

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War
Alfred Thayer Mahan
Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE GULF AND INLAND WATERS.

CHAPTER I.

PRELIMINARY.

THE naval operations described in the following pages extended, on the seaboard, over the Gulf of Mexico from Key West to the mouth of the Rio Grande; and inland over the course of the Mississippi, and its affluents, from Cairo, at the southern extremity of the State of Illinois, to the mouths of the river.

Key West is one of the low coral islands, or keys, which stretch out, in a southwesterly direction, into the Gulf from the southern extremity of the Florida peninsula. It has a good harbor, and was used during, as since, the war as a naval station. From Key West to the mouth of the Rio Grande, the river forming the boundary between Mexico and the State of Texas, the distance in a straight line is about eight hundred and forty miles. The line joining the two points departs but little from an east and west direction, the mouth of the river, in $25^{\circ} 26' N.$, being eighty-three miles north of the island; but the shore line is over sixteen hundred miles, measuring from the southern extremity of Florida. Beginning at that point, the west side of the peninsula runs north-northwest till it reaches the 30th degree of latitude; turning then, the coast follows that parallel

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War
Alfred Thayer Mahan
Excerpt
[More information](#)

approximately till it reaches the delta of the Mississippi. That delta, situated about midway between the east and west ends of the line, projects southward into the Gulf of Mexico as far as parallel 29° N., terminating in a long, narrow arm, through which the river enters the Gulf by three principal branches, or passes. From the delta the shore sweeps gently round, inclining first a little to the north of west, until near the boundary between the States of Louisiana and Texas; then it curves to the southwest until a point is reached about one hundred miles north of the mouth of the Rio Grande, whence it turns abruptly south. Five States, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, in the order named, touch the waters bounded by this long, irregular line; but the shore of two of them, Alabama and Mississippi, taken together, extends over little more than one hundred miles. All five joined at an early date in the secession movement.

The character of the coast, from one end to the other, varies but slightly in appearance. It is everywhere low, and either sandy or marshy. An occasional bluff of moderate height is to be seen. A large proportion of the line is skirted by low sandy islands, sometimes joined by narrow necks to the mainland, forming inland sounds of considerable extent, access to which is generally impracticable for vessels of much draft of water. They, however, as well as numerous bays and the mouths of many small rivers, can be entered by light vessels acquainted with the ground; and during the war small steamers and schooners frequently escaped through them, carrying cargoes of cotton, then of great value. There is but little rise and fall of the tide in the Gulf, from one to two feet, but the height of the water is much affected by the direction of the wind.

The principal ports on or near the Gulf are New Orleans

PRELIMINARY.

3

in Louisiana, Mobile in Alabama, and Galveston in Texas. Tallahassee and Apalachicola, in Florida, also carried on a brisk trade in cotton at the time of the secession. By far the best harbor is Pensacola Bay, in Florida, near the Alabama line. The town was not at that time a place of much commerce, on account of defective communication with the interior; but the depth of water, twenty-two feet, that could be carried over the bar, and the secure spacious anchorage within made it of great value as a naval station. It had been so used prior to the war, and, although falling at first into the hands of the Confederates, was shortly regained by the Union forces, to whom, from its nearness to Mobile and the passes of the Mississippi, as well as from its intrinsic advantages, it was of great importance throughout the contest.

The aim of the National Government in connection with this large expanse of water and its communications was twofold. First, it was intended to enter the Mississippi River from the sea, and working up its stream in connection with the land forces, to take possession of the well-known positions that gave command of the navigation. Simultaneously with this movement from below, a similar movement downward, with the like object, was to be undertaken in the upper waters. If successful, as they proved to be, the result of these attacks would be to sever the States in rebellion on the east side of the river from those on the west, which, though not the most populous, contributed largely in men, and yet more abundantly in food, to the support of the Confederacy.

The second object of the Government was to enforce a strict blockade over the entire coast, from the Rio Grande to Florida. There were not in the Confederate harbors powerful fleets, or even single vessels of war, which it was necessary to lock up in their own waters. One or two *quasi* men-of-war escaped from them, to run short and, in the main,

4 THE GULF AND INLAND WATERS.

harmless careers ; but the cruise that inflicted the greatest damage on the commerce of the Union was made by a vessel that never entered a Southern port. The blockade was not defensive, but offensive ; its purpose was to close every inlet by which the products of the South could find their way to the markets of the world, and to shut out the material, not only of war, but essential to the peaceful life of a people, which the Southern States were ill-qualified by their previous pursuits to produce. Such a blockade could be made technically effectual by ships cruising or anchored outside ; but there was a great gain in actual efficiency when the vessels could be placed within the harbors. The latter plan was therefore followed wherever possible and safe ; and the larger fortified places were reduced and occupied as rapidly as possible consistent with the attainment of the prime object—the control of the Mississippi Valley.

Before the war the Atlantic and Gulf waters of the United States, with those of the West Indies, Mexico, and Central America, were the cruising ground of one division of vessels, known as the Home Squadron. At the beginning of hostilities this squadron was under the command of Flag-Officer G. J. Pendergrast, who rendered essential and active service during the exciting and confused events which immediately followed the bombardment of Fort Sumter. The command was too extensive to be administered by any one man, when it became from end to end the scene of active war, so it was soon divided into three parts. The West India Squadron, having in its charge United States interests in Mexico and Central America as well as in the islands, remained under the care of Flag-Officer Pendergrast. Flag-Officer Stringham assumed command of the Atlantic Squadron, extending as far south as Cape Florida ; and the Gulf, from Cape Florida to the Rio Grande, was assigned to Flag-Officer Wil

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War

Alfred Thayer Mahan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PRELIMINARY.

5

liam Mervine, who reached his station on the 8th of June, 1861. On the 4th of July the squadron consisted of twenty-one vessels, carrying two hundred and eighty-two guns, and manned by three thousand five hundred men.

Flag-Officer Mervine was relieved in the latter part of September. The blockade was maintained as well as the number and character of the vessels permitted, but no fighting of any consequence took place. A dashing cutting-out expedition from the flag-ship *Colorado*, under Lieutenant J. H. Russell, assisted by Lieutenants Sproston and Blake, with subordinate officers and seamen, amounting in all to four boats and one hundred men, seized and destroyed an armed schooner lying alongside the wharf of the Pensacola Navy Yard, under the protection of a battery. The service was gallantly carried out; the schooner's crew, after a desperate resistance, were driven on shore, whence, with the guard, they resumed their fire on the assailants. The affair cost the flag-ship three men killed and nine wounded.

Under Mervine's successor, Flag-Officer W. W. McKean, more of interest occurred. The first collision was unfortunate, and, to some extent, humiliating to the service. A squadron consisting of the steam-sloop *Richmond*, sailing-sloops *Vincennes* and *Preble*, and the small side-wheel steamer *Water Witch* had entered the Mississippi early in the month of October, and were at anchor at the head of the passes. At 3.30 A.M., October 12th, a Confederate ram made its appearance close aboard the *Richmond*, which, at the time, had a coal schooner alongside. The ram charged the *Richmond*, forcing a small hole in her side about two feet below the water-line, and tearing the schooner adrift. She dropped astern, lay quietly for a few moments off the port-quarter of the *Richmond*, and then steamed slowly up the river, receiving broadsides from the *Richmond* and *Preble*,

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War
Alfred Thayer Mahan
Excerpt
[More information](#)

6 THE GULF AND INLAND WATERS.

and throwing up a rocket. In a few moments three dim lights were seen up the river near the eastern shore. They were shortly made out to be fire-rafts. The squadron slipped their chains, the three larger vessels, by direction of the senior officer, retreating down the Southwest Pass to the sea; but in the attempt to cross, the Richmond and Vincennes grounded on the bar. The fire-rafts drifted harmlessly on to the western bank of the river, and then burned out. When day broke, the enemy's fleet, finding the head of the passes abandoned, followed down the river, and with rifled guns kept up a steady but not very accurate long-range fire upon the stranded ships, not venturing within reach of the Richmond's heavy broadside. About 10 A.M., apparently satisfied with the day's work, they returned up river, and the ships shortly after got afloat and crossed the bar.

The ram which caused this commotion and hasty retreat was a small vessel of three hundred and eighty-four tons, originally a Boston tug-boat called the Enoch Train, which had been sent to New Orleans to help in improving the channel of the Mississippi. When the war broke out she was taken by private parties and turned into a ram on speculation. An arched roof of 5-inch timber was thrown over her deck, and this covered with a layer of old-fashioned railroad iron, from three-fourths to one inch thick, laid lengthways. At the time of this attack she had a cast-iron prow under water, and carried a 19-inch gun, pointing straight ahead through a slot in the roof forward; but as this for some reason could not be used, it was lashed in its place. Her dimensions were: length 128 feet, beam 26 feet, depth 12½ feet. She had twin screws, and at this time one engine was running at high pressure and the other at low, both being in bad order, so that she could only steam six knots; but carrying the current with her she struck the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War

Alfred Thayer Mahan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PRELIMINARY.

7

Richmond with a speed of from nine to ten. Although afterward bought by the Confederate Government, she at this time still belonged to private parties; but as her captain, pilot, and most of the other officers refused to go in her, Lieutenant A. F. Warley, of the Confederate Navy, was ordered to the command by Commodore Hollins. In the collision her prow was wrenched off, her smoke-stack carried away and the condenser of the low-pressure engine gave out, which accounts for her "remaining under the Richmond's quarter," "dropping astern," and "lying quietly abeam of the Preble, apparently hesitating whether to come at her or not." As soon as possible she limped off under her remaining engine.

Although it was known to the officers of the Union fleet that the enemy had a ram up the river, it does not appear that any preparation for defence had been made, or plan of action adopted. Even the commonplace precaution of sending out a picket-boat had not been taken. The attack, therefore, was a surprise, not only in the ordinary sense of the word, but, so far as appears, in finding the officer in command without any formed ideas as to what he would do if she came down. "The whole affair came upon me so suddenly that no time was left for reflection, but called for immediate action." These are his own words. The natural outcome of not having his resources in hand was a hasty retreat before an enemy whose force he now exaggerated and with whom he was not prepared to deal; a move which brought intense mortification to himself and in a measure to the service.

It is a relief to say that the *Water Witch*, a small vessel of under four hundred tons, with three light guns, commanded by Lieutenant Francis Winslow, held her ground, steaming up beyond the fire-rafts until daylight showed her the larger vessels in retreat.

During the night of November 7th the U. S. frigate San-

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War
Alfred Thayer Mahan
Excerpt
[More information](#)

8 THE GULF AND INLAND WATERS.

tee, blockading off Galveston, sent into the harbor two boats, under the command of Lieutenant James E. Jouett, with the object of destroying the man-of-war steamer General Rusk. The armed schooner Royal Yacht guarding the channel was passed unseen, but the boats shortly after took the ground and were discovered. Thinking it imprudent to attack the steamer without the advantage of a surprise, Lieutenant Jouett turned upon the schooner, which was carried after a sharp conflict. The loss of the assailants was two killed and seven wounded. The schooner was burnt.

On November 22d and 23d Flag-Officer McKean, with the Niagara and Richmond, made an attack upon Fort McRea on the western side of the entrance to Pensacola Bay; Fort Pickens, on the east side, which remained in the power of the United States, directing its guns upon the fort and the Navy Yard, the latter being out of reach of the ships. The fire of McRea was silenced the first day; but on the second a north-west wind had so lowered the water that the ships could not get near enough to reach the fort. The affair was entirely indecisive, being necessarily conducted at very long range.

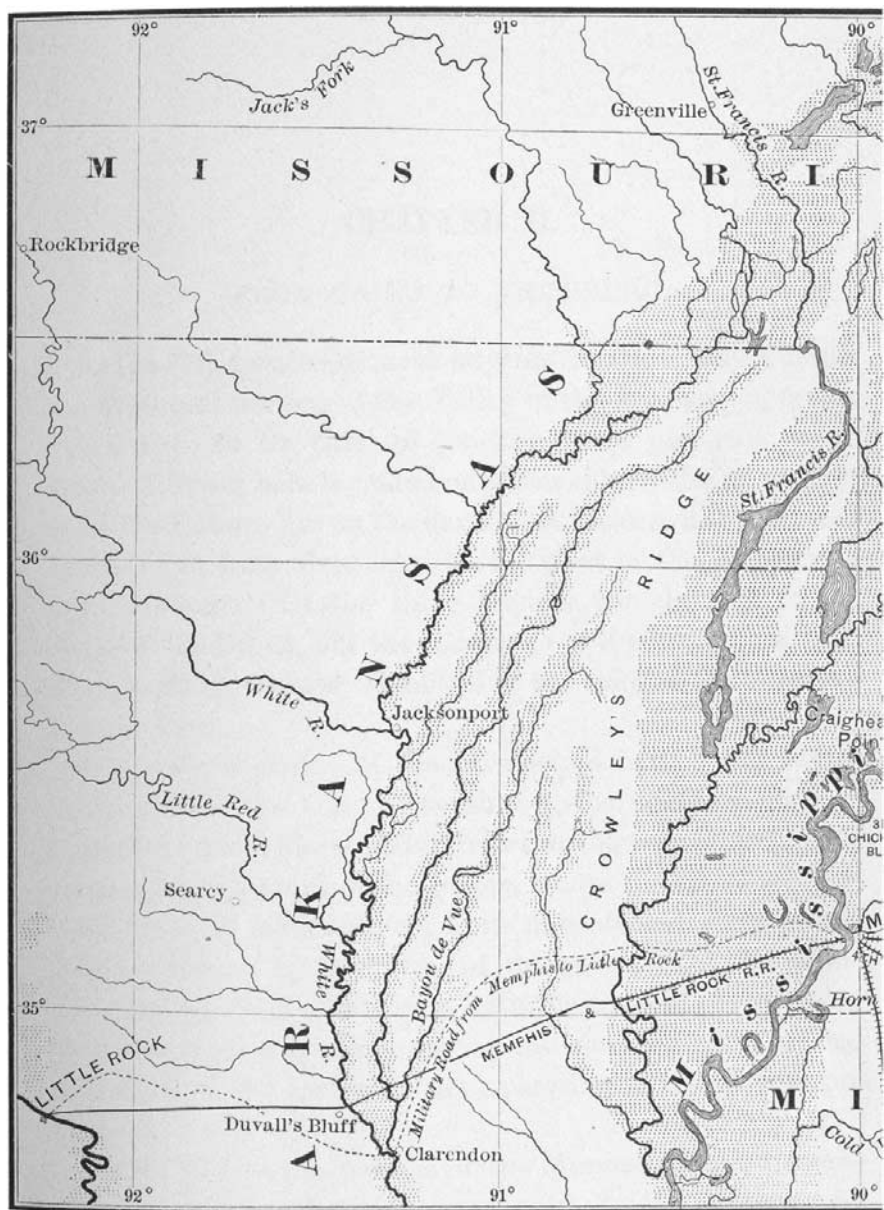
From this time on, until the arrival of Flag-Officer David G. Farragut, a guerilla warfare was maintained along the coast, having always the object of making the blockade more effective and the conditions of the war more onerous to the Southern people. Though each little expedition contributed to this end, singly they offer nothing that it is necessary to chronicle here. When Farragut came the squadron was divided. St. Andrew's Bay, sixty miles east of Pensacola, was left in the East Gulf Squadron; all west of that point was Farragut's command, under the name of the Western Gulf Blockading Squadron. Stirring and important events were now at hand, before relating which the course of the war on the Upper Mississippi demands attention.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War

Alfred Thayer Mahan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

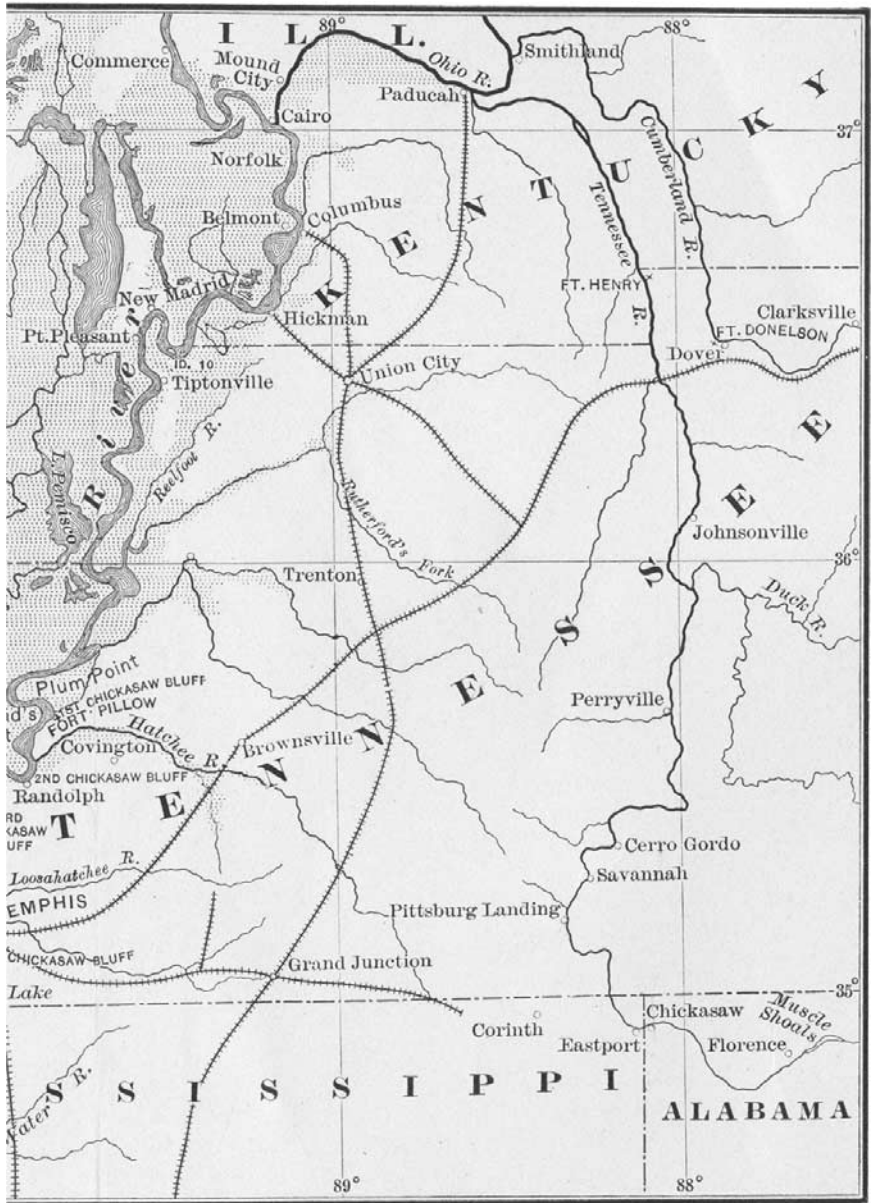
MISSISSIPPI VALLEY—

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02622-2 - The Navy in the Civil War

Alfred Thayer Mahan

Excerpt

[More information](#)**CAIRO TO MEMPHIS.**