



ANONYMOUS

Daily Life during the Siege of Vicksburg (1863)

When the Confederate army defending Vicksburg, Mississippi, was forced back into the city's defensive lines, civilian residents found themselves trapped by the ensuing Union siege. Shelling from both Union gunboats on the Mississippi River and Grant's artillery became a constant feature of life in the city; federal gunboats alone fired some 22,000 shells at the city during the siege. Civilians quickly evacuated their homes and dug caves in the sides of the city's many hills for protection from the ceaseless shelling. As the siege continued, supplies quickly dwindled because Confederate General John C. Pemberton, indecisive about his proper strategy, had failed to stockpile adequate provisions. The following entries describing daily life in Vicksburg are from the diary of an unknown woman who was a Unionist. (In a few places, paragraphing has been inserted.)

March 20th [1863] . . .—Non-combatants have been ordered to leave or prepare accordingly. Those who are to stay are having caves built. Cave-digging has become a regular business; prices range from twenty to fifty dollars, according to size of cave. Two diggers worked at ours a week and charged thirty dollars. It is well made in the hill that slopes just in the rear of the house, and well propped with thick posts, as they all are. It has a shelf, also, for holding a light or water. When we went in this evening and sat down, the earthy, suffocating feeling, as of a living tomb, was dreadful to me. I fear I shall risk death outside rather than melt in that dark furnace. The hills are so honey-combed with caves that the streets look like avenues in a cemetery. . . .

April 2d.—We have had to move, and thus lost our cave. The owner of the house suddenly returned and notified us that he intended to bring his family back; didn't think there'd be any siege. The cost of the cave could go for the rent. That means he has got tired of the Confederacy

and means to stay here and thus get out of it. . . .

April 28th.—I never understood before the full force of those questions—What shall we eat? what shall we drink? and wherewithal shall we be clothed? . . . Such minute attention must be given the wardrobe to preserve it that I have learned to darn like an artist. Making shoes is now another accomplishment. Mine were in tatters. H— [her husband] came across a moth-eaten pair that he bought me, giving ten dollars, I think, and they fell into rags when I tried to wear them; but the soles were good, and that has helped me to shoes. A pair of old coat-sleeves saved—nothing is thrown away now—was in my trunk. I cut an exact pattern from my old shoes, laid it on the sleeves, and cut out thus good uppers and sewed them carefully; then soaked the soles and sewed the cloth to them. I am so proud of these home-made shoes, think I'll put them in a glass case when the war is over, as an heirloom. . . . I have but a dozen pins remaining, so many I gave away. Every time these are used they are straightened and kept from rust. All these curious labors are performed while the shells are leisurely screaming through the air. . . . For many nights we have had but little sleep, because the Federal gun-boats have been running past the bat-

FROM George W. Cable, ed., "A Woman's Diary of the Siege of Vicksburg," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 8 (1885): 767-75.

teries. The uproar when this is happening is phenomenal. . . .

May 1st, 1863.—It is settled at last that we shall spend the time of siege in Vicksburg. Ever since we were deprived of our cave, I had been dreading that H—— would suggest sending me to the country, where his relatives lived. As he could not leave his position and go also without being conscripted, and as I felt certain an army would get between us, it was no part of my plan to be obedient. A shell from one of the practicing mortars brought the point to an issue yesterday and settled it. Sitting at work as usual, listening to the distant sound of bursting shells, apparently aimed at the court-house, there suddenly came a nearer explosion; the house shook, and a tearing sound was followed by terrified screams from the kitchen. I rushed thither, but met in the hall the cook's little girl America, bleeding from a wound in the forehead, and fairly dancing with fright and pain, while she uttered fearful yells. I stopped to examine the wound, and her mother bounded in, her black face ashy from terror. "Oh! Miss V——, my child is killed and the kitchen tore up." Seeing America was too lively to be a killed subject, I consoled Martha and hastened to the kitchen. Evidently a shell had exploded just outside, sending three or four pieces through. When order was restored I endeavored to impress on Martha's mind the necessity for calmness and the uselessness of such excitement. Looking round at the close of the lecture, there stood a group of Confederate soldiers laughing heartily at my sermon and the promising audience I had. They chimed in with a parting chorus:

"Yes, it's no use hollerin, old lady." . . .

May 17.— . . . About three o'clock the rush began.¹ I shall never forget that woful sight of a beaten, demoralized army that came rushing back,—humanity in the last throes of endurance. Wan, hollow-eyed, ragged, footsore, bloody, the men limped along unarmed, but followed by siege-guns, ambulances, gun-carriages, and wagons in aimless confusion. At twilight two or three bands

¹She is describing the retreat of Pemberton's army into the city after the Battle of Big Black.

on the court-house hill and other points began playing Dixie, Bonnie Blue Flag, and so on, and drums began to beat all about; I suppose they were rallying the scattered army.

May 28th.—Since that day the regular siege has continued. We are utterly cut off from the world, surrounded by a circle of fire. . . . The fiery shower of shells goes on day and night. . . . People do nothing but eat what they can get, sleep when they can, and dodge the shells. There are three intervals when the shelling stops, either for the guns to cool or for the gunners' meals, I suppose,—about eight in the morning, the same in the evening, and at noon. In that time we have both to prepare and eat ours. Clothing cannot be washed or anything else done. On the 19th and 22d, when the assaults were made on the lines, . . . people were sitting, eating their poor suppers at the cave doors, ready to plunge in again. As the first shell again flew they dived, and not a human being was visible. The sharp crackle of the musketry-firing was a strong contrast to the scream of the bombs. I think all the dogs and cats must be killed or starved, we don't see any more pitiful animals prowling around. . . .

The cellar is so damp and musty the bedding has to be carried out and laid in the sun every day, with the forecast that it may be demolished at any moment. The confinement is dreadful. To sit and listen as if waiting for death in a horrible manner would drive me insane. I don't know what others do, but we read when I am not scribbling in this. H—— borrowed somewhere a lot of Dickens's novels, and we reread them by the dim light in the cellar. When the shelling abates H—— goes to walk about a little or get the "Daily Citizen," which is still issuing a tiny sheet at twenty-five and fifty cents a copy. It is, of course, but a rehash of speculations which amuses a half hour. . . .

I am so tired of corn-bread, which I never liked, that I eat it with tears in my eyes. We are lucky to get a quart of milk daily from a family near who have a cow they hourly expect to be killed. I send five dollars to market each morning, and it buys a small piece of mule-meat. Rice and milk is my main food; I can't eat the mule-meat. We boil the rice and eat it cold with milk for sup-

per. Martha [their servant] runs the gauntlet to buy the meat and milk once a day in a perfect terror. . . .

June 7th. In the cellar.—There is one thing I feel especially grateful for, that amid these horrors we have been spared that of suffering for water. The weather has been dry a long time, and we hear of others dipping up the water from ditches and mud-holes. This place has two large underground cisterns of good cool water, and every night in my subterranean dressing-room a tub of cold water is the nerve-calmer that sends me to sleep in spite of the roar. One cistern I had to give up to the soldiers, who swarm about like hungry animals seeking something to devour. Poor fellows! my heart bleeds for them. They have nothing but spoiled, greasy bacon, and bread made of musty pea-flour, and but little of that. The sick ones can't bolt it. They come into the kitchen when Martha puts the pan of corn-bread in the stove, and beg for the bowl she mixed it in. They shake up the scrapings with water, put in their bacon, and boil the mixture into a kind of soup, which is easier to swallow than pea-bread. When I happen in, they look so ashamed of their poor clothes. I know we saved the lives of two by giving a few meals. . . .

June 9th.—The churches are a great resort for those who have no caves. People fancy they are not shelled so much, and they are substantial and the pews good to sleep in. . . .

June 13th.—Shell burst just over the roof this morning. Pieces tore through both floors down into the dining-room. The entire ceiling of that room fell in a mass. We had just left it. Every piece of crockery on the table was smashed up. . . .

June 18th.—To-day the "Citizen" is printed on wall paper; therefore has grown a little in size. . . .

June 21st.—I had gone upstairs to-day during the interregnum to enjoy a rest on my bed and read the reliable items in the "Citizen," when a shell burst right outside the window in front of me. Pieces flew in, striking all round me, tearing down masses of plaster that came tumbling over me. When H—— rushed in I was crawling out of the plaster, digging it out of my eyes and hair. When he picked up a piece large as a saucer beside my

pillow, I realized my narrow escape. The window-frame began to smoke, and we saw the house was on fire. H—— ran for a hatchet and I for water, and we put it out. Another [shell] came crashing near, and I snatched up my comb and brush and ran down here [the cellar]. . . .

June 25th.—A horrible day. The most horrible yet to me, because I've lost my nerve. We were all in the cellar, when a shell came tearing through the roof, burst upstairs, tore up that room, and the pieces coming through both floors down into the cellar. One of them tore open the leg of H——'s pantaloons. This was tangible proof the cellar was no place of protection from them. On the heels of this came Mr. J——, to tell us that young Mrs. P—— had had her thigh-bone crushed. When Martha went for the milk she came back horror-stricken to tell us the black girl there had her arm taken off by a shell. For the first time I quailed. I do not think people who are physically brave deserve much credit for it; it is a matter of nerves. In this way I am constitutionally brave, and seldom think of danger till it is over; and death has not the terrors for me it has for some others. Every night I had lain down expecting death, and every morning rose to the same prospect, without being unnerved. . . . But now I first seemed to realize that something worse than death might come; I might be crippled, and not killed. Life, without all one's powers and limbs, was a thought that broke down my courage. I said to H——, "You must get me out of this horrible place; I cannot stay; I know I shall be crippled." Now the regret comes that I lost control, because H—— is worried, and has lost his composure, because my coolness has broken down. . . .

July 3d.— . . . To-day we are down in the cellar again, shells flying as thick as ever. Provisions so nearly gone, except the hogshead of sugar, that a few more days will bring us to starvation indeed. Martha says rats are hanging dressed in the market for sale with mule meat,—there is nothing else. The officer at the battery told me he had eaten one yesterday. We have tried to leave this Tophet and failed, and if the siege continues I must summon that higher kind of courage—moral bravery—to subdue my fears of possible mutilation.

July 4th.—It is evening. All is still. Silence and night are once more united. I can sit at the table in the parlor and write. . . . We have had wheat supper and wheat bread once more. H—— is leaning back in the rocking-chair; he says:

“G——, it seems to me I can hear the silence, and feel it, too. It wraps me like a soft garment; how else can I express this peace?” . . .

. . . [Last night] when supper was eaten, . . . we crossed the street to the cave opposite. As I crossed a mighty shell flew screaming right over my head. It was the last thrown into Vicksburg.

We lay on our pallets waiting for the expected roar, but no sound came except the chatter from neighboring caves, and at last we dropped asleep.

I woke at dawn stiff. . . . Every one was expressing surprise at the quiet. We started for home and met the editor of the “Daily Citizen.” H—— said:

“This is strangely quiet, Mr. L——.”

“Ah, sir,” shaking his head gloomily, “I’m afraid (?) the last shell has been thrown into Vicksburg.”

“Why do you fear so?”

“It is surrender.”

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ALEXANDER S. ABRAMS

The Conduct of the Negroes Was beyond All Expression (1863)

In the following selection, Alexander St. Clair Abrams of the Vicksburg Whig described the entry of Union troops into Vicksburg, Mississippi, after its surrender, and their impact on the town’s slave population. Confederate propaganda frequently emphasized the alleged familiarity between Union soldiers and black women. In reality, racism and aversion to race mixing ran deep in the Union ranks and, at times, blended with antislavery sentiment.

On Saturday [July 4th], at twelve o’clock, M., [General John A.] Logan’s division of [General James B.] McPherson’s corps, of the Federal army, commenced entering the city, and in a quarter of an hour Vicksburg was crammed with them. Their first act was to take possession of the court house, on the spire of which they hoisted the United States flag, amid the exultant shouts of their comrades, and a deep feeling of humiliation on the part of the Confederate soldiers who witnessed the hauling up of the flag which they

had hoped never to see floating over the city they had so long and proudly boasted impregnable, and never to be taken by the enemy of the South. . . .

The conduct of the negroes, after the entrance of their “liberators,” was beyond all expression. While the Yankee army was marching through the streets, crowds of them congregated on the sidewalks, with a broad grin of satisfaction on their ebony countenances. The next day, which was Sunday, witnessed a sight, which would have been ludicrous had it not galled our soldiers by the reflection that they were compelled to submit to it. There was a great turn out of the “contrabands,” dressed up in the most extravagant style imagin-

FROM A. S. ABRAMS, *A Full and Detailed History of the Siege of Vicksburg* (Atlanta: Intelligencer Steam Power Presses, 1863), pp. 63–65.

able, and promenading through the streets, as if Vicksburg had been confiscated and turned over [to] them. In familiar conversation with the negro wenches, the soldiers of the Federal army were seen, arm-in-arm, marching through the streets, while the “bucks” congregated on the corners and discussed the happy event that had brought them freedom.

So arrogant did the negroes become after the entrance of the Federal forces, that no white Confederate citizen or soldier dared to speak to them, for fear of being called a rebel, or some other abusive epithet. One of the Confederate soldiers, happening to enter the garden of the house that the author of this work resided in, for the purpose of picking a peach, a negro, belonging to a gentleman of Vicksburg, who had charge of the garden, brought out a gun, and, taking deliberate aim at

the soldier, was about to fire. We immediately threw up the gun, and, drawing a knife, threatened the negro if he fired at the man; no sooner was the threat made, than the negro, with an oath, levelled the gun at us and drew the trigger; luckily the cap snapped without exploding, and we succeeded in getting the gun away and discharging it.

While making these observations about the negroes, we would say that it was confined to the city negroes alone. The slaves brought in by planters, and servants of soldiers and officers, did not appear the least gratified at their freedom. The majority of those connected with our army were very desirous of leaving with their masters, and General Grant at first consented that those who desired it should leave; but as soon as a few passes were made out, he revoked the order, and compelled the balance to remain.



JOSIAH GORGAS

The Confederacy Totters to Its Destruction (1863)

Josiah Gorgas, who was head of the Confederate Ordnance Bureau, was one of the Confederacy's most talented administrators. In the following diary entry, he reflects on the stunning change in the military situation in the summer of 1863.

July 28, [1863] Events have succeeded one another with disastrous rapidity. One brief month ago we were apparently at the point of success. Lee was in Pennsylvania, threatening Harrisburgh, and even Philadelphia. Vicksburgh seemed to laugh all Grant's efforts to scorn, & the northern papers had reports of his raising the siege. Port Hudson had beaten off Banks' forces, and "the question" said a northern correspondent was only now, could he save the remnant of his army. Taylor had driven the enemy from the greater part of Louisiana, and

had captured immense stores at Brashear. Winchester with 28 pieces of artillery and four thousand prisoners had fallen into our hands. All looked bright. Now the picture is just as sombre as it was bright then. Lee failed at Gettysburg, and has recrossed the Potomac & resumed the position of two months ago, covering Richmond. Alas! he has lost fifteen thousand men and twenty-five thousand stands of arms. Vicksburgh and Port Hudson capitulated, surrendering thirty five thousand men and forty-five thousand arms. It seems incredible that human power could effect such a change in so brief a space. Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success—to-day absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction.

FROM Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, ed., *The Journals of Josiah Gorgas, 1857–1878* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), p. 75.