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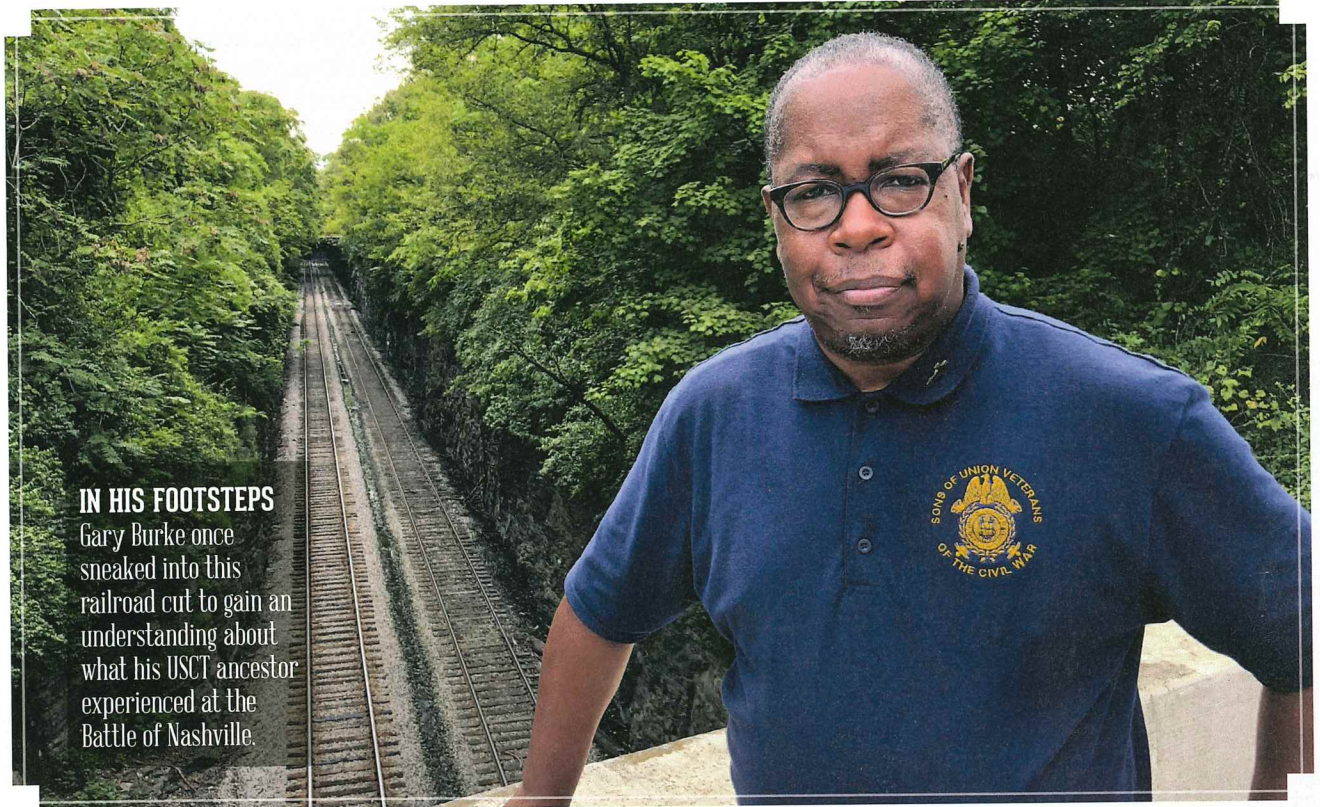
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BATTLE OF FRANKLIN

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February 2019
HistoryNet.com



IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

Gary Burke once sneaked into this railroad cut to gain an understanding about what his USCT ancestor experienced at the Battle of Nashville.

BATTLEFIELD OF THE MIND

YOU NEED A KEEN
IMAGINATION TO UNDERSTAND
THE FIGHTING AT NASHVILLE

IN A SMALL PARK along Granny White Pike in Nashville, joggers and walkers are busy burning calories early on a Sunday morning. Nearby looms the massive Battle of Nashville Peace Monument honoring Union and Confederate soldiers who fought over a vast swath of land south and west of this city. But the early risers seem oblivious to its existence. In an adjacent parking lot, a few steps from unmowed grass and 15 yards from a battlefield “witness tree,” visitors find a nearly unreadable wayside marker. This scene on the old Noel farm, once the front line on December 15, 1864, but now a sprawling neighborhood, is hardly surprising.

The Nashville battlefield has a torturous history. Bulldozed, paved over, developed and mostly ignored, the hallowed ground on which John Bell Hood’s Army of

Tennessee was nearly destroyed December, 15-16, 1864, is today unrecognizable as a battlefield. Only pockets of core battleground remain—in a grimy industrial area, on the grounds of a modern church, in residential neighborhoods, on a golf course, and elsewhere. Sadly, Nashville is mostly a battlefield of the mind.

While Gary Burke was growing up here, his father—a Korean War veteran—had never mentioned Peter Bailey, a 5-foot-4-inch private in the 17th United States Colored Troops from Lebanon, Tenn. Then, Burke discovered Bailey’s name in a family history and began digging for more information. Bailey, he learned, was his great-great-grandfather, who had enlisted in January 1864 at age 18.

As Burke talks of Bailey’s service, we walk the grounds of Travellers Rest, the Civil War-era home of Judge John Overton and one of Hood’s headquarters during the battle. He mentions how *Glory*—the 1989 movie about the

NASHVILLIANS HAD LITTLE DESIRE TO SAVE THE SITE OF A MAJOR CONFEDERATE DEFEAT

54th Massachusetts—inspired him to reenact and opened his eyes to the battlefield experiences of African Americans. “When I was younger, it made me angry because I didn’t understand the history of the Civil War,” the 54-year-old says. “I tell young people of color we should embrace it. Don’t feel ashamed.”

For Peter Bailey and eight USCT regiments, Nashville was their baptism of fire. At Peach Orchard Hill, across six lanes of I-65 from where we stand at Travellers Rest, the 13th USCT suffered 200 casualties, including five color-bearers, on the battle’s second day. “I never saw more heroic conduct shown on the field of battle than was exhibited by this body of men so recently slaves,” a Union officer said of the black troops’ performance that day.

Unfortunately, the site where Private Bailey and the rest of Maj. Gen. George Thomas’ Army of the Cumberland fought bears no resemblance to its wartime appearance. By the 1950s, Peach Orchard Hill had become a residential neighborhood, with road construction carving huge portions from core battlefield. A member of the Battle of Nashville Preservation Society, Burke isn’t pleased with the destruction, calling it “preposterous and sad.”

Later, we travel down Murfreesboro Pike, a gritty part of the city. It’s the same route Bailey and two USCT brigades took for a diversionary attack on the extreme far right of the Confederate line on the foggy morning of the battle’s first day. In industrial South Nashville, we inspect a small hill adjacent to a wrecker service. It is Granbury’s Lunette—all that remains of Confederate defenses here.

Four hundred feet west, we stand on a graffiti-marred, modern overpass to view a seldom-seen railroad cut—the very site where Bailey and his comrades, aiming to flank Confederates, instead were caught “like pickles in a barrel,” says Burke, and routed. He once sneaked into the cut—it’s about 10 feet deeper than it was during the war—because he wanted “to feel the fear that went through them.”

Unlike at Granbury’s Lunette, where a wooden marker placed by the Sons of Confederate Veterans notes its significance, there’s no battlefield marker heralding the service of the USCT. Burke, who has written a poem about the fight in the cut, hopes to rectify that someday in South Nashville.

On December 15, Colonel Sylvester Hill’s 3rd Brigade routed Confederates at Redoubt No. 3, an attack today that would storm past children’s slides, overturn benches, and damage the two-story brick building in back of Calvary United Methodist Church on Hillsboro Pike.

A 44-year-old Iowan, Colonel Hill was among those killed during the assault. Whether his death site is now in the parking lot of the Methodist church or postwar Woodmont Christian Church next door is open to interpretation. The shot that killed Hill, a married father of two children, is believed to have been fired about 300 yards away, from long-ago obliterated Redoubt No. 2, the site of a modern



REMEMBRANCE Framed by a “witness tree,” the Battle of Nashville Monument on Granny White Pike honors both sides of the December 1864 fight. Of 3,840 acres of core battlefield, only about 320 acres on which this critical late war fight occurred are preserved.

With John Banks



condominium complex.

After briefly discussing Hill's fate, church archivist Dave Nichols and I inspect the meager remains of the redoubt. It's really just a shallow trench in the ground, covered with vegetation to protect it from erosion. Still, parishioners readily agreed to save it when two large additions to the church were built in the 1990s.

Of the five redoubts constructed by Hood's army in the countryside south of Nashville, only traces of Nos. 1, 3, and 4 survive. A marker along Hillsboro Pike once noted the location of Redoubt No. 3, but it was damaged when it was struck by a car several years ago and never replaced. But every so often, parishioners receive a reminder of the significance of the land their church was built upon in the late 1940s. "We have had sermons about how a battlefield was turned into a church," says Nichols, 65. "This is a place where people were killed that has been turned into a place of peace."

Fifteen seconds into our meeting at Richland Country Club, Jim Kay establishes his Civil War credentials. On the back seat of the 58-year-old lawyer's black Lexus rests a Colt pocket pistol, a Schenkl artillery round recovered from a Battle of Nashville site, and a Gwyn & Campbell carbine. On the short drive to his house in Oak Hill—scene of

A MINIE BALL WASH?

At Nashville's Richland Country Club, site of 1864 fighting, tee boxes are marked by large replicas of Sharps carbine bullets.

intense fighting on the second day and today a wealthy suburb—it's quickly apparent Kay also has a deep connection to the Nashville battleground. In the yard of his impressive house, behind Confederate lines in 1864, he has discovered scores of relics from the battle. Kay—whose long, salt-and-pepper hair and sideburns give him the air of a Confederate officer—also is blessed with "Civil War vision" for the battle. Where you may see a modern house, Kay visualizes a battlefield, with all the infantry and cavalry movements and artillery positions.

As we drive down another street in the Oak Hill neighborhood, Kay points out the position of a Confederate battery in the front yard of a house, yards from a lengthy, wartime stone wall General William Loring's soldiers used as cover against the Union 4th Corps. Near the battery position, a huge oak hangs on to life despite missing its top. That "witness tree," Kay says, was a long-ago victim of cannon fire.

Soon, we're traveling south on Granny White Pike. When Kay was a kid, this area—about 15 miles from downtown—was farmland; now it's

largely developed. "I'm sick about it," admits Kay.

In a desperate attempt to block pursuit of Union cavalry, Colonel Edmund Rucker's brigade erected a barricade of fence rails and logs across macadamized Granny White Pike. Fierce, often hand-to-hand, fighting broke out that night during the "Battle of the Barricade"—the Army of Tennessee's last gasp at Nashville—and Rucker was captured. Some of the fighting took place on the present-day site of the Richland Country Club, where Kay serves as president.

"There were campfires everywhere here," says Kay as we stand by two replica 3-inch ordnance rifles near a fairway. Several years ago, a country club maintenance worker even eyeballed a Union belt plate on the ground.

Perhaps an apt metaphor for the Nashville battlefield may be found opposite an apartment complex, a few miles from booming downtown. Hidden among trees, weeds, and briars, the base of the old Battle of Nashville monument sits on a knoll overlooking Franklin Pike. Dedicated in 1927, the monument stood there defiantly until 1974, when a tornado toppled and destroyed it.

By the early 1980s, construction of an interstate had made what was left of the monument a castaway on a tiny island in a sea of development. It was, according to the Battle of Nashville Preservation Society website, a "disaster." Like the base on the second iteration of the monument, re-dedicated at the new site on Granny White Pike in 1999, the old pedestal includes this inscription:

"A monument like this, standing on such memories, having no reference to utilities, becomes a sentiment, a poet, a prophet, an orator to every passerby."

A fitting epitaph, too, for a battlefield lost. ★

John Banks is the author of two Civil War books and his popular Civil War blog (john-banks.blogspot.com). He lives in Nashville, Tenn.