

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 Civil War in Missouri

The Battle of Wilson's Creek in 1861 opened the Civil War in Missouri. For the next three and a half years, the state saw fierce fighting, mostly guerrilla warfare, with bands of mounted raiders destroying anything military or civilian that could aid the enemy.

The Confederates made many attempts to break the Federal hold on Missouri, two of them directed by Maj. Gen. Sterling Price. Shortly after Wilson's Creek, Price led his Missouri State Guard north, capturing the Union garrison at Lexington. He and his troops stayed in Missouri until early 1862, when a Federal army drove them into Arkansas. The Union

victory at the Battle of Pea Ridge in March 1862 marked a 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 \$10 million in property. Yet the campaign ended in disaster. At the Battle of Westport on October 23, the largest west of the Mississippi, Price was defeated and forced south.

By the Civil War's end, Missouri had seen so many battles and skirmishes that it ranked as the third most fought-over state in the nation.

The Commanders

CONFEDERACY



Brig. Gen. 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 U.S.-Mexican War. Seven months after victory at Wilson's Creek he was killed at the Battle of Pea Ridge, Ark.



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



Brig. Gen. Nicholas Bartlett Pearce, a West Point graduate, served 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.

UNION



Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon commanded Federal forces at Wilson's Creek. A West Point graduate, he was assigned to the U.S. arsenal in St. Louis in 1861. A supporter of Lincoln and the Republican party, Lyon worked with Missouri Congressman Francis P. Blair Jr. to keep the state from seceding. Killed at Wilson's Creek, he was the first Union general to die in battle in the Civil War.



Col. 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. His brigade's defeat at Wilson's Creek helped forge the Southern victory.



Maj. Samuel Sturgis took command of Union forces after Lyon's death. Like Lyon, he had served in the U.S.-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.

The Battle

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

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

President Lincoln called for troops to put down the rebellion and asked Missouri to supply four regiments. Governor Jackson refused the president's request. Instead he ordered state military units to muster at Camp Jackson outside St. Louis and prepare to seize the U.S. arsenal.

Capt. Nathaniel Lyon, arsenal commander, learned of the governor's intentions and moved most of the weapons to Illinois. In May Lyon marched 7,000 men to Camp Jackson to force its surrender. After a futile meeting to resolve differences with Governor Jackson in June, Lyon led his army up the Missouri River and occupied Jefferson City, the state capital. Jackson and part of the State Guard retreated to southwest Missouri.

Why Wilson's Creek? Lyon installed a pro-Union state government and moved reinforcements toward southwest Missouri. By July 13 he was camped at Springfield with 6,000 soldiers from Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa, plus companies of regular Army troops.

Meanwhile, Missouri State Guard commander Maj. Gen. Sterling Price had been drilling 5,000 soldiers southwest of Springfield. By July's end, troops under Gens. Ben McCulloch and Nicholas Bart Pearce brought the Confederate strength to 12,000. On July 31, with a plan to capture Lyon's army and regain control of Missouri, Price, McCulloch, and Pearce marched to attack the Federals. They were camped near Wilson's Creek by August 6—and ready to fight.

A Bold Plan Despite inferior numbers, Lyon decided to attack the Confederate encampments. Leaving 1,000 men to guard supplies, Lyon led 4,200 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 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, commander McCulloch canceled it. Lyon's attack the next morning caught the Southerners off guard, driving them back. 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, the tide turning with each charge and countercharge. Sigel's flanking maneuver failed in the Sharp farm's fields when McCulloch's men counterattacked. Defeated, Sigel and his troops fled.



Gen. Nathaniel Lyon was killed as he led a charge of the 2nd Kansas Infantry against Col. Richard Weightman's Missourians. This granite marker, near the spot where Lyon was shot, commemorates one of the Union's outstanding officers.

At about 9:30 am, 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. The Battle of Wilson's Creek was over. Losses equaled 1,317 for the Federals and 1,222 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.

Cavalry charge at Battle of Wilson's Creek by Henry Lovie, 1861.



Planning Your Visit

Visitor Center Start at the visitor center for information, a film, maps, exhibits, a library, restrooms, and a bookstore. You will find schedules for guided tours, historic weapons firing demonstrations, and programs; offered seasonally. The visitor center is open daily; closed Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. Details at www.nps.gov/wicr.

Civil War Museum The museum has exhibits and artifacts relating to the Civil War west of the Mississippi River. Closed in winter. You can also see exhibits on the park website.

Accessibility Contact the park for information about accessible activities and facilities. Service animals are welcome.

Safety First Remember, your safety is your responsibility. • Summers are hot; protect yourself from the sun and drink plenty of water. • Watch out for ticks, chiggers, stinging insects, and poison ivy. • Do not climb on cannon or historic fences. • The use of metal detectors is prohibited. • For firearms regulations check the park website. • Pets must be on a leash; they are not allowed in buildings.



Civil War Museum

• Do not disturb wildlife or plants or remove or deface natural or cultural features; all are protected by federal law.
Emergencies: call 911.

More Information
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www.nps.gov/wicr



Getting Here The battlefield is east of Republic and southwest of Springfield, Mo.
• From I-44: take Exit 70 (Mo. MM) south to Mo. ZZ; turn right on ZZ; go to park.
• From US 65: go west on US 60 (James River Expressway) to US 60/Republic exit; go south on US 60 to Mo. M; go left on Mo. M to Mo. ZZ; turn right on Mo. ZZ; go to park.

Wilson's Creek is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs, visit www.nps.gov.

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Touring the Battlefield

The auto tour's 4.9-mile loop road takes you to major points on the battlefield. Pay fee at the visitor center. Each stop has maps, artwork, and exhibits that tell the story of what happened there. Trails at Gibson's Mill, Ray House, Pulaski Arkansas Battery and Price's Headquarters, Bloody Hill (Stop 7), and the Historic Overlook (Stop 8) also have exhibits. Stops 2, 3, 5, and 7 have audio messages.

Share the Road! The one-way tour road is 18 feet wide. The left lane (12 feet wide) is for vehicles. The right lane is for pedestrians and bicycles. Please drive carefully.

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. Union Gen. Nathaniel Lyon's dawn attack drove Rains' division down the creek. A ½-mile trail leads to the Gibson's house, mill sites, and where Union Capt. Joseph Plummer crossed Wilson's Creek.

2 Ray House and Cornfield The Ray house was a Confederate field hospital for the battle. 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. The only major fighting on this side of Wilson's Creek was on the hill northwest of here, in the Ray cornfield. From there Union forces under Plummer were driven back across the stream.

3 Pulaski Arkansas Battery, Edwards Cabin/Price's Headquarters From the wooded ridge to the northwest, the Pulaski Arkansas Battery cannon opened fire on Bloody Hill. They halted the Union advance and gave Confed-

erate infantry time to form a line of battle and attack Lyon's forces. The battery fired on Lyon's men throughout the battle. Near here to the west, Missouri State Guard commander Maj. Gen. Sterling Price set up headquarters near the William Edwards cabin amidst the 12,000-man Southern army's camp. It was here that Price and Gen. Benjamin McCulloch learned of the Union attack.

4 Sigel's Second Position On the ridge across Wilson's Creek to your left, Col. Franz Sigel's Union artillery heard Lyon's attack



John Ray watched from his porch as the battle raged in his cornfield. His wife and nine children, a slave named Aunt Rhoda and her four enslaved children, and a mail carrier took shelter in the cellar.

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 Confederate cavalry gathering 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.

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 ¾-mile walking trail goes 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. At 11 am Union troops fought a delaying action while retreating to Springfield. You can see the John Ray house to the southeast.

This ends your battlefield auto tour. Follow the road to the visitor center parking lot.

