

Tracing the Civil War

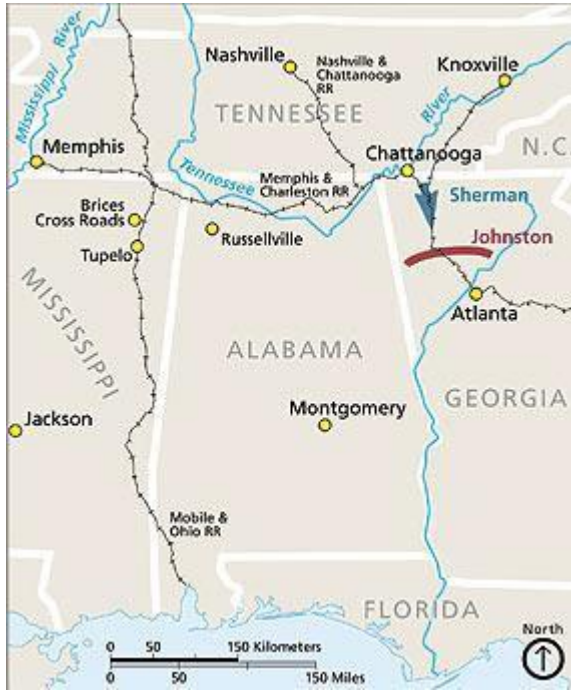
The American Civil War along the Natchez Trace: Mississippi



Summary of the Battle of Brice's Crossroads (June 10, 1864)

Overall Background

In the spring of 1864, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman faced a huge challenge. He had been ordered by General Ulysses Grant, now commanding all Federal armies, to march into Georgia, seek and destroy the Confederate army there and capture Atlanta. One of the most important concerns for Sherman as he began this campaign was maintaining and protecting his supply lines. A system of railroad lines running from Chattanooga to Nashville and from Memphis to Chattanooga would serve Sherman as the main arteries bringing food and supplies to his army as it marched southward. If raiding Confederate cavalry managed to damage and destroy these tracks, Sherman's advance would be seriously delayed or even stopped. Confederate cavalry under General Nathan Bedford Forrest had already carried out a successful series of raids into Tennessee and Kentucky. To Sherman, Forrest presented the biggest threat to his rear areas and thus needed to be dealt with. To that end, Sherman ordered that an expedition be launched from Memphis into Mississippi to tie down Forrest and destroy the Confederate railroads from Tupelo to Meridian and Grenada. In early June, an 8,000 man Union army under the command of



General Samuel Sturgis began the long, hot march into Mississippi.

Based in north Mississippi, Forrest was under the command of General Stephen D. Lee. Lee's primary job was the defense of Mississippi whose railroad network and fertile farmlands provided much needed supplies for the Confederacy. When Lee learned of the approaching Federals, he recalled Forrest to Tupelo from North Alabama where the Confederates were staging a raid into Tennessee. Forrest and his 3,500 troopers arrived in the vicinity of Tupelo to discover that Sturgis's column was nearby. Forrest hoped that he could destroy the Union army in detail as it converged near Baldwyn at Brice's Crossroads.

Forrest, familiar with area and knowing he was outnumbered, had several advantages he hoped to use for his benefit. The weather was very hot and the roads were muddy from an unusually long period of rains. The Federals would have to cross the bridge at Tishomingo Creek almost exclusively because the creek was flooded from the rain rendering impassable. He determined to bring the advancing Union cavalry to battle forcing them to call up the infantry for support. He hoped then, having caused the infantry to hurry in the rugged conditions, they would arrive worn out. His strategy would play out brilliantly for the Confederates and grievously for the Federals.

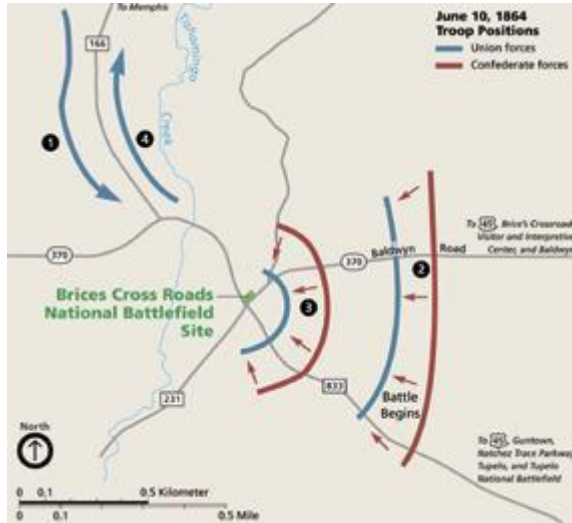
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The Battle

Union cavalry were positioned east of the crossroads when the advancing Confederates struck around



9:00 am. After a couple of hours of hard fighting, the Federal troopers began to fall back toward the crossroads awaiting help from the Union infantry. Sturgis ordered his infantry to “double quick” to the sound of the guns to relieve the cavalry. As Forrest had predicted, the Union foot soldiers arrived on the field worn from the heat and mud. As the Confederate troopers and artillery pounded the tired Federals around the crossroads, Forrest sent troops around the Union flanks in an effort to get in their rear and cut off any escape routes. After about four hours of vicious fighting, the Federal lines broke and they began an unorganized retreat back toward Memphis. An overturned wagon blocking the bridge at Tishomingo Creek added further complications as Sturgis’s men tried to fall back. The mud caused many wagons and

ambulances to become stuck and resulted in their capture along with the supplies and wounded they carried. Stiff resistance by a brigade of the U.S. Colored Troops slowed the Confederates enough to allow many of the panicked Federals to escape but Forrest’s victory was total and complete.

The Result

The Confederate victory at Brices Crossroads was one of the most one sided of the entire war. Forrest reported his casualties at less than 500 while Federal losses totaled about 2,500 men killed, wounded, or captured. The Confederates also captured hundreds of wagons, ambulances, cannons, limbers, and caissons along with their accompanying horses and mules. In addition, hundreds of rounds of artillery ammunition and thousands of rounds of small arms and their ammunition were confiscated as well. While the battle was a resounding tactical victory for Forrest, it had little impact on overall Union strategy. Sturgis’s expedition, while a failure, did succeed in keeping the Confederates occupied and off of Sherman’s supply lines in Tennessee. Sturgis and his column would be replaced by another which would march into Mississippi in July leading to the Battle of Tupelo.