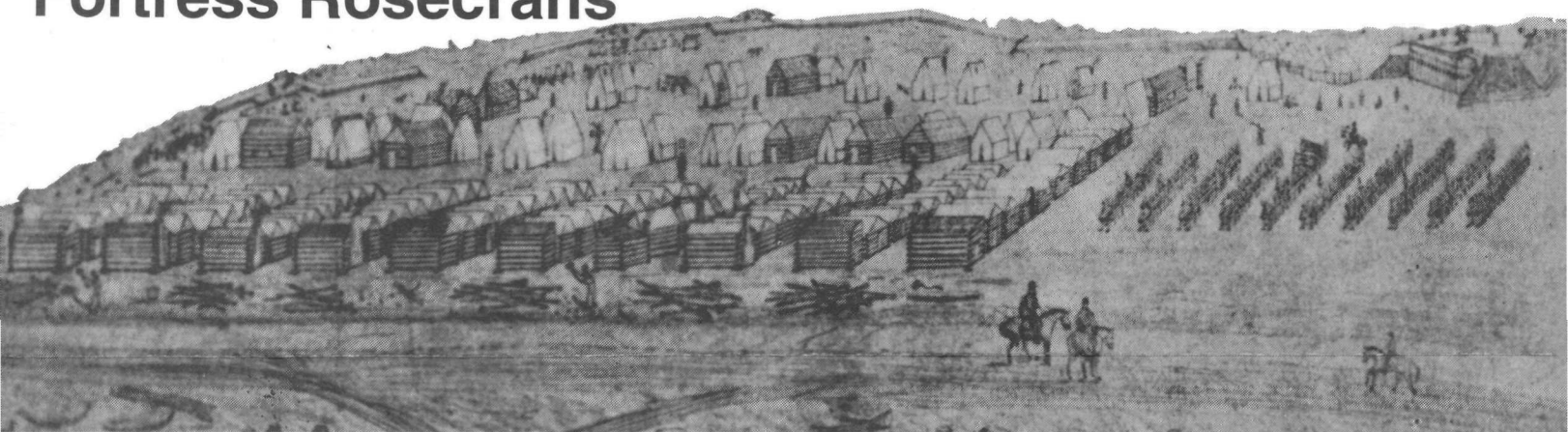




Fortress Rosecrans



Camp of the 115th Ohio, fortress walls in background courtesy Timothy R. Brookes

Rosecrans Leads the Union Army South

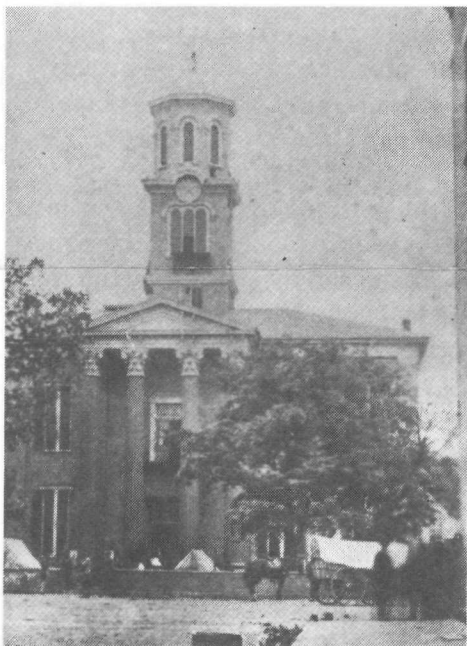


General William S. Rosecrans

The citizens of Murfreesboro never dreamt “they would ever hear the roar of cannon, the rattle of musketry, the groans of the dying.” So wrote John Spence, founder of the Red Cedar Bucket Factory in Murfreesboro, Tennessee and an opponent of secession. The bloody Union victory at Stones River in 1863 brought destruction and death to Murfreesboro. But the North gained a much-needed boost to morale. General William Rosecrans planned to press the Confederates south to Chattanooga, gain control of the vital rail link, and drive a Union wedge through Tennessee.

The Union army was far from its supply base at Louisville. General Rosecrans' troops constructed a depot, along with a fort to defend it, at Murfreesboro to distribute arms, food, and equipment. From January to June, 1863, the soldiers labored to complete the 200-acre earthen fort. It was named Fortress Rosecrans.

Occupation of Murfreesboro



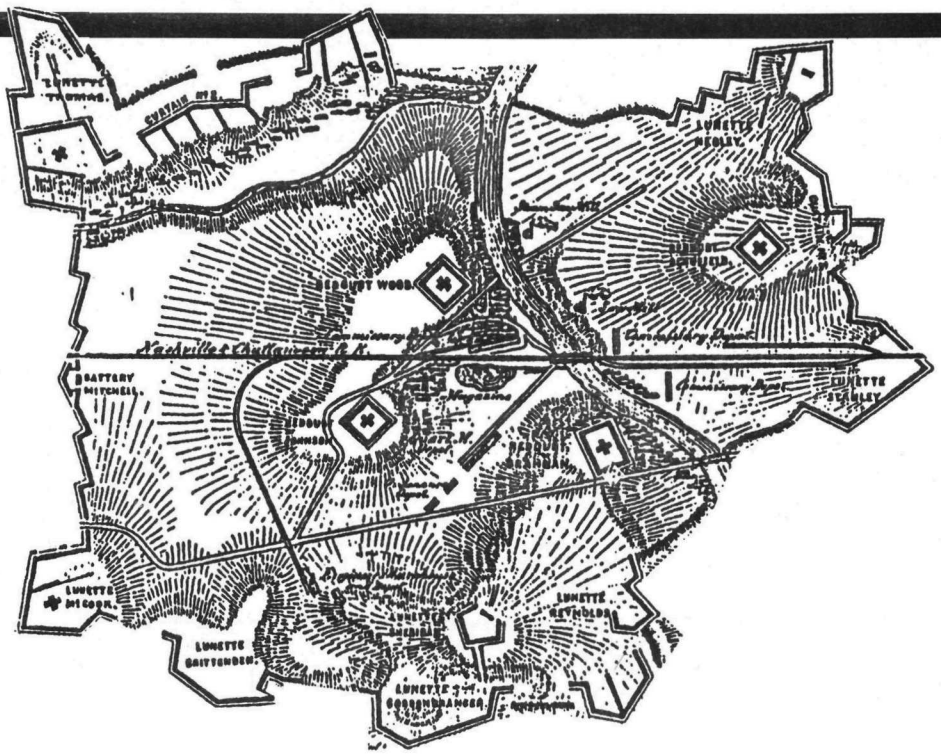
*Rutherford County Courthouse
Library of Congress*

Military occupation drastically altered life in Murfreesboro. Houses were torn down and the lumber hauled off to construct buildings for the army. John Spence wrote that “the streets were crowded [sic] at all times with wagons and soldiers, giving the place much the appearance of a wagon yard. Soldiers camping thick in and round town.” The officers particularly loved milk, “making use of citizens cows.”

When the Federals set off on the Tullahoma campaign, Spence noted that Rosecrans was “scarcely leaving forces sufficient to man the forts.” The new recruits and convalescents who stayed behind reportedly had orders to shell the town and burn it in the event of a Confederate raid.

One gun at the fort was trained on the courthouse. This elegant landmark was constructed shortly before the Civil War. During the war it served as barracks and a prison. By the end of the war, half the roof was blown off by the wind, windows and doors were broken, and plaster crumbled from the ceiling. The courthouse, now restored, still stands at the center of the downtown square.

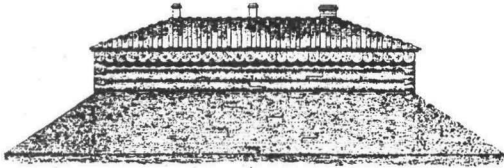
Fortress Rosecrans in 1863



When fully garrisoned, the fortress presented a formidable defense of the transportation routes. National Archives

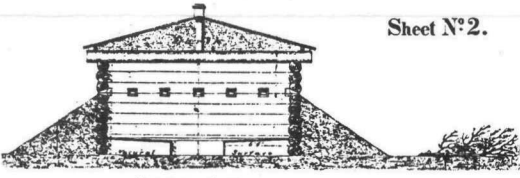
Confederates Threaten the Fort

BLOCK-HOUSE SKETCHES
for practical use in the field,
by
Capt. W.E. Merrill, U.S. Engrs.
Chief Engr. Army Cumberland.



Side Elevation.

Sheet N°2.



Transverse Section

Blockhouses formed a final defense if the earthworks were overrun. They also protected railroad bridges. Tennessee State Library and Archives

Confederate cavalry threatened Murfreesboro and Fortress Rosecrans in October 1863. Deterred by the fort's strength, the horsemen turned south of town, burned a bridge, and tore up railroad track before moving toward Shelbyville.

In late 1864, the Confederates hoped to recapture Tennessee and move into Kentucky. After a desperate fight at Franklin in November, in which six Confederate generals died, the Southern army followed the Federals' retreat north toward Nashville. Meanwhile, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest rode southeast toward Murfreesboro to destroy the railroad and blockhouses and to disrupt the supply depot. The Union forces retreated to the fort.

The next day, December 7, 1864, Union General Robert H. Milroy, with two brigades, faced the Confederates on the field about a mile from the fort in the Battle of the Cedars. After spirited fighting, the Confederates retreated and Milroy's troops retired to the fortress. The battle, fought along Wilkinson Pike, was considered a Union victory. Fortress Rosecrans remained unscathed.

The weakened Confederate army was crushed at Nashville. With their hopes for recapturing Tennessee dashed, the army fled to Mississippi.

Preserving Fortress Rosecrans

Five months later, the war was over and John Spence's sympathies had changed: "The prospect was gloomy to those returning from war." Fortress Rosecrans was no longer needed. During its two years' existence, the fort had deteriorated despite the garrison's efforts to maintain the works. The rains of winter and heat of summer conspired to wear away the sod covering the earthworks. In April 1866, the Union army abandoned Fortress Rosecrans.

Since then, most of the earthworks have been lost as Murfreesboro has grown past the fort. Only 3,000 feet of an original 14,000 feet of earthworks remain. In 1993, the city transferred remnants of the fort to

the National Park Service. Of the four interior forts within Fortress Rosecrans, only Redoubt Brannan remains.

As the garrison discovered, earthworks require constant maintenance. You can help by staying on the trail and by leaving nothing behind. Fortress Rosecrans tells the story of the soldiers who fought and toiled here, and of townspeople like John Spence who survived the great conflict.