

# Control of the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico

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The battles of Fort Henry, Fort Donelson and Shiloh were all part of the Union strategy to gain control of the Mississippi River. Tennessean David Farragut played an important role in those efforts. David Glasgow Farragut was born James Glasgow Farragut in Campbell's Station, Tennessee, an area near Knoxville, on July 5, 1801. After his birth, he was taken to New Orleans, where he was adopted by Commodore David Porter. Farragut began his service at a young age and served with his adopted father during the War of 1812. He later changed his first name to David in honor of his adopted father. Farragut was captain of the sloop *Saratoga* during the Mexican War.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Farragut decided to remain a U.S. naval officer, despite being a southerner by birth. Farragut was assigned to oversee the West Gulf Blockade Squadron and their operations in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>1</sup> During the spring of 1862, Farragut received orders which laid out a plan for his fleet to travel up the Mississippi River and aid Union armies in their attempt to control the river and cut the Confederacy in half. One of the keys to the success of the operation was for Farragut to capture the port of New Orleans. The battle for the largest city in the South began in April 1862. Against heavy resistance, Farragut steamed his ships up the river, taking cannon fire from all sides. Confederates pushed flaming rafts into the river to set Union ships ablaze. The rebels fired from incomplete ironclads still moored to their docks.<sup>2</sup> None of this stopped Farragut and his fleet. They passed the river defenses, defeated them from the north, and sailed triumphantly into the city.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 684

<sup>2</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 419-20.

With New Orleans in Union hands, Farragut took his fleet up the river, capturing cities and frustrating Confederates. The only city he failed to capture was Vicksburg, the final Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi. His accomplishments on the Mississippi earned Farragut a promotion to the rank of rear admiral. In March 1863, Farragut again sailed for Vicksburg to blockade the town. With the help of Grant's forces on the other side of the fortress, the town fell on July 4, 1863, one day after the Union victory at Gettysburg.

Farragut's next mission consisted of shutting down Confederate blockade runners. To do this, Farragut had to capture rebel ports that harbored such runners. The blockade was a crucial part of the Union strategy for defeating the Confederacy. The first harbor targeted was Mobile. Attempting to mimic his success in New Orleans, Farragut tried to run the gauntlet of Mobile's defenses. Instead of cruising through, however, the Union navy encountered Confederate water mines, called torpedoes. Several Union ships were lost due to the mines, and with the whole operation in chaos, Farragut delivered the order for which he is remembered. He strapped himself to the rigging of his flagship, the Hartford, and shouted the memorable phrase, "Damn the torpedoes. Full steam ahead." His ships finally passed through, and Mobile surrendered. After the capture of Mobile, Farragut was promoted to vice admiral.<sup>3</sup> The capture of New Orleans, Vicksburg and Mobile were key to the success of the Union's Anaconda strategy of strangling the Confederacy by cutting off its access to supplies and markets to sell its cotton.

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, "Farragut, David Glasgow," 684.