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The Eighth Regiment of Vermont Volunteers in the Lafourche Country, 1862-1863*

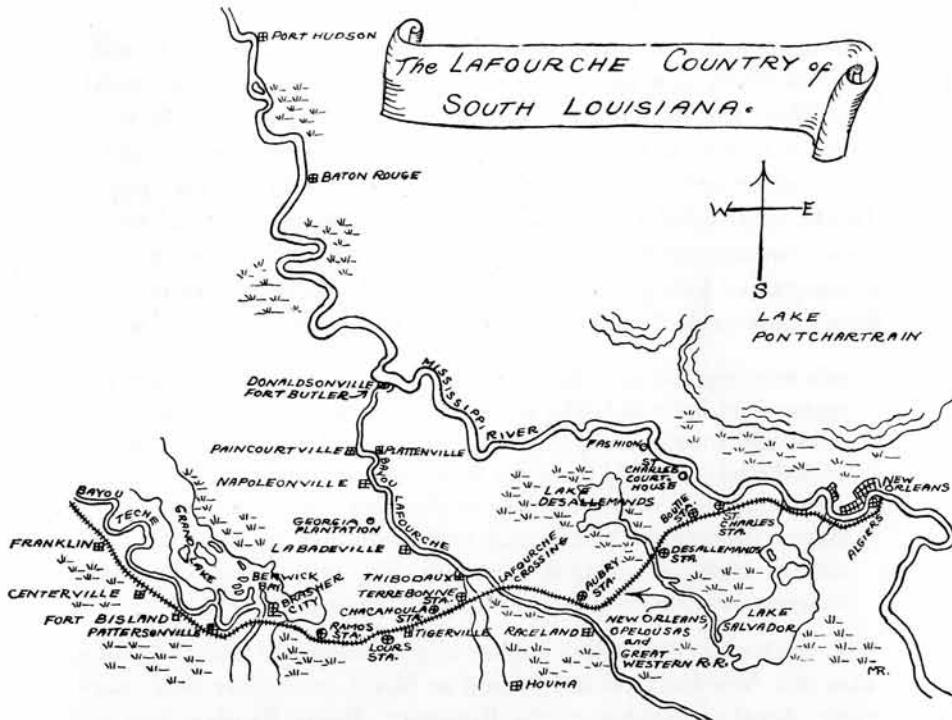
by HOLMAN D. JORDAN, JR.

In the summer of 1861 General Benjamin F. Butler suggested that a new army department, the Department of the Gulf, west of Fort Pickens, Florida, be created. At the time Butler was in command of the Department of New England and he suggested that some of its regiments be transferred to the new command which he hoped to have.¹ Butler asked the aid of the Governor of Vermont in filling his new command, having in mind the Eighth Vermont which by fall was in training at Camp Holbrook near Brattleboro. This regiment was commanded by Colonel Stephen Thomas, a resident of West Fairlee and a Democrat. As a member of the Vermont Legislature he had helped to make Vermont's response to President Lincoln's request for volunteers more substantial.² Butler's suggestion and request were complied with and on March 4, 1862, the Regiment happily left the rather inadequate training camp for the coast. It traveled to New Haven, to New York, and then on the *James Hovey* to Ship Island off Biloxi, Mississippi. Soon after their arrival operations were begun against Forts Jackson and St. Philip on the Mississippi River below New Orleans. These surrendered on April 28 and the South's greatest port fell with almost no resistance on April 29. When General Butler arrived in that city on May 1 to establish his headquarters he had already ordered the

*The map included was graciously drawn by a friend and colleague, Mrs. Muriel Rogan of the Nicholls State College Library.

1. U. S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1888-1901), Ser. I, vi, 687. (Hereinafter cited as *Official Records*.)

2. George N. Carpenter, *History of the 8th Regiment Vermont Volunteers, 1861-1865* (Boston, 1886), 8-24.



Eighth Vermont and two other regiments to be sent there for police duty and to restore telegraph communications.³

The Regiment arrived in New Orleans on May 12 and was assigned to police duty on the river above the city.⁴ This duty was brief, for on May 31 the Regiment crossed to the west bank at Algiers. There it was quartered in the depot and in some box cars of the New Orleans, Opelousas and Great Western Railroad. Colonel Thomas became, with this change, the commander of all west of the river.⁵ At first the Regiment was unopposed in its control of the area and the key rail line. This was true because of the disorganization and lack of spirit of the militia and citizenry in the Lafourche area.⁶ Some repairs were necessary on the road but it

3. *Ibid.*, 24-39. *Official Records, op. cit.*, 716.

4. Dr. C. S. Cooper, *The Reminiscences of . . .*, Vermont Historical Society Collections.

5. Rufus Kinsley, "The Slaveholders Rebellion", *The Civil War Diary of . . .*, Part I, November 1861-July 1865, Vermont Historical Society Collections.

6. Barnes F. Lathrop, "The Lafourche District in 1861-1862: A Problem of Local

was open to Lafourche Crossing and Thibodaux. This early military inactivity provided the men of the regiment an opportunity to explore and examine the surrounding countryside. Their reactions were varied but similar to those of men from other states whom the war brought to this area, which with its polyglot population, subtropical climate, and sugar culture was a source of almost constant amazement and comment.⁷ Dr. C. S. Cooper who accompanied Companies A, C, and E of the Regiment to its outpost at Lafourche Crossing seemed nearly overcome when he wrote

this first trip through this section of the country made a great impression on my mind. The great fields of cane on either side of the track with rows as straight [sic] as an arrow. Rice fields surrounded by little dykes to hold the water while the seed was sprouting: dense cypress swamps with their mass of creeping vines; a few orange orchards, peaches and figs, immense oaks with their great branches extending twenty or thirty feet on either side of the trunk filled with hanging moss reaching in some cases nearly to the ground.⁸

The contrast between this almost tropical lushness and the drabness of a New England left behind in March must have been startling. Another member of the Regiment, Rufus Kinsley, was interested in different aspects of the area. On June 3 he recorded in his diary that he and two others foraged for sweet potatoes and hunted alligators. Kinsley bragged that they had killed four alligators and "I tried my rifle on two of them; put a ball in the right eye of each." He reported that when boiled these tasted "more like chicken breast than anything else." Kinsley took the opportunity to visit some plantations and seems to have reinforced his near fanatical dislike of slavery by so doing. He reported his visits of June 18 and his reactions to what he had seen by writing that he had

Defense," *Louisiana History*, 1 (Spring 1960), 99-129. The railroad was a potential Confederate route for attacking New Orleans and an artery for the flow of vital food and other supplies into the South from Texas.

7. Frank M. Flinn, *Campaigning with Banks in Louisiana, '63 and '64* (Lynn, Mass., 1887). James K. Hosmer, *The Color Guard: Being a Corporal's Notes of Military Service in the Nineteenth Army Corps* (Boston, 1864). J. F. Moors, *History of the Fifty-second Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers* (Boston, 1893). John M. Stanyan, *A History of the Eighth Regiment of New Hampshire Volunteers . . .* (Concord, 1892).

8. Cooper, *op. cit.*

visited the day several plantations; and saw enough of the horrors of slavery to make me an abolitionist forever. On each plantation in all this section of the country there is a large building called a hospital, with only two rooms. In one may be seen the stocks, gnout, thumb screw, ball and chain, rings and chain by which the victims are fastened flat to the floor, and others by which they are bound to perpendicular posts; iron yokes of different patterns, handcuffs, whips and other instruments of torture, for the benefit of those who had been guilty of loving liberty more than life, but had failed in their effort to obtain the coveted boon.⁹

To a man with feelings such as these who in addition was deeply religious and a prohibitionist the locale must have been nearly overpowering.

The first Confederate force to appear was reported on June 16 near the railroad bridge over Bayou Lafourche. Negroes seeking the "blessings" of freedom, who were by this time almost pouring into the occupied areas around New Orleans, brought the news of this force which they reported was intent on tearing up the railroad. The Regiment's advance companies were withdrawn to Bayou des Allemands but on news of the destruction on June 22 at Raceland Station thirty men and two officers of Company H advanced with an engine and passenger car only to be ambushed. This baptism of fire cost the Regiment five lives with nine other men wounded. The farthest outpost from Algiers then became Des Allemands, the site of a key bridge, which was none too pleasant or glamorous. Doctor Cooper described it as having a half dozen residences and a few acres of high ground surrounded with swamps "filled with alligators, snakes &c too numerous to mention" in addition to mosquitoes which if trapped in an overturned iron kettle could fight their way out.¹⁰

Activity began to pick up with the coming of August. Major General Richard Taylor, C.S.A., whose plantation on the Mississippi River was only a few miles from the rail line, was placed in command of Confederate West Louisiana and began to organize its

9. Kinsley, *op. cit.* The tone of this entry and others certainly indicates that this man was a part of what David M. Ludlum describes in his *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (Montpelier, 1948).

10. Cooper, *op. cit.*

defense with energy.¹¹ At the end of August, Colonel Thomas was ordered to conduct a foraging raid up the river. With two companies of the Eighth Vermont, 100 men, 70 men from the Second Regiment of Massachusetts Cavalry, and a two gun battery he traveled on the railroad to Boutte and then marched to St. Charles Court House. After an early morning surprise attack and brief skirmish the command began its return, gathering horses, mules, cattle, and sheep in large numbers.¹² The foraging does not seem to have been restricted to livestock, however, for General Taylor's plantation, Fashion, was sacked of papers and valuables.¹³

Confederate leaders concerned with the morale and defense of the Lafourche area could not leave this raid unavenged. Governor Moore of Louisiana and General Taylor had before this time been making serious efforts to strengthen these defenses and to effectively activate the militia. Because of little success in the latter Governor Moore had dispatched a force of Texans into the area to forestall the possibility of a Union invasion *via* the railroad and if possible to harass them in the New Orleans area. This force was a mounted battalion under the command of a Major E. Waller.¹⁴ On September 4 this force ambushed the train at Boutte. The Texans had thrown the switch so that the train would run onto the siding and collide with some empty passenger cars standing there. The train, moving east, had a guard of sixty men and a flat car before the engine on which rode a twelve pound howitzer and its crew of twelve men. As the train approached the siding the Texans opened fire and except for the heroism of Private Louis J. Ingalls of Belvidere the Confederate plan would have worked. He dismounted or was knocked off the train and ran ahead, with no cover, and switched the train back on the right of way. Casualties numbered thirty-six of those riding on the open flat cars and included all of the artillerists. After burning the station at Boutte, Waller's men advanced on the outpost at Des Allemands. It was held by three

11. Richard B. Irwin, *History of the Nineteenth Army Corps* (New York, 1892), 44-46.

12. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xv, 132.

13. Richard Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction, Personal Experiences of the Last War* (New York, 1879), 111-112.

14. Barnes F. Lathrop, "The Lafourche District in 1862: Confederate Revival," *Louisiana History*, 1 (Fall 1960), 311-316.

companies of the Eighth, three officers and 136 men, commanded by Captain Edward Hall of Worcester. Waller reported sending a flag of truce to demand the surrender of the outpost and its subsequent capture. Colonel Thomas, however, wrote that Waller first raised a flag of truce and then captured the party sent to investigate it. A second party sent to find the first was also captured and then Captain Hall surrendered rather than fire on his own men.¹⁵ The Colonel in this report to Butler protested the violation of the flag of truce. This provoked a correspondence between Butler and Taylor with the former claiming that the Confederate action resembled those of the Negroes in the bloody revolution on San Domingo and the latter deprecating Butler's type of "foraging."¹⁶ The Confederate victory was short lived because Butler immediately dispatched two regiments, the Twenty-first Indiana by the river and the Eighth by train, to cut off the Texans' retreat. Thomas was frustrated in his chase when his train collided with a cow and extensive damage caused considerable delay. Colonel MacMillan's Twenty-first Indiana caught the Confederate force near St. Charles Court House, shattered it, and captured forty prisoners and 250 horses left behind when many of the Texans fled into the swamps.¹⁷ An unfortunate aspect of the Des Allemands affair was the execution of eight members of the Eighth Vermont by the Confederates as spies and traitors. They were residents of the area of German descent who had enlisted in the Regiment in New Orleans. They were judged deserters because of prior membership in the Louisiana Militia and spies because they had acted as scouts. Butler and his successor Banks pushed investigations to bring to trial the members of the courts martial and firing squad until 1865, with little success.¹⁸

After these affairs the rest of September passed bloodlessly. Thomas' command was still separate but now augmented by the First Regiment of Louisiana Native Guards (Colored). This was one of the several such regiments that Butler recruited and formed from

15. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xv, 134-135. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 55-57. G. G. Benedict, *Vermonters in the Civil War, A History of the Part Taken by the Vermont Soldiers and Sailors in the War of the Union, 1861-5*, II (Burlington, 1888), 97-99.

16. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xv, 565-567.

17. *Ibid.*, 133-135.

18. *Ibid.*, Ser. I, xli, Pt. 2, 917-918; xlvi, Pt. 1, 531-532. *Lafourche Parish Press*, May 11, 1960. Lathrop, *op. cit.*, 313-314.

the ex-slaves who sought freedom behind Union lines.¹⁹ By October Butler was anxious to deprive the Confederacy of the bounteous Lafourche District and gain its produce, sugar and cotton, for the Union. Too, General Taylor would be a thorn in his side as long as he possessed the left bank of the Mississippi because he could dispute control and use of the river. Plans were communicated to General Halleck and approved for a three pronged attack. The newly promoted Brigadier General Weitzel with his Reserve Brigade was to be sent to the origin of Bayou Lafourche at Donaldsonville with orders to move down the Bayou where he would meet Thomas' command which was to advance along the railroad to Lafourche Crossing. A naval force under Commodore Buchanan was to be sent to Brashear City on Berwick Bay to co-operate with the other two by cutting off the Confederate retreat.²⁰

Orders for this movement arrived at Thomas' headquarters on October 24 and he began his advance on the next day. Repairing the railroad as he went, he covered seven miles the first day and twenty the next. Culverts had to be rebuilt, rails replaced, and miles of a growth of weeds, so dense that it stopped the locomotive, had to be pulled from the roadbed. The only expected opposition, a force of Lafourche Militia at Des Allemands, was withdrawn to reinforce the Confederates opposing Weitzel before Thomas arrived. Unaware of the withdrawal Thomas, after warning his Negro troops of the consequences if they were lacking in courage, advanced his force with caution only to find the Confederate post abandoned and the bridge burned. Two days were required to rebuild the 475 foot long bridge before the force could proceed unimpeded to Lafourche Crossing. By this time Weitzel had reached Thibodaux and ordered Thomas to continue along the railroad to Berwick Bay making necessary repairs. General Butler commended Thomas, the Eighth Vermont, and the Native Guards for their work on the railroad in a report to General Halleck. By December 8, 1862, the Eighth had completed its work on the road, opening it to Brashear City via Terrebonne Station, Tigerville, and Bayou Boeuf.²¹

19. Benedict, *op. cit.*, 107-108. After July of 1863 Rufus Kinsley became a company commander in a Negro regiment (see Part II of his Civil War Diary).

20. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xv, 158-160.

21. *Ibid.*, 587. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 67-69, 74. Irwin, *op. cit.*, 48.

The only part of Butler's attack that had not succeeded was Buchanan's advance into Berwick Bay. He had arrived too late to cut off the Confederate retreat but did capture an enemy vessel. On a reconnaissance up Bayou Teche on November 4-5 he encountered a Confederate ironclad, the *J. A. Cotton*, which he reported too strong to take without the co-operation of land troops.²² Before these forces could be sent to his aid General Butler, much to the relief of the New Orleanians, was superseded by General N. P. Banks. The latter was determined to secure the river by first moving against Baton Rouge and by advancing into the interior of Louisiana via Bayou Teche.²³

On January 8 the Eighth Vermont was ordered to Camp Stevens south of Thibodaux only to be ordered back to Brashear City along with the rest of Weitzel's command two days later. Weitzel was ordered there to strike General Taylor's forces, which were reported to number 4,500 and to be preparing an attack into the Lafourche area. On January 13 the Union force was ferried across the Bay to Pattersonville and the next day moved against the first obstacle, the *Cotton*. On January 14 Buchanan's force moved to attack on the bayou, but the flag ship *Calhoun* was soon under fire from Confederate rifle pits on the batture and threatened with destruction. Prior to this development General Weitzel had ordered the Eighth Vermont up the east bank to clear the rifle pits and the rest of his force up the west, both advancing on the *Cotton*. Thomas on the east and a Lieutenant-Colonel Babcock commanding the Seventy-fifth New York Regiment on the west were each instructed to obtain sixty volunteers to lead the attack. The Vermont volunteers were sent forward on the run. At this time Thomas was informed of the plight of the *Calhoun* and led his whole force on the double against the rifle pits surprising the Confederates, capturing forty-one of them and putting the rest into flight. These last left a large quantity of small arms behind. This was done without loss to the Regiment. The rapid advance saved the *Calhoun* but it carried Thomas' force beyond its counterpart on the west which was destroying the *Cotton*. Thomas found his force isolated and confronted by superior numbers which might have been disastrous had the

22. *Ibid.*, 48. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xv, 183-185.

23. *Ibid.*, 627-628.

Confederates not withdrawn during the night. The rapid advance of the Eighth earned it the commendation of Weitzel and the brigade nickname of the "Vermont Cavalry."²⁴

With the destruction of the *Cotton* Weitzel's force was withdrawn, as Banks in New Orleans continued his preparations for the move into Louisiana and attacked Baton Rouge. On January 16 the Eighth was back at Camp Stevens near Thibodaux for its first real rest since October. Again Rufus Kinsley, no doubt one of many in the Regiment, explored the countryside. The Catholic Church in Thibodaux seems to have impressed him for he recorded three visits to it in January and February. He wrote of these visits as follows:

January 21, Very pleasant spring like day. Walked up the river [bayou] a few miles through the very pleasant village of Thibodeaux. Most splendid church, and surrounding scenery, I ever saw. Wild flowers in Church yard; first I have seen looking like home. A profusion of yellow dandelions, daisies, and all kinds of wild violets and roses.

But, with all the beauty of this lovely place, the curse is here.

February 15, Went to the Catholic Church at the village. Sermon in French. Congregation mostly women. Almost every one dressed in mourning. Many wear white for mourning, which in this country looks better than black.

February 22, Attended Catholic Church at Thibodeaux. First Sunday in Lent. Enough holy water sprinkled to drown a Yankee congregation; but the residents of these Louisiana swamps are amphibians and stood it like ducks in a shower. After service perambulated the village. . . .²⁵

On the next day the Regiment left Camp Stevens, boarding the train at Terrebonne Station, for Brashear City. The campaign for Port Hudson was beginning. The Regiment and the rest of Weitzel's command with nearly all of Banks' Nineteenth Corps moved first against the fortifications at Fort Bisland or Bethel Place, a short distance from the mouth of Bayou Teche. The Confederates withdrew in the face of Banks' advance on April 15 and the Corps advance at a speed of nearly twenty-five miles a day through New Iberia, Vermillionville, and Opelousas to Alexandria and finally to

24. *Ibid.*, 234-235. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 82. Irwin, *op. cit.*, 72-73.

25. Kinsley, *op. cit.*

Port Hudson. The seige of the latter lasted from May until July 9. Thomas and his Regiment participated with distinction in the disastrous and ill co-ordinated attacks on May 27, June 10, and June 14. The Regiment too provided fifteen volunteers for the force that made the final and successful assault.²⁶

During the long seige, while Banks was employing nearly his whole command before Port Hudson, Weitzel's and the Regiment's work of the previous year was being undone. Taylor in an attempt to get Banks to raise the seige sent two forces into the Lafourche country. One came through Donaldsonville where it by passed the new Union Fort Butler and moved to Lafourche Crossing before it was stopped. The other came through Brashear City taking prisoner the few men left to guard the baggage of the Corps and then following the railroad past Lafourche Crossing, which it found abandoned, to Boutte only twenty miles from New Orleans. The track was open all the way to Algiers and Banks' subordinate commanding the city had only some 250 men. The attack was pushed no farther for at this time Lee's defeat at Gettysburg and Grant's success at Vicksburg were followed by Banks' subjugation of Port Hudson, the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River.²⁷

On the day that Port Hudson surrendered Banks dispatched three brigades, including Weitzel's with the Eighth Vermont, to Donaldsonville to reconquer the Lafourche district. They landed on July 12 and Weitzel's Brigade led the move south. The Confederates were pushed to Labadieville and Banks hoped, as Butler before him, to cut them off at Brashear City. This did not materialize because after the battle at Kock's Plantation on July 14 the Confederates retreated more rapidly until July 21 when they were safely across Berwick Bay. Weitzel's command and the Eighth Vermont moved into Thibodaux on July 31 for summer quarters. The Regiment rested at a camp named Hubbard and sent recruiters to Vermont to refill its depleted ranks. It remained there until September when it moved back to the river and then to Bayou Teche

26. Cooper, *op. cit.* Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 91-92. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xv, 292-400; xxvi, Pt. 1, 21-22, 66-67, 529.

27. Jefferson Davis Bragg, *Louisiana in the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge, 1941), 152. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 167, 171. Irwin, *op. cit.*, 235-250. Barnes F. Lathrop, "The Lafourche District in 1862: Invasion," *Louisiana History*, II (Spring 1961), 175-201. *Official Records*, Ser. I, xxvi, Pt. 1, 187-203, 209-220, 223-229, 540-650.

near New Iberia where it was camped until January 1864. While there the enlistments of the original members of the Regiment ran out and most re-enlisted, much to the glee of the officers and the congratulations of their superiors. In March those who had re-enlisted were sent home to Vermont on furlough but by June they were back in Louisiana. The second stay was a short one for by July 7 orders were on the way and the Regiment was waiting for ships to take it to the Department of West Virginia. It ended its service as a part of the Army of the Potomac.²⁸

Much of the Regiment's stay and activity in Louisiana was undramatic and characterized by hard work. It seemed fated continuously to rebuild the short railroad from Algiers through the swamps and over the bayous to Brashear City. But this was work essential to the cause. When called on to fight or work the Regiment acquitted itself with distinction, at least after the rather inglorious beginnings at Raceland, Boutte, and Des Allemands. As interesting and significant as all of the above are the men's reactions to and reflections on this rather unique part of the South. Many more than Dr. Cooper and Rufus Kinsley must have been greatly impressed and awed by the natural blessings of the area. Others as Kinsley must have found these surroundings and people incomprehensible or even despicable when judged by their Vermont bred social ideals. Many too must have suffered, silently, from the endemic diseases that abounded in the area until recently. To all concerned the experiences of this sojourn in South Louisiana must have been an eye opener.²⁹

28. Benedict, *op. cit.*, 136. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 173. Irwin, *op. cit.*, 251-256. *Official Records*, Ser. 1, xxvi, Pt. 1, 204-209, 214-215, 222-223, 230-233; xxxiv, Pt. 1, 170, Pt. 2, 481-482, Pt. 4, 308; xli, Pt. 2, 65-66, 663; xxxviii, Pt. 2, 551. The Regiment's losses at Port Hudson, May 23-July 8, 1863, were one officer and twenty-four men killed, four officers and 128 men wounded. Nine enlisted men were reported missing and Colonel Thomas was among the wounded.

29. It was as much an eye opener to a family of naive Vermonters ninety-six years later.