

The Sentinel

The Battle of Fort Sanders: The South's Last Hope in East Tennessee*

Tennessee was the last state to secede from the Union in June 1861. It was also the first state to successfully complete “reunification” and be readmitted to the Union after the Civil War. This was principally because the eastern third of the state was staunchly pro-Union and fought secession as valiantly as it could in late 1860 and early 1861 while other southern states were almost in competition to see who could secede the fastest. Finally, the western two-thirds of the state, with its slave-based economy and vast agrarian base, prevailed, and Tennessee became a Confederate confine, albeit an unhappy one in some parts.

The heart of the Confederate strength in the first months of the war in the east was Chattanooga, in the very southeastern most part of the state and on the border of Georgia, a bastion of the South. When Chattanooga was overrun and occupied by Union forces in early 1863, it was a significant blow to the South and one they wished to rectify. After the Battle of Chickamauga in northern Georgia in the early fall of 1863, Confederate Commander-in-Chief Robert E. Lee saw the chance to regain

Chattanooga and perhaps push even farther into the north and dishearten the war weary Unionists; if not conquering them in the process, at least to again stir hopes for a negotiated settlement to end a war that would leave the South intact as a nation.

After Chickamauga, forces under Ambrose Burnside, the berated commander at Fredericksburg only a year before, consolidated the Union defense of east Tennessee in the nearby city of Knoxville. There he simply “dug in” and waited to see what Southern forces under James Longstreet and Braxton Bragg would do. It was said that, even after being ordered by Grant to move southward and meet the advancing column of Longstreet head on, Burnside chose to sit in Knoxville and enjoy a sumptuous Thanksgiving feast. His Commander-in-Chief, Abraham Lincoln, had recently declared a national day of observance for the first time.

After a number of preliminary clashes south of Knoxville, Longstreet decided to attempt to take the city by force by overrunning it from the southeast. What he did not know was that Burnside had taken an earthwork, originally called Fort Loudon and begun by Confederate forces months before, and turned it into a formidable defensive position with abatis, ditches, and parapets. On November 29, 1863, Longstreet launched a night attack on the fort, now renamed Fort Sanders after a superb Union general killed in defense of the city only a short time before. The Confederates did not expect the elaborate defense and launched several waves of troops against the earthen walls, only to have them turned back again and again by the sheer height of the walls and the depth of the murderous trenches in front of them. In the end, a few hundred Union troops were able to dominate the over 5,000 CSA forces, with only five killed and not many more wounded, while the Confederate losses were in the hundreds. This would be the last time the Confederacy threatened east Tennessee, an area especially valued by Lincoln as a key to Union hopes in the war.

Today, the site of Fort Sanders has been lost to the growth of the modern campus of The University of Tennessee. However, UT and the McClung Museum of Tennessee History in Knoxville have combined, along with others, to preserve this important memory in East Tennessee history by dedicating permanent exhibition space in the museum to the Battle of Fort Sanders and by producing a high-quality video about the battle, *Its Memory Alone Remains*, after an inscription from medals distributed at the first reunion of Union and Confederate veterans in the country in the 1890s.



A cropped stereograph by Hal Jespersen from the Library of Congress showing the Fort Sanders salient that was attacked by Longstreet on November 29, 1863. Seated on the stump is Major, (later Brigadier General by brevet) O. E. Babcock of the U. S. Engineers. Standing is Brigadier General O. M. Poe, Chief Engineer, Army of the Ohio.

*The program on Fort Pulaski originally scheduled for March was cancelled because of the speaker's sudden illness. We regret the rearrangement, but assure you that the original program is now rescheduled for September 2009.

Thanks Again to the History Center

With our annual meeting approaching, it is appropriate to thank our parent organization and sponsor, the Monroe County History Center, for its valuable support. The Center provides the space for our meetings at no charge and promotes them for us in the local press. If you are unfamiliar with the Center except for our meetings, we encourage you to get to know them better. The MCHC is the repository for Monroe County history and does many, many valuable services for the community. The Center is always in need of volunteers, so if you have three or six or more hours a month, consider signing on as a volunteer to be a desk greeter, a curator's assistant, a genealogy library helper, or any of a number of other possibilities. Many of us have done so, and more volunteers are always needed and appreciated.

New Video on Women in the War

JEFF MACARTHUR, a filmmaker and historian from southern California, has just released a new documentary about women soldiers in the American Civil War. It was shot at many of the battlefields where the women actually fought and includes some of the top experts on the subject, such as Joyce Henry, De Anne Blanton, and Wendy King. Check it out on the website www.forgottengrave.com

The Encampment is Back!

THE THIRD ANNUAL ENCAMPMENT on the History Center lawn looks to be taking place after all! While we thought that the event would not happen this year because we lost our participating re-enactors, a new group, the 35th Indiana, (see above story for a "preview" opportunity) has graciously accepted our invitation to participate in a bigger and better weekend this year. The date is set for August 22nd now, which is different from our previous early June encampments. Set your calendars now!

35th Indiana, the "1st Irish," in Indy

THE 35TH INDIANA VOLUNTEERS, the "1st Irish," Civil War re-enactors, now set for the annual encampment on the History Center lawn in August (new date), will return to the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis to give visitors a living history glimpse of civilian and military life during the Civil War. Watch the troops practice their paces and then join them on the battlefield and try the drills out for yourself. Inside, the corps will share aspects of daily life for civilians. Get a look at the medical practices common to the period, and learn about the ins and outs of being a soldier's wife. This event will take place in the Governor Frank O'Bannon Great Hall and on the State Museum front lawn. It will take place on Saturday, March 28 from noon to 3:30 p.m. and is free. Plan to attend!

Quiz Answers

THE QUIZMASTER WILL BE ON HIATUS THIS MONTH, but here are the answers to last month's quiz:

1. Of the Lincolns' four sons, only one, Robert Todd Lincoln, lived to adulthood. He died in 1926.
2. There are 56 steps on the Lincoln Memorial at Hodgenville, Kentucky — one for each year of Lincoln's life.
3. Lincoln's third personal secretary, after Nicolay and Hay, was William Stoddard.
4. Lincoln patented an inflatable device to lift boats over shoals, sand bars, and low milldams in rivers.

What Are Others Doing?

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED in seeing what other roundtables are doing, check out this newsletter from our sister group in Clarksville, Tennessee. Greg Biggs from the Clarksville organization will be our guest speaker in the fall, so we thought it appropriate to share his group's doings, with ours, and we are reciprocating. Check out their latest at: <http://clarksvillecivilwar.wordpress.com/>

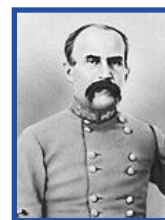
Shared Relics and the GAR

LOCAL RESIDENT JEREMY MIGNON brought some artifacts to share with the roundtable. These items were handed down to him by his family and he admitted knowing little about them, but hoped to learn from us what they might represent. The principal item was a sword and scabbard that had belonged to someone named Thomas Wirt. In excellent condition, the sword, with an elaborately engraved shaft, was quickly identified as most likely a ceremonial piece and was made by the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts. The other items were mostly medals that had been struck for encampments of the Grand Army of the Republic in Indiana during the late 19th century. However, one item was an actual GAR medal that most likely dated from the earliest days of the veterans' group.

Next Month and Beyond at the History Center

Tuesday, April 14, at 7:00 p.m.

Tony Trimble talking about his ancestor, Gen. Isaac R. Trimble, CSA, one of the principals in what history has identified as Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863. Was this also the "high-water mark" of Trimble's career? Join us to find out.



General Trimble

Tuesday, May 12, at 7:00 p.m.

Family History and the Civil War by Ronald Darrah

Tuesday, June 9, 2009, at 7:00 p.m.

Traitor or Patriot: Why Did Lee Side with the South? By John Crosby

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On the web at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~rawatson/roundtable/>

Web master, Rick Watson.