



## Strange but True Stories about Tennessee's Bloodiest Battle

I recently visited Shiloh, site of the bloodiest battle ever fought in Tennessee. With the generous help of the staff of Shiloh National Military Park, I wrote a virtual tour of the battle that can be found on our Web site (if you click on [www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/shiloh](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/shiloh)).

In the meantime, I thought I'd share a few of the more fascinating things that I learned:

- During the battle, which took place on April 6 and 7, 1862, nearly 24,000 Americans were killed, injured or missing. That's more than all the Americans in all the engagements that had been fought until that time.
- Geographically, when the two-day battle had ended, both armies were back where they started.
- The Confederate attack surprised the Union troops when they were eating breakfast, and during the early part of the battle the Union forces were generally in retreat. As the Confederate troops arrived at the Union camps, they could smell breakfast food left behind. Many of them stopped to eat and to rummage through the Union tents to take whatever they found. At one point, Confederate Gen. Albert S. Johnston admonished a lieutenant who was carrying Union souvenirs. "None of that, sir," he said, according to one account. "We are not here to plunder." The general had reason to admonish the lieutenant. The delay caused by eating and plundering slowed the Confederate advance.
- There were, during the Battle of Shiloh, several instances of so-called "friendly fire." For instance, a battalion of Confederate troops from Louisiana showed up wearing blue uniforms. On at least one occasion they were shot at by another battalion, which understandably assumed that they were Union troops. (The next day the Louisiana troops turned their uniforms inside out, which made it look like they were wearing white.) There is also some evidence that Gen. Johnston died from a Confederate musket ball, although no one will ever know for sure.
- As the battle ended and the Confederate troops retreated, cavalry troops under Nathan Bedford Forrest were ordered to protect their retreat. Forrest and his men got in a skirmish, and for a moment it looked as if he would be killed or captured. But according to eyewitnesses, Forrest reached down from his saddle, grabbed a Union soldier, and carried him along as a shield as his horse galloped away. Then, reaching safe ground, he flung the soldier aside.
- One of the Confederate privates captured by Union troops during the battle was Henry Stanley. After the battle Stanley went to a prisoner of war camp up North but later was allowed to leave that camp by volunteering to fight for the Union. Stanley later went on to have an amazing career as a journalist and African explorer. In 1872 he made international news by finding lost missionary Dr. David Livingstone in the Congo.
- After the battle was over, Union troops gathered as many of the dead bodies of their comrades as they could and buried them in graves marked by pieces of wood. They buried the Confederate bodies that they could find in mass graves. And they moved on. After the war, land on which the Battle of Shiloh took place went back to being farms. Occasionally a farmer or a wild animal would dig up a body of a soldier that had been abandoned there. It wasn't until 1894 that the Shiloh battlefield became preserved. And even then, no one ever did a complete search for bodies.
- A man believed by many to have been one of the heroes of the battle was Union Gen. Benjamin Prentiss. His men held out at the so-called Hornet's Nest for hours despite repeated Confederate charges. According to most accounts of the battle, they finally surrendered about 5:30 p.m. on the first day of fighting. The next day, Prentiss was the personal prisoner of a Confederate general named Jo Shelby. Many years after the battle, the two former enemies met face to face at a hotel in Missouri. The two men showed each other great respect and spoke about the war for hours. "It was quite early in the evening when the two old soldiers sat down to once more fight over their battles, but it was almost dawn when they separated," The New York Times later reported.

### Tennessee History for Kids

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of Tennessee History for Kids, an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to [www.tnhistoryforkids.org](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org).

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