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# A Soldier's Legacy: William T. Rigby and the Establishment of Vicksburg National Military Park

*Terrence J. Winschel*

“Vicksburg National Military Park Bill Passed the Senate Today,” blazed the headlines of the *Vicksburg Evening Post* on February 10, 1899, which confidently asserted it would “Now be Signed by the President.” Although temperatures in the city plummeted below zero that day, the citizens of Vicksburg hailed passage of the bill. “The Park will be a great thing for Vicksburg,” editorialized the paper, “it will be a source of pleasure to our own people, and will annually attract thousands of visitors from various parts of the Nation.” Eleven days later President William McKinley affixed his signature to the bill, by which the Vicksburg battlefield became a national military park. There was cause for celebration and pride in the city and across the nation, especially among those whose service and sacrifice would now be memorialized. Yet, no one associated with the effort was more pleased than former Union captain William T. Rigby, who had labored for almost four years in behalf of the park, and was destined to serve on the park commission for the next thirty years until his death in 1929.<sup>1</sup>



William Titus Rigby, born on November 3, 1840, in Red Oak Grove, Iowa, was the first of four children of Washington Augustus Rigby and his wife, the former Lydia Barr. Rigby's father was a devout Methodist and a pacifist farmer who watched with mounting anxiety throughout the decade of the 1850s as the debate over slavery threatened to tear the nation asunder. With the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, civil war became a reality. Although anxious to enlist, Rigby would not do so without the consent of his father, who was steadfast in his opposition.

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<sup>1</sup>*Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 10, 1899.

Union reverses marked the first year of conflict, and the war continued longer than most people had anticipated. In the summer of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for 300,000 additional men to fill vacant ranks. It was a call that William Rigby had to answer, and in July the young man finally gained his father's permission to enlist. He assisted in enrolling the 102 volunteers who made up Company B, 24th Iowa Infantry and was elected second lieutenant. The Red Oak Boys, as the company was called, experienced their first combat during the Vicksburg campaign, in which they fought at Port Gibson, Champion Hill, and throughout the siege of the fortress city. Little could Rigby have known at the time that his association with Vicksburg would come to dominate the final third of his life.

At war's end Rigby was mustered out of service on July 17, 1865, and returned home to Iowa. Rather than content himself with work on the family farm, he enrolled at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, by which he was awarded an A.B. degree in 1869. While at Cornell he met and fell in love with Sarah Evaline Cattron, whom he married on June 18, 1870. Will and Eva were devoted to one another, and their union was one of bliss, producing three children. Rigby pursued a career in banking and, upon his father's death in 1881, also ran the family farm that encompassed 640 acres. Like most Union veterans, he was an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic, belonging to Post 109 in Stanwood. In 1891, however, he moved to Mount Vernon to provide a better educational setting for his and Eva's daughter Grace. But as they settled in, their lives were soon transformed by the spirit of nationalism that swept across America like a whirlwind and led to their destiny in Mississippi.<sup>2</sup>



In the closing years of the nineteenth century, as the generation that fought the great war died, veterans of the blue and gray banded together and moved to preserve the fields of battle on which they had fought. Governors' mansions and statehouses across the nation were still dominated

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Rigby, *The Rigby Family* (published privately for family consumption, 1990), 5–6. Rigby's marriage established a family relationship to John F. Merry, who had married Eva's sister, Emma, on November 26, 1866, in Manchester, Iowa. The two men formed a close personal bond, and Merry's influence had a profound impact on Rigby that practically directed his life for more than thirty years.

by Civil War veterans, as were Congress and the White House, so that such sentiment was quickly acted upon. In 1890 Congress set aside the battlefields around Chattanooga, Tennessee, as the nation's first national military park. The establishment of Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland, site of the single bloodiest day of combat in American military history, quickly followed. In 1894 the battlefield at Shiloh was also set aside by Congress, and in 1895, Gettysburg was declared a national military park.

The same spirit of nationalism that led to the establishment of these parks inspired thousands of Union and Confederate veterans to gather in Vicksburg in May 1890 for the Blue & Gray Reunion. Jointly sponsored by Camp 32 of the United Confederate Veterans and Grand Army of the Republic Post 7, both of Vicksburg, the week-long event drew veterans and politicians from across the country. It is unlikely that Rigby attended the reunion, but among those present was former Confederate lieutenant general Stephen D. Lee of Mississippi, who along with Rigby was destined to be indelibly linked with Vicksburg. Those in attendance were saddened to see the battlefield at Vicksburg all but forgotten. Although many of the forts and long lines of trenches that played such a significant role in the forty-seven-day siege of the city were still visible, no effort to preserve them was evident. The former soldiers left Vicksburg convinced that the fields on which they had fought and the thousands of their comrades who had died "deserved more and must be properly marked and preserved by our government." It was an idea that strongly appealed to Lee.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>"Administrative History Vicksburg National Military Park." Draft manuscript by Edwin C. Bearss. Edwin C. Bearss Series, Box 2, Vicksburg National Military Park (VNMP), Vicksburg, Mississippi; Letter, Stephen D. Lee to S. A. Cunningham, January 16, 1908, quoted in Herman Hattaway, *General Stephen D. Lee* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1976), 224.

Lee commanded a brigade in the defense of Vicksburg. During the war he rose to the rank of lieutenant general and led a corps in the Army of Tennessee. In the aftermath of conflict, he lived in Mississippi and was a farmer, state senator, and the first president of what is today Mississippi State University. Lee was active in veterans' affairs and went on to become commander-in-chief of the United Confederate Veterans. More than many of his contemporaries, Lee supported these preservation efforts, which illustrates his embrace of the New South philosophy and willingness to work with former enemies for the interests of a unified nation. He wrote to a friend, "While I will remain forever loyal to the tender memories of the past, I will continue to be loyal also to our great country." This sentiment made him immensely popular throughout the South and established him as the spokesman for Confederate veterans.

The following year, the Governor's Greys from Iowa led by Captain John F. Merry visited Vicksburg. Although a goodwill visit, Merry's principal objective was to sound out southern veterans and the people of the Hill City as to their views on the establishment of a national military park at Vicksburg. Locally, a man named Tom Lewis was urging city officials to appropriate funds for the purchase and preservation of the forts that ringed the town. His efforts, however, failed to stir elected officials into action. It was obvious to Merry that congressional action was necessary and that only the veterans themselves could succeed in this effort. To do so would require the support of former Confederate soldiers, not just those in Mississippi, but from across the South. To Captain Merry, Lee's participation was deemed vital to gain southern support for the park idea. Because of his service in the Vicksburg campaign, Merry also coaxed his brother-in-law, Will Rigby, to get involved in the project.<sup>4</sup>

John F. Merry was born in Peninsula, Summit County, Ohio, on March 24, 1844. His family migrated to Iowa in 1856 and settled in Delhi, Delaware County. On August 22, 1862, he enlisted in Company K, 21st Iowa Infantry, but was discharged for disability on May 23, 1863. He re-entered service on May 18, 1864, as a second lieutenant in Company F, 46th Iowa Infantry, a 100-day regiment, but saw no action during his time of service. (David B. Henderson was colonel of the 46th Iowa and the association Merry formed with Henderson during their brief service together would later bear fruit in the establishment of Vicksburg National Military Park.) Following the war, Merry taught school then, in 1880, went to work for the Illinois Central Railroad as an excursion agent. He rose to become assistant general passenger agent and later to general immigration agent. As such he became one of the most powerful and influential men in the mid-West. Ever active in veterans' affairs, he served as departmental commander of the Department of Iowa, G.A.R.

The Governor's Greys from Dubuque, Iowa, arrived in Vicksburg on Thursday, February 8, 1894, after having participated in the Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans. The group stayed at the New Pacific House Hotel on Washington Street.

Lee was enthusiastic about the idea. Although defeat at Vicksburg had sealed the doom of the Confederacy, the general believed that the southern soldiers who had fought so valiantly at Vicksburg deserved to

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<sup>4</sup>*Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 9, 1894.

be honored rather than shadowed by shame. He promised both his support and energies on behalf of the enterprise and agreed to the formation of the Vicksburg National Military Park Association. On October 22, 1895, a preliminary meeting of the Association, called by Captain Merry, was held in the Club Room of the New Pacific House (commonly called the Piazza Hotel). Lee was elected chairman and addresses were made by Lee, Merry, and others, and plans were outlined for a permanent organization. The purpose of the Association was to petition Congress to establish a national military park at Vicksburg. Lee was elected president of the new organization. The other officers were Charles Davidson, formerly of the 25th Iowa Infantry, vice-president, and Charles C. Flowerree, of Mississippi (former colonel of the 7th Virginia Infantry), treasurer. Rigby was elected secretary, and from the moment of its inception, proved the most dedicated, energetic, and committed member of the Association. Fifty shares of capital stock were sold for \$5.00 per share, the proceeds of which would cover the expenses of the Association, and the veterans moved quickly to initiate their work.<sup>5</sup>

On November 18, 1895, the charter of incorporation was signed by Governor John M. Stone and issued the following day by Mississippi Secretary of State George M. Govan. Anticipating that the charter would be approved, on November 20, a train carrying 100 directors and members of the Association representing the Northwest left Chicago bound for Vicksburg. The *Vicksburg Evening Post* recorded their arrival:

Capt. Merry's party reached the city at 7:30 o'clock, at which hour a vast throng assembled at the depot to greet its arrival. A detachment of the Warren Light Artillery was already on the ground for the purpose of firing the salute, but the Volunteer Southrons and band, and the resident veterans of both armies, acting as a guard of honor, escorted Gov. Stone, Gen. S. D. Lee and other distinguished gentlemen to the platform where they awaited the coming of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Vicksburg Evening Post*, October 22, 1895; Minutes, Vicksburg National Military Park Association, Administrative Series, Box 7, Folder 158, VNMP.

This meeting was held in conjunction with the Western Waterways Convention, as many of the most powerful and influential politicians and business leaders in the Mississippi River Valley, mostly veterans North and South, would be in attendance.

Because of Captain Merry's pressing duties with the railroad, he knew that he would be unable to devote the time necessary for success of the association. Thus, he convinced his brother-in-law, William T. Rigby, to get involved.

visitors. As the train came in the guns of the Warren Light Artillery signaled its approach and seventeen rounds were fired—the Governor’s salute.

Following a series of welcoming remarks, the visitors were escorted to the Carroll Hotel “by a procession which would have done honor to a President or Emperor.”<sup>6</sup>

The following morning, November 22, a meeting of the incorporators was held in the parlors of the Hotel Carroll at 10 o’clock and the articles of incorporation were read and adopted. The first meeting of the board was then called to order by Lee. Former Union general Lucius Fairchild of Wisconsin rose and recommended “that the proposed Park should include the lines of the earthworks of the opposing armies and the land included within these lines, with such additions as are necessary to include the Headquarters of Generals Grant and Pemberton. Such of the water batteries as it may be desirable to designate, and other historical spots, the whole not to exceed four thousand acres.” The recommendation met with universal approbation and the Association’s Executive Committee was instructed to urge Congress to establish a park along the lines proposed by Fairchild.<sup>7</sup>

That afternoon, Lee called into session the first meeting of the executive committee of the board of directors. A committee consisting of Lee, Davidson, Rigby, Flowerree, and Edward Scott Butts of Mississippi was constituted and charged with: preparing a bill for the establishment of a park at Vicksburg, presenting the bill to Congress, and providing information as to the cost of land. The committee, which was to have full power on behalf of the Association, immediately arranged for a survey of desired land to be made and for a map to be produced of the proposed park. Options on the land were secured over the next few weeks illustrating the sentiment throughout Vicksburg and Warren County genuinely favoring the establishment of a park.<sup>8</sup>

Members of the executive committee spoke at length with Thomas C. Catchings, U. S. representative from Mississippi’s third congressional

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<sup>6</sup> Minutes, Vicksburg National Military Park Association, Administrative Series, Box 7, Folder 158, VNMP; *Vicksburg Evening Post*, November 22, 1895.

<sup>7</sup> Minutes, Vicksburg National Military Park Association, Administrative Series, Box 7, Folder 158, VNMP.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Edward Scott Butts was former captain of Company H, 21st Mississippi Infantry.

district, which encompassed Vicksburg. A former Confederate soldier who had served in Congress since 1885, Catchings cautioned that the plan was too ambitious, and that because of the desired size of the park, it would meet with opposition in Congress, especially from the tight-fisted speaker Thomas B. Reed of Maine. Catchings recommended that the proposed size of the park be reduced to the bare minimum needed to protect the key features of the battlefield.<sup>9</sup>

On January 10, 1896, a second meeting of the executive committee was called to order by General Lee in the parlors of the Hotel Carroll. Rigby made a motion outlining the size and location of the proposed park. The proposed park would encompass only 1,200 acres, and the average cost per acre would be \$35. Members of the Association were startled at the proposal limiting the size of the park as well as the asking price for land. Despite disappointments and concerns on the part of the committee members, the recommendation was freely discussed and passed. Lee, Davidson, Rigby, and Flowerree were instructed to go to Washington and have Representative Catchings introduce the bill.<sup>10</sup>

Lee, however, did not travel to Washington because of an outbreak of smallpox at the Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College in Starkville, where he served as president. But the others went to the nation's capital, where they met John Merry, James G. Everest (a member of the Association and commander of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee), and Representative Catchings. They remained in Washington for two weeks, during which Catchings's bill (H.R. 4339) was referred

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Clendinen Catchings was born on January 11, 1847, near Brownsville, in Hinds County, Mississippi. Following the war, he was admitted to the bar and practiced law in Vicksburg. He also served as a state senator and was attorney general of Mississippi from 1877–1885. Elected to Congress in 1885, Catchings served eight terms in Washington, after which he returned to Vicksburg and resumed his law practice. He died on December 24, 1927, and is interred in Vicksburg's Cedar Hill Cemetery.

Thomas B. Reed was born on October 18, 1839, in Portland, Maine. Following graduation from Bowdoin College, he pursued a career in law. He served briefly during the Civil War as an acting assistant paymaster with the Navy from April 1864–November 1865. He spent the remainder of his life either practicing law or holding elected office. Reed served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1877–1899, twice as Speaker, 1889–1891 and 1895–1899, when he resigned his seat. He died on December 7, 1902, and is interred in Evergreen Cemetery in Portland.

<sup>10</sup> Minutes, Vicksburg National Military Park Association, Administrative Series, Box 7, Folder 158, VNMP. The main body encompassed the area where Grant's assaults of May 19 and 22, 1863, took place. From the main body of the park, wings radiated to the Mississippi River above and below Vicksburg.



to the Committee on Military Affairs, chaired by Congressman John A. T. Hull from Iowa.<sup>11</sup>

From Washington, Rigby wrote to Lee and provided him with a detailed account of their work. Greatly pleased by what he read, the general replied to his colleague, "As you present it, it is most encouraging in every way. I feel that if the bill becomes a law, we will be indebted to Captain Merry more than any one else, and to yourself next for your painstaking, efficient, and complete work in the premises." Confident that the bill would pass, Lee conveyed appreciation for all that Rigby had done, and in expressing his admiration for the Iowan, penned, "I need not tell you that your appointment as one of the commission, or in any other place you desire, in my judgement, is due you, and would be most agreeable to the others who may be so fortunate as to be on the commission. I feel that no one could do more efficient, more loyal work, or more intelligent work."<sup>12</sup>

Eleven days later the bill was released from committee and referred to the Committee on the Whole House on the State of the Union. No action, however, was taken as Speaker Reed, referred to by members of the House of Representatives as "The Czar," refused to allow the bill to reach the floor. The members of the Association returned home sorely disappointed.

Upon his return home to Mt. Vernon, Rigby wrote again to Lee giving him a full account of the trip to Washington and provided an assessment

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<sup>11</sup> Catchings introduced the bill on January 20, 1896. The bill called for the establishment of a three-man commission to manage the park. All three had to be veterans of the siege and defense of Vicksburg, one Confederate representative and two Union representatives.

James G. Everest was a New York native who was born on February 9, 1834. By the outbreak of war he had moved to Illinois where he enlisted as a private in Co. I, 13th Illinois Infantry. Promoted through the ranks to captain of the company he served in that capacity until mustered out on June 23, 1864. He spent his life after the war working with various railroads in the Midwest and was active with veterans' organizations. On March 1, 1899, James Everest was appointed one of the three original commissioners of Vicksburg National Military Park and served on the commission until his death in Chicago on April 17, 1924.

John A. T. Hull was a native of Ohio and resident of Des Moines, Iowa, when the Civil War began. He was appointed a first lieutenant in Company C, 23<sup>d</sup> Iowa Infantry and later became captain of the company. Because he had been severely wounded during the Vicksburg campaign at the Big Black River Bridge on May 17, 1863, Hull was discharged from the service by year's end. From 1872–1890 he served successively as secretary of the Iowa Senate, secretary of state, and lieutenant governor of Iowa. In 1890 he was elected to his first of ten terms in the United States House of Representatives. Hull died on September 26, 1928, and is interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

<sup>12</sup> Letter, Stephen D. Lee to William T. Rigby, January 25, 1896, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-28, VNMP.

of the situation. Lee replied on February 19 and again commended the Association's secretary for his diligence and energy writing, "You have certainly won your spurs by your work in the interest of the Park, and I hope you, at least, will be rewarded for it, if no one else is." Having served in the Mississippi Senate, Lee had a more intimate and pragmatic grasp on politics and sought to assuage Rigby's disappointment. "There is some times a great delay in the passage of a bill in congress, even when unanimously recommended as our bill is," he observed, and cautioned "we may not be able to get it enacted as law this session."<sup>13</sup>

No action was taken on the park measure as winter turned to spring. To gain more wide-spread support for the bill and exert pressure on Congress, Rigby traveled throughout New England where he met with state legislators and spoke at G.A.R. camps. His travels ended abruptly in May when his mother became ill and died. He had made it home in time to be with her in her final days and remained in Iowa much of the summer to settle her affairs. On May 8, 1896, Representative Robert G. Cousins of Iowa wrote to express his condolences. In the same letter he gave Rigby a candid view of matters in Washington: "In regard to the prospects for passage of the Park bill, all I can tell you is that I talked with Mr. Reed about it, and recommended as strongly as I could its recognition . . . He named over about 15 propositions for which he said it was claimed that there were special reasons for passing, and that he could not see how they were to be recognized with an empty treasury."<sup>14</sup>

During the congressional recess, joint resolutions were passed by the legislatures in Mississippi, Iowa, New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island endorsing the park bill. Yet, despite such encouraging actions, it was a winter of frustration for Rigby, Lee, and those connected with the Association. Over the winter, Merry, Rigby, and others planned their strategy for the next session of Congress. Representative David Henderson of Iowa advised, "We have got to take [Speaker] Reed by the throat at this session." Fred Grant (son of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant), then police

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<sup>13</sup> Letter, Stephen D. Lee to William T. Rigby, February 19, 1896, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-28, VNMP.

<sup>14</sup> Letter, Robert G. Cousins to William T. Rigby, May 8, 1896, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-28, VNMP.

Robert Gordon Cousins, whose father had served with Rigby in the 24th Iowa Infantry, was born on January 31, 1859. Following graduation from Cornell College (Rigby's alma mater), he studied law, which he practiced in Tipton, the seat of government for Cedar County. In 1893 he was elected to Congress and served eight terms in the U.S. House of Representatives.

commissioner for New York City, wrote to Rigby on November 9, 1896, offering words of solace and encouragement:

What you say with reference to getting the appropriation for the Park at Vicksburg, is the usual experience, and I am not at all surprised at Speaker Reed not desiring the matter to come up in the last session of congress, owing to the financial condition of the country. However, the outlook for the coming year is much better, and I presume his objections will be less serious.

Supporters of the bill on Capitol Hill were persistent in their entreaty to “Czar” Reed, but to no avail. On December 14, Congressman Henderson assured his friend Rigby: “I have been pushing the Speaker,” but stressed, “much work is needed in that quarter.”<sup>15</sup>

On December 16, a meeting of the board of directors of the Association was called by Lee in the parlors of the Carroll Hotel in Vicksburg. Lee, Rigby, and others were instructed to travel to Washington in January to push the park bill. Accompanied by Fred Grant, James Everest, and members of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee, Lee and Rigby visited with Speaker Reed and urged his support of the park bill. The speaker, although not opposed to the park idea, was not sympathetic to the appropriation necessary for its establishment.<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting on the meeting weeks later, Lee lamented, “I feel all has been done that could be done for the Park Bill. The trouble is, the empty treasury—and Mr. Reed has 8000 arguments on his side.” Knowing that his frustration was shared by Rigby, Lee attempted to buoy the spirit of his new friend and ally, writing, “You have certainly done your duty in

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<sup>15</sup> Letter David Henderson to John F. Merry, November 6, 1896; Letter, Frederick D. Grant to William T. Rigby, November 9, 1896; Letter, Henderson to Rigby, December 14, 1896, Rigby Series, Box 1, Folder 28, VNMP.

David Henderson, a native of Scotland, was born on March 14, 1840. When he was only six years of age his parents immigrated to America and settled in Fayette County, Iowa. At the outbreak of the war, Henderson enlisted in Company C, 12th Iowa Infantry and was elected first lieutenant. He was wounded at Fort Donelson and again at Corinth on October 4, 1862, which resulted in the amputation of his foot. Although he resigned on February 16, 1863, he was later appointed colonel of the 46th Iowa Infantry, a one hundred-day regiment, in which he served with John F. Merry. After the war he studied law and entered politics. Henderson was elected to Congress in 1869 and served ten terms in the U.S. House of Representatives where he served as speaker in the 56th and 57th Congress.

<sup>16</sup> Minutes, Vicksburg National Military Park Association, Administrative Series, Box 7, Folder 158, VNMP.

the premises, and covered every chance. Mr. Reed is a man after his own mould, and I don't believe anyone can influence him against his decision when he has deliberately made up his mind." But Lee too despaired. "Although I think the bill may pass in the next Congress, yet the options will all have expired & we can never renew them as favorably again," he wrote. With deep emotion he expressed a fear shared by Rigby and those in the Association: "In the mean time many an old veteran in both armies will have 'crossed over the river.'<sup>17</sup>

When Congress reconvened, memorials "praying" for establishment of the park that had been passed by the legislatures of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin were introduced on the floor of the House of Representatives by members from those states. The speaker ignored the pressure and H.R. 4339 died when the 54th Congress adjourned in March 1897. Representative Cousins again wrote to Rigby, "I regret exceedingly that the measure could not have consideration at the present session." "I hope the options at Vicksburg may be extended without loss or serious embarrassment to those interested in the project," the Iowa congressman continued, and pledged, "I shall be ever interested in the matter until that success comes which your efforts so much deserve."<sup>18</sup>

"The failure of Congress to act on the Vicksburg Park Bill, makes it necessary to make a new start with the next Congress," wrote Lee to Rigby on October 29, 1897. "All preliminary work has already been done of course, but I want to consult with you as to what is now necessary for us to do." In a vein of desperation he implored, "What can we do? When can we do it? Where will we get the funds to further prosecute our efforts?" As Rigby sought answers to such pressing questions, the ever-active secretary continued his travels on behalf of the Association and strategized with those promoting the park measure. Among those he conferred with was fellow Iowan James K. P. Thompson, who suggested, "It appears to me that points to emphasise [sic] are the facts that if there is a battlefield of the late war worthy of recognition by the government, Vicksburg is that one. It was big with results. Gettysburg was simply a display of remarkable courage on both sides—no great results followed."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Letter, Lee to Rigby, February 7, 1897, Rigby Series, Box 1, Folder 29, VNMP.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, Robert G. Cousins to William T. Rigby, February 25, 1897, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-29, VNMP.

<sup>19</sup> Letter, Lee to Rigby, October 29, 1897; Letter James K. P. Thompson to Rigby, November 26, 1897, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-29, VNMP.

As members of the House assembled in Washington for the start of the 55th Congress, Representative Cousins warned Rigby that “the session promises to be somewhat stormy.” The nation’s financial situation was the major focus of debate on the floor as the session began and grew more heated as the temperature rose in Washington that summer. Despite the pall of gloom, members of the Association persevered and Representative Catchings bided his time. It was the second session of the 55th Congress before he again determined to act. On December 9, 1897, he introduced H.R. 4382 “to establish a national military park to commemorate the campaign, siege, and defense of Vicksburg.” As before, the proposed legislation was referred by Speaker Reed to the House Committee on Military Affairs.<sup>20</sup>

Rigby urged Lee to accompany him to Washington in January to push for support of the park measure. Frustration with events, however, influenced Lee to write:

Ex-Gov. Hull & Genl. Catchings both were of opinion that neither Col. Flowerree nor myself would avail anything by again appearing before Speaker Reed. I have already addressed him on the Park Bill in his private office. The members of the Mil’y Comtee have seen the park ground & have all information possible. The speaker is the only obstacle & if his comrades in the G.A.R. and other organizations cannot reach him, certainly I cannot . . . I hope the Speaker will yield this time, but I must confess I do not imagine that he will.

The general went on to suggest that they attempt to get the bill passed in the senate then go to the House.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the odds, Rigby traveled to Washington in late January 1898, and spent two days in the capital talking with members of both houses of Congress. “I am assured, however, that the House Military Committee will to day vote to report the bill favorably,” he wrote Eva from Indianapolis while on the next leg of his journey. To his wife he expressed the stark reality of affairs in Washington relative to the park measure: “It

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James K. P. Thompson had served in Company D, 21st Iowa Infantry during the Vicksburg campaign and was wounded in the May 22, 1863, assault against the city’s defenses. He later served as chairman of the Iowa Commission to locate the positions of Iowa troops during the siege of Vicksburg.

<sup>20</sup> Letter, Robert Gordon Cousins to Rigby, December 7, 1897, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-29, VNMP.

<sup>21</sup> Letter, Lee to Rigby, January 5, 1898, Rigby Series, Box 1, Folder 30, VNMP.

simply brings us fairly in front of the Speaker. As to whether he will let it be called up during the session, I am not sanguine." Rigby, however, had influential friends in Congress who were also strong supporters of the bill. He confided to Eva, "[Representatives] Allison and Cousins think he will, but have no definite information. My opinion is it depends on two things, first + chiefly on the amount of influence Henderson can bring to bear. He has the ear of Reed more than any other man in the House [and] will do everything for us he can: and second on the amount of outside pressure from the G.A.R. that I can bring to reinforce Henderson's influence." In support of his efforts he was pleased to inform her that Stuyvesant Fish, president of the Illinois Central Railroad, had provided him \$200 "to enable me to visit substantially all the Depts. G.A.R."<sup>22</sup>

From Indianapolis, where he met with the commander of the Department of Indiana, G.A.R., the energetic Rigby traveled south across the Ohio River to Kentucky. On January 29 he wrote his wife from Nicholasville, "I have succeeded with the Dept. of Ky and am going on to Chattanooga to get the Dept. of Tennessee in line." Success also quickly crowned his efforts in the Volunteer State from where he headed north to Chicago. From the "Windy City" he traveled east to New York, making several stops along the way to speak at local camps of the G.A.R. Although the winter landscape was in all its beauty, the iron rails he traveled seemed to stretch forever as they carried him from state to state. Despite frequent line changes, passes awaited him at most stations through the workings of President Fish of the Illinois Central Railroad and Rigby's brother-in-law, John Merry. Arriving in Albany on February 14, Rigby again wrote his wife and shared with her the continued success he experienced on the journey, "My friends in Mass., Conn. [and] R.I. [Rhode Island] do not disappoint me. I found letters from them awaiting me here saying it is all right." He also informed her, "I see the Dept. C[ommander] at Hd.Qrts. here tomorrow."<sup>23</sup>

Returning to Washington, Rigby met with Representatives Henderson and Cousins of Iowa. He attempted to see John A. T. Hull as well, but the congressman was out of town. His many weeks of travel wore heavily on the fifty-seven-year-old veteran for his work on behalf of the Association compelled the longest separation from his wife throughout their

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<sup>22</sup> William T. Rigby to Sarah Evaline Rigby, January 25, 1898, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-30, VNMP.

<sup>23</sup> William T. Rigby to Sarah Evaline Rigby January 29, 1898, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-30; William T. Rigby to Sarah Evaline Rigby, February 14, 1898, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-20.

marriage. "I have been away from you too long," he wrote to Eva in Mt. Vernon. "The memory of our last embrace is very sweet, but I long for a renewal of those remembered delights." Many more weeks were destined to pass before he enjoyed such delights for the balance of February Rigby traveled throughout the Midwest seeking support for the park measure from the G.A.R. commandries in Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. He then raced back to the nation's capital where the park measure was expected to be reported favorably out of the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union.<sup>24</sup>

Rigby was joined in Washington by several members of the Association. Although the measure was reported out of committee on March 1, 1898, before the proposal could be voted on the nation found itself at war with Spain. (The battleship *Maine* had been blown up in La Habana Harbor on February 15, and war was declared on April 25.) War measures engrossed the legislators' attention for the next six months. For Rigby, Lee, and others who had labored so long and hard on behalf of the park measure, frustration reached new depths. With no action on the park bill, Rigby returned to Iowa where he spent the rest of the year devoting what time he could to the park effort. In May, for example, Rigby drafted resolutions on behalf of the park measure and sent them to all the G.A.R. departments that were scheduled to meet that month.

The war with Spain had consumed the headlines throughout the summer. In both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of operations, U.S. land and naval forces proved triumphant and by late July Spain made overtures for peace. A protocol was signed on August 12 which brought an end to hostilities though several months would pass before a peace treaty was signed. The success of the war guaranteed Republican success in the mid-term elections in November, and the most-staunch supporters of the park measure were re-elected.

At year's end, Lee called to order a meeting of the Association in Vicksburg, during which he reviewed the efforts thus far made on behalf of the park bill. Again he, Rigby, and others were appointed to a committee to go to Washington and push for passage of the measure. Lee was unable to go, so Rigby traveled to the capital where he arrived on February 4 and remained in Washington until the 11th. (The week would prove to be one of the most memorable of his life.) He again met with

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<sup>24</sup> William T. Rigby to Sarah Evaline Rigby, February 19, 1898, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-30, VNMP.

James Everest and Major N. M. Hubbard of the Department of Iowa G.A.R., and they spoke at length to dozens of congressmen, including the chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, Representative Hull of Iowa. They even secured a private meeting with Speaker Reed, whose reluctance to call up the bill for a vote appeared to waiver.<sup>25</sup>

The Treaty of Paris had been signed on December 11, 1898. With the war over, veterans' issues were again of interest to Congress. Even the tight-fisted Reed seemed anxious to fund projects and programs of interests to veterans and dropped his opposition to the park measure. The opportune moment had finally arrived, and as the measure had been reported favorably out of committee in March 1898, Representative Hull asked on February 6, 1899, that Speaker Reed suspend the rules and pass the Vicksburg Park Bill. As soon as H.R. 4382 was read by the clerk, it was voted on and passed unanimously. The *Vicksburg Evening Post* announced passage of the bill on February 7, stating that "no matter ever brought before the Congress has been more faithfully presented and worked for in the past three years, than the bill which passed the House yesterday under a suspensions of the rules for the establishment of a National Military Park at Vicksburg."<sup>26</sup>

Two days later, Senator Edmund Pettus of Alabama, a member of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs who had served under Lee's command at Vicksburg, sent to the floor a companion bill, S. 4382. On February 10, Mississippi senator Hernando De Soto Money asked for "unanimous consent" to call up the measure. After a reading, the measure was passed. For Captain Rigby, who watched from the gallery as the park measure passed both houses of Congress, it must have been a moment of supreme relief and personal satisfaction that his efforts had finally achieved the long-sought triumph. On February 21, 1899, ten days after Rigby left for Iowa and a much-deserved period of rest, President William McKinley affixed his signature to the bill making Vicksburg the fifth battlefield from the Civil War to be set aside in perpetuity as a national military park or national battlefield site.

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<sup>25</sup> Minutes, Vicksburg National Military Park Association, Administrative Series, Box 7, Folder 128; Receipt from Hotel Normandie, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-31, VNMP.

The Association met in Vicksburg on December 28, 1898. Rigby, accompanied by W. O. Mitchell, who had recently been elected to fill the vacant vice-president position on the Board of Directors of the VNMPA caused by the death of Edward Scott Butts, arrived in Washington on February 4, 1899, and checked into the Hotel Normandie on McPherson Square.

<sup>26</sup> *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 7, 1898.



The legislation by which the park was established called for the appointment of three commissioners to oversee the park. All three had to be veterans of the Vicksburg campaign, one Confederate representative, and two Union representatives. Lee was clearly the logical choice for the Confederate representative, and his appointment was quickly made by the secretary of war. As more than 36,000 Illinois soldiers had served in the Vicksburg campaign, comprising fully one-half of Grant's army that captured the "Gibraltar of the Confederacy," it was readily accepted that someone from Illinois must serve on the commission. Thus, James Everest was appointed as one of the Union representatives. Political considerations, however, muddied the selection of the final representative and congressmen from numerous states advanced their own candidates for consideration.

Rigby's son, William C. Rigby, who practiced law in Chicago, recognized the danger and wrote his father in February, "All of your friends seem to think . . . that Ohio and Michigan may unite to beat you." He implored his father to use the influence he had established with members of Congress to gain the appointment. "I want you to use me as your headquarters clerk in this campaign," urged Will, "and want you to organize it as effectively as you did the one to secure the passage of the bill."<sup>27</sup>

Others also rallied in support of Rigby. State senator William O. Mitchell of Iowa wrote to William B. Allison, who represented the state in the U. S. Senate, "It is conceded by everyone that Captain W. T. Rigby is entitled to practically all the credit for originating and carrying forward the enterprise." Mitchell also wrote Representative Robert Cousins in Washington about Rigby, "He has worked for it for nearly four years, and it would be an out-rage if some one else were appointed commissioner in his place." Fred Grant, Stephen D. Lee, and a host of others interceded on Rigby's behalf. Even Lt. Col. John P. Nicholson, powerful chairman of the park commission at Gettysburg, was pleased to draft a letter of support, writing, "I do not see why there should be a moment's hesitation as it is almost entirely due to your efforts."<sup>28</sup>

These efforts proved successful. On February 24, 1899, a Western Union telegram from V. L. Mason, private secretary to Secretary of War Russell Alger, arrived at the Rigby home in Mt. Vernon. "The Secretary

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<sup>27</sup> Letter, William C. Rigby to William T. Rigby, February 8, 1899, Rigby Series, Box 1, F-31, VNMP.

<sup>28</sup> Letter, William O. Mitchell to William B. Allison, February 7, 1899; John P. Nicholson to William T. Rigby, February 11, 1899, Rigby Series, Box 1, Folder 31, VNMP.

of War directs me to request that you report at the War Department March first at ten A.M. in connection with the Vicksburg National Park Commission.” Rigby was not home at the time, and the news was relayed to him in Grinnell, Iowa, by John Merry. “I suppose it means my appointment,” he immediately wrote his wife. “Need I say or try to say how pleased I am. More on account of what it means for you and the children than for myself.” He instructed his wife to write him at the Hotel Normandie in Washington and promised her, “When I come home with my commission, we will celebrate.” The much deserved celebration had been a long time in coming.<sup>29</sup>

After receiving their commissions the three men met next in Vicksburg where they arrived on March 14 to establish the park office and start their new duties. A topographical survey of the lands to be acquired was ordered, tracts were purchased, and exhaustive correspondence was entered into with veterans of the siege to amass information necessary to accurately mark the battlefield with historical tablets for the benefit of visitors. The commissioners worked to construct roads and bridges and secure the placement of monuments by the various states represented by troops during the siege and defense of Vicksburg.<sup>30</sup>

The furious pace required of the commissioners, and of Lee and Rigby in particular, soon exhausted the general. On December 20, he wrote to Secretary of War Elihu Root asking to be temporarily relieved from his duties as chairman of the park commission and recommended that Captain Rigby be named acting chairman. The secretary of war approved both the request and recommendation. Lee never resumed his duties as chairman. On November 20, 1901, Lee reluctantly accepted the limitations that age and health were forcing upon him and tendered his resignation as chairman of the Commission to Captain Rigby, who was appointed to fill the post.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Telegram, V. L. Mason to William T. Rigby, February 24, 1899; Letter, William T. Rigby to Sarah Evaline Rigby, February 24, 1899, Rigby Series, Box 1, Folder 31, VNMP.

<sup>30</sup>Of the three men, only Rigby moved to Vicksburg where he managed the park office and the day-to-day business of the commission. Thus, on all correspondence, he signed himself “Resident Commissioner.”

<sup>31</sup>In a touching letter written from the heart, Lee expressed his admiration for his fellow commissioner:

I felt at the time when Colonel Everest and yourself by your votes made me your Chairman that it was an act of delicate courtesy extended to me by former antagonists,

Hence Rigby, who had gone from resident commissioner to acting chairman, now subscribed himself chairman of the park commission and would serve in that capacity until his death on May 10, 1929, a few months shy of his 89th birthday. During his tenure at the park he labored tirelessly to make Vicksburg the finest of our nation's military parks. In honoring the men in blue and gray who struggled at Vicksburg in the spring and summer of 1863, he worked with state commissions, veterans' organizations, and a host of individuals to secure placement of state memorials, regimental monuments and markers, and bronze and stone statuary that range from equestrian statues and standing figures to busts and relief portraits that were executed by the foremost American and European sculptors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collectively they have made Vicksburg, in the words of one Civil War veteran, "the art park of the world." In tribute to the man whose efforts have made Vicksburg an American shrine, a bronze bust of William Rigby was placed on the field in his lifetime and serves to remind current and future stewards of his selfless devotion to duty and of their charge to preserve the rich history that is ours as a people. Laid to rest alongside his wife, Eva (who died in 1928), Rigby is fittingly interred in Vicksburg National Cemetery along with his comrades in arms, whose sacrifice helped to shape the nation that he had so faithfully served as citizen and soldier.

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but now ever dear friends. From the very inception of the park movement, you have been the most active and industrious person connected with the enterprise. You have done more work and put more thought on the great enterprise than any member or person connected with the park. From this fact I have never failed to agree with you in almost every suggestion or act connected with your management, and I really feel from association and work you are now the most competent member to be the permanent Chairman of the Commission. I, therefore, tender to you my resignation as Chairman of the Commission and request that you assume all the duties of the office as permanent Chairman. (Letter, Lee to Rigby, November 20, 1901, Rigby Series, Box 2, F-52, VNMP.)

Lee, however, remained on the Commission as the Confederate representative and continued to work on behalf of the park until his death on May 28, 1908.