



Natural Resources – Backdrop to the Battlefield



As a lasting memorial to the bravery and ultimate sacrifice of those who struggled for the “Hill City,” Vicksburg National Military Park preserves diverse cultural, historical, and natural resources throughout its 1,800 acres. The park has become a place of natural beauty, and the now peaceful landscape, covering over 20 miles of reconstructed trenches, approaches, and parallels comprising the original siege and defense lines, provides habitat for many plants and animals.

Created by actions of wind and water, Vicksburg’s unique terrain is attributed to the unusual loess soil composing the city’s bluffs along the Mississippi River. Constant changes in the highly unstable river course cut off many meanders, forming oxbow lakes and backswamps bordered by natural levees. Long sections of abandoned channel formed bayous – slow- moving creeks – that followed the ancient river bed, creating a complex network of interconnecting waterways. Many were navigable by small steamboats, especially during high water. Naturally- drained backswamps filled with huge, dense stands of bald cypress, tupelo, willows, and oaks, creating habitat for alligators, snakes, fish, countless aquatic birds, and numerous mammal species, many still inhabiting the park today.



One of few places where the mighty river met the valley wall, Vicksburg was prime territory for early settlement, and provided safety from yearly flooding. The city became a bustling river town and essential stopping and trans- shipping site for traffic on the Mississippi and rail lines on either side of the river.

Ridge tops were cleared for farming, but ravines and steep hillsides were left covered in tangled scrub. During the war, the clear vista and imposing landscape allowed that, *“No place on earth is favored by nature with natural defenses as Vicksburg...”*



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Becoming the core of the city's defenses in 1863, the high bluffs provided such an advantage that General Grant's troops were prevented from taking the city by direct assaults, despite greatly outnumbering the Confederate forces. Defense construction required most of the available timber to build parapets and stockades, leaving only scattered trees dotting the battlefield. Bundled brushwood, called fascines, and woven cane gabions (dirt-filled baskets) were used for reinforcement, while sharpened branches were turned into obstacles called *abatis* or *chevaux-de-frise*. Trenches were easily dug in the loess soil, while caves excavated in the hillsides became havens during the siege, protecting civilians and soldiers alike from relentless shelling of Federal batteries. But when these caves received direct hits, they often collapsed, leaving the soil very susceptible to water erosion.

Today's battlefield looks nothing as it did in 1863. In 1876, the mighty river accomplished on its own what the Union army tried desperately to do – changing its course to leave Vicksburg high and dry. Only after almost 25 years did the city regain its port status, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers created the Yazoo Diversion Canal, re-routing the Yazoo River into the old Mississippi River bed.

Erosion control projects implemented by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s created a dense forest cover – efforts now realized to be only partially successful. Initially holding the soil, tree roots became exposed over time, channeling runoff. Many trees weakened, becoming susceptible to disease and wind damage. Time and modern earth-moving equipment have also leveled a large portion of the area's hills and ravines, greatly altering the landscape.

Current environmental technologies now enable park staff to maintain soil stability using resilient and quick-growing grasses. Projects to restore the historic scene have been undertaken, exposing key terrain features and long-hidden monument access, providing a more realistic experience for visitors as they tour Vicksburg National Military Park.



For additional information contact:
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