

Truth Behind U.S. Grant's Yazoo River Bender

(From History Net Staff)

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In March 1862, Major General Henry Wager 'Old Brains' Halleck was a frustrated man. One of his brigadier generals, Ulysses S. Grant, was getting all the credit in the papers for the taking of Forts Henry and Donelson that February, credit that Halleck believed belonged to the department commander — himself.

Halleck wanted to remove Grant from his command of the expedition, but he wanted the order to come from above. Halleck had been peppering the general-in-chief of the Union armies, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, with complaints, but it was on March 4, 1862, that he sent the clincher: 'A rumor has just reached me that since the taking of Fort Donelson General Grant has resumed his former bad habits. If so, it will account for his neglect of my often-repeated orders.'

Halleck was temporarily successful in his quest, for after the Battle of Shiloh Grant was removed from command of the drive on Corinth, Miss., but Grant proved resilient and regained field command later in 1862. Nonetheless, the notion of the general's supposed love for the bottle, the 'former bad habits' to which Halleck referred, was baggage he had to carry throughout most of his Civil War career.

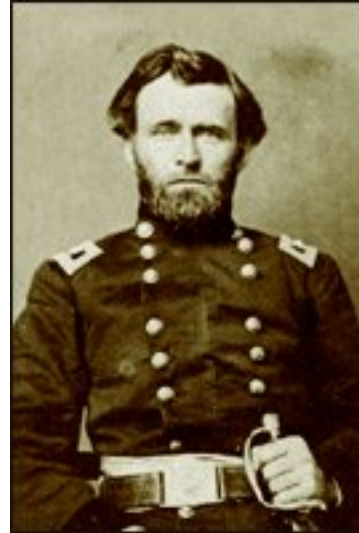
That reputation for overimbibing began years before the Civil War, when brevet Captain U.S. Grant was stationed on the West Coast, first at Fort Vancouver, Ore., and later at Fort Humboldt in California. Life at remote Fort Humboldt was tedious, and Grant sorely missed his wife, Julia, and their children.

Lonely Captain Grant began to drink, and reportedly to excess. On April 11, 1854, the day he was promoted to the permanent rank of captain in the Regular Army, Grant resigned his commission, allegedly hounded to do so by his commander, Colonel Robert C. Buchanan, and headed back to his family in Missouri.

The legend of Grant the drunkard lived on in the Army, which numbered less than 5,000 men at the start of the Civil War. In such a small and close-knit military family, gossip spread quickly and widely. The stories of Grant's irresponsible West Coast binges were repeated over and over, and no doubt embellished as they were told and retold.

By all accounts Grant was a lousy drinker with what we would call today a 'low boiling point.' One drink — even so much as a beer — was sufficient to slur his speech noticeably. Two or three drinks were entirely too many, and three would thoroughly incapacitate him. Consider, also, that Grant was short in stature — 5 feet 7 7/8 inches — and his weight fluctuated between 135 and 145 pounds. That is not a lot of body in which to distribute a glass of whiskey.

That low boiling point did not make Grant a drunkard nor an alcoholic with a physical dependence on alcohol. Grant was likely just an inept drinker when compared to other Army men such as the two-fisted imbiber Joe Hooker.



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Major General Ulysses S. Grant. Taken in early 1864, this photograph shows Grant formally kitted out with sash and dress sword, uncommon finery for the unfussy general.

It was fortunate, then, that Grant was off the bottle when, not long after the start of the Civil War, he was appointed to serve as commander of the 21st Illinois Infantry Regiment. Demonstrating a genuine sense of responsibility that was refreshing in an Army commanded mostly by amateur volunteer officers, Grant rose rapidly in rank. Under his own initiative and with the help of his aide John Rawlins, who, like the general, was a Galena, Ill., resident, Grant usually shunned drink. While he did occasionally imbibe, it was often out of sight of Rawlins and when Julia was not traveling with the army.

Grant's enemies in the U.S. Army and in the press were quick to ascribe any setbacks during his Civil War career to drink, and in victory called him a lucky drunk. President Abraham Lincoln turned a deaf ear to such stories as long as Grant was winning.

That seems to have changed, however, during the winter of 1863. Grant was keeping his army busy trying one scheme after another to get his forces around or through the delta country between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers in order to get at Confederate General John C. Pemberton's army and take the southern citadel at Vicksburg. Victory at Vicksburg was a top priority for the government. It would free up trade down the river to the sea for the Midwestern states and cut the Confederacy in two.

Concerned with the situation and rumors that Grant was drinking, Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton decided in March to send War Department troubleshooter and former journalist Charles A. Dana to travel with Grant's army. Dana would be Stanton's and Lincoln's eyes and ears. If Dana recommended against keeping Grant in command, it would likely mean the general's relief and replacement.

When Dana reached the main army camp at Milliken's Bend, Grant and his staff chose the wise course of bringing him into Grant's military family. He was allowed full access to everything that was happening in the Army of the Tennessee, and he soon became Grant's number one fan as he observed the general's relentless determination, activity, aggression and quick intelligence. Dana sent a stream of glowing dispatches about Grant back to the War Department.

Another one of the general's fans was the newspaperman Sylvanus Cadwallader, who had met with Grant in 1862 to secure the release of a *Chicago Times* reporter detained for sending the paper a damaging story about the Army of the Tennessee. The offending journalist was released, and Cadwallader stayed on. Cadwallader reported the army's news in a professional manner, including stories frankly — but accurately — describing unsuccessful efforts by Grant's men. Grant offered no complaints and allowed Cadwallader a great deal of freedom.

Years later in his memoirs of the Civil War, however, Cadwallader harshly described the general's role in an incident during the siege of Vicksburg. Cadwallader claimed Grant went on a disgraceful drunken binge while steaming up the Yazoo River in June 1863. Cadwallader's *Three Years With Grant*, published posthumously 92 years after the reputed incident, ignited a brisk controversy as to what did or did not happen when Grant steamed from the Union base at Haynes' Bluff to Satartia, Miss.



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Major General Henry Wager Halleck — ‘Old Brains’ — was frustrated when Grant was getting all the credit in the papers for the taking of Forts Henry and Donelson. Halleck believed that credit belonged to the department commander — himself.

According to Cadwallader’s account, on June 6, 1863, he decided to take a steamship ride north on the Yazoo to the town of Satartia, about 100 river miles north of Chickasaw Bayou, to see if there was anything to the rumor that Confederate General Joe Johnston was headed in that direction with an army to raise the siege.

Cadwallader hitched a ride on the steamer *Diligence* and found that there was nothing to the story. He was headed back downriver to Chickasaw Bayou and Haynes’ Bluff on *Diligence* when a steamboat carrying General Grant upriver met them en route. During the impromptu rendezvous, Cadwallader claimed that Grant and his cavalry escort, under former Chicago tobacconist Captain E.D. Osband, were transferred onto *Diligence*.

Grant had been drinking, Cadwallader stated, and was obviously drunk when he boarded *Diligence*. The general went to the barroom of the vessel and continued to drink, while Cadwallader threatened Captain Harry McDougall of *Diligence* with the wrath of Lt. Col. John A. Rawlins, Grant’s longtime friend and current assistant adjutant general, who considered it a positive duty to make miserable the lives of persons offering drinks to his chief. That well-known fact registered on the skipper, as did Cadwallader’s promise to brief Rawlins on the situation and have McDougall ejected from the region in shackles. Somehow Grant was lured out of the steamer’s bar; then

the door was locked and the key was ‘lost.’

That was only the beginning of Cadwallader’s ordeal with the general. Cadwallader took Grant to a stateroom and ‘locked myself in the room with him...and commenced throwing bottles of whiskey which stood on the table, through the windows, over the guards and into the river.’

Grant ordered Cadwallader out of the room, but the journalist stood his ground, protesting that at that moment Grant had no better friend in the Army of the Tennessee. At length, Cadwallader prevailed: ‘As it was a very hot day and the state-room almost suffocating, I insisted on taking off his coat, vest and boots, and lying down in one of the berths. After much resistance, I succeeded, and soon fanned him to sleep.’ *Diligence* reached Satartia as night descended on June 6. Grant awakened — not entirely recovered from his intoxication, Cadwallader inferred — intent on going ashore with Captain Osband’s squad of cavalry. ‘Poor Osband was now in a dilemma,’ Cadwallader wrote. ‘To obey orders and land just at night in such a miserable little hamlet, filled with desperadoes and rebel sympathizers, with but a handful of troopers to protect the general seemed suicidal. To disobey would lead to — he knew not what.’ Cadwallader forestalled Osband from debarking, promising that he would assume all responsibility for the consequences. The reporter returned to Grant and persuaded him not to debark. *Diligence* turned around and headed back for Haynes’ Bluff.

During the morning of June 7, *Diligence* was tied up at Haynes’ Bluff, and Grant appeared on deck sober and in command of himself. It was not to last. Cadwallader says an hour later the general was drunk again, having found a supply of whiskey on shore. Grant reboarded *Diligence* and ordered it downriver to the base at Chickasaw Bayou. Cadwallader believed this would spell disaster, because Grant’s arrival would take place in broad daylight and Army and Navy personnel would see the general drunk, and therefore he would be disgraced.

‘Captain McDougall was also alarmed, as to the consequences to himself,’ Cadwallader continued. ‘He was now very willing to take orders from me: First, not to start immediately, making pretext of slow fires, green wood, etc. Next, to not start until I assented....An hour or two was thus consumed. When Grant’s impatience at last threatened to burst all restraints...McDougall was directed to start, but to look out for a

safe sandbar or beach to stick on for a while.' *Diligence* finally arrived at Chickasaw Bayou at sunset and tied up alongside the headquarters steamboat of a Mr. 'Wash' Graham, a man Cadwallader claimed was a well-known Army sutler who made a practice of keeping an open bar for high-ranking officers. The *Chicago Times* reporter implored Graham not to serve any alcoholic beverages to the general. Graham made such a promise, but promptly broke it. After the horses had been offloaded from *Diligence*, Cadwallader went in search of the general and found him among a group of officers aboard Graham's steamer, 'in the act of swallowing a glass of whiskey.' Trying Grant's patience to the maximum, Cadwallader extracted him from the ship to where the mounted escort waited. That was a mistake.

Grant was using a borrowed horse on the expedition, a spirited beast named Kangaroo, for his tendency to rear and plunge whenever he was mounted. Grant saddled up and kicked his spurs into Kangaroo's flanks. Horse and rider were off like lightning, with the cavalry escort and Cadwallader hopelessly trailing. Cadwallader remembered Grant recklessly cutting through the camps, scattering campfires, riding over soldiers, crossing guarded bridges and risking fire from the pickets. After three-fourths of a mile the race ended with Grant slowing Kangaroo to a walk and Cadwallader catching up and seizing the reins from the general. Cadwallader led horse and rider off the road and persuaded Grant to take a nap, using his saddle as a pillow.

The cavalry escort had fanned out over the bayou country to find the general, and one of the riders came upon Grant and Cadwallader. The reporter told the trooper to report to Colonel Rawlins — and Rawlins only — and to get an ambulance to bring the general back to his tent. That was successfully done, and Grant was under his own canvas when Rawlins turned on Cadwallader, exclaiming: 'I want you to tell me the exact facts — and all of them — without any concealment. I have a right to know them and I will know them!'

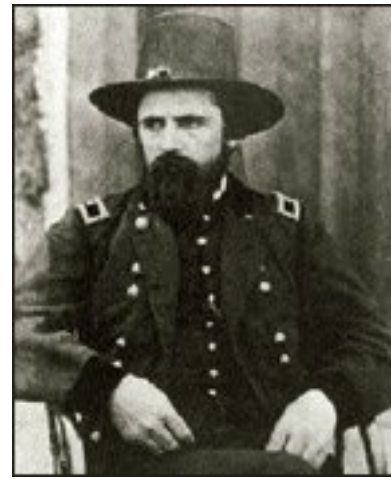
Cadwallader briefed Rawlins, and there the matter ended. Despite Grant's unsettling drunken binge, Cadwallader continued as a friend of the general's and, as he described it, a valued unofficial member of Grant's staff through the remainder of the war.

Curiously, Cadwallader omits from his story another important individual who accompanied Grant on the trip up the Yazoo to Satartia: Charles A. Dana, the envoy of the secretary of war.

In 1896-97, Ida M. Tarbell, a staff writer for *McClure's Magazine*, interviewed Dana extensively for the purpose of ghostwriting a memoir of the Civil War to be published in serial form under Dana's name. The Tarbell pieces included Dana's recollections of Grant's journey up the Yazoo. Published a half-century earlier than Cadwallader's memoirs, Dana's *Recollections of the Civil War* (1897) dealt with the same incident, but with significant differences in the details.

In his *Recollections*, Dana said he accompanied Grant to Haynes' Bluff, where they boarded a small steamer reserved for the general's use. They also brought along a guard of cavalry troopers. Grant was ill, Dana said, and soon retired to his stateroom. About two miles downstream from Satartia a couple of steamers met Grant's boat, and the officers on board told Dana that the town had no Union troops and that it might be in possession of the enemy.

'I told them that Grant was sick and asleep, and that I did not want to waken him. They [the officers] insisted it was unsafe to go on, and that I would better call the general. Finally I did so, but he was too sick to decide.' Grant begged off and let Dana make the call. The boat was soon headed back to Haynes' Bluff.



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Lieutenant Colonel John A. Rawlins — Grant's longtime friend and assistant adjutant general — considered it a positive duty to make miserable the lives of persons offering drinks to his chief.

‘The next morning Grant came out to breakfast as fresh as a rose, clean shirt and all, quite himself. ‘Well, Mr. Dana,’ he said, ‘I suppose we are at Satartia now.’

”No, general,’ I said, ‘We are at Haynes’s Bluff.’ And I told him what had happened.’

Dana took his leave of the general not long after to make a reconnaissance in the direction of Satartia. There are a number of discrepancies between Dana’s very brief account of the Yazoo River incident and the more colorful Cadwallader version. Dana made no mention in his memoirs of Wash Graham, the general’s further drinking spree, a wild ride through the Union camps or Grant’s ambulatory trip back to headquarters.

Some historians say Cadwallader’s version is backed up by a letter by Rawlins to Grant, quoted in *The Life of John A. Rawlins*, by James H. Wilson (a staff officer with Grant during the Vicksburg campaign): ‘The great solicitude I feel for the safety of this army leads me to mention what I had hoped never again to do — the subject of your drinking...you have the full control of your appetite and can let drinking alone. Had you not pledged me the sincerity of your honor early last March that you would drink no more during the war, and kept that pledge during your recent campaign, you would not today have stood first in the world’s history as a successful military leader. Your only salvation depends upon your strict adherence to that pledge. You cannot succeed in any other way. If my suspicions are unfounded, let my friendship for you and my zeal for my country be my excuse for this letter.’

The letter cannot be used to prove that the binge happened, however, since it is dated at 1 a.m. on June 6, 1863, *prior* to Grant’s leaving for Satartia. Rawlins’ famous letter refers to what Rawlins admitted may have been an ‘unfounded suspicion’ that Grant had taken a glass of wine at Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman’s headquarters some time before June 6. Rawlins reminded Grant that the general had promised not to drink during the campaign and apologized if the rumored wine tipple was fiction.

After the war Rawlins endorsed the contents of the letter as being his authentic correspondence. Rawlins added, ‘Its admonitions were heeded and all went well — John A. Rawlins.’ Would Rawlins have so noted after the end of the war if, just a few hours after the letter were written, Grant had gone on a drunken bender? Surely, even if he were not an eyewitness to the event, the word in camp would have gotten around to Rawlins within days, if not mere hours. On the other hand, Rawlins was loyal to his chief and had no motive to disparage his character, even if Grant had disregarded the June 6 letter.

Another discrepancy is the reported fact of Dana’s accompaniment of Grant on this trip. The War Department troubleshooter is mentioned elsewhere in Cadwallader’s memoirs, but not in connection with the Yazoo River story of 1863. Why would Cadwallader omit the presence of such a celebrity in Grant’s party? And why would Dana neglect to mention the presence of Cadwallader? In fact, correspondence dated June 18, 1890, sent by Dana to retired Maj. Gen. James H. Wilson, denies that Cadwallader accompanied Grant on the Satartia trip.

Dana’s account has Grant remaining in his stateroom and making no transfers from one boat to another. Why such a transfer would even be necessary defies explanation, since Grant and his cavalry escort were aboard the small steamer usually reserved for his own use and had no need of other transportation.

If Grant left his own steamer to board *Diligence* on what would appear to be a drunken whim, by what magic did his supply of liquor appear in a stateroom on the second steamer — to be so heroically disposed of by Cadwallader?

The answer is that there was no magic and no heroics by Cadwallader. In the same June 18, 1890, letter to General Wilson, Dana positively denies that Grant changed ships on the way to Satartia — a denial fully consistent with logic.

The letter also states that Grant was back at his headquarters by 'forenoon' on June 7, and not being taken on a slow boat to Chickasaw Bayou as claimed by Cadwallader. Based on that, the wild ride on Kangaroo could not have happened.

In addition to the fantastic and lurid details of Cadwallader's memoir and the staid account by Dana, there is more evidence to be considered. One factor is the absence of Julia Grant, the general's wife. She was present with the army until after Grant crossed into Mississippi to begin his final campaign against Vicksburg, when she went home to Missouri. Grant despised the dullness of siege warfare and was generally believed to be more disposed to drinking when she was away than at other times. Circumstantial evidence, admittedly, but not to be ignored.

Another piece of the puzzle is a terse journal entry on June 7 by then Colonel Wilson: 'General Grant intoxicated.'

But the major piece of evidence contradicting Dana's account that Grant did not drink on the trip comes from no one less than Charles A. Dana himself. In the April 28, 1891, edition of the *New York Sun*, which Dana published and edited, he wrote a piece called 'General Grant's Occasional Intoxication.' In that article he wrote, 'General Grant's seasons of intoxication were not only infrequent, occurring once in three or four months, but he always chose a time when the gratification of his appetite for drink would not interfere with any important movement that had to be directed or attended by him. We were alone with General Grant when General Rawlins rode up and delivered that admirable communication [presumably the June 6 letter]. After putting Rawlins' missive in his pocket Grant wound up going on board a steamer...and getting as stupidly drunk as the immortal nature of man would allow; but the next day he came out fresh as a rose, without any trace of the spree he had just passed through. So it was on two or three other occasions of the sort and when it was all over, no outsider would have suspected such things had been.'

Dana and Wilson were supporters of Grant during the presidential campaign of 1868, but opposed the corruption of Grant's Republican Party associates in the 1872 contest, with Democrat Dana coining the memorable phrase, 'Throw the rascals out!' Yet this political opposition does not mean that Dana, who represented the best in American journalism, would lie about Grant.

Then why was the subject of drunkenness omitted from Dana's Civil War memoir? Ida M. Tarbell wrote the book, and judging from the similarity in language between the book and the 1891 article in the *Sun*, she may have lifted her description of the Satartia expedition from the *Sun*'s morgue and simply omitted the comments about drunkenness out of respect to the late general. That is odd behavior for a future muckraking heroine journalist, but we can never know for sure.

Whatever it was that confined Grant to his stateroom on the night of June 6, 1863, drink probably had something to do with it. That is a hard admission for an admirer of Grant, the ultimate American soldier, to make. Cadwallader's tale was, in all likelihood, part fantasy, but based on a real bender on the part of Grant.

Is there any other explanation other than alcohol to account for Grant's behavior on the trip up the Yazoo? One possibility is migraine. Grant suffered terribly from migraine headaches, which can produce blinding pain, extreme nausea and the kind of apathy that Grant displayed when Dana asked him if he wanted to press on to Satartia. The sudden onset of the illness in Dana's description sounds much like one of Grant's sick headaches, and perhaps Dana mistook the behavior for a bender.

It is also possible that both the drinking and migraine theories are correct: Suffering from a migraine earlier in 1862, Grant received some ill-advised medical treatment. His frequent tent mate and cousin W.W. Smith reported in the papers of historian Hamilton Garland: 'Grant had terrible sick headaches which arose from indigestion. He was very injudicious in his eating. His doctor had so little sense as to prescribe brandy for him and once, down before Corinth, he was given a heavy dose of brandy at a time when his stomach was

upset and it affected him very strongly. He immediately ordered his horse and rode away along the lines. I went with him and after a ride of ten or fifteen miles, he returned and was all right.'

When all is said and done, however, the weight of evidence and testimony indicates that Grant, having slipped Rawlins' leash and away from his wife, resorted to the bottle in June 1863. He got drunk, but his intoxication harmed no one but himself.

This much more is certain: At no time during the Civil War was Grant incapacitated when his command needed him. His Yazoo River spree did not prolong the siege of Vicksburg by a minute, nor did it cost the life of a single blue-coated soldier. At no time in the war did a Union soldier find himself in danger or suffer a wound, capture or death because Grant was drunk. After having conquered three armies, won a peace with the Confederacy and then magnanimously prepared the foundations for the reconciliation of North and South through his generous terms to General Robert E. Lee, General Grant can be forgiven his rare sips of whiskey.

This article was written by Brian J. Murphy and originally appeared in the January 2005 issue of *America's Civil War*. For more great articles be sure to subscribe to [America's Civil War](#) magazine today!