

Celebrating 150 Years: Vicksburg District, US Army Corps of Engineers



U.S. ARMY



**US Army Corps
of Engineers®**

1798

Americans took possession of a Spanish military outpost called Fort Nogales. The Americans changed the name to Walnut Hills. This site would eventually be incorporated as the village of Vicksburg.



The land where the Fort Nogales was built



Mural depiction of the former Fort Nogales



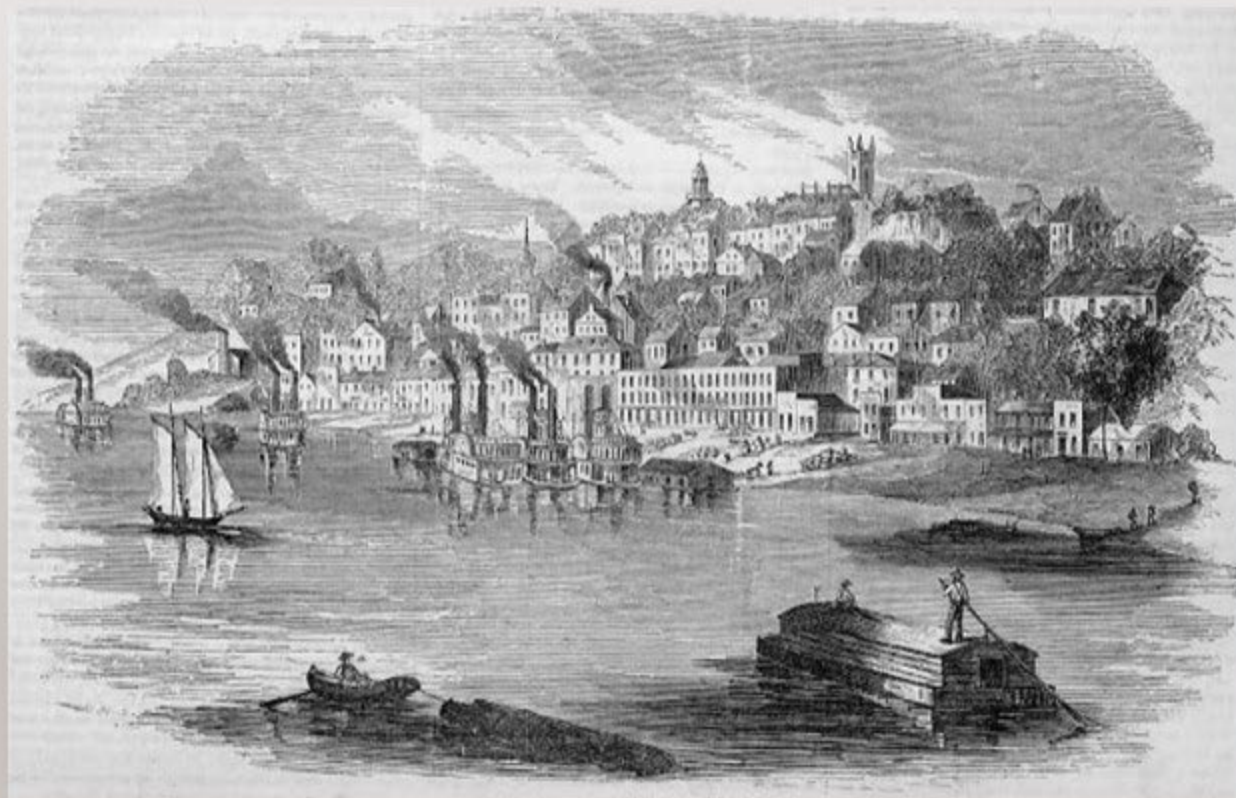
1803-1805

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase made lands west of the Mississippi part of the U.S. These lands included the portions of Arkansas and Louisiana that would become part of the Vicksburg District. The Mississippi Territory, which included what would become the states of Mississippi and Alabama, remained a territory until 1817.



1825

Village of Vicksburg was incorporated.



View of Vicksburg in 1825

1861-1865

During the Civil War, Vicksburg was vitally needed as a transportation route for Union troops. The Confederate Army controlled the city and guns perched atop the city's high bluffs prevented Union boats from using the Mississippi River below Vicksburg for nearly two years. The Army Engineers developed a plan to circumvent the Confederate guns by changing the river's course or through the construction of a canal. Although the proposed diversion and canal familiarized Army Engineers with the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers, in general the war wreaked havoc on the area that would soon become the Vicksburg District, as more than a century and a half of flood protection works were destroyed.



1873

The Office of Western River Improvements dispatched Capt. William Henry Harrison Benyaard from its St. Louis headquarters to the lower Mississippi valley to conduct surveys and remove wrecks and other navigational hazards in the Yazoo River in Mississippi and the Ouachita River in Louisiana. Recognizing the difficulty of administering these improvements from St. Louis, Benyaard established an Army Engineer office in Monroe, MS. Shortly after establishing the office in Monroe, Benyaard requested permission to move his headquarters to Vicksburg. On August 18, 1873, the office was officially moved to Vicksburg. During his ten-year tenure at Vicksburg, Benyaard initiated 22 projects for the improvement of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. These improvements included the removal of snags, wreckages and rafts on the Mississippi, Ouachita, Red and Yazoo rivers; bank stabilization work; and harbor protection.



William Henry Harrison Benyaard

1879

On June 28, 1879, an Act of Congress created MRC to direct all work on the Mississippi River.

Appendix C 1879 Mississippi River Commission Act

Forty-Sixth Congress, Sess. I, Ch. 43, 1879

(Chap. 43.—An act to provide for the appointment of a "Mississippi River Commission" for the improvement of said river from the head of the Passes near its mouth to its headwaters.

Enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled: That a commission is hereby created, to be called "The Mississippi River Commission" to consist of seven members.

Sec. 2. The President of the United States shall, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, appoint seven commissioners, three of whom shall be selected from the Engineer Corps of the Army, one from the Coast and Geodetic Survey, and from here and thence, one from each of the other four branches, and any vacancy which may occur in the commission shall, in no manner to be fixed by the President of the United States, and he shall designate one of the commissioners appointed from the Engineer Corps of the Army to be president of the commission. The commissioners, appointed from the Engineer Corps of the Army and the Coast and Geodetic Survey, shall receive no other pay or compensation than is now allowed them by law, and the other three commissioners shall receive no pay and compensation for their services until the sum of five thousand dollars per annum, and the commissioners appointed under this act shall continue in office subject to removal by the President of the United States.

Sec. 3. It shall be the duty of said commission to direct and complete, such surveys of said river, between the head of the Passes near its mouth to its headwaters as may now be in progress, and to make such additional surveys, examinations, and investigations, topographical, hydrographical, and hydrological, of said river and its tributaries, as may be deemed necessary by said commission to carry out the objects of this act. And to enable said commission to complete, such surveys, examinations, and investigations, the Secretary of War shall, when requested by said commission, detail from the Engineer Corps of the Army such officers and men as may be necessary, and shall place in the charge and for the use of said commission such amount or amounts and such machinery and instruments as may be under his control and under his disposal, and the Secretary of the Treasury shall, when requested by said commission in the proper order from the President and Congress, furnish such officers and men, or, if necessary, and when placed in the charge and for the use of said commission such amount or amounts and such machinery and instruments as may be under his control and may be deemed necessary. And the said commission may, with the approval of the Secretary of War, employ such additional lands and materials, and provide, by purchase or otherwise, such vessels or boats and such instruments and means as may be deemed necessary.

Sec. 4. It shall be the duty of said commission to take into consideration and make such plan or plans and estimates as will correct, permanently locate, and improve the banks and protect the banks of the Mississippi River, improve and give safety and access to the navigable portion, prevent destructive floods, promote and facilitate commerce, trade, and the public service, and when so prepared and authorized to submit to the Secretary of War and to the President of the United States, and of such plans, with estimates of their cost, and the proposed, estimated, to be by the President of the United States, that the commission shall report to him upon the practicability, feasibility, and probable cost of the various plans known as the jolly system, the levee system, and the canal system, as well as upon such others as may deem necessary.

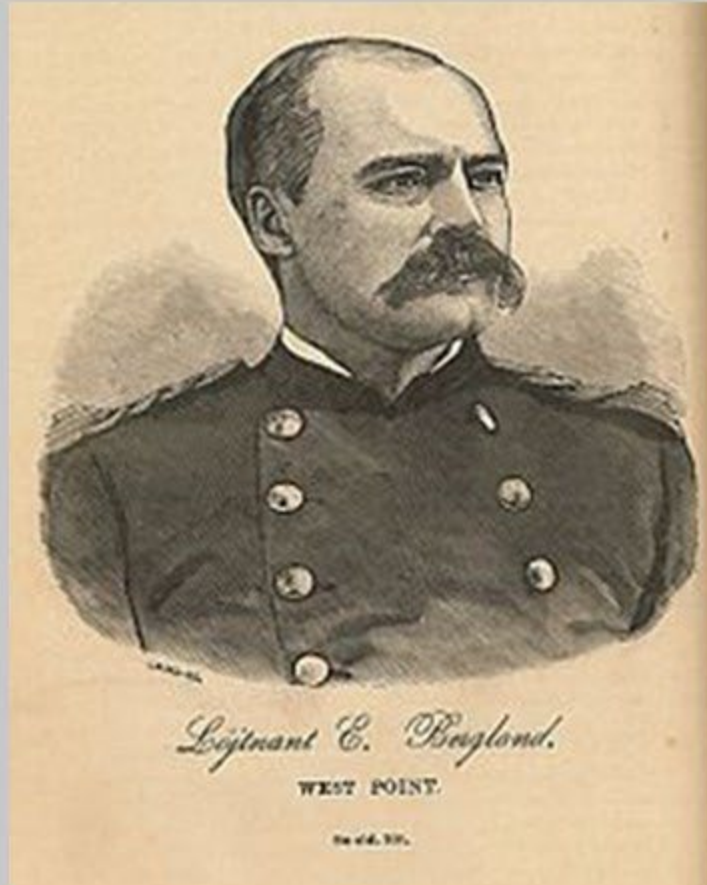
Sec. 5. The said commission may, prior to the completion of all the surveys and examinations contemplated by this act, prepare, and submit to the Secretary of War, specifications, and estimates of costs for such immediate works as, in the judgment of said commission, may constitute a part of the general system of works herein contemplated to be by him transmitted to Congress.

Sec. 6. The Secretary of War may detail from the Engineer Corps of the Army of the United States an officer to act as secretary of said commission.

Sec. 7. The Secretary of War is hereby authorized to expend the sum of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, or so much thereof as may be necessary, for the payment of the salaries herein provided for, and of the necessary expenses incurred in the completion of such surveys as may be in progress, and of such additional surveys, examinations, and investigations, as may be deemed necessary, including the plans and estimates, and the other, specifications, and estimates contemplated by this act, as herein provided for, and said sum is hereby appropriated for said purposes out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated.

Approved, June 28, 1879.

On August 1, 1884, Capt. Eric Bergland established the first permanent Engineer office in Vicksburg. However, this office had no responsibility for work on the Mississippi River.



1927

The Great 1927 Flood, which proved to be the greatest flood disaster in the nation's history, struck the lower Mississippi River valley. At the time of the flood, the Vicksburg District included 420 miles of these levees which were the only things protecting the lands behind them from inundation. To protect against levee failure, District Engineer Maj. John C. H. Lee brought in Navy seaplanes to patrol the levees for signs of weakness. Despite all efforts, levees along the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers broke, flooding large areas of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Losses from the flood in the Vicksburg District were estimated at about \$104 million.



The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927



Vicksburg Riverfront Mural of 1927 Flood

1959

Vicksburg floodwall complete.





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1969

The Steele Bayou drainage structure, which has a capacity to discharge 19,000 cfs from the ponding area to the Yazoo River, was completed.



1973

The 1973 strikes the Vicksburg District. Flood fighting labor and emergency funds expended by the district during the flood were greater than the 1927, 1937 and 1945 floods combined. The flood caused an estimated \$335 million in damages but losses prevented in the district were estimated to be \$4.4 billion.

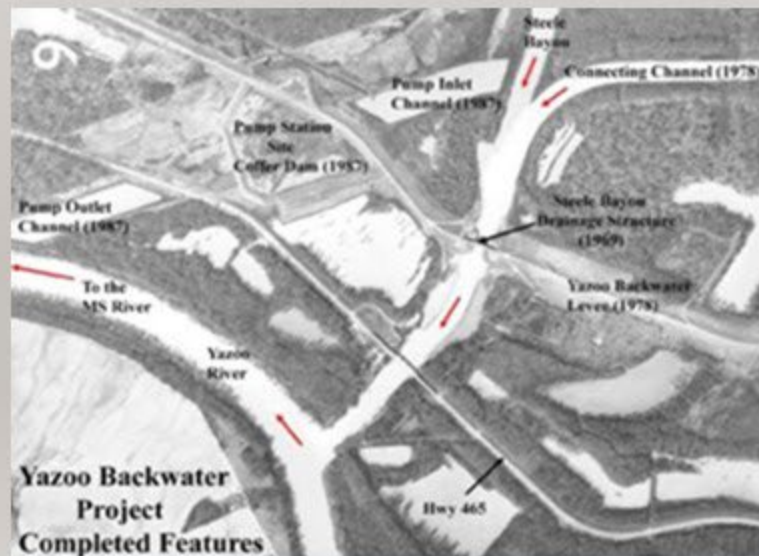


1978

The Yazoo Backwater Levees completed. The Yazoo Backwater Levee begins at the end of the Mainline Mississippi River Levee and proceeds upstream along the Yazoo River on the west bank to the West Guide Levee of the Will Whittington Auxiliary Channel near Spanish Fort, MS. During highwater, when overflow water from the Mississippi River backs-up the Yazoo River, the Yazoo Backwater Levee, along with the closed drainage structures, prevents the backwater from entering the South Delta.

Yazoo Backwater Connecting Channel that connected the ponding areas was completed.

All features of the Yazoo Backwater project completed except for the pumping stations.





1984

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The Mississippi Delta Headwaters Project (MDHP) was authorized in 1984 to provide a means for the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, to work cooperatively and demonstrate various methods to reduce flooding and major sediment and erosion problems in areas of the Yazoo Basin in northwest Mississippi.



1988-1989

A major drought on the lower Mississippi River required the Coast Guard to place restrictions on barges by limiting drafts to less than nine feet.



1997

The Lower Mississippi Valley Division was abolished with the establishment of the Mississippi Valley Division. The St. Paul, Rock Island, St. Louis, Memphis, Vicksburg, and New Orleans districts comprise the new division with the division headquarters at Vicksburg.



The 2011 flood sets records or near-records for stages and discharges throughout the lower Mississippi River. The Vicksburg District saw record stages at the Natchez and Vicksburg gages and severe flooding in backwater areas.



2019

In the Mississippi River Valley, heavy spring rains devastated 250,000 acres of farmland in 2019, causing a historic disaster on par with the infamous 1927 floods that left the region under water for months.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Vicksburg District opened the gates of the Steele Bayou Control Structure. The Steele Bayou Control Structure, which was built in 1969, combined with the Mississippi River and Yazoo Backwater levees, prevents the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers from backing up and further flooding the Delta.



The Mississippi River had one of the lowest water levels in October 2022, a record of -10.81 feet, more than the -10.7 feet experienced in 1988. The dipping water levels had a massive economic impact on transport.

The Vicksburg District responded to historically low water conditions on the Lower Mississippi River by dredging the channel, conducting surveys, and monitoring river stages.

