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MEIGS COUNTY BATTLE FLAGS

By Stewart Lillard

Two battle flags closely associated with Meigs County and East Tennessee still remain as symbols of the region's heroic past. The older banner was made in Knoxville in 1847, while the second banner was issued in Dalton, Georgia, during the winter of 1864. Both flags led Tennesseans into battle in regions outside East Tennessee. The banners, moreover, became symbols of the region's spirit of volunteerism and its stubborn (almost defiant) independence.

In 1847 a second call was made in Tennessee for three regiments of infantry to serve the United States for three years or for the duration of the war with Mexico. A scramble of folk volunteered to raise units in every county. Finally, a lottery established which counties could send companies to form the regiments. East Tennessee formed a regiment near Knoxville during November which was commanded by Colonel George W. McClellan--the 5th Tennessee Volunteer Infantry. On the evening of December 7th, the volunteers boarded eight flat boats in Knoxville and started down the Tennessee River toward New Orleans and Mexico. "Nearly all of Knoxville was out to see us off," recorded one of the soldiers from Cleveland, R. M. Edwards. "The ladies of Knoxville presented us with a regimental flag before we left the city," Newton Jackson Lillard of Decatur later recalled. Lillard was only fifteen years of age and may have served as the standard-bearer, thereby having knowledge of the origin of the flag and continuing to preserve it following his discharge in July of 1848.

The Mexican War flag was made of white silk, rectangular in form, 44 inches in height by 94 inches in length, plus a two inch gold silk fringe on the bottom and free right border. The heading along the staff contained one inch double stitch with nine stitched holes. The red and white stripes consisted of four red silk stripes (four inches wide) sewn onto the white silk flag and three white silk stripes (four inches wide) sewn onto the white silk flag. This improper arrangement formed a flag with four red stripes and nine white stripes. The field consisted of 31 blue silk five-pointed stars, each three and one-half inches across the points, on a white portion of the flag.

At some time during its construction or redesign, the flag was modified. A second drawing of the field was reconstructed using thread and seam lines which remain in the fabric. The white field contained the five inch letters, MEIGS, sewn over the bottom row of stars. These letters have been removed and no longer exist. Also, three inch letters made a half circle at the top of the field, ROUGHS & READYS. Only the stitches and pencil marks remain. This phrase "Roughs and Readys" referred to the nickname, "Rough and Ready" associated with General Zachary Taylor, hero of the Battle of Buena Vista, on February 22-23, 1847, which occurred nine months preceding the Tennessee troops' embarkation from Knoxville. Yet, why was this nickname sewn over the rude American flag and why was Meigs County, East Tennessee, singled out on a regimental flag? Did the ladies of Knoxville present the regiment with one well-designed American flag and then each unit produce an informal company banner?

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Another theory to the alternation of the flag may originate in a family tradition that the Mexican War flag was carried in the first months of the Civil War before the C.S.A. adopted an official flag. The altered field contained only 13 stars, not the original 31 stars of the 1847 era. Newton Jackson Lillard, who served as a standard-bearer in the Mexican War, organized a company of Meigs County troops and became a part of Colonel Vaughn's 3rd Tennessee Regiment, C.S.A., in Knoxville, in May of 1861. The regiment was ordered to Virginia, was under fire at New Creek Bridge on the 17th of June, and took part in the first battle of Manassas, July 21, 1861. Captain Lillard commanded his company at Manassas on the left of the Confederate line in the attack along Chinn Ridge. Captain Lillard's unit had declared in support of the Confederacy before Tennessee completed its vote for secession.

The second battle flag associated with Meigs County can best be described as a "Virginia Battle Flag of the Army of Tennessee under General Joseph E. Johnston" (1864). This banner pertained to the 26th Tennessee Infantry (Volunteers) C.S.A.

The second company from Meigs County for the defense of the South left Decatur about June 1st, 1861, and arrived in Knoxville on June 12th. By the end of the month, the 26th Tennessee Infantry was organized for a period of twelve months. Dr. John Mason Lillard of Meigs County was elected colonel of the regiment.

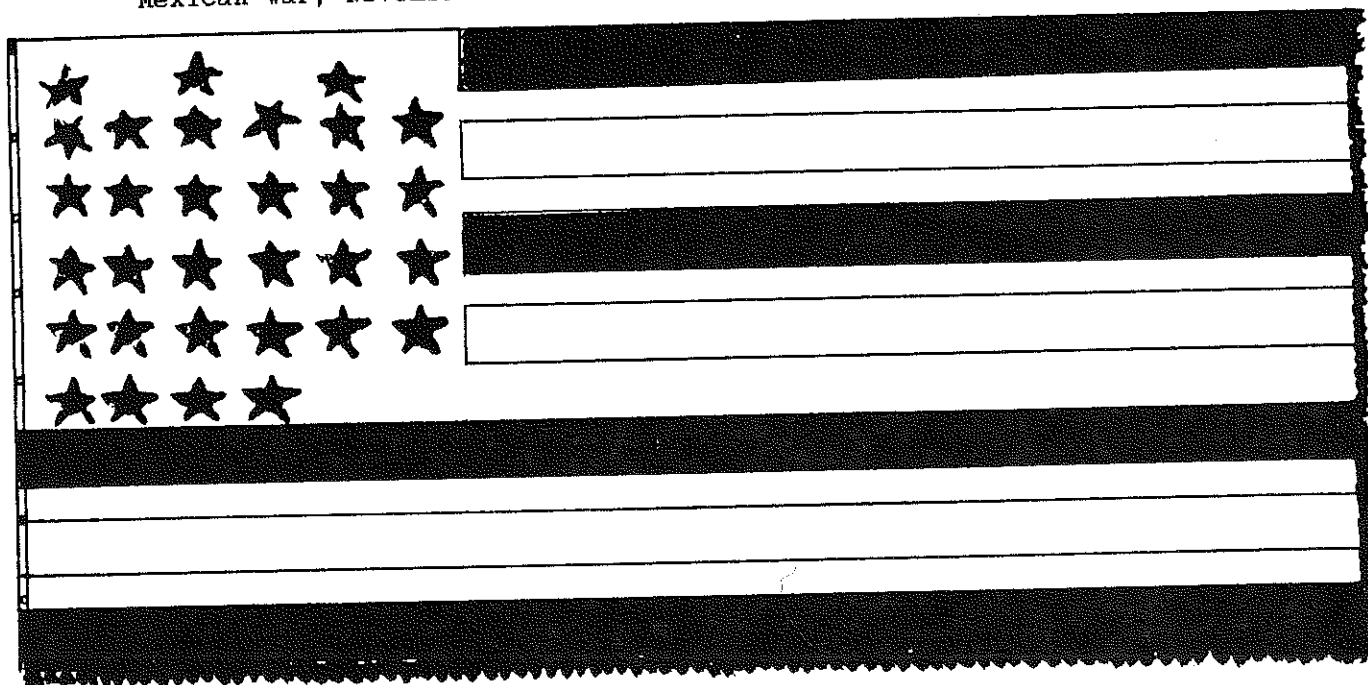
The regiment was at Fort Donelson in February, 1862, and was surrendered by General Buckner. A 26th Tennessee, C.S.A. banner from the Fort Donelson surrender is housed in the Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Again, in Knoxville, the exchanged prisoners reformed the unit during September of 1862. The regiment was ordered to Murfreesboro and took part in General Breckinridge's charge on the "Cedar Thicket." The regiment was mauled in the fighting of January 2, 1863, where it suffered 110 casualties. For a second time, the 26th Tennessee Infantry lost its regimental banner. This second banner was taken by the 78th Pennsylvania Volunteers at Murfreesboro in January, 1863. It was made of cotton and remains in the William Penn Memorial Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Leslie's Illustrated Weekly immortalized the loss of the regimental banner at Murfreesboro in its artists' sketches of the battlefield.

July and August 1863 were frightening times in Southeast Tennessee as confidence within the Confederate Army waned and individual military units withdrew from Middle Tennessee to the Chattanooga area. Portions of the 26th Tennessee Regiment deserted near Loudon in early September; the two hundred and twenty-nine soldiers who remained loyal to the diminishing Confederate fortunes entered battle on September 19, 1863, at Chickamauga, Georgia, as a subordinate unit of General J. C. Brown's Brigade. Eight officers and ninety-eight enlisted men from the 26th Tennessee Regiment lost their lives in the battle.

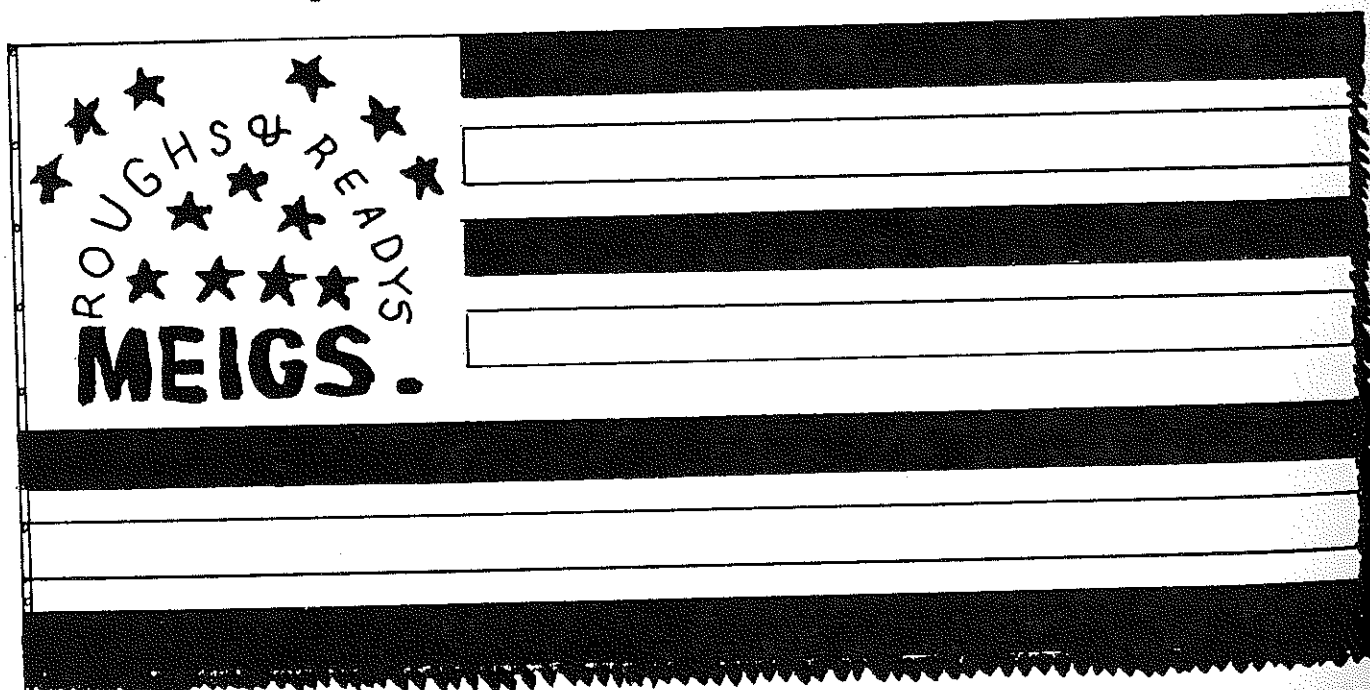
In December of 1863, General Joseph E. Johnston assumed command of the Army of Tennessee, replacing Braxton Bragg. Johnston issued General Order No. 25, Headquarters, Army of Tennessee, dated 19 February 1864. This order established the battle flag of the Virginia army as that for the Army of Tennessee. The many confusing banners would no longer be used. The new battle flags were issued in the late winter and early spring of 1864.

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Flag carried by Newton Jackson Lillard, Company B, Capt. George W. McKenzie's unit, 5th Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, Mexican War, November 1847 - 1848



Modifications made to the Mexican War Flag of 1847-1848: perhaps carried in the first months of the Civil War by Company "I" of General Vaughn's Third (3rd) Tennessee Regiment, C.S.A.



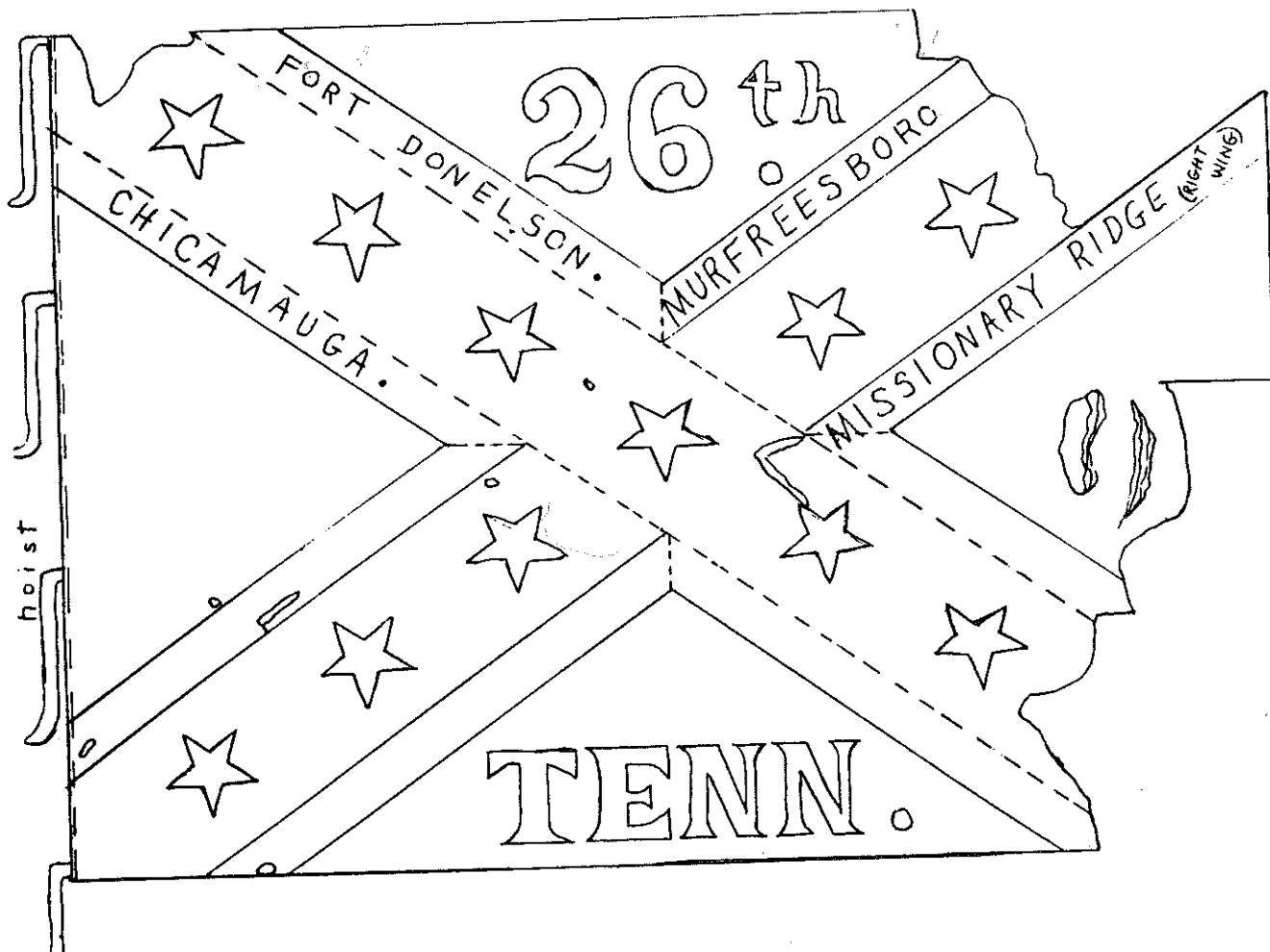
MEIGS COUNTY BATTLE FLAGS



DECISIVE CHARGE UPON BYRNE'S CONFEDERATE BATTERY, BY THE SEVENTY-EIGHTH PENNSYLVANIA, SIXTY-NINTH OHIO, AND NINETEENTH ILLINOIS VOLUNTEERS,
AT THE BATTLE OF MURFREESBORO' (STONE'S RIVER), JANUARY 2, 1863.

From Leslie's Illustrated Weekly

MEIGS COUNTY BATTLE FLAGS



Battle flag of the 26th Tennessee - Adopted 19 February 1864

The 26th Tennessee Regiment may have received its new banner at Dalton, Georgia. The regiment continued to see action at Atlanta, then at Columbia and Franklin, Tennessee, in Hood's Campaign; then in Columbia, S.C.; finally at Fayetteville, Bentonville, and Smithville, N.C.

In 1865, the flag was left on the field of surrender. Of the 1014 men mustered into the regiment during the war, only 72 remained. Of the 44 officers, only three survived. Colonels of the regiment included Dr. John Mason Lillard, James Bottles, R. M. Saffel, and Abijah Boggess. Nine flag bearers died while carrying the banners.

After the surrender, the 3rd banner was given to Governor John Albion Andrew of Massachusetts. His son, B. H. Andrew, of Union, West Virginia, returned the flag to the survivors in 1897. It was displayed in the Circuit Court Clerk's Office in the Meigs County Courthouse from the 1890's until the 1960's.

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The field is red cotton, the saltire is of blue cotton, and the fillet is of white cotton. The flag was tied to a staff by the use of four cotton ties sewn to the hemmed leading edge. The letters "26th" and "TENN" are white cotton sewn onto the red flag. The names of the major battles in which the unit was engaged before early 1864 are printed in black ink on the white cotton fillets. The battle flag contains many holes and is missing part of the free edge.

Perhaps in the near future, East Tennessee will establish an adequate museum where objects such as the 1847 Mexican War Flag and the 1864 Virginia Battle Flag of the Army of the Tennessee may be stored and displayed.

REFERENCES

1. Newspaper articles written by R. M. Edwards of Cleveland, Tennessee, "Down the Tennessee," appeared in the Knoxville Tribune between January 24 and March 17, 1895, part 2 of each Sunday issue. The final Chapter 12 of the series was accompanied by a letter from Newton Jackson Lillard of Creston, Ashe County, N.C., concerning the regimental flag.
2. Articles written by Jasper Worth Lillard in the Confederate Veteran, volume 5, number 12 (December 1897), pages 593-4.
3. Howard Michel Madaus and Robert D. Needham, The Battle Flags of the Confederate Army of Tennessee (Milwaukee Public Museum, 1976), pages 23, 69, 129.
4. Thomas H. Prescott, The American Encyclopedia of History, Biography and Travel (St. Louis: J. & H. Miller, 1858) pages 714-24. Page 722 refers to General Zachary Taylor as "Old Rough and Ready."
5. V. C. Allen, Rhea and Meigs Counties (Tennessee) in the Confederate War (Dayton, Tenn.: 1908), pages 66-72 and 117-120.
6. An interesting reference to the Battle of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, on January 2, 1863, was made by H. A. Crawford, of Dayton, Tennessee, in John Berrien Lindsley's The Military Annals of Tennessee: Confederate, First Series (Nashville: 1886, reprinted by The Reprint Company, 1974), page 412: "In this charge the Color-bearer, H. P. Green, was struck by a Minie-ball from the enemy, and was carried back by the detail for that purpose, supposed to be mortally wounded; a short time, however, revealed the truth that the ball had not entered his body, but struck a daguerreotype of his sweetheart, in the coat-pocket just opposite his heart. The colors were left on the field. The division, not being able to hold the ground against such fearful odds, was compelled to fall back under fire of the enemy. Captain J. A. Cash, of Co. E, finding the flag on the field, attempted to carry it back; it being a very large silk banner, he was unable to do so without removing it from the staff, which he did, and brought it off safely." This information seems to refute the information that the banner was taken by the 78th Pennsylvania Volunteers--a banner made of cotton and presently housed in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.