



# 'Naked, half-frozen and frantic'

## Stanley Nelson

Matthew Phelps, orphaned at age 8, grew up on a small farm in Connecticut. When he was 20, he married his teenage sweetheart, Jerusha.

In the early 1770s, Phelps heard that a group of British military veterans like him -- known as the Company of Military Adventurers -- was planning to begin life anew in Natchez country. He decided to join the group.

Phelps wrote about his Natchez country experiences in a book (Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Matthew Phelps, 1802). He described his first journey South as a scouting venture to find land in the Lower Mississippi River Valley.

As part of the British government's plan for the colonization of Natchez, veterans of the French and Indian War (1754-1763) were awarded land grants to help settle the region. Permanent title to the land was contingent upon the company (of military adventurers) planting the required number of settlers upon the lands reserved in its name.

In all, the huge colonization project sought to settle 380,000 acres along Bayou Pierre and the Big Black in present day Claiborne and Warren counties, Miss.

### 'ACRES OF GOOD, RICH SOIL'

Arriving by ship in New Orleans in the winter of 1774, Phelps and the veterans, many with their families, acquired small boats, and rowed against the swift current of the Mighty Mississippi with barely enough room on each vessel to store the provisions.

"From Fort Rosalie" at Natchez, wrote Phelps, "to Petit Gulf (Rodney) is ten and half leagues (about 25 miles)... several plantations have opened."

Along the Big Black River that flows into the Mighty Miss above

Grand Gulf, Phelps found ground "high and much broken," several springs of water, and "acres of good, rich soil." He chose a tract of land along the river described as a "small improvement or settlement." Phelps obtained the land "by paying a resident fifty dollars to relinquish his possession in my favor which by the custom of the country ensured a title to me."

In the vicinity, Phelps met two men -- a Virginian named John Storrs and his 19-year-old son. The two were destitute and so sick with fever and chills that they were "scarcely ... able to crawl." The Storrs' only possessions were an ax and a musket.

Phelps fed and nursed the two men for days until each recovered. As Phelps prepared to return to New England for his wife and children, Storrs offered to repay Phelps for his generosity by working Phelps' place in his absence.

Almost nine months after leaving his family, Phelps arrived home in August 1774 so weary and ill with the ague that he felt "reduced to the borders of the grave."

### 'EMACIATED BY SICKNESS'

In New England, reports historian Robert Haynes, "the quarrel between the colonies and England had reached a crisis stage. In anger over the destruction of tea in Boston, the British Parliament passed four Coercive Acts which alienated numerous American colonists and led directly to the calling of the First Continental Congress which met in Philadelphia the last of September 1774."

For a while, Phelps was unsure what to do, but when war seemed inevitable, he determined to make the move.

In May 1776, he loaded his children and pregnant wife onboard a ship and headed for

New Orleans. It was a harrowing journey as the ship avoided British warships along the way.

In the Gulf, their vessel drifted in the waters on windless days. In time, food and water had to be rationed. On July 30, six days before they reached the mouth of the Mississippi, Jerusha gave birth to a son, the couple's fourth child. Although he was born in the Gulf, Jerusha named him "Atlantic," on the suggestion of the sailors on the ship.

Soon they arrived in New Orleans.

After resting, the Phelps teamed up with two other families -- Joseph Leonard, his wife and six children, and Joseph Flowers, his wife and one child. Wrote Mississippi historian John F.H. Claiborne: "Mrs. Flowers sickened soon after they left New Orleans. The weather was intensely hot, and the current of the river very strong."

Twenty-four hours after the party left the Flowers' at Point Coupee, Claiborne reported, "Captain Phelps, his wife and children, all became ill and were compelled to tie up the boat." While the Phelps' attempted to rest and recuperate, Joseph Leonard "hired another boat and proceeded with his family, but his wife sickened and died at Natchez."

On Sept. 16, one of Phelps' daughters, Abigail, breathed her last. Claiborne wrote that Phelps "was obliged to bury her himself, rising from his sick pallet to dig the grave."

On Sept. 23, Atlantic, the child born at sea, died in the arms of his grieving and deathly ill mother.

Phelps was so ill at one point with fever and chills that he expected to die, but recovered.

In early November, the family reached Ellis Cliffs, 14 miles south of Natchez, where Phelps hoped to get help from

John Ellis, one of the largest landowners in the region. When scouting the country in 1774, Phelps had met Ellis, who encouraged him to return with his family and settle. Ellis also offered to help Phelps and his family in any way he could.

But Phelps said Ellis turned him away when he (Phelps) sought help: "I was so emaciated by sickness, or impoverished by misfortune, or both, that he (Ellis) did not now know me, neither could I engage him, amidst my severe distress, to afford me the least assistance."

The party moved on, reaching Natchez the next day.

### 'AMIDST THE BOILING WATERS'

By the time the family reached Petit Gulf (Rodney), Jerusha could travel no farther. A settler there -- Philip Alston -- opened his home to the Phelps family in their time of grief and need.

Jerusha died on Nov. 14.

Devastated, Phelps wrote that the "world appeared to me almost a dreary waste, and the scene of life as if nearly divested of all its decorations." But he had no choice but to press on, while now considering the comfort of his two remaining children, Ruth and Luman, his number one task.

Now in a small, flat-bottomed boat, Phelps docked at the mouth of the Big Black on Nov. 24. His land was just a few miles upstream. Also onboard Phelps' boat was 14-year-old Abram Knapp, who Phelps' hired to assist him on the remainder of the journey "for sickness and fatigue had so reduced me I was unable to manage the skiff alone."

The Big Black flowed into the Mississippi opposite Coffee's Point, a peninsula on the Louisiana side. Just below, a big bend that directed

the current into a point of rock at the Grand Gulf hills produced two great whirlpools. This location was considered the most hazardous on the river for boats to traverse.

To journey up the Big Black, Phelps had Knapp steer the skiff with the children on board, while Phelps pulled the boat from shore with "a rope for a tow line." Soon, they "came to a large willow tree which projected horizontally from the bank into the stream, and the top of the tree being half submerged a large drift had collected about it, and occasioned a whirlpool to set under the trunk of the tree between its sunken top and the bank, a space of thirty-five or forty feet."

Here, the darkness that had fallen over him along the Mississippi grew darker still. Said Phelps: "My two lovely children -- all that were left to me, a girl in her tenth and a boy in his sixth year -- were sitting on some blankets in the bow of the skiff, when, in an instant, it was drawn into the eddy under the tree, and the stern sank."

Adam Knapp, the 14-year-old steering the boat, panicked and jumped into the river and "swam around the head of the tree." Phelps, who couldn't swim, tied the rope to the willow and raced along the trunk of the tree toward the skiff, shouting to 10-year-old Ruth to remain still. Holding onto a branch with his left hand, he attempted to get Luman, the six-year-old, off the boat first but "at that moment the roots of the fallen tree gave way and floated from the bank; the boat broke loose, filled and turned bottom upwards."

In the chaos "amidst the boiling waters," Phelps could only watch and listen to the "voices of my dear ba-

bies" scream -- "daddy, daddy" -- before they disappeared into the Big Black.

Knapp pulled Phelps to shore and rushed for help. When he returned with two men they "found Captain Phelps, naked, half-frozen and frantic." The men recovered the bodies of the children. "I now viewed myself as being completely stripped of all ... happiness ... hopes ... " Phelps recalled.

A few days later, Phelps arrived at his property only to face more sorrow. In the custom of those days, wrote Claiborne, Phelps' "claim was regarded as forfeited, and new comers, finding it vacant, and no owner or representative in the district, had taken possession."

### 'BY THE BLESSING OF GOD'

But all was not lost. John Storrs and his son, the two men Phelps had assisted three years earlier when they were ill and down on their luck, came to Phelps' aid. In his own cabin, Storrs comforted the grieving man and nursed him back to health.

Without Storrs, said Phelps, "I had not whereon to rest my weary head, no family, no home, no money, a heart heavy with many sorrows, and even hope was dead." Inconsolable for many days, Phelps said the kindness of Storrs and his son, their care and encouragement, brought him back to life.

Phelps reported that "by the blessing of God" and hard work, Storrs and his son had prospered. They helped Phelps secure another claim less than a mile from theirs that included a cabin and open field for planting. They also supplied him with "a cow, a pair of steers, a horse, necessary farming utensils, and seventy dollars worth" of stock hogs.



THE BIG BLACK flows into the Mississippi River above Grand Gulf. (Credit: Lloyd's Map of the Lower Mississippi River, J.T. Lloyd, Publisher, 1862, New York)



DEAD TREES leaning over the bank of a stream with a strong current can become a hazard for boats. In the 1770s, Matthew Phelps was traveling along the Big Black River near its juncture with the Mississippi north of Grand Gulf when his skiff "came to a large willow tree which projected horizontally from the bank into the stream, and the top of the tree being half submerged a large drift had collected about it, and occasioned a whirlpool to set under the trunk of the tree between its sunken top and the bank, a space of thirty-five or forty feet." In seconds, the skiff was sucked into the whirlpool, resulting in death and despair. (Concordia Sentinel photo)

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