

## **FACTS ABOUT THE BATTLE OF WILSON'S CREEK AUGUST 10, 1861**

### ***BATTLE SIGNIFICANCE:***

Wilson's Creek was the second major battle of the Civil War, coming two weeks after the battle of First Bull Run in Virginia, and the first major battle west of the Mississippi River. The death of General Nathaniel Lyon focused greater attention by the federal government on the war west of the Mississippi in general and Missouri in particular.

General Nathaniel Lyon was the first United States general killed in action since the War of 1812, and the first Union general officer to die in the Civil War.

While technically a Confederate victory, with Southern forces retaining possession of the field, they were not able to pursue the federal forces and conquer the state of Missouri, thus achieving General Lyon's goal of preserving Missouri for the Union.

### ***BATTLE LEADERS:***

Many of the commanding officers at Wilson's Creek had previous military experience in other wars. General Sterling Price commanded Missouri volunteers in New Mexico during the Mexican War, while General Nathaniel Lyon served in the regular army in Mexico, as well as several campaigns against Native Americans. General Ben McCulloch fought in three wars: The Texas Revolution, the Mexican War and the Civil War. Colonel Franz Sigel was a former German soldier and revolutionary that left Germany during the 1848 Revolution. At the outbreak of the war, he was a political leader among the German population in St. Louis.

Of the thirteen graduates of the US Military Academy at West Point that fought at Wilson's Creek, five became major generals the three rose to brigadier generals. All four of the Confederate graduates would rise to the rank of Brigadier General in the Provisional Army of the Confederacy.

Sterling Price, commander of the Missouri State Guard, was a former governor and member of Congress. A popular leader among the soldiers, they nicknamed him "Old Pap".

Upon Lyon's death, command of the Union army passed to Major Samuel Sturgis. Sturgis later rose to the rank of Major General.

Captain James Totten, Commander of Battery "F", Second US Artillery, was stationed in Little Rock, Arkansas before the War, and trained the men of the Pulaski Arkansas Battery, part of the Arkansas State Militia, in artillery drill. During the battle of Wilson's Creek, Totten's Battery and the Pulaski Battery would exchange fire during the battle.

### ***The Armies:***

Total Northern forces engaged at the Battle of Wilson's Creek were 5,400 men. Southern forces numbered 10,125. In comparison the population of Springfield in 1860 was 2,000.

The Northern Army was made up of volunteer units from Missouri, Iowa and Kansas, as well as the Regular Army. The Southern Army was composed of Confederate forces from Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas, as well as Arkansas and Missouri state troops.

The Missouri State Guard, a pro-Southern militia force, were not technically Confederate soldiers, as they had not sworn allegiance to the Confederate government, nor had Missouri seceded from

the Union. Many State Guardsmen were poorly equipped with hunting rifles, shotguns, out-of-date military weapons and farm implements, with little to no uniforms.

The Union army departed Springfield at 5:00 p.m. on August 9. In 24 hours, it marched more than 20 miles and fought a pitched battle lasting more than six hours (from around 5:00 a.m. until around noon) before returning to Springfield on the evening of August 10th.

The combined southern forces camped on Wilson's Creek prior to attacking Lyon in Springfield. This area afforded water, forage and food for the army and was within striking distance along the Wire Road. Ironically, McCulloch ordered an attack on Springfield on the morning of August 10th, but a light rain the night before delayed their movement.

The First Kansas Infantry Regiment (US) is seventh on the list of Northern units suffering the largest number of killed, wounded or mortally wounded in any one engagement during the Civil War with 106 casualties taken at Wilson's Creek. The First Missouri Infantry Regiment (US) is number eight with 103 casualties.

A total of 537 men were killed at Wilson's Creek on both sides. The federals suffered 1,317 casualties (killed, wounded and missing) and the Confederates 1,222. In terms of percentage of losses, the Union Army suffered at 24.5% casualty rate and the Confederates 12%.

The lack of standardization in uniforms on both sides caused much confusion, including when Colonel Franz Sigel mistook the gray uniforms of the Third Louisiana Regiment (CS) for the 1st Iowa Infantry Regiment (US). Sigel's command was routed, and the tide of battle turned in favor of the Confederates.

There were a total of 31 cannons used in the battle. The Union had 16 cannons organized in three batteries. The south had 15 guns organized in four batteries.

Many ethnic groups were involved in the battle. Germans and Irishmen made up large percentages on both sides. Records indicate that several African-Americans were present as servants on both sides. Mary Lincoln's dressmaker's son, George Washington Kirkland (a mulatto), was killed at Wilson's Creek as a member of the 1st Missouri Infantry Regiment (US). A small number of Cherokees joined the southern forces just prior to the battle and participated in it.

#### ***OTHER INFORMATION:***

Confederates referred to the battle of Wilson's Creek as the Battle of "Oak Hill(s)", after the original name of Bloody Hill.

The Wire Road is named for the telegraph wire strung alongside the road that ran From Springfield to Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Five men – Nicholas Bouquet, Lorenzo Immell, John M. Schofield, William Wherry and Henry Clay Wood – earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for actions performed at Wilson's Creek.

The Ray House, the only surviving structure from the time of the battle, was used as a field hospital during and after the battle by the Confederates. There were many other homes used as hospitals in the vicinity of Wilson's Creek following the battle.

As the Union army retreated from the battlefield of Wilson's Creek on August 10, 1861, the exhausted survivors on both sides undoubtedly agreed with William Tunnard of the Third Louisiana Infantry, who wrote that the battle "enlightened many ignorant minds as to the seriousness and fearful certainty of the contest." The six-hour fight near Springfield, Missouri began the process of transforming inexperienced, eager recruits into veteran soldiers. For the

surviving army commanders at Wilson's Creek, as well as for the men in the ranks, the battle was merely the first major event in a long and bloody national tragedy.

For Major General Sterling Price, commander of the Missouri State Guard, Wilson's Creek was his first combat experience since the Mexican War. Fresh from the victory against Lyon's Federals, Price decided to go on the offensive. He marched his State Guardsmen north from Springfield and trapped a smaller Union force in the town of Lexington on the Missouri River. After a formal siege of three days, the Yankees surrendered on September 20, 1861. Although Price was soon forced to abandon Lexington, he kept his State Guard in southwest Missouri through the winter of 1861-62. When a large Federal army under General Samuel Curtis moved to capture Springfield in February, 1862, Price and his men retreated into northwest Arkansas. Curtis followed in pursuit.

Brigadier General Benjamin McCulloch, the overall Southern commander at Wilson's Creek, met with Sterling Price following the battle and discussed the march to Lexington. McCulloch, concerned about protecting Arkansas and the Indian Territory, declined to join the expedition and moved his troops back into Arkansas. After brief forays into Missouri and the Indian Territory, McCulloch and his Confederates settled into winter quarters in northwest Arkansas. In February, 1862, McCulloch was joined by Price's Missourians, and under the overall command of Major General Earl Van Dorn, they moved against Curtis. In the decisive action at Pea Ridge on March 7-8, 1862, McCulloch was killed and Price retreated off the field with the rest of Van Dorn's army.

In April, 1862, Price, now a Confederate major general, transferred his men across the Mississippi River. That fall he commanded the "Army of the West" at the bloody battles of Iuka and Corinth, Mississippi, both resulting in the retreat of the Southern forces. Recalled to Arkansas in February, 1863, Price directed his men in a valiant but doomed assault on the Federal garrison of Helena, Arkansas on July 4, 1863.

In the spring of 1864, "Old Pap", in command of the District of Arkansas, enjoyed mixed success against Union General Frederick Steele's movement from Little Rock to Shreveport. Although he could claim credit for the victory at Poison Springs, Arkansas, Price mismanaged his troops at the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry.

Always hopeful that Missouri could be reclaimed for the Confederacy; Price then led 12,000 men on a raid into the state in the fall of 1864. He threatened St. Louis and Jefferson City, but Price was eventually defeated at Westport (now Kansas City) in late October, and withdrew through Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and the Indian Territory and into Texas. The raid ended any substantial Confederate resistance in the Trans-Mississippi West. Price fled to Mexico in 1865, returned to St. Louis in 1867, and died of cholera a few months later.

Major Samuel Sturgis, who assumed command of Lyon's force after his death at Wilson's Creek, retreated with the Federals to Rolla, Missouri. Promoted to a brigadier general of volunteers, Sturgis was in charge of a brigade at the Battle of Second Manassas in August, 1862. The following month, his division, as part of the Ninth Army Corps, captured "Burnside's Bridge" at Antietam after costly fighting. At Fredericksburg, his troops unsuccessfully assaulted the "Stone Wall" on Marye's Heights and suffered heavy losses. In 1864, Sturgis, now in Tennessee, commanded an expedition sent to destroy Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry Corps. In the fighting at Brice's Cross Roads on June 10, Sturgis and his men were routed by Forrest's troops. Following this disaster, Sturgis did not take the field again, and was mustered out as a volunteer officer, but continued to serve in the Regular Army until his retirement in 1886. He died three years later.

### ***WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OFFICERS?***

Eighteen graduates of the United States Military Academy (West Point) participated in the Battle of Wilson's Creek. Four claimed a Confederate command and fourteen held commissions in the

regular United States Army. On the day of battle two wore the epaulettes of general officers; both were brigadiers: Nathaniel Lyon, commander for the Union Army of the West, and N.P. Pearce, temporarily a brigadier of Arkansas State troops.

Before the close of the Civil War – in addition to Lyon – of the thirteen Union West Pointers who fought at Wilson's Creek, five attained the coveted rank of major general, commanding divisions, corps or armies; three rose to be brigadier generals leading brigades or divisions; four became colonels; one was a captain.

Within the two years following Wilson's Creek, the three Confederate West Pointers (Louis Hebert, James McIntosh, and James P. Major), in addition to Pearce, rose to be brigadier generals in the Provisional Army, C.S.A.

The Union West Pointers at Wilson's Creek included eleven officers of company grade; two officers of field grade; and one general officer. Company grade officers included: Joseph B. Plummer, Frederick Steele, James Totten, Gordon Granger, C.C. Gilbert, Daniel Huston, Eugene A. Carr, John DeBois, Joseph Conrad, Charles Farrand and George Sokalski. Field grade officers included Samuel D. Sturgis and John M. Schofield, while the only general officer was Nathaniel Lyon.

All in all, the seventeen West Pointers surviving Wilson's Creek engaged in combat more than 100 times upon 70 different fields of battle which gave direction to a campaign or in themselves were significant. Official records disclose 30 official citations of gallantry in action sufficient to warrant the actor a brevet to a next higher rank.

Schofield commanded the Army of the Ohio and Steele commanded the Army of Arkansas. Granger headed up the IV Corps, Army of the Cumberland; and Gilbert led the III Corps, Army of the Ohio. McIntosh commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of McCulloch's Division and Huston commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the Army of the Frontier. Five of the officers became division commanders: Sturgis, Carr, Hebert, Major and Plummer. Totten became chief of artillery and ordnance, Army of West Mississippi; and DuBois became chief of cavalry, Department of Missouri.

At Franklin, Schofield repulsed General John B. Hood's great Confederate army to gain the additional time and relative strength necessary to render certain Hood's subsequent destruction at Nashville.

At Chickamauga, Granger's initiative saved the Union Army and ranked him with Thomas as the "hero of Chickamauga."

At luka, Herbert's Brigade absorbed the shock of Rosecrans' two divisions.

Among the West Pointers who survived Wilson's Creek, McIntosh is the single instance of death in combat. At Pea Ridge, McIntosh led a cavalry charge, then dashing to the front of his troops, fell when grape shot pierced his heart. Plummer, however, died of battle wounds August 9, 1862 near Corinth, Mississippi.

The good company and field grade officers under the test of fire on August 10, 1861 became good general officers in 1863; however, from any initial test of battle these same officers, doubtless would have emerged good leaders.

Forty-four months of bitter warfare lay ahead for the seventeen West Pointers who survived the second important battle of the Civil War. Brilliance and blundering and tragedy found a way.