



2008 Franklin's Charge Symposium "Fighting for the Middle Tennessee Heartland" Teachers' Guide

Middle Tennessee During the Civil War: An Introduction

When Tennessee seceded from the United States on May 7, 1861, it became the last of eleven states to join the Confederacy. Tennesseans were deeply divided over the decision to secede, and their divided loyalties continued during the four years of civil war that followed.

While there were both Unionists and Confederates in each of the state's three grand divisions, the regions had different geographies, economies, and histories, all of which influenced local politics. Unionism flourished in mountainous East Tennessee, with its small farms and strong historical ties to the American Revolution. Support for secession, on the other hand, took much firmer root in the flatlands of West Tennessee, with its cotton- and slave-based economy. Middle Tennessee, with its mixture of large plantations and small farms, exhibited little support for secession until after the April 1861 firing on Fort Sumter and President Abraham Lincoln's call for troops.

Rutherford and Williamson counties in Middle Tennessee were two of the state's most populous counties. In 1860, Rutherford had about 28,000 residents (including about 13,000 slaves) while Williamson had close to 24,000 (including about 12,000 slaves). Most white residents of these two prominent Middle Tennessee counties favored the Confederacy. Rutherford supplied at least 21 Confederate companies and 2 Union companies to the war effort; Williamson provided men for at least 16 Confederate companies.

Whether Confederate or Unionist, most Middle Tennesseans expected the Civil War to be short and relatively painless. Few predicted the bloodshed and devastation that would take place between 1861 and 1865. Because of its strategic location between the eastern seaboard and the Mississippi River, Tennessee became a key battleground. Both armies wanted to control the state's rich resources, particularly its rivers and railroads. In the end, about 2,900 military engagements took place in Tennessee, second only to Virginia.

The residents of Middle Tennessee witnessed plenty of fighting. When the Union army took Nashville in February 1862, it established the city as a major supply depot and sought to control the river and rail routes leading to and from the city. Franklin and Murfreesboro soon came under Union control. A successful raid on Murfreesboro led by Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest in July 1862 brought the war to the very heart of the town, with fighting in and around the county courthouse. A less successful raid on Franklin by General Earl Van Dorn in April 1863 brought the war to the doorsteps of the local citizens there.



Late in December 1862, the armies met on a much larger scale in the Battle of Stones River outside of Murfreesboro, as the Union army prepared to make a move toward Chattanooga. Stones River was one of the bloodiest battles of the war with some 24,000 casualties. The deadly stalemate ended after General Braxton Bragg retreated, giving the Union a much-needed victory and providing President Lincoln with the political support he needed to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

Smaller engagements took place throughout Middle Tennessee in 1863 and 1864, including the Battle of Thompson's Station (March 1863), the Battle of Hoover's Gap (June 1863), and the Battle of the Cedars (December 1864). But the region would again become known for a major, devastating battle late in November 1864, as Confederate forces under General John Bell Hood unsuccessfully sought to retake Middle Tennessee from the Union. The home front again became a battle front during the Battle of Franklin. With its disastrous frontal assault and more than 8500 casualties, the battle has often been called the death knell of the Confederacy.

Just as virtually every building had become a temporary hospital in Murfreesboro after the Battle of Stones River, so too did most of Franklin's buildings provide shelter for the wounded after the Battle of Franklin. Women and men on the home front cared for the wounded and provided food and medical supplies.

The horrors of the battle front experienced by the soldiers were terrible for families and friends in Middle Tennessee to witness, as were the painful deaths from disease (twice as many men died from disease as from wounds during the Civil War). Many families experienced the loss of loved ones during the war. Grief and sorrow became commonplace. Adding to this desolation was the uncertainty and instability caused by the war. Many suffered from hunger, as a result of shortages, inflation, and foraging by soldiers.

From the very beginning of the war, the close to 275,000 enslaved residents of Tennessee began to break down the bonds of slavery. As the Union army made inroads into Middle Tennessee in 1862, many slaves escaped to Union lines. Others used the threat of escape to negotiate better working conditions or more free time. By the end of the war, slavery had all but disintegrated in and around Union-occupied areas in Middle Tennessee.

After the war, newly freed African Americans established their own communities, anchored by churches and schools. Men, women, and children participated in political rallies and emancipation celebrations. Men gained the right to vote in 1867, and their efforts to exercise that right drew violent opposition from some white men. Attacks on former slaves took place in both Murfreesboro and Franklin during the Reconstruction years. The transition to a new society was not an easy one and would take many years to complete.