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**A MATTER OF MARCHING, A MATTER OF SUPPLY:
POLITICS AND LOGISTICS IN ARKANSAS, 1863-1864**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, History

By

Alfred Hoyt Wallace

May 2007

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History

Missouri State University, May 2007

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1864, Major General Frederick Steele led his men out of Little Rock on orders to cooperate with Major General Nathaniel Banks's campaign up the Red River. The two forces never met as planned. Steele eventually captured Camden, Arkansas, but was obliged to retreat in the face of a determined Confederate force approaching him. The Camden Expedition, as this became known, has typically been cast as an expedition that failed due to a severe shortage of available food along the line of march. Upon closer investigation, however, particularly in the records of common soldiers, a different explanation emerges. For most of the campaign, forage was easily obtained, and no unusual lack of food for the men appeared until the very end of the campaign, during the last days of the retreat back to Little Rock. Instead, the causes of the expedition's failure must be assigned to Steele himself. Beset with political problems within the army and Arkansas politics, he was reluctant to leave Little Rock. He failed to plan adequately for the campaign's logistical needs, particularly for a potential permanent occupation of Camden. Finally, his policies towards Arkansas civilians combined with a very conservative attitude towards logistics to make Steele unwilling to exploit fully the resources he had available. This thesis discusses Steele's decisions on the Camden Expedition and places them in the context of his civilian policy, difficulties within the army, and his experience the year before on the campaign to capture Little Rock.

KEYWORDS: Civil War, Arkansas, Frederick Steele, Camden Expedition, Little Rock Campaign

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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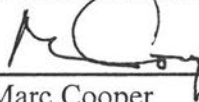
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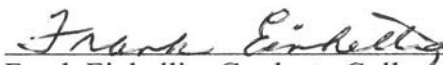
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Both the Red River Campaign and Steele's supporting movement, known as the Camden Expedition, failed to achieve any of their objectives and only narrowly escaped total catastrophe. The reasons for their failure have been debated down to the present. The Camden Expedition is usually treated as an adjunct of the Red River Campaign. However, it was also a separate episode, which one can investigate in the context of the wider Arkansas situation and Steele's particular decisions and priorities. It shall, for the most part, be so considered here.

While the Camden Expedition's failure most likely did not measurably improve the Confederacy's chances for final victory, and a major Union triumph would have done little to hasten the Confederacy's downfall, it, along with the Little Rock Campaign and Steele's subsequent occupation policy, does hold important insights for understanding the war.

First, the occupation of Arkansas provides a look at the nature and progress of Union civilian policy in one part of the Confederacy. Steele followed a so-called "Conciliatory Policy," considered too soft by some but generally supported in Washington. Advancing this policy affected Steele's other priorities, military and otherwise, in myriad ways. The Camden Expedition provides an especially intriguing look at how military and occupation policy interacted and clashed, sometimes violently.

Second, the military aspects of the Little Rock Campaign and Camden Expedition also provide interesting insights into logistics. Operational logistics during the Civil War has been little-studied, but is of signal importance nonetheless. These two campaigns featured disparate challenges and opportunities, often different from those further east. The railroad, for example, played no role in the operational supply of either

campaign. Furthermore, while wartime reports, as well as the modern secondary literature, contend that supply shortages led to the failure of the Camden Expedition, this explanation is inadequate.

Third, Steele's experiences in Arkansas reveal several conflicts within the Union high command, and different perceptions of the campaign between the high command and the common soldiers. The squabbles between Steele and Brigadier General John Davidson, a "radical" who opposed much of Steele's civilian policy, illuminate much of the controversy over the Conciliatory Policy, and had complicated the later Camden Expedition.

The contrast between the officers and soldiers came out most clearly during, and immediately after, the Camden Expedition. In a curious inversion of the well-known stereotype, the officers were unusually worried about the state of supplies for their men. The soldiers, in most cases, felt that their situation was, while not perfect, certainly acceptable and laid the blame for the defeat at Steele's feet, not on a poor forage situation.

Finally, the Camden Expedition's aims have been misunderstood, sometimes even by the participants themselves. The planning phase of the expedition was a confused affair. Steele corresponded with several generals among the larger Union high command, who gave Steele few direct, clear instructions, but numerous broad authorizations and suggestions. This thesis argues that this gave Steele just enough cover to set out on a campaign designed to give only halfhearted support to Banks on the Red River. Furthermore, the objective of the campaign changed halfway through. Steele found himself holding the great prize of Camden, strongly fortified and well

situated on the Ouachita River. His decision to hold Camden changed the character of the expedition, and the expedition's logistical needs.

The focus here is on the Camden Expedition, the largest and most-studied aspect of Steele's tenure in Arkansas. This thesis places it in the context of Union policy in Arkansas, and how that was expressed militarily from the moment Steele took command. When discussing military operations, the focus is on logistics: the support of the armies, particularly in food and fodder, the supposed Achilles' heel of the Camden Expedition. Besides the *Official Records*, a collection of numerous official reports and correspondence from the war, this work relies upon a wide range of other primary material from soldiers and officers alike, particularly archival sources that have been rarely used by scholars of these campaigns.

This thesis begins with a review of the secondary literature from the past fifty years. This section points out the trends in recent scholarship, along with the historiography's weaknesses, particularly in historians' choice and use of primary sources. What follows is largely a narrative of events in Frederick Steele's command (civilian and military) from Helena through Camden. Again, the focus is not on battles but on politics, logistics, and the problems of command. The thesis closes with a brief narrative of the Camden Expedition's aftermath. After the campaign, Steele took pains to keep his reputation, command, and the Conciliatory Policy intact in the wake of news of the disaster.

Despite being relatively unknown, in a less-than-glamorous theater of the war, and overshadowed by larger events, the Camden Expedition and its context deserve study for the sake of understanding the political and logistical limitations that can affect

campaigns. Furthermore, previous treatments of the subject have leaned far too heavily on the *Official Records*, which has presented a limited and one-sided view of the conflict. This thesis seeks to establish a larger context for the Camden Expedition within Arkansas, and bring the experiences of common soldiers closer to the front of the stage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the Camden Expedition has not been blessed with anything approaching the scholarly attention given to Gettysburg, it has attracted a smattering of studies over the years, typically as a part of larger projects, studying either Civil War-era Arkansas or the wider Red River campaign. One part of the Camden expedition, the notorious Poison Spring massacre of surrendering African-American troops, has received its own share of attention; however, as this event will not be treated in detail here, the fine works that have appeared on that subject will go without comment.

The best-known work on the Red River campaign, Ludwell Johnson's *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War*, has been the preeminent work on the subject since its publication in 1958. Along with illuminating a relatively little-known campaign in the Trans-Mississippi theater, Johnson argued that "the Red River expedition should help to illustrate the fact that the campaigns of the Civil War often sprang from a complex set of circumstances sometimes wholly nonmilitary in nature." The most prominent nonmilitary consideration, according to Johnson, was cotton. The Confederate government owned a great deal of cotton in the region, and capturing it and delivering it to Massachusetts mills, at a tidy profit to the United States government, was a major impetus to the campaign.¹

The Camden expedition receives one full chapter in *Red River Campaign*, and brief mention elsewhere. It is interesting that, whereas Johnson treats the political and nonmilitary motivations of Banks and the other major figures in the Red River campaign in depth, he largely passes over those of Steele. Johnson dispatches Steele's objections

¹ Ludwell Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), i, 47.

to the campaign in a single paragraph. Johnson quotes Steele's protests that he had elections to supervise in Arkansas, and that he feared many of his soldiers would not return from furlough because "matters in the Army are influenced so much by political intrigue, it is not certain that these troops will return to my command."² Johnson leaves this astonishing statement to speak for itself, without mentioning the conflict between Steele and Davidson, let alone how it reached a point where Steele feared that he would permanently lose his men because of it. Johnson rests most of his argument, however, on Steele's assertion that his command lacked the logistical support necessary to launch more than a demonstration to the south.

Johnson entitled his chapter focusing on Camden "The Federals Go Hungry in Arkansas," which sets the tone for the chapter. Johnson lists a number of challenges facing Steele in southwest Arkansas: "At that time of year the roads were sloughs, the country was swept bare as a desert of all food and forage, and guerillas were active and numerous on a scale unknown east of the Mississippi." It would be hardly possible to suggest a direr situation. Despite these claims of the region's destitution, Johnson does cite several instances of successful foraging. Indeed, he describes the region around Arkadelphia as "luxuriant," which inspired the troops to forage, with significant, if not entirely by the book, success.³

Johnson closed the chapter with a summary of reasons for the campaign's failure:

The one major cause of Steele's failure was his lack of supplies. This sprang from (1) the poverty of the country through which he marched and (2) the insecurity of his lines of supply from the Arkansas River. If he had been entirely

² Ibid., 85.

³ Ibid., 170, 172.

unopposed by hostile troops, Steele could have reached Shreveport, although his army would probably have been very hungry when it got there. But with a strong active enemy to impede his march, the task was impossible. Since Steele opposed the campaign from the first, and undertook it only as a direct order from Grant, he cannot be held responsible. He must, however, be held responsible for the loss of his trains. . . . On the other hand, Steele had to his credit the slow but well-conducted march from Little Rock and the successful rear-guard action at Jenkins' Ferry.⁴

This passage is odd in a couple of respects. That Johnson's own sources sometimes contradict the notion of southwest Arkansas's "desert" qualities has already been mentioned. Johnson, earlier in the chapter, describes the column's ability to reach Shreveport in somewhat brighter terms, stating that Steele set out with "rations sufficient to have lasted to Shreveport, had the march been more rapid."⁵ Johnson's later praise for Steele's "slow . . . march from Little Rock" seems out-of-place, as the very slowness of the march contributed to its downfall. Johnson's light treatment of Steele also seems unusual; many generals in history would probably have liked to be absolved of all blame for their poor decisions on campaign by claiming that the campaign was someone else's idea. This would seem to be a poor choice for a military historian, however, whose job is to analyze the decisions in and of themselves.

Johnson leans heavily on two sources for his account of the Camden expedition, the *Official Records* and A. F. Sperry's *History of the 33^d Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment*, a memoir first published in 1866. These are both excellent sources, and they will appear frequently in the notes of this thesis. Relying on just these two, however, limits the perspective of the campaign considerably. The *Official Records* present only the views of Steele and the high command. Sperry's work gives a view from the ranks,

⁴ Ibid., 204.

⁵ Ibid., 176.

but the way Johnson uses it limits its power. The view from below, in this account and others, often contradicts the story from the *Official Records*, but viewed in isolation this contradiction can be minimized. Johnson does this whenever evidence arose that the campaign theater was something other than a muddy desert; when Sperry reported that his regiment was able to forage for most of the campaign, Johnson treats their experience as an aberration.

A more recent treatment of the Red River Campaign is Gary Dillard Joiner's *One Damn Blunder from Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864*, published in 2003. While in general this work benefits from a broader range of primary sources than Johnson had available forty-five years earlier, Joiner wrote the chapter on Steele and Camden using essentially the same material: the *Official Records* and 33^d Iowa. The rhetoric, however, is substantially more moderate; rather than a "desert," Joiner describes central Arkansas as merely "barren." There is the occasional, odd contradiction, as well; first Steele's march from Little Rock to Arkadelphia was described as being "at a leisurely pace"; then on the next page Joiner writes, "Steele had made excellent time reaching Arkadelphia." As Joiner used predominately the same sources as Johnson, the narratives are unsurprisingly similar, and adduce the same basic causes for the expedition's failure.⁶

Perhaps the best example of placing the Camden expedition in the context of Civil War Arkansas is *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas*, edited by Mark Christ and published in 1994. Each chapter, written by a different historian, narrates one year of the war. Daniel E. Sutherland wrote the 1864 chapter, which features the

⁶ Gary Dillard Joiner, *One Damn Blunder from Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 123-125.

Camden Expedition. Sutherland drew on a far wider array of primary and secondary sources than had his predecessors, and the result is a narrative more in line with social, “new military history.” Still, the majority of his primary sources came from published material (which has, over the years, grown substantially) rather than archival sources. Sutherland concludes that “Steele’s most serious errors . . . were logistical. He did not anticipate the problems he would have in provisioning and supplying his men, and he lost far too many wagons and too much livestock.”⁷ That Steele lost “far too many wagons” is incontestable; that he “failed to anticipate” his logistical difficulties is a more interesting assertion. In fact, logistical problems were a major preoccupation during the expedition’s planning phase, and he could hardly have underestimated them given his portents of disaster. It would be more reasonable to assert that Steele prepared for these problems improperly, but Sutherland does not elaborate.

There have been a few works on the Camden Expedition itself; alongside two published works is a pair of master’s theses. The first, in 1958, was “The Camden Expedition, March 23 – May 3, 1864” by Ira Don Richards.⁸ While it is certainly useful to write the first scholarly treatment of any campaign, this particular thesis’s near-total reliance on the *Official Records* as a primary source weakens it considerably. The second thesis, written by Mike Fisher in 1975, is “The Camden Expedition.” This is a much fuller, and longer, treatment, featuring a much wider range of primary and secondary sources, taking advantage of the work done in the intervening seventeen years. Still, Fisher consulted few archival sources, and thus the lower ranks were

⁷ Mark Christ, ed., *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 123.

⁸ Ira Don Richards, “The Camden Expedition, March 23 – May 3, 1864 (M. A. Thesis, University of Arkansas, 1958).

represented largely by 33^d Iowa, and the *Official Records* provided the bulk of the rest of the primary source material. It is a readable and lively narrative, but in terms of explaining the failure and context of this expedition it essentially repeats the same story it inherited from Ludwell Johnson: too few supplies, and an unlikely plan in the first place. Fisher did, however, find greater fault with the expedition's cavalry arm, which was weakened by a poor forage situation. In the chapter dealing with the run-up to the expedition, Fisher describes the civil and political situation in Little Rock as "complex," but does not elaborate. His work is predominately a traditional military narrative, and while it is a fine example of its type it would have benefited from a fuller treatment of the expedition's political and military context.⁹

If there is a "classic" treatment of Camden, it is *Steele's Retreat from Camden and the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry* by the prolific Edwin Bearss, which appeared in 1967. It was virtually a commission piece. In 1961, an amateur Arkansas historian asked Bearss, as a research historian at the Vicksburg National Military Park, if the park's archives held anything about Jenkins' Ferry. Bearss "explained that they did not, but I would be delighted to undertake a field study and prepare a report of the battle."¹⁰ As the genesis of the project, and the title of the book itself, indicates, this slim volume focuses on the major battles taking up the second half of the campaign, from Poison Spring (which actually was before Steele's retreat began) through the return to Little Rock. However, far and away the gravest fault with Bearss's work is that he plagiarized

⁹ Mike Fisher, "The Camden Expedition" (M.A. Thesis, Kansas State College of Pittsburg, 1975), 14, 170-171.

¹⁰ Edwin Bearss, *Steele's Retreat from Camden and the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry* (Little Rock: Arkansas Civil War Centennial Commission and Pioneer Press, 1967), "Notes from the Author" (inside front cover).

extensively from Johnson's "The Federals Go Hungry" chapter, particularly in its conclusions.¹¹

In 2003, a new entrant in the field of Camden studies appeared: Michael Forsyth's *The Camden Expedition of 1864 and the Opportunity Lost by the Confederacy to Change the Civil War*. It is notable for being the first study of the campaign to use the Steele papers at Stanford University; it is also notable for being the first to claim that the campaign was critical to the Union war effort, and that if it had not been conducted the war might have been lost.¹² The armies under Steele and Banks had, after all, not been utterly destroyed, but, if they had been, the Confederacy would have been supreme in the Trans-Mississippi. This bit of what-if argument stretches credulity, in the first place, and furthermore moves the goalposts of "critical to Union success" to a remarkable degree. Burnside, after all, did not have his army entirely destroyed on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg; by avoiding complete annihilation did Burnside, then, help ensure Union victory?

All these works share certain drawbacks. For the most part, they use few sources from common soldiers, producing narratives based primarily on the *Official Records* and the testimony of Steele and other prominent officers. This has led to an uncritical acceptance of Steele's claim that he was in dire logistical straits; the view from below is rather more nuanced. Furthermore, these works typically pass over the political and

¹¹ Compare Bearss, *Steele's Retreat*, 177-179 (beginning "Despite the disappointing climax at Jenkins' Ferry, the Confederate campaign against General Steele had been on the whole a successful one. . . .") with Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, 203-205 (beginning "Despite this disappointing climax, the campaign against Steele had been on the whole a successful one. . . ."). Other examples exist, but this is the most extensive case of borrowing.

¹² Michael Forsyth, *The Camden Expedition of 1864 and the Opportunity Lost by the Confederacy to Change the Civil War* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 3.

interpersonal problems Steele faced before Camden, and thus their impact on the expedition itself is largely unexplored. Even *Rugged and Sublime*, which focused on the war in Arkansas, largely passed over the interplay between the civilian and military spheres.

This thesis attempts to provide this context: both the experience of the common soldier, and how Steele's experiences and problems before he left Little Rock helped shape the planning and execution of the Camden Expedition. By so doing, it brings out new complexities in the expedition.

FROM HELENA TO THE ROCK

Frederick Steele was born in 1819, in New York. He graduated from West Point in 1843, a classmate of Ulysses S. Grant. His older brother, John B. Steele, was a Congressional representative from New York during the Civil War and would play an important role in his younger brother's military career. Both were war Democrats. Frederick Steele was as an officer in the Regulars before the war and upon the onset of hostilities was a major at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He served in the Western and Trans-Mississippi Theaters throughout the Civil War. He commanded a battalion at Wilson's Creek, Missouri, and was promoted to major general in the spring of 1863. He commanded a division during the Vicksburg campaign. He was no stranger to Arkansas; in 1862 he served under Major General Samuel R. Curtis in northern and eastern Arkansas, and in 1863 was at the Battle of Arkansas Post.¹

Originally, Major General Benjamin M. Prentiss was the assigned commander of the campaign against Little Rock. As late as July 30, Major General Stephen A. Hurlbut, commanding the XVI Corps from Memphis, wrote to Prentiss with precisely the same orders Steele was to receive. However, at the last moment word came from Grant that Steele, Grant's old classmate and subordinate during the Vicksburg campaign, was to command. On July 31, Frederick Steele took command at Helena of the Arkansas Expedition, as the forces assigned to capture Little Rock were known.² Grant and Hurlbut ordered Steele to attack Major General Sterling Price, in conjunction with General John Wynn Davidson's cavalry division, and to capture Little Rock.

¹ The best printed source on Steele remains Ezra J. Warner's *Generals in Blue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 474.

² A map of, and order of battle for the Union forces engaged in, the Little Rock Campaign can be found in the Appendix, 77-79.

Before leaving, however, Steele had to assemble his men. The greatest obstacle Steele faced in doing so was disease. By the time Steele arrived, Helena had been a Union-occupied outpost on the Mississippi for just over a year. The Union garrison had withstood periodic Confederate attacks, but faced its gravest threats from epidemic illnesses. Malaria, dysentery, and typhus were endemic, claiming many lives and incapacitating many they did not kill.³

By the time Steele took command, many soldiers doubtless relished the idea of leaving Helena for anywhere. Charles Musser, of the 29th Iowa, camped in Helena from the middle of April. He wrote to his parents just two weeks after his arrival that he feared “we are doomed to Stay at this miserable town of graves and Sutler Shops all Summer. i would rather run the risk of one battle than Stay here through the hot months of august and september.” Three weeks later, on May eighth, he wrote of the death of Sergeant Burroughs: “he died of the Camp Dysentery. he was worn down to a mere skeleton. he looked very bad for some time back. if he had been sent up the river one month ago, he would have got well . . . there are too many that go the Same way, to the Shame of the army Surgeons.” Disease would dog the column all the way to Little Rock.⁴

Steele had little time to waste, as Davidson’s cavalry was already underway, moving from Pilot Knob through Jacksonport. From Memphis, Hurlbut wrote Steele on July 31 with a brief overview of the logistical situation and plan:

³ Rhonda M. Kohl, “‘This Godforsaken Town’: Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862-63,” *Civil War History* 50 (June 2004): 109-144.

⁴ Charles O. Musser, *Soldier Boy: The Civil War Letters of Charles O. Musser, 29th Iowa*, ed. Barry Popchok (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 49-50.

Davidson is about to move for Clarendon, on White River, a point easily accessible by boats at present stage of water. This should be the point of rendezvous for the entire force, and the temporary depot of supplies. If the Arkansas is in navigable stage, another point as high up as you can arrive with boats should be selected as a future depot. These questions must be intrusted to you to determine from better local knowledge than I can have since the short period to which I have been assigned to this duty. I am informed that the country between Clarendon and Little Rock is one of extreme difficulty, principally for lack of water and the peculiarly flinty character of the surface rock. In this view, if a route nearer the Arkansas River . . . exists, it would be advisable to follow it. Wagons to be used should be overhauled thoroughly, and horses and mules new and well shod. Nothing should be taken; baggage should be done without. If there is deficiency in supply trains, they can be furnished from this place [Memphis].⁵

Hurlbut ordered Steele to travel light so that the 10,000 men marching on Little Rock would move across the dry territory between Clarendon and Little Rock as quickly as possible.⁶ On August 5, Steele issued orders for the composition of the expedition. Despite Hurlbut's insistence on traveling light, Steele prescribed a very substantial supply train. Each regiment would have six wagons assigned to it: one for ammunition, five for transportation (four, if the regiment had fewer than four hundred men); batteries would have three wagons. Each regiment carried five days' rations, two days' worth being distributed to the men.⁷ The general supply train, carrying food and supplies for the entire command, would be vast. Steele's quartermasters would clean out virtually the entire wagon park of Helena, and two steam transports would move up the river. Sixty days' rations would be carried along in the general supply train; a very

⁵ War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 130 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901) 1st ser., vol. 22, pt. 2, 414-415. (Hereafter *OR*; all references are to the 1st series unless otherwise stated.)

⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁷ A day's marching ration for one soldier was "one pound of hard bread [hardtack], three-fourths of a pound of salt pork, or one and one-fourth pounds of fresh meat; sugar, coffee, and salt." John D. Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (1887; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 112.

conservative amount, considering that the Confederates were not expected to put up much resistance.⁸ Why Steele settled on such a large train, with so much food, is unclear, as no records on the subject survive. Steele had enough equipment to be very cautious logistically, and likely decided to simply eliminate any possibility of running low on supplies. He would display a similar aversion to risk later, before leaving on the Camden Expedition.

The bustle of a camp preparing to leave on campaign did not escape the notice of the men, of course. On August 5, Musser wrote home that his regiment began “making preparation for a long march across the country to Little Rock. it is Said a very large provision train is being fitted out.” He reported that yet more wagons were being unloaded at the docks, and that the sick call was growing ever longer.⁹

The wagons that made up supply trains carried a vast array of the materiel and impedimenta of war. A standard US Army wagon, hauled by six mules, could carry approximately a two-ton load under ideal conditions—a flat, paved road. Under less than ideal conditions, such as Arkansas, one could expect a wagon to draw approximately one ton, perhaps slightly more. Some of that load, however, was reserved for food for the draft animals themselves. Grazing, particularly while on campaign, was impractical; it required an enormous amount of land and time. Regulations stipulated that each mule should have fourteen pounds of fodder and nine pounds of grain per day; on campaign, this was typically too little, and many animals broke down along the way. Generally, a wagon would carry two days’ worth of animal fodder and grain (270 lbs.) along with its normal load of the supplies for the army: food

⁸OR, vol. 22, pt. 2, 433.

⁹ Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 75.

for the men, camp equipment, ammunition, baggage of officers and men would all be carried along.¹⁰ Furthermore, empty wagons would be brought along for foraging parties, in order to bring in the fruits of their labors. A wagon train, therefore, was an extensive operation, and occupied a proportional amount of space on the march. A six-mule wagon would take up approximately forty feet of road space; add to this an interval that would lengthen and shorten with the necessities of the road. Seventy-five to ninety wagons, in single-file, could thus stretch out over a mile.¹¹

By August 10, the expedition was ready to leave. Steele reviewed his troops, after which the men began to get ready to set off in the morning. Steele left Helena with some 6000 men, largely infantry, with four artillery batteries, to join Davidson, leading a further 6000, mostly cavalry.¹² The same day, Steele issued General Orders No. 5, establishing the order and conduct of the column. The Third Division, under Colonel Samuel A. Rice, would set out on the eleventh, going ahead of the rest of the army and “building such bridges and making such repairs on the road as may be necessary for the transportation of supplies, &c.” The main supply train would also move with this advance party. Despite the lengthy train, soldiers were obliged to leave many of their belongings behind in Helena. Charles Musser registered a box with the quartermaster containing his “Overcoat Coat, dress coat, 1 pair pants, one shirt, 2 pair drawers, one blanket.”¹³

¹⁰ John G. Moore. “Mobility and Strategy in the Civil War,” *Military Affairs* 24 (Summer 1960): 71 (note 7).

¹¹ The classic account of the nature of wagon trains is in Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, 350-376.

¹² *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, 475.

¹³ Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 77.

Already, Steele connected logistics to his political goals. Part VI of Order No. 5 dealt with foraging and discipline, and their political ramifications:

No property will be taken from citizens without authority. Foraging parties will be organized by brigade commanders and placed in charge of commissioned officers, for the purpose of obtaining necessary supplies. Straggling, marauding, and setting buildings on fire positively forbidden. Any infraction of this order that may be detected will be summarily punished, and any officer who shall fail to notice such infraction shall be deemed guilty of neglect of duty and dealt with accordingly. These measures are necessary for the sake of discipline, and as a matter of policy toward the people of Arkansas, whom we desire to bring back to their allegiance. The general commanding sincerely hopes that for the credit of the command and the reputation of the government which we represent, both officers and men will view this in a proper light.¹⁴

This is the first explicit mention during the campaign of a desire to encourage unionist sentiment among the Arkansan population through military policy. It was certainly consistent with President Abraham Lincoln's well-known and longstanding aim to encourage unionism in the Confederacy, and it would shape Steele's civilian and military policies for the rest of his tenure in Arkansas.

By the tenth, Davidson had already reached Clarendon, establishing a camp and awaiting Steele's arrival. Davidson's cavalymen, marching through northeastern Arkansas, found the forage relatively easy; Albert Demuth, of the 8th Missouri Cavalry, waxed lyrical about the Arkansas countryside and its bounty for the enterprising soldier:

It is all a mistake about the people of the South starving this next season for they have more than you have in Missouri. Such cornfields I have never seen since I was born. Every farm we pass has thousands of bushels planted, and such corn. I thought the Prairies of the North was the place to grow corn but these swamp lands of the Arkansas beats it so bad that it is of no account at all hardly. Why it grows so high that I could not reach the top ear standing on a flour barrel, and three or four stalks on a hill.¹⁵

¹⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 442.

¹⁵ Albert Demuth, *The Civil War Letters of Albert Demuth, and Roster Eighth Missouri Volunteer Cavalry* (Springfield, Mo.: Greene County Historical Society, 1997), 27-28.

Robert McMahan, an Ohio artilleryman with Davidson's division, was less lyrical but still found the going to be generally easy. On July 28, he wrote that the "crops of corn, cotton, & sweet potatoes look excellent"; on August 2, he found the same extraordinarily large corn that Demuth reported. By the 6, however, the corn he found had dwindled; "what few ears there were, were so small that we could barely call them roasting ears."¹⁶

Despite this considerable forage, however, Davidson's division still required frequent supplies of rations. Several times during their march, boats from the Mississippi or trains from Helena made their way up to Davidson's men, bringing rations. Davidson, who would later be a Radical thorn in the side of the conservative Steele in Little Rock, had something of a reputation among his men for being soft on the presumed rebels that lined the path of the march. Demuth was unimpressed by his General. "If we were commanded by a Blunt, a Herron, or a Hooker," he wrote, "this division would carve a name in the annals of our Nation's glorious victories that nothing human could approach." Demuth wrote that nine miles from Clarendon, the Confederates had amassed twenty thousand bushels of corn, which the Federals had been plundering for two days. "I suppose General Davidson will give them a receipt for it so they will not lose much," he wrote. "He gives the Secesh receipts for everything we take from them."¹⁷ There is no evidence that Davidson was ordered to forage lightly, or treat the inhabitants with any extraordinary concern. Given his later severe criticism of Steele's "Conciliatory Policy" towards Arkansan planters, either in the following few

¹⁶ Robert T. McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer: The Diary of Robert T. McMahan of the Twenty-fifth Independent Ohio Light Artillery*, ed. Michael E. Banasik (Iowa City: Camp Pope Bookshop, 2000), 169-174.

¹⁷ Demuth, *Civil War Letters*, 28.

weeks Davidson had a major change in approach, or else Demuth misinterpreted his commander's actions. The latter would seem more probable.

Davidson's cavalry waited for Steele's column for several days, the vanguard of which began arriving on the sixteenth, and Steele himself took command of the now-united force on the seventeenth. In the meantime, Davidson's camp was not idle. Boats came up with supplies on the fourteenth, and foraging parties went out regularly to bring in food, forage, mules, and often took in escaped slaves along the way. McMahan wrote that on the twelfth, a large group of black women and children were escorted into camp by foragers. McMahan did not give any precise figures, but did point out that "forty or 50" came from one nearby large plantation, and that Davidson established a contraband camp near divisional headquarters.¹⁸

Early on, the working relationship between generals Steele and Davidson appears to have been good. Davidson had been acting semi-independently before Steele was placed in command at Helena, and informing Davidson of what was going on with the larger operation was difficult. Davidson was, furthermore, impetuous and reining him in required some work. On August 4, he informed Major General Ulysses S. Grant that he could capture Little Rock himself if he could just be reinforced. However, instructions from Hurlbut clarifying Davidson's orders eventually reached him and, henceforth, Davidson and Steele cooperated fully.¹⁹

On August 16, as his command began to reach Clarendon, Steele wrote back to Hurlbut in Memphis. Forwarding a letter from Davidson, which reported on the disposition of the Confederate forces, Steele pleaded for reinforcements and heavy

¹⁸ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 175.

¹⁹ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 430, 442.

artillery. He thought that Price was being reinforced by Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith from the southwest, and that already the enemy was “much stronger than ours now,” and digging in. Without reinforcements, Steele predicted “a failure of the expedition.” He reported logistical worries, as well, requesting 600 barrels of water.²⁰

Water, indeed, was scarce along the route. Swamps and standing water, then as now, characterized the area between Helena and Clarendon. The heat, furthermore, was oppressive. Many of the units, such as the 33rd Iowa Infantry, had never marched hard on campaign before and suffered even more. The combination of these three factors produced suffering for the men. A. F. Sperry recalled after the war, “The heat and hard marching together, were too much for any ordinary powers of endurance. Men would fall out of the ranks and tumble down at the side of the road, by dozens and almost by hundreds.”²¹

The men from Helena marched into Clarendon over a few days, beginning on the sixteenth. There, disease, engendered at Helena and exacerbated by the heat and poor water, struck hard. Charles Musser wrote, “we have to leave a great many men here [at Clarendon] and a force to guard them. thirty of our regiment took sick since we left Helena. the complaint is swamp fever and the ague. We Camp on a low, flat bottom near a Swamp and use the river, which is very bad.” Sperry wrote that “Clarendon was the very home and head-quarters of ague in bulk and quantity. The very air was thick

²⁰ Ibid., 454.

²¹ A. F. Sperry, *History of the 33^d Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment 1863-6*, ed. Gregory J.W. Urwin and Cathy Kunzinger Urwin (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 46.

with it. We could almost hew out blocks of it, and splash them into the river.” Steele, writing back to Hurlbut in Memphis, reported “several hundred” sick.²²

The now-united command camped around Clarendon until the twenty-second, awaiting supplies and reinforcements. The water situation was still not good, but some units fared better than others. Robert McMahan’s artillery unit, for example, was camped around a well of “excellent” water. Meanwhile, Steele had to consider his next move. In his letter of the eighteenth, he considered Devall’s Bluff, another small town and the eastern terminus of the railroad out of Little Rock; this was clearly an important location, and Steele settled on this as his next objective.²³

Devall’s Bluff was one day’s march from Clarendon, and Steele’s column reached it on the twenty-third, with some elements trickling in on the twenty-fourth. By this time, the health of his men had deteriorated even further. Steele wrote a dire letter to Hurlbut. “The sick list is frightful,” he wrote, with many senior officers beginning to fall ill. “This is the poorest command that I have ever seen,” he continued, and again repeated that without reinforcements, the expedition would end in catastrophe. Devall’s Bluff, however, proved to be a happier location than Clarendon. Sperry wrote that the region reminded the Iowans of home, with its “Iowa prairie, and an Iowa breeze blowing over it.” George Flanders, of the Fifth Kansas Cavalry, was pleasantly reminded of Kansas, and declared it “the prettiest site I have seen in Ark.”²⁴

The infantry remained in Devall’s Bluff, recuperating, for a week while the cavalry scouted the routes to Little Rock and drove back elements of the Confederate

²² Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 80; Sperry, *33^d Iowa*, 51; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 438.

²³ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 180; *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 458.

²⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 468; Sperry, *33^d Iowa*, 52; Alice L. Fry, ed., *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry: The Letters*, (self-published, 1998), 186.

cavalry. On August 26, Steele wrote another report to Hurlbut. Boats had brought up the supplies, a hospital, and many men from Clarendon to the healthier air of Devall's Bluff, and the move had begun to pay off. In just three days, "the health of the command has improved perceptibly," thanks to having gotten out of the swamps and into a camp with a fast current on the river. Devall's Bluff held great promise as a supply depot. A gristmill and sawmill were two miles away. Lumber was not especially plentiful, but abandoned buildings were, and more lumber was obtained from dismantling a "large church where secession doctrines have been extensively promulgated." It was also a rich agricultural region, Steele wrote, with substantial supplies of corn and beef nearby.²⁵

The foraging opportunities in the area did not escape the attention of the soldiers, either, despite the stern admonitions of Steele's Order No. 5. Charles Musser wrote to his sister:

when we Stop at a plantation, the poultry, pigs, and beef has to Suffer. Some of our boys just now passed here, driveing a fat Steer. they are taking him out of Sight of the officers to kill him. . . . when there is orders not to Shoot, we bayonette the hogs and beef, the bayonette is more used for such purpose than any other.²⁶

Robert McMahan, for his part, ate "sweet potatoes and mutton" on the night of the twenty-fifth.²⁷

By the thirty-first, Steele felt that his infantry was ready to move again. He mentioned, in his General Orders No. 13, that "all the means at hand will be used for carrying water on the march," but the marching from Devall's Bluff would, in many

²⁵ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 476.

²⁶ Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 82.

²⁷ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 182.

cases, be harder than the march to Clarendon.²⁸ While previously the water was undrinkable, for much of the rest of the march it would be unavailable. The land was largely prairie. A. F. Sperry, writing after the war, gave a vivid picture of the thirst the men faced. "So we imagined we had already known what was meant by scarcity of water, but the worst was yet to come," describing a long march on September 1, he wrote:

So scarce was the water now, that to prepare for that twenty-miles march in the heat of a Southern August, many of us had to fill our canteens from a puddle where the hogs had wallowed, and in the bottom of which was a hard one. . . . Before the day was half gone, the "stragglers" . . . might be counted almost by hundreds. . . . One hardly can imagine what thirst is until he has seen some such time as this, when he begins to have strange, waking dreams of water, and of the happiness of lying down, if only for a minute, on a green bank, and having a river run into his mouth.²⁹

Steele wrote on September 1 about his own concerns. He reported a worsening situation in front of Little Rock, with reinforcements coming in from Kirby Smith, and the Confederates digging in amidst inhospitable terrain. Steele thought he was outnumbered, estimating Price's force at about 14,000; in fact, Price had around 8000 men at his disposal.³⁰

The particular military movements that ensued as the Union finally converged on Little Rock have been discussed in other works, and can be briefly summarized here. By August 27, the Confederates had fallen back to defend a perimeter five miles around Little Rock, and awaited the inevitable Union attack. The next several days were times of intense confusion in Price's camp. He was unable to rouse the citizens of Little Rock

²⁸ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 2, 501.

²⁹ Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 53.

³⁰ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, 474, 521. In his report, Price estimated Steele's forces at around 20,000.

to enlist as emergency defenders of the city. In addition, Confederate general John S. Marmaduke shot and killed his fellow general, Lucius M. Walker, in a duel on September 6, which threw the Confederate high command into turmoil. On the ninth, Davidson had crossed the Arkansas River downstream of Little Rock, and the two wings of the Union army converged on Little Rock. Davidson was temporarily halted just outside the city by Marmaduke's men, who inflicted few casualties but bought Price time to evacuate the city. Steele's men marched in on September 10. Steele's worries about a superior, well-fortified Confederate army proved to be unfounded, and Price was driven out of central Arkansas with extremely little fighting.³¹

Logistically speaking, once Steele's forces had crossed the prairies just west of Devall's Bluff, the march was in some sense "downhill." The weather remained hot, and there were still bayous to cross, but the major crises that plagued the campaign, disease and acute lack of water, had passed. Just before Little Rock, Sperry recalled that "grapes were quite plenty, from the small black frost grape to the rich and juicy muscadine. . . . [W]e marched along the side of a field containing one thousand acres of corn, with a strip of sweet potatoes looking large enough to supply all our army while the season lasted."³² Indeed, Union soldiers often mention sweet potatoes, and they acquired the southern staple by fair means or foul during their tenure in Arkansas. Robert McMahan ate them on September 8, along with honey, pork, "and a small ration

³¹ One excellent summary of the skirmishes and movements of the Little Rock campaign's final phases can be found in Thomas A. DeBlack, "1863: We Must Stand or Fall Alone," in *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas* ed. Mark K. Christ (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 91-94.

³² Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 54.

of hard bread.” The next morning, he had more sweet potatoes with his coffee and bacon.³³

The logistics of the Little Rock campaign was influenced by several factors. Geography and ecology played an important role. The army marched over varied terrain, from swamps in the east, across dry prairies, and finally the rich farmland near Little Rock. The poor water encountered over much of the march was exacerbated by intense late summer heat. A shortage of potable water was accompanied by a superfluity of food. Farms and animals were relatively common along the route, and pigs and sweet potatoes supplemented the rations Steele had brought along. He left Helena with sixty days’ rations, for a march which lasted about half that. Furthermore, when the advance followed the local rivers, steamboats were able to transport reinforcements, the sick, and supplies with relative ease. In other locations, however, the path was lined by swamps and standing water unfit for human consumption.

It is difficult to fault Steele for many decisions he made on this campaign; after all, he accomplished his objectives with extremely few losses. His logistical plan, taken as a whole, was quite successful. He made good use of his circumstances. He had substantial food stores at his disposal at Helena, and he was able to take along a long wagon train full of it thanks to the Confederates, who never posed a serious threat to his trains. He left Helena with an extremely sick command; marching overland with poor water and high heat only made things worse. The camps he established, however, were progressively better-situated, and with adequate periods of rest and recuperation his command grew healthier as it moved closer to Little Rock. His other major problem,

³³ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 193.

water, was solved through a combination of water supplies coming up the river and finding campsites with at least some wells. The end result was not enviable, but the command avoided crippling difficulties.

Steele displayed two characteristics on this campaign, conducted in an atmosphere of enormous material resources and minimal enemy opposition, which would recur throughout his tenure in Arkansas. The first was his concern for Arkansas unionists, wherever they might be. He wanted the Union army to tread lightly, lest the planters and farmers flee back into the arms of the Confederacy. He prescribed severe penalties not just for soldiers foraging by the road, but officers who knew of the foraging and did nothing. None of the sources considered for this project mention a soldier or officer being punished, but the threat was at least strong enough to persuade Charles Musser's comrades to butcher their captured steer in secret.

The second trait Steele showed was caution. Price reported that he defended Little Rock with approximately 8000 men; far less than Steele had, but Steele still thought he was marching against a vast, heavily-fortified enemy host.³⁴ Steele called several times for reinforcements and more supplies. He took very few risks during the campaign, logistically speaking. He did not count on the countryside to provide forage, as evidenced by his sixty days' worth of rations. He tried to stay close to rivers when possible, so he could be easily resupplied if need be. But, this campaign did not require many risks; in later campaigns, Steele would not be so lucky.

³⁴ *OR*, vol. 22, pt. 1, 521.

THE LITTLE ROCK OCCUPATION

With the capture of Little Rock, Steele's task of administering Arkansas, and shepherding it through reconstruction, began. Steele did not receive formal authority over all military and civilian policy until January 5, 1864, but he exercised *de facto* control from the moment he entered Little Rock.¹ Until the Camden Expedition, the administration of Arkansas and the Federal forces therein were Steele's only concern. The most thorough account of this period is Benjamin Boulden's "So Long as Strangers are the Rulers: General Frederick Steele and the Politics of Wartime Reconstruction in Arkansas."² As the title suggests, Boulden focuses on the domestic politics of Arkansas and how Steele's policies affected them. These policies, however, also affected Steele's military plans. One of Steele's primary concerns, just as during the Little Rock Campaign, was to tread lightly on Arkansas's civilian population, particularly the more conservative prewar elites. These policies would prove highly controversial, and would encourage attacks on Steele's position and authority.

Steele devised and implemented a plan for Arkansas reconstruction that he called the "Conciliatory Policy." Steele sought to bring Arkansas back into the Union with as little societal and political disruption as possible. This meant supporting the antebellum planter elite and keeping a lid on more radical factions, in the hope that the planters would change their allegiance if they saw the Federals meant them no harm. This motive underlay Steele's orders against foraging during the Little Rock campaign. As the administrator of Arkansas, Steele applied this policy on a grand scale. He sought to

¹ *OR*, vol. 32, pt. 2, 33.

² Benjamin Boulden, "So Long as Strangers are the Rulers: General Frederick Steele and the Politics of Wartime Reconstruction in Arkansas" (M. A. Thesis, University of Arkansas, 1992).

protect planter privilege just as he sought to protect planter property, and for much the same reason. His policies seemed to conform nicely to Lincoln's plan of "restoration," promulgated in December, 1863, which allowed a smooth transition back to statehood provided merely ten percent of the population swore future loyalty to the Union. However, Boulden argues persuasively that the real result of Steele's policy was to weaken unionism in Arkansas, not strengthen it.³

At the beginning, there were indications that Unionism was strong in Little Rock, and thus reconstruction would progress easily. On September 22 Charles Musser wrote that, "the Citizens [of Little Rock] generally Seemed glad to see us and treat us with great Kindess. there is Some very *fine people* in the city." Robert McMahan reported "quite a number" of loyal citizens in Little Rock, and heard a sermon from a pragmatic Methodist minister who "said he had his prejudices and who had not but he was willing to be subject to the 'powers that be' and a good citizen." On September 20, Edward Rolfe wrote that Little Rock had "the Most union people here of any town that they have been in to yet and hundreds are coming in of the Citizens to take the Oath every day."⁴

There was some support for the Conciliatory Policy among the ranks. Charles Musser, who would later be a strident critic of Steele, praised the policy and its effects in a letter home on January 1, 1864:

The policy of Genl Steele has won thousands [of Rebels] back and has recruited the Federal army with thousands of good men. . . . if he had adopted a policy Such as some rabid retaliators wished, men that would now wear the blue would

³ Boulden, "So Long as Strangers are the Rulers," 17-43.

⁴ Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 85; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 198; Edward Rolfe, *A Civil War Union Soldier Describes his Army Life as Three Years of "Hard Marches, Hard Crackers, and Hard Beds, and Pickett Guard in a Desolate Country"* (Prescott Valley, Ariz.: Lillibridge Publishing, 1993), 81.

then have been driven to desperation, and cursed the federal rule, and lay in ambush to revenge themselves.⁵

One aspect of Steele's policy was to encourage contact between the army and the citizens. Indeed, several of the soldiers whose letters have survived report taking meals with the locals, but perhaps the most popular shared entertainment was horse racing. Robert McMahan, a great fan of the races, enjoyed a day at the track in late January and reported, "all enjoy the fun, citizens as well as soldiers."⁶

The races, however, became one of the many points of conflict that arose between Steele and Davidson, his cavalry commander. Their good working relationship broke down during the occupation of Little Rock. Davidson was in command of the city of Little Rock itself, and thus the two generals frequently had overlapping, or clashing, spheres of influence. What precisely came between the two has been debated. Davidson had closer ties with the more radical Unionists in Little Rock, and differing politics doubtless explains some of the animosity. Davidson was also an ambitious man, and may have desired Steele's position for himself.⁷

In December of 1863, Davidson wrote a letter to Missouri Congressman S. H. Boyd, introducing a certain Arkansan. The letter ended up published in the St. Louis *Missouri Democrat*, and thence found its way back to Steele. In the letter, Davidson blasted the Conciliatory Policy as useless. Davidson claimed that it was only longtime Union men coming out of hiding that were taking the oath, not repentant rebels impressed by Federal restraint. Steele, incensed, wrote a letter of his own to the *Democrat* denying the inefficacy of his policy and calling Davidson "an ungrateful

⁵ Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 102.

⁶ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 216,

⁷ Boulden, "So Long as Strangers are the Rulers," 35-7.

scoundrel.”⁸ Steele had Davidson reassigned to an administrative post in St. Louis, and Davidson left Little Rock on February 11.

Out of Little Rock, Davidson began a campaign against Steele and the Conciliatory Policy in real earnest. In a series of letters to Lincoln, General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck, and the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, he accused Steele of hurting unionism and military readiness through his civilian policies. Notably, the Conciliatory Policy damaged the VII Corps’ logistics. Davidson accused Steele of issuing protection papers to almost any Arkansan, unionist or not, for miles around Little Rock, requiring foraging parties to travel more than twenty miles outside the city. The cavalry division found it difficult to requisition horses, and the horses it did have were often sent to the racetrack, where they were exhausted. Davidson cited reports that 2500 VII Corps horses died over the winter. Steele would keenly feel the lack of these horses in the spring, on the Camden Expedition.⁹

Nothing came of Davidson’s exertions. Steele had the support of his West Point classmate Grant, of Lincoln, and Steele’s brother in Congress. Davidson, furthermore, was possibly too strident for his own good, his rhetoric and determination tiring the authorities. Still, Steele began to worry more about his own position, and possible attacks from outside.

In January of 1864, reports began to circulate, in Washington and Little Rock, that Major General Dan Sickles, then making a tour of the occupied south, would stop in Little Rock. Steele and native Arkansas conservatives were worried that this might lead

⁸ United States Congress, Senate, *Report on the Conduct of the War*, 2nd Session, 38th Congress, Pt. 3, 1865-5, 38th Congress, 2nd Sess., Appendix, 83-4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-86.

to a less hospitable regime. One Little Rock resident, G. P. Bertrand, wrote Lincoln to assure him that Steele had the “unlimited confidence” of Arkansans and that “Gen Steele needs no one to be sent here to keep things straight, either in the civil or military departments.” Such testimonials came even after Lincoln had sent a telegram to Steele, assuring him that Sickles would not be “[meddling] in your affairs.” As it turned out, Sickles did not visit Arkansas.¹⁰

A third threat appeared later in the spring, in the form of Major General James Blunt. Blunt was the great Radical hope in Arkansas, and had the support of many of the Kansans under Steele’s command. Brigadier General John Thayer, commanding the District of the Frontier from Fort Smith, took his orders from Steele and would bear the brunt of Blunt’s assault. Blunt arrived at Fort Smith in early March, and wrote to General Curtis, a close ally, on the ninth. He reported that the condition of the troops in Fort Smith, the major post in northwest Arkansas, was quite poor and required better leadership. “It would be an easy matter,” he wrote, “for me to take command of all the troops heretofore belonging to the District of the Frontier, as officers and men are anxious for me to assume command of them, and they will cheerfully comply with whatever I may ask of them in defiance of Thayer and Steele.”¹¹ The labyrinth of intrigue surrounding this incident, stretching for months, deserves a treatment beyond the scope of this work. Suffice to say that Blunt, and Curtis, worked hard to undermine Steele’s authority in Fort Smith, despite repeated cautions from Washington that this was outside their proper territory. While Blunt was unable to entirely undermine

¹⁰ G. P. Bertrand to Abraham Lincoln, Feb. 20, 1864, Frederick Steele Papers, microfilm edition, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville (hereafter cited as “Steele Papers”); Abraham Lincoln to Steele, Jan. 25, 1864, *ibid.*

¹¹ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 2, 537.

Steele's authority, Blunt's popularity among some of the troops, particularly the Kansans, would cause further problems just as the Camden Expedition was to leave.¹²

During the first months of his occupation of Little Rock, then, Steele was beset by a great many problems, virtually all of them political. He was overseeing a controversial occupation policy and rebuilding civil government in Arkansas while facing threats to his authority and position from radical generals. Steele needed time to sort all this out and defend himself and his command. For Steele, a major military campaign could not have come at a worse time than in early spring, 1864.

¹² Robert Collins, *General James G. Blunt: Tarnished Glory* (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 2005), 175-179.

PLANNING THE SPRING CAMPAIGNS

The Red River Campaign was born out of political and economic considerations, rather than strictly military expediency. Mobile, Alabama, was a more logical military target for the forces in Louisiana. Shreveport and the Red River, however, commanded significant cotton-growing areas, useful for struggling New England mills. Furthermore, Lincoln and others in Washington feared that French-dominated Mexico, bordering Texas, might be the source of European intrigues in the war if the Union did not plant a secure force in the area.¹

Steele's belief that only he understood the true situation in Arkansas came out strongly in the planning for the 1864 spring campaign. Steele was expected, from the earliest planning stages of the Red River Campaign, to cooperate with Nathaniel Banks. Steele, however, found one reason after another to explain why his assistance would be unnecessary, unwise, or impractical. On February 5, he described his difficulties in a letter to Banks. Steele said there were three possible routes from Little Rock to the Red River: via Pine Bluff, Camden, or Arkadelphia. Steele considered the Pine Bluff route more "practicable" than the other two, but it was blocked by the greatest number of Confederates. Furthermore, Steele had a number of units on furlough, and feared that they would not return because of "political intrigue" within the army, likely a reference to the troubles with Davidson and Blunt. Finally, Steele had intelligence that an attack on Pine Bluff, a tenuous Union outpost, could come at any moment. Still, Steele assured

¹ Gary Dillard Joiner, *One Damn Blunder*, 1-11.

Banks that he would “be glad . . . to cooperate with you in any of your movements, *if possible*” (emphasis added).²

Soon, Banks and the other planners decided on March 5 as the date when Steele and Banks would set off. On February 28, Steele wrote that the fifth would be impossible. On March 14, a civil election was to take place, and Steele needed every man he had available to guard the polls against guerrillas. The rebels were growing in strength. Steele suggested that Banks, who was to receive troops from Major General William T. Sherman’s Army of the Tennessee, go on without him. Steele would “make a demonstration” against Price, which would drive the Confederates into Texas, where Banks would mop them up. Sherman disagreed; he valued the military campaign more than the political campaigns, and urged Steele to “push straight for Shreveport with all he has.”³

Sherman wrote Steele on March 4 with further instructions, couched as suggestions from a “friend and brother officer.” Sherman assured Steele that he might “safely rely on the country for forage, meat, and partial supplies of corn meal.” Sherman stressed speed, and urged Steele to “move toward Shreveport by the most direct route with all your force,” via Arkadelphia.⁴

Steele wrote to Banks on March 7, that he still needed to protect the polls for the upcoming election, but thought he could send men at least as far as Arkadelphia or Washington. Steele passed on some tantalizing intelligence on Price’s worsening situation he had gathered from refugees, spies, and Price’s adjutant, who visited an old

² *OR*, vol. 32, pt. 2, 246-7.

³ *Ibid.*, 448-49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 496-97.

friend on Steele's staff, who suggested that Price and others had recently fled to Europe via Texas.⁵

Steele wrote a letter on the same day to Sherman. Again, Steele had "no doubt" that Price had fled to Europe, claiming that he had it on the authority of the wife of one of Price's staff officers that the Trans-Mississippi high command was deserting. Steele wrote that the Confederates, facing the prospect of opposing Banks, would give up without a fight and melt into Texas. Sadly, Steele wrote, he would be unable to send men to Louisiana and Texas himself, but he was grateful that someone was helping clear the region of Confederates. In a P.S., Steele mentioned the Davidson imbroglio, claiming that Davidson was "blown up by his own bombshell."⁶

On March 10, Steele wrote a trio of letters, to Banks, Grant, and Sherman, in which he stressed that he had few troops to spare, and that they were mistaken "in regard to the situation of affairs in my department." His men, furthermore, would not be necessary to defeat the Confederates on the Red River. To Sherman, he mentioned logistical difficulties for the first time. "The country between here and the Red River has been nearly exhausted of supplies by both armies, and it will be very difficult to obtain forage and impossible to subsist even 7000 troops." As Steele had previously sent only small scouting parties to Arkadelphia, it is unclear how "both armies" could have stripped the region clean.⁷

Steele wrote to Halleck on the twelfth. He announced that he had resigned himself to the Shreveport plan, "against my own judgment and that of the best-informed

⁵ Ibid., 518-19.

⁶ Ibid., 522-23.

⁷ Ibid., 542, 546-47.

people here.” He planned to move by the most direct route: to Arkadelphia, and thence to Washington and Shreveport. He wrote that Sherman suggested he go through Camden, but this was impractical; no such suggestion from Sherman, however, is found in the record. Indeed, Sherman suggested that Steele get to Shreveport as quickly and directly as possible. According to Steele, Banks wanted him to move via Monroe, but again Banks was silent on the subject; Steele, however, had suggested Monroe himself on the fifth. Steele warned that if he were to leave Little Rock that, given Confederate activity in Arkansas, he would likely have to retreat back to Little Rock at any moment to protect the northern part of the state. In another letter to Halleck, he warned that General Blunt was again causing trouble in Fort Smith, “undoubtedly . . . to interfere with my contemplated movements.” Steele attacked all his sources of outside interference and preemptively blamed them for any failure that was to come from the expedition, while promoting his own inside knowledge of Arkansas affairs. He thus tried to wash his hands of the entire expedition.⁸

Five days later, the plan for the Red River Campaign had changed again. Steele wrote Grant, informing him that he now planned to go to Camden after all, and thence to Shreveport. He would receive supplies at Camden from Pine Bluff. Steele also bemoaned the sad state of his cavalry, which Davidson had previously reported to the Joint Committee earlier and had blamed on Steele’s mismanagement. Steele avoided discussing the precise cause of his cavalry’s troubles, but claimed it was another reason his expedition faced enormous odds.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 576.

⁹ Ibid., 646.

On March 23, just before departing on campaign, Steele gave instructions to Brigadier General Nathan Kimball, who would command in Little Rock in Steele's absence. By now, Steele was again unsure which path he would take. "*If* we go to Camden," Steele wrote, he would try to establish communications with Pine Bluff for supplies [emphasis added]. He also urged Kimball to continue Steele's "kind and conciliatory course" towards the civilian population. In the meantime, Steele had made no plans for regular resupply by wagon trains from either Little Rock or Pine Bluff; instead, he would call for supplies as he felt the situation demanded. Later, this lack of planning would lead to delays in getting supplies, as both posts were unprepared to send them on short notice.¹⁰

Steele's vacillations, and the contradictions in his letters, make it difficult to discern his actual intentions as he prepared to set out from Little Rock. He had little desire to conduct an extended campaign. He cited reports that Price had fled to Europe and that Confederate soldiers were deserting in droves to argue that the Red River Campaign did not need his support. On the other hand, he claimed that the Confederates were so strong that leaving Little Rock risked a major attack in his rear. Steele's contradictory arguments suggest that his greatest concern was with his own authority, and policy, in Arkansas, which he feared would be threatened if he left his post in Little Rock.

¹⁰ Ibid., 704.

TO CAMDEN AND BACK

Despite its commander's misgivings, the expedition marched south out of Little Rock on the morning of March 23. Steele left Little Rock with approximately 7-8000 men, in two divisions, one of infantry and one of cavalry, and three artillery batteries. Brigadier generals Frederick Salomon and Eugene A. Carr led the two divisions. Thayer, with a division from his District of the Frontier, set out from Fort Smith with two infantry and one cavalry brigade, approximately 4000 men. Opposing them was Sterling Price, commanding five cavalry brigades stretched across southwestern Arkansas. Price, with Marmaduke and two cavalry brigades, was at Camden.¹

Unlike those of the Little Rock Campaign, the precise marching orders for the campaign have survived only in part. Steele did, however, issue orders to his officers and men concerning supplies, in General Field Orders No. 1:

The proposed Expedition is through a country scant of supplies. The troops composing the Command will undoubtedly have hardships to encounter, which the Commanding General doubts not they will cheerfully endure for expected results. The country must yield all it can of food and forage, without bringing starvation to the people. This fact will not, however, justify plundering or indiscriminate seizure of anything. Commanders of Divisions will avail themselves of every opportunity to supply their commands, but always under lawful direction and accountability. Straggling on the march will be punished with severity.²

This order illustrates most of Steele's chief concerns throughout the entire expedition. First, he was certain that supplies would be few and far between, necessitating forage. Pursuant to his conciliatory policy, Steele expected his men to be ever aware of the civilian population and its needs; he would not countenance a "hard

¹ A map of the theater of the expedition, along with the Union order of battle, can be found in the Appendix, 80-82.

² Department of Arkansas, General Field Orders No. 1, March 21 1864, Steele Papers.

war” even in the face of what he felt would be severe hardship for his men. The soldiers’ record in obeying these strictures against foraging was, to put it mildly, spotty.

Despite being often exhorted to travel light, both Steele and Thayer struggled with their mobility, largely because of their extensive wagon trains. The expedition planners’ perception that this part of Arkansas was stripped nearly bare, and the experience of the Little Rock campaign the previous year, influenced the size of the trains. On that earlier campaign, with relatively little opposition and excellent roads, the supply trains did not prove to be an encumbrance; when the time came to leave again, Steele appeared to have attempted the same approach to trains and logistics. Sherman, in his letters to Steele, consistently emphasized the necessity of rapid movement, and would later suggest that having too many wagons, and hence moving too slowly, caused part of Steele’s difficulties during the campaign.³

Determining precisely how many men can be supplied by any particular stretch of ground is difficult. An army required a considerable amount of food for its horses and men. A force of approximately 12,000, the size of Steele’s VII Corps once it united, required something on the order of fifty tons a day of food and forage for all its men and animals, assuming full rations. Steele’s and Thayer’s men, before joining up, would have demanded around thirty-four and sixteen tons, respectively. One recent attempt to calculate how many men could live off the country concluded that “it appears from the history of the [Civil War] that armies of less than 10-15,000 [i.e., the size of Steele’s column] could live by foraging in most sections of the South almost indefinitely.” Steele also brought along ten portable grain mills to help process forage. How much

³ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 3, 479.

corn these mills could process is unknown; it is not even known if they were of a standard type. Fifty mills, again of unknown specifications, had been provided to Curtis's Army of the Frontier in southwest Missouri in 1862; it is possible ten of these had made their way to Little Rock and thence to Camden.⁴

The Federals were up before dawn on the twenty-third, and were on the road by 10:00 A.M., "with rations packed, knapsacks slung, forty rounds of ammunition in the cartridge-boxes . . . to the old, accustomed tune of Yankee Doodle." The first day's march was relatively short, approximately nine miles to Fourche Creek, "a small stream of beautiful and clean water," of which the men took full advantage.⁵

The next day's march set off with a brass band,⁶ and covered sixteen miles to a point on the Saline River, near the town of Benton. Franklin Denny, of the 1st Missouri Cavalry, described the area as "generally a very poor farming country, soil very sanding [sic] and Stony." That night, Robert McMahan of the 25th Independent Ohio Light Artillery "had a pretty good supper of fresh pork, boiled beef, hot coffee and hard bread." The 33rd Iowa drew rations, which, for the duration of the march, General Salomon informed them would be half-rations, except for coffee.⁷

The next day, the twenty-fifth, Salomon added to Steele's General Orders on foraging in a Field Order of his own to his division. It was another attempt to constrain unauthorized foraging:

Brigade commanders will detail daily from their respective commands a foraging party, to be charged with the special duty of collecting food and forage

⁴ *Ibid.*, series 3, vol. 2, 801; Moore, 72.

⁵ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 70; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 222.

⁶ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71; Franklin Denny diary, March 24, 1864, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri at Rolla; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 222.

for its own brigade in quantity sufficient for the day. Beef will be brought to camp on the hoof and there slaughtered.

Receipts will be given, if the owners are present, specifying the amount and kind of property taken, and reasonable supplies left on the place for family use. All property thus taken will be turned over to brigade quartermasters for issue . . .

Any soldier having in his possession any property, no matter of what description, not legitimately obtained, will be deemed guilty of disobedience of orders and punished accordingly.⁸

No diary or letter has yet been uncovered describing any soldier being punished for disobeying this order, although there are several descriptions of the crime being committed.

On the twenty-fifth Steele's expedition moved about eight miles to "a good camp where is plenty of rails and here and there a porker." Franklin Denny wrote that that night "our men started out a foraging for the first time since we left Little Rock. they came to camp loaded with fodder for there horses, besides the bacon hams, chickens, turkeys, eggs, &c. which they brought us for there own use." It seems likely that, in many of these cases, soldiers merely ignored orders to bring the fruits of foraging to the quartermasters for redistribution. This successful foraging, it should be noted, took place in a partially depopulated area. Denny wrote of the region: "We passed several farms on the road today. one half of them deserted and the other half you see no on except a few women and raged Children, thare has been a good deal of cotton raised here in years past, almost evry plantation has a cotton gin and press."⁹

For some men, however, the rations were already beginning to come up short. John S. Morgan, of the 33rd Iowa Infantry, recorded in his diary on the twenty-fifth that he was issued rations for the next two days: half-rations of hardtack, salt, and pork,

⁸ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 2, 729.

⁹ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 222; Denny diary, March 25, 1864.

along with a full ration of coffee. Reduced rations, naturally enough, tended to encourage foraging, authorized and unauthorized.¹⁰

On the twenty-sixth, the expedition reached the town of Rockport. The 1st Missouri Cavalry continued its good run of foraging. Denny noted:

our men getting a little short and also a little tired of Army rations, they scattered out in squads through the town and country to look after forage they was soon returning some with Sacks of flour, Some with Sacks of the very best bacon hams, while others brought in Sugar, Molasses coffe[e], Salt, Butter Honey, chicken turkeys, eggs, in fact almost every thing of the eatable kind we fared Sumptuously for one night on rebel expense¹¹

On the twenty-seventh, General Carr felt it necessary to reiterate the orders against unauthorized foraging. “All serviceable horses and mules and all good beef-cattle that [foraging-parties] can find” were to be processed through the correct channels so that the proper receipts may be issued to the proper owners. The more legalistic of Denny’s comrades in the 1st Missouri Cavalry may have noted that none of the previous night’s bounty—eggs, poultry, molasses, etc—were listed in Carr’s order. At any rate, Denny reported that that night the “men improved the opportunity by bringing in all the forage they could get hold of. the men and horses lived well.”¹²

Robert McMahan reported that, by the twenty-seventh, “our infantry have 6 secesh prisoners along.”¹³ There were indeed three groups other than the troops along on the expedition, but they appear only occasionally in the historical record: Sutlers, Confederate prisoners, and escaped slaves who attached themselves to the column as it

¹⁰ John S. Morgan diary, March 25, 1864, State Historical Society of Iowa; for a discussion and justification of the practice of foraging off the countryside, see Sperry, *33^d Iowa*, 73.

¹¹ Denny diary, March 26, 1864.

¹² *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 2, 752-3; Denny diary, March 27, 1864.

¹³ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 223.

moved through Arkansas. The latter two represented a drain on supplies, and Steele appears not to have factored either of them into his plans. The exact numbers of these “camp followers” of various descriptions is unknown; if they were particularly numerous, presumably they would have been mentioned more often, but to say more would be pure conjecture. They do, however, serve to remind us that Steele had more than his own soldiers to feed.

On the twenty-eighth, short rations, and foraging, continued. The foraging, however, was becoming more hazardous. John Morgan wrote that, on the twenty-eighth, there was “no wood—no water—no supper—found some dry branch—soon had coffee. . . . I went to bed while Billy cooked a couple of chickens that flew into our hands today. As 3 men were skinning a beef they had killed a man stepped out from the brush and shot on them. They shot at him and he will never more sho[o]t another yankee.”¹⁴

On the twenty-ninth, the column finally reached Arkadelphia. As it was one of the larger towns in the region, the surrounding area was more thickly settled than what VII Corps had been marching through for the previous six days. A. F. Sperry wrote:

About three miles from Arkadelphia, we suddenly came to a place, where all the trees, and the brush and grass looked much fresher and greener than any where else. The change was as great and noticeable as though the season had been moved a month forward, while we marched a mile. It had almost the appearance of magic. We never saw a similar appearance elsewhere, and could never account for this.¹⁵

This region was clearly more lush and prosperous than what they had marched through previously. The farms and plantations, too, were bigger. John Morgan “could

¹⁴ Morgan diary, March 28, 1864.

¹⁵ Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 75-6.

see Mr. Justis' plantation 1 mile above the ford—it appears like a larger town than either Benton or Rockport—A very fine brick planter's house, a good steam sawmill, and a long row of good negro-quarters.” When they reached the town, men started “seeing the sights and searching for eatables.” Eatables were not hard to find; as always, how they were obtained was a matter of some dispute. Sperry wrote that “there was little, if any foraging done. We paid for nearly all we got A considerable amount of good ham, corn-meal and molasses was obtained.” John Morgan, however, reported that he saw soldiers looting smokehouses; for his part, he and his men sought out food in a somewhat more rational way, by going house-to-house. “About the 20th house we visited found they had something left—they gave us a nice loaf of lightbread, all the meal we wanted and would take no pay.”¹⁶ Even this, of course, violated the orders that all forage be brought in and distributed centrally.

This first stage of the march, from Little Rock to Arkadelphia, demonstrated the great weakness of Steele's logistical planning. The formal supply system, rations carried the wagons, showed signs of strain almost immediately. The VII Corps had little hardtack, and the quartermasters had to cut rations almost immediately. Foraging had become a necessity.

Steele and his command attempted to establish a system of foraging that would protect the civilian population, provide sufficient food for the expedition, and prevent straggling. The idea was to send out dedicated forage parties, give money or at least receipts for what was taken, and distribute what was captured from the central subsistence officers outward. Nevertheless, unauthorized foraging remained extensive.

¹⁶ Morgan diary, March 29, 1864; Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 76.

In fact, the diarists and letter-writers made little mention of “formal” foraging. Why bother with a bureaucracy when chickens fly into your hands?

While not overabundant, most soldiers reported that the food brought in by whatever means was sufficient to their needs. Food could be drawn from the country, despite the early season and cold weather. However, Captain Charles A. Henry, the chief quartermaster for the expedition, described the region as “almost entirely destitute” and Lieutenant Colonel Adolph Dengler of the 43rd Illinois described the road to Arkadelphia as consisting of “sterile lands and deserted farms,” although Arkadelphia itself was much better off. The observations of officers and men, then, began to diverge early on in the campaign.¹⁷

While the men in the ranks may not have paid much attention to the formal rules of foraging, they did recognize, if not necessarily always observe, a certain code of their own. There was a line, however fuzzy, between looting and more proper food collection. Paying for food was the ideal, but soldiers generally accepted that a certain amount of stealing from the countryside was inevitable. John Morgan was displeased at the looting of the Arkadelphia smokehouses, though he never explained what precisely made this morally different from capturing livestock. Typically, taking food or fodder, with or without a receipt, was acceptable to most soldiers, while physical property destruction was beyond the pale.

The column remained in Arkadelphia for a couple of days, during which one incident of this kind of looting occurred. “Led on by the very demon of mischief,” A. F. Sperry wrote, some soldiers fell upon the Arkadelphia Female Institute, looting and

¹⁷ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 679, 731.

wrecking the building and its contents, seemingly leaving nothing unbroken. The culprits were never captured. To prevent further brigandage, Steele placed guards at other private residences and buildings in town.¹⁸

On the thirty-first, Steele's men spent what would be their last full day in Arkadelphia. There were rumors that the Confederates were due to attack that day, but no attack ever came. McMahan reported that they drew four days' rations, which amounted to eleven pieces ofhardtack.¹⁹ The army would continue to wait for the column from Fort Smith.

Steele had intended Arkadelphia to be the staging point where Thayer's Frontier Division would join him, at the end of March or on April 1. Thayer, however, was having his own difficulties. For most of March, he had been concerned with Blunt's assault on his authority in Fort Smith. On March 17, Colonel Francis H. Manter, Steele's chief of staff, informed him that Thayer and his men were to join the expedition. Manter asked Thayer when he thought he could be on the march, and with how many troops. Manter added that Thayer's column should be "in light marching order, with the smallest amount of rations possible, depending upon the country for meat and corn meal."²⁰

Thayer wrote back the next day. He had 2600 infantry, 1200 cavalry, and fourteen guns to spare, which he felt he could have ready to move in five to six days. "We have now five days' rations on hand," he wrote, and was working to bring in more

¹⁸ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 77; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 225.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 2, 638.

from Leonora and the surrounding countryside. Manter wrote back that Thayer had to move in three days, on the twenty-first, when Steele himself intended to move.²¹

As it happened, both Steele and Thayer faced delays. On the twenty-third, Thayer wrote to Manter to explain what had happened. "I have had innumerable obstacles and difficulties to overcome for want of means to move," he wrote.

Your dispatch directed me to move on Monday, the 21st. The same night . . . I sent to the outposts to call them in. Detachments were out 40 and 50 miles for forage, in some instances 60 miles from here. I have done all that human energy can do, both night and day, to put the command in motion. Night before last 60 of the Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry deserted and went, it is supposed, to Fort Scott. I had ordered that regiment [to join the column to Arkadelphia], and on Monday night the desertion took place, and part of the regiment went in pursuit. This is one of the unforeseen difficulties.²²

He had other problems besides desertion, which he described in two other dispatches to Manter. In the first, he advised Manter that he would not be able to take the direct route to Arkadelphia, as the area was "entirely destitute of forage for 80 miles," and instead chose a road that was "somewhat circuitous, but is the only route I could get corn." In the final dispatch, he gave more details: "It is 170 miles to Arkadelphia from here, according to the most reliable information. I mean to be at Arkadelphia before the 1st of April. Have that drink ready. . . . I will be troubled for forage; that is, I will have to go off the road a great deal to get corn." At the rate of march he proposed, Thayer would have certainly earned that drink, along with the rest of his command. He wrote that on the twenty-third, and if he expected to have reached

²¹ Ibid., 647-648.

²² Ibid., 706.

Arkadelphia by the thirty-first, he would have had to march his men at a rate of over twenty miles a day—a feat worthy of Stonewall Jackson’s “Foot Cavalry.”²³

Apparently neither Steele nor anyone in his command questioned Thayer’s rate of march, and they confidently expected him to appear on schedule. On April 4, Brigadier General Nathan Kimball, commanding in Little Rock while Steele was on the expedition, wrote a progress report to Sherman. Kimball wrote that he understood that Thayer would be in Arkadelphia by the twenty-ninth, a rate of twenty-seven miles a day, but that he had not yet arrived or sent an updated itinerary.²⁴

Thayer’s march was, indeed, far slower than anticipated. Private Henry Strong of the 12th Kansas Infantry wrote a vivid account of the march and its preparations in his diary. On the twenty-first, after the foraging parties returned, Strong received orders that he would march in the morning. “I went out in town this evening,” he wrote, “to call on a ‘young Arkansas Lady’ as a preliminary to leaving Fort Smith.” As it happened, Strong’s unit did not move out on the twenty-second, although the 18th Iowa did; his regiment would catch up over the next few days. On the twenty-third, the 12th Kansas did march, and made it six miles, and the next day another eight miles. After this slow start, the pace began to pick up, and the column moved twelve miles on the twenty-fifth and sixteen on the twenty-sixth. Thereafter the march became more difficult. The roads had gone from dusty to muddy, and the grade was increasing. The country he was marching through, which was poor and difficult, did not impress Strong. He wrote, “I can’t see anything that would entice me to leave a civilized and white man’s country to dwell in this wilderness among the rocks and hills where even the sun

²³ Ibid., 707.

²⁴ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 3, 39.

fails to shine more than eight hours in twenty-four.” This was rougher foraging country than Steele encountered.²⁵

The climb continued as the column struggled through the mountains. They were making excellent time, considering the terrain; typically twelve miles a day, but far below a pace that would bring them to Arkadelphia by April 1. The march was exhausting. On the thirty-first, Strong “had to carry blankets to the top [of the Fourche Mountains] four miles. I thought it a hard way of serving my country. . . . Got twelve miles. Am tired nearly to death.”²⁶

On April 1, Thayer’s column had not yet reached Hot Springs, let alone Arkadelphia. With the Frontier Division nowhere to be seen, and not heard from, Steele had to make his first important decision on the campaign: whether to wait in Arkadelphia, or to continue his march. His logistic situation suggested that he should move. While supplies and forage had held in Arkadelphia so far, foragers would eventually deplete the surrounding area entirely. On the other hand, marching would further separate his forces, and risk one wing or the other being cut off by Price and the Confederates. Up to that point, the Confederates had not been particularly active, but like the supplies around Arkadelphia, this could not be expected to last.

Having decided to move, the next question was where. Steele decided to march to Camden, intending to draw supplies there from supply trains from Pine Bluff and Little Rock. Captain Junius B. Wheeler, the chief engineer, wrote in his report that Steele and the high command considered several routes from Arkadelphia to Camden.

²⁵ Henry A. Strong, “*A Rough Introduction to This Sunny Land*”: *The Civil War Diary of Private Henry A. Strong, Co. K, Twelfth Kansas Infantry* (Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2006), 32-33

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

The command rejected three; the first, crossing the river twice and marching along the eastern bank of the Ouachita, “from plain military motives”; another, along the west bank, was considered impassible to the supply trains, and the third, the most-traveled road in peacetime, was defended by Marmaduke and the Confederates.²⁷

Steele thus decided on a fourth route. He would march from Arkadelphia towards Washington, the capital of Confederate Arkansas after the capture of Little Rock, to try to mislead the enemy into thinking Washington was his next target. After a brief feint, however, he would turn due south towards Elkins’ Ferry, and move on Camden from there.²⁸

The troops arose before dawn on April 1, and set off at six A.M. They marched approximately twelve miles to a tiny hamlet known under several names, but most commonly as Spoonville. The relatively rich land they first encountered around Arkadelphia continued; McMahan wrote that he “passed several large plantations today,” but that “many of the farmers have protection papers from Steele.” Attempts to restrict unauthorized looting became more serious, it would seem, when the army was in camp in Arkadelphia. McMahan also noted that “negroes are flocking to us fast since we left [Little Rock],” adding to the VII Corps’ logistical needs.²⁹

The march south continued the next day. Charles Musser, of the 29th Iowa, was part of the rear guard. He wrote of the “immens train of wagons along, which is a great encumbrance to an army.” April 2 marked the first significant action of the campaign, as Marmaduke attacked the column’s flank and rear. Steele’s men repulsed the

²⁷ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 3, 78; vol. 34, pt. 1, 673.

²⁸ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 673.

²⁹ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 226.

Confederates; Musser claimed that the rebels lost over two hundred men and seventy horses, while Price reported merely “little loss.” At any rate, the trains and column continued unscathed and camped on the Little Missouri River that evening.³⁰

The column marched but six miles on the third, through further skirmishing. On the fourth, Steele reached Elkins’ Ferry, and fought another sharp skirmish against Marmaduke. The Federals remained there the next day, and on the sixth marched another six miles, and camped just south of the ferry until the tenth. On the ninth, Thayer’s Frontier Division had finally caught up with Steele’s column.

For the Frontier Division, the march of the last nine days had been quite like that of the previous week: hard going, over rough country. The troops began to lighten their load with almost every mile. The process began already in March. On the twenty-eighth, Private Strong recorded that they eliminated much of the baggage in an effort to move faster: “All the troops ordered to destroy part of the tents and blankets and clothing. . . . It seems a great pity that so much has to be destroyed, but teams cannot haul all. We started with baggage enough to supply three times as many men. It takes some time for a fellow to learn anything.” The education continued as the men continued moving; by early April, they were obliged to march with knapsacks, which was a blow. “Six months ago we would not believe that we would be obliged to carry on our backs all our baggage or leave it behind,” Strong wrote on the first. On the third, he finally began carrying his own pack, which he himself nearly burned but decided that the knapsack would make it easier to carry his blanket.³¹

³⁰ Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 116.; *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 780.

³¹ Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 34-5.

The Frontier Division shed more and more gear as it hastened to join Steele. On April 5, just past Hot Springs, Private Strong reported that the column's supplies "have failed and we have to subsist off the country." Strong, unlike many of Steele's men, did not report much unauthorized forage, but instead described organized forage details. Forage was sufficient for the needs of the men; the rapid march, however, was especially hard on the mules. Strong wrote, "mules are giving out every day," and were abandoned when they weakened and could go no farther. The Frontier Division marched ever onward, however, as it had to catch up with Steele, who was himself on the move. Strong wrote that when his unit met the rest of the column on the ninth, after Steele had halted near Elkins' Ford, "Gen Steele's command welcomed us with cheers." Sperry of the 33rd Iowa, however, wrote that the appearance of the Frontier Division did not inspire confidence. "A nondescript style of re-inforcement it was too, numbering almost every kind of soldiers, including Indians, and accompanied by multitudinous vehicles, of all descriptions, which had been picked up along the road. General Steele toned down this extra transportation a good deal before we started again." Indeed, despite Strong's insistence that the trains were cut down again and again, they had to be reduced yet further; Captain Henry confirmed in his report after the expedition that Thayer still had over three hundred wagons, many of which were destroyed at this point.³²

With his command finally together, Steele was able to press on to Camden without further delay. First, however, the expedition had to cross the Prairie D'Ane, a broad, treeless expanse near Washington, where the Confederates blocked their path. The Battle of Prairie D'Ane would last for parts of three days, from the tenth of April

³² Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 36-8; Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 79; *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 679.

through the twelfth. Two brigades under General Price opposed the expedition. The heaviest fighting came on the first day, as the two armies first joined. That night the men ate their hardtack in the field, but the next morning many were able to take a better meal, as “details of men were sent back to the wagons, to make coffee at fires kindled behind some thickets, which hid them from rebel view. The more fastidious had their pork fried, and some went so far as to stew up crackers in grease and water, as a luxury; but the majority of the line had to take their ‘hard-tack and sow-belly’ in a raw state, and be thankful to have their coffee warm.” After the second day’s desultory skirmishing, Price abandoned his fortified position and pulled back.³³

Price had built a fortified line near Washington, intending to lure the Federals into them.³⁴ By now, Steele, however, had no intention of advancing to Washington or Shreveport, but moved on Camden according to the plan he adopted in Arkadelphia. The VII Corps reached Camden by the fifteenth, through often rough and swampy terrain. Even among the swamps and forests of the region, however, the men were still able to find forage.

Sperry reported a renewed effort to enforce the restrictions on foraging after the battle at Prairie D’Ane. As was often the case, the orders were spottily enforced, and Sperry wrote that the officers of his regiment tended to turn a blind eye. He wrote that men were able to bring in “sugar, pork, chickens, pigs, &c.” Corporal McMahan wrote that a forage train was sent ahead of the column as well, which doubtless brought in some of the same kinds of food. This first mention of a forage train indicates that the

³³ Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 83-84.

³⁴ *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 780.

quartermasters paired increased attempts to bring in regular forage with their attempts to reduce unauthorized foraging.³⁵

On the fourteenth, the march through the swamps and forests over bad roads continued. Private Strong wrote that there was “no chance to make up for deficiency [in rations] by foraging from the Rebels, as the troops ahead take all”. Being behind the bow of the wave was hard, especially as the rear guard, which included Private Strong, could be as much as fifteen miles behind the front. Soldiers closer to the front fared much better, such McMahan’s artillery unit, which came upon and claimed a large supply of beans in an abandoned farmhouse. It was, of course, this very situation that organized, deliberate foraging was designed to prevent; food collected and redistributed by higher-level authorities could, at least in theory, spread the food more equitably. Regulations, however, tended to be powerless against the means, motive, and opportunity of the troops on the march.³⁶

On April 15 and 16, the army made its way into Camden. Foraging opportunities were plenty. Sperry wrote that the cavalry rode into town “rich with the forage of a country where no Union troops had ever been before,” and soon after arriving in camp his own infantry began to spread out in search of forage of its own. They found “many a ham and pound of sugar, and pone of corn-bread, in most cases bought at a very small expenditure of legal tender.” McMahan wrote that, in another show of controlling the foragers, “patrols are catching up all our boys caught Jayhawking or without passes.”³⁷

³⁵ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 84; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 232.

³⁶ Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 40; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 233.

³⁷ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 88-9; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 234.

Camden was far and away the largest city the Federals had reached on the expedition, with a prewar population of 2219 (smaller only than Little Rock, with a population of 3727), and thus the civilian population provided a tempting target.³⁸ One resident and major landowner, Judge John Brown, wrote extensively about his experiences in his diary. He called the fifteenth “*THAT AWFUL DAY OF ALL DAYS*,” and reported that the first wave of Federal troops through the town captured a significant amount of his stores. “The soldiers,” he wrote, “dashed to our doors demanding food—I soon handed out all the victuals which were on hand, cooked--after dark they broke into the smoke house and commenced carrying off as they wanted. My bacon was soon taken except for a few pieces which I saved by packing it into the house. Fortunately I had hid some 200 lbs. which escaped. In the course of the night most of the contents of the store room was taken—say 2 bbls. flour—a lot of hand soap--neat a bbl. of sugar—and various smaller articles besides the meat.” Shortly, however, Steele restored order. Three “subordinate officers” ate dinner with Judge Brown, and assured him that by the next day he would have little trouble from Union soldiers.³⁹

Such proved to be the case. Brown wrote, on the sixteenth, that his part of the city was under control by noon, “by means of patrols in the streets and special guards to citizens.” Not all the city could be protected equally, particularly the outlying areas, but forage was slowly being bent to an official army policy. The seventeenth saw great success from a forage party, bringing in “several squads of cattle” with much else. The

³⁸ *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1860: Classified Population of the States and Territories by Counties: Arkansas: Population of Cities and Towns*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864.

³⁹ Judge John William Brown diary, April 15, 1864, Arkansas Historical Commission, Little Rock.

greatest prize came that day when the Confederate steamship *Homer* was captured some distance downriver from Camden, and with it thousands of bushels of corn, and, according to McMahan, two barrels of whiskey.⁴⁰

Steele's quartermaster reported that the *Homer* held 3000 bushels of corn. Assuming that this was parched kernels, the normal way to store corn and ship it long-distance, this represented somewhere between 75 and 85 tons. If entirely turned into cornmeal, and thence to cornbread, this could produce upwards of 120 tons of cornbread. This translates to 80,000 full daily rations; at least a week's worth of food; two weeks' at half-rations. This, combined with the food brought in from foraging, and later supplies from Pine Bluff, meant that provisions at Camden were not at critical levels..⁴¹

Once he saw Camden, Steele began to warm to it. He wrote to Halleck on the seventeenth that "strategically and commercially, I regard [Camden] as the first town in Arkansas. The Washita [sic] is navigable always for several months in the year to this place, and sometimes to Arkadelphia. . . . With a gun-boat as a convoy we can get supplies up this river. I expect supplies from Pine Bluff, and will move to Red River as soon as possible, but consider it all-important to hold this place."⁴²

Steele, despite earlier doubts about his ability to hold the Arkansas River line, was now proposing to move the line farther south to the Ouachita, between Arkadelphia and Camden. Now that he had decided to occupy Camden now indefinitely, Steele now had to find a more permanent source of supplies. In his report, cited above, he was

⁴⁰ John Brown diary, April 16, 1864; McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 234.

⁴¹ Charles Fox, *The American Text Book of Practical and Scientific Agriculture*. . . (Detroit: Elwood and Company, 1854), 112-121.

⁴² *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 661-2.

expecting regular trains from Pine Bluff, and steamers from the Mississippi up the Ouachita. In the meantime, foraging parties continued to head out from Camden. A nearby mill was commandeered and placed under the control of the 36th Iowa, which “was kept running at all hours of the day and night,” and supplementing that were the ten portable mills, operated by four-man teams, carried in the wagon train.⁴³

On April 17, a forage train set out from Camden toward Poison Spring, which had been a campsite for the column earlier. Elements of the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry regiment, some cavalry and two guns, 695 men in all, escorted the train of 198 wagons. They foraged through the night, and headed back on the morning of the eighteenth, “loaded with corn.” They met a reinforcement of 465 men and two more guns; however, due to straggling and fatigue, no more than 1000 men were effective. Confederates attacked the forage train shortly after the reinforcements arrived, and took three hundred casualties, plus all the wagons, to little Confederate loss. That night, reports began to stream in to Camden of atrocities committed against the African American soldiers of the 1st Kansas; some were scalped by Choctaw Confederate cavalymen, others were shot by white Confederates. The literature on the Poison Spring atrocities exceeds that of the rest of the campaign combined, and will not be summarized here.⁴⁴ The effect on morale was tremendous, however, and revenge would inspire the Federals, black and white, in later engagements. Henry Strong, and the 12th Kansas Infantry, beat drums all night on the eighteenth to guide in stragglers and the

⁴³ Ibid., pt. 3, 196.

⁴⁴ One excellent book is Mark K. Christ, ed., *“All Cut to Pieces and Gone to Hell”: The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring* (Little Rock: August House, 2003).

wounded; he wrote “They killed after our boys surrendered the wounded that had been put in ambulances. If this is true no punishment is too great for them.”⁴⁵

As notable and gruesome as the Poison Spring episode was, it represented but one supply train; on the twentieth, another arrived safely bearing ten days’ rations. These 175 wagons came from Pine Bluff, and were escorted by a scant 400 men.⁴⁶ The light forage and supply train escorts drew much commentary; neither Steele nor anyone else ever explained why much larger forces were not sent out. On the twenty-first, Strong and his unit escorted another forage train. “We went out about ten miles and loaded the Brigade train with corn and all the grub we could find, and got back just at dark. Got a good deal of meat and some potatoes. The Rebs tried to get their Cavalry between us and town and capture us. They nearly effected it, too, as they were only three miles away when we got back into the road. But we all got back safe.” Steele reduced the regimental allowance of wagons in order to spread out the losses from Poison Spring, and ordered the divisional commanders to cut back their headquarters baggage to “as little as absolute necessity may require.” Furthermore, “all horses and mules captured . . . will be at once turned over to the quartermaster” in order to supply animals to the quartermaster corps and the cavalry.⁴⁷ Strong also noted the orders to reduce the size of the supply trains, and also reported the rumor in camp that General Banks had been soundly defeated on the Red River. “If so,” Strong wrote, “we will not stay in this country long, but the rumor is not credited.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ OR, vol. 34, pt. 1, 743-6; Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 123; Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 41.

⁴⁶ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 235.

⁴⁷ OR, vol. 34, pt. 3, 245.

⁴⁸ Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 42.

As it happened, the rumors of the Red River Campaign's failure were accurate. On April 9, Banks suffered a major defeat at the battle of Mansfield, which precipitated his retreat down the Red River. On April 15, after more skirmishes and battles and retreats, Banks wrote to Steele to report that "the enemy is in larger force than was anticipated by the Government," and asked that Steele move at once to join Banks and sweep the Confederates before them. Steele chose not to; at this point in the campaign, joining Banks would have been the military equivalent of throwing good money after bad. Despite the Confederates having turned back the Red River Campaign, Steele's primary goal remained to defend his new outpost at Camden against the invigorated Confederates, who were due to be reinforced at any moment by veterans from the Red River. Camden, the "first town in Arkansas," was too rich a prize to give up.⁴⁹

Throughout, foraging (of various kinds) continued in town, if in a more controlled fashion than when the troops first arrived. Judge Brown wrote on the twentieth that soldiers were coming by and taking his cotton, paying for it with Federal government receipts, which he would not accept, believing these IOUs unlikely to ever be paid.⁵⁰ This is the only report of the Union army seizing cotton. How prevalent this practice was is unknown; it does not seem to have hindered the movement of the Federal army, and also was not one of Steele's stated priorities. Private Strong reported that there was a great deal of sugar and molasses in town, to which "the soldiers helped themselves pretty freely."⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pt. 1, 668; pt. 3; pt. 3, 161.

⁵⁰ Judge Brown diary, April 20, 1864.

⁵¹ Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 43.

On April 23, the supply train that had arrived on the twentieth turned back to Pine Bluff for more supplies with an escort from Camden. That evening, a Union outpost south of Camden was attacked, but it turned back the Confederates with little loss to either side. As it happened, this was a diversion to keep Steele from reinforcing the supply train heading back to Pine Bluff, which Confederates attacked and captured in the battle of Marks's Mills on the twenty-fifth.⁵²

When news reached Steele of this latest setback, he called an immediate council of war to determine the next move. He wrote in his report that he "could have held [Camden] against Kirby Smith's entire force" if they had been able to maintain their supply line; now, with the road to Pine Bluff being very tenuously held, the time had come to leave. Steele had heard of the disaster five days previously, and had it confirmed two days later. These were days he would want back as the retreat began.

The men, thanks in part to the camp rumor mill, had already begun to prepare for moving on short notice. On the twenty-fifth, the 33rd Iowa had "a strange feeling . . . that 'some thing was going to happen.'" The men began to prepare to leave on the twenty-sixth. Captain Henry, the chief Quartermaster, was ordered "to destroy such wagons and stores as could not be removed for lack of animals," nearly ninety wagons and an unknown amount of other equipment. Sperry wrote that among the destroyed stores were food supplies: "box after box of crackers were burned, which could have been better distributed to the soldiers." No other source reported food destruction, but rations were short for the march home. The supply train of the twentieth had brought in ten days' rations; by the twenty-sixth, the men would likely have consumed more than

⁵² *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 668.

half of these. Private Strong wrote that his unit got “five hard tack to the man, also a little bacon and coffee.” In the 33rd Iowa, rations appear to have been distributed unevenly among the companies; between luck and initiative, some soldiers would fare better than others. “Some men,” Sperry wrote, “drew but just two crackers, with a small amount of meal, some meat, and coffee, for the full supply that was to last them till we reached Little Rock; and many had not more than two crackers and a half-pint of meal. A few were fortunate enough to get their meal baked up into corn-cakes at houses near, before we started, but the rest had to cook it themselves, as best they might, along the road.” One soldier who had corn meal baked up before leaving Camden was John Morgan, who had a half-bushel cooked for him in town, a service he paid for with two and a half pounds of coffee. Besides his corn cakes, he and four comrades took with them ten hardtacks, nine pounds of ham, coffee, and some sugar.⁵³

The road back would not be a desert, just as the road down had not been; however, it was rougher going and the speed of march militated against the kind of foraging the army had previously conducted. Several factors dictated the speed of the retreat. First, getting back to Little Rock was a priority, and this encouraged the men to move as quickly as possible. During the retreat, however, it began to rain heavily, and many of the roads turned to mud. Since there were still well over two hundred wagons in the column, the men had to wrench the wagons out of the mud at regular intervals.

Furthermore, according to McMahan the column also had “twenty to thirty families” along with them, presumably either slaves escaping to Union-occupied Arkansas and freedom, or Arkansas unionists. The retreat seemed to be especially hard

⁵³ Sperry, *33rd Iowa*, 94-95; *OR*, vol. 34, pt. 1, 680; Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 43; John S. Morgan diary, April 26, 1864.

on them; what support, if any, they received from the Army was not recorded. During the retreat, they seem to have largely fended for themselves, and kept up with the march as best they could. Sperry wrote of two incidents involving them during the retreat. In the first, a wagon containing “a half-dozen negro babies, of assorted sizes,” was left in a muddy ditch, still hitched to a mule that had drowned in the mud. The second, a bit of hearsay that Sperry reported “as was told by many who witnessed the incident,” involved a mother who cast her baby by the side of the road “as a soldier would his knapsack.” Sperry had no idea what became of the child, and imagined that there were several such children abandoned on the march.⁵⁴

On April 28, the army reached the town of Princeton. Virginia Davis Gray, a Princeton resident, wrote of the army’s behavior. “They denied that they were retreating, but owned up to the loss of the train [at Marks’s Mills]. They came and kept coming—the infantry was like hungry wolves—they followed the directions given to Peter, “Stay and eat.” In less than one hour, great old bristly hogs was killed—cooked an eaten—ditto of cows scusing the bristles.” Enough remained, however, to feed the Confederates as they passed through the next day.⁵⁵

“Every night since leaving Camden,” Sperry wrote of the 33rd Iowa’s experiences, “we had camped in a corn-field,” but the exigencies of the march meant that the crops of the area provided little sustenance. The area around Princeton “reminded us all of Iowa,” suggesting an area of considerable foraging opportunities in

⁵⁴ McMahan, *Reluctant Cannoneer*, 238; Sperry, *33^d Iowa*, 109.

⁵⁵ Virginia Davis Gray, “Life in Confederate Arkansas: The Diary of Virginia Davis Gray,” Carl Moneyhon, ed., *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 42 (Summer 1983), 82. “Stay and eat,” rather than the more Biblically correct “Slay and eat” (Acts 11:7), as in the published transcript.

less hectic circumstances. As it was, food, aside from the liberated pigs and cows accumulated at Princeton, meant government rations, which were now dwindling rapidly.⁵⁶

On the thirtieth, Steele and his men having just crossed the Saline River, the largest battle of the entire campaign took place at Jenkins Ferry. Despite having made a forced march through rough country, and consuming short rations, the Federals dealt the Confederate army, now under the control of General Edmund Kirby Smith, a severe blow, and knocked them off the trail, which bought VII Corps enough time to reach Little Rock.

The last few days proved to be by far the most difficult of the campaign, despite being out of combat. On the morning of May 1, the column was about fifty miles from Little Rock; marching hard every day, they reached “The Rock,” and safety, by noon on the third. Private Strong and the rest of the Frontier Division, bringing up the rear, fared badly. Strong’s government rations had actually given out just before the battle of Jenkins Ferry, and his unit ate foraged grain. A. F. Sperry wrote that by May 1 and 2, the food situation had finally become a problem. He wrote that the men “had been hungry for some time, but now began to actually suffer for lack of food.” The distinction between hunger, and suffering from hunger, is telling; while the situation had been far from ideal for some time, the VII Corps was still able to march long distances over difficult terrain, and defeat the enemy in battle. By the morning of the May 2, Sperry wrote that those soldiers who had managed to conserve their rations were able to demand a high price for them; one got two dollars for a singlehardtack; another

⁵⁶ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 97; Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 44.

received a silver watch for two of the normally shunned and scorned pieces of hard bread. John Eckroate wrote that he was out of hardtack for one day, presumably the first or second, but wrote, rather coyly, that he “had plenty of meat so I did not starve.”⁵⁷

This situation did not last for very long. On the evening of the second, a supply train coming from Little Rock arrived in camp and distributed rations to the troops, who accepted them eagerly. The crisis, which lasted over parts of two days at the tail end of the retreat, had passed. These periods of acute food shortage, while obviously unpleasant and best avoided, were common to all the armies during the war, even the superbly-provisioned Army of the Potomac, which operated far closer to railheads and major depots than did Steele’s VII Corps. That great chronicler of life in the Army of the Potomac, John Billings, discussed the phenomenon. “I have been asked a great many times,” he wrote, “whether I always got enough to eat in the army, and have surprised inquirers by answering in the affirmative. Now, some old soldier may say who sees my reply, ‘Well, you were lucky. I didn’t.’ But I should at once ask him to tell me for how long a time his regiment was without food of some kind. . . . And I should be very much surprised if he should say more than twenty-four or thirty hours, at the outside.”⁵⁸ Such shortages, then, were common experiences of soldiers in the Union army, rather than only encountered on marches through parched territory.

The last few miles to Little Rock passed without incident. Just before entering the city, the column paused to reform its lines and march in with heads high and in the best military order they could muster under the circumstances. They had marched out of

⁵⁷ Strong, *Rough Introduction*, 46; Sperry, *33^d Iowa*, 112; John Eckroate, May 7, 1864 letter, John Eckroate Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa.

⁵⁸ Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, 108-109.

Little Rock weeks before to music and flags, but this time, wrote Sperry, “the fifes and drums had been so nearly used up on the campaign, the pounding was hardly as lively as usual.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 113.

“MISMANAGEMENT, BLUNDERING, OR ALL INTENTIONAL”

Back in camp, surrounded by a bustling Army-driven economy and a major supply depot, the men took advantage of finally being able to eat as much as they pleased, and in greater variety than before, and particularly the past week. Eating, sleeping, and reading mail occupied the men for the next few days.¹ Another popular activity was critiquing the campaign, and its commander.

The grumbling was loud, and sustained. Charles Musser of the 29th Iowa wrote just after Jenkins Ferry that “Steele is hated by all. even the Secesh here call him a fool. Blunder after blunder was committed. our trains being taken was a blunder of his or it was intentional. I would rather believe the latter. he is an old villain and a whiskey bloat and not fit to command a flatboat.” When he returned to Little Rock, he continued to vent. “Once more in our old camp at Little Rock and hartily glad we are here and not in the field where we can be sold by our own General. I hope he will be superseded Soon by a *man*. . . . [It was] all mismanagement, blundering, or all intentional.”²

The grumbling reached as far as Pine Bluff, where James Lockney of the 28th Wisconsin recorded that the men there, too, blamed the loss at Marks’s Mills on Steele’s “carelessness or treachery,” and mentioned that one of the variants on the treachery theme was that Steele’s sister was married to an important Confederate, either General Fagan or an unnamed Major, and lived near Camden. The idea, then, was that the expedition was a grand scheme to bring off a minor family reunion.³ These rumors were all patently false, but had remarkable staying power. Long after the war, Captain

¹ Sperry, 33^d Iowa, 113.

² Musser, *Soldier Boy*, 125.

³ James Browne Lockney Diary, April 28, 1864, James Browne Lockney Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Edward Ruegger of the 9th Wisconsin had “promoted” Steele’s sister to being the wife of General Kirby Smith, in an entertaining but entirely preposterous published reminiscence of the campaign.⁴

Some saw the debacle as a chance to attack Steele’s politics. “Scout,” writing in the St. Louis *Missouri Democrat*, blamed Steele’s Conciliatory Policy and poor fighting spirit for the defeat. “Scout” felt that Steele was well-placed to make real gains in Arkansas. “Having possession of Camden,” he wrote, “it would appear that a strenuous effort should have been made to hold it. The country was full of forage and corn.” The correspondent had a solution that Steele would have dreaded. “It would not be a bad move to try a *Blunt* policy,” he wrote, referring to General Blunt, the interloper in Fort Smith.⁵

Colonel Engelmann, commanding a brigade at Camden, tried to put the best face on the expedition. In a magnificent phrase, he wrote to his wife, “while it was a retreat, it was a victorious one.”⁶ To be sure, common soldiers sometimes recast the campaign in light of their performance at Jenkins Ferry and their fortitude shown on the forced march back to Little Rock. Sperry wrote that soldiers should look back with pride on Camden for its “examples of stern and determined endurance, of desperate courage successfully resisting the force of overwhelming numbers, of faithful attempts to obey orders, and cheerful fortitude in braving disaster.”⁷

⁴ Edward Ruegger, “Five Weeks of My Army Life,” Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵ “From Southern Arkansas,” *Missouri Democrat* (St. Louis), 10 May 1864.

⁶ Adolph Engelmann, May 4 letter (to Mina), Engelmann-Kircher Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

⁷ Sperry, 33^d *Iowa*, 113.

The fact remains, however, that the campaign *was* a disaster. The objective of the expedition was to reach Shreveport and cooperate with Banks's Red River campaign. In this, it failed utterly. How much of this failure can be attributed to Steele? Most recent historians, once again led by Ludwell Johnson, absolve Steele. If the campaign was doomed from the beginning, they argue, Grant, and the rest of the Union national high command, deserve censure, and Steele bears responsibility only for minor tactical decisions.

This conclusion rests on a pair of misconceptions. First, Steele deserves more responsibility for the planning and course of the campaign than historians give him. The distance between Steele and the eastern command meant that Steele had to be given latitude in where and how his corps marched. Furthermore, Steele seized this power for himself, through his continual protests about how he was the only one who understood his situation. When he set out, only he had any idea where he was going—if he even knew himself.

Given Steele's longstanding and oft-expressed opposition to the campaign, it is worth asking whether Steele, in the end, really intended to ever get to Shreveport. Obviously Steele had no reason to court a humiliating disaster, but at the same time he wanted to avoid committing himself. If Banks's move up the Red River drew out Price and the other Arkansas Confederate forces, then Steele could safely follow them as planned. On the other hand, staying in Arkansas and awaiting developments allowed Steele to observe Banks, and Price, as long as possible. Steele's concern for Arkansas, or at least for the survival of his position and policies, was apparently quite genuine.

There is no reason to doubt that he felt threatened by Blunt and Price, and that leaving Arkansas might have given both his enemies free rein.

Because of Steele's concerns, and slow march through southwest Arkansas, it seems reasonable to believe that Steele had little intention of moving directly on Shreveport as he was ordered to do. Rather, he conceived of his movement as essentially a probe, designed to buy Steele time, lend assistance to Banks at a distance, show the flag in southern Arkansas, and possibly inflict some damage on Confederate forces there.

When Steele occupied Camden, however, his priorities changed. Camden was the "first town in Arkansas," and Steele suddenly determined to hold the Ouachita between Camden and Arkadelphia. This was nowhere in the plans, and Steele was forced to adopt an ad-hoc supply line to Pine Bluff. It was when this line failed, at Marks's Mills, that Steele finally decided to retreat. This was the supply crisis that compelled Steele to retreat, not a "desert" between Little Rock and Shreveport.

Steele escaped heavy criticism thanks in large part to the spectacular failure of Banks on the Red River. Compared to that catastrophe, Steele's failings appeared minimal. To be on the safe side, however, Steele sent his aide, Manter, to Washington to act as a lobbyist on his behalf. Manter was highly effective, meeting with Lincoln, Halleck, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and others to discuss the campaign, and who should be blamed for its failure. Banks was the unanimous choice.⁸

In the Red River campaign, neither Banks nor Steele could have brought victory alone. The failure of either column meant the likely demise of the entire operation. It

⁸ F. H. Manter to Frederick Steele, May 13, 1864, Steele Papers.

would have been prudent, indeed, for Steele to retreat from Camden immediately upon hearing of Banks's defeat; his desire to hold Camden, however, kept him in camp until it was almost too late. If Steele had moved faster, he may well have reached Shreveport, but well ahead of Banks, and Steele may have been more exposed than he was at Camden.

The Camden Expedition had little impact on the wider war. It weakened Steele's position, and likely helped Price's raid escape Arkansas later in 1864, but that raid was crushed in several battles, notably at Mine Creek. This expedition is important not for its impact, but what it reveals about how occupation and military policy interacted during the Civil War. Steele's conciliatory occupation policy set in motion a long chain of events that affected the nature of the Camden expedition. It brought Steele numerous enemies, and complicated his tasks enormously. It encouraged him to tread very lightly on campaign, restricting his foraging policy. All his troubles engendered a distrust of outsiders who might meddle in his affairs, and challenge his supremacy in Arkansas. When it came time to march out of Little Rock, he was so unwilling to abandon Arkansas that he sacrificed his role in the larger Red River campaign. Politics and logistics shaped Steele's campaigns in Arkansas, revealing some of the problems of occupation and command in the Trans-Mississippi.

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APPENDIX

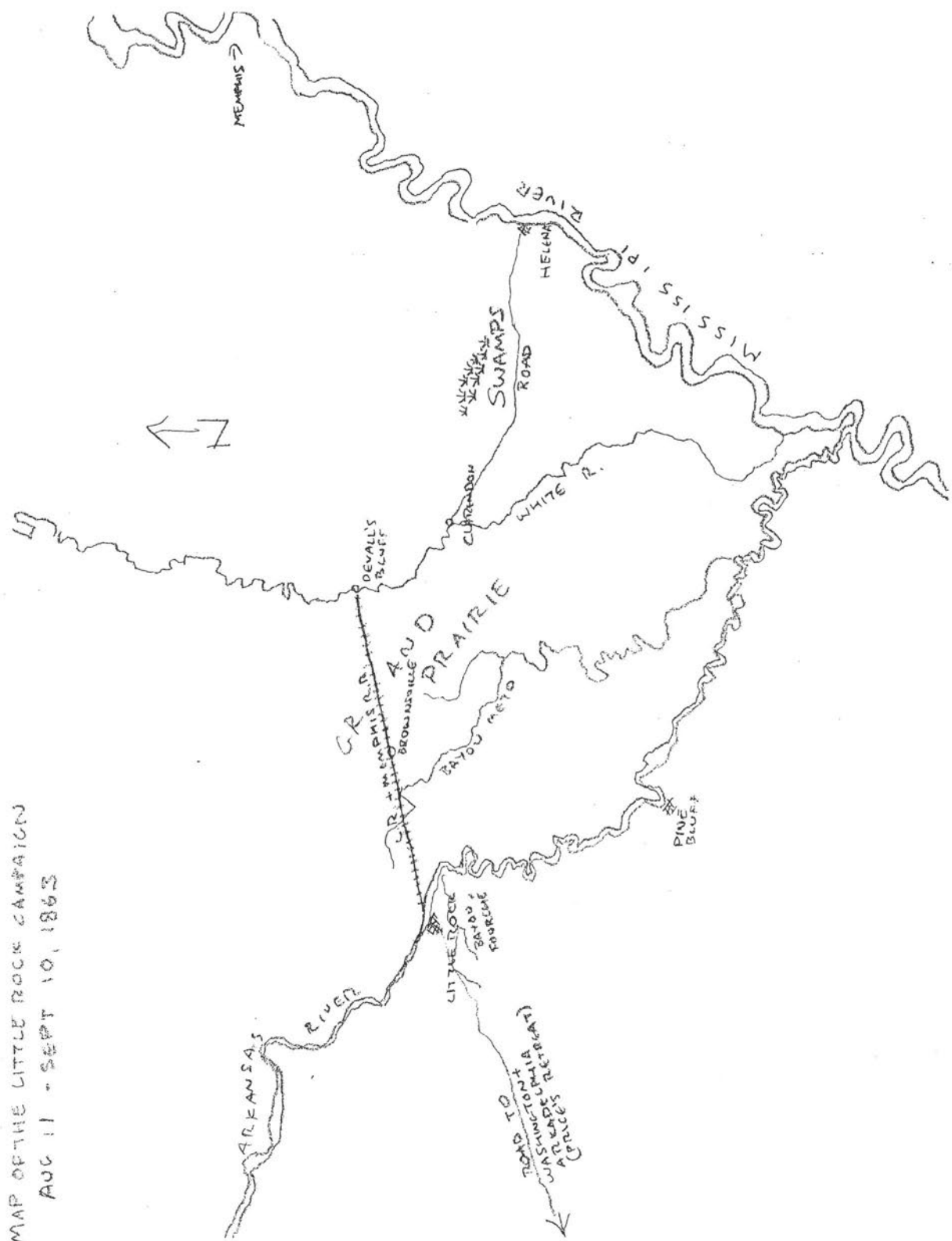


Figure 1: The Area of the Little Rock Campaign

Table 1: Union Order of Battle for the Little Rock Campaign

Major General Frederick Steele, Commanding

Escort:

- 3rd Illinois Cavalry
- Kane County (IL) Cavalry

First (Cavalry) Division

- Brigadier John W. Davidson, Commanding

- First Brigade (Colonel Washington F. Geiger)

- 2nd Missouri Cavalry
 - 7th Missouri Cavalry
 - 8th Missouri Cavalry

- Second Brigade (Colonel John M. Glover)

- 10th Illinois Cavalry
 - 1st Iowa Cavalry
 - 3rd Missouri Cavalry

- Reserve Brigade (Colonel John F. Ritter)

- 13th Illinois Cavalry
 - 3rd Iowa Cavalry
 - 32nd Iowa Infantry
 - 1st Missouri Cavalry

- Artillery (Captain Julius L. Hadley)

- 2nd Missouri Light Artillery (Bty. K)
 - 2nd Missouri Light Artillery (Bty. M)
 - 25th Ohio Battery

Second Division

- Colonel William E. Mclean, Commanding

- First Brigade (Colonel William H. Graves)

- 18th Illinois Infantry
 - 43rd Illinois Infantry
 - 54th Illinois Infantry
 - 61st Illinois Infantry
 - 106th Illinois Infantry
 - 12th Michigan Infantry

- Second Brigade (Colonel Oliver Wood)

Table 1 Continued: Union Order of Battle for the Little Rock Campaign

126th Illinois Infantry
40th Iowa Infantry
3rd Minnesota Infantry
22nd Ohio Infantry
27th Wisconsin Infantry

Third Division

Brigadier General Samuel A. Rice, Commanding

First Brigade (Colonel Charles W. Kettredge)

43rd Indiana Infantry
36th Iowa Infantry
77th Ohio Infantry

Second Brigade (Colonel Thomas H. Benton, Jr.)

29th Iowa Infantry
33rd Iowa Infantry
28th Wisconsin Infantry

Other forces with Steele:

Cavalry Brigade (Colonel Powell Clayton)

1st Indiana Cavalry
5th Kansas Cavalry

Artillery (Captain Mortimer M. Hayden)

3rd Iowa Battery
1st Missouri Light Artillery (Bty. K)
5th Ohio Battery
11th Ohio Battery

True's Brigade (Colonel James M. True)

(Arrived at the end of the campaign)

49th Illinois Infantry
62nd Illinois Infantry
50th Indiana Infantry
27th Iowa Infantry
Vaughn's (Illinois) Battery

MAP OF THE CAMDEN EXPEDITION
MAR. 23 - MAY 3, 1864

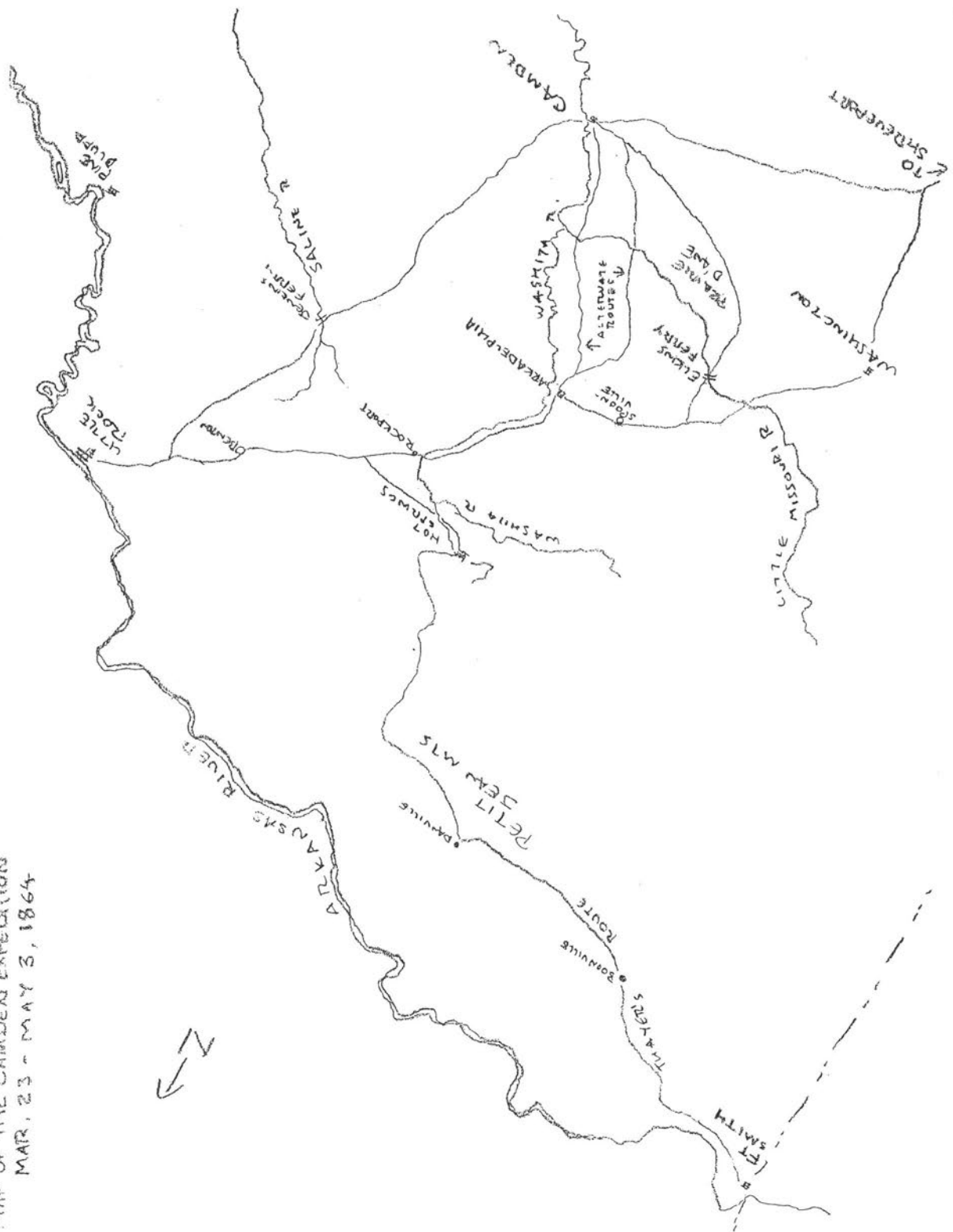


Figure 2: Map of the Camden Expedition

Table 2: Union Order of Battle for the Camden Expedition

Major General Frederick Steele, Commanding

Headquarters Units:

3rd Illinois Cavalry, Coy. D
15th Illinois Cavalry, Coy. H

Third Division

Brigadier General Frederick Salomon, Commanding

First Brigade (Brigadier General Samuel A. Rice)

50th Indiana Infantry
29th Iowa Infantry
33rd Iowa Infantry
9th Wisconsin Infantry

Second Brigade (Colonel William E. McLean)

43rd Indiana Infantry
38th Iowa Infantry
77th Ohio Infantry

Third Brigade (Colonel Adolph Engelmann)

43rd Illinois Infantry
40th Iowa Infantry
27th Wisconsin Infantry

Artillery (Captain Gustave Stange)

2nd Missouri Light (Bty. E)
Vaughn's (Illinois) Battery
Wisconsin Battery

Frontier Division (From Fort Smith)

Brigadier General John M. Thayer, Commanding

First Brigade (Colonel John Edwards)

1st Arkansas Infantry
2nd Arkansas Infantry (eight companies)
18th Iowa Infantry
2nd Indiana Battery

Second Brigade (Colonel Charles W. Adams)

1st Kansas Infantry (Colored)
2nd Kansas Infantry (Colored)

Table 2 Continued: Union Order of Battle for the Camden Expedition

- 12th Kansas Infantry
- 1st Arkansas Battery
- Third (Cavalry) Brigade
 - 2nd Kansas Cavalry
 - 6th Kansas Cavalry
 - 14th Kansas Cavalry

Cavalry Division

Brigadier General Eugene A. Carr, Commanding

- First Brigade (Colonel John F. Ritter)
 - 3rd Arkansas Cavalry (four companies)
 - 13th Illinois Cavalry, Coy. B
 - 3rd Iowa Cavalry (detachment)
 - 1st Missouri Cavalry (eight companies)
 - 2nd Missouri Cavalry
- Third Brigade (Colonel Daniel Anderson)
 - 10th Illinois Cavalry
 - 1st Iowa Cavalry
 - 3rd Missouri Cavalry

Forces at Pine Bluff, under Colonel Powell Clayton

- 18th Illinois Infantry
- 1st Kansas Cavalry (eight companies)
- 5th Kansas Cavalry (ten companies)
- 7th Missouri Cavalry
- 28th Wisconsin Infantry
