

Some Encounters

With

General Forrest



Compiled and Written By

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Dedicated

To

My Beloved Patroness

Mrs. Frank Fowler Byram

Foreword

The study of the American Civil War proves fascinating for many people. Sooner or later most of those interested persons focus their main interest and attention around a few events which took place during that great national conflict. The author of this booklet has done the same.

This booklet deals chiefly with the account of the Johnsonville battle of 1864 with some treatment of the battles of Lexington and Parkers Cross Roads, the skirmish at Beech Creek, these engagements having occurred in West Tennessee. The author has endeavored to locate data concerning all four engagements, giving a more detailed explanation of them than has usually been given in other works. The **Official Records** of the war and primary sources have been consulted in order to present a true coverage of the subjects involved.

This booklet is intended to serve a role, that of preserving certain interesting war data for posterity. And, with this thought the author extends this treatment to the public for examination and use.



Battle of Johnsonville

During the trying months of 1861 the Tennessee Confederate government attempted to establish several forts and supply depots along the banks of the Tennessee River, particularly near the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Presumably these places of fortification would help check the advance of the Federal armies into the state. But during the disastrous spring campaign of 1862, Forts Donelson and Henry fell, and as a result the Federal forces with their navies, had an opening through which they could penetrate deep into the Confederacy.

Along with the other forts which fell were Fort Heiman and the two minor ground forts near Reynoldsburg in Humphreys County, Tennessee. Fort Heiman was used during the following years by the Federals but had been abandoned by them shortly before the winter of 1864. This military position had an interesting history. Early in 1861 Governor Isham G. Harris ordered General Daniel S. Donelson to select sites along the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers which were favorably situated for forts. The work of Fort Heiman began 10 May 1861 under the supervision of Colonel Adolphus Heiman and his soldiers. The new fort was hence named Fort Heiman in honor of its chief builder. By October of the same year the fortifications there were still quite incomplete; however, about four hundred men under Colonel R. W. McGavock were stationed there. The commander of the Western Department of the Confederacy, General Albert Sidney Johnston, sent troops to finish the construction of Fort Heiman, but it was still pitifully weak by the last of October.

Fort Heiman was located in Kentucky and directly opposite it, in Tennessee, there was another fortification, Fort Henry. About a dozen miles away to the west was a more substantial fort. It had been established on the Cumberland River, Fort Donelson. It had been established by Lieutenant-Colonel Jeremy F. Gilmer, C. S. A. This fort was a very extensive one, making a circle of the area which included the little hamlet of Dover, Tennessee. It was at Dover that the railroad bridge over which ran the trains from Bowling Green and Columbus crossed. Everything, it seemed, depended upon these fortifications being erected and fully manned and yet through procrastination and indecision the Confederates did not prepare sufficiently and were to pay for this folly in the cold, rainy days of February 1862. The Federal commander, Ulysses Simpson Grant, was granted permission by General H. W. Halleck to open an offensive campaign into Tennessee.

On the sixth day of February 1862, Forts Heiman and Henry fell to the enemy. Fort Heiman had been abandoned by the Confederates and its forces

joined with the others at Fort Henry. The Federals had no trouble occupying this location. Federal Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Miller was told that Confederates were skirmishing near Conrad, Kentucky, and also at Fort Heiman, on 13 February. He took two battalions with his two sub-ordinates, Hill and Herndon, and rode to Fort Heiman; he entered the road about four miles from the fortification, encountered the Confederates, but had to fall back westward. Captain Stock's company fought in the rear and on the ridge, where the Confederates were trying to hold ground, and numbering two hundred soldiers, they fell again to the enemy. This was the last primary Confederate attempt to recover Fort Heiman until November 1864.

General Grant was determined to take Fort Donelson. Before moving his land forces to a siege he sent Federal gunboats to bombard the fort; this occurred about noon of the twelfth. The engagement of that day was between the Federal gunboat, the U. S. S. Corondelet and the fort batteries. Again, on the thirteenth and fourteenth more heated engagements ensued. Grant had wired General Halleck that he would take Fort Donelson on the eighth and then return to Fort Henry. He did not make his statement bear. In this boat-fort fighting the Federals suffered heavy losses while the Confederates had relatively few deaths. There were two water batteries and below these were located rifle pits, facing the river. The eight-inch howitzers spurted forth their deadly cannon balls and other metal projectiles, resounding through the air with a great noise.

On the first day of the bombardment General Grant with fifteen thousand troops embarked (with two divisions) for Fort Donelson, several days late according to a former estimate.¹ By noon of the same day some of these troops were within two miles of their objective. Spasmodic firing began, of course, and on the fifteenth the Confederates under Generals Gideon J. Pillow and Simon B. Buckner, attacked the Federal's right flank and forced it back along Wynn's Ferry Road. Federal General Lew Wallace's troops drove the Confederates back. During the night of the fifteenth it was decided by the Confederate commanders to surrender the fort. They attempted to negotiate terms with General Grant and that officer refused to do so and returned his now-famous answer, "Unconditional surrender." Therefore, with no mean dissension in the ranks of the Confederates the fort was surrendered at daylight of February sixteenth. During that very cold night a bold young Confederate officer, Nathan Bedford Forrest, head of a cavalry group, led his forces through the backwaters to safety. Others who could do so went with him. Although it is hard to judge at such a distance in time, historians generally believe that the fort's commanders miscarried in their duties. The Confederacy paid dearly for its procrastination.

With solid grief the Confederates under Johnston's command retreated to

¹ Official Records, Series I, Vol. 4, p. 124.

Corinth, Mississippi. It was a great loss; losing these forts and several thousands of troops to the enemy. Nashville fell later that month, defeat was met at Shiloh in April, Island Number Ten in May, and Memphis in June. At the close of the summer all of West Tennessee was under control of the Federals.

Below Fort Heiman on the Tennessee River the Federals immediately gained control of two rather insignificant forts, called Johnsonville. Besides being used as an arsenal, troops were stationed there to protect the United States military interests and to help with the steamboats which came down the river carrying much needed supplies. These were often transferred to the railroad at Johnsonville and distributed by such means throughout strategic points in the South.

For over two and a half years the Federals had an important center at Johnsonville. Indeed by the fall of 1864 it was considered a most important arsenal and depot, by the Federal and Confederate governments. From Johnsonville millions of supplies were being sent to General William T. Sherman who was operating against the Confederacy. At this time the Federal troops stationed at Johnsonville were made up of the Forty-third Wisconsin Volunteers (seven hundred men); detachments of the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and One Hundredth United States Infantry; quarter-masters employees (eight hundred men). Also in storage at the depot were a sordid collection of items of clothes, boots, scores of barreled whiskey, gunpowder, firearms of all descriptions, etc.

In October 1864 Nathan Bedford Forrest, who had become a General and was the famous cavalry leader in Tennessee, had been operating around the area of Jackson, Tennessee. By the twenty-fourth of October General Forrest was ordered to destroy the depot at Johnsonville. Certain that he would not be followed and harassed by the Federals from Memphis or Clifton, he started for Johnsonville. Thus was launched one of the most famous and diversified of General Forrest's wartime experiences.

General Abraham Buford, under the command of Forrest, had started for Johnsonville a little earlier than his commander. This able soldier led his men almost without incident to Fort Heiman. He had brought with him two valuable twenty-pound Parrott guns. The Confederates established themselves, with temporary headquarters at Fort Heiman which by that time had almost been reclaimed by nature. Bell's troops were stationed at Paris Landing, five miles away. This soldier was also a sub-ordinate of General Forrest.

No sooner had the Confederates settled themselves at the fort than four Federal steamboats rounded the bend in the river but the troops were ordered to hold fire on the boats so that their position would not be revealed. It was no easy inhibition for the boys in the gray who hid in the bushes, and behind old fortifications at the fort. The following day the steamboat, Mazeppa, from Cincinnati came into view below the fort. This time the Confederates wasted no time

in pouring the shell to the boat, which they damaged so badly that its crew ran her to the opposite shore and then escaped through the woods. A brave young, and nude, Confederate swam across the river using a log, landed on the Mazeppa and claimed her for the Confederacy.

Meantime the Confederates feeling hunger gnaw at their bodies and realizing their horses needed nourishment, too, they soon began to devise ways in which to secure food and supplies; their rations were running low. As was necessary, several soldiers made rading parties in which they took what they needed and apparently some more added to that, from civilians in Humphreys and Benton counties. Jerry Thompson lost fodder and corn, while Nicolas Brewer lost sixteen gallons of molasses, men's clothing, a saddle, corn and fodder, and to top it off, a mare. Alfred G. Farrar lost two mules, corn and fodder. John Allen's mare was taken from him. In many civilians of the area this action embedded deep hatred and resentment towards Forrest and his men.²

On the thirtieth the steamboats Undine, Venus, and the J. W. Cheeseman came steaming down the river and met a steady shelling from the Confederates. The Undine badly damaged managed to escape while the Venus passed by, but both turned around and were captured. The unfortunate J. W. Cheeseman was so battered and torn it was immediately taken over by the enemy. On the thirty-first General Forrest arrived on the scene. At once he was amused at the sight he beheld, two Federal steamboats manned by Confederate soldiers! Seeing this he decided on a small scale Confederate Tennessee River Navy. Such a grand plan had he been able to carry it through. The J. W. Cheeseman was burned, while the Mazeppa, Venus, and Undine were repaired. Setting sail they stopped at Danville to do the necessary repair work. For several days rain had fallen in the area and to further aggravate the soldiers the November air began to chill. But this did not deter the jolly "Rebs" in their labors, except for having to pull cannon and weapons over the muddy roads a little harder than usual.

In the late afternoon of November first the three steamboats, manned by Confederate soldiers, launched their journey for Johnsonville several miles down the river. The foot soldiers and cavalry men traveled along the banks. As would be expected under such novel circumstances the men were much pleased and thoroughly enjoyed their situation. Six miles from Johnsonville the Venus and Undine met the Federal steamboats, Key West and Tawah and did battle with them. The Venus was almost immediately banked and captured, the Mazeppa soon met a similar fate. Losing these boats was a genuine loss to Forrest; he had placed several of his guns and supplies for faster and easier transportation on the boats. Yet he had the Undine.

By the third of November, Forrest and his forces and the remaining steamer,

² Rebel Claims, owned by the Benton County Historical Society, Camden, Tennessee.

Undine, reached a position two miles below Johnsonville, near Reynoldsburg. The Federals were confident they had defeated the Confederates for good the day before. The Undine was in full view of the several steamboats and barges at the Johnsonville dock. The "sailors" of the Undine taunted the Federal naval commander, Lieutenant King, to give battle with three of his boats, but the confused officer suspected foul play. And well he might! While this was going on Forrest started placing his men across the river from Johnsonville, this was in the bottom lands. He had the advantage of being able to use the old Natchez Trace stage road which coursed its way through the bottoms. In the meantime action on the river was beginning to take place. The Federal steamboats Moose, Brilliant, Victory, Paw Paw, Fairy, Curlew, Key West, Tawah, and Elfin lined up for battle. They were to engage the lone Undine. The Confederates had lost the battle before it began, but for a few minutes they fought the other steamers; finally it was wedged between two enemy boats, and its commander, Frank M. Gracey, had to set fire to the boat and escape overboard with his men. After this incident the Federals thought that they had run the "Rebs" away again. One wonders, however, if the Federal commanders were so sure.

General Forrest along with Captain John W. Morton (an artillery commander) climbed the high eminence overlooking the camps of their men in the river bottoms. It is now called Pilot Knob. From this vantage point the two men made plans for the battle on the morrow. During the night of the third and in the wee, cold hours of the fourth, artillery officers Morton, Thrall, and Walton placed their batteries along the bank of the river.

In the morning Johnsonville showed signs of much activity; this pleased the Confederates. At two o'clock in the afternoon Forrest gave command to fire. His ten heavy cannon fired on the boats and barges at dock. The Federals were so surprised and ill-advised that while seeing his boats being struck Lieutenant King fired his boats for fear they would be captured by the enemy. Forrest was having a fine time at Mortons battery. On one side of the river general havoc ruled while on the other side the "Rebs" were having a good time. After concentrating fire on the boats Forrest then fired upon the warehouses and troops. One warehouse filled with liquor was struck, bursting numberless barrels of whiskey and the "spirits" flowed down the hill in full flame, rushing into the river. For over a mile along the bank a continuous wall of flame burned very brilliantly. So surprised were the Federals that Ed King Branch, a quartermaster employee, later reported that they hardly had time to run for shelter.³

General Forrest had accomplished his mission. Before him were the charred ruins of Johnsonville and even though the enemy feared he would cross the river there was hardly cause for that because Forrest had done his duty. In this raid the Federals lost four gunboats, seventeen barges, fourteen steamboats, and about

³ As reported by Ed King Branch's grandson, William C. Branch, to the author in 1956. Branch reported that Forrest's strike was so sudden that the men at Johnsonville could not turn their cannon towards the Confederate forces.

ninety-five thousand tons of quartermaster stores.⁴ The best figures describing the Federal losses at Johnsonville were set at about two million, two hundred thousand dollars.⁵ One hundred and fifty Federals were captured, while only nine Confederates lost their lives.

By night Forrest and his men had moved southward six miles, able to march by the light produced by the flames at Johnsonville. The next day Forrest went back to look at what had been accomplished and was accosted only by some Negro soldiers who were soon running with bullets peppering at their heels. Then Forrest and his men turned heels for Alabama and eventually Brices Cross Roads.

The Federal commander, General William T. Sherman, had good cause to wire General Grant in indignant wrath on the sixth: That devil Forrest was down about Johnsonville, making havoc among the gunboats and transports.

What greater tribute could General Sherman bestow on General Forrest?

Battle of Lexington

The date was 18 December 1862. This day had begun like most for the weary soldiers, one of marching.

Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, cavalry leader under General Jeremiah C. Sullivan, was given orders to prevent General Nathan Bedford Forrest from crossing with his troops at the Tennessee River near Clifton, Tennessee. Forrest had already forded the river and spent the night at Lexington. Colonel Ingersoll entered Lexington by the Clifton-Decaturville roads and there, near Shady Hill, Forrest charged the Federals; a fierce battle ensued.

Colonel Ingersoll and two Federal soldiers rode into Lexington on First Street, crossing Dr. J. H. Howards office on Purdy Street, and thence to Muse Street. On one side of the latter was a deep gully, in it a goodly number of women and children were crouched, having fled there when the fighting began anticipating a worse battle than actually occurred. A gallant Federal soldier ran into the gully, placed a white handkerchief on the nozzle of his gun, waving it vigorously in the air, thereby preventing bombing on the innocents.

The Federals were being defeated in good order.⁶ Colonel Ingersoll ran along the Muse Street gully and went on a long way and took refuge behind a house where he was captured. Then he was marched to the courthouse and later exchanged.

Some of the Negro slaves during this battle fled with the Federals. The old Pafford place served as a hospital for the wounded. One man recalled a dead

⁴ Official Records, Series I, Vol. 3, p. 777.

⁵ Ibid., Series I, Vol. 39, p. 860.

⁶ Lexington Progress (3 February 1933). Catalogued at the Tennessee State Library.

Federal lying on the floor in that place with a bullet wound in his forehead, and a generous amount of blood flowing from the same.⁷ One Confederate lieutenant fell during the heat of the battle; he had attempted to take a cannon planted at the Clifton road where it joins with the Decaturville road. This was where the battle had first started.

General Forrest had won the day. After General Sullivan learned what had happened at Lexington he wired headquarters:

Jackson, December 18, 1862, 7:10 p.m.

My cavalry was whipped at Lexington today. Colonel Ingersoll taken prisoner and section of artillery captured. The enemy are reported to be from 10,000 to 20,000 and still crossing the river. They are now within 6 miles of my outposts. I will try and find their number by daylight.

Jer. C. Sullivan
Brigadier General⁸

Battle of Parkers Cross Roads

Perhaps one of the most controversial military engagements held in West Tennessee was on the rolling farm lands at Parkers Cross Roads in Henderson County, located about eight miles north of Lexington, Tennessee.

The One Hundred and Twenty-Second Illinois Infantry arrived at Huntingdon, Carroll County, Tennessee in the evening of 29 December 1862. This group rode into Clarksburg about noon of the next day. The Federals under Dunnovan advanced on to Parkers Cross Roads.

General Nathan Bedford Forrest had traveled around north of Huntingdon, into McLemoresville during the night of the twenty-ninth and for two days rested and then marched on to Parkers Cross Roads. Early in the morning of 1 January 1863 General Forrest and his forces were enjoying their breakfast on the wooded lots of the Hiram Britt farm. Everyone seemed to be enjoying those precious morsels of food when about eight-thirty the sentinel fired a shot from a hill situated near the Britt dwelling. Up the soldiers went, grabbed their guns, and hastened to the line of battle, north of Hicks field. The Federals under Dunnovan lined up south of Britts dwelling and towards the Trenton road. In a short time the cannon were thundering on both sides, balls ripping through ranks of men leaving them mangled and dead. The smaller arms were being constantly used and at times all that could be seen were the colored streaks made by bullets. About eleven the Thirty-Ninth Iowa Infantry halted at the battle, being among the reinforcements, situated themselves behind a fence. Twelve pieces of Confederate artillery and a battery of about six guns on their right dashed them with fire. They misunderstood their orders and retreated but Colonel H. J. B. Cummings ordered them to a halt. They stood their ground, then, and fought with

⁷ Lexington News (5 May 1933. article by H. T. Smith). Catalogued at the Tennessee State Library.

⁸ Official Records, Series I, Vol. 17, p. 551.

their fellows, to the ultimate defeat of the Confederates. Forrest fought bitterly, causing the Federals to give at strategic positions. Some of the Federals were cornered at Doctor Parker's house and had just begun to stack arms when Sullivan's reinforcements were seen in the distance, coming at full charge. Forrest could not cope with fresh Federal troops, the day was almost spent (for prolonged battle purposes), about the hour of three, so he ordered retreat. Although in later years General Sullivan did not talk much about this battle he wired his commander, General Grant, in a burst of enthusiasm soon after the engagement: We have achieved a glorious victory.⁹ Considering the entire battle it was hardly a "glorious victory," but the Federals did take about four hundred prisoners, over five hundred horses, six heavy guns, plus small arms, weapons and teams. The Confederates suffered a genuine loss, the death of Colonel Napier, one of Forrest's aides-de-camp. Captain John I. Rinaker, C. S. A., was slightly wounded.

Casualties of the Federals were likewise impressive:

Federal Losses at Parkers Cross Roads

Groups	Killed	Wounded	Missing
11th Ill. Cav.	1 enlisted man	1	1 officer 8 enlisted men
18th Ill. Inf.			5
122nd Ill. Inf.	1 officer ¹⁰ 15 enlisted men	2 officers 48 enlisted men	15 enlisted men
50th Ind. Inf.	1 officer ¹¹ 3 enlisted men	39 enlisted men	2 officers 16 enlisted men
39th Iowa Inf.	3 enlisted men	4 officers 29 enlisted men	11 enlisted men
27th Ohio Inf.		2 enlisted men	
39th Ohio Inf.	none reported		
63rd Ohio Inf.	none reported		
7th Wis. Battery	3 enlisted men	1 officer 7 enlisted men	12 enlisted men

Why this battle, so hard fought and bloody, has been so lightly treated in annals dealing with military engagements in the Western Department is simple in explanation. One reason being that General Forrest and his men did not like to concede defeat, Federal officer, Dunnovan, was beaten by his foes all day and

⁹ Official Records, Series I, Vol. 17, p. 552.

¹⁰ This was Lieutenant Pleasant L. Bristow.

¹¹ This was Lieutenant Daniel J. Dean.

did not like to admit this, and Colonel Sullivan, despite his exuberant declaration to General Grant, was not "on the spot" when he should have been.

There has remained a human interest story concerning this battle and it is worth relating. The plantation of Peter Pearson, a prominent Henderson Countian, was located only a short distance from the scene of the battle. People in the neighborhood ran for cover when the battle began, but there were three adventurous boys out to look upon a battle, two of them were little Negro slaves, one of them was Peter Pearson's son, John called "X". These boys perched themselves in a position where they could view the conflict. Very soon they had a taste of the battle. In the distance an officer saw the boys through a pair of binoculars and perhaps thinking them spies, ordered that they be fired upon. Chubby "X" and his two Negro companions ran as fast as they could away from the scene, with bullets peppering all about them. Fortunately they arrived safely home. And, to add insult to injury, at dusk as the Federals were marching past the Pearson house, thirteen year old "X" Pearson had to draw water for the thirsty "Yankees." It was a day he never forgot.¹²

Skirmish at Beech Creek

Horses' hoofs sounded along the dusty roads as Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll of the Eleventh Illinois Cavalry, left Jackson, Tennessee. It was the evening of 16 December 1862. Along with Colonel Ingersoll rode on section of Captain Kidd's Fourteenth Indiana battery, led by Lieutenant McGuire; two hundred of the Eleventh Illinois Cavalry (Ingersoll's troops), who were led by Lieutenant-Colonel Meek.

This group having traveled twenty-eight miles arrived the next day at Lexington and there were joined by Colonel Isaac R. Hawkins of the Second West Tennessee, with two hundred and seventy-two men.

At noon, these combined forces marched to Beech Creek, about five miles east of Lexington. Halting at this place Ingersoll sent Captain Burbridge forward with one company to obtain information and locate, if possible, the person of Captain O'Hara who had been sent from Jackson into this area about four days before.

The sun was beginning to lose its radiance when sometime after five o'clock in the evening the Federal troops forged and spotted upon investigation, Confederate pickets. Captain Burbridge was ordered back, slowly to Beech Creek. By then it was dark, and Colonel Ingersoll ordered Lieutenant Fox of the Second West Tennessee to destroy the bridge that spanned the creek, and to picket the road. This was one mile from Lexington. Luckily for the Federals two hundred

¹² John I. Pearson ("X") and others told of this event to the former's niece, Mrs. Felix McCamy Davis, of Lexington, Tennessee, and she to the author in 1955.

soldiers of the Fifth Ohio under an Adjutant arrived on the scene. Lucky in the sense of increased numbers, unlucky in that these young men were raw recruits many having never undergone the rigors of battle or even a thorough military drill.

There were two roads leading into Lexington, the stage road and one simply called the "lower" road. Lieutenant Fox destroyed the stage road bridge but left the one on the lower route. Along the pickets men sang, slept, and waited for the morning of the eighteenth which came after so long a time. About daylight Major Funke of the Eleventh Illinois advanced along the stage road. Colonel Hawkins with two of his companies pressed to the lower road. Major Funke met the enemy after about four miles and fought hard, the Federals placing two cannon at the crossing of the creek and Lieutenant McGuire commanding them opened fire on the Confederates. Both sides suffered dearly.

Colonel Ingersoll left Major Kerr and Captain Woods of the Fifth Ohio to protect the stage crossing. The Confederates were pressing their enemies in stubborn fashion at the lower road bridge. The position was eventually taken by Colonel Ingersoll who sent Captain Hays of the Second West Tennessee into the hardest fighting; the forlorn captain and his men came back to Colonel Ingersoll in rout. Captain Burbridge advanced, drove the Confederates back and then the Federals had to surrender some of their conquered territory. The "Rebs" were closing in on the left and right flanks and in desperation Colonel Ingersoll tried to send forth the Second West Tennessee but they too were repelled. The Federals rallied three times, the brave Lieutenant McGuire shouting orders, rushing into the thick of the skirmish, displaying himself in a soldierly manner. At the third assault the Confederates broke the Federals. There were about five thousand of the Confederate troops, the soldiers of General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Colonel Ingersoll was captured, released later; the command fell to Colonel Meek of the Eleventh Illinois. The Confederates took one hundred and twenty-four prisoners. The Illinois cavalry group lost Lieutenants Slater and Wagner with seven men killed, nine wounded, fifty-one taken prisoners. The Fifth Ohio surrendered fifty-one men, and the Second West Tennessee fifteen, while their compatriots of the Fourteenth Indiana battery lost two men killed, two wounded, and twenty-nine prisoners with their leaders, Major Kerr, Captain Sheppard and Lieutenant Cornell.¹³

Two days later followed the Battle of Lexington.

¹³ Official Records, Series I, Vol. 17. pp. 553-5.