

Wilson's Creek

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Battlefield
Missouri



Maj. Gen. Sterling Price and the Missouri State Guard at Wilson's Creek
FROM THE PAINTING "DON'T YIELD AN INCH" BY ANDY THOMAS. COURTESY MAZE CREEK STUDIO

The Battle of Wilson's Creek (called Oak Hills by Confederates) was fought 10 miles southwest of Springfield, Mo., on August 10, 1861. It is named for the stream that crosses the battle area. Here Union and Confederate forces struggled bitterly for control of Missouri in the Civil War's first year.

Border State Politics As the Civil War began in 1861, the federal government considered Missouri's allegiance vital. Its strategic position on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers and its abundant manpower and natural resources made its loyalty to the Union imperative. Most Missourians desired neutrality, but many, including Gov. Claiborne F. Jackson, held strong Southern sympathies and planned to cooperate with the Confederate bid for independence.

When President Lincoln called for troops to put down the rebellion, Missouri was asked to supply four regiments. Governor Jackson refused the request and ordered state military units to muster at Camp Jackson outside St. Louis and prepare to seize the U.S. Arsenal. But they did not count on the resourcefulness of Capt. Nathaniel Lyon, arsenal commander.

Learning of the governor's intentions, Lyon had most of the weapons moved secretly to Illinois. On May 10 he marched 7,000 men to Camp Jackson and forced its surrender. In June, after a futile meeting to resolve differences with Governor Jackson, Lyon (now a brigadier general) led an army up the Missouri River and occupied Jefferson City, the state capital. After a failed stand upstream at Boonville, Governor Jackson retreated to southwest Missouri with part of the State Guard.

Why Wilson's Creek? Lyon installed a pro-Union state government and then moved toward southwest Missouri with reinforcements. By July 13, 1861, he was encamped at Springfield with 6,000 soldiers—the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Missouri Infantry, the 1st Iowa Infantry, the 1st and 2nd Kansas Infantry, several companies of regular Army troops, and three artillery batteries.

In the meantime Missouri State Guard commander Maj. Gen. Sterling Price had been drilling his 5,000 soldiers 75 miles southwest of Springfield. By July's end, joined by troops under Gens. Ben McCulloch and Nicholas Bart Pearce, the Confederates were 12,000-strong. On July 31, with a plan to capture Lyon's army and regain control of Missouri, Price, McCulloch, and Pearce marched northeast to attack the Federals. Hoping to surprise the Confederates, Lyon marched from Springfield on August 1, and Union troops mauled the Southern vanguard at Dug Springs the next day. Finding himself outnumbered, Lyon withdrew to Springfield. The Confederates followed and by August 6 were encamped near Wilsons Creek.

The Battle Despite inferior numbers, Lyon decided to attack the Confederate encampments. Leaving 1,000 men to guard his supplies, Lyon led 5,400 soldiers out of Springfield at night on August 9. His plan called for 1,200 men under Col. Franz Sigel to swing wide to the south, flanking the Confederate right, as Lyon's main force struck from the north. Success hinged on surprise.

Ironically, Confederate leaders also planned a surprise attack, but with rain at night on August 9, McCulloch, now in overall command, canceled it. Lyon's attack the next morning caught the Southerners off guard, driving them back. Forging rapidly

ahead, the Federals overran several Confederate camps and occupied the crest of a ridge later named "Bloody Hill." The nearby Pulaski Arkansas Battery opened fire, checking the Federal advance. This gave Price's infantry time to form a line of battle on the hill's south slope.

The battle raged on Bloody Hill for over five hours, often at close quarters, and the tide turned with each charge and countercharge. Sigel's flanking maneuver, successful at first, collapsed in fields of the Sharp farm when McCulloch's men counterattacked. Defeated, Sigel and his troops fled.

On Bloody Hill at about 9:30 am, General Lyon, wounded twice already, was killed leading a countercharge. Maj. Samuel Sturgis assumed command of the Federal forces and by 11 am, ammunition nearly exhausted, ordered withdrawal to Springfield. The Battle of Wilson's Creek was over. Losses were heavy and about equal on both sides—1,317 for the Federals, 1,222



As he led a charge of the 2nd Kansas Infantry against Col. Richard Weightman's Missourians, a bullet passed through Gen. Nathaniel Lyon's chest. Mortally wounded he dismounted and collapsed into orderly Pvt. Ed Lehmann's arms. This granite marker was placed in 1928 by the University Club of Springfield, Mo. It marks the approximate spot where Lyon was killed and commemorates one of the Union's outstanding officers.

for the Confederates. The Southerners, victorious on the field, could not pursue the Northerners. Lyon lost the battle and his life but achieved his goal: Missouri stayed in Union control.

The Civil War in Missouri The Battle of Wilson's Creek opened the Civil War in Missouri. For the next three and a half years, the state saw fierce fighting, mostly guerrilla warfare, with small bands of mounted raiders destroying anything military or civilian that could aid the enemy.

The Confederates made several attempts to break the Federal hold on Missouri, two of them directed by Sterling Price. Shortly after Wilson's Creek, Price led his Missouri State Guard north and captured the Union garrison at Lexington. He and his troops stayed in the state until early 1862, when a Federal army drove them into Arkansas. The Union victory at the Battle of Pea Ridge that March marked a huge setback for western Confederate military forces

In September 1864 Price returned to Missouri with 12,000 men. When his campaign ended, he had marched nearly 1,500 miles, fought 43 battles or skirmishes, and destroyed an estimated \$10 million worth of property. Yet the campaign ended in disaster. At Westport on October 23, in the largest battle fought west of the Mississippi, Price was soundly defeated and forced to retreat south.

By the end of the Civil War, Missouri had witnessed so many battles and skirmishes that it ranks as the third most fought-over state in the nation.

The Commanders: Confederacy

Union



Benjamin McCulloch commanded Confederate forces at Wilson's Creek. He had no formal military training but was a veteran Indian fighter, fought in the Texas War of Independence, and led a Texas Rangers company in the Mexican War. After serving Sacramento as sheriff in the California gold rush, he was appointed U.S. marshal for the eastern district of Texas. In 1861 he rose from colonel of state troops in February to brigadier general in the Confederate States Army in May. Seven months after victory at Wilson's Creek he was killed leading a division at the Battle of Pea Ridge, Ark., March 7, 1862.



Maj. Gen. Sterling Price commanded the Missouri State Guard at Wilson's Creek. He served in the Mexican War and U.S. Congress, and as Missouri governor. He accepted command of the State Guard when war began. At age 51 he was the oldest of the six principal commanders at Wilson's Creek and well-liked by his troops, who affectionately nicknamed him "Old Pap."



Nicholas Bartlett Pearce graduated from West Point in 1850 and served eight years on the frontier before resigning from the U.S. Army. When Arkansas seceded in early 1861 its Confederate state government commissioned him a brigadier general in charge of volunteers. At Wilson's Creek he commanded all Arkansas state troops.

Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon commanded Federal forces at Wilson's Creek. He was an 1841 U.S. Military Academy graduate and veteran of the Seminole and Mexican wars. He served at various frontier posts before being assigned to the U.S. arsenal in St. Louis in 1861. An ardent Unionist and a strong supporter of Lincoln and the Republican party, Lyon worked closely with Missouri Congressman Francis P. Blair Jr. to keep the state from seceding. Killed at Wilson's Creek, aged 43, he was the first Union general to die in battle in the Civil War.



German-born Franz Sigel was director of public schools in St. Louis when the Civil War began. As colonel of the 3rd Missouri Infantry he took part in the capture of Camp Jackson in May 1861 and fought in the Battle of Carthage two months later. His brigade's defeat at Wilson's Creek helped forge the Southern victory.



Maj. Samuel Sturgis assumed command of Union forces after Lyon's death at Wilson's Creek. An 1846 West Point graduate, he, like Lyon, had served in the Mexican War and on the frontier. When the Civil War began Sturgis commanded the U.S. Army post at Fort Smith, Ark. Cited for meritorious service at Wilson's Creek and in later battles, he rose to major general by war's end.



Henri Lovie sketched this Confederate cavalry charge at the Battle of Wilson's Creek.



ALL PHOTOS NPS UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

The Battlefield Tour



Driving Directions The battlefield lies three miles east of Republic and 10 miles southwest of Springfield, Mo. From I-44: take Exit 70 (Mo. MM) and turn south to US 60. Cross US 60 and drive $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to Mo. ZZ. Turn right on ZZ. From US 60 and US 65: take the James River Expressway to the US 60 exit, then turn left on US 60 to Mo. M. Turn left on Mo. M to Mo. ZZ. Turn right on Mo. ZZ. A park entrance fee is charged.

The visitor center film, battle map, and exhibits tell how the battlefield relates to the Civil War. The visitor center has schedules of guided tours, historic weapons firing demon-



The Civil War Museum (left), formerly General Sweeney's Museum of Civil War History, was founded in 1992 by Dr. Thomas Sweeney and his wife Karen. The National Park Service acquired it in 2005. It has an outstanding collection of artifacts of the Civil War west of the Mississippi River. Exhibits portray the war from 1850s Bleeding Kansas—as bitter fighting between pro- and antislavery forces erupted when the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed—to the final Confederate surrender in 1865. Your park entrance fee includes admission to the museum.

More Information
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Auto Tour Route Stops

The auto tour's 4.9-mile, one-way loop road takes you to all major historic points on the battlefield. Each stop has wayside exhibits with maps, artwork, and history of the battle. Walking trails at Gibson's Mill, the Ray House, the Pulaski Arkansas Battery and Price's Headquarters, Bloody Hill, and the Historic Overlook (stop 8) also have exhibits. At the visitor center you can buy a 42-minute audio tour of the battlefield.

Note: The one-way tour road is 18 feet wide. The 12-foot-wide left lane is for vehicular traffic; the right lane is for walking, jogging, and bicycling. Please drive carefully.

Built about 1852, the Ray House (right) is the only battle-related home in the park. From January 1856 until September 1866 it was a post office, John A. Ray, postmaster. From November 1858 to March 1860, it was a flag stop for the Butterfield Overland Stage. On August 10, 1861, the Battle of Wilson's Creek put the Civil War on the Ray doorstep. For the next four years the Rays watched soldiers and tools of war pass on the old Wire Road before peace returned to their lives.

1 Gibson's Mill The Confederate camps' northern end was here. Missouri State Guard Gen. James S. Rains headquartered his 2,500-man division near the mill. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon's dawn attack drove Rains's division south down the creek. A trail leads to the Gibson's house and mill sites.

2 Ray House and Cornfield The Ray house was a Confederate field hospital for the battle. Confederate Col. Richard Weightman died in its front room. Union Gen. Nathaniel Lyon's body was brought here at the fighting's end. The small stone springhouse down the hill was the Ray's water source. It is the park's only other surviving wartime structure. The only major fighting on this side of Wilsons

Creek was on the hill northwest of here, in the Ray cornfield. From there Union forces were driven back across the stream. The most intense, savage fighting took place on Bloody Hill, the wooded rise on the western horizon beyond Wilsons Creek.

3 Pulaski Arkansas Battery and Price's Headquarters From the wooded ridge to the northwest, Pulaski Arkansas Battery cannon opened fire on Bloody Hill. They halted the Union advance and gave Confederate infantry time to form a line of battle and attack Lyon's forces. The Little Rock, Ark., battery fired on Lyon's men on Bloody Hill through-



out the battle. Near here to the west, Missouri State Guard commander Maj. Gen. Sterling Price set up headquarters in the William Edwards home yard amidst the 12,000-man Southern army's camp. It was here that Price and Gen. Benjamin McCulloch first learned of the Union attack.

4 Sigel's Second Position On the ridge across Wilsons Creek to your left, Col. Franz Sigel's Union artillery heard Lyon's attack, and they opened fire on the 1,800 Southern cavalry camped in this field. Routed Confederates fled to the woods to the north and west. Crossing to this side of the creek, Sigel halted a quarter mile in front of you and formed his 1,200 men into a line of battle to oppose a

Confederate cavalry regiment positioned in the north end of this field. After a 20-minute artillery bombardment, the Southerners withdrew and Sigel continued his advance.

5 Sigel's Final Position Sigel halted his advance on this hillside, forming a line of battle across the Wire Road. Here, Confederate troops that he mistook for a Federal regiment attacked and defeated him. This costly error turned the battle's tide in favor of the Confederates.

6 Guibor's Battery Near here Capt. Henry Guibor positioned his battery with the Confederate line of battle. From its position the battery duelled with Union artillery on the crest of Bloody Hill. Confederate infantry mounted three attacks through these fields and woods, but the Union line held and each attack was defeated. On their fourth assault here, the Southerners found the Federals had abandoned the crest and were retreating.

7 Bloody Hill General Lyon's 4,200 men held this high ground against repeated attacks throughout the battle. As fighting peaked, battle smoke covered the entire south slope. Over 1,700 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed—including General Lyon—or wounded here. A 0.75-mile walking trail leads past the site of Totten's Battery, the Lyon marker, and a sinkhole where 30 Union soldiers were hastily buried.

8 Historic Overlook The battle's first shots were fired in this area around 5 am. Lyon's troops quickly overcame Southern resistance and advanced on Bloody Hill. After several hours of hard fighting, Union troops fought a delaying action in the area while retreating to Springfield. You can see the John Ray house to the southeast. This concludes your auto tour of Wilson's Creek National Battlefield. Follow the tour road to return to the visitor center parking lot.

