GEOGRAPHER'S SPACE

PORT HUDSON BEFORE PORT HUDSON

When a place becomes an event

BY
Richard Campanella

When war visits upon communities, physical damage is but one of the outcomes. The memory of battle can bring fame and infamy to populated places, inscribing in history books to the point of usurping local history. Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Appomattox, for example, once exclusively meant communities; today they primarily invoke events. Ditto Verdun, Pearl Harbor, and Hiroshima.

Here in Louisiana, Port Hudson takes this historiographical twist to an extreme—and if you think I mean the famous 1863 battle, that's exactly my point. I mean the town.

Port Hudson traces its origins to the spatial exigency of linking supply with demand. As the lower Mississippi Valley came into American dominion, cotton production spread on the loamy alluvial soils along the river as well as the silty loess bluffs to the east. But whereas riverside plantations could export their bales on the Mississippi, inland plantations had to cart their cargo overland or ship them on tributaries to reach the main channel.



Port Hudson did rebuild after the Civil War, but never did it recover.

One such tributary was Thompson's Creek, draining the plains north of Baton Rouge up into southwestern Mississippi. Around 1730, French colonials erected a rudimentary defense at the mouth of this creek; by the early 1800s, the Cochran & Rhea Store operated a landing here called named Port Jackson, where rafts poled their way upstream to what would become the Town of Jackson.

But shallow depths and a twisting, flood-prone channel made Thompson's Creek unreliable, forcing planters and merchants to resort to wobbly wagons on primitive roads, costing both time and money. As the *Woodville Republican* noted in 1828, "The price of cotton is often fluctuating and the difference of a day would often-times deprive us of the benefit of a market."

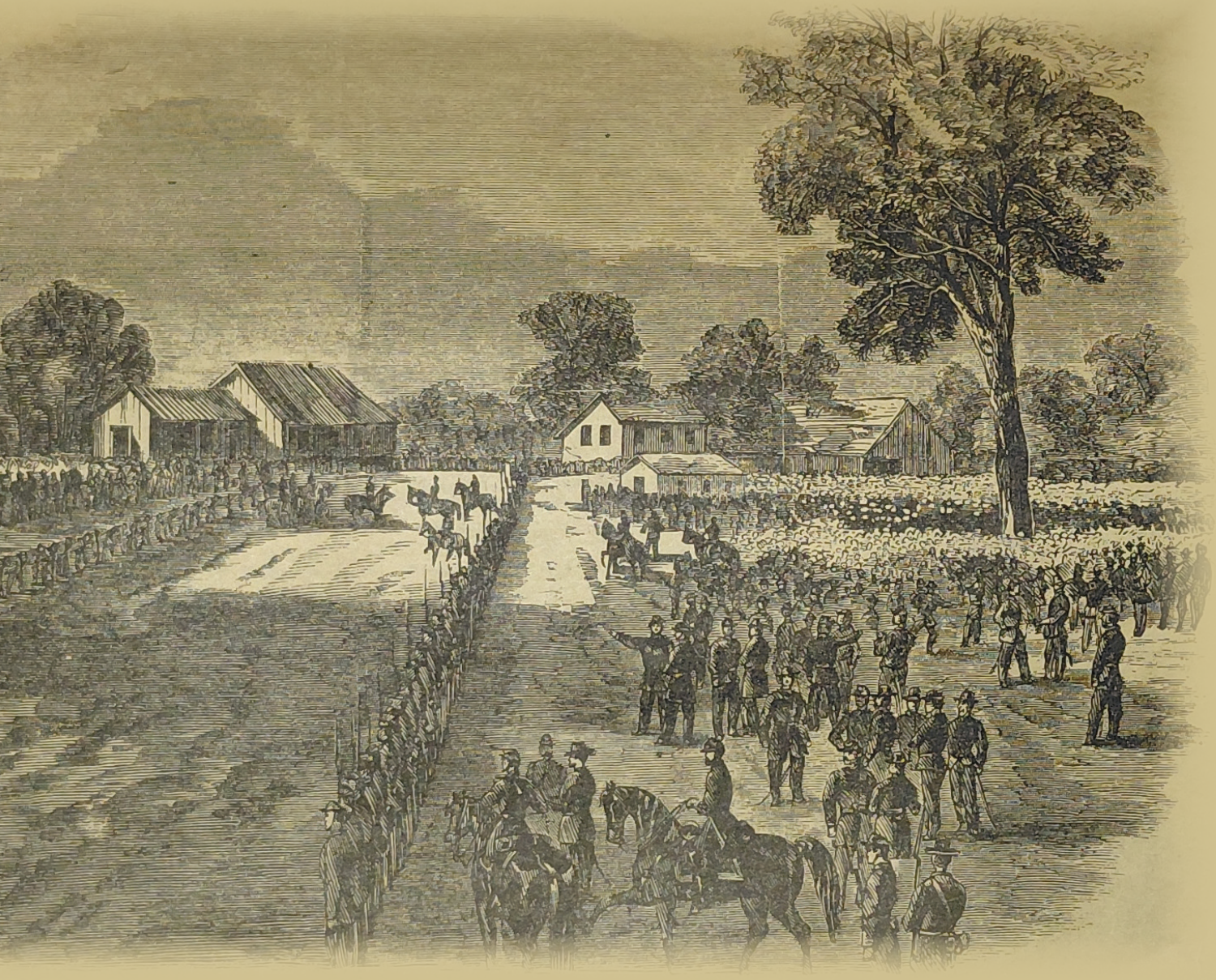
Engineers in England developed a potential solution: steam locomotion rolling on a road of rails. The new technology came to the United States in the 1820s, starting in New England and diffusing southward toward Louisiana, where in 1831 in the Pontchartrain Railroad opened in New Orleans.

Investors in the cotton region promptly began planning their own railroads. In 1831, the West Feliciana Railroad secured a charter to lay tracks from Bayou Sara up to Woodville. Around the same time, East Feliciana bankers devised a plan to lay tracks from Clinton to a new landing on the Mississippi.

The plans set off a whirlwind of land speculation, for everyone knew rail access would spike real estate value. Eager for development, the state offered public support for the private infrastructure, including engineering expertise, cash outlays, legal powers of expropriation, and even the provision of enslaved labor through the Louisiana Board of Public Works.

In the case of the East Feliciana Railroad, the state provided the services of the state engineer plus a thousand dollars to survey a twenty-seven-mile right-of-way from Clinton to the river. Working with land speculators, the engineer selected what appeared to be a suitable river landing backed by an eighty-foot-high bluff, one mile east of old Port Jackson, and named it "Port Hudson" for collaborating landowner James Hudson. Officials also aided the bankers on jurisdictional grounds: when the State Legislature shifted the East Baton Rouge parish line northward in 1832, it made sure the envisioned town of Port Hudson remained within East Feliciana Parish. To this day, it is the only Mississippi River frontage of this otherwise inland parish.

Engraving by James R. Hamilton titled "The Formal Surrender of Port Hudson." FROM *HARPER'S WEEKLY*, AUGUST 8, 1863, COURTESY OF RICHARD CAMPANELLA



In 1833, the bankers incorporated the Clinton & Port Hudson Railroad, and workers began laying track with a 4-foot-8-inch gauge. Public sentiment was sanguine. "As early as October, 1835," wrote historian Merl Elwyn Reed in a 1957 dissertation, "citizens in East Feliciana Parish discussed the possibility of making Port Hudson an official port of entry by act of Congress. There was even talk of erecting a cotton factory at that place."

Though the full line was not completed until 1840, segments of the Clinton & Port Hudson Railroad opened earlier, bringing enough action for the State Legislature to incorporate Port Hudson as a town in 1838. Wrote promoters in the *Daily Picayune* in January 1839, "we would point out Port Hudson as possessing many advantages that will make it a place of importance," chief of all "the Clinton and Port Hudson Rail Road. . . . Seldom is a more favorable opportunity offered for the safe and profitable investment of money."

Like most river bluff communities, Port Hudson had two distinct topographic realms. Up on the hill was the town proper, the equivalent of St. Francisville or Natchez, comprising two parallel main streets, named Mississippi and Railroad, within which were four squares lined with a post office, railroad office, stores, a school, Methodist and Baptist churches, and a dozen or so houses, most of them gable-roof cottages built in the Anglo style. Down a steep ravine was Port Hudson's river landing, equivalent to Bayou Sara or Natchez Under the Hill. "With the development of the new river port," recounted parish historian Henry Skipwith in *East Feliciana, Louisiana, Past and Present* (1892), "came a new set of merchants [who built], parallel to the river, a densely crowded row of handsome and costly warehouses, stores, saloons and hotels," in front of which "the steamboats [and] a long line of loaded country wagons plied almost incessantly."

Port Hudson grew into a regional transshipment node. Steamboats from New Orleans and Natchez called regularly, as did upcountry flatboats and ferries from across the river. "Approximately thirty thousand bales of cotton and two thousand hogsheads of sugar passed through the port annually," wrote historian Lawrence Lee Hewitt in *Port Hudson, Confederate Bastion on the Mississippi* (1994), stewarded by "some twelve or fifteen business establishments . . . up along the bluff." The traffic brought in cash, jobs, travelers, and the occasional luminary. In perhaps the biggest local event to date, Port Hudson in October 1848 held a "great barbeque" for General Zachary Taylor and volunteers returning from the war in Mexico; a year later, Taylor became president.

Port Hudson's 1850 population neared 300 people (200 white and 97 of African ancestry, mostly enslaved), plus scores of transients. But it was not without shortcomings. Physically isolated, Port Hudson was overly dependent on one viable ingress (the railroad), one egress (the river), and one commodity (cotton), which itself depended on fertile loess soils now steadily eroding. It also got off to a late start at a dubious site, selected not for innate natural advantages but corporate convenience. And because the railroad preceded the settlement, cargo generally passed *through* Port Hudson, without generating much value-added activity. For these reasons, Port Hudson never developed as a trade or administrative center, and had none of the architecture and sophistication of St. Francisville or Natchez. Port Hudson also suffered its share of strife, including bouts of yellow fever, river bandits, and financial woes. Rail service sometimes ran so sporadically that a backup livery service had to patch in. Worse, the river channel had migrated so much during the 1850s that both the landing and railroad terminus had to be relocated half a mile southward, calling into question the town's very reason for being.

Nevertheless, Port Hudson succeeded in invigorating commerce throughout East Feliciana Parish and adjacent areas, connecting them with national and world markets. It motivated the construction of a station stop midway to Clinton, aptly named Midway, from which a spur line was later extended to Jackson. Midway would get renamed Ethel, still a railroad community today, while modern Jackson heralds its railroad heritage.

Port Hudson's momentum came to sudden halt with Southern secession in 1861. Lincoln's blockade of the Gulf stifled cotton exports, while Confederate commandeering of railroads hindered overland transit. Western rivers became integral to the Union's Anaconda Plan to encircle and quash the rebellion, putting Southern river towns on the front lines of the impending confrontation. By June 1862, the Union Navy controlled the Mississippi down to Memphis and up to Baton Rouge; by late May 1863, Union forces lay siege to Vicksburg and Port Hudson; and by mid-July, the Confederacy surrendered both of these last strongholds on the Mississippi.

What transpired in and around Port Hudson from May 22 through July 9 was no ordinary battle; it was a particularly destructive campaign sprawled out over fifteen square miles of muddy fields in what ranks as the longest true siege in American history. The action tore up rail lines, destroyed plantations, left five thousand dead or wounded, and devastated the town—partly by its own defenders, who rimmed it with a horseshoe-shaped bastion of guns, batteries, and breastplates.

Port Hudson did rebuild after the Civil War, but never did it recover. The community suffered a spate of political unrest, including arson and racial violence, and by 1876, roughly half the population had shifted to the East Baton Rouge side of the nearby parish line. All the while, cotton exports dwindled in the face of loess erosion and labor shortages. As Skipwith euphemistically put it in his 1892 monograph, the parish



The last remaining antebellum Port Hudson home.
PHOTO BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

has "many large bodies of abandoned lands, which were once highly esteemed for their great productive capacity, but which have had a rest of twenty-five years, since the old system of labor was abolished."

In evidence of that poor 1832 siting decision, the river channel continued to shift southward away from Port Hudson, forcing another relocation of shipping activity to a rival landing named Port Hickey. And in 1886, the Louisville, New Orleans & Texas Railway purchased the Clinton & Port Hudson line and restored the segment from Clinton to Ethel, but abandoned the tracks to Port Hudson.

The divestment cost Port Hudson its status as an incorporated municipality, and its once-nucleated population further dispersed into a sub-rural smattering. A US Geological Survey map from 1906 indicates that most of the houses labelled as "Port Hudson" now stood on the East Baton Rouge side of the parish line, while a 1954 revision marks only the Port Hudson Cemetery where the town once stood. By then, most Louisianans understood Port Hudson to be an 1863 military event.

Today, folks generally take that toponym to mean Port Hudson State Historic Site, where exhibits and trails explicate the earthworks and siege. Even the US Post Office does not recognize Port Hudson as a place per se, addressing the area as being "in" Jackson or Zachary.

To visit the original town site, head west on Port Hudson Plains Road to Borskey Lane, which aligns with one of the two main streets. At the end of the lane, behind a granite Daughters of the Confederacy monument, stands the last remaining house of old Port Hudson, a well-maintained circa-1840s double-bay cottage with a gable roof, two side chimneys—and a bullet hole in a wall.

RICHARD CAMPANELLA, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment, is the author of *Crossroads, Cutoffs, and Confluences: Origins of Louisiana Cities, Towns, and Villages; Draining New Orleans; Bienville's Dilemma*; and other books. He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on X.

VISIT **64PARISHES.ORG** TO SEE THE **GEOGRAPHER'S SPACE** VIDEO SERIES.