

Battle of Baton Rouge  
August 5, 1862  
By Christopher G. Pena

Prelude

Shortly after three o'clock on the morning of August 5, 1862, a small cavalry detachment from the Louisiana 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion Partisan Rangers managed to stealthily elude their own Confederate line to probe the Union front along the eastern outskirts of Baton Rouge. Unbeknownst to their Confederate brethren, the Rangers soon clashed with Union pickets as they neared the Union line along Greenwell Springs Road. The sound of distance gunfire was the only hint that alerted the main Confederate force that trouble was brewing to their front, though they did not know at the time that their Rangers had sparked the spirited engagement. After a brief exchange of gunfire, the Rangers returned to the safety of their lines, or so they thought. Not knowing who was galloping toward them in the darkness and fog, Confederate pickets opened fire upon the Rangers before their identity was established; they in turn exchanged shots. The friendly fire resulted in a number of costly casualties, including Brigadier General Benjamin H. Helm, one of four Confederate brigade commanders, who was dangerously injured in a horse fall and subsequently replaced, Lieutenant A. H. Todd, his aide-de-camp and half-brother of Mary Todd Lincoln, killed; Captain Willis S. Roberts, 4<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry, severely wounded, and several enlisted men killed and wounded, along with two of artillery Captain Robert Cobb's three guns knocked out of action. It was an ominous beginning for the Confederates, and the battle had yet to begin in earnest.<sup>1</sup>

Urban Warfare Begins in Louisiana

---

<sup>1</sup> "Report of Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge, September 30, 1862" and "Report of Brig. Gen. Daniel Ruggles, August 9, 1862," *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 Volumes: Washington, D.C., 1894-1927 (rpr, Harrisburg, PA: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1985), hereafter cited as *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 77, 90. General Helm was married to Emily Todd, half sister of Mary Todd Lincoln.

By May 1, 1862, Union forces under the command of Major General Benjamin F. Butler had taken possession of New Orleans. A week later, Baton Rouge surrendered peacefully to the Union navy when its mayor, Palmer F. Bryan, realized the futility of defending the state capital void of political and military leadership; the governor and other state officials had evacuated the city in late April. Butler then dispatched a portion of Brigadier General Thomas Williams'<sup>2</sup> brigade (1,400 to 1,500 men) to occupy the capital. Natchez, Mississippi, the next Union target, capitulated by May 13.

But it was at Vicksburg, Mississippi, that Butler's conquest of Mississippi River port cities stopped. By the third week of May, Confederate positions at Vicksburg were too formidable to be swept aside by the mere threat of force by the Union navy or Williams' reinforced brigade that had accompanied it. Nevertheless, using an assortment of strategies the Union force spent June and the better part of July attempting to subdue or bypass the Confederate position at Vicksburg, to little avail.

By the third week of July, having failed to dislodge the enemy garrison at Vicksburg and hearing about Confederate plans to attack Baton Rouge, Butler ordered Williams' brigade (~3,000 soldiers) to board river transports and relocate back to the state capital. The six-week ordeal near Vicksburg had been a dreadful and an exhausting experience for Williams' men and had produced little success. Wracked with illness that had been caused by the oppressive heat, humidity, bad water, and lack of proper shelter near Vicksburg, Williams' sapped brigade arrived back at Baton Rouge on July 26 only to hear new rumors circulating about an imminent attack. Fortunately, there was little

---

<sup>2</sup>

General Williams was one of three brigade commanders under Butler's command.

time to worry about whether or not the rumors were true; they were. Within days, General Breckinridge and his army would be knocking at the doors of the state capital.<sup>3</sup>

Major General John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky was an unlikely choice to serve as a Confederate commander when war broke out in April of 1861. He had opposed the war initially. He had spent the greater part of his adult years in politics serving in the Kentucky legislature (1849-1851), the U. S. House of Representatives (1851-1855), and as Vice-president of the United States under Buchanan (1856-1861). In an unusual move, Breckinridge was elected to the U. S. Senate in 1859, one and a half years before his term as vice-president expired, and a year before his lost bid for president against Lincoln in 1860. It was not until early November of 1861 that Breckinridge accepted a commission as a Confederate brigadier after his native state declared for the Union. His military rise was nothing short of meteoric from that point forward. By mid-April of 1862, he was promoted to major general having gallantly served as a reserve corps commander at Shiloh (April 6-7). By summer, he found himself at Vicksburg aiding in its defense against the likes of General Williams. He had grown into an able commander capably of adapting himself to changing circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

When Breckinridge's superior, Major General Earl Van Dorn, learned of Williams' withdrawal from Vicksburg, he ordered the former vice-president to go on the offensive and attack the garrison at Baton Rouge. According to Van Dorn, he believed that if Baton Rouge could be recaptured, the stretch between Baton Rouge and Vicksburg could be reopened to Confederate shipping operating on the Red River, and it might even

---

<sup>3</sup>

Christopher G. Peña, *General Butler: Beast or Patriot –New Orleans Occupation May-December 1862* (Bloomington, IN: 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library, 2003), pp. 145-151.

<sup>4</sup>

Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1959), p. 34; John D. Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1963), p. 113.

“render the recapture of New Orleans.” The only problem with Van Dorn’s vision for conquest was that Breckinridge’s army, charged with the task, was in no better shape to execute the plan than Williams’ men were to halt it. By the first week of August, both armies were exhausted from the lingering effects of the Vicksburg episode and, in Breckinridge’s case, the added march to Baton Rouge from his soon-to-be base camp at Camp Moore.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, on July 27, Breckinridge departed Vicksburg by train with orders to travel south to the Confederate military training grounds at Camp Moore, located near Tangipahoa, Louisiana. Van Dorn had received reports that the garrison at Baton Rouge was planning an attack upon Camp Moore, and Breckinridge was instructed to reinforce the Confederate garrison under the command of Brigadier General Daniel Ruggles.

Fortunately for Breckinridge and Ruggles, the rumors were totally erroneous, for Breckinridge’s men, in particular, were in no shape to fight when they arrived. Breckinridge estimated that when his men reached Camp Moore no more than 3,400 out of a force of 5,000 men were fit for duty. Launching an attack against Baton Rouge, defended by what Breckinridge wrongly estimated to be no fewer than 5,000 men (Williams, in truth, had half that number), was out of the question without first obtaining naval support. Without the aid of a Confederate ironclad to clear the waters off Baton Rouge of three known Union gunboats, Breckinridge did not think it would be possible to defeat Williams. As such, Breckinridge wired Van Dorn asking his superior for the services of the ironclad C.S.S. *Arkansas*, one of the most formidable Confederate warships

---

<sup>5</sup>

Peña, pp. 151-152.

on the Mississippi, presently located in the waters off Vicksburg. If the *Arkansas* could “clear the water or divert the fire of the [Union] gunboats,” wrote Breckinridge, than he “would undertake to capture the garrison” at Baton Rouge. Van Dorn agreed, and ordered the *Arkansas* south to engage the Union navy at Baton Rouge. The plan called for the *Arkansas* to arrive by daylight on August 5 and deprive William of his naval support while Breckinridge attacked Williams’ eastern positions, with the hope of driving his enemy westward through the city, isolating and trapping them against the river’s edge. <sup>6</sup>

Assured that the *Arkansas* would arrive as scheduled, Breckinridge departed Camp Moore on July 30, joined with a small force (~ 1,300 men) belonging to Brigadier General Daniel Ruggles. As overall commander, Breckinridge divided his army into two divisions, with Brigadier Generals Charles Clark and Daniel Ruggles commanding the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions, respectively. Each division contained two brigades and one battery of artillery (see Appendix A: Confederate Order of Battle). By the afternoon of August 4, having reached the Comite River ten miles east of Baton Rouge, Breckinridge reported that he had no more than 3,000 effectives, not including 200 mounted Partisan Rangers, and an equal number of militiamen hastily gathered by Colonel D. C. Hardee from neighboring Clinton, Louisiana.

Neither group would participate in the battle. According to Breckinridge, sickness coupled with the hard 60-mile march from Camp Moore to Baton Rouge during the hottest month of the year zapped the size and energy of his army. Adding to his worries, by the morning of August 5, Breckinridge reported that his effective fighting strength had been further reduced to no more than 2,600 men. Many of his men had simply dropped

---

<sup>6</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 152; “Report of Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge, September 30, 1862,” *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 76-77.

out because of generalized weakness caused by the previous night's march. Half of his men possessed no coats, and hundreds were without either shoes or socks. Fortunately for Breckinridge, his enemy was no better off related to troop strength and health status. Many of Williams' men suffered from the same anomalies. Both sides, it turned out, were evenly matched. Unbeknownst to all, how successful the *Arkansas* would be against the Union navy would ultimately determine the outcome of the battle.<sup>7</sup>

By August 2, General Williams was fully expecting some form of attack or demonstration from Breckinridge. He had been alerted to the fact by a Union sympathizer who had seen the Confederate commander's departure from Camp Moore. Not knowing for sure if Baton Rouge or New Orleans was the real object of the Confederate offensive, Williams prepared his men as best he could.<sup>8</sup>

While commanding his troops earlier near Vicksburg, Williams had shown little sympathy for the suffering of his men. As a West Point graduate, class of 1837, Williams had a long distinguished career in the United States Army as an artillerist fighting against the Florida Seminoles, and was thrice brevetted for gallant and meritorious service during the Mexican War while serving as a member of General Winfield Scott's staff. Shortly after the start of the Civil War, Williams was appointed major of the 5<sup>th</sup> United States Artillery, before accepting an appointment as a brigadier of volunteers in late September of 1861.

Joining General Butler's army in March of 1862, Williams, by the summer of 1862, had earned the reputation among his men as a strict disciplinarian, drilling them

---

<sup>7</sup>

Breckinridge, pp. 77-79; "Report of General T. Williams, July 26, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>

Williams, *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 34.

with full knapsacks during the oppressive heat. The result caused hundreds of his men to fall ill or die. But Williams was a man of purpose who knew that one day his men would be called to action during an occasion of intolerable heat. Toughened by their prior experience, he knew that they would rise to the occasion, despite their prior complaints. The Battle of Baton Rouge would be that moment of truth, for few of his men were battle-tested prior to the arrival of Breckinridge's army. At least, William's men would be accustomed to the heat.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of Williams' strategy to whip his men into shape while stationed near Vicksburg, Williams knew that the experience had taken its toll on the men. By the first week of August, nearly one-half of his men at Baton Rouge were on the sick list. Williams wrote to Butler's assistant adjutant-general, Captain R. S. Davis, that he would avoid "unnecessary exposure or fatigue to [his] troops" now that he was back in Baton Rouge, and that he would take "such measures of military security as might suggest themselves" to protect his garrison. Williams had his work cut out for him. Fortunately, when rumors of an intended attack reached the Union sick and disabled, many of Williams' men rose from their beds to assume their duties. It seemed that the prospect of missing the fight was medicine enough to cure their ailments.<sup>10</sup>

Williams camped his force of about 2,500 men (composed of seven infantry regiments, four artillery batteries, and one unattached cavalry company – see Appendix B: Union Order of Battle) at various locations within the capital (see Appendix C:

---

<sup>9</sup>

Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: L.S. U. Press, 1964), p. 593; Winters, p. 109; "General Orders, No. 56, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup>

"T. Williams to R. S. Davis, July 26, 1862" and "Report of Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, August 10, 1862" *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 33, 39; Winters, pp. 113-114.

Battlefield of Baton Rouge). The bulk of his force was concentrated along his left flank in the northeastern portion of Baton Rouge, a mile from the Mississippi River, where he believed the main Confederate army, supported by the *Arkansas*, would launch its attack from the direction of the Bayou Sara Road to the north and Greenwell Spring Road to the east of the city. The only fault in the placement of his troops was that the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine and 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana Infantry, who composed the extreme northern left of the Union line, camped in front of their line of battle and were therefore directly exposed to enemy fire and vulnerable to being overrun. Nevertheless, Williams had figured correctly the approach of Breckinridge's army. The fact that the Confederate element of surprise was taken away when the Partisan Rangers briefly skirmished with Union pickets along Greenwell Springs Road during the predawn hours of August 5 only reinforced in Williams' mind that Breckinridge meant to attack. <sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, using the Greenwell Springs Road to divide his two divisions, Breckinridge placed Clark north and Ruggles south of the roadway with his army advancing west toward Baton Rouge in a long discontinuous arched formation that extended from the intersection of Clinton Plank and Bayou Sara Roads, located north and parallel to the river, to Clay Cut Road, located southeast of Baton Rouge. The battle began on the extreme right flank of the Confederate line along Clinton Plank Road. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Shields, 30<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry, was ordered by General Ruggles to neutralize a suspected Union battery position at the juncture of that road and Bayou Sara Road. In the meantime, advancing perpendicular to and south of Shields'

---

<sup>11</sup>

"Report of Lieut. Godfrey Weitzel, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 51-52.

line, Clark's entire division moved forward in the direction of the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry campsite.<sup>21</sup>

After a fatiguing night march in order to get into position, at approximately 4:30 a.m., after hearing the sound of small-arms fire coming from his left in the direction of the main Confederate body, presumably Clark's men, Shields moved his entire column south at the double-quick through a shroud of thick fog. Under his command, Shields had two companies of infantry, one dismounted company of Partisan Rangers, and a section of Semmes' battery, under the direct command of Lieutenant T. K. Fauntleroy. All total, Shields' force numbered approximately 150 men. Fortunately for Shields, no enemy battery was found at the road intersection. In addition, Federal pickets in the area quickly retreated into a patch of woods located west of Bayou Sara Road leaving their accouterments and equipment behind hanging on posts, trees, and the walls of houses that had been used as shelter that night. Only when they were safe did the Federal pickets feebly attempt to engage Shields, shooting one round toward their adversary before disappearing in the direction of the Federal Arsenal located along the river's edge.<sup>31</sup>

Unopposed, the bulk of Shields' force then placed themselves west of Bayou Sara Road in a cornfield marching south, with Fauntleroy's guns firing obliquely into the campsite of the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry, commanded by Colonel Frank S. Nickerson. The dense fog that had enveloped the city during the night of August 4-5 enabled Shields' men to advance in relative safety toward Nickerson's exposed left flank (Nickerson had initially positioned his men parallel and south of Bayou Sara Road, facing east).

---

<sup>12</sup> "Report of Lieut. Col. T. Shield, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Nickerson soon discovered that fact; he changed his front immediately, moving his line north through some timbers to confront Shields head on.

By that time, the fog was so thick that it was impossible to see twenty-five yards in advance, according to Nickerson. Fortunately for him, the fog shielded the Union advance and caused Fauntleroy's artillery and the Confederate infantry to overshoot their target, unable to adequately judge distances in the thick fog. After about five or six rounds, without a Union response and at a distance of less than 100 yards between the two lines, Nickerson ordered a volley by battalion directed toward Shields' advancing line. The effect stopped the Confederates in their tracks. Shields was compelled to consent to a withdrawal back to the Bayou Sara-Clinton Plank Roads juncture after four of Fauntleroy's horses, necessary to transport the guns, became "unmanageable and unserviceable from wounds received." However, the danger to Shields did not end once back at the road juncture. Mistaken for the enemy, Shields' men were fired upon by leading elements of Clark's division marching west toward their position. Miraculously, no one was injured during the friendly fire, but that would not be the case at times for other Union regiments during the course of the battle that day.<sup>14</sup>

Though Nickerson had managed to drive Shields' tiny force away from his campsite, the danger to his regiment had not passed. Almost immediately, Nickerson began to feel the firepower of General Clark's entire division and battery support bearing down upon his position from the east. Quickly changing fronts, Nickerson confronted Clark head on. With the assistance of the Lieutenant William W. Carruth's 6<sup>th</sup> Battery

---

<sup>14</sup>

*Ibid.*, pp. 104-105; "Report of Col. Frank S. Nickerson, August 8, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 69-70. After the infantry portion of his command was attached to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Mississippi Infantry upon their arrival on the field, Shields remained with the artillery at the road juncture until the ordered withdrawal of Breckinridge's army later that afternoon (Shields, p. 105).

(Everett's) Massachusetts Light Artillery, posted to the right and rear of the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine, Nickerson was able to completely hold Clark's advance in check for the moment.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, heavy fire was heard coming from the right of Nickerson's line in the general vicinity east of Magnolia Cemetery where Lieutenant Colonel John Keith's 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana Infantry was deployed. Having been alerted to the enemy's presence to his front by Lieutenant Charles D. Seely, Company A, whose company had been sent out as skirmishers, Keith marched his regiment at the double-quick along Greenwell Springs Road to a clearing 600 yards east of his camp from where he heard the sound of gunfire in the distance. Moving out under the cover of undergrowth, Keith formed a battle line. While waiting for the arrival of the enemy, Keith ordered Lieutenant William Baugh, Company C, to ascertain the position of the left wing of the Confederate line, presumably belonging to Lieutenant Colonel M. H. Cofer's 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry. (The 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky occupied the extreme left wing of Colonel A. P. Thompson's 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade.)

Suddenly, as Seely's company moved forward, it received heavy fire from an undisclosed enemy regiment, followed by a most destructive discharge from Thompson's entire left wing. The lethal fire resulted in the deaths of Seely and three other men under his command, along with three men from Company C. Keith's regiment returned the fire causing the Confederate center to splinter, driving the enemy towards their flanks.

By this time, Keith was alerted to the presence of a second large body of Confederate troops some distance on his left that had advanced beyond his rear line. Fearing a flanking maneuver, and wanting to draw out the enemy from cover in his front, Keith ordered a tactical withdraw some few hundred yards to his rear, where he hoped to

---

<sup>15</sup>

Nickerson, p. 70. Captain Charles Everett, commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Battery Massachusetts Light Artillery, was conducting business in New Orleans during the time of the battle ("Report of Lieut. William W. Carruth, August 6, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 64).

make a second stand against the Confederate advance he knew was coming. The Confederates failed to take the bait, however, but rather moved to the Union left into a cornfield east of the Magnolia Cemetery. This forced Keith to change his position again to the front of graveyard taking shelter behind a picket fence that formed the eastern border of Magnolia Cemetery.<sup>16</sup>

When Thompson's brigade discovered the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana crouched down along the eastern cemetery edge, they opened a intense fire into the ranks of Keith's regiment, doing little damage, for most of Keith's men were flat on the ground. Nevertheless, the contest between the opposing sides by that point was a "hot one," according to one Union eyewitness, with the Confederates showing not only bravery, but also "perfect desperation" in their attack. Finally, however, the Confederate frontal attack was too much and Thompson's brigade gave way, reforming to the left of the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana, causing Keith to charge his position again, diagonal across the northeast part of his original campsite.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, Keith was informed that a regiment of Louisiana troops belonging to Colonel Henry Watkins Allen's brigade was attempting to move at the double-quick by the right flank to his front on the next street over. A seesaw battle then erupted within the confines of the cemetery grounds as both sides poured a shower of lead into one another, all the while maneuvering through the thick fog that persisted after dawn. For Keith's regiment, it soon became a fight of "every man for himself," as men "took cover behind trees and such things as would shield them."

---

<sup>16</sup>

"Report of Capt. James Grimsley, August 7, 1862," and "Report of Lieut. Col. M. H. Cofer, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 73, 98.

<sup>17</sup> Grimsley, pp. 73-74.

Adding to the chaos, the 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont Infantry, commanded by Colonel George T. Roberts, whose regiment was to the rear of the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana, opened fire in the direction of all engaged, killing many of the Hoosiers and wounding several more. The effect caused the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana to fall back to where a chance meeting with General Williams occurred; Keith informed Williams of the situation concerning the Vermonters. Williams shortly afterward reprimanded the 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont and ordered them forward to support Keith. But according to one Hoosier, the Vermonters never followed up, though the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana was able to move back to their old position once the friendly fire ceased, aided by the arrival of 30<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry, and supported by the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry to their left.<sup>18</sup>

Major H. O. Whittemore, commander of the 30<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, whose campsite was located a mile or so to the rear and right of the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana, commenced to move his men east toward the sound of gunfire almost from the onset of the battle. Ordered to do so by the Federal right wing commander, Colonel Nathan A. M. Dudley, Whittemore maneuvered his regiment to a spot between the campgrounds of the 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont and 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana. Once there, Whittemore found his right and left flanks partially protected by the guns of Lieutenant George G. Trull's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battery (Nim's) Massachusetts Light Artillery and Robert's 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont, respectively.

But receiving potential flanking fire from the enemy was not the immediate concern for Whittemore. As soon as he arrived he found his men under "a most galling fire" from a determined adversary, composed of infantry and artillery, positioned in a thick strip of woods to their immediate front. Adding to the danger, beams of bright

---

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

sunlight were penetrating the fog and shining directly on their faces making it difficult to see. As a result, Whittemore ordered his men to lie down for the time being. The timing could not have been better as no sooner had he ordered his men down, “a perfect volcano of fire” opened upon them from that patch of woods, according to Captain Trull. The overhead fire caused few Union casualties, though Whittemore later wrote that the tents to his immediate rear were “riddled with bullets.” Both sides were no more than fifty yards apart at that point.<sup>19</sup>

Sensing danger, Whittemore ordered Captain Eugene Kelty, Company I, to deploy his men as skirmishers on the right in order to test the enemy. The maneuver cost Kelty his life, and Company I was forced to quickly retire behind the safety of Trull’s battery. Shortly afterward, the woods shook as Trull’s guns discharged “its terrible fire of shell and canister, together with the well-directed fire” from the 30<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. The result soon silenced the enemy artillery, whose own artillery blasts fortunately passed over the heads of Trull’s gunners. After three failed attempts by the enemy infantry to charge the Union line, the Confederates retired, leaving behind in the woods scores of their dead and dying.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, fighting amongst the 30<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, Lieutenant Colonel Keith did his most to rally the Hoosiers whilst “passing through the hottest of the fire and thickest storm of bullets,” according to Captain Grimsley. Displaying a “brave, cool, calm [manner], and [being] most energetic for success,” Keith was badly wounded in the

---

<sup>19</sup>

“Report of H.O. Whittemore, August 6, 1862,” *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup>

Whittemore, pp. 66-67; “Report of Lieut. George G. Trull,” no date of report given, *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 63.

right shoulder, forcing him to retire leaving Grimsley in command of the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana during the latter phase of the battle. Keith would not be the only officer taken from the field that day. During the fierce contest around Magnolia Cemetery, Colonel Charles Roberts was mortally wounded. His command fell to Lieutenant Colonel V. S. Fullam.<sup>21</sup>

If one takes into account the Union version of the battle thus far, the firepower of Keith's and Roberts' regiments, along with Trull's gunners, caused the premature withdrawal of Colonel Thompson's brigade, which occupied the center of the Confederate line. With that in mind, there is no doubt that some degree of stubborn Union resolve did play a critical factor in stopping Thompson's men who had managed to advance westward through the campsites of the 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana and 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont.

But there was another basis for the Confederate withdrawal and one that was much more lethal: overall massive confusion. While Thompson's force maneuvered through Magnolia Cemetery, on their right, Clark's division plowed headlong into the campsite of the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine. During the ensuing bedlam, Clark was seriously wounded, some thought fatally. This misinformation caused the premature withdrawal of his 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, originally commanded by Colonel Thomas Hurt and subsequently handed over to Captain John A. Buckner. (Prior to Clark's wounding, Hurt was wounded while leading his men and subsequently replaced, at the suggestion of Clark, by Buckner, an assistant adjutant general from Breckinridge's staff.) When Buckner learned that General Breckinridge had given no such order to withdraw, he, together with other regimental commanders, managed to face the brigade about and renew the attack. Meanwhile, Colonel T. B. Smith's 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade soon joined them, eventually driving the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine

---

<sup>21</sup>

Grimsley, p. 74; "Report of Lieut. Col. Volney S. Fullam, August 8, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 69.

through the 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont encampment into a ravine on the south side of the state penitentiary grounds. But Buckner's corrective measures may not have been quick enough to halt the confusion elsewhere along the Confederate line.<sup>22</sup>

To the far left of Buckner's line, along the southern edge of Greenwell Springs Road, Thompson's brigade saw the premature withdrawal of Clark's division. No one among Thompson's staff could understand why such a withdrawal had commenced as over the field the Yankees were in retreat. An unnamed mounted officer soon arrived and informed Thompson that a general retreat had commenced, and he was to take his troops off the field. Who that officer was and where he got his orders were anyone's guess. Thompson did what he was ordered, but not before igniting a power keg of anger among some of his subordinates toward their Yankee adversaries.<sup>23</sup>

In retiring, the 35<sup>th</sup> Alabama and 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry, forming the left wing of Thompson's brigade, became separated from the rest, and occupied a position 100 yards to the left and rear of Thompson's main line. When the enemy saw the withdrawal of Thompson's main body, great shouts and cheers could be heard coming from the Union camps as they reformed their lines and made preparations to reoccupy their abandoned campsites and advance beyond.

Nothing could have more ignited the Alabama and Kentucky infantrymen than to hear such Union shouts of jubilation. Not aware of the order to retreat, seeing the right wing of Thompson's line withdrawing, and fearful of a flank attack, Colonel J. W. Robertson, 35<sup>th</sup> Alabama, ordered his regiment to fall back to the right of the cemetery, where it regrouped, along with the 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky who formed to their left. Meanwhile,

---

<sup>22</sup> Breckinridge, p. 78; Winters, p. 117.

<sup>23</sup>

"Report of Col. J. W. Robertson, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15. p. 94.

Thompson seeing the Union advance, ordered the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry regiments to hold their position, take cover, and meet the Yankee advance with steady fire, while ordering the 35<sup>th</sup> Alabama and 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky to immediately advance toward the reforming enemy. Even before such orders were received, the Alabama and Kentucky regiments pressed forward. Their advance halted any momentary gains by the Union and sent them scurrying westward toward their new positions near the penitentiary grounds.

The ensuing bedlam produced the death of General Williams, shot through the chest while waving his men on to fight, as both sides slugged it out in the center of town. His death was instantaneous and clearly demoralized his troops, many of whom saw their commander's death. Like Williams, Colonel Thompson too was struck by a bullet while riding his horse and cheering his men on. Though not mortally wounded, Thompson's injuries proved to be serious, forcing him to relinquish his command. By that juncture of the battle, two of Breckinridge's four brigade commanders were down. Before the morning was over, a third would fall.<sup>24</sup>

As Thompson's brigade battled for territory in the heart of the capital, its left flank was supported by troops from Colonel Henry Allen's brigade, composed mostly of Louisianians. During the early phase of battle for control of territory in and around Magnolia Cemetery, Allen's troops were heavily involved, which intensified the Union urgency to reinforce the center of its line held by the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine and 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana Infantry, then under attack by three separate infantry brigades.

---

<sup>24</sup>

Thompson, p. 94; "Report of J. W. Robinson, August 8, 1862," and "Report of Lieut. Col. Edward Goodwin, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 96; Winters, pp. 117-118. Thompson was taken from the field and his brigade handed over to Colonel Robinson. Lieutenant Colonel Goodwin assumed command of the 35<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry.

Realizing the danger, and unable to count on Union naval support once his Confederate attackers closed in, General Williams (prior to his death) ordered the redeployment of some of his reserve units, including 9<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Infantry, 4<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry, one section of Captain Charles H. Manning's 4<sup>th</sup> Battery Massachusetts Light Artillery, and four (of seven) companies from the under-strength 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry, under the command of Captain (and acting colonel) Charles E. Clarke. The remaining three companies of the 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan (A, B, and F), under command of Captain (and acting lieutenant colonel) John Corden, located at the intersection of Clay Cut and Perkins Roads, supported by a section of Trull's battery to his left, was all that constituted the Union extreme far right.<sup>25</sup>

The calling forth of reinforcements by Williams initially stopped the Confederate juggernaut, but as daylight burned off the heavy fog, Union success began to sour. Several volleys by Allen's brigade sent the federal right wing scattering, taking with them their artillery, precipitating a response by Allen to continue the chase. But while calling for his men to quickly pursue the retreating Yankees, Allen was made aware of Nim's battery and Corden's isolated force along Clay Cut Road.

Fearing (wrongly) a possible flanking maneuver by the Yankees and wanting to stop it at all cost, Allen directed his entire brigade to the left. "At the command charge[,] the whole brigade raised a shout and made as gallant a charge as was ever witnessed," Allen later wrote. But as courageous as his men were as they charged across the open field, they were no match against the likes of Trull's deadly canister fire that raked the opening like a giant shotgun blast and sent many of Allen's men to an early grave. The

---

<sup>25</sup>

Winters, p. 117-118; "Report of Captain Charles E. Clarke, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 68.

field was later described as 300 yards wide and possessed not even a shrub to shield the Confederate advance. Two of the earliest casualties among Confederate officers were Lieutenant Z. R. Causey, a company commander and his superior, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Boyd, 9<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry Battalion. Causey was shot first, a bullet passing through his brain, killing him instantly. A few yards closer to the Union line, Boyd was shot through the arm and subsequently carried from the field. The ensuing chaos caused the enemy to flee, leaving two cannons in possession of Boyd's battalion, along with the capture of an officer and eight to ten privates. But the Confederate triumph was short-lived.<sup>26</sup>

Adding to the fury of Trull's cannonade, Corden's men, who were concealed to the rear of the guns, opened a heavy and galling fire toward the advancing Confederate line. Colonel Allen, who was riding in front of his men carrying the colors from Boyd's battalion and cheering his men on, was able to travel to within 100 yards of Trull's guns before his horse was killed, throwing Allen to the ground. Both of his legs were terrible shattered by the canister blast. According to Lieutenant Colonel S. E. Hunter, 4<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry, the site of Allen's fall caused the entire Confederate line to falter and finally give way, "the troops on the right and center giving way first." Bearing their beloved commander off the field, "the brigade [soon after] retired in confusion across the field through which it had so gallantly advanced."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>

"Report of Col. H. W. Allen, August 18, 1862," and "Report of Capt. Thomas Bynum, August 8, 1862" *OR*, Series I, vol. 15, pp. 100, 106; Winters, pp. 118-119.

<sup>27</sup>

"Report of Lieut. Col. S. E. Hunter, August 7, 1862," *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, p. 103; Winters, p. 119.

After a short delay, Hunter was able to reform his regiment, but with the loss of their brigade commander, no order to advance was forthcoming. Shortly afterwards, a section of Semmes' battery came up and prepared for action forming on the right of Hunter's 4<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry. By then, Colonel Gustavus A. Breaux, 30<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry, assumed command of Allen's brigade. Hunter was given orders to form to the rear of the artillery and support it. "After great exertion a line was partially formed," Hunter wrote, "but at this point the enemy's artillery opened on us at short range [causing the] right to gave way, followed by the whole line." Adding to chaos, Union gunboats, appraised of Allen's new forward position, opened upon it with deadly fire. By this time, with Hunter's troops "exhausted by fatigue and crying for water," utter confusion prevailed. All attempts by Hunter to rally his men were fruitless. "From this time no more fighting was done by our brigade," Hunter reported. Colonel Edward Crossland, 7<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Regiment, was ordered by General Breckinridge to support Semmes' battery, as Allen's brigade retreated, collecting their wounded and dead as they went.<sup>28</sup>

By ten o'clock in the morning, after nearly six hours of continuous fighting, the battlefield grew silent. With the men exhausted and thirsty, many of them having been unable to procure water since leaving the Comite River, ammunition nearly spent with the supplies wagons still far in the rear of the Confederate line, and having heard no positive news about the *Arkansas* engaging the enemy, Breckinridge was forced to retire from the field. During their orderly evacuation, Union campsites and stores that were passed, particularly those belonging to the 14<sup>th</sup> Maine and 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana, were destroyed by

---

<sup>28</sup>

"Report of Edward Crossland, August 7, 1862," and Hunter, *OR*, Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 99, 103.

orders of Breckinridge, while Captain Buckner and one section of Semmes' battery, supported by 7<sup>th</sup> Kentucky supported the rear. The battle was over.<sup>29</sup>

Breckinridge withdrew his forces one mile to Ward's Creek where he hoped to obtain drinkable water for his thirsty troops; however, he found none "fit for man or beast." Forced to move his men back to the outer portion of the battlefield, Breckinridge was able to procure "a very imperfect supply [of water] from some cisterns in the suburbs of the town." There his men stayed for the remainder of the day, aided by citizens of the surrounding region who "exhibited the warmest patriotism" by carrying off the wounded.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, Breckinridge still hoped for the cooperation of the *Arkansas*, with the intent of renewing the attack once she arrived. But by late afternoon, Breckinridge learned that the ironclad had developed engine problems four miles upriver from the capital forcing the captain to abandon her; the *Arkansas* was subsequently destroyed. Any plans of renewing the attack upon the Union garrison at Baton Rouge, without the cooperation of the *Arkansas*, were dashed from that point forward. Breckinridge believed that the capture of Baton Rouge without control of the river was pointless as the Union navy would simply shell them into submission or retreat.

By the evening of August 5, Breckinridge's army began its march back to the Comite River, leaving a small force to cover its retreat. The battle had been a disappointing venture for Breckinridge, though he had nothing but praise for the men who had fought the good fight. (See Appendices D and E – Casualties) According to

---

<sup>29</sup> Breckinridge, p. 79 and Crossland, p. 99.

<sup>30</sup> Breckinridge, p. 79.

Breckinridge, “no troops ever behaved with greater gallantry and even reckless audacity.” He followed by posing the question: “What can make this difference unless it be the sublime courage inspired by a just cause?”<sup>31</sup> Of course, that is a subject that continues to spark heated debate among some groups.

Breckinridge ultimately took his troops to the village of Port Hudson, twenty-five miles upriver from Baton Rouge, where he began the fortification process. Situated high atop a cliff, Port Hudson, by summer 1863, would rival Vicksburg in its strategic importance to the Confederacy. The failure of General Butler, or Banks who followed, to subdue the Confederate garrison at Port Hudson early in its infancy cost the Union thousands of additional casualties and triggered four battles in the Lafourche region between June and July 1863. But that was the nature of war, especially when some politicians, commissioned generals, commanded troops.

---

<sup>31</sup>

*Ibid.*

Appendix A  
Confederate Order of Battle

Commander – Major General John C. Breckinridge

1<sup>st</sup> Division – Brigadier General Charles Clark (w)

2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade – Brigadier General B. H. Helm (i)  
 Colonel Thomas H. Hunt (w)  
 Captain John A. Buckner (r)  
 Colonel Jephtha Edwards (after battle)  
 4<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry – Colonel Thomas Hunt  
 Captain John H. Millett (r)  
 5<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry – Lieutenant Colonel Caldwell (i)  
 Major J.C. Wickliffe (r)  
 31<sup>st</sup> Mississippi Infantry – Major H. E. Topp  
 31<sup>st</sup> Alabama Infantry – Colonel Jephtha Edwards  
 4<sup>th</sup> Alabama Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel John Snodgrass  
 Hudson's Battery

4<sup>th</sup> Brigade – Colonel T. B. Smith  
 15<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry – Colonel W. S. Statham  
 (Held in reserve, did not participate in fight)  
 22<sup>nd</sup> Mississippi Infantry – Captain Felix Hughes (mw)  
 19<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry – Lieutenant Colonel B.F. Moore  
 20<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry – Colonel T. B. Smith  
 28<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry Colonel Uriah T. Brown  
 Robert Cobb's Battery

2<sup>nd</sup> Division – Brigade General Daniel Ruggles

1<sup>st</sup> Brigade – Colonel A. P. Thompson (w)

Colonel J. W. Robertson (r)  
 3<sup>rd</sup> Kentucky Infantry – Captain J. H. Bowman  
 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry – Lieutenant Colonel M. H. Cofer  
 7<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Infantry – Colonel Edward Crossland  
 35<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry – Colonel J. W. Robertson  
 Lieutenant Colonel Edward Goodwin (r)  
 Sharpshooters – Lieutenant G. C. Hubbard

2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade – Colonel Henry Watkins Allen (w)  
 Colonel Gustavus A. Breaux (r)  
 4<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry – Colonel Samuel E. Hunter  
 30<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry – Colonel Gustavus Breaux  
 9<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Infantry Battalion – Lieut. Colonel Samuel Boyd (w)  
 Captain Thomas Bynum (r)  
 39<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry, Company I, Captain James M. Randel  
 9<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Partisan Rangers – Major James De Baun  
 Semmes' Battery (1<sup>st</sup> Confederate States Light Battery) – Captain Oliver Semmes

(w) – wounded, (mw) – mortally wounded, (i) – injured, (r) – replacement

#### Appendix B Union Order of Battle

Commander – Brigadier General Thomas Williams (k)  
 Colonel Thomas W. Cahill (r)

2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, left wing – Colonel Frank S. Nickerson  
 14<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry – Colonel Frank S. Nickerson  
 Lieutenant Colonel T. W. Porter (r)  
 9<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Infantry – Colonel Thomas W. Cahill  
 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana Infantry – Colonel James McMillan (ill)  
 Lieutenant colonel John A. Keith (r, w)  
 Captain James Grimsley (r)  
 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont Infantry – Colonel Charles T. Roberts (mw)  
 Lieutenant Colonel Volney S. Fullam (r)  
 4<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry – Lieutenant Colonel Sidney A. Bean  
 4<sup>th</sup> Battery Massachusetts Light Artillery – Captain Charles H. Manning

2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, right wing – Colonel Nathan A. M. Dudley  
 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry – Captain (acting colonel) Charles E. Clark  
 30<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry – Major H. O. Whittemore  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Battery Massachusetts Light Artillery – Captain Ormand F. Nims (ill)  
 Lieutenant George G. Trull (r)  
 6<sup>th</sup> Battery Massachusetts Light Artillery – Captain Charles Everett\*  
 1<sup>st</sup> Lieut. William W. Carruth (r)  
 Three guns – light artillery, detached 21<sup>st</sup> Indiana Infantry – Lieutenant J. H. Brown

Unattached – 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Battalion Cavalry – James M. Magee's Company

(k) – Killed (w), wounded, (r) – replacement

\* Capt. Everett – absent, in New Orleans on business related to company.

Appendix C – Casualties  
Confederate Return of Casualties

	Killed	Mortally Wounded	Wounded	Missing
1 <sup>st</sup> Division				
2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade				
5 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky	9	2	22	1
4 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky	5	0	13	1
31 <sup>st</sup> Mississippi	10	6	31	0
31 <sup>st</sup> Alabama	2	0	9	1
4 <sup>th</sup> Alabama Battalion	3	3	19	0
Hudson's battery	0	0	6	0
4 <sup>th</sup> Brigade				
19 <sup>th</sup> Mississippi	0	0	1	1
20 <sup>th</sup> Tennessee	0	0	2	0
28 <sup>th</sup> Tennessee	1	0	2	0
45 <sup>th</sup> Tennessee	1	0	2	0
15 <sup>th</sup> Mississippi	0	0	0	1
22 <sup>nd</sup> Mississippi	13	0	34	1
Cobb's battery	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Total	44	11	141	6
2 <sup>nd</sup> Division				
1 <sup>st</sup> Brigade				
35 <sup>th</sup> Alabama	4	0*	21	1
3 <sup>rd</sup> Kentucky	2	0*	15	1
6 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky	5	0*	20	0
7 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky	1	0*	12	1
Sharpshooters	0	0*	2	0

2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade				
4 <sup>th</sup> Louisiana	5	0*	25	12
30 <sup>th</sup> Louisiana	12	0*	28	18
39 <sup>th</sup> Miss. Co. I	1	0*	1	0
Boyd's battalion	5	0*	27	17
Semmes' battery	<u>5</u>	<u>0*</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>0</u>
Total	40	0*	161	50
Grand Total	84	11	302	56

Total Casualties = 453

\*No differentiation between mortally wounded/wounded listed in "Return of Casualties in the Second Division.

Source: *OR*: Series I, Vol. 15, pp. 82, 93

Appendix D – Casualties  
Union Return of Casualties

	Killed	Wounded	Captured or Missing
General officers	1	0	0
9 <sup>th</sup> Connecticut	1	9	4
21 <sup>st</sup> Indiana	24	98	4
14 <sup>th</sup> Maine	36	71	12
30 <sup>th</sup> Massachusetts	3	15	0
6 <sup>th</sup> Michigan	15	44	6
7 <sup>th</sup> Vermont	1*	9*	5
Mass. Cavalry	0	1	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> Mass. Battery	0	4	1
4 <sup>th</sup> Mass. Battery	1	5	0
6 <sup>th</sup> Mass. Battery	<u>3</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>1</u>
Grand Total	85	265	33

Total Casualties = 383

Source: *OR*: Series I, Vol. 15, p. 51

\* “Return of Casualties in the Union Forces” listed in the *OR* notes that no one was killed among the 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont Infantry; however, Colonel Roberts *was* killed, not wounded as the report implies. Thus, Appendix C list one (1) killed and one (1) fewer wounded than is found in the *OR*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Peña, Christopher G. *General Butler: Beast or Patriot –New Orleans Occupation May-December 1862*. Bloomington, IN: 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library, 2003.

. . . *Scarred by War: Civil War in Southeast Louisiana*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2004.

Spedale, W. A. *Battle of Baton Rouge 1862*. Baton Rouge, LA: Land and Land Publishing, 1985.

*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 Volumes: Washington, D.C., 1894-1927, rpr, Harrisburg, PA: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1985.

Warner, Ezra J. *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders*. Baton Rouge: L.S. U. Press, 1964.

. . . *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders*. Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1959.

Winters, John D. *The Civil War in Louisiana*. Baton Rouge, LA: L.S.U. Press, 1963.