

brices cross roads tupelo



In the second half of 1863 Union armies won important victories at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Chattanooga. Four of the 11 Confederate States were completely in Union hands. The strong positions Union armies held all around the Confederacy were further strengthened when Lincoln unified all the various commands and named Ulysses Grant supreme commander on March 9, 1864. Grant took command of the Army of the Potomac and placed William T. Sherman in charge of the western armies. This coordination of the Union war effort resulted in two great armies poised for the simultaneous invasion of the South.

The Battle of Brices Cross Roads

The Union plan for war in the west was to bisect the South east of the Mississippi with Sherman's army working out of Chattanooga and Nashville. His task was to destroy the Confederate Army led by Joseph E. Johnston, occupy Atlanta, and if possible, go on to Savannah and Charleston. From May to September, Sherman fought doggedly through northern Georgia, finally forcing, with the aid of a change in the Confederate command, the evacuation of Atlanta.

Early in the Atlanta campaign, the Confederate high command had considered the possibility of attacking from Mississippi Sherman's vulnerable supply line—the one-track railroad from Nashville to Chattanooga. Late in May, Gen. Stephen D. Lee, who commanded the Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, directed Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, an unschooled farmboy

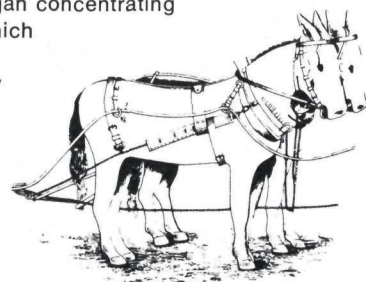
who had become a millionaire before he was 40 and had risen from private to major general, to strike Sherman's line of communications in middle Tennessee. Forrest had distinguished himself by his ability to move fast and fight hard. He lacked formal training in military science, but he acted on the simple maxim that in warfare it was all-important to get to the decisive point of the battle first with the most men. Gifted with daring and inspirational leadership, he had an uncanny ability to carry into execution his theory of successful warfare. So on June 1 Forrest put his columns in motion at Tupelo, Miss., and three days later was in Russellville, Ala., a day's march from the Tennessee River.

Sherman knew that his supply line was vulnerable and therefore charged Gen. Samuel D. Sturgis to move out of Memphis into northern Mississippi and hold Forrest there. Alerted by Lee of Sturgis' moves, Forrest hurried back to Tupelo.

Forrest began concentrating his forces, which numbered approximately 3,500 men, along the railroad between Guntown, Baldwin, and Booneville.

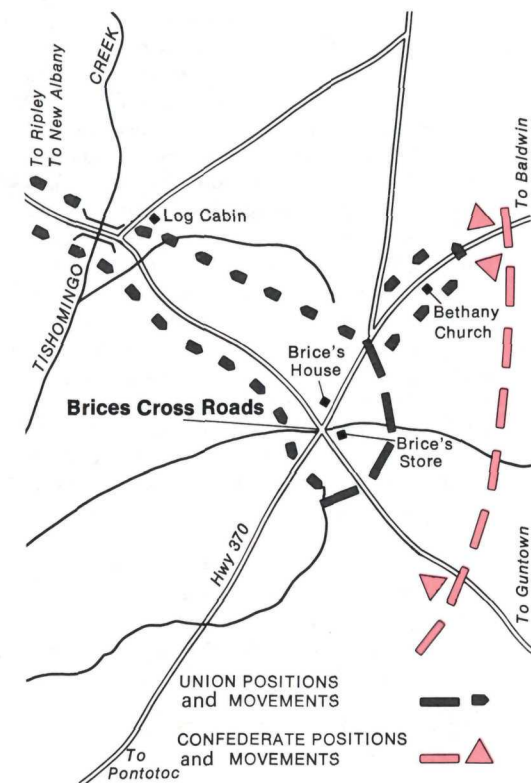
On the evening of June 9, he knew from his scouts that Sturgis, with about 8,100 men, was in camp at Stubbs Farm 13 to 16 kilometers (8 to 10 miles) from Brices Cross Roads. Both armies marched at dawn.

Forrest, who had scouted his enemy well, planned to attack at Brices. But Sturgis' cavalry reached and passed the crossroads before the Confederates got there. Forrest, approaching along the Baldwin Road, met the Union patrols about 1.5 kilometers (1 mile) east of Brices. The Confederates checked the Union advance and by noon, with rapid reinforcement, were attacking vigorously. The Union forces, called up on the



double, were exhausted from the march along the muddy roads made almost impassable by torrential rains the night before. Many never even crossed Tishomingo Creek.

Forrest pressed his attack and by midafternoon pushed the Union lines back to the crossroads. Sturgis began a careful withdrawal. But at Tishomingo Creek bridge there was trouble when a wagon overturned as the Federals recrossed the stream. Some 8 miles up the road, as they crossed the treacherous Hatchie River bottom, many of the soldiers panicked and the retreat became a rout. Most of the artillery and wagon train were abandoned, and, in the wild flight to Memphis, more than 1,500 Federals were captured.



Students and critics of military tactics agree that the engagement was characterized by the hardest kind of fighting and was a brilliant tactical victory for Forrest. Despite this, the battle at Brices Cross Roads did not bring relief to the Confederacy. Sherman, on this and other occasions, forestalled any attack on the Nashville-Chattanooga railroad by sending small commands into northern Mississippi. Assured of adequate reinforcements and supplies, he won the Atlanta and later campaigns which made the collapse of the Confederacy inevitable.

VISITING THE BATTLEFIELD

Brices Cross Roads National Battlefield Site is located about 10 kilometers (6 miles) west of Baldwin, Miss., on Miss. 370. The park consists of only a small piece of land, but from it much of the scene of action is within view. There are no National Park Service facilities or personnel at Brices, but park interpreters at the Tupelo visitor center of the Natchez Trace Parkway can answer your questions. Information is also available at the Brice's Crossroads Visitors and Interpretive Center, owned and operated by the city of Baldwin at 607 Grisham St. The center is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and from 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. It is closed Mondays and most major holidays. A small entrance fee is charged.

This type of wagon, with a six-mule team, was commonly used by both sides during the war. A Union supply wagon turned over on the Tishomingo Creek bridge blocking the crossing.



Battles often revolve around leaders and daring exploits. But a lot more goes into what happens before, during, and after the fighting. The lay of the land is important. Availability of supplies plays a crucial role. Weather, too, can be decisive.

When the Battle of Brices Cross Roads took place, torrential rains had soaked the area and swollen streams, making them, specifically Tishomingo Creek, impassable. When the Union wagon overturned on the bridge, the retreat turned into a rout.

When the Battle of Tupelo took place five weeks later, the land was dry and parched. Although the Federals had carried the day militarily, they began to run short of supplies and had to return to Memphis. The heat, dusty roads, and lack of water sapped a man's energy and prevented a serious pursuit by the Confederates.

The weather was not the only factor in these battles, but it did have an impact. We may not consider it today, but certainly the soldiers thought about, and perhaps cursed, the rain and then the sun.

The Battle of Tupelo

As far as Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman was concerned, the fighting in Mississippi in the summer of 1864 had only one purpose: to protect the railroad which brought food and ammunition from Louisville, through Nashville and Chattanooga, to his army. It was so important to him that after the Battle of Brices Cross Roads, Sherman ordered his commander in Memphis "to make up a force and go out to follow Forrest to the death, if it cost 10,000 lives and breaks the Treasury."

Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, Sherman wrote, had "whipped Sturgis fair and square, and now I will put against him A. J. Smith and Mower, and let them try their hand." On July 5, 1864, Smith moved south from La Grange, Tenn., with 24 cannon and more than 14,000 men. The dust-choked column of marching men and animals was nearly 24 kilometers (15 miles) long. With Smith went

Gen. Joseph A. Mower—"a young and game officer," Sherman called him. He commanded about half of Smith's force. The Yankees marched into north Mississippi, fighting and skirmishing along the way.

Gen. Stephen Lee and General Forrest knew that Smith and Mower were trying to bring the Confederates to battle. They believed that the best move on their part would be to await attack in a fortified position. They chose Okolona, 29 kilometers (18 miles) south of Tupelo, for their defensive line.

But to prepare a strong position, troops throughout north Mississippi had to be drawn to Okolona. Union cavalry learned that Tupelo was now unprotected, and on July 13 the Union forces headed in that direction. By taking the town they not only could gain a hold on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, but also could force the Confederates to attack them—in a fortified position. Realizing what was happening Forrest hurried up with his main force to attack the long Union column. The northern soldiers beat off the attacks and marched on, reaching Harrisburg about dark that same evening. At the little village, now within the Tupelo city limits, they camped, awaiting certain attack the next day, for as Lee said, Smith's army must be "dealt with vigorously and at once."

The battle opened in the early morning as part of Forrest's men dashed on foot toward the Federal position on the crest of a low ridge. For 3 hours parts of Forrest's troops attacked and fell back repeatedly. After an early afternoon lull in the fighting the Southerners tried again. And again blazing Federal rifle and cannon fire drove them back. That night they made a final, unsuccessful attack.

Although the Federals had repulsed Forrest's men and had suffered far fewer losses than the Confederates, Smith was alarmed. His men had little but coffee and worm-infested hardtack to eat. The sun was taking its toll; dozens were dropping from heat exhaustion. The ammunition supply, Smith reported, was distressingly low. On the morning of the 15th, he left his own and the

captured Confederate wounded, marched 6.5 kilometers (4 miles) north, and camped. Again Forrest's men attacked. And in a swirling, confused fight, the Federals drove them off. The next day Smith's men took up their march to La Grange. The Confederates followed cautiously for 2 days, but without venturing another major attack.

Neither side could claim complete victory. Lee and Forrest could say that the Union forces had turned back after the battle. The Confederates, however, had not fought with their usual skill. Forrest's soldiers "went in by piece-meal and were slaughtered by wholesale," a Confederate officer wrote years later. The attacks, Smith reported, "were gallantly made, but without order, organization, or skill."

Temporarily the railroad was safe. Smith had not followed Forrest "to the death," but he had held him for a time. Sherman gave him credit for that and sent him out to fight Forrest again in August. And again he kept Forrest away from the railroad. In September, Forrest rode into Tennessee. His men saw hard service, but it had no effect on the outcome of the war. Sherman was beyond Atlanta and beyond the railroad; he was marching through Georgia.

Brices and Tupelo were small parts of a new kind of warfare—what the 20th century would call "total war." After Grant took command in the spring of 1864, all Union armies worked together for the first time. From the west, Sherman drove into Georgia, battled the large Confederate army there, and destroyed anything which might feed, clothe, or arm Southern soldiers. In the east, Grant pounded Gen. Robert E. Lee's powerful army, never relenting until Lee's exhausted soldiers surrendered. Elsewhere small Union commands prevented scattered Southern forces from annoying Grant and Sherman. President Abraham Lincoln liked the plan, and remembering his rabbit-hunting days, summed it up in a homey phrase—"Those not skinning can hold a leg." At Brices and Tupelo, Sturgis, Smith, and Mower were holding a leg while Sherman did the skinning in Georgia.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

Do not allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. While every effort has been made to provide for your safety, there are still hazards which require your alertness and vigilance. Exercise common sense and caution. For a pleasant park experience, watch your children and don't let them stray. Drive defensively.

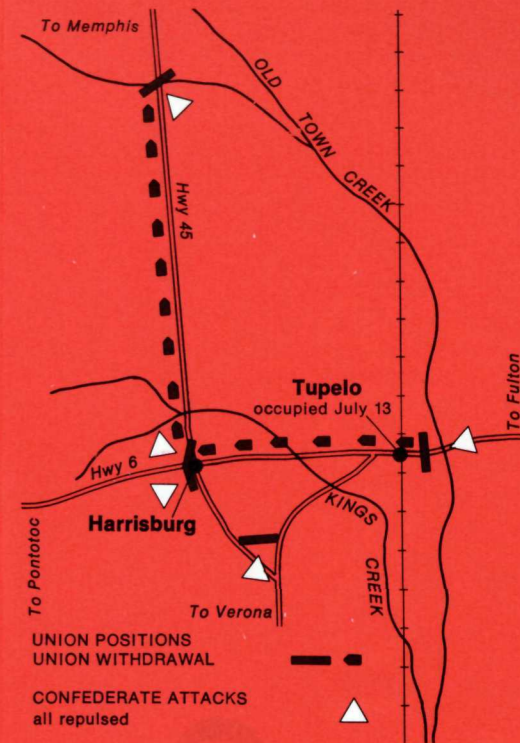
VISITING THE BATTLEFIELD

Tupelo National Battlefield is located near the place where the Confederate line was formed to attack the Union position. The park is within the city limits of Tupelo, Miss., on Miss. 6 about 1.5 kilometers (1 mile) west of its intersection with U.S. 45. It is 1.9 kilometers (1.2 miles) east of the Natchez Trace Parkway. National Park Service interpreters at the parkway's Tupelo visitor center can answer your questions and provide information about the battle.

ADMINISTRATION

Both Tupelo National Battlefield and Brices Cross Roads National Battlefield Site are administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent of Natchez Trace Parkway is in charge of both areas. Address all inquiries to 2680 Natchez Trace Parkway, Tupelo, MS 38804. You may also phone 662-680-4025 or 1-800-305-7417.

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