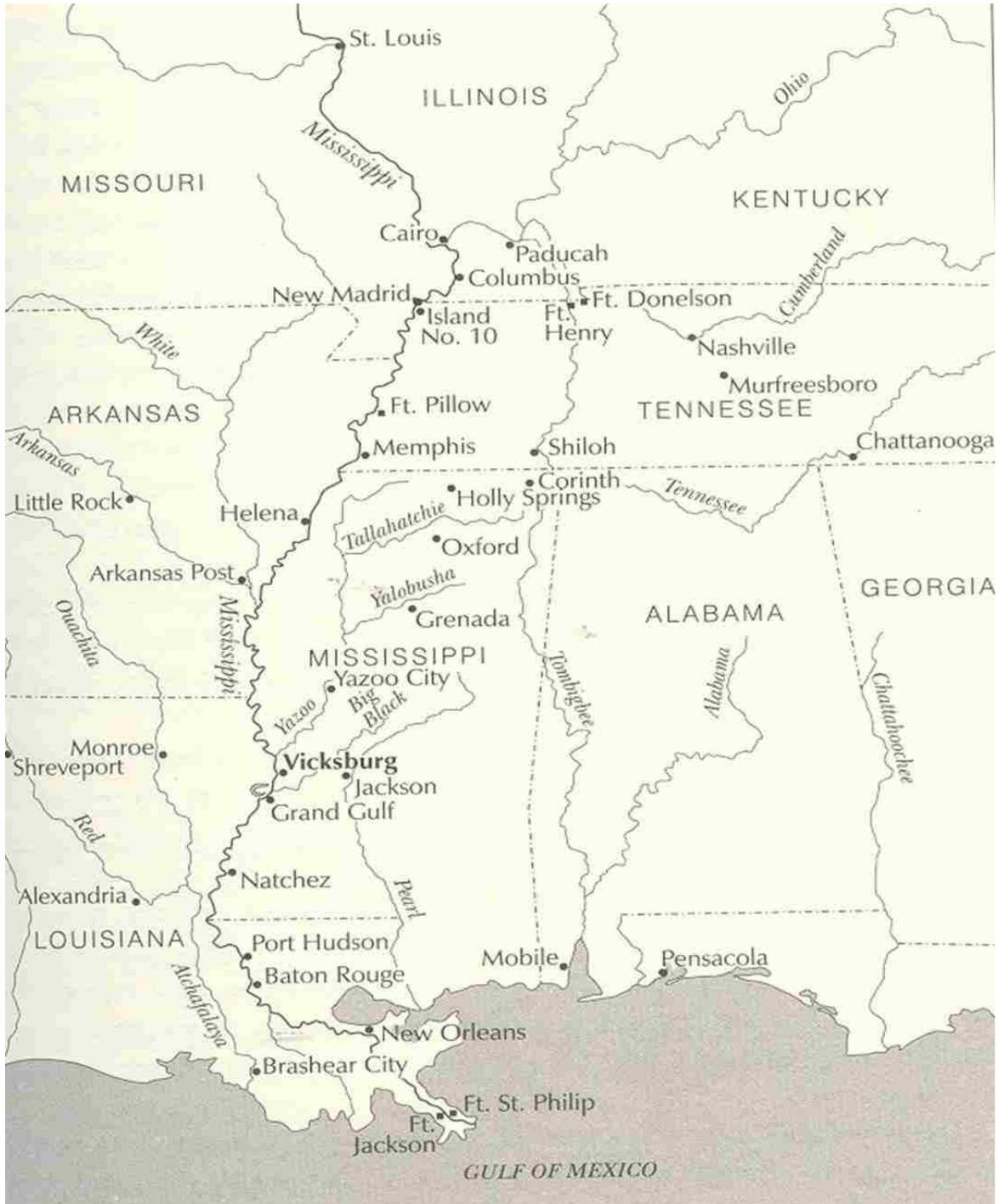
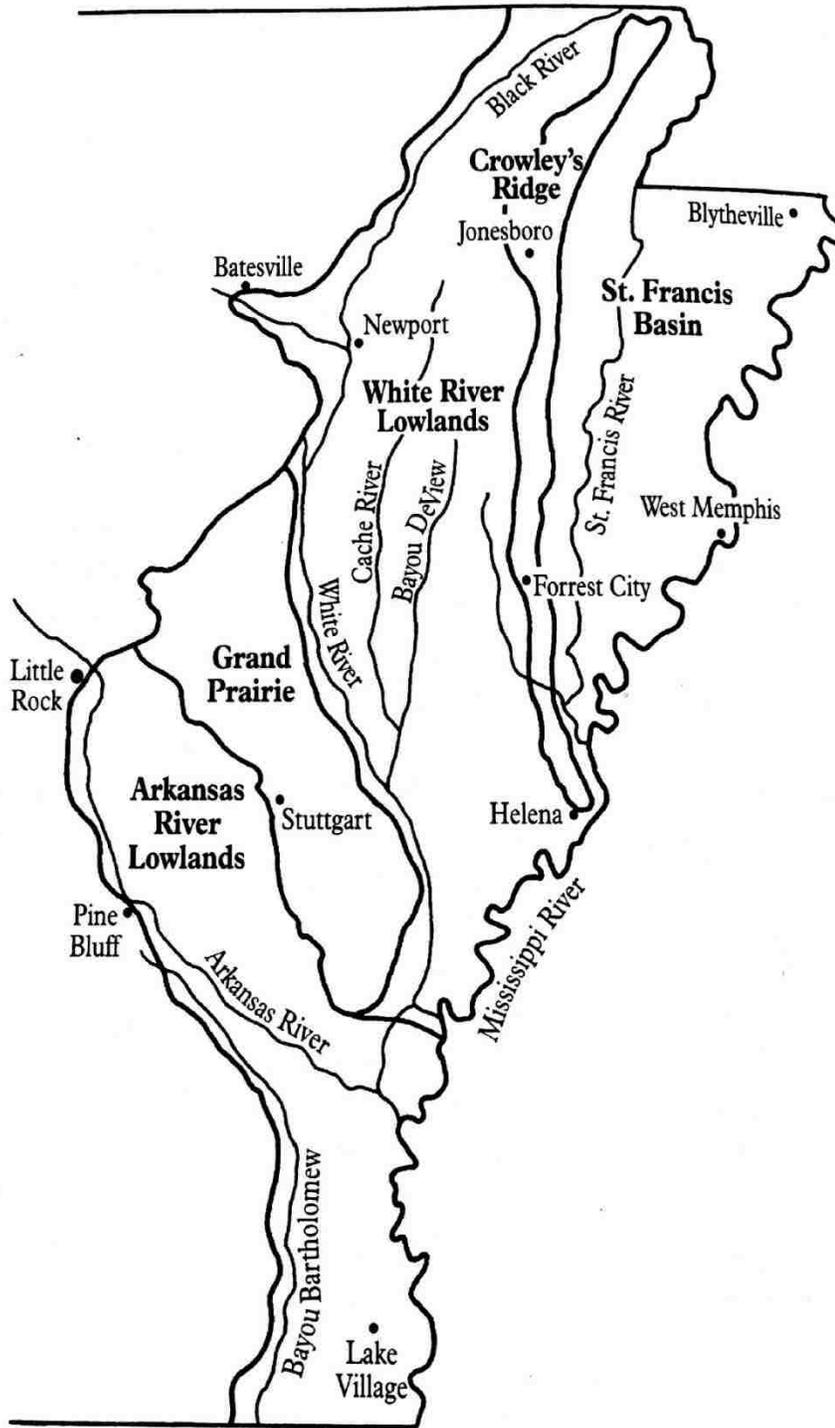
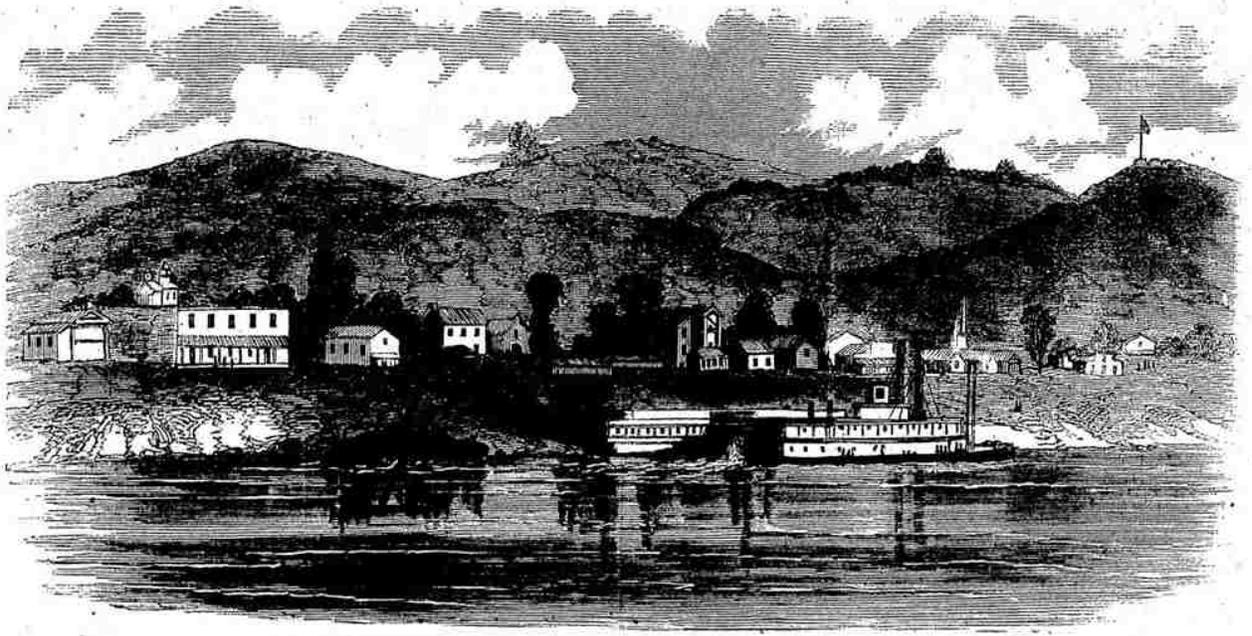


Figure 1: Helena, Arkansas, on the Mississippi River. Reproduced from *Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* by William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winshel by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 2003 by the University of Nebraska Press.



Rivers and Regions of the Delta.
 Courtesy of Tom Foti.

Figure 2: Arkansas Delta Subregions. Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood, eds., *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, 52.



THE WAR IN ARKANSAS—HELENA, ARKANSAS.—FROM A SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST, FRED. B. SCHELL.

Figure 3: “The War in Arkansas—Helena, Arkansas—From a Sketch by Our Special Artist, Fred. B. Schell.” *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 23, 1864: 276. *19th Century U.S. Newspapers* (accessed July 12, 2017).

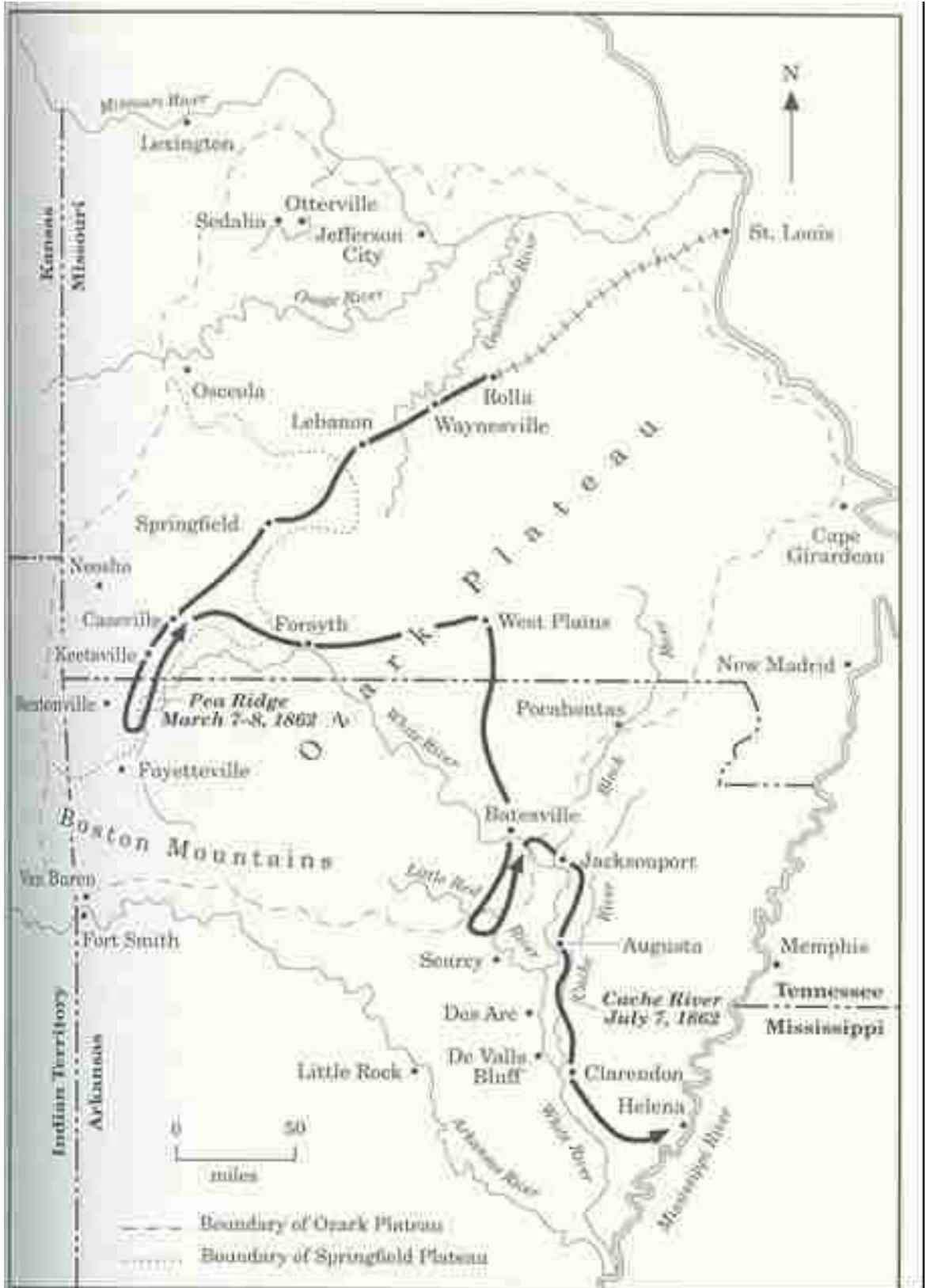


Figure 4: The march of the Army of the Southwest. Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, 293.

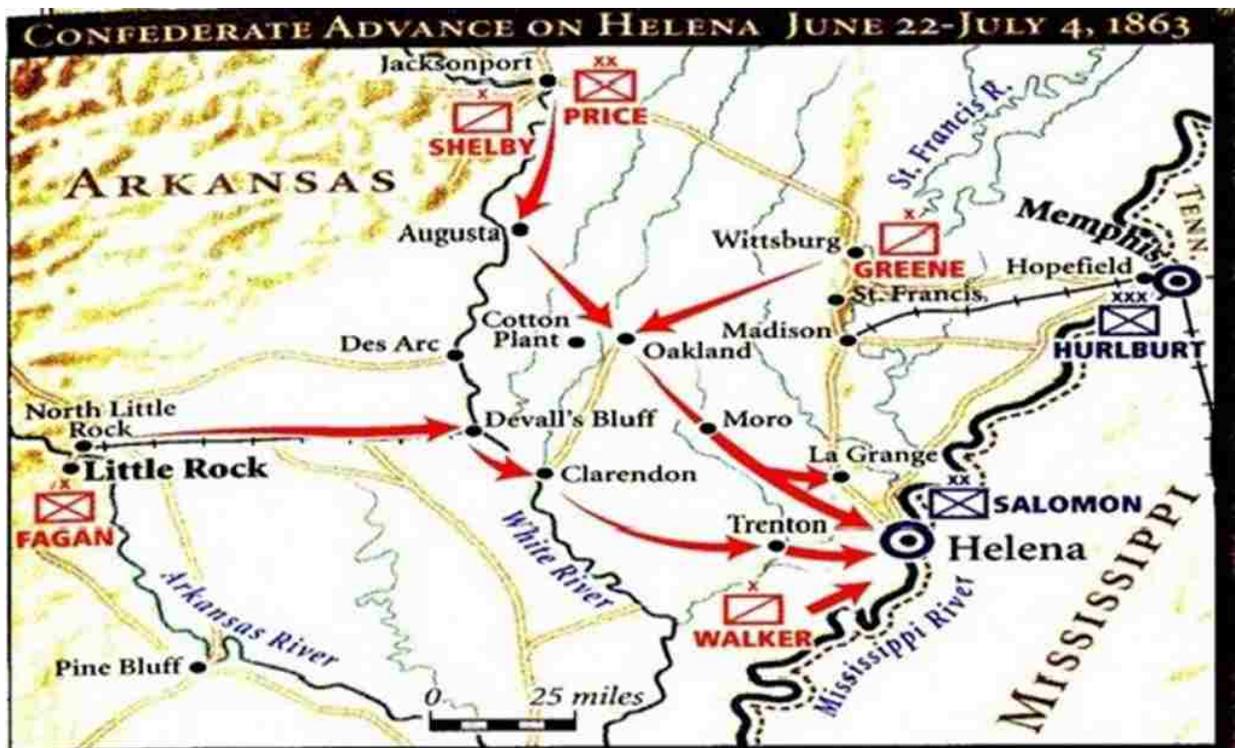


Figure 5: Confederate Advance on Helena, June 22-July 4, 1863. Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," 31.

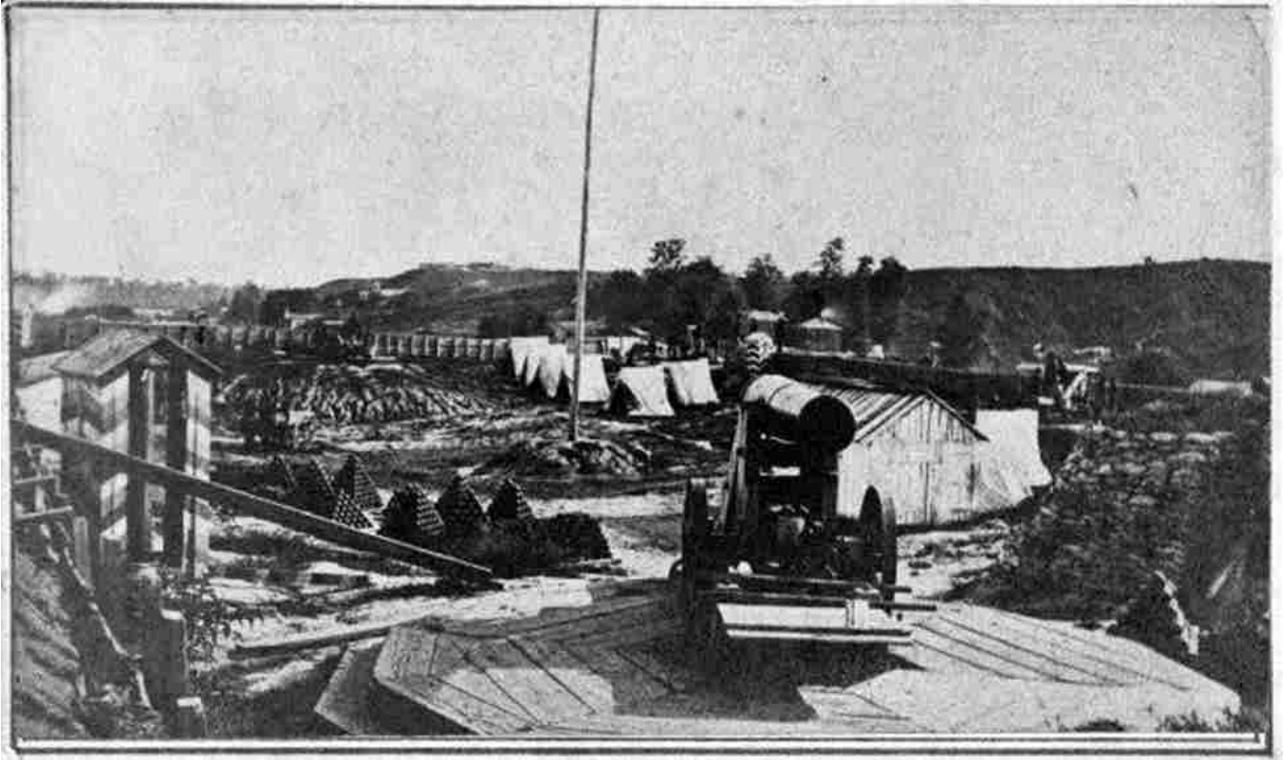


Figure 7: Fort Curtis, Helena, Arkansas (courtesy The Arkansas History Commission)

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