

*Terrence J. Winschel*

## Preserving Mississippi's Civil War Heritage

From Battery Robinette at Corinth and the forts around Grenada in the north to Beauvoir (the historic last home of Jefferson Davis) on the coast; from the Old Capitol Building in Jackson, where the ordinance of secession was passed on January 9, 1861; to the awe-inspiring monuments at Vicksburg National Military Park—scores of structures, sites, and battlefields serve to remind Americans of the rich Civil War heritage available in Mississippi and provide the state with a largely untapped reservoir for heritage tourism.

Long overshadowed by the battlefields and associated historic sites in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, few realize that some of the most bitterly contested actions of the war occurred in Mississippi. The state experienced 772 military events, among which were the battles of Iuka, Corinth, Brices Cross Roads, Tupelo, and, perhaps the most decisive campaign of the war, the complex army-navy operations that resulted in the fall of Vicksburg. The most celebrated cavalry raid of the war, Grierson's Raid, traveled the length of Mississippi, and William T. Sherman's Meridian campaign of 1864 was a precursor to the devastating "March to the Sea" which broke the spirit of the Southern people. Edwin C. Bearss, historian emeritus of the National Park Service, refers emphatically to the significance of these events as the "Decision in Mississippi," and argues that the military operations that focused on the Mississippi River determined the outcome of the war.

Until recently, the sites in Mississippi have largely been ignored by those interested in the Civil War. With the exception of Vicksburg National Military Park, which receives one million visitors a year, the battlefields, historic homes, and other structures associated with the Civil War across Mississippi could boast of only a few thousand visitors. Such is no longer the case, and interest in Mississippi's Civil War sites has grown dramatically in recent years.

Nationwide interest in Mississippi's Civil War heritage spirals upward in part due to the establishment by Congress of the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission in 1990. The commission was charged to identify the nation's historically significant Civil War sites, determine their relative importance, evaluate their condition, assess threats to their integrity, and recommend alternatives for preserving and interpreting them. The report issued by the commission in 1993 addresses those issues at 384

sites in 26 states. Of the fifty most significant sites listed by preservation priorities, eleven are in Mississippi.

National recognition of the state's historic sites has led to heightened awareness throughout Mississippi of Civil War resources. In turn, awareness has led to increased visitation across the state and has served to create a healthy climate for preservation initiatives. Those factors have combined with opportunities for significant results in battlefield preservation across the state. Leading the charge for battlefield preservation in Mississippi are two organizations that boast of impressive results across the country: The Conservation Fund and the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (APCWS). Other groups have joined in these efforts and present preservationists with unique opportunities to preserve entire battlefields, and thus provide communities with economic development potential through heritage tourism.

Fueling such mass appeal for preservation efforts in Mississippi are the price of land compared with acreage in Virginia or elsewhere, and the integrity of setting versus battlefields in other states. Capitalizing on this situation, The Conservation Fund, utilizing a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, has secured 825 acres at Champion Hill—site of the largest, bloodiest, and most decisive action of the Vicksburg Campaign. That land has

been turned over to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History for management. Coupled with a 5-acre parcel that includes the historic Coker House, owned by the Jackson Civil War Round Table, a significant portion of the battlefield is now preserved.

In the largest purchase of what has been a history of significant acquisitions, the APCWS secured 705 acres at Brices Cross Roads, which constitute 75% of the battlefield. An additional 146 acres of the battlefield was recently purchased by the APCWS. Commitment on such a grand scale was based largely in response to the tremendous support and financial assistance provided by local governments in three Mississippi counties: Lee, Prentiss, and Union. Plans are currently being drawn for a museum-visitor center and for interpretive markers that will be placed on the battlefield. Recognizing the benefits to be derived from such a park, funding for this project is mostly local.

Both The Conservation Fund and the APCWS have also targeted several smaller sites for preservation efforts. Under the guidance of Frances Kennedy, The Conservation Fund helped to preserve a small 2.5-acre tract that encompasses the remaining vestige of Grant's Canal. (Although across the Mississippi River in Louisiana, the canal was an integral part of the Vicksburg Campaign and is now a unit of Vicksburg National Military Park.) The APCWS recently

announced the purchase of a 6-acre tract at Grand Gulf (the preferred site for Grant's amphibious landing during the Vicksburg Campaign) that was donated to the state of Mississippi for inclusion in the Grand Gulf Military Monument. Both organizations are actively seeking additional land acquisitions at Champion Hill, Raymond, and Port Gibson battlefields, and welcome preservation opportunities on lesser-known fields throughout Mississippi. Preservation of the forts at Grenada should be recommended to these organizations for consideration.

In several Mississippi communities there is grassroots support for preservation, most notable of which is in Corinth, where The Siege and Battle of Corinth Commission is working to preserve impressive lines of earthworks across Alcorn County. Several sites, totaling 485 acres, have been designated a National Historic Landmark with the potential of adding over 2,000 additional acres to the NHL designation. NHL status is also being sought for the historic Shaifer Road on Port Gibson battlefield, and preservation stalwarts in Claiborne County are working diligently to ensure that more of the battlefield is protected. In 1995, Congress authorized the United States Mint to issue a silver dollar and clad half-dollar commemorating the battlefield preservation efforts. Proceeds generated by sales of the coins are earmarked for battlefield preservation,

\$200,000 of which—matched by the state of Mississippi—was awarded for land acquisition at Corinth, with a pledge for an additional \$200,000.

Much is also being done on the state level. The Mississippi Civil War Battlefield Commission was recently established by Governor Kirk Fordice to identify significant Civil War resources in the state and offer strategies for preservation. Mississippi is also participating in the Lower Mississippi Delta Civil War Task Force, which has developed a brochure identifying Civil War resources throughout a seven-state area that are publicly accessible and illustrates a number of travel corridors for visitors to use in touring the region. The forts at Grenada are included in the brochure that was released in 1997. In addition, Mississippi is part of The Civil War Discovery Trail.

Responding to increased interest in the state's Civil War resources, Mississippi is developing a series of folders, such as one on the Vicksburg campaign, that will highlight the major campaigns and significant Civil War themes available for study in Mississippi. One of the folders will detail Grant's Central Mississippi Campaign and provide for a loop drive from Holly Springs following Grant's line of advance through Oxford to Grenada and return following the route of Van Dorn's raid.

Publications have played a key role in enhancing public awareness in Mississippi and across the nation.

The state has produced the *Civil War Guide* which is available at no charge by calling 1-800-WARMEST. "A Guide to the Vicksburg Campaign" brochure has also been produced, and site-specific guide brochures on the battlefields of Chickasaw Bayou, Port Gibson, Raymond, and Champion Hill are available at the national military park in Vicksburg. Future guide brochures are planned for the battlefields at Jackson and Big Black River Bridge.

Advertising in publications such as *Civil War Times Illustrated*, *Blue & Gray Magazine*, *Civil War*, and a score of other Civil War-related publications target specific audiences that are more likely to visit historic sites. The National Trust for Historic Preservation informs us that "visitors to historic sites stay an average of a half-day longer and spend an average of \$62 more than travelers who do not visit historic sites." At Vicksburg National Military Park, for example, our sales outlet this year alone will sell in excess of \$730,000 in books and theme-related items.

Mississippi justly boasts of active and innovative battlefield preservation initiatives. Much has been done that will benefit generations of Americans yet to come, but more can and needs to be done. As in states such as Maryland and Kentucky, Mississippi has availed itself of the opportunity to use Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funding for protection of bat-

tlefield sites. Those three states alone have expended more than \$20 million of ISTEA funding to preserve hundreds of acres on significant battlefields. Such action is already paying economic dividends for those states in terms of tourism-generated jobs and tax revenue. ISTEA funding can be used to do even more in Mississippi. Revenues from the vast gaming industry could also be used for the sake of historic preservation. Regardless of the funding source, opportunities abound in Mississippi for preservation of Civil War resources that will spark both heritage tourism and economic development and benefit the state for generations to come.

In its publication, "Tourism + Preservation = Economies," The National Trust for Historic Preservation states: "Today, tourism and preservation are much more likely to overlap," and emphasizes that "the key to sustainable heritage tourism is to build a bridge between preservation and travelers." In every community the bridges are in place if only we will open and maintain them. Across Mississippi, communities large and small have heritage to offer. "When a community's heritage is the substance of what it offers visitors, protecting that heritage is essential."

With the continuing rise of national interest in the Civil War and associated sites, Mississippi stands poised to become a major attraction. We must recognize that preservation and tourism can combine in a "pow-

erful synergy” to create reasons for people to visit. In closing, permit me to paraphrase from the movie “Field of Dreams”: “If you preserve it, they will come”—and bring with them jobs, increased revenues, and economic development that is diversified and sustainable.

**Terrence J. Winschel**, Vicksburg National Military Park, 3201 Clay Street,  
Vicksburg, Mississippi 39180

\*\*\*\*\*

*Part 1 of this set of articles appeared in Volume 15, Number 2. It includes:*

Joseph E. Brent and William H. Mulligan, Jr., “Introduction”

Tanya M. Gossett, “The American Battlefield Protection Program: Forging Preservation Partnerships at Historic Battlefields”

Joseph E. Brent, “Preserving Kentucky’s Civil War Sites: Grassroots Efforts and Statewide Leadership”

Chris Calkins, “The Making of the ‘Lee’s Retreat’ Driving Tour”

