"Civilian Reaction to the Red River Campaign, 1864, Natchitoches to Mansfield, Louisiana."

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Civilian Reaction to the Red River Campaign, 1864, Natchitoches to Mansfield, Louisiana

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Abstract: As Confederate forces retreated into northwest Louisiana during the spring of 1864, the women and children of the area were left to face General Nathaniel P. Banks’s Federal army virtually alone. They survived the destruction of property and death of loved ones to care for the wounded and dead of both sides. Based on first-hand accounts by civilians and soldiers.

Key Words: Civil War; Red River campaign; Louisiana; civilians; women; children.

On 30 March 1864 the first of 36,000 Federal troops under Major General Nathaniel P. Banks entered Natchitoches, Louisiana, “with music and unfurled colors” as they marched from Alexandria toward certain victory in Shreveport and then East Texas. Less than two weeks later, the citizens of a fifty-mile stretch between Natchitoches and Mansfield had witnessed two major battles and a tornado-like path of destruction through the dense pine forests and isolated fields of western Louisiana. The only Federal troops remaining, however, would be prisoners, wounded, or dead.1

Historians of the Red River campaign have generally focused on the military duel between Banks and Confederate Major General Richard Taylor, the power struggle between Taylor and Trans-Mississippi commander Edmund Kirby Smith, and the politics that led President Abraham Lincoln to authorize the campaign to gain control over western Louisiana and Texas. Ludwell H. Johnson’s Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in

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1Orton S. Clark, The One Hundred and Sixteenth Regiment of New York State Volunteers (Buffalo, NY: Printing House of Matthews & Warren, 1868), 151.

the Civil War (1958) took the first detailed look at the battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill and the disastrous retreat back to New Orleans. Robert L. Kerby devoted half of one chapter to the event fourteen years later in Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (1972). In recent years there has been renewed interest, with three new books on the Red River Campaign: Curt Anders’ Disaster in Damp Sand: The Red River Expedition (1997), William Riley Brooksher’s War Along the Bayous: The 1864 Red River Campaign in Louisiana (1998), and most recently Gary Dillard Joiner’s One Damn Blunder from Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864 (2003). All of these studies mention civilians in passing, but none focuses primarily on the local reaction to the overwhelming events that enveloped them in early April 1864.\(^2\)

The Federal advance from Alexandria had been unopposed, and although some of the residents of Natchitoches expressed open hostility to the invaders, others seemed to be welcoming. Orton S. Clark of the 116th New York Volunteers reported that “Among the inhabitants, most of whom were French, there seemed less of that antipathy which we had always seen manifested in other places, and the women, we were foolish enough to think, showed evident signs of pleasure at our arrival. All later was explained as only their joy that we were being so easily led on to certain disaster.”\(^3\)

Despite orders to the contrary, some of the Federals “foraged considerably” in the area. Perhaps as an example, the provost marshal picked up six of the offenders, punished them “severely,” and “turned them over to Col. [George L.] Beal for court martial, which was done.” However, on at least one occasion, it was the local citizenry who disciplined the bluecoats. On Saturday, 2 April, three men of Co. I, Twenty-fourth Iowa Infantry, went out foraging at a nearby plantation. Three armed men (no uniforms mentioned) demanded that they surrender. The Federals were taken two miles away and


\(^3\)Clark, One Hundred and Sixteenth Regiment, 151; Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign, 112.
tied up. One escaped, the second was shot and killed, and the third was knocked in the head with the butt of a gun but later made it back into camp and reported the incident. General Thomas E. G. Ransom sent the rest of Co. I out the next day with orders to burn everything at the plantation that was of no use to the quartermaster department, and those orders were carried out "with exceeding cheerfulness." 4

General Banks chose as his army's route toward Shreveport the old stage road connecting Natchitoches to Pleasant Hill and on to Mansfield. It led through "piney woods," forests of huge original pines and a "thick, matted growth of underbrush." The land was described as "this land of gloom" and "little more than a great masked battery." Everything that the Federal army needed had to be brought with them. As one Yankee officer put it, "Such a thing as subsisting an army in a country like this could only be achieved when men and horses could be induced to live on pine trees and rosin." The men passed a few small clearings in which they found "the meanest construction of log and mud houses" and road intersections at White's Store and Crump's Corners. Refugees told the Federal cavalry at the head of the column that the Confederates would be waiting for them near Mansfield, where "they were going 'to begin to bury the Yankees.'" Having faced no impressive force during the entire advance until that point, the officers laughed it off. 5

The first town the Federals encountered, Pleasant Hill, had been established in the early 1850s and had a population of about 100 to 200. It was located in a clearing in the woods on the edge of an old field at the intersection of the road between Mansfield and Grand Ecore and another


5Beecher, Record of the 114th Regiment, 307; John Scott (comp.), Story of the Thirty Second Iowa Infantry Volunteers (Nevada, IA: by the author, 1896), 135; J. T. Woods, Services of the Ninety-Sixth Ohio Volunteers (Toledo, OH: Blade Printing and Paper Co., 1874), 53; Frank M. Flinn, Campaigning with Banks in Louisiana, '63 and '64, and with Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley in '64 and '65 (Lynn, MA: Press of Thos. P. Nichols, 1887), 99; Joiner, One Damn Blunder, 86; Gould, History of the First, 411; Marshall, History of the Eighty-Third Ohio, 125.
road from Texas and Fort Jesup to Blair’s Landing on the Red River. It had
about twelve or fifteen houses, a Methodist Church, possibly a Baptist
Church a short distance away, a post office, a hotel, three storehouses, a
school building for girls, and the as yet uncompleted Pearce Payne Method-
ist College for boys. One Federal declared that the village showed “more
than the common degree of enterprise and taste,” and another described it
as “intended in its inception as a place where the families of those cultivating
plantations on the low lands might more safely reside during certain
seasons.”

Pleasant Hill had two points of special pride—Pearce Payne College and
the Childers mansion. Pearce Payne consisted of two unfinished brick
buildings designed to be two wings of an as-yet-unconstructed grander
central building. Each structure was about forty by eighty feet, two stories,
with rough floors. The John S. Childers mansion had been constructed
about four years before for the not inconsiderable sum of $10,000, which
did not include the cost of the slave labor. It was a fine wood frame structure,
with two stories, eight large rooms, a spacious hall in front, and a very large
dining room and kitchen in the back. A balcony supported by four round
pillars with Doric pediments stretched over a broad porch across the front.
According to one grandson living in the house at the time of the 1864 battle,
“this house was known all over northwest Louisiana as being the finest.” A
fifty-six-year-old widow, Mrs. Maria Childers, lived there without any “male
protector”—only her daughters, possibly daughters-in-law, and some of her
grandchildren. At least one son was serving in the Confederate army at the
time. Stephen Decatur Chapman, Maria’s’ younger brother, had taken a
wagon load of area slaves to Texas, leaving behind his wife, Caroline, and
their children, including seventeen-year-old Sallie.

6Flinn, Campaigning, 99; Scott, Story of the Thirty Second Iowa, 201; Elias P. Pellet, History
of the 114th Regiment, New York State Volunteers (Norwich, NY: Telegraph & Chronicle Power
Annals of Iowa 7 (October 1906): 516; Benson, “Battle of Pleasant Hill,” map after page 490;
Beecher, Record of the 114th Regiment, 308; J. P. Blessington, The Campaigns of Walker’s Texas
Division (New York: Lange, Little & Co., 1875), 194; Scott, Story of the Thirty Second Iowa, map;

7Benson, “Battle of Pleasant Hill,” 500; Childers, “Reminiscences,” 514–16; DeSoto
Parish History: Sesquicentennial Edition, 1843–1993 (Mansfield, LA: DeSoto Historical and
Genealogical Society, 1995), 104–5; Scott, Story of the Thirty Second Iowa, 152.
Confederate troops, particularly cavalry, had operated in and around Pleasant Hill for some time, and passersby brought news of Banks's progress up the Red River. On Friday, 1 April, John G. Walker's Texas Infantry Division arrived in town after a fast march from Marksville via Fort Jesup. One of Walker's foot soldiers, J. P. Blessington, reported that "The whole country, far and wide, was aroused to the highest pitch of excitement by the retreat of our army. The inhabitants, all along the route of our retreat, were hurriedly quitting their homes, and flying before the approach of the invader. Consternation and alarm everywhere prevailed among the citizens. Old menshouldered their muskets and came to our assistance, to help drive back the invader." General Tom Green and the first of his Texas cavalrmen joined Walker's troops, and on Monday and Tuesday, 4 and 5 April, the Confederates retreated in the direction of Mansfield, leaving Pleasant Hill, consisting almost entirely of women, children, the elderly, and slaves, to face the Yankees alone. At noon on the seventh, Brigadier General Albert Lee and his Federal cavalry division entered the town.8

Henry H. Childers, grandson of Maria Childers, recalled that

soon the blue uniforms of Yankee officers appeared in our little back yard under the China trees, on horseback. The exercise these officers had taken that morning had given them an appetite and they demanded victuals. My grandmother, at first, did not think that she could afford to furnish food energy to the enemy but a certain wise discretion accompanied with some premonition, persuaded her that she had better feed these men. After eating, they proceeded to inquire for money and valuables and received unsatisfactory answers. The silverware and other valuable articles were then in the bottom of a six-hundred barrel oblong cistern under the house. . . . Soon after they had left the house, the soldiery began to pass on their way to Mansfield.9

When General Banks arrived, it came as no surprise that he chose the Childers mansion as his personal headquarters.10


9Childers, "Reminiscences," 506.

10DeSoto Parish History, 104.
Nearby, Arkansas (Mrs. Phillip J. “Jack”) Sleet had barely said goodbye to her husband, a scout with the 2nd Louisiana Cavalry, Company B, when thousands of Yankees appeared near her home. Two lines of soldiers took up residence between her house and her front fence. They began coming to her holding their caps and asking that they be filled with meal and other food. Her husband’s elderly English plantation manager advised her to comply, and he “took the key to the meat house, gave food to these, then they came in droves and stripped it completely. The whole top was hung with hams, bacon, etc., and in a very short while it was empty except for a hogshead of molasses for the negroes.” They took that, too, and others killed cows, calves, and all fowls. “Little chickens too small to eat were stepped on and killed; setting hens were killed and the eggs destroyed.” Some of the soldiers reportedly asked the family’s slaves if they were treated well, “to say the word and they would burn their mistress and her children up in the house.” The slaves allegedly protested that they had a good master and mistress, but Mrs. Sleet still asked for and received a guard to protect her home. She had tubs and other vessels filled with water, and then the family shut themselves up in the house for safety.¹¹

Soldiers also stripped out Caroline Chapman’s food supply—again, everything except a barrel of molasses. The thirty-eight-year-old wife and mother sat on that and refused to budge. The Federals, “after wrangling a little over the matter,” agreed to let her keep it and even agreed to roll it into her house to keep others from confiscating it. Unfortunately for Mrs. Chapman, in doing so they found out that the contents were not molasses but the family’s wine supply, which prompted a fight among the men. Evidently some of the wine survived the fisticuffs, because after the battle of Pleasant Hill, a canteen of it was offered by a member of the 15th Maine to a wounded man of the 14th Iowa.¹²

Young Sallie Chapman called it “a day of terror for the women and children”:

Houses were ransacked by soldiers. All cows, pigs, chickens and turkeys were killed and turned into food. Pantrys were raided

and food taken. Stores were broken into and the goods taken off. Several stores were full of meal for the Confederate Soldiers and that was taken. They took clothes or anything they wanted. The girls school building was burned. . . . Yards and gardens and all fences were torn down and used for fuel to cook their food. In some houses almost everything was destroyed. The women and children were almost wild with fear among thousands of Yankees. For two nights they did not undress for bed.\textsuperscript{13}

As early as 29 March rumors had begun to circulate in Mansfield, about twenty miles north, that the federals were advancing, and on 1 April twenty-two-year-old refugee Sidney Harding wrote in her diary that the Confederates had retreated as far as Pleasant Hill, “Yankees not far behind.” On Saturday, 2 April, she and three others left their temporary home near Keatchie and rode to Mansfield. They started to church the next day. “[W]hat was our surprise to see the road strewn with wagons—the army retreating But we went on not knowing the extent of it when Aaron Prescott met us and asked us to return. Our army was really retreating. . . . We returned—had difficulty in passing train. We got ready to come home immediately. . . . We started[,] hard to pass all the trains—gave up—here safely—saw Lt. Winchister said he wanted to send his servant up to give us warning in time to leave.” Sidney decided to stay in town and as late as Thursday, the seventh, recklessly rode down to Carroll’s Mill to visit her beloved 2nd Louisiana Cavalry. Soon the sight of wounded men from a fight at that place convinced her to return to Mansfield.\textsuperscript{14}

As the fighting got closer, many of Mansfield’s citizens decided to take whatever they could save and evacuate the town. Many moved to the Dollette Hills a short distance away to the east-southeast and waited to see what the impending battle would bring. Samuel Foster Smith wrapped up the DeSoto Parish record books in oil cloth and took them to the Dollette canebrakes for safety. John Patterson Finch and his family, who lived four miles southeast of Mansfield, hurriedly buried some of their possessions and put

\textsuperscript{13}Barron, *History of Pleasant Hill*, 3.

\textsuperscript{14}Harding (Miss Sidney) Diaries, 1863–1864, 1865, Manuscript Group #721, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, in *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution Through the Civil War, Series I, Selections from the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries, Part 1, Louisiana Sugar Plantations* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), typescript, 10, 11, 12, 13–14.
the rest in their wagon and left. Others, including twenty-two-year-old Eliza Crosby Fields, stayed in town. She held her baby daughter, Roberta, in her arms and stood at the gate of her father’s house, watching as the Confederate army, including the Louisiana Crescent Regiment, retreated through the town.

Captain Fields stepped out of the ranks, and gave his wife and baby a fond embrace, said a few words, and took his place again at the head of his company. What the thoughts of this gallant soldier were, no one can tell, for he was apparently leaving all that was near and dear to him in the hands of the enemy. This brave wife stood without a tear in her eye, evidently striving to make the shock of the separation as light as possible on the sorely stricken soldier. As soon as he was out of sight, she rushed to her room with her baby and closed the door.\textsuperscript{15}

One little boy remembered:

That day was the saddest we ever beheld, for the Confederate army passed through Mansfield on its retreat, and there was none left here but the women and children, for every boy and man that was able to do so had a gun in his hand and was in the ranks. There were two or three decrepit old men left, and as many disabled soldiers who could not be moved and everything was as quiet as death, all awaiting for the “Yankees to come.” The negroes had practically all been carried to Texas, and the town was forsaken.\textsuperscript{16}

Confederate Brigadier General James P. Major, with parts of two Texas cavalry brigades, engaged a larger Federal cavalry force at Wilson’s Farm, three miles north of Pleasant Hill on 7 April in what could be described as a severe skirmish. The Confederates then continued their strategic retreat. The next morning, on a Confederate national day of prayer and fasting, Walker’s Texans and a Louisiana division were ordered to move a few miles south of Mansfield and form a line of battle. They left their camps north of


\textsuperscript{16}“Last of the Mohicans,” 106.
the town with the bands playing "Dixie." Colonel T. R. Bonner of the 18th Texas recalled:

The sun of the 8th as it rose majestically in a cloudless sky, presented to the view of the astonished inhabitants of Mansfield, the divisions of Walker and Mouton marching proudly back to meet that foe before whom they had so long retreated. As we passed through the streets of the beautiful town, they were thronged with fair ladies—misses and matrons—who threw their bright garlands at our feet, and bade us, in God's name, drive back the Yankees, and save their cherished homes. As their cheerful songs of the Sunny South fell in accents of sweetest melody upon our ears, we felt that we were indeed "thrice armed," and through greatly outnumbered, would drive back the foe.\(^ {17}\)

Peter Gravis of the 17th Texas Infantry remembered a similar scene: "The doors and windows of the houses in town were thronged. Women and children waved us on with their white handkerchiefs, as they dropped tears of gratitude for those who marched to meet the enemy."\(^ {18}\)

Sidney Harding "was waked up early by shouts, our reinforcements. We dressed in a hurry to see them. Nearly all of our army passed down. . . . We saw nearly every one we knew. All Walker's division, Mouton and Polignac's brigade and a great deal of artillery. The Lt. and galant [sic] Col. Armant at their head how handsome he looked. All of our brave soldiers How sad it made me feel to see them all marching down to meet their fate. Poor fellows, many of them will never return."\(^ {19}\)

Eliza Fields and her father's family joined the others along Polk Street, watching the army and the bands march by.

As his regiment again passed the Crosby home, the captain kissed his hand at his wife and baby, and made some remark, but as a soldier could not leave his command when a battle was about to commence, he could not stop. However, the wife never flinched, and with her baby in her arms rushed out and took her position beside her husband in the ranks and the soldiers roused

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\(^ {19}\) Harding, Diaries, 14.
a tremendous rebel yell, for the captain's wife and child. The
writer [a small boy at the time] not knowing what to do followed
her, and with Mrs. Fields marched to the spot where the K. C. S.
depot now stands, where the soldiers were halted and the
cartridge boxes filled with buck and ball. Everything was in a rush
and we remember that a staff officer and Colonel Beard of the
Crescent regiment were rushing the work, as it was important
that the troops move rapidly. Under the circumstances, Captain
Fields could pay no attention to his wife and baby, but several
times as he passed, he stopped, and hurriedly kissed them, and
with a "God bless you," he marched away.\textsuperscript{20}

The people of Mansfield then turned their attention toward caring for
the anticipated casualties. "The women and older men began to gather all
available mattresses, bed clothes, straw, cloth for bandages and other
necessities, and readied the courthouse, churches, Mansfield Female Col-
lege and their homes to care for the Confederate wounded."\textsuperscript{21}

The armies met and fought late that Friday afternoon and evening, with
the Federals losing more than 2,000 killed, wounded, and captured, and the
Confederates losing just under half that number. The sound of the battle
carried for miles. Lafayette Price, a fourteen-year-old slave later told
interviewers:

Mr. Carroll say that at Mansfield where they were shooting the
big guns, the ladies was crying. He told 'em they needn't to cry
now; when they was shooting the big guns they wasn't killing
men, but when they hear the little guns shoot, then they could
start crying, 'cause that mean that men was gitting kill. I dunno
if you ever parch popcorn. That the way the little guns sound. He
say that then they could begin crying.\textsuperscript{22}

At the first cannon volley, little Richard Shackleford Fortson in the
Naborton area east of Mansfield, ran into his house and found his mother
hiding her silverware and other valuables. The children and slave women of

\textsuperscript{20}"Last of the Mohicans," 107.
\textsuperscript{21}"Mansfield Battle Plan," typescript. Mansfield State Commemorative Area, Mansfield,
LA.
\textsuperscript{22}B. A. Botkin (ed.), \textit{Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery} (Chicago: University
Miles Walton Goldsby, left alone when he joined the army at Mansfield, took refuge under the beds for hours until the battle was over. Mary Ann Owens Mixon simply mounted her mule and rode away, leaving all behind her.23

William Newton Whitton, seventeen years old, heard the battle from western DeSoto Parish near the Sabine River. He had joined the Home Guard in San Augustine, Texas, the year before, along with “old men with long beards of various colors and boys too young to shave.” The Guard had been ordered out “to take a stand and use guerilla war tactics in case General Taylor and General Walker were not able to defeat the Federal forces at Mansfield or other places in that vicinity.” They could hear the sound of cannon and massed rifles,

but they could not get any information for several hours from couriers to determine which side was winning the battle. They waited and watched many hours for the Yankees to spring upon them, but they never came. However, hundreds of scared white people and Negroes were fleeing from Louisiana to Texas in front of the Union soldiers. All persons were stopped and investigated. Some were sent home, and some were held for further investigation.24

The doctors and chaplains spent the night going over the battlefield with their lanterns, serving the dying and attending those who might recover. Local women joined them, searching for their husbands and sons. Eliza Fields found her husband’s body “riddled with bullets.” He had been “one of seven men killed carrying the colors” in a Crescent Regiment charge. “As soon as she had seen him buried, she did not succumb to grief, but threw herself with unselfish devotion into the work of caring for the Confederate wounded and the Crosby home was full of them, and she found herself to be just as great a hero as was her martyred husband, who carried the flag to the cannon’s mouth.” Twenty-eight-year-old Mrs. Martha Howell Lord emerged from a cave in the Dollette Hills where she had hidden her children, and she and her nine-year-old son William rode horseback to the battlefield. They discovered the body of her husband, Seth Lord, also of the Crescent Regiment, recognizable only by the socks she had made for him.

23DeSoto Parish History, 150–1, 167, 240.
She returned home, hitched up her wagon, drove it back herself, retrieved her husband’s body, and took it to Grove Hill Cemetery for burial. To add to her troubles, when she got home after the burial, she found that “Union troops had destroyed everything; bedding, carried off all meat, syrup and lard; all chickens but one blue hen that was on a nest in an ash barrel.” A Federal straggler appeared at her house and asked for a drink of water from the well. When she told him that she had no cups or vessels of any kind to offer him, he became angry and shot a puppy near her.\(^{25}\)

By the next morning, all of the nearby farm houses had been converted to hospitals, and then the wounded of both sides were carried on to Mansfield and to Keatchie. In Mansfield, the town hall, the Methodist Church, and the Mansfield Female College were converted to Confederate hospitals. When these filled, private homes became hospitals. Everywhere was the sight and smell of “seared flesh, clotted blood, splintered limbs, and dismembered corpses.” Wounded and dazed soldiers wandered the streets.\(^{26}\)

In 1910 Louis Hall, formerly of the Crescent Regiment, wrote to the editor of the Mansfield Enterprise of his experience after the battle. He was first taken to the college where he was laid on the floor, “every space was occupied by our wounded soldiers and some of Banks’s men. We were all treated alike. I was soon attended to, wound bandaged etc., while others were put upon the table, arms and limbs amputated.” Numerous ladies came to the makeshift hospital, asking to take soldiers home. Alice, Hattie, Florence, and Helen Parker approached Hall to see if he would like to go with them. “I gladly accepted their kind invitation, was put on a stretcher, and brought to their home, where I found every space, even the dining room and parlor occupied by wounded soldiers.” Felix Pierre Poché, a volunteer aide-de-camp to Colonel Henry Gray, mourned the wounded and the dead of Mansfield, adding in his diary, “But on the other hand the sight of the ladies who rushed on all sides bringing food and comfort to the suffering of their country was a spectacle upon which the patriotic eye feasted.”\(^{27}\)

Map No. 2, Henderson’s Hill, Louisiana, 21 March 1864
drawn by Union Colonel John S. Clark.

Maps from the Collection of the Cayuga Museum, Auburn, New York
Sidney Harding reluctantly accompanied a cousin and others to see the battlefield. "I had rather gone to the hospital as it was Sunday. . . . As we passed the hospital the gallery was full of our dead. Oh how sick it made me. It was a dreadful ride to me, very sad." Seeing only an open field, she returned to Mansfield to the home of Mrs. Gibbs. "All busy picking lint. Mrs. Prescott, Cus. A., Mrs. King and others there. Ma and Mrs. Pitts went to hospital. I went after dinner. Oh what a dreadful sight. Our poor men just lying on the floor in cotton. And such an odor. And they bore it so bravely. Not a groan was heard, all so cheerful. I only went to one church. There are more than a thousand wounded. Every house in town like a public building and every private house full." She visited one of the hospitals again on Monday, 11 April, two days after the battle of Pleasant Hill, and sought out the Missouri wounded at the request of one of the soldiers. "They like so for the ladies to visit them. Oh the sickening sights. Some shot in face, both eyes out, head bent, arms, legs, everywhere." By Tuesday she had returned to her home near Keatchie, where the family took in the wounded. When one man, "a handsome boy," died, they attended the funeral. "Poor soldier, thy warfare is over."28

Surgeons cared for wounded Federal soldiers at the Campbellite Church and most of the storehouses. The most severe cases of both sides were taken to the Baptist Church. About two a.m., early on the 11th, "one of the nurses lighted a candle and holding it in one hand attended the patient with the other, but the delirious patient struck down the candle" which fell on the cotton scattered on the floor. The fire spread "almost as quick as a flash of gunpowder." The approximately seventy men inside, all but seven of whom were Confederates, either jumped from windows themselves or were dragged out. One man was killed, and the Baptist Church burned to the ground.29

Federal and Confederate wounded later recalled the kindness of the women of Mansfield. Major John B. Reid wrote his family in Illinois that "I had the very kindest of treatment from the very nice family in which it was my good fortune to fall, were it not for this attention, I fear my chances of

28Harding, Diaries, 16–19.
life would have been poor. . . . So far the Confederates have given us as good as they have themselves, so we have no reason to complain." Many of the southern wounded who had been nursed in the Jacob Wemple home wrote back both during and after the war to let the family know how they were doing, and to thank them for the care that they had received under their roof.  

Between Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, at about 1:30 p.m., on Saturday, 9 April, a young girl and her family "heard the low rumble of drums in the direction of Grove Hill and in a few minutes the sound of marching feet." Soon the men of Walker's Texas Division came around the bend in the road:

a column of ragged, weary, gray-clad men marching in columns of fours. . . . They halted in front of our house, then stacked arms in the road and were told to "fall out" for a fifteen minute rest. Some had blood-stained bandages on their heads—some had an arm suspended in a bloody bandage or wore bandages on their necks or shoulders. Others staggered toward the house to beg for a bite to eat.

The girl's mother fed the men the leftovers from dinner, then a washpot full of warm hominy, and finally she stripped out her smokehouse.

But the men seemed reluctant to leave, crowding around Ma to thank her again and again and to invoke the blessings of Heaven upon her. Some handed her a dollar bill, some two or even five (Confederate money) and others hugged her as they left the yard. They had marched all night Thursday night, marched and fought all day Friday, then buried their dead at Moss' Lane during the night—all with only a few hours sleep and without a bite to eat since Thursday. A blast of the bugle soon brought the men back to the road where they secured their rifles and quickly lined up. Then the order rang out sharp and clear, "Attention! F-o-h-r-w-a-r-d—M-a-r-c-h." Then the order, "Double quick!—M-a-r-c-h!" Soon they disappeared in a cloud of dust in the direction of Pleasant Hill.  

Sixty years later that young girl, then a grandmother, would cry "big hot tears" as she told her grandson about the incident.

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30Reid, Civil War Letters, 89; Mrs. Mary Porter Goss, "Information on Big Battle Recalled," typescript. Mansfield State commemorative Area, Mansfield, LA.

Meanwhile, the Federals were pulling back into Pleasant Hill. Sallie Chapman recalled that "they were whooping, hollering and cursing shamefully, which caused great excitement among the women and children. . . . One officer told [her] mother, "Your folks sure did give us a licking at Mansfield." Some of the officers demanded food and beds, while others prepared for the pursuing Confederates. The women and children of Pleasant Hill at first took shelter inside their homes, but before long the Sleet family heard "the bullets raining on our house. . . worse than any hailstorm." After the battle had started, the residents were advised to leave the area, but to not go between the two main roads. According to Lillie Sleet,

In haste to join the other families that were leaving too, no time to pack and too sorely distressed and frightened to think, she gave her oldest daughter, a child of seven years, a double handful of jewelry loose in her hands, put the teaspoons in her own stockings, and left everything else. It was a pitiful sight, this evacuation of women and children and the children’s nurses. Our family had no sooner crossed the street, to join my aunt’s family, before the soldiers in the yard dropped their muskets and ran into the house, greedy for plunder. While at my aunt’s, waiting for them to join in the exodus, some Yankee officers came on the porch. One had our forks and teaspoons in his coat pocket; her second daughter saw and recognized them and started to pull them out. This scared her nearly to death as she thought he’d kill the child, so she pulled the little thing away quickly and he never knew they were seen. Our little band wandered all day in the woods, got lost and went into that section between the two main roads where we were warned not to go. Bullets rained down on us but fortunately their force was rather well spent and no one was hurt. At nightfall we stumbled upon a Yankee camp. The officers were very much surprised, saying, "Why, ladies, where are you going with these little children?" She told them we were seeking safety from the battle, so one of the officers said, "You can’t go farther, you will kill the children. You are safe here." They spread blankets down for the children and made coffee for the ladies and they spent the night sitting on logs around the big camp fire.32

Sallie Chapman also remembered taking refuge in the woods east of town where they could hear the battle’s roar. During the worst of the

32Barron, History of Pleasant Hill, 3–4; Benson, Battle of Pleasant Hill," 495; Stinson, “Reminiscences.”
fighting, Mrs. Hampton was dismayed to hear her children laughing, and she scolded them that they should be praying instead. Her daughter Emma replied, "O Laudy, mamma! it's no use praying now, the Yankees have got us."33

Little Henry Childers, his family, and their servants took refuge in the cellar at the rear of the Childers mansion. The two armies met for what became known as the battle of Pleasant Hill late Saturday afternoon, the 9th, in the old Jordan field to the west of his house, immediately in front of the Childers "flower yard." He did not stick his head out of the cellar door, but Henry Taylor, one of the slaves, did venture to the front of the house and reported that "a bombshell had hit the house. This caused great alarm, as we thought it meant an explosion and burning down of the house. . . . However, an examination after the battle, showed that a ten-pound round bomb had struck the house and passed through several walls, shattering several pieces of furniture and lodging itself between the ceiling, without the more serious damage of explosion." This shell cut the pillow on which, according to one account, the head of Gen. Banks had lain the night before. Many bullets struck the house, but no member of the family was hurt.34

Two young boys, Richard Joshua Wilson and his brother Bob, were thinning corn near Pleasant Hill when the battle opened. Richard told his grandson, Waylon Maroney, that "It sounded like fire coming through a canebreak; cannons roared like thunder. We heard mama call us on the horn for dinner, but we had to find out what was going on." When they reached the battlefield men were lying everywhere, and smoke and dust were hanging over the area. Confederates and Federals were mixed up "like salt and pepper, horses were spinning like windmills, some without eyes, some looking like shells had gone clear through them. Men were crying for water." The two boys helped an unidentified doctor by carrying water from a spring three-quarters of a mile down the hill to give to the wounded and the dying.35

The next morning Mary Hampton also went out across the old Jordan field to help however she could, "while the dead were yet unburied, the

wounded not all gathered in, and the debris of the great conflict scattered everywhere. Especially touching to the feminine heart were the boyish red uniforms of the Zouaves, 162nd New York [actually, the 165th], whose dead, like sacred roses, dotted all the long slope from the great ditch where Benedict fell, up to the crest of the hill on which stood the village of Pleasant Hill.” Solon Benson, of the 32nd Iowa, called her “the heroine of the battlefield.”

Confederate soldiers and others traveling between Mansfield and Pleasant Hill also commented about the aftereffects of the battle. H. C. Medford estimated that dead men and horses were scattered over an area of at least nine square miles. Gus Hall later wrote to the St. Louis Republican: “Ruin was on every side. Helpless women and hungry children stood tearfully by desolated homes. The naked chimneys [sic] showed where houses had been. Not even a bird was to be seen, nor any living thing that could get away. The wells were polluted; dead horses and broken vehicles lined the road.”

As soon as the battle ended, Pleasant Hill, like Mansfield one day earlier, became one large hospital and morgue. Every house and building, including the many with cannon ball holes in them, filled with the wounded, both Confederate and Yankee. All that Saturday night “the surgeons labored with the wounded, and when the bright Sabbath sun rose on the morning of the tenth, the [Federal] army had disappeared, and that little town of less than one hundred souls found itself oppressed with seven times its number of wounded belonging to both armies. And in their haste the army had taken away everything needed for the comfort of the men. There were neither provisions nor medical supplies,” one Federal soldier recalled. Only five Federal surgeons and a few attendants remained behind with approximately four hundred wounded.

At the Childers mansion, all the halls and rooms filled with the wounded, except for two bedrooms, the dining room, and the kitchen.

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Young Henry vividly remembered “one soldier who was brought in shot through the head. He seemed to be aware that his end was near and begged that he be put out of his misery. He died very soon afterwards.” When one Union soldier recalled the kind treatment his men received from the “noble” Pleasant Hill ladies, he named Maria Childers “very chief among them all.”

Arkansas Sleet and her family returned home to find that their house had been used as a hospital and the dead and wounded were strewn in the “commons” in front. Moreover, the building had been stripped:

everything in it was stolen or ruined; what the Yankees could not use or send home was destroyed; our old family Bibles and records were burned, mirrors put on the floor and stepped on, ink poured on them and the floor; mahogany bureau drawers taken to feed horses in, away off in different places in woods and fields. Absolutely nothing but the shell of the house left.

The Sleet family was not the only one left with almost nothing. W. F. Mills wrote home that “It was hard to see the poor women and children standing around crying over their losses. They had nothing to sleep on and nothing to wear.”

One of the first problems was the lack of food. For the first three days after the battle, Mrs. Sleet and her family had nothing to eat except pickled beef scavenged from the battlefield. On the eleventh a Confederate relief party from Mansfield brought provisions and other assistance, and on the twelfth or thirteenth the Federals sent Dr. E. F. Sanger, medical director of the Nineteenth Army Corps, and two big army wagons loaded with empty ticks for cots and other supplies.

For the first few days the Confederate and Federal wounded were not divided but lay side by side. Henry Childers later commented, “it was both beautiful and sad to see the soldiers and nurses of the two contending armies in pleasant conversation together, exchanging ministrations and offering up prayers together.” Not so beautiful was how numbed the little children became to the sight of dead soldiers, so much so that some were caught

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40Stinson, “Reminiscences.”
41“Battle of Mansfield Was Horror to Soldier from Area,” in DeSoto Plume, 55.
jumping from corpse to corpse and crowing like roosters. Maria Childers soon requested that her home be used solely as a Confederate hospital, so the Federal wounded were moved to the Pearce Payne College buildings, and the Confederate wounded were concentrated in the homes and buildings along the main street.\textsuperscript{43}

One physician and "one sound Yankee" also established an overflow Union hospital to handle one hundred casualties at the camp meeting ground just east of town. The next day Confederate surgeons reached that site, and "they were amputating arms and legs, almost by the wagon load." Rations were very short, "and we had so few cooking vessels that we were compelled to keep them going nearly all day and night."\textsuperscript{44}

The wounded Federals later wrote movingly about the care they received at the Pearce Payne College hospital in Pleasant Hill. Rations were meager and simple, provided by an Irish cook, and consisted mostly of meal and coffee. Solon Benson, of the 32\textsuperscript{nd} Iowa, remembered that

kind-hearted southern ladies, who remained at home with their little ones, were frequent visitors at the hospitals, and generously supplemented the bill of fare with such delicacies as their slender larders afforded, for they, too, had been plundered by both armies, and were almost constrained to part with the widow's last mite. . . . the coming among them of these gentle messengers of sympathy and mercy, was especially beneficent; and all the more so when it is remembered that all of them were true southern people, and in full sympathy with the southern cause, while we were in their eyes, their "Yankee invaders."\textsuperscript{45}

Michael Ackerman, another Iowan, remembered "the ministrations of the wife of a rebel officer who lived in the neighborhood, a Mrs. Cole, who came every week with such supplies as her home afforded, the tears running down her cheeks as she looked upon the starving men she could not feed!" One dying officer handed his gold watch to Mrs. William Hampton to repay her for her "constant kindness," but she immediately refused the generous gift. Sarah Hampton, the "curly headed flower girl," usually brought a bouquet when she came. A Mrs. Bullen, who made frequent visits to the

\textsuperscript{44}Van Dyke, "Ben Van Dyke's Escape," 524; Medford, "Diary," 224–25.
\textsuperscript{45}Benson, "Battle of Pleasant Hill," 501.
hospital from her country home on muleback, fell from the mule at one point and her fractured “limb” was tended by Federal Dr. J. E. Armstrong. Mrs. Jack Sleet recalled that “all the ladies in our little town nursed the wounded, Yankees and Confederates alike, and did all that could be done with so little to do with.”

The Confederates who died on the battlefields were the first to be buried. The army sextons buried many Mansfield casualties in the city cemetery on a hill. Other Confederate casualties of the fight at Mansfield were buried near where they fell. A member of Terrell’s Brigade saw them “in trenches with their hats and clothes on.” Lafayette Price said “they just dig a big hole and put ‘em in and threw dirt on ‘em. I went back after two or three days, and the bodies done swell and crack the ground.” Richard and Bob Wilson, the boys who had helped take water to the wounded after the battle of Pleasant Hill, watched the next day as

the ground was opened up with turning plows, and the dead of both armies were laid head to foot all the way around the south side of the Wilson place, and the whole hillside was “wrapped up with soldiers and the unburied dead.” When the earth began to warm later in the season, huge cracks appeared in the ground. It swelled up in ridges, like a big mole run, and the entire hillside turned green with flies.

By Sunday, 10 April, H. C. Medford reported that all of the Confederate dead from Mansfield had been buried, but on Tuesday near Pleasant Hill he still saw bodies including “a great quanity [sic] of dead men piled up in the head of a deep hollow and brush only thrown over them. Whatever officer is in charge of this ought to be cashiered.” Many of the Pleasant Hill Confederate dead found places in that town’s cemetery as well as at the Old Campground cemetery nearby. Capt. Elijah Petty of the 17th Texas Infantry was buried in the yard of the Childers home. Some bodies were sent to their families, wherever they were.

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46Benson, “Battle of Pleasant Hill,” 501, 502; Scott, Story of the Thirty Second Iowa, 152; Barron, History of Pleasant Hill, 4; Stinson, “Reminiscences.”


Of the four hundred wounded Federals left in Pleasant Hill, more than half died, and they were buried in a makeshift graveyard behind Pearce Payne College. The plots were "rudely marked, with name and regiment of the deceased." Five years later, after the war had ended, the War Department visited Pleasant Hill to disinter the bodies and take them to the national cemetery at Pineville, Louisiana, opposite Alexandria. By then, only seventy could be recovered, and none could be identified. Those who survived the makeshift hospitals of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill were exchanged directly, without joining their captured comrades at Camp Ford near Tyler, Texas.49

Solon Benson, who lost his arm at Pleasant Hill, returned to Louisiana sometime before 1906. He reported the relocation of the town of Pleasant Hill a couple of miles to the south, and the shifting of fields, forests, streets, and buildings. Despite these changes the area remained "rich in treasured memories of 1864." He also visited Mansfield, where he noted Memorial Day was observed every year on the anniversary of the battle of Mansfield, 8 April, and where "the event is emphasized by the long rows of buried dead from the battle-field, which their local cemetery contains."50

The impact of the Red River Campaign has lingered with the people of northwestern Louisiana long after the physical wounds have healed. It is revealed in the stories told from parent to child, and from grandparent to grandchildren, now noted in its parish histories and commemorated in community ceremonies. Those stories tell of battles fought not in a vacuum, but in the yards and fields of women and children mostly left to face an invading army on their own. That army stripped them of food supplies and other articles of use, while some of the soldiers, hardened by several years on the front, vandalized whatever was left. After the initial shock had passed and Banks had moved his army back south toward Alexandria, many of those same women and children struggled to recover, but also managed to minister to the suffering of both armies. Once enemies, northern soldiers and southern civilians met and formed bonds acknowledged for years to come.


50Benson, "Battle of Pleasant Hill," 504.