

End Came: Shy's Hill

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of preparation. Thomas was ready to fight. But now nature took over. Rain fell, turning to sleet and snow. A cold wind screamed out of the north, chilling the half-frozen Confederates to their bones, and making even the well fed Federals uncomfortable. The ground was covered with ice, and both men and horses could barely move on level ground. General Wilson declared an army armed with brickbats could defend the hills in such weather.

For five days the Federal high command fumed and fretted and threatened and begged — but Thomas bided his time. His second in command, Gen. John M. Schofield, sent surreptitious telegrams to Stanton designed to undermine Thomas, and gain the command for himself.

This pause in the preparations for battle seems a good time to examine the positions of the two armies.

In 1864 Nashville had a population of 100,000 people—three times what it had been at the beginning of the war. Taken by the Union Army early in 1862, it had been fortified as an important base of supply for Federal armies in Chattanooga and Georgia.

3 Large Forts

Captain James St. Clair Morton, U.S. engineer officer, had devised the city's defenses around three large forts. These were Fort Negley, on St. Cloud Hill; Fort Morton on Curry Hill, now Rose Park, and Fort Houston, where Division Street intersects Sixteenth Avenue South. He also built a blockhouse called Fort Casino on the present Reservoir Hill. The state capitol was fortified with log stockades, earthen parapets and cotton bales.

As the Confederate Army of Tennessee moved toward Nashville, Federal fortifications were extended westward around the city. New forts were built near the corner of Twenty-third Avenue N. and Hermosa Street, on the present site of the University, and on high ground at the intersection of Buchanan Street with Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Sixth Avenues. In the early winter all available hands were put to work constructing breastworks to connect these forts.

The Federal interior line, beginning on the Cumberland where General Hospital now stands, ran through the forts Morton had built and continued through what is now Vanderbilt campus, on through the newer forts to a point near Hyde's Ferry, on the river below the city.

The Outer Line

An outer defensive line branched off at Fort Casino, crossing Granny White Pike on the hill where the educational TV tower now stands and continuing past the Acklen mansion, now Belmont College. It crossed Natchez Trace at Essex, continued to the Love Circle knoll and finally ended on Centennial Boulevard, on a hill overlooking the river.

When the battle began Thomas had Steedman's force on his left, Wood's Fourth Corps in the center and a formidable force on the right—two corps commanded by Schofield and Smith. To this force on his right was added the 12,000-man cavalry force commanded by Wilson.

General Hood didn't have enough infantry to surround Nashville from the river above to the river below. His line from the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad to the Hillsboro Pike was no more than four miles long—about half the length of the Federal outer works, with depleted cavalry forces operating on its flanks.

Each of the five small redoubts guarding the left flank was defended by four guns, enough artillerymen to work them, and about a company of riflemen. Hood had lined up his three corps with Gen. B. F. Cheatham on the right, Gen. Stephen D. Lee in the center and Gen. A. P. Stewart on the left.

On the face of the matter, as the showdown neared, Hood was not too badly off. At Franklin he had seen what men behind breastworks could do to an army charging across open spaces. He wanted the Federals to attack him—and they were willing to oblige. He seemed confident of the result, but prudently planned a line of retreat in case of disaster.

Hood thought his veterans could cope with the Federal infantry, and perhaps he was right. But he had a fatal weakness. Forrest was not there, and even if he had been, it is doubtful that his depleted divisions could have matched the huge, mobile and destructive force under Wilson.

Morale Was Low

There was still another factor working against Hood and his army. His men lacked the supplies an effective force needs, and they lacked confidence in their commander. Thomas, on the other hand, enjoyed the admiration and confidence of his men and of his officers—save Schofield. What he didn't have was the confidence of his superiors in Washington and City Points.

So nervous was the high brass of the Union Army that a replacement for Thomas, Gen. John A. Logan, was en route to Nashville when the battle was fought.

On the morning of the 15th, Thomas struck. Most of the snow and ice had melted, but

for a while heavy fog slowed the movements of his infantry.

Thomas' battle plan has been highly praised by students of military strategy. It resembled the tactics of a boxer who jabs with his left and crosses a hard right hand. With the forces commanded by Steedman and Wood he meant to tie down the Confederate right and center. And with eight divisions under Wilson, Schofield and Smith he would strike Hood's left flank on the Hillsboro Pike.

Hood at Lealand

In the meantime General Hood, to be nearer the center of his battle line, moved his headquarters from Traveler's Rest, the old home of Judge John Overton on Franklin Pike, to Lealand, home of Judge John M. Lea, just east of Granny White Pike, at the foot of the Overton hills.

When he heard that Wilson's cavalry was crossing the Cumberland to take position on his left, Hood reasoned correctly that the main attack would strike this flank. He assured his army of "victory and success" and added: "Be of good cheer—all is well." His men, Sam Watkins wrote, saw a dim view of this cheerful message.

About eight in the morning Steedman attacked near the railroad cut on the Nolensville Pike. With the addition of troops from the Nashville garrison he now had 7,600 men, including three regiments of Negro soldiers under Col. Thomas J. Morgan.

These advancing regiments walked into a trap set by Cheatham's Confederates near the railroad cut, and suffered sharp losses to accurate rifle fire. Steedman now felt his "feint" had been made, and fell back to his original positions. During the afternoon Hood moved Gen. Edward Johnson's entire division to his left, two brigades at a time.

Pushed Aside

But these reinforcements could do little to stem the storm that was boiling up on Hood's left. Here the heavy weight divisions of Wilson and Smith had pushed aside the small, detached forces operating west of the Hillsboro Pike. Ector's infantry brigade, Rucker's brigade of Chalmers' cavalry division and Col. David C. Kelley with Forrest's old regiment all were forced to fire and fall back to the main Confederate line, behind a stone wall where the Green Hills shopping section now stands along the pike, from Woodmont to Hobbs Road.

The detached redoubts soon found themselves engulfed in a blue wave coming over the hills. Number 5 was the first to fall, being by-passed by Smith's men on both sides. Number 4 held on for more than three hours. It was commanded by Capt. Charles L. Lumsden, an old VMI grad, former commander of cadets at the University of Alabama. Lumsden took his orders to "hold your position at all hazards" literally. His men didn't leave until Federal soldiers came into the redoubt with them.

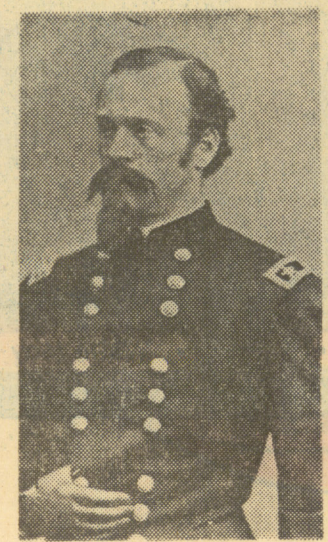
Redoubt No. 3, where Calvary Methodist Church now stands, was the next to fall, and the men who took it then ran across the road and captured No. 2. No. 1, an advanced salient east of the pike, north of Woodmont, was now the key position of the Confederates left. As men from the corps of Wood and Smith charged it front and flank, its Confederate defenders abandoned the position.

General Retreat

In the meantime Gen. Edward Walthall's division, stretching along Hillsboro Pike in a line roughly parallel to the redoubts, was being pounded by Smith's artillery and flanked by Wilson's cavalry. Walthall began a general retreat eastward and the Federals moved a half mile across Hillsboro Pike toward Granny White Pike.

As Ector's brigade retreated across Shy's Hill General Hood, who was on his horse atop this knoll watching the battle, stopped them. "Texans," he said, "I want you to hold this hill regardless of what transpires around you." The men dug in and replied, "We'll do it, General."

Late in the afternoon Hood ordered Gen. William B. Bate's division of Cheatham's corps to the left, and these men lined up on a hill (now Federal Hill) just north of Shy's Hill. In the last action of the day Couch's fresh division of Schofield's corps came up and drove Bate off the hill—an omen of what was to happen the following day.



Gen. James Wilson, USA Cavalry commander



This old drawing shows successful Federal assault on Confederate Redoubt No. 3 on Hillsboro Road, where Calvary Methodist Church now stands.

Now darkness fell and both armies dug in. It had been a good day for the Federals, with 16 pieces of artillery and 800 to 1000 prisoners falling into their hands.

Not Whipped Yet

General Hood, though mauled by the nutcracker on his left, was not whipped yet. He dug in on a new line about three miles long, his right resting on Peach Orchard Hill on the Overton farm east of Franklin Pike, and his left anchored on Shy's Hill. Both lines were refused to the south.

The corps commanded by Stephen D. Lee now was on Hood's right, stretched across Franklin Pike and around Peach Orchard Hill to the east of it. To the west of it Stewart's corps, battered in the first day's fighting, was posted behind the stone wall marking the northern boundary of Judge Lea's farm. Cheatham's corps was on Stewart's left, with Bate's division posted on Shy's Hill and Ector's brigade and other units prolonging the line south to the next hill, then back to the

Granny White Pike at the present Tynne Boulevard. The brigades on the hill and along its slope were Finley's, now commanded by Major Joseph A. Lash, and Tyler's, now commanded by Gen. Thomas Benton Smith. On the crest of the hill the remnants of four infantry brigades were commanded by Col. William M. Shy.

General Bate believed his position on Shy's Hill was vulnerable because the line was too far back from the brow of the hill to permit a field of fire, and his breastworks were being knocked down by Federal artillery fire from three surrounding hills. His line grew thinner and thinner as he extended to the left and southward to block flanking movements by Wilson's cavalry.

The Federal corps commanders seemed in no hurry to renew the action on the morning of the 16th. On the left Wood's men drove in Lee's skirmishers on Franklin Pike and then stopped before the main line. All during the morning superior Federal ar-

tillery blasted away at Confederate defenses on top of the hills, especially on the flanks.

During the morning Steedman's Negro troops charged right up to Lee's breastworks on Peach Orchard Hill, but were driven back with heavy losses. "Five color bearers with their colors were shot down within a few steps of the works," a Confederate division commander reported, "one of which having inscribed in its folds 'Eighteenth Regiment U.S. Colored Infantry,' presented by the colored ladies of Murfreesborough."

These attacks were no feat, and Hood now pulled three brigades from his line south of Shy's Hill to reinforce Lee. Lee said these brigades were not needed, and sent them to Brentwood at mid-afternoon. This tactical error, compounded by the absence of Forrest and two of his divisions, may have lost the battle for the Confederates.

A Cold Rain

About noon a cold rain began to fall, but despite this

Wood's corps, with help from Steedman's division, charged the Confederates on Peach Orchard Hill at 3 p.m. This attack carried almost to the fortified line when it broke and fell back under heavy artillery and small arms fire. This assault left the slopes of Peach Orchard blue with the bodies of dead and wounded.

But on the left, where Hood's line was anchored and doubled back on Shy's Hill, matters took a different turn. Here the energetic Wilson worked his cavalrymen behind Confederates in the angle of the line, and Bate's men reported Federal bullets were passing each other in the air over their heads. The salient was boxed in, with Federal infantry and dismounted cavalry on three sides, and battered by artillery on nearby hills. This was a situation that could not long endure. About 4 o'clock the combined corps of Wilson, Schofield and Smith charged the Confederate line at and near the angle.

At some points the Confederates stood their ground until they were run over by the

superior charging force. Colonel Shy was killed by a shot that powder-burned his face. Sam Watkins wrote that Finley's brigade, commanded by Major Lash, was the first to break and run.

Once the stampede started there was no stopping it. Hood tried in vain to rally his men. For most of them there was just one road out—the Franklin Pike — and they streamed through the hills to reach it. Fortunately Stephen D. Lee's corps still stood astride the pike, keeping the road open. The left and center of Hood's army melted away.

'The Lines Lifted'

"The breach once made," wrote General Bate, "the lines lifted from either side as far as I could see almost instantly and fled in confusion. The men climbed over the rugged hills in our rear and passed down a short valley which debouched into the Franklin turnpike."

To all intents and purposes, the great Battle of Nashville was over, and Hood's Tennessee campaign had ended in

a Confederate disaster. The last great battle of the Civil War had been fought.

The Federals didn't exactly take the Chinese advice to "build bridges of gold for a retreating enemy," but mud, cold and the timely arrival of N. B. Forrest made it possible for Hood to save the major portion of his army. Southward the army marched, fighting off the sorties of Wilson's troopers. On and on they marched, across the Duck, and finally back across the Tennessee to Tupelo, Mississippi. Hood's career as an army commander was ended, but many of his men would fight again that spring. Led by their beloved "Uncle Joe" Johnston they would make one more gallant but hopeless charge against Sherman at Bentonville.

In the wake of the battle General Thomas reported his casualties as just over 3,000. Thomas took more than 4,000 prisoners in the 2-day fight. The number of Hood's killed and wounded is not known — perhaps another 3,000 would be a fair estimate.



These 1864 photos from Library of Congress show Nashvillians watching the battle from Capitol Hill.

—Photos loaned by Lanier Merritt

What If the South Had Won at Nashville?

(Cont'd from Page 1)

never so anxious during the war as at that time."

In considering the situation at that time, a pertinent fact likely to be overlooked is that a large proportion of the population of the Northern states was thoroughly war-weary, and that both moral and financial support of the war effort were dangerously lagging.

Shortly after the battle of Nashville, when General Schofield was in Washington, Secretary Stanton told him that an early termination of the war was "an absolute financial necessity," as it had grown increasingly difficult to float the war bonds. There was a strong "peace at any price" sentiment in the North at that time, and it was officially feared that a Confederate victory at Nashville might precipitate in the North a clamor for ending the war that would be irresistible.

Schofield, in his autobiography, comments on the critical financial condition existing at the time and the importance of gaining a smashing Federal victory in the field "before the world should find out that the resources of the government had been exhausted and that the United States had not the financial strength necessary to make any further use of the men they then had on the muster and pay rolls." Further he says that "the Union cause was on the very verge of failure because it could no longer raise money, and that Secretary Stanton had consented to the Federal generals in the winter of 1864 that 'the rebellion must be suppressed in the coming campaign or the effort abandoned.'"

General James H. Wilson, who had been serving in Virginia just before the Battle of Nashville, says that "the newspapers throughout the North were filled with prognostications of disaster."

Gold was falling, the War Department was demoralized, and even General Grant himself showed greater uneasiness than he had ever exhibited before. "The depth of his uneasiness at this crucial time is evidenced by his feeling, as expressed in his 'Memoirs,' that if the South were able to prolong the war in the West into the summer of 1865 it

would probably be necessary to concede the independence of the seceded states. "The country was alarmed, the administration was alarmed, and I was alarmed, lest Hood should get North," Grant wrote.

Recognition of the decisiveness of the Battle of Nashville is to be found in the writings of many qualified students and historians. As early in 1867 William Swinton included it in his "The Twelve Decisive Battles of the War." "Nashville," wrote Swinton, "annihilated the Confederacy in the West." General Isaac R.

Sherwood, who commanded a Federal division at Franklin and Nashville, says flatly: "Nashville was the decisive battle of the four years' war."

General John Watts duPuyser, addressing the annual meeting of the New York Historical Society in 1876, chose for his subject "Nashville—the Decisive Battle of the Rebellion." "Of all battles of the great American conflict," said General duPuyser, "the most complete in its result, the finest and most perfect in its execution, strategically and tactically, the fittest as a study and as an example

to be referred to and cited hereafter, was Nashville. It was the Leipsic, or better the Waterloo, of the four years' struggle. No other fight can compare with it when the forces respectively engaged are taken into consideration."

In more modern times, General J. F. C. Fuller, in his "Decisive Battles of the U. S. A.," published in 1942, includes Nashville along with Saratoga, Yorktown, Chapultepec, Gettysburg, Santiago and the Meuse-Argonne in his consideration of "the battles that have decided the course of

American history." He refers to the engagement at Nashville specifically as "that decisive battle," stating that it was Thomas' victory at Nashville and not Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas that settled the war in the West and thereby decided the result of the war.

Lee's surrender at Appomattox and the final collapse of the Southern Confederacy followed so closely after the failure of Hood's Tennessee campaign that the importance of the Battle of Nashville was over-shadowed and obscured by the overwhelming impact of the ending of the war and the return of the people to peaceful pursuits.

The participating generals' reports of the battle were not written until months afterwards. It was years before these reports were published, and even then they were buried in ponderous official publications which had few readers. Contemporaneously and subsequently the Battle of Nashville had less publicity and discussion than any engagement of similar proportions and importance, and this lack of publicity accounts in great degree for the general lack of appreciation of the battle's decisive significance.

In recent years, however, the "revisionists" have been taking a keen second look at some of the historical dogma, with a consequent re-assessing of values. There is more of a willingness to recognize that some of our wars might possibly have had some other outcome. And, if the outcome of the Civil War had been reversed, a Confederate victory at Nashville might well be recognized now as the deciding factor in the establishment of the independence of the Confederate States of America.



This 1864 photo shows deserted Federal defense line looking west from Fort Casino.