

The Battle of Wilson's Creek

In the early morning hours of August 10, 1861, the rolling hillsides of southwest Missouri echoed with the thundering roar of cannon, the fire of muskets, and the shouts of officers and their men locked in mortal combat. By the time the smoke cleared, five hundred thirty five men lay dead in the hot summer sun. Hundreds more struggled with battle inflicted wounds. Included among the dead was Nathaniel Lyon, the first Union General to die in the Civil War.

Although the Civil War officially began with the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter in South Carolina, the roots of the conflict ran much deeper into America's history. Indentured servitude and the institution of slavery were part of the fabric of colonial culture long before America declared its independence from Great Britain. Differences in climate, and economic and social development between the Northern States and the Southern States however, led to the decline of slavery in the North versus the growth of slavery in the South. When the United States Constitution was created in 1787 it protected the institution of slavery. Nevertheless, slavery increasingly became a politically divisive issue between the two sections in the early to mid 1800's. A series of political compromises ensued as Southerners sought to protect their Constitutional right to own slaves from what they perceived to be an ever more anti-slavery North.

Missouri became a focal point of the slavery issue when in 1818 it requested admittance to the Union as a slave state. Missouri became the 24th State on August 10, 1821, but to maintain a balance of power in the Senate between slave and free states, the "Missouri Compromise" also admitted the State of Maine into the Union as a free state. In addition, the Missouri Compromise stated that slavery henceforth (with the exception of the State of Missouri) would not be allowed north of 36 degrees 30 minutes north latitude.

In 1853 Stephen Douglas, U.S. Senator from Illinois, desiring to establish state governments in the western territories, developed the concept of "Popular Sovereignty." Embodied in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Popular Sovereignty declared that the people of each state should decide for themselves whether their state would be free or slave. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act nullified the Missouri Compromise's restriction on slavery north of the 36 degrees 30 minutes line. It once again focused the nation's attention on Missouri and the slavery issue as pro-slavery Missourians and "Free-State" Kansans engaged in a bloody border war to determine whether Kansas would be a free state or a slave state. Opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act also prompted the birth of the anti-slavery Republican Party.

On the eve of the Civil War however, Missouri was a deeply divided state. Originally settled primarily by Southerners, there were large hemp and tobacco plantations along the Missouri River, an area later known as "Little Dixie," where large numbers of slaves toiled. Elsewhere in the state, particularly in the growing city of St. Louis where a large German immigrant community thrived, and in the Ozark Mountain region where the terrain was not compatible with large plantations, anti-slavery sentiment, or at least strong pro-Union sentiment, existed. Many Missourians indicated their desire to remain

neutral however, when in the Presidential election of 1860, they voted not for the Northern anti-slavery candidate, Abraham Lincoln, nor for the Southern pro-slavery candidate John Breckinridge, but for the candidate they believed represented compromise, Stephen Douglas. Remaining neutral would become an untenable position after Lincoln captured the Presidency by winning all the Northern States, and deep South slave states began to secede in protest.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Missouri's allegiance was of vital concern to the United States Federal Government. The state's strategic position on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and its abundant manpower and natural resources made it imperative that it remain loyal to the Union. Missouri though, had elected a Governor, Claiborne Fox Jackson, who was a large plantation owner with strong Southern sympathies. While officially claiming neutrality, Jackson worked behind the scenes to effect Missouri's secession. A state convention was held in February 1861 to consider Missouri's secession, but Union sentiment ran strong, and Governor Jackson's desire to take Missouri out of the Union was soundly defeated.

Following the firing on Ft. Sumter in April, President Lincoln called for troops to put down the growing rebellion in the South. Missouri was asked to contribute four regiments. Governor Jackson refused the President's request and ordered state military units to muster at Camp Jackson outside St. Louis. Tensions heightened in St. Louis and across the state as lines were drawn between Unionists and Secessionists. Out of this volatile mix emerged a fiery U.S. Army Captain named Nathaniel Lyon. Lyon was a West Point graduate, career Army officer who had served time in the far west and in Kansas during the Kansas-Missouri border war over slavery. His experiences had confirmed an anti-slavery conviction in him and a determination to defend the Government of the United States. Lyon was placed in charge of the U.S. Arsenal in St. Louis which held 60,000 muskets, powder, and cannon.

When Lyon learned that Governor Jackson intended to use the state militia units encamped at Camp Jackson to seize the Federal Arsenal, he secretly moved most of the weapons to Illinois. Using the U.S. Army forces under his command and German immigrant militia units hastily sworn into Federal service, Lyon marched out to Camp Jackson and forced its surrender. Lyon proceeded to march the disarmed state militia captives from Camp Jackson, through the streets of St. Louis, to the arsenal. Angry Southern sympathizers lined the route, hurling insults, stones, and other objects at the Union soldiers guarding the prisoners. Shots rang out, killing and wounding several soldiers. The soldiers fired back indiscriminately. By the time the melee ended, 28 people were dead, including a child. Known as the "St. Louis Massacre," the incident raised secessionist fervor across Missouri, and prompted the state legislature to authorize the Governor to raise the Missouri State Guard.

Lyon, elected a brigadier general of volunteers, was placed in command of all Federal forces in Missouri. After a futile meeting with Governor Jackson to resolve the crisis, Lyon led his army up the Missouri River and occupied Jefferson City, the state capital. Jackson and the Missouri State Guard mounted an unsuccessful stand against Lyon at

Boonville, before retreating to southwest Missouri. Lyon installed a pro-Union government at Jefferson City, picked up reinforcements in the form of volunteer units from Kansas and Iowa, and then proceeded across the state to track down the fleeing secessionists. By July 13, 1861, Lyon was encamped at Springfield with about 6,000 soldiers and three batteries of artillery.

Meanwhile, Governor Jackson had turned over command of the Missouri State Guard to Major General Sterling Price. Price had fought in the Mexican War and had served as Governor of Missouri himself. Although he was a plantation and slave owner, he had been a Union supporter until the events in St. Louis swung him irrevocably into the secessionist camp. Seventy-five miles southwest of Springfield, Price busily drilled the 5,000 men in his charge. By the end of July, Confederate troops from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, under the command of former Texas Ranger turned Confederate General Benjamin McCulloch, and Arkansas State troops led by Nicholas Bart Pearce rendezvoused with Price, bringing the secessionist force to a total exceeding 12,000 men. On July 31, after formulating plans to capture Lyon's army and regain control of Missouri, Price, McCulloch, and Pearce marched northeast to attack the Federals. Lyon, hoping to surprise the Confederates, marched from Springfield on August 1. The next day, in a minor engagement with the secessionist's advance guard at Dug Springs, Lyon was successful in driving the enemy from the field, but he realized he was outnumbered and withdrew to Springfield. The Confederates followed and by August 6, were encamped along Wilson's Creek.

Price and McCulloch were at odds. Price wanted to attack Lyon at Springfield, but McCulloch was reluctant. McCulloch had little faith in the rough-hewn Missourians, 2,000 of which were not even armed. The rout at Dug Springs had only further eroded his estimation of their fighting abilities. Furthermore, Missouri had not officially seceded. Price agreed to give McCulloch overall command in an effort to pressure him into attacking. The Confederate leaders planned a surprise attack on the Federals, but rain on the night of August 9 caused McCulloch to cancel the operation. McCulloch feared the paper powder cartridges they carried would get wet, rendering their ammunition unusable. Remaining in camp, they inexplicably failed to put out pickets to guard against an attack.

Attack is exactly what Lyon had in mind. Leaving behind about 1,000 men to guard his supplies, the Federal commander led 5,400 soldiers out of Springfield that same night of August 9. Adopting a plan put forth by German immigrant Colonel Franz Sigel, Lyon split his forces. 1,200 men under Sigel marched wide to the south, flanking the Confederate right, while the main body of troops struck from the North. Outnumbered two to one, Lyon knew success hinged on the element of surprise.

Price and McCulloch were having breakfast at the Edwards' cabin on the morning of August 10 when the Union army struck. Lyon's attack caught the secessionist troops off guard, driving them back. Forging ahead the Federals overran several Confederate camps and occupied the crest of a ridge subsequently called "Bloody Hill." Nearby the Pulaski Arkansas Battery opened fire, checking the advance. This gave Price's infantry time to

form a battle-line on the hill's south slope. The battle raged for more than five hours. Fighting was often at close quarters, and the tide turned with each charge and countercharge.

Sigel's flanking maneuver, initially successful, collapsed in the fields of the Sharp farm when McCulloch's men counterattacked. Believing McCulloch's soldiers to be friendly Iowans due to fact that the Iowan's uniforms were also gray, Sigel ordered his men not to fire. By the time he realized his mistake, the enemy was upon him. Defeated, Sigel and his troops fled all the way back to Springfield, leaving Lyon and the remainder of the Union forces to fend for themselves on Bloody Hill.

At about 9:30 a.m., General Lyon, who had been wounded twice already, was killed while leading a countercharge. The Federals continued to fight, now under the command of Major Samuel Sturgis. By 11:00 a.m. their ammunition was nearly exhausted. During a lull in the fighting, Sturgis ordered a withdrawal to Springfield. As the Confederates cautiously approached the hill they realized the battle was over. For reasons historians continue to debate, Price and McCulloch did not pursue their retreating enemy.

Casualties (killed, wounded, and missing) were severe and about equal on both sides – 1,317 for the Union and 1,222 for the Confederates. Southerners claimed a victory at Wilson's Creek, making the most of the fact that they held the field at the battle's conclusion and that they had killed Lyon. Northerners however, felt they had more than held their own, had only reluctantly retreated due to lack of ammunition, and had dealt a stunning blow to the secessionists. Lyon was hailed as a martyred hero.

On December 30, 1861, Congress passed a joint resolution in which it said:

That Congress deems it just and proper to enter upon its records a recognition of the eminent and patriotic services of the late Nathaniel Lyon. The country to whose service he devoted his life will guard and preserve his fame as a part of its own glory.

That the thanks of Congress are hereby given to the brave officers and soldiers who, under the command of the late Gen. Lyon, sustained the honor of the flag, and achieved a victory against overwhelming odds at the battle of Springfield, [Wilson's Creek] in Missouri...

Following the Battle of Wilson's Creek, and the further retreat of the Union army from Springfield to Rolla, the Confederates occupied Springfield. Price and McCulloch continued to have their differences however, and Price could not convince McCulloch to follow up their apparent victory with further advances into Missouri. The Confederate forces under McCulloch and the Arkansas State troops under Pearce retreated into Arkansas, while Price, re-assuming command of the Missouri State Guard, moved north and captured the Union garrison at Lexington. The Battle of Wilson's Creek and Price's continued activities in the state, finally drew attention to the necessity of a large Federal force to secure southwest Missouri. In early 1862 Price was driven from the state and into Arkansas. The subsequent Union victory at the Battle of Pea Ridge in March kept organized Confederate military forces out of Missouri for more than two years.

Nevertheless, for the duration of the Civil War, Missouri was the scene of fierce fighting, mostly guerrilla warfare, with small bands of mounted raiders destroying anything military or civilian that could aid the enemy. Price mounted one more campaign in September 1864 to capture his beloved Missouri for the Confederacy, but it ended in disaster when he was thoroughly defeated at the Battle of Westport. By the end of the war, Missouri had witnessed so many battles and skirmishes that it ranks as the third most fought-over state in the nation.

On January 11, 1865, a state convention passed an ordinance declaring that Missouri's slaves were "now and forever free." The decree emancipated Missouri's enslaved people even before the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution advanced the promise of the Declaration of Independence throughout the re-united nation:

'We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, and among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. '