



‘Great Panic’

Fueled by fear as war encroached, Nashville turned into a ghost town in 1862.

Photographed in 1864, this view from the north portico of the Tennessee Capitol in Nashville looking southwest shows Vine Street. The clapboard house occupies part of the site of today’s state Supreme Court building. This photograph is part of the James Hoobler collection. Photograph courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives and The Tennessee Historical Society. To view more of the TSLA and collections, go to www.tennessee.gov/tsla.

One hundred forty-seven years ago this month, Nashville was the scene of a panic unprecedented in Tennessee history. During the days following the Confederate army’s surrender of Fort Donelson, thousands of people living in Nashville fled south. All who witnessed it never forgot it.

When the war began, Nashville had about 30,000 residents: 24,000 whites, 5,000 slaves and 1,000 free blacks. An overwhelming majority of the whites were sympathetic to the Confederacy; in fact, author and historian Walter Durham estimates that there were, at most, a few hundred Unionists in the city.

When the war started, most Nashvillians believed that their city was well protected against a Union advance. But in January and February of 1862, a combined army and navy Union force proved this to be false, first by taking Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and then by capturing Fort Donelson on the Cumberland. These victories made Gen.

Ulysses S. Grant a hero in the North and left Nashville completely vulnerable.

News about the Confederate defeat at Fort Donelson spread as fast as it possibly could in those days, and it made its way into Nashville on Sunday morning, Feb. 23. Knowing only that the Confederates were retreating and the Union forces advancing, many people drew the erroneous conclusion that cannonballs would start falling on their homes within hours.

Worship services were called off and dismissed, some in the middle of the sermon. People rushed home, filled suitcases and bags with clothes, valuables and family papers and got out of town any way they could. Railroads became packed with people. Roads were clogged with everything from healthy families on wagons to hospital patients on foot. Across the city there were individual scenes of consternation and confusion that could have never been imagined days before.

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“Men and women were to be seen running to and fro in every portion of the city, and large numbers were hastening with their valuables to the several railroad depots, or escaping in private conveyances to some place of fancied security in the country,” wrote a newspaper reporter who witnessed the events in a pamphlet called “The Great Panic.”⁵ “The hire of private conveyances was put up to fabulous prices, and it was only the wealthy that could enjoy the luxury of a ride on that day. Large numbers, in their eagerness to escape from the city, left on foot carrying with them such articles as they wished to preserve.”

It wasn’t just the rank-and-file citizens who took part in this panic. Among those who fled Nashville during that week was Tennessee Gov. Isham Harris, who went to Memphis along with other state government officials. Also departing were former U.S. Sen. John Bell; Maxwell House Hotel developer John Overton; manufacturer Samuel Morgan; Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway founder Vernon K. Stevenson; and Nashville Union and American editor Leon Trousdale.

Protestant (but not Catholic) religious leaders fled as well. Among those who evacuated were First Presbyterian Church minister Joseph Bardwell, Tennessee Baptist editor J.R. Graves and Methodist Christian Advocate editor Holland McTyeire.

McTyeire fled south for good reason. He had espoused the Confederate cause with great vigor in his editorials. Years later he would return to Nashville and co-found an institution called Vanderbilt University, where he is buried today.

Most of those who decided to stay in Nashville did so out of a sense of duty or out of a belief that the best way to protect their property was to remain with it. Among those who remained were Nashville Mayor Richard Cheatham, surgeon John B. Lindsley, banker John Kirkman and Sarah Childress Polk, the widow of former President James K. Polk. Mrs. Polk, like so many of those who remained, sympathized with the Confederacy and had relatives fighting in its military. But she wasn’t about to flee her home and leave her late husband’s grave.

Throughout all this came Confederate Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston’s army, retreating from north to south through the city. The sight of these thousands of defeated men, who had marched many miles that day through rain, snow and ice, came as a great shock to the men, women and children of Nashville. As they camped in and near town, they needed food, firewood and shelter, stretching the survival resources of Nashville for what would certainly not be the last time during the Civil War.

Panic continued for the next several days with a sense that law and order were barely holding on. On Monday night, Confederate Gen. Gideon J. Pillow, who had fought at Fort Donelson, told an assembled crowd that the authorities would surrender the city to the Union army without a fight, and he

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instructed people to remain at home. That night, Confederate soldiers burned two steamboats that were in the process of being converted to gunboats, lighting up the night sky and scaring some people into thinking that the Yankees were already in the city or that the retreating Confederates were burning Nashville as they passed through it.

The next day, crowds of people began raiding government storehouses and private stores; Confederate cavalry (led by Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest) was brought in to charge the mob. Later that week, the retreating army burned the two bridges that crossed the Cumberland River in spite of pleas by some of the citizens not to do so.

As it turns out, the people who fled Nashville had no reason to hurry. Nine days would pass between the time the “Great Panic” ensued and the actual arrival of the Union army. Despite concerns that the city would be burned to the ground, this did not take place (perhaps because of torrential rains that fell several times that week).

Finally, on Tuesday, Feb. 25, the Union army, led by Gen. Don Carlos Buell, finally marched into Nashville. Union troops quickly got word that there was an American hero among Nashville’s Union sympathizers in the person of retired U.S. naval hero Capt. William Driver. In deference to him, the first American flag they raised over the state Capitol that day was Driver’s — a flag nicknamed “Old Glory” that had been given to him a generation earlier. Today that flag hangs in the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

Within weeks, Nashville had many newcomers — soldiers, servants, tradesmen, even newspaper reporters from all over the country. They were not, in general, a popular lot among the Nashville residents who stayed behind. “All hands appear to hate us cordially,” one Northern reporter wrote in March.

NOTE: For more about the Great Panic, purchase a copy of “Nashville: The Occupied City, 1862-1863,” by Walter Durham, which was just reprinted by the University of Tennessee Press.



Tennessee History for Kids

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