

pea ridge

national military park, arkansas

pea ridge national military

Control of Missouri was a leading objective of both Federal and Confederate forces during the first year of the Civil War. Southwestern Missouri appeared to be the area that could determine the destiny of this entire key State. Wilson's Creek, first significant battle in Missouri, was fought 10 miles southwest of Springfield on August 10, 1861. Although the battle was a Confederate victory, Southern forces were not able to make a successful follow-up. Similarly, the Federals could not establish strong control over the State.

On Christmas Day, 1861, Brig. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis was appointed to head the Federal Southwestern District of Missouri. His mission: drive the pro-Confederate forces from the State and bring it under firm Federal control. Acting with more determination than Major Generals John C. Frémont and David Hunter, his predecessors, Curtis began an active campaign to take Missouri. The operations that started in southwest Missouri late in December and ended at Elkhorn Tavern became known as the Pea Ridge Campaign. The battle itself was fought on March 7-8, 1862, a month before the bloody fighting at Shiloh.



park

scene

retreat and return Curtis' opponent was Maj. Gen. Sterling Price, the popular former Missouri governor, now in command of the State Guard. As Curtis' Federals pushed southwestward from their base at Rollo, Mo., Price had virtually no choice but to retreat. His force was made up of State troops who had not become a part of the regular Confederate Army. With insufficient men and supplies inadequate for effective resistance, Price drew back across the Arkansas State line on February 16, 1862. In Arkansas he expected to join forces with Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch's regular Confederate troops. Hoping to forget their past record of non-cooperation, Price proposed to combine forces and strike Curtis effectively.

By the last of February, Price and McCulloch had consolidated forces and moved to the Boston Mountains, about halfway between Fayetteville and Fort Smith, Ark. Meanwhile, the Federals had stopped at a place called Cross Hollows, 5 miles south of present-day Rogers. This is where Curtis expected the Confederates to attack. Posting most of his troops at Cross Hollows, and sending detachments as far east as Huntsville and as far west as Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), he hoped to detect any Confederate movement between these points in time to concentrate quickly wherever necessary.

On March 3, a new Confederate commander appeared on the scene. Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, grandnephew of Andrew Jackson, arrived to take command of the combined Confederate forces. Commanding the newly created Trans-Mississippi District, Van Dorn started his move the very next day. With aspirations of defeating Curtis, he planned to move on and capture St. Louis, subjecting southwestern Missouri in the process. St. Louis was the Federal base for western operations; it could very well serve the Confederates for the same purpose.

Preparing for Van Dorn's attack, Curtis started moving his army to a stronger position 15 miles north of Cross Hollows, about where Telegraph Road crosses Little Sugar Creek. He had already sent Col. Jefferson C. Davis into the area on March 1 to prepare for its defense. By nightfall of March 6, essentially all of Curtis' 10,500 troops were on several 100-foot-high bluffs overlooking Telegraph Road and the valley of Little Sugar Creek, the expected Confederate approach routes.

And it was up the valley that the Confederates advanced. By evening of March 6, after 3 days of hard marching through rugged country in disagreeable weather, they arrived at Confederate Camp Stephens on Little Sugar Creek, just 4 miles southwest of the Federal position. Aware of the strong Federal entrenchments ahead, Van

of the federal victory that saved missouri for the union

Dorn realized that a frontal attack up the valley would be suicidal. Deciding to attack the Federals from the rear, he moved northeast from Camp Stephens by way of the Bentonville Detour, then south on Telegraph Road. This flanking movement was designed not only to surprise the Federals, but also to get control of Telegraph Road, the main north-south route and Curtis' vital communication and supply line.

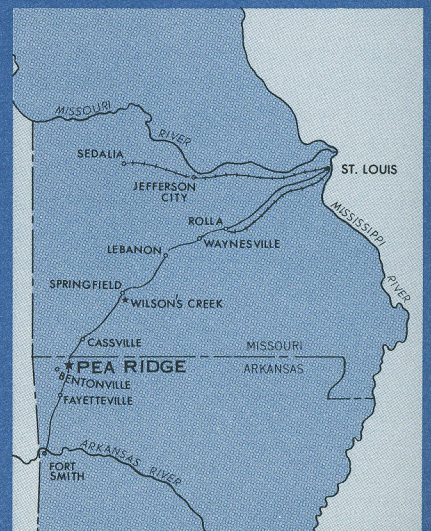
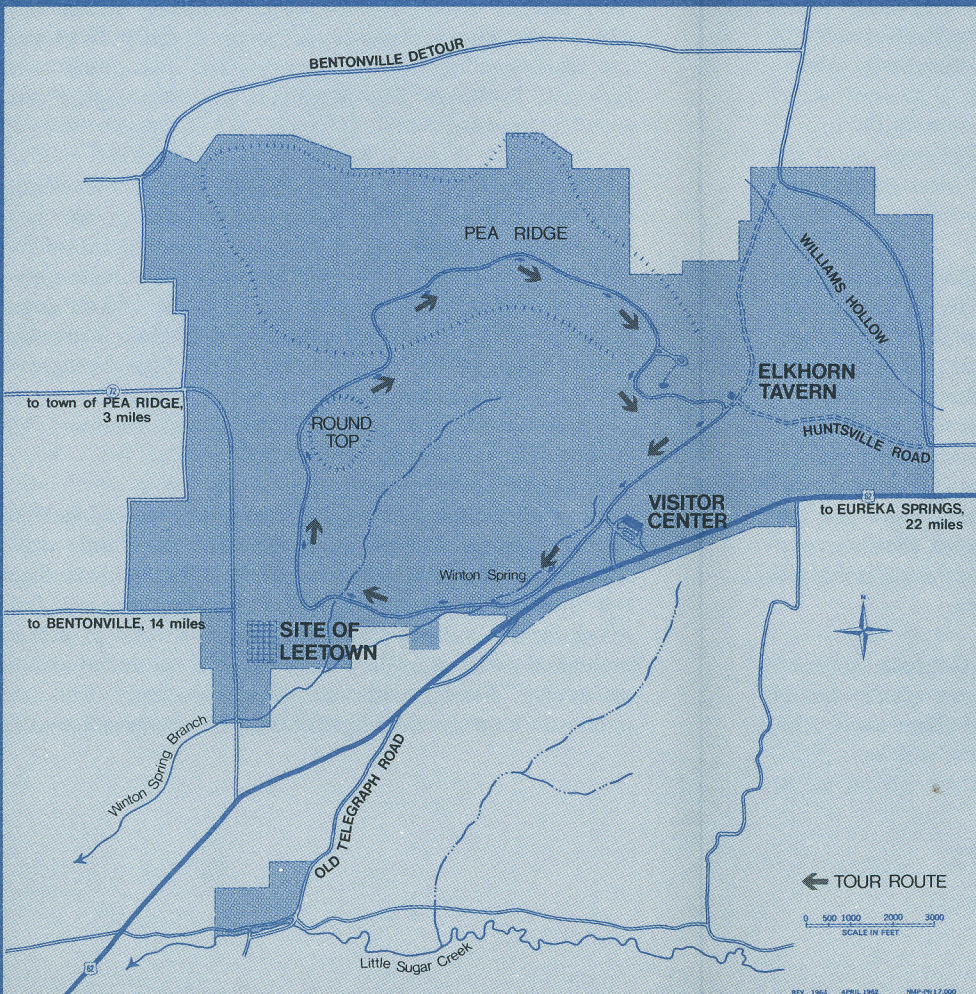
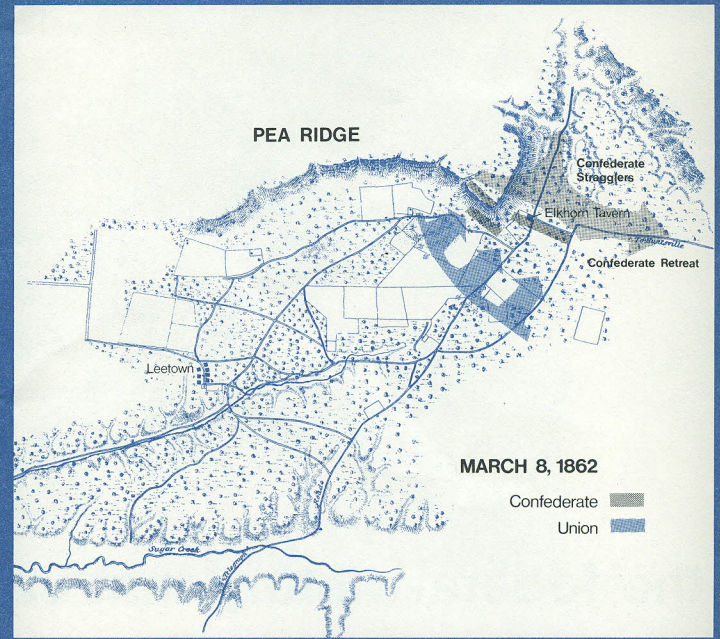
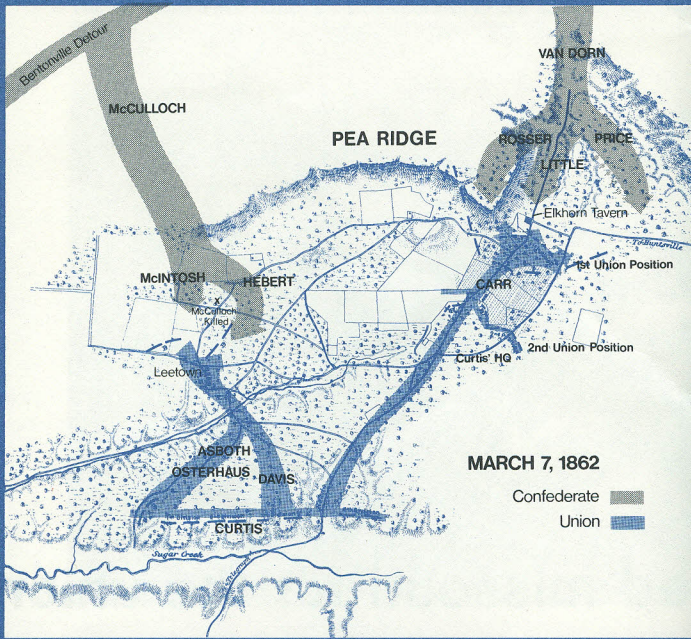
march 7, 1862 Van Dorn's 6,200-man advance force, commanded by General Price, failed to reach the junction of the Bentonville Detour and Telegraph Road at daylight as planned. It was 8 a.m. before they arrived. Furthermore, McCulloch's 10,000 men were still on the Bentonville Detour 3 miles away—near the northwestern end of Pea Ridge. Not wanting to wait for McCulloch's command to catch up, Van Dorn decided to split his force into two wings and make simultaneous attacks upon the Federal right and left. If both wings could attack at the same time, then move toward the center, the Federals would be surrounded and have to surrender. So thought Van Dorn.

But Curtis learned of the unexpected Confederate move shortly after daybreak. This left him no choice but to turn his men around and move most of them away from his fortified position above Little Sugar Creek.

Two distinct areas of battle developed early in the day: one near Elkhorn Tavern, the other 2 miles away near the little hamlet called Leetown. The two areas were separated by Round Top Mountain and other high ground that lay between.

Curtis ordered Col. Eugene Carr's division to the vicinity of Elkhorn Tavern. This inn and residence of the Jesse Cox family was being used by Curtis as the Federal provost marshal headquarters. Nearby was the Federal supply camp. As Carr's men moved out to resist Price's force, parts of Brig. Gen. Franz Sigel's two Union divisions moved north of Leetown to strike what Sigel thought to be Van Dorn's center. About 10 a.m., Federal forces met the Confederates at Elkhorn Tavern and Leetown. The Battle of Pea Ridge was underway.

During most of the day Carr's force tenaciously held on to the Elkhorn Tavern area against Van Dorn's drive. Early in the battle, Confederate Brig. Gen. William Slack fell mortally wounded. As he was being carried from the field, he ordered Col. Thomas H. Rosser to assume command of his brigade. Fierce fighting continued around the tavern. Although his men fought gallantly, Carr was unable to hold the field against Van Dorn's first-line com-



manders—Rosser, Little, and Price. At dusk the Federals were forced to withdraw.

The Confederates won at Elkhorn Tavern, but on the other side of Round Top Mountain, north of Leetown, they were decisively defeated. Brig. Gen. Albert Pike, who had brought a brigade of Indians from Indian Territory, had difficulty keeping his troops under control. Pike's Indians and part of Brig. Gen. James McIntosh's cavalry captured three cannon, and a Confederate victory seemed in the making. The Indians, however, were reluctant to fight against the Federal artillery—"wagons that shoot"—and confusion soon swayed the course of battle to the Federals' advantage.

While Pike was busy controlling his troops, McCulloch joined McIntosh's cavalry in an advance against Col. Peter Osterhaus. As Col. Louis Hébert marched his infantry over Round Top Mountain, McCulloch moved from the woods into an opening in front of his main force to survey the field. Conspicuously dressed in black, he became an easy mark for Peter Pelican, an Illinois sharpshooter. A single shot killed the Confederate general. Learning of McCulloch's death, McIntosh assumed command. Fifteen minutes later he too was slain.

Shortly after, a quarter of a mile to the east, Hébert's infantry had become hotly engaged with Davis' Union division. Pushed back momentarily, Davis rallied to a significant victory by attacking Hébert's left flank, at the same time continuing to resist the frontal attack. With this success came the capture of Colonel Hébert and an undisputed Federal victory for the ground north of Leetown. When the fighting ended on the first day, each side had a victory; each, a defeat.

march 8, 1862 Since neither side could claim the whole day on the 7th, both opponents prepared to renew the contest on the following morning. Scattered troops were reorganized and placed in battle positions. Most of the fighting was in the vicinity of Elkhorn Tavern: the Federal center lay half a mile south of the building, and the Confederate center was 350 yards closer.

On the second day artillery played a dominant, if not the decisive, role in determining the outcome of the 2-day fight. General Sigel's artillery, posted on the crest of rising ground opposite the southeastern spur of Pea Ridge, had a telling effect upon the Confederate batteries located in an open woods near the base of the slope.

Although the Confederates had 65 artillery pieces and the Federals only 50, the greater number was useless without ammunition. Leaving his supplies at Camp Stephens had been a serious mistake for Van Dorn. Early in the

battle his diminishing ammunition supply began to disturb him. He hoped it would last until a new supply could be brought around the Federals over 12 miles of rough roads.

When ammunition had not arrived by 10 a.m., Van Dorn realized the futility of continued resistance and ordered his troops to start withdrawing. Keeping a fighting force near Elkhorn Tavern, he moved his main force from the field by way of the Huntsville Road east of the tavern. The Federals, thinking the Confederates' main retreat would be over Telegraph Road and the Bentonville Detour, advanced up the road to stop them. Mistaking Confederate stragglers for the rear of the main force, the Federals pursued, while the main Confederate force was allowed to move to the southeast with little opposition.

By noon the Battle of Pea Ridge, one of the most decisive Civil War engagements west of the Mississippi River, had ended with an overall Federal victory. Casualties were high on both sides: the Federals suffered 203 killed, 980 wounded, and 201 missing, and the Confederates reported their loss as 1,000 killed and wounded and 300 captured. Missouri was saved for the Union.

From Pea Ridge the Confederates went to Van Buren, Ark. Gathering their scattered forces, they moved on into Tennessee—but too late to participate in the Battle of Shiloh. The Federals remained in the vicinity of Pea Ridge for about a month, shifting eventually to Helena, Ark.

about your visit The visitor center, open daily from 8 a.m. until dark, is 10 miles northeast of Rogers and 30 miles northeast of Fayetteville, on U.S. 62. Visitors can follow a self-guiding auto tour to significant battlefield features. Special services for groups are available on request to the superintendent. No camping facilities are available.

administration Pea Ridge National Military Park, containing 4,280 acres, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Pea Ridge, Ark. 72751, is in immediate charge.

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