

2013

Wrong Job, Wrong Place: John C. Pemberton's Civil War

Michael B. Ballard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh>

Recommended Citation

Ballard, Michael B. (2013) "Wrong Job, Wrong Place: John C. Pemberton's Civil War," *Journal of Mississippi History*. Vol. 75: No. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh/vol75/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Mississippi History* by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact aquilastaff@usm.edu.

Wrong Job, Wrong Place: John C. Pemberton's Civil War

Michael B. Ballard

John Pemberton had a seemingly never ending list of factors that affected his Civil War career. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 10, 1814, he married a Virginia girl, which was not enough to cancel out his Yankee-birth handicap. He graduated from West Point in 1837 (27th out of a class of 50) and went on to serve in the Mexican War, the Second Seminole War, and in a variety of outposts. Except for brief combat experience early in the Mexican War, Pemberton's army duties consisted mostly of staff work in war and peace. His persona changed from his rather carefree days at West Point, and he became an officer hardened by a soldier's life. From a likeable person, he gradually turned into somewhat of a martinet. When the Civil War began, he joined the Confederacy because of his wife Pattie's influence. Had Pemberton married a woman from the north, he would have fought for the Union. But he did not. He was very close to his wife and was an adoring father. After resigning from the U.S. Army, Pemberton went to Virginia. The new Confederate officer had never had the opportunity to lead men in battle, and witnessing war in Mexico had confirmed his preference for staff duties.¹

Pemberton began his Confederate military career as an artillery instructor in the Norfolk, Virginia, area. He was then sent to command a district in South Carolina, ultimately taking command of the District of South Carolina and Georgia when the previous commander, Robert E. Lee, returned to Richmond.

Right away problems and characteristics emerged to cause Pemberton grief. His birthplace did not sit well with South Carolinians. He had trouble communicating effectively with political leaders there (as did most normal people). Predictably, he backed off serving in the field, preferring office paperwork. His preference not only prevented

¹ Michael B. Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 24, 27–35, 40–41, 43–63, 85–86.

his gaining leadership in the field, but also deprived his personal staff of that same experience. His long absences from the field kept him from bonding with the men in his army. He never developed a solid interaction with the officers and men who served under him. Doubtless many of them never saw him.

Pemberton created a political storm when he made clear that he would surrender Charleston before risking the destruction of his army. South Carolina politicians considered that a treasonous position. The resulting uproar stuck in his mind when he was sent to his next assignment. Confederate president Jefferson Davis responded to criticism of Pemberton by South Carolinians by sending the general to Mississippi to take command of the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana, which included Vicksburg.²

Pemberton, with his organizational skills, soon had his department in the best administrative shape it had ever been in, and he settled into his headquarters at Jackson, Mississippi, to make sure the department details remained on track. He and his staff did a remarkable job attending to issues ignored by the previous commander, Earl Van Dorn.

Ulysses S. Grant's invasion of North Mississippi confronted Pemberton with his first great military challenge. Following his established pattern of leadership, he left management of his field army to Earl Van Dorn. He did consult with Van Dorn, and their army conducted an admirable campaign, retreating before Grant's advance, while at the same time slowing the Federals and fighting off Grant's flank attack from Arkansas. Again Pemberton proved to be just a name to his soldiers; he made no effort to establish rapport with his army, and none of the soldiers talked of seeing the general riding by with his staff to check the battle lines. There were no cheers of support when he was sighted or when his name was mentioned.³

Pemberton endorsed the idea of sending Van Dorn with cavalry on a successful raid to destroy Grant's supply base at Holly Springs. After the raid forced Grant to retreat, Pemberton went to Vicksburg

² Ibid., 86, 90–91, 103–5, 114–15.

³ Ephraim McD. Anderson, *Memoirs: Historical and Personal, Including The Campaigns of the First Missouri Brigade* (1868), ed. Edwin C. Bearss (Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1972), 245; Bell Irvin Wiley and Lucy E. Fay, eds., *"This Infernal War": The Confederate Letters of Sgt. Edwin H. Fay* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1958), 179.

to orchestrate the defeat of William T. Sherman at Chickasaw Bayou near the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg. He used the railroads well to get reinforcements from the North Mississippi front to Vicksburg. It was a staff officer's job, and he embraced it. Pemberton did not go to the battlefield, but confined himself to directing men who arrived in Vicksburg. He funneled reinforcements to Stephen D. Lee, commanding the Confederate Army in the field, and eventually Sherman gave up and retreated back to the Mississippi River.⁴

During all these events, Pemberton continued to neglect building a close relationship with his officers and men. He had a devoted staff, but he had no close friendships with his officers. His soldiers thought him aloof and considered him to be much the martinet. Later, after Grant crossed the Mississippi and began marching inland, Pemberton delivered a rah-rah patriotic sort of message to his men, but there is no evidence that his appeal to their patriotism had a great effect. They responded positively to their commanders and ignored the commanding general. Most of his officers considered him abrasive and had little confidence in his leadership. While many citizens, including political leaders in Mississippi, preferred Pemberton to Van Dorn, they never warmed up to the "Yankee" general.

In early 1863, Grant tried many approaches to take Vicksburg, but they all failed because of a variety of circumstances. Yet each move Grant made, from attempts to follow streams on the Louisiana side of the river south in order to bypass Vicksburg, to the Yazoo Pass operation, to the Steele Bayou/Deer Creek expedition fiasco (where the Union almost lost several ironclads), kept Pemberton guessing about what Grant was up to.

A diversion that did work involved the cavalry raid led by Benjamin Grierson. Grierson's column of seventeen hundred men slashed from northeast Mississippi on a southwesterly course through the center of Mississippi before arriving safely in Baton Rouge. Grierson's men destroyed supplies along the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and the Southern Railroad of Mississippi, the latter connecting Vicksburg to potential reinforcements, ammunition, and arms from the east. Grierson's campaign proved to be one of the most successful of the war;

⁴ Ballard, *Pemberton*, 127–29. On the North Mississippi and Chickasaw Bayou campaigns, see Ballard, *The Civil War in Mississippi: Major Campaigns and Battles* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 105–29.

his men destroyed fifty-six miles of railroad track and telegraph lines, captured and destroyed some three thousand stands of rifles, and took many horses and mules much needed by Pemberton's forces.

Meanwhile, Grant, frustrated for weeks by unworkable plans and failed expeditions, decided to take his army south through Louisiana and cross into Mississippi near Port Gibson. Pemberton's poor communications and interactions with his commanders cost him an opportunity to capture Union ironclads and led to a bitter feud with one of his subordinates, William Loring. During the Fort Pemberton campaign, he had also failed to listen to warnings from General John Bowen about Grant's march south on the Louisiana side of the river. Grierson had Pemberton's eyes looking east when he should have been looking west. Pemberton could not seem to focus on more than one problem at a time and obviously made a bad choice when he refused to take Bowen's warnings seriously.⁵

Meanwhile, Grant crossed the Mississippi at Bruinsburg below Grand Gulf, won battles at Port Gibson (where, despite Bowen's warnings, Pemberton had sent no reinforcements), Raymond, and Jackson. Meanwhile Pemberton wrestled with his own plans and orders from General Joseph E. Johnston, who arrived in Jackson in time to give up hope right away without resisting Grant.⁶

As Pemberton gathered his army minus two divisions at the Big Black River to protect Vicksburg, he received an order from Johnston to march to Clinton, where they could join forces. Johnston was nowhere near Clinton at the time and was, in fact, marching his army to Canton after abandoning Jackson. Pemberton initially intended to obey, but he realized that if he moved toward Clinton, he would leave Vicksburg vulnerable to Grant. Pemberton conferred with his generals, some saying Johnston should be obeyed, and some saying, as Pemberton preferred, that he should march toward Raymond and Grant's supply line. The voting particulars are not certain since different versions were later reported. But Pemberton decided on Raymond.

⁵ Ballard, *Pemberton*, 133–40; Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 187–88, 207–8; *Daily Delta*, November 12, 1862. The text of Pemberton's patriotic speech is quoted in Ballard, *Pemberton*, 130–31.

⁶ Joseph E. Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations, Directed, During the Late War Between the States* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 175–76. Johnston, after arriving at Jackson, sent a terse message to Richmond: "I am too late."

Johnston did not think Vicksburg worth fighting for; Jefferson Davis insisted it was, so Pemberton exercised caution in favor of Davis's directives. Ultimately, as he moved his army toward Raymond, he received another order from Johnston to join forces. This time, perhaps because he considered it dangerous to disobey two orders, or because he felt that if something went wrong he could blame Johnston, Pemberton tried to reverse his course, but he was unable to do so before Grant attacked. Johnston, still at Canton, wanted to join Pemberton at Clinton. Grant, who was aware of Johnston's second message because it had been intercepted by a Union spy, ordered two corps west to block Pemberton from getting to Clinton. To obey Johnston's second message, Pemberton had to throw his army into reverse, for it was strung out from the northwest near the Southern Railroad of Mississippi that connected Jackson and Vicksburg to the southeast at the Raymond road. As he tried to reverse his course, a cumbersome task at best, Grant's lead elements attacked at Champion Hill.⁷

The fight at Champion Hill was the first and only time Pemberton led an army in battle, and his lack of experience and poor relationships with his division commanders was evident. Some officers openly laughed at his orders. Pemberton's deployment of troops, a result of his army's position when Grant attacked, was north to south ranging from the railroad to the Raymond-Edwards road, consisting of the divisions of Carter Stevenson, John Bowen, and William Loring. Stevenson's division was wrecked during the early fighting. Bowen, who had Federals in his front, hesitated to reinforce Stevenson. Yet Bowen decided he must obey Pemberton's call for saving Stevenson, so he led a magnificent charge that almost broke Grant's line. However, a lack of reinforcements ultimately forced Bowen to retreat. Loring made no move to help until it was too late. Pemberton had to order a retreat. During the process, Loring's division was cut off and circled around to join Johnston. Is it possible Loring deliberately separated his division from Pemberton's army? Given his attitude toward the commanding general, he could not have been displeased at the way things worked out. There is no way to know Loring's intent, but since he was threatened by Federals pursuing Stevenson and Bowen, he must be given the benefit of the doubt.

⁷ Ballard, *Pemberton*, 153–60.

Pemberton waited for Loring on the west side of the Big Black, but after his forces were defeated there, he pulled his army back into Vicksburg where two fresh divisions awaited. He could have left Vicksburg to Grant and moved to the northeast, but he never considered it. Given the deployment of Grant's army, whether Pemberton could have escaped is problematical. If he had made the effort, William T. Sherman was in a position to attack Pemberton's right flank, and Sherman's corps was fresh, having so far participated only in the Battle of Jackson, which had not been much of a battle at all. Pemberton's only thought was that President Davis had said Vicksburg must be held and that was that. Never mind that Johnston had warned Pemberton about getting trapped in Vicksburg. The Union Navy blocked supplies and reinforcements from Louisiana, so Pemberton's only hope would be reinforcements, which unfortunately for his besieged army never came. Pemberton's men repelled two Grant attacks on May 19 and 22; at that point, the Federals began regular siege operations.

Having only limited contact with Johnston and unable to receive supplies, Pemberton reduced rations until it became obvious that Johnston had no intention of offering any help. Pemberton had much food stored away when he decided to surrender on July 4, so he obviously hoped to hold out longer.⁸

Despite the loss of Vicksburg, Pemberton did the best he could within the context of his background, especially his lack of battlefield experience and his personal isolation from his officers and men. He did well what his preferences, ability, and personality allowed him to do. He was outgeneraled by the best general the Union had, as many others would be.

After the surrender, Pemberton received no further assignment at his rank of Lt. General, for he had become a pariah to other southern troops who unfairly thought he had intentionally surrendered Vicksburg. Pemberton proved his loyalty by accepting a reduction in rank and spent the rest of the war in the Eastern Theater as an artillery officer. He survived the war, tried and failed at farming in Virginia, and eventually returned to Pennsylvania where his family welcomed him back into their foreign export business. His work brought him to Jackson, Mississippi, and one of his former aides invited him to visit

⁸ *Ibid.*, 167–200.

Vicksburg. Pemberton could not bring himself to do so. He lived with his wife and family for the rest of his life and died July 13, 1881.⁹

Looking back at Pemberton's defining moment, which was the Vicksburg campaign, it is worth considering the "what ifs" of his performance. Suppose Pemberton had been more experienced, more adept at building teamwork, more able to read the enemy's activities, popular with his soldiers, or had a navy to battle David Porter's Union fleet. The navy question is easy; the Confederacy had no navy on the Mississippi able to take on the Federal fleet, so that is a moot point. But otherwise, would he have done better? That question must be considered in light of the flawed Confederate command system. Pemberton's commanding general ordered him to do one thing, the president of the Confederacy another. Davis had encouraged Pemberton to communicate directly with him, bypassing Johnston. Johnston and Davis detested each other, and it showed. Pemberton's best was not good enough for a number of reasons, but had his best been much better, the result would very likely have been the same. Why? He still would have had no navy. More importantly and more to the point, he would have had to deal with Joseph Johnston and Jefferson Davis, who together ensured the loss of Vicksburg at Pemberton's expense.

⁹ For more on Pemberton's post-war years, *ibid.*, 188–202.

