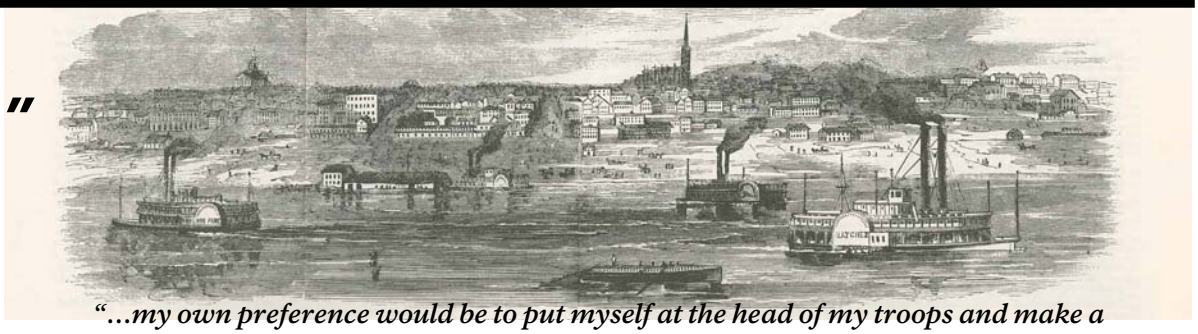
Vicksburg

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Vicksburg National Military Park

"…to catch the rabbit…"



"…my own preference would be to put myself at the head of my troops and make a desperate effort to cut our way through the enemy…But my duty is to sacrifice myself to save the army which has so nobly done its duty to defend Vicksburg. I therefore concur with you and shall offer to surrender this army on the 4th of July." **– Lt. General John C. Pemberton to his division commanders, July 3, 1863.**

July 1, 1863
General Pemberton's Headquarters

Confederate lines

In a meeting with his four division commanders: Major Generals Carter L. Stevenson, Martin Luther Smith, John H. Forney, and John S. Bowen, Lt. General John C. Pemberton asked their counsel on Vicksburg's fate:

"Unless the siege of Vicksburg is raised or supplies are thrown in, it will become necessary very shortly to evacuate the place. I see no prospect of the former, and there are many great, if not insuperable, obstacles in the way of the latter. You are, therefore, requested to inform me with as little delay as possible as to the condition of your troops, and their ability to make the marches and undergo the fatigues necessary to accomplish a successful evacuation."

The response was unanimous – not one thought that a successful evacuation was possible. The reason was not lack of food, as later noted by Pemberton, but simply that the men were exhausted – *"overpowered by numbers, worn down with fatigue."*

July 2, 1863

In a second council of war with his generals, Pemberton proposed his strategy for receiving favorable surrender terms from General Ulysses S. Grant:

"I am a northern man. I know my people. I know we can get better terms from them on the 4th of July than any other day of the year."

July 3, 1863
3:00 a.m.

Bowen delivering Pemberton's message to Grant

There was only one course now open to General Pemberton. Under a flag of truce, a messenger was sent into Federal lines bearing his proposal to discuss surrender terms with General Grant. The messenger, General John Bowen, a former St. Louis neighbor to Grant, was dying of dysentery, but hoped that by undertaking this last errand, his friendship with the Union commander would count for something at this critical moment. Pemberton's proposal stated:

"General, I have the honor to present to you an armistice for [several] hours, with the view to arranging terms for the capitulation of Vicksburg To this end, if agreeable to you, I will appoint three commissioners, to meet a like number to be named by yourself, at such place and hour to-day as you may find convenient. I make this proposition to save the further effusion of blood, which must otherwise be shed to a frightful extent, feeling myself fully able to maintain my position for a yet indefinite period.

"This communication will be handed you under a flag of truce, by Major-General John Bowen.

"Very respectfully, your obedient servant…"

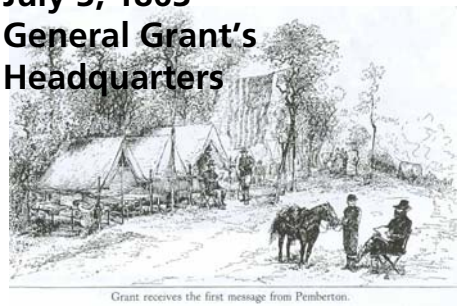
July 3, 1863
Behind Confederate Lines

The flag of truce

The flag of truce was seen differently by those who had struggled so long to save their city:

"On the 3d of July the firing begins to cease upon the lines. What can be the matter? A flag of truce is sent in from our General to the enemy. What is the meaning of this? Great excitement prevails throughout the garrison. Some suspect that a surrender of the town is in contemplation. At such a thought the indignation is universal & almost beyond control. Our brave men, who had endured so much from hunger, danger, exposure & fatigue could not endure the thought of losing all their labor. The thought of yielding up their arms into the hands of a hated foe & becoming prisoners of war was beyond endurance. To calm this excitement & give the men time for sober second thought, so that mutiny & rebellion might be avoided, the rumor was circulated that the flag of truce was only to request permission for the removing of some citizens out of the enemies lines…" – Chaplain William L. Foster, 35th Mississippi Infantry, Moore's Brigade.

July 3, 1863
General Grant's Headquarters



Grant receiving Pemberton's first message

General Grant accepted the message from General Pemberton, but declined to negotiate with General Bowen. His reply to Pemberton was unyielding.

"The useless effusion of blood you propose stopping by this course can be ended at any time you may choose, by an unconditional surrender of the city and the garrison."

Then he softened his terse response with an honest tribute:

"Men who have shown so much endurance and courage as those now in Vicksburg will always challenge the respect of an adversary, and I can assure you will be treated with all the respect due to prisoners of war."

Grant did, however, agree to meet with Pemberton later that day.

July 3, 1863
3:00 p.m.

With hundreds of soldiers watching from their earthworks, General Pemberton, accompanied by General Bowen and Colonel L.M. Montgomery walked out to meet General Grant, escorted by his staff and Generals E.O. Ord, James McPherson, John Logan, and A.J. Smith. Under a little tree scarcely 200 feet from Confederate trenches, the two commanders shook hands, although in a stiff and uncomfortable manner. When informed that no terms other than unconditional surrender would be considered, Pemberton snapped, *"The conference might as well end,"* and turned abruptly away. Quick intervention by General Bowen soothed the tension, and it was agreed further negotiations would be conducted among the commanders' staff. As the two leaders strolled between the earthworks, chatting, their subordinates talked over the next step as the troops watched from opposing lines. It was at last decided that Grant's final terms would be sent to Pemberton at 10 p.m., and the two commanders parted company.

Despite his firmness during the meeting, Grant, in the end, offered terms that stopped well short of unconditional surrender, and later caused some controversy in the North. Instead of being held prisoner, the Confederate soldiers were paroled; that is, they would be released upon signing an oath not to fight again until Federal captives were freed in exchange. The parole offer, Grant stated later, was not a gesture of good will, but made for purely pragmatic reasons:

"…Had I insisted upon an unconditional surrender there would have been over thirty thousand men to transport to Cairo, very much to the inconvenience of the army on the Mississippi…Then again Pemberton's army was largely composed of men whose homes were in the South-west; I knew many of them were tired of the war and would get home just as soon as they could. A large number of them had voluntarily come into our lines during the siege, and requested to be sent north where they could get employment until the war was over and they could go to their homes."

July 4, 1863
General Grant's Headquarters

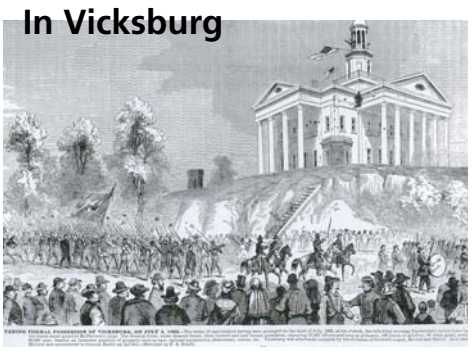
Sometime after midnight, General Pemberton sent Grant a message accepting his terms:

"General: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of this day, and in reply to say that the terms proposed by you are accepted."

General Grant, sitting in his tent with his son, Fred, read the note and spoke quietly to the boy.

"Vicksburg has surrendered," he said.

July 4, 1863
In Vicksburg


Grant entering Vicksburg

The last "wallpaper" edition of the Vicksburg Citizen, still set on the presses when Grant's troops entered the city, stated:

"Ulysses must get into the city before he dines in it. The way to cook a rabbit is 'first to catch the rabbit, &c…'"

A 'Note' added by the Federal forces which entered Vicksburg on the 4th continued:

"Two days bring about great changes. The banner of the Union floats over Vicksburg. General Grant has 'caught the rabbit.' He has dined in Vicksburg and he did bring his dinner with him…."

Last "wallpaper" edition of the Vicksburg *Citizen*