



# THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

## The Camp Jackson Incident

St. Louis lawyer Uriel Wright declared in May 1861, "If Unionism means such atrocious deeds as have been witnessed in St. Louis, I am no longer a Union Man." Wright was referring to what later became known as the Camp Jackson Incident, the first and only armed clash between Union and secessionist forces in St. Louis. At the western end of the St. Louis Street Railway line (near today's St. Louis University), in a park-like setting, events exploded which cast Missouri headlong into the Civil War.

Missouri Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson, who favored the southern cause, realized that the key to keeping his state neutral or causing it to secede from the Union lay within the walls of the U.S. Arsenal in St. Louis. Located on south Broadway, just three miles from the Old Courthouse and across the street from where the Anheuser-Busch Brewery stands today, sixty thousand muskets lay waiting to be used by one side or the other. The arsenal also held forty-five tons of gunpowder, over one million cartridges, forty cannons, and all the necessary machinery to repair and manufacture more arms. With this prize Governor Jackson could arm his Missouri Militia and control the future of the state.

Brig. Gen. Daniel Frost, who was secretly working for Governor Jackson, reported in January 1861 that the commander of the arsenal, Maj. William H. Bell, was ready to turn it over to state authorities if this was demanded of him. Missouri Senator Frank P. Blair, however, along with many pro-Union citizens of St. Louis, was not willing

to allow this prize to fall into Governor Jackson's hands. Blair pulled political strings to have Maj. Bell relieved of command at the arsenal, and replaced him with pro-Union Capt. Nathaniel Lyon. By April, Lyon sent the majority of the arms and munitions safely across the river to Illinois, and issued the remainder to over 7,000 volunteers.

The issue of which side would control St. Louis was still unsettled when Fort Sumter was fired upon by South Carolina forces on April 12, 1861, touching off the Civil War. On April 23rd Governor Jackson ordered the pro-secession Missouri Militia to establish a camp "to attain a greater degree of efficiency and perfection in organization and discipline." In response Gen. Frost ordered the militia of the 1st Military District into a week of training.

In the early morning hours of May 6, 1861, about 800 uniformed men began forming in companies and regiments at the corner of Sixth and Olive Streets. At 9:30 a.m. drums began to roll as columns of these pro-secession men marched west on Olive to the edge of town. John H. McNamara, a member of one of these units, the St. Louis Washington Blues, remembered that early morning: "Now, for my gray blouse, blue pants and Continental hat. So! Now, my musket. So! 'Fall into ranks?... Forward!' 'March!' Tramp, tramp! through many a winding street. Tramp, tramp! through crowds of admiring citizens. Tramping, tramping! to 'The Girl I Left Behind Me.' - Aye! but the girls must be left behind. They

crowd along the side walks; keeping opposite the 'files' where their sweet-hearts are proudly 'lefting' it... Tramp! tramp! through clouds of dust. Tramp! tramp! into Lindell's Grove. Tramp! tramp! to the air of Dixie... "The soldiers established "Camp Jackson," a military encampment named after Missouri's governor, near today's St. Louis University.

The following morning Capt. Joseph Kelly received orders to proceed to Jefferson City with equipment for the secessionist cause, including about 200 hunting rifles and 70 tons of powder. John McNamara recalled that the "first excitement in camp was a call for volunteers from each company, to go under command of Capt. Joe Kelly - the very head and front of a soldier - for the important purpose of secretly taking and guarding a large supply of ammunition, by steamers from St. Louis to the capital of the State. The enthusiasm of the boys brought out double the number called for, and the judgement of Capt. Joe sent back to camp the worse half of the volunteers - and myself along with them - which I always looked upon as an oversight."

The next few days passed quietly, but with much anxiety as rumors began to spread through Camp Jackson of an intended attack by Union forces under Gen. Lyon. Two companies of U.S. Regulars and about 7,000 volunteers, mostly Germans, composed Lyon's command. Around the campfires of the First Regiment the general feeling was expressed by drummer William C. Streeter, who stated that "If the United States regulars attack the camp I won't lift a finger in resistance, but if the Illinois, Iowa or German troops make the attack, I'm ready for a fight." On the morning of May 10, Gen. Frost sent a letter to Gen. Lyon from Camp Jackson asking what Lyon intended to do with his troops. Would he attack the camp of secession forces? Gen. Lyon refused to accept the letter, and ordered his 7,000 soldiers to begin their march on Camp Jackson.

Gen. Lyon deployed his infantry and two batteries of artillery completely around the camp, cutting off any possible escape if Gen. Frost intended to slip away. He sent a letter to Gen. Frost demanding the unconditional surrender of the

secessionist forces. Within Camp Jackson, William C. Streeter recalled that as "soon as the first startle at the appearance of the Federal troops had passed, Captain West ordered his company to fall in for drill, saying: 'Men, don't pay any attention to them.' Captain West soon was sent for to report at brigade headquarters, and leaving the company standing at a 'parade rest,' he obeyed the call. Although it seemed a long time, it was really but a few minutes when he returned and, assuming command, spoke, practically as follows: 'Men, this camp is to be surrendered to General Lyon and we with it as prisoners of war. We are to be marched to the United States arsenal to-night, and after that God alone knows what disposition will be made of us' ... After a few preliminary evolutions in the manual of arms, Captain West, just to show that we were soldiers, gave the orders to stack arms, hang the belts and accouterments on the stacks then right face, forward march into our assigned position at the head of the column of prisoners, between two ranks of Federals."

While waiting for Frost's surrender, Gen. Lyon was kicked in the stomach by an orderly's horse and rendered unconscious. An hour passed before he regained his senses, just enough time for trouble to begin. Fifteen-year-old Philip D. Stevenson remembered that "a tedious and dangerous delay in the proceedings took place, why, I know not. Why they did not march their prisoners off at once I can not tell. The delay brought all the trouble. The masses of the people and the troops themselves grew more and more into ferment of ill suppressed excitement. Probably insults, jeers too were thrown by the people at the German soldiers all through this waiting time, but I did not hear any. The first thing of the kind I noticed was the thing that precipitated the massacre! That massacre was started by a boy of my own age. He was quite near me at the time and I saw his act. We were inside the square, standing in quite a crowd of people looking at and facing the soldiers, and not thirty paces off. This boy picked up a clod of dirt and pitched it at their mounted officer, a Captain Blandowski, who was riding up and down the line slowly, trying I suppose to keep order. In an instant the whole line, up with their guns, fired a volley into us! He had wheeled his horse with a

smothered exclamation of some kind (the clod had hit his leg) and they, I supposed thought he said 'fire!' I do not believe he did. But the mischief was done; the raw undisciplined and excited recruits were beyond his control. Their volley was wild and overhead for the most part, but the results were bad enough. Blandowski himself shot, his leg shattered, and quite a number in the crowd killed and wounded. That however was but the beginning. We ran, of course, pell mell, but where could we run? Only towards the other side of the square. And as we did so, the other side opened on us. And thus like sheep in a slaughter pen, for some minutes, nay, after intervals of silence, men, women and children, were kept running from one side of the pen to the other, only to receive another volley poured into them, some falling killed or wounded all the time."

As the officers regained control of their men and the smoke cleared, the results of the past few minutes were plainly seen. Twenty-eight people lay dead or wounded on the green spring grass. Many more no doubt were carried to nearby homes mortally wounded, to die days later but not to be counted in the death tally. The prisoners were finally marched through the city streets to the St. Louis Arsenal. There they spent a cold, hungry and uncomfortable night crowded into a few buildings, and were paroled the following morning.

Following the round-up and unfortunate killing at Camp Jackson, St. Louis was firmly in the hands of the Union; soon the rest of the state followed. General Lyon led his army up the Missouri River to take the state capitol, Jefferson City, and forced the governor and the legislature to flee the state. Many of St. Louis' young men served in the ranks of the Federal army, and saw action in Missouri and throughout the South.

Governor Jackson used the events of May as a rallying cry to gather troops to his standard, for in his eyes Missouri had been invaded, its citizens murdered in the streets by Federal soldiers. The incident pushed many of Missouri's young men, who were generally neutral on the issues of the war, into the ranks of the pro-southern Missouri State Guard. Many later served in the Confederate

army, and tried to regain their beloved but "lost" state. Most never returned, finding only an unmarked grave on some southern battlefield, far away from home.

St. Louis' Camp Jackson Incident was one of the earliest instances of bloodletting in the Civil War, a minor precursor to the horrible battles to follow. It helped to polarize an already divided state. Even pro-Union men like prominent lawyer Uriel Wright disapproved of the conduct of the affair and the fact that it needlessly evolved into a bloody confrontation. St. Louis made nationwide headlines, sending a message that the state was by no means secure and prompting President Lincoln's later actions to keep Missouri in the Union at all costs. The Camp Jackson Incident set the tone for the conduct of the Civil War in the West, continuing the partisan violence of "Bleeding Kansas" and leading to the guerrilla outrages of "Bloody Bill" Anderson and William Clarke Quantrill. Missouri went on to suffer four long years of bloodshed, trailing only Virginia and Tennessee in the number of battles and skirmishes fought on her soil. The state paid a horrible price for the mistakes of Camp Jackson, which undoubtedly helped to prolong and deepen the animosities of the Civil War.

