

## **Review: Champion Hill: Decisive Battle for Vicksburg**

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Champion Hill: Decisive Battle for Vicksburg. Timothy B. Smith. New York, NY: Savas Beatie LLC (2004). 502 pp. 41 maps.

This is a review and summary of Timothy B. Smith's *Champion Hill: Decisive Battle for Vicksburg*. Dr. Smith sets out to write the first detailed history of the most important battle of the Vicksburg Campaign (some would say the entire war), and he has done an admirable job. *Champion Hill* is a detailed tactical level description of the battle, which occurred on May 16, 1863 on the eponymous hill located over 20 miles east of Vicksburg. This is no "New History" book filled with the social or political aspects of *Champion Hill* and its results.

Instead, Dr. Smith announces early on in the Preface that "what you are about to read is a battle study molded out of the old school". And he makes good on his promise. The action picks up as Smith details how Grant's Union Army of the Tennessee tried all winter of 1862-1863 to find a way to get at Vicksburg from dry land east of the Mississippi River. It then goes on to chronicle the battles leading up to *Champion Hill*. The majority of the text describes in tactical detail the ebb and flow of the *Battle of Champion Hill*. He follows up with a brief description of the pursuit to Vicksburg, the *Siege*, and the surrender of the Confederate Army on July 4, 1863. The book weighs in at just over 500 pages, with exactly 400 pages of text. The book contains an interesting amount of other material after the main read is finished. These include a "Thereafter", which details the lives of the main players after the *Battle*, a regimental-level "Order of Battle" which includes even regimental commanders (but no unit strengths), and a very interesting set of modern-day photos of the battlefield along with a keyed map allowing you to see the facing and position of the camera. Dr. Smith includes almost 40 pages of endnotes and an impressive bibliography containing numerous primary sources from manuscript collections and of course many secondary works, including the important previous works of Ed Bearss and Warren Grabau. And last but not least are the maps. Ted Savas, the publisher, has as usual filled this book to the brim with detailed tactical maps of the fighting. By my count, of the 41 maps, 32 cover the *Battle of Champion Hill*, with most of the others covering the preliminary action at *Port Gibson*, *Raymond*, and *Jackson*.

Smith leads off with a chapter detailing exactly why Vicksburg was so important to the Confederacy. He mentions that Vicksburg is situated on high bluffs on the eastern side of the Mississippi River just after

a hairpin bend, making it an ideal place to fortify and block the River. As long as Vicksburg (and to a lesser extent Port Hudson to the south) held, the Confederacy was not split in two. Vicksburg became even more important as the Federals took both Memphis and New Orleans, two key points to the north and south respectively. Grant's six failed attempts while situated in Louisiana west of Vicksburg are described, and Smith concludes that these diversions, along with some fortuitous Union cavalry raids, set up Grant's ultimately successful seventh attempt.

Details are given on the past history of the two commanding Generals, Pemberton and Grant, along with brief descriptions of the Division and Corps commanders. A point Smith goes back to time and again is the fact that he regards Pemberton as "a bureaucrat", not a field general. He believes that although Pemberton meant well, his skill set was simply not suited for a fight to the finish against a man with plenty of practice at hard fighting in Grant. The Confederate Division commanders were all West Pointers with the exception of William Loring. John Bowen is referred to as "Pemberton's finest field subordinate", and Stevenson is marked as a "thoroughly untested field commander". Smith goes on to describe Grant's struggles, both in private life and early in the War. But he makes the point that Grant had always stuck to whatever he set his mind on doing, and that this trait would help him in the Campaign ahead. Grant's triumvirate of Corps commanders, Sherman, McClernand, and McPherson, are given brief introductions similar to those of the five Confederate Division commanders. In his descriptions of these men, Smith differs from the commonly held view. He is higher on McClernand and harder on McPherson than most, and although I do not entirely agree with this assessment, it is nevertheless refreshing to see someone do their own research and not just rehash old views ad nauseum. Grant landed on the east side of the Mississippi at Bruinsburg, Mississippi on April 30, 1863. The Federals then moved inland, where they attacked brigades under the command of John Bowen. In the resulting Battle of Port Gibson, Smith writes that Bowen bought time for Pemberton to take charge of the deteriorating situation. However, according to Smith, Pemberton's fortress holding mentality rendered him incapable of the aggressive action required to save the day, and the city of Vicksburg, by attacking Grant then and there and pinning him against the River..

Grant next moved inland, staying east of the Big Black River and relying on the countryside for supplies. Smith relates that Pemberton "implemented halfway measures" throughout this crucial time, neither concentrating his forces for a decisive attack nor impeding Grant's advance with any kind of regularity. At the Battle of Raymond, James

McPherson's Union Corps fought the Confederate Brigade of John Gregg.

Gregg had moved from the state capital of Jackson to block Grant's movements in that direction. After describing the fighting in some detail, Smith allows that "Raymond was not James McPherson's best day, but it did offer a demonstration of his tactical abilities". The appearance of troops from Jackson caused Grant to change his plans. Instead of concentrating in between Jackson and Vicksburg and then heading west, he would instead deal a blow to the troops in Jackson first.

Joe Johnston's record in the field was one of "perplexing mediocrity", according to the author. As Grant moved toward Jackson, Pemberton missed an opportunity to fall on the Corps of Gen. John McClernand at Fourteenmile Creek. McClernand was acting as a roadblock in the direction of Vicksburg while Grant took care of business to the east.

Grant overran Mississippi's Capital rather easily in the almost misnamed "Battle" of Jackson. With this act, Grant prevented the city from acting as a troop concentration point for the Army of Relief General Joe Johnston was then attempting to assemble. Smith points out the contrast in the actions of the commanding Generals to this point in the Campaign. He characterizes Grant as "audacious" and Pemberton as bumbling. At this time, due to some now outdated directions from Johnston, Pemberton decided to move southeast and outside of his natural line of the Big Black River. Smith declares this to be an odd decision, given that by moving in this direction the Southern commander was basically interposing Grant's Army between the Vicksburg garrison and Johnston, rather than moving closer.

As McClernand maintained his position, McPherson's Corps moved west from Jackson, and Sherman's Corps destroyed all government property in the city, including (and especially) the railroads. Grant's men were well-rested in the days before the battle, while Pemberton's were not.

This would be important in the upcoming battle. On the night of May 15, both Armies camped within several miles of each other, Pemberton's essentially in their positions at the start of the battle the next day. As the decisive battle loomed, Johnston was moving ever further away from Pemberton!

Smith next takes a look at the topography of the battlefield, pointing out that Champion Hill dominated the surrounding area and that it would play the central role in the fight. He also mentions that Baker's Creek at Pemberton's back had only one bridge readily available to the Southern Army, though Pemberton's engineers were hard at work on a southern bridge on the Raymond Road. The road network is discussed as well. Grant was advancing against Pemberton on three

roads, the Jackson Road to the north, the Middle Road in the center, and the Raymond Road to the south. The Jackson and Middle Roads intersected just south of Champion Hill. Smith marks this crossroads as vital. Pemberton's Army needed to keep control in order to be able to retreat over the bridge on Baker's Creek that they had just marched over the previous night. If the Federals took control of the vital crossroads, and the Jackson road to the west, Pemberton's entire Army could be cut off. Grant had similar forces on all three roads. Stevenson's large Confederate Division covered Champion Hill and the crossroads on the left of the line, Bowen covered the center, and Loring covered the Raymond Road to the south on the right flank. Pemberton had left two whole Divisions near Vicksburg, and to make matters even worse, he was forced to react awkwardly as his Army lay where they had camped the night before. It seems Grant had again been the first to move. The initial contact came in the form of skirmishing along the Middle and Raymond Roads. Unfortunately for Pemberton and the South, he had neglected to picket the northern Jackson road, and Grant was coming in hard on his flank with three divisions.

S. D. Lee, who Smith rates very highly for his performance at Champion Hill, saw Grant's column north of Champion Hill, and rushed his Brigade to cover that flank and with it the vital crossroads just south of there. His Brigade was not nearly enough, even though he also had the help of two guns of the Virginia Artillery unlimbered on the crest of Champion Hill. Cumming's Brigade also partially moved to the crest, although Cumming was forced to leave two regiments behind to hold off McClernand's Federals advancing west along the Middle Road towards the crossroads. Hovey's and Logan's Federal Divisions from Grant's column had moved into position north of Champion Hill, and they were ready to attack at around 10:30 A.M.

Smith believes that Grant thought McClernand to be a better tactician than McPherson. His rationale for this is that Grant traveled with McPherson's column along the Jackson Road in the north, and he gave McClernand control of operations on both the Middle and Raymond Roads. At this point Smith also brings up the relative inactivity during the battle by the forces under McClernand. He justifies this uncharacteristic behavior of McClernand by pointing out that Grant had ordered him to be cautious and not to bring on a general engagement. Hovey attacked Champion Hill around 11 A.M., hitting and routing the part of Cumming's Brigade posted there. Logan's troops followed not long after, attacking Lee's and Barton's Brigades with similar results to Hovey. The Federals had gained control of the vital crossroads, and also had cut the Jackson Road to the west somewhat near the bridge

over Baker's Creek. The situation was critical to say the least for the South.

General William W. Loring and his Brigadiers were not at all cooperative with Pemberton. In fact, Smith relates that they were treasonously hostile on several occasions during the battle. Specifically, they first refused to come to the aid of the left wing, they later wanted to attack while acting as rear guard(!), and then Loring performed the controversial move of abandoning the Army to its fate at Vicksburg. Bowen's Division moved north to the rescue of Stevenson's Division and counterattacked up Champion Hill around 2:30 P.M. This fine Division of Missourians and Arkansans was combat hardened, and they drove Hovey's and Logan's Divisions back to their starting points near the Sid Champion house north of the hill. Some of Stevenson's routed Rebel Division tried to help Bowen, but their attacks soon faltered. Luckily for the Union, Marcellus Crocker's Division had reached the field, but it really only stabilized the lines until Crocker's third brigade under Holmes counterattacked. These fresh troops, along with heavy Union artillery fire and Bowen's lack of ammunition, turned the tide. Apparently Stevenson, on his own authority, had ordered Bowen's ordnance train west across Baker's Creek! Needless to say Smith is not very kind in his comments about Stevenson regarding this major mistake.

Communication between the separated Federal columns was incredibly slow. Many wooded ravines covered this area of Mississippi, and it made lateral movement exceedingly difficult. As a result, McClernand in the center did not order an attack until 2 P.M., even though Grant had sent the order much earlier. For all intents and purposes, McClernand's column sat and skirmished against only 2 Confederate regiments from 11 to 2 while only several hundred yards to the west and the northwest Logan and Hovey were fighting for their lives. Loring disobeyed Pemberton for quite some time before finally moving with two of his brigades for the vital crossroads at around 2:45 P.M. As McClernand finally got into action, essentially outflanking Bowen on his right rear, Loring's first Brigade under Buford showed up. Buford had his last two regiments taken from him without his knowledge. They were used to excellent effect in delaying McClernand while Bowen moved south and out of the trap he found his Division in. The other six regiments of Buford covered Bowen's left. Loring then arrived with Featherston, and the Confederates at last managed to temporarily stabilize the situation. But it was too late. They had permanently lost both the crossroads and Jackson Road, and now they had to retreat on the southern Raymond Road, and hope that the bridge started by their engineers earlier in the day was finished.

Pemberton withdrew around 5 P.M., with Featherston covering the rear on the left, and Tilghman covering the Raymond Road on the right. Skirmishing and artillery fire marked the extent of the fighting along the southern Raymond Road between Tilghman and the Federal Divisions of A.J. Smith and Frank Blair. Barton's Confederate Brigade, after having been routed earlier in the day by Logan, had moved west and was now covering the northern crossing of Baker's Creek. S.D. Lee had crossed at the southern crossing and was moving north to guard the northern crossing (Pemberton did not know Barton was already there). Barton thought Lee was the enemy, and withdrew from the crossing! Thus the Federals were handed a gift and crossed Baker's Creek. Bowen, covering the southern crossing and waiting for Loring, was then forced to withdraw. As a result, Loring, still east of the Creek as a rear guard, decided not to cross and took his entire Division south and then back northeast to Johnston. He thus saved his Division but deprived Pemberton of much-needed strength in the Siege to come. This decision has been controversial ever since, and Smith, although not committing decisively one way or the other, seems to lean towards the impossibility of Loring crossing Baker's Creek. He says that Union artillery already had the crossing covered, and that Loring's decision was a prudent one. This is the first time I had heard it presented this way. I had always thought Loring deliberately took himself out of the Campaign to rid himself of a commander he hated. Smith, although blasting Loring earlier for his disobedience, gives the Division commander a pass in this case.

In the aftermath of the battle, Hovey's Division, which had suffered a disproportionate number of casualties, remained behind to tend to the wounded and the prisoners, and to bury the dead. Out of 29,000 Union troops present, 2,441 were casualties, for an 8.4% casualty rate. Pemberton suffered much more severely. Out of 24,000 men, he lost 3840 for a casualty rate of 16%. When you throw in the removal of Loring from the campaign, the Confederate casualties were disastrous. Smith also points out that the above stats are a little misleading. Hovey's, Logan's, and Crocker's Divisions of the northern column had done most of the fighting for the Union, while the four divisions to the south suffered very little. I was amazed at just how few troops were casualties in McClernand's columns. To me, Smith gives McClernand a little too much of a free pass. If he had been more aggressive, Bowen or even the entire Confederate Army could have been trapped and destroyed. He does point out Grant's order to be cautious, but McClernand had to have heard the obviously major fighting going on right in front of him. Grant's orders at that point were for all intents and purposes obsolete. On the Confederate side,

Stevenson and Bowen did almost all of the fighting, and Loring's tardiness allowed his Division to escape virtually unscathed from the fighting.

The subsequent night time retreat of Loring near and sometimes almost through Union camps that night is an entirely different story, however. Smith calls Champion Hill a "decisive strategic and tactical victory" for Grant. He blames Pemberton almost completely for the defeat, citing his poor approach march, his lack of proper cavalry reconnaissance, his almost criminal neglect when he failed to ride over to the left completely to directly observe the fighting, and his decision to leave two full divisions behind in the entrenchments of Vicksburg. He points out again that Pemberton was unfit for command, and that he was a bureaucrat and a desk general. At this point he goes back to Loring's decision not to cross Baker's Creek and retreat with Pemberton. As I stated earlier, Smith believes that it would have been a close call if Loring had tried to cross the Creek, and that Loring might have been trapped and forced to surrender.

In the final chapter, Smith describes the disaster that befell the Confederates at the Big Black River Bridge the next day. Grant pursued relentlessly, and as a result routed the Confederates out of their entrenchments on the east side of Big Black River. Over one thousand more Rebels were captured, and Grant was well on his way to besieging Vicksburg. He then proceeds to wrap up the ensuing assaults, the Siege, and the surrender of Pemberton on July 4, 1863. Smith points out that Champion Hill was the most important and decisive battle of the Vicksburg Campaign, although he stops short of calling it the most important battle of the entire Civil War. It vaulted Grant and Sherman to later prominence, although it cut McClellan down at the height of his success. He had only himself to blame, due to a selfish proclamation he issued to his Corps after the Second Assault at Vicksburg on May 22. Grant relieved him and he never again held an important field command. Finally, Smith points out that with some better decision making by Pemberton, and with some more timely support of Bowen, the Confederates could have won the day. Champion Hill was a closer-run affair than it would seem at first sight.

In several interesting sections after the text, Smith details the later lives of the main players involved in the battle. He also has an excellent selection of modern-day photos, accompanied by a map depicting the position and orientation of the camera for each photo. What amazed me was that the Jackson Road in that area is obviously no longer used. It is little larger than an ATV path at this point!

The first thing that struck me after reading Champion Hill was Dr. Smith's assessments of McClernand and McPherson. He states that Grant thought McClernand was a better tactician than McPherson, and bases that on the fact that he rode with McPherson's column on May 16 and allowed McClernand independent command to the south. I do not entirely agree with this assessment, as I mentioned previously. For instance, how did Grant know which column would strike the enemy first? And how did he know precisely where the enemy was in strength when he set out on the morning of May 16. Regardless, I do partially share Smith's high opinion of McClernand. Although I am not fond of his unbounded and very public ambition, the political General did show a good tactical eye and an aggressive nature in numerous fights. However, I would not excuse his timid performance on May 16 as much as Dr. Smith does. He points to an order from Grant to McClernand not to bring on a general engagement. This is all well and good, but heavy fighting raged only several hundred yards to the west and northwest of McClernand on Champion Hill. Surely he heard the racket made by tens of cannon and thousands of rifled muskets? At that point, Grant's orders had become obsolete. McClernand had a chance to at the very least bag Bowen's entire Division of excellent fighters, a fine prize indeed, but he was uncharacteristically timid this day. While I also agree that Pemberton was to blame for the defeat, Loring's performance deserved a court-martial, and Joe Johnston was his usual timid self at the time of decision. It didn't help that the inexperienced Stevenson was in charge of the Division hit first and holding the most important terrain of the entire battle. These rather small points aside, I thought Dr. Smith's battle history of the Battle of Champion Hill to be well told and excellently explained book which went down to the regimental level. Since I am almost as much of a wargamer as an amateur historian and Civil War buff, I thoroughly enjoyed the attention to detail. As I mentioned in the introduction, Smith differs in some cases with Bearss, and does not hesitate to say so. He backs this up with good explanations, and I appreciate the fact that he was not simply rewriting Bearss' chapters on Champion Hill.

I must also take a moment here to mention the maps done by Ted Savas, who also happens to be the publisher. Anyone who has read any books published by Savas, whether under his old name of Savas Publishing or now Savas Beatie, knows that Mr. Savas has more appreciation for numerous good maps than any other publisher I have ever seen. This book is no exception. Fully 41 maps cover the action in regimental level detail and accompany Smith's words in perfect harmony. They allowed me to fully appreciate just what went on and gave me an insight into the battle I haven't had up to this point. I did have one minor quibble, and this coincides with the observation of Tony

Gunter, who posts on the "civilwarwest" Yahoo Group. Mr. Gunter has pointed out in the past that the maps use various shades for elevation, and this makes it a little harder to determine elevations than if topographical lines of elevation had been used. This is, like my minor disagreements with some of Dr. Smith's conclusions, a minor quibble. No one does maps like Mr. Savas, and I mean NO ONE.

As anyone who reads my reviews on a regular basis knows, I tend to recommend a book as long it is of reasonable quality if it is the only one to cover a given battle. In this case, although Dr. Smith's book is the only one to concentrate on Champion Hill to date, it is an almost perfect model of everything a tactical battle study should be. Smith delivers on his promise in the Preface, and delivers in a big way. This book was well-written, both in terms of being able to explain the often confusing action, and also in being able to keep me entertained at the same time. Dr. Smith has obviously done his homework, as the numerous manuscript collections in the bibliography suggest. His "Thereafter" section detailing the later life of the participants was also a fresh idea, as were the modern photographs of the battlefield. And the maps, as usual in a Savas-published book, were obviously seen as a major part of the book and not thrown in as afterthoughts like some books published today (Donnybrook comes to mind). Every serious student of the Civil War, and especially of the war in the Western Theater, should own a copy of this book. I eagerly look forward to more work from Dr. Smith in the future.

502 pp., 41 maps.

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