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# Thousand-Mile Front: Civil War in the Lower Mississippi Valley

**A**n intriguing, colorful, vital, and yet overlooked story of the Civil War is that of the Western Theater—the events and warfare that ultimately toppled the Confederacy by the capture of the Mississippi River. That story has now been told in “The Thousand-Mile Front: Civil War in the Lower Mississippi Valley,” a brochure produced by the Lower Mississippi Valley Civil War Task Force. Its 33 members represent a wide array of offices and disciplines from seven states. Prior to working on this project, committee members had not worked together, nor, in most cases, even known one another.

Nonetheless, the Thousand-Mile Front was successfully produced by this task force. The massive story was told by pulling resources together (with no budget) and having the grit and determination to finish the work. A two-year-long process has reaped the accolades of state and federal officials from each state, as well as from others. Most have been amazed that a feat of this size was accomplished at all, much less by means of the infamous committee.

The collaboration process by which the Thousand-Mile Front was created has been the subject of many national and regional presentations. Other state and regional efforts are interested in parroting the task force's work. Two of the most important reasons why are: (1) the task force utilized existing resources (experts) and required no new monies; and (2) the

effort brought local people into the planning and development process. Some of the underlying goals of the Thousand-Mile Front were to bring the history of America alive, make it more accessible and friendly to the public, and demonstrate the connection of history to the conservation and preservation of historic sites. The basis of the task force was to create a tourism document that would be of interest to the history buff, the general public, and the heritage traveler. The text of the brochure focuses on military action, as well as the lives of ordinary citizens. Many would argue that this is a natural connection, and others would argue that often history is taught in the third person and the student of history or historical events does not put time, place, people, and action together. Often history is taught by a series of dates and actions,

but is not related to place. The Thousand-Mile Front attempts to make just that connection.

Moreover, this project showcases the ultimate success that can be achieved through building regional partnerships and communication links and putting creativity to use—without the luxury of a large (or, for that matter, any) budget. The accomplishments of the Lower Mississippi Valley Civil War Task Force can be achieved by anyone or any group who sets a goal and is determined to achieve it. To adequately explain how the task force was formed and work on the Thousand-Mile Front came about, we must start at the very beginning.

It began in Louisiana. Historically, Louisiana has had a problem realizing the importance of historic preservation. Preservation efforts were usually handled by a small group—considered to be elite. Talk of preserving a battlefield, a house, a church, a school, or even a downtown “Main Street” area was above the heads of average community residents, who never realized how saving a building or cultural landscape affected them and their ability to provide for their families.

The bottom line is this: The everyday person-on-the-street has never identified with or been part of preservation activities. Nowhere in Louisiana is this more relevant than in the state's northeastern corner, which includes East Carroll, Madison, and

Tensas parishes. These parishes are adjacent to Vicksburg, Mississippi. As we all know (or as we in Louisiana would like to think everyone knows), the northeastern corner of the state played a major role in the Vicksburg Campaign, particularly Grant's March. In fact, remnants of Grant's canals are still visible.

It was believed that if the Vicksburg National Military Park receives over a million visitors each year, then surely Louisiana could derive some economic benefit. Never mind that there were no signs, sites, literature, trails, or interpretation—and never mind that northeastern Louisiana is noted as one of the poorest areas in the United States. To determine the interest of Mississippi in helping Louisiana pursue the re-establishment of Grant's March to tell the Louisiana side of the story, a group was formed that later became known as the Louisiana Civil War Task Force. It included academics; state park and tourist industry officials; representatives from the NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program's Louisiana field office; and Civil War historians. It was determined that pursuit of Grant's March was a good thing—and we strongly believed that the story could not be told without a link to Vicksburg and other battles along the Mississippi River, especially given the significance of Port Hudson.

While working on the Grant's March concept, it became clear that

telling the military history was only a part of the story, so it was decided to include cultural, historical, economic, and social issues of the era as well. Meanwhile, the Louisiana Civil War Task Force met with Vicksburg National Military Park and started discussions on how to best tell of Grant's March, focusing on the Louisiana side of the story. It was concluded that this would best be done by highlighting the stories, battles, and other events surrounding the capture of the Mississippi River. This growing concept now called for including the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. So it was that the Lower Mississippi Valley Civil War Task Force was created. Letters were written by the Louisiana lieutenant governor to counterparts in the other states requesting that appropriate participants be appointed to a working task force. After the members were appointed, an organizational meeting was set and the group was charged with the responsibility of developing a brochure providing an overview and illustrating the Vicksburg Campaign Heritage Trail along the Mississippi River from Memphis to the Gulf of Mexico.

Having no money to work with, along with no designated budget, each state agreed to absorb into existing budgets the expenses for travel, research, and staff time. Costs were held to a minimum. Mostly the expenses were for travel and lodging; meals were provided. The task force

held its first meeting, and the four states determined that the entire story needed to be told—from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico. Thus the states of Illinois, Kentucky, and Missouri were added to the mix, bringing the task force to 33 members representing the seven states. And, around this time, the efforts of the Lower Mississippi River Civil War Task Force were adopted by the National Park Service as part of its Lower Mississippi Delta Region Initiative.

Believe it or not, there were many nay-sayers! There were those who said this project could not be done by committee, that committee members would never reach a consensus, that the project would fizzle, and that states would not participate, among other comments. There were great concerns regarding the objective or any hidden agenda.

The work of the task force began with serious focus. We developed criteria, a site submission form, a time line, and a concept of the text and layout. According to the original concept, the text was to include a concise narrative of Civil War activities in the Lower Mississippi Valley and a chronology of events. All sites were to be marked on a seven-state map showing major transportation arteries, and a series of individual maps were to highlight significant military operations from each year from 1861 through 1865. The format was based on the National Park Service brochure "Civil War at a Glance."

This first prototype was produced with no sites listed—only icons on the map illustrating the type of site at a location. Obviously, this format did not work. It did not satisfy the mission of the task force, which was to produce a user-friendly brochure. Some members of the group objected to producing a collateral piece that was already for the most part done. Plus, there were objections to its being too military-oriented and uninteresting to tourists. So, after taking several other shapes, it finally crystallized into its present form—which everyone on the task force helped to build—and the Thousand-Mile Front was born.

Originally, there were three phases to the task force's Civil War project. Phase 1 created the document. Phase 2 begins the "hands-on" activities: grassroots efforts, using the expertise and know-how of the task force, to assist sites, communities, and states in their respective preservation efforts. Phase 2 includes mini-conferences, workshops, and field work. Phase 3, long-term planning, includes, but is not limited to, planning, developing, or incorporating into existing facilities and recreation areas such facilities as interpretive kiosks, trails (hiking, biking, walking, driving), and other facilities or forms of activity deemed appropriate by the states and local governing authorities.

The spin-off efforts of the Thousand-Mile Front have been a phenomenon. For instance:

- **Louisiana** created a statewide Civil War Map as promotional literature; is in the process of cooperating with Texas to create a brochure on the Red River Campaign; is working with Texas to create an even larger military guide to that state, encompassing the War of 1812 to the post-Civil War period; is working with the state of Mississippi and Vicksburg National Military Park to re-establish Grant's March; and is working with the Civil War Trust and the NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program to assess the restoration needs of Fort DeRussy in Avoyelles Parish, which may be used as part of a guidebook on methods to restore Civil War battlefields and sites.
- **Kentucky** is working on a statewide Civil War guide.
- **Mississippi** is creating 11 topic-specific brochures covering additional Civil War campaigns in the state; created a Friends of the Vicksburg Campaign non-profit group to work on the entire route of the Vicksburg Campaign, one of sites newly designated as "endangered" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation; and is cooperating with Louisiana to re-establish Grant's March, which will link the northeastern corner of Louisiana to the Vicksburg Campaign.
- **Missouri** is creating a more specific regional Civil War heritage

brochure along with the states of Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

- **The Civil War Trust** included the Thousand-Mile Front in its *Discovery Trail Guidebook*, with a map of the seven-state region and an overview of the trail; developed a guidebook on methods to restore Civil War battlefields and sites, using case studies in the Mississippi Delta region; and is also planning a state-of-the-art Civil War traveling exposition (which we hope to host along the Mississippi River in the Delta region) to take advantage of the unparalleled interest in the Civil War.

Most importantly, there have been discussions among the seven states exploring the possibility of establishing a multi-state heritage consortium which would use the talent and expertise on the task force to assist members in doing such things as to:

- Work together to pool resources to preserve historic sites.
- Develop a “connectiveness” between the lower Delta states and their various histories.
- Expand interpretation at historic sites to include living histories and living communities.
- Conduct multi-state educational workshops and mini-seminars highlighting methods or processes from other consortium states.

- Work to educate the Delta states on the importance of their heritage; of preserving and conserving their cultural, natural, and human resources; and of making interpretation more interesting to the public at large.

Historic preservation, the Civil War, tourism, parks, litter control, saving the landscape—and maintaining the integrity of an area or site—are all components of the same thing. We need to help one another, rather than fight one another. We need to cooperate rather than go our own ways. Much can be done through cooperative efforts: pooling of resources, pooling of money, creating the critical mass necessary for economic impact. The Thousand-Mile Front brought to the table groups that have never cooperated before. When this project began, we were quickly reminded by others sitting around the table that we needed to cast aside our personal views and work toward the total project. After overcoming this obstacle, the project took care of itself and success was almost guaranteed. Views, beliefs, and opinions became those of the group, rather than an assortment of individuals. Finally, a product was created which everyone believes in—and had a vital role in bringing to life.

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