



The Earth on Fire: War Comes to Cane River



Prelude to Destruction

The spring of 1864 found Louisiana and the fledgling Confederate States of America in dire straits. The tide of the American Civil War was undeniably turning. The stranglehold of the Union blockade of Southern ports and Federal control of many key inland waterways was being felt in every camp, outpost, dining room, and parlor throughout the Confederacy. Yet, life along Cane River had seemingly changed little despite the tumultuous times and Natchitoches Parish residents continued their focus on “planting, harvesting and socializing,” much as they had for the previous 150 years.

The Campaign Begins

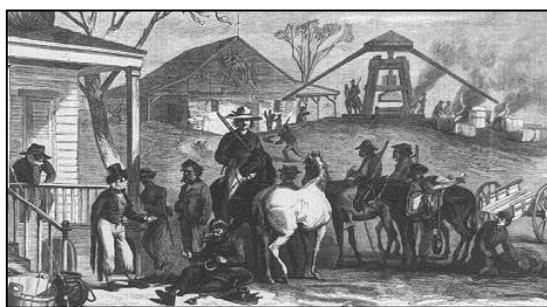
It was against this backdrop that Union Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Prentiss Banks, a U.S. Presidential hopeful, took his cue and entered infamy.

The Red River Campaign began with ill conceived and poorly developed goals and strategy. In the spring of 1864 Union forces assembled in occupied portions of south Louisiana and initiated a long march toward Shreveport. The blue-clad columns followed narrow wagon roads that were

alternately choked with heavy deposits of dust or mired in soupy mud. The army trudged these unfavorable roads while the navy wrestled up the shallow depths of the Red River in support.



Fires Burning



When Union forces reached Cane River they found fires blazing for the destruction of war had preceded them. Retreating Confederates, acting under orders, burned stored cotton before it could be confiscated by U.S. troops and shipped north to feed the material-starved looms of the Northeast. Few Cane River landowners managed to remove their cotton from storage sheds and gins before it was burned.

A Population in Peril

In a letter dated March 21, 1864, Ms. Elise LeComte, a member of the affluent family residing at Magnolia Plantation, wrote:

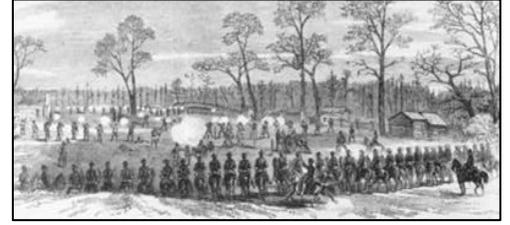
“...The Yankees are approaching. We are to be burned. May God have mercy on us. Pa’s soldiers have left...The streets are thronged with soldiers moving wagons...”

Upon the arrival of his regiment at Magnolia, a Union soldier wrote in his diary that the fire consuming the cotton was five days old, still smoldering and burning as they passed by. As the wary Union troops marched ever north along Cane River the sight and smell of burning cotton, floating ash and soot, the shouts of disdain and cries of mercy from terrified citizens permeated the human senses. Columns of smoke marked the route for the soldiers of the Union column, who noted the hasty destruction in their journals.

The Federal Retreat Commences

The battles fought at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, Louisiana on April 8 and 9 respectively proved disastrous for the invading Union forces. On their retreat south, the Federal troops stopped at Grand Ecore, four miles north of Natchitoches. There the battered soldiers dug in and awaited a Confederate assault that never came. On April 21 the Federal troops left Grand Ecore for Natchitoches and then farther south to safety. They burned Grand Ecore as they left, setting a dismal precedent for the remainder of the long

retreat back to occupied south Louisiana. The neighboring village of Campti was also burned, but Natchitoches was spared from the defeated soldiers' torch.



Wanton Destruction

General Banks placed the hard fighting veteran forces under General A.J. Smith to guard the rear of the long Union troop withdrawal to Alexandria, Louisiana. Smith's troops had participated in an incredibly destructive campaign in Mississippi some months earlier. Bitter in defeat and angry at a lack of effective leadership during the Louisiana campaign that should have been an easy victory, Smith's men and other stragglers ravaged

the countryside over the course of the next three days. One Union soldier bore witness:

“Destruction and devastation followed on the tail of the retreating column. At night burning buildings mark the pathway...as far as the eye can see...Hardly a building is left unharmed...”

Oakland Embattled

Large plantations fared the worst but, as contemporaries noted, not even the modest homes of enslaved workers were safe. Some saved their homes with quick-thinking ingenuity. Tradition holds that Estelle Prud'homme saved her residence, Oaklawn, by placing red caps on the heads of her children, a familiar warning of the presence of highly contagious scarlet fever.

Downriver, the main house escaped ruin at Oakland Plantation, but the destructive hands of war were not idle. Retreating Confederate troops had burned 1,000 bales

of stored cotton before advancing Union forces reached them. As the Union forces retreated south, they allegedly burned the Prud'homme's state of the art gin barn in their wake. According to family legend, a U.S. soldier purportedly ran his saber through the portrait of Lise Metoyer Prud'homme while rummaging through the parlor of the main house. Finally, owner Pierre Phanor Prud'homme was said to have been taken prisoner by U.S. forces and moved forcibly to town. He was very ill at the time, collapsed en route and later died in Natchitoches.

Magnolia Burns

Magnolia Plantation fared no better. Sometime during the Federal retreat U.S. troops burned the main house while camped in the vicinity. Family legend holds that the main house may have been burned as a result of a gambling disagreement between the Magnolia overseer and Federal troops. Whatever the case, the home was a smoldering ruin with only brick foundation piers and columns left rising above the ashes.

Death also visited Magnolia as this overseer was reportedly shot and killed on the front porch steps, and the two warring armies fought a two day skirmish on the plantation grounds.



The End and the Legacy

At Monett's Ferry, near the southern end of Cane River, hastily organized Confederates attempted to entrap the Union army and prevent its escape. Outmaneuvered, weary, and outnumbered the Southerners were easily beaten, finalizing the Red River Campaign along Cane River. Its wake left battlefield casualties and hundreds of people impoverished, from wealthy Creole planters to enslaved workers. The campaign forever changed the landscape of Cane River, violently ushering in a new way of life for all, while anointing a glimmer of hope of freedom for the enslaved people. It only required, as one contemporary historian termed it, “a case of equal opportunity destruction.”

Red River Campaign Sources:

Dollar, Susan “The Red River Campaign, Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana: A Case of Equal Opportunity Destruction.” *Louisiana History* (Fall 2002): 411-432.

Joiner, Gary D. *“Through the Howling Wilderness.”* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006)

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