

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Battle of Brice's Crossroads

By **Stewart Bennett**, Blue Mountain College

The year 1864 proved pivotal in the development of the American Civil War. Decisions made determined the destinies of commanders, the men who fought under them, and the civilians caught in the crossfire of war. This was especially true in North Mississippi. This was also the year Lincoln put the military fortunes of the Union and its armies under the authority of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant.

While Grant led the war effort from the eastern theater, he put his trust in his close friend Major General William Tecumseh Sherman to command and oversee the work of the Union armies in the Western Theater. According to Grant, Sherman's ultimate goals included the destruction of the Army of Tennessee, if possible, and the capture of Atlanta. Atlanta was a major railroad hub for the South and specifically the Western Theater. By taking Atlanta, Sherman would sever Confederate rail lines between the two theaters of war thus continuing to divide the Confederacy. In order to make these goals attainable, Sherman needed a strong army and a protected supply line. Sherman focused on how to supply his armies throughout the campaign toward Atlanta. Damage to Sherman's supply line would have caused lengthy delays in the Union army's movements and ultimately would have meant disaster for Sherman. One of Sherman's problems and, quite possibly his most vexing, was the fear of a Confederate attack upon his long vulnerable supply line by Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest and his cavalry forces.<sup>1</sup>

Sherman had good reason to worry about Forrest. Although Forrest had no military training, it became obvious early in the struggle that he was a natural at making war and a force to be reckoned with. From leading a successful escape of his troops from Fort Donelson, his hard fighting at Shiloh and Chickamauga, his raids through Tennessee, his successful pursuits of Union forces in Alabama, and then his controversial taking of Fort Pillow, Forrest and his cavalry had made themselves seem larger than life

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<sup>1</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Webster, 1885 and 1886), 2:120.

to many in the South and to Union armies who crossed his path.<sup>2</sup> Although Georgia was on Sherman's mind, the specter of Forrest haunted Sherman's thoughts. Sherman later admitted that, "there was great danger, always in my mind, that Forrest would collect a heavy cavalry command in Mississippi, cross the Tennessee River, and break up our railroad below Nashville."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Sherman developed a plan for dealing with Forrest.

In May 1864, Confederate Major General Stephen Dill Lee had taken command of the department that comprised all of Mississippi, Alabama, East Louisiana, and Western Tennessee. This encompassed all Confederate forces operating within this large domain including Forrest and his cavalry. Although others clamored for Forrest's cavalry to strike Sherman's supply line in Tennessee, Lee had his own problems. If Forrest and his men rode into central Tennessee, it would leave North Mississippi's cornfields and important rail lines vulnerable to Union raids. Furthermore, this could hamper the delivery of supplies to General Joseph Eggleston Johnston's Confederate Army of Tennessee, which depended on North Mississippi for much of its provisions. Lee's fears of Mississippi's vulnerability grew when he realized Alabama's susceptibility to Union raids.<sup>4</sup>

Sherman realized that until Forrest had been captured or killed, the southern cavalryman would be a constant worry. Therefore, Sherman decided to take the fight to Forrest and sent a Union army from Memphis in search of the illusive cavalryman. In doing so, Sherman hoped to keep Forrest busy in Mississippi and away from Union operations in Georgia. Sherman sent Brigadier General Samuel Davis Sturgis with this small army out of Memphis. Although Sturgis first attempt in late April ended in failure, due mainly to rainy weather and low supplies, on May 31, Sherman ordered Sturgis, once again, to move forward. This time, Sturgis had Waring's Cavalry Brigade numbering 1,500 troopers along with Winslow's Cavalry Brigade of 1,800 cavalymen, and six pieces of artillery all commanded by Brigadier General Benjamin Henry Grierson. Infantry were also part of these Union forces and included Colonel William Linn McMillen's brigade of 2,000 men along with Company E, First Illinois Artillery, four guns; a section of two guns from the Fourteenth Indiana Battery and part of Colonel George B. Hoge's brigade of Major General Andrew Jackson Smith's division, some 1,600 troops. Finally, Captain F. H. Chapman's four-gun battery was added along with

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 92-93; Brian Steel Wills. *A Battle from the Start* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 113-6.

<sup>3</sup> William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1875), 2:31, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen D. Lee, "Battle of Brice's Crossroads, or Tishomingo Creek, June 2<sup>nd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>, 1864," Edited by Franklin L. Riley, *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* (Oxford: Mississippi Historical Society, 1902), 4:27-28. It should be noted that an official report of this engagement by General Stephen D. Lee was not completed or has not been found at this time. Lee's publication for the Mississippi Historical Society appears to be his report, however, it is written in 1902, which is years after the war and death of General Forrest.

Colonel Edward Bouton's brigade of colored troops at 1,200 strong. The plan had Sturgis leading his men to march on Corinth. From there, they would continue to Tupelo, then on to Okolona, Columbus, and finally Grenada. The combined forces planned to return to Memphis from Grenada. Sturgis hoped, during his travels, to provoke an engagement with Forrest.<sup>5</sup>

While Sturgis' men marched through North Mississippi on June 1, Forrest and his men were busy moving toward the Tennessee River to break Sherman's supply line. However, with Sturgis on the move, Lee decided to call Forrest back to Mississippi in order to halt the Union advance. Lee's decision worked wonderfully into Sherman's overall plan. Heavy rains and lack of supplies once again hindered Sturgis's movements through north Mississippi, except this time Sturgis resolved to keep moving toward Tupelo.<sup>6</sup>

On the morning of June 10, Grierson's cavalry reached Brice's Crossroads ahead of Forrest's troopers. Forrest, hoping to catch Sturgis's cavalry separated from the infantry, sent forward what troops he had at the time, roughly 2,000. These men formed a strong skirmish line until Colonel Tyree Harris Bell with almost 2,800 men, more than half of Forrest's available troops, could arrive and enter the fight. Cavalry on both sides fought dismounted. Forrest later reported that his available force during the fighting at Brice's Crossroads stood at only 3,500.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the numbers, Forrest's men were able to conceal their troop strength by using the area's topography to their advantage while keeping up a heavy skirmish fire. This caused considerable angst for Grierson who believed that Forrest had more men than the wily southern general actually commanded. Sturgis and his infantry were at least two miles from the conflict at Brice's Crossroads when the general received notification of the fight. Sturgis committed himself and two of the infantry brigades to the action by moving troops on the double quick under a stifling Mississippi sun. In doing so, Sturgis lost many of his infantrymen due to heat exhaustion before they could reach the crossroads. By 1:00 p.m. the remnants of his brigades reached the Union line at Brice's Crossroads. Colonel Tyree Bell's Confederates had also arrived and entered the fight. Forrest moved his men forward and pushed the Union forces back upon the crossroads finally breaking the federal line and forcing the Union troops back across Tishomingo Creek. Sturgis's final brigade, made up of Bouton's black soldiers, arrived in time to hold the Union line near the Tishomingo Creek bridge allowing Union forces to cross the

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<sup>5</sup> 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 I, volume 39, part 1, p. 217-8 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 39, pt. 1, 217-8).

<sup>6</sup> *O.R.*, I, 39, pt. 1, 221-2.

<sup>7</sup> John Watson Morton, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry, The Wizard of the Saddle* (Nashville, TN; Dallas, TX: Publishing House of the M.E. Church South, Smith & Lamar Agents, 1909), 174; James Harvey Mathes. *General Forrest*, (New York: D. Appleton, 1902), 238-9, 241; Thomas Jordan and J. P. Pryor. *The Campaigns of Lieut- Gen. N.B. Forrest and of Forrest's Cavalry*, 1996 Da Capo Press ed. (New Orleans: Blelock, 1868), 467-9; *O.R.*, I, 39, pt. 1, 222-3, 225.

creek. The black troops then retreated and joined other Union troops in a final stand on Whitehouse Ridge. This last stand was short lived since Sturgis's line could not withstand Forrest's onslaught. The Confederate charge caused the Union men to flee toward Ripley and beyond to Memphis. Sturgis lost about 200 wagons and all of his artillery. Union troops trickled into Memphis over the next two weeks; yet Confederate forces captured many before they could reach the city. Sturgis recorded Union losses including the missing at 1,623.<sup>8</sup>

Forrest's win at Brice's Crossroads came with a price. Confederate casualties for this victory were hard to replace. S.D. Lee would write the authorities in Richmond of Forrest's exploits announcing that Forrest had, "gained a complete victory, capturing many prisoners and wagon train." Yet, in the end, Lee wrote, "our loss quite severe." The Union army suffered 617 casualties, while the Confederate army lost 492 in killed and wounded. Given that Forrest had a smaller command, his loss was as Lee mentioned, "quite severe." The greatest difference in assessing this battle could be in the number of Union soldiers taken prisoner.<sup>9</sup>

The battle of Brice's Crossroads became a celebrated Confederate victory; it cemented Forrest's reputation as a great leader and fighter, while also helping to secure North Mississippi under southern control, at least for the moment. Sherman received word of Sturgis's debacle soon after the fight. Although disappointed in the outcome, Sherman had, in effect won at Brice's Crossroads for the fight kept Forrest away from Sherman's supply line. Sherman continued to take the fight to Forrest in North Mississippi and showed his commitment to defeating Forrest by sending an even larger army into the state, believing that Forrest's cavalry "should be met and defeated at any and all cost."<sup>10</sup>

In time, the veterans would recall the battle. Henry George of Lyon's Kentucky Brigade spoke of Brice's Crossroads years later. Henry, in looking around and letting the memories flood back like the Confederate tide that covered over Brice's Crossroads on that sweltering day in June realized, "It has been truthfully said that battle fields may seem on the historical page to be fields of glory, but in reality they are most horrid scenes. While I am writing this my mind runs back to that awful day, and the terrible scenes are almost as vividly in my mind as if they had occurred but yesterday." Henry understood what Brice's Crossroads meant to him and those who fought there. He also understood the pain and reality of war regardless of victory or defeat. As at Brice's Crossroads, everything in this war came with a price. The battlefield is quiet and peaceful now. Few tablets and monuments dot the land. The Tishomingo Creek continues to meander through the battlefield. The areas that were once Union and Confederate battle lines are now peaceful undulating landscapes, making it difficult to fathom that such an

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart Bennett. *The Battle of Brice's Crossroads* (Charlestown, South Carolina: The History Press, 2012), 41, 66-69, 72, 99-104, 106-7, 109-15, 117-22; *O.R.*, I, 39, pt. 1, 92-95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 95, 220, 230-1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. 2, 115.

encounter happened on this peaceful landscape so many years ago in Northeast Mississippi.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Henry George. "Brice's Cross Roads: A Visit to One of Gen. Forrest's Triumphant Battle Fields," Brice's Crossroads Visitor Center Collection; Bennett, *Brice's Crossroads*, 125-6.