

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Mill Springs, Kentucky

By **Stuart W. Sanders**

In late 1861, it was unclear if Kentucky would remain with the Union or join the fledgling Confederacy. As a divided, proslavery border state, Kentucky proclaimed neutrality during the first five months of the war. That stance ended, however, when northern and southern troops moved into the commonwealth.

First to enter Kentucky, the Confederates established a defensive line across the southern portion of the state that ran from the Mississippi River to the Appalachian Mountains. Confederate Brigadier General Felix Kirk Zollicoffer, a Tennessee newspaper editor, politician, and six-term U.S. congressman, controlled the eastern flank near Cumberland Gap. Despite having little military training, Zollicoffer had been active in Eastern Kentucky, fighting at Barbourville and the Battle of Camp Wildcat, near London. His activity in the region spurred Union authorities to shift troops toward Somerset, 100 miles northwest of the Cumberland Gap. Ultimately, Union Brigadier General George Henry Thomas, a Virginia native who had stayed with the United States, marched toward Somerset to link with other Federal forces. Together, they would attempt to drive Zollicoffer out of the commonwealth.

With Union soldiers gathering, Zollicoffer advanced. He established a camp at Mill Springs, located on the south side of the Cumberland River about twenty miles southwest of Somerset. Mill Springs gave Zollicoffer a solid defensive position that was protected by high bluffs along the river. The inexperienced general, however, wanted to be closer to the Union troops. Therefore, he crossed his army to the north side of the flooded Cumberland River and built extensive earthworks at Beech Grove. Although Zollicoffer believed that Beech Grove was defensible, this move placed his army's back against the river. His superiors worried that if he was attacked, his troops would not be able to escape.

In mid-January 1862, Confederate Major General George Bibb Crittenden, a Kentucky native and son of U.S. Senator John Jordan Crittenden, arrived at Beech Grove and took command of Zollicoffer's army. Crittenden learned that Thomas's soldiers had reached Logan's Crossroads, just ten miles north of the Confederate position at Beech Grove and eight miles west of Somerset. Crittenden feared that Thomas would reinforce his men with the Union troops in Somerset and would then attack the Confederates at Beech Grove. The Confederate general, however, believed he had one advantage: the weather had been terrible, with cold, constant rain, and nearby rivers and streams were impassable. Therefore, Crittenden hoped that the Union troops in Somerset

would have difficulty joining Thomas at Logan’s Crossroads. With the Federal command divided, Crittenden decided to march northward to strike Thomas before he could be reinforced.

At midnight on January 18, the Confederates left their camp. It was a difficult march, with steady rain, bitter cold, and muddy roads. Because of the poor conditions and the Confederate troops’ inexperience, the Confederate attack plan was simple. They would advance northward up the Mill Springs Road toward Logan’s Crossroads. Upon encountering the Federals, the Confederate regiments would deploy on either side of the road and attack, using the lane as their guide.

At daylight on January 19, after marching all night, the Confederate advance encountered Union pickets of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry along Timmy’s Branch, a small creek that crossed the Mill Springs Road about three miles south of Logan’s Crossroads. With musketry beginning to sputter, the Union cavalymen fell back toward two companies of the 10th Indiana Infantry, who were posted a mile up the road.

The muddy roads slowed the Confederate army, separated units as they struggled northward, and forced them to enter the battle piecemeal. After slogging through the mud, the 15th Mississippi Infantry Regiment attacked the two companies of the 10th Indiana and the pickets from the 1st Kentucky Cavalry. As the action started, it was foggy and difficult to see, which was made worse by the black powder smoke, which clung to the ground.

Zollicoffer, who now commanded a brigade under Crittenden, followed the attack plan and placed the 19th Tennessee on the left, or west side, of the road, and the 15th Mississippi on the right side of the road. Other regiments formed behind these troops. These deployments, however, made in the rain, fog, and mud, were exceedingly slow. The delays gave the 10th Indiana time to rush the rest of the regiment to the front to join their two companies who had initially slowed the Confederate advance. Soon, the remainder of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry arrived and fought dismounted with the 10th Indiana behind a split-rail fence where an old farm road intersected the Mill Springs Road. The 10th Indiana Infantry and 1st Kentucky Cavalry fought alone for nearly an hour; as news of the attack spread, the Union 4th Kentucky Regiment, led by Colonel Speed Smith Fry, arrived and replaced the 10th Indiana at the fence. When the 4th Kentucky appeared, the 15th Mississippi tried to outflank the Union position by moving into a steep ravine located on the left side of the Union line. The fog continued to be problematic. Poor visibility hindered troop movements, led to frequent lulls in the fighting, and made it nearly impossible to see enemy soldiers unless they were very close. After multiple attacks, the Confederates charged up the hill toward the fence and closed on the 4th Kentucky Infantry. The Union troops, however, drove them back. One Federal soldier wrote, “Our bullets were sent with unerring aim. Many of the rebels are shot in the forehead, breast, and stomach.”¹

The Union troops, who were primarily fighting a defensive battle, held the advantage because most of the Confederate troops were armed with antiquated flintlock muskets. In addition

¹ “The Kentucky Victory,” in *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, January 23, 1862.

to having a more limited range than the Union troops' rifled muskets, in many instances the Confederate flintlocks simply did not fire because of the rain. James Cooper of the 20th Tennessee Infantry believed that "not one in three" would shoot. "Mine went off once in the action," he wrote, "and although I wiped the 'pan' and primed a dozen times it would do so no more."² Other estimates contended that one in five of the muskets would not shoot, while others claimed that one in ten of the guns would not fire. Frustrated soldiers were seen smashing their faulty flintlocks on trees. Others walked off the battlefield, dropping their useless guns.

The battle raged as a stalemate for several hours. On the Confederate right flank, the 15th Mississippi and the 20th Tennessee tried to advance out of the ravine to dislodge the 4th Kentucky Infantry and the 1st Kentucky Cavalry, who were behind the rail fence along the old farm road. On the rebel left flank, Zollicoffer led the 19th Tennessee forward to try to push back part of the 10th Indiana, which remained on the field.

When the 15th Mississippi and the 20th Tennessee entered the ravine east of the road to outflank the Union position, a wide gap opened between them and the 19th Tennessee. During a pause in the action, Zollicoffer, who was terribly nearsighted, realized that he had lost track of the two regiments on the east side of the road. Peering through the fog, he could see his men shooting at a mysterious regiment ahead of him, on the other side of the road. Fearing that his men were firing at friendly troops, Zollicoffer rode away from the 19th Tennessee and toward the road. What Zollicoffer did not realize was that the mysterious regiment was the Union 4th Kentucky Regiment.

When Zollicoffer moved toward the lane, Union Colonel Speed Fry of the 4th Kentucky Infantry also rode there to check on the right side of his line. The two officers encountered one another in the road. Because Zollicoffer was wearing blue trousers and a blue cap, Fry assumed that he had encountered a fellow Union officer. Equally confused, Zollicoffer thought that he was talking to a Confederate soldier. The befuddled enemy officers, thinking that their regiments were shooting at allied troops, complained to one another about friendly fire. Suddenly, a mounted Confederate officer appeared from behind a tree and shot at Fry, striking Fry's horse. Since Zollicoffer had ridden from that direction, Fry realized that Zollicoffer was a Confederate officer. Fry drew his pistol and shot Zollicoffer. At the same time, other members of the 4th Kentucky also fired. The forty-nine-year-old Zollicoffer fell dead in the road, struck by a pistol shot and two rifle rounds.

The death of Zollicoffer, who had been with the 19th Tennessee, disheartened that regiment and they fell back. As Confederate cavalryman R. R. Hancock explained, "the fall of our gallant leader was a desperate blow to the followers."³ The Confederates fighting in the ravine on their right flank were unaware of Zollicoffer's demise, and they continued to assail the Federal line.

² James L. Cooper, "Service With the Twentieth Tennessee Regiment," in *Confederate Veteran* 33 (January 1925):16.

³ R. R. Hancock, *Hancock's Diary, Or, A History of the Second Tennessee Confederate Cavalry* (Nashville, TN: Brandon Printing Co., 1887), 126.

Shortly after Zollicoffer's death, General George Thomas, the Union commander, arrived on the field. Thomas immediately called up reinforcements and sent nearly his entire army into the fray. While the Confederate attack had been piecemeal, Thomas massed his men for a savage blow against the rebel line. To drive the Confederates out of the ravine, he sent a brigade of Kentucky and East Tennessee Union troops off to the left. On his right, Thomas deployed the 9th Ohio Infantry Regiment, which was comprised of German immigrants from Cincinnati and was his best-drilled regiment. Finally, to shore up his center, Thomas deployed the 2nd Minnesota Infantry to replace the exhausted 4th Kentucky, 1st Kentucky Cavalry, and the few companies of the 10th Indiana that remained along the fence.

When the Union reinforcements arrived, the 2nd Minnesota reached the fence while the 4th Kentucky was falling back. The 15th Mississippi, which continued to charge out of the ravine, reached the fence at the same time as the Minnesotans. A hand-to-hand fight erupted that lasted more than thirty minutes. Both sides shot and stabbed each other through the rails as enemy troops tried to grab the muskets of opposing soldiers. Ultimately, the fresh 2nd Minnesota shoved back the exhausted Mississippians.

As the brigade of Unionist Kentuckians and East Tennesseans drove the Confederates out of the ravine on the Union left, the 9th Ohio made a disciplined bayonet charge on the right and broke the rebel line. Other Federal regiments joined the advance, and, according to one Union colonel, "the whole [Confederate] line gave way in great confusion, and the whole turned into a perfect rout."⁴

The coordinated Union advance broke the Confederate line. The southerners retreated to their camp at Beech Grove, and the equipment and weapons that lay scattered for nearly ten miles (including blankets, haversacks, canteens, cartridge boxes, swords, muskets, pistols, knives, and more) detailed the rebel defeat. The battle had lasted approximately four hours, from 6:30 a.m. to nearly 11:00 a.m.

The Union army chased the Confederates back to their entrenchments at Beech Grove. Expecting to assault the works the next morning, Union artillery spent the night shelling the rebel lines. That night, using a commandeered steamboat and some barges, the routed Confederates crossed the river and escaped. At daylight, the Federals moved into the abandoned works and found a massive amount of supplies, weapons, horses, and ammunition that the Confederates had left behind. On January 20, Thomas issued a congratulatory order from the "Camp Opposite Mill Springs," forever connecting that location—nearly ten miles away from the battlefield—to the name of the fight.

Crittenden's army was shattered. After a week-long, privation filled march, the surviving Confederates reached Gainesboro, Tennessee, approximately seventy-five miles east of Nashville.

⁴ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 7, p. 94.

Crittenden's reputation never recovered from the loss. General Thomas, the Union commander, was hailed as a national hero.

The Federals had approximately 4,000 men on the field while the Confederates had about 5,500. The Union army lost 39 killed and 207 wounded, while the Confederates suffered 125 killed, 308 wounded, and 95 missing.

Unionists were elated over the victory. One called it “a great victory on our side,”⁵ while another said it was “the first blow which breaks the back of this rebellion.”⁶ The Federal victory at Mill Springs broke the right flank of the Confederate defensive line that crossed southern Kentucky. It also led to a series of Union advances. With the rebel army pushed from eastern Kentucky, the Confederate line across the state collapsed and the Confederate troops withdrew to Tennessee. Other Confederate positions fell quickly. In February, Fort Henry and Fort Donelson surrendered. Nashville then dropped to Union forces, and, by the end of March 1862, the Confederates had fallen back to Corinth, Mississippi, having lost Kentucky and large swathes of Tennessee.

As the first significant Union victory since the Federal defeat at the Battle of First Bull Run in Virginia, Mill Springs provided Unionists with a needed victory and boosted flagging national morale. As Union veteran Thomas Speed proclaimed, the battle “brought hope and cheer in place of dread.”⁷ Importantly, it also opened East Tennessee for Union invasion and put Kentucky firmly in Union hands.

The Battle of Mill Springs was a small battle of great consequence. The Union victory there touched off a chain of events that spiraled Confederate hopes west of the Appalachian Mountains downward and showed the divided nation that the Civil War would be a long struggle.

⁵ John Dow**Error! Bookmark not defined.** to “Dear Ann,” January 21, 1862, letter, in Dow**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Family Papers, Correspondence 1862, MSS A D744 Z, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

⁶ “Major Henry G. Davidson,” in *American Phrenological Journal* (March 1865): 93.

⁷ Thomas**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Speed, *The Union Cause in Kentucky, 1860-1865* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1907), 194.