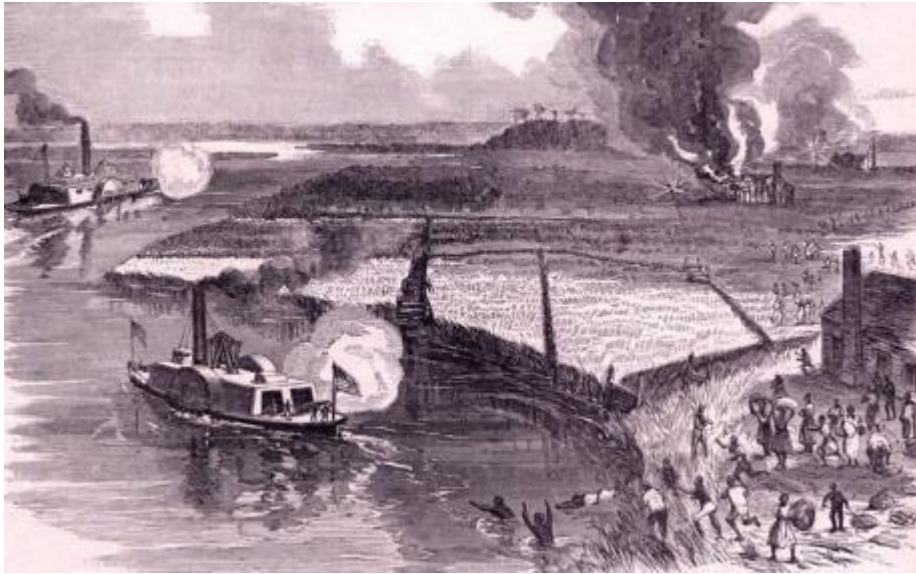


The Combahee River raid, 1863 - Earl Conrad



A short account of the Combahee River raid during the American Civil War, which was led by former slave and underground railroad activist Harriet Tubman, and freed nearly 800 slaves.

Harriet Tubman

Col. Montgomery and his gallant band of 300 black soldiers, under the guidance of a black woman, dashed into the enemy's country, struck a bold and effective blow, destroying millions of dollars worth of commissary stores, cotton and lordly dwellings, and striking terror into the heart of rebellion, brought off near 800 slaves and thousands of dollars worth of property, without losing a man or receiving a scratch. It was a glorious consummation.

After they were all fairly well disposed of in the Beaufort charge, they were addressed in strains of thrilling eloquence by their gallant deliverer, to which they responded in a song. "There is a white robe for thee," a song so appropriate and so heartfelt and cordial as to bring unbidden tears.

The Colonel was followed by a speech from the black woman, who led the raid and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted. For sound sense and real native eloquence, her address would do honor to any man, and it created a great sensation...

Since the rebellion she had devoted herself to her great work of delivering the bondman, with an energy and sagacity that cannot be exceeded. Many and many times she has penetrated the enemy's lines and discovered their situation and condition, and escaped without injury, but not without extreme hazard.¹

The Combahee River, in South Carolina, was the first one visited by the Spaniards in the year 1520. Vasque de Ayllon, having discovered it, gave it the name "River Jordan."² Although subsequently renamed the Combahee, the stream now became a River Jordan literally for more than seven hundred and fifty Negroes who, under the leadership of Harriet Tubman and the auxiliary command of Colonel James Montgomery, delivered this number of blacks into the free lines. The River Jordan has been in biblical history a reality, and in modern Negro allusion a symbol of the barrier between bondage and freedom, and it is an interesting coincidence, therefore, that the Combahee campaign should so parallel the ancient situation. It is significant as the only military engagement in American history wherein a woman black or white, "led the raid and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted". The N.Y. Tribune says that the Negro troops at Hilton Head, S.C. will soon start an

expedition, under the command of Colonel Montgomery, differing in many respects from any heretofore projected. 3

The Combahee strategy was formulated by Harriet Tubman as an outcome of her penetrations of the enemy lines and her belief that the Combahee River countryside was ripe for a successful invasion. She was asked by General Hunter "if she would go with several gunboats up the Combahee River, the object of the expedition being to take up the torpedoes placed by the rebels in the river, to destroy railroads and bridges, and to cut off supplies from the rebel troops. She said she would go if Col. Montgomery was to be appointed commander of the expedition...Accordingly, Col. Montgomery was appointed to the command, and Harriet, with several men under her, the principal of whom was J. Plowden...accompanied the expedition". 4 Actually in this raid it was Montgomery who was the auxiliary leader. The whole venture owed its success to the complete preliminary survey made by Harriet Tubman's espionage troops.

Captain John F. Lay, the Confederate investigating officer, discussing the movement afterwards, said, "The enemy seems to have been well posted as to the character and capacity of our troops and their small chance of encountering opposition, and to have been well guided by persons thoroughly acquainted with the river and country. 5 It was a commentary, however indirect, on Harriet's work and the labor of her subordinates.

About ten miles north of Port Royal Island, Harriet's station, was St. Helena Island, and between this island and the mainland of South Carolina was the water known as St. Helena Sound. The Combahee River, a narrow, jagged stream that ran about fifty miles into the interior of the State, began at the Sound: and on its banks were rice fields and marshes.

During the night of June 2, 1863, Harriet and Colonel Montgomery, with a party of about 150 Negro troops in three gunboats, started up the Combahee River. Pickets located at stations near the mouth of the stream spotted the oncoming boats and dispatched word to the Confederate commander, Major Emanuel, located deeper inland at Green Pond...Every plantation on both sides of the river was aroused; the Union soldiers, in small detachments, raced from one to another, creating a general devastation of the zone.

In the Combahee Ferry region the Blake, Lowndes, Middleton and Heyward plantations were in ruins. The Negroes fled to the gunboats and the slave masters skedaddled inland. The bridge at Combahee Ferry was burning too "but not badly. 8

As the gunboats passed up the river, the Negroes left their work and took to the woods, for at first they were frightened. Then they came out to peer, "like startled deer." But scudding away like the wind at the sound of the steam-whistle. The word was passed along that these were "Lincoln's gunboats come to set them free." From that moment on, the overseers used their whips in vain, for they failed to drive the slaves back to the quarters. They turned and ran for the gun-boats; they came down every road, across every field, dressed just as they were when they left their work and their cabins. There were women with children clinging around their necks, hanging onto their dresses, or running behind, but all rushed at full speed for "Lincoln's gun-boats." Hundred crowded the banks, with their hands extended toward their deliverers, and most of them were taken aboard the gun-boats to be carried to Beaufort.

This is about what happened all through the night and morning of June 2 when Harriet, Montgomery and the colored soldiers overran the Combahee.

Footnotes

1. The Commonwealth, Boston, July 10, 1863, volume 1, Number 45.
2. The Principia, p. 1139, column 3.
3. Official History of the War of the Rebellion, Series 1, volume xiv, p. 308.
4. Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman, p. 39.
5. Official History of the War of the Rebellion, Series 1, vol. xiv. P. 306
8. Ibid.

From <http://www.harriettubman.com/tubman2.html>