

Brices Cross Roads Tupelo

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Battlefield Sites
Mississippi



FROM "THE BATTLE OF BRICES CROSS ROADS" © BY NICK REEVES. COURTESY NICK REEVES

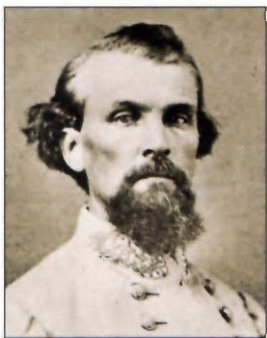
The Battle of Brices Cross Roads, June 10, 1864



William T. Sherman
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Samuel D. Sturgis
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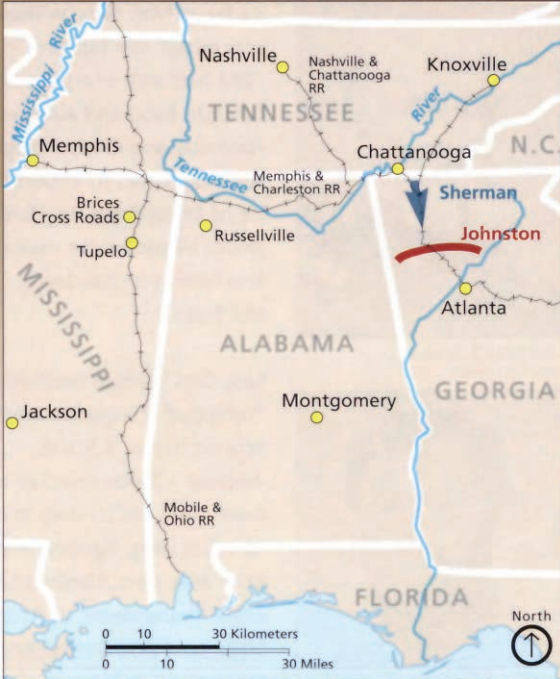


Nathan Bedford Forrest
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

In the second half of 1863 Federal armies won important victories at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Chattanooga. Four of the 11 Confederate states were completely in Union hands. The strong positions Federal armies held all around the Confederacy were further strengthened early in 1864 when President Abraham Lincoln unified all the various commands and named Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant supreme commander of all Federal forces. When the 1864 campaigns got underway, Grant chose to accompany the Army of the Potomac and put Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman in charge of the western armies. This coordination of the Federal war effort resulted in two great armies poised for simultaneous advances into the South.

In the spring of 1864 the Federal plan for war in the West was to bisect the South, east of the Mississippi River, with Sherman's armies working out of Chattanooga and Nashville. Their task: destroy the Confederate Army of Tennessee led by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, occupy Atlanta, and, if possible, go on to Savannah and Charleston. From May to September 1864, Sherman's troops fought doggedly through northern Georgia, finally forcing the evacuation of Atlanta.

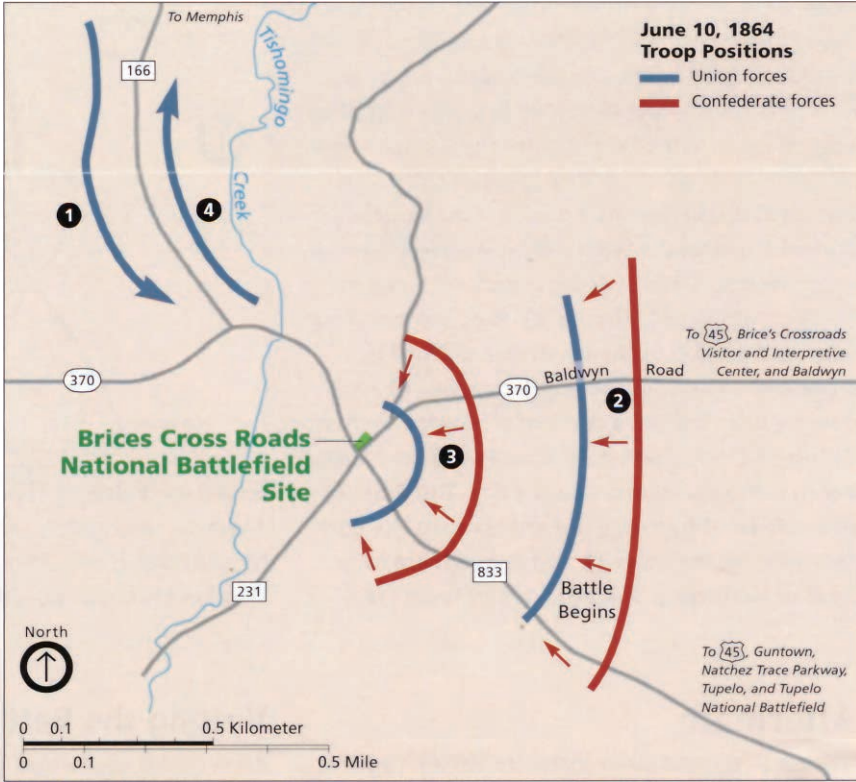
Early in the Atlanta Campaign the Confederate high command had contemplated attacking Sherman's vulnerable principal supply line—the 151-mile, single-track Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. Late in May, Maj. Gen. Stephen D. Lee, commanding the Confederate Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, sent Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest to strike Sherman's line of supply. Employed as mounted infantry, Forrest's troopers knew how to wreck a railroad.



On June 1 Forrest put his horsemen in motion at Tupelo, Miss.; three days later they were in Russellville, Ala. Knowing that his supply line was vulnerable, Sherman ordered Brig. Gen. Samuel D. Sturgis with about 8,100 Federal infantry and cavalry to move from Memphis into northern Mississippi to locate and eliminate Forrest and his troopers. Alerted by Lee of Sturgis's movement, Forrest hurried back to Tupelo and began concentrating his forces, approximately 3,500 men, along the Mobile & Ohio Railroad south and north of Brices Cross Roads. On the evening of June 9 he learned that Sturgis's force was in camp about 10 miles northwest of Brices. Both commanders planned to march the following morning.

The Battle in Brief

Sturgis's army moved out at dawn on June 10, the cavalry in the lead, headed southeast ❶. A mile-and-a-half from Brices the troopers routed a Confederate patrol, pursuing it across rain-swollen Tishomingo Creek, through the crossroads, and down the Baldwyn Road about a mile. There they were stopped by Forrest and a brigade of Kentuckians ❷. It was here that the Battle of Brices Cross Roads began about 9:30 a.m. By 11 a.m. Forrest, now reinforced, began to push the Federals back toward the crossroads. The Federal horsemen held out long enough for Sturgis's infantry to arrive. Having established arcing battle lines around the Brices Cross Roads intersection ❸, the two forces battled each other for the next four hours. By 5 p.m., after enveloping both Federal flanks and launching a slashing frontal attack, Forrest had shattered Sturgis's line, forcing the Federal commander to abandon the field and retreat back to Memphis ❹. An overturned wagon at the Tishomingo Creek bridge slowed the Federal withdrawal and resulted in the loss of at least 16 artillery pieces, and supply wagons containing guns and ammunition. Thanks to a series of defensive actions by several regiments of United States Colored Troops, most of Sturgis's army was able to escape almost certain capture.



Aftermath

Students and critics of military tactics agree that the engagement at Brices Cross Roads was characterized by the hardest kind of fighting and was a brilliant tactical victory for Forrest. Despite this, the battle did not bring relief to the Confederacy. Sherman, on this and other occasions, forestalled any attack on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad by sending small commands into northern Mississippi. One of Sherman's objectives was to hunt down and kill "that devil Forrest." A native Tennessean with no formal military training, Forrest became one of the leading cavalry commanders of the Civil War. When the war broke out he enlisted in the Confederate army as a private and by 1864 had risen to the rank of major general with an independent command. Sherman called him "the most remarkable man the Civil War produced on either side" and feared that "there never will be peace in Tennessee till Forrest is dead." At the subsequent Battle of Tupelo Sherman almost got his wish.

U.S. Colored Troops at Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo

After the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, former slaves and free black men were allowed to volunteer for U.S. military service. These men, formed into regiments commanded by white officers, were known as United States Colored Troops. Several USCT regiments under the command of Col. Edward Bouton played critical roles during the battles of Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo.

At Brices Cross Roads, Bouton's regiments, held in reserve until Forrest's troopers

soundly defeated the Federal forces, made several critical stands that slowed the Confederate pursuit during the Federal retreat. Before the Battle of Tupelo, the USCT protected the supply train and served as rear guard for the Federal army. The USCT successfully held off several attacks by Confederates, which allowed the Federals to secure the most advantageous ground for the battle of July 14–15.



USCT soldier typical of those who fought at Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo.
COURTESY DON PERCE

Soldiers! Amid your rejoicing do not forget the gallant dead upon these fields of glory. Many a noble comrade has fallen, a costly sacrifice. . . . The most you can do is cherish their memory. . . .

Nathan Bedford Forrest



FROM "THE SKIRMISH LINE" BY GILBERT GAUL. COURTESY WEST POINT MUSEUM

The Battle of Tupelo, July 14–15, 1864



Andrew J. Smith
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Stephen D. Lee
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

As far as Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman was concerned, the fighting in Mississippi in the summer of 1864 had only one purpose: to protect the railroad that brought food and ammunition from Louisville, through Nashville and Chattanooga, to his army advancing on Atlanta. It was so important to him that after the Battle of Brices Cross Roads Sherman ordered his commander in Memphis "to make up a force and go out to follow Forrest to the death, if it cost 10,000 lives and breaks the Treasury."

Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, Sherman wrote, had "whipped Sturgis fair and square, and now I will put against him A. J. Smith. . . ." On July 5, 1864, Maj. Gen. Andrew J. Smith marched into northern Mississippi, with more than 14,000 men in a dust-choked column nearly 15 miles long, fighting and skirmishing along the way. Both Maj. Gen. Stephen Lee, commanding the Confederate Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, and Forrest knew that Smith would try to bring the Confederates to battle. They believed that the best move on their part would be to await attack

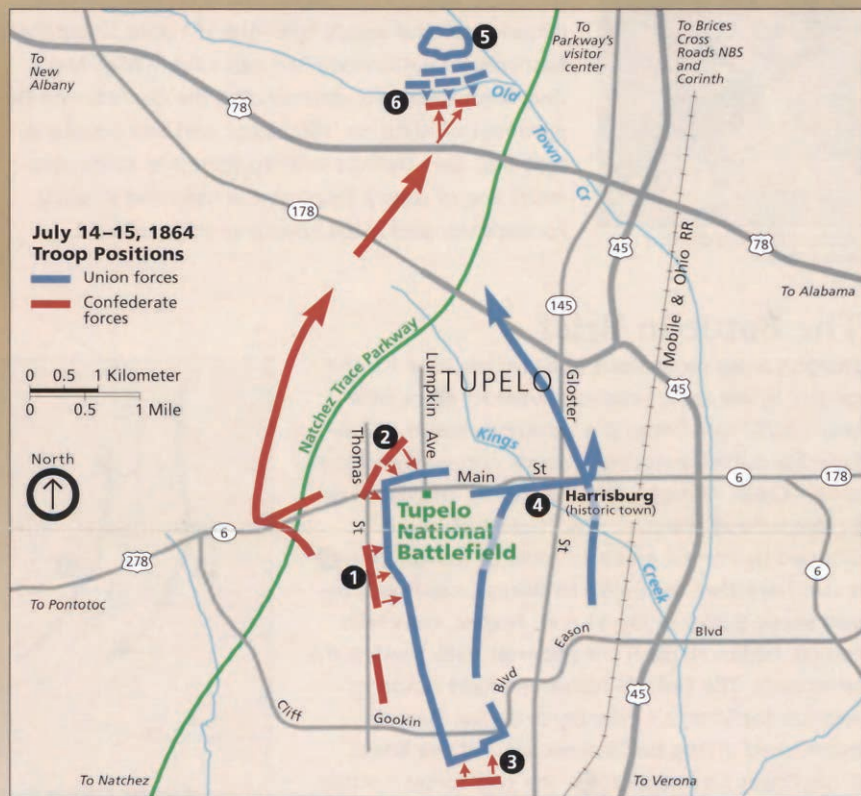
in a strongly fortified position. They chose Okolona, 18 miles south of Tupelo, for their defensive line.

To prepare a strong position, however, troops had to be drawn to Okolona from throughout north Mississippi. On July 13, his cavalry having learned that Tupelo was now unprotected, Smith marched his forces in that direction. By taking the town he believed that not only would he gain a hold on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, but he could also force the Confederates to attack him—in a fortified position.

Forrest realized what was happening and hurried up his main force to attack the long Union column. Smith's soldiers beat back the attacks and marched on, reaching the little village of Harrisburg (now within the Tupelo city limits) about dark that same evening. Here they camped, forming a battle line along the crest of a low ridge, and waited for the attack they expected to come the next day. Lee did not plan to disappoint them, telling Forrest that Smith's army must be "dealt with vigorously and at once."

The Battle in Brief

The Battle of Tupelo began here **1** at 7:30 a.m. when the Confederates began a series of uncoordinated charges against the Federal position. These attacks were easily beaten back with heavy losses. Having failed to break the Federal center, the Confederates attacked the Federal right flank, **2** again without success. The Confederate attack here was followed by a counterattack by Smith's troops that quieted the Southerners temporarily. After dark on July 14, the Confederates made another attack from the south **3** without significant effect. Although his troops had repulsed several Confederate attacks, General Smith was alarmed. The heat was taking its toll on his soldiers. Also, due to bad planning, his men had little but coffee and worm-infested hardtack to eat, and their ammunition supply was distressingly low. At 2 p.m. on July 15, after skirmishing with Confederates on the western and southern fronts, the Federals began marching north in the direction of Memphis. **4** They marched four miles and crossed to the north side of Old Town Creek and camped in the late afternoon. **5** At 5 p.m. on July 15, from a commanding ridge south of Old Town Creek, Confederate forces surprised Smith's troops with artillery and infantry fire. The Federals scrambled and formed a line that pushed the Confederates off the ridge **6** and forced them to retreat to Harrisburg. The fight at Old Town Creek



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ended the Battle of Tupelo, in which both sides suffered many casualties. Among them was Forrest himself, who received a temporarily disabling wound that kept him out of action for three weeks.

Aftermath

Neither side could claim complete victory. Lee and Forrest could say that the Federal forces had turned back after the battle. The Confederates, however, had not fought with their usual skill. Forrest's soldiers "went in by piece-meal and were slaughtered by wholesale," a Confederate officer wrote years later. The attacks, Smith reported, "were gallantly made, but without order, organization, or skill."

Smith had not followed Forrest "to the death," but he had held him for a time. Sherman gave Smith credit for that and sent him out to fight Forrest again in August. And again he kept Forrest in Mississippi and away from Sherman's supply route. In September, Forrest rode into Tennessee and his men saw hard service, but it had no effect on the outcome of the war. Sherman was beyond Atlanta and beyond the railroad; he was cutting through Georgia on his "march to the sea."

Visiting the Battlefields

Brices Cross Roads National Battlefield Site is six miles west of Baldwin, Miss., on Miss. 370. The park consists of only one acre of land, but it is surrounded by 1,390 acres of preserved battlefield owned by the Brices Cross Roads National Battlefield Commission. Information is available at the Brice's Crossroads Visitor and Interpretive Center in Baldwin, near the intersection of U.S. 45 and Miss. 370. The center is owned and operated by the town of Baldwin. It is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and from 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. It is closed Mondays and most major holidays. A small entrance fee is charged.

Tupelo National Battlefield is on Main St. (Hwy. 6) in Tupelo. The park is 1.2 miles east of the Natchez Trace Parkway. National Park Service interpreters in the Parkway's Tupelo visitor center can provide information about both battles.

Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo are two of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.

More Information
Natchez Trace Parkway
2680 Natchez Trace Parkway
Tupelo, MS 38804-9718
800-305-7417
www.nps.gov/brcr
www.nps.gov/tupe

