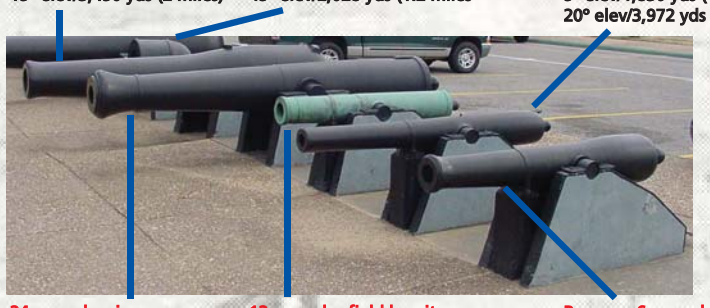
Vicksburg National Military Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Vicksburg National
Military Park

Civil War Artillery

The Civil War was the apex of the muzzle-loading cannon, and was used for more than destruction of enemy lines - it was a symbol to all on the field. Quoting Major Robert Stiles, a Confederate artillerist, "The gun is the rallying point of the detachment, it's a point of honor, it's the flag, it's the banner. It is that to which men look, by which they stand, with and for which they fight, and for which they fall. As long as the gun is theirs, they are unconquered, victorious; when the gun is lost all is lost."



Artillery is classified in various ways, including, weight of the projectile, bore diameter, inventor, or mobility. Field artillery was lightweight, mobile, and able to be moved with the troops. These guns had a long range and flat trajectory, their principle use being to batter heavy constructions with solid or exploding shot, or to shoot canister and exploding projectiles at masses of infantry.

Heavy artillery was generally brought to the front to defend or lay siege to an area. The weight of the cannon made it difficult to move, so the guns were positioned to attack fortifications (siege guns) or defend fortifications (garrison guns). Heavy guns and mortars could drop shot or shell behind obstructions amongst troop concentrations.

The cannon displayed near the Visitor Center parking lot represent several types used during the siege of Vicksburg by both Confederate and Union troops.

The ammunition used in artillery pieces varied according to cannon, and many cannon could fire more than one type, depending on the situation. Artillery projectiles used during the campaign and siege of Vicksburg included:

Solid Shot - A solid projectile, non-explosive, used for battering fortifications and against masses of troops.

Shell - An explosive, hollow-cast missile containing gunpowder and equipped with a paper timed fuse for spherical projectiles, and either a timed or percussion fuse for elongated projectiles. The shell would produce deadly fragments upon exploding.

Shrapnel (Spherical Case) - The shell was filled with lead or iron musket balls, the number varying as to caliber or artillery piece (shell for 12-pounder cannon carried 78 balls), and which scattered on detonation. Effective range was 500-1500 yards.

Grape - This shot was used for naval, siege/garrison and seacoast artillery and contained a cluster of nine iron balls within an open iron frame which shattered on firing. Each ball was approximately the size of a baseball.

Canister - Shot (about the size of a golf ball) was packed into a tin can that fractured on firing, scattering the shot. This type of ammunition was very effective against infantry attacks up to a range of 350-400 yards. 27 balls in a can were used for guns, 40 balls in a can were used for howitzers.

Timed fuses consisted of paper cylinders packed with black powder. Graduations in seconds on the outside of the paper case enabled the gunner to shorten the fuse to achieve the desired burning time. The fuses were ignited by the explosive charge loaded into the cannon to propel the projectile to its destination.

Percussion fuses, used mainly on elongated shells, detonated the projectile upon impact with a hard surface. The shock of discharge permitted a plunger to drop to the bottom of the fuse until impact with the target, wherein the plunger was thrown forward, striking the point and igniting the priming charge. These fuses were an extremely important development, particularly for long-range rifles.