

# Blockhouses-- Federal Means Of Protecting Communication

These ingenious little forts gave a measure of security for key points on the railroad from Atlanta to Nashville. But depend on Forrest to devise a way to knock them over.

*By Col. W. E. Merrill*

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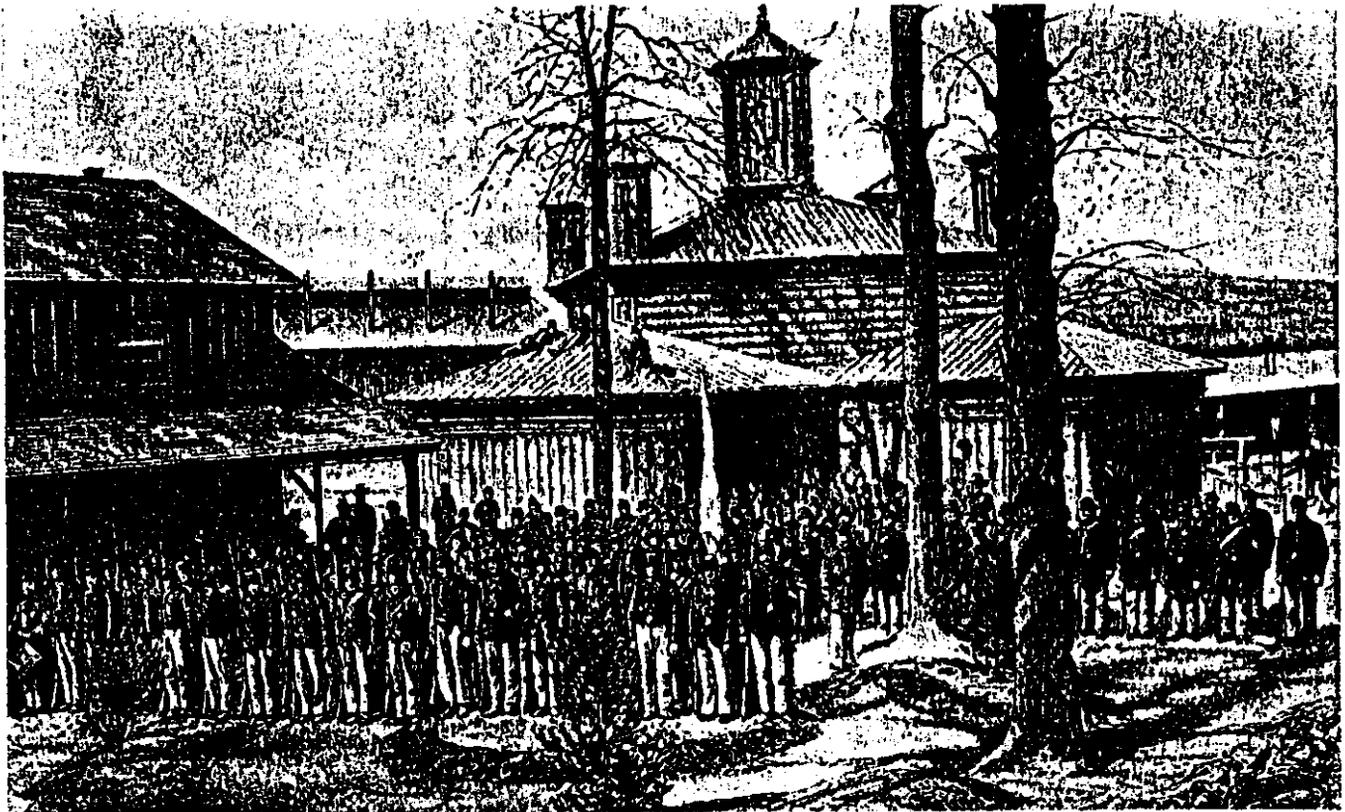
AMONG ALL the American armies that fought in the Civil War, the Army of the Cumberland was the only one that fought exclusively along railroads, was supplied wholly by rail, had its depots at prominent railroad centers, fought to secure enemy rail centers, and in general was compelled to adapt its strategy and tactics to the logistics of rail transportation. Also, no other army acquired so great an experience in defending rail lines passing through hostile territory.

Supplies for the depot at Nashville were received chiefly by rail from Louisville, 185 miles, and when the army was at Chattanooga its only line of supply was the single-track railroad to Nashville, 151 miles. When Sherman's armies were at Atlanta their line of supply back to Louisville was 473 miles long, most of it in enemy country. The success of the campaigns depended entirely on holding this line with such tenacity that no serious break in it could be made by cavalry raids or by the disaffected population. The destruction of a single defile such as a bridge would have been serious. It was important, then, to arrange a system of railroad defenses that would require a minimum of men, otherwise the army at the front would have been so weakened by guard detachments as to be unable to continue the offensive.

AS CHIEF ENGINEER of the Army of the Cumberland I was responsible for the safety of the rail system shown on the map. Experience led me to select the blockhouse as the only practical means of defense. During Buell's campaign in Kentucky and Tennessee my predecessor constructed stockades for defending bridges, a favorite form being that of a square redoubt with four circular bastions without overhead cover. These works were effective against infantry but were worse than nothing when attacked by artillery, becoming at such times mere slaughter pens. I determined to make my blockhouses proof against the horse artillery that accompanied cavalry. At Lavergne I decided to change the location of the stockade there, so took advantage of this opportunity to test the power of such a redoubt to resist artillery. After several rounds of solid shot had been fired at it, I saw that even timber twenty-four inches thick would not stand up against artillery. I decided to double the walls.

The tower of the blockhouse provided an excellent observation point. It was set diagonally to the lower story, so as to thoroughly cover the surrounding country. To avoid excessive weight it was made of one thickness of logs, the expectation being that it would be vacated in the event of an artillery attack.

To resist plunging fire, the roof of the blockhouse was made of a layer of logs laid side by side and covered with earth. This was covered with shingles when they could be procured, or with boards and



*Blockhouse for defense of railroad yard at Chattanooga.  
(Atlas to Official Records)*

battens, it being important to keep the blockhouse dry inside, so that the garrison could live in it. For the same reason, bunks, water tanks, cellars, and ventilation were provided.

**OCTAGONAL BLOCKHOUSES** would have been better but at the outset there was not time to construct them. Late in the war they were built, and provided much better observation and fire from the loopholes. Where iron rails were available they were spiked horizontally to the timbers above the earth, thus making a rude ironclad turret.

Usually the small railroad bridges had one blockhouse each, while the larger ones had two, on opposite sides of the track. At long, high trestles four blockhouses were provided. Blockhouses for artillery were built in a few cases. A work of this kind is so costly and difficult to build that it can be justified only at critical points such as the two long bridges at Bridgeport on the Tennessee River.

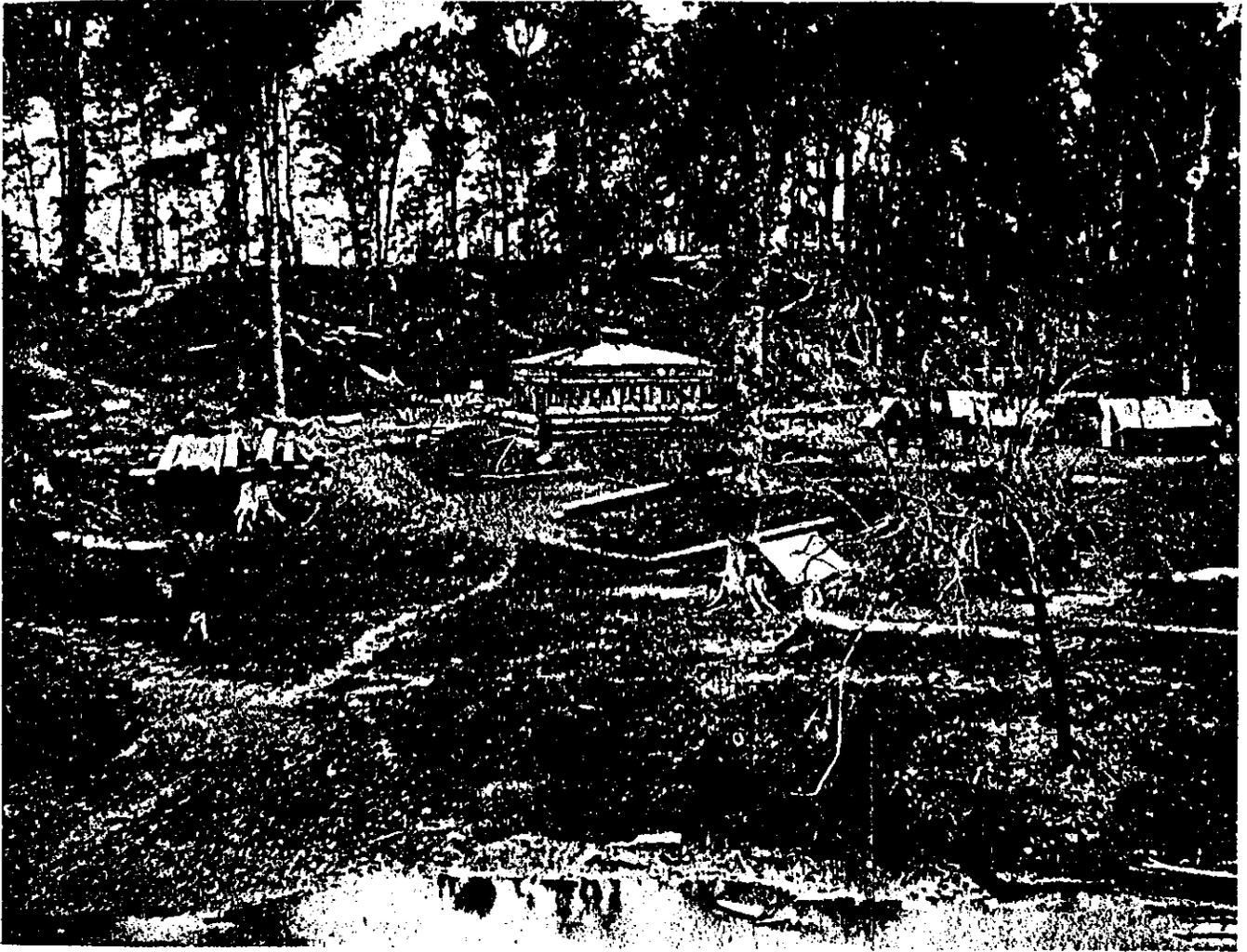
The enemy soon found that our blockhouses were proof against ordinary attack, and small bodies never molested them. Damage to the railroad track was repaired by the garrison almost as soon as made, and after a while such annoyances ceased. The only serious assaults were as follows.

**IN AUGUST 1864** General Joseph Wheeler, CSA, with a division of cavalry swept along the railroad

from Chattanooga to Atlanta, tearing up the line in some places but attacking no bridges or blockhouses. He next struck the railroad between Chattanooga and Nashville, but did no serious damage. Blockhouse No. 5, at Smyrna, defended by a small detachment under Lieutenant John S. Orr, 115th Ohio, was attacked on August 31 after refusing to surrender. The Confederates fired four pieces of artillery at the blockhouse for nearly three hours, five shells coming through and killing three men and wounding nine. The defenders kept the enemy at 1,000 yards distance, causing several casualties and preventing the bridge from being burned.

Blockhouse No. 6, at Stewart's Creek (near Murfreesboro) surrendered unnecessarily, but Blockhouse No. 7, which was fired at by musketry alone, held out. Blockhouses between Murfreesboro and Tullahoma were not attacked.

**A WOODEN BLOCKHOUSE** with only its small garrison could not, of course, withstand a determined attack by a large force having artillery. In October 1864 General Hood started north from Atlanta with his army, followed by General Sherman's forces. Sherman ordered all the blockhouses south of Dalton to be evacuated and burned. A small blockhouse near Tilton was defended to the last, and the account of that action, furnished by Lieutenant Colonel S. M. Archer, 17th Iowa Volunteer Infantry, illustrates the determination with which these small forts were defended by their garrisons:



*Blockhouses on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad in 1864. The small garrisons of forts of this type, being isolated from their main armies, lived near their blockhouses when not under attack.*



AT 7 A.M. October 13 my pickets on the railroad between Resaca and here were fired upon. They immediately deployed and skirmished with the enemy as they fell back to the blockhouse, into which I at once placed as many men as could man the loopholes, and disposed of the rest in the rifle pits on either side. At the same time I sent out two companies as skirmishers on the left of the railroad in the direction of the Connesauga and on the road in the direction from which the first demonstration was made upon us. They had been deployed but a few minutes when they were charged by the Rebels, forced back to the blockhouse, and very soon were surrounded by a heavy force of skirmishers, who secreted themselves behind trees, logs, and our partially destroyed huts. A brisk fire was maintained on both sides for four hours, during which the Rebels gained no ground, and were punished considerably, while my loss was but three or four men, from chance shots into the ditch or through loopholes.

At 11 o'clock I received, under a flag of truce, a demand to surrender. It was signed by Lieut. Gen. Alex. P. Stewart, C.S.A. I refused, and notified my command that there would be no surrender, which was applauded by all. Sharpshooting was kept up until 1 p.m., and I was congratulating myself that the enemy, having no artillery, would soon be giving up the attack, when a cannon ball passed over the blockhouse, and it was discovered that three guns were in position on a hill about 300 yards southwest of us.

THESE GUNS fired 21 shots, at intervals of about two minutes, doing no injury other than a few slight wounds. A part of the roof was torn off and the protection to the entrance shattered. Discovering that we would not yield but on the contrary poured volley after volley into them as their 12-pounders were wheeled into position, they brought up three 24-pounders. They opened a terrific fire; every shot that struck the blockhouse sprung and shattered its timbers and shook the building as if it were a reed. The roof was soon demolished and its timbers so strained that the dirt covering rained down on us in torrents. We endured this, hoping for assistance from some quarter, until 12:30 p.m. The 47th round entered a loophole and exploded in the center of the room, prostrating half the men and enveloping us in so dense a smoke that no one could see his comrade.

Failing to receive assistance, and conscious that two or three more shots would reduce the blockhouse and crush my men, that the pits were gradually being brought under enfilading fire, and having but ten rounds of ammunition left, I surrendered the garrison, satisfied with having detained the enemy seven and a half hours . . . I was taken to Dalton with my adjutant, where we were paroled.

AFTER THE CAPTURE of Dalton, Hood wished to go west through Buzzard Roost Gap. In this gap was a blockhouse containing thirty men. This blockhouse commanded the wagon road, so that no wagons or artillery could get through until it was captured. Bate's infantry division, with three batteries of artillery, were detailed to take it. The artillery fire soon made a breach in the blockhouse, but the garrison held out until dark. During the night the Confederates organized a storming party, part of whom should stop the loopholes with fence rails while the others were to leap on the roof and dig down to the garrison below. At daylight, before giving the command to attack, the Rebel colonel called on the little fort to surrender. It did so. Fully half the garrison were dead or wounded and had tried to surrender during the night, but their calls were not heard. They had con-

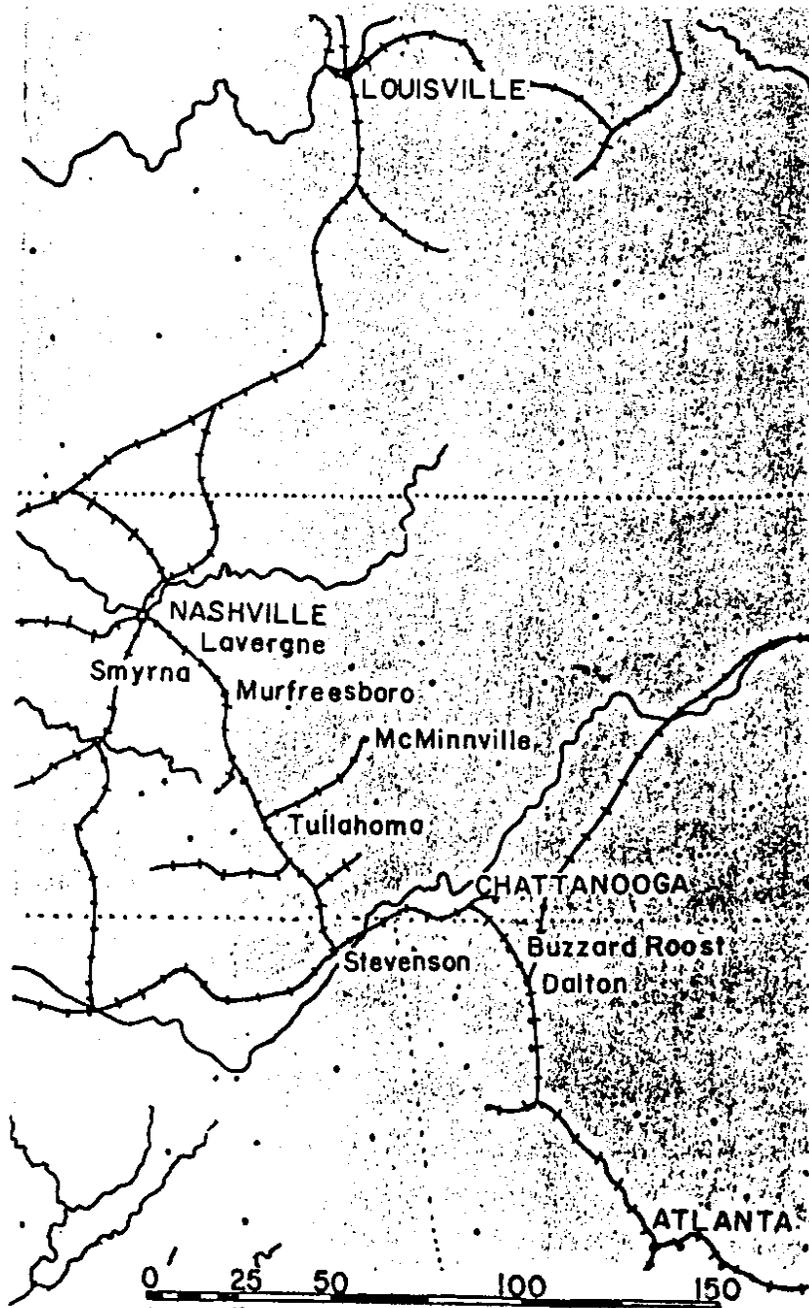
cluded that the Confederates were enraged at their obstinacy and were determined to kill all.

General Hood said of this engagement:

Our army attempted to march through Mill Creek Gap but was prevented from doing so by a squad of men in a little fort . . . field artillery had little effect upon this fortification, and when the men charged up to it they could not find an entrance; therefore it could not be taken without much loss of time and at considerable cost. We were obliged to march some twenty miles around it.

THE MOST serious destruction of blockhouses occurred in September 1864 during a raid made by General Forrest. The following account I afterward obtained from Forrest himself. He first attacked an unfinished blockhouse near the southern end of the road, and the first shell from his battery entered the

*Federal supply line by rail from Nashville to Atlanta—exposed to frequent Confederate raids. Blockhouses defended defiles, especially bridges.*



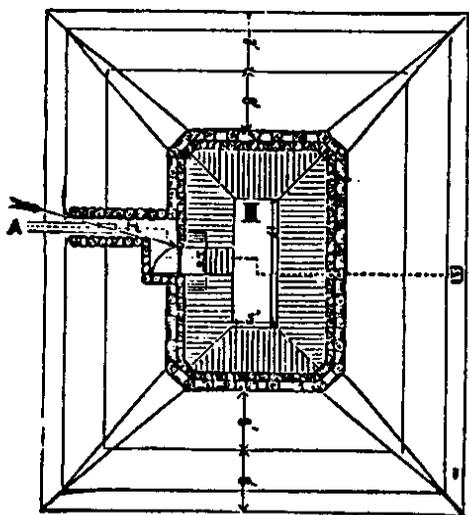


FIG. 1. PLAN OF RECTANGULAR BLOCK-HOUSE.

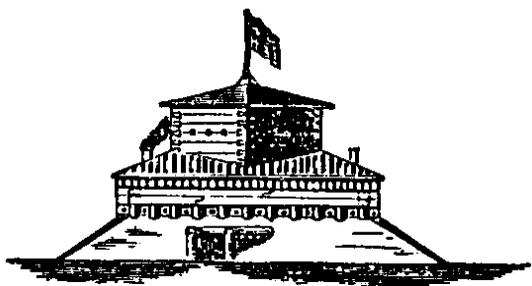


FIG. 2. ELEVATION OF RECTANGULAR BLOCK-HOUSE.

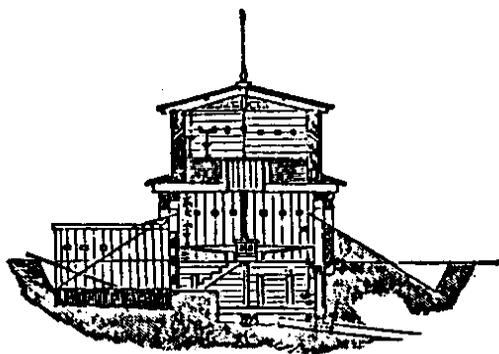


FIG. 3. SECTION ON A. B. (FIG. 1.)

blockhouse and injured some of its occupants. They at once surrendered, and the blockhouse was burned. At the next blockhouse he ostentatiously paraded the captured commander of the first; and on this convincing proof that blockhouses could be taken, quite a number of them surrendered without a fight. In all he took eleven blockhouses.

Major James R. Willett was placed on the staff of General Thomas as Inspector of Railroad Defenses. He describes some of his amusing experiences:

STOPPING my train at a blockhouse, I approached it unchallenged. No one was in sight. Inside were two soldiers, one sick and the other seated and doing nothing. He informed me that the rest of the garrison was in the woods a mile off.

"What are they doing there?"

"Cutting firewood."

"What for?"

Further investigation disclosed that the men got 50¢ a cord for cutting wood used in the locomotives. The contractors who were furnishing this wood found it more economical to hire soldiers than to pay laborers several times that amount. They were making a fat thing of it, though in the meantime the railroad was undefended. Several officers who had been bribed to wink at this activity were court-martialed, which produced great improvement.

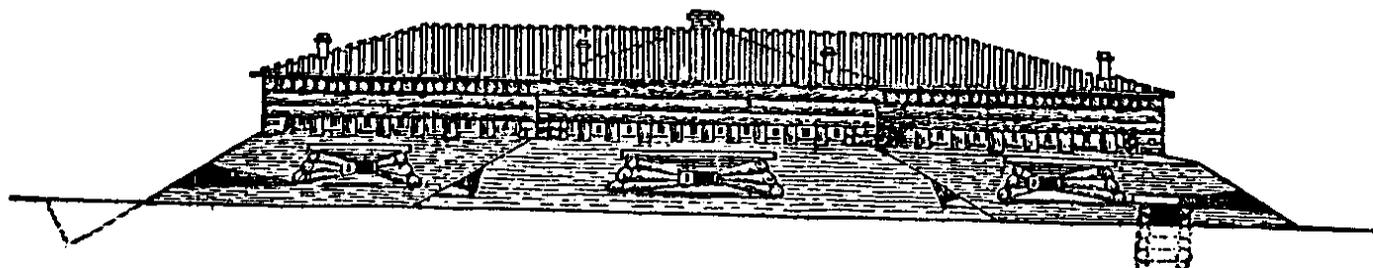
ON THE Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad just north of Stevenson, Alabama, the line crosses Crow Creek frequently, necessitating a number of blockhouses. Here I found that most of the men were camped a mile and a half away. The captain, questioned about this, explained that there was fever and ague in the area, and he, a doctor, felt that his first care was the health of his men. Hence he camped them at a distance from the swamps.

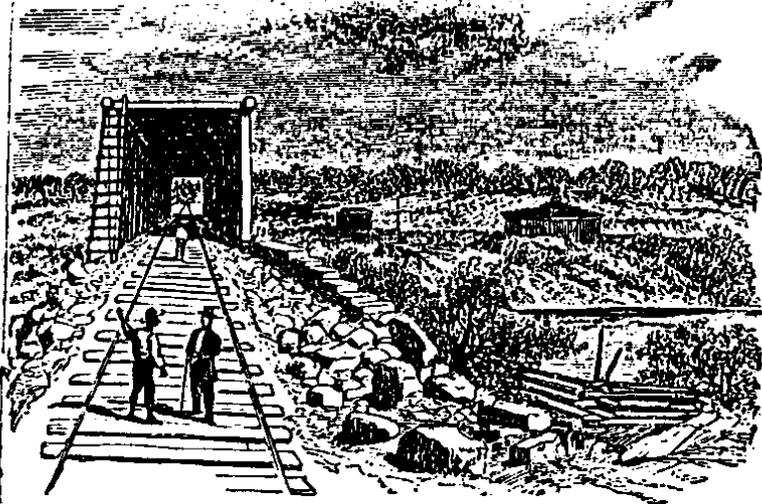
On another occasion I found a blockhouse, hidden in a thicket, and surrounded by a ditch—into which I fell—in apple pie order. The commander explained that he had fixed it all up for the visit of the inspector. He knew the latter was coming because the telegraph operator at a nearby station had told him that the inspector's train was on the road.

BESIDE their use in railroad defense, blockhouses were freely employed in the defenses of Nashville, Murfreesboro, Stevenson, McMinnville, Chattanooga, and other fortified positions. Occasionally they were independent works, but were usually citadels or keeps for earthen forts, so that the garrisons might have a secure place to which to retreat in case the main work was carried.

General Sherman testifies to the worth of the blockhouse system of defense:

*Elevation of artillery blockhouse. (Merrill)*

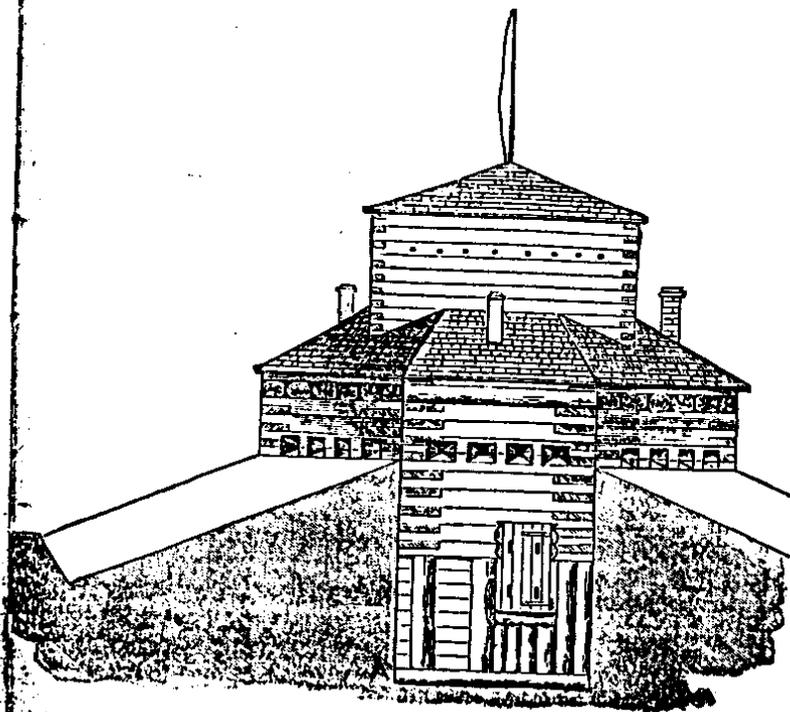




Bridge at Resaca. (Lossing)

All the important bridges were protected by good blockhouses, admirably constructed, and capable of a strong defense against cavalry or infantry. The Atlanta Campaign would simply have been impossible without the use of railroads from Louisville to Nashville; from Nashville to Chattanooga; and from Chattanooga to Atlanta. Every mile of this single track was so delicate that one man could in a minute have broken or moved a rail, but our trains usually carried tools and means for repair. We had, however, to maintain strong guards and garrisons at each important bridge or trestle the destruction of which would have necessitated time for rebuilding. For the protection of a bridge, one or two log blockhouses, two stories high, with a piece of ordnance and a small infantry guard, usually sufficed. The blockhouse had a small parapet and ditch about it, and the roof was made shot proof with dirt. These points could usually only be reached by a dash of the enemy's cavalry, and many of the blockhouses successfully resisted serious attacks by both cavalry and artillery.

Elevation of octagonal blockhouse. (Merrill)



### Maybe His Name Wasn't Smith

FRANKLIN W. SMITH, a Boston contractor, was tried by court-martial, and found guilty of pocketing a thousand or two dollars out of a contract with the Navy Department for supplies. The report of the court-martial was sent to President Lincoln for his approval, who returned it with this characteristic indorsement:

"Whereas, Franklin W. Smith had transactions with the United States Navy Department, to a million and a quarter of dollars, and had the chance to steal a quarter of a million; and whereas, he was charged with stealing only ten thousand dollars, and from the final revision of testimony, it is only claimed that he stole one hundred dollars, I don't believe he stole anything at all.

"Therefore the records of the court-martial, together with the finding and sentence, are disapproved, declared null and void, and the defendant is fully discharged."

—"A. Lincoln"

—The Blue Coats

### Knight of the Bath

UNCLEANLINESS was one of the things the regiment would not patiently endure. There were instances, though very few, where an offender was taken to a brook, stripped of his clothing, and his body holy-stoned until he looked like a boiled lobster. One such case we have in mind, of a man whose uselessness as a soldier suggested a likeness to that worthless old arm known as the "smooth-bore musket," which was carried by a few regiments in the first months of the war; and so they called him "Smooth-Bore." Water and lead were two things his melancholy could not stand, and so he relieved the regiment of his presence by deserting. It was a happy thought on his part, and put us under obligations we can never repay. To our minds, nothing he did, while in service, so became him like the leaving of it. Exit "Smooth-Bore."—History of 13th Massachusetts

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