



Pemberton: The General Who Lost Vicksburg

Michael B. Ballard

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It was the sad fate of General John C. Pemberton (1814–1881), a northerner serving in the Confederate army, to die in disgrace and humiliation. Because he surrendered Vicksburg to General Grant, many Confederates considered him a traitor. Because he lost this strategic southern port on the Mississippi, Pemberton was branded as an incompetent.

In this biography, the first to examine Pemberton's life and career in full scope, Michael B. Ballard credits Pemberton for military prowess that previous Civil War scholars have denied him. Here his strength is shown to be in administration, not in the theater of combat. Ballard persuasively argues that if Pemberton's abilities had been properly used, he could have made a positive contribution to the Confederate cause.

Ballard focuses upon Pemberton's theory of command in South Carolina, where his foremost conviction was the preservation of his army. Pressure from both state officials and the Confederate War Department in Richmond, however, dictated that he must hold Charleston at all costs. Submitting to his superiors, Pemberton carried this new philosophy to Mississippi for his next assignment, where his main objective was to defend Vicksburg, a city whose river defenses blocked Union commerce along the Mississippi River. Throughout the winter of 1862–63 Pemberton's forces held off Ulysses S. Grant's army, but in the spring of 1863 Grant's complex diversions confused Pemberton and allowed the Union to gain a beachhead on the east bank of the river and to launch an inland campaign that trapped Confederates in Vicksburg. Remembering the lesson of Charleston, Pemberton tried to save this river city, but he lost both Vicksburg and his men.

Ballard's slant on Pemberton's life, fair and revisionist, must be considered in future assessments, for it details fateful moments in Pemberton's career and offers new insights gained from family papers and manuscripts not previously examined. "I find the author's arguments to be convincing," says Civil War historian Herman Hattaway, "and like him, I am led to a keener appreciation of Pemberton than I ever had before."

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