

The Country All Around Was Laid Desolate: Rutherford County's Civil War Battles



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Rutherford County's geographic location and the presence of the railroad made both the Union and Confederate armies wish to control the area during the Civil War. Image from Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (1896).

The imprint of the Civil War fell hard on Rutherford County from 1862 to 1864. The county's geographic location and well-developed turnpikes and railroad made the county strategically significant to both the Union and Confederate forces. Federal forces first occupied Murfreesboro on March 10, 1862. Control of the area passed between Federal and Confederate forces during the remainder of 1862 until the Battle of Stones River during December 31, 1862–January 2, 1863, after which the area was under the control of the Union Army for the remainder of the war. To protect the railroad at Murfreesboro, the Union Army constructed Fortress Rosecrans, one of the largest earthen-work fortifications built during the Civil War.

This publication briefly describes five Civil War engagements: Battle of Murfreesboro, the Battle of Stones River, the Battle of Vaught's Hill, the Battle of Hoover's Gap, and the Battle of the Cedars. Few places in the South experienced the terrors of war more than Rutherford County, Tennessee.

"It was also described to me as "a pretty, shady village, before the war." But the trees had been cut away, leaving ugly stump-lots; and the country all around was laid desolate."

—Description of Murfreesboro and surrounding area by John. T. Trowbridge in 1867.



This map of the Murfreesboro area, drawn in 1863, illustrates the town's extensive transportation connections. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

First Battle of Murfreesboro

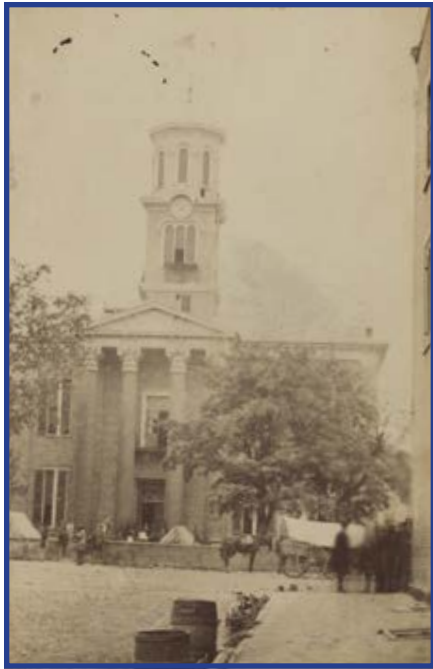
July 13, 1862

*Troops: 3rd Minnesota, 9th Michigan, and other Federal troops garrisoned in Murfreesboro (U.S.A.); Forrest's Cavalry (C.S.A.)
Estimated Casualties: 890 (U.S.A.), 150 (C.S.A.)*

"I must demand an unconditional surrender of your force as prisoners of war or I will have every man put to the sword. You are aware of the overpowering force I have at my command, and this demand is made to prevent the effusion of blood."

—Nathan B. Forrest

As U.S. Gen. Don Carlos Buell and his Army of the Ohio began a slow advance toward Chattanooga in early June 1862, the Confederacy sent Col. Nathan B. Forrest to Chattanooga to organize a cavalry brigade. By July, Forrest had enlisted C.S.A.



The town square in Murfreesboro was transformed into an urban battlefield during the Battle of Murfreesboro when Confederate troops attacked the Federal forces garrisoned inside the courthouse. Image courtesy Library of Congress.

Col. John Hunt Morgan's troops, and their combined forces of 1,400 began a number of cavalry raids into Middle Tennessee and Kentucky.

Forrest planned to take his forces to Murfreesboro. At dawn on July 13, he launched his attack. U.S. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden had arrived in Murfreesboro just one day before to take command of the Union forces garrisoned there. The Union forces were separated into different locations around town, with the 9th Michigan encamped at Maney's Spring, and the 3rd Minnesota and a unit of the 1st Kentucky battery encamped 1.5 miles northwest of town.

Forrest's Confederate troops attacked the Union garrisons at about 4:30 in the morning, first taking over a Union hospital and the 9th Pennsylvania Regiment's camp on Woodbury Pike. The Union troops separated into two camps; only one surrendered. Under the flag of truce, Forrest led the resisting commander, Col. Henry C. Lester of the 3rd Minnesota, through Murfreesboro, where he showed him the same forces repeatedly, leading Lester to overestimate Forrest's men.

Lester surrendered and the Confederate forces destroyed the rail line and supplies in Murfreesboro. The Union Army dismissed Lester in December 1862. This battle moved the Union forces away from Chattanooga and gave C.S.A. Gen. Braxton Bragg a

chance to concentrate his forces in Chattanooga in preparation for his Kentucky offensive in September. The battle also led to Nathan B. Forrest's promotion to brigadier general.

"The gentlemen were afraid to venture up town, as they were firing from the houses, so much it was dangerous to go on the street."

—Kate Carney diary entry, July 13, 1862

Battle of Stones River

December 31, 1862–January 2, 1863

*Troops: Army of the Cumberland (U.S.A.),
Army of Tennessee (C.S.A.)*

Estimated casualties: 12,906 (U.S.A.), 11,739 (C.S.A.)

"Our Army is still in line of battle a few miles in front of the town awaiting in momentary expectancy the opening of the conflict. The advance of the Federal columns steadily continues and without doubt this morning's sun will herald in the great tournament of arms."

—Murfreesboro Daily Rebel Banner, December 30, 1862

U.S. Gen. William Rosecrans took command of the Army of the Cumberland in the fall of 1862. He was expected to attack C.S.A. Gen. Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee to move them out of the region. Bragg's army remained in the region to stop the Union advance on Chattanooga. By late December, Rosecrans moved his forces south to attack Bragg.

On December 31, 1862, Confederate forces attacked the Union Army at dawn. The Union forces were driven back, and both sides suffered significant casualties on a bitterly cold day. By the end of the day, however, the Union had not broken, and both sides remained in the field.

January 1, 1863, was largely a quiet day as both sides tended the wounded and buried the dead. Against the advice of his generals, Bragg ordered Gen. John Breckinridge to attack Union forces stationed on a hill on January 2, 1863. Despite his protests, Breckinridge made the attack, which stalled and led to the loss of nearly one-third of his brigade.



This topographical map of the Battle of Stones River highlights the terrain of the battlefield and also shows the location of the various hospitals that tended the wounded. Map created by O.R. Dahl, c. 1864, courtesy Library of Congress.

Rosecrans received reinforcements on January 3, 1863. On the evening of January 3, Bragg began withdrawing his troops to Tullahoma. Rosecrans did not pursue Bragg's army, remaining instead to occupy Murfreesboro. The battle is considered a strategic Union victory.

"I ride over the battlefield. In one place a caisson and five horses are lying, the latter killed in harness, and all fallen together. Nationals and Confederates, young, middle-aged, and old, are scattered over the woods and fields for miles."

—U.S. Col. John Beatty diary excerpt



C.S.A. Gen. John H. Morgan's reputation diminished following the Battle of Vaught's Hill. Image courtesy Library of Congress.

men caught up with Hall's rear guard a mile west of Milton. Because of the battle's proximity to Milton, some accounts refer to it as the Battle of Milton.

Unable to outrun Morgan's advancing troops, Hall took a stand on Vaught's Hill, a steep prominence with rocky outcroppings, and positioned his men in a perimeter defensive line.

Morgan's forces attacked Hall and were met by artillery fire from above. Morgan continued his attempt to overtake Hall's men from his weaker position below the hill until noon, when he learned that Union reinforcements would soon be arriving from Murfreesboro. Morgan retreated to the nearby community of Liberty. Morgan's failure to overturn Hall's position tarnished his reputation.

Battle of Vaught's Hill (also known as the Battle of Milton)

March 20, 1863

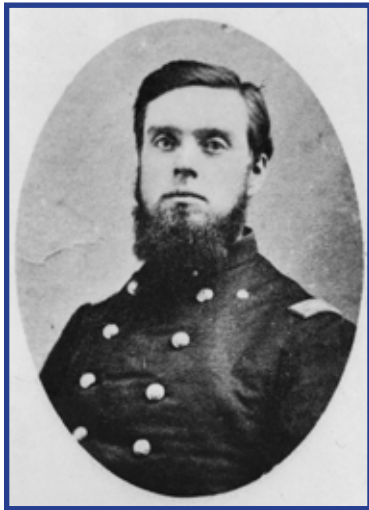
Troops: 2nd Brigade, 5th Division, XIV Corps (U.S.A.), Morgan's Cavalry Division (C.S.A.)

Estimated casualties: 62 (U.S.A.), 373 (C.S.A.)

Two days prior to this battle, U.S. Col. Albert S. Hall's brigade left its Murfreesboro base to raid the surrounding territory. C.S.A. Gen. John H. Morgan followed Hall and his men on their return to Murfreesboro. On March 20, Morgan's

“The battle of Milton will not figure among the big battles of the war, but we flatter ourselves that it will be worthy of mention as a handless victory. They deliberately made the attack with force enough to completely surround us, we had no protection, and they expected to gobble us up as they did the Hartsville brigade but Morgan failed for the first time.”

—Maj. James A. Connolly, 123rd Illinois Infantry, to his wife, March 28, 1863



U.S. Col. John T. Wilder and his Lightning Brigade opened the Tullahoma campaign on June 24, 1863, when they moved into Hoover's Gap. Image courtesy Library of Congress.

Battle of Hoover's Gap

June 24–26, 1863

Troops: XIV Army Corps (U.S.A.); Bate's & Johnson's Brigades, Stewart's Division, Hardee's Corps, Army of Tennessee & J.R. Butler's 1st (3rd) Kentucky Cavalry (C.S.A.)
Estimated Casualties: 583 (U.S.A.), Unknown (C.S.A.)

“I directed the advance to push speedily forward and take possession of Hoover's Gap, and, if possible, to prevent the enemy from occupying their fortifications, which I learned were situated at a narrow point of the gap, 16 miles from Murfreesborough.”

—Report of Col. John T. Wilder

U.S. Gen. William S. Rosecrans's Army of the Cumberland remained in the Murfreesboro area after the Battle of Stones River. To counter these forces, C.S.A. Gen. Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee set up a defensive line along the Duck River from Shelbyville to McMinnville. Infantry and artillery guarded the

three “gaps” through the small mountains known as “knobs” in the Cumberland foothills. Union commanders feared that Bragg was preparing to break the Union's siege of Vicksburg and urged Rosecrans to attack.

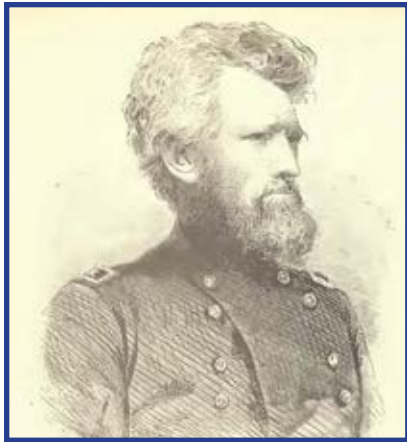
On June 23, Rosecrans created a diversion by feigning an attack against C.S.A. Gen. Leonidas Polk in Shelbyville while in reality concentrating his forces against the Confederates at Liberty and Hoover's Gaps. U.S. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden's XXV Corps moved to Bradyville southeast of Murfreesboro. Federal mounted infantry stormed Hoover's Gap on June 24 and held against a Confederate counterattack. U.S. Gen. George H. Thomas ordered Col. John T. Wilder to withdraw; however, Wilder felt he could hold the area and refused to move his troops out of the area. The next day, Crittenden's men arrived and repelled the Confederates, turning the tide of the battle. Confederate forces withdrew at noon the next day, June 26.

Rosecrans's tactical offensive forced Bragg's retreat from Middle Tennessee. He led his forces south and camped behind the Tennessee River at Chattanooga, allowing Union forces to sweep into southern Middle Tennessee.

The Union forces' use of superior technology, the new seven-shot Spencer repeating rifle, influenced the victory at Hoover's Gap. Wilder's refusal to withdraw from Hoover's Gap also contributed to the Union victory. However, U.S. victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg overshadowed Rosecrans's victory. In a message to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, he wrote, “You do not appear to observe the fact that this noble army has driven the rebels from Middle Tennessee.”

“It was a bright day for the glory of our arms, but a sad one when we consider the loss of the many gallant spirits who sealed with their blood their devotion to our cause.”

—Report of C.S.A. Gen. William B. Bate following the first day of battle at Hoover's Gap



U.S. Gen. Robert Milroy commanded two infantry brigades at the Battle of the Cedars. Image from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Famous Leaders and Battle Scenes of the Civil War (1896).

and man performed his duty with the most unflinching bravery and promptness.”

—Maj. Gen. R.H. Milroy (U.S.A.)

C.S.A. Gen. John B. Hood ordered Gen. William B. Bate to attack the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad depot at Murfreesboro to disrupt Federal supply lines on December 2, 1864. During the following three days, Gen. Nathan B. Forrest forced four Union blockhouse garrisons guarding railroad bridges between Mill Creek and LaVergne into surrender. Bate's division joined with Forrest's command and together they advanced on Murfreesboro. C.S.A. Gens. Claudius W. Sears Joseph B. Palmer also added their troops to Forrest's, making their combined forces number about 6,000. U.S. Gen. Lovell H. Rousseau controlled Murfreesboro with a force of 8,000. Knowing that he could not successfully attack Fortress Rosecrans in Murfreesboro, Forrest planned to lure Rousseau's troops out to a more vulnerable position.

Rousseau was aware that Forrest and his men were somewhere in the area, and on December 7, 1864, he sent about 3,300 of

Battle of the Cedars

December 5–7, 1864

Troops: District of Tennessee (U.S.A.); Forrest's Cavalry, Bate's Infantry Division, Gen. Claudius Sears's and Gen. Joseph B. Palmer's Infantry (C.S.A.)

Estimated casualties: 208 (U.S.A.), 214 (C.S.A.)

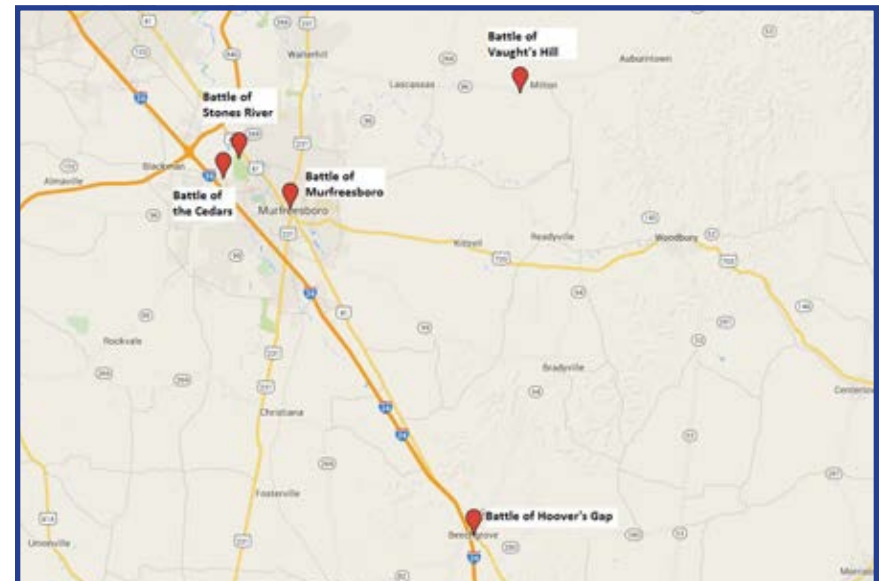
“I cannot speak too highly of the bravery exhibited by my troops especial by those in the front regiments, under the gallant Col. Thomas. Never did troops fight better for the time they were engaged. Every officer

his cavalry, infantry, and artillery to find Forrest. The two forces met near the Wilkinson Pike and engaged in a skirmish that ended in a messy retreat; some of Forrest's troops were wearing Union uniforms they had collected from the Battle of Franklin, and in the commotion of engagement, Forrest's troops fired on each other.

Hood ordered Bate to return to the main army and Forrest to continue to trouble the Union troops back at Murfreesboro. Forrest uprooted the railroad tracks, interrupting Union supply lines, but his relatively small number of men wasn't sufficient to overcome the larger Federal force at Murfreesboro.

“The enemy moved boldly forward, driving in my pickets, when the infantry, with the exception of Smith's brigade, from some cause which I cannot explain, made a shameful retreat, losing two pieces of artillery. I seized the colors of the retreating troops and endeavored to rally them, but they could not be moved by any entreaty or appeal to their patriotism.”

— Report of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest



This map shows the approximate location of the battles mentioned within this publication. Map courtesy Google Maps.



This brochure is a project of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation and the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, a partnership unit of the National Park Service administered by the Center for Historic Preservation. Text by Blake Cantrell and staff of the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area.