

A Pandemonium of Torture and Despair The Capture of St. Charles & Explosion of the *Mound City*

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The Civil War moved quickly in the western theater during the spring of 1862. Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn and his Confederate army met defeat at Elkhorn Tavern, and the Confederacy lost Missouri. Van Dorn's adversary, Maj. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis, was marching triumphantly across northern Arkansas. A month after the defeat at Elkhorn, Confederate General Albert S. Johnston was killed and his army driven from the field of Shiloh. By early June Federal troops occupied Corinth, Mississippi, a vital supply depot and rail junction.

Events on the vital Mississippi River were also worsening for the Confederate cause. Admiral David Farragut's naval force captured New Orleans in late April. After a pitched gunboat battle early in June, Memphis fell into Union hands. Of the major defensive positions on the Mississippi, Confederate forces controlled only Helena, Vicksburg, and Port Hudson. The little gunboat battle at Memphis not only netted that city for the North, but also destroyed the Confederate Western Flotilla. Of the eight-ship fleet, only the *General Van Dorn* escaped destruction or capture. (1) After this battle on 6 June, only a few rebel gunboats were left to defend the Mississippi and its tributaries between Memphis and Baton Rouge.

The Army of the Southwest, which had routed the Southerners at Elkhorn Tavern, was moving east across northern Arkansas by early May. This army, under the command of General Curtis, began to slow down by the time it reached Batesville. Curtis had stretched his supply line too thin and now had to rely on a new "cracker line." He began to send urgent requests for equipment and supplies, while his army came to a halt in the Batesville and Jacksonport area.

Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman, Confederate commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department, anticipated the fall of Memphis three days before it occurred. (2) He began a crash program to defend the White River. It was obvious to him that an effort to resupply Curtis must use this waterway. The point Hindman chose to defend the White River was St. Charles, eighty-eight miles north of the river's mouth. St. Charles was chosen because of its easily defended high bluffs, the first bluffs to appear above the point where the White River flows into the Arkansas River. The village itself was small, consisting of only a few small

homes and businesses. (3) On 8 June, the Confederate gunboat *Ponchartrain* arrived at St. Charles, bringing with it two 32-pounder cannons for the defenses of the town. (4)

By order of General Hindman, Lt. J. W. Dunnington of the *Ponchartrain* began building fortifications. The crew placed the huge weapons two hundred feet from the shore and seventy-five feet above the water. (5) The guns were not only on high ground, but also on a strategic bend in the river. This afforded a sweeping angle of fire both up and down the river. The guns themselves were hidden from view by dense undergrowth and trees.

Many of the local citizens began to leave the village when the sailors told them that a fight was expected. Lieutenant Dunnington was boarded with one of the citizens who did not plan to leave, Mrs. Mary S. Patrick. She wrote in her diary, "Many families have moved some miles from town.... I conclude to wait and face the foe, if they come." (6)

Mrs. Patrick and her family evidently became close friends with Lieutenant Dunnington. She recalls:

Capt. [sic] D. took daughter and I to see the battery-while Capt. Smith was drilling the gunners. The big guns were tried and Capt. D. explained the manners of shooting etc....The Capt. is intelligent, interesting, and gallant. We enjoyed his explanations. Truly these are formidable weapons. I hope that we may not have to use them. (7)

As the fortifications were nearing completion, Dunnington left a small force at St. Charles and departed for Little Rock for additional men and equipment.

While Lieutenant Dunnington was busy at St. Charles, preparations of a different kind were made at Memphis. Flag Officer C. H. Davis, the commander of the Western Flotilla, informed Washington on 10 June of plans for an expedition up the White River. He planned this expedition for two purposes: first, and most important, to open communications with General Curtis; and second, to clear the White River of any remaining rebel gunboats. This expedition was delayed until 13 June, while repairs were being made and provisions put on board. Three ironclads set sail that



Monument to both sides during the engagement at St. Charles, listing all the casualties

morning: the *Mound City*, the *St. Louis*, and the *Lexington*.

The next morning the remainder of the small fleet, delayed even longer, left Memphis. These were the gunboat *Conestoga*, the transport *New National*, which carried the 46th Indiana Infantry, and the transport *White Cloud*, containing provisions for Curtis' army. Two tugs towing coal barges brought up the rear. Col. Graham N. Fitch of the 46th Indiana Infantry was in overall command of the expedition.

The *Conestoga* and transports caught up with the first half of the fleet at a place called the Arkansas cutoff, where the Arkansas and the White Rivers converge before emptying into the Mississippi. It was there that the Federals met their first opposition. Apparently with little effort, the *Mound City* captured the rebel steamer *Clara Dolsen*. The commander of the *Mound City*, Capt. A. H. Kilty, sent the ship back to Memphis as a prize of war. The Confederates had also attempted to block the river by sinking wet timber in the channel. With the protection of the Indiana infantry, the sailors quickly removed the obstacles.

The fleet left the Arkansas cutoff the morning of 16 June and moved cautiously up the river. By dusk it had reached a point five miles below St. Charles. The fleet laid anchor for the night. At daylight the following morning the big guns would be tested at St. Charles. (8)

The Union fleet was not aware that there was so little to resist it on the White River. When the Confed-

erate gunboat *Ponchartrain* left for Little Rock with Lieutenant Dunnington, only one Southern ship of war was left on the White River. This boat, the *Maurepas*, as well as the *Ponchartrain*, was part of a six-boat fleet purchased in New Orleans at the beginning of the war. These wooden steamers had little protection except for their iron plating around the bow and engine. (9) The *Maurepas* had proven quite formidable in its short career. The commander of this vessel was Capt. Joseph Fry, formerly of the United States Navy. He proved to be an able leader on the White River. In late May the *Maurepas* was operating on the river as far as Jacksonport, Arkansas. In fact, at one point the steamer and its crew of less than forty actually captured this little river port. The 9th Illinois Cavalry, which was protecting Jacksonport, fled after only ten shots were fired from the *Maurepas*—apparently believing that a larger land force had accompanied the gunboat. The crew, with the help of some citizens, destroyed large amounts of cotton and sugar. Much more could have been destroyed, but Fry set sail when it was feared his vessel would be stranded because of falling water levels in the river. (10)

On 15 June the *Maurepas* reached St. Charles. As the senior officer present, Captain Fry immediately took command and began unloading his stores in the fortifications. (11) Soon after the *Maurepas*, another group of Southerners arrived, thirty-five infantrymen commanded by Capt. A. M. Williams of the Confederate Engineers. These men were detailed from five companies of the 37th Arkansas Infantry. (12) The remainder of the 37th Arkansas had also been sent by General Hindman, but it was waiting in Devalls Bluff a few miles upstream, while its powder was being processed into cartridges. On the day of the ensuing battle, this regiment advanced within ten miles of St. Charles before the battle was decided. (13)

Lieutenant Dunnington finally returned to St. Charles from Little Rock. Dunnington made the trip overland, leaving the *Ponchartrain* to be repaired. He brought with him two ten-pound Parrot rifles he had found in the arsenal at Little Rock. These two weapons would help, but it would take much more to stop the Union forces. By the afternoon of the 16th, smoke from the Federal fleet could be seen rising from the river five miles below. It was obvious to Fry that the wooden gunboat *Maurepas* would be useless against the ironclads he had to face. Fry decided to scuttle the *Maurepas* in an effort to block the river channel. Fry ordered the gunboat along with two small steamers, the *Eliza G.* and the *Mary Thompson*, sunk in line across

the river. This was a difficult process, for there was no ballast to ensure the ships would not shift position while sinking in the current. It took the entire night to scuttle the three vessels. On the night of 16 June, Captain Fry organized his defenses. Lieutenant Dunnington commanded the 35-man crew of the *Ponchartrain* in the upper battery, which consisted of the two 32-pounder rifles. Midshipman F. M. Roby took command of the crew of the *Maurepas*, about forty men, and four field guns in the lower battery. This battery was 400 yards downriver from the upper one. It included two Parrot rifles from Little Rock, a 10-pound Parrot rifle from the *Ponchartrain*, and a 12-pound howitzer from the *Maurepas*. Captain Williams' men were detailed as sharpshooters below the lower battery. The Confederate troops bedded down as close as possible to their guns on the evening of the 16th for the expected attack the following morning. (14)

By daylight the next morning, people were already active in St. Charles, and the Union fleet had gotten up steam and started upriver. It proceeded in the following order: *Mound City*, *St. Louis*, *Lexington*, *Conestoga*, and transports. (15) The lead boat, the *Mound City*, seemed prone to misfortune. The *Mound City* and the *St. Louis* were two of seven boats constructed on contract by the James B. Eads Company of St. Louis, Missouri. All of these vessels were basically the same, each with a long, low profile and medium armor. Two weeks earlier the *Mound City* had received heavy damage at Ft. Pillow. The crew had no way of knowing that their ship was destined for more bad luck. (16)

The Federals moved slowly up the river. Shortly after 0900, the *Mound City* encountered a squad of Williams' infantry two miles below the main fortifications. The giant guns on board the vessel began belching grape shot and shell onto the riverbank, opening the battle of St. Charles. (17)

At 0800, before the Federal fleet had arrived, Mrs. Mary Patrick invited the Confederate officers for breakfast. Most of the officers declined so they could stay near their guns, but several, including Midshipman Roby and Captain Smith, found the offer too tempting. Mrs. Patrick recalled the interrupted breakfast in her diary:

We had just been seated a few moments when the loud booming of cannon startled Leut. Roby and others.... Another loud boom and the ball came whizzing over my house and fell in the stable yard. Another and another. Close enough to be distinctly heard as they passed through the air. (18)

The officers left the Patrick dining room and ran the 300 yards back to the lower battery. Mrs. Patrick, who had been so determined to stay, used her better judgment and made hasty preparations to leave.

Poor Nellie; so frightened. I went to the buggy with her... she looked whiter than I thought her Mullater face could be made. We drove rapidly out of town. Had to stop once or twice to avoid branches cut by the fierce cannon balls. (19)

It did not take long for the giant shells to drive the tiny squad of infantry away from the riverbank. As the Confederate sharpshooters pulled back, the steamer *New National* hove to shore two and one-half miles below the main battery and began unloading the 46th Indiana Infantry. The Union regiment was soon advancing cautiously, driving the rebel skirmishers back towards the village. (20)

As the *New National* was unloading its cargo of infantrymen, the ironclad came abreast of the lower battery. A brisk but ineffective artillery duel began between the lead boats and Midshipman Roby's battery. The firing had been going on for thirty minutes when skirmishers of the 46th reached the home of Mrs. Patrick. Here Williams and his men were attempting to make a stand. (21)

Colonel Fitch knew his men were but a few hundred yards from their destination and had received only slight casualties, but he paused. He had an unreasonable fear for the safety of his troops as they faced the heavy guns. The 32-pounders actually posed little threat to his scattered troops. Fitch notified Captain Kilty of the *Mound City* that he had the option of



One of the two 32-pounders recovered from the White River

allowing the infantry to charge the batteries or of steaming ahead, locating the main battery, and silencing it with the gunboats. Unfortunately for the men of the *Mound City*, Kilty chose the latter. (22)

The fleet disengaged itself from the lower battery and steamed ahead. The gunners were ignorant of the location of the rebel guns until the first one opened an accurate fire on the *Mound City*. Now Kilty made a deadly mistake. He sailed on, and by doing so placed his boat between and below the rifled guns. This put him in point-blank range of both weapons. (23)

On the third shot of the number two gun, Lieutenant Dunnington stepped up and personally sighted and fired the weapon. The solid iron projectile penetrated the forward casemate of the *Mound City*. Three seamen were killed in its flight before it passed through a bulkhead and punctured the boiler and steam chest. Instantly the entire vessel was filled with scalding steam. All those who were not immediately killed or seriously injured began pouring out of the gun ports into the river. A correspondent for *Harper's Weekly* reported:

The gundeck was covered with miserable, perishing wretches: Some of the officers who were in their cabins rushed out frantic with pain, to fall beside some poor though fortunate fellow who had just breathed his last. The close burning atmosphere of the vessel was rent with cries, and prayers, and groans, and curses--a pandemonium of torture and despair.

They suffered, writhed, and twisted like coils of serpents over burning fagots; but many who were less injured than others, felt even in that hour the instinct of self-preservation, and, running to the ports, leaped into the river. The water, for a while, relieved them of their pain, and they struck out bravely for the shore opposite the fortifications, or for the *Conestoga* or the *Lexington*, perhaps a half mile in the river. (24)

All those capable of controlling the ironclad had jumped overboard, and the ship drifted helplessly to shore between the upper and the lower battery. The river was filled with struggling men. Boats from all the vessels were in the water in a matter of minutes, picking up the wounded as the *St. Louis* and *Lexington* engaged the battery.

The *Conestoga* came to the aid of the *Mound City*. Mr. Dominy of the disabled vessel was standing on the stern crying out, "Come and tow me down; we are all lost, we are all lost!" The *Conestoga* hooked on and towed her out of the engagement. (25)

Captain Williams saw the sailors jump off the

disabled *Mound City* and ordered the remaining sharpshooters to the riverbank to fire on the struggling men. It was reported that many were shot and killed in the water. This is doubtful, however, since most of the sharpshooters were armed with smooth-bore muskets—a weapon accurate only at short range. Through the years Captain Fry has been accused by both Northern and Southern sources of giving the order to fire on these men, but Williams alone was guilty of what was then considered a great atrocity. (26)

The men of the 46th Indiana were anxious to make their assault on the rebel works. When learning of the catastrophe on the *Mound City*, Colonel Fitch directed all the other vessels to fall back, fearing that they might suffer the same fate. Fitch then gave the order and his men began to do what the Navy could not. In five minutes the infantry overran the lower battery and started to climb the bluff to the main battery. (27)

Captain Williams and his remaining troops, along with the crew of the *Maurepas*, fell back to the main battery only a few seconds ahead of the Federals. Captain Fry realized that the situation was hopeless. The enemy outnumbered them ten to one and was advancing on two sides. Just as he gave the order to retreat, Federal troops broke over the hill fifty yards distant and poured a galling volley of musketry into the fleeing rebels. Captain Fry himself was severely wounded in the shoulder. The rest of the men scattered, the officers bringing up the rear. A half-mile gauntlet of fire had to be run before the retreating Southerners could disperse into the forest. (28) An officer in Colonel Fitch's command hailed Lieutenant Shirk of the *Lexington* and said, "We have the Battery!" (29)

Mrs. Patrick received the news of the battle's end around 1100. She and her family started back to town in hopes of helping the wounded, both friends and foe.

First was a Federal—a sailor—lying under the gin shed—we hurried Charlie off for water for him—poor fellow so thirsty—another and another claimed our care and sympathy—most of them Feds. Only three Confederate army... One man or rather a youth lay dead close to the front door of the spacious hall with musket in hand.

Mary Patrick returned to her home to find it completely looted and vandalized by the Union soldiers.

It had been broken open—everything of value had been taken away...books lay around the gallery with holes through them made by the bayonet. A large mirror bore the marks of the same weapon. Feather

beds were emptied on the upper hall floor and suppose they needed large sacks to carry off their plunders and needed the bed ticks for that purpose. (30)

The 46th Indiana Infantry was lucky. It received no serious casualties when it stormed the works at St. Charles. Confederate casualties were also light. Reports are incomplete, but it appears that 8 were killed and 24 wounded and captured, among them Captain Joseph Fry. It was a completely different situation aboard the *Mound City*. Of a crew of 175 officers and men, 82 were killed in the casemate, 43 were killed or drowned in the river, and 25 were severely wounded, among them Captain Kilty. Only 3 officers and 22 men escaped uninjured or with only slight scalding.

The wounded and prisoners, along with four small captured guns, were loaded aboard the *Conestoga* and taken to Memphis. The other ships remained in St. Charles, their crews destroying fortifications and burying the dead. The two large 32-pounders were spiked and rolled into the river.

The *Conestoga* returned to St. Charles on 20 June. With it came additional troops and boilermakers to repair the *Mound City*. Soon the fleet was moving

north, easily passing through the wreck of the *Maurepas*. (31) Because of the low water level, Des Arc was as far as the Federal expedition would travel. This was still seventy miles short of the intended destination of Jacksonport. Communications with General Curtis were opened overland from Des Arc.

The battle of St. Charles was a limited Union success. After opening communications with his superiors in Memphis, Curtis was able to progress through eastern Arkansas and eventually to Helena on 13 July 1862. The real value of the White River was not realized until higher water levels permitted more efficient navigation. Occupied ports on the river, such as Des Arc and Devalls Bluff, were essential in later stages of the war as supply bases for the Union Army. With east Arkansas in Union hands and the White River undefended, Maj. Gen. Frederick Steele and his army of 20,000 easily captured Little Rock on 10 September 1863.

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Notes

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2. U. S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), series 1, 13:34.
3. Rpt. Gen T. C. Hindman to Gen S. Cooper, AG, 19 Jun 1862, in H.V. Glenn "The Battle of St. Charles," *Grand Prairie Historical Society Bulletin* (January 1962):1. See also H. Allen Gosnell, *Guns on the Western Waters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), p. 101.
4. Diary of Mary S. Patrick, 8 Jun 1862, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock, Arkansas.
5. Howard P. Nash, Jr., *A Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1972), p. 121.
6. Patrick Diary, 8 Jun to 10 Jun 1862.
7. *Ibid.*, 14 Jun 1862.
8. U. S. War Department, *Official Record of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), series 1, 23:161-65.
9. Miller, *Photographic History*, 6:218.
10. J. Thomas Scarf, *History of the Confederate States Navy* (New York: Rodgers & Sherwood, 1887), p. 341.
11. Glenn, "The Battle of St. Charles," p. 5.
12. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:931.
13. Glenn, "The Battle of St. Charles," p. 1.
14. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:929.
15. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:165.
16. Miller, *Photographic History*, 6:214, 220.
17. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:931.
18. Patrick Diary, 17 Jun 1862.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:931.
21. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:929.
22. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:173.
23. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:929.
24. *Harper's Weekly*, 12 Jul 1862.
25. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:165-66, 178.
26. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:931.
27. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:173-74.
28. *Official Records/Armies*, 13:931.
29. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:168.
30. Patrick Diary, 17 Jun 1862.
31. *Official Records/Navies*, 23:169-74.