ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

# The Campaign and Battle of Wilson's Creek

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The day Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated, Missouri delegates in the state capital, St. Louis, voted 98 to 1 declaring that "there was no adequate cause to impel Missouri to dissolve her connection to the …Union."[1] The date was March 9, 1861. By May, radical Unionists and ardent Secessionists were fighting for control of the state despite a conservative majority which sought compromise. Both extremes were driving the state to armed conflict and in June, the war's first military campaign began, culminating in The Battle of Wilson's Creek on August 10.

Fort Sumter's surrender on April 14 demanded action by Lincoln and Secretary of War Simon Cameron who called for 75,000 "militia of the several States of the Union" to serve 90-days."[2] Pro-Secessionist Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson rejected the call for Missouri to provide four regiments, stating flatly that it was ". . . illegal, unconstitutional . . . inhuman, and diabolical . . . Not one man [would] the State of Missouri furnish to carry on such an unholy cause."[3]

On May 6, Jackson ordered the state militia to assemble for its annual muster and some units established Camp Jackson just outside St. Louis. It numbered fewer than 900 men and displayed both United States and Confederate flags, but company streets like "Beauregard" and "Davis" left little doubt which faction held sway. Crates labeled "Marble" were delivered to this camp but actually contained cannon from the U.S. arsenal in Baton Rouge; Jackson intended that the guns in the St. Louis Arsenal should be his as well. But it was heavily defended by newly recruited U.S. volunteers, many from St. Louis's large

[1] *Journal and Proceedings of the Missouri State Convention, Held at Jefferson City and St. Louis, March, 1861*" (St. Louis, George Knapp & Co., Printers and Binders, 1861), 36, 46.

[2] George P. Sanger, ed., *By the Authority of Congress. The Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the Unites States of America. From December 5, 1859, to March 3, 1859. Arranged in Chronological Order and carefully collated with the Originals at Washington. With References to the Matter of Each Act and to the Subsequent Acts on the Same Subject.* (Boston: Little, Brown, And Company, 1863),12:1258

[3] United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series III, volume 1, p. 82-83 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, III, 1, 82-83).

German-American community, due to the efforts of Congressman Frank Preston Blair, Jr., Colonel Franz Sigel and Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon.

Lyon, a West Point graduate from Connecticut and career Army officer, was a fanatical Unionist and considered secession as treason that must be punished. He was aware of the Baton Rouge guns and the pro-Confederate activities at Camp Jackson. Lyon considered it a "nest of traitors" and as temporary commander of the Department of the West, he intended to shut down Camp Jackson.[4]

On May 10, Lyon surrounded the camp with 6,500 troops and the outnumbered men in the camp surrendered. The federals marched their prisoners into St. Louis while thousands of people, many pro-Confederate, lined the streets. Soon they began to throw rocks and bottles at the federals, and then a shot was fired. Union soldiers opened fire killing twenty-eight civilians; two U.S. soldiers, three militiamen, and about 75 citizens were wounded.

Word of the "Camp Jackson Massacre" reached Jefferson City later that day and within 15 minutes a bill was passed which gave the governor broad military authority and created the Missouri State Guard. Sterling Price was appointed major general in command. A former Congressman, Mexican War U.S. volunteer brigadier general and governor, Price had favored neutrality prior to the Camp Jackson Affair, but afterward became one of Missouri's leading pro-secessionists.

The new State Guard commander met with Brigadier General William Selby Harney, the returning Department of the West commander, on May 21. The resulting Price-Harney Agreement called for Governor Jackson to maintain order in the state, in return for which U.S. troops would not interfere with the state's operations; unless it was in cooperation with state troops. The agreement outraged Blair and Lyon who believed Harney was pro-secessionist and that the agreement set the stage for Missouri's secession. Calling on his friendship with Lincoln and his brother's influence as Postmaster General, Blair had Harney removed from command and Lyon promoted to brigadier general of volunteers and given command of the department.

Lyon, Blair, Jackson, and Price met in St. Louis on June 11 to determine the roles of the U.S. and state forces. After hours of fruitless debate Lyon ended the meeting, declaring that "Rather than concede to the State of Missouri … the right to dictate to my government in any matter however unimportant" he would see everyone at the meeting and "every man, woman, and child in the State dead and buried."[5] Jackson and Price returned to the state capital and the next day the governor called for 50,000 volunteers.

[4] Thomas L. Snead, *The Fight For Missouri, From The Election Of Lincoln To The Death Of Lyon* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 169.
[5] Ibid. 200.

On June 13, 1861, the Wilson's Creek Campaign began. Lyon moved 2,000 federal troops up the Missouri River by steamboat toward Jefferson City. Unprepared to defend the capital, Jackson assembled State Guard troops upriver at Boonville and two days later Lyon occupied Jefferson City. On June 17, Lyon moved 1,700 troops to Boonville. In the subsequent battle, about 450 poorly armed and organized Missouri State Guardsmen were routed by the federals. For the first time in the war troops from the same state faced each other on the battlefield.

In the wake of defeat Jackson ordered Price to southwest Missouri to organize the guard. Price chose Cowskin Prairie and he met with Brigadier General Benjamin McCulloch, commander of Confederate forces in northwest Arkansas. McCulloch, a Tennessee native, was a veteran of the War for Texas Independence, Mexican-American War scout, former Texas Ranger and U.S. Marshal. At the same time, Jackson moved south and hundreds of recruits and numerous units joined his column. When it reached Lamar on July 3, it was about 6,000 strong, but 2,000 were unarmed.

At Boonville, Lyon had gathered supplies and reinforcements to move in pursuit of Price and Jackson and on the July 3 marched south toward Clinton to rendezvous with 2,200 federals commanded by Major Samuel Davis Sturgis. He had left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas on June 24 with orders to make camp at Clinton and await Lyon's arrival. A third federal column was on the move toward Rolla. It had left St. Louis by train on June 12, the day Lyon had moved up the Missouri River. Once there, two infantry regiments and two batteries commanded by Colonel Franz Sigel marched 100-miles to Springfield. They occupied the town on July 24 and then moved west to prevent Price and Jackson from rendezvousing with McCulloch. Sigel learned that Price was already at Cowskin Prairie with about 1,700 troops, but that Jackson might still be caught.

Sigel had positioned 1,100 soldiers and his cannon north of Carthage on July 5 when Jackson attacked. Outnumbered, Sigel fought a series of rear guard actions then withdrew to Springfield. Jackson moved south, joined Price, and then left for Richmond to request assistance from Confederate authorities.

At Clinton on July 9, Lyon learned of Sigel's defeat, and after a 90-mile forced march arrived in Springfield on July 13. He appealed to Major General John C. Frémont the new Department of the West commander for assistance, but Frémont's attention was focused on Cairo, Illinois. On June 27 Confederate forces had occupied New Madrid, MO and more had moved from Arkansas into southeast Missouri. If the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers was lost, it would be a major blow to the Union. Frémont ignored Lyon's repeated requests.

While these events unfolded, Price, who had marched to Cassville, Missouri was joined on July 29 by McCulloch, his command, and Arkansas troops led by Brigadier General Nicholas Bartlett Pearce. Their combined forces totaled 12,000 including the 2,000 unarmed Missourians. Ben McCulloch, the only Confederate general officer of the three, commanded the Western Army and had requested that Price leave the unarmed men at

Cowskin Prairie. Price ignored the request and moved them with the army to Cassville but assured McCulloch they would stay there. It was the beginning of mistrust between the two.

In Springfield, Lyon had received erroneous information about the southern troops.[6] It was reported that they were in three separate columns, and the general decided to attack one of them using the region's principal route, the Wire Road. On August 1, Lyon led about 5,800 troops down the road and the next day routed the State Guard cavalry advance of Brigadier General James Spencer Rains at Dug Springs, but was unable to locate the main enemy column. Fearing enemy cavalry might cut him off from his base, Lyon returned to Springfield on the August 5. There the Union leader's newly organized Army of the West waited for supplies and reinforcements from Frémont. Few of the former and none of the latter arrived. Furthermore, his men had not been paid, their uniforms were in tatters, and hundreds returned to St. Louis as 90-day enlistments expired. By mid-August about half of his 7,000 strong force had been discharged.

On August 6, McCulloch camped about 10 miles from Springfield where the Wire Road crossed Wilson Creek. And the tension between McCulloch and Price had escalated. McCulloch was angry about the route taken at Dug Springs, Price's cavalry's inability to gather information on the federals and that the continued inability to find arms for all the men in the army. For his part, Price was frustrated that the Confederate commander would not attack, and told him if he did not move against Lyon, he would do so without McCulloch.

The Texan relented and ordered an attack for the morning of August 10, however, on the evening of August 9 rain forced a change of plan. Many of the soldiers did not have cartridge boxes and carried their ammunition in their pockets or cloth bags; a downpour could render them defenseless. The attack was cancelled. Pickets who had been called in advance of the move were not ordered back to their posts leaving the army open to a surprise attack.

In Springfield, Lyon grew increasingly anxious. The enemy was at Wilson's Creek, there was skirmishing west of town, and he believed he was greatly outnumbered. The evening of August 9, after discussing options with his senior officers, Lyon determined to attack at dawn on of August 10 and then march to Rolla. Boldly the general undertook a dangerous plan dividing his command into two columns. He would attack the Confederate camps from the north with 4,300 troops and Sigel would take up a position south of the camps with 1,100 men. Upon hearing Lyon's attack, Sigel would join the assault. The Southerners, caught in a pincer move, would be routed allowing Lyon a safe route for withdrawal to Rolla.

[6] At this time Missouri had not seceded from the Union, and the issue of its secession is still debated. Therefore, the Missouri State Guard forces were not Confederates. Also, though Arkansas had seceded, the Arkansas State troops in the battle that not had been incorporated as Confederate volunteer troops. This is why the word "southern" is used here.

About 1:00 a.m. Lyon halted, the glow of the Western Army's campfires visible. By 5:00 a.m. Sigel's troops were positioned on the east side of Wilson's Creek overlooking the main Southern cavalry camp, which included the unarmed Missourians. At 4:00 a.m. Lyon advanced and soon encountered foraging southerners, who fled south. The general formed his lead units into line and continued forward. The foragers reported the federals to Rains and couriers were sent south to alert McCulloch and Price. Rains formed a cavalry unit on the northern spur of what soon earned the name, Bloody Hill. Just to the north, at about 5:00 a.m. Lyon's artillery opened fire on them. The battle of Wilson's Creek had begun.

Lyon advanced and forced the Missourians south toward the hill's crest where the rest of Rains' command was in line but they were easily pushed over the crest down the slope toward the main Southern camps. The federals now held the battlefield's most prominent ground, but to secure his left flank, Lyon sent a US regular infantry battalion across the creek to "carry forward the left flank of the attack."[7] But at about 6:30 a.m., they were defeated and rejoined Lyon and by 7:30 a.m. the Confederates had secured the eastern section of the battlefield.

While the battle's opening phase was unfolding, word reached Price and McCulloch who were eating breakfast together at the base of Bloody Hill. The Texan did not believe the report of, "twenty thousand men and 100 pieces of artillery" from Rains' courier; but a second courier arrived with similar information followed by the report both Lyon's and Sigel's guns.[8] Up to this point, the Southern commanders had not heard the sounds of battle due to the phenomenon of acoustic shadow, the war's first example of this occurrence. They quickly responded issuing orders to meet the enemy. Across the creek opposite Bloody Hill, Confederate artillery opened fire, slowing Lyon's advance buying valuable time for Southerners to form and advance up Bloody Hill.

Having heard Lyon's opening guns, Sigel's artillery fired on the main cavalry camps. Most of the troopers fled as the federals crossed Wilson's Creek and moved north. At the far end of the camps, Texas cavalry formed into line of battle, but were forced to withdraw when Sigel's guns opened on them. By 8:30 a.m., after a short advance, the federals held the Wire Road where they captured dozens of Southerners as they tried to escape the fighting to the north. Sigel assumed Lyon was driving the enemy south and determined to hold his position. He sent out a few skirmishers and did not attempt to contact Lyon. Both decisions proved critical to the battle's outcome.

In response to Sigel's attack, McCulloch led a portion of the 3rd Louisiana down the Wire Road. Other troops joined the movement and the combined force soon made contact with Sigel's skirmishers who fell back. Mistaking the gray uniformed Pelicans for some of the gray clad companies of the 1st Iowa serving with Lyon, Sigel ordered his command not to fire as the supposed Iowans advanced; at 40 yards the Confederates fired a devastating volley and charged. Simultaneously, Southern artillery opened fire on Sigel. Most of the federals fled the battlefield. McCulloch regrouped his infantry and concentrated on Lyon.

[7] *O.R.*, I, 3, 72.
[8] Snead, *Fight for Missouri*, 263.

From this point, the rest of the battle was fought on Bloody Hill, the Southerners making three assaults. About 6:30 a.m. Lyon had positioned 2,800 infantry and 10 guns in line on the hill's crest. Price attacked with around 2,000 troops, supported by four guns. The ground cover, ravines, and slope's contours as well as the Southern units' inexperience made for an uncoordinated and disorganized assault. And because they were armed with a combination of shotguns, rifled and smoothbore flintlock muskets, units opened fire from ranges of 20 to 100 yards from the Union line. About 7:30 a.m. the attack had ground to a halt and Price ordered his troops back.

During the lull before the second attack, two cavalry units attempted to turn the federal right flank, however, the attack was uncoordinated. Only one unit made an assault which was easily turned back by Union infantry and artillery fire. Around 9:00 a.m., his line reinforced, Price began the second attack up Bloody Hill where Lyon now had 3,500 soldiers and 10 field guns in line and the Regular infantry battalion in reserve. The attack lasted about one-hour and was described as, "almost inconceivably fierce along the entire line."[9]

While at the front directing troops, Lyon was slightly wounded by a bullet grazing his right calf. Then a second round grazed his head. With blood running down his face, he limped to a relatively safe location behind the line where he was joined by Major John McAllister Schofield. Lyon told him "Major I'm afraid the day is lost", but Schofield convinced him to continue the fight.[10] Encouraged, the general rode to the front where he suffered a mortal wound when a bullet tore through his chest. By about 9:30 a.m. General Nathaniel Lyon was dead—the first Union general officer to die in battle in the war. Fighting continued for about thirty more minutes before Price disengaged and withdrew.

Command of the U.S. forces passed to Major Samuel Sturgis, the senior regular army officer, and although the federals had turned back two assaults, a heavy price had been paid in casualties. They were hot, tired, thirsty, and hungry, having not eaten since leaving Springfield 15 hours earlier and there was no information about or from Sigel. If Sigel did not appear soon, Sturgis knew he must retreat. While he met with senior officers a large column was seen moving across Wilson's Creek, with what appeared to be a US flag. Believing they were Sigel's men, Sturgis ordered his command to prepare to advance, but before, the movement began a 1,000 yard long line of battle came into view. The line was composed of Missouri, Arkansas, and Confederate units. This third assault had up to 5,000 men and artillery support and the Union center received the brunt of the attack in what was the day's most intense fighting. Four U.S. guns fired rounds of canister into the Southerners, some of whom had closed to within 20 feet of the muzzles. After about 45-minutes of brutal fighting, the attack withered and for a third time Price ordered the troops to fall back.

By about 11:30 a.m., with no word from Sigel and little remaining ammunition Sturgis began to withdraw. By 12:30 p.m. only federal casualties remained on Bloody Hill.

[9] *O.R.*, I, 3, 67.
[10] John M, Schofield, *Forty-six Years in the Army* (New York: Century Co., 1897), 44.

About the same time the Confederates moved unopposed onto the hill's crest. After a brief exchange with the Union rear guard, the Southerners, also low on ammunition, hot, tired, and hungry, did not pursue the retreating column. Around 5:00 p.m. Sturgis arrived back in Springfield. Sigel was already there.

Fought just twenty days after First Manassas, the August 10, 1861, battle of Wilson's Creek, or Oak Hills, as it was called by Confederates, was the war's second major battle and the first west of the Mississippi River. In about six and a half hours of fighting, the 5,400 man Federal Army of the West suffered 24.5% casualties - 285 killed, 873 wounded, and 186 missing, totaling 1,317. The Confederate Western Army lost 277 killed and 945 wounded, totaling 1,222 or 12% of their force of 10,200.

After the battle, McCulloch and Pearce returned to Arkansas while Price marched north to the Missouri River. As Price moved north, State Guard units and thousands of recruits joined the column and his command grew to 20,000 strong. On September 20, 1861, he captured Lexington and its Union garrison of 3,000, but this victory marked the high point of pro-secessionist efforts in the state. Price returned to the Ozarks in the face of advancing federal columns which outnumbered his command.

In October, Governor Jackson convened a rump session of the legislature in the town of Neosho, taking the state out of the Union and making Missouri the twelfth state of the Confederacy. However, federal forces kept the state firmly in Union hands for the balance of the war.

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