

Civil War Troop Movements Across the Plateau Following the Tullahoma Campaign

Ralph Thompson

Part 1 of a 2 Part Series

The Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865. The war's turning point came in 1863 and was signaled by three main events. The first was the Union's siege of Vicksburg, which gave the North control of the Mississippi River. The second was the Union victory at the Battle of Gettysburg, which stopped the South's deepest penetration into Northern territory. After Confederate General Robert E. Lee's defeat at Gettysburg, Lee was forced to fight a series of losing battles in defense of Richmond. The third event that turned the tide of the war against the South was the loss of Tennessee. The state was critical for two reasons. The first was that its agricultural products were being used to supply the Confederate Army, and second, Chattanooga was a major railway hub that controlled the movement of supplies and equipment and was the gateway to the South. In 1862, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton wrote that the occupation of Chattanooga was regarded by the President as "nearly as important as the capture of Richmond."

The final series of battles for control of Tennessee began in December of 1862 when Union General William S. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland moved against Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee at the Battle of Stones River (Murfreesboro). A defeated Bragg retreated to Tullahoma and thus began the Tullahoma Campaign. After an extended period to resupply and train, Rosecrans moved again against Bragg. After a series of battles and skirmishes, including Hoover's Gap, where the first repeating rifles were used, Bragg was forced to retreat from Tullahoma to Chattanooga.

This retreat and Rosecrans' advance resulted in tens of thousands of troops moving across the Plateau. At the beginning of the Tullahoma Campaign, Rosecrans had approximately 65,000 troops under his command to Bragg's 51,000. The following is a description of the routes taken by the troops.

Bragg's Retreat

Following the Battle of Stones River, Bragg had established his headquarters at Tullahoma and deployed troops generally along the Duck River. General Leonidas Polk's Corps was at Shelbyville, and W. J. Hardee's Corps was headquartered at Wartrace. However, when Union forces push through Hoover's Gap began to flank Confederate troops, Bragg ordered a retreat to Tullahoma. Polk and Hardee's

retreat began on the night of June 26, 1863. By July 28th, with the retreat still in progress, Bragg made the decision to fight from fortified positions around Tullahoma and maintain supply and communication lines with Chattanooga. At the same time Rosecrans' forces were flanking Bragg's right by moving to Manchester and Hillsboro. The problem with the Bragg's Tullahoma strategy was highlighted on the night of June 28th.

On that night, Union Colonel John T. Wilder's Lightning Brigade crossed the Elk River outside of Pelham and struck during the night at Decherd. The Brigade destroyed 300 yards of railroad track, water tanks, the trestle for the Winchester branch line, and telegraph instruments; then they burned the depot including the commissary stores. From Decherd the Brigade moved to University Place by way of Brakefield Point and destroyed the railroad to Tracy City, then returned to Pelham by way of the Stage Road through Gilliam's Cove. Only a troop train at Tantalum prevented them from destroying the railroad east of the plateau.

On June 29th, General S. B. Buckner with 4,000 men arrived by rail from East Tennessee to reinforce Bragg. However, on the same day, General Polk advised retreat from Tullahoma lest they be cut off from Chattanooga and be forced to retreat to northern Alabama. The following day, with Rosecrans' forces moving toward Tullahoma from Manchester and Hillsborough, General Bragg ordered a retreat from Tullahoma to south of the Elk River. Bragg's headquarters was moved to Decherd.

By July 2nd Confederate forces had crossed the Elk River and destroyed the bridges behind them. Union forces occupied Tullahoma, Manchester, Hillsboro, and Pelham. At 1:30 a.m. General Bragg ordered Polk to retreat to Cowan and Hardee to the foot of the mountain at Brakefield Point. It is not clear if he considered fighting from that position or if he was simply staging for another phase of his retreat. However on that same day, July 2nd, at 4:00 p.m. General Bragg issued the order for "put your train in march over the mountain at once". At the same time cavalry units that had been guarding the Elk River crossings began to pull back, but continued to protect the retreating units.

The night of July 2nd found Polk's Corps on the mountain road between Cowan and University Place. At the same time Hardee's Corps was ascending the mountain at Brakefield Point. Both passed through University Place on the 3rd of July.

Polk's retreat turned south toward Burnt Stand (Jump Off Road) and had descended into Sweeton's Cove by way of "The Levels" by the night of the 3rd.

Polk's Corps accompanied by General Buckner's army traveled down the southwest side of Battle Creek. At the mouth of Battle Creek, Buckner turned south and crossed the river at Bridgeport. Polk's Corps crossed the Tennessee about a mile north of the mouth of Battle Creek using a pontoon bridge and continued toward Chattanooga by way of the Shellmond and Whitesides Depots. This is the general route of I-24 from Nickajack Lake to the I-24 rest area at the Georgia state line.

On July 3rd, Hardee continued northeast from University Place until reaching the Stage Road that descended the mountain to Battle Creek. He reached Battle Creek by that night. Hardee was joined by Forrest's Cavalry and travelled along the northeast side of Battle Creek turning north to Jasper. From there they followed a road across the Sequatchie River and then along the north bank of the Tennessee. The Tennessee was crossed at Kelly's Ferry, and the troops approached Chattanooga through the gap at Raccoon Mountain where US Highway 41 now enters Hamilton County from Marion County.

While Polk and Hardee were responsible for moving their Corps' supplies and field guns, Bragg took full advantage of the railroad to move supplies and heavy armament to Chattanooga. This combination permitted General Bragg, in a span of just 4 days, to move his entire army, except for the rear guard cavalry, from Tullahoma to safety across the mountain and into the Sequatchie Valley. In 7 days the forces were in Chattanooga. General Bragg had saved the Army of Tennessee to fight another day, but had lost Middle Tennessee to the Union.

The next move belonged to General Rosecrans.

This paper was written based on research that included official reports and field communication from the Army of the Cumberland and the Army of Tennessee. Also used were Rosecrans' field maps prepared by Capt. W. E. Merrill with troop positions by Capt. S. C. Kellogg.

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Part 2 of a 2 Part Series

Part 1 provided background as to Tennessee's importance, as both an agricultural center and a railway hub, in influencing the outcome of the Civil War. Confederate losses, under General Braxton Bragg, first at Stones River and then in July 1863 in the Tullahoma Campaign, gave the Union forces, under General William Rosecrans, control of Middle Tennessee. General Bragg retreated to Chattanooga to protect the vital railway hub there. Bragg's troop movements across the Cumberland Plateau were detailed in Part 1.

General Rosecrans' Advance on Chattanooga

General Rosecrans was faced with a difficult challenge. While retreating, General Bragg simply had to mass his troop and move them out of harm's way as rapidly as possible while using the cavalry in a rear guard action. Rosecrans had to extend his supply lines, develop a strategy for attack, move troops across the mountain and do so in a manner that would not reveal his plan of attack. The good roads were left rutted by Bragg's retreat and the remaining ones were marginal at best. Most of the bridges had been damaged or destroyed and railroads had been damaged.

Because Bragg would be defending from a position of strength, fortified positions on the opposite bank of the Tennessee River, Rosecrans' strategy included an element of surprise. He would deprive the enemy of knowing the direction of attack. To accomplish this it would be necessary to divide his forces and give the appearance of an attack from a second direction. This is similar to what was done in the Tullahoma Campaign when Rosecrans appeared to initiate an attack on General Polk's Corps at Shelbyville but instead attacked the Manchester Road. Rosecrans' plan was straightforward, divide his army, simultaneously cross the plateau at several locations, and give the appearance of preparing an attack from up river, while moving his main force in from the southwest.

The first order of business was to restore rail service and develop forward supply depots. By July 13, 1863, the Elk River Bridge had been restored with the mainline to Bridgeport, Alabama, in operation by the 25th. The branch line to Tracy City was not in operation until August 13th. This was due to the fact that the special engine required to traverse the steep mountain grades had to be repaired before the line could be put into use.

Two main depots were established, one at Bridgeport and the other at Tracy City. The plan called for Union forces to be supplied from these two depots once forces had reached Sequatchie Valley. They would continue to do so until the Union established rail or boat service to Chattanooga. The supply operation was a unique operation unto itself. Supplies, including ammunition, rations, and livestock feed, were shipped by rail to the supply depots. From there the supplies were moved by wagon trains to the forces in the field.

“A standard wagon body was ten feet long. It had a canvas top which could be drawn closed at both ends. Mule teams were hitched to wagons in either two or three pairs depending on the load, the lead pair in front, then the swing pair, then the pole (or wheel) pair nearest to the wagon. The driver, called a mule skinner, rode the near (left) pole mule, which had a saddle, and guided the lead team with a long single rein that traveled through loops on the harness of the swing pair to the bit of the near leader, from which an iron rod led to the bit of the off (right) leader. A steady pull on the rein while shouting “Haw!” would head the team to the left; short jerks and “Gee!” would head them to the right (“Yay!” meant straight ahead.). For downhill travel, a wagon brake could be operated from the saddle. For steep mountain grades the wagon might also include a log chained behind the wagon to slow its descent.” *From “The Old Anderson Road” by Patricia Hudson*

These wagon supply trains were immense. Confederate General Wheeler wrote the following in his report of a daring raid on a supply train that was traveling north from Bridgeport on October 2. “We here found a large train of wagons, which proved to extend from the top of Waldens’ Ridge for a distance of 10 miles toward Jasper. This train was heavily loaded with ordnance, quartermasters, and commissary stores. The number of wagons was variously estimated at from 800 to 1,500. No one saw, perhaps, more than half the train. The quartermaster in charge of the train, as well as other employees, stated that there were 800 six-mule wagons, besides a great number of sutler wagons.”

On August 8th, Corps commanders were authorized to begin issuing rations to support a general troop movement. As soon as Tracy City became operational on the 13th, Rosecrans was prepared to move across the plateau in force. Rosecrans had three large corps under his command; General George H. Thomas’ XIV Corps, General A. McDowell McCook’s XX Corps, and General Thomas L. Crittenden’s XXI Corps. There were also two smaller corps; General Gordon Granger’s Reserve Corp and General Robert B. Mitchell’s Cavalry Corps. Granger’s Reserve Corps was assigned primarily to protect Nashville and the supply line to the plateau.

Each major Corps was assigned a general corridor for crossing the plateau. Thomas was assigned the middle, which was basically from Cowan north to University Place. McCook's route was west of Cowan as far as Salem (Huntland, Tennessee). Crittenden's assignment was north of Tracy City. Three brigades of cavalry came from Fayetteville, Tennessee, and Athens, Alabama, by way of Huntsville, Alabama. Union forces began general troop movements across the plateau on August 16, 1863.

XIV Corps under General Thomas advanced as follows.

- Parts of 1st Division under Rousseau crossed the mountain from Cowan, through Tantalum, Anderson and down to Stevenson, Alabama, in advance of the 16th. This was to establish a forward base and supply point.

On August 16th there was a general advance in this order.

- 2nd Division under Negley advanced along this same route as Rousseau and camped between Crow's Creek and Stevenson.
- General Baird followed with the remainder of 1st Division and camped near Anderson.
- 4th Division under Reynolds followed by,
- 3rd Division under Brannan advanced from University Place (Sewanee) south toward Burnt Stand (Jump Off) and down the mountain into Sweeton's Cove. From there the two divisions traveled along the southwest side of Battle Creek and camped near the mouth of Battle Creek.

Thomas' four divisions were positioned to cross the Tennessee at any point from Kelly's Ferry south to Bridgeport.

XX Corps under General McCook advanced his troops as follows.

- 1st Division under Davis from Winchester south to Big Coon Creek in Alabama thus approaching Stevenson from the southwest.
- 2nd Division from Salem west of Winchester (near Huntland) south to Larkin's Fork, Alabama (Larkenville) then to an encampment near Bellefonte Station just northeast of Scottsboro, Alabama.

McCook's two divisions were positioned to cross the river at any point from Bridgeport south to Scottsboro.

XXI Corps under General Crittenden had perhaps the most difficult task. His assignment was to move three columns across three separate routes over the most difficult terrain.

- 1st Division under Woods moved from Hillsboro/Pelham through what is believed to have been Payne's Cove and on to Tracy City. From there 1st Division moved north toward Altamont before turning northeast just north of what is now Coalmont. This took them to Therman's Road, which went from near Altamont to Therman's Crossroads (Daus) in Sequatchie Valley. This road followed the route of the McMinnville and Chattanooga Stage Road from what is now known as Tatesville down Daus Mountain and to Daus. 1st Division was accompanied by Wilder's Mounted Infantry for additional support and protection.

This positioned the 1st Division to either cross Sequatchie Valley to Anderson then take Anderson's Pike across Walden's Ridge, down what is now known as the "W" Road and to Chattanooga or to move south down the valley to join XIV Corps. On August 21st, 2nd Brigade of 1st Division under Wagner crossed the mountain on Anderson Pike.

- 2nd Division under Palmer, because of road conditions in Grundy County, moved from Manchester northeast to Viola. From there the Division moved through gaps in the Ben Lomand Mountain and into Northcutt's Cove and on to Irving College. Just east of Irving College the troops turned southeast on Hill's Trace. The Trace is one of the oldest established roads in the region. It connects Warren County and the Collins River Valley with Dunlap. The road ascends the mountain from Hill's Creek in Warren County and descends the mountain (Hill's Turnpike) at Fredonia into Dunlap.

2nd Division would then be in position to cross the valley at Dunlap and follow Poe's Trace through Henson's Gap (route of the current State Highway 111 east of Dunlap) to Poe's Crossroads (Daisy, Tennessee) or to proceed down the valley and join forces with XIV Corps between Jasper and Bridgeport. On August 21st, 2nd Brigade of 2nd Division under Hazen crossed the mountain on Poe's Trace.

- 3rd Division under Van Cleve advanced from McMinnville by way of Harrison's Trace. This road went directly to Pikeville at the upper end of the Sequatchie Valley. The first section of this road followed the same general route as State Highway 8 does today. Van Cleve was accompanied by Minty's Cavalry for additional protection.

3rd Division would be in position to defend the valley from elements of Forrester and Dibrell's Cavalry that continued to operate in the mountain between Kingston and Sparta.

In addition to the three main corps, General Rosecrans made the following assignments.

Reserve Corps under General Grainger would be responsible for the city of Nashville and the supply line from there to the depots at Tracy City and Bridgeport. The depot at Tracy City received little use because of the difficulty in moving supplies from there to Sequatchie Valley. Most supplies were moved up the valley from Bridgeport.

Elements of the Cavalry Corps under Mitchell would advance south out of middle Tennessee to Athens and Huntsville, Alabama, and protect the Memphis and Charleston Railway, which ran east and west across northern Alabama. This railway had been the major east-west link across the Confederate States.

These movements were essentially complete by August 19th, 3 days from the time they began.

General Rosecrans then issued orders that would put into place an attack on General Bragg from the south in an attempt to cut his supply line with Atlanta. The two brigades of XXI Corps identified above and Minty's Cavalry were assigned to "watch and annoy the enemy" in Chattanooga. They began by shelling the town on August 21st. The remainder of XXI Corps was ordered down the Sequatchie, crossing the Tennessee near Jasper and taking a position at Wauhatchi (near current I-24 Welcome Center) at the foot of Lookout Mountain.

XIV and XX Corps crossed the Tennessee at four locations between Shellmound to the north and Caperton's Ferry (Stevenson) to the south. These two corps took up positions near Trenton and sent out advance parties as far east as Cooper's and Steven's Gaps.

These two gaps overlooked a place whose story was yet to be written – Chickamauga.

Sources:

- Maps by C. S. Mergell under the direction of Col. W. E. Merrill (1865);
- Troop Positions by Captain S. C. Kellogg, U.S. 5th Cavalry (1891)

- *The War Of The Rebellion: A Compilation Of The Official Records Of The Union And Confederate Armies / Series 1 - Volume 30 (Parts I and II) also known as "OR" (Official Record)*