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## UNIONIST RESISTANCE TO CONFEDERATE OCCUPATION: THE BRIDGE BURNERS OF EAST TENNESSEE

By David Madden

An episode in the first railroad war in history that has not received the attention it merits is the burning of the bridges on the 270-mile railroad in the Great Valley of East Tennessee. The novelty and the simple dramatic appeal of "The Great Locomotive Chase" through Georgia in the spring of 1862 has overshadowed the uniqueness and daring of the bridge burning venture in East Tennessee. Five months before a professional Union spy led twenty-two disguised Federal soldiers in the capture of the Chattanooga-bound Confederate train at Big Shanty, William Blount Carter, ordained Presbyterian minister and devout Unionist, set into motion a more complex paramilitary sabotage plan that was intended to prepare the way for the invasion of East Tennessee.

By the mid-nineteenth century, East Tennessee had evolved into a unique southern region. With a society and economic system having less dependence on slavery than most of the South, with political leanings divergent from Middle and West Tennessee, and with a heritage of independent action evident in the State of Franklin movement in the 1780's and in the desire for separate statehood in the 1840's, most East Tennesseans saw little future in joining a rebellion of southern states in which they had little at stake and much to lose. Thus when Tennessee Governor Isham G. Harris, backed by overwhelming popular support in Middle and West Tennessee, made moves to withdraw the state from the Union to join the Confederate States of America in 1861, Unionist leaders in East Tennessee organized a powerful movement to prevent secession. They voiced their disapproval of Tennessee's steps toward disunion by holding well-attended conventions in Knoxville and Greeneville, and at one point asked that the eastern counties be allowed to separate from Tennessee and create a separate state, following West Virginia's example of breaking from the Old Dominion. When Tennessee voted

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officially on the issue of secession in June of 1861, East Tennesseans cast their ballots by over a two to one margin against disunion. And even after Tennessee had officially seceded from the Union, most East Tennesseans never accepted the authority of the Southern Confederacy. Beginning in the summer of 1861, thousands of Union sympathizers from East Tennessee began to cross over the Cumberland Mountains; during the next four years, possibly 30,000 of them joined the Union army to fight against the Confederacy. Unionists who remained in the rural counties surreptitiously organized and trained forces of up to 500 men and threatened armed resistance to the Confederacy.<sup>1</sup>

Confederate authorities were by no means ignorant of the situation. They were especially concerned over the safety of the East Tennessee & Virginia Railroad, a key transportation link for troops and supplies moving to the Virginia front. Having a large bed of disaffection within its boundaries keenly embarrassed the infant Confederate nation in its attempt to win foreign recognition and ultimately independence.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the summer of 1861, Tennessee Governor Harris and Confederate authorities maintained a light hand in their dealings with East Tennessee, in hopes that leniency would eventually bring Unionists around to the southern cause. But continued resistance by armed "tories," and the refusal of many East Tennessee political leaders to fully embrace the Confederacy, convinced southern authorities to change their policies. Governor Harris informed the Confederate secretary of war, "I fear we will have to adopt a decided and energetic policy with the people of that section." On August 16, the governor announced a new and vigorous policy of repressing "Loyalists" by arresting hundreds of Unionists, and the war department in Richmond soon ordered several regiments of Confederate troops into the region. Before long, the Confederates had over 10,000 soldiers stationed in the eastern counties, guarding key railroad bridges, supply depots, and important defensive positions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Oliver P. Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War* (Cincinnati, 1899), 366-70; Charles F. Bryan, Jr., "The Civil War in East Tennessee: A Social, Political, and Economic Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1978), iii-iv; Jesse Burt, "East Tennessee, Lincoln, and Sherman," *East Tennessee Historical Society's, Publications* No. 34 (1962), 3-25; No. 35 (1963), 54-75; Eric R. Lacy, *Vanquished Volunteers* (Johnson City, Tenn., 1965); Martha L. Turner, "The Cause of the Union in East Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XL (1981), 366-80.

<sup>2</sup>Bryan, "Civil War in East Tennessee," 65.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 71-72; William Rule, *The Loyalists of Tennessee in the Late War* (Cincinnati, 1887), 4.

From the beginning of the secession crisis, East Tennessee Unionists barraged the leadership in Washington with frantic appeals for help. As early as May, 1861, Senator Andrew Johnson and Congressman Horace Maynard urged President Lincoln to send military aid to the Tennessee loyalists. William G. Brownlow, defiant editor of the Knoxville *Whig*, the last Unionist newspaper to remain in operation in the South, called for vengeance in his fiery editorials for the many Unionists who had been arrested:

Let the railroad on which Union citizens of East Tennessee are conveyed to Montgomery in irons be eternally and hopelessly destroyed. Let the property of the men concerned be consumed and let their lives pay the forfeit and the names will be given. Let the fires of patriotic vengeance be built upon the Union altars of the whole land and let them go out where these conspirators live like the fires from the Lord.

Brownlow urged Union men to "hold themselves in readiness for action, action, action . . . A Union man of high character who will disguise himself and travel hundreds of miles at his own expense to serve true men to him personally unknown deserves to be immortalized and to live forever." The identity of the man to whom Brownlow was referring is not known, but Reverend William B. Carter proved to be such a leader.<sup>4</sup>

One of Brownlow's oldest enemies—in politics, religion, and journalism—was Landon Carter Haynes of Carter County. Among the first East Tennessee Confederates to predict a Unionist uprising and the burning of the bridges along the main supply line in the Great Valley, he wrote on July 6, to Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker:

Mr. Brownlow, in his paper, says civil war is inevitable, and that the Union men have 10,000 men under drill and armed with rifles and shot-guns. Mr. Thomas A. R. Nelson made a speech . . . on Monday last . . . in Carter County, in which he incited the crowd to resist the action of the State . . . The New York Times, in a lengthy article, says that East Tennessee is a vital point to the Lincoln Government; urges the Union men to seize Knoxville, and hold it till Lincoln can give aid.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>William Gannaway Brownlow, *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession; with a Narrative of Personal Adventures Among the Rebels* (Philadelphia, 1862), 134-40, 277-78, 299-301, 414; *War of the Rebellion . . . Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols., Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series II, Vol. 1, pp. 911-12, hereafter cited as *O.R.*

<sup>5</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 4, pp. 364-65.

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Throughout the summer of 1861, other prominent rebel sym-  
 pathizers (especially Knoxvilleians William Swan, John Crozier  
 Ramsey, and J. G. M. Ramsey) and Confederate military figures  
 described an explosive situation in East Tennessee and urged Presi-  
 dent Jefferson Davis to take immediate action against the Unionists.  
 Gen. Samuel Cooper reminded Gen. Felix K. Zollicoffer, com-  
 mander of the East Tennessee District, that "the great importance  
 of the East Tennessee and Western [*sic*] Virginia road require that  
 it should be closely guarded wherever there is reason to apprehend  
 its destruction."<sup>6</sup>

The fears of the Confederate authorities were indeed well-founded.  
 In September William B. Carter escaped into Kentucky to persuade  
 Federal authorities to rescue loyal East Tennesseans. Carter, whose  
 ancestors figured prominently in the early history of the region, was  
 pastor of a Rogersville church, but ill health forced him to retire  
 from the ministry and he took over the management of his family's  
 farms. During the secession crisis, the forty-one year old minister  
 spoke impressively against the evils of secession and supported the  
 most extreme measures, including separate statehood for East Ten-  
 nessee and armed resistance to the rebels.<sup>7</sup>

At Camp Dick Robinson, the large Federal recruiting center near  
 Lancaster, Kentucky, Reverend Carter conferred in late September  
 with Gen. William T. Sherman, Andrew Johnson, Horace Maynard,  
 and Gen. George H. Thomas, who had recently taken command of  
 forces in Eastern Kentucky. Carter's older brother, Lt. Samuel  
 Carter, whom Lincoln had urged to go on special duty from the Navy  
 to organize and drill Tennessee volunteers because he was familiar  
 with upper East Tennessee, informed the group of enemy troop  
 distributions. Someone in the group then proposed a bold plan—the  
 simultaneous burning of all the bridges on the railroads passing  
 through East Tennessee. All agreed except Sherman. But Thomas,  
 who had earlier convinced their superior, Gen. Robert Anderson,  
 "the hero of Ft. Sumter," of the efficacy of an expedition into East  
 Tennessee, answered objections so forcefully that Sherman confessed  
 himself "converted" and ordered Thomas "to push on an expedition."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*O.R.*, Series II, Vol. 1, pp. 829-30; Series I, Vol. 4, pp. 529-30, 824-37.

<sup>7</sup>Oliver P. Temple, *Notable Men of Tennessee, From 1833 to 1875* (New York, 1912), 88-90.

<sup>8</sup>For more on Samuel Carter and his family, see William Garrett Piston, "Carter's Raid," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, No. 49 (1977), 61-76; No. 50 (1978), 31-57; John S. Goff, "Colonel James P. T. Carter of Carter County," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXVI (1967), 372-82; Temple, *East Tennessee*, 376.

With Sherman's blessings, Carter traveled to Washington to persuade President Lincoln and Gen. George B. McClellan, Union army general-in-chief. Thomas gave Carter a letter of introduction, boldly declaring: "It would be one of the most important services that could be done for the country, and I most earnestly hope you will use your influence with the authorities in furtherance of his plans which he will submit to you together with the reasons for doing the work."<sup>9</sup>

Lincoln was predisposed to listen to a plan for moving into East Tennessee. On July 23, two days after Bull Run, he had issued "Memorandum of Military Policy Suggested by the Bull Run Defeat," projecting simultaneous expeditions into Virginia, down the Mississippi, and into the loyal region of East Tennessee. He ordered arms smuggled through the mountain passes and desired nothing more desperately than the liberation of Union-loving people in East Tennessee from rebel oppression. That he felt their suffering deeply was well-known. His understanding of the economic, political, and military importance of East Tennessee was also clear.<sup>10</sup>

In Washington, the plan Carter placed before Lincoln, McClellan, and Secretary of State William H. Seward projected the simultaneous burning of nine main bridges on the East Tennessee and Georgia and the East Tennessee and Virginia railroads between Bridgeport, Alabama, and Bristol, Tennessee. Destruction of the long bridge over the Tennessee River at Bridgeport would prevent the Memphis and Charleston railroad from connecting with the Western and Atlantic, the main supply line from Memphis and Nashville to Richmond. The long bridges at Bridgeport and Loudon were the most expensive, the most strategic, but the whole line was vital. Closely coordinated with the bridge burnings was the planned advance of an army toward Knoxville, sixty miles south of Cumberland Gap. General Thomas would seize and control that key rail center while Unionists rose in revolt against their Confederate tormentors. Lincoln, McClellan, and Seward approved the plan. McClellan promised to keep the Confederates in Virginia too busy to send reinforcements. The details of the burning of the bridges were left to Carter's judgment.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 1, p. 889.

<sup>10</sup>Burt, "East Tennessee, Lincoln, and Sherman," 10-11; T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York, 1952), 23-24, 47-48.

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Reverend Carter returned to Camp Dick Robinson with \$2,500 allocated for expenses as a tangible expression of Federal support of his plan. During mid-October he left camp with two officers recently detailed to this mission, Capt. William Cross of Scott County and Capt. David Fry of Greene County. In East Tennessee Carter recruited six leaders, who in turn selected five or six men to help destroy the bridges.

From Morgan County, near Montgomery, Tennessee, Carter reported to Thomas on October 22:

I am within 6 miles of a company of rebel cavalry. I find our Union people in this part of the State firm and unwavering in their devotion to our Government and anxious to have an opportunity to assist in saving it . . . You will please furnish the bearers with as much lead, rifle powder, and as many caps as they can bring for Scott and Morgan counties. You need not fear to trust these people. They will open the war for you by routing these small bodies of marauding cavalry . . . Tomorrow night I hope to be near our railroad. I have not been able as yet to gain any information as to my prospects of success.<sup>12</sup>

Five days later, Carter was closer to Loudon and one of the main bridges. From near Kingston he wrote to General Thomas:

I am now within a few miles of our railroad, but I have not yet had time to obtain all the information I must have before I decide on the course best for me to adopt. If I can get half a dozen men to "take the bull by the horns," we can whip them completely and save the railroad. If I cannot get such leaders, we will make a desperate attempt to destroy all the bridges, and I firmly believe we will be successful.<sup>13</sup>

Troop strength, Carter reported, was 160 at the Loudon bridge; 1,400, mostly ineffective, at Knoxville; and 6,000, only about 1,600 of them effective, at Cumberland Gap. He pointed out that Zollicoffer's hold on East Tennessee was tenuous, and that Davis was unable to send reinforcements from Virginia. Meanwhile, despotic oppressions had only intensified the loyalty of Unionists and their eagerness to rise up and throw off their "fetters." Having pleaded with Thomas to ask McClellan for more troops, Carter apologized for presuming, as a civilian, to make suggestions to a military man. Willing

<sup>12</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 4, p. 317.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 320.

to risk his own life, he was about to ask his people to do the same. "I can assure you that whoever is the leader of a successful expedition into East Tennessee will receive from these people a crown of glory of which any one might well be proud, and I know of no one on whom I would more cheerfully bestow that crown than on yourself."<sup>14</sup>

Although he knew that October 22 or 23 was set for Thomas's march south, Carter was unaware of the development of the military phase of the plan. On the 21st, for instance, Col. T. T. Garrard drove back Zollicoffer at Wildcat Mountain, about 45 miles below Camp Dick Robinson. On the 25th Sherman warned Thomas, "Don't push too far. Your line is already long and weak." Gen. Albin F. Schoepf went no farther than London on the 28th, only 40 miles north of Cumberland Gap. From Camp Dick Robinson Thomas continued to keep the advance into East Tennessee before Sherman's attention, and on October 31 he started south for Crab Orchard.

On November 2, acting through Freemorton Young of Roane County and William Stone of Hamilton County, Carter entrusted the simultaneous destruction of four bridges in lower East Tennessee to the leadership of 39-year-old A. M. Cate, an active and influential opponent of secession and a highly respected citizen of Bradley County.<sup>15</sup>

Four days before the date set for the raids, Carter was still convinced that his mission was, as planned, coordinated with the movement of Federal troops under General Thomas. But as late as November 5, Thomas sounded as if he were still trying to "convert" his commanding officer. Enclosing Reverend Carter's October 22 and 27 letters as means of persuasion, General Thomas assured Sherman that "If we could possibly get the arms and the four regiments of disciplined and reliable men, we could seize the railroad yet. Cannot General McClellan be induced to send me the regiments?" Had not McClellan already committed himself to the combined operation? Was Sherman pretending or insinuating an actual obstruction of the plan by McClellan?<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* Ironically, information in Carter's postscript only lent credence to Sherman's conviction that an expedition into East Tennessee would weaken a more strategic concentration in the direction of Bowling Green.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 318, 321, 325.

<sup>16</sup>Temple, *Notable Men*, 85-87.

<sup>17</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 4, p. 338.

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In another letter to Sherman, also dated November 5, Thomas noted that "with my headquarters at Somerset I can easily seize the most favorable time for invading East Tennessee." But the day before Carter's raiders struck, Thomas intimated to Andrew Johnson that Sherman had already decided not to execute the Carter plan: "I have done all in my power to get troops and transportation and means to advance into Tennessee. I believe General Sherman has done the same. Up to this time we have been unsuccessful. If the Tennesseans are not content and must go, then the risk of disaster will remain with them." On the same day Thomas wrote to General Schoepf at London: "I sympathize most deeply with the Tennesseans on account of their natural anxiety to relieve their friends and families from the terrible oppression they are now suffering; but to make the attempt to rescue them when we are not half prepared is culpable."<sup>18</sup>

Also on the day before the raids, Sherman wrote to Thomas from Louisville: "Mr. Maynard still presses the East Tennessee expedition. I do not doubt its importance, but I know we have not force enough and transportation to undertake it. Instead of dispersing our efforts we should concentrate; and as soon as possible our forces must be brought nearer together. In the meantime do the best you can." Discouraged by Sherman from moving South, Thomas stayed at Crab Orchard, Kentucky. He had been out of communication since late October with Carter, and even if he had had a way to contact the reverend, it was too late to reach the six leaders to postpone the raids.<sup>19</sup>

Given the initial support of Lincoln, Seward, McClellan, Sherman, Thomas, and his own brother, Lt. Samuel Carter, the architect

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 343, 347. On the eve of the raid, McClellan wrote to Gen. Don Carlos Buell, who was to be appointed Sherman's successor on November 9 (to take command on the 15th) giving a long explanation about the importance of East Tennessee, stressing the political implications:

It so happens that a large majority of the inhabitants of East Tennessee are in favor of the Union. It therefore seems proper that you should remain on the defensive on the line from Louisville to Nashville while you throw the mass of your forces by rapid marches to Cumberland Gap or Walker's Gap on Knoxville in order to occupy the railroad at that point and thus enable the loyal citizens of Eastern Tennessee to rise while you at the same time cut off the railway communication between Eastern Virginia and Mississippi.

The invasion McClellan was trying to persuade Buell to plan had already been formulated with Reverend Carter, Lincoln, and Seward, and the date had been set for the very next night. *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 300, 347.

of the plan had, on the evening of November 8, 1861, no reason to be uneasy over his inability for the past two weeks to communicate with the Federal army. At his command post near Kingston, midpoint on the railroad and about 25 miles from the strategic Loudon bridge, Carter was certain that the bands of Union raiders were poised to put the torch to nine wooden bridges and that General Thomas was poised to invade.<sup>20</sup>

After an eighty-mile ride to Bridgeport, Alabama, Robert W. Ragan and James D. Keener found the river lined with rebel troops at the longest and most powerfully built of the nine bridges. Discouraged by this show of force, the two would-be raiders returned to their homes, having failed to destroy the most important bridge.<sup>21</sup>

Thirty miles northeast of Bridgeport, in Marion County, Tennessee, W. T. Cate, A. M. Cate's brother, and W. H. Crowder, rode 25 miles and burned two bridges, one belonging to the Western and Atlantic Railroad at Chickamauga Creek east of Chattanooga, and another on the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad leading to Knoxville.<sup>22</sup>

The closeness of the village of Charleston on the Bradley County bank and the hamlet of Calhoun on the McMinn County side lent special hazards to the task of burning the bridge over the Hiwassee River. A. M. Cate led the expedition against the bridge when William Stone, overwhelmed with a sense of his fearful responsibility, returned to Cate's house and laid the task at his feet. Jesse Cleveland, Adam Thomas, and Thomas L. Cate had already agreed to take part in the raid.<sup>23</sup>

While waiting for Thomas on a public highway, bathed in brilliant moonlight, the Cate brothers saw a rebel officer leading two squads of troops along the road from the bridge. Seeing no way to escape, except to run like a coward, A. M. told his brother to pretend a child-like innocence. They rode past the rebel soldiers without being questioned. When they returned to the meeting place, Thomas joined them. Down the road, Cleveland and his son were waiting for them with pine torches. At about eleven o'clock, the men stopped in a pine thicket almost a half a mile from the bridge. Sounds

<sup>20</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 380.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Petition of A. M. Cate (1871?)*, Special Collections, University of Tennessee Library, 1-4.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

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of revelry came from the town, full of rebel troops and citizens. The presence of so many soldiers made Cate suspect that an attack on the bridge had been anticipated. He decided, however, that if the watchman was alone, he would bribe him with a hundred dollars or kill him and throw him into the river.<sup>24</sup>

At about one o'clock the town was dark and all seemed still. Having determined that the safest approach to the bridge was by the railroad, they gathered up their matches, turpentine, and fuel and set off. Other members of the raiding party, however, tried to persuade Cate to turn back. For Cate, the time for talk had passed. "Protect me with secrecy," he told them. "Go back if you wish; I have come to burn the bridge, and I will do it or die." Thus admonished, the others continued with Cate, passing to the left of the depot. With faint light shining from the guard house, Thomas Cate crept up to the window where he observed the watchman fast asleep. Moving silently, Thomas Cate, young Cleveland, and Thomas rushed to set fire to the bridge while A. M. Cate and Jesse Cleveland stood guard. One of the saboteurs cut the telegraph wire. Armed with a holster pistol, a sixshooter, and a three-pound knife, A. M. went to the window where he could see inside and easily reach the door; Cleveland stood nearby with his musket charged, ready to kill the watchman if necessary.<sup>25</sup>

To Cate, the bridge—several hundred feet long, boarded up the sides, covered and pitched on the top—was a splendid piece of architecture. It was so dry that when the flame set off the turpentine, it flashed to the pitch and seemed to dart all over the roof like electric arcs. Having applied the torch, the saboteurs dashed away. Looking back when the bridge was almost out of sight, Cate saw a blaze that glowed from bank to bank; it seemed that all the water in the Hiwassee River could not extinguish it. Mr. Cate divided the money, separated the men, and, after a seventy-one mile ride, was resting at home.<sup>26</sup>

As Cate and his accomplices attacked the four bridges at the southern end of the Great Valley, raiders who remain unknown found the long bridge at Loudon so well guarded that the attack was called off. There is no evidence that Reverend Carter led any of the raiding parties.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 9

<sup>27</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 381.

Fifteen miles east of Knoxville, where the line's name changed to the East Tennessee and Virginia, the railroad crossed the Holston River and entered Jefferson County at Strawberry Plains. Riding from the mountains of Sevier County, William C. Pickens led twelve men in the attack on that important bridge. On the Strawberry Plains side, the raiders made an opening in a rail fence and crossed a field to the Holston River. Clouds obscured the moon; the air was frosty. Having made no examination of the site in advance, they left their horses with two men and groped along the bank to the abutment.<sup>28</sup>

Pickens, later described as a "bold, dashing, reckless, good-natured fellow, who delighted in just such adventures as this," and another man climbed up onto the trestlework. Pickens lit his torch and was just about to place it between the scantling and the weatherboarding when a bullet struck his thigh, knocking him to the ground. The fall snuffed out the torch. A small, but powerfully built guard, James Keelan, grabbed Pickens. As they struggled, one of the raiders rushed to Pickens' aid, but in the darkness he mistook his colleague for the guard and hacked at him viciously with a long home-made knife. Another raider got up on the platform, sank his knife into flesh, felt himself grabbed by the hair, and felt a dirk thrust into his own body. Other raiders on the ground reached up, hitting the guard box with their knives. More men got up on the platform, sinking their knives into posts and wooden sills on two platform levels of the trestle, firing twenty rounds into the dark. Hearing Keelan fall down the embankment, the raiders assumed they had killed him. But the men still below the trestle heard the guard get up and run, and into the confusion of the darkness they fired at him.<sup>29</sup>

Having captured the bridge from its lone guard, the men searched for their matches, but only Pickens had brought some. In the struggle with the guard, he lost his grip on the box, which fell into the river. One raider suggested that they secure fire from a nearby house, but the idea was rejected by the others for fear of being recognized. With their leader Pickens suffering a bullet wound from the guard's

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 381-83.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* In 1862, Radford Gatlin, author of the *Confederate Spelling Book*, published a fourteen-page pamphlet that made the thirty-five year-old guard, James Keelan, famous throughout the South. He entitled it *The Parentage, Birth, Nativity and Exploits of the Immortal Hero James Keelan, Who Defended Successfully the Bridge at Strawberry Plains, and Alone, Put to Flight Fifteen Lincolmites on the Night of Eighth of November, A. D., 1861* (Atlanta, 1862, reissued 1932).

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<sup>30</sup>Temple, *East*

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pistol and a severe knife wound inflicted by one of his own men, the raiders reluctantly turned their backs on the long bridge.<sup>30</sup>

Fifty-six miles farther northeast, Capt. David Fry, a Greene County native, detailed for "special service" from Company F, Second Regiment, East Tennessee Volunteers, led Jacob Harmon and his sons, Henry and Thomas, Jacob M. Hensie, Henry Fry (no relation to David), A. C. Haun, Harrison Self and son Hugh S., and about fifty other men in an attack on the long bridge over Lick Creek in Greene County, fifteen miles west of Greeneville.<sup>31</sup>

Quickly capturing the guard on the bridge, the raiders surrounded a tent at the west end and took five more prisoners. A few minutes later, the bridge was engulfed in flames. Returning to the tent with a large number of men, Captain Fry verbally abused the six guards. Cursing them for persecuting Unionists in Greene County, he forced the rebels to swear not to take up arms against the United States Government. A raider, sheathing his knife, entered the tent, declaring, "That damned wire's done telling on us now."<sup>32</sup>

Thirty-five miles northeast, in the county named after Reverend Carter's historic family, Daniel Stover, Andrew Johnson's son-in-law, led an attack on the Watauga River bridge at Carter's Depot (Piney Flats). The bristling presence of Capt. David McClellan's company of Confederate infantry, however, discouraged that attempt.<sup>33</sup> Stover then led his men to a second target, the bridge over the Holston River at Union Depot (Bluff City), Sullivan County, within ten miles of the Virginia line. They easily captured the two soldiers guarding the bridge and forced them to swear not to reveal the raiders' names. After torching the bridge, Stover released his prisoners.<sup>34</sup> In all, seven bridges had been destroyed and now the raiders anxiously awaited Thomas's army of liberation.

Meanwhile, 400 Sevier County loyalists, certain that the bridge burnings were a signal for the invasion of the Federal Army, marched toward Strawberry Plains to make a second assault on the bridge. At Underdown's Ferry on the French Broad they encountered

<sup>30</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 382-83.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 4, p. 862.

<sup>33</sup>Abram Jobe, a Unionist from Carter County, recalled many years later that he had persuaded "the commander" of the men who were to burn the Carter Depot bridge to spare it because he feared reprisals should Sherman fail to rescue East Tennessee loyalists. He stated that a Negro man had been offered his freedom the next morning if he would fire the bridge that night. Jobe to Oliver P. Temple, September 20, 1899, Temple Papers, Special Collections, University of Tennessee Library.

<sup>34</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 385.

a Confederate force, composed in part of Knoxville and Strawberry Plains citizens, which fired at them from the north bank. After thirty-four hours of skirmishing, the Sevier countians retreated, losing some of their men as prisoners.<sup>35</sup>

Loyalist activity continued also at Union and Carter's Depots. The Confederate guards released by Stover renigged on their oaths of silence, and under an oath to the Confederacy they identified the saboteurs. When news circulated among the mountain men of Carter and Johnson counties that the bridge burners were to be arrested and hanged, one thousand of them assembled at Sycamore Shoals to resist.<sup>36</sup>

Near Carter's Depot, Unionist pickets fired upon advancing Confederate troops under Capt. David McClellan, who was forced to retreat. But at night he launched a counter-attack, only to be repulsed again. Fully expecting Confederate reinforcements to overwhelm them, however, the Unionists retreated through Big Springs to Elizabethton, then to Doe River Cove six miles beyond, staying there until Col. Danville Leadbetter broke up their camp two weeks later. As they fled into the mountains, some were captured and imprisoned in Knoxville and Tuscaloosa; many escaped into Kentucky, where they joined the Union army, fully expecting it to invade East Tennessee within days. Others sought refuge in the mountains until September, 1863, when the Federal army finally fulfilled Lincoln's promise to invade East Tennessee.<sup>37</sup>

The mass attacks by Unionists in Johnson and Carter counties had very little military consequence, but an element of victory flared in their successful demonstration to Confederate authorities that Unionists would never submit to a revolutionary government. Coming quickly after the burning of the bridges, the "rush to arms" and the acts of aggression by large bodies of men in Johnson, Carter, Jefferson, and Sevier counties alarmed Confederate authorities like no previous acts of resistance. These demonstrations "startled the whole Confederacy." For East Tennesseans, however, the bridge burnings brought persecution and strife rather than deliverance. A veritable reign of terror set in, as large numbers of suspects were sent without trial to prison, where some died of illnesses.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 386; Rule, *Loyalists of Tennessee*, 9-10. For letters concerning the exile of William Carter's wife and the wives of Horace Maynard, Andrew Johnson, and others, see *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. 1, pp. 883-89.

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What happened to the bridge burners? After his triumphant destruc-  
tion of the Hiwassee bridge, A. M. Cate wandered three hundred  
miles over the mountains until reaching Somerset, Kentucky, in  
January, 1862. He joined the Union army, rising to the rank of cap-  
tain. After the war, he was elected twice to the state legislature.  
In 1871, he petitioned the U. S. Senate and House of Representatives,  
"praying compensation for himself and others, for services rendered  
in burning certain important railroad bridges in East Tennessee the  
night of the eighth of November and for loss of property resulting  
from said act and their devotion to the United States Government."  
At one point, he casts a shadow of doubt over Reverend Carter's  
reputation as the heroic architect of the plan. At Flat Lick, Ken-  
tucky, before the raids, Carter paid him \$500,

but to me seemed to be exceedingly careful not to acknowledge  
himself the supervising agent . . . . I have several times re-  
quested of the Secretary of War a copy of Mr. Carter's report,  
or to be allowed to examine it, for the benefit of the commit-  
tee, and he positively refused both. We have not only been un-  
fairly dealt with, but I have reason to believe, a large amount  
of the money appropriated for that purpose went into the pockets  
of gentlemen behind the curtain, who, outside of their knowledge  
of the matter, gave it no assistance, except, perhaps, to defraud  
the real actors and sufferers.

Cate pointed out that because Carter refused to recognize him, "the  
Secretary of War says he has no power to pay." Cate died the year  
he made the petition.<sup>59</sup>

Cate's brother Thomas was captured, imprisoned in Knoxville,  
escaped, was recaptured, and imprisoned in Alabama for nearly three  
months; near death from disease, he was released. After the war,  
he became a banker in Chattanooga.<sup>40</sup> W. H. Crowder, partner of  
W. T. Cate in the burning of the two Chickamauga Creek bridges,  
fled to Kentucky, where he joined the army and served two years.<sup>41</sup>

The identities of many of the bridge burners were kept secret for  
as long as thirty-five years. Capt. William Cross, of Scott County,  
told his family that he had been connected with bridge burning, but  
he did not take responsibility for the intention of burning the Ten-

<sup>59</sup>*Petition of A. M. Cate*, 7. Temple does not cite this petition as one of his sources; he reports  
the total amount allocated to Carter as being only \$2,500. The amount varies from one authority  
to another; Patton gives \$20,000.

<sup>40</sup>Temple, *Notable Men*, 87.

<sup>41</sup>*Petition of A. M. Cate*, 11-12.



nessee River bridge at Loudon.<sup>42</sup>

David Fry managed to slip into Georgia where he stole locomotives, destroyed tracks, and cut telegraph lines on the railroad between Marietta and Chattanooga. Arrested while trying to enter Kentucky with forty others, he was jailed in Knoxville as a spy and a traitor. After being transferred to Atlanta, Fry and some of the Union soldiers, who were convicted of participating in the famous theft of the locomotive at Big Shanty, overpowered their guards the night before their scheduled execution and escaped into North Carolina.<sup>43</sup>

Pickens, leader of the attack on the Holston River bridge at Strawberry Plains, doubled up with one of his men and led his band to Dan Kenner's house, several miles away, where Dr. James H. Ellis, of Trundle's Cross Roads, dressed his wound. Placed on a sled and concealed with fodder, he was hauled back into the Smoky Mountains through Tuckaleechee Cove, on up into Wear's Cove, one of the most inaccessible parts of the mountains.<sup>44</sup> In that mountain retreat, where loyal men supplied their every need, including fresh bear meat, they met Parson Brownlow and quite a number of other prominent Unionists. Brownlow's employee, William Rule, had ridden secretly to Sevierville the day after the burnings to warn Brownlow that Confederate soldiers were looking for him as a conspirator in the burning of the bridges.<sup>45</sup>

In January, a pilot led Pickens and his men through the Cumberland Mountain passes into Kentucky, where Pickens became the first colonel of the Third Tennessee Cavalry; six of his fellow raiders became officers in the cavalry and other branches of the Federal army. Pickens died a few years after the war.<sup>46</sup>

Confederate Secretary of War Judah Benjamin issued orders that the bridge burners were to "be tried summarily by drum-head court-martial, and if found guilty, executed on the spot by *hanging*," their bodies to be left "*hanging* in the vicinity of the burned bridges." From Greeneville, Colonel Leadbetter informed Benjamin on November 30: "Two insurgents have today been tried for bridge-burning, found guilty and hanged." A third was spared because he

<sup>42</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 381.

<sup>43</sup>*O.R.*, Series II, Vol. 1, p. 881. For additional information concerning Fry, see pp. 862, 863, 882, 899; Series I, Vol. 7, p. 147; Temple, *East Tennessee*, 400; Philip Shaw Paludan, *Victims, A True Story of the Civil War* (Knoxville, 1981), 65, 67, 128, 129.

<sup>44</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 383.

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<sup>47</sup>*O.R.*, Series  
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<sup>48</sup>Kermit Hall,  
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was too young. People on passing trains reportedly leaned out to strike the corpses of Hensie and Fry with canes and sticks.<sup>47</sup>

Parson Brownlow, assured that he would suffer no physical harm, left his refuge in the Great Smoky Mountains and surrendered to Confederate authorities in Knoxville on December 6. Imprisoned with some of the bridge burners and many other loyalists, he saw A.C. Haun taken from that jail to be hanged. Henry Harmon was forced to watch the execution of his son and was himself hanged immediately afterward. Harrison Self, accused like Haun and the Harmons of burning the Lick Creek bridge, was sentenced to hang on December 27, but his daughter Elizabeth, with Brownlow's help, sent an appeal to President Davis, who, along with Benjamin, was already moved by earlier appeals to suspend the execution. Benjamin finally authorized Brownlow's exile to the North in March, 1862. "I would greatly prefer seeing him on the other side of our lines as an avowed enemy, than as a secret enemy within."<sup>48</sup>

The architect of the plan, Reverend William Blount Carter, shocked by the Federal army's failure to execute the most decisive part of the plan, for which the burning of the bridges was intended only as a fiery prelude, was isolated in enemy territory, where he quickly became known as the leader of the incendiaries. On November 16, he reported the success of his own part of the plan to his brother, Lt. Samuel Carter, and readily expressed his impatience with the glacial pace at which the Federal army was keeping its promise to Loyalists in East Tennessee. Eventually the minister escaped his native region, but unlike his brother he did not serve in the army, possibly because of illness. When Gen. Ambrose Burnside entered Knoxville in September, 1863, Reverend Carter finally returned to Carter County, where he became the leader of conservative opposition to Lincoln's emancipation policies.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 7, pp. 700-01; Bryan, "The Civil War in East Tennessee," 91; Brownlow *Sketches*, 311-12, 420-21.

<sup>48</sup>Kermit Hall, "West H. Humphreys and the Crisis of the Union, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV (1975), 59-60; Brownlow, *Sketches*, 293; *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 7, p. 806. See also E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Chapel Hill, 1937), 154-207; Steve Humphrey, "That D----d Brownlow" (Boone, N. C., 1978), 218-53. For a curious, vivid, fictional account of the burning of the bridges and of events preceding and following, with some attention to Brownlow, see William F. Barton, *A Hero in Homespun* (Boston, 1897). "The historical background," the author claims, "is believed to be true to fact," vii.

<sup>49</sup>*O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 4, pp. 359-60. For more letters from Samuel Carter concerning the invasion of East Tennessee, see *ibid.*, 361-70; Series II, Vol. 1, pp. 892-94, 896-97, 899-900. In January, 1862, Colonel Leadbetter reported that Holston Bridge at Union was still down. December 19 of that year, General Carter entered Tennessee east of Cumberland Gap and destroyed both bridges, the first Union cavalry operation in the West. After the war, Major General Carter re-entered the Navy and rose to the rank of Rear Admiral, reputedly the only man in United States history to rise to such eminence in both branches of the service. Piston, "Carter's Raid, II," 56; Temple, *Notable Men*, 92.

Long after many of them were already known, Carter kept the names of his men secret for thirty-five years, going to his grave in 1901 without revealing any of them. But Oliver P. Temple, in his chronicle of Civil War East Tennessee, succeeded in tracking down most of the names and, "with permission from those still living," published them in 1899.<sup>50</sup>

Knoxville historian William Rule's conclusion that the history of the events directly related to the bridge burnings is "imperfectly understood" and can never be "fully written" is still true. Except for Temple's *East Tennessee and the Civil War* and the *Official Records*, little more primary information is available now than then. While the raids were clearly acts of war perpetrated by a paramilitary force, even some Unionists, wrote Thomas Humes, another Knoxville historian, "thought them inexpedient, —hurtful to public convenience." Lacking a full knowledge of promised Federal military action, for which the burning of the bridges was intended only as support, some Unionist sympathizers criticized the operation for its failure to produce practical results. "The attempt to burn these bridges at this time," wrote Temple, "was, in my opinion, from every point of view . . . most unwise and unfortunate. It did little injury to the enemy, while it brought untold calamities and sufferings on the Union people."<sup>51</sup>

Several features of the burning of the bridges call to mind "The Great Locomotive Chase," which occurred five months later. The two exploits had in common the specific mission of burning railroad bridges to cut southern supply lines for the general goal of liberating East Tennessee from Confederate rule. Both ventures had military backing, but evaluations of the kind and extent of that backing conflicted then and remain unclear even today. Always in dispute has been the strategic value of the two actions even in conception. But while the execution of Andrews' raid was indisputably a failure (as had been an earlier raid led by him), Reverend Carter's venture at least produced five burned bridges, with fewer losses. Andrews and seven of his raiders were executed and fourteen went to prison. None of Carter's raiders was killed in action and only a few were wounded; five were hanged for burning one bridge and only four other

<sup>50</sup>Temple, *East Tennessee*, 379; Temple, *Notable Men*, 92-93.

<sup>51</sup>Rule, *Loyalists of Tennessee*, 10; Thomas Humes, *The Loyal Mountaineers of Tennessee* (Knoxville, 1888), 133; Temple, *East Tennessee*, 387; James W. Patton, *Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill, 1934), 60; Bryan, "Civil War in East Tennessee," 87-91.

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men went to prison. As a thrilling exploit that captured and has con-  
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received thus far.