

Forts Henry and Donelson

Essential Questions: What were the outcomes of the Battles of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson? What was the significance of these battles?

The Fort Henry Campaign, February 1862

In early 1862, as the Union army struggled in the East, General Ulysses S. Grant and Flag-Officer Andrew H. Foote requested permission to go down the Tennessee River into northwest Tennessee. The purpose of the expedition was to capture Fort Henry, which overlooked the western section of the Tennessee River. Henry was not as strong a fort as other Southern strongholds on the Mississippi.¹ Yet the Tennessee River cut Tennessee in half and dipped into Alabama, making it a crucial avenue for an advance into the Deep South. Also, capturing Fort Henry opened up the way to Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River.

By February, Grant and Foote were on the move. The roads were too muddy for travel by Grant's large army, so Grant was ordered to steam down the Tennessee River with Foote's fleet. On February 5, Foote's transports deposited Grant's 15,000 soldiers below Fort Henry. The plan involved the ironclad riverboats pounding the fort from one side with Grant approaching overland from the other. When the steamers approached the fort, an artillery duel began. The ironclads were so effective that Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman surrendered in a little over an hour. Grant's troops had not even arrived. Fort Henry was in Union hands along with "seventeen heavy guns, General Lloyd Tilghman and staff, and 60 men."² Also, the river belonged to the Federals all the way to Alabama. Foote's gunboats sailed down to Muscle Shoals and back harassing the Confederate navy along the way.³

The Fort Donelson Campaign, February 1862

Grant planned to attack Fort Donelson the same way he had attacked Fort Henry. Foote would wear down the Confederate defenses from the river on the east. Grant would capture the fort from the west with foot soldiers. The idea was then to march on and occupy Nashville.

By February 13, the Grant's entire force of 15,000 men was in front of Donelson, gunboats and all. Foote and his navy attacked on the 14th hoping for the same result as Henry. Fort Donelson, however, proved formidable and well-equipped. After damaging a handful of Foote's vessels, Confederate gunners had repulsed the attack. Grant then decided to hold his lines and wait for the boats to be repaired.⁴

¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 393.

² *O.R.*, *Ibid.*, 121.

³ *O.R.*, *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 159.

The Confederates in Donelson, however, led by General John Floyd, Tennessee politician Gideon Pillow, and General Simon Bolivar Buckner, decided that the best thing they could do was try to break out of the fort and fight off Grant's army. On the morning of February 15, while Grant was away visiting an injured Andrew Foote, Confederate forces attacked on the Union right. The rebels shoved the Federal force back over a mile. Heavy casualties were inflicted on both sides. In confusion and exhaustion, however, the Confederates were ordered by Pillow to retreat back to their entrenchments. Considering that the Union men were out of ammunition, the Confederate force might have broken out of the Donelson siege if they had kept up the attack.⁵

When Grant returned and saw that the Confederates had pulled back, he assumed they were more demoralized than the Union's defeated force. "Taking advantage of this fact," Grant later reported, "I ordered a charge upon the left (enemy's right)..."⁶ By nightfall, Grant's men had retaken all the ground they had lost. The following morning, while Grant prepared to attack, General Buckner sent Grant a note under a flag of truce, offering to end the fighting and discuss surrender terms. Grant replied that he would accept "no terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender."⁷ Buckner, trapped with his men in the fort, had no choice. That same day Grant filed a report to his superiors: "I am pleased to announce to you the unconditional surrender this morning of Fort Donelson, with 12,000 to 15,000 prisoners, at least forty pieces of artillery, and a large amount of stores, horses, and other public property."⁸ U.S. Grant's terms for Buckner's surrender earned him a nickname that stuck throughout the war: "Unconditional Surrender" Grant.

The capture of Forts Henry and Donelson, were significant because they provided the Union its first foothold in the South. It also provided a much-needed morale boost to Northerners, who had been disappointed by the lack of progress in Virginia. After capturing the forts, Grant and his army moved deeper into Tennessee--all the way to the town of Pittsburg Landing, home to a small church called Shiloh. It was there, in the spring, that Grant would clash with Confederate Generals Albert Sidney Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard in one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 400-01.

⁶ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 159

⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 402.

⁸ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 159

Battle of Stones River (Murfreesboro)

Essential Question: What was the outcome of the Battle of Stones River? What was the significance of the Battle of Stones River?

The fall and early winter of 1862 was a difficult time for the Union army and northern morale. Although he had stopped a rebel invasion, General George B. McClellan had failed to cut off the fleeing Confederates and destroy Robert E. Lee's army after the Battle of Antietam. Instead, Lee's rugged fighting force slipped quietly back into Virginia where it would continue to cause frustration for the Federal army. In December, the Union Army of the Potomac, commanded by General Ambrose Burnside, was soundly defeated at Fredericksburg. Also, General Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of Fort Donelson and Shiloh, had failed to capture the Mississippi River post at Vicksburg. This failure was largely due to rebel cavalry raiders, such as Nathan Bedford Forrest and Earl Van Dorn, who ran circles around Grant's plodding army cutting communication lines and confiscating supplies. Although a Confederate invasion of Kentucky had been repulsed at Perryville, General Don Carlos Buell seemingly refused to deploy his Army of the Cumberland to attack Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of the Tennessee. In October, therefore, Buell was replaced by William S. Rosecrans. Lincoln made it clear that if Rosecrans wanted to keep his job, he had better march against Bragg.¹⁶ In essence, the Union needed a victory, and Lincoln hoped Rosecrans would provide it.

In December, President Jefferson Davis visited Bragg's headquarters at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Citizens of the small town showered the beloved president with balls and dinners. While there, Davis sent a large number of Bragg's men westward to slow Grant's approach to Vicksburg. Nevertheless, Bragg considered using his weakened force to recapture Nashville. When he received news that Rosecrans was advancing from Nashville, however, Bragg decided to stay put and prepare for his enemy's arrival. In the meantime, he dispatched "Fighting Joe" Wheeler's cavalry to harass Rosecrans. Wheeler rode around Rosecrans, tore apart supply wagons, and stole ammunition.¹⁷

The Union, however, continued to advance. By December 30, Rosecrans was in place along the Nashville Turnpike just northeast of Bragg, who was positioned by a creek called Stones River. Both Rosecrans and Bragg planned to attack the next morning. "A fierce battle is expected to-morrow [sic] by the full force of both armies," predicted Confederate Governor of Tennessee, Isham G. Harris.¹⁸

¹⁶ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 579.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 579.

¹⁸ *Chattanooga Daily Rebel*, January 1, 1863.

That night, as soldiers from both sides bent over their campfires tensely anticipating battle the next morning, the army bands entered into a contest of their own. Trying to outplay one another from across the front, the Union band's version of "Yankee Doodle" was countered by a Confederate concert of "Dixie." When the Union piped "Hail Columbia," the Confederates answered with "The Bonnie Blue Flag." Finally, one band played "Home Sweet Home," a song enjoyed by both armies. Both bands eventually played the song together with thousands of troops singing in union.¹⁹ This small tinge of camaraderie proved joyful and wistful at the same time, as the following morning, the same soldiers would butcher one another.

In the early hours of New Year's Eve, Bragg struck first by charging Rosecrans's right where many soldiers were eating breakfast. The rebels pushed back the Union flank through a thick cedar wood and out into a cotton field. The battle continued there. Many of the Confederates, overwhelmed by the sound of guns, stuffed their ears with cotton.²⁰ Fighting was terribly fierce as the Southerners tried to bend back the Union flank and get between Rosecrans and Nashville, cutting his supply and escape route. Rosecrans, however, coolly rode up and down the battle line wearing a blood-splattered uniform. The blood belonged to a staff-officer whose head had been blown off by a cannonball.²¹

When Rosecrans examined the battlefield and the Confederate thrust against his right, he called off his own attack plans and concentrated on defense. As reinforcements came up to fill the torn Union line, the rebels continued to sweep back the Federals. All would have been lost had it not been for a sturdy division commanded by Brigadier General Philip Sheridan. Sheridan had predicted Bragg's intent and therefore positioned his men in defensive positions at 4:00 a.m. In some exceptionally savage combat, Sheridan was able to hold the rebels at bay. All three of Sheridan's brigade commanders were killed. His division lost a third of its men. The Confederates, as well, suffered heavy losses.²² After the initial assault, Rosecrans found his right side bent back at a right angle. At that angle was a dense patch of wilderness called the Round Forest. Bragg thought the area of strategic importance and ordered a division, under former Vice President of the United States John C. Breckinridge, to cross Stones River from the east and charge the position. The division charged but, after a murderous engagement, fell back. At an enormous cost to themselves as well as the enemy, the Federals held. Afterward, Round Forest became known as "Hell's Half-Acre."²³ Near Murfreesboro, the year 1862 had concluded with a "very obstinate and bloody" fight.²⁴

Following December 31, Southern newspapers declared a great victory. Bragg, in a dispatch, talked about he had driven the Union troops from every position except the extreme

¹⁹ James L. McDonough, "Stones River, Battle of," *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, Vol. IV, ed. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2000), 1877.

²⁰ "Battle of Stones River Campaign," *Tennessee Civil War Sourcebook, 1862*, Part IV, ed. James B. Jones (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Historical Commission, 2005), 173.

²¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 580.

²² *Ibid.*, 580.

²³ McDonough, "Stones River, Battle of," 1879.

²⁴ Nashville *Dispatch*, January 1, 1863.

left. “With the exception of this point,” Bragg said, “we occupy the whole field.”²⁵ Whether or not victory could be declared, one thing was certain: the fighting had been costly. “The bloodiest day of the war has closed,” declared a Chattanooga newspaper.²⁶ Rosecrans, however, refused to withdraw; more blood was to come.

On New Year’s Day, after a small fight, a Union division moved east of Stones River and occupied a formidable hill. The following day, Bragg ordered Breckinridge to again cross the river and attack a strong Federal position. Breckinridge, under protest, carried out his orders. His division ran through the Union line. But on the other side of the river was a ridge blanketed in Yankee guns. The cannons opened fire and tore Breckinridge’s division to shreds. After losing a third of his men, Breckinridge pulled back.²⁷ The following day, January 3, Rosecrans’s army was reinforced. Seeing the strengthened enemy in front, Bragg thought it wise to retreat. The Confederates abandoned Murfreesboro and fled south to Tullahoma. The two armies suffered an estimated 24,645 combined casualties.

The Battle of Stone’s River is significant because it gave the Union the victory it so badly needed.²⁸ After the first day, the situation looked dire for the Yankees and promising for the rebels, but the Federals stood firmly, and forced Bragg and his Army of Tennessee to withdraw. General Rosecrans, triumphant at last, began to plan an expedition to capture the Southern railroad hub of Chattanooga. He would not get there, however, for over six months.

²⁵ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 20, pt. I, p. 662.

²⁶ *Chattanooga Daily Rebel*, January 2, 1863.

²⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 582; McDonough, “Stones River, Battle of,” 1879.

²⁸ McDonough, *Ibid.*

Battle of Franklin

Essential Questions: What was the outcome of the Battle of Franklin? What was the significance of the Battle of Franklin?

While George Tecumseh Sherman marched his army across Georgia to the sea, Confederate General John Bell Hood, a hero at both Gettysburg and Chickamauga (where he lost his right leg), pushed his Army of Tennessee into a campaign where he hoped to recapture the Volunteer State, move into Virginia, link up with Robert E. Lee, and annihilate both Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant. Bell's plan was overambitious and, in a sense, delusional. One historian has even written that Bell's plan "seemed to have been scripted in never-never land."⁵¹ Moving northward into Tennessee with 40,000 men, Bell tangled with the Federal Army of the Ohio led by Generals John M. Schofield and George H. Thomas. In late November, 1864, Hood faced Schofield at Franklin just south of Nashville. The Battle of Franklin was a disaster for the Confederacy both in terms of casualties and morale.

At the start of his campaign, Hood had little problem advancing through Tennessee. He had sent ahead cavalry, commanded by General Nathan Bedford Forrest, to ride around the enemy and cause chaos much like Stonewall Jackson had in the Shenandoah in 1862. After a small skirmish, Union forces held off rebel attacks but abandoned Columbia and looked to be heading north for the fortifications at Nashville. "The enemy evacuated Columbia last night and are retreating toward Nashville," Bell alerted the Confederate War Department. "Our army is moving forward. I have had no difficulty about supplies, and anticipate none in the future."⁵² By the end of November, Schofield had positioned his army at the crossing of the Harpeth River at Franklin, which sat fifteen miles south of Nashville.⁵³

Hood had taken over the Army of Tennessee from Joseph Johnston during the defense of Atlanta. For this reason, Hood believed that the army had been trained only to fight on the defensive and did not possess an attacking spirit. Therefore, to test his troops' bravery, Hood ordered a frontal assault against Schofield's entrenched position. Hood's subordinates protested the attack, but he thought their complaints were evidence of the army's lack of fighting spirit. Nevertheless, the Confederates faced a larger, well-protected enemy supported by artillery batteries. On the other hand, the rebel artillery had yet to make it to Franklin with the rest of the army. And, yet, despite all of these disadvantages, Hood stood firm on his order to attack. So, on November 30, the assault commenced.⁵⁴

⁵¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 811.

⁵² *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. I, p. 1254.

⁵³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 812.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Across the field stormed twenty-thousand Confederates, many of them barefoot. Contrary to what Hood believed about his army's offensive capability, his soldiers charged courageously and reached the Union ranks. There, savage hand-to-hand combat broke out, and the rebels were pushed back. The fighting continued well after dark as Hood's army tried again and again to break Schofield's line. Finally, near midnight, the Union troops fell back and moved toward the fortifications of Nashville.

While on the surface, the battle appeared a Confederate victory (they had driven off Schofield, after all), the heavy toll taken by Hood's army transformed Franklin into a grievous defeat. The Army of Tennessee (Confederate) had lost almost 7,000 men, nearly three times as many as Schofield's Army of Ohio (Union). Twelve Confederate generals had been killed. The ones lucky enough to survive were exhausted and crestfallen. As a fighting force, Hood's army had been rendered insignificant. And yet Hood still lived in a land of delusion. He ordered a proclamation to be read at the head of each regiment.

*The commanding general congratulates the army upon the success achieved yesterday over our enemy by their heroic and determined courage. The enemy have been sent in disorder and confusion to Nashville, and while we lament the fall of many gallant officers and brave men, we have shown to our countrymen that we can carry any position occupied by our enemy.*⁵⁵

Hood would follow the Union army to Nashville and besiege the city. A Union newspaper in Knoxville described Hood's campaign. It read, "Hood, without any base of supplies, without any matured plans of operation, and with the recklessness of a fool, attacked our forces in their strong works at Franklin,"⁵⁶ The Battle of Franklin is significant because it crippled Hood's army. Never again would the Confederates be able to challenge the Yankees for superiority in Tennessee.

⁵⁵ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. II, p. 628.

⁵⁶ *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, and Rebel Ventilator*, December 7, 1864.

Battle of Nashville

Essential Questions: What was the outcome of the Battle of Nashville? What was the significance of the Battle of Nashville?

Confederate General John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee had been devastated by Union forces at Franklin. Nevertheless, in December of 1864, Hood and his limping troops pursued the Union Army to Nashville. Once there, Hood ordered entrenchments dug and had his army place Tennessee's capital under siege. Facing Hood was General George H. Thomas, Union hero at Chickamauga. For a time, the two did nothing but dig in and wait for the other to make a move. When Thomas finally struck, he did so with a daring and military brilliance that dashed any Confederate hope of regaining Tennessee. The Battle of Nashville represents the Confederacy's last hope for success in the western theater.

In early December, after suffering nearly 7,000 casualties at Franklin, John Bell Hood dragged his army of 40,000 men to the outskirts of Nashville where they besieged the city and 60,000 Union soldiers under George H. Thomas. Hood hoped to receive reinforcements from across the Mississippi River, but the Union navy patrolled the waters and kept any reinforcements west of the river.⁵⁷ Hood waited for Thomas to attack.

However, bad weather prevented Thomas from doing so. Thomas's inaction not only dismayed Hood but worried Union leadership as well. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton complained that Thomas had adopted the "McClellan and Rosecrans strategy of do nothing and let the rebels raid the country." Ulysses S. Grant also voiced displeasure at Thomas's perceived halfhearted approach at Nashville. "If Hood is permitted to remain quietly about Nashville, you will lose all the road back to Chattanooga, and possibly have to abandon the line of the Tennessee," Grant wrote Thomas. "Should he attack you it is all well, but if he does not you should attack him before he fortifies."⁵⁸

On December 15, 1864, as the fog lifted from the cold ground, Thomas ordered 50,000 soldiers, including members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), to smash into Hood's 25,000 men. Thomas distracted Hood by launching sporadic attacks on his right side, while pounding Hood's left. Hood was confused and postponed reinforcing his left for most of the day. By the time he sent reinforcements, it was too late. As night fell, Hood's battered left side gave way, and his entire force fell back two miles south and reformed in a much shorter defensive line.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 813.

⁵⁸ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. II, pp. 15-17.

⁵⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 813-15; Richard M. McMurry, *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 179.

The following day, December 16, Thomas's army again surged forward with members of the USCT leading the charge at Overton's Hill. Thomas was one of the few Union generals who believed that black troops could fight as well as white troops and gave the USCT a chance to prove themselves in battle. Another innovative aspect of Thomas' plan was to have his cavalry dismount and then attack using repeating rifles. These weapons fired seven shots compared to the single shot muzzle-loading rifles of the infantry. Amidst rain and a dark sky, Confederate units crumbled. Thousands of defeated troops threw down their weapons to either flee or surrender.⁶⁰ Rebel commanders tried to make a new line at Brentwood, but, as Tennessee Private Sam Watkins wrote, "the line they formed was like trying to stop the current of Duck river with a fish net."⁶¹ Hood's army was in shambles.

"Hood can't make another day's such fight, while Thomas is in good condition to press him," Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton reported.⁶² For weeks, the pursuit raged southward, as Union cavalry tramped through thick mud and chased remnants of the Army of Tennessee into Alabama and Mississippi. Confederate armies would never challenge for Tennessee again. The Confederate defeat at Nashville was significant because it utterly destroyed any hope for Confederate victory in the western half of the Confederacy. Hood's failure in Tennessee, combined with Sherman's capture of Savannah, made December 1864 a completely disastrous month for the Confederacy.

⁶⁰ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 815.

⁶¹ Sam R. Watkins, *Co. Aytch, or, A Side Show of the Big Show* (Chattanooga, Tennessee: The Times Printing Company, 1900), PDF e-book, 217.

⁶² *New-York Tribune*, December 19, 1864.

Civil War Battles

Read the first and last paragraphs of the articles on Forts Henry and Donelson, Shiloh, Chickamauga, Franklin and Nashville, then summarize the key information in the boxes below. Record the location of the battles, the outcome (which side won?) and the significance (importance) of each battle.

<p style="text-align: center;">Forts Henry and Donelson</p> Location: Outcome: Significance:	<p style="text-align: center;">Stones River</p> Location: Outcome: Significance:	<p style="text-align: center;">Franklin</p> Location: Outcome: Significance:
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<p style="text-align: center;">Nashville</p> Location: Outcome: Significance:
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<p style="text-align: center;">Summary</p> How did the outcome of these battles help the Union win the war?
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