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Mississippi's Most Unlikely Hero: Press Coverage of Ulysses S. Grant, 1863-1885

By Susannah J. Ural

In the fall of 1990, Ken Burns's now-famous documentary, *The Civil War*, captivated nearly forty million viewers for five consecutive nights. Historians still debate the benefits and detractions of this famous work of cinematography, which inspired its viewers to study America's defining conflict while reinforcing a host of stereotypes. One of the most stubborn of these myths is modern Americans' understanding of the Union siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and its surrender to the Federal forces led by Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant on July 4, 1863. After mesmerizing television audiences with Grant's dramatic invasion of the state, destruction of the capital at Jackson, and desperate battles on the way to Vicksburg, the documentary explained that exhausted and starving Confederates finally surrendered the city on Independence Day. "The Fourth of July," viewers were told as the screen faded to black, "would not be celebrated in Vicksburg for another 81 years."¹

Numerous Civil War scholars have worked to correct this erroneous claim, but the symbolic parallels of freedom and surrender have held firm. Part of this thinking may be influenced by the fact that the fall of Vicksburg proved devastating for white Mississippians and the Confederacy as a whole. Historian Timothy B. Smith rightly argued that the city's surrender, preceded by the destruction of Jackson, convinced Southerners that "the enemy was there to stay" and signaled a sharp erosion in Mississippians' will to fight. Historians Terry Winschel and William L. Shea agreed. In their analysis of the military significance of the campaign, they insisted that the "capture of Vicksburg and its

¹ This erroneous claim is still listed under "Civil War Facts" at the PBS website for the documentary: <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/civil-war/war/civil-war-facts/>. Burns's analysis of the Vicksburg Campaign is found in Burns, Ken, et al., Episode Five: "The Universe of Battle," *The Civil War* (Burbank, CA: PBS Home Video, 2004).

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garrison was a strategic victory of almost incalculable proportions” and “the single greatest feat of arms achieved by either side during the entire Civil War.” Contemporary Confederates agreed. Reflecting on the South’s defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 3 and the surrender of Vicksburg on July 4, Colonel Josiah Gorgas, chief of the Confederate Ordnance Department observed, “Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success—today absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction.”²

Considering the fatal significance of Vicksburg to the larger war effort, one might assume that Mississippians would feel a strong animosity toward Ulysses S. Grant, the man who orchestrated the port city’s surrender. His victory at Vicksburg launched Grant on a trajectory that led to command of all Union forces and two terms as president of the United States. If one believes the myth that Vicksburg refused to commemorate any aspect of July 4, the date of their surrender, it would be easy to conclude that the town’s citizens, and the state as a whole, would harbor significant animosity toward the man who orchestrated their most infamous moment. An examination of contemporary newspaper accounts during and after the Vicksburg Campaign through the anniversary of General Grant’s death, however, reveals a very different story.

When the Vicksburg Campaign began at the end of March 1863, Mississippi newspapers reminded us that Grant was not yet the man he would become. Newspapers called for his removal from command, as did members of President Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet. First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln openly referred to Grant as “the Butcher,” a popular reference to the high human price that the press insisted was required for the general’s victories. Until that spring, Mississippians could point to their own success in thwarting the efforts of both Grant and Union Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman. He may have become famous afterwards, but Grant was not yet a star in the spring of 1863,

² Timothy B. Smith, *Mississippi in the Civil War: The Home Front* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 3; William L. Shea and Terrence Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 178; Gorgas quoted by Winschel in D. Scott Hartwig and Terrence J. Winschel, “Two National Park Service Historians Contemplate the Significance of Gettysburg and Vicksburg — Hallowed Ground They Walk on Every Day,” *America’s Civil War* (July 2003), 17; see also the argument by historian Michael Ballard, who insisted that “it is one of the unfortunate paradoxes of the Civil War that Vicksburg mattered more and is remembered less than many campaigns and battles of distinctly smaller consequence” in *Vicksburg: The Campaign that Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 430.

and Mississippians were confident that Confederate forces would successfully defend Vicksburg. Indeed, Grant's name was mentioned infrequently in papers, and it was often simply listed along with other Federal commanders in the area.

After the Civil War and even after the end of Reconstruction and Union occupation — a time when newspaper editors would have felt safe to publish their outrage against federal policies and when Confederate veteran groups began to organize — there was a brief spike in anti-Grant statements, but this faded quickly into positive and even glowing references to their onetime foe. Finally, on the anniversary of Grant's death, Mississippi newspaper editors seemed to enter a formal period of mourning. It is rare to find anyone who will speak ill of the dead publicly, but the level of praise that Mississippians showered on Grant is noteworthy. They recognized that it was Grant who conquered Vicksburg and, along with Sherman, fractured Mississippi's ability to contribute substantially to the Confederate war effort after 1863. But by the time of his death in 1885, he had become a respected adversary among white Mississippians. Indeed, Ulysses S. Grant had become the unlikely hero of the Magnolia state.

This article analyzes Mississippians' public opinions of Grant through the pages of Magnolia state newspapers. Other scholars have examined citizens' private thoughts on the war through diaries and correspondence, and still others have studied the history and memory of the Vicksburg campaign. But historians lack a sense of Mississippians' evolving opinion of the man who sealed their fate that summer, and the findings of this article contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate over postwar reconciliation. In the last several decades, historians have observed that Civil War veterans reconciled their differences in the late-nineteenth century through a shared view of the war as a fight over states' rights and the preservation of the Union that largely ignored the centrality of slavery and emancipation in the conflict. Recently, however, scholars have clarified that while Union and Confederate veterans could set aside their differences after the war, each side was willing to sacrifice reconciliation to emphasize the righteousness of their own cause. This article concurs with this latter argument, revealing strong wartime animosity toward Grant that slowly evolved into a reconciliationist opinion of their one-time foe by the 1880s. But citizens were also quick to remind each other that such sentiments had their limits. That was certainly the position of the editors of the

Biloxi Herald in July 1890. As Southerners considered contributing to a Grant-Lee monument symbolizing reconciliation around Independence Day that year, the editors explained their opposition. "We are glad to see our northern friends building monuments to those who served them well. Let them build one to Grant that will pierce the skies and let it go higher and higher, marking in the fullest manner the appreciation and admiration of those he served so well. But for us and ours," they insisted, "let us mourn alone over our dead."³

"Let Our People Take Courage": Mississippians and Grant During the Vicksburg Campaign

On March 29, 1863, Grant ordered the Union Army of the Tennessee to march south, down through Arkansas and Louisiana on the west side of the Mississippi River. They were joined by Union Admiral David Dixon Porter, who led his Union fleet on a daring and swift run past the Confederate defenses at Vicksburg in mid-April and reconnected with Grant opposite Bruinsburg, Mississippi. With the help of Porter's ships, Grant's army crossed the Mississippi River and launched an astonishingly rapid invasion of the state on April 30 and May 1, 1863. Over the next ten weeks, Mississippians clambered for news about Grant's movements and their own army's ability to defend their homes and families and drive Union forces out of the state. Mississippians watched with horror as Union soldiers clashed with Confederates at Port Gibson and Raymond in the first half of May and then captured the state capital at Jackson on May 14. Grant's men destroyed everything of military value and significantly avoided the need to secure their supply lines by feeding off the land. It seemed that Mississippians could only watch with horror as Grant turned his army west, pushing on to the bloody battle of Champion Hill on May 16, followed by the Battle of the Big Black River the following day. But when they reached the outskirts of Vicksburg, Grant discovered that he was wrong in assuming that Confederates were so thoroughly demoralized and exhausted that they would barely resist him. After several attempts to break through Confederate defenses, Grant ordered his army to surround and lay siege to the river town. For forty-seven days, Union soldiers attacked and dug their way into Vicksburg, while

³ *Biloxi Herald*, July 5, 1890.

Confederates inside the city and throughout the state remained equally determined to turn the Federals back.

That resolve was one of the strongest themes to surface in Mississippi newspapers throughout the Vicksburg Campaign. The citizens of Natchez, for example, watched closely from the south. Natchez was a fellow port city along the Mississippi River, and one of the oldest and wealthiest communities in the state. It had fallen to Union control a year earlier in May 1862, shortly after Federal forces captured New Orleans the previous month. As Grant's men marched south through Louisiana, the *Natchez Daily Courier* and Jackson *Mississippian* promised the state that the Federals would be defeated. "Let our forces be concentrated, if necessary, and the enemy can never successfully penetrate the interior far from his river communications." Recalling the logistical challenges that Sherman faced in late 1862 in north Mississippi, the editors promised that if Grant "depend[s] on railroads, these, we know, can be tapped and destroyed. . . . The impossible condition of subsisting a large army in any enemy's country, hundreds of miles from any adequate depot of supplies, without sure and speedy transportation, with a powerful and determined army in front, or flank to contend with must be complied with before such a scheme could be made effective." Readers in Natchez and Jackson were assured that "We are not, to-day, in a bad situation. . . . Let our people take courage."⁴

Four days later, the *Natchez Daily Courier* shared an account from the New York *Tribune* that insisted that "one or two more staggering Union victories would ward off" possible British assistance for the Confederacy and help ensure victory for the North. The *Natchez* editors laughed, rightly reminding their readers that "So far this Spring, the Federals have had 'staggering Union victories,' but somehow or other the results have all been overwhelmingly in favor of the Confederates! A few more such 'staggering victories' would make the whole Federal army 'stagger' home where they belong." It was true, the paper admitted, that Federals had "struck hard" at Port Hudson, Vicksburg, and at Charleston in recent months. But on each occasion, the editors boasted, they had "been splendidly whipped."⁵

By April 22, however, word had spread about Porter's ships slipping

⁴ *Natchez Daily Courier*, April 11, 1863. The *Daily Courier* reprinted this article from the Jackson *Mississippian*.

⁵ *Natchez Daily Courier*, April 15, 1863.

past Vicksburg. Editors in Natchez reported that citizens across the river in St. Joseph and Waterproof, Louisiana, were evacuating, and the *Daily Courier* continued to offer advice on how to best defend Vicksburg.⁶ Others in the state, though, were less concerned. The editor of the *Canton American Citizen*, located about forty miles north of Jackson, stated on April 17 that Union gunboats remained near Vicksburg, and reported rumors that Federal forces were preparing to launch a campaign in the northern part of state. General Grant, they told their readers, had moved his Army of the Tennessee north to join Union General William S. Rosecrans, who was then operating in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. But a week later, the *American Citizen* confirmed in a small notice that Porter's ships had raced past Vicksburg on April 23, and that the discussed invasion from the north were likely "only raids to divert attention, with a hope to draw troops from our seriously threatened defenses at Vicksburg and elsewhere."⁷

Rumors like this continued throughout April 1863 as editors in the larger communities around Vicksburg struggled to keep their readers informed. Despite the confusion, confidence remained high, even in Vicksburg. On April 24, the *Vicksburg Daily Citizen* reported that Grant's "side expeditions" would result in nothing, just as his planned canal had. "As to a direct assault upon Vicksburg, we presume no sane man believes it could be successful even with a force two or three times greater than that now held by Gen. Grant." Editor J. M. Swords clarified the accuracy of this information to his readers, promising that his correspondents and their reports ensured that his paper "exceed[ed] . . . any other public journal" in accuracy. He argued that, "We have good reason to believe that Gen. Grant has not at any time since he was ordered to Vicksburg felt any considerable confidence in the success of the undertaking. Grant, Swords insisted, was directed by "wretched charlatans in Washington." He was one of the few editors open to the idea of Grant as a talented military commander. If left to his own devices, Swords admitted, Grant might have caused "some substantial results." But this would not happen, the *Daily Citizen* promised. "The Mississippi will not be opened this year. Less than two months remain in which our Northern soldiers can operate in the climate of Vicksburg, and this brief space of time will not suffice for

⁶ Natchez *Daily Courier*, April 22, 1863.

⁷ *Canton American Citizen*, April 17, 1863 and April 24, 1863.

a change of base by General Grant's army and the prosecution of any effective campaign."⁸

By early May, Mississippians learned that Grant's army had crossed the river at either Grand Gulf or Port Gibson, but they had little idea where he was going or if Confederate defenders had stopped him along the Mississippi River.⁹ The Jackson *Mississippian* shared their readers' frustrations on May 3 and admitted in a column titled "No Reliable News" that rumors were swirling, but they could confirm nothing. Still, they reminded Jacksonians that all essential military information would go to Confederate Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton, in overall command in Vicksburg, and though he "has no time to telegraph, save to Richmond ... if anything serious had occurred he would have warned the citizens of Jackson, of course."¹⁰ Few Mississippians understood at this point how swiftly Grant was driving his army and how much destruction, including of telegraph lines, the Federal forces left in their wake.

By May 15, the Natchez *Daily Courier* could report little else beyond the Federal capture of Port Gibson, not yet having learned of Raymond's fall or that Grant had already seized control of Jackson.¹¹ Still, editors in Jackson managed to report some news. On May 23, the Jackson *Mississippian* published "Cheering New[s] from Vicksburg" that Confederates there had repulsed six separate attacks in which Union forces suffered terrible losses. Confederate Major General Carter L. Stevenson (who commanded a division in Pemberton's Army of Tennessee) promised that he could "hold Vicksburg indefinitely." While the editors also shared reports that Vicksburg's defenders had "abundant provisions," the Jackson *Mississippian* likely worried readers by adding the clarification that orders had been given that any man feeding corn to stock "will be shot."¹²

By the end of May, it was clear to readers that Grant's army had pushed on to Vicksburg, and his name was appearing with more frequency in news reports. Still, the mood in Mississippi papers was confident. Reporting Federal boasts along the river that "Grant will

⁸ Vicksburg *Daily Citizen*, April 24, 1863.

⁹ Natchez *Daily Courier*, May 2, 1863.

¹⁰ Jackson *Mississippian*, May 3, 1863.

¹¹ Natchez *Daily Courier*, May 15, 1863.

¹² Jackson *Mississippian* report from May 23, 1863, published in Natchez *Daily Courier*, May 28, 1863.

Take Vicksburg in Three Hours,” the *Natchez Daily Courier* retorted on May 30 that Grant had tried but, after seven failed assaults on the Vicksburg defenders, had lost 30,000 men killed, wounded, or captured. “It is a very long ‘three hour’ job Gen. Grant has taken, and one that he is evidently prosecuting under difficulties!”¹³ Similar reports of failed Federal assaults and high casualties appeared in the Jackson *Mississippian* and were reprinted in the Canton *American Citizen*. “Our boys [are] literally piling up their dead in heaps,” the *Mississippian* promised on May 26.¹⁴

Part of the confidence seen in Mississippi papers published in the cities surrounding Vicksburg might have been to inspire similar hope in their readers. But it is also true that the citizens of Natchez had little to worry about — they were already under Federal control — and readers in Canton were comforted by the arrival of forces under Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, who established his headquarters there at the end of May. “Gen. Johnston is decidedly the right man in the right place,” editors promised their Canton readers, not knowing just how badly Johnston would fail the defenders at Vicksburg.¹⁵

Mississippians’ confidence that summer also appeared in communities far from the besieged defenders along the river. This may have been influenced by the Southern victories that spring at battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville in Virginia, and by their own ability to repulse Grant and Sherman’s attempts to conquer Mississippi in 1862. It is also quite possible that the Federal destruction of telegraph and rail lines caused significant confusion about their operations. In Macon, Mississippi, located in the eastern portion of the state north of Meridian, editors at the *Beacon* reported on June 10 that Gen. Johnston was in Jackson, and that Pemberton was devastating Grant at Vicksburg. The paper had to resort to publishing rumors and reported that Grant was likely “retreating toward Grand Gulf. If true we have gained a great victory.” Still, editors warned, nothing was certain. As if to underscore that fact for modern readers, they added that “Gen. Sherman had his leg amputated and since died.”¹⁶ Mississippi newspapers continued to exude hope by the early summer

¹³ *Natchez Daily Courier*, May 30, 1863.

¹⁴ Jackson *Mississippian* report of May 26, 1863, published in the Canton *American Citizen*, May 29, 1863.

¹⁵ Canton *American Citizen*, May 29, 1863.

¹⁶ Macon *Beacon*, June 10, 1863.

of 1863. The only newspaper in the state that seemed to have any confidence in Grant was the Corinth *Chanticleer*. Its editors reported great Union victories around Vicksburg, but they were also Union soldiers of the Second Iowa Infantry occupying Corinth and, in their spare time, publishing the *Chanticleer*.¹⁷

By mid-June, Mississippi editors in and around Jackson and Vicksburg were referencing Grant more by name, but he still seemed to be just another Federal commander who, if their confidence was well placed, would soon be forgotten. This confidence even appeared in Vicksburg as late as July 2 when editors of the *Daily Citizen* reported that “The Yanks outside our city are considerably on the sick list. Fever, dysentery and disgust are their companions, and Grant is their master. The boys are deserting daily and . . . cussing Grant and abolitionists generally.” The editor added a report that “The great Ulysses — the Yankee Generalissimo, surnamed Grant — has expressed his intention of dining in Vicksburg on Saturday next, and celebrating the 4th of July by a grand dinner and so forth. . . . Ulysses must get into the city before he dines in it. The way to cook a rabbit is ‘first catch the rabbit.’” While Vicksburg’s civilians dodged Federal artillery and suffered from dwindling food sources, the editor helped their community laugh at their increasingly desperate situation. The *Daily Citizen* thanked an officer for sharing a “steak of Confederate beef *alias* meat” with his office. “We have tried it,” editor J. M. Swords reported, “and can assure our friends that if it is rendered necessary, they need have no scruples at eating the meat. It is sweet, savory, and tender, and so long as we have a mule left we are satisfied our soldiers will be content to subsist on it.”¹⁸

Two days later, editor Swords fled Vicksburg as Confederate forces surrendered the city to Grant. Union occupiers published his last issue on July 4, 1863. They added a note to remind readers that “Two days bring about great changes. The banner of the Union floats over Vicksburg. Gen. Grant has ‘caught the rabbit;’ he has dined in Vicksburg, and he did bring his dinner with him.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Corinth *Chanticleer*, June 12, 1863.

¹⁸ Vicksburg *Daily Citizen*, July 2, 1863.

¹⁹ Vicksburg *Daily Citizen*, July 4, 1863.

“The Great and Magnanimous Soldier”: Mississippians Reflect on Grant as Veteran and President

When the Civil War ended, black Mississippians were some of the few openly praising Gen. Grant, along with the U.S. Army forces occupying the state. The headquarters of the Freedmen’s Bureau for the Vicksburg district was also housed in the city, making it a symbol of one of Grant’s great victories and of one of the war’s most powerful results. An African-American newspaper in New Orleans, the *Tribune*, reminded its readers in the summer of 1865 that the veteran officers of the Army of the Tennessee were hosting an anniversary ceremony to celebrate Independence Day and their capture of the city. They expected Grant to attend.²⁰ Such celebrations continued throughout Reconstruction and even after Union forces left the state. In July 1877, for example, the Vicksburg *Daily Commercial* reported that the city had enjoyed an unusually festive Fourth of July. “Several hundred people attended the Hibernian picnic at Newman’s Grove,” the editors noted, and “the colored population turned out in large force, fully one thousand men of them going down the river on excursion boats to picnic-grounds, yet there were enough of them left in the city to form a very respectable procession of colored Masons, and a very large audience to listen to the oration of Judge J. S. Morris.” While there were no official fireworks and businesses were not closed, there was, the *Daily Commercial* reported, “the prevalence of a broader National sentiment and a determination to at least partially forget the past which renders the Fourth of July especially distasteful to Vicksburgers, and make it in the future ‘The Day We Celebrate’ as much as any other National holiday.”²¹

Similar festivities had become a tradition on the Gulf Coast. As one Pass Christian resident explained in July 1876, “We are to have a grand picnic, music, dancing, orations, &c., together with a centennial hymn of thanks that, in spite of Grant, the country has not gone to the devil. . . . Apropos of the 4th we of the South have a great deal to be thankful for, and it is very appropriate in us, after four years’ desperate effort, to get out of the Union, to be spasmodically returning thanks because we couldn’t do it.” Still, the man who signed his letter to the editor “Quid Nung,” believed some reticence on the part of Southerners

²⁰ New Orleans *Tribune*, June 7, 1865.

²¹ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, July 5, 1877.

was understandable. “We didn’t get out, and we are satisfied to except [sic] things as they are — like erring children who have been severely punished by a stern father. We are told that we are ‘still a part of the country and should rejoice in its progress,’” Quid Nung explained. But they had been “punished for thirteen consecutive years for one offense, it is natural . . . to feel that it would be better” to belong “to some other family.” Still, he looked forward to Independence Day celebrations on the coast.²²

It was in that same year of 1876, while the nation celebrated its centennial, that Ulysses S. Grant ended his second term in the White House. It is noteworthy that it was also at this time that a flurry of complaints surfaced in Mississippi papers about his presidency. In Starkville, the *Livestock and Farm Journal* declared that it was time to return to Democratic rule after two disastrous terms under Grant. The editors argued that “not a single Republican was found who did not condemn the course of Grant in most unqualified terms. ‘He is drunk half the time, and no decent man can have any influence over him,’” one man complained. The *Journal* reported another who argued that “There is more ground for the impeachment of Grant than there ever was for the impeachment of Andy Johnson.”²³

The Corinth editors of the *Sub-Soiler and Democrat* agreed. They accepted that “there can be no allowance of ‘southern war claims,’ no ‘pensioning of the confederate soldiers,’ no ‘danger that the claims for the value of slaves would be considered and paid,’” but the editors wished similar high standards would rid the nation of “the wholesale corruption and debauchery now manifest in every department of the government. . . .”²⁴ Editors at the Vicksburg *Daily Commercial* agreed, and mocked the local black population to whom the paper claimed Grant and Republicans had made great promises that they failed to keep. In a small section on local issues, the *Daily Commercial* shared a fictional conversation between two Freedmen. “Tambo — ‘What’s Geni’l Grant a doin’ now?’ Sambo — ‘He’s done retired to make a crap on dat forty acres of land wid dat mule you niggers spected you was gwine get.’”²⁵ The Democratic editors argued that even Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes would be better than Grant. He would bring

²² Handsboro *Democrat*, July 1, 1876.

²³ Starkville *Livestock and Farm Journal*, August 3, 1876.

²⁴ Corinth *Sub-Soiler and Democrat*, September 29, 1876.

²⁵ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, March 23, 1877.

Reconstruction and occupation to an end and fulfill Grant's "empty" promise to "let us have peace."²⁶

Grant was barely out of office when Mississippians started to miss the devil they knew and showed early signs of reconciliation. In 1878, the *Daily Commercial* refuted rumors that Gen. Grant had publicly criticized Confederate Maj. Gen. Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson while Grant was on his European tour. Responding to these charges, the *Daily Commercial* reported that Grant refuted such claims. "I knew Jackson when he was a cadet, served with him in the Mexican war, and know that he enjoyed the confidence and respect of all who knew him," Grant explained. Jackson "was regarded as a man of great ability, great perseverance, and great piety." The retired General insisted that whatever Jackson did in the war, "he did conscientiously [sic], no matter whether it was right or wrong. I have compared him . . . with Cromwell."²⁷

It was statements like this one that led to a noticeable shift in the tone with which white Mississippians spoke about Grant after Reconstruction. The corruption scandals of his presidency and his support for the Fifteenth Amendment, which enfranchised hundreds of thousands of African-American adult male citizens, faded from memory. These comments were replaced with a view quite similar to the one Grant used to describe Stonewall Jackson. White Mississippians did not agree with Grant's Unionist loyalties, but they respected him as a worthy foe. In the summer of 1878, the Vicksburg *Daily Herald* published a piece titled "Grant Again," signifying the frequency with which they returned to this issue. They reported that Grant had expressed admiration for both Jackson and Lee, as well as Joseph E. Johnston and Albert Sidney Johnston. It seemed, the *Daily Herald* reported "that there is more in the man [Grant] than his enemies have been in the habit of admitting," though there were limits to their admiration. The editors clarified quickly that they would not support Grant if he sought a third term in office.²⁸

The white citizens of Columbus, Mississippi, however, were not convinced. Grant remained a Republican, the Columbus *Index* reminded their readers, insisting that the sole purpose of that party "is now, and has been ever since it was organized, to destroy the government and

²⁶ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, September 20, 1877.

²⁷ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, June 24, 1878.

²⁸ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, July 29, 1878.

build upon its ruins a despotism." The good news, the editors explained, was that "States rights and local self-government will survive" even if Grant or even Sherman were elected to a third term. "The time has passed when the Federal government could over-ride successfully and with impunity the power-rights and authority of States. . . . The war . . . was not waged against States rights, but against secession." The South was sufficiently independent, the *Index* promised, to survive another Republican president so long as they remained in the Union.²⁹

By the late 1870s and early 1880s, white Mississippians heavily involved in business and trade joined others praising Grant. As one Mississippi Democrat in Vicksburg claimed when he pledged to support Grant for president in 1880, his vote was earned not by "U.S. Grant as the former president, but as the great and magnanimous soldier; as the commander-in-chief of all the nation's armies; as the man who proclaimed that the terms of the immortal Lee's capitulation must forever remain inviolate." Grant had, the author argued, "spoken not in suppliant but in manly tones of ex-rebels; as the man who says there must be peace between the sections; and lastly, as the chiefest [sic] citizen and savior of the nation; and who utters to the world that war, if it made the United States anything, made it a nation for all time to come." This citizen of Vicksburg believed that "the South is not disloyal; she is simply an enemy to herself. Just now she is beginning to open her eyes to the fact. . . . Like the Hebrew children of old, she is in a wilderness and she is beginning to see that the path of salvation must be blazed by the Republican party, with U.S. Grant at the head of it."³⁰

While this was just a letter to the editor in the *Daily Commercial* and cannot speak for the entire community, additional signs surfaced by 1880 that showed that Vicksburg's opinion of Grant was changing. In 1865, it was the general officers of the Army of the Tennessee that organized Independence Day celebrations and invited Grant to join them. Fifteen years later, however, the "City Fathers" of Vicksburg, knowing that Grant was touring the country and stopping in nearby New Orleans that spring, formed a bi-racial board to extend a formal invitation to Grant to visit Vicksburg.³¹ Additional invitations came from African American leaders in Jackson and Greenville, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana, where representatives from the two states

²⁹ Columbus *Index* published in the Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, August 6, 1879.

³⁰ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, December 30, 1879.

³¹ Vicksburg *Daily Commercial*, March 30, 1880.

offered a joint invitation to Grant to return to Vicksburg. A letter to the editor of the African American newspaper the *Weekly Louisianian*, reported that “Every man you talk with says he is for Grant first and last. . . . While there are many other worthy men, there are none whose names can awake such enthusiasm as that of Grant, or would cause the colored men of this parish to awake to a sense of their duty—to vote and have that vote counted.”³² Ten days later, reporting on Grant’s visit to New Orleans, the editors of the *Weekly Louisianian* reported that “General Grant is the lion of the town. Southern hospitality is maintaining its reputation.” They referenced the economic growth credited to Grant’s presidency, arguing that “The Grant boom still booms.”³³

Not everyone agreed on this public praise for Grant. In January 1885, the *Brandon Republican* complained that the *Vicksburg Post* wanted to return Grant to his title as General of the U.S. Army. The *Republican* suggested that the next request from the *Post* would be for Adelbert Ames, the unpopular Reconstruction Governor of the state, to return to his former office as well. “Thank God there are but few Southern men who want to lick the foot of the man who kicked them after they were down,” the *Brandon Republican* claimed. The *Vicksburg Post* quickly defended their praise of Grant, but clarified that they had no desire for Ames’s return.³⁴ The *Brandon* editor’s fury is noteworthy, but it is important to recognize that by the early 1880s, white Mississippians’ opinion of Grant had radically improved, and black Mississippians’ continued to view him as one of the key architects of emancipation.

“The Nation’s Hero”: Mississippians Mourn General Grant

Mississippians’ public opinions of Grant fluctuated in the postwar period, with praise sometimes followed by critical reminders of his presidency, Republican rule, or wartime defeats. But if there is one powerful indicator of just how much Mississippians had come to respect their former foe, it came with his death on July 23, 1885. A flood of reflection and mourning swept the state. The *Natchez Weekly Democrat* insisted that “when the news came that death had claimed his mortal

³² *Weekly Louisianian*, April 3, 1880.

³³ *Weekly Louisianian*, April 10, 1880.

³⁴ *Brandon Republican* quoted in the *Vicksburg Evening Post*, January 16, 1885.

part” the South was gripped in “sorrow for the loss of one who as an American won so much of renown in a contest in which they were the unsuccessful parties.” The editors clarified that “of the character of Gen. Grant as a soldier or as a statesmen the time has not yet arrived for it to be correctly appreciated,” but they sought to “assure our Northern friends that we in the South . . . sympathized with the afflictions and sorrow for the death of this distinguished American soldier.”³⁵ The Greenville *Times* marked the occasion by publishing an account about the empathy Grant had shown a Confederate widow during the war, advocating for her despite challenges from other commanders and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.³⁶ The Magnolia *Times* reported Grant’s death under the headline “The Nation Mourns the Loss of Its Great Military and Civic Chieftain.” The Yazoo *Herald* described Grant as showing chivalry to a Confederate general’s wife during the Vicksburg Campaign.³⁷ The *Carrollton Conservative*, published a full-page review of Grant’s life from childhood through his meeting “Miss Dent” and onto his military career and later presidency, and the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* offered its readers similar reports that spanned multiple pages of print.³⁸

The Mississippi press that covered Grant’s death in greatest detail, however, was in Vicksburg. On July 31, 1885, half of the *Weekly Commercial Herald*, an eight-page paper, was dedicated to accounts of Grant’s life and death. This was a press known in the 1870s for its highly partisan critiques of President Ulysses S. Grant and Federal Reconstruction policies, as well as Mississippi leaders like James Lusk Alcorn. But in the summer of 1885, at least on the topic of Grant, these Vicksburg editors had changed their position. They presented readers with “Sketches of His Life in Pen and Pencil” reminding the city of Vicksburg that Grant was “The Nation’s Hero.” Coverage of Grant’s death continued into October that year, and included the publication of the eulogy that famed abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher delivered in Boston. At least three Mississippi papers — the Panola *Weekly*, the Magnolia *Gazette*, and the Grenada *Sentinel* — carried detailed coverage of Beecher’s speech, which included his reminder that the South’s devotion to slavery had caused the war, but fell under the

³⁵ Natchez *Weekly Democrat*, July 29, 1885.

³⁶ Greenville *Times*, August 8, 1885.

³⁷ Yazoo *Herald*, August 7, 1885.

³⁸ *The Carrollton Conservative*, August 1, 1885; Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, July 29, 1885.

headline “The Plymouth Pastor Delivers a Warm Eulogium on the Life, Virtues, and Heroic Deeds of the Departed Warrior Statesman.”³⁹

The Ulysses S. Grant of 1885 was a very different man in the eyes of white Mississippians than the Grant of 1863. Their opinion of him improved sharply after Reconstruction ended, and his comments about Confederate commanders earned Mississippians’ respect. The state continued to show signs of hesitation in its praise, but as this review of Mississippi’s evolving news coverage of Grant demonstrates, the state genuinely mourned him at his death, because they had warmed to the man years earlier. The Magnolia state remained decidedly Democratic until the end of the twentieth century, but one Republican, Ulysses S. Grant, proved to be Mississippi’s most unlikely hero.

³⁹ Panola *Weekly*, October 31, 1865; Magnolia *Gazette*, October 30, 1885; Grenada *Sentinel*, October 31, 1885.

