

Navy Yards



Prior to the buildup of a naval presence, Cairo was described in the *Chicago Tribune* of May 22, 1861, thus, “Every other house on the levee is a saloon, and every one has a guard stationed at the door to preserve order. A great mass of people, nearly all men (we have not seen ten women at Cairo) are lounging along the levee all day, with no apparent purpose. Many of them are Southerners, probably spying. Steamboats are tied up, fire out, and no business going except in connection with the camp, and a small tide of travel.” Entitled “The Ohio Levee at Cairo [sketched by Alexander Simplot],” this line engraving, published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume V, No. 246, p 582, September 14, 1861, shows the St. Charles Hotel at left, with soldiers and civilians along a river bank crowded with wharf-boats and steamers. Ron Field Collection.

Cairo and Mound City Naval Station

By Ron Field

LOCATED AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE OHIO AND MISSISSIPPI RIVERS, CAIRO, ILLINOIS was one of the most strategically important places in the Civil War midwest, and essential to the success of Major General Winfield Scott’s Anaconda Plan to invade the Mississippi valley, thereby splitting the Confederacy in two. Although Union troops first arrived at Cairo on April 22, 1861, Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant assumed command of the city on September 4, 1861, as

part of the District of Southeast Missouri, Western Department. On August 27, 1861, Captain Andrew Hull Foote, late Master of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, was ordered west to take command of “all the naval forces in Western waters,” and was appointed flag officer during the following November, with Commander Alexander M. Pennock commanding as fleet-captain in his absence as of October 21, 1861.¹

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Part of the naval station stands beyond the marine ways at Mound City, circa 1864. The marine ways allowed steamboats to be hauled entirely out of the Ohio River, enabling shipwrights and carpenters to repair and improve them for wartime duty. A marine stands on guard by a sentry box at left. The building next to him may be the original railroad depot. The large brick building seen through the trees in the distance may be the hospital established in 1861, and which accommodated both Union and Confederate wounded pouring into the city in the wake of battles at Shiloh, Vicksburg, and elsewhere. Library of Congress (Control No. 2013647551, LC-DIG-ppmsca-34045).

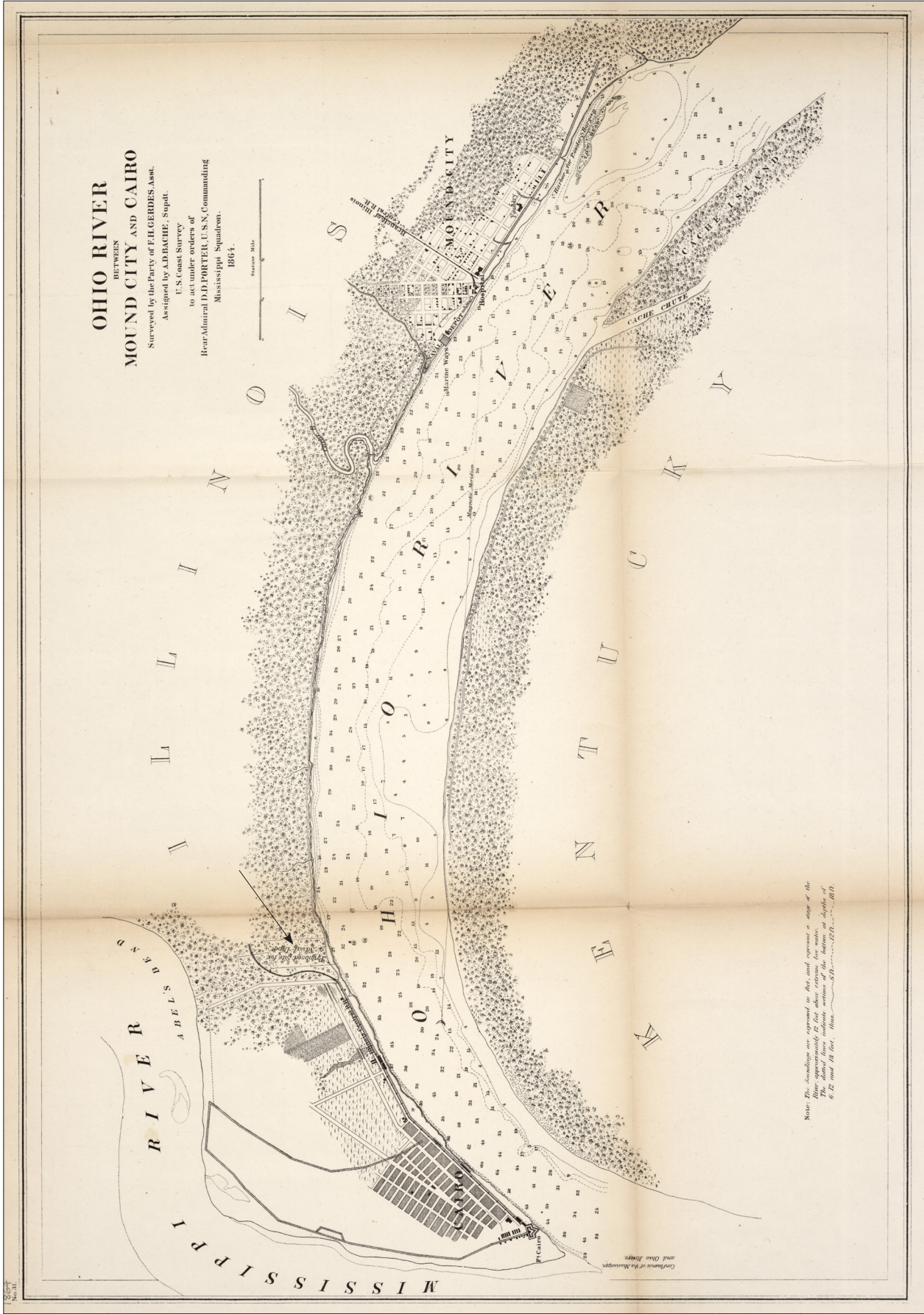
Also during August 1861, James B. Eads, an ex-riverboat man and copartner of Eads & Nelson, a St. Louis wrecking company, was awarded a contract to build gunboats at a yard he leased from the Mound City Marine Railway and Shipyard, located about five miles upstream from Cairo on the Ohio River.² A likely place to choose, Mound City was a small port town with a thriving boat-building industry, marine ways, and repair shops.³

The three vessels built by Eads at Mound City in 1861 under the superintendence of a Mr. Hamilton were the river ironclads *Cairo*, *Cincinnati*, and *Mound City*, the first of seven *City*-class ironclad gunboats. Anchored off Cairo by the end of the year, they were commissioned in January 1862, and were subsequently joined by the other four ironclads, plus 38 mortar boats and 28 tugs and steamers which had variously been built by Eads at Carondelet, Cincinnati, and St. Louis.

Visiting the naval station developing at Cairo in December 1861, a reporter for the *Missouri Democrat* wrote that on “the river, and along the wharves, have

sprung up scenes of most unwonted life and activity. The gunboat fleet is anchored in the stream or lying by the levee; the little tug-boats and ship-launches, manned by gallant man-of-war-men, are lying about hither and thither; the sound of the hammer and chisel and saw, and the busy notes of industry arising from all marine quarters, give Cairo just now considerable of the appearance of a navy-yard.”⁴

On May 9, 1862, Captain Charles H. Davis replaced Foote as acting flag officer in command of the Western Gunboat Flotilla and served until October, during which time vessels from Cairo took part in engagements at Plum Point Bend, Memphis, and Vicksburg where they cooperated with the squadron of Flag Officer David G. Farragut. Davis was replaced by Commander David D. Porter on October 15, 1862, and under his command the Mississippi River Squadron (as it became known after transfer from the Army to the Navy on October 1, 1862) cooperated with Grant’s forces and successfully steamed south of Vicksburg after passing under its guns on April 16, 1863. By



Produced in 1864 by order of Rear-Admiral David D. Porter, this map illustrates the close proximity of Cairo and Mound City. Note the site indicated for a proposed naval depot close by Cairo, which was not used (arrow). The Naval Depot, Marine Ways, Hospital, and Iron Foundry are clearly indicated at Mound City. Farther upstream, and at a safe distance, lay the harbor for powder barges. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division (Control No. 2008628264, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g37070.cw0213500>).

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The boat closest to the camera at the Mound City Naval Station may be the *Tensas* (Tinclad No. 39), although the placement of the bell makes this difficult to be sure. The craft behind her is probably a wharf-boat. The building in the distance is the sawmill. The nearer building is probably one of the machine shops, while that at far right is most likely the blacksmith shop. Library of Congress (Control No. 20136477550, LC-DIG-ppmsca-34044).

**WANTED AT THE NAVAL STATION,
MOUND CITY, ILLS.,
100 Ship Carpenters and 100 Caulkers.**

Transportation furnished. Inquire on board the Volunteer, near foot of Cherry street.

Published in the *Daily Missouri Democrat* (St. Louis, Missouri) on September 12, 1864, this advertisement for carpenters and caulkers bears witness to the continued shipbuilding activity at Mound City Naval Station at a late stage in the war. Ron Field Collection.

blockading the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers during the next few months, Porter's gunboats greatly aided in the fall of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863.

Regarding marines to police and guard the Cairo Naval Station, Porter at first believed he could recruit men along the river, but by April 1865 only 41 had been enlisted to serve in the entire Mississippi River Squadron.⁵ In lieu of this he used soldiers to serve as "marines," while Colonel Alfred W. Ellett recruited volunteers from the army to man his ram fleet which, by November 1862, became the Mississippi Marine Brigade. The first detachment of U.S. Marines eventually arrived to assume their duties at Cairo on November 6, 1862 but, with the receiving ship *Clara Dolsen* lacking room and no building available to house them, they spent the first two nights without shelter.

A correspondent of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* visited the Naval Station in November 1863 and wrote, "Cairo, since

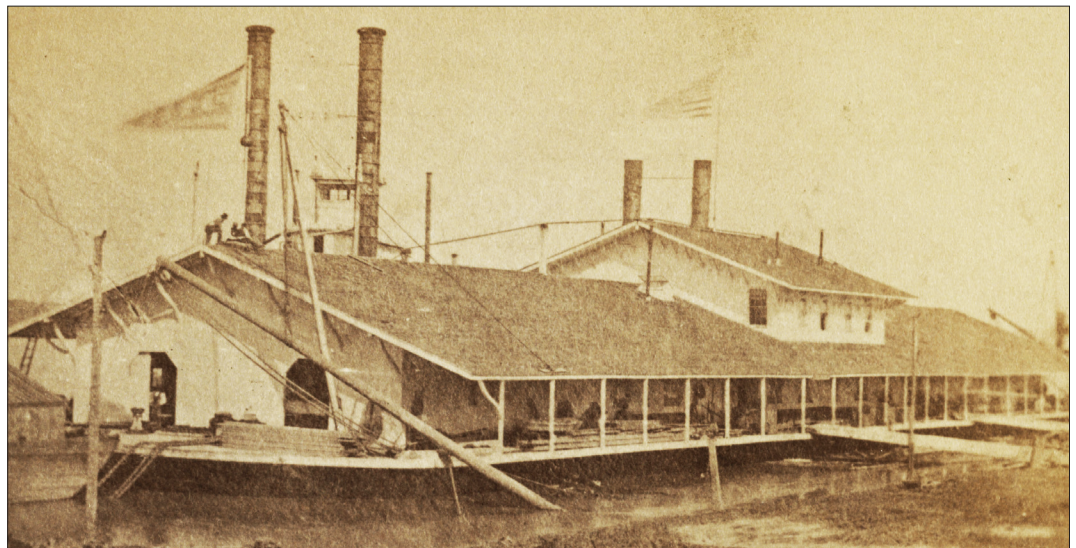
the outbreaking of the present Rebellion, has become a vast naval depot ... The new wharf-boat built for the convenience of the Navy, which is the headquarters of the fleet, is one of the finest built structures in the West. The Admiral [David D. Porter] has his headquarters on the Black Hawk steamer at Mound City It will be seen that there are eighteen vessels in Cairo, some of which are lying up for repairs; besides, there are a number of mortar-boats moored at the shore, and six or seven of the large Marine Brigade boats, expressly fitted up for carrying infantry, cavalry and artillery, making a total of twenty-five or twenty-six boats alone, nearly all of which, with the exception of the station ships, will leave as soon as they can take advantage of the rise of water in the Mississippi River.”⁶

By this time the naval station at Cairo was becoming less able to accommodate the increasing demand for supplies made by the naval forces on the Mississippi and its tributaries. The alluvial soil around the city was subject to damp and flooding, and shells and powder could only be stored successfully on ships. During March 1864, a government-appointed engineer surveyed grounds offered for an alternative navy yard and, as a result, another facility was opened on ten acres of land leased at Mound City. More suited to the needs of the Mississippi River Squadron, not only did the construction and repair of warships continue with greater ease and pace, naval ordnance and supplies could be stored more safely ashore. By May 9, 1864, the transfer of most of the stores from Cairo had been completed and an ordnance yard had been fully established at Mound City.⁷ As the new naval station became more important to the burgeoning naval force along the Mississippi, the

Marine presence there also grew and by May 1864, Captain Matthew R. Kintzing commanded a battalion of 157 officers and men.⁸

Relations between sailors and the soldiers encamped around Mound City were not always good. On June 27, 1864, a “serious affray” occurred between a squad of provost guard and about 50 discharged and furloughed tars that resulted in the mortal wounding of one sailor and the slight wounding of two others. According to a report in the *Chicago Tribune*, the “difficulty grew out of sailors quarrelling,” following which the guard “fired revolvers.” The authorities quelled further trouble later that evening, and the next day the *Tribune* was able to report, “All is quiet at Mound City—the difficulty between the soldiers and sailors having been settled.”⁹

Regarding later naval operations out of Mound City, on February 8, 1864 the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported preparations for the less successful Red River Campaign that began on March 10, “There is great activity here, at Mound City, at Carondelet and other naval depots. The workmen in the yards are employed day and night, in order to have all the boats ready at a certain appointed



Moored at Mound City, this wharf-boat served as a storeroom below decks, while above was offices for the various officers of the Mississippi River Squadron. The smokestacks of two steamers can be seen moored alongside. On June 2, 1864, this wharf-boat caught fire and was completely destroyed. According to a report in the *Louisville Daily Democrat* of June 3, 1864, “The fire was first discovered in a paint and oil room, supposed to have originated from spontaneous combustion. The fire was not discovered until spread so as to be beyond control. The progress of the flames was so rapid that nothing could be saved, many on board narrowly escaping. The smoke rendered egress by the stairway impossible, and many escaped by the roof. No lives are known to have been lost. Paymaster [Charles E.] Boggs...was seriously burned, and came near being suffocated while attempting to save his funds and papers. The entire loss may reach half a million dollars or more, consisting principally of naval stores.” Library of Congress (Control No. 2012649395, LC-DIG-ppmsca-33226).

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time.”¹⁰ When Porter returned east after the fall of Vicksburg he was replaced in command by Fleet Captain Alexander M. Pennock who was temporarily in post until November 1864 when Rear-Admiral Samuel P. Lee took his place until August 14, 1865.

Of events at Mound City during the closing days of the war, the most dramatic was the burning of the flag-ship *Blackhawk*, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Charles A. Babcock, with the loss of four men of a crew of 325 on April 22, 1865. A report in the *Pittsburgh Commercial* recorded, “After the upper works had burned, she dragged anchor, and the wreck floated down stream some three miles, and was in plain view of Cairo when her magazine blew up. The shock from the explosion was distinctly felt throughout the city. The column of smoke, fire, sparks, fragments of shell, &c., was sent high in the air, and presented a grand sight.”¹¹

Naval activity at Mound City was winding down by the beginning of June 1865, when the *National Republican* of Washington, DC, stated, “Work has been suspended at the navy yard at Mound City, and a rumor current that the naval depot at that place is soon to be removed to Pensacola.”¹² On September 7, a public auction was held to sell off the store ship *Abraham*, accommodation ship *Sovereign*, and ordnance boat *Great Western*, together with scrap iron, machinery, and tackle. Another auction towards the end of the month sold off naval clothing and provisions. During the same month, the *Cairo Evening Times* reported, “We learn that the U.S. Hospital at Mound City will be vacated on the 15th inst. Everybody at the Mound is said to be flitting or preparing to flit.”¹³

By the fall of 1865, three *Passaic*-class monitors under construction when the war ended were reported lying off Cairo. On September 14, the *Evening Times* reported, “The monitor Manyunk [*sic*], opposite our city, now presents a finished appearance. Her turret and smoke stack are painted,—scaffolding and everything not pertaining to her removed.” Built at Pittsburgh, the

Manayunk was joined by the *Oneota* and *Catawba*, built at Cincinnati, by the beginning of October, following which all three vessels were laid up at Mound City for several years. Renamed the *Ajax*, the former vessel was eventually commissioned in 1871 and served in the North Atlantic Squadron for several years. The other two were sold to Peru in 1868.¹⁴ As a final indication that the Mound City Naval Station was no more, a *Cairo Evening Times* reporter visited on October 13, 1865 and observed that “the levee where blue coats mostly *did* congregate, now is nearly deserted.”¹⁵

Sources

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3. “The River,” *St. Louis Daily Courier* (St. Louis, MO), March 9, 1861, p 4, col 1; and “River Matters,” *Louisville Daily Democrat* (Louisville, KY), April 12, 1861, p 3, col 3.
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14. “Finished,” *Cairo Evening Times* (Cairo, IL), September 14, 1865, p 4, col 1; and “The Manyunk,” *ibid*, October 8, 1865, p 1, col 4.
15. “Mound City,” *Cairo Evening Times* (Cairo, IL), October 14, 1865, p 4, col 2.



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