Tennessee in the Civil War**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*Standards:5.5, 5.11, 5.15, 8.75, 8.80*

*Essential Question:* *How did the Civil War affect Tennesseans?*

At the outbreak of the Civil War, most Tennesseans remained hopeful that a political compromise could be reached and thus adopted a moderate stance on the question of secession. In fact, Tennessee would be the last Southern state to secede, and the only one to secede by legislative declaration rather than convention ordinance. Like their fellow southern brethren in neighboring states, Middle and West Tennesseans feared that the election of Abraham Lincoln meant that the federal government intended to use its powers to abolish the institution of slavery. However, East Tennesseans had little invested in the institution of slavery, and more invested in the preservation of the Union. As it had done so throughout its brief history, Tennessee’s sectional animosities significantly influenced the decisions made by those in West, Middle, and East Tennessee as they each faced the decision to go to war for the Union or the Confederacy. During the Civil War, Tennessee served as an important strategic position for both the North and South and, as a result, many significant battles occurred there.

The Governor of Tennessee, Isham G. Harris, became a staunch secessionist after the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency. However he realized that many in his state still adopted a “wait-and-see” approach, claiming that Lincoln had not overtly threatened slavery in the states where it already existed. The state was almost equally split; the majority of westerners favored secession and the majority of easterners remained loyal to the Union. Middle Tennessee, however, was almost evenly divided on the issue of holding a special state convention to consider their “federal relations.” In February 1861, Unionists won a narrow victory as Tennessee voters rejected the proposed secessionist convention.

However, after the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for troops to put down the “Southern rebellion,” most Tennesseans leaned toward secession. Tennessee Unionists faced a difficult dilemma. They were determined to remain in the Union but they also recognized the right of their neighboring states to secede. Forced to choose sides, several joined their southern brethren to wage war against the North. Seizing on the furor unleashed by Lincoln’s call for troops, Governor Harris pressed the General Assembly to adopt a declaration of independence for the state of Tennessee based on the inherent right of revolution. Legislators passed this resolution on May 6, 1861. The results of the popular referendum decided by Tennessee voters in June were staggeringly in favor of secession: 69 percent to 31 percent. The vote revealed that Tennesseans remained split over secession and the decision to go to war against the federal government.

East Tennesseans witnessed the horrors of sectional violence to a greater degree than Middle and West Tennesseans during the Civil War. Unionist delegates in the region led by William G. Brownlow and Andrew Johnson banded together in defiance of secession. They even proposed the creation of a new state, similar to the course adopted by West Virginians in 1862, although it was never acted on. It was not until 1864 when vast portions of the region were secured by the Union army that the violence and guerilla warfare began to cease in East Tennessee.

The Confederate controlled General Assembly enacted the Provisional Army of Tennessee Act, which authorized the creation of a state army of 55,000 men to defend against the expected invasion of the Union army. Capturing Tennessee remained an important strategic goal for the Union army for many reasons. First, it contained important natural resources, in addition to the Confederate’s leading military manufacturing centers in the west—Nashville and Memphis—that were essential to the Confederate war effort. Second, it had important human resources in the east where the Union army hoped to invade and liberate the unionists from Confederate control, thereby securing more allies for the Union cause. Third, Union military leaders viewed Chattanooga as the strategic gateway to Atlanta, the Confederate’s industrial center. Fourth, the Mississippi, Cumberland, and Tennessee rivers provided an ideal avenue of approach to the heart of the Confederacy, both of which could not be controlled without securing strategic areas of Tennessee such as Memphis and Fort Donelson. As a result, Tennesseans endured more battles than any other state in the Confederacy with the exception of Virginia.

Problems arose almost immediately for Confederate officials over the question of how to defend Tennessee’s vast northern border. Considerable defenses were established along the Mississippi river in the West, with less substantial defenses along the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers. Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston decided to deploy his troops along the northern border in hopes of staving off a northern attack. However, Confederate lines were spread too thin and beginning in early-1862, Tennessee’s defenses began cracking. In January 1862, General Felix K. Zollicoffer’s forces were routed in southeastern Kentucky and retreated back into East Tennessee. Union General Ulysses S. Grant led an army and navy expedition up the Tennessee river, and seized Fort Henry and Fort Donelson by mid-February. The Tennessee and Cumberland rivers were safely in Union hands. Next, Federal troops led by General Don Carlos Buell marched south from central Kentucky into Middle Tennessee and captured Nashville—the first significant defeat of the Confederacy in either the western or eastern theater. But by the spring of 1862, Johnston’s forces regrouped in Northern Mississippi where they were physically reinforced and morally reinvigorated. Johnston decided to launch a counter attack against Grant’s troops who had advanced almost to the Tennessee-Mississippi state line. At Shiloh, in the early hours of April 6, the Confederate army launched an attack, taking Grant’s army somewhat by surprise; but when Union reinforcements arrived from Nashville, the Confederates were pushed back. In subsequent months, the Union army overpowered southern defenses along the Mississippi river, and by the summer of 1862, most of Middle and West Tennessee was firmly under Union control.

In the fall of 1862, Confederate General Braxton Bragg, Johnston’s successor, attempted to regain Middle Tennessee at the Battle of Stones River. However, his forces were outgunned and outnumbered and he was pushed south of Chattanooga by the summer of 1863. Reinforced with additional Confederate troops from the eastern theater, Bragg proved successful at the Battle of Chickamauga in northern Georgia. Grant soon arrived to reinforce the Union attack on Chattanooga, and defeated Bragg at the Battles of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge in November 1863. Meanwhile, another federal force under the authority of General Ambrose Burnside liberated upper and central East Tennesseans as they drove the Confederates from Knoxville and erected an impregnable breastwork known as Fort Sanders. Burnside’s troops managed to repel a deadly Confederate counter-attack on November 29, 1863. By the following spring Tennessee was entirely under the control of the Union.

As soon as West and Middle Tennessee were largely under the control of federal troops, Lincoln appointed Andrew Johnson as military governor of Tennessee to oversee the reconstruction of a loyal state government. Like Lincoln, Johnson sought to restore the South to the Union as it was before the war. Conservative secessionists remained in Nashville, however, and so did their constituencies. Political reconstruction in Tennessee proved to be as bitter a fight as the Civil War that raged around it. Although Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation exempted Tennessee because Johnson argued that it would hinder the reconstruction process and anger Unionists, the General Assembly passed a state emancipation act in January 1865. While Johnson was no less racist that the most adamant 19th-century southern fire-eater, he was in favor of freeing Tennessee’s slaves in accordance with the northern free-labor agenda. Furthermore, after the Union occupation of Tennessee, runaway slaves, or “contrabands,” were considered freed once they made it behind Union lines. There they worked as menial laborers digging trenches for the federal troops. Eventually, 20,000 black Tennesseans enlisted to fight in the Union army.

Many changes were brought about through the federal occupation of Tennessee during the Civil War. Secessionist sentiment only intensified in areas where federal armies attempted to stamp it out. Many Confederate loyalists joined guerilla bands that set about attacking federal troops on patrol and sabotaging railroads and other lines of communication used by the Union army. Guerilla warfare permeated throughout the state during the war, and as the tolerance for secessionist Tennesseans waned among federal officers, punishments for such guerilla activity intensified. By the end of the war, federal officers resorted to jailing anyone caught espousing Rebel sentiment. Living conditions in Tennessee towns also changed drastically as overcrowding increased due to refugees—black and white. Unemployment, inflation, and food shortages resulted in mass poverty and disease. The Union army did its best to preserve law and order, distribute rations to needy inhabitants, and restore municipal governments, schools, and churches, so long as they did not promote secessionist sentiment. Rural inhabitants faced other threats from the Union occupation: troops seized property, provisions and livestock, in addition to destroying crops and fences. Furthermore, Union soldiers did not distribute provisions to those rural inhabitants whose lives were destroyed by the war. Many rural whites became refugees in nearby towns, further intensifying the overcrowding in urban areas.

Confederate nationalism waned as Tennessee fell further under Union control. Prior to the end of the war, Tennessee secessionists conceded Union victory and the emancipation of slaves. Many remained antagonistic to northern political rule and black emancipation, however. When hostilities on the battlefield ceased in the spring of 1865, Tennesseans braced themselves for the brewing storm of Reconstruction.

1. This essay is a summation of chapter 6 in, Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History* (Knoxville, 1999), pp. 132-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)