

In our own backyard

In December 1862, the Civil War roared into Murfreesboro with one of its bloodiest clashes — The Battle of Stones River.

By Mark E. Johnson



The Battle of Stones River occurred over three days — Dec. 30, 1862, to Jan. 2, 1863 — with a lull in the fighting on New Year's Day. Painted by Alfred Edward Lewis, a Union soldier who would become a well-known artist later in life, this scene depicts the fighting between what is now Old Nashville Highway, right, and the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad line, left.

Gone are the clip-clops of the cavalry horses' hooves along the dirt road then known as the Nashville Pike. They've long since been replaced by the hum of motor vehicle tires rolling across the pavement of Old Nashville Highway.

Gone is the twinkling of hundreds of campfires under late afternoon skies. Now, only the headlights of a park ranger's pickup truck penetrate the December dusk.

The Stones River National Battlefield in Murfreesboro is quiet — aside from the sound of a 737 flying high overhead — and a visitor viewing the swaying fields of broom sedge and switchgrass might be hard-pressed to believe what history assures us is true: Only 147 years ago this month, these 650 pastoral acres — and 3,000 more now outside the park boundary — were ablaze with one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War.



Local historians say the open farmland and pastures and dense cedar glades are much the same as they were early on the morning of Dec. 31, 1862, when Confederate Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee's division initiated an attack on the southern end of the Federal line. The real challenge for present-day

battlefield visitors is to conjure up the earth-shaking booms of hundreds of cast-bronze "Napoleon" cannons and the din of their 12-pound solid cannonballs blasting through the cedar undergrowth and shattering limestone outcroppings; the ceaseless and deafening report of tens of thousands of Springfield rifles and muskets being fired in unison; the squeals of cavalry horses as their legs are shot away from beneath them; the wild battle cries of Gen. Braxton Bragg's Rebels as they charge headlong into the deadly grape and canister shot of Gen. William Rosecrans' Chicago Board of Trade artillery battery near the Nashville Pike; the clattering wheels of driverless Union and Confederate ammunition caissons being dragged indiscriminately by terrified animals fleeing the cacophony of explosions; the moaning and pleading and praying of more than 15,000 wounded Americans strewn among some 3,000 of their dead comrades; the

acrid stench of spent gunpowder and burnt flesh; and the countless plumes of black smoke and flame rolling into a cast-iron-gray winter sky.

"It's all about imagination here," says Jim Lewis, a park ranger who works at the battlefield and visitor center operated by the National Park Service. "We are always going to have cars traveling down the road and planes flying overhead. Nothing we can do can ever take us back to the 19th century, but the sense of place is what connects people to this story."

Costliest battle

While not as widely remembered as the battles of Gettysburg or Antietam or Bull Run, Stones River was not only the costliest engagement of the war in terms of percentage of casualties — nearly one-third of each army was either killed, wounded, or captured — but it was one of the most strategically

important as well. The productive Middle Tennessee farmland was a gem guarded voraciously by the Confederacy and coveted by the Union. And because a major objective of Federal strategists was to seize control of the railroads that ran southeastward through Tennessee and Georgia, Union generals viewed Murfreesboro as a perfect supply base for their strike into the heart of the South.

After a Union victory in Perryville, Ky., in October, 1862, Bragg, commander of the Army of Tennessee, retreated through the Cumberland Gap and took up winter quarters in Murfreesboro, hoping to block Federal troops from advancing to Chattanooga.

On the other side, Union generals were "taking heat from the top," says Jim. President Abraham Lincoln was nearly frantic for a major Union victory that might keep European countries from recognizing the Confederacy while

adding muscle to the Emancipation Proclamation he issued only three months earlier.

“Lincoln was pushing all his army commanders to go out and get a win, basically saying, ‘Use it or lose it,’” Jim explains. “Rosecrans wasn’t particularly anxious to go chasing after Bragg in the dead of winter, but Lincoln left him with little choice.”

On Saturday, Dec. 26, at the urging of the president, Rosecrans, commander of the Union Army of the Cumberland, “struck” camp in Nashville, occupied by Federal troops since Feb. 25, 1862, and began the march toward Murfreesboro. More than 43,000 pairs of Yankee boots trudged along Nashville Pike and Nolensville Road through LaVergne, Smyrna, and Triune. By Tuesday, Dec. 30, the Union troops had massed just northwest of downtown Murfreesboro, and the Confederate Army of Tennessee, nearly 38,000 soldiers strong, formed its lines a few hundred yards east.

A frigid, sleepless night passed with the brass bands of each army trying to “outplay” the other from across their respective lines, according to witnesses. Trading musical



LEFT: Guests study the exhibits in the museum of the visitor’s center at Stones River National Battlefield. The museum features several interactive exhibits, a theater that plays a short documentary about the battle, relics from the battlefield, and other visuals. RIGHT: Gib Backlund, a park ranger and chief of operations at the facility, says Stones River is one of the “hidden gems” of all Civil War battlefields.



instruments for muskets, the Confederates attacked at first light the next morning when Hardee’s divisions furiously assaulted the Union right wing of Maj. Gen. Alexander McCook’s troops.

“Bang went a gun on our extreme right quickly followed by others, and in a moment, every gun was at work,” wrote William C. Robinson of the Union’s 34th Illinois brigade in David R. Logsdon’s book, “Eye-witnesses at the Battle of Stones River.”

With that volley, the fighting began and raged throughout the entire day, says Lewis.

‘Carnage’ on Wilkinson Pike

“The Confederates look like they are winning a victory through most of the day on the 31st,” he says.

“They inflicted very heavy casualties, driving the Union lines back and bending them onto the Nashville Pike, which was their main line of supply and communication.”

Sam R. Watkins, a Confederate private and Columbia native who, 20 years later, would write a classic Civil War memoir entitled “Co. Aytch,” described the battlefield immediately after some of the most intense fighting near present-day Wilkinson Pike. “I cannot

remember now of ever seeing more dead men and horses and captured cannon, all jumbled together, than that scene of blood and carnage and battle on the [Wilkinson] Turnpike,” he wrote. “The ground was literally covered with blue coats dead; and, if I remember correctly, there were eighty dead horses.”

The following day, Jan. 1, 1863, the battle paused while the armies tried to tend to their wounded and dead. Practically every home in the area was converted into a field hospital, and wounded soldiers quickly outnumbered Union and Confederate medical staff. Severely wounded men lay exposed for hours in driving rain with temperatures hovering near freezing.

“I helped gather together at one of the field hospitals all the wounded of the regiment, where their wounds were attended to by Surgeon [John B.] McDill and others,” recalled Sgt. John McCabe of the 84th Illinois brigade in Logsdon’s book. “There were not one-tenth of the wounds dressed. Most of them had to lie out of doors upon the damp ground, covered only with a blanket and having a good fire at their feet. As rapidly as possible, they were sent to hospitals at Nashville, but suffering as they were, they rode twenty-six miles in army wagons.”

The battle roared back to life with renewed vigor the next morning when Bragg ordered Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge to move his five brigades to push Union forces back across the Stones River, setting up a bloody clash that had troops on both sides chasing each other through nearly freezing, waist-deep water. As an onslaught of Confederates drove the Yankees across the river, Union Maj. Gen. Thomas Crittenden unleashed one of the most devastating assaults witnessed in the Civil War.

“My chief-of-artillery enabled me to open 58 guns almost simultane-

ously on Breckinridge’s men, and to turn a dashing charge into a sudden retreat and rout in which the enemy lost 1,700 or 1,800 men in a few moments,” recalled Crittenden in Logsdon’s book. “The very forest seemed to fall and not a Confederate reached the river.”

By the end of the day, Rosecrans’ troops had repelled what promised to be a sure Rebel victory. Battered and dazed, both armies were unwilling to “go at it” again, and the Confederates reluctantly moved out of Murfreesboro and headed for Tullahoma where they would spend nearly six months recuperating before re-engaging the enemy.

“It is a critical moment in the war,” says Lewis. “If the Confederates had won here, they might have actually changed the outcome and possibly wiped a large Union army off the map. They might also have had a shot at retaking Nashville. Instead, the Union army wins, and the Confederates are forced to give up a huge chunk of Middle Tennessee and the crops that are feeding them and their horses and mules.”

Preservation begins

Emboldened by their new supply base, the Union army would sweep through Chattanooga, Atlanta, and the Carolinas — sealing the fate of the Confederacy. After the muskets finally fell silent in 1865, the war-weary government — and veterans — began looking at ways to memorialize and preserve the sites of important battles. Gib Backlund, chief of operations at Stones River Battlefield, says that due to a number of different reasons, the Murfreesboro site hasn’t received the attention many historians believe it warrants.

“The Civil War preservation movement began in the 1890s with the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park,” says Back-

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This section of replica Civil War-era fencing is near an area where the fighting was so intense that soldiers dubbed the ground the “Slaughter Pen.”

Stones River

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lund. “Several other battlefields were set aside soon after, including Shiloh, Antietam, Vicksburg, and Gettysburg, but there were politics and money involved even then. There was an early effort to include Stones River in that group, but Congress got to wondering, ‘Where do we stop?’ They embarked on a study to establish the sites of the most importance, but that wasn’t published until 1925, after most of the veterans who were providing the political pressure to create national battlefields were gone.”

The Murfreesboro site was finally earmarked for preservation in 1927, and a three-person commission composed of a Union and Confederate veteran and an army engineer was assigned, explains Backlund. The group chose only 350 of the original 4,000 acres. In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order transferring several War Department sites — including Stones River Battlefield, the Statue of Liberty, and Wright Brothers National Monument — to the National Park Service.

“Murfreesboro was a pretty tiny town back then, and this area was all farmland,” he says. “There was never any strong political push to expand the park.”

19th-century landscape

In the 1960s, the battlefield benefited from a nationwide effort to add visitor centers to many National Park Service sites, and the structure was renovated in 2004 with an updated museum featuring interactive exhibits and a documentary-style movie. The size of the park remained largely unchanged until 1987, when U.S. Rep. Bart Gordon of Murfreesboro introduced legislation to expand the site by some 50 acres.

“To date, we have acquired a total of 650 acres,” Backlund says. “But major growth in Murfreesboro since then has made property values higher and reduced the desire in a lot of folks to set aside land.”

Backlund says the park maintains the pattern of open fields and forest that were present at the time of the battle to help visitors understand how the landscape affected the fighting. Some 35 acres of battlefield are planted in soybeans and tended by local farmer and Rutherford Farmers Cooperative member Epps Horde, whose family lives nearby in an antebellum home that was used as the Union army’s main field hospital. Backlund points out that early maps of the area show much of the battlefield and surrounding land was planted in either corn or cotton in 1862-63.



Containing a 35-acre field of soybeans, the largest open area of the battlefield is situated along Old Nashville Highway. There are also several miles of walking trails that run through both the open fields of the park and the dense cedar forests.

“Although we’d prefer more of it in agricultural crops, we are gradually converting most of our open ground to native warm-season grasses like big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, and switchgrass,” he says, noting that the park is a regular customer of Rutherford Farmers Co-op as well. “We either cut hay from this or allow the Rutherford County Sheriff’s Department to cut hay to feed to their mounted patrol horses. In some cases, we’re saving the hay for use as seed stock.”

Although it is virtually surrounded by commercial and residential development, Stones River National Battlefield has become an oasis, of sorts, for ecological as well as historical preservation, adds Lewis.

“We have created for people a sense that they are walking through a 19th-century landscape, and — oh, by the way — bird-watchers can come see more bird species than anywhere else nearby,” he says. “Occasionally, visitors can actually hear a coyote howl in the middle of the park, and turkeys are now roosting in the cemetery. People can walk through here and see and feel the same things that ol’ Sam Watkins was seeing and feeling as his Company H of the First Tennessee Regiment marched into battle.”

Backlund says it is “critical” for current and future generations to visit national battlefields like Stones River to explore their American heritage and keep alive the memories of those who fell in battle.

“The Civil War is obviously one of those big, national stories,” he says. “It changed the nation and ended slavery in this country, which was a phenomenal accomplishment, and we are trying to provide ways for people to come into the



Only a few months after the battle ended, members of William B. Hazen’s 41st Union Infantry Brigade erected a stone monument, in back, honoring 45 of their comrades who died during a fierce defense of their position. Located across Old Nashville Highway from the southern end of the park, Hazen’s Monument is the oldest of the Civil War.



LEFT: Backlund inspects some of the big bluestem warm-season grass on the battlefield. Park officials have planted several native grass species in an effort to recreate the landscape at the time of the clash. RIGHT: A “Napoleon” cannon resides at the battlefield cemetery.



story and learn about it. In the grand scheme of things, this event happened very recently, and more than 3,000 Americans died outright over two days of fighting, which is hard to fathom. Sites like this and other national battlefields go a long way toward keeping this chapter of

American history alive in our collective memory.”

For visitor information about Stones River National Battlefield and a complete schedule of upcoming “living history” programs, visit www.nps.gov/stri online or call 615-893-9501.