The Bridge Burning Plot of 1861

*Standards: 5.6, 8.75*

*Essential Questions: What was the Bridge Burning Plot of 1861? How did the plot reflect and intensify divisions within the state?*

In 1861, the question of secession divided Tennessee, as Middle and West Tennessee supported the Confederacy while East Tennessee remained strongly with the Union. East Tennessee’s support for the Union did not change when the majority of Tennesseans voted to secede in June of 1861. Even before the secession vote, a number of East Tennesseans met in Greeneville and petitioned the legislature to allow East Tennessee to separate and form its own state. The legislature refused for many reasons, especially given the strategic importance of the rail lines in East Tennessee that connected Virginia with Georgia and the Deep South.

The importance of the railroads and in particular railroad bridges was obvious to Unionists and Confederates alike. In the late summer of 1861, Unionists began to plot the destruction of the railroad bridges and an invasion of Union troops. President Lincoln and General George McClellan approved the plan. Union officers Captain David Fry of Greene County and Captain William Cross of Scott County were sent into EastTennessee in October to recruit men for the plan and swear them in as Union soldiers. Unfortunately, General Sherman, who had never favored the plan, decided that the invasion was too risky and cancelled it. However, there was no way to warn the Unionists already preparing to burn nine key bridges that they would have no reinforcements.

On the night of November 8, 1861, groups of loyal Unionists made their way toward their targets. Three of the bridges were heavily guarded, and the men were forced to turn back. The bridge at Strawberry Plains had only one guard, but the guard managed to stop the bridge burners from succeeding in their task. However, the bridges at Chickamauga, Hiwassee, Union Depot, and Lick Creek were burned. Many of the men who took part in the plot were either captured when the Union invasion failed to occur or were forced to hide in the mountains to avoid capture. Many of them eventually made their way to Kentucky, where they joined the Union army. One man, Harrison Self, was pardoned by Jefferson Davis moments before his execution. Most of the men who were captured were not so lucky. A number died of disease while in Confederate prisons. Two bridge burners were hanged near the Greeneville Train Depot. Additionally, Greene County bridge burners Jacob Harmon and his son Henry were hanged in Knoxville along with Christopher Haun. Haun’s wife Elizabeth kept the American flag that draped her husband’s coffin. She cut small pieces out of the flag and gave them to other men who were involved in the plot or supported her and her family after her husband’s death.

The failure to liberate Unionist East Tennessee in 1861 had serious consequences for the region. Unionists felt betrayed by the decision not to invade, while the Confederates intensified their efforts to suppress Unionist sentiment. More and more men were forced to either hide to avoid conscription or leave their families to join the Union army in Kentucky. President Lincoln continued to advocate for the people of East Tennessee. In 1863, he said:

*I want you to do something for those mountain people who have been shut out of the world all these years. I know them. If I live I will do all I can to aid and between us perhaps we can do the justice they deserve.*

# Sources:

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