Six hundred miles, checked

Measuring Grierson's 1863 cavalry raid through Mississippi against his own report, the Confederates' telegrams, and the map Harper's printed that summer

Grierson's "over 600 miles" is plausible: his stops lie 448 straight-line and about 600 road miles apart. The Confederates chased a raid a day ahead of their news, and the cavalry Pemberton sent from the Grand Gulf front was about 45 miles away when Grant landed.

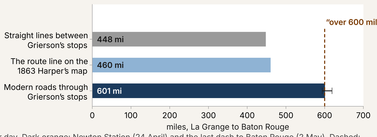
1 The 600 miles · 2 A day behind · 3 Away from the river

1 The 600 miles

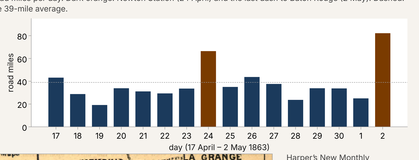
Grierson reported that his brigade "marched over 600 miles in less than sixteen days." I took the dated stops in his report (40 distinct places: towns, plantations, "5 miles south of Pontotoc"), placed each on a modern gazetteer and routed between them on today's roads. The total is 601 miles (594–619 when the uncertain Louisiana points move about 9 miles). Straight lines between the same stops give 448. Elapsed time: 15.4 days.

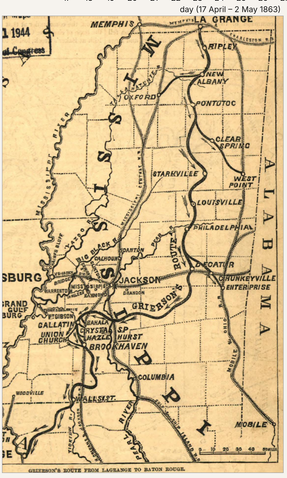
The road figure is generous: on the 15 legs where Grierson gives a distance (together 127 miles), the router runs 37% longer, mostly where plantations lie off today's roads. His last 28 hours, which he put at 76 miles, come out at 75–82. The line on the map Harper's printed that summer is a sketch: it measures 460 miles.

Three ways to measure the same ride. Straight lines are a floor; modern roads probably overstate a column that often rode "through woods, lanes, and by-roads." Bar: shifting the uncertain Louisiana stops.

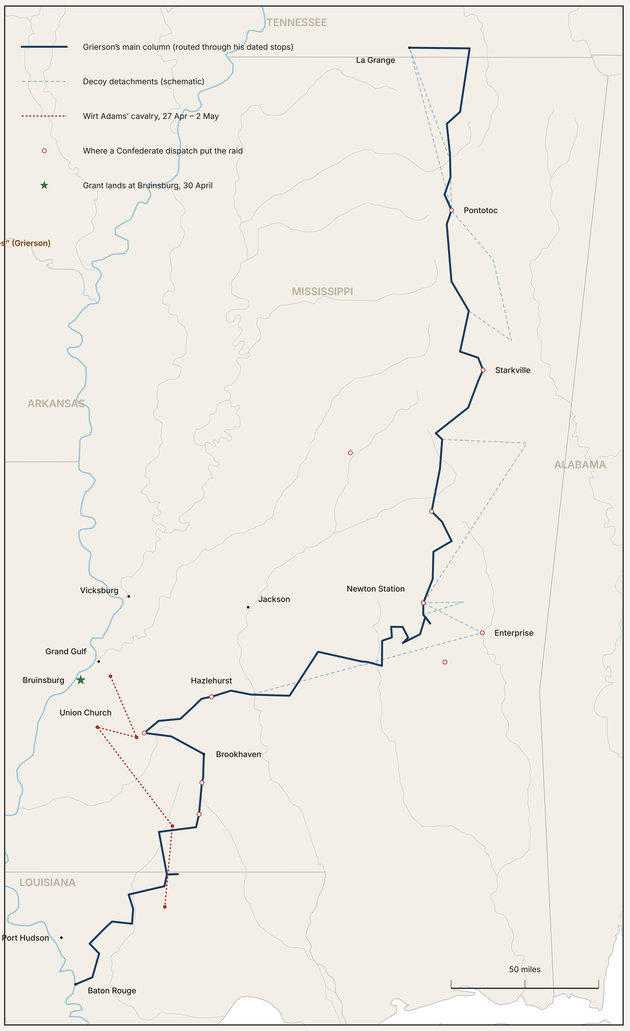


Road miles per day. Dark orange: Newton Station (24 April) and the last dash to Baton Rouge (2 May). Dashed: the 39-mile average.





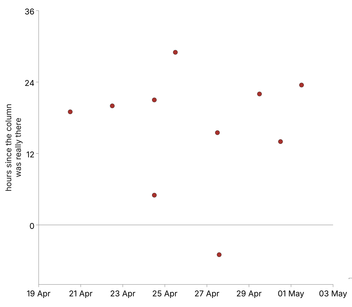
Harper's New Monthly Magazine, vol. 27 (1863), p. 271. Library of Congress, g3981s.cw0259200. Georeferenced on 21 towns (rms 6.5 mi); its line lies a median 6 mi from Grierson's stops.



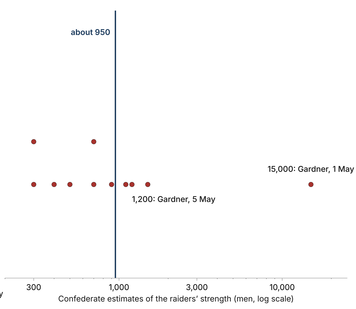
2 A day behind

I coded 20 Confederate telegrams and reports that say where the raiders were or how many. Measured against Grierson's timed itinerary, the news about the main column (ten claims, two of them about its advance guard) was a median 20 hours old when it was sent; most dispatches carry no time, so single values are uncertain by about 12 hours. Estimates of its strength ran from 300 to 15,000; it had about 950. 5 claims fit a decoy or nothing at all: a 35-man company at Enterprise, a battalion on the railroad, a column reported near Kosciusko.

Each dot is a Confederate dispatch about the main column: when it was sent, and how long before that the column had actually been at the place it named. One point below zero is the advance guard at Hazlehurst, ahead of the main body.



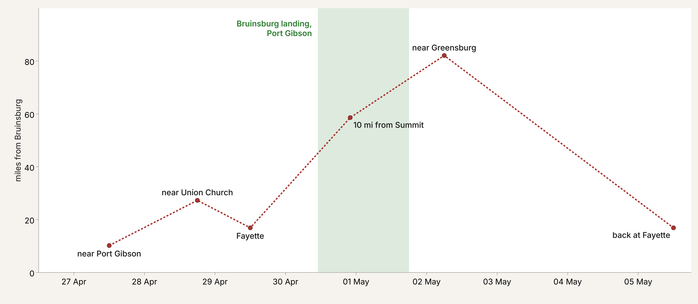
Every strength estimate in the dispatches. Blue line: about 950 men after 21 April (Grierson). The highest, 15,000, is Gardner at Port Hudson on 1 May; on 5 May he wrote 1,200.



3 Away from the river

On 27 April Pemberton sent Wirt Adams' regiment, cavalry on the Grand Gulf front, after Grierson. It was 17 miles from Bruinsburg at Fayette on 29 April and 82 miles away near Greensburg on 2 May; at the hour Grant's divisions landed, 11 a.m. on 30 April, "without opposition" in a Union eyewitness's words, it was roughly 45 miles away. On 1 May Pemberton called the pursuit off.

Adams' regiment, placed from its own and Richardson's reports. Green band: the landing at Bruinsburg and the battle of Port Gibson.



What this does not show

Modern roads are not 1863 roads. Straight lines (448) are a floor and the road route (601) probably a ceiling; "over 600" sits at the top of that range.

Times such as "about daylight" and positions such as "near Greensburg" are mine to read; every one is quoted in the supplement.

Adams being away does not prove he could have stopped the landing, and his was not the only mounted unit on Pemberton's roster. It shows where the cavalry sent from the Grand Gulf front was.

What is new here, and what is not

Stephen Forbes, who rode in Company B, worked through these same dispatches in 1907: he traced Barteau's wrong turn, Macon's 5,000 that were 35, Pemberton's guesses, and Adams' camp five miles from Grierson's on 30 April. What I add is measurement: miles, hours, and the spread of numbers.

Timothy Smith's The Real Horse Soldiers (2018) is the standard modern account; I have read only reviews of it. I found no route-distance check of the 600-mile claim in what I could reach.

Sources and method

Official Records, ser. I, vol. 24, parts 1 and 3 (1889), Internet Archive OCR. Forbes 1907. Harper's map via the Library of Congress.

Gazetteer: OpenStreetMap Nominatim. Routing: OSRM on OpenStreetMap roads. Basemap: Natural Earth.

Every number is computed from files in the reproducibility supplement.