

**It had the potential as the greatest victory in the Civil War for the Union as a combined effort of the Navy, Marines and Army. Indeed, what had begun as a spectacular maneuver ended in fiasco as**

**THE** **human greed and corruption, as it so often does, spelled ultimate defeat.** BY DANA WEGNER

# RED RIVER SQUADRON

**B**y the summer of 1864 and during the third year of Civil War in the United States, Texas still stood relatively undefiled by Union forces. Vicksburg, bastion of the South, had fallen the year before and Emperor Napoleon III of France was entering Mexico City with French troops.

While continuing the war with the South, the Federal Government had no intentions of letting France or Mexico regain either diplomatic relations or territory in Texas again. The immediate problem was to gain some foothold in Texas as a Rebel state and to convince Mexico of the Union's intentions to retain Texas as part of the Union after hostilities.

Partially to this end, Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks, an overly impressive dresser and suspected former star of stage, was assigned to take an Army expedition up the Red River which flowed along the Texas northern border, across Louisiana, joining the Mississippi River above Baton Rouge. He was to follow the Red through Louisiana and establish a base at Shreveport from which to launch a fast offensive into Texas.

The route was Banks' choice but the movement was dictated by the government under pressure from the Northern cotton mills who were feeling the pinch of war. Admiral Porter was to accompany the troops



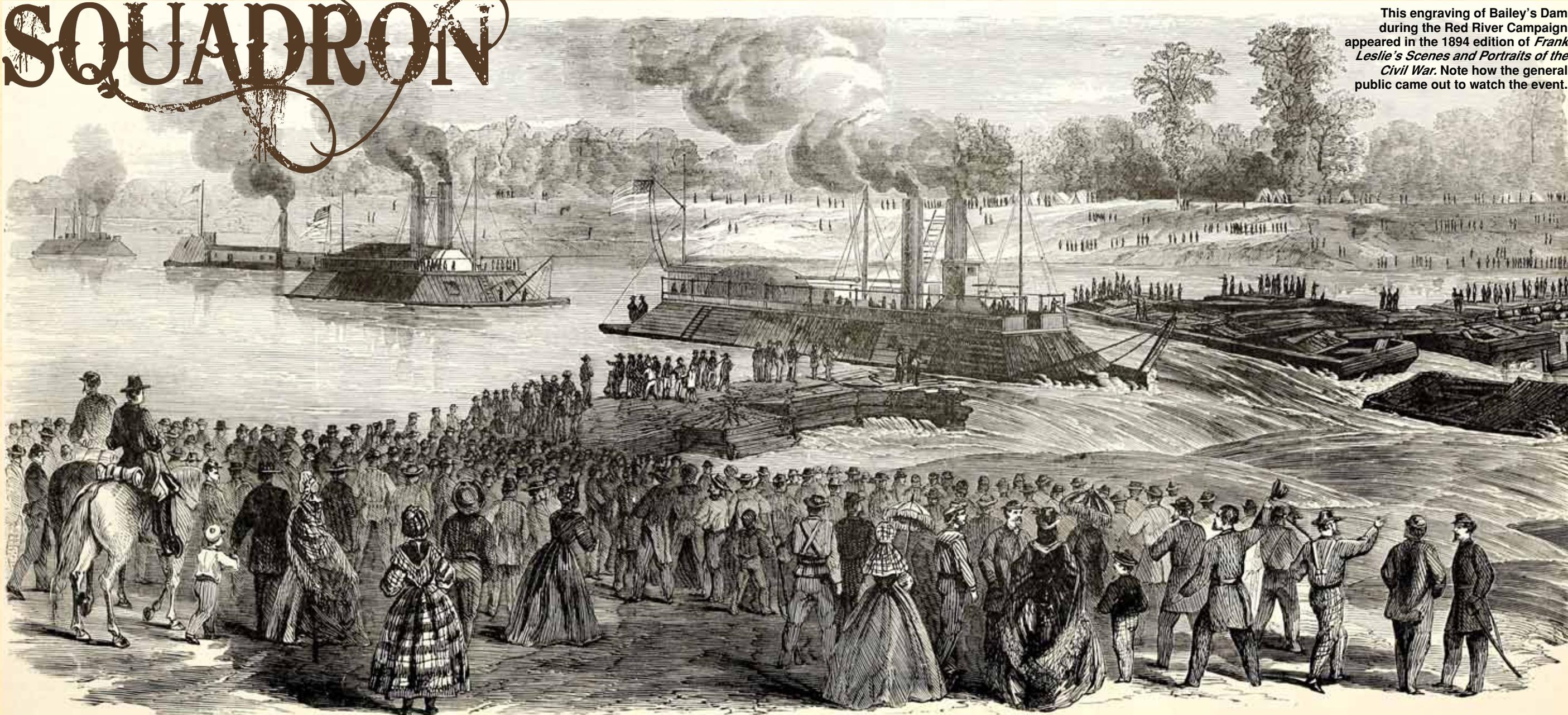
Vintage lithograph depicting the occupation of Alexandria, Louisiana.

with gunboats and transports and assist wherever possible by interdicting the river and returning with the valuable captured cotton.

Banks, from New Orleans, asked Porter to meet him with his fleet in

Alexandria, Louisiana, on 17 March 1864.

On 10 March, Adm. David Dixon Porter assembled his fleet at the mouth of the Red located on the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and Natchez. For the expedition he chose the pick of the fleet, leaving only a nominal force to retain control over the Mississippi. Present were the leaking *Benton*, the *Essex*, *Lafayette*, *Choctaw*, *Chillicothe*, *Louisville*, *Carondelet*, *Eastport*, *Pittsburg*, *Mound City*, *Lexington*, and the tinclads *Ouachita*, *Fort Hindman*, *Cricket*, *Juliet*, *Gazelle*, and Porter's Flagship, the *Black Hawk*. Besides this array, were the



This engraving of Bailey's Dam during the Red River Campaign appeared in the 1894 edition of *Frank Leslie's Scenes and Portraits of the Civil War*. Note how the general public came out to watch the event.