

THE RAY HOUSE

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The Ray House is believed to have been built in the early 1850's. John Ray deposited with the Register of Land Office in Springfield on Aug. 23, 1851 payment for the land which now includes the Ray homestead. A certificate signed by President Millard Fillmore on Oct. 1, 1852 was issued by the Land Office granting the forty acres on which the Ray House is located (NW1/4 of the NE1/4 of sec. 25.) and the forty acres northwest of this tract to John Ray and his heirs. Construction was probably started on the new house that year, with hand digging the cellar the first order of business. Postal records show the completed house as the post office for Wilson's Creek Township in 1856.

The front two rooms were constructed first. Archeological testing found kitchen midden (ashes, bone scraps, and evidence of other discarded refuse) apparently thrown from the south door on the east side of the front two rooms. This indicates these front two rooms were occupied for a period of time before the back two rooms were added. The house is constructed mainly of sawed lumber with much of it presumably salvaged from the house located on the farmstead settled by Mrs. Ray and her first husband, William Steele, who died on July 22, 1848.

By 1860 John Ray owned over 400 acres of land, which included the 120 acres he had purchased from the Steele estate in 1851. The 1860 Census Report states 150 acres of Mr. Ray's land was improved or under cultivation. The census also states that found on the farm were: seven milk cows, five horses, four oxen, six other cattle and fifty hogs. The homestead also produced in that year 272 bushels of wheat, 1,000 bu. of Indian corn, five tons of hay, 300 bu. of oats, fifty bushels of Irish potatoes and twenty-five bushels of sweet potatoes. Additionally, the Rays had churned 500 pounds of butter and sheared sixty pounds of wool. Finally, Mr. Ray's fruit orchard was across the road to the front of the house.

The Ray family may have been more prosperous than most other area farmers, but they also had many mouths to feed. The Ray family at the time of the battle consisted of John Ray, his wife Roxanna, their eleven children and both a female slave, whom the Ray children called "Aunt Rhoda," and her four daughters.

This was the second marriage for both John and Roxanne. She, with her first husband William Steele, came to Missouri in the late 1830's from Georgia and had settled close to the spring where the Ray's spring house now stands. The Steele house was a small, two-room frame structure. Upon his death, Steele left Roxanna with four small children: William Fletcher almost

eight years, Anna Elizabeth six years, Andrew McCord two years, and a small baby, Mary Cornelia.

The widower John Ray had moved to Missouri from Tennessee with his daughter Frances Elizabeth, born in 1844. He began courting the Widow Steele soon after her husband's death and the two were married after the customary one year of mourning in 1849. From that union six more children were eventually added to the family: Livonia (1850), John Wesley (1852), Olivia (1855), Marshal (1857), Marcellus (1859) and Charles Edward in late 1860.

It is believed this growing family first lived in Roxanna's home. After John Ray purchased the Steele estate in 1851 and purchased the adjoining acreage, the building of the house along the main road started. This road, immediately in front of the Ray House, was originally an Indian trace leading from the Southwest territories to St. Louis and on to the East. The French explored this land west of the Mississippi River as early as 1673 and claimed possession in 1682. France controlled this area until 1770 when the Spanish government assumed control of the Louisiana Territory. The Spanish government maintained control until 1804 even though the territory was returned to France in 1800. The Louisiana Purchase agreement in April of 1803 made it a territory of the United States.

The road was gradually improved but was still a rough rock-strewn trail when Missouri became a state on August 10, 1821 and early settlers started arriving. In 1859-60 the telegraph wire was established along this road reaching to Fayetteville and on west. That is the reason the road was known both as the Telegraph Road and the Wire Road. The Butterfield Overland Mail coaches also traveled this road for over two years, 1858 to 1860. For a period of time the Wilson's Creek Post Office was a flag stop on this route, meaning if there was either mail or a passenger to be transported, a flag would be displayed and the coach would stop and take them on.

The Butterfield Overland Mail traveled from the end of the railroad at Tipton, Missouri to San Francisco, California. This was to be a trip of approximately twenty-five days stopping only to change horses and feed the passengers. This stage line was specifically organized to speed communication with the new but distant state of California. A stage was to leave from Tipton two times a week and from San Francisco two times a week for Tipton. Consequently four stages were passing the Ray House each week.

John Ray was appointed Wilson's Creek community Post Master on January 18, 1856 and held this position for over ten years. The Post Office facilities were in John Ray's home and you could either come there for your mail or you could pay Julius Short, a man who worked for Mr. Ray, to deliver your mail for a standard fee of two cents for a letter and one cent for a

newspaper delivery. You also mailed your correspondence there and purchased stamps. Mr. Ray would have kept a listing posted outside his front door of the names of persons with mail to be picked up. There was no rural free delivery at this time.

John Ray would have been considered sympathetic to the Union cause since he was still a Federal employee after the Civil War, even though both he and Roxanna were natives of Confederate states and owned slaves.

Roxanna and her first husband William Steele owned two young slaves, a girl Rhoda and boy Wiley who then became a part of Mr. Steele's estate. Wiley was sold by the Rays in 1856 because "... he had become difficult to manage ...and may run away." He was sold to Samuel Fulbright for \$827.00 in April 1856. In 1860 the total value of Ray's land, farm implements and livestock was \$ 8,000.

By the time of the Civil War, Rhoda had four daughters, with the approximate ages of 8 (born 1853?), 6 (born 1855?), 4 (b. 1857), and 2 (b. 1859?) years, bringing the total slave count of the Ray's to five. It is believed that a small, one-room log cabin back behind the house was used as quarters for Aunt Rhoda and her daughters. These slaves would have been freed under Missouri's new constitution, January 1865, emancipating the state's slaves (effective July 4, 1865).

In the days preceding August 10th, 1861 and the Battle of Wilson's Creek, the Rays would have realized trouble was brewing. On the first day of August, General Lyon and a force of more than 5,000 Union soldiers, including three batteries of artillery and five troops of cavalry, passed in front of the house on their way to confront the Southern Army moving up the Wire Road from Arkansas. A short but intense skirmish with leading elements of the Confederate column at Dug Spring near the present town of Clever halted the Southern advance for a while. On August the fifth, weary Union soldiers trooped back by the Ray house, returning to Springfield where General Lyon had his headquarters.

By August sixth, over 12,000 Confederate and State Guard soldiers had converged on the Wilson Creek community. They camped along the Creek not simply because of its proximity to Springfield and the Union camps, but because of the availability of both water and the resources offered by fertile farms in the valley. As that many men, along with about 4,000 horses, required approximately 70 tons of supplies and forage daily, these resources were critical. Their encampment spread over an area two miles in length and one half mile wide along both sides of Wilson's Creek. Much of the Confederate and State Guard's food supply was acquired by "foraging" (a military euphemism for stealing food and supplies) in the surrounding area. Consequently local farmers and their families suffered greatly.

In the early morning hours of August 10th, three of the Ray children, Livonia, John Wesley and Olivia were sent down with the horses to graze and water them at the creek when a mounted soldier suddenly appeared and told them to get back to the house because a battle was about to start. They rushed home and told their parents. It frightened Roxanna and as they looked to the north-west they could see a long dark line of troops on the distant hills. This was General Lyon and most of the 4200 Union troops. The Ray family could soon hear the beginnings of battle as General Lyon's soldiers swept State Guardsmen off the backside of Oak Hill (since called Bloody Hill).

Roxanna and Aunt Rhoda quickly led all the children, both black and white, down into the cellar. (The cellar had two entrances at that time. The interior entrance is still located in the northwest corner of the kitchen but the exterior entrance, located at the southwest corner of the house, has since been closed off.) All remained in the cellar from early morning until the battle ceased over five hours later. As the battle raged John Ray sat in a rocking chair on the front porch and watched as the Federals fought both Confederates in his corn field and a combined force of Confederates and State guardsmen on the far hill now known as Bloody Hill. Over 500 men were to lose their lives that day in the brief five-hour battle, and over three times that many would be wounded. At least one Federal cannon ball landed in the yard of the Ray house, having been fired by Union artillery on Bloody Hill toward the Confederates seen around the house.

Early in the fight, Confederates took over the house and used it as a field hospital. It was the place where many of the wounded and dying would be brought for immediate emergency treatment by the surgeons there. By agreement, surgeons and their assistants treated any and all wounded, no matter what uniform they wore. When the Confederates who occupied the Ray house finally ran up the hospital standard (a large yellow flag with a large Green "H" in the center) thereby indicating the house as a hospital location, firing toward the Ray house ceased. Only the corner of the chicken coop was hit by a cannon ball; nothing struck the house.

As noontime approached and the firing ceased the women and children emerged from the cellar to find wounded everywhere. A daughter, Olivia, when interviewed by a reporter for the Springfield newspaper in 1930, recalled " it resembled a field hospital. Men were lying on the porch and in the yard and every available space inside the house was used to accommodate the wounded and dying men." The Rays immediately started caring for the soldiers by putting blankets or knapsacks under their heads and by going to the spring house to bring cool drinks of water since the weather was extremely hot (reportedly greater than 100 degrees).

General Lyon had been struck by a small caliber rifle ball and killed about mid-morning. He was the first Union General to be killed in the Civil War. As the Union soldiers retreated in

defeat to Springfield they tried to take as many wounded with them as possible. There, women and others helped care for them in make-shift hospitals located in churches, homes and public buildings. Surgeons did the best they could, using medical practices of the time. Anesthetics, either chloroform or ether were used to render the patient surgically unconscious. To ease the pain, drugs such as morphine and opium were applied. The most common surgical procedure during the war was amputation. At the time of the Civil War the medical community knew nothing about bacteria. The medical use of antiseptics in surgery wasn't discovered until 1865 by the British surgeon Joseph Lister. Consequently, nearly all wounds became infected. The major killers of the Civil War were uncontrollable diseases and infections primarily caused by bacteria and poor sanitation.

The body of General Lyon was left on Bloody Hill. Although Major Sturgis, who took command after Lyon's death, had ordered the body placed in a wagon, it was subsequently off-loaded to make room for the Union wounded being taken back to Springfield. One of the Union surgeons, Dr. Melcher, was still in the field treating the wounded after the Union's retreat and was told the General's body had been found by the Confederates. Dr. Melcher requested the body be taken to the Ray's house. He later went there to verify the circumstances of the General's death. The body of General Lyon was placed on the bed in a front room. (This same bed is now in the front west room of the Ray house.) After being prepared by Dr. Melcher, General Lyon's body was wrapped in Mrs. Ray's white counterpane or coverlet (now on display among Visitor Center Exhibits) and taken on to Springfield. It was conveyed by a military escort supplied by State Guard General James Rains and turned over to the Union.

The Union army had retreated to Springfield the afternoon of the battle, but the Confederates were slower to depart the valley of Wilson Creek. Wounded were left on the battlefield for a number of days and many of the 535 dead remained unburied for as much as a week and a half later.

Once the Confederates and State Guardsmen had departed, the Rays had to cope with the fact that nearly all their eatables were confiscated and every animal either pressed into service or slaughtered for food. The farm's split-rail fences had mostly been torn down and used for cookfires or as barricades during the battle. The unharvested corn field had been destroyed. For the Ray family, the winter of 1861 – 62 appeared bleak indeed.

John Ray remained as the Wilson Creek Post Master until 1866 and would have had a continued income, though rather inadequate for the family's needs. He was never reimbursed for all the animals and food-stuff that had been confiscated.

John Ray died in 1875 and the Ray family continued to live in this house until Mrs. Ray's death in March, 1876. As long as they lived, members of the Ray family and members of the Wilson's Creek community never forgot that day. It was known by the Confederates as the Battle of Oak Hills, and the Union as the Battle of Wilson's Creek.

Although both Union and Confederate soldiers were to pass down the Wire Road many times during the remaining years of the Civil War, the war never again stopped to leave its harvest of death and destruction on Mr. Ray's doorstep.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Ray House

- If you lived here what would your life have been like before August 10, 1861?
(plowing etc. with horses or oxen, splitting fence rails by hand, churning butter, carrying water from spring etc.)
- Where would you have gotten your food-stuff?
(raised and butchered your own meat, large garden/orchard, bartered with neighbors)
- How were the meat and vegetables preserved?
(smoke house, cellar)
- Can you explain the purpose/use of a smoke-house, cellar, spring-house?
- When over 12,000 Confederate soldiers came and camped along Wilson's Creek, how do you think you and your parents would have felt?
- On August 10, the morning of the battle while you were in the cellar what would your thoughts have been?
- What would Mr. Ray have been thinking as he watched from his porch the fighting in his cornfield and on the hill nearby?
- The Ray House was made a field hospital the day of the battle. When you came up from the cellar about noon, what would you have seen and thought?
- How could you have helped the wounded soldiers?
- In the days and weeks following the battle, when all your animals, corn, grain, and food had been eaten or taken by the soldiers, how would this have changed your life?
- Which side won this Battle of Wilson's Creek?
- How old is this house now?
- Can you explain why Mr. Ray's home had been chosen for a Post Office?