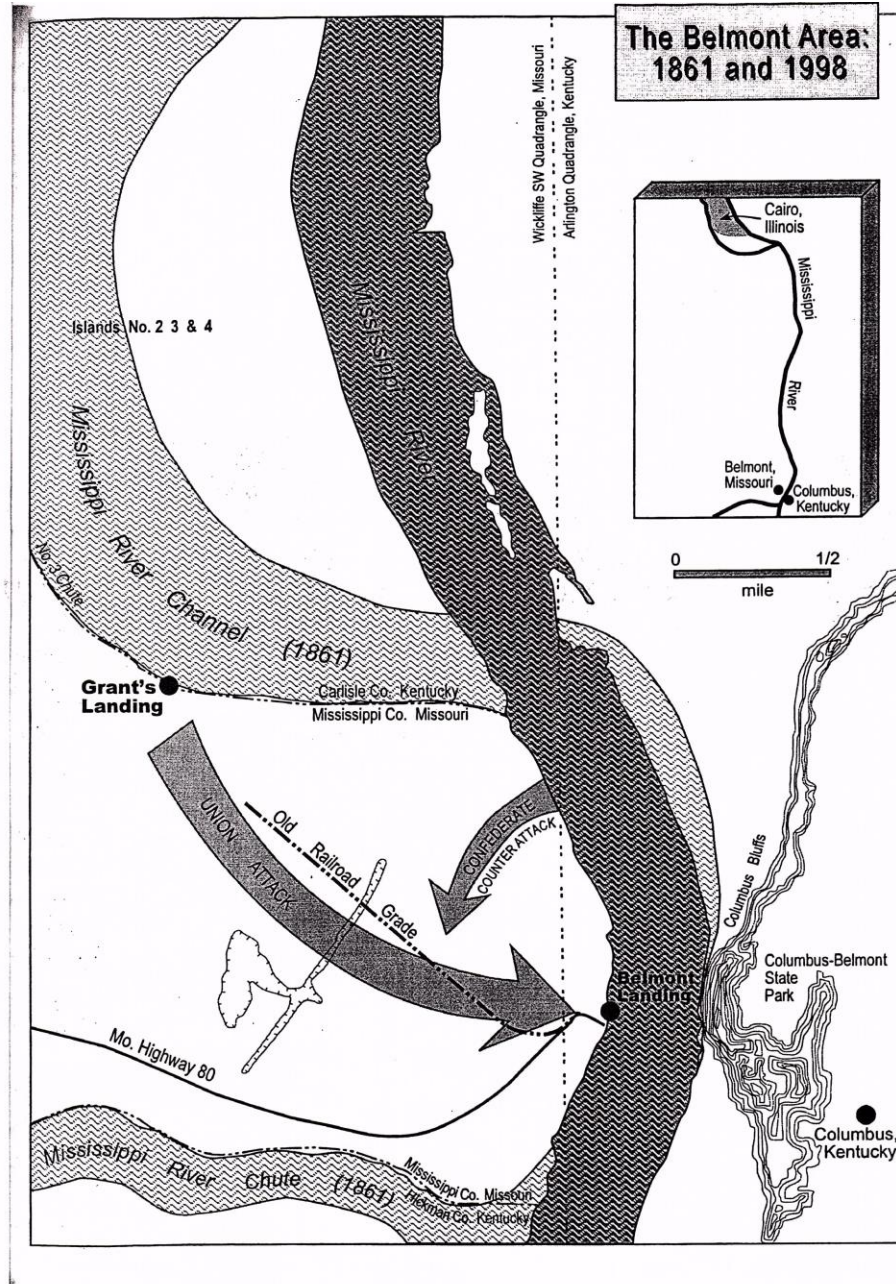


—from Glacial Deposits (Yearbook of the ISU Geography-Geology Dept), summer 1998

### BELMONT 1861: GEOGRAPHY OF A BATTLEFIELD



*"All battles are fought at the junction of two or more map sheets."*

-Murphy's Law corollary

This rule certainly applies to the battle of Belmont, the nearest Civil War battlefield to central Illinois....but at least there's a good reason for it. Since the former hamlet of Belmont was located in the southeast Missouri Bootheel, on the Mississippi River across from Columbus KY, the 1:24,000 USGS maps of the area come from those two states. In November 1861, when Ulysses Grant took 3,114 young men down from Cairo IL in paddlewheel steamers for an attack on the Confederate position there, he may or may not have had the same problem with maps.

Visiting historic battlefields is a popular pastime for several reasons: good exercise, attractive scenery, intellectual stimulation, and emotional engagement. There is a haunted atmosphere to those places where dramatic and deadly events took place, especially when the location isn't commercialized and overrun with tourists. This is certainly the case with Belmont, twenty miles south of Cairo. The Confederate fortifications on the Kentucky side of the river have been made into a very nice state park, but Missouri has done nothing with the actual battle site other than putting a single historical marker on Highway 80 near the river. I've taken several groups there, and we have always had the place to ourselves.

This would be an especially rewarding trip for anyone interested in geography or geology, because those disciplines explain why there was a battle here and why it went the way it did.

In 1861 both North and South realized that control of the Mississippi River would be a crucial part of the forthcoming struggle, and had to view the river as a military problem. Cairo, at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi, was clearly a critical point, and it soon became a major mobilization center and supply base for the Union, the springboard for any later advance south. Between Cairo and the Gulf there are several points where the twisting course of the Mississippi comes in contact with high loess bluffs on the eastern side of the river's flood plain: Columbus, Fort Pillow, the Chickasaw Bluffs at Memphis, the famous site of Vicksburg, and Baton Rouge north of New Orleans. Each would play a role in the war. Columbus is the northernmost of these, and on September 2, 1861, General Leonidas Polk's Confederate troops violated Kentucky's self-proclaimed neutrality to seize that critical spot. From its 150-foot heights, cannon could dominate the river and fire accurately down on enemy ships. During the six months from September 1861 to March 1862, Polk turned Columbus into the "Gibraltar of the West," with 140 cannon and 19,000 troops manning extensive earthworks which can still be seen today.

In contrast, the opposite shore at Belmont is flat as a pancake. The contour interval on that USGS map is only five feet, and even so there aren't many contour lines. The Confederates had an outpost there, a base for reconnaissance and to keep in touch with Rebel guerrillas in the Bootheel and with forces farther west. The river is about half a mile wide here, and steamers were used to maintain contact. Today, alas, we don't have that advantage. The ferry shown on the USGS mapsheet was discontinued two decades ago, and to cross that half

mile requires a forty-mile drive through Cairo! I've always wanted National Guard helicopters to help out with my Guard or ROTC visits, but haven't yet been able to arrange any.

In early November 1861 General Grant, commanding at Cairo, received orders to do two things: drive Confederate guerrillas out of the Bootheel area, and discourage General Polk from sending forces west to support the Rebel army in southwest Missouri. Grant sent columns of troops marching through southeast Missouri and western Kentucky, and these demonstrations met the requirements of his orders. Even at the beginning of his career as a commander, though, Grant was aggressive. He assembled a force of 3,114 men to strike a blow at the camp at Belmont. This would give some of his young recruits combat experience, and would show the Confederates at Columbus that they had a belligerent and forceful opponent.

On the morning of November 7 Grant's little army disembarked on the Missouri shore, safely out of range of the Rebel artillery batteries on the Columbus bluffs. His men marched several miles southeast, defeated the Southern forces they encountered, and captured and burned the enemy camp on the riverbank. General Polk didn't know what Grant's objectives were; he suspected that the Missouri fighting might be a feint and that the real threat might be to his fortifications on the Kentucky side. By mid-afternoon he was willing to ship several thousand men across the river to land a mile upstream from Belmont, march inland through the dense and swampy forest, and try to cut Grant off from his boats. The Union troops managed to fight their way through this attempted encirclement, reembark on their paddlewheelers, and return to Cairo late that night. Both sides claimed victory. Polk had driven the Yankees away from Belmont (even though they planned to leave anyway). Grant had turned his raw recruits into veterans, demonstrated his aggressiveness to his opponents, and met the requirements of his orders (even though Polk, it seems, had no intention of sending troops to southwest Missouri). This small battle was a learning experience for all concerned, and was a dress rehearsal for Grant's Vicksburg campaign eighteen months later.

What has changed since 1861? In some ways the geography of the battle site is identical, in others dramatically different.

On the Kentucky side, the bluffs are as impressive now as they were then. Many of Polk's fortifications remain, a bit mellowed by erosion and covered with vegetation but still showing what 19,000 young men could do with enough shovels and time. They also show that the basic principles perfected by the great French military engineer Vauban were still being followed 150 years after his death. The biggest change on the Kentucky side is the relocation of the town of Columbus after the 1927 flood, from its location down on the flood plain to a new site up on the bluffs.

On the Missouri side, the field of battle is still there, and the biggest changes are to the north and south of the former peninsula on which the battle

took place. Nathaniel Hughes' otherwise excellent book on Belmont contains a map showing the changed course of the Mississippi flowing over a third of that peninsula, but this is one of the book's few errors. The river cut itself a new and straighter channel, apparently as a result of the 1927 flood, and former islands on the east side of the old channel now form consolidated blocks of land on the west side of the new one. They still belong to Kentucky, and form that state's only toeholds west of the Mississippi. The one to the north of the Belmont peninsula is rather oddly called "Islands Nos. 2, 3 and 4," and is separated from Missouri by an intermittent watery channel or cutoff labeled "No. 3 Chute" on the map. South of the peninsula is Kentucky's "Wolf Island No. 5," again not a real island at all (these islands were originally numbered in sequence south from Cairo). Apparently no Kentuckians live on those pseudo-islands, and the one north of Belmont is covered with dense vegetation. According to the Columbus park officials, the only cash crop there is marijuana, and when government agents pay occasional visits to burn offending patches, strange smells can be detected across the river....

Grant's 1861 landing site is now back on No. 3 Chute, about two miles from today's river. This is a heavily wooded area, and I haven't yet been able to talk any groups of ROTC cadets or National Guard officers into trying out their patrolling skills and visiting the site. They could get to within half a mile of it quite easily, because there is an abandoned railroad line that runs straight from Highway 80 near the river back to the northwest, right through the heart of the battlefield. The railroad was built in 1869 and abandoned in the early twentieth century, but the graveled path along its roadbed is tailor-made for visitors. The state of Missouri could easily set up markers or provide brochures for a historical trail, but has done nothing of the sort. It would have to acquire the rights from the current owner, Mount Pleasant Farms, whose property manager is very helpful toward those groups that find their way to the site.

The Belmont peninsula (if we can still call it that) has changed in another way. In 1861 most of the area was covered with dense swampy forest, broken by occasional cornfields and farm lots. Today all that forest is gone, and open soybean fields predominate. There are still some wooded second-growth patches to provide reminders of the old conditions, and anyone who wants to push through them can get a taste of what it was like for those three thousand young men from Illinois and Iowa and for their opponents from Tennessee and Louisiana.

A comparison between the modern USGS maps and the 1862 map mentioned in the bibliography shows that the basic shape and layout of the peninsula have not changed. There are two distinctive features that confirm this. One is the slight (very slight!) elevation at the northeast corner of the peninsula, still there today. The other is a long straight depression or slough, today filled with dense vegetation, which runs southwest to northeast across the battlefield. This is a fissure formed by the great New Madrid Earthquake of 1811, whose

epicenter was not far from here. In 1861 Grant's men, marching down from their landing point, deployed into line of battle when they reached this depression, then crossed it to engage the enemy beyond. One of his five regiments had to detour around a narrow pond filling the depression in its front, rejoining the rest of the army later.

There should be thousands of bullets and shell fragments in the battle area, but they may be lost forever. An acquaintance who visited the site with a metal detector says that he found nothing, and the reason must be that the alluvial deposition from repeated flooding has buried those artifacts too deeply. Old Man River has altered the geography to the north and south of the battle site, and has smoothed over the scars of battle on the site itself as well.

With the current flood (excuse the pun) of Civil War books and battle reenactments, it's surprising that Belmont is still undeveloped and unspoiled. It remains accessible to anyone who wants to visit a site that is historically, geographically and geologically interesting.

Of course if the New Madrid Fault produces another "big one," all that will change. Maybe anyone interested in the battle of Belmont should visit it now, before it's too late.

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