BATTLE OF NASHVILLE

"So thoroughly was the destruction of Hood's army accomplished that it was deemed unnecessary longer to retain a large force in Tennessee, or indeed anywhere in that section."


Orchackers watch the battle from the slope of Capitol Hill

BATTLE OF NASHVILLE

Introduction

The Battle of Nashville was considered the last major engagement of the Western Theater during the Civil War. Fought over two days, December 15 and 16, 1864, Federal Major General George H. Thomas embarked the Confederate Army at Nashville, commanded by General John Bell Hood, the city just south of it. In all, Thomas suffered over 2,000 killed and wounded, along with 4,100 captured. The overwhelming Union victory sealed the fate of Confederate hopes in the west.

About the Tour

This driving tour incorporates sites associated with the Confederate defenses of Nashville and the first and second days of the battle. All the stops can be reached using public streets. It is a little, especially in the subdivision surroundings, to forget the horror of war. To get the most from this tour, try to imagine the area the way it was in December, 1864—a barren landscape with few trees, scrubby farms and plantations, and the bitter cold of winter. The winter Federal occupation by tens of thousands of soldiers left deep scars in the landscape.

When the Confederate Army of Tennessee entered in Nashville the troops were exhausted. They had been on the march from Atlanta since September, fighting all along the way, including the devastating battle at Franklin on November 30th. Food and forage were scarce, and Hood’s men were poorly outfitted. While the Federal soldiers were better fed and clothed, life in occupied Nashville was not especially pleasant either. With the influx of occupation soldiers and stores from the countryside, the small town had grown about overnight into a greatly overcrowded city, waiting out the winter years of war. Combat was fierce and personal—often hand-to-hand—and medical care was crude at best. The tour map is accompanied by written directions about the significance of the site. There are also a number of historical markers along the route or nearby. Stopping to read them will enhance the tour.

Federal soldiers beneath Ft. Morton

Occupied Nashville

In the afternoon of 1864, Ft. Donelson, located ninety miles northeast of Nashville on the Cumberland River, was captured by the Federal army. The fall of Donelson led directly to the surrender of Nashville on February 23rd. Occupation by Federal troops lasted until 1867. During that time, the city was fortified by a series of defensive installations, making Nashville a major stronghold of federal operations in the West. Both men and materials were transported into and through the city to supply the various campaigns to capture the Deep South, including Stones River, Tullahoma, Chatanooga, Atlanta, and Sherman’s March to the Sea. Federal troops also re-established seventeen churches and hotels to use as hospitals—over twenty in all. With tens of thousands of soldiers stationed in Nashville during the war, the areas natural and agricultural resources were depleted, leaving a ravaged landscape for decades after the fighting ended.

 Prelude to the Battle

Following a two-month campaign from north Georgia into middle Tennessee and the bloody Battle of Franklin on November 30, 1864, Confederate commander John Bell Hood tried to move his battered Army of Tennessee to the suburbs of Nashville on December 2nd. Hood took up headquarters at Travellers Rest, the home of Col. John Overton. As part of his overall plan, he deployed cavalry units to the west and three infantry corps under Major General Benjamin P. Cheatham, Major General A. P. Stewart, and Light. Gen. Stephen D. Lee on a line that ran from the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad on the right to a series of roads along the Hickman Pike on the left. Hood also established two cavalry divisions under Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest and Lieut. Gen. William Rose’s Ritter division thirty miles southwest to depart from the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad and protect Hood’s flank. The importance of resource protection to the Confederate invasion of southern Tennessee was critical and was likely one of the reasons they made it to the winter months with good food. On the other hand, Hood would send over half of his 58,000-man army attacking in an attempt to collapse Hood’s entire line.

For two weeks, from December 2nd to December 11th, the armies of Hood and Thomas engaged in a series of battles that would determine the outcome of their military operation. During one of these battles, between the two armies called the "Murfreesboro" battle, the Confederate army under General Thomas was defeated by a Union force under General Burnside. Despite the Confederate defeat, the battle marked a turning point in the war and resulted in the retreat of the Confederate army from Tennessee. The battle was fought on December 16th and 17th, 1864, in Rutherford County, Tennessee. The Union forces, led by Ulysses S. Grant, captured the Confederate army under General Robert E. Lee and forced it to retreat, leading to the eventual surrender of the army.

The Battle

December 15, 1864

With the loss quickly realized, Thomas realized his plan and issued orders to his commanders to attack at first light. As the sun rose on the 16th, the city and the battlefield were opened by a dense fog produced by the melting snow. As a result, Thomas’s Division, using four United States Colored Infantry Brigades, made several unsuccessful attacks against a battery defended by Griston’s Brigade of Cheatham’s Corps on the Confederate right. The regiments took hundreds of casualties. At 10:45, Wilson’s Command and Smith’s 12000-man XVI Corps began their attack on the north side of the Hillsboro Pike. They were followed just after noon by Wilson’s IV Infantry Corps. Smith’s and Wilson’s men captured the majority of Confederate casualties. By 15:00, Division commanders in Stewart’s Corps, realizing they were flanking, ordered their men to retreat, abandoning Reclusi on the west and Stull’s Battery on the east. Mudd moved his entire army back two miles as he set up the first day of battle.

December 16, 1864

On the morning of the 16th, fog again covered the battlefield as the Confederates took up a two-mile defensive position, anchored on the left by Cheatham’s Corps. The attack was renewed later in the day as the Harrison’s Battery finally fell. After a delay of several hours due to confusion on the part of Federal commanders, Maj. Gen. John Adams of Stewart’s XVI Corps began an attack from the left against the Confederate right (against Counts’s II & XVIII). The American regiments stormed up the incline around 4pm in the afternoon. The Confederates at the top were overwhelmed and began to fall back. Seeing the confusion of his retreating, Stewart’s Corps withdrew. Faison, a poet, quickly fell behind the rest of the army. From atop Parham’s Orchard Hill, Maj. Gen. D.C. Lee witnessed the battle and, with the news of the retreat, retreated in the rear guard as the Army of Tennessee moved hastily down the Franklin Pike. As darkness covered the battlefield, Thomas wired Washington on his victory.

The Aftermath

Williams’ Frome’s Confiscated into Eastern Alabama. On the day after Christmas, Hood re-crossed the Tennessee River. The Federal victory at Nashville/Shenandoah’s capture of Savannah, Georgia, satisfied the mood of the men. The Army of Tennessee re-crossed at Tuscumbia, Mississippi, with between 15,000 men, less than half of the number they entered Tennessee in November. As Adj. Gen. Henry Gray of Thomas’s staff noted, “by the time of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox (April 1865) there remained in Tennessee only the plant garrisons and railroad guards needed to protect the property of the United States.”

Federal troops on the Nashville battlefield

A Driving Tour of the 1864 Battlefield

Map of Battle of Nashville Preservation Society (1993-ensigning)